

A woman with intricate tattoos in shades of pink and blue is shown from the chest up, partially covered by a translucent pink veil. She is positioned in a dark, watery environment, possibly a pool or aquarium, with light rays filtering through the water. Her expression is neutral as she looks towards the camera. The overall aesthetic is ethereal and artistic.

A  
PLEASURE & PREY  
NOVEL

# DELICIOUS

AJ MERLIN

**DELICIOUS**

PLEASURE & PREY

**AJ MERLIN**

Delicious

Copyright © 2024 AJ Merlin

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design by Books & Moods

Ebook isbn: 978-1-955540-35-3

# CONTENT WARNINGS

*Delicious* contains talk of ex-cannibalism, and chainsaw crimes with all the expected gore of them. If chainsaw safety lessons and the consequences of wielding one as a weapon against deserving men bothers you, then *Delicious* might not be for you.

# 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](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About AJ Merlin](#)

## CHAPTER

# ONE

I can tell whenever the Jeep has had enough. And apparently, the hour and some change drive from the suburbs of Akron to the Morgan Swamp Preserve has done her in for today. At least, enough that getting a hotel for the night rather than driving back is starting to become a real possibility, instead of something I try to ward off with crossed fingers and muttered prayers whenever I pet my Jeep's hood like a dog's head.

But at least she's brought me here, and hopefully with a few hours of a break while I photograph whatever I can for the preserve's new website, my Jeep will be good to get us back home. "Hopefully," I mutter, rummaging through my camera bag. While the air outside still carries the nip of early spring, it's late enough in the year that I've discarded most of my jackets and long, warm clothing in favor of airier, lighter outfits.

Though, today is a bit different, given that I'm in a literal *swamp*. I'm wearing a pair of leggings under my denim shorts, and I'm glad that they're lightweight enough I can barely feel them. My hiking boots hadn't been pried out of their box in months, and they remind me of that every time I flex my toes against the empty space at the front of my shoes. While I'd given in and just worn a brown, faded tee, I had at least compromised for a light jacket to put over top of it, just in case the temperature dips.

Which it has a nasty habit of doing, given where I am and my normal luck.

“Okay,” I mumble, pulling out a few of my favorite lenses from the bag along with my camera on its long strap. I don’t intend to lug the whole bag with me, but there’s also no way I’m coming back for more supplies unless I absolutely have to. Especially once I’m miles into the preserve with sore, tired feet and the distant regret of hating exercise like I hate taking vitamins.

With one foot, I open my door, pushing it more than kicking it open before I slither to the ground. I pocket my keys and phone the moment I’m out, and turn to pull out my camera as well, the lenses weighing heavy in one of my back pockets. It’s not the most comfortable arrangement, since it means my keys dig into my hip whenever I bend. But it’s better than carrying most of my stuff with me instead of having my hands free for a quick picture.

“There, there, Miss Roxie Hart,” I tell my Jeep, giving the red exterior another quick pat. “Just take it easy for a bit so we can get home. *Please*, make sure we get home.” I stress the word, as if my Jeep can hear me. If it could, I have no doubt it would take issue with the fact I’d named ‘her’ after one of my favorite musical characters, from my absolute favorite show of all time. Checking one more time to make sure everything is in my pockets, I turn to look for the path in the afternoon sun. I hope that I’ll find one that will take me deeper into the preserve, instead of skirting around it.

But with only one to choose from, all I can do is cross my fingers and hope. The small, open lot has four cars other than my own, but I don’t see anyone as I walk, camera strap around my neck as I hold the camera itself in my hands to fiddle with the settings. My steps meander as I do, and I have to glance up more than once so I don’t walk off the trail into the already lengthening, thickening grass.

But it can’t be helped. If I don’t set things up now for the level of light and other natural factors of the preserve, then I’ll have to do it later. Most likely causing me to miss the shot of my *life*.

Or so past, tragic experience tells me.

Like the pictures I'd seen online when I'd gotten the email offer to come out here and take pictures for an article on the preserve in a local magazine and the revamp of their website, Morgan Swamp is *gorgeous*. Sparse trees dot either side of the trail, with clumps of grasses and other flora springing up in clumps, instead of just all over. I pause a few times at particularly chaotic arrangements of grass and flowers, snapping a few pictures and glancing at them to see how happy I am with the results.

In the end, I fiddle with things a little more, switch out the lens for one in my back pocket, and keep going. My goal is to find an animal, or a group of animals. Viewers always connect more with animals than weeds—even when they're so pretty. So, if I could somehow find one of the elusive river otters that call this place home, I'll be set for life. As would the preserve, in my opinion. But I also know the chances of seeing the bevy, or even one, are incredibly small.

So with that in mind, I make sure to take pictures of any interesting flowers or plants I see. I even give the same attention to intriguing formations of trees. Some of them are downed and rotting, with the swamp a backdrop to them like a scene from some eerie, atmospheric horror movie. Though, in my memory, the only horror movie I've seen that took place in a swamp is *Anaconda*, and I ward off thoughts of giant snakes before I pivot in place and march my ass right back to Roxie.

The best thing about my work is how much I love it. Though, when I look up what has to be hours later to find the sun starting to dip below the horizon, I blink a few times and marvel at the fact I hadn't realized I'd been out here long enough to be edging in on sunset. Loving my job makes losing track of time rather easy, though. With a sigh, I let the camera hang from its strap as I look around to see where I've ended up.

Yep, I'm nowhere near where I started. That's clear the moment my eyes land on the edge of the dock leading into the marshland beyond. The one that's had me captivated for probably the last hour as I try to find the *perfect* shot of frogs making their way from lily pad to branch and back again.



“Well, crap,” I mutter, treading back off the dock to the trail itself. I’m pretty sure I know where I came from, at least, but if I want to get back before it’s well and truly dark, then I need to go now instead of—

The person running into me knocks me off balance just as easily as they knock away my train of thought. I stagger, hand on my camera, but the man doesn’t stop or slow down. He just turns to me, a look of irritation on his pale, sweat-shiny face as his long strides create immediate distance between us.

Thankfully, however, a tree proves to be my lifeline, and before I can trip over my own feet as I try to regain my balance, my hand darts out for the nearest trunk. My fingernails dig into the bark, and when I feel a touch on my waist, I nearly fall all over again.

“I’m so sorry.” The person retracts their hand instantly, lifting both in surrender as I turn. *I want to take your picture*, is the immediate thought that flits through my brain, and my artistic side clicks to life like a lightbulb, rendering me momentarily rudely silent.

He’s not *conventionally* attractive. That’s the first thing I notice. His face is just a touch too angular; his eyes just a little too big. But they’re blue in a way I don’t normally see outside of editing apps, with lashes that would make most girls—me included—sigh with envy. His blond hair is messy, half of it stuck together with sweat and brushed back from his pale face. As I stare at him, he doesn’t move, like a deer in headlights.

Or, on second thought, with his eyes on mine and his hands raised in surrender, it’s like I’m the petrified deer about to bolt. Is it politeness? I can’t help but wonder if he’s like this to every girl he meets alone in the middle of a swamp. With a jolt, my brain drags me back to the moment, and the almost puppy-like look on his face.

“Why are you sorry?” I ask, turning to look at the retreating man on my other side. “He’s the one that ran into me. Unless he’s your friend.”

“He’s not,” the man tells me quickly, in a voice as quiet as the crickets around us. “You’re not lost, are you?” He glances

toward the man almost wistfully before lowering his hands to shove them in his pockets. “Do you need help getting out of here?”

“No,” I murmur, shaking my head as I look him over. As I’d noted before, he’s not “model pretty.” Not in the normally accepted way, at least. But something about him makes me loathe to look away. And for some reason, my brain tells me we have to keep looking at him, and that I can’t let him get out of my sight while he’s around.

Somehow, it doesn’t quite feel like attraction. At least, not completely. It feels more like some of my other jobs. The ones where wild animals had been around, and I’d always needed to keep at least a little of my attention on, just in case I needed to climb a tree or jump in a vehicle with little to no warning.

Except, it makes no sense for my brain to think that way around a person instead of a tiger.

“It’s getting dark,” the man says, nodding his chin toward the setting sun through the tall, spindly trees that line this part of the trail. “And it’s easy to get lost out here. Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“I’m sure,” I promise him, putting one hand over my heart like the Girl Scout I used to be while I hold the other up in a three-fingered scout salute. “On my honor, I know how to get back and I won’t drown in the marsh.”

“Add in that you won’t get eaten,” the man says, after a moment of examining my exaggerated pose. “And I’ll go.”

“I won’t get eaten,” I vow to him soberly. “I might just get run into again when he comes back this way.”

But the man shakes his head at that, his relaxed posture rolling into something more graceful as he shifts his weight and shoves his hands in his pockets. “Nah, we’re not coming back this way. Have a good night, and please don’t get eaten.” His lips twitch, then lift in a delicate smile that fits his face well, and I dip my head in a nod, hands falling to my sides.

“I need, like, three more shots,” I assure him, even as he’s walking past on the trail that will take him in the same

direction as the man who'd run into me. The one he'd promised wasn't his friend, but that he can't stop looking for in the trees. "I'll be out of here within the hour."

My words pull his attention, and the blueness of his eyes could make me drown. "Good," he tells me. "Things get weird around here after dark." I want to ask what he means, or if he's fucking with me, but his strides lengthen and he's out of earshot before I can do more than open my mouth or figure out what to say.

## CHAPTER

# TWO

The next time I look up, it's because my light has disappeared. With surprise, I squint through the trees, having not realized that the sun started to set in earnest some time ago.

"But it hasn't been that long," I mutter, dropping my camera so it can hang from the large, sturdy strap around my neck. "It's only been..." I glance at my phone, wince, and look away.

Okay, it's been a little longer than an hour. So maybe I'd lied to the guy who'd told me things get weird here after dark. No big deal. I'll never see him again, and it's not like the swamp preserve is inherently dangerous as long as I don't walk off the path into the quicksand.

But I really hadn't expected to be here this long. I glance from one side of me to the other, measuring the path on both sides as I scan my brain to remember how in the world I got all the way out here. To this spot where the only sound is the rustle of the breeze through the curtain-like trees that bend over the swampy, brackish water.

I'm sure I know the way to get back. And even if I go the wrong way, from the maps I've seen, this place is a big loop. One direction is just going to take me longer to get back from than the other. But even if I pick the wrong one, the only thing it means is a bit of extra walking.

That's what I tell myself, anyway. I say it over and over again in my head until it sounds believable and true.

My steps are quick along the path, and the wind shoving into me feels like it's trying to hurry me along. I *really* hadn't meant to stay this long. Even though I know doing so has gotten me some pretty great pictures. Photos that I hope will impress the preserve and make them hire me again, or at least mention me to whoever else the board members know so I can get more work like this.

It would be such a welcome change from weddings and headshots. Hell, if I could stay away from those for the rest of my life, it would be the greatest miracle I've ever—

A large *plop*, then a sound like a croak, catches my attention and I whirl to my right, one hand going to my camera on instinct. My heart leaps for only a second, just long enough for my eyes to lock on the two frogs sitting near the edge of a dock, and a rabbit on the ground near them with its nose twitching.

"It's already dark anyway," I remind myself, chewing on my lower lip. Hadn't I *just* told myself it was time to go? "But it isn't like a few more pictures are going to make this any worse." My voice is a whisper as I edge off the path, crouching with my camera raised. The moon's reflection and last rays of the sun give me the light I need for the pictures, and I lose myself in it.

When the rabbit moves, languidly exploring the side of the dock before heading for a grassier area, I don't stop to think. I follow it, shuffling along with my camera to try to find any cute or unique pose from the creature in front of me. Surely, if anyone would appreciate some night photography, it would be the Morgan Swamp Preserve. That thought cements my actions and I drown myself in my work once more, following the rabbit as far as it'll go, even though it takes me deeper into the swamp and, ultimately, off the path itself.

It isn't until my foot hits a patch of mud and I nearly fall on my ass that I come to my senses again. *This is kind of stupid*, I tell myself, coming close to flicking myself in the forehead for what I'm doing. I often get carried away with my work, sure... but is heading into *a swamp* in the dark really the best thing I've ever come up with?

No. No, it's really not.

"I need a better—" A long, loud sound cuts me off, and my hands fumble at my waist, until I have my cell phone in my hands and the light is on to provide me with some reprieve from the darkness. The sound comes again. More inhuman than human, and I blink around in the light from my phone and the darkness of the swamp.

*Shit.* My hand tightens on my phone, and every shadow seems to crawl toward me with a snake-like presence. "There's nothing out here except you and the animals. And the swamp. And the alligators," I mutter, and cram my eyes shut. I definitely don't need to be thinking about things that'll eat me right now.

God, hadn't I just promised some handsome stranger I wouldn't get eaten in the damn swamp? Hadn't I also told him I'd be gone before night fell?

"Don't be a liar twice over," I sigh to myself, looking at the edge of the water for the alligator I'm sure has materialized there out of nothingness.

But, luckily for me, there's nothing except the frogs and distant ripples that I'm stubbornly going to attribute to fish or some other small, harmless, animal that lacks the teeth it would need to eat me. Or the jaw size.

Another long, loud wail meets my ears and I freeze where I stand, my grip so tight on my phone that the light on the ground trembles over the sparse stalks and stems of the weeds beneath me. It has to be a deer. An elk. A *moose*, even though I'm pretty sure the only local moose in the area belong to the Cincinnati Zoo. But I've heard the call of a deer before, and I remember it freaked me out the first time, just like this.

They have absolutely no right to sound so much like humans, but this isn't the first time they've reminded me of someone dying in the wilderness with a knife to the gut. When it comes one more time and then sharply cuts off, I suck in a breath and force my muscles to unclench. I can't stand here for the rest of the night until my phone battery runs all the way down while praying someone comes to save me.

The image of the blond man from earlier, with his sweet smile and sharp cheekbones, swims through my head and I sigh. Yeah, like he's going to just appear in khaki shorts with a torch and machete, then lead me out of the swamp like Indiana Jones.

*Be realistic, Saylor,* I admonish myself with a quick shake of my head. The only person who's going to get me out of the swamp is me. And I need to do it while I still have a light.

I raise the light in question over my head, and I peer down one path before squinting down the other. In terms of confusion and strangeness, they look identical. I don't recognize the landmarks on either side, but as I'd told myself already tonight, the path is a giant circle.

For all I know, both are equidistant from my car. And standing here isn't going to do me any good. I take a step, then another, and glance behind me one more time before committing to the path in front of me. But no matter how I try not to, my ears strain for the sound of wails and screams, and my eyes dart toward every shadow that looms or sways thanks to my unsteady arm holding the light up in front of me.

The sooner I get moving, the sooner my heart will stop pounding and I'll stop being afraid of every little thing in the swamp.

That's the hope, anyway. Though by the way I can't help levitating when every sound—real or imagined—hits my ears... Well, I'm already sure this is going to be an insanely long night. But I force myself to keep walking, even through another of the wails that I will believe is a deer until my dying breath.

And the next noise, the mechanical sound that burns through my ears like an engine, doesn't have me stopping. It has me walking faster, my steps eating up the ground between me and what I hope is the parking lot. There's no animal in the world capable of making that noise. At least not one I've ever heard of. And no deer has been born that has learned to rev an engine.

*But how is there an engine out here?*

It sounds again, and I trip this time, stumbling and ultimately slamming to my knees no matter how I try to prevent it. My phone, naturally, goes flying, skittering off into the undergrowth until the light is muted and barely visible.

“*Shit*,” I grumble, fingers curling against the cement of the path. My palms burn, and I don’t need the light to tell the throbbing, stinging pain means I’ve skinned them up. But still I turn them over, eyes searching in the almost complete darkness, and I can *feel* the hot blood against my skin, welling against the wounds and staying there.

“Stupid, *stupid*,” I mutter, slamming my eyes shut against the blackness. An overwhelming irritation rises in my throat like bile, all of it focused inward. “You’re so stupid, Saylor. And now you’ve probably broken your phone.” God, I’ve got to stop this before it really starts. This isn’t the time to go into a full *thing* about how much I suck. My shitty mental health is not a welcome addition to this night, and it’s certainly not going to make this experience any better.

Or any faster.

On trembling knees and burning hands, I crawl across the hard-packed dirt, thanking every god I’ve ever heard about that my camera is still swinging around my neck and hadn’t cracked against the concrete. If it had, I really would just lay down and die. I might as well, at that point. “Come on, you can do this.” The verbal pep talking is a suggestion from my therapist, to quiet the mental rebukes that I can never really seem to stop. “You’re probably almost back to the parking lot. You’ve been walking forever.”

Forever is about seven minutes, give or take thirty seconds. But if I say it out loud, then it’s a little easier to believe.

Something snaps in the undergrowth and I flinch, sitting up to look around the darkness with wide eyes. But it’s impossible to see anything, and the darkness presses against my vision. My phone goes out and I curse softly, looking around for the light, only to find nothing. “H-hello?” I ask, not understanding why the light is gone. Had an animal stepped on



it? Was the phone battery near enough to being drained that the throw had done it?

Trembling, I get to my feet, now unable to go anywhere without any light in this part of the densely forested swamp. My hand brushes my camera as I rub my bleeding palm against my shirt; on a whim I pick it up, turning in a slow circle as I make sure the flash is on by feel and click to take a picture.

As I'd predicted, the flash briefly lights up the area. It's not enough for me to see details, but it's enough for my brain to see that there's nothing out of place. I hope, anyway. I turn more, clicking the camera again and again until I've made my way a good seventy-five percent around.

There's no one and nothing here, and I still don't know what to do if I can't miraculously find my phone. I can't make it back in the dark.

There's no way in hell of that.

Distracted, I turn again, almost missing the flutter of movement that I can barely see in the near-blackness. I click the camera with a vain hope that my phone will just be there, levitating in the air and waiting for me to grab it.

The flash illuminates with the click of the camera, and I drop it in surprise to hang from the strap at my neck at the garish, grimacing figure lunging at me.

I don't even have time to scream. Not when the light from my phone comes back on as the man *slams* into me, knocking me back to the ground and causing my palms to skid along the cement once again. It only serves to send searing pain up my arms, and I'm sure they're worse now than they were a moment ago. The pain is so sharp that I cry out, but the man in front of me, his dark-stained face lit by the white light of my phone, doesn't seem to notice.

He towers over me, even on his knees, and behind the dark liquid staining most of his face, I belatedly realize this is the man who'd run into me before. "Help me," he gasps, grabbing

my wrist with my phone still in his hand between us. “*Fuck*. You have to help me. We have to call—”

His arm bumps mine and I recoil, one knee coming up between us as I try to shove him away. Heavy and solid as he is, he doesn’t go far. “Get off of me!” I shriek, my slick hand sliding against his shoulder when I shove. But it does nothing except grind pain into my palm, and I can’t scoot away from him, with his weight on my knees.

“Shut up! Just shut up.” He scrambles to his feet, my phone light still on, and whips it around the area. “I need to call the police, then you can have your phone back.”

He keeps talking, saying something I barely catch about the man in the woods. But for me, he’s the only thing out here. He’s the danger I need to get away from, and I crab-walk away from him, chest heaving as I fight the panic welling like lava in my chest.

“*Fuck!*” he snarls, when the phone light goes off. He pushes it on again, just as my back hits something strangely solid, though neither wide nor thin enough to be one of the swamp trees. “Why can’t I get a call to go through?”

“Because there’s no service out here?” I realize too late what I’m leaning against, just as fingers graze my hair and I hear something big being shifted in his grip. “Because we’re in the middle of a swamp and you’re panicking?”

The man freezes, my light still pointing at the ground, and it’s almost in slow motion that he turns, bathing both me and the person behind me in pale, white light.

I don’t want to, but I force myself to look upward, head craning back as my eyes find sharply lit cheekbones and rolled-up sleeves.

“But mostly because you’re panicking,” the blond man from earlier today says in his quiet, unassuming voice and shrugs. “Are you done running now?” He moves his arm, hefting the thing he’s carrying into both hands.

*Oh God...*

“Because you’re ruining everyone’s night.”

He's holding a *fucking chainsaw*.

## CHAPTER

# THREE

Without realizing what I'm doing, I jerk away from the man behind me and the weapon he holds. It's like something out of a horror movie, and with my eyes glued on the chainsaw, I don't stop until I'm off the trail and sitting in wet grass that seeps water into the fabric of my shirt and pants.

*Oh, my god.* The thought circles in my head over and over again, not letting any logic come through, no matter how I try to think of something—*anything*—else.

Fingers wrap around my arm, and the chainsaw man's face contorts into frustrated disbelief as I'm jerked painfully to my feet, a yelp leaving my lips before I can stop it. "Kill her," the man hisses, the tremor obvious in his voice. "Just kill *her*. Anyone will do for you, right?"

"What?" I whirl toward him, eyes wide in the darkness and the stark light cast from my phone in his hand. "How dare you—"

"I won't tell anyone," he goes on, his eyes glued to the blond man's. I realize, finally, that the dark stains on his face are a mix of mud and blood, mostly the latter, and recoil from his bloody hands that clutch at my arms. "Just kill her instead, and—"

I kick him. Hard enough that his knee buckles and he nearly goes down. The grip on my arms slackens, and I try to pull away, only for his hands to tighten again.

“Stupid little girl,” he snarls, nails digging like knives into my skin. “What the fuck is wrong with you, *huh?*” His eyes roll wildly, and blood stains his teeth when he bares them at me, shaking me in his grip like a dog. “C’mon,” he cajoles, attention back on our impassive audience member. “She’s a much better victim than me. Even you can see that, right?”

“You’re actually trying to bargain getting out of this by sacrificing someone else?” I whisper, not looking back at the armed man. I can’t. I don’t have the guts to do it; I’m too afraid of what I’ll see.

I’m afraid he’s going to take this crazy man up on his suggestion. The bloodied man shakes me again, harder this time, sneering at me as he replies, “Yeah. You’d do the same if you weren’t such a fucking wimp. You think I want to be cut up by that?” I don’t need to follow his nod to know he’s gesturing toward the weapon in the man’s hands.

I don’t want to be cut up by it either. God, I want anything *but* that, but with my heart pounding in my chest so hard it feels like it’s trying to escape, I have no idea what to do except kick the man again.

So I do.

This time he shoves me, harder than I would’ve thought possible for someone in his condition. My knees buckle and I stumble, feet finding an uneven place on the ground before I slam down onto the hard-packed earth once again on my hands and knees. My scraped up palms burn, and this time my knees join in on the fun.

But more importantly, my camera hadn’t escaped impact this time. The lens cap pops off as I gasp, hand darting out to search for the rolling, elusive cap like that’s the most important thing right now.

But to my fragmented, confused brain, it is. I can’t afford another camera. Hell, I’m still paying off this one, and I need it for my job.

When beat up sneakers appear in my vision, however, my shaky breathing stops and I stare at them, too terrified to look

up. I can't. If this is how I die, by the hands of a chainsaw-wielding crazy person, I can't look.

*I can't.*

But then he kneels, and one hand comes up in front of him to show me the lens cap I'd stupidly been looking for. "It's okay," he murmurs, pressing it to my fingers where I clutch it on reflex. "But I'm sorry you got involved in this." A rueful smile crosses his face, though I can only see bits of it in the darkness. "That's why I hoped you'd left before the sun went down."

I don't answer. My eyes dart down to his other hand, the one still holding onto the chainsaw, and I swear his smile turns...almost shy.

All I can really do is look from him to the lens cap, and I watch as he looks me over, as if searching for some sign. Then he leans forward, our faces close enough that I can feel his breath ghost against my skin.

*I need to run.*

"What's your name?" he asked, his free hand coming up, then falling.

He doesn't need to know my name. I shouldn't tell the man who's probably going to murder me anything. But before I can stop myself, my lips form the familiar syllables and I'm whispering, "Saylor," into the air between us.

"Close your eyes, Saylor. No matter what you hear." He reaches out, his knuckles brushing the skin of my cheek so softly I can barely feel it. "You won't like what comes next."

He's going to kill me. And yet, even though that thought is clear in my head, my legs are paralyzed. My palm feels glued to the dirt, and I watch him stand in front of me, a sigh leaving his lips when he does. With a numb, detached feeling, I wait for him to do it. I wait for him to lift the chainsaw, pull the cord, and start cutting me into pieces as easily as if I were just a bunch of wood.

"It's rude of you to involve someone else in this," he tells the man who, for some reason, hadn't run away while he had

the chance. I turn around when the man with the chainsaw strides past me, still holding the terrifying weapon loosely in his grip, like it's nothing more than a toy. "It's rude. You've ruined her night."

With my phone light pointed downward, towards the other man's legs, I finally see why he isn't running. There are cuts along his thighs, probably from the chainsaw, and blood drips to the ground, soaking the leg of his pants all around his left ankle.

From the way he's standing, he can barely manage that much. My assumptions are proven right when he moves, trying to take off again, and his leg crumples under him. He can't run any more than I can, but for him, it's nothing to do with the fear I can see in his face and in the sweat beading on his skin.

It's because he physically can't.

I want to look away.

I *need* to look away, and I know that. But my eyes are glued to the stark scene as my phone falls from his hand, landing mercilessly face-down on the ground so the light from it shows me the garish scene in front of me.

The only mercy is that most of the color is bleached from the world, so much so that it looks like a black and white movie in front of me. But that only helps a little. And it doesn't help me when he starts to beg. One hand comes up, as if he's reaching toward the other man, only for one dirty sneaker to kick him down onto his back, where the man hastily climbs onto his elbows to babble and beg.

I swear he asks for the man to kill me again. But I can't hear well enough to say for sure. His words combine with the roaring in my ears, and when the man lifts the chainsaw to pull the cord, I beg myself to do the one thing he asked.

*Look away.*

He looks so comfortable with the weapon. Like he's been using it forever. Like it's an extension of him, instead of something I know is heavy as hell.

He has to pull the cord twice for it to catch, and my fingers dig into the ground at my sides, palms burning against the dirt.

*Please, God, Saylor. Look the fuck away.*

He revs it once. Twice. The man is speaking again, but all I can see is his wide eyes, and the way he tries for a few seconds to crawl away.

But he doesn't make it far.

How could he?

The man with the chainsaw thrusts it downward, the loud weapon driving straight into his chest. Blood pours from the wound, and this time I can clearly hear the man on the ground.

I hear his screams.

I hear the high-pitched wailing when he jolts; and even as the blood sprays upward, staining the jeans and shirt of the man above him, he continues to scream.

He screams until the chainsaw slices messily against his throat—cutting off his ability to make noise—in a spray of arterial blood that arcs across the ground, nearly reaching me.

But the man with the chainsaw never looks particularly put out, or even interested. He just finishes what he's doing, and as the noise from the motor dies, he lets the chainsaw fall to his side, bumping against his leg once it's well and truly off.

I still can't look away. My eyes feel glued open, and I can feel myself shaking where I sit. But my eyes slide upward, no longer on the dead or dying man, but on the one standing over top of him, still as the surrounding night.

Until he picks up my phone from the ground with a sigh and turns, his face in the light long enough for me to see his eyes find mine. "You shouldn't have watched. I know the sound would've been atrocious either way. And I would've done something for you if we'd had time." Casually, like it's just another day in the preserve, the man comes to kneel in front of me, the chainsaw on the ground beside us.

It pulls my gaze, the bloody blade shining in the white light from my phone. Now it's this I can't look away from, and



a disgustingly morbid part of me can't help but try to imagine what it had felt like to cut into a man's chest.

*And now I'm next.*

"I..." I don't know what to say. Begging for him not to hurt me seems stupid at this point. The idea of begging for him to make it quick makes my mouth taste bitter and burnt. I don't want to die. But I really don't want to die screaming like the man whose body steams on the ground. "I just..." God, I need to find something better to say. Especially with this man, this *murderer* on the ground in front of me.

"He deserved it." To my astonishment, the man sits all the way down, my phone still in his hands between us to illuminate our faces harshly. He crosses his legs under him, his too-blue eyes on mine. "He deserved it more than you could possibly understand."

"No one deserves that," I hear myself whispering, when I know I should just agree with him. "That was terrible. It was brutal."

"It was necessary. And better than he deserved." The man isn't at all put out by my trepidation, nor does he look away. "You said your name was Saylor." It isn't a question, but he tilts his head like it is. "I'm Jed Shaw."

"Why are you..." I should just shut up and agree with him. I know that for certain. My fingers play with the loose strings of my shoes, and I can't look away from his eyes. "Why are you being nice to me? Aren't you going to—" I can't finish the sentence, but my eyes betray me, darting towards the bloody chainsaw beside us.

"Have you done something to deserve me doing *that*"—he nods his head toward the other man—"to you?"

Quickly, I shake my head, both honest and terrified. "Then don't worry about it, Saylor. I don't want to hurt you."

Hope soars in my chest, and I clutch at my shoelaces like a terrified child. "So I can leave?"

"Do you know the way back?" It's not quite an answer... but it isn't a *no*. The hope bubbles up my throat, and sudden

energy courses through my body at the prospect of escape and calling the police. I just need to play along, just for a few more minutes.

Just until he isn't looking. My fingers inch towards my phone, but that hope in my throat turns bitter as he pulls it back closer to him on the ground.

"Because even if you do, I don't think I can let you go. Not right now, when you're just going to call the police—"

"I won't," I lie, but his rueful smile tells me he sees right through it.

"And I haven't had a chance to clean up yet. I don't want to go to jail, Saylor. Not for you, or anyone else." When I dart for my phone with a sudden rush of speed, he curls his fingers around it and yanks it back, my hand on it only serving to pull me forward across the ground, my face once again too close to his for comfort.

*He smells like blood.*

There's no way around it. He reeks of the stench of old and new blood, and it nearly chokes me as I stare up at him before moving away.

But I'm too slow. A hand curls around the back of my neck, holding me to him, and I can only make a small sound of disbelief when the hand on my phone disappears, only to return moments later to rest somewhere between us.

"I'm so, so sorry." *Fuck*, but he looks like he means it. All puppy dog eyes and sad, guilty frowns. I shake my head and try to pull away, one eye still on the chainsaw. "But I can't let you go tonight."

"Please don't do this." I'm shaking now. There's no way he isn't holding a knife, or isn't preparing to jerk the chainsaw close to him and do to me the same thing he did to the other man. "Please—"

"Don't beg me, Saylor. You'll only break my heart." He's *joking* with me, the hint of a smile on his lips that makes me want to vomit. "You'll call the police. I see it in your eyes."

And I need you to understand that I can't have you doing that before I let you go anywhere."

"But I promise," I whisper urgently. "I swear, okay?" Realizing I even half mean it, and I try to pull away from him, to stand, to do anything. "I won't call anyone. You said it yourself. There's no service here."

"But you won't be out here for long. We're closer to the parking lot than you realize." His grin is so fucking apologetic it makes my heart hurt. "Don't be afraid of me. Please."

"Then don't do this." Tears sting my eyes. I want to do something, to get out of this. But the only thing I can think of is how this is just my luck. Of course I would be the one paralyzed in a life-or-death situation with no idea of what to do.

*Damn it.*

When his hand comes up, my breath hitches in my throat. I brace for the pain. For the sharp-edged agony of him slitting my throat.

But I'm not expecting for him to cover my mouth and nose with one hand holding a cloth. I jerk in a breath, and that's my immediate undoing. My vision spins as Jed sidles closer, supporting me with his arms as he fights to keep the cloth pressed to my face, even as my hands reach up to claw desperately at his wrist.

"Shhhh, *shhh* don't fight me," he all-but purrs, eyes never leaving mine. "It'll be over in a second, I promise, if you just...don't..."

I don't hear the last words with my fingers latched into his skin, but in my brain I feel them on the tide of darkness that rises to claim my consciousness.

*Fight me.*

## CHAPTER

# FOUR

I have no idea where I am, or what time it is.

As the black tide of sleep releases me slowly, uncurling like fingers from my chest and head, I feel...strange. Lost, in a way. Almost like I'm dissociating.

But nothing had happened that I remember. I didn't have some self-sabotaging episode, nor had I talked to my stepmom the day before. Hell, it's been weeks since she's called, and weeks since I'd needed an emergency appointment with my therapist.

So why do I feel so strange?

As if I'm trying to watch a movie through static, pictures flit across the backs of my eyelids. Grass, the swamp. The click of my camera that does more to soothe me than anything else ever could. I remember begging my car to just last for the trip home. And she must've, right? Given that I'm definitely on a bed; though my head is on a pillow that feels not quite like one of mine.

But it has to be one of mine, because there's no other explanation.

*Right?*

My brain urges me that something is wrong. Something's off, somewhere in my world, and serves to wake me up faster than normal, though the confused and dazed feeling remains. Something isn't right, even if it's only in my own head. I've had that happen more times than I can count as well. Where I

wake up anxious, panicking, and thinking that the world is ending or I'm some colossal failure.

My therapist had explained it to me once; okay, maybe more than once. That the body's cortisol levels only create a wicked cycle in some people with anxiety or other mental health struggles. It hadn't made me feel better to learn the science behind it, since I've never been good at rationalizing myself out of my fears and panic.

And yet...this doesn't feel like that, either.

I feel my breathing change as more and more of me sluggishly wakes up, and within seconds I can tell without a doubt that this is neither my pillow, nor my bed. It's too soft. The pillow is too fluffy, instead of crammed down to flatness after years of my face on it and being folded over to double its thickness.

But it takes my senses another few seconds to zero in on the fact that someone is touching my arm. Once I realize that, I fight for consciousness, trying my best to wake up to confront whatever the hell is touching me—

*The fucking chainsaw.*

The sound of it fills my ears, along with the man's screams, while the sight of him being murdered fills my vision, blocking everything else out like I'm sitting too close to a drive-in movie screen. My entire world is encompassed by the sound, though I feel my lips part and a soft, desperate sound meets my ears.

Only belatedly do I realize the sound is from me.

“Shhh, it's okay.” The hand on my arm disappears, instead coming to cup my face. “You're all right, Saylor. I've got you.”

But the words *I've got you* do the opposite of bringing me any kind of relief. Distantly, I remember the cloth over my mouth and nose that had robbed me of my consciousness in the first place. I dimly wonder if that's the reason I'm having such a hard time waking up now, and why my mouth feels so dry.

I've certainly never had this much trouble waking up before, that I can remember anyway. Another sound, a whimper if I'm being honest, passes from my lips, and the man strokes his thumb over them, one hand going back to the arm he'd been touching before.

"You're all right," he croons sweetly, gently. "I told you I wouldn't hurt you. It would break my heart to hurt you. I'm sorry I had to knock you out. I'm so sorry, but I meant what I said..." He trails off, lifting my arm. "It's just that I really don't want to go to jail."

Something smooths down my arm, and I wonder why in the world he's running his hands over the space between my wrist and elbow. Had something happened to me? Had I been hurt? I certainly don't *feel* pain anywhere, but that's not saying much since this still half feels like the dream I wish it was.

"I'm sorry for this too," I hear him murmur, a rough edge to his voice. "I know you're out of it. So this is so...fucked up of me." He lets out a grating chuckle, and the bed creaks under us. "*Fuck*, I'm sorry Saylor." His grip shifts on my arm and suddenly he's running his thumb along it again.

...I think.

But it doesn't quite feel like his skin against mine. It's different, though my brain refuses to put together the pieces. Instead, I work on swimming up toward full consciousness, the rhythmic movement on my arm trying to lull me back down into sleep, if anything.

But thankfully, I win against the drugs and the exhaustion. My eyes finally snap open, showing me a dizzying view of a vaulted ceiling and lights that glow dimly orange in the room. I've definitely never been here before, and when I take a breath, it smells like someone has just doused a campfire three feet from me.

"What..." The word is out before my eyes connect with the man sitting on the bed beside me, and what he's doing.

He has to know that I'm watching now—from the way my breath falters in my throat, or my fingers jerk in his grip—he

*has to know.* But he doesn't stop the way his tongue laps against my bloody, stained skin that's still shiny in the light, like the blood isn't fully dried yet.

His eyes flick up, finding mine, but he still doesn't stop. He turns my arm toward him more fully, his grip not tight, but secure enough to hold my arm in place, and his wet, warm tongue runs one more line up my arm, chasing the last line of blood up toward my palm.

"It's my fault," he tells me in a soft voice when he's done, finally letting my arm fall gently back to the bed. "I didn't know he was still leaking in the car. You had blood on you. *Have* blood on you." He frowns, gesturing to my upper body. "I just wanted to clean you up. I didn't think..." His gaze flicks back down to my arm, before up at my face once more. "How do you feel?"

"Where are we?" I demand, my heart thumping in my chest. I can barely process what he'd been doing. The fact that he'd been lapping blood off my skin like a dog or a—

I decide quickly not to finish that thought, and snip the end of it away with desperate precision.

"You're at my house. I brought you back here after you passed out." He looks away, guilty, like he knows those words aren't quite true. I hadn't just spontaneously *passed out*. Not without a lot of help from him.

"*Where?*" I snap, though my bravado is fueled more from fear than rage. Trembling, I sit up, looking around for my phone and camera. "And where are my things?"

"I'm not going to give you a map of where my house is. We're still in Ohio," Jed chuckles softly, his sky-blue eyes never leaving my face. "Your camera is over there. I kept it safe for you and cleaned the lens cap. It should be all right, though I'm no expert. Your phone is charging, but it's not in here. I'm not telling you where it's at, Saylor."

I blink at him, owlishly, and can't help but think that this murderer is more considerate than any man I've ever dated. God, what does that say about me and my life choices?

More importantly, what does that say about the general population of men in the Akron area?

“You kidnapped me.” The words nearly choke me, and they stick in my throat for longer than they should. Only after they’re out, I wish I could take them back. I don’t want to upset him, or hasten the death I’m still sure is coming.

There’s only one reason he’d kidnap me, after all. I’m a liability. A threat. Collateral damage for the chainsaw-wielding maniac.

“Yeah,” he admits, tilting his head to the side and giving me those convincing as hell puppy dog eyes again. “I did. No way around that. But I’m hoping you’ll let me explain why. And what happened. I’m hoping—”

“Why do all this just to kill me?” I grip the comforter in both hands, balling it up in my fingers. “Don’t...don’t *play with me* like I’m some sort of gullible child. I’d rather you just get it over with. Just—” I don’t know what I’m saying. Panic rises in my throat, cutting off my air, and I stare at him desperately, willing all of this to fade into some nightmare brought on by too many horror movies. “I don’t want to do this,” I whisper, the fear setting into my bones. It makes me anxious. Jumpy. I feel wired, like I have too much energy and *I need to do something*.

Before he can stop me, I throw the covers off of my legs, half-surprised to see I’m no longer wearing my jacket or shoes. I don’t look for them, however, before taking off across the room, to the railing that my brain doesn’t quite register that sits on the open side of the space.

“Wait! Saylor, no!” I hear him get up as well, but I don’t stop running. Whatever is on the other side of that railing could be my chance at freedom, and no amount of him yelling or the shakiness of my muscles is going to stop me.

I hit the railing hard and scream, my vision finding the gap on the other side and the terrifying distance between me and the living room below. “Fuck!” I wail, trying to teeter backwards on unsteady legs and failing. This was an absolute



mistake. If I fall here, I'm going to hit the glass coffee table. I'll break every bone in my body and—

Strong hands tow me back up, arms curling around me as I collapse back into them dizzily. This little excursion has made it clear I can't trust my body or brain yet, and I suck in deep breaths as my heart pounds out a morbid, frightened tempo in my chest.

*How am I ever going to get out of here if I'm on the verge of killing myself with my own stupidity?*

"That's what I was trying to warn you about," Jed sighs in my ear, walking backward until he can set me down on the bed once more. "You don't have to stay here, in bed, or even in this room. But you can't just jump off the balcony, either."

"What do you mean, I don't have to stay here?" I look up at him hopefully, barely realizing my hands are clutching his wrists that are still hugging me to him. "You'll let me—"

"I mean that we're so deep in the forest that you'll never find your way home without my help," he tells me flatly, his eyes deadly serious for the first time since I'd had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting him. "You're barely even awake, and don't know what's going on." Firmly he pushes me back down onto the bed, my head back on the fluffy pillow from before. "You're going to hurt yourself if you aren't careful, Saylor. And if you get yourself lost in the woods, even I might not be able to save you from the wild animals."

*Wild animals?*

Where the hell are we?

"I just want to go home," I tell him, capturing his blue gaze with my hazel one. "Please, *please*. People will be looking for me, and—"

"You don't need to lie to me, okay?" His smile is sweetly apologetic, and he runs a hand up my shoulder until he can lightly grasp my throat. "I looked through your phone. I messaged the preserve. There's no one coming for you, princess. No one's missing you, and there's definitely, most certainly, no one coming to save you."

I want to reply. I want to tell him he's wrong, that I have friends and a family that gives a damn. But he's right, and the rush of adrenaline has kicked exhaustion back into my system. My lips part, and I feel his fingers on my neck more keenly than I should.

"I want to go home," I say again, voice a whisper. "I don't want to die."

"Yeah..." He looks away, eyebrows drawn together like he's arguing silently with his own mind. "I don't want you to die, either. But the problem is, I also want to keep you." The words ring in my ears as I fade out of consciousness, silently begging that I'd made them up in my drug-induced haze as I go.

## CHAPTER

# FIVE

Waking up for the second time isn't nearly as awful, or as confusing, as the first. I feel almost *normal* as I find myself staring at the rise of a black pillowcase beside me. My arm is tucked under the pillow my head rests on and knees drawn partway up to my chest, just like how I'd sleep at home.

But I'm not at home.

I'm lucid enough this time to realize that.

But my brain still isn't working quite right. Things click in sections. Like I'm watching a movie, or just running down a list of things.

I'm in a killer's cabin.

*He killed a man with a chainsaw.*

I'm in his bed.

*He licked blood off of my arms like a fucking psycho.*

There's a railing that opens to the living room below, and if I try to jump it, I will break every bone in my body.

*He killed a man with a chainsaw and then proceeded to lick blood off of my arms like a fucking psycho.*

Yeah, that feels like the gist of it. At least as much of it as I need to understand right now, and all of what my brain can handle. I lay where I am, eyes closing, but my ears remain alert for any sound in the cabin.

But if Jed is here, then he's moving more quietly than I ever could—or he's not moving at all—because I don't hear a damn thing from anywhere. Not even from the windows on either side of the bed, though hearing him outside would probably be a long shot since they're barely cracked.

“Fuck,” I breathe, finding that I don't want to open my eyes to my current reality. I've never, not once, wanted to star in my own horror movie. But it's starting to feel like I don't have much of a choice.

*He said he doesn't want to hurt me.* The words whisper through my brain and my fingers tighten on the pillow under me. There's no way those words weren't a lie, though the honesty pouring off of his face had been...convincing to say the least.

*Very convincing.*

Finally, I force my eyes open again and sit up, looking around the room once before something in the air catches my eye. Even when I tilt my chin up to it, the ridiculousness of what I'm seeing takes me a few seconds to process.

A piece of lined notebook paper is taped horizontally to a stick that's taped to the railing. In messy, cursive writing are the words *The door is over there*, sitting above a scribbled, thick black arrow.

He must really think I'm an idiot.

But he's not really wrong. Embarrassment sizzles along my skin as I remember waking up the first time and making a break for the rail. I would've gone over without him catching me, and I can still recall the dizzying, terrifying moments where I was sure I really would go over.

After all, it would've been so much easier for him to just let me fall. He wouldn't have had to do a thing, and I probably would've been snapped into a thousand pieces.

So why didn't he?

Somehow, I chase away that thought. Though the humiliation the sign brings to mind is harder to shake, so I avoid looking at the sign as much as possible. At the foot of

the bed my jacket is folded neatly on a small black bench, and my shoes are just under it, sitting side by side and looking cleaner than they had the last time I'd tugged them on.

Curious, I bring the jacket to my nose, surprised to find that it smells freshly laundered. "Why wash my jacket?" I mutter, pulling it on and zipping it. I slip into my sneakers as well, and give the room a thorough search, just in case my phone and keys are also somewhere nearby.

They aren't, naturally. Because why would there be a *dumb* murderer out in the woods with a penchant for kidnapping?

*And blood licking.*

I blink that away, pausing when I notice my camera sitting neatly on a long, mirrored dresser. Though I try to be cool about it, I can't help rushing over, curling my hands around the familiar form and screwing off the slightly scratched but clean lens cap to peer at the lens underneath.

He was right last night. It's not any worse for wear, and I couldn't give a damn about the damage to the lens cap. If it did bother me, I could buy one way cheaper than I could've replaced my camera.

My other two lenses are beside it, still in the small bags I'd had them in out in the swamp. They look somehow cleaner as well, and there's a twinge of something in my stomach that I can't place, let alone name.

Why do all this for me, if he's just going to kill me? At the risk of mentally beating a dead horse, it occurs to me again that none of the few men I've dated would've done this for me under penalty of death. Especially cleaning my shoes and washing my jacket.

God, I hope there wasn't blood on my jacket. Though judging by last night, I can't help but think there most definitely had been. Clearly he knows what he's doing, if he could get out blood stains that must have been dry by the time he tossed this in the washer.

*Maybe he's done this before.*

The thought is definitely unwelcome in my brain, and I chase it out ferociously as my feet take me to one of the unlabeled doors. Upon opening it, I find a walk-in closet that's barely half full, and just as meticulously neat as the rest of the room. Before I can close the door completely, however, I hesitate.

My phone could be in here. If I were him, I would have hidden it and my keys in a stupid place, like the underwear drawer, which I plan to check next.

But neither search yields either of them, and I open the other door to a simple bathroom. Half-heartedly, I check the drawers, running my fingers through my hair when I catch sight of myself in the mirror.

Today is a bad day not to have a scrunchie. My long black hair, thicker than it has any right to be, is a mess. Tangles snare most of it, and even though my fingers do some work to fix that, it's not nearly enough. Well, it's not like whatever animals live in the woods are going to care that I look like I live out there, too.

Back in the bedroom, I finally take the door indicated by the sign, finding that it opens to a landing on top of a curving set of stairs. Those take me down to the living room I'd nearly crashed into last night, and I make an unhappy face at the coffee table that had almost been my doom.

Had it really only been last night? A glance at the stove clock in the kitchen that sits squarely under the bedroom shows me it's a little after three in the afternoon.

Why had I slept for so long? I'm normally up by nine, since I can't stand lying in bed with my own thoughts for very long, and I look for things to distract me as soon as I can the moment I'm awake.

*Drugs*, I sigh mentally, walking around the sofa and coffee table as my eyes take in everything. *Probably all the drugging me he did*. That's what I'm telling myself, anyway. And probably the reason I felt so off the first time I'd woken up, though I'm pretty sure I didn't imagine him licking the blood off of my arm like a—

I refuse to use the *c* word that ends in *-al*. Even in my own head. For my mental state, and the small bit of stability I have left, I can't bring myself to even think it, let alone say it.

And I have to get out of here before he comes back. Even without my phone, I'm not helpless. If I can figure out where I am, I can make some kind of game plan, get my camera, and get the hell out. But I don't want to risk my camera right now. Just in case he's right outside, or I'm stupid enough to walk myself into a river, or something else just as detrimental to my job equipment.

I finally find the door, and send up a prayer to a god I haven't believed in or prayed to since my mother died twelve years ago as my fingers curl around the handle, press the lever, and pull.

It opens.

Easily, even. The door swings inward, causing me to stagger at the surprise of it. I'd expected to be barred in, at the very least, and then I'd have to move onto the windows.

But...hadn't he told me when we talked that I could go outside if I wanted to? Which, admittedly, I'd thought was a lie. After all, what murderer lets their soon-to-be victim just wander around? Especially outdoors, where my plan is to find my way to the nearest road by following the driveway, flagging down a car, and getting the hell out of here before going to the police and convincing them I'm not crazy.

Except, when I look out at the gravel parking area, my stomach sinks and I rock back on my heels in dismay.

There are two narrow gravel roads that lead away from the house; in opposite directions. The trees are so thick that I can't see signs of civilization, houses, or anything *but* forest on the path of either of them, no matter how much I squint or wander the small parking area.

I also can't help but wonder where my car is, since she isn't here. God, I hope he hadn't left it at the preserve to get towed, though I suppose that's the most reasonable course of action.

*But maybe if he did, someone will realize I'm missing.*

He'd been right that no one knows I'm gone. Or, honestly, cares that much. My step-mother rarely calls or texts and never expects me to respond. Because of that, I'm low-contact with my dad as well. They won't suspect anything until Christmas, and that's almost eight months from now.

By that time, I doubt I'll be here anymore.

"Pick a direction, Saylor," I mutter to myself, looking from one path to the other. "You've gotta pick something before he gets back." Since there's a large Jeep here, locked of course, I'm sure Jed can't be far.

It's the sound of rustling tree limbs and underbrush that kicks me into gear. I take off at a jog down one of the paths, glancing behind me as if I'm afraid Jed is going to be there, chasing me down the gravel driveway like the iconic scene out of a certain movie I refuse to name right now.

But there's still no one there. No Jed, no dead man. No chainsaw.

And I'm determined to keep running until I find civilization, one way or the other. Come hell or high water, there's no way in the world I'm ending up back here without an army of police, or the feds, or someone with guns who can help me get my camera and get away from here once and for all.

By the time the house comes into view, I can't help but groan, sagging against one of the large trees that I had *known* looked familiar when I'd seen it last.

Somehow, the road that led deeper into the woods looped me back around, though I hadn't realized it until about five minutes ago. Even then I'd hoped I was just tired and seeing things, since I'd been walking for a good two hours and the shadows in the woods had lengthened considerably in the last twenty minutes or so.

"Fuck," I mutter, leaning my head against the bark as well. "*Fuck.*" I don't want to be here. In fact, I want to be anywhere



but here, but to get somewhere else, I'm going to have to take the other road and pray.

But I can't help my fear of the dim woods, of what could come out at night. There are more things to worry about in Ohio than serial killing, chainsaw wielding, blue-eyed maniacs with good cheekbones, after all.

There are bears. And wild dogs. And coyotes that would totally eat me, probably, given the chance.

It's a toss up where I'll be safer. But I doubt I can find a hiding place here, around Jed's house, where he won't find me until morning if he bothers to look. But still my feet take me back to his parking area, my eyes fixed on the other road even though every muscle in my body begs to stop, take a break, and find something to drink, if not something to eat as well.

But I can't. I really *can't*. I need to keep going, to keep—

The noise that meets my ears makes me freeze, it's the sound of footsteps crunching on gravel. And this isn't an innocent sound of nature I can ignore and put off this time. It's too close, too solid for that.

I need to run.

The sound is coming from the other side of the Jeep, and I know I probably only have a few seconds of a grace period before whoever it is comes around and sees me.

*I need to run.*

But God, I'm just so tired. Hiking has never been a hobby of mine, or something I would consider myself good at. My trembling, rubbing thighs are more than a testament to that. Yet somehow, from somewhere, I need to get the energy to run. *Now*.

Jed saunters out from behind the Jeep, his blue eyes focused on the house and not at me. But I think I make a sound. A whimper, or a gasp, because they snap my way instead, pinning me in place.

He's covered in blood. My mind churns, fingers going cold as my palms start to sweat. I feel cold all over seconds later, as

my gaze drops to his hand, where he's holding the same chainsaw from before.

And worse still, it's just as bloody as the rest of him.

*He's going to kill me.*

And I'm pretty sure I'm too exhausted to do anything but stumble and wait for the end.

"I see you've been out enjoying the woods." Jed's words are mild, and a small smile hitches on his face. "Find anything good out there?"

## CHAPTER

# SIX

As his words hit my brain, all I can do is stand there and stare at him like a deer in headlights. It feels like the rational part of me has switched offline, and all I can focus on is the hunger twisting in my stomach and the soreness in my thighs.

There's no way I'm about to find a second wind that doesn't exist. Absolutely no way I can get away from him when he charges across the parking lot with the chainsaw on and revved in his hands. The only thing I can hope is that he trips and falls, somehow impaling himself on the rotating blades.

But he doesn't move. Instead, Jed repeats his words, more slowly this time, the smile twitching with an edge of concern.

"What?" All I can do is mumble the word as I stare at him, eyes flitting between his bloodstained face and the weapon in his hands. "What did you say to me?"

"I asked if you found anything good out in the woods," he repeats, even more slowly, if that's possible. Does he think I'm simple? Or just slow? "You've been gone for a while. I saw you leave earlier and figured since you were going with such, uh, conviction?" He shrugs his shoulders. "That you knew what you were doing."

"That road doesn't lead to anything," I say stupidly, as if he doesn't know that already. But instead of making fun of me, Jed nods sagely, like I've given him some solid advice.

“It loops around about three miles out,” he agrees. “Near the river. I rarely walk it, but the previous owner of this cabin would take his fishing gear out that way. He fished so much he had the small road put in for his four wheeler.”

That knowledge does nothing for me, and I just look at him, still feeling frozen in place as my legs threaten to give out. “Then the other road leads to where I want to go,” I reply, my words careful, yet regrettable the moment they’re out of my mouth.

Jed turns lazily, his eyes landing on the other gravel path away from the cabin. He seems to consider it, like he’s looking for something new, before his gaze slants back in my direction. “Oh, yeah?” he asks at last, his head tilting to the side.

“Well...yeah,” I all-but snap. “There are two driveways. If it’s not this one, it’s that one.”

“Are you going to try that theory tonight?” he shifts the chainsaw to his other hand and glances up, squinting to look through the trees. “You have a few hours of daylight left; but it’s easy to get lost out here after dark. And no offense, Saylor, but you could barely stay on a clearly marked path the last time you were outside in the dark.”

When he looks back at me, I can feel his heavy gaze on my face. Unfortunately for me, my eyes are fixed on the weapon in his hand, still shining with dark blood and pulling all of my focus as my brain goes around and around with how much it would hurt to die that way.

*I really don't want to be chopped up by a chainsaw.*

“I wasn’t sure when to expect you back,” Jed sighs, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like he feels guilty. “Or if I’d have to come show you the way. It wasn’t exactly my goal for you to see me all bloody and with this.” Carefully he sets it down, then takes a few deliberate steps away from it, so it’s out of range for him to just reach down and grab it.

In fact, with how he’s moved, I’m the one closer to it now.

But I have no idea how in the world to even turn it on, let alone use it. Will it do me any good, even if I can get my hands on it first?

Well, better me than him, right?

“I’m not trying to scare you.” His voice is gentle, and it draws my attention up to him in surprise. Even his *face* is gentle. In the fading, perfect light of golden hour, he really is impossibly striking. His cheekbones stand out against the blood, and his light blue eyes are discernible under his long lashes and with the trees’ shadows reaching out for him. There’s something incredibly unfair about a murderer being this attractive.

“You kidnapped me,” I point out, taking one step sideways as if I’m trying to create distance between us. “You literally kidnapped me after drugging me. Remember? I don’t think there’s much else to say.”

“There’s a lot more to say,” he argues, tracking my movement with his eyes. It’s almost an inhuman reaction, and sends a prickle of fear up my spine. In this moment, in this perfect light, he looks like a gorgeous and adept predator. “I didn’t bring you here to hurt you, Saylor. If I wanted to kill you to keep you from telling anyone, don’t you think I would’ve done it by now?”

I open my mouth, only to find I have no idea what to say. His words make me uncomfortable in their honesty, and it bothers me that I can’t find the lie in his face or his eyes.

But there’s no way in hell I’m going to let my guard down, let him talk me into complacency, or do anything else to compromise my small chance of making it out of this alive. I don’t have much of a choice, I realize, as my tired muscles tense.

I have to get the chainsaw.

Something changes in his face. Incredulity and warning cross his features almost before I move. When I take off—somehow finding a burst of energy I was sure I didn’t have—my feet scabble on the gravel under me and I lunge for the

chainsaw, figuring that I have enough of a distance advantage to make it.

Immediately Jed makes it clear that even on my best day and with a bigger head start, my attempt for the chainsaw is a fever dream I should've flushed down the drain.

Arms close around me like steel cables, pinning my arms to my sides and snatching me up from the fall his weight had knocked me into. My fingers close, brushing the handle of the chainsaw, before I'm jerked up and against him. I'm forced to stumble backwards, and I *shriek* in desperation, fighting him and watching my one chance fade away into nothing.

He's never going to let me go after this.

"Stop, *stop*," Jed growls in my ear, sounding stern and almost less-than-friendly for the first time since I'd met him. "Saylor *stop*." He shakes me like a scruffed puppy, easily standing upright and braced as I fight him. It occurs to me—when I slam my head back against his collarbone—he has a good six inches on my five foot seven height, and a hell of a lot of muscle, judging by the way he's not fazed by my jerking, desperate movements.

"I'm not going to hurt you!" he snaps against my face, finally taking off with my shoes kicking in the air with futile effort. "I'm serious. But I won't let you hurt yourself with that!" Before I can do more than laugh like I've lost my mind, my back is against his Jeep, the warmth of it a solid line as he brackets my body with his, also pressing his arms against the shell of the vehicle to hold me in place against it.

"I'm not going to hurt myself!" I snarl, my thighs screaming that I'm about to slither to the ground. "I'm going to hurt *you*!" Then I shove against him, but just like a boulder, he doesn't move.

"You're not going to hurt me. Have you ever picked up a chainsaw in your life?" His hand inches upward, and he swipes his thumb over my throat, prompting me to pull away as his murmured apology meets my ears.

But it's hard for me to hear it when he brings his now-bloody thumb to his lips to lick off what had transferred from him to me. Looking down, I realize that I'm now half as bloody as him, and my clothes look like I've been an accomplice to a particularly messy murder.

"No," I admit in a whisper, trying half-heartedly to shove at him again. "But I don't think it matters. It can't be that complicated."

"You don't even look like you could pick it up," Jed points out dryly, moving back slightly of his own free will when I push against him. "Let alone rev it. You're more likely to cut off your own leg than hurt me with it. Look, can you just..." He catches my wrist in his long-fingered hand, prompting my heart to drop into my stomach and my breath to stutter in my throat.

I don't miss the way his eyes flick down to my blood-streaked skin. I *can't* miss it, or the way his lips part when he does. He's so fucked up that it has me breathless, wordless, and almost mindless with fear as my heart slams against my ribs like a trapped animal.

"Just come inside," he murmurs in a low, soft voice. "Come inside with me and have dinner. I'm not going to hurt you, or whatever else you expect of me. I can't let you leave yet. Not until I know you understand how things are. But I *won't* hurt you, Saylor. Especially not how you think I will."

I don't know what that means. But agreeing might mean that I'll have another moment, another chance, to make my escape. At this point, I don't know what else to do. Going back in the house with him feels like a trap, like I'm allowing him the space and ease to kill me the moment we get inside.

The fear of that thought closes off my throat, but with my eyes on his, I try to jerk a nod to him.

For a few terrifying moments, I don't think he believes me. Jed searches my gaze, his blue eyes still so bright in the lengthening shadows like there's some kind of light behind them, shining out. Under any other circumstance, I would be looking for a reason to take a picture of him.

But this is the worst circumstance imaginable, and taking photos shouldn't even register in my brain. When I nod again, Jed's grip on my shoulders relaxes. The heat of him pulls away, and he blinks a few times, gaze becoming just as mild as I'm used to. "Come on," he invites, turning to pivot on one foot as he starts toward the cabin.

I don't move. I can't, because my eyes are back on the chainsaw and I'm already moving centimeters closer to it, hoping he won't notice.

It really is my one chance, even though I haven't thought past grabbing it and hoping I can rev it.

A sigh hits my ears, and it takes me a moment to realize it's from Jed, and he isn't moving. "You won't make it," he tells me without turning. "I'll catch you before you're even halfway there. I'll have to drag you inside with me, instead of you walking. Even if you did reach it, this won't end like you think. Don't do it, Saylor. Just come inside with me."

But *I can't*.

God, I can't bring myself to even consider another course of action. Not now.

Not *here*.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, though I have no idea if I'm talking to myself or him. I take off again, nearly falling when I do, and this time I don't even make it to the back end of the Jeep before he grabs me once more, arms around my waist.

But Jed doesn't bother to press me against the nearest hard surface. No, in a dizzying movement he picks me up over his shoulder, the air leaving me in an *oomph* when my stomach hits the hardness of his body. I'm forced to stare down the length of his bloody back while he walks, trying to suck air back into my paralyzed lungs.

All too soon I hear the door opening, and with a few more steps and a small whimper of protest, it closes behind me with a click.

But Jed doesn't put me down. Not even when I start fighting, and certainly not when I manage to deliver a



particularly ear-splitting shriek. “Put me *down!*” I finally manage to articulate, trying to kick against his chest. For all my trouble, Jed just wraps his arm more securely around my legs, and his movement changes, steps heavier.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s going up the stairs. Somehow that makes everything more horrifying, and everything snaps into terrifying clarity around me as I fight him, to absolutely no avail whatsoever.

I don’t quite realize where we’re going until I’m dumped on my ass on the closed toilet of his upstairs bathroom. I jerk my chin up, mouth open, to find his coldly burning gaze closer than I would’ve thought.

“Let’s talk about this,” he growls, shoving me down the moment I try to get up. “A chainsaw isn’t like a *knife.*” Inexplicably, he turns away from me to reach into the large glass-walled shower with a built-in bench. He turns one knob, then a different one, and the sound of water makes me look up to see the rainfall feature in the ceiling come to life.

Well, that’s certainly fancy.

“You can’t just hack away with it if it isn’t on.” When he comes back to me, I shrink back, and I swear I can see a touch of regret and embarrassment on his face. But it only lasts a few seconds before he kneels down in front of me, one hand on my knee. “It’s heavy. Too heavy for most people who don’t know the weight.” He reaches down, fingers carefully unlacing my sneakers as he continues to hold my gaze hostage with his. “Even if you do manage to rev it, which I doubt you could, Saylor. No offense meant, but let’s be honest with each other.” His head twitches to the side, a small smile flickering on his lips. “You have no idea what you’re doing. But like I said. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and say you *do* rev it. Do you know what happens then?”

“The chain spins around the uh, blade?” I whisper, like this is some kind of exam that matters in the long run. “And then it’s dangerous.”

“A chainsaw is always dangerous. And it does more than spin. If you’re not holding onto it, it’s going to jerk around. It’s

going to spin. It's going to *cut you*." His words are sharp as he pulls my shoes off and tosses them toward the door. They're muddy as hell, but he doesn't seem to notice how mud splatters on the floor from his throw.

"If you can't hold on to it? You're going to get hurt. This isn't about you hurting *me*, Saylor. It never has been. But I'm not going to stand by and watch you probably end up killing yourself. Sorry if that hurts your feelings, or your pride. But I didn't bring you here"—he breaks off to reach out to me, ignoring my flinch of surprise as his fingers gently tug down the zipper of my jacket—"just so you can kill yourself trying to get away from me." Some of the cold burn leaves his gaze, and a hint of a smile comes back. "It's also not nearly as flattering as you might think to imagine you hurting yourself like an animal willing to chew its own leg off to escape. So..." He stands up, pulling my jacket with him, and takes a step to the side.

My jacket ends up on the floor, but he reaches into the cabinet under the sink to produce three fluffy towels of varying sizes that end up on the top of the bathroom vanity. "Take a shower. Clean up. I can't...*focus* when you have blood streaked on your skin." As if to prove his point, he reaches out to run his fingers up my arm, over my throat, and to a sticky spot on my face from being pressed to his shirt. As I watch, he brings his now-bloody fingers to his mouth, sucking the blood off like it's chocolate.

There's no way that tastes good...right?

"I'm going to go make dinner. If you have any allergies, this would be the time to shout them out." He pivots on one foot, heading for the door and snatching up my jacket and shoes to take with him.

"Can I ask you something?" I whisper, still unable to move from my spot on the closed toilet as steam rapidly fills the bathroom air and obscures the edges of his form like he's not quite there.

He stops, but doesn't turn. Still, I take it as a yes and press my luck anyway.

“The blood on you and...and me. Is it human?”

He waits for a long moment until I'm sure he isn't going to answer. But finally Jed lets out a breath, his shoulders falling, and says simply, and mildly, “Yes,” before walking out and closing the door behind him.

## CHAPTER

# SEVEN

For a moment, I consider not getting in the shower once he's out the door, my shoes in his hand. Like that'll stop me from running down the gravel driveway in my socks.

But then his words connect with my brain and I shuck off my bloody clothes with haste. Then spread a towel on the floor a second before I hop into the large, too-fancy shower.

Then again, I think as I pick up a clean wash rag that he'd left in the shower and dump a liberal amount of body wash onto it, everything here is too fancy for a casual forest hunting cabin. It feels like he's paid someone to make it more than just livable.

It's...nice. Not huge or anything. One bedroom, two bathrooms, and an open space on the first floor for everything else. But I could see myself living here, if circumstances were different.

In the quiet, semi-dark of the bathroom's dim lighting and the loudness of the shower, I'm even willing to admit that in another situation—one where Jed isn't a chainsaw wielding maniac—I'd go out with him if he asked. And either that says something terrible about my taste in men, or...

No, it's definitely my taste in men.

My legs fold as I sit cross-legged on the floor of the shower, the rag still clenched in my hand as my black hair falls heavily down my back as it's soaked by the spray. A small part of me is thrilled that this isn't like my bathtub, where my knees smack against the sides and I have to sit uncomfortably

huddled on the floor of the shower when I want to relax under the hot water. I even eye the bench, wondering if it's comfortable enough to curl up on or if I'd just slip right off.

But even this is too much. I shouldn't be this comfortable in another person's shower. Especially a stranger's.

Especially a murderer's.

The blood on my skin streaks down in pink lines as I watch, eyes narrowed, unable to not relax as the hot water sings a lullaby to my abused, overworked muscles.

God, I could sit here forever. Or at least until the hot water is gone. I don't even try to move, except to lean my head into my hands and let myself fall forward just enough so the water cascades down my spine to the floor below me. One day, when I make real money, I want a shower like this.

*What if he's telling the truth?* The thought comes a few minutes after I let my mind drift, giving into the siren song of comfort and exhaustion from all the escaping I'd been doing today. Not that it had been a very successful escape, but I refuse to just call it *walking* or *skipping* down the gravel road to the river beyond.

I really should've picked the other road, though... My teeth bite into my lower lip as I remember the way he'd looked at me. How he'd welcomed me to try it, even though if it were the right way, surely he would be upset and trying to stop me.

In fact...Jed has barely tried to stop me from doing anything, except grabbing the chainsaw, and according to him, that was mostly for my safety, not his. If I can believe that.

*But what if he's telling the truth?* The thought nags at me, tugging at my brain insistently. He can't be. There's no way he is, considering he kidnapped me and brought me here against my will after drugging me in the swamp. Sure, he could've killed me there. Or here. Or literally any time in between. But he hadn't. And even tonight, when I'd tried multiple times to pick up a chainsaw to run him through—or at least get him to back off so I could run—he'd only brought me inside, told me

to shower, and asked if I was allergic to anything so he could make us dinner.

My stomach clenches when I realize I have no idea what I'm going to do if I walk out of this bathroom and find he's made good on his word. Do I just...eat dinner with him? Let him explain things, like he keeps saying he wants to do?

I doubt he'll let me stab him with a fork, and I'd really rather not lose fork privileges if future food is involved.

But there's no way I can trust a murderer. Especially one with a chainsaw and a fetish for licking blood off of my arms.

Well, not just my arms. But that thought brings a few uncomfortable ideas, and it takes me screaming the lyrics of "Sk8er Boy" in my head to chase away the mental pictures that I refuse to entertain for even a microsecond.

A sound makes me open my eyes, but when I look up, I see nothing has changed. I listen, head tilted under the spray, but nothing happens.

Until it comes again. Louder this time, and it occurs to me that Jed is tapping on the door as softly as he can.

"Dinner will be ready in ten," he calls, his voice almost... *shy*? Embarrassed, maybe? He doesn't sound completely comfortable, or confident, but I can't figure out why. He definitely holds all the power here. "I hope everything is okay." I can feel him standing there, waiting, and it's not until another few seconds have gone by that I hear the sound of his retreating footsteps as he walks back to the stairs on the other side of the room.

He's considerate, for a chainsaw wielding maniac. Really considerate, in fact. It's almost like he's normal. Like he's the kind of man I would love to drag home to my step-mom to prove to her I won't end up old, alone, decrepit, and starving.

Jed really is so gorgeous. His blue eyes have no right to be as striking as they are. Nor should his permanently tousled hair be so sexy. I've seen him run his fingers through it a few times since I've been his 'guest,' so I figure that his hair is trained

from that repetitive movement. Is it a nervous thing? Or just a sub-conscious act he does without even thinking about it?

And why in the world do I care? Why am I letting myself think about him as anything other than a chainsaw wielding maniac with a great shower?

And *amazing* cheekbones, as my brain so unhelpfully points out. Sharp, angular, and *perfect* for all the photo ideas I have involving his face.

It really is too bad about the murderer part of him. That's not something I can get past, for my own safety if not for anyone else's, and I don't see how I could ever trust that he isn't about to chop me up the moment he gets bored.

The water temperature changes, some of the heat I'm absorbing into my skin lessening, and I blink when I realize it's definitely been almost ten minutes. Hadn't he said dinner was going to be ready in ten?

Though at this point, I'm expecting chopped up people, freshly dressed deer, raw meat, or something else that will horrify me beyond belief. The image sets nausea rolling in my stomach.

But I don't have much of a choice. I sigh as I get to my feet and shampoo my hair quickly, just to get the sweat and dirt out of it. To save time, I don't use his conditioner. Even though I know I'll have to find some way to brush it out later when my hair maliciously curls and knots up after it's been wet; but that's a problem for another hour, if not another day.

Once that's done I mess with the knobs, narrowly missing dousing myself in freezing water before I turn the shower off and ring out my hair, eyes on the fluffy towels and my bloody, stained clothes.

I really don't want to put them back on. Hell, I'd give anything to have a change of clothes with me, or be able to wash these. But I doubt my captor is about to oh so kindly offer me access to his washing machine or let me borrow something from him.

I don't even know if I could put on something of his and not be horrified about what might have been on it before.

Finally, when I can't procrastinate anymore and the fear in my chest has frozen to an ice cube, I shrug on my dirty clothes, gritting my teeth at the feel of them, and stand in front of the mirror.

One way or another, I have to get this over with. My fingers drum on the vanity for a few moments before I finally tear myself away from it, going to the door and cracking it open like he might be there, waiting outside with a chainsaw.

He isn't. Obviously. But I still tiptoe down the stairs, heading to the kitchen where a bunch of really delicious smells suddenly remind me that I haven't eaten in probably at least a day and a half. My stomach clenches at the thought, and I fight not to put my hand against it in an effort to stop it from gnawing itself to bits at the smell of food.

*Real* food. Not the Lunchables stacked sky high in my fridge or the popcorn I'm guilty of microwaving and pouring salt and butter over at three am.

I don't realize I'm staring at the kitchen island and its array of food until Jed slides into a seat on the opposite side of it, eyes on mine and wary as hell.

As if *I'm* the unknown risk factor here and not him. While I watch him, Jed slowly jabs a fork into whatever he's eating that looks suspiciously like Chicken Alfredo with broccoli, and takes a bite; chewing carefully, like the sound of it might chase me away.

"You didn't give me any allergies or dislikes," he points out, like I'm somehow accusing him of something bad. "And I figured you had to be hungry. Since you haven't eaten since before the preserve, right?" He gestures with his fork to another plate, and my eyes fall on the already made up large, shallow bowl. It's filled with pasta, strips of grilled chicken, broccoli, and covered in a white sauce that sends tendrils of garlic-filled deliciousness my way to pull me in like a cartoon pie.



When my stomach growls again, I grip my shirt, still standing there unsure as my eyes flick back up to his.

“*And...if I were going to kill you, I wouldn’t go to the trouble of feeding you,*” he mumbles under his breath, stabbing another piece of chicken.

He...has a point. Unfortunately. Gingerly, I step forward to sit across from him, in front of the plate and the glass that’s filled with ice water. Up close, the food smells impossibly good, and I’m half-sure my stomach is going to riot if I don’t eat something *now*.

“Thank you,” I whisper, unable to stop myself. He did cook for me, after all. It would be rude as hell to not thank him for it. Out of the corner of my eye, I swear I see his mouth twitch in a smile, but he chases it away before I can tell for sure. “This smells better than anything I’ve ever thrown in the microwave.” I don’t know why I’m trying to joke or lighten the mood. Probably a survival tactic.

“I would hope so,” he replies, eyes on his food as he spins pasta around his fork. “Since this didn’t come out of a box.”

I don’t answer him this time. Instead, I take a few small, separate bites of food. First the chicken, then the broccoli, and finally the noodles that are so much better than any box I’ve bought. Though, admittedly, that could be my cooking of them, versus anything wrong with boxed noodles.

“Clearly I’m shopping in the wrong section of the grocery store,” I mutter, unable to not appreciate how good the sauce tastes on everything.

“Why’s that?” He chances a glance up at me, one brow raised as he appraises the huge bite of noodles and chicken that’s halfway to my mouth. I see it again—that small twitch of a grin on his lips—before it’s gone again.

“Because no box of noodles or any sauce I’ve bought has ever tasted this good.” I slam the whole thing into my mouth without politeness, and if this were any other situation, I would moan dramatically at how good it tastes.

Jed, for his part, finally grins, though he ducks his head and drops the edge of his fork down to his plate, where it sinks into noodles. “It’s not that good,” he argues, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think he was trying to be modest. “But uh, it’s not out of a box *or* a jar.”

“You’re not seriously about to tell me you made this.” The words are out before I can stop them. “Like, *made* this. From scratch.”

He looks up at me again, searching my face, then gestures over his shoulder to the counter where I see a few different pots and pans, and a weird, square-like appliance with a handle on the side. “It’s not that hard,” he assures me, before I can say a word. “Pasta doesn’t take long to make. And I could make Alfredo sauce in my sleep. It’s not...” He looks around again, as if he doesn’t know what to say. “It’s not a big deal, Saylor. Promise.”

I can’t answer. How can I, when my mind is blown at the idea of this man, this *murderer*, just casually cooking me dinner completely from scratch like he’s trying to impress me or...or....

Like this is a date.

The thought makes my fingers go numb, but I clench my fork harder and wind noodles around it again. “My meals consist of microwavable dinners, popcorn, and Lunchables,” I inform him at last, finding it a bit easier to meet his gaze this time when his eyes flick up to catch mine.

God, how are they so *blue*?

“Lunchables?” he repeats, his eyes narrowing. “You mean the fancy kind, right? Wheat crackers, better cheese, meat not processed completely to hell?” His brows rise by increments, like he’s building hope with every movement. “Right?”

“Wrong.” I point my fork at him, then stab it into a strip of chicken. “We’re talking turkey and cheese on crackers with a Nestle crunch bar. Pizza with sauce lacking, probably, real tomatoes.”

The disgust on his face is priceless, and I fight the small smile that twitches at my own lips. But this shouldn't be so... easy. It shouldn't feel like he's my friend. Like I'm *interested*. Because I'm definitely, irrevocably, not interested in anything other than getting the hell out of here.

But even that thought isn't enough to turn the food to ash in my mouth, so I keep eating. He's content enough to eat quietly, though every time I look at him, his eyes flick up to mine like he's just waiting for me to do or say something.

"I guess you, uh...locked up the chainsaw, huh?" I ask at last, when my bowl is two-thirds empty. "Along with all the knives?"

"Yeah," he agrees, giving my question a few moments' thought. "Yeah, I did. Sorry, Saylor." I have no idea why he's apologizing to me, but I watch as he sits back with a soft huff, his plate empty. "I figured the knives you actually *could* and *would* do damage with. And I don't want to wake up with a slit throat."

"That's...fair." I sit back, having picked out all the chicken, most of the noodles, and some of the broccoli from my bowl. I can't help wondering if he's a good cook across the board. Not that I intend on finding out. "But umm." I suck in a sharp breath, close my eyes, and barrel onward. "I want to ask—"

"You want to know why you're here. Why I didn't kill you. What I'm going to do with you?" He taps his fingers on the counter as he speaks, in a rhythm that threatens to get stuck in my head. "And I'm more than willing to answer all of that. As long as you do me one favor."

I open my eyes sharply, lips parting, but he cuts me off before I can say a word.

"I want you to listen to me explain what happened at the swamp, and why you really shouldn't be afraid of me, or feel sorry for him."

## CHAPTER

# EIGHT

**M**y brain rockets, thoughts soaring through my head at a million miles an hour. Delicately I pick up my napkin, worrying the paper through my fingers as I stare at him, wide-eyed and quiet.

I don't exactly have another option. And...he did just feed me. Literally made me a *homemade* meal instead of just popping something in the microwave like I would've done, even if my guest were the president himself.

"Okay," I say finally, my voice quieter than I'd like it to be. I clear my throat lightly, like that's the problem instead of the overwhelming fear and anxiety thrumming through my veins and making me a little nauseous. God, it would be such a waste to not get to keep custody of the food I'd just eaten. A crime, actually. Not just a waste.

So I suck in a breath and swallow the bad feelings in the back of my throat before meeting his eyes and saying, with more conviction, "I'm listening."

I don't expect the flash of approval, of satisfaction, on his face. But it's too clear for him to hide, even when he looks away and folds his hands, leaning his chin on them before he takes a breath. "His name is—or was—Tyson Miller, and he killed four girls over the span of a few years. He killed them *horribly*, Saylor. I saw pictures of the last one, from last month. It was..." He shakes his head from side to side, obviously lost in the memory. "If you knew my family and what I saw growing up, you'd know how hard it is to unsettle me with murder or gore.." He unlaces his fingers like he's

nervous, tapping the knuckles of one hand against the counter under us.

“So you’re Batman with a chainsaw?” I ask, disbelieving. There’s no way he’s some vigilante going around punishing those the law doesn’t. And if he tries to make me believe that, I’m going to start looking for the chainsaw again.

“No,” Jed shakes his head fervently, the look on his face incredulously amused. “No, not at all. I’m not very nice, and my friends aren’t either. Though...if they would’ve talked me through explaining this to...” He looks up at me, his blue eyes wide and doe-like, as if *he’s* the one caught in searing headlights instead of me. “Well. Anyway, no, I’m not. And I’ve killed people who don’t deserve it, which won’t help this conversation, I’m sure.”

He searches my face, looking for anything, and whatever he must see there causes his gaze to flick back to his empty plate. “But I’m trying to explain about *this* man and why I couldn’t wait for you to leave first before I did it. Normally, I’m sure there are no witnesses, unless I need there to be. But he was leaving soon. That swamp? He used it for uh, a disposal site once. Pretty sure he was visiting it before leaving, and I couldn’t let him leave.”

“How do you know all this about him?” My curiosity gets the better of me, and the words pour out of my mouth before I can stop them. “If you aren’t Chainsaw Batman with an infinite list of resources and informants.”

“It’s a small world.” Jed just shrugs. “A friend of a friend told me. Even for my friends and I, killing children, doing what he did to them?” He shakes his head. “It’s not right. If I hadn’t done it, one of them would’ve. It was just unlucky timing that you were there and saw. Though...” He finds my eyes again, pinning me in place and not letting me look away. “I’d be lying if I said I regret meeting you. I just wish it was under better circumstances.”

My mouth opens, then closes. I swear I have a million things to say, from insults to one-liners to unfunny jokes that even I won’t laugh at. But all I can do is look at him, as the

admission zips around my brain like a trapped fly, and watch those ice-blue eyes stare at me with anything but a threat in them.

“Okay,” I say stupidly. Because I have no idea what else to say to that admission from him. I, for one, regret being there. I regret not getting out of the swamp when he’d told me to, though I have gotten a fantastic dinner out of it.

I just don’t want it to be my *last* dinner.

He searches my eyes for another moment, head tilted, before letting his eyes flit away once again, to focus on something I can’t see. “So I killed him. And made it hurt, the way my family taught me to. I’m good at that, though I never asked to be.” Casually he shrugs one shoulder, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world to admit your family members are also probably serial killing chainsaw aficionados.

*I would be the one to go home against my will with a chainsaw lover.*

“Okay.” I don’t mean to repeat the word. But I don’t know what else to say. I feel numb at his declaration. I feel as if the meaning only half-registers, the rest of it sliding off of my outer shell without sinking in. All I can really decipher are the things he’d said about the man. About what he’d done.

But I don’t know whether I can believe him. Certainly he hasn’t hurt me, but he’s definitely kidnapped me, kept me here, wielded a chainsaw and—

“You could’ve killed me.” I don’t mean to say it, but I can’t help the words as they pour out. “You could’ve killed me like, any time over the past two days.” My stomach twists, nausea threatening to choke me. “But you haven’t. Are you...” I search my mind for a question I can ask. Anything I can say to somehow assure myself of my safety. But how can I trust any of the honeyed words out of his perfect mouth after what I’ve seen?

“I know you don’t trust me.” He sighs, letting the words trail off with disdain. “I wish I’d met you under any other circumstance, Saylor. It would be so much easier to convince

you if you hadn't watched me kill someone. I won't kill you, and I don't want to keep you here against your will. But I don't want to go to jail or risk that for my friends..”

His *friends*. He's mentioned them more than once, and it sticks in my mind as something important as I sit gingerly back in my chair.

“Your friends...are they like you? Are they...?” I mime holding and swinging a chainsaw, and his eyes darken with poorly hidden amusement.

“Yeah, you're not going anywhere *near* my chainsaw,” he informs me as I drop my hands. “That's not the kind of motion you make at all. You'd cut off your own leg, princess—” He freezes, finding my eyes for my reaction, and I realize he thinks he's fucked up with the nickname. That I'll be mad or run screaming.

But all I can really do is stare at him and try to remember if anyone, even a man I've dated, has called me *princess*.

That, and I try to ignore the fact I don't hate it whatsoever. I should hate it. It should feel awful, or at least weird. But I hope my face doesn't betray the only confusion I feel is at the timing and the source. Not the intent or the word itself.

“They don't have chainsaws lying around, but they're like me,” he adds awkwardly, trying to get the conversation back on track. “Just not raised by a family like mine. They just... *are*.” He shrugs, and I have no idea what in the world those words mean.

But I also don't have the guts to ask.

“You can't be sure I won't tell.” God, why do I say the stupidest things? “Like, I could tell you all the things you want to hear. I could act like I won't tell.” The stupid words that are going to get me murdered just keep coming, no matter how much I want to stuff them back inside. “Are you going to keep me here forever?”

“Well...” Jed sits back in his chair, eyeing me carefully. “You're not a very good actor. Especially when you're afraid. So if you try to come and tell me you won't tell without

meaning it, I'd be incredibly surprised if you can make me believe it. Sorry, Saylor." His smile really is apologetic, and he loosely crosses his arms over his chest.

"So I'll just have to trust you when I think you're telling the truth. You're right I'll never know for certain. I'm not a mind reader. And I can't stop you once you're gone. But since I'm not willing to kill you, it puts me in a difficult place... unless you get murdered by a coyote, a tree, a stray twig, or a leaf," he amends quickly.

Am I really so pathetic that he thinks a leaf could take me out? I open my mouth to ask, then close it, realizing I don't want to know. After the chainsaw safety lectures he seems full of, I'm pretty sure he thinks me capable of any stupidity in the world right now.

"What do I have to do to convince you I won't tell the police? You know, since if I promise it now and go on about it, I know you won't believe me?" My words are careful, and I don't expect a real answer, even as his gaze slants to the side, thoughtful.

"You could stop trying to murder me with my own chainsaw, for one," he offers, brows raised with gracious intent. "That would be pretty cool. I enjoy carrying you, but not when it's to stop you from accidentally hurting yourself—"

"You could just say due to murderous intent," I mutter, hating hearing, again, how I could've offed myself in my attempt to escape.

"Either way. You could stop trying to maim me with my own chainsaw. You could stop acting like I'm going to kill you every time you see me. Or looking for weapons over my shoulders while we talk." He says it so casually. Like I'd been obvious in my intent.

It's a blow to my self esteem that I'm not subtle, and I huff. "Aren't you just bursting all of my bubbles tonight?" I mutter, the words more lighthearted than I expect them to be.

"Sorry." His smile is wryly apologetic. "Why don't you... tell me your favorite color?" he asks at last, getting to his feet



and snagging my plate from in front of me while picking up his own. It feels wrong for him to cook *and* clean, and I know my mother is probably glaring at me from the afterlife as I let him scrape our bowls into the trash before running them under hot water.

She'd always been the one to preach good manners, under any circumstance. I'm sure even in this circumstance she'd preach good manners.

"Indigo," I tell Jed, after a moment's hesitation to consider the question. "My favorite color is indigo."

"Why?" he doesn't stop doing dishes as he asks, but does tap the toe of his shoe against the floor under him.

"I don't know. I don't think color preferences are a conscious choice, are they? Though I prefer cool colors, and the colors between other colors, if that makes sense." I pluck at the napkin in front of me, eyes still fixed on his. "What's yours?"

"Chartreuse," he answers instantly.

"Oh, and you question *my* color choice? You should feel lucky I even know what chartreuse is." Somehow, it's easy to talk about things like this. Especially with the rewarding smile he throws my way as if it cost him nothing. Though, I guess it didn't. He's not the one watching his every move.

Or who should be, anyway.

"What's your favorite food? I don't want to make something you don't like, so it benefits you as well."

"Cheese makes the world go 'round. It's truly God's gift to mankind." I'm not really joking, and I watch as he turns to lean against the counter, his grin wide.

"I don't believe in God," Jed admits, rolling his shoulders in the sleeves of his long-sleeve tee. "Sorry."

I think back to the look of him in the swamp, with the chainsaw in his hands and blood covering him. "Yeah," I sigh, hands dropping to my lap. "I guess if I were you, I might not either."

Twenty minutes later, I'm staring down at his pillows, realizing for the first time that as this is the only bed in the cabin, it's *his* bed. I'd seen the blanket and pillow on the couch in the living room below and I can hear him there now, rustling around as he gets ready to sleep. But I hadn't realized that he'd let me monopolize his room and ensuite without even saying a word about it. He hadn't told me he was sleeping here too, or kicked me to the floor or sofa, like a guest deserves.

Instead, he'd given me this room, this bed, his shower, while acting like it was the most normal thing in the world for him to take the couch and be relegated to the small bathroom. Jed had even revealed he'd grabbed a few days' worth of clothes while I'd been knocked out, so he wouldn't need to bother me with coming in and out.

But I'm too tired to argue with myself tonight. Too tired to do more than sink into the mattress and let my head fall onto one of his soft pillows that smell like him and his sharply scented body wash. I curl onto my side and stare out the dark window, thoughts reeling from our conversation and the things he'd said.

*I don't know what to do.* My eyes close, thoughts hazy as I feel myself sinking into sleep while I listen to Jed move around downstairs. *What if he isn't lying to me?* I fade off with that thought in my brain, clenching blankets he'd slept on and a pillow that smells enough like Jed to assure any dreams I have will be of him.

## CHAPTER

# NINE

I'm surprised to wake up earlier than him. It's pure instinct to tiptoe around when I do wake up, hating that I'm still wearing the same clothes from the last few days. They're starting to feel disgusting, and it's taking all of my willpower to not be constantly grossed out by them with every move I make.

But I do the best I can in the bathroom mirror; washing my face and finger combing my hair that's started to sense a rebellion is on the rise. In a few more days, I'll have to chop it off to end the mutiny that's coming. That, or deal with mats the likes of which the world has never seen.

And being tender-headed, that's a no go for me whenever I can help it.

When I tiptoe back out of the bathroom, rolling my shoulders to loosen them and relieve my stiff neck, my ears pick up movement from below. A low sound, at first, but one that draws me to the railing at the edge of the room, when something clatters to the wooden floor.

The first thing I see is the length of smooth skin that makes up Jed's back. Half sitting, half leaning over to search the floor with splayed fingers like he isn't really awake yet, I can see that his pj pants have ridden down to sit low on his hips; revealing more of his skin to me than I've seen before.

God, no one who cuts people up with chainsaws should be this gorgeous. But that thought only drives the conversation

from last night through my skull like a nail, and I close my eyes against his words. Against his explanations.

Against the fact he's happy I'm here, even though he wishes there were better circumstances. I hate the fact I'd marveled at the food he made. I hate even more that I'd been so willing to listen, and that I'm still *so fucking willing* to understand.

But there's nothing to understand. If he's not lying to me, then he's a psycho. One or the other.

My eyes open, and my stomach lurches into my throat when I see he's sitting on the couch, head resting on the back of it, tilted up so he can look at me. His blue eyes, so shocking even from this far away, wait patiently for mine to find them, and I can't help but stare right back.

I need to say something. I need to diffuse the situation, but the suddenly heavy air in the cabin makes me feel like I can barely breathe.

All I can do is stare at him. Even from up here, I can read a fathom of emotion in those sleepy eyes. Hopefulness. Uncertainty.

And there's something underneath. Something that lurks behind those emotions, using them as a mask to sit unseen. It makes me certain that he's not the kind vigilante he'd presented himself as, and that his boyish charm isn't quite all of him.

He's hiding part of himself from me.

But I'm not sure I want to know what it is.

I blink, finally, and suck in a breath of cool air. It helps, so I do it again, all of me unfreezing as my fingers unclench ever-so-slightly from the railing I'm holding onto. All the while, I search for words in my mushy haze of thoughts; my lips parted in anticipation of whatever I find.

"Don't you have a job?" They aren't exactly the best I could offer, but I can't take them back once they're out in the world for him to hear. Still, my teeth clench, my jaw aching with the effort. That was a rude as hell question, and one he

definitely doesn't have to answer. What the hell does it matter if he has a job or not?

"I do." Amusement laces with his words as they travel up to me, and when I finally get the courage to look at him once more, I see that Jed hasn't moved. He's still leaning on the back of the sofa. His hair tousled and his eyes sleepy and adorable.

In another life, I'd love for him to be up here instead of down there. I'd love to see his sleep-scattered expression up close, drag my hands through his soft-looking hair, and—

"Aren't they missing you?" The words from my mouth thankfully cut through the treacherous fantasy that shouldn't be within a mile or ten of my brain.

"No." He's so casual when he says it, and shrugs one bare shoulder. "They don't mind when I take some personal time."

"Oh." I pull on my sleeves, wrinkling my nose at the state my shirt is in. "You have to let me go home soon," I add conversationally, this time looking at my hands instead of at him. "My clothes are getting disgusting."

"I have a laundry machine," Jed points out smoothly, without hesitation. "Why don't you let me wash them?"

"Because I don't intend to walk around here naked?" Wasn't that obvious? I don't add the last part, but I do let my gaze flick back up to his, skeptical of his words. Surely he doesn't think I trust him nearly enough to take off my clothes while he's here and just be naked. Hell, he can't even trust me not to tell the cops what he is.

"I'm not asking you to." He gets up and stretches, not bothering to do much to fix the waistline of his pants. I watch, unable to look away, as he stretches like a cat, all smooth muscle and impossible grace.

It's unfortunate that when my eyes find his again, he's looking at me as if he's waiting for something.

But if I'm supposed to know what it is, then my brain isn't helping me out by spelling the answer out for me. "Can I come

up?” he asks finally, head tilting toward the staircase that he’s near.

“Okay.” It’s not a perfect answer, but he barely hesitates before taking the stairs languidly, like he has all day to do so. He opens the door after a brief pause, and looks at me where I still stand in front of the railing, my arms crossed on it while I try to look casual or relaxed.

Or like anything other than a pinned, trapped rabbit.

His eyes are strangely thoughtful as he looks me over, eyes dropping down my body as if he’s calculating or estimating, not appreciating how awful I look in blood-stained, filthy clothes.

“I’ll wash the sheets today,” he says like an afterthought, strolling over to the big armoire and pulling open a drawer. From there he pulls out a couple of shirts, and from a drawer two down, he takes out another two pairs of what I assume are sweatpants.

“Do you want a jacket?” Jed doesn’t wait for my answer. I don’t have one anyway, since I’m so surprised at his consideration for me. He passes in front of where I stand, opening the closet door and stepping inside to pull out two hangers.

“You can pick,” he offers, tossing everything to the bed. “And I can wash your clothes for you. I’m not sure...” His gaze slants back my way, fixed on the cloth of my shirt. “If the blood is going to come out. But I’ll try.”

“Oh.” I reply, having no idea what I’m supposed to say. But the clothes on the bed look more inviting than they should, and amplify the grittiness of my own against my skin. “Umm. Thank you.” It would be beyond rude not to thank him, even though Jed is already back on the landing of the stairs.

He stops to turn, gazing at me with something like surprise on his face. His lips curl into a soft smile, but he doesn’t say anything. He just...goes away. Back down the stairs to grab a change of clothes from the pile by his sofa that he whisks into the downstairs bathroom along with him.

I don't hesitate, even though I should. I definitely shouldn't be so willing to put on Jed's clothes, that's for sure. But I grab a shirt, a pair of pants and, after a moment of hesitation, one of the hoodies before I disappear back into the bathroom.

Instead of putting them on, however, I jump back in the luxurious shower, feeling a moment of guilt for stealing some of the hot water. But I make sure to be fast, so that I hopefully don't affect his shower downstairs, before jumping back out and toweling off so that I don't feel grimy before putting on fresh clothes.

Thanks to my curves, the clothes aren't as baggy as I'd like them to be. The pants are, for the most part. They're snug against my thighs and I tie the drawstring loosely around my waist, glad that they're warmer than I'd first thought. But the shirt fits even more snugly, though not to the point of discomfort. That is to say, it hugs my curves and shows exactly where I could stand to drop a few pounds.

Like everywhere.

But that thought only brings up the familiar feelings of self-deprecation, and the sound of my step-mother's voice in my ear telling me all about this new diet drink she saw on a talk show that she's bought me three cases of.

I'm already kidnapped. Do I really need the amount of depression that'll bring on as well? It seems unfair. Still, I can't stop my hands from trailing over my body, fingers tingling as my eyes stay stuck on the mirror. God, I should've done this in the bathroom mirror. The mirror in the bedroom is much larger, and much less forgiving.

*Why do I do this to myself?*

I can see the hurt on my face. I can feel the sinking in my chest, and the familiar feelings of insecurity that always rush to accompany this.

But Jed's face in the mirror over my shoulder makes me pause, and he watches me, confusion on his features. "You look good in my clothes," he murmurs into a silence so

absolute that it should be illegal. If there were a clock ticking in the room, I'd hear it. Hell, I can hear my breathing, faster than his, and his longer, steadier breaths behind me.

“No, I don't.” My mouth betrays me, but I can't agree with his words. Not with how I am now. “You can see *everything*.” For emphasis, I run my fingers over the sides of my stomach, tracing my shape with the pads of them.

“What?” He tilts his head, confused, and his hands come forward near my sides, hovering inches over my skin. “That's...well, yeah. That's why you look so good.” I can see the bemused concern on his features, and it only makes me look away from him.

“I know what I look like, all right?” I huff at last, though my legs won't move so I can casually walk away like I so desperately need to. “You don't have to lie to me.”

“I've never lied to you”—his voice is too soft, too kind, and God, I really need to move—“I don't intend to start now.” Very, *very* lightly, I feel his fingers touch the backs of my hands, matching my movements up and down the sides of my torso.

Thankfully, he has more sense than me. Jed pulls himself away and clears his throat, so I pretend not to notice the flush on his face as he ducks to the side to hide it. “I have to go outside,” he tells me, studying the floor. “I...things to do. You can come or stay or...I'll do laundry later. Shoes by the door.” He's losing words in his sentences, like he's used them all up for the day.

And that's what I'll tell myself when I wonder why I followed him. That I'm curious why he doesn't seem to have enough words for everything he wants to say. I follow him, dogging his steps down the stairs and pulling my shoes on while he waits at the door.

“I'm coming with you,” I announce, my chin raised like it's a threat or an admission of boldness.

But his smile tells me he doesn't see it that way. Neither does the way his shoulders drop, as the tension leaves them.



“Good,” Jed tells me, eyes bright. “We’ll take the other path so you don’t have to do it on your next escape attempt.”

## CHAPTER

# TEN

I can't pretend to be surprised when he doesn't protest me following him, because that would require Jed to say more than a few words. And as we walk outside, I can tell that he's not exactly in a talking mood.

The woods feel different from the city. It's darker, cooler, and things are quieter than they are in my apartment. But then again, with a half-deaf landlady always watching *Wheel of Fortune* at full blast next-door to me and a younger couple who lives to party above me, anywhere is quieter than my apartment.

But the shadows feel deeper as well, and I rub my hands up and down my arms as I follow him down the path I hadn't tried to escape down yesterday. "Doesn't this lead to the road?" I ask, when he shows no sign of stopping.

Jed cranes his head back to look at me, eyebrows raising by small increments as his blue eyes remain wide and plaintive. "I know you think so," he says almost kindly, a small, almost apologetic smile on his face. "But I'm probably going to break your heart."

That's a no if I've ever heard one. But only part of me believes him. One of the two ways to get to the cabin has to lead to civilization. It's not like he levitated his car here, or took a magical underground tunnel. No, if he's not bluffing then...

Well, then I really don't know what could be at the end of this road.

I don't realize I've fallen into a surly silence, my steps quickening to match Jed's, until my shoulder unexpectedly bumps against his. My chin jerks up, eyes slanting toward his. I find his gaze already waiting like he knows I'm going to look up at those too-blue eyes of his that don't match any version of a serial killer I've created in my head. It's unfair of him, really. It's unfair for him to be so gorgeous and so honest-looking.

And it's definitely unfair that I can't look away from him. Even when his arm brushes mine, his steps are in sync with mine as we walk along the path that's slowly turning into more dirt, less gravel. Which, unfortunately, means he might have been honest about the fact this path doesn't lead to a road.

"You have to have driven here somehow," I point out, still not looking away from his face. "You didn't just snap your fingers and bring us here by magic in your Jeep."

A smile curls along his perfect lips, and he doesn't attempt to create any space between us. "True," he agrees, with only a little bit of hesitation. "I'm no magician."

"So there has to be a road out of here. The trees are too close to drive between." I glance back behind us, wondering if I've missed some side road, somehow, with tire tracks that disappear between the trees. Surely yesterday I would've noticed something. But today, when I'm distracted by him?

I feel like I barely notice anything at all.

"Does there?" His eyes glitter when he asks, and he's unable to stop the start of a slow, dark smirk along his lips. "Are you sure? Out here?" he spins in a circle as he walks, not stopping but giving the area around us a quick, cursory scan like he's looking for the road I've mentioned. "Sorry." The smile doesn't drop, but he does shrug one shoulder.

"Why are you sorry?" I don't know why I ask. I don't know why I can't look away from him or even move far enough away that my arm doesn't brush his.

But I know his skin against mine is soft and warm, and part of me wants to slide even closer for some of his warmth.

“Because I don’t mean to tease you,” he drawls in that lazy voice of his. “I don’t want to make this worse, or make you think I’m taunting you with an exit that doesn’t exist. It *does* exist, by the way. Especially for you. Just not this way. Not... on this path.”

“Then why are we walking this way? Are you like a local forest ranger? Is that why you live out in the middle of nowhere in a way-too-fancy cabin?” My lips move of their own accord, but my curiosity about him is raging today. “Do you like chartreuse because trees are your job?”

“I’m not a forest ranger,” Jed promises in a low laugh. “I like chartreuse because I am who I am.” He shakes his head, and his fingers brush mine once, then again when I don’t jump. “You’re not quite so afraid of me today,” he remarks, without answering my other questions.

“You’re not so frightening today,” I fire back, before I can lose my nerve. I wonder if it’s me that’s changed, and not him.

“I think it’s the other way,” is his quiet response, and challengingly he hooks his pinkie finger around mine, just tightly enough that I know he’s there, but loosely enough to leave me with an escape. “You can always walk away from me, Saylor,” he promises, going suddenly serious and wordy. “I’ll never force you into a situation you don’t want.”

“Except being here,” I remind him, a rueful half-smirk curling my lips.

“Except that,” he acquiesces. “Come on.” His steps pick up, and he hooks another finger around mine so he has a better grip. Jed tugs me along the path, dragging me further into thicker woods of the, presumably Ohio, wilderness.

“I like to come this way every few days,” he admits, still walking at his aggressively long-legged pace that requires me to walk faster than normal to keep up with him. “Just to make sure there aren’t any poachers.”

“Poachers?” I question the word, surprised at it. Where the hell are there *poachers* in Ohio? “Like, actual *poachers*? Invaders of land, hunters of illegal animal *poachers*?”

“Well, we are on the edge of a nature preserve,” Jed drawls without looking back. “Look.” His steps slow as we reach a large, flat dirt area of the path. “No, you still won’t find the road from here unless you want to walk for a few days,” he adds, before I can ask. “But...” He gestures at old tire treads that look too small to be actual, full-size vehicles.

Now I see why he says I wouldn’t find the road from here. If the only way to get here is a four-wheeler, not a car, then how the hell do I find where an actual road might be? He must sense that I’m getting lost in my thoughts, because Jed pulls me closer, steps slowing as he desperately clutches more of my fingers gently in his.

I should pull away.

My stomach flutters, butterflies taking flight somewhere under my ribs when I look at him, then at our hands. Something has clearly happened to me, because overnight I’ve gone from petrified of him to, well, definitely less.

The fear is still there. It bubbles and seethes under my skin, but now there’s something bubbling and seething along with it. Something I’m not sure I’m willing to name. Jed isn’t like anyone I’ve ever met before. Even apart from the chainsaw wielding, bloody-skinned killer I’d met a few nights ago at the marsh.

And before I know it, my fingers curl in his, almost without me willing them to. I see Jed’s eyes look down to our hands once more, and a small look of surprise flits across his features before he squares his shoulders and looks away. Maybe he’s decided ignoring it will make it not as big of a deal. Or make me think it isn’t.

I can’t help that his words flit through my head on repeat. Why he’d done it. What the man had done. How he felt bad about me seeing it and us meeting this way.

How he isn’t sad or regretful that he met me.

In any other circumstance, I would be thrilled to meet Jed. Though, realistically, I don’t know in what other circumstance we would’ve met. He’s everything all the men I’ve ever met

could never be. Including the amazing chef my life so desperately needs, since he can boil water without setting the house on fire.

My heart flutters when he slows again, brain drifting back to the warmth of his skin on mine. “Jed?” It’s times like these that my brain runs away with itself, and my mouth doesn’t know how to stop.

He comes to a halt, and over his shoulder I see something through the trees that looks man made instead of natural. When he searches my gaze, however, his brow furrows and he sighs. “You’re going to ask me something you don’t like,” he assumes correctly. “Can you wait? Just for a few seconds so I can show you something?”

I mull that thought over in my head before tilting my chin forward in agreement. “Okay. Does that mean you’ll answer what I ask you?”

His stare lasts a few more seconds, eyes seeming to lighten to a ghostly, ethereal blue. “Yes.” The word is simple, honest, and seems to echo in the woods. Jed gently tugs on my arm again, pulling me down the path until the structure fully comes into view.

It’s a bridge. A wooden bridge, starting a few feet from where the ground drops away from under the now-grassy path. I want to stop, to stare at it, to take it in as I wish I had my camera, but Jed pulls me along with him, onto the wooden planks of the bridge and up.

My hand goes out, fingers trailing along the wooden railing as we walk, until a sharp jolt of pain makes me hiss between my teeth, jerking my arm away from it as it burns.

Naturally, I’ve cut myself on something. The scrape is shallow and long, stretching from the underside of my wrist up towards my elbow, though stopping halfway.

Wonderful. Now I’m probably going to get Ebola or wood-tetanus.

Still, the view of the gentle river below is worth it. Jed stops and drops my hand, having not noticed my cut just yet as

he leans his arms on the bridge's rail to stare at the water as well. "I like coming here," he admits. "There are trails on the other side, but they aren't used much anymore. I don't keep going unless I see signs of someone being here." His words are thoughtful, explanation easy and sensible.

I lean against the railing as well, my ears flooded with the sound of water as my eyes take in every inch of the woods and the river below the old wooden bridge. "It's so pretty," I admit, almost ruefully. "What nature preserve are we in?" I don't mean it as a prodding, escape-type question. But Jed's snort and his baleful look make me realize that's exactly what it seems like. "Yeah, okay. Sorry. I was just curious," I mutter with a roll of my eyes and my weight shifting from my heels to the balls of my feet.

"You can ask whatever you want," he tells me after another minute of me mentally painting the scenery into my memory. I don't know if I'll be back, after all. "Just remember the way back if you decide to run." He barely sounds put out about it, and it occurs to me he expects me to run.

But I don't ask right away. Though the questions bubble to my lips and I know they won't last behind my gritted teeth for much longer. If not now, when?

"Why were you covered in blood yesterday?" I ask, almost wishing I didn't. "When you killed that guy like three days ago. You told me it was human blood."

"It was," he agrees, dipping his head without looking at me. When I look at him I can tell he's searching for the least offensive or horrifying answer he can, but then he sighs, resigned, and adds, "One of my friends needed something cut up for...disposal." Even with him muttering the last word, I still hear it, and it still sends tremors down my spine.

"Was it someone who was bad?" I whisper, barely audible over the rushing of the water. "Like the guy from the marsh?"

"I don't know," Jed admits with a shrug. "I didn't think to ask. He showed up when you were asleep yesterday morning, asked me for help, and left. I was trying to time it so you wouldn't know anything about it. It was...bad timing all

around.” He grins wryly, the look dropping from his face a moment later. “I’m sorry. Even though I don’t know anything about the guy, or what happened, he probably wasn’t an upstanding citizen.”

Shudders run up and down my spine as I stare at the water. But there’s nothing I can do about that person. That blood. Or that murder. It wasn’t Jed, and something in me unclenches in relief at that, though it shouldn’t matter to me which of them had done it.

Murder is murder, after all. And Jed had helped. Even if he’d only helped at the very end. Surely that should stir up my fear and my disgust more than it does.

My eyes are drawn to the blood on my wrist, welling at the scratch from the rough wood of the railing. “Why did you...” God, I really shouldn’t ask. I should let this particular question die. “I’m not judging,” I say, as if for some reason it should matter to me if he’s offended by the question.

But that draws his attention towards me in full, and I *feel* the moment he sees the cut on my arm. “Why do you care when there’s a dead guy’s blood on me? Why do you...?” I trail off, unable to finish my question. Unable to ask why he’s so quick to lick the blood of murdered men off of me.

A low, grating chuckle leaves him, and Jed reaches out gingerly, his fingers encircling my wrist, just under my palm. He tugs, lightly enough that I know he’d let me pull away, and gingerly pulls my arm up toward him. “It’s not just a dead man’s blood that I care about.” When did his voice get so hoarse? So rough and low in my ears? “It’s just something about seeing blood on you, Saylor.” Instead of saying anything else, he turns my wrist to face him, his eyes locked on mine. I know what he’s going to do.

I know I should stop him.

But I only loosely curl my fingers, my breath stuttering in my chest as his tongue darts out to run up my arm, over the line of still-wet blood from the cut. It doesn’t hurt; it tingles. The warm wet sensation of his tongue is strange against my



skin as he cleans up my arm way more thoroughly than he needs to.

Like he's looking for any missed speck or drop of it before he can let me go.

"That can't taste good," I whisper, and his eyes darken at the words.

"It tastes better than you can imagine," he replies in a strained whisper. My heart pounds as he surveys the cut, blood welling at its irritated edges just for him to catch it once more on his tongue. "When did this happen?" he asks, distracted, when once again there's no blood for him to lap up like a cat.

"Just...just now." There's a lump in my throat, but that's not my biggest problem. No, I'm much more concerned at the warmth spreading through my body; pooling between my clenched thighs.

I barely even notice when he pulls me another step closer. My brain certainly doesn't register anything until my back hits the railing, his body pressed against mine and one of his hands still holding my wrist up to his face, while the other one presses against the rail beside my hip.

"It can't taste good," I say again, brain short circuiting. There's no other explanation for why I'm still here. For why my body is *begging* for him to close the scant centimeters between us so I can rub against him like a cat.

"You don't think it can?" His eyes slant to mine, impossibly blue in the light filtering through the trees. "You really don't?"

I shake my head, extra-aware of the fact he's sliding impossibly closer, until his body presses against mine, thigh slotting between both of my own.

And *fuck*, I should really push him away.

"Find out," he invites, dropping my arm. His free hand comes up to my chin, tilting my head up to his as his eyes darken and that look from before, the one where something dark and sinister lurks behind his gaze, finds mine in the light of day.

*He's hiding something darker from me.*

But I don't get a chance to say anything about it. The kiss I expect to be as gentle as his hold on me sears against my mouth; his teeth sinking into my lower lip as he growls, expectant, against me. Immediately I open my mouth to him, feeling his tongue press against mine as the combined taste of my blood, coppery and sharp, and *Jed* himself takes over my entire existence.

*Fuck, he tastes so good.* My blood adds a strange sharpness to the act, and I feel myself reach out to grip his shirt, balling the material in my fingers as I drag him more tightly against me. For a moment, I don't realize what the sound and feeling in my mouth is until I realize with a shock it's his growl. His fingers tighten on my jaw, holding me with a ferocity just this side of painful.

And he doesn't let me pull away.

Not that I want to. No part of me wants to pull away from him, and a deeper, feral part of my brain wants him closer than this, if that's even possible.

But when his sharp canines nip at my lip, nearly drawing blood, the answering jolt that shoots between my thighs is enough to shock my brain into the realization that this isn't right. I can't do this. Not with him. No matter how much every part of me begs to.

"N-no. Wait," I hiss, pulling away from him. "I can't—"

"I know," Jed sighs, dropping his arms immediately and pulling away, though a glance at his face shows that he isn't angry, or disappointed. He's actually...amused? "I know, Saylor." Jed runs his fingers through his hair, licking his kiss-swollen lips. "Just give me a second before you run. Please?"

"Why?" I demand, breath coming in fast pants. I know the way back. I know how long it'll take. My muscles clench; thighs burning as they beg for movement. "*Why?*"

"So I can remind myself not to chase you." It's there again, the dark hunter in his eyes that he tries so hard not to let me see. As I watch, he forces it away, seconds before his eyes

cram shut. “Go,” he says lightly, tilting his head back towards the cabin. “I know you need to. So, run.”

He’s right. And his words only make my heart pound harder.

I run.

And with every step, his words echo in my ears and in my brain.

*So I can remind myself not to chase you.*

*Run.*

## CHAPTER

# ELEVEN

Taking up cardio as a hobby is starting to feel like something I should look into. At least, if I did, maybe my lungs and thighs wouldn't burn and tremble so much from running for more than thirty seconds.

Thankfully, Jed hadn't chased me. Even though his words sent ripples through my body, shivers up my spine, and it's hard to tell myself the heat between my thighs is from sore muscles when I can't help but think of the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice when he'd threatened to chase me.

Or rather, hinted that he wanted to.

My breaths come in deep pants as I slow to a stop; doubling over with my fingers splayed on my knees as I try to suck in more oxygen than my lungs can hold. Everything hurts, and my heart pounds in my chest, beating painfully against my ribs while I try to breathe.

Yeah, I should definitely look into cardio when—if—I get back home. There's no way I could improve my stamina in the next few days, and where am I going to run? Through the woods?

I'd trip and break an ankle for sure. No, I need air conditioning, a treadmill, and high-quality reality TV to even consider doing strenuous physical activity for my health. Especially running, which is easily the most painful, most boring, physical activity I can think of.

"Shit," I wheeze, willing my lungs to chill out. It takes a few minutes, and belatedly I remember hearing somewhere

that I shouldn't just stop completely. Instead, I should start walking, trying to cool down and not just stop dead. But that's easier said than done.

At last, I force myself to resume walking. The cabin is in sight and thankfully Jed is not. If I'm willing to believe something other than the worst, then I'd like to think that Jed is giving me a while to cool down. To stop freaking out over what happened.

To stop obsessing over what his lips had felt like on mine. Or his mouth on my arm as he'd licked the blood from my cut. I know I should've made him stop. I know that I shouldn't have been enraptured by the sight of him licking my blood off my skin.

I know I shouldn't have enjoyed the sharp tang of my blood in my mouth, mixed with the taste of *Jed*.

And fuck, that's the problem. No matter how much I want to freak out. No matter how much I want to say that it was the worst thing that's ever happened to me...it wasn't. And way too much of me wanted him to continue. I *wanted* him to keep going, to see what he would do. I *wanted* to feel his mouth and tongue and teeth on my skin. Especially on other places of me instead of just my arm. Though, the way he'd started to devour my mouth had certainly been a nice teaser as to what might come.

"You're fucked up, Saylor," I mutter, tilting my head back as I walk and trying to convince my muscles to stop throbbing. My feet scuff along the gravel, and I fall into a comfortable silence as I walk, listening to the sounds of the breeze in the trees and things I can't see around me.

It should be creepy. And maybe when the sun goes down, it will be. But for now, the near-quiet is comforting, and I wish I could see the animals that call this place home. Hell, I wish I'd brought my camera to the bridge. I could've lost an entire day there, looking for the perfect pictures. The perfect angles. The perfect...*everything*. And if Jed had been there? Staring off into the woods with his ethereal blue eyes and that look of near-longing on his face?

Yeah, I could've made an extra day out of just having Jed there. To have someone in a perfect place for photography who might be open to all the stupid, creative, and weird ideas I have?

I'd even shoot him there, covered in blood, for the gorgeous contrast between him and the surrounding nature. If that's not messed up, I definitely don't know what is.

My fingers itch for my camera, and for a few seconds I consider going back with it in my hands. Except for the fact that I'm not sure I can face him, it feels like a great idea.

I stop at his Jeep, peering into it for any sign of my phone or anything else that might get me out of here. Kiss or not, gorgeous charm or not, I need to get free. I can have these moral dilemmas when I'm at home, in the comfort of my own apartment, when there's no one around with a chainsaw.

Unless I want him to be around, anyway.

Sighing, I realize that not only is there nothing of use glaring up at me from inside the vehicle, the doors are locked. Naturally. Jed's thorough and thoughtful. He doesn't miss any details, and seems to think of everything. In any other situation, it would be inspiring.

Now, it's just frustrating.

I should walk back into the cabin. I could go collapse on the bed and daydream about escape, or do something productive like think of a plan. But, true to how the last few days have gone and my actions during them, I don't. Instead, I walk around the cabin, looking at the windows and minimal landscaping that Jed still manages to keep up with.

This is one area I enjoy as well. I like taking care of plants, or designing little gardens. Though for me, it's indoors instead of outdoors. My gardens are all in pots and hydroponic hangers. Not actually planted in the ground like the flowers and bushes around the outside of his cabin.

I follow the straight wall of the cabin around to the back, and I'm surprised to see another parking area, with another driveway that winds through the trees. A good half mile away,

I see a gate as well, crossing over the driveway and attaching to a fence that disappears into the line of trees.

*Oh.*

I blink once. Then again. That's why Jed was never concerned about me going down one of the two paths on either side of the front door of the cabin. I'd never once thought to actually walk around the house, instead of just accepting what I could see. It makes a lot of sense that this more cared for gravel road would be the way back to civilization. Though that only helps me partially, since I have no idea how long this particular road is.

Yesterday I'd been sure that anywhere would be better than here. But today? Well, I don't want to be lost in the wilderness, on a gravel road in the middle of nowhere, when I've proven to myself how bad at hiking and running I am in general.

This road is a problem for another day. Probably tomorrow, when I can grab my camera, look a little harder for my phone, and take off at a sustainable fast-walk. I'm too worn out to do anything other than collapse or trudge around for a few more minutes, at most.

Which is how my eyes land on the shed. Or rather, the small dirt path that leads to the shed peeking through a few big trees on the other side of the cabin. I know I shouldn't. After all, curiosity killed the cat, and no amount of satisfaction would bring me back after getting a chainsaw through the chest.

But....

But I've always been a mess. Why stop now?

My feet take me across the gravel, rocks scuffing under my feet, and I give one more quick look to my surroundings to make sure Jed hasn't miraculously popped up out of thin air. That would be my luck, honestly. That he'd appear like magic and see me doing something that I really shouldn't be doing.

Like investigating the little shed in the woods.

It never occurs to me, not even once, that I might regret this for other reasons. The only thoughts that go through my head are about sating my curiosity, the ache in my muscles, and making sure Jed isn't around. After all, what else is there to worry about out here?

The answer hits me square in the face when my hand curls around the handle and *pulls*. I'd half expected the door to be locked. Especially given that Jed locks or hides away everything of value around here. But instead, the door pops open in my hand, causing me to stagger back from it.

But when my eyes finally adjust to the darkness and my brain accepts what I'm looking at, I wish instantly that I hadn't come here.

My stomach twists before any thoughts really register in my brain. Unfortunately, by that time I've somehow taken three steps forward until I'm inside the shed, standing just past the doorstep as the door swings shut behind me.

*I never should've done this.*

The scent of both old and new blood slams into me, nearly making me stagger back with the weight. My hand is on the inside of the door now, holding onto the handle desperately, like it's going to stop me from keeling over at any moment.

"Oh fuck," I whisper, my eyes wide and roving over every inch of the shed. "Jesus *fuck*."

This is where he chops up the bodies of the people he and his friends have killed. That's obvious when my eyes land on the arm just sitting on the far counter built into the small shed. I don't need to look at anything else. At any of the other pieces stacked or thrown on other surfaces, some of them half wrapped up in tarps like they're going to be shipped out of here.

And I certainly don't need to look at the chainsaw to my left.

But I do.

I step inside and turn toward it, my hands shaking as I lift them, fingers stretched out like I'm going to touch it to see if



it's real. And maybe something inside me *needs* just that. But I don't try to pick it up. I don't try to pull the cord to rev it, to make sure Jed was telling the truth in his chainsaw safety lesson. I just rest my hands on the guard, the metal cool under my fingers and slightly sticky feeling from the dried blood.

I expect to feel traumatized. Terrified. Something.

But instead I just feel...empty. I'm strangely closed off from the emotional part of my brain as my fingers trail along the surface of the chainsaw, over where the motor resides and back to the handle, where Jed grips it when he cuts people to pieces whether they're dead or alive.

God, now I can't help but wonder if he's ever cut anyone to pieces while they're still living. *This* is why I can't kiss him. Why I can't allow myself to enjoy his attention, or trust him.

This is exactly what I always knew I'd find.

The smell that's been pounding against my skull really hits when I turn to the pile of parts. It's easier that none of them are a face or a head. I'm able to imagine they're doll parts, instead of what they are. But the *smell*?

I don't know how anyone can handle this. My hands clench at my sides, in my borrowed shirt that's probably seen this blood so many times before. How many times has this shirt been covered in it? How many times has Jed used this shirt to wipe away blood splatter from his face or hands?

*How many times has Jed done this in his life?*

I can't help the gagging that starts in my chest. I can't help as fingers seem to dig at the insides of my esophagus, climbing up with nails digging into my throat as I clap a hand over my mouth to prevent the creeping nausea. My eyes water and I stagger back, hitting the side of the shed with the chainsaw that rattles on its altar behind me.

I gag, but somehow nothing comes up. I lock it behind my teeth, behind my palm and pressed-shut lips, and whirl toward the door. Slamming open the closed door and admitting sunlight into the shed that makes everything ten times worse.

And not just because Jed is outside the shed, leaning against one wall as he gazes casually up at the sun coming between the trees in shifting, filtering patterns.

He doesn't react as I stumble out and fall to my knees to suck in breaths of cleaner air that doesn't stink of old blood and bodies.

He doesn't say a word when I *gag*, finally spitting up into the leaves and grass under my clenched fingers. It's a good thing I haven't eaten today, but the bile burns more than it ever has before as I wretch and cough and *heave* out the smell that's gotten clogged into every pore of my body.

"It's the smell, isn't it?" he asks at last, casually closing the door and pushing until the latch clicks. "Everyone thinks that it's seeing the bodies that gets you. And the blood. But I know it's not. It's that smell you never really get used to."

"How—" I shudder and wretch once more, back arched as I screw my eyes shut. "How do you stand it?"

"I've been cutting up bodies, or helping, since I was five," Jed answers honestly. "I just don't notice it as much anymore."

*Since he was five?* The horror sinks in along with the words, and I find I have a lot of questions that I'm pretty sure I do not want answered. A five-year-old wouldn't be cutting up bodies on his own. Especially if he was only *helping*.

"Five?" I whisper, still hoarse. "But...why?" There are a million better things to ask or say or fuck, to *scream* into the woods and hope someone, even a poacher, hears me. But instead I'm asking why he was a childhood butcher.

Jed sighs and kneels down beside me, moving slowly as he pulls my long, tangled hair back from my face. I can feel him braid it gently, while kneeling in the grass beside me like he's not at all worried I might puke on him. "Because my family are a bunch of monsters," he informs me plaintively, gently tugging on the separated sections to braid them. "Because they've been butchering people for longer than I've been alive. Because we can't choose the family we're born into."

There are so many implications in his words, but I can't bring myself to face them. Not now. Not yet.

"Are you mad at me for going in there? You were trying to hide it from me, right?" I assume hoarsely, finally sitting back on my knees and finding that he's right there, still holding my hair, one hand splayed against my back to hold me up.

"If I were trying to hide it from you, I would've locked it," Jed points out after a few seconds of silence. "I'm not mad at you. Or even shocked you're puking in the grass. I wondered if you'd come back and find it. Part of me thought you'd just go back inside, back to bed, but..." I turn to see him smiling wryly. "Having known you for a few days now, I figured you might end up this way."

"But you're not mad." There's a low rumble in the distance that my brain ignores. I'm too busy holding his gaze, my own eyes wide with shock and fear and *denial*. "You're not going to kill me?"

"You already knew about this, anyway." He nods toward the shed. "You just hadn't seen it...oh." He looks up as the rumbling gets louder and carefully reaches out a hand to me with a sigh. "Come on. You might want to be standing for *him*."

Without thinking, I let him pull me to my feet, looking up in time to see the large truck pull into the driveway and park, gravel dust curling through the air behind it. I can hear the loud music from inside, just as well as I can see the man's lips moving before he turns off the engine, cutting off the music and the loud engine of the truck.

Jed groans as the door opens, shoving his hands into his pockets as he steps away from me, looking guilty. "Perfect timing," he mutters to his feet, though there's no real heat in it or actual anger. If anything, he looks...ashamed.

"Uh, *Jed*?" My heart pounds as the black-haired man gets out of the truck, his shoes scraping in the gravel before he closes the door behind him. "Was she puking while I was driving up here? Please tell me she wants to be here and the shit I heard from Cass about *kidnapping* some girl you're

freaking out over isn't true. Because honestly?" I look up at him finally, seeing his coal-black hair and brows raise over concerned eyes. "We're going to have to have an intervention if you've *literally* kidnapped her and aren't letting her go."

## CHAPTER

# TWELVE

When I'm finally able to tear my gaze away from the black-haired man in front of me, a glance at Jed shows me he's just as surprised and speechless as I am. He shoots me a look, then glances down like he's ashamed of something, foot scuffing in the dirt.

"Did Cass tell you *everything*? Or did you hear I'd kidnapped someone and just floor it all the way up here?" he mutters, shoving his hands in his pockets like a kid who's been caught doing something wrong. "Surprised you didn't drive straight through the gate to rescue her, Wren."

Wren rolls his eyes in exasperation, his attention turning to me. "I'm Wren," he greets, stepping towards me carefully. He moves gingerly and hesitates, as if he's afraid I'm going to run away. He stretches one hand out to me, non-threatening and non-lethal, but I just look at it for a few seconds. "I won't hurt you. He's not going to hurt you, either."

Just as carefully, I reach out and take his hand, shaking it loosely before dropping it like a hot potato. "Saylor. Can I ask you something?" I ask, eyes wide as I gaze up at all six-foot-something of him.

"Yeah, of course. Saylor? You can ask me anything." His eyes pin me in place, their earnest honesty and concern not nearly as nice to look at as Jed's.

"Are you the one who dumped a body here for Jed to chop up into bits?"

The look of shock on Wren's face is almost comical. So is the choked, coughing noise that Jed makes as he turns away from the both of us, hand going to cover his face. Wren glares at him, glancing at the shed before looking back at me. "Okay. I'll bite. Clearly there's something I don't know, if you're asking me shit like that. Where...did you find her exactly, Jed?"

"Well, I didn't swipe her off the street," the blond mutters. "You want to come in or something? Feels weird to make her stand in front of the butchering shed when she..." He glances down at my still-drying vomit on the ground, and I wince in embarrassment. "Well, it stinks anyway and I'm tired. Saylor needs something to drink." He turns his eyes on me once more, a small, hopeful smile curling his lips.

But I can't return it this time. I can't get the smell of dead, rotting flesh out of my nose. I can't get the feel of the chainsaw on the pads of my fingers out of my mind enough to do anything but stare.

"Great. Awesome. Got any food?" Wren walks between us, throwing an arm over Jed's shoulders and towing him along without a look back at me. I see him lean over and hiss something sharp in Jed's ear. Something that makes the killer wince, but his tone is too quiet for me to do more than speculate about his words.

But from Jed's face, he doesn't like whatever it was Wren said.

I follow them at a short distance, picking at my nails as Wren all but drags Jed along merrily. It's...something to see him being manhandled by someone much bigger than him, and part of me almost feels bad for my kidnapper.

Jed finally pulls away when we're inside, going to the kitchen and opening the fridge before he turns and looks at me. "What would you like?" he asks, gesturing to the well-stocked fridge. "Just water to wash your mouth out for now? I can make you something to eat soon, if you feel like it after that?"

Wren makes a noise I can't identify and sits down hard at the counter in one of the high, stool-like chairs. "Oh man, Jed," he sighs, leaning forward and running his hands through his mass of black hair. "You have it bad. What did he make you for dinner last night?" He peers up at me from under his hands, grinning, and I freeze in place, confused.

"Umm. Chicken and broccoli Alfredo?" I reply, confused.

Wren whistled. "He made you pasta from scratch already? We're not holding back, are we, brother?" His grin is wolfish when he looks at Jed, who hunches his shoulders and gives a quick shake of his head before swiping three bottles of water from the fridge and closing it.

"Don't do that," he requests, because there's no way it's a dare when he says it so...hopefully. Even a request is being generous. "Don't make her uncomfortable, Wren. This is weird enough for her."

"Weird isn't the word I'd use," I admit, leaning against the back of the sofa, darting a glance at the water bottles in Jed's hands. He pauses, stopping mid-way when he'd been going to sit, and instead strides across the distance to hold one out to me, smiling slightly as he does.

It makes my heart twist in ways that definitely don't fit the situation, and I want to bang my head against the nearest wood pillar in the room in response.

"I'm not trying—" Wren trails off with a sigh, his smile falling incrementally as Jed sits down beside him. "Look. You fucked up by kidnapping her. We don't *do* that Jed. Cass said something about it being a bad circumstance, but I want to hear it for myself."

Jed makes a noise in his throat, stirring as he grips the bottle hard. "Like I told him—"

"Nah, sorry." Wren doesn't take his eyes off me as he talks. "I want to hear it from *her*."

I jolt, probably jumping a few inches as my ribs squeeze down on my heart. My hand trembles as I bring the water bottle to my mouth, swishing it around before swallowing.

Thankfully, I'd only heaved up a little bit of bile and nothing worse. I'd hate for it to have been worse. "Why me?" I ask, glad I don't have to sit. I know I don't really have anywhere to go, but I feel better standing here instead of sitting there. Especially when my heart thumping in my chest tells me that Wren might be the one to actually kill me.

My face must give something away, because his gaze softens. "I'm not going to hurt you," he promises, raising his empty hands in surrender. "Jed wouldn't have let me in here if I was going to hurt you, okay?" He glances between us, and Jed dips a quick, jerky nod at his words.

But I don't understand what in the world he means by that. Why would Jed let him in or not, depending on if Wren was going to hurt me? But I don't question it. Not out loud, at least. I'm not sure I want the answer. Instead, I tap my fingers along the plastic of the water bottle; being careful not to smooch it in my clammy grip.

"You want to hear what happened that night from me?" I clarify, lounging against the sofa's supportive back. I want to make sure I understand him right and determine if he's making fun of me.

Wren dips a nod, taking a swig of water. "Please? I want to figure out how I can help you the best...without Jed getting sent to jail," he admits ruefully, almost as an afterthought. "So, if you could help me understand everything that's happened, I'd appreciate it."

When I start, it's by telling him about the job. About why I'd been in the preserve in the first place. My words are unsure, but thankfully grow in confidence as I explain the first time I saw Jed and the other man. I try to leave out the stupid things, like how afraid I'd been and how I thought Jed was going to do the same to me. I also try not to paint Jed in the worst light possible, though it's impossible to miss when he buries his face in his hands and sighs heavily as I explain about him drugging me.

Well, I don't exactly know how to soften that part of it. But at least I leave out him licking blood off of my skin, which



feels too personal for Wren to really get to hear.

By the time I'm done, while leaving out the licking, the kissing, and the way some of his words and actions make me feel, Wren's water is empty and he's twisting the bottle in his hands, looking thoughtful.

"Wow," he says at last, when silence has enveloped the cabin for at least thirty seconds. "*Wow*. You know, I thought Virgil and Sloane were bad. But this?" He tilts his head in my direction, eyeing up Jed. "This takes the cake. You know that, right?"

Jed doesn't answer. He's too busy staring at his water bottle like it might put him out of his misery. But at this point, I find it impossible to keep my mouth shut, so I ask, "Who's Sloane? And Virgil?"

That gets their attention, though in two different ways. Jed looks guilty, and a little bit nervous. Wren looks...thoughtful.

"Virgil is one of our best friends," Wren explains. "He's actually the one who brought that body out here the other day. He killed the guy spur of the moment, after what he saw him do." His eyes are locked on mine as he speaks, and his water bottle crunches between his fingers softly. "You know that much, right? That we're killers? Some of us aren't as discerning as others, I suppose. But we don't just go around killing people for fun. Your friend at the marsh deserved it. That guy in the shed? *Definitely* deserved it after what he did to a little boy, I promise."

He sits back in his chair, like he's trying to choose his words carefully before he goes on. "Virgil is one of our best friends, like I said. Way less fun than me, but still more talkative than him." He gestures with the bottle at Jed. "Not that it's difficult to talk more than our darling chef here."

*Chef?* It makes sense, and my gaze slides to Jed's face at the word. Is that his day job, then? The one he said he'd taken a break from?

"Sloane is Virgil's girlfriend," Wren goes on, explaining that part as well. "They met, uh, in a special way."

“Fiancee as of a week ago,” Jed corrects quietly. “And don’t sit there pretending you didn’t meet Hazel in a *special* way.” His glare is baleful when he turns it on Wren. “I’m not the only one who goes about things poorly.”

“I keep forgetting he proposed. Can’t believe she said yes.” Wren sighs, dipping his head in agreement.

“Can’t believe you haven’t,” Jed quips under his breath. “Or do you just wear a collar with a bell for Hazel to clip a leash onto when you get home?”

“Don’t be shitty.” Wren bares his teeth in a sudden predator’s snarl. “I’m not the one who kidnapped a girl who doesn’t trust him and went about this all wrong.”

“I don’t know what else to do!” Jed jumps to his feet, upset for the first time since I’ve met him. It’s enough to freeze me in place, though I can’t take my eyes off of him as he chucks the bottle into the sink and rakes his fingers through his hair, forcing it to stand on end. “If I hadn’t, we’d all be in jail. I’m good at cleanup, but not that good.” His voice is a low, agitated growl. Not a yell like I’d been expecting.

And he doesn’t seem...mad exactly. Just exasperated and at the end of his rope.

“I *know* I went about this all wrong. I *know* she’s never going to like me, okay? But I had to figure out what to do in that moment and she was going to *call the police*. I’m sorry.” He looks at me, and for the first time I see the tumultuous whirl of emotion on his face. “I’m *sorry*. I didn’t know I’d meet you there. Saylor, I didn’t know what to do, but I had to kill him before he left and hurt someone else. I know you’ll never want to see me again. I’m just hoping I can—*Wren* can—convince you not to go to the police.”

“Whatever you want,” Wren agrees. “Money or an excuse. A job if you want. I can get you—”

“I don’t need that.” I don’t know why, but the words make my throat burn like I’m about to vomit up more bile. Still, I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest. “Okay, yeah, I don’t have a lot of money, but...” I look away from Wren,

back to Jed. “I thought *you* were going to convince me not to tell.”

It shouldn’t have come out like a challenge. Then again, it shouldn’t have come out at all.

But now that the words are out, like so many others I can’t keep bottled up, I can’t take them back. My fingers curl, crinkling the bottle loudly. “I just mean...” God, there’s no way to fix what I’ve said. Especially when I see the wicked grin cross Wren’s face.

“No, I get what you mean,” he assures me, his chair scraping on the laminate floor as he gets to his feet. “Trust me.” He flicks a look to Jed, who, in my opinion, looks like he’s been hit with a thousand volts and just hasn’t fallen over yet. “Maybe I was wrong to, uh, floor it all the way up here, huh?” There’s something in his face I can’t read as he looks me over, like what I’ve said is some divine announcement. “Just...” He looks between us with a frown. “Let her go soon, okay? Don’t keep her here for too long, Jed. And when things are better?” He sounds a little iffy on that one. “Bring her to dinner.”

Before my brain can process any of that, Wren saunters out the door, leaving both of us in the open area of the cabin only a few feet apart.

Finally Jed takes a breath. Then another one. He comes toward me and reaches out a hand for the bottle I hadn’t realized was empty, before tossing it into the sink without walking away from me. “Did you mean it?” he asks, his voice soft enough that I barely hear him. “What you said?”

“Which part?” I ask in response, my own voice a hoarse croak.

“He really would give you anything you want,” Jed goes on like he hadn’t heard me and I’d given him some kind of an answer. “He has money and connections. He’s friends with the CEO at GreenCo—”

“I don’t need it,” I cut him off, feeling my wide eyes and the way my heart stutters in my chest. “I don’t...want that.”

“Okay.” Jed looks down, then back up at me. “So you meant what you said, then? That you want me to convince you, instead of taking something he’d give you?”

Shit. Of course this is where we are, and my words have trapped me in this predicament better than any handcuffs ever could. Why hadn’t I been able to keep my mouth shut when Wren had been talking before?

*Why had I said that?* I could’ve said...literally anything but that, honestly.

“Can you?” my treacherous mouth asks, eyes flicking up to his blue ones.

“Can I what?” Jed tilts his head to the side, his hands at his side.

“Convince me?”

## CHAPTER

# THIRTEEN

He's too close. Especially in the silence, Jed is too close for me to do anything except stare into his blue eyes and take one deep, almost-shuddering breath after another. Why had I said that? Why had I said *any* of that to Wren?

Because now that he's gone, it's like the buffer is gone from between us. I can't do anything but look at him; focus on *Jed*. When Wren was here, at least, he had some of Jed's attention on him, so the chainsaw-killer couldn't look at me like this and make me feel...

Well, I definitely don't like thinking about how this makes me feel.

"You've obviously done a pretty good job of it already," I point out, glancing down at the scant amount of space between us and taking a breath. "You told me why you did it, and Wren seems believable." But neither of those things is why I feel less than terrified when I'm standing here with him so close, and I'm worried I'm not the only one who knows it.

At the very least, he doesn't call me out on the not-quite-honesty of what I'd said. Instead, I see his hand move, his fingers twitching closer to me like he wants to touch some part of me before he aborts the movement and jams that hand into his pocket. The other still hangs at his side, and I wonder what he's thinking.

As always, Jed is inscrutable. I couldn't even fathom what goes on behind those eyes. I wouldn't even know where to

start. Especially when I look up from his hands and find him still looking at me. Gaze calculating and unsure. He doesn't look as afraid of me running away as he had, at least. He looks at me less like a terrified deer and more like a person.

But I don't know if that's good or bad for me. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I look right back into those blue eyes, and I can't help self-consciously tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. He follows the movement, like he can't help it, and his other hand comes up just enough for me to know he wants to do it himself.

"I'll do anything to convince you that I'd never hurt you," Jed murmurs, breaking the silence between us.

"Would you, if I were someone else?" I can't help but ask, but now that the words are out, the question is one that I need answered. If I weren't me. If he wasn't attracted to me for some reason I definitely can't fathom, would he still be so careful and be so adamant about not hurting me?

"Would I...?" His brows furrow and he glances down, then back up to my face. "Would I *what*, if you were someone else?"

"Would you have hurt me? Would you have killed me, too?"

"No." The answer is immediate, and followed by a shake of his head. Then, unexpectedly, his expression turns sheepish. He turns away from me, glancing at the floor as he continues. "But I...would've handled things differently."

"How?" I'm already in this far. I definitely need to know what '*differently*' means.

A tiny, rueful smile hitches at his lips as his eyes dart back up to mine. And even that is enough to send butterflies into flight between my ribs. Just a look from him shouldn't do it, and my fingers tighten on the sofa's cushioned back behind me. Yet again, I wonder how it's fair for a serial killer to look and act like him, when he seems to be anything but.

"I would've called Wren and told him to come over before you were awake. He would've done the convincing. Made

offers, whatever. Instead of me trying to convince you and being honest about what had happened.” He tilts his head as he speaks, and yet again I wish I could tell what he was thinking.

“Then...why do it differently with me?” This time I know the answer. At least somewhat. He likes something about me, though it can’t be any of the things I see when I look in the mirror. Maybe it’s my winning personality and penchant for dad jokes.

Maybe he needs new headshots.

This time he tilts his chin forward, eyes sharpening as they stay on mine. “You’re really asking?” He seems somewhat surprised, if I’m reading him even close to right. Especially when his brows climb toward his hair that’s still as tousled as it had been when he’d messed with it earlier. A big part of me wants to reach up to run my fingers through it, so I tighten my grip even harder on the sofa to remind myself that is not an option.

“I’m really asking,” I reply, quieter than I mean to be. My heart pounds in my chest as he just...*looks* at me. And from the corner of my eye I see his hand leave his pocket, fingers curling into his palm. “Will you really tell me?”

“If you need to hear it.” His voice is suddenly lower, rougher, and my stomach jolts as I realize I might have gotten myself into something that I’m not so ready for. “Though I figured Wren was pretty clear when he was here.” I think back to Wren’s words. About his surprise at Jed cooking for me, and suddenly I can’t meet Jed’s gaze. I look anywhere but at him, which is difficult when he’s this close to me.

“I’m not a very good roommate,” I mutter, trying to relieve some of the tension of the situation. I can feel my heart beating in my throat, just as intent on this conversation as the rest of me. Every single inch of my body feels like it’s on alert, and I feel like I’m stuck in limbo, waiting for whatever he’s going to say or do. “I took your bed.”

“I gave you my bed,” Jed points out. “It’s not like I’d let you sleep on the couch.”

I suck in a breath. “I tried to take your chainsaw.”

“You...certainly tried,” he agrees, and I swear there’s a hint of amusement in his tone when he says it. But that’s not what I’m focused on. Suddenly he’s closer than he had been, and I’m stuck scrambling in my brain to figure out when he got this close to me.

Where did all that space between us go?

“I threw up when I saw your slaughter-shed,” I add in a rush of words that come out almost jumbled.

“Wren almost threw up the first time he walked in as well. That’s not the insult you think it is.” It should be impossible for him to sound this good when it feels like he’s quietly laughing at my words. I can’t see the floor between our bodies anymore. Instead, my vision is consumed with his front, and the borrowed shirt that hugs my curves too-tightly for me to feel anything but uncomfortable. The thought makes me lift my hand, and I pinch the fabric with my fingers, trying to pull it away from my hip without doing much good, though I can’t help but repeat the movement on the other side as well.

“You don’t need to do that,” Jed murmurs, eyes training on my movements. “Especially if it’s because you think something bothers me. *Nothing* about you bothers me, Saylor. Except how you’re afraid of me. But...” He doesn’t continue until I look up at him, just in time to see the dark, tempting grin curl over his lips. “If you want me to convince you, then I’ll take all the time you need to reassure you that you never, *ever* need to be afraid of me, or think I’m going to hurt you. I just need you to be willing to convince *me* you won’t tell anyone what I did. What *we* do. Can you do that for me?” I’ve never heard him talk like this. I’ve never heard him sound so confident, or so tempting.

He takes that last, small step to close the rest of the distance between us and my breath catches in my throat. I can’t move when his hand comes up to cup my cheek in his warm, calloused palm.

He’s going to kiss me again.



And I'm more than willing to let him.

One of his knees presses between mine as my mind scrambles, trying to figure out how the hell we got here. How the hell I'm suddenly more okay with this than I was earlier. He's so fucking hot, so sweet, and the red flags that litter his metaphorical yard are suddenly looking like my favorite color in the whole damn world.

*But fuck, this is not right.* He's a murderer. A killer. I see it in him every time I look at him and every time I close my eyes.

When Jed catches my gaze, I know he sees it too. The indecision. The memory that I can't stop playing over and over and—

"It's okay," he breathes. "I know we're not quite there yet. I know you don't trust me like I need you to, and you still can't open your mouth and tell me, without a doubt, you won't be tempted to tell anyone, can you Saylor?"

As if to prove him wrong, I part my lips, words ready on my tongue...only for me to find that they won't come out the way I want. My stomach sinks and I realize that he's right. I *don't* trust him like he wants me to. I *don't* think I can promise him I won't find myself at the local sheriff's station the moment he lets me leave.

And what in the world does all of that say about me? I feel panic rising in my throat, along with the worry that he regrets not letting Wren make me an offer to keep me from going to the police. I'm sure it's more trouble than it's worth for him to do this himself, considering he isn't offering me money or a car or a job or *whatever*. Nor is he threatening me, past the obvious part of still being kidnapped and having no real idea where I am.

"You're thinking too hard," Jed murmurs, his free hand resting on my hip. "You always have a way out of this. I won't make you do something you don't want."

"I can't tell you what you want to hear, though," I remind him, feeling almost disappointed in myself for that fact. "I

can't say—”

“I know, Saylor.” There’s a definite hint of amusement in his voice. A very audible chuckle as he gives me the softest, sweetest smile that covers something much less tender, but no less affectionate. “I’m not dumb. And you’re not that mysterious. You were literally on your hands and knees throwing up because of what you saw in my backyard. Do you really think I expect you to announce your overwhelming trust in me now? Do you think even if you promised never to tell, never to say a word, I’d believe you after I know what you saw?” He shakes his head at me, and something in me unfurls, loosening like a too-tight knot.

It shouldn’t make me feel better, because it means he’s not about to give me my keys and phone and let me waltz on out the door.

“I’m trying,” I say instead, letting out a disappointed breath. “I’m *trying*. But you’re a killer, and I’ve never exactly sat down and had a pep talk with myself about *what to do when you’re kidnapped by a serial killer*.”

“Serial killer is a strong accusation,” Jed interrupts, snorting, though he doesn’t move away. “You’ve seen me kill *one* whole person.”

“Are you saying I’m off base?” Some part of me grows hopeful, my chest lightening.

“Oh, no, not at all. No, I’m definitely by all definitions a serial killer,” he promises, still amused. “I just wanted to point out it’s a jump from knowing I killed one person to knowing I’ve killed a lot.”

Oh. Well, then.

I can’t stop the small scowl that pulls at my lips, or the way I glare balefully at him. He chuckles deep in his throat, as if he can’t help himself, and presses his thigh more firmly between mine, holding me against the sofa unless I’m willing to backflip over it.

But even then, I might end up just getting pulled back up, or dragging him with me. Which brings a lot of inappropriate

images to my head; I work to beat them back with a stick, for all the good it does when I know I'll see them again the moment I fall into his bed and press my face against the pillows that smell just like him.

"Fuck, you're adorable when you do that," Jed murmurs, once more in that rough voice.

"Do what?" I ask, snapping from my thoughts. "I'm not doing anything."

"Oh, yeah, you are." Jed chuckles, leaning closer to me. "You should see your face when you do that. When you try so hard not to think about whatever it is that you can't keep out of your brain." A smile splits his lips, his eyes dancing. "What are you trying so hard to ignore this time, Saylor?" he asks, while my heart races against my ribs.

*You.* I don't say it. I can't say it. Yet somehow I reach up, my fingers curling in his shirt seconds before I yank him the rest of the way to me and seal my lips against Jed's in the stupidest, hottest move I've ever made in my life.

And *fuck*, it's just as good as I knew it would be.

He doesn't hesitate. He doesn't even stop to question as his hand shifts from my face, falling to grip my opposite hip so he can hold me exactly where he wants me. I barely have control of the kiss for a few seconds before he takes it from me, his teeth nipping at my lower lip and the edge of my tongue before he's tasting and exploring every inch of the space between my lips.

But I want more from him than this. I *need* more of him, to see what's under his clothes and run my hands along every inch of him. As if he has the same idea, his hand slips under the edges of my borrowed shirt, dragging it up my body along with his fingers that are splayed against my skin.

I can't help the soft sound of protest, the small movements I make as all of my insecurities and self-deprecating nature come rushing back full force. But Jed shuts it down with a soft growl against my open mouth.

“No,” he insists, harsher than I would have expected he was capable of. “Don’t you do that, Saylor. Don’t you *dare* try to hide any part of yourself from me.” The words make me shudder, and all the heat that burns in my face shoots instantly between my thighs that are clamped around his.

*I need him.* I need—

A loud rap on the door makes us spring apart, and my eyes are wide as I stare at him, panting from between sore, bruised lips.

“Fuck,” Jed growls, rucking his fingers through his hair. “Why is he back?” It occurs to me he means Wren, and I let out a groan, falling back against the sofa’s sturdy back. Of course Wren would show up now, just when I was getting what I shouldn’t have.

Well, maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.

“Just let me see what he wants,” Jed sighs, crossing around the sofa and heading for the door. His pupils are blown, eyes feverish, and his movements are jerky as he tugs at the bottom of his own shirt to make sure it’s back in place.

Had he been as turned on as I was before the knocking had been enough to throw a metaphorical bucket of cold water over my head? From the way he adjusts his clothes before touching the door, it definitely seems like it.

I walk around the couch as well, belatedly registering that I’m hungrier than I’d realized, and slide down to the sofa. I rest my head in my hands as I hear the sound of the front door opening on its hinges.

“Mr. Shaw?” That’s not Wren’s voice, and my head snaps up at the sound, eyes darting for the open space between the doorframe and the wall.

“We have a few questions. Could we come in?”

It isn’t Wren standing at the door.

It’s the police.

## CHAPTER

# FOURTEEN

My breath catches sharply, and for a moment I can't seem to draw air into my lungs. I sit there, fingers clenched on the edge of the sofa, and when I stare at the two stern, solemn officers at the door, all I can think is one thing.

This could be my way out.

They would take me out of here, and I'd have the chance to tell them everything that's happened. I could be back in my bed, in my too-loud apartment that's not very welcoming, with my almost dead plants, by sundown.

Hell, they could probably even find my car. All I have to do is tell them what's happened. All I have to do is show them to the slaughter-shed and the body parts still there, along with the bloody chainsaw. I'm sure the smell alone would tip them off by the time we opened the door. They wouldn't even have to go inside.

*That's all I have to do to make all of this a memory.*

My eyes lock onto Jed as he opens the door wider, arm up to gesture them into the cabin. He looks at ease and relaxed. Like he has nothing to worry about and nothing to lose. I have no idea how he's doing it, when I know he must be worried about what they could find. Or, worse, what I could tell them.

But he barely glances my way before closing the door behind him and offers the two officers water. They decline, and Jed just shrugs before dropping into an armchair, looking like he's the definition of relaxed.

It's such a change from the normally hesitant and cautious looking Jed. In fact, he reminds me more of Wren as he crosses one leg over the other, runs a hand through his hair, and settles back lazily into the chair. It's such an accurate impression of Wren's comfort from when he was here that I'm pretty sure that's where he'd learned it. That would make sense, after all. None of them can have a weak link if all of them are going to stay out of jail. If he used to be unable to face a police officer, they would've had to do something about it to help him.

That's my guess, anyway. But what do I know? Maybe he's just naturally good at this...though I wouldn't take bets on it.

The officers look around the room and I take that time to inspect the two of them, though I'm not exactly impressed by what I see. The man, who's definitely older than the woman, looks like he might be able to chase a criminal twenty steps before doubling over, wheezing. His brown hair is graying at the sides, and his snub nose looks like it had been broken at least once in the past. Beady eyes complete the too-small features of his doughy face, and they dart everywhere in the room with boredom.

It's the woman that appears to be the hard-ass. Her mouth is too big for her face, and set in a line that gives her resting bitch face. She, unlike her partner, wears a pair of sunglasses that she whips off as I watch, folding them and shoving them into her shirt pocket. She's shorter than the man, and possibly around my height. Her black hair is chopped short and layered, like the start of the typical Karen Cut that was so popular a few years ago.

Absently, I pull my hand to my mouth, chewing on my thumbnail as I watch her suspicious gaze flow over everything in the room. She's looking for something, it seems. Her partner is just looking like he has nothing better to do.

"I'm Officer Rayez," the woman introduces, pivoting to look at us. She hooks her fingers in her belt loops, glaring at both of us as she does. "This is my partner, Officer Brown."

Yeah, he looks like a brown. Just standing there, wheezing, even though he isn't doing anything physical and existing in a *brown* way. He's unimpressive, non-threatening, and probably the worst partner for her possible, unless there's a side of him that's not exactly obvious here.

"Can we help you?" Jed asks, rolling his shoulders as he watches her with eyes that remind me of chips of ice, instead of the warm blue of a Caribbean island commercial I see when he looks at me. "Because I'm not sure what we did to warrant this visit." He grins at them, all sweetness and innocent puppy-dog eyes.

But all I can think is that he needs to be careful. He has too many secrets and too many bodies buried here to piss them off. Surely he knows it, too.

Blinking, I realize too late the female cop has zeroed in on me. She crosses the room and, without invitation, plants her ass on the sofa beside me. She watches me the whole time, her dark eyes never leaving my face. "What's your name?" she asks, whipping out a small pad of paper from her shirt pocket and nearly knocking her sunglasses to the floor.

I have a choice. I know that the moment she gives me that glare once more, obviously waiting for my answer. All I have to do is tell her what's going on. Hell, I'm sure that if I even *look* nervous, she'd get me out of here. I could glance at Jed right now, to see his face, and I know even that would set off her instincts with how high-strung Officer Rayez is.

*It's so easy. I can get out of here just like that.*

"I'm Saylor," I tell her, tucking my black hair back behind my ear. "Saylor King."

"How old are you?" She barely waits for me to finish telling her my name before she goes on, her tone demanding as my heart pounds in my chest. "And where are you from?"

"I'm twenty-four," I inform her, keeping my voice level. My fingers still dig into the couch cushion, but I draw one foot up under me, trying to keep my shoe off of the couch while I

make myself more comfortable, as if I actually live here or visit often. “And I live in Akron, when I’m not here.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Jed stir, but I’m too afraid to actually look at him, in fear of Rayez realizing something is wrong.

*But don’t you want her to know?* Some voice in my brain screams. *Don’t you want her to take you out of here, you idiot?*

Yeah, this probably isn’t my smartest move. But I still have time. I don’t have to decide just yet. There are a ton of moments between now and them leaving for me to change my mind so they’ll take me away from Jed and let me go back home. That has to be what I want, so why can I feel the ghost of Jed’s lips on mine, and the way he’d held my hips in his hands when we kissed?

Why can I suddenly remember every dream I had last night, when my face was buried in his pillows while I slept?

“How do you know Mr. Shaw?” she nods her head at Jed, jolting me out of my reverie. The way she’s looking at me, I wonder if she’d had to ask more than once before I’d realized she was talking to me, and I hope to God that’s not the case.

“He’s my friend,” I reply, then clear my throat, knowing that sounds...not very believable. “Sorry, it’s a habit that I tell people that. It’s new, so...” I suck in a breath. “Jed is my boyfriend.”

“That so?” There’s no shock on her face, but she jots something down in her little notebook. “How long have you been dating?”

“Two weeks, but we’ve been, uh,” I let my natural insecurity and inability to sound confident at the most necessary of times do me a favor here, and my hands come up to make stupid gestures in front of my chest. “We’ve *known* each other for months. You know?” I know what I’m hinting at, and I raise my brows at her before glancing at Jed with a rueful half-smile.

The other officer, Brown, catches my eye and nods with a comforting smile, like he’s convinced I’m telling the truth.



Well, at least I've got one of them convinced.

"Have you seen anything suspicious since you've been here? We got a call about strange cars coming up here from town. And there's been a man reported missing this past week. We're checking our bases," the female officer asks, explaining her reasoning before she's done.

"No," I shrug. "No, I haven't really seen anything out of the ordinary. We walk the trails a lot, so I'd probably see something?" I gesture toward the door, pointing one way, then the other, to illustrate the two paths that I've now explored since being here.

But I still can't look at Jed. I'm afraid I'll crack if I see the look on his face, and more than that, I worry what he thinks of me right now.

I worry, because my brain is calling me ten kinds of stupid and I don't know what to do other than continue on this awful, terrible path I'm on. At this point, I've committed to it right? I can't do anything else.

*Convince me.* That's what I'd said to him. That's what I'd dared him to do before he came closer and let me kiss him. Fuck, Jed's lips are so soft, so inviting, and so, so dangerous if I'm lying to the cops just to get another taste. But I'd told him to convince me. It feels only fair that he gets a chance to do so.

And it doesn't feel right to expose him to the police now.

I continue to answer the officer's questions, and while Rayez is more aggressive and fires them off at me without giving me much time to answer. Brown only chimes in a few times, asking me easy questions or allowing Jed to chip in with an answer of his own.

By the time Rayez stands up, my body and mouth feel numb from answering her questions and all the lying I've done. She sighs, like she'd hoped to find something, and I rise to my feet as well when she sticks a hand out for me to shake.

"Well, we just ask that you both keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary," she tells me, looking between the both of us for the first time in at least ten minutes. It almost

feels like she's met Jed before, and isn't impressed. Or maybe one of his friends? I'm sure Wren could do that to someone, if he's given even half of an opportunity. "And we'll be back if we have any more questions."

She heads to the door, Brown on her heels murmuring to Jed in a tone much kinder than the one Rayez has been using. I wonder if she suspects that Jed is more than he seems. I wonder if she has a *reason* to suspect him. But I'm certainly not about to bring that up, when my first priority is getting out of this uncomfortable situation.

Before the door closes, Rayez turns, her sunglasses in her hand. "Hey." She holds the door open with her hand, curled fingers white with the force of how hard she's holding the door. "Saylor, right?" I dip a nod, confused. "If there's something wrong..." She glances at Jed over my shoulder, her eyes narrowed in a glare. "If there's anything going on here, you can tell me." She sidles closer, and my heart does a flip while my stomach flutters. "I can help you."

*She can help me.* My brain latches onto that statement and my lips fall open, parting like something will come out when there's nothing there at all. Not even a whisper. I just stare at her, nonplussed, and wait for my brain to catch up.

"I can get you out of here, okay?" For the first time, her voice is gentle when she says it, and while I can feel Jed behind me, waiting, he doesn't do or say anything. He doesn't try to get between us, and I don't feel his hands on any part of me, in reassurance or in warning.

He's waiting for me to decide.

"I'm fine." My eyes meet the officer's, and my chin tilts upward with confidence. I say it again, repeating the words to her flatly. "I'm fine."

The worst part is that she believes me. The suspicion fades from her gaze and she slips her sunglasses back on, nodding curtly while Brown waddles back to their car. "If you think of anything you've seen, please let me know." She hands her card to Jed, who has come to stand at my side sometime in the past few seconds. "Have a nice day, both of you."

Then she turns, gets in the car, and they drive away without stopping. Without seeing the slaughter shed.

Without taking me with them.

But all I can do is stand there while Jed pockets the paper, my hand tight on the door while the rest of my body vibrates with tension.

“Saylor...” There’s relief in Jed’s voice as he looks at me, and he reaches one hand out for me, stopping when I whirl on him.

“Stop. Please,” I whisper, holding my hands up in front of me like a shield. I can *feel* the tears burning at my eyes, and I see my upraised hands shake. “Please, Jed. I just...” Cutting myself off, I close my eyes hard, shaking my head. “I don’t know what I did. I don’t know *why*...” He doesn’t interrupt me. He doesn’t say anything as my stomach threatens to reject the water I’d had.

“I need to go. I need to—” I step out of the cabin, onto the gravel beyond as my breathing comes in sharp, jagged pants. “Just for a little while. Let me *think*.” He isn’t arguing with me. Hell, he isn’t saying anything.

But his gaze says it all. It expresses the worry, the concern, and the thing I’m not sure he wants me to see.

I can tell, in his eyes, that he doesn’t just *like* me, though the strong emotions there should be impossible for someone who’s only known me for a few days.

“I’ll be here,” he promises, his own voice low. “I’ll be here, for whatever you need. Saylor, I’m—”

But I step away because I can’t listen to him say it, even though I don’t know what *it* is. I want to kiss him; I want to slap him, and I want to run away. Finally, my brain settles on one option just as I pivot on my heel. My tiredness and sore muscles are forgotten as once again I do the thing I’m starting to think is my true calling after all these years.

I run from him.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTEEN

I hate how easy it is to lose myself in my wandering thoughts. I hate how good I am at losing hours and hours of my day when I need more than anything to stay in the present so I can figure out what in the world I'm going to do.

But more than anything, I hate how lost I am right now. Physically and mentally, I have no idea where I am or what I'm doing. Mostly it's the physical part of being lost that's making me jumpy right now, as the sun has already set and the air is chillier than I'd thought possible for April in Ohio.

Obviously I should've realized that with my luck, I'd be out here when temperatures plummet without the jacket Jed had offered me.

"Fuck," I sigh, burying my face in my hands. Since I don't have my phone, I have no light, and my heart pounds in my chest every time I hear something in the woods around me. I have no idea where in the world I am, or how badly I've gotten myself turned around. I can't see the cabin, or a path, or anything else through the trees.

And I'm too afraid to scream or call out for Jed. I worry there's something else in the woods, like a bear just waiting to eat me, as dumb as that might sound.

"You have to get up, Saylor," I mutter, my fingers clenching into my borrowed sweatpants. At least I'm not out here in just shorts and a t-shirt, but his shirt is too thin to really provide even half the warmth the sweatpants do. "You have to find your way back. Or somewhere, at least." Somewhere that

isn't the middle of the woods, in the dark, where animals with long, sharp teeth roam around.

I force myself to get to my feet, my legs half-asleep from the cold and how long I've been sitting. I've really fucked up this time, but I do a quick spin on the off chance that since now it's fully dark, I'll be able to see something other than... well, nothing.

Nothing except the dark, and the few trees closest to me.

My heart hammers in my chest, but I take a few deep breaths to try to make things better. Or at least to make my brain stop running through all the worst-case scenarios that could happen while I'm out here.

"You won't freeze to death," I murmur, setting off in a random direction that feels somewhat okay. It's better than sitting at least. While I walk, I rub my arms, trying to warm up. "You will *not* freeze to death. You may be miserable. You may catch the fucking *consumption* out here from the cold. But you will not freeze to death, Saylor." The sound of my voice does a good bit to calm me down, and my strides lengthen as I keep going.

"You also won't get eaten," I add, when I hear a far off howl. "Animals are more afraid of you than you are of them. As impossible as that seems right now." Truly, I'm not sure how anything could be more frightening than I am at this moment, but I'm willing to hear an explanation or see evidence of that. "Even if there are a few bears out here, what are the chances of you running into them? Coyotes don't eat people, right?" I'm pretty sure they don't.

"And this is a nature preserve," I add, jumping when a stick I trip over comes back to whack me in the leg for vengeance. "There's no one out here that's doing anything... nefarious. Except maybe Jed and his friends." Because, well, that's obvious. But other than him? Who could be out here at night, when I haven't passed any other houses or businesses this far out in the woods?

Hell, I haven't even seen a road.

“You’ll find something to point you back, eventually.” That feels...not as true as the other things I promise myself. I can convince myself that there aren’t rabid wolves, that I won’t freeze, and that there aren’t serial killers waiting in the woods to kill me. But convincing myself I’m not hopelessly lost, doomed to starve in the woods before anyone finds me?

That one is harder. The thought causes my heart to slam against my ribs, and I can feel tears burning at my eyes as the idea of it comes around again and again with mounting viciousness.

“You’ll be—” Crashing through the underbrush cuts me off, and when I hear the sharp bays of something I can’t identify, I’m sure that either the Ghost of Easter Past is on my tail, or I’m about to get eaten by an animal I’d written off as harmless.

But the bays become barks as I freeze, and I whirl around to see the light of two bright LED flashlights. The dogs run to me, circling, sniffing my legs and barking up at me with teeth bared in their ugly, hound faces. One of them snarls at me, prompting me to pull my arms up and across my chest while I stand there, unable to do more than pray that I won’t get eaten.

The dogs certainly don’t seem very friendly.

*But maybe they’re a rescue party.* I can hear voices behind the lights, though I’m blinded by their brightness, and I stare into them, doe-eyed, like I’m an animal being spotlighted by hunters. “H-hello?” I ask, when the lights are close enough for me to reach out and touch. One of the dogs snaps at me, causing me to gasp, and I stumble to the side, nearly falling, as both of them follow me eagerly, waiting for a chance to do more than bark.

“The *fuck?*” The voice isn’t familiar, and a hand reaches out to clamp on my arm, jerking me upright. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m—” I squint, trying to see past the bright lights that have spots dancing in my vision. “I’m lost, I’m...trying to find my way back. Who are you?” Something in me prickles, and

my stomach doesn't unclench with relief. If anything, these two people and their dogs make everything in me feel worse.

Like I really am in trouble now.

"Can you make them stop? Please?" I ask, tripping away from the more aggressive dog. The man's grip tightens on my arm, making me yelp, and my heart goes into overdrive at that.

"You're *lost*?" The man sounds amused, if a little unbelieving. "You expect us to believe you just wandered out here? The only ones out here in the preserve are the rangers." He sounds gruff, with an accent that places him far to the south of Ohio. Distantly I hear the other one spit, and with a low whistle, the dogs back away from me, though one snaps at my leg in warning.

"I'm *lost*. I stay with a friend around here," I protest, once again trying to wrench my arm away. "Who are you?" Their lights are still in my face, and I hear something heavy being readjusted as I blink away the light-spots once more.

"You drunk?" the other asks finally. "Who the hell wanders out here at night without a jacket, huh?" I hear him walking closer to me, and the light bobs until it's inches from my face. I turn away from it, squeezing my eyes shut, only for a gloved hand to yank my face back toward it, fingers digging into my lower jaw. "You sure as shit look drunk to me."

"Drunk...?" I repeat, still unable to open my eyes. I'm colder than I should be. I'm cold all over, and not being able to see them makes this even worse. "No, I'm not drunk. I don't drink, I just. I got *lost*," I say again, trying to jerk out of his hold as well. Their hands on me make me feel gross. Like there are spiders climbing up my arm and across my face. "Let...let go of me."

Suddenly I wonder if there are worse things to worry about in these woods than wild animals.

Unhelpfully, Jed's voice echoes in my ears, and the remembered words make me stiffen.

*Just to make sure there aren't any poachers.*

Yeah, that's what he'd said. And he'd been so casual about it, like they're just simply a fact of life around here.

"Do you... Umm..." I don't know what to say, and I try to find their faces behind the lights once more. "Do you live around here...too?"

One of the men snorts, and his fingers clench my jaws harder, grating into the bone. "Nah, we don't live around here. Bet you don't either." He sidles closer, causing my breath to catch in my throat. "You're a ranger, aren't you? Stupid girl."

"I'm not a *ranger*," I hiss back, finally managing to jerk out of his hold. "I told you, didn't I?" If I don't show them how afraid I am, hopefully they won't take advantage of it. That's what I tell myself anyway, as I stand straighter in the light of their flashlights. "I don't know how to say, again, that I'm *lost*. That's all. I just need you to point me toward literally anything, and I'll find my way from there. Is that so hard to understand?" I don't want to go too far with my false bravado, so I close my mouth and wait.

"Come back with us." The one still holding my arm is the one to speak first, I think. Though it's hard to tell in the dark. "We'll drive you to wherever you want to go. Our truck isn't that far."

His tone, and his words, immediately have me on edge. Instantly, I know that going with them would be an awful idea, and I shake my head without hesitation. "I'm not going with you," I promise quietly. "I don't fucking know you. Like I said, I'm just—" The fingers on my arm tighten, and I'm jerked forward into a body that smells like unwashed clothes and tobacco.

"You're awfully bitchy for someone that needs help," the man snarls, his breath hot and fetid against my face. "Awfully demanding. Want us to just leave you here, little lost *thing*?" He spits the word at me, causing me to recoil as much as I can. I can feel the other man behind me, his breath coming in sharp pants.

*I need to get out of here.*



“Fuck off,” I snarl, unable to pretend for even a moment that I’m not disgusted. “Don’t touch me. *Don’t touch me!*” Fear makes my voice raise higher and louder than I intend, and when the man tries to jerk me closer, I shove him.

And for some reason, he goes. His grip leaves my arm, tightening enough to bruise before ripping backward. The dogs start freaking out, and the flashlight drops to the ground at my feet.

“What—” The man behind me shoves me hard, causing me to stumble toward the snapping, growling dogs as he strides forward. “Earl?”

I hear something I don’t recognize, seconds before Earl cries out. The lone remaining flashlight falls to the ground, and from the sounds, I wonder if Earl has fallen into his companion. I dart out, grabbing the light in shaking fingers, and turn it off so I’m not drawing attention to myself.

Whatever the case, their dogs are going crazy, and no one’s attention is on me anymore.

“Touch her again and I’ll break your other hand as well.” I don’t recognize the voice at first. I don’t recognize the cruel, dark undertones or the pure vitriol that accompanies it into the frigid air. “Take one step towards her and I’ll break your fucking legs. The rangers are on their way.” I hear what sounds like the sound of a safety being clicked off, and I freeze.

Someone has a gun.

“Don’t touch your fucking rifles.” Another light flicks on, this one less bright and sharp than the ones the two men had. It reminds me of my own, and I flick it back on, turning the bright light towards the dirty, greasy looking men with rifles on their shoulders.

They look...pathetic. Dirty, cruel, and filthy come to mind as they blink in the sudden light. One of them cradles a hand that looks mangled, and as I watch, he hugs it to his chest, shifting away from the other person in the woods.

“Get shot and get arrested, or get the fuck out. It makes no difference to me.” I’m sure I’ve never heard anyone sound so terrifying in my life. Their anger freezes the air around us, and I fight not to turn the flashlight on my rescuer just to see who it is. I don’t want to blind him.

And I’m starting to think I know *exactly* who else is in the clearing with me.

The quieter man, not-Earl, spits on the ground before baring his teeth at Jed. “We’re goin’,” he snarls at last, a low whistle on his tongue at the end of his words. He calls the dogs to him, though they snarl and snap at Jed as they pass. “Fuckin’ shitbird.”

Jed doesn’t hesitate. The gun goes off, and in the dim light, I see the dirt explode near the man’s foot, spraying him with dirt and debris. One of the dogs yelps, terrified, and shoots off in the direction I think the two men came from.

Earl curses, still holding his broken hand close.

“One more word,” Jed invites coolly. “And you can crawl back to your truck. If I see you again, I’ll take it as an invitation. Do you understand?”

Earl is quick to mutter his agreement. His companion holds out for a few seconds, fingers itching for the rifle he won’t have time to reach. Finally he nods as well, and the two of them scramble from the clearing, back toward wherever they’d come from.

“I mean it,” Jed drawls, his voice just loud enough so they can hear him. “Come back here, and you won’t get to walk away so easily.” He doesn’t move, and I can’t move either. Not until the men’s footsteps and their figures in our lights are long, long gone, as are the sounds of the dogs.

“Oh, my God,” I mutter, edging closer to him as my legs shake. “Oh, my God, I thought I was dead. I thought I was going to get *murdered*.” There’s a tremor in my tone, and I stumble the last couple of steps to reach Jed, who still hasn’t said anything. “I’m so fucking sorry. I didn’t mean to be out

here so long,” I ramble, more and more afraid that he’s upset with me the longer he doesn’t say anything.

But even that doesn’t get a response. I can somewhat see him in the near-dark, and from the edge of my flashlight I see him slip the gun into his waistband at the back of his jeans, carefully and slowly.

“Are you...mad?” I ask, heart still pounding in my ears. I feel jumpy and jittery. The adrenaline in my veins needs an outlet, but I can’t help myself as I stand there, needing to know if he’s upset with me. “Jed, I’m—”

He whirls on me, faster than what should be possible, and knocks the flashlight from my hand as he grabs me to jerk me toward him, my feet scrabbling in the debris. I feel like I’m going to fall, until one of his hands grabs my hip, balling in the material of the borrowed shirt as he drags me the rest of the way against his chest, his other arm tangling in my hair.

“*Fuck, Saylor,*” he snarls against my lips. “I thought you were fucking *dead.*” He doesn’t give me the chance to reply, though. His lips slam against mine, cutting off my words, and for the first time, I feel myself drown in it, my head reeling. Instead of running or pulling away or looking for an excuse, I kiss him back with the same amount of ferocity that he gives me, fueled on by the growl that travels from his body into mine.

“I need you,” he hisses, his words sharp and direct as his hands tighten on my hair and hip. “I fucking need you right now, Saylor, or I’m going to go kill them for touching you. Do you understand me?”

## CHAPTER

# SIXTEEN

A tremor of fear tingles deliciously up my spine, and I whine against his lips as the full weight of his words slams into my chest. I should be terrified of him. Of what he'll do now that he's this worked up. I've never seen him like this. I've never seen him so frantic or aggressive.

I've never seen him look like a killer or a predator. Not even that first night in the swamp when I *watched* him kill someone pretty thoroughly with a fucking chainsaw. That should've been more intimidating than this. Yet somehow, this version of Jed is just so much...more.

*Fuck.*

"I'm sorry," I say again, my fingers tangling in his hair as I drag him down to me. The flashlight in my hand hits the ground with a thump, and I can barely see anything at all. But I don't need to. I'm too busy letting him devour my mouth and looking for an opening to do the same with him.

This is so fucked up that I can't even wrap my brain around all the ways this is wrong. I definitely shouldn't be kissing him, or wanting to rip his clothes off of him out here in the middle of the woods.

"We should go home," he purrs against my lips. "It's cold. *You're* cold." He sounds like he's trying to convince himself, instead of me, and another low growl echoes between my lips.

"Is it cold?" I mutter, fingers tightening in his hair that's way softer than it looks. "Doesn't feel that cold to me." I'd been freezing less than five minutes ago. Hell, I'd had to

remind myself it's not cold enough to freeze to death. But the temperature is the least of my concerns. Besides, his mouth sears mine so thoroughly that it feels like he's heating me up from the inside.

"Oh, Saylor..." He chuckles softly, the sound low and grating. "You're not doing a very good job of convincing me we should go back home. It really is *cold* out here," he reminds me, reluctantly pulling away. "I don't want you to freeze." Even without being able to see him, I can feel the disappointment radiating off of him as he lets out a huff of air that brushes my jaw. "Come on." He turns on his heel, pivoting as I scoop up my flashlight from the ground. "Let's just—"

I don't give him time to finish. I don't even give him a chance to take more than a few more steps in the opposite direction. With my light in hand, I lunge forward, grabbing his hand and jerking him around, mouth slanting against his once again. "I'd apologize," I tell him in a soft hiss. "I really would, except I'm not sorry and I just really need this too. If you want to stop, though—"

Now it's my turn to get taken by surprise. Jed's hands on my hips lift me up, the weightlessness dizzying for a few moments, before I'm spun around and slammed into a large, probably old, tree. Above me the leaves rustle, and the bark scrapes at my back as my shirt is rucked up over my skin.

"I don't want to stop," he snarls softly, nipping hard at my lower lip. "But I'm trying so hard here, Saylor. It's cold, it's dark. You're scared—" He rests his forehead against mine with a hoarse groan. "But if you keep this up, then I'm not going to be able to keep my hands off you for the entire time it takes to get home."

"Okay," I agree, panting as I dip a nod he can't see. "I got it." Jed sighs, then moves to pull away, only for me to yank him back. "So...maybe don't?" I offer instead, gripping his shirt in my fingers. "Unless you're afraid of the dark?"

"Princess..." I've never, *ever* heard him sound like that before. "If there's anything at all in the dark to be afraid of, it's

me.” His fingers dig into my hips, and before I can do anything at all, he has me in the air, my back pressed hard against the tree once more. “I want to take my time with you,” he purrs, all frenzied movements and nips to my flushed skin. “I want to take you apart and see you while I do it.” His actions belie his words, however, when he grabs my borrowed sweatpants and thrusts them down my hips.

Truthfully, I want the same things. I want to see his face and trail my fingers along his skin. I want to see the expressions he makes and taste the sounds he can’t keep back. But more than that, I’m completely feral for him. There’s a thrill in my blood that makes me feel like I’m boiling from the inside. Especially after what he’d done to those poachers.

“Would you really have hurt them?” I gasp, my fingers gripping his wrist and tugging his hand down between my thighs, where I want it.

“Yes,” he hisses against my ear. He doesn’t need the encouragement of my hand, however. Expertly, his fingers find their way, sliding against me once, then again, before they circle my clit and send a shockwave through me. “Does that bother you?”

“Not out here in the dark,” I tell him, nipping at the shell of his ear when he leans forward to bury his face against my shoulder, nose skimming my neck. He peppers my skin with harsh kisses and nips, his fingers moving from teasing to motivated. Without warning, he buries both of them inside me, pulling a gasp from my lips that he’s quick to devour between his teeth.

He has no right to be this gorgeous. I’ve always thought that. But tonight, I’m stuck on how he has no right to be so fucking *good at this*. Every motion, every movement, has me reeling, and I’m glad for the tree behind my back that supports my weight without complaint. Lord knows I sure as hell can’t do it.

Jed’s fingers twist, plunging deeper and drawing a sound closer to a shriek from me. This one he also swallows greedily, his face never far from mine. “Good,” he murmurs. “You

never have to be afraid of me, Saylor. Never in a million years. But whenever someone touches you, I go *crazy*. I can't help it, and I don't think I'll ever be able to. Not when they're touching you like that. Fuck." I arch into him with another cry, body pressing against his. "I would've dragged them back to the cabin and kept them alive for days, cutting off one piece at a time, just for scaring you."

I...have no idea what to say to that. And with my silence, I feel Jed start to pull away, insecurity moving into his every movement as the thrusts of his fingers become less aggressive.

"Don't—" I reach up and grip his throat, meaning to go for his shoulder. But this works too, and I drag him back down to look me in the eye. "Don't pull away from me. I'm not afraid of you and I'm not upset." Maybe I should be. Lord knows I absolutely should be *more* than a little upset that he's so clearly got a plan for the two men who scared me and threatened to take me back to their car with them. "You really would have?"

"Yes." There's no doubt in his answer. There's no hesitation, and I can feel him swallow under my fingers. The motion causes my touch to slip, but it falls into place just under his jaw, perfectly in place for me to feel his pulse. "Even if it scares you. I can't change how I feel."

"I don't want you to. Though I think this is where I have to state the obligatory obvious." He doesn't reply. I can't feel any movement under my fingers, but I pull him just a few inches closer, until I can feel his breath on my lips. "You barely know me, Jed. I can't cook; I even burn water. I'm not that interesting, and I don't have some cool, secret life. I'm much less appealing in the daylight."

His laugh is grating, and he grips my wrist where I still hold his throat. "You're so wrong about all of that. Everything about you is appealing. I want *everything* from you. And that's the joy of being a psycho, didn't you know?" He leans forward, until his jaw brushes my face and I feel the touch of his lips on my ear.

“I know what I want the moment I lay eyes on it. And I know I’ll do anything to make whatever it is *mine*.” The words pull all the air out of my chest, and I barely hear the sounds of his belt unbuckling or the zipper of his jeans. But then his hands are on me again, on my thighs, urging one of them up and over his hip.

“Are you ready for me?” he purrs, still so close to my ear. All I can do is nod while my voice is lost somewhere in my chest as the dizzying effect of his words hold me in their grip. “Good girl.” My stomach falls clear through the floor at that, and I feel the brush of his length against my inner thigh seconds before he lines himself up and plunges into me, not stopping until he’s fully seated in my body.

“Oh *fuck*,” I wail, surprised at just how much he fills me up. It’s almost too much. He’s so big that it nearly hurts, but that just makes it all the more perfect. As per usual, every aspect of Jed is perfect. “How are you so good at everything?” I can’t help but voice the question, arms wrapped around his neck as he pulls back, just to slam into me again.

It makes me see stars in the best way possible.

“I’m not that good at most things,” Jed purrs in my ear. “But I love that you think so. I want to be good for *you*, Saylor. That’s the only thing that matters.” He shouldn’t be able to make my insides melt by saying things like that. But with my eyes fixed on one of our discarded flashlights, I’m unable to do more than meet his thrusts with my leg clamped around his hip.

When he leans me back against the tree to snake one hand between us, I hate the distance between my body and his. At least, until his fingers find my clit once more, thumb stroking over it teasingly as I gasp in happy surprise. “I want to feel you come,” he tells me frankly. “Will you do that for me? Will you come around my cock, Saylor?”

“*Fuck*,” is my empathetic, meaningful reply. His fingers drive me toward climax, as I grip his shirt with hands that shake. “I don’t want to be done. I want—”



“Oh, princess, no. You’re not done. Even when I fill your pussy and throw you over my shoulder, we’re not done. We’re just getting warmed up.” He breathes heavily, still thrusting into my body with harsh, thorough movements. “Just let it go. Don’t fight me, gorgeous girl.” It’s absolutely impossible not to do what he says. He continues thrusting into me, working me closer and closer to my edge, until finally my tense, shaking muscles have no other recourse.

I come with a shriek, my body clamping around his as my hands jerk him back against me so there’s no space between us anymore. With his arm trapped between our bodies, all he can do is continue to rub my clit. Even if I’d wanted him to stop, we’re too tangled up for him to do anything else.

And when the feeling becomes overwhelming, my orgasm crashing through me, I sink my teeth into the juncture of his neck and shoulder, crying out against his skin. I lose my ability to think; and I know I must be hurting him. But frankly, if anything, he seems to be enjoying it.

“*Saylor.*” My name sounds like both a curse and a prayer on his lips, and he finally manages to extricate his arm, though he only uses it to grab my hair and jerk me against him. He thrusts into me impossibly harder, my body firmly pressed between him and the tree behind me. Jed’s thrusts only draw my orgasm out even more, and I whimper against his throat when it starts to become too much.

“Shh, shh, I’ve got you,” he murmurs, panting hotly against my skin. “Can I come inside you? You can tell me no, and I’ll—”

“You’d better, after all the pretty promises from earlier.” I laugh hoarsely, turning to slant my lips to his. “If you don’t, it’ll be the biggest disappointment in my life.”

His answer is a growl, and his lips on mine again. He doesn’t ask anything else. And he doesn’t need any further encouragement. His thrusts become erratic, movements losing rhythm as he fucks into me once, twice, four more times until at last he buries himself into me in earnest, his kiss becoming desperate.

“You’re perfect, you know that?” he growls, holding me in place, even though I can’t see much of him.

“Not even,” I deny, but that only earns me a low sound of disapproval from Jed.

“Okay then.” He pulls away, leaving me empty and confused before I scramble to fix my sweatpants while he presumably fixes his jeans, by the sound of his movements.

“What? Are you mad?” The response wasn’t what I’d expected, and I watch as he scoops up the wayward flashlight from the ground.

And then, in the darkness, he suddenly scoops me up over his shoulder, my breath leaving me in a harsh *oomph* as my stomach hits his shoulder. “I could never be mad at you, Saylor,” Jed promises me, taking off from the large tree and the spot where the poachers caught up to me. “But I told you before, didn’t I? I’m not done with you. And clearly I need to teach you just how perfect you are. No matter how long it takes for the lesson to stick.”

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTEEN

“You can’t carry me like this the whole way back!” I protest, though there’s definitely no complaint in the words as I grip his shirt in one hand, fingers bunching the material.

“Why can’t I?” Jed asks, his steps sure as he walks through the dark woods. “Can’t have you getting lost out here again, Saylor. Especially not when there are so many things I still intend to do with you.” I can hear the barely camouflaged excitement and want in his voice, and it sends a thrill through my stomach.

“Because...I’m heavy?” I offer. “I can walk, and—”

“You’re not heavy,” Jed interrupts. “But you know why I’m not putting you down?”

“Why’s that?” I ask, breathless even though I’m not the one actually walking or doing any of the work.

“Because I can’t have you forgetting that you’re mine.”

*Fuck.* The words send tingles of heat down my spine, and I press my thighs together against his chest, glad he can’t see my face. My body throbs, and I’m close to begging him to put me down, throw me against the nearest tree, and fuck me again.

But the fact that I’m really starting to feel the cold seals my mouth shut, and I focus on not making a fool of myself, while simultaneously being amazed that he never shows signs of me being too heavy for him. He carries me all the way to

the cabin, and though I can't exactly see the structure itself, I see the lights bathing the gravel outside of the cabin in warm, orange light.

"You going to put me down now?" I ask, when he stops at the door to shift his grip on me.

"Nope." Jed doesn't sound like it was ever a question. He opens the door, brings me inside, and kicks it closed behind him without even turning to look at it. "Not yet. And don't go off about that 'you're too heavy' crap again, princess." He chuckles softly, and facing backward, I can only blink in the sudden light, still having no real idea or clue of where we're going.

Though, from this angle, I do have a very nice view of his ass. It's really a perfect ass to go along with the perfect expanse of the rest of him.

A gasp is tugged from my mouth when he starts going up the stairs. I hadn't expected that. If anything, I'd expected him to drop me onto the sofa.

"After this..." Jed's tone is conversational, and I swear he must be superhuman not to show any kind of strain in his voice from carrying me for this long. "I'll feed you. Maybe not homemade pasta, but you haven't eaten much today. Any requests?"

"I am so easy to please," I assure him, blinking again in the warm light. It really has been hours since I saw more than darkness so absolute I'd thought it was the inside of my eyelids more than once. "You could seriously just stock the fridge with Lunchables—"

"I'm banning that word," he mutters, interrupting me. "Do you like grilled cheese?"

"Is that...a real question?" I blink at the floor and his perfect ass. "Doesn't *everyone* like grilled cheese? But are we talking American cheese on white bread, or...?"

I can *feel* his full body shudder seconds before he grips me with both hands, bends forward, and throws me backward. The

action forces a yelp out of me that's louder than I intend as I'm suddenly falling.

Though, the fear doesn't last long. Neither does the fall. My back hits the mattress of his bed, and I stare up at him with wide eyes as he stands over me, a smile on his face.

"We're banning that too. American cheese?" His nose scrunches up in disgust. "Might as well just eat plastic and call it a day."

"Well, I am so sorry, Mr. Fancy-pants chef," I drawl, using my elbows for leverage so I can sit up just enough to stare him down. "I do not mean to offend your delicate sensibilities."

"Oh, I'm very offended," he assures me, ripping off his shirt as I watch. "You think I'd cook with that? Let alone keep it in my house?" I can barely focus on his words. No matter how much I love his banter when he's in this kind of mood, watching him strip for me is definitely better.

Though, the moment I can see his body, my breath catches in my throat. He sees the look on my face. The worry, and a soft, self-conscious smile curls on his lips. "Does it bother you?" Jed is quick to ask, and I can't miss the note of uncertainty in his voice.

"It bothers me because it looks like they hurt." I reach out, as if to touch his chest marred by thin lines of scars. "But not because it makes you any less gorgeous."

"I'm not gorgeous," Jed purrs, though he settles over me on the bed, thighs bracketing mine. It brings him close enough for me to touch, and I do so. My fingertips stroke over the lines that look like they were made by a blade, and I bite my lip. "That's purely your territory, Saylor." His hands come up as I touch him, cradling my face between them.

"If I ask, will you tell me?" I murmur, my eyes finding his. "You don't have to. I mean, it's none of my business—"

"I'll tell you," he agrees, though he tugs my shirt up and over my head as he says it, leaving me in my bra and borrowed sweatpants. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. Haven't I said that before?" There's a small crease of a

smile on his lips, and he hooks his finger in the front of my bra to pull me toward him. “Anything.”

“Are you sure?” I let him brush his lips to mine, and in seconds my bra is gone; tossed somewhere on the floor. My body absolutely begs for him, and now that I’ve had a taste of what it’s like to fuck him, I’m pretty sure I’m addicted. “I could ask you something awful. I’m good at doing that.”

“Then I’ll tell you whatever it is. In all its *awful* glory.” Jed pushes me back down onto the bed, shifting until he’s between my thighs instead of pinning me down. It’s all too easy for him to yank off the sweatpants he’d given me, and he takes my underwear with them, leaving me bare once I’ve kicked off my shoes.

*Fuck.*

The way he looks at me makes me squirm. I feel vulnerable. Helpless, even. My skin tingles when he looks at me, and I give a full body shudder when he reaches out to run his fingers lightly down the sides of my body.

“You’re so gorgeous.” His voice is soft and rough. “You’re *perfect*, princess.” Every time he calls me that, I swear it sends a wave of heat right between my thighs. This time, it causes me to attempt to clench them together, and a smile curls on his lips when he notices. “Do you like it when I call you that?”

“Maybe I just like it when you’re confident and in charge,” I reply, my mouth moving before my brain.

“Did you think I wouldn’t be? That I’d maybe be shy and hopeless?” For all of his perfection, he’s still the charming, gorgeous man that I shouldn’t be falling for. There’s still a sweet gleam in his too-blue eyes. He still treats me with the utmost respect, even though I’d like him to *disrespectfully* wreck me.

“I...have no idea what I thought.” My eyes are locked on him, and I watch as he encircles my ankle with his long fingers, bringing it up to rest against his shoulder. He kisses my ankle, his eyes on mine, before working his way up my calf with teeth and tongue.

If someone had asked me before right now if a guy kissing my calf could be hot, I would've said absolutely not. There's nothing sexy about *calves*.

But here Jed is, wiping away my prior expectations of life. It's hard to breathe normally, and even harder to form words, but I finally manage to swallow and ask, "How did you get the scars?"

"Some of them are from my family," Jed remarks offhandedly, without hesitating. He still watches me, though I can't tell if it's to see how I feel about what he's doing, or what he's saying. Either way, I can't look away from him. "They're not exactly the nicest people. Some of them though..." He pauses, grazing his teeth against the side of my knee and making me jerk in surprise at the ticklish sensation. Jed doesn't let me pull away, however. He holds my calf with fingers that dig into my skin, nipping at the joint once more. "Are from the people we took."

"You...took?" I'm pretty sure I should know what that means. I'm also more than sure that I shouldn't question it deeper.

"Yeah. Tourists. People who didn't belong. Drifters. You know, those that wouldn't be missed. My family has rules. They've never been caught, and there's definitely a reason." He says it so easily. So matter-of-factly, but his mouth moves further up my leg, to the sensitive areas of my inner thigh.

"Why did they—you—take people? To kill them?" I don't understand the urge to just murder people. And besides, what did his family do with the bodies? Why just *take* people off the street?

"Oh, Saylor..." Jed's other hand comes out to press against my stomach, holding me down flat against the bed as he leans down. He presses my thighs apart with the other, anchoring one with his free hand. "You really haven't guessed yet? You *really* don't know what I used to be?"

I feel like I should. I'm sure it's there, at the tip of my tongue and at the edge of my brain. It's obvious, isn't it?

That's what my mind says. But right now, with his breath hot against my slit, I can't think of anything at all.

So I shake my head, gaze locked on his ice-blue eyes that won't let me go while he kneels between my thighs, mouth inches from where I want him most.

"My family are cannibals," he tells me, in a voice like silk and razors. "I grew up with a family that ate people, princess. And yet you're the best thing I've ever fucking tasted."

He doesn't give me a chance to sit with that knowledge. Instead, Jed wraps both of his arms around my thighs, jerking me to him as he buries his face against my cunt. I cry out in surprise, his tongue licking a stripe up my slit until he can lap at my clit.

One of my hands flies down to tangle in his hair, and I slam my eyes closed at the myriad sensations from his mouth. While I've had a guy go down on me before, Jed makes an art out of it. He blows any other experience I've had out of the water as his tongue teases and dips between my folds, taunting me with kitten-licks against my clit and entrance.

"Nah, you're not going anywhere," Jed growls, when my hips jerk in his grip. He drags me right back down, and when he licks me again, he thrusts his tongue into my entrance, tasting every part of me he can. "You're mine. And I need a lifetime to taste every inch of you."

There's no way to really answer that. The licking makes more sense now; and why he doesn't mind the taste of blood. Hell, he always seems to enjoy it when it's on my skin, and that does things to me it shouldn't.

Such as wondering what he'd do if I were covered in fresh blood. Would he take the time to lick it all off?

Some part of my brain sounds the alarm bells. He is a *cannibal*, and here I am, letting him put his mouth on me. Hell, I'm welcoming it. And I'm not worried about what he might do. But I should care. I should be petrified and running off to find the officers that were here before.



Instead, I drag him closer with my grip in his hair, words of encouragement falling like rain from my lips as he does his best to taste every part of me, inside and out. When he shifts, one hand leaving my hip, I barely even register. It's not until those fingers replace his tongue that I do notice, and only then to yelp in appreciation when they thrust into me.

But if I'd thought he wasn't using his mouth anymore, I'd been wrong for those few seconds. His tongue finds my clit, lips closing around it as he sucks and licks at the small, sensitive bud.

“*Fuck!*” I wail, twisting in his grip. “Jed, please—”

“Do you want to come, princess?” he interrupts in that low, perfect growl of his. “Do you want to come for me?”

I nod vigorously, not realizing how hard I'm gripping his hair. But he doesn't mind whatsoever, given by the low, grating groan that pours from between his lips like honey.

“Then what are you waiting for?” He curls his fingers into me, sending sparks up my spine when they rub against my g-spot. His mouth is back on my clit in the same second, and he holds me in place while his actions send me to the edge of my sanity. Before I can even register it fully, I feel my body clench, my muscles trembling as his tongue on my clit sends me right over the edge.

This time I do scream. I know I shouldn't be so loud, but that seems like something to work on at another time. He licks me through my orgasm, fingers still working me open as I clench and gush around him. My breath comes in pants when the scream dies off, and it takes longer than it should for me to realize that his tongue is no longer on my clit.

Jed wraps both hands around my thighs again, pulling me right back against him, and presses his open mouth against my entrance. My body still shudders, but Jed shoves his tongue back into me, lapping against my walls with long, thorough strokes.

I whimper at the foreign, delicious feeling. My fingers flex in his hair, and I worry I'm going to rip it out as he licks my

folds like he really is trying to devour me. It drags out my orgasm until I'm pulling him away, needing a break from the overstimulation.

"It's too much," I pant, eyes screwed shut. "Please—I really just need a second."

"Just this once," Jed purrs, finally pulling away. When I manage to look down at him, his face is soaked with my release, and he licks his lips with his eyes on mine. *Fuck*. That's hotter than it should be. "Can I fuck you, Saylor? One more time? Let me fill up this pretty pussy until you're dripping with my cum."

"If you talk to me like that, you can do whatever you want to me." I laugh breathlessly.

"Careful"—there's a warning in his eyes, and his voice, as he unbuckles his jeans and shoves them down his hips—"I'll hold you to that, princess."

Now that I'm getting a good look at his cock for the first time, I immediately want to do more than just let him fuck me. He's hard from eating me out, and it curves up toward his stomach; larger than any of my previous partners' and about on par with what I was expecting from when he'd fucked me in the woods.

"When did you stop eating people?" I ask as he presses me back down, one hand on my throat while he slides his hand over his length, positioning it at my soaked entrance.

"A few years ago," Jed replies, not acting as if this has any impact on the mood, or the fact that he's going to fuck me. "Does it bother you?" He enters me in a smooth motion, kissing me to swallow my gasp of delight.

"Not like it should." I all but cackle, my tone rueful. "And it *really* should—Oh, my God." He pushes into me, not stopping until he's fully sheathed inside me. With how thoroughly he'd eaten me out, it's easy for him to just fuck me however he likes.

"You're so tight," Jed growls, letting his teeth graze against my lower lip. "Your cunt grips me like it was made for

me. I bet you'll look so good with my cum dripping out of your pussy." His thrusts pick up with his words, until he's all but slamming into me, though he maintains perfect control over himself as he does. Hell, he isn't even panting with the effort as he holds me under him, keeping me right where he wants me.

"I think..." he trails off to bite at my throat, in the spaces his fingers don't cover. "If you wouldn't be against it, next time I want to see you dripping from all of your holes. Would you let me, Saylor?" He doesn't give me the chance to answer. Not when his lips close on my nipple and he laps his tongue over it.

My hands fly up to his chest, nails scraping against his skin, though I don't pull him away. It's awkward, and I can't figure out what to do or where to hold on to him.

Finally, Jed makes the decision for me. He grabs my hands and lifts them over my head to the pillows over my head, pushing them down to make a point before he goes back to kneading and teasing my breast while he fucks me.

"You didn't answer me," he murmurs, and I realize he's right.

"You can do *whatever* you want to me," I remind him with sharp inhaled breath. "Didn't I say that already?"

"I know you said some things I could make you regret." Jed chuckles, hoisting one of my knees up so my calf is resting over his shoulder. It gives him a deeper angle, and I swear I can feel him impossibly deep inside of me. He shifts, and I notice that his breaths are finally coming in sharper, harsher pants. He's getting close, and somehow, I am too. Though I have no idea how I'm about to come for a fourth time tonight.

"God," I whisper, closing my eyes hard as heat surges through me. "I can't come again. I *just* did—"

"You can though," Jed goads, his thumb finding my clit for encouragement. "You definitely can, princess. Come for me, won't you? I need to feel you come around my cock. I love feeling your body so desperate for my cum." His words and

tone are enough to drag me back toward that edge, and my foot flexes over his shoulder, my muscles trembling as I look for any release to the tension building in my core.

“I don’t know,” I whine, eyes on his as he stares down at me with so much intensity I can barely meet his gaze. “It’s a lot. I just—”

“Trust me,” he promises darkly. “I can feel how you’re clenching around me. You can come for me, Saylor. One more time for me.” He keeps on with the words, the dirty encouragements winding around my brain until I can barely see straight.

All I can do is mutter a quick ‘*oh*’ when I suddenly hurtle back into another orgasm, digging my heel into his shoulder and dragging him closer, deeper into me. This one isn’t like the ones before. It’s raw and ragged, and on the edge of painful. But that just makes it better, somehow. Especially when he curses and spills into me, pulling my hips tight against him so I have absolutely nowhere to go and he’s filling me up, just like he’d promised he would.

But by the time he’s pulling away from me, leaving me horrendously empty and loose as a rag doll on the bed, I can barely focus on the ceiling that spins above me.

Still, I can feel his fingers tracing my slit. I *feel* when he scoops up some of the leaking cum on his fingers, only to shove it back inside of me, drawing a small, soft mewl of protest from my throat.

“Shhh, shhh.” Jed drapes himself over me, drawing me to his body. “I’ve got you, Saylor.” He does it again, pushing more of his cum back into me and this time dragging a more forceful cry from my throat. “Sorry,” he chuckles against my throat. “You just look so good like this. All ruined for me and dripping my cum. You don’t have to stay awake. I’ll clean you up, princess. I’ll take care of you.”

“Do I still get a grilled cheese?” I murmur, turning into his chest to press my nose against his skin and inhale. “Because you totally promised me a grilled cheese.” As hungry as I am,

unfortunately, I'm starting to think that my exhaustion is going to win out.

“Yeah, Saylor,” Jed chuckles. “I’ll make you a grilled cheese. As soon as you wake up.” I barely register the end of his words. The only thing I can really feel is his hands on me, running up my side to cup my jaw lightly. His thumb runs along my lip, and he pulls me closer against him. “Go to sleep, perfect girl. Everything will be here for you when you wake up.”

I don't need any more encouragement than that. My consciousness escapes when I take another breath of Jed's scent, and within seconds, I'm asleep.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTEEN

I can feel him watching me when I finally wake up in earnest. Somewhere in the back of my brain, I remember inhaling two immaculate grilled cheeses that could make angels weep with their perfection. But I'm pretty sure halfway through the second one, I fell back asleep on Jed's chest.

"Please tell me I don't snore," I mutter, not bothering to open my eyes. He chuckles, knuckles stroking my cheek as he pushes a lock of hair back behind my ear.

"I can't tell you that," Jed purrs in my ear. "But it's cute how enthusiastic a sleeper you are, Saylor."

I groan and bury my face against his chest, glad for the warmth. "That's embarrassing." But that's not the only problem, or even the worst one.

In the light of day, everything feels so much different from last night. My fears eat at me, and the terror that I've felt around him for days is back to prickle at my fingertips. After all, dreaming of his slaughter-shed had brought that particular fact right back to the forefront of my mind.

*And suddenly I don't know how I'd forgotten it.*

"You're thinking very hard." He sounds...nervous. Terse, short, and like he's unsure of where we stand with these thoughts running around my skull. But then again, that makes two of us. I'm also not sure where we stand in the light of day that's impossible to hide behind.

“I know,” I agree, finally opening my eyes. “I wish I wasn’t.”

He sighs and shifts against me. “Yeah, I wish you weren’t either.”

But I am. And it’s impossible to stop now. My eyes crack open and I sit up, hair falling around my shoulders as I stare down at Jed, who looks amazing in the morning light. But then again, he looks amazing in any light, or in the shadows at night. He just looks...*gorgeous*. His blue eyes are wide and calculating as he watches me, though he doesn’t say anything. Not even when I reach down to stroke my fingers along his jaw, relishing the feel of his skin.

“I know,” he murmurs at last, turning to kiss my palm. “I get it, Saylor.”

“Get what?” I whisper, reveling in the stillness of the cabin that’s nothing like my apartment. Sure, the trepidation and fear make my heart beat against my ribs like a trapped bird. I remember all the things he’s done, and what he told me last night.

*Jed is a cannibal.*

Or, well, according to him, *was* a cannibal. But how can I be sure, when he so very clearly still has a taste for...

Me.

“Things are different in the morning.” He gives a slow, languid shrug. “I can see the way you look at me now versus last night. But at least I know something for sure.” He continues leaning into my hand with eyes full of trust and no lines of tension in his body.

I know it too, when I look down at him like this.

He *trusts* me. Jed doesn’t need to say it. He doesn’t need to utter any of the words that make up that sentence, and I’m pretty sure he knows it too, since he just watches me with that steady, blue gaze. He knows I can see it in him.

Just as he can see the opposite in me. *Fuck*.

“While you were asleep, I got your things ready for you.” I can feel the heaviness of his words. I can feel the reluctance in them, even as they leave his mouth. My heart sinks, but a part of me is relieved. Isn’t this what I’ve wanted all along? To be set free to go the hell home?

“I did your laundry, and everything is on the dresser over there.” I follow the flick of his eyes and see a pile of familiar clothes...along with a familiar set of keys. “You’re not my hostage, Saylor. It kind of feels like you never were, but I have to remind myself you might not see it—”

I kiss him. Hard. With my lips slanted against his and my eyes closed, it’s easy to fall back into the feelings from last night.

Almost.

He kisses me back with the same enthusiasm, and doesn’t chase me as I lean away from him, tucking my hair behind my ear.

But he watches me. The entire time I take to get dressed and shove my things in my pockets, Jed watches me without taking his eyes off of me once. It should feel threatening. I should move faster because of it, I know. And yet, that’s not the case at all.

I love the weight of his gaze on me.

However, he knows me better than I know myself, and apparently has for longer than I’ve been awake. My jumbled thoughts tell me I need to leave. I need space from him, even if it’s not permanent. But I need the space, at least for now. I need to go home and remember how to be Saylor, and figure out how to stop my thoughts from running around in dangerous, chainsaw-shaped configurations in my head.

When my hands close on my camera, however, I pause. The thought I’ve had this whole time comes back to me and I turn the camera in my hands. “Can I...take a picture of you?” I ask, and immediately see the look of surprise and uncertainty flicker across his face. “Not like that. You can say no. I don’t want to go to the police or anything. It’s not that, it’s just—”



“Yes,” Jed interrupts, the word warm and sure. “Yes, Saylor.”

My lips pull into a smile even without me willing them to. I pull my camera to my face, and watch him through the viewfinder as he lays back onto the bed and just looks at me.

It’s exactly what I want. I take a picture of him, then another when his eyes slant away, toward the ceiling. It makes my heart twist, because he really is just as perfect as I knew he would be.

Everything about him is perfect, after all. Except for the chainsaw-wielding maniac part. That’s the thing that still hurts. That still terrifies me when the lights are on and the sun is up. At night I can ignore it. Yesterday, after everything, I could pretend that I didn’t care about it.

But today, this Saylor, the one that lives in the real world, can’t help but care. I can’t brush it off. At least not so easily.

My fingers itch to reach out and touch him again. Especially when he looks back at me with that sweet, affectionate look on his face. “I’ll never push you,” he reminds me, voice soft but without the roughness of last night. “Even if you never want to see me again.” But at that I can see the flicker of uncertainty in his face.

And I swear, for maybe a microsecond, he’s afraid that’s what’s going to happen. I want to reach out and comfort him. Part of me *begs* to assure him that’s not the case. That I just need some time away from all of this to come down and remember what normal eating is while I try to revive my plants. *I just need time*, I want to wail. But I can’t promise that time won’t be forever.

It all depends on how I feel when I break this magnetic connection between us and go back to my real life for a little while. And that right there is the worst part of it.

Still, before I can stop myself, I jump to my feet, knowing I need to either break away now or fall back into bed with him. It’s hard when one of those options is a lot more alluring than

the other, but I manage to walk away from him without touching him again. Without saying something I'll regret.

Though I wonder if walking away is going to be my biggest regret of all.

My Jeep is outside, in the spot where his had been parked before. And no part of me can really be surprised by it, or the bottle of water sitting in the console. Jed is the most considerate man on Earth, I've decided, and I'm even *less* shocked to see the full tank of gas that I'm sure I didn't have when I'd been at the preserve.

And here I am, walking away from all of this. From him, and the best relationship I'll probably ever have. "Fuck," I mutter, my heart twisting and protesting in my chest while I pull my car around to the real driveway instead of the two roads that lead me further into the woods.

"Fuck!" I nearly yell it the second time, as I wait for the gate to open to take me back to the main road. With my GPS on and working to lead me home, I can see that we were never that far away from Akron. Hell, I'll be back home within an hour or so. It feels...wrong somehow. Like I shouldn't be this close to reality.

It feels like I should be hours and hours away from home, not just fifty-four minutes.

"Bye, Jed," I tell my steering wheel as the gate opens wide enough for me to get through it. "I just don't know if I can do this." Because someone like me, who cares for her plants and eats Lunchables, might not be able to accept someone whose skills lie in carving up bodies and lying to the police.

## CHAPTER

# NINETEEN

For the entire first day after I get back to my apartment with my wilting plants and glaring landlady, I sleep. It's crazy how exhausted I am, even though I'd basically spent the last night at Jed's sleeping and eating grilled cheese.

After he'd made my wish come true and disrespectfully wrecked me, of course.

But the only times I wake up for the rest of the day are to scarf down Lunchables and brush my hair. Though I'm pretty sure I'd fallen asleep for the second task, judging by the fact I'd woken up with the brush on my pillow and my hair still tangled.

For two days after that, I try to remember what it's like to be a normal human, and fail miserably. Though, I manage to write a reasonably convincing email to the preserve giving them an excuse for why the photos are late. They even believe it, and give me an extra twenty-four hours to get my work submitted to them. It's not quite as much as I'd like, but if I have to spend all day editing and picking out the best photos, then I will.

All in the name of getting paid, at the very least.

When that's finally done and sent, let myself be distracted by the thing I've been trying to avoid for the whole time I've been working. What I've set to the side, my stomach twisting into origami swans every single time my eye finds them by accident.

The pictures I took of Jed.

But finally, when there's nothing else left to do and I can't give myself any other excuses, I draw my laptop up onto my knees and lean back in my recliner, eyes fixed on the two photos I'd taken before I left his cabin.

Somehow, he looks better than I remembered him. And that's saying something, since in my memory, Jed is perfection personified. I feel almost as if I could reach out to the pictures and feel the silkiness of his hair, though I know I'll just hit the glass of my laptop screen instead. In the first, he's looking away from me. Gazing up at his ceiling with the length of his neck and upper body on display. He looks so thoughtful and so...sad. But resigned, in a lot of ways. Like he's losing something important to him, but he knew it was coming all along.

And that makes my heart twist into knots, just like my stomach. I hate the feeling of being almost unable to breathe when I look at him; it just gets worse when I open the other picture and it covers the first.

In this one, Jed had been looking directly at me. His blue eyes were sweet, lashes sweeping across them with that small start of a smile on his lips. Gorgeous could never begin to cover how he looks. Especially when he's looking at *me* like this.

"You're a murderer," I tell the picture, though my heart screams in disagreement with my dismissal. "I can't. I *literally* can't get past that." That's what I say, but everything in me tends to disagree.

It's not like he'd done anything wrong, after all. Kidnapping me, for as long as that had lasted, had been to protect him and his friends. And for all that I was a 'hostage,' it had barely felt like it. But God, here I am making excuses for him, instead of being happy that I'm free and clear.

*But I'm not happy. That's the problem.*

Every morning I've woken up, disappointment sets in when I realize I'm back in my apartment. And not just because my fridge is full of Lunchables, instead of real food. Every time I bury my face in my pillow, I remember that it doesn't

smell like Jed; it's always such a hit to my gut that I have a hard time going to sleep. It might be wrong as hell, but I can't control how I feel when I'm half-asleep and wishing for more than I have.

"What's wrong with me?" I mutter, slamming my laptop shut and banging my head back against the headrest a couple times. Not that it does much, given how overstuffed the chair is. "You have got to get over this, Saylor. You cannot be in love with a serial killer." Especially one that wields a chainsaw for fun, like something out of the goriest horror movies known to man.

My phone ringing makes me jump, and for one wild moment I hope to God that somehow Jed grabbed my number before he returned it to me and is calling to ask me out. Or, hell, to tell me he's tracked me down and he's outside.

Unfortunately, it's my step-mother. And if anything in the world could make me feel worse than I already do, it's her voice when I accept the call and hear her say, "*You missed dinner with your father and me this week, Saylor.*"

Oh. Yeah. How could I have forgotten? But I can't exactly tell her what happened. I definitely don't even want to. Still, I flex my legs out on the recliner, stretching my toes as far as they'll go before I answer.

"I was busy," I tell her, flipping down the footrest of the recliner and getting to my feet. She's officially ruined the mood I was in, which wasn't a great one anyway, and dragged me back to a reality I'd rather stay away from. "I was working for the preserve and I forgot." It's only partially a lie. Not that I care about being truthful to her.

I've never liked my step-mother, Brenda, anyway. Missing dinner with them doesn't upset me, since she would have been there. The only thing I feel even a little bad about is that I didn't get to see my dad. And, thanks to how much I dislike her, visits have already dropped in frequency to become once a month or so.

"*You could have at least called us.*" It's obvious she isn't going to let this go, but I busy myself with looking for my

laptop charger. Her words don't hurt me nearly as much as they used to, thankfully. But she is always good at searching for something to dig under my skin while we talk. I have no doubt today will be the same.

"I was really tied up. I couldn't get away," I mutter, gently dropping my laptop onto the desk in my room. My bedroom is small, and mostly dominated by plants, but I still have a small workstation set up for when I actually feel like doing work at a desk like an adult, instead of in a recliner or in bed half asleep. Sure enough, my charger is here, and I slide it into the port as I make sure not to bang my camera off of its charger.

*"What, were you being held hostage?"* Brenda snorts derisively in my ear.

"Yeah, something like that." She's closer to the mark than she can ever know, and I can't help my wry grin that she can't see. "Hands tied tight, the whole nine yards. Haven't been home in days." The truth will just irritate her, so I sprinkle it in where I can while I tidy up my apartment. This way, I can be productive while she nitpicks at me.

Which, of course, she does. Once she's moved past how inconsiderate I've been, she moves onto the other easy things. How she's seen some of my peers from high school. How good they're looking, and how they've settled down to have families. She, of course, makes sure to let me know I'm probably not going to be able to land the same kind of fairy tale ending as them, but that she's sure I'll figure something out.

I brace myself, knowing that what comes next is going to be about my weight and my looks. Except, when she starts on her tangent about this new diet she's seen so much about...I don't hear her.

Not really, at least. Instead, I hear Jed's voice in my ear, whispering about how he likes every part of me. Hadn't he been so honest, and so earnest, when he'd stroked his fingers along my sides; along my curves that my step-mother is so keen on shaming me for?

“*Did you hear me, Saylor?*” The crack of Brenda’s voice drags me out of my thoughts, and I let go of my t-shirt that I’ve been twisting around my fingers.

“Sure,” I tell her easily, though the truth is I haven’t been hearing her. Not whatsoever. Because Jed’s voice is more prevalent, even as a remembered-whisper. “I’ll look into that.”

A knock on the door makes me look up in surprise, and stupidly, I again hope that it’s Jed. I hope he put a tracker in my car, or just used his super-serial killer powers to track me down. More than anything, I silently beg for it to be him.

“Hey, I gotta go.” My words cut hers off, and I can all but hear her hackles raise from my side of the call. “But umm, I’ll call Dad and set up another dinner. I’ll apologize to him for missing last week.” Because no way in hell will I ever apologize to her.

I don’t even let her get a word in. I barely hear her start by the time I’ve hung up the phone, my steps taking me across the small apartment to the door.

*Please be Jed.*

I suck in a breath, grabbing the handle with the fingers of my other hand crossed tightly enough to ache.

*Please, please be Jed—*

I open the door quickly, still so hopeful that it hurts, only for the thought to stop dead and fizzle out in my skull.

Because it isn’t Jed standing at the door, waiting to take me back to his cabin or literally anywhere else.

It’s the same police officers from his cabin in the woods. Only now, they’re looking a lot less friendly, and a lot more wary as they stand at my door.

“Can we come in?” Officer Rayez asks, that false smile crossing her lips like it had back at Jed’s cabin. If this is her attempt to look friendly, then someone should really tell her how bad of a job she’s doing with it.

“Sure.” I know the disappointment in my voice is audible, but I don’t know what to do to change that. Hell, I don’t give a

damn at this point. Let her see how disappointed I am to waste my day with these two instead of doing something productive.

Like finding a way to either move on, or send a bat-signal to Jed to let him know I fucked up.

“Thank you.” She nods at me and removes her black sunglasses, tucking them in her pocket as she steps inside. “You remember us from a few days ago, yes? At your boyfriend’s cabin?” She looks around the small, beige apartment as she speaks, her eyes squinting at the photos hung up on the walls in frames. “These yours?”

“I remember you,” I agree, smiling at Officer Brown, who I’d definitely rather have on my trivia team if it came down to it. If only because he looks like he’d be less likely to yell at me when I fucked something up during a competition.

Officer Rayez looks like someone who cracks the whip in all aspects of life. Not just her work. I follow her with my gaze, but I don’t stare her down as she moves from one photo to the next. Instead, I head to my kitchen table, grab a bottle of water from my poorly stocked fridge, and sit down hard in one of my chairs. I don’t offer them water. I don’t want them thinking they’re welcome here, or that I want them staying for any longer than what is strictly necessary, after all. “And, yeah. Those are mine. I’m a photographer.”

She glances at me when I say it, and my brows raise. If she has an issue with my job, she can walk herself right back out the door.

“You’re good,” is all she says, however, before seating herself at the table across from me. Officer Brown doesn’t say anything, but he goes to examine the photos on my walls with squinted eyes. “Makes me wonder how in the world you ever met that boy, since it seems to me you travel in two very different circles.”

Obviously, saying he kidnapped me a few days ago and somehow I’ve fallen in love with him is not an appropriate explanation. But I shrug my shoulders, still looking bored out of my mind as I consider my answer. “We met a few months



ago,” I lie finally, hoping that Jed hasn’t already told her some lie that I’m not fucking up. “And started dating last month.”

“Do you stay at his place often?” If she has an opinion about my lie, she doesn’t say anything about it. But I shake my head, deciding to be truthful this time around.

“Nah. This was the first time. Definitely wasn’t expecting the cops to pay us a visit.” There’s no lie in that, and I figure that’s the safest option now. It’s always easier to remember the truth, if she decides to ask me the same questions again.

“We wouldn’t have, except we’d heard some rumors about him. And based on where he was seen a few days prior...I know you say you hadn’t heard anything, but you still have no knowledge of the murder at the Morgan Swamp Preserve last week?”

I just shake my head as she speaks, trying to look bored and oblivious. “I was there with Jed last week,” I have to say, because I know she’ll either find out or already has. “The Preserve needed me to take new photos for their marketing department.”

Officer Rayez nods, pulling out that stupid little pad of paper and flicking through it. “Yes, I’d confirmed that with the preserve this morning. But you say you went with Jed?”

“I met him there,” I tell her smoothly. “Then we went back to his cabin together. For a while he’s wanted to see me at work. He’s...” I smile at her, the first genuine reaction since she’d come in. “He’s really supportive of my work. It means a lot.” That, too, is as accurate as I can make it.

“I’m sure. He seems like a caring guy.” She flicks through a few pages, blinking down at her tiny handwriting. “Do you know the name ‘Tyson Miller?’”

My heart leaps, aiming for my ribs and an easy escape that it won’t find. But I shake my head at her, sitting back in my chair. “Should I?”

“That’s the man who was killed at the preserve. The same day you and Mr. Shaw were there,” Officer Rayez explains. “I just wonder if you saw anything at all. Maybe you ran into

him, or his killer, and didn't realize it? Was there anyone else at the preserve when you were working, Miss King?"

"Umm..." God, it's hard to lie when the answer is banging against my skull. "There was a guy walking around. He ran into me at one point. He seemed to be in a hurry, I think? But I don't know. I wasn't really paying attention." I give her a rueful, apologetic grin and press my hands against the table. "It's unreal how much I get tunnel vision while I work, and I end up losing so much time. I'd meant to leave by the afternoon, but it was late when Jed finally dragged me back to the parking lot."

If only she knew how much truth was in those words, and how close she was to solving her murder. She'd probably have an apoplexy if she got even a *whiff* of it, if I were to guess. My fingers tap as she stares down at her pad, and I want more than anything for her to just *leave*.

"Well, just in case you know more than you think you do, I'd like to give you a little warning." Officer Rayez smiles sweetly at me, though it definitely doesn't reach her eyes. Still, it makes me feel a little nauseous, and somehow I know that the next words out of her mouth aren't going to be 'God bless you.'

"Tyson Miller was a bad guy. He did a lot of things I would've loved to arrest him for. And he also has a brother, who, from what I've heard, is a real piece of work. Not only that, he was really attached to Tyson."

"Okay?" I try to sound bewildered, instead of nervous, and I flip my hands over on the table, flexing my fingers absently. Officer Rayez glances down at my hands, then her dark gaze catches mine.

"Even if he just suspects you had something to do with his brother's death, he might be not so friendly about asking his questions. I know it's not much to go on, but if you see a man in his forties with brown hair and green eyes who seems out of place or aggressive, you'd do well to call me. At the very least, stay away from him. You don't need a man with a penchant for taking revenge to be out for you, Saylor."

“Why would he?” My lips move with the words, but I feel my palms beginning to itch; the clamminess sinking into my skin. “We didn’t do anything.”

Officer Rayez just *looks* at me. She stares at me for long enough that I’m half-sure she doesn’t believe me, before a smile finally hitches along her lips again and she stands up from my table.

“Maybe pass my message along to Jed, next time you see him,” she advises, nodding as she puts her sunglasses back on. Officer Brown is already back at the door, and I wonder why he comes along if it’s not to help her out with her interviews. Isn’t this the time where they should be playing good cop, bad cop, or something?

“I’ll tell him,” I agree, bewildered enough for it to be real. “Though I don’t think he’ll know what to do with that information either.”

She searches my eyes from behind the sunglasses, head cocked to the side as she stands half in, half out of my apartment. “Maybe not,” she agrees finally. “Maybe I’m just overthinking this. Stay safe, Miss King. And good luck with your photography.” They leave after that, not giving me a chance for the last word or anything else.

But that’s just as well. Because my thoughts are racing, and I know, finally, that I’m not about to spend the rest of the day moping for Jed again. My steps take me back to my room, and I pull my laptop off of its charger to take it to the bed, where I curl up with it in my lap.

I may not know how to get a hold of Jed, but I do know one thing, at least. Wren, his best friend, works for *Greenco*. And thanks to working for them a couple times last year as a party photographer, I know for a fact they have a full employee directory online with pictures. I may not be the world’s best investigator, but even I can scan pictures for the black-haired, smiling murderer who’d shown up at the cabin and nearly busted down Jed’s gate.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

With the receptionist staring up at me with a friendly, expectant look on her face, I feel my confidence falter.

What in the *hell* am I doing?

I was free; free and clear from Jed and having ties to any murderers. I could've just gone about my life, found a normal boyfriend, and just moved on. But, well, I'd tried that for three whole days. And every single minute had been absolute hell, when all of me craved Jed.

Now I feel like I'm the psycho. It's more believable for me to be out of my mind with how much I miss him. I've known him for a week, not a lifetime, after all. Breaks are normal. Being away from someone, even if you love them, is *normal*.

Maybe this means I'm just not that normal. Or I have unhealthy, codependent tendencies like my therapist had once hinted at when my mom had died and I was unable to even get dressed in the morning. If that's the case, then I definitely owe her an apology for ghosting her and telling my dad she'd started talking about exorcisms mid-session, so he'd never take me back to see her again.

"Miss?" The receptionist is starting to look concerned as she looks at me, though she maintains her kind, professional smile impeccably while her eyes widen. "Are you all right?"

No. I'm having an existential crisis the likes of which this office building has ever seen.

“Yeah,” I say, trying to fix a confident smile on my face. I’m sure I don’t succeed. But the best I can hope for right now is that I don’t look psychotic, or in need of a straight jacket complete with a padded room. “Sorry, it’s just been a long day and I lost my train of thought.” It’s been a long *week*, to be honest. But she doesn’t need to know my pathetic life story. Not only that, but in the past twenty-four hours I’ve done enough sleuthing to track down how to get to Wren and his business hours that I could put *private investigator* on my resumé and only barely be lying.

“Are you here to see someone?” the receptionist prods as I stand there stupidly. “Or...do you have a delivery?”

“I’m here to see someone,” I say quickly, knowing that I’m really failing at my calm, cool, and collected act. If she throws me out, it’s all over and I’ll have to do something *really* shady like wait for him in the parking lot and try not to get arrested. “Is Wren Crystal here today? I’m supposed to discuss some business with him.” I’d settled on this explanation, figuring it’s better than nothing. At worst, I could bring up working for them in the past, and how Wren had told me that if I needed a reference or if there was any issue with getting paid, I could talk to him.

Both of which are untrue statements, of course.

“Let me just make sure he’s here today.” Her eyes drop to her computer, and I hear her clicking on the keyboard somewhere on her side of the desk. I watch, trying to look patient, as she flicks through screens, then finally rewards me with a smile. “He’s off in thirty minutes, but Wren is in his office. Do you know how to find him?” I find it strange that she’s not going to call up to him, to make sure that I’m not some crazy girl that’s here to profess her love to him. But maybe that’s just how he is. Or just how *GreenCo* is in general.

How lax of them.

“Not really,” I admit, hoping it doesn’t blow my sad excuse for a story. “I’ve only been here a couple of times.” That part, at least, isn’t a lie. I’d been here twice last year

when *GreenCo* had hired me to do their party photos. And neither of those times had I been anywhere other than the event space and a meeting room. But damn, I do remember they'd had amazing donuts.

“You’ll take this elevator up to the seventh floor.” The receptionist gestures to the elevator behind her, at the beginning of a hallway leading to another part of the building. “Turn left, then head straight to the end of the hallway. Wren’s office is at the corner, with the big windows and his name on the plaque.” She rewards me with another smile. “You can’t miss it, or him. I promise.”

“Thank you so much. I appreciate all your help.” I know at least how to *act* like I’m not crazy, and I give her one last quick wave before crossing the large lobby. When I reach it, I gently smash the elevator button like all of my hopes and dreams depend on it.

Well, okay, not all of them. But I *do* really need to see Wren.

The elevator dings, doors opening so I can step into the freshly cleaned cab. I press the button labeled 7 and the doors close smoothly, no sign of creaking or uncoiled gears anywhere in sight. But I suppose when it’s a *GreenCo*—one of the richest and most profitable companies in Akron—elevator, it’s no wonder the elevators are immaculately cared for and clean.

Though, they also have the worst elevator music. It makes my ears burn as I watch the floors go by, leaning on the back wall with my gaze fixed on the counter that beeps lightly with the changing of floors. Is it just me, or is this the slowest elevator known to man?

Finally, when I’m sure I’ve aged about forty years, the elevator dings with more conviction and the doors slide open. I take the provided escape, glad that the music plaguing my ears is left far behind while I take a left and breeze down the hallway like I know exactly what I’m doing.

It’s too bad that I don’t.

My plan started at the door, and ends in about twenty feet, where I estimate Wren's office to be. I figure I need to tell Wren about Tyson Miller's brother, and the fact that the cops showed up at my apartment. But other than that? I have no idea what I'm doing here.

My steps slow as I reach the office, my eyes fixed on the door where I see the shiny, silver plaque engraved with black letters.

WREN CRYSTAL glares at me from the sign, taunting me with how close I am to getting what I'm pretty sure I want. Or at least finding the access to it.

But...

I bite my lip, a thought occurring to me that hadn't before this unfortunate moment. What if Jed doesn't want anything to do with me? What if his words had been just that? It wouldn't be the first time, or the second. There's a big chance he was only being that nice to me to make sure I wouldn't tell the police on him and his friends.

Worse, what if he'd decided I wasn't worth it when I left his cabin and didn't look back? Then it would be all my fault, and my stomach plummets at that painful possibility. It would be literally *all my fucking fault*, if that's the case. And all I would've had to do was not run away like an idiot.

Once I work through my racing thoughts and blink a few times, I realize I'm staring into Wren's office window with someone looking back at me.

Only, it isn't Wren.

Nor is it Jed.

A brunet with the same lithely muscled build as Wren stands on the other side of the glass, meeting my gaze with furrowed brows and a bemused look on his face. His arms are folded, his hair cut shorter than both Wren and Jed's, though nothing close to a buzz cut. His eyes are a darker hazel than I had first thought, and as I watch, he tilts his head to the side.

I mirror him without meaning to, and his smile widens just a touch.

“There’s a girl staring into your office like you killed her cat,” he interrupts, and I realize belatedly that Wren has been talking to him this whole time. Unluckily for me, the windows are thin enough that I can hear him when he’s this close. “*Did you kill someone’s cat today?*”

“Yeah, clearly,” Wren sneers, amusement lacing his tone. “I make it a habit to throw cats into trees and kick puppies on my way to work. Didn’t you know?” With a snort, he adds, “Move your ass, Cassian. Let me see who it is.”

“Not your assistant,” Cassian mutters, but side steps enough for Wren’s expectant eyes to find mine.

His brows fly up to his bangs, and he blinks once, then again, like he’s more than a little surprised to see me. But that’s okay, because I’m just as surprised I’d made it here. “Oh.” I can barely hear the word, and I only know from the shape of his mouth that it’s what he said. “That’s...huh. Open the door for her, would you?”

“Last I checked I was *not* your assistant,” his friend repeats, but he opens the door and gestures for me to come in. “Did you get a new assistant?” he asks, glancing over his shoulder before closing the door. “Because she looks terrified of you. Like you yelled at her.”

“No, she’s not my assistant.” Wren’s gaze stays locked on mine, and he leans back in a large, comfortable looking chair behind his mahogany desk. “And I certainly didn’t yell at you, did I, Saylor?”

I shake my head as Cassian mouths my name, clearly familiar with it. “Saylor,” he mutters. “I know that name, don’t I?”

“You should,” Wren replies. “Since Jed’s sure he’s in love with her.”

My stomach bottoms out at his words, and for a moment I feel like I’m going to fall over. *In love with me?* Sure, he acts way more than just enamored of me when we’re together, but I think saying he *loves* me is too much of a stretch...isn’t it?



“You’re the girl he kidnapped,” Cassian says, the pieces finally clicking together. “From the preserve. I remember now.” He gives me a quick, easy smile and reaches a hand out to me. “I’m Cass. And you seem to be no longer held hostage.”

“I left.” I flick my gaze between them, my words quick and unsure. “He said...well, we...” God, I can feel myself blushing, and I have to look away from them before I say something stupid. “I...I kind of ran away. I think.”

“I see,” Wren’s voice is carefully neutral, and he watches me shrewdly from thoughtful eyes.

“But I didn’t mean to,” I add, just as fast and unsure.

His eyes widen, just a bit, and he trades a look with Cassian. “I *see*.” Is that a hint of a smile playing at his lips, or am I just imagining it?

“But I miss him. And the cops came. I didn’t tell them anything.” I’m rambling now, though I can’t stop, and I spill random parts of Rayez’s visit to him as they come back to me. “So...they asked about us. And I lied. I said we were together, and that made me feel worse. I know it’s been five days, but I miss him. And I don’t have his number, so I can’t call him. Then I kind of stalked you.” Yeah, I probably could’ve left that part out. “Though now I wonder if maybe this was a mistake. Maybe he doesn’t want to see me again, or he’s trying to move past it? I know you just say things when you want someone to trust you, so if that was the case, I get it—”

“Saylor.” Wren’s voice is firm, but understanding.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to assume, because—”

“*Saylor*,” he interrupts again, this time leaning his forearms on his desk. “Stop for five seconds, *please*.”

Finally, I look up at him, and I’m shocked to see the wide smile on his lips, and the way his eyes flicker with amusement. A quick look at Cass shows me he’s trying and failing to cover a grin, and his shoulders shake with silent laughter.

“Is he mad at me?” I whisper, unable to stop myself. “Does he want me to just never show up again? I didn’t mean to—”

“He’s driven past your apartment four times a day, every day, since you’ve been gone,” Cass interrupts this time, his voice edged with amusement. “I can assure you, he isn’t mad at you. And he’d love for you to show up anywhere he’s at. He doesn’t want to pressure *you*.” He turns to look at Wren, still unable to help himself. “Tell me you acted like this with Hazel when you first met her.”

Wren makes a face and shakes his head. “I showed up too much at her apartment for her to ever think I wasn’t obsessed with her. Clearly, space was the wrong answer, judging by the way the two of you are *pinning* for each other.” He snorts, and when my shoulders drop, gestures for me to take the chair in front of his desk. “Sit, before you fall.”

I sit. Hard. And only belatedly think that it might have been rude.

“The first thing you need to understand about Jed,” Wren begins, resting his folded hands on the table in front of him. “Is that he’s the sweetest, most oblivious creature to ever roam the earth. So...” He glances at Cass, his smile turning wicked.

“So?” I prompt, heart thumping in my chest.

“What are you doing for dinner tonight?”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

More than any other time in my life, I can say with certainty that I have no fucking idea what in the world I'm doing. Which, so far, seems to be the theme of my day. "What are you doing, Saylor?" I mutter, throwing myself back against my seat. I've been at the restaurant now for a solid ten minutes, and the whole time I've been here hiding in my car, I've made sure no one walking in could see me.

Hopefully.

I could still run away, after all. There's a tiny part of me screaming about the fact I'm going to dinner with *serial killers*. Plus, the one I care about the most has a penchant for horror history's goriest, nastiest weapon.

I'm probably insane, if I had to guess. Maybe I hit my head between the night at the preserve and now, because this is possibly the worst decision I've ever made. By far.

On the bright side, I look better now than I did at the preserve, or at Jed's house. My hair is brushed and back in a half-up ponytail. Thanks to having my bathroom at my disposal, I'd been able to even curl it some and put on eyeliner. Any more makeup than that would've been too much, and disingenuous to what I normally have the motivation for on a daily basis.

"I don't know if I can do this," I mutter to the backs of my eyelids. Even in clothes that make me look less like a traveling hobo, I still have absolutely no confidence in what I'm about to do. Dressed in a short black skirt, black boots, a tucked in

black shirt, and my favorite jacket, I should feel at least okay about myself.

Instead, I feel like I'm dressed in a paper bag.

On the other hand, I've made it this far. And I know for certain that if I go home now without even going inside, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

Even if the guy I've dressed up for is a serial killer. That part will never not bother me, I've decided. But something about his face, and the way Jed had treated me, makes my heart ache to get over the small, itty bitty sticking point of him murdering the shit out of people with a chainsaw.

Either way, I need to make a decision now. Because there won't be any going back, no matter what I choose.

*You're a safe option person*, my brain tells me comfortingly. And...she's right. I've always picked the safer option, from clothing to my job. Never having the guts to take the risky path. I like to know that my path is as secure as I can make it, and that there's very little risk involved. Maybe it's boring and a little disappointing, but at least I've never been in a situation I couldn't get myself through. Not to mention, I've never been low on money when rent time rolled around, or when I needed to go grocery shopping.

Safe is...well, *safe*. It's an attractive option for a reason.

But going in there right now and confronting Jed is the absolute opposite of safe. It's dangerous and risky, for all the reasons that parade through my head to the tune of "Night On Bald Mountain." Hell, I'm even sure the devil is dancing in his mountain somewhere inside my skull, egging on the fears and worries of my choice.

I should go home. Live safely. Coerce my plants to come back to life and wait for my step-mother to call.

But instead of turning the key in the ignition, I yank it out and stuff my keys in the pocket of my jacket. Next I pocket my phone, and before I know it, I'm kicking open my door and all but slamming it shut. Then, after a quick apology to Miss Roxie Hart for my rough treatment of her, I walk toward

the door like I'm James Bond on a mission to rescue his love interest in that particular movie.

I don't expect the restaurant to be so nice. Not even when I'd been staring at The Cascades' exterior and patio for the past ten minutes from the safety of my Jeep. A chandelier in the small entryway catches my attention, and soon my eyes are drawn to the glass-walled wine room not too far away and the dark, sultry interior of the place.

Yeah, I've definitely never been anywhere as nice as here. Except maybe for the one dinner I joined my Dad and stepmom for one of their anniversary celebrations.

"Can I help you?" The hostess is polite, and beams at me from the stand. Dressed in black and white with a tidily knotted tie that sits perfectly at her throat, she's every bit as polished as the restaurant itself.

"I'm...meeting some people here," I murmur, giving her a wide-eyed, nervous look.

Her confusion lasts only a moment, before her smile widens. "You're with Wren's party, right?" she asks, a small chuckle in her voice. "He said he might have someone else coming. And that she might be a little nervous."

"Nervous is probably just him being nice," I mutter, pulling on the edges of my skirt and suddenly feeling simultaneously over and under-dressed. Butterflies take flight in my stomach, but it's not a cute or comforting feeling. In fact, it makes me nauseous.

"You'll be fine," she assures me, coming around the hostess stand. "Come on. I'll take you to their table." Breezing through the restaurant in between the bar and booths, she takes me in an L-shape until we're in another room, only filled by four bigger tables that each have their own corner of the room.

Immediately, my eyes lock on Wren's table. It's a large booth, with half of the seats facing my way and another bench facing the other. It looks like it could easily fit eight, but tonight, there are only four people there.

Wren sees me first. He and the girl, a blonde-haired woman who looks about my age, are the two people facing me, while the other two face them. Wren grins, and nudges the girl, who glances up at me with some surprise. Within seconds, though, she smiles and says something to Wren, nudging him back the same way he had her.

“I know I said I brought you here for your pity party, Jed,” Wren begins, when I’m close enough to hear. “But I really hope you’re okay with me inviting someone else to join us.”

*Jed.* I should’ve realized the tousled blond hair facing away from me was his. But I’d been too focused on being nervous and counting my heartbeats to make sure I’m not about to stroke out.

“Who...” Jed trails off when he turns to look at me, and for the first time in the week I’ve known him, he looks absolutely lost for words. It does nothing for my nerves, and I can feel my fingers twisting in my skirt as the waitress says something and walks away. “Saylor,” he murmurs finally, still with that unreadable gaze.

“Hi.” I don’t know what else to say. My heart pounds in my throat as I stare down at him, unsure he even wants me here. Glancing at Wren for help, I see that he’s beaming, and his eyes flick between us. “I don’t...if you would rather that I leave—”

“No.” Jed is quick to cut me off before I can finish. He surges to his feet, ending up right in front of me without much space between us. “No, I...” It’s like he can’t believe I’m here. Which I’m sure of in the next moment when he reaches out to brush his fingers along my arm as if he needs reassurance I’m not a hallucination. “You came,” he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Wren invited me,” I reply, unable to look away from him. All of the boredom and emptiness from the last few days just snaps into pieces, and there’s no doubt in my mind that I’m just as attracted to him as he is to me. No matter how crazy that is. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to see me anymore.” Behind him, I see Cass ease himself out of the

booth, only for Wren and the blonde girl to bring his glass and utensils over to their side before making room for him on their bench.

“Why?” Jed’s brows knit together in confusion. “Why would I ever *not*?”

“Because I left.” The answer seems obvious to me, and I don’t step away when he touches my arm once more. “Because I didn’t stay.”

“Saylor...you needed to go home.” He smiles wryly, in spite of himself. “Of course you were going to leave.”

He makes it sound so...obvious. Like I hadn’t been running away from him at all, and instead had made a move we’d both agreed on in advance. I can’t help the stupid grin that crosses my face when I think about it that way, and some part of me unfurls, letting the rest of me relax.

“You could sit down. Both of you,” Wren remarks, gesturing theatrically to the booth as if neither of us know it’s there. “Then you could order a drink, we could all order food, and you know. This could be something other than the world’s saddest pity party.”

Jed’s eyes flick back to his friends, and I see him register Cass on the other side of the table with a slight narrowing of his gaze before he steps away from me and reaches out a hand to me. “Inside or outside?” he asks, though from his movements, I have to wonder if he’d prefer the outside.

Which, in all honesty, is fine with me. I sit down and scoot to the far inside of the booth, my elbow against the wall. I didn’t need to go so far, though. Not when there’s room for two more of us on the bench. Gingerly, Jed sits down as well, giving me glances every few seconds as if he can’t believe I’m here.

“Saylor showed up at my work today,” Wren hums absently, taking a drink from his glass. “She *stalked* me. Her words, not mine. She stood on the other side of my office and stared at Cass like she was going to shank him. It was something.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I sigh, burying my face in my hands as I lean my elbows on the table. “And it wasn’t that bad. Right?”

“Oh, it was something,” Wren assures me wickedly, leaning back and pressing his shoulder against the blonde girl’s.

When she sees me look her way, she grins. “I’m Hazel. He’s kind of an ass. Do you want me to punch him for you?” she asks sweetly, her eyes dancing.

“I do,” Jed mutters. “Hit him hard. He’s enjoying this way too much.” I glance up at him when his leg brushes mine, but when I don’t flinch, he does it again. Only this time, he doesn’t pull it away.

“Please, not at the table,” Cass sighs. “I know this is your romantic *Lady and the Tramp* moment and all, but not at the damn table. Not even for Jed will I put up with you guys playing footsie while I’m right here.”

“He only says that because he can’t get a girlfriend,” Wren informs me sweetly.

“I’m Saylor,” I tell the girl, realizing belatedly that I hadn’t told her my name. I don’t want her, or any of them, to think I’m being rude. “Though, I’m sure you probably knew that already.”

“I’ve been hearing about you for a few days,” she agrees. “But that’s not a bad thing.”

“Well, she was pretty concerned when I told her I rolled up on Jed holding back your hair as you puked all over his slaughter shed.” It really feels like Wren just can’t help himself. I see now why Jed wanted her to hit him.

“Please stop,” Jed deadpans, leaning back. “Please. If I can’t be weird, neither can you. Besides, they don’t know *you* here like they know me.”

That’s strange, and not what I’d expected when the woman had called this Wren’s party.

“How do they know you here?” I ask, curiosity winning out over my too-fast heart and clammy palms. “Do you come



here a lot?”

“I worked here,” Jed tells me, a small smile on his lips. “The chef here is Sophie Piccola. She currently holds six Michelin stars. Anyway, I worked here under her, before she decided to open another location on the other side of town.”

“So you work there as a chef now?” I assume, when he doesn’t go on.

“As *the* head chef,” Wren corrects. “And before he tries to downplay it, Jed holds two Michelin stars himself. We come here because his mentor loves him, and he’s a food snob. Her food is the only thing he really enjoys and doesn’t just put up with.”

There’s probably some irony to the ex-cannibal being an amazing chef, but all I can do is stare at him in awe. No wonder his food had been amazing and my Lunchables had offended him so much.

“I can’t cook,” I blurt out finally, feeling suddenly subpar to him in this area. “At all. Like, I burn water.”

“You’ve told me.” A small smile sneaks onto his lips, warming his expression. “And I kind of got that when you told me you exist off of Lunchables.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I have zero appreciation for the culinary arts?”

“You seemed to appreciate it well enough when I cooked for you.” He leans close to me, like he’s drawn to me by a magnet, until his lips brush mine. “And besides—”

“Not at the *table*,” Cass grumps, cutting him off. “And your mentor is coming.” I can feel him kick Jed under the table, who straightens with slightly wide eyes as he looks up into the face of a tiny, older woman.

“My staff told me you were here,” she greets, reaching out and cupping his cheeks affectionately. “Celebration, or pity party?” Her eyes flit between everyone at the table before finally landing on me. She glances between us, looking down at his hand on my leg, before beaming even wider. “Celebration I see. It’s so good to see you, Jed. The bourbon

salmon isn't on the menu anymore, but you don't need to worry about that." She pets his cheek. "I'll make one up special for you." Then her attention turns on me, and I can *feel* her assessing me like she's his mother and I have to meet with her approval.

"I'm Saylor," I introduce, wondering if I should curtsy or announce my sub bar lineage. "I'm—"

"You must be special if my Jed has been able to take his nose out of his cookbooks for you," Sophia Piccola interrupts, still beaming. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Tell Jed to bring you around more often. He knows how much I love him and his friends." She turns and winks at Cass, who grins back at her, and then promptly walks to the back of the restaurant, a pep in her step that belies her age.

"She feels..." I trail off, watching her go as I look for the right word.

Jed rubs his cheek, grimacing. "Terrifying?" he supplies. "Dictator-ish?"

"Kind," I say, and turn my smile on him. "Why in the world is she terrifying?"

"She threw him in a dunk tank once," Cass mumbles from around a mouthful of bread. Wren barks out a laugh, and even Hazel snorts. "Go on, Jed. Tell her how she got mad about your chicken being dry and carted a dunk tank here to throw you in."

"Oh my god," Jed groans, head in his hands as his elbows hit the table. "I'm not telling her that. This is so embarrassing, you guys."

"Okay, no problem." Cass looks at me, and I can tell by the glint in his eyes this isn't over. "So it was four years ago, and Jed here was so sure he was cooking chicken the right way. Anyway, he wasn't—"

Jed's moan of despair in my ear makes me snicker into my hand, but I give Cass my full attention, needing the entire story for my curiosity to be sated.

THE MOMENT JED gets rid of Cass and Wren, finally telling them under no uncertain terms *goodbye and goodnight*, he pulls me around the building toward the staff parking lot, his grip on my arm tight enough that I couldn't break free if I wanted to.

Luckily for both of us, I absolutely don't want to.

But when he turns and I see the uncertainty in his face, my heart sinks.

"You...don't want me here," I assume automatically, my heart freezing in my chest. I should've known, or guessed, this was an act so his friends don't think he's an ass. He could get any girl he could ever want. Why would I think he wants *me*?

"What?" He stares at me in shock, eyes wide. "No! I... please don't say that. *Why* would you think that, Saylor. I—" He cuts the words off with a click of his teeth. "I'm scared *you* don't want to be here."

It takes a moment for his words to sink in. I blink at Jed, confused, and run our conversations through my head. "Why would I be here...if I didn't want to be?" I ask, eyes narrowed. "I could've told the cops. Or not stalked Wren to his work. Or not come here. Or, hell, I could've chickened out and gone home. I surprised *you*. You didn't have those options. If anyone here is in a place to reject someone, it's—"

He doesn't let me finish. Jed grabs my hips, pulling me round until he can shove me against the side of his Jeep as his lips slam into mine with all the finesse of a badly tuned piano crashing down from a fifth story roof. I gasp at the contact, and Jed takes the opportunity to slip his tongue between my teeth, tasting every part of me like he doesn't know what I had for dinner.

"Fuck, princess," he purrs, finally pulling away. "*Fuck*. I just don't want to force you, or make you think—"

This time I'm the one who closes the distance between us, with my hands looped around his shoulders to yank him back to me. I kiss him hard, nipping at his lower lip in a way I know

will make him moan. He does, of course, and I swallow the sound happily.

“I missed you,” I tell him, glad the darkness hides my blush. “I feel crazy, because I’ve only known you for, what, a week? Like, I shouldn’t feel this way about you, right?”

His laugh is low and grating. “Don’t ask me that, Saylor,” the serial killer growls against my jaw. “Because I’ve wanted to keep you since the moment I laid eyes on you. I don’t know if it’s love. Maybe I’ve always been too fucked up for that. But whatever this is? I’ve known it since the moment I met you. And it’s *forever*.”

“You say that,” I murmur, hating how unsure I feel. “But you don’t know—”

“I know,” he assures me. “Trust me, okay? I *know*.” When he talks like that, I have no choice but to believe him. Not with the certainty that laces his tone.

When I pull away, however, whatever I was going to say is lost in my shriek. That’s the only thing that saves Jed from getting smacked by the baseball bat being swung in his direction. He whirls, one hand out, and somehow catches the bat, then wrestles it away from the man. His other hand grabs mine, pushing me behind him so I’m up against the wall.

“You did it.” The man wavers, looking drunk and unsteady on his feet. His voice is somewhere between a whine and a growl, and I can see him bare his teeth in the low light. “You fucking *killed him*.”

The smell of alcohol hits me and I recoil, nose scrunched in disgust, but Jed doesn’t move.

“Get lost,” he states, one hand still on me as if he needs to know where I am at all times. “I don’t know who you are, but you’re drunk and lost. So keep moving, okay? Before I make this the worst night of your fucking life.”

The man sways harder, his eyes unfocused. He’s drunk as hell, and the bat seems forgotten, now that it’s no longer in his flexing hands. “*Fuck you, man*,” he growls. “I know what you did. I know how fucked up you...*monsters* are.” He spits the

word at Jed, who doesn't flinch. "If Tyson were here..." Jed stiffens at that, but the man takes that opportunity to stagger into a brighter part of the parking lot, away from the two of us.

"The police told me about him," I whisper, my fingers wrapped around Jed's wrist. "I think that's the guy's brother. From the preserve."

"Yeah," Jed agrees, his eyes trained on the drunk man. "Yeah, I think it is, too. They certainly smell the same." He bares his teeth like a dog, then shakes his head as if to clear it. "Come on. I'll take you back to your car, and—"

"Actually." I have no idea what I'm doing. Especially now, with my heart racing and adrenaline pumping through my veins. "I was thinking, uh. My apartment kind of...is awful. And my upstairs neighbors are loud."

Jed spares me a glance, one brow raised as the drunk man continues on his way. "Are you asking what I think you are?" he murmurs, and I swear I see the hint of a smile on his lips.

"Depends," I reply. "Can we call it kidnapping again? Only, maybe don't put me with the bleeding body this time. If I'm allowed to make that request."

A snort of a chuckle meets my ears, Jed shakes his head. "Tell you what," he says, eyes trained on the man who's now making his way back in our direction. "Why don't I pick you up? Give me just a few minutes. I want to uh, discourage Mr. Miller here from ever darkening our doorstep again."

I hesitate, my fingers still on his wrist, before I get the courage to ask, "Are you going to kill him?"

Slowly, Jed shrugs, and only gives me a look before saying, "Only if I have to." But I don't get anything better from him. In the next second he's urging me toward the well lit customer parking lot, and the last thing I see is him slowly stalking closer to the brother of Tyson Miller, just like the version of him that hunts through my darkest fears.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

Part of me worries that Jed isn't going to show up at my apartment. I still haven't gotten his number, somehow, and that means I can't stare at my phone, hyperventilate, and worry. All I can do is the worry part. And the hyperventilating part.

I change out of my dinner outfit the moment I get back, though I leave my makeup on and my hair up in its half-ponytail. I'm attached to the curls and the way my hair frames my face. All in all, I don't think my hair has ever looked better. And more than anything, I want to look good for Jed, so he doesn't notice the parts of me that don't look so great.

With my clothes on the floor, my phone takes that moment to go off. It vibrates off my desk to startle me enough that I bump into my dresser.

"Ow." I sigh and rub my hip, nakedly scooping up the phone in my hand, expecting a number I don't recognize. It's probably Jed, I think, telling me he went on and killed Tyson Miller's brother and not to wait up for him.

I'm probably not as interesting as murder, anyway.

But when the phone shows me *Brenda* in big letters, I stand there, blinking in both surprise and slight horror. I don't want to talk to her tonight. I never want to talk to her, to be fair, but tonight I really don't want her to ruin...everything. She's especially good at that, and my stomach sinks as I imagine all the ways she could make tonight suck.

So I simply don't answer her. I don't send the call to voicemail, because that would be rude and, more importantly, she'd *know* that I'm here, available, and pointedly ignoring her call. Instead, I gingerly handle my phone, making sure not to press anything as I place it back on the desk, closer to my laptop so it's not dangling off the edge like a Cirque du Soleil performer about to hurtle off of the abyss.

Then I turn my back on Brenda's call, and return to my dresser to grab a pair of blue, cotton panties. When I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, however, I stop with a frown. "What are you even doing, huh?" I mutter to myself, hands planted on my hips in disappointment. Whether Jed does show up or not—God, I hope he does—it's my plan to be more prepared than navy cotton undies.

That's just disgraceful.

Instantly they go into the laundry pile, and I dig around in my drawer until I find a pair of black, high-waisted underwear edged in lace. They give me a plan, and my next dive into a dresser drawer results in me finding a bralette edged in the same lace, with a line of barbed wire glittering in silver print wrapping over it. The wire twists and sparkles in the light of my room, and while there's no wire design on the underwear, I love the way the silver adds just a bit of something extra. Plus, they're different. At least, I hope Jed hasn't had girlfriends lining up to meet him in a bralette with barbed wire printed across it.

A knock on my door makes me jump again, and I whirl around, looking toward my door. I doubt it's Brenda. If it is, then she's taken *ruining my night* to a terrifying new level. Without thinking, I jog out of my room, not remembering that I'm barely dressed in my hurry to make sure it's Jed and not someone else. He won't mind waiting at the door for a few seconds, right? Just enough time for me to put on a shirt and leggings?

That thought goes out the window, though, when through the peephole I see exactly what I'd hoped for...only a little bloodier than I'd expected. Jed stands on my doorstep, scrubbing at his raw, bloody knuckles. There's a cut on his

bottom lip bleeding sluggishly as well, and the shock of it causes me to pull the door wide, instead of calling out and asking him to wait.

“Are you okay?” I ask, causing his gaze to flick up to my face.

Well, for a moment, at least. Jed’s eyes widen as he looks at me, and he blinks before his eyes fall to my chest, then lower down. Then I remember I’m not wearing anything, and close my eyes hard in embarrassment.

“Shit. I was going to ask you to let me finish getting dressed.” My stomach clenches, twisting as I call myself ten kinds of stupid to just open the door in my underwear.

“I’m, uh, selfishly glad you forgot,” Jed says with a chuckle in that sweet, thoughtful voice that I’ve come to absolutely adore. “This is so cute.” He reaches out with one bloody hand to trace his fingers along the barbed wire, and all I can do is stand there, looking at him. “Maybe we...?” He steps forward, causing me to take a step back, and he has the wherewithal to close the door behind him, a smile still on his lips, though that darker look swims into his eyes. “I’m not an asshole, I swear. But I’d rather be the only one appreciating you like this, princess.”

The sweetness is still there in his tone, but the sultry growl is there as well. *Fuck*, but he’s good at sounding so hot. I can feel warmth tingling down my spine, gathering between my thighs as he steps forward once more to run his fingers up my side. It makes me squirm, and Jed’s grin widens as he does it again, clearly enjoying my reaction.

“Someone’s ticklish, huh?” he murmurs, reaching out to grip my opposite hip in order to hold me in place. “God, I’ll never get tired of looking at you.”

Only now do I remember his hands, and I reach out to grab the one on my hip, bringing it to my face so I can see the split knuckles glistening with blood. “Are you okay?” I ask, gaze sliding up so I can catch his eyes before I can speak. He’s so expressive that I think I’ll be able to tell if he’s hiding something. Maybe.



But Jed just dips his head, brings my hand up to his lips, and playfully nips at my knuckles. “I’m always okay,” he hums, his tongue darting out to taste along my skin. “You should know that by now.”

“You’re bleeding though,” I reply, stepping closer so I can stand on my tiptoes and touch my fingers to his mouth. When he doesn’t pull away at my first brush, I gently urge him closer so I can look at the split in his lip.

But Jed, clearly having other ideas, slants his lips against mine harshly instead of letting me examine his mouth. He chuckles at my sound of surprise, deepening the kiss to swipe his tongue around the recesses of my mouth. Almost instantly I can taste his blood on my tongue, and instead of disgustingly bitter or cringe-worthy, it’s...

Sharp. Not in a terrible way. Not even in a mildly bad way. It’s just *different*. Apparently different and intriguing enough that I don’t realize at first when I lick at his upper lip, tongue flicking over the split and bringing more of his blood into my mouth.

But Jed’s groan brings me back to myself and he pulls away with fluttering-shut eyes, his lashes dusting his cheeks. “That’s so hot, Saylor,” he grates out hoarsely, pressing his body against mine firmly enough I can feel that even that little action is enough for him to be interested. “*Fuck*. I never thought I’d be so turned on by you licking the blood off my lip.”

“It’s not bad like I thought it would be,” I whisper, though I’m nowhere near craving it like him, I’m sure. Still, I pull on his hand, bringing it back to my face as his eyes fly open, surprise glittering in their depths.

“You don’t have to—” His words cut off into a strangled, desperate sound when I flick my tongue across his still bleeding knuckles. A shudder goes through him, and while the taste isn’t my favorite, his reactions are. I do it again, being more thorough as I clean the blood off of his skin.

“*Fuck*.” Even before, in the woods, he didn’t sound like this. He sucks in a breath through his nose, eyes magnetized to

my mouth, and flexes his fingers as I move to the next one. “Fuck, Saylor. I’m gonna need you to stop if you don’t want me to rip off your clothes right here,” he informs me, though he doesn’t sound so sure of his actions. As if he might do it anyway, even if I do stop.

“I would really like you to fuck me tonight; if you want to. Unless...” I look toward the door, blinking. “Did you kill him?”

“No.” Jed’s tone is flat as he flexes his hand, moving it to stroke my cheek. “I didn’t kill him. But if he shows up again, then I will. I made that very clear.”

“What if he goes to the police?”

A smile ghosts across his lips, and his eyes turn morbidly amused. “Let him. I’m pretty sure they’d just love to have a word with him about how much he knew of his brother’s actions. I’m not afraid of him, Saylor. And you shouldn’t be either. You still want to come home with me?” He looks down at my state of undress again and sucks in another breath.

“I definitely would rather be at your place than here,” I assure him, breaking away enough that I can walk unimpeded back to my room. “I just, maybe, need pants. And a shirt. And shoes.”

“Just for the drive back,” Jed agrees, not arguing with my words as he follows me instead of waiting in my living room, like I’d thought he would. No, he’s much more interested in looking around, gazing at the photos on my walls with fascination. “You’re pretty good at this photography thing,” he points out, staring at the photo closest to my room. It’s a shot of the woods close to my dad’s house, near nightfall, and there’s a coyote staring at the camera with one ear up and another down.

It’s one of my favorites, truth be told, because of the slight edge of eeriness that the photo holds.

“I’m okay,” I dismiss his praise, shrugging one shoulder as I go back to my dresser. Suddenly, the clothes aren’t as important as they were a few minutes ago. Not now, when I

know he likes the underwear I picked out. Besides, from the way his eyes flick to my ass and travel along the rest of me, it really does seem like the clothes are a formality for the drive.

A shiver goes up my spine at that fact, and I approve heavily of it. I *want* to be naked at his cabin, under him on the bed with his mouth on every part of me. I've *missed* him, and I definitely did not get enough of him last week.

God, I hope he doesn't get tired of me.

As if knowing my mood has dipped, even just a little, my phone rings again just as Jed passes through my open door. He glances at the phone, blinking, and picks it up to show me the screen. "Who's Brenda?" he asks, all curiosity and no malice or jealousy in his tone.

At first, I don't answer. I rifle through t-shirts until I find a red one that fits me loosely enough to be comfortable. "She's..." I pull it on, then go for a pair of leggings with cut-outs in the front to show the red-colored mesh underneath. They're more comfortable than I'd thought they'd be, and they've become my go-to when I want to be comfortable but still look good.

But I really don't want to tell him about my family life. That'll lead into everything else. Like my depression, my self-deprecating nature, and how Brenda has never approved of any of my choices. Though she might approve of Jed. As long as she never finds out what he is.

"You don't have to tell me." His words are quick, and obviously meant to reassure me I don't have to tell him. But that just makes me feel so much worse. This isn't a secret I want to keep from him. If anything, it's just incredibly inconvenient when I'd rather talk about anything else.

Including having another chainsaw safety lesson.

"She's my step-mother," I say, pushing through the discomfort as I shrug on a too-big hoodie. "She married my dad after my mom died."

"Do you want to answer?" He holds the phone closer to me, but when I vehemently shake my head, he puts it right

back down on the edge of the desk. “That’s fair. I don’t answer calls from my family, either.”

I pause, interested in the topic of his family, but not wanting to pry. “Did they disown you?” I ask at last, toeing on my shoes and grabbing the backpack I’d already packed when I first got home. Jed casts an incredulous look at it, and I feel my cheeks flushing. “It’s just...stuff. So I could stay for a few days,” I explain before he can ask. “But only if you want me to.”

That has him plucking the strap out of my hand, and he shoulders it with a wolfish grin. “No amount of clothes you could fit in here could be enough for how long I want you to stay at my place, Saylor,” he promises in his low, promising growl. “And uh, not exactly. My mom would take me back. Grandpa likes to tell me how much he misses me, but that’s only because he thought I was an ‘asset to the family.’” He slowly shakes his head as he talks, bowing me dramatically out the door as I swipe my phone off of the desk and pocket it.

“That seems really dramatic,” I point out as we head for the door, my mood lifting when he tells me about his family instead of prying into mine. Still, I owe him an explanation. If he’s going to tell me, then it’s only fair for me to tell him. “Like, weekly serial on FX dramatic.”

“I’ll tell you about them when we get back. I can show you my skills as a bartender so you can appreciate me even more while I tell you the most dramatic family tale you’ve ever heard,” he bargains with a chuckle. “How does that sound?”

“Incredibly appealing. Let’s do that,” I reply, matching his grin with a wolfish one of my own. If there’s one thing that can match how much I want his hands on me, then it’s definitely hearing about cannibal family life.

HEARING his life story and the epic tale of his family, however, doesn’t happen.

And I’m not sure if it’s my fault, or his.

We make it to his house, and I even manage to set my backpack down on his sofa politely, my shoes off and by the

door. But when I turn and look at him—only to see him staring at me with something like disbelief and *want* across his gorgeous face—I can't remember any of what we'd planned to do.

Instead, I find myself walking towards him, once more reaching up to bring his face down to mine so I can look at his lip. It's a nasty cut, that's for sure, and I feel like I should do more than just *lick it*.

"Does it hurt?" I murmur, both of my hands on his face. "It looks like it hurts."

"It doesn't hurt," Jed growls, his gaze locked on mine. "But you are always welcome to kiss it and make it better. Again." There's a note of teasing in his voice, and in his eyes, but I can tell he doesn't really expect me to do it.

Then again, I don't expect me to do it again, either. I know what it tastes like now, from the accidental to on purpose licking of it I'd done when he'd kissed me in my apartment. My breath hitches in my throat, though, and I lick my lips before managing to ask, "Did he hit you first?"

"Yes." Jed cocks his head to the side, his eyes narrowing. "Well, he tried." That danger lurks in his eyes, and this time I want to push to find out what, exactly, it is.

"Did you like that he tried?" This close, he can't hide from me. It's not dark, so I can see every emotion in his expression-filled face as he thinks about my question. "Did you like getting to hit him back?"

Jed shifts his weight from one foot to the other, doing his best to look ashamed, though he can't hide the opposite feelings from his face that my question brings. Not only that, but he knows it, too. I can see that just as clearly as I can see the sick, perverse joy that the thought brings.

"I don't want to scare you," he says at last, bringing his hands up to wrap lightly around my wrists, though he doesn't push me away.

"I think I'm doing pretty good at not being so afraid of you anymore," I admit, a small smile cracking my lips. "Come on,

I'm here aren't I?"

"So you aren't afraid of me at all?" By the shrewd, narrowed look he gives me, I know that lying won't fly. Neither will downplaying what I'm feeling.

But I don't pull away from him. If anything, I pull him closer until his mouth is only inches from mine. "You terrify me," I finally get the courage to admit. "Every time I look away, I ask myself how in the world I could be okay with this. But then..." I search his face, my grip tightening.

"Then?" he prods, obviously impatient.

"Then I miss you. Or I look at you, or you touch me like this. You open your mouth and say something sweet, or you kiss me. And I *remember* all the things that outweigh that fear. Jed, I watched you murder a man the first night we met with a chainsaw. You held my hair after I saw all the body parts in the slaughter shed. Whatever you tell me isn't going to scare me. Or at the very least, not enough for me to run away."

His eyes darken in earnest, and the smile that crosses his lips is a little less than friendly. "You want to bet on that?" he asks, in a dark murmur I've never heard from him before.

It makes my heart jolt, and suddenly it reminds me of a trapped bird with my ribs as its cage.

I wonder if I've fucked up this time and gone too far. But I still hold his gaze and dip a nod to him, then add, "I'm more than sure."

"Then let's find out. Because if you're going to stay, if we're going to make this work, then I need you to accept all of me, Saylor. Every fucked up, bloody inch and all of my sharp edges." Without warning, he lunges forward, picking me up the same way he had in the woods. He throws me over his shoulder, ignoring my yelps of protest. Even without being able to see more than the gorgeous line of his body and the floor, I know instantly where he's taking me.

So it's no surprise when he throws me down on the bed, though when I expect him to join me he just stares down at me, eyes still dark. As I watch, he pulls off his shirt, much like

he had that first night, and finally falls down to his knees over me, pinning my hips to the mattress.

“You can ask me to stop at any time,” he assures me, voice soft against my throat when he leans in as if he’s scenting my skin. “I will *always* stop when you ask, Saylor. Don’t ever be too afraid to ask. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, unclear where in the world my voice is or why my heart is pounding in my throat. It’s the same as last time...right?

But, it doesn’t feel like it.

Jed bites me suddenly, one hand pinning me down as his teeth press into my skin. I squeal in surprise, twisting under him as he sucks what I know will be a dark and lasting mark onto my fair skin. “Good girl,” he grates, finally pulling away, though it’s only so he can lick over the mark. “You’re so good for me, perfect, Saylor.” When he looks at me, though, I still see that sweetness in his face, and I know he’s checking to make sure that I’m all right.

It calms my pounding heart, and my stomach loosens a little at the sight. My body relaxes a second later, when he flashes me one of his caring, adorable grins that reminds me of a puppy. He’s still *my* Jed.

But he’s something else as well. Something he’s been hiding from me since we met.

“I wanted him to keep going,” my ex-cannibal tells me, fingers finding my shirt hem and pulling it over me in one quick jerk. He leans over me once he does, fingers tracing the silver design on my bra while he stares down, contemplative. “I taunted him into hitting me, because that’s how I convince myself that I’m not the same as before.”

“Before?” I whisper, unable to keep quiet.

“Before Virgil and Wren found me hitchhiking, fresh out of Texas,” he supplies easily. “They made me want to be a better person. You make me want to be *everything* for you.” He bares his teeth in a wolfish grin, his fingers skimming

across my stomach until he can hook them in the top of my leggings.

“He would’ve walked away if I hadn’t pushed him. But *fuck*, I wanted to push him, princess.” His fingers pull downward, and he uses his other hand to maneuver me until my leggings and underwear are somewhere over the foot of the bed, leaving me just in my bralette. “And I enjoyed it when he snapped. He hit me once.” Jed taps his lip before his hands come back to smooth up my sides. I shudder at the touch, my body on fire from his voice and his hands alone. “I let him have it, because he was drunk, and if I didn’t let him have a little something, I would’ve felt terrible.” His smile darkens as he leans over me, his knee pressing between my thighs.

“But after that first hit, I didn’t give him anything at all.” His bloody, raw knuckles trail up my sides, over my arms, until he can stroke one thumb along my lip. “And I loved every sound he made. I wanted him to make more. His blood was sour and flat. Filled with cheap booze and cigarettes. My mother would’ve called him bad meat and made jerky out of him, if that.”

“Why...” I lick my lips, accidentally touching his thumb with my tongue. “Why jerky?” He has to be joking, right?

But his grin tells me he isn’t. “Because it’s the most forgiving way to treat bad meat like him.” I know he can feel the shudder that goes through me, and while much of it is from revulsion at the idea of *eating* someone labeled bad meat... some of it has nothing to do with the cannibalistic aspect of this.

“That’s umm.” I have no idea what it is. Or why my body is still begging for him to do more than just watch me.

“It’s fucked up,” Jed supplies with a sudden, rueful laugh. His expression lightens, just a touch, and with a few quick movements he tugs my bralette off over my head, staring down at me again. “I’m fucked up, in case you haven’t noticed. Don’t deny it.” He cuts me off the moment I open my mouth. “It is what it is, Saylor. If you can’t live with it, I understand.”



“Does it make me fucked up if it’s not a sticking point?” I take my time with the words, and when they come out, they’re barely audible.

“No.” His reply is quick, and he finds my eyes to hold them with his. “It makes you perfect.” He leans down, until he’s just inches above me, and I can feel his breath on my lips as he keeps his gaze on mine, waiting to see what I’ll do.

So, naturally, I don’t keep him waiting. All the trepidation in the world isn’t enough to rip away my attraction and need for him. I lean up just enough to catch his lips, my arms twining around his shoulders so I can jerk him down to me; bringing him close enough for my tongue to once again find that split in his upper lip. That makes him moan like he’s gone feral.

I lick over it again, my movements small and teasing while my tongue occasionally dips into his mouth. When my licks break it open, however, and fresh blood seeps between my lips, he doesn’t give me the opportunity to apologize. His groan becomes a snarl, and he slams his lips against mine to turn whatever this is into a real, earnest kiss.

Then he proceeds to devour me like he’s trying to suck out my soul through my lips. Distantly I can hear and feel him struggling with his jeans, and within less than a minute I hear the distinctive sound of them hitting the floor.

“Fuck, Saylor,” Jed pants, pulling away with lips smeared with red. “I can’t believe you exist.” He lunges back down again, but this time, instead of going for my mouth, his tongue licks a line up my throat, only for him to follow it again with nipping, grazing teeth.

It’s not normal. My stomach prickles with excitement and fear while he licks and nips my skin, giving both sides of my neck a thorough taste before he moves further downward.

“Are you—” I begin, but again he cuts me off.

“Tasting every inch of your perfect skin,” he purrs, like it was obvious all along. “I love the way you taste, Saylor. Especially right here.” He strokes his tongue over my nipple,

over and over until I'm a whining, twisting mess under him and my nipple is stiff under his mouth.

He finally moves to the other, his fingers and tongue quickly doing the same to it before he sits up just enough to readjust and kneel between my thighs. His eyes tell me exactly what he's planning, and I can barely breathe when anticipation closes my throat.

"But I think you know what my favorite part of you is?" His grips my thighs like he had that first time, and his thumbs stroke over both sides of my slit, eyes never leaving mine. A whimper leaves my throat, desperate and needy, and that only causes his smile to widen.

"I just want you to know in advance," he tells me, fingers swiping over my clit. "That I'm not going to stop until you come with my tongue deep in your cunt. I'm going to taste every inch of your pussy while you come, Saylor. You got that?"

But it's obviously a rhetorical question, because in the next second he's leaning down, mouth open as he breathes against my pussy. Even that is enough to make me yelp, though it's more in anticipation than anything else before he seals his lips against my body, his tongue flicking out to tease at my entrance. He isn't satisfied with that, however. His mouth moves, sliding up my slick folds until he can kiss and nip at my clit before running his tongue over it just like he had the rest of me. I twist, writhing as my hand flies down to tangle in his hair. Not that he minds, or notices.

Especially when he seals his mouth over my clit and sucks it into his mouth, causing me to let out a surprised scream. It only encourages him, though. He sucks harder, teeth grazing against it, before pulling back with an audible, wet sound as he looks up at me with a ravenous, toothy grin.

"You're the best thing I've ever tasted," Jed purrs, going back in to suck on my clit once more. He repeats that twice, sending me nearly into a coma with the intensity of the feeling. I try to move my hips, to close them or at the very

least flex my legs, but his iron-tight grip isn't letting me go anywhere.

“And I'm not just saying that.” He's panting the next time he speaks, but he licks a stripe up my cunt in between his words. “Out of everything and *everyone* I've tried?” he waits for me to look at him, my eyes wide and my thighs trembling. “This is the one thing I'll never be able to get enough of.”

When his tongue plunges into me, I see stars. He thrusts it into my entrance, deeper than what I think should be possible, and his fingers join in the action as he messily eats me out. He's as thorough as humanly possible, that's for sure, and when my thighs start to shake, the best I can do is whimper and reach down with my other hand, fingers brushing against his flexing jaws.

Somehow, even with his fingers in my pussy, he's still able to hold me down. Even when I writhe and twist and beg for him to give me a second, that it's too much, he just doubles down, I swear. His movements push me into the bed, hard, until I'm breathless from how good it feels as the too-much, too-fast sensation drags me toward the edge of my sanity.

My orgasm hits me so hard and so suddenly, that I really do scream. The sound morphs into a wail somewhere in the middle, but with my thighs held down and spread open, all I can do is clench around his tongue and keen while his tongue plunges into me, his nose rubbing my clit enough for it to send matching sparks of sensation through my body.

Jed makes good on his word. He doesn't stop as I come, his tongue and fingers dragging out my orgasm for longer than I could ever imagine. He's not quiet, either, with his sounds of appreciation and the wet sounds of his mouth being both a turn on and humiliating as he eats me out.

I nearly scream again when he goes back for my clit once my orgasm is starting to fade, but his mouth sucking and tugging on the sensitive bud has my eyes screwed shut, my head thrown back. I'm sure I'm about to black out and never wake up again.

“*Saylor*,” I hear him growl, and it’s enough for me to open my eyes in time to see him wipe his arm across his soaking wet face. He watches my every movement, tongue flicking out to lick his lips. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but it’s clear the universe made you for me.” He lunges forward, quick as a viper, to crush his lips to mine again, and this time I can taste my release on his lips while his fingers grip my thighs, yanking them wider apart.

“Are you going to—”

“I’m going to fuck you until you can’t see straight,” he growls against my throat.

All I can do at that is laugh, tiredly. “I already can’t see straight.”

“Then I’ll fuck you until you can’t see at all.” He plunges into me hard enough that I cry out, and my fingers find his shoulders, nails sinking into his skin. “That’s right,” he encourages, fucking into me immediately with no mercy. Not that I’ve asked for any, or intend to. “Hold me just like that. Make me bleed, princess. Mark me as yours.” His encouragements never stop, though sometimes he falls back into reminding me how good I taste while he fucks me into oblivion.

“I’m going to come in your sweet, tight pussy,” he informs me in a low, growling pant. “You know how much I love it when you’re full and dripping.”

“I know,” I gasp, one of my hands curling in his hair as I match his grin with my own. “Don’t you know how much I love it, too?”

His eyes widen, and his movements falter for only a second, before he picks up his pace with a snarl; it’s like my words have spurred something deeper in him to action. It takes only another minute or so for him to come, and somehow he drags another orgasm out of me as well, just as he slams into me and comes, face buried in my throat.

“Don’t worry about getting up.” Jed laughs, when I start to shift and release my death grip on his shoulders. “I’ve got you,

Saylor. I'm not letting you go anywhere, I promise.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-THREE

When I'm the first one awake, I can't help but be surprised. Jed snores the entire time I get dressed, though I can't stop myself from glancing back in his direction every once in a while to make sure he's actually sleeping, and not just faking it.

But he isn't. Clearly last night tired him out more than I would've thought possible, and I have to admit to myself that seeing him while he sleeps is...nice. He looks sweet. Cute, with his eyelashes brushing his cheekbones and his face smoothed out in absolute innocence.

It makes sense how he gets away with so much, when he has a perfectly innocent, believable face whenever he wants to use it.

Silently, I grin, shaking my head before pulling on my light hoodie from the night before. I have no intention of really going anywhere, but while he's sleeping is a perfect time to take my camera and go outside around the cabin to see what I can find to take pictures of.

If I'm not always looking, my thoughts wander into less productive avenues. And god, I hate less productive avenues of thought. Especially with three missed calls and two voice mails from Brenda on my phone. I'd checked one of them last night, just to make sure Dad is okay, and when I realized it was mostly her bitching me out for my rudeness, I'd shaken my head and put my phone on silent.

I don't regret it, though I know I probably will in a few more hours or days. She always finds a way to make me regret ignoring her calls, no matter how much I want nothing to do with her. But that's less than important right now. And I won't let her ruin my day, when it's off to a really great start. Though, maybe that's just my body talking and how absolutely satisfied I am by how Jed had worked me over multiple times during the night.

Dinner hadn't been bad either. I'm glad I stalked Wren to his work, and as I pad down the stairs to look for my shoes, I give myself a small pat on the back for not chickening out, like I almost had. Six times.

"Good for you, Saylor," I mutter, pulling on my sneakers. My next step is the door, and I open it wide only for the foggy expanse of the forest to greet me heartily; pushing itself against me like a cloud trying to seek escape from itself.

Sure, the fog isn't perfect for most kinds of photography, but I really like the weird stuff. And around here, there's a ton of weird stuff to take eerie pictures of.

With one last look up toward the loft to make sure Jed isn't up yet, I give a quick grin and then head outside, camera in hand and ready.

Warming up is essential, if a little bit boring. So I find small things, like stones or flowers in his landscaping, to snap a photo of before viewing it and messing with the settings on my camera. The fog makes things different, though not quite difficult, and I spend a good twenty minutes just playing with my settings until I feel better about moving onto the things I'd rather focus on.

Which, admittedly, probably aren't that interesting to most people. Most of my following shots are of trees, or the spaces between them. I almost want to walk in the fog to the bridge where I'd first kissed Jed, a thought that makes my toes curl in my sneakers, but I don't want to be gone that long.

Especially since I definitely remember him saying something about homemade French toast last night, between

two episodes of him pinning me down and making me see stars. Yeah, I definitely don't want to miss out on French toast.

Instead, my steps take me wandering around the side of the cabin, and I take a few random photos of items or landscaping that pique my interest for all of a few seconds. It's not so much that things have to be super interesting for me to care. But this is my hobby, and I love having the opportunity to practice in the fog.

But when the slaughter shed comes into view, barely visible even though it's only about ten feet in front of me, I know that I've hit photography gold. The way the shed sits tucked between the trees is perfect. Especially now, with the trees cradling it on either side, while wisps of fog barely curl around the dilapidated boards. I don't have the guts to open it, nor would I particularly want to see body parts in my photos. I'm not *that* kind of photographer, and I worry that would infringe on snuff film territory. Especially if I were to print them. Snuff photography, maybe? Perhaps it would be a new subgenre.

Still, though, not one I'm willing to be known for. I walk all around the shed, my footsteps silent on the grass, and take as many outside pictures of the creepy building as I can without moving close enough for the smell to creep up on me. I know one whiff of it will make me vomit, and I don't think Jed would find that very attractive if I were to come back inside heaving my guts out just in time for breakfast.

"I guess that's about all I can do," I tell myself in a soft voice, clicking through the photos on my camera to see if there's anything I've missed. I'll be able to judge them better once I can actually see them on my laptop. And I'm excited to edit them enough to make them seem a little less flat than they do in the fog. From what I can see, actually, they have quite a bit of potential. But maybe that's just my narcissism for my own work talking.

When I turn, ready to go back inside and blinking away the fuzziness from the fog that threatens to make me go cross-eyed, I pause. A figure stands further out in the mist, their



features obscured by the white mist, though I can see that it's a man with his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

For a moment, I'm sure it's Jed. After all, who else could be all the way out here, except for him and his friends? But as the fog shifts just slightly, I can see from the way the man stands, and the way he's hunched over, that something is wrong.

He's too short to be Jed. And a little too stocky, if I'm seeing things right. But that means he can't be Wren either, and I don't know who else just shows up here. When had he gotten here? I certainly hadn't heard anything, but the fog does more than make my vision iffy. Sound is also muffled in the clearing around the cabin, to the point where I can barely hear any of the sounds I expect coming from the woods.

"Hello?" I ask finally, squinting hard to no avail. "Are you, umm...lost?" That's the only thing I can think of when I have no idea who's standing there awkwardly in the fog.

"I'd hope you are." The voice is familiar enough that I should be able to place it, but it's not until the man steps forward, finally close enough so the fog doesn't obscure his face, that my heart plummets and I swallow my gasp of surprise.

It's Tyson Miller's brother.

"I followed him last night," the man tells me, one black eye not making him look any better. Neither does his split lip, or the nose that's probably broken. "I thought maybe he'd kidnapped you. Who the fuck would just go with him? But you were at that restaurant too." He shakes his head. "Do you have any idea who he is?"

"Uh, yeah," I reply, clutching my camera in my fingers more tightly than I should. "He's my boyfriend. Are you jealous? I'd get you his number, but I don't think you're his type." I flash him a nervous smile, and wonder if I can make it back to the cabin if I take off now.

But as if he knows what I'm planning, the man takes a step in the direction I'd need to go, still glaring at me. "He killed

my brother,” the man informs me quietly. “I know he did.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen him kill anyone.” I laugh nervously. “But you can certainly ask him. Maybe not here or now. He’s not going to like it that you’re here—”

“Why?” The man takes one step forward, then another. “Why’s that, huh? Because this is his property? His territory?” the man spits. “Or maybe because I’m really considering getting him back for last night by messing up your face the way he messed up mine.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. My fingers are clammy as I kneel just enough to set my camera near the shed, and I take a few steps back until my back hits the door.

Which is, conveniently, when the smell surrounds me. I breathe through my mouth, trying not to let it kill me, and the man takes another inching step forward, as if he’s looking for the opportunity to pounce. The look on his face tells me he isn’t lying. And the hatred there proves he won’t feel a bit bad for hitting me.

But today isn’t a good day for a broken nose. In fact, it’s not in the stars for me. As he lunges forward, I lunge back, hitting the door of the shed open on purpose and stumbling back through it. I wheel around, hearing him curse as his steps come closer, and I send up an apology to Jed the moment I lunge toward one of the counters built into the shed wall.

My hands close over the handle of the chainsaw and I haul it up, nearly staggering at its weight. It occurs to me then that Jed was right. There’s no way in hell I can use this as a weapon.

But Tyson Miller’s brother doesn’t know that.

Before he can set foot in the shed, I lurch out of it, braced on the gravel with the chainsaw in both hands, blade facing him. “Try me,” I tell him, one hand going to the cord as the other strains to hold up the weight of the entire thing on its own.

Holy *shit*, why is this thing so heavy? More than that, how does Jed wave it around like it's absolutely nothing?

"You want to die? You'll end up in this shed, too. Take another step." From somewhere in the distance I hear the bang of a door, and through the fog I hear a voice that might be Jed's.

The man wavers, his eyes on the chainsaw, before darting to the cabin. "I'm not afraid of you," he promises, taking one step back, then another. "And I'm not afraid of him, either. Tell your boyfriend I'll be back, and I won't waste time just breaking his fucking *face*."

After another call from the cabin, the man takes off, plunging into the fog and disappearing moments before Jed shows up, his face contorting into incredulous surprise when he sees me.

"I can explain," I tell him, setting down the chainsaw hard. "Seriously. Don't freak out. And you know what? I'll admit it. You were right. This thing is way too heavy for me to use." I huff out a breath, my arms burning, and am only a little surprised at his resigned snort of amusement before Jed comes forward to pick up the chainsaw in one hand, pressing a kiss to my forehead before he takes it back into the slaughter shed.

"Explanation time," he announces, coming back out with concern on his face. "What in the *world* were you doing with my chainsaw?"

"Umm..." I trail off for a moment as Jed twines our fingers together before leading me back to the cabin.

IT'S OFFICIAL.

I've never had better French toast than the magical concoction I'd watched Jed make. He'd tried explaining his recipe to me, even while a muscle had ticked in his jaw after I filled him in on my early morning activities and the visit from Tyson Miller's brother. His movements had been a bit jerky as well, but the quality of the food had never, not once, been compromised.

And the fact he'd made enough to feed an army meant I could load my plate with berry compote. I dripped it over my French toast, leaving more than enough for the others to have some when they got to the cabin.

"You don't have to help me." Jed's voice is snapping with anger, and he drums his fingers on the table as Wren wolfs down food. Across from Jed, a dark-haired, dark-eyed man watches him with interest, and according to Jed, this is Virgil. The elusive other member of the murder club who I hadn't met before now.

He's intimidating. Not funny like Wren, or corny like Cass. And he's definitely not sweet like Jed. According to what I'd heard before, he's engaged to someone he met a year ago. But I don't think I'd ever have the guts to marry a man with the look of a predator like him.

*No, my brain tells me spitefully. You fell for the chainsaw wielding cannibal. Much better choice. Good job.*

But at least my ex-cannibal is sweet, with a smile of gold and a personality to match.

As if he can feel my eyes on him from the other side of the kitchen island, Virgil turns to survey me, his eyes never leaving my face. "Does she know what you plan to do to him?" he asks, nodding in his head in my direction.

"Oh yeah," Wren assures him, stuffing another piece of toast in his mouth. "She's feral for our little chef. Don't you see those marks on her neck?" He smiles, beaming in my direction when I reach up to self-consciously touch the marks. "She doesn't mind a little murder."

"Is she coming along?" Virgil's question nearly makes me choke on a raspberry, and Jed shakes his head, looking a little nervous.

"No. She doesn't need to," he promises, looking down at his plate. "I don't want to do that to her. Especially since it doesn't involve her."

"You sure it doesn't?" Virgil definitely freaks me out. "You sure she's going to be okay when you come home

covered in blood and cut up the body in the shed?” It’s almost like his eyes are daring me. Challenging me to speak up.

It’s uncomfortable, to say the least.

“She doesn’t need—”

“What would I do if I did come?” I demand, unable to stop myself. “I can’t help you kill the guy.” I’m just barely learning to wrap my head around all of this. Especially now that I’m sitting in the middle of a fucking meeting between three men looking to *kill* the brother of the man Jed previously butchered.

This is all starting to feel like a nightmare. And more than a little fucked up. The only thing to complete my day would be for fucking *Brenda* to call again.

“Moral support,” Virgil replies shrewdly, cutting off another protest from Jed. “Could you do that?”

Looking away from him, I slant my gaze toward one of the windows as I stir the berry compote around my plate. I don’t know. *I don’t know*, and that’s the problem. If I’m as in love with Jed as I think I am...shouldn’t I know?

They’re quiet for longer than I expect them to be, but it’s Wren that finally breaks the silence by saying something about knowing where the guy’s truck is parked. Apparently, Tyson Miller’s brother is just as stupid as Tyson had been, and none of them are in any way worried about consequences, or not being able to find him.

It almost sounds like they’re just looking to put a hit out on the guy.

Thankfully, none of them ask me anything else while they talk. Their plans filter in and out of my ears, and all I can do is stare at my cooling food while my heart and brain go to war over what I should do. Obviously, Jed won’t hold it against me for not going. For being here with my head in his pillow and his blankets over my head.

He doesn’t think I have it in me to go.

And frankly, neither do I.

The scrape of Wren's chair has me looking up, and I watch as the taller man twists, spine cracking as he stretches languidly. "I'll be back," he offers lazily, like none of this is a big deal to him. Like it doesn't *matter*. "Let me look into some things. Find out if he's still around where his truck is. You coming?" He looks at Virgil, who nods and stands up as well.

"If you want the company," the man murmurs. He looks at me again, and once more I see that challenge, that look, that says he wants more from me than I'm pretty sure I can give.

In response, I narrow my eyes and stuff a strawberry in my mouth. The corner of his mouth twitches upward, before he follows Wren to the door and closes it swiftly behind him, leaving me and Jed in the room alone.

"You don't need to go with us," Jed promises, still riled up from telling his friends about the confrontation in the restaurant parking lot, and now me being crept up on in the fog. "Seriously. It's going to be a mess, and it won't be entertaining. He doesn't deserve it quite like Tyson did. I don't want—"

"What if I do go?" I ask, biting my lower lip hard. "What if I just...*went*?"

But it's just words. Just a question, because I know for certain there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to get my ass in a car and go on a murder trip with my boyfriend and his two best friends.

Not on my life.

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FOUR

When the Jeep crawls to a stop outside of a dilapidated old building that definitely looks like it's falling apart, my stomach doesn't get the memo. It keeps going, plummeting toward the ground, and I can feel the bile crawling up my throat to lodge a protest in my mouth.

*Please don't throw up*, I beg myself, hands clenched against my leggings. *Please!* God, I don't want to vomit all over Jed's lap, my lap, or the ground. I'm pretty sure the last of those options would be especially bad if they're going to commit a crime here today.

I suck in air, only slightly aware of how Jed is watching me with undisguised worry on his face. I can see him out of the corner of my eye, but not vomiting is, unfortunately, the bigger problem right now. No matter how much I want to play it cool and tell him I'm more than fine.

I am so not fine.

"Do you want to wait here?" Jed's voice is gentle. His hand strokes over my knuckles, but I shake my head vehemently. I'd come this far. And I'd already told myself that if I can't do this, then I can't be with him. This is my victory condition, even though I haven't shared that with Jed yet.

"No," I promise him, my voice hard. "No, I don't need to wait out here. I can do this." I don't think I can do this. "I'm—"

The sound of my phone ringing makes me jump, and I glare down at it in the console, knowing that there's only one

person with this kind of awful timing.

Sure enough, when I pick it up and flip it over in my fingers, the phone reads *Brenda* in unwelcome letters.

“Your step-mom, right?” Jed’s hand closes over the phone, not giving me the chance to answer or not. “Who you’re not really fond of.”

“Right,” I whisper. “But she’s going to keep calling. I can’t ignore her forever.” The ringing stops, and sure enough, picks right back up as she calls me for the second time in the span of a minute.

“May I...?” He gingerly picks up the phone, making sure that I’m all right with it as he does. I know that I have the choice to take it back. He makes it clear with the hesitancy, the caution, in his actions. But part of me is too curious to stop him. The other just really doesn’t want to talk to *Brenda*.

Jed answers the call before it can go to voicemail again, and with his gaze firmly on my face, he hits the button for speakerphone.

“*This is getting ridiculous, Saylor.*” Brenda’s voice is like a whip. “*I’m trying to plan your father’s birthday dinner, but you’re acting like it’s not at all a priority to you. Can you—*”

“I’m really sorry.” Jed’s voice is charming, apologetic, and sweeter than honey when he smoothly cuts her off. “But Saylor is asleep right now. We were out late last night, and she’s exhausted.” When he stops, Brenda is silent. Probably floored that someone has the audacity to cut her off or tell her anything she doesn’t want to hear.

“*Who is this?*” she asks at last, her voice full of suspicion. “*I don’t recognize your voice.*”

“I’m sorry. I’m Jed. Saylor’s boyfriend.” His explanation is still in that same, sweet voice that I don’t think she can argue with if she tries. How can she, when he sounds as if his heart will break at the first sign of confrontation? It’s fake, of course. I can see it in the glint from his blue eyes. It’s all an act for Brenda. “She’s asleep.” He repeats that part more firmly, solely for Brenda’s benefit. “Can I have her call you later?”



“*Oh. Saylor hadn’t mentioned a boyfriend.*” Brenda sounds almost put out by that. As if she would ever be the first to know. “*Will you be coming to her dad’s birthday dinner?*” God, she really never quits.

Jed looks up at me, brows raised, and I nod vigorously. I don’t mind if he wants to meet my parents. I’m just not sure if I’ll ever be up for the same with his family. “Yes,” he says, when I’ve nodded for maybe the hundredth time. “She asked if I’d want to go. But only if it’s not an inconvenience to your plans.”

“*No, it’s fine.*” She huffs a sigh. “*I just need her to actually tell me these things. What did you say your name was again? Jade?*”

His smile twitches on his lips. “Jed,” he corrects easily. “Just J-E-D.”

“*Is that short for something?*” Naturally, she’s going to start prying now.

“Maybe,” he chuckles. “But I prefer just Jed. Could I let you go? I want to get lunch going before Saylor’s awake.”

I can *feel* her surprise like a wave through the phone, and sure enough, her next words are, “*You cook?*”

“I cook,” Jed assures her. “I’d be glad to help out if you ever need anything in that department.”

I shake my head ruefully, a grimace on my lips. He’s asking for it now by offering to help her. She’ll definitely take advantage of him if she gets half a chance.

“*I’ll have to consider that. Just make sure Saylor calls me? Today?*” Her voice is whip sharp, and I roll my eyes at how typically Brenda it is. She can’t let anyone forget who’s on top, after all. At least in her own mind.

“Sure.” He hangs up on her with a polite dismissal and slides the phone back into the console. “She sounds lovely.”

“Oh, she’s a peach,” I agree, sucking in another deep breath. At least her call has given me some time to get myself

under control, and while I still feel shaky, I don't feel like I'm going to toss my cookies everywhere.

“Are you ready?” His hand grazes over mine, and he clasps my fingers lightly. “If you're still sure you want to go in.”

I'm not, but I nod my head a couple of times in jerky, singular motions. “Yeah. I'm uh, so ready.” To prove it, I open the door of the Jeep and slide down to land on my feed, blinking up at the old, broken-down barn.

It certainly looks like a place to commit a murder. It's clearly abandoned, and the wood has turned gray with age. The building leans in on itself, with panels missing from the roof and large, rusted nails sticking out on all sides.

“Are we sure it isn't going to collapse?” I mutter, following Jed to the back of the SUV. “Like, I'd rather not die today from a barn falling on my head.”

Jed chuckles and opens the back of the SUV, exposing a tarp-lined interior and his chainsaw. Today, the blood has been mostly scrubbed off of it, and he picks it up like it weighs nothing. When he awkwardly reaches for the tarps, I reach out to help, though I have no intention of carrying the tarps.

Which he realizes, when I point at the weapon in his hands. “Oh, Saylor,” he sighs, shaking his head. “You just never give up. Fine.” Easily he hefts it in my direction, lifting it higher so I can more easily grab the handle he's holding onto. “Just don't drop it,” he requests, and picks up the tarps in his other hand to bundle them in his arms. With his elbow he closes the hatch, and I follow him to the barn, trying to pretend that the chainsaw isn't the heaviest thing I've ever carried.

“I don't get how you swing this around,” I admit, nearly dropping it on my foot when I have to step over a small pile of boards. “Don't you worry about dropping it?”

I can feel his grin, even if I can't see it. “No,” he assures me easily. “I've been using them since I was ten, give or take, but with supervision back then, of course. It's not that heavy to me.”

“You’re insane.” My voice is sweet, and he cackles out a laugh.

“Yeah, I most definitely am.” He pushes open the rickety door with one shoulder, and it falls back on its hinges like it’s going to hit the floor at any moment. Frankly, I’m surprised the hinges have held on this long. Clearly the barn was made with superior craftsmanship to anything that could be found around here today.

The scene inside nearly sends me scurrying back out the door, however. I’d known based on the call Jed got that Wren and Virgil had picked up Gary Miller, Tyson’s brother. I’d expected him to be here, obviously.

But to see him tied to a metal chair, on top of more tarps and looking dazed is something that I know will be seared into my brain for the rest of my life. He isn’t bleeding, thankfully. Though he still sports a black eye and busted nose from Jed the night before.

Unfortunately for him, he’s about to be in much worse shape than this. And by the look on his face, he knows it too.

“Well, well, look who showed up.” Wren’s head tilts to the side, his eyes dancing as he watches me struggle with the chainsaw. “Don’t tell me she’s going to be your little protégé, Jed? She looks like she can barely lift that.”

“Good for her that she came at all,” Virgil murmurs from his spot leaning against a more solid part of the barn. “You sure you can do this without vomiting, Saylor?” He looks at me shrewdly, making me just as uncomfortable now as he had back at the cabin.

“Nope.” I grin recklessly at him, and my screaming arms demand that I set the chainsaw down. I do so on the tarp in front of Jed before stepping backward like I’m using him as a shield.

Jed turns, wraps an arm around my shoulders, and kisses my temple with a soft, “Thank you,” against my skin. The pride in his tone, and the warmth, makes all of this worth it. Even the nausea.

I can do this.

I'm *going* to do this.

"You're really okay with this?" Gary Miller's eyes are locked on mine. "You're not a killer. I can see you aren't like *them*." He looks around at the three men, who don't look particularly offended by his words. "You're going to just let them—"

"She doesn't get much of a choice." Virgil's voice cracks out like a whip, impatience rippling through his words. "But even if she did..." He looks at me, straightening. "If it was your choice, would you let him go?"

"Don't," Jed protests, stepping more in front of me and shaking his head. "Stop, okay. You wouldn't have asked Sloane that last year. Don't make her—"

"Sloane had a personal stake in the man I killed for her," Virgil argues. "So did the guy Wren killed for Hazel. But she doesn't. She could leave and go to the cops. She could let him go, if we let her. Then he'd get us all arrested and put away—"

"No, I wouldn't." I don't love the way Virgil talks to me, though I can respect how protective he is of his friends. "Even though I know I'm not like your fiancée"—I haven't met her, but from what I've heard, she sounds terrifying based on the fact she can stand *him*—"I'm not as bad as you think. I hope, anyway." I suck in a breath, feeling their gazes on me as I look back at the man tied to the chair.

He shouldn't look so hopeful. He shouldn't fight his bonds as he stares at me, as if I'm Caesar and about to give him the thumb's up so he can walk on out of here like a gladiator who's killed the lions.

Because he should know, the lions always win, and Caesar never played fair.

"Kill him." I shrug, though it takes everything in me to make it sound so...easy. "It's not like you haven't asked for it, Mr. Miller. Your brother deserved it, and from what I hear, you aren't a very good person either." That's true, at least. And it helps remind me he's not blameless in this, even though I'm

back to feeling like I'm going to puke all over the place. "You came after Jed. You came after *me* this morning. I'm not stupid. You would've hurt me if I hadn't had the chainsaw and he hadn't come out." I shrug again, wondering if I'm putting on the performance of my life or just looking as wretched as I feel.

"And that was where you went too far," Wren adds in a purring, dangerous tone. He prowls behind the chair, hands coming down hard on Gary Miller's shoulders. "You don't *ever* go after one of us. Not me, or Jed, and definitely not Saylor." He winks at me when he says it, in that annoying but helpful big brother kind of way. "We gave you every opportunity in the world, Gary. You could've walked away like she said."

He's starting to fight in earnest now, trying to rip his arms out of the bonds as Wren holds him and Jed picks up the chainsaw. "N-no!" the man yells, whirling to look for any sympathetic face.

But he finds none, as I knew he wouldn't. "No. *Please.*" His eyes land on mine, and my heart jolts when he just won't look away from me, even as Jed revs the chainsaw.

Every sound of it makes my stomach heave and makes my hands tighten into fists.

*I can't do this.*

I don't want to do this.

The sound of the chainsaw's motor catching returns more nausea to my stomach, and my breath catches in my throat as it jerks in Jed's hand. This is everything I'd been afraid of, and my muscles tense, begging me to run away from him and the situation.

When I look at him like this, I'm afraid of him. I see the monster from the preserve who killed Tyson Miller and kidnapped me, seemingly with no cause. I can't do this, I can't watch him do this and ever look at him the same.

At least, until my gaze slides upward and I meet his eyes.

Jed isn't looking at Gary Miller with the chainsaw loud in his hands. He's staring at me. Waiting. Whatever he sees when I'm able to look at him brings the smallest of smiles to his lips, and in turn, it settles something in me that I hadn't realized was about to fall apart.

"You don't need to watch this," he tells me, though I have no idea how I hear him over the loud engine. "Go outside, Saylor. You aren't any less for not being able to watch this. No matter what Virgil says."

My eyes flick to Virgil's face, where he still leans against the wall. He's impressed, one brow raised, and his head tilts towards the door, giving me the same permission that Jed had.

*I won't think less of you.* That's what his expression says. Lastly my gaze falls on Wren, who's giving me the same patient, understanding smile from his dark eyes and curved lips.

I can't do this.

*Yet.*

Not completely, at least. My steps take me back to the door, and I stumble over my feet when Jed turns, all smooth and graceful movements. He's not my boyfriend as he stalks over to Gary Miller holding a chainsaw like he was born with it in his hands.

He's a predator. He's a hunter, moving with deadly precision, and when the chainsaw comes up, my hand hits the door a second too late.

I can't turn away as he thrusts the blade forward. It's not quick and smooth, but Wren moves instantly as the blade begins to cut through Gary Miller's chest while he screams and begs for mercy.

I should've moved sooner. I should've opened the door sooner, and looked away, because right now, with my eyes full of gore and blood that splatters on Jed's front, I can't—

Virgil fills my vision, his face calm and edged in concern. "Time to go, Saylor," he murmurs. "You've proven everything you needed to and more." He blocks my entire view of the

screaming, dying man, and shoves the door all the way open until I can stumble out into the daylight beyond.

Then, before I can take another look inside or say a word, he closes it again, leaving me in the sunlight with the sound of Gary Miller's screams.

I stand there, transfixed and unable to move, listening to his screams. Even though I can't see it, I can imagine every bit of—

Blinking, I realize that there's something else in my ears. Apart from the screaming and my own internal turmoil. Something from this side of the barn, that sounds closer than Gary's screams.

When it sounds again, I turn around, confused, and my eyes scan the area around me as my brain tries to figure out what in the world is going on. Is that—

A cat meows softly, rubbing against my ankles. The small, gray-furred ball of fluff does one circuit around my legs happily, like it can't hear the screaming from beyond the door. That, or it doesn't care.

"Hi," I whisper, kneeling down and reaching one trembling hand out for the little cat to sniff. "Hello, little friend."

The cat, showing no sign of fear, pads up to sniff my fingers before rubbing its body against my hand with a loud, contented purr.

I can't help it. A smile breaks out over my lips, and I carefully move away from the door, followed by the sounds of the cat's purring. It isn't a kitten, judging by its features. But the cat is smaller than most other adult felines I've seen.

"Are you far from home?" When I sit down fully on the grass, the cat takes that opportunity to jump onto my knee, rubbing its skinny body against my chest. I'm careful as I touch it, my fingers running along bumpy ribs and hips that are too angular with hunger. The little cat doesn't look like it's eaten in ages. And definitely not well. "Or do you not have a home?" The cat is incredibly friendly for not having a home, and when it nuzzles my face, my lips curl into a smile.

“I don’t know if Jed will let me take you home,” I admit, blinking when I realize the screams have come to a stop, even if the sound of the chainsaw hasn’t.

But of course. Jed is good at cleanup, and I know it requires his special skills to get the job done. Namely, his mastery of chopping people into little bits.

“You’re so chill about this,” I tell the little cat, scratching it under the chin. One of its eyes is a little weepy, and I’m sure it hasn’t had the vet care it needs in awhile, if ever. “Do you hear people getting murdered and chopped up often?”

At my question, the cat purrs louder and chews on the end of my finger. Seconds later, the barn door opens, and Wren comes out whistling, carrying a pile of tarps to his truck. “You good?” he asks, pausing in the grass to look over at me. “You looked a little uh, uncomfortable back there.”

“I found a cat,” I reply, gesturing to my new friend. “Cats make everything better.”

“Indeed,” Wren agrees, looking the little creature over but not coming closer. “Must be a stray. No one lives out here anymore.” He walks the rest of the way to his truck, and I wince at the *thump* the tarps make on the bed of it. Once that’s done, he strides over, moving more and more slowly the closer he gets to me.

But the little cat isn’t afraid of him, either. It walks right up to the serial killer, standing up on its back legs so it can rub its face against his jeans. Wren’s smile widens, and he scratches it under the chin. “What a friendly little thing. Are you going to keep it?”

He asks like it’s just the most obvious thing in the world for me to take it home.

“Does Jed like cats?” I ask gingerly. “Do you think he’d be okay bringing it home?”

“Ask him,” Wren recommends. “He’s not a hard-ass. And it is a *really* cute cat.” With that he disappears back into the barn, whistling his strangely cheerful tune.



Jed is the next out, carrying the now bloody chainsaw to the SUV along with some of the tarps. He glances around the yard until his eyes find mine, and a smile hitches on his bloody lips. “Oh.” He stops, opening the hatch of the vehicle as he surveys the situation. “I see you made a friend.”

“I think he’s a stray.” Anxiety builds in my chest, half because I’m about to ask him about the cat and half because he’s covered in blood and looks...frankly terrifying. Subconsciously he runs his crimson fingers through his hair, and it stands on end, coated with blood, when he’s done. “And he’s pretty thin.”

“Yeah?” Somehow I haven’t found the opportunity to ask him, but Jed comes closer, dropping to the ground opposite me. The little cat doesn’t waste a second, naturally. It bounds over to its new friend, rubbing on his arms like they aren’t streaked with blood. “Just a second, darling.” Jed chuckles, wiping his arms on his shirt before presenting them to the cat again. He runs his fingers along its body, just as I had done, and grimaces. “You are thin, aren’t you kitty?” As if it understands, the cat meows and pushes itself closer to him.

“Well...” He looks up at me, his eyes wide and sincere. “We probably can’t just leave it out here. Outside of a murder barn, in the middle of the woods.”

“Are you asking *me*?” I can’t help the small, surprised grin. “I was trying to figure out how to ask *you* if we could take it home. Since it’s your house, and all. My apartment definitely doesn’t allow cats.”

“Oh, we’re so taking the cat home.” Jed gets to his feet, and reaches out to help me when I scoop the cat into my arms. It doesn’t fight me, and instead turns to rest more comfortably against my chest, with its little body rumbling like a motorboat. “Are you okay?” He pulls me close, the cat trapped between us and not minding at all.

I open my mouth to answer...only to find that the words aren’t there. Not just yet. The memory of Gary’s screams is still sending prickles down my spine, and as I stare into his

face, I don't see a bit of remorse. Not that I'd expected to see any.

But it's different to know and then to *see* what he is right in front of my eyes.

"It doesn't bother you? To kill him like that?" I incline my head toward the barn, but Jed is already shaking his head. "It doesn't bother you to cut up someone into pieces?" He's still shaking his head as I ask, his smile rueful and apologetic.

"I wish it did right now," Jed admits. "If only so I could give you the answer that you need, Saylor." He reaches out with bloody fingers to gently cradle my chin in his fingers. "If you aren't okay with this, I understand. I get it, and—"

"I'm not...as against it as I should be." I interrupt him, before he can assume something different. "Really. I just need time, I think, before I'm willing to watch you massacre someone. If that's okay with you." My heart flutters when I speak, and I hope I can live up to my words.

His smile widens, and he drags me closer, until the cat squeaks in protest and worms its way upwards between us, so it has more space. "I'll give you all the time in the world, princess," Jed promises, as earnest as the fucking sunrise. "And I'll never push you. Haven't I told you that before?"

"Once or twice," I agree, my own voice just as quiet. "Thank you. For this. For everything. For being willing to give me that time." At least I know how to squash the voice that screams this is the biggest mistake I'll ever make.

"Why don't you two go on home?" Wren's voice makes me spring backwards, and Jed reluctantly lets me go. "We'll finish up here, right?" I look over to the barn, just in time to see Virgil nod, looking bored.

"You sure?" Jed hesitates, but when he looks at me, I know he wants to leave as well. "I can stay—"

"Go home and make her your famous ice cream sundaes," Virgil is quick to drawl, his eyes on me. "She looks like she could use the sugar so she doesn't pass out." Wren makes a

face at him, but Virgil only shrugs and ducks back in the barn, clearly done with the conversation.

“I’m totally not about to pass out,” I promise under my breath, scratching the kitten’s chin as Jed strokes along its ears.

“I believe you,” my boyfriend promises. “But uh, now that I look at you, maybe you should hand me the cat and get in the SUV. You know. Just in case.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FIVE

“Have you named it?” Jed’s voice breaks me out of my thoughts, and I cast my gaze sideways so I can see my beautiful, bloody boyfriend. He hasn’t bothered to really clean up, past taking a rag to his face and hands. So I can still see the dark blood staining most of the exposed areas of his pale, perfect skin.

He’s gorgeous even when he murders the shit out of people. What a terrifying problem for me.

“No,” I reply after a moment, stroking along the small, gray cat’s head and back. It doesn’t try to pull away from me and doesn’t squirm around in my lap. If anything, he seems content. Like he was born to be here and couldn’t imagine life anywhere else. Curious, I roll him over, garnering a protest from the little cat, and lift one of his back legs to peer between them. “Oh, someone needs to get neutered,” I announce, letting the cat flip back over onto his paws. He shakes himself, fur fluffed, and leans off of my lap to sniff at Jed’s arm that’s pressed along the console.

Jed glances over, a small smile on his lips. “My vote is for Alcatraz,” he says after a moment of looking between the cat and the road. Slowly, he lifts his free hand, stroking it along the cat’s head.

“That’s morbid. Isn’t that like, tempting fate or something?” I would think he wouldn’t want to bring any talk of that kind of prison into his house, if at all possible.

“Chainsaw?”

“You want to name a cat *chainsaw*?” My eyes roll before I can stop them, and I shake my head at my chainsaw-wielding murderer. “That’s awful. You’re awful at this. Might as well name him *Wren*, if we’re going for awful names.”

When Jed doesn’t reply, I sneak another look at him, and I’m surprised to see him looking like he’s considering it. “You’re joking,” I deadpan, letting the cat back into the circle of my arms when he walks across my lap once more. “You really want—”

“He is such a *cute* little Wren.” Jed’s voice is a coo as he reaches across my lap to scratch the cat’s ears. The cat purrs louder, though he hasn’t really stopped since I’d picked him up by the road while Jed and his friends were, well, murdering a guy. “Look at him. Doesn’t he look like a little bird to you? But...” His face turns serious, and he casts a look in my direction. “Naming rules are two yeses, one no. If you don’t like it, we’ll pick something else.”

That causes a grin to break out over my lips. “That’s the rule for naming a *child*,” I point out.

“Yeah, and?” God, he’s completely serious. Not only that, but it’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

“And I like Wren.” My fingers tickle the cat’s chin and he narrows his green eyes at me, bottlebrush tail flicking back and forth in delight. “How’s human Wren going to feel about cat Wren, do you think?”

“Oh, he’ll absolutely be offended. Especially if we call him old Wren and the cat *new* Wren,” Jed assures me, with a smile that tells me to him, that’s the best part.

The rest of the drive continues in mostly companionable silence, though I do confer with Jed to make a list of things new Wren needs in the immediate future. Cat food is, of course, pretty high up on the list. Along with a cat tree spanning the height of the universe and food bowls.

“We could get a custom cat tree,” he offers, pulling up into the parking lot. “Be careful not to let him out. As much as new Wren loves us, I think, I’m sure the allure of the wild is

stronger than ear scratches.” I know he’s right, and I bundle up Wren in my jacket, hugging him to my chest as I open the door and push it all the way out with my foot. Wren never tries to escape, however. If there’s any kind of allure in the still-foggy morning, between the trees that are barely visible in the mist, then Wren doesn’t hear it. He’s the first cat in creation that I know of who likes being carried.

That, or he’s just exhausted from being outside on his own.

Once inside, I’m surprised to see Jed already in the kitchen, a small, shallow bowl on the island with a pack of deli meat beside it.

“You don’t slice your own?” I ask, causing Jed to eye me as he opens the meat, though I can see the hint of amusement on his face as he chops the sliced it into tiny pieces. “Isn’t that against the rules of the Michelin Star Society?”

“There is no *society*,” he chuckles. “And our only rules are no Lunchables and no American cheese.”

“*Ouch.*” It’s such a personal blow, and I pull a hand away from Wren and press it against my sternum in full offense. “That’s just hurtful.”

“It’ll be less hurtful once we break your addiction to plastic cheese and processed meat with too many additives to count,” Jed promises me sweetly. He dumps the meat into the bowl and pushes it to the middle of the island before turning and putting the rest of the meat back in the fridge.

I just stand there, sure he doesn’t want the little street cat on his counter.

But when Jed turns back around, surprise on his face when he sees me still holding Wren, he asks, “Aren’t you going to let him eat?” His sweet, bemused tone is such a stark contrast to the blood staining his clothes and skin that I can’t help but grin.

“On your counter?” I glance down at the island between us, and then back up at Jed with raised brows. “You want to build bad habits?”

“It’s just once,” he argues, reaching out his hands for the cat. I hand Wren over, knowing for a fact that *just once* is still going to become a habit. But hey, they aren’t my counters. And it’s adorable to see him cradle the cat in his arms. The cat leans up to sniff his chin and Jed leans down, letting Wren nuzzle his face against his blood-streaked jaw.

“You’re too precious to be real,” I tell the two of them. “I didn’t know you liked cats this much.” Realistically, there’s a lot I don’t know about him. But unless I suddenly re-grow my conscience, morals, or, well, common sense, I have time to learn everything.

“I love all animals,” Jed murmurs, nuzzling the cat’s little forehead before setting him down on his paws. “My family had dogs and a few barn cats. Taking in the local strays was probably the only good thing they ever did.”

“Well, they also had and raised you,” I point out, as new Wren sniffs the meat before attacking it voraciously. “I think that’s a pretty good thing.” It sounds cheesy to my ears. But before I can apologize or laugh it off, Jed sends me a bright, winsome smile and crosses to my side of the island, pressing a kiss to my temple.

“I need to shower,” he murmurs, lips brushing my skin as he speaks. “Do you want anything before I go up?”

“No,” I tell him, reaching out to twine my fingers with his. “I’m fine. Are *you* fine?” He treats murder like it’s so easy. Like it’s the most normal thing in the world. And maybe for him, it is. Jed shakes his head, murmurs his thanks against my temple, and heads upstairs to the bigger, nicer bathroom with the fancy as hell shower.

But when he’s gone, I feel...deflated. Even with new Wren sucking down the chopped up meat and purring the whole time, I feel like I’m missing something.

*Jed*, obviously. I’m missing him.

“Please don’t break anything,” I tell the small cat, and give a quick look around the cabin to make sure there’s no window cracked and that the doors are both shut and locked. There’s

no way for him to get out, and it would do him some good, I hope, to explore his new home. After giving him one last scratch between his ears that the cat mostly ignores in favor of food, I hit the stairs and trail up after Jed, not hesitating until I get to the bathroom door where I can hear the shower running inside.

There's always the chance he doesn't want me in there. That he wants to clean up alone and decompress. I know that, but I still knock on the door, hard enough that I hope he can hear me over the shower.

Almost immediately, the door opens, revealing a shirtless Jed with his jeans unbuttoned and hanging low on his hips. My eyes take all of it in, and for a moment I'm breathless at how savagely gorgeous he looks with the blood on his hands, arms, and face.

"Are you okay?" His words make me blink, and look up at him with heat flushing into my cheeks when I realize he's been watching me stare at him. "Do you need—"

"Can I shower with you?" My words come out quick, uncertain, and a little breathy.

In response, his brows flick up towards his bangs. "You want to shower with me while I scrub off all this blood?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I absolutely want to hop into that shower with you right now."

"Blood and all?"

"Blood and all." His grin widens at my answer, and he pulls me forward, lips slanting against mine.

"You're perfect. Have I told you that today?" Jed purrs against my lips, backing into the bathroom. He closes the door, and I wonder if it's more to keep the warmth in than anything else. Or maybe to keep new Wren out, should he head up this way.

"You know, I don't think you have." The blood still makes my stomach twist. It still drags up that smarter part of me that says to *run away* before he kills me.



But it's getting easier to ignore that part.

Especially when Wren grips my shirt, raising it over my head before he removes my bra and leggings. Before long, we're both naked, though I'm much less bloody, and he pulls me into the hot water of the shower, his mouth on mine for almost the entire time.

"Do you want me to turn on the lights?" Jed purrs, the rainfall showerhead soaking us both as water falls from the ceiling. I hadn't even realized he was relying on natural light from the windows instead of the actual bathroom lights, and I shake my head at his question.

"No. I like the dark." Well, the relative dark anyway. My hands reach out, fingers trailing along his arms as blood streams from him to the shower floor below us. It whirls around the drain, dark red and muted in the dimness of the bathroom, but hypnotizing all the same.

Jed Shaw is a murderer.

An ex-cannibal with tendencies that make me sure that it'll never be completely in his past.

And he's mine. He's made that clear from the very beginning, hasn't he? Ever since he brought me home drugged in the back of his car. Ever since the first time I could've run away, not come back, and gone to the police.

But I hadn't.

"I want you." Jed's growl against my ear is sharp and hoarse. Despite the heat from the shower, I still shiver, especially when I feel his fingers at my slit. "I want you so bad, Saylor. *Fuck*, I always want you."

He drops to his knees unexpectedly, his hands on my thighs as he peers up at me. Water runs across his face, catching on his eyelashes as he stares up at me from behind a mask of dark, streaked blood.

There must be something wrong with me that my breath catches in my throat. My fingers wind through his hair, sticky and stiff with blood, but I don't mind that, or the way it transfers to my skin. He licks me, his eyes never leaving mine,

and soon his licks become deeper, less teasing, before at last he buries his bloody face against my pussy and shoves his tongue inside of me, like he'll never be able to get enough.

And fuck, maybe I can't get enough either. There's something that makes it hotter, knowing the blood on his face is rubbing off against my thighs. And the blood swirling down the drain definitely doesn't give me pause in the way that it should while he eats me out like I'm the last meal he'll ever have.

I have a problem.

And Jed is the only solution I care to explore.

He doesn't wait for me to come this time. He's too impatient, but so am I. I urge him onward when he stands up to slam me into the wall, guiding my leg up onto the bench to give him better access before the serial killer slams into me, his cock making me see stars.

"I love you," he pants in my ear. "Or, *damn*. If this isn't love, it's close enough for me. I don't care that I only met you a week ago. You're *mine*, princess." He nips at my ear, my throat, and finally settles on sinking his teeth into my lower lip as he fucks me. "And I will kill anyone who thinks they can change that. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," I pant, turning as my hips move to meet his movements. "I think we're fucked up as hell, but I hear you."

His grating, growling laugh reaches my ears, and I gasp at a particularly deep thrust. "Maybe we are," he agrees. "But I'd rather be fucked up with you, than sane with anyone else."

"Yeah?" My head spins, and I know I should have a better answer than that. "You really think—" He cuts me off with a harsh kiss, his movements becoming erratic as blood streams down his face from his hair, leaving dark lines of red on his skin and mine.

"Do I think what?"

"Do you think we're forever?" I know it's a dumb question; that it's too soon to tell. I barely know him, and this is definitely the honeymoon phase. But I can't help the words

as they leave my mouth, nor can I help but watch the rivulets of crimson trail along our skin.

“Yes,” Jed promises, and there’s no hesitation in his words, in his voice, as he pins me in place and sinks into me with a groan. “You and I are forever, Saylor. Till death and after. I promise you, I won’t have it any other way.”

And for all the fear that flutters in my heart, in my chest, and clenches my stomach, any words of reason are lost as I come, body clenching around him.

He’s terrifying, a murderer, and probably a psychopath.

He’s covered in blood, and it drips onto me as he fucks me.

Jed is a monster out of my darkest nightmares.

*And he’s all mine.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## **Thank you Mom.**

Really. I know you said you did not under any circumstance want this book dedicated to you, but here we are. Doing it.

You're the best. Without you, I would not be in a place to write ex-cannibal romance, and planning a not-so-ex cannibal romance. You're the best.

# ABOUT AJ MERLIN

AJ Merlin would rather write epic love stories than live them. I mean, who wants to limit themselves to only falling in love once? She is obsessed with dark fantasy, true crime, and also dogs. From serial killers to voyeurs all the way down to the devil himself, AJ's specialty is in writing irredeemable heroes who somehow still manage to captivate their heroines (and her readers).

