

The background is a dark, artistic composition. In the center is a human heart, rendered in a golden, metallic texture. To the left is a large, detailed rose in shades of pink and red. Above the heart are several flowers, including a large pink daisy-like flower and smaller orange and red blooms. Below the heart, a network of thin, golden roots or veins spreads across the dark space. A small, blue, fuzzy object is also visible near the heart. The overall aesthetic is dark and macabre, fitting the book's title.

ABBIE ROADS

DEEYING

EVIL

A Dark
Romantic
Thriller

DEFYING EVIL

A STANDALONE DARK ROMANTIC
THRILLER

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN...

BOOK 1

ABBIE ROADS

Defying Evil by Abbie Roads

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ALSO BY ABBIE ROADS

Beautiful Nightmare Series

Dangerous Dreams

Broken Dreams

Shattered Dreams

Blood is Thicker Than Series

Defying Evil

Capturing Fate

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

It's a sad testament to the state of humanity that we elevate serial killers to the level of mega-celebrity.

—Ellsworth Garyington, MD, *Journal of Human and Philosophical Studies*

The air reeked of dirty pennies and death. The bodies had been removed days ago, but Cain Killion could still *feel* the desperate energy of the dying and almost— *almost*—hear the echoes of their screams imprinted on the bones of the house. He abhorred the sight of blood, and yet here he was, standing in another murder house in front of another wall smeared, splattered, and sprayed with gore.

His heart banged against the cage of his ribs, trying to bust out and make a break for it. A bead of sweat slid in agonizing slowness down the center of his spine.

“You don’t look so good.” MacNeil Anderson stepped into Cain’s line of sight, diverting his attention from the blood. The furrows around Mac’s eyes cut deeper than normal, and three days’ worth of old-man stubble fuzzed his cheeks, giving him a haggard and homeless appearance. Not exactly the look the FBI was going for when they promoted Mac to *senior* special agent.

Cain almost smiled at his own thoughts, but laughter no longer existed in this place. Only horror could thrive here now.

“Do I ever look good when I’m about to...?” Yeah. There wasn’t a name for what he did. To the bureaucrats with their thumbs jammed up their asses, Mac called it profiling—had to call it something. But it wasn’t profiling. Not at all. What Cain had to do with the blood was something worse than profiling. So much worse.

“This is different.” Mac reached up and put his dry palm on Cain’s forehead. “You sick? Have a fever?”

Cain might be thirty years old and had lived on his own since he was eighteen, but Mac had never outgrown the role of his adopted dad.

“You can always walk away.” Mac made this offer at every kill scene.

And every time, Cain’s legs twitched with the urge to run. Only determination, masochism, and the promise of sick satisfaction kept him locked in place. “I’m staying. I always stay.”

“I’d stop calling you out for these cases, but I know you’d just find someone else who would.” Mac’s words were slow and glossed with sadness.

“No one else has the history I have. No one else can do what I do. No one else can give you the information I can.” Yeah. His *profiles* were more accurate, more detailed than anything a traditional profiler could come up with. In the majority of cases, his work guided law enforcement directly to their perpetrator. “It’d be stupid not to call me.” Not to mention he *needed* to be around that dynamic duo—blood and death. They stripped away his mask of normalcy, leaving him naked to the one truth about himself he could never forget.

He was Killer Killion’s Kid—*Triple K*, the media called him. The spawn of a killer with the genetic predisposition to be a murdering machine. One of the only ways Cain had found to curb the ugly urges was to force himself to attend these murder scenes. Force himself to witness the destruction.

His deepest, darkest, dirtiest secret—the thing he would never utter out loud because it terrified him: sometimes he

enjoyed himself.

“Son, you don’t have anything to prove. Not to me.” Mac used a caring tone, but that word—*son*—threatened to transport Cain back to his childhood. Back to his biological father using that word like a curse.

Not going there.

Cain stepped around Mac and moved to look out the window. The Victorian home sat on a miniature peninsula of land that jutted out into a large pond. Such an odd place for a house. A beautiful place—breathtaking and yet eerie in its loneliness and total isolation. Just the kind of place Cain loved.

Had location been a consideration for the killer? Had he finished with his bloody work, then stood in this very spot staring out the window at the water?

Cain sucked in a breath, held it for as long as his lungs would allow, then blew it out slowly. “I know I don’t have anything to prove to you. I do this for me.” He tried to make his tone firm, but it came out a little shaky. Mac the-FBI-guy would hear it, but Mac his-adopted-dad wouldn’t press. Time for a change of subject. “You notice anything odd about this place?”

“It’s not the typical.” Mac’s words were spoken on a sigh. “Not that there is a typical. This just isn’t like any other location I’ve been called to investigate.”

“Yeah. Victorian house. In the woods. On a pond. I get why our guy would like the isolation of this place. But there’s something more. It has to do with...” He had trouble finding the words to describe the gut-level truth inside him. “...all of it. The house. The woods. The pond. The family. It’s like this guy wanted the complete package.”

Mac nodded, his expression serious as a gravedigger. “You get that from the blood?”

“Just a feeling I have.” It was the kind of place he’d choose if he were going to plan a murder. Kind of like how

salt and sweet tasted so good together, this was violence and peace in one location.

Enough stalling. Cain turned away from the window and faced the room.

Three walls were covered in Victorian-era wallpaper—rich gold background, red blossoms on a vine, and fancy peacocks. *Ostentatious* was the word that came to mind. One wall—the longest, largest wall—had been painted the same color as the paper’s background. Yeah. Four walls of peacocks and posies might’ve caused bleeding eyeballs.

Finally, Cain forced himself to look at the blood on the wall. Rosettes of red seeped into the wallpaper, the fat watercolor splotches almost blending in with the flowers.

Mac cleared his throat as if gearing up for a formal speech. “The techs released the scene this morning. They worked ’round the clock to get everything cataloged and bagged so we could get you on this ASAP. The blood is, of course, clean. I wouldn’t have called you in otherwise.” He pointed to the three distinct blood pools. “The family—Dad, Mom, girl—was found here. Killed here too. Forensics places their time of death at—”

“Mac.” Cain spoke the name loud enough to smother whatever the guy had been about to say. “Quiet.” He needed the absence of sound to *see* what happened. And he needed to do it now before he pussied out.

Mac clamped his lips closed, nodded, and moved across the room—out of the way.

Just fucking get it over with.

Cain knelt at the altar of blood. The sweet scent of rotting biological material was an abomination to his nose, and yet foul anticipation crawled underneath his skin. His mind slid sideways like it always did around the red stuff. Back to his childhood. Back to a time when he was very much his father’s son. Back to when blood covered his skin—the slick, silky warmth of it so wrong and yet so horribly soothing at the same time.

He slapped his hands down into the congealed sludge. The coldness sent pleasant shock waves up his arms. He didn't want to feel pleasure, didn't want to enjoy this, but that *other* part of him had terrible intentions. Helpless to stop himself, he smeared his hands around in the red like a kid playing with finger paints. Only when his fingers and palms were coated with the family's blood did he raise them to his face.

A miniscule part of him rebelled against what he was about to do, but the rebellion was quashed before it began. He spread the blood over his forehead, his cheeks, coating his skin in the thick, sweet goo. He painted his neck, his bare arms, then lifted his T-shirt and wiped his hands on his chest.

His head fell back on his shoulders. His breath came in shallow, hyperventilating gulps. From a distance, he heard himself moan—only it wasn't a moan; it was more like the yowling of a feral cat fighting for its life. Or getting ready to mate.

Blood did that to him, was a pleasure and a pain. A gift and a curse.

He had a complicated relationship with blood. He hated it. He loved it. Blood was a conduit, a link, a connection between him and those who slayed souls. Blood opened a doorway, allowing him to step into the minds and bodies of those who found bliss in ending life. He became the killer. He saw what the killer saw. Did what the killer did. Felt what the killer felt.

An incandescent light flashed behind his eyelids. Cain was gone. He was now the killer.

HE STOOD ON A LADDER, rolling simple white primer on the wall.

A song had been locked inside his head for months, and only now was it time to give voice to the words.

Lift your feet when you

Dance around the old well,

Be careful or you'll tumble pell-mell.

Look into the dark, dark, waters

For the blood of your fathers.

Show some courage, young man,

Find your calling, young man.

He loved the song. He hated the song. But that was life, wasn't it? It was all one big paradox.

A breathy sound intruded. He turned on the ladder to see the ones on the floor.

They were laid out in a neat row in the middle of the room. Each of them on their stomachs, hands bound behind their backs and tied to the shackles on their feet, mouths obliterated by duct tape. The male's wrists were hamburger, dripping blood from fighting against the metal cuffs. But none of them struggled now.

Their faces were wet from tears, or maybe sweat—didn't really matter—and splotchy red and pale. The child grunted.

"Do you want to sing along?" He used a soft tone, the same as he would if he were cajoling a whipped dog. "I will let you, but you must sing it properly. No mistakes."

More tears slicked the girl's face and dripped on the drop cloth underneath her. A bubble of snot blew from her nostril and hovered there waiting to pop. She shrank from him. The female seal-humped herself up and over the girl as if to hide the child beneath her body.

Oh well. He wouldn't allow them to destroy the pure freedom of this moment. He turned back to his task, losing himself in his song once more.

Save pomegranate seeds

as payment for the ferryman,

Offer red, red wine

as payment to the bar man.

Carve some red, red meat

as food for the hungry man.

Show some courage, young man,

Find your calling, young man.

And then the wall was done, the completion of it sneaking up on him like a surprise party. He stepped off the ladder, moved it to the side to have an unobstructed view, and then unzipped his painter's coveralls and let them slide down his body.

The cool air whispered over his naked flesh like an endearment, the sensation wonderful after the confines of the material. His head fell back on his shoulders, and he stood there absorbing and savoring. Everything from this moment to his finish would be carefully recorded in his memory. No matter what happened, no one could erase his memories. They were his alone—safe and untouchable—to be lovingly replayed until his death.

The female sobbed, deep throaty sounds similar to gagging. He faced the ones on the floor and used a gentle voice. "I do understand this is distressing for you, but I"—he dropped his tone a couple of octaves to show his seriousness—"Need. Complete. Silence." He took his time, meeting and holding each one of their gazes before he continued. "I need to rest now."

Only when they all quieted did he sit on the couch he had moved to face the wall. The material he'd spread over the cushions—couldn't risk leaving DNA when he left—scratched against his ass and testicles, but that couldn't be helped. He lay back and stretched out, waiting for his body to relax.

The blank canvas before him was a beautiful thing. All the potential in the world was right here. A picture waiting to be born.

He emptied his mind of all thoughts and feelings and stared at the wall. He stared, unblinking, until his vision yellowed and then darkened into something that looked akin to an X-ray. He stared until tears watered his

cheeks and his eyes burned like hot coals in their sockets. Only then did he catch a flash of what needed to be created—all he needed was a glimpse.

Wings. He saw wings.

He was about to create a masterpiece in blood.

A sense of timelessness came over him as he killed and painted. Painted and killed. He lost himself in his work. Not thinking about anything, just letting his hands wield the brushes, mindless of the image he produced. When the blood in his paint container was nearly gone and an image had been born upon the wall, he came back to himself.

He stepped away from the wall, taking more and more of it in with each footstep until he stood on the other side of the room, taking in the full magnitude.

The color contrast of blood on white was as breathtaking and beautiful as a flock of cardinals against the brilliance of snow. Tears burned his eyes. His face stung, and a wild freedom he hadn't experienced in years surged through him. He recognized the feeling. In this moment he was God. The author of destruction. And creation.

The image he'd painted was so... No words existed to convey the gloriousness. Words were small and meaningless compared to this wall.

On the wall—a man knelt, head bowed, hair falling forward, shielding his face from view. Even in that supplicant's position, supremacy and authority radiated from him. He looked like the strongest of warriors after a great battle—exhausted, but not weak. No, never weak. There wasn't an ounce of vulnerability in his sinew, muscle, and bone. Nor was there any delicacy to the lacework of scars marring the skin of his arms. And on his chest, directly over his heart, were two crisscrossed slashes that dripped blood down his torso.

Surrounding him was a magnificent pair of wings. Not the kind you'd see on a sparrow or even on a chubby cupid, but the kind of wings that conveyed power and strength and utter indestructibility.

He loved the picture as he loved himself.

AN INCANDESCENT FLASH and Cain returned to reality, to the stench of decomposing blood smeared over his face.

His brain recategorized everything that he'd just seen and done into the it-wasn't-really-me file. But that didn't take the *feelings* away. The awe spreading through his chest at what he'd seen. The guilt sinking into his gut because he'd had no remorse.

A dull thumping started behind his eyes. Usually when he did his blood work, he was there for only a few seconds before skipping on to the next images and the next. Those flashes gave him a migraine every time, but seeing entire scenes like this... The migraine was gonna be a badass bitch today. He had maybe ten minutes before the pain ratcheted up to the level of ax-buried-in-his-brain.

Mac handed him a black towel—black disguised the blood better than any other color.

“You back?” Mac knelt next to him, his face full of concern, but Cain could see the concealed disgust in the way Mac's mouth turned down at the corners, like he was fighting an outright grimace.

That look—especially when it was aimed at him—always took him back to the moment Mac had found him. Cain had been covered in snot and blood and shame. He had to give it to Mac. The guy had tried to hide his horror, tried to pretend Cain was just a kid, when he'd never been a kid. He'd been more monster than anything else.

Cain scrubbed the material over his face, his arms, wiped his hands. The blood on his body—so thick and dry it smeared *into* his skin—would only come off after a good scouring down in a scalding shower.

He turned his attention to the image on the wall. But... there was no image. Instead, the wall had been painted gold, perfectly coordinated with the rest of the room. Mac must've called him back from his vision before the killer covered up his work with the paint.

Holy.

Fucking.

Christ.

Cain's legs wobbled when he stood. His hand shook like an alcoholic in need of his jolly juice, but he pointed at the wall. "He painted a picture." His brain bashed against the backs of his eyeballs. He wanted to press his hands to his eyes to keep them from exploding out of their sockets, but his hands were smeared with the family's blood. The pain was only beginning.

"I-I don't know what you mean." Mac's tone was full of question.

"He painted the wall white—made a blank canvas. Then he used the family's blood to create a portrait of some guy..." Cain closed his eyes, seeing on the back of his lids the scars lined up and down the man's arms, the slashes over his heart, just like the ones on his body.

"Fuck!" His lids popped open. His gaze automatically sought the wall, hoping to see the actual image again, but gold paint pulsed in his vision from the thumping inside his head. He held his arms out in front of him. Underneath the thin coating of blood on his skin, a network of white slashes ran from his wrists to his shoulders.

The wounds had healed decades ago, but the scars still remained. He pulled his shirt up high and looked down at his chest stained with drying blood. A thick, white crisscrossed scar rested over his heart—cut into his flesh by his father. Every scar on his body, placed there by the man.

"What is it?" Mac's tone was full of question, mixed with a bit of suspicion. "You've got to talk to me. I don't know what's going on."

Cain's heart galloped up and down his rib cage, but he forced himself to speak slowly and quietly—in deference to the ax beating against his skull. He told Mac everything he'd seen and everything he remembered about the artwork in blood. "It's there. You can't see it, but it's there. *I'm* there. Underneath that gold paint."

It took a lot to catch Mac off guard, but score one for Cain—he'd just done it.

Mac's mouth was slightly open, lips twitching like they were trying to form words, until one finally spilled out. "Infrared." The word came out soft and hesitant. "We might be able to see the image using infrared photography." Things went quiet for a moment while Mac stared at the perfectly painted gold wall. "Why paint you? Why not paint Killion? I mean, people are obsessed with you both, but why choose you over him? And this guy made it clear it was you he painted. Without those scars, we would've thought it was Killion."

Yes. Cain was cursed with looking too much like his father—like one of the world's most horrendous killers. It usually took a double take and some head-scratching before people realized he wasn't Killer Killion.

Mac shook his head. "But then our guy covered up what he'd painted. Probably thinking we'd never know the image was there."

"He even fucking signed it." Cain didn't realize until the words exited his mouth that he *had* seen a signature.

"He put his name on it?"

"Not his name. A symbol." Cain wiped his hands harder on the towel, then dropped it on the floor. He yanked his cell from his back pocket and tapped on the ArtPad app. The white light from the phone lasered into his skull. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open and not groan out loud. He drew a Christian cross, then put a hook on the bottom of it that looked like an upside-down question mark. "You've seen this before. I've seen this before."

He showed the image to Mac and watched the guy's face turn pink, then tomato with recognition.

“Yeah.” Cain’s voice was straight as a line. “It’s from my father’s last kill. But he didn’t do this. Not unless Petesville Super Max allows weekend furloughs.”

Mac snorted. “Only way he’s getting out of there is in a body bag.”

Couldn’t happen soon enough. His father was a stain on humanity. “So we know he didn’t do this.”

“But...” Mac’s words disappeared for eight thumps of Cain’s brain. “The girl—Mercy Ledger—made that mark on the wall as she was bleeding out from your father cutting... from her throat being cut. It didn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“*Didn’t* mean anything until today. That symbol was at that scene twenty years ago, and it’s here now.”

Mac shook his head slowly, like an old dog with neck problems. “No one ever questioned her about it. The prints on the wall were hers. Jesus, we need to find Mercy Ledger.”

Mac didn’t say it, but Cain knew how the man’s brain worked. Mac thought Mercy must’ve done this. “She didn’t do this. She’s been locked down in the Center of Balance and Wellness for the past few years.” The words popped out of Cain’s mouth before he censored them. And he really should’ve censored them.

He lifted his arm, pressed his eyes against a clean patch of material near his shoulder, and spoke without looking at Mac. “I...” Yeah. Just what was he going to say? It wasn’t like he could confess that he’d been checking up on Mercy Ledger for the past twenty years. That would make him sound like a damned stalker. And stalking was considered the gateway drug to killing. “Liz told me.” Bold-faced, flat-out, flaming-bright lie. And Mac would know it. The guy was trained to spot a lie at thirty paces. And yet Cain would rather endure the cost of the lie than spend the truth. Call him chickenshit—he would own it. He kept his eyes closed against his shoulder.

“Isn’t that a violation of confidentiality or something?” Mac worded it as a question, but it sounded like a statement. “Liz could lose her nursing license.”

But Liz hadn’t *actually* told him. He’d guessed. He’d known Liz long before he’d met Mac. In those dark days of childhood, his father had forced Cain to work with him at the Center. Liz had been a night nurse and the only person ever to show kindness to him. Even after his father had been caught, she’d remained a part of Cain’s life—babysitting him when Mac was away for work. She was one of the few people Cain considered a friend and the closest thing he’d ever had to a mother. And now he’d tossed her in front of the bus because he was a pussy.

The quiet closed in around him. His head felt like it was about to burst off his shoulders. His stomach started rolling.

“The Center?” Mac finally broke the quiet. “That’s a horrible irony.”

And it was. That Mercy Ledger had lived the past few years of her life among the same hallways his father had roamed as a janitor was beyond irony. It was downright wrong.

In a recent online auction, the knife Adam Killion used in the Ledger family murders sold for a record-breaking \$2.3 million. The Son of Sam law prohibits convicted felons from profiting from their crimes, but someone just made a fortune.

—J. C. Brown, www.criminalnewsinvestigations.com

Mercy Ledger sat in the therapy circle with eleven other crazies from Ward B. The pungent funk of unwashed bodies and rotting chicken—thanks to Bo Coray and his chicken fetish—hung heavy in the air. The suicidal, homicidal, or just plain psychotic didn't care about trivial things like hygiene.

Dr. Payne wore his usual attire—three-hundred-dollar shirt, perfectly tailored pants, and shoes so shiny that when he stepped in front of her, she could see her reflection in them. He looked too *GQ* to be a psychiatrist in this underfunded, overpopulated dump of a mental hospital.

He handed her a sheet of paper. In what had once been bold letters, but now were more in the realm of fuzzy gray from over-photocopying, it read:

GRATITUDE JOURNAL

Practice an attitude of gratitude!

List three things you are grateful for today!

GRATITUDE? Seriously? After two years on Ward B, there wasn't a whole lot to be thankful for.

Dr. Payne held out the box of crayons to her. They didn't trust the residents of Ward B with pens or pencils. Guess no one had ever gotten shanked with a Crayola. "What color are you going to choose?" His words themselves were benign, but each syllable was threaded with judgment.

Her pulse pounded in her veins, her face got hot, and her hand holding the paper began to shake.

The vibe that came off Dr. Payne was something she recognized. Ever since that long, terrible night with Killion, she'd been able to sense people's bad intentions as if she had an early warning system. It had to do with their energy—it connected with her differently than with most people. But then most people hadn't survived what she'd survived.

Her mind's early warning system flashed her snatches of tomorrow's session with Dr. Payne. If she selected the yellow or orange crayon, he would say she was trying too hard to be cheerful. If she picked red, he would accuse her of having angry or violent thoughts. If she grabbed blue or gray, he'd declare her depressed. If she chose black, he'd claim she wanted to disassociate. Whatever the color, he would make sure she was wrong, forcing her to spend all of tomorrow's session defending tonight's color selection. And if she wasn't successful in her defense, he'd use that as an excuse to have more private sessions with her.

"Mercy. Take a crayon." Dr. Payne's voice sounded like a calm ocean, but underneath the surface, hungry sharks swam.

Shit. She grabbed the purple crayon.

"I can stay after group to help you process your reluctance." His tone was full of fake helpfulness.

"No. I'm sorry. I was just daydreaming." Great. Now she was going to have to come up with a reason why she'd stared at the damned crayon box so long without choosing one. It wasn't like she could tell him the truth—that she knew what

he wanted and had been trying to outthink him. The level of control he had over her life scared her nearly as much as Killion had all those years ago.

He moved on to Bo, handing him the paper and giving him a crayon, but she still felt the burden of his gaze on her: watching her, assessing her, looking for an excuse—any excuse—to have more one-on-one sessions with her.

She settled her hand over the six-inch ridge of puckered skin scarring her neck. The old injury was always cold, and the heat of her palm soothed something inside her, reassuring her soul that she had already survived the worst of life—and she would survive Ward B and Dr. Payne too.

But she'd better get her hand off her neck before he decided she needed to talk about Killion again. Dr. Payne enjoyed her tragedy too much.

She moved her hand away from her throat, and the scar went cold. She held the purple crayon by the fingers of both hands.

“For tonight’s education group...” Dr. Payne used his Moses-parting-the-seas voice and took the empty seat next to her. He *always* sat next to her. “...we’re going to talk about happiness and some of the research being conducted in the field of positive psychology. A group of Harvard psychologists have found that happy people have a particular set of habits.”

None of the patients on Ward B gave two shits about happiness. They were all too damned crazy to care about such an elusive term. Now, if this evening’s group had been about how to score smokes, line up conjugal visits, or get extra pudding cups, most of the patients would have been taking notes.

“I’m already happy!” Bo let out a high-pitched little-girl giggle that sounded nine kinds of wrong coming from a three-hundred-pound guy. “I’m Bojangles! See!” He framed his face with his pudgy hands and smiled an open-mouthed, deranged clown smile.

He called himself Bojangles, partly because of his chicken fixation and mostly because the name sounded like a clown's name, and that's exactly what Bo thought he was—a clown. That crazy smile and his carrot-colored Afro only solidified the delusion.

"I'm so happy!" Bo swayed violently in his seat, bumping into her and knocking her into Dr. Payne, whose arm went around her, locking her against his hard body. He held her too hard and too wrong. The room fell away. Bo's shouting vanished. The only thing that existed was his horrible strength, trapping her against him, and the urge—the almost uncontrollable urge—to scream.

"Are you all right? If he hurt you..." Dr. Payne's breath fanned across her cheek, smelling of sweet tea and summer. He should be the one who smelled like rotting chicken. Her body went into rigor mortis. She couldn't move or breathe or think.

Bo jumped to his feet and moved into the center of the circle. Dr. Payne let her go. What had felt like an eternity of being pinned against him had probably lasted only two seconds, since no one seemed to notice.

"Let's be happy together!" Bo hollered at the top of his volume range and began twirling like a morbidly obese ballerina. "Bojangles. Bojangles. Bojangles." He sang his name at an ear-throbbing volume.

Dr. Payne didn't move, didn't blink, just watched Bo with an expression of absolute indifference on his face. That was part of how Mercy had known he was a sociopath. He never reacted normally—and he didn't have the excuse of being pumped full of anti-psychotics and sedatives like the rest of the group. He never seemed threatened, no matter the situation. Probably because he was always the biggest threat in the room.

Bo pirouetted to a stop in front of her. "Dance with me, baby doll!" He snatched her up against his flabby body and hurled them around. His rotten-chicken stench assaulted her nose, but no matter how bad he stank, she wasn't scared of

him. Bo would never intentionally hurt her or anyone else. He was like a mastiff pup. He didn't understand how big he was, or how strong, or how his size could intimidate.

"Bo, I don't feel like dancing right now." She pushed against his pudgy man boobs.

His bottom lip jutted out shiny with saliva, but he stopped and let her go, just like she knew he would.

His chest bellowed, his lungs wheezed and whistled. Hauling around three hundred pounds would do that to a person.

"Now why don't you sit down, catch your breath, and let Dr. Payne finish tonight's—"

Bo began toppling over sideways, taking his time to fall, the way a giant tree goes down in a thick forest. She reached out to grab him, but his momentum and weight were too much. He landed—knee, hip, then shoulder—the sound of flesh slapping concrete punctuated by the thud of heavy bones. Where Bo had been only a second before, Dr. Payne now stood, staring at her. Not at the man on the floor.

And that's where her ability to sense bad intentions fell short. Spontaneity. When someone acted without planning, her internal warning mechanism failed every time. She could never fully rely on it.

"What'd you do to him? He was done. He was going to sit down." The moment the words flew out her mouth, she wished she could suck every syllable back inside and swallow them down whole.

An unnatural silence engulfed the room. No one in the group moved, no one spoke, no one checked on Bo. They all stared at her. At her. As if she'd done something wrong. And she had done something wrong. She'd challenged Dr. Payne—talked back to him instead of being subservient. And worst of all, she'd shown caring for Bo.

There was a terrible pattern to her life, one she tried to deny, one she tried to tell herself wasn't real. But the undeniable truth, the thing that loomed over her ever since that

night with Killion, was that if she cared for someone, they were bound to get hurt.

But didn't anyone else care about Bo? Or that Dr. Payne had somehow caused Bo to fall? She wanted to scream at the group, at Dr. Payne, but clamped her lips firmly closed.

Click. The sound was a mini explosion in Mercy's head. Her gaze shot to the panic button clipped to Dr. Payne's belt and his finger just lifting off the pad.

Her stomach kicked. *No, no, no.* He wouldn't have hit the button because of her words. He wouldn't put her on Ward A just for questioning him. Or would he? On Ward A, he'd have supreme control over her. No interaction with anyone except for him. Just what he wanted and what she'd managed to avoid for the past two years.

Dr. Payne's eyes were black and unfeeling, his lips pinched in a promise of terrible things to come. He reached into his pants pocket and withdrew a syringe, uncapped it, and took a step toward her.

An odd buzzing sound started in her ears, and her vision narrowed until the only thing she saw was that syringe held between his perfectly manicured fingers. She couldn't let him inject her. Couldn't let him knock her so completely out that she would be unconscious and then in a sedated, vegetable state for days afterward.

Dr. Payne jammed the needle in Bo's ass cheek. Mercy sucked in a lungful of air—she hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath.

Two security guards and two male nurses rushed into the room. She moved away from Bo and stumbled back to her chair, collapsing so hard on the metal seat her tailbone rang.

“Transport him to Ward A.” Dr. Payne returned to his place beside her. “I'll be down to assess him in a few minutes.”

She wanted to cringe away from him, but forced her body to stillness and watched as each member of the security team

took an arm or leg and dragged Bo out of the room. He weighed too much to carry.

“We’ll be cutting group short tonight. Everyone fill out your papers, return them to me, and then go to your rooms.”

Dr. Payne passed her a fresh sheet of paper and the pink crayon, her paper and crayon having somehow disappeared in all the commotion. Using her leg for a solid surface, she scribbled the same thing on all three lines.

I’m grateful to be alive.

I’m grateful to be alive.

I’m grateful to be alive.

Without glancing at Dr. Payne, she handed in her paper and crayon and strained to walk from the room, instead of run. Because she wanted to run. She wanted to be far away from Dr. Payne and Ward B and this miserable existence where everything she did was under a microscope.

In her room, she didn’t bother with the overhead fluorescents. She went straight to her barred window and stared out into the night. There were no distant lights dotting the horizon, no stars twinkling in the sky. Nothing to indicate an entire world existed beyond her pane of glass. Just a void—a massive, black nothingness stretching on to infinity. The emptiness, the illusion of being alone, soothed her.

Her door clicked and swung open. She clamped her teeth together and breathed a quiet huff of frustration. Privacy didn’t exist on Ward B. To the staff, privacy equaled delinquency. The wavy image of a person reflected on her window. Liz—the charge nurse—always checked on her after she’d done everyone else. She understood Mercy’s need to experience the only peaceful moments of the day.

“All good here. I’ll get in bed in a few minutes.” Mercy forced lightness into her tone. If she let any irritation or tension leak into her voice, she risked Dr. Payne finding out.

“Mercy—” A man’s voice.

She startled, a jerking of muscle so violent it felt as if she'd been electrocuted. She whirled from the window to face him.

“—I need to make sure Bo didn't hurt you.”

Her mind rebelled against the message her eyeballs were sending. Dr. Payne stood in her doorway. He never entered a patient's room. And male staff were not permitted in the rooms of female patients. But here he was and here she was, and this wasn't going to end well.

Her heart went off like a cannon.

“I'm responsible for you. You're under my care. I won't let anyone interfere.” Dr. Payne wore a grin, his deep dimples giving him a look all the women—staff and patients alike—adored.

“I'm fine. No harm done.” There was only a slight tremor in her voice. Maybe he wouldn't notice. She cleared her throat and aimed for a stronger tone. “Liz knows my routine. She'll be in to do a check in a few minutes.” Yeah. Remind him that someone might catch him if he tried anything. “She's fine with me being awake as long as I don't bother anyone else.”

Dr. Payne took a step into the room. “Liz is dealing with Bo.”

Slowly, silently, the door began to fall shut behind him. The light from the hallway pinched off inch by inch until only darkness stood between them. The barely audible click of the latch sent a cold rush of adrenaline through her limbs.

Her internal warning system went off, and she knew—knew in the way of instincts and reflexes and urges, knew with a clarity beyond understanding—what he had planned for tonight. For her. The images flickered through her mind almost like memories, but they were of things to come. Him forcing her facedown over her bed. Him taking what she wouldn't give. Him making it hurt. Him making her bleed. Him marking her as his.

Fear licked down her spine and bit into her guts, but she refused to cower before him. She wouldn't be an easy victim.

Not her. Never her. Never again. And if he didn't know that, it just went to prove how much he sucked at his job.

She would handle this. She'd been through worse. She'd *survived* worse. This time, all she needed to do was get to the hallway where the lights were on and the cameras were rolling and there was always someone at the nurses' station. Ten feet. That's all that stood between her and safety.

She walked toward him. Better to be on the offensive instead of being forced to react. She put an extra sway to her hips and prayed he'd be too distracted to realize she was going for the door—not him.

He watched her, that dimpled predatory smile never leaving his lips. Her heart somehow exited her chest, floating up into her head and pounding in her ears. She stopped a mere foot away from him.

Calm. Keep calm. Breathe in slow. Exhale slow. She could freak all she wanted later. But not now. Not when it really mattered.

Slowly, she shifted to his side, a mere two feet from the door. No sudden movements. Not yet. Not until she knew she could grab the handle and get out into the hallway before he stopped her.

“What do you think you're doing?” His words were liquid nitrogen to her blood. She froze.

He turned to face her, moving farther into her space. He wasn't much taller than she was, his dead eyes and taunting mouth right on the level of hers—only inches away.

Do something. Do anything. Don't let him touch you. Her mind screamed the words to be heard over her heart thundering in her ears.

With every ounce of force she possessed, she rammed her knee into his knobby knockers.

He didn't make a sound. He didn't move. Didn't react.

Had she missed?

He struck out with his fist so fast she didn't have a chance to flinch, block, or move. The impact sent a shock wave of agony through her face, the sensation so intense she couldn't feel the epicenter. She stumbled backward, lost her footing, and landed on her ass. The impact vibrated through every bone in her body like a plucked violin string.

Dr. Payne bent double, cupping his pulverized parts. He shuffle-walked the one step to her, drew back his foot, and slammed it into her ribs. Air whoofed out of her. She collapsed back, rolling and writhing to escape the fire in her side.

How long she lay there, she didn't know. But suddenly, Dr. Payne's face was in her line of sight, and his intentions were in her head. Her mind flashed through images of the stark walls of Ward A, of herself drugged beyond awareness, of Dr. Payne amusing himself with her mind and body.

She tried to move toward the door, but her body wasn't able to comply. She was lost in an inferno of pain.

Dr. Payne ruffled his hands through his hair, making it messy. He pulled at his perfectly tucked-in shirt, making it sloppy, then knelt down next to her.

She scooted away from him, but he grabbed her hand, forced her fingers open, gripping her middle finger in his fist. Was this some new form of torture? He yanked her finger to his face, jammed the nail against his cheek, then scraped it down over his skin, leaving a red trough of blood. He slammed her hand against the floor, but she had reached a familiar place. A numb place. A place where physical pain no longer hurt her. He could slit her throat like Killion had, and she wouldn't feel it.

He stood and hit the panic button, then pulled another syringe from his pocket.

“You were the reason Bo acted out tonight. You stormed off from group without completing your assignment. I came here to check on you. You attacked me. You called me Killion. You've had a break from reality.”

The whimpers and whines of a wounded animal filled the room. The sound came from her, and no matter how hard she tried to shush herself, something deep inside had broken and wouldn't be soothed.

He raised the syringe over his head and slammed it down with all the force of a large hunting knife, stabbing her in the thigh. She watched as the clear fluid emptied into her body.

“I think it's time we stepped up your treatment. ECT should help. I'll plug you in a couple times. See how you behave toward me then.”

A wave crashed over her, but it wasn't a wave, it was her body. No, it wasn't her body moving, it was the drug hitting her system, pounding its way to her mind. The world went gray. She fought to stay on the surface, to not let the sedative pull her under, but the world went dark and she drowned under the drug's effect.

Hybristophilic—A person who finds murderers and rapists sexually appealing.

—Fern Boyd, PhD, *Kissing Killers: The Psychology Behind Those Who Love Deviants*

Three days later...

The moon beamed pearlescent rays across the sky, but none of the beauty touched the expansive lawn around the Center. The grounds were tarnished with a hopelessness that could never be polished away. How could anyone get better when the environment itself sucked at your soul?

Cain hated the place. Had hated it from that first night his father brought him to work on the night shift. Cain had been just five years old and was forced to split the duties—emptying the garbage, mopping floors, cleaning toilets, scrubbing vomit and feces off the walls on Ward A. By far not the worst of his childhood memories.

From the dense woods surrounding the building, a coyote yipped and howled, the sound a wild combination of mournfulness and exuberance.

He pulled his cell from his pocket and hit the screen. It was 3:35 a.m. Liz was five minutes late. That didn't bode well for Liz or him or Mercy. Or their clandestine meeting.

He had only two questions for Mercy. Did she remember drawing the symbol on the wall all those years ago? And what

did it mean to her?

Since Dr. God Complex refused to let Mac meet with Mercy because it might *jeopardize* her treatment, Cain had decided to use the back door—literally, he stood at the Center’s back door—to get answers. There had to be a goddamned reason a picture of him—in blood—was signed with the same symbol Mercy had drawn as she lay bleeding out from the wound caused by his father. He just needed to figure out that reason.

His neck itched and his body twitched. He shifted from one foot to the other, unable to stand still. Christ. He felt like an ADHD kid hopped up on sugar and trying to rein in a surplus of energy. Only it wasn’t energy pumping through him. It was anger. Rage. Fury. That’s what this place did to him. Made him into the sullen boy he’d once been who dreamed of wrath and revenge.

“Mercy.” He whispered her name to the moon, and some of the anger evaporated. “Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.” He used the word as a mantra, reveling in the taste of those vowels and consonants inside his mouth. Just saying her name calmed him.

From inside the building, a rusty bolt scraped and banged, loud as a cherry bomb. The door swung inward, the squeal of old hinges shrieking through the night. In the woods, the coyote howled, as if claiming its territory against the odd-sounding intruder.

Liz backed out the door, pulling a wheelchair. Twenty-five years ago, when he’d first met her here at the Center, she’d looked like a mom—a smile on her face, encouraging words on her lips, and a stern don’t-break-the-rules attitude. Now she looked like the grandma version with her gray hair and pleasant plumpness.

“Getting her out here was easier than I expected.” Liz didn’t exactly whisper, but she didn’t speak at a normal volume. “Ward A doesn’t have cameras since everyone is locked down. Thank the angels the night shift workers are

notorious slackers. We didn't run into anyone." Liz turned the wheelchair to face him.

The woman in the chair slumped in the corner of the seat, head hanging as if it were too heavy to lift. Her hair dangled in limp, stringy hanks that reminded him of blond worms.

"This isn't my Mercy." Shit. The *my* had just slipped out. He didn't look at Liz—didn't want confirmation that she'd heard the slip.

His Mercy had always been strong. Even at ten years old, throat wrapped in a fat wad of bandages, she'd seemed oddly poised and imperturbable during all the media interviews. She had survived something worse than what he had endured and yet retained her strength. She'd inspired him, intrigued him, and tied herself to him without ever knowing.

And she'd always been pretty. All strawberry-blond hair and turquoise eyes and features that he'd just wanted to stare at because they made him feel warm and nice on the inside. He'd never gotten close enough to smell her, but he imagined her scent to be a cross between fresh baked cookies and sunshine—not body odor and vomit like this woman.

"It is her. See what he's done to her?" Liz's voice snapped like a whip.

"Who?" Cain asked the question to Liz, but his gaze remained locked on Mercy. She hadn't moved, hadn't spoken, didn't even seem alive.

"Dr. Payne. He's had a sick fascination with her from the first. Probably because she was the only person on Ward B who didn't deserve to be there. He'd been pretty harmless until three days ago, when he moved her to Ward A."

"Why the fuck is she even here if she's not...?" He'd assumed her past—what his father had done to her and her family—had finally caught up with her. He knelt in front of her wheelchair.

"Don't you curse at me, boy." Liz's tone was all angry mom, making him feel like a bad kid. "Her official record says undifferentiated schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress

disorder. But I've seen psychotic. She's not psychotic and never has been."

He'd never spoken to Mercy before, never been this close to her, never dared to. He'd been a wuss—too damned scared of her reaction to approach her. She had every right to hate him. It was his father who had killed her entire family, his father who had slit her throat, and his father's blood ran in Cain's veins.

He touched Mercy's hair, feeling the damp stickiness of it on his fingers, and smoothed it back over her shoulder. Moonlight gave him more than enough illumination to see. Mercy's eyes were half open and half rolled up in her head. A dark shadow marred the side of her face, spreading up and around her eye. His insides went arctic. "Who hit her?" The words exploded, loud and angry and conspicuous into the night. All the rage he'd suppressed came surging back into his body, tensing his muscles and nestling in his bones.

"Dr. Payne *claims* she was hallucinating and thought he was Killion."

Cain flinched as violently as if Liz had struck him. It was a reflex he couldn't subdue, even after all these years. Hearing his father's name still had that effect on him.

"I don't buy it. The good doctor *claims* he was in the process of subduing her when she fell and hit her face. And her ribs. Seems a bit odd that the bruise where he injected her with the sedative is the exact size of a man's fist around the needle mark."

Cain sucked in a slow breath to calm the anger revving through his muscles. He felt like yelling at Liz for everything that had been done to Mercy, but the rational part of him knew it wasn't her fault. He metered and measured his voice to force it to sound calm. "You reported him, right?"

"There's no point. It's his word against whose? Mercy's? My speculation?" Liz's tone contained the anger that Cain had been trying to control. She was as pissed off about this as he was.

“Dr. Payne *claims* she’s been unresponsive to meds, so now he’s shocked her twice in two days and still has her on enough meds to sedate an angry bull elephant. But you won’t find any of that on her official record. If it ain’t recorded, it didn’t happen.” Liz’s lips pinched so tight the tiny wrinkles around them turned into chasms. “At this stage, the damage isn’t permanent. Only short- term memory loss. But the longer she’s with him... I’m not risking my job so you can talk to her. She’s unable to talk. I’m risking it so you can save her life. You have to take her away from here before he destroys her.”

Liz’s words fell into his brain one by one, each lining up until the meaning finally hit him. He jerked back from Mercy and stood. “No way. You know I can’t.”

“You will.”

“I just wanted to ask her a question. Maybe two. That’s all. I can’t take her. Be responsible for her.” He was going to hit Liz with his best shot. “She wouldn’t want me to take her. I look too much like *him*.” Cain backed a few steps away from Liz and Mercy.

“Cain”—Liz had that take-no-attitude tone—“if you don’t take her, Dr. Payne is either going to turn her into a vegetable or kill her. Do you want her emotional or physical death on your hands? Because it will be if you walk away.”

His heart jerked. Liz’s words were a bull’s-eye straight through everything he feared most—being responsible for someone’s death. And Liz fucking knew it. In that moment, for the first time in his life, he hated her a little for using his fear against him. “I never thought you would stoop so damned low.”

She gave the wheelchair a shove toward him. “I can tolerate your anger, even your hatred, but I can’t endure sitting back and watching Dr. Payne kill her a little more each day. If I take her, they’ll just find her and put her back in here. Her best chance is with you. No one would ever think to look for her with you.”

Cain opened his mouth to say something, to argue the point, but his brain went devoid of thought. Liz slowly turned

and walked back into the Center. She shut and locked the door behind her. Only when she was gone did Cain find the words.

“Holy fucking Christ!”

He was going to kidnap Mercy Ledger.

CAIN HAD SPENT THREE HOURS, a third of a tank of gas, and a metric ton of worry driving across Ohio. The windshield wipers thwacked a steady rhythm—not from rain, but from a fog so thick it was like driving through cotton candy. Outside his Mustang, the world had completely vanished. Gone was the thin strip of curving blacktop, gone were the forests and low hills, gone was his ability to see more than three feet in front of the car’s headlights. The effect was eerie and alien and oddly serene. Almost the same way snow makes everything feel peaceful and quiet and transforms the landscape into something completely different.

He slowed to a pace just above turtle speed and searched the vapor for any indication of the turnoff leading to the cabin. Even on a bright, sunshiny day, it was hard to see the lane hidden in the woods.

Hours ago, he’d shifted his rearview mirror to aim at her, not out the window. She lay across the backseat, the same way she’d been the entire time, yet something inside him still couldn’t believe Mercy Ledger was in his car, and he was going to keep her hidden until... until when? He couldn’t hide her forever. Someone was going to notice she was missing. Someone was going to start searching for her. And that someone might even try to get her put back in the nut ward.

Just let them try. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles burned.

In her sleep, Mercy shuddered as if the temperature hovered in the frozen zone, yet her face was slicked with sweat and her pallor hung somewhere between gray and ghastly.

Withdrawals. From all the meds. Just how bad were her withdrawals going to get? He hadn’t thought to ask Liz, and

she hadn't bothered to tell him. Worst-case scenario was what? Seizures? Death? Could someone die from suddenly going off psych meds? No. He was not going to have Mercy's death on his conscience. That was why he'd taken her in the first place. To save her.

"We're almost there, Mercy." Once again, saying her name calmed his mind. Her name seemed to contain magical properties.

He yanked his gaze away from her and back to the fog along the passenger side of the car. A break in the solid white line. A gap in the trees. Found it.

He pulled onto the rutted, gravel road squeezed in among the greenery. The car rocked from side to side, shifting and moving Mercy's body along with it. She moaned, a long, low sound of primal pain that punctured his heart and popped the air in his lungs. He eased his foot down on the brake and slowed to lessen the jostling. And yet she still didn't awaken.

How much pain must she be in for her to moan while unconscious?

A shadow formed in the gloom in front of the vehicle, then solidified into the shape of the cabin. The place looked quaint with its large windows and welcoming front porch. But to him, it wasn't charming. It was a jail, a prison of sorts, a place where he locked away the nightmares. The one place where he didn't have to hide the ugliness inside him—where he could purge himself and lance the festering thoughts in his head.

He parked alongside the structure and turned off the car. The sudden silence screamed in his ears as it always did after the constant roar of the Mustang's engine.

"We're here." He had to speak. Couldn't let the silence reign. Needed sound. Needed noise. Needed a distraction. "I, uh, have to go unlock the door." Part truth. Part lie. He had to unlock the door, then he needed to hide his sketchbooks. He couldn't allow her to find the evidence of the evil inside him. "I'll be right back."

He got out of the car and shut the door softly, but the white mist distorted the sound and bounced it around the small clearing like a drum solo. The air smelled of pine and tasted of remembered pain.

Maybe he shouldn't have brought her here. He'd known not to take her back to his place. There was no evidence of him being at the Center and no chance that Liz—if grilled, if pressured, if threatened—would ever rat on him. But if anyone looked close enough at her, they'd find him.

This was the only completely safe place he knew of. It was off grid—no electric, no gas, no running water. Not even Mac knew Cain came here. No one would be able to find him. He rented the place by the year. The old lady who owned it was mostly blind, happy to take cash, and didn't ask questions for an extra five hundred dollars.

Anywhere else, Cain risked being seen. Even though it had been twenty years ago, too many people still recognized him as Killion's kid—either that or they thought he was his father for a split second until their minds had enough time to catalog the differences.

He walked up on the porch, the boards creaking a muted tone from the damp. The wooden rocker he had sat on for years looked down over the lane as if a ghost sat sentry. Cain unlocked the door and stepped inside the one-room cabin.

His eyes immediately locked on the sketchbooks. On the mantel above the stone fireplace were his personal portraits of blood and murder and death. Heaviness settled across his shoulders, then sank into his guts. Oh, he recognized that feeling. Knew it intimately.

Shame.

He'd been cozying up with that emotion since he'd been a child. Shame was a stalker, always there, always watching, always waiting for its chance to ravage his fragile hold on normalcy.

He scooped the books off the mantel and into his arms. Shit. Where the fuck was he going to put them? He hadn't

thought beyond the need to hide them.

The room was sparse. A fireplace. A full bed. A large cupboard that contained foodstuffs and supplies. A small table and chair. No good place to ensure she wouldn't stumble across them.

Outside. He'd put them out there. He opened the cupboard, grabbed a plastic grocery sack stuffed in the back corner, shoved the books inside, then went back out to the porch and around the side of the cabin to the woodpile. He shifted the top logs forward and shoved the sack into the space between the cabin and the wood, then restacked the logs until they appeared untouched.

He forced himself to walk calmly back to the car, despite the way his heart skittered around his chest as if he'd just escaped a death sentence. He flung open the driver's door and scooted the seat forward. He'd never wished for a back door on his car until this moment. He contorted himself into an unnatural position—feet and legs on the ground outside the car, torso and arms inside, trying to gather her limp body to him, while not causing her any more pain or banging his damn head on the ceiling.

God, she smelled of sweat and barf and a chemical stench that he assumed was the meds working their way out of her system. He backed out of the space, cradling her to him, and began walking toward the cabin.

“Uhh...” The sound wisped from between her lips, yet it may as well have been an air horn to his ears. Every muscle, every fiber, every cell inside him locked on her. Her head lolled against his chest, her arm flopped out at an awkward-looking angle. “Idontfeelgood.” The sentence came out in one slurred mass that took his mind a moment to translate into individual words, each with its own meaning.

“You're safe now. No more drugs. No more shock treatments.” In the light of day, the bruise on her cheekbone was a grotesque mound of black. Christ. Her cheek could be broken. If he ever happened across Dr. Payne... “I've got you, and I won't let anyone hurt you.”

Her head jerked against his chest, and she uttered something else that he couldn't understand.

“Everything's going to be—”

Her body tensed so suddenly he almost dropped her. A slick stream of vomit gushed from her mouth, sliding down her chin into her loose smock top and wetting his chest. He stopped and stared down at her to make sure she'd finished and wasn't aspirating. When nothing else came out, he tilted his head back on his shoulders and looked up into the foggy abyss.

This day was just getting better and better.

He tried to find a breath free of stench, but he was surrounded. He thought she'd stunk before? That had only been the plateau on the way to this new peak of reek. “Okay. So here's the plan, and I need you to be on board with it. I'm going to have to clean you up. You stink. You gonna be okay with that?”

Her face, mashed in the barf on his chest, gave a little jerk.

“I'm taking that as agreement.” He carried her onto the porch and set her in the rocking chair. She was too weak to sit up straight and slumped half over the side. Oh well. For the moment, it was the best he could do.

Eyes still closed, she mumbled something that he chose to hear as acceptance.

“I'll be right back.” He yanked his shirt over his head and let it fall on the porch floor. *Splop*.

Inside the cabin, he grabbed a sweatshirt for her to wear—she seemed so cold—a washcloth, a towel, and a bar of soap, and set all of it out on the porch rail. She hadn't moved from the way he'd set her. Then he went around back to the hand pump and pumped fresh spring water into the bucket.

It was gonna be cold, but at least she'd be clean.

Back on the front porch, he set the pail down and stared at her. There was so little left of the Mercy he had covertly watched for so many years. The woman in the rocker was frail

and fragile and bruised. Nothing like the dignified, composed woman she had always appeared to be.

“Okay... So...here we go. I’m just going to take your shirt off and clean you up.” His face went hot—goddamn, he was probably blushing. Fucking blushing. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen a naked woman before. He’d seen too damn many. The hybristophiliacs—he hated using their cutesy name, Killer Killion’s Kissers—loved flashing him their boobs like he was their own personal Mardi Gras. They couldn’t have sex with an actual serial killer, so why not fuck the son that looks almost like one? Or at least they tried. Both women and men. *Yeah. Not fun.*

His hands shook like a junkie’s. *Get a goddamned grip.* He clenched his fists so tight they trembled, then released them. Much steadier now. He reached for her shirt and stopped—his gaze locked on the thick, puckered scar ringing her neck like a pink choker collar. How she’d survived was a miracle no doctor had been able to explain, and seeing it up close, Cain had to agree. Nothing short of magic and wonder and a bit of divine intervention had allowed her to live through that. She really was a special human being.

He began drawing her shirt up her torso. He didn’t mean to ogle, but he couldn’t help noticing—he wasn’t blind—the concave stomach, the line of ribs, the... black goddamned bruise the size of a softball. The edges were a fading rainbow of color from stormy sky to sage to sick yellow.

Liz hadn’t been bullshitting him. “Do your ribs hurt?”

“Likeasonofabitch,” Mercy murmured, her words slurred but understandable. He was surprised she was even awake enough to respond. She lay slumped exactly as he had set her and looked completely unconscious.

The meds. Maybe her mind was aware, but her body wasn’t quite up to speed.

“I’ve got to pull your shirt up over your head. Can you lift your arms for me?”

This time she didn't say anything and didn't move. So much for her cooperation. He started with her right arm, lifting and threading it through the shirt, then did the same with her left, moving extra slow because of her ribs, and finally pulled the material over her head. She sat bare-chested in front of him, and the one thing his eyes locked on wasn't her breasts or the bruise. It was the filigreed cross scored—scarred—into the flesh over her heart.

As we near the twenty-year anniversary of the Ledger murders, it is important to remember that Adam Killion has never confessed. To this day, when confronted with DNA and scientific evidence, he refuses comment. Friends and even some staff at Petesville Super Max have periodically questioned whether this man could actually commit the crimes he's incarcerated for because he always seems like "such a nice, normal guy."

—Lee Sheets, the *Manseon Dispatch*

Wood crackled and snapped from the small blaze in the fireplace. Shadows and bronze light fought each other for dominance in the small room—the shadows seemed to be winning. Cain didn't mind one bit. The darkness concealed him, smothering the constant worry over Mercy's reaction when she finally recognized him.

She'd been conscious, unconscious, and in some crazy in-between state, but from one moment to the next hadn't been able to remember a danged thing—courtesy of the shock treatments. And so far, she'd been too out of it to recognize him, but the time was coming.

He settled his hand on Mercy's forehead—an act that reminded him of Mac—and felt her temperature. For the past two days, she'd run hot with a fever, vacillating between chills and sweats as the drugs metabolized out of her system. But now, her skin felt cool and dry. The fever had broken. Finally.

They were turning a corner, speeding down a one-way highway that would end either in her acceptance or her total rejection of him.

Her eyes blinked open so suddenly he yanked his hand off her head as if he'd been caught coppin' a feel.

"How are you feeling?" He'd asked her the question a dozen times over the past days, but hadn't always gotten an answer.

She turned her head to him, her face scrunching up, most likely from her bruised cheek. "Wow. I feel drunk and hungover at the same time." Spoken with a clarity of tone she hadn't possessed in previous days. "And a little bit like I've got the flu. But, hey, I've been worse." An out-of-place cheerfulness infused her voice.

"Do you remember where you are?"

"Ward B of the Center of Balance and Wellness. The name doesn't fit. It should be called the Center of Indifference. No one here cares—except for Liz. You know Liz?" He opened his mouth to answer, but she bulldozed over him, her words coming out in a rush. "She looks like Nurse Ratchet, but her personality is all Mary Poppins. She always lets me stay up past lights-out since it's the only solitude to be had in the whole place. Once, she snuck a cupcake in on my birthday. Now isn't that sweet? She—" The words were speeding out of her mouth.

Not that he was complaining. He preferred her hyped up over out of it, but she might backslide if she didn't stay somewhat calm. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down. Take a breath. We've got all the time in the world here." Had to be the meds or lack of meds—some strange part of the withdrawals—causing her diarrhea of the mouth.

She grabbed in one good breath, then was off again. "You know there aren't many people to talk to in here." She turned her voice down to a whisper. "Everyone's crazy. I mean *really* crazy. Certifiable. It's hard to carry on a rational conversation with someone who keeps talking to the demon that lives in their ankle. You ever have that happen? Where you're talking

to someone, and all of sudden they lift their foot up in front of their face and start having a conversation with it? It's a bit off-putting, if you know what I mean."

Her expression was full-on seriousness, and he probably shouldn't laugh—definitely he shouldn't—but he couldn't help it.

A smile—no, it wasn't quite a smile—tipped the corners of her mouth, giving her a look that said she was thinking about something pleasing.

"We've hit a new phase of your withdrawals. Speed talking."

"Oh my. Your voice. Wow. It reminds me of dark chocolate, a hot bath, and sex and—"

"Apparently your mental filter is malfunctioning."

"—sweaty, dirty, hard fucking."

Holy Christ. Just the words *sex*, *sweaty*, and *dirty* had his dick going all skyscraper inside his jeans, but when she said *hard fucking*, he blacked out for a moment. When his mind came back online, it decided to flash him images of what *sweaty*, *dirty*, *hard fucking* would look like with her. Her nipples brushing against his chest as he rammed into her with a pace and depth and exuberance he'd never experienced.

He needed to change the subject, but couldn't remember how to get his mouth to form words. He might've swallowed his damned tongue.

"Why do you suppose your voice sounds like sex on a summer day? It's because I'm horny. I haven't had sex in five years. That's a long time, you know. I have needs."

He finally figured out how to flap his lips, while making sound to form actual words. Maybe he'd had a stroke. "Jesus Christ, woman." The words exploded out of him. "You've got to stop talking about sex." He scrubbed his hand over his eyes, trying to wipe out the mental images that still played. "You're speaking every single thought that floats into your mind. No goddamned censor. It's gotta be the meds or the shock treatments causing it. Something."

Her bottom lip pushed out in an utterly inappropriate—but adorably kissable—pout. “I don’t see anything wrong with talking about how I feel. Maybe that’s why I can’t get out of this place. I won’t open up. Won’t let Dr. Payne-in-My-Ass into my mind. Maybe if I—”

“Christ on a crapper. You’ve got to stop for a moment.” She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. “I need you to listen for thirty seconds. A minute tops. Then you can talk about sex, Dr. Payne, and your feelings all you want.”

“You can’t go putting sex, Dr. Payne, and my feelings in the same sentence. Wrong. So wrong.”

“Won’t argue about that. But I need you to keep your lips closed.”

Pain pinched her features as she lifted her hands, placing them over her mouth. It should have been a comical gesture, but all Cain could see was her hurting. It had been five days since Dr. Payne had injured her, and the fact that her body still suffered scraped his justice bone. If he ever got the guy alone, he just might uncage that part of himself that thirsted for blood.

Cain cleared his throat and emptied his mind of those thoughts. “There are some things you need to know right now. Important things. Like you’re *not* at the Center. You’re safe in a cabin in southern Ohio. You’ve been withdrawing from the meds for the past two days. Your short-term memory is shit from the shock treatments. I’ve been taking care of you the whole time.” He spoke the sentences as if they were a list he’d memorized—probably because he’d said the same thing so many times before. “That’s why we keep having this same conversation and you can’t remember it.”

She lifted her hands off her mouth. “Cool. That works for me. Never liked that place.”

Ooo...kkaayy... She obviously wasn’t fully grasping reality. “You’re not going to remember any of this, are you?”

“Probably not. Not when I’m feeling half drunk.” She put her hand back over her mouth, but her eyes sparkled with

laughter.

She might be more coherent, but she definitely wasn't fully functional. "I just want you to know. You *are* safe here. I won't let you go back there. And I won't hurt you. I would *never* hurt you."

She lifted her hands off her mouth again. "I trust you. I'd know if you were some creepy asshole. You're the kind of guy a girl feels dainty and delicate around."

Yeah. She'd trust him until she actually saw him in full light, when fully aware. "Um..." He didn't know what to say. Time for a subject change. "I need you to drink some water for me. It'll help flush the drugs out of your system. I'm going to help you sit up." He slid his hand underneath her back and helped her upright.

"Man, everything hurts. Feels like a busload of sumo wrestlers sat on me."

He shoved the pillow behind her back. This was progress. The first time she'd been upright in days. "Dr. Payne did a number on you. Looks like he hit you in the face, the ribs, and on your thigh."

A furrow of thoughtfulness dug into her forehead. "I don't remember any of that. You'd think I'd remember something like that. Why can't I remember it?"

"The shock treatments."

"Oh yeah. You said that, didn't you? And I forgot it." A thin edge of concern cut through her tone.

"Hey, don't worry about it. The short-term memory problems are temporary. I promise. Drink for me." He held the glass to her lips. She reached up and covered his hand with hers. His heart skipped a few beats, then returned to its regularly scheduled rhythm.

She swallowed down the entire glass of water the same way she talked—full speed and without censorship, gulping and slurping like a child. "That's good. Real good. I'm so thirsty all of a sudden." She didn't take her hands off his. He

tried to move the glass, but she gripped it tight. “No. I want to keep touching you. It feels so good to have my skin on yours.”

Holy.

Christ.

Those images of *hard fucking* jumped into his mind again. He should change the subject, divert her attention in some way, but what came out his mouth had nothing to do with those intentions. “I’m going to be sad to see this side of you go. I like you being affectionate and warm to me.”

“Then hold me. Just for a little while. Until I fall asleep again.” The words themselves weren’t a question, but his heart heard the quiet query behind them.

“Anything you want.” He would deny her nothing. She let go of him so he could place the empty glass on the nightstand. Instead of crawling in the bed with her, he picked her up. She nestled her face against his chest, and his heart banged extra hard trying to get her attention. A contented sigh slipped from her lips, and he felt more light and carefree in that moment than he had in his entire life. He sat in the chair directly in front of the fireplace.

The fire had burned down to a few low flames, deepening and lengthening the dark, but still putting out a bit of warmth.

“A girl could get used to having a big, strong man carrying her around.” Her words were a sigh.

“A guy could get used to having a beautiful lady to carry around.”

She laughed, the sound lovely in the same way birdsong enchanted the ear.

“Are you flirting with me?” One of her hands stroked his chest.

Christ. Was he flirting with her? Was he—Cain Killion, son of the man who’d tried to kill her—flirting with her? Hell yeah, he was. Wrong or not. “Are you flirting with me?”

“I don’t know. It’s been so long since I had anyone to flirt with that I’m not sure what it is anymore.”

“I think you’re a natural.” He rubbed his chin on the top of her head. “You’re doing better today. I was worried about you.”

“You’re so sweet. I haven’t had someone to worry about me since my family died. Did you know my family died?”

Everything good and warm and happy dissolved. He didn’t want to hear her talk about this. Not this. This was too soon. Too close to the bone. Too close to the blood. Too close to his own dark urges.

“They were murdered. By...by...by Killion.” Everything inside him kicked like a reflex at the name. “Why am I talking about this?” Her voice hitched. “I never allow myself to think about it. Forgetting is good therapy. But I’ve never really forgotten how my parents screamed before he slid his blade into their throats.” Her voice took on a monotone quality. “The sound of their blood pumping, spritzing, dripping onto the floor—I can’t escape it. Or the way Killion stared into my brother’s eyes, caressed his cheek, ran his hand through his hair—almost as if he loved him—just before he cut out his throat. And when he turned to me, his blade dripped the blood of my family on my neck. The warmth of it startling and sickening and strangely comforting. I had been scared watching them die, but I wasn’t scared anymore. I wanted it. I wanted it over.”

His body had turned to stone. His heart a mausoleum of sorrow. His lungs twin pillars of shame and guilt. That she would confess her most horrific moments to him... She obviously didn’t know who he was. And now was not the fucking time to tell her.

A pained whine issued from her mouth, growing in volume to wailing, then leveling out at full-body weeping. She shuddered and shook against him, the force of her sobs startling in their power. Her face mashed against his chest, her tears wetting his shirt, his skin.

Life had been perpetually unfair to her. He ached for the pain she’d endured. The pain she still experienced. And the pain she would experience when she recognized him. Because

he knew. Knew she'd be afraid of him. And all of this—holding her, flirting with her—would be nothing but a memory.

“Shh...shh... I'm right here with you.” He didn't bother with bullshit words. He stuck with the facts. He was here. With her. Period. He wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly to him, hoping that by some strange osmosis she'd be able to absorb his strength.

How long she cried against him, he didn't know and didn't really care. He'd sit here holding her for a hundred years, if that's how long she needed to grieve. When the last of her sobs subsided, she stilled against him, sniffing and snuffling every once in a while.

“I... Wow, sorry about that. I don't normally go all crybaby. Maybe it's the meds.” She pulled back to look at him.

His lungs latched down tight, refusing to let in any air.

The last of the firelight caught the wetness on her face and lashes, causing her tears to shimmer like melted gold.

Her gaze roamed over him. He couldn't remember what he should say to soothe her, to reassure her. Words seemed inadequate. He tried to tell her with his gaze that he meant no harm. That he wasn't his father. And for a moment she seemed to understand. Then her eyes widened and rolled in their sockets like a frightened foal. She bucked away from him, all the force of fear in her movement. She landed on the ground—nearly in the fireplace—a grunt of pain shooting from her mouth. Mindless in her fear, she scuttled back from him, placing her hand near the glowing coals.

“Careful.” He reached for her, to get her away from the fire before she hurt herself.

She screamed, the sound no canned movie scream but filled to bursting with genuine terror.

He went statue still, arms still outstretched to her.

She pushed herself away from him, further and further until she huddled in the far corner of the cabin, gasping for air like she'd been holding her breath for too long.

He hadn't moved. Hadn't said a word. Had been paralyzed by her reaction. If he was the crying kind—which he wasn't—he'd have felt like having a good old-fashioned water party. That look on her face was something he'd never wanted to see. That was why he'd never sought her out. He'd known what was left of his soul couldn't handle it.

And he'd been right.

His stomach contracted. He grunted from the unexpected pain of it. All the humiliation of lost hope rolled up his throat. He tipped forward in the chair, opened his mouth, and dry heaved. His innards seized and spasmed, refusing to release him as he gagged on self-disgust.

The room went hotter than an incinerator. Sweat dripped off his face and splatted onto the floor. The sounds coming out of him were as wretched as he felt. The phantom barfing lasted a short eternity.

He needed to reassure her that he intended no harm. He turned his head toward her corner, opened his mouth—

She was gone.

His eyes nearly leaped out of their sockets.

Shit.

He jumped to his feet, gaze darting around the cabin, at the same time knowing she'd run off while he'd been sick. "Mercy." Her name came out on a sigh of defeat. He should just let her go. Let her run toward whatever fate awaited her. She didn't want him. She preferred Dr. Payne over him, so let her have Dr. Payne.

No.

He might be a monster, but he wasn't an asshole. Duty, obligation, and remorse propelled him out the door after her. To her, it wouldn't be a positive sign that he was *chasing* her. But what other option did he have?

The night was starless and moonless, casting the world in varying shades of black. A sea of dense forest surrounded the clearing the cabin rested on. The woods were thick and dark,

the kind that would claw and bite and close around you tighter than a prison. No, she wouldn't have gone in there. She would've found the lane more appealing. She would've hoped to find a road. To find help. To find salvation.

He ran as if her life depended on it. And it did. If someone found her, she'd eventually end up back in the Center. And Dr. Payne would have a second try at frying her mind.

The late-spring night was too quiet and too still. Almost as if it were holding its breath waiting, waiting, waiting to see what was about to happen. Cain's breath rasped, his footfalls pounded, his soul died a bit more.

Christ. He didn't know how long she had been gone. How far away she could be. If she could even hear him.

"Mercy." He tried to add a reassuring quality to his tone, but it was impossible while running and yelling. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not him. I'm Cain. I'm Liz's friend. She asked me to save you from Dr. Payne. I won't hurt you. I'd never hurt you. I'm trying to save you."

The lane ended abruptly, dumping him out onto the solitary road. He looked right—nothing. Looked left—a shadow lying on the road. Any vehicle heading down the pavement would run right over her. "Shit." He whispered the word and ran toward her.

She lay on her stomach, arms stretched up to her head as if she'd been trying to fucking *crawl* away after her legs couldn't carry her any further.

Goddamn it.

He couldn't deal with this. Yeah, he might be a masochist, but this was a level of suffering he couldn't endure. Didn't have it in him to let her keep stabbing his dying soul.

He went down on his knees beside her. Not daring to touch her, he let his head drop on his shoulders and stared at his lap. "Mercy." He tried to make himself sound as harmless as possible without going falsetto. "I'm not going to hurt you, but I need to take you back to the cabin where you'll be safe."

When she didn't say anything or move, he forced himself to look at her.

Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed. He touched her cheek. She didn't flinch away from him.

For the first time since he'd taken her from Liz, he was grateful for her unconsciousness.

CAIN STOOD in the farthest corner of the room from Mercy, staring at her tucked up under those covers. In the predawn light, the scar across her neck seemed to glow silver. Sleep had relaxed her features, making her look younger than her age. He could almost see the girl she'd once been.

When she had looked at *him*, she'd only seen his father and assumed he was the same. But had he really expected anything less? *No. Yes. No. Yes. Stop it.*

He might've saved her from the Center, but the way she'd looked at him locked him in a prison he'd always feared—being seen in the same light as his father. He'd been a big, dumbass idiot for thinking this would've worked out any other way than her being terrified of him.

He couldn't do this with her again—couldn't tolerate that fear on her face again when she woke up. Once was bad enough.

Cain nabbed his cell off the table, then walked out the door into the gray dawn light. A lone bird began singing a solitary song. He walked down the driveway, heading toward the road—the only place where he could pick up a cell signal. A woodpecker began rapping against a tree. Nature usually soothed him, but today it did nothing for him.

Ten feet from the road, he turned on his phone, waited until it booted up, and found a weak signal. At least there was a signal. He punched in Liz's number.

It rang. Once. Twice. "Hello. You've reached Liz Sands ___"

Cain hung up.

He shouldn't. He knew he shouldn't, yet his finger hit Mac's number. He braced himself for Mac's reaction. Mac was smart enough to add. One Mercy missing plus one Cain missing equaled a whole hell of a lot of problems.

Mac picked up on the first ring. "I was just getting ready to call you. We caught a case. A bad one. I need to talk to you about it."

Cain's brain had trouble catching up with Mac's words. He'd expected disappointment. Anger. Something. He hadn't expected shop talk.

"Cain? You there? You all right?" Mac had the concerned tone again. The one he used far too often around Cain.

"Uh...uh..." Christ, what was he going to say? He should've taken two seconds to think about how this conversation was going to play out before he'd called Mac. "I don't think I'll be able to make it."

"What's wrong? I can hear it in your voice. Talk to me. Whatever it is, you'll be fine. We'll get through it. I'm here for you. Always have been. Always will be." The words flowed out of Mac's mouth as if he'd carefully rehearsed them for years.

And didn't that just about suck. That Mac had suspected Cain would lose his shit at some point and had a pre-rehearsed set of platitudes.

Ignore that. Focus on what's important. "What have you heard about Mercy?"

Mac breathed one of those dodged-a-bullet sighs. "I talked to Legal at the Bureau, and they say we can't do anything until her psychiatrist gives us permission. The only option is to file a motion to have her mental state evaluated by another psychiatrist, but that could take months. And if they fight it, years."

Holy. Fucking. Christ. Mac hadn't heard that Mercy was missing?

No. Mac *would've* heard. Everyone *should've* heard by now. It should be playing on all the radio and TV stations.

Something as big as Mercy Ledger going missing from a psychiatric facility wouldn't be kept quiet. Hell no. That was the stuff of good ratings.

"I have Mercy." Cain blurted the words out without even trying to pretty them up.

Silence for a few beats. "Say that again. 'Cause I could've sworn you said you had Mercy."

"I do. She's with me. I've had her for two days now. You'd know if she had been reported missing. So that means she hasn't been reported missing. And that says there's something majorly fucked up going on."

"Wait a minute, I'm still back on you saying *you have her*. What do you mean you have her?"

"I mean she's in my bed sleeping off all the meds Dr. Payne had her on. And her short-term memory is shot to shit from the shock treatments."

"You...you..." Mac stuttered.

"I intended just to meet with Mercy so I could find out about the symbol. That's all. Liz agreed to make that happen. I never thought Liz would demand I take Mercy. And when she told me what Dr. Payne had been doing to her... Mac, I couldn't leave Mercy there. That man was going to kill her."

"Liz? Liz helped you take her? Two days ago? And you haven't talked to or seen Liz since?" Mac didn't give him a chance to answer. "Christ. I'm on my way back there right now. Don't you move. Don't you do anything. Don't call anyone or talk to anyone. We'll figure out how to handle this."

"I'm not at home." He gave Mac the directions to the cabin, and they hung up.

In three hours, he was going to pull one of the biggest cowardly moves of his life. He was going to dump Mercy Ledger in Mac's lap and walk away.

What does it say about us that our primary sources of entertainment are shows and movies that glamorize violence, rape, and murder?

—Ellis Worth, MD, *Journal of Human and Philosophical Studies*

The first thing Mercy became aware of was her face throbbing a low-level beat. Her bones ached, and her muscles felt too heavy to move. Her side burned with every inhale and exhale. Her stomach felt oddly distended and empty at the same time.

And she was going to milk it for all it was worth.

She finally had a viable excuse to stay in her room, avoid group, and cancel her session with Dr. Payne. The flu. She'd tell everyone she had the flu. Couldn't be too far from the truth. It wasn't like she was faking how bad her body felt. She would spend the entire day lying here, eyes closed, pretending to sleep, and luxuriating in the rare bit of isolation.

“Are you awake?” a masculine voice whispered.

Her heart slammed against her spine, and her muscles leaped. She gasped a sound of undiluted shock and wrenched her eyes open.

The world around her had changed. Gone was the sterile room with bars on the windows. Gone was the stench of

industrial cleaning products laced with cafeteria food. Gone was the entire Center. In its place was a cozy wood-paneled room with a quaint stone fireplace and a man.

His hair was the color of dark caramel and cut just long enough to be swept messily to the side. His features were angular and hard and so damned masculine it almost hurt to look at him. His eyes were the color of a changing sky—light in the center of the iris like a cloudless summer day and dark like a winter’s night toward the outer edge.

She knew him. Recognition stabbed her in the neck—in the scar she bore across her throat. The echo of that past pain stole her breath. She grabbed her throat, hand pressing over the cold scar. Her heart turned into a battering ram and beat against the bars of her ribs.

She went from lying on the bed to fully upright and ready to run.

“You.” The word was an accusation, a condemnation, a judgment, scraping its way up her throat and out her lips. She wasn’t going to show him an ounce of fear. He’d swallowed her fear twenty years ago and enjoyed the flavor.

He blinked, a long, lazy closing of his eyes, and when he reopened them, the light in his gaze had been devoured by the dark. “I’m not him.” He spoke with just as much conviction as her allegation had contained.

His words turtle-crawled from her ears to her brain, their meaning finally firing along her synapses, and she understood.

Her body unclenched, and she relaxed against the headboard with an exaggerated sigh. As the initial in-your-face shock wore off, she could actually see him. See the humanity in his features. Something his father would never possess. And if he’d meant her harm, she would have felt the energy of his foul intentions.

“I know you.” Her voice was softer and held a bit of wonder in its palm.

“I’m not him.” He repeated the sentence, nothing in his tone changing, but she saw something in his eyes— through

his eyes. Sadness. Resolve. And just a hint of fear. That was her undoing. That he could be scared of her—wow.

“I-I know. You’re Cain.” His name came out in hard vowels and sharp consonants.

He held her gaze for a moment, then shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and looked down at the floor.

Silence stretched between them.

For years, she’d imagined what it would be like to have a conversation with him. Even from her first glimpse of him as a child on the TV, she’d recognized something in his eyes. Her eyes had that same scarred look. The look of having experienced something so painful that it marked more than their bodies—it left gaping wounds on their souls. There was an unspoken solidarity in their shared pain.

But in all her fantasies of connecting with the only other person who knew firsthand the evils of Killion, she’d never once thought there’d be this much silence.

Obviously, it was going to be up to her to make the first move.

“You know”—she cleared her throat, trying to go for a friendly tone—“over the years, I had thought about finding you. It always seemed like we had a bad bond of sorts. I just never did it because I didn’t know how you’d react.”

That got his attention. He raised his gaze to meet hers, the hard angles of his face easing just a bit.

He looked at the scar on her neck while he spoke. “I’d thought about the same thing.” His words were spoken with a tentative quality, as if he worried about her response. “But I always wondered if I would remind you of...” He didn’t say the name.

“You look similar to him on the surface, but I see beyond the surface to *you*.” She emphasized the word *you*. Wanted him to understand she didn’t equate him with his father. “You also look different to me somehow. Maybe it’s your eyes. Maybe it’s how you look at me. So different than he did.” She

held her hand out to him. “Nice to meet you, Cain. I’m Mercy.”

One second. Two. Three. Four. Five... Finally he stepped toward her and grasped her hand in his. His grip was firm and dry, his skin rough and wonderful, his touch magnetic and hypnotizing. She got lost in the sensation of total connection. Of there being no boundaries between them, almost as if their skin, muscles, and bones had melded together into one—

He yanked his hand away so suddenly that hers was left out there in midair, still holding the shadow of where his had been. Something was wrong. She just didn’t know him well enough to understand.

He aimed his eyes toward the floor again. “You’ve been pretty sick. You went through the vomit stage. The fever stage. The drunk, flirty stage was my personal favorite.” A smile almost grabbed hold of his lips, but missed. “The crying stage.” He sucked in a breath and spoke while he exhaled. “The scared-of-me stage.”

The way he said those last words made him sound more like a little boy trying to be brave than six feet of hard-muscled male—who also happened to resemble a serial killer. His tone made her want to reach out to him and offer comfort, but he was so skittish with her that she didn’t dare.

“This”—he gestured with his head to indicate her and the cabin—“wasn’t my intention. It was all because of Liz. She —”

“Liz?” The nurse had always been the only staff member Mercy trusted. “How do you know Liz?”

“I’ve known her since I was a child.”

Of course. Killion had been the custodian at the Center, a fact Dr. Payne never allowed her to forget.

“We’ve kept in contact over the years. She’s my...” He stopped like he was searching for the right word. “Friend. Anyway, I’m a consultant for the FBI. Almost a week ago, I found a link between a current case and yours.”

It wasn't like he'd suddenly started speaking a foreign language, but Mercy couldn't quite wrap her mind around what he was saying. And he knew it. He'd stopped speaking, his gaze searching her face for... something she couldn't name, something she didn't understand.

She fought to find the words she needed to say. "Killion is in prison." When she said the name, Cain flinched as if she'd slapped him.

"Yes, he is, but we still needed to speak with you." Cain wouldn't look at her. Did she look that terrible?

She listened as he explained how MacNeil Anderson— she remembered him from all those years ago—had tried to talk with her, but Dr. Payne had denied him. So Cain had sought Liz's go-around-the-rules help. "When Liz wheeled you out the door"—he shook his head—"it was pretty plain what Dr. Payne had done to you."

As he told her all the ways Dr. Payne had hurt her, Mercy's mind searched for some memory to attach to those events, but it kept coming up with a big fat nothing. And yet she didn't doubt Cain for a moment. Dr. Payne had been playing a game with her the entire time she'd been on Ward B. Because of her internal warning system, she'd always managed to stay one move ahead of him. Until he suddenly ended the game and she was the loser.

"So, I feel bad because of the withdrawals, the shock treatments, and Dr. Payne hitting me." She was glad she couldn't remember it.

"Yeah."

Withdrawals. Shock treatments. Dr. Payne. She'd heard her own words, and suddenly they added up to one terrible question. Was Cain acting uneasy because he assumed her gray matter was malfunctioning? She'd spent the last two years of her life locked in a psychiatric facility. That didn't happen to *normal* people. Not that she was perfectly normal, but she wasn't batshit, bananas, or bonkers. But then Dr. Payne always told her that crazy people don't know they were crazy. What did that asshole know?

“I’m not crazy. I didn’t belong in there.”

His brows dipped low over his beautiful eyes. “Never said you did.”

“Really. I’m not crazy. I don’t know how it happened, but someone did something to get me locked in there. I spent the first six months shouting about how I wasn’t nuts. Finally, I decided to change my strategy. Go along to get along. When in Rome and all that crap. I cooperated. I did every damned thing they asked of me, and still it wasn’t enough to get me out of there.”

“How did you end up in there?”

“No joke, the cops showed up, and right behind them were the men in white coats, and right behind them was Dr. Payne.”

“Why was he there the day they took you? Had you met him before then?”

“I’d never seen him before in my life.”

Cain glanced at her, then looked away again. “Did someone... you know, say you were crazy?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have people in my life. I have no relationships or friendships. You know how it is. Everyone acts like Killion dipped us in gold, and they all want to break off a piece of us for a sick souvenir. So if you want names, I don’t have any.” No one understood that the sum total of her existence could add up to more than that one terrible day. Everyone acted as if that one day *was* her entire life.

Except for Cain. He would understand. He was in the same position.

“And I’ve never told anyone about my ability. I could see if I had, they might wonder. It is a little strange, but I’ve never mentioned it to anyone except you. So I have no idea—absolutely none—how I ended up in there.” For just a moment after she finished talking, things were okay. Then the impact of what she’d said hit her. Damn. Probably shouldn’t have mentioned her ability. It didn’t exactly jibe with her I-swear-I’m-sane argument. It was his danged fault she’d said it. He

was so quiet, she just kept talking and talking, filling the silence with things she shouldn't be saying.

“Your ability?” His attention locked on her so tight she almost couldn't move. Great. Now he chose to look at her. Probably assessing her danger level.

That piece of her was out there now. She couldn't suck it back in and pretend she hadn't said it. That would only make things worse. “I'm not mental. This is real. After Killion... You know... Well... Um...” She almost couldn't figure out how to put it into words. “It's like I have an internal warning system. I'm sensitive to bad energy or bad vibes. I can tell when someone has bad intentions.

“I don't know why or how it happens, but it's like memories come into my mind, but they're not memories. They're what the person plans to do in the future. It's not perfect. Especially if a person is behaving spontaneously. So I can't rely on it.” She'd gone this far, so she might as well finish it off. “It's a one-way kind of thing—I only see bad. Never the good.”

As she watched, a shield of wariness fell over him, dimming the light in his eyes. A tiny part of her wanted to be angry at him for not believing her, but she didn't have the strength for anger right now, and logically she couldn't blame the guy. If she were in his shoes, would she really buy what she was trying to sell? Hell no. She'd go running from the store. “I know it sounds weird. It's not exactly normal, but it is real.”

He nodded, a curt movement of his head, one that she interpreted to mean that he'd heard her words, understood their meaning, and didn't want to talk about her craziness any longer. All right; give him what he wanted.

“So what's next for me? You pretty much kidnapped”—he winced slightly at that word—“me, so I'm assuming everyone is searching for me. I'm going to need a lawyer to keep me out of the Center. You're going to need one to deal with any charges they file. And I should notify the police that I'm all right. I don't want them wasting their resources.”

“No one is looking for you.” The sentence came out calm and flat.

“But—”

“I just talked with Mac. He said there’s been no mention of you being missing. My translation of the situation: Dr. Payne doesn’t want anyone to know you’re gone.”

Cain stared at her for a long moment. At least he was looking at her more directly now. Then he turned away and went to work at the small counter across the room.

What did that mean? Understanding? Should she say something else? Figure out how to keep him engaged in conversation to prove she wasn’t Insane Jane? “Um... Thank you for getting me out of there. You probably saved my life.”

He came toward her with a glass of water in one hand and a bowl in the other. “You’ve been drinking pretty regular, but I haven’t been able to get you to eat anything.”

Her stomach gave a growl worthy of a hyena defending its kill. “Yeah, I think I’m starving.”

“The cabin is primitive. No electric. No running water. No refrigeration. So food here isn’t anything fancy.” He handed her a bowl of SpaghettiOs.

“You gave me SpaghettiOs. Did you know they used to be my favorite?” Her voice wavered and she stared down at the orange sauce, the round mushy O’s. Tears pricked her eyes. She didn’t normally let herself think about the past—the good or the bad or the mundane. They all hurt for different reasons. “Mom liked to make everything homemade, but sometimes she let me have these as a treat.”

Cain settled his palm on her shoulder. His solid strength soothed her, anchoring her in the present. She turned her head to his wrist, and rubbed her cheek against the bristly hairs on his arm. He gave her a gentle squeeze but didn’t move his hand. His understanding was unlike anyone else’s. He got it. Really got it in a way that no one else did. He understood how Killion destroyed lives. Because his had been destroyed too. He had been a victim too.

His beautiful light-and-dark eyes locked on her. Something happened in her psyche—a subtle shift as if this man was the key to her lock, and he'd just opened her up, exposing all her vulnerabilities. And yet she trusted him to not harm the most fragile parts of her. Why? Because she knew his vulnerability too. Knew his past pain.

Their shared pain had always pulled her toward him, but she'd denied the sensation for so long that it had become normal. Not anymore. If soul mates really existed, his father had created him to be hers. What an intriguing thought. She'd spent so much of her life avoiding connections with people, fearing they'd get hurt, but what if—*what if*—Cain really was meant to be hers?

“I think we're meant to be this way,” she said simply. He gave one dip of his chin. God—that gesture was sweet and silent and a bit infuriating. She didn't quite know how to interpret it.

The thud of a car door from outside pulled his attention to the window beside the bed.

“Mac's here.”

Those two words didn't sound profound. Didn't sound like they should carry so much dread, yet they did.

I've spent the past fifteen years as a corrections officer at Petesville Super Max. Of all the inmates, Killion was always the politest, friendliest, and most engaging. He seemed like the kind of guy you'd invite over for a beer and to watch the game.

—Joshua Beckers, corrections officer (retired)

Cain had survived some serious shit in his life. And yet standing here—in front of Mercy Ledger—he felt like a fucking coward.

“Cain?” Mercy’s tone drowned in an emotion that sounded an awful lot like fear.

He couldn’t look at her.

She’d been a trouper this time when she’d awakened, but that didn’t mean the next time she wouldn’t be scared shitless again. Her short-term memory was garbage. She probably wouldn’t remember this, and he didn’t know how long the meds would remain in her system. They could still be in there, still be sedating her from the full impact of being in the same room with him.

He’d been delusional to think she’d feel anything except fear toward him. The best thing was for him to *adios, amigos* before full-frontal awareness hit.

He forced himself to walk across the cabin and open the door. He lost momentum just before he stepped outside. The urge to look at her, to say something, nearly overcame his

good sense. The door shut behind him. The familiar *thunk* of wood meeting wood was a period, the end of him and Mercy. He would never see her again.

Unless he revived his old stalking routine.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

No. No. No.

The idea of watching her appealed to him so much that he recognized the danger in it. He wouldn't do that. He would pretend she didn't exist.

Mac stood at the back of his car—trunk up, rummaging around inside.

Cain strode across the gravel drive toward him. The crunch and crack of rock underneath his boots echoed in the quiet. Overhead, clouds the color of sad days had settled just over the treetops, and he could feel the moisture in the air—the prelude to a downpour.

He rounded Mac's trunk. Mac held his service revolver in his hand, not in the ready-aim-fire position, but just holding it like he would a sack of groceries.

“Here's the rundown.” Cain sucked in a breath. “Liz asked me to take her. It was a stupid-ass idea, but I didn't see any alternatives. If you had seen her, you would've done it too. Right now, she's over the worst of the withdrawals. But her short-term memory is gone from the shock treatments. She's more lucid than she has been, but she's still a bit off balance.” Off balance—he was being intentionally vague. No way was he telling Mac about her so-called *ability*. Didn't want the guy to think that she actually deserved to be in the Center, but he wanted to lay the groundwork of blaming the meds and shocks in case she mentioned it.

Mac settled his service pistol in the portable gun safe, shut the lid, and then checked to make certain it was locked. “Not taking a weapon around her until I can gauge her mental state.”

Part of Cain wanted to argue that she wasn't dangerous and didn't need such considerations, but she had been in the

Center, medicated, and shocked. If anyone had a right to be a bit nutso, it was her.

“Last time she woke up, she thought I was...” Still couldn’t say the name. Mac gave a nod—he knew. Hell, everyone with eyeballs knew. “She ran from me. I found her in the middle of the road...” He couldn’t bring himself to say *crawling away from me*. That was just too damned shameful to utter out loud.

“You’re not him.” Mac’s tone brimmed with sympathy. Fucking sympathy.

Give him anger. Give him fear. Give him fuzzy-assed unicorns that shit glitter and gold—just don’t give him sympathy. Sympathy sucked a giant sack.

Mac put his hand on Cain’s shoulder, a fatherly gesture meant to offer silent comfort and solidarity. And it did. But only to a point. Didn’t change Cain’s need to get the fuck away from her before she got scared of him again.

Mac looked beyond him to the cabin. “So two days ago, Liz asked you to take Mercy?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d she seem?”

“She was fucked up from all the meds and shocks.”

“I meant, how was Liz?”

“If you’re asking if she was in her right mind, yeah, she was. If I hadn’t gotten Mercy out of there, she’d probably be dead by now. Liz saved her life.”

Mac studied him, really studied Cain’s face as if he were looking for the lie he might be telling. Only Cain wasn’t lying. And Mac would see that.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why haven’t you ever told me about this place? I’ve wondered where you go for days at a time. I would’ve respected your privacy. I just wouldn’t have worried.”

Heat crept up Cain's neck, burning his cheeks. It was just like Mac to notice he would go off-radar, but not say anything until Cain opened the door. "I just... I needed... I wanted to be away from it all. Where no one could find me, and I could..." *Draw the foul things I see on the backs of my eyelids every time I try to sleep.* He clamped his lips closed. Jeesh, he didn't want to have a confession session out here in the middle of the driveway.

"I get it. You wanted a place where you weren't Killion's kid."

Mac had it backward. This was the place where Cain could be his father's son. Those journals buried in the woodpile proved that. Cain didn't say anything. No words would be right. They'd either be a lie or the truth, and neither of those choices had a happy ending. Time for a subject change. "What did you find out about the symbol?"

"I googled it—an upside-down question mark with a slash through it."

"That's what the FBI has resorted to? Google?"

Mac held up his hand in a wait-for-it gesture. "That symbol also looks like the Christian cross with a hook in the bottom. I found an obscure post about the symbol. It means"—Mac sucked in a slow breath through his nose and spoke while exhaling—"slave of Satan."

"Are you sure?" Cain packed his voice with theatrical disbelief. "I'm pretty certain it means property of the Tooth Fairy."

Mac almost cracked a smile, his eyes crinkling in amusement for only a moment, but then settling into a grave and grim expression.

"That was my reaction too. And then I showed it to Stan Pitts. In the eighties, he worked a Satanic cult case. He saw that symbol tattooed on a guy who claimed to be—you guessed it—a slave of Satan."

In the middle of Cain's spine, right between his shoulder blades, a dull throbbing ache began. "Satanic-cult-ritual

bullshit doesn't fit the murders.”

“I agree. There was nothing ritualistic about the deaths of Mercy's family. The Dawsons' house was odd with the blood painting on the wall, but it didn't have a ritualistic flair. Stan agrees on those points. But it is strange.”

“Strange doesn't equal slave of Satan.”

Mac didn't say anything.

“Come on. You can't be buying this shit.”

“I'm not buying it. But I am looking at the merchandise. And I am keeping in mind that whoever is involved might be wearing the merchandise. I've got a couple new agents looking through the old Killion crime-scene photos to see if that symbol shows up anywhere else.”

They both went quiet. Everything that needed to be said had been said, and there was no reason to stay. “Um...thanks for...you know...showing up. I know you had a case, and I don't know what you had to do to be here instead of there, but I appreciate it.”

“I'm glad you called.” Mac stared into Cain's eyes as he spoke. He might have been Cain's adopted dad, but he did a fair imitation of an emotional mom at times. “I'm here for you. Have been from the beginning.”

When the guy got all sentimental, it always made Cain feel like a kid. Like he had suddenly shrunk a few feet and lost a few decades—and damn if he didn't sometimes want to throw himself into those fatherly arms and pretend for just a minute that Mac really was his dad and that nothing that came before Mac existed.

But he couldn't do that. Had never been able to do that. No matter how much he wanted to. Something always held him back. That something being his father and the life he'd lived before Mac. The things he'd done before Mac. The thing Mac didn't understand was that Cain didn't deserve him.

Cain did the only thing he could. He nodded and changed the subject. Again. “I need to get going. Keep me updated”—*about Mercy*—“about the case.”

“I will.” Mac gave him a slow, sad look, the kind that always made Cain feel like an asshole.

He should say something more. Offer some sort of... something to the guy. But he had no words. None. He wasn't programmed that way. Didn't speak that language. The language of affection and emotion.

“Listen.” Mac's tone was in the serious range. “I don't know everything that's going on with the Liz and Mercy situation. Keep your eyes open.”

“I didn't think anyone was looking for her.”

“I want to check a few back channels to be certain.” Mac was more protective than a momma bear. “Lay low until I give you the all clear. I'll call as soon as I know something.” Mac gave him another long, assessing look, then turned and headed toward the cabin.

Cain watched until the guy hit the porch, then forced himself to turn away and head toward the car.

In the Mustang, a pervasive emptiness grew in his torso—as if someone had taken a giant ice cream scoop and hollowed him out one spoonful at a time. There was a name for that feeling.

Lonely.

He felt goddamned lonely.

After two days in Mercy's presence, it felt different, odd, weird, not to have her nearby.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” Once he got back to his place, got back to his routine of waiting for Mac to call with the next case, life would balance out again. He was lying to himself. And he damned well knew it. Something had happened in that cabin with her. In those few moments when she'd been flirty and friendly with him, she'd ruined him. Given him a taste for affection when all he could afford was apathy.

He had the urge to look up, look at the cabin window, hope for one last glimpse of her, but he focused on turning the key

in the ignition and then K-turned the car until it was aimed down the rutted drive.

Overgrown bushes and brambles slapped and smacked the doors, but Cain didn't have the brain capacity to care. His mind overflowed with her.

At the end of the driveway, he let the car coast to a halt.

It didn't feel right leaving her.

It didn't feel right staying.

For her, he needed to leave. Didn't want to scare her again. For him, he needed to leave. Didn't want to see that look of fear on her face again.

He rammed his boot down on the gas. The tires chucked gravel, the back end fishtailed, then the car shot out the driveway onto the road with a skid and roar of the engine. Nothing like speed to narrow his concentration.

He pedal-to-the-metal it. The car surged forward, all its horses galloping. A quarter mile ahead of him, the road curved left, and he fisted the wheel—no brakes, baby. The car could handle it. And he needed the adrenaline to get his mind off her.

A tiny, gray sports car shot around the curve, coming toward him. It was the kind of car a guy with a small dick and a large ego would drive. The vanity plate read HEADOC. What the fuck was a *headoc*? And what was the point of getting a personalized plate if no one understood its meaning?

The small-dick-mobile zipped past him, but Cain kept his eyes on the curve in front of him. The Mustang roared with all the confidence of good ole American muscle. Tires hugged the pavement on the curve, momentum pushed against him, exhilaration flooded his system. And then the curve was gone and only a straight hilly road stretched out before him. He needed about fifteen more of those curves, and he just might make it home without obsessing about Mercy.

Mercy. How did she like Mac? She would have to like him. If Mac could win Cain over, the guy would have no problems with Mercy. But what if she—

“Fucking stop. Don’t think about her. Think about something. Anything. Just not her.”

His brain turned into a giant empty chasm with only one thought ping-ponging off the walls.

Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

Goddamn it.

He searched the landscape for something, anything, to latch on to. The road. Yes. And the sports car that had passed him. It was probably a Porsche. Had that metrosexual foreign look to it. And that stupid-assed license plate. HEADOC. “*He ad oc? Hea doc? Head oc?*” He heard himself say the words—heard what his brain wasn’t putting together. Head doc.

Head doc, head doc, head doc bounced around inside his skull, colliding with his thoughts of Mercy. The world blinked out of existence, and he remembered how narcissism had screamed from the picture he’d seen of Dr. Payne on the Center’s website: perfectly tailored trousers and pin-striped shirt with genuine fancy-ass cuff links. The guy dressed like a Wall Street pussy, not a psychiatrist working in a state-funded facility. That Porsche was just the kind of car he would drive.

“Fuck!” Cain yanked his cell from his pocket and hit the button to call Mac.

Beep beep beep. The no-signal sound hammered into his ears.

He slammed on the brakes. Tires screamed. Rubber smoked. The car shuddered and bumped. He wrenched the wheel, the vehicle sliding and slipping over the pavement as it swerve-turned in the middle of the empty road.

Facing the way he came, Cain nailed the gas so hard his foot slammed the floorboards, punching his hip up off the seat. It seemed like a small piece of forever while the tires churned, trying to grip the pavement. And then he rocketed off going zero to sixty in only a fast jiffy.

The woods on either side of the car whipped by in a smeary blur of green. Only moments ago, he’d pulled out of the driveway, yet the drive back took hours. Tortured hours

while he pictured Mercy's eyes so wide the whites showed all around the irises. Pictured her mouth slit open in silent horror. Pictured her screaming for help. Screaming for him.

Something dark and terrible clawed around in his guts. At the driveway, he jammed the brake at the same time he cranked the wheel. He was going too fast— fighting a losing battle with inertia and momentum. The car skidded off the road into the dense forest alongside the driveway. Bushes and brambles slapped and banged against the vehicle as if they were protesting its intrusion. His Mustang slammed into something big, immovable, heavy enough to jostle him like a crash-test dummy, but then somehow all four tires hit gravel and he rocketed down the lane. The small-dick-mobile had been parked in the middle of the lane—just out of sight of the cabin.

Every goddamned one of his fears was confirmed.

Cain mashed the brake. He didn't remember slowing or parking—he just found himself sprinting for the cabin. Arms and legs pumping, each footfall an explosion of sound.

Pppgglll... A gunshot.

A blade of terror sliced his sanity, his control, in half.

Mac hadn't worn his gun. There were three people in that cabin, and Cain couldn't afford to lose two of them.

He burst through the door and froze.

Mac lay on the floor, blood gushing out of a wound in his side in waves that mesmerized...hypnotized... relaxed...

Cain felt the pull, the urge to kneel in all that red and paint himself with its gooey warmth. He wanted to lavish his body in the wetness the way his father had taught him. No, his father hadn't *taught* him. His father had *forced* him. His father had made Cain into the human version of Pavlov's pups. But instead of ringing the bell before food, Cain had to wallow in blood before he'd be fed.

Blood was his savior. Blood was his nightmare.

He tore his gaze away from Mac—away from the blood—and found Mercy.

Her clothes were gone, and she was on her knees. Dr. Payne had his hand fisted in her hair, cranking her head so far back on her shoulders it looked as if it were about to tumble off and roll away. Against her neck—against the scar his father had given her—Payne scraped the muzzle of a gun, turning the old wound an angry red. An angry red that matched the welt Payne sported down his own cheek, the only thing marring his perfect complexion.

It was bad enough that Mercy was naked, but that wasn't what sent a shard of ice into Cain's brain. It was Mercy's eyes. They were all wrong. They stared up at Payne, not showing one hint of fear. Instead, she actually looked...defiant. Like she double-dog dared him to carry out the threat his gun made.

That look on her face scared Cain more than anything. More than the gun. A sound came out of him. A sound he didn't recognize, but one that felt as much a part of him as his heartbeat. He launched himself at Payne.

Yeah, Cain had a death wish. A wish for Payne's death. And nothing short of a kill shot was going to stop his progress. Two more steps toward the guy—almost there—and the gun barked.

The noise magnified in the small space. Heat seared Cain's flesh in that odd fleshy place between neck and shoulder. His body flinched away from the feeling, but his legs didn't stop moving.

He tackled Payne with all the force of an NFL line-backer, sending them both into a game of momentum versus the wall. Payne met the wall first. The impact sent the gun flying out of his hand and clattering out of sight.

In his peripheral vision, Cain saw Payne's fist swing toward his face, saw the flash of one of those rich-man rings that looked pussy no matter who wore it. That was gonna hurt. Payne's fist impacted with Cain's temple. The lights blinked out, then came on blazing even brighter than normal. That one hit was going to be the only blow the guy delivered.

Cain swung with every ounce of force he possessed, landing a gut punch that whoofed the air out of the guy as loudly as a dog barking. He grabbed Payne by the shirt and tossed him into the corner where the guy ricocheted off the wall and slumped to the floor, clutching his stomach.

No mercy. No fucking mercy. Cain was on top of him in less than a second. He raised his fist, then shot it toward that too-perfect nose. The impact crushed his knuckles and crunched the cartilage. He lifted his hand and served the guy another one. This time, he felt warmth coating his knuckles. Blood. His mind slid sideways into that part of him that was his father's son.

He closed his eyes, slammed his fist downward, connected with some meat on the guy, and lost himself in the rhythmic heartbeat of blood and punching. Punching and blood. The smell of it flowed into him. He inhaled deep swallowing breaths.

The impossibly small sound of rustling fabric penetrated the blood trance.

Mercy.

Mac.

He shoved off Payne. The guy lay there unmoving, unconscious, his complexion looking like a series of burst hemorrhoids. Assface. Yeah, good name.

Mercy knelt over Mac, one hand pressing the material of her ripped sweatshirt over his wound, the other holding the gun.

Cain tried to stand to go to her—to Mac—but the lights dimmed and a heaviness weighed down his limbs. That chunk of skin between his neck and shoulder burned, and his head throbbed from the bell-ringing Assface had delivered. He crawled toward Mercy.

She lifted the gun, aiming at him. Her hand steady as a surgeon's. Her eyes cold and blank.

“Mercy, no. It's me. I won't hurt you.” Everything he'd tried to do—save her from Assface, save her from himself by

leaving—none of it worked. None of it. And here he was, exactly where he never wanted to be again. The object of her terror. Except she was in a place beyond terror. A place of resignation. A place where she found strength. He wouldn't take that away from her.

“Do it. Pull the trigger.” Cain hadn't expected those words to come out his mouth. Didn't know why they came out. But somehow they felt right. He'd been breathing heavily, but now his body calmed. He closed his eyes and spread his arms wide, giving her a larger target. “Just fucking do it.”

And then he heard the shot.

Technology over the past twenty years has evolved to the point where we've been able to identify a serial-killer gene. Having this gene does not necessarily mean the carrier will become a killer, but if the environmental circumstances are right and the gene gets turned on...it is a guarantee the person will kill.

—Phillip Aze, MD, geneticist, Research Our Lives Corporation

Five minutes ago...

Without a word or so much as a glance at her, Cain had walked across the cabin and out the door. The soft *thunk* of wood against wood had a strangely sad sound.

Mercy didn't need his words to tell her that he was leaving for good. That old axiom, *Actions speak louder than words*. Yep. His actions—having trouble meeting her eyes, not talking much, running away from her the first chance he got—said a lot.

Message sent.

Message received.

He didn't want to be around her. He couldn't wait to get away from her.

She twisted in the bed and looked out the window as he walked across the drive to the other car. His shoulders were broad, stretching the material of his T-shirt, his waist trim.

Even the way he walked... Damn. It was odd she found him so appealing. He looked a lot like his father, but there was so much more to him. It was that *more* that she found irresistible.

She watched the two men talking, watched Mac put his hand on Cain's shoulder. The way the older man looked at Cain and touched him was like he was offering some sort of reassurance. What would Cain need reassurance about? Walking away? When Mac strode for the cabin, Cain watched and then slowly turned and headed toward his car. She whipped around and faced front when she heard Mac on the porch. Wouldn't look good to get caught spying.

She realized she still held the bowl of SpaghettiOs and quickly shoveled in a giant mouthful to look like she was busy eating, not watching them.

Mac knocked on the cabin door. Her mouth was too full to say anything so she grunt-yelled a sound that he took as *Enter*, because he opened the door and poked his head inside.

“Mercy?”

She nodded, chewing frantically, feeling her cheeks bulging out like a chipmunk. Jesus. What had she been thinking, shoving all that in her mouth?

“Can I come in?”

She smiled and nodded and kept chewing.

He walked in and shut the door behind him, his gaze trained on her—so unlike how Cain was almost afraid to look at her. Mac wasn't a big man. Not a small man either. More average size. But to her, he'd always been a superhero.

“You remember me?” he asked and sat on the end of her bed.

She swallowed part of the mouthful, took a sip of water from the glass on the stand, and swallowed the rest. “I'm sorry. I was... I was hungry. Haven't eaten in a few days.” She was out of breath from chewing and swallowing. “I would never forget you.” She remembered him finding her. Remembered him holding dish towels to her neck while he yelled into a walkie-talkie for an ambulance. Remembered him

telling her to hold on. That she was safe. And no one would ever hurt her again.

Funny. She'd believed him. It had been something in his eyes. A sincerity she'd recognized even as a child. And now that they were both twenty years older and he was a lot grayer, his eyes still held that same sincerity and kindness.

"You feeling well enough to tell me what happened?" Mac leaned forward a little, like he *really* wanted to know.

One of those sardonic smiles tipped her lips. "You're going to have to be more specific. What happened that I ended up at the Center, or what happened that I ended up here?"

"How about all of it."

So she told him everything she'd just told Cain. About the cops, the men in white coats, and Dr. Payne overseeing it all. Then what she remembered from waking a bit ago and what Cain had told her.

Mac listened without interrupting, his eyes bright, his attention completely focused on her and her story. "So Dr. Edward Payne was there the day you were taken to the Center."

She nodded. "Yeah. That was the first time I saw him. He's hard to forget."

"And there's nothing, no reason at all, that you should've ever been put in the Center."

She expected this sort of question. Battling the crazy label wasn't easy—she'd been fighting that war for the past two years. "I can see if I was suicidal or homicidal. I could understand if I was out of my head, but I was none of those things. I was just living my little life and then got thrown in there."

Mac's attention went beyond her to the window facing the driveway. He sucked in a deep breath and wiped a hand over his mouth. "Ah...shit."

"What?" She whipped around to see Dr. Payne-in-Her-Ass jogging up to the door of the cabin. Her world stopped. The

only thing moving was Dr. Payne. Getting closer and closer.

“I won’t let him take you. I promise.” Mac headed over to the door. “Hide,” he whispered.

She tossed back the covers, started to get out of bed, and saw she didn’t have any pants on. Only an oversized sweatshirt. Now was not the time for modesty. Her eyes scanned for a back door. But there wasn’t one. The only way out was past Dr. Payne.

Mac pressed himself against the wall next to the door. Mercy ducked down and hid on the far side of the bed in case Dr. Payne peeked in the window.

The sound of the doorknob rattling jangled her nerves. She couldn’t seem to remember how to breathe. Either that or somehow all the oxygen had gotten sucked out of the room. The doorknob twisted again.

She poked her head out from beside the bed to see Mac. He caught her eye. Held his finger to his lips and shook his head. The plan: pretend they weren’t here. She slid back into her hiding place.

A crack of sound startled her, and she nearly leaped out of her skin. Her brain couldn’t immediately categorize the sound, it seemed to be on a two-second delay. The door. The door had burst open, and then there was silence. Complete, smothering, I-can’t-stand-it silence.

She peeked out from behind the bed to see Dr. Payne with a gun aimed at Mac. “Mercy. I need you to come out where I can see you,” he said, his tone an order, not a request.

On hands and knees she crawled out from beside the bed.

“Good.” He moved toward her, his gun still aimed at Mac. “Now, here’s what I want you to do. Take off your shirt and kneel before me.”

Dr. Payne’s words bitch-slapped her. She just stared at him with utter disbelief.

“You son of a bitch. You leave her—” Mac’s tone was angry.

She lost the rest of Mac's words. Her early warning system caught the scent. Images flashed in her mind of what Dr. Payne really wanted. He wanted her on her knees, begging him. He wanted her completely submissive. He wanted her mouth on him. But those images didn't scare her as much as the other thing he wanted. The one thing she couldn't afford to give.

He wanted her sanity.

He could force her body to do his bidding, but she refused to let him have her mind. She'd known from the first moment he'd taken her that this day was coming. Somehow, she'd managed to avoid it until now.

She pulled the sweatshirt over her head. Let him think of her as cooperative. Let him drop his guard. And if he tried to put anything in her mouth...biting down would be a pleasure. But there was no way she'd give him her sanity. Her body could recover from anything. Her mind was what needed protecting.

"Jesus Christ." Mac's words barely penetrated her mind. He lunged at Dr. Payne. The gun fired. Mac fell. But it was like she saw it all in the periphery of her vision. She was about to battle Dr. Payne for her sanity. And she needed every ounce of concentration to win.

He came up to her, wrapped his hand in her hair, and yanked her head back. She stared into his shark's eyes, refusing to show him any fear. Not one damned ounce of fear.

And then she felt something cold against the skin of her neck. Against the scar Killion had put there.

"Can you hear your mother screaming?" Payne asked, his voice warm with the thrill of his actions. "Can you see your brother crying? Do you feel the blade on your neck?"

And all her intentions of saving her sanity vanished under the weight of her past.

ONLY TWO THINGS existed for Mercy. The monster that dominated all her nightmares and her. The world wasn't big enough for both of them. One of them had to die. It wasn't going to be her.

Killion crawled toward her. Beads of blood, small enough to be red glitter, speckled his face. Larger drops splotched his shirt. Great smears of it covered his neck and chest. His right hand raised toward her, a fat teardrop of red dripped from his open palm, falling, falling, falling. The sound of its *splat* soft and yet strangely sonic.

His eyes glowed as if backlit with hell's fire. And yet she wasn't afraid. There was a place that resided beyond fear, a place where perfect numbness lived. A place where emotion didn't cloud decisions and only logic ruled.

Her heart beat a slow, sure rhythm. A certainty settled in her bones. *He's either going to kill me, or I'm going to kill him. I've already been his victim once. Now it's his turn.*

She raised the gun.

His mouth moved. He spoke words, but his words didn't matter. No words mattered. The only thing that mattered was retribution. Justice. Revenge.

He sat on his knees, straightened, and opened his arms wide in an invitation she wouldn't refuse.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Ppogglll. The gun bucked, almost jumped out of her hand.

That place beyond fear—the numbness—vanished, and she was back in Cain's cozy cabin. Beside her on the floor, Mac laid unconscious and bleeding. And Cain— Cain, not Killion—stared at her, his gaze intense and unyielding despite the blood dripping from the wound near his clavicle and the one on his arm. His eyes went unfocused, and he listed to the side, then toppled over.

Time exploded into fragments, each piece containing an image she didn't want to see.

Cain, his eyes locked on hers, betrayal and stoicism shining bright.

Cain, lying so quiet and oddly fragile-looking on the floor where he fell.

Blood everywhere—on her hands, on the floor. Pouring out of Mac, drizzling out of Cain's wounds. Wounds he'd gotten trying to save her. One of those wounds *caused* by her.

Time coalesced again and plopped her smack in the middle of the horror that was all her fault.

“Cain?” She sounded like a scared little girl. The girl she'd once been. She tried to drop the gun, but her muscles had locked around the weapon, too tense and too tight to release it. She flapped her hand wildly—the way someone tries to shake off an insect—until the gun loosened and flew from her hand, catapulting across the room.

She scrambled through blood—Mac's blood, Cain's blood—to where Cain lay. Blood flowed from a bullet hole in that fleshy part between his neck and shoulder. Farther down his arm, his shirt had been torn away by the bullet when she'd shot him. More blood. Thank God her aim sucked. She'd been going for his heart.

“Cain.” She gathered his head in her lap and brushed the hair from his forehead, the strands satiny and smooth as they whispered against her fingers. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I... Oh God. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” *I'm sorry* seemed to be the only words in existence, and yet they were puny tokens for the amount of guilt ripping through her.

“Cain?” She stroked his cheeks with her thumbs, smearing blood on the left side of his face.

His eyes opened and slowly—so slowly—shifted toward her. But his gaze never met hers. It got locked on her breasts dangling inches from his face. “Sorry.” She wrapped her arm around them, covering her nipples but not much else. His eyes shifted to meet hers.

“I want to wake up like this every day. See those beautiful nipples waiting for my mouth. Taste them. I bet they taste like

peaches and your cream.”

Heat zinged down to her girlie parts, her body understanding the words before her brain could process them. Of all the things he could’ve said...she hadn’t been expecting that. Not that she had an expectation beyond his anger and blame.

Logical thought struggled to the forefront of her brain. “We...uh...need an ambulance. Do you have a phone?”

“Let me see you again. I tried not to look when I cleaned you up, but now it doesn’t matter.” He lifted his hand and tugged at the arm covering her nipples. She could resist him, but she didn’t want him straining and bleeding more.

“Give me your phone, and I’ll let you look all you want.”

He let her go to reach into his pants pocket and then held out the device to her. She dropped her arm, trying to ignore the satisfied smile on his face and the way her skin warmed pleasantly under his gaze. She punched 911 into the phone.

Beep beep beep. “No signal.”

“I know.” An ornery, little-boy smile curved his lips. “You have to walk down to the edge of the driveway to place a call.”

“Okay, I’ll go—” She started to push back from him, but he caught her wrist, his grip impenetrable, his eyes stone-cold serious.

“Don’t go anywhere without me. It’s not safe.”

Her gaze darted to Dr. Payne, lying in an unconscious, bloody heap on the other side of the cabin. For the first time since she’d met him, the doctor posed no threat.

Part of her recognized that Cain’s concern about her safety might just be him not thinking clearly, but the other part believed him. She had fought an uneasy sensation from the moment Cain walked out the door. Maybe he’d felt the same way.

“I need to be wherever you are.” He spoke with a profound seriousness that resonated through her as if *his* words were *her* truth.

A stupid smile bloomed across her face. This was so not the right time for smiles and butterflies. “Come on. I need you to sit up so I can check on Mac.” She reached under him and tugged upward on his shoulders. He used his uninjured hand to help push himself upright.

“Mac.” The way he said the word—voice rough and full of anguish—sliced across her heart. His friend was injured because of her. This whole mess was because of her. Dr. Payne had shot Mac because of her.

Cain slid through the blood to Mac and lifted the sweatshirt she’d pressed over the wound. He looked under the material, then tilted his head back and stared toward the ceiling. She couldn’t tell if he was praying to or cursing at whatever entity might be up there.

He turned and faced her. “This place is so remote that the nearest emergency services are a half hour away. Add another half hour to get him to the hospital, and that’s too long. We need to get him out to the car.”

“I need clothes.”

Cain pointed at the cupboard.

She was across the room, grabbing material, yanking it over her head and up her legs. She didn’t give a thought to what she wore. She might’ve used pants as a shirt and have her legs threaded through a T-shirt. Didn’t matter. She needed to get them both to the hospital.

Cain bent low over Mac. He pulled Mac upright by one arm and carefully draped him over his uninjured shoulder.

He meant to carry him. “You shouldn’t—”

“You got another idea, sweetheart?” The way he said *sweetheart* had bite to it. “’Cause I don’t see a lot of options here. You weigh half of what he does. No offense, but you wouldn’t be much help unless we had a wheelchair. Which we don’t.”

Cain raised up on both knees, then got one foot under him. Paused. Breathed. Then got the other foot underneath him and stood, shaking and swaying until he found his balance.

He was doing all the work, but Mercy was the one sweating, just watching the exertion it took for him to stand with Mac dangling limp and lifeless off him.

Blood raced from the wound in Cain's shoulder and arm, splattering against the wood floor. Mercy had heard that same sound as her family died. Cain could die. He was losing a lot of blood. "You're bleeding."

"No shit." He wobbled on his feet, his eyes aimed at the door. "You gonna get that for me?"

"Of course."

She opened the door, then darted to the cabinet, grabbed a wad of towels and followed him outside. The rough gravel of the drive bit into her bare feet, but she ignored the pain. It was nothing compared to what Cain had to be going through. But he hadn't uttered a grunt or a groan. The only sounds from him were loud huffs of exertion.

She ran in front of him, past the sports car to the car parked behind it.

"Get...the passenger...door open." His breathing was so heavy he almost couldn't speak.

She opened the door for him. He leaned in and gently settled Mac in the seat as if he were a precious babe. "Gimme one of those towels."

She handed him the towel, and he pressed it against Mac's side. He backed out of the car door, closed it, and then stumbled. She inserted herself underneath his good arm to steady him. His weight was staggering, and she nearly went to her knees, but if he could carry Mac, she could help him around the car to get in the other side.

"You...get in...backseat." His words were more breath than sound.

"No. I'm driving." She leaned him against the car while she opened the door.

"You...don't know...the way." His breathing went into the Darth Vader zone. His skin turned an ugly shade of gray.

“Then you better tell me before you pass out.”

MERCY STARED at Cain sleeping in the hospital bed. His dark-caramel hair brushed his forehead. She longed to sweep it back off his face. She longed to do a lot more. She longed to apologize. Longed for him to forgive her. Longed to go back to those moments in the cabin before Mac arrived when everything had seemed—so briefly—okay.

Thankfully, none of Cain’s wounds required surgery. He’d gotten numbed up and stitched up, and by the time the nurse let her back into his room, he had fallen asleep. She wasn’t going to wake him. It had been a flat-out miracle that Dr. Payne hadn’t killed him. And something a bit more extraordinary than a triple rainbow that she hadn’t killed him either.

He slept without a shirt, and for the first time she saw the damage that had been done to his body from his childhood. His arms were lined with white scars. His chest covered with puckered dime-sized wounds that looked as if they’d still be tender, even though it had been decades since they’d healed. And more of those slashing white marks. Her gaze locked on a crude line of scars that crisscrossed over his heart like a primitive crucifix. In a way, it was the ugliest reminder of his past. In another way, it was divine.

Slowly, gently, so as not to wake him, she settled her hand over the scar. The raised ridges reminded her of Killion’s mark on her neck—cool and smooth and full of memories. She lifted her hand from him, then reached under her shirt and settled her palm on the filigreed cross she’d had burned into her flesh. How strange that they both had that symbol over their hearts.

To her, the symbol meant victory over sin and death. His had probably been placed there by his father and had no special meaning beyond the pain he’d endured.

Why was she looking for special meaning between them? She was being ridiculous. If ever there was someone she should run from, it was him. For his own safety.

She tore her gaze from Cain's sleeping form and looked out the window. The sky was colored in a gray scale ranging from the palest of pewter to the darkest iron. It looked hard and angry and sad at the same time. Exactly how she felt.

There was something about Cain. Maybe it was that he saved her from Dr. Payne. Maybe it was the hurt little boy she'd glimpsed in his eyes. Maybe it was their shared experience at the hands of his father. Whatever it was, she really liked him. And what had she done? She'd shot him. In that moment when she'd pulled the trigger, she'd intended to kill him. Didn't matter that she was lost in a flashback.

A tear tickled its way down her cheek. She didn't bother brushing it away. For the first time in two years, she could allow herself to feel something other than disdain. She preferred disdain. This sucked.

She'd never thought she belonged in the Center, but after today, she wasn't so sure. She'd lost track of reality long enough to shoot an innocent man, a man who'd saved her and protected her.

"What's wrong?" Cain's voice was thick and throaty and full of concern.

She didn't look at him. Didn't want him to see her tears, didn't want or deserve the sympathy he might offer her. She wiped her cheeks dry with her palms, took a breath, and faced him. "How are you feeling?"

"Is it Mac?" His eyes reminded her of a sad spring sky.

"No. Oh no. Sorry. They took him to surgery an hour ago. I haven't heard anything since." He dipped his chin in a gesture that meant that he'd heard her but wasn't going to say anything. "Cain. You have to know... I didn't mean to... I thought you were Killion." She blurted it all out there.

He flinched as if she'd slapped him, the same as he'd done the last time she'd said his father's name.

He turned his face away from her. "You'll always see him in me."

“That’s not it. It’s where I went in my mind. I went back to that day. I was there again, and all I could see was him.”

“You saw me.”

“No, I saw him.”

He muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *same difference*, then said, “And yet you shot *me*. You’ll always see him in me.”

“No. I need to explain. Dr. Payne—”

“I want you to go.” His words were monotone.

“Back at the cabin, you didn’t want me to go as far as the end of the driveway without you. Why do you want me to leave now?”

He aimed an angry glare at her. She suspected he thought that if he merely told her to leave, she would leave. *No such luck, buster.*

“Back at the cabin... Chalk it up to confusion, adrenaline, and your boobs in my face.”

She almost smiled, but he wasn’t being funny. He was serious.

“I gave Payne a beating he won’t forget. By this time, he’s probably been arrested. Hell, he might even be in the room next door getting half his face sewed back on. He won’t hurt you again.”

Mercy grabbed Cain’s hand and squeezed, the feeling of his skin and hers together warm and sweet. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay. I want to be near you. To be your friend. To have a human connection with the one person who understands what happened to me because, in a way, it happened to you.” She resisted the urge to clamp her hand over her mouth. None of those words should’ve been uttered aloud. They should’ve remained locked inside because she *should* leave. The problem was she didn’t want to.

“What’s wrong with you?” His voice was a gun loaded with hatred and contempt. “You get off or something on being

around the guy who looks like the one who killed your family? Who tried to kill you? That's sick."

She bore the bullets of his words without flinching. He was angry. Had a right to be. She had shot him when he'd been trying to save her.

"Go."

Two letters never sounded so terrible or contained so much force. She brushed the hair off his forehead. He jerked at her touch. She pretended not to notice and bent down and kissed his cheek. The scrape of his stubble against her lips was electric, zinging through her body. He tensed. His hands flexed into fists. He trembled as if suppressing the urge to beat her down. No less than she deserved. She had shot him.

"I am sorry," she whispered, then set his car keys on the stand next to the bed and walked toward the door. She stopped and turned to him, but his eyes were clenched closed, and she could see fresh blood spotting the bandages on his arm and up near his shoulder from his muscles being so tight. She walked out into the hall. And stopped.

Doctors and nurses and frantic people rushed by her. Hospital sounds—intercom announcements, people shouting, and machines beeping—bombarded her ears. She smelled industrial cleaner and body odor. It was all too much. She couldn't think in the middle of this chaos.

Her legs started moving as if they understood better than her mind. She walked down the crowded hall, out a door, and into that ominous day.

What now? She didn't have family. Didn't have friends. Her apartment had probably been rented out to someone else a year and a half ago. She didn't have a wallet or money or an ID. She had some cash in the bank—not much, enough to survive on for a while, but how could she withdraw it if she didn't have an ID or her bank card?

There was one place she could go.

Home.

She should've had the place demolished when she turned eighteen. Instead, she'd taken the money donated to the Mercy Ledger Trust and Education Fund and gave it all to a security and maintenance company with the understanding that they'd keep the place locked up tighter than a prison. No more pieces of bloody wallpaper, no more scraps of bloody carpet for sale on murderabelia.com.

It was sick that people wanted to own a piece of her family's suffering.

No, she couldn't go home. No way. Homeless was preferable to that house of horrors.

She headed across the parking lot, past Cain's car that she'd carefully parked away from the others. She didn't have a destination. She'd just walk until an idea about how to survive hit her. And if she didn't have any ideas, she'd just keep walking.

*For Sale: Letter from Adam Killion to Cynthia Wonnimaker
(authenticity confirmed) Price: \$350 (SOLD)*

Dear Cynthia,

Thank you for your kind letter. I do enjoy reading. It is a wonderful way to pass the time. I have added you to my visitors list and hope to meet you in the future to discuss books.

Adam Killion

Cain ripped the IV out of his hand, the sharp stick of pain nothing compared to the shit cooking on high between his ears. He'd been a total jackhole to Mercy. She didn't deserve it, but he didn't know how the fuck else to get her away from him. She was like the mouse trying to cozy up to the cat. And he'd wanted to grab her. Hold on to her. Gobble her up. And then tell her he was sorry for all of it—starting with what his father had done, then moving to him leaving the cabin and Payne hurting her.

Everything inside him had trembled with the urge to do just that, but that was selfish. She needed to be away from him, whether she realized it or not. She wasn't going to heal with a constant reminder of the man who'd tried to kill her.

He wiped the blood dripping from his hand on the bedding.

His room door swung open, banging into the wall. Dolan Watts—Mac’s next in command—stood there panting like he’d run across Ohio instead of using his vehicle. “You’re all right? No major damage? What happened? Where’s Mercy Ledger? How’s she involved?” The questions raced out of Dolan’s mouth.

The guy might be Mac’s second, but he was barely older than Cain. He wore his usual G-man garb. White shirt. Black suit, black tie. Even his hair was black and slicked off his face so severely it almost looked painful. Maybe that’s why Cain had never seen him smile—his hair hurt. Mirrored shades hid Dolan’s eyes despite the guy being indoors.

“Got my bell rung and some flesh wounds. Nothing serious.” Didn’t feel like taking on the Mercy issue just yet, so he changed the subject. “What’s with the sunglasses?”

“I’m going for the incognito movie-star look.” Dolan’s tone rode the line between sarcasm and humor. “For the moment, everything is on the QT. I’m in front of the media storm, but I don’t know if we’re going to be able to outrun this tornado. All it takes is one hospital employee leaking that you’ve been shot and Mercy Ledger is here, and it’ll be all over the damned news.”

Cain had expected local law enforcement to arrive at the ER within minutes of the doctors finding out that he’d been shot. But two hours and no cops later, Dolan had managed to work some magic to keep everything quiet. “You hear anything about Mac?”

Dolan heaved a relieved-sounding sigh. “The surgeon was cautiously optimistic but said he’d know more after they opened him up.”

Cain clung to the word *optimistic*. A world without Mac was a world he couldn’t imagine living in. From the moment Mac found him, Cain’s life had been about living up to the potential Mac saw in him. Without Mac, what would happen to that potential?

Cain felt like punching himself in the same temple where Payne had landed a blow. Wanted to ring his own bell this time

because none of this would've happened if he'd just stayed at the cabin. If he'd never called Mac. Hell, if he'd never taken Mercy in the first place. But if he hadn't, she'd probably be dead by now.

The truth would get Payne convicted for what he'd done to both Mercy and Mac.

Cain sucked in a giant breath and told Dolan everything, starting from the moment he'd called Liz to set up the clandestine meeting with Mercy and ending with Mercy driving him and Mac to the hospital.

Dolan sat at the foot of the bed, leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and aimed his gaze at the floor while he listened. Only when Cain finished did Dolan turn his face in Cain's direction. "So you were the last person to see Liz Sands alive."

The words hung suspended in the air between them for a long moment. But a moment was all it took for Cain's ears to hear them and his brain to translate their terrible meaning. "See Liz alive?" His insides began to tremble, and his head shook in denial. "What're you talking about? You've got your wires crossed or something. I just talked to her two days ago when she dropped Mercy on me." His voice sounded firm and solid. Not reflecting the rising dread inside him.

Dolan scrubbed a hand over his mouth. "Aww...shit. I assumed Mac told you."

"Told me what?" Dolan's words echoed through Cain's mind. *So you were the last person to see Liz Sands alive.* There had to be another meaning to that sentence. Had to be.

"Liz Sands...is...dead. It happened two days ago." Dolan spaced out the words, as if speaking them slower would help them sink in deeper. His lips turned down, and then he spoke one of the ugliest words in the English language. "Murdered."

A sound partway between a gasp and groan slipped from Cain. A horrible hollow feeling expanded in his chest. He could no longer see the hospital room, could no longer see Dolan. All he could see was the past.

From his earliest memories of Liz at the Center until just last week when they'd split a carryout pizza and watched *Frasier* reruns. Liz loved *Frasier*. It made her laugh that a psychiatrist could be so bumbling and good-hearted. So different from those she worked with at the Center.

Oh, Liz.

She was one of the few people to accept him. She never treated him like he was his father's son.

Raw and roiling emotion traveled up Cain's throat. He swallowed it back down before he either barfed or bawled. He'd deal with the feelings later, when he was alone.

"I know the timing of this is shitty, but..." Dolan's voice carried a killing kindness. "The Director is wanting some answers. He's got some...concerns."

Cain's attention snapped to Dolan. "I'd. Never. Hurt. Her."

One of Dolan's brows twitched above his shades, and he held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. "I know that. You know that. Mac knows that. But the Director needs reassurance. He doesn't know *you* like we do."

Wasn't that the story of his life? Everyone always seemed to be waiting for the moment he'd snap and morph into his father. Maybe he would. He almost did today. He could've killed Payne with his fists.

His knuckles were scraped, swollen, bloody, and bruised. He clenched his hand, welcoming the stiffness and pain. Pain was a sensation his mind could choose to master or invite—both ways had advantages. That was the only good thing his father had ever taught him.

"I can't believe Mac knew and didn't tell me." Why hadn't Mac said anything? This wasn't oops-I-forgot-to-mention-it shit; this was a whole steaming pile.

Cain's mind raced back to his conversation on the phone with Mac. *We caught a case. A bad one. I need to talk to you about it.* But then things had gone in a different direction. Why didn't Mac say anything at the cabin? Cain replayed their talk outside, hearing things he hadn't heard the first time around.

I don't know everything that's going on with the Liz and Mercy situation.

Lay low until I give you the all clear.

Cain had just thought the guy was being overprotective. Overprotective because he thought Cain might be wrongly accused? Or overprotective because he thought Cain had something to do with Liz's death? Fucking shit. That explained how Mac had acted on the phone. *What's wrong. I can hear it in your voice. Talk to me. Whatever it is, you'll be fine. We'll get through it. I'm here for you. Always have been. Always will be.* Mac had assumed Cain was in trouble. The I-just-killed-someone kind of trouble.

The temperature inside him rose to a spontaneous-combustion level. His armpits went damp, and a bead of sweat slid down his temple. Anger and shame collided inside him, bashing and slashing each other for dominance.

Dolan's phone buzzed. He yanked it from his pocket and looked at the screen. His lips puckered tighter than an anus. He hit the talk button and held it to his ear. "Director."

Cain swung his legs over the side of the bed and lurched toward the alcove bathroom. He slammed the door behind him. Couldn't bear to hear Dolan's conversation.

It was all too much. Liz was dead, and the Director suspected Cain had done it. The asshole.

His shoulder throbbed and the place where Mercy's bullet grazed his arm burned, but those things were a welcome distraction from the emotions threatening to burst out of him.

He took a piss, imagining Payne's face in the water, then washed his hands in the sink and splashed cold water on his cheeks and forehead until some of the throbbing heat receded. He lifted his head and stared at his dripping reflection in the mirror. His features were as sharp and angular as chiseled bone, his hair some color between blond and brown. It was hard looking at himself. Had been difficult since he'd hit his early twenties. Part of him recognized himself, but another part could only see his father staring back at him. Over the

years, he seemed to grow into the image of the man he hated, the man who'd hurt him and so many others.

Cain dried his face and hands, then opened the door.

Dolan stood in the middle of the room staring down at his phone. "Dude. The Director is going wack-jack. You've got to explain these pictures." He shoved his oversized phone in Cain's face.

In shades of charcoal ranging from the palest gray to the darkest black was a sketch of a man's torso, ripped open, guts strung out in fat worms beside him.

Cain's knees went wobbly. A shudder ripped through him. He couldn't bear the images that stuck in his mind from murder scenes, so he purged them by putting them on paper. He never looked through his sketchbooks. They were too terrible to view.

"Those are my private..." Shit. What was he going to call them? "...drawings." *Drawings* came out barely audible. It was too innocuous a word for the gruesome images on the page.

"Your right to privacy vanished the moment an FBI agent was shot at your cabin." Dolan's words weren't asshole, just matter-of-fact.

Cain wanted to argue with the guy, but didn't. Of course they were going to comb every inch of the cabin inside and out, looking for answers.

"The Director wants to know where you were on the evenings of Friday, May fifth, and Saturday, May sixth."

Cain's head felt like it was expanding, getting larger and larger, getting ready to pop like a water balloon. "You really think I had something to do with the Dawsons' murder?" His voice came from a dark place.

"I don't. But you've got to start giving some answers the Director will believe. After what happened with the second-highest-ranking profiler going serial killer, he's not taking any chances. Look at it from his point of view. It's awfully coincidental that you are a blood consultant who has some

unexplained ability to perfectly profile killers. And he just found out that you're an artist." The way he said *artist* sounded like *ar-teest*. "And an artist painted a portrait of you on a wall in blood. A portrait that only you could see until we brought in infrared. What conclusion do you think he's going to reach?"

"Holy motherfucking son of a bitch." Cain's brain buzzed against his skull, plugging in connection after connection that he hadn't made before. Even without being his father's son, there was an awful lot of circumstantial evidence pointing directly at him.

What *had* he been doing the nights of the fifth and sixth? He flipped through his memories, searching back nearly a week to those two days, searching for proof—beyond his word—he hadn't killed the family. He could never do something so... Who the fuck was he trying to lie to? He *could* kill. It was in his DNA, in the very foundation of who he was as a person. But he sure didn't have any memory of himself mutilating that family, beyond what he'd gotten from the blood. He would've recognized the scene—the scent and sight and fucking taste of being there before. Right?

But there were gaps in his childhood memories. Large gaping holes that he'd never dared to peer into for fear of what he'd find. His normal memories were already a horror—how much worse could the ones his mind blocked be? Could he have done something to that family, and his mind had hidden it from him?

No. Stop. He wasn't going to entertain the Director's suspicions. "The Director wants to know about these drawings? They're how I fucking survive the shit I see in this job. All everyone else sees is the aftermath. But I see..." He trailed off. No one but Mac really knew what happened to Cain when he worked. All the Bureau knew was that Cain needed disease-free blood to be able to profile.

"The Director wants to accuse me of killing the Dawsons? Tell him to find some proof. In the meantime, Payne killed Liz." Those words sounded so horrible coming out of his mouth. Cain swallowed and shoved all the unproductive

emotions that wanted some airtime into a dark, dangerous corner of his mind. “He was trying to find Mercy. He’s obsessed with her. Liz probably told him I took Mercy, and when he couldn’t find me, he followed Mac.”

“Biggest mistake of his life,” Dolan said.

“Yep.” Cain lifted his hand and bumped knuckles with Dolan.

“I’ve got him pegged as a crier. The moment we catch him and he realizes there’s no escape, I just know he’s going to—”

“Catch him? I thought you had him. He was unconscious when we left him. He got away?” Cain had trouble pulling oxygen out of the air. “Mercy’s out there. She’s in danger as long as he’s on the loose—”

“What do you mean she’s out there?” Dolan made a sound halfway between a groan and a growl. “Please tell me you mean she’s out in the waiting room.”

Cain’s heart pressed against his sternum, trying to propel him into action. His legs twitched with the urge to run out the door looking for her, but he forced himself to stillness. She might not want to be frightened of him, but on a level deeper than her conscious mind, she was terrified of him. All he had to do was look down at that bandage covering his bicep to see just how deep her fear went. “She left about fifteen minutes ago.” His voice came out steady and even, containing none of the urgency his body felt.

“She just left?” Dolan’s voice screeched like a pubescent boy’s. “She fucking shot you. Payne tried to kill her. And she just strolled out of here?”

“None of it’s Mercy’s fault. Shooting me. Leaving. It’s all on me.” He could elaborate about the exact reason she left, but didn’t. He shouldn’t have been such a shit to her. Should’ve just kept his mouth closed. Didn’t this just shove the blade of truth deeper? Even when he was trying to protect her, he was hurting her. “You’ve gotta find her. She couldn’t have gone far.”

“I’ll get everyone—even the damned dog warden—on it.” Dolan put his hand on Cain’s shoulder, a level of familiarity they didn’t normally share. “You should know that Mac came around for a moment before his surgery.”

Cain’s gaze snapped to Dolan’s face.

“The only thing he had to say was: *Tell Dolan to let Cain do his job.*” Dolan then moved away and tapped on his phone’s screen a few times, seemingly looking for something. “I need you at 703 Bunkirk. The scene has been cleared, and the blood came back clean.”

“That’s Liz’s address,” Cain heard himself say stupidly. Of course that’s what Mac had meant when he’d said to let Cain do his job. But this was too much to ask. And too much to refuse. If he could see something from the blood that would help capture Payne, it’d be worth it. Right? He’d deal with the mental fallout later. Yeah, right. He’d do what he always did. Draw it.

Cain nabbed his keys off the stand next to the bed and looked around the room for a shirt. Nothing. At least he’d refused to remove his pants. “I’ll be in contact.” He and Dolan headed toward the door.

“I’ve got a few more asses to kiss here with the hospital administration and the local lawmen, and then I’ll meet you there.”

Cain walked out of the room. A red EXIT sign over a pair of exterior doors spelled out both his salvation and destruction.

A nurse approached, taking in his appearance. Her eyes widened. Her steps faltered and then slowed as she stared at him, her face a mixture of fear and desire. Yep. She was a dirty girl—fascinated by the fear he instilled just by resembling his father. The kind of girl who wanted to lie down with a killer and get kissed.

“You haven’t been...discharged.” Her voice was airy and distracted, as if it was hard for her to speak and think and look at him all at the same time.

“Go on ahead. I’ll take care of this.” Dolan’s tone screamed irritation at the nurse, but the woman seemed too far gone to notice.

“Thanks, man.” Cain didn’t have the time or energy for bullshit. He needed focus. To do his work with Liz’s blood, not go searching for Mercy Ledger. No, he wouldn’t search for her. No. He. Wouldn’t.

THE RAIN CAME DOWN gray and thick as a shroud, blurring his vision of the world. He flipped on the wipers and pulled out of the hospital parking lot onto the road. Fat blobs smacked the windshield loud as marbles being tossed against the glass. Was that hail? As if it mattered. His car was trashed.

Cain had covered the passenger seat and all Mac’s blood with a blanket he kept in the trunk. Even though his view of all that crimson was blocked, his mind knew it was there and his eyes kept wandering to the blanket, calling up the image of the dark stickiness coating the seat and the floor. All that blood was playing touchy-feely with his sanity. And he wasn’t in the mood for games.

He drove past a gas station, a fast-food restaurant, a person walking alongside the road. His foot hit the brake before his brain had a chance to talk him out of it.

Mercy.

Her hair was slicked to her skull, and her clothes—his clothes—were sucked to her body, doing a shitty job of hiding her curves. At least the T-shirt she wore was black, not white. He pulled over to the berm and watched her in the rearview mirror.

She stopped walking, stared at the car—knew it was him—but didn’t move. Could he blame her for not wanting to be around him after what he’d said to her? Not really. And yet he couldn’t leave her alone and walking in the rain with Payne still out there. Not to mention that she didn’t have anyone or anywhere to go.

She still hadn't moved from her spot. He left the car running, opened his door, and got out. The rain slapped him—frigid, bordering on icy, soaking his clothes and dripping in his eyes. The pressure of it hitting the wounds in his bicep and shoulder made him wince. But that was all the attention he'd give to the pain.

“Get in the car.” The words came out harsher than he'd intended.

Mercy crossed her arms in front of her chest, lifted her head, and somehow managed to stare down her nose at him, even though she was almost a foot shorter. “No.” She said the word as if it didn't matter that they were standing in the middle of a downpour.

“Get in the goddamned car.” This time the words came out loud and angry sounding. Like that was going to win her over. What was his problem?

“Fuck you.” She looked miserable—all wet and shivery, and yet feisty and taking none of his crap.

He should soften his tone. He should try to be nicer. He should, but his inner asshole seemed attracted to her inner bitch. “You don't have anywhere to go. You don't have any money. You don't have friends.” His voice softened and filled with some emotion he couldn't name. “You don't have anyone looking out for you, caring for you, able to help you in a pinch. You got no one.” He sucked in a breath, and when he spoke next, his voice was soft and pleading. “Except me.”

The moment he finished speaking, he wanted to retract every goddamned one of those words he'd spoken. “I'm... Shit...” He ran a hand through his soaking hair. “Goddamn it. I'm a dick. Okay?” He softened his tone. “Now, will you please get in the car?”

Her shoulders straightened, her chin lifted, and she walked forward without looking at him. He expected her to stomp past the car, but she yanked open the passenger door and got in. Seconds passed while he just stood there, getting even wetter and staring at the back of her head poking above the headrest.

“Now what?” he asked himself. Just what was he going to do with her? Drop her on Dolan? Yes. *No*. Yes. *No*. *No*. *No*. The last time he tried dropping her on someone, she’d almost gotten hurt. If Mac hadn’t been able to keep her safe, Cain sure as shit wasn’t going to trust Dolan with her.

He got back in the car. Every inch of him was soaked. He brushed his hair back off his face and wiped the water from his eyes.

Mercy stared out the passenger window, refusing to look at him. He reached over and touched her shoulder. Underneath his hand, her body tensed, then trembled. Shit. Was he scaring her?

He wrenched his hand off her and wanted to use the damned thing to slap himself around a little. Maybe then he’d get it through his stupid brain that she was fucking frightened of him. Too many words flooded his mind, and he didn’t know which ones to say. The I’m-sorry ones. The I-won’t-hurt-you ones. The I’m-an-asshole ones. The I-don’t-know-what-to-do ones.

She turned to him. Rain slicked her cheeks. Or was that tears? Her beautiful eyes were the color of tropical waters—deep and fathomless. He held up his hands in a show of surrender, and she flew across the console at him.

He closed his eyes and braced for the blows, but none came.

Instead, slender arms wrapped around him. Her hair, cold and wet, dripped against his chest, but her cheek over his heart was warm—so warm.

Maybe he’d had a stroke or something, because this felt like she was hugging him. And that couldn’t be. Could it? He opened his eyes and looked down at her.

Yep. She was wound tight around the front of him. And suddenly his brain let him feel the total sensation of it. Of being held tight as if he mattered to her. He let his arms fall around her and squeezed, pressing her tighter to him. Damn,

this felt good. She felt good. It was oddly comforting to have her clinging to him so tightly.

He closed his eyes and memorized the pressure of her arms around him and the way her hands pressed into his back. The subtle ripple of her spine and ribs underneath his fingers, the way her skin felt warm against his when every other part of him was cold.

If he'd been given a stop-time button, this was the moment he would've used it. Here, holding her, the gentle lullaby of rain playing in the background, was the only perfect moment of his entire life.

It takes a certain type of man to kill with a knife. It takes strength and stamina. Knife work is personal. Intimate. Messy. It lacks the safety and distance that someone using a gun has.

—Inmate at Petesville Super Max interviewed by Peanch Renell, PhD,
forensic psychologist

Cain held her tighter than a straitjacket, and she loved it. Loved the way she felt protected and powerful at the same time. Loved the way his scent filled her nose with the aromas of rain, woodsmoke, and something warm, comforting, and uniquely him. She inhaled the essence of him, the scent traveling beyond her lungs and down to that spot between her legs where she suddenly felt squirmy and in desperate need of satisfaction. What was up with that?

Maybe she was having a weird reaction from all the drugs she'd been on. Maybe the shock treatments had fried her hormones. Maybe she was just horny.

Not that he would do anything about it. He was so damned worried about her being afraid of him that he'd never think she'd want him—as in want to have humping, hot, screaming sex with him.

“I need to tell you something.” She spoke the words softly, her lips brushing his chest.

He made a sound in his throat that was half moan, half groan.

“Dr. Payne did something to me in the cabin.” Tension gripped Cain’s body, transforming him from merely strong and solid to feeling like she was hugging steel and his arms around her were iron bars. “He didn’t physically hurt me. He...” How to explain what happened? “It’s like he made the day my family died real for me again.” Those memories tasted foul in her mouth. She swallowed them down. She needed to make Cain understand *why* she’d shot him.

“Somehow, he knew all the details of what your father did and used them against me. He made me kneel in the same position. Did everything the same. Said the same words. Touched the same places. He wanted me to lose my grip on reality and go back there to the moment when...” Her voice sounded weak and fragile—just as she’d felt back then. “... Killion cut me. And it worked. I didn’t see you. I saw Killion because that’s what Dr. Payne wanted me to see.”

Silence stretched between them like one long string of taffy. Did he understand? Did he get that she’d really thought she saw Killion because that’s what Dr. Payne had triggered her to see?

“If I ever see that asshole, motherfucking son of a...”

She lifted her head from his chest and met his gaze, hoping he would recognize the truth shining in her eyes. “I need you to understand. It wasn’t you. It’ll never be you that causes me fear. To me, you look different from your father. On the surface, your face looks similar to his”—she reached up and touched the cleft in his chin, then the wrinkle line that ran across his forehead—“but you carry emotion in your features. Your father’s face is empty and blank. Like how a shark doesn’t have facial expression.”

Cain didn’t move. Didn’t say a word. He wasn’t even breathing. She leaned into him, placing her cheek over the slashing scar on his heart, and let him absorb everything she’d said. The guy was over six feet of hard-muscled male and yet skittish as an abused kitten around her. “Does this feel as good

to you as it does to me?” She finished her sentence with a light kiss over his heart.

“Best moment of my life.” His tone carried no hesitation and was heavy with certainty.

Her head whipped off his chest to look at him. His eyes captured her attention. They were the color of a summer sky and just as sincere. His skin was damp from the rain, and she supposed she was wet too, but it was hard to feel anything except his gaze on her, heating her from the inside out.

He loosened his hold on her and started to back away.

“No. Don’t you dare move away from me now. I’m not done. I need more.”

His brows jacked skyward. “What do you need?” His voice was rough as gravel and heavy as stone.

Being parked alongside a busy street wasn’t the ideal location for this, but she was going to show him exactly what she needed from him.

She leaned toward him slowly, oh so slowly. Was she really going to do this? Her body answered by continuing closer, closer, closer. He tracked her movement, wariness hardening his features. He braced as if he expected a blow, and then his tension morphed into eyes-wide-open surprise when her lips touched his.

The way his features were cut so sharply, she had expected his lips to be hard, but they were soft and smoother than satin. A hot streak of yearning bolted to the junction of her thighs. Her eyes slid shut, unable to bear sight and sensation at the same time.

His hands cupped her face as if he held something fragile in his palms, and then his tongue was in her mouth and she was lost. She didn’t know where she was. Didn’t have a past or future. All that existed was this moment where every muscle and bone, every breath and heartbeat, every working brain cell tuned in to Cain and his tongue in her mouth filling her with the warm, sweet taste of him and the feeling that for the first time in her life, she’d found perfect harmony.

The sound of a car horn nearby barely registered, but Cain jerked away from her as if kissing her was some sort of vehicular violation. He glanced in the rearview at the same time his cell phone started buzzing. “Damn it.” He yanked the thing out of his pants pocket and stared at the screen hard enough the plastic should’ve melted. “I have to answer this.”

It wasn’t like he was asking her permission, but she nodded anyway and pushed herself back over to her side of the car. The absence of his closeness—his body’s warmth—gave her chills. Goose bumps erupted over her skin.

“What?” Cain practically yelled into the phone. The word was an explosion packed with fragments of anger and maybe—just maybe—sexual frustration. Or was she just hearing what she wanted to hear?

“Are you sucking face with Mercy Ledger?” The guy on the other end of the phone line had a voice that not only carried, but was filled with shock and humor and a hint of attaboy.

Suck face—such crude, adolescent words to describe the way he’d enthralled her with just a kiss. It made her seem all teenage girl, but Mercy giggled.

A smile fired across Cain’s lips, lighting his whole face as if a beacon inside him had just been turned on. In that moment, she saw past his outward appearance to the little boy he kept hidden inside. A boy who wanted so much to be a part of the world, but who’d been hurt so badly he hid inside the man.

She couldn’t help herself. She reached out to him, settling her palm against his cheek, feeling the scrape of stubble against her fingertips. His eyes blazed with intensity and intimacy. They were so much alike. He had a damaged boy inside him, and she had a damaged girl inside her.

“Hello? Cain? Are you there?” The voice on the other end of the line broke the trance.

Cain cleared his throat. “Who I suck face with is none of your business.” His tone was light and distracted. His gaze

slipped down to her lips, with a future promise that warmed her girlie parts, before traveling back up to her eyes.

“That *is* Mercy Ledger.” The voice on the other end exclaimed like Cain had just answered the game-winning question. “And yeah, it kinda is my business. I need to call off the search for her. Save the taxpayers money and such. Oh, and just in case you forgot, she shot you.”

The words slapped her as solidly as a palm across the cheek. Even Cain flinched and gripped the steering wheel as if he were either trying to go all Incredible Hulk and break it into pieces or he was holding on for dear life. “Seriously, Dolan? I don’t think you realize how loud you are talking. She can hear every word, and you’re not on speakerphone.”

“Have you checked her for weapons?” The guy on the other end of the line sounded sincerely concerned for Cain’s safety. Which she supposed was only logical. As he’d pointed out, she *had* shot him.

But two years of having to monitor every word, every tone, every facial expression led to the desire to be honest. To put the truth out there—and the consequences could go roast on a spit in hell. “Put it on speakerphone. I’ve got some things to say.”

Cain tapped a button on his phone, then held it out between them. “Mercy, this is Dolan Watts. He’s going to be taking over for Mac, and he’s parked right behind us.”

Oh...that *meeping* noise hadn’t been some random honk. She turned in her seat to see the black sedan behind them. The guy behind the wheel wore a pair of sunglasses—the cool aviator kind. They fit his features well, but it was raining. Cloudy skies with no hope of sunshine. What was up with the sunglasses?

“Hi, Dolan. It’s nice to meet you, I think.” She raised her hand and waved at him through the back window.

“Oh. Uh...” Dolan raised his hand and waved back as if it were a foreign gesture, one he’d never done before. “Yeah. Uh... Back at ya.”

“You need to know some things. I did pull the trigger. I did shoot Cain. And I do regret it. But I want you to understand why I did it. And to understand that, you need to understand who Dr. Payne is.” She played the highlights reel from her time in the Center. “When Dr. Payne showed up at the cabin, Mac tried to protect me, but Dr. Payne doesn’t like anyone or anything getting between us so he shot Mac.”

This next part was going to be the part she really needed Dolan to understand. Cain settled his hand over hers as if offering his support for what she was about to say. “Then he messed with my mind. Forced me back to that day twenty years ago. He knew things. Things no one else knows. Things I’ve never told anyone. And I got lost in the past. For a moment I thought Cain was Killion, but only because Dr. Payne primed me to see Killion.”

“Jesus.” Dolan let out a low whistle. “This guy really is obsessed with you.”

“Welcome to the past two years of my life. You don’t have to worry about me hurting Cain. I’d never willingly harm him. Never. He saved me from Dr. Payne. He and Liz. I owe both of them my life.”

“Damn. There’s a whole tangled mess of connections here. You and Liz. Liz and Cain. You and Cain. You and the symbol. Cain and the symbol.”

Dolan’s words were such an unexpected combination that it took Mercy’s mind a bit longer to process them.

“I haven’t had a chance to ask her about the symbol yet.” Cain squeezed her hand. “She was sick. Then everything with Mac happened. There just hasn’t been any time.”

“What symbol?” Her mind raced back to Cain telling her that he and Mac wanted to talk to her about what happened to her family. She flipped through memories— but not the worst ones—searching for something that might be a symbol. Nothing. “I don’t know anything about a symbol.”

Dolan’s voice came over the phone speakers. “While Cain is doing his work at Liz’s, we’ll discuss the image. I’ve got a

picture of the one you drew from twenty years ago. You might remember it if you see it again.”

“I don’t remember drawing anything.”

“Back then, we confirmed that your fingerprints were on the wall. We didn’t realize it was a symbol until the same design showed up at a recent crime scene.”

She stared out the back window at Dolan. “I want to be very clear when I say this. I won’t help you if you’re one of those people seeking to exonerate Killion. Too many times, I’ve been approached and asked to recant my testimony.”

Dolan’s sunglasses aimed right at her. He held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “Killion’s a bastard who deserves worse than he got.”

Cain nodded his head but didn’t say anything. He handed the phone to her, then faced forward in his seat, shifted the car into gear, and pulled out onto the road. Dolan followed.

“I’m just trying to find out who’s copying this element of his crimes. And I need to find Dr. Payne. Bastard shot a federal agent. That doesn’t go unpunished,” Dolan said. “When we get to Liz Sands’, I’ll need to take a formal statement from you. What you remember about the symbol and what happened at the cabin. Then we’re going to need to contact the local authorities. They’re the ones who will investigate and file charges against Edward Payne for what’s been done to you. By the time the FBI is done with him and you’re done with him, he’s going to be fighting at least a dozen serious charges and life in prison.”

Mercy couldn’t help it. A vindictive smile stretched across her lips. “Liz will corroborate a lot of my story so it won’t just be my word against his.”

“Liz is dead.”

Her face stung with cold, as if the temperature had just dropped to arctic levels. The sensation traveled down her neck, her torso.

Dead. Dead. Dead. Her mind locked on that word and refused to let go. *Liz was dead.*

“Jesus, Dolan. She didn’t know.” Cain snatched the phone away from her, tapped the screen, and tossed it onto the dash.

She stared straight ahead. At the rain hitting the windshield, at the wipers scraping it away, at the cars passing by them. They were on a highway. When did they get on a highway? Just a moment ago they’d been on the road Cain had found her on.

“Mercy?” She felt Cain’s gaze on her, heard the concern in his tone, and felt his hand covering hers. His skin was so warm. She just wanted to cuddle up next to him and take a nap. Maybe when she woke, she’d discover the past two years had been a nightmare. No, maybe she’d discover the past twenty had been the nightmare, and she was a ten-year-old girl again whose only worry was making sure the ribbon she wore in her hair perfectly matched her outfit.

But wishing for a thing never made it real.

“What happened to Liz?” She didn’t want to know. She needed to know.

“We don’t need to talk about this right now. Why don’t you—”

“Tell me what happened.” Mercy tried to make her tone forceful, but it came out as a whisper.

He squeezed her hand but didn’t say anything.

“Tell me, damn it.” But in her gut, she already knew. “It was Dr. Payne. Right? He did it to find me.”

Cain remained silent—all the confirmation she needed.

“It’s my fault.”

“No, it’s Assface’s fault. Not yours.”

She shook her head, denying his words with her body, because her mouth couldn’t speak. He gripped her hand tighter, telling her with his touch that she would be all right. It took willpower and fortitude and a bit of masochism, but she yanked her hand away from him. Coldness leaked into her, seeping deep into her bones.

Liz was dead because of her.

Mercy shifted to stare out the window at the same time tears pooled in her eyes, reached the tipping point, and skimmed down her cheeks. If Cain saw her tears, he'd offer her comfort. She didn't deserve comfort. She deserved to be punished. She might not have delivered the fatal blow to Liz, but by caring for her, by liking her, by accepting her kindnesses, she'd sealed Liz's fate.

Cain had been worried that she'd be frightened of him? He had it all wrong. He should be afraid of her. If she didn't keep a tight rein on herself, if she didn't get away from him as soon as possible, he would end up dead.

The true opposite of good isn't evil. It's indifference. Lack of emotional connection. Lack of conscience.

—Lucille Bert, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation

Somber, swollen clouds hung low in the sky skimming the rooftops as Cain navigated the car through Liz's neighborhood. If clouds could look depressed, these fit the diagnosis. And Cain's mood.

How had everything gone from the paradise of the kiss to the misery of Mercy yanking her hand away from him and refusing to look at him? Heap on top of that the growing dread gnawing at his gut, and the drive had been his own personal perdition.

Mercy slept, curled against the passenger-side door. She had blamed herself for Liz's death—he could see that in her reaction. It wasn't her fault, but he understood how survivor guilt worked. Knew the illogical nature of it and yet how the mind warped it into believability and truth.

He turned onto Liz's tree-lined street in middle America. It might as well have been hell's main boulevard, with the way sweat suddenly moistened his skin. His underarms turned into swampland. The oxygen in the car went stale, and the smell of blood he'd been able to ignore roared into his nostrils, demanding his attention.

He cranked down the window and leaned his head toward the opening to gulp the chilly, damp air. There was no relief. No solace. Things were only going to get worse—so much worse.

He eased the car to the curb in front of Liz's house. Dolan's black sedan slid in behind him.

So many times over the years, he'd parked right here. And every one of those times he'd wanted to be here. Except this time. This time Liz wouldn't be opening the front door and rushing down the sidewalk to greet him. She wouldn't be offering him her special homemade lemonade laced with vodka. She wouldn't be stuffing him so full of home cooking he could barely walk. She wouldn't be treating him like the son she'd never had.

No, all that was over and gone as if it had never existed.

He shifted into Park and shut off the engine. It normally pinged a few times as it cooled down. Not today. The abject silence around them was the slow inhalation before the scream. Now he had to go in there and allow the blood to transform him into the monster who killed the closest thing he'd ever had to a mother.

"Cain?" Mercy's voice knocked him out of his thoughts. "Are you all right?" Her hand landed on his arm, and he realized he was gripping the steering wheel so tight his muscles shook. In the rearview mirror, he watched Dolan get out of his car.

"No, and I'm not going to be. I don't know what your plans are after you speak with Dolan, but I'm going to be sick. I'll have a migraine and be nonfunctional for eight hours." It was pathetic that the headache was going to be the best part of this experience. He reached into his pants pocket and withdrew his money clip. He peeled off a twenty for gas and handed the rest to her— had to be few hundred there. "You make sure you take care of yourself."

She didn't reach for the cash. "Why are you giving me this? How do you know you're going to be sick?"

He didn't have the energy to answer. He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, smelling Mac's blood on the seat. Blood. Everywhere. He couldn't escape it. And the one undeniable truth: his father's blood would always run through his veins.

He supposed he could shift the car into Drive and take off. But he wouldn't—couldn't—do that. Dolan wanted him here, but he wasn't here for Dolan. He was here for Mac and Liz. Mac wanted him here. He wouldn't let Mac down. Mac kept calling him out for these cases because there was no better way to know the enemy than being inside his mind. And Cain wanted to find something—some tidbit of information—that would confirm for Dolan that Payne had been the one to kill Liz.

A hell more horrible than any of his other blood work awaited him inside Liz's house. He glanced skyward, the closest he would ever get to prayer.

Dolan knocked on the car's trunk—a get-your-ass-moving gesture—and headed up the sidewalk to the front door. Cain wasn't ready. Would never be ready.

Mercy finally took the money clip he still held out to her.

His body felt weak and shaky, but he dragged himself out of the car.

"I don't understand what's going on." Mercy's voice held a pinch of panic. She met him as he rounded the hood, her face full of confusion and questions.

Maybe he was an ass for not explaining, but he didn't know what to say. He grabbed her hand. Her cold fingers instantly soothed the inferno blazing inside him. She was his safety blanket. Touching her didn't change the situation, but it gave him a fragile courage.

She squeezed his hand and didn't speak. Maybe she understood. Maybe he just desperately wanted her to understand the horror that awaited him.

He'd seen gruesome things, but the worst were always the ones that had personal meaning. His father killing Boo Boo—

his childhood cat—had been vicious, but this was going to surpass that by a few thousand miles.

The air seemed thick and hard to walk through as they followed Dolan. Just like every spring, carefree rows of blooming daffodils framed the sidewalk. The house itself had been painted the softest buttercream yellow trimmed in white with a robin's-egg blue door. So cheerful. So happy. So Liz.

“This looks just like the kind of place Liz would live.” Mercy whispered the words, quiet reverence dominating her tone.

“She grew up here. Said she never wanted to leave.”

“You were really close with her, weren't you?”

A boulder of regret lodged in his throat. Mercy thought Liz's death was her fault? Nope. It was his for involving Liz in the first place. If he'd never mentioned wanting to talk to Mercy, if he'd never asked Liz to make it happen, she'd be in there right now baking cookies, or out working in her garden, or doing any of the hundreds of wonderful things that made up her life.

Dolan stopped at the front door framed in crime-scene tape. “Shit. Where's the damned key.” He rummaged in his pants pockets, then his coat pocket.

Cain dropped Mercy's hand—missing her touch almost as much as he would miss oxygen—and reached up over the porch light to feel for the key Liz kept stashed there. Many years ago, she had shown him where she hid the spare key. *Just in case*, she'd said. *Just in case*. How could she have ever known this was going to be the *just in case*?

His hand shook as he unlocked the door and pulled the crime tape away and then walked across the threshold.

The house was small by today's standards, but it was the coziest, homiest place Cain had ever been. To the left was supposed to be a formal dining room, but Liz didn't do formal anything so she'd turned it into a library. Shelves full of books lined the walls, and comfy chairs and reading lamps were scattered around the room. To the right was the living room.

The place they'd watch the Ohio State football games in the fall and eat nachos and dip until they were ready to burst.

Everything looked exactly as it had the last time he'd been here. But the atmosphere was different. Almost like the terrible things that had happened had imprinted themselves on the air. He could almost feel the echoes of pain whispering over his skin.

The habitual part of his brain expected Liz's home to smell of flowers, floor polish, and something good baking in the oven. But that's not what hit him. The air didn't exactly stink; it just lacked all the homey scents and contained a faint, almost imperceptible undertone of rot. He recognized the scent. Decomposing blood.

His stomach flipped on end. He wanted to run, but there was no turning back. The only way out was to go forward.

For Mac, for Liz, he reminded himself.

Dolan squeezed past where Cain had rooted to the floor and pointed at the kitchen door. "Your work is in the back. I'll keep Mercy in the front rooms."

Cain's vision narrowed to the swinging door to the kitchen. Liz had always loved that swinging door. Said it made her feel fancy.

He pushed one foot in front of the other toward that door.

"Cain?" Mercy moved around in front of him, but his gaze was locked on the kitchen door and he couldn't tear it away. "Are you all right?"

He tried to open his mouth, tried to form some words, but couldn't. She touched his face, and his gaze snapped to her.

Her eyes were bloodshot, but that only made their color more entrancing. They reminded him of tropical waters, not quite blue, not quite green, but some beautiful, elusive color in between. If he could dive into those depths, submerge himself, then float on those waters for days upon days, maybe, just maybe he'd come out on the other side of this in one piece.

"You look like you need to sit down."

Cain worked to find some words that would reassure her, but those words didn't exist. There was no assurance that his soul would survive.

Mercy latched on to his arm and tried to lead him to the living room sofa. The same sofa he and Liz always sat on... No, he couldn't sit there among all those memories.

Speech still eluded him, so he motioned toward Dolan and then pointed to Mercy. His message: *Handle this. I can't.*

Dolan's brows above his sunglasses burrowed together. His forehead wrinkled. The guy looked down-right worried. Yeah, he should be. He had no fucking idea what Cain was about to do with the blood or what would happen to him afterward.

"Mercy, this is Cain's job. It's what he does. He's all right." Dolan stepped forward and motioned toward the living room.

Carefully, Cain disengaged his arm from her hand, hating the way he felt so alone and small without her soothing touch.

"He's not all right. Just look at him." Mercy snapped the words at Dolan.

Cain walked toward the kitchen on numb legs. Behind him, he heard Mercy trying to talk Dolan into stopping him, but Dolan wouldn't comply. He wanted the information too bad and was willing to sacrifice Cain to get it. *But then Mac had been willing to do the same thing*, a voice in Cain's head stated.

Liz's place wasn't huge, but each footstep closer to the kitchen added up to miles of exertion. At the swinging door, Cain's momentum faltered for only a moment before he pushed through it, bracing for a nightmare.

Nothing.

Everything looked exactly the same. And then, as if drawn by a magnet, he saw the red drops on the back window.

He didn't remember walking across the space, opening the door, and going out on the porch. He was just suddenly there,

surrounded by death's favorite color.

Blood.

Everywhere.

Smears on the siding. Streaks on the ceiling. Splashes and partially dried puddles on the floor. The smell of decomposition entered him, nestled inside him, and sent out its evil feelers.

Oh. God. Liz.

Superimposed over reality were memories of them sitting on this porch on a hot summer night, drinking her vodka lemonade, and staring out over her enchanted garden full of bushes and blooms and birdbaths. Her garden, walled off from the world, had been her oasis and his version of paradise, a magical place crafted by one woman's hands.

His legs buckled, and his knees crashed into the floor so hard his teeth clacked together. A whine of pain or maybe pleasure slipped from his lips. No. He didn't want to find any pleasure in this blood.

As if they had a life of their own, his hands smacked down into a pool of Liz's blood. The congealed mass was oddly soothing against his heated skin. He raised his fingers to his face and spread the slickness over his forehead and cheeks, down his neck.

His mind slid sideways, and that part of him that enjoyed this took over completely. He coated his chest and arms, loving the way blood felt so right against his flesh. Like silk and satin and sin.

The sensation grew inside him, building and burning and yearning—almost like the rising of an orgasm.

An incandescent flash behind his eyes, and Cain was gone.

He was now the killer.

UNDER HIS BLADE, the skin of the woman's neck parted as easily as slicing through frothy cream. She made no

sound. She did not flinch. She just stared at him with eyes full of wisdom and acceptance. It was odd how peaceful she was, how accepting she had been from the moment she'd seen him standing in her kitchen. Most people fought, clung to life with a tenacity that was incomprehensible—and frankly stupid.

But not her. She'd known what most people didn't: true suffering came from arguing with reality.

Crimson arced from her neck. He caught the freshly oxygenated blood in a container. This blood was always the brightest, the reddest, the most stunning in color.

Now she fought. Only it wasn't her fighting. It was her body, overruling her mind at the massive loss of life force. She yelled, or at least she tried to. The duct tape over her mouth stifled the volume. Her arms wrenched at the tape securing her to the outdoor lounge. And then as if she had suddenly grabbed the reins on her galloping body, she calmed, breathing slow and deep through her nose. Her eyes met and held his—not in challenge or anger, but with grace and benediction.

The steady pumping of blood slowed, and that ethereal thing that gave life dimmed, faded, and vanished.

At one point so many years ago, he'd taken crude pleasure in the moment of dying. He'd evolved and transformed since then. Death itself no longer held pleasure; it was simply a side effect of creation. Small-minded people wouldn't be able to understand. They wouldn't be able to see his art. All they would see were death and a spent carcass.

The song bubbled up inside him, so he sang it to the corpse as her blood filled his container.

Lift your feet when you

Dance around the old well,

Be careful or you'll tumble pell-mell.

Look into the dark, dark, waters

*For the blood of your fathers.
Show some courage, young man,
Find your calling, young man.
Save pomegranate seeds
as payment for the ferryman,
Offer red, red wine
as payment to the bar man.
Carve some red, red meat
as food for the hungry man.
Show some courage, young man,
Find your calling, young man.*

THE SONG he couldn't help singing. A song of pain and love. Of hurt and hope. He didn't know why the song and the memories it carried had become a part of his process, but it had. And he would honor the intuitions that guided him along this journey.

He stepped back from the body, selected a brush, dipped it into the blood, and began painting.

His first kill had been on a winter's day. Blood in the snow. He remembered staring at that color combination and being utterly transfixed. He supposed the white wall and bright blood he swept over it with flourishes and sweeping arcs were an effort to re-create that experience, to perfect it.

He lost track of himself while he painted, letting a divine force guide his hand. Time didn't matter. The ache in his arms, the thirst in his throat didn't matter. Nothing mattered, only creation.

And then suddenly he stopped. Finished. His body no longer driven to add more strokes. He swallowed the dryness in his mouth and stepped back from the wall to take it in for the first time.

His face tingled, an electric current pulsing just beneath his skin. Tears glazed his eyes—he wasn't the crying type—but these weren't sad, wimpy-ass tears. No, these tears were from witnessing beauty created from enlightenment and wrought by his own hand.

On the wall, it was him again.

His features were severe as he stood strong and proud like a warrior born of legend. He wore no shirt, exposing a plethora of scars and wounds. The damage done to his flesh made him appear invincible, as if he could only be wounded but never killed.

Eyes. If eyes were the window to the soul, this man's soul had exited his body. There was a blankness, an emptiness to his razor-focused gaze. The intensity of his stare—fixed on a point in front of him—was so real that it seemed some action should be happening mere feet in front of the blood portrait.

The man held a knife, one with a curved blade—good for slitting and gutting, his fingers wrapped around the hilt so tight theropy veins in his arm popped.

But again, just as last time, wings dominated the portrait, each one larger than the man himself. Massive. Impressive. Destructive.

He dragged his gaze away from the portrait and raised his bloody hands to his face. His hands had crafted majesty and strength and utter indestructibility in a set of wings. The larger question—what did those particular wings symbolize? Flight. Freedom. Escape. Angel. Heaven.

A thought floated into his mind, the wisps of it so thin that he almost couldn't grab hold and make it solid. Most would say his art was evil, but nothing so profound, so ethereally beautiful could be evil.

He tucked those thoughts away for the days of utter boredom ahead of him. He stood, uncapped the can of house paint, dipped a clean brush in the paint, and

began covering his masterpiece stroke by stroke. Each swipe of his brush was an annihilation of art, but it had to be done. The world wasn't ready for him. The world wouldn't understand.

The day had passed into evening by the time he was finished. Seven coats to hide his art from Luminol.

“Look.” The female voice rang as loudly as an alarm.

He whirled, expecting the woman to be communing through death's mouth, but she lay as she had at her end.

“At. Me.”

Something tugged at his psyche, some urge to...to what? “Look. At. Me.”

And then the world flashed with a lightning-like luminescence and everything changed.

CAIN SUCKED in breath after breath—couldn't pull in enough oxygen to satisfy his body's needs. The stench of rotting blood burrowed into his sinuses. He couldn't remember any other scent. Death was all that existed. Liz's death.

A sledgehammer thumped inside his skull. He deserved the pain. What he did, what he saw, was born of the maliciousness of his father and therefore its own brand of evil.

“Cain?”

His name spoken by Mercy rushed over him like a cooling balm. He forced his eyes open. White light blinded him for a moment, then intensified the beating in his brain.

His eyes slowly focused on the only thing he ever wanted to see. Mercy. She stood over him, her face marred with unconcealed concern.

Something deep inside of him, something he kept buried, kept locked inside, stirred, stretched, and...

Grew.

It—whatever *it* was—expanded and spread until he felt as if he were about to explode into a million fleshy bits.

“Mm...Mmm.” Christ, he was so far gone he almost couldn’t speak her name. “Mercy.” He meant to warn her. Tell her to back away from the monster, but her name came out sounding like a plea for surrender.

That thing inside him reached critical mass.

He couldn’t control it or himself.

In a study of over two hundred and fifty family members of serial killers, I have discovered some surprising facts. Twenty-five percent of these family members reported bizarre moodiness, rage, or general oddness in their serial-killer family member. The other seventy-five percent of family members thought their husband, father, grandfather, or uncle was completely normal. Oftentimes, family members defended them and lived in a general state of denial for years after a conviction. The takeaway: these monsters are skilled chameleons.

—Hugh John, PhD, *Killer Minds*

Ten minutes ago...

Mercy stood in Liz's house, staring out the window at the lawn. Winter's death was just beginning its reincarnation into spring. Bright-green shoots of grass were infiltrating the brown yard. Robins and sparrows hopped along the ground, looking for an easy meal after the rain. Out there, everything seemed so easy and carefree. In here, all she could think about was Liz.

They were using Liz's home as if she were in the other room making tea. It felt wrong to be here. Wrong to sit on her furniture. Wrong that Liz was dead.

"Damn it." Mercy's hands balled into fists. Anger at herself burned a hole in her heart. She was a contagion. A

disease. She should be quarantined. Isolated from all human contact. She couldn't be trusted. She knew the consequences and was still selfish enough to put people in danger. "It's my fault Liz is dead." That one thought played over and over on an endless loop. If she'd just minded her own damned business. If she'd never talked to Liz. Never opened up. Never been friendly, then Liz would be alive right now.

"That's the first thing you've said that I don't believe." Dolan's tone was conversational, like they were chatting about the weather, not Liz's murder.

"I didn't kill her, but that doesn't mean it's not my fault. You want the doer of the deed? Find Dr. Payne. He's obsessed with me, gets off on controlling me. And will hurt anyone who stands in the way of his access to me." He had hurt Bo in the Center. Shot Mac. Shot Cain. And if she stayed anywhere near Cain, next time he might not be able to walk away with a flesh wound. Because there would be a next time. Dr. Payne-in-Her-Ass wouldn't let her go so easily.

"I don't mean to sound like you're not interesting—or good looking, for that matter—but why? Why's he obsessed with you?"

"I'm fascinating." Sarcasm dominated her tone. "I survived your worst nightmare. Everyone said I was lucky. I wasn't lucky. Everyone I ever loved died." *I almost died.* She clasped her throat, feeling the thick, cold scar. She didn't bother trying to smother the anger in her voice. She let it burn. "It's been twenty years, and everyone still wants to talk about it. You know how many books, movies, and TV shows have been dedicated to Killion?"

She turned away from the window.

Dolan had sprawled out—still wearing his sunglasses—in one of Liz's comfy chairs, looking as if he ought to be taking a midafternoon siesta instead of conducting an interview. His shades were aimed directly at her, and she could feel the intensity of his gaze. He was listening to every word she said and trying to hear the ones she didn't.

“Thousands. And every one of them mentions me. Society itself is obsessed with me. Dr. Payne just had unlimited access. And didn’t like it when his access was revoked.” Her hands were still balled into fists so tight they shook. “So yeah. Dr. Payne killed Liz because of me. Because of who I am. What I am.”

Dolan stared at her for a long moment. Those damned sunglasses hid his eyes, keeping her from accurately interpreting his thoughts. Slowly, he shifted his gaze away from her and to the photo he’d set on the stand next to his chair. “You’re sure, absolutely certain, you have no memory of this symbol?”

It was a picture from the worst day of her life. A picture of a smeary bloody cross with a hook in its tail. Funny how the image was similar to the one she had over her heart, to the one Cain had carved over his, and yet such a small thing—that curved tail—made it look wrong. Evil.

“You’ve asked me this four different times in four different ways, and you can keep asking, but every time the answer is going to be the same. I don’t remember drawing it on the wall. I don’t remember ever seeing it until you showed it to me.”

Dolan didn’t say anything, just aimed his mirrored shades at her.

“You remind me of a gambler on one of those reality shows. Always wearing sunglasses to hide your eyes so no one will know what cards you’re holding.” She looked directly into his sunglasses and saw herself wearing Cain’s baggy clothes, dark splotches of color staining her shirt—blood. Even in miniature, her image was grotesque and obscene.

She could wash the blood off, but there’d be no cleansing the guilt from her soul. “I’d like to be done with this. I’m tired. I’m hungry. I’m covered in blood. I need a shower. Need some sleep. After that, if you need me to give you the same answers to the same questions, I’ll do that for you. But right now, I’m spent.”

“I don’t know how long Cain is going to be.”

Why did it matter how long Cain was going to be? Oh. Dawning understanding hit her slower than it should have. “I’m not going home with him.”

Dolan quirked his head to the side as if she’d spoken words he didn’t understand. “I thought you two were together.”

She couldn’t find any words of denial. She couldn’t find any words of affirmation. She couldn’t find any words at all.

“Then I’m gonna need an address and number to contact you.” Dolan spoke the words with utter seriousness.

“Seriously?” She was acting like a total bitch to this guy, but couldn’t seem to rein in the attitude. “I haven’t exactly had a chance to go apartment shopping since Liz and Cain broke me out of the Center.”

“You need to stay close. Local law enforcement is going to want to talk to you about your experience with Payne and the Center.”

“Find me a cheap motel, and that’s where I’ll be.”

Dolan didn’t move, didn’t say anything, just aimed his sunglassesed gaze at her as if he was still waiting for her to give him an answer. He heard her. He just didn’t like it.

“I’ll go home then.” The words came out exasperated and yet laced with a defiant strength. No way would she spend time in the same house her family had been murdered in. But if Dolan thought she was there, he’d let the issue go and she’d find someplace—anyplace—else to go.

Dolan took the photo of the symbol off the stand and tucked it into a zippered folder. “I’ll drop you off.”

Great. She’d have to wait until he drove off, then walk back to town. Cain’s cash would come in handy to rent a room at a small motel. Then tomorrow she’d begin working on getting her life back. Priority one: get an ID and gain access to her bank account.

But what about Cain? With the reality of walking away from him staring her in the face, she knew the truth. She

couldn't sneak off without a good-bye. A thank-you. An *I'm sorry*. Her legs acted before her brain gave them the command and took her across the room toward the door he'd disappeared behind.

Dolan caught her arm, his hold on her gentle, but firm enough to get her attention. "Don't interrupt him." His voice sounded every bit the authoritarian FBI guy.

Not that it mattered to her. She would not leave Cain without seeing him one last time. Maybe she just needed to make certain he was okay. More likely she wanted to absorb the sensation of being in his presence and store it away in her memory for all the lonely days and nights that stretched out in front of her.

There was a peace that came from being with him. She didn't have to worry about his ulterior motives because he'd been through something nearly as bad. He was the only person who didn't want anything from her. And the only one who understood how horror and survival had transformed them into something different.

And this was the last time she'd see him—she'd make certain of that. Her eyes burned.

Nope. Tears were not going to happen right now. No way. Later. But not now.

With very little effort, she pulled away from Dolan. Her muscles tensed, waiting for him to argue with her, grab her again, but he simply watched her walk away.

She had expected to see Cain on the other side of that door. What she hadn't expected was a completely empty kitchen that looked like it should be featured in some magazine.

Even though the day was cloudy, the light shining through the windows was clean and cheerful as it bounced off the white cabinets and gleaming appliances. A large farm table sat in the middle of the room. She could practically see a family sitting around that table talking, laughing, eating. For a brief moment, she imagined her family sitting there. But those

what-might- have-been thoughts never ended well. She forced the picture out of her mind.

The sickeningly sweet scent of dying flowers came from an oversized vase of wilting daffodils in the center of the table. Their brilliant yellow had faded to a duller shade, a melancholy shade. Who knew yellow—the happiest color—could ever be sad?

On the other side of the table, the back door stood wide open, like an awful invitation. One she wanted to refuse but knew she couldn't.

Her legs felt awkward and heavy as she crossed the kitchen and walked through the doorway.

Red. Everywhere. She wanted there to have been some bizarre accident with a can of red paint and recognized her thoughts for what they were. Denial. All that red was blood.

And Cain knelt in the middle of it. Crimson wetness slicked his face and his chest, and dripped from his hands. His eyes were feral and devoid of human compassion and empathy, looking beyond her, through her as if she didn't exist. He looked a lot like the man who'd murdered her family, the man who celebrated the sensation of blood on skin.

Her heart hit the pause button. For one second...two...three...she couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Her legs trembled with the urge to run fast and far from this guy.

This wasn't *really* Cain. It was some other version of him. The monster of his father's making. The real Cain had saved her life and taken care of her when she was too sick to take care of herself. The real Cain had made SpaghettiOs for her. Any man who loved SpaghettiOs couldn't be all bad.

Her legs were stiff as a pair of stilts as she moved toward him. "Cain?"

Behind her, she heard Dolan step out on the porch. He sucked in a shocked breath. She glanced over her shoulder at him. He knew Cain. Knew this wasn't Cain. And probably knew what to do.

Nope.

Dolan's sunglasses might hide his eyes, but they did nothing to hide the way his mouth hung open or the way his hand rested on the gun strapped to his waist.

"No." She aimed the word at him, using a tone she recognized because she sounded like her mother.

She moved in front of Cain, shielding him from Dolan.

Cain's eyes moved, tracking invisible events playing out in front of him. Like how a person's eyes darted around during REM sleep—except his eyes were open.

Hands shaking, she reached out to him and roughly grabbed his bloody face, trying to ignore the fact that she was also touching Liz's blood. "Cain. Look at me." Her tone was a command, an order to be obeyed. "Look. At. Me." She repeated the words once, twice, twenty times until something flickered in his eyes—a spark, a bit of life, a bit of humanity that brought him back from wherever he'd been lost. His eyes shifted, finding her. Seeing her.

"Mm...Mmm..." His mouth was closed, the sound coming out like a hum. "Mercy?" No longer were his eyes the blank pools of the sociopathic. Sadness and shame lived on his face. It hurt seeing such a strong man looking so vulnerable and wounded.

"It's okay." Her chin trembled when she spoke.

He shook his head, denying her words, then nabbed her by the waist and buried his face against her stomach. Heaving, ragged breaths came out of him—the sound a serrated, violent thing. For a moment she wondered if he had asthma, but then somehow she knew. Breathing was his only defense against the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

She understood. It was the price of loss. A price she had paid twenty years ago. A price he was paying now. His sadness was her sadness. His shame was her shame. They were united in shared hurt—had been from the beginning.

How could she ever have thought he reminded her of Killion? Killion wasn't capable of feeling pain. Only a good man could hurt this badly.

He wrenched away from her, crawled the few feet to the edge of the porch, and vomited. She went to him, but he held his hand up, blocking her. “Stay away.” He choked before another round of gagging started.

Everything inside her screamed to go to him, but she sensed he would fight her, and she didn’t want to make him feel worse. She was rooted in place, unable to look away as his insides tried to visit the outside. He clutched his head.

Dolan moved in beside her. “Shit. I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” The words came out absentmindedly—her attention focused on Cain.

“Didn’t know any of this. His process. How he got his information. That this was what happened to him. I thought he was just being really private when he wouldn’t let anyone but Mac on scene while he worked. Thought he was overly sensitive for needing a few days off between jobs.”

“He’s going through this because of *you*?” She didn’t know what to call it. Wasn’t even sure what Dolan meant. “This is Liz’s house. Someone he knew. Someone he loved. And you asked him to do *this*?” Her volume rose with each word. Her hand clenched into a fist, longing to have a meet and greet with his face.

“I-I didn’t know.” Truth filled his face, but that still didn’t give her the warm fuzzies for him.

“How could you do this to him? To a friend?”

Dolan’s face was washed of all expression, almost like a shield had fallen over it. Almost like he was trying to hide how he really felt. Total poker face. She wished she could see his eyes. They’d tell the truth.

She pointed toward the kitchen door. “Go get a towel and a bowl of water.” Dolan jumped to fulfill her command.

She moved closer to Cain and rubbed his back as he continued to suffer. This time he didn’t fight her, probably because he was too busy trying to keep his guts from coming out his mouth.

When Dolan returned, she gestured for him to set the items on the porch floor next to Cain. She dipped the towel in the water, and Cain turned bloodshot eyes on her. Anyone else would have seen hate and anger in his glare. She saw what he really felt. A shame so deep its teeth had taken a bite out of his soul and enjoyed the meal.

She reached out and smoothed a sweaty lock off his forehead. He flinched away from her. “Don’t touch me. Just leave.” His voice cracked.

“No.” She dipped the corner of the towel in the water and wiped the blood off the side of his face.

He shifted away from her, out of arm’s reach. “Don’t make me fucking beg. Just go.” He snatched the towel from her, plunged the whole thing in the bowl, and then wiped his face and body. His hands trembled but it was the way his back bowed, curving in defeat, that made her want to cry.

MERCY WAS LOST.

Dolan had told her to turn on County Road 17. And she had. But there was nothing on County Road 17. No cars. No houses. Not even a hint of civilization. Gray skies and desolate fields surrounded the car, giving the landscape a lunar vibe—like she was driving them across the moon, instead of Ohio.

The only break from the nothingness was a patch of trees in the distance. After two years of being in a giant cage, the wide-open space made her feel oddly overwhelmed. Like the world had expanded and she’d shrunk.

Maybe Dolan had said County Road 16. He should be the one driving Cain home. He knew where to go. But he’d suddenly been too busy to take care of Cain. Said he had favors to call in and asses to kiss and didn’t have the time. The guy was no friend.

She glanced at Cain leaning against the passenger door, eyes closed—hopefully sleeping off the headache. She’d drive down every road searching for the house number 6260 before she woke him to ask for directions.

Bzzzz...

Cain's phone on her lap vibrated. She snatched it up, not wanting the slight sound to disturb him. She divided her attention between the road and the cell phone, trying to determine how to answer a call without wrecking.

"Hello?" A tiny, disembodied voice came from the phone.

Crap. She'd somehow answered it with a touch. She jammed the thing to her ear. Silence swelled the line.

"Hello?" Her volume hovered at whisper level.

Didn't want to wake Cain.

"Oh...I'm looking for...Cain." The voice sounded tired and slurry, but she instantly recognized the speaker.

"M—" She almost said his name, but stopped herself. If Cain was awake, he'd want to talk to Mac, and she wasn't sure if that was the smartest idea when Cain needed all his energy to keep his head from exploding. "Mercy. It's me, Mercy. Cain's sick. Migraine. Vomiting."

"Dolan had him working on Liz's murder?" All the drowsy vanished, leaving plain rage. "The son of a bitch. I told him no. Told him not on this case." He sucked in a shaky-sounding breath, and when he spoke, the fatigue was back in his tone. "Not when Cain looked at Liz like a mom."

"It was..." Mercy didn't have words to convey the depth and breadth of what Cain had been through, so she went with the simplest word. "...bad."

"It's always bad for him." Mac sighed a sound full of miles of sympathy. "He thinks he's a monster for what he does. He never lets me help him. It's like he wants to punish himself."

Mac's words plucked a chord of truth. Cain had been the same with her.

"When he's feeling better, tell him...tell him it's my fault. Me being shot is *my* fault. He'll blame himself. He's always so willing to think of himself as the bad guy. He's not. He's one of the best human beings I know. I'll explain more when I see

him. Can you tell him that for me?” Mac’s volume began to fade. Mercy strained to hear the last of his words.

“Yes. I will. Don’t worry... I’ll take care of him.”

“Good. He needs you.”

He needs you. He needs you. He needs you. The words wouldn’t stop echoing in her mind. Probably because they strummed that truth cord too. He did need her. No one should have to suffer alone. No one. Especially not him. Mac’s words just confirmed what she already suspected about Cain.

But none of that changed the fact that she had to leave; it just delayed the inevitable. The consequences of staying were too great, but for now she’d do anything to ease him.

The line had been quiet for a while. “How are you?” She waited for Mac’s answer, but he was gone.

He was doing well enough to call. Well enough to check on Cain. That was something.

She set the phone in her lap and glanced at Cain. He hadn’t moved.

Ahead, a nondescript gray, battered mailbox jutted crookedly out of the ground with the numbers 6260 stenciled on the side.

Mac was going to be all right. She had found Cain’s place. Things were looking up.

She slowed the car and pulled into the drive. Gravel crunched and popped underneath the tires. The driveway was no short little lane. Nope, it ran smack through the middle of a field heading toward a stand of trees at least a half a mile away. Through the naked branches, she glimpsed a gray clapboard farmhouse with white shutters and a gleaming tin roof. It was small, neat, tidy, and not at all the kind of place where she’d picture Cain living. Not that she’d really had a picture. This just wasn’t it.

“Drive past the house, and park in front of the barn,” Cain murmured without moving.

The lane forked at the house, one side leading to the dwelling, the other continuing on through the middle of another field. She took the fork leading away from the house, heading toward a copse of trees a quarter mile away. Questions lined up in her head, but she had to trust he knew where he was going. 'Cause she sure as hell had no idea why they drove past the house.

It wasn't until she drove past the grove of winter-dead woods that she saw the barn.

Only it wasn't a barn in the traditional sense of haylofts, cows, and chickens. This barn had been converted into a house. A spectacular showplace of wood and glass and wide porches flanking both sides of the structure.

"You live here?" Awe gave her tone an airy quality.

He grunted an affirmative.

"It's like nothing I've ever seen. It looks so homey and warm and rustic. Perfect for this location. Perfect for you." She didn't realize she'd been talking out loud until she stopped.

He hadn't moved. Didn't indicate that he'd heard her, though she knew he had.

She parked in front of the barn. Cain reached for his door handle and started to get out.

"Wait. I'll help you." She and Dolan had half carried him out to the car at Liz's, and he didn't look any better in the twenty minutes that had passed.

Cain ignored her so absolutely she might as well have been invisible. *Not going to work, buddy.* She shut off the car and raced after him. His face was the same sick hue as the sky. He shielded his eyes from the cloudy light with a hand. At least he wasn't puking.

She inserted herself underneath his arm.

"Don't need your help." His voice was chipped and sharp, meant to cut.

“I know.” She put an extra bit of spring in her tone. He couldn’t argue when she verbally agreed with him. But then there was that whole actions-speak-louder-than-words thing. She wrapped her arm around his waist.

He tried to resist her help, tried to move away, but his efforts were weak and lacking. It was easy to take over when he was locked in the vise of a migraine. She felt the moment he stopped defying her, felt some of his weight drop on her shoulders—and almost staggered. Thankfully, she caught herself or he would’ve returned to fighting.

She helped him to the front door. But *front door* sounded so ordinary and plain, nothing like the two massive barn doors that had to be at least ten feet tall and just as wide. Beautiful wrought-iron scrollwork patterned each. Cain tapped a control pad set in to the wall and revealed a backlit panel. He punched in a few numbers. She heard a click, and then the doors parted wide enough to let them enter.

A grand—only grand was too small a word—staircase rose up, up, up through the center of the barn to a dark loft tucked against the roof. The space had to be at least three stories above everything on the main floor.

On either side of the stairs, the structure was wide open. One side held a dining area with rough-hewn yet comfortable-looking furniture. The other side was a living room. Along the entire back wall was a modern kitchen. And dotting every wall were windows. More windows than she’d ever seen in a dwelling.

Most people would have blinds or curtains, something covering those windows, but it would be a tragedy to obstruct the view of fields and trees and the wonderful openness of the outdoors.

Consulting for the FBI must pay well. Maybe she needed to get in on that gig.

Cain moved forward. She went with him as he started up the stairs.

Behind them, she heard the soft sound of the doors coming back together to shut. Must be on a sensor. “This place is amazing. I mean, wow. Just wow. Everything is so...” She struggled to find a word. “...unique.”

He pretended he didn’t hear her and continued up the steps with her serving as a living crutch. The staircase had looked beautiful from the bottom, but halfway up she realized it was a torture device. Her legs—unused to physical activity, let alone stair-climbing—began to burn, and his weight didn’t help. She started breathing heavily. Man, she was out of shape.

With each step higher, the light faded a bit more. At the top, a soft darkness full of shadows and shades of gray dominated. Made sense he’d design a bedroom like this when he had these kinds of headaches.

He pitched away from her, moving toward an open doorway. Without a thank you or a fuck you, he shut himself inside the room. She tiptoed toward the door and pressed her ear against it, listening. The sound of water hitting tile came to her. A shower. He was going to wash all the blood off. Totally understood how that could be a priority, even with a migraine.

She turned and faced the darkened room. Her eyes had begun to adjust to the dimness, and she could make out the shape of a king-size bed beneath a large window covered with blackout curtains. Across the space, there appeared to be another doorway. She headed in that direction, found a light switch just outside the door, and flipped it on.

The light seemed garish and overly bright after the darkness of the room. Then she realized she was staring into Cain’s walk-in closet.

One way to get to know someone was to look inside their closet. The space was way larger than the amount of clothing in it. Boots and tennis shoes and some dress shoes were lined up in a neat row under a shelf. A few dress shirts hung on hangers, alongside a few pairs of dress pants. But mostly his clothes were stacked in neat bins. One bin held workout pants, one T-shirts, one sweatshirts, one jeans, and others held socks and underwear.

She reached in the bin and nabbed a pair of black boxer briefs. An image floated into her mind of him wearing them. And then another—better—image of him not wearing them. Her heart pumped a stream of longing through her entire body. Now was not the time to be thinking about jumping his bones.

She snagged a pair of sleep pants and a T-shirt and dashed out of the closet, flipping the light switch behind her. Blackness swallowed everything, blinding her. Ahead of her, she heard the bathroom door open, and she could just make out the shape of him walking into the bedroom. It was too dark to see any details, but shape was all she needed.

His shoulders were so broad, his waist so trim. Her gaze shifted downward, locking on that place she shouldn't be looking. She squinted, trying to see in the dark. Too bad she didn't have a pair of those night-vision goggles. Damn. Was he wearing a towel?

“Clothes.” She thrust out the pants to him. He took them and then put them on while she tried and tried to see through the dark. He walked over to the bed, drew back the covers, and lay down. He turned his back to her and sighed a breathy sound of pain and sorrow.

That was enough to knock her out of horny-land. She pulled her filthy shirt over her head, and put on the clean T-shirt she still held, then let the sleep pants she'd put on ages ago fall down to her ankles. She needed a shower, but he needed her more—whether he'd admit it or not.

She padded to the other side of the bed and slipped under the covers, facing him.

“No. Don't.” His tone was that of a petulant child, arguing just to argue.

She scooted closer, slipping her arm underneath his neck, and pressed herself in to his body. He smelled clean and warm and safe. And even though she was in his bed to offer *him* comfort, her body eased, relaxing more than she had in years.

His body was rigid with tension—he was two seconds from pulling away. “Shh... Just let me hold you.” She ran her

hand through his hair. Felt the dampness of it on her fingers.

As if the balloon of his tension had popped, all the hardness in him turned to softness and he melted against her, shifting to find his place of comfort. He nestled his head on her shoulder, his arm around her waist pulling her tighter in to his body. And it felt so right. So natural to be like this with him, as if they truly were meant for each other.

Part of her knew they were. No one else could ever understand her the way he did. And he needed her to show him he wasn't a monster, but a beautiful soul who'd survived some bad shit.

Tonight, she'd lie here with him, soaking in the sensation of his arms holding her tight, of his warm breath fanning across her chest, of holding him just as tight as he held her, of feeling at home for the first time in her life.

A tear slipped out of her eye and tickled its way down her cheek because tomorrow she would leave.

Seeking high-quality photos or videos of Cain Killion or Mercy Ledger, or both, for upcoming twentieth-anniversary special. Payment negotiable depending upon content of photos/videos.

—Celebrity News X

Cain awakened and felt for her in the bed, but she was gone. Rainy-day sadness weighed on his heart. It was stupid—beyond stupid—but he wished he could've woken with her still in his arms. It would've made facing the day and the phone call he needed to make a bit easier. Hell, a lot easier.

He sat up slowly, testing to make certain yesterday's pain that had threatened to split his brain in half was really and truly gone. It was. The only indication of the migraine was the typical brain fuzz where all his thoughts seemed to come at him through a fog instead of clear and head on. And the dry, gritty feeling in his eyes.

He stood, walked to the edge of the balcony, and peered down. Sunshine shone in the windows below, casting all the wood in honeyed light. He scanned for her, but the place looked empty. His chest felt heavy with rain clouds. Had she left while he was sleeping off the migraine? Where would she go? How would she get there—unless she took his car or found his truck parked around back.

He couldn't blame her for leaving, even if she had stolen one of his vehicles. What she'd seen yesterday was a horror show, starring him as the horror. Any illusions she'd had about him had been ripped apart when she saw the ugliness inside him. And yet she'd still been kind enough to drive him home and stay with him— obligation and pity. Hated those two words.

He pushed back from the balcony and moved across the room to pull open the curtains over the bed. Light flooded the space from the oversized window above the bed. His cell phone sat on the bedside table. She must've brought it to him before she'd left. Kind to the very end.

Might as well get the call over with, then he'd take a shower and go visit Mac in the hospital. And try like hell to not think about Mercy Ledger or worry about her or wish she was still with him.

He looked down at his phone. Mac had called. Twice. Both calls lasted a few minutes. That had to be a good sign. That Mac was able to call and talk. He checked his voice mail. Nothing. Maybe Mercy had spoken to him.

Enough stalling.

He sat on the edge of the bed and punched in Dolan's number.

The guy answered before the first ring even finished. "You're still among the living. That's a good sign."

"Yep. I'm alive." That about summed it up. His heart beat, his lungs breathed, and he yearned for her—the definition of living. "You hear anything about Mac?"

"He got through surgery fine. He's been up and around. I've talked to him a few times on the phone. He sounds good. Strong. And trying to get the doctor to release him, but they want to keep him until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow seems too soon."

"Yeah. But it's a good thing." Something in Dolan's voice conveyed a meaning that Cain didn't want to contemplate. "He

should be able to return to light duty in six to eight weeks and full duty in three months. He was lucky.”

“Lucky would’ve been not getting shot.” Somber truth threaded through those words. “You got time to talk about yesterday?”

“Shoot.”

Cain sucked in a giant breath and then spoke every terrible thing he’d seen. His throat went tight and his words went thin when he spoke about Liz, but he spit it all out—without vomiting or going sissy-prissy crybaby. His face tingled with heat, remembering how he’d acted. And in front of Mercy. He might as well have snapped off his stick and stones and started wearing sundresses.

Had to give Dolan some credit; the guy never interrupted although he must be holding back a Hoover Dam worth of questions.

The moment Cain finished and two seconds of dead air sounded, Dolan jumped in. “Wait. Wait. Wait. So you’re telling me Liz Sand’s death was committed by the same person who killed the Dawsons?”

“Yes. Not only is the MO exactly the same, but the signature is there too.”

“Didn’t see that one coming.” Surprise raised Dolan’s voice to an octave just under a soprano. “I need to get a team out there to uncover the image.”

“If you want to see it.”

“It’s of you again?”

Wasn’t that the mind fuck of the week? “Yeah.”

“You were adamant that Edward Payne killed Liz to find Mercy. Hell, Mercy said the same. Is that where your mind is? Because that would mean he killed the Dawsons too.”

“Something doesn’t feel right about Payne doing this. He’s too pretty boy to get himself dirty this way.” And it was messy, bloody work.

“I’ll have the team look into him. See where he was on the night of the Dawsons’ murder. He’s still in the wind. We went through his place. And yeah... Mercy said he was obsessed with her. I want to make it official: obsessed is too a mild word. He has *pictures* of her.”

Something about the way Dolan said *pictures* tweaked something inside Cain. “What do you mean?”

“I’m talking thousands of pictures. Some of them... nudes.”

Nudes.

The word hung out there for a moment, before Cain’s mind started flashing him images of what Dolan meant. Dolan had seen them, and crime-scene techs had seen them, so it was only a matter of when they’d surface in the media. “Fucking Christ. You got them on lockdown, right? The last thing she needs is for those pictures to be flashed all over.”

“Doing my best, but with all the digital shit, it’s hard to contain. Looks like he’s been using spyware in her bathroom at the Center. I’m pretty sure he’s been wearing a hidden camera every time he talks with her. His walls are papered with pictures of her. It’s pretty sick, to say the least. Oh, and here’s a fun fact: before he got the job as chief psychiatrist at the Center, he was a psychiatrist at Petesville Super Max.”

Every muscle in Cain’s body went rigid. His father was at Petesville. Cain tried to swallow but couldn’t. “Did they know each other?”

“Oh yeah. The warden told me they had twice-weekly sessions for the entire duration of him working there. Three years.”

“Holy. Fucking. Shit. Maybe it *is* him committing these murders. Maybe—”

“Let me blow your mind a bit more. I applied to meet with Killion—to speak to him directly about the symbol. I got back a denial and a request.”

“A request? For what?”

Silence danced a little jig before Dolan answered. “For you.”

Those two words dangled in the ether along the phone connection between them. Cain refused to grab on to the words. Refused to take them in.

“He wants to see you. Will only talk to you.”

The life he’d built over the past twenty years exploded around him. He fell back on the bed. He hadn’t talked to or seen his father—other than on TV—in twenty years. And still that wasn’t long enough. Eternity wouldn’t be long enough.

“No.” The word came out a whisper. Cain cleared his throat, forcing volume into his tone. “No. Not going to happen. Ever.”

“Dude. I understand your reluctance. But ask yourself this, how many more lives can you stomach on your conscience? One? Two? How many kids have to die? The Dawsons had a young daughter. You could find out what Killion knows about Payne and the symbol. Did he tell Payne about it? We might just get enough information to find...” There was a long pause, almost like Dolan was searching for words. “...to stop the killing.”

Dolan’s words sounded pretty, all higher-order morality and such, but he didn’t understand.

“There will be a price to pay. There always is.” Growing up, every scrap of food he’d eaten, every stitch of clothing had cost him. And he knew—just as he knew a part of him would always be a monster—that his father hadn’t changed. Would never change.

“What can he do to you? Nothing. He’ll be locked down, unable to hurt you.”

Dolan spoke as if Cain were afraid of his father *physically* hurting him. He’d endured every pain imaginable growing up. Pain was nothing.

“You can walk out of there.” Dolan sounded all what-the-hell’s-the-big-deal. “Any time.” He made it sound so simple.

He had no idea the control his father had once had on Cain's mind.

After all this time, was he strong enough not to let his father inside his head? "You don't know what you're asking." He spoke around a lump of something that tasted a lot like weakness.

"If it's as bad as what I saw yesterday, I do know what I'm asking. And to save lives, I think it's worth it."

Yesterday was gonna be unicorns shitting sunshine compared to him face-to-facing it with his father.

But something Dolan said reverberated through Cain's head. *Save lives*. Wasn't that why he did this job in the first place? To save lives? The cost to him had always been worth it, but this...this was a steep price.

"I need you on this ASAP. Like yesterday."

This whole crapball of shit had started with the symbol at the Dawsons'. The symbol was the key, and his father was the door. But would Cain be able to walk back through the doorway when it was all done? Or would he end up locked inside with his father? "I'll think about it." That was the only thing he could say.

"And Cain?" Dolan paused, sucked in a resigned-sounding breath. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I was an ass for asking that of you when Liz was so important in your life. I didn't know... what happened... You know... when you..."

Cain hung up on him. Dropped the phone on the bed before he decided to pitch the thing against the wall. If he destroyed his phone, Mac wouldn't be able to get hold of him and would worry.

He lay on the bed, staring up at the exposed beams overhead. Twenty years ago, he and Mac had spent days and days power washing the dust, dirt, and manure off all the beams and rafters in the barn. At the time, he'd felt more monster than child. As the days had passed into months—then years—Mac's steady guidance and the power of hard manual labor had turned him into something less monstrous.

Would just being in the presence of his father awaken the monster?

So much of what Dolan said was technically true. His father would be shackled. Wouldn't be able to *force* him to do anything, but that didn't mean the man didn't have the capacity to hurt him. Bruises and cuts and broken bones healed with little effort. His body took over and automatically mended the damage. But his father's words could slash through the scars on his sanity and find that kid who'd been groomed to be a monster.

A faint, barely perceptible sound reached him. He sat up in bed, strained to make it out, but couldn't place it. A thin hope seeped into him. He stood and headed down the stairs toward the noise. He recognized the sound of running water.

At the bottom of the steps, he walked around behind the staircase to the closed bathroom door. Water rang against the antique brass tub. She was still here.

His heart sprouted wings and fluttered around his ribs. He wanted to barge in there, sweep her up in a massive hug, and thank her for driving him home, for staying with him—holding him until he fell asleep. But instead his mind conjured up an image of her. Pale thighs straddling the lip of the tub, breasts rosy with warmth, nipples puffy from the heat and in need of his mouth.

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Why the hell was he playing a porno in his mind? One his dick was obviously enjoying since the bastard had gotten hard enough to hit a home run.

He pressed his palm to the door and hung his head. After the kiss they'd shared, he'd hoped—hadn't even realized that his subconscious had latched on to that until now—that they'd have something more. But it was too late for hope.

She was a kind person. A considerate person, for taking care of him yesterday, but no way—no way— would she ever look at him without the shadow of what she'd seen yesterday clouding her eyes.

He headed back around to the front of the stairs and started up the steps to his bedroom. His knees wobbled, probably because his dick felt as large as a third leg. Distance. He needed to be far away from her, from the temptation to open the bathroom door, slide them both in the tub, and have wet, wild, wonderful sex with her.

“Christ. Stop thinking about it.” But the images got stuck on repeat.

The thing about fantasies was that they weren't reality. Confusing the two and looking at her with hunger in his heart would only compound an already awful situation.

He walked into the master bath, stripped off his pants, and climbed into the shower. Cold water slapped against his body, stinging against his wounds. He didn't bother cranking the warm faucet. He was hot for her. Steam practically rolled off him.

His dick was on fire. The fucker pulsing up and down, waving as if to get his attention. Yeah. Cold water wasn't going to do it for him.

His rough hand on his own dick wasn't pleasing. The size and texture seemed all wrong. Like he was trying to whack off with one of those giant clown hands people used at football games. He wanted her. Her hand. Her mouth. Her body. This wasn't satisfying. He felt like a starving man who'd been given only water. It could sustain him but wasn't filling, wasn't what he needed.

He needed her.

He wanted to punch himself in the head and knock all the thoughts about her away, but his hands were busy doing the two-fisted tango. Images of her—some real, some made up—surrounded him, mounted an attack, killed everything except her and what it would be like to be with her. To fill her, please her, spill himself inside her.

The orgasm slipped out of him almost shyly and lacking any real gratification.

He scrubbed under the cold spray until his balls shriveled up somewhere behind his sternum to keep warm. Maybe he should keep an ice pack in his briefs until she left. And she was going to leave. No way of getting around it.

He stepped out of the shower, nabbed a towel, and dried himself as he walked into the bedroom.

And nearly ran into her.

A towel—a mere piece of cloth—wrapped her body, the edge of it tucked in just above the swell of her left breast. Her skin shone pink from her bath, and her hair hung in a tangled wet mess over her shoulders. She'd never looked so lovely.

When she didn't say anything, he forced his gaze to rise above the towel to her face. Her eyes were aimed downward, toward his—

“Fuck.” He'd been standing there just holding the towel in his hand, not even thinking to hide the log jutting straight out from his body. He slapped the towel over his dick, nearly decapitating it.

“I was”—she swallowed and looked at him— “looking for something to wear. I didn't want to interrupt you.”

She wanted something to wear? His ears heard the words, but all his brain could focus on was how easy it would be to get that towel off her. She didn't need to wear anything.

“Cain?” Alarm sounded in her voice. Her eyes widened.

He took a step back and ass-smacked into the edge of the bathroom door.

“You're bleeding.”

It wasn't her words, but the concern in her voice that knocked him out of the stupor he'd been in. He glanced down at himself. A rivulet of blood ran down his chest from the gunshot wound high up on his shoulder.

She moved closer to him. He couldn't move away. All he could do was press his ass harder into the wall.

With steady hands, she unhooked the secure edge of her towel and let it swing from one hand in front of her. He caught a glimpse of pink breast and pale thigh before he clamped his eyes shut. But he'd seen enough. His dick went granite. The unrequited longing painful. He smothered a groan.

She pressed her towel low on his abdomen, so low her hand brushed his—the one covering himself with a towel. His dick leaped, strained for her touch.

She raised the material, stroking up his skin, higher and higher until she gently pressed it to his wound. “You want me?” Her voice was thick and husky, as if she was having a hard time talking.

He forgot how to speak, but his body remembered the universal sign for yes. He nodded. Or at least he tried to. Maybe he was having a stroke or something, because suddenly he felt paralyzed. And confused.

“Open your eyes. Look at me.”

Disobedience didn't exist. He opened his eyes. She looked at his hand trying to cover his erection, then met his gaze. “I can tell. I just thought I'd ask.” A sweet smile—shy as a spring sunrise and stunning as a summer sunset—settled on her lips.

She peeked under the towel on his shoulder, and he peeked at her body.

Glorious. Long, slender muscles and bones. Her breasts weren't large; instead, they were perfect, with peach-colored nipples he longed to taste. The only imperfections were the fading green bruise on her ribs and the filigreed cross scarred into the flesh over her heart.

He pointed at the cross. Jesus. What was wrong with him? He'd forgotten how to use words.

She glanced down at herself and then settled her hand over the raised flesh as if to pledge her allegiance. “It's to protect me. I know it sounds weird, but I felt that if I had this symbol carved into my body, I'd be safe from the demons in the world.”

She grabbed his free hand and placed it over the scar. The coolness of the damaged flesh imprinted on his palm. She tugged at his other hand—the one covering himself with the towel. No way could he deny her. The material fell from his fingers, and she guided his other hand up to the puckered ring around her throat—where his father had cut her neck—and settled it on that scar as well.

A jolt, almost a shudder, ran through him at the dual connection. He melted into her. Merged with her. Became a part of her. Somehow, touching those places was more intimate than anything they could do sexually. She had given him her greatest gift. Her vulnerability and trust.

“In a weird way, the two scars give me balance.” She closed her eyes, her head tilting back on her shoulders as if him touching her in this way was an erotic pleasure.

Slowly, she raised her hands and settled them over the wonky cross carved over his heart.

A shudder ripped through him at the contact. Her hands were soft and cool and oddly soothing—as if the place had ached for a lifetime and the pain had suddenly stopped. There was something strange, something important about him touching her scars and her touching his—and how his father had damaged them both.

“Your father is the one who did all this to you.”

All this... Two innocuous little words that represented so much pain. *All this*—she referred to the scar over his heart, the puckered scars from cigarettes being extinguished against his flesh, the slashing white scars that covered his arms and torso from his father’s version of knife play. And suddenly none of it seemed important. The only things that mattered were her and what was to come.

“Are you...” His words came out with the same level of sound as a silent movie. Jesus. He needed to remember how to fucking talk, but he didn’t quite know how to ask what he needed to ask. “Are you...”

She stepped close until only a thin strip of air separated them and then leaned her body into his, keeping her hands over his heart. She looked up at him and smiled so brilliantly he could have been gazing at an angel. “Am I sure I want this? Hell, yes. I’m hornier than a teenage boy on prom night. You realize it’s been five years since I’ve had sex. I’ve got some serious sexual energy to work off.” She paused, some of her brightness dimming. “Are you sure?” She pulled away from him and stepped back a few feet.

A grief so heavy and so severe it threatened to bring him to his knees hit him from the loss of contact. He felt as though he’d lost something vital to his existence when she stepped away. He wanted to cry, or maybe fling himself on the floor and throw a toddler tantrum.

“I should’ve asked before now.” A slight tremor sounded in her voice. “You’re not dating anyone, are you?”

Her question struck him as stupid. Him? Dating? The son of Killer Killion? The only people interested in him were Killion’s Kissers, the hybristophiliacs, or those who had a death wish—as in death fascinated them and the idea of sleeping with him seemed dangerous.

A smile tugged at his cheeks, feeling weird and wonderful. When was the last time he’d smiled? He knew the answer. When she’d had that bout of diarrhea of the mouth back in the cabin. Since he met her, he’d smiled more than in the past two years combined. “Not dating anyone. And more than sure that I want you.”

Even though he spoke the words, he couldn’t believe they were exiting his mouth. Just minutes ago, he’d been convinced he’d never see her again. Sometimes life granted the most amazing gifts.

She jumped on him. Actually jumped on him, wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. He caught her, his body tuned so perfectly to hers it anticipated her every move. She weighed nothing. Or maybe she just made him feel strong.

Every inch of her skin touching his was a miracle of sensation. He wanted to squeeze her tighter to him, to bring her inside him and make her a part of him. He closed his eyes and just let his body map the sensation of her against him. She felt so right, so perfect, that it hurt.

Her lips landed on his neck, sucking and nipping and kissing a trail toward his mouth.

And all he could do was stand there holding her. This was enough. More than he'd ever dared to dream. More than he deserved.

She found his mouth, her lips plush and warm against his own. And then her tongue was inside, stroking his, and a surge of white-hot desire crashed through him. He thought he knew desire and longing? Nope. This was a whole new level. His dick throbbed, aching with the knowledge that her warmth hovered mere inches above him. He needed to get her to the bed before he turned and took her against the wall. He liked the idea, but not for their first time.

Sunshine gilded the room in ethereal light. He started to carry her toward the bed, but paused to turn in slow, lazy circles and kiss her.

And kiss her.

And kiss her.

His hands slid lower down her back, underneath her ass, palming those wonderful globes. Lower and lower his fingers dove until he felt the sweet center of her and dipped a finger into her. Wet. Dripping. Her juices slid down his hand. She was primed and ready to go, and he hadn't done anything.

She gasped, a small wonderful sound, and shifted her hips on his waist, seeking to take in more of his small offering. He had a lot more to give.

He moved to the bed, kneeling over it while she stayed locked around his body. He stretched out on top of her, feeling the heat of her center open to him but denying himself. There was time. There would always be time for this. He pulled back from her and stared into her eyes. They were such a beautiful

color. Looking in them was like floating on a raft in clear tropical waters. Relaxation and contentment and—something altogether weird for him—connection.

She'd said before that they were connected. He'd always felt it, and maybe so had she. Who knew that out of the horror they'd both endured, this one good thing would arise?

"You're looking at me funny." She reached up, trailing her fingers along the ridge of his jaw.

"I..." Yeah. He didn't know how to put into words what he felt. It would sound crazy and stupid if he tried to say it out loud.

A look of knowing covered her face. "I know. Me too. It's like we were meant for this. Like no one fits me but you."

He nodded, taking in every word she spoke as if it were the Gospel According to Mercy.

His erection throbbed. The urge to shift forward into her nearly overtook him, but he wanted more from this than just a quick lube. He wanted long and slow and savoring. She wrapped her hand around his shaft. Her fingers were cool where he was an inferno. She positioned him at her opening. All his good intentions of going slow turned to vapor. "Cain... please..."

Her words of need and pleading were a command he couldn't refuse. He slid into her. His eyes rolled back in his head. A moan of sheer pleasure erupted from him. Oh. God. She surrounded him, welcomed him into her body in a way none of his other partners ever had. He seated himself deeply and decided he was never leaving. Nope. He'd just stay right here for the next fifty years and die a happy man.

She grabbed his ass, her fingernails digging in deep. Damn, if that didn't feel like the most carnal of pleasures. She tilted her hips, and he slipped impossibly deeper. He lost himself—unable to tell where he ended and she began.

He almost couldn't move. The pleasure was already off the charts, and if he lost one second of self-control, it'd be all over for both of them.

She rocked her hips underneath him, setting the rhythm. He followed her lead. Gritting his teeth. Concentrating on not coming. *Do. Not. Come. Not until she's ready.*

Her pace went frantic and furious. She bucked against his body. Her back arched, her head flung back on the pillow, and she moaned a sound that went straight to his balls.

The orgasm exploded through him, shattering everything he'd ever known about life and love. His world tilted, like everything had been a few clicks off the norm his entire life and now had suddenly slipped into its right and normal place. And his new world was good. Oh so good.

This week on Murder Book: The Girl Who Lived. If you missed it before, we are replaying our documentary Mercy Ledger: The Girl Who Lived. Follow her life before, during, and after the brutal murder of her entire family. This special anniversary edition has an update: Where is Mercy Ledger now?

—News Channel 5

Exquisite pleasure echoed through Mercy's body, its reverberations pulsing outward until her fingers and toes tingled with the power of it. She'd thought she'd had good sex in the past. Nope. What she'd just experienced with Cain ranked up there as an F-5 orgasm. The kind she'd never recover from. The kind she'd crave from this moment on, and there'd be no going back to those paltry F-1s or F-2s she'd lived off in the past.

Cain's breath came in hard gasps that mirrored her own. He slumped over her, still inside her, and the way he filled her—*fulfilled* her—changed her.

Her eyes went watery. She blinked rapidly to fan the tears away, but they came too fast and too hard to contain. Crying right now, after the best damned sex of her entire life, was the gold medal of bad timing. An award she didn't care to win, but couldn't prevent because every stolen moment put his life at risk. When she left him, she'd be leaving the best parts of herself with him. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that the best sex of her life happened to be with him. Why couldn't he have been some anonymous nobody who didn't matter at all to her? Somebody she could walk away from and never think about again. It wasn't fair. But then, nothing about her life had ever been fair.

"Damn." Cain chuckled, his voice lighter and more carefree than she'd ever heard it. He nuzzled the skin of her neck, his caress so sweet her eyes grew wetter.

She tried to say something back, to tell him just how powerful their connection had been, but a suppressed sob had lodged itself in her throat. The tears overflowed. She didn't want him to see her like this. He would blame himself. And the truth would only hurt him worse. She should've left while he slept, and she certainly shouldn't have let things go this far. But she'd been too caught up in him to think clearly.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly to her so he couldn't see her face.

"Everything okay?" he whispered against her neck. She nodded. Couldn't speak.

He stiffened, tried to pull back at the same time she tried to keep him from looking at her.

"What's wrong?" The concern in his tone tore open the fragile control she had over the storm rising inside.

A sob ripped out of her before she could catch it.

He jerked out of her embrace to look at her. His face tightened with horror the moment he saw her. "Oh God. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." He tried to pull away from her—pull out of her—but she wrapped her legs around him, locking him to her. Telling him with her actions what she couldn't say with her words.

Tears obscured her vision of him. She wanted to reassure him, but couldn't figure out how to say it. "Please." That one word carried so much meaning. *Please, don't blame yourself. Please, don't think I'm crazy. Please, just hold me.*

"Anything you need." He understood and gathered her to him, then turned them on their sides, tucking her face against

his chest, his arms and legs wrapping around her like he was shielding her body. But even he wasn't strong enough to protect her from the tsunami of emotions flowing over her. Emotions that had everything to do with Cain.

The stark loneliness of her life. The inability to let anyone in, to let anyone know her. The constant vigilance of being on guard against people who wanted to capitalize on her tragedy.

“Whatever hurt you, whoever hurt you will never get the chance again. I will protect you. I will keep you safe.” He sighed. “Even if it's from me.” He spoke the last words so quietly she barely heard them.

What if it's you who needs protection from me?

He stroked her hair, her back, and kept the assurances coming. And she believed him. Believed his promises of safety and security. But that only made her cry harder.

The emotions slowly ebbed, like thick, cold molasses, leaving her coated in them but no longer drowning in them. When she found her voice, she spoke against the wet skin of his chest. “That was the exact wrong reaction to have after the best sex of my life.” She tried to laugh, but it sounded hollow and flat.

She pulled back to see him. He rested his head on the pillow, his face inches from her own. A deep gash of worry marred his forehead.

He looked so much like his father in some ways, and yet so different. His face had the marks and lines of worry and stress. His father's face had been too beautifully smooth—a sign of no expression. No emotion.

She reached up and massaged the worry from his brow with her thumbs.

He watched her, his gaze sad. “Do you regret—” He rushed on. “I'm clean. I swear. But I should've used a condom. I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry.”

A condom? Whoa. The thought hadn't crossed her mind and normally it would've, but she couldn't muster an ounce of concern. “No regrets. None at all.” She meant it too. No matter

what happened. “I’m clean too. And I think we should do that again. I promise next time I won’t act weird afterward.” *Damn. Damn. Damn.* She shouldn’t have said that. She should leap out of this bed and run. Not have another go-round with him.

He dried her cheeks with his hands, his fingers rough and tender against her skin. “You want to talk about it?”

Did she want to talk about it?

Yes. It would be nice sharing the burden with someone who’d understand.

But no. That’d only cinch her all the more tighter to him emotionally.

She opened her mouth to tell him no, but that’s not what came out. What came out surprised even her. She told him all the terrible things she’d experienced after Killion. The string of foster homes, the lack of any true caring. Being an adult so completely alone in the world she might as well have been the only person on the earth. The Center and Dr. Payne and life in a giant cage where every look, action, gesture was monitored and scrutinized. Where Dr. Payne forced her to relive the worst moments of her life so he could get off on them.

Cain listened quietly, all his attention focused on her, and for the first time in her life, she felt really and truly heard. Everyone else—from the police investigating her case to the foster parents who wanted to sell her story—wanted something from her so they could capitalize on her pain. No one had ever just listened without expectation.

Never in her life had she lain in postorgasmic bliss with someone and talked. About important things. Being with Cain really did change everything.

“Did yesterday—what you saw at Liz’s—trigger your reaction? The bad memories. I never should have brought you there.”

“Me crying had nothing to do with that.” She hesitated, not certain if she should say more, but decided to anyway. “But I do have questions.”

“Ask me anything.” His words sounded sure-footed, but his tone tripped over itself. Openness of that kind didn’t come easily to her and probably didn’t exist for him either.

“What were you doing? Why did you have all that blood on you? Why were you sick?”

His eyes went unfocused, and she could tell he saw beyond her and into the past. “My father... He made me...” His body stiffened, as if bracing for an assault.

She hadn’t meant to bring up his past. She knew whatever she’d experienced with Killion had been fleeting—an endless evening—but what Cain had experienced had been an eternity. “You don’t have to tell me about him.”

“One of my earliest memories is...” He squeezed his eyes shut. The gesture reminded her of a little boy trying to hide under the covers from the monster beneath his bed. “...playing in...in...intestines.”

Flashes of color—red, pink, and white—speckled her vision. A gasp of revulsion slipped from her mouth. He flinched as if the sound were a physical blow she’d rained down upon him. Her soul wept for him. This powerful man, so feared because he was the son of a killer, had a hurt little boy inside him.

“I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.” Desperation dominated his tone.

“God, Cain. How could you know? You were a child.” She grabbed one of his hands and squeezed it between her own, offering every bit of reassurance she had to him.

“He just kept on...with the blood. My life revolved around blood. Mine. Or an animal’s. He killed my cat Boo Boo. Made me watch. Made me...” His voice was serrated with pain, then trailed off. “And then one day, I knew it wasn’t an animal’s blood.”

She was the world’s biggest wimp for having a melt-down over her life’s shit, when Cain’s life had been the epitome of hell from the moment he’d been born.

“I started seeing things, feeling things, hearing things when I touched blood. I saw through my father’s eyes, felt what he had felt as he killed.” His eyes, squeezed so tightly shut, slowly opened. “All that exposure to blood, to my father... It did something to me. Changed me. Opened a connection that’s never gone away. When I have blood on me, I see, feel, hear, touch, and do what the killer does. I become a killer.”

“So yesterday at Liz’s, you...” She didn’t know what to call it. Didn’t have the words.

He swallowed, the sound loud in the quiet room. “Killed her.”

“You didn’t. You just saw it or... Wait. It’s kinda like you’re psychic or something.”

His expression turned questioning as if the thought had never occurred to him.

Had he truly never thought of that? “How else do you explain it?”

“I’m a monster. The son of my father.” The words sounded flat. Dead.

“Cain, no,” she softly scolded. “How could you think of yourself like that?” She clasped his hand that she still held to her heart.

His eyes, usually brighter than a blue sky, looked dull and sad and full of self-loathing.

She hated to see him that way. “You told me once you were a consultant. So you do what you did at Liz’s for other cases?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Why do you do that to yourself? I saw how sick it made you.”

“I usually just have a migraine. The severity of it depends on how deep I go. Most of the time I just see flashes of images and feelings, not whole scenes like I saw yesterday. The information I get from the blood helps catch killers and

prevent more deaths. It's worth it. Balances things out in a weird way."

She understood—he was making up for the sins of his father. "You're using something bad in your life for good. That's noble."

"Noble?" Undiluted shock sounded in his voice and fired on his face. "No one has ever called *me* noble."

"Well, they should have. The sacrifices you make for others and get no recognition for—that's noble. And courageous. Something to be proud of. Not ashamed." She ran her fingers over the hard ridge of his jawline, the stubble teasing her skin. "Your ability brought us together. Isn't that something? Something good?" Until she left anyway.

The way he stared at her was almost a physical thing. She could feel his eyes roaming over her, searching for the truth, desperate to believe her, but her words were battling decades of self-loathing. She could practically see him sorting through what she'd said, trying to shift around the furniture in his mind to see if this new way of thinking might fit.

"Can you tell me about the case with the symbol? The one that brought you to me." It felt so normal, so right to be lying here totally naked, sharing a pillow, and listening as he talked about the Dawson case and the similarities to what he'd found at Liz's. "Pictures of you in blood at both scenes? The symbol at both places? My assumption was Dr. Payne killed Liz, but since the cases are related... I don't know."

"Doesn't seem to fit. Especially with what Dolan told me they found at Payne's place."

"What did they find?" She clung on Cain's every word, hoping to solve the mystery of it all.

"You."

"Me? What's that mean?"

"You were everywhere. Dolan said Payne's walls were papered in pictures of you. That it seemed he'd been wearing a camera every time he interacted with you. And he had nude

photos of you, probably from a hidden camera in your bathroom.”

Mercy closed her eyes, waiting for some feeling of shock or indignation to hit her, but it never came. All she felt was a deep sense of resignation. She’d known. Known the first time and every time after when he wore that camera. Her early warning system had shown her exactly what he intended to do with those pictures.

She’d always felt uncomfortable at the Center. Always felt under the microscope even when she was alone. And now that microscope was going to turn into a magnifying lens when the world saw the pictures. She wasn’t lucky enough to have none of them end up on the Internet. “I knew what he was doing. He targeted me from the moment we met. Enjoyed forcing me to talk about Killion. Looked for excuses to have to meet with me more often than our daily one-on-one.”

“Dolan’s trying to contain the images, but with digital... it’s more than a photo and negatives. Digital can be stored on multiple devices in multiple locations and in multiple online storage places.”

It was sweet of Dolan to try, but his resources would be better spent elsewhere than trying to save her pride and dignity.

“Before Payne worked at the Center, he was the head psychiatrist at Petesville Super Max where he had twice weekly sessions with guess who?”

“Oh my God.” Undiluted shock raised her volume. “Your father?” The layers of irony were not coincidental. That she’d been under the care of the same psychiatrist Killion had seen. That she’d been locked down in the Center, the same place Killion had worked before he’d been captured. It had been intentional. All of it. She’d been targeted by Dr. Payne for his own personal amusement.

“Yep. You said you didn’t know why you’d ended up at the Center. I’m pretty certain Payne arranged it.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Had talking with Killion been what sparked Dr. Payne’s interest in her?

“This whole case is a mind twist. It’s like there are all these dangling threads, and no matter how I try to braid them together, there’s always a thread or two that doesn’t fit. So there’s a blood painting of me with wings at the Dawsons’. Another blood painting of me with wings and a knife at Liz’s. Both paintings have the same symbol that was on the wall at your family’s murder twenty years ago. You didn’t know the Dawsons, and I didn’t know the Dawsons. But we both knew Liz. Until I saw the blood painting, I thought for sure Payne had been the one to kill Liz. It doesn’t feel like something he’d do, but the timing is so coincidental. And the paintings were of me. If Payne did them, wouldn’t he paint you? He’s obsessed with you, not me.”

“It feels like we’re missing the one thing that ties it all together.”

“Exactly.”

She rolled onto her back and stared up. Exposed beams crisscrossed at least another story over them. “This is such a unique place.”

He grabbed her topic change. “It didn’t always look this way. It used to be just a ramshackle old barn out back of Mac’s place.”

“Mac lives in the house we passed?”

“Yeah. I know it’s a little weird living this close, but it makes sense for me. I don’t own the property, so no one can find where I live. I just pay the utilities and taxes to Mac.”

“I can see why you’d live here. It’s spectacular.”

“Mac and I worked on it for years.” His voice held pride and satisfaction.

Mercy turned her head to look him directly in the eye. “This is the best place. Ever.”

Pink spread across the bridge of his nose and tinted his cheeks, somehow making him look even more masculine to

her. “We started fixing it up almost as soon as he got custody of me. Originally we were just cleaning it up. He thought working together to build something was therapeutic. I suppose he was right. He’s usually always right. Then as I got older, I don’t know, I just loved this place and wanted to turn it into something special.”

“It is definitely special.” Maybe she shouldn’t say what she was about to say, but surely he wouldn’t judge her when he had his own ability. “Mac seems like a good guy. I didn’t get any bad-guy vibes from him.”

The corners of Cain’s lips tilted upward. “You’ve got your own version of psychic, don’t you?”

He tossed those words back to her so easily, yet she didn’t know how to catch them. Just as he never put that name on himself, she had never placed it on herself either.

“Does it hurt? Do you get headaches from sensing the bad vibes and seeing the bad intentions?”

Well, he’d definitely been listening when she’d explained her ability. “No. Doesn’t hurt. Not physically anyway. It makes it really clear who I can trust and who I can’t. Most people land in the not-ever-gonna-trust-you category. It would be nice if I could see good intentions, you know. See the positive instead the negative all the time.” She still hadn’t let go of his hand. “Your father changed us both.” The words came out soft and airy, just a wisp of air, not even a sound.

A tender quiet spread between them for a few moments.

“Would you come with me to visit Mac in the hospital?” Cain’s tone carried sincerity and little-boy longing for her to say yes.

She couldn’t deny him when he looked at her that way. “Of course.”

A smile broke out on his face, transforming him into a younger man.

“But first...” He leaned over her and captured her mouth with his. His tongue stroked hers in slow sensual movements that made her warm and melty on the inside. He lifted his head

and stared at her long and hard. “You are the best thing ever to happen to me.”

He spoke with such seriousness, such naked truth, that her heart cracked right down the middle. How much more of his sweetness could she endure before he left her in pieces? Didn’t matter. She wouldn’t need her heart or her soul when she left. He could keep them.

The tears threatened again, but she wouldn’t let him see her cry. Not about this. She reached up with both hands, settled them on his cheeks. “And you, Cain, are the best thing to happen to me.” She packed her gaze with truth. Wanted to sear this moment into his brain and hope later, when she left, he’d understand that it wasn’t because of him.

He bent his head to her neck, kissing and nuzzling down to her collarbone. His touch was light and tender and reverent. He worshiped her skin, moving lower until he got to the scar over her heart—the one she had seared into her own flesh to protect herself from evil. His tongue was warm and wet and soft against her.

He reached up and wrapped his hand around her throat, covering the scar his father had inflicted upon her. Erotic energy throbbed through her at the feeling of his mouth over her heart while his hand covered her tenderest skin. She shivered, but it wasn’t quite a shiver, more like a jolt from raw nerves being sensually stroked. Holy wow.

Desire flared into an inferno. Who would’ve thought her erogenous zones were her neck and heart? Guess he knew that about her.

She caressed his shoulders—careful of the wound that looked so raw and painful, yet didn’t seem to faze him.

He shifted from her heart to her nipple, swirling his tongue around the bud in intoxicating circles that made her dizzy. He took her fully into his mouth and suckled her. His deep pulls shot hot waves of yearning down into her belly. “Cain, I want you. Now. Right now.”

“I’ll give you everything you want. And more.” His hands moved to her breasts, cupping them from underneath as if treasuring the weight of them against his palms, and then his mouth moved lower to her stomach, then her belly button. She lost track of his hands and tongue, the sensations of his touch overwhelming her mind and leaving her a raw mass of writhing sensation.

He buried his nose in the mass of strawberry-blond curls at the juncture of her thighs and inhaled deeply.

“You smell primal. Like sex and cum.” His words were hot and dirty and had the same effect as the most sensual of touches. They made her want him even more.

“Open your legs for me,” he whispered.

It took a moment for his words to sink in. No, he didn’t intend to... Not after... Her head shot up off the pillow to look at him.

His expression was intense. Eyes full of animalistic promise. “I want to taste us.”

A wave of pure carnal lust hit her so hard her body rocked from the power of it.

Of their own volition, her legs fell open, an invitation to continue if she’d ever seen one.

She watched as he lowered his mouth—her body aching, aching, aching for that first touch. And when it came, his tongue against her tender flesh was a nirvana of sensation. Wet and hot and full of wonder. He licked her opening in one long, luscious stroke that set her right on the precipice of orgasm.

His fingers found her opening, sliding into her as her hips rose to meet them, begging for more. Because she needed more. She needed all of it. All of him. As if sensing her need, he rose over her, staring down at her.

He bent to kiss her at the same time he withdrew his fingers. She groaned at the loss, but then moaned a sound of ecstasy as he filled her with himself. His mouth landed on hers, the taste an aphrodisiac. Sensation overwhelmed her. Her body rejoiced.

And yet deep inside, her soul wept for it knew this was the last time they'd be together.

Murderabilia is estimated to be a \$150 million industry. But this figure is likely low since most murderabilia sales are conducted through black-market sites.

—Kay Vassar, *Black Market Economics*

The hospital elevator dinged an oddly ominous sound. Or maybe Cain just thought it sounded ominous because he hated hospitals, hated being in public, hated waiting. The longer they stood here, the greater the chances someone would recognize him and Mercy.

His arm was wrapped around her, her head leaning on his shoulder, one hand on his chest, the other around his back—no mistaking their intimacy level. Not that he was ashamed of the relationship. Not at all. He just wanted everyone on the planet to mind their own damned business.

After an eternity and two forevers passed, the elevator doors slid open.

A man in a suit with slicked-back salesman hair stepped off the elevator, glanced at them, then froze midstride, blocking the entrance. His attention bounced back and forth between the two of them. “You’re Killion. And you’re Mercy Ledger.” The awe in his tone was unmistakable.

Cain fucking hated assholes like this. “I’m. Not. Killion.” The words came out sounding like a threat. God, he loathed the name Killion and its attachment to him.

“Yeah, I know. You’re Killer Killion’s Kid. Triple K.” His voice sounded like he was reciting facts pulled directly from a spreadsheet. “Hey, I’m Ken Jackson with News 5. I’d love to interview you both. Here’s my card.” Seemingly out of thin air, he conjured up a business card. When neither of them reached for it, he said, “I can offer a paid interview. How’s three grand sound?”

“Sounds great.” Mercy’s tone oozed fake excitement. Only this dumbass was too one-track-minded to hear it. “But I have a few minor stipulations.”

“I’m sure we can work them out. What are they?” He gave his hand holding the business card a go-ahead-and- grab-it shake.

“First, I need to ask you a question.” Mercy’s words carried weight, but he suspected Ken didn’t realize she was probably going to bash him upside the head with the heft of them.

“Oh sure, anything.”

“What’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to you?” she asked with full-on serious curiosity.

Ken’s face went utterly blank, as if Mercy had spoken a language unknown to man.

The elevator doors—still blocked by Ken Jackson— began to slide shut. No way was Cain going to stand here waiting again. He reached around Mercy and stopped them. Then maneuvered Mercy and himself around Ken and into the space. Ken followed their progress, card still outstretched.

“Ken, I need to know the worst thing that’s happened to you.” Mercy’s tone was all fake concern. “Then I need to broadcast it daily, write books about it, and make movies and TV shows about your tragedy. After twenty years of grinding it in your face, I’ll happily give you your interview. Because then you’ll have a clue what it’s like.”

Ken opened his mouth to say something, but Mercy sliced her hand through the air in an unmistakable shut- up-and-listen gesture.

“I know what you want. You want to break some big news story about us being together.” Mercy raised her hands and made air quotes. “Twenty Years Later: The Unlikely Lovers.” She spoke the words in a dramatic announcer’s voice. “Come on. Can’t you come up with anything better?”

I know what you want. This was part of her. She could see bad intentions. She’d outright said it back at the cabin, hinted at it in bed, but here it was playing out in front of him.

Ken’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “How’d you know I was—”

“You’ll spin our story until there’s only a thread of truth, because truth isn’t important to you. But I get it. You’re not happy at your job. You think you deserve better.”

The elevator began to slide toward Ken’s outstretched arm. He was a persistent little fucker. At the last possible moment, he dropped the business card and withdrew his hand. The white rectangle of paper fluttered to the floor. Neither of them stooped to pick it up.

“I hate that kind of person,” Mercy said. “Always trying to get something out of us. It’s sick.”

“Yep.” Couldn’t have handled the situation any better. Hell, he *wouldn’t* have handled it. He would’ve headed for the nearest exit, but Mercy had handled it like a fighter. Landing some blows the guy didn’t even realize he was receiving until it was over. She was magnificent.

“You knew all about him.”

Pink tinted her cheeks.

“I didn’t doubt you or think you were lying, but wow—you really do know when people have bad intentions.”

“Ever since...you know...that day.”

The day his father killed her family and tried to kill her. It was weird how his father had created Cain’s relationship with blood and somehow through his actions had given Mercy the ability to see bad intentions. That wasn’t normal. Hell, none of

this was normal. But now wasn't the time to be deep thinking all this shit.

He turned to her, stepped into her space, and pushed her back against the wall, savoring her soft curves against his sharp angles. "Is it wrong that the way you handled that turns me the fuck on?" He took her mouth.

She opened to him, her tongue dancing with his. She slid her hand down the back of his jeans onto his bare ass and squeezed. Damn. His dick grew hard just wishing she'd squeeze it that way.

He couldn't get enough of her. She was his oxygen. Necessary to his survival.

The elevator dinged that terrible tone again. He forced himself to pull back from her. Her eyes remained closed. Her lips looked just kissed and so deliciously red his mind conjured up a picture of her on her knees taking him into her mouth. He wanted to make that happen. Right here. Right now. But yeah—talk about giving the reporter something juicy to write about.

Her lashes fluttered open. "You steal a piece of me every time you do that."

"Good. Soon I'll have all of you."

She smiled, only there was something sad in the way her lips tipped upward. Something that scared him. Something that almost brought him to his knees.

He started to ask about her sorrow, but the doors slid open to the sound of quiet crying. A young woman sat in a cluster of chairs across from the elevator, sobbing into her hands.

As if being in a hospital wasn't hard enough, witnessing undiluted grief was a real heart ripper.

Cain followed Mercy off the elevator and into the hallway. Someone moaned and called out for Mona. A machine beeped an incessant sound. A cluster of nurses quietly gossiped, not even looking up as he and Mercy walked by.

Good. At least no one on the fifth floor recognized them yet. He wrapped his arm around Mercy's shoulders, and she leaned into him, hugging his waist as they headed toward Mac's room. It felt so right to be walking with her like this. As if they'd done it a million times and had the muscle memory to prove it. Relief cooled any residual worry he carried. She responded to him, so maybe that look she'd given him... Maybe he'd misinterpreted it.

Outside Room 509, he rapped his knuckles on the closed door.

"Come in." Mac's voice sounded strong and sure.

Cain pushed open the door, conscious that he was holding his breath.

Mac sat in a chair in front of the window, wearing one of those hospital smocks that would make the most testosterone-loaded hulk look like a pansy. Knobby knees and skinny calves jutted out from under the gown, and a thick pair of white socks—that had a decidedly feminine flare—covered his feet. Next to him was a pole holding his IVs.

Cain let out the breath he'd been holding. "You look better than I expected." It wasn't until that moment that he realized the image of Mac shot and bleeding on the cabin floor had dominated every thought of the guy. "Though I'm hoping this isn't a fashion statement you plan on adopting."

"You don't like my dress? I asked for one with ruffles, but this was all they had." His gaze slid from Cain to Mercy, then back to Cain. "So...you're together."

It wasn't a question, more of a statement of something he already knew and wanted Cain to confirm.

"Yeah. We are." He glanced at Mercy. She wore a smile that was a sister to the one in the elevator. The word *sorrow* came to mind. But sorrow here and now didn't make sense.

Cain let go of Mercy and stepped closer to the man who'd saved him from his father. The man who'd taught him how to be a man. He bent down and gave Mac a hug. The first time he'd ever hugged him.

Mac grabbed on. Holding Cain tightly as if making up for lost time. And Cain let him. Finally, when Mac released him, he stepped back and damn... Were those tears in Mac's eyes? No way.

Mac swallowed and nodded his head absentmindedly. "That means a lot to me." He thankfully turned his attention on Mercy. "You clean up nice."

On the way to the hospital, they'd stopped at a department store, and Cain had bought Mercy some clothes and underthings. It hadn't been until he paid that it dawned on him how vulnerable she was without money, clothes, an ID, a place to live. He was more than willing to take her in and help her out. Indefinitely.

"And you're looking a hundred times better than the last time I saw you." Mercy went to Mac, leaned down, and hugged the guy.

When Mercy pulled away, Mac gestured toward the bed. "Have a seat."

"So what's the doctor say?" Cain asked as he and Mercy sat on the edge of the bed across from Mac.

"They won't let me out of here until tomorrow. They're being overly dramatic. Yes, it was a gunshot wound. Yes, I've had surgery. But I've been up. I've been walking around—as long as someone drags all this shit behind me." He gestured toward the IV and machine. "I've eaten and taken a piss. What more could they want?"

Mac was a cantankerous asshole whenever he got sick. So this was normal, a sign that everything was gonna be all right. But then Mac's face went serious.

"Cain." He paused, waited until all Cain's attention landed on him. "I told Dolan no. That you would not work Liz's case. I'd never do that to you." He balled his hands into fists. "I don't know what possessed him to make you go there."

Cain *had* thought Mac wanted him to work the case. Never crossed his mind that Dolan—the fucker—could've been lying. *Note to self: don't believe everything Dolan tells you.*

He was gonna have a chat with the guy next time he saw him. A his-fist-meets-Dolan's-face kind of chat.

“I ripped a hole the size of a soccer ball in his ass for doing that to you, and he just took it. Hell, I half expected him to bend over and tell me to do it again. Something's wrong with him. He's not acting right. The Dolan I know wouldn't do that to you.”

Sympathy and sadness etched deep grooves around Mac's mouth. “I can't even imagine what you went through. I know how bad it is for you normally, but that...that...that had to be...”

“Yeah. It was.” Yesterday's memories crept out of their hiding place and bombarded him with images and a shame he wanted to forget. Mac had seen Cain have headaches, but he'd never seen anything like yesterday where Cain's body revolted to the point he hadn't been able to talk about what he'd seen until today. Hopefully, that wasn't going to be the new norm.

Mercy slid her arm around Cain's waist and leaned in to him, the gesture oddly fortifying. If she was still here, still with him despite what she witnessed yesterday, there was hope.

“I'm glad Mercy was with you.” A bit of the light returned to Mac's face.

Cain was glad too. He'd walked through hell, and she'd been the cooling breeze that kept him going.

“Dolan tell you what I saw?”

Mac nodded, his expression one of being lost in thought. “The Dawsons and Liz are connected. Didn't see that coming.”

“Exactly what Dolan said.”

“The easiest explanation is usually the right one.” That had been one of Mac's mantras ever since they'd started working together. “Edward Payne. Dolan said they're looking for a connection between him and the Dawsons but can't find anything.”

“I don’t think it was Payne.”

“Really?” Mac’s brows shot skyward. “The blood tell you that?”

“Not exactly. It’s more of a feeling. It just doesn’t seem like something he’d do. He’s too...”

“He’s too *GQ* to get his hands dirty,” Mercy added. “I spent two years with him and never once saw a hair out of place or a shoe not shined or him smelling like he hadn’t just showered and fumigated himself in expensive cologne. I can’t imagine him getting messy.”

“Our guy seems almost...spiritual. Like he worships the process. Payne is more simpleminded. I think his role begins and ends with his fixation on Mercy.” *Fixation* made it sound like the doctor was just a superfan. *Obsession* was a better word, but still didn’t encompass the effort Payne was willing to expend to get Mercy. He would not be given another chance.

Mac looked down at his lap like he had some really bad news to give and didn’t know quite how to deliver it. “This”—he gestured at himself and the equipment attached to him—“is my fault.”

Cain shook his head so violently his eyeballs had trouble keeping up. “I shouldn’t have called you. Shouldn’t have involved you. Shouldn’t have tried to lea—”

“I told Edward Payne where you and Mercy were.” The words that came out of Mac’s mouth were foul and disgusting.

Mac told Payne? No, Cain must’ve heard wrong. Must be misinterpreting Mac’s meaning. Cain searched for any other logical explanation, but there was none. He couldn’t think of what to say, but then one word popped out. “Why?”

“I-I thought you were in trouble. Big trouble. Liz was dead, and then you call to tell me about taking Mercy *from* Liz. You were the last person to see Liz alive.” He raked a hand through his wiry gray hair. “I was trying to keep Edward Payne from finding out *you* took Mercy and, worse, filing charges against you. And I needed to talk to you face-to-face

to see what you knew about Liz. It wasn't on my radar that you taking Mercy could've been a good thing. At least not until I saw her. Talked to her."

Cain's mind flashed back to what Mac had said when he'd called to tell him about Mercy. *What's wrong? I can hear it in your voice. Talk to me. Whatever it is, you'll be fine. We'll get through it. I'm here for you. Always have been. Always will be.* Cain could read between the lines. Mac—his closest friend—had thought he'd killed Liz.

Cain's stomach squirmed like a hundred worms were rolling and writhing around in there. "Fucking. Son. Of. A. Bitch. You thought I..." He couldn't say the word out loud. "...hurt Liz?"

Mercy leaned into him, wrapping both arms around him, holding him tight. The comfort she offered warred with the betrayal beating him from the inside out.

"When you said you had taken Mercy from Liz... and Liz was dead... God. I didn't know what to think."

"Cain..." Mercy's voice was soothing, trying to offer calm compensation for everything he'd just learned about Mac.

"So you've expected for years that I'd go all psycho killer. Turn into my father?"

Mac didn't need to say anything; Cain could see the look on his face. Guilty as charged.

Cain's world wrenched itself off its axis. If he hadn't been sitting, he might've fallen. Mac had been the one person who always believed in him. But it had been a facade.

"Holy. Fucking. Christ. So this"—he gestured back and forth between the two of them—"was what? Your way of keeping an eye on me all these years? A way of making sure I stay in line so I can keep doing my work for the FBI?" His volume rose to shouting range. He shoved up off the bed. Couldn't sit there one moment more with all this...this...shit boiling inside him.

"Cain, it's not like that." Mac's volume rose, matching his own.

“Then how the fuck is it?”

“I made a mistake. I should’ve trusted you. You’ve never let me down. Ever. I should’ve known you were doing the right thing. You always do the right thing. I was wrong. And all of this is my fault. I don’t know exactly what happened after I got shot, but I put you both in danger. And for that, I will always have regret.”

“I-I-I can’t be here right now.” Cain stalked off toward the door, but stopped and turned when he realized Mercy wasn’t with him.

She sat on the bed, eyes aimed at the floor—not even able to look at him. She thought of him the same way Mac did. Like he was a time bomb, programmed to detonate into a killing machine at some unknown date and location.

His heart shriveled up and died.

It didn’t hurt. Actually, he felt numb, incapable of feeling anything. In an odd way, that was the worst feeling he could imagine. It made him too much like his father. He turned and headed toward the door again.

“Goddamnit, Cain.” Mac yelled at his back. “It’s because you’re *my* son. Maybe not biologically, but I love you like a son. Like a goddamned son. I know you’ve got hang-ups about the whole father-son relationship thing, but it’s the truth.”

Cain’s footsteps faltered. Father-son always meant Killion and himself. Not what he and Mac had. That was something different. Something he’d thought was healthy. The real kick in the ass was that Cain didn’t know what was worse: that Mac thought he could kill, or that Mac had seen past his facade all these years to the monster within.

“I was wrong. I’m sorry.” Mac spoke softly, each sentence packed with feeling. “The reason I did what I did was because I love you. Because I wanted to protect you. Only I made a mistake. I should’ve trusted you.”

Cain wrenched open the hospital door, ignoring Mac calling his name. When he emerged into the hallway, he was different. He’d just severed himself from everything he’d

thought was good in his life. All that was left of him was his father's son.

It's a myth that all serial killers mutilate, torture, and kill animals before they evolve to humans. Many start out with humans and evolve in their method of mutilation.

—Lind Patrick, PhD, forensic psychologist

Mercy's heart didn't break watching Cain's pain. Nope. Instead, the bloody organ bashed against her sternum, trying to crash through the bone barrier and run after him. It belonged to him and wanted to be returned to its rightful owner. She grabbed her chest—a futile effort to keep her heart from tearing her apart from the inside out.

Her gaze locked on the negative space where Cain had stood just a moment before. Even though he wasn't there, she could still see the echoes of his image. She could still see the rigid set of his shoulders, the way his muscles strained and twitched as if he carried a burden too heavy to bear—hurt. But hurt couldn't be measured in pounds. It was measured in time—the days, months, years it would take to heal. And Mac had very nearly severed Cain's heart from his soul. She had witnessed him bleeding shame all over the room.

More than anything, she had wanted to staunch the flow, to help heal his wound with her understanding and complete acceptance of him.

Yet, she had added to Cain's pain. She'd let him assume she sided with Mac.

The truth—the hard fact she'd been avoiding with excuses—was that she couldn't walk away from Cain. *Weakness*

wasn't normally a word she equated with herself, but Cain was her soft spot. The only chance she had to save him from herself was by letting him walk away.

"What's wrong with you?" Disgust sliced through Mac's tone. "Don't just sit here fucking staring at the door. Go after him."

"I can't." Her voice sounded pitiful and pathetic.

"The hell you can't." He nearly shouted the words.

She suddenly felt like a five-year-old being yelled at by her father. Her stomach burned from swallowed guilt.

"He needs you."

"I know." No sense in arguing with the truth.

"Right now."

"I know." Oh God, she knew. The pain of seeing him hurt and not doing one thing to ease him—she'd endure a thousand years of the Center to never feel this ever again.

"So go after him."

"I can't." The words came out sounding as brittle as she felt, like if anyone touched her, she'd splinter into a thousand shards of regret.

"Why not." The words weren't a question. They were a demand for an answer.

She forced her gaze away from where Cain had last stood and looked at Mac. Saw anger glaring back at her. Knew he hated her for not easing Cain's pain. She hated herself for the same reason. "To keep him safe." The words tasted bitter in her mouth.

"Why do you say that?" Mac spoke fast, leaned forward in his seat, waiting for her explanation.

"I'm the girl who lived. And I keep on living when everyone I ever care about dies. My family. Now Liz. And if I stay with Cain—something *will* happen to him too." She took a breath, expecting some form of understanding to fire on Mac's features, but he stared at her as if she had a nose

growing on her forehead. He didn't get it. "Dr. Payne is still out there. He'll find me. What he did to you—shooting you—was bad. What he'll do to Cain will be worse. The only way to protect him is to be away from him."

"Bull-fucking-shit." Mac leaned back in his seat, winced from the movement. "Jesus. You and he are too damned much alike. Always thinking you're gonna hurt other people. You want to know the truth?"

The truth? She knew the truth. Lived the god-awful truth every day.

Mac sat forward and grabbed her hand in his. His fingers verged on gnarled looking, but the way he squeezed her hand spoke of deep strength. "Look at me." He waited for her to lift her eyes from their hands. Waited for her to look him directly in the eye. "You're a fucking coward."

His words hit her harder than any physical blow, reverberating inside the dome of her skull like a gong upside the head. She tried to yank her hand away from him, but he wouldn't let her go. Righteous rage pounded through her. "You have no idea what I've been through."

A smile that wasn't really a smile touched Mac's mouth. "Of all the people in the world..." He spoke slow and soft, as if the words themselves carried too much power to be uttered too fast or too loud. "...I'm one of the few who knows exactly what you went through."

A tear snaked down her cheek, followed by another and another. Why was she crying?

"I was there. I found you. I found Cain. Every day, I carry the burden of knowing what you both went through. You think I didn't blame myself? Think that maybe if I'd worked a little harder, a little faster, I could've prevented what happened to your family? To you? Saved Cain a bit of the torment?"

He glanced away from her. For a moment, stoic torment pinched his features. It was gone by the time he looked at her again. "Those thoughts nearly destroyed me. Your *everyone-I-love-dies* attitude is bullshit. Deep down, you know it too.

You're not trying to protect him. You're trying to protect yourself. You're afraid of getting hurt again. Afraid that if something *does* happen to him, you won't be able to deal with it. So you won't even open yourself up to the pain.

"Wake up to reality. Love *is* painful. You hand your beating bloody heart to someone and hope to Christ they don't pulverize it. Hope is all you get with love. There are no guarantees."

She wanted to deny every word he spoke. But she couldn't. Was she afraid of getting hurt? *Yes*. Was she afraid she couldn't handle losing another person? *Yes*. Was she a coward? *Yes. Yes. Yes*. "How do you know this?"

"You think I haven't battled back my own inner coward while raising Cain? I was scared shitless during those early years that he was going to turn into his father. But that didn't help him or me. He only blossomed when I decided to love him unconditionally—no matter what he did, no matter how much it might devastate me later.

"I fucked up this shit with Dr. Payne. But I can't make it right without him. I'm begging you—go look for him. He's probably long gone, but maybe he waited for you. Maybe he waited."

Maybe he waited for her.

She went from sitting on the bed in Mac's room to sprinting out the door and down the hallway. Hospital staff congregating at the nurses' station stared at her as she streaked past, heading for the door marked STAIRS. She didn't have time to wait for the elevator.

On a leap, she bounded halfway down the first flight. It was almost as though her feet had sprouted jet packs to give her extra airtime. Or maybe the universe had decided to give her extra juice to help her reunite with the one person who was truly perfect for her.

She pictured him sitting in the old beater truck he'd driven today. He'd said his car needed to be cleaned of blood before he could drive it again. Pictured him staring straight ahead,

warring with himself about whether or not to leave. Then she pictured his face when he saw her. Imagined the relief she would see in his expression.

She'd fix everything. Herself and him. Him and Mac. Once she explained all of it, he'd understand.

She slammed into the door at the bottom of the steps, the metallic clang of it percussive in the hushed lobby. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw everyone startle and look at her. The people and chairs in front of her were nothing more than an obstacle course. She ducked around an elderly man walking with a cane. She dodged right to avoid a woman in a wheelchair. Leaped over a low-slung coffee table with all the grace of a hurdler.

She drew up short of the automated door, stopping only an inch from impact. The danged thing took its sweet time to shudder and slowly begin to slide open. The moment she thought the door had opened wide enough, she squeezed through, leaving a bit of skin, but that didn't matter.

Outside the air carried the bite of spring and brightness of summer.

She shot to the parking lot, feet pounding pavement, gaze darting among all the cars, searching for the old truck. For Cain. And suddenly she reached the last row of cars. No, must've missed the truck. She whirled around to run back the way she came, but in that moment she knew.

He was gone.

Gone.

Gone.

She couldn't move. Couldn't force her lungs to pump air. And her heart—the organ had gone MIA. Everything inside her felt wrong, empty, as if someone had torn out the most vital parts, leaving only her shell. She couldn't even cry.

The only thing she felt was utter desolation born of extreme loneliness.

Once upon a horrible time, loneliness had been something she treasured. She'd seen it as a strength—self-preservation. A way to keep herself safe from all those people who wanted to take advantage of her. But right here, right now, she saw the truth. She yearned for connection and understanding. She yearned for Cain.

“Cain?” She spoke aloud to the sea of empty cars around her. “Where are you?” As stupid as it sounded, she waited for an answer, some bit of intuition to give her a direction. Because she was lost. More lost than she'd ever been.

Nothing. No bit of breeze, no bird flying overhead, just the sad hospital crouching next to the parking lot.

The hospital. Mac. He knew Cain best. Knew where he'd likely go.

Hope sprouted delicate wings and fluttered in her chest.

She'd find Cain and explain how she had always thought she was cursed. How Mac made her see logic. How Mac loved him and made a mistake. Then they needed to have a conversation about his father. About how his father's actions may have bonded them in some way, but they couldn't—neither one of them—continue to live in the shadow of the past.

She didn't run back inside; this time she walked. Her steps faltered when she spotted Ken Jackson outside the sliding doors with his cell phone aimed at her. Filming her.

The asshole.

His energy was foul, this time almost worse than last time. In that way of hers—that way of *knowing* beyond reason and rationality—she saw images flip through her mind like memories, but they weren't memories. They were of what Ken Jackson intended—him at an anchor desk summarizing her history and Cain's. Footage of her running through the lobby playing. His sensationalistic speculation.

She walked with her head held high, her face a mask of dignity, her steps strong and sure. When she neared him and he

opened his mouth to say something, she held up her hand in the universal symbol for “Stop.”

A piece of grace must’ve been on her side, because he didn’t say anything else, just kept filming her as she walked by him, walked through the lobby, toward the elevator. Her walking wasn’t exactly going to get him the numbers he wanted. Maybe she should moon him. A minuscule smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. It might almost be worth it to see the shocked look on his face.

The elevator doors slid open, and a young family exited the space. Mercy moved in after them, hit the close-door button, and looked up to meet Ken’s gaze. He obviously possessed no shame in the blatant way he followed her with his phone’s camera.

The elevator doors closed, and she slumped against the back wall. The same wall Cain had backed her up against, where he’d kissed her so thoroughly, where she’d felt possessed by him—and liked the feeling. How had things gone from that to this sense of devastation in mere minutes?

Thankfully, no one was around to watch her trudge back to Mac’s room. Outside his door, she paused and sucked in a breath. He was going to be so disappointed. But the sooner she talked to him, the sooner she’d know where to look for Cain.

She walked into Mac’s room.

Everything was the same.

The room was the same.

Mac was the same.

But everything had changed somehow.

Tendrils of menace twined up her legs, her hips, her torso, wrapping around her neck and choking off her ability to breathe. Something was wrong. So wrong. The energy of the room was wrong.

“Mac, what’s—” Her words pinched off when she saw the man sitting on Mac’s bed.

His back was to her, his artfully trimmed blond hair shining like a gold medal. A white doctor's coat covered his frame. The way he held his shoulders, the way his neck cradled his head, spoke of conceit and cruelty. Everything good and kind and nice retreated to the shadows in his presence.

Dr. Payne.

Maybe she should be surprised to see him, but she wasn't. Every moment since she'd escaped the Center had been stolen time. She'd felt that on a level deeper than thought. The inevitability of Dr. Payne had been looming over her. Confronted with him here, she couldn't find any fear for herself. None. She just wanted it over. Wanted him dealt with so she could build a life with Cain.

“Run!” Mac shouted from his chair.

She heard him. Everyone probably heard him, but she didn't move.

Dr. Payne jumped from the bed and rammed his hand into Mac's injured side. All the hearty color drained from Mac's face. Torment twisted his features and flashed in his eyes. A sound unlike anything she'd ever heard—the sound of pure anguish—filled the room.

Dr. Payne's foul intentions played in her mind. He would kill Mac to get what he wanted.

Her.

He wanted to drug her. Make her helpless against him. And he had no problems killing anyone who got in the way of that.

The soft squeak of thick-soled shoes moved down the hallway toward her. Great. A nurse was about to interrupt.

“Your words will have consequences.” Dr. Payne still hadn't looked at her, didn't need to. She knew exactly what he meant and knew which consequences she could live with and which she couldn't.

She turned and met the nurse in the doorway. “Sorry about the noise. The doctor is examining him and hit a tender spot.”

The woman looked too young and too naive to have graduated from high school, let alone have a nursing degree, but she gazed around Mercy into the room where Dr. Payne bent over Mac in a show of physicianly concern, his face hidden from view.

“Oh. Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything.” She turned and walked away, having no clue what was really happening in the room. Some people were lucky like that. Bad shit never landed on them, so they never saw evil crouched in life’s corners.

Time slowed a bit as Dr. Payne straightened from his fake examination of Mac. Inch by inch he turned, revealing his face.

Looking at him was an odd experience. Her mind conjured the image of him she was most familiar with. And this guy wasn’t it. His pretty-boy good looks hid beneath a rainbow of pain—jaundiced yellows, eggplant purples, and every shade of black imaginable. One eye so bloodshot it bordered on demonic. His left cheek swollen to almost comical proportions. But there was nothing funny about the fury pulsing off him.

First priority: protect Mac.

The only way to ensure Mac’s safety was to get Dr. Payne away from him. “I’ll cooperate. Let you do whatever you want to me. Just don’t touch him again.”

“Mercy. No,” Mac gasped, his voice buried beneath his body’s physical agony.

Dr. Payne didn’t speak, just held out his hand and motioned for her to come closer.

Instinct told her to run. Conscience told her to stay. She mind-over-mattered and forced her feet to move toward him. One step, two, three, four... She stopped next to him, inhaling the scent of his expensive cologne. Despite his house being off

limits due to the police investigation, he had some fancy place to lie low—a place with all the amenities of home.

He motioned for her to sit in a wheelchair parked next to Mac. She sat in the cold seat but didn't take her eyes off Dr. Payne.

He bent over Mac. "One word from you in the next two minutes, and I'll splatter the ceiling with her brains. You got that?" He spoke through clenched teeth.

Images of things Dr. Payne planned for her flashed in her mind. He wanted complete control of her. He wanted her drugged and sedated. He wanted her at his mercy—Mercy at his mercy. He wanted to play with her the way a cat plays with a dead mole. But he didn't want to kill her. And that was going to be the reason she'd defeat him. She wasn't weak and helpless. She was no dead mole. She was a damned possum playing dead until the moment was right.

Still gasping in pain and curled in on himself, Mac nodded.

Dr. Payne grabbed a blanket off Mac's bed and draped it over her shoulders. "Now you better do a great impersonation of a patient or, so help me, I'll turn around and finish what I started in the cabin."

She slumped in her seat and hung her head forward to hide her face. He grabbed the handles and maneuvered them out the door and down the hallway toward the staff elevators.

Alone inside the elevator with him, she turned to face him, to say—

A needle plunged into the meat of her upper arm. A sharp gasp escaped before she could cage it. The thing had to be as thick as a pencil with the way pain rippled outward. She watched his finger depress the plunger. A memory flared into her mind of him injecting Bo in the group room. And another wispy, barely tangible image of her lying on the floor of her room in the Center, him looming over her with syringe in hand.

The ground jolted underneath the wheelchair. She rocked forward and almost fell. He grabbed on to her, pressing her

back against the seat. The room strobed in and out of focus and began a slow spin. Gravity suddenly didn't exist. She felt like she was falling, falling, falling but never landed.

Adam Killion was convicted for the Ledger murders but has been the primary suspect in no less than seventy-eight other murders. There's never been enough evidence to pursue charges. In the twenty years since his conviction, there have been seventeen copycats, all seeking the same fame Adam Killion possesses.

—Marie Danielles, *Crime Report Journal*

It was late. Way past prison visiting hours—nearly midnight—but the staff had been surprisingly accommodating. Obviously, they'd been expecting them.

After Cain left the hospital, he'd driven around aimlessly, searching for something he'd never find—himself. In those hours, he realized he'd made a fatal mistake. He saw that now. He never should have hoped to be anything other than Killer Killion's Kid. Being his father's son had been a terminal diagnosis, one that denial could mask but never effectively treat. And now the mask was gone, and he was left exposed and vulnerable to the truth.

Cain stared through the one-way glass of the observation room into the empty interview room. An anemic overhead light provided barely enough illumination to see the table, two chairs, and a door beyond. Hell, the entire prison was shrouded in shadows. A guard had told him and Dolan that the state decided to go half power or less during the night as a cost-cutting measure. All the lights were on a timer. If he wanted to

see his father without the mood lighting, he'd have to wait until morning.

He couldn't wait. Neither could Dolan.

Dolan leaned against the wall next to the one-way glass—still wearing his shades as if the night was too damned bright for his eyes. Cain should be angry with the guy for lying to him. Angry that Dolan was the reason he had to see Liz's murder. Angry that he'd been so sick afterward. But Cain wasn't angry.

Apathy seemed to be his dominant emotion at the moment. "What asses did you kiss to get us in here after hours?"

"More like I had to suck a sow's teat. And now I need to vomit and take a shower."

Cain waited for a hint of a smile, something to indicate that Dolan was joking, but the guy's expression remained full-on serious.

The door to the interview room opened, and a prisoner shuffled in.

His father. Cain would recognize him anywhere. It was like looking in the mirror and reliving the worst memories of his childhood at the same time.

His heart stopped pounding out individual beats. It vibrated so fast he could feel it humming along like an engine revved too high. If there had been a chair nearby, he might've sat down. But there wasn't, so he locked his knees and wouldn't allow himself to look away from his DNA source.

In the dim light, the color of his father's prison uniform looked black. For some reason, he'd always thought of his father in orange, but black seemed more fitting.

"How's Sparky doing?" his father asked, looking at the guard as if he really cared what the guy said.

The guard wore a cap pulled low over his face and focused on attaching the handcuffs to the table. "Vet said he was gonna need double knee surgery and be on bed rest for six weeks.

You know how difficult it is to explain to a boxer that he can't run and jump?"

"There's just no rationalizing with a dog, is there?" A wide smile bloomed on his father's face. In all his childhood, Cain could never remember his father smiling. And yet the man sat there smiling up at that prison guard like they were buds about to share a beer. What. The. Fuck.

The guard chuckled and bent to attach the leg shackles to a giant bolt in the floor. "It'll cost me an arm and a leg, but the vet says he'll likely be good as new after he heals."

"You have it scheduled yet?"

"Not yet. You know how it is." The guard glanced up at Cain's father's face. "Too many irons in the fire. Gotta wait until things calm down a bit." He stood. "I'm gonna go get your son. You need anything after I return, I'll be right outside the door." He placed his hand on Killion's shoulder. "Have a good visit, Adam."

"Thanks, Randall." His father sounded friendly.

Fucking friendly.

Cain's mouth hung open at the abject normalcy of what he'd just witnessed. It was like they were two friends chatting, not a prison guard and an inmate.

After the door closed behind the guard, his father lifted his gaze to the mirrored glass that separated them, his eyes roaming the pane until they locked on Cain. Fucking locked on him like his father had x-ray vision.

Cold, unlike anything Cain had ever experienced, pumped through him. His hands shook, his entire body shivered. It was like the guy could see him standing there. Fuck. Maybe he could. With the lights dim, maybe he could see everything.

It had been twenty years—twenty goddamned years—and yet just seeing this man made Cain feel like the child he'd once been, a child who was more monster than boy. No matter how his father *acted*, Cain knew it was all just an act. Evil didn't just up and vanish like a fart in a tornado.

Maybe Cain hadn't really changed either. Maybe he'd just learned how to *act* civilized too.

"You ready?" Dolan asked and shoved off the wall to walk up next to him.

Cain couldn't move. His lungs felt like someone had shoved them in the blender and hit Liquefy. Air didn't exist anymore.

"Cain?" Dolan nudged his arm.

It took everything—every single drop of concentration—to pull his gaze away from his father and look at Dolan.

"It's simple." Dolan held out a photograph taken from the original scene at the Ledger home. "You go in, you ask about the symbol, you leave. Don't make it harder than it has to be."

Dolan had no fucking clue. This wasn't going to be a nice, simple conversation. No way. Cain was going to pay a price for every second he spent in that room. The price would be his sanity and his soul.

The door behind them opened. "He's ready for you." Cain turned away from the window to face the guard. And froze.

For a moment, not even a full moment, more like a picosecond, Cain thought the guard *was* his father. It was the way the man carried himself—an arrogant kind of posture only those in a position of power could pull off. It was in the man's height and weight and build. It was the shape of his face, and with his correction officer cap pulled low over his forehead, it almost looked like Daddy Dearest standing there.

If he was seeing his father in a random stranger, he was losing his shit. A strange kind of pressure started growing inside Cain—the prelude to an epic meltdown. The kind that would end with blood and bodies. He couldn't tell if the feelings were suicidal or homicidal. At this point, it didn't really matter.

The guard lifted his chin at Cain in one of those *mucho-macho* manly moves. "You look a lot like him."

You did too for a moment. Cain forced his legs to move forward. “Yeah, I know.” He followed the man down a hallway and around a corner to the door leading to the interview room.

The guard stopped and faced him. His features were small and weaselly—eyes spaced too close together, nose too small, lips too thin—but still there was something about the guy’s features that reminded Cain of his father.

“The rules. No touching. That means no hand-holding or hugging, or the interview ends. Got it?”

“No touching. No problem.” Cain didn’t even want to be in the same room as the man. He sure as hell wasn’t going to touch him.

“When you’re done, knock and I’ll let you out.” The guard unlocked and opened the door for Cain.

I’m not ready, he yelled in his head, but it was too late. The door was open, and Cain could feel his father’s gaze upon him. Felt the assessment, the measurement, the judgment.

By some miracle, basic body functioning still worked, and his legs carried him into the same space his father inhabited. It felt like miles and hours passed as he crossed the room. Panicked, half-formed thoughts and fully formed memories flowed into and out of Cain’s mind like waves upon the sand.

Get a goddamned grip on yourself. This isn’t the past. This is now. And now the man can’t hurt you. He fucking can’t hurt you. Just like Dolan said: “You go in, you ask about the symbol, you leave. Don’t make it harder than it has to be.”

An odd sort of calm clarity settled over Cain. As though his brain had just figured out he was really an adult, could really walk away, and that this man could never really hurt him again—unless Cain allowed him into his mind. Which he wasn’t going to do. His shields were up, and his walls were impenetrable.

He found himself sitting in the chair and felt like he was staring into a mirror. Only it wasn’t a mirror. It was his father’s face staring back at him. His father might be in his late-forties,

but he could pass for someone a lot younger. Maybe that's what living without a conscience did for a person's appearance—granted them eternal youth.

His father dipped his chin and closed his eyes for a few beats, an almost subservient gesture. "I missed you." His voice sounded nothing like Cain remembered. It was soft and slow and full of some emotion his father shouldn't possess. Affection? No. No way. The man had no conscience. No way could he feel affection. "Son."

Son. Cain hated that word.

His father's eyes, identical to his own, met his. "I know why you're here. I've known since the beginning we were going to have this moment."

Since the beginning of what? Since Cain's birth? Since he'd started killing and teaching Cain to do the same? Since his arrest? Cain wasn't going to ask. There was only one topic that had brought him here. The symbol. And he was going to stick to it like superglue.

He set the photo of the symbol on the table facing his father. "Tell me about this."

His father picked up the glossy paper, his gaze roaming over it, taking in the details as if he'd never seen the symbol before. "A little bit of mercy always leaves a stain."

Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

Her name coming out of his father's mouth was an abomination. Wrong in the deepest pool of wrong. That the man even thought about her made her unsafe. And made Cain scared shitless for her.

But wait. Did his father mean simply the word *mercy*, or did he mean her name?

As if hearing his thoughts, his father spoke, "Doesn't she?"

Cain's heart went cold. The hair all over his body stood on end as if zapped by an electrical current. "This has nothing to do with her." His voice came out strong and sure—so different from the ice pumping through him.

His father shook his head, a small indulgent smile on his lips. “It has everything to do with her. She’s the reason I’m in here. She’s the reason you’re sitting across from me right now.” He leaned forward as far as his shackles would allow him. “I created her for you.”

I created her for you. The sentence ping-ponged around in Cain’s skull. Earlier in the day, he and Mercy had had a conversation parallel to this, that they had been brought together by his father. United in the horror they’d both experienced.

Later, when he was alone, he’d devote some brain cells to thinking about this. But not now.

“I spared her. At the time I didn’t know why, only that I *couldn’t* finish her.”

Holy fuck. They were taping this? Everyone assumed Mercy was his father’s one mistake. And here the man was claiming he’d intentionally spared her. Cain knew his father to be cruel, but never a liar.

“I spared her for you.” His father paused. Inhaled a slow breath, exhaled. “She’s yours.”

She’s mine, Cain’s mind whispered. Something felt so right about that. Something felt so wrong.

She belonged with him. Cain saw that. Felt that. Knew no one else would ever understand what he’d gone through at the hands of his father.

But he did not belong to her. She’d pretty much given him the ole fuck-you when she chose to stay with Mac instead of leave with Cain. Her feelings were pretty damned clear.

“Tell me about the symbol.”

“Ownership. It signifies ownership.”

He’d heard that before. From Mac. From that agent who’d worked Satanic cult cases in the eighties. But his father—a Satanist? Didn’t compute. The only god his father could possibly worship was himself. “I know you drew it.”

“I did, using Mercy’s tender hand.”

“Why is it at two new crime scenes?”

“Why indeed.” It wasn’t a question, more of a musing.

“I’m asking you.”

“You already know.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I knew.” Truthfully, he was only here because he had masochistic tendencies. Mac had knocked his feet out from under him. Now it was his father’s turn to kick him while he was down. Cain felt like he was straddling a fence. Mac on one side. His father on the other. And Cain needed to decide which side to come down on.

“You don’t want to face the truth.”

“The truth?” What the fuck was his father talking about? Could twenty years in prison have caused the guy to go a bit nutty and fruity?

“The truth of who you are.”

“I know who I am.” Killer Killion’s Kid. Triple K. “This isn’t about me. It’s about this.” Cain tapped the photograph that now sat on the table between them.

“You’ve got it all wrong. The symbol. Mercy.” His hands, cuffed to the table, opened and spread wide, as if indicating the room, the prison, the whole dang world. “All of it—everything—is about you.”

What the fuck? The man was talking in circles. A moment ago, it was all about Mercy. Maybe twenty-three hours a day in a cell did that to a person—made them delusional.

Cain jabbed his finger at the photograph to get his father back on topic. “There’s a copycat. Who’ve you been talking to?”

His father shook his head as if he was disappointed in Cain. What the fuck was going on? Violence and rage had been his father’s reaction all those years ago, not normal human emotions like disappointment.

“You know they monitor all my correspondence. I’m sure they’ve searched through every piece of incoming and

outgoing mail and found nothing.” He looked beyond Cain to the mirrored glass. He knew they were being observed.

“What about Dr. Payne? Did you mention it, draw it in one of your many *therapy* sessions with him?” Yeah. Whatever Payne and his dad discussed was probably about the opposite of therapy.

“Edward was more interested in the victims. How they died. Not physically speaking, but psychologically. Did they submit, did they fight, did they accept their fate? He was particularly interested in Mercy. But I’m sure you can find all that in the recordings. Everything I say or do is recorded. How do you explain a copycat if *I’ve* not told anyone about it?”

Wait... His father might not have told anyone about it, but there were plenty of people who knew about the symbol. They’d just never classified it as a symbol until Cain found it. Just about any FBI agent with clearance could look at the old case files and see that symbol. And fucking Dolan had known that. And yet sent him in here as if this was the only damned answer.

“I see you making connections. But they’re all the wrong ones. It’s you. It’s all about you.” His father’s gaze hit him so hard Cain almost looked away. He fought the urge to look down and be as submissive as he used to be. “I made mistakes with you. If I had a chance, I would do things so differently.”

Cain did more than just hear the words; he felt the words. Felt each one of them land on that pathetic child inside him who still—fucking still—wanted his father’s love. He’d thought that kid had died long ago until his father’s words resurrected him.

“MacNeil Anderson is a good man. But he doesn’t know you like I do.”

Cain’s mind flashed back to his childhood. To all the horrors orchestrated by his father that he’d been too ashamed to tell Mac about. Hell, the ones he had told Mac were bad enough; the ones he hadn’t spoken of were horrendous—and then there were the things he couldn’t remember. Those had to be off the charts.

“No one will ever understand. You are created in my image. You are my son. You’ll never be his son. No matter how much he tries. He’ll never understand us. Because we’re different. We’re special. You know that now, don’t you?”

The bad part of him—that part that was his father’s son—listened to the words, took them in, caressed them, loved them.

Mac would always doubt Cain because of his past. Because of his father. There would never be any getting around it. Mac was no different than every other person in the world. They all *thought* he must be a monster. His father was the only one who *knew* he was a monster. And accepted him anyway.

Cain didn’t have to pretend to be a good person with his father. He could be himself. Be as fucked up as he wanted, and his father would embrace him, encourage him.

But he didn’t want to be that man. Didn’t want to turn into his father. Sanity—a.k.a. the good part of him—returned from its hiding place. What was he thinking? Of having a father-son reunion? No. No fucking way. In life, there were unforgivable sins, and his father had committed most of them against his own son.

Cain pushed back from the table and picked up the photo.

“Son.”

That word again—like razor blades running up his spine. He didn’t look at his father.

“I’ll see you soon?”

He wanted to say something smart-ass back. *The hell you will. In your dreams. Fuck off.* But none of the words left his mouth. Too many years of conditioned submission to this man made him hold his tongue.

Cain walked toward the door. The guard opened it before he even got there, like he’d been watching and waiting. Each step put distance between the monster and himself. Or was he carrying the monster with him?

“I need to leave. Right now.” He spoke directly to the guard. “Come back and get Dolan after I’m gone.”

The guy didn’t question Cain, just led him away.

An inside man at the FBI was the problem. Dolan had wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth while the damn horse kicked Cain upside the head. Now Cain was done. Done. Walking away from this gig for a while. Walking away from blood and death and civilization. Maybe he needed to find one of those cabins in the isolated Alaskan wilderness where the only way to reach him was by plane a few times a year. Yeah, that sounded right.

“Cain!” Dolan shouted his name from far down a hallway, the sound echoing through the empty space.

Cain didn’t bother to turn around, just raised both hands over his head—birds flying—and then followed the guard through a metal door that locked behind them.

“Cain, wait! Fucking Christ. Wait.” Dolan’s voice, muffled through the door, was still loud enough to hear.

Let him fucking shout until his goddamned vocal cords ruptured.

He went through the motions of signing out. Prison personnel spoke to him and he must’ve answered, because he found himself outside, walking toward his truck, keys and wallet in hand.

Hard-edged beams of light cut through absolute darkness. He sucked in a breath of free air. Free air tasted different, smelled different than institutionalized air.

He got in his truck and started the engine. The old beater fired to life. She wasn’t pretty, but she’d turned out to be more reliable than any human in his life.

His phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen.

Forty-two missed calls from an unknown number. Yeah. Probably Mac calling from the hospital feeling like a shit because he’d finally been honest. Well, now it was Cain’s turn to be honest. No more trying to be a man Mac could be proud

of. He was just going to embrace the fucked-upness that was himself. But first he probably needed to find that place in Alaska.

The guard—the one who he'd mistaken for his father—walked past the front of his truck and got into an old Honda a few cars down. The guy must've been clocking some overtime to deal with their sorry asses.

Cain drove out of his parking place and headed for the road. His phone buzzed again. He glanced at the screen and saw one word. MERCY in all caps. He slammed on the brakes, and the phone shot onto the floor. He bent to pick it up, but the seat belt locked on him. He fumbled with the release, got free, and snatched the phone.

Dolan: MERCY's been taken.

Cain's heart fell out of his chest and splatted somewhere on the pavement underneath the truck. The world narrowed down smaller and smaller until the only things in existence were the words on the screen. *MERCY's been taken*.

He had to be reading it wrong. There had to be some other meaning. His brain searched for a way to make those words mean something—anything—other than what they meant. But there was no other meaning. *MERCY's been taken*.

A car honked behind him. Honked again. Again. He couldn't move. Could only think those three words. *MERCY's been taken*. The honking continued, but it was of no significance. Those three words contained everything that mattered.

The Honda, carrying the friendly-with-his-father guard, revved its engine, squealed its tires, and shot around him, going partway in the grass to pass his truck.

He dialed Dolan. "What happened?"

"Edward Payne showed up at the hospital. From what Mac said, Mercy went with him willingly."

"She didn't fucking go with him because she enjoys his company."

“I know. Everyone’s looking for her.”

A tap on the passenger side window caught Cain’s attention. Dolan stood there phone to his ear, goddamned sunglasses still on his face. Cain hit the unlock button and Dolan climbed in.

Cain ended the call and tossed his phone on the dash. “How long has she been missing?”

Dolan pulled his shades off and delicately set them on the dash. “Seven hours.”

Seven hours. Seven fucking hours. Dolan had known *before* Cain showed up at the prison. Hours before he’d shown up. And yet hadn’t said a goddamned word. He’d just wanted the job done. Fuck Mercy and her safety. Fuck Cain and his sanity.

Cain turned in his seat and swung his fist, nailing Dolan on the cheek. The smack of flesh on flesh was loud in the small space. The impact reverberated up Cain’s arm—it felt great. He swung again, impacting lower on Dolan’s jaw. The guy grunted, but never raised a hand to defend himself or fight back. Beating someone who wanted a beating lacked the fun factor.

Cain grabbed the guy by his shirt front and slammed him against the passenger door. His breath came hard and fast. Anger and fear warred inside him. Anger at Dolan. Fear for Mercy. “I’m not in the fucking mood for carpooling. Get out.”

He let go of the guy.

The muscles in Dolan’s cheeks jumped from his jaw being clenched. Slowly, he reached for his glasses and put them back on. “You want to see her alive? Shut up and drive.”

Survivor's guilt: The feeling that a person has done something wrong or bad by surviving a traumatic event. The feeling that they should've died or had done to them what was done to others.

—*Psychological Diagnosis Now* magazine

The blade slid across Mercy's neck. The pain of it oddly absent. She'd thought it would hurt, but she felt nothing beyond the comforting warmth of blood gliding down her chest. Suddenly, her sliced flesh screamed, and she felt it. Felt it all. Felt every millimeter of scored skin. Felt a terror so primal that death would be a tender blessing.

Mercy jolted out of the dream that wasn't a dream. No, it was a memory. She lay on her side on a soft surface that smelled equal parts mildewy and dusty. Her mouth tasted foul. Her head felt heavy. Some combination of dizzy and woozy had taken up residence in her body.

What was wrong with her? This felt like the world's worst hangover. She didn't remember drinking. All she could remember was Cain. And Mac. And...

Dr. Payne. He'd drugged her.

Her heart jolted and then started a bass pounding so violent her entire body jerked with each thud of the organ. Her sluggish mind couldn't think beyond the blows her heart delivered to her chest.

She inhaled long and slow, then let the air out little by little. Three more breaths and her heart calmed, but she wasn't going to stop the slow breathing. No way. The moment she stopped, unrestrained hysteria might slam into her again.

"It's gratifying to know you were actually listening when I taught you how to breathe through panic."

She startled away from Dr. Payne's voice, her eyes flying open. The fog of darkness shrouded the room. Moonlight cast a fat silver line on the wall. Why were they in the dark?

An eerie sort of quiet rang in her ears.

Dr. Payne sat next to her on a bed, holding a steaming mug of coffee. Despite the circumstances, the glorious smell of it made her mouth water.

"Here, drink this." He reached underneath her, raising her head, then placing the cup to her lips.

She clenched her teeth together. No way was she drinking anything he offered. *Drug me once, shame on you. Drug me twice, shame on me.*

"It's just strong coffee. The caffeine might help clear the fog."

She waited for her internal warning system to alert her to his true intentions, but no images formed. She sniffed—it smelled like coffee. She took a tentative sip, held the brew in her mouth, trying to taste if there could be a drug in there. But it tasted normal. Strong and bitter and exactly how she liked it. Black.

She sipped the coffee, its hot bitterness washing the bad taste out of her mouth. The caffeine hit her system, clearing out the last of the brain fog.

Bad energy flowed off Dr. Payne, and she knew in that way of hers what he intended.

Her on her knees, knife to her throat. Just like he'd done at the cabin. Him starring in the role of Killion.

He wanted to play with her. Play on Killion's pain and add his own layer. He wanted to see how far he could push before

her mind snapped. Killing her wasn't his intention. He'd harm her a little in his game—draw blood on her neck. But he didn't want her dead. He needed her to be a hollowed-out husk. Mind gone. Body alive. Because his ultimate intention, the thing he meant to accomplish above all else, was to rebuild her from the inside out. But to do that, he first had to destroy her.

This was gonna be an epic battle for her sanity. Winner take all.

Knowing his intentions didn't frighten her. It gave her an advantage. She could plan countermoves. That's how she'd survived those years in the Center.

She sat up, took the cup from his hands, and drank long and deep. The warmth slid down her throat and thawed a core coldness she hadn't realized was there until this moment. It was so bizarrely normal to be sipping a cup of coffee, yet to do it in front of the man who wanted to turn her into his own personal vegetable seemed almost comical. A smile almost landed on her lips, but missed.

“Caffeine really is a wonder drug, isn't it? When used appropriately, it can cure a host of ailments.” He spoke in his teaching-the-group voice.

She ignored him and looked around the space for an escape route, a weapon, and a phone.

Across from the foot of the bed sat a child-sized chest of drawers. In the dark, it was hard to make out its specific color, but she guessed it to be white. A round mirror sat above the dresser, aimed at her on the bed. She saw her reflection, sitting here, holding the cup of coffee.

Everything stopped. The world stopped. Her heart and breath stopped. She was stuck in suspended animation mode like God had hit her pause button to give her mind a chance to catch up with the images her eyes were sending it.

She saw herself at ten years old. Sitting on this very bed, looking into that very mirror. Saw herself hugging a stuffed animal while she kissed Mom and Dad good night. Saw

herself lying back against the pillow and looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling.

Oh God. No. She didn't want to look, but she had to. She craned her head back. The yellowish-green glow of stars and planets twinkled down at her. Her insides trembled, and the hand holding the cup started to shake.

"Do you know where you are?" Dr. Payne's understanding tone jarred her out of the stupor. This was his plan. His game. But she was in it to win it.

She now understood exactly what she was going to have to do to defeat him—give him exactly what he wanted. Let him lead her to the precipice of insanity. And in her last moment, the moment before he shoved her over the edge, she would knock him off the cliff instead.

"Home. I'm home." *Home is where the heart is. Home sweet home. There's no place like home.*

Her life had been divided into two distinct sections. Before Killion murdered her family. And after Killion had murdered her family. In the before time, all those phrases about home would've warmed her childish heart. In the after time, all they represented were the worst memories of her life.

"That night..." Her voice trembled like the last leaf on a dying tree. "That night I woke to strange noises. Nothing like the normal sounds of Mom and Dad getting ready for bed. Did you know true terror has a special sound—a frequency—all its own?" She settled back on the bed and stared up at the stars. "I just lay here, waiting until Killion came for me. Why didn't I run? Why didn't I hide?"

"Tell me about when you first saw him."

She didn't mean for it to happen, but her mind conjured up the movie reel of that night and started playing it. "For as long as I live, I will always remember the silhouette of Killion standing in my doorway. Backlit by the hall light. Just standing there. I knew. I knew he intended to hurt me."

"What did you do?" Dr. Payne spoke in the soft tone he used when trying to teach a relaxation skill.

“Nothing.” Her voice sounded like a strangled whisper. “The sound of his feet crushing the carpet as he came toward me...loud. So loud it hurt my ears. Isn’t that weird?” The words coming out of her own mouth surprised her, and they shouldn’t. Maybe it was because she had *never* allowed herself to think about that night in any sort of detail.

Broad strokes. While she’d been in the Center, she’d gotten good practice at giving Dr. Payne the broad strokes—words about that night that carried no weight. But what she spoke now flowed from her soul out her mouth, and it was heavy and hard and hurt like a motherfucker. Exactly what he wanted.

“I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. I tried again and again, but I couldn’t make a sound. The only thing I could hear was his feet on the carpet. Each footstep a hammer on my heart. He sat on the bed.” Exactly where Dr. Payne sat—he’d known that detail. Killion had probably told him. “He looked at me. Just stared at me for the longest time with a tenderness that shouldn’t exist.”

“Tenderness?” Naked shock in his tone. “What makes you say he was tender?”

Ahh...something Killion had never told him. A secret Killion had created between him and her that night. “He brushed the hair off my forehead, then sang...to me. His voice was nice, but I didn’t like the words.”

“What song did he sing?”

The words flowed out of her like they’d been locked in a cage for twenty years, searching, searching, searching for their freedom.

*Lift your feet when you
Dance around the old well,
Be careful or you’ll tumble pell-mell.
Look into the dark, dark, waters
For the blood of your fathers.
Show some courage, young man,*

Find your calling, young man.

As she sang, her voice melded with the memory of Killion singing. Funny how she remembered the exact words and yet had only heard the song one time. Or maybe it had been stuck playing on repeat in the back of her mind ever since that night.

Save pomegranate seeds

as payment for the ferryman,

Offer red, red wine

as payment to the bar man.

Carve some red, red meat

as food for the hungry man.

Show some courage, young man,

Find your calling, young man.

“When the song ended, he scooped me out of bed and carried me to where the rest of my family waited.” She could practically feel herself in his arms. Feel the horrible strength of them.

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Dr. Payne’s voice was a whisper of excitement. “You’re here and there. Seeing the past and present at the same time, aren’t you? Almost like a double exposure, right?”

She wasn’t going to confirm or deny his words. She didn’t have to. He knew she straddled the fence between the past and the present.

Dr. Payne reached out and brushed her hair off her forehead, just the way Killion had in her memory. “Tonight, we’re going to re-create history.”

A light in the hallway flicked on, casting a rectangular shadow on her room floor. Soft footsteps walked toward her room. Footsteps on carpet.

Her heart banged so loud in her chest it jarred her entire body. An odd whooshing sound—almost like the sound of a

seashell held to her ear—buzzed in her head. A shadow fell across the doorway. A man appeared.

The sound she'd heard—the one she thought sounded like the ocean. She'd been wrong. She remembered it now. It was the sound of terror.

Her vision flickered and turned to static. A pinprick of darkness started in the corner of her eye and began to grow. The last thing she heard was her name.

There is a fine line between good and evil, just as there is a fine line between love and hate.

—Ernest James, PhD, professor of philosophy, Scioto University

“**M**ercy.” He spoke to her despite her being unconscious. “Kindness.”

He took a step toward the bed.

“Compassion.” He took another step. “Pity.”

Another step. “Pardon.” Another. “Forbearance.”

He stopped beside her, staring down. “Tonight none of these shall be yours.”

He settled his palm against the top of her head like a benediction. The silky strands against his calluses were a fascination. He allowed his fingers to burrow against her scalp and slide down the length of her strawberry-blond hair, then wrapped a fat fistful around his knuckles. He’d forgotten how the softness of a woman’s hair felt remarkably similar to cool blood slipping and sliding against his skin.

And Mercy carried a special appeal. She had the kind of face that would make an ordinary man want to protect her. But an ordinary man wouldn’t understand the power to be had in sacrificing her.

Some people grow up to resemble nothing of their childhood selves. Life takes a toll on their appearance. They gain weight. Women change hair colors and styles and contour their faces with makeup to look like anything other than their ordinary selves. But Mercy looked exactly the way she'd appeared all those years ago. She carried her childhood with her. Couldn't escape it. It had become a vital part of her. So vital she couldn't exist without it.

A wonderful déjà vu sensation warmed him like the summer sun. Every wasted second of the past twenty years was going to be well spent for what this night would bring.

He tore his gaze away from her and focused on Edward Payne for the first time. Edward's features were swollen and distorted, his face a rainbow of colors. He'd obviously suffered at the hands of someone larger and stronger. Social etiquette dictated he show some concern about the injuries, but Edward's purpose had nearly been served.

"You didn't tell me about the song." Edward's tone carried the distinct air of whiny-ass child.

If his son had ever dared used that tone, he would've peeled the skin off his tongue. But he forced himself to answer in a calm tone. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"She said you sang to her. Sang her some weird song about wine and meat and blood." Now he sounded like the class tattletale.

"Has it occurred to you that she could be lying?" She wasn't, but Edward didn't need to know that. He didn't need to know much of anything else at this point.

"Did you drug her?" He wanted Mercy awake for what was about to occur, not sedated. Sedated, she would carry no power.

Edward waved his hand as if the question held no merit. "A mild sedative hours ago. She was awake. Talking. Reliving the past. Seeing you sent her over the edge of consciousness." Edward didn't bother to contain the glee in his voice.

It was comical. Edward thought of himself as *enlightened*. That was the word he'd used. But really his ultimate goal boiled down to simple role-playing. He wanted to spend a few hours pretending to be the killer, just to witness the psychological transformation that would occur when Mercy was forced to relive everything she'd already gone through. Like this was cosplay or something.

Edward was content to worship at the altar of other people's greatness instead of being a god. They were all created to be gods, but only the worthy ever dared to find glory through death.

"Is everything set? Any problems?" he asked as he moved away from Mercy.

Edward pulled back his perfect cuff to glance at his expensive watch. "Everything is just as we planned. The alarm system is on a bypass that will end at 7:55 a.m. That's the time frame we have to work in. A little over five hours."

Time had been the bible he'd read for twenty years. He gave Edward an approving smile and walked around the bed toward him. He made sure to moderate his speed, put a larger smile on his lips, and look nonthreatening.

Edward stood and moved toward him, exactly like a fan being noticed by his favorite celebrity. He had no clue what was about to happen.

"Edward. You've done well," he said and opened his arms to the man. Only instead of hugging him, he punched him. The impact of knuckles on flesh felt good. Satisfying to hit something other than a mattress or a concrete wall.

Surprise and betrayal and fear finally washed over Edward's features. All these years, Edward had thought he carried the control. That he was the one dictating all this. The one pulling the strings and making shit happen. He'd had the audacity to think they were friends on a mutual mission. The audacity to think they were on equal footing.

He popped Edward twice more—hors d'oeuvres before the main course. The man landed in a messy, unconscious heap

beside the bed.

He slung the limp body over his shoulder and walked down the hallway to the family's living area. The kill area. He nabbed a chair from the dining table and dragged it into the living room.

Edward slumped in the seat when he settled him in. No matter. He used electrical cord ripped from the lamps to bind the guy to the arms and legs of the chair. No gag needed. Edward probably wouldn't wake up to witness his own end. That was fine. He had been nothing but a pawn in this whole chess match. A chess match no one knew they were playing. Or more accurately, no one knew *he* was playing them, forcing moves that served him.

He went into the kitchen and rummaged in the cupboards until he found a few mixing bowls. It was ironic how this place was completely preserved. Almost like a time capsule. From the furniture to the carpet to the walls to the blood. Frozen in that one moment from twenty years ago.

Why did Mercy keep the place? And not only keep it, but keep it as is. She could've had the entire place scrubbed down and stripped. She could've had the structure torn down, completely destroyed, but she'd kept it. Maybe he would ask her these questions before her end.

She wasn't the only one still stuck in the past. All these years later, the shrine still existed where the Ledger mailbox had once stood. He'd seen it on his way in. Teddy bears and stuffed animals. Flowers both fake and fresh—some new, some wilting, some long dead.

He settled the mixing bowls on the floor—under Edward's arms. He then carried Mercy out to the living room, to the place she had been reborn and would soon be sacrificed for another's rebirth.

Gently, he settled her on the floor. The stain of her family's blood surrounded her like a halo. Perfect.

He untucked his shirt and reached around to the small of his back, to the knife he'd secretly sheathed there.

It was time to begin.

He settled the blade against Edward's left wrist and pressed. It was a unique sensation—live flesh under a blade—so different than cutting into a dead hunk of beef or chicken. Blood poured from the wound, ringing against the metal bowl on the floor like rain on a tin roof. He paused to savor the sound. Funny the things he'd missed over the years. He continued with Edward's other wrist. The sound of Edward's life raining away was a beautiful surprise. One he enjoyed as he pulled the brushes from his pockets and examined his canvas.

He knew exactly what would be born upon this wall, in this house, on this night. The twentieth anniversary.

In a few patients, there is very little distinction between suicidal and homicidal tendencies. If they can kill themselves, they're capable of killing others and vice versa.

—Irene Lester, licensed professional clinical counselor, the
Center of Balance and Wellness

“**Y**ou want to see her alive? Shut up and drive.” Dolan’s words hit Cain like a boulder in a clear pool of water. The impact itself was massive, but long after the sentences were over, waves of anger licked at Cain.

Dolan. Goddamn Dolan was involved.

Cain’s hand rested on the truck’s gearshift, but he didn’t shift into Drive. Didn’t trust his hand simply to move the lever down. No. His hand might get some ideas of its own and rip the thing off and beat Dolan with it. Then he wouldn’t have transportation to find Mercy. And he *would* fucking find Mercy.

He stared out the truck’s windshield at the small swath of prison parking lot illuminated by the headlights, but beyond that small circle of light, the world vanished under night’s dark cloak. There could be monsters, demons, or horror creatures roaming just outside the perimeter of what he could see, and he would never know it. But inside the truck, all he had to do to find some evil was turn his head and look at Dolan. Should he shoot Dolan with a silver bullet, stake him through the heart, drown him in some holy water? All of them carried appeal.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” A bit of attitude leaked into Dolan’s tone.

“Give me a moment. I’m debating how to kill you.” What really sounded satis-fucking-fying was a good old-fashioned beatdown. He grabbed Dolan by the lapels of his G-man suit and dragged him out the driver’s side door, then shoved him, hands ramming into the guy’s chest, toward the front of the truck.

Dolan didn’t fight or attempt to defend himself. Momentum carried him for a moment, then his feet got tangled. He went down, ass and elbows and shoulders banging against the pavement in the path of the truck’s headlights.

Clean white light landed on Cain, following him as he stalked toward Dolan. A spotlight. The guards had turned a spotlight on the spectacle happening in the parking lot. This was probably better than pay-per-view to them.

“Where the fuck is she?” Cain’s voice was a serrated thing, meant to cut and maim. Rage tensed every muscle to the point of shattering. He could actually kill the guy and be fucking happy about it. But he’d do that after—only after he had all the answers.

Cain bent over Dolan, pulled back his arm, and let his fist find a bull’s-eye in Dolan’s nose. Those stupid, fucking sunglasses shattered between fist and face, slicing into Cain’s knuckles, but the pain was good. So damned good. Exactly what he needed to burn the edges off the need to annihilate Dolan. The guy made a high-pitched noise halfway between a scream and a squeak.

Piece by piece, the glasses fell off his face. A cut across the bridge of his nose leaked a meager stream of blood, but then red stuff splashed out of Dolan’s schnoz, over his mouth, down his neck, and onto his professional G-man shirt. The blood captured Cain’s attention. He felt its pull, felt part of him wanting to go to it, to touch it. Why the fuck was blood always so alluring? His father. His father had made him that way. He yanked his attention from all the crimson.

And then Cain saw what Dolan had been hiding behind those sunglasses.

The guy had two black eyes. The kind of twin shiners a person got from a broken nose.

Oops. Looked like he'd just re-broken the thing. Didn't feel one bit of remorse. In fact, he was tempted to thump the area again for good measure.

"Where the fuck is she, or I swear to Christ, I'll bash your nose so far into your brain they'll have to open the back of your skull to find it." He cranked back his arm, prepared to hit the asshole even harder this time.

Dolan cupped his nose. "I'm trying to find dot." His voice was nasal, his words muffled behind his hand, but Cain was pretty certain he'd heard correctly.

"You're trying to find a dot?" He snatched Dolan up by the lapels again, lifting his ass a foot off the pavement. "I'm not in the mood for bullshit." He shoved him back down.

Dolan raised his arm in a defensive gesture. A gesture that reminded Cain an awful lot of himself as a child trying to fend off blows from his father. He stepped back from Dolan and dropped his fist. It was clear the guy didn't intend to fight back. Hello. He had a fucking gun strapped to his waist. He could just fucking shoot Cain if he wanted, but he obviously didn't want to.

"Not dot." Dolan's words came fast. "Daught. As in short for Daughter. That's her name. Daughter."

Dolan didn't have a daughter. Shit. Maybe he'd hit the guy too hard. Maybe some of his nose cartilage was rubbing up against his brain, making his smarts center short out. "Man, you don't have a daughter." He tried for a calmer tone.

Dolan stared up at him. "Her *name* is Daughter. That's the name your father insisted she be called."

That's the name your father insisted she be called. "What the—"

"I'm looking for your sister. Your twin sister."

Standing and thinking at the same time took too much effort. Cain let his knees fold and went down on the pavement in front of Dolan.

He had a sister? A twin sister? His mind whirled through the past, searching for some hint that he'd had a sibling, but he found nothing.

And there would never be something because the reality was he couldn't trust one fucking word from Dolan's mouth. The guy was lying. Again. He'd lied about Mac wanting him to work at Liz's. He'd lied by omission by not admitting that every FBI agent had access to the photo with the symbol on it. Oh, and the cherry on the lie-by-omission sundae—that Mercy had been taken. There was no reason to think Dolan had suddenly started spouting truth.

“You're a fucking liar. I might've bought your bullshit before, but I'm not buying this. I don't have a sister.”

“Every asshole, dickheaded thing I've done is to find Daught.” Dolan's face was red, his eyes watery, his voice ragged with emotions Cain recognized. Anxiety. Anger. Anguish.

This wasn't just a case for the guy. This was something more. This was Dolan's white whale. Almost every lawman had one. The case that got its hooks in and wouldn't let go.

“Daught's been missing since the Dawsons died.”

“The Dawsons? The home where I found the first blood painting? What's that got to do with anything?”

“Thirty years ago, the Dawsons adopted a baby girl. You're thirty. Seems more than reasonable you might be twins. A nonnegotiable part of the adoption agreement was that the girl be named Daughter. A weird request, but the Dawsons honored it.”

Cain's mind went back to what he'd seen through the blood. The mom and dad had seemed a bit older—he just hadn't thought about it at the time. And they'd had a little girl. “Wait, wait, wait. I think I hit you too hard. The Dawsons had a daughter who was killed alongside them.”

“That was Emily. They adopted her ten years ago, shortly after Daught left for college. The day Daught’s family was killed, she got a photo in the mail. One of those old photo-booth photos. It was of a young woman and your father as a young man. There’s a major resemblance between Daught and the couple in the photo. Her real parents. She’s got your eyes and mouth, but looks more like your mother.”

“Mac would’ve told me about a photo of my father.” Wouldn’t he? “He definitely would’ve told me if the only remaining Dawson family member had gone missing. It’s a vital part of the case.”

“Mac doesn’t know.” Dolan sucked in a sigh. “No one knows.”

“How does no one know? Everyone should be all over this.”

Dolan held up his hand in a wait-for-it gesture. “Daught and I... I was... We were... I don’t know... We had something.”

What Dolan meant seeped into Cain’s ears. “You saying you were in a relationship with a family member of the victims?”

“I’m saying I was starting something with her *before* all this shit went down. Before her family was murdered.” Dolan’s expression went distant, like he was seeing something from his and Daught’s past. “Daught was still reeling from finding out about her parents and little sister when she got the photo of your dad and a woman who looked like her mom. Before we could figure out what to do about any of it, I got hit in the face with a two-by-four out of nowhere. Seeing that board coming at me was the last thing I remembered for a whole two days.

“When I woke up, Daught was gone, but there was a note pinned to my shirt like a goddamned baby bib. *I’m watching every move you make. Look for her, and she dies.*”

There was a picture of his mom. “You know who my mom is?” The words popped out before he could contain them.

According to his father, Cain's *first* victim had been his mother—she'd died from his birth. But that was all he knew. There were no medical records. No birth and death certificates. There was no body. Not even a name. Nothing about the woman who'd birthed him, except for what his father had decided to tell him.

“All I had was the photo.”

Cain wanted to see that photo. Wanted to look into the eyes of the woman who'd birthed him. In that moment, he realized there had always been a gaping hole inside him. An empty space where a mother should've been. Liz had done her best to fill the gap. But this could give him something—even if it was only a photo. “I need to see the picture.”

“When I woke up, it was gone too. The one thing I could use to prove a link between the Dawsons and your dad and you. I know I've lied. I know you don't have any reason to trust me. I know you'll probably hate me forever, but I did it all to find Daught without directly looking for her.”

Was he really going to believe Dolan? Maybe he shouldn't, but Cain did. He *wanted* to believe him. Wanted to think there might actually be a family member out there who was normal. Someone he shared a biological connection with who could prove to him that evil wasn't in the genes.

They sat on the pavement in the path of the truck's headlights, like it was normal to sit in a prison parking lot in the middle of the night, having a chat about life's most important issues.

“Why insist she be named Daughter?”

“Your father is Adam. You are his son, Cain. You've heard the biblical implications. He thinks he's the father of... I don't know, a race of people or something. In the Bible, none of Adam's daughters had names. That's why your sister's name is Daughter. At least that's the best I can come up with.”

“I don't see how any of this is related to finding Mercy.” That's the only thing that mattered right here, right now.

“Everything is fucking related. Not in a ‘two plus two equals four’ kind of way, but more like a ‘two times x equals six’ kind of way. That symbol from twenty years ago, the symbol everyone thought was just Mercy’s dying doodle on the wall... I just heard Killion say he fucking made that using Mercy’s hand. He did. And that symbol was placed where Daught’s family was murdered.

“If you’d seen the picture you’d know—Daught *is* your sister. Killion’s daughter. It’s all related. It has to be. The timing is too coincidental for it not to be. The thing I can’t seem to make fit is Liz Sands. What role did she play in all this?”

Dolan looked out into the night for a moment, then glanced at Cain. The guy’s eyes were bloodshot, his nose was already swollen to twice the normal size and skewed to the left, and those twin shiners... He didn’t just look pathetic. He looked fucking pissed off. “This thing with Daught is big. No one is looking for her. Not her coworkers at her counseling practice. Not her friends. No one. Don’t you see? Someone made that happen. For Daught to have gone missing and for no one to be looking for her, someone orchestrated a cover-up of mammoth proportions. I can’t directly look for her without endangering her life. But maybe by solving the murders... I don’t know. Maybe I’ll happen upon something that leads me to her.

“I thought if I got you in front of Killion, there would be something, some hint, some word, something about Daught. But there was nothing. It was all about you and Mercy.”

Mercy. My Mercy. Created just for me. “You said you knew where she was.”

“I know she’s not here. So that means she’s somewhere else.” Dolan voice carried a duh-are-you-stupid tone. He cupped his nose and rose onto his knees and then stood. He swayed, then caught his balance. With the blood all over his face, he looked like a damned vampire.

Cain stood and moved toe to toe with Dolan to look into the guy’s eyes. “Tell me what Daught means to you.” His

voice was hard and unforgiving. He needed to know if Daught meant as much to Dolan as Mercy meant to him.

Dolan looked out over the parking lot toward the prison. He swallowed, the sound loud enough to be heard over the low rumble of the truck. A muscle jumped in his cheek. He locked eyes with Cain before he spoke. “She means more to me than anyone else in my life. I’d blow up the whole fucking world to get her back.”

It was the tortured look on Dolan’s face that made Cain completely believe him. Dolan had lied and done some bad shit in an effort to find Daught. Cain would’ve done the same—and worse—to find Mercy. “I’ll make you a deal. Two assholes are better than one. We find Mercy alive and unhurt, and I’ll help you find Daught.”

Dolan held out his hand to shake on it. Cain took the guy’s hand, pumped it twice, then they walked back to the truck and climbed in.

Cain rummaged under the driver’s seat until he found a smashed roll of paper towels and then tossed them onto Dolan’s lap. “Clean yourself up. You look like you lost the fight.”

Where was Mercy? Where was Mercy? Where was Mercy?

From the moment Dolan told him Mercy had been taken to this moment, Cain hadn’t had a chance to think about where she’d be. And once he asked himself the question, he realized he already knew the answer.

Cain shifted the truck into gear and jammed his foot on the gas. Tires squealed against the parking lot pavement, then caught.

The moment the clock had hit midnight, it’d become the twenty-year anniversary of the Ledger murders.

At the road, Cain cranked the wheel to the left. The back end of the truck slid before catching. He pressed his foot to the floor. The old beater revved, shuddered, then surged forward. Traveling at the speed of light wouldn’t be fast enough to get to Mercy.

“I guess you have an idea where Edward Payne took her.” Dolan unrolled a wad of towels, tilted his head back, and held the mass to his nose.

“The place where it all started.”

“The house? Isn’t that too obvious? Too dangerous? And the place is alarmed against sightseers and trespassers. Doesn’t really sound feasible.”

“She’ll be there.” Something deeper and wider than a gut feeling told him that’s where he’d find her.

“But what if she’s not?”

“She’ll fucking be there.” There was no room for argument in his tone.

Dolan took his cell phone from his pocket and dialed.

Cain drove and listened as Dolan went through all the channels to be patched through to the sheriff’s office nearest Mercy’s childhood home. Dolan pulled the phone away from his face and hit the speaker button while they waited. Finally, when a dispatcher came on the line, Dolan explained who he was and the situation, ending with: “I have reason to believe Mercy Ledger is being held captive at the Ledger home. I need some units out there. Right now.”

Silence stretched longer than it should have before the dispatcher answered. “Um... Is this a joke?”

“What part of this sounds like a goddamned joke?” Dolan’s voice rose to a near shout.

“This is the twentieth anniversary.” The implication: we’re expecting some pranks.

“This isn’t a joke. I’m not pulling your leg. I’m dead serious that Mercy Ledger’s life is in danger out there.”

Across the line, they both heard the dispatcher suck in a deep breath and then let it out. “Look. I can tell that you’re concerned, but we haven’t heard anything from Hale Security. And they have that place wired top to bottom, inside and out. If someone so much as pulls in the driveway to turn around, they know it. They have motion sensors and window and door

alarms. If she was out there—if anyone was out there—Hale Security would've notified us that they were investigating and asked us to be on standby. We haven't heard a word from them.”

The dispatcher's words echoed in the truck. Dolan glanced at Cain, his face full of doubt.

“She's fucking there. I just know it.” Cain knew he sounded like a feral asshole and couldn't help it.

“I need to speak with your superior.”

“I am the superior tonight.”

“Fucking son of a bitch.” Dolan ran a hand through his hair. “Can you contact Hale Security and just ask them to double-check that everything is buttoned up?”

“That I can do. Hang on.”

The truck sped down the country road, the speedometer hovering between eighty and ninety—maxed out for its age. “We're forty minutes away.” Cain heard the mix of urgency and fear in his voice. “The locals could be there in fifteen.”

“I know.”

“They can't gamble with her life.” Panic dominated Cain's tone.

Silence ruled for five minutes until the dispatcher came back on the line. “Okay. I talked to Hale himself. He said there's nothing on the monitors to indicate anyone is out there. Everything looks secure.”

Cain's stomach fell.

“But Hale said he'll drive out there—he's about twenty minutes away—and look things over just to ease your mind.”

“Well, that's something,” Dolan said.

“He'll call us if there's anything suspicious. And I gave him your number to confirm that all is quiet when he gets there.”

Cain spoke up. “Tell him we’re thirty to thirty-five minutes out and will be there shortly.”

“Will do. And I hope you find her.”

Dolan ended the call and put the phone back into his pocket. Neither of them spoke. There was no need. Nothing to say.

Cain tried *not* to let his mind wander to what Payne had been doing to Mercy all day. Instead, he focused on the road, on the miles and time passing, counting off each minute, each mile in his head like some perverse countdown.

Twenty minutes passed. No call from Hale.

Five more minutes passed. No call from Hale.

Six more minutes passed. No call from Hale.

Cain turned onto the road Mercy had lived on as a child. He shut off the truck’s lights. Coasted forward to keep the engine quiet.

“There it is.” Dolan pointed, but he didn’t need to. Cain recognized the place. Hell, everyone recognized the house. Not just because people had died there, but because Mercy had survived.

The house sat in the country. Not the kind of isolated countryside he lived in, but the kind of country where the yards were more like fields and the neighbors next door were a quarter mile away. A truck with a logo of some sort on the door sat in the driveway. Must be Hale Security. But why the fuck hadn’t the guy called?

The house looked dark, uninhabited, but Cain felt in his bones that Mercy was in there.

At the edge of the property, he pulled over and cut the engine. A gently curving drive shone silver in the moonlight as it led around the back of the house. The house itself was only one story. In the daylight, its red brick gleamed bright as blood. But tonight the house looked black. The extra-large front window that spanned half the length of the house was rimmed in stark white, looking like a portal to hell.

Cain reached up and disabled the dome light, then got out of the truck. Dolan followed. Neither man needed to talk about a plan. The plan was simple. Get Mercy. Dolan had the authority to arrest Payne, and Cain would let him. After he was done with the guy.

Dolan grabbed his arm. “Play this safe. Stick to the shadows to get up close to the house. We need to do some recon before we make a move.”

Cain nodded his agreement, but had his mental fingers crossed. When it came to Mercy’s safety, he wasn’t promising shit.

Like two fucking cartoon characters, they ran from tree to tree, then up beside a window.

Cain eased over, inch by inch, to get a glimpse inside. Nothing. A black curtain or sheet blocked the entire window. Made sense. Having the curtains wide open would only lead to more gawkers.

Dolan pointed for Cain to go one way around the house and motioned that he would go around the other. Cain walked along the side of the house to another window. Same blackout curtains. The next window more of the same. Around the corner of the house. And then he was at the back door.

Once upon a time, when the family who lived here was killed and one child lived, this door had been all glass. Now he stood in front of a solid mass of steel with no fewer than four locks on it—all of them deadbolts. This door screamed *stay out*, and yet he reached out and grasped the knob.

He anticipated resistance, but it turned under his hand. He expected each millimeter of movement to be the knob’s last, but he turned a full revolution and the door opened with a quiet whoosh of sound. Before he opened it all the way, he spared a quick glance toward where Dolan should be rounding the side of the house, but when he didn’t see the guy, he stepped inside.

Dust coated the air, tickling his nose and making it hard to breathe. A nightlight with a small bronze bulb had been

plugged into the outlet beside the door, its meager light providing just barely enough illumination to see by.

He stood in what had once been the family's dining area. A table. Four chairs. He could practically picture Mercy as a child sitting in one of those chairs, innocently eating a meal with her family and having no idea that evil would visit in the night.

To his right, the kitchen was a wide-open space of counters and cabinets. The main house spread open before him into one large room with a hallway on the left leading to the bedrooms. Dead ahead were those massive front windows—blacked out by thick, dark drapes. And then he realized the only reason he could see that far ahead was another nightlight must be on in the living area.

He moved forward, his boots making small crackling noises against the ancient linoleum. So much for the element of surprise. The flooring changed to carpet when he left the dining area and headed into the living area.

A large box TV. A couch. A love seat. In the dim light, everything looked so normal it was hard to believe death had visited the house. Yet the moment he'd passed from linoleum to carpet, he entered the kill room. The place where all those years ago his father had murdered Mercy's family and tried to murder Mercy herself.

The air changed from dust-coated to a wet penny tang so sharp Cain could practically taste it. He recognized the scent. Blood. His heart turned to stone, heavy and inanimate and fucking painful. Oh, Mercy. Her name was prayer and plea.

And then he saw Assface sitting in a chair, head bowed forward as if in deep prayer or deeply asleep. Cain opened his mouth to launch a verbal assault and jumped forward, ready to grab him and deliver another beatdown, but then he saw the cords binding the guy to the chair and froze.

Payne had been tied palms up. His ankles were tied to the chair's legs. Cain wanted to believe Mercy had secured him, defeated him, but even in the elusive light, wide-open gashes were visible on the man's wrists. The blood he smelled had

come from Payne. It didn't take a degree in medicine to know the guy was deader than roadkill.

Mercy. Where the fuck is Mercy. Cain's mind screamed the words. Then they bounced around his skull, echoing off each other until they meshed and blended and became one word.

Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

He stepped closer to Payne. Then he saw her lying on the other side of the chair in a massive Rorschach of her family's dried blood.

Cain's heart had a head-on collision with his sternum. The impact reverberated throughout his body, threatening to buckle his knees and knock his sanity off balance. Her lying there—in the exact spot her family had been murdered—was a sick, fucking twisted joke. The kind that carried no humor, only horror.

One moment he was five steps away from her, the next he was kneeling beside her, gathering her up out of that mass of twenty-year-old blood, cradling her against him. Her body was a deadweight, head lolling on her shoulders as though it would snap off if he didn't support her neck.

“Mercy. Come on. Wake up.” He pressed his fingers to her neck, feeling for her pulse.

Yes. The pitter-patter of her heartbeat was a miracle against his skin. He didn't bother standing. He just scooted them back away from her family's blood, back away from Payne, away from the wall that loomed over them.

She wore the same clothes she had earlier.

But earlier seemed years ago. Earlier was when they'd spent the morning making love. Earlier was when he took her clothes shopping. But then earlier had turned into too late when she stayed with Mac instead of coming with him. No matter how this ended, she would never be his. The only way he could live with that was if she survived.

He glanced around the open living area. Where the fuck was Dolan? The guy should've been here by now. He needed

to get her out of here. No way should she ever have to relive the horrors that happened here.

He started to stand, to carry her out of the house, when his gaze snagged on the wall. On an image the shadows nearly obscured. An image both fascinating and terrifying. An awful action portrayed in a wondrous manner. A blood painting with grotesque beauty.

In the picture Cain had a pair of wings. A massive pair that portrayed strength and masculinity and something either purely divine or purely evil. He stood over Mercy, and she knelt at his feet staring up at him, tears streaming down her cheeks, and yet her expression was one of naked devotion—fucking devotion—despite the knife he held, buried to the hilt in her throat. The look on his image's face was one of self-loathing, anguish, and defeat. As if the good inside him was dying along with Mercy. And the monster was about to emerge.

Cain's heart clenched, released, clenched, released like someone had a pair of those resuscitation paddles pressed to it and was repeatedly hitting the on button. His stomach heaved and his throat kicked open. Something awful wanted to escape from deep inside him. He laid Mercy on a clean patch of carpet, then crawled hands and knees away from her, gagging as he went. His body shook, his arms almost couldn't support him, but then his fingers found a patch of wetness. A patch of salvation. A patch of blood.

Blood. It still carried hints of a body's comforting warmth. Instantly, the only thing that mattered was the blood.

He raised his fingers to his face and smeared the drops on skin. It felt so wonderful. Comforting. Soothing. His head fell back on his shoulders.

“Just the way I taught you.” The voice came out of the dark, a bull's-eye to the heart of Cain's being. But that voice couldn't be here.

Snap—the flick of an old light switch, and the room flooded with what seemed like a thousand rays of light. Light so bright Cain couldn't see for a moment. Didn't want to see.

He closed his eyes, allowing himself a few more seconds of blessed denial before forcing them open and turning to face the voice.

A prison guard stood in the area between the kitchen and living area, bloody hand on the wall switch. But he wasn't really a prison guard.

His father stood there, tall and arrogant, wearing the uniform. Both his father's hands dripped crimson. *Ptt. Ptt.* Fat droplets landed on the carpet and were smeared over the wall switch.

For a moment, or maybe a year, Cain gave denial free rein, allowing himself to think that he was going to wake up from a nightmare. He'd be back in bed holding Mercy, and everything was going to be all right.

The thing about lying to yourself is that you know you're lying.

Weight settled in his chest, on his shoulders. It was the weight of the past, the present, and what was to come. He didn't know if he was strong enough to shoulder the burden.

"Your friends won't be joining us."

His father's words squirmed into his ears. Dolan. Dolan was dead? And the Hale Security guy? Cain wanted to say something, but couldn't form words as his mind flashed back to the prison. His father and the guard had been friendly. Friendly in a manner that wasn't possible for a man like Adam Killion. A man who possessed no feelings, no conscience, no soul. And then Cain remembered how for a split second he'd thought the guard had been his father.

The truth struck him like a bolt of lightning, shooting a wild combination of adrenaline, fear, and fury through his entire body.

Cain knew everything.

Knew his father had brainwashed that guard into trading places. Knew his father had been going on excursions outside the prison walls, courtesy of twenty-three hours of isolation a day and a guard who shared enough of his appearance to pass

as him—if no one looked too closely. Twenty-three hours was plenty of time to leave, kill, return, and be seen.

His father had been the one to paint all those blood portraits of him. His father had killed Liz. And the most horrifying thing was that he understood the words his father had used hours ago. *I created her for you.* He'd created Mercy for Cain to kill.

It's okay to be curious. Embrace the curiosity on the Killion Tour. Our knowledgeable guides have met with Adam Killion and can share personal stories from their time with him. Tour stops: the Ledger house, the Center of Balance and Wellness, the Killion home, and the Killion Tour gift shop, where you can watch eight solid hours of film relating to all things Killion, examine genuine memorabilia, and write your own letter to Adam Killion.

—Killion Tours brochure

Cain might've been thirty years old and the same size as his father, but seeing the man looming over him felt as if he'd stepped into a time machine and emerged the scrawny, weak kid he'd once been.

This was all too familiar. The way his father stood. The way his father spoke. The way blood dripped off his father's fingers. The way his father pressed his palms to his forehead, then wiped his hands down the length of his cheeks to his neck, leaving a foul, bloody trail that made him look part Halloween ghoul, part butcher.

Cain recognized himself. He looked exactly the same when he got done with his blood work.

And yet the color of all that blood satisfied something inside him. There was no color like it. Burgundy, crimson,

scarlet—the names were pale comparisons to the shimmer and shine and wonder of fresh blood.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” His father’s gaze locked on the smears of Dr. Payne’s blood Cain had wiped on his own face.

Those smears turned to acid against his skin. Sweat slicked his underarms. A bead of it formed above his top lip. His hands went shaky. His body went weak. He recognized the sensation.

Shame.

He wanted to wipe off the blood—the evidence that he was just as demented as his father—but he couldn’t move.

Years ago, he should’ve walked away from the blood work. Stopped being around it. But he’d sold himself a lie—that he was helping solve crimes. Serving justice to people like his father. Really it’d been a form of self-pleasuring the whole fucking time. He could see that now.

“I tried to tell you. Everything has been about you. I saw something inside her and knew she was yours. I saved Mercy for your soul. I spared her for you to kill when you were ready. You understand the power to be gained from death. Her death by your hand will enlighten you in a way few ever experience.”

I don’t want to be enlightened. Cain didn’t say anything, couldn’t say anything. Words were dangerous. Words would be used against him.

“Greatness is locked inside you. All you have to do is bathe in her blood, and it will all be yours. I know you want this.”

No, he didn’t want this. None of this.

“Quit denying the part of you that *wants* to kill. To kill *her*.”

Cain met his father’s eyes—something he never dared do as a child—and moved his head back and forth. Even that tiny form of denial—disobedience—seemed a struggle. He couldn’t break the bonds of ten years of childhood-conditioned

fear. His first memories were of cowering from this man. Fearing this man. Of doing anything to avoid this man's wrath.

"What's her life worth to you?" His father spoke as if it was a question, but it wasn't. He was making a point.

What's her life worth to me?

Her life was worth more than the brilliance of autumn leaves and the snowy hush of winter. More than spring blooms and summer sunshine. Her life was worth more than soft rain showers and starlit nights. Her life was precious beyond measure to Cain.

"Is her life more important than..." His father tapped his chin, fingers leaving bloody smudges. "MacNeil Anderson's life?"

Cain's mind shuddered to a halt. For long seconds, all he could do was blink until his brain clicked back on and the words—those horrible fucking words—knifed him straight in the heart.

"A dear friend of mine has a gun to MacNeil's head at this very moment, waiting for my word to execute him or save him. Which do you choose?"

The room distended, got longer, wider, taller; the floor sank out from under Cain. He felt as though he was falling, but he hadn't moved.

He wanted his father to be lying. Wanted the man to be playing some terrible mind game, but he'd never been one to joke or one to lie.

Mac doesn't deserve to die. He'd done nothing wrong—other than take in a boy who was more monster than child and teach that boy to be a man. Mac may not be related to him biologically, but here in this moment Cain understood something he'd never known before.

Mac loved him.

Twenty years ago, Mac had been a man in his late thirties. Vital. Strong. Someone who didn't have to take on the responsibility of a deranged kid. Yet he had. He'd taken on

Cain. Even homeschooled him because the media wouldn't grant any privacy to Killer Killion's Kid. Mac had seen the worst of him and never run. Instead he'd been a steadfast supporter and protector.

Cain wanted a do-over. He wanted to go back to earlier in the day. He wanted to sit and listen to Mac and acknowledge what he'd said about loving him like a son. He wanted to tell Mac he loved him like a father. Because he wasn't sure Mac or any of them were going to get out of this alive.

His eyes felt scratchy and a bit wetter than normal. He couldn't lose Mac. Couldn't. But then his father's words echoed through his head. *I created her for you.* Cain felt that. Owned that. Couldn't escape it. And hated himself for it.

No way could he lose either of them.

He was no longer a small, weak child. He was at least the same size as his sire. It would be a fair fight. Even if it was a fight to the death. No one was going to hurt Mac. And no one was going to hurt Mercy.

Fury, anger, and rage got him to his feet, rising to his full height and meeting his father's gaze as equals. Fucking goddamned equals. He shifted to block Mercy from his father's view.

"Son." His father paused, waiting for Cain's full attention.

That word—*son*—spoken so often by this man during Cain's childhood had always signified ownership and his total subservience to his father. Wait, ownership? There was that word. A word that was attached to the symbol that just happened to be on the wall.

"Son." His father's voice was low, menacing.

But now, all these years later, knowing what his father wanted from him, the word *son* no longer carried the power it once had.

He wasn't his father's son any longer. Now he was Mac's son. And he was going to make damned sure nothing happened to Mac.

His father pulled a gun from the back of his pants. “I know exactly what you’re thinking. But it won’t work. I have a gun. You come at me, I’ll hurt you. If I have to hurt you, then *I’ll* kill her. And I won’t be nice about it.”

Defeat threatened to pull Cain’s rip cord, threatened to shove him back down to the floor. He locked his knees.

“I asked you a question. Is she more important than Mac? Would she be worth the sacrifice?”

Cain didn’t say anything.

Silence stretched long and thin between them. Somewhere in the house a furnace kicked on, the low hum of it almost comforting in its abject normalcy.

“How about your twin sister?”

The words hit him like blows from an MMA champ. Each one wounding Cain’s already battered soul.

“I thought that would surprise you. By the look on your face, I just confirmed something you already suspected. Guess Dolan wasn’t very good at keeping secrets.”

Daught was real. Daught had been taken. Daught was in danger.

“I named her Daughter. She looks a lot like your mother and has many of her traits. She works as a mental health counselor helping people. She is patient and kind. She doesn’t envy or boast. She’s not proud. She doesn’t dishonor others. She isn’t easily angered. She doesn’t delight in pain and sorrow. She trusts, hopes, perseveres.”

Daught was a good human being. She was the light.

Cain was the dark. And more than anything, he wanted to meet her.

“Are Mac and Daughter’s lives worth sacrificing for Mercy? Two for the price of one? Just think of all the positive Daughter could do in her lifetime. I was going to make it three for one with Liz’s life, but that was just too many variables in play. Anyway, Liz and I created some beautiful art.”

“I won’t do it. I fucking won’t do it.” Cain’s voice sounded confident, so different from the war of the worlds raging inside him. “You try to hurt her, and I’ll fucking kill you.” His lips pulled back in an animalistic snarl.

His father reached into his shirt pocket and removed a flip phone. Without looking away from Cain, he opened it, pressed a number, and held the phone out in front of him for Cain to hear.

“Yes,” a disembodied voice said on the other end of the line.

“Put MacNeil Anderson on the phone.”

The sound of shuffling on the other end echoed loud through the room. “Fucking son of a goddamned—” Mac’s tone was full-on angry.

“Mac!” Cain yelled.

“Cain?” The anger melted from Mac’s voice. “I know what your father wants from you.” He spoke rapidly. “Don’t you do it. I’m not worth it. I’ve lived a life. None of this is your fault. It’s all *his* fault. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“Mac. I—”

His father pressed a button on the phone, and the sound vanished. He held the device up to his ear and spoke one word. “Proceed.”

Cain’s heart suddenly had that strange pins-and-needles feeling, like when he slept on his arm wrong and the thing fell asleep. It wasn’t the being asleep that hurt. It was the waking up that killed. The electrical pulses of nerves coming alive. And now his heart felt that exact way, like the epicenter to some great lightning storm that would crack the earth open.

“No!” Mercy yelled.

The word whipped through the air, startling him.

“You’re going to stop.” Mercy’s tone offered no room for argument. “Right now.”

Cain whipped around. She struggled to her knees, her face rigid with some emotion that resided somewhere between pain and anger. Her defiance was beautiful.

“Mercy.” He was next to her in a picosecond, reaching for her, needing to offer her what comfort he had to give, but she held her hand up against him. Blocking him.

He stopped, arms comically outstretched.

Realization hit him. She wasn’t in physical pain. Fuck. If only it were physical pain. They could overcome that. Bruises faded. Cuts healed. But this... He could almost see the armor she wore over herself. An armor that gave her strength and fearlessness.

She’d heard everything. Knew the deal his father wanted him to make.

“Leave Mac and your daughter alone, and we’ll give you what you want.” She looked so fragile and small kneeling on the floor next to him, but her voice carried no weakness, only determination.

His father contemplated her, gun in one hand, phone in the other, before he spoke. “Wait. I’ll call with further instructions.” He closed the phone and returned it to his pocket.

“Cain. Look at me.” Mercy’s voice trapped him. He didn’t want to look at her and see the look in her eyes, but he couldn’t deny her, even though he knew he wouldn’t survive.

It seemed like hours and days passed before his gaze finally found hers. And what he saw was even worse than he suspected. She grasped one of his hands in both of hers. “I can’t be the *reason* people you love die.”

“I love you.” The words slipped out before he could contain them, protect them from his father.

A brief spark of happiness lit her eyes, then drowned under her tears.

“My life—at the sacrifice of theirs—would be worthless. There are things I can live with and things I can’t. Don’t make

me live with that guilt. Again. Not again.” Her tears hit the tipping point and overflowed. She rubbed them on the top of his hand.

If words were weapons, she’d just stabbed him, shot him, then detonated an explosive in his chest.

“No. No. Nonononono...” No other words existed. He couldn’t figure out how to say anything else.

He felt the hilt of a knife pressed into his free hand— his father handing him a blade. He wanted to drop the thing, to fling it across the room, but his fingers tightened around the heavy handle.

He could just jam the blade into his own throat. Taking the pussy way out sounded so damned appealing except for one thing. Mercy. He couldn’t leave her alone with his father. Cain would save his own death for *after*. Then he’d slice his own damned throat and be done with all of it. Just as she couldn’t live with Mac and Daught dying, he couldn’t live with killing her. Even if it’s what she wanted.

“I’m so sorry.” She spoke against his hand, her breath warm. “I’m sorry you have to do this. I’m sorry you’re in this situation. I’m sorry for all of it.”

It wasn’t her place to apologize. His fucking father should be the one apologizing.

Cain gave a futile look toward the man. His father stood with the gun aimed right at him, watching the exchange between them as if it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever witnessed. Cain wanted to lunge at him, attack him, tear his heart out and eat it raw for putting him and Mercy in this situation. But wanting was as far as it would go.

If he made a move toward the guy, a simple squeeze of the trigger and he could be taken down and then forced to watch as his father pleased himself with Mercy’s suffering.

It came down to degrees of horror. Her quick death by his hand or her slow, painful suffering at his father’s hand.

“Cain, I need you to promise me one thing.”

“Anything.” He could deny her nothing. Even when she was asking for this.

“Promise me you won’t hurt yourself after.”

He swallowed, choked, coughed before he could speak. “Don’t take away the only way I can survive this.” His voice cracked, his eyes burned, and hot tears splashed down his cheeks.

“Promise me.” Her voice was firm. Her expression stern. “You have Mac. He loves you. He’ll understand this was my choice. He’s always been there for you, and he’ll be there for you after this.” She looked directly at his father and spoke in a clear, calm voice. “Do you promise if Cain does this, that Mac won’t be harmed?”

His father nodded once. “You have my word. MacNeil Anderson will not be harmed.” He sounded so solemn and pious.

Her eyes narrowed. “Can I trust you? Trust that you’re not lying?”

“I don’t lie. Ask my son.”

She looked to him for confirmation.

“He doesn’t lie,” Cain heard himself whisper.

“Okay. Then after...” She swallowed. “Promise me you won’t hurt yourself.” She squeezed his hand tight between her own.

He wanted to hate her for asking this of him, but he couldn’t find any hate. All he could see in front of him was regret and love. “I promise,” he whispered so softly he wasn’t certain she heard him until she nodded.

She reached for his knife hand. One by one, her fingers wrapped around his hand and moved the blade to press against her throat.

Her bloodshot eyes on him were more beautiful than the sky and ocean combined. Crystal-clear aquamarine. He wanted to dive into their depths and forget everything. Tears dripped down his face, tickling his skin as they skimmed down, down,

down. A tear landed on her cheek, mingled with her own, and slid to the corner of her mouth. She licked the wetness.

They were exactly as the picture on the wall showed them. Exactly. It was sickening and beautiful at the same time.

She pressed his hand. Flesh yielded under the blade—horrible and astounding at the same time. Fat droplets of blood dribbled down her slender neck. He couldn't pull his gaze away from the crimson. One thing his father had been right about—the allure of her blood was intoxicating.

He looked at his father. The man still held his gun aimed at Cain, but even he was slightly—just slightly—mesmerized by the sight of Mercy's blood.

Cain forced the knife away from her neck, her hands fighting him the whole way, then bent over her, opened his mouth, and licked. She tasted salty, and sweet, and a bit like sunshine. He lapped upward until his tongue ran over the groove in her throat—the old scar put there by his father, then found the new puncture wound put there by him.

He knew how he looked to his father and knew how disgusted Mercy had to be, but he couldn't help it. He filled his mouth with her blood, letting a nirvana of sensation wash through him. He swallowed her inside him, then whispered in her ear, "Forgive me."

In order to be found mentally incompetent to stand trial, an individual must not understand the illegality of his crimes. The vast majority of serial killers have been found to be mentally competent—they understood they were committing a crime and took measures to prevent themselves from being caught. Under this definition of competency, serial killers are as sane as you and me.

—E. J. Daniels, author of
Mental: What Is Crazy?

“**F**orgive me.” Cain wasn’t sure what those words meant to him. To her.

Forgive me for what I’ve done?

Forgive me for what I’m about to do?

He wanted time to take a hiatus. Wanted to be freeze-framed forever in this moment with his face pressed to Mercy’s throat and the taste of her on his tongue. Everything needed to stop right here—in the few seconds that existed before he committed murder. Once he crossed that threshold, there’d be no going back. He would be every bit his father’s son.

But time stopped for no one. Especially him.

He pressed a final kiss to Mercy’s throat and pulled back from her.

Her hand, still on his, repositioned the knife at her throat. Their eyes locked, but it was more than gazes colliding, it was a tangible sensation of joining, of being one. They clicked together like a key into a lock— neither serving a purpose without the other.

His world distilled down to its most essential element— awareness. An awareness of love and blood and the odd way they combined to make him into something...

Something different.

Something better.

Something worse.

Her fingers tightened around his hand and she pushed, forcing the blade into her skin. She was using his hand to slit her own throat, and it was wrong. So fucking wrong.

His stomach gave a shove against his esophagus and tried to come up his throat. The give of her flesh under the blade hurt him. That knife may as well have been skimming along his heart. In all his life and through eternity he'd never forget her willingness to sacrifice her life for him and Mac. If that wasn't the definition of love, then love didn't exist.

Blood rushed from the wound, cascading down her neck. He allowed himself to watch it just long enough to feel its exhilarating pull—knowing he wasn't the only one snagged by the alluring sight.

Time warped, bent, and bulged like a wad of gum being blown in a bubble. Too many things happened at once. His brain couldn't keep up with his body, or maybe his body couldn't keep up with his brain. He shoved her back—away from the blade, ripping his knife hand out of her hold. "Run!" The word landed with a dull thud in the closed-up house.

For the first time in his life, he disobeyed his father.

He charged the man.

His father stared at the space he and Mercy had occupied as if they were still there, as if Cain still had the knife to her throat, as if Cain were actually killing her.

The look on his father's face said it all. Satisfaction and fucking fatherly pride. Something Cain had never seen before, but instantly recognized. The little boy inside him ate it up. Swallowed it whole and swelled with happiness.

But then his father's gaze shifted, and the fragile bubble of time popped.

His father's face transformed into the monster Cain knew too well.

“Don't you—”

Reprimand tried to slap him back into complacency. Years ago, the tone, the volume would've been enough to have Cain cowering in the corner like a wounded animal.

But now—it only drove him harder. Cain had an advantage his sire didn't.

Love.

He fucking loved Mercy and wasn't going to kill her. Or let Mac be killed either. This was a life-and-death fight all right. Mac and Mercy's life for the death of his father. The only bargain he'd make.

Ppogglll...

Sound exploded in his ears.

The gun. His father fired at him.

A bullet whizzed by his thigh, so close it kissed his jeans. His father could unload the whole clip into him. It didn't matter. No words. No bullets. Not even Satan himself was going to stop Cain. He had only one purpose, one need: to kill.

Death was the only road to freedom. His father's death.

His father aimed.

Ppogglll...

The impact wrenched Cain's shoulder back, but he felt no pain. Only the odd sensation of invasion—like he had a massive splinter wedged into his skin. He kept going.

The world went quiet. Not a sound reached him, except for what was happening inside his body. *Thumthumthumthum...* His heart raced. His lungs sucked and released. Those were the only sounds in existence. In an odd way, they were comforting.

With the gun still aimed at him, Cain watched his father's finger squeeze the trigger.

His quad locked. Only it wasn't a muscle cramp. The bullet found a nice, tight little home in there. He stumbled, his leg not able to carry its weight. Funny, that time he hadn't heard the gun.

His father easily stepped back, aimed. Cain stumbled forward another step. His father fired.

Pain, sharp as a lightning bolt, hit him in the thigh. His leg buckled and he fell, catching himself with his hands, still clutching the knife in his right hand. No fucking way he was going to let go of the blade. One way or another, that knife was going to be his salvation.

He tried to move his injured leg, willed the damned thing to work, but it hung off his body, limp as a wet towel.

He couldn't grab a full breath. His insides trembled. He'd been shot three times and though he didn't yet feel the pain of it, his body was sending frantic *danger danger danger* signals to his brain.

Cain trained his eyes on the floor like a defeated dog.

Wasn't hard.

"You think I didn't know you'd try this? You think I don't know how your mind works? Boy, I made you in my image. I know you. I own you." His father walked up to him. "I created all of this. You. Her. Art. This world"—he opened his arms wide to indicate the house—"I am the author of its existence.

"I told you what would happen. Now you're going to watch every second of her suffering." He knelt next to Cain, grabbed his hair, and yanked his head back to look him in the face. His scalp screamed. Funny how a little hair-pulling hurt worse than bullet wounds.

Cain closed his eyes.

“Don’t you hide from me. Open your eyes.”

Just like when he was a boy, he obeyed, but he couldn’t meet his sire’s stare.

“You better embrace suffering. Every second of her agony is caused by you. I catch you looking away while I work on her, and I’ll cut off *her* eyelids.”

Cain met his father’s gaze. Held it. Glimpsed the monster within himself shining in his father’s eyes.

And then slid the knife into his father’s femoral artery. Relief washed over him at the same time a volcano of warmth erupted over his hand and rained on the carpet. His father’s eyes widened. He jerked back and fell on his ass. Blood arced from the wound, hung suspended, then splattered against the carpet. His father clutched his inner thigh. Tried to control the gushing artery, but it was no use.

“You don’t know me, and you sure as fuck don’t own me.” Spit flew from Cain’s mouth.

His father raised the gun. Pointed it directly at Cain’s face.

Cain didn’t duck. Didn’t flinch. Didn’t move. He expected this. His father’s arm fell to the ground. The man couldn’t kill his creation. Cain had banked on that.

He crawled the few feet to his father, dragging his leg behind him.

He set the knife down. Blood dripped from his hand as he reached into his father’s shirt pocket for the phone.

Silently, his father watched him.

Cain opened the phone, coating the thing with red. He found the last number dialed and waited while the phone rang.

“Yeah.” A man’s voice.

He dropped his tone. “Let him go.”

Silence.

For a full three seconds, Cain thought the voice on the other end knew it wasn't his father.

“Your boy did it? You didn't think he would.”

It wasn't hard impersonating his father. He heard the man's voice in all his nightmares. “He surprised me.”

“You just want me to let him go?”

“Yeah. Let him go. I'm a man of my word.”

“Will do. Call me when you need me again.”

“Count on it.” He disconnected the call and tossed the phone away from the mess of his father's gore. Later. Much later, he'd figure out how to have the police track that number.

But right now he intended to finish what he'd started.

Write *The End* to his father's life.

His hand was steady as he picked up the knife, raised it high and plunged it into his father's chest. The blade pierced bone and flesh. A grunt of mortal agony, then the wet noise of viscous fluid flowing.

His father's eyes locked onto him. Admiration shining in the once lifeless depths. A blast of heat, hotter than a blue flame, burned under Cain's skin. He realized he'd just given his father exactly what he wanted. He'd killed. He'd fucking killed.

“Did you fucking know? Did you plan this?” Had his father known all along this would be the outcome? He grabbed the guy by the shirt front and lifted his body, but he could already see that life had begun making its grand exit.

Part of him wanted the man to live. To prove to him that he wasn't a killer. The other part...

Raw rage—the kind he never allowed himself to feel since it scared the shit out of him—consumed him.

He ripped the hilt out of his father's chest and raised the blade to stab him again. He wanted to feel his father's blood spraying on his face, wanted to hear it splattering the walls and floor. He wanted his hands and body coated in the mess. He

wanted to savage the corpse—and even that wouldn't be enough to repay the lifetime of pain his father had inflicted on him and Mercy.

“Cain.” Mercy's voice permeated the haze of hate he'd locked himself inside. She stood next to him, tears streaming down her cheeks, blood ringing the collar of her blouse.

He realized his arm was raised. Blade poised for another penetration, but with her watching, he couldn't do it. He just couldn't.

The knife fell from his fingers. He shoved himself away from the body and scooted on his ass until a wall stopped him. He would've kept scooting for miles—away from his father's body, away from Mercy—if that wall hadn't been there.

“Cain. Oh my God. You need a doctor.” Mercy came toward him. He raised his hands to ward her off. Blood dripped from his fingers, splatting onto his jeans and soaking into his soul.

Inside his body, something was wrong. Something more than a few bullet wounds. He felt like an old engine pushed to the max, some parts loose and wobbly, some grating and grinding. And then, something broke. For a brief moment, the tension vanished and an odd sense of freedom came over him, almost like he was gliding above all the shit in his life. But then he slammed back down to earth, the impact destroying all the walls he'd built around the past.

An unbearable pain seized his chest, and he coughed but instantly recognized it wasn't a cough. Before he could pull the mental reins and stop himself from going all bawl-baby, his body overruled his mind.

It's rare for serial killers to work with a partner, but when they do, it's always a dominant-submissive type of relationship.

—Brin Dobkins, former FBI agent

Blood. Everywhere. it seemed to be the only color in a black, white, and gray existence. The blood was all Mercy could see.

It was on the wall in that grotesque picture that loomed over them all.

It was seeping out of Killion's body. The thirsty carpet made soft sucking noises like a dry sponge absorbing moisture.

It was all over Cain. Dripping from his hands. Dribbling from the wound in his shoulder. Drizzling from the wounds in his leg. The sound of it splattering and splashing on itself was deafening.

The very air itself seemed heavy and thick with the mineral tang of it. She could practically taste it on her tongue.

The sight of it, the sound of it, the smell of it transported her back in time to another bloody night in this house. In this room.

Past and present mingled and merged as memories both old and new flashed in front of her eyes.

Her parents pleading with Killion just before he slit their throats.

The image on the wall of Cain with his knife in her throat.

Lakes of blood soaking into the carpet.

The pressure of a knife against her neck.

Cain's tortured face, tears in his eyes at what his father demanded of him.

The spent husks of her family's bodies lying on the floor, staring at her while she thought she was dying alongside them. Only she'd lived.

Her straining against Cain's hold on the knife, trying to slit her own throat with his hand to take the burden from him.

It was all too much. Too much for one person. Too much for one lifetime.

Inside, Mercy felt things shift. Felt herself crawling further and further away from reality, back into the corner of her mind she'd hid in all those years before. People used to comment about how she had handled the horrors of her family's murder with poise and grace.

She hadn't been poised. She'd been in shock. Her body and mind had been functioning on autopilot. It had been eight years before she felt strong enough to crawl out of her dark corner and take control.

And now she felt the overwhelming urge to hide again until she was at a safe emotional distance and could deal with the mind fuck they'd both been dealt.

They'd both been dealt. Both.

Cain and her.

But there was a huge difference this time. She wasn't alone. Cain was with her. And Cain was going to need her to survive this as much as she was gonna need him.

Her vision shifted away from all the blood—it was still there, still covering him—but now she was able to see beyond it to him. To the agony that bowed his back and slumped his shoulders.

Hateful, painful, mournful sounds came from him. Sounds of suffering so great they splintered her soul. He raised his arm, hiding his face in the crook of his elbow, like a child ashamed of his tears.

There should be no shame. Only triumph. He'd won. He'd saved them all. He alone had the courage to kill his father.

"Cain." She could barely speak around the emotions clogging her throat. She went to him, but he held up his hand, trying to block her, keep her away from him.

She knew why. He thought the worst of himself for what he'd done. It was just like Mac said. Cain was always willing to see himself as the bad guy, but never the good guy. She could tell him all day how what he'd done for her and Mac was an act of grace, but words wouldn't count. Only her actions would.

She grabbed on to his bloody hand. The slickness covering his fingers was cold and repulsive, but underneath, underneath, she felt him. The man she loved. She wove her fingers into his and brought their hands to her heart, clutching them there while a wave of gratitude washed over her.

They'd just been through hell. And hell had gone deeper and further than either of them could've imagined. But they'd survived.

Without letting go of his hand, without moving it from her heart, she knelt next to him and wrapped her free arm around him, part pressing herself into him, part pushing him into her. Nothing mattered except him knowing that she loved him. As much as ever.

He squeezed her hand holding his, and his free arm snaked around her slowly, as if he was waiting for her to change her mind. But only love lived here between them. Slowly he settled his head against her shoulder and neck.

His breath against her skin was hot. The heat of his tears warm. The sting of their salt in her wound...perfect.

His powerful body trembled against hers. She couldn't help it when her own tears took over. She cried for what they'd

both just been through. She'd been willing to give her life to save Mac and his sister. She'd never been suicidal. And she wasn't sure if what just happened qualified, but it was still a mind twist. And if her mind was in knots over it... Poor Cain.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry." She wanted to say more. So much more, but she couldn't find any other words.

He gripped her tightly, squeezing her hard. Not painfully. More like he never wanted to let her go. Maybe that was his way of saying it was all right. She squeezed him back. And found some new words to say: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

He leaned more fully against her, but his arm around her went slack. Were her words relaxing him? Offering him solace? She hoped. More of his weight shifted, and he slumped completely into her.

"Cain?" He started to slide, but she caught him, easing him down to the floor. His cheeks were damp, his skin pale. Too pale. "Oh my God. I'm so stupid." He'd been shot multiple times by his father, and what had she done? Stared at him, then given him a damned hug. He needed a doctor. Right. Now.

The phone. The phone. Where was the phone? It felt like her eyes bounced around in her head searching for it. She spotted it on the carpet and scrambled on hands and knees to it. It was covered in blood. Killion's blood, but that didn't matter. Getting Cain to a hospital was the priority.

She flipped it open and dialed 911.

She crawled back to Cain while she told the operator the address. Then hung up when the lady asked her to stay on the line. She gathered Cain's head in her lap. "Cain. Hang in there. It will only be a few minutes until the police arrive. You're going to be all right. *We're* going to be all right. I promise."

She bent down and pressed her lips to his forehead. When she pulled back, his eyes were open but glassy. "Haven't we done this before? But the last time you were naked?" he asked.

A small smile bloomed on her lips. "Want me to take my shirt off?"

“Nah. Next time I see you without your shirt, I want to be able to do something about it.”

Mercy put her hand on his chest and felt the strong, steady beat of his heart. “An ambulance will be here soon.”

He looked away from her, swallowed, then looked back. He raised his hand to her neck, to the cut. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you ever apologize for this.” Her tone was scolding. “You didn’t cut me. I did. I felt you pulling against me the whole time. None of this is your fault. None of it. It was all his.” She flicked her gaze at the corpse across the room. She would never fault Cain for his actions. He’d endured a childhood of pain from that man. He’d endured a mind fuck of the highest quality. And yet he’d saved them all.

“I...” Cain looked away. “I would’ve...” He closed his eyes as if he couldn’t bear what he was about to say.

“Shh... It’s over. All of it. He’ll never hurt you or me or Mac or his daughter ever again. I love you. And that’s all that matters.”

He nodded, but didn’t open his eyes. A tear—a lonely tear—escaped from the corner of his eye and slipped into his hair. There was something about that tear. Something sad. Something sweet. Something that told her he was a man who felt deeply—nothing at all like his father.

Serial killers can't be fixed or cured. They are simply wired to be predators.

—K. A. Gaffla, PhD, forensic psychologist

A week later, Cain walked along the remote path leading to the pond. Each step was a mini-agony. When his foot was on the ground, his leg throbbed. When he lifted it, the burn came. *Throb, burn. Throb, burn.* He concentrated on trying not to limp. Sweat slicked his skin at the effort. He couldn't act injured. He couldn't act weak. He had to act just like his father.

Finally, he spotted the bench where he was supposed to meet the-man-on-other-end-of-the-phone-line. Ten more steps... Eight more... Six more... He was breathing hard from the excursion. Christ. He needed to get his breathing under control in case the guy was watching. Simple walking shouldn't wind a person, but he felt as though he'd just run a marathon frontward and backward.

He rested his hand on the back of the bench—really he was using it as a crutch to take some of the weight off his leg as he lowered himself to the hard-ass seat. His leg screamed at him to straighten it out, to prop it up, but he didn't dare move. Impersonating his father— appearing invincible—was his priority.

This place was an in-the-middle-of-nowhere nature preserve, an isolated woods, prairie, and pond where wildlife could roam free from man's influence.

A peaceful dusk settled over the pond, darkening the trees all around. He could smell the pungent scent of algae and pond water. The throaty sounds of bullfrogs rang out over the water. A gentle breeze caressed his skin, drying the sweat. A half-moon was just beginning to glow, and an early star punctured the sky.

It was all so peaceful. The kind of place Cain could imagine having a picnic with Mercy.

Goose bumps prickled the skin of his neck, and he fought the urge to shudder. He was being watched. His heart began a slow jog inside his chest. Not because he was afraid. Nope. Because he was excited. There were two reasons he'd arranged this meeting. To catch that bastard who'd held a gun on Mac and to see if this guy knew anything about Daught.

Cain's father had gutted Dolan from stem to stern, and by some twisted miracle, the guy had lived. Three surgeries in one week, and Dolan was now missing a few pieces and parts, but he was still this side of the dirt. Even in his drugged-up state, he'd begged Cain to find Daught. Cain knew for damned certain if the doctors hadn't had Dolan sedated right up to the threshold of comatose, the guy would've been out there searching, wheeling an IV pole and clutching his stomach to keep his guts from falling out.

And what his father had done to Hale Harding, the security guy...poor bastard. Wrong place. Wrong time. And all that bullshit. The doctors had expected the guy to die by now, but he kept stubbornly clinging to life.

Cain lifted his hand and adjusted the ball cap he wore—the heads-up signal for something's-about-to-happen. Somewhere nearby, Mac was watching with a rifle. Just in case. Mercy was with him. She wouldn't let either of them leave without her, and though he'd protested that she should stay home, Cain was secretly glad she was here. It might make him a pussy, but he needed her close. She made him feel whole and human. He

didn't know how he would've retained his sanity after killing his father if it hadn't been for her tender acceptance. She lived up to her name.

Behind him, he heard the soft rustling of leaves. Could be the breeze. Could be an animal. Could be a human.

They probably should've had a whole team of agents in the woods, watching, waiting to take this guy down, but Cain now believed Dolan about the note. *Look for her and she dies*. They were taking the note seriously, trying to stay off the radar, because they suspected whoever took her was monitoring law enforcement.

The freaky thing was that no one was looking for her. Not her coworkers at her counseling office and not her friends. They all blindly believed she was on a humanitarian mission in Africa. Her being missing wasn't on anyone's radar.

Behind him, Cain heard the distinct pattern of footsteps—no mistaking the sound now. He reached up and adjusted his ball cap again. Was it now dark enough the man-on-the-other-end-of-the-phone-line wouldn't recognize that he wasn't his father?

Rumors of his father's death had been circulating online, but no one in an official capacity had made a statement. So everyone assumed it was all a rumor. Confirmation was coming. Once the investigation into how Killion had been able to take vacations on the outside was complete, then there would be an announcement.

The prison guard his father impersonated had offed himself by tying a plastic bag around his head. Where he got the bag, no one knew. Dead men don't talk.

The soft crunch of grass underfoot sounded from behind Cain.

A calmness settled over him. He felt focused and centered and ready to tie this last loose thread into a fucking knot.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a guy move around the bench and sit next him. Cain kept staring out over the pond, listening to the bullfrog chorus.

“It’s peaceful here, isn’t it?” The guy spoke in a near-whisper as if he didn’t want to interrupt the sounds of nature.

Dusk had turned into dark, and Cain finally looked at the man.

An ordinary guy sat next to him. He wore jeans and hiking boots with a plain button-down shirt. In Cain’s mind, he’d conjured up an image of the man who’d held Mac at gunpoint, and it wasn’t until this moment that he realized he’d conjured the image of his own father. As if his father lived in every bad guy.

But this fellow looked like an average guy you’d pass on the street and never give a second glance.

Cain made sure to drop his tone a bit before he spoke. “I need Daughter. Now.”

The guy faced out over the pond, leaned back against the bench, and smiled, a thoughtful look on his face. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a vape. He took a deep pull on it, then exhaled. “So...” He turned to Cain again. “Killion’s dead.” His tone was filled with sorrow.

Those words rammed a rod of steel up Cain’s back. He opened his mouth to... What? Argue with him, try to convince him that he really *was* his father? Stupid. He didn’t say anything, but met the guy’s gaze.

“Adam was an inspiration. A free thinker. Ahead of his time. Persecuted because society is too closed-minded to embrace his greatness.” The man took another pull from the vape.

Holy shit. This guy acted like his father was a religious icon.

“You look a lot like him.” The guy stared at Cain’s face, searching his features as if memorizing them. “Adam knew there were only so many outcomes. Mac’s death, Mercy’s death, or his own death. No matter how it ended, he would win.” He closed his lips around the vape and sucked in long and deep.

“He didn’t win.” The words came out lighter and yet more confident than Cain would’ve expected. For a while he’d thought his father *had* won because he’d killed. His father had expected that the act alone would be the on switch, and Cain would turn into a killing machine. But the one thing his father hadn’t anticipated was how love changed a person. If he hadn’t had Mercy, if he hadn’t had Mac, Cain might’ve turned into a carbon copy of his father. Being loved and giving love was transformative, and his father could never have understood that.

“And so in our situation there are only so many outcomes. I won’t kill you—Adam wanted you untouched. You could kill me. You could have me arrested. You could let me walk away. But I think I’m going to—”

“Tell me where Daughter is, and I’ll let you walk away.” It would be hard to let this guy walk away untouched, but Daught’s life was more important than revenge.

“Adam’s daughter will populate the earth.” The man said and looked back out over the water.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said.” The man smiled, a slow twisting of his lips. “There’s another outcome. An honorable one. The one I’m choosing. The one your father chose, whether you realize it or not.” He clutched his throat, and a violent choking noise ripped from his mouth, loud and startling in the peaceful evening. His body bucked, and he fell off the bench, landing on his knees, then falling over to his side, clawing at his throat.

Cain leaped off the bench, his leg buckling from the unexpected movement and pressure. He went down next to the guy, which worked just fine. He grabbed him by the shirt, lifting him off the ground. “Where the fuck is Daughter?” he yelled in the man’s face.

The electronic cigarette lay on the ground. Cain would bet his left nut that thing had some sort of poison in it.

The guy said nothing, his body bucking and writhing through its last seconds of life.

“Where is she?” He shook the guy. “Tell me.” He shook him harder.

The guy met his eyes, life fading fast. He opened his mouth. Cain leaned in to make damned certain he heard whatever the guy was going to say.

“She’s...populating...the earth.” His body went limp.

Cain shook him once more, a completely futile effort to wake him up.

“Goddamn it! Wake up!” But he knew this guy wasn’t going to wake up.

He shoved the body away and rested his back against the bench. Daught was populating the earth. What in the holy hell did that mean? It meant Daught was well and truly lost.

Telling Dolan was going to be a slow walk through hell. Partly because Cain understood exactly what it would feel like to lose the person he loved. It would be harder to survive that than any mortal injury.

CHAPTER 24

There is no problem so great—war, hunger, poverty, bigotry, religious persecution—that it cannot be defeated by love. Love yourself. Love everyone. Love life in all its forms.

—Guru Abro

Mercy awoke to the sound of Cain’s cell phone buzzing on the nightstand and birds singing outside. Cheerful morning light beamed through the window, and for just a moment, she languished in a half-asleep, half-awake space until she reached out for Cain and realized she was alone.

She rolled over and nabbed the phone.

Mac calling lit the display.

She tapped the screen and held the phone to her ear at the same time she flopped back on the bed. “Morning, Mac.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.” Mac’s tone reminded her of a concerned parent. “Do you and Cain have plans today?”

“Nothing important.”

“I’ve got a case for Cain. He said he was ready to get back to it, but I’m honestly glad I got you on the line instead of him. You think he’s ready?”

A month ago, she never would’ve thought he’d work again. Today, she knew he was chomping at the bit to get to it. It was Cain’s way of helping right the wrongs. She wouldn’t

take that from him. Even if it was going to be hell to watch him suffer from the headache afterward. But she had some ideas of things to ease him— medication, massage, and meditation were the first things she'd try.

“He's ready.”

Mac heaved a sad sigh. He didn't want to see Cain suffering any more than she did. A few seconds of silence came across the line. “Have you given any thought to my proposal?”

His proposal had been for them to experiment with her ability. He thought—and she agreed—that she might be useful in cases where they were dealing with someone suspected of planning terrorist activities. “I'm in.” It wasn't until she'd spoken the words out loud that she realized how excited she was to give it a try. It would be her own way of giving back. Cain had his way, and she could have hers.

“I'll drive back and pick you both up in an hour.”

“See you then.” She ended the call and then set Cain's phone back on the nightstand. It was odd that she had awakened alone. Cain normally didn't leave the room without telling her where he was going. To other couples, that probably sounded codependent, but for them, it worked. They were each other's safety blanket. Time would heal them both, but right now, when everything was still fresh, when they still had to battle back the nightmares of the past, being together was the best medicine.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her body was deliciously sore from being loved long and hard by a good man. Damn, she loved the feeling. Loved how he was the only one who'd ever made her feel that way.

She stood and stretched before heading to the closet. She bypassed her clothes and nabbed one of his shirts. It hung nearly down to her knees, but wearing his clothes had become something she adored. In a weird way, it was like a bit of him touching her at all times.

“Cain?” she called as she walked downstairs.

At the bottom of the steps, she headed around to the back of the staircase into the kitchen area, but he wasn't there, and the bathroom door underneath the steps was wide open. Hmm... Where was he? She moved through the house looking out all the windows until she spotted him on the path that ran behind the barn, alongside the field toward the creek.

His back was to her. His knees were on the ground. His arms were moving almost like he was...weeding. Weeding?

Curious, she slipped on a pair of shoes by the back door and walked outside. Red-winged blackbirds trilled, mourning doves cooed, and other birds she didn't recognize sang soft songs. Late-spring sunshine warmed her skin and promised a pleasant day. All around his house—their house—were fields of vibrant green. Cain said it was winter wheat.

She loved living here with him. It was the first time since her family had been murdered that she felt as though she had some true privacy. Heck, she was out here wearing nothing but a shirt of Cain's and wasn't worried one bit about anyone seeing her. Now that was privacy.

"Whatcha doing?" she asked as she got closer to him.

His head came up, but he didn't face her. "You're supposed to be sleeping." There was a lightness in his tone. A lightness that hadn't existed in the days when she'd first met him. A lightness she knew that she'd played a part in putting there.

"I got lonely." Her tone was full of sexy innuendo.

"Woman, I thought I took care of you last night."

"You did, but now it's morning."

He chuckled and looked down at what he was doing. She couldn't see around him, but it really did look like he was weeding.

"Mac called. You have a case. He'll be here in an hour." Cain turned on his knees to face her.

She saw what he'd been doing.

He held a bouquet of dandelions he'd picked from along the field's edge. Their bright heads looked like he'd wrestled a piece of the sun out of the sky and was now offering it to her. Something about the sweetness of him picking her those flowers brought happy tears to her eyes.

"I wanted to surprise you in bed." He held the flowers out to her.

She took them from him, her fingers lingering over his, and then brought them to her nose. They smelled like happiness and the best parts of her childhood. She could remember playing out in the yard, picking bouquets of them for her mom, while her father complained about the weeds in the yard.

"Oh, Cain. They're lovely." No store-bought bouquet could ever rival this one.

His gaze roamed over her, taking in his shirt on her body, her bare legs, then traveled up to her face. "Are you happy here? Happy with me?" He looked so earnest, so serious, like this was life's most important question.

She moved closer to him, stared down at him still on his knees, and put her free hand on his cheek. "Happier than I've ever been."

He covered her hand with his own, then moved it off his face and held it in front of both of them. "Me too. I want us always to be together. I want to wake up with you in the morning. I want to go to bed with you at night. I want to spend lazy days on the couch with you. I want to spend sunny days outside with you. I want to spend busy days and slow days and every day in between with you." He reached into his pocket. "Mercy Ledger, will you promise me all your days?"

She started to say yes, then saw the ring he held between his fingers. Surrounded by a thick edging of art deco silver, a bloodred garnet winked in the morning sun. It was the most unique and beautiful ring she'd ever seen. And he'd gotten it for her.

“Will you marry me?” His words were strong and sure, his face expectant and hopeful.

In this moment, she could see beyond the strong man in front of her to the little boy inside him. The boy who’d been so beaten and abused by his father, but who still dared to hope for happiness. And by some miracle he’d chosen her to share his life with.

“*Yes* isn’t a strong enough word. But yes. Yes. Yes.” She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, hugging him, but that wasn’t enough so she went down on her knees with him.

His hand shook just a bit as he slid the ring on her finger. She couldn’t look away until it was seated. She wiggled her finger in the sunlight, the garnet glowing a deep cherished red, and she knew she’d never take this ring off. Never. “It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

She pulled his head down to her, kissing him with all the love she possessed.

The birds sang all around them, the winter wheat rustled lightly, and pure cleansing sunshine lit their world with cheerfulness.

This was their happily ever after.

EPILOGUE

What happened to Dolan...

The man standing in front of Dolan, only a foot away, shouldn't be here.

Couldn't be here.

And yet, standing there was...

Adam Killion.

Adam Killion, whom he'd seen less than an hour ago at Petesville Supermax. Somehow, the man had escaped.

One word came out on a gasp. "How?" Others followed. "How did you get out? How are you here?" Adrenaline burned through him. He reached for his gun, but time was his enemy.

Starlight glinted on six inches of wickedly curved steel as it pricked his belly, just enough to grab his attention and freeze his body.

Killion thrust the knife into him.

Everything inside Dolan clenched, bracing for the stab of pain. But it didn't feel sharp. It didn't feel painful. It felt... hot.

Wetness splattered the ground beneath him. Blood. His blood pouring from his body. The spattering amplified louder and louder until it hurt worse than the heat in his gut. Then a soft wet sensation as Adam Killion drew the blade upward.

Breath burst from his body. He grabbed at his stomach, feeling the warmth of his life force against his suddenly icy hands. And still the raging noise of fluids raining from him like a waterfall. So loud.

He met Killion's gaze head-on. The man wrenched the blade upward until it ran into Dolan's sternum with a knock that echoed throughout his body.

Dolan grabbed Killion's hand holding the blade inside him. It was slick and hot. He still couldn't feel any pain beyond a diffuse heat, but he could feel that everything inside was

wrong. He knew pulling the weapon out would be the end of him. Before he died, he had some questions he needed answered.

“Daught...” He couldn’t find the air to say anything else.

“Have you been a naughty boy and violated the rule to not look for her?”

Unable to speak, he shook his head. He’d followed the *don’t look for her* rule to perfection. He hadn’t looked *for* her. Nope. Instead, he’d looked *all around her*. So he’d focused on her family’s murders and Adam Killion. It was all linked, and Killion had just confirmed as much.

Dolan now knew the truth. Adam Killion was the orchestrator of Daught’s fate.

“Where... is... she?” He sounded desperate and dying.

“Daughter.” Killion caressed the vowels and consonants of his child’s name. A terrible smile played on his lips. “She’s turned out well, hasn’t she? Living a *good* life. Being a *good* person.” The way he said *good* held a heaping helping of mockery. “But then, what is good? What is evil? It’s all a matter of perspective.”

“What... are... you...” He gasped, struggling to speak. “... doing... to... her?” A bubble of blood burst up his throat, filling his mouth with the taste of iron. His knees wobbled, threatening to fold, but he locked them to keep himself face-to-face with this monster.

Killion yanked against his grip, but Dolan held on with the last of his strength. “Tell me.” Even as he spoke, he realized how stupid he was. He was going to die, and there was no way he could save her. He only hoped to linger long enough to tell Cain.

“It’s her duty to populate the earth with our bloodline. No matter what happens, my bloodline will live on and on and on.”

Before Dolan could process the meaning of the words, Killion wrenched the blade out of him. He grabbed his stomach with both hands as the pain finally hit. Pain so deep

and wide and vast that he couldn't breathe and couldn't think beyond *Daught. Daught. Daught.* At least his final thoughts in life would be of the one person who'd brought him joy.

Killion licked the blunt edge of the weapon with the casualness of someone savoring a flavor. "You'll want to roll over on your back to keep things from spilling out for as long as possible."

Dolan realized he lay on his side in the grass. He didn't remember how he got down here. When he didn't move, Killion used his foot to push him over onto his back.

A searing, tearing agony ripped through him.

Without a backwards glance, Killion walked away, blood dripping from the knife as he went.

Overhead, stars speckled the sky, winking at him, teasing him with their beauty.

Wherever Daught was, could she be staring up at these same stars, thinking about him?

"Daught? Are you out there? I'll find you. I'll find you in the stars. Daught..."

The flickering stars faded until everything went black, and he had no more thoughts and no more feelings. He was a piece of nothing, floating in the universe. One star in a sky full of trillions.

This isn't the end for Dolan. Find the rest of Dolan and Daughter's story in [Capturing Fate](#).

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