

HE DOESN'T EXPECT A HAPPY EVER
AFTER BUT SHE CAME CRASHING BACK IN

A BARNES BROTHERS NOVEL

CRASHED

SHILOH WALKER

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF RUINED

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A Barnes Brothers Novel

By

Shiloh Walker

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Dedication



To my Patreon supporters. Your support is everything.

For all the readers who kept asking when Travis would be getting a book. I know it took a while. I hope the wait is worth it.

Trans lives matter.

Trans rights are human rights. The End.

My Patreon Supporters



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While I sought their insight and assistance on trans issues while writing Aaron's storyline, knowing I'd need insight and care on how I wrote about a trans teen and how I addressed certain trans issues, in the end, any inaccuracies lie solely with me, the writer.

Thanks to A for your insight on Storm's character.

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September



15 Years Old

Text messages sent & received

Isabel: I miss you already.

Travis: I know. I can't believe it's going to be a year before I can see you again. Can't I at least call you?

Isabel: Travis, I told you about my dad. He's absolutely the worst. He probably thinks I'll get pregnant just talking to a guy I like.

Travis: Alright, alright. I'd just as soon avoid pissing him off since I plan on marrying you as soon as we're 18.

Isabel: You can't be serious.

Travis: I told you I fell in love with you the second I saw you and I meant it. You said you love me, too, right? So, why shouldn't we want to get married, Bella mine?

Isabel: ♥ ♥ ♥ Bella mine? That's so sweet! ♥ ♥ ♥

Travis: Yeah, well. It's how I feel. You're mine. I'm yours. That's it for me.

Isabel: I don't know how I ended up finding a guy like you. You're so wonderful.

Travis: Is that a yes?

Isabel: You're impossible.

Travis: I'll keep asking until you say yes.

August



16 Years Old

Text messages sent & received

Travis: It's official, Bella-mine. I hate that guy. Your dad is a dick.

Isabel: I told you. I'm sorry he was so rude to you and your brothers. Your mom, though...wow. She's a queen. I've never seen anybody put him in his place like that.

Isabel: Travis?

Travis: I want to ask you something. Please don't lie to me.

Isabel: Okay.

Travis: Do you promise you won't lie?

Isabel: I won't lie. But I can't promise to answer, either.

Travis: I guess if you don't answer, that will be an answer on its own, won't it?

Travis: My dad followed you and your family out to the car. I know because I was kinda following, too, and I saw him. I didn't say anything about it. I planned to, but then we got home and everybody had gone to bed ... well, I went downstairs and heard him talking to Mom.

Isabel: About what? Why would he follow me?

Travis: The same reason I did. He was worried your dad would hurt one of you.

Travis: Isabel?

Travis: Iz?

Travis: Iz, damn it, answer me or I'm calling.

Isabel: Don't call! Please!

Travis: You're scared of him.

Isabel: I can't answer that.

June



17 Years Old

Text messages sent & received

Travis: One more month until I can see you again, Bella-mine. I can't wait.

Isabel: Me, neither. The months get longer and longer, don't they?

Travis: Yeah. But that's only because we're almost done with this shit.

Isabel: I hope so. But you have to remember what we planned.

Travis: I know. We'll take care of all that. I've spun some bullshit to my mom, pretending I was thinking about a book and asked her. We can do this, Iz. I promise.

Isabel: I hope so, Trav. I really hope so. Dad did something... never mind.

Travis: What did he do?

Isabel: Don't worry about it, okay?

Travis: Tell me.

Isabel: You're a bully sometimes. Look, maybe it's no big deal, but he introduced MK to some guy. It's the son of a friend of his. Maybe it will be okay. I don't know. But I heard him on the phone and he's already talking about them getting married. It was...weird. Okay?

Travis: Your dad talking about them getting married and being okay with it? That's not weird, baby. That's straight-up Twilight Zone shit. And what the fuck? MK is 15! He doesn't even want you dating.

Isabel: Not unless it's some asshole he likes. And I don't like the assholes he thinks I should date.

Travis: When did this start! WTF!

Isabel: Fuck. I shouldn't have said anything. He's just had a couple of guys from his office come over and SUGGESTED I accept when they ask me out. I haven't, okay? But he's pushy about it.

Travis: I want to kill him.

Isabel: Don't say that. He's a jerk, but he's still my dad.

Travis: I didn't say I would kill him, just that I wanted to. Don't let him push you into anything, Bella-mine. I love you.

Valentine's Day



18 Years Old

Text messages sent & received

Isabel 9:52 PM: Travis. Something happened today.

Isabel 10:59 PM: Never mind. Forget about it.

Travis 11:37 PM: Hey, I saw your text. Sorry I didn't answer sooner.

Travis 12:02 AM: Isabel?

Travis 7 AM: Isabel, come on, answer me.

Travis 8:31AM: Hey, are you mad at me? I meant to text earlier than I did last night, but things got a little crazy here. I don't want to keep texting cuz it was getting late and I didn't want to wake you. I know the gift card thing isn't the same as flowers or anything, but you know I love you.

Isabel 8:45 AM: I'm not mad at you. It was just a shitty day. My dad pulled that "it's time you start thinking about your future" shit again and we were all out to dinner this time and I couldn't get away from the fucking prick he invited along as my DATE. I hate him, Travis. I hate him so much. I hate him, hate him, hate him.

Travis 8:47 AM: I hate him, too. Want me to fly out there and beat him up?

Isabel 8:50 AM: I want you to fly out here and take me away from all of this. Now.

Travis 8:53 AM: If you're serious, I'll be on a plane as soon as I can get a ticket. Just say the word, Bella-mine.

Travis 9:02 AM: Iz?

Travis 9:39 AM: Isabel, do you want me to come get you?

Isabel 10:01 AM: More than anything. But I can't. My sisters need me. My mom won't do shit to protect them from Dad. They've only got me. If I run off without finishing school, it

will make it that much harder to get custody. But this summer, I'll graduate, they'll be 16 and it will be different. It's just a few more months. Right? I can do it for a few more months. I can.

Travis 10:03 AM: You can. Then you'll never have to see the prick again.

Summer



18 Years Old

Provincetown, Massachusetts

“Hey...aren’t you Zach Barnes’s little brother? Travis, right?”

Travis glanced at the older guy before focusing back on his phone. “You’re a little old to be a *Kate+Nate* fanatic, aren’t you?”

Travis was used to people recognizing him. Some even mistook him for Zach at first, although that was happening less and less. Both Travis and Trey were catching up to their older, very famous brother, but over the past couple of years, Zach, the former child star and tattoo-artist-in-training, had started sporting a fair amount of ink.

The paparazzi had gone crazy over the first few tattoos, but Zach had ignored it all, pretty much as he had ignored just about everything Hollywood-related, save for his co-star, since the last episode of the sitcom aired a few years earlier.

“Yeah.” The stranger smiled, a friendly, affable grin.

Travis didn’t buy what that smile was selling. Not for a minute.

“Guilty, kid. I never watched it much. My sister did. She had pictures of him tacked all over her room. Now Abigale...” He smiled. “She’s something else.”

Snorting, Travis shot a look to the line waiting at the counter. Zach was up there, along with Travis’ twin, Trey. But the line was moving damn slow and they were too far away to hear.

“You better not let Zach hear you talking about her. He’s crazy about her. And ...” He gave the man another look from head to toe before giving a derisive snort. “She’s a little young for you, don’t you think?”

“I’m not talking about that. She’s a beautiful young woman, of course, but I’m old enough to be her father.” The man frowned, and the look of distaste in his eyes told Travis he meant it. But then he shot another look back at Zach. “They got a thing going, huh?”

Travis put the phone face down. Isabel probably wouldn’t be able to text him any time soon, but he was ever hopeful. They were on the final countdown here. Just a matter of days. That’s all it was.

But first, he had to deal with this jackass.

Leaning against the padded back of the bench, Travis gave the man a hard look. Probably close to forty, he decided. Old. But his eyes were even older. He wanted something, too. Growing up with a famous—and rich—older brother, Travis had learned how to spot the takers and users pretty young.

“What do you want?” he asked bluntly. “You’re not here to talk about Zach or Abby. Are you?”

The guy’s eyes narrowed in speculation, then, after shooting a look over his shoulder toward the front of the restaurant where the other two Barnes brothers waited, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small white card. Placing it in front of Travis, he used one finger to push it to the edge of the table. “You’re a sharp one, aren’t you? I want to talk to you about your girlfriend, kid. She’s...not exactly what you think.”

Anger punched through him, cutting through his surprise that this guy knew about Isabel. “Fuck off.”

“I’m serious. Look, I know all about the thing going on between you two. Adorable, really. But there’s a lot of shit about that girl—and her family—that she hasn’t told you. And it’s ugly, dangerous shit.” He leaned closer. “I’m talking shit that could put that family you love so much in danger. Call me. Or don’t. But if you’re as sharp as I think you are, you’ll do the right thing.”

He turned and walked away, leaving Travis to glare at his back. He almost jumped up and went after him, but stopped

himself when he caught sight of his twin waving him down. Trey pointed at the sign and mouthed something Travis didn't care enough about to parse through so he just nodded and went back to fuming.

Looking at the card, he read the simple font.

Miles Hawkins

The official-looking seal on the card was what really got under his skin ... that, and those three words just under the man's name.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

“What the fuck?” Scowling, he picked up the card.

“Don't forget the ketchup, Trey.”

Hearing Zach's voice, he shoved the card into one of the pockets on his board shorts, zipping it shut just before Zach put down a tray filled with soft drinks—and an amber bottle.

Zach had recently turned twenty-one and was enjoying his legal drinking-age status.

Normally, Travis would have razzed him about it.

But he was too busy thinking about the card the guy had left.

An FBI agent.

What the fuck?



“You going to tell me what's up?”

Travis shot his twin a dark look. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You've been in a mood ever since lunch.” Trey swung his legs over the side of the bed. “What's the deal? Your girl not here yet?”

Travis glared at him. He'd never outright *told* Trey about Isabel. Hadn't needed to, really, because his twin knew. The

one time Trey had asked for information on whoever it was that had him twisted up, Travis told him the truth.

“I love her. We’re going to get married as soon as she graduates high school.” Travis and Trey had both already graduated and were in college—a couple of years early. *“Don’t go running and tell Mom or Dad, though. Her dad is psycho—seriously psycho and if he hears anything about it, he’ll hurt her.”*

“If he’s crazy, why not call the cops?”

“Because her dad is a US District Attorney, man. He’s a dick and he’s crazy, but nobody will listen if I just call the cops without any proof. She’s afraid he’ll hurt her family and none of the cops will listen if I just try to report him. I can’t risk him hurting her.”

“I told you not to talk about her,” he said now, keeping his voice low, although it was just the three of them there at their parents’ vacation house just outside of Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Zane was in Europe ... somewhere, waiting tables in Italy, hiking the Alps, taking pictures in France or eating stinky cheese. Travis had no idea.

Sebastien was spending the night with one of the kids he’d become friends with during their numerous summers here.

Zach was probably online chatting with Abby, which meant he wasn’t aware of anything, or anybody, else.

Their dad had surprised their mom with a getaway to a B&B for just the two of them their first three nights in the Cape Cod area, so for the first time, it was just the three brothers.

Trey rolled his eyes but held up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’m just wondering what’s wrong, man.”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” Trey scowled. “Look, if you don’t want to talk, fine. Tell me. But don’t lie to me, okay?”

Guilt twisted his gut and he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry, Trey. I’m just in a shitty mood, alright? That’s the truth, too—no lie.” He wasn’t going to go into detail, though. He trusted his twin, but his gut was in knots about what that Hawkins guy had said earlier.

He needed to talk to Isabel but they had just gotten into town a few hours earlier. It would be tomorrow at the earliest before she could get away from the vacation house her father owned.

“I’m going for a run, alright?”

Trey eyed him. “Want company?”

“Nah. I just need to clear my mind.”



Isabel: Dad has a fun-filled day of deep-sea fishing lined up tomorrow.

Can we meet early?

Travis’s heart almost jumped out of his chest when the text came. It was already racing from the three-mile run he’d just taken and now thundered in his chest, the beat brutal.

He’d been waiting to hear from Isabel ever since he woke up that morning—at five fucking a.m.

She’d be here today. They *always* got to Provincetown on August 2, rain or shine, no matter what.

He knew he wouldn’t see her until tomorrow, at the earliest. But once she was ready, they were leaving this town, getting away from her father, and getting married.

He already had everything planned, from how much money he needed to pay a guy in town to drive them to Boston, to the tickets they’d need to fly out to California—no way could they stay here. Not right away, at least. He already knew his parents would be pissed, but they’d get it, once he talked to them. They’d understand. And Mom could help, too. She might not be some hotshot US District Attorney but she

was still a lawyer, and she was fucking whip-smart and she had a brain that was almost scary.

His hands were shaking a little as he lifted the phone and read the message again. Another popped up before he could text his reply.

Isabel: Travis, listen. There's something I need to tell you. It's really important. I

“I *what?*” Frowning, he waited, but no other text came.

He texted her after a few minutes of waiting.

There was no response.

Not then.

Not thirty minutes later when he arrived on the outskirts of the property owned by Wilson T. Steele, US District Attorney and the man Travis had hated since he was sixteen.

He stayed in the shadows created by the hedges as he looked across the carefully manicured lawn, lip curled in disgust at what he saw. A fucking party. Steele was always having these parties here, even flying in friends he wanted to impress, making his girls and wife dress up like living dolls to parade in front of people.

A slim, almost frail figure passed by and he recognized Mary Kate, felt a wash of protectiveness run through him. Steele called her and she nodded, heading over to her father without speaking.

Gripping one of the tall iron fence posts, he searched the crowd for Isabel, easily finding Ellen, Mary Kate's twin. He grinned when he saw what she wore, suspecting she'd worn it solely to piss her dad off. Ellen couldn't be more different from her more delicate twin, even though their looks were identical—at least on the surface. But nobody who really *looked* at a person would ever mistake one twin for the other. Ellen wore a dress that was probably better suited for a woman ten years older, a bold, blistering red that ended just a few inches past her butt and dipped low in the back—and the front, he realized when she turned around to wave at her father when he called her name.

Steele glared at her but she pretended not to notice before turning back to her conversation partner, a guy easily three times her age, who couldn't keep his eyes off the neckline of her dress.

Travis wanted to scale the fence and go hit him, even though he'd never officially met Ellen. It was the right thing to do for a sister-in-law, though, wasn't it?

"Finally ... the guest of honor!" Wilson called out, his voice carrying.

Everybody fell silent.

The hair on the back of Travis' neck stood on end.

"Hey, kid. Fancy seeing you here."

He shot a look to his right and saw Miles Hawkins, the FBI agent—or so the card had said. But he only made eye contact for a few seconds before Steele's voice caught his attention once more.

"Honored friends and guests, my oldest daughter, Isabel."

Travis saw her in the doorway and his heart twisted in his chest, the exact way it had done when he'd seen her for the first time three years ago. It almost hurt to breathe now, just as it had then, and he had to remind himself that breathing was *necessary*.

The crowd parted and his hand tightened convulsively on the fence post. Could he get her attention? Could he—

"What the fuck ... "

Dazed, he grabbed a second fence post with his left hand, needing the support desperately as one of the guests went to stand next to Isabel.

As the tall man bent to kiss Isabel's cheek, Travis felt his gorge rise.

When the guy put his hand on Isabel's softly rounded belly, Travis felt everything in him crystallize, then shatter.

"They're engaged."

Travis had forgotten he wasn't alone. Numb, he looked over at the older man standing next to him.

"She's pregnant," he said, voice barely more than a croak.

His girl was pregnant. He had no idea how far along she was—he only knew the basics about pregnancy. Oh, and he knew how to *not* get a girl pregnant. But he *did* know that baby couldn't be his. Human pregnancies didn't last a fucking year. Besides, the two of them had done a lot of fooling around the past summer, but they'd stopped just short of actually doing it—not because Travis hadn't been ready, though. He was a guy—*of* course, he was ready. But the girl he wanted—*Isabel*—hadn't been. So when she put the brakes on, each time, he'd stopped.

She hadn't stopped this guy, though.

"Yeah. They've been together since Valentine's Day, according to my sources."

Valentine's Day. Travis wanted to hit something.

Instead, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Isabel



September

19th Birthday

Richmond, Virginia

“Sir. *Sir!* You can’t come in here!”

Isabel Steele rolled her head so she could bury her face in the pillow. She hurt so bad, she would have curled into a ball to ease the pain in her belly, but even moving hurt, so she stayed still.

If she had the energy, she would have told the well-meaning medical staff not to bother. *Nobody* told Wilson Steele what he could and couldn’t do, where he could and couldn’t go.

“I’m going to speak to my daughter *now.*”

She barely controlled a flinch at the whip that was her father’s voice.

Then she forgot all about him as pain tore through her abdomen, arcing up through her spine, then down through her thighs. She tried not to scream, but the pain was too severe and her cries shattered the taut silence of the room.

“Here,” a soft voice said and she opened bleary eyes to look at the kind nurse who’d been with her almost since the moment they wheeled her onto the floor. “Squeeze my hand.”

Behind her, she could hear Wilson berating the staff and demanding to speak to her.

“He ... ” She stopped and licked her lips. She was so thirsty. It felt like it had been *days* since she’d had anything to drink. “He won’t leave. You can’t make him.”

The nurse’s eyes glinted against light brown skin, almost like golden coins in their brightness. Leaning in, the woman lowered her voice, but the intensity never wavered. “Honey, I

know all about who your dad is. But he's met his match. Don't worry."

Isabel wanted to believe that. But that last time she'd believed in anything, it had led her straight into hell.

"You should all be careful," she said, pitching her voice low even though the voices behind her were too loud for anybody but Tamika, the nurse with the bright eyes and warm smile, to hear. "He's dangerous."

"I know, baby. But nobody pushes Dr. Viv around. Trust me." She brushed Isabel's hair back. "Is there anybody *you* want here? Anybody you'd like me to call?"

Isabel thought of a warm smile, a boy with laughing blue-green eyes who'd told her he loved the second day after they'd met. Another pain seized her, but this time it was in her heart and nothing, not even the drugs they pumped into her system to help with the contractions, could help.

She wished they'd just drug her heavily enough to knock her out. It wasn't like it mattered. The tests already showed that the fetus was dead. A pregnancy that had been forced on her, just like too many other things. Now it was ending and the dead baby was another casualty of her father's cruelty. Couldn't she have the respite of unconsciousness for a little while?

But she'd asked twice, and had been told no twice. She wouldn't ask again.

Aware the kind-eyed nurse was still watching her, and patiently waiting, Isabel shook her head. "No," she said softly. "There's nobody. I don't have anybody."



The man in the chair across from her had faded, tired-looking gray eyes. His shoulders bowed forward somewhat, as if he carried a heavy weight.

"I want to assure you that absolutely nobody will know you're talking to me, Ms. Steele."

Isabel studied him a long moment before shrugging and looking back out the window. The sky was impossibly blue and the leaves already started to turn golden.

She usually loved this time of year.

Fall was her favorite season and the colors in Richmond were stunningly beautiful.

But all the color had washed out of her world over the past two weeks. No. Longer. More than a month since color, life, joy ... *hope* had disappeared.

“My father has people everywhere, Mr. Hawkins,” she said.

He said nothing for a long time. And when he did speak, he sounded puzzled.

“You don’t sound very concerned about that.”

“It’s not a matter of concern.” She lifted one shoulder. “I just don’t care.”

She knew she should. The hospital had a shrink come in to talk to her every other day. That shrink, and the dogged determination of Dr. Vivian Atwell, were the two main reasons why Isabel was still in the hospital after two weeks.

The first week would have been understandable.

She’d started bleeding the day after the baby had been delivered—still-born, just as the doctors had known it would be. It had taken surgery to stop the bleeding.

Her father had strode in on the third day and hauled her out of bed, which tore stitches, both inside and out. She hadn’t attempted to fight as he led her out of the room, even though she’d felt the blood on her thighs in a hot, thick flow.

Doctors and nurses swarmed him, security staff facing down with Wilson’s bodyguards in a stalemate that ended when Isabel collapsed.

She hadn’t woken up for two more days following the surgery needed to repair the damage he’d caused.

The story was leaked to the press and her father, normally so protected and unaffected, was faced with a firestorm of negative publicity from all fronts.

One of his bodyguards was found dead in his home—the reports were suicide but nobody knew what to believe.

His second bodyguard was arrested for trespassing on hospital grounds after being thrown out twice and the judge, a very vocal opponent of Wilson Steele, had denied bail after the second arrest.

All this time, she'd seen her father as the boogeyman and now the public had a glimpse of the monster, too.

It had been Dr. Viv who had come to Isabel about an FBI agent wanting to speak with her. If she was up to it, the doctor would make it happen. If she wasn't, then the doctor would make sure he stayed away.

Isabel had nothing left to hold onto, so she'd agreed.

She hadn't been surprised to find out that when he entered, he'd looked familiar. Special Agent in Charge Miles Hawkins had tailed her several times—she'd seen him. Chances are, he'd wanted her to. And now, he wanted her help to put her father away.

But he just sat there.

So she did the same.

A suppressed sigh from Hawkins caught her attention and she looked at him, puzzled by the way he watched her. “What do you want, Agent Hawkins?”

“I've already told you that I'd like your help in locking away your father.”

“Yes. So ... why aren't you asking questions?”

“Frankly because I'm concerned.”

She waited.

Leaning forward, Hawkins said, “I'm concerned about *you*, Isabel. You've been through a rough few days. You lost your baby—”

“I wanted an abortion,” she said, cutting him off.

He sat back, caught off guard.

Shifting her gaze back to the window, she stared at the endless blue sky. It hurt to see that shade of blue. It made her think of Travis. The ice around her heart grew another layer. She welcomed it.

“One of my father’s friends raped me,” she said tonelessly. “My father knew. He’d been pushing me into dating Stephen—our fathers are thick as thieves. I told him no. But my father doesn’t believe in the word *no*. Neither did Stephen. We were at a charity dinner on Valentine’s Day and my father trapped me in a corner all throughout dinner, then left with my mother near the very end of the meal, leaving me stranded at the banquet hall with nobody but Stephen to take me home. Stephen raped me, then walked me back into the house once he got me home and smiled at my father.”

Hawkins’ breath came out in a harsh burst. “Your father ... he *knew*?”

Isabel turned dead eyes to the man. “He’s involved in human trafficking. People are commodities to him, agent. Especially women. Why would you expect him to see me any different?”

The look he gave her actually struck her as *funny*.

She’d tried to tell so many people who Wilson Steele was, had tried for so long. But nobody believed her.

“You really think you can lock him away?” she asked quietly as the shadow of the girl she’d once been stirred inside her.

Hawkins inclined his head. “With your help, I think we can.”

“I want something.”

She barely saw the flicker of his lids. He didn’t hesitate to ask, though.

“What do you want?”

Miles



December

“Can I ...”

The faint, polite smile on the young man’s face faded, then fell away completely as he met the eyes of Miles Hawkins. A cold expression settled on his face and he stepped outside the sprawling ranch-styled house a few miles outside Malibu.

After closing the door behind him, Travis fixed his cool gaze on Miles and folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t know why you’re here, agent. I don’t have another girlfriend living some other life I’m unaware of.”

The hollow, flat words hit Miles straight in the chest, striking him in a heart that had gone numb over years of dealing with the worst of mankind. Although the damn thing wasn’t as numb as he’d like. It had been causing him a lot of trouble over the past few months, all because of this kid, and the girlfriend.

Isabel Steele.

Ever since he’d seen her in the hospital and she’d started to talk, he’d been slowly choking on the poison of his own rage and guilt. His mother had often told him growing up that hatred could be a poison you fed yourself and he’d lost sight of that in his determination to wipe Wilson Steele off the map—that hate had blinded him to who and what Wilson was capable of, blinded him to the point that Miles hadn’t realized just who Wilson would sacrifice if he saw fit.

Like his own daughters.

If it was the last thing he did in his life, Miles would fix what he’d done to these two.

“Travis.” He dredged up a smile. “I wondered if I could have a few minutes.”

Travis set his jaw, the line hardening until it looked to be made of pure granite. “Why? I’m pretty sure there’s nothing me or my family can do to help an FBI agent.”

Miles smoothed a hand down his tie and shifted his gaze away. “This has nothing to do with the department, son. It—”

“Don’t call me *son*,” Travis said, his voice low and cold, ice all but dripping from the words.

“Of course. I’m sorry.” One glance at the younger man’s eyes and Miles knew he was running out of time to say what he needed to say. “This is about Isabel Steele.”

Travis shut down, his face going blank. “Yeah, I think we’re done. I don’t need to hear anything about her.”

He turned.

“I was wrong.”

Travis froze. His entire body was a taut line, so stiff, he looked like he might shatter, one hand on the door, the other hanging at his side, but not loosely. Each muscle clenched, the veins bulging, his hand in a fist as if prepared to fight.

“Wrong about what?” he asked, the voice barely above a rasp.

“Everything,” Miles said quietly. “I was wrong about everything.”



More than an hour later, the two of them stood on the beach. Travis had abandoned his shoes and stood ankle-deep in the surf.

Miles wore a loose canvas jacket over a t-shirt, jeans and battered athletic shoes, having left his suits and ties back in Massachusetts for the trip to California.

“It seemed for a while that she’d been the only one he couldn’t intimidate into silence,” Miles said, a few feet behind Travis. He wished the kid would say something. But there was just more silence. “Based on her testimony, we were able to

get two more in his inner circle to turn. Between the three of them, we now have a rock-solid case. The trial starts in February.”

“Beresford. The ... ” Rage pulsed in every word Travis uttered, in every breath he took. “You said he’s one of the other guys on trial. He’s the guy I saw standing with her at the party—the guy she was supposed to marry. What’s his connection? What evidence did she give on him?”

Miles closed his eyes. So that’s what Travis had been doing with his phone as Miles had talked. “There are some things I’m not going to tell you, Travis. It’s not my place.”

Travis flinched. Slowly, he turned and looked at Miles, the setting sun turned the waters of the Pacific to fire and casting Travis in a fiery glow. His face was stark, eyes bleak and Miles suspected he was reliving the way Isabel had flinched away from Steven Beresford the night Travis had last seen Isabel—nearly seven months pregnant, and soon to marry, according to her father.

“He hurt her, didn’t he?”

Miles looked away, but that was an answer in and of itself.

He waited until the knot in his throat eased before he continued speaking. “She’s in witness protection. But if you’d like to speak to her, I can—”

“No.” Travis strode past Miles to the car. “She’s away from him. She’s safe. She’s moved on with her life. I don’t deserve any place in that life.”

“Fuck that,” Miles snapped, grabbing onto the younger man’s arm. “I’m the one who got involved and fucked things up. If I hadn’t decided to interfere—”

“I’m the one who *listened*.” Travis jerked free. “Nobody made me do that. *I* listened to you and never once tried to reach out to her and give her the benefit of the doubt, did I? I ignored her texts, hung up on her the one time she called. She’s moved on. And if she’s in witness protection, that means she needs to live a life where she isn’t calling attention to herself. I’ve got a world-famous brother, at least one more on

the way with how Sebastien is shaping up and I look enough like both of them that I'm pretty damn easily recognized. She doesn't need me complicating her life. Let it go. It's over."

Chapter 1



Isabel

22 Years Old

“Ms. Steele, is it true you and your father had a contentious relationship?”

Isabel stared at the lawyer and wondered how many times she’d have to go through this.

Then she thought of her sisters, thought of her mother, dead and cold in the ground, thought of the endless reports unearthed after she agreed to cooperate with Miles Hawkins and the investigation of her father, an investigation that had involved numerous international intelligence agencies as well as the FBI, the CIA, and DHS.

How many times would she do this? If it kept Wilson Steele locked up, she’d do it every day for the rest of her life.

“Yes.” She met the attorney’s gaze. “We had a *contentious* relationship. He locked me in a room for three weeks after I refused to marry—”

“Your Honor, please ask the witness to focus on the questions asked.”

Isabel wanted to yell at him, blacken his cool eyes and break his nose. Instead, she looked at the judge. “Your Honor, he asked me about my relationship with my father. Almost every teenager thinks they’ve got it rough. But how many have actually been locked up by their own *fathers* for *refusing* to marry?”

“Your Honor—”

The judge gave him a flat look and lifted a hand. “You asked the question, Mr. Rheingold. The statement stands.”

He tried again, going at Isabel from several angles. But she’d prepared for this, the same way she’d once prepared for track and field events, turning that dedication to honing her emotional control so she wouldn’t break for worms like this.

His eyes took on an avid gleam and Isabel knew the next question was going to be bad. Very bad.

Clenching her hands into tight fists, she let her nails bite into her palms, that small pain grounding her as Rheingold started to speak.

“Were you arrested five years ago for attacking your father, Ms. Steele?”

“Yes.” She stared at him, unblinking.

“You broke his nose and knocked him down, causing him to strike his head on a desk. He needed stitches and suffered a concussion. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Her voice started shaking as the memories of that slammed into her.

“And is it also correct that he had to have his own security personnel restrain you? His own daughter?”

The faux horror in the lawyer’s voice made her want to vomit. But when she opened her mouth, what came out was laughter—near hysterical laughter.

“Is this funny, Ms. Steele?”

“*Funny?*” She echoed, uncertain how she managed to stifle the laughter. It hurt, that macabre sound, like it was edged with rusty razor blades that tore her throat. “Why would it be *funny*, Mr. Rheingold, that I’d attacked my father after he refused to let me get an abortion although he *knew* I’d been raped, that one of his friends had been the man to rape me, and he *knew* that, that he’d given the bastard the go-ahead? No, it’s *not* funny. Although I find it grotesquely humorous, in a way, that you have the balls to *act* appalled over it *considering you were there* on one of the days I *tried to run away—and that my father attacked me for it.*”

She had to keep raising her voice to be heard after Rheingold, then the judge both demanded she be quiet.

Her final words, though, had everybody falling silent.

Even the judge looked slightly dismayed.

Rheingold was pale, his mouth slack.

The prosecuting attorney acting on behalf of the state was the first to regain composure. She rose, her hands flat on the surface of her desk.

“Your Honor, permission to approach.”

Judge Whitmer cleared her throat and then beckoned for both attorneys to join her.

Isabel was fuming. But at the same time, she was cynically amused.

Oh, she'd been *waiting* for this moment.

Rheingold thought she hadn't noticed him that day, skulking outside her father's office when she'd been dragged into her father's office, her attempt to slip past the watchful eye of her dogged babysitters an abysmal failure, just like the past three had been.

She hadn't been able to believe it when the prosecuting attorney handling her father's second appeal had informed her that Edwin Rheingold would be handling the case.

He'd been her father's protegee. Better than most, Rheingold should know how dangerous it could be to piss Wilson Steele off, how ... *unhealthy* it was to fail to live up to his rigorous standards.

Wilson Steele's *displeasure* was on display for the whole world to see right now, his features hard as granite, pale gray eyes as chilly as chips of ice. He flicked a look in her direction.

Isabel stared back without flinching, any fear she'd once felt having long since burned away. The only thing he could do to frighten her would be to threaten her sisters and they were safe away from him, under witness protection, several states away.

As long as they were safe, nothing her father said or did mattered.

There was nothing left he could take from her.

A faint noise caught her attention and she shifted her focus to Edwin Rheingold. He moved on stiff legs toward the bench, the colorless oval of his face seeming to float above the lapels of his pricy designer shirt. His pale blue eyes and pale blond hair barely offered any color, offering a washed-out appearance more than anything.

He looked like a man already dead.

His eyes wheeled in her direction as he closed the final few steps between them.

She stared back at him pitilessly.

She might have felt sympathy, had he been unaware of her father's actions, his influence.

But he'd been in their house too many times, had stood silently as those who displeased Wilson Steele had bones broken, noses smashed, fortunes obliterated and children threatened.

The only people she would pity would be any family he might have, innocent people ensnared in the actions of others, the way she and her sisters had been.

Sometimes, late at night, when she clutched her pillow and tried not to think about the empty forever stretching out in front of her, she wondered if there was going to come a time when she couldn't even find it in her to care about that.

Chapter 2



“Why are we here?”

Miles Hawkins met the blue-green eyes of Travis Barnes and gave him a smile he didn't feel. Acting came easy to him, though. At forty-six, he was fairly young to be in charge of his own division, but an injury a couple of years earlier had ended his career in the field.

That career had shown him too many things, shown him a world where the vicious preyed upon the weak and too often, those in power cared little to step in and help.

A couple of years earlier, a few months after Miles had mistakenly screwed up the lives of two innocent kids, one of those kids had showed up at his house.

Travis Barnes had shown an amazing resourcefulness, tracking him down as he had, something Miles had taken notice of. It wasn't like FBI agents tended to keep a large profile. Travis hadn't come looking for an apology, though. He'd demanded entrance to Miles' world—for an absolution that only Miles owed.

But Travis hadn't wanted to listen.

Because Miles understand the weight of guilt, and because he was too aware of the shit he'd slogged through and how unbalanced the scales were, he'd given Travis access to that world.

Travis could very well become one of the US government's best assets. His affluent upbringing and keen intellect made it easy for him to gain entry into a world where the world's elite used their money for craven, awful excess at the expense of others.

He had the gift of both charm and insight, and a natural ability to play chameleon, showing his targets whatever face they expected to see.

Now, just a few weeks shy of twenty-four, he'd already helped collect information on three high-profile targets—with actionable intelligence on all of them. Miles had just received confirmation that morning that two were expected to be in US custody by the end of the week.

Nobody would ever connect their arrest to the pretty-boy asset sitting next to Miles.

Granted, the man next to Miles currently looked nothing like the laughing, teasing playboy who'd wined and dined the wife of one of the biggest human traffickers in Europe while she was on holiday in Italy.

Had she, or any of her bodyguards, glimpsed this side of Travis Barnes, they would have stayed far clear—and possibly ordered his immediate assassination. It was getting to the point that his face would soon become a liability—and present a danger to the other person who shared that face. When Miles had pointed that out, Travis had calmly come up with a solution—a brilliant, drastic one that was, at the same time, ridiculously simple.

It was his knowledge, skills and abilities they really needed, after all. His face wasn't necessary, and he didn't need that face to know the ins and outs of high society.

And although Miles wanted to refuse the kid, time and again, he knew how desperately the skills and mindset of somebody like Travis were needed.

There wasn't a day Miles didn't worry Travis would slip, make a mistake and come back to the US in a body bag. Or not at all.

Miles still sent him out.

He'd do so as long as Travis was willing, or until it was obvious Miles could get no further use out of him—he was just that damn good.

Yet when Travis had ended up finishing his last job right at the same time Isabel had been scheduled to be in Boston, on the stand in yet another attempt by her father to get his sentence overturned, Miles knew he'd try again.

Every chance he got, he'd try.

"You said you wanted a drink and a damned steak that wasn't like cooked until it resembled leather. So ... here we are." Miles offered a crooked smile and gave a sweeping gesture that encompassed much of the luxurious lobby bar and restaurant, tucked into the corner of one of Boston's most exclusive hotels.

Travis picked up his drink and tossed it back, treating the twenty-five-year single barrel malt like backyard moonshine. As he met Miles's gaze, he put the now empty high ball glass down on the polished mahogany bar with a distinct *click*. "Pricey place for a meal on Uncle Sam's dime."

"This is my treat." Miles smiled thinly. His father's death a year earlier hadn't come as a shock—the former senator had lived hard, partied harder, even into his seventh decade and nobody who knew him would be surprised that he'd collapsed by the bed just as after rolling in the sheets with one of his three mistresses. His wife, dead for nearly twenty years, had left a substantial family fortune to her two surviving family members—her husband, and her son, Miles.

His father had been a genius with money and after his death, aside from a few charitable bequests, Miles had inherited everything.

That had come as a shock.

Miles had been estranged from his father for most of his adult life and he didn't regret not spending any time with the corrupt, cold-hearted bastard.

But that his father had left the estate to him? Yeah, he'd been surprised.

Most of the money was still sitting in the bank, collecting dust and interest but he could take the boy who'd become his protegee out for a nice meal and not expense it to his work account.

Just like he'd arranged for the funds—and the security—that had Isabel Steele, now known to the world as Bella Franklin, staying at this same hotel, private security backing

up the US Marshals who'd been assigned to protect her while she was in town to testify against her father.

The marshals hadn't liked hearing there was an outside team on the job.

It wasn't...policy, but Miles didn't give a shit. He'd informed both the marshals and his superiors he hadn't liked that information about Isabel's location and last alias had been leaked the last time she was in town, and the outside team wasn't going anywhere.

Currently, Tina Winslow, the second-in-command of that private team, was on watch and had just updated him with the news there *was* no news. Isabel was in her room. Everything was quiet. Miles had texted the young woman with an invitation to join him in the lobby twice already, with the second barely fifteen minutes earlier.

So far, they'd both gone ignored.

He wasn't ready to give up yet.

When his phone vibrated with a text notification a few minutes later, he ignored the text—it was a woman he'd met through a friend, asking him if he was interested in drinks. He'd liked her, thus the reason for ignoring any and all overtures. He fucked up every relationship he'd had and with his life in the shape it was now, it was only going to get worse. He did, however, take the time to send Isabel a third text—and a subtle warning.

Miles: I'm at the hotel. You might as well come down and talk to me or I'll come up. You know I'm as stubborn as you are. I just want to see how you are doing.

Then he tucked the phone away and gave Travis an easy smile. "Sorry. Never off the clock in this job."

The look Travis gave him told him he saw clear through the bullshit.

The bartender came by, a smile on her pretty face. Her wide brown eyes warmed as they landed on Travis, lingered in appreciation which he completely ignored.

“Another round for you gentlemen?” she asked, her voice husky.

Before Travis could answer, Miles said, “Yes, please.”

Travis breathed out a heavy sigh and rubbed his neck as she moved away to start on the order. “You know, I had maybe four hours of sleep the night before last—and that was after crossing several time zones. I had to get up for a debriefing at the crack of dawn yesterday, spent most of the day closed up in offices the size of a postage stamp wearing a fucking suit and tie, crashed at a shitty hotel with an even shittier bed, got up and had to do it all over again. *And* in a suit and tie, no less.” He yanked at said tie in disgust and gave Miles an irritated look. “When you told me you were going to spring me and give me a bit of a break, I didn’t think I was going to have to spend a few more hours in this miserable suit, at a bar eating peanuts while you keep staring past my shoulder at the elevator.”

Miles went to speak, but Travis wasn’t done. Leaning in closer, he said in a low voice, “Who the fuck are we waiting on and why the fuck is there security crawling all over the place?”

His phone buzzed with another alert, but under the sharp attention of his protégé, he didn’t dare check the screen. Instead, he studied Travis with narrowed eyes.

Travis rolled his. “You think I didn’t notice? Five guys—okay, to be correct, four guys, one woman. She’s probably private, knows how to blend better. The guy with her, also private. The other three are feds. I’m sure I’m missing somebody since nobody is going to put that much security in one area.”

“Three more on the ground floor,” Miles said. “And a couple more ... elsewhere. You’re getting better. You were already good.”

“I’m also not distracted. Who the fuck are we waiting on?”

Miles blew out a breath. “I should have known you’d realize something was going on.”

“Yeah, now why don’t ... ” He lapsed into silence as the blonde bartender approached a warm smile on her face and two drinks in hand.

As she set them down, Miles checked his phone, saw the text from Tina. It was via his regular texting app, but coded, in a manner of speaking, so you’d have to be aware of the situation to understand.

It simply read, *incoming*.

He took a breath and glanced up just in time to see the bartender place a napkin in front of Travis with exaggerated care. Her lips curved in a smile as she gave the napkin a tap it with a red-slicked fingernail. “Let me know when you need anything else.”

Travis didn’t even look at the phone number and he barely waited until she was out of earshot before spinning back to Miles. “Talk.”

Miles glanced at him, then past him. His jaw went tight.

That had Travis glancing in the mirror behind the bar. His eyes bounced off the person approaching as he resumed his quick assessment, looking for a potential threat.

Travis muttered an irritated curse even as he went to do the same, turning. The breath he’d just taken exploded out of him in a harsh burst, quickly followed by, “Isabel.”



Isabel hadn’t had the luxury of friends in her life. Even growing up, she’d been relatively isolated, although her mother, ever the perfect wife for the powerful, suave district attorney Wilson Steele, had made sure her three daughters had the upbringing one would expect from a rich, affluent family.

Isabel had been enrolled in ballet and piano lessons and the girls from both had invited her to parties, just as her mother had taken care to reciprocate—birthdays, Christmas get-togethers, Fourth of July.

Isabel was nine when she stopped sharing invitations, ten when she'd told her mother she didn't want any more birthday parties. When her mother had asked why, Isabel had, naively, told her mother.

One of the girls said her father thinks Daddy is a criminal. Is he?

Her mother had slapped her. Evelyn Steele had immediately apologized and pulled her close to hug her. As the years passed and Isabel matured, she understood the emotion behind her mother's violent response.

Fear.

Her mother had known exactly who her father was and she'd feared him.

While she'd not immediately understood *why* her mother had slapped her, she had understood on an instinctual level. After extricating herself from her mother's arms, with her cheek still burning, she'd reiterated what she'd said, *I don't want any more birthday parties, Mom. I won't go to any when I'm invited. And you shouldn't throw any more for the twins.*

Isabel hadn't even understood *why* she'd felt that way, but on a level deep inside, she'd understood the need to protect herself, and her sisters. The only way she could do so from such a young age had been to keep them isolated from those who might hurt them.

She'd let her guard down only once. It had destroyed her, breaking her heart into such tiny pieces that she'd never been able to find them all.

The man who had been hassling her to join him for a drink, Miles Hawkins, was, oddly enough, the closest thing she had to a friend these days. He had long since told her about the part he'd played in Travis's abandonment of her. At the time, she'd wanted to attack him, beat on him, screaming like a banshee, but the fury had passed, washed out to a tired, gray apathy.

It was over.

It was done.

Travis was no longer part of her life while Miles was her lifeline.

The FBI agent, alone, knew the worst things about her, what had happened to her, what her father had done—what he had *allowed*.

He hadn't looked at her with pity or disgust when she'd told him.

There had been guilt aplenty, along with other emotions she hadn't understood, but never had he looked at her with pity or disgust.

He'd told her he could put her father away so he couldn't hurt anybody else, if only she would trust him, and she had.

Miles had kept his word.

It had been the answer to Isabel's silent prayers.

The death of her relationship with Travis, followed by the sudden death of her mother and the slow destruction of any other dreams she'd had over the coming weeks had been the final casualties of Wilson T. Steele's brutal reign.

It was over.

Every time her father pushed for yet another retrial—only two successful attempts had even made it to court—the man's canny mind finding nearly invisible flaws in the trial that had sentenced him to life behind bars for the human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women, immigrants and minors, Miles had been there.

No matter what, he was there, taking several days away from his job so Isabel wouldn't be alone. He had security watching the house so she didn't worry her sisters would be in danger while she was gone.

Because he was a friend, and because he asked for very little, she'd dragged herself out of bed and pulled on a sweater and jeans, dragging a brush through her hair. The lobby bar wasn't a sweater and jeans joint, but she didn't have the energy for a dress and heels, or even makeup.

Catching sight of him sitting next to a broad-shouldered man with hair cut with near military precision, she told herself she could handle one drink. Just one.

But then the man with him turned around and blue-green eyes glanced her way.

Shock slammed into her, freezing her in place. She blinked, half-expecting him to disappear, but after another look, he was still there, real, solid ... and far more beautiful than he'd been the last time she'd seen him. He'd been close to perfection as a teenage boy, but now ...

His jaw was more square, brows heavier and those eyes ... so much more intense. There were other changes, too, small ones she couldn't even identify and he seemed to have aged far more than just a handful of years would account for, but there was no mistaking those eyes.

It was him.

"Travis," she whispered.

She felt like somebody had just reached inside and ripped her heart out, torn it into shreds before cobbling it back together and shoving it back into place. There were gaping wounds in place of all the missing pieces and the pain was too much, so numbness settled in—she *had* to go numb.

If she let herself feel this kind of pain, here and now, after everything she'd had to deal with over the past few days, after staring into her father's hated face *again*, she'd shatter.

And she couldn't ever shatter.

Her sisters, especially Mary Kate, needed her too much.

Drawing on the icy reserve that had allowed her to function while she still lived in Wilson Steele's household, she took a slow breath, then another. Each one was agony, but she didn't let that show.

She could do this.

She could face him.

She'd gotten through it when he abandoned her; it had been one of the most painful things in her life, but she'd survived.

If she could live with what Stephen Beresford had done, could function despite her father's cold apathy and the weeks of being confined to the house so she couldn't get an abortion once she learned about the pregnancy, if she could survive realizing Travis had turned his back on her after realizing she was pregnant, then she could face him now.

"Travis." She inclined her head slightly, drawing on memories of her mother doing that very same thing as she greeted people at one soiree after another.

He was still staring at her, looking poleaxed.

Shifting her attention to Miles, she cocked a brow. "I didn't realize we were going to have company."

Miles gave her a look she couldn't quite decipher. It almost looked ... *pleading*.

His guilt all but clung to him and she realized she wasn't shocked. That guilt was choking him and she hadn't realized how much until now. Some distant part of her felt pity for him with that awareness, but it was distant, buried under a layer of ice.

She was grateful to Miles, so grateful. But she didn't owe him this. And she owed Travis *nothing*.

"Isabel," Travis said, the syllables of her name rough, as if he hadn't spoken in ages. And somehow, the sound of her name was almost ... reverent, as if he were giving voice to a prayer.

The idea was laughable.

"Ma'am."

She glanced over at the bespectacled, black-suited maître d' and wondered what he'd do if she threw her arms around his neck in gratitude. She had a legitimate reason to leave now, one that wouldn't look like she was running away. Instead of giving into the urge, she gave him a simpering smile that

would have done her now former-socialite mother proud.
“Yes?”

“We ... ah ... ” He glanced at the two men standing with her and paled, immediately jerking his gaze back to her. “I’m afraid there’s a strict dress code here at Henri’s. Your—”

“She’s *fine*,” Travis said, the words coming out a lethal growl, nothing like the roughly tender whisper of her name seconds earlier.

“Hardly,” she said, stepping between Travis and the pale hotel employee. Hooking her arm through his, she started ushering him to the door, giving the older, silver-haired gentleman no choice but to walk with her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I hope you’ll forgive the rudeness.”

She was walking *away*.

Next to him, practically forgotten, Miles swore under his breath before speaking.

Travis was already moving, though. He had no idea what he was going to say *or* do. He couldn’t think, was surprised he could walk steadily after being poleaxed like this, but damned if he’d let her just leave without ...

Begging her to forgive me.

Telling her how sorry I am.

Asking if she’s okay.

Offering to cut out my heart, a lung, anything if it would fix shit.

Travis knew none of that would work. But he had to say... something. In his mind, he kept replaying the one time they’d talked since he’d seen her at the party, looking beautiful, aloof...and pregnant.

She’d called him, the third time in an hour, just a week later, and that was unusual enough that he’d finally answered, although he told himself he was a fool for doing it.

“Yeah, what?” he demanded.

“I ... Travis ... is something wrong? Were you ... what happened? We were supposed to meet ... ” Her low, husky voice trailed off.

It was like another punch to the gut, those words. Yeah, they were supposed to meet. By now, they would have been back in California, married.

But she was pregnant.

“Sorry. I guess I got a little confused and assumed the baby’s daddy would be taking you to Vegas, not me.”

She sucked in a breath. “Travis, wait. That ... look, you don’t understand.”

“Really?” He laughed bitterly. “Look, unless you’re the next Virgin Mary, I don’t think there’s anything to understand. We didn’t fuck. You’re knocked up. It’s not mine. Have a nice life, Iz. Hope the next sucker is smarter and quicker than I was.”

Shit, those words had haunted him over the years and he was dying inside from the poison of them.

She was already halfway across the lobby, striding on long legs wrapped in form-fitting denim tucked into knee-high boots. Those leather boots had a spike heel that could have qualified for a deadly weapon and judging by the way she’d looked at him, he’d be lucky if he didn’t end up with one of them in his throat.

But he didn’t fall back.

He caught up with her a few feet from the elevator bay and touched her arm. “Isabel, wait—”

“Don’t *touch* me,” she said, whirling around to give him a look of complete, utter scorn.

Her voice was so full of venom, he wouldn’t be surprised if he started showing signs of a toxic reaction, while her gaze was razored and cold, like blades made in the coldest pits of hell.

Travis deserved no less.

Holding his hands up, palms out, he backed up a few feet. “Okay, okay. I ...” Swallowing, he searched her face, taking in the differences—her cheeks weren’t as soft and that made her big green eyes look even bigger, darker, while her mouth was still the same sweet, lush curve, even set in that hard, unsmiling line. Her hair was no longer a smooth, elegant sweep of mink-brown silk she wore down her back or in a smooth twist away from her arresting face. No, it was loosely tumbled brown, streaked with lighter hints of gold, now cut to her shoulders, probably several months past a trim.

She looked the same ... but more beautiful.

She looked the same ... but sadder. Harder.

How much of that was because of him?

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

Her lashes flickered.

He held his breath.

“Oh?” One arched brow shot up and she wrinkled her nose as if she’d just discovered the source of some foul stench. “And just what are you *sorry* for?”

His face slowly bleeding to a furious red and he had to force himself not to look away. The shame was eating a hole in his gut once more, but his folks hadn’t raised cowards—*if you screw up, you have to own that mistake. Look the person you wronged in the face, and say your apologies. Mean them. Even if you know you’ll never be forgiven.*

He wouldn’t.

He could tell just by the way she looked at him that forgiveness would not be granted.

“For what happened,” he said, forcing the words past the knot in his throat. “I...saw you. The day y...Steele had the party. I saw you. Saw you were...pregnant. And I lost it. I should have listened when you called—hell, I should have been at the park like we planned, and waited for you to explain. I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

“Well.” She gave him a brittle smile. “I’m sure you’re glad to get *that* off your chest.”

He did look away then, unable to take that cold expression, especially knowing he was, at least in part, why she’d become that cold, that hard. Eyes burning and chest cracking wide open from the hollow ache that had replaced his heart, he forced himself to look back up—just in time to see her turning away from him.

Again.

This time, he didn’t say anything.

She was almost to the elevator when she stopped once more and looked over her shoulder at him.

The icy hardness had left her expression and she met his gaze, the sadness in her eyes so absolute, he would have done anything, *anything*, to take it away.

“Good-bye, Travis.”

The elevator doors slid open.

A couple stepped out and she slid in, keeping her back to him until the doors closed, hiding her from view before whisking her away, and out of his life once more.

And for the last time, he knew.

He’d never seen her again.

She’d make certain of it.

His heart split completely in two.

Chapter 3



Present Day

“I’m *fine!*” Travis thought about getting out of the hospital bed to shout the words into his handler’s face but he had a bad feeling he might collapse where he stood.

If he did, it would kind of negate the entire point of his argument.

“Bullshit.” Miles stormed across the room and bent over the bed, gripping the bedrail with a hand that become thin since the last time Travis had seen him. “You are going to take some time off this time, Travis. Take time off—*real* time, or you’re out. *For good.*”

“I just took a couple of weeks last year.” He glared into Miles’ haggard face, taking in the bags under Miles’ eyes, the pale cast to the older man’s skin. “Shit, you don’t look much better than me.”

“I’ve been sick, dumbass. I also ride a desk. I’m not trying to infiltrate human trafficking circles. My life isn’t at risk every second of every day while I’m on the job,” Miles snapped. “When you’re in that line of work, you have to have razor-sharp instincts. Once mine started slipping, I made the decision to move off the front line.”

“I’m *not* slipping,” Travis growled. “The intel was shit and there were more potential targets than anticipated. And what the fuck are you bitching about? I got the information you needed. I got in, got out.”

“You got in, got shot, you ... ” Miles stopped and turned away, stomping over to the window to glare out over the skyline of Mexico City. “Travis. You can’t keep this up. With your last injury, that bullet you took put you down for three months. This time, you were on an op that should have been a cakewalk for you. You—fuck. Never mind. But you’re done. You’re taking time off. Six months, *minimum*, and if you even *try* to argue this, I’m cutting you loose.”

Six months?

Travis hauled himself into a sitting position, ignoring the nauseating pain through sheer will alone. Sweat dripped down his brow, the thick, clammy sweat that came from illness or exhaustion—or both. He ignored that, too, staring at Miles' back with something bordering on desperation.

“Miles ... shit. Look, okay, I'll be careful. You're right. Maybe I was a little reckless this time.”

“Stop.” Miles turned and pinned a hard look on him.

Something in his old friend's eyes made Travis do just that.

“You think I'm blind to how much you've changed in the past few years? How much you've changed since that night you saw Isabel?”

Travis jerked his gaze away, fixing it on the overbright sunlight streaming in through the window. “She's got nothing to do with this.”

“Bullshit.” Eyes hard, Miles cut between Travis and his determined study of the view of the city beyond the window. “Fuck me, it started before that. You've been half-dead inside ever since you learned the truth and it's gotten worse every single year. For more than a decade, I've been watching you self-destruct, but this past year? It's twice as bad. I think what really pushed you over the edge was seeing your twin get hitched. What's the matter? Are you that fucking jealous of seeing your brothers all happy?”

Travis shoved out of the bed, temper exploding out in a rush of violence. “Keep it up, Hawkins, and we'll see how fast I can put you on the floor.”

“You can't stay upright for more than a minute.” Miles crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, giving his watch an insulting glance as if to measure the time. “Maybe we should make a wager on it. If you can come over here and make me eat my words, then fine, you can come back to work once the doctor releases you.”

Travis clenched a hand into a fist and cursed, each one blistering and hot. But he didn't take a single step; he could already feel his legs going wobbly and weak under him, adrenaline deserting him.

"I don't begrudge my brothers *any* happiness," he bit off, furious Miles would even insinuate it. "Especially not Trey. He's been through enough hell. He damn well deserves what he's found with Ressa."

"I never said you begrudged him, or any of them," Miles said quietly. "You're too good a man for that sort of pettiness. But even the best of us can feel envy and I know you too well, probably even better than your brothers, better than your own twin at this point, because you don't let them know you. Ever since you got back from Trey and Ressa's wedding, you've gotten quieter, darker, sadder. And we both know why."

Travis wanted to tell Miles to shut the fuck up.

Not because he was wrong, but because Miles was right.

Too right.

About most of it.

"You're wrong about one thing," he said, dropping back down onto the bed, grunting as it sent pain screaming through him. "I'm not a good man."

A good man wouldn't have turned his back on the woman who'd loved him, not when she'd needed him the most.

"Travis ... " Miles sighed. "You made a mistake. You were just a kid. And shit, you're easier on me than you are on yourself. *I'm* the reason you *made* the mistake. Can't you forgive yourself? It's been almost fourteen years."

"Ask me in a hundred and fourteen." He flipped the thin, scratchy blanket over his legs and flung a forearm over his eyes. "You win. I'll take some time off. But I can't go back to my family with my head in the shape it's in. Figure something else out. Shoot me the details when you do. Now get out and let me sleep. I'm tired, Miles."

Chapter 4



Six Days Later

The rhythmic, frantic screeching woke him up.

It was the second morning in a row but at least this time, he didn't strain his slowly healing side by rolling out of bed in a crouch and coming upon the side with his weapon in hand.

He did *pull* the handgun out from under his pillow where he'd stashed it, the habit too hard to break after years of training. But this time, he was able to stay on his back, breathing mostly level as his heart hammered away in sheer reaction.

The whole time, he listened to the strained, painful sounds and slowly realized there was some sort of *intent* behind it.

Yesterday, he'd been all but nauseated with pain, too much so to think past anything but now, as he sat there, breathing through the slightly less intense misery, it was obvious. Somebody *wanted* that sound—*that* sound in particular.

He eased himself upright, one hand braced on the bed. Once upright, he shoved the handgun under his pillow and slowly plodded over to the window. His heart thudded hard but began to slow.

As he glared out the window, somebody walked out of the neighbor's open garage, guitar in hand, the cord trailing along behind him like a restraining leash. The kid grabbed something from the van and trudged back into the garage.

Maybe he was done ...

The wailing resumed.

Travis eyed the clock on the nightstand and groaned when he saw the time. It wasn't that early, but what the fuck happened to kids sleeping in and watching cartoons on Saturdays? Wasn't that still a thing?

“Just kids,” he muttered to himself. “They’re just kids. Lighten up before you turn into nothing more than a grumpy old bastard.”

The kid playing the guitar hit another off-note and Travis shuffled over to the bed, sank onto it and grabbed his pillow. Dragging it over his face, he closed his eyes. He was exhausted, worn out in a way he couldn’t begin to explain. After another restless night, he desperately wanted a few more hours before trying to face the world.

But there was no blocking out that ... music.

He was a light sleeper anyway, had been all his life. Ever since stepping into a darker world, he’d refined that trait. It seemed best since he worked a job where anybody who didn’t wake at the drop of a pin might find themselves waking up with a knife at their throat or a gun at the base of their skull.

Or worse.

In the shadowy world where he made a living, there were things *much* worse than dying.

He’d seen that firsthand.

“Maybe that’s what this is ... a new form of torture,” he muttered, cringing at the chords lingering in the air. They sounded like the guitar’s death refrain. Maybe they were—maybe the guitar was dying and the torturous sounds were a plea for help.

Flinging the pillow to the floor, he sat up. Once more, healing muscle and skin pulled and he grimaced. On the opposite side, he had an injury that had laid him up less than two years earlier. It had barely healed and here he was down with an even uglier wound.

At this rate, his sorry ass was going to be able to double as a sieve—assuming he didn’t end up dead first.

Another discordant series of notes from the guitar player and he shoved upright and stormed back over to the window.

The one thing Miles *hadn’t* mentioned when his handler and friend updated him about this place was the wannabe

rockstar. Slamming the window shut, he sighed with relief as the guitar riffs immediately dulled to a bare whisper. He couldn't hear much from the ocean, either, but he could always pick a different room for sleeping.

There was also the option of leaving, going somewhere else entirely.

But Miles had already vetted this place, knew it was secure and the few neighbors were all above board. His boss had sweetened the deal by adding that the local grocer would deliver if Travis paid an extra fifty—expensive, sure, but if Travis preferred not to go into town while he was resting up, it was worth it.

Small towns made it harder for people who didn't belong to blend in. Travis was actually pretty good at blending in when he wanted. He'd become a veritable chameleon over the past decade-plus—he could look like the pretty-boy rich kid plenty of people might expect, or he could look so nondescript, folks forgot him the second they saw him.

But he was fucking tired and didn't want to put effort into anything these days.

And he liked it here.

It was beautiful.

It might look desolate to some, but not to him.

This particular strip of land bordered on three sides by the Atlantic, and all of four houses dotted the rock-laden sandy terrain. The house where Travis was staying was the farthest out, perched precariously on the very tip, with water all on three sides ... for the most part. The road stopped at the driveway and the house, which had clearly been expanded over the years, took up what safe, available land there was available.

The next building, home of the mini musician, was probably twenty yards away.

Plenty far enough, Travis would have thought.

Out of habit, he searched the road and mentally went through the available escape routes now that his brain was awake and music no longer assaulted his eardrums.

He had several different options—one via land, and two more via the waterways.

His first option lay with the specially outfitted truck in the garage. With that, he could take down anything short of a tank.

There were also the two boats, a newer speedboat, and then a ramshackle thing nobody would take seriously, both which were excellent options. The ramshackle-looking boat pretending to be a piece of shit was actually the fastest and the one he'd go for if he had to bail and couldn't get to the truck.

Right now, that ramshackle boat looked damned appealing.

Granted, he hadn't thought he'd need any of the escape routes, and definitely not because some teenaged, possibly tone-deaf kid was out in his garage tearing up a guitar while Travis tried to sleep.

He'd had four days of blissful peace and quiet in this house, perched on the edge of a small peninsula in Maine. The air tasted of salt water. The soothing rush of the waves had lulled him to sleep each night.

Then the evening before last, just before sunset, a battered van pulled onto the street. He'd eyed it from the porch swing until the side doors opened and disgorged three kids of varying ages, heights and builds. Then he'd heard a baby's strident cry split the night air. Four damn kids, and one was a baby with a wail to rival a banshee's.

He'd only caught a glimpse of the woman's averted head before he'd gone inside, chased away by the bright curiosity of the second smallest kid who'd seen him and shouted, "Who is that?"

Since then, he'd spent most of his time outdoors on the sprawling deck built onto the eastern side of the house. It butted right up the water's edge, secured to the rocky beach by thick supports under the deck and foundation but the most appealing part was that the house's design kept the deck

hidden from view unless somebody was actually out on the water.

Thanks to the security system Miles had installed—one that would do any paranoid federal agent proud—Travis didn't have to worry about unexpected visitors, either. Motion sensors in the yard, along the decorative-looking fence that ran parallel to the road starting at the property line, as well as along the driveway and near the accessible points of entry sent alerts to his phone whenever anybody came within spitting distance of the house.

So far, other than the neighbors farther up the street and last night's late glimpse of his closest neighbors, the only time he'd seen anybody was when he'd had groceries delivered.

He would have appreciated a warning about the music.

While Travis had prowled around the house the night he'd arrived, Miles had mentioned that the neighbor nearest to him sometimes traveled to visit family, especially this time of year.

"They should have stayed another week or two," Travis muttered now, his head pounding in time to the barely discernible drumbeat that had started accompanying the guitar. If they had, he'd be healed up well enough to travel without much issue and he could head to pretty much anywhere—hell, maybe he'd be in decent enough shape to face his twin. No way could he risk seeing Trey before he healed more, though. Not after the last time.

A dull headache, the product of too much whiskey the night before, pounded at the base of his head as he left the room. Loose, heather-gray joggers clung to his hips, riding lower than they had a few months earlier. He'd lost weight in the hospital and in the week since being discharged. But who the hell ever *gained* weight eating in hospital food?

Since he was still healing and his body needed the nutrients, he made himself a shake, grimacing through the noise caused by the blender. The protein mix, combined with bananas and peanut butter, settled easily enough on his gut as he stood looking out the large picture window in front of the house.

Movement in the water caught his eyes and he squinted against the rays of the sun, a smile slowly appearing. Harbor seals. Distant memories of trips to Cape Cod, trips out on the water with his parents, swam up from the back of his mind. He'd made a pointed effort to block out much of the time he'd spent on the East Coast when he'd been younger.

Thinking about Cape Cod, Provincetown and his trips out east had always led to thinking about Isabel. Those thoughts just added to the ache in his chest, and tore open whatever scabs had formed over wounds that would never heal.

Now, though, he remembered a day spent out on the water, the giggling squeals of his baby brother who'd only been learning to walk as his mother pointed the silly-looking seals out to all of them. Even Zane, the oldest of them who already started losing interest in *little kid shit*, had been entranced.

It's called bottling, Travis. They're relaxing. Harbor seals love two things most of all—eating and sleeping. If you see them bobbing around like that in the water with just their noses poking up, they're laying back and taking it easy.

Sebastien's laughter had been cut off as a right whale came up from the water, making the large yacht they'd taken out with friends rock back and forth. Denise Barnes had just laughed and pointed out the whale's tail as he fluked just a few dozen yards away.

Sunlight reflected on something to the left and he craned his head, grinning as he realized a couple of seals had pulled themselves onto the sandy edge of land across the narrow strip of road in front of the house, not even fifteen yards away.

He was outside on the porch in seconds, tossing only a quick glance around to make sure none of the neighbor kids or their parents were close by.

The air had a bite, even though it was still late summer. He didn't mind. The threadbare t-shirt and joggers he'd pulled on before collapsing into bed didn't provide much warmth, but the damp air felt cool and clean against his skin, in his lungs as he dragged in a breath.

One of the seals lifted his head as a loud shout came from down the road, but then lowered it, clearly unimpressed by the humans in the area.

“Me, neither, pal,” Travis muttered. He’d spent so much time in the muck, dealing with the worst mankind had to offer, he wasn’t sure there was much of anything mankind *could* offer that would undo all the shit he’d seen.

Another shout, this one higher, angry, and maybe a little scared, caught his ears and he scowled but turned his head to look anyway. Several of the seals lumbered into the water, but a couple remained, huffing out what sounded like irritated sighs.

As he reached the edge of the porch, he could only see one person.

But his ears picked up several others—and the lack of ear-destroying guitar.

“... a fucking *girl*,” a taunting, *mean* voice said.

He locked his jaw, disgust swimming inside as he jogged down the steps and started in the direction of that voice, not even stopping to ask why he was doing it.

Another comment had Travis narrowing his eyes, especially once he saw the speaker—a lanky kid, probably fifteen or sixteen, shoulders already showing signs of broadening, in the gawky stage of puberty that came a few months before the rest of the body started to catch up with the height.

He didn’t like the menace he’d heard in that angry, young male voice. Didn’t like it at all.

“I’m *not* a girl, shithead.”

Travis glanced at the other kid—slighter than the first teen, more than a head shorter, with a voice full of rage.

“Yeah, *shithead!*”

That came from one of the kids he’d seen that night a whole gang of them piled out of the van before disappearing into the house. This kid was pint-sized, barely came up to the

mouthy punk's waist, dainty as a fairy, dressed in one of those play costumes kids her age liked. It was poufy and pink and added to the fairy impression. Her mouth was set in a mutinous line as she gave the bully a dark look.

The taller of the three, the punk with the bad attitude, reached out like he was going to shove the little girl. Travis swore, cursing the injury that had him moving slower than he liked.

But the smaller teenager shifted position and in a move that had Travis smiling in approval, he joined his hands together, swiveled his hips and swung, using his double fists like a bat, out and up, striking the asshole right in the chin.

The blow sent the punk stumbling back.

Before the kid could catch his balance, Travis was there.

“Is there a problem?”

The smaller teenager whipped his head around.

Big, doe-brown eyes met his, hardening with a glare.

Travis scanned the kid's features, replayed the bits of conversation he'd heard and thought he might know what was going on. It didn't make him like the asshole anymore, either.

Bigots were exhausting, even if they were young bigots.

“Brant used Aaron's deadname,” the little girl piped up, her bright blue eyes all but dominating the small oval of her face. She tucked her hand into Aaron's and snuggled closer, beaming up at Travis before looking at the other kid—the little asshole.

Travis bit back a smile as the little she-devil stuck her tongue out at Brant.

“You're a doucheface, Brant.” The little girl once more tucked herself close to Aaron. “Stop calling Aaron by his deadname. He's a *boy*.”

“Brooklyn,” Aaron said, a smile softening his hard expression as he looked down at his fierce defender. “You go

inside, okay? And *hush* with the names. She'll get us both if she hears you calling somebody that."

"I wanna stay with you." Brooklyn still clung to Aaron's hand. "Brant's the one who should leave." Her big eyes, framed with incredibly thick lashes, narrowed on the other kid. "Brant, go *away*. This isn't your home."

"It's not *your* home, either, you little twerp," Brant said, scowling at the little girl. "Your parents don't love you enough so the court took you away. You're just freeloading here."

"That's enough." Travis stepped in before the other two could respond. Putting his body between them and Brant, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe you should leave."

The boy's eyes met his, then jerked away, his show of false confidence lost as he faced an adult.

It was over. His body language made that clear even before he turned away and started to slink off.

Then Aaron spoke. In a mockingly cold voice, he said, "That's right, little man. Run along home now that a real *man* is here. Isn't that kind of what you said to me the other day?"

Brant spun around and rushed forward, fist upraised.

Travis caught it. Pain twisted inside as his injured side protested the movement, but he didn't let it show.

The older kids both gasped and Aaron whispered a stunned, "*Fuck*."

The little girl was much, much louder.

"*WOW!*" Her shriek echoed in a way that didn't seem possible and jacked up the pain in Travis's skull.

"If you want people to think you're a *man*," Travis said, his tone level. "You might want to try working on that temper of yours. And maybe stop trying to pick fights with people half your size."

"What the fuck are you doing to my kid?"

Travis had seen the man approaching.

While he was disappointed the broad, brawny man seemed to think his kid was the one being wronged, he wasn't surprised. It had been his experience that asshole kids usually happened because they had asshole parents.

"Don't even try to touch either of those kids," he said in warning before letting Brant's fist go.

The boy stumbled back, his face still pale but harsh flags of color stained his cheekbones, a sign of both humiliation and anger.

"What is this shit?"

A larger, more heavily muscled version of Brant pushed into Travis's personal space, the man's lantern-jawed face twisted with an angry sneer.

"Who do you think you are, laying hands on my kid?"

"I'm the guy who stopped him from punching somebody half his size." Travis watched the man's eyes flick over to his kid, and then toward Aaron.

"If that kid wants to pretend to be a boy, she needs to figure something out," Brant's father said, his tone derisive. "Boys their age get into fights. She don't like it? Then *be a fucking girl.*"

"I don't think the kid's gender is any of your business—or that of your kid's," Travis said, lifting a hand when the kid behind him sucked in his breath to respond. "And I don't know about you, but back when I was a teenage boy, guys who tried to pick fights with kids half their size were generally considered assholes and bullies. Pretty sure those rules haven't changed."

The bigger man shoved even closer to Travis, one big hand coming up to grip the front of his shirt.

Looking down at that hand, Travis debated his options on how to handle this. "Since his father clearly didn't teach him how to control his temper, I figured I might as well step in. You really should take your hand off me. Now."

“Yeah?” The man gave him a sneering excuse of a smile and tightened his grip on Travis’s shirt. “Or what?”

Travis caught the man’s wrist and twisted, spinning into the movement as he yanked the bigger guy off balance and sent him smashing facedown into the sandy, gravel-ridden dirt.

Distantly, the pain in his side flared a red-hot warning.

On the nearby rocks, one of the lounging seals barked. Travis tried to decide if it was mockery, reproach or approval as he wrenched at the man’s wrist. The bigger guy jerked as he tried to twist out of the hold. He failed and ended up whining in pain. Travis put his bare foot on the guy’s shoulder. “Stop moving. You’re making it worse.”

“Get the fuck off my dad!” Brant rushed toward him.

Travis sidestepped and shifted, putting the kid’s father between them as a barrier. Brant was moving too fast, that gangly form working against him and he tripped over his dad’s legs and his own feet to go sprawling, the air knocked out of him. He lay there, flat on his belly for a second, then rolled over and gaped at Travis.

“Stay down,” Travis advised. Since he didn’t necessarily trust the kid to listen, he shifted his stance so he could keep a closer eye on him.

Face red-hot with humiliation and anger, Brant slowly sat up, his knees bloody and red under his long, baggy shirts and his chin skinned, face dirty from his fall.

But he stayed on his ass.

To the struggling adult, Travis asked, “What’s your name?”

“Fuck you.”

“No wonder you’re so pissed off at the world. If my mama named me that, I’d be angry, too.” Behind him, the other two kids snickered. “Come on. Name? It’s awkward having a serious conversation with anybody when you don’t know their name.”

“It’s Lloyd,” the older kid from behind me said. “Lloyd Brimley.”

“Thanks, kid. Okay, Lloyd, I’m going to let you up in a minute here. You’re going to take your kid and walk on back to your place, then have a talk with him about picking fights with kids half his size. You should probably tell him that it’s a dick move, trying to push around a little girl who probably isn’t any older than five or six. Personally, if it was me, I’d talk to him about being a bigoted brat, too, but he probably learned it from you so I’m not going to hold my breath there.”

Lloyd started to struggle again, only to stop and swear in a pained voice as Travis added more pressure to his hold. “You keep that up, my friend, and you’ll dislocate your shoulder. I can tell you from personal experience that it hurts like a son of a bitch.”

“Let me go, you stupid fuck, and don’t tell me what to do with my own kid.”

Travis blew out a breath. “Guess we’re not going to be able to solve this politely. Alright, Lloyd. I’m going to let you up but if you come at me again, you’re going to piss me off.”

The sound of a car’s engine approaching came to him but he kept his attention on Lloyd. “You understand, pal?”

“I’m not your *pal*, fucker. But, yeah. I understand.”

Travis let go. He promptly moved back, taking care to nudge the two kids who’d been behind him farther away, clear from danger in case Lloyd decided he hadn’t understood after all. He made sure they were clear from Brant, too, although the kid was limping toward his father already.

Lloyd shoved upright, his face a furious shade caught between red and purple. A vein throbbed in his temple as he glared at Travis before looking around, gaze finally landing on Brant. The kid swiped the blood from his chin and sheepishly looked away.

“Did you touch my kid?” Lloyd snarled.

“No. He tripped over his own feet and you after he tried to rush me. That was a dumbass move to begin with, so I

discouraged it by moving out of his way. And it's all been recorded—just like the incident here.” The car he'd heard went quiet. Judging by how close it was, he suspected Aaron and Brooklyn's mother had arrived.

Travis huffed out a breath just as Aaron groaned. “Fuck, we're so busted.”

Lloyd still glared at Travis. “I ought to sue your ass. I'm calling the fucking cops and having you arrested for assaulting a minor.”

“*I* am gonna call the fucking cops because *you* are a d-hole!” Brooklyn announced, planting herself at Travis's side.

A d-hole?

“Ah ... Brooklyn, I'll take care of this,” he said, stroking a hand down soft, silky hair that was a soft ash blonde with streaks of paler gold. He could feel her looking up at him but he didn't take his eyes off Lloyd.

“Stay out of this,” Lloyd snapped, glaring at the girl. “And if you don't want Brant bugging you, stay away from him, kid. And stop cussing so much.”

“You can't tell me what to do!” She rushed forward, quicker than Travis could react—in his defense, he just wasn't expecting her to be a miniature Valkyrie. In what world did little girls decide to take on grown-ass men who acted like schoolyard bullies?

In this one, apparently. She kicked Lloyd in the ankle.

And that was when Travis saw that she had topped off her pretty princess dress with a pair of princess shoes that had a pointy toe. Not quite high-heel adult pointy-toe, but still, pointy enough that if a kid managed to kick a bony prominence, like an ankle, in just the right place, it would hurt.

He almost choked on his laughter as Lloyd's face went red, a blistering stream of cursing erupting from him as Brooklyn darted away, no doubt planning to hide behind Travis.

Lloyd shot out a hand and Travis slammed the bladed edge of his palm down along Lloyd's wrist, hard.

Lloyd let out a pained grunt and yanked his hand back.

“You don’t want to touch that girl. You don’t want to bother either of these kids. Neither does that boy of yours,” he advised softly. “Go on home. Make your call to the cops. Have fun with it. But ... keep in mind, that boy came swinging at me. All I did was defend myself. The laws allow an adult to defend themselves against a minor when the minor attacks—I only deflected *his* attempted assault and I never laid a hand on him otherwise. All the scrapes came from him tripping over you when he tried to rush me. This entire fiasco, including your boy’s attempt to swing at a child, was caught on the video set-up at my house. All of it will be turned over to any authorities.”

Lloyd’s mouth tightened.

“Ms. Bella is here!”

The name *Bella* struck a knife into his heart. An old, beloved nickname for a beloved person who no longer loved him. *Bella-mine*.

He shoved the painful thoughts away as Brooklyn caught Travis’s hand and tugged on it several times, her excited squeal helping to separate the then from the now a little quicker, and with a bit less pain.

“Lloyd.” The woman’s voice was warm and husky, catching Travis’s attention immediately. “If that kid of yours is harassing Aaron again, I’m calling the police.”

Travis might have looked over at the woman just then—she sounded kind of familiar. But his blood had started roaring in his ears, his still recovering body telling him to sit the fuck down. Now.

“This ain’t about Brant harassing anybody. This fucker here was knocking him around!” Lloyd snapped, finally looking away from Travis.

“You liar!” Brooklyn shouted. She shoved between Lloyd and Travis, moving in a way that said she did everything at top speed. She half-tripped over the hem of her fluffy pink gown

and wobbled, her thin shoulder slamming into Lloyd's groin as she tried to steady herself.

This time, at least, it was an accident.

Lloyd went red, eyes crossing in pain. His hand shot out toward the little girl and Travis reacted. Pure instinct guided him again as he shoved forward, using his body to separate child from adult before catching the man's wrist. He twisted Lloyd's arm and the man bent over, snarling out a curse at the pain as Travis put pressure on the limb.

"I *told* you not to put your hands on that kid," he said, teeth clenched as the wound in his side protested—and tore. Something hot oozed down his side. Fuck. Perfect. *Just* perfect. He'd gone and busted open the staples, or at least a couple of them.

He dragged in air, tried to focus past the nauseating rush of pain, tried to clear his head.

It might have worked. Maybe.

But over the scent of the sea and the overpowering scent of the man's cologne, Travis caught the hint of something warm and feminine. It tugged at an elusive memory, teasing him even as the warm, wet body fluid trickled down his side to dampen the waistband of his loose, gray sweat pants and the asshole in his grip jerked against his hold.

His head swam even more and he blinked hard, blew out a slow, steady breath.

Some piece of shit asshole wasn't going to put him on his ass. He didn't care if he *was* just a few days out of the hospital, still recovering from a miserable infection that had been hours short of going septic.

His thoughts cleared, some.

"My patience is pretty much gone, so somebody needs to start talking."

That voice—

This time, the memory wasn't so elusive. Adrenaline swam over him in a wave, clearing the fog from his head.

A face came to him. He blinked and gave another sharp shake of his head. Nah. Couldn't be.

Miles would *not* have done that—

Fuck. Yes, he would have.

Slowly, he looked up and found a pair of green eyes slanting his way at just that moment.

For a minute, she stared blankly at him, her gaze showing no sign of recognition.

Then her lips parted on a soft inhalation.

As for Travis, he felt leveled, like he'd been hit sideways across the head with a metal baseball bat. The impact was so intense, he let his grip on the asshole go slack.

Lloyd tried to jerk away and Travis automatically tightened his hold, taking the heavier guy's leg out from under him at the same time.

“Stay down.”

He did it all, takedown and order, without looking away from Isabel.

Mouth dry and mind racing, he tried to find something to say.

He managed an abbreviated version of her name before his lungs locked up on him.

“Bel.”

The thick fringe of her lashes temporarily hid the rich green of her irises. Soft color flushed her cheeks. But once she opened her eyes and focused on him, her expression was a smooth, blank mask.

“Travis.”

She said his name with such icy precision, that he wouldn't have been surprised to look down and discover he had frostbite.

“Why did you put my neighbor on the ground?”

Travis blinked, a full second passing before the rather sensible question actually made sense. Following the direction of her gaze, he looked at the back of the grown-ass man who'd had no problem mocking a teenage kid, side by side with his mouthy son.

“He was being an asshole,” Travis said, his disgust strong enough to clear his head. “Was about ready to grab your little fairy princess.” He paused, then added, “The princess did kick him, and kinda accidentally raked him. But she barely reaches his hip.”

“Lying puke,” Lloyd mumbled, his cheek pressed in the dirt and face lobster red with anger or humiliation. Probably both.

“Bet the security cameras will disagree, shithead.” Travis didn't spare him another look.

“Shithead,” Brooklyn said agreeably, delight in her voice. “D-hole shithead.”

Chapter 5



Travis Barnes.

For a few seconds, she hadn't even recognized him, his face more square and roughly hewn in a way she wouldn't have expected.

But then she'd seen his eyes—and there was no mistaking those eyes.

Of all the people to show up in her life, *now*, why was it *Travis Barnes*?

But then again, thinking of the shape Miles was in, was she *surprised*?

She shouldn't be.

The sight of Travis, even as pale and ragged as he looked, hit her like a punch to the gut, to the heart.

She wanted to stare, greedily imprint the image of him as a fully-grown male on her mind. He was whipcord lean, *too* lean, it seemed, especially with the wide wall of those shoulders, but still, fucking beautiful. His jawline was granite hard and square, overwhelmingly masculine, saving his face from being *too* pretty.

Somehow, some way, it *almost* didn't seem right, didn't seem to fit the picture she'd always had in her head of him. But it had been years, hadn't it?

And those eyes ... those eyes were unmistakable. Heart-stopping.

Travis ...

Lloyd's screeching interrupted the spiral of her thoughts and she jerked her gaze away to glare at the man who had become a monster pain in her ass.

Just then, she really wanted to kick her neighbor, even if he literally *was* down. Maybe she wouldn't discipline

Brooklyn *too* hard about ... whatever had happened. She had absolutely no doubt that whatever had happened, Travis's version was much closer to the truth than whatever tale Lloyd wanted to sell her.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at two of her foster kids. "Back to the house. Now."

"But—"

"C'mon, Brooks," Aaron said, his quiet voice and quick, meek look getting through to the little general in princess clothing in a way Isabel couldn't do even if she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Not that yelling was her thing. Brooklyn just adored Aaron and had almost from the first time they'd met not even six months earlier.

As the two kids walked back to the house, she shifted her attention to Brant. Her narrow-eyed look had his face going red and hot and he backed up several steps, shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Do you really want to grow up being the kind of person who picks on weaker people, Brant?" she asked.

His Adam's apple bobbed, eyes jerking toward her, then away.

His dad snarled, face still in the dirt.

"Don't talk to my boy, bitch."

The rage in his voice had the blood draining out of Brant's face until he was all big, scared eyes and nerves.

"Go home," she mouthed to him.

He didn't respond, but she wasn't surprised to see him spin on his heel and take off running.

Wordlessly, she directed her attention to Travis.

He was still staring at her, one hand controlling Lloyd's body with ridiculous ease. His free arm was tucked in close to his side, the position awkward, almost unnatural.

“Let him go.” She didn’t ask.

But Travis complied, releasing Lloyd and backing up a few steps as Lloyd came surging up, one hand swinging in a wild punch.

Travis had moved toward her and without her quite realizing how he’d done it, he put his body between her and Lloyd, moving her several steps back and well out of range of Lloyd’s clumsy attempts to strike.

Lloyd spun around, his eyes landing on Travis, then shifting to Isabel, fury a vibrant glint in his gaze.

“You ever put your hands on this woman or any of her kids, I won’t stop with a warning next time,” Travis said, his voice so cold and flat, it sent shivers down her spine just to hear it. “I’ll break bones—more than one. You’ll be trapped flat on your ass healing for months, and that’s if I’m in a good mood. And if I see that kid of yours with even a *mark* on him tomorrow, if he even *moves* funny, I’m going to drag you kicking and screaming from your bed and beat you to a bloody pulp.”

Lloyd stared at Travis, his reddened face draining of blood.

Whatever he saw, it made the bigger man back up a step.

Then Travis added, “And I’m going to enjoy every fucking second. You might want to think twice about giving me a reason to ever look your way again.”

Lloyd walked away, his pace not *quite* a run, but a hell of a lot quicker than the man’s usual strutting gait.

His door banged shut maybe a minute later.

Travis still stood with his back to her.

She drew in a ragged breath and almost moaned because now her head was full of the scent of him.

Backing up a couple of steps, she took another breath and reminded herself to focus.

It worked, too.

But she found herself focusing on the wrong kind of thing.

“What the ... ” She sucked in a breath. “Travis, you’re *bleeding*.”

“I know.” The words came out gritty. “It’s fine. Just tore a couple of stitches.”

Without even looking at her, he walked away, elbow tucked in close to his side where the fabric was slowly growing wetter and redder from blood.

She shoved a hand into her hair and fisted it. Her thoughts spun in empty, dizzying circles before finally settling down into a coherent stream.

Travis was hurt.

He’d intervened and helped her kids.

And he was *hurt*.

Fuck.



When he didn’t answer, Isabel let herself in, braced for the ear-shattering screech of the alarm system.

But it was quiet.

Please don’t let me find him collapsed on the floor somewhere.

Less than a minute passed before she found solid proof she needed to be much more specific when she prayed for things.

Travis *had* all but collapsed.

But he had made it to the couch in the minimalist-styled living room where she’d often sat with Miles over the six years since she’d settled in Maine.

Looking at him now, pale, sweating, mouth set in hard lines as he pressed a folded towel to his side, Isabel’s mouth went dry. A hundred questions flashed through her mind, everything from *what happened* to *why are you here* to *why didn’t you have faith in me*.

But the last one was the most intimate, the most personal, the one she'd never let herself ask.

Do you still love me?

As if some psychic echo of her question slipped from her mind to his, his eyes snapped open.

Despite his obvious pain, the force of his personality was evident in his blue-green eyes as he stared at her. It didn't matter that he was slumped on the couch, hair disheveled and in need of a wash, with the scruff of what was probably a week's worth of facial hair darkening his cheeks and chin. Travis Barnes was a man who compelled the eye just as much now as he had been as a teen, hovering on the edge of adulthood, ready to take her father on, despite the apparent disparity of power between a well-known DA out of Virginia and a young, if affluent, teenager from the West Coast.

That the force of him was so much ... *more* now didn't surprise her at all.

He blinked, wildly curling lashes sweeping down to hide the incredible color of his eyes for a split second. When he looked at her again, it was like he'd pulled on a mask.

The hard lines of his face smoothed out.

The deep groove between his brows disappeared.

And although he didn't sit up, everything about his demeanor changed—a second ago, he'd been in pain, yeah. But he'd had this ... watchfulness to him. An alertness that told her he might not be looking for trouble but fuck the world if it thought he couldn't handle it. She knew that attitude. She hadn't realized just how *well* she'd known it until she was away from it, either. The men her father had called *friends* or *employees* who had actually been his hired muscle had moved with an awareness similar to what she'd just seen in Travis outside.

Similar. Not the same.

It made her uneasy.

Now he looked at her with a half-smile that was nothing more than the grown-up echo of the boy he'd been. Lazy, confident and easy.

She felt like she had whiplash.

He went to push himself into a sitting position and that spurred her into action.

“Be still,” she snapped, striding over to him. She paused only long enough to turn on the light.

He blinked in protest, the hand on his unaffected side rising as if to block the glare.

It gave her a little *too* much pleasure to march over to the large window facing out over the Atlantic and snap both curtains *wide* open, then oh, so, slowly lift the blinds so the bright, late summer sunshine came pouring in.

She heard a sharp breath behind her.

Nothing else.

Turning to face him, she gave him a bright smile. “You were kind enough to help my kids out. I can’t just leave you to bleed all over Miles’ couch, now can I? Let me go wash my hands.”

It took a conscious effort to walk past him and keep that smile in place, though.

Because when she'd met his gaze, he hadn't been scowling.

No.

Travis looked at her with something akin to longing in his eyes.

And it left her shaken down to her very soul.



He could have turned the air blue with his curses.

He wanted to stare after her, watch the swing of hips that had become deliciously curvy in the years since they'd last seen each other.

He wanted to stroke his fingers over skin that was no longer delicate ivory as if she never saw the sun. Warmth kissed her cheeks now, just the faintest hint of a glow to her complexion that made her even more beautiful to him,

But she'd always been beautiful, becoming more so with every year that passed between their short, infrequent assignments—if you could call their summer romance that.

The subtle change in the air currents told him she was returning. He only caught a bare hint of sound, her feet all nearly silent on the floor as she rounded the couch and came to a stop a few feet away.

She gave him a quick once-over, her lips pursed in a slight frown. “Can you get that shirt off?”

“My shirt?”

“Yes. The one you're bleeding all over. Can you get do it or should I just cut it off?” She stared at him, her gaze far more direct than it had been when they were kids.

She'd had a strong personality then—it had been necessary to survive her father. But she'd also learned coping mechanisms, the same way many in abusive homes did—avoiding conflict with abusers became habit.

The Isabel Steele in front of him looked like she'd spit conflict in the eye and tell it to kiss her ass.

Travis was damn glad he was sitting, even gladder he was in no shape to be on his feet, and even gladder than *that* he was too drained to get aroused, given the circumstances.

“Fine,” she muttered, more to herself than him. “We'll cut it off.”

Travis had been listening to the rhythm and cadence of her husky voice—but not exactly *hearing* her words. The *cut-it-off* comment had him jerking upright, which immediately sent

pain crashing through him. He bit back on the curses only out of the instinct developed over the years.

Showing a weakness could lead to getting killed. Apathetic as he was about life in general most days, he owed his family better than to get his ass murdered on the other side of the globe doing God only knows what, so he generally did try to avoid it.

But he couldn't hide the sweat that broke out on his forehead in response to his abrupt movement, or the way his head started spinning.

Isabel had turned away as she muttered to herself and now she was facing him again, her mouth in a hard, flat line. Light reflected off the scissors she held in her hand.

Bracing one hand on the couch, he eyed the scissors, then slanted a look up at her. She didn't *look* like she'd gone and developed some bloodthirsty edge over the years.

“What are you talking about cutting off?” he asked warily.

Her brows rose, a puzzled look on her face. Then, slowly, a smile curved her lips, humor dancing in her eyes. “Oh, honey. That ship has sailed. Those days are long, long past.”

She started forward.

He didn't relax as he darted another look at the scissors. “What ship are we talking about? And you haven't answered me.”

“Your shirt,” she said tartly. “You're bleeding.”

“I can deal with it.” It finally dawned on him that she'd come over to *help* him. He couldn't quite believe it, not from her. Not after what he'd done.

She sat on the solid, square block that served as a coffee table and faced him, her gaze direct. “I'm not leaving until we get that cleaned up. Quit being a baby.”

“Why are you helping me?” he asked, the words coming out like they had to be dragged from his tight throat. “You don't owe me shit.”

“That sounds like something my father would say,” she fired back at him, her green eyes flashing. “You don’t do a kindness because it’s something you *owe* another. You do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

The light in her eyes almost knocked the breath out of him—what little he still had.

“There was a time when I wouldn’t have had to point that out to you,” she continued, a deep furrow between her brows. “There was a time when you were one of the kindest people I knew.”

Cheeks flaming, he looked away. “Times change, Iz. People change. *I’ve* changed.”

“Not that much.” The couch cushions gave way beneath her as she moved to sit closer, her face only inches from his. “You had no reason other than kindness to go out there and help my kids.”

His throat tightened.

He was so pathetically grateful when she lowered her head, although panic stirred as she reached for the hem of his shirt.

“Don’t,” he whispered, grabbing her wrist. The last thing he needed was for her to see the mapwork of scars that now marked his body. It had been hard enough to explain those to his twin—not to mention getting Trey to swear he’d keep his trap shut. All Isabel would have to do to make him fold was look at him the right way.

Kind of like she was doing now, lambent eyes under the fringe of her lashes as she studied him.

Then she jerked her wrist away. “Stop being a *baby*.”

This time, when she went to cut his shirt, he set his jaw and stared straight ahead, because what the fuck else was he going to do? She’d already shown she wasn’t going to listen and there was no way he’d risk so much as hurting her feelings by walking out of the room and throwing her kindness in her face.

At the sound of her harsh inhalation, he closed his eyes and dropped his head onto the back of the couch.

Fuck. Why had he even gotten out of bed today?

Chapter 6



The wound was ugly.

Isabel caught her lip between her teeth to hold back the flood of questions trying to break free.

She'd expected to see a surgical incision. In fact, she hadn't even considered anything *other* than that. She'd already had her temper up, ready to call Miles and lay into him, sick or not, over letting Travis—no, not *Travis*, *anybody* fresh from surgery come out to his house *alone*, a good thirty minutes from the small county hospital that was the nearest place for serious medical emergencies.

But this was no surgically precise wound.

Although she could see the fairly neat row of staples that held the upper part of the wound together, the wound itself was jagged, like lightning carved into his lean torso. Too lean.

Her hands trembled a little and she ordered herself to get a grip, then said, "Give me that towel."

He turned it over, eyes still staring resolutely ahead.

The color had drained from his face, a sign that he was hurting, no doubt, but also likely a sign he was still recovering. Judging by the look of the wound he'd probably torn open just minutes ago, out there dealing with Brant and Lloyd. Even aside from that, the wound looked to be healing poorly, the edges angry and red.

"When did this happen?" she asked as she pressed it to the wound still oozing blood.

He was quiet for so long, she wasn't sure if he'd answer. But finally, a terse reply came. "Ten days ago."

She set her jaw and eased the towel up so she could take another look. "This doesn't look ten days old."

"You see a lot of people with their sides torn open?" he asked, caustic sarcasm in his voice. Then, immediately after,

he muttered, “Shit. I’m sorry. You’re trying to help.”

She ignored the apology. “I’ve seen enough injuries to know what something should look like after a week and a half. It should look better than this.”

She half-expected him to ask when and how she’d seen such injuries, and wondered what she’d tell him. He didn’t ask.

“It got infected,” he said in a gruff voice. “Wasn’t healing right and that’s how I ended up in the hospital.”

Under the fringe of her lashes, she took in some of the other scars she could see, wondered what he’d tell her about those, then decided she wasn’t going to ask.

Instead, she applied more pressure and looked over at her first-aid kit. It was well-stocked, yes. For the past five years, she’d had anywhere from one to seven foster kids living with her and *nobody* could collect cuts, scrapes and bruises like a child.

But she didn’t keep the material for sutures *or* staples on hand—nor would she know how to *use* such even if she had found them.

“I’m going to go check Miles’ first-aid supplies,” she said with a sigh. “Nothing I have is going to do jackshit to close this wound.”

“You don’t have to—”

“If you tell me again what I don’t have to do, Barnes, I’m going to hit you.” Rising, she strode out of the small living room. Once in the bathroom, she closed the door and leaned back against it. “God help me.”

She needed a few minutes to get her head on straight. A few hours, maybe even a few days, would be ideal but it wasn’t like she could leave him out there bleeding like that while she tried to get a grip.

So she dug out the first aid kit she knew Miles kept on hand. She didn’t want to know just *why* he had such a comprehensive kit in his closet, decided she’d sleep better not

knowing. Still, she was glad he *did* have the kit because she found what she needed to help Travis.

There were no staples or a suturing kit. It wouldn't have mattered because she had no idea how to use either but she found alternatives. She'd had a bit of experience with bad wounds, thanks to a neighbor, back during one of her previous identities, before she'd lived as Bella Franklin. That particular neighbor had had a condition that prevented her from healing well and Isabel had helped out a couple times a week with dressing changes after the woman found out insurance would only cover visiting nurses to come out twice a week instead of the four times weekly the doctors wanted.

Isabel was no nurse but if that wound was as old as Travis said it was, there was no point trying to close it back up. It just needed to be cleaned and the bleeding dealt with. And, as inflamed as it was, he needed to be on antibiotics—hopefully, he was.

After rifling through the kit, she decided to just take the whole thing out to the living room. And damn it, it hadn't even taken a couple of minutes—nowhere near enough time to settle her mind.

“So, fake it,” she told her reflection. She'd had to do that more than once in her life. She could pretend she wasn't a mess of nerves, hormones, and heartbreak once she was sitting down next to the guy who had shattered her dreams, right?

Thinking of that, of how much she'd cried over him, steeled her resolve and she left the bathroom with her mask in place.

It wavered a bit when she came into the living room and saw Travis sitting still as death, his head on the heavily padded couch, eyes closed, barely even seeming to breathe.

Her heart gave a hard, painful yank.

Then, before panic could settle in, he cracked open one eye.

She kicked herself mentally and continued on, sitting on the chunky, slab of wood that served as a coffee table this time

and putting the supplies on the couch next to him.

“This wound is really red, inflamed as hell. Looks like you’re getting an infection,” she told him. Not *getting* one. *Had* one. A *bad* one. “Are you on antibiotics?”

“Yes.”

She gave him a dubious look. “I don’t think they’re doing the trick.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

“Okay.” She flicked him another glance before using a couple of gauze pads to clean up the blood. “You need to let a doctor look at it.”

“I know what infections require, Iz. I’ll take care of it.” He glanced at her but only held eye contact for a moment.

Biting back a sigh, she finished rinsing out the wound, using the towel he’d been holding to catch the run-off since he clearly didn’t want to move. Once that was done, she pulled on a clean pair of gloves and packed the shallow wound carefully, trying not to think about the steady rise and fall of his chest, or the stoic silence. This had to be hurting him but he didn’t make a sound.

Just as she went to tape the non-stick bandage into place, the final part of the dressing, Travis said, “That girl is something else.”

“Aaron isn’t a girl,” Isabel snapped. Annoyed with him, *and* disappointed, she shot him a glare.

His eyes were still closed, but his lips curved. “I wasn’t talking about him. The little fairy princess she-devil. Brooklyn, I think.”

Isabel’s cheeks heated and she ducked her head, focusing on the bandage. “Oh, sorry. I ... hell, Aaron gets a hard time from just about everybody and I just assumed ... anyway, I’m sorry. And as to Brooklyn? You’re not wrong. That girl could slay dragons if any of them existed.”

“Something tells me she’d rather charm them and make them into her own dragon army so she could ride them into

battle.”

That made her look at him and she saw that he'd once more cracked an eye open and was looking at her.

A laugh bubbled out of her and she gave up trying to distract herself with the bandage. She couldn't do anything else to secure it without adding more tape and that wasn't necessary. So she edged away from him under the guise of gathering up the trash in one pile. After stripping over her gloves, she returned the unopened supplies to the proper kit.

“You're right on the money,” she said, smiling at the thought of brave, stubborn little Brooklyn commanding her own army of dragons.

“I heard something that mouthy punk said when he yelling at them—they foster kids?”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Yeah.”

“How many are you taking care of?”

“Four, at the moment. They keep me busy.” She managed a smile as she stood, Miles' first aid kit in hand. “I need to put this back.”

When she returned, Travis was easing his way into a clean, faded t-shirt he must have pulled from the basket of laundry that waited on a recliner. She was about to ask if he needed anything, manners delaying her urgent need for escape.

But then he looked at her, hair ruffled from the shirt he'd pulled on, his blue-green eyes as beautiful as they'd been the first time she'd seen him.

“Four foster kids,” he murmured. “That's pretty amazing. How many kids do you have of your own?”

She froze, her heart jumping up to settle in her throat while an ache that would never really disappear settled in the pit of her stomach.

And he saw. Damn him for still being able to read her.

“Isabel?” He frowned, taking a wary step toward her.

“None,” she said. The single word sounded hollow even to her. “I don’t have kids of my own, Travis.”

I don't. And I never will.

She grabbed her kit from the table and started for the front door, acutely aware Travis was watching her.

She didn’t look back.

“Take care of that injury,” she snapped as she opened the door. There, she stopped and looked back at him. “And for fuck’s sake, ask a doctor about a better antibiotic. You better do it before you end up collapsing because if I have to call the ambulance, I’m going to tear Miles a new one. I don’t care how sick he is.”

She turned.

“Wait.”

Shock had a gasp breaking free and she turned, looking down at the hand Travis had wrapped around her elbow.

How had he moved so fast? So quietly?

She went to jerk her arm free, a scathing retort burning its way to the tip of her tongue.

But then she saw Travis’s expression.

“What do you mean by that ... how sick Miles is? And for that matter, I thought he *was* sick ... ” He must have seen something on her face, even though she tried to hide it, because his voice trailed off, awareness dawning in his gaze.

As his hand fell away, Isabel closed her eyes and swore, low and hard.

Damn you, Miles.

“Isabel?” The roughness of his tone had her looking back at him.

And despite how he’d hurt her, she felt her heart twist in her chest. “Shit, Travis. I’m sorry. He hasn’t told you, has he?”

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. He said nothing.

And that was answer enough.

Chapter 7



It had been six hours since his first call.

Two hours since his last.

He'd sent a text every hour on the hour.

Needless to say, the silence was pissing him off.

Staring at the phone and the little cursor in the message box, Travis debated on what he wanted to say before finally deciding it was time to take off the kid gloves.

Travis: I know you're sick, Miles. Either you call me by the time I have my first cup of coffee in the morning or I'll just come looking for you.

Nice and point blank, the way he preferred to handle things.

Miles *really* didn't like it when Travis showed up anywhere near Miles's place of employment.

Travis no longer worked for the federal government—hadn't for years, not since he'd refused a direct order to leave some kids behind on an op. They'd been *kids*. How could he leave a couple of kids behind in that hellhole?

Miles had tried to go to bat for him, but even Miles had people had to answer to his superiors. And when push came to shove, Travis had said he hadn't regretted his actions, because those kids were alive, and safe.

So he was what they considered *freelance*, working with a handful of other freelance assets to ferret out useful information ... and do the occasional rescue. He'd saved more people doing it *his* way and he didn't have to answer to Uncle Sam, either.

Still, it wouldn't be a good idea to be seen anywhere near the bureau ... not that he didn't know how to blend in. But it was never a good idea to get cocky.

Travis wasn't a fan of the bureau, never had been, even during his brief, and unconventional employment, working under Miles to obtain information focused on human trafficking rings that fed into the US.

If he was linked to the bureau in any way, his career was over. Travis wasn't entirely sure he cared, but it could put his family at risk, and *that*, he did care about.

But he also cared about that stubborn ass, Miles.

He'd had an uneasy feeling in his gut about how Miles had looked when he'd seen the grouchy bastard a year ago.

But he'd let Miles distract him and the next time he'd seen his handler, Miles had looked ... well, not okay, but almost normal. For him.

At the hospital last week, though, Miles had most definitely *not* looked okay.

He hasn't told you, has he?

Knowing sleep wasn't likely to happen but rest was necessary, he took his phone and a bottle of water dosed with a healthy serving of a nutritional supplement that was meant to help with wound healing, he made his way out to the deck and sat down.

Normally, the sound of the waves soothed him.

He had his own place in Oregon, a small house on the coast that he'd bought for its isolation and because he could let the sound of the ocean in on the rare occasion that he spent any downtime there. But he didn't go often. It turned out that being alone in his head was one thing Travis didn't like.

Right now, the endless rhythm of the water did nothing to ease the knots of tension tightening his muscles.

He picked up his phone and started to dial, just as he had a half dozen times over the past hour but always stopped just short of calling. And he did the same this time.

Miles would have received his messages.

He'd call in his own damn time and Travis knew that.

When that would be?

The fuck if Travis knew, although his gut told him it would be before morning. Miles wouldn't risk him making good on his threat—and Travis wasn't going to risk it, either, even if he told himself otherwise.

It was just as he was eyeing the cell, debating on starting a seventh dial when the phone rang.

The clouds had started to go all pink and gold with the coming sunset, but Travis hadn't been able to appreciate their beauty or how soft the air had become.

Now, struggling to clear his head as he saw his mentor's number on the screen, he blew out a breath.

It rang again and he answered, going through the rote process of identifying himself even though both he and Miles knew this call had nothing to do with the job.

"Identity confirmed," Miles said, as he'd said for what was probably the thousandth time.

Then there was nothing between them but silence.

Travis swallowed.

Miles sighed.

"Who is going to go first?" the older man finally said.

"I might as well, since I'm the one with all the questions," Travis muttered, feeling foolish, angry ... and so fucking sad. Miles's silence over the past several moments had said far more than words could. "I know you're sick. What's wrong?"

"Cancer. I've got maybe a year if I keep up with chemo, but ... son, I'm fucking tired."

Tears burned Travis's eyes. As much antagonism as he'd often felt toward Miles, they'd developed a friendship over the years and he truly did respect his handler. "So there's no real hope?"

"It was already spreading by the time I got diagnosed, Travis." He huffed out a laugh. "When they tell you to get

those damn screens once you start hitting your late forties, kid ... just do them. Don't put them off."

Unable to stay still, Travis pushed upright and paced over the railing of the deck, staring out over the water. The tide was out, baring rocks covered with seaweed. Gulls came swooping in, leaving just as swiftly. Travis saw all of it, but couldn't focus on a damn thing.

"So, you're fucking dying," he finally said.

"Yes. I'm fucking dying," Miles replied. "But, hell, aren't we all?"

"Don't get philosophical on me," he snapped as he spun around. He wanted to hit something. Wanted to scream. He drove his fist into the rough wood of the house and felt pain hot and bright. "What the fuck, man? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were in deep on a dangerous op." Miles' response was blunt and to the point. "The last thing you needed was to be distracted. Then *I* would have been worried about *you* dying ... on my watch."

"And now I'm going to be stuck watching you die!"

"Trav ... " Miles' voice was gentler now. "I'm sick."

That gentle voice cut through Travis's rage like nothing else could. Numbly, Travis half-stumbled, half-walked over to the Adirondack chair where he'd been sitting and he sank down, watching the deepening colors of the sunset. "I don't want to do this work without you there. I don't trust anybody like I trust you."

"That's your call." Miles cleared his throat. "I hope you don't mind me saying this ... Travis, I *want* you out. You're young. You've *done enough*. You never should have been in this to begin with."

"There is no enough," he said. But he couldn't regret the words he'd spoken. Although ... what the fuck was he going to do with himself? He knew how to fight. He knew how to charm and seduce information out of people. He knew how to infiltrate places he wasn't supposed to even know about, much

less *be* in. And he knew how to kill people. Those weren't useful skills that would fit in with the life he'd been *meant* to live. And now he didn't even know what fucking life that was supposed to be.

And just like that, his thoughts landed squarely on Isabel.

“Why did you send me here, Miles?”

“Because I'm running out of time to fix the damage I did to two people I care about,” the older man said. He didn't pretend not to understand. “And it's the one thing I have to do before I can leave this earth.”

“That's not on you.” Feeling his chest go cold and tight, Travis dragged his hand down his face. “I'm the one who doubted her.”

“You were a kid and I knew damn well what I was doing.” Miles knew how to use his voice and how to wield words and now he used them like a blade. “I'm tired of seeing you punish yourself when *I'm* the reason you acted as you did.”

“I could have trusted her.”

“And she could have told you before she arrived at the Cape that year, couldn't she? But she didn't. How would you have felt if you'd seen her in town? You would have still been hurt, still been confused. I made it worse twisting it the way I did. I fucking well knew what I was doing, so don't try to absolve me of this.” Miles stopped abruptly as his phone clicked. “I have to go. But we'll talk ... soon.”

“Not about this.”

But he was already gone.



It was past eleven before Isabel let herself slow down.

The second she did, thoughts of Travis all but overwhelmed her.

That wasn't to say she hadn't been fighting the intrusion of him in her head all day—and she meant *all* day, from the time

she'd seen those impossibly blue-green eyes staring at her out of a face far too thin, and looking far, *far* too old for his years.

Ten years had passed since she'd seen him.

He'd be thirty-two now, the same age as her, separated by only a couple of months.

But he looked older. Not *old* in years. He just ... carried a weight in his eyes.

She'd seen that weight in her own eyes back when she'd been living under the interminable pressure of her father's influence, knowing what sort of man he was, what he was capable of. She hadn't *always* known the full degree of his cruelty, hadn't always known just how corrupt he was, but after what Stephen Beresford had done, and when her father had just shrugged it off ...

She curled her lip and told herself not to go down that road.

Her father had died in prison four years earlier, although he'd kept trying, until the very last, to get his conviction overturned.

In the end, it had been somebody *he'd* sent to prison that had gotten him ... indirectly, or at least that was what everybody believed. There was no concrete evidence to support the theory, but there were enough threads that Miles felt secure enough to tell her that was what he believed had happened.

He told her he was pretty certain her father's death had resulted as a '*favor*' by a lifer on the account of somebody in another federal prison in a completely different part of the country, a rival of sorts, in the sex and drug trafficking trade—one Benedict Jenkins. Jenkins' trial, from what Isabel had learned, had been one of the cornerstones of her father's career, catapulting him to his appointment as a US District Attorney.

But the man who'd killed Wilson had been clever, going after him when there were no witnesses and he had injuries of

his own to back up his claims that Isabel's father had attacked him first.

Isabel knew her father, though.

He wasn't a fighter.

He was a tough bastard, but he'd never start a physical confrontation.

However, when she'd been asked whether she had doubts about how the ordeal supposedly went down, she'd smoothly said, *My father was a man with a lot of secrets. Who knew what he was capable of?*

Nobody had spared a lot of time on the matter.

Wilson Steele had been a criminal who'd caused a lot of pain and had made a mockery of the US justice system. That he'd died in prison had been just desserts as far as most people were concerned.

She still had to occasionally testify, either in court or at a probation hearing, the last time being at Stephen's attempt to get probation. He'd served ten years of his fifteen-year sentence, but he hadn't been the easiest man for those on the panel to feel sympathy for, his natural arrogance showing through his attempts at piety.

He wouldn't ever serve a day for what he'd done to her—or his part in what he'd cost her, but she relished sitting in court the day he'd been sentenced and on his one attempt at an appeal, as well as his recent attempt at early probation.

“Stop it,” she told herself, dropping down on her bed and staring out through the wide, elegant window that faced out over the ocean. “If you keep thinking about him, about your pissant father, you'll have nightmares.”

But her thoughts were caught in a loop and had been ever since seeing Travis earlier.

Travis, with his too-handsome face and his too-old eyes.

What had he been doing with his life to put that sort of weariness in his gaze? And those wounds on his body?

So many scars ...

It hit her then.

Miles ...

Slowly, she sat up, her feet hitting the floor with a solid thud as a sick realization came to her.

Hoping she was wrong, she grabbed her tablet and put in a video call to Miles. She had to see his face when she asked this question. If he lied ... she'd know. Wouldn't she?

The line rang and rang and rang.

Just when she thought he wasn't going to pick up, his face appeared on the screen, his thinning hair disheveled, eyes heavy with sleep but clearing with each passing second.

“Bella, is there a problem?”

“No ... not that kind, at least.” She had an instinctive twitch at hearing that name on his lips, even though she'd gotten used to it years ago. Why it was bothering her now ... well, she knew. Of course, she knew. Seeing Travis threw her back to when she'd been a teenager, back to when she'd been Isabel Steele, in love with a boy who'd promised to take her away from a life she'd hated.

On the screen, Miles' eyes flickered before his face took on a calm expression.

She knew that mask.

It was the one he almost always wore with her.

“Why are you still in touch with Travis?” she asked bluntly.

Another flicker of his lids, then he inclined his head. “What do you mean?”

“Don't try to play stupid with me,” she bit off. “There's *no* reason for you to have kept in touch with him. But he's *here*—and yeah, I've already figured out you're trying to meddle again. You've probably already heard from him, and I'm afraid I let that cat out of the bad ... he knows you're sick.”

He sighed and looked away. “Yes, Bella, I talked to him.” He held up a hand when she would have blasted him for hiding the information—she’d *seen* the shock, the pain, the *hurt* in Travis’s eyes when she’d inadvertently revealed Miles’s poor health to him. “I wasn’t hiding the information from him—there just hadn’t been a good time for us to talk. It’s not something you tell somebody in email and we hadn’t been able to talk on the phone for some time ... and now? Well, he’s recovering from an accident—”

“Don’t you mean a gunshot wound?” she fired back. It was a stab in the dark, but earlier, she’d done some googling as she tried to solve the puzzle of what kind of injury he had and that was the only thing that made sense.

Travis Barnes, related to a couple of famous or semi-famous guys, had one healing gunshot wound and at least *one* other that was fully healed and now an ugly scar on the side, as well as numerous other scars.

And only *one* thing made sense.

Back when they’d been secretly seeing each other, and for several years after, they had been the occasional picture of Travis in tabloids or online, but not any in years—at least not that she knew of, and she’d made herself stop looking, too, although she hadn’t always been able to keep herself from clicking when she saw pictures of his famous brothers.

Her stab in the dark hit true—Miles flinched.

“How do you know about that?” he asked.

“I saw it.” She narrowed her eyes. “We had ... an altercation with my loudmouth neighbor—again—and Travis got involved. He ended up ripping open a couple of the staples holding the injury closed and starting bleeding. I followed him to the house and made him let me look at it.”

“He actually *let* you?” Miles’ brows shot up almost to his hairline.

“Stop stalling.” She leaned closer to the screen. “Why are you still in touch with him? And why the fuck does he have a *gunshot wound*?”

“Isabel ... ” Miles gave her a smile she hadn’t seen in some time.

But it wasn’t one she’d forgotten.

It was the one he always offered when he was about to lie to her.

Maybe if they hadn’t become friends, she never would have learned to tell that smile from the real one. But she had. Or maybe she was just too attuned to lies after a lifetime of living with her father.

But the next words out of his mouth were utter bullshit.

“I just stayed in touch with him because I kept hoping for a chance to fix the mess I caused between you two ... that’s all. We became friends. A few days ago, he reached out and told me he needed a place to crash. Since the house was open and you were gone, I didn’t see the harm.”

Isabel stared at him for several long seconds. Then, with a cool tilt of her head, she said, “You’d think a federal agent would be a better liar.”

Disconnecting the phone, she rose and slid through the door to the attached deck, needing to look over at the house.

She didn’t expect to see Travis.

But the scent of woodsmoke filled the air and when she walked to the very end of the deck that ran the length of the house, she saw the firepit situated outside the house where he was staying.

And there he was, seated on an Adirondack chair, the firelight limning his lean, muscled form so that all she could make out was his shadowy form.

It was him, though.

Her heart leaped at the sight of him and before she knew it, she was sliding on a pair of worn sandals she kept on the deck and moving down the steps to cross to him.

Chapter 8



Isabel appeared out of the night like a dream.

For a second, Travis wondered if maybe she was.

But then he brushed the fanciful thought aside.

Even in all the dreams he'd had of her over the years, she hadn't been this beautiful.

When she came to a stop a few feet away, he inclined his head back against the seat and watched, trying to get a read. It was a lot harder than it had once been.

Slowly, she sat down on the arm of the chair closest to him and the firelight, warm and golden, flickered over her, highlighting her lovely face.

Her green eyes looked almost black in the night and they held a glassy, hard glitter.

So. She was angry.

Tipping back his bottle of beer, he took a sip.

"I don't plan on being here long, Isabel. Give me a couple of days and I'll be out of your hair. You won't ever see me again."

"I don't recall telling you that you had to leave," she said, her husky voice soft and low. She angled her head to the side and the firelight played off the stubborn line of her jaw.

Oh, yeah. She was pissed, alright.

"Somehow, I don't see you being pleased about me being here." He took another long pull of his beer, staring out over the night-dark ocean. It was either that or stare at her, feast on her while he could. Fuck, she was so beautiful. Seeing her filled a hole in him even as it cut gouges into his heart and soul. He'd missed her so much. Every fucking day for the past fourteen years, until missing her was just part of who he was,

just like loving her. He didn't know who he was without that love, without that need. Without that longing.

But he also didn't have the right to sit here and stare, bask in the very warmth of her.

So he'd heal up a day or two, catch a few more glimpses, because fuck if he was that strong to go without them while she was so close ... and then he'd leave.

"I honestly haven't decided how I feel about you being here."

Those words were so unexpected that he jerked his head around to gape, caught off guard.

It was hard to shock him.

He'd seen so much filth in his life. Even before he'd started working for Miles, he'd seen his share of users—you couldn't be related to something as famous as his older brother Zach had been and *not* see users and takers. Then his years working to ferret out secrets related to some of the worst monsters imaginable, people who'd sell their own family for a quick buck ...

Yeah, it took something to shock him.

But looking into Isabel's gaze, he was at a loss for words.

She leaned closer, the heavy fringe of her lashes lowering to shield her eyes so only a thin rim of her irises showed.

"Travis ... "

His voice came out tight and strained as he asked, "What?"

One hand braced on the arm of the chair where he sat as she closed yet more distance, her eyes so close, watching him intently. "I need to ask you something."

"Okay."

Her lashes drifted down a bit lower, then swept back up. "Are you working for Miles?"

For maybe five seconds, the question made no sense.

Then he shoved out of the chair. Even as he did it, he realized how fucking stupid an action that was and he huffed out a laugh. “Working for Miles? Doing what?”

It wasn't a bad cover. He didn't sound strained or stressed.

And maybe if it hadn't been for his abrupt lurching out of the chair—which had the wound in his side pulling like a *bitch*—he would have gotten away with it.

But as he turned to face her, he saw the dawning fury in her eyes and he knew she didn't believe him.

Isabel strode to him and shoved him.

“You *are*,” she said, the words low and furious. “Damn it, *why*?”

She shoved him again when he didn't answer. He caught her wrists. He'd take out whatever abuse she wanted to give him, except she was strong as hell and he was still recovering from a bad infection—if she kept it up, she just might shove him on his ass, and he didn't want her feeling guilty over that. And she would.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said, lying because what the hell else was he going to do? “I do accounting work, Iz. When I bother to work at all.”

“Bullshit.” She wrenched her hands free—it wasn't hard. He'd never force anything on her, even though letting her go ripped a piece out of him. But once he was no longer touching her, she reached up and drove a finger into his chest. “You're no more an accountant than *I* am.”

“I graduated top of my class from Berkeley,” he said mildly. “Two years early.”

He didn't mention his other major—criminal justice, because it wouldn't help him here. She already knew he'd graduated early from high school, the same as Trey, although Travis could have finished high school two or three years sooner if he'd wanted. But he hadn't—leaving Trey behind just wasn't an option.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion and he thought maybe he'd skate by, but then she shook her head. "Okay, so maybe that's the cover you use. But you're one of his. And you're not going to tell me ... either because you *won't*, or because you *can't*."

She fisted her hands in his shirt and stared at him, her face crumpling.

"*Why*, Travis? You had dreams, *big* ones. Why did you end up down in the dirt?" She shook him slightly and it wasn't anger on his face now, but pain.

And that pain gutted him.

It only got worse when she let go of his shirt to slide her hand to the healing wound on his side and carefully trace the area around the injury. "In the dirt, doing shit that damn well could get you killed. *Why?*"

"*Why?*" His voice cracked. He couldn't hide it from her. She'd asked and he'd tell her. He had no willpower when it came to her. But that wasn't any real news. She'd always been his greatest weakness. "I stopped dreaming fourteen years ago, Iz. What I did with my life after that ... it didn't matter. I figured I might as well do some good somewhere or other."

Her face twisted in a rictus of grief and pain while tears swam in the misty green of her eyes.

"Damn you." Then she reached up and cupped his neck, pulling his mouth to hers.

Isabel had given up on the idea of feeling true *happiness* when she'd realized that Travis Barnes had abandoned her. For years after he'd walked out of her life, everything had existed in swathes of gray with little exception. Color had started seeping back in only after she'd started to truly believe that her father would stay in prison, but even then, the colors were muted.

Sometimes, she still felt like she couldn't take a deep breath.

But as her mouth touched Travis's, the world lit up.

It didn't matter that it was night, the only illumination that of the fire by their sides.

It might as well have been high noon, with the sun shining down on them in all its glory.

The world took on color.

Sensation snapped to life inside her.

The scent of him, musky and male, smelling of the sea and the sun, flooded her senses.

For the first few seconds, he didn't move, rigid against her.

Then his arms banded around her, one hand shooting into her hair, dislodging the clip she'd used to twist the wavy strands into a loose knot while his free arm clamped around her waist and hauled her to him.

He angled his head to the side, deepening the connection of their mouths and his tongue swept into her mouth.

She moaned and the sound was echoed by him.

His kiss ...

Oh, hell.

She strained against him, her breasts aching in a way that was wholly unfamiliar, while her nipples drew tight and a heavy, relentless pulsing settled between her thighs.

Most of her life she'd gone without experiencing desire, save for a few inexperienced, awkward make-out sessions with the man who now held her, back when they'd both been two teenagers desperate with the throes of young love. She had a couple of lovers, but those hadn't been really about passion. Loneliness had driven her, not desire.

She might have enjoyed her time with the few men who'd passed in and out of her life, but that was it. A passing pleasure. Nothing more. Even at the time, she'd known she'd only been filling a void. Those men had paled in comparison to the boy she'd loved.

And now...?

These kisses didn't even *compare* to the heat that had passed between her and Travis all those years ago.

Those kisses had been hot.

These kisses threatened to melt her very bones from the inside out.

Those kisses had made her swoon and sigh.

These kisses threatened to destroy her sanity, while she threw caution to the wind and embraced the long freefall all the way to its very end.

His teeth nipped her lower lip as he tangled his fingers tightly in her hair and tugged, urging her head back.

“Open,” he murmured against her mouth. “Open for me, Iz.”

Anything ...

Whatever he wanted, she thought. She'd give him anything. Everything.

His tongue rubbed over hers and she echoed the caress, insanely pleased when it had him groaning deep in his throat. Raking her nails over his neck, she pressed him closer, while her other hand gripped his hip.

Another shudder wracked him and he broke the kiss to skim his lips along her jaw, the touch delicate, so at odds with the vicious hunger threatening to tear her to pieces—and she could sense the same echoing inside him, too.

And then his mouth came back to hers, soft, seeking ... seducing.

He teased the corner of her lips with his tongue, coaxing her into a dance she'd gladly enjoy—he didn't even have to ask. When she sank into him, he sucked on her lower lip, the upper one, before finally taking her mouth again in a deep, drugging kiss that had her rocking against him, seeking a deeper contact, although they were pressed as close as they could possibly be without being naked together.

Naked ...

Skin, Isabel thought. She wanted skin.

Grabbing the hem of his shirt, she yanked it up.

And felt Travis stiffen, then recoil.

Chapter 9



Even with the nauseating pain twisting through him, lust and need were twin lights ablaze inside Travis.

Panting, one hand pressed gingerly to his side, he stared at Isabel.

Awareness drifted in, the hunger in her eyes slowly fading.

But it didn't die.

He wanted to cling to that, but he didn't dare.

They'd been combustible back when they'd been a couple of naïve teenagers, fumbling around on the beach in the moments they'd stolen when she'd go out running, the only time her father allowed freedom.

Those runs were how they'd met, how this attraction had started.

All these years later, the passion still burned every bit as hot and bright.

For some reason, Travis wasn't even that surprised.

"I'm sorry," he said in a tight voice, struggling to lash his own needs down so he didn't give in and reach for her again. Even the gut-wrenching pain in his side hadn't been enough to kill the hard-on that was trying to punch a hole through the faded denim of his jeans.

Sooty black lashes lowered, shielding her eyes for a heartbeat and then she was looking at him with cocked brows and an amused smirk. "I'm pretty sure *I'm* the one who kissed *you*."

He opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Nothing to say?"

He kept his trap shut, because what the fuck was there *to* say?

She closed the distance he'd put between them and reached up, touching the tip of her finger to his lower lip.

He went rigid, that simple touch jolting through him like lightning. His cock pulsed, all but waving and demanding her attention. Other women could have stroked him off with less reaction—*had*.

But that wasn't surprising.

It had only ever been her.

Isabel.

Always Isabel.

“You're not leaving, Travis,” she said quietly.

He blinked, the words a far cry from what he expected to hear from her.

“I'm not?”

A slow smile curved her lips as she shook her head. “No. You're not.”

“Why?” He scowled, staring at her even as that smile did things to him—twisting his heart into knots and soothing a thousand myriad wounds.

She laid a hand on his cheek, staring into his eyes as the firelight flickered across her skin. “Because I'm not yet sure what to do about you ... and I'm not going to let *you* remove yourself from the equation until I figure it out.”

Then she turned and walked away into the darkness toward her house.

He was still standing there several minutes later trying to think that through when he heard her door close.



The text came at nine the next morning.

Normally, Travis would have already been out of bed, finished the strenuous exercise regimen his lifestyle required,

had breakfast and been on his computer, either researching for his next assignment or looking for one on his own.

Since the injury, his routine had changed more than a little. The workout routine had cut back—in a major way.

What little research he was doing was either abstract or focused on information he could pass on to contacts he'd acquired while working freelance.

But when his phone chirped out its alert, he was just starting to wake up and he lay there, bleary-eyed as he waited a fraction of a second for his brain to snap into focus.

The phone was in his hand in the next moment and he sighed because, in his gut, he already knew who it was.

It was Trey. His twin. Somebody who knew him better than he knew himself sometimes, and yet, didn't even know him at all.

Haven't talked to you in a while. Getting kind of worried.

If his twin was getting 'kind of worried', then his parents were probably about to lose their shit—not that they'd ever show it. They were too ... collected for that.

But he knew he needed to call them.

He made sure to send texts every couple of weeks, and tried to call once or twice a month, if not more, but the last job had been ... problematic, even aside from landing him in the hospital. The last several assignments had been rough, to be honest. And fuck, he was tired.

The delicate tightrope he walked between the two worlds he lived in was getting harder and harder to maneuver.

"Why, Travis? You had dreams, big ones. Why did you end up down in the dirt?"

Isabel's voice came to him, a haunting echo as he hauled himself into a sitting position. He didn't know how she'd worked out what he did. She couldn't know the details. It wasn't possible. But she'd had a rough idea and that was bad, in more ways than one.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he eyed the message on his phone for several seconds before shooting his twin back a quick response, promising to call Trey later.

Okay. Would be nice to see you soon, too. We miss you ... all of us.

That last bit had him scowling and he realized he'd definitely gone too long without talking to his mom and dad. One of them, his dad most likely, must have said something to Trey. They may not show their worry to Travis, but they would occasionally check in on him via his twin.

Dragging a hand down his face, he wondered if maybe it really *was* time to get out.

And another voice rose up to haunt him, this time, Miles, this time.

"I want you out ... you've done enough."

He'd been honest when he'd told Miles there *was* no enough.

But he was so fucking tired.

And two bad injuries, so close together ... he didn't think either had happened because he'd gotten lax on the job, but when a guy in his line of work got as tired as he was, mistakes happened.

When those mistakes *did* happen ... well, sometimes, it led to other people being hurt.

The thought sent a spike of cold down his spine and in an instant, he knew Miles was right.

It *was* time to get out.

His phone chirped with another alert.

Although everything on his phone was encrypted—protection, just in case—messages relating to his work had an extra layer of security. He had to do a retinal scan to open the new message and saw that it was from Miles.

I'll be in town later today. We need to look at your injury, see how you're healing.

He rubbed a hand over the several days' worth of beard growth on his face as he considered the message. He didn't need it looked at, knew damn well why Miles was coming out.

But he needed to tell Miles his decision, and he wanted to see the old man anyway.

We can meet in town.

Miles's response was agreeable, but Travis knew better than to assume that meant Miles would mind his own damn business. The man never had been good at that. Why would he start now?



“Are you gonna make babies with the neighbor?”

Brooklyn's question had Isabel bobbling the buttermilk she was adding to the pancakes, some of it splashing on the counter. She glanced down and estimated it wasn't enough to make a difference so she added the rest before the girl could startle her—*again*—and cause another mess.

That girl, she thought wryly, even as an old heartache twisted through her chest. Putting the measuring cup down, she picked up the mixing bowl and turned to face one of her youngest, and the absolutely most precocious, foster kids.

“And why on earth would you ask that, Brooksy?” she asked, falling back on the nickname Aaron had given the girl within a week of the two meeting each other.

“Because ... ” She bit her lip and slid a look to the other kids at the table. Since it was the last week of summer, she'd herded them all up and out of bed—with the promise of a special breakfast, not just cereal. For a couple of them, she had teased them with bacon, but honestly, they probably would have been satisfied with just pancakes. Brooklyn hadn't even needed the bribe of chocolate chips in her pancakes.

Storm Grainger, her oldest and newest charge, came in bouncing Mariah on her hip. Mariah was Brooklyn's baby sister. Storm was fifteen and was still quiet and reserved, but

she was slowly warming up to Isabel and the others, although she insisted she wasn't staying. As soon as her father was able, he'd come to get her, she told everybody at least once a week. That had been the case for the three months she'd been there and Isabel didn't think it would change.

Storm's real name was Raqueline but she didn't answer to it. A few weeks earlier, she'd confessed that her mama's name had been Cherise Raquel and she hated the reminder of her mom.

That was something Isabel understood. Her own mother had been lost to her a long time, long before they'd found her lying dead in the secure home Miles had found for them after Wilson had been locked away without bail, the empty pill bottle by the woman's side a silent testimony to the fact that her mother hadn't been able to live with the guilt or shame once Wilson Ward's crimes had come spilling out.

Isabel didn't care for reminders of her mother, either. Her mom's father had been a rich man, one with connections and there had been times in Isabel's childhood when he'd tried to get his daughter to leave Wilson, but Evelyn Stone Steele had insisted that a *woman's place was with her husband* ... and so Isabel and her sisters had grown up under Wilson's brutal hand.

Yes, Isabel understood wanting to cut away from painful reminders.

Storm suited the girl in a way—and not just because she vaguely resembled a young Halle Berry with her tawny complexion and large brown eyes, combined with a lithe, graceful form. The girl *was* an X-men fanatic, though, and had used some of her allowance to first bleach, then dye her hair platinum. In her free time, she worked on a webcomic and Isabel had to admire the girl's skill and talent.

"I changed her," Storm said, putting the baby in a high chair. "I could hear her jabbering while I was putting my makeup on."

"Thank you." Isabel smiled at her. "You didn't need to do that."

Storm smiled and shrugged before moving around to her seat.

“I wanna wear make-up,” Brooklyn announced.

“You’re too little, pipsqueak,” Storm said.

“Stop it with the names, Storm,” Isabel said automatically as she continued to whip the batter. Recognizing the mutinous look on Brooklyn’s face, she said, “Brooksy, maybe later, I’ll give you a manicure. We’ll even paint Mariah’s toenails if we can catch her while she’s asleep.”

“Why just her toenails?” Brooklyn asked, her near-meltdown forgotten.

“Because she’ll wake up if we mess with her hands.” Isabel winked at her.

Brooklyn tried, and failed adorably, to wink back.

Aaron leaned in and whispered something to Brooklyn and the girl’s face lit with devious delight as she looked at Isabel with laser-like focus. “You didn’t answer me about the neighbor.”

Aaron grinned widely, displaying a slightly crooked right front tooth. “The *sexy* neighbor.”

“How sexy?” Storm asked, intrigued.

“What’s sexy?” Brooklyn demanded.

The phone rang.

Isabel muttered, “Thank God,” and grabbed it.

“Bella ... this is LeAnn!”

The other woman’s voice had a familiar, frantic edge Isabel knew all too well. Out of habit, Isabel thought about the groceries she had in the house—more than enough, and considered the room arrangements—she had two open rooms, still, not counting the spare rooms she always kept open for her sisters.

“Hey, Lee. How are you doing?”

“Shit is *crazy*. How are you?”

“Not bad. Making up bacon, eggs and pancakes for the kids. What do you need?”

“I think you already know,” LeAnn said with a weary laugh. “I hate to ask because I’m sure your hands are full, but you’re my last option. I’ve got a fifteen-year-old boy—he’s a bit of a hard case.”

As LeAnn talked, Isabel started pouring the pancakes, desperately trying to tune out the two teenagers debating on whether they should or shouldn’t explain *sexy* to five-year-old Brooklyn.

Isabel winced as it was decided she’d hear it soon enough since she was starting school.

“A second, Lee,” she said and then she grabbed the phone and looked over her shoulder. “Aaron, Storm—*no*.”

They scowled at her—she ignored them and focused on Brooklyn. “Brooklyn, *sexy* is a word grown-ups use for other adults they find attractive. It’s *not* a word for five-year-olds. Got it?”

She waited with arched brows until Brooklyn heaved out a glum sigh and mumbled, “All the fun words are grown-up words.”

“Do I want to know?” LeAnn asked.

“Just the usual,” Isabel assured.

“Considering it involved Brooklyn ... ” LeAnn let the silence linger and then they both laughed.

“What happens if I can’t help?” she asked, referring to the boy LeAnn wanted her to take in.

“If you can’t, he’ll end up in a group home for troubled kids and he’ll probably stay there until he ages out of the system. You’ve got a knack for helping kids like him, Bella. You’re honestly his best chance. You’ve worked miracles before.”

Isabel didn’t know about miracles, but hearing that the kid might end up in a home decided it.

“I’ll give it a shot,” she told LeAnn. “But don’t go expecting miracles. You know I don’t believe in them.”

Even as she said it, she thought of the man with eyes the color of a tropical ocean who’d showed up next door, completely out of the blue. Sure, a nosy, interfering old grump had no doubt been involved, but that Travis was here at all was something of a miracle, wasn’t it?

“I believe in *you*, Bella. That’s enough.”

With a sigh, Isabel hung up the phone and expertly flipped the first round of pancakes.

As she went to pour the next batch, a flash of pink appeared in her line of vision and she braced herself. Looking over to see Brooklyn loitering a few feet away, she said, “Remember, five squares away from me while I’m at the stove.”

Brooklyn looked down and pointed.

Isabel checked and counted the floor’s square tiles. Exactly five stood between her and Brooklyn.

“Okay, kiddo. What’s up?” She already knew, though.

“You didn’t answer me,” Brooklyn said in a very clear, patient voice. Crossing her arms over her chest, she lifted her delicately pointed chin and stared Isabel down. “Are you gonna have babies with the new neighbor?”

At the table, Storm and Aaron snickered and giggled behind their hands.

Mariah found it all terribly funny, apparently, because she picked up the bottle Aaron must have had gotten ready for her and smacked it on the tray of her high chair as she cackled.

“No, Brooksy,” Isabel said, ignoring the rest of the chaos. “I’m not having babies with the new neighbor.”

Brooklyn scrunched up her face. “Are you *sure*?”

“I’m quite sure,” Isabel said. She checked the pancakes. “I’m not having babies.”

“But ... ” Brooklyn huffed out a breath.

Flipping the cakes onto a server platter, she turned off the stove and turned to look at the little girl. “But what, Brooklyn?”

“But I saw you *kissing* him.”

“Ooohhhh ... ” Storm said. “And when was this?”

Aaron wolf-whistled.

As Isabel flushed, Brooklyn preened. “I saw it last night! Out my window!”

Isabel heaved out a beleaguered sigh and marched Brooklyn and the pancakes over to the table.

Of course, she had to be spotted ... and of *course*, she had to be spotted by *Brooklyn*.

Chapter 10



Travis didn't see Isabel—or either of the kids he'd met the other day—when he headed out to meet Miles.

He considered it a stroke of good luck. Or at least he tried to convince himself he did, even as he slowly drove by the house, hoping for a chance of a lean, long-legged brunette.

The kid playing basketball in the driveway across from Isabel's house saw him and fumbled the ball, sending it rolling into the street.

Travis hit the brakes and waited for the kid to get it.

Brant just stared at him.

Travis waved at him and when the boy did nothing, he leaned on the window. “You want that ball or do you want me to drive over it?”

Hesitantly, Brant approached, but a few feet from the road, he stopped and the look he gave Travis had his gut twisting into nasty, slipping knots.

Putting the truck into park, he turned the vehicle off and pocketed the keys, then slid out and circled, going to grab the ball.

Brant had backed up several more feet by the time he turned around and Travis blew out a tired breath. “Brant, unless you plan on trying to swing at me again, I'm not going to touch you. And even if you were to try and swing at me again, all I'd do is keep you from hitting me. I don't believe in harming kids.”

“I'm not a kid,” Brant said, jutting his chin up. “I'm almost fifteen.”

Remembering how he'd felt at *almost fifteen*, Travis considered that, then nodded. “Okay, well, I don't believe in swinging at something who is more than half my age. Just doesn't seem fair.”

“I’m not a pussy.” Brant curled his lip, sneering at him. “I can take it.”

It was clear by the way he acted that he believed that—and it was doubly clear Brant *had* taken it, and then some.

“Be that as it may,” Travis said, bouncing the ball on the pavement once, then again, absently moving into a long-forgotten rhythm as he held the kid’s gaze. “Some things, a grown man just doesn’t do. Bullying somebody younger than you, weaker than you ... that’s what *pussies* do. Real men? They don’t do it. They don’t need to.”

Brant flinched, then immediately covered it with a sneer. “My dad’s back is messed up. He hurt it years ago. Says if it wasn’t for that, he could’ve taken you easy.”

“Okay.” Travis shrugged.

Brant clearly wasn’t expecting that. He blinked, his pale, hazel eyes sliding from anger to confusion, then back. “You don’t believe me? He was the best football player this town’s ever seen—went to Ohio State on scholarship. He *should* have gone pro, but a couple of teachers didn’t like him and they scr—*fucked* him over, cost him his scholarship.”

Yeah, Travis thought. He bet that was how it happened.

Instead of answering, he shrugged, then glanced at the basketball hoop. “You into football, too? Or you prefer basketball?” The kid had the long, lean frame for it, that was certain.

“I’m good at both,” he said with a cocky curl of his lips.

“Yeah?” Travis gauged the distance to the hoop, the healing wound in his side. Then he shot.

It sailed in, not even kissing the metal hoop.

Brant’s eyes popped wide. “*Nice.*” Immediately, he recovered, the appreciation fading from his features like it had never been there and he shrugged, giving Travis a once-over. “Not bad for a pretty boy, I guess.”

Travis smirked. “You should see my brothers.” Pulling his keys from his pocket, he tossed them up and caught them, still

holding Brant's gaze. "Your dad play much with you?"

"He can't." A sullen look came over his face. "His back. Plus, he's always hustling to find some work. Too many places can't take him on cuz of it."

Travis wondered how often the boy heard all of that. Often enough that it had become routine for him to parrot back whatever his father said, that much was certain.

"Maybe if you can lose the attitude with the kids across the street and act like you got some decency, I'll shoot a game or two with you here in a few days."

"Why not now?" The question seemed to surprise Brant even as he voiced it.

It didn't surprise Travis. The boy was so lonely, it was practically written on his face.

"I've got a meeting." He shrugged, careful not to let any sign of pain show. He shouldn't have shot that basket. But he felt sorry for the kid. Maybe, just maybe, if somebody showed him a better way, he could get off the path he was on before it was too late. "And I'm still healing up from a work injury ... another few days before the doctor wants me doing anything."

"So you won't be doing shit," Brant muttered. "I know that story."

"I'll be up to a couple of games in a few days." Travis caught his gaze and held it. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have said anything. The question is ... can you stop being a dick to those kids?"

"What do they matter to you, anyway?" Brant's reddish-blond hair, tangled and damp from the heat, fell into his eyes. He shoved it back impatiently as he waited for an answer.

"They're good kids who've been through a hard time. They don't need a bigger kid pushing them around for kicks and giggles," Travis said in a blunt voice. "That's dick behavior. You want to go through your life being a dick who pushes around people who are smaller than you? That's not what being a man is."

Brant's cheeks went a harsh red and his mouth quivered on an angry response. But he said nothing, not for several long seconds.

When he finally did speak, there was no sarcasm or vitriol. "Why do you cuss so much?"

"Because you clearly aren't going to stop cussing yourself, so what does it matter? I might as well speak to you in a language you understand." He cocked a brow and Brant's gaze slid away.

Brant opened his mouth, then closed it. After a minute, he jerked his chin. "They don't matter to me none anyway."

Travis didn't believe that for a minute but since he seemed to have gotten what he wanted, he was content.

"Then we'll have a game here in a couple of days." He nodded to the boy and headed back to his truck. As he started the engine back up, he glanced at Brant.

The boy offered a tentative smile. Travis lifted a hand and waved before throwing the truck into drive.

It wasn't until he turned onto the main road that would take him into the small town of Blessing, Maine that he realized he'd have to hang around a little while. He'd made that kid a promise, and he wasn't in the habit of breaking promises.

But Isabel had already told him he wasn't leaving, hadn't she?

And as far as she was concerned, she owned him, heart and soul.

If she wanted him to stay, he'd stay ... for as long as she allowed him.



Miles looked every bit as worn and tired as he had the week before, but as he rose from the bench to greet Travis, there was

a lightness to him Travis hadn't seen before. A peace, he realized.

"You shouldn't have hidden this from me," he said, pulling the older man into a tight hug, his chest constricting on him while a knot settled in his throat, making breathing difficult.

"We already talked about it, son," Miles told him, patting his back. He pulled away first and smiled at Travis and the smile held none of the weight Travis was so used to seeing. "But I'm glad you know. I'm glad it's out. Come on. Let's get that wound looked at."

Travis didn't argue, knowing Miles wouldn't settle until it was done.

The R.V. was parked at the small town beach and on the outside, it looked like any other R.V., a little dusty, the back of it peppered with stickers from any number of national and state parks.

The inside, though, it was equipped well enough to operate as a small clinic.

Travis recognized Dr. Xi Qing before she even turned around. Her slim figure, clad in pristine white scrubs that never seemed to wrinkle, was one he'd seen often over his years of working with Miles. He didn't know if she was with the Bureau or if she was somebody else Miles hired outside the government's employ, although he suspected it was the latter.

Xi didn't seem to have a stick up her ass, as opposed to the uptight way most doctors employed by the feds did.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, offering a quick smile before turning back to whatever she had on the counter in front of her. "Hello, Travis. I hope you haven't done yourself too much damage since I saw you last."

He grimaced and settled on the exam table that was bolted to the wall.

"I've actually been trying to rest."

“Nice to know that *some* of my patients listen to me.” She turned and pinned Miles with a hard look before focusing on Travis. “Shirt, please.”

Knowing he’d end up bared to the waist at some point today, he’d opted for a button-down and he quickly stripped off the shirt, already bracing for the acerbic response he’d get when she saw he’d ripped through the staples.

“You reinjured yourself,” Miles said, voice clipped.

“I told you we shouldn’t have released him.” Xi gave Travis a dark look and instructed him to lift his arm so she could a better look at the injury. “At least you did a halfway decent job trying to close it back up. Although ... how?”

“I had a little help.” His voice came out neutral.

But Miles’ eyes narrowed on him, a line appearing between his brows. “Help, hm?”

“They didn’t do a bad job. Too bad they didn’t have the right tools ... ” Her voice trailed off and she sighed. “But at this point, with the injury as old as it is, there’s no point in trying to put fresh staples in. I’m going to get a culture, then clean it.”

Setting his jaw, Travis focused on the cabinet in front of him, stifling the flinch as she swabbed it for the test she wanted to run. He didn’t bother telling her he didn’t think there was any new infection. He was actually feeling pretty decent today—other than the pain from her digging around in his wound. She’d only sweetly point out that *he* hadn’t been the one to graduate from medical school, had he? If she needed advice on human trafficking rings or perhaps rescuing kidnapped children or other scary shit, she’d ask his advice—she’d said that to him, word for word, the last time he’d tried to tell her he didn’t need extra lab work.

Since she was right, he’d stopped arguing with her.

All it did was drag these visits out.

“Bit of a sting,” she advised him.

He swallowed a curse as she doused him with what felt like liquid fire.

The pain eased over the next minute and he breathed through it, glaring at her when she glanced at up at him.

“Bit of a sting?” he said. “How do you define *hurts like hell?*”

“Don’t be a baby,” she said in a brisk voice as she stripped off her soiled gloves and put on a fresh pair. “If you’d stayed in the hospital another forty-eight hours as I’d advised, you wouldn’t have to put up with my piss-poor bedside manner right now.”

He choked off a laugh and closed his eyes. “Just get it done.”

“The worst is over. I’m putting a new ointment on. It’s still in the research stage but the results coming in are phenomenal—as long as you don’t have any unwanted side effects and you stick to the prescribed regimen *and* keep drinking the supplement I ordered, this should help cut your healing time by as much as thirty percent.”

That had his eyes flying open. “Thirty percent? You’re shitting me.”

“It may not be that much, but it’s possible,” she said, eyes focused on her task.

Something cool smoothed over the wound. It still hurt like a bitch, but in comparison to whatever she’d used to clean it with, this was a balm.

“You’re lucky this went in where it did,” she murmured as she finished. “With the infection you picked up ... ” She sighed and lifted her gaze to his. “That’s two times I had to pull you back, Travis. You were close to septic by the time we got to you, you know that?”

“I know.” Because they were friends of a sort, he touched his fingers lightly to her gloved wrist. “Thanks.”

“Thank me by not making me do it again. It gets old, having to save your sorry ass.”

He offered a tired smile. “Actually, I was going to talk to the boss about that.”

Miles stirred from the small bench seat where he’d settled when Xi got to work.

“Talk to me about what?”

Travis hesitated as Xi gestured for him to lay down, then lifted a large pad to his side. “It can wait, Hawkins. Watch how I do this in the mirror,” she ordered, gesturing to the mirror over the exam table, the mirror fixed in place for just such a reason. Curtly, she told Miles the discussion could wait another minute. “In a few more days, you’ll be able to take the staples out. I’ll send a kit with Miles. I have to head out for an assignment elsewhere, but he’s taken staples out. For the area where the staples were ripped, we’re going to pack the wound, pretty similar to how it was done by whoever helped you with it. This allows the edges to come together naturally on their own—it will just take a bit longer, although the nutritional supplement you’re drinking and the topical ointment should speed it along. Now watch ... this is a wet-to-dry dressing.”

Travis watched as she walked through the steps, committing them to memory. After she taped a larger pad over the dressing itself, she had him verbalize the steps back and he did so without error.

“Good. Now if you can just *avoid* tearing the wound open again,” she said, shaking her head. She offered a hand to help him sit.

He took it, accepting the help. She might be slim but she was strong as hell.

“Just how *did* you tear it open?” she asked as she cleaned up the trash, wadding everything up in her gloves before stripping both off until everything was balled up inside.

“Ah ... ” He didn’t know if Isabel had mentioned it to Miles. If she had, any lie he told, the old man would sniff out. “Some kid was about to punch a much smaller kid—they’re probably about the same age, but the boy had about thirty or

forty pounds on the other kid. I didn't much care to see it, so I intervened."

"A *boy* caused you to rip that wound open?" Xi said, disbelief thick in her voice.

"Well, no ... " Travis blew out a breath and rubbed his neck, shooting Miles a look. The older man was watching with speculation and Travis suspected Isabel hadn't said shit. Great. He should have just made something up. But what? A bar fight? Like they'd believe that. "The kid's dad came out. They're teenagers, so it's not like these are nine or ten-year-olds. The boy is only two or three inches shorter than me, already starting to pack on muscle. But his dad decided to get involved and put his hands on me. I didn't much care for it." He shrugged. "But then he also went to grab onto a little girl and ... well ... "

"Brooklyn?" Miles lifted a brow.

Travis couldn't stop the smile. "She's something."

"I'm aware. The last time I dropped in to visit Bella, that child answered the door and she scrutinized me within an inch of my life. If she was thirty years older, she'd terrify me." Miles laughed softly and there was a look of deep affection in his eyes.

"Some asshole was about ready to hit a little *girl*?" Xi asked.

"I'm not sure if he was going to hit her or just shake her and try to scare her," Travis said with a shrug. He'd been lightheaded from the pain at that point, not to mention lack of sleep, dehydration, general malnutrition and the lingering effects of the infection. Oh, and the booze from the night before. Can't forget that. "But he was going to put his hands on her and I wasn't going to let it happen."

Xi's deep brown eyes narrowed to mere slits and then she huffed out a breath. "Fine. You're forgiven for causing me more work—*just* this once."

"Thank you, Xi." Travis smiled at her.

She blinked, then shook her head and looked at Miles. “I don’t know what you have him doing in the field, but he’s too fucking pretty to be an agent. You know that, right?”

“His pretty face has its uses.” Miles smiled, then gestured for Travis to put his shirt on. “Tell me about this talk we were going to have. Or would you prefer privacy?”

“No,” Travis said softly, focusing on the buttons instead of looking at Miles, although his mind had shifted back to the decision he’d made earlier that day after his brief conversation with his twin. It was a decision he should have made last year, maybe even sooner. “It’s not classified. I just ... ” He blew out a breath as he finished the last button, then looked up and met his mentor’s gaze. “I’m out, Miles. I’m done.”

Chapter 11



“What about this one?”

Her newest charge, Jacob Howard, glanced at the black graphic t-shirt that was almost identical to the one he was wearing and shrugged. “I don’t see why you’re spending money on clothes for me. I ain’t gonna stay long. I never do.”

“You’ve only got a handful of shirts and two pairs of jeans, Jacob.” She gave him a smile and wished he’d accept a hug. He stood so stiff and brittle, it was a wonder he didn’t break. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t like doing laundry any more than necessary—and I hate wearing dirty clothes. A couple pairs of jeans and a few new T-shirts will make it easier on everybody.”

“Spend the money on the baby instead.” He poked at Mariah’s foot.

The baby gave him a big grin, which he ignored.

“Everybody likes babies,” he mumbled.

“Well, I like you just fine and I think you need a few more shirts and some jeans. Plus a jacket. The nights are already getting cooler.”

His eyes slid away and she knew he was thinking she’d boot him out before fall really had time to settle in. But Isabel didn’t go into anything planning to fail.

“Come on,” she cajoled. “Pick a few things out and we’ll grab some food before we head home. You like pizza?”

His gaze flicked up to hers, then away. The first sign of interest she’d seen from him in the hours since they’d met. “At a restaurant?”

“Yeah. I was thinking of Spinelli’s. You been there?”

His mouth twisted. “You rich or something?”

“I do okay.”

“Taking in brats from the state?” He sneered now.

“No, although taking care of you all can definitely be work.” She did get the checks from the state for them, which she used for their clothes or school supplies, and the allowance she paid each of them, but she didn’t need that money. She and her sisters had inherited a rather sizeable fortune after their mother had died, a fact that had shocked the hell out of all three of them. They hadn’t realized their mom *had* any money that wasn’t also tied to their father.

But there had been a house that had been left to their mother by her father—a house that could go *only* to their mother—and it had been stipulated in the will that upon her death, it would go to *her* children, or be donated to an arts charity.

Isabel’s grandfather *really* hadn’t liked Wilson T. Steele.

Along with the house, there had been money left in trust for each of them, money their father couldn’t touch.

They’d needed Miles’s help to deal with the money, since by that time, they’d all been living under witness protection, but it had been a simple matter for Miles. The house had been sold, the money split between the three of them and he’d handled transferring the money out of the bank into undisclosed accounts—how, she’d never asked—until he had new identities set up for them.

As long as they were careful, they’d have easy, comfortable lives. Pizza at a nice, small-town Italian restaurant every now and then was no big deal.

“So ... you hungry?”

She’d heard his stomach rumbling several times already, but she’d pretended not to. He was too thin and not just the lanky thinness of a boy hitting puberty, but the kind of thinness that came from going hungry too often.

“I guess I could eat,” he said with feigned disinterest.

She watched as he grabbed the T-shirt she’d suggested, and several others, then followed up with a couple of pairs of jeans. While he was trying them on, she picked out a package

of socks and another one of boxer briefs—her experience with teenage boys had told her that they tended to prefer them.

She eyed his shoes—they were held together with duct tape but decided that would have to come on a different trip.

He already looked like he wanted to bolt.

One day at a time, she reminded herself.

That was how she'd taken it when she'd first found herself free of her father's overbearing, stifling, cruel influence.

It was how she'd handled each of her kids.

Bit by bit, she'd come to trust herself.

Bit by bit, most of the kids she'd taken in had come to trust her.

She'd have to hope for the same with Jacob.



“Are you and Ms. Bella gonna make babies?”

Travis had heard somebody approaching, had checked the reflection in the window and seen it was Brooklyn so he'd had a moment to brace himself.

But he still choked on his beer at her blunt, innocent question.

Slamming a fist against his chest, he turned to look down at the pint-sized, blonde, angelic-looking creature and wondered how in the hell Isabel handled her.

Bella, he reminded himself. *Bella*.

He'd had a long talk with Miles earlier, including a concise update on ‘Bella Franklin’, and her life here.

So, she'd be Bella ... out loud.

Not sure how to handle such a question from a kid who didn't look more than four or five years old, he swiped a hand over his mouth, took another sip of beer to ease the rawness in

his throat after damn near choking to death, then considered his possible answers.

“Just what do you know about making babies?” he asked. Shit, she couldn’t even be in school yet.

“Everything.” She sniffed as she swung back and forth, making her poofy, purple princess skirt billow out. Today, she wore a tiara that looked a lot like Wonder Woman’s—and that made Travis smile inwardly. No doubt, Diana Prince would *adore* this little warrior in training.

“Everything, huh?”

“Yeah!” She wrinkled her nose up at him and shot a furtive look around, then made a *come here* gesture.

Bending over warily, Travis braced himself for more outlandishness.

Brooklyn didn’t disappoint.

“You make babies when a boy puts his *penis* in a girl’s *vagina*,” she whispered in a too-loud voice.

Travis straightened and to his unending shock, felt his face go red. “Er ... and how do you know *that*?”

“I read it. In a book.”

“You read it?”

She nodded, looking pleased with herself. “I taught myself to read. I read *lots* and *lots*.”

“And does Is—” He broke off, cleared his throat and looked around. “Does everybody know you’re reading about making babies?”

Her eyes fell away.

“Uh-huh.” He bent forward and braced his hands on his knees. “Just where did you read about this, sweetheart?”

“Ms. Bella has books on it. She’s got books on *everything*.” Brooklyn gazed at him, her big blue eyes all innocence.

“And I bet she’s told you that some books aren’t for you to read just yet, didn’t she?”

Brooklyn tugged at her dress. “Most of the books are just too *boring* for me!”

“Then maybe you tell her that. I bet she’d help you find better ones.” He tugged gently on her hair. “Ms. Bella has rules in place to help protect you, cutie. And I bet she’s told you that.”

“I don’t like grown-up rules.” She flopped bonelessly down onto the threadbare grass and flung her arms out. “Everything is all *rules, rules, rules*. Adults don’t have rules!”

That made him laugh. “You wanna bet? We’ve got plenty of rules.”

“Like what?” She eyed him suspiciously, pushing up onto her elbows to study him.

Before he could answer, Isabel’s voice called out, “Brooklyn, where are you? Didn’t I tell you not to leave the yard?”

Brooklyn jumped up and grabbed his hand. “Busted!”

“Hey, don’t go trying to hide behind me,” he said as she darted behind his legs.

Isabel had already seen the child and veered toward them.

Travis saw the way her lips twitched in a smile before she controlled the expression, coming to a stop a few feet away with her arms folded over her chest.

Travis made a serious effort not to notice how the stance had her breasts plumping up against the scooped neckline of her cropped, short-sleeve t-shirt.

“Brooklyn.” Isabel lifted a brow as she waited for her young charge to come out from the shelter of Travis’s body.

Slowly, Brooklyn sidled out, peering around his hip. “I’m in the *sideyard*,” she said, pointing to the side of the house.

“No. This is Mr. Travis’s house,” Isabel said sternly. “And you know that.”

“I just wanted to ask him something!”

Travis fell back on years of training to keep from smirking but when Isabel shot him a wary look, he was hard-pressed not to smile.

“I’m afraid to ask,” she finally said.

“You should be.” He gave up trying to hide the smile this time. Being around her soothed all the raw edges inside him, especially since it seemed, *somehow*, she didn’t hate him.

He didn’t know how that was possible, other than a fucking miracle, but the way she’d looked at him last night, and the gleam of humor in her eyes now ...

No. She didn’t hate him.

He knew he didn’t have a chance at winning her heart back, but just knowing he wouldn’t see that cold, angry look of pain in her eyes was enough for him. He could move on, maybe. No, he wouldn’t ever love anybody again. She was the only one for him, but maybe this raw, ragged hole inside him could start to close.

Brooklyn crossed her arms over her chest and gave them both a mutinous look. “I have to ask *somebody*, Ms. Bella. *You* weren’t telling me and he’s the only other person who’d know!”

“Sweetheart, has it occurred to you that some things just aren’t any of your business?” Travis asked, shifting his attention to Brooklyn.

When she shot him a dark look, he chuckled and stroked a hand down her hair. It was downy soft and silken under his touch and her eyes widened a fraction before she leaned into him, almost like a little cat.

“But if I don’t ask...” She bit her lip, then looked away, moving closer to Travis and hiding her face against his leg.

“Hey, hey ... ”

That low, husky murmur from Isabel hit Travis like a ton of bricks and he was knocked breathless by the need that tore through him, smashing down defenses and walls he’d built

over more than a decade, ever since he'd destroyed what they'd had.

Isabel saw Travis tense, but she couldn't focus on him now.

Tugging Brooklyn into her arms, she knelt on the sandy, patchy grass and rubbed her cheek against Brooklyn's hair. The Wonder Woman tiara she loved so much ended up getting dislodged but whatever had the girl so distressed was major, because Brooklyn didn't notice as it fell to the ground.

Isabel saw Travis bend and pick it up—she bit back on the urge to fuss at him from doing so, knowing it would hurt him with that ugly injury he had. He was a grown-ass man, after all. “Brook, talk to me. What is it you were asking Travis?”

She sniffled and shook her head.

“Come on, baby. Talk to me. Didn't I tell you I'd try to help you with problems?”

There was a long, hesitant pause, and then Brooklyn nodded.

“And I will. But you have to do your part ... and what's your part?”

“I have to talk to you,” Brooklyn said, mumbling her answer. “But I asked you and you wouldn't tell me.”

Isabel sighed. She had a bad feeling she knew what Brooklyn's question was now. Rising, she started to tell Brooklyn they'd talk back at the house.

But a booming noise erupted from the garage.

“Great,” she muttered, turning to look over her shoulder. Storm was walking toward the main road, pushing the stroller in front of her, her platinum hair swaying as she bobbed her head, a pair of earbuds blocking out the music coming from the garage.

Aaron and Storm had worked out a deal that allowed the boy to practice playing in a manner that kept the baby from either screeching along in accompaniment or protest. Storm

took Mariah for daily walks and Aaron took care of Storm's part of the evening chores.

Since it worked out for everybody—except Isabel's eardrums—she allowed it.

But that music wouldn't allow for a peaceful talk inside the house.

"If you need to talk to her, use my deck," Travis said.

She slanted a look at him, aware of a quiet tension that had settled over him in the past minute or so, a tension that hadn't been there initially. She wondered about it, but Brooklyn, as with her other kids, had to be her priority.

"I've got a new kid in the house," she said, rubbing Brooklyn's shoulder. "I should be where he can find me easily ... but maybe we'll sit by the firepit?"

Travis lifted a shoulder, the thin, faded cotton of his t-shirt outlining taut muscles that insisted on drawing her eye.

"Either way is fine by me."

Their gazes locked and held for a taut moment and her mouth went dry, her heart pounding in a heavy, slow rhythm that had her blood turning to honey.

"Thank you," she said, finally tearing her gaze from his.

"I think maybe I'll wander over and listen to the ... music," he told her, his lips twitching up at the corners.

"It's your eardrums."

Taking Brooklyn's hand, she led the girl over to the chairs by the firepit, mentally bracing herself for the old pain that was likely to flare up.

She'd handle it. She could, because Brooklyn had looked at her with a different sort of pain and she wouldn't be a coward and hide away when a kid needed her.



There was another kid in the garage with Aaron, a taller, skinny Black kid with shoulder-length dreads and round-frame, electric blue glasses. Those glasses reflected the light and hid his eyes as he swung his gaze toward Travis when he braced a shoulder against the frame of the garage door.

The music came to a dead stop, the Black boy backing away from the keyboard and microphone while Aaron's hand lowered from the strings of a pretty decent-looking Fender.

"Um, hi," the Black kid said, clearly nervous.

"Hey, Travis." Aaron didn't look as nervous, but he didn't look happy, either. "Guess you think the music is too loud."

"Well, it's loud," Travis said with a shrug. "But I came over to listen for a minute or two ... if that's okay." A couple days ago, he would have said something far different—or he would have shoved his head under his pillow and prayed for the noise to stop.

Aaron's eyes widened.

The Black boy blinked, clearly surprised.

"Is that okay?"

The two kids looked at each other, then back at Aaron. It was the Black kid who said, "We're not very good."

"*I'm* not very good," Aaron muttered, a dull flush coloring his narrow face. "*You're* amazing."

The other kid flashed a wide, warm smile at Aaron. "You're getting better. It just takes practice."

Aaron jerked a shoulder in a shrug, then darted another look at Travis. "If we're not going to break your eardrums or anything, I guess you can listen. If you want." He lifted a hand back to the guitar strings, then paused. "This is Booker."

"Quite the name," Travis commented.

The boy grinned, some of the tension draining from his shoulders. "Yeah. Hell of a namesake, huh? Booker Darius Howard Phillips, after Booker T. Washington, my dad, and my

mom's dad. I don't know which one of them is going to be the hardest inspiration to live up to, either."

Judging by the kindness and earnestness Travis had seen in the smile he'd given Aaron, he doubted the kid would have any trouble forging his own path there. "Something tells me you're going to do just fine."

Now the boy's smile turned bashful and he jerked his gaze away and focused on Aaron. "Start from the beginning."

The music started again.

Loud.

Booker definitely had skills, both the keyboard and singing, although Travis wasn't certain what sort of music they were making—indie grunge? Was that a thing? He had no idea.

Every now and then, discordant twangs from the guitar would break the melody they were trying to attain and he studied Aaron's hands on the guitar, remembered when he and Trey had been learning to play, determined to keep up with Zane back when his oldest brother had been doing the same.

He considered making a suggestion, but after a moment, reconsidered. He'd check on something first, then maybe.

Just as the chords started to die down, the door to the garage blew open and a tall, rangy boy with dark brown hair and intense brown eyes came storming in. Aaron still had his head bent intently over the guitar and Booker's eyes were closed as he sang.

Travis shoved away from the frame of the garage door but didn't get there in time to keep the kid from yanking the amp's plug from the wall.

"Enough with that shit!"

Chapter 12



“So, let me guess.” Pulling Brooklyn onto her lap, Isabel stroked the child’s hair back from her face. “You decided to go and asked Travis if the two of us were going to go and make babies, huh?”

Brooklyn looked away, jerking a thin shoulder in a shrug. “Yeah.”

“That’s a pretty personal question, Brooklyn.”

The girl’s chin dipped and her shoulders, already slumped, hunched even more.

“Why is it so important for you to know?” There had to be a reason behind this, something more than Brooklyn’s incessant curiosity.

“Because,” Brooklyn whispered.

“I need a little more than that.” Cupping Brooklyn’s chin, she guided her face upward.

Brooklyn shoved her face into Isabel’s shoulder and mumbled.

Frowning, Isabel picked apart the words until she’d made sense of them, then repeated, “Babies are special? Is that what you said?”

“It’s true,” Brooklyn said. “That’s why my mama wanted to have Mariah. She thought if she had another baby—especially if the baby was a boy—our daddy would want to stay with us more. But he didn’t. He left, and not long after that...”

Asshole, Isabel thought.

Isabel knew exactly what had happened. Just a few short weeks after she’d given birth to Mariah, the girls’ mother had overdosed. Brooklyn had been the one to find her, had been the one to call 9-1-1. She rarely talked about it outside of the therapy Isabel had arranged, but Brooklyn had known her

mother was dead before she even touched her. She'd picked the baby up, carried to the living room and made a pallet for her, then called emergency services, acting too much like the little grown-up she'd been forced to become.

So many ghosts this child had, so many shadows.

Cuddling Brooklyn on her lap, she stroked the girl's soft, wispy hair. "And are you thinking if *I* have a baby of my own, maybe I won't want you kids?"

"You wouldn't," Brooklyn said, sniffing. "If you and Travis make babies, why would you need us? You'd have your own babies to love."

"Oh, honey." She squeezed Brooklyn closer and kissed her temple. "Love is a funny thing, you know. Your heart can carry so much of it ... even when you give lots of it away, like I do with you, Mariah, Aaron, and Storm, there's always more left over, because your heart can hold so many people."

Brooklyn said nothing.

Cupping the girl's chin in her hand, she pressed gently until Brooklyn finally met her eyes. "I'm not going to be having babies, Brooklyn."

Not with Travis. Not with anybody. It was an old ache by now, but sometimes, it still stung. Now, though, there was barely a twinge, almost as if helping somebody with their hurt made that old pain fade into the background.

"You might," Brooklyn said with a watery sniff. "You like him a whole lot. I can tell."

Isabel wasn't sure how to describe her feelings for Travis Barnes. *Like* didn't even touch the surface.

"No, Brook. I mean, it's true that I like him." That didn't even touch on how she felt about Travis, but that wasn't the point. With a heavy sigh, she brushed Brooklyn's hair back from her face again and held the girl's eyes. "I *can't* have babies. Ever."

Brooklyn's eyes widened while her face took on a puzzled look.

“Why can’t you?”

“I got sick,” Isabel said simply. “It’s not anything you have to worry about. It was a long time ago and I’m all better now, but there was a complication and by the time the doctors took care of it, the end result was that I’d never be able to have kids of my own.”

Brooklyn folded her mouth into a thoughtful frown, her too-canny mind turning this new information this way and that. After a minute, she squinted up at Isabel. “Is that why you take care of kids like us? Because you can’t have your own kids?”

“It started out that way, I guess.” With a one-sided shrug, Isabel said, “But it turns out, I’m pretty good at it. I know what it’s like to be in a bad place and need somebody who’ll take care of me, listen to me ... only I didn’t get it. If I can help kids like you and Aaron and Storm out, then all the bad things that happened to me when I was a kid ... well, maybe there was a reason.”

“And Mariah,” Brooklyn added. She considered a moment, then said, “And Jacob, although I don’t think I like him yet.”

“He’s a work in progress,” Isabel agreed.

The music coming from her house came to an abrupt halt, followed by a raised angry voice.

Silently, Isabel swore.

“I think he’s a d-bag,” Brooklyn said philosophically.

Swallowing her frustrated laughter, Isabel gave Brooklyn a stern look. “We’ve talked about that language.”

“I’m not saying it around teachers, strangers or Mariah!” Brooklyn gave her a defensive look as Isabel nudged her onto her feet. “And he *is* a d-bag!”

Aaron’s angry shout cut off whatever response Isabel had been about to make. “Later,” she told the girl. Taking off at a jog, she headed for the garage, arriving just as Booker backed out, an amazed look on his handsome young face.

“Damn, he fast,” the kid muttered under his breath. “I mean ... *fast* ... ”

Isabel swung into her garage just as Travis gave Jacob a warning look, his hand on the kid’s shoulder “Didn’t I tell you to keep your hands to yourself?”

“Get your fucking paws off me! This is child abuse!” Jacob’s lips peeled back from his teeth.

“Sure, kid. I’ll let go as soon as you calm down.” Turning his attention to the other kid, Travis asked, “You going to keep your cool, Aaron?”

“As long as that punk doesn’t touch me or my stuff again.” Aaron jerked his head in a nod and Travis released the skinnier kid, turning his focus back on Jacob.

“You ready to show some sense?”

Before Jacob could answer, Isabel stepped into the garage. “What on earth is going on?”

Neither boy spoke.

Travis eyed the one he still had a grip on. “What’s the matter? You had plenty to say a minute ago.”

Jacob curled his lip in a sneer and jerked against Travis’s hold. “Let me go, dumbass.”

“Watch how you address adults,” Isabel said.

Jacob’s cheeks went a blistering red but he jerked his shoulders up. “The fucker put his hands on me.”

“And what inspired him to do such a thing?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest and pinning him with a flat look. She’d address the language after the bigger problems were dealt with. One thing she’d learned after a couple of years of doing this was to pick her battles.

“Maybe he’s a prick,” Jacob suggested.

“Don’t you say that about Mr. Travis!” Brooklyn said, fury in her voice. Then she looked up at Isabel. “What’s a prick?”

“A bad word for a jerk,” she said with a quick look at the child. She smoothed her hand over Brooklyn’s hair. “Let me handle this.”

“But we’re supposed to stand up for our friends.” Brooklyn puts her hands on her hips and gave Jacob a defiant look.

“In general, that’s a good rule of thumb,” Isabel allowed. “But I think Travis is pretty good at standing up for himself ... and I’m also here.”

Brooklyn seemed to consider that and then she smiled sweetly, first at Isabel, then at Jacob. “Okay, Ms. Bella. You can stand up for Mr. Travis. You’re meaner than me anyway.”

“Mean? You’re just a runty little girl,” Jacob said with a snort.

Isabel winced inwardly. That boy was going to regret that.

Brooklyn’s heart-shaped face remained sweet, that deceptively innocent smile in place. “Ms. Bella is a girl,” she said with a shrug. “And you got put with her because nobody *else* would take you. Girls are tough.”

Isabel grimaced. She had no idea where Brooklyn had picked that up.

Jacob’s mouth went tight and Brooklyn smiled sunnily at him before skipping past him, right on into the house. “I’m gonna make some Kool-Aid, okay, Ms. Bella?”

Not certain whether she should be relieved or wary, Isabel nodded. Getting Brooklyn away from Jacob was a good idea, though, so she nodded and said, “Be sure to clean your mess up, sweetheart.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

As the door closed, Isabel gave Jacob one more quiet look. “You going to offer an explanation?”

“What the fuck does it matter?” He jerked a skinny shoulder and moved over to the window, his tone resigned. “I’m sure you’re ready to get rid of me no matter what.”

It's not going to be that easy, kid, she thought. Turning to Aaron, she lifted a brow.

Aaron gave her an irritated look. “He came barging in and unplugged my amp in the middle of practice, Miss B. I yelled at him, and he yelled back. Then he called me a fucking girl and I shoved him. He shoved me back and I tackled him and ... ” Face red, he looked away. “I’m *not* a fucking girl. He knows that. We all told him. He’s already done it a couple of times and I’m having a shit day with my dysphoria anyway and hearing it ... ” He sniffed and dragged a hand under his nose, his dark eyes filling with tears. “I fucking *hate* this body and I don’t need some asshole kid reminding me of just how much I hate it, how much I don’t belong in it!”

“Hey, hey ... ” She approached Aaron and gingerly touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry. And you’re right.” She shot Jacob a hard look. “You shouldn’t have to put up with anybody being cruel and reminding you of things that cause you pain.”

Jacob glared right back, but after a few seconds, his eyes flickered to Aaron then fell away.

Since her newest charge had nothing to say at the moment, she focused on Aaron. “I can’t tell you it’s okay to haul off and attack another kid when they’re being transphobic bigots. You know it can cause problems—for you, for me, for the other kids in the house. But I understand it can be hard. No more music practice today and no video games. You and Booker can still hang out until his moms can pick him up. We’ll talk about the rest later ... and if you need to just ... talk, or vent, whatever, come find me.”

Aaron’s shoulders slumped and he nodded but before he turned to go, he darted a look at Travis. “All Travis did was grab us both before we started swinging. He didn’t do anything else.”

“I kinda already figured that, but thank you.” She ruffled Aaron’s hair and wished she could hug him, but he was intensely guarded. She’d learned that he’d let her know when he needed or wanted anything but the barest physical contact.

“You two go on. You can put your gear away in about twenty minutes.”

After he and Booker left, she turned and looked at Jacob.

“I want to help you, Jacob. I’m willing to work with you and help you find a home here—but I will *not* tolerate bigotry or hate directed at another kid in this house. Aaron is a *boy*. Period.”

“Science says otherwise,” Jacob said with a sneer.

“Oh, really?” Amused now, she folded her arms over her chest. “And just where did you get your degree in ... *science*? When did you have a chance to look at his chromosomes?”

“*She’s* got tits so that means *her* chromosomes are the same as yours, XX.” Jacob smirked at her.

“Ah, but you haven’t seen *my* chromosomes, either, have you? For that matter, you probably haven’t seen yours. And there’s more to chromosomes than just XX and XY. You mention science, but the fact is, actual *science* supports transgender biology. *That* is the reality. Both the medical *and* scientific communities agree. There are numerous studies and articles on it. If you look into the real research being done in genetics, hormones and neurobiology, you’d see what I’m talking about.” Isabel paused, waiting to see what Jacob would say. He just glared at her. “And that’s just the focus on transgender individuals. What about intersex people, those who fit in between the binary? Those who are born with both testes and ovaries, for example. You could have the external genitalia of a female but undescended testes, which are part of the male reproductive system. And there’s vice versa.”

The boy’s face shot to fire-engine red and he jerked his eyes away.

“Oh, is this making you uncomfortable?” Isabel smiled sweetly. “You’re the one who felt perfectly comfortable referring to someone’s ... tits—they aren’t your tits, though, are they? Neither Aaron’s body, nor his body parts concern you, so why is *this* discussion bothering you? You’re so grown up, and you know so much. So, let’s continue. And yes,

intersex is a thing. One to two out of every one hundred births, across the world, are born intersex. That means there are literally *millions* of intersex people in the US alone.”

He opened his mouth, hesitated then snapped it closed.

Isabel wasn't done.

“If you're not too up to date on the facts of intersex people, it's going to *stun* you to learn that there are chromosome pairings like XXY, XYY, XXYY.” She frowned and paused to consider. “I believe there might be another couple in there. Then there are babies born with ambiguous genitalia and atypical genitalia. There is androgen insensitivity, conditions like gūevedoces, Swyer syndrome—that's when a baby is born with the XY chromosomes and has the gonads of a male, but also has the external genitalia of a female and some female reproductive organs ... they are usually unable to get pregnant naturally, but there have been a few rare cases.” She arched a brow as Jacob's mouth dropped open. “What ... didn't you read about these conditions and cases when you were reading up on ... science?”

He stood with rigid shoulders now, gaze locked on the ground.

“People are complicated, Jacob. The human body is complicated. Sex and gender aren't synonymous. More and more biologists and scientists in general argue that sex and gender *aren't* binary. You have various genetic components that come into play and current research seems to point to a genetic component to being transgender. So if you want to argue *science*, perhaps you should actually read up and see what science has to say.” Lifting a shoulder, Isabel said, “Basically, you can't get by using a poor understanding of science to justify you being a bigot.”

That made him look up, eyes narrowed and gaze hot. “I'm *not* a bigot. It's just that all that shit is made up.”

“Are you going to tell me the earth is flat, too?”

She thought she heard Travis laugh, but the sound was cut off so quickly, she couldn't be sure.

“No!” Aaron’s face was hotly red now but he was looking at her again, hands balled into fists. “I’m not one of those crazy quacks. But all that made up is shit about XYZ and guvo-whatever ... that’s not for real.”

She propped a hand on her hip. “Okay, so ... I just told you there are numerous studies that support what I’ve said. You are telling me you believe in *real* science?”

“Yeah.” He curled his lip at her. “If it’s *real*, with facts and shit. That kind of real science.”

“Excellent. You have the laptop I got you for school. Go get to work. Prove me wrong. I want five authentic sources and a couple of paragraphs summarizing your findings. Go on inside and get to work. *I* can find sources for everything I just told you. If you’re so certain I’m wrong, though, prove it.”

He blinked.

She smiled. “What are you waiting for? Research. But ... ” She let her smile widen. “The information has to come from *legitimate* websites—medical websites. Scientific journals with verified sources. You think you can handle that?”

“I ... ” He snapped his jaw shut, still glaring at her. “What’s the point? You’ll argue nothing I show you is real anyway.”

“Why don’t you just give it a shot? I expect the data to come from colleges and schools of medicine, research studies ... but if you don’t think you can...”

“Did I say I couldn’t?” He jerked a shoulder. “I know how to research shit. I’m not stupid.”

“I didn’t figure you were. When you fail to prove me wrong, you will apologize to Aaron. And regardless, you’re on kitchen duty for the next three nights on your own—you don’t get cause people hurt in my house and get away with it.”

His mouth folded into mutinous lines.

She had a feeling he wouldn’t be doing those chores.

It wouldn’t be the first time one of the kids in the house refused.

That was fine.

She'd waged these wars before.

"Go on inside." She held his hard, angry glare. "Into your room. You should get to work—you've got to prove me wrong, right?"

He curled his lip and stormed off, not saying another word.

Travis waited until the door slammed shut before he spoke. "When did you develop such an interest in genetics?"

"Not long after Aaron moved in," she said, sliding a look at him from the corner of her eyes. "His mom had supervised visits for a little while. Nothing shuts up a religious fanatic quicker than calmly pointing out the scientific flaws in their arguments. She kept trying to argue he was acting against God's design and I pointed out that only God knows Aaron's *design*, and only *God* and Aaron know what's going on in Aaron's head and body so maybe she should shut up and mind her own, then I went on to tell her about some of the info I just laid on before Jacob. I think her brain was melting by the time I was done."

He prowled a little closer, all long, lazy movements that had her heart fluttering in a rhythm she recognized all too well. He'd done this to her before, back when they were teenagers. Only he'd become more potent.

That deep brown hair, so dark it was nearly black, fell into his eyes and he absently brushed it back as he stopped just a foot away, so close she could smell the warm, masculine scent of him, the salt of the sea, something woodsy and fresh ... either his soap or shampoo, and under that, the musky scent that was him.

Her mouth was watering, and her hands itched to touch.

She shoved them into her pockets. "I'm sorry about Brooklyn ... earlier. She's too damn smart for her own good."

"It's okay. She's a cute kid." He reached up.

She stiffened.

He hesitated, then, slowly, as if giving her a chance to back up, he brushed his thumb over her cheek, gently, a soothing touch. “Something’s made you sad, Iz. Is it me?”

Her throat went tight and she thought about telling him yes, telling him she’d changed her mind, that she wanted him to go.

But her heart raged in refusal. No. He couldn’t go.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“We’ve never lied to each other,” he murmured.

“Didn’t we?” She caught his wrist, clinging to it. She’d meant to push him away—at least, that was what she’d told herself. But she didn’t do anything of the sort. She held on, staring into eyes of a blue-green so intense, it was hard to believe they were real. “There were a hundred little things I never told you. There are things you’re not telling me now ... things I haven’t told you.”

“Lies of omission.” He shrugged. “Not exactly the same thing.”

With a ragged sigh, she broke away and turned her back. Putting a few feet between them, she said, “Okay, yeah. But I’m not ready to talk about it. Not with you. I don’t know if I ever will be.”

“Okay.”

She swallowed her apology when she heard him turn to go.

She’d hurt him. She knew she had.

But some of her wounds were still raw and tender, even after all this time.

Rubbing the heel of her hand over the ache in her chest, she wondered what in the hell she was doing, staying in such close proximity to the man who’d devastated her so thoroughly years ago.

But she already knew the answer.

She still loved him. She’d never stopped.

Somewhere deep inside, she must have always been hoping they'd have a chance, even though she'd pushed him away the one time they'd seen each other after everything fell apart.

Maybe she was a fool.

Chapter 13



At just a little before eleven, Isabel stood in the doorway of the kitchen and studied the dishes still piled in the sink.

“Want me to help?”

She looked over at Storm, shook her head with a smile. “I’ll take care of them.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You helped cook. I’ll get this.” She wrapped her arm around the girl’s shoulders, hugged. “Go on. I’m sure you’ve got a book you’re trying to finish reading before you get too tired to see straight.”

The pretty girl made a face at Isabel. “Like you can talk.”

“Yeah, but I’m not starting school in another week.”

“You still get up with us.” Storm kissed her on the cheek. “But since I don’t love dishes, I won’t argue with you.”

Isabel hated dishes herself, but for the most part, the kids in the house were pretty decent about cleaning up after dinner, scraping off the excess food, rinsing the plates off and loading the dishes up. It only left Isabel with the dishes used to cook, and those dirtied up by Jacob, Brooklyn and Mariah. Brooklyn *was* trying to get better, but she was only five—and she couldn’t see inside the sink to rinse her dishes off.

Jacob had no excuses, and Isabel knew he’d done it just to try and push her.

He hadn’t had much in the way of *proof* when she’d asked him—away from Aaron, because while she wanted Jacob to realize he didn’t know as much as he thought, she wasn’t teaching him a lesson at Aaron’s expense.

He’d mumbled under his breath something too low for her to hear but he hadn’t tried to argue his case any further. And she *had* seen him reading a site she was well acquainted with—it had several articles she’d first read when she’d been

trying to learn more about the science and information available on transgender youth and identity.

She already knew Jacob was into science and tech—he'd been tearing through some of the books she kept in her library for kids, so he was smart.

He just needed to ... open his mind.

If he spent some time educating himself instead of listening to hateful rhetoric, then that was as much as she could ask for.

So she'd worry about the dishes and other stuff tomorrow.

She had just finished loading up the dishwasher when the phone rang.

Frowning, she rushed over and grabbed it just as it rang a second time.

“Hello?”

Only silence answered.

Annoyed, she waited a few seconds, then said, “Hello?”

This time, she thought she heard breathing.

Disgusted, she slammed the phone back down on the cradle and returned to the dishwasher.

“Ms. Bella?”

She looked up as she finished loading the dishwasher. Aaron loitered in the doorway, pale face strained. “Come on in, sweetheart.”

She closed the dishwasher and started it, then went to the table, waiting for Aaron.

“Jacob give you any more trouble?” Bella asked softly.

“He's not even looking at me now.” A ghost of a smile danced on his lips and Aaron hitched up a shoulder. Thick, dark brown hair tumbled into his eyes and he impatiently shoved it back. “I was wondering ... ” He paused, biting his lip.

“Wondering about what, Aaron?”

“Can I get my hair cut shorter?” He blurted it out, like he was afraid to ask. “I was thinking about buzzing it on the sides, leaving it longer on the top. I want to be able to spike it up on top, so I don’t want it too short, but the way it is ... ” Face twisting in a scowl, he grabbed the wavy locks and jerked. “This, my face, how short I am ... ”

As he fumbled for words, Bella listened. Several seconds passed though and Aaron lapsed into silence.

“It’s aggravating your dysphoria, huh?”

Aaron’s eyes dipped away and he nodded.

In the months since he’d come to live with her, he’d started opening up more and more about the misery he felt, living inside a body he didn’t belong in and although Isabel couldn’t truly understand, she could listen. And this was a small thing. “Find a couple of styles you like,” she told him with a smile. “And we’ll try to work it in this weekend, okay?”

“Thanks!” He came to her and with a wide grin, he hugged her.

A minute later, she was alone. Going through the kitchen, she turned off all the lights. As she passed by the window, she glanced outside.

Her heart hitched, then skipped a beat when she saw Travis out there, firelight flickering over his face.

She didn’t let herself think it as she grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and headed outside.



Travis didn’t want to brood.

He had no reason to expect Isabel’s secrets, her trust or her confidence. Not now, not ever again. Just because she didn’t want him leaving just yet didn’t mean she was ready to resume some sort of relationship with him again. For all he knew she just wanted to sleep with him a couple of times—or even just once—the one that got away and all that shit. Even as he

thought, he told himself he was letting his dick think for him, although to sleep with Isabel and never have her heart again would kill the rest of his soul, and he knew it.

Hell, maybe she just wanted to jab at him, make him bleed.

That he'd never stopped loving her didn't matter.

He'd lost faith in her during the time she needed him the most; *that* mattered.

He didn't know but whatever she wanted from him, be it jabbing at him, extracting a pound of flesh, he owed her that much, and more, so he'd stay.

He needed to find a way to get past the instinctive hurt that kept trying to well up inside when she'd refused to trust him earlier.

Why *should* she trust him?

She'd done so once and look at what he'd done with that precious gift.

"Get over it, man," he told himself.

A quiet rustle had him looking up and as the silhouette appeared around the house, his breath caught in his chest. *Get over it and get a grip.*

He'd wined and dined heiresses and models, seduced beautiful women, all to get close enough to steal secrets and if he'd been caught, it could have ended with him dying, buried in an unmarked grave while his family never knew what became of him. The legend Miles had built for him, in case of discovery, was solid, complete with a family history, falsified dental records, a credit history and more, enough to fool pretty much anybody ... except his family. It would have led a person trying to track his history to a down-end street, regardless of what happened to Travis.

Doing what he'd done over the past decade and change had taken nerves of steel, a will of iron and determination.

When Isabel sank down onto the seat next to him, a beer extended, he tried to find some shred of that will, those nerves, tried to steel himself against her ... and he failed.

“Nice night,” she said softly.

The night was fucking perfect, all because she was here, close enough for him to breathe in the soft, sweet scent of her skin and see the paler glints of gold in the rich brown of her hair, to see the scattering of freckles over the slope of her shoulder as her lightweight sweater dipped low.

She scooped it up and lifted her beer to her lips, gaze skimming over the surface of the water before moving to his. “You ever been in the area during the fall?”

“No.” Damn, was that rusty, creaking rasp his voice? He took a deep pull of the beer she’d offered, wetting his throat. “Don’t usually have much time for travel.”

As soon as he said the words, he wanted to pull them back.

Her gaze came to his, full of frustration and worry. “How long until you’re back at a job that’s going to end up killing you?”

“I told Miles I’m done,” he said softly.

Isabel’s eyes widened and a soft breath of surprise escaped her. She drew another breath, let it out slowly. “I’m surprised you’re telling me that much.”

“I never was able to hide shit from you,” he murmured.

“Tell me why you got into it then.”

Jaw set, he looked away. “I can’t talk about the work, Iz. It’s dangerous for you to have guessed what you have.”

“I’m not asking for details,” she said. “I’m asking to know *why*.”

Shoving up, he paced a few feet away. The healing wound on his side protested the abrupt movement but nowhere as much as it would have a day or two earlier. Dr. Qing might have been pushing experimental treatments on him, but she knew her shit.

And he was trying to sidestep Isabel’s question, even in his own mind.

Dragging a hand down his face, he focused on some lights bobbing out on the water, far, far away from land. “Think about it, Iz. It’s not that hard.”

“I’ve done nothing *but* think about it,” she said sourly. “If I’m not refereeing a potential world war, feeding a teething infant or coaxing Brooklyn into a bath, I’m brooding over it, Travis. I’m tired of it. I want to understand.”

He tossed her a dark look over his shoulder. “What does it matter, Isabel? I’m not going to be here for long and once I leave, you won’t see me again.”

The thought all but tore bloody ribbons into his heart.

A rough sound came from her and he turned around, any hint of her suffering anathema to him.

She was on her feet, glaring at him, one fist all but bloodless as she gripped the beer bottle, her green eyes nearly black in the night.

“Stop saying that,” she said furiously. “Stop throwing that in my face.”

“I’m not. I’m just telling it like it is.” He took another sip of beer, more out of a need to cover his confusion and need than thirst this time. Damn but he couldn’t understand her. Didn’t she *want* him gone? She sure as hell *should*. “I’d figure you couldn’t wait to see the back of me.”

“I already told you, I don’t know what I want.” Her chest heaved raggedly, drawing his attention to a fact he hadn’t noticed until that very moment—whatever she had on under that thin sweater ... it wasn’t a bra. Her nipples pressed hard and stiff against the sweater.

His tongue suddenly felt awkward in his mouth, his hands too big and clumsy, aching to feel the weight of her breasts in them, to toy with those plump buds and feel them against his palms, his chest.

Her breathing hitched and he dragged his gaze back up to meet a gaze gone foggy with want.

“Why don’t you want me gone?” he asked. His voice wasn’t steady.

But neither was he.

“I’m still figuring that out.” She licked her lips.

He groaned and closed his eyes. “Stop looking at me like that, Isabel. I’m already teetering on the brink as it is.”

There was a soft thud, then the whisper of bare feet on soft, sandy soil. He opened his eyes, expecting to see her walking away from him. But she was coming toward him, then stopping, now only a few bare inches away.

“I want your hands on me,” she told him, the words so quiet, the sound of the waves crashing into the beach threatened to steal them away.

“If I put them on you, I’m going to want a lot more than just a couple of kisses, Isabel.”

Her lids dipped low, then lifted and her lips curved in a smile. “Maybe I’ll give you more than a few kisses ... or at least let you take more than a few.”

Then she closed the distance and pressed her mouth to his.

And the control he’d cultivated over the years collapsed, like a sandcastle under the waves.

The intensity that had lived just under his skin as a teenager had only grown.

Isabel had caught glimpses of it in the days since she’d found out her temporary neighbor was none other than the boy she’d once loved—a boy who’d grown into a devastatingly handsome man with eyes so full of secrets and pain, it stole her breath.

Now, all that intensity was focused on her and she thought she might be terrified ... if he’d left any room for anything else to exist inside her head.

But he took over with that kiss, pushing his hands into her hair and craning her head back, adjusting the angle until he

had her exactly as he wanted her.

And then he took.

He sampled.

He savored.

He devoured.

She didn't know how he'd done it, but she was sprawled on his lap on the steps of the deck, lost in the shadows cast by the house. When she tore her mouth from his to gasp for breath, she shoved her hands to his shoulders. "Your side ... your wound."

"I can't even feel it," he said, pushing his hands back into her hair and pulling her mouth back to his.

She couldn't resist him. With a moan, she sank back into his kiss.

He cupped her breast, his hand sliding under her sweater and tank to find her flesh, his touch sure and confident, and her breath stuttered out of her in a gasp as he teased her nipple until it was pulsing in time with her heart.

"Travis ... "

"Iz ... " His lips painted a path down her neck, found the sensitive spot just above her pulse.

When he bit her there, she arched and cried out.

The hand on her breast traveled lower and she went still as he toyed with the waistband of the ankle-length skirt she wore paired with the summer-weight sweater and tank top.

"I want to touch you," he whispered against her lips.

"I ... Travis, we can't."

"I know ... I just want to touch you. Let me."

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes, fell so, so deep into the endless blue-green. Gripping his wrist, she hesitated. Then, cheeks flaming, she nodded and dropped her head onto his shoulder.

He nuzzled her as he spread his hand wide over the dip of her waist but he didn't do anything else.

He just rubbed his lips over her skin and murmured to her, voice too low for her to hear, but the rhythm of the words, the cadence of his speech was both erotic and soothing. Soon, she lifted her mouth to his, needing more of his taste.

Isabel found herself rocking against him and he slid his other hand down her back, fingers sliding under her shirt to splay wide over her bare skin. She shivered and pressed closer, only to gasp as she felt his fingers trailing up over her bare thigh.

He'd pulled her skirt up and she'd never noticed.

"I'll stop if you want," he murmured. "Just tell me."

"I don't want you to stop." Brow pressed to his, she gripped his biceps and watched him as he circled ever closer to the drumbeat that seemed to have settled between her thighs.

She whimpered he grazed one finger over her clitoris, a harsh growl escaping him. "Baby ... you're so wet."

Her cheeks flamed red.

He stroked lower, the hand on her spine urging her closer while the other teased her more and more.

She whimpered and thrust her hips against him. "Travis!"

"More?" He nipped her earlobe.

"Yes!"

He thrust his finger inside her.

She came apart.

Travis lifted his head to watch.

The flickering flames from the firepit were just enough to paint her in a soft golden light as she flung her head back and rode his hand, the folds of her sex squeezing tight around him as she rocked and squeezed and panted, throaty cries breaking free, muffled by the way she bit her full lower lip.

She'd never looked more beautiful.

As she started to come down, he stroked her, soothing her with gentle touches. She sank into him, cuddling close.

His heart twisted inside his chest as she rubbed her nose against his neck.

When she finally stirred, he eased his grip on her, braced for embarrassment, censure.

What he wasn't ready for was the way she lifted her head and curled her arms around his neck right before she planted a long, slow, lazy kiss on his lips.

"That was ... lovely," she said with a sated sigh.

"You're lovely." Cupping her cheek in his hand, he rubbed his thumb over her lower lip.

Her gaze fell away, but she smiled and sank back into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I should get back to the house."

"Probably."

She stroked her hand up his back, dipped into his hair. "You never did tell me why you're getting out."

He controlled the urge to flinch, to tense up, just as he controlled the urge to prevaricate or lie. He shouldn't have said anything to her, but she'd already figured out the biggest secret in his life—how, he didn't know. And wasn't it better to put it to bed so she'd stop wondering?

"It's time," he said. "I've gotten reckless or gotten too old. I've had two bad injuries in just a couple of years and if it keeps up ... " He shrugged, letting the words trail off. When she didn't say anything else, he added, "It's just time."

"Why did you even get into it?"

He sighed and fisted his hand in her hair. "If I tell you, will you let it go? No more questions?"

Chapter 14



Isabel's gut tightened as he dragged his hands down his face and turned his gaze out over the water.

Travis had never had any problems meeting her gaze. That he wouldn't now told her that she wasn't going to like what he had to say. Her muscles tightened, but she already had a sinking suspicion about what had put him on the road he'd been walking all these years.

"Miles came to me a couple of months after ... after we last talked that summer."

"I know he was involved in you finding out about the pregnancy," she said in a flat voice. It had taken her a long time to move past that, to forgive the other man, but in the end, she'd let it go—not for Miles, but for herself. Not being able to forgive him had caused her more harm than anything and she'd been tired of carrying rage and bitterness inside her. But even now, she could feel the fury rising up in her throat. Had he told Travis ...

"He didn't tell me anything about what had happened to you," Travis said.

She jerked her head up, not even certain when she'd lowered her gaze.

Travis was staring at her and she felt the dull rush of color flood her cheeks, hold and cold chills alternating as the old, familiar shame washed over her. She willed it down, knowing she'd have to deal with that later. She'd fought through it, would again. Survivors of rape never truly recovered—they dealt with it, learned to live with it...or some did. She had. For long periods, she could even forget. But there were times when it crept back.

While that slippery, greasy knot of shame twisted in her gut, she held her stare.

“We’re not talking about me,” she replied in a hard, flat voice.

She expected him to push.

But he didn’t.

His gaze fell away and he looked back out over the water. As he shoved to his feet, the movement easy and graceful despite the injury in his side, she swiped a shaky hand over her mouth and forced air in, blowing it back out in a controlled manner. She’d spent years in therapy, working with an anonymous counselor Miles had arranged and she still relied on the breathing exercises, still did the yoga routines that had helped her gain control of the panic attacks and rage.

Now, she used the breathing to steady out as Travis paced over the shoreline and stared out into the night before walking back to her a couple of minutes later.

Rage simmered in his eyes.

“I’m not going to ask. You don’t need to talk. But I have to say this—I know he hurt you—that Beresford fucker. I saw you flinch from him the night I ... that night,” he bit off. “If I hadn’t been so fucking angry, so jealous, so fucking *blind*, I would have figured it out sooner, and I’m ... no. You don’t want or need apologies from me and they won’t fix shit. But I’m not stupid. I know what he did. And if I could get my hands on him, I’d destroy him. I’d hurt him, make him beg and then I’d kill him, painfully. And I’d enjoy it.”

At that moment, he was a stranger.

Brutal, ruthless, capable of the torturous murder he’d just promised.

Isabel’s breath caught in her throat.

Then he blinked. A long, steadying breath escaped him and when he looked back at her, she saw the Travis she’d come to expect over the past few days, different from the boy she’d fallen in love with, but not a deadly, remote stranger capable of a cold-blooded execution.

Which one are you?

“I know what happened,” he said again, far more calmly now. “And I know about your father. Rage was eating me alive after Miles told me you’d helped them uncover what Wilson Steele was doing, that you were going to put him away. You and your sisters, your mom, you had to go into witness protection—then your mom ended up dying ...” He paused.

“She killed herself,” Isabel said softly. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself, the dull, scarred-over wound of that particular betrayal a nagging ache. “She was always weak. I’m not saying that because she ended her life. I understand that some see suicide as a way out—sometimes, you are trapped in impossible situations and fuck knows I understand that. For others ... hell, I know depression. I know the pain it can cause—I’ve lived with it for years and it can be cancerous. But she was weak in other ways and she put us in harm’s way because of it.”

She heard a harsh breath but didn’t look his way.

“Some people don’t understand that the wounds you don’t see can be every bit as painful and unrelenting as those we carry on our skin.” She thought of the scars on her belly, scars he would have seen if there had been light, if he had maybe been a little less ... focused on other parts of her anatomy earlier. Even as she thought it, her throat tightened. She’d have to tell him, she realized. If they pursued this any further, she’d have to tell him. He deserved to know.

She thought, bitterly, of the occasional articles she’d seen about his family. Even when she’d tried to tell herself she was over him, done with him, she’d never quite been able to cut that thread and when she’d see the infrequent tabloid spreads on his older brother Zach over the years—and later, his wife, Abby, or more recently, pieces on his kid brother Sebastien and the gorgeous movie star he’d married, Marin, she’d read them. She’d hoarded pieces on Trey, because out of all the brothers, Travis was naturally closest to his twin.

But only rarely had there ever been a mention of the most reclusive Barnes sibling, and never any pictures. There had been *nothing* on Travis in years.

One thing there had been?

Frequent mentions of the family.

Abigale Applegate Barnes was expecting her first child within the year.

Within a month of that announcement, there had been another—Marin Lassiter-Barnes was also expecting.

Trey and his wife Ressa? They had two kids together—one from Trey's first marriage and a child Ressa had brought into the mix. They'd been featured in some magazine a year earlier.

The Barnes were all about the *F* word ... Family. With a capital fucking *F*.

Aching, she turned away and placed a hand on her belly, the one that would never carry life.

Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked them.

"Stephen Beresford doesn't concern me," she said in a voice that came out cool and controlled, so calm she should have been pleased with herself. But she didn't have the emotional bandwidth to spare. "He's still got another three years of his mandatory agreed sentence before he'll qualify for probation and after that, he'll be on parole five years. Miles will have him monitored and I'm no longer so easily cowed."

"You were never easily cowed," Travis said, a thread of anger still underscoring his voice. "And what happened to you wasn't *your* fault."

"I know that...now." She went to him, unable to keep her distance when he looked so fierce, so angry. For her. Stroking her hands down his arms, Isabel peered up at him. "I talked to a counselor for years. Miles made sure of that. And I know it's not my fault. As to being easily cowed ... " Now, she managed to smile. "You're right. I wasn't. But I was easily controlled—my sisters and my mom were always my weaknesses."

Her twin sisters, Mary Kate and Ellen, always *would* be her weakness, but Miles had kept them safe all these years. He'd continue to do so, too. Miles had already made arrangements with the agent who'd take over once he passed.

He'd come to her not long after his oncologist had told him his prognosis.

After she'd gotten over the shock, he'd explained the plans he'd already laid out.

And here was Travis, another piece of Miles's machinations, although this was a personal matter for her old friend. She should have expected it. He'd never forgiven himself and he wouldn't rest if he didn't fix this.

Her heart squeezed in her chest and some part of her almost laughed, even, thought maybe she'd tease the old bastard, ask if he'd haunt them both if they refused to give him what he wanted.

But in her heart ...

Isabel sighed and tucked that thought away. She was having too many realizations today, far too many.

"Enough of me," she said as the wind kicked up over the water and blew her hair back. "This is supposed to be about you."

"I can't talk about how I got into it without discussing you, though."

At those words, she turned, the knot in her gut drawing tighter. It was like that knot pulled some latent anger out of hiding and she had to struggle to lash it down. The anger wouldn't help. She *knew* it wouldn't.

And she *tried* to control it. Oh, she tried.

Tension still arced between them, heady and intense, and all it needed was a spark.

"Elaborate," she ordered.

He inclined his head.

"I went to Miles a year after he came to see me, tell me that he'd ... been wrong about you." He cleared his throat. "I was drowning. I'd been planning on going to law school or maybe medical school after college, but ... " He shrugged, a restless twitch of his shoulders. "I'd already lost interest in

both of those fields and ended up switching my majors. Criminal justice and accounting. Accounting ... well, it was easy and let me really focus on criminal justice. I guess some part of me already knew what I was planning. Once I'd graduated, I went to Miles and I told him I wanted in."

"And he just *let* you," Isabel said with a disbelieving scoff. She sank back down onto the Adirondack chair she'd occupied earlier, her entire body feeling far too weary now, older, as if she'd aged a few years in the span of the past ten minutes. "You with that pretty-boy, semi-famous face fresh out of Malibu? He just *let* you into the FBI? Agents have to *blend*, Travis. You don't blend."

He bared his teeth in a savage smile. "You'd be surprised. And there are various places they need people to *blend*, Iz. Every Day Average Joe isn't going to blend into the places a pretty boy fresh out of Malibu can ... at least not without a hell of a lot of training and work." Scraping short, neat nails down his jawline, he added, "And as to a semi-famous face ... we found a way around that."

"Yeah?" She snorted. "Like what? Erasing yourself?"

His eyes went hooded and she half-expected him to change the subject.

Instead, he paced closer to her seat and he bent over, bracing one hand on the arm of the chair. He wrapped the other around her wrist. She let him, curious. He guided her fingers to his hair. "Feel behind my ears."

She did so and when she felt a thin, narrow scar, she stiffened. "What's that?"

"Surgical scar." A ghost of a smile danced on his lips. "One of several. I've had a couple of different plastic surgeries, Iz. Minor changes, just enough to confuse facial recognition scans—otoplasty to alter the position of my ears, and slightly change the shape of my earlobe and the helix." He let go of her wrist and reached down, brushing the tip of his finger over the upper arch of her ear. "This part. Ears are as unique as a fingerprint. Changing mine meant there wouldn't be any way of linking me to my twin that way. I also had work

on my jawline—it's more square than it used to be. A few years later, I had work done on my nose. A Not long after that, my cheekbones."

"Didn't your family notice?" She was appalled, disgusted to think he'd had such drastic changes done to his body, all so he could work for Miles. And *why*?

"They did." He lifted a shoulder. "They were told I'd been in a car wreck while traveling in Europe." Rubbing his nose, he added, "As to later surgeries, I let them think there were complications and I was having issues with headaches and breathing a few years ago and the doctors did the nose work then, claimed they'd missed something and had to fix the damage which explained the nose work. They didn't really notice the cheekbones. I ... haven't been around a lot."

"Must be hard lying to your twin, your brothers ... your *mother*," she said. And she could hear the anger pulsing in her voice. She couldn't hide it any more than she could hide the shaking in her fingers when she shoved her hands into his hair. "Why did you do this to yourself, damn it? *Why*?"

"I had to." He went to his knees in front of her, closing his hands around her wrists. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Explain it to me," she demanded, tears burning her eyes again and she couldn't hold them back. "*Make* me understand."

Her voice cracked and the pain he heard was like claws dragging into an open wound. He'd rather take another bullet in his side, deal with another infection that left him shaking with fever and out of his head than be the cause of this pain—*her* pain. Again.

And he knew he was going to add to it.

Letting go of her wrists, he shifted his hands to her face, cradling her cheeks so he could look into her eyes.

"I hated myself after what I did to you," he said, emotion roughening his voice. "I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror. There were days I couldn't even stand to face my twin

because it was another damn mirror. Every day, I thought of the pain in your voice when you called, thought of the messages you'd sent me, thought of how alone you'd been when you testified against him ... and how alone you'd been when that Beresford fuck had touched you. And I couldn't do shit to help you. But I had to do *something*. I couldn't help you, but maybe I could help somebody else."

Tears spilled out of her eyes.

He stroked them away with his thumbs, felt the callouses rasp over skin satiny soft and smooth. "I thought maybe there were others Miles hadn't tracked down. So I went to him. But you'd been thorough and you helped break that ring into pieces. It had turned into an obsession by that time. I couldn't help you. But I'd damn well help the next girl like you. I'd stop the next Wilson Steele, the next Stephen Beresford. If I did that, maybe I'd sleep at night. So I called Miles. He wouldn't talk to me. I went to the address on the card he'd left me. He wouldn't see me. I booked a hotel room and called every damn day, leaving a message with his assistant when he wouldn't take my calls. It took him two weeks but he finally talked to me. I told him I wanted in."

"And he let you in," Isabel said. "Just like that."

"No." Travis snorted. "*Not* just like that. I ragged him for weeks. He threatened to have me arrested, threatened to have me hauled back to California. I told him to do whatever in the hell he wanted. I'd just come back. Finally, he told me I wouldn't be of any use to him because of my ... pretty-boy, semi-famous face. I told him I'd take a sledgehammer to it if that would help."

Isabel closed her eyes. "I'm afraid to ask if you were serious."

"Close enough."

She grabbed his arms, her nails biting into his skin through the worn cotton of his shirt. "You're *insane*. You could have gotten *killed*."

"I was already dead inside."

She shuddered, then, grabbing two handfuls of his hair, she hauled his face to hers and kissed him.

It was a deep, rough kiss, a tangling of tongues and teeth and it ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

“No. Don’t say that. Don’t *ever* say that.” Then she shoved at his shoulders. “Move,” she said thinly. “I need ... I ... just move. I have to think about this.”

Travis shoved to his feet, biting back a grimace as pain from his side tore through him. Earlier, he hadn’t felt it. Now the pain came crashing back and he almost reveled in it. It was better than the pain twisting in his heart as he watched her walk away from him, alone in the darkness, her shoulders slumped and her arms wrapped around herself.

Chapter 15



Over a week passed with the two of them seeing each other only in passing.

Isabel told herself she wasn't ignoring him. Not exactly.

She had plenty of shit to do.

The kids were starting school on Wednesday and she had *four* children to shop for, clothe, and prepare for school this time around—she'd rarely had so many kids under her roof, and rarely so many school-aged kids to get ready at the same time.

Jacob didn't make things easy, either.

He picked fights over the smallest thing, although he stopped skipping out on his chores after that first night.

The next morning—the morning after she'd learned such devastating secrets about Travis—Jacob had woken up late, as Isabel had expected, and come down to find the rest of them finishing up a huge breakfast spread that had consisted of French toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon. He'd asked where his food was and Isabel had coolly informed him that he could have cereal. He'd gaped at her. She told him that if he didn't help with the clean-up, he couldn't expect nice meals. So, if he wanted something other than cereal, sandwiches or TV dinners, he needed to learn out how to pull his weight.

After a surly look, he'd stomped to the fridge, jerked it open and poured himself a glass of Kool-Aid.

Isabel should have known something was up by the way the other three kids at the table studiously focused on their plates.

But she'd been distracted feeding Mariah.

Jacob had taken a swig of Kool-Aid—a big one—and it went spraying.

Brooklyn had promptly dissolved into giggles while Aaron and Storm gave him looks of faux disinterest, Storm even curling her nose. “Gross, man.”

Isabel had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing, because she suddenly realized why the big pitcher had remained untouched since Brooklyn had made the day before.

That devious little darling had done something. Her idea of payback to the boy she’d decided had been too mean to her friends.

Isabel would have to address it, but she’d do it in private. “Please clean up your mess,” she’d told him as he grabbed a glass of water and rinsed his mouth out.

Later, she discovered that Brooklyn had used salt instead of sugar—and she’d added some pickle juice.

Brooklyn had been told to spend the rest of the day in her room and she’d just nodded and smiled sunnily, happy with her own form of vengeance. The girl would be a force to reckon with once she was older.

Isabel had opted not to tell Jacob about the incident. For lunch, he’d come in while they were having burgers. There hadn’t been one for him and she’d pointed him to the fridge where there were hot dogs. “There’s also peanut butter and jelly if you’d prefer. I’m making meatloaf tonight. If you’d like any of that, I suggest you help clean up after lunch, since I had to clean up for you last night at dinner.”

She’d walked in on him sullenly scraping dishes and helping Storm load the dishwasher.

No kid ever went hungry in her house, but they all learned to pull their weight.

Frankly, she was surprised it had only taken a couple of meals for Jacob to get the point. As a reward, she’d made cookies along with the meatloaf. He’d eaten almost a half dozen on his own.

But he still couldn’t go a day without picking a fight with somebody.

Usually, it was Aaron, although he did seem to avoid calling the other boy a girl from what she could tell. Aaron, to give him credit, did a decent job of ignoring Jacob. It was something the younger teen was decent at—sadly, it was a skill that had been forced on him.

When she complimented him on his patience, Aaron had just told her, “It’s not patience. If I didn’t learn to ignore some of the assholes I meet, I’d never do anything but fight. All he wants to do is get a rise out of me. You learn to figure out the ones who really want to cause your problems and the ones who are just jackass kids or adults. He’s just a jackass.” Then he’d apologized for cussing, shooting a look around to make sure Brooklyn wasn’t around.

Now, as she and Brooklyn finished putting away the last of Brooklyn’s new school clothes, she listened to the music coming in through the window.

Booker hadn’t been able to come over today and Aaron was outside instead of in the garage, playing the acoustic guitar she’d picked up for him at a music store the last time she’d been in Bangor. It was a secondhand instrument, but the owner had told her it had plenty of good use still in it and it might work for somebody with smaller hands.

He sounded better, she thought. Not *good*, exactly. But ... better.

As she handed the stack of folded t-shirts to Brooklyn, she smiled. “Alright, Brooksy. You’ve got your school clothes all good to go. Put these up and you can go get a snack.”

“Cookies?” The petite blonde child gave Isabel an angelic look.

“No.” Isabel kept her face stern. “You snuck donuts for breakfast. Eat some fruit. If you eat a good dinner, we’ll see about cookies after dinner.”

“You’re no fun.” With a glum sigh, Brooklyn carried her clothes over to the dresser and plopped them down, then dragged a drawer open.

“That’s me,” Isabel said easily.

As she headed out into the hall, the phone started ringing and she veered into the small home office to grab the landline she kept in there.

Irritation twisted her face into a grimace as she said hello and received nothing but quiet breathing as a response. She didn't bother repeating her greeting again, just waited another five seconds and hung up.

It was getting to be a pattern, one almost every day for over a week, but nobody ever said anything.

It was probably Brant. He'd been mostly quiet since the last altercation with Aaron and his father had been conspicuously absent but she wouldn't put it past the unhappy kid to be making crank calls just to annoy her—or maybe be doing it in hopes of getting Aaron on the line so he could pick on the kid.

The music outside the house had gone quiet. She jogged down the stairs to the landing and took a peek through the open window.

Her heart stuttered in her chest when she saw Aaron talking to Travis.

His color was better.

He looked ... stronger.

He had on a tank top and athletic shorts, paired with a pair of running shoes that looked like they'd seen some miles.

She hoped like hell he hadn't been out exercising, not with that injury he had.

He gestured to Aaron and that was when she saw the guitar Travis held.

Unbidden delight washed through her as she realized it had to be *his* guitar—or one he'd picked up.

She hadn't exactly forgotten that he played. She just hadn't thought of it. It did something to her as she watched Aaron sit down next to him, the boy settling his guitar in his lap, making minute adjustments at Travis's direction.

Isabel forgot about the chores she needed to do, the new clothes she'd picked up for Mariah—clothes that needed to be washed and dried, then put away. She forgot about the meal prep she needed to get to work on.

She forgot about everything but the two guys out in the yard between her place and the house where Travis was staying, one older, one younger, both so focused on the other, that they didn't seem to notice anything else as Travis played a tune and guided Aaron through it.

When Aaron messed up a chord, Travis stopped, replayed, patiently guiding Aaron through.

“What are you looking ... oh.” Storm came to a stop next to her.

Isabel felt her cheeks heat and studiously kept her gaze on the impromptu music lesson happening outside the window.

“He really is hot,” Storm said after they finished one song and moved to another.

“I think he's a little old for you,” Isabel said dryly.

“I'm not talking about for *me*.” Storm gave her a look from the corner of her eye and smirked. “And you know it.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“So Brooklyn didn't see you two kissing?”

The sly innuendo in the teenaged girl's voice had Isabel huffing out a laugh. “That's enough, Storm,” she said, turning to face Storm.

“So you *were* or *weren't* kissing him?”

“None of your business,” Isabel responded even as her face flushed.

Storm grinned, the wide, pleased smile telling Isabel the girl already knew the answer.

Brooklyn came stomping up the stairs, a sulky look on her face.

Isabel brushed her fingers over the little girl's shoulder. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Nothin'," Brooklyn mumbled. But she stopped and leaned against Isabel's leg. After a few seconds, she said, "Boys are dumb."

"They certainly can be." Stroking a hand down Brooklyn's hair, she asked, "What happened?"

"Jacob won't let me play basketball." She tipped her head back. Her Wonder Woman tiara fell into her eyes and she pushed at it impatiently so she could glare up at Isabel. "But he'll play with that doucheface, Brant."

"Stop it with the doucheface talk, Brooklyn," she said, although it was more out of habit than anything else. Her thoughts were mostly on the idea of Jacob hanging with Brant. The idea of those two kids hanging together did *not* fill her with the warm and fuzzies. More like the cold and uglies. She hid her instinctive grimace and rubbed Brooklyn's back. "I've told you how older boys can be. Maybe you and me can play ball together."

Brooklyn's scowl deepened. "No, thanks. You're no good at basketball."

She hugged Isabel, not noticing her foster mother's disgruntled frown, and carried on upstairs to her room.

Storm was trying—and failing—to hide her smile, but when Isabel cocked a brow, she did clear her throat and try to look serious. "We need to help that girl with her filter."

Isabel rolled her eyes. "No, we need to *get* her a filter. They forgot to give her one the day she was made."

Storm's laugh made Isabel smile.

"I can play with her," she offered, jerking a shoulder in a shrug. "I don't mind."

Storm had been pretty adamant about not being into sports when she'd moved in, so now Isabel gave her a narrow, suspicious look. Storm gave another shrug, this one more disjointed while nerves showed on her face. "I ... um ... well,

my last foster family, they were all big on me playing basketball and it turned into a thing. When I wanted to quit the team, the guy was ... he was kind of an ass—I mean, a jerk about it. But you're not the kind to do that.”

“You don't have to play sports here unless you want to, Storm. You know that by now.”

Storm shrugged. “Yeah. I just ... I like ball, but I don't want to get invested in a local team when my dad will be coming back for me soon, ya know?”

The pretty teenager had been insisting her father would come for her—soon—almost since the first day she'd been placed with Isabel nearly three months earlier after the state had found out her mother had taken off with a boyfriend and left the girl alone in the one room apartment where they'd lived. Storm had been living on her own for some time before a neighbor became suspicious and called CPS. Storm had insisted she'd called her dad, a long-haul trucker who lived in Illinois, that she hadn't thought she'd be on her own for long.

Isabel had her doubts whether the girl had ever talked directly *to* her father, because Storm, normally fairly open, wouldn't outright say what she and her father had discussed.

Now, as Storm gave her a look that held an uncertainty Isabel doubted the girl was aware of, she couldn't do anything but smile in understanding. “I get it, kiddo. Come on. Why don't you help me figure out something easy for dessert tonight?”



“You *gotta* come,” Aaron said, his young voice flat, his eyes earnest. “You need to let Ms. Bella know you gave me the guitar. I don't want her thinking I stole it.”

“I don't see her thinking that.” Travis rested a hand on the kid's thin shoulder. Aaron tensed at first, then relaxed, even shuffled a little closer. The boy seemed almost starved for affection—not that he didn't get plenty of it from Isabel, but Travis had to wonder how empty the kid's life had been of

simple kindnesses before he'd been placed in his current home. "I get the feeling she thinks quite a bit of you."

Aaron's face flushed and he looked away. "Ms. Bella is pretty cool. But I'd still feel better if you came with me and told her."

Well, fuck. Not that he minded seeing her—hell, *he* was starving as well—starving for her, for another look, for the scent of her ... another taste. But it was clear she still wanted space. They hadn't talked in over a week and any time he *did* see her, she made a dogged effort to be looking busy.

"Sure, I'll drop in." He drummed up a smile. "Now, or can I swing by in a little bit?"

"Now's great!" Aaron grinned at him. "She'll be starting dinner soon and if you come in while she's cooking, she might put you to work."

"Well, we can't have that." So much for hoping to grab a quick shower, Travis thought.

He grabbed the other guitar case before Aaron could try to lug them both and they started for the door. The sound of a ball slamming into pavement and youthful voices rising in playful jeers caught his attention and he glanced over and saw that the newer kid, Jacob, was still playing hoops with Brant. "How's Jacob settling in? You two getting along any better?"

"He's not riding my ass so much," Aaron said, voice a little stiff. He shot a look up at Travis and smirked. "And he gave me a lame ass apology the other day."

"A lame ass apology. Wow." Travis cocked a brow. "Impressive."

Aaron laughed. "Ms. Bella had something to do with it, I know. She read him the science act about genders and all, I think. It's not the first time she's done it."

"Yeah, I caught some of it." Travis grinned at Aaron. "Your foster mom is a sharp lady."

Aaron's smile turned sly. "She's also hot."

“Is she?” Travis gave him a neutral look. “I think she’s a little old for you.”

“I’m talking about *you*, weirdo. Brooklyn told me she saw the two of you kissing.”

“The kid is dangerous.”

“Yeah.” Aaron sighed in satisfaction. “And she likes me best so I’m safe.”

The front door swung open just as they mounted the first step and Travis still as Isabel stepped out, a red scarf wrapped around her dark hair, her big green eyes distracted, although they sharpened and locked on his immediately. “Travis.”

“Ms. Bella.”

Her lips twitched in a smile as he echoed the title the kids used.

“I heard the two of you playing.” Her smile warmed as her gaze held his, lingered, then moved to Aaron. “You’re sounding better all the time, honey.”

Aaron blushed, then jogged up the steps, shoving the guitar case in front of him. “Travis said I could have this ... it’s an acoustic and it’s a better size for me. The one I’m playing is so big, I’m struggling to make it work ... my hands and all.”

Isabel opened her mouth, then, after a pause, she closed it and just nodded. She rested a hand on Aaron’s shoulder for a brief moment. “I assume you told him thanks.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled at her, looking young and sweet and for all the world, the picture of the perfect child.

Isabel rolled her eyes. “Okay. Go on in and put it up, You need to check and make sure you’ve got your homework caught up before dinner, okay?”

Aaron heaved out a sigh and started for the door. He was almost there when he turned and came back for his other guitar.

“I’ll take it in, Aaron,” Isabel said.

Aaron shrugged. "I'll come back and get it if you just want to put it inside."

"Okay."

After the boy disappeared, Travis said, "He's got some natural skill, I think. And he's determined."

"It was kind of you to give it to him. I hope you didn't spend much on it."

"It didn't cost much." He offered a half-smile. "I had my brother send me one of our old ones. I had to go pick it up in Bangor the other day ... *and* I had to promise to go see him soon, and go back to California and see our parents." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking away from the woman who watched him so closely. "Zach ... he's married now ... they're expecting their first baby and I promised to get out there and see both him and Abby. And my baby brother and Marin. They're expecting, too."

"I read about it...both of them getting married. I can't say I was surprised about Zach marrying Abby."

He shot a quick glance and found that she was smiling.

"There was never anybody else for him," Travis said with a shrug. *Or for me.*

A burst of raucous laughter burst out from behind them and Travis shifted and looked at the two teens playing ball at the house across the road.

Isabel's strained sigh caught his attention and he looked over at her. "Problem?"

"No, I ... hell. I'm just hoping those two don't end up being bad news for each other." She scowled. "Brant would probably be an okay kid if his father wasn't a dick. Jacob ... he's already struggling."

"They're both lonely. Maybe they'll be good for each other. They've been playing close to an hour straight and having fun."

She went to respond, then cocked her head. "An hour. You're sure?"

Brooklyn came tearing outside before he could answer and threw herself at him. “Mr. Travis! I haven’t seen you in days and days!”

“Days and days, huh, squirt?” He braced the guitar case against the post nearest him and bent over until he and the child were face to face. “Has it been that long?”

Brooklyn nodded so vigorously, that her tiara toppled off. He caught it before it could hit the ground and held it out to her. She grinned at him, displaying a new gap in her smile. “Look,” she said, poking her tongue into the empty space. “I lost a tooth. I got a whole *dollar* for it. Why do tooth fairies want teeth?”

“Ummm ... because they’re creepy?”

“Travis!” Isabel glared at him even as she tried not to laugh.

“Well ... ” He shrugged, then looked at Brooklyn. In a fake, too-loud whisper, he said, “It is creepy. Do you want somebody buying your teeth?”

Brooklyn giggled and clapped a hand over her mouth. With her other one, she reached for his hand and turned to look at Isabel. “Can Mr. Travis stay for dinner?”

They both looked at each other.

Even as Travis started to make up an excuse, a wave of longing washed over Isabel and she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Travis stared at her.

She smiled, feeling nervous, needy ... and hopeful.

In the days since she’d seen him, one thought had too often overtaken her.

So easily, he could have been taken away from her ... *forever*.

But he hadn’t been. He was here ... and safe.

They’d missed out on so many years together.

Did she really want to let this second chance slip away?

His blue-green eyes locked with hers.

“Stay for dinner, Travis.”

And that was all he needed to hear. Whatever she wanted from him, he’d give it. “Okay.”

“Yes!” Brooklyn bounced up and pumped a fist in the air. “I’m gonna go tell Aaron.”

As she bolted inside, Travis and Isabel both smiled.

“I should go shower, change.”

Isabel nodded, but as he turned to go, she said, “Hey, wait ... you said they’ve been playing for an hour?”

Travis quirked a brow. “Yeah. I was doing some working out on the front part of the deck and could see them.”

“For an hour.”

“Yeah.” His brows drew together and he took a step toward her. “Is something wrong?”

She thought about the phone calls but brushed them aside. If there were any more, she’d say something to Miles. “No. It’s just ... ” She smiled. “Unexpected, I guess.”

Chapter 16



Travis went home first to shower.

After that, he shaved and dressed in a pair of jeans that were still a little too loose. A belt fixed that. He found one of the few decent shirts he'd packed. It was also too loose but the style and cut made it look intentional.

The soft, ivory linen draped easily over his shoulders and torso and he studied his reflection for longer than normal, wondering if he looked too dressed up. Fuck, he'd deliberated over his clothing choices for assignments less than this.

But Isabel ... she *mattered*.

Finally, he muttered, "Fuck it." So what if he actually gave a damn how he looked for once? He'd stopped caring years ago. It was only natural that the urge to look halfway decent would return now, when he was going to spend an evening with her.

"Not a date," he told himself.

How could it be? He was spending it with her *and* five foster kids.

Five. The number still boggled the brain.

After dragging his hands through his still-damp hair, he gave his reflection one last look, then headed out of the bathroom. After only the briefest hesitation, he detoured by the built-in wine cellar, a large space almost the size of the kitchen itself. Miles had given him the code and told him he could have anything he wanted, although so far, Travis hadn't touched anything.

Now, though, he went to take a look.

If he'd had time, he'd drive into town, pick up flowers, and buy his own damn bottle of wine, but this would have to work.

"Still not a date," he reminded himself as he came to a stop in front of the whites.

They were eating fried chicken, she'd told him. Debating his choices, he selected a Chablis he was familiar with. One of the numerous things he'd developed over the years was the knowledge of wines—playing up that pretty-boy kid from Malibu, as Isabel had jibed about. And what pretty boy player from Malibu didn't know his wines?

He smirked as he left the large, walk-in storage space tucked off the kitchen. He caught sight of a hallway mirror and paused once more to check his image in the reflection there, but just as he went to step away, he paused.

Isabel's voice came back to him.

Why did you do this yourself?

Must be hard lying to your twin, your family ... your mother.

He reached up and touched his jawline, traced his fingers down it, and recalled the expression in his mother's eyes as he told her about his 'accident'. There had been a throwaway comment about an American injured in a Swiss newspaper, something Miles had arranged, cover for the main surgery he'd undergone.

The differences weren't extreme. He still resembled his brothers, even his twin, although they weren't identical, especially since the most recent surgeries. Some changes could be attributed to the weight loss and hard physical regimen he maintained, but not all of it.

Those surgeries had been necessary, though.

The first had been during his mid-twenties, almost a year after Trey's first wife had died. Aliesha had been pregnant and although their son had survived the emergency C-section, he'd been small, born too early, and had spent months in the hospital.

Travis had taken a leave from work to help his brother and because the media had flocked to the tragedy of the already-famous young author, one of the best ways to help had been for Travis to just *act* like Trey. It had allowed Trey some

measure of privacy as he sat with his premature infant during those first long months in the hospital.

Even though on his earliest assignments, he'd taken measures like dying his hair, wearing colored contacts and eyeglasses to change his appearance, after the numerous images that had been taken of him, it was decided he needed to either stop going under on assignments—in other words, quit—or something more drastic had to be done, to both protect his twin and the rest of the family, and to protect his cover.

So they'd done the surgeries.

The anatomical changes caused by the surgeries were severe enough to throw off facial recognition software. Paired with the continued, slight alterations of his hair and eyes, there was *just* enough about him to give people the idea that he was somebody they *should* know, but couldn't place. Pair it with his familiarity with the high life and he could fit into the inner circles of high society almost anywhere.

Now, though, more than ever, he was faced with the cost.

He didn't know the man in the mirror.

It wasn't ... *him*.

His *family* didn't know the man in the mirror.

His phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket and stared at his brother's name on the line.

His instinct was to ignore the call, shoot off a text that he couldn't talk right now, just as he'd done so often over the years.

He didn't.

“Hey, man.”

There was a brief pause and then, Trey blew out a startled breath. “Well, I'll be damned. I was starting to think you forgot *how* to answer a phone.”

“Ah, well. Maybe I did.”

There was an awkward silence, followed by the both of them clearing their throats. Then they both laughed.

Trey was the one to break the uneasy tension. “Something’s going on with you these days. And not just the guitar.”

“Ah ... yeah, sort of.” He glanced out the window in the direction of Isabel’s house. Brooklyn was out in the sideyard with Storm, who held the baby Travis had only met a time or two. Brooklyn had one of her princess outfits on and was attempting to dribble a basketball while Storm bounced the baby on her hip, a big grin on her pretty face. Looking at the kids, especially Brooklyn, caused his heart to clench in his chest.

“What’s that?” Trey demanded just seconds later and Travis knew his twin had felt that savage pull of emotion.

Travis dragged a hand down his face. “I don’t have time for this right now.”

“You never have time,” Trey said sourly. “I’m surprised you even bothered to answer the damn phone. Fine. You go ahead and brush me off. I’ll talk—”

“It’s a woman,” he blurted, the guilt grabbing him by the throat and choking him. He’d hurt his twin, his *family*, so much over the years with this mission he’d put before himself. And it had to stop. *He* had to stop.

Trey went silent.

Travis heaved out a ragged breath. “I can’t talk things right now ... we’re having dinner, and beyond that, it’s ... complicated. I mean, *really* complicated. And I’m not saying that because I’m trying to avoid talking to you.” *It’s the girl I fell in love with, remember her? You should. There’s only been the one. But I can’t mention her name, because she’s in witness protection and that’s just one of the secrets I’ll have to keep from you, brother.* “I just ... *can’t* talk about it yet.”

Seconds ticked away.

“Huh.”

A bubble of nervous laughter escaped Travis. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Not sure what else to say, man.” Trey blew out a breath. “But that’s the most honest you’ve been with me in ... well, a long time. Are you dating?”

“No. It’s ... well, like I said, complicated.” Would dating even *work* between them? He’d like to take her out on a date—a hundred of them, make up for all the things they hadn’t had.

In the background, a young, high-pitched squeal was interrupted by a series of yips and Trey groaned. “Aw, fuck. I gotta go. Damned dog.”

“I didn’t know you had a dog.”

“We *didn’t*,” he said. “Until this morning. Listen, we’re not done with this conversation.”

“No.” Travis considered it and wondered what more he could say. But there was more, even if it wasn’t about Isabel. “I guess not. I’ll talk to you later. Hug the kids and Ressa for me.”

The line went dead but instead of slipping the phone back into his pocket, he went online and logged into a secure cloud account, input the complicated password and opened the photo album. He found a picture of Trey and opened it.

For a long moment, he stared at his twin, his throat tight.

Then, before he could consider the thoughts circling in his head, he opened the encrypted message app and sent a text to Miles.

I think I want my face back. My real face. Can we make that happen since I’m getting out?

Then, closing the app, he grabbed the bottle of wine and headed for the door.

It was time for dinner.



“You look nice.”

Isabel jerked her head up from the salad she'd tossed together and found Aaron standing in the doorway to the kitchen, a wide grin on his narrow face.

Despite the nerves twisting her belly, despite the flush she could feel crawling up her cheeks, she managed a calm smile. "Why, thank you."

"Did you dress up for us?" His smile was all innocence.

"I'm not dressed up." She huffed out a breath and went back to slicing tomatoes. "It's just a dress."

And it was just a dress. Granted, it was a *pretty* dress, a pale, sage green that made her eyes look even greener. And so maybe she'd brushed on some makeup, something she rarely messed with these days.

But she wasn't even wearing *shoes*. That lingering, leftover act of rebellion stemming from the years when she'd been forced to fit the picture of perfection in her father's household, never a hair out of place, groomed within an inch of her life, save for the approved exercise times, was one she welcomed. She loved feeling the warmth of a bare hardwood floor in the summer, the sensation of sand between her toes when she was out on the beach.

The front door banged open and Brooklyn shouted, "He's here!"

The clattering of the girl's hard, plastic 'princess' shoes heralded her arrival as she ran into the kitchen, stopping just inside to bounce on her toes and grin at Isabel.

"Mr. Travis is here!" Then she looked at Isabel and her eyes rounded. "Wow, you look so pretty!"

"I couldn't have you be the only one looking fancy tonight, could I?" Isabel grinned at her.

Brooklyn whirled around and rushed back out, reappearing a minute later with Travis's hand in hers. She dragged him into the kitchen, all but quivering with her excitement as she pointed at Isabel. "Doesn't Ms. Bella look pretty?"

Travis met her eyes.

Her mouth went dry as that intense, surreal gaze darkened a fraction.

In a husky murmur, he said, “She looks very pretty, Brooklyn.”

His voice stroked over her senses as if he’d slid his hand down her spine, touched her in places intimate and wet.

Isabel swallowed, throat tight and her skin feeling too small for all the emotions raging inside her. She fisted her hands in the loose, flowing skirt of her dress even as she drummed up a smile. Camouflaging her emotions had been a skill she’d learned early in life. It had been a skill necessary to survive in Wilson Ward’s home. The subsequent trips back to court, the numerous trips to make victim’s impact statements when he or some of the others had tried to make parole, it had only made her better at controlling the deep, inner rage that had kept her going for so long.

But she wouldn’t have guessed that *need* would be so much harder to hide.

And damn but she needed him.

It was akin to her need for oxygen, water, food and light.

“Glad you can join us, Travis,” she said and her voice was only a *little* shaky.

“Thanks for having me.” He stroked Brooklyn’s hair before cutting around her, coming to a stop in front of Isabel, hand outstretched.

Isabel looked down and spied the bottle of wine he offered. Her eyes widened.

“When did you have time to go find that?”

“It didn’t take long.” A ghost of a smile flirted with the sensually seductive curve of his mouth and he hitched up a shoulder. “I just ducked into Max’s wine cellar. He told me to help myself, so I did. He’s got more wine in there than we could drink if we had a bottle every night for the next ten years.”

She arched her brows, then accepted the offering. “Well. I guess this will go with fried chicken just fine then.” Their fingers brushed.

Judging by the skip in his breathing, she knew she wasn’t the only one who felt the charge pass between them.

The front door banged open, shattering that gathering tension.

Isabel sucked in a nervous breath.

Travis’s lids drooped, the ridiculously thick lashes shielding his eyes from hers and then he looked back at her, crooked a smile. It was a sexy, secretive smile that made her belly tighten and her thighs clenched.

Oh, man ... I’m in trouble, she thought.

And she decided she didn’t mind.

Not one bit.

A split second later, a truculent young male voice snapped out, “What the hell is *he* doing here?”

“He’s—”

“I think Ms. Bella and I can handle this, Brooksy,” Travis said, the amusement mostly throttled back.

Isabel put the wine on the counter and angled her body to watch as Jacob sauntered over to stop just maybe two feet in front of Travis, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his new jeans and his chin angled belligerently high as he stared at Travis.

Jacob was tall and gangly, in that way teen boys were when they shot up fast in a short period of time.

He was still four or five inches short of Travis’s height and his long, bony frame lacked the easy grace the older male possessed, but that didn’t keep the belligerence from the boy’s gaze as he looked Travis up and down.

Next to him, and a little behind his left shoulder, stood Brant.

The other kid looked nervous and when he met Isabel's gaze, those nerves magnified until he ended up lowering his gaze and staring at his toes.

Isabel wondered if his father knew where he was.

"Bella, what the hell is he doing here?" Jacob demanded.

Swinging her gaze from Brant to Jacob, Isabel coolly asked, "Excuse me?"

If she hadn't been watching him, if she hadn't spent the past five years working with kids just like him, she might have missed the way he jerked, his shoulders tensing. In a flash, he relaxed, the tightening around his mouth fading away to be replaced by that same sneer as he looked Travis over before shooting her another look. "Why is he here?"

"I invited him over for dinner," she said in an icy tone. "And I don't believe I require your permission, Jacob." She waited a beat, then asked, "Did circumstances change, sweetheart? Are *you* now paying for this house? The utilities? Are *you* buying the groceries? Cooking the food? Doing anything to determine who deserves entry into *my* home?"

A dull flush washed over his cheeks and his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

Satisfied she'd made her point, she shifted her attention back to Brant. "Hello. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Um." The tall, lanky kid shifted on his feet and darted a nervous look around the room, his cheeks sunburn-red. But it wasn't the sun responsible. He was nervous—and embarrassed.

Then he slanted a look at Travis and his shoulders slumped even more.

"He's my friend," Jacob said, some of his attitude returning. "You told me this was my home. Is it?"

This kid was going to try her patience in ways she hadn't experienced in some time, Isabel decided.

Considering her options, she glanced around, then looked at Travis. "Why don't you take Storm, Mariah, Aaron and

Brooklyn and make sure they've all washed up? I need a minute." Then she shot a look at Aaron and Storm to make sure they got the point.

Both of the older kids had been glaring daggers at Jacob and Brant but at her words, they sucked in a breath, then, with reluctance, followed Travis out of the kitchen. Storm gave Travis quiet directions. Once they were out of earshot, Isabel folded her arms over her chest and focused on the two teen boys in front of her.

Pointing at Brant, she said, "Not a word from you until I give you permission. Otherwise, you're out and you'll never come back in. Am I understood?"

He bobbed his head. "Yes, ma'am."

Hmmm. Interesting.

Then she focused on Jacob.

"Let's get one thing straight. This *is* your home. Yes, you can invite friends ... *after* you get my permission. *You* are the child. *I* am the adult. You get my okay, first, or it doesn't happen." She planted her hands on her hips and held his surly stare. "It's *always* with my okay. I may not have enough food. I may already have plans. You *might* be inviting somebody who has harassed other kids who live here." She shot a look at Brant. He was the color of a boiled lobster and busily observing the floor. "Furthermore, you *might* be inviting somebody who has a parent who *might* seriously object to them being here. You're new here, so you need to understand the lay of the land a little better before jumping into the fire. Understand?"

"Just because he doesn't get along with Aaron doesn't mean *I* can't be friends with him," Jacob said in a sulky voice, jabbing a thumb at his chest.

"I don't give a damn if he and Aaron get along or not," Isabel responded. "But he has repeatedly disrespected Aaron *to his face*. He bullied *Brooklyn*—she's *five*, even if she does seem to think otherwise."

Neither teenager would look at her now.

But she wasn't done. "If I invited somebody here who blatantly disrespected you, how would *you* feel?"

"I don't give a shit what you do," Jacob said. But he still wouldn't look at her.

Isabel waited, staring at his averted head.

Finally, Jacob said, "I don't see what the big deal is."

"You weren't the one being picked on and harassed," Isabel said, managing to keep her voice level—somehow. "Were you?"

Brant was the one to break the silence. "I'm sorry."

It was ... unexpected.

He shifted his feet and looked away, directing his gaze at everybody but her. But he kept talking. "That ... um, it's kinda why I wanted to come over. I figured I might have a minute to tell ... Aaron I was sorry, to show you guys I'm not always an asshole."

I'll be damned, Isabel thought, eying the kid with a bit more consideration.

Jacob shifted to stand closer to his friend. "See?"

Isabel flicked him a look. "Hush." Focusing back on Brant, she asked, "Why are you sorry?"

"I ... " He huffed out a breath. "I just am, okay? I get mad sometimes. Do we gotta have a big talk about it or can I just go tell Aaron I'm sorry? I'll tell Brooklyn, too."

Isabel saw nothing in his eyes but guilt and embarrassment, but before she moved to call the other boy into the room, she asked, "Does your father know where you are?"

"No." His cheeks turned a darker red. "He's down in Bangor for a couple of days, helping his cousin with some stuff, earning some money. I texted my mom. She knows."

"Okay. You know your dad won't like you being here ... and I don't want to cause problems between him and your mother." God knows Brant's poor mother had enough problems, just dealing with Lloyd.

“I’m not telling him,” Brant mumbled, staring at his feet.

Isabel decided to leave that statement alone. Walking to the door of the kitchen, she called Aaron back in and gestured for Jacob to leave the room so Aaron and Brant could talk in private. He clearly didn’t want to go, but he did, after shooting Aaron and Brant a last look.

A few minutes later, Brant left, giving Isabel a tentative smile. He took another minute to look for Brooklyn and Isabel saw the younger girl give him a fatalistic shrug in response to whatever apology he offered.

On his way out, Brant spotted Travis. Isabel saw the way his shoulders straightened, his head lifted. Travis nodded at him, the same way he’d nodded at Aaron and she had a suspicion she knew exactly what—or who—was behind the kid’s abrupt change in attitude.

Wonders never cease, she mused.

Feeling like the world was trying to realign, she called everybody back in.

Aaron was washing his hands, looking puzzled. When she joined him, he whispered, “Did you make him do that?”

“No.” She huffed out a laugh and glanced over her shoulder to see Brooklyn telling Travis how to settle Mariah into her high chair. Travis, the smartest man she’d ever known, listened and nodded soberly, then thanked Brooklyn for her help and the young girl glowed under his attention. Looking back at Aaron, she lightly touched his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Surprised.” He shrugged, then moved in, gave her one of his quick, rare hugs.

She hugged him back, keeping the contact light. “Are *you*?”

“Yeah.” Aaron stepped back and his cocky smile was back in place. “Just feeling a little ... weird, I guess. That’s the first time anybody’s ever apologized for that shit and seemed to mean it.”

He moved around her and headed to the table, telling Brooklyn not to start hogging the potatoes before the meal started.

Isabel wanted to hold him closer for a little bit longer. That kid's young heart had already been bruised so much. But as he settled down between Brooklyn and Storm, he was grinning, and he looked happy.

Sometimes, that was the most she could hope for on a day to day basis.

Turning back to the counter, she focused on plating up the rest of the meal.

Chapter 17



Isabel didn't hear him coming up behind her, but as she finished piling the chicken on a serving platter, Travis was just there. Her heart jittered in her chest and she glanced up at him, felt her breath catch at the sight of him, and she wondered if she'd ever get used to it ... to *him*.

“What was that all about?”

“Oh, nothing ... just a minor miracle,” Isabel said lightly. “Or what seems like one. I'll tell you about it later. Although ... I'm wondering. Did you say anything to Brant?”

He slanted her a sidelong look. “Not much. Just mentioned that guys who pick on kids half their size are usually nothing more than assholes. Asked if that was who he wanted to be. Guess he decided.”

Isabel had a feeling it went deeper than that, but now wasn't the time.

Jacob and Aaron were circling around each other with the same uneasy wariness she'd expect to see in fighters from warring factions and she didn't want to take her eyes off of them for longer than a minute.

“Ms. Bella!”

Isabel looked at Brooklyn as the girl came rushing up, her Wonder Woman tiara toppling into her eyes as she skidded to a halt on the hardwood floors.

Travis reached out and fixed it, settling it back into place and Brooklyn beamed at him before focusing back on Isabel.

“Yes, Brook?”

“I'm hungry!” she all but shouted. “Can we eat?”

“Such sweet, dulcet tones,” Isabel said dryly with a sideways look at Travis.

“Yes, like a bird.” Aaron rolled his eyes as he took the plate of chicken from Isabel. “And when I say a bird, I’m talking something like a rooster ... or maybe a Canadian goose.”

Hooking her arm through Aaron’s, Isabel grinned.

“What’s dulcet?” Brooklyn asked.

“Gentle and soft,” Isabel said. Next to her, Travis coughed but she heard the strangled laugh he’d cut off. She didn’t dare look at him, focusing instead on Brooklyn. “Yes, sweetheart. We can eat. Why don’t you show Travis where he can sit down?”



The dinner was animated chaos.

Travis settled back to observe and found himself smiling more than once. Also more than once, he found himself having to drag his gaze from Isabel. Her dress was a misty, soft green with a gathered bodice that highlighted her full breasts before nipping in her waist and then flaring out over round, lush hips. The soft color made her skin glow with warmth and he wondered how much time she spent out on the beach.

She’d always been so pale in her teens, even when they’d spent the better part of the mid-morning out of the beach, soaking up the sun, walking and talking. But she’d always been slathering on sunscreen.

He’d once teased her about it, and the look that had come over her face had made him realize it wasn’t vanity or some predilection for burning easy, despite her fair complexion—it had something to do with her dick of a father.

She no longer worried about letting the sun kiss that fair skin. She was all peaches and cream and he wanted to lick her up.

Just then, her gaze met his across the table and the connection was electric.

He saw her throat work as her breath caught, watched her cheeks go rosy and her eyes darken.

Blood drained out of his head, traveled south.

Fuck, he wanted her. Like he wanted his next breath.

“*Stop it,*” she mouthed silently, as an echo of his need flared in her eyes, darkened them to the shade of a forest as a mist settled over the trees.

He gave her a slow smile, watched those eyes darken a fraction more. Then, before he eroded his control anymore, he looked at the quiet boy sitting next to him. “How are you settling in, Jacob?”

“Fine, I guess.” Jacob jerked a shoulder in a shrug as he answered, not even looking up from his plate.

A real talker, Travis mused.

“School going okay?”

Jacob did look up at that, his lip curled in a sneer. “Oh, it’s fantastic. I’ve been moved around so much, I’m behind in half the shit, and ahead in the rest.”

“Watch your mouth, Jacob,” Isabel warned.

He snorted and focused back on his food. Shoveling a bite of mashed potatoes in, he swallowed, then darted another look at Travis. “Anything else you think you need to ask? Show me a little more interest so maybe she’ll fuck you because you were nice to all of us?”

“Jacob!”

Jacob flinched at her voice, then straightened his shoulders and tossed Isabel a cold look. “What ... it’s not like I’m lying. That’s all guys like him ever do.”

“Jacob,” Travis spoke before Isabel could. “It’s bad enough you’ve got to insult a woman who’s been nothing but decent to you, but you’re also insulting yourself.”

That had Jacob whipping his head around to glare at Travis. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Guys like me ... I’m assuming you mean because I’ve got a decent-looking face and I’m spending time with Isabel. Well, you’re not ugly. So I assume when you get older, that’s how you plan to treat women?”

Jacob shoved back from the table, eyes hot on Travis’s face. “Listen, you dickless wonder, just because I might look like my dad doesn’t mean I’m anything like him.”

“Okay.”

Jacob opened his mouth, closed it.

Travis picked up his glass of wine and took a sip before looking back at the kid. “That woman over there can see through a man trying to pull one over at her quicker than you can tie your own shoes, and she’s been doing it longer than you’ve been alive. So, either you can learn to start respecting women—and trust them—therefore showing you really *are* different than your dad, or you just disrespect them in another way. Up to you.”

Jacob gave him an ugly look then spun on his heel and stormed out.

The taut silence lingered over the room in his wake, Isabel covering her face with her hands.

Brooklyn piped up, “Is Jacob going to be in trouble for saying one of the D words?”

Isabel made a sound that could have been a strangled groan, could have been a laugh.

“That’s Ms. Bella’s business,” Storm tugged teasingly on Brooklyn’s hair. “You going to finish those mashed potatoes? You said you wanted them, but you barely touched them. If you don’t plan on eating them ... ”

Brooklyn snatched up her fork and gave Storm a challenging look before scooping up a monster bite to shove into her mouth.

Travis watched it all play out before meeting Isabel’s gaze over the table.

There were fine lines of strain fanning out from her eyes but she offered him a half-shrug and lifted her glass of wine in his direction.

The rest of the meal passed in subdued silence and when the kids started to help her clear the table, he joined her at the sink.

“Why don’t you give your troops a night off?” The strain in her expression was obvious. “I’ll help you clear and clean up.”

“You’re a guest,” Storm said, frowning at him. “You shouldn’t help clean.”

“He *offered*.” Brooklyn scowled up at the older girl.

“No,” Aaron grabbed Brooklyn’s hand and shot Travis a smile, then switched it to Isabel. “Storm’s right. And you know what, Ms. Bella? I think you should take the night off, too. *Both* of you go relax ... hey, maybe you can have more of that wine out on the deck!”

“Great idea. I’ll get the glasses!” Storm dashed into the kitchen.

Aaron grabbed the bottle and hustled past Travis and Isabel, striding out to the deck. When he came in, he gave them both a chiding look as if to say, *what, you’re still here?*

“I wanna sit on the deck, too,” Brooklyn said, poking her lip out. She leaned against Travis’s leg and slid her hand into his.

“Help me with the chores and I’ll put makeup on you, Brooklyn,” Storm said, reaching into the cabinet and withdrawing two clean wine glasses.

Isabel and Travis exchanged amused looks as the oldest kid disappeared onto the deck.

When she returned, Brooklyn had moved away from Travis and was waiting to meet Storm, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Lipstick, too?”

Storm grinned at her. “Absolutely. I’ll even do your hair.” Then she met Isabel’s gaze. “Go on. We’ve got this.”

“I think we were managed,” Isabel said a couple of minutes later as they leaned on the railing of the deck. The wine bottle and glasses sat on the railing between them, untouched.

“There’s barely enough in there for half a glass.” Travis picked up the bottle and held it to the dying light, then turned, poured it into the glass nearest her. “Enjoy.”

She smiled, then picked it up and took a sip before passing the glass to him. “We’ll share it.”

He accepted, sipped and passed it back. “I have to be honest ... I prefer whiskey to wine. And if I’m drinking wine, I don’t really love these dry types.”

“Really?” A laugh escaped her. “If that’s the case, I’ll polish this one off.”

They lingered there, enjoying the silence and Travis listened to the noise coming from inside for a minute before slanting a look at her. “Think I could slip off and grab another bottle of wine? Or maybe this bottle of brandy I’ve been eying?”

“Is Miles okay with you sneaking all of his booze?”

“He told me to the code to the wine cellar and pointed out the brandy himself. I figure he wouldn’t have done it if he didn’t want me to enjoy it.”

It was unassailable logical, Isabel had to admit.

“He’s got some nice ice wines,” she said, giving him a slow smile. “I’m fond of those.”

“You always did have a sweet tooth.” No sooner had the words left his lips than a shadow fell over his face.

She reached up and covered his cheek with her hand. “Stop it,” she murmured, stroking her thumb over his lower lip. “I had to stop living in the past unless I wanted to live my life angry and bitter. You need to do the same.”

He covered her hand with his own, eyes boring into hers. Instead of answering, he brought her palm to his, pressed a soft kiss to it. “I’ll be right back.”

He was true to his word, carrying a slim bottle of dark glass, already opened and resealed with a plain, reusable cork, a fresh wine glass and another glass—this one a highball. The scent of it told her it was probably whisky. Miles preferred it.

“No brandy after all?”

“Changed my mind. Didn’t feel like wasting time cutting it open and all that shit. The whisky was easier.” He poured her a glass of the wine and offered it, waiting as she tasted.

Isabel let out an appreciative sigh, then nodded to the long, comfortably padded chaise lounges. “Want to sit? Who knows how long we’ll have this lovely peace.”

It actually lasted almost thirty minutes and she was on her second glass of the deliciously cold and sweet ice wine when Brooklyn came bursting through the back door, hitting the porch lights on full so the deck lit up like the fourth of July.

Preening, she spun and twirled her way to stand in front of Isabel and Travis, her arms held out as she posed.

“How do I look?” she demanded, angling her chin up and puckering her lips in an expression Isabel couldn’t identify.

“Lovely,” Isabel said soberly, trapping the laugh that wanted to escape. And the girl *was* lovely—Storm had used a delicate hand with the makeup, although the glittery swooshes of purple eyeshadow would have delighted Brooklyn. That, and the pink lipstick were the only obvious signs, but it was enough to make the little girl feel beautiful. Being with the older girl had worked wonders for the girl’s confidence.

Isabel’s heart ached at the thought of one day maybe having to let both Brooklyn and Mariah go—they were both young, and loving, children, healthy, the kind many looked to adopt. Aaron and Storm were older, harder to place, and Isabel had already asked Aaron if he’d like to stay, even consider letting Isabel adopt him, but he had yet to answer her—Storm knew the option was open to her as well, but she’d refused,

insistent her father would want her once ‘*knew what was going on.*’ She’d never wavered in her faith in him.

“Ms. Bella!” Brooklyn rushed to her and climbed onto her lap, patting her cheeks. “What’s wrong? You look sad. Should Storm do your makeup?”

“No.” Releasing a laugh she hoped wasn’t too watery, Isabel pressed a kiss to Brooklyn’s brow. Storm, bouncing Mariah on her hip, came over and offered Brooklyn a hand. Isabel gave her a reassuring look. “Why don’t I read the two of you a story and then you go run your bath?”

“But my makeup will wash off!” She looked crestfallen.

“Then we’ll just have to do it again tomorrow before I go hang with Farrah,” Storm said easily. “That means you’ll get a makeover *two* days in a row!”

“Yeah ... I guess. Storm, will you help me with my bath? And can Mariah take it with me?”

“Brooklyn, that’s not Storm’s job,” Isabel said.

But Storm winked at her over her shoulder as she took Brooklyn’s hand. “I think that sounds just fine. After that, *then* we’ll read a book—in your room. You got one in mind?”

The door shut behind them and Isabel sighed. “Yes. We’re definitely being managed.”

“Should I go?” Travis asked.

Isabel waited only a moment before she said, “Only if you want to.”

He met her gaze and in a voice as deep and dark as the night, he told her, “I don’t want to go.”

Chapter 18



It was maybe thirty minutes later that a freshly washed, sweet-smelling Brooklyn came back outside. Dressed in Wonder Woman pajamas, with her hair brushed back, she went with her arms outstretched straight to Isabel.

“I’m not *tired*,” she said, voice sulky. “But Storm promised to read *two chapters* of the Yellow House Mystery if I laid down.” Even as she pulled back from Isabel, hug received, Brooklyn knuckled at her eyes and smiled with pride. “She was *only* going to read one, but I asked for two and promised to be *really* good.”

“Very clever,” Isabel told her.

Travis had a feeling the kid wouldn’t be awake past five pages.

The girl Isabel cuddled close was already blinking heavy eyes, each blink lasting longer and longer.

Brooklyn clambered off Isabel but instead of heading for the door and the promised story, she spun and hurled herself at Travis. He caught her, biting back a grimace at the twinge of pain in his side. But it was just that ... a twinge. Cradling the back of her head, he felt another twinge, this one closer to a true ache, right in the vicinity of his heart as Brooklyn burrowed in closer.

“Next to Isabel, Mariah, Aaron and Storm, and maybe my new best friend Lizzie, I think I like you best, Mr. Travis,” she said in a loud whisper, right next to his ear.

“Thank you, Brooklyn,” he murmured, his heart squeezing even tighter. “I’m pretty sure you’re one of my favorite people, too.”

She gave him a smile of such sweetness, it stabbed him right in that aching heart and he was left breathless as she

pulled away and headed for the house, her hand tucked into Storm's.

Aaron was at the door, a grin fighting to tug at his lips, but never fully manifesting as he said, "Storm and I have studying to do. We'll turn the lights out ... and stuff."

As the door shut, Isabel smothered a laugh. "If romantic music comes on, I might start giggling."

The second the lights switched out, Travis moved.

"I don't need romantic music."

Her breath caught just as his mouth came down on hers. The thin sliver of the moon overhead was all the illumination left, the few lights on the house not enough to penetrate here on the deck. All she could see was his looming shadow and the glint of his eyes just before her lashes closed.

And then she was lost.

Lost to the heat of him.

Lost to the strength of him.

Lost to the taste and feel of him.

Lost to *him* ... to Travis, the only person who'd ever pulled these kinds of emotions from her. At that moment, it didn't matter that they'd only been a couple of teenagers when they'd met. It didn't matter that he'd broken her heart or that they'd spent over a decade apart.

It only mattered that his mouth was on hers, that he'd skimmed a hand up her side to cup the back of her neck as he angled her head while deepening the kiss.

She grabbed his arms and sank her nails into his biceps, through the fine linen of the shirt that had draped lovingly over the taut and toned body that had taunted her all evening. He grunted in approval and settled his weight more firmly against her. Isabel tore her mouth away from his and arched her hips up. "*Fuck!*"

His lips feathered down her neck. "Are we okay?"

She had to force her lids up. If she hadn't heard the concern in his eyes, she wouldn't have bothered. Every last neuron in her body was on overload, the pleasure she felt having him so close visceral in its intensity.

"More than." She stroked her palms down his sides and dragged the hem of his shirt up, pressing her hands to the hot, smooth skin of his back. She felt the ridges and bumps of scars—so many scars—but she shoved aside her worry and anger—for tonight, for now, she only wanted to feel. "There's just one problem."

Her eyes had adjusted to the dim light and she caught a hint of his smile.

"Only one?"

"Maybe more than one ... " She rose up and bit his lower lip. "You're wearing too many clothes. And we're on the damn deck."

A hoarse noise escaped him and then he kissed her. "Bellamine ... "

The sound of that old, familiar name, one he'd used almost from the first, had her throat going tight and she clung to him, need spiraling out of control.

She broke the kiss and whispered against his lips. "Come inside with me."

He went rigid against her.

"Isabel ... "

She covered his lips with her index finger. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think. Unless you don't want me ... ?"

"Does it *feel* like I don't want you?" He cupped her hip and moved against her and then he had to catch her smothered cry with his lips. "I've wanted you every fucking day since we met. Do you think that's changed?"

Tears burned her eyes at the anguish in his voice.

"Then come inside."

He was off her in the next instant, moving with a strength and fluidity that belied the injury he'd taken recently. She accepted his outstretched hand and then she tugged him along behind her, leading him to the short flight of stairs at the far end of the multi-level deck that led to the private balcony outside her bedroom. Her room, and the nursery, were the only rooms on the first floor, allowing her some modicum of privacy. She unlatched the gate that prevented little Mariah from trying to crawl up the steps and waited until he'd latched it back, then they walked silently up those few steps to the deck, and into her room.

The door was unlocked and they slid inside, silent as thieves. They didn't turn on any lights but she lingered by the fan she kept by her bed and flipped it on, then went to the door and slipped outside after a quick glance at Travis.

He was still waiting by the bed when she returned.

"I had to make sure the front door was locked," she murmured. Her gaze moved to the one behind him.

"It's locked. The back door?"

"Aaron took care of it when he saw me locking up the front." She smiled even as a flush swept over her cheeks. "I feel like *I'm* the teenager, the way he was grinning at me. He knows damn good and well I'm in here with you."

"We're not teenagers," Travis said softly, moving to stand in front of her.

"You make me feel like one again ... like that first day I bumped into you, all hot and nervous and flustered."

"You didn't show it." He cupped her cheek and rubbed his lips over hers. "You played it all cool and easy like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth."

"Ha. Shows what you know. *I* was melting. Turning to putty, right there, and you didn't even notice."

"That takes brain power, Bella-mine. And you'd already destroyed my brain." He nuzzled her neck. "You sure about this?"

“If I wasn’t, you wouldn’t be here.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the open neck of his shirt, breathing in the warm, clean scent of him. His soap smelled sexy as hell. Sandalwood and something else, a musky, masculine scent that threatened to drive her crazy. “I’ve got protection here ... in the nightstand.”

“Good thing. Because I sure as hell wasn’t expecting this.” He tangled his fist in her hair and nibbled on her neck.

She shivered. “Damn, you’re good at that.”

“If I do anything that bothers you ... ”

“Don’t.” She pulled back and met his eyes. “That was a long time ago. I’ve had lovers, Travis. I’ve known pleasure.” Pleasure, she thought. It sounded simple and easy. It was, compared to what she felt for this man. Those encounters had been fleeting and short, about companionship more than anything else. Travis was ... *everything*; he always had been. “He stopped haunting me a long time ago and I won’t *let* him come between us—not here. Not ever again.” Still, Travis hesitated and she cupped his face, willed him to understand her. “Not *ever* again. He’s *nothing* to me.”

“Understood, Bella-mine.” His mouth took hers and she quivered as the force of him washed over her again.

He nudged her backward, slow-stepping his way as he moved them toward the bed. She felt it hit the back of her thighs and when he ended the kiss with a slow, sweet suckling of her lower lip, she started to sink down. He stopped her by curling his hands around her waist and nuzzling her neck, moving lower and lower.

“This dress has driven me crazy all night,” he murmured against her skin, breath feathering over her collarbone. He caught the tie that held the gathered bustline closed and pulled. She shivered as he buried his face between her breasts, a ragged breath escaping him as he breathed her in.

“You smell amazing ... honeysuckle ... something else. I want to eat you up.”

She caught hold of his arms and squeezed, clinging to him for balance as he traced a hot, teasing path along the lacy edge where her bra framed her breast.

“Can I, Bella-mine?”

She was drowning. They’d barely gotten started, weren’t even undressed and she was already drowning.

“Bel?”

She dragged her eyes open, unaware she’d even closed them, and focused on Travis. The shadows in the room made it impossible to make out the color of his eyes, but she couldn’t mistake the hunger she saw burning there. She cupped his cheeks in her hands and pulled his face to hers, desperate for another kiss, another taste of him.

But after only seconds, he ended the kiss, dragging his lips along her jawline to her ear. “Hold this for me,” he murmured, taking her wrist and guiding her hand down.

Dazed, she complied, gripping a handful of soft fabric, repeating the action on the other side, and looking at him as he pulled back, lingering just long enough to nip her ear. “I need to taste you, Bella-mine.”

He kissed a pathway down the midline of her torso, lips scalding hot through her dress and she shuddered when he hooked his fingers in her panties, so lost, so overwhelmed with need that she ... just forgot about the scars until that light, gentle touch came.

“Isabel ... ”

Her eyes flew open and she looked down just as he lifted his head to stare up at her.

“Not now,” she said, pleading. Everything would change after that conversation. *Everything*. And she needed this ... at least *one* night with him, with the man she loved beyond reason, even after all that had happened, even after the years that had gone between them without a word. “Please ... not now.”

His breath had trapped in his throat when he saw those scars, several of them, thin and pale, across her softly rounded belly, all faded and years old. Now, as he stared into her eyes, seeing a mix of fear and dread that threatened to wash away the arousal, he called on the driving sense of will that had propelled him forward all these years and leaned in to press his mouth the scars, one, then the other. “Later, then.”

She trembled, one hand moving to the back of his head and the skirt of her dress fell. He caught the gauzy material, tangled his fist in it as he sank lower and lower until he could brush his lips over the curls at the apex of her thighs.

“Travis ... I ... ” Her breaths came out in harsh, choppy pants. “I need to lay down. I’ll fall ... ”

“I’ll catch you.” He braced the hand holding her skirt at the base of her spine and steadied her.

“Your side.”

“Fuck my side,” he muttered, groaning as he dipped his tongue into the heat of her, finally catching a taste. Salty and sweet, all at once and the tang of her hit his senses like a blast of napalm.

Isabel tangled her fingers in his hair and yanked. “Fuck me instead ... after you let me lay down.”

“Fine.” He laughed hoarsely, allowed himself one more taste, then rose, catching her up against him before, nudging her down so she could sit on the bed. “Fine, Bella-mine ... have it your way. You can lay down.” He bit her lower lip, tugged on it before releasing it. Her lids drooped while her eyes went heavy and dark. “But I’m not going to fuck you. I’m going stroke you, tease you, love you until I’m imprinted on every inch of you, every cell.”

He caught the dress’s hem and worked the garment off, draping it over the headboard, because Isabel liked her spaces neat, kept everything ordered and in its place.

That done, he stepped back and just stared.

She shifted, then, with a half-nervous, half-sly smile, she said, “If you’re going to just stare at me, you could at least

take that shirt off.”

He did so, far more self-conscious than he'd ever been before, and not just because of the scars on his body. He was fit, even if he was still too lean—he knew that, just as he knew those scars might very well make him more appealing to some women. They bothered Isabel, reminded her of the life he'd chosen when he'd turned his back on her. But it was more than that.

Her breath came out, shuddering and soft, and she licked her lips.

As he knelt, bracing one knee by her hip, she reached out and stroked a hand over his shoulder, down his chest. His heart banged hard against her palm, as if in recognition and he caught her wrist, held it there.

Dipping his head, he claimed her mouth, love and need swamping him.

Isabel curled one leg around his and he groaned into the kiss as damp heat teased him through her panties and the trousers he still wore.

But when she started to rock against him, he gripped her hip and pinned her in place. “Stop or this will be over before it starts. I already feel like I'm going to come just from having you beneath me.”

When she would have tried to wiggle and move again, he pressed down harder with his hips, the movement drawing a cry from her. The sound went straight to his cock, while drawing his sac tight to his body. Fuck ...

He growled and broke away, shoving to his knees and catching her hips. Wrestling her higher up onto the bed, he caught the front clasp of her bra and opened it, eyes hot as he watched her breasts spill free. He dipped his head and caught the tip of her nipple between his teeth, taking her other breast in his free hand.

She planted her feet on the bed and shoved her pelvis upward, arching her spine at the same time. “Travis!”

His cock pulsed, pounding in time with his heart.

Working his way down her body, he parted her thighs and settled between them. Isabel jerked her hips as he spread her open and licked, the lush, rich taste of her, the scent threatening to destroy the iron grip he had on his control.

“Holy ... ” A startled cry tore out of her and she shoved her hands into his hair.

Travis teased her clitoris with his tongue as her breathy moans melted into his name, into broken little sighs forming an erotic song. They all added to the sensual spell that pulsed and pounded in his blood. Smoothing a hand up her thigh to her hip to her ass, he tilted her higher, probed deeper with his tongue and felt her clenching tight.

A fine tremor overtook her body and he growled in approval.

“Come for me, baby,” he said, greedy for it, greedy for them both. “Come, Bella-mine.”

Isabel arched, her teeth sinking into her lower lip to silence her cries as the climax edged closer and closer.

He pushed two fingers into her and twisted them.

She exploded, her mouth opening on a soundless scream as she shuddered and bucked under him. He levered himself up and covered her, replacing his mouth with his hand, pumping his fingers in, out, learning the rhythm of her body as her orgasm claimed her. A keening cry started to emanate from her lips and he kissed her, swallowing the sound down and urging her even as the orgasm edged off, working her right back to the precipice again.

When she was panting and straining against him again, he shoved onto his knees, twisted to reach the nightstand.

The wound in his side stretched uncomfortably, but it was fully closed now, if not fully healed and he ignored the discomfort as he yanked open the drawer and found an unopened box of condoms. Tearing into it, he pulled one off the strip and ripped the foil packet open. In under a minute, he had the condom unrolled over his length and he caught Isabel behind the knee, drew her leg up and to the side, opening her.

Her lids lifted, her spine arching as he pressed against her.

“Look at me,” he said, voice raw and rough, his control eroded to nothing now. “I need to see you ... need you to see me.”

She lifted sooty lashes, then, with a sexy, and somehow tender smile, she reached up and cupped his cheek. “I see you, Travis ... I’ll always see you.”

He took her hand, pressed a kiss to her palm, then linked their fingers. Pressing her hand to the bed next to her head, he leaned into her.

They both cried out as the penetration started, shivers racing up and down Travis’s spine that were mirrored in Isabel’s body.

She was tight, squeezing his cock as he forged his way in and he had to stop, pull out and work deeper, taking his time even as she arched her hips, straining to take him.

They never looked away, the eye contact as intimate as their possession of each other—and it *was* a mutual possession, a mutual *claiming*, Isabel taking him as thoroughly as he took her. When, finally, he had buried himself inside her, Travis released her hand and cupped the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair, holding her in place as he slanted his mouth over hers.

Mouths fused, bodies entwined, they began to rock, slow, incremental movements that belied the intensity of their need—but neither wanted it to end too soon, this first, desperate, beautiful union.

Isabel tore her mouth from his, dragging in air, as she panted, “No ... I don’t ... I’m so close ... I don’t want this over so soon.”

Travis shifted position and rolled to his back, dragging her with him.

She gasped at the change in position, rising up to peer down at him.

He urged her to sit fully upright, his hands moving to her butt.

The change in position, in rhythm had her smiling and she braced her hands on his shoulders. As she began to roll her hips, Travis feasted on the sight she presented, full breasts swaying, mouth swollen from his, and her head falling back as her hair fell in a tangled cloud around her shoulders.

“Bella-mine,” he muttered.

She shot him a seductive smile and he levered up, fisted a hand in her hair and pulled her down to meet his kiss.

At the same time, he drove up into her, harder, deeper.

She gasped out his name, moving now with a frenzied hunger that echoed his while the sounds of their lovemaking filled the air.

“Please,” she begged against his lips.

“Please what?” He stared into her eyes even as he initiated another kiss. “Just ask. I’ll give you anything.”

But all she could say was his name. Her nails bit into his shoulders and he grunted, primitive need gripping him in a fist.

He rolled them back over and shoved onto his knees, pulling her butt in closer and hooked her thighs over his shoulders before leaning back over her, thrusting harder, deeper.

Her eyes widened, a startled, dazed look washing over her face just before her lips opened. He swallowed her cry only seconds before she started to climax.

As her inner muscles clenched down tight around him, Travis couldn’t hold back anymore and his cock jerked, hard, almost painful, as he started to come, harder than he’d ever come in his life.

Chapter 19



His legs didn't shake on his way back to the bed after he'd disposed of the condom.

But they sure as hell had on the walk *to* the bathroom and his heart was still racing in his chest as he stretched out next to Isabel on the bed. She immediately turned into him and wrapped an arm around his waist, and he turned his face into her tumbled hair, drew in a breath, and let it out as he acknowledged the fear he hadn't let himself consider earlier—that as soon as they'd tangled up the sheets, she'd kick him out.

Even as he thought it, she tilted her head back and gave him a sated, sleepy smile that cracked his heart wide open.

She yawned and cuddled even closer.

“Did I bore you?” He crooked a grin at her, using humor to cover the nerves that were already jumping inside him. Nerves ... and the driving urge to ask her about those scars.

She gave him a cat's smile. “I don't think you could say I was bored.” That smile widened as she pushed up onto her elbow and rubbed her nose against his. “But if you'd like to put more effort in, you might be able to impress me a bit more.”

His cock twitched in interest and he twisted in a smooth, easy motion, tucking her beneath him. “Do you need to be impressed, then?”

Her eyes widened in surprise and then a giggle escaped. “Nice moves.”

“You haven't seen anything yet, Bella-mine.” He stroked a hand over the dip in her waist, down to her hip, his thumb stroking over satin-soft skin. And he felt the ridge of a scar.

The smile faded from his face.

Her expression sobered, too.

She reached down, covered the scars. “You need to know, don’t you.”

It wasn’t even phrased as a question.

He bit back the yes that leaped to his lips, although it was so damn hard. Swallowing past the tightness in his throat, he made himself say what he knew was the right thing. “You don’t owe me answers on anything, Iz.”

“Stop.” She sighed and nudged his shoulders.

He fell back, expecting her to leave the bed, even while they were both still sweating, still recovering from good—no, *fucking great* sex. But all she did was push herself into a sitting position with her back against the painted, white headboard. She crooked a finger at him and he moved closer.

Apparently, it wasn’t close enough because she reached out and hooked a hand around his neck and pulled him close, kissing him hard and fast.

“We need to have this talk,” she said softly.

He covered her thigh with his palm, the pain that lingered in the back of her gaze tearing gouges into him.

“You don’t need to tell me.” It hurt to say that—he needed to know what had put those marks on her, needed to know the way he needed to breathe, like the way he needed to see the sun rise and kiss her skin in the morning.

But he needed to avoid causing her pain even more.

He’d already hurt this woman too much.

So whatever it cost him, *whatever* it cost, he’d take that weight and never let her see it.

“No.” She took his hand and guided it to her belly. “If we’re going to make it, Travis, you need to know.”

She could have sprouted a head and he’d be less shocked.

“Make it?” he croaked.

Isabel smiled and it was the same warm, teasing smile of the girl he’d fallen in love with almost twenty years ago.

“Yeah, goofball. Make it. That’s where this is leading, isn’t it ... ? Despite everything, despite the years and ... everything else, I’m still in love with you. I still want to be with you. Grow old with you. Make memories and laugh and fight ... and just *be* with you. Aren’t you still in love with me?”

Shaken, he bent and pressed his brow to hers.

Tears burned his eyes and he squeezed them shut until he thought maybe, just maybe, those tears wouldn’t fall.

But he could hear the echo of them in his tight voice as he rasped, “Bella-mine, it would be easier for the stars to fall from the sky than it would be for me to fall out of love with you.”

“Travis ... ” It was a tremulous whisper and her lips brushed his, and then she curled her arms around his neck, clinging to him.

“Even when I was fucking everything up, when I was so wrong and so stupid, I still loved you. I was an idiot—and I’m so sorry for thinking—”

“Stop it.” She pressed a kiss to the vulnerable spot behind his ear. “We were both kids. Both young, desperate, determined kids ... and we were both being manipulated by men far older than us.” Taking a deep breath, she broke away and, after dashing at the tears on her face, she said, “My father knew about us, Travis. He never came out and said it, but he made enough insinuations in the letters he sent from prison—they never got directly to me, but ... Miles held onto to them in case I wanted to read them and stupidly, I read a few. He figured things out, had software put on my phone and was spying on us. He knew about our plans.”

Travis felt his gut go cold.

“Don’t,” she said fiercely, catching his chin even as guilt started to claw at him. “Neither of us could expect a man would turn his own daughter over to a bastard just to keep her under his thumb. Even *I* didn’t see it coming and I *knew* him. And I never thought he’d have my phone ... bugged or

whatever. I should have thought of that, too. But I didn't. I thought we were so careful ... and ... ”

She sighed, tucking her face against his neck and taking a deep breath. “I texted you on Valentine’s Day ... I don’t know if you remember.”

“I remember,” he said in a gritty voice. Hell, he still had the fucking texts, all of them, screenshotted and saved in a secure folder. Sometimes, when he was feeling particularly low, he read them, one by one, and thought, *what if* ... but if she was serious ...

“It happened that night. Beresford, I mean. It was just my bad luck I ended up pregnant. And of course, my father found out. I tried to sneak out several times and get an abortion, but ... ” She shuddered.

Instinctively, he smoothed his hand down her back.

“It never worked out.” This time, the words came out cool, strangely flat. The lack of emotion was more disturbing than it would have been if she’d screamed them. “And then ... it was too late. I was too far along. One day, a seamstress and designer showed up in my bedroom. They told me they were there for my final fitting—for the wedding dress. Shit, I was so furious. So desperate. I punched one of them—grabbed a vase and threatened the other. I don’t know which was which. But they both ran out of the room and I took off after them. My father had been ... ” She stopped, swallowed, then cleared her throat and looked up at him. “He locked me in my room. I wouldn’t marry Stephen Beresford and because of that, he locked me in my room. He finally got tired of waiting and maybe thought forcing the issue would solve the problem. It didn’t. I made it to the landing of the stairs before he showed up. We yelled ... I hit him. He hit me back. And I fell.”

Travis snarled before he could stop himself. Cuddling her closer, he rocked her.

And still, she kept talking. “I fell all the way down the stairs ... fifteen of them. I hit my head on the marble tiles in the foyer and when I woke up, it was two days later and I was in the hospital.”

He was shaking, Isabel thought. This big, tough man who had made her bully of a neighbor all but hide in his house sat with her on his lap and he was *shaking*. He cradled her like she was something precious and he stroked her hair, nuzzled her temple, kissed her cheek and all the while, he shook.

She made herself keep talking, although the knot in her throat was the size of a fist.

“The baby was dead. There was no saving it and I’m not ashamed to say I don’t feel bad about it. I never *wanted* that child and suddenly, it was gone. I was glad. The second day I was in the hospital, I started bleeding and I had to have emergency surgery to make it stop. The doctor said it was touch and go ... ” She smiled then, thinking of the nurse who had been there by her side when she first woke up—Bertrice, and Dr. Viv. Bertrice had been right about Dr. Viv, although her father had found that out the hard way. “I lay in the hospital, filled with dread because I knew my father would twist it—if I didn’t do what he said, how he said, he’d find a way to make this my fault. I was lying there, trying to think of a way to get away from him, take my sisters and just run. He arrived not long after I woke up ... got chased out. But he came back the day after the surgery ... I know he was worried I’d talk and doctors might listen. Some of them might have the power to *make* others listen. But he was ... stupid. Or just blinded by his arrogance. He hauled me out of the bed and security had been alerted to watch for him. I was standing there, barely able to stay on my feet and he was having a confrontation ... I started bleeding again, passed out.”

Her voice cracked this time and she looked away.

“The first surgery, the doctor was able to save my uterus. But the second time ... ” The hand on her belly flexed, then curved back in, as if to stroke away wounds long healed. The deeper wounds, though, they still lingered. No babies of her own, no children of her own womb ... no chance for a child that was the echo of their own love. Not ever. “The second time, it was too much. It was either a partial hysterectomy, or she risked losing me on the table. She made the call.”

“It was the right one,” he whispered. “Nothing is worth your life.”

Tears burned her eyes and she turned her face to his, kissed him. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He clasped her cheeks in his palms, stared at her with a gaze that seared her all the way. “You were brutalized, isolated, battered, and had to have surgery after that bastard knocked you down a flight of stairs. *Why* are you apologizing?”

“We ... ” Her voice cracked. “If we stay together, Travis, we ... I can’t give you children.”

“You think that matters more than you?” His face was anguished. “Isabel, you are *everything* to me. My world has been empty without you ... and now that you are here ... that’s all I need. *All* I need.”

He kissed her with breath-stealing intensity but even as she went to respond, he was pulling away. His lips still touched hers, though, as he murmured, “And this may escape your notice, but you’ve got quite a few kids in this house who *adore* you. You don’t *have* to give birth to children to be a parent, baby. If you want children, we can have them. As many as you want. But *you* are what I need.”

Chapter 20



She had nightmares sometimes.

Brooklyn didn't think it was a baby thing to have nightmares.

As Aaron would say, she'd been through some tough shit. And as far as Brooklyn was concerned, Aaron knew *everything*. He'd told her that *he* had nightmares. So if he had nightmares at almost *fifteen*, why couldn't she still have them at almost six?

She didn't like waking people up when she had a bad dream.

Before, back when she hadn't been with Bella, she'd just stay in her room and if she had batteries in her flashlight, she'd read. She didn't leave the room she shared with Mariah, because sometimes there were men in the house with her mama and there were a few who made her belly turn to knots. She knew what those knots meant even if she couldn't fully explain it. Fear was something she was too familiar with and she listened when something said she should be afraid.

But she'd learned there was nothing in Ms. Bella's house to be afraid of. It had taken a little while, but Ms. Bella wasn't just *nice*. She'd *protect* Brooklyn—and Mariah, and everybody else in the house, too. She wouldn't mind if Brooklyn got up for some water, or a snack, or even to go get a book to read.

Tonight, she wanted a pop tart and water. Maybe if she got more food, she could sleep.

But as she was walking toward the kitchen, she froze, her sharp little ears picking up voices.

Two voices—and they weren't coming from upstairs where Storm, Jacob and Aaron slept.

Nervous now, she crept closer to Ms. Bella's room. One of the voices was light, pretty and soft and she realized fast it was

her foster mom's. She thought sometimes she'd like to call Ms. Bella *Mom*. Her mom didn't want her anymore. She knew that. Sometimes she got mad thinking about it. She knew her mom didn't want her. She didn't need that stupid jerk Brant telling her to know it, but she got mad at him sometimes because he'd said it and reminded her.

It wasn't his fault her mom didn't want her, but he didn't have to be mean and *say* it, even if it *was* the truth.

Ms. Bella *did* want her, though, she thought. Both her *and* Mariah.

But who was that with her?

It sounded like a guy.

Maybe it was Travis.

Then she heard another sound ... one she knew too well.

Ms. Bella was *crying*.

It couldn't be Travis. He wouldn't make her cry.

Without thinking about it, or what she'd do, she ran to the room and threw the door open.

"Get away from ... " She stopped because it *was* Travis. He sat on the bed and Ms. Bella was on his lap—and both of them were *naked*. Really naked.

And Ms. Bella had her arms around his neck and was crying like something hurt really bad inside while Travis was rubbing her back and rocking her. To make her feel better. So, he wasn't hurting her ... ?

And they were *naked*.

Confused, Brooklyn just stood there.

Ms. Bella sprang up.

"Brooklyn!"

"Um ... hi," she whispered. "I had a nightmare."

"Turn around, please," Ms. Bella said.

Obediently, she did so, staring out into the dim hall while her belly rumbled and thoughts of pop-tarts roamed through her mind. Maybe she'd just go get one ...

"You can turn around now, sweetheart," Ms. Bella said in a brisk voice.

Now she had on a robe and Travis had on the same pair of pants he'd worn to dinner, leaning against the tall, skinny pole that jutted up from the end of the pretty, fancy bed. Brooklyn eyed them both suspiciously. "Why were you naked?"

"Who said I was?" Travis responded, his brows arching.

"Well, Ms. Bella *was*." Brooklyn crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him before looking at Ms. Bella. "*And* you were crying."

"I ... " Her foster mother opened, then closed her mouth.

Travis put a hand on her shoulder and gave Brooklyn that kind of look that told her to mind her own business. It wasn't a mean look—it was the sort of look Aaron gave her sometimes. Only with Travis, the look was ... bigger, somehow. "She was upset, Brooklyn. I was just holding her."

"*Naked*?" Brooklyn squinted at him.

That look on his face deepened.

And Ms. Bella's cheeks went red.

"If you're having sex, just say so," Brooklyn said. Her mom used to have sex all the time. But sometimes, she cried, like it was bad.

"Okay, kid. That's enough," Travis responded, and this time, *he* turned red. But his eyes had that too-bright look that Ms. Bella's had. "You need to go back to bed."

"But I had a nightmare." She rubbed her belly and gave Ms. Bella a pleading look. "I need a pop tart."

Ms. Bella smoothed a hand down Travis's arm.

Brooklyn bit her lip to keep from saying anything when he covered her hand with his and squeezed. Ms. Bella smiled at him.

Well, whatever they were doing, Ms. Bella still smiled at him.

That was good, right?

“Go on to the kitchen, sweetheart,” Ms. Bella said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay.” Happy now, she beamed at Travis. “Travis, you like pop tarts?”

“Ah ... ”

She poked her lip out. That bad dream was still there, in the back of her mind. She’d feel better if he stayed longer.

“Sure.” Mouth curving in a smile, he glanced at Ms. Bella and she shrugged. “As long as it’s okay with Bel.”

Satisfied, Brooklyn turned around and started to skip down the hall. A light came on upstairs and she looked up the stairs and saw Aaron glancing down the steps. He had a scowl on his face, then clapped a hand over his eyes when he saw her. Before Brooklyn could ask what was wrong, the phone on the hall table rang.

Brooklyn, forgetting it was late, shouted, “I’ll get it!”

Racing over, she grabbed it and yanked the handset up, putting it to her ear. “Hello?”

There was a pause, then she shook her head. “No. Nobody called that lives here.”

She went to put the phone down, then stopped again, head cocked as the man on the other end of the line kept talking. Sighing, she said, “I *told* you, nobody named Isabel lives here —”

Brooklyn gasped as Travis pulled the phone from her hand.

“Hello, may I help you?”

Chapter 21



There was a startled surprise on the other end of the line.

Travis slipped his phone out of his pocket and opened his secure messaging app, opening the last text he'd sent Miles. Putting his back to the wall, he said, "Anybody there? We don't have all night."

He sent the text to Miles.

Might have a problem. Trace recent call to Isabel's. Now.

He waited to make sure Miles saw it.

The response was almost immediate.

On it.

A low breath came through the phone line, the kind somebody would take if they were trying to calm themselves down.

Isabel had a wary look on her face. He angled his chin to the kid near them, then jerked his head toward Aaron. He'd spotted the teenager the second he came into Travis's line of sight, although he'd already heard the floorboards creaking, suspected one of the older kids had heard Brooklyn.

Isabel scowled at him, but she took the girl's hand, urging her away.

"I'm trying to find a friend of mine," the caller said. His voice was slightly slurred, but beyond that ... flat. Devoid of emotion and with no trace of an accent. Hard to guess an age, too, because he spoke so quietly.

"Yeah? Did you try the contacts in your cell phone?" The hairs on the back of Travis's neck were standing on end.

His phone vibrated and he looked down.

Working on it. Whoever it is, they don't want us to know where they are.

The subtle clang of warning in his head went to full-out alarm. Hearing Isabel's footsteps behind him, he looked over, saw her approaching.

Turning, he put his cell on the table behind him and held out his hand.

Her face was solemn, eyes unreadable as she twined their fingers and moved closer. He tucked her close as the caller said, "That's just the thing ... I haven't been able to track her down. Been ... out of touch for a few years and I'm hoping to reconnect with her. Say, by any chance, would your name be *Travis*?"

Going with his gut, he said, "I take it I'm talking to Stephen."

Isabel went rigid next to him.

"I'll be a son of a bitch ... you went sniffing back after her, didn't you?" The man on the other end of the phone no longer sounded cool and disconnected. He laughed and it was an insane, high-pitched giggle. After less than five seconds, it broke off. "You should know ... you need to get the fuck away from her, boy. She's *mine*."

"No." Travis stroked his hand down her spine even as fury clawed holes in him. "She wasn't ever yours. And she never will be. Go back to weeping in your pillow, alone in whatever hole in the ground you crawled into."

Then he disconnected the call.

Isabel opened her mouth but he shook his head. "I need a minute."

"But—"

He jerked his head up and touched her cheek. "I know you've got questions. So do I. But I need to call Miles. If that was Beresford, we've got a problem ... the call was blocked and Miles already started trying to trace it and ran into a wall. That means ... " He paused and tried to find the gentlest way to explain.

But her face had drained of color and she closed her eyes. “That means he’s not in prison. He can’t make those kinds of calls in prison.”

“No.” Travis cupped her face in his hands and pulled her close to him, pressing his lips to her forehead. “He won’t touch you, Bella-mine. I swear it. He won’t fucking touch you.”

Chapter 22



A laugh that was pure ice came from her.

Startled, Travis lifted his head and looked down, saw the fierceness that had entered her eyes.

“Bet your ass he won’t,” she said in a hard voice. “But if he were to *try*? I’ll break his hands off at the wrist and feed them to him. I’m not the scared, trapped girl I used to be, Travis.”

“No,” he murmured after a moment of studying her. “You’re a queen.” He dipped his head to press another kiss to her, but this one to her lips and it was raw, potent and full of all the love and need he had for her. “You’re *my* fucking queen.”

He slid his lips along her jawline and nuzzled the curve of her neck, but pulled back as she tried to tug him closer. “We need to talk to Miles, figure out what the hell is going on.”

“If I’m a queen, you must be my knight.” Her mouth curved in a smile, this one with a wry edge. “But you’ve always tried to take that role on, haven’t you?”

“Every queen needs a knight.” He’d play along for now. Even if she wasn’t terrified, he could still glimpse the edge of fear in the back of her eyes. Hell, *he* was scared. He and Isabel both knew better the cruelty people were capable of. And it wasn’t just Isabel living in this house, either. It was Isabel and a handful of kids, all of whom were vulnerable.

But they’ve got me. That prick has no idea what I’m capable of.

Nor did he have any idea what Isabel was capable of. She was right, there. She wasn’t broken, scared or trapped, wasn’t a pawn to be used by her father, with her sisters there to keep her contained.

A floorboard creaked overhead and he shot a look toward the stairs, saw a shadow fall along the railing and he took

Isabel's hand and squeezed. "Why don't you check on the kids, let them know it's okay while I get Miles on the phone, see what he's found out? I need to get my laptop and a few other things from my house, then I'll be right back."

Her lips parted as if she'd argue, but then she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

"Lock up. Set your alarm system."

"You'll only be gone a couple of minutes ... no." She shook her head. "You're right. After all, it's not just me. Hold on."

She disappeared into a room she pointed out as the library earlier and returned in under a minute, pushing two keys into his hand. "The front door and deadbolt. And the alarm code ... " She bit her lip, then recited a series of digits to him.

The day they met.

Her cheeks went red, chin going up as if to dare him to comment on it.

He just kissed her.

"I won't be gone long."

Isabel watched him leave and told herself it was just her imagination that the house felt strangely absent after he'd left.

Retreating to her room, she pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a tank top, then jogged up the stairs.

Aaron, Storm and Brooklyn were all in Storm's room, with Jacob lurking outside. He gave her a narrow-eyed look. "What's going on?"

Instead of saying anything to him that second, she knocked on Storm's open door and waited for the girl to beckon her in. Isabel waited a moment and said, "I'd rather only explain this once. Can Jacob come in?"

Storm and Aaron exchanged a look before the teenaged girl slanted a look back at the door and said in a saccharine voice, "Sure, he can come in. But if he gets nasty with you, I

might pop him in the mouth, Ms. Bella. I'm tired and my temper runs short when I'm tired."

Isabel sighed and pushed a hand through her hair before giving Storm a warning look. Storm gave her an angelic smile. Isabel shifted her gaze to Jacob. "She may be pulling your leg. She may not be. And the last time she threatened to pop a kid in the mouth, she knocked out two of his teeth—he was bigger than you. That was before she came here, but I heard about it from her caseworker."

"I just want to know what in the hell is going on," Jacob said in a surly voice, opting to totally ignore Storm's comment.

"Then come on in, sit down, and shut up." Isabel gave him a hard look, then did the same at the older two before giving Brooklyn a softer version. "As hard as it is for you to be quiet, Brooks, you need to hold your tongue, too."

"Okay." She licked her lips, then whispered, "But where is Travis?"

"He'll be back." Moving to the window seat, Isabel sat down. "I'm trusting all of you to be responsible enough about this to keep it to yourself. And I might have to keep you all home from school for a few days until I find out what's going on—it's *not* a get-out-of-jail-free card. You'll still be doing your lessons here on the computer."

"*Fine,*" Jacob snapped, jamming his thin shoulders against the wall and glaring at her. "Just tell us what happened."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I can't tell you everything. It's not safe—and I made an agreement." She gave Aaron a hard look when he started to interrupt. "Regardless of how tough life has made some of you—" and she wouldn't belittle them by pointing out that they were just kids. She'd just been a kid, too, and she'd taken down Wilson Steele. "I made agreements and I gave my word. You know how I feel about honoring promises."

When none of them balked, she smoothed her damp hands down her yoga pants and gave a very brief, very redacted

version of the events—she'd once had knowledge of a man who'd done horrible things and she'd helped put him and several of his accomplices away in federal prison. One of them had found her.

She'd had to pick and choose her words very carefully because she couldn't risk any of them finding out anything that might identify her—that could endanger them. When she was finished, Aaron huffed out a breath. "I could drive trucks through the holes in that story with how much you left out."

"I already told you I can't tell you everything," Isabel said.

Aaron went to shoot something back at her.

Storm laid a hand on his thin shoulder and squeezed. "Is he dangerous?" she asked.

"He could be. And if you want, I'll find new homes for each of you. I might have to, anyway."

"No!" Brooklyn lurched off the bed and propelled herself to Isabel. "No, Ms. Bella. If we go, you're alone. And Travis is here. He'll protect you."

Isabel had stopped expecting anybody to protect her a long time ago. But, yeah, her heart warmed at the thought of Travis Barnes ... her knight.

"I'm not alone, baby," she said, stroking her hand down Brooklyn's soft, downy hair. "Even aside from Travis, the people who've been protecting me are already aware of what's going on. They'll find out what happened, how he found me ... and they'll take action."

"That's if they get here first," Jacob mumbled.

He was looking outside the window, a hard, angry look on his face.

"They've never let me down." She said it gently, and she saw him flinch.

"Cops," he said with a sneer. "They've never done *anything* but let me down."

He turned on his heel and stormed out, all but plowing into Travis as he left.

Brooklyn bolted off the bed and dashed to Travis, wrapping her arms around his legs and clinging to him. “Are you going to protect Ms. Bella?”

“I think Ms. Bella can protect herself,” he said after shooting a look at Isabel. His lean face softened with a smile and he hunkered down in front of the girl to brush his knuckles over her cheek. “But I’m going to make sure nobody hurts any of you.”

“She said a bad man hurt her once and she put him in prison.”

“I know.” Travis dropped a kiss on Brooklyn’s brow, then scooped her up. “She’s a brave woman, Brooklyn. And a smart one. I need to talk to her about a few things. Can you stay with Aaron and Storm for a while? Ms. Bella and me, we need to talk to a friend of mine.”

“But—”

He gave her a look.

She huffed out a breath. “Fine.”

“You have to tell me how you do that,” Isabel said as she followed him out of the room, closing the door behind them.

“Do what?”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “Earlier, you shut Jacob up with just a look, and you did the same thing with Brooklyn. I’ve been doing this for *five years* and I can’t command that kind of instant respect.”

A hint of a smile appeared, then disappeared. “I honestly don’t know what to tell you,” he said as she led him to her office. She locked the door and turned to face, arms folded over her chest. “It’s a toned-down version of my *shut up, sit down or I’ll make you* look but I don’t think those kids honestly think I’m going to cuff them and work them over.”

She gaped at him, mouth parting on an inhalation of shock. “Have you ... no. Never mind. And we’ll pretend you didn’t

say that.”

“You know I wouldn’t harm a hair on their heads,” Travis said gently.

“Of course, I know that.” She closed the distance between them, stroking the disheveled hair back from his eyes. “You’d no sooner hurt a child than me.”

A dark look came and went on his face.

“Stop it.” She cupped his cheeks in her hands, glaring at him now, the intensity making her voice flat. “We’re not going to keep rehashing old ground, Travis. That’s over and done. We’re rebuilding. The past is behind us.”

“Not yet, it’s not.” He gripped her wrists, turning his head so he could press a kiss into each palm before backing away.

Hefting a leather laptop bag onto her desk, he unzipped it and pulled a laptop out. “I’ve arranged to have somebody come inspect the security here, making sure it wasn’t compromised, but I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Arranged ... ?” Puzzled, she eyed him, then said, “Oh. You mean Miles. You’ve already talked to him?”

“No. I texted him and told him to make it happen.”

She eyed him, blinking slowly as she processed his words. “You just *told* him.”

“Yes.” He pulled several gadgets from the bag and fiddled, but stopped the second his phone rang. He checked the screen, tapped something, then turned away with his back to her, speaking in a voice too low to hear.

“Is that Miles—”

He held up a hand, still speaking in that too-low voice.

Finally, in a normal tone, he said, “Confirmed.”

As he turned back, he glanced at her. “Sorry. This has to be handled ... a bit more officially now.”

She wasn’t sure what that meant, but she nodded.

“Sir, I’m going to let you talk to her now. Need to check her office before I put you speaker.”

She frowned at him. “Check my office for what?”

He shook his head and passed her the phone.

“Bella.”

She recognized the sound of Miles’ grizzled voice and said, “Hello.” As he replied, she watched Travis pull a long, slim wand-like device from his bag.

“If you’re wondering what’s going on, Travis is checking for bugs in your office.”

“Bugs ... ”

Travis shot her a look and lifted his finger to his lips.

Baffled, she passed a hand over her eyes. “Right. I’ve had a bigger problem with spiders than normal. That last one scared my kids half to death.”

“Understandable. I’m not a fan myself.” On the other end of the line, Miles chuckled. “Not a bad cover-up, but it is highly unlikely anything has been planted in your house. But we have to make sure. Travis is going over it now and the team I’m sending out will do a more thorough sweep.” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “I’ll figure out what the fuck is going on, Bella. I promise you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She glanced at Travis again, saw that he’d already covered more than half the room. “I know you will, Miles.”

“Travis gave me a quick rundown while he was getting his gear.” Miles recounted what Travis told him. “Does all that sound about right?”

“Yes. I ... ” Frustrated, Isabel ran a hand through her hair. “I didn’t talk to him, man. Not even for a *second*. For all I know, it’s not him.”

“Regardless, somebody not only has your *number*, but they know who you are. And they’ve connected you to him ... and Travis.”

She sucked in a breath and her gaze shot to Travis. She hadn't heard that part. At that moment, he lowered the device he carried and thumbed a switch on it, turned to her. "It's clear in here. I'll go over the rest of the house in a minute." He crossed to his bag, pulled out another device. It looked like one of the walkie-talkies she'd bought for a couple of the boys she used to have in the house ... sort of. Just a lot more high-tech.

He fiddled with it, then put it on her desk, glancing up at her only once. "It's a sound jammer—it's designed to interfere with any electronic surveillance. I doubt there is any, but just in case."

"Fun." It came out terse and hard. She didn't mean to sound so bitchy—none of this was his fault and she wasn't exactly *angry* at him.

But he heard the temper and lifted his head, focused back on her, giving her a slower, more thoughtful look.

"I hear Travis so I assume he's done sweeping for bugs," Miles said just as Travis opened his mouth.

"Seems like." Too confused, too frustrated to talk, she held the phone back out to Travis and walked to the window.

A split second later, Miles was talking over the speaker.

"Bella, now that we have some certainty of privacy, I want to know if anything unusual has been going on. Weird visitors. Strange phone calls. Deliveries."

"No, I ... " She stopped and shook her head. "I've had several hang-ups recently."

Travis's gaze locked on her, his mouth flattening into a firm, tight line. She averted her eyes.

"How long?" Miles demanded.

"I don't know. Less than a month, I guess. I think the first call came a few days before we left to visit Mary—Marilyn." She squeezed her eyes shut as she blundered one of her twin sister's altered identities. Not that either of them was in danger

from Travis, but she knew better. Had to *do* better. “I didn’t think much of it, can’t really recall any details.”

“Remember the time of day?”

“Morning.” She huffed out a sigh. “All the kids were up. Aaron was begging me to take him into Bangor to check out a new music store that had opened up and I had to tell him no.”

“You remember more than you give yourself credit for,” Miles said easily. “Okay, let’s discuss the other—” His phone clicked. “I’m going to put you on hold for a few minutes, Bella.”

She swore and pushed away from the window to pace the room. On her second pass, Travis caught her arm. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t owe me apologies for this.” She stared at him, all the emotions raging inside turning her thoughts to noise and static. Travis’s nearness, his warmth, that got through, though, and she covered his hand with hers, holding his gaze. “I do need to know one thing, though.”

“Anything.”

“What did Miles mean when he said the caller had connected me to *you*?”

Travis went stiff, and then, after a long, taut moment, he expelled a harsh breath. “Damn him.”

“*Tell* me.”

He closed the scant distance between them, his hands moving to grip her hips through the pajamas she’d pulled on. The thin barrier wasn’t enough to hide the heat in his hands, and that heat sent shivers through her. Her heart gave a hard knock against her ribs as he tucked her closer, lowering his head so he could rub his cheek against hers.

“He knew who I was, Iz,” he murmured. “That’s all. He said my name.”

She went rigid.

He shifted his hand to her back and spread his palm wide, smoothing it in long, slow strokes. “All it means is that you

were right—your father knew we had something going and he shared the news with some of his men. That’s all it means.”

“That’s *not* all.” Horrified, she shoved her hands against his chest. “It also means your *family* could be in danger.”

He caught her wrists. “No.”

Miles came back on the line. “Travis, Bella ... I’m sending a team to watch over the twins, just in case. Travis, you’re on Bella for now. Are you fit for duty?”

A mask fell over Travis’s face and his posture subtly changed. “Yes, sir.”

“What’s going on?” Isabel demanded.

“Undetermined as of yet. I have to go to my office and make some more calls.”

“Damn it, Miles!” She wanted to reach through the phone and shake him.

A weary sigh escaped him. “That’s the truth, Bella. What I can tell you is that I just got off the phone with someone working at the federal prison where Stephen Beresford is being held and ... as of six weeks ago, he was released on parole.”

A cold chill raced down her back.

“That’s not possible. I’m supposed to be *notified!*”

“So am I.” Miles sounded coldly furious. “And that’s why I need to get the fuck into my office.”

Chapter 23



If he stared any harder at the phone, Miles thought it might just explode in front of him—either that or his head would.

Finally, it rang and he answered with a terse, “Yes?”

“May I speak to Miles Hawkins?”

“Speaking.” Miles had an excellent mind for recall and the voice on the other end of the phone was unfamiliar to him. He checked the number once more, just to be sure. The unease that had been growing inside him over the past eighteen hours expanded, spreading through every inch of him, just as invasive as a cancer. “Why am I not speaking with Harriet Bingham? She’s the warden at Big Sandy and I specifically said I needed to speak with her.”

“Yes, well ... Miles, we’re going through a difficult patch here—”

“First,” Miles said, interrupting with a cool bluntness that had the agent in the driver’s seat sliding him the side-eye. “It’s SAC Miles Hawkins. You can call me *Agent* Hawkins, or just Hawkins, but *not* Miles. *Second*, I want to know who the fuck I’m talking to. *Third*, I don’t give a fuck about your difficult patch. I want Warden Bingham on the phone. Now.”

There were several chilly moments of silence before the man cleared his throat then said, “Of course, Agent Hawkins. This is Acting Warden Ashton Jackson; we’ve met before. I was working under Harriet’s second in charge, Julio Jimenez when you were out here a few years back.”

“And you still haven’t put Bingham on the phone. Fix that. Now.”

“Well, sir ... ” He cleared his throat. “I can’t. She’s currently in the hospital.”

And that sickening sensation of *wrongness* in his gut spread.

“Why am I only now being notified of this?”

“Well, Miles, I’ve got a lot of prisoners under my watch, and things went to shit after the attack where Harriet was injured—Jimenez didn’t make it.”

“*Agent Hawkins*,” Miles snapped even as his mind supplied him with an image of a stocky Latino in his early fifties, a man with somber eyes and matching expression, but one who had a keen wit. Dead. “When were you placed in your current position?”

“The day after the attack,” Jackson replied stiffly. “If you can tell me what this call is related to, I’ll see what I can do to help.”

“We’ll discuss it when I get there.”

Several moments of silence passed, followed by a short, “Sir?”

“I’m on my way to the facility. I’ll be putting in a call to the regional director to find out just what the fuck has happened and why I wasn’t notified about these issues the moment I hang up. Please use the time to update yourself on the following two inmates—” He checked the dates of birth for both although they were imprinted on his mind and read them off. “—and have an updated report ready.”

“Hawkins, I don’t work for you and I’m a busy man—”

“You’re a busy man who may soon find himself out on his ass, as I have a man currently walking around free when he should have been serving out another three years of his sentence, minimum, and that man has somehow located a woman in witness protection—a woman he has *harmed* in the past. I want to know about his release, his parole officers, what the fuck he ate the night before he left your custody and I want all of it together within the next couple of hours. So I suggest you get your thumb out of your ass and get to work.”



Eyes gritty with fatigue, Travis moved onto his deck and stripped off his shirt, then went to the farthest end where the water was deeper. The tide was in so it was safe enough for him to jump in and he did so, pushing his body as he swam long and hard before turning and starting back to the house next to Isabel's.

A team of FBI agents dressed in overalls and other work gear was at her place, going over everything with a fine-toothed comb even as they set up a top-of-the-line security system, one that would rival Miles' ... and Miles had a set-up that could make any security geek weep.

One of the agents would be staying behind, too.

Travis needed somebody else on hand besides him. Miles found one of his men who bore enough of a surface resemblance to Travis that, at a quick look, a casual bystander would probably assume the person *was* Travis. Travis had to do some traveling, very shortly, because thanks to Beresford proving he did know at least *something* about Travis, he needed to talk to his family—his twin.

Travis couldn't do it over the phone, not after lying for as long as he had.

It was best to get it done now, too. Miles had gotten word from his people that the call from Beresford had originated from West Virginia. An APB for Beresford to all law enforcement agencies in between there and Maine already been issued. It would take the prick time to get here, traveling backroads, avoiding cameras, highways, minimizing the risk of encountering law enforcement, so Travis had a very small window of time.

He at least had to see Trey, talk him and Ressa into going to Arizona or California to stay with the rest of the family for a few weeks.

Everybody else lived out west, so they were far away from Beresford and any lingering reach Wilson Steele might have had, although they'd all have security. But Travis had to take care of this.

Twenty-four, maybe forty-eight hours, and he'd be back.

In the meantime, federal marshals, accompanied by security specialists Miles had handpicked from the years he and Travis had worked together were being sent to look over Isabel's twin sisters, and hopefully relocate them.

Apparently, *relocating* wasn't always easy.

Mary Kate—or Marilyn, as she was now called—didn't do well with the relocations she'd been forced to endure, and Ellison—or Ellen, as Travis had known her—went nowhere without her twin.

Isabel had told him that the twins might end up coming to stay with her until everything was settled. If it was the only way to keep Marilyn from being alone in her house, it was what they'd do. He hadn't seen the problem, but then Isabel had *told* him the problem—it was *him*.

Ellison hates you. They don't know many details, but they know a few and she hates your guts. I won't be able to undo that damage in just a short time.

Travis could live with Ellison hating him. Hell, he'd lived with his own self-hate for more than a decade. What he couldn't live with was either of the twins being harmed so he wanted them here.

As he finally climbed out of the water, muscles somewhat refreshed, he grabbed the T-shirt he'd discarded and used it to dry his face. Before his swim, he'd collapsed on his bed and grabbed a short nap, feeling safe enough to do so since he had backup on site.

Thanks to the nap and the swim, he felt fairly energized, so he grabbed a quick shower. He was on the deck and heading toward the steps when his phone rang.

"Tell me you've found out what the hell happened," he demanded, having recognized Miles' number when it came up on the secure app.

"I have a few answers, but even more questions—are you going to be ready to fly out in a few hours?"

Travis shoved a hand through his wet hair. “Yes. But tell me what’s going on.”

A taut silence passed, then Miles asked, “Are you with Isabel?”

“No. The techs are there and I needed some sleep and a shower. Since she has people there to watch over her and the kids, I came back to the house.”

“Good.” Miles blew out a breath and started to talk.



Isabel clutched the glass of whiskey in her hand and watched him over the rim, her face pale and strained, eyes glimmering diamond-bright in the last fading rays of the sun.

“Let me understand this right,” she said in a voice taut with anger. “Stephen apparently had a stroke after contracting COVID in prison a couple of years ago. He’s spent the past two years trying to get moved to a lower security area because his stroke made him less of a risk—according to *one* of the doctors at the prison, but two other doctors disagreed. A couple of months ago, there was a riot at the prison. The warden and her second-in-charge are hurt—one of them fatally and the other seriously enough that she’s been in a coma for almost two months. The man now in charge has *less* experience than others in the facility and he has yet to be replaced by somebody with *more* experience. A month ago, one of the regular doctors at the prison just ...*disappeared*, but there’s been little news about this anywhere, even in Kentucky. The regional director in charge of the prison system there has been strangely unaware of *all* of this fucked-up shit, so somebody has really been working hard to cover things up there. A few days after all this went down, Stephen ended up getting *compassionate release* even though *two doctors* disagreed with the doctor who stated his stroke was severe and disabling. Oh, and he missed his first check-in with his parole officer and that’s been brushed under the rug, apparently. Was he even *evaluated* by somebody who specializes in strokes?”

She finally stopped to take a breath and after a couple of ragged inhalations, she tossed the whiskey back, then resuming glaring at him.

“Not that Miles has been able to uncover,” Travis said in a flat voice. “The acting warden has a lot of hard questions to answer. Miles has two agents en route to question Beresford’s family because whoever was involved in this had money to spare and then some, not to mention contacts. Beresford’s family checks all the boxes—his mom has ties to political thinktanks and you already know the connection between . . . ” Travis’s words trailed off as she nodded, her knuckles stabbing sharp against her skin from how tight she clutched her glass. “The regional director is already on his way to the federal prison in Sandy Hook to meet Miles there and two more agents from the local field office are joining in.” Travis’s expression was grim.

Isabel shoved to her feet and walked, stiff-legged, to the railing of the house.

Travis’s phone buzzed, a familiar pattern, and he pulled his phone out, activating the security app that let him view the camera feed just in time to see a dark-colored sports car pull into the driveway next to one of the agency vans.

A message on his secure app popped up next. It was a familiar contact and he opened it, read it.

“One of the security guys is here,” he said in a tight voice. “I’m going to go talk to him.”

His head was a mess.

How could he leave Isabel now, knowing how well thought out Beresford’s escape had been? They had to have been planning it—for years. According to the information Miles had passed on, Stephen had been evaluated in the hospital following a short bout of COVID after reporting neurological symptoms—they diagnosed a mild stroke, which had been in the reports Miles had received. Those medical details were still considered private but due to the long-reaching human-trafficking schemes Beresford had been involved, and considering Beresford’s ever-persistent attempts

to be moved to lesser secure facilities, it had been deemed the federal government—namely Miles—had a vested interest in the general details.

All the doctors had deemed it a mild stroke—except for *one* of the facility’s in-house physicians.

And that one had been involved in Beresford’s compassionate release.

Brooding over the fucking mess he had in front of him, Travis rounded the house to find a whipcord-lean figure leaning against the hood of the sports car.

The bright lights shining out the windows fell on the man’s face and the freelance security specialist shifted his misty green eyes toward the porch. “I take it there’s no immediate threat?”

“What do you think?” He held out a hand. “Good to see you, Rye.”

Rye Phillips was so pale, one might think he never saw the sun, but that was just his complexion. Too much time without sunscreen, he’d told Travis, and he’d turned lobster-red. His hair was midnight black and his eyes a soft, dreamy green. He was pretty enough to be on the cover of one of the filthy romance books Travis’s twin wrote under another pen name, not that he would ever tell Rye that—he liked his teeth where they were.

Rye grabbed his hand, squeezed and tugged him in for a hard, fast hug. “Heard you were getting out. Going to miss you.”

“It’s time.”

“Travis?”

At the sound of Isabel’s voice, he turned and looked at her.

The wind toyed with her hair and the hem of the oversized t-shirt she’d pulled on and his breath trapped in his throat.

“Damn, son,” Rye said in a low voice. “Get that hook out of your mouth before somebody sees it.”

“Fuck off.” But there was no heat to it. Glancing at Rye, he said, “Come on.”

As they approached the house, Rye took in the lay of the land and Travis knew he was assessing vulnerabilities, weaknesses. “The windows are all bullet-proof, doors reinforced. Once the locks are set, it won’t be an easy entry.”

“She been expecting trouble?”

Travis knew Miles wouldn’t have had time to fully brief the assets he’d brought in. “It’s complicated.”

After introductions, Rye looked at him. “I heard you had to take off for a day, maybe more. Ace is supposed to be here within the next ninety minutes. I should be fine once I familiarize myself with the property. Miles can update me when I call him in about twenty.”

Travis hesitated.

“Problem?” Rye cocked a brow.

“I’m ... thinking about taking care of my business over the phone, sending some people I trust out to handle the other ... stuff.”

“No.” Isabel’s voice was flat.

Now both Rye’s brows shot up.

Travis ignored him, turning to face Isabel. “I don’t feel right leaving you, not after hearing that fucker has been out as long as he has, how much planning he put into this.”

“Do you trust the men Miles is sending out?”

“Ace is a woman,” Rye offered helpfully as he crossed his arms over his chest. The tattoos twining around his arms rippled with the movements.

Travis scowled at him. “Do you mind?”

“Not a bit,” the man said cheerfully.

Annoyed, he looked back at Isabel. “Yes, I trust them or I wouldn’t let them near you. But—”

“Travis, go see your family.” She closed the distance between them and laid a hand on his cheek. “He knows who you are. You think I don’t see the fear in your eyes when you’re thinking about your family? I *know* you’re not worried for yourself. You’ll feel better when they’re under protection, and you *can’t* hurt them by letting strangers tell them the truth.”

“They wouldn’t say shit,” Travis bit off.

“They’re not stupid.” She held his gaze steadily. “Your twin knows you inside and out. And your mom ... I swear, I can still remember the way she looked at me, like she could see inside my head. They may not know *what* you do, but they know you’re hiding things. Go tell them. It won’t take long. I’ll be *fine*.”

“Isabel ... ”

She placed her fingers over his lips. “I’m right, and you know it. So quit fighting with me.”

Swearing, he pulled her to him, one hand cupping the back of her neck.

After a quick, rough kiss, he turned and faced Rye. “Outside. I’ll give you a quick rundown then I’m heading out.”

Chapter 24



“Baby, what’s wrong?”

Trey Barnes looked up from the notebook he’d been staring at for going on twenty minutes. He’d been trying to rough out some notes for the next novel due in his contract. The idea was there, all but fully formed in his head, yet something stopped him.

No.

Not *something*.

It wasn’t some nebulous unknown.

His chest was tight and a knot of worry sat in his gut, all but pulling on him. He wanted to get up, find his phone and call his twin. The urge to talk to him was driving him crazy.

But Travis had already sent him a text—an unprompted one, for once, and it had been waiting on his phone before Trey had even had his coffee.

Text me when you’re up.

So, Trey had.

Instead of texting back, Travis had called.

“*What the fuck is wrong?*” Trey had demanded.

Travis, as he always did, had danced around the question without really answering, then, bluntly, said, “*I’m on my way to your place. Should be there in about an hour.*”

Before Trey could ask anything else, his twin said he had to go and the noise in the background had been so loud, Trey had barely heard him.

“Travis is coming,” Trey murmured as Ressa squeezed his shoulder.

“That’s great!” Ressa came around and dropped into his lap.

Automatically, he slid a hand up her thigh and placed it on her belly. They hadn't told anybody about the baby yet. With both Marin and Abby pregnant, it didn't seem fair to distract from what was going on. Ressa confessed she was also nervous. At barely two months, she wanted to wait until she was farther along first and Trey had agreed to wait.

"You know," he said wryly. "You don't have to pretend to like him on my account."

"I don't dislike your brother," she said calmly. Her dark brown eyes held his levelly. "I don't know him well enough to have made a decision, but he loves you ... and hell, Neeci loves him. She's only met him twice, but she's a better judge of character than most adults."

"Kids frequently are." Trey brushed her hair back from her face and tugged her down to meet his kiss. "I love you, Ressa Bliss-Barnes."

Ressa laughed, her nose crinkling up and her eyes bright with laughter.

He was catching that laugh with his lips when a knock sounded on the door.

They broke apart and Trey sighed. "That's Travis."

"It's so weird how you two can tell."

"Not to me," he replied easily.

Hand in hand, they walked to the foyer and he opened the door with a smile.

That smile wobbled, then fell as he saw his twin for the first time since he'd married Ressa a year earlier.

The changes were myriad.

Travis was leaner—too lean, like he'd been scraped down to little but muscle, sinew and bone. That would have worried him.

But ...

Trey cocked his head, vaguely aware of ... something.

He couldn't quite figure out what it was. But there was ... something.

Travis angled his head to the side, a movement that echoed Trey's, his lids dipping over his eyes. Those eyes were almost the exact shade of blue-green Trey saw reflecting back at him in the mirror.

The eyes.

Trey took a slow breath as he realized that was the difference.

There was a weight gone from those eyes and shadows no longer lay so heavy under them.

Not saying a word, he stepped forward and grabbed his twin in a hard, tight hug while his own eyes started to burn. "You bastard."

Travis's arms came around him just as tight and for long moments, they stood like that.

Trey was so caught up in whatever unseen seismic shift had taken place in his twin that he never noticed the two individuals standing behind his brother.



Not even five minutes into the highly edited version of his life over the past few years, Travis wasn't surprised when Trey lurched up off the couch to pace over to the window.

Ressa stayed where she was, watching her husband.

Travis quit talking when Trey shoved his hands through his hair, recognizing when his twin needed a break.

Trey spun around to glare at him. "Why? Can you tell me that?"

Travis had spent the better part of the flight here trying to find the explanation and the only answer was the modified version of the truth.

Blowing out a careful breath, he said, “You remember her, don’t you?”

Trey cocked his head, looking puzzled, then abruptly, he narrowed his eyes. “No. No way.”

“Her father was ... bad news.” Travis shot a look at Ressa before meeting his twin’s eyes once more. “I can’t go into any more details right now. I don’t know if it’s ever going to be possible, either. It’s all classified. But she helped put him in prison. I’d already fucked things up between us because the one time she needed me, I didn’t believe in her. It cost her.” Travis looked away, thinking of Isabel’s tears as she told him about the emergency surgery, what had been done to save her life ... the results. “It cost her a lot. I didn’t even know how much until recently. By the time I realized how bad I’d fucked up, though, it was already too late. She was in witness protection and I ... hell, man, I was lost. I couldn’t live with myself, couldn’t stand to see my reflection in the mirror. The only thing I could think about at night was finding some way to fix it, some sort of ... absolution.”

“So you risked your *life*?” Trey half-shouted. “You erased who you are? What did that do? What did you accomplish?”

“It made me into somebody who could get into places a lot of others couldn’t, Trey.” Shoving off the couch, he went to his twin. “Her dad was involved in human trafficking, brother. Kids, women, people hoping to immigrate—they tricked these desperate folks into coming here and working their lives away. Sex trafficking—some of the girls in the rings I’ve helped break up weren’t much older than your kids, Trey. *That’s* what I accomplished.”

Trey spun around and slammed his fist into the wall.

“Hey, hey ... ” Ressa was there, catching Trey’s arm and pulling him around to face her. “Okay, we’re not doing that. You can be mad and frustrated and scared all you want. But we are not doing that.”

Trey dropped his head onto her shoulder, shuddering as the frustrated fury and fear ate at him.

Over his body, Ressa met Travis's gaze.

He was surprised at what he saw there. Compassion ... and understanding.

Trey hugged her, then lifted his head and Travis turned away to give them the illusion of privacy.

"Why don't you seem surprised by this?" Trey said.

"Because I always figured he was something more than an accountant," Ressa replied.

Travis bit back a smile as he recalled the awkward interactions between him and his twin's wife, back when Trey and Ressa had first gotten together. She'd seen through him quicker than his own family. But not as quick as Isabel.

"I can't believe I never figured any of this out." Disgust in his voice, Trey said, "Damn it, Travis, turn around. I don't want to stare at the back of your head."

Some of the anger had leached out of his twin's voice although there was still a hard look in Trey's gaze when their eyes locked.

"You saw what you needed to see," Travis told him quietly. "You saw what I let you see."

"I want to punch you in the face," Trey said, hot, thick anger in his voice.

"If that's what you need to do."

But Trey snorted in disgust. "It's no fucking fun if you're just going to stand there and let me do it." A minute ticked by, then another. "Now what?"

"Now ... " Travis rubbed a hand over his hair. "Now I'm flying out to talk to Mom and Dad ... and everybody else."

Trey just stared at him for a second, then he looked at Ressa. "Yesterday was your last day before our vacation, right?"

Wary, she eyed him. "Yes."

"Good. We're going with him."

“Ahhh ... ”

Trey narrowed his eyes on his twin. “Shove it. I’m not letting you drop this on everybody without us. Besides, I’m assuming you’re telling us all of this because you’re sticking bodyguards on us. It’s just as easy to protect us all in one place versus multiple—and I’d rather my kids and wife be on the other side of the country from whatever the hell is going on *here*.”

Travis cut a look at Ressa.

She held up her hands. “Don’t look at me. He’s your brother. You ought know to how stubborn he is.”



“So, it went okay?”

As the plane sped through the sky, barreling westward, Travis scraped his nails down his unshaven jaw and tossed a look toward his brother whom he saw playing a game with Neece and Clayton.

Ressa was sleeping. She’d closed her eyes almost the moment the plane started to taxi and dropped off.

Travis couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so easily.

“More or less,” he said, cradling the phone to his ear. He wanted this part over with—as much as he missed his family, as much as he knew he owed them these explanations, he didn’t like being away from Isabel right now. He wanted to settle this mess with Beresford.

The plane, chartered privately by Miles rather than the agency, was luxury defined, and he sat in the very back, his eyes on his family while the hired security team remained on duty.

The other teams were already in place and each had checked in with Travis. Sebastien and Marin were the hardest to keep eyes on, since they lived in the house Marin had bought years before in Malibu and it wasn’t exactly someplace

you could park a car and just watch through a pair of binoculars. They were also going to be the hardest target, though, and so, likely, the safest from anybody Beresford might try to send after them.

Just to be on the safe side, Miles had arranged to contact both Sebastien and Marin's agents with an anonymous tip about a possible stalker who was targeting Sebastien. With Marin so far along in her pregnancy, they didn't want to risk scaring her, and because of her pregnancy, they knew Sebastien would do whatever was necessary to keep her calm, including going along with the agent's suggestion of having some security guys on site.

Miles had intervened there, as well, and calmly swapped out two of his own with the team that had initially been sent out. Those two, for the time being, had agreed to keep quiet for a minimum of six hours, no more, to give Miles' men time to explain things to Sebastien—which meant Travis had to see his baby brother first.

“What does more or less mean?” Isabel asked warily.

“I mean, he only threatened to hit me once or twice.”

“Oh. Okay.” She blew out a breath. “That's good then. You two are okay?”

At that moment, Trey looked up, a half-smile on his face as he met Travis's eyes.

Travis smiled back, relieved when there was no tension in his twin's face as he went back to playing Uno with the kids. “He's my twin. We'll be okay. Ah ... speaking of twins, what's going on with your sisters?”

Isabel groaned. “Did you have to ask?”

Chapter 25



Travis wasn't the least bit surprised to see Sebastien all but shove past the freelance security agent who'd opened the door.

"Damn it, man, I told you it was my brothers—I'd think I know who my brothers are," Bastien said with a smirk before turning to Travis and throwing his arms around him. "Get in here ... Man, what the fuck! What are you doing here? Did Mom threaten to beat your ass if you didn't show up soon? And shit, Trey, too! Why are you here? Abby's due any day and Zach will beat my ass if you don't stop in and visit him with the baby so close."

Sebastien Barnes had born living life at top speed, and apparently, that hadn't changed.

The youngest of the Barnes siblings shoved Travis into the house, past the bodyguard who met Travis's gaze with a bemused sort of grimace, before turning his attention to Ressa.

Despite the rapid-fire pace of Sebastien's questions, he didn't slow down or pause to give anybody a chance to answer, just hugged Ressa and nudged her into the house after Travis before grabbing the other twin and giving him the same treatment as his brother had received.

After pushing Trey in with the others, he stooped and caught the kids in his arms, questions and comments still tumbling from him as he stepped inside and spun the kids around.

Both Neeci and Clayton whooped while Sebastien laughed, the fading scar that bisected his face on one side doing little to decrease the attractiveness of a face most of the world considered *painfully beautiful*.

Feeling a gaze on him, Travis looked up and saw Marin at the top of the stairs, one hand on the swollen mound of her belly, the other on the railing.

"Mare," he said, nodding.

She eyed him for a long moment, then nodded back. Then she turned her gaze to Sebastien. “Sebastien, maybe you’d like to move your playdate somewhere the rest of us won’t have hearing loss.”



“I’m sorry, what? Can we rewind this conversation some?”

Travis met Sebastien’s baffled gaze levelly. “To where?”

“Oh, I dunno ... how about to the part ... what was it ... ” Sebastien squinted his eyes, then in an eerily accurate echo of Travis, he repeated what his older brother had said several minutes earlier. “*I’ve been working alongside federal agents helping bring down human trafficking operations.*” He snapped his fingers and gave the room at large a big, broad smile that was patently false. “That part is where I’m getting hung up. Can we rewind back to *there*?”

“Seb ... ” Trey rubbed his temples.

Sebastien came off the couch in a barely controlled explosion of movement. “Hey, look, maybe you’re cool with this—you’ve probably known a while and I get it. You two don’t have secrets, but I kind of need a few minutes!”

Travis saw Trey flinch and he hated himself a little bit in that minute.

“I didn’t tell him, Sebastian,” he said, sharpening his voice to a blade.

Sebastian was already forging ahead, though, and it took a second for Travis’s cold words to penetrate.

He stopped and blinked, rubbing the back of his neck before looking at Travis. “What?”

Jamming his hands into his pockets, Travis said, “When you’re doing undercover or off-the-books work for the federal government, you don’t get a pass to tell family, even if it’s your twin. *Nobody knew.*”

For once, Sebastien seemed rendered speechless.

“Your face,” Marin said quietly.

Travis slanted a look at her.

She made a vague gesture toward her own features and shrugged. “Every time we see you, you look just a little more different. It was intentional, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” What was the point in lying now?

“You wanted to avoid detection by any sort of facial recognition software.” She rubbed a hand over her swollen belly, a fine line forming between her brows.

“That was one of the reasons,” Travis acknowledged. “I also needed to make sure I kept my brothers, my family safe.”

Sebastien stared at him incredulously. “So there was no wreck in the Alps ... you just, what, went and smashed your face to disfigure yourself so you wouldn’t look like us?”

“I *couldn’t* look like you—and I sure as hell couldn’t wear the same face as Trey,” Travis pointed out.

Sebastien still looked like he wanted to explode and Marin laid a hand on his knee. Her gaze slid to the room where the security team waited with Ressa and the kids. “I assume there’s a reason why a couple of super-scary-looking muscle types joined you both. And why you’re telling us this now.” Slanting a look at her husband, she said, “Sebastien, let’s dial down on the anger so he can finish saying what he needs to say.”



“Well, this is going to be fun.”

Isabel and her sisters stood in the foyer, the three of them together for the first time in several years.

Ellison’s brisk announcement hadn’t been one of excitement and neither Marilyn nor Isabel were going to pretend otherwise. Mari gave her twin a sidelong look and muttered under her breath, “You could have stayed in Boston. I wouldn’t have cared.”

“You need somebody to help watch out for you,” Ellison said.

“Is ... Bella can do that.” Mari shot her oldest sister an apologetic look and Isabel shrugged it off, her attention focused on Ellison.

“Because she’s done so good so far?” Ellison snorted. “It sounds like we’re about to get uprooted *again* and no doubt it’s *her* fault.”

Isabel closed her eyes. She was used to Ellison reacting like this, but she wasn’t in the mood today—*so* not in the mood. She’d been talking with the kids’ caseworkers, trying to explain what she safely could, and unfortunately, there was no ideal situation to move *any* of them on such short notice—Jacob would likely still end up in a group home, Aaron hadn’t fared well with any of the other foster homes he’d been in, Storm didn’t want to leave because she feared it would make it that much harder for her father to find her, and nobody wanted to take both a five-year-old and a seven-month-old baby.

“Just *stop* it, Ellie,” Mari said in a sharp voice.

“I’m not *doing* anything,” Ellison said, pressing her hand to her chest. “I’m just pointing out that we’re in the same mess we always end up because of Isabel—”

“You sound mean.”

Isabel clapped a hand over her forehead at that pronouncement.

The twins both looked up.

At Mari’s smothered giggle, Isabel shot her youngest sister a look. Mari offered a small shrug.

Ellison looked disgruntled as she located the pretty little blonde sitting on the top step with Storm leaning over the railing just a few feet away. Both girls were looking at Ellison with the same interest one might study a bug under a microscope.

“Yeah, well, you look short,” Ellison finally said before looking back at Isabel. “Your *foster kids* are still here? What

the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You shouldn’t cuss in front of me,” Brooklyn piped up.

Ellison whipped her head around, the short, choppy locks of her hair flying around her face as she looked back at Brooklyn in astonishment. “Noted, pipsqueak!”

“And you shouldn’t call me names.”

Storm covered her mouth with her hand, but not before all of them caught sight of the smile dancing on her lips.

“Brooklyn, please go to your room,” Isabel said, not bothering to hide *her* smile.

“But I wanted to ask you something!”

“Okay.” Isabel folded her arms over her chest. “Ask, then go.”

Brooklyn frowned. “Well, now I can’t remember.”

“When you do, come and ask me. Until then ... ”

Brooklyn stood up, accepting the hand Storm offered. But before she turned to go, she gave Ellison one final look. “You *do* look mean. And I won’t always be *short*.”

“She’s got you there, Ellie,” Mari said.

“Why are your foster kids still here?” Ellison hissed.

“Because things just started happening,” Isabel retorted. “And contrary to what you think, it’s not as easy as just throwing them in a mailbox with *return-to-sender* marked on their foreheads. They are *people* who deserve to be handled with some level of care!”

“And what if Beresford shows up on the doorstep *tonight*?” Ellison half-shouted.

“That’s his name?”

Isabel groaned and lasered her sister—and her overly large mouth—with a quelling look. Walking over to the steps, she sank down and looked over to see Jacob and Aaron both standing in the door to the library. “How long have you two been in there?”

Aaron and Jacob exchanged a look, then shrugged. “An hour, maybe?”

“Without killing each other?”

“I can deal with him when he’s not being a narrow-minded jerk,” Aaron said.

Jacob flipped the skinnier kid off. “We were just looking some stuff up. You said this guy’s name was Beresford?”

Instead of answering them, Isabel turned a narrow glare on her sister. “Gee, motormouth. Thanks.”

Ellison opened her mouth, then snapped it closed.

At that moment, Rye stepped through the door of the kitchen and took a look around. Ace had been there to greet the twins when their bodyguard detail had escorted them inside, so neither of the twins had met the tall, lean male currently approaching Isabel.

“Ma’am.” He nodded at her, then glanced at the twins before looking at the two foster kids. “I need a word.”

Ellison’s entire demeanor changed.

Isabel rolled her eyes heavenward as she dragged herself off the bottom steps. Looking at the boys, she said, “Zip it. You don’t repeat a word. You understand?”

“Absolutely,” Jacob said soberly.

“No problem.” Aaron gave her a big-eyed, earnest look.

And she had no doubt that Aaron would be telling Storm exactly what had happened.

“You two understand this information is the kind that gets people hurt, right?” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them.

“What information?” Rye asked, voice flat.

“One of my sisters let a name slip,” Isabel said in disgust.

The security specialist slanted a look at the twins, the lines bracketing his mouth deepening slightly. But he said nothing to them. Instead, he approached Aaron and Jacob.

“In a few years, you’re going to be men. Here’s your chance to show you’re already on the road. You found out something you shouldn’t know,” he said in a cool, implacable voice. “You react the way responsible grown-ups would—*by keeping it to yourself*. We don’t want people ending up hurt because you let that information slip to the wrong people, right? You’re going to show me you’ll be adults about this, understand?”

Both of them had gone rigid, staring at Rye without blinking.

He had that same way of commanding attention that Travis did.

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“And since we don’t know who the *wrong people* are, we assume *everybody* is the wrong people. Right?”

“Yes, sir!”

He held their gazes another long, pregnant moment, then nodded. “Go to your rooms, please. I need to talk to Bella.”

They bolted and Rye turned, pinned a look on the twins. “Which one of you was foolish enough to say a fucking *name* in a house full of *kids*?”

Mari jerked up her hand and pointed at her twin, eyes wide.

Ellison gaped at the woman next to her.

Mari held up her hands. “I’m not going down for this. Besides, *I* know better!”

Isabel stared at her sisters as if she didn’t even recognize them. After a few seconds, she started to laugh. “Good for you, Mari! Good for you!”

Ellison, still looking disgusted, threw her hands up.

“If you would have had them sent elsewhere, none of this would have happened!”

“As of yet, we haven’t determined what the safest course of action would be for those kids,” Rye said, crossing his arms

over his chest and giving Ellison a baleful look. “But we do know that our target already knows your sister has at least *a child* here, that he knows *she* is here, and we know *she’s* known around here as well. It stands to reason he may well already know about those kids. Sending them off to someplace where they might not be protected isn’t going to be a smart move, now is it?”

Ellison opened her mouth, then snapped it closed with an audible click.

“I think I want to go back to my condo,” she announced.

Rye smiled. “Too late, sweetheart. You’re here and you’re staying here where we can watch you.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” she said in a pithy voice before storming past him, down the hall to the two spare bedrooms on the first floor Isabel always kept made up for her sisters—they weren’t ever used by any of the foster kids so the rooms were ready should the twins ever drop in, which never happened. But Ellison had no trouble finding her room. She went in, slammed the door, and a minute later, music started blasting.

Mari came and sat by Isabel, taking her hand.

“She’s in a cheery mood,” Isabel said glumly.

“The guy she’s been seeing dumped her.” Mari rested her head on Isabel’s shoulder. “I told her it would happen. He’s not somebody you can trust with small secrets, much less big ones, but she didn’t listen to me.”

Taking her baby sister’s hand, Isabel twined their fingers. “Is that why she insisted on coming? Or is she here to keep an eye on you?”

“I’m *fine*,” Mari said with a huff. “I’m not nineteen and breakable anymore. I told her if she wanted to stay in Boston with a team of bodyguards, I’d be okay here. But she insisted on coming to watch out for me.”

“Maybe she didn’t want to be alone.”

Mari rubbed her cheek against Isabelle's shoulder again, then softly murmured, "Maybe."

Rye caught her eye and Isabel focused on him.

"What did you need?"

He braced his back against the door and hooked his thumbs in his belt loops.

"Well, some of it, I already mentioned ... that information about your foster kids. I've been talking with Miles and he's of a mind that they'd probably be safest maybe just crashing in a hotel for a few days to ride this out, putting a couple of teams on them to watch over them."

Isabel groaned. "Brooklyn in a hotel? She'd drive everybody else crazy."

"She's the itty-bitty one, right?"

"Not the baby, no."

"Nah, that mouthy little blonde—a little wild cat." Rye grinned and the expression changed his entire face.

Isabel wasn't ashamed to say her heart skipped a beat or two. He was probably one of the prettiest damn men she'd ever seen in her life.

The door to Ellison's room opened—she knew by the abrupt change in the music. It was louder, no longer so muffled.

Rising, Isabel shifted and she saw Ellison swing around the railing of the stairs just as she heard Brooklyn calling her name out.

"Listen, I'm sorry, okay?" Ellison said. "I've had a rough few weeks and I don't need to be taking them out on you. I'm sorry—"

"—Bella, I remembered my question!"

Brooklyn crashed into her and wrapped her arms around her leg.

Ellison sighed and crossed her arms but made a go-ahead gesture toward Brooklyn.

Looking at the little girl, Isabel asked, “What was your question?”

“When is Mr. Travis coming back?”

Fuck.

Both Mari and Ellison went tense.

“Ah, I’m not sure, sweetie, but I’ll let you know once I have a better idea,” Isabel said, managing a neutral voice ... somehow. “Hey, why don’t you take this up to Storm and have her order pizza ... double, no ... tell her to triple my normal order. The regular place.”

She fumbled her debit card out and pushed it into Brooklyn’s hand, hoping the smile on her face didn’t falter.

Fortunately, Brooklyn was so excited by the idea of pizza that she didn’t notice anything.

“Remember, tell her to triple the order,” she called up as Brooklyn pounded up the stairs, shouting for Storm.

“Judging by how eager you were to get the kid out of here, I don’t think we have to *ask* if it’s a *coincidence* that there’s a guy named *Travis* involved,” Ellison said, her voice tight.

Mari came off the steps, eyeing Isabel warily, although she said nothing.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Izzie,” Ellison said, falling back on the old childhood nickname. “Tell me you haven’t hooked back up with somebody who fucked you up like he did.”

Chapter 26



“I don’t believe it!”

Travis let his father haul him in a hard hug and he closed his eyes as he gripped the older man tight to him, fighting the rush of emotion that had his chest going squeezing on him. The air in the room didn’t seem adequate, but Travis knew it was just him, just in his head and that it was a mix of relief and trepidation, all over the talk they were about to have.

Just as his father released him to step back, he heard a soft, feminine cry of surprise and he stepped away, caught sight of his mother.

Denise Barnes was five ten, all curves and softness, and she rushed toward him with her arms outstretched while tears flooded the blue-green eyes she’d passed down to three of her boys.

Travis bent over her as he hugged her, aware of his father greeting Sebastien and Trey, because, of course, Sebastien had decided he needed to be on hand for this discussion.

Ressa and the boys had stayed back in Malibu with Marin, the drive to Santa Monica a short one. Ron Barnes was laughing and asking Trey about the kids, checking in on Marin via Sebastian.

But Travis wasn’t surprised when his mother drew away from him and cupped his face in her hands.

He closed his own hands around her wrists and held her eyes.

“What’s the matter, son?” she asked softly.

“We need to talk, Mom.”

She nodded and looked over her shoulder at her husband.

Ron, sensing her focus, lapsed into silence and met her gaze.

“Ron, our boys need to talk to us. Why don’t you pour us all some drinks?”

It was early in the day for whiskey but Travis didn’t turn it down when his father tipped the bottle in his direction after they’d settled in the family room. Some conversations just went down a little easier with booze. And, if he was completely honest, he might admit he needed a little liquid courage when it came to telling his mother the truth about everything.

He’d introduced the bodyguards as *associates* for the time being, but he’d seen the appraising looks both of his parents had given them and knew they weren’t fooled. A couple of times, Zach and Sebastien had both dealt with crazy stalker types, so this wasn’t the first time Ron and Denise had needed bodyguard detail.

One of the men who would be staying with his parents had stepped into the family room already and was finished going over it with a scanner just as Travis had entered, giving a brief nod to let him know the room was safe.

That done, he decided to rewind things farther back with them, because maybe then, they’d understand better, especially his mom.

“Do you remember that girl you thought I liked back in Cape Cod?”

Ron looked a little confused, but Travis wasn’t surprised when Denise inclined her head. “Isabel Steele.”

He didn’t ask how his mom knew her name. Isabel had mentioned that she felt like Denise Barnes had seen straight through to the inside of her skull and sometimes, Travis felt like she could as well.

“Yes.”

Denise’s hands clenched around the glass of whiskey Ron had just poured her. “This can’t be about her father ... he died in prison several years ago.”

“I need one of you to bring me up to speed,” Ron said quietly. “I don’t remember every last detail like you do, baby.”

Denise reached over and took his hand. “You’ll remember her. It’s the pretty girl we ran into outside the Lobster Shack in Cape Dennis, dear. Her father was the one you followed to his car.”

“Oh, that dickhead.” He lifted his drink, then lowered it and looked at Denise. “What do you mean he died in prison?” His eyes flew to Travis. “Please tell me he didn’t hurt that girl of his.”

“He did, although that’s not why he ended up in prison.”

Denise’s eyes narrowed slightly, speculation beginning to glimmer there.

Travis swallowed and took a sip of his whiskey, letting it burn a path down his throat. “Her father, Wilson Steele, was a US district attorney, Dad. And he was involved in human trafficking rings.”

Both Trey and Sebastien were watching him now, completely silent. He hadn’t told them this much detail. He’d texted Miles on the drive over, told him he had to give his parents a bit more detail because once his mother and father saw Isabel, they’d know ... and if he had his way about, they *would* see her, because he wasn’t letting her go again.

Miles had told him to use his best judgment.

That was what he was going to do. With that in mind, Travis began to talk.

As he detailed some of what had brought him and Isabel together, what had ended them, and what had put Wilson Steele in prison, his mother, alone, didn’t look surprised.



“Who I’m with doesn’t concern you, Ellie,” Isabel said. “It’s my business.”

“Do you not remember how you were after he disappeared?” Ellison glared at her, disgust stamped on her

face. “You were a *ghost*. It was like you stopped living! And he just *disappeared*, no explanation. And how the fuck did he even find you, anyway?”

“It wasn’t as simple as him just *disappearing*,” Isabel bit off. Anger surged up inside and she didn’t try to fight it. But it wasn’t directed at Travis, or at herself, as it so often was. Even though she *knew* she hadn’t been to blame, that lingering guilt had haunted her for *so long*, so, *so long*, until it had almost poisoned her. “Dad had shoved his meaty paws in there, too. For the record, there are things you don’t know about me and him—like how Dad knew about me and Travis, knew *all* about us, knew we were planning on taking off and getting married, all of it. That was why he was so set on getting me hooked up with one of his cronies. And I wouldn’t take the bait, so he just turned *me* into bait.”

“What are you saying, Izzie?” Mari asked softly. There was a tremor to her words.

But when Isabel looked at Mari, the baby, the one both she and Ellison had tried so hard to protect, she saw a quiet determination. Taking Mari’s hand in hers, she used her free one to brush Mari’s hair back. The dark, heavy curls fell right back into Mari’s face.

“That’s why he set me up with Stephen Beresford, Mari. Even knowing ...” Isabel swallowed, because it was still hard to accept it, even after all this time. “Even knowing what Stephen would do, Dad didn’t care. He was fucking *okay* with it because he was convinced Stephen would *get me in line*.”

Mari closed her eyes, her hand spasming on Isabel’s.

“Are you *serious*?” Ellison demanded.

She looked at her other sister. “Can you really be surprised?”

Ellison spun away, shoving her hands into her hair and jerking at the choppy strands. Harsh bursts of hair escaped her, followed by a sharp, strangled scream.

“That’s enough.”

All three women jumped.

Ellison jerked her head up to gape at the tall man who'd come to a stop in front of her.

Isabel started to ask Rye to give them a few minutes, but Ellison slammed her hands into his chest. "Excuse me, but this is none of your fucking business."

"No, ma'am, it's not," he said agreeably. "Although I'd point out that your sister is a grown woman and her relationships are none of your fucking business ... pardon my language, ma'am. However, one thing that is my business is the safety and security of everybody in this house. That includes those kids. You're two steps away from flipping your top, which will upset them. Now, Ms. Jensen." He gave her an imminently reasonable smile as he addressed her by her altered name. "Can you really tell me those kids will feel safe and secure if you're down here screaming and shouting? Will that make my job easier? Will I be able to keep everybody calm and maintain control should our target call in the next five minutes if you're screaming and shouting?"

Isabel rolled her lips inward against the instinctive urge to laugh when all that escaped Ellison was a snarl that didn't even sound human.

She curled her hands into claws as if she'd like to attack Rye's pretty face with them. Then she whirled back to Isabel and snapped, "We're not done talking about this."

"We can discuss it all you want ... once everything is settled. But my relationship with Travis is none of your business. And you *will* be polite to him."

Ellison had been about to storm out of the room, but now she spun back to Isabel.

"He's coming *here*?"

"He lives next door," Isabel responded.

Ellison opened her mouth again.

Rye cleared his throat.

She hissed at him and stormed out of the room.

Isabel closed her eyes and rubbed her temple. A headache had taken up residence there and she had a feeling it wouldn't be going away any time soon. Aware both Rye and Mari were still watching her, she forced her hand down and looked up.

“You said you needed to speak with me?”



Trey and Ressa had opted to stay behind in Santa Monica with the twins' parents.

Now, alone again after the short flight to Arizona, Travis sped down the highway outside of Tucson. He was on his way to the house where Zach and Abby had moved after finding out they were expecting.

According to the report he'd just received from the teams watching his older two brothers, Zane, Keelie, Zach and Abby were all together there. Abby and Zach were expecting their parents to descend within the week and knowing Abby, she would want the house organized down to a *T*—and since Travis knew his brother, that meant he would have hauled his brother and friend Keelie into helping, doing what he could to keep Abby from doing anything more than the bare minimum.

Travis had no doubt Abby would have somehow managed just fine—she was terrifyingly efficient, likely a response to her freakishly chaotic mother. Travis was of the opinion that her mother, Blanche, was one of the sorriest excuses of human excrement ever to grace the planet and the only decent thing she'd ever done or created in her life was Abby, and he knew he wasn't alone in that opinion.

But Abby adored her husband and if sitting around while he doted on her made him happy, she'd play along ... until it drove her crazy.

And now he was going to go in there and drop all of this on them.

As he pulled into the neighborhood, he called the two teams assigned to watch the couples, giving them a heads-up.

One was in the empty house across the street, doing unnecessary repairs. The other had found the house behind and the right of them available for long-term rentals on Airbnb, so either Uncle Sam or Miles were currently footing that bill. There was another team located closer to Zane and Keelie's place just in case the oldest Barnes brother and his wife made a quick exit and one of the teams couldn't quickly vacate.

Zach and Abby were still somewhat visible in the media and unlike Sebastien and Marin, they were easily accessible and, therefore, vulnerable. Miles wasn't taking any chances. Travis couldn't thank his mentor enough for the care he was taking with his family.

As he parked the simple Black Ford Fusion in the driveway, he blew out a breath. A couple more hours, and he'd be back on his way to Isabel's side. He checked his phone for any updates from Miles, or a text from Isabel, but saw nothing.

Just as he was pushing his phone back into his pocket, the front door opened and the two men there paused at the sight of him.

Travis went still, tucking his phone away and offering Zach and Zane a smile.

"Ah ... hey, guys."

A wide grin split Zach's face and then he took off running. In seconds, Zach had him wrapped in a tight bearhug that threatened to choke off his air supply. A second set of arms soon joined it and Travis closed his eyes, letting himself just enjoy his family for a minute.



"You've got security watching us, don't you?"

The question came from Keelie. She was wearing a skinny denim skirt over a pair of pink fishnets, Doc Martens and a pink tank top, her eye makeup playing up her exotic eyes—one the pale gold of whiskey, the other icy, remote blue. And those eyes were sharp, peering right inside you. Travis had

always taken care to avoid spending much time around this woman—she had the kind of street smarts that had made him suspect she'd pick up on things about him he'd rather she not see, much as Ressa had.

Since he was about to introduce them to their respective security teams, there was no point in lying, so he shrugged and nodded. "It's necessary. Until this threat is dealt with, you'll have people watching you."

Zach scowled. Abby rubbed her belly.

Zane yelped and rubbed his side, looking at Keelie, who had just poked him in the side.

She had a smirk on her face and was smiling at her husband. "I told you so."

"Yeah, yeah." He tugged her in close and kissed her, then looked at Travis. "How long?"

"I can't say for certain." Blowing out a breath, he said, "My gut says it won't be long." Glancing at Zach as he wrapped his arm around Abby, he added, "Guys, I'm sorry."

Abby frowned at him. "This isn't your fault. Blame whoever this bastard is that's terrifying your girlfriend ... Isabel, right?"

"It's not just this," Travis said.

"Travis." Zane's quiet voice pulled Travis's gaze to him. "All of us have known you were dealing with some shit for a while now. We all hoped you'd come to us if you needed help, although ... fuck, I don't think any of us thought it was going to be something like this. And as it turns out, you're not in trouble, you're just carrying weight from seeing the absolute worst of society out there. And you were doing it all because you couldn't quit blaming yourself for being a stupid kid. You could have died at any point in time since you threw yourself in there. You don't owe us any apologies. You were hauling kids out of hell. Shit, you're a fucking hero."

"No," Travis said in a gritty voice. "I'm not."

“I’ve been one of those kids living in hell, Travis,” Keelie said quietly. “Not in a pit as deep as some of the kids you’ve helped, but it was still hell. You sure as hell are a fucking hero.”

Eyes stinging, he lurched off the couch and paced over to the window.

He wasn’t any damn hero. He’d spent years living lies and he was ready to be done with it.

Soft hands touched his shoulders and he turned to stare blindly at Abby.

“Travis ... it sounds like you’ve got a second chance with this woman, and it sounds like you’ve loved her for a long time.” She smiled at him, a dimple creasing her cheeks. Glancing over her shoulder at Zach, she looked back at Travis. “I could have missed the best thing that ever happened to me if I’d insisted on being stubborn. Don’t you go insisting on being stubborn, too, and messing up this second chance you’ve been given. Not everybody gets one.”

She pulled him in for a hug. “Now ... bring in these bodyguards we’re supposed to have, then you finish up what you need to do so you can get back to where you’re supposed to be.”

Chapter 27



Travis stepped back into what sounded like the beginning of World War III.

Brooklyn was standing in the middle of the foyer with her hands over her ears, crying quietly and looking like she wanted to hide.

Jacob was on the steps with a deer in the headlight look in his eyes and when he saw Travis, he bolted up the steps. Over the din of raised voices, Travis heard a bedroom door slam.

Storm was trying to calm Mariah, along with one of Isabel's twin sisters—it had to be Mary Kate ... no, she went by Marilyn now.

Aaron sat on the foot of the steps, watching Isabel face off with the other Steele twin, Ellison, if Travis remembered right. He still hadn't officially met either of the Steele twins, but he'd seen plenty of pictures and hadn't forgotten any of the details Isabel had told him.

She'd face off with the devil if she felt the need to, Isabel had once told him.

Considering the look of pure fury in Isabel's eyes as she glared at her sister, Ellison might have been better off squaring up against Lucifer. But damn if there was a lick of concern in her bright green eyes.

As Travis watched, she rocked up onto her toes and drilled a finger into Isabel's chest.

“ ... got it?”

Two of the security team who were supposed to be monitoring the situation inside the house took one look at what was unfolding and backstepped, but not before Travis caught sight of the looks on their respective faces—looks that told him this wasn't the first blow-up between the sisters.

He cast another look around, hoping to find Ace or Rye, because what the fuck, he'd expected at least *one* of them to stay on top of the situation.

But he spotted neither.

So, seeing no other alternative, he lifted a hand to his mouth and gave a piercing whistle.

Silence struck like a hammer.

Brooklyn and Isabel spotted him at the same time. A soft smile curved Isabel's lips. Brooklyn's face remained teary but she dashed toward him and he dropped his bag and bent to catch her in his arms, the fist that wrapped around his heart tightening just a little more.

Aaron shoved off the stairs and took a couple tentative steps toward him.

Recognizing what he saw in the boy's face, Travis walked over to him and held out his arm, letting the kid decide.

Aaron flung himself at Travis's chest.

"Nice to see you, too, kid," he said.

Aaron gave him a quick, fierce squeeze then shoved away while Storm sauntered over, Mariah suddenly calmer and making excited chattering noises. Storm rose on her toes and kissed Travis on the cheek, then pushed the baby at him.

It had been a few years since he'd juggled a baby and having Brooklyn in one arm while he adjusted to Mariah's softer, smaller body made it a little more interesting, but in a few seconds, he had both of the girls cuddled in close. Mariah patted his unshaven cheeks while Brooklyn snuggled against him and sighed in satisfaction.

"She wants Ms. Bella to send us away to another foster family," Brooklyn pronounced. "Don't let her, Mr. Travis."

Travis looked up and found all three Steele sisters staring at him.

But a familiar voice rang out from down the hall before he could speak.

“Nobody is sending you kids to another family, Brooklyn. You’ve got my word on that.”

Brooklyn turned that heart-melting smile on Miles Hawkins for a long moment, then, without a blink, looked at the woman squaring off with Isabel and stuck out her tongue.

Travis bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

But then he got a good look at his mentor, and all humorous thoughts evaporated.

As Rye put a hand on Miles’s arm to steady him, Travis said, “What the fuck, man ... you look like shit.”

“You cussed,” Brooklyn whispered.

Travis barely heard the girl.

“I know,” Miles said, waving a dismissive hand. “But I’m upright and mobile and my brain is still functioning. My replacement is en route and I’m not abandoning these women until I know they’ll be comfortable with who takes over for me.”

“If he trusts *him*, I don’t see how I can trust *anybody* he brings in,” Ellison snapped. “Not to mention how he thinks it’s okay for these *kids* to be here.”

“People know about the kids,” Travis said, catching her eye when she tossed a dismissive look at him. He stared at her, a hard, challenging look, and as he’d expected, she didn’t look away. “Save for one, they’ve all lived here for months. People know their names, and what they look like, enough to identify them. Finding secure places for them—*all* of them—would be a logistical nightmare. You want your sister *and* Miles to abandon *five* vulnerable kids? Is that what you’re saying? And do you think she would? Do you know her at all?”

She opened her mouth, then snapped it closed.

“That’s what I’ve been explaining to her,” Isabel said in a cool voice. Then, after a withering look at Ellison, she came to Travis, took Brooklyn in her arms and planted a smacking kiss on her forehead before putting her down. “Why don’t you ask

Aaron to help you set up the PlayStation? You can play games for a little while.”

Brooklyn looked like she wanted to argue. Aaron caught her hand and tugged. “Come on. We can do that racing game you’re always beating me on.”

Storm offered to take Mariah, but the baby had fallen asleep against Travis’s chest and he shook his head. So the older girl disappeared up the steps. In the relative silence, he pinned Rye and Ace with a hard look. “Why the hell weren’t you two out here?”

“Bossman had vapors.”

Miles gave Ace a disgusted look and the pretty, petite Black woman with the curves of a movie star from Hollywood’s golden years and a mouth like a sailor gave him a sunny smile.

“What else you going to call it, sir? You all but swooned on me and unless I’m even hotter than I think, it wasn’t because of *me*.” She winked at him.

Despite the playfulness of her tone, Travis heard the worry in Ace’s voice. Judging from the grim way Rye was watching Miles, the other person here on security detail wasn’t having good vibes, either. Ace, like Rye, worked private security and had done highly specialized work with Miles. Travis had done more than a few ops with her and would trust her at his back in any crisis.

But he didn’t need her sharp eye to know Miles had gotten weaker since Travis had seen him.

He had lost even more weight, so much that his clothes hung from him. He hadn’t bothered with a suit, just pulled on a dress shirt and trousers, the belt cinched in so tight, Travis wondered if he’d had to punch extra holes in it so it would fit.

But the man’s eyes were sharp as ever.

When Miles inclined his head, Travis knew it was a silent message.

I got this, son. I’m going to see this through.

Travis gave a short, sharp nod, then cleared his throat. “My family is all squared away, settled with their teams.”

“Good. Now, let’s discuss what’s next.” Miles glanced to the family room, then at Isabel. “How about we set up in the kitchen? I imagine it’s the quietest place.”

“What are we setting up *for*?” Ellison demanded. “And FYI, I’m *not* staying in the same place as *him*.”

She jabbed a finger in Travis’s direction, tossing him a derisive look. “Maybe you think that pretty face of yours can get you out of any kind of scrape but it won’t work with me.”

“If I was the kind to think my pretty face could keep me out of trouble, I would have tried getting your sister back over a decade ago,” Travis said in a flat voice. “And she would have planted a boot in my face—deservedly so. Now, we have serious shit to cover and if you can’t be mature enough to be quiet and let the grown-ups talk, I’ll have Rye escort you to your room until we’re done.”

Ellison went a blistering shade of red, opening and closing her mouth as she struggled for words.

Finally, she sputtered out, “*Escort me to my room*? Excuse the *fuck* out of me? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Right now?” Travis closed the distance between them. “I’m the man who will damn well make sure everybody *here*, from your sisters to you to those kids, *all* stay safe. And if you get in my way, you *will* be removed from the discussion and decisions made *without* your input.”

Ellison spun and glared at Isabel. “This is *your* house! And Miles is the one who handles our security! Why are we putting up with *him*?”

“I’ve sat behind a desk for the better part of a decade, Ellison,” Miles said. “And your sister has always trusted my judgment on matters of her safety—and yours. He’s active in the field—I’m not. I’m the senior person here, but Travis is my eyes and ears, along with the rest of the crew—and he’s one of the best I’ve ever worked with.”

“I’m not in security and I’m not an FBI agent or anything else.” Isabel smiled serenely. “I take care of kids. I cook. I bake. None of that seems helpful in our current situation. So, either be *quiet*, Ellison, or you can take a walk with Rye.”

Rye shifted closer to the younger woman.

Ellison made a soft growl of frustration and cut around all of them to storm into the kitchen.

While the others moved to follow, Travis lingered, catching Isabel’s hand. Her eyes went wide and soft as he pulled her to him.

“How did it—hmmm ... ”

The rest of her question was caught against his mouth as he kissed her, one hand going to grip the back of her neck. The clip holding her hair fell out and he shifted his hand to his twist his fingers in her hair.

She pushed onto her toes, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him closer as if she’d crawl inside him. Hell, it wasn’t possible, Travis thought. She was already there, tucked inside his heart, where she’d been every day since that first summer when they’d met all those years ago.

From several feet away, somebody cleared their throat.

Travis broke the kiss and said, “Ace, go away. We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Alright, hot stuff. But cool it, you’re gonna make me need a cold shower.”

Travis felt blood creeping up the back of his neck and Isabel buried her face against his neck and giggled. The bright, happy sound settled inside and made him want to haul her against him and swing her around until she laughed like that again and again.

“She’s embarrassing,” he mumbled.

“I like her.” Isabel lifted her head and said in a conspiratorial voice, “I think Ellie is afraid of her.”

“Anybody smart is afraid of Ace. I think even Miles is.”

Isabel laughed and Travis reached up and brushed her hair back. “You were about to ask me how it went ... it went ... fine, mostly. Weirdly enough, two of my sisters-in-law and my mom were the least surprised.”

“I told you, baby.” Isabel stroked his cheek. “That mom of yours can see right through a person’s skull, clear into their head.”

“They remember you,” Travis said. “My mom and dad.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“My mom knew the moment she saw us together that there was something between us. She apparently kept expecting me to say something and when I didn’t ... ” He hitched up a shoulder. “But she kept an eye on your dad, knew about you being the star witness against him. Then you disappeared into the wind. She never told me, though, that she’d guessed about us.”

Somebody else said his name and he stepped back. “Come on. I need an update and we need to figure everything else out.”

While Isabel and Rye worked on making coffee, Miles let Travis update him on his family situation. That took all of five minutes—and would have taken less time if Ellison hadn’t interrupted.

“Wait a minute ... Sebastien and Marin ... you’re not ... ” She gaped at Travis. “Are you talking about Sebastien Barnes and Marin Lassiter-Barnes ... as in *the* biggest couple in Hollywood right now? You *can’t* be talking about them. There’s only *one* other brother and he’s Trey’s twin.”

“Yeah. That’s my twin,” Travis said. “Why? You want an autograph?”

Ellison started to laugh scathingly but Isabel and Travis just watched her, as did Miles. The rest looked interested, but that was it.

And Ellison’s laughter choked off, then faded.

“You’re *serious*.”

“I don’t see the point in lying about something like that.”

Ellison started to sputter. “But Trey’s twin is *identical*. I’ve seen pictures.”

“They’re twins, Ellie,” Isabel snapped, irritated. “I met both Zach and Trey. It was years ago and I doubt they remember.”

“My parents remember you,” Travis reminded her.

Ellison was still gaping.

Clearing his throat, Rye said, “While it’s lovely to be in the same room with somebody almost famous, can we discuss why we’re really here? It’s a little thing called a potentially dangerous ex-felon with a history of violence who wants to harm at *least* one individual in this room?”

“I think that’s a good idea.” Miles cleared his throat and pulled a pair of wire-rimmed glasses from his pocket before picking up a file folder on the table in front of him. “I’ve had several likely sightings—and a couple of potential sightings. The most recent was near Freeport.”

“Here in Maine,” Isabel said to nobody in particular. A chill raced down her spine and Travis covered her hand with his.

“Yes. It was first reported last night by a state trooper. A few select troopers with the state police have been keeping a ...” Miles paused and pursed his lips. “A discreet eye on him.”

Travis made a low sound deep in his throat, one that sounded a lot like a growl.

Isabel turned her hand over and tightened her grip on the strong fingers holding hers.

“That’s barely an hour away,” Ace said, looking up from her phone. “This place here is barely a speck on the map. If our target knows where Ms. Franklin lives, he could be here at *any* time.”

“He’s still in the Freeport area.” Miles picked up his phone, tapped the screen a few times, and read something. “Once I heard about the sighting, I had two of my most trusted head to that area. One of them got eyes on him this morning when he left his motel. He’s 99.9% certain our target.”

“Then why don’t they *arrest* him?” Ellison demanded.

“You don’t want to risk him using it as an excuse to cry foul if this goes back to trial,” Marilyn said before anybody else had time to respond. She looked at Isabel, then at Ellison. “Right now, he’s just driving down a road in Maine. They can’t trace the calls to him, not with 100% accuracy. It’s all speculation. And I imagine he’s thrown away whatever cell phone he’s used. Until he’s *here*, threatening Isabel in person, all he’s done is skip out on parole.”

“Yes,” Miles said, not wasting any words.

Travis wanted to hit something, but he knew Miles wasn’t wrong.

“It’s the best way.” Isabel’s voice was soft. “We can’t take the chance he just goes back to jail for a few years or ... worse, gets a slap on the wrist.”

“Exactly.” Miles looked at her and his expression was as hard as Travis had ever seen it. “He spent years trying to find a way out and when he saw it, he planned, calculated and executed his plan, then focused on nothing but making his way here. He’s dangerous, Bella. One of the last things I plan to do on this earth is to see you, and your sisters, safe from every last threat posed by your father. It’s the least I, and this country, owe you.”

Isabel sniffed, then managed a watery smile. “Miles, you’ve done ... so much, already. But thank you.” Her hand tightened even more on Travis’s. He stroked her thumb over his and he felt a tightness in his chest, wondered if he’d ever be able to find the words to thank the stubborn old bastard in front of him.

“Don’t thank me,” Miles said, shaking his head. “Please. Now ... we need to discuss the safest way to extract those kids

and your sisters.”

“Wait a minute.” Ellison slapped her hands on the table.

Marilyn set her jaw and shook her head.

Isabel looked at each of them and shook her head. “It’s not up for debate.”

Chapter 28



Getting Ellison to leave was almost as hard as convincing Brooklyn she wasn't being sent to a new foster mom.

As they finally got Ellison out the door, Rye looked back at Travis and Miles with pure disgust in his eyes. "Old man, if you weren't dying, I just might hate you for doing this to me. That woman is a menace."

"I'm not looking forward to it, either, you prick," Ellison snarled at him.

Rye ignored the petite form at his side as he held his hand out to Travis. "In case I don't see you again when this is all said and done, man. It's been an honor."

"Same." Travis gripped Rye's hand, held tight. "Thanks for helping me out with this. I know it's not your normal milieu."

"Don't use them fancy five-dollar words on me, Hollywood." Rye winked at him. "Highfaluting Hollywood, damn. Yeah, I should have guessed it, though. Always were being sent into those fancy-ass spots while we were there in the muck ready to pull you out if things went to shit."

"Oh, kiss my ass." Travis laughed. He couldn't help it. More than once, Rye had been one of the *other* pretty boy types Miles would send in, because he, unlike too many federal agents, knew how to move and blend with those in high society. "I saved your ass a time or two, if I recall correctly."

Rye grinned at him. Then his smile faded and he shook his head. "Don't thank me. This kind of job ... it's a nice break. Get to spend some time around some nice kids. At the end of it, I know they'll be in good hands—and the bad guys ain't going to win *this* one. You'll take him down or put him back where he belongs. I know that much."

After one last smile, Rye turned and gave Ellison a curt nod.

Strangely, Ellison had been quiet throughout the interaction and she further surprised Travis by turning away with only one last pithy look.

After watching to make sure they all cleared out, Travis cast a look at the darkened windows of the house across the street, then at the only other home along the narrow road.

Those windows, too, were dark.

“Neighbors?” he asked, turning to look at Marie Jung, the agent who would be succeeding Miles. Travis had met her several times and liked her well enough. Right now, though, looking at her only reminded him that his mentor and friend was dying, and although that wasn’t her fault, it made him irrationally angry.

She seemed to understand and she kept their exchanges short.

“We’ve relocated the couple that lives there, telling them there’s a problem with the main electrical line leading to this road that will take approximately seventy-two hours to repair.” She offered a politely bland smile. “They were happy to take a paid trip to Bangor. They did ask not to be placed in the same hotel as the Brimley family. Apparently, the father is unpleasant.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

“It’s likely moot. We were able to contact Bridgette Brimley at her place of employment—she apparently *can’t* take a few days off. She works for a nursing home and the staffing shortage is too severe to allow it, but she agreed to stay at a home on the other side of town that we arranged. My man handling those aspects reiterated several times that it would be dangerous to be in the house while the work was being done and she seemed to understand, and came home to pack some clothes for her and her son.” She pursed her lips. “When I asked about her husband, she said he’s been off looking for work. I don’t think she’s lying, but I don’t believe she really thinks he’s off looking for work, either. He may be a problem.”

“He already *is* a fucking problem,” Travis muttered. “We need somebody over there in case he shows up. And it needs to be somebody who can handle him because he *will* get ... testy.”

“I’ll be over there with a two-man team.” Jung gave another one of her bland smiles. “I did obtain permission—more or less—and told Ms. Brimley that we’d need access to the house to do checks to make sure everything was completed satisfactorily.”

“Like that will really fly if anybody looks too deep at this,” Travis muttered. Just another reason he was happy to leave this life behind. But neither Brant nor his mom deserved the trouble Stephen Beresford could bring down on them, and even as big a prick as the father was, Travis didn’t think he deserved Beresford, either. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he looked out front. Save for the black Cadillac, which Jung had arrived in, the only vehicle visible on the street now was Isabel’s big van.

“We’ll be moving that into Miles’ garage,” Jung said.

As if on cue, one of the agents who’d be with her across the street came over and collected the keys.

“Hawkins, you want him to run you down there?”

“I can walk,” Miles said sourly.

Travis wanted to tell the older man not to be stubborn but he elected to keep his mouth shut. If he was in Miles’s shoes, he would have chosen the same.

Their radios all went live just as Miles reached the door.

“Report,” Miles said after security codes were exchanged and confirmed on both sides. As he spoke in a cool, clipped voice, he looked over and found Travis, their gazes connecting.

Isabel, who had just entered the foyer, slid her hand into his just as the unknown agent on the other end of the line began to speak.

“Our target is on the road and heading toward the destination, sir.”

“Understood. Follow at a discreet distance and keep me updated.”

“Got it.”

As the radio went dead, Isabel rested her head on Travis’s shoulder. He broke their clasped hands and slid his arm around her shoulders, tugging her in even closer.

Miles met her gaze. “It will be over soon, Bella. I promise.”

“That would be nice.” She smiled nervously. “Hey, maybe I can even get my life back. Think it’s possible?”

“Anything’s possible,” Miles said.

Then he turned and gestured for the agent to precede him. “Since we’re now on a timetable, you might as well drive me over.”



They were alone in the house.

If you didn’t count the numerous bugs and cameras that had been scattered around the property. Three agents were across the street. Two were in the small boathouse in Isabel’s backyard. Two were in her detached garage. And Miles was in his own house, which had a computer set-up to rival NORAD from what she’d been told.

It was just her and Travis in her place. With him, she felt safe. But she was also nervous as hell. They hadn’t had more than a few minutes alone since they’d slept together and *everything* between them had drastically changed, so fast.

In the foyer, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his blue jeans.

She shoved hers into the kangaroo-like pouch of her hoodie.

And they just looked at each other.

“You need—”

“Are you hungry—”

They laughed nervously and Travis gestured at her. “You first.”

“Ah ... I was just wondering if you’re hungry. You’ve been on the go almost non-stop since all of this started. And I haven’t even had a chance to ask how everything went.”

“I already told you ... it went well enough. There’s time for a deeper discussion later.” He glanced up where he knew a small camera was placed. “When we have real privacy. And no ... I’m not hungry for food.”

Her face went red, hand fluttering up to her throat.

The look on his face must have relayed everything he felt because her breath hitched.

“We need to get you in your vest.” He gave her a critical look. “You wearing anything under that?”

“My bra.”

“It will chafe without something under it.” He held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s see what we can find.”

“What about you?”

Travis shrugged. “I can get into mine in seconds. Practice. And I’ve got a hoodie on the couch.”

Isabel nodded and turned to head down the hall.

He locked up the doors, set the alarm, and did a quick walk around the interior of the house as he sent out a request for an update on Beresford’s location.

“Stopped for gas a few minutes ago. He’s still about thirty minutes away from the destination.” The agent following him had to fall farther back and had been replaced by another, this time somebody in a truck that looked like a beat-up POS, according to the report Travis had gotten. “We got a couple of

state boys who spotted him but they received the revised request to stay at a distance as we're in position now."

"Miles, you've made sure no local law enforcement is going to be stepping in?"

"I spoke directly to the county sheriff and the chief of the police here in Blessing, Travis. Neither of them wants to get in on this, trust me. The locals have their hands full dealing with Lloyd and his type when they go on a bender."

Travis trusted Miles, completely, but he'd had locals interfere before and his silence must have conveyed something to the other man. "We're listening to the locals, son. If there's any sign of trouble, I've got extra men in town who'll move in. He won't get away."

"Okay." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to check on Isabel, help her with her vest, make sure she's set. If I go silent for a few minutes, that's why. It won't be long."

Jung started to speak, but Miles cut her off.

"If she's nervous and you need a minute or two, that's fine. Just keep it short. We need you downstairs, looking as normal as possible."

Travis was halfway to Isabel's room by the time Miles had signed off and he tugged off his earpiece, thumbing the tiny power button. As he slid into Isabel's room, he set the device on her dresser.

She glanced at it, then at him.

He nodded to her closet, acutely aware of the camera positioned near the balcony door, the other just outside her bedroom. "Show me what sort of thin, long-sleeved shirts you have hanging up. Something soft. Anything else will bunch up under the vest."

A soft flush rose up her cheeks as she turned and went to the walk-in closet.

He followed and closed the door, pulling her back against him and turning, pressing her against the door.

Isabel gasped. "Travis ... the cameras ..."

“Shhh ... ” he pressed his mouth to her neck, one hand going to the drawstring waistband of her soft, flannel pants. He pulled his phone from his pocket, opened a music app and hit play.

Low, lyrical music poured out.

“They’ll know,” she whispered.

“I don’t care.” He nuzzled her neck. “I need you. That’s all that matters ... unless you don’t want this.” He flattened his hands against her belly. “If you want me to stop, I will. Just say the word.”

She turned her head in the darkened closet and found his mouth with unerring certainty. “No ... I don’t care.”

She started to turn, but he stopped her, pushing his hand down her pants and into her panties.

A rough groan escaped as he stroked her. “You’re already wet, Bella-mine.”

“When you looked at me ... ” her breath stuttered out of her. “Downstairs, I knew. The way you looked at me, your eyes ... it was like you were already touching me, stroking me.”

He caught her chin in his free hand and pulled her face around to his, kissing her deep and hot as he pushed his fingers inside her. At the same time, he flicked his thumb over her clitoris.

Isabel’s knees threatened to give out.

She clutched at his forearm with one hand, slid the other along the smooth surface of the door, found the cool metal of the doorknob and held on tight. Travis pumped his hips against her backside and she whimpered as she felt the hard, heavy ridge of his cock.

She moved against his hand, her orgasm so close, she could already feel her thighs tightening.

“I need you inside me,” she said desperately. “*Please ...* ”

He groaned and bit her lower lip, then reached down between them to shove her pants down. They caught and tangled around her knees, along with her panties. She heard the rasp of his zipper, felt the hot, hard brush of his penis along her butt.

Then he froze. “Fuck ... we don’t have the condoms in here.”

He swore and backed away.

She whimpered and pressed her head to the door.

“Shhh ... ” He slid his hand around, cupped her. “I’ll take care of you.”

“We don’t need the condoms ... do we?” She pressed her burning cheek to the door. “I’ve always been careful. I’m disease-free, so there’s nothing to worry about there. And you ... well, there’s nothing else to worry about, either.”

“Bella ... ” He cuddled her against him, cradled her, kissing her neck, her temple, her cheek. “As if that would ever be a worry for me. And yeah, I’m all clear on the health front. I’ve gotten checked several times ... and I’ve only had a couple of partners, nobody recently. But are you sure?”

“It’s always been you and me, Travis. Always. Yes, I’m sure. Make love to me.”

Travis swore raggedly. “Damn ... Bella-mine, I love you.”

He dipped his knees.

She tried to spread her thighs, but the pants, still tangled around her thighs, trapped her. And he wouldn’t let her go. He shifted his position, bent her forward and reached between them, guiding himself into her, and then he straightened her back up, pinning her to the door as he slowly, so slowly pushed into her.

She was surrounded by him, filled by him.

“Bella ... ” Travis sounded dazed, and he caught her hip, holding her still when she tried to follow him as he withdrew. “For fuck’s sake ... be still ... you’re burning me alive ... oh, *fuck* ... ”

She grabbed his wrist and clenched around him, her other hand braced against the door for leverage. “Travis, *please*.”

Desperate need filled her. *Desperate*. She undulated her hips, clenched down around him as he thrust up into her. She felt every ridge, every pulse of his length as he filled her, then slowly withdrew and she wiggled against him, squirmed, trying desperately to hold him inside a little longer.

“Be still ... you’re so damn wet and hot. Nothing’s ever felt so good.” He caught her shoulder into his other hand, growled in her ear.

“Fuck me, I feel like I’m already going to come.”

“I *want* to come ... right *now*.”

His laugh was strangled, a little wild in her ear, as he wrapped both arms around her.

She caught her breath.

“Isabel ... ?”

“I’m fine!” She groaned and ground her hips against him, trying to ride the heavy length invading her. She was rewarded with a harsh intake of breath, so she did it again. “I just need you to fuck me before I lose it!”

Travis went tense and she stilled. Maybe that was too crass

But he moved, spinning them around and taking her to the ground with careful, controlled strength that left her heart racing. “Maybe that’s what we both need,” he muttered against her neck just before he put her on her knees and yanked her hips up with hard, competent hands. Then he lunged, slamming into her.

She screamed, dazed, delirious delight tearing out of her.

“Is this what you need, Bella-mine?” he demanded.

“Yes!”

“Good.” He shoved a hand into her hair, fisted it close to her scalp, clenched her hip with his other and started thrusting,

heavy, powerful digs of his hips that had him filling all the empty places in her.

Isabel shuddered, heart racing, strange, animalistic sounds falling from her lips.

The ridge of his erection swelled inside her and she tried to stretch her thighs apart instinctively, but somehow, her flannel lounging pants were still trapped and tangled around her knees and Travis tightened his hand on her hips. “Be still,” he rasped, leaning into her, the thrusts coming harder, faster. “You have no idea how good you feel ... how many times I’ve dreamed of this ... oh, *fuck*, Bella ... ”

She clenched around him and came with a cry.

He let go of her hair, gripped her hips with both hands, hitched her hips higher, his pace increasing until he was slamming into her.

And she loved it. “Yes, please ... Travis!”

“That’s it ... come for me ... let me feel ... squeeze me ... *fuck* ... *Bel* ... ”

She drummed her feet against the floor, gasped out his name and came again, breaths still ragged from the first climax. It didn’t matter, because he was sending her flying again and then he slammed into her one final time, groaning her name as he, too, started to come.

Isabel moaned, barely able to breathe.

Travis slumped, pressing his lips to her spine before pulling away and tugging her into his lap.

The phone was still playing music and she couldn’t stop the indelicate giggle that escaped.

“What?” Travis asked, his voice drowsy.

“If those cameras are sensitive as I suspect, I don’t think that music did any good ... I’m pretty sure they heard me screaming in town.”

“Well, you did ask to be fucked. I hope I got the assignment right.”

This time, she didn't just giggle. She turned her face into his neck and laughed. "Oh, baby. You passed with flying colors."

Chapter 29



Lloyd Brimley wasn't having a good day.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't having a good day, a good week, a good month, a good fucking *year*, or a good fucking *life*.

But he most certainly wasn't having a good fucking *day* and the last thing he'd needed was to get back in town and find out his *wife* wasn't able to come pick him up from the diner.

His piece-of-shit brother had dropped him off there and told him he had to get back to Bangor, and couldn't even be bothered to drive the extra ten miles to take Lloyd home. And after Lloyd had been helping him build all that shit for his dumbass *man cave*.

How much had his brother, his *friend*, paid Lloyd for all the work he'd put in?

Two hundred and fifty bucks.

The amount of work he'd put in should have landed him a thousand, easy. Over a week's worth of work and he'd gotten two-fifty, a lousy couch to sleep on in the basement and a few beers at night while Lewis and his girlfriend Tamara either flirted or fought. Either way, they always spent the night fucking in the bed over where Lloyd had been forced to sleep while doing the work, and that just served to remind him that his wife never seemed interested in doing her wifely duties.

Sometimes, he thought she might spend too much time talking to that high and mighty bitch across the street because the last time he suggested she show more interest in her husband, she'd looked down her nose at him in a way that had about made his dick fall off from frostbite.

Who the fuck wanted to touch a woman who made you feel like that?

Not Lloyd.

So he didn't mind disappearing for a few days to go work for his brother or do a job for a buddy. But it was just his luck his truck had broken down while he'd been staying in Bangor and he didn't have the money for the part he needed. Nor would his brother help him out with it, either.

So his truck was stuck in his brother's driveway for now and he was stuck in the diner, waiting for Bridgette to call so he could get a ride home.

He'd been calling her half the day, it seemed. She hadn't even paid his phone bill—had *refused*, saying she wasn't going to pay for the package he wanted, so if he wanted it, he had to pay for it himself—and so his service had been cut off and half the money he'd made needed to cover that.

The moment his service was reactivated, a shit-ton of texts and missed calls lit up the screen, too. Several from her, but now that he was trying to call her, did she answer?

Fuck, no.

Finally, though, after he'd been trying for over an hour, she'd finally answered and he'd told her she'd have to come pick him up from work. She'd gotten pissy, told him she was *working*. Did she *care* that this was an emergency and he was stuck there at the diner with his back hurting him? Hell, no.

He'd pointed that out, but instead of understanding, instead of listening, his fucking *wife* had told him they couldn't be at the house.

Some horseshit line about electrical work being done on lines near the road. She was staying somewhere else for a few days.

He'd already bought a six-pack of beer and had drunk a couple of them out back behind the diner while he waited for her to call him back. Now, with the rest stowed in various pockets of his jacket to keep out of sight of the diner's managing harpy, he stared at the table and brooded.

The buzz from the beers made it a little hard to think straight, but he was almost certain his wife was making up

stories.

This was her way of telling him she'd left him.

The hell she could just go and disappear on him like that.

And what about their boy? A kid needed his mama. Or was she planning on taking Brant with her? Ah, hell no on that. Brant was his boy.

He picked up the phone to call her again, but it just rang and rang before abruptly clicking off. A few seconds later, *his* phone rang and he grabbed it without reading the name on the screen. "Bridgette, so help me, if you don't get your ass down here—"

"Ah, yes, Mr. Brimley?"

The cool, professional voice cut into his rant and he stopped, surprised.

This wasn't his wife.

"Yeah, this is Lloyd Brimley. Who the fuck is this?"

"This is Joseph with Coastal Cooperative Electric and—"

"I ain't never heard that name before," he said, interrupting.

"We're a subsidy of your local electric company, Mr. Brimley and we've been hired—"

"Oh, the fuck you have. Leave me the hell alone," he snapped and ended the call. As he dumped the phone on the table, a shadow fell over him and he glanced up, ready to tell whoever it was to leave him the fuck alone.

"Hey, you didn't just say your name was *Lloyd Brimley*, did you?"

He squinted at the man in front of him—a stranger, Lloyd thought. "What's it to you?"

"*Are* you Lloyd Brimley? Played for OSU a few years back?" The man smiled and revealed straight, perfect teeth.

"Yeah, that's me." Some remnant of pride surfaced and Lloyd managed a smile.

“That’s fucking *amazing*,” the man said, slipping into the seat across from Lloyd, a look of excitement settling on his features. “I watched you play ... I thought for sure you’d go pro. Then that one bad play ... that fucker did you dirty, you know.”

Lloyd jerked his head in a nod. “Damn right, he did.” Nobody ever seemed to get that. Always talking about bad luck and bad landings, but that piece of shit had hit him wrong *deliberately*, had killed his career. “What’s your name, pal?”

“Steve.” The man offered his hand and gave Lloyd a wide, friendly smile. “It’s Steve. Man, it is a *pleasure* to meet you.”



“We might have a problem.”

Travis had just finished securing his vest when Miles came on the line.

“Explain.”

After taking the quickest shower in the history of mankind, he’d come out of the bathroom, turning it over so Isabel could take a longer one. Now, as he listened to the sound of water rushing, he slid out of her bedroom and leaned against the wall just outside the door. Less than fifteen minutes had passed since his last update—sure, it had been a fast and furious few minutes in the closet, but they’d both needed each other. He’d devote so much more time to her later. Once this was all settled, once she was safe.

“We had a team in the dinner—a man and a woman, paired up and acting as tourists passing through. They saw our target come in. He approached somebody we believe is a local. They got a picture of him as they left—”

“*Together?*” Travis demanded, shoving off the wall.

The shower shut off and he pressed the heel of his hand against his eye. *Fuck, fuck, fuck ...*

“Yes,” Miles said, voice clipped with impatience. “Together. The man we believe to be local got into the car with our target—there was no obvious threat made. From everything the team could tell, the local went along willingly, was smiling and chatting with the target.”

“Did he pay him? Are they partners? What?”

“We’re working on it. Another team picked up following while the first team stayed on site—they might luck into getting some information out of the staff at the diner.”

“I need the picture. Any details,” Travis demanded. “Is ... Bella knows these people, has lived here for ages. Maybe she knows whoever it is. Can you give me the details?”

“I already got them from the team. Where is Bella?”

The door swung open and he looked up, saw Isabel look out in concern.

“She’s right here,” Travis said, pulling out his phone and switching the call from his earpiece to the phone, then putting it on speaker. Travis gave her a quick summary and saw her mouth tighten, eyes darken with worry. “Miles has a description of the guy, maybe you know him.”

Isabel grimaced. “I suck as descriptions like that ... I need a picture, a face. Something.”

“The team is sending one but it needs to be cleaned up a bit—they weren’t at a good angle to grab one, so the techs on working on it. It shouldn’t take long, another half hour.” Miles sounded pissed at the delay. “But for now, here’s what we have. Approximately six feet, white male, mid-to-late thirties, wore a baseball hat, most likely black, with what one agent thinks was an Ohio State logo on it. Solid build, but getting a little thick through the middle. He walked with a faint limp, favoring the right leg. He had a ruddy complexion so my agents think he might work the boats around here, either that or just has that sort of skin tone.”

Travis’s stomach clenched at the mention of the ball cap and the limp.

He looked up at Isabel and saw the same worry in her eyes.

“Tell your team to do a run on Lloyd Brimley.”

Barely a second passed before Miles swore. “Son of a *bitch!*” He bellowed out an order, followed by another order to a different member of his team. Two more orders followed on the heels of that. “And I need to know where the fuck Bridgette Brimley and her son are, *now!*”

“How far is the diner from here?” Travis asked Isabel softly.

“Not even ten minutes.”

Distantly, a faint, mechanical hum came to Travis’s ears. Isabel jerked her head up and looked downstairs. “That’s the school bus. It shouldn’t even be stopping here.”

He caught her arm. “You need clothes—and grab that damn vest.”

“But—”

“*No.*” Steeling his voice, he said, “Get dressed and grab that vest. You won’t leave this house without it—*nothing* matters to me as much as you do. Understand?”

“But if it’s one of the kids ... hell, it could even be Brant.”

“Stop arguing and get dressed. It will take less time.”

Isabel glared at him, then growled before swinging around and rushing to her room. He followed to make sure she’d listen and turned to leave only after he saw her shimmying into jeans.

He paused at a window and looked up the street where the bus was still stopped at the main road. Nobody had gotten off. “We know what’s up with the Brimley kid yet?”

“No,” Miles said. “We checked in with the mother just an hour ago. She was picking the kid up and they were going to the house we rented for them. We asked if she’d heard from her husband and she said he’d been calling her off and on for over an hour, claiming he needed a ride, then getting angry when she wouldn’t leave work to come get him. We had a man call, trying to help get him settled away from the situation and that didn’t work.”

“He didn’t buy the electric line repairs,” Travis said, still watching the bus.

A sedan turned onto the street and drove steadily in his direction. “What kind of car is our guy in?”

“A Ford Taurus—roughly 2014, 2015. Dark grey.”

Travis said softly, “He’s here. And if it’s not Lloyd Brimley in the front seat, it’s somebody else.”

Travis looked up as Isabel came out of the bedroom, holding the vest by the straps. He took it from her and adroitly fit her into it, securing it with the straps on the side. “Grab your hoodie. Hurry.”

Her face tight with strain, she started to turn her head. But Travis stopped her, his hand on her chin as he drew her toward him as if for a kiss. He’d already moved out of the line of sight and now, with her pressed against him, she was as well.

“He’s here,” he told her gently. “And we think Lloyd’s with him. Right now, we don’t know about the kid, or anybody else. Get your vest. He knows nothing about the agents we have on site, nothing about the rest of my team and he has no idea what I’m capable of. None. Let’s keep it that way.”

Isabel met his gaze and after a moment, she nodded.

He kissed her gently, quickly, then let her go.

Adjusting his position, he went back to keeping watch on the car as it slowed to crawl in front of Lloyd’s house and slowly turned into the drive.



“Mom, the driver is saying I *have* to get off here ... and there’s *nobody* working on the road or anything here,” Brant said, his face red as everybody on the bus stared at him. The bus driver glared at him and Brant turned his back on the grouchy old asshole, hitched up his backpack. “Look, I can’t just *stay* on the bus!”

He jumped off and the bus driver waved for him to cross the road, then pulled off in a cloud of stinky exhaust. Several cars that had been piled up behind the big vehicle gunned their engines and Brant spun around, feeling like all of them were staring at him.

Hopefully, none of them were his dad. If his dad was waiting ... but no truck turned down the road and he didn't see the vehicle in the driveway, either. But as he walked, the relief drained away and realization settled in.

There *was* a car in the drive. And it wasn't his mom's.

And his dad wouldn't ever drive a car like that—hell, Brant doubted he'd ever drive a *car*. *Men drive trucks*, his dad always said. Brant didn't know what the hell it mattered, but his dad never shut up about it.

The door swung open just as Brant considered calling his mom.

And he saw his dad. Relaxing a little, he broke into a jog, even as a pinch of nervousness gripped him. He hadn't told his dad about how he'd been hanging out with Jacob some ... or that he'd been talked to Aaron. He couldn't tell him that. Because his dad would his shit.

He didn't like hiding it, but he didn't know what else to do.

Lately, he'd been thinking a lot about what Travis had said, about treating people and all. All his dad did was push people around and he wasn't ever happy. But Isabel ... fuck, she was so pretty. And nice. She did lots to help people and she was always smiling.

“Hey, Dad,” he said, as he approached their yard. Over the hood of the car, he saw the pale blue eyes of the guy who'd climbed out of the driver's side door.

The frisson of nerves in Brant became a trickle, then a river, because those eyes held ice.

They weren't mean eyes, not like his dad's when he was drunk or angry.

No ... these were even worse.

“Hey, kiddo ... ” Lloyd grinned at him and Brant swung his gaze back to his father, saw the broad, happy grin on his dad’s face and felt confused.

He hadn’t seen his dad look that happy and easy in ... shit, how long had it been?

“Come on over and meet Steve. He’s a new friend of mine. He’s going to take you, me and Mom out to dinner later tonight ... he was a fan of mine when I played ball back in school,” Lloyd said, dropping his arm around Brant’s shoulders and walking him around the back of the car to face the other guy.

Brant dragged his feet, not really wanting to go.

Reptile-cold eyes met his and in a blink, the man smiled, his face friendly and easy-going, but Brant wasn’t fooled. He knew what he’d seen. Just like he knew his dad was an asshole most of the time and could be downright awful at others, he’d met even worse people.

This guy ... he was worse.

The skin on the nape of his neck crawled.

He thought about Isabel across the street, the way she’d told him a few weeks ago, just after Travis had put his dad on the ground. *Go home*, she’d mouthed at him, telling him to get out of his dad’s way until the old man’s temper had cooled.

Somehow, she’d known. He had moments like that, when his gut told him something bad might happen. Now, his gut was screaming.

He couldn’t go into that house with his father and this man.

He didn’t know why, but he couldn’t.

“Yeah, okay.” He cleared his throat and pasted a fake smile on his face, fairly confident it would be believable because it wasn’t like he didn’t have to lie to his dad about a ton of shit anyway. And the man bought it. He always bought. Shrugging free of his dad’s arm, he nodded at the man, then, pretending to pat at his pockets, he said, “Ah, man, I must have dropped

my phone back at the bus stop. I'm going to run back and grab it."

His dad just scowled at him. "You're always dropping shit. Go on, get it."

But the guy stepped forward. "You go on in with your dad, Brad. I'll get it."

"It's Brant," he said, backing up a step. "And that's fine, man. I'll get it."

The guy reached for him.

Brant backpedaled, moving faster.

And just like that, the mask dropped from the man's face and he said, coldly, flatly, "Boy, you get the fuck over here. Now."

Chapter 30



Travis saw it all flying apart in the blink of an eye.

Setting his jaw, he looked at Isabel. “Stay inside.”

She grabbed his arm. “Travis!”

He caught her hand, brought it to his lips. “Stay inside ... I’ll take care of Brant. Please ... trust me.”

“You?” Her voice cracked. “You, I trust. But Stephen? And fuck, Lloyd will screw over his own mother!”

“It will be fine,” Travis told her. “Remember, there are armed agents in that house. Just stay inside.” And knowing she might not, because he could see the love burning in her eyes, the same love he felt for her, reflecting back at him, he played dirty. “I know what I’m doing, Iz. But I can’t focus on helping them if I’m worried about you, too.”

She glared at him, dashing tears from her eyes. “Damn you. *Go*. But don’t get hurt. I swear ... so help me, *God*, Travis, if you get hurt, I *won’t* forgive you this time.”

He just crooked a smile at her and stepped outside, only lingering long enough to say, “Stay away from the windows.”

Then, closing the door, he called out across the street, “Hey, Stephen. You got the wrong house?”

Brant had been backpedaling while his father looked on, looking confused, the dumbass.

And Beresford had been moving forward to grab the kid.

Now, though, he had Beresford’s attention.

Pasting a smug grin on his face, he hopped down the few steps on the porch, strode down the sidewalk and started across the street.

For several seconds, Stephen just stared at him.

An expression of relief crossed Brant’s face.

Lloyd looked caught between an expression of confusion and anger, and he chose anger, not surprisingly, as he shot Travis a dirty look. “Get the fuck off my property.”

Travis ignored him, closing the distance between him and his target even more. A few more steps and he could grab Brant, get the kid behind him. He sized up Beresford, watched as the other man reached behind his back.

The tiny radio transmitter in his ear chirped.

“Target is armed.”

Travis tapped his left thigh, twice, then once, then twice again, indicating he’d received the message. To any casual observer, it would look like a restless gesture. But Ace was out there and they’d worked together enough that she’d know.

“Message received,” she confirmed not even a second later.

The gun came out just as Travis came within arm’s reach of the boy. Brant saw the weapon before his father and dropped his backpack, his naturally ruddy complexion draining of color.

Lloyd was still looking at Travis.

“Son, if you don’t get off my property—”

“I’ve had about enough of you,” Beresford said, using the butt of the handgun he held to strike Lloyd in the head—hard.

The solidly built man hit the ground.

Travis grabbed Brant and shoved the boy behind him. “Stay behind me, kid.”

Beresford looked a little thrown, but then he smiled. “I’ll just shoot through you.”

“Do that and the people on the street will hear, call the cops,” Travis replied easily. “Small town. They call the cops the second anything looks funny. And this ... ” He smirked, gesturing to the two of them. He angled his chin at Lloyd, still collapsed on the ground. “Looks damn funny. I figure it will

take them, what, five, maybe ten minutes to get here. How fast can you do whatever it is you plan on doing, Stephen?"

As he walked, he backed up, one hand on Brant's elbow, keeping the kid behind him, making sure they stayed in step. He just had to reach the car, then he could shove Brant down behind the safety of it.

"We can take a shot," a voice said over the radio. "We're clear. Do we shoot?"

Travis still had one hand up, that instinctive *stay* gesture people the world over had used for millennia.

He didn't dare let go of Brant, either. The kid's breath had hitched when he passed by his father and Travis could feel the boy shaking. He was holding on by a thread. If Beresford got a hostage, this would all get so fucking ugly, so fast.

Jung spoke up. "We can still take him in. Barnes has it under control."

Travis wanted to swear a blue streak.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Lloyd, hands moving restlessly on the dirt. If that stupid fool started moving again ...

They reached the other side of the car and Travis grabbed Brant and shoved him down. "Under the car, now." Brant hit the ground hard and lay there dazed.

Dazed, but out of the line of fire, so Travis moved, forward and out, striking with one hand and knocking the weapon out of Beresford's grip. It hit the ground and Travis caught Beresford, slamming him against the car hard enough to knock the air out of him.

"Drawing a weapon on a minor, huh, man? Think that will qualify as a violation of your parole," he said, slamming a fist into the man's kidney before spinning him around, face first, into the vehicle. "Oh, so will *having* one."

But Beresford was strong, built like a fucking wall, and he hadn't spent the past fourteen years behind bars sitting on his ass. He slammed back with his head and lifted up a booted

foot to drive down onto Travis's. Travis sensed both moves and managed to counter, but it cost him precious seconds. He still wasn't back at one hundred percent after his near-fatal infection—fuck, he probably wasn't at seventy percent.

Still, he muscled the other man back against the vehicle while the radio squawked in his ear. The fight was brutal and short and he almost had Beresford's wrists behind him when a booming voice shouted, "Sir, *drop the fucking weapon or we will shoot!*"

Who had a fucking weapon?

"I ain't dropping nothing until I see my boy!"

Travis could have punched something, he was so sick with fury, with frustration.

Lloyd Brimley. And damn that prick to hell, that was actual *fear* in the man's voice.

"Where's my damn boy?" Lloyd bellowed in rage.

In his ear, Travis heard Miles speak, voice calm and controlled. "Step back from Beresford, Travis. We've got him surrounded on all sides. But Lloyd Brimley has a weapon pointed at the back of your head ... and he's not very steady on his feet."

Snarling in his throat, Travis pressed his mouth close to Beresford's ear and said, "You're done, you sick fuck. Keep that in mind."

Then he shoved away from Beresford, with his hands up. "Lloyd, your kid is under the car. I told him to get under there—I didn't want him caught in any crossfire."

"Get the hell away from him...I want you both where I can see you," Lloyd said, panic making his voice shake.

Travis didn't dare turn around, barely dared breathe. In the reflection of the car's mirror, he saw Lloyd's reflection, could see the man weaving back and forth on his feet. Slowly, he moved three steps away, still close enough to grab Beresford but maybe it would be enough for Lloyd.

“He’s lying to you, Lloyd,” Beresford said, shoving away from the vehicle and starting to turn.

“Shut the fuck up!” Lloyd screamed. “Don’t move! Brant? *Brant!*”

Travis heard the scrambling coming from under the scar and he stiffened. “Brant, stay—!”

But he was already rolling out from under the car, dusty and scraped, red in the face. “Dad, I’m fine. I’m right here—”

Beresford hauled the kid’s stocky body to his before Travis could move the distance to stop it.

In his free hand, he had another, more compact handgun. The prick must have been a fucking Boy Scout.

Just like that, the situation went from not good to absolutely fucked.



Isabel shoved her fist against her mouth to stifle her cry.

Staring out one of the privacy-tinted narrow windows that bracketed her front door, she stared as Stephen held Brant’s struggling body easily against his own.

He’d changed over the years, and all the changes were for the worst—he was harder, stronger ... hungrier.

She could see where maybe he *had* been affected by a stroke. The left shoulder drooped just slightly and his posture wasn’t quite as perfect as it had been when she’d first met him.

But he was still clearly strong. She’d seen the ease of movement that Travis had used, the speed. Yet Stephen had almost thrown him off.

Travis had *had* him, though. He’d been right *there*.

Then Lloyd staggered to his feet ... and just as the agents came rushing through the front door of the man’s own damn house, weapons raised.

She grabbed the door and fumbled with the locks.

A voice boomed out of nowhere in her house and she froze.

“Isabel, stay where you are.”

She froze, stunned. She hadn’t heard her name in ... years. Her *name*, stripped from her as so many other things had been. “Miles?”

“Don’t go out there,” the man said. “Don’t you *dare* give Travis one more person to worry about.”

“I can’t just *stay* here!”

Her phone rang. Miles, voice calmer now, said, “Pick up the phone, Isabel.”

Her phone, tucked in her back pocket out of habit, vibrated again. Almost by rote, she answered, but she couldn’t speak.

In a voice far quieter, he said, “You need to trust Travis ... and me.”

“Travis will let that bastard shoot *him* before he lets him shoot a *kid*,” Isabel said, her voice breaking.

“I know. Take a breath ... ” His voice came again, but muffled, and then, this time, as he spoke, his tone was different, no more background noise comprised of other voices. No, she heard the wind and the crashing of waves “Now, Isabel, listen to me. Do you think *I* will let that man be shot? Now? After everything I’ve done to try and fix my past mistakes?”

She sucked in a breath. “Miles ... ”

“Stay inside, Isabel.”

The line went dead.

Feeling almost numb, she moved to the picture window in the living room just a few yards from where she stood.

There were several agents almost that distance from Lloyd, Stephen and Brant, just a bit further from Travis. It might as well be miles. Shaking, eyes burning, she stood there paralyzed.



“You’re not getting away, Stephen,” Travis said, his heart racing.

It had all gone to fucking hell so fast.

Lloyd was swaying on his feet. If he’d just drop the gun or pass out—

But he somehow stayed upright, gun jerking from Beresford to Travis.

“Shut the fuck up, you bitch-ass punk,” Beresford said before breaking in a half-mad giggle. He tightened his arm around Brant’s neck and swiveled, turning so he could watch both Lloyd and Travis, his back to the street, facing the house. “I’ll get what I want and what I *want* is for ... ” He was panting now. “*Is for that ... BITCH ASS TO SUFFER!*”

“What you’re going to get is a pine box,” Travis replied. No point in hiding his cards now. “Those boys and girls with the guns over there? Federal officers. You’re a federal prisoner —”

“I got *parole*,” he sneered.

“It’s been revoked,” Travis adlibbed. He didn’t fucking care what he had to say to distract the prick. “You lied your whole damn way through it and are connected to the disappearances of at least two federal penitentiary workers, the death of one, and assault of another. You’re going back in a cage now ... for a long, long time.”

“What the fuck do you know?” Beresford jerked Brant even closer to him.

Travis let all the coldness that had built inside him over the past fourteen years out, let it gleam in his eyes. “You stupid fuck ... why do you think *I* am here? You know the name Miles Hawkins?”

The man’s face went florid with rage.

“I’m his top man,” Travis said. “You want to be pissed ... be pissed at *me*.”

The taunt worked. Sort of.

Beresford swung toward Lloyd. “You want your boy back? Shoot that cocksucker ... *now!* Then you and your kid can *go!*”

Travis curled his lip in derision at Beresford, then stepped toward Lloyd. It was, after all, a step closer to Beresford. “Figures you can’t handle me on your own. You pussy.” As Beresford’s face went all but purple with rage, Travis looked at Lloyd. “Go on, if you’re going to do it.”

Lloyd swayed on his feet, struggling to keep the gun level.

A little closer ... a little closer.

He spread his feet, trying to regain his balance and failed, ending up lurching to the side and in the process, dropped the weapon. Travis kicked it out of reach, then kicked Lloyd’s ankle out from under him. “Stay down, man.”

Lloyd let out a sound like a broken old bear and covered his face but Travis ignored him as he looked at Beresford, the ugly rage he’d felt all these years pouring out of him.

Something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He didn’t dare turn to look. Instead, he shifted position and moved, forcing Beresford to do the same thing.

A low quiet voice came into the earpiece. “A bit more.”

Beresford’s hand trembled on the gun he held and he swung it toward Travis. Better. Much better.

Travis knew the ins and outs of hostage negotiation tactics and he considered his options. This bastard was too far gone to be rational and he was losing control, more and more. He continued to circle and shift, keeping his movements casual.

“You might as well let that kid go,” he said, blocking out the fear he saw in the boy’s eyes. “You can’t shoot him. If you do, you have no shield. And if you do, your situation gets so, so much worse. Let him go, Stephen.”

“Go,” Miles said in a clipped voice.

At the same time, Stephen waved the weapon around, his aim going wide as he screamed, “Shut. The. *FUCK*—”

The arm around Brant’s neck went slack.

Chapter 31



Startled exclamations and curses exploded over the radio. Over it all, the one voice that came the loudest was Jung's. "*Who the fuck took that shot?*"

Travis ignored her and everybody else as he lunged, grabbed Brant and yanked the kid up and around, hiding the gory mess spreading out behind him.

Barely aware of his movements, he hauled the kid around the car. There was blood and other matter on the kid's face and after propping him against the trunk of the Ford, Travis whipped his hoodie off, did what he could to wipe the blood away.

"Here," Ace said. "These will do it better."

He wasn't surprised when she pushed a fistful of baby wipes into his hand—she *should* have been a Boy Scout, as prepared as she always was. Brant looked at him with wide, dilated eyes, breaths coming in thin, raspy gulps.

"Breathe, kid," Travis ordered. "Deep breath. Come on."

"Brant!" Lloyd called out.

Brant's eyes wheeled around and he jerked.

"Take a deep breath first," Travis ordered. "You're not moving from this spot until you get air moving in and out."

Lloyd came lurching toward them, limping, all but hopping, with tears streaming down his face. "Boy, are you okay?"

Suddenly, Brant gulped in air and a sob exploded out, followed by another.

Lloyd crashed into the kid's side and grabbed him, hauled him close. Since Brant was breathing again and went to clutch at his father, Travis stepped back. Ace met his eyes. "I'll watch them."

He nodded and turned, eyes going to the house where he'd been staying.

Miles was no longer on the small, barely-there balcony on the back half of the house where he'd hidden himself, the shade of a towering tree offering protection to anybody who hadn't seen the sun glint off that scope at just the right moment, as Travis had.

But then he heard his name, a ragged breath, and everything else faded into the background.

Heading jerking around, he saw Isabel rushing toward him.

He still held the bloodied hoodie and there was blood and other, darker things on his protective vest from where he'd hauled Brant against him. Holding his hands, he said, "Wait ... I'm fucking disgusting right now—"

"Shut up." She flung herself against him and her lips pressed to his. Hard.

Helpless against her, he dropped the hoodie and closed his arms around her. It wasn't until that very moment that he started to shake. Fisting his hand in the soft fleece that covered her vest, Travis tore his mouth from hers and shoved his face against her neck, sucking air in and out.

Oxygen seemed to be in short supply. His heart hammered against his ribcage so hard, it felt like it was trying to break through. He felt disconnected from his own fucking body and he tried to focus, bring himself back in.

Isabel shoved against his chest and he forced his arms to unclench, somehow, and backed up. Only, she didn't let him. She followed him, lock-step, her hands moving to his face, stroking, as if she needed to see if he was okay,

"I've never been so scared in my *life*," she said, the words coming out in a ragged whisper. Then she shoved him. "Don't you *ever* scare me like that again."

Isabel knew she was being irrational—Travis hadn't done anything but his job, hadn't done anything but protect her *and* a kid who'd just been unlucky enough to be in the wrong place

at the wrong time. Well, and Lloyd. But she didn't want to think about Lloyd. Or anybody else.

Cupping Travis's face in her hands once more, she pulled him down to her level, kissed him. "I was so scared."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and he kissed them away, pulling her against him and rocking her, one hand cupping her neck firmly while his other arm was a secure brace at her back. "I won't ... that's the last time, I swear, baby. I swear."

"Good." She shoved her feet between his, wishing she could get closer. Hell, she'd crawl inside him at this point. Shuddering, she tried to bury her face against his chest but the vest was in the way. She started tearing the straps.

Travis eased her hands away and dealt with it, then pulled her back against him, guiding one hand to his heart. "I'm fine. I'm safe. It's over. It's over."

Maybe, in a year, ten years, a hundred, she could forget the sight of Stephen Beresford standing in front of Travis and waving a gun around, face contorted with hate and rage. Maybe.

But she doubted it.

She'd accept those memories, though, as long as she had Travis with her. For always.

Without thinking it through, she lifted her head. He met her gaze.

"We're getting married," she told him.

His brow quirked up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's overdue, don't you think?"

In response, he bent his head and kissed her.

All around them, FBI agents swarmed. She thought she heard somebody yelling. Miles spoke up and the yelling got worse, but Isabel didn't care. She was too focused on the here and the now, on the man who she managed to find again, and on the fact they'd both survived all this time ... that their love had.

She wasn't going to waste a second of it.



“Here to debrief me?” Travis asked, leaning against the kitchen island.

It had been a couple of hours since the absolute shitshow with Beresford.

He'd had a few minutes to contact his family and let them know it was over and that he was safe, but other than that, those hours had been pure chaos.

The man's body had been taken away and was currently en route to Virginia. His parents had finally been located—they had taken an extended trip out of the country right around the time Beresford missed his meeting with his parole officer.

Travis had no idea how they'd reacted to the news of their son's death, nor did he care.

He was done and as he shed more of the shock over the day, he realized there was a sensation in his chest he hadn't felt in years—hell, there were a *lot* of emotions raging inside him that he was struggling to deal with, but the biggest one of all was this strange sort of surprised relief.

He'd faced death more than once and felt just ... apathy. He'd kept pushing on for his family, no other reason.

Today, he'd felt real fear for the first time in so long, he couldn't remember. Maybe it was the *first* time since he'd started down this twisted road. The fear, relief, shock, so many other emotions that had overflowed inside earlier when Isabel had come running into his arms were still pumping in his veins, but he had a little more control now—a little.

But that scant bit of control was enough to let him meet Miles's stare levelly, not showing a hint of emotion, even when Jung and two other agents crowded into the room with her.

“We’ve got questions,” she said shortly. Her eyes went to Isabel. “Ms. Franklin, we need some privacy.”

Isabel didn’t say a word as she pushed away from the counter, but Travis caught her hand, staring at Jung with a flinty expression. “This is her home, Jung. I think you can *ask* for privacy if you *want* it, instead of making demands.”

The agent’s brows dropped over her eyes and her face took on a mulish expression.

Travis laced his fingers with Isabel’s. “Or I can just not tell you a fucking thing. Ask Miles. If I don’t want to talk to you, I sure as hell won’t. So, your choice, Jung. You can be polite to Ms. Franklin and get what you want, or you can be rude and bang your head against a brick wall for as long as it takes for you to get the point.”

“If you think you can throw your weight around and still keep working with me—”

“I thought you’d heard,” Travis said, cutting her off with an easy smile. “I told Miles I’m out. This was my final job. I’m done.”

Jung narrowed her eyes, opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally, she blew out a breath and looked at Isabel. “If you would excuse us for a brief time, we need to talk.” She gave Travis a pointed look. “There are certain details I need to go over. One of my agents can escort you up to your office.”

“Lovely,” Isabel said with a saccharine smile. She turned to Travis, kissed him, then headed out of the kitchen. She lingered by Miles and touched her fingers to his cheek. He covered her hand with his and smiled, one of the rare, gentle smiles few others probably saw.

That smile was gone the second Isabel pulled away and Miles looked at Travis. “Don’t suppose there’s any coffee left?”

“Enough for a cup,” he said easily. He poured enough for his mentor, then without batting a lash, poured the rest into his own mug. He wasn’t sure he liked *or* trusted her, so she wasn’t getting shit from him. Even if it was Isabel’s coffee. “No more

left and that was the last Bella had in the house. Time for a grocery run.”

Judging by the faint twitch of Miles’s lips, the man saw right through him. But he took his coffee and said nothing as he moved toward the large, wooden, farmhouse-styled table by the windows facing out the water. “Shall we get this done, Jung?”

Jung and one of the other agents joined him, while the third, a tall, skinny pale man with close-cropped black hair that was already starting to thin took up a position by the door. He looked about as happy to be there as Travis was to have him there. So did the other agent, a Latina who wore her hair swept into a high, tight ponytail while narrow, gold-framed lenses attempted to hide a spectacular face.

Travis didn’t recognize them, but he had no doubt they were Miles’s. The man wouldn’t have brought anybody he didn’t trust implicitly in on the op.

Jung pulled a notepad out of her briefcase and glanced up at Travis.

“Are you joining us?”

“I’m good right here.” He sipped his coffee and gave her an easy smile. “I’m still feeling pretty jumpy from earlier. And I don’t do sitting still very well. Never have.”

Her mouth compressed into a firm line. “Mr. Barnes, please, sit.”

He sipped his coffee and waited her out.

“Are you trying to be difficult?” she asked sharply.

“It seems to me you are,” he responded. “You have questions you want to ask. I’m not a suspect in any crime, unless you failed to inform me of something, and you’re in the private home of a woman who was in fear for her life until just a few short hours ago. There’s no reason for you to be on a high horse and demand *I* sit because it makes *you* happy. I don’t need to *accommodate* you, Agent Jung. And you know it. So, maybe *you* should ask yourself ... are *you* trying to be difficult?”

Miles hid his smile behind his cup of coffee.

The other two agents pretended not to hear anything.

Jung snatched up her pen and, with a cold look, she said, “I want you to go over *exactly* what transpired earlier. In *your* words. We *will* be recording this.”

After taking another sip of his coffee, Travis proceeded to tell her exactly what transpired. In his words. He just left a couple of small details out. Then she had him do it a second, and a third time.

It was the same story each time.

Chapter 32



“Thank you.”

Travis looked at the hand in front of him, still trembling somewhat, then met Lloyd’s gaze. He hesitated, then slowly shook the man’s hand.

“I don’t know what the hell was going on, but I know you saved my boy, probably me. So...” Lloyd cleared his throat. “Thanks.”

“How about instead of saying thanks, you start talking to somebody about the anger issues you deal with?”

Lloyd’s face went red and he jerked his head away.

“You could have lost your son today,” Travis said. “He could have lost you. Second chances don’t always happen. You got one, so maybe do something with it.”

The other man didn’t look like he was going to speak, but after a moment, he jerked his head. “You might be right.”

Travis couldn’t hope for anything else so as Lloyd turned back to the house, and the porch where his wife and son both waited, he sought out Brant. The kid was still pale, but when he met Travis’s gaze, he offered a hesitant smile.

“We’ll see about that game of ball tomorrow,” Travis said.

Brant’s eyes widened, then a real smile spread across his face and he nodded.

As they retreated back into the house, Travis went back to where Isabel and Miles waited.

Isabel continued to nervously pace the yard but she caught his hand, squeezed it as she said, “Lloyd Brimley saying thank you. Wonders never cease.”

“Miracles can happen.” He cupped her cheek. “I found you again, didn’t I?”

She blushed but was smiling as he pressed his mouth to hers.

Adrenaline still flooded them both, so they kept the contact short. They wouldn't have any semblance of privacy in a few more minutes, so they couldn't afford to get lost in each other.

As he drew apart, he gave her hand one last squeeze and headed over to the porch.

Miles waited for him.

“You could have told the truth. “You wouldn't have caught flack—I would have made sure of that,” Miles said quietly. It had been several hours since his replacement had begun questioning them and she'd finally given up less than forty-five minutes earlier, calling her team in to get ready to head out.

Miles had told Jung he'd be back in the city with them later the following day, claiming exhaustion.

It was clearly true, although Travis had no doubt that if Miles had wanted, he could have pushed through. That was simply who he was.

That he was here now told Travis he felt he had more important business here.

Isabel continued to pace the yard, arms crossed over her chest, eyes on the intersection at the end of the road as she waited for the kids to return.

Keeping his voice low, Travis said, “And what purpose would that have served? You did what you thought you needed to do. You saw a chance, had a shot and you took it. Nobody else did and the situation was getting out of control.”

“Jung will try to argue it put the boy at risk.” Miles pulled off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. “But I don't care. You're right—I *did* have the shot and Beresford would have soon killed the kid as looked at him. Come tomorrow, after I write up my report, I'm turning in my resignation.”

Travis looked at him, not sure whether to be shocked or just relieved. “I thought you'd work yourself right up to your

own funeral.”

“I practically am.” With a wry smile, he said, “I’ve got less than three months, four at the most.” He made his way over to the porch swing and sat down with a weary sigh. “And I don’t want to spend it in the office, filling out forms or anything else. If it hadn’t been for this debacle with Beresford, well ... I’d planned on submitting my resignation at the end of the week anyway, but now is as good a time as any.”

He smiled and looked out over the water. “I think I’d like to spend the rest of my time taking it easy ... sitting on my porch at that house over there, looking out over the water.”

“Am I getting evicted?”

Miles smiled at him. “Oh, there’s room for both of us. But I get the feeling you won’t be spending much time sleeping in an empty bed, will you, son?”

Travis just smiled.

“I’ve got Xi looking into the request you made. It should be doable.” Miles glanced at him. “It’s a good idea, if you ask me.”

Travis nodded. “I think so. Time to say good-bye to this... chapter of my life. Might as well bury the face with it.”

A black SUV appeared at the end of the road and turned toward them. Isabel shot him a wide smile over her shoulder.

He smiled back even though she’d already started toward the driveway. As she rushed to greet the vehicle, he looked at Miles. “We’re getting married.”

“Good.” Miles blew out a sigh and despite the weariness on his face, it seemed some of the deep, carved lines smoothed out a fraction. “That’s ... good.”

Throat tight, Travis moved to the man’s side and sat down next to him. “Miles, I can’t thank you enough for—” As Miles’s eyes snapped open and a scowl appeared on his face, Travis scowled right back. “And don’t you interrupt, you stubborn old son of a bitch. I get to say my piece, damn it.”

Miles blinked, then, surprisingly, he laughed.

“I was dead inside,” Travis said, looking at the SUV as it parked. Doors opened and kids tumbled out. It was no surprise that Brooklyn reached Isabel first, throwing her arms around her foster mother with unabashed love while the others gathered around. “You already know that, but I have to say it. You kept me going, kept me on my feet and when it was obvious I was about ready to just ... give up, you sent me here. I don’t know how she managed to forgive me, but ... ” His throat tightened back up.

“She loves you, Travis.” Miles’s voice was raw and thick. “As much as you love her. The two of you ... both of you love so deeply. And that love let you forgive a miserable old bastard like me. Of course she was going to forgive you.”

Travis reached up and gripped Miles’s shoulder. It was thin, so thin and feeling frail, but Miles covered Travis’s hand with his and squeezed.

“Travis!”

Thudding footsteps came rushing his way and they both cleared their throats, tried to pretend they weren’t about to cry as the small girl came rushing eagerly toward them.

“Travis!” Brooklyn flung herself at Travis and he caught her up against him and held on tight. “You’re still here!”

“I am. And I’m not going anywhere, either.”

He held Brooklyn as the rest of the kids streamed up the steps, Aaron and Storm coming to hug him. Jacob offered a tentative smile, which shocked the hell out of Travis.

“We’re making burgers on the grill,” Brooklyn told him, squirming away and clambering out of his arms. “Are you eating dinner with us? And you, Mr. Miles?”

“As long as it’s okay with Ms. Bella,” Travis said, tugging gently on her disheveled blonde hair.

Isabel nodded and gave Miles a questioning look.

The other man accepted but declined to go inside, saying he wanted to enjoy the peace and quiet a bit longer. Travis suspected Miles was too tired to get up just yet.

“I’ll be outside a while,” he told Isabel. “Walk around a little bit ... I need to call my family, talk to them longer.” Rising to kiss her, he murmured, “Come back out when you have a minute. I want to ask you something.”

She nodded, then ducked inside, Mariah perched on her hip.

Mariah babbled and squealed as she waved a pudgy hand at Travis before cuddling close to Isabel.

As the door closed, Travis looked over at Miles.

The older man had his head back, eyes closed. His chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm and Travis suspected he was close to falling asleep.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he put in a call to Trey.

His twin came on and Travis closed his eyes with a smile, aware, again, of the sensation of a weight he no longer carried.

“Hey, man,” he said.

“Hey, yourself,” Trey said easily. “I guess things are ... resolved, then.”

“More or less. I ... ah ... I got some news.”

Trey snorted. “More news, huh? I’m not sure how much more news I can take from you right now. You going to up and tell me you have a kid or something, too?”

Behind him, he heard Aaron and Brooklyn, their voices carrying through an open window and he wondered how Trey would react if he told his twin he would soon be helping to raise *five* kids ...

Five. But he didn’t think his twin was ready for that yet. Hell, he was still adjusting to it.

“Actually, I’m getting married.”

Chapter 33



The sun was setting as the bride walked down the aisle with her hand tucked into the arm of Miles Hawkins, a recently retired federal agent. He was thin but the suit had been tailored to fit well, concealing weight recently lost due to illness.

At the altar, on the bride's side, there were two women, identical twins, both of them dressed in soft, rich green that matched the ribbons in the bride's hair. They stood in line with two girls. The oldest was a teenager, the rich green of her dress glowing against the warm, soft brown of her skin, bringing out the tawny undertones. The tousled curls of her short hair, dyed white, were topped with a crown of flowers.

She held a baby in her arms, a little girl with hair the same color of blonde as the other child standing next to her, this one a fairy of a thing, all of five years all and she practically danced in place, her excitement coming through in every wiggle, every breath. She wore a dress fit for a princess ... and a Wonder Woman tiara in her ash blonde hair.

The bridal party was rounded out by a slim boy in a custom-fitted suit with a collarless shirt and a green silk vest that matched the colors the bridesmaids wore. Nobody asked why he was standing up with the bride instead of the groom and he grinned shyly at a good-looking Black teen who sat with his moms in the crowd.

A boy of roughly the same age stood with the groom, also wearing a tux, although he'd forgone the vest. His shirt, like the others standing with the groom, was a vibrant blue-green that complemented the rich greens of the bridal party.

The best man stood with the other groomsman, two more men, all bearing a strong similarity to the groom.

They all grinned as Travis sucked in a breath at the sight of his bride.

Isabel wore a dress of elegant lace over silk, the form-hugging silk fitting close to her body until it reached the knee

where it flared out in a mermaid-style skirt, complete with a small train. Her sisters had been surprised by the choice, but she'd told them she'd never forgotten her dreams of marrying the man she loved and now that she was getting that dream, she wanted the dress to match.

The back was open from nape to the dip in her back, but as they'd opted to marry in the open space between their houses, she'd worn simple satin flats.

The setting rays of the sun gilded her skin gold as she reached the altar.

Miles paused to kiss her cheek, his hand trembling lightly on her arm before he let go.

Both of them pretended not to notice the tears in his eyes.

As he moved to take his seat, the minister of a small, local church cleared his throat and began the service.

Travis, known among colleagues and his family for a sharp, near-perfect memory, forgot damn near everything the preacher said as soon as he said it.

But he'd never forget how Isabel's eyes held his. How her mouth curved in a smile, how her voice sounded as she spoke the vows she'd written.

He'd never forget the way her hands trembled as he spoke his to her, or the way *his* shook as he slipped the ring on her finger and when she slid her ring onto his.

One phrase the minister said that he would remember ...“You are now husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Slowly, he reached up and cupped her face. Isabel wrapped her hands around his wrists, staring at him.

He stroked a thumb over her lower lip, felt it quiver, watched it curve.

Sebastien, who'd flown in just for the wedding, while Zach, Abby and Marin all stayed back out west, hooted and shouted, “Come on, already!”

“Shut up, Seb,” Travis told him. To Isabel, he said, “Bella-mine ...”

He couldn’t find the right words after that.

That was it. Just ... *Bella-mine*.

Her lips parted as he lowered his head and took her mouth slowly, sweetly.

Their first kiss as they stepped into this life they’d waited too long to start.

The small group of friends and family they’d invited broke into applause, but neither the bride or groom took much notice.

Not until an impatient hand grabbed hold of Travis’s pant leg and pulled.

“Do we get cake now?”

They broke apart, laughing, and Isabel looked at Brooklyn. “Yes, baby. We can have cake now.”



Sometime near the end of the simple wedding ceremony, a stranger had slid in, along with a woman in her forties. The woman looked like a school teacher—one kids would love, but also the one they knew would take no shit. She actually had spent a few years teaching but had moved into social work. That had been nearly twenty years earlier.

LeAnn had planned on being here for the entire ceremony but an unexpected work call had delayed her. She’d spent most of the past twenty-four hours hustling her ass off, save for a short bit of downtime overnight.

That call was also the reason for her unexpected plus one.

The lanky Black man next to her rubbed his hands down the sides of his pants as he studied the pretty teen with her dyed white hair and wide, excited grin. “She looks good. Looks happy.”

“Isabel’s taken very good care of her. But Storm’s never stopped talking about you.”

“Storm, huh?” He grinned.

“She’s ... very fond of comics,” LeAnn said. “Especially the X-Men.”

“I used to buy those comics for her.” His face tightened and he looked away. “Damn her mama, disappearing like that ... ”

They were quiet a moment, then LeAnn said, “Storm’s never given up on you. She insisted you’d find her. The way she talks, you’d think she just saw you a couple of months ago.”

“It’s been *five years*.” Javon Russell’s mouth drew flat and he looked away. “Five years, I missed out on. How somebody recognized her from one of those flyers in the mail ... Hell, I can’t even believe she remembers me.” He rubbed a hand over his eyes and shook his head. “Man, when I got that phone call ... ”

LeAnn nodded and gave him a minute. “You want to go see her?”

“Do they know I’m coming?”

“No. I didn’t want to interrupt when they had so much going on and I had to verify your identity.” She saw the nerves on his face, the frustration and she reached out to touch his arm. “You don’t need to worry. Bella’s never wanted anything for the kids she takes in except what’s best. You’ll see for yourself, though.”

Javon nodded, but LeAnn knew he didn’t believe her. She didn’t blame him. Too many had been abused by the very system set up to protect them.

Tucking her hand into his arm, she led him through the crush as they made their way to the table where the kids sat with Travis and Isabel.

She wanted to get there before they got too far into the party because LeAnn knew about the ‘present’ Travis and

LeAnn had planned for the other kids.

Storm looked up at just that moment and glanced over.

She saw LeAnn and wariness flickered over her pretty face, the wariness LeAnn had come to expect.

But then her eyes saw the man at LeAnn's side.

Storm's eyes widened.

Her face froze.

One by one, everybody around the table, then the men hanging around near Travis and Bella noticed. Travis was instantly on his feet and when Javon tensed, LeAnn said, "It's okay."

"Storm?" Travis said quietly.

That broke through whatever held her frozen.

In a second, she was on her feet.

"Daddy!"

Javon moved to meet her and LeAnn pressed her fingertips to her lips as father and daughter caught each in a desperate hug.

When she looked again, Bella was standing with Travis and she was smiling, tears gleaming in her eyes. Travis had lost the tension in his face, while the other foster kids looked on with a mix of interest and envy.

Making her way to Bella, LeAnn smiled nervously. "I hope it's okay. We just connected earlier ..."

Bella lifted a hand. "You don't need to explain *anything*. The look on her face just now tells me everything I need to know."

Javon and Storm settled at a table by themselves. He had a hotel room, but Miles had offered him a room in the house next door. Storm had pleaded with him and because he would do anything for his baby girl, Javon had agreed to stay there.

He had a job in the Midwest, but he'd taken a few days off to come find his daughter and although he hadn't said as much

out loud, he could tell she loved the woman who'd been taking care of her, so he wanted to give his girl time to say goodbye. And he figured he should get to know them since it was obvious Storm wouldn't ever cut ties. He understood that and respected it. He owed the woman who had taken such good care of his baby.

He had a lot of questions, but tonight he wanted to enjoy just having his girl back.

Not long after people settled down, Travis and Bella stood up.

"We're glad *most* people listened about not bringing gifts, but just because there aren't a lot of gifts to be opened doesn't mean the evening is almost done," Bella said. "In fact ... we have an announcement."

Travis pulled a thin stack of paper from inside his suit jacket and handed several envelopes out. "Don't open it yet," he advised Jacob before passing another to Aaron, then Brooklyn. There was another he held onto, tapping it playfully against Mariah's nose. The baby made a grab for it and giggled but Marilyn, Bella's sister, gracefully sidestepped, just as Travis pulled it out of reach. "You've got one, too, angel. But well hold onto it for you."

"Oooh!!!" Storm gasped, then pressed her hands to her mouth.

Next to her, her father slid her a look.

She grinned at him. "I know what's about to happen."

Travis sat down, Bella moving to stand at his shoulder as he pulled Brooklyn onto his lap.

"Alright, kids, come over here," Bella called out.

The photographer moved closer and Javon got an idea of just what might be happening, felt himself smiling.

"Okay," Travis said to the girl on his lap. "Open it."

The sound of paper shredding filled the air.

“I hope it’s tickets to California—I want to go to ... ”
Jacob’s mouth fell open.

Aaron lifted dazed eyes to Travis and Bella.

Brooklyn was still reading.

Then, she burst out crying.

“Oh, honey ... ”

She flung her arms around Travis’s neck and through her tears, everybody heard her. “You’re gonna be my mama and daddy? For real?”

“Yes!” Storm whispered, covering her mouth to muffle the sound.

“You knew, baby?”

Storm looked at her father and nodded. “Ms. Bella talked to us about it a couple of months ago.” She took his hand. “I love her, a lot, Dad. But I always knew you’d come for me. I told her no. But I’m glad my brothers and sisters are gonna have them. They all need somebody to love them like you love me.”

Javon pulled her to him and kissed her forehead.



Sebastien left not long after. His wife was due in three weeks and he hadn’t wanted to miss the wedding, so he’d only flown out that morning and was hopping back on a privately chartered plane that would have him back in California in a matter of hours.

As for Zach and Abby, their newborn, a one-month-old little girl with Abby’s red hair and what might just be Zach’s blue eyes, they’d watched the wedding on Zoom, just as Marin had.

Over the next hour, the rest of the guests trickled away.

Within the next half hour, Isabel found herself whisked away in a sleek black BMW Z4, a gift to the both of them,

Travis had told her—apparently, he'd done next to nothing with his money over the past thirteen years and now he wanted to indulge a little. Or a lot.

The car pulled up in front of a pretty little Cape Cod-styled cottage and he turned the engine off. When she opened the door, he slid her a look. "You wait."

"Orders from the husband already?" she teased.

He grinned. "Maybe."

Climbing out, he went around and opened the door, then offered his hand.

She let him help her out, then gasped as he swept her up into his arms and carried her up the steps to the door.

In the past month since she'd told him they were getting married, he'd filled out more, putting on weight and regaining muscle. He was still lean, but no longer had that *too-hard* look to him. The shadows were gone from his eyes.

At the door, he managed to punch the code on the pad and open it without much trouble and then he carried his bride over the threshold.

Isabel gasped as lights switched on low, and the flicker of illusory candlelight came to life.

"Travis ... it's beautiful."

"You're beautiful." He finally lowered her to the ground. "I know we're holding off on the honeymoon until next summer, but I think we deserved a night. Right?"

"Absolutely." She curled her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. At that moment, music began to play from somewhere and she laughed, delighted by this romantic streak.

"I adore you, Isabel Barnes," he murmured against her mouth.

"And I, you, Travis Barnes." She combed her fingers through his hair as he started to spin her around in a slow, lazy

circle. “You know ... the years without you sucked, but ... this was worth waiting for.”

“I would have waited a thousand years for you. Ten thousand.”

“How about you spend those years with me instead?”

He kissed her and spun her around the room again. “Deal.”

Trans Rights are Human Rights



Statistics show that between 500,000 and two million youth face homelessness yearly in the United States alone. For some, it's temporary. For others, it will become a way of life. ([Source: Youth.gov](#))

Per a 2021 study, CDC stats indicated that perhaps 25% of the country's high school-aged population identifies as LGBTQ, with the majority identifying as bisexual, 5.2 identifying as questioning, 3.9 as other, 3.2 as gay or lesbian and 1.8% indicating they didn't understand the question. ([Source: CDC](#))

More than 25% of LGBTQ youth will face homelessness at some point, the risks up to 120% higher than that of their non-LGBTQ peers. These youth are at risk of violence, sexual trafficking and death. The main reason LGBTQ youth end up homeless is due to family conflict, namely due to a lack of acceptance from their families. (Source: [nn4youth.org](#))

Trans teens who live in a home where they have little to no support face an [increased risk of suicidal ideation](#), with [more than 80% having seriously considered suicide](#) and [more than 40% making at least one attempt](#). (Source: PubMed | NIH, Trevor Project, Human Rights Campaign, etc).

However, studies show that LGBTQ youth who have at least *one* supporting adult in their life, be it a parent, a teacher or a trusted friend, [have a decrease in suicide attempts of up to 30%](#). (Source: [Trevor Project](#))

Particularly, trans-affirming care has been shown to decrease suicide risks in trans youth by up to 70%. (Source: [HCPlive.com](#)) Many hear *gender-affirming* care and they automatically think **SURGERY!** This isn't the case. Prepubescent kids do *not* receive surgeries.

Gender-affirming care is a process and it *starts* at home. It starts by listening to your child and it's rooted in loving your

child.

Critics still fail to understand that *gender-affirming care* is all based on age-appropriate actions, starting with those who are younger who voice that they are a gender other than what they were assigned at birth ... simply acknowledging that and respecting it if they vocalize a desire to be addressed by different pronouns or if they have a preferred name, letting them dress in gender-affirming clothing.

This is such a simple thing.

And it can save the lives of the most vulnerable people in our society ... our children.

Read A Prime's Passion

Eyes down, little wolf...

In her world, the strong were broken young or they didn't survive. Eyes down, little wolf, Zee's father would say. You aren't strong enough yet.

Zennia Day kept her eyes down and stayed quiet, knowing that one day, she'd escape.

When her chance comes, she finds herself on a road that takes her far from Massachusetts, all the way to North Carolina.

She has her eyes on the future...until she meets Niko, a dominant Therian male and future Prime. When she looks at him, instead of a challenge for dominance, Zee sees a promise of forever.

Niko charmed her, teased her...and stole her heart. Mere days later, after making a public, permanent claim, he crushed that same heart in his fist, tossing her aside in front of the entire world and casting her out of pack lands.

Ten years later, she's an outcast, living far from her own when she gets word her father is dying.

She can do nothing—she was banned. Violating Niko's order was to court punishment, even if it was just to tell her father good-bye.

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WRECKED

Book 1 in the Barnes Brothers Series

In the nineties, Abigale Applegate and Zach Barnes were the most beloved sitcom child stars in the world. Then they grew up and left Hollywood behind...

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ABIGALE APPLLEGATE?

SHE'S BEEN WONDERING THE SAME THING.

With her Hollywood dreams long gone, Abigale now has a nice, neat, uncomplicated life—until the day her perfect fiancé needs to talk. Dumped, a little more than shattered, and totally confused, Abigale turns to Zach, her best friend since forever, to help her pick up the pieces. He does it with a gift—a copy of *Wreck This Journal*. She can vent her frustrations, and sketch out a new plan. Zach just hopes he's part of it. Because he's been in love with Abigale his entire life.

When the journal falls into Zach's hands, he discovers Abigale wants a new man. And fast. Nothing more than a hot distraction. Zach has a strategy, too. He's going to be that man. It's his last chance. Abigale might be out to shake up her life, but Zach's out to reinvent it. Now, all he has to do is convince Abigale that life can go as planned.

READ ON FOR AN EXCERPT FROM WRECKED, THE FIRST BOOK IN SHILOH'S WRECKED SERIES

“Hey, Zach.”

She glanced down and he followed her gaze, saw that she had the journal he'd picked up for her. “Did you bring that here to beat me up with it or something?”

She laughed. “Well, there is something about an unexpected action ...” Then she shrugged. “Nah. I actually figured out a plan. It's a weird one, but I'm here to ask you to help me do one of the things on the list.”

“Okay ...” He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and waited.

“I want a tattoo.”

Zach closed his eyes. Reaching up, he rubbed his right ear and then said, “You want what?”

“A tattoo.” She wiggled the book. “I wrote it down and everything. I did it last night and I’ve thought about it all day and I’m sure I want to do it, so stop looking at me like I’ve lost my mind, okay?”

“You wrote a plan that includes getting a tattoo,” he said slowly. His mind was churning at the very idea of it and his blood was boiling. Putting his hands on her...focus on the issue at hand, Barnes! “And you want me to do it.”

“Well ...” She grinned at him and the dimple in her chin winked at him. “The tattoo part is in the plan. And who else would I ask? You’re my best friend, right?”

He pressed the heel of his hand to his eye. “You sure about this, sugar?”

“Yes.” She tapped the book against her leg, looking around. “Ah...does that mean you’ll do it?”

“Like I’d let anybody else,” he muttered. “Do you know what you want?”

She shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought it through that far. I was kind of thinking you could help me figure it out.”

He shoved a hand through his hair and glanced around. The parlor was empty. “When did you want to do this?” He could take some time to think up some designs for her. Take some time to get a grip and—

“Now.”

So much for taking time to get a grip.

“Okay.”

* * * * *

Bent over the table, she watched as he sketched out another image. Keelie had left, locking up the front door and lowering the blinds. Zach seemed completely focused on the task at

hand. “You got any idea where you want to put this?” he asked.

“Ah...well, I was thinking that I’d rather have one that doesn’t really show. It’s for me, not anybody else.” She scooted back from the desk and went over to the design wall, studying some of the pictures. The back of her shoulder seemed innocuous enough, but this was something she was doing for herself. Not to show off and she wanted it personal. Completely personal. She saw one woman’s picture—the woman was pretty damn clearly showing off—she was sexy as hell, Abigale had to admit, but did she really have to have her jeans open like that?

Although one thing was clear. She wasn’t about to have him doing it on her hip like that. She’d have to all but pull up her skirt. Considering the way she was having trouble thinking clearly around him just now...? Yeah. Not happening. “I guess my lower back.”

Glancing down at her skirt, she frowned and turned around to find Zach staring at her. His gaze dropped back down to the sketchbook in front of him. “Will this skirt work okay for this?”

“Yeah. You’re fine. You wanna take a look at any of these?”

She crossed the floor to study the designs and frowned. They all looked so...simple.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well...they’re pretty, but ...” She glanced at the vivid color on his arms, the intricate detail and then back at the sketches. “Aren’t they kind of plain?”

“Sugar, you’ve never had a tattoo before. Trust me. You want simple. They hurt. And the more intricate it gets, the longer it takes.”

“Oh.” Well, technically she realized it wasn’t going to feel good. But having it pointed out to her made some of the nerves inside her flare to life.

A warm hand brushed down her arm and she turned her head, found Zach watching her closely. “You know, this isn’t anything you have to do,” he said quietly.

“Yes, it is. I want to.” Tearing her gaze away from his, she looked at the designs. One in particular had caught her eye the second he’d drawn it. Simple or not, it was lovely. The stylized dragonfly made her smile. It was pretty, fantastical, and silly.

“I think that one is just about perfect,” she said, tapping it with her finger.

“Okay.” He checked the clock. “I need some time to get this ready. Don’t suppose you feel like ordering us in some pizza or something, do you? You can put a movie in while I do this.”

“Sure.” She tugged her phone out and then glanced at him as he pushed back from the desk. “I...ah, well, I didn’t know it was any more complicated than you just doing it.”

A grin tugged at his lips. “Well, if you had the design in mind already or brought one with you, we could move a little quicker. But yeah, it takes a little while.” He gestured down the hall. “The number for the best local pizza place is hanging on the fridge in the break room if you want to use them, or we can use Rosatti’s.”

Once she left the room, Zach dropped his head down on his desk and groaned. He had to do this. He knew he did. And he wasn’t going to deny a very huge part of him wanted to do this—wanted it so bad, his hands were shaking from it, but how in the hell was he supposed to handle this without losing his damn mind?

“By doing your damn job.” She came here because she wanted some ink. So that was what he was going to do.

As he pushed back from the desk, he kicked the chair she’d dragged over and knocked her purse over. The journal fell out as he scooped up the purse. He went to dump them both back on the chair, but found himself flipping through the journal. She hadn’t done much of anything.

But then he stopped.

One page held her neat writing.

She'd titled it. That was typical Abby, although it made him a little nervous. Wreck this life. What the hell ...

But the first few goals had him smiling. Tell off Roger. Cool. Flip off the photographers? He'd been telling her to do that for years. Stop worrying so much. Wonderful.

The tattoo...yes. She was serious.

But the last one had the blood draining out of his head.

Fffffuuuuccckkkkk ...

Snapping it closed, he dumped the book on top of her purse and shot upright. Have a fucking affair? What the hell?

Thunder crashed inside his head. At least it felt that way, although more than likely, he was having a stroke or something. His feet seemed to get in the way as he turned around and started for the door. They needed to talk.

Abby had just broken things off with that prick she'd been engaged to. She was upset and feeling a little lost, needed to do something crazy. He could understand that, he thought. And while he was completely on board with her learning to live a little, the idea of her having a fucking affair with some guy who wouldn't give a damn about her made him want to chew glass and break things. Lots of things.

Still, that journal was her personal property and he hadn't had any right to go rooting through it. He hadn't expected to find anything like that and how could he explain that he'd read it? He couldn't lie to her. But did he tell her that she needed to think this through?

Damn it.

Following the sound of her voice, he stopped in the doorway and made himself close his eyes while she finished placing the order.

Breathe, man. Gotta breathe. Gotta think. Gotta be calm.

First he had to explain just how he'd managed to see it in the journal. He hadn't exactly been prying...well, he had, but he was her best friend and he was nosy, and she knew that, and ...

Feeling the weight of her gaze, he lifted his lashes, not looking directly at her. Not yet.

But Abby wasn't looking at his face.

She was eyeing his arms. Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she tugged on the soft curve and he almost went to his knees at the sight. A second later, she glanced away, but then she looked back.

The thunder that had been crashing inside his head grew louder and louder.

Have a torrid affair.

Damn it, if she was dead set on that idea, she could have an affair with him, he decided.

Even as the idea slammed into him, he tried to brush it aside. He'd kept what he felt wrapped up and buried deep for years. Spilling it now?

Just wondering if you're ever going to do anything about it.

It's complicated ...

Hell. He was lecturing Abby about living life and letting go, and here he was, afraid to grab on.

The woman he wanted like he wanted his next breath was standing right there and he was afraid to even make a move.

She turned away as he stood there, still wrestling with the very thought of it, need burning in him and twisting him into tight, hungry knots. Damn it. Damn it. He needed to do this—

“It will take about an hour or so,” Abby said.

I'm thinking longer—

“They're pretty busy.”

“What?” Distracted, he dragged his eyes away from the curve of her ass and focused on what she was saying.

“The pizza place. They said it would be about an hour or so—asked if they should come around to the back and I told them yes.”

“That’s fine.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Ah...I need to get back to work.”

“I was thinking about going to grab some wine or something.”

Good idea. Wait. “You can’t.” He turned around and headed back into the main area of the shop, found the consent forms he needed. Abby was behind him, although he hadn’t heard her. When he turned around, she was just a foot away and the scent of her went straight to his head and Zach had to wonder just what in the hell he’d done to get this kind of torture thrown into his life.

“I can’t go get wine?” A smile curved her lips as she tipped her head to look up at him.

“I can’t do the tattoo if you do—I won’t put one on anybody who has been drinking. Saves me trouble later on. And you need to read through the consent form and sign. Make it all nice and legal.”

“Ahhh ...” She took the paper and moved over to one of the seats, crossing her legs as she started to read. “I guess I should be totally clearheaded. Otherwise, I could end up having arms like yours.”

“Nah. I might try to talk you into having Forever Nate’s tattooed on your ass, but that’s it.” He gave her a strained smile and turned around. Distance. Serious distance was needed here so he could get back on track.

As he headed down the hall, she called out, “Yeah, sure. I’ll do that when you have a heart with Kate somewhere on you.”

Once he was in his office, he rubbed the heel of his hand over his chest.

What in the hell would she do if she knew he already had her written on his skin?

Not Kate, of course.

He hadn't fallen in love with Kate.

He loved Abby and always had.

He'd loved her when she ran away from California all those years ago...and he'd waited until she stopped running, so he could follow.

He'd loved her when she came to him and told him she was getting married...to a man who didn't deserve her.

And now she was laying out a plan to go and have a torrid affair. With who?

Curling one hand into a fist, he crossed back to his desk.

"Why in the hell not me?"

* * * * *

Wine would have been a good idea, Abby thought. Maybe he didn't want her drinking before he got started, but after? Yeah, it would have helped.

Stretched out on her belly, she closed her eyes and tried to think about anything but the pain.

"You okay?"

Zach's hands on her weren't helping her zone out, she decided. It was one hell of a distraction, but it wasn't helping her zone out.

Swallowing the knot in her throat, she croaked out, "I'm as good as I think I can expect to be."

"And how good is that?"

"Lousy."

He laughed a little. "Why don't you talk to me? We're halfway done," he said. "If you talk, you'll get distracted and it will be done before you know it."

“Okay.” She scrunched her eyes tightly closed and tried to think of something to say. Her mind was blank. “I don’t know what to talk about.”

“You always have something to talk about,” he teased, his voice low and easy and she knew even without looking at him that he was smiling.

“Not right now I don’t.” Well, she could think of a thing or two. But those weren’t really things she could say. Were they? No. She’d thought this through. She wasn’t going down that road with Zach.

“Okay. I’ll help. What is this new life plan you’ve got laid out? Besides the tattoo?”

I plan on flipping my life upside down.

She bit her lip to keep from blurting that out. That would make him worry. She loved him dearly and she didn’t need him worrying about her right now. “It’s not a life plan exactly. It’s just a for now plan,” she said slowly. “Some things to keep me distracted until I figure out what I’m going to do with myself. There’s the tattoo thing, which you’re obviously helping with. I’m going to try to stop worrying so much. One of them, though...I plan on calling up Roger and telling him off.”

He grunted. “Good plan.” Something soft brushed against her lower back and she hissed a little.

Damn it, that hurt. It felt like something was slicing right through her skin.

Distraction. Talk, damn it. About anything.

“I don’t get it,” she said softly, some of the confusion and pain breaking free. “I mean...I thought he loved me. How could he love me and walk away like that? Over the life I used to have? That’s what it’s all about. I used to be an actress. I’m not anymore—I haven’t been for years and I’m happy with that. How can he not see that? If he loved me, wouldn’t he be able to see that I don’t want to act anymore?”

Zach didn’t answer.

Turning her head, she peered over her shoulder at him.

He had his head bowed, the gold-streaked strands falling down and hiding his features from her.

“Zach?”

He sighed. “Do you really want to hear what I have to say about this right now, sugar?”

“I always want to hear what you have to say.”

“Okay.” He used the cloth again on her back and then bent down, staring at her skin like there was nothing else in the world but her back and the design he was inking on her flesh. “He never loved you.”

It was a strike, square to her heart.

She closed her eyes.

“If he loved you, he wouldn’t treat you the way he did. When you walked into a room, it would have showed on his face...if he really loved you. Either he’d have been so busy staring at you because he just had to see you, or he would have been looking away so nobody could see it. Except he was going to marry you—you were his and he had every right to let the world see how he felt.” Zach dabbed at her back again, still focused on the work.

She was almost glad of the pain now, because it was easier to think about how much it hurt than to think about what he had to say.

“But when you walked into a room, that fucking prick was too busy either messing with his damned gadgets or looking at everybody else to see what they thought about you. He was in love with the idea of having Kate the cutie on his arm—the son of a bitch just loved to talk about his fiancée, the actress... and don’t tell me you never noticed. He might have loved the idea of being with Kate...but he never loved you.”

He paused what he was doing and for a brief second, the world fell away as he looked up and met her eyes. “He never loved you, and the son of a bitch sure as hell didn’t deserve you, sugar.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs as his blue gaze held hers.

And then, as it started to feel like all the oxygen in the room had dwindled away, he turned his attention back to the task at hand.

It felt like he was flaying the flesh from her bones. And she decided that was just fine, because now she needed that distraction.

Was he right, she wondered?

She'd noticed, and tried to ignore, Roger's fascination with her old life, but she'd chalked it up to him just wanting to know about her. They were getting married...they should know about each other. But what if Zach was right?

What if Roger had never really loved her at all?

And that thought, as much as it infuriated her, it also made her wonder one simple thing.

Had *she* loved him?

* * * * *

“Okay, here are the important things,” Zach said as he studied the design. It was cute and sexy as hell. If he found out another guy was the one who got to press his lips to that dragonfly where it curved low over the flare of her left hip, he thought he just might go insane. “I’ll send you home with some instructions on how to care for it, but you need to make sure you keep it clean. No scrubbing at it or anything—you need to be gentle when you wash it. I’ve got some ointment I’ll send home with you and I’ll go into detail about using that, too.”

She was still staring at it over her shoulder in the mirror. Worrying her lower lip with her teeth and eyeing the dragonfly like she expected it to take flight or something.

“I need to get the bandage on,” he said softly.

“What? Oh.”

She continued to stand there and he reached up, pressed his hand between her shoulder blades. “Lean forward a little.”

Hunger screamed, jerking on the leash inside him as he eased the waistband of her skirt just a little lower so he could get the bandage in place. Bent over the table like that, he could so easily imagine pulling the hem of the skirt up. Slipping his hand between her thighs. Would she sigh? Moan?

No. This was Abby and she'd freak the hell out and then she'd run away and he'd lose her—

A soft, shaky sigh caught his attention as he smoothed the bandage down. Keeping his head bowed, he checked the mirror from under his lashes and his knees almost buckled.

Fuck.

Abby was staring at their reflection and her face was flushed.

What. The. Hell.

Abruptly, he stepped back and moved away. If he didn't move away immediately, he was going to grab her and do things he should never do to his best friend. The woman he loved. That was the problem. He'd loved her for too long and he was misreading the signals and—

“Do you really think all that's true? About Roger?”

Hearing that shithead's name on her lips snapped his temper. He turned around and glared at her. “If I didn't think that was the case, Abs, I wouldn't have said it. He's an egotistical, arrogant piece of work and he never loved you. You deserved a hell of a lot better and I knew it all along. But he was what you wanted so who in the hell was I to say any different?”

“You're my best friend,” she said quietly.

“Shit.” He went to pass a hand over his face and stopped. He still had his gloves on. Stripping them off, he tossed them into the red trash can near the door and headed over to start cleaning up. “Yes. I am. You asked me what I thought and I told you. But I can't tell you what is in that fucker's head. You can always ask him when you call him to tell him off, although I doubt he'll tell you the truth. He doesn't even see the truth anyway.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

In the middle of gathering up his supplies, he paused. Zach closed his eyes and started to mouth every single foul, nasty curse he could think of. He had four brothers. He could think of a lot of cuss words. Halfway through one that involved anatomical improbabilities and a goat, a hand touched his shoulder.

“Zach?”

Damn it, he couldn't do this. Moving away, he started grabbing his supplies at random. Dumping trash, slamming the tools here, there. Being fucking careless with them, but he couldn't look at her yet. If he did, she might see—

He went to dump the trash and turned around.

Abby was right there, dark brown eyes locked on his face, her shirt still knotted just under her breasts, leaving her belly bare.

“What is this?” she teased. “You make me play twenty questions all the time.”

Edging around her, he focused on cleaning up. “I'm thirty-two years old, Abby. Yeah. I've been in love,” he said, keeping his voice flat and his eyes on the task at hand. “It didn't work out.”

“Why not?”

“She never seemed to notice that I was staring at her when she walked into the room.”

Read more at [Shiloh's site](#).

About

Shiloh Walker has been writing since she was a kid. She fell in love with vampires with the book Bunnacula and has worked her way up to the more...ah...serious works of fiction. Once upon a time she worked as a nurse, but now she writes full time and lives with her family in the Midwest. She writes romantic suspense and contemporary romance, and urban fantasy under her penname, J.C. Daniels. Follow her on [Twitter](#), [BookBub](#) & [Facebook](#). Read more about her work at her [website](#).