



Voices
TINTO

PLACE



THE MEN OF SIERRA FALLS

STEFFANIE BLAIS

Pieces Into Place

Steffanie Blais

Copyright © 2023 by Steffanie Blais

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact Steffanie Blais.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Book Cover by Y'all. That Graphic.

Edited by Rin Sher and Amanda Villa.

This book is dedicated to readers who love a good slow burn
with lots of tension and banter. For those who are less patient,
I give you chapter 18.

Preface

“Millie,” Wyatt rasps.

“Wyatt!” I answer and run over to where he is collapsed against the wall.

I kneel in front of him and reach out, gently placing my hand on his swollen cheek. His eyes focus on me, and the confusion starts to clear. Relief spreads across his face when he sees that I’m OK. Then he looks over and sees Johnny dead, and his shoulders relax. But as soon as his gaze lands on Theo’s lifeless form, he begins to weep silently.

“Wyatt, I’m here,” I say gently as I kiss his forehead and then his cheek. I kiss every inch of his face and hold him close.

“Are you alright?” he says faintly.

“I’m OK. We are going to be OK,” I say as I hold him, but I don’t know if I believe my own words. We sit amidst the blood and the smell of gunpowder, rocking back and forth, holding on to one another for dear life. In the distance, the wailing of sirens is getting louder.

Aperture

Contents

Prologue

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

6. Chapter 6

7. Chapter 7

8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9

10. Chapter 10

11. Chapter 11

12. Chapter 12

13. Chapter 13

14. Chapter 14

15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16

17. Chapter 17

18. Chapter 18

19. Chapter 19

20. Chapter 20

21. Chapter 21

22. Chapter 22

23. Chapter 23

24. Chapter 24

25. Chapter 25

26. Chapter 26

27. Chapter 27

28. Chapter 28

Epilogue

Big Thanks

Also From Steffanie

Except from Strange Love

Prologue

Kane - 13 years old

“I think this vacation is gonna be *killer*. Don’t you think, Tyler?” the red-headed kid says.

“Definitely. We’re going to *murder* those slopes,” replies the blond one.

I’m ignoring it. I won’t give them the reaction they want. My eyes remain fixed ahead on the back of the head of the kid with the faux hawk.

“We will *slay* them,” says the one who looks like a Chucky Doll.

My eyes involuntarily roll. *Slay them? That one was weak. Surely, they can do better than that.*

“Maybe we can go to the *butcher* shop with my dad after skiing?”

Deep breath.

I wish I could walk away, but we have to wait in this stupid line every day after lunch.

They turn to look at me as if they didn't know I was here, both slightly larger than I am. Not that their size matters. "Oh. You should come, Kane. Maybe your dad can come, too?"

Is he really going to go there? That would be a big mistake.
My heart is beginning to beat faster as I clutch my fist at my sides.

"Oh wait, he can't," mocks the redhead.

Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six—

Blondie invades my space, leaning in close to my left ear. "Too bad your real dad was murdered, Kane," he murmurs snidely.

My vision tunnels into nothing but shades of red. I have a vague realization of spinning and landing a solid punch to the head of the blond one. Next, I tackle the other one to the ground, pounding my fists into his face. I hear my name being called from somewhere behind me, but it doesn't stop me. Nothing exists right now except making these two pay for their cruel words.

Suddenly, hands are gripping me, trying to stop my attack, and the voices of Callan and Marcus, my closest friends, filter in.

"Kane! Stop!" Callan yells. He tightens his hold on my shoulders and hauls me backward.

I wasn't done with them, but I allow him to restrain me while I take deep breaths, forcing myself to calm down. I stand there,

looking at the boys on the ground, shaking with barely contained rage.

Both boys are bloodied, but otherwise, they appear fine. They take their time to get up and wipe the crimson evidence of their beat down off their faces. Those dickwads will live to tease another day. They just won't be teasing me.

"Dude, that was crazy," Marcus says beside me, his hand on the back of my neck, leading me away from the scene as the crowd of kids who witnessed the fight hoot and holler. "Remind me never to piss you off. My face is too perfect to get beaten," he says, angling his chin toward the sky for emphasis.

I can't help but exhale a laugh. Marcus can always get a laugh out of me. Callan is loyal and more intense, but Marcus is easygoing and relaxed. He's always ready with a joke to de-escalate a situation.

Usually, I am, too, unless people talk about my father. It's the one thing that can make me lose my cool. Unfortunately, people have figured that out and use it as a tool to get under my skin.

We don't make it too far from the scene of the fight before we hear the voice of Mr. Ruger, the yard duty helper.

"Mr. Hudson," he yells, "stop where you are." We halt in our tracks but don't turn around. Our fancy private school has a strict no fighting policy. Unfortunately, they are relaxed on the no bullying policy.

“Balls!” Marcus whispers next to me. “We can trip him while you run.”

I huff out another laugh. “Thanks, Man, but it won’t do any good.” I slowly turn around and get ready to face the music.



“I get it, Kane, I do. But fighting is not how you handle it,” my mom says as we sit in the office and wait for the headmaster to call us in. She’s not telling me anything I don’t already know.

Staring down at my feet, I reply, “I agree, Mom. I just get so sick of being teased.”

“I understand,” she says, gently rubbing my shoulder. “It’s mean and cruel, and those brats will be punished for bullying.”

“I just want to be left alone,” I whisper honestly. “I don’t like to think about it.”

“I know, sweetie.” Sliding her hand over to my other shoulder, she pulls me in for a kiss on the head, and I take comfort in the gesture.

I wasn’t lying when I told my mom I wanted to be left alone. None of this is within my control. It’s not like I chose this as my life.

The story goes like this: Almost eleven years ago, the infamous Sierra Falls Strangler, who had been targeting women for some time, had finally been caught. Actually, he

was killed that day, but not before he murdered my biological father.

My father was murdered by a serial killer.

It was a national headline for weeks and then people moved on to the next big thing. Until it came back into the spotlight.

We've recently experienced an unusual amount of rain for this time of year, and part of a hillside on the west side of town slid down onto the highway below. The slide brought wood, boulders, and human remains along with dirt.

It turns out that hill was the home of a massive, undiscovered grave site. Most of the remains have been identified thanks to the advances in DNA-based evidence discovery. All of the women are thought to be the victims of the strangler. It's been all over the news lately, and with it, the story of his last known victims and the final moments of their lives. That means my father, Theo Brissett, is once again front-page news.

There's still some whispered speculation about the kind of man Theo was. Rumors fly rampant about how and why that madman targeted him. I don't understand why the media makes him seem like he did something wrong. My mom says people don't know anything, but that doesn't stop them from "creating their narrative." It sells papers and magazines.

As such, some people think being the son of Theo Brissett is the most exciting thing about me. Sometimes, they think it's the *only* thing about me, even though I never met my father.

As it's told, my mom didn't know she was pregnant with me when everything happened. Theo sacrificed his life to save hers, even though she was in love with his college best friend. Theo adored my mother, and his last act in this life was one of love. He's a hero, not a punchline or way to stir up interest in something that happened over a decade ago.

I'm sure he wasn't a perfect man, but my mom says he was a kind and generous person. He didn't deserve what happened to him, just as I don't deserve the hateful words those boys were slinging at me. It feels like I've been dealing with questions and teasing my entire life.

Just then, my *other* dad strides into the office, looking irritated. He strikes a commanding presence, exuding an air of authority, and it doesn't surprise people to learn he's a cop. Wyatt Hudson is the only father I've ever known. He's a good man, a great detective, and a little bit of a lookalike for Thor at the moment. He desperately needs a haircut.

He stops when he sees us, greets my mom with a kiss on the forehead, and then shifts his attention to me. I look up at him with embarrassment and guilt written across my face. I know better than to engage with jerks like those kids earlier. I'm sure he's disappointed in my actions.

"Let's take a walk, Kane," he says sternly.

"Mr. Hudson," the secretary calls, "the headmaster will be with you soon. He has asked that you wait here for him."

He doesn't spare her a sideways glance as he leads me past her desk toward the door. "We will be outside," my father states

politely but with authority. “My son and I need some fresh air.”

We walk in silence until we get out of the building, my stomach twisting into knots; then he turns and looks me in the eye.

“What happened?” he asks.

Sucking in a breath, I scuff my shoe back and forth on the ground.

“They were talking about my—“ I pause. My dad never seems upset when Theo is mentioned, but I still feel bad talking about him sometimes.

“Your dad,” he finishes with a deep sigh. “Kane, your father was my best friend. I loved him, too. You can talk about him and ask questions. You *should* do those things,” he says earnestly.

“They were making jokes about him being dead,” I state, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice and the tears from trickling down my face. “Ever since that gravesite was discovered, it’s been worse.”

“Sounds like they deserved what they got,” he quips before exhaling a deep breath. “I understand why you snapped. But you’ve been involved with boxing and jiu-jitsu since you were six. It isn’t exactly a fair fight.”

“I know,” I reply, kicking a rock on the ground before me.

“Kane, this is going to follow you your entire life. It’s like something out of a movie, and people are fascinated by it.

Right or wrong. That's just the way it is. Some people will ask you about it, pry into your business, and push past acceptable boundaries. You can't control that. You can only control how you react to it."

"I know," I say, biting the inside of my cheek. "I tried not to let it get to me."

"I'm sure you did," he says, ruffling my hair. "But we use self-defense only when we need to. Not to beat the crap out of idiots. That's always been the deal. You weren't threatened, right?"

"No," I answer, shaking my head.

"You weren't fearful for your safety?" he asks.

"No, sir, " I repeat.

"So next time, we will handle it differently, OK?" he says, bending over to look me directly in the eye.

"Yes," I say, gnawing on my lower lip to keep it from trembling. I hate that I allowed them to get to me, and I hate that my parents have to deal with this situation now.

"I'm not upset with you, Kane. Neither is Mom," he says reassuringly. "You're a good kid. This will have some consequences, but it will be fine."

"Can I keep taking the classes?" I ask tentatively.

"Of course," he says with a smile. "No member of this family will ever be a victim again."

His words ignite a fire in my belly, and the anger from before returns. I hate the man who took Theo's life. How many lives did he ruin? How many life paths did he change for those left behind? If he were here, I'd kill him myself. Of that, I'm sure.

The secretary rushes out, frantically looking left and right. "Mr. Hudson, the headmaster is ready to see you now."

"Ok, Son," my dad says with a smile, "let's go."

Chapter One



“You look like shit, Hudson,” comes a voice from the far end of the room. I roll over and try to pry one eye open, but my skull feels like it is splitting in half. I’m unsure what time it is, but it’s already hot here, the air thick with oppressive humidity. It’s always donkey–balls hot this time of year in this part of the world.

When I was a kid, I would watch cartoons on Saturday mornings. Sometimes, the channel would go out on our television, leaving white static on the screen. I loved the cartoons so much that I’d sit and watch that static until they came back on. Even when the show returned to the screen, I could still hear the crackling noise. My brain feels like that white static on a television right now. It won’t become a clear channel without some intervention on my part—namely, water and Ibuprofen.

I reach over and find that cool, sweet spot in the bed next to me. I only had one drink last night, but my head is thick with vague memories of the bar. It was dirty and smelled like shit,

but they had whiskey. You have to take what you can get in this turbulent, unstable sand dune thousands of miles away from Jack Daniel's country home.

I don't drink often because I can get a little out of control. Alcohol and fights almost cost me my place in the Navy when I was younger, so these days, I reign it in. This assignment, however, has been long and particularly grueling, with lots of waiting around and time to kill. That's never been a good combination for me, as evidenced by my current state.

"Where's Smitty?" I ask, shifting my elbows underneath me to elevate my body a bit.

"That's a great question?" Drake responds. "Last time I saw you two assholes, you were getting hauled out of the bar for trying to take on six men. I'm willing to bet your stupid-ass has a concussion."

Oh, I definitely have a concussion.

"No," I say, carefully shaking my head. "It's coming back to me. We didn't start that."

Drake shrugs. "I don't care if you started it or not. Emerson heard about it and wants to see both of you at 0900."

"Fuck," I respond with a sigh, sitting up and throwing my legs over the bed. I push the palms of my hands into my eyes to stop the pounding. "What time is it?"

"0730. I suggest you get your shit together, Brother."

"Copy that," I reply, dreading what this day will bring.



I find Emerson sitting outside, puffing on a cigar and sipping coffee from a tin cup. Who smokes a cigar this early in the morning? I'm willing to bet he's doing it to fuck with me. It's working, as the smell from the cigar causes my stomach to roll in nauseous waves.

He doesn't address me when I approach him; he just stares ahead with his sunglasses on, making it impossible to read his expression. Emerson is known for having a temper, and even without seeing his eyes, I know we're on thin ice.

I hear footsteps behind me, and then Smitty appears to my right. I guess he didn't die last night, after all. I glance at him without turning my head and see he is far worse for the wear, sporting a busted lip, a purple, swollen eye, and a bruise along his jaw that extends from his chin up to his ear.

"At ease, gentlemen," Emerson says, waving for us to sit at the table. We promptly sit as he extinguishes his cigar, and the smoke rises like a snake being charmed out of a wicker basket. "Did you enjoy yourselves last night?"

"We did, sir," I answer without hesitation.

"You're an asshole, Hudson," he remarks without emotion.

"I am sir," I agree. It won't do me any good to argue, and ultimately, he's right.

"And you, Smith," he says, "shouldn't have ever made it out of processing week."

“Yes, sir,” Smitty agrees.

“No, I’m serious, Dick for Brains. I don’t know how you completed the necessary paperwork to enter the Navy, much less become an operator.”

“I guess I’m lucky, sir,” he says, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to lose my shit in a fit of laughter.

“Do you morons understand why we’re here? I mean, you must know that our presence here isn’t something we want advertised?” he asks, cocking his head to the side but still not looking in our direction.

“Yes, sir,” I answer.

Finally, he turns to look at us. “Then perhaps you can tell me why the local cops got reports of ‘two American soldiers’ brawling in a shit-hole bar last night?”

Emerson removes his glasses, and if I were a lesser man who hadn’t trained with men exactly like him, I’d shiver at the coldness I see in his dark eyes.

“Just letting off steam,” I respond, meeting his stare.

“Un-fucking-believable.” He shakes his head, slowly lights the cigar again, and takes several short puffs. We sit silently as the smoke rings circle us, dissipating into the hot surrounding air.

He turns to look at Smitty, sitting to his left. “And what the fuck happened to you?” he asks.

“A couple of those guys were pretty big. They were stronger than I thought,” he admits. Smitty isn’t purposely trying to be

glib. He's answering the question that was posed to him.

My best friend is a simple country boy from Montana. He's not always great at reading situations, and it tends to drive our commanding officers up the fucking wall.

My lips twitch as a smile threatens to break out again. He tried to take on six guys in his drunken stupor. They could have been fourteen years old, and he still would've gotten his ass kicked.

"You don't seem too bad, Hudson," Emerson says, addressing me.

"No, sir. Just a bit of a headache."

He runs his hand over his face and looks up at the sky as if willing God to give him the patience to continue.

"Gentlemen, we are here at the request of the United States of America, under the cover of anonymity, to do some shit most people do not want to know about," he says, pausing to look out over the barren desert before us. "I understand you want to blow off steam, but I suggest you figure out how to do it in a way that doesn't jeopardize this team, or you will be gone faster than a whore's panties on a Friday night."

The silence sits heavy between us. Finally, he says, "Neither of you is worth the fuel to get you home. One call and you will be replaced. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," we say sharply in unison.

"Good," he says, relaxing in his chair. "Now go get checked out by medical and get the fuck out of my sight."

“Yes, sir,” we repeat, promptly stand, turn, and walk away.



“Why are you always in my medical tent, Hudson?” Doc asks.

I hold my hands up in defense. “This one isn’t on me, Doc. Smitty got into it with some locals. I was just doing my job to help out my brother.”

“Bullshit,” he says as he sits before me, shining a light in my eyes. It’s fucking bright and makes my head pound even harder.

“So what did the locals say to instigate the melee?” he asks.

I shrug my shoulders and fight the nausea traveling through my stomach. “Something about how country boys fuck cows.”

Doc drops the flashlight and stares at me incredulously. “Fuck cows?” he questions.

“Smitty loves cows. Just not in *that* way,” I reply with a smirk.

“You fucking guys,” he says with a shake of his head. “Too much testosterone and too little brain matter.”

He’s not wrong. You have to be a certain kind of person to do what we do for a living.

“Well, I hope it was worth it. You have another concussion,” he says, with a shake of his head.

“Fuck!” I drop my head back and stare at the ceiling of the green canvas tent.

“How long am I out?” I ask.

Doc looks up from where he is making notes. “Depends,” he says. “Do you have a headache?”

“No,” I lie.

His eyes squint as he studies me. I’m certain he knows I’m lying, but he continues. “How about nausea or dizziness?”

“No, and no,” I continue to answer dishonestly. I might as well steer straight into the skid at this point.

His lips are pursed as he looks at me with disbelief. Eventually, he stands and rubs his chin in thought. “Three days,” he says.

I nod in understanding. He’s doing me a favor here, and I know not to push my luck. I stand too fast and nearly fall over as the dizziness threatens my equilibrium. I manage to correct my stance with a quick step back.

Doc places his hand on my shoulder and looks me in the eye, so there is no mistaking his serious tone. “You get one more concussion, Kane, and you’re on your own. I won’t look the other way next time.”

“Understood,” I say, briskly walking away before he can change his mind.

Chapter Two



BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. I'm confused as I try to open my eyes. The loud ding is vibrating through my ears and making my head pound with each jarring note. My eyes painfully roll around while briefly observing the bright lights before closing automatically. I hear shuffling and anxious voices but can't open my eyes.

"Kane, can you hear me?" A disembodied voice calls. "Kane, open your eyes."

The voice is familiar, but I can't do what it asks. Everything is so heavy. My body is being pushed into the bed by an invisible lead weight. I can't move or speak, but I am acutely aware of the voices around me.

I struggle to remember something, *anything*, but it's a dark, blank canvas. Before I can take my thoughts further, the black, viscous space pulls me under again, and everything goes peacefully quiet.

I'm not sure how much time has passed when the voices call me back again, but they are sharper now. A warm hand touches my face, causing me to lean into it. It's soft and familiar with a scent I recognize. My head is no longer pounding, but the accompanying heaviness remains.

"Kane," comes the feminine voice. "I'm right here."

Then, her face forms in my mind. *It's Kathrin. She's here. Why? How did she get here?* I lazily open my eyes and see my girlfriend staring at me with wide, concerned eyes, her red hair wild and messy while tears stream down her cheeks.

"Kathrin," I choke out. It's barely a whisper as it crackles through my dry lips. "How are you here?"

"Sshh," she says as she kisses my temple. "Don't talk. The doctor will be here soon." Her familiar scent washes over me and calms my rapidly beating heart as my sluggish brain comprehends what's happening. Her soft fingers thread carefully through my hair, making me want to close my eyes again, but I force myself to focus and assess my situation.

As I slowly scan the room, I realize I'm in a hospital. A shiver runs through me as I acknowledge my current reality. The machines that have been screaming in my ears are attached to a blood pressure cuff, an oxygen cannula, and an IV running into my left arm that pumps clear liquid into my veins. A tube runs thick, tan liquid nutrition from my nose into my stomach.

The doctor saunters in, looking pleased about something. "Petty Officer Hudson," he starts, "it's nice to see you awake."

“Where am I?” I ask with a shaky breath.

“You’re in Bethesda, Maryland,” he replies as if being here is the most normal and natural thing in the world. But it’s not normal because my memory is beginning to return, and the last thing I remember is heading out to an operation six thousand miles away.

He approaches, looking at the IV bag hanging behind me before continuing. “Are you in any pain?” he asks.

I quickly determine that I’m not in pain; the IV is doing its job well. “No,” I reply. “But I’m confused.”

“That’s normal,” he replies. “I would expect you to feel like you’re in a bit of a fog after what you’ve been through.”

He offers no other explanation, and I can feel my patience starting to wane. “Maybe you can tell me what I’ve been through,” I respond in a clipped tone.

“Of course,” he answers, not appearing to take my sour mood personally. “Can you tell me the last thing you remember?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“So you don’t remember anything?” he inquires.

I look briefly at Kathrin beside my bed and then back at the doctor. “I remember enough,” I reply curtly. “But I’m not free to tell you where I was or what I was doing.”

The doctor’s eyebrow peaks in amusement before he nods. “It seems your brain is working well,” he says. “That’s very

good.” He looks at Kathrin and smiles. “I need you to wait outside for a moment, please.”

She squeezes my hand and gives me a tight-lipped smile before turning and leaving the room. Once she’s gone, the doctor begins.

“Your body has been through quite an ordeal, Son,” he starts.

“You’ve experienced a traumatic brain injury.”

“Medical speak for a concussion,” I reply. “I’m familiar.”

The doctor takes his glasses off and casts his glance down at the floor before returning it to my face. “I’m afraid it’s more complicated than that,” he says. “You sustained a very serious head injury. You’ve been in a coma for eight days.”

I hear what he is saying, but it doesn’t make any sense. I do the math in my head and it’s not computing. “What? No. That can’t be right. What day is it?”

“It’s October twenty-third,” he answers.

The op was set for October fifteenth. *How is this possible?*

“What happened,” I ask, my voice shaky with the anticipation of dread.

“There was an explosion. Others will be able to give you more details. All I know is that you were close to the source and thrown ten feet, landing on your head.”

He takes a deep breath, giving me a moment to take in his words before continuing. “It could have been fatal. I’m honestly surprised you’ve fared as well as you have.”

Maybe that's supposed to make me feel better, but it doesn't. I'm in a hospital instead of in the field with my team. My girlfriend was looking at me with pity and guilt. Nothing about this feels good.

"So, when can I get back to work?" I ask hopefully.

"I'm afraid I can't say for sure," he replies. "You were in a coma. Your brain has experienced more trauma than it can handle. You've been having seizures."

My head spins as he attempts to fill in the gaps in my memory of the past eight days. "Seizures? How many?"

"Several per hour until we got them under control with medication."

"No. This can't be right. I need to get out of here. I don't belong here." Even as I say the words, my body will not allow me to sit up straight. I'm weak, and I don't do weakness. It's unsettling, and my current set of circumstances have me feeling furious and on the verge of panic.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but going anywhere isn't an option right now, so I wouldn't even consider it. Now that you're awake, we need to run more tests. We need to assess the damage to your brain."

"What about my team?" I ask with trepidation.

"I'm not entirely sure," he says. "I will alert your local commanding officer, and he can fill you in on the details. For now, you have your visitor outside, and your parents are on

their way. The best thing for you right now is to rest and spend time with your family.”

I fight against the torrent of emotions that threatens to overwhelm me, anger and sadness mixing together in a potent cocktail. This man has no idea what my life has been like since I was deployed. I long to be reunited with my family, but my mind refuses to settle until I know the fate of my team, whether or not they are still alive.

“You have to understand, this is important to me,” I growl at him. “Please tell whoever you need to, so I can get news of my unit.”

Chapter Three



My lips turn down involuntarily as I stare at the tray of clear liquids. The broth is tasteless. The jello isn't much better, lying in a pool thick with some kind of fruit-flavored syrup that smells like artificial pineapples. I push the tray away in disgust as my nurse, Renee, waltzes into the room. Her curly hair is thinning a little bit, stretched in tendrils around her face. She looks tired, but pushes her exhaustion aside to deal with me.

She's been on my ass for the past three hours, trying to get me to eat something without success. Kathrin hasn't returned yet and I still haven't heard anything about my team. It's getting on my nerves.

Renee eyes my full tray and exhales noisily through pursed lips. "You need to get some food in your stomach," she repeats for the third time. "I took out the nasogastric tube because you said you were willing to try to eat."

"Then give me real food," I reply.

"That is real food," she retorts.

“Let’s just be honest with one another, Renee. Jello is hardly real food.”

She sighs and shakes her head. It’s the same song and dance we’ve been doing all afternoon. “You’ve been in a coma. You’ve been taking pain medication for days. You can’t eat anything except this until we know your digestive system is up and running.”

“As soon as I fart, you’ll be the first to know, Renee,” I joke, attempting to squash the beef between us. And it apparently does the job.

“I’ll be waiting on pins and needles,” she smiles, glancing at the machines behind me. “How are you feeling overall?” she asks.

“Stronger. Sharper,” I reply.

She nods and punches something into a machine behind me, then turns to leave.

On her way out, she glances back at me, and I scrunch my face tight to indicate I’m trying to comply with her request. She’s chuckling as she passes my parents on her way out. I exhale and relax as soon as I see them.

It’s a strange phenomenon, but children always seem to find comfort in the presence of their parents. I’m a 30-year-old man who has seen and done things that would mentally break most people, but as soon as I see my tiny blonde mother, I’m just her son, and she’s here to make things better.

Millie Hudson strides in before my father, throws her stuff on the chair next to the bed, and leans down to kiss my forehead before she even says a word. She pulls back, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, and says, “Kane Theodore Brissett Hudson, you are lucky you’re not dead. Because if you were, I’d kill you.” It’s precisely the nonsensical thing I’d expect her to say in this situation.

Behind her, my dad chuckles and leans down to hug me. “How are you feeling, Son?” he asks, the concern etched across his face.

“Better,” I reply. Although my memory is starting to become more lucid on the days prior to the accident, I still can’t get any clarity on the day it actually happened. “I don’t remember much.”

My father nods while my mother places her hand on her chest, trying to hold her emotions at bay. She knows I’m a soldier. I was recruited right out of high school. She also understands it’s dangerous, and I’m sure I’d be doing *anything else* for a living if she had her way. But she’s married to a detective and used to worrying about the men in her life.

“I’m still waiting to hear what’s been going on with my unit,” I tell him honestly.

“I’m sure they will contact you once they receive word that you’re awake,” he says. “I’m grateful you were stable enough to fly home.”

“Me, too,” I tell him. I realize it’s strange that I haven’t seen Kathrin since the doctor ushered her out of here a few hours

ago. My still-foggy brain has yet to catch up with my current timeline. Maybe she's out getting me a contraband cheeseburger. "Have you seen Kathrin?" I ask my parents.

There's a moment of silence as my parents offer each other a glance. My father's face remains passive, but my mother has never owned a good poker face. She wears her emotions right there on her sleeve for all to see, and what she's feeling right now is anger.

"What?" I ask. "What's going on?"

"We don't know, exactly," Dad says. "We saw her earlier, and when we tried to speak with her, she made an excuse and ran out of here."

I've been with Kathrin for almost three years, and even though our relationship hasn't been easy—long absences due to my work often keeping us apart—our love has remained strong.

Kathrin lives in the small house I bought five years ago and cares for everything, including my dog. Even though we don't see each other as often as we'd like, she respects my love for my work, and I more than make up for time away when I see her.

"That's weird. She must've had an emergency," I tell my parents, to which my mother's grimace becomes even tighter and hard-set. She and Kathrin have always gotten along, so her attitude and silence are doing little to put my anxiety at ease.

"Well, she's been acting odd lately," my mom offers. "She hasn't been answering my calls or texts. I don't know what to

make of it.”

“There’s nothing to make of it, Millie,” my dad tells her. “She will talk to Kane when she comes back. I’m sure everything is fine.”

My mom nods in agreement and gives my dad a soft smile.

I’ve always been amazed by the way my dad speaks to my mom. Even when they argue, his voice is low and soothing, like a lullaby. I can tell he really understands her. They have a silent language between them that communicates more than words ever could. His gaze holds loving promises that he won’t let her down, no matter what happens. Watching them fills me with hope for my own relationship, one where Kathrin and I can trust each other enough to be vulnerable and find unconditional and long lasting love.



My parents stay for the rest of the day, filling me in on everything back in California, especially with my brother and sister. The twins are good with their respective families. Even though they are a couple of years younger than me, they both seem to be surpassing me in their personal lives, at least.

My brother, Jack, is working for our cousin, Emmett. He’s a contractor and seems to be doing well for himself. He’s been married for almost two years now. I’m betting I’ll be an uncle sooner rather than later.

Lexie is an artist. She has inherited our mother's artistic genes and love of capturing beautiful things. Mom uses a camera, whereas Lex uses paints and an easel. She's living down in San Diego with her boyfriend. Dad says he recently asked him for her hand in marriage. It's a little old-fashioned, and I don't think Lex will like it when she finds out, but I appreciate the gesture. I think I'll call him when I get up and moving and make him ask me as well, just to fuck with him. He's always been a little scared of me. Through all the questions and confusion of my situation, that simple thought makes me smile.

I seem to be the last to settle down in our family, which is unsurprising given my line of work. What no one knows is that I am planning to change that. I bought a ring last time I was home, and it's been sitting in a hidden spot in my house for months. I was due to return by the end of this month and planned to propose to Kathrin then.

The accident makes me suddenly conscious of my mortality like a jolt to the soul. My heart is filled with dread and regret as I think of the pain on my mother's face if something happened to me. I'd been skirting around my feelings for so long, but now I finally see the truth; every moment is nothing more than a fleeting gift, and I can't waste them any longer.

Kathrin deserves the chance to share whatever time we have left together, so I quickly make up my mind to get off my ass and propose. I love Kathrin. She understands me. This is the logical next step.

The afternoon flies by. My mom fusses over me and ends up sneaking me some food. The woman is a saint. I'm ready to rest by the time they leave, but it's difficult with the anxiety of being kept in the dark about my team and my girlfriend. I don't have my phone, so I can't contact anyone.

Thankfully, the night nurse comes in and gives me some medication. Renee left a few hours ago, but I haven't formed a love/hate relationship with this new nurse just yet.

She asks the usual questions and pushes a syringe of clear medication into my IV. She mentions it's my anti-seizure medication. I'm not used to it yet, and it has a sedating effect, which I welcome. Tomorrow, I will get some answers.

Chapter Four



I'm able to get up and walk down the hall the next morning. It feels like running the last two miles of a marathon. My legs are like lead weights trudging through thick mud, and my lungs burn with every foot I walk. I have to stop twice, but I get it done. Better yet, the doctor is pleased that I haven't had any seizures in four days. I'll take any small victory at this point.

When I return to my room, I find Lieutenant Commander Marks standing in my room facing away from me, hands locked behind his back, and looking out the window. Seeing him has my heart rate spiking in anticipation of the news he has to offer.

"Sir, "I say breathlessly, "it's good to see you."

He turns to greet me, remaining formal in his stance. "Petty Officer Hudson, please relax," he says, motioning to my hospital bed. I refuse to appear weak in front of this man, so I politely decline.

“I’m fine, sir. I just want to hear about my team,” I say, leaning slightly on the locked bedside table for stability.

He looks me straight in the eye and nods once. “You’ve no doubt been eager to receive information about the assignment you were on. I wish I were here under different circumstances,” he says, and my heart drops into my stomach. “Four members of your team have been injured in the explosion, including yourself. One of them didn’t make it.”

No. This can’t be true.

“Are you okay?”

I mentally shake my head. “I’m fine.” Although trained to face these types of situations, I still feel my heart racing faster than ever as a steady stream of adrenaline is released into my veins. The specter of death looms so close that I can almost feel its icy breath on the back of my neck.

“Who was lost?” I ask in a monotone voice that sounds distant, staring into his tired, brown eyes.

“Petty Officer Smith,” he says on a heavy exhale that causes my chest to tighten with grief and anger at the same time.

The ground feels like it shifts slightly underneath me, or maybe it’s me who sways. *This can’t be happening. Smitty.* My legs threaten to give out again, but I somehow manage to stand tall, swallowing past the bile rising in my throat. Emotions circle my chest and squeeze it tight. I want to fall to the ground and cry, but I work hard to shut down those feelings

and remain strong. “Has his mother been informed?” I ask robotically.

“Yes, she has,” he replies softly.

Smitty was all she had. She was a single mother who sacrificed everything for him. Even in her advanced age, she runs her small farm from sunrise to sunset daily. Smitty used to tell me that he planned on moving home and taking over the farm. He wanted his mom to relax and enjoy her golden years, saying it was the least he could do for everything she’d done for him.

I remember when my best friend first came into my life. His infectious laughter and his kind heart made me wish that I had known him sooner. Now, he’s gone, and those we were fighting for justice against remain unscathed. I’ve never felt more helpless; why are the evil rewarded and the good taken away from us? *How is there any justice in this life?*

I look at this man, Marks, looking so damn regal in his uniform after having delivered some of the most difficult information humanly possible, and I wonder how he can do it. How many times has he delivered this type of news? What does he do after this? Does he just return to work and continue as if nothing has happened? Does he go to lunch?

“I should be getting back,” he says after a few beats of silence.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“When can I return?” I ask flatly.

Picking some non-existent lint off his uniform, he answers, “That depends on what the doctors say.”

“Thank you for coming here in person, sir,” I tell him.

“Get better soon,” he says before swiftly walking out the door.

After he leaves, the gravity of the moment catches up with me and I collapse onto my hospital bed, unable to stop the tightening in my chest. Sucking in heavy breaths, I rub my temples and close my eyes as the heat builds in my core and travels up to burn behind my eyes. I can’t remember the last time I cried. It’s been years. But sitting alone in this white, cold room, I let go and cry. I cry for my best friend and brother, for a life cut short too soon and the unfairness of it. I cry because I can’t remember my last words to him or our last moments together. I cry for his mother and the loss that no parent should ever experience. And I cry for the uncertainty of my future.



Kathrin finally returns the next day. She called the hospital and asked that they relay a message that she would be back soon with a surprise. As much as I’ve wanted to see her and have thought it was strange that she hasn’t been here, after the news I received yesterday, I was grateful for the space. Once my tears ran dry, the pain turned into anger, and it has been simmering under the surface ever since. I needed time to process it before being around anyone.

I've been moved to a short-term rehabilitation unit within the hospital, and I'm walking with the physical therapist when I see Kathrin walking down the hall with sunshine on four legs.

As soon as she sees me, Annie Oakley runs toward me at full speed, pulling free from the hold Kathrin has on her leash, completely knocking my girlfriend off her feet.

I drop down to a squat and open my arms to catch my sixty-pound Golden Retriever before she launches her body into me. It's a whirlwind of golden fur and dog licks as she smashes into my chest, nearly knocking me over.

"Annie!" Kathrin yells, quickly making her way toward us.

"It's OK," I laugh as my dog wiggles and nuzzles into me. Seeing her is exactly what I needed and I'm so glad Kathrin brought her. I sit in the middle of the hallway for a minute and reunite with Annie as onlookers smile and laugh at the interaction.

Standing, I embrace Kathrin with the exuberance I couldn't when I first saw her. She melts into my arms and places her face in my chest as we both slowly exhale and try to reign in our emotions. After a moment she pulls away and I gesture at her to follow toward my room where we can have some privacy. I understand now why she left abruptly, and I'm grateful for her thoughtfulness.

Once we enter my small hospital room, I take a moment to study this woman. She is so beautiful. Now that the lingering fog in my brain is gone and it's working better, I can appreciate what her presence here means to me.

Her red hair is tamed in a long braid, and her blue eyes shine thickly with unshed tears. I haven't seen her in almost four months, but every freckle on her face and curve of her body is etched in my memory.

"I can't wait to get home. That's what I really need," I say, pulling her into another embrace. This time I feel her body tense under my touch. She's likely afraid to hurt me, but she doesn't need to worry. I'm feeling better every day, physically at least.

I pull away and look at her face. Touching her cheek, I lean in and plant a chaste kiss on her lips. The feel of her soft, warm lips sparks the desire I've been missing these past four months, and I quickly deepen the kiss.

My fingers slide down to grip her by the waist and pull her flush to my body, but just as our bodies come together she abruptly breaks the kiss and pulls away from me, casting her gaze downward.

With furrowed brows, I place my fingers under her chin, forcing her to meet my eyes. "Kathrin, I'm not going to break. I'm OK. I'm going to be fine."

"No, I know," she says, wiping the tears streaming down her face.

"Then, what's wrong?" I ask, taking her hands in mine. I can feel her hands cold and shaking under my touch. "Talk to me."

"Nothing," she replies, a fake smile spreading across her face. She's lying. My brain may not be fully normal, but I can still

spot someone lying a mile away, especially someone I care about.

“Come here,” I tell her, patting the bed beside me. She reluctantly sits and stares straight ahead, still not speaking.

I grab her chin again and turn her face toward me, forcing her to look at me. “It’s me, Kate. You can tell me anything.”

Her face drops again as she begins wringing her hands together. “Kane, I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“Hey,” I say, grabbing her hand in my own, “I’m going to be fine. I may even be able to return to my unit soon. You and I have an amazing future ahead of us.”

She blinks and a single tear streams down her cheek. “It’s just that so much has changed,” she admits.

She’s either not making sense or my brain injury is once again casting a fog over my ability to think straight.

“They’ve been changing for a long time,” she continues.

“What’s changed?” I plead. “Stop being cryptic, and tell me what is happening.”

“I met someone,” she says quietly.

Her words hit me like a bullet and I recoil from the shock. The only sound in the room is Annie’s panting as she stands with her front paws on the window and stares out into the parking lot. I close my eyes and try to go back to thirty seconds ago before she made her announcement.

“What do you mean you met someone?” I ask, trying to keep my tone calm and steady.

“Kane, you’re never home. I’m always lonely.”

“That’s not an answer, Kathrin. I’m asking you to tell me what is going on,” I demand in a clipped tone.

“I’m trying to,” she whines, wringing her hands together. She takes a deep breath and continues. “I met someone and feel like we have a real chance to make things work.”

She met someone...while I was away.

It’s so cliché that I almost laugh. *Almost*. Soldiers talk about this situation all the time. It’s a tale as old as time. A soldier leaves, and their significant other replaces them while they are off, risking their lives in some remote corner of the world. I just never in a million years imagined it would happen to me.

Suddenly, adrenaline gives me strength I didn’t possess twenty minutes ago. I stand up and turn to face her. She’s still sitting on the bed, crying as she rips my heart out.

“You never had a problem with me being gone before,” I say flatly.

“I tried to make the best of it,” she weeps. “But I missed you constantly.”

“Tell me about this relationship,” I demand.

“What?” she asks, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

“Have you slept with him?” My tone is accusatory, but I already know the answer. I’m just waiting for her to confirm it.

“Kane-” she starts before I cut her off.

“Are you in love with him? Are you just having sex because you’re lonely? What is the situation, Kathrin?”

She stares at me blankly, effectively answering my questions tacitly.

“So let me get this straight? You missed me so much that you what? Tripped and fell on some guy’s dick and developed feelings for him?” My voice is raised but I can’t control it. This is too much.

Kathrin finally meets my gaze, her blue eyes bright with anger. “Don’t be so crass, Kane. That isn’t what happened,” she says sharply.

My jaw clenches in frustration as I yell back, “Yeah, I don’t think you get to act morally superior here, Kathrin. If you’ve been feeling this way for a while, why didn’t you tell me? We could have fixed it!”

She stands up to face me, anger radiating from her posture as she shouts. “Fix it? How would you fix it, Kane? Would you leave the Navy for me? You know that’s never going to happen.”

I stare into her eyes, unable to recognize the woman standing before me. Heartache and anger collide inside me like two ships in a stormy sea. I attempt to reign in my temper but I’m finding it more and more difficult with the news of my best friend’s death and now this.

Kathrin takes a deep breath. “I know what’s happened is difficult. I wish it weren’t like this.”

My voice rises in pitch as I step into her personal space and shout again, “Do you wish we were getting married? Do you wish I had, I don’t know, proposed to you?”

She shakes her head sadly and pleads with me, “Please don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be, Kane.”

Then I remember something my mother had said about how Kathrin hadn’t answered any of her calls or texts recently. With an intense stare, I ask slowly, “How long?”

Kathrin regards me quizzically and remains silent.

“How long have you been fucking me over?” I grit out.

Kathrin shakes her head and takes a step back. “I’m not doing this with you, Kane.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically, throwing my hands in the air. “So when are you moving out of my house?”

She stills and then speaks so softly I can barely hear her. “I moved out last month.”

My eyes widen as her words sink in. “Last month? What about Annie? Is she home alone all of the time?” I ask, with barely contained anger.

Kathrin looks like I slapped her across the face. “No, of course not. She’s with me.”

“So you got a new place *and took my dog with you?*“ I ask incredulously. I’m so angry I can feel my heartbeat pound in

my temples.

“No. I moved in with Ryan.”

My face scrunches up into a tight knot of fury. “Who the fuck is Ryan?”

Kathrin draws a deep breath and exhales slowly before she begins to explain. “We went to high school together. We reconnected a few months ago-”

“That was a rhetorical fucking question, Kathrin! I don’t give two shits about Ryan from high school. But you moved my dog in with your new boyfriend? Are you fucking serious?” My voice rises with each word until it seems like the room is shaking around us. I glance over at Annie, who’s panting nervously as she looks between me and Kathrin before sitting down at my feet-her way of reaffirming whose side she’s on.

Kathrin throws her hands up in exasperation.

“See. That’s it right there,” she says with a wave of her arm toward me. “You’re more upset about your dog than your girlfriend.”

“Ex-girlfriend,” I reply coldly. “And it would seem I have reason to be. One of you is much more loyal than the other.”

Kathrin’s mouth gapes open. “Wow. That’s low, Kane,” she says with a sigh. “This was never going to work.”

I shake my head as the room gets smaller and smaller by the minute. “That’s not true, and you know it. But if that’s the excuse you need to tell yourself-”

“Kane, listen to me. You’re a great guy, but you’re never home. Even when you are home, you are millions of miles away.” She shakes her head as she continues. “We’ve been drifting apart for a long time. You have this drive or something. I don’t know what it is or why it’s so important to you. But your need to do this job comes first. It was fine until I realized that it’s not normal.”

“Thousands of people make these types of relationships work, Kathrin. Don’t tell me it’s not normal. It may not be perfect, but it can work.”

She exhales heavily. “Yes, it can work. But it hasn’t been working *for us* for a long time. I just didn’t realize it.”

“This is bullshit,” I snarl. “It’s just an excuse for you to leave guilt-free.”

She steps closer and reaches out for my hand but I quickly tuck it away. My jaw clenched as she continues.

“First, you need to know that I didn’t plan this. It just happened.”

My intense gaze burns into her but she stands her ground and proceeds with her rehearsed break-up speech.

“I love you. I have loved you since we met. At first, I was drawn in by your quiet strength and mysterious nature. You seemed to be fighting a battle no one else could see. All of the time. And it made me feel so special to be the one person you could open up to, even if only a little bit. But that’s just it. I don’t think you ever really let me in...not in any true way. We

were great friends who had fantastic sex, but there was always something missing. I am not the person you need.” She takes a deep breath before she finishes her thought. “I am sorry, Kane.”

“I was going to propose to you,” I blurt out. I hear her gasp and see more tears streaming down her face.

Calmly, she steps toward me and looks up into my face. “Kane, can I ask you a question?” she whispers.

It takes me a moment, but I finally nod.

“Do you really want to marry *me* or do you just think it’s something you think you *should* do? Be honest with yourself.”

My heart squeezes in my chest as I let her words linger in the air between us. I don’t honestly know the answer to the question. I know I’ve always wanted a relationship like my parents have. But maybe she’s right. Maybe I’m broken somehow and incapable of the vulnerability required to achieve it. It’s all too much to think about right now. In the span of two weeks I’ve almost died, lost my best friend, and now my girlfriend has decided to leave me.

I sit on the bed and stare out the window in defeat. I’m used to fighting for what I want, but I can’t fight for this. I’m going to lose this one, just as I lost the one that landed me in this place. It’s over.

Kathrin sits tentatively beside me on the bed. “I’m sorry. The timing is horrible. I didn’t want it to come out this way. And your parents-”

I interrupt her before she can say something else that will ignite my anger again. “Yeah, I can guarantee you’re off the Christmas card list.”

She chuckles through her tears. “Kane, I’m so sorry. I know I can’t make it right.”

I don’t respond, because she’s right. There is nothing she can say.

“For the record, once you decide to settle down and really give your heart to someone, you’re going to make her very happy.”

In the history of stupid break-up cliches, that has to be the worst. It conveys pity and superiority. Neither of which I need. Right now, I don’t see myself ever settling down. If this is love, I never want any part of it again.

“I assume your stuff is all out?” I ask in a calm, measured tone, staring straight ahead.

“Yes,” she answers, her chest heaving with sobs waiting to rip free.

“Then I guess we are done,” I tell her, the finality of things sitting on my chest like a heavy anchor.

“What about Annie?” she snuffles.

“She can stay with me tonight. I’m heading home tomorrow. I still don’t know when I’ll be able to go back to work.” I don’t bother telling her anything about Smitty. She’s no longer part of my life. She excised herself out of my heart with a dull, rusty knife.

She nods in understanding. "I am sorry, Kane."

"Goodbye, Kathrin," I reply. She gets up and hugs the dog, planted firmly at my side, and then turns to look at me. I make no move to stand or give her access to me, so she turns and walks out for good.

Chapter Five



Today is my meeting with my physical therapist and neurologist to discuss my progress. Driving to my appointment, my mind is already venturing into work mode. I will need to get something squared away for Annie and my house while I'm out of the country, but I'm sure it won't be a big deal.

I have been working so hard these past six weeks to get my life back. I'm doing everything I'm told to do and then some. I've channeled all of my anger, all of my sadness, and all of my resentment into healing myself. Thankfully, I haven't had any more seizures and was granted permission to drive again. Slowly, but surely, my life is beginning to return to normal.

Once I arrive, I'm led to a conference room where I sit on one side of the table, and they sit on the other, looking suspiciously contrite. A nervous energy slowly replaces my good mood as the tension emanates from the other side of the table.

My physical therapist starts first. "Kane, you've made excellent progress," he says guardedly. "You're nearly back to

100 percent. I am very impressed with how hard you've worked and how far you've come in such a short period of time.”

I nod, acknowledging the praise. I don't care what he has to say. I know I'm in great shape. What I need to hear is my progress from the neurological perspective. I have been through countless tests to determine the extent of my brain injury, and in my opinion, I'm fine.

Dr. Adler begins speaking softly, “As you know, you have obtained a tremendous amount of trauma to your brain with your recent accident. We categorized your injury as severe and coupled with smaller concussions you've experienced throughout your career, we believe that the damage to the tissue may have long-lasting effects.”

My shoulders tense, and I crack my knuckles under the table. My leg bounces as I dig my fingers into my thighs, trying to control the anxiety that is currently taking over my ability to sit still. “What are you saying, exactly?”

“It means there are concerns that you may experience long-term problems with cognition, behavior, or emotions. Unfortunately, there's just no way to tell.”

My hands begin to sweat, and I wipe them along my pants in rapid motion until they burn against the denim of my jeans. “So if there's no way to tell, you're rolling the dice with my future?” I question. I've spent countless hours researching brain injuries. I know much of it is a game of chance. “Yes,

those things can happen,” I state knowingly, “but I can also be fine.”

The doctor nods his head while the therapist simply looks at me with pity. “That’s true, Kane. And for a normal person, we wouldn’t be concerned. If you were an accountant, you’d return to work tomorrow.”

If I were an accountant, I’d shoot myself in the face, I think.

“But with what you do for a living, we can’t take the chance of your decision-making being compromised. You need to be able to communicate effectively and have full control of your emotions,” he adds with a sigh.

My world starts spinning around me. It’s not as if he is telling me anything I don’t already know. *I* am the one who does the job, so *I* am the one who is aware of everything it requires, but it truly never once occurred to me that I am broken beyond repair. A pit of acid forms in my stomach as the weight of his words settles heavily into my chest. It bubbles and burns before traveling up to my throat, causing me to swallow thickly.

“I’m sorry, Kane,” he continues, “but we can’t allow you to go back into the field. There are just too many unknowns.”

“I want a second opinion,” I say calmly.

“We’ve had your scans and tests reviewed by the best physicians in the country. Everyone agrees,” he replies.

Panic sets in as my body goes into fight or flight mode. I don’t know what to do with myself, but I know I can’t sit in this

white conference room with the shitty art on the walls and the cheap, worn-down chairs.

I stand up with a force that knocks my chair over behind me. I don't give either of them another chance to speak, leaving the office without another word, afraid that if they continue, I will lose my temper and accomplish nothing but proving the doctor right.



As I stare out my kitchen window into the woods behind the house, attempting to make sense of what is happening, the weight of the conversation with the neurologist starts to settle in. I've done my best to deny everything he said, especially that these symptoms would prevent me from returning to my job.

Hours later, after what felt like an eternity spent reflecting on all that had been said, I slowly started to understand the gravity of the situation. I can no longer ignore the fact that my brain injury poses a risk to both myself and my team if I return. It's a bitter pill to swallow but it doesn't change the truth – I simply can't be safe in a life and death situation if I'm not at full strength.

I've been told that I have two options: remain in the Navy and work a desk job or accept an honorable discharge. The thought of leaving behind what I'd worked so hard for makes me want to throw up, but at least then I won't be stuck living within this dull routine that is slowly killing my spirit. I'll rot away

behind a desk and my already blackening heart will disintegrate into a powdery decay. By tomorrow morning, I'm expected to give them my answer.

I already know the option I'm going to choose, which is why I feel so fucking miserable right now.



I motion to the bartender for another whiskey, and feel the heat of a gaze coming from my right. I turn to see a brunette with heavy brown eyes, her lips slightly parted in an expression that seems both hungry and inviting. Her form-fitting dress hugs her curves in all the right places, making me contemplate my dry spell since my breakup with Kathrin. The thought of having someone new between my sheets sends an electric thrill through my body and I can't help but return a lascivious smile, making sure she knows that the interest is mutual.

Just then, a tall figure steps between us, blocking my view. His voice is thick with menace. "Are you fucking staring at my girlfriend?" he spits.

I sigh heavily. I'm not looking for trouble tonight, but after months of feeling numb and empty, it might be just what I need.

"Another," I say to the bartender after swallowing my last sip of whiskey. With every swallow of the amber liquid, the pain of the past few months becomes more bearable. My therapist and doctor would say drinking alcohol is bad for me, but fuck

those guys. They don't know what I'm going through and haven't done anything to help me.

I throw back the last of my whiskey and stand to face him. We're similar in size, but he's soft in the middle. He looks sloppy, and he's about to get his ass kicked.

"I don't know," I say flatly. "Is your girl the one over there giving me 'fuck me' eyes?"

He cocks his arm back but before his punch can land, I connect with his jaw and he stumbles back, dizzy with the contact. I'm vaguely aware of some shouting and screaming circulating around me when I reach for his throat, but before I can land another punch I'm being pulled back by two bouncers. I don't protest, because even as drunk as I am, I know not to fuck with these dudes. They drag me outside and push me against a parked car.

"You're done!" one of them shouts, as the other grabs my keys and wallet from my pocket. "You got a ride home?" he asks. "You're not driving like this."

Before I can answer, the one looking through my wallet sees my military ID. Without a word, he hands it to the first guy who scans it.

"Look, we're going to call you a car. You need to sit here and calm down." He gestures to the other bouncer and says, "Paul is going to get you a glass of water while you wait." Then he shoves my keys and wallet in my direction and says, "Thank you for your service."

I was ready to face the physical pain of two behemoths pounding my face, believing it would be better than hearing those five words. I feel the strength I had just moments ago evaporate and I sink to the sidewalk, unable to look up as tears threaten to stream down my face. I take a deep breath and wait for a ride to take me away from this moment of heartache.



Despite knowing how much suffering this cycle will bring, I still find myself falling into the same behavior. Grief comforts me because it is familiar, like an old friend. It slips in quietly and promises immediate relief—a false solution that never really solves anything and only creates deeper layers of depression and anxiety. For twelve years, I dedicated myself to naval service, and when it ended abruptly, all my identity was taken with it.

My mind understands that changes are necessary but my emotions are too weak to confront them. I don't possess the strength to make hard decisions so instead I choose to stay in my misery, enduring this tumultuous cycle for months.

They say sometimes people have to hit rock bottom before they realize just how dysfunctional they've become. I'm wading in the shallow depths of rock bottom, but haven't crashed yet; although, my days are bringing me closer and closer. I'm beginning to feel the depression swallowing me daily.

My apartment is a disaster zone, clothes strewn everywhere and dishes piled high in the sink. I barely sleep at all, my mind racing with anxious thoughts that drink after drink can't seem to silence. Occasionally, I'll go out and try to find someone to take home, but mostly I just stay inside, drowning my sorrows in bottles of booze.

I'm intentionally pushing my parents away, even though they only want to help me. When we do talk, it's like walking on eggshells-there's so much left unsaid between us. The only solace I have is Annie. She always makes me happy, no matter how dark things get. Even though I can barely drag myself out of bed these days, I make sure to take her for walks every day because she deserves better than this.

I think it's Tuesday, but the days all seem to blend together lately. When I finally drag myself out of bed past 3 PM, I can feel a hangover headache starting up. Annie's ecstatic energy encourages me outside for a walk. The sweat from my brow feels more like whiskey than water, and soon enough, we are headed home.

As I picked up the day's mail from the mailbox, dread begins to creep in with each letter I toss into the trash pile. Until I see the return address on the last one: Conrad, Montana. Smitty's mom, Sandy Smith, lives there-and although I haven't spoken to her since shortly after the accident that claimed her son's life, I'm terrified this letter can't be good news. Adrenaline courses through me as I open the envelope with shaking hands.

Chapter Six



On legs that feel like they will collapse at any moment, I open the letter and begin to read. Before I even make it halfway through, the tears cloud my sight, causing me to pause and wipe my eyes with a nearby towel.

Dear Kane,

I hope this letter finds you well. First, I need to tell you that I am so sorry for what happened to you. The things you've gone through are things no one should ever have to endure. Hopefully, with each passing day, I hope your heart is finding a way to heal.

As for me, I'm moving forward day by day. After Luke passed away, the grief was suffocating and nothing felt right anymore. My friends kept pushing me to visit a support group for people who had lost a child, and I finally caved in, mostly just to get them to leave me alone.

When I arrived, a wave of sadness engulfed everyone in the room as we gathered around in a circle introducing ourselves.

I didn't think I'd have the strength to stay, but somehow I did.

One by one, painful stories were shared with tears streaming down our cheeks but also with laughter when remembering the good times we spent together as a family.

As difficult as it was to talk about our struggles, it was immensely satisfying to connect with other people who understood what I was going through. It was so hard to listen to everyone's stories and even more difficult to share my own story, but once I did, I found a community of lovely, supportive people. Together, we could talk about our children with reverence instead of profound sadness.

One of the men who leads the meetings also lost a son about Luke's age who was a firefighter. We bonded over our similar situations and began to have coffee together quite often. He has become a very unexpected and wonderful surprise. Who would have thought that at my age I'd find a companion? Life sure is strange.

I'm still working the farm and enjoying it. I don't see myself ever retiring. It gives me a purpose.

I still miss Luke deeply, and now I'm finally coming to terms with the fact that he was doing something he loved. His dream was to serve and being on a team with you was his greatest joy.

I remember how full of life he would be when speaking of you, Kane. He would light up talking about the fun times you two had together; it was like no time or place mattered. He looked

forward to bringing you home to Montana to get you on horseback—a sight he thought would be side-splittingly funny.

I can't thank you enough for nurturing that friendship. No matter where his duty called him, Luke always kept telling me stories about getting into some kind of mischief with you – although I never knew the specifics. My old lady's heart couldn't take it.

Thank you, Kane, for being an incredible friend to Luke and loving him like your own brother. Right now I don't know what emotions are swirling through you, but I want you to remember this: do not feel guilty about what happened to Luke. He was living his life as a soldier and fulfilling his purpose; we both knew what kind of dangers came with that job description. I have accepted his death, and will forever honor him in my heart.

Luke thought the world of you and wanted you to be happy.

Are you happy, Kane?

If not, maybe it's time to ask yourself why and what you can do to get there. Luke would want you to live the kind of life that is meaningful and full of joy. He'd hate to see you any other way.

Please write to me or come to the farm and hug an old lady. I'd love to see you.

I'm proud of you, Kane, and I know that whatever happens, you will live a life that would make Luke proud, but you as well. You're too special not to live the life you deserve.

Love, Mama Sandy

After reading the letter twice, I slide down the cabinets until my back scrapes against the tiled floor. A sob escapes my lips as I let the paper flutter to the ground next to me. The pain of not only losing my future, but also losing Smitty, is overwhelming. My body trembles with emotion as Annie stays beside me in comfort despite her inability to help.

Feeling Sandy's words resonate inside me, I find the strength to stand and survey the disarray within my apartment. The room is a mess. Bottles, boxes, and clothes strewn everywhere; even a pair of toenail clippers are resting on the coffee table. Unmade bed sheets drape over an unkempt mattress, and embarrassment seeps into my veins at seeing what an abomination my home has become.

I spend the next two hours organizing, cleaning, and washing; when I eventually reach the bathroom mirror, I wince at its reflection. My normal amber-colored eyes are no longer radiant or lively; instead, they appear dull and bloodshot surrounded by wild dark hair and a thick beard that covers most of my jawline.

I look too tired for a 31-year-old man. I feel like I've finally woken from a different kind of coma: a one-man pity party of self-loathing.

I throw the alcohol away next, not that there was a lot in the house at the rate I've been drinking it. I force myself to eat a healthy meal for dinner, pushing past the nausea, and then go to bed early.

The next morning Annie is bouncing with excitement as I increase our run to five miles, huffing and struggling with a task that used to be as easy as brushing my teeth. The entire time, I think about my skill set. What can I do that would provide me with a sense of purpose? I have never wanted to be a cop like my father. That is out of the question. But there is always the private sector.

I shuffle past people in the busy street, thoughts of uncertainty whirling through my head. Too many lives had been taken at my hands during my military service, and I yearn for something new, a different path. I still need to use the skills I'd gained, but now to protect innocent people instead of taking them away.

A spark of hope flutters in my chest as an idea comes to me. Maybe working as a private contractor is the answer? I hasten my steps, eager to get home so I can contact an old colleague of my father's who owns a private security firm. Spotting the business card tucked in the corner of a desk drawer, I snatch it up and dial the number.



My first few assignments have been demoralizing. I'd expected to protect innocent people, not wealthy, entitled pricks who believe they're better than everyone else. At times, I've even wondered why I'm doing this. I've been assured this assignment will be different. Our client wants me to guard this

asset without her knowledge. I'm eager to meet with my boss and get the details.

Henry and I are in a dimly lit bar, him nursing a beer while I sip black coffee. His eyes scan the room until they lock onto his target: a woman sitting alone near the back of the room with her arms crossed and her gaze set firmly forward. Her brown hair is pulled back tightly into a bun that accentuates her delicate features, and my boss directs my attention to her with a slight nod. "There's your girl," he says, sliding me an envelope filled with information about my new client, Ms. Olivia Monroe – a thirty-year-old first-grade teacher from Boston.

Inside the manilla folder, there are two pages of essential background details including her height, weight, hair color (brown), eye color (blue), and occupation.

"Why would a teacher need our services?" I ask Henry, skeptical about this case. "Who could she have possibly pissed off? The PTA President?" I joke as I take out a picture of Olivia Monroe from the dossier.

Henry angles his head toward the envelope, gesturing to look at the file again. "Keep reading."

And there it is – the daughter of famed mobster Shaemus Kildare. I've heard enough of his reputation to know he is one of the most brutal mobsters on the East Coast. He's the grandson of Irish immigrants, and he's got a reputation for quarreling with other mobsters and trying to expand his territory.

Olivia had the privileged upbringing of the rich and powerful; her father likely showered her with money and influence while ensuring that she attended only the best schools. I will be right back where I was before, guarding a selfish princess. At least, I'll be able to do it from afar.

I continue reading and see that she's been targeted by a rival mob as retribution against her father's actions. Threats of kidnapping, extortion, and violence were leveled against her in no uncertain terms.

"So, is this all there is?" I ask him, setting the papers down and taking a sip of my lukewarm black coffee.

"You said the less you know, the better." He smiles smugly. "There is more, but I quote, 'I only want the minimum amount of knowledge necessary to do my job, Henry.'"

I grunt in acknowledgement as I think over what I'd read so far. "OK. I get the point. This is enough for me to protect this entitled brat from any danger that may come her way."

He nods approvingly. "I know you can handle it. That's why I pay you the big bucks."

"Why isn't her old man having her protected?" I asked curiously. "He has the resources to do it himself, if not through one of his own operatives then likely through an outside firm like yours."

Henry shrugs noncommittally. "Who knows? You'll just have to do your job and see what happens."

“Who hired us?” I ask, leaning over the table and looking my partner in the eye.

He sighs and tugged at his collar, looking away before answering. “I couldn’t tell you. An attorney came to me and said he wanted to hire us for an important job, but wouldn’t disclose his client’s name. We both know what that means – whoever it is has gone into hiding, likely trying to protect themselves from mobsters who would go after anyone and anything pertaining to them.

“Have there been any attempts on her life?” I ask, glancing around the room as a server passes by with a tray of drinks.

Henry shakes his head. “She changed her name and moved to this town right after college, vanished without a trace. Kildare is sick. Our client thinks someone might make a move on her if they find out where she is.”

I nodded in understanding. “My cover is set?”

He gives me a wry smile and says, “You start tomorrow. Good luck with that.”

With a heavy sigh, I take my last sip of coffee, knowing that this one is going to be interesting.

Chapter Seven



I worked late into last night, taping up thick construction paper to create a bright and cheerful mural on the walls of my first-grade classroom. I had found themed decorations for each subject area—a frayed map of the world in social studies, pictures of animals in science, and colorful alphabets strewn across every available space.

To complete my vision for the classroom, I tried to make sure it was a comfortable place for my students to be both emotionally and physically. I fashioned a cozy nook in the corner of the room from two old chairs, an incredibly soft rug, and little twinkle lights hung from the ceiling. A variety of stuffed animals were arranged around it, so that if any student felt overwhelmed they could retreat there for some comfort. It was also reassuring to know I had a place to go if I needed a break myself.

I've always been drawn to children. The innocence in their eyes, the pure joy of a puppy or a kitten, and the ability to experience life without the complexity of adulthood have

always entranced me. At times, my admiration for adults has been disheartened by their tendency to be manipulative, disingenuous, and selfish when it came to gaining something they wanted – not caring how it may affect another’s well-being. Maybe that’s an unfair generalization, but it’s historically true of adults throughout my life.

As I walk in on the first day of school, I’m filled with anticipation. I smile as I think about how excited my students will be for their new adventure and all the amazing things we will learn together.

I carefully balance two dozen cupcakes, a stack of construction paper name tags, and an armload of crayons and coloring pages as I make my way to my classroom. My heart races with excitement at the thought of all the eager faces I will see when I arrive. The smell of cleanliness lingers in the air, and I savor every second of this moment; an oasis before the inevitable chaos begins.

Then it happens. The moment my sensible teacher shoes meet the wet mop water, everything occurs in slow motion. My body shifts as my foot slides out from underneath me, sending me flying backward with arms full of treats and supplies. Before I can try to catch myself, my butt slams against the cold tile floor with an echoing thud. All around me are streams of soaked cupcakes and broken crayons. Suddenly, someone is there.

“You OK?” he asks, looking down at me with a bemused grin.

Food, along with the other items I brought, lay strewn across the floor. To make matters worse, this man seems completely oblivious to the fact that I have just slipped and fallen into a puddle of mop water. His black pants and gray button-down shirt clearly mark him as part of the janitorial staff and I find it impossible not to snap at him.

“No. I’m not OK,” I cry out, throwing my hands up in frustration while remaining seated on the wet floor. “Where are the wet floor signs?” I seeth through gritted teeth.

The man shifts his feet and shrugs his shoulders passively, so I offer him more explanation.

“The signs that signify that the floor is wet! They are supposed to be out!” my voice rises in volume and pitch as my patience for ineptitude quickly evaporates.

The stranger’s beautiful eyes widen in surprise as I fume at him. They are somehow not quite dark enough to be brown, but hinted with deep orange tones. His face is expressionless as anger boils within me.

“You do know the signs of which I speak, right? They are yellow and shaped like diamonds; they say ‘Caution - Wet Floor’ with a picture of someone slipping. Does any of this ring a bell?” I spit out sarcastically.

Without missing a beat, he spins on his hard-soled shoes and strides away, leaving me surrounded by soggy papers, fruit, and sweat treats. He returns moments later with a tall yellow caution sign tucked under his arm. With almost robotic precision, he places it six inches from my butt before returning

to his mop. He says nothing further as he mops the small area around us.

I let out an exasperated shout. “Are you freaking kidding me?” I yell incredulously.

He continues mopping without looking up and finally speaks in a low voice, “You asked for a sign. I got you a sign.”

He doesn’t inquire as to the health of my tailbone or ask if I need help with my pile of wet crap.

Houston, we have a big fucking problem.

I grit my teeth and struggle to keep my voice even as I address the janitor. “What I asked for, *Janitor*, was for you to do your job correctly. Maybe that’s too difficult? Maybe I should take this up with Principal Jones about how you don’t follow basic procedures here?”

His face wears a mask of disinterest as he looks me up and down slowly before snatching his headphones from his belt. Without looking at me, he snaps them on and utters just loud enough for me to hear, “Maybe you could try not to be such an uptight hag.”

My hands clench into tight fists, my nails biting into the soft flesh of my palms. Words fail me, so instead I start gathering the soggy supplies scattered across the floor, shouting primarily to myself since he has already moved on from the conversation. “You are unbelievable! This is an important day – it sets the tone for the entire year -and you ruined it!”

Glaring at him, I shove as much as I can into my canvas bag with enough force to make an impression. My frustration only grows as he continues working and whistling, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I'm still there. There's something about him – powerful yet restrained. He carries himself with an energy that states he doesn't give a fuck about what people think about him. It's equally attractive and irritating, especially since it's currently directed at me.

Finally, I grab my keys and storm toward the classroom. I want nothing more than to slam it with a hard thud, but the heavy door is designed to close slowly so kids don't get their fingers pinched.

Even after I manage to pull it shut, his whistling follows me down the hall, mocking me all the way.



Despite the start of the morning, the rest of the day goes surprisingly well. I only have two nose pickers, one crayon eater, two exceptionally loud girls, and one over-sharer. He told me during share time that his mom and dad like to spend time alone together, watching adult movies, and drinking adult drinks. No judgment here. That's probably how I would be as a parent, as well.

I glance up at the clock as I pack my things away and realize I'll miss the bell. Not that it matters. I haven't seen the janitor from hell all day, and he's the one with the keys to lock up.

I was going to approach the administration about him after our first meeting, but after a long day with thirty kids in a cramped classroom, I realized I didn't know his story. He might have just had a bad first impression of me, too.

Just then, he saunters into the room looking bored and disinterested. His tired eyes wander over the mess left behind by impatient children, shaking his head as he heads for the corner trash can.

He doesn't spare me a glance until I crack a joke: "Did you make anyone else fall on their ass today?"

"Nope. Just you," he replies snarkily. "Did you try to steal the souls of any unsuspecting children?"

I arch an eyebrow in surprise at his unexpected wit. "Funny," I say sarcastically as I take a moment to study him while his back is to me. He's tall and lean with broad shoulders and wavy dark hair that tickles the nape of his neck. His work pants hug his trim waist, showcasing a surprisingly toned physique beneath a tucked-in shirt. I bite my lower lip as I let my eyes wander over the hard planes of his body before he turns and they meet his eyes. They sparkle with hidden depths, highlighted by flecks of orange like a campfire reflecting off a lake at night. A smirk reveals a dimple on the left side of his cheek that I could sleep in. Holy crap. *Asshole Janitor is hot.* But it doesn't matter how good looking he is—he's obviously a self-obsessed prick.

"You know what? I was going to be nice and tell you which desks have dried, crusty boogers underneath them. But your

attitude sucks, so you can find them yourself.”

“Pretty sure I’m up to the task.” He chuckles humorlessly. His condescension is both rude and insulting.

“Whatever!” I exhale under my breath but loud enough to make sure he hears. He’s making me passive-aggressive. I hate passive-aggressiveness. Once again, he ignores me and does his job as if we haven’t begun a Hatfield-McCoy-sized feud.

“I hope you don’t fall into the toilet when you’re scrubbing all of the tiny turd messes,” I say. This garners me with raised eyebrows and a tiny smile on his stupid, handsome face.

I gather my belongings and move toward the door. His eyes follow me as I walk, but I don’t let myself slow down or be intimidated. I swing open the heavy entrance, feeling a sense of satisfaction when it closes behind me. Stepping out onto the street, I take a deep breath of fresh air. It’s like an elixir for my soul; it helps to wash away all of the stress from the day.



I make my way home to my refuge. Eight hundred square feet of stucco and windows is the only place where I can truly feel secure in who I am. My real name might be Simone Olivia Kildare, but here I am known as Olivia Eden Monroe – and that’s how it has been for years now. It’s confusing as hell, and I’d need a tree diagram to explain it accurately.

I was born Simone Olivia Holt. That was my name for my first thirteen years of life. Then, against my will, I became Simone

Olivia Kildare. I was forced to live under that ruse for five more years. As soon as I was able to at the age of eighteen, I started going by my middle name and grandmother's maiden name. It was partially to distance myself from my previous life and for protection. I've been Olivia Eden Monroe for over ten years now.

Somewhere along the way, I forget where each persona stopped and the other started. I've lived three different lives in my short 30 years and don't entirely know who I'm meant to be.

Simone Holt had golden locks, a glistening white smile and a penchant for activities that didn't involve sitting still. She was the life of the party, constantly surrounded by friends at sleepovers, pool parties and weekend trips. Her passion for sports showed in her trim figure, she could run like the wind and throw a baseball like nobody else. But most of all, Simone wanted to explore the world beyond her small town.

At thirteen-years-old, Simone felt invincible. Every day was full of excitement and possibility. One summer evening, she held hands with Connor, the star baseball player who she'd been crushing on since seventh grade. They kissed under the stars and Simone thought she'd found true love. If only she knew that as soon as their lips parted, so too would her dreams.

Then came Simone *Kildare*. When she stepped into a room, her eyes scanned everything and everyone with a practiced detachment born of painful experience. Her face was a mask

of stoicism, but beneath it simmered a barely contained rage at the unfairness of life. Loss had hollowed her out and left her closed off from anyone who might try to reach out. She knew that fairytales were just stories, fictions created to distract people from reality.

Olivia's hair was tinted darker than its natural color, an attempt at reinvention that failed to fully conceal the wounds underneath. She moved through life with cautious steps, always on guard against those who might hurt her. Intimacy was impossible for her – how could she connect with someone when she was afraid to let them get too close? Instead, she turned to dating apps, seeking quick, casual encounters in neutral locations that would end before any awkward post-sex conversations could occur.

I move through my small space, shedding the day as I go. Gently kicking off my shoes, I wiggle my toes in the plush carpet and sigh. Reaching for the top button of my blouse, I slowly undo the buttons one by one until I'm able to pull it off my body. Next, I unfasten my bra and let it fall to the floor with a satisfied sigh, feeling as though a heavy weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

Slipping into a faded blue t-shirt and old sweatpants, I run a brush through my hair before banding it up into a messy bun on the top of my head. Turning toward the mirror, I smile at how comfortable and relaxed I look. Taking a deep breath, I grab a wine glass and fill it with a generous amount of Viognier before making my way out to the balcony.

The sun is setting on the distant hills, casting a warm pinkish hue over the valley below as dusk settles in around me. From where I'm sitting, I can hear birds beginning their melodic chirps and feel the slight chill of the evening breeze wash away any remaining tension from the day.

I bring the glass to my nose and inhale deeply, taking in the floral aromas of peaches and honeysuckle. As soon as the smooth chilled taste hits my tongue, I sink further into my chair and allow myself to relax completely.

Closing my eyes for a few moments to reflect on how the day went, I find gratitude that it had been a good day overall. I have some lovely students and a few that are going to be more challenging, which I welcome. I've found over the years that helping the most difficult children is the most rewarding task I undertake. They are often burdened by circumstances beyond their control, either with learning difficulties or problems at home. I can absolutely relate to the latter.

I formulate my plan for tomorrow and consider making a few changes to seating and reading groups if things remain the same by the end of the week.

Now that I have that figured out, I can let my mind roam free. The memory of the altercation with the janitor flashes through my mind and I clench my fists in frustration. It took all of my effort not to lash out, not to make a scene that would draw attention to myself. Blending in was key – drawing notice meant risking exposure, vulnerability, and more pain.

There was no reason for him to be so adversarial. Yes, I snapped at him, but only because he was clearly unfit for his job. *Imagine if it had been a child who fell and got injured.* Would he have been so glib then? I was just trying to teach him a helpful lesson.

Within minutes, I've convinced myself that he was one hundred percent wrong and I bear zero responsibility for the outcome of our first meeting. I'm mumbling the justifications to myself and finishing the last sip of my wine when I'm struck with a realization. *He finds me attractive!* It may be the wine talking, but it makes complete sense. The new janitor with the pretty eyes wants me.

I slip inside, pour another glass of wine, and return to my spot on the deck. By the end of the second glass, I'm more convinced than ever that he took one look at me and was so struck with my beauty that he forgot how to act like a decent human being.

Wow! It's sad if you really think about it.

Later, I scrub my teeth and rinse with mouthwash, still pondering the janitor's behavior. It's clear he's captivated by me, but all I can feel is pity for him. I wonder what kind of life he's led? Was he a high school dropout or an ex-convict? Questions swirled in my mind as I fell into bed.

Just before I drift off to sleep, I realize with dismay that my whole night has been spent thinking about the strange janitor with a seemingly endless fascination for me – or maybe it's the other way around.

Damnit.

Chapter Eight



I eye the tiny, misshapen turds in the small toilet with disgust. *How hard is it to flush?* As a former military man, I have seen some foul things, but this is a new level of repugnance. Kids are disgusting.

'Hope you don't fall in,' I mutter to myself thinking about the prissy teacher as I scrub latrines, pry gum off tables, and mop up vomit that looks like spaghetti. This place is a carnival mystery house of biological nightmares.

As I empty the trash cans in Olivia's classroom, a sarcastic thought crosses my mind. She's a real gem, entitled and self-centered – just as I had suspected when I took this assignment. She tried to get under my skin earlier, but I refused to be bothered by her nonsense. *Hope you don't fall in...*

Finally, I sigh and look around at the mess in the classroom. What in the calamitous fuck have I gotten myself into?

This is not the first job I've had protecting someone with a questionable character. I make sure not to get caught up in the

moral debate; it's just part of this line of work.

Still, this assignment is going to be difficult on many levels. I try not to learn too much about the people I am hired to protect – it helps me maintain personal boundaries. But, I can't help but be curious about Olivia Monroe. She changed her name and escaped her father somehow. *Why?*

What little I do know of her is that she needs to watch where she walks, she's stubborn and will likely refuse protection if aware of it, and surprisingly feisty for living in a world ruled by mobsters who have been known to take revenge on entire families and bloodlines.

I take in her classroom, trying to get a better understanding of who she is beyond the mob princess. I'm sure that since she was born, her father has treated her like royalty. Her discipline this morning reinforced that.

Perhaps there's nothing more to her than that, but my intuition tells me otherwise. Every desk contains a handwritten note with a child's name and an inspirational message. It must have taken her a long time to do this. In one corner are twinkle lights and a cozy reading nook, something I could have appreciated as a kid being bullied.

I pick up one of the stuffed animals, a large ladybug still with its tag attached, and realize the gesture isn't as benevolent as it appears when I remember she's probably using her dad's money, even if they're not on good terms.

She may have difficulty interacting with adults, but she is adept with the language of six-year-olds. I finish cleaning her

classroom, dodging small pellets of waste and pieces of old food as I go to find where she lives.

After stopping by my place to freshen up and grab a quick bite, I head over to the address Henry provided.

The building is pleasant, yet not overly extravagant. There are no entrance gates or codes required, which is strange considering her accustomed luxurious lifestyle.

I locate apartment 323 on the third floor and park my Ducati motorcycle before walking around the complex. Families and single dwellers fill the floors; some have wreaths hung on their doors or welcome mats in front of them. Her door though remains lifeless and uninviting compared to her classroom. She must be trying to keep a low profile at home.

I stand outside her door for a minute, listening for faint noises coming from inside. Eventually, I hear a small person moving around followed by running water. It seems that she has not been killed in the past several hours, or if so, it had to be done by the world's smallest and cleanest assassin.

As I'm about to start my bike and ride away, Olivia steps out on her balcony.

She looks peaceful in her sweatshirt and glasses, sipping wine from a glass and reading a book while she gazes at the nearby hills. Then she stops and puts her pen in her mouth, her eyes shifting up and right as if deep in thought. Her lips begin moving rapidly as she talks to herself – arguing with herself, judging by her expressions. Great, I think. She's a complete nutcase; no wonder so many people want her dead. Even

though I should go, I find myself watching her apartment until long after she's gone inside. When the lights finally turn off an hour later, I drive to my temporary place, call my parents to check on Annie, and try to get some sleep. Busy times ahead.



At 7:15 the next morning, Olivia's car appears on the road. Always punctual, this makes it easy for bad guys to target her with her predictability. If I had access to her, I would advise mixing up her schedule to avoid predictability, but since I can't do that, I'll just have to keep an extra close eye on her.

I follow behind on my bike, keeping a respectable distance so she won't spot me. She drives the speed limit during the seven-mile trip to school.

I hang back when she parks and watch as she emerges from the car looking like Minnie Mouse, with a red and black polka dot dress and small heels. It's kind of like 'Golden Girls meets Lucille Ball.' It should look ridiculous on a woman her age, but she's pulling it off. It cinches at her small waist and flares around her hips. I'm not sure if I love it or hate it, but seeing as how *she's* wearing it, I settle on hate.

In one hand, she holds coffee, in the other hand, she has a stack of recently copied worksheets and a collection of *Amelia Bedelia* books. In the crook of her arm, she cradles a potted Boston fern, while various colorful items threaten to spill out of the bulging tote bag precariously sliding off her shoulder. This woman, always carrying fourteen different items in her

hands along with a large bag slung over her shoulder, is a circus juggling act of self-important bedlam. As I watch, an idea sparks in my mind. It's wrong but I can't shake it loose.

I rev the engine of my motorcycle as I pull out from where I'm parked on the side of the school and speed by. Startled, her coffee cup falls to the ground with a crash and she screams. The Boston fern and once pristine worksheets and books are strewn across the asphalt. Her tote bag has lost its wrestling match against its contents, which have sprung free in a colorful melee of construction paper and Crayolas.

"Motherfucker!" she yells as she turns to look at me, eyes blazing with anger, but I'm wearing a full helmet so she can't see my face. A sardonic laugh bubbles up within me as I ride by, knowing that I shouldn't be stirring up trouble but it's more fun than anything else right now.

Her chest is heaving, her cheeks have turned an angry shade of pink, and her mouth has twisted into something resembling a snarl. Her expression has changed from that of a mild-mannered elementary school teacher to something much less pleasant – like the visage of a Russian sailor after too much vodka. I think it'll make dealing with her much more interesting.

I can't help but wonder how far I can push her before she completely snaps. Now that would truly be something worth seeing.

Chapter Nine



When I walk into the lounge area, there are two teachers gossiping about the usual stuff – who’s dating who, who’s cheating, which children have single parents. As always, they’ve got their finger on the pulse of school life.

“Hey Olivia,” one of them, Andrea Lamb, says. She’s an attractive fourth grade teacher who talks entirely too much for my liking. Andrea is known for flirting with both single men and some taken ones too.

“Hi Andrea,” I reply before heading for the coffee machine. This won’t be as tasty as my carefully curated home brew, but at least it will provide a much-needed caffeine boost.

“We were just talking about the new janitor,” Andrea said excitedly, her cheeks flush with excitement. “Have you met him yet?”

I add a spoonful of clumped up powdered creamer to my coffee, watching as it floats across the surface reluctantly like an oil spill in the ocean. I stir it furiously with a flimsy

wooden stick looking for some sign of dissolution. I shrug slightly and say, “Can’t say that I have.”

The memory of yesterday’s awkward exchange still fresh in my mind, I silently curse myself for having landed on my ass. I wasn’t about to tell them that he is anything but sweet – they can find out for themselves.

“Girl, that man is F-I-N-E,” Andrea adds, her words tumbling over each other. “I introduced myself yesterday and he seems so nice.”

The other teacher, Leslie, fans herself slightly with one hand as she speaks, “He has the best smile. And eyes. And that body – it’s perfect. I wonder if he’s single?”

My stomach churns at the thought of how wrong they are about him. Even though I want nothing more than to jump in and correct them, I force myself to remain casual. “I wouldn’t know,” I reply lightly. “I don’t even know his name.”

“His name is Kane,” Andrea says with a dreamy sigh. Her face lights, and I feel a flutter in my stomach at the sound of his name. Irritated, I stir my coffee leisurely, before dropping the wooden stick in the trash and heading for the door. The last thing I hear them saying is “work hottie” as the door swings shut behind me.

Walking down the hallway toward the administrator’s office, I can hear laughter coming from inside. I pause for a moment before entering. As soon as I walk in, there he is - *Kane* - standing near the front desk charming the school secretary with that million dollar smile. His dimples are on full display,

and she is eating it up. Rolling my eyes, I chuckle to myself. *'Give me a break...'* That will probably become my new favorite line.

Mrs. Jensen's expression softens as she notices me, her lips curling up into a polite smile. "Good morning, Ms. Monroe," she greets me in a formal tone.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jensen," I reply, returning the formality. I'll admit I put some extra emphasis on the MRS. part, just to make sure everyone in the vicinity is aware of her marital status.

There's a flier for the back-to-school fling in my cubby, reminding me that I signed up to chaperone the event. It's only for the fifth and sixth graders and consists of boys standing on one side of the gym while the girls congregate on the other, occasionally co-mingling at the food table. It's such an awkward age. I enjoy observing it like I'm Diane Fossey, and they are the elusive mountain gorillas of Rwanda.

As I pass Kane on the way out of the office, I hear him mumble, "Have a good day, Ms. Monroe."

"Bite me, Janitor," I whisper to him as I walk past, earning me a smirk and a soft chuckle.

Kane matches my strides just moments after I start walking down the hall toward my classroom. He stays close, though we don't say a word.

As we stop outside my classroom, he towers over me with his muscled physique, arms folded in a defensive stance. His

brows furrow and his lips curl as he cocks his head in confusion. “You know, I have an actual name, right?” he asks.

I am already running late after that maniac on a motorcycle nearly ran me over and sent my entire lesson plan (and coffee!) into squandered pandemonium. My coffee mug was shattered and it was part of a set of four mugs, now I only have three. I had bought them in a fit of optimism, the mugs sporting a big colorful heart with the words “cup of love” inscribed on them. I feel like my optimism lay shattered with that porcelain in the parking lot. *Bastard Motorcycle Motherfucker!* Now I’m wasting valuable time conversing with this janitor who seems to be in his own world.

“I know you have a name. I just don’t care what it is,” I say firmly while shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

He smirks and raises an eyebrow in disbelief before turning the conversation away from himself. He looks me up and down, apparently unfazed by my crossed arms and defensive posture. “What’s with the polka dots?” he asks, throwing me off balance. As usual, conversing with him feels like trying to ride a bull for eight seconds.

“What? I just – I like polka dots, they’re cute. Plus the kids like them,” I answer.

He smiles and rocks back on his heels. “My name is Kane,” he says. His voice is deep and masculine and it almost thaws my icy exterior. *Almost.*

“I know,” I say quickly before realizing my mistake. “But I didn’t ask your name; it was offered to me against my will.”

“Good to know,” he grins. “But you don’t strike me as someone who does anything against her will.”

“I don’t,” I counter. “I just happened to be in the vicinity of a conversation about the new janitor.”

“Huh?” His eyebrows rise in interest. “What were they saying?”

“People are talking about how mean you are,” I reply nonchalantly. “And ugly.”

He looks startled by the description. “Ugly? What kind of ugly?”

“Elephant-man ugly,” I declare, meeting his gaze with a smile.

“Wow,” he draws out. “Well, I wouldn’t want to hold you up by making you look at my hideous face any longer.”

“I appreciate that,” I say as I step around his large frame to walk past him.

“Have a good day, Olivia.” I can hear the humor in his voice as he calls out to me.

And wouldn’t you know it? The sound of my name rolling off his lips makes me smile despite my best efforts not to. And then I realize, I never gave him my name.

Chapter Ten



The following week and a half goes smoothly. My class is settling into the groove of the new school year, and I'm getting to know them better. We have a good time reading and working on math, but my favorite part of the day is our afternoon sing-alongs. Every afternoon after lunch, we sing and dance to get the wiggles out.

It's a time when I'm allowed to be a silly kid myself. Sometimes, I wonder if I crave that time because my childhood was cut short. I don't let myself dwell on it, but it crosses my mind sometimes. Maybe I'm just a kid at heart? Regardless, singing *Itsy Bitsy Spider* with a room of six-year-olds is simply the best part of my day.

I've seen Kane around the school, mostly in the hallway near my classroom and in the cafeteria. I stand by my theory that he's obsessed with me, but there is no proof of this yet. He has this mysterious way about him, as if he's hiding something by just standing quietly and observing everything.

The teachers are all friendly to him. He dresses nicely in slacks and ironed button-down shirts. Although he does wear different shirts each day, I haven't noticed any wrinkles on them, which tells me he irons his shirts every night before bed. His hair stays perfectly styled over his forehead, with a couple strands resolutely out of place. He could have been the inspiration behind one of Michelangelo's marble busts worthy of the Vatican; however, I'm sure Michelangelo would have stabbed him with a mallet and chisel before his commission ended. I try to avoid looking at him as much as possible because every time I look at him my heart beats faster and my cheeks flush pink. *Why am I affected by him?* It isn't just his good looks; it's something else more basic and instinctual that draws me to him like a moth to an open flame, or in this case, an intelligent woman to a dumbass.

My mind drifts to him as I prepare for the back-to-school festivities. I slip into a pair of jeans and a soft sweater that is the color of butter and just as soft I opt for the most comfortable flats I own. Last year, I attempted to dress up in a sundress and heels, and spent most of the night regretting it as my feet throbbed for the rest of the weekend.

It'll be dark outside when I come home so I walk around the apartment closing all the blinds. I don't feel safe with people being able to peek into my space at night. Even though I know it's irrational, it's a precaution that comes from my dangerous upbringing.

I lean toward my living room window to shut the curtains when I see someone across the street on a motorcycle. It's

clear that it is a man from his build wearing a helmet and a dark visor facing my apartment. I duck back quickly as all sorts of thoughts rush through my head: is he affiliated with my father's mob? Does he work for someone else in the criminal underworld? Or is he connected to anyone related to my past life?

From the corner of my eye, I recall last week's incident when a motorcycle rider made me drop my coffee. Although it could have been the same guy, his behavior didn't scream dangerous. Yet, why mess with me?

I peek around the curtain for another look at the man, but the spot on the curb is deserted. Maybe I was overreacting; maybe he wasn't even looking into my apartment. Could be just my jittery mind playing tricks on me.

Instead of staying in all weekend frozen in fear, I push those thoughts away and go out. My decision to not let fear be the captain of my life was made years ago, and I'm not going back on that now. With that thought, I grab my pan of brownies and head out.

When I arrive at school, I spot a few teachers and parents already bustling about, inspecting the decorations and food. One parent even volunteered to provide the music for tonight. It's likely his son is embarrassed that his father is here, but one day he will appreciate the love and effort put into his life. I would do anything to spend more time with my mother.

"Hey, Olivia," Andrea hollers from beside the table of snacks. I carry over the brownies and together we catch up on small

talk.

“Are you pumped for tonight?” I joke.

“You bet! Especially since Kane will be here. I’m hoping I get to chat with him some,” she answers. Good luck with that. The man has the conversational skills of a potato.

I cock an eyebrow in surprise. “Kane is coming to this? Why?”

Andrea shrugs and remarks, “They wanted a few extra guys here for safety.”

I answer with an unenthusiastic, “Oh yeah, that makes sense.”

“Speak of the devil,” she says as Kane steps into the gymnasium. His black tee shirt is tight around his chest and back, his jeans fit him snugly in all the right places.

“He makes one helluva security guard,” Andrea comments. “That man can protect me any day of the week!”

I give her a token smile before hastening to the restroom to catch my breath. Something about his presence unsettles me, and I’m sweating more than usual now. Heat rises from my neck to my chest, underarms and back, and sweat is already soaking through my shirt.

Usually, I have enough time to prepare for seeing him by formulating sarcastic comments, but tonight he’s caught me off-guard. Even worse, I’m captivated by how he looks. It seems this evening I’ll be just as awkward as the kids.

I'm standing in front of the broken mirror, staring at the words "ASS" and "BITCH" that are carved into it, when Kane shows up, filling the doorway with his tall frame.

"Are you alright?" he asks with a hint of worry on his face.

"Are you alright?" I reply, causing him to look confused.

"Me? What do you mean?" he inquires.

"You're in the female restroom," I point out. "Going through some kind of mental episode or just plain old-fashioned voyeurism?"

He responds drily, "Voyeurism, definitely. I saw you rush in here and wanted to make sure nothing was wrong."

I lie, assuring him, "Nothing's wrong." Then I narrow my eyes suspiciously. "Since when did you care if I'm OK?"

He pauses before answering, "Since I began working here as school security – until nine o'clock tonight, the safety of everyone is my responsibility."

"Where was that sense of responsibility when you caused me to fall on my ass?"

"Hey," he says in a tight voice as his eyes bore into me. "I asked if you were alright, and all you wanted to do was yell at me. Nothing was hurt except for your pride."

My heart races as I try to move around him.

He steps slightly to the left, allowing me space to slide past him, and before I know it his fingers grip my elbow. His touch sends sparks up my arm and a flush rose up my cheeks. "You

know, you make it really difficult to care about your well-being,” he says.

I shake off his grasp and reply sharply, “Good thing you don’t need to care about my well-being then.” With that I spin away from him and stomp off.



The children move around with an air of excitement, whispering to each other in small groups and erupting into laughter every few minutes. Meanwhile, Kane remains a vigilant presence by the door, keeping a sharp eye on all comers and goers.

I find myself glancing over at him from time to time; his tall frame stands firm and determined, arms crossed resolutely across his chest, and he returns polite smiles as people approach him for conversation. I try my best to avoid him after our awkward encounter in the bathroom; there is something about him that seems a little too complex for me to unravel. It makes me uneasy.

As soon as the music fades out, I hastily gather up my things and make a beeline for home, feeling more content in my own space than I had all night.

Chapter Eleven



I arrive at Henry's chosen meet-up spot, a dimly lit bar where the pungent scent of stale beer and cigarettes lingers. Henry is already seated at our regular table, nursing his own drink.

He slides a cold bottle of beer across the table to me as I take a seat. The condensation from the bottle drips onto my hand as I take a long swig. It's been a while since I've been out drinking, but tonight just might be the night to break that streak.

I'm eager to debrief with Henry about my week, but before I can speak, he says, "You look like you could use that." We both chuckle.

"I don't know how much longer I can deal with those kids," I say, glancing around the dimly-lit room. "Some of them are cute, sure, but most of them are total assholes."

Henry nods in agreement before taking another sip of his drink. But then my thoughts drift back to Olivia.

“Hey man,” I finally say, breaking the silence. “Do you think Olivia is still in danger?”

Henry takes a deep breath before responding. “Yeah... actually. One of my guys got word that the Profaci’s are ramping up their search for her.”

I lean forward in my seat. “Do you think they will be able to find her?”

He hesitates before shaking his head slowly. “I don’t know... but we will be ready if they do.”

“I don’t get why they are so interested in Olivia Monroe. She’s dull. All she does is work, run errands, and then go home,” I explain to Henry. “I haven’t even seen her exercise or take a walk,” I add.

“Sounds like it should be an easy job for you then,” he states.

“Except, that I’m a janitor,” I remind him. “Have you ever done this kind of work before?”

“Nope,” he responds with a laugh.

“Hey, those people deserve a raise and a blow job,” I joke, which makes Henry erupt in laughter. “This scenario creates extra difficulties though,” I tell him. “I thought it would be nice to observe the subject from afar but now I am rethinking that decision.”

“Do you think she would let you into her life if she knew who you are?” he queries.

I shake my head. “No way in hell. She’s a prissy she-devil. Plus, she is too stubborn to accept help, especially from me.”

“I thought you two were getting along better?” he asks.

I drop my head back and exhale loudly. “We just don’t interact much. That seems to take care of it for the most part.”

“You’re oil and water, huh?” Henry jokes.

It’s not the worst analogy, but Olivia and I are much more combustible than that. “More like gasoline and fire.” I laugh as I glance away from him.

Henry looks over my shoulder with a smirk on his face. “Looks like your girl has decided to be less boring this evening,” he comments, motioning with a jut of his chin toward the entrance of the bar.

My eyes widen as I turn to see who just entered. It’s a woman – blonde, attractive, confident – as she takes her seat at one of the stools and picks up a menu. As she turns her head toward me, I get a closer look and realize in shock that it’s Olivia. Her usual teacher clothes have been replaced by an outfit that is unlike anything I’ve ever seen her wear before: a tight black dress hugging her hourglass shape, tall black boots, a blonde wig, and bright red lipstick meant to draw attention to her full lips. I narrow my eyes in confusion as I try to figure out what she’s up to.

“That’s new,” I tell Henry as my eyes drift toward the figure sitting at the far end of the bar. Although momentarily intrigued, a feeling of dread washes over me. I have a sneaking

suspicion whatever she is up to is going to give me a headache.

“Indeed,” he says before offering me a sly smile.

An unknown force compels me to get a closer vantage point.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I tell him after downing the remainder of my beer.

Standing, I carefully make my way across the smoky room and take refuge behind a large wooden beam near where she is seated. Peeking out from my hiding spot, I watch with curiosity as an awkwardly dressed man saunters in and takes a seat beside her. His pants are noticeably too baggy and too short, his haircut reminiscent of a fifteen-year-old boy, and his posture gives away his lack of confidence.

“Stacy?” he asks tentatively. *Stacy?* Did she give him a fake name? This should be good.

“Tom?” she replies with an awkward giggle before adding, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Wow. You’re beautiful,” he starts, his lips curling into an awkward smile. He’s short, a few inches over five feet, and has a slight frame; not quite scrawny but certainly not a bodybuilder. His eyes dart around the place as if he can’t quite believe he’s here.

Olivia giggles and pushes her hair behind her ear. “Thank you,” she says meekly.

Behind them, I step out from behind the beam and cross my arms over my chest. I could take him down in seconds if

needed; but he isn't here to hurt her, just another horny guy who messaged the wrong woman. But this behavior makes my job more difficult, so I need to nip it in the bud. Tom notices me then, seeing me for the first time with a look of surprise on his face.

He tries to ignore me at first glance. He catches my eye and looks over his shoulder, likely assuming I'm not glaring at him. When he sees no one behind him, he nervously shifts his body and looks back at Olivia, trying to listen to whatever she's saying. After a moment, he interrupts her.

"I'm sorry, but do you know that guy?" he asks.

"What guy?" she says, clearly confused by the abrupt conversation change.

"That guy right there," he says, motioning behind her to where I stand.

Olivia slowly turns her head, the blonde wig atop her head briefly swaying. Her sky-blue eyes widen as they meet mine and she freezes mid-sentence. For a tense moment, she glares at me before turning back to Tom with a cheery "Nope!" accompanied by a playful pop of her lips on the "p" for emphasis.

"Are you sure? He's still looking over here and he seems furious," Tom observes.

"It's probably someone from work, but he doesn't matter," Olivia replies casually.

Taking my cue, I stride to the bar and order a Buffalo Trace neat, before approaching them again. Leaning against the bar just behind Olivia, I can feel her tension radiating off her body.

“So what do you do for a living?” he asks.

Olivia flashes a practiced smile and pauses, taking a moment to assemble her story. “I’m a traveling nurse,” she answers smoothly, her voice like honey. I watch as she surveys the room, sizing up the other patrons in an instant and coming up with contingency plans of escape if needed.

“That’s great,” he says. “So you don’t live around here?”

Her eyes dart away from his gaze and she shakes her head slightly. “No, I’m just here for a short time.”

I sip my whiskey and can’t help but smile at how easily the lies are rolling off her tongue.

He leans forward with an eagerness that hadn’t been there before and asks, “So, do you want to get out of here?”

Olivia slinks off the bar stool, bag already in hand, prepared to make her exit. “I’d love to,” she replies.

“Lucille,” I say, firmly grabbing her elbow and spinning her to face me. Her blue eyes meet mine, and I can see the shock in them as they widen. Her confusion is palpable, her mouth trying to form a question, but I continue. “You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille, four hungry children and a crop in the field,” I say, with a barely contained smile, as I realize the lyrics to the Kenny Roger’s song my dad always sings to my

mom just sprang from my mouth. “The kids need you. I need you.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks, a look of shock spread across her face.

I soften my grip on her arm, my fingers still tracing circles around her wrist. “What I’m saying is... I’ve had some bad times, lived through some sad times...but this time your hurting won’t heal. You can’t walk away like this. Please,” I beg, my voice growing quiet at the end.

A flush creeps up from her collarbone to her cheeks, and anger flashes across her features like lightning in an angry stormy sky. When Tom speaks up, she doesn’t break eye contact with me for even a second. “Wait. I thought you said you didn’t know this guy, and why does everything he says rhyme?”

She grits her teeth and hisses through them, “I don’t know.”

I nearly lose it as I watched Tom take a few steps backwards, his hands raised defensively.

“Yeah, so, this is more than I want to get involved with. Sorry Stacy, er Lucille,” he says, glancing around the bar before quickly turning and leaving. His shoulders are tense and his gait is hurried as if he’s fleeing from an unseen danger.

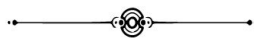
I exhale and took another sip of whiskey before turning to face Olivia. Her eyes are ablaze.

“What the actual fuck, Kane? Why would you do that? Lucille? Really?!” She places her small hands on my chest and pushes me as hard as she can.

With lightning-fast reflexes, I grabbed her wrists as she tried to push me away. My face is inches from hers as I growl my warning, “I’d be very careful if I were you, Princess. I’m not the kind of man you lay your hands on. If you do it again, you will regret it.” Her face drains of color and she immediately withdraws her hands.

“I was just trying to save you from a bad night,” I reply casually as I shrug my shoulders, my stance suddenly relaxing. I begin to sing “Lucille” under my breath as I turn back to the bar. Olivia’s mouth drops open in disbelief.

“Hey, Kenny Rogers, this one’s on the house,” the bartender puts another shot of whiskey in front of me before walking away chuckling.



Olivia

“I saved you,” he repeats. “That guy doesn’t know shit about pleasing a woman. He was here to get himself off. Technically, you should thank me.”

I can feel my cheeks heat up with embarrassment and anger, the seconds passing by like hours in the crowded bar. I have to fight the urge to clench my fists at his arrogance and instead gesture wildly with my arms as I yell, “You don’t even know what you’re talking about! It’s possible he was here to get us *both* off. You wouldn’t know anything about that!”

Kane scoffs, leaning in closer so that his breath fans my face as he speaks softly, almost conspiratorially. His words send a shiver down my spine and my heart races in anticipation of what's coming next. My mind fills with possibility as he says, "If it were a different place and time, I'd take you home and pleasure you until you begged me to stop."

He seems so sure of himself, but I'm flustered and confused, surprised by his words and confidence. Still trying to make sense of this unexpected turn of events, I stammer out, "I just – I mean – I don't understand." Before asking him point-blank, "Why are you even here?"

He steps back and looks at me passively as if we didn't just have the most intimate exchange of our short association. "I was having a drink with a buddy, minding my own business, when you walked in here incognito and caught my attention." He reaches out and grabs my wig, his hand ghosting my cheek softly as he does, causing my skin to prickle under the heat of his touch. "Why are you wearing this?" he asks.

For a split second I consider telling him. I consider telling him that I'm lonely. That I'm bored. That the only relationships I'm capable of having are brief sexual encounters with strangers, and he's right. Most of the time, I don't even get off. But it's human contact, and sometimes we all need that. Then I come to my senses and remember that this is Kane, and he doesn't deserve to know anything about my personal life.

Instead, I recoil from his touch, my skin burning at the contact. Anger and hurt boil within me, turning my vision red. I want

to scream at him and hit him until he releases the tension that's coiling around my chest like a vise. Instead, I turn and storm away from him, my purse clutched tightly in hand.

But no matter how far I run, his words follow me like a specter. *Princess*. His insult had been so unexpected and unnecessary – what right does he have to talk to me like that? To invade my evening with his presence and then imply that I'm not independent enough to sort out my own dating life? He has no idea who I am or what I've been through, yet here he is, criticizing me for it.

My fury sticks with me throughout the weekend as I hole up in my apartment, determined to avoid any possibility of running into him again. The more I stew on it, the angrier I become. I oscillate between wanting to scream and googling “how to make a body disappear.”

I can feel anger simmering inside of me as I open the heavy school doors Monday morning, my canvas bag slung over one shoulder. When I see Kane rounding the corner, my jaw tightens and my fists curl into balls. I am determined to make sure he doesn't forget that I am not someone to be messed with.

Chapter Twelve



Friday night was a real eye opener for me. I went to the bar ready to relax and to forget Olivia, the girl who had been on my mind for far too long. But then there she was, flirting with some guy that I didn't know. The sight of her made me so angry that I just had to intervene.

Messing with Olivia by implying she left me with four kids and a farm to run was unnecessary but just plain fun. She got so flustered that she couldn't even form sentences. Her cheeks turned a delicious shade of pink as I whispered in her ear about taking her home – something I hadn't intended to do until those words came out of my mouth.

At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to take her back to my place and have a fantastic fuck. After all, if we had just met at the bar, it would have probably been inevitable. But now that I know her better, I realize that it just isn't worth the headache.

Judging by how she's behaving this week, she's still not happy with me about Friday night. The air between us is heavy and

tense, clearly alluding to the simmering rage beneath the surface. Every time I glance her way in the hallways, classrooms, or cafeteria, she shoots me a glare so potent it could cut through steel. Her avoidance of me throughout the week only reinforces my suspicion that she's still holding a deep grudge.

As I slowly edge toward my motorcycle at the end of another weary week, I feel an impending sense of doom like something is about to happen. Sure enough, as I reach for the handlebars, I hear a noise behind me. Turning around, I see Olivia standing there with her hands balled into fists and her face contorted in anger.

Judging by the look on her face, she's figured out I'm the owner of the motorcycle, and the one who made her drop her coffee, fern, and whatever other teacher crap she was carrying. That was weeks ago. *She can't still be mad about that.*

"You motherfucker!" she yells, charging at me like a bull seeing red.

I guess she can still be mad about that.

"Who do you think you are?" she demands, stepping closer to me. Her face is tight with rage and I can see she's earnestly trying to get an answer. But it's hard not to be distracted by the polka dots on her dress, which makes me feel like I'm being accosted by Minnie Mouse on a bender.

"I asked you a question, Asshole!" she says, voice full of venom.

“Oh, I thought that was rhetorical,” I responded in a relaxed tone.

“You’ve been interfering in my life ever since you got here. I want to know why,” she insists.

“You flatter yourself,” I say in a measured tone. “I don’t care about your business.”

“You’re a liar,” she hisses as she steps so close that our toes are almost touching. “I knew it! You are obsessed with me. What kind of sicko are you?”

My laughter echoes like thunder, a mocking sound. She’s such an arrogant brat; of course she would think that.

“I’m not obsessed with you Olivia, I’m just tired of your games. It was fun toying with you at first, but now it’s becoming tedious.”

Her face contorts in fury at my words. “Is that why you followed me to that bar? Is that why I’ve seen your motorcycle parked outside my apartment? Don’t deny it, I know it was you!”

Fuck! My teammates would have a field day if they found out I was caught so quickly by a civilian. *Stupid Kane*; she’s really got me off my game. All I can do is deny it and try to make her look crazy. Gaslighting 101, here we go...

“Perhaps, in some giant plot to make money, the companies that make motorcycles made more than one,” I say condescendingly.

She grinds her teeth as she gazes at me with anger. “Don’t act like that toward me. Don’t talk to me like I’m dumb. Whatever strange game this is, it ends here,” she screeches, gesturing between us.

“There is no weird game; your imagination has created a fantasy world,” I snort in response.

“That’s how you want to be? Fine. On Monday, I’m going to the head of administration and have you fired,” she barks before spinning around and stomping back toward the portal of hell she came through.

When she’s about three feet away, I let my temper flare up and yell loudly enough for people passing by to hear if anyone were in our presence.

“You are really an awful person, you know that? You are a miserable, lonely, spoiled little brat.” I should stop now – that would be the best thing to do. But I don’t always make the wisest decisions, so I proceed with the horrible course I’m on. “No surprise that you have to meet strangers for casual sex in bars. Everyone who knows you understands why they should stay far away.”

Olivia stops in her tracks and hangs her head for a moment as if silently asking for forgiveness for what is about to happen. Before I know it, she spins on her heels and briskly moves toward me, a fury of polka dots. All I have time to see is a tiny fist flying toward me. It’s almost funny until she makes an impact; that tiny fist rams into my throat like a Mack truck.

“Fuck!” I wheeze, my hand automatically going to my throat. When she starts yelling, I’m still bent over and heaving, trying to take in any tiny amount of air through my spasming larynx.

“You do not get to talk to me like that. Ever. I am a human being. You will not disrespect me.” That tiny right hook is still fisted and primed for more contact.

“Jesus Christ, Lady!” I gasp, now that more air is being allowed into my lungs. “You can’t just go around punching people. You could get seriously hurt.”

She takes a step back, affronted by my statement. “I’m hardly the one who is hurt here, *Janitor*.”

Operating on pure instinct, I grab her by the shoulders and spin her around. With her back to my front I wrap one arm around her waist as my other hand goes to her throat, effectively restraining her movement and giving me the ability to control the airflow to her lungs. I’m clenching my teeth with barely restrained anger as I lean in and growl in her ear, a warning she will need to heed around me. “I am a patient man. I don’t hurt people who don’t deserve it, which makes you lucky right now. Make no mistake, Olivia. If you come at someone like that again, make sure you finish the job or you may live to regret it.”

Olivia squeaks behind my grip as her eyes pool with tears. In that moment, I almost feel sorry for her, but the truth is she’s lucky it was me instead of someone else who she had provoked. The thought of it chills me – if it had been someone

else, she'd be sprawled out on the ground right now in all the darkness a good punch can accomplish.

Reluctantly, I release my hold on her and step back, giving us a safe distance from each other. She faces me with shock in her eyes and fingers still clasping where my hand had just pressed hard.

"Who are you?" she questions with a shaky voice.

"I can be a force to be reckoned with," I hiss, as I take a menacing step forward. My eyes narrow and my jaw tightens as I spew out the words that will irreparably damage any possible reconciliation between us. "It's clear why you've been alone for so long."

Olivia's face crumples and her lips tremble as she silently turns away from me, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Once she's gone, I look up at the sky and take a deep breath, feeling the heavy weight of what just happened in the air around me. There was no sense of victory in our exchange. Only guilt and regret for speaking such harsh words and ruining any chance I had of being forgiven.

My fingers fidget anxiously against my phone before finally unlocking it and sending a desperate text to an old friend. Almost immediately there is a response, but I already know there is no way out of this situation. I'm screwed.



I watch Henry's shocked face from across the table as I relay the details of today's events. I finish telling him what happened in the parking lot, sit back, and take a long sip of beer. I know I've messed up. Not only have I blown my cover, but I've managed to get into a physical altercation with my client. The woman who doesn't even know she's my client. *What a fucking mess.*

Henry's face is beet red as he unleashes on me. "What are you doing, Kane? You're supposed to be blending into the background and keeping an eye on her, not trying to anger her to the point of physical assault."

I nod in acknowledgment. He's right, and he's not telling me anything I don't already know. "It is less than ideal," I offer placatingly.

"Less than ideal? Are you fucking joking? This isn't your first assignment. What is going on between you and this woman?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "She gets under my skin. There's something about her. It's like I can't control myself." I take another long gulp of beer, the amber liquid coating my sore throat from my earlier interaction with Olivia. "I fucking hate her, Henry. You should've seen it. She came at me like a polka-dotted tsunami."

"You don't hate her, Kane. That's not the problem," he says sternly.

I shake my head in rebuttal. "No, I really do. She's been horrible to me since the day we met. I can see why people want this woman dead."

He laughs as he shakes his head and he starts to relax. “People want her dead because of who her family is.”

“Well, that’s not why I would kill her,” I joke. “She’s honestly a detestable person. A small, mean, horrible person. She’s like a chihuahua.”

“Hey, me and the missus have a chihuahua. Let’s not bring Taco into this,” he jokes. Then he releases a deep sigh. “We just do the job we’re given,” he says before pausing. “It’s not up to us if the person is worthy of protection. You know this.”

“I do know this,” I reply.

Henry’s eyes narrow as he lets out an exasperated sigh. “You need to tell me if you can’t do the assignment,” he says accusingly.

I recoil in surprise at his insinuation. “I can handle it, Henry,” I reply defensively. “I’m not going to let you down.”

He nods slowly and reassuringly; although, his expression remains serious. “Good, because intel tells us that the Profaci family is making a stronger effort to find her.”

“Any indication they know where she is?”

Henry shakes his head. “No, but it might be only a matter of time before they figure it out. We need to talk to her about this as soon as we can.”

My mouth twists into a grimace. “Can’t wait for that conversation,” I mutter sarcastically.

“You won’t have to wait long,” he says as he rises from his seat, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips, and angling his head toward the entrance. My eyes follow his gesture and I see Olivia standing there, her eyes searching for something or someone. She pauses when she spots us and Henry waved her over.

“What is she doing here?” I ask, disbelief filling my voice as I watch her make her way to our table.

“I called her,” Henry said calmly. “After I got your text, I knew it was time to intervene. So, I dialed up her number and explained who I was. She sounded hesitant at first but once I mentioned your name she agreed to come out and meet me.”

“Watch out for her left hook,” I caution. “She hits like Mike Tyson.”

I stand up as well when she approaches. She’s changed into jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, while I’m still in my work pants and polo, having come straight here.

Henry extends his hand and she meets his shake, tentatively. “Olivia, thank you for coming,” he says. “I understand it’s been a rough day. I appreciate you meeting us.”

She nods and looks in my direction. I don’t say anything, and neither does she, before we all take our seats. We’re acting like petulant teenagers, and neither is ready to make the first move toward reconciliation.

Henry starts the conversation. “Can I get you something to drink?” he asks.

“White wine, please,” she says quietly.

Henry motions to our server and places Olivia’s order, and then we begin.

“So, like I told you on the phone, Ms. Monroe, Kane and myself are here at the request of someone who wants to keep you safe.”

“Who?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Henry replies honestly. “Sometimes our clients do not want to be disclosed. We allow for them to remain anonymous and pay for our services without direct contact.”

Olivia shakes her head. “I’ve been thinking about you since you called. There is no one from my past who cares enough about me to pay someone to keep me alive.”

Her admission has me wincing, my guilt over my previous remarks intensifying. It’s clear that she feels so abandoned and disregarded that she isn’t even sure anyone would notice if she was gone.

“Well, somebody does,” Henry says. “Shaemus Kildare is sick. Did you know that?”

The server arrives with Olivia’s wine glass and sets it down in front of her with a soft clink. She curls her fingers around the stem and takes a sip before responding to Henry’s statement. “I didn’t know,” she said in a cold, emotionless voice. “And I don’t care.”

“Well, the Profaci family certainly does,” I interject quietly.
“They seem to be searching for you for some reason now.”

“God, not those fucking lugheads,” she spews. “I don’t know why. I’m not interested in his line of work. I don’t want anything to do with him or the family. Whatever happens is of zero concern to me.” She shrugs.

The Olivia I’ve known for weeks is emotional, but the way she’s speaking now is cold and detached. She truly has no feelings for her father.

“In any case,” Henry cuts in, “they are looking for you. That’s the reason Kane and I are here.”

She turns to look at me and smiles weakly. With a small huff she says, “You never did figure as a janitor.”

“Pfft,” I scoff, “I was crushing it.”

“Was your rude demeanor part of your cover?” she asks snidely.

“No, that’s just me,” I reply with a shrug.

“Charming,” she says with a fake smile plastered on her face.

Henry interjects. “I need to know if you will allow Kane to guard you. You two obviously have some issues. I have other men, but I will be honest, he’s the best. It’s your decision.”

Olivia takes another sip of wine and stares blankly in thought over Henry’s shoulder at the wood-paneled wall. When she speaks, it surprises me.

“OK,” she agrees. “I’ve worked too hard for this life, and while it may seem pathetic to *some*, I’m free of that family and I like it.”

Ouch. Direct hit to the heart.

“You can operate in the background, right? No interaction?” she asks me.

“Yes.” I nod. “I’ll come by the school, but stay outside. I’ll check on your place in the evenings, just as I’ve been doing, but we don’t need to have much contact. It will be minimal just to do my job.”

She nods in understanding. “OK, then. That should work.” She turns her attention to Henry.

“I’m really curious to know who hired you. Can you work on finding that out?”

“I can ask,” he says. “Ms. Monroe, Kane’s services do not come cheap. Whoever hired us is serious about your safety.”

“Hhm,” she mumbles. “How much do you know about my life?”

“I know very little,” Henry answers. “Kane knows even less.”

She thinks for a moment before a sad look crosses her face and then she speaks abruptly. “Well, it’s been a long day and I’d like to go home now.”

“Of course,” Henry says as we both stand at the same time she does. “You have my number should you need to reach me.”

“And your number,” she questions, looking at me. “Will I have access to you at my beck and call?”

I can't help but smirk. Some sick, twisted part of her is going to enjoy this. “Yes, you will,” I tell her. “Let me see your phone.”

She hands it to me and smiles when she takes it back and looks at the entry. My number is now saved in her phone as JANITOR.

“Thank you for the transparency, gentlemen. I think this arrangement will work out much better than the previous one.” With that, she turns and walks out of the bar and I watch her, unable to look away from the sway of her ass, the entire time.

Henry catches me and exhales deeply. “Be careful,” he warns. “This has the potential to end in disaster.”

“I'm not going to let anything happen to her,” I respond.

Henry shakes his head. “That's not what I'm talking about,” he states.

Chapter Thirteen



As I drive the three mile stretch back to my apartment, all I can think about is a nice hot bath and another drink. When Henry called me, I thought it was a joke, but he offered to meet in public, so I decided to take the risk. But why would someone hire him? The only person from my past that I'd been close with was Dante, one of the maid's sons. He was around a year older than me and we had fun exploring the large house together, daydreaming about our futures and laughing at whatever came up. His mom Graciella lived in the guest quarters, and she was truly beautiful – olive skinned with long black tresses. She gave me warmth and compassion when no one else could be bothered.

As an adult, I realize neither Graciella nor myself was content in that dreaded place, where the worst kind of people roamed. We had become close friends during my adolescence; she inspired my friendship with Dante who was my only friend from age thirteen to seventeen. He listened while I confessed how much I loathed living there and yearned for my family. In

return, he taught me Spanish and how to fight. The latter skill came in handy today when I threw a punch at Kane.

Going away for school was never part of Dante's plans; but his ambition yearned for something more than what his mother could provide. Even though I understood why he left, it wasn't easy saying goodbye. That final year by myself in that dreadful environment became almost too hard to bear.

I'm doubtful that Dante is footing the bill for my security. He doesn't have the funds, and we haven't seen each other in over a decade. For all I know, he's forgotten me entirely. But I'm determined to find out who's behind this, even if it's giving me a headache.

Speaking of things that give me a headache; Kane. Now I understand why he seemed so menacing today. His roughness was familiar. It reminded me of Shaemus's ex-military buddies' physical strength when they fought their opponents. He must be trained in combat.

I shouldn't have hit him. He's right about that. It's just that the things he said hit too close to home. He's observant. I *am* lonely. I'm physically and mentally isolated from people. And the sad truth is that I will probably die alone. Kane obviously isn't familiar with any of those concepts, and he hurt me when he threw them in my face.

We seem to be able to push one another's buttons astonishingly well for two people who barely know each other. It's a dynamic unlike any other in my life. It's good that we will have distance between us now, but it's still strange,

knowing he is watching me. If what Henry said is true, and Shaemus is dying, then it's possible my world is about to change once again.

I leave the living room, my feet dragging on the floor, and stumble into my bedroom. I collapse on the bed, my head spinning with questions that don't have simple answers. Kane's presence in my life is a constant reminder of uncertain danger.

I exhale slowly, telling myself to trust Kane's skills and keep him at arm's length if he gets too close. My eyelids droop as I drift off to sleep, wishing that this new arrangement could work without any conflict between us – but I just don't know if it's possible.



The next few days are like a strange game of cat-and-mouse. Every morning, Kane is there, just a few cars behind me in my rearview mirror, roaring up on his motorcycle. He's left his janitor post at the school but still lurks around the perimeter of the playground and peers into windows as I walk through the building.

Every afternoon, he follows me to places that have become annoyingly familiar – the post office, the supermarket, the drycleaners– and it feels like he's always lurking in the shadows, watching my every move. What had been an uneasy feeling before now feels like mortal danger as I become more aware of Kane's eyes on me.

The dry cleaners are situated in a seedy area of town, and while I have never faced any problems there before, I still take caution as I park my car two blocks away from the building. As I walk down the alleyway, crunching through the piles of discarded garbage and leftover rain puddles gathered in the broken pavement, I hear a series of shuffling noises behind me. With school long over and the sun setting, darkness is quickly spreading across the city.

I stop and turn around, my heart pounding in my chest. I strain my eyes in the darkness, peering into the shadows for a sign of something, anything. All is quiet until I hear it again. A faint scraping of shoes against pavement. My breath catches as I realize it's not just my imagination – someone is following me.

I break out into a frightened sprint, feeling desperation as the alley walls seem to close in around me. Every footstep echoes off the brick walls like thunder, magnifying its presence. I can feel them getting closer and closer with each panicked breath I take. And then, an arm wraps around my waist and pulls me backward while a gloved hand covers my mouth to muffle my screams.

The hand releases me as I'm spun around so that I'm facing my attacker. A wave of relief floods over me when I recognize Kane's golden eyes staring back at me from beneath his hood. He steps closer so that his face is inches away from mine, and speaks in a low voice, "Calm down, Olivia."

My fingers trembled as I touched the hard contours of his muscular chest, my heart racing like a wild animal trying to

escape an inescapable cage. His face is a mask of warring emotions – concern and annoyance competing for dominance. He opens his mouth to speak, but I beat him to the punch.

“Jesus Christ, Kane. You scared me.”

“What are you doing walking in dark alleys?” he asks, his voice tight with concern.

“It’s a short cut. It’s not a big deal,” I lie, unwilling to admit how frightened I am of the danger that lurks in the shadows surrounding us.

“It *is* a big deal, Olivia,” he argues. “Anytime you’re alone gives someone the advantage. You’re so much easier to abduct or kill when you’re not around other people.”

“You can call me Liv,” I tell him, making him screw up his face in confusion.

“Did you hear what I said?” he asks.

“I heard you,” I tell him. “But I’m looking around, and the only person currently stalking me is you. So you might as well call me Liv,” I repeat.

“It’s ironic your nickname is Liv, since you seem hell-bent on doing everything you can to get yourself fucking killed,” he scoffs.

“Well now you’re just being dramatic,” I say. I’m fairly certain his head is about to explode if the red color of his cheeks and the vein protruding from his forehead are any indication.

“Please, just hurry up and get your shit,” he asks with a sigh.

“I’ll follow you and make sure you get back to the car.”

“OK.” I shrug. “Let’s go on an adventure.”

Chapter Fourteen



My phone rings and I check the caller ID: She Devil. “What can I do for you?” I inquire, trying to maintain a level voice.

“A pleasant morning to you, too,” she comments sarcastically.

“I wanted to let you know we’re going on a field trip today.”

“There is no way that’s happening,” I reply flatly.

“Yes, there is,” she counters with equal conviction. “I go to the aquarium every year as a chaperone, and this year isn’t going to be any different.”

“Olivia,” I say, rubbing my temples in frustration, “Every time you defy me, it puts you in danger and makes my job that much more difficult. You have to understand that.”

“This is all I have, Kane,” she retorts sternly. “I need some normalcy in my life. Please don’t take this away from me,” she begs.

I exhale a deep breath and mull over the conversation I had with Henry last night. There’s no indication anyone is any

closer to finding her today than yesterday. I can't deny her this. It's clearly something that means a lot to her.

"Fine," I reply, envisioning her taking the school bus in my mind. "You're riding the school bus, right?"

"Thank you," she replies, a relieved sigh heavy in her voice through the phone. "And yes. We leave at 8:45, sharp."

"I'll follow behind and make sure you get there safely," I tell her. My next question brings more frown lines to my forehead.

"Is the aquarium closed for students or open to the public?"

"Open to the public," she answers.

That presents more of a problem, but I don't bother to tell her that. She's made up her mind and can't be reasoned with at this point.



I watch as the first grade classes, led by their teachers and parent volunteers, shuffle onto the buses, dressed in heavy layers against the chill of winter. At the head of her class is Olivia, a woman with the biggest smile I've ever seen stretched across her face, a paper crown topping her brown waves and streamers made from construction paper that mimic jellyfish tentacles swaying around her hips.

Everywhere she looks, there are cheers and laughter, which only seems to make her big smile even wider. It's suddenly clear to me that teaching these children is everything to her, just as my former job had been everything to me. We may

have been doing wildly different tasks with contrasting outcomes, but this job is no less important to Olivia than being a soldier had been to me. She's a woman with a purpose, and I can't help but respect her despite our differences.

As the buses arrive at the aquarium, I watch as they slowly file off in a semi-orderly line toward the entrance. Olivia's group is particularly chatty and cheerful, their school bags bumping against each other as they make their way to the front of the line.

After purchasing my ticket, I follow them inside and into the room with a large glass tank ahead. Rays of sunlight penetrate the water, sparkling like stars on a clear night sky as stingrays gracefully glide past and schools of colorful fish dance around coral gardens and waving strands of algae. I can't remember the last time I visited an aquarium, and seeing it through the children's eyes paints a smile on my face.

Olivia catches my eye and reciprocates with her own smile before silently mouthing, "Thank you." I offer her a small nod before we move from one tank to the next, finally arriving at the tide pool area. The kids eagerly reach into the shallow pools of water, searching for small snails, crabs, sea cucumbers, and starfish.

Olivia picks up a particularly disgruntled looking hermit crab and shows him off to her class. His green eyes bulge out of his shell while his mouth forms a tight line. He definitely does not want to deal with this shit today.

Their laughter fills the air as they make jokes about the “grumpy crab” held by Ms. Monroe. Then, she meets my gaze for a split second, looks back around her class and announces that his name is Kane. Kane the crab. A tiny smirk appears on my lips as I watch in amusement as the children burst into laughter at his new name.

We take a break around lunchtime and go outside to eat on the grass in front of the building. There’s a small play structure nearby for children to expend much needed energy before going back in for the remainder of the excursion.

I’m watching Olivia move from child to child, helping with juice boxes and snacks, when I hear a piercing scream coming from the playground area. Without hesitation, I take off running, my heart pounding in my chest.

When I arrive at the monkey bars, I see a small figure lying flat on his back, his face contorted in fear. Dropping down to my knees, I lean in close and ask softly, “Hey little man, can you try to breathe for me?” His eyes are wide with panic but he stares into my face and nods slowly.

I kneel beside him, taking in the redness of his face and the tears that are streaming down his cheeks. His small body shakes as he struggles to breathe. He looks up at me, his eyes filled with fear and pain. “Steven pushed me off the monkey bars,” he chokes out between sobs.

I cup a hand around his shoulder and gently squeeze in reassurance. “It’ll be okay,” I whisper softly.

Suddenly, Olivia and a few other adults rush over to us. She looks frantic as she asks, “What happened?”

“I think he got the wind knocked out of him,” I reply, studying Tyler’s face for signs of further injury. His breathing gradually slows and he manages to shake his head no when I ask if anything else hurts.

Tyler turns toward Olivia, sniffing and wiping away tears from his eyes. “Steven pushed me, Ms. Monroe,” he says quietly.

Olivia’s face softens into an expression of sympathy. “I’m so sorry, Tyler,” she murmurs apologetically. “I’m sure it was just an accident.”

Tyler shakes his head vehemently, protesting her assumption. “It wasn’t! He’s always picking on me!”

Gently, a parent guides him away with a hand on his shoulder toward the eating area. I stand and scan the area for Steven, my gaze intense with anger as I search for the perpetrator.

Olivia notices my action and laughs incredulously. “What are you doing, Kane?” Her eyes sparkle with amusement. She places her petite hand on my arm and looks up at me with those pretty blue eyes.

“I’m looking for Steven,” I answer flatly.

“You can’t be serious. They are only children,” she says gently.

I frown down at her and reply seriously, “I don’t like bullies.”

Her expression changes from amused to fondness as she gazes up at me, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “I don’t either, but you can’t go around acting all menacing to a six-year-old,” she says softly, with a slight squeeze to my arm.

“Watch me,” I tell her firmly.

She releases a small puff of air on a chuckle and stands on her tiptoes to place a feather light kiss to my cheek before stepping back down and smiling softly. “Thank you for being here to protect all of us,” she says sweetly.

My heart skips a beat at the unexpected gesture and for a moment I forget all about my newfound feud with Steven. She pulls away and offers one last gentle smile before returning to her class.

Of all the things I expected to happen today, that was definitely the last.

Chapter Fifteen



Another week of anxiety-filled days and restless nights under Kane's watchful eye drags on without respite. Every time I see him, I give him a cheerful wave, as if completely unaware of his hostile glare in return. Unbeknownst to him, it only eggs me on to enjoy myself more.

Saturday afternoon arrives, and I find myself trapped in my apartment with nothing to do. A desperate craving for fresh air plagues me. Could I leave the safety of my home unseen by Kane? Even something as simple as getting a cup of coffee seems impossible. Then I have an idea—what if I used food as a form of bribery? My mouth salivates at the thought of whipping up a savory dish or sweet dessert to offer him as a bribe.

As I slide the curtain aside, I can't help but sigh at the sight of Kane across the street, ever vigilant. It's like he never leaves his post, despite knowing that he must go occasionally to attend to his own needs. I wonder if he sleeps on that motorcycle or just manages to hold himself up indefinitely.

Desperate for a change in routine and some kind of break from Kane's constant surveillance, I decide to make chocolate chip cookies. Surely, they are a classic treat everyone enjoys? I gather the ingredients and whip up the batter, carefully dropping spoonfuls onto the cookie sheet. As I wait for the oven to preheat, I scan outside but don't see Kane.

It's probably a bathroom break, I muse, making a mental note to tease him about it later. Anything to get a rise out of him especially when it comes to seeing those eyebrows pinch together with barely restrained anger.

Finally, the oven beeps its readiness. With a flick of my wrist, I slide the sheet inside and let them bake to golden perfection. Maybe this small gesture will be enough to earn me a chai latte and a brief respite from being under Kane's surveillance.

I pull the cookies out twelve minutes later as the smell of sugary baked goodness permeates my apartment. I'll take him some as soon as they cool off. I look outside again, but the spot where he always parks is unusually empty. That's odd. Maybe he has diarrhea. *Please let him have diarrhea.* I can make fun of that for days.

I march back and forth in my apartment, my feet slapping the worn hardwood floor. I pause every so often to crane my neck toward the oven, watching for the last batch of cookies that will be done baking shortly. Part of me wants to use this anxious energy to go running, but I know it won't do anything to help my nerves and only make the situation worse. So instead, I shove a cookie into my mouth and keep walking.

Glancing out my window at least once every fifteen minutes yields the same discouraging result: no sign of Kane. He never takes this long when he's on duty. Even if he is irritable, he always shows up if he's supposed to protect me. The longer he doesn't show up, the more anxious I become.

By seven o'clock, it's been hours since I've seen him, and a strange feeling begins to settle over me: disappointment. Maybe they're taking him off assignment, maybe I'm not in danger anymore. The thought brings a pang of sadness with it; strangely enough, having him in my life made me feel a little less lonely and a lot more alive than before these past few years.

Kane is also easy on the eyes, so it hasn't exactly been a hardship to see him every day. He has a handsome, chiseled jawline and hair that always seems to be just purposefully out of place. A small smile tugs at the corners of my mouth every time I see him despite that he usually annoys the crap out of me. It is nice having someone around who cares about me, even if he is being paid for it.

Two hours later, I placed the cookies I'd been baking into a tupperware container before changing into comfortable sleepwear. Kane has failed to return this evening.

I've just tucked myself under a warm blanket on the couch and pressed play on an episode of *Criminal Minds* when a loud motorcycle engine revs outside. He won't get any of my cookies now, I think firmly.

A frantic knock sounds at the door seconds later, followed by Kane's voice calling my name in an urgent tone. "Olivia! Open the door. Now."

I jump up and swing open the door to see a figure standing in the threshold, drenched in sweat and chest heaving with panicked breaths. "We need to go," he says urgently, hurrying past me as he scans the apartment.

"What's going on?" I ask, my heart pounding and my body shaking as fear begins to creep through my veins.

"They know where you are," he snaps gruffly. "We have five minutes to get out of here."

"Ok," I exclaim, my legs feeling like lead weights beneath me as the panic begins to take hold. My mind reels with questions; I have wondered if this day would ever come and now that it's here, I feel overwhelmed and unprepared. "I need to grab some of my stuff," I say quickly.

"There's no time," he replies sternly. "Where's your cell phone?"

I point in its direction, still on the couch where I had left it moments before. "Over there," I say.

Kane picks up the phone and deftly removes its back panel, tossing it aside. He slides out the SIM card and inspects it for a moment before quickly placing it on the kitchen counter. With a swift movement, he flips the switch of the garbage disposal and drops the card in, watching as it is consumed by whirring blades. Then, he drops the husk of the phone to the ground and

crushes it beneath his boot heel, shattering its plastic chassis into pieces.

“Let’s go,” he says, grasping my arm firmly.

“I need clothes!” I cry, suddenly realizing I’m wearing little more than a tee shirt with no bra underneath and sleep shorts.

In response, Kane reaches for my jacket near the entrance and then scoops up a pair of slippers, handing them both to me in one swift motion. “Put this on for now. We can worry about it later,” he says hurriedly.

I pull the clothes onto my body with haste before scrambling down behind him as he draws a gun from the back of his waistband. He scans our surroundings quickly before beckoning me forward with a nod. I move to follow him in line, reaching out to lightly grasp at his shirt sleeve as if tethered to him. Once we reach Kane’s motorcycle in the parking lot, I pause in resistance.

“I can’t get on that thing,” I shriek fearfully.

He whirls around, eyes blazing with a mix of authority and concern. “Olivia,” he says sternly, “this is not up for debate. If you don’t get on this motorcycle, I will have to make you. Now go!”

I swallow my fear and step closer. He reaches out with strong arms, effortlessly lifting me onto the seat behind him before handing me a helmet. The engine roars to life as he briskly fastens it below my chin.

His voice is gentle but insistent when he takes my hands and wraps them around his waist. “Hold on tight.”

Trembling, I grip him tight and feel the bike surge forward. His body presses into mine as we speed away together, wind blasting us in all directions. The cold air bites my bare legs in the space between my slippers and jacket. I close my eyes and hold on as tightly as I can.

We ride for about ten minutes before Kane pulls into a small driveway and parks the motorcycle. I let my hands fall from his waist as he gets off the bike and stops in front of me to grab the helmet from my head.

I suck in a breath as the cool air hits my face. Kane gently grabs my chin and lifts my face to look him in the eye, a move that is unexpected and surprisingly tender.

“Hey,” he says softly. “I will explain everything later. We need to go inside and grab a few things and get out of here. It’s going to be alright.”

I nod while biting my trembling lower lip. I haven’t felt scared in years, but right now I’m terrified. Of staying. Of going with Kane. Of Shaemus’s enemies, who I thought had long forgotten me.

“Olivia,” Kane calls. “Come inside. I need to grab a few things. It will be cold where we’re going.”

I follow him into what appears to be his small apartment and Kane heads for the bedroom as I stand in the small space of the living area. It’s minimal, neat and tidy. He has no personal

effects or evidence of his personality on display, much like my own home. The one thing that catches my eye is a framed picture sitting on the fireplace mantle.

I move closer and pick up the frame, feeling the cold metal against my shaky hand. It's a photo of Kane sitting in the grass with a beautiful Golden Retriever in his lap. He's smiling widely, a look I've never seen on his face. I swear the dog is smiling, too. It's almost enough to make me crack a smile of my own, but the truth is, this night has been something out of one of my worst dreams. I don't think anything can thaw out the frost that has settled into my soul.

Kane comes back with a sweatshirt and sweats for me to put on over my clothing. As he moves about the apartment, he grabs various items to shove into his duffle bag. His movements are military-precise as he prepares to leave, which only heightens my anxiety that something terribly wrong is going to happen tonight. The duffle bag he places near the door bulges at an angle that suggests there are multiple guns inside along with other equipment and supplies that I cannot begin to imagine what their purpose would be for or what they hold.

“Go get changed. You'll want warm clothes where we are going. They will be big, but that's not what matters right now. I can get you more things in your size later.”

As I step into Kane's bedroom, a chill runs down my spine, no doubt from the overwhelming combination of adrenaline and the fact that I'm undressing in his bedroom.

I quickly pull up the sweatpants and roll them over multiple times at the waist to keep them up. Then, I slide the oversized sweatshirt over my head, letting it fall until it reaches my knees. It's soft to the touch and smells like him, giving me an immediate sense of comfort.

After hearing a noise from the doorway, I glance back to find Kane standing there with an intense look on his face. He shakes his head slightly before speaking. "Are you ready?"

We make our way into the living room where Kane has finished packing the large duffel and backpack, slung onto his shoulder. After opening up the garage door, he tosses the bags into the back of an old truck parked inside.

"We're not taking the motorcycle?" I ask, grateful to have a warmer mode of transportation this time around. "No," he replies as he moves over to the passenger side of the vehicle and opens the door for me. "We need a truck where we are going."

I hop in and Kane closes the door, then he moves around to his own side of the vehicle and gets in, stopping to place his gun securely in a spot by the center console. The truck rumbles to life and we back out before stopping for Kane to jump out and replace the now empty truck space with his motorcycle. It only takes a few strides of his long legs before he makes it back to the truck and gets back in, offering me a soft smile before shifting into reverse again.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks, to my surprise. Normally my comfort is not his first priority.

“Yes.” I nod.

“We will be driving for a few hours. There’s water in the backpack and a blanket if you get cold.”

“Say no more,” I reply, and reach into the backpack to pull out a warm, fuzzy blanket. “Oh, this is going to do just fine,” I say, earning me a smile from Kane.

“How did they find me?” I ask after another minute.

He shakes his head while checking the rearview mirror. “I’m not sure. I noticed a black SUV earlier at the school. I took note of the plate and then this afternoon I saw it again. It drove by your apartment several times. I had Henry run a check on it, and it came back registered to a guy named Marco Donati. Does that name mean anything to you?” he asks.

I bite my lip as I try to recall all of the names I’ve heard over the years in Shaemus’s company. There were so many, but it was just so long ago. “No, it doesn’t,” I reply.

“He’s a known associate of Profaci’s. He’s got a reputation for being a guy who does the dirty work,” he offers, checking his rearview mirror again.

“By dirty work, you mean he’s a killer?” I ask with a shaky voice.

“Yes,” he answers, as he reaches over and gently squeezes my knee, sending warmth through me. It’s probably a benign gesture that he’s made without giving it much thought, but it means the world to me. I’m not alone for the first time in a very long time.

“Don’t worry, Olivia. I got to you first. We’re going to be fine.”

“Thank you, Kane,” I whisper, turning to look out the window so he doesn’t see the lone tear rolling down my cheek.

I know there are more things I want to say to him, and questions I want to ask, but for the time being, I’m comfortable sitting in the car, snuggled in my blanket and listening to John Fogerty’s distinctive, rough timbre as “Creedence Clearwater Revival” comes through the stereo. I’m sure Kane is probably feeling the same way, staring ahead in deep thought, likely about what to do now to keep us safe. It’s not the time for conversation, and I’m fine with that, for now.

Chapter Sixteen



I awaken to the cold air caressing my cheek and the sound of tires crushing over thick, packed snow and ice. I move my stiff neck to the left to find that my face had been pressed against the window. The sun is just beginning to rise, illuminating the winter wonderland before me.

I didn't realize I had fallen asleep, lulled into peace by the melody of the radio and the heat circulating through the car.

I look over at Kane who is, per usual, serious and stoic. "Where are we?" I ask, stretching my arms above my head and trying to shake the sleep out of my system.

"Almost to Lake Tahoe," he answers.

"I've always wanted to come to Lake Tahoe," I reply, looking around with the wonderment of someone who hasn't seen snow in a very long time. "It's beautiful."

Kane nods once but remains quiet. Of course, he does. After what happened earlier he's lost his footing. Now, he has to do

a factory reboot back to Major Private Asshole, or whatever his rank and title is. I'm fairly sure that's it.

I shift my gaze to the right, and the panoramic view of the town's sharp ledge hits me like a punch to the heart. The barrier railing feels too thin for comfort as the truck snakes around the ice slushy bend in the road.

Tiny street lamps twinkle in the darkness far below the mountain pass, making it look like a wintry wonderland from up here. I look to my right at the sharp ledge just over the barrier railing. It's unnerving to be so close to falling over the edge. "That's a big drop," I say more to myself than him, since I know he's barely paying attention to me.

"Christmas Valley," Kane says, still looking ahead.

"What?" I ask, looking at his profile.

"That neighborhood down there is called Christmas Valley. Every street down there is named after something having to do with Christmas."

My mouth drops open in amazed surprise. "Seriously? That's amazing!" I exclaim.

"We're staying out there. A little farther out, but not too far away," he explains with an air of anticipation.

"This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen!" I say in amazement.

"Calm down, Olivia," he reprimands me sternly. "Remember, people are still trying to kill you."

“Right,” I reply soberly. “I thought for a second that we were having some kind of dreamy lovers retreat,” I say sarcastically, rolling my eyes in exasperation.

His knuckles turn white around the steering wheel as his grip tightens, and he flashes me a wry smile. “This isn’t exactly what I had in mind either,” he replies. “I’m not particularly looking forward to being stuck down there with you. You might actually steal my soul like a short, scrappy succubus while I sleep.”

“You’d have to have a soul for me to steal, Silly,” I tease him and playfully punch his arm. His lips twitch at the corners as if he wants to smile but won’t let himself.

Once we descend the summit, we slow down to turn right into the Christmas Valley area. I read the name of every street we pass, getting more and more giddy with each street, despite my dire situation. First Blitzen Road, then Santa Claus Drive. I’m about to jump out of my seat.

“This neighborhood is so cool,” I tell him. It’s secluded and picturesque out here, nestled between the mountains and tall pine trees, thick with fluffy snow. I feel like I’m about to see a Hallmark movie being filmed at any moment.

The homes range from small cabins to large lots with enormous family homes. Snow-flocked trees glisten along both sides of the road. I roll down the window slightly to smell the fresh mountain air, which reminds me of popcorn and roasted chestnuts on a warm winter evening.

After several minutes, Kane pulls up to a smaller A-frame cabin set back amongst the woods. We park alongside the house, and he shuts off the engine. “This is it,” he says, looking outside. Then, turning to me, he says, “Stay in the car while I look around.” He grabs his gun from the console and disappears.

I wait for a few minutes, the cold beginning to penetrate the inside of the truck since he turned the engine off, before he reappears at my door, opening it and offering me his hand. “Everything looks good. Be careful,” he says, reminding me of the fact that I’m wearing slippers and there’s snow and ice on the ground.

I tentatively take his hand and find myself losing footing as soon as my slippers touch the snow. “Sorry,” I tell him, as I hold on tighter. “They aren’t called slippers for nothing.”

Kane lets out a reluctant chuckle and sweeps me up in his arms as if I weigh nothing. His strong muscles tense under where my hands are placed on his shoulders and he strides into the cabin. The front door opens and then he kicks it shut behind him with me still in his arms. Finally, he gently sets me on my feet at the entryway.

My eyes scan over the small cabin. It’s cold in here, and a shiver runs through me as I pause by the front door, taking it all in. The living room is cozy and quaint with a stone-faced fireplace that cuts off about three feet above the mantle before a flatscreen television sits on top of it. To the right of the

living room is the bathroom, and I can make out a shower and a small bathtub from here.

Kane returns a minute later with the bags as I continue surveying my surroundings. The cold air has me wrapping my arms around myself in response. “I checked the pipes and they aren’t frozen,” Kane says from behind me. “Feel free to take a hot shower or bath.”

“That sounds nice,” I tell him. “Can I look upstairs?”

“Be my guest,” he replies. “That’s where you will be sleeping.”

I wander upstairs to explore the open loft. There’s a comfy looking chair and queen-sized bed pushed against the back wall, soft quilts folded neatly at the foot. An armoire sits to the right.

Opening it up I find some blankets and linens. I’m surprised it doesn’t smell stuffy or like mildew in the cabin. With the amount of snow they seem to get, I’d expect some sign of wear and tear. Instead, it smells like cinnamon and fresh laundry detergent. I wonder who owns this place. Whoever it is keeps it up and obviously had it cleaned recently. I wonder briefly if Kane anticipated having to come here.

Sighing, I go downstairs and grab the bag, pulling out the blanket I used in the car. It’s mine now. I’m not sure if Kane knows that or not.

“I have to go get a few things. We’re expecting some pretty heavy snow over the next few days. The cabinets are bare and

you need some new clothes,” he says. “Will you be OK while I’m gone?”

“Yep,” I reply. “I’ve managed to live this long,” I tell him.

“It’s probably that right hook,” he jokes and we both chuckle, somewhat uncomfortably. That incident is still relatively fresh, but I’m glad we can attempt to make fun of it.

After he leaves, I settle onto the couch. There’s a bit of firewood in a basket by the fireplace and I consider trying to make a fire, but Kane said he would be back soon and I don’t want to push this temporary truce we’ve managed. I don’t know if the flue is open and the last thing we need is for me to burn down this cabin, so, I go back into the kitchen and start searching for something to eat.

The pantry is pretty bare, but there are some bags of popcorn and packets of cocoa. Perfect snack, I think, and start about making something to eat. Within minutes the cabin is refreshed with the smell of freshly popped corn and powdery chocolate delight.

When Kane returns forty minutes later, I’m sitting on the couch snuggled up with a cup of warm cocoa, a bowl of popcorn on my lap, and a book in my hand. I found it upstairs in one of the drawers. It’s historical fiction which is not normally my thing, but there’s nothing else to do so I am giving it a chance.

Kane walks in, sets down a few bags on the kitchen counter, and looks at me like I’ve grown another head.

“What?” I mumble through a mouthful of popcorn.

“Comfy?” he asks, unloading the items on the counter.

“As a matter of fact, I’m cold.”

“Of course you are,” he scoffs. “Is there anything else I can get you to make your stay here more comfortable?”

“Now that you mention it,” I say. “You could make a fire, leave the groceries, and jump headfirst into a snow berm. That would make me very comfortable.”

“I’m sure it would.” He snickers as I take inventory of what he’s unloading; pasta, beans, potatoes, bread, milk, and meat. The last thing he retrieves from the bag is a bottle of Viognier. *He’s noticed what I like to drink.* Of course he has, but only because it’s his job to notice things, I remind myself.

The next bag he unloads contains some clothes, which I assume are for him, until I get a closer look. Judging by the size, they’re all for me. There are fleece sweats and sweatshirts, socks, a sports bra, cotton underwear, a hat, plush jacket, and a pair of boots. My stomach flutters at the sweet gesture from Kane. He better be careful. If he keeps this up, he’ll change my opinion of him.

“I didn’t know your sizes, so I guessed,” he says, almost sheepishly.

“I’m sure everything will work just fine. Thank you.” I say genuinely. He nods and looks away, making sure I don’t see that my words of gratitude might actually have some kind of

effect on him. Next, he moves to the last bag and my excitement peaks.

He unloads cards, a cribbage board, Scrabble, Battleship, and Yahtzee.

“You bought games!” I shout, much louder than I need to.

Kane chuckles as he glances at me. “Yeah, I don’t know how long we’re going to be here, and since we’re going to be getting a lot of snow in the next few days, I thought something other than television might be good.”

“I love to play games!” I exclaim.

“That’s actually kind of what I was worried about,” he says snidely.

“What? You think I’m a sore loser?”

“Not at all,” he replies seriously. “I just think we are both overly competitive and this may end badly.”

“Pfft. The only way it ends is with me kicking your ass,” I tell him.

“And that’s exactly what I was talking about.”

“Shut up. Just go make a fire and I’ll make us something to eat,” I tell him.

“Are you a good cook?” he asks as one dark eyebrow piques.

“I’m a great cook. It’s one of the few things I was allowed to do at Shaemus’s house.”

Kane stops and looks like he wants to ask me something, but then bites his lip and shakes his head, stopping himself from

expressing whatever was on his mind.

“Make whatever you want. The supplies are pretty bare though,” he finally says.

I look over the food on the counter and decide on chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans. Kane seems like a meat and potatoes kind of man. I’m sure that will be fine.

An hour later we’re sitting side by side at the small kitchen counter. There’s a fire roaring in the fireplace and the chill in my bones has finally ceased. It’s surreal, sitting next to him, sharing a meal. This forced cease-fire on the account of my mortal danger is really taking our relationship to new places.

“This is really good,” Kane says with surprise in his voice.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I joke, refilling my wine glass. “Are you sure you don’t want a glass,” I ask for the second time.

“No, I got that for you,” he says. “I can’t drink anything while I’m on the clock.”

I nod, feeling suddenly even more appreciative of his commitment to his job.

After lunch, Kane offers to take care of the kitchen clean up so I can have some time for myself. I thank him and rush to the bathroom with my towel, eager for a hot shower.

The water cascades over my shoulders, dissolving all the tension and worry that had accumulated in my body after the events of the night before. Until now, I hadn’t realized how

much being dragged away from home in the middle of the night could affect me.

I stay in the shower until the water cools off, but when I finally emerge from the curtains, steam billows around me. In my mind, I can't help but picture Kane standing in front of the same showerhead, his chiseled frame coated with soap suds as he scrubs away the day's dirt. The thought makes me tingle in places I shouldn't be while thinking about my bodyguard.

Kane is cocky and too sure of himself, but there is a certain kind of strength and determination beneath it all that makes him extremely attractive. He doesn't need anyone else's approval or support. He follows his own convictions and dedicates himself wholly to causes he believes in. It wasn't something I expected to find in a man like him, but here I am admiring him.

When I exit the bathroom, he's sitting on the couch holding a white bottle with a pink label, but as soon as he spots me, he pushes to his feet and smiles shyly, extending his arm and offering the bottle to me. "I um.. grabbed this for you. It must have fallen out in the truck, so I went to grab it when you were in the shower."

I take it from him carefully as if afraid to break it, looking at him questioningly as I start unscrewing the lid. "What is it?" I ask with a slight amount of apprehension.

He shrugs one shoulder and looks away sheepishly before responding. "It's lotion for your face," he mumbles. "It gets

pretty dry up here and I thought you'd want a moisturizer. It might not be the right kind though.”

My heart flutters at his thoughtfulness and my eyes begin to well up with tears as all of the emotions of the past few days come bubbling up to the surface. I can barely contain my emotional response to his sweet gestures today. A lump forms in my throat and my chin quivers as I look into Kane's eyes, thankful beyond words for his kindness.

He instinctively takes a step back when he sees the tears in my eyes, his mouth agape as he tries to figure out how to fix what he thinks is broken. But then I move forward and embrace him fiercely, feeling his warmth and solid body beneath my fingertips and hearing the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear.

His arms slowly encircle me and pull me closer, and I can feel the softness of his sweater against my skin. His lips caressed the top of my head in a gentle kiss before murmuring words of comfort. We stay like that for several moments until I finally release him. His gaze finds mine and I see tenderness in his eyes, but then he breaks the mood with a joke.

“It was all they had and it will probably give you acne,” he says wryly.

I can't help the laugh that rumbles out of my chest.

“Kane,” I say, returning his tone.

“Yes,” he responds.

“I'm going to beat your ass at Scrabble.”

Chapter Seventeen



It's been snowing for six hours straight. At this point, even if we wanted to leave, we wouldn't be able to. So instead, we sit across from one another with palpable friction emanating between us. I grab my Scrabble tiles and line them up on my tray, and Kane does the same.

He goes first and places his word on the board. SWAP. It's decent, but I can do better. I look down at my tray and see the obvious answer. Placing my tiles on the board, I smile smugly as he looks at me. I use the P and spell out CREEP. Kane nods in acknowledgment and writes down the total. Then, with a sly smile, he puts his second word down. SHREW.

"I bet you think that's clever, don't you?" I ask, my eyes narrowing at him.

"It's actually terribly clever," he replies.

"Well, it's slang, and you can't use it," I inform him.

He looks taken aback for a moment before speaking. "I find it interesting that you assume I'm using the slang definition of

an unpleasant woman instead of the word for a tiny mouse-like mammal.”

“*You’re* a tiny mouse-like mammal,” I say under my breath.

“What was that?” he asks, arching an eyebrow.

“Nothing.” I smile sweetly. We play for a few more minutes before finding short, low scoring words until my tiles line up, causing a smirk to cross my face.

I place my tiles down one by one, slowly, drawing it out, waiting for Kane’s response. C-O-C-K. I keep my face straight and raise an eyebrow, primed for retaliation.

Instead, he smiles ever so slightly and uses the ‘E’ in SHREW to create WET. Now I’m the one who is uncomfortable, and judging by the satisfied look on his face, he’s won this round.



The next morning, I woke up to a quiet house. I thought I’d have a difficult time sleeping given the strange circumstances, but I actually slept like the dead. That’s a bad choice of words, I think to myself. I slept like a log. That’s better. *But why do people say that? What does it even mean to sleep like a log?* Thankfully, I’m pulled from the ramblings of my suspended consciousness by a loud thumping sound outside. I quickly grab some of my new warm clothes and head toward the source of the noise, which is where I find Kane chopping wood.

My boots sink into the powdery snow as I walk toward him, captivated by how his figure is silhouetted against the mountains. Flakes of snow swirl around us in the chilly morning air, and the sun sneaks out from behind a peak, glinting off the blanket of white below. We have gotten twenty-four inches of snow, and even the snow plow hasn't made its way around yet.

Kane glances up at me with a soft smile, which is a far cry from the glare I would have received even a week ago. My heart warms at the sight of him, and I can't help but admire how he looks beneath his heavy knit coat and woolen cap.

"Morning," he says politely. "Did you sleep well?"

I smile in response. "Wonderful, thank you for asking. And you?"

His eyes shift away for a moment before he responds, "Not bad." But something tells me that isn't entirely true.

Taking in another glimpse of winter's beauty after so long away from it all, I say softly, "It's just so beautiful out here." He nods in agreement, gazing out upon the snow-covered landscape.

"How long has it been since you've seen snow?" he asks.

"More years than I can remember," I reply. "I went to college in Florida, then got my job and have very rarely deviated from my routine. I haven't really taken a vacation in years."

"You went to college in Florida?" he asks, the surprise evident in his voice.

“I did. I figured you’d know that. Aren’t you required to learn at least a *minimum* amount of information about people you guard?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I prefer to know very little. It’s not pertinent to my job.”

“But what if the person you are guarding is a horrible human being?” I ask.

“They often are,” he replies drolly. I glare at him and he smirks before he continues. “It’s not my job to judge who gets to live and die, Olivia. The morality of that dilemma is something every soldier grapples with at some point. I can’t allow myself to get caught up in it, so I compartmentalize.”

“So, you *are* a soldier?” I ask, although I’ve been suspecting it for a while now. Everything from the way his clothes are pressed to his stance and posture are perfect. I suspect these are hardened habits of a man who led a disciplined life for many years.

“I was,” he says seriously, slicing the ax through another log. “I had a brain injury that wouldn’t allow me to keep my job. Fortunately, it didn’t affect my ability to be a good bodyguard.” My first instinct is to ask if his brain injury is the cause of his sparkling, warm personality, but the seriousness of his expression has me holding my tongue.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, sensing an aperture to finally see Kane, to really see Kane..

“Not particularly,” he answers, putting an end to my quest for information.

“Well, that must have been difficult,” I say, brushing some snow off a stump so I can sit. I pull my legs up into my chest and await his reply.

“It was,” he finally admits, “but things have been looking up lately. People trying to kill you notwithstanding.”

I let out a forced chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. “Yeah, I could live without that part,” I joke. My gaze locks onto his, and my heart races with anticipation as I ask him the question that’s been on my mind for weeks. “Can I ask you a question?”

His response surprises me. “Yes.”

“Do you believe in revenge?” I inquire, cocking my head to the side like a curious puppy.

He pauses briefly with the ax perched on his shoulder before responding. “Interesting question. Where did that come from?”

“It’s just something I think about sometimes,” I explain with a shrug, trying to play it off as casual.

Kane answers with confidence, slicing through another chunk of wood, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine. “No, I believe in retribution.”

My curiosity piques at his response. “Is there a difference?”

He nods slowly, resting the ax beside his leg and standing tall.

“There’s a difference.”

“Explain it to me,” I implore him, leaning in closer. For once, I don’t feel as though he is worried that I’m judging him.

“Revenge is about hurting someone who hurt you,” he begins, his piercing stare never leaving mine as he talks. “It’s personal. It’s pleasurable, at least in the short term.”

The way he says the word “pleasurable” sends a shiver down my spine. As he speaks, my mind wanders to thoughts of all the people who have wronged me in life, and how much satisfaction I would get from seeking revenge on them. But Kane’s words remind me that maybe there’s a better way to handle things than just lashing out in anger.

“Retribution means to punish any wrongdoing done and restore balance,” he explains.

I ponder his words for a moment before responding. “I agree with that concept.”

Kane’s eyes widen in surprise, one dark eyebrow rising. “You do?” he inquires.

“Yes, I do,” I say before hopping up and shaking the snow off my butt. The temperature outside is plummeting, so I leave him standing by the pile of wood and go into the cabin in an attempt to warm up before returning to the frozen tundra. While inside, I concoct an idea that he might actually appreciate.

I walk outside ten minutes later with two cups of hot cocoa. I set Kane’s down on another stump covered with fresh,

powdery snow, and watch as it liquefies outward into a thick slush around the cup.

Kane is back to chopping wood again like it's his job. This time, my eyes stay drawn to him, no longer distracted by the snow or our earlier conversation, and I have to say, I don't hate it. His large build is enhanced with both a sweatshirt and a flannel, making him appear even larger.

He swings the ax in long, even strokes. Watching him do this is like watching an athlete doing something extraordinary. An elite receiver catching a difficult pass. A hockey player hitting the perfect slapshot. A sprinter outrunning everyone around him with ease. It's mesmerizing.

“*Olivia*,” he says as if he's repeating it for the tenth time, pulling me from thoughts. The annoyance in his voice is apparent, but then it usually is when he's talking to me.

Obviously, it was so mesmerizing that I didn't hear him speaking to me. I shake my head and meet his dark gaze. His face is covered by a short beard now, adding to his lumberjack vibe. “Sorry, what?” I reply.

“I said thank you for the cocoa,” he says, looking at me with concern. “What's wrong with you?”

I rear my head back, trying to sell the fact that I didn't just get caught ogling him. It's an over exaggerated gesture that only makes me appear more guilty. “Pfft, nothing. I'm just enjoying the view. Of the mountains. And the snow. The view of the mountains and the snow,” I say rapidly. *Way to go, Liv. Way to sell it.*

One dark eyebrow arches as he says, “OK.” But it’s actually more of a question than a statement, indicating he doesn’t believe me. “Well, why don’t you put your drink down, pick up some of this wood, and take it inside.”

“You didn’t say ‘please’,” I reply, jutting my hip in fake indignation.

“And I won’t,” he shoots back, with a wicked grin.

“Whatever,” I reply, setting down my cocoa and grabbing a few pieces of wood.

“Not like that,” Kane says with a heavy sigh. *How is everything I do a disappointment to this man?*

“You can’t possibly tell me there’s a correct way to carry wood, Kane.”

“There’s a correct way to do everything, Olivia. You just seem to have a knack for not knowing what it is.”

“They are about to find your dead body in these woods with an ax *correctly* shoved up your ass,” I say through gritted teeth, which only causes him to laugh.

“Come here,” he says.

I’m clearly at war with myself when it comes to this man because I’m torn between following his command, and wanting to stand closer to him and get high on his masculine pheromones. I wait a beat and then go stand in front of him.

“Hold your arms out,” he instructs. I do what he says and he layers five pieces of wood in my arms. I have to admit, this is

easier than the way I was doing it. “Is that too heavy?” he asks.

“No, it’s fine,” I answer. I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of admitting that this is, in fact, the correct way to carry wood.

“Wait,” he says, as I turn to head inside. I watch him go over to the cup of cocoa I made and pick it up. He returns to stand in front of me and takes a long sip of it. This wood is not getting any lighter and I’m getting more irritated by the second. He raises his glove to his mouth and bites the tip of the middle finger between his teeth, sliding the glove off and then grabbing it in his fist. His index finger dips into the last remaining dollop of whipped cream which has yet to melt, and then he taps it lightly onto the tip of my nose with a smirk. “Now you can go inside,” he says.

I stand there with my mouth agape and eyes squinting at him. Did he seriously just do that? I try to hold onto my indignation, but the genuine smile on his face has an entirely different effect on my body. With wet panties, I make my way back inside the cabin.



We sit across from one another later that evening with a cribbage board between us. It’s a pretty even game and we’re playing at a leisurely pace, having a relaxed conversation.

“So, how do you know Henry?” I ask, pegging two points.

“He worked with my dad years ago, and once he retired, he started a successful security company, specializing in wealthy clientele. After my discharge, he reached out to me.” He pegs three points.

“And do you like what you do?” I ask.

“Sometimes,” he answers truthfully without looking at me.

“How about right now?” I ask, as butterflies take flight in my stomach in anticipation of his answer.

He grins before speaking. “Oh, right now I’m absolutely loving it,” he says sarcastically.

“Liar,” I smile, and peg twelve points from my crib, pulling me ahead of him.

“So, do you know anything at all about me, other than I’m wanted dead?” I question.

“I know you’re Shaemus Kildare’s daughter. That says enough to me.”

My eyes bore into him like ice-cold daggers, my hands trembling around the cards in my hands. “And what exactly are you implying by that?” I growl, my voice dripping with ire.

“You couldn’t even carry a simple bundle of wood,” he sneers, the nice evening we were having now gone.

“What kind of outdated thinking is that?” I seethe, my patience having disintegrated into nothing. “It’s not my fault I never

had to do any of these manual tasks!” I cry, desperate to prove myself to him.

“Being a Princess just doesn’t seem like difficult work,” he retorts with a shrug. Rage fills my veins like lava. His backhanded insult only further fuel my fire of indignation.

“Who do you take me for, Kane?” I demand, looking him squarely in the eye.

“The selfish, lazy daughter of a notorious mob boss,” he replies without hesitation.

His words hit me like a slap in the face. “No, correction,” I respond sharply. “I am the *adopted* daughter of Shaemus Kildare.” His eyes widened in surprise at my claim, but I boldly continued on. “But, you assume I’m guilty by association, right?” My voice is cold with a simmering undercurrent of fury.

“I was a normal, happy girl until I was thirteen-years-old,” I say reluctantly. Although it pains me to retell the secrets I guard so closely in my heart, I’m determined not to give Kane the satisfaction of believing he can control me with his judgment. If he’s here to protect me, he needs to understand who he is guarding.

“Before Shaemus brought me into his home, I was a completely different person,” I continued, expecting him at any moment to tell me that he doesn’t want to hear it. Instead, Kane sets his cards down and turns his body to face me, giving me his full attention.

“My name was Simone,” I start. “I was an eighth grader living with my mom and grandparents. My life was perfect; I had a boyfriend and had just made the volleyball team. We were all very happy,” I choke out as tears begin to spill over my cheeks.

I feel the pain of my past seeping through me as I begin to tell him all I know.

“Someone in my family did something awful to someone with ties to the Profaci crime family. The next thing I know, both my grandparents had been killed in a supposed car accident, and my mother was found dead after being mugged.” It’s been nearly fifteen years, but my voice hitches at the memory of losing everyone I’ve ever loved. I catch myself before dissolving into that puddle of despair as I clear my throat. “None of it made any sense, especially because soon after that, I was placed in protective custody. Then, Shaemus somehow struck a deal and suddenly I was living in his home on the other side of the country, under a new name. The whole situation felt like a betrayal, and I resented him for it. I still do after what he did.”

Kane’s expression changes to one of confusion and fury. “What did he do?” he demands, his jaw clenched tightly as if ready for a fight.

I shake my head. “Nothing like that,” I murmur, barely above a whisper. His shoulders slump in relief, but his mind still seems on edge.

“He never hurt me physically,” I continue, recalling every memory that was seared into my brain from my captivity. “But it was more than just simple protection he was offering; he wanted to use me as a means to get at Profaci. I was hidden away in a cold and lonely mansion in Boston most of the time, and only brought out for public events as a way to spite his rival.” My voice wavers slightly, and I inhale deeply before continuing. “He kept me as close as possible without actually caring for me. I was nothing more than an asset to him. I’d characterize the hurt as willful neglect. Isn’t that what they call it when you are nothing more than a prop in someone’s life? He saw me as furniture. I’m a spiteful end table,” I say with humorless chuckle.

“Everyone and everything I had before I became Shaemus’s daughter was taken away, even my last name,” I say with a trembling voice. “I was homeschooled until I was sent to a very expensive private school. I couldn’t play sports or date anyone. I just existed.” I sigh before continuing, “I hated my life, and eventually, it became too much for me to handle, so, when I turned eighteen, I left it all behind. I thought Shaemus would come after me or try to bring me back, but he didn’t care by then; his mission of making his enemy suffer was complete.”

Kane’s features are set in an expression of conflicting emotions as he listens. I can see that he feels pity for me, and that is the last thing I want him to do. I just want him to understand.

“What about your biological father?”

“No idea who he was,” I reply tersely. “So, I have no family left. I miss my mom. I miss how she said she would always be there. I miss, I miss how much she loved me. I have no one,” my voice cracks under the weight of its thickness. “It has me wondering why, after all this time, someone suddenly cares about keeping me safe? Who? I’ve been alone all these years. Who is it?”

“I don’t have those answers,” he says, though he looks like there might be something else he wants to say.

We remain silent for a while, allowing me to gain control over my emotions. The atmosphere is growing stuffy, so I make an effort to inject some levity into the situation. “I thought you’d have something ironic to say when I told you I couldn’t have a boyfriend,” I jokingly commented.

Instead of responding to my comment, Kane glances away, his lips pursing together in a thin line. He let out a deep sigh before finally speaking, “Nah, I think it sucks that you never got the chance to have a boyfriend.” Then he adds, “So, you’ve never had a real relationship?”

I snort and cross my arms over my chest. “It’s so complicated. I don’t know who I am, how can anyone else ever really like me for the real me? It’s impossible and my paranoia doesn’t help.”

Kane nods slowly as he avoids eye contact with me. In a flat tone, he says, “Well, relationships aren’t always what they are cracked up to be.” There’s something in his voice that catches my attention; pain?

I hesitate before asking my next question. “It’s obvious someone hurt you. Can I ask what happened?”

A small smile curves Kane’s lips. “Obvious?”

“Well, you have the world’s largest pole stuck up your ass. I imagine someone put it there.” It feels nice to have the focus off my sad past, and I find it impossible to stifle my chuckle at the visual.

He smiles again, but this time sadly. “My ex put it there,” he says, his face solemn. “With no lube.”

I wince at the thought of it. “Ouch,” I say before continuing in a more serious tone.

“What did she do?”

“She left me for some guy from high school while I was off fighting bad guys,” he says with a sigh. “She unilaterally decided after three years that I wasn’t able to give her the life she wanted.” Kane’s voice is heavy with sadness as he recounts his story. His eyes seem distant, as if reliving the past. He takes a hefty sip from a tall glass of water and I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows before continuing. “Here’s the real kick in the nuts, though,” he says. “She told me right after I found out my best friend had died. She was already living with the new guy, with my dog, in his house.”

“She sounds like a real twat waffle,” I reply casually, causing Kane to return to the moment and howl with laughter. This is the most relaxed I’ve ever seen him, and it makes me feel good that I’m the reason for it.

“Nah,” he says with a shake of his head. “It’s not her fault. She’s not wrong about a lot of things. I was married to my career in the military. I loved her, but she did come second.” His eyes drift off again, lost in thought as he remembers the past few years of his life.

“So they really made you leave the military because of a head injury?” I ask. He absently rubs his temples and answers quietly, “One too many hits to the old ‘noggin’. They wouldn’t let me keep doing the kind of work that meant everything to me.” His hands form tight fists as he continues.

“Did that kind of work involve killing people?” I ask.

He doesn’t speak for a while, allowing the silence to stretch between us until it’s almost unbearable. Finally, he looks me directly in the eye and nods slowly. I can feel a sudden shift in our relationship; like we are no longer strangers, but two kindred souls connected by shared understanding and pain.

My instincts compel me to go to him, to comfort him somehow. So, I get up, taking a step toward him, and he parts his legs, inviting me in. His eyes are lowered, but I can see the corners twitch with anticipation. My hands slide into his hair, and soft strands that are like feathers tickle my palms. His head falls back into my touch and a ragged sigh escapes from his lips.

My thumb passes over a raised spot on the left side of his head, just inside his hairline. I trace its outline and feel the scar. He reaches up and grabs my wrist, pulling me closer as if

begging for more of my touch. I lean down to kiss the scar and leave my lips there for an endless moment, inhaling his scent.

When I pull away, Kane's eyes meet mine. They hold the same desire that courses through my veins, igniting a strong fire between us. We've always felt something between us, sparkles of attraction here and there, but this is different. Something real has taken root and it's unmistakable.

The room becomes inexplicably smaller and the air suddenly thickens. The heat around us is tangible, and every breath we take feels more charged than the last. I can feel my pulse quicken, knowing that even the slightest move would send this spark of desire into a full-fledged fire. But there is also hesitation, fear even, palpable in both of us.

I take a step back and instantly feel relief from the physical distance between us but it only makes me want him more. My fingertips ache to explore his skin and my lips yearn for his touch.

Breaking the tension first, Kane rises smoothly from his seat and recomposes himself, returning to his usual business-like demeanor.

"It's getting late," he announces as if nothing happened. "You should get some sleep."

Agreeing with a nod, I headed up to the loft, knowing everything will be different after tonight.

Chapter Eighteen



When I was younger, I would spend hours lying in my bed straining to hear the distinct sounds of Shaemus's henchmen walking the halls outside my room. I'd listen for clues about their activities: conversations being whispered, doors being opened and closed, and small rustlings in the kitchen.

The past few nights I've been lulled to sleep by Kane's snores echoing through the small cabin. Tonight is different; he seems restless, tossing and turning, sighing loudly as he gets out of bed to get a glass of water. But instead of the sound of even breathing when he finally falls asleep, I can make out the sound of sheets pulled down before settling into an uneasy peace.

As I lie in bed, I hear a subtle change in Kane's breathing. It grows faster and the pull-out sofa creaks with each rhythmic movement. My skin tingles and my own breaths get caught in my throat as I realize he is pleasuring himself.

I really should cover my ears and give him privacy, but something primal inside me needs to witness this moment of

raw passion.

I slowly rose from the bed, pausing to listen for any sign that he heard me. When I don't hear anything, I tiptoe quietly down the stairs, stopping at the landing when he comes into full view. He is a vision of pure male beauty, his nakedness unashamedly on display. The sweat glistening over his body as he succumbs to the pleasure can be seen in the dim light of the fading fire.

His legs are slightly parted, and his toned thighs flex as he strokes his cock, his movements becoming faster. I watch him with rapt attention, my own desire stirring in response. With my eyes glued to the sight of his hand fisted around his cock, I slide my fingers into my panties and feel myself slick. I start circling my clit slowly, feeling the sensations build at a rapid pace.

As if sensing my gaze on him, his eyes snap open and land directly on me. Instead of stopping or looking embarrassed or mad, his strokes increase while his eyes drop to where my hand is inside my sleep shorts. I'm too swept up in the feelings of pleasure to care that he caught me watching him, or care about what I'm currently doing.

The lustful look on his face intensifies, and his strokes become more urgent. My breathing becomes more shallow as the feelings overwhelm me, and a small moan escapes me when I increase the pressure of my fingers. Kane's eyes darken at the sound and we lock gazes, a low groan rumbling from his chest

in response. His movements become more jerky, indicating he's getting close.

Reaching up, I tweak my nipple with one hand while continuing to stroke myself with the other, letting out an involuntary cry at the intensity of it all. My world explodes and I throw my head back when the orgasm wracks my body. I look back at Kane just as he reaches his own release. "Fuck! Olivia," he grunts, as thick ropes of cum release onto his hand and stomach.

We continue locked in that heated gaze until he seemingly snaps out of his lustful trance and carefully gets up. My body tingles in anticipation that he will make his way over to me, but instead he walks straight into the bathroom where the door shuts behind him. A moment later, the shower begins to run.

I consider waiting for him to emerge from the bathroom so we can talk about what just happened, but decide it's better to let him process it. He's not someone who likes losing control, at least not with me, and this is going to take him some time. But even he can't deny what's right in front of him; things between us have changed.



Kane

I scrub my hand over my face as the hot water trails over my body. That shouldn't have happened. I can't believe how much I've been drawn to Olivia, even though I know it's wrong. Our

conversation earlier made me realize how misguided my assumptions about her have been. While I had initially perceived her as a cold, heartless princess, I now understand that beneath the icy exterior is a soul who had endured her own share of pain and loss. Her sharp intuition and far-reaching compassion are undeniable. She has merely done what she needed to do to shield herself from further pain. She's beautiful and strong, inside and out. The number of mistakes I've made since taking this assignment make me think I'm in the wrong line of work.

But no matter how hard I try not to feel anything for her, my mind still drifts back to the moment when she trembled through her orgasm, and suddenly, I find myself wanting her again. My cock begins to get hard even as guilt sweeps through me at the thought. But then desire takes its place and it makes it difficult to think straight. *How am I going to face her after what just happened?*

My mind races as I try to figure out what to do. On one hand, I have become close to her – more than I've ever been with anyone in a very long time, despite me trying to maintain a distance between us. We share a connection that is intense and undeniably strong. On the other hand, I'm a professional, and it's a mistake to let my guard down.

Henry would be furious if he knew about this situation. There's no telling what he might do. The only way out is the truth, no matter how painful it may be. I just have to tell her that we made a mistake and can't do that again – even though deep inside me, I want nothing more. But here we are, stuck in

this corner of the world together for the foreseeable future, and avoidance isn't the answer.

I quietly step out of the bathroom, my feet padding softly on the carpeted floor. My heart pounds, expecting to see Olivia waiting for me in the darkness, but instead there is only an eerie silence. A chill creeps up my spine as I realize she could have left without me noticing, and I run upstairs to check.

The loft is dimly lit by a sliver of moonlight that filters through a gap in the curtains, and reveals her silhouette against the pillows. Sighing with relief, I step back down the stairs and collapse on the old pull-out couch. My thoughts race throughout the night, until finally, I drift off just as morning light creeps in.

Chapter Nineteen



I slowly open my eyes, taking in the sight of Olivia sitting in the armchair by the window, a thick book open on her lap and a fresh cup of coffee steaming on the table beside her.

“Hi, Sleepy Head,” she says with a smirk. *I can already tell this is going to be a whole thing.* Before I can reply she speaks again. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, thanks,” I mumble, rubbing my eyes and trying to gather my thoughts.

She gives me a look of disbelief in return. “You always say that.”

My brows furrow. “What?”

“You always say that you slept well, even when I suspect you didn’t. Why is that?”

I sigh and reply, “It’s polite. Why burden someone else with your crap?”

Olivia rolls her eyes and smiles softly. “But we’re friends now, and we are *wayyyyyy* past polite.”

“Olivia, I’m barely awake. I have morning wood. I have to take a piss. Can we table this until I’ve had my coffee?” I ask groggily, fighting back a yawn.

“Of course, take your time,” she says with an enthusiastic smile that’s too bright for so early in the morning. When I return to the kitchen, she’s brewed a cup of black coffee and it’s waiting patiently for me on the counter.

“Thank you,” I say politely before continuing, “we need to talk about what happened last night.”

She nods in agreement but there’s something mischievous glinting in her eyes as she speaks. “You really should call me Liv. After all, I have seen your ‘O’ face.”

“My ‘O’ face?” I repeat incredulously. “Jesus Christ. Look, whatever happened last night can’t happen again.” Even as the words leave my mouth, I see her smirk, alerting me to the fact that she isn’t taking this seriously.

“I’m serious,” I reply, my voice resolute. “We are not in a situation to be taking any chances. My job is to guard you, and that’s all there is to it.”

She tilts her head slightly, looking up at me mischievously. “I knew you were going to say that,” she replies, her voice calm but firm. “And I respectfully disagree.”

I narrow my eyes skeptically and step closer. “You disagree?” I question, my voice low and challenging. “That’s not up to

you,” I say as I set my coffee on the counter and cross my arms over my chest. A defensive gesture she is all too familiar with.

Her lips curve into a smile as she shakes her head slightly, and then sighs. “I knew you were going to go all ‘Kane’ over this,” she responds knowingly. “Look at you right now. Standing all tall with your arms crossed like that, trying to intimidate me, but it won’t work anymore. You think all the time you spent watching me means I haven’t learned about you too?”

My jaw is nearly on the floor as I struggle for words against her insight, realizing she’s seen straight through my tough façade.

I shake my head almost violently from side to side. “It doesn’t matter. This isn’t happening,” I tell her forcefully.

“You like me,” she says coyly. She takes a step closer to me and looks into my eyes, hungry for a reaction.

“Olivia, the only way I’d like you is if you were choking on my cock,” I lie, hoping I can somehow convince both of us. She swallows audibly as her pupils dilate with surprise. Her expression doesn’t waver as she leans in close and says, “That’s not intimidating; it’s just really fucking hot. So be honest, you do want me.”

“Fucking isn’t love,” I reply coldly. “This isn’t some fairytale where we get our happily-ever-after. I’m not cut out for that sort of life. Not anymore. The sooner you accept that, the better off we will both be.”

“Kiss me,” she says, catching me off guard.

I hesitate for a moment, mouth hanging open as I try to comprehend her request. “Have you not been listening to a word I’ve said?”

“I’ve been listening,” she says seriously. “But I think you’re lying to both of us. So I want you to kiss me. Let’s see if this thing with us is as strong as I think it is.”

My gaze softens as she continues to explain, and I can feel the tension between us grow. She’s standing close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating off of her body, and when she finishes speaking, it is like an electric pulse between us.

I take a step closer to her until we’re almost touching. The air around us seems to stop moving as my hand traces along her cheekbone and cups her face in my palm. “You want me to kiss you, Liv?” I whisper, searching her eyes for some sign of hesitation or doubt.

Her eyes flutter shut before she whispers breathlessly, “Yes.”

As soon as the word leaves her mouth, I lean in and brush my lips lightly against hers. She inhales sharply at the contact and opens slightly, inviting me in further.

Our tongues entwine as my free hand moves from her waist up to cup the back of her neck, pulling her closer. We kiss slowly and deeply, both of us surrendering completely to each other in the moment.

The kiss is electric; my heart races and a thrill shoots through every inch of my body. But I force myself to break away, only

to find Olivia's eyes heavy with desire, her inviting lips still parted slightly from mine. I gaze into her cerulean eyes, and I feel as though time has stopped. I want to linger in her embrace, but instead I step away and do what needs to be done. I lie.

“It would be hot between us, but like I said before, fucking isn't love. I'm not the guy you spend the rest of your life with, Olivia. I'm the guy you think about fucking while you're with that guy. Nothing more. I hope you finally understand the difference so we can move on.”

She nods slowly, blinking away the welling in her eyes as she backs away from me. She opens her mouth to say something before quickly closing it and rotating on her heel toward the bathroom door. With one final glance over her shoulder, she slips inside without another word.

I walk outside and take a deep breath, wishing the day had started differently. I wish I could interact with her without feeling like absolute garbage afterwards.

Reaching into my pocket, I grab my burner phone as I begin to pace the length of the porch. It's been two days since I've spoken to Henry, wanting to give things some time to calm down. I dial his number with anticipation and dread.

“Kane,” Henry answers on the first ring. “How are you? How's Olivia?” His voice is strained, and filled with worry.

“We're both safe,” I reply warily. “Have you heard anything?”

Henry sighs heavily before saying, "They burned down her apartment building." The words hang between us for a moment before I clear my throat and respond.

"Jesus," I hissed through clenched teeth. "Did anyone get hurt?"

"No," he replies. "The fire department was able to contain it before anyone was injured. But her stuff...it's all gone."

My eyes close and I press my fingertips against my temples. "How am I going to tell her?" I mutter, more to myself than him.

"You're not," he answers flatly. "It's the last thing she needs to worry about right now."

I open my eyes and drag a hand over my face. "How many were there?"

"Two," he says. "They were hanging around the school earlier, but they would've left town by now."

I see red as soon as the words penetrate my consciousness. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I had a couple of guys go check it out. They left in a hurry, which makes me think they found what they were looking for."

My brow furrows, deep in thought. "There's more to her story than we know. Do you know that Kildare isn't her biological father?"

“I do,” he admits. “But the sheer force these guys acted with makes me believe this is personal... some kind of vendetta. It’s more than just her association with Shaemus. Has she told you anything else?”

“She gave me bits and pieces about her family,” I reply. “Someone from her past crossed Profaci. His retaliation killed her entire family, and Shaemus adopted her as part of his plan to make Profaci pay.”

“That makes things a bit more clear.” Henry pauses for a moment and sighs heavily. “Try to get more details out of her if you can. She knows something we don’t. I’m going to see what else I can find out on my end. We’ll talk again soon.”

The air whooshes out of my lungs as I exhale. I’m relieved that the school was left unscathed, but a darker part of me can’t help but think how easy it would be to hunt those responsible down if anything had happened to just one child. The thought terrifies me.

My heart is pounding and my mind races as I try to process everything Henry just told me. *Who was Simone Holt?* What secrets did her past life hold that could be related to the current situation? Why were we unable to locate whoever had paid for her protection?

Struggling to make sense of it all, I know I need some space to clear my head. Scenes of the fire that destroyed her apartment flash through my mind, followed by more anger that someone could have set a building full of innocent people ablaze. My hands shake at my sides as I clamp them together tightly.

In an effort to calm my nerves, I decide a perimeter check is just what I need. Taking a deep breath, I begin to move about the snow-covered grounds. This is a ritual for me at least twice per day, one which usually yields nothing more interesting than animal tracks in the fresh powder. But this time, I hope it will give me some answers.

As I trudge through the snow, my mind swims with thoughts of Olivia's face this morning. Her sad eyes are a painful reminder of the hurt I had caused her. Normally, I would brush it off and carry on without a care, but something about today felt different. She has been through so much, and more and more lately I've felt a greater connection to her. Even though I tried to talk myself out of it, the attraction I feel toward her keeps growing stronger.

I realize she was right: things have changed between us. My heart feels both warm and heavy as my protective instincts kick in, in a way I haven't experienced in a long time. I want to keep her safe – not just because it's expected of me, but because I truly want to protect her from any further pain. Yet, at the same time, my desire to protect her conflicts with the fact that I could potentially do more harm than good. I return to the cabin with no answers and feeling even more conflicted than before.



This entire day has been full of uncomfortable silences, punctuated only by the occasional clatter from the kitchen

when Olivia made sandwiches for lunch earlier. I must have fallen asleep on the couch because the next thing I know, I hear an ear splitting shriek, followed by a thump.

I leap off the couch and race up the stairs, not realizing until it's too late that I must have thrown off my sweatshirt in my sleep and I'm now wearing nothing but jeans. My heart pounds with worry as I burst upstairs to find Olivia huddled in the corner, pointing to her bed.

"There was a spider!" she shrieks, her voice trembling. Her eyes are wide with terror as she gestures to the pillow where it must have been perched. "It was right there, Kane. It was huge... all eight of its little eyes were fixed on me!"

A fucking spider? My jaw clenches as I turn to Olivia. "So what is it you'd like me to do here?"

She stands up and places her hands on her hips; a look of indignation on her face.

"I'd like you to find it and get rid of it," she says, her arms crossing over her chest.

Resisting the urge to rub my temples in frustration, I survey the bed. The sheets are rumpled and tossed aside, revealing the mattress where the eight-legged creature wildly scurried about moments earlier. Ignoring my near naked state, I search beneath pillows and peer into dark corners, but I'm unable to locate the intruder.

I cross my arms and regard her skeptically. "What am I doing right now that you couldn't be doing for yourself?"

Her voice breaks and she stammers, “I...I don’t like spiders. It’s not an irrational fear.”

Although I keep my expression neutral, I can’t help but smirk inwardly. In a calm tone, I reply, “It’s actually very irrational; most species are harmless and actually provide important services to our ecosystem.”

She huffs in annoyance before raising her eyes skyward with exasperation.

Suddenly remembering why we were here in the first place, I throw up my hands in triumph. “Well, it’s gone now!”

Her mouth drops open in confusion. “What do you mean it’s gone?”

“I mean it’s not here. Poor bastard probably found a crack in the wall when you screamed like a banshee and decided to take its chances outside,” I say.

“It didn’t just disappear, Kane. I don’t know if I can sleep here until I wash all the bedding,” she states matter of factly with a shake of her head.

“That’s just ridiculous,” I reply in frustration.

She looks me square in the eye with a seriousness that could stop traffic. “I know it is. It’s ridiculous. *I’m ridiculous*. Go ahead and add it to the list of things you don’t like about me. I’m sure your list must be as long as a football field by now.”

I want to tell her how wrong she is and that there was no such list written down anywhere or even jotted in my mind. But before I have the chance, she charges ahead with her words.

“Don’t even deny it. You have one reason after another ready for any moment when you need an excuse to keep me at arm’s length; another rationalization to justify your contempt towards me. So go ahead, write it down. Give yourself every reason to stay away from me.”

A million unspoken words battle against each other on my tongue and lips. Words about how strong I think she is; how when she kissed my scar it felt better than any one night stand; and how alive I feel when she looks into my eyes and challenges me, but none of them make it out of my mouth. Instead, I slowly begin to turn around without saying anything. Before I can take three steps away from her, she calls after me with a voice full of pain. “Go ahead and run, Kane. You’re good at that.”

I squeeze my fists tight, feeling like I’ve been sucker-punched right in the gut by her words. She’s right – but no matter how much it hurts or how much I want to prove her wrong, getting into an argument won’t lead us anywhere.

I once again find myself standing outside in the cold, my bare chest heaving with rage. Her words are still ringing in my ears and each breath feels like needles of ice against my skin. I’ve been dealing with her for weeks where it has felt like at any moment we could erupt into a storm of yelling and accusations. The woman infuriates me, but also excites me in a way I never expected. Staying away from her is exhausting. I’m so tired of fighting this thing between us. It’s consuming me.

My thoughts shift as an idea begins to form in my mind. What if I gave in and acted on the chemistry between us? How bad could it possibly be? We've been skirting around each other like two magnets; me unwilling to cross the invisible line that continues to pull us together. One thing is for sure. If I go there with Olivia, there is no turning back. I can't run from her or hide from this any longer. My cards will be laid out on the table. It makes us both vulnerable, and to be honest, it's probably not the smartest decision.

But the thought of her body pressed against mine is too tempting, and soon I find myself justifying entering the house and giving in to the desire that has been growing between us since day one.

Chapter Twenty



The front door slams, and my heart leaps into my throat. Heavy footsteps thunder up the stairs as Kane's voice calls out for me. His boots clomp across the hardwood steps and stop at the edge of my bed. I've been rooted to this spot since he left earlier. My heart feels like lead in my chest. The fear of the spider that had been skittering around the room is a distant memory, and I'm too sad to care. I'm standing now, but can't muster enough courage to meet his gaze. My cheeks are stained with tears, old mascara smudged like a raccoon's mask beneath my eyes. He doesn't mention it though, just steps closer and lightly lifts my chin until our eyes lock. The air between us crackles and shifts in intensity as something unspoken passes between us.

His lips part and I can smell the cold on him. On an exhalation he breathes, "Fuck it." Suddenly, his mouth crashes against mine. He grabs my face in both hands, holding me steady as he deepens the kiss, running his tongue along my lip and capturing it gently between his teeth. I moan into his mouth

then grip the back of his head tightly, pulling him closer so that our bodies press together eagerly.

I don't know what changed his mind or brought us here to this moment, but all that matters is that I never want it to end. I've waited for this moment. I've thought about it countless times, and it feels better than I imagined to feel his intimate touch.

Kane grabs a fistful of my hair, pulling my head back so he can kiss me more deeply. His tongue eagerly explores my mouth and I welcome him with my own.

I move my hands down his body, tracing the wide muscles of his shoulders before moving lower over the small patch of hairs on his chest. I continue exploring down his abs to where his jeans hug his hips. His skin is somehow both cold from the frigid winter air and hot under my touch.

A jolt of anticipation races through me as he drops to his knees in front of me, lifting the bottom of my sweatshirt and showering kisses across my bare stomach. His hands caress my curves, kneading and squeezing as I moan with pleasure.

My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, and urging him on with each moan.

"Fuck," he whispers as his eyes travel up my body, drinking in each inch of me. "You're so beautiful."

"It's about time you admit it," I reply with a smirk on my face.

His hands wander over my hips and belly, caressing every curve possessively as he leans in to place feathery kisses across my skin. He stands and plants one last kiss on my lips

before purring, “It’s that smart mouth of yours that I really like. I think I’ve figured out a good use for it.”

My cheeks flush as I look at him through hooded eyes. The gaze he returns is filled with lust and need.

Slowly, he unbuttons his jeans and steps out of them while I admire the toned muscles along his abdomen that contract when I trail my fingers across the waistband of his boxer briefs.

Kneeling before him slowly, I push his briefs down and his hard cock bounces against his stomach. I lick my lips, smile, and grab it firmly yet gently, placing a kiss on the swollen head. His breathing becomes heavier as I begin to stroke him from base to tip, and then abruptly take him into my mouth and suck lightly. His fingers entwine themselves in my hair and our eyes lock together for a moment as an indefinable emotion passes between us.

I pull away slightly so he can see the smile on my face before continuing the exploration of his body.

“Just like that,” he hisses through gritted teeth as I take him as deep as I can, coating his cock with saliva and causing my eyes to water. He moans in approval as I continue working his shaft and begin to suck and tug on his balls.

He drops his head back and allows me to take complete control now. Pleasure rips a groan from his chest as he begins to pump his hips, but then he suddenly pulls back, releasing himself from my mouth.

“I need to taste you,” he rasps with heavy-lidded eyes.

He hoists me up and I land on the bed with a muffled thump, and I can't help but giggle.

Kane's big hands land on either side of my head and he leans down, capturing my lips in a passionate kiss, sucking and nibbling at my lower lip as I eagerly explore every hard contour of his body, scratching lightly with my nails.

He buries his head in my neck and tenderly brushes his lips across my skin, sending shivers down my spine. His warm hands move across my body, exploring intimately as I tilt my head back, savoring the moment. .

When he pulls back, his strong hands slide purposefully to the edge of my sweater, firmly grasping the edges and swiftly pulling it off in one smooth motion, leaving me laying there in nothing but the soft cotton underwear he picked out for me. I fall back onto the bed, eagerly arching my back and letting my legs fall open in invitation.

He grabs my face tenderly in both hands and holds me close, our eyes locking and his gaze boring into mine. “Liv,” he whispers before slowly dropping his head to place soft kisses along on my neck and chest. My heart flutters at the sound of my name on his lips. A knowing hint that we have become something more than enemies.

His caressing fingertips leave a trail of tingling pleasure as they dance down my chest and then cup my breast, squeezing and kneading, before rolling my nipple between his fingers.

He slowly moves around my body, planting kisses along the way. His mouth lingers on my breasts and I can feel him smile against my skin, no doubt from feeling me quiver beneath him. His nose grazes over my stomach before he looks up at me, his eyes twinkling in satisfaction.

I arch for him as he tugs my underwear down. I feel his breath on my inner thigh and warmth spreads through me as he kisses and sucks the area. I almost cry out when his tongue lightly runs up and down the length of me, my need to feel him growing stronger with every second.

Finally, he kisses my clit softly, taking his time there, making me writhe with need. He kisses and licks me softly and sweetly, until I begin to push against him, seeking friction.

Understanding my need, he begins putting more pressure on my clit and slips his middle finger inside, causing me to cry out at the delicious feeling. He adds another and works me with both fingers, sucking my clit harder.

“Watch me,” he demands, pulling my attention to his heated gaze. I stare at him as he devours me, savoring my body like it’s his last meal. He watches me as he hooks his fingers inside and presses against my front wall while his tongue lashes at my clit with several hard flicks. I explode on his fingers and tongue. My body arches off the bed, and I convulse with pleasure. He continues his assault, lighter now, as I ride out my orgasm, and doesn’t stop until he’s licked and savored every last ounce of my release, then he finally lifts up, his lips and chin glistening with my juices.

He settles on the bed next to me, tracing a lazy pattern along my arm while I look up at the ceiling with a smile.

“We aren’t done, right?” I ask, my voice nothing more than a breathless whisper.

His response is a loud laugh that fills the room before he turns his head to look me in the eye. “For tonight, yes,” he says, his lips quirking into a sly smile.

“But you didn’t get to finish,” I reply.

He brushes away a piece of hair that is stuck to my forehead and traces circles around my cheekbone with his thumb. “Trust me, I’m more than satisfied. I could eat that pussy for every meal and die a happy man.”

“But I want you,” I plead.

Kane brings his face close to mine and speaks softly against my skin.

“Olivia, don’t argue or I won’t do that again.”

I don’t say another word.

Chapter Twenty-One



The warmth of Olivia's body pressed against mine is the first thing I'm aware of when I wake the next morning. Her limbs are curled into one another, and my arm is draped protectively over her hip. The feel of her skin beneath my fingers brings back the memories of last night. Everything we did was perfect and I refuse to ruin it by second guessing myself. My new goal is twofold: keep her safe above all else, and give her as many orgasms as possible. I'm up to the task.

The idea of waking her up while feasting between her legs sounds perfect, but the cabin is bone-chillingly cold, so I carefully pull away from her warmth, get out of bed, and put on my jeans before heading downstairs to light a fire.

It's still early, so the sun is just beginning to rise over the peaks. I'm used to waking up early. It's part of the job in the military. Very rarely do I wake up when it's already light outside, which I don't actually mind. I've always appreciated seeing the sun rise. Today, it's especially beautiful.

The fresh snow on top of the mountains is glistening and chasing away the shadows of the previous night. There are no clouds in sight. It's going to be one of those deceptively sunny days where it looks nice out, but once you step outside, the cold hits you like a truck, and steals your breath.

We have some wood cut, but it would be good to get more ready in case we get more snow. I take inventory of things that need to be done, which includes my perimeter check, and I should probably shovel off the porch and driveway while I'm at it.

I quietly make a fire and start the coffee machine before jumping into the shower. Knowing Olivia is sleeping naked upstairs makes it nearly impossible to drag my ass outside, but she needs to rest. As many little jokes as she makes, and no matter how she attempts to play it off, this situation is difficult for her. How could it not be? She's spent her adult life trying to hide from the people who want her dead. That's never going to happen though. Not on my watch.



The sweat drips down my back as I shovel the last of the heavy snow. *This shit is hard.* It's a better cardio workout than most things we did in the military.

I remember as a kid we would come up here to the mountains and I would do anything possible to get out of helping my dad do it. As my muscles ache and strain, I remember why I

avoided it at all costs. *There are much better things to do to burn calories.*

My mind starts wandering to what else I could be doing again as I think of Olivia lying in bed. Suddenly, a snowball slams into the center of my back just before I hear a tiny, girlish giggle coming from that direction.

I turn to see Olivia standing there with a mischievous smirk. She's wearing a white puffy jacket and light blue knit beanie with fuzzy pom on top. When I bought it, I was only thinking about how it would keep her warm. But seeing her now, she looks like some sort of little snow angel.

Her brown hair cascades down her back in soft waves as she flashes me an impish grin, her smile just as bright and dazzling as the freshly fallen snow around us. She might be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And right now, she's in trouble.

I tilt my head to the side and narrow my eyes at her before taking off running at full speed in her direction. She lets out a high pitch scream and tries to turn and run away, but I'm on her in a second. I grab her slender waist and pick her up in my arms as she squeals and wriggles to get away.

I lay her down lightly in the snow and her long locks tumble down into her eyes. I tenderly brush the hair out of her face and smile down at this woman, who up until recently was the biggest thorn in my side.

I have her pinned to the snow-covered ground, held captive, my body imprisoning hers beneath me as I hold a menacingly

tight grip on her wrists with one hand. Her chest heaves frantically and my breath fogs in white swirls around my face as I laugh wickedly and use my free hand to raise a handful of snow above her. “You didn’t actually think you were gonna get away with that, did you?” I tease.

Her eyes widen slightly and she pouts, pushing out her full bottom lip, nodding slightly.

“That was your first mistake,” I joke again, slowly lifting my arm as if to follow through with my threat of covering her face with cold snowflakes.

“Kane, wait, wait, wait!” she stammers. Her voice wavers in begging tones. “I didn’t mean it. Please, I’m sorry.”

“Too bad,” I reply, hovering above her like a predator with newly found prey.

“But I made pancakes,” she pleads.

My eyebrows arch in surprise. “Pancakes, you say. Well, that changes things.” I lean back on my heels and pull her up and into my arms as she winds her arms around my neck.

I place my forehead against hers, breathing her in and then lightly touching her nose with my own. She smiles softly and places a gentle kiss on my lips. My eyes close and I revel in the feeling of her warm lips against my own.

Using my tongue, I caress her bottom lip, asking for permission to deepen the kiss before she opens her mouth. Cradling her face in my gloved hands, we kiss for what feels like hours despite the freezing wind blowing around us.

Once even the heat between us can no longer keep us warm, I stand up and throw Olivia over my shoulder as she squeals with laughter. Giving her a slap on the ass I say, “Let’s go eat some pancakes!”



We finished our pancakes, bacon, juice and coffee over thirty minutes ago but we can’t seem to pull ourselves away from the counter. We’ve been talking and laughing since we sat down.

“Wait,” she says, lying her hand on my arm and doubling over in laughter, “Marcus did WHAT?”

I’m laughing so hard it’s almost impossible to finish the story.

“I’d say we were twenty-one or twenty-two at the time. I was home on leave. So, we were leaving the bar and this car pulled up. The dudes inside start talking crazy shit saying all kinds of stuff that would get your ass kicked normally, and I’ve been drinking so I’m fired up. But Marcus, he doesn’t like to fight. It’s not who he is. He’s a joker, but also kind of an asshole. So, instead, he walks over to the car, unzips his pants, pulls his dick out, grabs the side of the guy’s head, and smacks him in the side of the face with it. Not once, but three times!”

“NO WAY!” Olivia gasps, her eyes widening.

“Yes way!” I wheeze out between laughs. “Slap, slap, slap in quick succession.”

“What did the guy do?” she asks, her mouth forming an “O” from disbelief.

“What could he do? He wasn’t going to get out of the car and try to fight us after that. He backed the hell up and drove away!” I answer. “I imagine none of his buddies in the car ever spoke to him again. I mean, when you get smacked in the face by someone’s cock, there’s no coming back from that.”

“Oh my God.” She chuckles. “That’s hilarious.”

“Callan and I couldn’t even move. We were doubled over in the parking lot laughing our asses off as he calmly put his dick away and zipped up his pants. We called Marcus ‘The Wiggler’ for two years after that.”

“Oh, I cannot wait to meet him!” She then suddenly looks anxious about what she just said and jumps up. “I should do the dishes,” she nervously stammers as she starts collecting our plates and cups. She quickly moves to the sink, busying herself with chores.

I slide off my stool and step behind her, putting my arms around her waist from behind. “Hey, why are you so nervous?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t mean to presume I’d be meeting your friends. Sorry for that.”

Leaning down close to her ear, I whisper, “Don’t worry. They’re going to love you when they meet you. I can’t wait for them to get to know you.”

She slowly turns in my arms and looks up at me. “Are you sure?”

“I was sure the second our lips first touched, Liv,” I tell her.

She melts into my arms at the sound of her nickname and places her head against my chest.

“You know what I just realized?” I ask. “It’s already mid-morning and you haven’t had an orgasm yet. That’s just unacceptable.”

Her eyes grow wide as I push my hand up her sweater and unclasp her bra slowly with the flick of my fingers. I move my hand around to the front and squeeze and knead her breast slowly, watching her mouth part slightly and her head fall back.

I lightly pinch her hardened nipple between my fingers and revel in the soft moan it elicits. I trail my fingers lightly over her other nipple, then let my hand roam over her stomach, gently brushing back and forth from hip to hip.

Then silently, I grab her hand in mine and lead her to the couch. Before she lays down, I pull her sweater over her head and watch her bra fall to the ground. Next, I pull her soft leggings down and watch lustfully as she steps out of them.

My eyes roam her naked body and take in all of her exquisite curves and my hands itch at my sides to touch her. She takes my hand and lays on the couch, pulling me on top of her.

Continuing my earlier exploration of her body, I let my hands continue to roam over her soft body, feeling her muscles tense under my touch. I kiss her deeply, tasting the sweet syrup from our breakfast.

Moving my hand between her legs, I run my fingers through her lips, allowing her arousal to coat my fingers. Her hips rise in response as her breathing increases.

I glide my middle finger inside of her as I take her mouth and kiss her with more devotion. Her hips rise and fall to the rhythm of my pumping, and I add another finger, sliding in and out as my tongue does the same to her mouth. She's writhing beneath me as I begin swirling my fingers around her engorged clit.

I alternate between pumping my fingers in and out and working her clit, but when I feel her body tense, I focus on circling it with more pressure. Her breathing increases, and her kisses become frantic as she loses control.

"That's it, Baby. Give me everything you have," I command.
"It's mine."

I can feel her body convulse around my fingers, her legs shaking and her hips coming up off the couch as her orgasm reaches its peak. She throws her head back and moans my name repeatedly as her orgasm moves through her.

I kiss her lips gently, her lips curving into a smile as she looks up at me, brushing my hair back from my eyes.

"Kane," she says sweetly.

"Yes, Baby?" I reply.

"This couch is so uncomfortable."

I chuckle, nodding. "It really is," I agree.

“You’re sleeping with me from now on,” she tells me matter-of-factly.

“That’s a deal,” I agree, and then move off the couch to grab a condom from my wallet.

Turning back to her, I take in the image before me. The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen is Olivia, sprawled out naked before me.

“Are you ready for this?” I ask.

“I’ve never been more ready,” she responds with a sexy grin.

I tear the condom open with my teeth and throw the wrapper on the floor.

“Can I do it?” she asks sweetly.

“You can do anything you want,” I answer honestly.

Taking the condom from my hand, she reaches down and grabs my aching cock, wrapping her fingers around it. “Just like that,” I rasp as she strokes me from root to tip instead of rolling on the condom.

Her touch feels so good that I’m afraid I might come from just foreplay. My eyes are closed when I feel her soft lips kiss the tip of my dick. They fly open in surprise as she looks up at me and takes the head into her mouth with hot, gentle suction.

I cradle the side of her face as she takes me deeper, licking and sucking on the head each time she pulls back. She swirls her tongue around the sensitive underside of my cock, and I have to stop her before I go off in her mouth.

“That feels so fucking good, Baby, but I need to be inside of you,” I admit, pushing her back. She breaks the suction with a pop and smiles up at me wickedly.

I grab the condom from her and roll it over my length as she watches, excitement playing in her eyes. Once completely sheathed, I lay on her, settling between her thighs when she parts her legs for me. Leaning down, I kiss and suck on her nipples, switching from one to the other, and then finally move up to her mouth, plunging my tongue between her waiting lips. Lifting my hips off her, I stare into her eyes and line myself up with her center. Slowly, I guide myself inside one slow inch at a time.

Stopping myself from snapping my hips and thrusting into her takes all of my self-control, but I want to take this slowly and savor this feeling, so, I continue with small, deliberate movements as I kiss her.

Olivia grabs my ass and urges me forward, finally pushing me all the way inside.

“You are perfect,” I whisper, slowly moving my hips, and purposely undulating to keep myself from going too deep and giving her the friction she seeks.

Being inside her is the best feeling I’ve ever experienced. Not just the sex, but the intimacy, the feeling that she trusts and cares about me.

Slowly, Olivia gets used to the feeling, evidenced by her moans and hips meeting mine. I can see her body flush with

excitement as I sit back on my knees to get better access to her clit.

With one hand squeezing her hips and guiding our movements, I use the other to begin rubbing that spot she craves with more intensity. Soon she is arching her back and barely moving against me as I remain sheathed inside her, rubbing the tender spot. I can feel her orgasm from the inside; her muscles contracting and releasing, then her walls tighten around my cock, and I lose control, pounding into her as gently as I can with what little restraint I still possess.

Her slickness increases with my every thrust, and her wet heat feels so good that I can't hold off any longer. I hold her hips in place as I pump inside her and spill into the condom. It's the best orgasm I've ever experienced, and I feel like I might black out as I hold her in place, then collapse onto her a minute later.

Slowly, I slide out of her, disappointed at the loss of her heat. We lay on the couch together, snuggled in a warm cocoon, dozing off and on. Everything about this moment feels perfect, and I don't want it to end.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“Tell me about your family,” I say, sitting with Kane under a thick fleece blanket later that evening.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before beginning. A small smile creeps onto his lips as he seems to think about them. “They’re awesome. I have a younger brother and sister who are twins. They’re basically better than me at everything,” he says, trying to suppress a chuckle.

“Are you close to them?” I ask.

Kane’s expression changes slightly, his previously jovial smile replaced by one of nostalgia. “We were, when we were younger,” he says with a sigh. “But I’ve been away from home for the past few years, and it’s been tougher to keep in touch often as we’ve all gotten older.” A hint of guilt hangs in the air as he finishes his sentence.

“And your parents?” I inquired further, taking a sip of my hot cocoa as the warmth spread through my body.

Kane seems to lighten up again at the mention of his parents. His smile widens and a twinkle sparkles in his eye. “My parents are great,” he says proudly. “My mom is a photographer and my dad was a detective until he retired last year.”

“Sounds perfect,” I note with admiration.

Kane shrugs nonchalantly. “It’s not perfect,” he admits, “but then again, no family ever is.”

I’m always fascinated to talk to people who have happy, functioning families; if my mom and grandparents hadn’t been killed, I know our home would have maintained that same dynamic too, despite my mother being a single parent. Even though there was pain hidden behind their smiles, love and happiness were never lacking from our home.

“So your mom is a photographer?” I ask, eager to learn more.

Kane nods. “She’s really good, too.”

“How did your parents meet?” His eyes sparkle with nostalgia at the mention of his parents’ meeting story, but soon dim with sadness. For a moment he goes somewhere else; somewhere profoundly sad, but returns to me with a shake of his head.

“It’s an interesting story, actually,” Kane begins. “My dad was on a case. He was trying to protect my mom from someone who was stalking her.”

I lean back against the couch in disbelief, somewhat caught off-guard by the similarities in our meeting stories. “That sounds a little familiar. Was he a grumpy ass at first as well?”

Kane shrugs with a half-smile and continues, “Probably, but Millie wasn’t having any of it, though. She didn’t particularly want his help. She was feisty and independent. Still is. Even though my father is bigger than me, it’s always been my mother I’m scared of.” He laughs.

I can’t help but chuckle in agreement. “Aren’t most men scared of their mamas though?”

He nods knowingly. “I met plenty of guys during my service who were the toughest motherfuckers you could imagine, but if their mothers called them out? Forget about it, they’d just about shit their pants.”

“Sounds about right.” I giggle. “So, she finally allowed him to help her?”

He nods. “She fought it for a while. But eventually he got his way. And they fell for each other.” His eyes soften with longing as a ghost of a smile plays on his lips.

“I love that,” I tell him.

“Some enemies make the best lovers.”

Kane grins widely and pulls me closer so I’m straddling him on the couch. His hands settle gently at my waist, and I can feel the warmth in his touch. “You think so, huh?” he says.

“All evidence points to yes, so far.”

Kane gently teases a strand of my hair away that has fallen across my eyes.

“So what about you? Was your mom scary and tough too? Was she like you?” he asks softly with trepidation. The snowflakes outside fall as gently as his question as they pile up on the window sill waiting for my answer.

I sigh. “She was nothing like me. She was sweet and magical. I’ve probably built her up in my mind as a saint after all these years, but she baked everything from scratch. No shortcuts, no cake mixes for cakes or pumpkin from a can for pumpkin pie. She would actually bake the pumpkins. She was kind, never hurt a creature, not capable of it. She was the type to rescue bees from the sidewalk, and take hapless spiders that found their way into our house outside with a Dixie cup. Neighbors loved her. She took care of everyone. She’d stay up with you for hours if you had a nightmare. And she was so beautiful. She never wore a stitch of makeup, but she had this glowy beauty. Kind of Bohemian and ethereal - long hair, long flowy skirts. She smelled like vanilla and summertime.”

“She sounds a little like someone I know, except the spider part,” Kane whispers into my shoulder.

“My memories of her make it hard to reconcile what happened to her. She didn’t deserve it. She wasn’t just mugged. She was murdered.” I choke and feel Kane shudder as he rests his chin on my shoulder.

“I know what it’s like, having someone you care about die like that,” he murmurs.

“You mean your friend in the military?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“I’ve lost a lot of friends over the years because of our service, but that’s not what I mean. This happened before I was born, but someone I cared about, someone who even though they are gone, has a huge part in my life, and the fact that they aren’t here has left an even bigger hole,” Kane acknowledges solemnly.

“But, they were murdered?” I ask reluctantly, not sure I want an answer.

Kane nods, but doesn’t say anything further so I wrap my arms around him in a fierce hug and feel complete when he hugs me back with the same intensity.

“When I have a birthday, would you bake me a cake from scratch?” he asks somewhat sheepishly.

His question catches me off guard and I have to laugh. I love what his question implies, that I will still be in his life for his next birthday, whenever that is.

“What kind of cake do you want?” I pull back to look at his face.

“I love carrot cake, but no raisins. I never understood why people spoil a good thing with raisins. Life is too short for food obstacles,” he replies with an earnest grin that makes me smile.

“I think I can remember that. Done,” I nod reassuringly.

He cups my chin in his hand and pulls my lips to his, letting the warmth of his breath linger for a moment. “Who would

have thought we'd be here when we first met?" he asks with a smile.

"Me," I say confidently, although my cheeks flush at the admission.

Kane lets out a laugh. "You did not. You hated me."

"That is true," I concede. "But I also thought you were objectively hot. Plus, I was positive you were obsessed with me."

Kane chuckles, shaking his head so that his dark hair falls over one eye. "Obsessed with you? Is that the vibe I was giving off?"

I shrug, feeling heat creep up my neck. "No, it was more like complete abhorrence, actually, but I figured the only reason you were always around had to be some kind of secret obsession."

"I don't think I'm cut out for undercover work." He laughs.

I shake my head and chuckle at his admission. "I don't think you are." We both sit in silence, small smiles playing on our lips as we look at one another. Then, I ask the question that's been plaguing me.

"What if they never stop coming after me?" I search his eyes, looking for reassurance.

Kane's expression grows serious. "They will," he says with a nod of his head, his voice taking on an edge of authority. "When we get you out of this situation," he adds softly, "you go back to your students and live your life without fear."

I want to believe him. I trust him and I know he means the words he speaks to his very core. “Okay.”

“Henry and I are working on it,” Kane says determinedly. “It starts with finding out who hired us.”

I nod, feeling relief wash over me at Kane’s words of assurance. I feel safe in the knowledge that no matter what happens, we are in this together and he will move Heaven and Earth to make sure I stay safe.



I point at Ethan, who gazes wide-eyed at me from the front of the class. His bright blue eyes twinkle with excitement, and an infectious smile spreads across his freckled face. “Old MacDonald had a farm,” I start, and Ethan jumps in with glee: “E-I-E-I-O! And on his farm he had a- “

“PIG!” he squeals as everyone else joins in singing along. We all laugh when the song finishes, and I look up to see the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, casting everything in a warm yellow light. Taking a breath, I smile and say, “OK everyone, let’s grab our stuff and get ready for the bell.”

The kids all spring into action, gathering their books from their desks and placing them into their backpacks. I watch proudly as they hustle around making sure they are all ready to leave for the day.

The bell rings sharply two minutes later. I usher the children out of the classroom and into neat lines throughout the

hallway outside, each one eager to begin their weekend plans. One by one, they say goodbye, some with hugs, some with a fist bump or high fives, and others with a simple wave.

I see all the cars in the parking lot drive away until finally the school is empty and eerily still. As I start turning around to go back inside, I notice that the sky has become ominously dark from clouds rolling in, blocking out what little sunlight remains. A violent gust of wind sweeps through the area as if it were trying to erase any trace of sound. The air feels like shards of glass against my skin and I can feel my pulse racing through my veins.

When I turn around again to go back into the school, there is nothing left but an open vacant space where it once stood. Panic sets in as I begin to spin around in circles, searching desperately for an explanation or an escape route.

I squint in the distance, my heart skipping a beat when I make out the shape of a figure huddled close to something on the ground. Drawing closer, I realize it's Kane, and he's leaning over his bike, surrounded by an eerie, deep silence. Panic courses through me as I see the ground open up behind me like some gaping maw of darkness, but I push myself forward, determined to get to him despite my legs feeling like they're moving through molasses.

My legs feel like lead as I force them to move faster, running towards Kane who is still visible in the distance. Exhausted, I stumble toward the motorcycle to find him slumped over it.

His breath is shallow and labored as he grasps onto the frame and then crumples to the ground. I cling onto him desperately, begging for him to be OK. Dizziness threatens my vision, and terror fills my body as I see the crimson trail of blood trickling from his neck, staining everything in its path. His body is heavy in my arms, his head cradled in my lap. Gently, I brush his hair out of his face and kiss his temple.

“Olivia,” he mumbles with a pained moan. “You need to run.”

“I’m not leaving you,” I say frantically.

He looks up with bleary eyes. Tears stream down my cheeks as I beg him to stay with me.

“No, no, no!” I cry. “You’re going to be fine. I just need you to get up for me, OK.”

“Liv, I can’t,” he rasps. “You have to go.”

“I won’t leave you,” I cry. “You’re all I have.”

“No,” he says quietly. “You have yourself, and that’s always been enough.”

My heart breaks when his gaze clouds over, and his breathing stops. Gently cradling his head in my lap, I kiss his temple one last time before letting out a loud sob.

“Kane!” I scream into the night. My heart shatters, and I know nothing will ever be the same.

“Olivia!” Kane’s voice calls through the dark room. “Liv, wake up!”

My eyes flutter open and I gasp at the unfamiliar setting. With my heart crashing against my ribcage, I frantically look around the cramped bedroom searching for any signs of danger. Sweat drenches my skin as I heave in quick, shallow breaths.

“Liv, look at me,” Kane says soothingly. His face gradually comes into focus, and as soon as our eyes meet, a wave of calm washes over me. Reaching out with shaky hands, I grasp onto his shirt and examine him with great urgency, desperate to make sure he isn’t hurt.

“It’s alright, shhh.” He brings my head to his chest and cradles it gently there. “I’m here, I’m OK. Just breathe.”

“But you were dead!” I blubber.

“It was just a dream, a terrible dream,” he says soothingly.

“It felt so real,” I sob, my tears soaking Kane’s shirt. He holds me tightly, rubbing a hand up and down my back until I start to calm down.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

I shake my head silently and whisper, “No, I just want to forget it.”

Kane takes a deep breath and says softly, “I have an idea. How about we build a snowman tomorrow?”

I half chuckle at the absurdity of his suggestion and attempt at cheering me up. It works, though.

Even just his presence has an instant calming effect on me. His strong arms wrap around my shoulders, and I close my eyes to

breathe in his familiar scent. The thought of spending another day with him gives me hope, pushing away the fear that had been gripping me moments before.

Slowly, but surely, my body relaxes and the tightness in my chest fades away. A day building a snowman and making love sounds like a dream come true. Kane's warmth surrounds me as the nightmare fades away, and I find myself falling back asleep in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Three



I awaken a few hours later to light kisses being planted on the back of my neck. I roll over, and Kane is hovering above me, gazing sweetly into my eyes.

“Good morning. How are you feeling?” he questions, delicately moving the hair out of my face with his fingertips as he speaks.

“Much better now,” I answer him, running my hands across the muscular curves of his shoulders.

“Do you want to have some coffee and venture outside? That snowman isn’t going to build himself,” he says softly.

“Eventually,” I respond coyly. “First, I was thinking that we could stay in bed a little bit longer if you’re up for it,” I say suggestively with a grin and a wiggle of my eyebrows.

“Oh, I’m always up for it!” he responds, shifting his body between my legs so that I can feel how hard he is. “We have one small problem,” he adds.

I push against him and say jokingly, “First of all, it’s not small. Secondly, it’s definitely *not* a problem.”

Kane laughs before shaking his head. “Thank you for the ego boost,” he says. “But the problem is that I don’t have any more condoms.”

“You don’t?” I question.

“I wasn’t exactly expecting this to happen,” he explains. “I have four guns, but no condoms. You know, priorities.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“I was going to grab some later, when I go on a supply run.”

I think for a minute before speaking. “I’m on the pill,” I say with assurance, “and I haven’t been with anyone in over four months.”

“Yeah?” His eyebrows lift in surprise. “I haven’t been with anyone in several months, either. But are you sure you’re alright with that?”

I bite my lip and nod excitedly. The thought of Kane bare inside me is the hottest thing ever.

His eyebrows lift in surprise and he releases a deep laugh. “Be honest, you weren’t really going to go home with that guy, were you, Lucille?”

My cheeks flush as I shake my head. “No,” I confess. “I just wanted to get away from you...and our four hungry kids. I’m not even sure that guy could drink, legally.”

He releases a deep laugh and then moves his hips against me, sending a surge of pleasure through my entire body.

“Don’t forget about the crop in the field,” Kane’s voice is hoarse with lust.

“No, I certainly cannot forget about the crop,” I answer breathlessly and buck against his hardened length.

His mouth captures mine in a blistering kiss and I moan into him. He pulls back slightly and looks deeply into my eyes. “You want me inside you?” he whispers breathlessly.

He captures my mouth again in an electric kiss. “Yes,” I say breathlessly. I’m already wet and so ready for him.

He draws his hips back and then pushes forward into me. He doesn’t even need to use his hand to guide his way inside me. We are both so ready.

He leans down and starts kissing me as he slowly pumps in and out, his tongue mimicking what his hips are doing. I grind underneath him, savoring the feel of his body on mine and his bare cock inside me. His elbows are resting on either side of my head, keeping his weight off me as he kisses me and drives his hips forward, in and out.

After a minute, he reaches down and puts his hands under my ass, tilting my hips up slightly so that he hits the bundle of nerves deep inside me. Between that feeling and the friction working my clit as I grind below him, I feel myself start to peak. I grind harder, using his body to chase my high.

“Come for me, Liv,” he whispers in my ear, and I climb higher. Moments later, the orgasm slams into me.

“I can feel you squeezing my cock,” he says. “That’s it, Baby.”

Once my orgasm subsides, he flips us over while still inside of me, holding my hips in place while he drives into me from below. My legs feel like jello, muscles drained and depleted, but I am going to give this to him.

I sit up and ride him, lifting my hips up and down, our hands clasped together as he helps hold me up. I feel him start to move faster, and happily let him use my body the way I used his. After a few more snaps of his hips, he releases my hands and grips my hips tightly, holding me in place as he comes. I can feel the moment his orgasm hits.

“Fuck! Yes. Liv!” he groans as he pumps through his release.

I fall onto his chest as we both try to slow our breathing. His heartbeat is swift, like my own.

Finally, I lift off him, and we both moan as he slips out of me. I start to get up and Kane follows, sitting up and pulling me into his lap, kissing me again.

“I can’t even tell you how amazing that was,” he says sweetly.

I lean into him for another kiss, pressing my lips softly to his. We continue kissing softly, our hands roaming and exploring while we come down from our high.

“Let’s take a shower and start our morning routine,” he says.

“We’ve been here long enough that we have a morning routine?” I ask in disbelief.

“As long as coming in you is part of that routine, I’m a happy man,” he says.

Within minutes, Kane has started the fire and we’re in a hot shower, taking our time washing each other gently, talking, and laughing. His strong, soapy hands feel amazing, roaming over my body.

He doesn’t have to tell me how he’s feeling at this moment. I can feel it in the way he touches me and looks at me. I can see it in his reverent gaze and feel it in his soft kisses. He’s guarded with his words, but his eyes betray his secrets. They tell me everything I want to know.

All I want to do is immerse myself in him. After we finish showering, we dry off and take time to enjoy our morning coffee together.

While he does his perimeter walk around the property and gathers firewood, I get dressed for the day and bundle myself up to go outside as well. Kane is cleaning the ice off of the truck’s windshield when I join him. There’s something about how he tackles even the most menial tasks that makes them seem sexy. He’s just so capable. It’s like he knows how to do everything.

In contrast, I’ve always had to rely on myself and YouTube tutorials to teach me things like changing a tire or installing a ceiling fan in my bedroom. Kane has a rugged competence that leaves me feeling envious and a bit breathless.

My thoughts start to turn in an inappropriate direction as I imagine Kane shirtless under my car changing the oil. Realizing where my thoughts are taking me, I shake my head and focus instead on the pinecones by the car that need to be picked up.

As I wander around picking them up, my mind flashes to arts and crafts projects with the kids. These would have been perfect for something like that. *I miss my class.*

“What are you doing?” Kane asks, coming to stand in front of me.

I glance down at the pinecones piled inside my jacket and then back up at him before shaking my head. “Nothing,” I mumble. “It’s silly.”

“What’s silly?” he questions, genuine curiosity in his eyes.

“I was thinking we could use some of these pinecones to make a bird feeder or some cute Christmas decorations,” I answer timidly, shrugging my shoulders.

Kane takes a pinecone from my hand. “That sounds like a great idea,” he states.

My eyes widen in surprise. “You think so?”

“Yes! It’ll be something fun to do instead of watching DVDs.”

“I need some that aren’t as green though.”

“There’s some just behind the house. We can look for more later or tomorrow,” he says cheerfully. “Let’s get to making that snowman!”

Thirty minutes later, we stand back and observe the final product of our efforts. “He’s so cute,” I say, wrapping my scarf around his neck. “I wish I had some other way to decorate him.”

Kane stands there thoughtfully for a moment and then retrieves a small, thick stick. I’m assuming he’s going to turn it into a snowman nose, and I watch with pride as he finishes the final touch. However, the head is not where he places the stick. Instead, he uses it to create an enormous snowman dick.

He steps back from the snow figure, a broad smile dancing across his face. “Now, he’s perfect,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

I let out a small chuckle and cross my arms. “Are all men just fourteen-year-old boys at heart?” I ask him, raising an eyebrow.

Kane nods thoughtfully and glances toward the oversized, icy phallic sculpture. “Pretty much,” he answers with a mischievous grin.

I shake my head incredulously, but can’t help but laugh with him. “We can’t leave it like that though, what if the neighbors see?”

He laughs louder and sweeps me up into his arms. “Then they’ll be happy for him and his enormous snow cock!”

My gloved hand flies to my mouth, an infectious chuckle bubbling up from somewhere deep inside. I shake my head in

disbelief, the words spilling out like a secret confession, “I’m falling for an idiot.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



The unmistakable sound of tires crunching over snow and ice reaches our ears when Olivia and I are on the couch, cuddled up and watching a movie.

My muscles tense and I rush to the window to make sure it's Henry. I relax slightly upon seeing him leave his vehicle. He sent a text this morning informing me that he'd be coming to discuss something important, and I've been anxiously awaiting his arrival ever since.

I spin around to find Olivia slipping on a light jacket. "Where are you going?"

"You two need a moment alone," she announces. "I want to take a stroll and pick up some more pinecones anyway."

"All right, but stay within the boundaries of the house," I warn her. "It will start getting dark soon."

She nods and utters, "Yes, sir," before pressing a peck to my cheek and opening the door for Henry when he knocks. She will definitely be saying that later in bed tonight.

“Hi, Olivia,” Henry says upon entering, but I can tell there’s something in his tone. “You look good.”

Olivia gives him a faint smile. “Thank you,” she responds before glancing back at me and then venturing out for a walk.

“Be careful,” I reiterate before the door shuts.

Henry takes a seat in one of the chairs with an air of apprehension. “Have a seat, Kane.”

A few beats pass before he leans forward in his chair, his hands clasped together. “How much do you trust her?”

I shift uncomfortably, my brows lowering. “Who? Olivia?”

He nods. “Do you think she’s been withholding information from us?”

I think back to the conversations we’ve had, the things she’s admitted to me. There’s no way she’s been keeping secrets. She told me things that were hard to admit.

“No, she’s been truthful with me,” I tell him.

Henry blows out a breath and leans back, nodding his head. “In that case. Do you believe in fate?”

I shift my weight again, focusing my gaze on a point somewhere to the left of Henry. “I don’t know anymore.”

Henry moves to the edge of his seat, his features pinched with apprehension, clearly something is wrong.

“I’m not sure how to tell you this,” he says, his voice low but firm. “I can’t believe it myself. I mean, what are the odds?”

I sit straighter, my mouth going dry as I wait for him to tell me what the fuck is going on. “What is going on?”

“You and Olivia...Simone Holt, share a past,” he says grimly, shaking his head in disbelief. My brows furrow while I wait for him to elaborate. “The man who killed your biological father is her uncle.”

The room starts to spin around me and my breaths quicken. “What?” I mumble, shaking my head. The words refuse to sink in and don’t make any sense. “What are you talking about?”

“Her uncle is the one who killed your father.”

My heart pounds in my chest so hard that I’m sure it’s about to burst out of my ribcage. Olivia saying she has no family left races through my mind. But she never mentioned an uncle. I feel like I’m back in that hospital room, knowing my life is about to be torn to pieces. Then her words come back to me. *“Someone in my family did something awful to someone with ties to the Profaci crime family. The next thing I know, both my grandparents had been killed in a supposed car accident, and my mother was found dead after being mugged.”*

It feels like the walls were closing in on me, stealing each ounce of oxygen from the small space.

Henry’s voice is tired and grave when he speaks again. “He’s the reason for all of this, Kane. The Sierra Falls Strangler, John Edward Holt, is Olivia’s uncle.”

My mind races through the possibilities of what this could mean. I stand and begin pacing the small room, my heart pounding against my chest like a mad drummer as I try to make sense of everything. Just thinking about the man who killed my father makes my blood boil. Too many times I've thought about how good it would feel if his life were taken at my hands, and not my mothers.

Henry watches me with an expression of sorrow on his face; it's almost as if he's been here before, and he knows there is no right answer or way out.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Henry breaks the silence. "Take your time," he says gently. "There's no rush."

I stop and stare out the window, engulfed in the scene before me. The snow sparkles against the afternoon sun, glinting off of the thick coating of ice that has settled on the branches of the surrounding pine trees. Pockets of heavy pinecones and needles are scattered across the ground, like stars shooting through a pitch-black night sky.

And standing tall in the center of it all, is the snowman Olivia and I built together; its presence alone a painful reminder of something that I am in danger of losing.

"Tell me everything," I say softly, still not taking my eyes from the view before me.

Henry exhales heavily, rubbing his forehead as if gathering his thoughts. "Johnny Holt seemed to be your average, suburban kid. He grew up with loving parents in a cozy home with his little sister who adored him."

I nod slowly, recalling the memories of my own childhood that I thought had long been forgotten. Everyone else is always so quick to paint Johnny with one brush – a monster. But I know monsters are rarely born overnight.

“After he was killed...” Henry pauses, choosing his words carefully, “his family was subjected to some dark times. Their home was struck in the crossfire of public outrage and they became targets for those seeking revenge. People wanted justice they couldn’t take from Johnny so they sought retribution elsewhere.”

Retribution. Olivia’s questions about revenge and retribution suddenly become clear.

But what if her revenge is on me? That is what Henry was getting at with his initial questions, right? I shake my head internally. No. I don’t believe she’s capable of that.

My heart plummets as the weight of what he said sinks in. I know first-hand how it feels to be an innocent victim of someone else’s sin, and I can’t help but feel compassion for that family.

“After a while, they couldn’t take it anymore. They packed their meager belongings, loaded them into the back of an old pickup truck, and drove until they found a town just small enough and far enough away to start over. They settled there, away from all the commotion and reminders of Johnny’s past. Olivia’s mother became pregnant with her. Seems the guy wasn’t interested in sticking around. He’s not even named on the birth certificate,” he sighs. “Anyway, they lived in peace

for years until Johnny's mass grave site was discovered fifteen years ago."

My mind flashes back to that time as if it were yesterday: all over the news channels were stories about Johnny's crimes, his victims, and speculation about who knew what and when. I can still feel the teasing from my peers when they discovered who I was. I was so confused and so angry. That's why I got into so many fights. If it weren't for my best friends, Marcus and Callan, I may not have made it through that time in one piece.

I can feel the dread in my stomach as I stare outside, thinking about Olivia and what she must have gone through.

"Did people find out who they were?" I ask, finally turning away from the window. Henry nods solemnly.

"Yes. But more than that, the wrong people found out who they were," he adds.

I furrow my brow, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

"They were identifying the victims through DNA evidence. Among them was a young woman named Cecily Profaci."

My breath catches in my throat as the pieces come together. Olivia's uncle murdered Profaci's daughter.

"So he went after their family," I murmur.

"He had a seething vengeance and wouldn't rest until his mission was complete," Henry answers. "Went absolutely insane trying to get to them. Apparently, after his daughter had gone missing, he was convinced she'd run away from him and

the family. But when he discovered that she'd been killed, it pushed him over the edge. He wanted everyone connected to Johnny Holt dead – and almost succeeded.”

“It was him that had her family murdered,” I whisper, making sense of the situation.

“Correct,” Henry confirms. “And she was next on his list.”

“But she was only thirteen!” I exclaim in disbelief. “She wasn’t even born when her uncle did all those things.”

“I can’t tell you why he committed such a heinous act, Kane,” Henry says with a somber expression. “It takes a monster to do something like this.”

“So, it was Shaemus Kildare who adopted her; but not because he wanted to help her out, or even because he cared about her wellbeing – just to get back at Profaci, right?” I say sadly.

Henry nods with a glistening eye. “She told you.”

“Yes,” I reply. “Her entire life, she’s known very little besides monsters,” I declare. “Even me.” I feel sick to my stomach, remembering how I treated her at first.

“No need to beat yourself up, Kid,” Henry says. “You couldn’t have known this would happen. The odds of you being connected to any of this are astronomical.”

But I still shake my head and insist, “It doesn’t matter. I treated her horribly. I judged her before she even said a word.”

My words come back and strike me like a meteor, nearly knocking the air out of my lungs. Memories of all the times

where I labeled her “spoiled” or a “princess” make me cringe with shame. The fact that she still somehow managed to fall for me is evidence of her big heart.

I sink down into the couch and let my head drop into my hands. “So why now?” I ask Henry. “Why is he coming after her now? She left Shaemus’s protection over ten years ago.”

“I asked the same thing,” he says, his tone low and filled with frustration. “At first, she did a good job of concealing herself. Then it seems as though time went on, Profaci’s interests expanded to include arms dealing, he wasn’t able to allocate his resources to find her anymore.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “So, when Shaemus became ill, his priority shifted back to finding her.”

“That seems to be the case,” Henry says with a heavy heart. “They don’t want her running the family business. She is the only legitimate family member that we know of who is left. She’s a loose end and ending her will truly end Shaemus’s reign.”

“You understand the irony of this, Henry?” I can feel my anger rising in my throat. “The fucking irony here is that Olivia wants none of this. She doesn’t want anything to do with that despicable family. All she wants is to teach children and live quietly.”

“I understand.” A calming hand lands on my shoulder. “But now we know the entire story and we know what we’re dealing with,” he says.

“What about the person who hired us?” I inquire.

“I’m getting close to figuring that out. I have a hacker helping me trace it back through the bank deposit details. It might take some time, though,” he says before adding, “I know this is a lot for you to process, Kane. Are you alright?”

I shake my head. “I’m okay. But I’m worried about Olivia.”

“You guys must have grown close,” he murmurs cautiously.

“We have,” I confirm firmly, making sure to look him in the eye.

“Kane, listen, I need to ask you something,” Henry states apprehensively.

I nod, gesturing for him to continue.

“Do you think there’s any chance Olivia knows anything about this?” And there we have it, the question he didn’t ask earlier.

“No fucking way! Don’t even go there. If she had any idea how our lives were intertwined, she would’ve told me by now. She probably never looked into her uncles’ victims. I sure as hell wouldn’t have if I were her.”

“Alright, alright.” He holds his hands up defensively. “I understand – I just had to ask.”

I blow out a heavy breath. “So what now?”

“Now we wait some more,” he says. “We need to find the person who hired us and figure out a long-term solution to keep her safe.”

I rake my fingers through my hair and sigh. Every moment I've spent with Olivia has been better than the last, but being cooped up here is starting to take a toll on both of us.

Henry retrieves his coat from the sofa and says, "I'll be in touch soon." He then turns to me and asks, "Are you going to tell her about what we discussed?"

"Eventually," I answer. "I know her well enough to know that she will take this news hard. She doesn't need to carry this burden right now."

He nods in agreement, and then turns to walk out the door.

I stare out the front window, watching Henry's truck back down the driveway, my thoughts racing from everything I just learned. It's hard to keep this information to myself when Olivia deserves to know who I am to her, but I can't bear the thought of our relationship falling apart right now because of it. Even picturing my life without her brings an ache to my chest. My worry is that she will blame herself and pull away from me. *No*. I decide; I can't tell her now.

I walk over to the side window, hoping to see Olivia out there, but my eyes catch something in the snow. Fresh tracks leading into the woods past the perimeter that weren't there before when I first started talking with Henry. Fear crashes over me as I rip open the front door, spotting a small stack of pinecones scattered across the porch steps, as if someone had dropped them quickly and ran off. Fuck! Olivia must have heard me talking to Henry.

Without thinking, I take off after the tracks in a full sprint. Protecting her body is one thing, but protecting her heart is even more important now.

Chapter Twenty-Five



I skip through some of the nearby trees, feeling so light and happy, twirling around like Snow White as I pick up pinecones, pretending they're jewels, half expecting birds to land on my shoulder and squirrels to come out of their homes to offer me their winter harvest of acorns.

Is this what it feels like to be in love? I don't remember ever feeling like this before. I wasn't even capable of these complicated emotions when I was only thirteen.

As I make my way through the trees just behind the cabin, my skin prickles. Everywhere Kane's coarse beard touched me last night left a burning trace of pleasure that is reignited when the cold air kisses it.

The past week has been nothing short of magical. The world seems to spin around us as we move together. Our connection has always been so strong that it felt like an invisible force pulling us together even as it pushed us apart. There's an undeniable passion between us, but this is more than just

physical attraction. It's an emotional connection unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Though our unique circumstances have forced us together in this particular situation, I know that even if fate hadn't brought us here, we would have somehow found one another.

We fit together as pieces of the same puzzle – two parts longing to be reunited after being lost for so long.

I'm filled with so much joy and admiration for this place, for the way it has given us a chance to explore together. Even as I try to hold back my enthusiasm, I can't help myself. I can feel myself spinning around the tall trees like a character out of a storybook.

It's beautiful and romantic and silly, but I know better than to say any of that out loud. Kane is incredibly sweet and sensitive, but he's still a man no matter how deeply he cares for me; he doesn't need to hear all of these sappy details about my experience here. No, this stays between me and Christmas Valley.

The sky is a brilliant shade of pink, the mountains fading into silhouettes as the sun begins to dip below the horizon. I imagine Henry and Kane must have finished their conversation by now, so I start to make my way back home, my thoughts already turning toward cooking dinner for Kane. I know there are steaks in the fridge that would be perfect marinated and served with garlic mashed potatoes. Plus, I could take out some pinecones for arts and crafts time later on.

Despite not having ventured far from the cabin, as per Kane's strict orders, I have to pick up my pace due to the quick temperature drop when the sun disappears from view.

As I approach the front porch, I hear Kane's raised voice coming from within, making me stop in my tracks and hastily step aside to hide beneath a window so I can listen without being noticed.

He's practically yelling, and his booming voice seems to fill the small cabin. I feel my chest tighten as I creep closer, straining to make out the words in the heated conversation.

Henry's measured tone contrasts sharply with Kane's emotional one. Realization suddenly hits me like a punch; they're talking about Profaci and my uncle.

Despite the cold, I can feel sweat beading along my forehead as I imagine what Kane must be thinking. Just like everyone else from my past, he'll assume I'm some sort of monster as well, all because of my connection to The Sierra Falls Strangler.

No, Kane is a reasonable man. He's levelheaded above all else. He won't blame me for the actions of a psychopath who I never even met. Yet, even as I try to keep my breathing steady and my hands from shaking, doubt still manages to creep in. That same psychopath has taken away so much from my family; he ruined my life and indirectly caused at least three more deaths. My mom and both grandparents.

I stand there clutching the pinecones tightly to my chest when I hear it. Something about my uncle killing Kane's dad. What?

That makes no sense. Kane's father is alive and well; we've talked about him before. He's a retired detective. Except...No. No, that can't be true.

The other night in bed Kane mentioned something about losing someone very close to him – someone who had been murdered. He was beginning to open up about his past. Maybe that person was his father. Which can only mean one thing.

My uncle *was* responsible for killing Kane's father.

I feel like I can't breathe anymore, every inch of air around me becomes thicker and thicker until it constricts around my ribcage like a vice grip. My heart thuds heavily against my chest and tears blur my vision. I turn around to leave. I need to be anywhere but here.

Kane is going to hate me; I've lost everything. My legs give out beneath me as I step off the porch into the snow, collapsing down onto my knees and sending the pinecones flying out around me. I struggle to swallow down the vomit rising in my throat and the sobs lodged in it.

I reach blindly through the dim light and tears, feeling for something to pull myself up. My fingers brush against a cold, damp branch, and I clutch it desperately, using it as an anchor to lift me from the frozen ground. Still unsteady on my feet, I stumble back the way I had come, away from where the light can reach me.

I remember the story about Cecily Profaci that my mother had been forced to tell me when I was thirteen-years-old and the news story was everywhere. I choke back more tears and

swallow the bile in my throat. Cecily Profaci and the story of how my uncle had brutally murdered her had sent us into hiding. I have never allowed myself to think about any of the other details of his life or death until now. There's no avoiding it now that I know Kane and his family were directly involved in it all.

With my muscles screaming from exhaustion, I make my way further into the depths of the forest, and then finally collapse onto my knees, unable to hold back the vomit any longer. I wipe a gloved hand across my mouth and nose, shuddering at the icy chill that courses throughout my body.

Before I can stand again, a gloved hand clasps over my mouth, suppressing my scream as three faceless figures emerge from the shadows dressed in black military gear.

The realization that this is how my life will end has my stomach plummeting to the ground, and all I can think about is Kane and how grateful I am to have known his love for even such a short period of time.



I hear an angry voice demanding to know why I am unconscious as I struggle to open my eyes. "If you've fucking hurt her, I will end you," he says.

"I didn't hurt her, Boss," a panicked voice says. "She passed out when I got to her, probably from fear."

With trepidation, I slowly open my eyes and take in my unfamiliar surroundings; I am lying across the cold gray leather of the backseat of an SUV, with a blanket pulled up over me and someone at my feet whose legs push against mine as we drive through the snow. There are four other men in the car, all dressed in black: two in the front seat and two in the middle row.

Fear has turned my body to stone, trapping me to the cold leather. I feel a chill that has nothing to do with the cool air of the car and everything to do with the voice from the backseat. A voice I don't recognize, but one that sends an unmistakable threat through my veins – stay still or face the realization that I will never see Kane again. So I squeeze my eyes shut, desperately clinging onto a memory of the brief days Kane and I spent together when I had been so close to finding something resembling happiness.

The sound of gravel crunching under tires fills the car as it makes a sharp right turn.

“Liv, open your eyes, please,” the voice begs now, softer and laden with emotion. With trembling arms, I push myself upright and focus on the figure sitting next to me in the shadows. Molasses colored eyes stared back at me – much older and worn compared to how I remember them – yet there was no mistaking who they belonged to.

“Dante?” My question hangs heavily in the air.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Frantically I follow her tracks deeper and deeper into the woods, the light dwindling to a pale purple the further into the pine canopy I go. My chest constricts. *Damnit, where is she?* I'm about to call out her name when I stumble upon chaotic footprints in the snow. Several sets match a smaller set where it looks like Olivia has fallen into the snow.

My heart shatters. She's been sick and has been overtaken. I survey the scene. *Think Kane, Christ!*

Three sets of heavy footprints track further into the woods away from where Olivia had thrown up. Olivia's small prints end where she collapsed. They must have carried her out. Four other sets of prints wind back behind me. *Shit! Someone else is still here.*

I whirl around in time to see a trim, dark-haired man outfitted in black tactical gear step out from behind a tree with his piece pointed at my chest, the red laser lighting me up like a bulls-eye. Another larger man steps from behind another tree, while two more climb up from a snowy outcrop.

“Kane Hudson,” the trim one acknowledges me, but holds his gun steadily pointed in my direction.

Quicker than I can say ‘piss off,’ I’ve drawn my Glock 19 and have it trained on his forehead even though I know I am stupidly outnumbered.

“Whoa, whoa, my name is Antonio,” he waves his gun away from me and I see the red laser pointed at the snow in front of me.

Most assassins don’t introduce themselves.

“Where’s Olivia?!” I demand.

“Safely away from here,” Antonio answers, “but you and I, and my friends here, are not. Questions later. Profaci and his men are here.”

As if to punctuate Antonio’s point, the unmistakable ear-splitting cacophony of bullets scream across the forest as they pummel the distant cabin.



Olivia

“Hi Liv,” he says, his tone is warm and inviting. Yet, I feel my body tense and I scramble to the other side of the seat, pushing myself as far away from him as possible. He notices my obvious fear and hesitates before speaking again. His expression softens as he brings his hands up in a calming gesture. “Liv, I’m not going to hurt you. I promise.”

Confusion paints itself across my face at his words. *What is Dante doing here? Why has he kidnapped me?* A million more questions race through my mind while my voice trembles with apprehension. “What’s going on?”

He sighs heavily before replying.

“I’m going to tell you everything, but you need to come inside with me right now.” His henchmen stand guard at the car door like stone statues, waiting for us to exit.

My breath hitches and I shake my head in disbelief at the situation. He must sense my hesitation because he adds, “I promise no harm will come to you. Liv. We need to get you inside. Now.”

I reluctantly step out of the car, feeling lightheaded. I’ve never fainted before and Dante’s assurances only seem to make me more scared than reassured.

He leads me inside the house with two burly men on either side. The air is crisp and dry, and a chill runs through my body. The landscape outside is desolate – brown dirt covers the ground without a single blade of grass in sight, nothing but worn-down sagebrush in deserted patches. The mountains loom in the background, snow-capped and imposing. We must have driven East, I think to myself.

Nervously, I step inside the dimly lit room, my gaze darting from side to side. Dante is huddled in a corner with four other men and they’re speaking in hushed tones. One of them takes off outside, another heads into the kitchen, and two more stay by the door as if standing guard.

Dante waves me over to a chair, and I apprehensively sit down, my legs pulled up close to my chest.

I wish Kane was here with me. Since I came to, he has been the constant thought racing through my mind. My heart aches at the thought of never seeing him again, but some small part of me fears he was going to leave me anyway after what Henry told him.

“What’s going on, Dante?” I ask impatiently.

He sighs heavily and leans forward, his arms resting on his thighs. “I should start by telling you about the past few years,” he says solemnly. “My mom died about five years ago,” he adds morosely.

A pang of sadness pierces my heart as I think of Graciella, and the deep love Dante had for her. “I’m so sorry, Dante,” I say sincerely. “She loved you fiercely.”

He nods slowly, acknowledging my words. “She stayed with Shaemus until the end. Even after I finished school and got my MBA. I was making good money, working in New York City. I wanted to help Mom retire but she wouldn’t leave that house.” His voice is heavy with emotion as he speaks, and it’s obvious that telling this story is difficult for him.

“One day when I went to visit her, I found her in bed, weak and gaunt-looking. When I asked why she hadn’t told me she was sick, she said she didn’t want to be a burden.” He clenches his jaw, fighting back tears. “Then she told me that she’d confided in Shaemus about being ill, but he hadn’t done anything to help her.”

My stomach churns at the thought of what a despicable man he is. “I’ve always known he’s a sociopath, but even that is unforgivable,” I say angrily.

Dante’s face grows grim as he continues his story. “It was then, on her deathbed, Mom confessed that she’d been having a long-term affair with him.”

My expression twists in disgust. It isn’t surprising to hear of yet another woman being treated like an object by Shaemus.

“That’s why she never left,” Dante concludes sadly. “She kept hoping he would change his ways, but he never did.”

Dante stands from the chair, his hands nervously clenching and unclenching as he paces in front of me.

“Before she died, she must have had a moment of clarity,” he says, his voice wavering slightly with emotion. “Because she wrote me a letter. It was filled with secrets that she’d learned over the years. Secrets about how to take Shaemus down. Secrets about how to get his men on my side. Secrets about how to take over his empire.” He stops pacing and looks up at me, meeting my eyes.

Confusion mars my face as I ask, “Why? Why would she think you would want that?”

A hint of bitterness creeps into his voice as he replies, “Because as Shaemus’s son, I am entitled to it.”

My hands fly to my mouth as the weight of what he’s saying sinks around us. The truth slowly dawns on me. “Shaemus is your father?!” I ask in disbelief.

“He *was* my father,” Dante says with a shrug before continuing in a flat voice. “He’s dead now.”

I stare at him without feeling; I have wondered over the years how I would feel when Shaemus died; if I would feel relieved or even a little sad at the loss of a human life, but I feel nothing.

“Did he know?” I question softly.

“He did,” Dante replies sadly, staring off into the distance. “He knew all along and didn’t care. She was a lowly maid. Why would he ever commit to her and raise his son?”

A wave of sadness washes over me as empathy for Dante surges within me. He has lost so much due to circumstances outside of his control. It’s all too familiar.

“She tried to get him to accept me,” Dante continues quietly, still looking away from me. “He never would. So her last act was choosing me over him and trying to help me get what’s rightfully mine.”

“Did you kill him?” I ask.

He scoffs and shakes his head. “I wish,” he said emotionlessly. “I was working on it, but his own irresponsible lifestyle and his liver did him in first.”

“So you’re the one calling the shots now?” I ask.

He nods slowly. “It has been a long, difficult process getting to this point. I’ve done some backdoor dealing, handed out some bribes, and even resorted to more sinister methods to get here. You don’t need to know all the details”

A chill races up my spine as he speaks, his words making it clear that he has succumbed to the same life of crime we wanted to escape from, yet he looks almost unchanged, apart from the age in his eyes and a subtle air of authority, his olive skin is just as vibrant.

My mind whirls with questions until one manages its way out. “What do I have to do with this?”

His face contorts into a mask of contrition. “I had hoped you wouldn’t be involved at all. Shaemus was not a good person, but believe it or not, he didn’t want to see you hurt. Even after you left his home, he kept tabs on you. He kept Profaci in place.”

I scoff in disbelief at his words, but he continues. “But then he got sick. You became vulnerable before I could take over officially. Profaci saw it as an opportunity to finally try and get rid of you.”

My throat feels tight with regret as I ask, “So it was never about me possibly taking over the family at all?”

He slowly shakes his head. “No. It was always about the same thing with you. Revenge for what your uncle did.” His words shoot through the air like a bullet, piercing my chest with pain and sorrow. The consequences of my uncle’s actions continue to cost me more than ever. After today, they may even cost me the only man I’ve ever loved.

Dante looks me in the eyes as he speaks. “When I took over the family, I intended to issue an ultimatum to Profaci that if

he ever tried anything with you, I'd burn him to the ground with my men on the inside, but I didn't get the chance."

The truth slams into me like a freight train. "You hired Henry and Kane?"

Dante nods slowly. "Yes, they were there for your protection until I assumed control after Shaemus passed away. I couldn't issue the order to Profaci until then. I couldn't play my cards too early. Everything had to be perfect."

"And now?" I ask.

"And now, Shaemus is dead. I'm in charge and you will never have to worry about Profaci again."

My heart leaps into my throat as I jump up from the chair, overwhelmed with this conversation. "Why did you grab me like that? I thought you were there to kill me!"

Dante offers a small smile, his face suddenly looking aged beyond his years. "There's that fiery girl I remember," he says. "Shaemus just died yesterday. Profaci's men were coming, so we had to act fast in order to get you out of there before they arrived."

Tears threaten to spill down my cheeks as I cry out, "What about Kane?! You left him there with Profaci's men on the way!"

"Calm down," he says, which does nothing but make me more angry.

My fists tighten at my sides as I shoot daggers in his direction. "Don't tell me to calm down! In the last two hours, I've been

kidnapped, thought I was going to be murdered, and found out I have a brother who runs an infamous criminal enterprise. Not to mention, I don't know what's going on with the man I love!"

The men surrounding us suddenly grow eerily quiet; their eyes flicker in amusement as Dante runs a hand across the back of his neck.

"Liv, listen to me. Kane is fine. He stayed back with some of my men to neutralize the threat at the cabin."

I throw my arms up in frustration. "And what about the next time?"

"There won't be a next time. Kane and my men handled the —" he pauses to choose his words carefully "situation. And Profaci has also been neutralized."

"How many people have died in the past twenty-four hours, Dante?" I ask incredulously.

He looks away for a moment before meeting my eyes again, then he gives a small shrug and answers in a low voice, "Fifteen, maybe. But they were all bad guys, I promise."

I nervously twist my hands together, feeling sweat trickle down my back. The breath I take to steady myself feels hollow. "I need to talk to Kane," I plead.

Dante's lips twitch into an amused smile. "Let's call your boyfriend, Sis."

Chapter Twenty-Seven



I hear the first ring before I jolt out of my chair, answering on the second. “Hello,” I say through gritted teeth, anticipation for Olivia’s response hanging in the air.

“Kane. Are you alright?” comes her soft, almost angelic voice, like a balm to my frayed nerves.

“I’m fine. Where are you?” Anxiety is already stealing the breath from my voice; it only grows more present as she hesitates before responding.

“I don’t know, exactly.” There’s a rustling and murmuring on the other end before I hear a man take over the call.

“Kane, we’re coming back to you,” he says in an arrogant tone that immediately puts me on edge.

“She better not be hurt,” I warn him, anger thickening my words.

“Why would I hurt my own sister? Not to mention, I left four men with you to take care of business and I understand that it went as expected?” His question hangs between us like a

snake ready to strike and I feel myself tense up further at the reminder of what had happened earlier.

“Yes,” I grind out through my teeth.

“You killed two on your own. Impressive.” His voice is laced with amusement that only manages to irritate me. I will destroy anyone who tries to hurt someone I love, but that doesn’t mean I have no regard for human life. Every life I’ve ever taken exerts a toll on me. It’s a price not everyone is willing to pay.

“I picked the right man for the job,” Dante continues. “You should come work for me.”

“Never gonna happen,” I say without pause, receiving a chuckle from him in return.

“Bring her back here, now,” I demand, urgency coating every syllable.

“On our way,” he answers with amusement still ringing clear in his words.

A grueling forty-five minutes later, the black SUV winds slowly up the driveway, leaving a trail of dark snow behind. The sun has long since set, and I watch from the porch, my heart pounding in my chest. Sweat pools on my forehead as I think of what Dante’s men had done to clean up the mess. Even from out here, I can make out the faint smell of coppery blood lingering in the cold night air as tarps were thrown up and chopped wood piles were stacked to cover bullet-ridden walls.

Dante's men have been busy disposing of the intruders in whatever way they do; tarps were involved in that too. Their efficiency and precision in restoring the outward appearance of the cabin and surrounding areas to before-massacre likeness are nothing short of amazing and amazingly disturbing. They managed to get fresh snow covered over any area that was recently pooled with blood. The local Sheriff's were dispatched after receiving reports of gunshots, but somehow Dante's men convinced them we were only hunting in the woods behind the cabin. I couldn't believe it when they began to drive away – without any bodies, there was no crime for them to solve.

As soon as the car parks, Liv jumps out and begins running toward me but stops herself just short of reaching my arms. She stands back, as if she's forcing herself to maintain a distance. Instead she looks me up and down, breathing heavily. "Are you alright?" she asks.

Unable to stay away from her, I pull her to me until she crashes against my chest and I hold her in a tight embrace. "I'm fine. You're OK, right? No one hurt you?"

She trembles against my chest, her breath coming in small gasps. "Jesus, Liv, I was so worried. Why did you run away?" Before she can answer, Dante appears at our side; his eyes heavy with fatigue.

"We need to get inside and discuss a few things, friends," he says, gesturing to the cabin. The walls are pockmarked with bullet holes. A lamp lays shattered on the floor and the coffee

table is smashed beyond repair. In this dim light, it is hard to make out much else.

Olivia slowly scans the room with wide eyes before cautiously perching herself on the couch, her body trembling as I sit beside her and take her hands into my own to offer reassurance.

“My men will take care of it all. It’s finished for both of you,” Dante says calmly.

“What about other men?” Olivia asks meekly.

“No one else will be coming around. Profaci is gone, his replacement and I are united in his demise. We have an agreeable arrangement. It’s over,” he replies firmly.

Olivia gulps hard and turns to look at me. It’s true I am responsible for the death of two people tonight. While I’ve never enjoyed the loss of any human life, I’d do it again in a heartbeat to keep her safe. “You took out Profaci?”

I don’t want to look her in the eye, but in this moment, for her to trust me and trust that I would do anything for her, I know I need to. I take a deep breath and gaze into her sweet, inquisitive face.

“I had to,” I answer sincerely, not taking my eyes from hers.

“I’m so sorry, I put you in this position,” she tenderly kisses my cheeks knowing the toll of death I keep adding to my soul.

“I did exactly what I was meant to do,” I pull her into my arms and kiss the top of her head.

“I trust I don’t need to stress the importance of keeping quiet about all that happened tonight?” He pointedly looks at me and then keeps his gaze on Olivia.

We both nod in response. There is no reason to cause further problems for everyone involved, including myself.

Dante’s gaze shifts from Olivia to me as he offers his help. “Is there anything I can do to help with the cabin?”

I shake my head and let out a small chuckle. “Nah,” I say. “Marcus is gonna love this – his cabin full of bullet holes.” A smirk passes over Olivia’s lips and her spark returns for the first time since I’ve seen her.

“We are leaving then,” Dante says before turning to leave. As he walks away, he calls back to Olivia: “I am always available, should you need anything, Liv.”

She stands and steps toward him, her arms reaching out for an embrace. He stiffens before offering a curt nod and hurriedly walking out the cabin door.

The silence is so thick it seems to swallow us both as Olivia finally speaks. Her head hangs low but her eyes stay locked on mine, “I left because I overheard what Henry told you,” she says. “You must hate me.”

Confusion draws my brows together. “Why would I hate you?” She drops slowly onto the couch with her eyes still glued to mine. “My uncle killed your father,” she whispers.

“Yes, a man neither one of us ever met did some terrible things, but that has nothing to do with you.” Compassion and

understanding lace my voice as I add, “It’s an amazing coincidence, but it has nothing to do with you and I.”

“You sounded so angry earlier,” she says, her voice barely a whisper.

I draw her close to me, and look deep into her eyes. “I was. With him. With this situation. Never with you.”

She steps back and narrows her gaze, as if searching for the truth in my words. “How can you be so sure?”

My heart races as I cup her chin with my hands and speak earnestly. “Because I’m in love with you. Somewhere along this crazy ride, I’ve fallen for you, Simone Olivia Eden Holt Kildare Monroe.”

She exhales a laugh at the sound of all of her names.

“I love every part of you. Everyone you’ve ever been and everyone you will become. You are strong, and tough, and beautiful, and exasperating, and I love all of it.”

The air between us sizzles as our lips inch closer together until they finally touch in a sweet kiss that seems to stretch on forever. She pulls away, tears shimmering in her eyes, and breathes out three little words: “I love you.”



Olivia

That's all that needs to be said before Kane's lips smash against mine. It's rough and frantic, ragged breaths and hands roaming wildly. He briefly stops and rubs his nose against my own.

"Is this happening?" I whisper.

"Yes," he replies breathlessly.

Kane responds by kissing me again, this time with more restraint, gently coaxing my mouth open with a swipe of his tongue. He lowers us to the couch, then lays his body on top of mine. I spread my legs to accommodate him, allowing him to slide his pelvis between them. I'm surrounded by his smell, the weight of his body, and his mouth on mine. It's a heady combination that has me feeling light-headed.

He continues his soft, gentle kisses, his tongue plunging and retreating against my own, occasionally stopping to suck on my lower lip.

"I thought I lost you tonight," he whispers.

I shake my head, relishing the feel of his lips on me. "I thought the same thing about you."

"Don't you ever run away from me again. You are the best thing I've ever found," he then says, placing open-mouth kisses on my neck. I can feel the moisture pool between my thighs at his words and his touch. He bites and sucks my neck gently as I push my feverish center against him, seeking delicious friction to my throbbing clit.

Kane responds by grinding back against me, his erection rubbing me just where I need it. His hand makes its way from cradling my face to my ass, squeezing and kneading as he dry humps me into ecstasy.

His hand travels to the bottom of his sweatshirt that I'm wearing, and he ducks it underneath, trailing his hand up my stomach over my shirt. Then, his hand reaches my breast and we both moan as he squeezes it, teasing my nipple with the pad of his thumb through the thin fabric of my bra and shirt.

Reaching up and placing my hand over his, I guide it down and under my bra, needing to feel his warm flesh on mine.

I arch my back as he obliges and then deftly unclasps my bra behind my back with one hand, pushing it up and out of the way. Kissing his way back to my mouth, he finds my nipple and rolls it between his thumb and forefinger while plunging his tongue into my mouth.

My body is on fire, the swollen, aching hunger between my legs making all my decisions. The direct pressure he's applying with his hardened cock, plus the agile work of his fingers and tongue, combined with the fact that his body against mine feels like the past and future finally colliding, ignite my body into wave after wave of pleasure. I moan loudly as my body is wracked with its release. Kane kisses me through my orgasm and then stares at me, awe-struck.

"You're so beautiful," he says. "I knew it would be amazing between us, but I never imagined this." We make love after

that for what feels like hours, lost in one another until exhaustion finally claims us both.



I awaken hours later as the cool air licks my pebbled, naked skin. We had moved our way to the bed to sleep in more comfort than what the couch could offer. Kane stirs awake as I shiver. He stealthily backs his way toward the foot of the bed and begins placing wet kisses on my inner thigh. Biting and sucking, he teases me, going from one thigh to another before finally landing on my aroused, erotic core.

He licks me from back to front before spreading me open with his thumbs and blowing warm air on the sensitive nerves, causing my body to shiver with luscious titillation.

“So responsive,” he mumbles before continuing. He concentrates all his attention on my engorged clit, kissing and licking softly, just like he does to my mouth.

Groans of pleasure emanate from deep in his chest as he continues his ministrations, slowly alternating between languid flicks of his tongue and gentle suction.

My body responds by raising my hips in time with his tongue. Sensing my urgency, he slips a finger inside. He works me gently, sliding in and out in time with increased pressure on my most sensitive area.

Adding another finger as I climb higher and higher, he hooks them forward, finding a place I didn't know existed, then he

sucks me into his mouth with hard suction.

The orgasm hitting my body makes my shoulders rise off the bed. I buck against him as he continues his onslaught of pleasure, holding my hips down until I'm nothing more than a puddle of shaky legs and sensitive nerves. He falls on the bed on his back next to me and I slowly climb on top of him, straddling his hips.

I slowly start to sink down onto him. "That's it, Baby. Go slow. You feel so amazing." I do as he says, wiggling slightly from side to side, getting used to every inch of him. I finally sink down completely and Kane lets out a hiss.

"Nothing has ever felt this good, Liv," he says sweetly.

"Mmmm. It feels so full and deep."

"You're in control, Baby. Move up and down, forward and back, whatever way you like until you find what feels good for you."

I chuckle as I start to move, and his jaw clenches.

"Just like that," he whispers with barely contained restraint, holding my hips only to help me move.

Leaning forward to kiss him creates friction and I roll my hips faster. It feels amazing. Between the feeling of him inside me, the friction on my clit, and his tongue exploring my mouth, it doesn't take long before I'm bucking wildly on him, chasing my orgasm. I feel like some sort of goddess, taking what I want, and his dirty words only spur me on.

“That’s it, Baby, ride my cock. Use me to make yourself come again,” he says, holding my hips to increase the friction.

That’s all I need before I feel the orgasm wracking my body. I bite down on his shoulder as my body convulses, starting at my toes as the orgasm laughs through my limbs reaching all of the way to my head, where my thoughts feel light and clear. A feeling of euphoria slams into me.

Kane holds me in place, squeezing my hips and pounding into me from below. It doesn’t take long before I feel him find his own release. “Fuck! Liv! You feel so good,” he moans, pumping inside me frantically.

We lay in a tangled mess of sheets, exhausted yet sated from our lovemaking. His body is still joined with mine, and I can feel each beat of his heart reverberating through my own. Taking a deep breath, Kane gently pushes back the strands of my hair that had matted against my forehead, then brushes his lips against mine.

“That was incredible,” he whispers.

I grin mischievously and nip at his chin. “I was going for sublime. I can do better,” I say as I lick my lips seductively.

“I love you, *Janitor*.”

“I love you too, *Shrew*.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



I nervously wring my hands together, feeling my palms sweat against the denim of my jeans for what feels like the twentieth time in as many minutes. Kane casts me a sideways glance before slowly taking one of my hands into his own, stroking circles onto the back of it with his thumb in an attempt to soothe my worries.

“Stop, Baby,” he says in a low, calming voice, sending a wave of warmth down my spine and briefly wiping away all my worries. He chuckles lightly. “I’ve never seen you so anxious.”

“This is a big deal,” I tell him, motioning with my free hand.

“It’s really not,” he offers calmly.

“I’ve never met anyone’s parents before, Kane!” I screech. “I never got the chance to do this when I was younger.”

Kane brings my hand up to his lips and kisses each knuckle softly. A smile spreads across his face. “I know, Livvy Love,” he says, using the nickname he’s recently started calling me. One that he knows reduces me to a puddle of goo every single

time. He gently squeezes my hand and winks at me, silently reassuring me that everything will be alright.

As we pull up to his childhood home in the magical town of Sierra Falls, I inhale a deep breath while butterflies dance in my stomach and my pulse hammers in my neck. He turns the engine off and faces me. “I promise you have nothing to worry about.”

I bring my palms to my face and peek at Kane through the cracks of my fingers. His expression is neutral, but his eyes are open wide with emotion. “Except for the part where I’m meeting your parents. You know, considering someone in my family is responsible for your father’s death. What am I supposed to say? How am I supposed to feel?”

Kane reaches out and takes both of my hands in his own, stopping me from hiding from him. “We’ve talked about this, Liv,”” he says softly. “You are no more responsible for what happened than anyone else involved. Everyone is a victim here, including you.”

I swallow hard and nod even though his words don’t quite make it into my heart, the heaviness of guilt still lingers there. Kane notices it too and pulls me close, enveloping me in an embrace.

He opens the door of his truck, steps out and grabs our bags from the backseat before closing the door behind him. He throws his duffle bag over his shoulder and grabs my suitcase with one hand, holding my hand in his other as we set off down the cobblestone path that is flanked by bright patches of

lush green grass. Colorful flowers trim the yard, but my eyes are drawn to the candy apple red tulips that line the porch. Tulips have always been my favorite flower.

We reach the large oak door and Kane gestures for me to go first, his free hand pushing open the door with a loud creak. “We’re here!” he calls out as we step into the entryway.

The walls are adorned with a series of framed photographs; some capturing Kane and his younger siblings horsing around on the beach, others of his mother posing in front of famous monuments and landmarks, and one of the entire family hugging beneath a beaming sun. The love radiating from each image is unmistakable.

The afternoon sunlight spills through the windows facing west, bathing the living area in a warm orange glow; I feel an immediate sense of calm and comfort wash over me from within its walls.

We move past the living room, with its oversized couches, plush pillows and cozy throws spread out across them, into the large kitchen. It’s bright and open with gleaming chef’s appliances and a large marble counter, topped with a centerpiece of fresh red tulips standing tall in their glass vase like proud sentinels ready to greet us.

“Kane,” a deep masculine voice calls from behind us. I turn to see Kane’s father, Wyatt, enter the kitchen. He’s obviously taller than Kane, looking taller than his 6’2 frame suggests, but not as muscular. His hair is lighter than Kane’s, almost a dirty blonde color and his short beard is peppered with gray. He

looks incredibly distinguished with an air of poise about him – although not in the same way as Kane – which makes sense since they are not biologically related.

Kane steps forward and wraps his arms around his father in a tight embrace before Wyatt pulls back and plants a kiss on his cheek. There's no lack of physical affection between them, and something about it warms my heart.

“Dad,” he says smiling proudly at me, “this is Olivia.”

I take a step closer, forming my nerves into some semblance of courage as I reach out to shake his hand. “Hello, Mr. Hudson,” I say with a shaky voice.

His smile is warm and inviting as he gently shakes my hand. “Please, call me Wyatt.”

I nod. “Thank you for having me,” I say. “Your home is lovely.”

“That's all my wife,” he jokes.

Kane already has his head planted in the refrigerator and pops a grape into his mouth before asking, “Where is Mom?”

All of a sudden, she appears from the same direction as her husband. She's petite, blonde and strikingly beautiful. I can immediately make out the resemblance to her son.

Kane strides over to her with a bright smile, wraps his big arms around her tiny frame, and lifts her up in a bear hug. She squeals and kisses his cheek before pulling away and staring at him for a moment – her eyes twinkling with joy. It's as if she wants to etch this moment in time forever in her memory.

Then she turns to me. I'm trembling where I stand but I manage a smile as she approaches. Before I can offer my hand or greeting, she wraps her arms around me tightly. I'm only slightly taller than her, and I find myself resting my head slightly on her shoulder.

When I pull away, she takes my face in her hands and looks kindly into my eyes. "Olivia," she says softly, "I am so happy you're here." Then she pulls me back in for another embrace and something happens. I short circuit. All of the built-up loneliness from not having felt any parental love or acceptance in so long releases like an avalanche inside me, and I burst into tears without control. But instead of pushing me away or letting go, she holds me tight against her chest, allowing me to release it all and comforting me.

When I finally muster the strength to pull away, I notice Kane and his dad sharing a perplexed look.

"Wyatt," Millie says, "I think we'll have barbecued chicken and tri-tip for dinner tonight. Why don't you and Kane go pick it up from the store?" Wyatt's face morphs into confusion.

"But you said you were making pasta?" he questions.

"And now I'm not," she retorts with a slight tilt of her head. "You and Kane will be barbecuing so that I can spend some time with Olivia."

Kane steps forward, wraps his arms around my waist and lightly tugs me closer. "Are you going to be okay?" His voice is tender yet laced with concern.

I smile in response before nodding my head. Even though this is his childhood home, he would whisk me away in a minute if he sensed anything amiss.

He leans in, gently nuzzling my nose with his own before planting a chaste kiss on my lips. "I'll be back soon."

"OK," I murmur while stealing a glance at Millie, whose face is imprinted with thoughtful curiosity.

Once they leave, Millie motions for me to follow her into the living room. I sink into the soft cushions of the couch and tug a blanket around my shoulders against the slight chill in the air. She hands me a steaming mug of tea, and I settle back, comforted by its warmth.

"My son loves you," Millie says suddenly, and I feel a rush of surprise.

"Yes," I reply with a smile. "I love him, too."

"I know," she says softly. "He looks at you like he's never looked at anyone before."

I pause, staring at her incredulously. "Really?"

She nods slowly. "Kane has always been very tough, almost like he had to be," she says sadly. "But underneath it all, he has a really good heart and he's given that to you."

"I will never take it for granted," I whisper.

"I know," she says thoughtfully. "Has he told you anything about his father? Theo?"

My heart begins to beat wildly in my chest at her words. I want to jump up and run away. I don't want to face this; face the hurt and anger in her eyes when she blames me for what happened to someone she loved; the father of her first child. But, instead, I stay. I sit and listen, because I love Kane, and if this needs to happen in order for us to clear the air and move on, so be it.

"A little," I reply.

"I think it's important that we talk about him," she says, extending her arm, and I feel the warmth of her hand as it wraps around mine. "It's not your fault."

My mouth opens slightly in surprise and I shake my head slowly to make sure I haven't misheard her.

"Olivia," she says with her voice unwavering, "Listen to me. What happened is not your fault."

The lump in my throat grows larger, but eventually I manage to say, "I'm just so sorry for your family. He took so much away from Kane."

"He took things away from a lot of people." She pulls her legs onto the couch and folds them beneath her, holding a cup of steaming tea between her palms as she breathes out heavily before saying softly, "I actually think it's very poetic. You're both victims of the same crimes, brought together by those very circumstances at a time in your lives when you're ready for one another. Personally, I think this was fated from the beginning."

I stare at her in shock. “You do?”

“Yes, I do,” she assures me, her voice full of emotion. She picks up a framed picture from the end table and hands it to me. It’s a photo of a man who looks strikingly similar to Kane, embracing a little girl with joyous laughter. “I took that on the day I met him,” she informs me, her eyes twinkling.

“Kane looks so much like him,” I say in awe.

“He does,” she affirms as she takes the frame back from me.

I take a deep breath before asking the question that has been on my mind since I first walked into this home. “Do I remind you of him? My uncle?”

Without hesitation, she shakes her head confidently. “Not one bit. The beauty of your spirit shines through so clearly. The only thing I see when I look at you is a young woman deeply in love. I’m so happy for you and Kane,” she says seriously. “Who we are related to is just random chance. It’s not who we are. One thing about this life is that you get to choose who you want to be and who you want to surround yourself with – that is your family.”

I am shocked at the power of her words. She speaks with such a forceful conviction, and it’s clear that her heart is pouring out into her words.

“One last thing,” she says soothingly. “Olivia, from the bottom of our hearts, and I speak for my entire family, and Theo’s family, too – no one blames you for anything. None of you.

Not you, your mom, or your grandparents. It's time to let it go."

I feel my shoulders slump and the tears that had been pooling in my eyes overflow down my cheeks. This was the absolution I hadn't even known I had craved for so long. I wrap her tightly in a hug, feeling the warmth emanating from her body, and will myself to hold onto this moment forever.



Kane

Dad and I enter the house with two heaping bags of groceries. As we step into the living room, a wave of warmth washes over me; sitting side by side on the couch are Mom and Olivia, engrossed in flipping through my childhood photo album.

"Oh, come on!" I protest with a smile, taking a seat alongside Liv. "At least show her my football pictures or something where I look tough."

"I particularly like this one of you, Marcus, and Callan dressed as Ninja Turtles." Liv laughs.

"Hey, those costumes were a hit that year," he says with a chuckle.

"It's a right of passage for a mother to show her son's girlfriend baby pictures," Mom adds with a grin. Suddenly, a wave of guilt crashes over me; here is Olivia being happily whisked down the memory lane of my life, having lost all traces of her own childhood year in that devastating fire. There

is nothing I can do about what she's already lost, but I can make up for it moving forward – starting with this moment.

“Mom, can we go to the beach tomorrow? I'd like to take some pictures,” I say, a smile spreading across my face.

She smiles knowingly before answering. “I think that's a great idea,” she replies.

“We can invite more family if you're up for it,” she says to Olivia.

Olivia smiles brightly before wrapping her arms around my waist in a tight embrace. I have no idea what they talked about, but whatever it was has clearly reassured her of her place in my life.



Since our return from Tahoe, Olivia has been living with me. We were able to salvage very little from her apartment, with the exception of one slightly chipped coffee mug that has a heart on it and is inscribed with the words “cup of love.”

Dante offered to help her out in any way she wanted, though she graciously declined. I can understand why she didn't want anything to do with him. He often operates on the wrong side of the law now, and it's probably better for both of them if they keep their distance. As for me, I'll always be grateful to him for helping her be able to live freely.

Her plan now is to save money by living with me before eventually moving out into her own space. But as far as I'm

concerned, that isn't going to happen. The three of us, Liv, Annie and me, have created a life, a home, and family; and I have to admit that our furry daughter is a lot less destructive with two parents around to shower her with adoration and belly rubs.

With how much Olivia has come to care for my dog, plus how enthusiastic she is about our amazing sex life... I'm fairly certain that Olivia is here for good.

We hated each other at first, then came the threat on her life, a reluctant friendship, mobsters, and a serial killer uncle, and despite all of that, the love between us is undeniable. Though our love story is an unusual and complicated one, it is ours. We embrace and nurture our connection, like two pieces of a complicated puzzle finally fitting together.

THE END.

Epilogue



Olivia

3 Years Later

Kane carefully places the bright orange carrot in the middle of the snowman's crotch, a vegetable phallus sticking out for the world to see, giving me a suggestive smile.

"You really are a pervert," I joke, shaking my head in mock disapproval. Kane grins as Marcus adds his two cents worth. "While you're at it, use those rocks for his balls."

I laugh as I brush the icy crystals from my gloves. "The carrot is for his *nose*," I say.

Marcus bounces Callan's baby in his arms. She is sweetly bundled up, snugly in a white snow suit and blue beanie with a fluffy pom-pom on top. Her chubby cheeks are stained pink from the frosty air. She might be the cutest thing I've ever seen.

“You guys are like teenagers,” I playfully scold Marcus and Kane who are standing in the snow with their beers and making funny faces the baby. Callan is the only one acting his age as he shovels snow from the walk.

“Nah,” Callan chimes in, “We were way worse at fourteen.”

Kane chuckles knowingly, his dark brows knitted together as he starts sharing stories from their days at Camp Happy Bush. Tales from this trio are legendary in and around Sierra Falls.

As if answering a silent call for chaos, Annie charges across the snow-covered ground and rips the bright orange carrot right out of the snowman’s groin with her pearly fangs. She sprints around Marcus, Kane, and James, Marcus’s wife, who has come to stand beside Marcus and Iris. Iris, her wild violet eyes wide and observing cries, “Daddy! Annie is going to eat the snowman penis!”

A deep laugh rumbles from Marcus’s chest as he hands the baby to James and meets his daughter’s gaze.

“It’s OK, Iris,” he says soothingly. “We have an entire bag of snowman penises in the house.”

“Marcus!” James scolds. “We have plenty of *carrots* inside that we can use for the snowman’s *nose*, Squirrel,” she tells Iris.

Iris shakes her head. “But the ratio of carrot length to the snowman’s body makes it more fitting for his penis,” she replies seriously.

“Stop talking about the snowman’s penis, Iris,” Orion, Callan’s oldest child, chimes in. “It’s rude.”

“Mind your own business, Orion!” Iris exclaims.

Orion erupts in laughter as he points to Annie, who has been nonchalantly gnawing on the bright orange carrot, pieces of it flying out her mouth like wood from a chipper.

Startled by the abrupt disruption, she halts her munching and cocks her head to the side inquisitively, before continuing with her snack. The snowflakes that blanket the surrounding area are showered with tiny pieces of orange pulp. It’s a vegetable bloodbath.

As Orion continues to laugh uncontrollably, Callan speaks up with a suggestion for peace.

“Maybe we all just calm down about the whole...carrot penis thing?”

Callan’s wife, Colby, shoots him an exasperated glance before turning back to their son. “Stop calling it a carrot penis!” Which only makes Orion laugh harder.

I look around at this group of people who have known one another most of their lives. The men still resemble the photos I’ve seen of their younger selves. Marcus wears his blond hair the same. His eyes are still bright blue with flecks of green glittering in them even though he’s older. They crinkle around the edges when he smiles.

Callan also resembles his younger self, with a more carefree smile now and a brightness in his green eyes only true

happiness can exude. I watch as Kane interacts and smiles at them reflexively, caught up in the warmth of being with old friends again.

Callan, Colby, and their son Orion, stand to my left, with their beautiful baby daughter perched happily in Callan's arms. Orion is a carbon copy of his father in appearance with the same brown hair and green eyes, though his facial features mirror more of his mother's appearance. They are such a beautiful family. Their love story is one that anyone would cheer for: childhood best friends that had lost touch, only to find one another later and rekindle their relationship into something special. It's about to become even more special for them, as Colby told us just this morning that she's pregnant with baby number three. Her face glows with new life as she watches Orion and Iris interact.

Iris stands next to Orion, her slightly younger cousin and best friend. They argue like siblings, but they don't hate each other. It's a gentle banter, full of love. I hope that it stays this way for them as they grow into adulthood.

Marcus and James share their own sweet story. They are newlyweds. After fighting their attraction for years, they finally got out of their own way and gave in to their desires. After a period of trials and tribulations, they were able to overcome their obstacles and become an inseparable couple and are raising Iris together with lots of laughter and hugs thrown in daily for good measure.

The one outlier is me. I've only come into their lives in the last few years. Yet, when I look around, I don't feel like an outsider.

For the first time since I was thirteen, I have a family. Everyone here treats me like I've been around from the beginning. No one has ever leveled judgment upon me or my past.

It's easy to see why Kane has been friends with these men for so long. Their personalities both compliment and challenge one another.

Callan is a lot like Kane, but more serious and often gets lost in his own thoughts. He's a thinker and often very sensitive. Of everyone, I have been surprised by the depth of my friendship with Callan. His quiet nature blends seamlessly with my quirkiness. We've spent many nights exploring complex conversations about life and loss. He lost his brother, Nolan, to cancer when he was just a teenager. Callan is a spiritual man, and his perspective on death has given me solace. Death no longer seems so frightening; instead, it has become a reminder that the souls of our loved ones live on through us. It was a comfort I hadn't expected.

Marcus is the fun one. He always has to have something exciting going on, whether it's a plan or a prank. He's full of life and incredibly intelligent with an almost child-like sense of wonder about him. He's the person you seek out when you need anything. He's always ready to lend a hand in any way

possible. All Marcus wants in life is to see people happy, and have a good time.

And my bodyguard, Kane. Well he's as strong and stoic as ever. Kane is a massive, immovable figure who has been by my side for the past few years. It took time to earn his trust, but when I did, I found that Kane is a hopeless romantic. Every day he shows me with small acts of love, from sending me notes in the morning to leaving sweet little presents around the house. I am privileged that he protects me. I do everything I can to protect him and his heart, in return.

There are three things that bind these men together in a brotherhood: loyalty, love, and family. That loyalty is how we came to move back to Sierra Falls.

After what happened in the mountains, Kane and I returned to the city. I had nothing left but a coffee mug after Profaci's men burned my apartment building to ash and took everything of value from it. The insurance covered the cost of replacing some of its contents, but not the rest of my worldly possessions.

As much as I loved living there, it wasn't a life I could live with only myself to depend on anymore. After speaking with Dante about my situation, he offered to buy me a new house and set me up for life.

I appreciated my brother's offer, but wanted nothing to do with the lifestyle he chose. He understood and promised he would always be there if we needed anything, but I knew I wouldn't because I had Kane.

I moved into Kane's house on a temporary basis. He asked me to stay forever, but I was hesitant at first. He tried to replace my lost coffee mugs. The closest he could find was one with a different heart, and it was inscribed with the words "Cup of Joe," instead of "Cup of Love"... He had presented it to me with his dick in the mug saying his dick was named "Joe." Needless to say, temporary became permanent after that. Once you name something, it becomes yours. Three months became six, and six months quickly became a year; the best year of my life.

During those first few months, while Kane worked with Henry, I returned to work and tried to create savings on my small salary. Annie and I became best friends, and I was never lonely after that. Kane and Annie became my everything. It is hard for me to consider what I was doing before Kane came along as living.

We were learning to be the new versions of ourselves along with how to be a couple. After about two years, Henry announced that he, the missus, and Taco would be retiring.

Kane bought the business with a substantial investment from Marcus, who never blinked an eye. As a *mostly* silent partner, Marcus asked for very little in return of his investment. He did gently suggest we move the business closer to home to be near family, and in the end, it was a wonderful decision. Marcus, being the businessman he is, is typically correct about these types of decisions.

Giggles echo off the snow-dusted pine trees as we frolic in the white powdery landscape of Christmas Valley. The aroma of hot cocoa and fresh pastries drift from the large mountain home behind us, where parents, grandparents, Henry and his wife, and Smitty's mom, Ms. Sandy Smith and her husband Alan are gathered inside.

No longer is this the tiny A-frame cabin Kane and I had called home on that fateful four-week trip during which we'd fallen madly in love three years ago – this is Marcus's palatial mansion. It has ten bedrooms, three bathrooms, and all the amenities needed for a gathering of our size. It almost seems too grand to be true. Everyone inside or out here in the snow right now is an invited guest at our wedding tomorrow. Something I could never have imagined when I was unable to even date just a few years prior.

The wedding is tomorrow. Holy Crap. I'm getting married tomorrow.

Sometimes, I still can't believe it. I'm marrying my lover and best friend, and as a bonus I get about thirty other people who love and care for me. Everyone from Callan, Marcus, James and Colby's families, plus my own set of new twin siblings and their families.

My closest bond is with my soon to be mother-in-law. Millie has been the mother I have missed so desperately. She is always ready with advice, a hug, or just to have a glass of wine and a laugh with.

My eyes start to fill with tears, and I'm about to turn away when I feel Kane's strong arms come around me from behind. He places a soft kiss on my cold cheek and whispers "Hi, Livvy Love," into my ear. His warmth is comforting as he nestles his head against my shoulder.

The sensation of being embraced releases the emotions I've been holding inside, and soon I'm nestled into Kane's chest, fighting back happy tears. "Thank you for this life," I profess in between gasps of air. "I'm so happy, beyond anything I ever thought possible."

Kane tenderly strokes my back, his lips pressing against the top of my head in reassurance.

"You deserve everything and more, Liv," he says. Then he looks deeply into my eyes and asks, "Are you ready to change your name for the last time tomorrow?"

A satisfied smile spreads across my face as I take in the beautiful sunset behind us. The rehearsal dinner is fast approaching and I can feel my heart pounding with excitement at the thought of taking that final step toward our future together.

Taking a deep breath, I look up at Kane and say firmly, "Yes, I'm ready to be the person I've always been meant to be." ♥

Want to read more about Kane and Olivia's romance?

*Subscribe to my newsletter to read a bonus chapter from the
night of the dance.*

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/kqkzuc1q8r>

Big Thanks

Thank you so much to the amazing team of people who believe in and encourage me throughout the endless hours in front of my laptop. It starts at home with my husband and children. They are the best motivators in the world. My husband wants me to write because he knows it makes me happy. My children want me to write because they think if I make a bunch of money they can become “nepo babies.”

To my writing friend, my accountability partner, my source of sanity when I’m trying to do too much, Rin Sher. Thank you for everything you do for me as an author and more importantly, as a friend.

To the best beta readers around, Misty Unser and Sarah Beth Ols. You ladies make me feel like I know what I’m doing and keep me from getting too far off track when I try to make everything a mystery. Honestly, if you’re happy with the book, I’m happy with it. I’m very lucky to have you both make time to read my stuff. You are the best!

And of course, my amazing editor. My confidant in crime and the best cheerleader I could ever ask for. Thank you so much, Amanda Villa, for your knowledge, patience, and love!

Also From Steffanie

Are you excited to read more about the Men of Sierra Falls? Binge the rest of the series FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

Read Callan's story here. **Ever the Same, Book #1.**

<https://a.co/d/gtm2kug>

Read Marcus's story here. **Beautiful Small Things, Book #2**

<https://a.co/d/aSpqrtE>

Are you curious about Kane's parents and where everything first started? Read Millie and Wyatt's story here. **Aperture available now. <https://books2read.com/u/bOjnyg>**

Except from Strange Love

Ivy, age 12- 1981

“Pamela Taylor! COME ON DOWN!” The familiar cadence of Johnny Olson’s voice booms through the studio as the newest contestant makes her way down to contestants’ row. Her face is painted with a broad smile as she jumps and claps in absolute glee, only for her oversized orange nametag to nearly slide off her chest. The other contestants stand nervously beside her, eyes darting between each other as if searching for the magical answer of how to get up on that stage.

Bob Barker strolls across the stage, looking impossibly slick in his grey suit and royal blue tie. His chocolate brown hair sharpens his look, combed back effortlessly, along with his stark white teeth, which stand out in contrast to his golden tan skin.

He raises the microphone to his lips, beckoning the contestants with his kind intonation before turning to the side as the

curtains part to reveal a beautiful redheaded model dressed in a stunning coat. “Here’s the first item up for bids.”

“IT’S A FUR COAT!” Johnny announces, and the contestants jump up and down, eyes wide with wonder, as the model performs a graceful turn in the exotic and expensive-looking pelt.

“The one of you who bids the closet without going over wins,” Bob announces. Martha goes first with a bid of \$150. My mom purses her lips around her cigarette and rolls her eyes toward the television set. “That coat costs way more than that,” she mutters in a tone of disapproval.

Madeline is next. She makes a bid of \$1000, which is met with an eruption of shock from the entire audience. Mom snubs out her cigarette in the giant ashtray I made in school that sits atop the coffee table and shakes her head. “That’s way too much,” she chides.

Nancy leans into her microphone and confidently announces her bid of \$400. My mother watches with silent admiration as Nancy presents her bid.

Finally, it’s Pamela’s turn to bid. She listens to the audience members shouting out numbers and pauses for a few moments as if deep in thought, before declaring her answer of \$401. Being the last contestant to bid is the best place to be, so you can evaluate your number based on what everyone else has done. Pamela is lucky she was called last.

Johnny’s voice suddenly cuts through the silence. “The actual retail price is \$595.” Pamela freezes briefly before jumping

excitedly in place as Bob declares her the winner. The other contestants feign excitement for her in the name of sportsmanship but are clearly disappointed. Who wouldn't be?
The coat is gorgeous.

Pamela races across the stage, her tight jeans swishing around her ankles. Reaching Bob, she kisses his cheek before standing beside him on the stage, highlighted against the lime green and orange backdrop. I don't think I'll kiss Bob when I'm on the show. It's just too creepy.

Bob tells us it's time for Pamela to see what she will be bidding on just before Johnny's melodic voice echoes out, "IT'S A NEW CAR!" as the curtains split, revealing a shiny red Oldsmobile convertible gleaming off the fluorescent lights in the center of the stage. A leggy brunette drapes herself over it. She, too, is wearing the fur coat from earlier over her white leotard. *A car! The holy grail of potential prices*

Pamela is so lucky, I think to myself, and then wince as I try to swallow. "Mom, can I have some cream of tomato soup?" I ask.

"Of course, Sweetie. Just wait until the commercial," she replies, still glued to our large television, which takes up the majority of the opposite wall with its large wooden frame.

Pamela's hands tremble as Bob announces she will be playing Lucky Seven. That's a tough game. She's given \$7 from Bob, and she has to guess the price of the car. Every time she is wrong, he takes money away. If he takes all \$7, she loses.

She selects her first number, and Bob's eyes widen in anticipation. She chooses six, but the number is seven. The audience groans along with my mom from her spot on the couch. Pamela peels out a dollar bill and hands it to Bob, who quips, "Close but no cigar."

With a deep breath, Pamela announces her second guess: four. But the correct answer is one. Bob snaps up three more dollars from Pamela's diminishing stash. She only has three dollars left, her final chance to win the car slipping through her fingers like sand through an hourglass.

Bob cajoles Pamela playfully to wring every last ounce of drama out of the moment as she struggles to make her final guess. She can't afford to make a bad guess here. I may be staying home from school sick today, but my brain is still working well enough to do basic subtraction.

Her last guess is nine. The tile is turned over with a sharp ding to reveal the answer is two. She lost. Pamela lets out a choked sob as the sound of defeat—WOMP WOMP—fills the studio. With drooping shoulders, she slinks offstage as Bob smiles from ear to ear. My mom mutters another I-told-you-so from the couch.

"She was never going to win that car," my mom says, her voice heavy with resignation. She takes a moment to place the back of her hand on my forehead, checking my temperature. "Cool as a cucumber," she says, her expression conveying both relief and amusement.

“Want to watch Scooby Doo?” she asks. I nod eagerly in response. Whenever I stay home sick, we have the same routine. Price is Right, Scooby Doo, and then General Hospital. My mother is obsessed with her soap opera. She never misses it if she can possibly avoid it.



My Cocoa Puffs are slowly turning my milk a velvety shade of brown as I stir my spoon around my bowl. My little sister, Natalie, sits beside me, taking vicious stabs at her toast with a fork. Ever since she turned six, she’s declared that only white food is acceptable. My parents keep scolding her, but it’s been two weeks, and she’s stayed firm in her decision. Apparently, the dollop of strawberry jam I put on her white toast makes it inedible.

Dad rushes into the kitchen, just like he does every morning before work, frantically searching through the stack of mail on the counter for his keys. “Ivy, have you seen them?” He asks, expecting me to answer with a mouthful of sugary cereal.

“Nope!” I mumble after swallowing it down.

“Irene!” Dad yells for my mom, who shuffles into the room shortly after, rubbing her eyes and looking half awake yet thoroughly annoyed. “Have you checked your coat pocket?” she suggests.

He frantically pats his pockets, searching for the keys, and breathes a sigh of relief when he feels them and pulls them out. He hugs Mom tightly, closing his eyes and resting his chin on her head. “What would I do without you?” he asks.

“You’d be late for work everyday!” she jokes with a wink before kissing his lips. Dad then moves to me and brushes my hair back from my face as I look up at him with a subtle smile. “How are you feeling, Pumpkin?” he asks softly.

“Better,” I reply, nodding my head assuredly. “My throat isn’t too sore anymore.”

“That’s good,” he says and moves to Natalie. She has barely touched her toast other than to massacre it with the tines of her fork. “At least drink your milk,” he says with a slight edge in his voice. She looks down at the white whole milk with its pasty ring of fat around the top and nods happily, agreeing it is suitable for her current diet. Dad rolls his eyes and pecks her on the nose which earns him a giggle before he hurries out the door.

“Hurry up, girls,” Mom commands as she zips our lunches into our backpacks. I have a Scooby Doo lunchbox and Natalie has a Holly Hobbie one. My thermos is my favorite part. Mom will sometimes fill it with warm soup and I hope she’s done that today. I squint through the window at the fresh snow covering overnight.

I lace up my boots and zip my jacket as high as it will go, tucking in my chin so only a sliver of my face is exposed. We step outside into the sharp cold air, and I immediately feel the

sting in my lungs. The snow crunches under our feet like broken glass as we make our way down the driveway.

“Hurry up, Nat,” I urge her as she dawdles behind me, admiring icicles hanging from tree branches. I reach for her mittened hand, and we continue toward the bus stop.

We’re just down the end of the street and about to turn onto the main road when we hear the sound of a big car behind us. The sound of an engine grows louder, and I glance over my shoulder to see a white van barreling down the street. I tug Natalie closer to me, gently pushing her toward the snowbank on our right. She babbles excitedly about Schoolhouse Rock! as I try to listen for the van’s approach.

It pulls up next to us with a screech of brakes, blocking our path. My heart pounds in my chest as two people, a man and a woman, spring out of the back doors. They don’t say anything -just rush us. I push Natalie away from them with all of my strength, but they’re too quick. One grabs at her arms while the other attempts to take her legs.

Natalie screams and thrashes against them, as I fight back with everything I have. I grab the woman’s leg and throw her off balance so she drops my sisters lower body. Natalie continues to thrash around wildly and somehow gets free of the man who had her arms, her slippery jacket making it impossible for him to maintain a good grip.

“Go under the van!” I yell to Natalie. She does as I say and crawls on her hands and knees to to the side of the van, slides her small body underneath, and pops out the other side. I can

see her legs holding her in place so I scream again. “RUN, NATALIE! RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN!”

“Dammit!” she got away, the woman says, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

“Let’s just grab this one,” the man says as I scream as loudly as possible. He cuts me off with a hand over my mouth. They heave me into the van, and the door slams shut as the van skids off.

“IVY!” I can hear my sister scream as I curl up into a ball in the back of the van. They have me, so there’s no use fighting. But at least they didn’t get my sister.

This 80s love story featuring all your favorite tropes, including fake dating, opposites attract, unequal social status, fish out of water, and emotional scars is releasing 3/22/24. Pre-order

now.

<https://a.co/d/dgIquBW>