



Her
RENEGADE

AMANDA
MCKINNEY

BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

HER RENEGADE

STEELE SHADOWS MERCENARIES

AMANDA MCKINNEY



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DEDICATION

For Mama

ALSO BY AMANDA

ROMANTIC THRILLER BOOKS

(Amanda McKinney)

ON THE EDGE:

Buried Deception

Trail of Deception

THE ANTI-HERO COLLECTION:

Mine

His

BESTSELLING STEELE SHADOWS SERIES:

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Cabin 2 (Steele Shadows Security)

Cabin 3 (Steele Shadows Security)

Phoenix (Steele Shadows Rising)

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Ryder (Steele Shadows Investigations)

Her Mercenary (Steele Shadows Mercenaries)

Her Renegade (Steele Shadows Mercenaries)

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Redemption Road

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The Lake (A Berry Springs Novel)

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The Fog (A Berry Springs Novel)

The Creek (A Berry Springs Novel)

The Shadow (A Berry Springs Novel)

The Cave (A Berry Springs Novel)

The Viper

Devil's Gold (A Black Rose Mystery, Book 1)

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Tomb's Tale (A Black Rose Mystery Book 3)

Evil Eye (A Black Rose Mystery Book 4)

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THRILLER BOOKS

(Writing as Amanda Tisevich)

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*A Marriage of Lies - A Thriller Novel **Coming 2024***

Thriller Novella Series:

The Widow of Weeping Pines

The Raven's Wife

The Lie Between Us

The Keeper's Closet

And many more to come...

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

JAGGER (STEELE SHADOWS INVESTIGATIONS)

*2021 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in
Mystery/Suspense 2nd Place Winner*

RATTLESNAKE ROAD

*Named one of POPSUGAR's 12 Best Romance Books to Have
a Spring Fling With*

2022 Silver Falchion Finalist

REDEMPTION ROAD

2022 Silver Falchion Finalist

THE STORM

Winner of the 2018 Golden Leaf for Romantic Suspense

2018 Maggie Award for Excellence Finalist

2018 Silver Falchion Finalist

2018 Beverley Finalist

2018 Passionate Plume Honorable Mention Recipient

THE FOG

Winner of the 2019 Golden Quill for Romantic Suspense

*Winner of the 2019 I Heart Indie Award for Romantic
Suspense*

2019 Maggie Award of Excellence Finalist

2019 Stiletto Award Finalist

CABIN 1 (STEELE SHADOWS SECURITY)

2020 National Readers Choice Award Finalist

2020 HOLT Medallion Finalist

THE CAVE

2020 Book Buyers Best Finalist

2020 Carla Crown Jewel Finalist

DIRTY BLONDE

2017 2nd Place Winner for It's a Mystery Contest



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HER RENEGADE

Never fall for your target ...

Three years ago, Sophia Banks fled her home, finding solace . . . and solitude . . . in the snowy mountains of the Alaskan wilderness. Every detail of her new life was carefully orchestrated, from her job to her hair color—until a scarred, callous mercenary shows up on her doorstep.

Justin's mission is clear: Find Sophia Banks and interrogate her—by any means necessary— to obtain the information he needs. But when Justin and Sophia survive a blitz-style attack a mere hour after their meeting, Justin realizes he's not the only man looking for the runaway, and the mission isn't nearly as cut-and-dried as the paperwork suggested.

When a blizzard moves into the area, Justin and Sophia are forced to shelter in place. Here, Justin learns there is more to Sophia than meets the eye, and he wonders if he can trust her—or himself, for that matter.

As the mission falls apart, Justin must make the biggest decision of his life: go with his heart, or with his gut?

ASTOR STONE, INC.



- CLASSIFIED -

Contract for Services of Astor Stone, Inc.

PARTIES TO THE AGREEMENT

This Contract For Services (the Contract) is made effective as of September 12, 2001 (the Effective Date), by and between the Parties: Astor Stone, of Astor Stone, Inc. (Astor Stone, Inc.); and the Government of the United States of America (the US Government).

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES

Astor Stone, Inc. hereby agrees to provide the US Government with clandestine operations, including, but not limited to, the planning and execution of highly classified extraction, assassination, and intelligence-gathering missions, both within and outside of US borders, under the terms and conditions hereby agreed upon by the Parties as defined in Appendix A.

Astor Stone, Inc. shall receive orders directly from the United States Central Intelligence Agency and/or the United States Department of Defense, and is to operate independently from the US Government, concealing US Government involvement in said orders. The US Government is not responsible for injuries or casualties and will deny all knowledge of Astor Stone, Inc. and its agents.

TERM

The Contract renews on a yearly basis pending a formal review of completed missions. The Contract may be extended and/or renewed by the agreement of all Parties in writing thereafter.

PAYMENT

The US Government agrees to pay Astor Stone, Inc. \$1,500,000 USD per mission, distributed as follows: \$750,000 paid on receipt of orders, and \$750,000 paid upon mission completion. Bonuses may be paid on a mission-based basis, as determined by the US Government.

PROLOGUE



Justin

Clawing at the bear trap clamped around my temples, I groaned, muttering curse words I hadn't used in a decade. When I realized there was not, in fact, a metal trap impaling my brain, I opened my eyes.

A ray of afternoon sunlight hit my retina like a laser beam.

“*Fuuuck.*” I scrubbed my hands over my face.

A warm breeze from the open windows swept over my naked body, the briny scent of the sea slowly pulling me out of my haze. Using the sound of the waves crashing against the shore as an anchor, I carefully moved my limbs to ensure my body was intact and that everything was in working order.

My bare foot knocked over a beer bottle, causing a chain reaction like dominos. Bottle after bottle tipped onto the tiled floor, the *clink, clink, clink* sounds like knives piercing my eye sockets.

That's when I realized *I* was on the floor. And also still very—*very*—drunk. With that realization came a slight reduction in pain. I'd been here before. I knew how to deal with this. Like everything in life, it would soon fade away.

I rolled onto my side, causing more bottles to crash against tile. My arm flung over a body. Warm, I noted. Not dead.

This was good.

Like a blind man tapping Morse code, I fluttered my fingers over the bare skin, eventually finding a breast, a nipple.

A woman. Even better.

My pulse began to increase, arousal awakening.

The whore moaned as I stuck two fingers between her legs, then she muttered something unintelligible in Spanish, to which I agreed. Because yes was always better than no.

Finding a half-full beer with my other hand, I rolled onto my back, lifted my head, and chugged the dregs as a warm, wet mouth enclosed around my erection.

With a heavy sigh, I dropped my head back to the floor and stared at the ceiling, finding the same spot that greeted me every morning when I woke in this same place. A hole in the middle of the rotted planks that served as a roof for the hut I called home.

I contemplated that tiny circle of daylight, my thoughts as vacant as my soul.

Nothingness was the space in which I lived. I was a shell of a human with a shell of a life. A very comfortable place to die.

Lost in the nothingness of it all, I suddenly became faintly aware of a ringing close by. It took me a second to realize the sound belonged to a cell phone.

Frowning, I mumbled to the woman between my legs, then flopped my arms around the floor, eventually finding the source of the godforsaken noise. It was *my* phone—the one that I'd turned off months ago, thrown in the closet, and forgotten existed.

“What the hell?”

I studied the foreign object until the call stopped and my vision focused. I had sixty-two missed calls, and one hundred eleven texts.

Snorting, I reared back to hurl it through the window when the screen lit again.

Blocked number.

For reasons unbeknownst to me, I answered the call—the call that would change my life forever.

1



Justin

Present Day

The streets of Tokyo were alive. Thousands of tourists clogged the sidewalks, swarming from one spot to the next like a colony of ants.

That night, the most overcrowded, overpopulated city in the world felt particularly suffocating. I didn't like crowds. Didn't like people. Being in the middle of hordes of tourists? I'd rather eat my own spleen.

For a moment, I was mentally transported back to my first black op in Karachi, Pakistan, another overpopulated cesspool where living shoulder to shoulder was a way of life—though the two cities couldn't be more different.

Walking through downtown Tokyo at night was like walking through a video game after taking a hit of acid. Every high-rise was encased in neon lights, flashing, blinking, displaying scrolling ads the length of a football field. The streets were awash in an eerie blue fluorescent glow, reflecting off the hundreds of compact cars, bicycles, and motorbikes as they zipped past. The noise alone was enough to cause confusion and raise anyone's blood pressure.

In short? It was a calculated, clever assault on the senses that guaranteed wide-eyed wanderers and naive tourists stayed up all night, making bad decisions while spending their hard-earned money with reckless abandon. Not ten minutes on the streets, and I'd already seen three people get pickpocketed, two men pummel each other in an alley, and a teenager get sucked off by a hooker in exchange for a joint.

I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

I sidestepped a group of drunken French tourists, bumping aimlessly off each other, laughing, slurring, completely oblivious to the danger around them.

Danger like me.

For a moment, I considered slipping the blade of my knife into one of their kidneys just to see how long it took before

anyone noticed. But a digital clock on the building ahead reminded me that I didn't have time for such games.

A cacophony of horns blared as I stepped onto the street, ignoring the blinking crosswalk. A portly fellow in a car the size of a tennis shoe leaned out the window, his face contorted in anger, his stubby middle finger in the air.

A universal gesture. One of my favorites.

I returned the greeting and slipped into the crowd, missing a food delivery truck by a mere inch.

The watch on my wrist vibrated with an incoming message.

You have ten minutes, tops.

I increased my pace, shouldering through the crowd. At the next light, I pivoted onto a slightly less crowded street. A cool breeze whipped between the buildings, carrying the scent of fried food, spices, and burnt gasoline from the motorbikes. Smoke from a yakitori street vendor billowed into the street, catching the colors of the neon lights.

Another right, followed by a left at the next block.

I glanced at my watch, picking up my pace.

Forty seconds later, I turned into one of the lesser-known izakaya alleys, home to authentic Japanese-style dining bars and restaurants. Very popular with tourists.

In stark contrast to the busier streets, this alley was dark, lit only by paper lanterns swaying from strings of lights that had been looped between the buildings that flanked the alley. Between the lanterns, massive bushels of bright pink Japanese anemone flowers hung low in the air, adding a sweet fragrance to the spices and incense.

After a quick glance over my shoulder, I opened an inconspicuous red door under a sign that read simply RESTAURANT. Inside, everything was red. The light bulbs, the lanterns, the tables, the booths, even the rugs that stretched over worn hardwood floors.

A young woman with long black hair, red stilettos, and red lipstick greeted me from the hostess stand.

“I’m here to see Haru,” I said in Japanese.

“O—oh.” She blinked, obviously expecting me. “Yes. ID, please.”

As I dug into my coat pocket, the hostess swallowed deeply, her gaze flickering over my shoulder.

Her hand trembled as she returned the identification. “Haru is out at the moment but will be back shortly. She is expecting you. Right this way, please.”

The diners turned to watch us as we made our way through the tables. Because I’m Caucasian, because I’m wearing a suit that cost more than their cars, or perhaps it was because of the thick, jagged scar that ran down the side of my face.

I was led behind a curtain of beads and into a dark hallway that ended at a closed door. Through it, I could hear the low base of some godawful Japanese R&B music.

The hostess gestured to the door, indicating this was where I should wait, then took two steps back, eager to put distance between us.

I waited until I was alone in the hallway before turning the knob and opening the door.

The room was small, illuminated only by red light. It was hot and humid, rank with the scent of sex.

Set up like a waiting room, there were plastic chairs lining the walls. A small portable bar stocked with liquor sat in the corner. Ahead were three identical red doors. I recalled the blueprint I’d studied hours earlier. Behind each door was a room, and each room was a carbon copy of the next, containing nothing but a twin-size bed and a chair.

Hidden in the shadows, a naked woman knelt in front of a balding businessman. His thick, beefy hand fisted her hair, guiding her head back and forth as she sucked him off. He lazily regarded me, his lids heavy with satiation and whatever drug he’d taken before paying Haru, the madam of the brothel.

Something about me must have flagged his instincts because he slowly sat up, his eyes a little wider, his back a little straighter, studying me a little harder. I guessed I had about five more seconds until he realized I was not there for a good time.

I refocused on the wall ahead of me. Three doors. Three options. Each door locked from both the inside and outside. Only Haru had the keys.

Pivoting to the left, I pulled a lockpick from my suit pocket and approached door number one.

The room was empty.

The businessman was on his feet now, asking who I was and what the hell I was doing breaking into one of the rooms. The woman cowered on the floor, one eye on him, one on me. As he tucked himself into his pants with one hand, he used the other to produce a gun from his waistband.

Shit.

Having exactly zero time to deal with this bullshit, I knocked him out, sending his body slamming into the back wall with half his dick hanging out of his pants.

This was when all hell broke loose.

The naked woman started screaming. Stumbling off the floor, she covered her breasts and ran out of the room.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

I kicked open door number three. A man lunged from the corner, nailing me with a right hook. Like a shot of heroin, adrenaline surged through my veins, igniting me from the inside out. I lived for this feeling. Thrived on it. It was why I was so damn good at my job.

I sent my heel into the man's kneecap, popping it backward. As he bellowed in pain, I grabbed his shirt collar and yanked him to me.

“Look at me,” I snarled.

The moment our eyes met, I slammed my forehead into his nose. The sound of cartilage crunching echoed through the small room. A burst of blood sprayed onto the walls. The man crumpled to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

“Turn around,” I said to the naked Caucasian woman who was curled into a ball on the bed, sobbing like a child. Even in the dim light, I could see the bite marks on her neck.

She complied without hesitation.

Narrowing my eyes, I examined the Celtic cross tattooed on her back and confirmed it matched the one in the image I’d studied earlier—a photo of my target, an American tourist who had been kidnapped eight months earlier. Her tattoo was her one identifiable mark.

“Courtney.” I held out my hand. “My name is Justin Montgomery. I’m here to take you home.”

She turned, her bloodshot blue eyes wide with shock, her body frozen as she processed this turn of events.

“No.” I snapped my fingers impatiently. “Stop crying. You need to be quick, you need to be calm, and you need to do exactly as I say. Do you understand?”

Courtney nodded fervently, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

Boots pounded down the hallway.

“Come on,” I said, pulling her off the bed.

After stepping over two bloodied bodies, we were halted at the doorway by a fit young man I recognized as a diner when I’d walked in. A well-meaning patron, a complete idiot, having absolutely no idea that his favorite restaurant was funding an illegal brothel in the back.

After dropping him, I led Courtney through the main room where the diners had congregated in the corner, crying, covering their ears and faces. Stunned, scared, and speechless.

“Put this on. Now.”

As Courtney slipped into a dress coat I'd snatched from the back of a booth, I grabbed a cloth napkin off a table, wiped the blood from my face and neck, and then tossed the bloodied rag into the air behind me.

The hostess gawked as I passed.

"For your trouble." I tossed a stack of yen onto the stand.

As we stepped into the alley, I looped my fingers through my target's, and with a firm grip, leaned into her ear.

"Act normal. We're a boring couple, leaving a boring dinner—that's it. Nothing to see here. Slow down, and for the fucking love of God, *stop crying*."

A blacked-out Lexus slowed to a stop next to the sidewalk. Sirens wailed in the distance.

I opened the door, guided Courtney inside, and after a quick look over my shoulder, ducked in after her.

"Go," I said as I tapped the back of the seat.

Once we were a safe distance from the chaos, I leaned back and adjusted my cuff links.



Justin

The Lexus descended into a secret underground tunnel that led to a small parking garage with an elevator.

The spots were filled with every make of luxury car imaginable—Porsche, Jaguar, Maybach, Bentley, Benz, and two armored Range Rovers that cost \$500,000 a pop. Unsurprisingly, the newly constructed skyscraper above us was rumored to be one of the most expensive buildings in all of Tokyo.

“He’s waiting for you,” the driver said, rolling to a stop in front of the elevator.

My target waited until she received an invitation from me to exit the vehicle. She stayed at my hip as we stepped into the elevator.

“Thank you,” she whispered as the doors slid closed, staring at my profile as she’d done the entire drive.

In the light, Courtney’s reflection in the mirrored elevator doors looked ghostly. Her long, skinny legs and bare feet were pale and veiny, bruised and scarred, and she was at least twenty pounds lighter than in the photos that had been splashed all over the news for months. Her blond hair was dirty, with greasy strands crowding her face as she studied the jagged scar on mine.

I looked away.

We were greeted in the foyer by a tall, lanky Japanese man I didn't recognize. He wore a pinstriped black suit and a gold watch the size of a satellite dish.

"Mr. Montgomery. My name is Aiko," he said as we shook hands. "Can I get the password, please?"

"Not until you give me yours."

The corner of the man's lip quirked. "Astor warned me about you—that you don't trust anyone."

"History has taught me not to."

"Understood."

Aiko supplied the correct password, and I returned the favor by giving him mine. Each job has its own set of unique passwords so that we know who the good guys are and the bad.

"I trust that everything went smoothly?" Aiko casually asked, guiding us into another mirrored elevator.

Smoothly?

I wondered what my target thought of such a foolish question. Did she think everything had gone smoothly when the US government waited months before opening an official investigation into her disappearance? Only to fail, and hire us?

Had it gone smoothly while she waited, being sold from man to man, being forced to have sex at all hours of the day and night? Or when, with every thrust, she wondered what kind of STD she was getting or if she would wind up pregnant?

Had the endless hours gone by smoothly while her soul was slowly being sucked from her body, trauma invading her brain like a deadly virus, while she waited for her country to save her?

No, I can say with all confidence that not a single one of my missions, not as a Navy SEAL or as a mercenary, had gone smoothly for *anyone* involved.

The elevator dinged, the doors slid open, and we stepped onto the gleaming marble tiles of the forty-second floor.

A chandelier hung from the ceiling, long tendrils of crystals cascading like rain. Expensive leather couches stretched over a gaudy plum-colored rug that probably cost as much as the armored cars in the parking garage. Even the scent being piped in from the air ducts was lavish. The space was opulence in its most ostentatious form. Just like my boss.

There was no signage on the walls or any identification whatsoever. Only those who were invited were lucky enough to visit this floor.

It was my first time visiting the Tokyo branch of Astor Stone, Inc., a private investigation firm named after its founder and my boss, Astor Stone. The PI angle is bullshit, though, although we do, on occasion, take random cases to avoid suspicion.

In reality, Astor Stone, Inc. is a private security company that contracts with the US government to assist in foreign affairs by conducting top-secret clandestine operations all over the world. Astor receives his orders directly from the Department of Defense, and he filters those orders down to his agents, like me. Astor hand-picks each of his mercenaries, most of whom served either in the military or in high-ranking government positions. We are trained to be covert, lethal, and to accept death before revealing who we work for and what we do.

We followed Aiko down a long, windowed hallway with sweeping views of downtown Tokyo. At the end were two massive hand-carved wooden doors with long gold knobs.

Aiko stopped and gestured to the doors. “He’s expecting you.” With that, the man turned and walked away.

The office, the size of a basketball court, was basically a box of windows—every wall floor-to-ceiling glass. Everything in it was black and gold, with accents of fine leather and crystal. It was as breathtaking as it was intimidating, as most say of Astor Stone himself.

Astor looked up from the leather couch where he was sitting, whiskey in one hand, pen in the other. Wearing a double-breasted suit, he was leaned back, an ankle over his knee. His slick ink-black hair shone under the dim glow of the lights.

The man sitting across from him slid his whiskey onto the table, stood, and crossed the room, his eyes locked on Courtney.

“Nice work, Mr. Montgomery,” the man said, though his focus never left her.

I watched as he extended his hand, she accepted, and together, they turned and walked out of the room without a word said between them.

But before the heavy doors closed, Courtney looked over her shoulder, and with tears swimming in her eyes, she mouthed, *thank you*. I dipped my chin and watched the doors close.

Mission complete.

“Nice work, indeed,” Astor said. “Sit. Would you like a drink?”

“Where are they taking her?” I asked, nodding my assent while settling onto the couch.

“That was David, with the US government.” Astor poured two fingers of whiskey from the crystal decanter next to him and handed it to me. “I’ve got my private jet ready for them. Courtney will be back home by morning, and your payment will be transferred to your account within the next ninety minutes.”

I knocked back the drink.

“Any casualties?” Astor asked.

“No.”

“Anything I need to know?”

“No.”

“Are you well? Any injuries?”

“No.”

“Good, because I’ve got another job for you.”

My brow cocked. The only downside to working for Astor was the lag time between jobs. But not now, apparently.

His black eyes narrowed on me. “This one is not as cut and dried or as easy as delivering Courtney back to the States.”

“I’m intrigued already.”

Astor grabbed a remote and the room fell dark. As the automatic window shades buzzed down, a projector screen lowered from the ceiling. Another few clicks and a woman’s face filled the screen.

My reaction was immediate, visceral—and alarming.

“Her name is Sophia Banks. Age thirty-eight, single, no children, currently living in Alaska. Miss Banks is an informant for a secret Russian militia group called the Black Cell Unit, which has been dormant for twenty years—or so we’ve been led to believe.”

Unmoving, I considered the woman on the screen, completely enraptured.

The photo, which appeared to be some sort of surveillance picture, was taken from a distance. Sophia was sitting in a coffee shop, her fingers with long dark-red-tipped nails wrapped around a ceramic mug. Her hair, the color of honey, cascaded over her shoulders in loose waves. Her lips, a dusty pink that matched the scarf wrapped around her neck, were pursed in a full pout as if she were in deep thought.

Her eyes were a shade of gold I’d never seen before. But it was the emotion inside them that got me, an intensity so fierce, it was as if I could hear the scream behind them.

I shifted in my seat, forcing my body to redirect its energy from craving to focus. My job didn’t allow me the luxury of attraction, affection, or passion. Emotions like those were akin to drugs. They distracted you. Made you soft. Hijacked your focus. Love made men do crazy things and I, well, I was crazy enough.

“Sophia Banks is married to the leader of the group, Kusma Petrova, the mastermind behind numerous terrorist attacks against the United States and other Western powers. She’s one of his wives, I should say. Kusma is known for his brutal tactics to force coercion and submission of his rivals, and within his own team, for that matter. The guy has more blood on his hands than the Grim Reaper, but because he works for the government—secretly, of course—he never gets arrested. You might remember the Dragging at the Kremlin?”

The slide switched abruptly from one of magnificence to one of murder. Blood, strewn body parts, caped men with guns.

I blinked out of my trance.

“In the middle of the night, a motorcade of vehicles with hooded armed men at the wheel drove through Red Square dragging human bodies—each of whom was alive and coherent when they were tied to the back of the trucks. Rumor is the victims were forced to sit next to the trucks for days, staring at them, knowing what was going to happen. It was a brutal, slow, horrific death, but that wasn’t good enough. Afterward, the victims were beheaded, and the heads were mailed to their loved ones. The Black Cell Unit claimed responsibility, and Kusma Petrova was the head of the unit at that time. It was his first big massacre, solidifying his spot as top dog. It was also what got his group shut down. Too much media coverage, too many questions.”

Astor paused to take a sip of his whiskey. “As you know, Russia is in a state of upheaval with the invasion of Ukraine. It has become enemy number one to most of the world and has become desperate—a very dangerous place to be. Rumor has it that Black Cell has come back to life to help rid Russia of its growing enemies—but this time, they’re not alone.”

He clicked to the next slide, this one of the North Korean presidential palace.

“Shit.”

Astor nodded. “My thoughts exactly. When Black Cell was active, Kusma formed an alliance of sorts with the leader of

North Korea, a genuine friendship between two madmen. Rumor is they've reconnected through their shared interest in nuclear warfare."

"That doesn't sound good at all. Where is Kusma Petrova now?"

"Exactly. That's what we need you to find out."

He clicked to the next slide, this one a grainy black-and-white photo of a group of men wearing green militia-style uniforms. A red circle highlighted the man in the middle. He was unremarkable, neither tall nor short, not big or small. Just average in every way.

"Is that him?"

"Yep. Don't let his appearance fool you. Kusma is smart, slippery, and a master of disguise. His team is extremely loyal and followed him wherever he went into hiding after the Dragging. With the rumor that he is active again and working with North Korea, bad guys are coming out of the shadows, begging to work with him. It's a movement, a call to action, a big deal. The United States has failed to find him and has called us. I'm putting you on the case."

Astor tossed a large manila envelope on the coffee table between us. "Your details are in there. According to the DOD, Kusma's last known location was in British Columbia, fifteen months ago. They tracked him, but he slipped away and has yet to resurface."

"What was he doing in BC?"

"Recruiting. Canada has a very large Russian population. After the First World War, more than a million Russians fled the country after the Russian Revolution, and many settled in Canada. Could be that he's trying to mobilize units as close to the US as possible, and he's positioned his wife, Sophia, in Alaska for that very reason. The working assumption is that he is somewhere on the coast, close to the ports. Your job is to deliver the exact coordinates of Kusma Petrova's location." He clicked back to the image of the woman, Sophia Banks. "This—she—is where you will start."

“Why start with her?”

“Because the US government told us to. They obviously think she is the key to capturing him.” Astor turned off the projector. “You’ll see your first payment in your bank account within forty-eight hours. Seven hundred fifty thousand upon signing, then seven hundred fifty once the mission is completed, minus my cut. However, the DOD is offering an additional five hundred thousand for your speedy completion of this mission.”

“How speedy?”

“One week.”

“*One week?*”

“One week.”

“Seven fucking days?”

“Seven days. Your flight leaves in two hours and will take you to Anchorage, Alaska. From there, you will meet with a contact I’ve secured. His picture and information are in the envelope. There, he will give you everything you need to execute this operation. Once you find Sophia Banks, interrogate her by any means necessary to get the location of Kusma Petrova. Once you confirm his location—by laying eyes on him—report back to me and your mission is done.”

“What about her?”

“What about her?”

“Does our government want her too?”

“No.” Astor sipped his drink, watching me closely over the rim. “I’ll reiterate. Get the information from her by any means necessary.”

“So, they don’t care if I kill her?”

“I believe you know the definition of *by any means necessary*, Justin.”

“So, I’m only supposed to deliver Kusma’s location, once confirmed?”

“Correct. And to be clear, his location is only confirmed by you actually *seeing* him. We don’t need another mess like Uzbekistan.”

“Understood.” I frowned. “But why not just bring him in? If I’m going to be that close to him, I can easily capture him and deliver him directly to the DOD.”

“Because that’s not the job.”

“Ah, I see. Because once I supply the DOD his location, they’ll send in their own men, and they’ll get the credit for finding him.”

“Likely so.”

My eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe they haven’t been able to find this guy.”

“I agree. They’re lying. They’re being unusually guarded about this mission. I personally believe it’s because they don’t want the liability if something goes sideways while hunting him. With the US’s ongoing support of Ukraine, the tension between the US and Russia is at an all-time high. They don’t need any bad press.”

This would be my thirteenth mission with Astor Stone, and the first that almost instantly triggered a red flag in my gut. Something didn’t feel right. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something seemed off from the jump.

Sensing my hesitation, Astor pushed the paperwork in front of me, urging this to move along. “Till death,” he said low, his gaze piercing.

Till death was an Astor Stone motto that meant loyal until death—loyal to the job. Die for each other, die for the cause, no questions asked.

“Till death,” I muttered, signing on the dotted line.



Aleks

*M*y stomach seizing, I clenched the sides of the toilet, heaving bile. My sinuses felt like they were on fire, my body like I had ingested cyanide.

I jumped at the sound of a knock at the bathroom door. After gagging a few more times, I wiped the tears from my cheeks and pushed to my feet.

Knock, knock, knock.

Quickly, I checked my reflection in the mirror—not a good idea. My face was a mess with mascara-stained tear-streaked ghostly pale cheeks, mottled with little red hives. My eyes were bloodshot and puffy, pink lipstick smeared past the corners of my mouth like a mad clown. Most horrifying was the few strands of hair that had escaped the French twist my stylist had spent ninety minutes smoothing into place.

I gasped, finding tiny specks of vomit on the bodice of my one-of-a-kind Vera Wang wedding dress. The mustard-brown drips stood out like spotlights against the blinding-white lace.

Another knock came at the door—this one loud and impatient.

“Just a minute,” I said, my voice cracking. “*Shitshitshitshitshit,*” I whispered.

Turning on the faucet, I worked madly to remove the vomit but only succeeded at smearing it into larger, more noticeable spots. My pulse skyrocketed. It wasn’t lost on me

that the stain on my insanely expensive dress was causing more anxiety than the fact that I was about to walk down the aisle. Because it wasn't perfect. Because *I* wasn't perfect.

Because there were consequences to such pathetic displays of weakness.

"*Aleks.*" My grandmother's sharp voice penetrated through the roaring in my ears. "Open the door right this minute."

"Yes, ma'am," I said into the mirror, scrutinizing the train wreck of a woman I was.

There was nothing I could do. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

There's nothing you can do. Get it together, Aleks.

Gritting my teeth, I pulled my shoulders back, spun like a ballerina, and unlocked the door.

My grandmother, Anja, squinted at me, her wrinkled face screwed into a scowl. Her perfume assaulted my senses, as loud and obnoxious as the gaudy pink chinchilla shawl (real) that draped over her pointy shoulders. An alabaster silk dress, a dozen strings of pearls (also real), and Dior ballet flats completed the grandmother-of-the-bride look. Every detail of her appearance had been meticulously planned, just like my wedding.

Anja had worked closely with a high-end designer to bring to life her vision of my wedding dress. The end product was a mermaid-silhouette lace Swarovski dress with a sheer nine-foot veil that covered my face. The whole thing sparkled like the moon. It was flamboyant, gaudy, and deliberately crafted to ensure everyone in the room knew how much money we had.

I hated it.

Anja promised it had been an accident (the designer's mistake, of course) that the dress was made two sizes too small. When I asked if it could be resized, she suggested I resize my calorie count instead. For the next three months, my meals were chosen for me, presented to me on tiny plates, and forced down my throat. You see, instead of the dress being

created for me, I was being molded into the ideal silhouette for the dress.

As was my life.

In those three months, I lost my feminine curves, half my hair, and all the color in my cheeks. I'd also lost my future, my hope, and any chance of creating my own identity.

I'd been promised to a very powerful man for no other reason than to secure the longevity of the corrupted world I'd been born into.

All the dreams I'd had as a little girl, those of fairy tales and happy endings, were taken from me by a handful of men over a bottle of brandy. My fate was decided for me, just like that. The dreams I'd once had now hovered over me like a storm cloud, taunting me, teasing me, reminding me what could have been.

To my shock, Anja didn't notice the vomit on my dress. Probably because she was too distracted by the repulsive odor wafting from the bathroom behind me. Disgusted, she shook her head in disapproval, her perfect pearl earrings glinting in the light.

My stomach sank. No matter how much I despised my grandmother, her constant disappointment in me felt like a knife in the gut.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, then yelled for "the makeup girl." No name, no identity, no importance other than to turn me from ugly to pretty.

After my makeup had been reapplied and my hair quickly smoothed again, Anja grabbed my arm, digging her long acrylic nails into my bicep. Baby pink, like the roses she'd chosen for me.

"Hurry," she hissed, dragging me across the room. "They're waiting."

I abruptly stopped. "Wait. My heels. . ."

Not perfect, not perfect, not perfect . . .

"They're still in the bathroom."

“Oh my God, Aleks.” Anja raised her hand to slap me but recoiled, apparently deciding there were too many prying eyes. “Stay here. Don’t move a muscle. I’ll be right back.”

I did as I was told, my hands clasped in front of me, my gaze on the floor.

I could hear the music in the nave, a fifteen-piece chamber orchestra. I could smell the long-stemmed pink roses, hundreds that had been flown in from all over the world. All around me, everything was black, white, and pink. Those were the colors that were chosen for the highly publicized, highly gossiped-about social event of the season.

While most brides spend their wedding weekend surrounded by friends and family, I did not. I was quarantined from the bridal party, and basically anyone who was not my grandmother or “the staff.”

Due to security threats, they’d told me, though I knew this was a lie.

They’d separated me because they didn’t trust me, plain and simple. Looking back, I wondered if perhaps they knew what I was capable of before I did.

Everything was timed so that I wouldn’t have to be in the same room as anyone else. The rehearsal dinner was held at a private chateau that resembled a medieval castle. The polished stone interior dripped with chandeliers, pink roses, and white drapery.

The menu was prepared by a world-renowned chef and his team, who had been flown in from Italy. The most expensive wines and champagnes were served in gold-rimmed crystal glasses.

While the waitstaff took drink orders, I was held in a back room until everyone was seated. Then I was escorted into the banquet hall by two of my father’s men, where my soon-to-be husband sat at the head table, dead behind the eyes. I’d been presented like some rare jewel that you could only look at but not touch. This ridiculous display only added to the gossip and allure of the wedding.

Once Anja secured my two-sizes-too-small heels, I was guided to the cathedral foyer where twelve bridesmaids and groomsmen waited for my arrival. Like sentinels, they stood in parallel lines, tall, silent, and motionless—as instructed. The women clasped bouquets of roses, and the men stood with their hands folded behind their backs.

Twenty-four pairs of eyes turned to me.

I didn't know a single one of these people. They studied me with ice-cold expressions, some appearing fearful that this could happen to them, others envious.

Why her? Why not me? they probably thought.

If only they knew I would trade my soul for freedom in an instant.

The music began to get louder, the drama building.

It was time.

The massive double doors opened, and the bridesmaids and groomsmen began their descent.

Anja's nails dug into my arm as she whispered something in my ear, though I didn't hear a single word of it. My thoughts were racing far too loudly. Then the viselike grip released, and my grandmother was replaced by my father.

I felt him before I saw him, a large, ominous presence. I forced my gaze forward so that my emotions, my weakness, wouldn't betray me.

My entire body tensed as I slid my arm through his—just as we'd rehearsed. No words were spoken.

Anja had disappeared somewhere, as was usual when my father entered the room.

After the last of the bridal party departed, the doors closed.

Like a wave moving in unison, my father and I stepped into position. My heart roared in my chest.

The orchestra blossomed into a crescendo. The doors opened, and my heart jumped into my throat.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't swallow.

Hundreds *and hundreds* of the richest and most powerful people in Russia turned to look at me. But my eyes were locked on one person. The center of it all. The man I'd been given to.

Given to.

In an instant, my fear and anxiety were replaced by anger.

"Aleks," my father's deep voice snapped, and I saw that he had been trying to walk while I was still frozen in place.

Closing my eyes, I commanded my brain to tell my knee to bend.

Together, we entered the nave.

Left, right, left . . .

Fury surged through my veins.

Right, left . . .

My focus narrowed on the man standing under the cross.

Left, right . . .

I lifted my chin and straightened my spine.

Left, right . . .

I hate you.

Left, right . . .

I hate you.

I. Hate. You.



Justin

The airplane bounced several times before skidding to a stop at the end of the runway. I opened the window shade to find nothing but a blur of white. Big fat snowflakes swirled angrily on a blustery wind that howled past the fuselage.

“Welcome to Alaska,” the pilot said over the intercom, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. “I hope you brought your snowshoes.”

I looked down at the pair of black Santini dress shoes I’d purchased a week earlier and sighed.

At the bottom of the jet bridge, a woman wearing an oversized red puffer jacket greeted me. “Good morning, Mr. Montgomery. We’ve got your vehicle ready.”

I looked up at the gloomy gray sky above. *It is morning, isn’t it?* I glanced at my watch, recentering myself. The travel from Tokyo to Alaska had taken fifteen grueling hours.

Turning my face away from the biting wind, I followed the woman across the icy pavement to an unmarked black SUV, where a man wearing a snowsuit and a beanie was loading my luggage into the back.

“Sir?” The woman offered the keys, blushing.

After settling into the driver’s seat, I pulled out my phone, clicked into the latest text message from Astor, and entered the destination into the GPS.

Thirty minutes later, I arrived at the Bear's Nest, an upscale bar located in the middle of downtown Anchorage. Inside, candles were everywhere, their light flickering off the wall-to-wall woodwork and gleaming hardwood floors. A fire crackled in the back. I wondered if my contact planned to set the place ablaze when were done.

I spotted him immediately—the only person sitting alone. In front of him, a newspaper rested next to a cup of coffee and a half-drunk martini. Lemon Drop, based on the fruit and sugar around the rim.

He was older than I'd anticipated, late sixties, with salt and pepper hair and a beard to match. He was tall and slender, the kind of operator who most people underestimate upon first introduction, but then get blindsided by his swift, nimble feet and catlike reflexes. I knew his type well. A snake in the grass, a man you always want on your side.

He stood as I arrived, smoothing the lines of his navy suit, and we shook hands. He introduced himself as Leo Hogan, my contact while I was in Alaska. He was former CIA, retired but still active.

I figured "still active" meant that he either worked for a private military firm or that he was a gun for hire, like me. Either way, I didn't mind. As long as he provided what I needed, I couldn't care less how the man spent his days—or that he ordered Lemon Drops before noon. Or that he ordered them at all, for that matter.

The waitress came by, giving me a long once-over. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Coffee." I settled into the booth.

"And how would you like that?"

"Black with sugar."

"Anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

"How was your flight?" Leo asked as the waitress sauntered away.

“Bumpy.”

“I was worried they were going to divert your plane due to the weather. I’m glad they didn’t. I understand the urgency of this mission.”

I appreciated that Leo got straight to the point without torturing me with small talk first. I despised small talk.

Leo reached into his lap but paused as the waitress set a porcelain cup in front of me. The silence felt heavy as she poured from the carafe, watching me from the corner of her eye. Leo was watching me too, I noticed. Assessing, whereas the waitress was curious.

The moment she walked away, Leo slid an envelope onto the table. I quickly tucked it into my suit jacket pocket.

“Everything you need is in that envelope. Information, coordinates, background information.”

“Give me the CliffsNotes.”

After a sip of his martini, he began. “Your target, Sophia Banks, lives in a small town called Falcon Creek, which is located in the middle of the Chugach National Forest. It’s about ninety minutes northeast of here, though it will take you much longer in this weather. Falcon Creek’s population is less than five hundred. It’s a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it kind of town, nothing but a pass-through for tourists and logging trucks. Sophia’s home address is included in the paperwork, as well as the address of the diner where she works—again, you can’t miss it.”

“What do I need to expect in terms of weather?”

“Snow on and off for the next twenty-four hours. After that, there are two more systems coming in back-to-back that are forecasted to drop a few more inches of snow. The temperatures over the next week are projected to be steady in the mid-twenties, so the snow will stick and stay. Travel will be impacted, possible loss of electricity too. In short, be prepared for anything. I’ve packed provisions in the back of your SUV. Did you see the bag?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Do you have a place to stay while you’re here?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Figured so. Also, you should know that cell service is shoddy in Falcon Creek, as it is anywhere in Alaska, really.”

“I have a SAT phone.”

“Perfect.”

Resting my elbows on the table, I steepled my fingers. “The intel Astor gave me on this job is thin. I want to know everything you know about my target. I know that she’s an informant for Black Cell and married to their head guy, but that’s literally it.”

Leo shook his head. “I’m sorry to say the information on this one has been as shoddy as the cell service.”

“No shit.”

“Here’s what I know. Sophia wasn’t on anyone’s radar until she showed up here in Alaska. Her laptop—which is no longer active—was flagged for multiple reasons, including communication with an alias that the government knew belonged to someone within Black Cell. That person is no longer alive, FYI. From there, they began tracking her, and using facial recognition software, they were able to identify her in several photographs with Kusma Petrova in Russia. It was then confirmed that she was his wife.”

I sipped my coffee, having trouble picturing the woman I’d had such a visceral reaction to marrying a monster like him.

Leo continued. “Sophia moved to Falcon Creek from Russia three years ago. Bought a house, got a job, settled in. She appears to be a hermit. Wakes up early, goes to work, then straight home. Wash, rinse, repeat. Oh, and she likes books. Has, like, a million in her house.”

“Does she live with anyone?”

“No.”

“What about friends? Boyfriend?”

“Kusma would kill anyone she had an affair with.”

“So, that’s a no. What about friends?”

“Also a no.”

“How about siblings?”

“There are several photographs of her with a girl around her age, taken years ago. The two resemble each other. The girl’s name is Aleks; that’s all we know.”

“That’s unhelpful. Have you tailed Sophia?”

“Yes, in preparation for your arrival. I began the moment Astor called me, as were his strict instructions.”

“When was that?”

“Six days ago. I dropped everything and have been tailing her nonstop. He kinda called in a personal favor on this one.”

“He’s good at that.”

Leo snorted, then took a deep sip, his hand trembling slightly as he lifted the glass to his lips. “Again, I don’t know much more than you do. You’d have to talk to someone in the DOD.”

“Who?”

Leo shrugged. Picking up on my frustration, he continued. “Surely, this isn’t your first mission going in blind.”

“No.” *But it’s the first that doesn’t feel right in my gut.*

“I remember those days,” Leo said, reminiscing. “I was Army Special Forces. Led more than my fair share of half-baked missions. Broke my back on the last. One second, I’m Rambo, and the next I’m disabled and kicked out of the only thing I ever loved. Since then, I’ve had a total of four surgeries, plus years of therapy, but I would still go back in a heartbeat if they’d take me.”

I understood. Men are either born soldiers, or they’re not. It’s as simple and complicated as that.

Being a soldier taps into a man’s most primal instincts, to protect, to serve, and to avenge those who have been wronged. Our training is as much discipline as it is learning to control

fear, regardless of the dangers or discomforts. It's a job where courage—man's greatest challenge—is necessary for survival. If you're lucky enough to develop it, it is extremely addictive.

Our bodies begin to crave the adrenaline rush that accompanies operating in life-or-death situations. There is at least one moment in every mission when every soldier vows it will be his last, yet the moment the job is done, the need for that rush emerges again. And on and on we go.

"How did you get involved with Astor?" I asked.

"A buddy of mine left the Army to work for him."

"Who?"

"Name was Eric Williamson. Died on his first mission." Leo stared out the window, lost in memories. "Anyway . . ." He shook his head, pushing them away. "I applied to take Eric's spot after he died, but Astor wouldn't hire me due to my injury."

Truth? I wouldn't have hired him either. As a unit, a soldier is only as strong as the man next to him. This is one of the reasons I preferred to work alone. I don't trust people.

"But it's fine," Leo said, blowing it off. "A year later, he called me up and offered me a job doing this kind of work for him. To be an agent's contact when needed—like I'm doing for you right now. He chose me for this particular mission because I helped profile Kusma Petrova decades ago when I worked for the CIA."

He shrugged.

"Astor pays well and lets me do something I love." A wicked grin cracked Leo's face. "Like tail a ridiculously beautiful target for a few days."

The protectiveness hit me fast and sharp. I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable about my reaction.

What the hell was it about this girl? Sophia Banks was not the first beautiful woman I'd ever seen and wouldn't be the last. Hell, having sex with random women was a way of life

for special ops soldiers. It was a release, like alcohol or drugs, but without the hangover.

Women fawned over us, and we took them. Keeping them, however, was an entirely different story. But never once—not a single time—did any of the women make my heart jump the way it had when I looked at Sophia Banks for the first time.

“Has anyone else been tailing her?” I asked, needing to know that there weren’t a bunch of operatives jerking off to her from behind their tinted windows.

“Nope. Just me. You know Astor; the fewer people involved, the better. And this mission has included the fewest I’ve been involved with. Like you said, the information we have sucks, but that’s in part because the information on Sophia is extremely limited in the first place. There is no profile or background to study, which corroborates with how the Black Cell Unit operates. Their members are virtually untrackable—or just trackable enough to throw you off. The Russian government funds Black Cell—although they’ll never admit to it—and sets them up with alternate IDs, safe houses, fake death certificates if needed. There is absolutely nothing on Sophia Banks until she popped up on the radar after moving here.”

“I understand the government thinks Kusma is in the area, possibly on the coast somewhere. What do you know about that?”

“Nothing more than exactly that.”

“And you’re sure she’s not with him?”

“If so, she hasn’t been seen with him. It appears she lives alone.”

“Did you break into her place to confirm that?”

“I had a look around.” He flicked a piece of lint off his jacket. “I’m telling you, there is not a single thing to indicate a male lives in that house.”

I scratched my chin. “What about her cell phone? Have you been able to track it? See where she’s gone in the last few months.”

“She doesn’t have one.”

“Bullshit. A woman, living alone in the wildlands of Alaska, has a cell phone.”

“Maybe she has a burner, but none of the local cell phone providers have an account under the name Sophia Banks.”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. But here we are.”

I sat back, shifting my coffee cup between my fingers, unable to shake the feeling of unease surrounding this job.

“You said you profiled Kusma when you worked for the CIA. What are his strengths, his weaknesses? How do women—like Sophia, for example—play into his profile?”

Leo nodded, straightening in his seat. “Kusma’s strength is his IQ. He’s extremely smart and cunning. He’s also charismatic. This plays a huge part in his ability to gain loyalty. People listen to him, they trust him, completely unaware that he is actually manipulating them. I compared him to Hitler in my profile.”

“That’s a hell of a comparison.”

Leo’s brow cocked with warning. “It’s not far off. Don’t underestimate him, Justin. He is what we call an organized offender—every detail of everything he does is well thought-out. The data we collected from his kill sites suggested that he planned for months, sometimes years in advance. A lot like Bin Laden with 9/11.”

“And his weaknesses?”

“His ego, and now his age. I would assume that Kusma is not nearly as mobile as he was twenty years ago. He’s around sixty now—he was in his thirties during his heyday in Russia. This makes me think he’s likely to have chosen a headquarters of sorts for his work, probably a protégé as well, to take over when he dies.”

Leo drained the dregs of his Lemon Drop.

“As for the women in his life . . . for Kusma, the more the merrier. This taps into that ego I mentioned. Sophia is one of Kusma’s many wives. He likes them very young. The last woman he took into his harem was just sixteen years old. Rumor is Kusma gains their commitment and loyalty in the same way he obtains it from his enemies—through intimidation, fear, and torture, both emotional and physical. He’s been known to use his women to lure in his rivals, where he then kills them—both the rival *and* the decoy. Women are nothing but sexual pleasures and pawns in his brutal game.”

“If that’s true, Sophia should be more than willing to deliver his location when I find her.”

“You don’t understand. The women are loyal for a reason. It’s likely that he has not only threatened to kill them, but probably also every living relative in their family tree. He has something on her, no doubt about it, and unless she’s willing to let that go, she’s stuck with him, doing whatever he asks, whenever he asks it.” Leo considered his empty martini glass. “The threat of losing someone you love can be enough to make anyone do things they never thought they’d do.”

A moment of silence ticked between us as he looked up, studying me closely.

“Normally, I’d feel inclined to advise you to keep your focus on the job and nothing else. Sophia . . . she’s a beautiful woman. Alluring.” He tilted his head to the side. “But I understand women are not your weakness. Your ice-cold reputation precedes you.”

“And what is my weakness?”

After waving away the waitress, he refocused on me. “I knew your brother.”

“Did you?” I deadpanned.

“Yes.” His gaze flickered to the scar on my face. “He was a good man. A better operator.”

I stood and tossed back the rest of my coffee. “Thank you, Mr. Hogan. I’ll be in touch.”

5



Justin

Welcome to Falcon Creek

The snow-covered wooden sign was almost unreadable. Long, gangly icicles hung from its bottom, disappearing into a snowdrift that had gathered beneath it.

The sign was tucked among crowded spruce trees that lined the road, their long, feathered branches bending under the weight of the snow, their tops bowing as if a soldier accepting defeat. Above them, a blanket of gray clouds loomed overhead, unmoving and relentless, spitting out snowflakes that swirled in an icy wind howling outside the windows.

It was a frigid, miserable afternoon.

Leo wasn't kidding. The drive took twice as long as anticipated. The farther north I drove, the worse the conditions became. I'd stopped twice to help tourists stranded on the side of the road, allowing them to use my SAT phone to call for help. The cell service was shit, indeed.

I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to live in such a remote—therefore dangerous—location. Falcon Creek was truly a blip in the middle of rugged mountains and dense wilderness.

It made me even more curious about the story behind Sophia's decision to settle in that exact spot. There were no businesses, no houses, just a desolate pitted two-lane road that cut through miles of evergreens. I also noticed there were no cars in the area. Every vehicle I'd passed was either an SUV, a truck, or a side-by-side. The people here were geared up for survival.

The "town" of Falcon Creek was basically a short strip of buildings on either side of the highway, consisting of a gas station that doubled as a food market—the only source of groceries—a diner, and a hole-in-the-wall bar in a log tavern

that looked like it was one huff and puff away from falling down.

That's it.

I assumed the citizens (all five hundred of them) drove into Anchorage once a week for their groceries, doctor appointments, errands, whatever, because no one could live off this town alone. I made a mental note to ask Leo about Sophia's footprint in Anchorage—how often did she go, who were her doctors, did she visit anyone while there?

It was three in the afternoon by the time I arrived in town, though heavy cloud cover made it look much later. I pulled into the local eatery, named Creek House Diner, and parked facing the side of the building between two jacked-up trucks.

I cut the engine, grabbed my duffel from the back, and set it in the passenger seat. The most important part of every job was adapting to your surroundings. Step one of that personal adaptation was changing clothes.

As I wrestled out of my suit jacket and began unbuttoning my dress shirt, I took in the small diner ahead of me. Much like the prehistoric bar across the street, the diner also looked like something out of the past. A fifties-style establishment, it had the daily specials written on the windows in bright, colorful paint, red leather booths, a black-and-white checkered floor, and a row of barstools in front of the cash register.

The dining room was packed. Not surprising, considering it was the only place to get a prepared meal within sixty miles either way.

The diners were mostly men, dressed in snowsuits and thick hats. A few tourists taking refuge from the weather cuddled in the corner, wearing wildly inappropriate clothing considering the conditions. A woman with a bun of gray hair piled on top of her head and large owl-like glasses stood behind the register. She wore a traditional black waitress dress with a white apron. This amused me for some reason.

I scanned the crowd once again. No honey-haired Lolita.

After peeling off my shirt, I began working on my belt.

That's when I saw her.

Sophia Banks breezed out of the kitchen, her hands and arms loaded with plates of food. Literally, like you see in the movies, one plate on each forearm and one plate in each hand. She was wearing the same black-and-white uniform as the other waitress, although instead of amusing me, I instantly imagined a role-play scenario.

She was curvier than in the photographs I'd studied, and I immediately decided I preferred this. More of her, in any way, was a good thing. She moved quickly, nimbly through the diner. Gracefully.

The men watched her as she passed, every single one of them looking over their shoulder to get the full view. The few women in the room glowered at their husbands as she passed by. Sophia greeted her table with a warm smile before bending at the knees and sliding the plates onto the table.

I found myself frozen in place, my belt half-off, its buckle clasped in my hand.

The same feeling I got when I first saw her picture bloomed in my chest. Except this time, tingles joined the party, breaking out like a rash over my skin. Again, I was so dumbstruck by my reaction to this woman that I told myself to look away—although I couldn't. I was mesmerized by her.

I noticed two things right away. One, she wasn't wearing a ring, which didn't necessarily mean much if she was working undercover for Black Cell. And her eyes were different.

In the surveillance picture Astor had shown me, Sophia's expression was that of a tortured woman, sad, desperate, alone. Here, however, she smiled—albeit softly—and it sparkled in her eyes. In contrast to the picture, she was relaxed and obviously very comfortable in her surroundings.

As if sensing me, her gaze lifted to the window, and for a moment, our eyes met before she turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Jesus,” I muttered, the exclamation slipping from me.

With my pulse a bit livelier now, I slid out of my pants and kicked out of my shoes, wondering how this woman had found herself married to such an evil man.

Sophia returned to the dining room. With laser-like focus, I watched her move from table to table. The woman absolutely commanded the room. Due to her efficiency, or was it because of her beauty? A combination of both, I mused.

As she returned to the kitchen, I wrestled into my tactical pants and work boots, my attention never leaving the men who were watching the kitchen door like salivating dogs, eager for her return.

I slipped on a long-sleeve thermal shirt under a thickly lined flannel, then pulled a beanie over my hair. Comfortable now—and feeling much more like myself—I sat back and settled in to watch my target.



Aleks

*H*e could tell by my expression that I didn't want to have sex. I could tell by his that this was unacceptable. After all, he'd gone to so much trouble with the wedding and all. And by he, of course, I meant the party planners. Like me, my new husband had nothing to do with our wedding planning.

We were in one of those little huts on stilts in Bora Bora, the most cliché rich-person honeymoon on the planet, sequestered from the “common folk.” We had not one but two butlers, ready to attend to our every request. Everywhere I looked was another exotic flower arrangement, another box of chocolates, another priceless bottle of champagne. Every room smelled suffocatingly sweet, like my grandmother's overbearing perfume.

I fully faced him, turning my back to the sweeping window that overlooked the ocean. I'd been watching the moon rise, too wired to sit, as my husband took calls.

There, I'd stared at the endless black ocean, daydreaming about dropping into the water and allowing the waves to wash me out to the horizon where, with one big gulp, they would swallow me up. In this fantasy, I looked at the moon while sinking into the abyss, and I died with a smile on my face.

Instead, I saw my husband, Viktor, the dealer of an entirely different kind of death.

After the nuptials, we'd taken a private jet to the islands, though Viktor and his colleague, a brusque man named Igor (who accompanied him everywhere), worked the entire time. I sat in the back seat of the jet, in the shadows, where a woman should be. Still and silent, as a woman should be.

Now, however, I was desperately trying to find my voice.

Viktor set his tequila on the coffee table. Below his feet, a dozen fish swam lazily under the glass floor, illuminated by an underwater light. Oh, how I wanted to be one of them.

My heart started to pound. I felt dizzy, light-headed. The weeks leading up to the wedding had left me wildly sleep-deprived. In fact, by our honeymoon, I was running on less than five hours of sleep in over forty-eight hours. I was at my wits' end.

With his dark, beady eyes on me, Viktor began shedding his designer suit. Not in a seductive way, but a threatening one. He was tall and lanky. His head was shaved, along with his stringy arms and legs. His entire skinny body was hairless, courtesy of his whores who waxed him monthly. Victor's intimidation was in his wallet, not his physical stature. He reminded me of a snake, one of those albino pythons.

He tossed his pants on the sofa.

A rush of heat traveled up my chest, my neck, all the way to the tips of my ears. I could practically feel the hives forming on my skin. Anxiety, fear, anger, I was rank with it all.

As he lowered his boxer shorts, his erection sprang out, skinny, purple, veiny. I almost vomited right then and there. I had to look away.

I don't know how I knew, but this made Victor smile. My disdain for him aroused him. I recognized very quickly that I needed to learn how to control my reaction to my new husband.

"Look at me," he demanded, standing in front of me now. When I didn't, he grabbed my chin, digging his nails into my skin. Victor had long, sharp nails, a trademark of his, like his bald head. His pinky nail was painted blood red.

I lifted my gaze and cursed the tears that gathered in them.

“Take off your clothes.”

“No,” I said, my response pitifully weak.

The slap felt like a bomb detonating on my cheek. Pain reverberated through my jaw, my eye socket. The room spun, and it took a moment to get my vision back.

That was the first time Viktor hit me, though physical abuse was expected. What came after, I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

“Now that we're clear, I said take your clothes off.” His voice was quivering with arousal and bloodlust.

Victor was well known for picking on those weaker or smaller or of lower social status. A bully who got off on a power trip.

I loathed the man.

Fighting tears, I pulled off the sundress I was wearing, took off my bra, and slipped out of my panties. I stood before him, trembling and buck naked, forcing myself to appear strong and unaffected.

His jaw clenched as he shoved four fingers into my vagina, grabbing me like a bear trap. I winced in pain as his nails sliced both the outside and inside of me.

“You are my wife, Aleks. I will fuck you when, how, and anywhere I want to. Until you give me a child, in which case, you will be fed to someone else.”

A rush of air escaped my lungs as he withdrew his fingers, his nails coming away with my blood.

I knew that procreating with Viktor was the main reason, if not the entire reason, we'd been married. But I'd already made a promise to myself.

I would kill my baby rather than give it to that monster.

I'd already gotten the pills. He would not take that from me. My child, if such a gift was ever bestowed upon me, would not belong to him, would not be born into this world

under such chauvinistic and brutal circumstances. My child's life would not be messed up like my own. It was the one thing I could control.

I was thrown onto the bed, my legs shoved apart as he positioned himself on top of me. His skin was cold and clammy like a snake.

“Hit me,” he seethed, his putrid breath wafting over my face.

I blinked, shocked—horrified.

“Hit me, bitch. Fight me. Fight me like you're worth something.”

He spat in my eye, and I slapped him across the face as hard as I could.

This scared me more than anything else. It wasn't me. I wasn't this person.

Screaming and crying, I fought like a trapped animal until I was exhausted, until my face swelled and my skin burned, until I saw this barbaric fetish was exactly what he wanted. He was dripping with precum when I finally surrendered, weeping like a child.

My arms were pinned above my head as he drove into me, dry and hard, my blood the only lubricant, the pain excruciating. He bit my neck, my breasts, the lobes of my ear so hard, I thought he'd actually bitten them off.

He finished quickly and I thought he was done.

I was wrong.



Justin

Sophia's shift ended at seven o'clock. By then, it had been dark for over two hours.

Leo had failed to remind me of Alaska's short days and long nights. That, combined with the endless cloud cover, made for a pitch-black evening, the kind so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

I started the engine as Sophia waved good-bye to the staff. After cranking up the heat, I waited until a flood of headlights pooled from behind the diner.

Pulling down my beanie, I slid a little lower in the seat and began reversing out of the parking spot as the headlights curved around the building. A beat-up red Ford F150 emerged from the side of the diner. At least two inches of snow covered the top of the cab, as well as the hood.

My brow cocked. As if I needed another reason to be attracted to this woman.

I waited until Sophia's taillights were barely visible through the snow before pulling out behind her. After glancing in my rearview mirror to ensure we were alone on the road, I clicked off my headlights and then accelerated to close the distance between us. Not only because I didn't want to lose her, but also because her taillights were my only source of illumination.

Luckily, Sophia drove like a ninety-year-old blind woman, so following her was easy.

Eventually, she clicked on her turn signal—despite the fact that we hadn't passed a single person since leaving the diner—and turned onto a dirt road barely wide enough for two vehicles.

I slowly braked, hanging back for a minute before turning onto the road.

Five minutes passed, then ten. The farther we drove, the narrower the road became. There was nothing around. No houses, no other roads, no other vehicles. I kept my gaze glued to the red truck, its headlights reflecting off the wintry landscape, creating a circle of light that faded into pitch black.

Soon, the dirt road seemed to close in on itself, creating a tunnel-like effect. The trees sagged overhead, their branches threatening to snap at any moment and tumble down on her vehicle. She'd slowed drastically, going no more than about fifteen miles an hour. I could run faster than this.

Finally, she took another left (that turn signal again) onto what appeared to be a driveway.

Relief washed over me. I didn't know what I would have done if she'd gotten stuck or needed help. It wasn't time for us to meet.

Not yet.

Tonight was all about reconnaissance. The goal was to observe my target and gather information, so that I knew the best way to interrogate her.

I came to a full stop in the middle of the road and watched her headlights bounce off the trees as her truck climbed the drive. A minute later, the lights cut off.

After edging my SUV as far into the ditch as possible, I cut the engine and pocketed my keys. The bitter air whipped around me as I stepped out, burning my exposed skin. I put on my provided parka, then gently latched the vehicle door closed.

The snow falling against the trees created a loud white noise, hampering my ability to hear much else.

I flipped up my hood, dipped my face against the wind, and slipped into the darkness of the trees. My boots sank into the powdery snow, and my breath came out in heavy puffs. It had been a while since I'd done an op in the snow.

In the distance, a light turned on, then another, and another.

A few more yards, and I was able to make out the shape of her home, a small A-frame log cabin with a red metal roof and a chimney on the side. The tree line was a mere fifteen feet from her house. Sophia had almost no backyard, which posed several security threats that I'd probably never tell her about. A porch stretched across the length of the front, but there were no chairs, no welcome mat, no outdoor decor of any kind. No garage.

No security lights.

The first thing I did was confirm that there were no other vehicles, then I slipped behind a withering oak tree and watched as my target moved through the interior of the home, turning on lamps as she passed. She was alone, no man, no woman, no dog or cat. Just her, in the middle of freaking nowhere.

The home was one large room, as best I could tell. A loft bedroom sat under the A-frame roof, and below it, a living room. A log ladder led up to the bedroom. The kitchen was separated from the living room by a three-stool bar, and next to that was a door to what I assumed was the only bathroom.

Sophia gathered three logs from a large metal crate and strategically stacked them into the fireplace. Then, using kindling and a starter pack, she ignited the fire.

Efficient woman.

As the fire began to pick up in intensity, Sophia sat back on her haunches and stared blindly at the growing flames. Once satisfied with her work, she stood up and pulled the band from her ponytail. Long, honey-blond hair cascaded around her shoulders. After running her fingers through the strands,

she tossed the tie on the couch and began stripping out of her clothing. First the shoes, then the apron, then the black dress.

My lips parted as she removed her bra. But when she removed her panties, my heart short-circuited. A flush, hot and fast, rushed through my body.

For a moment, I considered reaching down and rubbing one out, despite the subzero temperatures and the fact that I was on a job—*and* the fact that I hadn't jacked off since I couldn't remember. Although, considering my latest sexual encounters, I might as well have been.

For the last few years, having sex has involved me closing my eyes and imagining another woman just so that I could climax. A fictitious woman, the only kind who would ever be willing to put up with the kind of work I did, who knew about the bodies I'd buried, had witnessed my nightmares. I couldn't imagine telling another human being about the darkness that lurked deep inside me, only releasing in random explosions of blind rage.

Instead of draining myself, I watched Sophia gather her clothes and walk across the room, trying desperately to make out every detail of her blurry body. Of all the times to forget my damn binoculars. From what I could see, Sophia's body was staggeringly sexy—soft, feminine curves, the kind made for grabbing onto while straddling my thighs, and then curling into after screwing each other into oblivion.

Damn—*this woman*.

She moved out of sight, and like a magnet, I moved with her, slipping from tree to tree. I caught sight of her again just as she stepped into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, Sophia reemerged wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around her body. Guess I'd have to add *timely showers* to my turn-on list. Her long wet hair ran down her back, curling at the tips. She disappeared into a small room off the kitchen (the laundry room, I assumed), and returned wearing a pair of baggy flannel pajama pants and an even baggier sweatshirt. I wasn't sure which was sexier, to be honest.

She opened the fridge, grabbed a beer, popped the top, and took a long sip. My mouth watered. Then she sank onto the couch with the weight of someone who'd worked a ten-hour shift. After another long pull from her beer, Sophia picked up a book from the coffee table and settled in, in front of the fire. That's when I realized there was no television in her home.

Sophia read for exactly thirty-seven minutes before her head lolled to the side and the book slipped from her fingertips and tumbled onto the floor.

I waited a few minutes to be certain she was asleep before slipping out from behind the tree and circling the house, surveying the property. There was an old shed in the back, nothing special. Aside from that, the perimeter of the home was all trees and shrubs—now under inches of snow.

I made my way to the window.

The interior of the house was minimally decorated with only a single couch, an end table with a lamp, the coffee table, and a rocking chair. The most expensive item looked to be the massive Navajo rug that stretched over the hardwood floor. Where there should have been family pictures or paintings were bookshelves filled with books. Hundreds and hundreds of books in the shelves, on the floor, on the countertops.

My brows lifted as I took in the total disarray of it all. Sophia might be gorgeous, but she lived in a pigsty. Shit was everywhere. Clothes and shoes and towels were strewn about, discarded glassware and plates sitting on surfaces, newspapers and notebooks were stacked haphazardly.

Okay, so *not* perfect.

For a moment, I watched her sleep, the image tattooing itself onto my brain. Strands of golden hair framed a soft face, gently parted lips, and long, curved eyelashes. Occasionally, her lids would flutter and her finger would tap.

Something deep inside me stirred.

Sophia Banks lived a life of solitude, inside her little bubble completely cut off from the rest of the world. And from

experience, I knew that there was only one type of woman who lived alone in the middle of nowhere.

A woman with something to hide.



Justin

When you make it past a certain point in the military, things you once considered necessary for comfort become irrelevant.

For example, going for days on little to no sleep, eating bugs the size of your fist, and remaining motionless for hours while hidden in a bush swarming with insects become just a part of the job. If you couldn't handle it, another—*stronger*—man could.

A part of the job that I never grew accustomed to, though? Sleeping in a car.

Screw. That.

Sleeping under the stars, I could do. But finding a comfortable position in the confinement of a vehicle—especially in subzero temperatures—was nothing short of impossible. If not for my thermal blanket, I would have frozen to death.

So, when I pulled into the Creek House Diner the next morning, timing it so that I arrived an hour after Sophia, I wasn't in the best mood. The only positive was that the snow had stopped, but according to the forecast, much more was on the way.

A bell jangled as I stepped inside. The restaurant was warm and smelled of fresh coffee and bacon. My stomach growled.

I saw her instantly.

Bent at the waist, Sophia was serving coffee to a couple of hunters who were wearing head-to-toe camo. Both men, one the size of a refrigerator with a gut that could barely fit under the table of the booth, and the other, young and skinny with buck teeth who reminded me of the rabbit my brother and I caught when we were little. We named him Buck, obviously.

Sophia straightened and glanced over her shoulder. Our eyes met, and I was faintly aware of someone appearing in my peripheral vision.

“Good morning.” The same silver-haired woman who’d been working the day before greeted me. “Just one?” she asked, sliding her large, owlsh glasses further up her nose.

I tore my focus away from Sophia. “Yes, just one. Back corner booth, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all,” she said, giving me the once-over.

I followed the waitress through the diner, catching Sophia’s eye once again. I tossed my coat into the seat and slid into the booth.

“My name’s Velma.” The waitress slid a laminated menu onto the table. “Can I get you started with some coffee?”

“Please.”

“You got it. Sophia will bring it right out.”

I watched as Velma and Sophia met at the coffeepots. Grinning from ear to ear, Velma whispered something to Sophia, jerking her chin toward my table. Sophia didn’t react. In fact, her expression was hard, and she seemed annoyed. It didn’t take me long to figure out why.

The two hunters she’d been serving when I arrived were completely inebriated, despite the early hour. Probably fresh off a night hunt. Their voices carried across the room, loud, slurring, and they stank of stale liquor. They were laughing, chiding each other about something. As they spoke, their bloodshot eyes kept flickering toward Sophia, and that’s when I realized they were talking about her.

Sophia ignored their sneers as she passed their table, carrying coffee and condiments.

“Good morning.” She forced a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Good morning,” I said, and as she began to pour my coffee, I took the carafe from her. “I’ve got it.”

She blinked. “Thank you.”

A burst of drunken laughter rang out from across the room. Sophia’s jaw twitched.

“What can I get you for breakfast?” she asked tightly.

“Yo, sweetheart,” Gorilla Gut hollered over his shoulder, oblivious to the fact she was assisting another customer—*me*.

Sophia’s cheeks flushed, with embarrassment or fear, I wasn’t sure. Either way, it wasn’t okay. No woman should have to put up with that bullshit at their place of work or anywhere else.

I felt a tingle in the base of my spine, a protectiveness I hadn’t felt in a very long time. Maybe ever.

Ignoring the men, Sophia held my gaze, a moment passing between us—one of her showing defiance to them, and one of me completely forgetting why I was there in the first place.

“Do you know those guys?” I asked.

“No. They walked over from the bar about ten minutes ago.”

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning.”

“The bar stays open all night. The owner, Chuck, lives in the basement. As long as he has patrons to give him their money, he stays open. We get a lot of his customers looking for food to sober up.”

“Hey, sweetheart! I’m talkin’ to you.”

My hand curled into a fist in my lap.

Sophia didn’t grace them with her full attention, but instead spoke over her shoulder. “I’ll be right with you.”

“Get me more coffee!”

“I said I’ll be right with you, sir.”

By now Velma was watching, as well as the few other elderly diners. The jukebox had even gone silent. The room was so quiet, you could hear the bacon sizzling in the kitchen.

My pulse began to pick up.

“Sir,” Sophia snapped at me. “What can I get you?” She was impatient, eager to refill the hunters’ coffee so that they’d leave.

“Nothing. Coffee is fine.”

Just then, the cook emerged from the kitchen, a tall, beefy guy with long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. His name tag read RON.

“I said *get me some more coffee.*” Apparently, Gorilla Gut didn’t like being ignored.

A trigger for him, I mused, as he was probably the fat, ugly kid who was bullied at school, only to grow up and become a bully himself. I glanced at Ron, the cook, who was watching the situation closely.

Pissed now, Sophia whirled around and stalked over to the drunks’ table. Without a word, she lifted the carafe of coffee from their table—that they could have easily done themselves—and refilled their mugs.

“Now, add the sugar, honey,” Gorilla Gut said with a smirk.

As Sophia reached across the table to get the condiments, Gorilla stuck his hand up the back of her dress and sank his sausage fingers into her ass, squeezing and erupting into laughter.

There was no thinking, no hesitation.

I surged out of my seat, grabbed the bastard by the back of his collar, and pulled him out of the booth like a rag doll. Coffee went everywhere. Bucky stumbled up, yelling something, but was silenced by my fist connecting with the

middle of his forehead. He locked up like a plank, his eyes glazing over.

Chaos broke out.

The cook jumped into the fight, tackling Buck as he fell to the floor, although he was already knocked out cold.

I heard the swoosh of the blade before I saw it.

His chest heaving, Gorilla Gut glowered at me, his arms open, ready for a fight. The hunting knife he'd pulled from his belt was clasped in his hand. His face was mottled with hives, drunken rage spilling from his eyes.

He lunged forward.

I grabbed his weapon arm and yanked him to me while digging my thumb into his carpal bones and twisting. He bellowed in pain, dropping the knife while buckling at the knees. As he dropped his weight, I bent his arm behind his body, using the man's own body weight to dislocate his shoulder.

Someone screamed.

Gorilla Gut sobbed like a child as I dragged him outside and threw him into the snow, his face bouncing off a concrete parking block.

Ron followed suit, dragging a dazed Bucky out the front door. Together, we threw the kid next to his buddy.

I loomed over them, my fists clenched.

"Please let us go," Gorilla Gut begged. He'd rolled over like a beached whale, pathetically covering his face with his hands.

I knelt between them, grabbed their hair, and turned their bloodied faces to me.

"If either of you ever come back to this diner again, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Vehement nods from both.

“Good.” I released their heads and stood. “Now, get the hell out of here.”

“What’s your name?” the cook asked, extending his hand as the drunks scrambled across the street to their trucks.

“Justin,” I said as I shook his hand.

“Justin, nice to meet you. Ron Fitch, owner. You’re welcome here anytime. Free meals on me for life. Just tell them—”

Our attention was pulled to a flash of red peeling across the parking lot, a small silhouette in the driver’s seat. Sophia slammed the gas, fishtailing onto the road.

“Excuse me, Ron.”



Aleks

The abuse continued. Some weeks, daily. The cruelty was dependent on my husband's mood, which was dictated by his work.

I'd grown to expect it, which somehow made it easier. Which, I suppose, is the issue, isn't it?

There is a pivotal moment in trauma that defines our experience in it. At some point during my captivity—because that's what it was; I was forced to marry Viktor in fear of disrespecting my father—I switched from an escape mentality to one of survival.

Instead of spending every hour spinning in the helplessness of my victimhood, I eventually submitted to the comfort of letting go. Of no longer fighting my situation or constantly plotting how to get out of it. Of accepting and adapting. Of doing whatever I needed to do to ease the anxiety that coursed through my veins at warp speed.

People talk a lot about survivor mindset, but they fail to discuss the thin line you could cross at which surrender becomes giving up. For me, in this space of survival, I became complacent. And in this, I lost myself.

Instead of having a panic attack every evening while anticipating my husband's return home from work, I spent the day preparing for his arrival so that my heart wouldn't feel like it was going to burst out of my chest the moment he walked

through the front door. I'd created a checklist to prepare for his arrival.

Viktor's home was to be immaculate at all times, so I spent my days cleaning it from top to bottom, every nook and cranny. If Viktor was pleased with the state of his home when he walked in the door, my evenings were much smoother.

His dinner was to be made from scratch, fresh, warm, and sitting on the kitchen table by six o'clock sharp. This was the most difficult as his hours varied. So, beginning around four in the afternoon, I would begin cooking. If my husband didn't arrive home by six, I trashed the dinner and cooked it again.

As Viktor's wife, I was expected to be ready for him at all times, whenever he felt the urge to take me. So, the moment I heard his vehicle come up the drive, I hurried to the bathroom, where I would lubricate myself to help with the physical discomfort that was sure to follow.

I spent my entire married life anticipating my husband's moods and preparing accordingly. I was a maid, a chef, a whore. In public, I played the part of a happy, loving wife—even to his many mistresses. At family dinners, it was the same song and dance.

Not long after I surrendered to my situation, I began to orgasm when he raped me. This was perhaps the biggest mind fuck of all, because then I questioned if I had ever been raped in the first place.

Before long, I couldn't remember who I was before I married Viktor.

Around our one-year anniversary, Viktor began to express dissatisfaction with the fact that I hadn't become pregnant. He fixated on my "issue," outwardly annoyed and dissatisfied with my ability to fulfill my role as his wife. He demanded sex twice daily, morning and night.

After weeks of this, I couldn't take any more. I couldn't handle the pain. I threw out my secret stash of birth control pills, and three months later found out I was pregnant.

I was excited. How messed up is that?

I was excited to tell my husband that I had succeeded and finally gotten pregnant. That I had fulfilled my duty as a woman and a wife. I was proud, both as a wife and my father's daughter. I had finally done something right.

Unable to contain myself, I'd texted Viktor to come home.

Three hours later, he walked into the bathroom, where I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor, singing to the radio.

"Aleks."

I jumped, nearly falling onto my side, and plucked out my earbuds. "You scared me."

The annoyed expression on Viktor's face snapped me into shape. I quickly stood, dusted off my hands, and straightened the hem of my shirt. He was not pleased that I'd texted him while he was at work.

"What's going on?"

I suddenly felt embarrassed. I'd spent the entire morning with my head in the clouds, dreaming of bassinets and pacifiers. How silly of me.

Feeling my cheeks heat, I shifted my weight. "I—I have news."

"Well, share it." He glanced at his watch.

I walked over to the counter, opened the drawer, and pulled out the little white stick. "I'm pregnant."

Viktor blinked, staring at the two pink lines. Then he looked at me. "Good." He nodded. "This is good."

Joy bloomed in my chest. My smile widened. "Thank you."

"Have you made a doctor's appointment?"

"Not yet. I wanted to tell you first."

"Good. Is there anything else?"

"I, uh, no."

“Okay. I’m going back to work.” He turned on his heel, then paused and turned back. “Aleks?”

“Yes?”

“It had better be a boy.”

The anxiety I felt from that moment onward was nothing compared to the fear of what I knew Viktor would do if the baby turned out to be a girl. What I experienced in those six weeks was the most intense, debilitating anxiety I’d ever known in my life.

I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t even think straight. When I’d speak, my words and sentences were jumbled. My insides felt like they wanted to jump out of my body. Although I’d pray a hundred times a day that my baby was a boy, I somehow knew it was a girl. I don’t know how, but I did.

Every night, in my nightmares, I saw him killing our baby girl in a hundred different ways, and I was helpless to stop him.

I went crazy during that time.

I’d pack a bag and plot my escape, but then would be too scared to leave, so I’d tell myself to wait until the right time. Then I would stress so badly that Viktor would find my go-bag while I was working up the nerve to leave, that I would unpack it and put everything back. Over and over, I did this.

Then one morning, I wiped away blood. I’d miscarried.

I cried because I was a failure, because my body was unfit to carry a child.

I cried because I was relieved that my little girl wouldn’t have to go through what I did.

I cried for myself. For the child I’d never meet.

And finally, I cried in fear of my husband’s retaliation.

When Viktor came home that night, I was so exhausted from crying that there was no room for anxiety. In a nutshell, I was nothing. A shell of a human and nothing more.

I was in bed, curled into a ball under the covers, when he walked into the room.

“What’s going on? Are you sick?”

No, I’m dead.

He rushed to the side of the bed. “Aleks. Talk to me.”

“I miscarried,” I whispered from under the covers.

There was a long, heavy silence.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“Then get up,” he said.

I closed my eyes, willing the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

“Get. Up.”

I rolled onto my back, blinking up at his scowling face.

“If you’re not making a baby,” he said, “then surely you have the energy to finish the rest of your chores.”

“What?” I was shocked by his lack of sympathy, though I don’t know why. This kind of icy callousness was on par with each of my husband’s moves.

I rolled back the covers and swung my legs over the side.

He clapped his hands, startling me. “Come on. Let’s go, let’s go,” he snapped, addressing me like a disobedient dog.

My heart jumping into my throat, I surged off the mattress, slid into my slippers, and grabbed the robe I’d flung over the end of the bed.

He spoke to me over his shoulder as I followed him into the hall. “The floor needs to be mopped and the china needs to be cleaned.”

My eyes rounded. “The china?”

“Yes.”

Viktor's most coveted possession was his china collection, passed down from his great-grandmother. Two twenty-piece sets of rare red porcelain china that were valued at \$2.2 million.

I'd never touched them. I wouldn't dare.

That night, my husband stood over me like a sentinel as I cleaned every piece of his precious china, a detailed process that took five painstaking hours.

That night, instead of hating him, I began to hate myself.



Justin

I sprinted to the SUV, fired up the engine, and hit the gas, sliding on a patch of ice before pulling onto the road. Sophia had a three-minute start on me, but if she drove anything like she did the night before, I figured I'd have no problem catching up to her.

I was wrong.

I caught a flash of red as she turned onto the narrow road that led to her house.

The SUV slid as I braked, stopping no more than a foot from the ditch. After righting the vehicle, I slammed my foot on the accelerator but realized Sophia was already out of sight—again.

This was definitely not the slow, cautious driver from the night before. This was Mario Andretti. Sophia was driving so carelessly that I was certain she was going to end up in a ditch, or worse, down a ravine.

This wasn't how I'd expected our first meeting to go. And mostly, it was my fault.

I couldn't control my rage when I saw the drunken asshole put his hands on her. It felt like someone poured gasoline on my body and lit a match. But still, it didn't make sense that she'd bolt like she did. The hunters were no longer a threat to her—so, what the hell spooked her? What was she running from?

Me. It was the only viable explanation. But why?

Ramping over a drift of snow, I pulled into her driveway.

Sophia wasn't there.

Frowning, I shoved the SUV into park and got out. There were no fresh tire tracks or boot prints in the snow, no lights on inside the house.

"Shit."

I'd been so preoccupied contemplating why she ran from me that I didn't notice the absence of tire tracks in the snow.

Spitting out expletives, I reversed out of the driveway and picked up the tracks that passed her house and led deeper into the forest.

Where the hell was she going?

Minutes turned into miles. Turn after turn convinced me that Sophia was intentionally trying to lose me.

Why?

Finally, I came to a fork in the road. Fresh tire tracks went in both directions. I came to a full stop.

"Well, good job, Miss Banks," I muttered, shaking my head. I'd officially lost her—or she lost me was probably more appropriate.

My cell phone had zero bars, so I reached into the glove box and retrieved the SAT phone.

Leo answered on the first ring.

"She ran."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Does she know who you are?"

"Impossible. We didn't even get that far. Something about me spooked her and she ran."

"She thinks you're a Fed."

“You’re probably right.”

“Which pretty much confirms that she’s working with Black Cell and has something to hide. Did you tail her?”

I shifted in my seat, moderately embarrassed. “I lost her. Best I could tell, she went northwest of her home. But there are so many damn random roads out here, who knows where she came out. I need you to watch the airports in the area. If she checks in, let me know.”

“On it. Let’s hope she doesn’t alert the cell that someone’s poking around Falcon Creek.”

“I don’t give a damn who she alerts. My job is to get Kusma’s location from her. That’s it.”

“What if *he* runs?”

“Then she’d better know where to look.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone.

“Remember, you have seven days, Justin. *Seven* days.”



Justin

I searched for Sophia's truck for hours, getting lost no fewer than three times while driving through the snowy Alaskan backwoods.

The roads were like mazes, intersecting randomly with no signs. Half of them came to dead ends, and the other half were almost impassable. Not only due to snow but also because of deep potholes and debris—literally downed trees in some cases.

I found myself bouncing between anger that she ran and worry that she'd slid off the road somewhere. At every steep ravine, every lake or pond, I'd park the SUV, get out, and survey the area, looking for the red truck and that honey-blond hair.

The only positive thing was that I gained a clearer understanding of the layout of the area.

Eventually, I returned to the diner to see if Sophia had come in for her shift. Ron, the heavy-handed cook, informed me that he hadn't seen her, and that it was extremely abnormal for Sophia to skip out on her shift like she did, especially without explanation. She was nothing if not reliable, he said.

I got the sense that Ron was very worried about her, and I caught myself wondering if there was more to their working relationship.

I waited until nightfall to revisit Sophia's house. She wasn't there, so I decided to circle back to an overgrown access road that I'd discovered during my search earlier. It was about fifty yards from her front door and offered broken views of her home.

I hid the SUV behind a copse of trees and then used a pine branch to sweep away my tire tracks, ensuring concealment. Finally, I slid behind the wheel and settled in to wait.

And wait.

And *wait*.

At one in the morning, a pair of headlights flickered in the distance. I sat up, watching the truck begin to slow as it closed in on Sophia's driveway.

"There you are."

I'd mulled over how to play this. Now that I knew Sophia was a flight risk, my interrogation techniques were limited.

In any other scenario, I would have already sneaked into the house where, the moment my target stepped over the threshold, I would have immediately immobilized them, then interrogated him or her until I got the information I came for. Quick. Easy. Done.

In the best-case scenario, I'd use the Reid Technique. This is the most commonly used (and accepted) interrogation technique. It involves a three-pronged approach including factual analysis, interviews, and interrogation. But I didn't have the time—or intel—to take this route.

My next option was enhanced interrogation techniques, a personal favorite of mine. This is what you see in the movies. On its most basic level, it's torturing detainees for information. This includes waterboarding, walling, sleep deprivation, prolonged confinement, etc.

The US Department of Defense maintains a list of "approved" techniques. Astor Stone Inc. does not. There are no boundaries to what his mercenaries are allowed to do to gain information, mainly because what we do is under a black cloak of secrecy.

I was not surprised when I learned of this leniency, considering a part of our training was to undergo waterboarding. In fact, during our training, we were schooled in the enhanced interrogation techniques that were *not* approved by the government. The ones considered too brutal and inhumane.

These include ice-water baths, repeated waterboarding, hallucinogens, rough physical takedowns (vicious beatings), hanging stress positions, sexual-abuse threats, death threats, and rectal feeding (a crude way to deliver nutrients to a human for the sole purpose of keeping them alive so that they can continue to endure torture).

While I have been witness to, or personally used, most of the above, I've always taken a particular interest in psychological manipulation, the least messy of the bunch. My specialty was uncovering the detainee's weakness and exploiting it until he or she cracked. Kusma and I weren't so different in this way.

So, I had a few options for how to approach Sophia. But after the dramatic event at the diner, I decided to try a more gentle, unfamiliar approach—at first, anyway.

I slipped out of the SUV, zipped up my coat, and lifted my hood. Big fat snowflakes swirled around me. The frigid wind howled through the trees, stinging every inch of exposed skin. It was dangerously cold.

I made my way through the woods, keeping my eyes on the pair of headlights ascending Sophia's driveway.

I arrived at her yard the moment she cut the engine.

A few seconds slid by, then a full minute. I wondered what the hell she was doing in there, or what she was waiting for. Impatient, I stepped out from behind the trees and walked right up to the truck—where I was greeted by the barrel of a .357 Magnum.

My brow cocked. I took a step back, raising my palms in surrender. Sophia had either seen me or anticipated that I would be waiting for her when she returned.

Smart girl.

Behind the foggy window was a blurred head of frizzy blond hair, and a pink-tipped finger curled around a trigger.

“Welcome home,” I said in a voice loud enough for her to hear me through the closed window.

“Get the hell out of here or I’ll shoot you,” she yelled back, foolishly emboldened by the thin pane of glass between us.

The corner of my lip twitched because I kind of believed her.

“I have a few questions I want to ask you, that’s all. And I’m not leaving until I do.”

“I’m going to call the cops.”

“Be my guest,” I said, although I hoped she wouldn’t.

Working for Astor was a slippery slope of deception. We weren’t allowed to tell anyone, including law enforcement, what we did for a living. Therefore, if I were arrested, I would likely spend multiple days in jail while Leo and Astor did whatever they did to orchestrate my release. It had happened a few times before, and I really didn’t want to go through that again.

Sophia lowered her gun, just enough for our eyes to meet. Her cheeks were flushed, her nose red, her chest rising and falling with adrenaline.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Justin Montgomery.”

“What do you do?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Why are you here?”

“Why did you run?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

My jaw twitched. “I’m not going to repeat this again, so listen carefully. I have a few questions for you, and I’ll leave

the moment I get the information I need. You'll never see me again."

When she didn't respond, I continued.

"Miss Banks, if I meant to hurt you, why would I have dismantled those two assholes at the diner? Why would I have cared if they grabbed your ass?"

Her aim wavered, which meant her shoulders were relaxing, which meant *she* was relaxing.

And just like that, I uncovered Sophia's weakness. Vulnerability. She would easily be manipulated by a (false) sense of safety. Based on past targets with the same weakness, I knew that if Sophia didn't feel like she had control of the situation, she would become a loose cannon.

And I did *not* like loose cannons.

"Let me see your identification," she demanded.

"Get out of the truck and I'll show you."

"Do you think I was born yesterday?"

"Based on the caliber of that gun you're holding, no, I don't." I reached for the handle and opened the truck door. "But based on the fact that you forgot to lock your doors before shoving a gun in my face, I'd say you still have a lot to learn."

She didn't move. The only thing that gave her away was the sudden tremble in her hand.

She was in quite a pickle now. I could easily overpower her, shove her into the passenger seat, and take off in the truck. Or I could throw her out and steal her truck, leaving her a sitting duck, unable to run.

Or I could kill her.

"Get out," I said. "Now."

Keeping her aim and eyes on me, Sophia released one hand from the gun, grabbed her purse from the passenger seat, and carefully got out of the truck, pressing the barrel into my chest as she did.

With the gun at my heart, we stood toe to toe, my six-foot-three-inch height towering over her tiny five-foot-three-inch frame. She all but gasped when she saw my scar for the first time. At the diner, I'd intentionally sat with that cheek to the wall.

"Identification," she said, her voice quivering as she struggled to hold eye contact.

I sighed. "Fine."

As I reached into my coat pocket, I was blindsided by a knee to my groin.



Justin

I doubled over in pain as a wave of nausea swept over me. It had been a hot minute since a woman had kicked me in the balls. I'd forgotten how blinding and debilitating the pain was.

While I was busy trying not to vomit, Sophia spun on her heel and began sprinting to her front door.

Now I was pissed.

Growling, I forced myself upright and ran after her, shoving the toe of my boot into the door as she attempted to slam it shut.

“Sophia, stop!” I barked, sending the door popping on its hinges.

A baseball bat whizzed past my face, with such fervor that a puff of wind moved my hair. One inch to the left and she would have shattered my skull.

Jesus Christ.

Staying low, I lunged forward, tackling little miss Rhonda Rousey at the waist.

Sophia stumbled backward, falling to the floor. The bat tumbled from her hands.

I flipped her onto her stomach while simultaneously pulling her wrists over her head. Then I straddled her ass. I'm mildly embarrassed to admit that I was out of breath by that

point. Physical altercations are always more exhausting when you don't expect them.

She whimpered in pain.

I leaned down, pressing my entire body weight against her back. "I didn't want to have to do this, Miss Banks."

"What? Rape me?" she hissed back.

I was shocked by her response. So shocked that I immediately released my hold on her wrists and stepped off of her.

I'd been called many things in my life. Asshole, murderer, the devil himself. But never a rapist. The fact that her immediate thought was that I would rape her for information confirmed just how dark her life in Black Cell had been.

Chest heaving, she rolled onto her back and began massaging her wrists. I cringed at the red marks I'd put on them. She glowered up at me with pure, vile hatred in her eyes. Sophia knew she was defeated, yet she remained defiant.

Looking back, I realize it was that—that single moment—when I fell in love with Sophia Banks.

I watched as her emotions swung from one end of the spectrum to the other in a matter of seconds. Without warning, her stubborn expression softened and her chin began to quiver. She covered her face with her hands and began sobbing. I knew from experience she was suffering an adrenaline crash.

Because of me. Because I'd scared her.

Dammit.

I also knew from experience that I was the worst at dealing with strong displays of emotions. I'd been told this, in no uncertain terms, by many of my former lovers.

Women made me uncomfortable to begin with, but a crying woman was borderline insufferable. I was like a child in their presence, knowing what I should do (comfort the crying female), but having no idea how to do it. Something about a woman's tears turned me into Usain Bolt. I'd run every time, unable to deal with a fluid concept like emotions.

My gut twisted as I stared down at her.

Sophia Banks wasn't the first woman I'd scared, but she was the first to make me desperate to dry the tears.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said quietly.

"You just did."

"I'm—I'm . . ."

Sorry? What the *hell*, Justin? Are you going to *apologize* to a target? No.

Instead of delivering my balls to her on a silver platter, I knelt down and extended my hand. "I'm going to touch you to help you up, okay?"

She swatted away my advance while calling me names I hadn't heard since high school. I had to refrain from helping as she shakily pushed herself off the floor.

Instead of running, Sophia squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and confronted me head-on with mascara tears running down her cheeks. Her nose was red, her cheeks flushed. I had a strong urge to lift her off her feet and wrap her in my arms.

"How did you find me?" she demanded.

"I followed you home last night," I said, a partial lie. "And stop looking at my scar."

She blinked, looked away, then refocused on my eyes. "You followed me home?"

"Yes."

Her jaw dropped. She was embarrassed she hadn't noticed someone tailing her. I wanted to ask so many questions in that moment, but reminded myself there was only one that mattered.

"Do you work for him?" she asked.

I frowned. "Who?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Are you a Fed?"

"No."

“You’re a liar.”

“Every day of my life.”

“Let me see your identification.”

“The last time you made that request, my balls ended up in my throat.”

“I won’t knee you again.”

Eyeing her like a venomous snake, I took a step back, then produced my driver’s license, even though I knew she was smart enough to know that my ID could have been easily forged—just like the other two in my duffel, the ones in my safe room at my house, and in my safe deposit box, and in Astor’s office . . .

Unimpressed, Sophia sniffed and folded her arms over her chest. “Ask me your question and get out.”

“Where is Kusma Petrova?”

Her jaw clenched. “Do you work for him?”

“You’d know if I did, wouldn’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I released a long sigh and glanced at my watch. “Miss Banks, I couldn’t care less that you are an informant for Black Cell. All I need from you is—”

“*What?*” She gaped at me, then shook her head as if it were all too much to process. “I have to get out of here.”

She breezed past me, but I caught her arm.

“Not until you tell me where Kusma is.”

“I don’t know—let me go. I *have* to go.”

“Why are you running?”

“Because if you found me, they can too. And if you’ve been asking questions about the Cell, trust me, they know.” She grew more agitated, more panicked. “You have to get out of here. He will kill you. He will kill me. He’ll kill us both.”

“Drop the cover. Stop lying and just tell me where he is.”

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.”

Sophia jerked out of my hold, fuming now. “I don’t know, all right? You’re wasting your time here.”

“You’re really starting to piss me off.” I yanked her to me, nose to nose, as her breath hitched and her lips parted. “You will not leave this house until you give me the information I need.”

“I don’t know where Kusma is,” she hissed, inches from my face. “You can torture me to death—actually, be my guest. At least I won’t have to run any—”

She suddenly looked past me. The blood drained from her face.

I looked over my shoulder. A pair of headlights flickered through the trees in the distance.

“They followed you,” she whispered.

“Who followed me?”

“Let me go.” She wrestled out of my hold and began frantically gathering random items. “They’re here. Oh my God, they’re here. They followed you.”

“*Who?*”

“Kusma’s men.”

“There’s no way someone followed me. If someone from Black Cell is here, it’s because they were watching you long before I showed up.”

I knew it was bullshit. Somebody very likely could have followed me. I hadn’t been watching my tail. Hell, I didn’t know I needed to.

“Stop,” I said, reaching for the gun on my hip. “Stop running around like a madwoman.”

Sophia whirled, a book tumbling out of her hands. “Why should I trust you?”

“Looks like I’m the only option you have right now, sweetheart.”

She stilled for a moment, the proclamation resonating with her.

Make her feel safe.

“I’m going outside to meet whoever this is. Hide behind that couch and stay there until I get back. Do you understand me?” I grabbed the bat she’d tried to behead me with earlier. “Here. If anyone tries to come through the window behind you, don’t hesitate.”

Sophia nodded, her eyes wild with fear.

“You’re going to be okay. Just stay down.”

Once I was certain Sophia was out of view, I stepped onto the front porch. The snow had already picked up, obstructing my view. The second wave of the snowstorm that Leo had warned me about was here.

The mystery vehicle stopped at the end of the driveway. Ten seconds passed, twenty, then—

Bullets whizzed past my ear, hitting the house behind me.

“Stay down!” I yelled, diving into the snow.

Shards of wood and glass rained around me as the assault continued.

I heard two gunshot echoes. One in front of the house—and one behind it. The vehicle at the end of the road was a diversion.

I pushed off the ground, and double-fisting my gun, stumbled around the side of the house, my boots sliding and sinking into the snow.

Pop, pop, pop. The windows shattered above me. Shards of glass peppered my hair, pinging off the back of my neck.

“Stay down,” I yelled into the cracked windows, over and over.

At the corner of the house, I pivoted and ran into the trees. There I stopped and crouched down, allowing my eyes to adjust to the inky blackness. I held my breath, straining to hear anything beyond the whipping wind.

A twig cracked in the close distance, then another, and another.

I took off toward the sound, following the thud of heavy footprints. The snow stung my eyes, blurring what little vision I had to begin with. I was practically running blind through the darkness, risking getting knocked out by a tree branch. Whoever I was chasing was running far too fast for the conditions and so was likely wearing night-vision goggles, which suggested I was dealing with no amateur.

Soon, I became aware of the distance I'd run and the space I'd put between Sophia and me.

Shit. I lurched to a stop and spun around. I could barely see the lights of her house. A sick feeling landed like a bowling ball in my gut. Whoever was in the vehicle could be trying to get to Sophia.

For a moment, I was frozen in inaction. My brain was telling me to keep to the chase, but my heart told me to save the girl.

With a groan, I gave up the chase and sprinted back toward the cabin.



Sophia

The sound was terrifying. The gunshots, the exploding glass, the screams ripping from my throat.

And then just like that, an eerie silence settled around me. Everything just . . . stopped. Like someone had snapped their fingers, the chaos ceased.

I lifted my head from the fetal position I was curled into behind the couch. Tiny shards of glass fell out of my hair. Glass was everywhere—all over me, the floor, the couch. Snowflakes blew in from the shattered windows, twirling on the wind before drifting to the floor.

Shivering, I slowly uncurled myself, pausing every moment to ensure I hadn't been spotted. With my heart roaring in my ears, I gripped the back of the gunshot-riddled couch and peeked over the edge.

Nearly every window in my home was destroyed, jagged pieces of glass spearing up from the windowpanes like knives waiting for prey. Drifts of snow were beginning to gather on the floor. Bullet holes pocked the log walls and my cabinets. Even one of my lamps had been shattered.

Where is Justin?

Like a turtle coming out of its shell, I peeked further above the couch. The truck that had been at the end of my driveway was gone—or maybe they'd simply turned off the headlights. There was no way to be certain.

Where is Justin?

Remaining in a crouched position, I pivoted on the balls of my feet and crab-walked to the kitchen, which had more cover than the living room. I hid behind the bar that separated the kitchen from the main room. Thankfully, the tiny window above the sink was still intact. I felt safe there.

My thoughts spun.

They'd found me. Despite everything I'd done, all the precautions I'd taken, all the sneaking around, all the money I'd spent to ensure a stealthy exit, they'd found me.

I had to get out of there. This rush of urgency became so great that it overcame my fear.

I had a go-bag ready in my room, but I recognized now how stupid it was that I'd chosen that spot to hide it in, because I had to climb a ladder and expose myself to get it. A rookie mistake. An idiot mistake. Kind of like forgetting to lock my car door before pulling a gun on a stranger outside the window.

I ground my teeth, furious at myself. Embarrassed, maybe.

You got complacent, Sophia.

You're better than this, you're better than this.

I debated making a run for my vehicle. But, considering my house looked like a saloon in a 1960s spaghetti Western, it was a good chance my truck looked worse.

Could you drive a truck with a busted windshield? What if the tires had been destroyed? Screw it. I'd drive on the rims if I had to. I'd escaped once. I could do it again.

Time to be strong.

I pushed to a low stance, but as I took the first step past the window, movement in the backyard caught my eye. I immediately dropped back to my knees, knowing my silhouette was backlit by the few lamps that had survived the attack.

Make a run for it, Sophia. Get your go-bag and run.

Just as I was about to lunge across the living room, the front door opened. I slipped back behind the bar.

“*Sophia!*” Justin rushed inside, a pitch of panic in his voice.

I exhaled, placing my hand over my heart. In that moment, I knew that I was *not* scared of Justin Montgomery. Something in my instinct didn’t fear him. Trusting him, however, was another story.

When he yelled my name again, frantic now, I stood from behind the bar. Our eyes met instantly. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, his nose and the tips of his ears almost purple. The fear in his expression resonated—hard. He was worried about me. There was no mistaking it.

His chest decompressed with relief, and he took a second to speak, almost as if he needed a minute to gather himself.

“They’re gone,” he said finally, his expression hardening back to his normal asshole resting face.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

His focus was already off me and on the war zone that was now my home. “We’ll hunker down here tonight. Make a plan.”

“What?” *No, surely, he doesn’t think—*

“They won’t come back,” he said, reading my thoughts. “The weather’s getting too bad. And they probably assumed you called the cops, and also, they know you’re not alone.”

“But what if—”

His voice turned to ice. “If they do come back, I’ll be ready.”

And just like that, it was settled.

“Do you have any plastic sheets?”

I watched as he strode across the room, on to the next thing. I got the sense that this was life for Justin Montgomery.

He made a decision, people fell in line, and he moved on.

“Yes, I do, in the shed, but I don’t know if I have enough to cover all the windows.” I closed my eyes and shook my head, unable to let it go. “But hang on, Justin. I have to leave. I have to—”

“Your car is destroyed, and I’m not letting you take mine. Even if you left this house right now, you would get stranded on the side of the road, in the middle of the night, where you’d be a sitting duck for them. And if they don’t kill you, there’s a chance the weather will. We’re not leaving right now. That’s the last I’ll say about it.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“Right back at you. Staple gun?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Get it. I’ll get the plastic sheeting from the shed.”

As he turned, the light glinted off the scar running down the side of his face. It was revolting, a stain on a stunningly beautiful canvas. It was jarring, jagged and puffy. Whoever had sewn it up had done a terrible job. I wondered where he’d gotten it. A scar like that had a story.

I also wondered what the rest of his body looked like. Was it as smooth and chiseled as the rest of his face? Or was it covered in scars?

Justin strolled out the back door as I watched, completely dumbfounded by the situation I’d found myself in. This man showed up at my diner, went all John Wick on two men who were being disrespectful to me, then showed up on my doorstep, bringing a gunfight with him.

I walked to the window, studying his silhouette through the blizzard.

My stomach swirled with adrenaline, anxiety—and yes, attraction. It was impossible not to acknowledge how incredibly sexy Justin Montgomery was.

Tall, built like an ox, with a mysterious, dangerous vibe that pulled you in like a magnet, despite all the warnings your

mother gave you about men like him. It was his confidence, though, that did me in. I envied it, craved it, wanted to be smothered in it.

I had so many questions, like why was he looking for Kusma? Who did he work for? And why come to me about it?

One thing was certain: Justin was right about the weather. I'd lived in Alaska long enough to know that this was not the kind of night you went out into.

I watched Justin's cell phone's flashlight bounce around the inside of the shed. When he finally reemerged with the plastic sheeting tucked under his arm, I ran to the kitchen for the staple gun.

"Make a decision," I whispered to myself.

Right now, make a decision. Hunker down and hope for the best, or run right now?

My heart pounded.

Make. A. Decision.

Tonight, I would hunker down and make a plan—one that got me as far away as possible from Falcon Creek, as fast as humanly possible.

Justin Montgomery had no idea who he was dealing with. He was as dead as me if they came after me again.



Sophia

We worked together in silence, covering the windows with haste. I followed Justin's lead, holding, then stretching the sheeting while he secured each corner with the staple gun. Then we would switch and he would hold, and I would secure.

The plastic sheeting would do nothing to keep anyone out, of course, but Justin explained that having the windows covered blocked a direct view of us—giving us a tactical advantage—while also keeping the heat in.

Every once in a while, I caught him looking at me from the corner of his eye in the same way I was observing him, cataloging facts about this new man in my life.

Like, for one, Justin did not do small talk. This didn't bother me. After everything that had just gone down, I was having trouble forming a single coherent thought, let alone multiple sentences.

Two, the man was incredibly cool under pressure. While I was still trembling, Justin was laser-focused with steady hands, calm breath, and quick, smooth movements. He was the opposite of me.

How many times had I tried to breathe through panic attacks, pain, or trauma? And how many times did it actually work? None. Sometime after I turned thirty, I gave in to the fact that I had become an emotional train wreck and I hated

that about myself—which was why I had an entire bookcase dedicated to self-help books.

Three, he smelled like snowy pines mixed with that musky scent of man.

Four, he was *hot*. Plain and simple, the guy was straight out of a dark mafia romance novel.

All that to say, it was difficult to focus on the task at hand.

The windows took an hour to secure, and in that repetitive movement, my pulse calmed to only mild heart-attack level. I didn't know if I could trust Justin, but I did feel safe with him. He could have easily killed me, many times over, or simply given me to whoever shot at us.

Instead, he did the opposite. He saved my life. If Justin hadn't been there, I would be dead. Plain and simple.

After securing the last staple, I gathered the remaining slivers of plastic from the floor and began sweeping up the million teeny-tiny pieces of glass while Justin tended to the fire. The house was still cold, but much less so with the windows covered and the fire going.

Once that was done, Justin settled on the floor next to the fireplace and began unlacing his boots. He set them in front of the fire, along with his socks, which had gotten wet from chasing the shooter in the snow. Then he stripped out of his coat and tossed it on the floor in the corner. Finally, like some transformer, he began pulling multiple weapons from hidden places in his clothing and laid them out one by one.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked, gawking at the number of weapons he'd had on him. “Something to eat?”

“What do you have?”

“Water, almond milk, beer, granola— Oh, I have some leftover fish and chips from the diner.”

“I'll take a beer.”

I was hoping he'd say that because I needed a drink like I needed my next breath.

I grabbed two beers from the refrigerator, then heated up the leftover fish and chips. I met him in front of the fire, where he was counting his ammunition. Three clips lay next to two knives, two handguns, a pair of handcuffs, and a small bottle of bear spray.

Catching the scent of food, he looked up. I felt extreme satisfaction from the spark in his eyes. He was hungry.

I set the plate on the coffee table and handed him his beer. He drank half in one go. I took a few pulls off my own.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Checking my stash. I have more in the truck if I need to get it, but I think this is fine.”

“If they come back for us, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s your truck?”

“Hidden.”

“What if they found it? Slashed your tires or busted out the windows?”

“Then I guess I’ll have to find a new ride, won’t I?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of small brass pieces covered in dirt, then carefully set them on the floor in front of his weapons.

“Are those shell casings?”

“Yes. These are from the guns the men used to shoot at us.”

“Really?” I knelt next to him, interested. “How did you get them?”

“I picked them up from the snow after they left.”

“Can you tell anything by them?”

He tilted his head, examining me closely. “Whoever these guys are, they’re trained operators. These are nine-millimeter casings. I’m guessing they used suppressed MP5s—machine guns that are commonly used in special ops. The guy out front

was a diversion for the guy in the back and took out your vehicle with outstanding accuracy.”

I peered at Justin’s profile as he spoke, all sharp edges, his eyes as cold as ice. The flames flickered off his tanned skin, highlighting the opaque scar that ran down his face.

How could a man be so beautiful and yet so terrifying at the same time?

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you as soon as you tell me, Sophia Banks.”

“We’re at a stalemate then. Thank you for what you’ve done, and I mean that, but I don’t trust you.”

“Then why are you so close to me?”



Justin

Our lips collided with such intensity that my entire body erupted into tingles.

Her lips were warm and soft and tasted of beer, and when a whimper slipped from between them, I went feral. Fisting the back of her hair, I turned her face upward so that I could devour every inch of her.

With my other hand, I grabbed her waist and pulled her against me, needing her as close to me as possible. She arched into me, her body trembling. We kissed madly, wildly, like two long-lost lovers reunited.

My lungs squeezed for air, my heart roared, my pulse raged like a jackhammer.

I cupped her face in my hands, needing the touch to anchor myself, to ensure that she was real, that *this* was real. She moaned—the sexiest damn sound I’d ever heard—as I lightly stroked my thumb back and forth over her cheekbone.

Then, as abruptly as she’d kissed me, she pulled away, panting.

Wide-eyed, we stared at each other, our chests heaving, my head unable to form a single thought other than . . .

Again.



Aleks

I'd lost my mind completely. There was no other explanation for my actions that day.

After a particularly rough night with Viktor, I abandoned my daily chores, grabbed my car keys, and fifteen minutes later, barged into my father's office—which was forbidden. Women did not belong in business. In fact, it was only the second time I'd been to his office. The first was when he'd summoned me to tell me he'd chosen a husband for me to procreate with.

It was a bitterly cold winter day in Russia. It had been dark and gloomy for weeks, as if the sun had simply given up on everything.

Just like I had.

Kusma ended the call he was on and watched me as I stormed across the expansive office.

I looked like shit, something else that was forbidden, but I didn't care. I was disgustingly skinny by then and had stopped wearing makeup or styling my hair. I was wearing a pair of jeans that were three sizes too big and a cashmere sweater that had holes at the hem.

"Aleks," he said with a frown. "What's going on?"

I'd practiced all morning what I would say to my father. I'd memorized every word, every inflection, even the way I

would stand as I spoke. I'd be strong. Confident. Chin up, shoulders back.

And what happened? I dissolved into tears. Before even speaking a single word, I was crying. I was done, my dam broken. There was no restraint left in me.

Kusma stood, both uncomfortable and confused at this unexpected display of emotion. "Speak," he demanded.

"Please let me get a divorce."

His eyes bugged out.

I rushed to the front of his desk. "Please, please. I don't want to be married to Viktor anymore. He's—this isn't a healthy marriage."

"Healthy?" Kusma's eyes narrowed as he rounded the desk.

Instinctively, I took two steps back.

He stopped in front of me. "You're right, Aleks. It's not healthy."

The sudden threatening tone of his voice made my pulse race.

He continued. "I hear you've been too unhealthy to hold a baby."

I looked down, shame spreading over my cheeks like fire.

"Are you pregnant now?"

"No, sir," I whispered.

"Look at me, Aleks."

The blow was swift and hard, the back of my father's hand connecting with my cheek in an explosion of pain.

"You will remain married to Viktor, and you will produce him a child."

My chest heaved.

"And you will never, ever speak to me like that again. Do you understand me, Aleks?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, get on your knees.”

Tears flooded my eyes. “No,” I whispered.

“Aleks, you must be punished. Those are the rules; you know this. Now, get on your knees.”

Choking back the sobs, I slowly lowered to my knees. I closed my eyes as my father unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis. I almost gagged at the scent of him. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I took his fat, stubby erection in my hand.

He sighed, tipping his head back. “Good girl.”

My stomach roiled, my body shook with adrenaline.

“Now, call me by my name.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good job. Now, suck me off like a good little girl.”

“Yes, Daddy.”



Justin

Sophia didn't speak to me the rest of the night. Honestly, I was glad. The kiss between us had been so raw and intense that I think we both needed a second to wrap our heads around it.

There was absolutely no way we could deny the electricity between us. So, where did that leave it?

Almost immediately after the kiss, Sophia had retreated to her bedroom loft, where she didn't make a peep for hours. I don't think she'd slept either.

Meanwhile, I'd taken to the couch—centrally located in the home—and kept the fire stoked and my head on a swivel. Though focus was difficult as my thoughts kept returning to that damn kiss. But it wasn't long before my good sense returned, banishing the kiss-induced dopamine.

It became painfully obvious that Sophia's abrupt advance was nothing more than a manipulation tactic, one I had personally used many times before. Sophia seduced me in an effort to distract and disorient me. To confuse my intentions with lust. She'd used what she believed was her most valuable asset, her sexuality.

Honestly? Good for her. She and I were not so different after all. I respected that. And that's where things got cloudy.

I knew that if Sophia would have initiated sex, I would have fucked her, many times over, right there on that

hardwood floor next to the fire. I would have put my job—hell, my life—on the line for one hour with that woman. No hesitation, no questions asked.

It was a jarring thought.

She was getting to me already, and I needed to keep my eyes open—and my dick in my pants.

The storm slowed around two in the morning after dropping another two inches of snow. Despite my attention to the fire, the house was cold. Damn cold. The wind outside was relentless, whipping the plastic sheeting all night long, creating a deafening white noise.

At six a.m., Sophia finally gave up on pretending to sleep and came downstairs.

She was wearing a vintage Metallica hoodie and a pair of red flannel pants. Her long blond hair was tangled and mussed in a way that made me picture her rolling under the sheets—under me. Her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep, her nose pink from the cold. My gaze dropped to her slippers, two pink bunnies—with button eyes, fluffy ears, and a cottontail on the back of each.

I couldn't fight the grin. Sophia glared at me, daring me to make a comment. I looked away.

Not a morning person. Noted.

“Coffee?” she barked, her voice hoarse and gruff.

“Please.”

As Sophia made her way to the kitchen, I pushed off the couch and checked the windows, moving around the cabin now that I didn't need to worry about waking her from her (fake) slumber.

I caught her watching me from behind the bar with an expression I couldn't read as the coffee maker spit and gurgled next to her.

God, this woman.

I made an effort to keep my eyes off the bunny slippers as she shuffled across the room, carrying two mugs of coffee. She handed me one. I accepted the mug and took a step back.

Sophia cocked her hip and narrowed her eyes. Okay, so she was mad about something, although I had no idea what about. If anything, *I* should be mad at *her* for trying to seduce me.

“Who are you, really?” she asked.

“A mercenary.”

“Like, what? A gun for hire?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I can actually see that.” She licked her lips, and all I could think was that I wanted them on me. “Is Justin your real name?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you here?”

“You know why I’m here.”

“I don’t know where Kusma is.”

“Then give me everything you do know.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Then why did you kiss me?”

“Call it a moment of weakness.”

“How about a moment of bullshit?”

She frowned.

“You’re good, Sophia, but you’re not that good.” I closed the inches between us. “Your body betrayed you.”

Her breath became shallow.

I leaned in and ran my thumb down her cheek. “Just like it is again, right now.”

“You don’t affect me.”

“Liar,” I whispered.

My fingertip trailed down her neck to her collarbone. Shivering, she closed her eyes and inhaled.

“Next time you make an advance like you did last night, you’d better be prepared for the consequences. Because next time, I won’t let you pull away.”

Her eyes opened, but instead of heat, there was ice. “And if that happens, you’d better be prepared for another knee to your groin.” With that, she turned and began crossing the room. Over her shoulder, she said, “I’m going to get in the shower.”

“Can I come?”

“There’s not enough room for both me and your ego, Justin Montgomery.”

Grinning, I watched her over the rim of my mug as she shuffled into the narrow door next to the kitchen. The door slammed shut.

I waited until the shower turned on, then I got to work.

First, I checked her kitchen. Her cupboards and oven were bare, and despite the clutter on the countertops, the drawers were also relatively bare. She lived minimally, with only the necessities. I assumed she got most of her food from the diner where she worked.

After rounding the bar, I paused, contemplating what to search next. I then focused on the bookcases, one of the most common places to hide secrets.

I began pulling the books out one by one, a grin stretching across my face. I’d never seen so many man chests in one place in my life. I found myself mentally comparing my body to the men on the covers and wondered if Sophia had done the same after meeting me. No, of course she didn’t, because none had a scar like I did.

Focus.

Aside from a stash of pepper spray designed to look like ballpoint pens, there was nothing to link Sophia to Kusma Petrova or Black Cell. I moved to the couch and checked

under the frame, under the cushions, under the coffee table and the easy chair.

Nothing, nada.

Finally, I made my way up to her bedroom, figuring that if Sophia was like every other woman I'd been with, I still had a good twenty minutes before the water turned off.

Her room smelled like her. Something like coconut that made me want to go into the bathroom and taste every inch of her body.

I checked under the mattress, inhaling her scent as I did. Then the closet, which surprisingly didn't take long.

Sophia Banks owned six full outfits, two pairs of sensible shoes, plus jogging shoes. That's it. I then made my way to the armoire. My search was momentarily halted by the strings of lacy underwear in her top drawer. Sexy as hell. Her bras, on the other hand, were dingy cotton Hanes, made for comfort—and comfort only. I grinned, finding this startling contradiction rather cute.

Focus.

Fisting my hands on my hips, I walked to the loft railing and looked down, surveying the house. Sophia was hiding something, of that I was certain.

Why can't I find it?

Then a light bulb went off.

The shed. The place no one would think to look—especially in this climate.

The wind stung my cheeks as I stepped outside. Dawn had yet to break through the dark, billowing clouds overhead, though there was just enough light to see where I was going. Flurries drifted from the sky as I paused to look around.

I'd already checked for tracks in the snow, multiple times overnight, but checked again to be safe. Whoever ambushed us hadn't come back, but something told me they would—and soon.

The shed was nothing fancy. A small single room with stacks of chopped wood. A few garden tools loomed in the corner, leaning against a generator that looked like it hadn't been maintained in years. In the corner was a rusty old lawnmower with a flat tire.

My eyes narrowed.

After a quick glance over my shoulder, I stepped over the stacks of wood and studied the mower. I lifted the rusty hood. A weatherproof black bag was taped underneath it.

Bingo.

I tucked the bag under my arm, closed the hood, and jogged back into the house. Sophia was still in the shower.

Using my pocketknife, I sliced open the top of the bag and dumped the contents onto the kitchen counter:

Four stacks of hundred-dollar bills, totaling forty thousand dollars.

Three credit cards

One Social Security card

One passport

One driver's license

The name on each:

Aleks Petrova

Folded neatly underneath it all was a birth certificate that read:

Aleks Petrova

Born: Moscow, Russia

Mother: Yulia Tisevich

Father: Kusma Petrova



Justin

*H*oly shit.

Sophia Banks was Aleks Petrova—the daughter of Kusma Petrova. *Not* his wife.

Sophia Banks was a cover, a fake identity. One probably gifted to her by Black Cell before she came to the States.

A thousand thoughts ran through me at once.

This changed everything.

The story I'd been operating under was that Sophia (Aleks) was one of Kusma's wives. I could use this to my advantage, assuming she hated being married to the bastard. But his daughter? That kind of allegiance was completely different. Blood is thicker than water—thicker than anything else. I knew that more than anyone.

Aleks's random location made much more sense now. She'd been planted there by her father and tasked to recruit or head up a local chapter—probably in Anchorage. This made more sense than Kusma giving one of his random wives that kind of power.

Shit.

I felt slighted. Played. A fool.

Everything—the tears, the kiss—it was all an act.

“I don't know where Kusma is.”

Bullshit.

I began pacing the kitchen, recalling Leo's criminal profile for Kusma:

“. . . his strength is his IQ. He is extremely smart and cunning. He's also charismatic . . . manipulative.”

Like father, like daughter.

Heat rose up the back of my neck.

I needed to change my tactics, my plan, my interrogation technique. I needed to drop the kid gloves.

Then I stilled with an epiphany.

The fight at the diner . . . could that have been a ruse? Premeditated? Orchestrated by her to make me feel sorry for her and go gentle on her? Did she know I was in town? Could she have seen me tailing her the night before?

I scrubbed my hands over my face. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so caught off guard on an op.

It was *her*. Her beauty, those eyes, that smile, that goddamn feeling she gave me.

Stewing, I shoved the cash into the bag and tucked everything else into my pocket. My gaze narrowed on the bathroom door.

Time to take off those kid gloves.

Hands balled into fists, I stalked across the room and banged on the door.

No answer.

I knocked again, louder, listening to the sound of the water hitting the shower wall.

No answer. I tried the knob . . . it was locked.

Something in my stomach began to twist.

“Sophia!” I pounded on the door. “Sophia! Open the damn door.”

Done with patience, I slammed my boot into the door, sending it popping on its hinges. I rushed inside.

The bathroom was empty, the shower was empty.

The window, however, was wide-open.



Sophia

*M*y lungs burned as I ran through the woods. I could no longer feel or move my face. My eyes stung in their sockets. My knees felt stiff. For a fleeting moment, I considered frostbite, but just as quickly, shook away that thought. Losing a digit was the least of my worries.

I was dangerously unprepared to be running through the Alaskan wilderness. But thanks to Justin's sudden appearance in my life, I didn't have time to cross my t's and dot my i's.

I hadn't slept a wink. I couldn't. I was too overwhelmed with conflicting emotions about that damn kiss.

On one hand, I'd never felt before the way I did the moment our lips touched. Fireworks? I now understood that expression. And the best part? It was mutual. I could feel in my bones that Justin felt the same. No man had ever kissed me like that. Ever.

On the other hand, I'd reverted to my old ways. One whisper of Black Cell, and I turned back into the disgusting whore I'd once been. In an instant, I resurrected the bad, manipulative decisions of my past.

That's the thing about bad decisions—they're always lurking in the dark corners of our subconscious, anxiously waiting for your next moment of weakness. I was embarrassed, ashamed, and worst of all, confused.

How could a single person turn my life completely upside down?

I didn't trust Justin, not fully. And while I felt confident he had no intention to physically harm me, I had to look at the facts.

The moment Justin Montgomery entered my life, asking about my father, someone tried to kill me. Coincidence? Absolutely not. And even if I did believe Justin was one of the "good guys," he now had a target on his back. He alone could not protect me, and if the Cell was tracking him, he'd lead them right to me.

So, while in my room—while Justin thought I was asleep—I'd put on every piece of warm clothing I had, concealing the bulky layers under a baggy sweatshirt and flannel sweatpants. I was able to hide my emergency go-bag (a small backpack) under the sweatshirt, although I had to empty half its contents. What remained was a wad of cash, energy bars, a burner phone, a charger, and identification. If I needed water, I could drink the snow.

Justin would discover I was gone soon enough, but I figured I had at least a thirty-minute start on him. He would be faster than me, but I knew the area much better than he did. That had to count for something.

My goal was solid—get the hell out of town.

Alone.

But how? Well, that's where things got muddy.

My truck was shot to smithereens—no windshield, flat tires—so that wasn't an option. In truth, I'd actually considered driving on the rims as far as I could, but Justin would have heard the engine fire up. So, I had no other option than to leave on foot.

I had enough money in my emergency go-bag to get a hotel room for a few nights. But where? The only thing I could think to do was to hitchhike. There were plenty of tourists driving through the area. I could catch a ride with one, then

find another, and another, until I got far enough away where I felt safe.

After lying low for a while—no clue where—I would return to my home, retrieve the money and documents I had hidden in the mower in the shed, pack a suitcase, and be on the next flight out to God knew where. South America, maybe, where I could easily get another fake identity. There I would dye my hair, get a job, and start over, just as I'd done in Alaska.

I'd done it once, so I could do it again.

It was a shitty plan; I knew it was. But it was all I could think to do . . . well, almost all.

My hands trembling, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the burner phone I'd purchased years earlier. Though one bar of reception out here usually meant zero, I dialed anyway. It went straight to voice mail, so I left a message.

“Ron, hi, it's Sophia. I'm so sorry, but I need to take some time off work for personal reasons. Also, I—I was wondering if I could borrow your side-by-side for a few days? The one you use to haul wood and stuff? If you could bring it to the diner, I could come by and pick it up. You're probably not even going to get this, but I really need—”

The call dropped.

“Shit.” I shoved the phone back into my pocket.

Fatigue settled in. Not enough sleep, not enough food, too much anxiety, treacherous conditions.

Still, I didn't stop. I pressed on, the sudden resurrection of the horrible past I'd tried so hard to forget giving me the push I needed. Memories of Viktor's face, my father's beady eyes, my grandmother's disappointment, the baby I'd lost, they all floated around me like apparitions.

My eyes filled with tears. I sniffed, ground my teeth, and forced myself to pick up speed.

I hate you.

I hate you.

I hate you, Daddy.



Justin

*J*knelt down, examining the small boot prints in the snow. They began underneath the bathroom window and disappeared into the woods.

Son of a bitch.

She ran. The crazy woman actually ran.

A stupid, *stupid* decision. What could she possibly have for survival? A bar of soap, a razor, and a toothbrush? And why would she make such an irrational, idiotic decision, especially in this weather?

Above, the sky swirled an angry gray. Soon, the snow would begin again, and with this wave, temperatures were expected to plummet. What *the hell* was she thinking?

I was angry—furious—but mixed in there somewhere was a mound of guilt. I had scared Sophia enough to make her think that I was as bad as whoever was chasing her. In her mind, sneaking out in the middle of a blizzard was safer than staying with me.

It was hard to stomach.

I'd let many women down by not being what they needed in their worst moments. Well, one. Only one.

Now two.

Fuming, I sprinted to the SUV I'd hidden fifty yards behind Sophia's cabin. Thankfully, the goons from the night

before hadn't spotted it. The first thing I did was retrieve my SAT phone from the glove box and send Leo a message.

We need to talk. Sophia is Aleks Petrova—Kusma's daughter, not his wife.

It took ten minutes to shovel my way out of the snow. With each stab, I thought about Sophia, her little feet trudging through the heavy drifts. How tired her legs must be. How worried I was for her.

Working to my advantage was the fact that I was mildly familiar with the dirt roads, thanks to my lengthy search for her after she'd run from me the first time, and I also knew which direction she'd gone.

I did a quick calculation in my head. Sophia had a thirty-minute head start on me. She was five foot three, a buck thirty at best, and was going on zero sleep. Considering the weather and the dangerous terrain, I guessed she wasn't much more than a mile from her home.

Eyes peeled, I drove slowly through the tunnel of trees, my windows down so I could hear if she screamed.

I didn't know what color clothing she was wearing, so I didn't have that to my advantage. If she were smart, she'd have dressed herself in white to avoid being spotted, but something told me she hadn't put that much thought into her escape.

The early morning light washed the freshly fallen snow in a gloomy gray. Every few minutes, I'd hear the crack of a branch breaking under the weight of the snow, and I'd pray Sophia wasn't under it.

I was sick with worry.

So many scenarios went through my head, like, had she contacted someone from Black Cell to come pick her up? Yes, cell reception was shoddy, but Sophia knew the area well, which meant she knew where to hike for reception. If this were the case, I was out there chasing my damn tail, giving her exactly what she wanted—lots of time to put lots of distance between us.

I had underestimated Sophia, aka Aleks Petrova. In under twenty-four hours, she had escaped me not once, but twice.

Thirty minutes turned into an hour. The wind picked up, howling like a banshee through the trees. Snow started falling heavily again around hour two. At hour three, my sense of urgency turned into panic.

Screw the mission. If I didn't find Sophia, she was going to die.

My head was at war with my heart. I slammed the steering wheel and scrubbed my hands over my face.

What's the goal, Justin? What's the ultimate goal here?

To learn and verify Kusma's location.

How do I do that?

Interrogate Sophia.

So, that's what I'll do.

With renewed focus, I switched my goal from finding her in the woods, to anticipating where she could go and finding her that way. If she were alive, she was eventually going to need food, water, and shelter, maybe even medical attention.

I looked toward Falcon Creek. If Sophia really wanted to escape from me, she was going to need a ride.

I turned in that direction and hit the gas.



Justin

As I neared the main strip of Falcon Creek, a crowd and a line of cars had gathered on the side of the road. A deputy's truck was parked haphazardly in the snow. Behind it, two other vehicles.

I rolled to a stop at the end of the line.

An elderly woman wearing a flannel coat over a pink robe and snow boots was waving her hands, obviously emotional.

My stomach dropped. Did the woman find Sophia?

I jumped out of the SUV and broke into a jog, pushing my way through the crowd.

The deputy was scribbling in his notebook. The woman was mid-sentence.

“ . . . short, small, wearing nothing but a baggy gray sweatshirt and sweatpants. She had blondish hair; I could tell even though her hood was pulled up. She was just walking down the middle of the road, and that's what caught my attention, because who the hell would be out in this godforsaken weather? I figured it was a tourist whose vehicle had broken down, so I got dressed and came outside to offer to help. But the moment I stepped onto the porch, they took her.”

“What do you mean, they took her?” I asked, earning confused glances from the crowd.

“Some man in a white truck. He jumped her and dragged her into the truck. Whoever it was was wearing a black ski mask. She screamed and everything.” Tears began streaming down the woman’s face. “She fought him, but he hit her. I think he knocked her out cold.”

Panic blew through my veins. It had to be the same people who had tried to gun her down the night before.

“Which direction did they go?”

“That way.” The woman pointed toward the mountains, where there was nothing but rugged wilderness for hundreds of miles.

“How long ago?”

“About twenty minutes.” She shot a glare toward the deputy. “Took him that long to get here.”

I spun around and sprinted to my SUV.



Justin

An hour later, I opened the door to a small roadside coffeehouse that doubled as a tourist center. I'd requested—in no polite terms—that Leo meet me in Falcon Creek, but he insisted on meeting closer to Anchorage, as he had an important meeting soon after.

Leo was sitting in the back corner. He dipped his chin when he spotted me.

He looked starkly different than when I saw him two days earlier. The suit was gone, replaced with a thick olive-green coat that had seen better days. A scruffy brown beanie sat low on his head. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy. Mismatched gloved hands clasped a large, steaming cup of coffee. No Lemon Drop that day.

Waving off the waitress, I slid into the booth. I didn't have time for a drink or small talk, so I dove straight in.

“Sophia Banks's real name is Aleks Petrova. I found her birth certificate hidden in her shed. She's Kusma's daughter, not his wife. Last night, a truck—white, I think—opened fire from the end of her driveway. The vehicle was meant to be a diversion for a lone shooter who came up on the backside of her cabin. I lost him in the woods. This morning,” I glanced at my watch, “roughly four hours ago, Sophia escaped the cabin and was kidnapped on a side road about a quarter mile from the center of Falcon Creek. I followed in pursuit until the

tracks disappeared under fresh snowfall. It's the same people who tried to gun her down last night, I'm sure of it."

"What prompted the shootout in the first place?"

I noticed the faint smell of booze on Leo's breath.

"Not sure. Either someone tailed me to her house, and they were spooked that she might tell me whatever the hell she's hiding—which means someone has had their eye on her. Or she's playing me like a goddamn record and is probably sitting in a hot tub getting drunk on Black Cell's dime."

"How did they kidnap her? Run her off the road?"

"No, her truck was destroyed in the shootout. She walked to town."

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. It's like she has a death wish."

"Or maybe she just doesn't care if she dies. Do you know if she has a cell phone with her? I could track it and pin her location if you know the number."

"I don't know. She sneaked out the bathroom window. I'm certain she doesn't have much." I jabbed my fingers through my hair. "I'll talk to the people she works with at the diner. She has to have some sort of communication, if only to speak to them."

"Do that, then I'll see if I can ping it. But if it's Kusma's men who took her, they're not stupid. The first thing they would have done was search her and disable her phone. If I had to guess, it's probably in a million pieces along the side of the road, covered by an inch of snow by now."

"What about a smartwatch? Do you know if she had one? I'm not sure if I remember seeing one on her . . ."

"Same scenario—they're not stupid. If so, it's destroyed."

"Shit." I dragged in a deep breath. "What about her fake identity as Sophia Banks? What were you able to figure out?"

"That Sophia Banks is *not* Aleks Petrova."

I blinked. “What?”

“I said Sophia Banks is not Aleks Petrova.”

“Impossible. I saw the driver’s license and the birth certificate. Why do you say that?”

“Because Aleks Petrova is dead,” he said. “Therefore, it is impossible that Sophia Banks is Aleks Petrova.”

He took a quick sip of coffee.

“The moment I got your voice mail, I began researching the name in my old case files. Aleks Petrova died in a car accident three years ago in Russia.” He slid a piece of paper across the table. “There’s the death certificate.”

I quickly scanned the paper, then tossed it across the table. “Then tell me why Sophia would have Aleks’s birth certificate and several pieces of the woman’s identification hidden in her home?”

He lifted a shoulder.

Impatience shot up my spine. “You’re supposed to be my damn contact here, Leo. You’re supposed to help me—that’s your job. You’re supposed to be a wealth of information for me. I don’t understand how no one seems to know anything about this woman. It doesn’t add up. Who else is linked to her, even loosely? You’ve got to give me something. Do your fucking job, Leo.”

He sat silent for a moment, contemplating something.

“These men . . . they are very, *very* bad men, Justin. They are as smart as they are cruel. They’ve been underground for years, and no one, not even the US government, has been able to pin down their location.”

I scoffed. “They just weren’t looking hard enough. Anyone can be found. There is no such thing as ‘underground.’ It’s a bullshit term made up by those who have failed in finding someone. Who was the last government operative that looked for Black Cell? Give me their damn number.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s dead.”

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. “Well, whoever he was, do you have access to his notes? His case files?”

“Actually, Justin, you knew him better than anyone.”

My blood turned ice-cold. I opened my mouth to speak but was unable to form a single syllable.

Suddenly, I felt like I was falling.

“That’s right, Justin,” Leo said. “The last operative to track Black Cell was your brother, four years ago. That was the case he was working on when he died.”

All the air expelled from my lungs.

“You know I’m not supposed to tell you any of this,” Leo leaned in. “You know I could get thrown in jail for this. Your brother’s death is buried under mountains of classified paperwork. Only those with the highest security clearance can open the files. That’s why the information they gave you and your family was so limited. They told you he died during a training accident. They lied. The truth is that a drone blew up the safe house he was staying in while working undercover in Russia. It was his first international operation. There were three others with him, more experienced. Everyone died. The only reason I know about it is because I worked with him personally—briefly—on the case.”

The room began to spin.

“Justin, when I found out Astor assigned you to *this* case, I almost fell out of my chair. The rumors about how you’ve changed since he was killed are . . . well, they said you went crazy afterward, that you disappeared and no one could find you for months. For a while, people thought you’d killed yourself. Then one day, you suddenly resurfaced, working for Astor Stone Inc. Then the rumors changed. They said you’d turned into some kind of emotionless ice-cold assassin.”

His gaze shifted to my cheek.

“I heard about what you did in Zambia a few years back . . .”

I couldn't breathe.

“But I'm telling you this because if these men could kill an operator as skilled as your brother, they can kill you. Forgive me, but you need to hear it.”

He grabbed the sleeve of my jacket. I was in too much shock to move.

“You can't trust *anyone*, do you understand?” His expression turned desperate. “Do not trust anyone, Justin. If you find Sophia Banks, do not trust her. Hell, maybe she has Aleks Petrova's identification because *she* killed her. I'm telling you—do not trust *anyone*.”

Abruptly, Leo released his grip on me and stood, pulling the phone I hadn't even heard ringing from his pocket.

“I need to take this. Excuse me for just a minute.”

As he walked away, I stared at the empty booth, memories pummeling me.



Justin

*M*y brother was killed one day after his twenty-sixth birthday. Nate was younger than me by five years. I'll never forget the day he was born. I remember holding him for the first time and feeling a weird parental tug toward him. An instinctive obligation to keep him safe.

I'd failed.

Growing up, Nate and I were as thick as thieves. Best friends and partners in crime. When my dad walked out on us for another woman, sending our mother into a deep depression, it only intensified our bond. We did everything together.

There was no Justin. No Nate. Only Justin and Nate.

Where are Justin and Nate? people would ask.

What happened to Justin and Nate?

Justin and Nate skipped school again.

Did you hear Justin and Nate got arrested again?

Our reckless personalities and totally inappropriate sense of humor were identical. The only difference between us was in our appearance. In school, I was dubbed "Pretty Boy," which I hated, and Nate was "Tadpole," a nod to his tall, lean stature.

Physically, I'd taken after my father, thick and built like a lineman. Nate took after our mother. Gaining muscle was

always a challenge for him, but he was as fast as lightning. He was constantly underestimated and also wicked smart, and he used both to his advantage. Me? I was a bull in a china shop. Whatever I did, I went in guns blazing every time. He and I both had tempers, but my brother knew how to control his. I admired that.

One day, he told me he admired me. It was the first time I'd felt real purpose in my life. That day, I made a vow to never let him down.

Nate and I spent every day after school playing "war" in the woods that surrounded our trailer home. Usually, I was the bad guy and Nate was the good guy. But some days, we would band together to fight unforeseen adversaries. For these very dangerous missions, Nate and I created our own sign language. Codes, we'd called it, a stealthy form of communication only he and I knew how to decipher. Our codes would bring down the enemy every time. I still remembered every single one of them.

After high school, I went into the Navy, where I became a SEAL. When Nate graduated and opted out of following me into the military, I pressured him to apply to the CIA and FBI. It was because of me that he got an interview with the CIA. I'd called in several favors. Nate was hired immediately and quickly worked his way up the ranks.

I had no idea he was pursuing a career in clandestine service. He didn't tell me because he didn't want me to worry.

We didn't see much of each other after that, but we talked or texted every day, even while on missions.

The day Nate died, I had just arrived home from a particularly rough mission in South America. I had a broken arm, two cracked ribs, and second-degree burns on my legs. I was sitting in the hospital waiting room when my mother called me with the news.

The weeks that followed are a blur. The years, really.

All the rumors Leo had heard were true. I did go MIA. I left everything. My job, my mom, my life.

In the middle of the night, I packed a bag, drove to the airport, and took the first flight out without telling a single person. I landed in the Galápagos Islands where I drank every day until I passed out, did every drug known to man, and fucked countless women.

Looking back, that's where I lost myself. The lines between right and wrong became blurry. Guilt, and all emotions for that matter, were suppressed with chemicals instead of being properly dealt with. Grief was deadened to a dull ache, alleviated by whatever whore I'd dragged home with me that night.

For the first time in my life, my brain just kind of went on cruise control. There was no mulling over the past or worrying about the future. I was dead inside.

I did consider killing myself. In fact, if Astor Stone hadn't called me, I'm sure I would have. With that single call, my entire life changed.

I still have nightmares about the things I did in Zambia, on my first mission as a mercenary for Astor Stone. That mission served as a release for me, for the rage I'd suppressed. I'm not proud of it.

Nightmares still plague me about the first time I saw my mother, after having abandoned her for years. So vivid that sometimes, I feel like I have gone back in time and am right there, standing in my mother's living room all over again.



“Please, let me help you,” my mother begs as she sobs on the couch, blinking up at me through endless tears. “Please help me help you. I found a great therapist, highly recommended for PTSD. I’ll pay for it. I’ll pay for you to go to therapy.”

“I don’t need your money.”

“You need something, Justin,” she snaps, pulling a handful of tissues from the box one of her church friends crocheted for her.

It reads THIS TOO SHALL PASS.

“Nate’s been dead for three years. Three years. And yes, it still hurts every single day, but I make an effort to keep moving forward, to move on. You,” she jabs a long, bony finger in the air, “you, on the other hand, are just stuck in a deep black hole. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

She drops her head in her hands and collapses into sobs again, but I feel nothing.

“This is my fault,” she mutters through the tears. “I should have been there for you more after Nate died. I should’ve made sure you were okay. I should’ve done so much more.”

A minute passes. I remain silent and still, wishing I were anywhere else in the world.

Finally, she looks up, and when she sees I haven’t left the room, that I am just standing there watching her cry, she snaps. Her eyes go mad and her trembling body surges off the couch.

She stands toe to toe with me, and for a fleeting moment, I remember the woman she used to be before Dad left her.

“Do you want the truth?” She sneers at me. “I don’t know you anymore, and I don’t want to know you. You’ve become a cold, callous, heartless man. Do you know that your old SEAL buddies called me to tell me they were worried about you? Your ex-girlfriend, Leslie—that lovely girl you dated a few times and then dropped for no reason—she told me she was scared of you. Actually scared of you! Said you’d scream out in your dreams, that you were violent. Hell, Justin, I don’t even know what you do for this private investigation company you work for. I don’t want to. If this is the man you are going to be for the rest of your life, I don’t want any part of it. I can’t take it anymore. You are not my boy anymore.”

Her knees buckle and she drops onto the couch, wailing, heaving sobs, gasping for air.

Without a word, I turn around and walk out the door.



Guilt is lethal. It slowly poisons you from the inside out. And the worst part? You don't even know it's happening. It becomes a default reaction.

I have replayed that night more times than I can count.

My mother and I never spoke again after that. She died of heart failure a year later. I didn't go to the funeral.

I never forgave myself for not being there when Nate died, and I never forgave myself for abandoning my mother after his death. The only woman that mattered in my life was abandoned by the three people she loved the most—her husband, me, and Nate, by death.

In the year following that night, I thought a lot about the decisions I made after Nate died, and I came to one conclusion

...

I was meant to be nothing more than a mercenary.

And then I met Sophia.



Justin

I was jerked back to the present when Leo passed by the window behind our booth. He was on the phone, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk.

Something was wrong.

The waitress appeared in my peripheral vision. “Are you sure you don’t want something to drink?”

“No,” I said, slapping a hundred-dollar bill on the table as I stood.

Leo had pivoted and was crossing the parking lot, walking toward the line of trees that backed up to the coffee shop.

I wove my way through the crowd and pushed out the front door. A gust of wind blew past me, sending snow spiraling around me like a tornado.

The moment I rounded the corner, I heard it. A faint *pop* a split second before Leo’s head knocked backward in a cloud of red mist.

I lunged forward, sprinting toward him as he locked up like a plank and fell to the pavement. Drawing my gun, I quickly scanned the trees, spotting a faint silhouette in the distance, sprinting away from the scene.

I fell to my knees, gun in hand.

“Leo,” I rasped. “Come on, Leo.”

Snowflakes fell onto his face, sticking to his lashes and his dirty brown beanie. His eyes were open, his jaw slack, as if he were shocked by his own death. A line of blood oozed from the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

There was no question he was dead.

Frantically, I looked around. No one had seen what had happened, but it wouldn't be long until someone took note of the man lying on the ground.

I needed to get the hell out of there.

I found his cell phone about a foot from his body. Immediately, I saw it was not the phone he'd had the day before. This one was different. Using the butt of my gun, I flipped open his coat. Sure enough, his main phone was tucked into his pocket.

After pressing the unlock button on the phone he'd just been talking on, I held it over his face until it unlocked using facial recognition.

I took one last look at my contact.

"Peace be with you—finally," I whispered before closing his eyes.

As I jogged to my SUV, his advice played on repeat in my head:

Don't trust anyone.

Don't trust anyone.

Don't. Trust. Anyone.



Justin

Blasting the horn, I swerved around a Mazda doing about twenty down the highway. The weather was getting worse. The flurries had turned into sheets of snow propelled by blustery wind. The temperature was dropping too.

I was wild with fury, the kind of unrestrained rage that reminded me of my time in Zambia.

My brother had been *murdered*.

The boy I used to walk home from school to ensure he made it okay, the boy I sat next to until his tears from his first heartbreak dried up, the boy at the center of the first prayer I'd ever said in my life.

The funeral had been a closed casket. Looking back, something in my gut knew that the information his commanding officers told us was bullshit, but because I understood, from being a SEAL, how many things happened "under the radar," I didn't question it.

Also, I was too goddamn paralyzed with grief to care about the details. Nate was dead, that was all that mattered. What difference did the circumstances make? I couldn't bring him back.

Hearing this new information felt like I was reliving his death all over again.

There was a split second when I was staring down at the bullet hole in Leo's forehead that I considered leaving again, just like I'd done after Nate had died. Leaving everything, catching a flight back to the Galápagos Islands, and wasting away until the devil finally—*finally*—decided it was time to meet my fate.

Only one thing kept me from doing this. Sophia Banks.

I was desperate to find her. Desperate in more ways than I cared to admit. She was the key to everything; there was no question about it. Get her, get the bastard who killed Leo, get the bastards who killed my brother.

After fleeing the coffee shop, moments before Leo's body was spotted by one of the coffeehouse staff, I sped back to Falcon Creek, Sophia's last known location.

I had a lead, a good one—the telephone number of the person Leo was communicating with when he was shot between the eyes. Something told me that the person he was talking to was the same person who had tried to kill Sophia.

And he was a dead man.

It was time to bring in the big guns.

“Come on, come on,” I spat into the phone.

“Yo, J.”

I could barely hear Mack over the crack of a cue ball in the background.

Mack McCoy was a mercenary like me. He'd worked for Astor Stone since the beginning, though you wouldn't know it. While Ryder, Roman, and I had become hard and calloused over the years, somehow Mack was able to compartmentalize what we did for a living. He was always the first one to crack a joke, always wildly inappropriate. He was the first to interrupt a meeting with a case of beer, or to bring twins home from the bar. We needed him. We all needed a reminder that somewhere outside the hell that was our job, there could still be laughter.

Mack was also our most valuable computer geek. Before accepting a job with Astor, Mack worked for the Cyber

Crimes Unit in the FBI. There was no system he couldn't hack into, and if there were, he'd work tirelessly to figure out how to.

"I need you to ping the location of a cell phone number for me," I said as my truck swerved around a corner. "I just texted the number to you."

"On it." Mack covered the receiver, saying something to the people he was with. "Sorry," he said when returned, his hasty footsteps echoing in the background. "We got a new pool table for the break room."

"Glad to know something's keeping you busy." I spun out going up a hill. "*Shit.*"

"I'm in my office now," he said. "Give me a few minutes with this number. In the meantime, tell me what's going on. How's the case?"

"Upside down. It's a shit show."

"What happened?"

"For starters, Leo, my local contact, just caught a bullet between the eyes."

"Shit. You okay?" The tone of Mack's voice switched from jovial to serious.

That's the thing about us. We might do things that will forever haunt us, but we're a tight-knit group. We always have each other's back—no matter what. No questions asked. *Till death.*

Was I okay? I considered telling him that I'd just found out my brother was murdered by the very group I was tracking but stopped short. I didn't know why, other than the fact that I hadn't spoken about Nate—hadn't uttered his name a single time in four years.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I lied as I reversed down the hill. "Before Leo got shot, my target, Sophia Banks, ran and got kidnapped along the way."

"She *ran* from you?"

“Yeah.”

“How’d you let that happen?”

My teeth ground as I shoved the truck back into drive and slowly pressed the gas, hoping the second time would be a charm.

“She’s hot, isn’t she?” Mack poked before I could respond. “Got you all turned around, didn’t she?”

“Fuck you.”

“Where are you?”

“No, I don’t need you right now. Don’t come here.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed me. I asked where you were,” he repeated sharply.

“Mack, I’ve got this. Stay put. I’ll let you know if I need backup.”

“God, you’re stubborn. Just know that I can have someone out there within a few hours. Astor hired a new guy, Drake, a surly fellow, former MMA fighter. He started yesterday, eager as hell to get his first job.”

“I don’t need anyone right now.”

“Okay, whose phone am I tracking right now?”

“It’s the number Leo was talking to when he got shot. Best I can tell from going through the text threads is that Leo was crooked. A double agent. A gun for hire while secretly feeding information to the Black Cell Unit. I’m certain whoever he was talking to when he got shot is his Black Cell contact.”

“A double agent?” Mack snorted. “Astor’s gonna love that.”

“Tell me about it. According to the text history, Black Cell threatened to kill his daughter if he didn’t comply.”

Leo’s words from our first meeting echoed through my head. *“The threat of losing someone you love can be enough to make anyone do things they never thought they’d do.”*

Now that I knew Leo was working both sides, I realized I'd missed warning signs along the way. Like, all the little tidbits he'd provided about Kusma that didn't come directly from the mission files. And how, ironically, the moment I came to town, Sophia's house turned into target practice. And how he emphatically told me not to trust anyone.

He'd meant *not even him*.

Leo was the one who had informed Black Cell I was there with plans to pull information from Sophia. That's why she was shot at. And Leo had been killed for his unplanned meeting with me. Black Cell was tailing him and probably thought he was going to talk.

What a shit show.

"Okay," Mack said as I finally made it up the damn hill. "I got it."

"You pinned the location?"

"Yep. Looks like they're out in the middle of nowhere, about thirty miles from Falcon Creek. They're heading northeast on a dirt road."

"Zoom out. What's around it?"

"Nothing, dude."

"Send me the coordinates. They're taking her somewhere." *Where?* "One more thing. What's the name attached to the cell phone number? Who was Leo talking to when he was killed?"

"Checking. Hang on . . ."

As I rounded a sharp corner, I saw a small, dark silhouette stumbling through the snow.

Squinting, I leaned forward as Mack said, "The cell phone is registered to someone named Ron Fitch, the owner of some local diner."



Justin

Ron Fitch, the cook/owner of Creek House Diner. Sophia's *boss* was part of the Black Cell Unit.

My head spinning with this new information, I disconnected the call. There was no way in hell it was a coincidence that Sophia was working for him.

I glowered at the silhouette on the road, knowing it was Sophia.

Sneaky, sneaky girl.

This was a setup, a trap. Sophia was bait, and there I was, the fool trying to be her knight in shining armor.

Don't trust anyone.

Don't be stupid, Justin.

I pulled the gun from my belt, laid it on my lap, and wrapped my finger around the trigger. I scanned the tree line as I approached Sophia, looking for anyone who might jump out and ambush me.

The moment she saw it was me, she began running toward me, waving her arms, but she stumbled on a drift and tumbled to the ground. Snow exploded around her in a big white cloud before catching on the blustery wind.

I slid to a stop inches from her body.

Again, I surveyed the endless trees around us. When I saw nothing suspicious, I climbed out of the truck, gun in hand. I didn't give a shit anymore. If this was a trap, so be it. At least I didn't have to hunt the bastards anymore.

Sophia's hair was matted with ice and snow, same with her eyebrows and lashes. Her face was blotchy red, an eerie contrast to her blue lips. She was shivering so severely that for a moment, I thought she was having a seizure. I stilled, gaping at the nasty cut that marred her cheekbone just below her swollen eye.

She'd been beaten.

Despite everything, rage blew through my veins.

I knelt next to her. "Sophia, if you try to kill me right now, I swear to God I will kill you first." I shoved the gun in my waistband and scooped her into my arms, half expecting to get blown to pieces.

I didn't.

After lowering Sophia into the passenger seat, I jogged around the hood and slid behind the wheel. I cranked up the heater as hot as it would go, then turned my full focus to her, recalling the hypothermia training I'd taken years earlier.

First, I checked her pulse. It was faint but there.

"Sophia, say something."

Eyes closed, she mumbled incoherently.

"I have to remove your wet clothing."

I carefully peeled off the thin gloves that covered her hands. Then her boots and her socks. I discovered she had three pairs of pants on, which was likely the only reason she was still alive. They were wet from her fall, so I removed them as well. Then I tugged off the bulky sweatshirt, stiff with snow and ice, but left on the long-sleeve thermal she'd had under it.

Her skin was fire-red, like someone had poured gasoline all over her and lit a match.

I grabbed my thermal blanket from the back and laid it over her legs, gently tucking in the sides so that it wrapped her like foil.

Studying the gash on her cheek, I decided it definitely needed to be cleaned, but it didn't need stitches. I made the decision to wait to do that, because I needed to get the hell out of there.

I shoved the truck into reverse, driving backward for over ten yards before finding a spot wide enough to turn around without getting stuck.

Constantly, I checked on her, driving as fast as I could through the blizzard.

After ten minutes, her tremors calmed, and her color was beginning to even out.

Her eyes opened. Blinking, she looked at me.

"Who did that to your face?" I asked.

Confused, she blinked again, then brought her hand to her cheek. She winced at the touch.

"Who did that to you?" I repeated, my pulse picking up speed.

"I—I don't know . . ."

I wanted to slam my fist against the steering wheel.

Just give her a minute, my heart whispered. *Don't trust her,* my head screamed.

I wanted to drive off a cliff.

Instead, I just drove.



It took ten minutes for Sophia's body to warm and her pulse to return to normal. Alert, she kept turning in the seat, checking behind us.

"Don't worry. They're not coming after us."

“They will.”

“Sophia, we have a lot to talk about. First, I want to know who hurt you.”

“The guy who kidnapped me.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. He had a ski mask on.”

“Tell me what happened.”

She swallowed hard. “I was walking down the road and someone came up behind me. When I realized they had stopped, I started to run, but they caught up with me. I tried to fight him, but he punched me. Next thing I knew, I woke up in the back seat of a truck. At first, I thought it was you. I don’t know why. Then everything came back to me.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“No, just knocked me out.”

“How did you get away from him?”

“When I woke up, I pretended that I was still out and took a second to get my bearings. There was only one guy in the truck, and I figured I had good odds to fight. So, I maced him.”

“You *maced* him?”

“Yep. I had it in my pocket—I carry it in every pocket, actually. I have like twenty of them. They’re disguised as ink pens. I have them literally everywhere in my house and never leave without one on me.”

I remembered the stash of ballpoint pens hidden in her bookcase. “Then what?”

“He screamed, of course. Have you ever been maced?”

“I’ve been in a gas chamber.”

Her brows popped.

“Yeah, for training. Keep going.”

“He ran off the road and into the ditch. The back doors were locked, so I had to scramble up front, and I got out while he was clawing his eyes out. I ran until I couldn’t anymore. Then . . . there you were.”

I shook my head. “If what you’re telling me is true, you know none of this would have happened if you wouldn’t have run away from me in the first place.”

“I got shot at the moment you came into my house. Of course I ran from you.”

“After you kissed me.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why are you being so aggressive with me?”

“Tell me about your relationship with Ron Fitch.”

“My boss?”

I shot her a look. “Don’t fucking do this right now.”

“Stop talking to me like that.”

My knuckles turned white against the steering wheel. “I’m not doing this with you anymore, Sophia. I have no more patience for lies or bullshit. Just talk. Dammit, *just talk.*”

“Fine. He’s my boss at the diner, nothing else. We’re not in a relationship, if that’s where you’re going with this.”

“How about a working relationship?”

“Uh, yeah, I work for him. I just said that.”

“Only at the diner?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sophia, a friend of mine just took a call from Ron Fitch and was shot in the head while talking to him.”

“*What?*”

“Ron is part of Black Cell.”

She stilled with shock and then her jaw dropped, a sudden epiphany widening her eyes. “Oh my God.”

“What?”

“I texted Ron—*before* I was kidnapped—asking if I could borrow his side-by-side. I thought I could drive that out of town. Anyway, I told him I was on my way to the diner. He’s the only one who knew where I was going. If he’s really with Black Cell, he’s the one who tipped off my kidnapper, there’s no question.”

I watched the blood drain from her face. Either Sophia was a really, *really* good liar, or she was genuinely shocked.

I dragged my hand through my hair. “I need you to tell me everything.” I shot her a look. “*Everything*, Sophia. Start at the beginning. Tell me how you’re involved in Black Cell.”

“I’m not anymore. I escaped,” she said, lifting her chin. “That’s why I’m here in Alaska. I picked this place with a dart on a map. I’m not joking. I’ve been here for three years, unbothered, and then you show up and toss everything upside down.”

Anger flashed in her eyes.

“I’d finally laid down roots, established something. I *liked* it here. I had plans to add onto my cabin, to get a dog, maybe . . . And now I have to leave. Again.”

A moment of silence stretched between us. If what Sophia was saying was true, then everything Leo told me was a lie. Sophia was not an informant. She was a woman on the run and therefore very likely did *not* know where Kusma was.

“What is your real name?”

“Aleks Petrova,” she said, her eyes narrowed, daring me to challenge her. “I am Kusma Petrova’s daughter.”

“Aleks Petrova is dead.”

“Yes, she is.”

I chewed on this for a minute, slowly putting the pieces together. I looked over at her. “You paid someone to make you a death certificate, didn’t you?”

“Exactly. My cousin’s name was Ana. We were close. One day, she and I had planned to do a girls’ day of shopping, lunch, that sort of thing. At the last minute, I canceled on her.

She was killed in a horrible car accident that day, and I saw it as an opportunity. I paid an ally of mine to tell everyone I had been in the car with her, that I burned to death next to her, and then paid him to forge my death certificate. That's when I became Sophia Banks. I left Russia that night."

"So, you were born in Russia?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you have an accent?"

"I learned English very young and have spent the last three years getting rid of my accent. I'm never going back. I want to erase all traces of my past."

"Who was your ally? The guy who helped you escape?"

"One of my dad's minions who had a crush on me. I paid him ridiculously well to keep quiet, using money I'd stolen from my dad. It was risky, but I was willing to take that risk." She looked away. "I believe Ana's accident wasn't an accident. I think I was targeted."

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now."

"Aleks—"

"No. Don't call me that. I'm not her anymore. I'm Sophia. Please call me Sophia."

We came to a fork in the road, barely visible through the snow. I hung a right, taking us deeper into the dense Alaskan wilderness.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Somewhere you can't run."

Somewhere I could decide, once and for all, if I could trust this woman.



Justin

We were quickly losing light. The blizzard-like conditions made it almost impossible to see the road ahead—not that there was much to see under the snow that had fallen over the last few hours.

It wasn't just the impassible roads or the wind chill that I worried about, it was the cracking tree limbs I kept hearing in the distance. One big limb could immobilize the SUV, leaving us stranded without a working engine, or if the windows shattered, a barrier against the weather.

I was almost about to come up with a plan B when the GPS beeped from the console, alerting me that I'd arrived at my destination. It was a deserted old one-room cabin that I'd stumbled upon while searching for Sophia after she'd run from me. For some reason, I'd kept the coordinates in my phone, a whisper of intuition telling me I might need them at some point. I'm glad I listened.

Built of rock, concrete, and wood, the old cabin had been overtaken by the forest around it. Half the structure was underground, and the exposed half was consumed by vegetation, all the way up to the roof. A crooked stone chimney clung to the side. I assumed it was at least a hundred years old. Now, it was barely visible under the blanket of snow.

It was perfect.

Sophia stirred as the SUV bumped over the terrain. She blinked and rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Forty-five minutes.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize . . .” Wincing, she gripped the side of her head.

I hit the brakes. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a terrible headache.”

“Your body has been through a lot.”

“Oh my God.” She gawked at the blizzard swirling around us in an apocalyptic color of gray, the last of the muted sunlight.

Her jaw dropped.

“Don’t worry,” I said as I slowly decelerated. “We have shelter.”

Frowning, Sophia squinted at the cabin ahead, which looked like nothing more than a mound of snow. “Where are we?”

“A spot I found while looking for you after you sneaked out of the bathroom window.”

“You looked for me?”

“Of course I did.” I shoved the SUV into park. “We’ll hunker down here tonight.”

Speechless, Sophia gaped at the cabin, her throat working a deep swallow.

“Sorry it’s not the Four Seasons.”

“No,” she said quickly, “it’s fine. I just . . .”

When her voice trailed off, I couldn’t get a read on what she was thinking, and that bothered me.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Just a little shook, I guess.”

“You’re safe here. We’ll reassess in the morning. For now, try to relax.” I grabbed my bag from the back and flung it over my shoulder. “Stay there. I’ll come around.”

To my surprise, Sophia complied.

Icy wind tore through my parka as I opened the door and quickly scooped her into my arms before she could protest. When she wrapped her arms around my neck, I could smell the gentle scent of coconut—the scent of her. Careful to keep the thermal blanket wrapped around her naked legs, I kicked the door closed and trudged through the snow that reached the middle of my boots.

The front door of the cabin was boarded up by a few rotted planks nailed horizontally.

“Turn your face and close your eyes.”

Sophia buried her face in my chest. After two heel kicks, the planks fell to the ground.

“Grab the flashlight from my pocket.”

Sophia did as I told her and slowly aimed the light through the space. It was exactly as I’d expected.

One room, rotted, dilapidated, practically falling apart. The floor was made of concrete, which was good news. The bad news was that the roof had several holes in it, and while the dead vines helped provide a screen, several mounds of snow had gathered on the floor.

The relief from the wind was instant.

I carried Sophia to the side of the room with the most roof cover and kicked away the debris—leaves, twigs, the nest of an animal who had once lived there. Gently, I lowered her onto the floor.

She looked up at me. The bruising under her eye was already beginning to darken. Knowing that someone had physically hurt her drove me insane, consuming me from the inside out. All I could think about was finding the asshole and beating him to death with my fists.

“Look!” she said with startling excitement, pointing to several half-burned logs in the fireplace. Next to it was a stack of more. “Looks like we aren’t the only people to have taken shelter here at one point.”

Luck was on our side. For now.

Sophia had begun shivering again. I took off my coat and draped it around her shoulders, then positioned the flashlight in a way that illuminated half of the space in a dim golden glow.

Fisting my hands on my hips, I surveyed the room. It wasn’t much, but it would get us through the night.



Sophia

*A*fter checking every nook and cranny of the cabin, Justin made several trips to his vehicle while I sat like a bump on a log.

I'd offered to help but was immediately shut down. Not that I minded, considering I was half-naked (under a blanket, at least), and my body felt like it had been run over by a truck. Also, I was incredibly shaken. I knew that I would have died if Justin hadn't found me.

As much as I hated to admit it, the uncertainty I'd felt for him in the beginning was quickly becoming overcome by desire. A longing, a thirst to learn more about him, and for him to want to learn more about me.

I was literally living the white-knight scenario. Me, the damsel in distress; him, my brooding, grumpy, scarred savior. As much as I tried to discount the feelings I was having, it was impossible to ignore what I was feeling. It was uncontrollable.

I wondered if this was what schoolgirls felt when the star quarterback walked by. All heady and giggly with little hearts in their eyes. I wouldn't know. I was homeschooled because life outside my father's control was too dangerous. I was a kidnap risk, I'd been told. A sitting duck for any one of his rivals.

It was at that moment that an epiphany hit me like a wrecking ball. All my life, I'd been waiting for someone to

save me. I was sick of saving myself, over and over again, all alone.

I wanted someone to *want* to save me.

Tripping over these unsettling thoughts, I studied Justin as he cleared the chimney, plunging out the debris with a stick he'd found outside. He didn't mind the black soot raining down on him, the spider webs, the dead leaves. He didn't care much about anything other than the task at hand. He moved from one job to the next with a laser-like focus. He also had hearing like a cat, because the second I began to stand to help, he scolded me.

Once satisfied with the chimney, Justin got to work building a fire, using two starter logs he'd retrieved from his pack.

I watched him in awe. A mercenary, an outdoorsman, a survivalist—an incredibly gorgeous, mysterious creature.

It all felt so primal. Me, in nothing but a shirt and panties, my man building a fire, taking care of me while a storm raged outside.

It took a good twenty minutes for the logs to catch. Once the fire ignited, Justin shifted his focus to me, first aid kit in hand.

“Can you feel the heat?” he asked, kneeling in front of me.

“Yes, thank you. And this blanket helps too.”

“Yeah. It's literally saved my life before.”

He examined the cut on my cheek. His jaw clenched.

Our eyes met. A shiver rippled through me, but this time, not because of the cold.

I could tell Justin wanted to say something, probably to ask for the umpteenth time who hurt me. I wish I knew.

“I need to clean it,” he said instead.

“Okay. Don't worry about hurting me.”

His eyes flashed, locking onto mine with such intensity, I instinctively leaned back.

“I *won't* hurt you. Ever,” he snapped. “Now, be still.”

Justin gently ran his thumb along my swollen cheekbone, leaving a trail of heat over my skin. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

I was extremely attracted to him, yes, but I'd never, ever had such a physical reaction to a man's touch. Most of the contact I'd had with men had been cruel and excruciatingly painful. Something about Justin Montgomery lit me from the inside out.

We didn't speak as he cleaned the wound, then bandaged it with a Band-Aid the size of my fist. I felt embarrassed at how silly I must look, but quickly shook it off. An infection was the last thing I needed.

After tucking the kit back into his bag, he pulled out a canteen of water and an energy bar.

“You need to eat and drink.”

He didn't need to ask twice. The moment the water touched my lips, I realized how thirsty I was—and also starving.

Justin watched me eat, ensuring I ate every single bite. I felt like a prisoner under the heavy scrutiny of my captor, but in a totally sexy dark-romance-novel kind of way.

“Thank you,” I said, handing him the empty wrapper. I felt immensely better. Even my headache had lessened to a dull roar behind my eyes.

Justin moved to my feet, lifted the thermal blanket, and took my left foot in his hand.

I jerked out of his hold and pulled my leg to my chest. “What are you doing?”

“I'm checking for frostbite,” he said with a frown.

“Oh.” A blush crept up my cheeks. “Sorry. I didn't know what you were doing. I don't know why I did that—I haven't

had a pedicure in a long time and I just, I don't know, I'm weird with my feet."

I wanted to laugh at how ridiculous I sounded.

"Well, a pedicure will be the last thing on your mind if you lose your toes."

"Lose my toes?" I squeaked in horror.

Justin's lip quirked with the closest thing to a smile I'd seen. I was amusing him—and also annoying him because he impatiently snapped his fingers.

"Come on, just let me see them."

Begrudgingly, I straightened my legs. He took each foot in his hands, examining each of my toes. I found the whole thing extremely erotic. What the hell was wrong with me? I must be ovulating, I decided. There was no other explanation.

I caught Justin noticing the flush on my neck.

Our eyes met. Electricity crackled between us.

"How are my feet?" I asked quietly, my voice quivering.

He didn't speak for a moment, just considered me with that soul-shaking intensity he was so damn good at.

"They're fine," he said finally. Then he abruptly dropped my foot, stood, and moved to the other side of the room, as far away from me as possible.

I blinked. *Okay then.*

He began pacing the room, rechecking things he'd already checked. He seemed nervous, edgy all of a sudden. *This* amused *me*. Justin didn't know what to do with me. Or was it that he didn't know what to do with himself?

After a few minutes, he stopped pacing and stared between the wooden planks that boarded up the windows and seemed to lose himself in his thoughts. I wanted so badly to know what he was thinking about.

My gaze settled on the jagged scar down his face.

“Where did you get that?” I asked, hugging my knees to my chest.

“Get what?” he said, not offering me his attention.

“That scar.”

A moment passed, and I wondered if he’d heard me. Then he slowly looked at me, and in a voice as emotionless and as cold as ice, he said, “I sliced open my face with a kitchen knife.”

My jaw dropped. It took me a second to find my words. I’d assumed it was an injury from his time in the military.

“You—you did that to yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Ignoring the question, he returned his focus to the window, his expression hard, his eyes narrowed.

I couldn’t imagine someone intentionally mutilating and disfiguring their own face. It was then that I recognized Justin’s soul might be as tortured as my own.

“Come sit with me,” I whispered.

His eyes glinted in the firelight. Again, he didn’t know what to do. I took sick pleasure in the fact that I could do this to him.

I opened the blanket. “Come. Come sit with me.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Sophia.”

“Are you afraid I’m going to kiss you again?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to kiss you.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

After a brief hesitation, Justin joined me under the covers. We sat in identical positions, knees up, arms draped over them, eyes on the fire.

“When I was a girl, me and my cousin, Ana—the one who died in the car accident—had this thing where we would tell

each other our deepest, darkest secrets with the pact that we would carry those secrets to the grave. We had a phrase, *v krovi*, which meant *in blood* in Russian. Anytime we started a conversation with those two words, we knew that we had just entered a safe place. No judging, just listening. She was the only person I could talk to like that, and I sometimes think I would've gone mad without her and our safe place." I looked at him. "You've never had a safe place, have you?"

"Why do you say that?" His voice was low and husky.

"Because I can see it in your eyes. You are a little mad, Justin. There is a side of you that is unrestrained, unchecked, and completely feral. Why did you mutilate yourself?"

He picked up a twig and tossed it into the fire. "My brother was killed."

So, we'd both lost a lifeline.

"When?" I asked.

"Four years ago." His focus turned to me. "Do you know what he was doing when he was killed?"

My stomach clenched.

"He was hunting Black Cell. He was killed because he got too close."

Exhaling, I closed my eyes in shame, recalling all the times I'd heard my father ordering the assassination of undercover spies who had gotten "too close."

"And this was why you cut yourself?" I asked.

What seemed like forever slid by, and just when I was sure he'd closed up again, he said, "In high school, I was always called Pretty Boy." His brow cocked. "If you can believe that."

"I can."

He snorted, then looked away, and I wondered if he even knew how attractive he was.

"Nate—that was my brother's name—was called Tadpole. He was tall and skinny. It was the only way we were different. After he died, I got really messed up on drugs and alcohol.

One night, I grabbed a kitchen knife, went to the bathroom, and sliced open my face so that no one could ever call me Pretty Boy again.”

A flood of emotions rolled through my body, a soul-wrenching empathy that could only be understood by those who have been through such deep, life-changing trauma.

“No,” I whispered.

Justin looked at me, and for the first time, his expression was soft. His armor was cracking.

I continued. “You didn’t cut your face so that no one would call you Pretty Boy again. You did it to erase the memories. Erase Pretty Boy, erase the memories—and erase the pain.”

He gaped at me in epiphany.

My heart broke for him.

Before I could stop myself, I placed my hand on his cheek. “I understand,” I whispered, my chin quivering. “I understand that kind of pain. That kind of anger.”

I slowly trailed my finger down his scar, now the most beautiful piece of his body.

His eyes swimming, he took my hand in his and pressed it against his chest. I could feel his heart pounding through his shirt.

“I won’t let them touch you again,” he whispered against my lips. “I won’t let them hurt you again, Sophia. You have my promise.”

With those words, I dissolved into tears.



Justin

Watching Sophia cry was like reliving all the times I'd been tortured in a single teardrop. Sobbing, she collapsed onto her back and curled into the fetal position.

I saw my mom. I saw her crying on the couch while I did nothing. I saw myself turn my back and walk away. Because I was mad, because I was sad, because I was too goddamn selfish to help someone else while writhing in my own pain.

Never again.

I lay down, scooped Sophia into my arms, and held her tightly. I didn't say anything, didn't know what to say. I just let her know I was there—and that I would never, ever turn my back on her.

She fit like a puzzle piece curled next to me, one of those small but important pieces that completed a vital shape or color. Without it, the picture was nothing but disjointed chaos. A piece that had been missing in my life for years. With each shudder of her body, each snuffle, I felt my heart crack open just a little bit more.

Then, finally—*finally*—the trembles ceased. She started to pull away, but I grabbed her shoulder.

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

I closed my eyes and inhaled as she wrapped her arms around my torso, resting her head in the crook of my neck. I didn't move, didn't want to ever move again for fear of never experiencing this feeling again.

"You don't know who they are, Justin," she said, staring into the fire. "You don't know how brutal, how savage Black Cell is. They will kill anyone who betrays them, or worse, make their lives a living hell."

Sophia lifted up on her elbow. Her eyes were puffy from crying, the tip of her nose pink. She was the most vulnerable, strong, beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life.

"This is the life I lived, Justin. Was born into. And do you want to know the worst part? I thought it was normal. I thought this kind of violence and eye-for-an-eye revenge mentality was simply how people lived day to day."

"Sophia, I'm not going to pretend to understand what you've been through. And I'm going to confess to you that I'm not very good at dealing with emotions—giving or receiving. But I am good at listening, so please, keep talking."

"You're also good at saving my life."

"Yes."

She took a deep breath. "I don't think you want to hear about my past."

"I just confessed to you that I voluntarily dragged a kitchen knife down the side of my face."

"That's a good point." A smile played on her lips, but her eyes were still marked with sadness. "Okay, if you think you can handle it . . ."

I clutched her hand and pressed it against my chest. "I can handle you."

She dragged in a shaky breath. "It wasn't until about age six that I learned who my father was. That Kusma was the head of this super-secret militia group that worked directly for the Russian government, doing very bad things for them. Assassinations, kidnappings, torturing people for information.

My father took orders from the government, no questions asked.”

“Sounds kind of like what I do.”

“No, there is no righteousness with them. Their job was to punish people who rebelled against the government. Kusma was both respected and feared.”

“Where was your mom?”

“Long gone. She was some whore my father got pregnant. She was of no use to him, so she was discarded. Killed, for all I know. God knows why he kept me. There are many days I wish he wouldn’t have.”

Whore. This word usage stuck out to me. How easily she said it, how easily she accepted it. I knew from experience how easy it was to adopt your parents’ bad behavior. Maybe because there is a sense of normality to it, or maybe because it seems less unacceptable as it’s your blood doing it.

“I was eight years old when my father first touched me inappropriately.”

A bomb detonated in my brain. I blinked, my lips parting in shock. Sophia closely watched my reaction, her hand slowly fisting my T-shirt, begging me not to leave, not to surge up in rage and go apeshit—which was exactly what I wanted to do.

“I was too scared to tell anyone,” she said, her voice small and weak. “And then it got worse.” She looked away, her cheeks flushed with shame. “A year later, it progressed to full-on rape. He would make me call him Daddy—” She squeezed her eyes shut, hiding her tears.

It broke my damn heart.

Overwhelmed with emotions, I wrapped my arms around her, cocooning her against my chest. I said, simply, “I’m here. I’m here, I’m right here.”

• • •

Once her tears dried, Sophia rolled out of my hold and onto her back, wiping her eyes. “God, it feels good to tell someone about it, as crazy as that sounds.”

I lifted onto my elbow and looked down at her. “That doesn’t sound crazy. I understand—it felt good to tell you about my scar. To be honest about it, I guess.”

“You’ve never told anyone the real story?”

“Nope. Said I got it in combat. You never told anyone about your father?”

“No. I was too ashamed.”

“Not even your cousin?”

“No.” Sophia took a deep breath. “I truly don’t know where he is. I’m sorry, I don’t. I can’t help you there. Honestly, I don’t ever want to know where he is again. He’s been out of my life for three years, and a lifetime won’t be long enough. I’m trying to get my life back together—or, I guess, *a life*, I should say . . . a new one.”

She chewed on her lip. “You see, after he started abusing me, I kind of turned into someone else. Someone I’m not proud of. Somebody that I am trying very, very hard to shed.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine the person she was referring to. Sophia used her gorgeous looks and her body as a bargaining tactic when it served her. I understood, more than ever, why she’d kissed me that night. It’s how she’d survived in the past. And you know what? I didn’t blame her. She was smart. Sophia used her resources while others perished.

“I don’t judge you, Sophia.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Do you think less of me?”

I thought of all the things I’d done in my life that I wasn’t proud of.

I shook my head, sweeping my thumb over her chin. “We are very, very similar creatures.”

Her fingers intertwined with mine. “I’ve told you almost everything. What questions do you have?”

“Ron Fitch. Did you know?”

“That he was with Black Cell? No, I didn’t. I had no idea. Are you sure he is?”

“Yes. He threatened my contact’s family to earn compliance. And he tipped off whoever kidnapped you.”

“Meaning there are more just like him around here.”

“Exactly. When did Ron start working at the diner?”

“Not long after I began working there. He bought the place from the owner, a really old guy who needed to sell.” She tilted her head to the side. “What? What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that your father knows where you are, who you are, and planted someone to watch you because you are a liability. And when I came around asking questions, he was afraid you’d crack.”

“But why wouldn’t he just kill me if he knew where I was?”

“He just tried to. Twice.”

She groaned, scrubbing her hands over her face.

“You told me that you think you were targeted the day your cousin, Ana, died in the car accident. If that’s true, why did your father want you dead?”

“Because I had failed miserably at being a wife.”

“You’re *married*?” My stomach plummeted.

“I was, before I faked my own death.”

“To whom?”

“His name is Viktor Lukin. Kusma was grooming him to take over Black Cell.”

The name burned like a tattoo on my brain.

“He was like my father . . .”

Our eyes met in understanding. He’d raped her too.

For the next hour, Sophia told me all about her and Viktor’s arranged marriage, about how horrible he was to her,

about how her sole purpose was to provide her husband a baby. And finally, about what her father had done to her when she asked for a divorce. By the end of her story, I was physically shaking.

“Where is Viktor now?” I clenched my teeth, seething.

“Who knows? Rotting away in a mansion surrounded by a harem of women and a dozen maids.” She shook her head. “He made me clean the house from top to bottom every day. He was obsessed with order and cleanliness.”

“Ah.”

She squinted, a smirk tugging at her lips. “Yes, that’s why I currently live in a pigsty. It’s my F-you to him. I don’t ever want to be a maid again.”

“Good for you. I don’t blame you.”

She snorted, then her face fell once again. “Anyway, he probably has four babies to his name by now.” She paused. “This is why I think I was the target that day with Ana.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My sole purpose was to give my husband a child. I couldn’t. I had multiple miscarriages, which rendered me useless to him. I think my father told him I wanted to divorce him, and I think Viktor paid someone to kill me to save his precious ego.” She took a deep inhale and shook her head. “He probably doesn’t even remember me anymore.”

“I doubt that.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re impossible to forget.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please.”

“Sophia, look at me. It’s true. I haven’t stopped thinking about that goddamn kiss. Whether your intentions were pure or not, I don’t care. I didn’t care . . . It was—it has—consumed me.”

“Me too,” she whispered. “Can we start over?”

“Yes. And this time, you’re in complete control.”



Sophia

Our lips collided in an explosion of passion.

Strong, calloused hands cupped my cheeks as Justin devoured me with a needy intensity that rendered me motionless underneath him. His kiss was greedy, frenzied, melting me into nothing more than simply . . . me. *Me*—whoever I was without all the armor and all the lies. In that single kiss, I *was*. There was no past, no present, no insecurity, no fighting myself or my decisions.

In that kiss, I let go. Of everything.

In him, I let go.

I began to shiver, my body unaccustomed to the feral electricity shooting like lightning between us.

I was scooped into his thick, muscular arms. He rolled onto his back, taking me with him. We kissed madly, shedding each other's clothes.

The heat from the fire washed over my backside as I straddled him, feeling his erection against my ass. My skin tingled with both adrenaline and excitement. Something inside me surged to life, an all-consuming need that demanded to be assuaged. This time, I cupped his face, demanding his submission while I became someone I'd never met before. Someone who shamelessly took what she wanted.

Reaching back, I wrapped my hand around his thick shaft, as hard as an iron rod. Our tongues swirled together, my thighs

clamping around his hips like a vise, my pussy grinding against his thick, springy hair.

He moaned into my mouth, and unable to take it a second longer, flipped me onto my back and rolled on top of me.

Our gazes clashed like thunder, his wild slitted eyes twinkling in the firelight. Me, the prey, and he the predator.

Justin pinned one of my arms over my head and took my breast with the other hand. I gasped as his mouth closed over my hard nipple, his fingers pinching and kneading the base of it.

“Oh my God.” I breathed out the words, feeling as if I were floating.

While his tongue suckled and licked my nipple, he released my wrist and trailed his hand down my torso, my waist. I squirmed, the throbbing between my legs all but screaming out for him.

His finger dipped inside me. Once lubricated, his fingertip slid over my clit. Gentle, rhythmic swirls felt like electric shocks between my legs. My pussy actually ached, the throbbing so intense that I was sure all the blood in my body had drained to that single spot.

He released my nipple, found my mouth again, and lowered on top of me. I groaned under his weight, pure muscle, all man.

I almost cried out when his finger left my clit.

“Take me,” I whispered breathlessly. “Take me, Justin.”

His eyes met mine as he swept a strand of hair out of my face. “I already have.”

He then slid the head of his cock between my lips, teasing me while he wet the shaft. I tipped my head back like the prey of a vampire, begging to be feasted upon. My legs opened wider, my hips feeling like they could unhinge from the sockets.

I cried out as he thrust inside me, an explosion of pain and pleasure that knocked the breath from my lungs.

“*Fuck.*” He moaned, dropping his head into my neck.

Clawing at his back, I thrust upward to meet his deep, powerful strokes.

Lips on mine, he dragged his fingers through my hair, his erection stretching me from the inside out. I couldn’t take it anymore. My entire body was trembling, my pulse flying, my head spinning.

“I’m going to come,” I said, barely coherent.

“Me too,” he said breathlessly against my lips. “Can I come inside you?”

“*Yes.*”

We released together, my pussy convulsing around the warm strings of cum pulsing inside me. I thrust upward again and again, needing to feel every drop of him inside me.

It was the sexiest moment of my life.

Once the world stopped spinning, Justin collapsed onto me, our chests heaving. I continued to weakly pulse around him, my body short-circuiting from the orgasm. He moaned with each pulse.

Finally, he lifted his head and gazed down at me, his lids heavy with satiation.

We watched each other in wonder, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again.

For a long time, we didn’t speak. We lay in front of the fire, me wrapped in his arms, resting my head in the crook of his shoulder—my new favorite place—as he gently caressed my shoulder with his thumb.

Every few minutes, he’d lift his head and kiss me on the temple as if needing to remind himself I was real. That *this* was real.

“I don’t want to leave here,” I whispered.

“I don’t want you to leave me again.”

“Let’s run away, Justin, just you and me.”

A long moment stretched between us.

Finally, he said, “The only way to stop running is to take care of what you’re running from. Only then can you be free, Sophia.”

I lifted my head, looking down at him. “What are you going to do with my father once you find him?”

He pinned me with his gaze, so intense that my heart skipped a beat.

“I’m going to kill him, Sophia.”



Sophia

The next morning, I awoke in Justin's arms.

A blinding whiteness shined like silver swords through the holes in the roof and the slits in the windows. I didn't have to look outside to know that snow covered everything. Thankfully, though, not a single flake was falling from the sky. The storm had moved on.

I blinked a few times, feeling like I was still in a dream. The smell of him, the touch of our naked skin under the thermal blanket, the smile on my lips, the safety in my heart. I wanted to keep all of it forever.

But how? Does he want it too?

I stayed still, not wanting to wake Justin as memories of the night before flooded my brain. My body responded immediately to these erotic thoughts, sending a rush of heat between my legs.

But just as quickly, the heat was chilled by the memory of the icy tone of his words: *I'm going to kill him, Sophia.*

You probably think Justin telling me that he was going to kill my pedophile, incestuous, rapist father wouldn't have fazed me. Hell, you'd probably think I would have given him a high five.

But you would be wrong. For reasons that made absolutely no sense, I had mixed feelings about the fact that the man

whom I was undoubtedly falling madly, head over heels in love with, was going to kill my father.

Kusma was a vile, evil human being, yes, but he was my blood. Could I sit on the sidelines while Justin took my father's life? And why did it have to be him to do it? Why couldn't I just wake up one day and hear that one of Kusma's rivals had taken him out? Why did it feel like that would be easier?

Yes, the snow might have stopped, but it felt like I was on the verge of an entirely different kind of storm.

Justin's thumb stroked my shoulder. Butterflies awakened in my belly.

His grip around me tightened. I smiled into the nook of his arm, blushing.

God, I don't want this to go away.

"Your thinking woke me up." A gruff, oh-so-sexy voice vibrated from deep in his chest.

"Sorry. I didn't think my anxiety had reached telepathic levels."

He kissed my temple. "You okay?"

"I think so."

Pulling his arm out from under me, Justin lifted onto his elbow. I relaxed against the floor and looked up at the man that I was *already* in love with.

Shit.

"Talk to me," he said. "Remember, I'm a good listener."

"You're good at a lot more than that."

He grinned. "I know. And you're good at deflecting."

I scrubbed my hands over my face. "I'm . . ." I squeezed my eyes shut, hiding under my hands. "It's just . . . I have strong feelings for you."

A moment passed, and I thought I was going to die of embarrassment. Just when I was about to slide out from under

him and run away buck naked into the snow (which would have stung less than Justin's lack of words at that moment), he gently pried my hands away from my face.

When I opened my eyes, his expression shocked me. It was one of affection. Adoration. Love.

"I know," he said simply, the corner of his lip curling up.

"That's it?" I deadpanned. "That's all you've got?"

"I also know that you know that I feel exactly the same about you."

"Do I?"

"You knew it the moment I kissed you back when you fake-kissed me."

I exhaled, feeling my pulse begin to calm. He was right. And why do women need such reassurance?

I shook my head. "This is just so crazy, you know? You're hunting *my father*, Justin. And you just slept with your target's daughter."

"Wrong. I actually slept with my target, which is *way* worse." He smoothed back my hair, gazing down at me. "We are living moment to moment now. Everything has been flipped on its head. But one thing is for certain—I am not leaving you."

"And I'm not leaving you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I exhaled, then began chewing on my lower lip. "Can you call your boss? Can he do something to help us?"

Justin snorted. "Not if I want to live another day."

"What do you mean?"

"I've officially gone rogue on this mission. Which is unacceptable, as it should be. In the world of mercenaries, there is either a successful mission or a failed one. There is no in-between—no matter what happens. I've already made

decisions that will get me fired. Decisions I would make again and again and again, to be clear.”

“So, what do we do?” I asked.

“Make a plan.”

“I told you what I want to do. I want to leave. Run away. I’m not joking.”

He shook his head. “I’m not running away anymore. After Nate died, I ran away from my mother when she needed me the most. It doesn’t solve anything, only makes it worse. I won’t do it again.”

“But this time we’re running away together.”

“No, Sophia. Our problems won’t just go away, and you know that as much as I do.”

Justin was right. My father and his men would never stop hunting us, especially now.

“Does this new plan involve you leaving me, then? Hiding me away somewhere while you go all mercenary on my father and his men?”

“No. But you have to do exactly as I say, when I say, how I say, where I say it.”

I nodded, then looked away.

“What?”

“I . . .” I had no idea how to broach the subject, so I just came out with it. “I don’t want you to kill my father.”

“Too bad.”

“What do you mean, too bad?”

“Exactly what I said. The asshole not only abused you in the most unfathomable ways, but he also ordered the killing of my brother. He and I have a score to settle, and I won’t rest until he pays. If you don’t want to be a part of this, I have somewhere I can take you until it’s done. I have friends who could—”

“No.”

“Sophia, you need to hear this. I would—I will—kill for you. It doesn’t make sense, but it doesn’t have to. It is what it is, and here we are.”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. “This is all so . . . crazy.”

“I will handle it. All of it. You don’t have to be a part of any of it.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Let me make some calls.”

“No.”

“Sophia—”

“No.” I sat up and crossed my arms over my naked breasts. “You just said you weren’t going to leave me. Listen, obviously, both of us have huge abandonment issues—you for leaving your mom, and me, for well, having absolutely no one to take care of me my entire life. We are in this together. And besides, haven’t you ever read a romantic suspense novel?”

“You mean all those books with the naked dudes on your bookshelf?”

My brow cocked. “Jealous, are you?”

“Not after making you scream like you did last night.”

I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, you know what happens every time the hero leaves the woman? Boom. Gone,” I flutter my fingers, “like the wind. The bad guys get her every time.”

“Sophia—”

“I’m not weak,” I snapped. “I know I’ve cried like a baby since you’ve met me, but I am strong. I’ve survived things I shouldn’t have, and here I am.”

“Believe me, I know you’re not weak.” He ran a finger down my cheek. “The difference now, Sophia,” he leaned in, his lips brushing mine, “is that you have someone else to fight for you.”

I cursed the tears that instantly sprang into my eyes. “Dammit, Justin, do you see what you do to me?”

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Cry. Let it out.”

Instead, I cupped his face, that beautiful scarred face.

“Just shut up and make love to me, Justin. Right now. Forget everything around us. Just make me feel like you did last night.”

After making me feel *exactly* like he had the night before—times ten—Justin and I packed up what few provisions we had and loaded them into the SUV.

Even with snow chains secured on all four tires, it took three hours to make it back to Falcon Creek, a drive that should have taken twenty minutes. At least once every mile, Justin had to get out and shovel a path through a drift or move a tree limb so that we could pass.

I was worried about him. I knew he hadn't slept much in the last few days, which in itself is unhealthy, but after shoveling snow for hours, his body had to be past the point of exhaustion. We'd eaten nothing but protein bars and water. His face was pale, his eyes bloodshot and colored with dark circles.

I knew from experience how exhaustion, both physical and emotional, can confuse proper decision-making. With Justin, I had a feeling it also triggered his temper and short fuse as well.

Overhead, a blanket of dark, brooding clouds hung low in the sky, fitting for the mood inside the SUV.

“Remind me again what we're doing,” I asked, wringing my hands.

“We are going to have a chat with Ron Fitch.”

“A chat, huh?” I cocked a brow.

“Yep.”

I began counting off on my fingers. “To, one: confirm he is working for Black Cell. Two: figure out who killed your contact. And three: figure out if he tipped off whoever kidnapped me.”

“And four, see if he knows where Kusma is.”

“What if he’s not at the diner?”

“You said he works every day.”

“Yeah, but if he is responsible for any one of the things I just stated, don’t you think he would have skipped town?”

“Not if he was ordered not to.”

I chewed on that for a second. “And you really think he’s just going to tell you everything?”

Justin shot me a look.

“*Oh*. You’re going to interrogate him.”

“If he doesn’t talk, yes.”

I could only imagine what a man who would willingly drag a knife down his own face could do to a bad guy.



It was late morning by the time we arrived at Creek House Diner. Ron’s truck was parked in his usual spot, in the back corner.

Through the window, I could see Velma and her trademark gray bun. She appeared to be making a fresh pot of coffee for the only diner in the restaurant, an elderly man who I recognized as a local. Eddie, I think, was a widower who lived just a few miles from the town center. He came in every single morning for a carafe of coffee and two blueberry muffins.

Justin parked behind Ron’s truck, blocking him in. He cut the engine, then turned to me. “Do exactly as I say, when I say, do you understand?”

“Yes.” My heart began to pound.

“Let’s go.”

Justin grabbed my hand as we met at the back of the vehicle and held it tightly as we crossed the parking lot. Not a sweet *I love you so much* kind of squeeze, but more of a *stay close or else* grip.

The steel back door of the diner was unlocked, as usual. I'd chastised Ron many times about being so cavalier with our security, but he never listened. He would definitely regret that now.

I was greeted by the familiar sounds and smells of my workplace. Old country music, fresh coffee, and grease.

Ron was standing with his back to us, flipping strips of bacon on the long black griddle I'd once learned to make hash browns on.

"Stay back," Justin muttered, dropping my hand.

Tunnel-visioned, he barreled into the kitchen like he owned the place, grabbed the back of Ron's collar with one hand, and with the other, bent Ron's arm behind his back.

Ron bellowed in pain, folding at the waist to release the tension in his shoulder. His face stopped inches above the sizzling-hot griddle. Instinctively, Ron slapped his free hand onto the griddle to attempt to push away. The scream that came out of him sent my hair standing on end.

I could smell his skin frying.

Someone screamed from the restaurant.

Snapping into action, I spun on my heel and rushed Velma, who was charging into the kitchen.

"Stop." I grabbed her shoulders, blocking her entry.

Her eyes rounded in terror as she took in the barbaric scene behind me.

Words were being exchanged between Justin and Ron, and although I couldn't make them out, based on Justin's tone, he was none too pleased with the conversation.

"What the hell is going on?" Velma squealed, hives breaking out on her neck.

"Please, stop." I pressed into her, forcing her backward. "Everything is okay. Just don't go in there. I need you to be calm. You're okay. And please don't call the cops after we leave. I just need you to trust me on this."

Just then, Eddie shot out the front door with the speed of a jungle cat, jumped into his truck, and peeled out. *Smart man.*

“What’s going on?” Velma demanded, spittle flying from her lips.

“I can’t tell you.”

“He’s hurting him!”

“I know.”

“Jesus, Sophia, he’s going to kill him!”

“I know you don’t understand, but please just stay back. I repeat, you are safe. *You* are safe. You are not going to get hurt.”

“What about *you*?” Her wild eyes met mine. “You came in with him—holy shit! Is that the same man who fought those two drunk hunters the other day?”

“Yes. I know him, and yes, I am safe.”

Velma’s attention shot over my shoulder, and she screamed.

I turned around to see Justin dragging Ron across the kitchen floor while Ron wailed, waving his burned hand in the air. It looked like it was melting off his arm.

Justin kicked open the door to the bathroom, threw Ron inside, and turned to me. His eyes were feral, crazy, and extremely disturbing.

“Sophia, I don’t want to do this in front of you. Go into the restaurant until I come back out.”

Swallowing the knot in my throat, I dipped my chin, turned on my heel, grabbed Velma, and pulled her into the restaurant with me.

As I was locking the front door, the horrific sounds coming out of the bathroom turned my blood to ice.

Velma had pressed herself into the far corner of the room and was muttering prayers while crossing herself.

As we stood there listening to what sounded like an animal being tortured to death, something snapped inside me.

I thought of all the people my father had made cry like that.

Of Ana and our last conversation before she was killed.

Of the back of Viktor's hand connecting with my cheek.

Of me on my knees, calling my father *Daddy*.

Of Justin dragging a kitchen knife down his face while grieving his brother—dead because of my father.

Justin was right. It was time to end this, so that no one else had to go through what he and I had.



Justin

“*W* here is Kusma?”

Ron choked on the blood running down his throat. Chunky red mucus sputtered from his mouth when he said, “I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.”

Fisting his hair, I yanked back his head and slammed it again into the white porcelain sink, now splattered red with blood. He gagged, spat, and three teeth tumbled onto the tiled floor.

It had been a while since I’d physically tortured someone for information. Normally, I dragged out the event for as long as I could, enjoying every second of it.

But not that day. I had no patience for that shit-eating asshole. Ron had already admitted to working for Black Cell. Everything else, however, was getting muddled in bloody translation. Also, I didn’t like not having eyes on Sophia.

I was impatient, pissed, and desperate. Not a good combination.

“Time’s up.” I pulled him off the floor.

I yanked open the bathroom door and dragged him out.

“Turn around,” I ordered Sophia, who was guarding the front door. Once she did, I dragged Ron back to the griddle,

grabbed the oil, and sprayed the surface. The griddle erupted in flames, the oil popping everywhere.

“No, God, no, no, no.” Ron’s eye, the one that wasn’t swollen shut, rounded in horror. He begged in garbled sobs. “No, no, no . . .”

“Stand the hell up.”

Keeping a grip on the back of his collar, I maneuvered behind him and pressed his gut against the lip of the griddle. I’d already tied his hands behind his back, so they were no use to him.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, Ron.”

I twisted his collar. He gasped for air and wept like a child, asking for someone to save him.

Not today.

“Where is Kusma?”

“I—I . . .”

“Wrong answer.”

He turned his face a split second before it connected with the griddle. He screamed like a banshee. As his ear and half his face melted on the black surface, his knees buckled, and he shit himself.

“*Dammit.*” I hopped back, keeping my hold on his shirt collar.

Now I was furious.

I peeled his face from the griddle. The layer that remained cooked like bacon. He vomited everywhere.

“My face,” he sputtered, hyperventilating. “My face.”

“You have three seconds to tell me where Kusma is before I cook the other side of your face.”

“I . . . he’s . . .”

“Three, two, one.”

I jerked him up.

“*No!*” he screamed. “Please, no! I will take you to him. I know where he is. Please stop.” Sobbing, he choked out, “I will take you to him.”



Sophia

My knuckles were white as I clenched the steering wheel, my gaze constantly flicking to the rearview mirror where Ron sat slumped over, his hands and feet bound by zip ties. His clothes were covered in blood. Justin sat next to him, behind me, with a gun to his head.

Ron's face was almost unrecognizable, as well as absolutely revolting. One of his eyes was swollen shut, the thin skin around it puffed like an overblown purple balloon. Dried blood trickled down his nose and out of the corners of his mouth.

But the side of his face was the worst. The first few layers had been burned off, and what remained was an oozing fire-red patch of flesh that looked like it was melting off his skull. It reminded me of a Freddy Krueger mask.

Justin had updated me while we laid a tarp in the back of the SUV before throwing Ron inside. Apparently, Justin drew the line at shit-pants.

As Justin had suspected, Ron worked for Black Cell. After I'd escaped Russia, my father hired Ron to find me. When he did, he assigned Ron to Falcon Creek to keep an eye on me, while simultaneously recruiting young male misfits from Anchorage and the surrounding area to join the movement. According to Ron, my father planned to travel to Falcon Creek to personally escort me back to Russia. He never did.

Ron swore up and down that he was not the man who kidnapped me, though Justin and I were both certain he'd tipped off whoever did.

But I didn't care about any of that. I was about to see my father for the first time in three years.

I'd spent hours preparing for this reunion during my weaker, wine-fueled moments after I'd escaped. I think deep down, I knew that someday he'd find me. In front of the mirror, I'd practiced what I would say, how I would react. What I would do.

For a long time, I practiced forgiving him. Saying those three little words that, according to the mounds of self-help books I'd purchased, were supposed to set me free.

They didn't. News flash: It's all a lie.

The truth? There are some things, like a father raping his daughter, that are quite simply unforgivable. There is no gray area, no debate. It is unequivocally the worst, most unforgivable act of humankind.

So, where did this leave me? Spitting words of condemnation into the mirror that I knew would bounce off him like cotton balls.

A man who is capable of such deviant behavior has no emotional capacity to feel guilt, remorse, or to worry about petty things like the afterlife. These men will keep going, keep spreading evil, keep destroying lives until someone stops them.

I looked into the rearview mirror. "Justin?"

Ron hadn't spoken in thirty minutes. I was beginning to worry that he was dead, which would have been a worst-case scenario considering he was our guide for this little field trip.

"What if this is a trap?"

"Then I'll fight through it."

"No. *We* will fight through it."

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “You, Sophia, will do exactly as I say. This is very important. Do you understand?”

I swallowed the knot in my throat and nodded.

“Trust me,” he whispered.

I drew in a ragged breath. “Okay.”



Sophia

We waited until nightfall.

It had started snowing again by the time we arrived at our location, an upscale neighborhood on the outskirts of Anchorage—although calling it a *neighborhood* was a stretch because there were ten wooded acres between each home. Basically, this was where the richest of the rich lived.

I could see my father choosing this spot. It had access to the ports, which was vital for anyone dealing in dirty commodities, and also ideal for those who needed quick exits, especially to Russia. Also, the ocean is a great place to dump bodies.

The adrenaline rush from the “interrogation” Justin had given Ron had dissolved hours earlier, leaving him in a world of pain. Though he remained silent and compliant, driven by the gun Justin kept pressed to his temple.

“Stop and kill the lights,” Justin said.

I braked at the end of a long, winding driveway lined with ornate lampposts. Snow flurries drifted from the darkness overhead.

“This is it?” Justin tapped the barrel of the gun against Ron’s head.

“Yes. This is one of Kusma’s homes. He purchased it when he learned his daughter was in the area,” Ron mumbled,

squinting through his one good eye.

A shiver rippled over my skin. “What now?” I said over my shoulder.

“We go say hi.” Justin cocked a brow, surveying the landscape ahead.

“Smartass.”

He winked.

“Okay.” I inhaled, lifting my chin. “Here we go.”

“Keep the lights off, okay?”

“You got it. Trust me, I’m in no hurry to announce our arrival.”

Slowly, I drove up the driveway as anticipation swirled in the air around us. I could practically feel the adrenaline pouring off Justin. Ron was even sitting up fully now, his head on a swivel.

I understood this reaction. I felt the same way when approaching my father.

At the end of the drive, a sprawling futuristic-looking mansion sat atop a bluff that overlooked a massive black lake. Gray concrete walls framed sweeping windows and countless terraces over multiple levels. Everything was sharp ninety-degree angles, like a bunch of boxes stacked on and around each other. The home was cold and uninviting, just like my father.

If I had to guess, he had a fancy boat somewhere below, stocked with everything he needed to run at a moment’s notice.

Aside from security lights, the home was mostly dark, save for a distant glow coming from somewhere in the back.

The moment I slid the SUV into park, two men stepped out from the shadows, guns drawn.

“Justin. We’ve got company.”

“Guards,” Ron said unhelpfully.

“How many are there?”

“Three,” Ron said. “At all times.”

“Stay here.” Justin handed me his pistol. “If Ron makes one move, shoot him in the face.”

The guards were less than twenty feet away, their urgency increasing with each step. Dressed in all black, they were tall and thick and scary as hell.

I nodded, my heart pounding. “Hurry.”

After retrieving a spare gun from the glove box, Justin loaded the chamber, then slipped out the back door.

Pop, pop!

Both guards crumpled like a deck of cards.

My door swung open.

“Okay, out,” Justin said, reloading. “The clock is ticking now.”

After using the thumbprint of one of the guards to unlock the front door, we stepped inside.

The instant I crossed the threshold, my blood turned ice cold. I could *feel* his presence. I could feel the evil in the home. Adding to the creepiness factor, the low melody of haunting instrumental music was playing from somewhere inside.

We’d gagged Ron with a bandanna to ensure his compliance.

“Stay at my hip,” Justin ordered in a low growl.

No problem.

Gun up, Justin led us through the foyer, pushing Ron ahead of him, his gun pressed into Ron’s kidney.

The music grew louder, the low, eerie moan of the cello sending goose bumps rippling over my arms.

We followed the light to a living area adjacent to the kitchen that opened to a large patio. A sitting area centered the room, with plush leather couches, stained-glass floor lamps,

and a rolling wet bar filled with crystal decanters of whiskey. Bookshelves lined most of the walls. Next to the entry was a concrete fireplace, large enough to burn a body.

A fire roared inside it, popping and hissing.

A man wearing a black sweater and black slacks was standing with his back to us, the firelight dancing against his shiny bald head.

My entire world stopped. My heart, my breath, my legs. I felt as if I'd been struck by lightning.

I knew who he was before he even turned from the window.

Viktor Lukin.

My husband.

Justin was watching me closely, noticing my abrupt stop. I was rooted to the spot like a statue.

Taking no time to figure it out, he narrowed his eyes, his jaw clenched as he reset his sights on the man I was forced to marry, the man who had raped and abused me just like my father had.

It was then that it hit me—Viktor was the one who'd kidnapped me. He was wearing the same black sweater, and underneath the beanie was nothing but skin.

Martini in hand, gun tucked into the waistband of his slacks, Viktor turned and studied Ron, his gagged, bloodied, beaten colleague. Instead of rushing to his aid, Victor chuckled and shook his head, disgusted by Ron's lack of physical fortitude. Then he focused on us, smiling politely as if we'd been invited to Sunday brunch.

He'd been expecting us.

We stopped in front of the fireplace in a line of three. Me, Ron, and Justin. The heat from the fire was suffocating, sending beads of sweat forming over my skin.

My heart hammered.

“Took you guys long enough to get here,” he said.

My stomach dropped. God, that *voice*. It had been so long

...

“You could’ve just had Leo drive straight here. Would’ve saved everyone some time,” Justin said.

Viktor shrugged flippantly.

“But you killed him because you were afraid he was telling me your secrets.”

“I did, yes. He was a tortured soul . . .” Viktor regarded Justin closely, and I recognized the spark in his eye, the one he got right before he started a fight. “Something you, Justin Montgomery, know plenty about.”

Viktor was referring to Justin’s deceased brother. He was poking him, taunting him, and by the flush on Justin’s neck, I was worried he was taking the bait.

“Where is my father?” I asked, pulling Viktor’s attention to me.

“Right here.” Victor grinned, opening his arms widely. “I am Kusma. The new, and may I say highly improved, Kusma Petrova.”

“Take one more step toward her,” Justin said, his voice sending a chill up my spine, “and I will kill Ron and then kill you.”

Ignoring the threat, Viktor tilted his head to the side, amused. “Ah. So, she’s manipulated you too, huh? She made you think she loves you?” His grin widened.

His teeth were blindingly white. His skin was paler than I remembered, and he’d lost weight. An albino python.

Viktor continued. “She is cunning, this one. Did she tell you how many men she fucked to get what she wanted? How many dicks she’s swallowed? You’re just a number, GI Joe. Know your place.”

An arm suddenly wrapped around my throat, and I was yanked backward, pulled a few feet away from Justin and Ron. My body hit against the hard body of another guard. The cold blade of a knife pressed against the side of my throat.

“Don’t you dare move,” Viktor yelled as Justin released Ron and lunged toward me. “Drop your gun, or I will have your whore decapitated in under three seconds.”

Justin froze, and our eyes met.

The gun dropped, clattering onto the floor.

“Kick it away.”

My stomach sank as I watched the gun slide out of view across the concrete floor.

Clawing off his gag, Ron stumbled away and collapsed onto the leather couch.

Viktor dipped his chin to the man holding me. A gun appeared next to my face, followed by two ear-splitting shots. The back of Ron’s head exploded into a red cloud. Blood and brain matter splattered everywhere, parts of it landing in the fireplace and sizzling against a log.

“He was of no use to me anymore. No, Justin. Do. Not. Move.” Viktor sniffed, flicking a piece of Ron’s skull from his sweater. “Good boy.”

Viktor advanced, returning his attention to me. He walked slowly, a cocky saunter that I recognized from my darkest days.

“As for your question, my dear wife, I killed your father three years ago. The moment he officially put me second in charge, I took his spot and his name. You should thank me, really. He was just about to give you a little surprise, showing up at your doorstep.”

So, that’s why no one could find my father. He was dead, and his death was kept secret by those few who worked directly with him.

My *husband* killed my *father*.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t shocked. Viktor idolized my father, and Kusma trusted him.

Viktor stopped at the edge of the fireplace, studying Justin in a predatory way that made my stomach clench. His finger

curled around the trigger of his pistol. He looked at me, the corner of his lip curling up.

Victor was about to kill Justin—in front of me. To punish me for leaving him.

Panic flooded my system. The only word I could think was *no*.

I reacted instinctively, with no hesitation. I slammed the heel of my boot into the guard's kneecap, sending it popping backward.

“*Sonofabitch,*” he bellowed, momentarily relaxing his arms.

I lunged out of the bastard's hold, grabbed the black wrought-iron shovel from the fireplace, and threw sizzling-hot embers into Viktor's face. Before I could react, gunshots blew through the air, screams, then a blow to my head so hard that my entire world went black.

I awoke seconds later to total chaos.

I was back in the guard's arms, being yanked backward, the same knife cutting into my skin. Viktor was screaming, his eyes streaming tears, his face mottled with angry red burns. He held two guns now, one in each hand, one pointed at me, the other at Justin.

Justin's stance caught my attention. His shoulders were hunched, his hip cocked at an unusual angle. Then I noticed the trail of blood down his side.

He'd been shot.

“Justin!” I screamed, barely feeling the puncture of the blade against my skin.

The rug beneath our feet caught fire and the flames began to spread quickly. The heat was searing as thick black smoke began to swirl around us.

“You fool.” Viktor's chest heaved with rage.

Keeping his arms up, guns pointed at us, he stepped backward to a narrow door between two bookcases.

“You might not know me,” he sneered at Justin, “but I know you, Justin Montgomery. Every deep, dark corner of your life. Every single regret.”

He opened the door.

A dim orange overhead light spotlighted a man wearing tattered clothing. He sat slumped in a chair, a rope tied around his torso and his ankles. Lines of scars marred his exposed skin, neck, arms, and shins.

I squinted, taking in the prisoner. He was a tall, skinny version of Justin.

Oh my God.

Justin’s face had paled as if he’d seen a ghost. In a way, I guess he had. The man tied to the chair was Nate, Justin’s brother, who was supposed to be dead.

As he reveled in Justin’s shock, a wicked grin crossed Viktor’s face. “Your brother has been my captive for four years. We kept him as leverage, in case the US government found us.”

Black smoke engulfed us. I began coughing, choking. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Even then, the guard didn’t release me.

The fire had reached the bookcases, blinding-white flames flicking all the way up to the ceiling. Viktor opened the sliding glass doors to the patio, where several propane tanks sat next to a grill. Feeding off the fresh oxygen, the flames ballooned as if inhaling lighter fluid.

“Looks like we’ve got about five seconds before we’re all blown to bits.” Viktor’s eyes were wild. “Who will you save, Justin? The brother you thought was dead? Or the whore you’ve let con you?”

With that, Viktor spun on his heel, cackling a mad maniacal laugh that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Who will you choose?

Five.

Trust me, Justin's words filtered through my head.

Four.

Trust me.

Three.

From inside the tiny room, Nate lifted his head, his eyes locking on Justin—his brother. His fingers fluttered.

Two.

Outside, the flames engulfed the tanks.

With a guttural scream, Justin bent over and pulled a KA-BAR knife from each of his boots. He hurled one into the air, then turned and lunged through the smoke.

The guard released me, but it was too late. Justin leaped onto him like a wild animal, plunging the knife into his neck. The man was dead before he even hit the floor.

I was swept off my feet and cocooned against Justin's chest.

"Hold on, baby."

As we sprinted across the room, I could barely make out the figure running next to us, KA-BAR in hand, binds falling off his long skinny limbs piece by piece.

The house exploded the moment we jumped out the window, the blast so loud, so earth-shattering, I saw stars.



Sophia

My ears rang from the explosion. My focus was blurred. I felt confused and disoriented, but safe knowing I was in Justin's arms. Through the ringing in my ears, I could barely discern the urgent conversation above me.

"Are you okay? Brother, are you okay?" Justin's voice.

"You've been shot." This from Nate.

"Flesh wound. I'm fine."

"Are you sure—"

"I'm fine."

"Holy shit, man. I can't believe you're here. You found me. What the hell did you do to your face?"

"That's a story for another time. You're scarred too—everywhere."

"Yeah, the asshole liked to drag his knife down my skin. Jesus, man, I can't believe you remembered our code. I can't believe you could read my signal—"

"I looked at your fingers the second I realized it was you. You flashed me the code for *fight*. So, I did. You fought good, brother."

"You saved my life."

"Nate, I'm so sorry—"

“No. Don’t do that. Not right now. For now, we’ve got to get Viktor before he disappears. Did you see which way he ran?”

“Yes. I need you to stay here and watch Sophia. Here’s my gun. I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To finish this.”

“Godspeed, brother. Godspeed.”



Justin

I ran like a crazed animal through the woods, the hilt of my knife gripped in one hand, the blade slashing violently through the ice-cold air. I couldn't even feel my gunshot wound.

Like a lion on the hunt, I'd gone savage, blindly chasing my target with no regard to consequence or self-preservation. In that moment, my sole purpose for living was to hunt down the man who'd raped my woman and tortured my brother.

I was completely out of my mind.

I ran parallel to the manicured path that led to the boat slip at the bottom of the cliff, where I knew Viktor would be. Running like the pussy he was.

Through the darkness, the lights of the boat clicked on.

Like a shark smelling blood, I pressed faster, flying over the terrain, kicking up clouds of snow in my wake. My heart roared, my lungs burned, my fingers tingled with that insatiable urge to kill, to take, to end life.

I can say without hesitation that if anyone—man, woman, or child—would have stepped into my path in that moment, I would have sliced them to pieces.

Without breaking speed, I leaped onto the dock the moment the engine fired up. Puffs of smoke barreled from the exhaust, the scent of marine fuel filling the air. The boat swayed under the drop of weight as I climbed aboard.

Viktor stood at the hull of the speedboat, readying his escape. Startled by the dip of the boat, he grabbed his pistol and spun around, shakily pointing the barrel at my chest. The burns on his face looked like angry, oozing chicken pox.

There was no hesitation, no stopping, no break in my step. Lunging forward, I ripped the pistol from his hand, blocked a weak attempt at a right hook, then pistol-whipped the bastard across the face. He staggered back. I adjusted my hold on the gun, then bashed the hilt into his skull. Over and over again until Viktor Lukin crumpled to the deck.

I considered simply putting a bullet between his eyes, but I decided that would be too easy. I wanted this to be up close and personal.

I tossed the gun over the side of the boat. It splashed into the water.

Viktor moaned, writhing in pain, gripping his oozing head. He blinked wildly, bloodshot eyes dilating as he attempted to focus on me, on what was happening to him.

After retrieving a nylon rope in the cargo, I pulled his arms over his head, bound his wrists together, then tied the rope to the steering wheel. I did the same to his ankles, securing the end of that rope around the base of the captain's chair. I stared down at the leader of Black Cell, bloodied and hog-tied, strung like a stuck pig.

Pathetic.

Viktor's eyes rounded as I flipped open the blade of my knife, the light glinting off the tip.

My eyes never leaving his, I cut off his sweater and his slacks, then removed his shoes and socks. When I cut off his underwear, he began to weep like a child.

His penis was small and shriveled. I imagined the pain, both physical and emotional, it had caused Sophia. Rage, like fire, swept up my neck.

"Look at me," I demanded, straddling his naked body. "Look at me or I will staple your eyelids open."

“Please,” Viktor begged. “Please don’t kill me.”

“I won’t. Not yet.”

I leaned down, inches from his face.

His eyes went wild with panic. “No, no, no, no—”

“This is for my brother.”

I dragged the tip of the blade from the top of his shoulder to the tip of his thumb. He screamed, bucked, tried to fight out of his binds.

Holding him down, I did the same to his legs. Long, thin slits, the skin unfolding, opening like a budding flower, the blood popping out and then trickling down the curves of his flesh.

Just like he’d done to my brother.

Then I took his limp penis in the palm of my hand.

“No, God, no, please, please, please—”

“This is for Sophia.”

I castrated him. The scream that came out of his lungs sounded alien. Otherworldly.

I tossed his penis into the water.

“And this, motherfucker, is for me.”

I dragged the knife down the side of Viktor’s face, slitting him open from eyebrow to chin. Just. Like. Mine.

And then, with a guttural scream, I shoved the blade into his heart.



Justin

After saturating the towels I'd found in the back of the boat in gasoline, I tied them together, dipping one end into the gas tank. I lit the other end, then got the hell out of there.

The boat exploded the moment I reached the top of the cliff.

The entire home was engulfed in flames, smoke rolling in the wind and ashes flickering as they rose into the dark sky. I could feel the heat before I'd even set foot into the backyard.

The first thing I noticed was a black SUV parked next to mine—a vehicle that hadn't been there when we arrived.

A man in a black suit was standing over two bodies, the guards I'd shot before entering the home. The man pointed a pistol at one of their heads, who must have survived my shot. I watched as he pulled the trigger, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, cleaned the gun, and hurled it into the fire.

Sophia and Nate were safe next to my SUV with a thermal blanket wrapped over their shoulders.

I jogged up to the man. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Drake. I'm here to clean up your mess."

"Drake," I repeated, my brain pulling a fuzzy memory from the last time I'd spoken to Mack. "You're the new hire."

Drake dipped his chin.

I regarded him closely, angling my head to the side.

He was tall and thick, like the rest of us. Fit—a necessity for a mercenary. There was a cool, quiet confidence in the way he moved and spoke, the kind of self-assurance that comes with years of experience. I wondered what he'd done before Astor scooped him up and made him sign his life away.

“Help with this body, will you?” he said. “I already rolled the other into the fire.”

Together, we dragged the guard to the edge of the fire, then using the heels of our boots, kicked him into the flames. He rolled several times before catching, where he would burn to ashes, ensuring no trace of me or Sophia would be left on his body—or in the home, or in the boat, or on Viktor's body.

“Chatter has already started on the radio,” Drake informed me. “Every cop and fireman in the country will be here within ten minutes. Take them,” he jerked his chin to Sophia and Nate, “in your truck, and follow the directions I've already sent to your phone. They'll zigzag you through the mountains—away from anyone who might see you fleeing the scene, and then back to the airport where I've got a chopper standing by.”

He glanced down at the blood that had now soaked the entire left side of my body. “I've got a trauma pack in the blue bag in the back seat of my SUV. You might wanna grab that before heading out.”

“Thanks.” My brow cocked. “Astor approved the chopper? I kinda went rogue on this mission. Figured I was out of a job.”

Drake cleared his throat. “I was told to tell you to simply get your ass back to the office as soon as possible.”

“Okay, and what's the truth?”

“The truth is that Astor is MIA.”

“What?”

“Left without a trace.”

“Where?”

“He was last seen two days ago at the New York office. Security cameras caught him getting into his Aston Martin later that night and then, boom, gone in the wind.”

“No one knows where he went?”

“No.”

“Did he leave on his own accord?”

“I don’t know.”

I frowned. The list of Astor’s enemies was endless, but he knew this, and therefore had built a wall of security around himself, both physical and technological that, quite frankly, made him more untouchable than the president.

I shook my head. I couldn’t think about that right now.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’ll meet you back at the New York office to debrief.”

“I owe you.”

“No.” He held up his fist. “Till death, right?”

I dipped my chin. “Till death, brother. Welcome to hell.”



Justin

The hospital swarmed with police officers, federal agents, and journalists from all over the country. Fox News, CNN, ABC News, even someone from Canadian broadcasting wanted an exclusive.

It was a circus.

The news that a CIA agent, presumed to be dead, had been rescued after being held hostage for four years dominated the headlines the moment the information was leaked to the press. The Feds were working overtime on damage control, spinning the information faster than a dinner plate.

Honestly, it was both hysterical and appalling to watch. Only Nate, Sophia, and I knew the true story, and we wanted to keep it that way.

Nate was being held in a restricted wing of the hospital under heavy security. Only two people were allowed in his room at a time, not including me.

The doctors had held off the Feds as long as they could, conducting a bevy of examinations that included multiple X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs, and a full blood workup, checking for vitamin and mineral deficiencies, infections, and parasites—all of which he had.

After it was confirmed that Nate had no life-threatening conditions, the interviews began. The debrief process, this is called. Though it varies from situation to situation, the process

consists of multiple stages of medical assessments and interviews, and then a decompression time assisted by ongoing rehabilitation and therapy.

Sophia had also been admitted to the hospital, undergoing most of the same tests as Nate, despite her protests. It was only after she was deemed in excellent health that I allowed the doctors to tend to my gunshot wound. Had Sophia not been by my side to ensure I complied, I would have likely been arrested for disturbing the peace.

I did not want to be admitted. My brother was my sole focus, not my health.

After cleaning, stitching, and stabilizing my arm in a sling, they finally allowed me to see my brother. Sophia, not permitted into the restricted area, returned to a conference room they'd sectioned off from the staff, where she was also being interviewed.

During the hours I was banished from Nate's room, I'd paced outside his door like a rabid animal. My only moments of respite came in the form of text messages between Sophia and me.

The communication between us, her concern and support, will be etched into my soul for all of eternity. It was the first time I had someone, an anchor, to pull me back to earth when everything around me seemed so out of control—including my anger.

Looking back, I think it was a good thing that my time with Nate was limited in those initial hours. Wild, disjointed thoughts ran like freight trains through my head, colliding in explosions of rage. Hatred for Black Cell, anger at the universe for allowing such horrible things to happen to innocent people, and outrage at the government for misleading my mother and me regarding Nate's death.

We still didn't have solid answers on the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. I didn't know if someone knew he was kidnapped and covered it up, or if the DOD truly believed he'd been in the safe house when it exploded.

We will probably never get the truth.

It was a lot to process, seeing my brother's living, breathing body after having watched his casket be lowered into the dirt. Seeing him in the flesh after seeing his ghost in my dreams every night for years. Seeing him again after I'd turned into someone completely different—because of his death.

I realized that Nate's death had become my identity. Every thought, every decision, everything I'd thrown away, was all a side effect of unprocessed grief. I'd allowed the anger to poison me from the inside out, erase everything I knew to be true and replace it with darkness.

Now that he was alive, who was I?

Nate had been given a second chance at life, and in those few days, I knew I had been too.

• • •

“Mr. Montgomery.”

I spun away from the window I'd been staring out of. Two Feds in suits, one pinstriped, one navy blue, stepped out of Nate's room, quietly closing the door behind them.

“We'd like to begin your interviews this afternoon, if that's all right.”

I nodded, quickly closing the few feet between us. I didn't like Nate being alone in the hospital room, not even for a minute.

Pinstripe stuck out his hand. “We'd also like to thank you for your service, and for discretion in everything that's happened within the last week.”

He was the twelfth Fed to reiterate, in many different ways, that they wanted me to keep my mouth shut. And while I knew I could whistle-blow the hell out of the situation, I had zero interest in reliving it all. What mattered to me was that Nate and Sophia were taken care of, and everything else was bullshit.

“I’m not the only one with highly sensitive information,” I said, lifting my chin.

The suits shared a quick glance.

“Yes,” Pinstripe said. “We understand that, and we plan to discuss this with both Nate and Aleks Petrova.”

“Not until we settle a few things first.” I gestured between us.

Their beady eyes narrowed.

I held up a finger. “One, I want two million transferred to an account in Nate’s name within the next twenty-four hours, or I speak to the press.”

“Justin—”

I held up a second finger, cutting him off. “Two, I want the Federal Protection Program to create a new identity for Aleks Petrova under the name of Sophia Banks. You’ll need to erase the current one she has, it was put together by some kid, and start from scratch. I’m talking the works—new Social Security number, identification, passport, birth certificate, school records, create an online trail for her identity, everything.”

“That could take some time.”

“I’m not done. I also want all her belongings packed up, including everything in her shed, and sent to my home address. And once her new identity is established, I want the same amount, two million dollars, transferred to an account in her name.”

Pinstripe crossed his arms over his chest. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“How much does your silence cost?”

“Once you have completed those three things to my satisfaction, you have my word that I will never speak of anything that happened.”

“You don’t want money?”

“Yes. Four million, distributed in the manner I just stated.”

They looked at each other.

After a moment, Pinstripe stuck out his hand. “You have a deal, Mr. Montgomery.”

“Great. Now, please get out of my fucking way.”

I paused at Nate’s door, listening to their footsteps fade down the hallway. After a quick breath, I opened the door.

Nate was staring up at the ceiling, motionless, his eyes vacant.

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until his gaze found mine.

I shoved the hand of my good arm into my pocket and walked to the side of his bed.

Nate had been abnormally docile since his rescue. Initially, this had concerned me, but once the MRI came back normal, it was explained to me that his emotions—or lack thereof—were a direct result of the physical, emotional, and mental torture he’d sustained while being held in captivity for so long. Nate had coped by emotionally detaching himself from his situation.

Like brother, like brother, I mused. It was strongly advised that I educate myself on trauma so I could help him through the next year of his life.

It felt like the universe was shoving emotions down my throat, placing me in situations where addressing, and reacting to, mental health was unavoidable. First Sophia, and now Nate. Both needed more than I was capable of.

Until now.

There, in the hospital, I made a promise to myself that I would become the man I needed to be. The one I’d shoved away for years. I’d focus on my own growth, behind the scenes, with an emphasis to recognize, receive, study, and understand my emotions as well as theirs.

I began that day with a request for coffee with the on-call psychologist while Nate was undergoing one of his many examinations. What was supposed to be a simple request for information turned into three separate hour-long visits.

Dr. Daniels—that was her name—spoke in depth about PTSD, a condition I'd once rolled my eyes at and considered a bullshit medical term designed for no other reason than to drain more money from veterans' pockets. Now, I listened with open ears and an open heart.

From our conversation, I learned that Nate would likely experience several confusing emotions, such as survivor's guilt, maybe even feelings of empathy toward Black Cell, and ongoing anxiety while his body adjusted to no longer being in constant fight or flight.

Then we spoke of Sophia and all the ways her trauma could manifest. During that conversation, it felt like someone ripped my heart from my body and shredded it into a million pieces.

I vowed to be her safe place, her anchor, her shoulder to cry on, until death do us part.

Just like that, I had a purpose. I was ready.

I could do this.

I *would* do this.

I would be what they needed.

“How are you doing?” I asked Nate, still not believing I was staring down at my brother. The kid brother I'd grown up next to, laughed with, cried with, fought with, stood behind, took punches for. The one I trusted and loved with my whole heart.

“Ready for these IVs to be out,” he grumbled.

The old me would have removed them for him, right then and there.

Instead, I said, “I know. Give it some more time. Your body needs the vitamins and electrolytes. We'll be out of here soon.”

“Mom’s dead, isn’t she?”

I blinked at the abrupt change in subject. He’d asked for Mom on the flight to New York. I’d pretended I didn’t hear him and quickly changed the subject.

Steeling myself, I took a quick inhale. “Yes.”

“How?”

“Heart failure.”

“Were you there?”

“No.”

He looked away.

Tears welled in my eyes, completely uncontrollable. I looked away, quickly wiping them away with the back of my hand.

When I turned back, Nate was watching me.

“I failed her,” I said. “Just like I failed you. Ah, *screw it.*” I clutched his hand in mine, giving in to the inner turmoil. “I’m sorry, brother. I’m so sorry. I’m so—”

“Justin, stop. You literally saved my life. It’s the opposite of failure.”

I couldn’t look him in the eyes.

Squeezing my hand, he continued. His hand felt so damn good in mine. “You know, there were people, in and out, held captive with me. There was a woman once. Older. She’d been taken in retaliation for her son’s disobedience—he was killed. When she died, I remember feeling such relief that she’d been released from it all. Do you know what I mean?”

Understanding, I nodded. While it didn’t fix things or make it right, it lessened the sting to know that my mother was no longer suffering.

“Speaking of women,” he said as he lifted his head off the pillow, pinning me with his gaze. “Who’s the girl?”

I closed my eyes, recentering on what had become the light of my life. “My future.”

He smiled, the first since being rescued. “So, someone finally got to you.”

“Yeah, I’d say that’s an understatement.”

Nate leaned his head back, a wistful look in his eyes. “Wow, I’m just now thinking of all the women before . . .”

Before is what we called his kidnapping. Our lives were officially split into two blocks: before and now.

Before was the old us, where bad memories lingered. Now would be the new us.

“Do you remember Lisa?” His eyes sparkled.

“The girl you were dating before? Yeah. She’s here, dude.”

“No way.”

This time, I grinned. What is it about women that can bring a man to life? Mysterious, powerful, beautiful creatures they are.

He lifted his head again, his eyes widening. “Tell them to pump more shit into the IVs, give me a little muscle before I see her again.”

I laughed. “It’ll come in time.”

A moment of silence ticked between us, comfortable. A hint of how it used to be.

I felt his gaze linger on my scar.

“Brother?”

“Yeah?”

“Where did you get that?”

I knew this question would come, and I’d rehearsed a million different answers. In the end, I settled on, “From before.”



Sophia

Two Days Later

“*H*ow is he?”

I startled at the voice behind me, nearly dropping the coffee cup I was carrying into the kitchen.

“Sorry.” Ryder, Justin’s friend and a fellow mercenary, flashed me an apologetic smile.

“It’s okay,” I said, turning fully to him. “He’s still asleep.”

Ryder nodded, pleased. Of all Justin’s friends, Ryder was the most concerned for his colleague. I assumed it had something to do with the fact that he was expecting his second child with his wife, Louise, whom I’d yet to meet.

“Where are Roman and Drake?” I asked.

Ryder looked to Mack, another mercenary, though this one was less domesticated, and that was putting it lightly. Of the two, Ryder was James Bond, and Mack was, well, Andre the Giant. A monstrous man with a strange affinity for toothpicks. Seriously, I’d never seen him without one dangling from his lip.

“They’re at the office,” Mack said. “They’re going to swing back by later.”

“Any sign of your boss, Astor?”

“They’re working on it.”

Same as they had been for the last forty-eight hours straight. Combining this with their concern for Justin, Ryder and Mack were looking a little worse for wear.

“Where’s Nate?” asked Mack.

“Asleep in the guest room.”

“Good.”

I nodded. Justin didn’t sleep for days while Nate was in the hospital. Once out, he stayed by his brother’s side until sleep eventually took them both. The two had been comatose for almost two days straight.

“You guys want some more coffee?” I asked.

“Please.”

“Dear God in Heaven—yes,” Mack said with the most spark I’d seen in him in the last few days.

I chuckled. “Coming right up.”

The boys, as I lovingly referred to them now, returned their focus to the card game they were playing, although Mack was feverishly texting on his phone most of the time. I got the sense the card game was nothing more than a ruse to make me more comfortable.

Truth be told, yes, I was out of my element, and under the care of the most intimidating men I’d ever met in my life, but I’d never felt safer.

After being released from the hospital, we were driven to Justin’s apartment just two blocks away from Astor Stone, Inc.’s headquarters. Justin’s penthouse—yes, *penthouse*—was located across the street from Central Park, with floor-to-ceiling windows that made you feel like you were flying. It was breathtaking. And for the time being, my new crash pad.

I was living from minute to minute, mainly because my head would explode if I spent too much time thinking about what happened next. My main concern and focus was on Justin’s recovery.

The bullet had gone through Justin's upper arm, grazing his bone and missing his brachial artery. His doctor said, in no uncertain terms, that someone above must have cashed in a favor for this miracle. Justin was very lucky, only requiring stitches, albeit a lot. The doctor said he would be in a sling for weeks and would require physical therapy afterward.

Justin was down for a while—but not out.

The same doctor had also tended to the laceration on my cheekbone from where Viktor had punched me. Although it was now seven shades of yellow and purple, the salve he'd given me had eliminated the swelling, and for that, I was incredibly grateful.

Never again would I bear the mark of a man.

Never.

My second concern was, well, *everything else*. Returning to my home in Alaska was not an option—at least for a while. So, I was currently homeless, with no job, no car, and a fake identity that would only pass minimal checkpoints. The only clothes and toiletries I owned were the few I'd grabbed down the street after Ryder pretty much forced me to take a break from Justin's side.

By the way, don't ever go shopping on Fifth Avenue with limited funds.

I had a lot to do, and I needed money to do it, so my first goal would be to find a job. Then I'd pick up the pieces one by one and start a new life, yet again. But where?

I carried the carafe into the sitting room. A mound of papers, surveillance photos, and handwritten notes covered the glass coffee table. An impromptu evidence board contained every fact, clue, date, and timeline surrounding the mysterious disappearance of their boss.

“You know,” I said, perching on the side of an armchair. “I was thinking . . . you said that nothing has suggested that Astor left against his will, right? Like, no one kidnapped him or anything like that, right?”

“Right,” Ryder said. “There are no signs that any altercation took place at either the office or his apartment where he was staying at the time.”

“And he just left without saying a word? Left his whole fancy-schmancy life, without even a note, right?”

“Appears that way.”

Mack narrowed his eyes. “How do you know this?”

“Eavesdropping is my superpower.” I grinned.

“Where are you going with this?” Ryder asked, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Well . . .” I glanced over my shoulder to Justin’s bedroom where he was fast asleep. “There’s only one thing that can make a calculated man like Astor Stone do something completely out of character.”

“And that is?”

“A woman.”

Ryder and Mack blankly considered me for a moment, then blinked in unison before they looked at each other.

“Holy shit,” Ryder said.

At the same time, Mack said, “I don’t think we even considered that.”

They gawked at me.

I grinned. “See? I’m helpful. You guys really need a woman on the team. Tell me, is Astor married?”

“No—I mean, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? So, you don’t know?”

“I mean, he’s never spoken of a woman in the entire time that I’ve known him.”

“Does he wear a ring?”

Blank stares.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Wow. Men are so unobservant. How about pictures? In his office, or maybe on

his screen saver?”

“No, but that doesn’t surprise me. He’s extremely private.”

“A man with an ego like Astor’s has a woman, or a few—trust me on this. Maybe a special someone that he keeps tucked away. Or maybe she’s walked back into his life, I don’t know.”

“We need to dig into this angle.” Mack began tapping his pen against the table. “Find out every woman he’s been involved with, then track where they’re at.”

“Also, look for children,” I said. “He might have one, illegitimate even.”

Mack nodded, then picked up his cell phone. “On it.”

As Mack disappeared into the other room, Ryder dipped his chin. “Nice work.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean with Justin too. You haven’t left his side.”

Feeling a flush on my cheeks, I looked away.

The entire team knew about my case. That I was born into a top-secret Russian militia group, that I was abused, and that I escaped. The one thing they didn’t know, however, was how madly and deeply I had fallen in love with their best friend.

“Also,” he said, “I wanted to let you know that my guy got back to me about that thing you asked me to do. He’s got several apartments he’ll rent for dirt cheap. He also—”

“She doesn’t need it.”

I whirled around to see Justin leaning against the door frame, his hair mussed, his eyes twinkling, his arm in a sling—and dear God, gray sweatpants covering his legs.

Grinning, Ryder stood. “Good to see you, man. How’re you doing?”

“Hungry.”

“That’s good. I’ll get something ordered for all of us, and uh, I’ll just give you two a moment.”

“You shouldn’t be up. Go back to bed,” I said tersely, herding Justin like cattle in a pasture.

With a wicked grin, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him. “Did you hear what I said?”

“I don’t care what you said. You’re delirious. You need to rest.”

He wrapped his good arm around my neck. “I said you don’t need that apartment.”

“It’s part of the Ryder relocation package.”

“No, I mean you don’t need to leave.”

I blinked and opened my mouth but was rendered speechless by the butterflies that erupted in my stomach.

“Don’t leave,” Justin whispered. “Stay here while you—we—figure out our next steps.”

“The next step is for me to get a job.”

“Work for us.”

“Us?”

“Astor Stone. We’ll pay you to help investigate, behind the scenes. You have a unique skill set, trust me.”

“Meaning, I’m the daughter of the head of an internationally known evil militant organization?”

“Exactly.” He winked.

I shook my head. “I need a real, *normal* job. I’m thinking about waitressing until I figure it all out. I was good at waitressing. I enjoyed it.”

“Okay, well, you won’t find better tips than in this area. People around here have more money than they know what to do with.”

“Tell me about it.” I gave him the side-eye.

He tilted his head. “You’re uncomfortable here?”

“No, your place is absolutely beautiful. It’s just . . . I don’t know. I’m totally overwhelmed.”

“Then relax. Stay here. With me.” When I hesitated, he pressed. “Listen. You can think of it like a roommate scenario. You need a place to stay, right? We’ll just be roommates.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, cupped my face, leaned in, and brushed his lips over mine.

“Until you’re ready to become something more, that is. I’ll wait. I’ll wait forever. I’m not going anywhere, Sophia.”

Sophia.

There was something in the way he said the name. It felt real when he said it.

I knew then that with Justin, I was myself. My *real* self. Whether named Sophia, or Janet, or Karen, whatever, I was me. Authentic, emotional, tough *me*.

I dragged in a deep breath and decided, from that day forward, that listening to my heart would be the foundation of *me*.

“I am ready, Justin. Since the moment I saw you, I’ve been ready.”

“Yeah?” He beamed down at me.

“But I want you to make one promise to me, okay?”

“Anything—*my God*—anything.” His hand swept over my torso as he pulled me even closer to him.

“Promise me we’ll have a maid.”

He laughed, tears filling his eyes. “I promise, baby. You will never clean again a day in your life. God, I love you, Sophia. I love you.”

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. “Say it again.”

“I love you, *Sophia*.”

Justin pulled away, and there was something in his eyes, a spark of pure joy, that had my instincts piquing.

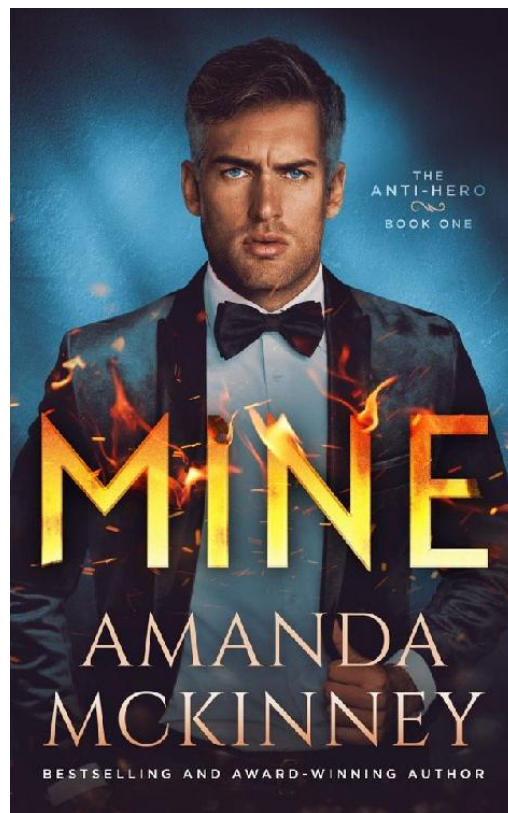
“What? What are you up to?”

“I have some papers for you to sign.”

“What papers?”

He took my hand and led me into the kitchen. “They’re from the bank . . .”

★ MINE ★



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Amanda McKinney is the bestselling and multi-award-winning author of more than twenty romantic suspense and mystery novels. Her book, *Rattlesnake Road*, was named one of *POPSUGAR's 12 Best Romance Books*, and was featured on the *Today Show*. The fifth book in her Steele Shadows series was recently nominated for the prestigious *Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense*. Amanda's books have received over fifteen literary awards and nominations.

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READING GUIDE

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE READING GUIDE

↓ Dark Romance/Thriller ↓



Romantic Suspense/ Crime Thriller ↷

↓ Small-Town Romantic Suspense ↓



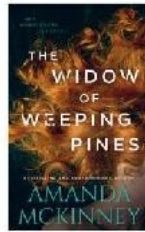
Romantic Suspense/Paranormal Novellas



THRILLER READING GUIDE



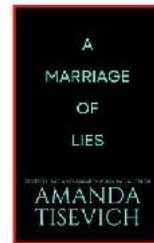
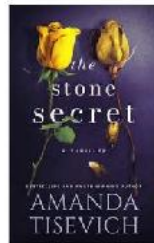
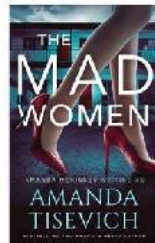
Psychological/Domestic Thrillers



WRITING AS AMANDA TISEVICH



Thriller Novels



Coming 03/24!