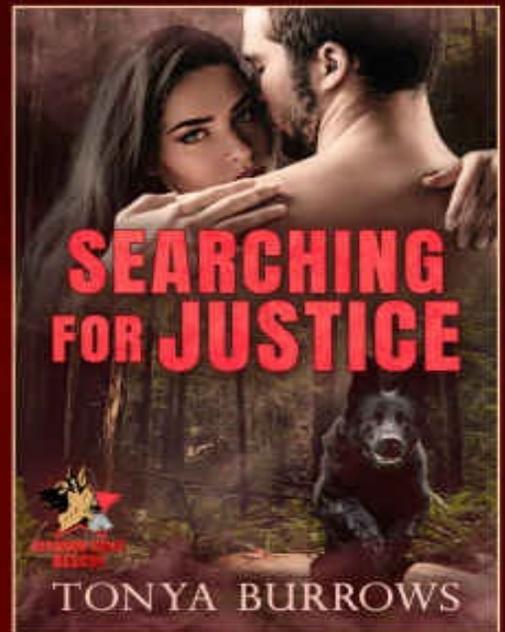
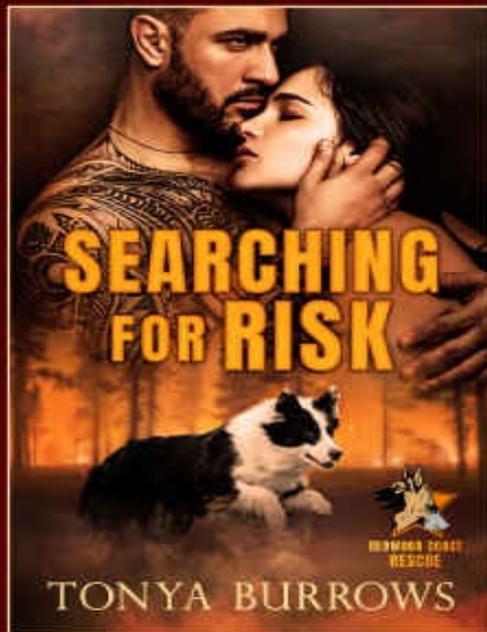
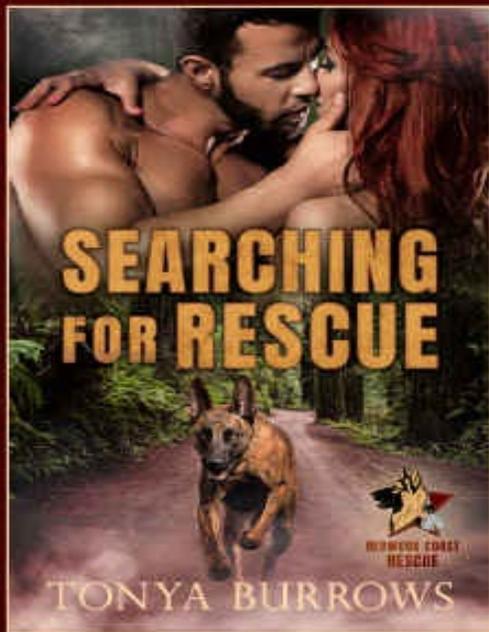




REDWOOD COAST RESCUE

BOOKS 1-3 • BOX SET



TONYA BURROWS

redwood coast rescue

Books 1-3

Tonya Burrows

Copyright © 2023 by Tonya Burrows

All rights reserved.

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

Cover by Kim Killion.

contents

Searching for Rescue

I. Lost

- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
- [Chapter 12](#)
- [Chapter 13](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)
- [Chapter 15](#)
- [Chapter 16](#)
- [Chapter 17](#)
- [Chapter 18](#)
- [Chapter 19](#)
- [Chapter 20](#)
- [Chapter 21](#)
- [Chapter 22](#)

II. Found

- [Chapter 23](#)
- [Chapter 24](#)
- [Chapter 25](#)
- [Chapter 26](#)
- [Chapter 27](#)
- [Chapter 28](#)
- [Chapter 29](#)
- [Chapter 30](#)
- [Chapter 31](#)
- [Chapter 32](#)
- [Chapter 33](#)
- [Chapter 34](#)
- [Chapter 35](#)
- [Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Searching for Risk](#)

I. [Ignite](#)

[Episode 1: What Happened to Darcy?](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Episode 2: The Search](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Episode 3: The Main Suspect](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

II. [Burn](#)

[Episode 4: The Crime Scene](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Episode 5: The Interrogation](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Episode 6: Darcy's Last Words](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

III. [Extinguish](#)

[Episode 7: Questioning the Investigation](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Searching for Justice](#)

I. [Hate](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)

II. [Love](#)

[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Tonya Burrows](#)

searching for rescue

part one

lost



“Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for.”
Clarence Darrow

chapter one

ZAK HENDRICKS WASN'T drunk enough for this shit.

He glared at his former best friend across the scuffed bar and knocked back another shot of Jameson. His fourth of the night. At *this* bar. He washed it down with a glug from his second beer.

Yeah, still not drunk enough to deal with Sheriff Ash Rawlings' holier-than-thou attitude.

"Whaddya gonna do, *Ashley*?" He leaned on Ash's full first name because he knew it bugged the guy, then signaled the bartender that he was ready for another shot. He'd told her to keep them coming until he was wobbling on his stool. Then maybe he'd be able to sleep tonight. "Arrest me for having a drink? I'm over a decade past the legal age. And I seem to remember *you* used to drink with Donovan and me long before we were legal. You used to be fun."

A muscle twitched under Ash's neatly trimmed beard. He hated being reminded of his wayward youth, so Zak delighted in mentioning it every chance he got.

"That was a long time ago, Zak. I grew up."

"And now you're the big, bad Sheriff of Lost County. The fun police."

"What you've been doing tonight is nowhere in the neighborhood of *fun*. I could arrest you for assault, destruction of private property, disturbing the peace... take your pick. You've had a busy night." Ash scowled and held up a hand, stopping the bartender from pouring another shot. "He's done, Rose."

"Not if he still has money, Sheriff. He's single-handedly keeping the lights on around here." Rose Galasso put a hand on her slim hip, and her cropped Mad Dog Pub T-shirt rode up to show a glimpse of a tattoo on her ribs.

Momentarily distracted from the conversation by the colorful ink, Zak wondered what the tattoo was and just how much skin it covered...

As fast as the spark of interest flared, it fizzled. Rose was a beautiful woman with breasts that tested the limits of her shirt, long black hair, and snapping blue eyes—but he only needed one lover in his life, and her name was Whiskey.

Who could've guessed his sex drive was in the leg he left back in Afghanistan?

Goddammit, he wanted another shot.

“Rose, my drink?”

Ash turned that sanctimonious glare on her. “Don’t do it. I’ll have your liquor license stripped for over-serving.”

“Asshole,” Rose muttered but set the bottle of Jameson down and walked away.

“This is bullshit. I didn’t start that fight at the brewery.” Zak shoved to his feet. The room tilted, the floor rolling under him. He stumbled sideways, and the toe of his fucking prosthetic leg caught on his stool. He crashed into a nearby table, sending a trio of backpackers scurrying to get out of the way. Glasses shattered; beer spilled. His head cracked against the floor as he landed, and his vision dimmed for a second, but he didn’t feel any pain through the haze of alcohol and rage. The white-hot, all-consuming rage he couldn’t drink away.

Rage at himself.

And at Rose for not giving him another drink.

And at Ash for trying to leash him.

And at his useless fucking metal leg for being useless and metal.

And at the men who brought him home broken instead of leaving him in Afghanistan to die a hero.

“Jesus,” Ash said softly and reached down to help him.

He shoved Ash’s hand out of the way and tried to stand, only to discover his prosthetic was no longer attached. It stood wedged in the footrest between the stool’s legs. Face burning, he pulled himself upright on the table and hopped over to disentangle the prosthetic, but it wouldn’t come loose.

With a growl of frustration, he picked up the whole stool, leg and all, and threw it across the bar. It slammed into the wall by the door, and several pictures clattered to the floor. The abrupt movement upset his equilibrium, and he hopped on his one leg to regain his balance before he fell again.

Rose stared, and her red-painted lips opened in a little O of surprise. The backpackers snickered.

“A one-legged man hops into a bar...” one of them said, and the snickers turned to laughter.

He snapped up a beer mug from the nearest table and threw it at them. “Shut the fuck up!”

Ash grabbed his arm in a vise grip. “Enough. You’re going home.” He raised an eyebrow at Rose. “Unless you want to press charges for destruction of property?”

After a second, she closed her mouth and shook her head. “It’s fine. Just get him out of here.”

Ash sighed and all but carried Zak out. When he stopped to untangle the prosthetic leg from the stool, Zak snagged the bottle of Jameson still on the bar and took a long drink.

“Goddammit.” Ash yanked it out of his hand, gave it to Rose, and then muscled him out the door.

The July night was brisk, the air heavy with a sea fog that curled around the streetlights on Main Street, dampening their yellow glow. Across the street, spotlighted by the lamp directly in front of the closed grocery store, a kid of about sixteen sat in the open side door of a camper van straight out of the 1970s. Her long blond ponytail trailed over her shoulder in dreadlocks from under her hooded sweatshirt. She twisted the end of one dread as she sucked on a cigarette and watched them with wary eyes.

He’d seen eyes like hers before.

Eyes that had witnessed too much, too young.

Eyes like Tehani’s.

Jesus.

He should’ve opened his throat and sucked down that entire bottle of Jameson while he had the chance.

Ash dumped him into the back of a Chevy Tahoe marked with the green and brown Lost County Sheriff logo and shoved the prosthetic leg at his stomach. “You’re so goddamn lucky nobody’s pressing charges tonight, man, or I’d be taking you to jail right now instead of home.”

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “Doesn’t matter.”

Muttering a string of curses, Ash slammed the door shut and circled to the driver’s side. He was still cursing when he slid behind the wheel. He didn’t

start the car. Instead, he sat there, opening and closing his enormous fists around the steering wheel.

Something snuffled at the back of Zak's hair. He bolted upright, twisting in his seat, ready to fend off an attack.

Intense golden eyes stared through the metal bars separating the trunk space from the rest of the vehicle. The dog—*was it a dog?*—had a brindled coat, tall, pointed ears standing erect on its wedge-shaped head, and a black mask around those creepy gold eyes. Its lips peeled up, showing a row of vicious-looking teeth.

Zak leaned forward, away from its snarling snout. He got the feeling the cage separating them wouldn't do a damn thing if it really wanted to chomp down on his spine. "The fuck is that?"

Ash glanced over his shoulder. "That's Ranger. One of my sister's projects. Careful. He damn near took off my arm trying to wrestle him into the truck." He started the engine and pulled away from the curb. "A lost cause, you ask me."

Like you.

It went unspoken. It didn't need to be said. Zak was well aware of what everyone in town thought about "that Hendricks boy." Everyone, including his own family and his former best friend.

Tortured.

Damaged.

Trouble with a capital T.

A lost fucking cause.

"But you know AJ." Ash sighed heavily, his broad shoulders moving with the exasperated exhale. "The queen of lost causes."

He *did* know Anna Jade Rawlings. Far better than Ash knew. He wondered what the by-the-book sheriff would do if he detailed exactly *how much* of Anna he knew. Her flaming copper hair was all natural and matched everywhere—top and bottom. It also fit her personality. She was fiery and strong-willed and just as self-righteous as her twin brother. She was also generous to a fault and the most compassionate person Zak had ever met.

The queen of lost causes.

And even she didn't think he could be saved.

But apparently, she thought this bloodthirsty dog had a shot.

What did that say about him?

chapter two

BELLA LOWE WATCHED the sheriff warily, but he had his hands full dealing with the drunk man. He wasn't worried about an underage girl out too late, smoking a cigarette.

It was a bad habit, she knew. But she also knew there were worse ones.

She looked down the quiet street with its charming Victorian storefronts to the eyesore on the corner. This town was cuter than others she'd visited, but underneath that quaintness was a seething underworld, and its epicenter was The Palace. Maybe the place had been a palace at one time—it looked the part, with all its ornaments and flourish—but now it was a peeling, sagging black hole that fed on the souls of the drug-addled and desperate. It reminded Bella of an aging hooker, past her prime, but still trying to paint herself attractive with bright colors and inappropriate clothing.

Mom had gone inside to score some meth hours ago. Jessica had either passed out in the bar or found a man willing to pay her for sex. Probably both. Knowing her mother, definitely both. Either way, she was on her own for the rest of the night.

Sighing, Bella stamped out her cigarette on the sole of her knock-off Doc Martens. The smoky mint of the menthol was making her nauseous. She hadn't eaten a decent meal in days, had been existing on gas station chips, soda, and one shriveled hot dog.

She sensed movement behind her and shifted to look at the bed stretched across the camper van's back half. Her sister sat up. With big blue eyes, wild blond hair, and chubby, dirty cheeks, Poppy was still little more than a baby. Barely five. Soft and still so innocent.

"Bella?" she said around a yawn. "I can't sleep. I'm hungry."

"I know, kiddo. Me, too." She glared down the street at The Palace. Mom

wasn't coming out anytime soon, so what was the point of waiting around here?

She climbed into the van and shut the door. The overhead light turned off, plunging them into night's cool, damp darkness.

"Bella?" Poppy's voice was a tiny squeak. She'd always hated the dark.

"It's okay. Nothing in the dark can hurt you." Darkness was safety. It was a blanket to hide in—protection from Mom, who always left at night, and her mood swings. It was a refuge from the leering men that Mom liked, who always went with her when she left. Darkness was an invisibility cloak, allowing freedom from detection by the cops and the abusive shit of a man they'd spent the last several years running from.

Daylight was far more frightening.

The camper they called home was nothing more than a king-sized mattress they all shared and a short stretch of cabinets along the wall opposite the sliding door. Nothing was in those cabinets besides a few dishes, a dented stock pot, a hot plate they rarely used, and a camp lantern. Bella found the light and flipped the dial to turn it on. The battery was dying, but it was better than nothing. She set it on the counter beside a narrow sink.

"Scoot over."

Poppy shifted, making space on the bed. She sat beside the little girl and put an arm around her thin shoulders, pulling her in close.

Poppy wrinkled her nose. "You were smoking again."

"Yeah."

"Smoking's bad for you."

"Yeah, I know."

"Why do you do it?"

Probably for the same reasons Mom wasted her life flitting around the country, chasing men and her next high: an addictive personality, a deep need for love, a tendency for self-destruction, a disdain for convention. Bella was nothing if not her mother's daughter. If not for Poppy, she'd be Jessica Lowe's copy in every way.

Poppy's birth had saved her from their mother's fate.

The least she could do was feed the child.

"Tell you what. I saw a truck stop off the highway a ways back, and it had a Wendy's. Want nuggets?"

Poppy's face lit up. "And a Frosty?"

Bella thought of the crumpled five in her pocket that she'd been hoarding

for two weeks. It was all the money she had left from the forty she'd taken from Mom's purse before Jessica smoked, injected, or snorted it all. Only enough for nuggets, but she couldn't say no to all that hope in Poppy's eyes.

"Sure. We'll even get some fries."

She'd figure something out. Maybe she'd get lucky, and it'd be a lonely guy working the late shift. She could exchange a blow job for the meal. Her stomach twisted at the thought, but it wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last. She'd do anything to keep Poppy safe.

In that way, she was very much not like her mother.

Poppy's excitement faded, and she looked out the back window at the foggy street. "What about Mom? She told us to wait."

"Fuck Mom."

Poppy gasped, then smothered a giggle behind her hand. "You said a bad word."

She cupped the girl's face and waited until their gazes met. She wanted to make sure her next words were understood because she might not be around to protect her sister forever. Two more years, and she'd be eighteen, legally an adult. She'd do everything in her power to keep Poppy by her side when she finally left, but it might not be possible at first. She'd need a job and a place to live. She'd need to prove she was a better parent than their mom. Who knew how much time that would take?

"Listen, Pop. This is important, okay? You never, *ever* put Mom's needs before your own, no matter what she says you owe her. Because you don't owe her anything. Real moms are supposed to protect their kids, care for them—make sure they are safe and happy and comfortable—but she has never done any of that. She's never put you first. So if you're hungry, you get food, and fuck Mom. Let me hear you say it."

Poppy's eyes widened. "Fuck Mom," she whispered, gaze darting like she was still afraid she'd be reprimanded for the swear.

"Louder."

"Fuck Mom!" she shouted, then squealed with laughter.

"There you go." Bella got off the bed and slid into the driver's seat. She didn't have a license—needed money and a stable address for one—but she'd been driving the camper since she was tall enough to reach the pedals. As she cranked the key and prayed the engine started, tiny arms circled her neck from behind and squeezed.

"I don't need a mom," Poppy said and kissed her cheek. "I have you."

chapter three

THAT LAST GLUG of Jameson had done the trick, thankfully shutting off Zak's brain and allowing him to drop into sleep during the long ride from town to his cabin on Bluff Road. He didn't remember Ash wrestling him out of the SUV or dumping him into bed. He didn't remember his former friend staring down at him with a disapproving frown, sad eyes, and a whispered, "What happened to you over there, man?"

All he knew was the floaty, buzzy peace of an alcohol-fueled sleep.

At least until the nightmares reached through the pleasant darkness and wrapped their boney hands around him, dragging him down into their oily muck. They always started the same—a rehash of the moment he fucked his life. He'd walked into a room at the abandoned U.S. base way up in the Hindu Kush, and saw a scared sixteen-year-old girl strapped into a bomb vest, trembling and white-faced and determined to pull out the wires until the vest exploded. She'd been willing to kill herself rather than become a martyr for her megalomaniac husband.

He crouched in front of her and caught her wrists. "Tehani, don't. It's not active."

She blinked at him like she didn't understand, even though he'd spoken in Pashto.

"It's not active," he said softly again. "I made sure it wouldn't hurt you."

He checked over his shoulder at a soft sound from the hall. Was that a footstep? Askar, Jahangir Siddiqui's second in command, was growing suspicious of him, and he knew that the unfeeling bastard was having him followed.

They were out of time.

He surged to his feet and scooped Tehani into his arms. She was so light—he'd carried heavier rucks—that he had her halfway out the window before she fought him. She sent a fist flying. He dodged it, but wasn't fast enough. It glanced off the side of his head and rang his bell enough that he nearly dropped her.

"Fuck!"

Tehani froze and stared at him, and he realized too late that he'd spoken in English.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

He switched back to Pashto and set her back on her feet. "You need to trust me."

At the sound of voices in the hall, he glanced toward the door and swore again. This time, he didn't bother to hide the English curse.

She shied away from him. "You're American!"

He gripped her shoulders, holding her still. "Tehani, do you want to leave here?"

She nodded, and her veil slipped off her head. Her dark eyes were huge in her too-thin face.

Tehani hadn't been his mission, but he couldn't leave her behind. He'd grown too attached to the feisty, stubborn girl in his months deep undercover, so when he discovered her husband's plan to kill her, he'd rigged the vest, making it inactive, then boosted her out the window. He followed, but landed badly and jacked up his ankle. He couldn't outrun the fighters chasing them, so he'd sent her on ahead with his intel and hoped it reached American troops in time. She escaped, survived, and thrived.

He... hadn't.

Pain.

It hit so bright and hot that it reached through his dreams into reality. Sweat beaded on his skin. His breath sawed in and out of his lungs. He twisted in bed, knotting the sheets under him.

As an Army Ranger, he'd trained to withstand torture, but no amount of training could prepare a guy for the reality of having his back stripped to ribbons with a cane. Over and over again, each strike worse than the last. Blow after blow until his voice gave out from screaming, and the copper-penny scent of his own blood flooded his senses, and his knees collapsed from under him. His body swung forward, catching on his bound arms, wrenching his shoulders nearly out of their sockets. Unconsciousness would've been a

blessing, but he was too damn stubborn. He stayed awake through it all until they tired of the cane and continued the beating with fists and boots...

Zak bolted upright, gagging on a scream and the surge of liquor burning back up his throat. His stomach emptied in an eruption, splattering the floor beside his bed. When it was over, he fell back on the mattress and stared up at the spinning ceiling, shaking and sweat-slicked and cold down to the marrow of his bones.

He couldn't go back there.

No more sleep.

He fumbled in his pocket for the baggie of Stay Awake he'd bought from a dealer at The Palace earlier in the night, praying Ash hadn't searched him and taken it before leaving.

Still there.

He breathed out in relief and then smirked. Some cop Ash was.

He didn't bother with neat lines. He just dumped the fine white powder onto the back of his hand and snorted. The rush hit almost instantly, warming his blood, sizzling away the lingering dark slime of the nightmares. The shaking stopped. He felt awake, alive...

Invincible.

This was better. So much better.

He secured his prosthetic leg in place, then took another bump, relishing the hot euphoric buzz. It was the closest he'd been to happiness in two years. He could ride this wave well past dawn. Sleep was overrated.

He grabbed his motorcycle keys. July nights on the Northern California coast were cold and blanketed in fog, but the bike was his only option since his truck was still at the Mad Dog in town. And he sure as hell wasn't going to town. He wanted another run-in with Ash about as much as he wanted to go back to sleep.

He'd cruise up the mountain to Wildcat Ridge and watch the sunrise. If he got lucky, he might even find a party still raging on the Ridge and he wouldn't have to worry about running into Ash. The legalization of marijuana had made the mountain more volatile, and it was too dangerous for anyone in uniform to patrol up there alone. With more people vying for less money, the illegal farmers viciously protected their crops by any means necessary.

There was a reason locals called Mt. Humboldt "Murder Mountain." People often went up there and vanished.

None of that bothered Zak. He liked the mountain, the outlaws, and the backwoods justice. Everyone there was just doing their own thing, and if you didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother you. He wished more people in town were like that.

Why couldn't they let him destroy himself in peace?

The thought made him laugh, and he pushed the bike faster, nearly laying it down around the next curve in the road. Ocean fog had rolled in thick and damp, choking off visibility to only a few feet in front of his headlight. Each hairpin turn on Highway 1 became a death-defying adventure. What waited on the other side of the turn? A rock wall? A cliff dropping into the ocean? More winding road?

Did he care?

Nope.

He was flying.

He was free.

Nothing else mattered.

A pair of headlights suddenly pierced the fog, momentarily blinding him. An old camper van chugged up the hill from the opposite direction. He had time to get out of the way—plenty of time to swerve back into his own lane on the narrow road—but one thought crystalized from the buzzy haze in his brain.

This is it.

The escape he'd wanted for two long years.

Once, during a late-night PTSD-fueled phone call, his friend Greer Wilde asked if he ever thought of killing himself. Yes, all the time. It was constant, eating away at the back of his mind like a cancer.

"Why don't you do it?" Greer had asked.

"Same reason you don't," he'd shot back because he hadn't wanted to admit that he was a coward and too afraid to take that step.

But *this* wasn't suicide. This would just be a tragic accident. His family and friends would mourn, but they'd also be relieved. The town gossips would *tut-tut-tut* about that "poor Hendricks boy," but they'd be relieved, too.

It was better this way.

But in the heartbeat before the collision, he saw the driver's face—a ghostly, terrified oval in the splash of his headlight beam.

A girl.

Just a girl.

Like Tehani.

Jesus.

He wrenched the handlebars to the right, overcorrecting. The van clipped his back tire and sent him skidding across the highway. There was no guardrail. The front tire hit the narrow strip of slick grass along the shoulder, and the bike flipped out from under him. He sailed over the handlebars, tumbling through the air, aware that he was falling too far, too fast. He should've hit the ground by now, but the earth had vanished.

He'd gone over the edge of the cliff.

Any second, he'd hit the ocean and sink, broken, into its dark, cold embrace. He wasn't afraid. He'd gotten what he wanted, after all.

He was flying.

He was dead.

It was what he wanted...

So what the fuck was this panicked surge of regret?

When he finally landed, he wasn't greeted by the oblivion of the ocean like he thought. He hit a rock outcropping and felt a bone snap in his arm as he bounced.

No. No! Fuck, this wasn't what he wanted.

He flailed for something to grab, but his left arm was as useless as his missing leg. His prosthesis was gone. His helmet was gone—had he even been wearing one? Squat bushes reached for him with thorny hands and ripped his clothes, tore his skin. With the world tumbling around him, he had no sense of direction anymore. The road, the hill, the cliff's edge, the ocean. Road, hill, cliff, ocean. Road, hill, cliff, ocean. It blurred around him until, suddenly, it all stopped.

He landed on his back with his head uphill and the sheer drop of the cliff inches from the bottom of his boot. The fog, disturbed by his fall, swirled and then settled around him like a damp blanket. He couldn't hear anything. Couldn't feel anything.

Maybe he had died, and this was Hell. No sound, no feeling. Just endless gray.

Something small hit the top of his head. Then another. Pebbles pinged around him. He could hear again, too. Footfalls crunched on stone—someone was kicking the pebbles loose as they skidded down the hillside.

Zak tried to crane his neck to see, but pain swamped his senses and threw him back in time to Afghanistan. He'd never been rescued. His whole life for

the past two years was only a figment of his imagination, and now Askar was coming back to torture him some more.

When hands touched him, he struck out at the ghostly figure in the fog. The female gasp of surprise caught him off guard.

Tehani?

Her face floated before his eyes. Not as she was then at sixteen—scared and too thin and still so stubbornly determined—but as she was now, a brilliant high school senior who already had a full ride to Stanford next fall. She lived down the street with his parents. They had sponsored her student visa at his request, then officially adopted her when they discovered she had no family left in Afghanistan save for a sister-in-law. She slept in his old bedroom and attended his high school with so many of the same teachers he'd had. He hadn't died for her, but he'd given her his life.

And he couldn't even look at her anymore.

Tears spilled in hot tracks from the corners of his eyes. He reached out a hand to her, surprised to see how bloody it was. Past and present blurred. He was simultaneously in Afghanistan, beaten and broken, and bleeding out on a cliff in California.

I'm sorry, he wanted to say, but something was blocking his throat. He tried to clear it and blood spilled from his mouth.

“Oh my God.” She grasped his hand, and her face came into focus. “Oh, fuck.”

Not Tehani.

The driver of the van.

This girl had the same brown skin, but her hair hung in long blond dreadlocks from under the hood of her sweatshirt. She had a nose ring and his gaze zeroed in on the small gold hoop. It sparkled when she spoke. “I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't see you! I called for help. Hang on.”

He wished he could tell her it wasn't her fault. He was the dumbass who tried to kill himself. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But when he opened his mouth, more blood bubbled out rather than words.

“Oh, fuck,” she said again and looked up as a police siren cleaved the fog. She tried to release his hand, but he held on tight. “Please. I can't stay. They're coming to help you, but I can't be here. I don't have a license. They'll take Poppy from me. I can't—”

He let her go as his strength faded. The last thing he saw before unconsciousness took him was the girl vanishing into the fog.

chapter four

ANNA RAWLINGS BREATHED a sigh of relief as her twin brother's Tahoe stopped in the circle drive in front of her house. "You found him?"

Ash eased out of the driver's seat and circled to the back of the SUV. "Yeah, I got him."

She raced down the steps and reached him just as he pulled open the back hatch. Ranger sulked inside and glared at them with his bright yellow eyes. His lips curled off his teeth in warning.

"All yours, sis. I'm not touching him again." Ash stepped back and crossed his arms protectively over his chest.

Some big bad sheriff he was.

She rolled her eyes at him, then approached the kennel slowly, speaking to Ranger in a soft, soothing voice. "You're okay. Let's get you out of there now, huh?"

The dog relaxed marginally. He never fully relaxed, but she hoped to change that. After the hell he'd been through, he deserved a peaceful retirement. He allowed her to put the muzzle on him but wasn't happy about it. He all but steamed with resentment. "There you go. What a good boy!"

Ash snorted. "I think you need to look up the definition of good."

"Oh, no." She stroked her hand over Ranger's back and felt his muscles trembling under his beautiful brindle coat. "He's a very good boy under all of that snarl. He's just scared." She clipped on his leash and led him toward the barn next door to her house. "Where did you find him?"

"Going through the trash behind The Palace. I nearly got bit trying to wrangle him into the rig, then had to deal with a disturbance call at Mad Dog." He sighed heavily and rubbed a hand around the back of his neck as he followed her. "Zak."

He didn't need to elaborate. That name said it all.

She ignored the clench in her belly and kept her pace even. Feelings filtered down the leash, and she didn't want to stress Ranger out any more than he already was. But would she ever be able to hear Zak Hendricks' name without feeling a messy mix of... something? It had been fifteen freaking years since he took her virginity and bounced off to join the Army without so much as a see-ya-later. She shouldn't still care, but every once in a while, during her quiet moments, the hurt and shame crept back in to torture her.

And, dammit, she cared.

Zak was her first love, and despite what he'd done to her, witnessing his slow-mo self-destruction was painful.

She settled Ranger into a new run—a heavy-duty one this time, with cinderblock walls he couldn't chew through—then faced her twin again. “Thanks for finding him. And I'm sorry about Zak. I know seeing him like that hurts you.”

Ash opened his mouth, but instead of saying anything, he shook his head and slung an arm over her shoulder. “I'm on break for the next twenty minutes. How about a coffee for your big bro?”

“You're fifteen minutes older.”

“And fifteen minutes wiser.”

She bumped her hip against his and felt his phone vibrate a second before it rang. “You're in demand tonight.”

“So much for my break.” He groaned and released her to slide the phone from his pocket. He answered with a brisk, “Rawlings.”

“Want a to-go cup?” she whispered.

He nodded, but then his grateful expression shifted as he listened to the caller. It ran the gamut from anger to concern, then finally dread—all in the space of a heartbeat. Anna knew her twin's face as well as she knew her own. She could read him like a favorite novel. This wasn't a normal call-out. Something was very wrong.

“Where?” he demanded of the caller, and his strides lengthened. “Okay, I'll be there in ten.”

She ran to catch up. “What happened?”

“A one-vehicle accident on Highway 1. Dispatch said a motorcycle went off the cliff.”

Her breath stalled in her lungs. “You don't think—”

“I don't have to think. I know.” He looked at her over the hood of his

SUV, and in the warm yellow glow of her porch light, she saw a glint of tears in his eyes. “His truck was still at the Mad Dog. I drove him home.”

She grabbed the passenger door handle as he slid behind the wheel. “I’m going with you.”

“Anna, no. You—”

“He was my friend at one time, too.” *And so much more.* She settled into the seat and crossed her arms mulishly, glaring at him, daring him to disagree. “I’m going.”

Instead of arguing—her twin was a smart man and knew it would only waste time—Ash grumbled something under his breath and shoved the vehicle into drive. The ride was tense silence, broken only by the crackling murmur of his police radio until he hit the edge of town and flipped on his siren.

Highway 1 followed the coast, zigzagging while sandwiched between mountains and ocean. It was dangerous on a clear day. On a night like this, with fog smothering the countryside in a thick blanket, it was treacherous. The SUV’s headlights barely penetrated the gloom.

“That’s his bike,” Ash said suddenly. He cut the siren and pulled his Tahoe sideways across the road, lights still flashing, reflecting garishly off the fog. The motorcycle lay in a twisted heap on the shoulder, but there was no sign of Zak.

Anna jumped out and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Zak!”

No answer.

“Zak!” Ash’s voice boomed, carrying farther than hers, but still not far enough. The fog muffled everything. Still, they both waited for a breathless beat, hoping for a response.

Nothing.

Her stomach cramped with dread. What if Zak had gone off the cliff into the ocean? They’d never find him. He’d be lost forever. His poor family would never have closure—

No.

She shut down that line of thought. Nothing was lost forever. She *would* find him. She looked at her brother. “I’ll go home and get Winston. He’ll find Zak’s body.” Her golden retriever had trained for search and rescue since he was a puppy and had an incredible find record. He wouldn’t let her down now.

“Take my truck.” Ash grabbed a toolbox from the back, then tossed her

the keys.

It was only as she slid into the driver's seat that she realized she was already thinking of this as a recovery mission.

Zak's body, she'd said.

Not Zak.

Not alive.

Something tore open in her chest, and tears flooded her eyes. Despite everything, the man was a hero. Damaged and twisted by war, but he still deserved better than this ending. She tightened her hands on the steering wheel and drew a breath, forcing back the tears. She needed to get Winston but couldn't bring herself to lift her foot off the brake. She watched Ash light a flare and drop it on the road. The phosphorous-red glow reflected off something metal in the grass as it fell.

Anna hesitated, then shut the SUV off and climbed out. An old, dented stock pot sat upright in the grass on the side of the road, like someone set it there intentionally.

Weird.

She picked it up, and her hand came away red. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought it was blood, but it was too waxy between her fingers. Lipstick? Someone had drawn an arrow pointing down the hill, away from the road.

Anna looked around, but the fog was too damn thick to see more than a few feet in any direction. She used the flashlight on her phone to scan the hillside, and the beam reflected off something farther down.

A helmet.

Zak's helmet. She could tell by the smiley face on the side. He'd told her once that his nickname in the military had been Smiley because he had smiled through everything the Army threw at him.

Until he returned home two years ago and stopped smiling altogether.

The helmet also sat upright, like someone had deliberately marked the spot with it. The yellow emoji winked in her flashlight beam under another lipstick arrow.

She followed and found a prosthetic leg arranged with the foot pointing down the hill. Another arrow. Beyond, a dark shape lay motionless in the grass.

"Ash, I found him!" She started down the hill, slipping in the slick grass and dislodging small rocks under her boots. She had to take a minute and

slow down, or she'd slide right over the edge of the cliff. She sat and scooted the rest of the way on her butt.

He was...

Oh, God.

There was blood everywhere, soaking the front of his T-shirt under his leather jacket. His face was bruised and swollen, his eyes open to slits and unfocused. His left arm was broken, twisted unnaturally.

Her hand shook as she searched for a pulse. As soon as she touched him, he flinched away like he was trying to escape and made a sound that was all animalistic fear, reminding her of the abused dogs she rescued. This was not the cocky bad boy with the beautiful smile who stole her heart in high school.

She released a choppy exhale and impatiently swiped at the tears leaking from her eyes. "Shh, Zak. It's Anna. You're okay."

He tried to say something, and blood bubbled from his mouth. Shit, he was bleeding internally. He needed paramedics and a hospital.

"Ash!" She looked up the hill, searching for her brother, and started to get to her feet. In a lightning-fast move she wouldn't have guessed him capable of, Zak grabbed her hand so hard the bones in her fingers shifted.

"Can't... go... back..."

She dropped to her knees beside him. "You're not going anywhere except a hospital."

His gaze locked on hers, and the desperation she saw there broke her heart.

"Help," he whispered. "Help... me..."

"I will," she promised as his hand went limp and his eyes rolled back.

An ambulance siren whooped from the road, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Anna?" Ash called.

"Down here!" She found she couldn't release Zak's hand until the paramedics muscled her out of the way. She was too afraid the contact was the only thing holding him to this world.

"Hey." Ash wrapped an arm around her shoulders as the paramedics carried Zak up to the road. "Hey, don't cry. He's a fighter. He'll be okay."

She burrowed into her brother's side, inhaling the comforting scent of him, and didn't point out that he sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Help me.

If Zak died, that plea, and the fearful desperation in his eyes, would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Help me.

And if he lived, she was going to fulfill her promise. Whether he liked it or not.

chapter
five

Six Weeks Later

BELLA WASN'T PREPARED for the storm. It came, as it always did, out of the blue. She'd sent Poppy to the neighbors to play with their adorable twin girls and was thrilled to have a few hours of quiet time. She'd found a book with a gorgeous cover that someone had left behind at a campsite and had been sneaking chapters at night after Mom and Poppy were asleep. It was a sweeping fantasy with a brooding dark fae prince, and an ordinary human girl swept up in the danger and intrigue of the fairy world. She couldn't wait to see how it ended.

But then the storm came.

It started with the slam of a car door.

She looked up from the book and saw Mom, who hadn't come home last night, get out of a beat-up old truck. A greasy man with a drug-scarred face sat in the driver's seat. He didn't look like he was awake enough to drive, but he shoved the clunker of a truck into reverse and dug holes in the ground as he peeled out.

The sound of the tires made Bella think of that foggy night six weeks ago and the man on the motorcycle. A few days after the accident, she'd found a copy of the local newspaper that someone had left on a picnic table. It said he'd been transferred an hour away to the nearest trauma hospital, but she had heard nothing since then.

She really hoped he was okay.

"Where's Poppy?" Jessica's eyes were too bright and ping-ponged around the campsite. She tore open the door of their van and flung their blankets onto the ground. "Poppy!"

"Wait, Mom. It's okay. She's not in there, but she's safe." Resigning herself to the fact she would not be finishing her book this afternoon, Bella closed it and pushed out of the camp chair she'd been lounging in. The chair was broken, with only her weight holding its legs in the right place. When she stood, it collapsed into the dirt.

Just like her life—held together with duct tape, gravity, and a prayer.

She exhaled hard and followed her mom into their van, picking up everything Jessica had tossed out as she went. "Mom, please stop. She's safe. She's playing with the kids from the next campsite over."

"You let her go *by herself*?"

“It’s fine.” She dumped the blankets in the passenger seat. Now she had to scrounge up change for the laundromat in town. She wasn’t about to let her sister sleep in a dirty bed. “I know the family. The Whelans from Utah. They’ve been here for two weeks, and they’re nice. Mr. Whelan works in tech, and Mrs. Whelan is a teacher, and they have twins, Sadie and Millie. They’re leaving tomorrow, and the girls wanted Poppy to spend the day with them. They’ve become really good friends.”

“How many times have I told you, you can’t trust *anyone*?”

“I know, I know, but it’s good for Pop to be with kids her age for once.”

Jessica wasn’t listening. She crashed out of the van. The door banged shut behind her, nearly catching Bella’s hand.

Shit. This was bad. She had to get to Poppy before Mom.

She scrambled for the handle, hands shaking from the sudden adrenaline surge, but by the time she got out, Jessica was already storming back to their campsite with a crying Poppy in tow. Her grip would leave finger-shaped bruises on that tiny, fragile arm.

“Mom, don’t. Please. It’s not her—”

Jessica threw Poppy into the van and slammed the door shut. “You stay in there until I say you can come out.”

“Mom, please—”

Jessica whirled on her. She never saw the backhand coming. She should’ve, but for some reason, she was always surprised when the abuse happened. Maybe because it wasn’t a regular thing, and there was never any sign it was coming—no red flags. Mom had hit her while high and while sober, while angry, and even when she was calm.

Metallic blood filled Bella’s mouth. Her lip had split. She swiped at the blood with her hand and tried not to look at Mrs. Whelan, who stood at the boundary of their campsite and watched with her arms crossed and a worried frown.

Jessica turned on her next. “Mind your own business, you nosy bitch.”

Mrs. Whelan’s shoulders straightened. She gathered her girls, who had come out to see what all the noise was about, and they disappeared into their huge, fancy RV.

“Mom, it’s okay,” Bella said, but Jessica was on a rampage.

Nothing would get through to her until the rage faded. She stomped around their campsite, kicking over their chairs and dumping the jugs of water Bella had carried from the pump for washing up. Water splashed over

her book.

“No!” She lunged for it, tried to save it from getting too wet, but of course, that drew Mom’s attention.

Jessica picked it up and looked it over. “What is *this*? Smut?” She ripped out a handful of pages and threw them at Bella. “Disgusting little whore.” She shredded the book.

Bella scrambled to pick up the pages, clutching them protectively to her chest, then realized Mom wasn’t standing there anymore. She was at the van’s door, reaching for the handle, screaming at Poppy to shut up.

No. Not Poppy. She didn’t deserve their mother’s wrath.

Bella shoved to her feet and let all the anger and hatred inside her boil over. “I’m the whore? At least I only read about sex. You’ll open your legs for anyone who will give you your next high!”

“You bitch!” Jessica flew at her with bruising fists, biting nails, and pointed shoes that felt like knives in her stomach and side.

Poppy continued to wail from inside the van, adding to the chaos, and she folded herself into a ball, covered her head with her arms, and wished she’d been born into a nice family like the Whelans. Instead, she’d gotten Jessica and a deadbeat father who disappeared when she was only a toddler.

She had flashes of her dad sometimes, usually in dreams—a black man with a big grin and booming laugh who had handled her gently. Those bits of memory were probably more fantasy than reality, but she clung to them anyway. Her dad loved her and only left because Jessica made him, or scared him away, or something.

And, like that, the storm passed, leaving silence and destruction in its wake.

She still didn’t move, not fully trusting it was over until she felt her mother sit beside her. She lifted her head from her knees. Jessica wrapped an arm around her, and she forced herself not to flinch at the touch. She didn’t want to do anything that might spark the storm again.

“I’m so sorry, Belladonna.” Jessica buried her face in Bella’s shoulder. Tears fell on her skin and burned like acid. She wanted to shove the woman away, but that would only set her off again, so she stroked a hand over her mom’s head instead.

Jessica sobbed. “I get so scared, you know? Jake is out there looking for us and could snatch Poppy away anytime. He still has custody. He can take her, and the cops won’t do a damn thing to stop it because he’s one of them!”

You *know* what he did to her. He *touched* her. I won't let him have her to ruin."

"It's okay, Mom." Her voice came out thin, and even she could hear the edge of fear in it. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I know you just want to protect us."

"Oh my God, I'm such a terrible mom."

"No." Bella nearly choked on the protest and told herself she had to perform better than this if she wanted any chance at a peaceful night. Jessica *was* an awful mom, but she supposed, in the grand scheme of things, there were worse ones out there. And it wasn't like she could trade her mom for a better model, like a car.

She had to work with what she'd been given.

And she'd been given Jessica.

She sucked in a breath and injected as much sincerity into her tone as possible. "You're not a terrible mom. You want to protect us. Bad moms don't protect their children."

Jessica smiled. "That's right. I'll do *anything* to keep you safe."

Except get a job. Or get an apartment. Stop using drugs. Stop hanging out with burned-out creeps like the one who dropped her off. Stop hitting us whenever the mood strikes.

A page of the book fluttered by, dancing on the salty ocean breeze.

Bella had to swallow hard to dislodge the knot of resentment. "I know."

Jessica popped to her feet. Her boho shawl with the bright southwest print and fringed edges swirled around her. "We've stayed here too long—time to hit the road and go north to Seattle. You'll like it there. Their music scene is lit. Or maybe east to the Rockies and Denver. Road trip! New town, new adventure."

Bella squeezed her eyes closed. Not again. Road tripping wasn't an adventure when it was all they ever did. At this point, the real adventure would be a house and school—a regular life.

Besides, they couldn't leave now. Bella finally had a lead on an under-the-table job she could do without a work permit. She'd also signed Poppy up for school with Mrs. Whelan's help, which started soon. She liked it here. She'd fallen in love with the soaring trees, craggy cliffs, and crashing ocean in the past six weeks. This part of the California coast was the most beautiful place she'd ever seen—and she'd seen a lot of the country in her sixteen years.

But she had to tread carefully with Mom or risk another storm. Make her think staying was her idea.

“That sounds awesome,” she said, voice bright, almost chirpy. “But maybe not the Rockies right now. It’ll be winter soon. All that snow. It’s probably already snowing in some places up there. Seattle would be cool, but doesn’t it get like a ton of rain?”

Jessica winced. “We’ll go back south. San Diego.”

“That puts us only a few hours from Jake. I don’t want to be that close to him.”

“Well, then, where do you suggest?”

She pretended to think about it for several seconds. “We’re still safe here. You haven’t seen Jake around or anything? He doesn’t know we’re here?”

“No. He can’t possibly know.”

“Wouldn’t we be easier to track if we’re on the road? There are cameras all over. He’d know how to find the footage. And he probably asked his cop friends to watch the highways for anyone who looks like us.”

It took a minute, but the light clicked on in Jessica’s drug-addled brain. “He’ll be looking for us in cities. He probably expects us to go to Seattle or Denver.”

“Small towns like this are safer,” Bella agreed.

“How did you get to be so smart?” Jessica slung an arm around her shoulder again and hugged her too tightly. “Okay, how about this? We’ll stay here through winter and figure out where we want to go next in the spring.”

“And maybe... we can find an apartment for rent?” She was pushing her luck. She knew she was but couldn’t help herself.

Jessica’s eyes flashed with temper. “What, our camper isn’t good enough?”

“It’s just... it might be cold over the winter. For Poppy, I mean. I don’t mind it. Just thought—”

“What, you want a fancy RV like that flashy house on wheels next door?”

“No, I was only thinking of Poppy. I—”

Jessica shoved her. She wasn’t braced for it—let her guard down again, dammit—and fell back, whacking her head on the camper’s fender hard enough that she saw stars.

When she righted herself, Mom was gone.

She scrambled to her feet and made sure Jessica really had left before opening the van and climbing into bed beside her sister. Her entire body hurt.

Her ribs ached, and a sharp pain stabbed through her chest every time she drew a breath, but it didn't matter. She'd take a million more blows if it protected Poppy from having to endure even one.

Poppy had sobbed so hard that she'd given herself the hiccups. As expected, she had a hand-shaped bruise on her thin arm. "I wish Mrs. Whelan could adopt us," she said between hiccups.

Bella wrapped the little girl up in her arms. She wasn't about to admit she wanted that, too, with all her heart. From this angle on the bed, she could see straight into the Whelans' RV. The twins were at the table, happily chattering away while they ate lunch. Mrs. Whelan's face appeared in the window, peering out between the blinds, the worried frown still pulling down the corners of her perfect mouth.

Bella pulled the ratty shade down, plunging them into a familiar, cozy darkness. She didn't want to see the other woman's worry or pity.

She tucked her sister's head against her sore chest and nuzzled Poppy's hair, which was freshly washed and braided and smelling of strawberries, thanks to Mrs. Whelan. "We'll be okay, Poppy. I promise you; we'll be okay. We have each other, and that's all we need."

chapter **six**

PROBATION.

License suspended.

Enrollment in an outpatient drug and alcohol treatment program.

Zak only half-listened as the judge listed off his punishments like a god giving out commandments. He was too aware of the disappointed, disapproving gazes on the back of his head. His parents and siblings. Ash and Anna. He wished they had all stayed away.

Mandatory therapy for PTSD.

One hundred hours of community service.

It was bullshit. The only person he'd hurt was himself, and he'd already spent the last six weeks recovering from the broken arm and punctured lung with minimal drugs for pain management. Because, God forbid, they feed the junkie's habit.

He wasn't a junkie. He just wanted... oblivion. Was that so much to ask?

His lawyer patted him on the back and congratulated him. "It could've been worse. You'll be able to apply to lift the license suspension once you complete the treatment program." Then he turned and shook Grady Hendricks' hand and said the same thing.

At that moment, Zak hated his father for hiring the man. He'd been ready to plead guilty and face whatever punishment the court saw fit. He deserved it. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw a face, pale with terror in the splash of his headlight. He could've killed someone besides himself.

"Zakir."

His mother's soft voice had a surge of tears rushing to his eyes. He wanted to turn to her, fall into her arms, and breathe in her orange blossom perfume. He wanted her to comfort him like she always had after a nightmare

when he was a child, but then she said in Pashto, "Please come home."

And he remembered the nightmare was his life now.

His skin crawled. The language used to make him think of home and comfort. It used to remind him of laughter at his American father's bumbling attempts to learn it and of his mother's fierce love, but it was the same language his torturers had used.

"Who are you, traitor?" Askar grabbed a young woman and her toddler, civilian prisoners, and shoved her into the chair across the Zak's. His left eye was swollen shut, and his right had been taped open so he wouldn't miss a second of the gore. They'd given up on torturing him, realizing that no amount of pain they inflicted would make him talk. Instead, they'd started hurting innocent people. Villager after villager dragged in front of him, shot and shoved aside. But the mother and child were too much.

"Don't," Zak whispered around the lump in his throat.

Askar pressed the gun to her temple. "Who do you work for?"

Zak almost broke. He opened his mouth to spill it all, tell them everything. He could take all the pain and humiliation they dished out, but he could not sit idly by while women and children were murdered in cold blood.

But the look on Askar's face as he held the gun to the woman's temple stopped him from uttering a sound. The little boy and his mother were both already dead in that soldier's eyes. They all were, and nothing Zak said would change that fate. He could spill all the state secrets he knew, and he still wouldn't save any of them.

"You fucking prick!" Tapping into a reserve of strength he didn't know he had, he kicked out with his chained legs. He unbalanced his chair, but he also nailed Askar in the balls, and the bullet meant for the woman went into the ceiling.

"Run!"

She didn't listen. She clung to her child, sobbing in big hyperventilating gulps.

After a moment, Askar straightened. Wincing in pain, he ignored the woman and child and limped over to Zak's overturned chair. Still, there was no flicker of emotion. No anger, just a flat assessment. "Why risk death to save a woman you don't know?"

Zak gritted his teeth. The fall had sent his already-aching body flying to new heights of pain, but he wasn't about to let on how much damage he'd done to himself. He met the soldier's impassive stare with as much defiance

as he could muster. “If you don’t already know the answer to that, then you’re incapable of understanding and I’d rather not waste my last breath explaining it.”

“So you know,” Askar said, “you didn’t save the woman or her son.” And he pressed gun’s barrel against Zak’s kneecap.

Bang!

Zak flinched and shoved out of his chair, the legs scraping loudly in the sudden silence. “I’m free to go?” he asked the lawyer, careful to keep his gaze away from his family.

“Uh...” The lawyer slid a glance toward his dad. “Yes. You’ll have to report to your probation—”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Zak,” his dad said. “Let me take you home—”

He shook off the hand Grady set on his arm and strode out. He’d thought the sound of the gun had been in his head, but discovered the heavy door loudly closed every time someone exited the room.

Bang!

Just a door.

Cold sweat had his shirt clinging to his spine by the time he stepped outside. He gulped in a lung full of cool autumn air and shook out his hands. His fists had been so tightly clenched his fingernails had left angry half-moon imprints on his palms.

“Zak, wait!”

Jesus, why couldn’t they just let him escape?

He growled and spun to face Anna Rawlings. He must have looked feral because her protective twin, walking a half-step behind her, shoved her behind his body.

Like Zak would ever hurt a woman. Yeah, he was a bastard, but he had some lines he wouldn’t cross. “What do you want?”

Ash plucked a folded sheet of paper out of Anna’s hand and, ignoring her protests, shoved it at Zak’s chest. “Your community service starts in one hour.”



Zak took one look at the court order, snarled, and shredded it.

Well, okay. That didn't go over well.

Anna released a breath and bent to gather the pieces of paper. She kept one eye on Zak as he walked away. His back was as straight as a steel rod, his movements stiff as if he still experienced pain from the accident. He was too thin, almost gaunt. Like a mean, feral street dog, wasting away but too distrustful of people to accept a helping hand.

"Are you sure you want to do this, AJ?" Ash asked with a heavy sigh and knelt to help her. "You don't need to put your reputation on the line for him."

But I promised I'd help him. She didn't say it out loud. Her brother was practical to a fault, a rule-follower with a strong sense of right and wrong and little tolerance for creative interpretations of the law. He was too jaded by Zak's antics these past two years and didn't think rehabilitation was possible, but it was *always* possible with enough patience and kindness.

At least, it was with dogs.

She had to believe it worked on people, too.

She *needed* it to work with Zak.

"You already have enough on your plate with those developers sniffing around the rescue," Ash continued, all practical reason. "Why take this on now?"

She ducked her head, hiding her wince. Monarch Development Corp. was more than sniffing around her land. They were taking her to court with a claim that her family never legally bought the land they'd been on for hundreds of years, and the presiding judge was the same one who just sentenced Zak, so her motives weren't entirely altruistic. Yes, Zak needed help. Yes, she thought she could help him. But showing the judge her rescue was worth more to the community than another resort would go a long way toward strengthening her case.

She straightened and faced Ash. "Someone has to believe in him, or he'll never believe in himself enough to seek help."

His gaze softened. "That someone doesn't always have to be you."

"Who else? *You?* You've given up on him." She waved a hand back toward the courthouse. "Did you see his family? They made the barest effort to connect. *They* are giving up on him. I won't."

"You have no idea what you've signed up for, but I can see there's no talking you out of it." Ash exhaled hard and gave her the pieces of paper he'd gathered. "Zak's poison. He's always been a little dangerous—I mean, look

at the trouble he got me into when we were kids. But now it's—he's like a malignant cancer destroying everything he touches. He doesn't care who he hurts, and if he hurts you—" His voice cracked.

"I love you for worrying about me." She cupped one bearded cheek and raised to her toes to kiss his other. "But I'm stronger than you think I am. I got this."

"If he gets to be too much, remember there's no shame in backing out. They can easily reassign him to garbage duty with a highway crew."

It wasn't an option, but she couldn't let him know the truth—that she had to make this work or there was a very good chance she'd lose their family's land—so she simply nodded. "I'll keep it in mind."

Ash covered her hand with his, then stepped out of her reach as one of his deputies came out of the courthouse and called his name. He glanced in the direction Zak had gone. "He probably won't even show up. If he doesn't, he's in violation of his—"

"I know. I'll call you." She watched her brother walk away, then turned to look in the direction Zak had disappeared.

Please, please show up.

chapter

seven

HE DIDN'T SHOW UP.

Anna sat on the front steps of her house and stared down her driveway, willing him to appear even though Zak's first community service session was supposed to start nearly twenty minutes ago.

"Dammit!"

Winston bumped his head under her arm, and she smiled at her dog, scratching behind his floppy ear. "I'm okay, buddy. Just annoyed. It's like he *wants* to go to jail."

Winston licked her face. She hugged him, then sighed into his amber fur. "Guess I need to go call Ash and hear his I-told-you-so."

As she stood, Winston went on alert. He stiffened and stared intently at the driveway, then wiggled with excitement. She followed his gaze to the man standing on the street at the end of her long drive.

Zak.

He was here.

Late, but he'd taken the first step. He'd come to her. That was all she'd needed of him today.

"Well, look at that. He's here." She patted Winston's side and walked down the driveway, since Zak didn't seem inclined to take that second step yet.

He didn't look any better than he had hours ago at the courthouse. He'd always been a beautiful man with his bronze skin and thick, perpetually tousled black hair. He had dark eyes as rich as melted chocolate and lashes that any woman who had ever spent money on mascara would envy. The girls in school always thought he was a god, a perfect specimen all the other boys should aspire to be like, and he'd soaked up their adoration with his crooked

half-smile and a naughty spark in his eyes.

That was the boy she remembered, the boy she'd secretly loved to distraction, but it wasn't the man standing before her. Those mischievous eyes were full of shadows and spoke of long, sleepless nights.

Haunted.

That was how she'd describe him now. Like he'd seen too many ghosts in his thirty-three years on this planet.

God, he was halfway to a ghost himself. The muscles those high school girls always swooned over were gone. He looked as if a good strong wind could topple him. His jeans hung on him, and then there was his leg...

She realized she was staring and pulled her gaze back to his face. "Thanks for coming."

His lips curled into an ugly sneer. "Like I had a choice."

She didn't flinch back. Just like with her dogs, she knew showing nerves now would be a game-ender. She'd get nowhere with him if he lost respect for her. "You did. Here or jail. I'm glad you chose here."

His snarl faded. After a beat, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Now what?"

"Why don't you come up to the house, and I'll get you something to eat? We can talk."

"I don't want to—"

She'd already turned away and started up the driveway at a brisk pace. If he wanted to complain, he had to catch her first.

She didn't glance back to see if he was following. She wanted to, but this whole thing was going to be a battle of wills, and she was just as stubborn as him. She refused to be the first to give in. She went inside to her kitchen and started pulling ingredients from the fridge for sandwiches. Deli meat, cheese, and an assortment of condiments. When she heard Winston's whimpers of joy from the porch—a typical golden, he loved new people—she let herself have a second of smugness. He'd followed.

She'd won the first war.

The screen door opened and slapped shut. A moment later, Zak stood in her kitchen. He may have been a shell of the man he used to be, but he still filled the small space with his presence, his dark mood charging the air. Winston didn't care. He tap-danced around Zak's legs, begging for attention. The man must have a heart of stone to ignore the dog's big eyes and infectious happiness.

“I don’t want to talk,” Zak finished. “I want to do whatever bullshit task I need to get you to sign off on my papers, then go home.”

She set out four slices of bread and grabbed a butter knife from the cutlery drawer. “Where you can wallow in your misery in peace?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Too bad. You’re mine for the next four hours.” She pointed at the table with her knife. “Sit. Do you like mayo or mustard?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Mayo it is.”

He grumbled but didn’t offer any other protest, so she took it as an agreement. She opened the jar and spread a thin layer on the bread, then added turkey, tomato, cheese, and lettuce. She made the sandwiches bigger than usual because he looked like he could use every calorie and finished the plate with a handful of potato chips and a thick pickle slice because back in high school, he could never resist a pickle. She set the plate in front of him, then went back to the fridge for two cans of sparkling water. As she bumped the door shut with her hip, she caught him staring down at his plate like a man who hadn’t seen food in a very long time.

Her heart clenched. What happened to turn him into this? No, scratch that, she decided as she sat across from him and slid him the can of water. She really didn’t want to know.

“Eat, Zak.”

His hair was too long, having crossed the line from charmingly tousled to tangled mess months ago. He glared at her through the strands. “Why are you doing this?”

“Eating a sandwich? Because I’m hungry.” She wasn’t really, but she took a bite to make her point.

“No.” He growled and shoved a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his face. “*This*. Sponsoring me.”

“Would you rather be picking up trash on the highway?”

“No, I—” He stopped and seemed to struggle for words. A muscle twitched in his jaw under his thick layer of stubble. “You have every reason to hate me. Why help me?”

“Oh.” Her stomach knotted, and she set down her sandwich. So they were going there now. She knew they’d have to talk about it but hadn’t expected him to bring it up first thing. It was probably for the best to air it all out, but she wasn’t ready. She dabbed her mouth with a napkin, giving herself

precious extra seconds to gather her nerves, then met his gaze. “I did hate you.”

“You still should.”

“It was a long time ago.” And she did *not* want to poke at those old wounds. She shrugged as if it was no big deal. “Besides, I didn’t have any attachment to my virginity. I wasn’t saving myself for someone special or anything like that. I just didn’t want to go to college a virgin, so if it wasn’t you that summer, it would’ve been someone else.” All partial truths, but he didn’t need to know how deeply he’d broken her. He was dealing with too many demons as it was. She refused to add her own to the mix.

Zak swore viciously and pushed up from the table. He paced the few quick steps it took to cross her kitchen, then spun back. “I should’ve told you I had joined the military. I should’ve told you I was leaving before I ever touched you. And I should’ve said this years ago...” He trailed off and drew a breath. “I’m sorry.”

Her jaw dropped open. Of all the things she’d expected from this meeting, an apology had been nowhere on that list. A hard knot rose in her throat, old sorrow returning to the surface. She should tell him...

No.

Look at him. He was barely functioning. Nowhere near healthy—physically or mentally—and he needed to be before she told him the whole truth.

It took longer than she would’ve liked to compose herself. “Uh, thank you, but it’s fine. Really. Let’s put it behind us and focus on getting you through this... uh, rough patch. Okay?”

He stared at her for several uncomfortable beats. “You’ve always been too nice.”

“Why do you say that like it’s a weakness? Our world could use as much niceness as it can get, don’t you think?”

He scoffed but returned to his seat and picked up the pickle. He pointed it at her before taking a bite. “Nice people wind up dead.”

“What about your parents? They’re some of the nicest people I know.”

He didn’t respond. Just took another bite of the pickle and stared at her with those haunted eyes.

“Or are you talking about someone specific?”

The shadows in his eyes darkened. He glanced away.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to answer that. I’m not your therapist, but you

will come here for your court-mandated therapy sessions with Dr. Firestone.”

His gaze shifted back to her. “*Here?*”

“Yes. We’re the only veteran treatment program in the county. We have group sessions on Wednesdays and dog therapy sessions on Saturdays. Some of our vets even volunteer here on off days. They find the dogs soothing and we’ve discovered the human-animal bond boosts the results of traditional therapy. You’ll see some familiar faces.”

He didn’t respond. But, she noted with a zing of triumph, he’d picked up the sandwich. Baby steps. She gave him several minutes to eat before she spoke again.

“So,” she said when he was almost done with the sandwich. “For me to sign off on your community service papers, you’ll need to be here twenty-five hours a week for the next four weeks. You’ll feed and walk the dogs, clean the kennels, help with set up and take down for group therapy, help with adoptions and doggy daycare, and assist with training.”

“Is that all?” he muttered.

“Hey, this is *fun*.”

“If you think picking up dog shit is fun, you need to reevaluate your definition.”

“You could pick up highway garbage instead.”

He grumbled and as expected, lost interest in the rest of the sandwich. He shoved the plate away and crossed his arms. He meant it to be a defiant, defensive gesture, but it also spoke of fear and vulnerability. He’d been afraid, on edge from the moment he stepped onto her property. If he knew how much of a glimpse into his damaged psyche he was giving her, he’d shut down completely.

So she had to make sure he didn’t know.

She stood. “C’mon. I’ll show you the facility.”

chapter eight

THE PROBLEM WITH SMALL TOWNS—OTHER than everyone knowing your business—was the past never stayed in the past. There was always something or someone around every corner to remind you of all the things you wanted to forget.

Like a first love.

A first heartbreak.

First fuckups and regrets.

Anna was supposed to stay in his past. He hadn't wanted to see her ever again. But now the woman he'd literally fucked over had become his jailer, the court-mandated key to his freedom.

Karma was a vicious bitch.

He followed Anna outside. The cheery yellow house with the big wrap-around porch had belonged to her parents, and it had changed little in the last fifteen years. He still remembered the distinctive creak of the porch swing from when he used to come over as a kid and play with Ash.

The Rawlings Ranch had been owned by the family since before the town was a town. Ash and Anna's parents used to have a thriving dairy farm, but after they died in a tragic car accident five years ago, the twins had sold off the cattle and torn down all but the biggest barn, which had been repurposed for Anna's dog rescue. With thirteen hundred acres stretching from ocean-front grasslands up into the timber-filled mountains, it was prime real estate and, recently, the town gossips had been buzzing about developers sniffing around the property. From the highest point, you could see the lighthouse to the south and Del Norte Beach to the north, as well as the sea stacks littering the coast. It was an awe-inspiring view.

It was also the first place Zak had kissed Anna.

It had been an abnormally warm spring day at the end of his senior year, with a clear sky made impossibly blue by a calm ocean. He'd gotten into a fight with his dad about joining the Army and stormed off to Rawlings Ranch to vent to his best friend.

But he hadn't found Ash.

Instead, Anna had been home alone.

As long as he lived, he'd never forget the way she looked, sitting on the front porch swing with a book in her hands and a glass of iced green tea sweating on the table beside her. Her dog, an old bloodhound with eyes as droopy as his jowls, snoozed in the sun, and she'd rub her bare foot lovingly over his back whenever she swung forward. Zak had seen her in shorts every summer, thousands of times, but he'd never *noticed* how long and gorgeous her legs were. She had a dainty chain around one ankle and sexy pink polish on her toes.

When had she grown up?

Desire hit him like a sucker-punch to the gut. He hadn't seen it coming, and his steps faltered as he approached her. He surreptitiously pressed a hand to the erection suddenly thrusting against his fly. What the hell was this? He couldn't get a hard-on for Anna.

It was *Anna*, for fuck's sake.

She barely glanced up from her book. "Ash is up on the hill helping Dad cut timber for the new barn."

The "hill," as she called it, was a mountain, and the main trail up was a moderately strenuous hike with an elevation gain of nearly fifteen hundred feet. Ash wouldn't be back until dark. His other best friend, Donovan, had stopped talking to him after their last brush with Steam Valley's finest had landed the three of them in jail for the night.

He had no one to talk to.

And he nearly popped off just from seeing Anna's legs.

Anna's.

Jesus. Maybe he was out of control, like his dad said.

He rubbed a hand over his face and sat on the steps with his back to her. "Shit."

"He isn't supposed to talk to you anymore, anyway. Dad thinks you're a bad influence."

"He's right. I am."

The swing stopped creaking. A moment later, she settled onto the step

beside him, and he breathed in a lung full of sweetness, which didn't help the erection situation. He wanted to touch her and see if her skin was as soft as it looked. He wanted to undo her braid and run his fingers through all that fiery hair.

He popped to his feet and paced away, putting a safe amount of distance between them. "I should go."

"Hey, wait." She jumped up and caught his hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine." He tried to shake her off, but she held on with surprising strength.

"No, really, Zak. What's wrong?"

"Just wanted to talk to Ash. No big deal."

"Well, you could try...." When she trailed off, he risked a glance at her. She gave an awkward shrug. "You could talk to me. I mean, you've known me just as long as you have Ash."

He couldn't tell her why that was such a bad idea. Couldn't let her know anything had changed between them. Because, for her, nothing had. This sudden sharp need was entirely one-sided.

"I'll go." He had every intention of leaving but made it only a handful of steps away before she spoke again.

"We could take the ATV up the hill. We might find him."

He turned back. "Your Dad won't like that."

"Dad'll get over it. You obviously need a friend right now, and since you won't talk to me, I'll help you find Ash."

She was too good. Too sweet. He should've walked away. The few warning alarms his teenage brain possessed were all blaring—*Danger! Danger! Danger!*—but he wouldn't learn to listen until the military fined-tuned those alarms into a sixth sense. So he climbed onto the ATV behind Anna and tried to keep their bodies from touching the entire ride up the hill.

It was torture.

And they didn't find Ash.

At the top of the hill, the entire world seemed to spread out at their feet. Anna sighed happily, climbed off the ATV, and wandered over to the edge to admire the view.

He admired the view of her.

It was a clear day with barely a cloud in the sky, but when she spun back toward him with a grin on her face, he swore he was struck by lightning. He didn't think. He wound his arms around her and pulled her in tight, thrilled

that he could feel the flutter of her heart against his chest. She curled her hands into his shirt and stood up on her toes, and their lips touched. Gentle at first. Unsure and exploratory until the lightning struck again, sizzling between them, consuming them.

The kiss started a short, hot summer affair that ended the day he left for boot camp. He never told her he'd enlisted. He simply left because, at eighteen, it was easier to run off to war than face the complicated, messy crash of emotions he had for her.

And now he felt nothing.

Except...

As he followed her across the circular drive to a large A-frame building, his gaze skimmed down her backside, and he felt a tug of... something. It was too faint to name, but he'd been dead inside for so long that the sensation took him off guard. He miscalculated, and his metal knee locked up. He lost his balance, but Anna was suddenly right there, catching him before he fell.

Their gazes met, and that faint sensation in his chest coalesced into a spark, bright and inviting. It warmed him from the inside out, and for the first time in a very long time, he felt... *real*.

Alive.

For that moment, he wasn't a ghost trapped in nightmares, grasping for life with drugs and dangerous surges of adrenaline.

Amazed, he looked down at where she held his arm.

She let go. "Uh, sorry."

Why was she apologizing for touching him? He mourned the lost connection, which was weird when he hadn't wanted any kind of connection since returning from Afghanistan. "Nah, it's fine."

"Watch your step. The driveway's full of potholes."

He didn't see any potholes. She was giving him a plausible excuse for nearly falling on his face, and that pissed him off. He didn't need an excuse. He needed a new damn leg that didn't lock up every time he stepped wrong, but the VA was a slow-moving bureaucracy on its best days, so he wasn't holding his breath.

He strode forward with as much dignity as he could muster. "Let's get this bullshit over with."

chapter nine

ANNA RARELY MISSED A BEAT, but he was almost to the barn-turned-dog rescue before she caught up. He'd surprised her—or, more likely, pissed her off.

Good.

The more distance between them, the better. He didn't need to feel anything. He preferred the numbness and had plans with a bottle of Jameson later.

She was all professional as she opened the front door and led him in. "Welcome to the Barn. We still call it that, even though it's not really a barn anymore with all the additions and renovations." She motioned to the room in front of them. It was painted a cheery blue and had bright pop art pictures of dogs on the walls. Centered on the back wall was a huge U-shaped desk, and an entire corner was dedicated to shelves filled with dog food, beds, leashes, and other pet supplies for sale. "This is the lobby, where we handle all the day-to-day stuff—adoptions, check-in for daycare, retail, etc. There's a room back behind the desk that we use for training classes and various community outreach programs. That's where you'll set up for group therapy. There's also a lounge with a TV and a kitchenette the staff uses as a break room." She pointed to the left. "That door leads through the play yard to our vet's office. Do you remember Sasha LeBlanc from school? She was a year behind us."

The name brought to mind a quiet, chubby girl with dark hair, pale skin, and even paler eyes behind oversized glasses. "Yeah, everyone called her Wednesday Addams."

"Only the jerks."

Zak said nothing because, yeah, he had been one of the jerks who called her that. But it was a well-documented fact he was an asshole.

“She’s the best vet in town now,” Anna continued, chattering a bit too brightly. “She rents the building next door, but her practice is fast outgrowing the space. I wish I could add on for her, but there’s no money. She’ll have to move to a bigger place eventually, and I dread the day. I’ll take you over there and introduce you to her staff, but first, the dogs.” She spun, and all but skipped into another hallway, her ponytail swinging in a mesmerizing arc between her shoulder blades. “We have forty-eight kennels arranged in three wings. A Wing is for our adoptable dogs. B Wing is our biggest. It’s our long-term stay and doggie daycare. Then we have C Wing. It’s reserved for my babies who need a bit more love before they can go up for adoption.”

Of course, she pushed through the door marked C Wing. “This is where I’ll need the most help. These dogs require extra training and socialization, so you’ll be spending a lot of time in here.”

The hallway was lined with ten large dog runs, but only three were occupied. The first was a golden retriever missing a large swath of amber fur across her back and shoulders. She shied away when he stopped in front of her kennel, shrinking into the soft bed in the corner with her tail tucked between her legs. Her brown eyes were bright with fear as she looked back and forth between them.

“That’s Matilda,” Anna said softly at his side.

“What happened to her?”

“Some sadistic asshole tied her to a tree this summer and set her on fire. Luckily, a group of hikers were in the area and heard her. They doused the fire before it did too much damage and brought her to Sasha. She’s been here recuperating since. She’s especially afraid of men, which leads us to think a man did this to her.”

“The guy wasn’t caught?” He realized his hands had curled into fists at his sides and forced his fingers to relax. Yes, he was an asshole, but he’d never harm an innocent animal like this. That took a special kind of evil.

“No. But the great thing about dogs is they don’t live in the past, so we try to follow their example around here. Matilda has so much love to give. She just needs to learn to trust again, so it’s a good thing you’re here to help her overcome her fear. Most of my volunteers are women.”

“I’m not a volunteer.”

“But you are a man, and exactly what she needs.” She continued down the row and he followed because—well, hell, what other choice did he have?

The next kennel contained a medium-sized black dog with a long, corded

coat. The dog wagged when he saw them, and a pink tongue rolled out of his mouth.

“Is that a dog or a mop?”

Anna laughed. It was a delightful sound that almost made him smile. “That’s Raszta. He’s a Puli. His coat naturally forms dreadlocks, giving him the mop look.”

Dreadlocks.

An image flashed in Zak’s mind of a girl with dreads leaning over him, telling him he’d be okay, but it was there and gone before he could grasp it and bring the girl’s face into focus.

He shook his head and let the dog sniff his hand. “Why is he in jail? He seems friendly.”

“This isn’t a jail, and he is very friendly... until dinner time. He came to us from a hoarding situation in Texas, where he used to fight around ninety other dogs to eat. He’s food aggressive, but we’re working on it. He’ll make someone a good pet someday.”

The final occupied kennel looked like a tornado had hit it. The bed was shredded, and cotton stuffing formed fluffy mounds like piles of snow. Kibble scattered the floor. The water bowl had been upturned and now sat in a small lake like a stainless steel island. The black and gold brindle dog in the middle of the chaos had startling yellow eyes that tweaked a thread of recognition in Zak’s mind.

He stopped in front of the kennel and stared into those eyes. “I know this dog.”

Anna nodded. “You met him once. The night of your accident, when Ash picked you up from the Mad Dog—”

“Ranger.” He didn’t know why the animal had stuck in his memory when everything else from that night was a blur. “He wanted to eat me.”

“Well, don’t take it personally. He wants to eat everyone and everything.”

Ranger’s radar dish ears twitched at his name, and he focused on Zak with the intensity of a heat-seeking missile. He got up and walked over to the door with the regal air of a king who had been waiting for his knight to return from battle. The series of exasperated huffs he gave sounded a lot like, “*About time you showed up!*”

“No teeth for me this time, mutt?” Zak knelt down, and his prosthetic knee thumped loudly on the concrete floor. Ranger cocked his head at the sound and stared at him with those freaky yellow eyes. He let the animal sniff

his hand, then risked losing a finger by poking it through the bars and rubbing Ranger's black nose.

Anna glanced between the two of them. "Huh," she said after a long minute of silence.

Zak gazed up. "What?"

Her head tilted much like the dog's. "He rarely likes anyone but me."

"What's his story?"

Anna knelt beside him. "He was a military working dog, but his handler was killed in action, and he was badly injured. He came out of the experience with post-traumatic stress—"

"Dogs get PTSD?"

"Yep, same as people. Ranger was suddenly aggressive when he never was before, fearful of unexpected noises, hyper-vigilant, anxious. The military retired him and tried to adopt him out, but he was returned sixteen times for behavioral issues. They were going to euthanize him until we stepped in and rescued him."

"He's a beautiful dog. What breed is he? I never saw any like him in the Army. All the MWDs I crossed paths with were Malinois."

"He's a Dutch shepherd. Dutchies are cousins of the Mal and the German shepherd." She climbed to her feet and opened the kennel door. Ranger gave a slow wag of his plumed tail and bumped his head against her legs as she picked up his water dish. "I've been working with him every day, and he's made tremendous improvements. He'll never be a pet, but I have high hopes he might work again. Probably not in a war zone, but something like narcotics or cadaver detection isn't out of the question. He might even do well with search and rescue. He has the drive for it."

Ranger strutted over. He had a limp, too. Slight, but every time he put weight on his front left paw, his stride hitched. A long, mean-looking scar sliced down that front leg.

Zak reached out and slid his thumb over the scar. In return, Ranger bumped his head against Zak's metal leg.

"He has a plate and screws in there," Anna said. "He almost lost the leg."

A knot tightened in his throat, and he got to his feet as quickly as he was able. Which wasn't quick at all because of the damn knee locking up again. Shame burned across the back of his neck as he struggled. Fucking babies could stand up better than him.

He hated it.

He hated Anna for just standing there, watching him. He didn't want her help—that would be worse—but she could've at least looked away and offered a shred of dignity.

And he especially hated the dog with its PTSD and gimpy leg.

When he finally gained his feet, he didn't dare look at them. He didn't want to see their pity. "Are we done here?"

Anna said nothing for a beat. "Yes, we can be done for today. I'll see you tomorrow."



Anna's heart thundered in her ears as she watched Zak stride away, his back soldier straight. His long legs ate up the floor with only a slight limp, taking him farther away from her, both physically and mentally. She'd pushed him too far, too fast, and now he was building new walls like crazy while desperately patching up the ones he'd already constructed to keep them from crumbling.

The problem wasn't that he didn't care. It was always that he cared too much, and he didn't want to.

The dogs got to him, just as she'd hoped. She'd seen his fist clench when she told Matilda's tragic story. She'd seen his amusement at Raszta, the mop dog. And Ranger...

Ranger's story had hurt him. Cut too close. He'd seen himself in the dog, and he hadn't liked the reflection.

Ranger returned to her side and gave a questioning whine. *Where'd he go? I thought we were going to be partners.*

She patted his head. "Give him time, Range. Remember how you were at first? He hasn't made as much progress, but we're going to help him with that." As the bang of the front door echoed through the building, she looked up at the empty hallway again and smiled. "And now I know exactly how."

chapter ten

BELLA FIRST NOTICED the man at the end of summer, one week before her mom left their campsite and never came back. The man stood on the cliff overlooking the beach where she and Poppy spent their afternoons hunting for good shells and building sandcastles. At first, she didn't think much about him. Lost Rocks State Park campground was packed with tourists, and it wasn't unusual for someone to stand on the cliff and take in the view of the impressive sea stacks jutting up from the crashing surf. She made note of his hoodie, but it was a windy day, especially up on the cliffs.

Poppy ran over and excitedly showed her a pure white shell with a perfect, unbroken curl. When she glanced back at the cliff a few minutes later, the man was gone.

The second time she saw him, Mom had been gone for a week.

It wasn't a big deal. Jessica often disappeared for days at a time, especially after a blow-up fight like they'd had. A week was abnormally long, but honestly, Bella didn't care. Life was easier without Jessica there, especially since she'd found a job trimming buds at a local pot farm. She could afford food and new clothes for her sister's first day of kindergarten.

Poppy was bright as a sunbeam in her yellow top and pink leggings, her blond ponytail swinging as Bella led her toward the school. The girl chattered excitedly about Mr. CJ, her cheerful and flamboyant new teacher, whom they had met last week, and didn't notice when they turned the corner and Bella's step faltered.

There was the man again.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. He wore the same hoodie as before—Army green with the brand's logo in black on the upper chest—but she still couldn't see his face or any other identifying features. She

couldn't even tell his race. He was shadowed by his hood and the tree he stood under.

Was it Jake?

She gripped Poppy's hand a little tighter and hurried her through the school's front gate, which would be locked after drop-off. Poppy would be safe inside with Mr. CJ and her classmates. Of course, if Hoodie Man was Poppy's father—Jake Beckett, the sick pedophile hiding his twisted fantasies behind a detective's badge—then the school could release her to him. He had custody and parental rights. Bella didn't. She'd just have to make sure she was here right at the end of the school day to pick her up. She wouldn't give him the chance to steal her away.

When she stepped back out onto the street, the man was gone.

She shook off the chill of unease. It was nothing. He was just a parent dropping off his kid. He probably wasn't even the same man she'd seen on the cliff. His sweatshirt was a popular athletic brand found in every department store. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people likely owned the same one.

It wasn't Jake.

They were safe here in Steam Valley. Bella had a job and had even made some friends. Poppy had school. She'd make friends her own age and have stability for the first time in her young life. No way Poppy's asshole dad could find them here. Despite his widespread connections, he couldn't have tracked them all the way from Arizona. She was worrying for no reason. And she had to stop dwelling and get to work. Rainbow, her boss, was a nice woman but expected punctuality.

She would not let Mom's constant paranoia poison her mind and ruin the only good thing they'd had in a long time.

They *were* safe.

At least, she thought so...

Until later that night.

The sound of a car door startled Bella out of a sound sleep. She rolled over and checked the digital watch she'd bought at the local thrift store so she could get Poppy to school on time. The pale blue display showed 3 AM.

Her heart sank.

It was Mom finally coming home. Had to be. Nobody else would be at their campsite at this time of night, but why couldn't Jessica have just stayed away? Life was so much easier without her.

Bella scooted to the window and lifted the shade, but a dense gray fog draped the campsite and all she could see was the outline of a car, its headlights like beady yellow eyes in the gloom. Ghostly figures moved through the mist. Two? Three?

She squinted.

No, she only saw two. One was about the size and shape of Mom. The other was much bigger. A man.

Great. If Mom thought she was going to bring him in here for a fuck, she had to think again. Poppy had school in the morning and needed to sleep.

Bella could just barely hear their voices, muffled but... angry? Yes, that definitely sounded like anger, and more. Hatred. The man *hated* Mom. Even though she couldn't make out his words, the hatred seethed in his tone.

Oh, shit. This situation could go bad fast.

Nervous now, Bella edged off the bed, careful not to disturb Poppy, and double-checked that all the doors were locked.

Of course, Mom had a key, so if the man really wanted to get in, he could take it from her.

Not a comforting thought.

She could just start the van and drive off, leaving them here to deal with their shit without putting Poppy in danger. She'd been considering a move anyway and had her eye on an inland campsite away from the turbulent winter seas this area was known for. Or she could drive up to work. Rainbow had already said she could camp at the farm and that option saved her money, which she'd need if she wanted to find an apartment.

As the plans raced through her head, she pulled on her boots without tying them and gently woke her sister. "Pop, I need you to put your shoes and coat on." Just in case they had to run. "And then crawl into the front seat and buckle up for me, okay?"

"Why?" Poppy whined.

She didn't bother with a lie. Her brain was still sleep-dazed, and she wouldn't be able to come up with a fiction more compelling than the truth. "Because Mom's home and she brought someone I don't like."

Poppy's eyes widened. "Is he scary?"

"Maybe. Please, just get dressed and buckle up in case I have to get us out of here fast. Can you do that?"

She nodded solemnly.

Bella kissed her forehead. "There's my brave girl."

She watched Poppy pull on her rain jacket and boots and silently cursed their mother. No five-year-old kid should be so solemn or have to deal with these scary, adult things. She peeked under the blind again. There was a lot of movement, almost like the two were dancing together or—

Bang!

Bella's heart lunged into her throat as she drove for the driver's seat. The sound had been muffled by the fog, but there was no mistaking what it was: a gunshot. And she wasn't about to stick around to find out who had the gun.

“Stay down, Pop. Don't come up here! Just grab something and hang on.”

She jabbed the key in the ignition and cranked it.

Nothing happened.

“No, no, no, no.” She whispered the word over and over under her breath like a prayer. “Please start. Please.”

She twisted the key again and got a faint revving sound in return. *Okay. Don't panic. It just needs time to warm up. Keep trying.*

Something heavy hit the side of the van, shaking the thing on its wheels.

Poppy screamed.

Bella choked back a sob and turned the key again with shaking hands.

The engine roared.

Choked.

Sputtered.

Died.

Someone threw open the sliding door, and fog curled inside the van like skeletal fingers. A man stood there, outlined by the other car's headlights.

He wore a green hoodie. And black leather gloves. And he was reaching for Poppy, who kicked at his outstretched hand in silent, wide-eyed terror.

“No!” Bella threw herself between them and clawed at his face with her ragged nails, but he was huge. So much bigger than she expected, with mounds of muscle like a bodybuilder. He easily subdued her, twisting her arms behind her back and pulling her against his solid chest.

“Stop it,” he hissed. “Please. I won't hurt you.” He had an East Coast accent. Boston or New York; she couldn't tell. They all sounded the same to her.

And was he crying?

It didn't matter. She couldn't trust anything he did or said. Why else would he be doing this if he didn't want to hurt them?

She opened her mouth to scream. Maybe if she made enough noise, the

Whelans next door would hear and—

He clamped a hand over her face, his beefy palm covering both her nose and mouth, and her scream died in her throat.

“I’m sorry,” he said again and again as he dragged her from the van and locked Poppy in. Her boots came off and her heels touched something warm and wet on the ground.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Didn’t want to look down. Couldn’t.

But she had to.

Mom.

She lay face-down on the ground in a spreading pool of blood. The shawl she always wore—the one she’d stolen from a chintzy tourist trap shop in New Mexico—covered half her face. The other half of her face was... gone. Nothing but a mess of blood and bone and lumps of tissue.

Bile burned up Bella’s throat and she clamped her teeth hard on the fleshy part of the man’s hand. He released his grip on her mouth and she sucked down a lung-full of air.

“Poppy,” she wheezed. “Please, don’t let her see Mom like that. Please.”

The man blinked and tears rolled down his dark face. “I’ll take care of it,” he said in a voice thick with emotion. He opened his car door and gently deposited her on the backseat, then locked her in and disappeared from view.

The car was still running.

She could run him over when he came back!

She dove into the driver’s seat and swore when she realized why he’d felt safe leaving it on.

No key detected.

It was one of those push-button starts and he had the key with him. It wasn’t going anywhere without him. She could unlock the door and run to the Whelan’s campsite, but... no. The man would disappear with Poppy before she could get help. No way was she leaving her sister alone with him. She pounded the steering wheel with her fists in frustration, then realized—*duh, horn!* She could wake up the whole campground.

She balled her hand and raised it over the center of the wheel but froze when the man reappeared with a blanket and crouched over Mom’s body. He rolled her onto it, then wrapped it around her lovingly, like he was swaddling a baby. He carried her to the back of the car. The truck popped open, and the car shifted at the additional weight. He hadn’t thrown Mom in. He’d set her in there gently, carefully.

But... didn't he hate her? Bella was sure she'd heard the hatred in his voice earlier.

When he reappeared, he wore a jacket rather than the bloodstained hoodie. He opened the back door and placed a duffle bag on the seat.

"I'll get your sister now," he said roughly. "Stay here. Please."

"Okay." It was all so strange, and she didn't know how else to react. "Thank you. Poppy didn't need to see that."

He said nothing more, just shut the door and went to the van. Poppy was a ghost, her eyes showing too much white and glazed with the tears pouring down her cheeks. She didn't fight the man, and actually clung to his big shoulders. He picked up Bella's boots from the bloodstained ground on his way back to the car.

He handled Poppy as gently as he had Mom, tucking her into the backseat with another blanket before buckling her in.

Bella turned to study her sister. "Are you okay, Pop?"

The girl just curled in on herself and stuck her thumb in her mouth. That was a bad sign. Poppy had stopped sucking her thumb a long time ago.

Hoodie Man dropped her boots into the footwell under Poppy, then opened the driver's side door. "Move."

Bella climbed over the center console into the passenger seat. She tried the door handle but knew it would be locked. "Where are you taking us?"

He shoved the car into reverse. "Someplace safe."

chapter eleven

ZAK HAD a firm idea of what group therapy would be—a mix of crunchy granola bohemian-types whining about how their chakras were out of whack; and middle-class, middle-aged men losing their hair as they went through mid-life crises; and overworked, under-appreciated housewives who used pills and wine to cope.

He dreaded it.

He didn't want to sit in a room and share his demons with people who didn't know what true suffering was, but he wanted his damn license back. Walking everywhere was getting old, and without wheels, he felt more trapped in this fucking town than usual.

If he could survive daily torture for over two weeks, these twice-weekly meetings should be easy. Maybe he could even skip the dog sessions. He'd have to double-check with his lawyer, but he didn't think it was part of his court-mandated therapy. Besides, he spent enough time with the animals as it was. The last three days of cleaning pee and poop and avoiding the dog with the yellow eyes and metal leg had been torture worse than he'd endured in Afghanistan. At least that kind of torture he'd been trained to withstand. This was hell. And, adding in group therapy, it was only going to get worse.

He arrived a half hour late.

Fuck walking, man. It always took longer than he expected, especially now with his half-metal leg. He used to do grueling ruck marches with fifty pounds on his back with little thought, but he no longer had the stamina for a short, hilly hike.

It was only when he saw Anna playing in the dog yard with Winston and Ranger that he remembered he was supposed to have been here an hour ago to help set up. So he was actually ninety minutes late. No doubt she'd have

something to say about that.

Fuck.

Sucking in a fortifying breath, he pushed into the room Anna used for adoption and fundraiser events and found a group of five people seated in a circle of hard plastic chairs—three men and two women.

The older woman with the neat wire-framed glasses was Dr. Amelia Firestone. In another lifetime, she'd been his high school guidance counselor and had encouraged him to think about joining the Army since his grades sucked and he had no interest in college. Given how it ended up, he should hate her for it, but he couldn't even find that in the blessed fog of numbness he'd spent the morning curating with a bottle of Jameson.

Except for the new silver streaks in her black hair and a few more wrinkles around her gentle eyes, Dr. Firestone had barely changed.

The other woman had straight dark hair pulled back into a long ponytail and hard, dark eyes. He recognized her from around town but didn't know her name. She wasn't a local. She'd only appeared in the area about a year ago. A fluffy brown and white dog sat on her lap. It was wearing a plaid bowtie.

Seated to her left was a blond man in a USMC hoodie with a brown lab on the floor beside his chair. The dog wore one of those harnesses with a handle on the back and a vest that proclaimed her name was Zelda and she was a service animal at work.

Jesus. The man was blind.

The realization had a ball of dread rising in Zak's throat, and he slammed to a halt just inside the door. Every eye in the room turned toward him. Except for the blind man's.

And he remembered something Anna had said during his initial visit. *The only veteran treatment program in the county...*

These people were like him.

War survivors.

He wanted to back out of the room and run away as fast as his gimpy leg allowed.

"Zak," Dr. Firestone said warmly and waved him in. "Glad you could make it. Come in. Coffee and donuts over there." She indicated the table along one wall with her chin. "Help yourself and pull up a chair."

He couldn't move.

Dr. Firestone only smiled and turned back to the group. "Go on, Sawyer.

You were telling us about your week?”

The blind man hesitated for a beat, and then his fingers flexed around the handle of his dog’s harness. “So, uh, yeah. It’s been a shitty week. Stuff I used to do all the time, the easy shit you don’t think about, like making a coffee, is now this whole fucking process. I used sugar instead of coffee grounds yesterday and only noticed when I took a sip of hot sugar water. It’s —” He broke off and seemed to search for the right word.

“Frustrating?” the female veteran suggested, sinking deeper into her chair and wrapping her arms around the dog in the bowtie. The little creature licked her cheek.

“Infuriating,” another man said. He was a big guy with full tattoo sleeves, and his voice broke the immobility spell keeping Zak’s boots glued to the floor.

Shocked, he strode forward. “Donovan?”

Again, everyone looked at him.

Donovan Scott glanced over his shoulder, gave his trademark smirk and a two-finger salute. “Hey, Zak.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Zak,” Dr. Firestone said, her voice somehow both firm and gentle. “We never question each other’s motives for therapy, okay?”

“No, I didn’t mean—” He stared down at the man who had once been one of his best friends. He, Ash, and Donovan raised so much hell together as kids the townspeople had called them The Terrible Trio. “I thought you were still overseas.”

Donovan tapped the rope of scar tissue on the side of his face. “Got blown up. Head trauma. They discharged me over a year ago.”

He’d been back in town a whole year, and Zak hadn’t known. “Man, I’m —I’m sorry.”

“Is what it is.”

The bland statement ignited the simmering well of resentment inside him like a match to gasoline. “What kind of Buddhist bullshit is that? ‘It is what it is?’ You’re just accepting it?”

Donovan’s smirk faded, and he pushed out of his chair. He was as tall as Zak, and they were almost nose-to-nose. “What, you think the way you’ve been handling your shit is better? You think I didn’t try it that way, too?” He waved an arm at the group. “We’ve all been there, done that, got the T-shirts and scars. I almost killed myself and ended up here, and now I don’t think

about swallowing a bullet every day. So, yeah, I'm accepting it. I can't change my scrambled, fucked-up brain."

"And I'll never see again," the blind man, Sawyer, added.

The third man in the room, who still hadn't said a word, thumped his hand on the arm of his chair to get everyone's attention. His neck was scarred extensively, like something with big teeth had tried to rip out his windpipe. Donovan glanced over, and the man grunted, making a lot of movements with his hands.

"Pierce says he'll never speak again. And *you* can't grow another leg," Donovan finished. "It is what it fucking is, and now we have to learn to live with it."

"We're all here because we're dealing with something," the woman said. Unlike the men, she didn't explain what her *something* was. Nor did she give her name. She continued hugging the dog like a shield and eyed him with suspicion over its ridiculously fluffy ears. "You're not special."

Dr. Firestone rose from her seat and picked up a folded chair from the stack next to the coffee and donuts. She opened the chair and placed it between her and Pierce. "Here. Take a seat, Zak."

He stayed where he was. He didn't want to know more about these people or their problems and absolutely didn't want to tell them about his own. He didn't care. Couldn't. Because caring about others fucking hurt. Caring had cost him his leg, his life... his sanity.

Dr. Firestone left the chair empty and returned to hers. "I'm sorry you've been struggling, Sawyer," she said, picking up the conversational ball that had dropped when Zak interrupted. "When we're born with sight, it becomes second nature. We rely on it for everything, but take it for granted, thinking we'll always have it. It's the same with hearing or speaking or"—she nodded toward Zak—"a missing limb. We don't realize how much of our identity is tied into that piece until it's gone."

Sawyer exhaled hard. "I remember how hard it was at first. I fought against re-learning how to live."

Zak shifted uncomfortably on his feet. This guy was blind, and wasn't even looking in his direction, so why did it feel like he was staring right into his soul?

"Everything felt impossible," Sawyer continued. "Like my doctors and family were asking me to climb Everest with no equipment or training. Sometimes it still feels that way. I miss being able to chill out and watch TV."

I miss video games and going to see a new movie with friends. I can listen to it, but it's not the same." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "And not that I have friends anymore. I pushed them all away because I hated them for still having what I didn't."

Pierce grunted and made a bunch of insistent hand movements.

Donovan translated. "What about us?"

Sawyer's lips twitched. "You assholes don't count."

A ripple of laughter went through the group. Even the woman cracked a small smile from behind the shield of her tiny dog.

Dr. Firestone gave them the moment of levity, then shifted in her seat to face Sawyer again. "And how have things been since you received Zelda?"

"She's magnificent." He bent over to stroke a hand over the dog. Her tail thumped on the floor. "I don't know how I survived without her. She's given me a freedom I didn't think I'd ever have again. We went for a hike yesterday." A grin split his face. "She took me on an eight-mile hike."

"Tell us about it."

Sawyer exhaled hard, and when he spoke again, his voice was thick with emotion. "You know, before, I was always in the mountains. Camping, hiking, rock climbing. It was like a church for me." He wiggled his fingers at his temple. "It quieted my mind like nothing else. And after, I couldn't—" He broke off.

"We're not talking about that," Dr. Firestone said gently. "We're talking about yesterday. How did it feel?"

He nodded and swallowed hard. "I couldn't see the scenery, but it didn't matter. I thought it would, but it didn't. It felt so fucking good to be out there again, to have a bag on my back and a path under my boots. I didn't realize how much I missed it until we were up on the mountain, and I could hear the waves crashing below, the birds calling out to each other, the trees rustling. I felt the wind on my face and breathed it in. It smelled faintly like smoke from the fires down south, but I didn't care because I finally found it again—that quiet in my mind. Zelda gave that back to me."

"I'm so happy for you," Dr. Firestone said, and it sounded like she truly meant the words. "How are the nightmares?"

Goddammit. Zak didn't want to hear about anyone else's nightmares. He had enough of his own, thank you very much. He eyed the door. Would it violate his probation if he bolted?

Probably.

Fuck.

Sawyer's smile faded. "Yeah, um..." He cleared his throat. "Uh, you know, good nights and bad nights."

"We all know that roller coaster," Donovan said, and a ripple of agreement went through the room.

"But Zelda helps there, too," Sawyer added. "She wakes me up when it's a bad one. She's not even trained for that. I think she just worries about me."

"I wish I had a Zelda," the woman said and hugged the little dog closer. He snuggled in under her chin even though he apparently didn't belong to her.

Dr. Firestone shifted in her seat to face the woman. "How are you, Veronica? You've been quiet lately."

Veronica's gaze flicked to Zak, then cut away. "I don't want to talk."

"Okay. That's okay." Dr. Firestone's gaze followed. "How about you, Zak? Can you tell us a bit about yourself?"

He tried to say, "hell, no," but his throat closed up as every gaze pinned him down. He couldn't breathe, couldn't hear beyond the thunder of his heartbeat in his ears.

He couldn't do this.

Violation or not, he had to leave.

Right now.

chapter twelve

ANNA SAW Zak leave the barn like his ass was on fire then stagger to a halt in the middle of the driveway. She looked down at Ranger and Winston, who were laying in the grass at her feet, tongues out, taking a break from their game of fetch.

“Looks like group therapy went well. Honestly, he lasted longer than I expected. That has to be a promising sign, right?”

Winston continued to pant happily.

Ranged grunted and stretched out on his side.

Out in the driveway, Zak glanced around like he was lost, then bent double and placed his hands on his thighs, gasping as if he'd finished a marathon and couldn't catch his breath. Her smile faded.

Uh-oh. That was a panic attack. She'd had enough of them to know the signs, even from a distance.

She jogged across the field with the dogs racing at her heels. When she climbed over the fence, Winston skidded to a halt and sat down to stare at her through the wire with wounded eyes. Ranger didn't slow. He bounced off the side of the barn and took a flying leap, his sleek body stretched out long. He cleared the fence with feet to spare.

Okay, then. A six-foot fence was not a deterrent for her Houdini dog. Good to know.

She winced when he landed and his bad front leg gave out, but he recovered quickly, limping only slightly as he streaked toward Zak.

Ugh, those two were a pair. The dog, like the man, always pushed boundaries. Neither of them wanted to accept their limitations.

She made it to Zak's side steps behind the dog. His face was startlingly red, like he was choking. She rubbed his back. “It's a panic attack. Breathe

through it.”

He shook his head.

“Yes, you can. Follow my breathing. In and out. Nice and slow.”

He sucked in a sharp breath and let it out in a ragged exhale.

“There you go.” She took him by the arm and guided him over to the house. They were at the porch before he thought to shake her off.

“I’m fine.”

He still didn’t look it. Now he was pale, and his hand shook as he rubbed it down his face.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll get you something to drink. Water?”

He collapsed onto the porch steps. “Whiskey?”

“Water it is.” She went inside and filled a stainless steel bottle for him and a bowl for Ranger. Before heading back out, she snagged a banana from the fruit basket. He needed food, and he’d always liked bananas when they were younger. She had to assume he still did.

At the screen door, she stopped short, and her heart squeezed. Ranger sat next to Zak, chin resting on his knee. He was miles away, staring off into the distance, but he still stroked a hand absently over Ranger’s head.

There was no therapy in the world like the love of a dog.

She purposely shifted her weight so the floorboards under her creaked before she opened the door. She didn’t want to startle him.

Zak glanced back and accepted the water and banana without a word. He drank down half of the bottle in one breath, then peeled the fruit and ate on autopilot.

She set the bowl down for Ranger, but it was ignored. For some reason, the dog was enamored with this man. Maybe Zak reminded him of his former handler. Or maybe it was simply because he could sense they were kindred spirits.

Not that she could blame Ranger. She’d been enamored with the same man at one time, but he’d broken her heart.

And so much more.

As much as she wanted to help him—*needed* to help him for the sake of her family’s land and the future of her rescue—she couldn’t risk falling for him again.

She sat on the step beside him and together they watched the rest of the group leave one by one. Dr. Firestone was last, and as usual, she came over to the house to drop off the key for the community room. Alfie, her therapy

trained Papillon, looked snazzy in his plaid bowtie as he rode in her oversized tote, his fluffy ears flapping in the breeze.

Zak wouldn't look at the doctor as she made small talk for a few minutes, and she let him get away with it. She was a good doctor, but sometimes she was too soft. Zak needed a firmer hand.

Anna waited until Dr. Firestone's car was headed down the driveway, then she scowled at him. "Coward."

His spine snapped straight. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Do you have any *idea* what I've done? What I'm capable of?" His voice was deadly calm, and his eyes went hard and flat. She imagined it was the face his enemies had seen in war before he ended them. A shiver raced down her spine, but she wasn't about to back down. Someone had to call him out on his bullshit if the therapist wouldn't.

"Oh, believe me, I know. I've heard all the stories. You were a badass black ops soldier. A war hero. And that's amazing. Truly. Most men couldn't do the things you have, but right now, at this moment?" She pointed at the cloud of dust kicked up by the doctor's car. "You acted like a coward. You couldn't even look that sweet woman in the eyes and say hello."

He wanted to protest. She could see it in the defiant line of his jaw and the tick of muscle as he ground his molars. He removed Ranger's head from his knee and pushed to his feet. "I'm leaving."

She let him get a few steps away before calling, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

He stiffened like he expected an attack but didn't turn back. "What?"

"Since you were late and missed set-up for the therapy group, you still owe me your community service hours for today."



Zak swore, spitting every colorful combination of four-letter words he knew. This woman called him a coward, and now she wanted him to spend the next several hours cleaning up dog shit at her beck and call.

He'd killed men for less.

And she thought he was a hero. Ha. She had no idea the man he was.

Fists balled, jaw clenched so tightly he was giving himself a headache, he faced her again. “What do you need me to do?” He had to squeeze the question out between his teeth.

She grinned. She was obviously enjoying herself. “Give me a piece of your clothing.”

He wasn’t even going to ask. He peeled off his overshirt, thankful there was enough of a bite in the air today that he’d layered up. He tossed it to her.

She caught it and looped a hand through Ranger’s collar before throwing a ragged rope toy in his direction. He wasn’t expecting it and nearly dropped the thing. Ranger made happy dog noises and his entire backside wagged.

Anna laughed and patted his side. “Patience, pup.”

Zak held up the toy. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

“Go hide and give him that toy when he finds you.” She nodded toward the woods. “Whistle when you’ve found a place. And don’t half-ass it. Find a good, well-concealed spot so Ranger can practice his tracking skills. I don’t want him getting rusty in his retirement.”

“Great,” he muttered and stuffed the rope in his back pocket. “Now she has me playing hide and seek with a dog.”

“Would you rather pick up poop?” she called. “Because that’s still an option.”

He gave her the finger over his shoulder and plunged into the woods.

A few feet in, the world morphed into an alien place where everything was impossibly green. The color dripped and drizzled around him, clinging to the thick redwood trunks in blankets of moss and carpeting the ground in feathery clusters of ferns. All-encompassing, the green muffled all other noise while it whispered and beckoned and seduced you deeper into its cool grasp.

It was... nice. Soothing. Peaceful.

He *enjoyed* being out here.

How could he have forgotten that about himself?

He followed a narrow winding path for a while until he came to a bridge he remembered from his childhood. He and Ash used to spend summer days here, jumping off the bridge into the creek below. The water was shallow now from an extremely dry summer, but by winter it would be a bubbling, chattering stream of ice cold snow melt from the mountaintop.

Okay, then. If Anna wanted a challenge for the dog, he’d give her a challenge. He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a sharp whistle that cut the church-like silence of the forest, then he hopped over the railing and

landed ankle deep in the creek. His boots were waterproof, so he wasn't worried about his prosthesis rusting, but he cursed when the knee locked up again. He slammed a fist against it a couple of times.

Hell, maybe it'd be a good thing if it rusted. Then the VA might get off their asses and actually process his request for a new one.

Nah, probably not. He'd just end up with a locked knee and a rusted foot. Hence, the waterproof boots—and he was still too much of a soldier to skimp on caring for his boots. Footwear could make or break a mission. He'd seen it happen plenty of times.

He slogged downstream until the creek deepened and forced him onto the bank. He took stock of his location and decided to circle back and head up the mountain. By the time he found a hiding place in a craggy spot on a steep grade, he was sweating and out of breath.

Holy shit. If he didn't stop sucking in air like an asthmatic, Ranger would hear him before scenting him. He forced himself to take slow, deliberate breaths until he stopped gasping. Man, he'd really let himself go. That uphill climb should've been easy. A few years ago, he could've done it with a hundred extra pounds on his back.

Hell, he *had* done it. He'd all but carried a terror-stricken Tehani up a hill like this—with a fucking sprained ankle, no less—while Taliban fighters chased them.

“This is Zak. I need an exfil now.”

Static replied, but he thought he heard a voice mingling with the white noise.

“I repeat, this is Sergeant Zak Hendricks. I've been made. Get me the fuck outta here.”

“Zak?”

He jolted at the voice and lashed out at the hand on his shoulder.

“It's okay,” Anna whispered. “It's just me. And Ranger's here, too. You gave him a good run, but he found you. Can he have his toy?”

Numb, he grabbed the toy from his back pocket and offered it to the dog. Ranger took it but spat it out and nudged his cheek with a wet nose.

“I'm okay, mutt.” He didn't sound okay, though. Even to his own ears, his voice was thin and reedy.

Anna sat on the small bolder that shielded his hiding spot. “Where were you just now?”

He exhaled hard and dropped his head into his hands. “Afghanistan.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Fuck, no.” He used the rock outcropping to pull himself upright, and once again, he had to pound on his stupid mechanical knee to get it to straighten correctly. He held out a hand for the rope toy. “Let’s go again.”

“Are you sure?”

He spotted the rope on the ground where Ranger had dropped it and scooped it up. Without answering, he strode away to find another hiding spot.

chapter thirteen

HE DIDN'T FREEZE up again. But, Anna noted, he always stayed under the green canopy of the redwoods and didn't venture up the mountain again, where the terrain could be mistaken for another set of mountains on the other side of the planet.

By the third round, when Ranger found him in a hollowed-out tree, he even seemed to enjoy the training exercise. He threw the rope toy and made a sound that almost passed for a laugh when Ranger pounced on it.

He ducked out of the tree and brushed himself off. "Take off your clothes."

She gave a startled laugh. "Excuse me?"

His eyes didn't quite sparkle with mischief like they used to, but there was a spark of amusement there. He smirked. "Get your mind out of my pants."

"*You're* the one telling *me* to undress."

"Because it's your turn to hide. I wanna see how he works. Show me how to give him the scent."

A thrill shot through her belly, and not only because he was joking about undressing. He was finally showing an interest in *something* besides drinking himself to death. More than once today, she'd caught glimpses of the old Zak, the kid she'd once loved to distraction.

He was coming back to life.

So she spent the next half hour coaching Zak on how to give Ranger a scent and how to handle him while he searched. Once she was satisfied, she pulled off the bandana keeping her hair out of her face and offered it to Zak.

"Sure," he said to the dog with an exaggerated eye roll. "I give her a shirt, and she gives me a lousy bandana."

“Play your cards right, soldier, and you might get to see more.” Her face flamed as she darted away to find a hiding spot, and she was so glad he couldn’t see her tomato-red cheeks.

Holy shit. Why did she say that?

She paused at the creek to splash her face with the cool water and let her scent pool, then zig-zagged over it a few times before finding the old hunting blind between two trees. She used to play out here all the time when she was a girl, pretending it was her castle and she was the lost princess waiting for her knight to rescue her.

Little did Young Anna know, *she* would be doing the rescuing more often than not. And she actually preferred it that way.

The blind let her watch Zak and Ranger’s progress. They worked together flawlessly, as if they’d been training for years. As if she needed any more proof that the two of them were soul mates. Now she just had to convince them of it.

Nose to the ground, Ranger zig-zagged over the creek, never missing a beat. Zak struggled to navigate the uneven ground because of his prosthetic. There had to be a way to get him a new one that didn’t lock up all the time. She’d have to ask Dr. Firestone about it.

Ranger came straight toward her and circled the base of her trees several times, then sat down. He didn’t alert. The poor thing just looked confused.

“What’s wrong, mutt?” Zak asked. “Did you lose the scent?” He pulled her bandana out and let Ranger sniff it again.

Ranger huffed, circled the trees, and again sat down in confusion.

Zak ran a hand through his hair and scanned the forest. “Aw, fuck. Did she lose us?”

Anna stifled a giggle behind her hand.

And her phone signaled a text.

Both man and dog looked up.

“Real cute,” Zak said dryly.

Ranger popped to his feet, his entire body wiggling as she tossed him his rope. She climbed down and checked her phone’s screen. “Looks like we’re done practicing for today. Winston and I have a real call out.”

“You mean a search and rescue call?” Zak fell into step next to her as she hurried back toward the house. “Can I come?”

“I don’t know how much of a rescue it will be,” she warned. “It sounds like a recovery mission.”

“The dead don’t bother me.”

She shot him a doubtful glance.

“It’s the memories that get to me,” he said softly and tapped his temple.

“The nightmares.”

God, she wanted to hug him.

And because of that, she picked up her pace. “If you’re coming with, you gotta keep up.”



Anna was amazing.

When they got to the Lost Rocks State Park campgrounds, both she and Winston, the goofy golden, slid into work mode. Ash was already there with a handful of his deputies, cordoning off the beach, the campgrounds, and the parking lot.

“What do we know?” she asked her brother as he lifted the police tape to let her through.

Ash scowled at Zak and dropped the tape before he could duck under. He just glared back and ripped through the plastic.

Ash growled. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s helping.” Anna clapped her hands in front of her twin’s face. “Focus. We’re running on a limited watch. What do we know?”

Ash drew a breath and waved for them to follow him across the campgrounds to a beat-up camper van from the seventies. It was pale blue with a faded yellow peace sign decal on the side. Something about the van was familiar, but Zak couldn’t place where he’d seen it before.

“We have a missing family,” Ash said, all cop again. “A mother and two girls—one a teenager and the other elementary age—were reported missing this morning by their neighbors in the campsite next door.”

“Tourists?” Zak asked.

“We don’t think so. The mother may be a trimmigrant working at one of the pot farms up the mountain. She’s been seen hanging around The Palace a lot, and the campground manager said the family’s been here all summer.” He nodded toward a massive RV at the next campsite. A family of picture-perfect blonds stood in front of it, talking to one of the deputies. “That’s the

Whelans from Utah—Tad, Jenna, and their daughters. They called in the report. They were packing up to head home today and found this.” He motioned them over to the camper van.

Zak skidded to a halt. That smell. Even before he saw the red stains, he knew what he’d find.

Blood. A lot of it. The ground was soaked, and the van’s partially open panel door was splatter-painted.

“The Whelans saw the older girl and her mother in a fight yesterday just after lunch,” Ash said. “The mother slapped her around before taking off. It was bad, but it doesn’t account for all this blood. Mr. Whelan said he heard a banging sound, like a gunshot, around 3 AM, but when he looked out the window, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.”

“That’s a lot of blood,” Zak said. “Someone was killed here.”

Ash nodded. “So now you see why I think this is probably a recovery.”

“If there are bodies here somewhere, Winston will find them.” Anna stroked her dog’s head. “What are the victims’ names?”

“Hang on. Let me double-check. I didn’t take the initial report.” Ash grabbed a tattered notebook from his jeans pocket and thumbed through the pages. “Okay, yeah. The mother is Jessica Lowe, thirty-five years old, Caucasian, approximately five foot six, one-twenty, blond and blue. The kids are Bella, sixteen, mixed race, five-five, skinny—one-ten at most—with dyed blond hair and brown eyes. And Poppy, five, around three and a half feet tall and thirty pounds, blond and blue.”

Poppy.

The name reverberated through Zak’s mind like a plucked guitar string. Why did he recognize it? He searched his memory and only found the faint echo of a phrase repeated again and again.

They’ll take Poppy from me.

Anna touched his arm, drawing him out of his head and back to the here and now.

“Did you see something?” she asked.

Shit. How long had he been staring blankly into the woods? He knew and appreciated what she was attempting to do—she was afraid he’d regressed into memory again like on the mountainside and didn’t want him to embarrass himself in front of Ash.

He shook his head. “No. Just... that name rings a bell. Poppy?”

“That’s the five-year-old,” Ash said, suspicion dripping from his tone.

“Why would you know *her* name?”

He glanced over at the man who had once been more like a brother to him than his actual blooded brother. “C’mon. Hate me, fine, but at least give me the courtesy of pretending you know me better than that. I would never hurt a child.”

“Ash, apologize,” Anna demanded.

Ash exhaled hard. “Sorry. I wasn’t implying anything.” He ran a hand over his face. “I’m tired and punchy.”

“Ask me,” Zak said, “this is a marked improvement from your usual point and grunt.”

Ash clenched his teeth. “You just love pushing my buttons, don’t you, Hendricks?”

“You have so many fun ones to push.”

“Oh, both of you, grow up.” Anna elbowed her brother, then shoved a finger in his face. “Don’t make me regret bringing you.”

He held up his hands in surrender and backed up a step. “I’m a ghost. Won’t even know I’m here.”

“Yeah, right.” She drew a breath through her nose, let it out in a huff, and returned her attention to Ash. “Do we have a description of what the girls were last wearing?”

Ash nodded and consulted his notebook again. “The Whelans weren’t sure about the mother other than the long shawl she always wore. They described it as multi-colored, with a southwest Native American design on the back. Bella was last seen wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt under an oversized red flannel, black jeans, and combat boots. Poppy was in purple leggings, a pink long-sleeve T-shirt featuring the Disney character Stitch, and flower rain boots. She also has a pink puffer jacket with a flower design on the front pockets.”

“Okay.” She patted Winston’s side. “Ready to work, buddy? Let’s find these girls.”

Zak stepped out of the way and watched from the outskirts of the crime scene as Anna and her dog worked. They moved together in a well-rehearsed dance born from a mix of intense training and instinct—just like soldiers. They were a team.

Damn, he missed being part of a team.

Ash stepped up beside him, arms crossed, jaw set. “I know what you’re thinking.”

Temper flared hot along the back of his neck. “The fuck you do.”

“The old rule still applies.”

“What, the dumb-ass Bro Code?” He scoffed. “It was stupid then, and we’re not bros anymore.”

“She’s off limits.”

“That’s her decision.” Why was he even arguing about it? He had no interest in sex with Anna or anyone else. He was too busy battling the demons in his head and trying to survive each day, but he wasn’t about to say that to Ash.

Better to just remove himself from this conversation.

He turned away, but Ash caught his arm in a bruising grip. “She doesn’t need you fucking up her life again.”

Zak met the man’s gaze, surprised to see it burning with hatred. “Again?”

“Sheriff?” a deputy called out from the neighboring campsite.

Ash released him and walked away.

chapter fourteen

THE SEARCH TURNED UP NOTHING.

No sign of the mom or kids.

Winston kept catching a scent, but then he would endlessly circle the campsite. She could only assume it was because all the blood confused him. They wanted him to find decay, but it was all over that campsite.

So much blood.

Luckily, Zak held up better than she'd expected him to. She'd had reservations about taking him after the incident while playing with Ranger.

"The dead don't bother me. It's the memories that get to me."

What memories? What had happened to him over there?

She angled her rearview mirror to see the backseat. Winston hated to disappoint, and whenever he couldn't complete the job he'd been tasked to do, he got depressed and moped. When the search was finally called off because of rain and darkness, Zak climbed into the backseat to soothe him. She figured they both needed the reassurance and didn't say a word about it as she slid behind the wheel.

Now they were both asleep. Zak's head tipped back against the headrest, and Winston's big square head was on his lap. His hand was still buried in Winston's wet fur.

She hated to disturb them, but they were nearly to Zak's. His cabin was tucked away on Bluff Road, its cedar shake siding grayed by decades of ocean storms. His parents had built the small two-bed, one-bath home when they first moved here in the late 70s with their newborn daughter Jamila, and it still had "The Hendricks Family" carved into a plank over the carport. When Zak came along, the cabin became too small for the growing family. When Taj arrived two years later, they moved to a bigger house in town but

still kept the cabin as a vacation rental until Zak returned from Afghanistan and needed a place to live. Now it was worth at least ten times what they'd paid to build it.

Why wasn't Monarch Development trying to bully the Hendrickses into selling? It was prime oceanfront property that bordered the Rawlings land they wanted so badly.

Actually, they probably had made an offer, Anna realized as she pulled into the driveway. And she wouldn't be surprised if Paksima Hendricks had told them to shove their offensively minuscule check where the sun doesn't shine and go take a flying leap off the bluffs. Zak's mother, the current high school principal, wasn't afraid to tell people exactly what she thought.

Anna parked behind Zak's truck, which sat unused in the carport with a boot on the back tire. No doubt Ash's handiwork. As far as she knew, that wasn't standard practice for a DUI. Her brother probably put the boot on as a precaution to keep Zak from driving without a license because as much as he complained about Zak, and as much as they butted heads, she knew he cared.

Zak had so many people who cared about him and he didn't even realize it.

She shifted in her seat to look at him. Winston was awake now and gave a slow tail wag when he saw her watching. His eyes seemed to say, *"I'm sorry I disappointed you."*

She reached back to rub his soft muzzle. "You're a good boy, Winny. The best. You could never, ever disappoint me."

Zak jolted awake with a gasp and looked around like he didn't know where he was.

"Hey, you're okay," she said in the same gentle voice she used for the scared and abused dogs she rescued. She set a hand on his knee. "You're home."

He focused on her like she was a lifeboat in a turbulent sea. After a second, the fog of sleepy confusion cleared, and he groaned softly, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Sorry. Must've fallen asleep."

"Yep. You were snoring." He wasn't, but the appalled look on his face was worth the white lie.

"I don't snore."

"Like a foghorn."

"I don't—" He noticed her smirk and shook his head. "You're a brat."

"You used to like that about me." Oh, shit. There went her mouth, saying

things before her brain told it not to.

“I still do,” he said so quietly she almost didn’t hear him over her racing thoughts.

Something changed between them at that moment. The air felt charged, like electricity danced over every surface and if she touched him again, they’d create sparks. But it wasn’t an uncomfortable sensation. Instead, with the rain pattering on the roof and windshield, the dark vehicle felt safe and cozy, and... *intimate*. She could tell him anything right now, all her secrets...

Damn, this was dangerous.

She should turn on the overhead light and cut through the intimacy with the harsh yellow glow, but then he’d see the blush heating her cheeks. Before she could decide, he spoke again.

“Do you... want... to come in?”

Yes.

She closed her eyes and imagined it. His hands on her body, finding all the secret places it seemed only he knew about. The places that made her gasp and quake and melt. She’d had other lovers since him—some of them quite good—but none had ever made her want so thoroughly or come so hard as Zak Hendricks. She’d accepted long ago that no man she invited into her bed would ever live up.

So, yes, she desperately wanted to go into that cabin and find out if sex with him was as good as she remembered. After the stress of the fruitless search, she needed the release.

Except.

The halting way he’d asked was a huge, waving red flag. He wasn’t ready for a relationship, even if it was just a one-night stand. He had to re-learn how to take care of himself first, and he had a long way to go.

She opened her eyes and found him watching her intently in the darkness. She smiled, hoping to soften the blow. “I should go home.”

He said nothing for several heartbeats, then nodded and shoved open the car’s door. He was pissed. She could see it in the tight line of his shoulders and his stiff movements as he climbed out of the vehicle.

“Zak, wait. It’s not...” Too late, she realized she couldn’t take that sentence any further without revealing too much, so she let it trail off.

“Not what?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “A good idea.”

He ignored her and leaned in to give Winston a final pat on the head.

“You’re a good dog,” he said, then shut the door.

She rolled down the passenger window. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He stopped short, and his shoulders rose and fell with the deep breath he took. When he turned back, rain streamed down the expressionless mask of his face. “The cadaver stuff. Could Ranger do that?”

She stared at him, thrown by the abrupt subject change. “Uh... well, I don’t see why not. He’s already familiar with tracking live humans. We’d simply have to train him to recognize the scent of decomposition, too.”

“I want to do it. I want to train him.”

Her heart grew wings and fluttered wildly around her chest, but she kept the joy off her face. “I think he’d love that.”

“Okay.” He wiped the rain from his face and continued on to his front door. “Tomorrow, then.”

chapter fifteen

“GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE.” Dr. Firestone set her tote beside her chair and the little black, brown, and white dog poked his head out, his wing-like ears all but flapping. Today, his bowtie was black with shiny gold swirls all over it. He jumped out of the bag and patrolled around the room, intently sniffing everybody like he was looking for something.

That tiny animal couldn’t possibly be the same species as Ranger and Winston.

It looked more like a stuffed toy than a dog, Zak decided as it came over to sniff the boot of his prosthesis. He shook his foot. It barked—a surprisingly robust sound with only a bit of the squeak Zak had expected.

He smirked down at it. “What’s your name, little dude?” He only realized he’d spoken out loud when conversations ground to a halt and everyone looked at him.

“That’s Alfie,” Dr. Firestone said, breaking the silence. “He’s an emotional support animal and therapy dog.”

Alfie sniffed his boot again, then sat. The dog’s big ears flipped back as he tilted his head up to give the biggest puppy eyes Zak had ever seen.

“And,” she added with a smile, “it looks like he’s chosen you today.”

Zak scowled at her. “What?”

“He’s psychic,” Sawyer explained and felt around for his chair before he sat. He folded up his cane and set a hand on Zelda as she settled in beside him. “He always knows who needs the most support.”

“Jesus. Psychic dogs?” He shook his head and went back to doctoring his coffee. Strong with lots of sugar—he’d need both the caffeine rush and sugar high to get through this damn meeting. He hadn’t slept a wink last night, but for once, it wasn’t memories of Afghanistan keeping him awake. It was

memories of Anna—her hands on his body, her lips on his, the silk of her red hair fanned out over his thighs as she—

Damn.

He took a big drink of the too-hot coffee and realized everyone was staring at him expectantly. The dog was still at his feet. “What do you want?”

Alfie barked and stood up, dancing in circles on his hind legs.

“He’s an emotional support dog.” Sawyer grinned. “Obviously, he wants to support you.”

“I don’t need support.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Court order.”

Sawyer nodded. “Ah, yes. We’ve all been there.”

“Several times,” Donovan said and scooped up a muffin from the tray. “Hey, Daredevil. Catch.” Then he fast-balled the muffin at Sawyer’s face.

Even more shocking, the blind man lifted a hand and caught it easily before it hit in square in the nose.

Zak nearly dropped his coffee. He glanced back and forth between them, his mouth working soundlessly.

Donovan smirked and grabbed another muffin, taking a bite. “Didn’t see that coming, did ya?”

“I did,” Sawyer said.

“What. The. *Fuck*?” Zak finally managed. He pointed an accusing finger at Sawyer, heat rising up the back of his neck. “You’re not blind. What was all that shit you said last time about—”

“No, I am.”

Pissed, Zak picked up another muffin and threw it. Again, Sawyer caught it. And, this time, he threw it back. Zak did not catch it. It bounced off his chest and rolled across the floor.

“They’re messing with you,” Veronica muttered. She was already curled up in her seat, legs drawn up under her oversized hoodie. “Sawyer can see movement.”

“Aw, way to ruin our fun,” Sawyer said. “I wanted to see how pissed he got at me.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Dr. Firestone took her seat. “This is supposed to be a safe space, so we won’t be hazing every new guy.”

Everyone except Veronica groaned. Even silent Pierce made a bunch of hand movements that looked like he was saying a lot of unflattering things.

Dr. Firestone ignored them and patted the empty chair next to her.

Zak walked over and sat before he realized what he was doing. Alfie followed and danced on his hind legs again, his front paws pressed together like he was praying.

Okay, fine. Alfie was ridiculously cute. Who could resist those Dumbo ears?

With an exasperated exhale, Zak caved and scooped the dog up. Alfie turned circles on his lap, then curled into a soft, warm ball. And, dammit, it was comforting. His blood pressure, which had been in dangerous territory all morning, instantly dropped.

A psychic dog.

Who'da thunk it?

Dr. Firestone nodded with satisfaction. "All right, since everyone's here, let's begin. Sawyer, do you want to start by telling Zak about your condition?"

"Yeah, sure. It's called Statokinetic dissociation, or Riddoch phenomenon," he explained and grinned. "Like Vin Diesel in *Pitch Black*."

"Nah, not the same." Donovan took his seat between Sawyer and Pierce. "Riddick could see in the dark. The way you sense things, you're more like Daredevil."

"Whatever." He waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Point is, I'm legally blind, but I can still see movement. Like that steam rising off your coffee."

Zak looked down at his cup. Sure enough, thin wisps of steam danced over it. "Holy shit. How?"

"I was on patrol in Afghanistan right before they pulled us out. I was days from going home and caught a sniper's bullet right here." He tapped the back of his head. "My helmet stopped most of it, but it fragmented on impact, and a piece got through to damage my occipital lobe. There's nothing wrong with my eyes; they can see fine. My brain just doesn't know it. Or, to be more precise, it can't process the information it gets from my eyes like it's supposed to. So, I see nothing until something moves, and my brain remembers that—oh, hey, we *can* see—for just an instant. When the movement stops, I'm blind again."

"Brain trauma really fucks with you," Donovan muttered. "I can't remember shit anymore. This morning I stood in front of my bathroom mirror for a good ten minutes, my face all lathered up, my razor in my hand—and I couldn't remember how to shave. It's so simple, and I couldn't figure it out."

So, I washed my face off and came here to tell you guys about it and, fuck me, if I didn't suddenly remember just now."

"Brain trauma can feel vicious," Dr. Firestone said. "Cruel, even, because everything that makes you *you* is stored in your brain, so when it's damaged, it can feel like you've lost yourself."

"I sure as fuck don't feel like myself anymore," Donovan said. "I don't know who I am now."

"Me, either. But, hey, I'm starting to find out." Sawyer smiled down at his dog with his heart in his sightless eyes. "And at least I can see Zelda's tail when it wags."

At her name, her tail thumped on the floor.

"Like that. Or when I take her out to the dog yard here, release her from her harness, and let her zoom. I can watch her run and, for a minute, feel normal."

"I get it. Yesterday, I—" Zak bit down hard on his tongue to stop himself from saying more. Jesus. It was like his mouth had a mind of its own lately.

"Go on," Dr. Firestone prompted. "What did you do yesterday?"

Fuck. He glanced toward the door, but he had a sleeping dog on his lap. He couldn't make a clean escape this time.

Trapped.

Donovan leaned back in his chair and smirked, crossing his tattooed arms. "C'mon, Zak. We showed you ours. Time to strip down and show the goods."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "You're disgusting."

He grinned at her, but there was an edge of mean to it. "You don't have a vote because we still haven't heard your tale of woe."

"Oh, fuck you, Van."

"Name the time and place, sweetheart."

"Donovan," Dr. Firestone said, her voice like a whip. "That's enough."

"Yeah, you're right. That *is* enough." He shot to his feet and kicked his chair across the room. "We can sit here and talk everything to death, but it won't change the fact my brain is Swiss cheese. So, fuck this. I'm outta here." He punched the wall on his way out, leaving a hole in the drywall by the door.

Veronica withered into her chair and pulled up her hood.

Sawyer set a comforting hand on Zelda's big brown head.

Pierce stared hard at the wall across from him.

Nobody said anything for several long beats, then Dr. Firestone inhaled

hard and exhaled a slow, deliberate breath. Then she smiled, but it was strained around the edges. “Tell us what you did yesterday, Zak.”

He opened his mouth to say, “hell, no,” but then glanced over at the hole in the wall and shut it again without uttering a sound. He stroked his fingers over Alfie’s soft fur. The dog stretched out his little paws and arched his back, then repositioned and fell promptly to sleep.

Zak scanned the expectant faces around him and decided it was easier to focus on the dog on his lap. He rubbed Alfie’s Dumbo ears between his fingers. “Yesterday, I played hide and seek in the woods with an incredible dog, and I laughed with a beautiful woman, and I felt... normal. For the first time since I lost my leg, I felt almost whole again, but then I went home and drank half a bottle of Jameson and didn’t sleep because I knew the nightmares were right there waiting for me.” He looked up at Dr. Firestone. “I want to feel normal again. Will coming here help me?”

She nodded toward the rest of the group. “Ask them.”

Zak looked at Veronica since she was seated right beside the doctor. “Is it helping you?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t leave my house, but I’m here, aren’t I? That has to tell you something.”

Pierce clapped to get everyone’s attention, then his hands moved in a series of gestures Zak couldn’t decipher. He’d have to learn sign language if he was going to be hanging around the guy.

“He says therapy works,” Sawyer translated.

“Wait, you can see what he’s saying?” Zak asked.

“His hands are moving.”

Okay, wow. He still couldn’t wrap his head around that. It must be a difficult way to live, caught in limbo between sight and blindness. “And what do you think?”

Sawyer stayed quiet for a moment. “We are broken people carrying our busted pieces as best we can. Some days—like today for Donovan—are brutal reminders of everything you’ve lost, but he’ll come back next time. We all return because in this room when one of us inevitably drops some or all of those pieces, we know the rest of us are right here to pick them up and help glue them back on. So, yeah, it does work, but it’s not easy. If you’re going to be part of our group, we need you all in with us.” He paused and looked toward Zak’s seat. “Are you in, or are you just here to fulfill the court order?”

Even though Zak wasn't moving, and Sawyer couldn't possibly see him, it felt like the guy was staring into his soul. He finished his coffee and released a shaking breath. "I don't know."

chapter **sixteen**

ZAK STAYED in the community room long after the therapy session ended. He told himself it was because he was supposed to tidy up, but even after he folded all the chairs, took the leftover muffins to the staff at the vet clinic next door, and cleaned and primed the coffee maker for next time, he still lingered. Despite what he told himself, he knew exactly why he was reluctant to leave. He'd dreaded seeing Anna again since the awkwardness of last night.

But he couldn't stay here forever if he wanted to train Ranger as a cadaver dog.

Dammit, he *was* a coward.

He found Anna in the kitchenette of C-Wing. She wore surgical gloves and had an array of glass vials spread out on the counter in front of her. There was also gauze, small canvas bags with Velcro enclosures, and a short length of PVC pipe with holes drilled in it. If he didn't know her better, he'd think she was making a bomb. "What are you doing?"

"Hey, you're just in time. I'm preparing for our first training exercise." She tilted her head, indicating he should come in and shut the door. "We're teaching Ranger to recognize the scent of death today. You'll want some gloves."

He glanced around and spotted the open box of surgical gloves beside the sink. He grabbed a pair, then realized they were too small and set them aside. Found a box of larges under the sink and slipped the gloves on as he returned to her side.

He picked up one of the glass vials. "Pseudo-Corpse? Does it really smell like a dead body?"

She smirked. "Give it a sniff."

How bad could it be? Shrugging, he opened the cap and inhaled, then immediately regretted it as bile surged up the back of his throat. He coughed and started to close the vial, but she laughed and held out a hand.

“Give it here.”

He coughed again and passed it to her. “That’s... potent.”

“You’re not supposed to stick your nose in it, dumbass.” She used a dropper to put a little of the scent on a gauze pad, then closed the vial and placed the gauze in one of the canvas bags.

“Is that enough?”

“More than. Remember, a dog’s sense of smell is up to one hundred thousand times more sensitive than ours.” She passed the canvas bag under his nose. “Can *you* still smell it?”

He gagged and waved it away. “I think the scent is burned into my nostrils.”

She laughed again, and he found his own lips twitching with amusement. He enjoyed making her laugh. He liked the fizzy champagne feeling her laugh caused in his blood. “What do we do next?”

“Well, here. Why don’t you do it? You need to learn.” She handed him the canvas bag. “These bags are used to train dogs on the scent of drugs, but it works for decay, too. It allows scent to escape but keeps the dog from getting to what’s inside. That’s especially important when we start using actual human material.”

That gave him pause. “We’ll use real bodies?”

“No, that’s illegal. But I do have a stash of dirt I’ve collected from underneath bodies—with permission. The scent soaks into the ground and makes a fabulous training aid. And all of my volunteers know if they have any teeth pulled, I want them. One of my volunteers even donated her placenta after she gave birth, which was so amazing of her. It’s all in that freezer over there.”

He eyed the chest freezer in the corner of the room. And here he’d thought that was for dog food or something. “I’m never eating here again.”

She smacked his arm. “It’s important to train with more than just the Pseudo-Corpse because bodies release all kinds of different aromas as they decay. We want to expose our dogs to as many of those scents as possible.” She slid the length of PVC pipe toward him. “I go the extra step of putting the bag in this. It’s probably unnecessary with the narcotics bags, but this is how I was trained to do it.”

He dutifully stuffed the bag inside the pipe, then capped the ends.

“All right.” She stripped off her gloves. “Let’s go out into the yard and hide it.”

Zak removed his gloves and followed her out into the dog yard. “How long will the training take?”

“It takes anywhere from eighteen months to two years to earn a cadaver dog certification, but Ranger already knows how to track a living person. It’s what he did in the military, so that might give us an advantage. Or it might hinder us. It could be a simple matter of teaching him we also want him to look for this new scent, or we might have to retrain him completely. We’ll see how he responds today. He’s a smart boy. I know he’ll catch on fast.”

On the way outside, Anna picked up a stack of plastic barrels and placed them in a line in the center of the yard. She then went to a storage shed and grabbed another one.

“This is the ‘hot’ barrel,” she said as she returned. “We always put the pipe in the same one and store it separately from the others, so the dogs aren’t confused by lingering trace odors.” She set it in the line and motioned for him to place the pipe inside. “Now, since Ranger is trained to track humans, you’ll want to go through and touch all the other barrels, too, or else he could just track your scent to the right one. We want him to start to recognize the cadaver and ignore your living scent.”

Zak touched each of the barrels.

“Okay, good. Go get him and bring him out on a leash. You’ll walk him past the barrels, and as soon as he shows any interest in the cadaver scent, give him his blue rope as a reward.”

Ranger knew something new and fun was happening when Zak attached the leash. His radar dish ears twitched, and his body quivered with excitement.

Zak took a moment to give him a quick scratch and pep-talk. “You got this, mutt. I know you do.”

But Ranger didn’t seem all that interested in the scent at first. He walked up and down the line of barrels, completely ignoring the one with the pipe in it.

“It’s okay,” Anna called. “Take him to them one by one. When you get to the cadaver, have him sniff, then give him his toy and praise him.”

After that, the lightbulb clicked on in his smart doggie brain and he went right to the barrel with the cadaver scent. They ran the exercise repeatedly,

moving the barrel with each round, and he nailed it every time. They also tried it off-leash with the barrels scattered across the yard rather than in a line, and once again, he zeroed right in on the cadaver scent.

“Good dog!” Zak clapped and hooted as Ranger did a victory lap with his toy, strutting like a show horse around the yard.

Anna nodded. “Very good dog. I knew he’d catch on fast. Tomorrow, we’ll work on adding a command, so think of the word or phrase you want to use. ‘Track’ is his live-search command, so you could go with ‘find,’ ‘look,’ or even ‘search.’ Just stay away from ‘dead’ or ‘stiff’ or anything like that. It has to be sensitive enough to use in front of victims’ relatives because they will often work with you to find their loved ones. A lot of trainers use ‘find the napoo.’”

“Napoo?”

She shrugged. “It means dead. Some say it’s a Native American word, but I think it’s actually slang from World War I, a corruption of the French phrase *il n’y a plus*, meaning ‘there is no more.’”

“I’m not using napoo.”

“That’s fine. Use whatever works for you and Ranger. Whatever command you decide, he’ll pick it up fast.”

Ranger tossed his toy into the air and caught it before whipping it around.

Zak grinned. “Look at him. He’s proud of himself.”

“He should be. And you should be proud of yourself, too. You’re a natural dog handler.”

“No, it’s not me. It’s all him. He’s so fucking smart.” He felt her gaze on him and glanced over. She watched him with soft eyes and a sweet smile. “What?”

“I haven’t seen you grin this much since we were kids.” She touched his cheek, brushing her thumb over his heavily stubbled jaw. “It looks good on you.”

He shifted toward her, and just like the first time he’d kissed her all those years ago, he didn’t think about it. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. Unlike the first time, she didn’t react right away. She let him kiss her but held back. Just when he started to wonder if he’d made a mistake, she took fistfuls of his shirt, surged up onto her toes, and met the seeking thrust of his tongue with her own. She tasted as sweet as he remembered, and an uncomfortable prickly feeling raced over his skin as she deepened the kiss. It felt like when a leg went to sleep and all the blood rushed back too fast,

except it was his entire body waking up, not just one limb. His heart suddenly felt too big for his chest, like he was the Grinch and it had tripled in size.

No.

He couldn't breathe.

It fucking hurt.

He didn't want all these feelings. He wanted to be numb again and heard the siren song of the whiskey he had waiting at home. It beckoned to him, promising a night of peaceful oblivion.

He broke the kiss.

She looked so beautiful with her face turned toward his, her cheeks flushed, her lips rosy. All the more reason he should leave. She was beautiful, inside and out. He was a grotesque, half-dead creature that would suck the life out of her if he stayed around.

He backed up a step and thrust Ranger's leash at her. "I need to go."

She blinked. "Wait, what? Where?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Zak." Her voice broke on his name as he turned away. "Please don't go home and drink. You're doing so good."

chapter seventeen

ZAK STEWED on her words the entire two-mile walk back to his cabin. Who was she to tell him what he could and couldn't do? If he wanted a fucking drink, he'd take a fucking drink, and she couldn't stop him.

As soon as he stepped into his house, he grabbed the bottle waiting on the kitchen counter and twisted off the cap. Except when he raised it to his lips, he stopped before a drop touched his tongue. The smell turned his stomach.

If you're going to be part of our group, we need you all in with us.

Are you in...?

Zak threw the bottle in the sink, watched the drain plug it down, and panicked. What the fuck was he doing? He needed the alcohol to sleep. He grabbed the bottle and took several long, deep swallows.

We are broken people carrying our busted pieces as best we can...

He leaned over the sink, head pounding. His chest burned from the whiskey and still felt too tight for his heart and lungs to function properly.

Jesus, why was breathing so hard? He'd been doing it his entire life, but now it took all his focus just to suck in air and push it out.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

The tightness eased.

In.

His lungs opened.

Out.

He turned around and slid down the cabinets until his ass hit the floor, then pulled off his prosthesis and rubbed the stump. It ached.

Was it any wonder Anna had rejected him last night? And when he kissed her today, she should've shoved him away, but she was too nice. She glowed with warmth and kindness. She was perfect and no red-blooded, heterosexual male in his right mind would turn her down. She had her pick, so why would she choose a man with one leg and demons riding his back?

Jesus.

He didn't know how long he sat there drinking. Long enough that his butt went numb, and the cold of the kitchen tiles seeped into his bones. Long enough that he finished the half bottle. He got another from the pantry across his narrow kitchen by using his prosthesis as a hook to open the door and roll the bottle within grabbing distance.

He drank and watched the shadows of evening lengthen and blacken into night. He watched the night fade to gray. Sometime in the early morning hours, when his second bottle was light and his head was still buzzing with dark thoughts, he wondered what was the point of surviving Afghanistan? He should've died over there. At least then he would've been a hero and not a useless, broken burden.

He could die now.

The thought sliced through him with a knife's edge, but instead of pain, he experienced a euphoric rush of relief. He'd gone about it all wrong out on the highway six weeks ago, trying to make it look like an accident. If he wanted it done, he had to man up and use a gun. Better chance of success that way.

He took another drink of Jameson and used the counter to pull himself up, not bothering to put his leg back on. His gun was in a wall safe behind his couch. It'd only take a few hops to cross the distance and then it would be over.

Something dropped out of his pocket and clunked on the floor. His phone. He picked it up. The screen showed a call was in progress, and he squinted at the ticking numbers. It had been going for a while.

He raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Zak!" The relief in the deep voice on the other end was tangible. "Jesus fucking Christ. Are you okay?"

"Whoz dis?"

"It's Greer."

Greer Wilde. His commanding officer in the black ops death squad he'd been a part of, and the man who was responsible for his rescue. It had been a

fully deniable op, so when he was captured, he'd known no help was coming—but Greer had gone against orders and hired mercenaries to find him. He owed the man his life. For what little it was worth.

“You don't remember calling me?” Greer asked, worry edging out the relief.

Now that he mentioned it, the fuzzy memory of reaching for the phone bobbed to the surface of his alcohol-flooded brain. “Yeah. Kinda.”

“We've been on the phone for hours. You were talking about suicide and how I should've left you in Afghanistan, then went silent—” Emotion broke in his voice. “Zak, man, you need help.”

“I don't need—”

“Yeah, I thought the same thing, but I was wrong. Everything got better when I finally reached out to my family, my loved ones. I know you have people who care about you. Lean on them until you're strong enough to stand by yourself.”

“I've done enough leaning, thanks.” Though he was leaning now, staring into the sink. Where was the water coming from? The faucet wasn't on.

Oh. Right. His face. He was leaking.

A woman's voice murmured in the background, and he cursed as he swiped at his eyes. Greer was married now. His life was good, all candy hearts and sunshine bubbles. He no longer spent his nights wasting away on booze and bad memories.

“Sorry, shouldn't've called.”

“Yes, you should've,” Greer said sharply. “You can always call me. Night or day, drunk or sober. You hear me, Hendricks? *Always.*”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Zak muttered and grabbed a bottle of Jameson on the counter, only to find it empty. He threw it in the sink, where it shattered.

“All right, I'm coming out there. You shouldn't be alone.”

“No, I'm juss drunk. I'm fine. Really. Won't do anything stupid. Promise.”

Greer said nothing for a second. “Drink some water. Go to bed. I'll call later and you better answer or I'm getting on the next flight out.”

“Yeah, okay. Later.” He stuffed the phone into his pocket and looked toward the wall safe.

Fuck it.

He wanted the gun.

He was done with this shit.

chapter eighteen

ON MONDAY, Zak didn't show up for his community service.

Anna told herself not to worry. After the kiss, it shouldn't surprise her he'd ghosted. This was perfectly on-brand for him: run away and stay away. Isn't that exactly what he'd done fifteen years ago? He'd run from her arms into the arms of the Army.

And look where that got him.

Dammit, she was worried. He shouldn't be alone with his memories.

She debated whether she should go check on him all morning. Not that she could get away, even if she wanted to. Sasha's receptionist had called in sick, so she'd volunteered to answer phones for the vet clinic, and they never stopped ringing. She barely had time to take a breath between calls.

But Ash was coming over for lunch today. She could ask him to do a quick welfare check on his way...

Yeah, no. Sending him to Zak's would be like throwing a match into a jug of gasoline. *Boom.*

Zak was fine. Or, at least, as fine as he usually was. Which, let's be honest, wasn't fine at all.

Someone cleared their throat, and Anna realized the phones had stopped ringing. She gazed up at her best friend. Sasha LeBlanc was a beautiful woman with dark hair and eyes, more curves than a mountain road, and one of those husky, femme fatale voices that made even the blandest of statements sound sexy—but she didn't see her own beauty. She was always too worried about her weight, constantly on one fad diet or another. She was currently on a juice cleanse and the concoction in the tumbler she carried looked like pureed grass.

"You're biting your nails," she said with a knowing smirk, and took a

drink of the green stuff. She winced but tried to cover it with another determined sip.

Anna looked at her ragged nails. “Dammit. They were actually growing for once, too.” She eyed the tumbler. “Sash, please just eat a sandwich.”

“No. It’s good.” Her face at the third sip said otherwise, and she set the drink down on the reception desk. “Why don’t you drive over to his house and check on him?”

Was she that obvious?

“No, it’s fine. He’s fine.” She busied herself with straightening the reception desk. Instead of pinning the phone messages to Sasha’s cork board in the treatment room as they came in, she’d let all the call back slips pile up. “Sorry I didn’t get these back to you sooner. There are some semi-urgent questions in there and at least one med refill that needs to be done today and —”

Sasha stilled her hands. “It’s okay. Go check on Zak.”

“He’s probably just drunk or hungover or both. You need my help here. I don’t know how Mary-Lisa does this every day and makes it look easy. I’ll be hearing that phone in my sleep.”

“Because she’s a superhero, and we’re lost without her.” Sasha took off her lab coat and hung it on a hook behind the desk. “But we’re closed for lunch now, and my schedule is light this afternoon. My techs and I can handle the phones, so *go*. I’m a big believer in following your instincts, and yours are—” She broke off.

“Are what?” Anna glanced up and grinned when she saw why Sasha had stopped talking.

Ash stepped into the office in full uniform. He usually wore jeans and a button-up to work unless he had something official to do. Today was an official kind of day, and as a woman, she could appreciate how handsome he looked in the wide-brimmed felt hat, khaki shirt, and dark green tie, pants, and jacket with his badge on the breast and the Lost County Sheriff’s Department patch on the arm.

But, as his sister, she was obligated to tease him. “Oh, look, Sash. I didn’t realize Smokey the Bear had an appointment today.”

“Ha ha,” Ash said, deadpan, and took off his hat. “Hey, Sasha.”

“Hi,” she replied so faintly it was barely a breath of sound. Her face flushed bright red, and she snapped up her drink, backing toward the swinging door to the treatment room. “I, uh... should... lunch. I mean, duh,

it's lunchtime. I should go... eat... er, drink... lunch." She spun and whacked her shoulder on the doorjamb as she pushed through. With how fair-skinned she was, she'd probably have a hell of a bruise.

Anna winced in sympathy and looked at her brother. "She likes you."

He stared at the door Sasha had disappeared through, his lips compressed into a thin line. "I know. Her, and every other single woman in the county."

"It was that Most Eligible Bachelor article in the paper when you were elected."

He growled. "I wish I'd never agreed to that publicity stunt. Now, are we gonna eat or what?"

She grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair and circled the reception desk. "Well, if you weren't a bachelor anymore, it wouldn't be a problem. So, when are you going to ask Sasha out?"

"I'm not."

"Why?" She faced off with her brother, arms crossed. "She's gorgeous, sweet, and intelligent. You can have an actual conversation with her—once you get past her shyness. She's leagues better than the women you usually go for. And you both love animals. You're perfect for each other."

He put his hat back on and held the door open for her. "I don't date. I—"

"Yeah, yeah." She puffed up her chest and deepened her voice, swaggering like a cowboy from an old western as she walked past him. "I don't date. I fuck."

He winced. "I've never said that."

"You might as well."

"I don't date"—he enunciated each word—"because I don't have time for a relationship."

"Correction: you don't date because one-night stands with air-headed tourists are easier than taking the time for a relationship."

A low sound of annoyance rumbled in his throat. "Why are you like this?"

She gave her sweetest smile and looped her arm through his as they walked across the driveway toward the house. "Aw, you'd be lost without me."

"I swear, AJ, sometimes..."

"Sometimes you wonder how you got so lucky to have me as your twin. I know. I get it. I'm awesome."

"You're a brat."

And that made her think of Zak again. All the worry she'd been able to push away for the last few minutes came flooding back. Her smile faded.

"What's wrong?" A frown creased Ash's forehead. "I didn't actually hurt your feelings, did I? You know I never mean—"

She waved it off. "No, it's not you."

Now his frown turned dark. "Zak." A statement, not a question.

She worried her lip with her teeth. "You didn't... receive any calls about him over the weekend?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I don't know. He didn't show up today."

"That violates his probation."

She stepped in front of him and pressed a hand against his chest to stop him from rushing over there. "Don't. Please, Ash. It's not a violation. It's... something else, and I'll handle it after lunch."

His eyes narrowed, but when he opened his mouth to argue, his phone rang. He grabbed it and looked at the screen. "Sorry. This is probably about that missing family."

"Of course. Go ahead and answer."

She shamelessly listened in while he took the call, but he said little. It was just a lot of typical Ash grunting and an abrupt "yes, keep him there," followed by, "okay, I'm on my way."

"Catch a break in the case?" she asked when he hung up.

"No. We're still at a dead end, but the father just arrived. He's a detective down in Arizona and has been searching for his ex-girlfriend and the kids for years. He was awarded primary custody of the younger girl—his biological child—and temporary emergency custody of the older girl, but the mother took off with them instead of complying."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah, it's a mess. I gotta go."

"Let me know if you need Winston again."

"It'll probably come to that. My gut tells me they're dead, and we need to be looking for bodies. This new information, coupled with the fight the neighbors witnessed between the mother and older daughter, makes me think we're dealing with a murder-suicide situation." For a moment, his strong shoulders sagged like he carried the weight of the world. "And now I have to go tell a father that."

"Hey." She caught his hand before he turned away and stepped into his

arms, hugging him tightly. “You got this.”

He exhaled a long, ragged breath. “Thank you. I *would* be lost without you.” He squeezed her back hard and kissed her forehead before releasing her. “Since we’re not having lunch, you might as well go check on Zak now. I can tell you’re worried.”

“You are, too.”

“Yes,” he admitted grudgingly. “Fuck him, but I am. He was like a brother once.”

“I know.”

He went over to his truck. “Keep me updated?”

“Yep. You, too.” She blew him a kiss. “Love ya, big bro.”

“Ditto, little sis.” He cracked a smile, slid behind the wheel and pointed the Tahoe toward town.

Anna waited until his truck pulled onto the road at the bottom of the driveway, then turned to retrieve her car keys from the house. She only made it a couple of steps before Oliver Lawrence came running out of the barn.

“Anna!”

She stopped and waited for him to catch up. He was a local kid who wanted to be a vet and worked half days as part of a new work-study program the high school was trying out with their seniors. Sweet, a little nerdy and prone to theatrics, but a hard worker. And he adored the dogs.

“Everything okay, Ollie?”

He shook his head but couldn’t form words between his wheezing breaths.

She sighed and patted down his coat pockets. “Where’s your inhaler?”

He fumbled it out of an inside pocket and depressed the button, sucking the medicine in. When he caught his breath, he huffed out two words that froze her blood: “It’s... Ranger.”

“What about him?”

“He was there when I fed him before school this morning, and I’m sure I locked his kennel but when I went in to clean just now, he—he wasn’t—and I thought maybe you had him but here you are and he’s not—”

“Whoa, wait. Slow down and take a breath before you give yourself another asthma attack.”

He stopped and sucked in several deep, stuttering breaths.

“Okay, good. Now, slowly, what’s wrong with Ranger?”

“He’s gone!”

chapter **nineteen**

BANG BANG BANG BANG!

Zak peeled his eyes open and realized the incessant pounding wasn't only in his head.

The door.

Someone was at the door.

And... someone was in his bed with him?

With a lot of hair.

And a tail.

And dog breath.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

He bolted upright, and his stomach revolted. He had to clamp his jaw shut and swallow hard to keep everything in place. When he was sure he wouldn't vomit all over himself, he carefully shifted to look at the brindle dog stretched out on his back, paws in the air. "Ranger?"

Ranger's plumed tail lazily beat the bed, but he didn't open his eyes.

No.

Wait.

This wasn't right. The dog couldn't be here. Was this a hallucination? Was he seeing things now? Because that would just be the cherry on the shit sundae that was his life.

Zak poked Ranger's belly, and he felt real enough. Nope, not a hallucination. Somehow, the dog was actually in his bed.

"Jesus, mutt. Get down!"

Ranger huffed, then twisted his body in a spine-defying way and melted off the bed, front paws first. He paused, gave a yoga-like stretch and a yawn, then walked forward until his back paws hit the floor. He shook, his collar

clinking as it swung back and forth, then sat and stared unblinkingly at Zak with excited golden eyes.

So, what are we gonna do today?

Zak stared back at him, uncomprehending. “I—wha—you—” He scrubbed his hand down his face. “How’d you get here?”

The pounding started on the door again, and he suddenly knew exactly who was on the other side.

Anna.

He scowled at the dog. “You’re about to get me in trouble, aren’t you?” Grabbing his phone from the nightstand, he ignored the notifications about missed calls from Greer Wilde, his parents, and his siblings, and checked the time. “*More trouble. Fuck.*”

So maybe it wasn’t Anna at his door, but Ash coming to throw his ass in jail for violating his probation.

The world rippled around him as he stumbled out of bed. He had to grab the nightstand to steady himself.

Damn, when had he stopped drinking last night?

He hadn’t even reached the hangover stage yet, though he didn’t really feel drunk, either. Just dizzy and faintly nauseous.

And where the hell was his leg?

He hopped over to the dusty arm crutches propped in the corner of his bedroom. He hadn’t used them since he first learned to walk again, but he was sober enough to realize one-footing his drunk ass to the door was asking for disaster. As he crossed through the living room, he spotted the leg hooked in the pantry’s handle and vaguely remembered using it to get another bottle of whiskey from his stash.

Ranger trailed after him, wagging the whole time.

The shadow in the door’s frosted window was too petite to be Ash. Thank God for small, red-headed miracles.

Anna called his name, her voice filled with worry. Her fist was raised to pound again when he pulled open the door.

Sunlight blasted his retinas, and he squeezed his eyes shut. “What?”

Shit. That wasn’t what he’d meant to say.

Her eyes widened as her gaze skimmed his body, and he realized he was only in his boxers. She could see everything—every scar on his skin, his bare stump. Nothing was left to her imagination.

Shame burned through him. “Yeah, it’s ugly. I’m not the handsome kid

you knew anymore. What do you want?”

Her eyes met his, and he *hated* the pity he saw there.

“You didn’t show up,” she said without condemnation, and that pissed him off even more. She should be mad. She should be furious.

“So why are you here instead of your brother? I violated my probation. Shouldn’t he be slapping handcuffs on me right about now?”

“Because I told him I’d handle it. Is Ranger—” Her gaze dropped to the dog, and she smiled. “I thought so.”

“I don’t know how he got here.” But even as he spoke, the memory bobbed up through the haze of alcohol.

He’d had his gun in hand and was trying to grab the box of bullets from the back corner of the wall safe when he heard a scratching at the door. Ranger had worked the latch and let himself in and at the sight of him, Zak had broken. He’d dropped the gun, grabbed the dog, and cried.

If Ranger had arrived a few minutes later, it would’ve been too late.

He set his hand on the dog’s head and all of his anger evaporated in a profound wave of gratitude. “I want to adopt him.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “Uh... what?”

He’d surprised her. Hell, he’d surprised himself. He’d never planned on having a dog. He could barely take care of himself. But Greer was right, and he shouldn’t be alone. Ranger had been there for him when he’d most needed a friend.

“I want to adopt him,” he said with more confidence.

Anna stared over his shoulder at the disaster area he’d been living in, and embarrassment heated the back of his neck. She started to shake her head, the “no” already forming on her lips, but then she stopped and looked at him. Really looked. It was impossible for her to know what he’d nearly done to himself last night, but in that moment, she must have seen it in him. Her eyes teared up, and she dropped her gaze to Ranger, who pressed closer to his one leg.

She knelt in front of the dog and rubbed his radar dish ear. “You knew he needed you.”

“Yeah, he knew,” Zak answered for Ranger, his voice cracking. “He stayed in bed beside me, and I didn’t dream. I slept, Anna. For the first time in years, I slept.”

She exhaled softly. “Okay.” Standing, she met his gaze. “I can’t let you adopt him until I’m satisfied he will be safe and happy here, but we can do a

trial foster-type situation. If it goes well, and you complete your community service and quit drinking and stay out of trouble, then we'll talk about adoption." Her nose wrinkled as she shouldered by him. "And we need to clean your house."

She eyed the leg still hanging from his pantry door but said nothing about it and opened the fridge.

It was barren.

"What do you eat?" She shut the door and scanned the rows and rows of empty liquor bottles lined up on the counter. "Never mind." She started gathering the bottles.

He reached for them. "I can—"

She easily sidestepped him and dumped the bottles into the empty recycling bin. "No, you're going to shower off the liquor-sweat. You stink." She pulled the prosthetic leg free of the pantry and handed it to him. "I'll get started cleaning up, and then we'll go to the grocery store and the farm supply." With that, she left him standing there, holding his leg.

"Wait, why the farm store?"

"Because if you want to keep Ranger, he'll need supplies—food, bowls, treats, toys, a bed. And, speaking of food, we'll get food while we're out because I'm hungry and I'm not eating here until this entire kitchen is scrubbed with bleach." She opened the cabinet under the sink and found a bucket, scrubber, rubber gloves, and a bottle of bleach that he hadn't even known about. He'd never looked under the sink before.

"Well, why are you just standing there? We have a lot to do." Anna snapped on the gloves and started filling the bucket. "Move it, soldier."

chapter twenty

THEY WENT to the farm store first, and Zak cursed when he saw the total. Ranger had been glued to his side since they left the house and now sat by his boot, ears pinned back, watching the cashier swipe the new bed and toys with curiosity.

He scowled down at the dog as he pulled out his credit card. “You’re gonna break me, mutt.”

Ranger’s ears popped up. He stood and wagged his whole body.

Zak’s scowl faded into a faint smirk of amusement, and he reached down to scratch the dog under the chin.

Anna’s heart swelled as she watched them. This was good. This was healing—for the both of them. She’d been working with Ranger for months now, and the improvement in him just since he met Zak and started cadaver training was astounding. She’d taken the wrong approach with his rehabilitation—he’d only needed a person and a purpose.

And Zak needed this dog.

God, she hoped this arrangement worked out.

While they loaded the supplies into her Kia, Anna’s stomach rumbled loud enough that Zak heard it.

He side-eyed her. “Hungry?”

She slid into the driver’s seat and pretended her face wasn’t turning bright red. “I was supposed to have lunch with Ash, but he was called away on the missing family case.”

“Anything new there?”

She shook her head. “At least, nothing he’d tell me. Those poor kids. I don’t think this will end happily.”

“Cases like this rarely do.” When her stomach grumbled again, he nodded

out the windshield toward Main Street. “Isn’t there a new cafe in town?”

“Hot Shots.” Which was owned and operated by Monarch Development, who bought out the building’s previous owner, kicked out the mom and pop shop there, and installed their own franchise. If anyone from corporate saw her, they might think she’d reconsidered their offer after their most recent thinly veiled threat.

She made a face. “I’d rather not go there. What about The Grove?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. She was testing him, and he was fully aware of it. The Grove was a staple in Steam Valley, having been in business for over fifty years. It was where all the locals hung out, and they would undoubtedly run into people they knew.

His jaw tightened, but he shrugged like it was no big deal. “Fine with me.”

The bar and grill was an unassuming log building nestled in a grove of young redwoods, from which it got its name—it used to be The Groovy Grove, but the owners changed the name when the word groovy fell out of style in the eighties. The parking lot was packed with the dinner rush and people clustered at tables on the wraparound porch. Propane heaters helped ward off the evening chill.

Anna kept an eye on Zak as she circled the lot, looking for an open spot. He’d gone silent and stared at the diner like it would explode at any second and tear a hole in the universe.

Dammit. Maybe this was too much. He needed a gentle push, not a shove off a cliff.

She pulled into a parking spot and shut off the engine. “You don’t have to do this.”

Ranger pushed between the seats to nuzzle him, and he patted the dog’s nose. “I’m okay, buddy. We’ll be back soon.” He shoved open the door. “Let’s get this over with.”

As they crossed the parking lot, a man she didn’t recognize approached them, hand outstretched. He was a tall, muscular man with neatly cut blond hair and hard hazel eyes. There was an air of danger about him that had the hair rising on her arms in warning.

Zak flinched and panic flashed in his eyes before he shoved her behind him, putting himself between her and the stranger. “Stop right there.”

God. He was terrified, and yet his first instinct was still to protect her.

The man stopped several feet away and held up his hands. He was

carrying a stack of flyers and nothing more, but Zak still didn't relax.

"Sorry," the man said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm just—" He pulled a paper from the stack and held it out. "Have you seen my daughters?"

Zak stared at the man for a beat, then slowly reached for the flyer. Emotion flickered over his face as he looked at the missing poster—there and gone in a flash. The man wouldn't have seen it because he didn't know Zak, but to her, it was like a neon sign. He recognized the photos.

She stepped out from behind the shield of his body. "You're the father of the missing girls?"

The man nodded and held out his free hand. "Jake Beckett."

"Anna Rawlings. And this is Zak."

"Rawlings?" he asked as he shook her hand. "Like the sheriff?"

"My brother. He'll find your daughters."

His lips tightened. "He's not doing enough. They're in danger. He should have his entire department out there looking for them."

Annoyance snapped through her. He was upset. She got that. But it didn't give him the right to disparage her brother when Ash had been working his ass off since the night he received the call. She opened her mouth to tell him exactly that, but Zak put a hand on her arm, stopping her.

"We haven't seen the girls," he said.

Jake eyed them. "Call that number on the flyer if you do."

"Sure thing." Zak folded the flyer, slid it into his pocket, and put a possessive hand on the small of her back, steering her toward the restaurant.

She waited until they were well out of earshot. "But you *have* seen those girls. You recognized them."

He shook his head and glanced back at Jake. "Not now."

She also looked back, saw the man was still standing right where they'd left him, staring after them. "You got bad vibes from him, too."

Zak snorted. "Vibes? Sure."

"What else do you call them?"

He didn't respond. He stopped walking like he'd hit a wall and stared at a group gathered around one of the tables on the porch.

She followed his gaze. "Oh."

His whole family was here. His parents, Grady and Paksima. His older sister, Jamila, and brother-in-law, Lance. His brother, Taj, and sister-in-law, Leslie. His youngest sister, Zara, and her fiancée, Chelsey.

And the girl he'd rescued in Afghanistan, his newly adopted sister,

Tehani.

They noticed him and their conversations trailed off. He was frozen, unable to take that next step, but also unable to run away.

She entwined her fingers with his and tugged him forward. "Let's say hi."

"Zak! You came!" Tehani jumped up from her seat, her dark eyes glittering excitedly, her smile as bright as a sunbeam. Her English was almost perfect, with only the slightest accent. She'd learned fast in her two years as an American citizen. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Came for what?" he asked with a strange hollow note in his voice.

"It's Tehani's eighteenth birthday," Jamila said. "We all called you."

"Multiple times," Taj said with a roll of his eyes. "You could've answered and let us know you're not dead."

"Taj, shut up," Zara hissed. "You're not helping."

Paksima stood and reached for him. "Zakir." She said something in her native language and every muscle in his body tensed up like he was expecting an attack. He stared straight ahead as she hugged him, but Anna knew he wasn't seeing his family. He had that faraway look in his eyes again, like up on the mountain. He was back in Afghanistan, reliving horrors that nobody should ever have to endure.

When she didn't get a response, Paksima backed up a step and folded her hands in front of her mouth. Tears leaked from her eyes.

Grady wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and said in English, "How are you?"

Zak shook his head, and without another word, walked away. Paksima turned into her husband's arms and sobbed. Tehani deflated into her seat while Jamila, Zara, and Chelsey tried to comfort her.

"I—" Helpless, Anna looked between his departing back and his family. "I'm sorry. This is my fault. I pushed him to come here, and he wasn't ready." She hadn't known about the birthday party, or else she wouldn't have suggested it. "I'll talk to him."

Taj shoved back his chair. "If he's just gonna keep coming around and hurting Mom, he can stay away. You hear that, you bastard?" he shouted across the parking lot and took a step like he was going to chase Zak down, but his wife and brother-in-law grabbed him, holding him back. "Stay the fuck away from us!"

"I'm sorry," Anna said again and ran after Zak.

He was waiting at the passenger door and jumped in the moment she

unlocked her car. Ranger nuzzled his face, but even the dog's happiness at seeing him didn't penetrate his fog.

She slid in behind the wheel. "Zak..." She said nothing more for a handful of beats. "You should—"

"Please, don't." His voice was still empty and toneless. "I'll do whatever else you demand, but don't make *them* part of the conditions for keeping Ranger. Because I can't, okay? I can't. Not with them."

"I don't understand. Your family loves you. And that girl? You saved her. Not only that, but you brought her here and gave her opportunities she never would've had in her country. She adores you. You're her hero."

His jaw tightened. "Just take me home."

"Where you can drink yourself to death? Hell no." She studied him, waited for him to look at her. When he only continued staring straight ahead through the windshield, she sighed. "You don't like that word, do you? Hero?"

"It's thrown around too much. It's lost all meaning."

Shit. This was bad. This was the man she'd seen when he answered the door earlier—hollow-eyed and on the brink of something disastrous. A man who thought he had nothing left to live for. She had to remind him that wasn't true. And Ranger, as good as he was for Zak, just wasn't enough. She had to find another way to connect with him.

There was one way she hadn't tried yet...

It was dangerous. She could—probably would—end up heartbroken again, but the still-simmering attraction between them was all she had left in her arsenal.

She had to try.

Because she knew without a doubt if she couldn't reach Zak soon, the next time he didn't show up for work, she'd find him dead.

Her stomach rolled at the thought.

She had to try.

chapter **twenty-one**

ZAK ONLY REALIZED they weren't heading toward home when she pulled into the fast food drive-thru at the truck stop outside of town. He scowled at her. "What are you doing?"

"Getting food. I haven't eaten all day. What do you want?" she asked as she rolled down her window.

He didn't want anything. His stomach was in such tight knots he didn't think it'd even accept food right now. When he didn't respond, she shrugged and ordered cheeseburgers, fries, and drinks for them, and a plain burger for Ranger. She paid at the window, then passed him the bag and pointed the car in the opposite direction of either of their houses. He didn't bother asking where they were going. He was sure he'd hate whatever she had in mind and just silently watched the evening sun sink toward the ocean as they wound their way along Highway 1. She pulled into the lighthouse parking lot, which was packed with cars of tourists waiting for the sunset, and gathered a blanket from her trunk. She leashed Ranger, then stood beside the car, the blanket tossed over her shoulder and one hand on her hip.

"Well? You just going to sit here all night and let me starve?"

Grumbling under his breath, he got out of the car with the bag of food. Instead of dragging him down the path to the beach below the lighthouse like he thought, she chose one that wound up onto the cliffs overhead. It was a steep hike, and he was winded by the time they reached the picnic area at the top, but she still didn't stop. She let Ranger off his leash and slipped into the woods, following a barely there trail even higher. The dog bounded after her, having the time of his life on this impromptu hike.

Zak paused and leaned on a picnic table, sucking in several gasping lungfuls of air—fuck, he really had to start working out regularly again.

When he finally caught up, he found her spreading the blanket out next to a steaming pool of water. A narrow waterfall bubbled soothingly through the rocks overhead before cascading into the spring.

The ball of tension in his chest loosened. There was nobody else here but them.

“What are we doing here?”

She took the food bag from him and sat down. “Having a picnic in my favorite spot.”

“I’m not talking about my family.”

“I wasn’t planning on talking. I’m eating.”

He glanced back at the path they had taken. He could see glints of the setting sun on the ocean through the trees, but nothing more of the sunset. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“I have a flashlight. What, are you afraid of the dark?”

“I’m afraid of falling off a cliff in the dark like any rational person would be.”

She unwrapped the burger for Ranger and baby-talked as she fed it to him. “Who’s a good boy? Ranger’s such a good boy.”

Zak watched the dog devour the patty and winced. “That can’t be good for him.”

“Oh, relax. It’s a treat. Good boys get treats.” When he still didn’t move from the path to join her, she arched a brow in obvious challenge. “*You* are not a good boy.”

Heat curled through him. “You don’t want me to be.”

A smile flickered at the edge of her mouth, but she didn’t confirm or deny as she dug in the fast food bag for her own burger. She took a bite and made an orgasmic sound that had all of his nerve endings bursting to painful life again, just like last time he’d kissed her.

His mouth went dry, and he grabbed one of the sodas, focusing on the trees, the spring, the waterfall, the dog—anywhere but on her—as he sucked it down. “Where are we?”

“Mm.” She swallowed the bite she’d taken and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “My family’s land.”

He pulled up a mental map of town, and the geography wasn’t adding up. The Rawlings ranch lands were north of Steam Valley and stretched eastward into the mountains from the coast. The lighthouse, and therefore this spring, were to the south of town.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” She grinned and popped a fry in her mouth. “Yep, the Rawlings own more than the ranch. It’s the best kept secret in town.” Her smile dimmed a wattage. “Thankfully.”

He finally stepped off the path and lowered himself onto the blanket. “I take it the developers don’t know?”

Her gaze snapped to his. “How do you know about them?”

“Small town, and the rumor mill has been working overtime, especially in the bars. Everyone’s saying they want the ranch land for a resort, and everyone has an opinion about it.”

She picked at the bun of her burger, ripping off a piece. “They want my house and Redwood Coast Rescue, but they’re not getting either.” She popped the bread in her mouth and looked at the waterfall. “And no, they don’t know about this place. If they did, they’d want it, too. My several-times-over-great-grandfather bought all of this with a shell company he’d set up to launder money during the gold rush. The company’s all legal now—Ash wouldn’t have it any other way—but it would take Monarch years to dig through all the paperwork to find the owners. It’s not worth it to them when they think they can bully poor little Anna Rawlings and her struggling dog rescue.”

“They have no idea who they’re up against,” Zak said. “The stubbornest woman in the world.”

She sighed. “Yeah, well. I may be stubborn, but I don’t have unlimited funds like they do. Wish my however-many-greats-granddaddy had thought to put the ranch under the company’s name, too, but...” She trailed off and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. They’re not getting it, no matter what they threaten.”

“They’ve been threatening you?”

She finished her burger and wadded up the wrapper. “You might as well know Monarch’s taking me to court, saying I don’t actually own the land. I volunteered the rescue for your community service because the judge who handled your case will also handle the property dispute. I thought if I could rehabilitate you, it would prove my rescue is more of an asset to the town than some fancy resort.”

“Ah, so you’re not as altruistic as I thought.”

“Let’s call it a mix of altruism and desperation.”

“Unfortunately, you placed your bets on the wrong horse. I’m beyond help.”

She met his gaze. “No, you’re not.”

“Anna Rawlings, the queen of lost causes,” he muttered. And this convo was getting damn uncomfortable, so he grabbed a handful of fries from the bag to avoid continuing it. They were cold but tasted good and he suddenly realized he *was* hungry. Starving. He’d been subsisting on a liquid diet and the occasional handful of stale cereal. He couldn’t even remember the last time he ate actual food. Was it the sandwich she’d made for him?

Fuck. That was over a week ago.

He unwrapped his burger. Judging by her amusement, he must’ve made a noise similar to hers when he bit in, but he didn’t care. At that moment, it was the best thing he’d ever tasted, and when it was gone, he wished he had another.

“Here.” Anna took his burger wrapper and passed him the bag of cold fries. “Have my fries. I’m done.”

She stuffed the wrappers and napkins in the small trash bag she’d brought from her car, then stood and stripped off her shirt.

He nearly choked on the fries. “What are you doing?”

“Getting in the hot spring. Why else would I hike all the way up here?” She pulled off her sports bra and let it drop onto her shirt. When she skimmed her pants down her legs, he averted his gaze.

She snorted a laugh. “Oh, c’mon, you’ve seen me naked lots of times.”

“Fifteen years ago.”

“Nothing’s changed other than my weight.”

Yeah, right. From the glimpse he’d gotten before he looked away, a lot had changed. She was no longer the skinny teenager he remembered, and that extra weight she mentioned had filled her out in all the right places. Her breasts would overflow his hands now and her ass...

He shifted, suddenly uncomfortably hot.

Fuck, he wasn’t hungry anymore. At least not for cold French fries.

She was toying with him, playing on the still simmering sexual attraction between them. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Swimming?”

“You’re trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

He heard a splash and risked a glance in her direction. She stood under the waterfall, her head tilted up toward the spray. She was beautiful. Ethereal, like a creature of myth.

His breath caught in his chest. “Yeah, it’s working.”

chapter **twenty-two**

ANNA WALKED BACK across the pool toward him, her soft laughter like a siren's call, beckoning him to his doom.

He squeezed his eyes shut and mentally grabbed onto his quickly unraveling thread of control with both hands. "Anna, stop. You don't want to go there again with me. I broke your heart last time—on purpose—because it was easier to walk away."

"I know. So now it's my turn to get revenge and break yours."

His eyes popped open at that. "I'm already broken. There's nothing left."

"We'll see."

God, she didn't look real standing there in the pool of clear water with steam swirling around her. Her hair curled over her shoulders and water dripped from the ends, trailing down her body. He wanted to lick it away.

Using the tip of her finger, she traced one droplet's trail between her full breasts. "What are you staring at?"

She was shameless. Completely comfortable in her own skin, and he couldn't decide if he hated her for it or wanted her even more. "A woman who doesn't know when to stop."

"Do you want me to stop?" Her hand stopped moving just below her navel, fingers teasing the red curls at the vee of her legs. "Or would you rather I come closer so you can touch me? Warm me up? That waterfall was cold."

Even from where he sat, he could see the goosebumps on her skin. Her nipples puckered to tight little peaks as she continued closing the distance between them. An erection—his first in... Jesus, he didn't even remember how long—swelled painfully against his fly. He wanted to cover her body with his and warm away those goosebumps using the kind of hot friction that

ended with both of them coming.

She stopped in front of him and smiled seductively as she picked up his hand and splayed it on her hip. He shuddered at the contact and surged up just as she bent down, their lips crashing together in a desperate click of teeth and dance of tongues. She straddled his lap, digging her hands into his too-long hair, her nails biting into his scalp. It felt like she was punishing him for something—missing his community service, scaring her, walking away from his family. He didn't care to know her reasons. Whatever they were, he was one hundred percent on board. He was an asshole of the highest caliber and deserved all the punishment she could dream up. Especially if it lit him on fire like this.

He wasn't numb anymore. When she touched him, he could *feel* again. The scratch of her nails, the bite of her teeth on his lower lip, her cold, wet body grinding against his throbbing cock. He felt all of it, and it didn't make him want to eat a bullet or drive off a cliff. He wanted more.

He reached between her legs and found her soaked—and not from the spring. She circled her hips against his hand as his fingers dipped inside and the pull of her walls sucking at him almost made him rocket off right then and there in his pants. It had been a long time since he'd last had sex. Too long. He would not have any staying power, so he had to make sure she came first.

Groaning, he broke the kiss and captured her breast in his mouth, giving her nipple a hard tug with his teeth. She gasped and arched, pushing his fingers deeper into her body. He pressed his thumb against her clit and watched her ride herself to climax, loving the way she moved against him and the sounds she made as she came.

She was a good girl in the streets, but a bad girl in bed. He'd forgotten that about her. The summer they'd spent together, she'd been wild and up for anything. They'd done things together that, to this day, he hadn't done with any other woman.

"Fuck," he whispered against her skin. "I want you, Anna. I've always fucking wanted you. Never stopped."

She stared down at him with sleepy eyes and a satisfied smirk. "Bet you can't make me do that again with just your cock."

Challenge accepted.

He unzipped so fast he was lucky he didn't pinch himself— but stopped her before she could slide down his length. "We don't have a condom."

She rubbed teasingly against his tip. “I can’t get pregnant.”

That was all he needed to hear. He grabbed her hips and pulled her down on him as he thrust up. He lost himself in the rhythm of their joining until every nerve ending in his body exploded in a brilliant flash of heat and color. He had no idea if he made her orgasm again, but he came so hard he thought his body might rip in half. He went blind and deaf and lost all sense of self, of sanity, as his world narrowed to her. She was the oxygen that filled his lungs. The water in his blood. She was everything he needed to survive.

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight, resting his head against her breasts, listening to the gallop of her heartbeat. If he let her go, he’d float off into the black, endless numbness again.

He couldn’t to go back there.

Without a doubt, he’d die there if he went back.



He was shaking.

It was the first thing Anna realized when she came back to herself from another mind-shattering orgasm. He’d been wild and desperate, pounding into her like his life depended on it. All she’d been able to do was hang on and hope he didn’t buck her off. Then he hit a spot inside her that sent her flying. She hadn’t known she could come from penetration. She’d always needed clitoral stimulation in the past, and her dare had been nothing but a sneaky way to get him to drop his guard—and his pants.

But that orgasm? She’d experienced nothing like it before. Her body still hummed and buzzed, and mini firecrackers exploded across her skin. She wasn’t cold anymore, that was for sure.

But Zak was. Even though he was still fully clothed, he shook like he was trapped in the middle of an ice storm without winter gear.

“Zak?” she whispered, combing a hand through his hair. “What’s wrong?”

His arms tightened around her, and he muttered something that sounded like, “I can’t go back.”

Her throat closed up, and she cradled his head against her chest. “We don’t have to right now. We still have time before it gets dark. We can stay

right here if you want.”

“No, I—” He sucked in a breath and let it out in a rush that sounded dangerously close to a sob. “I can’t go back to the darkness. The emptiness. The numbness. I was drowning in it until you. I *feel* with you. And I’m so fucking afraid if I let you go, I’ll sink into that cold nothing again and won’t come back up. I almost killed myself last night. If Ranger hadn’t shown up when he did—” He broke off.

She’d known it, had seen it all over him when he answered the door this afternoon, but hearing him confirm it ripped through her like a serrated blade. She looked at Ranger. He lay several feet away, watching them with an expression of doggie annoyance.

Thank you, she told him silently. He lifted his head, and she saw understanding in his yellow eyes. “I’ve never been so glad he’s an escape artist.”

Zak tightened his grip on her and sniffed like he was trying to hold back a flood of emotion. “You’re right. I am a coward. It’s easier to walk away from my family than talk to them. It’s easier to drink myself stupid than face you or my therapy group. It’s easier to kill myself than deal with what happened to me.”

Oh, God, she regretted calling him that. “That’s not true. You’re the bravest man I know.”

“Brave men don’t take the easy way out. I’ve never taken the easy way in my life, so why is it all I can think about now? I’m in a fucking tailspin and I’m not strong enough to pull myself out. I’ve tried.”

“Zak.” She lifted his chin with her hand, unsurprised to see his lashes spiked with moisture and tear tracks on his face. She kissed them away. “You don’t have to face this alone. You have me. You’ve *always* had me. That’s why I brought you up here. To remind you of us, the way we used to be. We could be that again. I’d like for there to be an us again. You have *so much* to live for.”

Ranger gave an exasperated huff, and she smiled over at him. “And you have a strong support network now. You have Ranger, Dr. Firestone and the rest of your therapy group, your family. You even have Ash. He may not admit it, but he worries about you nonstop. We all do. We’re all here for you, so if the darkness swallows you again, all you have to do is reach out. Just reach out.”

He trailed his fingers down her arm but stopped inches from touching her

hand. "I'm reaching," he said, voice raw. "I need help."

Heart in her throat, she closed the distance between their hands and laced her fingers with his. "And I'm right here. I'm not letting you drown."

part two

found



We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is
community.

Dorothy Day

HAVE YOU SEEN US?

BELLADONNA "BELLA" EVELYN LOWE



AGE: 16
HEIGHT: 5 FT 4 IN
WEIGHT: 115 LBS
HAIR: BLOND DREADLOCKS WITH DARK
ROOTS
RACE: MIXED
EYES: BROWN
CLOTHES: GRAY HOODED SWEATSHIRT, RED
FLANNEL, BLACK LEGGINGS, AND COMBAT
BOOTS

POPPY LINEA LOWE



AGE: 5
HEIGHT: 3 FT 6 IN
WEIGHT: 30 LBS
HAIR: BLOND, STRAIGHT
RACE: WHITE
EYES: BLUE
CLOTHES: PINK PUFFER JACKET, PURPLE
LEGGINGS, AND FLOWER RAIN BOOTS

**BOTH GIRLS WERE LAST SEEN ON OCTOBER 16TH OF THIS YEAR AT LOST
ROCKS STATE PARK CAMPSITE A. THEY WERE ABDUCTED BY THEIR
MOTHER, JESSICA LOWE, FROM THEIR HOME IN TUCSON, ARIZONA.**

**IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION THAT CAN HELP FIND THEM,
PLEASE CONTACT THEIR FATHER, JAKE BECKETT, AT (123) 456-7890.**

chapter **twenty-three**

ZAK SPENT every night of the next two weeks at Anna's and almost never went home, except to grab more clothes. In truth, he was afraid to. The last night he'd spent there had nearly been his last on earth. If he went back, would he slide into that darkness again?

He wasn't certain enough about his newfound will to live to test it.

Besides, he enjoyed every second in Anna's bed, where they fucked like horny teenagers until they fell into an exhausted, sated sleep, usually with his cock still nestled between her legs. He liked waking up beside her, having breakfast with her, and then walking across the driveway to the barn to help her care for the dogs. He was slowly earning the trust of the poor burned golden retriever, Matilda. He had fun playing with Raszta, the mop dog. He loved training Ranger in cadaver detection and worked with him daily.

For the first time since he made the decision to blow his cover and rescue Tehani, he felt alive.

The only kink in all the happy was Ash. He was pissed about the rekindled relationship and uncharacteristically vocal about his feelings. It didn't seem to bother Anna, so he tried to let it roll off him, too.

He'd never admit it, but Ash's intense hatred of him hurt.

Yeah, he'd been a dick since he got home and had made Ash's job a hundred times harder, but a few bar fights couldn't possibly be all that was behind the guy's simmering rage. Something more fueled it, but any time he brought it up to Anna, she shrugged it off as Ash being Ash.

"He'll come around," she said. "He's just being a protective ass. Give him time."

Greer Wilde called every day to check on him. At first, it annoyed Zak, but then he started to look forward to their evening conversations.

Reconnecting felt good, and he was touched beyond words when he was the first person Greer called with the news that he and his wife were expecting. The man had been his commander, his brother-in-arms, and their bond was formed in the blood and dirty deeds of an endless war that had left them both shattered in different ways. If Greer was okay enough now to have a happy marriage and become a father, then maybe there was hope for Zak.

Maybe he wasn't a lost cause.

Talking to Greer was also better therapy than the court-mandated group shit. He was one of the few people who knew exactly what Zak had faced overseas, and he also knew when *not* to bring it up—unlike the damn therapy group.

Zak dreaded every session.

As Sawyer predicted, Donovan returned and said nothing about his blow-up. He simply arrived early for the next session with a drywall repair kit to fix the hole, then sat down like nothing happened. The sessions carried on like usual after that, with one of them doing the majority of the talking each time. The day it was Pierce's turn, Zak was lost. He really had to learn some sign language.

But, this morning, everyone seemed off—quieter, more withdrawn. Even Dr. Firestone wasn't her usual cheerful self as she set her bag down and let Alfie out to use his psychic powers. He sniffed around the circle, then stopped, as he so often did, in front of Veronica's chair. She scooped him up with a muffled sob.

The good mood Zak had been riding all morning suffocated in the thick cloud of depression. Dammit, he didn't need them dragging him down when his good moods were so few and far between. "What the hell is up with you all?"

Dr. Firestone cleared her throat. "There was another member of our group who stopped coming right before you joined us—"

"Christina Jimenez," Veronica said and hugged Alfie, burying her face between his ears. "She was found dead this morning with a needle in her arm. She sat where you sit now."

The news hit Zak like a blow, knocking all the air out of his lungs.

Someone else had once sat in his seat.

Someone who just lost her battle with her demons.

Donovan pressed his fingers to his eyes. "I thought Chrissy was off that shit."

Pierce signed something. Nobody bothered translating, so Zak had no idea what he said.

“Yeah, I don’t get it, either,” Sawyer said, presumably answering Pierce. “She was doing so good. She was healing, and then she just stops showing up out of the blue? It doesn’t make sense.”

“You don’t heal from the shit she went through,” Veronica whispered.

“She never told us what she went through.”

“She was raped by a commanding officer and when she tried to get help, command kicked her out and silenced her.” She shook her head and tears spilled from her dark eyes. “You don’t heal from that.”

Donovan dropped his hand from his eyes and stared at Veronica for a long moment. “Fuck,” he said with an edge of anger in his voice. “You’re talking from experience. That’s what happened to you, too, isn’t it?”

Veronica looked at Dr. Firestone, who nodded encouragement. “It’s time, Vee.”

“Okay.” She drew a deep, ragged breath. “Three of my fellow airmen held me down at gunpoint and—” The words seemed to catch in her throat, and she coughed. “They—they gang-raped me. Men who I thought were friends, who were supposed to have my six, and they violated me. And like Chrissy, when I tried to report it, they claimed I wanted it. I was branded a slut and a troublemaker and pushed out of the Air Force.”

Pierce popped to his feet and paced, signing furiously. Zak didn’t have to know the language to know the guy was cursing a blue streak. There were a lot of middle fingers being thrown around and gestures he recognized.

Donovan had gone deadly silent.

Sawyer shook his head. “You didn’t trust us enough to tell us.”

“Can you blame me? I can’t trust any man anymore. Not even my dad or my best friend since childhood. This group—” She broke off and looked at Dr. Firestone again.

“Go ahead,” the doctor urged. “Tell them.”

“This group is exposure therapy for me.”

“We’d *never* hurt you.” Donovan’s jaw was clenched so tightly, it was amazing he got any words out. “We don’t hurt women here.”

She lifted a shoulder. “I thought the same thing about the men who attacked me. Look, you’re not my friends. We’ll never be friends. I’m only here because I need help, and Dr. Firestone suggested it would be good for me.”

I need help.

Zak looked away, the words echoing uncomfortably in his head. He'd said the same to Anna at the hot spring two weeks ago. "We don't have to be friends to help you."

Everyone looked at him. Or, in Sawyer's case, toward his voice.

"What was that?" Dr. Firestone asked.

Shit. He should've kept his mouth shut. He rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his thighs. "She doesn't have to see us as friends for us to be here for her. We just have to wait until she's ready to reach out." He met Veronica's gaze across the room. "I'll be here when you're ready."

"Me, too," Sawyer said.

Pierce nodded.

"Yeah, friends or not, you're one of us," Donovan said. "We'll always have your six."

Several beats passed in silence.

Dr. Firestone blinked. "Well, thank you, Zak. That was very insightful."

He cracked a small smile. He'd smiled a lot more over the last couple of weeks, but it still felt weird on his face. "I've learned a few things."

Veronica set Alfie down and grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair. She ignored them all, except for the doctor. "Can I leave?"

"It's not a prison. You're free to come and go as you please." Dr. Firestone also stood. "In fact, in honor of Chrissy, we'll call it a little early today and I want you all to go out into the community and do something in her memory—clean up the beach, volunteer at the soup kitchen. Let's spread some joy in her name."

Donovan lingered behind after everyone else left. He leaned against the wall by the door and watched Zak fold and stack the chairs with suspicion. "Okay, what happy pills are you taking and where can I get some?"

"I'm not on drugs."

"You're not drinking either."

"How the fuck do you know?"

"You don't smell like a distillery anymore."

Zak scowled at him and moved on to dealing with the coffeepot. He tapped the used filter into the garbage and took the nearly full pot to the sink to dump it.

Donovan pushed away from the wall and trailed him to the employee break room. "And then that shit you said to Veronica? It was exactly the right

thing, exactly what she needed to hear, but none of us who have known her for months thought to say it. So, yeah, it's got me wondering what changed? What's the magic pill? Because I've been coming here for almost a year and every fucking day is still a struggle."

"Nothing's changed."

Donovan's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit. You're different."

The side door leading out to the agility yard opened and Anna walked in with Matilda on a leash. Sasha followed and the two women carried on a conversation about the dog's progress as they led her back to C-Wing. Anna waved to him before they disappeared down the hall.

Zak smiled. He couldn't help it. It was an involuntary response every time he saw her.

"Ah." Donovan slapped him on the back. "I get it. Not a magic pill. Magic pussy. I should get me some of that."

Jealousy sizzled through him like a lightning strike. He shrugged off Donovan's hand and whirled on the guy, fully intending to punch him if he said another word. "Make a move on her and you won't have to worry about your scrambled brain anymore. It'll be on the wall."

A grin spread across Donovan's hard face. "Nah, no worries there. Redheads aren't my thing. The curvy one she was with, though? Damn, I could make some magic with her."

The asshole had been poking at him on purpose, trying to get a rise out of him. And it had worked. He couldn't shake the lingering jealousy. It buzzed under his skin, making him twitchy.

Emotions.

Jesus.

After being numb for so long, he wasn't used to their intensity and never knew how to handle them when they took him in a chokehold like that.

He grumbled and turned his attention back to cleaning the coffeepot, scrubbing it out harder than necessary. "Don't you have to go spread joy somewhere else that's not here?"

Grin still in place, Donovan opened his arms wide and backed toward the door. "Man, I spread joy everywhere I go."

"Yeah, when you leave."

Donovan snorted a laugh and gave him the finger before shoving through the door.

chapter **twenty-four**

ZAK SAT at the kitchen table, scrolling through a news article about Christina Jimenez's death, when Anna came back to the house for lunch.

"Oh, you made mac and cheese! Thank God. I'm starving." She leaned over his shoulder and stole a bite from his bowl. "What are you reading?"

He closed the laptop. "It's nothing. How's Matilda?"

She crossed to the stove to scoop some pasta for herself. "Sasha doesn't think she'll get full range of motion back in her front leg because of all the scar tissue, but, honestly, it hasn't slowed her down much. The daily agility runs have helped, and she *loves* them. That dog's happiest when she's zooming. I'm even seeing some of her personality peeking out. She's sassy and has a high prey drive. She might be an excellent candidate for search and rescue if we can work through her trust issues."

"I'll go play with her again this afternoon after Ranger's training session. I think she's starting to like me."

"She more than likes you. She's getting a bit of a doggie crush on you."

"Who can blame her? I mean, look at me." He gestured to himself. "A one-legged soldier with a drinking problem and PTSD out the wazoo. I'm a catch."

"I think so."

He grabbed the coffee he'd forgotten about and took a drink. It was cold. He made a face and pushed it aside. "And I still think you need your head examined for taking me back."

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for lost causes." Anna leaned against the counter with her bowl in hand and took a bite of the pasta as she eyed the laptop. "So, how was therapy?"

He raised a shoulder. "You know. Therapy."

“Uh-huh.” She came over to the table, set her bowl down, and before he realized her intention, she snatched the computer.

“Oh,” she breathed when she saw the article and sank into the chair beside him. “Chrissy. I’m guessing they heard the news then?”

“Yeah. Everyone was pretty torn up about it.”

She shook her head, closed the laptop, and dragged her bowl over in front of her. “It’s so sad. I didn’t know her well, but she seemed like a good person. She volunteered here occasionally, and the dogs loved her.”

She sat where you sit now.

Zak poked at his macaroni, but his appetite was gone. “Do you think she did it on purpose?”

“What, overdose?” She paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth, considering it. “I didn’t know her well enough to say, but she *was* an addict and there’s been a rash of fentanyl-related deaths lately. It could be she just wanted to get high and bought from the wrong person. Why do you ask?”

“Everyone was so shocked. They said she seemed like she was doing well, healing, and then she suddenly stopped showing up to group and…” He motioned to the laptop. “Three weeks later, she’s dead.”

She set down her spoon. “You’re afraid you’ll backslide, too.”

“It’s not an irrational fear.”

“No, it’s not. But you have something she didn’t…” She reached for his hand and laced their fingers together. “Me.”

“How did I get so fucking lucky?” He leaned over the table to kiss her but was interrupted by an annoyed throat clearing.

“Ash,” he muttered and sank back into his seat. “Great timing, as usual.”

A muscle ticked in Ash’s jaw as he glowered at them from the kitchen doorway.

Anna smiled brightly at her brother. “Did you need something?”

He growled and started to turn away. “No.”

“Oh, c’mon, Ash. Don’t be like that. You came here to vent. I can see it all over you. So, sit down and vent.”

Ash dragged a hand through his disheveled hair. He was usually all buttoned-up and militarily neat about his appearance, but the guy looked haggard. His beard was overdue for a trim and dark shadows lined his eyes. He hesitated a beat, then grudgingly sank into a chair and slapped a wrinkled flyer down on the table between them.

It was the missing poster for Bella and Poppy Lowe.

Shit. Zak had completely forgotten about the one the girls' father had given him outside of The Grove. He picked it up and studied the two photos. Once again, his gaze was drawn to the older girl, Bella. Why was she so familiar?

"Jake Beckett's been on my ass about his daughters," Ash said. "He refuses to accept the case has gone cold, and I don't blame him for wanting answers, but... there aren't any. I have no leads and absolutely zero evidence the girls or their mother are still in the area. I can't even say for sure if they're alive or dead. We had the blood at the campsite tested and it matched Jessica Lowe's blood type, but DNA confirmation's gonna take weeks. I've done everything I can officially. It's not even my case anymore—it's FBI jurisdiction because the kids were taken over state lines, but they are doing jack-shit with it and now Beckett's been investigating it himself. He's going around accusing people and causing problems in the community, but I can't take my deputies away from active investigations for his wild goose chases."

"We can do another search," Anna suggested.

Ash shook his head. "I can't put any more department resources toward this, especially now, with the Jimenez case."

Zak looked up from the poster. "Chrissy Jimenez's death wasn't just an overdose?"

"It probably was, but as an unattended death, it has to be investigated."

He was lying. Or at least avoiding the entire truth. Zak recognized his tells from when they were kids. His left eyelid always twitched slightly when he lied. "What aren't you telling us? Is there a connection between the Lowe family and Jimenez?"

He raised his hands in a halt gesture. "I can't comment. The media are already swarming because of the circumstances of Jimenez's dismissal from the Army, and I can't risk leaks. It's going to turn into a circus."

"Maybe it needs to be a circus," Zak said. "What happened to her wasn't right. The Army should be held accountable."

Ash scowled, and it was very obvious he didn't want to admit he agreed just because it was Zak who had said it. But, after a stubborn second, he nodded. "Yes, but that leaves me playing politics, and those girls are still out there somewhere with nobody but their dad looking for them. And there's something off about that man. I get the sense he's lying to me every time I talk to him."

Anna gnawed on her lower lip and looked at Zak, then at the flyer he still

held. “What if I set up a training exercise at the campground? We can see how Zak and Ranger and some of the other new teams do in a real-world setting, and maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“That’s overly optimistic, AJ.”

“It’s better than doing nothing.”

He was silent a moment. “Yeah,” he finally said with a sigh and pushed out of his chair. “You’re right. I need to get back to work, but let’s do it. Set up the training exercise and let me know when it is. I want to be there.”



That night, Zak dreamed for the first time in weeks, but it was different from his usual nightmares. He wasn’t mired in it, reliving pain or torture, but instead watched the scenes play out in bits and pieces like a stuttering old movie reel.

A foggy road.

A camper van.

A ghostly, wide-eyed face in the harsh splash of headlights.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t see you! I called for help. Hang on.”

A girl with a jeweled nose and dreadlocks.

A bloody hand gripping hers tightly.

“Please. I can’t stay. They’re coming to help you, but I can’t be here. I don’t have a license. They’ll take Poppy from me...”

Zak bolted upright, his breath caught in his throat.

The girl.

He scrambled out of bed.

“Zak?” Anna sat up and turned on the light. She blinked at him, pushing her hair back from her face. “What’s wrong?”

He hopped over to their pile of clothes on the floor and dug through until he found his jeans. He’d folded the missing persons flyer earlier and stuffed it into his back pocket. Now he pulled it out, flattened it on the dresser, and studied the older girl’s face. She didn’t have a nose ring in the picture, but he knew she’d gotten one since it was taken.

It was her.

Bella.

The girl who had witnessed his first suicide attempt.

The girl who had saved him by calling for help and holding his hand until the last second before that help arrived. She'd kept him anchored, kept him from giving up.

"Jesus," he whispered and leaned on the dresser as his knee threatened to give out.

Anna came up behind him and flattened her hand over the ropes of scar tissue on his back. When they first started sleeping together, he hadn't liked her seeing or touching his scars, but now he found the weight of her hand a comfort.

"Did you have a nightmare?" she asked softly.

"No. At least, not about Afghanistan." He tapped the flyer. "This was the girl who called for help the night of my accident."

Her eyes widened. "The lipstick."

He glanced over, eyebrow raised. "Lipstick?"

"I always wondered..." She shook her head. "I found you that night because there was a trail of random objects with lipstick arrows on them pointing down from the road to you. We never figured out who did that."

"She saved me." Zak stared at Bella's photo and certainty bloomed in his chest. "She's alive."

"Oh, Zak. You can't know that."

"No, she's alive. She lived with an abusive, drug-addicted mother, who flew into rages at the drop of a hat, and she took all the beatings without complaint to protect her younger sister. That family at the campground next to theirs told us as much the night of the first search. Bella also got a job off the books to support herself and provide for the kid. And she pointed you to me, using whatever she had on hand to create a trail." He tapped the photo again with his knuckle. "This girl's tenacious and smart. She's a survivor. She's alive and wherever she is, she's still protecting her sister." He lifted his gaze to Anna's. "We have to find them."

chapter **twenty-five**

IT HAD BEEN over two weeks since Mom died. Actually, almost three now. Nineteen days.

Bella kept track of the passing time by scratching marks into the wood paneling of their prison with a nail she'd wiggled loose from the floorboards.

And she still didn't know who Hoodie Man was or what he wanted.

As promised, he didn't hurt them. After depositing them in this basement room, he never laid a hand on them again. He locked them in and only returned to give them food three times a day or bring them fresh clothes and bed linens. He never really spoke—he acted like he wanted to, but couldn't figure out what to say—and always seemed sad.

As far as prisons went, this was a comfortable one. The room was large, with a plush sectional sofa, two soft beds, a full bathroom, and a huge entertainment system. Poppy was dazzled by the TV, the wide selection of streaming services, and the overflowing bookshelves. There were DVDs, board games, puzzles and all kinds of books—but not the one about the fae prince that Mom had destroyed, dammit.

If she died without finding out the ending, she was going to be pissed.

There was a galley kitchen along one wall with and a line of cupboards filled with snacks and a small fridge stocked with water, juice, and soda. Their first day here, Bella had checked to see if there were any knives in the drawers, but Hoodie Man had removed anything she could use as a weapon.

Compared to the way they had been living, this place was like a luxury resort. Poppy had never seen anything like it in her young life, and Bella managed to convince her they were on vacation. Luckily, she didn't seem to remember anything from the night Mom died.

Every morning when Hoodie Man brought their breakfast—with plastic

cutlery, of course—he asked if there was anything else they needed or wanted. It was weird. He seemed to care about their comfort and was probably the nicest kidnapper in the crime's history.

But she knew from Mom's mood swings that could change in an instant. Nobody good kept two girls locked in a basement. It was only a matter of time until they saw his true nature, so she spent every free moment plotting an escape.

For all the good it'd done her.

Nineteen days and she still hadn't come up with a solid plan.

She knew they were still in Steam Valley. He'd apologetically blindfolded her after leaving the campgrounds, but she had a vague idea of the distance they'd traveled and knew they'd gone up in elevation. They were up on Murder Mountain. Maybe they were even close enough to Rainbow Rodriguez's pot farm to make a run for it.

Problem was, Hoodie Man always kept the door locked. It was a heavy door, too. Not something she could easily kick through, like in the movies—she'd tried and hurt her ankle.

The room had windows, but they were the thick glass block kind that allowed light in and didn't open. She couldn't see out and nobody could see in. She'd tried breaking through them at the end of the first week and only busted up her knuckles.

Hoodie Man had not been amused either of the times he'd had to patch her up, but he'd been gentle about it. As he'd bandaged her split knuckles, she'd glanced toward the First Aid kit and thought about lunging for it. There were scissors in there—she'd seen them when he cut open the package of sterile gauze. But he was a big man, with hands more than double the size of hers, and they were comically tiny scissors. The only way they'd do any real damage was if she got him in the eye or something.

Wasn't worth the risk.

And, besides, she didn't really want to hurt him.

He didn't look like a killer. He was handsome, with sharp cheekbones and skin on the lighter side of black. His dark eyes were kind and his touch always gentle.

“Why are you doing this?” She glanced toward Poppy, who was enthralled with the TV and not paying attention. Still, she lowered her voice. “Why did you kill Mom?”

He winced. “I loved your mother.”

“But you murdered her.”

He said nothing in reply and scooped the bandage wrappers into the trash.

“Who are you?”

He exhaled hard and closed the First Aid kit. “It’s... complicated.”

She stared after him when he left, a weird empty ache blooming in her chest. She rubbed at it and scoffed at herself.

God. Can you say Stockholm syndrome?

Okay, next plan: somehow get a hold of his phone.

She had bounced around California long enough to know basements were rare in the state, so she could easily direct police to this place if she could call 9-1-1. A house on Murder Mountain with a basement that had glass brick windows. There couldn’t be that many.

But how to get his phone?

And was there even a signal here?

She was on the couch, mulling over the problem while Poppy watched *Lilo and Stitch* for the hundredth time, when the door opened and someone other than Hoodie Man peeked inside.

Her blood ran cold.

Jake.

He’d found them.

Was he who Hoodie Man had been waiting for all this time?

He stepped into the room, and the door didn’t shut all the way behind him. “Hi, Bella.” Then he looked at Poppy with a smile and everything in her screamed, *no!* Mom had been a shitty mother, but the one thing she’d done right was get Poppy as far away from this man as possible.

She didn’t think, just acted on pure, savage instinct. She exploded out of her seat and plowed into him. He hadn’t been expecting it, and fell backwards with a forced exhale. His head hit the edge of the open door and his eyes rolled back. He went limp.

Bella grabbed her sister’s hand. “Let’s go!”

Poppy pulled away and looked back and forth from Jake to the TV. “My movie’s not over.”

She couldn’t take the time to explain. She scooped the girl up and jumped over Jake’s motionless body. Her foot slid in the pool of blood spreading under his head.

Was he still breathing?

Had she killed him?

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

She ran upstairs, pausing for a heartbeat at the top to listen for movement. Nothing. Hoodie Man wasn't here. He was too big to move silently in the old house with all the creaky floors.

This was her chance.

She sucked in a breath, hugged Poppy tighter, and ran.

chapter **twenty-six**

THE TRAINING EXERCISE went off without a hitch. All teams performed well, but Zak and Ranger were exceptional. If they kept this up, they'd be ready for certification in record time.

But nobody found any scent that she hadn't planted.

Anna didn't know why she was disappointed. It had been a long shot, but she'd hoped having more teams scouring the area would produce something actionable. She hated seeing Ash so twisted up over this case. He was looking more haggard with each passing day.

As the exercise wrapped up, she joined him next to his Tahoe in the parking lot. He was dressed casually today in jeans and a sweatshirt because he technically wasn't on duty, but her brother didn't know how to take a day off.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He shrugged. "We both knew there was nothing here to find. If there had been, Winston would've led us to it that first night." He smiled down at her dog and gave his head a pat. "Nobody has a better nose than this handsome boy." He straightened and nodded across the parking lot, where Zak was playing with Ranger, rewarding him for a job well done. "Except for maybe that dog. He's something else."

"They make a great team, don't they?"

Ash slid her a sideways glance. "I hope you know what you're doing with him."

"Of course I do. Dogs are my life. Ranger's—"

"Don't play dumb. You know what I'm talking about. You and Zak." The constant frown he'd been wearing lately deepened and creases formed on his forehead. "It's dangerous."

Her heart went all gooey as Zak's laughter carried across the lot. She looked at them again and saw man and dog racing toward the beach as fast as his prosthesis allowed. "It's what he needs."

"What about what *you* need?"

She didn't reply because she didn't dare tell him the truth: she loved Zak. She adored his sarcasm and the smirk he wore when he was trying not to smile. His laugh, as rusty as it was, never failed to make her heart sing.

She loved that he was comfortable enough with her to show the vulnerability he hid from everyone else behind biting words and scowls. She wanted to hold him through all of his rough nights and soothe all of his nightmares.

And, of course, his single-minded focus on her pleasure in bed was off-the-charts amazing.

She loved his stubbornness, his grit, his heart. God, he had so much heart. She saw it every day when he interacted with the dogs.

In truth, she had always loved him. Never stopped. And, right now, her needs didn't matter until he was healthy again.

Which Ash definitely didn't want to hear.

Luckily, the radio in his Tahoe chirped with the dispatcher's voice, saving her from having to come up with an answer her brother would be satisfied with.

Ash leaned through the open passenger window to grab the mike. "Rawlings, here. Go ahead."

She wandered away to let him handle the call. "Let's go down to the beach, too, huh?" she said to Winston.

He wagged and bounded ahead. "Beach" was one of his favorite words and he ran laps around her, zooming to the beach and back as she strolled down the path winding through bleached piles of driftwood.

Zak and Ranger were all the way at the far end of the beach, down by the jetty where Razorrock River spilled into the ocean. She started toward them, figuring she'd meet them when they turned back.

Except they didn't turn back.

Ranger skidded to a halt and his nose shot into the air. He veered off the beach into the thick woods along the river, beyond the border of the state park's land.

Zak didn't hesitate to follow.

Did they have a scent?

Anna broke into a run. Winston gave a joyous bark and shot out ahead of her.

Maybe it was nothing.

It was probably nothing, but nobody had searched that area along the river because it was remote, mountainous, heavily forested terrain outside the state park's border. While it was only about a two-mile walk away on the beach, it was at least five times that distance by car on steep, twisty logging roads. Too dangerous to send teams out there without concrete evidence saying that was where they needed to search, and nothing pointed them in that direction. All the information they had indicated a vehicle was involved in the family's disappearance, so she'd focused search efforts on the easily accessible roads around the campgrounds. Hell, none of the dogs there could've even caught a scent from the river due to the geography of the area. Sharp cliffs rimmed the park to the north and east, creating a textbook dead zone at the campground for any scent originating from outside the park's border.

That was why Winston had circled aimlessly during that first search. He couldn't find anything other than the blood on the ground in front of him because all other scents were riding the wind on the cliffs over their heads.

As Winston neared the spot where Zak and Ranger had disappeared off the beach, he also skidded to a halt and lifted his head, his nose working overtime. He looked back at her, his expressive eyebrows raised in question, his tail starting a slow wag. He had a scent and knew this game. He was just checking in with her to make sure it was the game she wanted him to play.

"Yes, Winston. Good boy! Go. Find the napoo."

He put his nose to the ground, sniffed back and forth along the tree line, then plunged into the forest in the exact spot Zak and Ranger had.

The terrain was unforgivingly steep and slippery. She was struggling to keep up with her dog and couldn't imagine how Zak had managed it.

After nearly forty minutes of searching with no sign of Zak or Ranger, she wondered if they had gotten lost. Dammit, would she have to pull in teams to search for them, too? They were still training. Zak might not recognize when Ranger was off track or know how to redirect him. Ranger could just be chasing an animal.

Except Winston was on the scent, too, and he knew better.

They'd moved inland, and the beach was well behind them now. She followed her dog up another steep hill and found herself on an abandoned

logging road. Up ahead, Ranger trotted around with his blue rope toy as Zak knelt, staring at something off the side of the road.

Winston surged toward them, circled Zak and Ranger, then came charging back to her, full of doggie excitement. He made the loop again and again until she caught up. He was telling her found the napoo.

This close, even her inferior human nose could smell death.

She tossed him his favorite ball in reward, then crouched next to Zak. There, in the ferns a few yards from the road, was a mound of freshly dug earth covered with a fringed shawl in a bright southwestern print. A bloated, blackened human arm in an advanced state of decay poked out of the shallow grave.

“That shawl...” Zak glanced over at her, then back at the body. “Ranger found her. Jessica Lowe.”

He sounded amazed by that fact.

“You *both* found her.” She stood and surveyed the road with her hands on her hips. This section was little more than faint ruts in the mud, and who knew what the rest of the road looked like? It was going to be hell getting a crime scene crew here, but that was for her brother to figure out. “Leash the dogs so they don’t disturb anything. We need Ash and more search teams up here to look for the girls.”

“The girls are alive,” Zak said with absolute certainty.

She ached to believe him. “God, I hope so.”

chapter

twenty-seven

ZAK WAS EXHAUSTED.

It was the bone-deep, every-muscle-aching kind of exhaustion that came with long hours of physical labor and took him back to his days as a young soldier in Ranger School.

But he was also exhilarated.

His dog had found Jessica Lowe.

Yeah, yeah, Ash had cautioned not to jump to conclusions. The body was too decomposed for a visual ID, but it was covered with the shawl Jessica was last seen in.

Who else would it be?

She wasn't just dumped on the logging road. She was buried and lovingly covered. Someone had taken a lot of time and great care to dispose of her body, leading Ash to believe that the individual knew her and lived somewhere nearby. Nobody would just stumble onto that road unless they were familiar with the area.

Which meant the girls were close.

There were a few houses scattered up there, most of them off-the-grid hunting retreats, but with darkness closing in, it was too dangerous to continue the search. Ash wanted to canvass them all first thing in the morning, and Zak planned to be right there with him, whether or not the grumpy bastard liked it.

Bella had saved him when he hadn't even known he wanted to be saved. It was only right he returned the favor.

"Ugh, I need to shower off the smell of decay," Anna said as they walked into the house. "It's making me nauseous. Can you feed the dogs?"

"I got it." He nodded to the stairs. "Go on up."

He fed Winston and Ranger, slipping them an extra treat each because they were such awesomely good boys. Then he went out to the barn to check on the residents of C-Wing. Even though Anna hadn't asked him to, he knew she'd sleep better knowing everyone was safe and tucked in for the night.

By the time he got back to the house, he found Anna curled up in bed in just her robe with a towel still wrapped around her wet hair. Sound asleep.

He leaned over to kiss her, but thought better of it when he caught a whiff of himself. The scent of death clung to him, too. He detoured to the bathroom.

When he crawled into bed beside her ten minutes later, naked and still damp from his quick shower, she moaned softly and turned toward him. He kissed her and unwound all that gorgeous copper hair from her towel with one hand while the other walked down her belly to the apex of her legs.

Her eyes opened a crack, and she smirked at him. "What are you doing? I'm trying to sleep."

"I'm trying to make you come."

She arched against his hand. And, moments later, she did come. He caught her cry of pleasure with his mouth, swallowing it down as he eased himself over her. Her legs opened around his hips, and he sank into her sweet heat with a groan.

The sex was slower than usual. Less frantic. Less desperate. He wanted to touch and taste and explore every inch of her body. He wanted to *feel*. Her. Everything. It only seemed right after facing the ugliness of death head-on like they had. He even let her explore him and trace her fingers over his scars—which he still struggled with. He hated he wasn't still the smooth-skinned boy she'd once loved.

"Will you ever tell me where these came from?" she murmured against one scar before kissing it.

"Maybe. I don't know." He pushed his hand into her hair and watched, mesmerized, as the red strands filtered through his fingers. "You don't want to know."

She propped herself up on her elbows. "I don't want you to relive the pain. That's the last thing I want. But just know if you need to talk about any of it, all of it—I'm here. I'll listen."

"It's ugly. The man who did most of it was... twisted. Askar. They broke him long before I showed up, in ways even I can't imagine. And when they set him loose on me, he... played. He was a cold sonofabitch, but he enjoyed

ramping up the pain until I passed out just so he could wake me up and start it all over again.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her lips to his scar again. Tears dropped onto his skin.

“Anna, don’t cry.” He lifted her chin with his hand and was surprised to see rage rather than pity.

“There are too damn many ugly people in the world who have only one goal: to make everyone else as ugly as they are.” She crawled up his body, kissing each scar along the way. When she reached his mouth, she bit his lower lip in a punishing tug. “You will not let Askar succeed in making you ugly.”

“I think he already did.”

“I’m not talking about your scars or your leg.” She rubbed a hand over his stump and a thrill heated his blood. His cock lengthened against his stomach, and she wrapped her fingers around it, teasing him with a loose fist. “Those things make you beautiful because they mean you survived. You survived and came back to me. So, stay with me now.”

“I’m with you.”

“Are you? Because you’ve spent the last two years going back to him, letting him make you ugly. Tell me you won’t go back there again.”

“Never again.”

“And you’re staying here with me now.”

“Yeah.” The word came out strangled.

“Good.” She tightened her fist and dropped her mouth to his tip, sucking like a damn vacuum. His spine arched off the bed as he exploded hard enough to see stars burst behind his closed eyelids.

When he returned to himself, she wore a self-satisfied smirk.

He scowled at her. “You’re evil for mixing therapy with sex.”

“Sex is therapy.”

He burst out laughing.

“What?”

“Just—” He gasped and clutched his ribs. He couldn’t breathe and, for once, it wasn’t because of a panic attack.

Eyes sparkling, she sat up. “What’s so funny?”

“Thinking about how awkward that’d make group if sex really was therapy.”

She laughed and flopped back to the bed. “I bet Dr. Firestone’s a

dominatrix.”

“Oh, Jesus.” He pushed his fingers into his eyes. “Nope. Don’t want that mental image.”

As their laughter died away, she snuggled in beside him. “We should try to sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day for us both.”

He pulled the blanket up over them and kissed her forehead. Several long minutes ticked by in comfortable silence and her breathing evened out, but he knew she wasn’t asleep yet.

“Do you think...” He hesitated.

“Hm?”

“Could you love someone like me? With all my baggage?”

Her lips curved against his neck. “I already do.”

chapter **twenty-eight**

DAWN WAS JUST BREAKING over the mountains when Zak climbed out of the driver's seat of Anna's Kia at the bottom of the logging road, where the search party had set up a base camp.

Ash glowered at him. "You're not supposed to be driving."

"Anna was sleeping. She's exhausted, and I wasn't going to wake her." He opened the back door to grab his backpack and let Ranger out. "You want to arrest me for caring about your sister?"

"I'll arrest you for breaking the law."

"Yeah, well, wait until after we find the girls."

Ash grumbled something under his breath and continued divvying out assignments to his deputies. When he finished, he swung onto a sheriff's department ATV. "Zak, with me."

"Aw. Does this mean we're pals now?"

"I don't trust you by yourself." His scowl deepened when Zak grabbed another ATV from the waiting group instead of climbing on the back of his, but he didn't offer further protest. He just turned the vehicle toward the mountain and gunned it.

Zak whistled to Ranger, who hopped up onto the seat in front of him. As he hit the gas to give chase, Ranger's tongue rolled out and his lips pulled back in a grin. Crazy mutt was just as much of an adrenaline junkie as he was.

They caught up to Ash as he pulled up to the first place on their list—a rustic cabin that offered little in the way of amenities, judging by the outhouse in the side yard.

"Charming," Zak said.

Ash ignored him and went to the door, rapping on the wood with the

knuckles of one hand while the other stayed close to his gun. “Sheriff’s Department.”

No answer.

Zak told Ranger to stay, then swung off the ATV and circled the house until he found a dusty window. He scrubbed at the grim with his sleeve and cupped his hands around his eyes to peek in. The cabin was a single room, and it was empty. “Hey, Ash? Nobody’s been home for a long time.”

Ash grunted, but also came over to look in the window. He scratched the cabin off their list, then shoved the paper back into his pocket and tucked the pencil behind his ear. “We’re walking from here.”

“Joy.”

“Hey, you choose to be here. Stay close.” He turned on his flashlight and, without another word, walked into the gloom of the forest behind the abandoned cabin.

Hours passed as they trudged through the woods in silence. Any conversational attempt Zak made was shut down with one of Ash’s growls of annoyance, so he focused all of his attention on Ranger. The dog seemed to catch a scent near a large, expensive house perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean. He was very interested in the driveway and, nose to the ground, followed the trail into the woods. After a short walk on a path wide enough for a vehicle, they emerged onto—*well, would you look at that?*—the old logging road.

Ranger sat and glanced around, signaling he’d lost the scent, but it didn’t matter.

Zak consulted his compass and a map of the area, tracing his finger along the road until he found the house. They were on the other side of the mountain from base camp, but the crime scene was only a short drive uphill from where he stood. Someone had driven from that house to drop the body up there.

“Zak!” Ash’s angry voice boomed through the trees, startling a flock of birds into the air. “I told you to fucking stay close.”

He winced and pocketed the map. “Why does it feel like I’m a kid disobeying daddy dearest?”

Ranger chuffed.

“Yeah, you’re right. He’s an asshole.” He turned to head back toward the house, but spotted Ash striding through the trees, all but steaming with rage.

All right. Enough of this bullshit. They were working toward the same

goal here and wanted the same outcome. The least they could do was work together like mature adults, but apparently that was too hard for Ash.

The man had been spoiling for a fight for weeks, so Zak would give it to him. “What’s your problem with me?”

“You really have to ask?” Ash got in his face. “You’re a drunk and a menace to my town.”

“*Our* town.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Ash shoved his shoulder, but he’d been braced for it and didn’t move, which only pissed the guy off more. “Since when have you ever cared about this place? You left us and never looked back until you had to.”

Surprise burned through Zak’s annoyance. Of all the things he’d expected Ash to call him out on, leaving town as a teenager had been nowhere on the list. “Is that it? You’re seriously pissed at me because I left, and you were stuck here?”

“I wasn’t stuck. I stayed for my family and my community. I stayed because Anna needed me after the baby—” He broke off and his eyes went wide as if he realized he’d said too much. He backed up a step. “Forget it.”

“Whoa, whoa. Hold up. Baby?” Zak grabbed his shirt to keep him from taking another step back. “Anna was pregnant?”

Ash wouldn’t meet his gaze. “The baby died. Stillborn.”

Unease slithered through him and balled into a tight knot in his gut. “When?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It fucking matters to me. I—”

A bullet hit the tree behind them, splintering bark, and they both dove for cover behind a rotting log on the side of the road. Ranger yipped with fear and darted into the woods.

“Ranger!”

He didn’t come back to Zak’s call and disappeared from sight. Fuck. The dog hated loud noises and especially hated the crack of a gun.

“Who the hell is shooting?” Ash demanded and pulled his service weapon. “Did you see him?”

“No. It came from the northeast. Do you see Ranger?”

“No.”

“Give me your back-up piece.”

“You’re on probation. I’m not giving you a gun.”

“And I’m not sitting here without a way to defend myself!” He realized

his voice had gone high and panicked and sucked in a breath. His hand shook as he held it out. "Please. I was defenseless in Afghanistan. I couldn't do anything but wait for them to come torture or kill me, and I never knew which it would be. I *won't* be that helpless again."

"Fuck," Ash muttered after a beat and pulled a compact pistol from his ankle holster as a deep voice, full gravel, rumbled through the trees.

"Trespassers will be shot."

"You missed, you crazy fuck," Zak called.

Ash hissed between his teeth. "Jesus, do you have to antagonize everyone?"

"I don't miss," the man said. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be bleeding out at my feet. Get off my property. This is your only warning."

Ash holstered his gun and stood, hands raised. "It's just me and my friend Zak."

Oh, so they were friends now? When the good old rule-following sheriff had been about to punch him moments ago? Okay.

Ash smacked him and said through his teeth, "Stand up." Then he turned back to the man and calmed his voice. "We're out looking for a couple of missing girls. Their mother was murdered. Her body was found yesterday uphill from here."

"On my property?"

"No. State land."

Zak rose from behind the log. The man, in full camouflage and face paint, lowered his weapon slightly. He was younger than expected, early to mid-thirties, and held himself like a soldier. His face was obscured by the paint and the shadow of his boonie hat, but the shape of it was wrong, like he'd been broken apart and glued back together wonky.

"So get the fuck off my land. No girls here."

"What about that house on the cliff?" Ash lifted his chin in the direction of the place. "Do you know who owns it?"

"Some fucking company rents it out to rich tourists."

"Have you seen anything strange over there in the past few weeks?"

"I mind my own business."

"Okay." Ash slowly reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the missing flyer. He held it out, but didn't move forward to give it to the guy. "These are the girls, Bella and Poppy. If you see them, please contact me and not the man listed on the flyer. It's urgent. Whoever killed their mother is still

on the loose, and we just want them safe.”

After a tense moment, the man inched close enough to grab the poster, then backed up fast. He stared at the pictures, then crumpled the flyer and stuffed it in his pocket. “Leave.”

“Yeah, we’re going.” Ash grabbed Zak’s arm and hauled him back toward the house.



“Two men looking for you girls.”

At the gravelly voice, Bella jolted awake and spun around, making sure Poppy was still asleep and tucked in safely behind her.

“Get away from us!” Instead of sounding tough like she’d hoped, her voice came out too high and wobbly. “I have a gun!”

“No, you don’t.” A man materialized like a ghost at the front of the lean-to.

She blinked at him. No, that wasn’t possible. People didn’t just appear out of thin air.

He carried a rifle on his shoulder and was dressed head-to-toe in camouflage, blending in with the foggy greenery of the morning. She couldn’t see his face behind the layers of paint. “Who are you?”

“You’re on my land.” He held out a gloved hand, and she flinched back.

Growling low in his throat, he dropped whatever he’d been about to hand her. It floated to the ground, and she saw her own face staring out from under the words HAVE YOU SEEN US? Poppy’s picture was there next to hers. Both photos were years old, from when they lived in Tucson. She picked the poster up, scanned the text, and saw Jake’s name and number at the bottom.

She dropped it like it was on fire. “We’re not going back.”

The man grunted. “Can’t stay here.”

Of course she knew that. When she ran from the house two nights ago, she’d originally thought to take Jake’s car, but he’d locked the doors and she didn’t dare go back inside for the keys. She’d run for the road, figuring it had to lead somewhere—only to walk and walk and get nowhere. When headlights shone through the trees, she dove back into the woods because it had to be Hoodie Man returning. No way it was anyone else. This place was

too remote for a random passerby.

The first night, she and Poppy had huddled under a redwood with a hollowed-out trunk, cold and exhausted. She tried to convince Poppy it was a fun adventure, but the girl wasn't stupid.

"Who was that man?" she kept asking between hiccupping sobs. "Who was that man? Why did we run? I want to go back and watch *Lilo and Stitch!*"

"Shh." Bella held her close and rocked her. "He's nobody. He's gone, but we can't go back."

Poppy stuck her thumb in her mouth. "I'm scared."

She couldn't admit that she was, too. She was the big sister. The protector. Nothing was supposed to scare her, so she'd curled around Poppy, offering her body heat, and waited until morning.

As night brightened to day and day faded to evening, she finally accepted they were lost. They had to go back to the house, or they would die out here, but she was so hopelessly turned around, she couldn't find her way back.

The lean-to seemed like a gift from God when she found it. It had three walls built with thick logs and a sturdy roof. There was a fire going in front of it. Inside was a sleeping bag and backpack filled with bottles of water, some kind of jerky wrapped in a canvas bag, and two shiny apples. It looked like someone planned to return at any second. At that point, she hadn't cared if that someone was Jake or Hoodie Man.

But the lean-to didn't belong to either of them.

It was this guy's.

"I'm sorry we ate your food."

He grunted.

"And drank your water."

He glanced to his right, and she noticed a spot on his face where the paint had smeared away. Her breath caught in a gasp. He was horribly disfigured under all that make-up, his skin thick and ridged.

At her squeak of shock, he looked back at her, and his lips flattened into a scowl. "There's a dog here. Follow him. He'll take you to safety."

And then he was gone again, ghosting off into the trees.



Zak shook off Ash's grip and spun on him once they'd put a good amount of distance between them and the crazy man. "Who the fuck was that?"

Ash scrubbed a hand over his beard. "Shane Trevisano. He lives off the grid up here and doesn't like people coming around."

"Obviously."

"He's harmless."

"He *shot* at us," Zak reminded. "Jesus, I gotta find my dog."

Ash shoved a hand against his chest, stopping him from going back into the woods. "Like he said, if he wanted to hit us, he would've. He was a Navy SEAL. He won't hurt Ranger, but he will sure as shit shoot you if you trespass again."

Zak's throat burned. His lungs constricted as panic sizzled around the edges of his consciousness. "I can't lose that dog."

"We'll find him," Ash said, gentling his tone. "And, for fuck's sake, breathe. I can't have you passing out on me at a crime scene."

"Crime scene?" He glanced around and realized they were at the edge of the house's yard again. He tried sucking in air, but it kept getting caught on the lump in his throat. "That house—Ranger found a scent trail—"

"Yeah, pretty sure the girls were held here. I found a partial footprint in blood on the porch. It's small, like a petite woman's or a child's. I'm calling everyone in to focus our attention here. You good?"

Fuck, no. His ears buzzed and his head felt stuffed with cotton from lack of oxygen, but he nodded so that Ash would step back and give him some space.

Ash turned toward the woods. "Ranger!" His voice boomed like thunder. "Come, boy!"

Zak bent double and focused on breathing until the buzzing stopped, then he straightened and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Ranger! It's okay, mutt. It's safe now. C'mon, buddy! Come back—"

Ash grabbed his arm in a vise grip. "Holy shit. Look."

He spun and spotted his dog trotting toward them, looking very pleased with himself. And for good reason, because on the trail behind him?

Two pale, dirty, terrified girls emerged from the woods.

chapter **twenty-nine**

BELLA LATCHED on the Zak's hand as soon as she was close enough to touch him and her eyes spilled over with tears. "Thank you for finding us."

"Hey, no big deal. I owed you."

She nodded and refused to let go of his hand even as paramedics treated her and her sister for some minor cuts and dehydration. He couldn't tell if she actually recognized him from that foggy road or if she just saw him as her protector now.

Either way, he didn't mind, and stayed with her through the police questioning at the sheriff's department. She proved to be a perfect witness and described everything, starting with the night her mother was murdered.

Had she seen the shot that killed Jessica?

No, she'd heard it.

Could she describe the man who kidnapped her?

Yes, but there were two guys, and one of them was Jake Beckett. She claimed he was a pedophile who had abused Poppy back in Tucson.

Ash easily tracked down and arrested the bastard at the local hospital, where he'd been admitted for a severe concussion. Jake wasn't talking, but Bella had described his accomplice— "Hoodie Man," as she'd called him— to a sketch artist and a BOLO went out. If he was still anywhere in town, he'd be found.

Once it was all done, Ash and Zak left the girls in the comfortable interview room used for victims and their families. Ash leaned against the wall and called his sister on speakerphone to update her.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "What those poor girls went through..."

Zak watched them through the window. They were curled up together on the couch, with Poppy twisting one of Bella's dreadlocks around her finger.

“What happens to them now?”

Ash scrubbed both hands over his face. He looked exhausted. “CPS is looking for a foster home. Until then, they’ll go into a group home.”

“No,” Anna said, outrage ringing in her voice. “Absolutely not. They’re coming here.”

Ash sighed heavily. “AJ, you said you couldn’t take more placements after the last adoption fell through—”

“I know what I said, but I’m still a foster parent in the eyes of California, and those girls have gone through too much to get shoved into a group home and forgotten. I’ll contact my social worker. Bring them here.”

Of course she was a foster parent. It was perfectly on-brand for Anna Jade Rawlings, the queen of lost causes.

And, with that decision, the girls were finally safe.

So why couldn’t Zak breathe properly? Each inhale tightened his chest with dread as he pulled her car into the driveway.

Anna waited on the porch swing with a book in hand, and he was thrown back in time fifteen years to that summer day he’d come looking for Ash and instead noticed her as a woman for the first time.

Everything had been so innocent then. So easy.

How he wished he could go back.

Anna tossed her book aside and raced down the porch steps, Winston on her heels. She threw herself into his arms before he was fully out of the car. “You found them!”

“Ranger did.” At his name, Ranger clambered across the seats and shoved his nose between them.

Anna laughed. “You both did.” She backed up long enough to let Ranger jump out of the car and run with Winston, then wrapped herself around him again and raised her face toward his for a kiss.

Goddammit, he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and bury his face in her neck to breathe in her comforting scent.

He didn’t move.

Now that the adrenaline of the day was fading, the words Ash said out in the woods kept bouncing around in his skull.

The baby died. Stillborn.

Ash’s truck rumbled up the driveway behind them. He had the girls with him. There was no time for the conversation they needed to have now, and Zak couldn’t decide if he was relieved or anxious that it had to wait.

Anna drew back, her forehead creased with worry. “What’s wrong?”

“Once you get the girls settled, we need to talk.” He watched her eyes as he spoke and saw the flicker of panic.

Oh, yeah. She knew exactly what was wrong. His heart froze in his chest. Fuck.

A car door opened. She abruptly broke away from him and turned to meet her brother and the girls, her smile of welcome overly bright.

Ash recognized the strain in it and glowered at Zak as he opened the Tahoe’s back door for Bella and Poppy. Of course Ash thought it was his fault. The guy would never consider the possibility that something he had said was causing her current distress.

Anna ignored them both and focused on the girls. “Hi, I’m Anna. You’ll be staying with me for a bit while we figure everything out, okay? You’ll be safe here.” She set her hand on her dog’s head. “And this big guy here is Winston. He’s very friendly. You can pet him if you like.”

Poppy looked up at her big sister with hope in her exhausted eyes.

Bella nodded and nudged her toward the dog. “It’s okay.”

“Hi, Winston.” She squealed with delight when he lapped his tongue over her face. “He kissed me!”

“He likes you,” Anna said.

Bella’s flat, assessing gaze traveled over the yellow house to the barn. “I hear a lot of dogs in there.”

“That’s because I run a rescue and we train dogs to do special things like find people.”

Poppy beamed. “Like Ranger! He found us.”

“Yep, just like that. Zak and Ranger work here.”

He scoffed at her choice of words. *Work?*

She glared at him, made a cutting motion with her eyes, and guided the girls toward the house. “I’ll take you out to the barn to meet some of the other dogs, but let me show your rooms first. Are you hungry?”

Yeah, okay, Zak thought as he trailed them. *Work* was not the word he’d use to describe his current situation, but how else did you explain a DUI and court order to a five-year-old? He had no idea. He’d never had kids.

That he knew about.

The baby died. Stillborn.

Ash caught his arm. “I know what you’re thinking. Forget I said anything. Don’t take her back there.”

Zak shook him off and strode into the house. As angry as he was at Anna, he wanted to make sure the girls were comfortable.

He found Bella upstairs in the room that used to be Ash's. She stood in the center, looking lost, like she wasn't sure what to do next. Anna's and Poppy's voices flowed out of another room down the hall.

He tapped a knuckle on the doorjamb. He didn't want to startle her. "How are you doing, kid?"

She spun toward him. "Honestly? I... don't know. What's going to happen to us?"

Tehani had asked him the same thing the first time he spoke to her after his rescue, except the conversation had been in Pashto.

"What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll be okay. I'll make sure of it."

"Promise?"

He cleared his throat to ease the sudden tightness. "Listen, I knew a girl who was a lot like you. She was in a horrible situation with no way out, but she escaped through grit and stubbornness. Just like you did."

Bella rubbed her arms like she was cold. "Is she okay now?"

Jesus. He didn't even know. He assumed Tehani was happy in her new life, but he hadn't spent enough time with her since coming home to know for sure.

But Bella needed reassurance and so he forced a smile. "She's amazing now. She was adopted into a loving family. She's safe and happy."

It probably wasn't a lie. His family loved Tehani. He knew at least that much was true.

Bella studied him for a long moment. "I didn't want to say anything with everyone else around, but... I recognize you from the highway. You almost drove your bike into my van, but veered off at the last minute. You tried to kill yourself."

He winced. He should've seen this coming. "Yeah. I was in a bad place that night."

"I'm glad you survived."

"Bella!" Poppy sprouted through the space between his leg and the door like—well, a poppy—and wrapped her arms around her sister's legs. "Anna says we can have ice cream tonight after dinner. Ice. Cream." She emphasized each word with wide-eyed solemnity. "She even says we can even have any flavor we want, and she'll make her brother go to the store for

it.”

Bella smiled down at the girl, affection lighting up her world-weary face. “That sounds amazing. What flavor are you getting?”

“Hmm... just vanilla. No, wait. Chocolate! No, strawberry.”

“You know there’s a flavor that has all three?” Zak said. “Neapolitan. That’s my favorite.”

His metal knee thunked hard on the floor when he knelt to meet her gaze and Poppy looked at it, then up at him. “Does that hurt?”

“Poppy, that’s not nice,” Bella chided.

He held up a hand. “No, it’s okay. She’s allowed to be curious.” He pulled up his pant leg and showed her his prosthetic, tapping his fingers against the metal. “My old leg hurt a lot more.”

“What happened to it?”

He felt Anna’s presence in the hallway behind him like a static charge on the back of his neck, but ignored her, keeping his focus on Poppy. “Well, see, I hurt it really, really bad when I was a soldier, and it got so infected that it was making me very sick, so the doctors got rid of it to save me.”

Her blond brows slammed together. “Were you mad? I think I’d be mad if someone took away my leg.”

“Yes, I was mad at first, but now I’m glad they did it because I wouldn’t be here to meet you if they hadn’t.”

Anna made a soft noise behind him that sounded like a muffled sob.

Poppy looked at her, then grinned at him. “I’m glad, too.” She took his hand and tugged. Her fingers felt so tiny and fragile wrapped around his palm. “Are you having ice cream with us?”

“Absolutely.” He pushed to his feet. “I never turn down ice cream.”

Later, after the bowls were all but licked clean and the girls settled into the living room—Poppy lounging in front of the TV using Winston as a pillow, and Bella browsing Anna’s vast collection of books—Zak took Anna by the hand and led her out to the porch.

She made sure the door was firmly shut, then turned to him with a sad smile. “You’re good with them.”

All he could do was shake his head because the lump that had been in his throat all day suddenly made speech impossible. Several seconds passed in silence before he forced any words out. “The baby was mine, wasn’t it?”

She wrapped her arms around herself and nodded once. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “Ash told you about her?”

Her.

A baby girl.

He squeezed his eyes shut as pain unlike anything he'd ever felt cleaved his heart in two. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She didn't answer.

"If she had lived, would you have told me about her?"

Again, she said nothing, but she didn't have to. Her silence was answer enough. She had never planned to tell him about his daughter.

"Fuck." He shouldered past her and yanked open the door, whistling for his dog. "Ranger, c'mon. Let's go."

"Zak, wait." She reached for him, but he swatted her hand aside and put as much distance between them as he could. He was so angry, he was afraid of what he'd do if she touched him.

"Stay away from me."

"Zak!" She chased him down the porch steps, but skidded to a halt when he whirled on her. She must've seen how close he was to the edge of doing something unforgivable, because she flinched back.

"My community service ends today," he said through his teeth. He actually had twenty-four hours left in his sentence, but he couldn't do it. Not with her. "You'll sign my papers saying I served the entire hundred hours, and then we're through."

She shook her head. "Please, don't do this. Let me—"

"We're. Through."

chapter **thirty**

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

Anna shut and locked the front door, then swiped at her eyes and forced a smile as she turned to face Bella. “Of course.”

The smile hurt her face, and she knew her cheeks were probably a splotchy mess from sobbing.

After Zak walked away, she grieved all over again for her daughter—the precious baby with a head full of spiky black hair that she’d only gotten to hold for a few hours. She grieved for the other children she’d never have because the birth had been so traumatic the doctors had to remove her uterus to keep her from bleeding to death. She grieved for the decisions she’d made as a scared teenager and for the relationship she’d just lost because of those decisions. And, most of all, she grieved for Zak, because she knew him, and this could push him over the edge into complete self-destruction.

If something happened to him tonight, she’d never forgive herself.

She called Ash to let him know Zak might go off the rails, but he didn’t pick up. She didn’t leave a voicemail. He’d call back.

And then she pulled herself together and went into the house because the girls she’d taken in needed her to be strong.

Bella eyed her doubtfully, then the door. “You don’t have to pretend for me. I heard a little of that fight. It sounded intense.”

She exhaled a shaky breath. There was no fooling this girl. She’d seen too much in her young life. “It was, but I’ll be okay.” She just hoped Zak would be, too. She pushed that thought out of her mind and peeked into the living room to check on Poppy. The little girl was sound asleep in front of the TV, still using Winston as a pillow. The dog’s tail slapped the floor when he saw her watching. He was in his happiest of happy places.

She noticed Bella had left a stack of books on the end table untouched. “Didn’t find anything that interested you?”

Bella’s cheeks flushed with color, and she dropped her gaze to the floor. “Uh... there was a book I was reading before—” She broke off and picked at a loose thread in the sleeve of her borrowed Lost County Sheriff’s Department hoodie. “Mom ripped it up when she found me with it and called it smut—but it really wasn’t,” she added quickly. “There was some kissing, but that was all. I swear it wasn’t anything bad—”

“Bella.” Anna set a hand on her shoulder and waited until she lifted her gaze. “You’re sixteen and I imagine, given the life you’ve lived, you’re well aware of what sex is. If you want to read a romance novel that shows a healthy sexual relationship, you’re allowed to in this house. In fact...” She dug her phone out of her pocket and brought up the Amazon app. “What’s the title?”

Bella told her.

She found it and had to admit it looked good. She’d always loved fantasy and would definitely read it once Bella was done. “There. Ordered.”

Bella’s eyes rounded. She looked at the phone and then back at Anna. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. You’ll have it in a couple of days.”

To Anna’s shock and delight, Bella lunged forward and hugged her tightly. “Thank you for being so nice to us.”

She wrapped her arms around the girl and every emotion roiling inside her settled. This was good. This was right. Whatever other bad decisions she’d made in her life, sheltering these girls was not one of them.

They stood together like that until a knock on the door had Bella pulling back and swiping at her face with her sleeve. “Who’s that?”

Zak?

Anna squashed the stupidly hopeful thought. It wasn’t him. He was probably well into his first bottle of Jameson by now.

“I bet it’s my brother. I called him a little while ago.” She pulled open the door and started to ask Ash why he didn’t just use his key—

Not Ash.

Not Zak.

She froze at the sight of the gun pointed at her head.



“Hey, Sheriff. You haven’t left yet?”

Ash looked up from his computer and had to scrub at his gritty eyes before he could focus on the deputy in his doorway. “Uh, no.” He cleared away the rasp in his voice and checked his watch. Almost midnight. He’d been going for nearly forty-eight hours on only a brief nap. No wonder he kept seeing spiders on his desk that weren’t there. “Just finishing some things. What do you need?”

The deputy hesitated. “You should go home and sleep.”

He mentally fortified himself for another twenty-four on the clock and reached for his coffee. The mug was empty. He’d need at least a gallon more. Better yet, he should just mainline the stuff right into his veins. “C’mon, Wright. I’m already here, so you might as well tell me.”

“Jake Beckett escaped his guards at the hospital,” Wright said. “We’re looking for him, but thought you should know.”

“Shit.” He set the empty mug down and reached for his phone, seeing a missed call from his sister. He called back, but it dumped straight into voicemail.

It was fine, he told himself. She was probably sleeping. Besides, she had Zak there. The man was a pain in the ass, but he was combat trained. If Jake tried anything crazy to get to the girls, Zak would protect them with his life. Of that, he had no doubt.

“I want every available deputy out hunting his ass down. And someone should swing by my sister’s—no, never mind. I’ll do that.” He grabbed his coat off the back of his chair.

“One other thing before you go,” the deputy added. “We officially have an ID on the body from the logging road up near Razorrock Falls.”

“That fast?”

“Yeah, I forwarded the results to your email. Her DNA was on file.”

Ash spun back to his computer and pulled up his inbox. “I expected as much. Jessica Lowe has been arrested multiple times and—” His gaze landed on the name. “Wait. Is this correct? The victim’s name is Nicole Madison?”

“Yeah, that’s what the report said. Her DNA was on file because fifteen years ago, her one-year-old daughter, Makyła Madison, was kidnapped from

a shopping center in the suburbs of Boston. Nicole and her husband, Kyrone, both gave DNA samples after it happened in case remains were ever found.”

“And were they?”

“No. The girl is still considered missing to this day.”

“So she’d be sixteen now...” He scattered papers on his desk, looking for Jake Beckett’s flyer. When he found it, he held it up next to Nicole Madison’s ID on his screen.

Holy. Shit.

The resemblance was undeniable.

Bella Lowe was actually Makyla Madison.

chapter **thirty-one**

ANNA RAISED her hands and backed up. “I don’t have any money.”

The wild-eyed blond woman nudged her back into the house with the tip of the gun. “I don’t want money.”

Bella gasped and her face drained of color. “Mom?”

Jessica Lowe smiled and reached for her. “Hi, baby.”

“But you—you—” Bella stumbled backward until she hit the stairs and collapsed onto the steps. “You were dead. I saw you dead...”

“Oh, that wasn’t me, honey. That bitch Nicole was spreading lies, trying to take you away from me.”

Keep her talking, Bella.

Anna tried to will the command at the girl as she inched toward the kitchen. Ash insisted she have a gun for protection, but she never thought she’d actually need it and kept it in a lockbox on the top shelf of the pantry. If Bella could distract Jessica long enough, maybe she could get to it.

Keep her talking.

As if hearing the silent plea, the girl glanced at her, but the quick movement drew Jessica’s attention.

She swung around, eyes showing too much white and bugging out of her head. Her pupils were pinpricks. “Don’t move!”

“Mom!” Thinking fast, Bella popped to her feet and grabbed the woman in a hug. “I’m so glad you’re alive, but what are you talking about?” Her eyes pleaded for Anna to run. “Who’s Nicole?”

Brave, brave girl.

Jessica wrapped her arms around Bella. The gun wobbled dangerously in her hand. Her finger was still too close to the trigger. “She’s nobody. A liar. I had to kill her. I was just protecting you like any good mother—”

Anna darted for the kitchen and almost made it. Her fingers were inches away from the pantry door when Jessica grabbed her ponytail and yanked her head back, shoving the gun against her temple.

“And now *this* whore’s doing it, too!”

The woman’s breath was hot and rancid on the side of her face. Anna gagged. Her scalp was on fire, and her neck felt like it would snap if pulled any harder. A strangled cry of pain escaped her throat as Jessica yanked her hair again, and the gun bruised her temple. With her neck at such an extreme angle, she couldn’t breathe. She flailed for something—anything—to use as a weapon, but her hands found nothing as she was dragged back toward the foyer. Her vision grayed around the edges. Voices floated around her, sounding miles away.

“Mom, please stop. You’re hurting her.”

“She’s trying to steal you. I saw you hugging her. You’re *my* daughter!”

“Yes, yes, I am. I’m your daughter. I don’t even know this woman. She was just letting us stay here for the night because we thought you were dead. But you’re not, so let’s get Poppy and go home to the camper.”

“We don’t live in the camper anymore. I have a house for us. Where’s Poppy?”

“In the living room.”

The grip on Anna’s hair loosened, and she sucked a ragged gasp into her burning lungs. Jessica shoved her toward the living room. Her legs didn’t want to work right, knees going to gelatin, which pissed the other woman off.

Winston had backed Poppy into a corner and stood guard in front of her. The golden didn’t have a mean bone in his body, but he was putting on a good show. He looked vicious.

Good boy.

“Get it away from her!” Jessica shrieked and pointed the gun at Winston. “Get it away from her!”

“It’s okay, Mom.” Hands held up in a calming gesture, Bella put herself between the gun and Winston. Which was either extremely stupid or very brave since her mother was high on something and not thinking rationally. Her finger could slip on the trigger at any moment.

Bella took Winston by the collar and led him into the half-bath off the living room. He howled the moment the door clicked shut. “Okay, the dog’s gone. Please put the gun down. You don’t need it now.” She crossed to Poppy and scooped her up. “We’re going with you.”

For a half second, Jessica seemed like she'd comply, but then she tightened her grip on Anna again. "So's she."

Bella's eyes popped wide in surprise. "Why?"

"Don't you talk back to me like that!" Jessica struck her in the face with the butt of the gun. The blow was quick and brutal, and she dropped Poppy.

The younger girl screamed.

The older just straightened slowly with the faraway look of someone pushed beyond their limit. She pressed her sleeve to her bleeding nose. "I wasn't trying to be sassy, Mom. I just don't want her to come. We don't need her. We have you."

"You stupid cow. Don't you know anything? Her brother's a cop. She'll call him as soon as we leave."

Bella met Anna's gaze, but only for the briefest of seconds. Still, it was enough to convey what she was trying to say. *I'm sorry.*

It's okay, Bella. She wanted to shout it, but kept her mouth firmly shut and hoped the girl could see the reassurance in her eyes. *We'll be okay.*

chapter **thirty-two**

“SHE HAD no right to keep the baby a secret.”

Ranger cocked his head and watched Zak pace circles around the house with a bottle of Jameson in hand. He’d opened it as soon as he got home, but had yet to drink a drop.

“No right. Right?”

Ranger chuffed an agreement.

He pointed at the dog. “Yeah, exactly. I’m not in the wrong about this.” He noticed the bottle in his hand and lifted it to his mouth, but stopped before drinking and paced some more. “You know my ex-wife was pregnant once?”

Ranger woofed.

“Yeah, crazy, right? Our marriage was shit at that point, but, man, I wanted that kid more than anything. She miscarried pretty early on. We never even had time to tell our families.”

Ranger sighed and settled down on his bed, eyes still tracking Zak’s every movement until he stopped pacing. He slid down the living room wall to sit next to his dog and finally remembered the Jameson in his hand. He tilted his head back and opened his throat. The liquor burned all the way down to the knot in his gut.

He waited for the numbness to set in.

It didn’t.

His rage was too hot, his sorrow too sharp.

“A daughter,” he whispered and knocked the back of his head against the wall with a solid THUNK. “I had a daughter. Jesus, she’d be Bella’s age now. I wonder if she looked like me or Anna. Did she have a name? She must have a name. Is she buried somewhere?” He pressed his fingers to his burning eyes. “Fuck. I have to know where our baby’s buried. I have to go

back and talk to Anna.”

Ranger lifted his head and thumped his tail at her name.

“Yeah, I know you’re excited to see her again, but I don’t know if I can talk to her without completely losing my shit. How do I talk to her after what she did? Not telling me…” He stared off into near space, imagining teenage Anna in a hospital bed with a stillborn baby in her arms. His heart clenched so hard he gasped at the pain and worried for a moment he was having a heart attack.

It was late, but he had to talk to her tonight. He wouldn’t be able to rest until he had answers.

He struggled to his feet, cursing when his knee locked up.

“C’mon, mutt.” He grabbed his truck keys, only to remember Ash had booted the damn thing. He dropped the keys back on their hook by the door. “Okay, guess we’re walking.”

He knew the instant he set foot on Anna’s road that something was wrong. Red and blue lights bounced off the low-hanging clouds at the top of the hill.

Police.

He broke into a run, cursing his prosthetic every step of the way because he wasn’t as fast as he used to be. Fuck waiting on the VA to process his claim for a new leg. He was buying himself a running blade because he planned to run and hike all over these mountains with Anna next summer.

With Anna?

He stumbled at the thought and had to catch his breath.

Yes, with Anna. When he pictured his future, he couldn’t imagine life without her and the dogs. He couldn’t hate her when she’d been a frightened teenage girl not much older than Bella—the same age as Tehani was now—making big, hard choices that even adults had trouble with.

Jesus, why all the police? Was she hurt? Were the girls?

He picked up his pace.

Ash stood on the cordoned-off street in front of his sister’s house, barking out orders to his deputies.

Zak grabbed his arm. “What’s going on? Where is she?”

“Fuck,” Ash said with deep disgust and yanked out of his grasp. “You’ve been drinking.”

Yeah, but he was stone-cold sober. “Where is she, Ash?”

“We don’t know. We think Jake Beckett has her and the girls.”

“Why?”

“How should I fucking know? My job is to find my sister, not get into that creep’s head and—” He stopped. Took a breath. “Sorry. Uncalled for. Beckett escaped the hospital, and he might be working with Jessica Lowe to abduct the girls.”

“But she’s dead. We found the body...” At Ash’s uncompromising glare, he trailed off. “Didn’t we?”

“The body wasn’t Jessica.”

Zak rubbed at the headache drilling into the center of his forehead. “Still doesn’t make sense. Why would Beckett work with her? He was desperate to find the girls and get them away from her. He said she kidnapped them.”

“It’s a clusterfuck and I can’t get into it now.” A deputy called out to him from Anna’s driveway, and he shouldered by Zak. “Just stay out of the way. I don’t need your drunk ass stumbling around the crime scene.”

Yeah, well, too bad. Zak wasn’t drunk, and he was absolutely going to stumble around until he found out what the hell was going on. He stopped by a deputy’s car, the bright red headline of Bella and Poppy’s missing flyer catching his attention. A whole stack of them sat on the dashboard. He surreptitiously reached through the window and grabbed one.

Jake Beckett’s number was listed at the bottom.

He walked away from the crowd and pulled out his phone. He didn’t expect an answer and figured he’d leave a voicemail, but a deep voice said, “Hello?”

Thrown, he took a minute to collect his thoughts. “Beckett?”

“Who’s asking?”

No, not Beckett. This voice was too deep to belong to the man he’d met at The Grove and also had a bit of a Boston accent.

When he didn’t reply right away, the man said, “I’m hanging up.”

“You’re Hoodie Man.”

He didn’t hang up, but his silence confirmed Zak’s suspicions. “This is Zak Hendricks. Is Beckett with you?”

More silence.

“Okay, answer me this. Did Jake ever hurt Poppy?”

“He never touched her. That was one of Jessica’s many lies.”

Another suspicion confirmed. “I assume you know Jessica has taken Bella and Poppy again, and I think she also has the woman I love. Maybe we can help each other.”

The phone went dead, but he knew they hadn't hung up. The time counter still ticked on the call, so they'd put themselves on mute. Probably discussing whether or not they should trust him.

He waited.

Every second felt like an eternity.

Finally, Hoodie Man came back. "What's your plan?"

"I'll meet you at the intersection of Rawlings Road and Highway 1."

"The sheriff—"

"Isn't paying attention to us."

He growled. "If you're setting us up..."

"I'm not."

The line went dead again. This time, because they had ended the call.

Ranger pushed his head under Zak's hand.

"Yeah, mutt. I hope I'm making the right call, too." He looked at Anna's house. Ash still stood at the end of her driveway, deep in conversation with two of his deputies. He sucked in a breath and glanced back the way he'd come. It was a long trip back to the highway. Depending on how far away Beckett and Hoodie Man were—and he had to assume they were close by—he had little time to get back down there. He'd have to run.

When he got to the intersection, a car already idled in the scenic pullout across the highway from Anna's road. He jogged to it and pulled the back door open for Ranger.

Jake Beckett sat in the backseat, looking like he would either throw up or pass out at any second. He still wore a hospital gown over a pair of baggy sweatpants. A line of stitches marched across his forehead over his right eyebrow.

The light-skinned black man in the driver's seat was huge. His hands made the steering wheel look like a kid's toy. And he was indeed wearing an Army green hoodie.

"You got a plan, Hendricks?" he asked.

Zak slid into the empty passenger seat. "You got a name other than Hoodie Man?"

"Kyrone Madison. Ky."

"Yeah, Ky. I have a plan. Jessica spent a lot of time at the Palace, so we're gonna go knock heads there until somewhere tells us where on the mountain she's holed up."

Ky grinned. "Now we're talking."

chapter **thirty-three**

THE HEAD-KNOCKING WASN'T as satisfying as Zak had hoped.

Jake stayed in the car because one: he was a wanted man, and two: he was in no shape to fight. But when Zak and Ky shoved into the bar, the drug-addled roaches who infested the place scattered.

Ky snagged one skinny, pock-marked guy by the back of the neck before he could scurry away, and pinned him to the wall. "I saw this asshole with her the night she killed my wife."

The guy's eyes bounced around in his skull like ping-pong balls. "I don't know nothing."

Zak got in his face and studied every oozing scab, then smiled and drew his gun. It wasn't a friendly smile, and the asshole practically shit himself. "Yeah, you know something. Tell us where Jessica is, and we'll let you walk out of here on the legs God gave you." He pressed the boot of his prosthetic on the guy's foot and the barrel of the gun to his kneecap. "Or... I can tell you in excruciating detail exactly how much it hurts to get shot in the knee right before we put bullets in both of yours. You want two of these shiny metal legs?"

"I—I—" He screeched and flapped his arms wildly like a wounded bird. "She's on the mountain."

"We know that much, asshole." Ky knocked him against the wall again. "Where?"

Five minutes later, they slid back into the car with the location, but Ky didn't start the engine right away.

"We good?" Jake asked.

"We know where they are." He pushed out a breath and tilted his head toward Zak. "Because this guy is wicked scary." The Boston really came out

of him in those words. “I nearly pissed myself.”

“You held your own,” Zak said.

“Been in more than my fair share of fights.” He finally started the car and glanced over at Zak. “I never got a chance to thank you for finding my wife. I hated leaving her like that—” His voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “But I didn’t have a choice.”

They had a bit of a ride ahead of them. Plenty of time to get the truth.

“What happened?” Zak asked. “I want the whole story. I think I’ve earned it.”

Ky lifted his gaze to the rearview mirror.

Jake nodded, then winced and touched his stitches. “We should tell him. He’s in this now.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ky exhaled hard. “The girl you know as Bella? She’s my daughter, Makyla. She was taken from us when she was a year old. My wife was out shopping and turned away for just a second and…” He snapped his fingers. “Gone. There was video footage of the kidnapper, but we never found her.”

“Until recently,” Zak guessed. “Jessica Lowe?”

“Yeah. About two years ago, we met Jake at a conference for parents of kidnapped children and he showed us a picture of his missing girls. I recognized Makyla instantly. She looks just like my wife, but with my nose and smile.”

Zak studied his profile in the darkness. Yeah, he saw it now.

“So, we started working together,” Jake continued. “When I tracked Jessica here, I contacted Ky and Nicole.”

Ky shook his head. “Should’ve gone to the police, but I’m a felon, ya know? Work in tech now, but did five years for some dumbass shit I got into as a kid. I don’t got much trust for law enforcement.”

“It took him a year to trust me,” Jake said. “Even though I lost my detective’s shield before we met because I was so obsessed with finding my girls.”

Zak shifted to look at the guy in the backseat. “Poppy is your and Jessica’s biological daughter?”

Jake forgot about his concussion and nodded, then groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, leaning back in the seat.

Ky glanced back at him. “If you’re gonna boot again, open the window.”

After several deep breaths, he said, “No. I’m good.” He straightened and

met Zak's gaze. "I met Jess at a bar in Tucson six years ago. She was gorgeous and fun. A little dangerous, but I liked that about her. It was a fling, but then Poppy came along, and I fell in love with both girls. Not so much their mother, but I asked her to marry me, anyway. We never made it to the wedding. She became erratic, got heavily into drugs. The last straw was when she hit Bella hard enough to break one of her teeth. I immediately filed for custody, having no idea Bella wasn't actually her daughter. She started screaming that I was a pedophile, then took off with the girls when I was granted custody. I put my life on hold to find them, and finally tracked them here last month."

"When Jake told us he knew where they were, Nic and I flew out here," Ky said. "We confronted Jessica at the campgrounds. We demanded she give Makyla—Bella—back to us. She lost it, pulled a gun. I tried to wrestle it away from her, but she shot Nic—" Again, he stopped and cleared the thick emotion from her throat. "Jessica got away, and I couldn't call the police. The optics weren't good. A black felon standing over a white woman's body with two kidnapped girls yards away? Hell, they would've shot me on sight. So I took the girls up to the house we'd rented, then buried Nicole, and called Jake for help."

Jake picked up the story: "We decided to keep the girls locked in the house until we found Jessica, and I started riding the sheriff to look for them because I knew if he looked long enough, he'd find Jess for us. But I got sloppy. Stupid. I just wanted to see my girls again so badly and Bella—that girl's a fighter." He laughed softly and touched the line of stitches. "She believed her mother's lies about me and she'll do anything to protect Poppy. As soon as she saw me, she charged. Knocked me flat out and ran. I couldn't have been prouder of her. Or more scared for her. We looked all over those woods, but she kept Poppy well hidden until you and your dog found them."

Zak stayed silent for several moments, processing it all. "Wow." It was the only thing he could think to say.

"Jessica's unstable," Jake added. "Unpredictable. She was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and is almost certainly self-medicating with narcotics. Whatever our next move, we have to proceed with extreme caution because she *will* kill the girls rather than let them go."

chapter **thirty-four**

BELLA USED every trick she'd ever learned to keep her mother calm. Submission. Flattery. Nothing was too low if it kept Anna and Poppy safe.

Poor Anna. She'd been nothing but nice and didn't deserve to be knocked out with a gun and stuffed her into the trunk of her own car.

"Bella, you drive. I'll tell you where to turn." Jessica slid into the backseat with Poppy, the gun on her lap, and directed her to drive up the mountain to a ramshackle trailer perched on a narrow spit of land between two pot fields.

The smell of weed clogged the air and turned Bella's stomach as she got out of the car. "Where are we?"

"Our new home," Jessica said brightly and swung out her arms to encompass the property. "These fields are ours, too. We're homesteaders now."

Bella stared at the trailer, and the churning in her stomach got worse. The roof didn't even look waterproof. "It's perfect."

"I wanna go back to Anna's," Poppy said around her thumb. "She had ice cream and TV and dogs."

Jessica swung around, face red. "You don't need any of that shit—"

Bella deftly stepped into her path before she could attack Poppy. "Thank you, Mom. You worked so hard to give us this. I'm so proud of you."

"I *did* work hard. You know how many disgusting cocks I had to suck—"

"I know."

"Ungrateful little bitch." She sneered at Poppy, but turned toward the trailer, and her eyes went all dreamy, like she was looking at a mansion and not a piece of shit on flattened wheels. "Come see. It's huge. You both have rooms. Your own rooms!"

Bella glanced back at the car as Mom dragged her up the crumbling concrete stoop to the front door.

God, she hoped Anna was okay.



Anna was pissed.

When she woke up bouncing around in her own trunk and realized what had happened, she literally saw red for the first time in her life. The anger was so hot she was surprised she didn't burn right through the bottom of the trunk and land in the street. She braced herself to keep from whacking her head on the roof and breathed through the rage, but the air in the confined space was getting thick and too warm.

She was suffocating.

No. There was enough air. She just had to relax and breathe. When the car stopped moving, she could free herself.

Finally, the car stopped.

She heard voices—Bella's and Poppy's for sure, and probably that bitch Jessica's, too—but couldn't make out what they were saying. She waited, biding her time until she was sure they'd moved far enough away, then found the inner trunk latch.

Sweet, cold air rushed in. She let herself take a second to breathe before pushing the trunk all the way open. She crawled out and crouched by the car, making a mental note of the trailer and the cannabis fields. She could see Wildcat Ridge peeking through the trees to the southeast, which helped orientate her. She wasn't that far from home. She could run back and get help for the girls.

She edged toward the road. She was barefoot, and rocks bit into the bottom of her feet, but she kept moving one slow step at a time. Once she got to the road, out of sight of the trailer, she could run and find Ash.

Nearly... there...

Headlights speared through the trees and cut off abruptly. Someone coming to the rescue?

She froze and debated her options. There were a lot of unfriendly people up here. Whoever was in that car was probably in league with Jessica. Best to

avoid.

She backed away and crouched in the pot field to wait and watch. Several dark shadows left the vehicle and tiptoed through the looming trees. She counted three people, most likely men given their sizes, and... was that a dog?

Shit. If it scented her, she was done for. She had to move downwind—

The dog stepped into a spear of moonlight and her heart swelled with relief as yellow eyes focused on her position. Ranger raced toward her, licked her face, then tore back to Zak, then came back to her, leading him straight to her just as he'd been trained.

"Anna!" he whispered and grabbed her in a tight hug. He kissed her, and that sweet sense of relief evaporated.

He smelled like alcohol.

She would never fix him, would she? He'd always go back to the bottle at the slightest bump in the road, and she'd been a fool for thinking she could change that. Sometimes a lost cause really was completely, irredeemably lost.

The realization had tears springing to her eyes.

"Hey, don't cry. I'm here now. You're safe." He swiped the tears away with his thumbs, careful to avoid the swelling lump on her cheek where Jessica had hit her. "Where are the girls?"

Unable to speak, she tilted her head toward the trailer.

He looked at the thing, then nodded to the two men with him. One was Jake Beckett, still dressed in a hospital gown. The other looked like the sketch Bella had provided of the man who kidnapped her.

She stared at the three of them. "What...?"

"Long story," Zak said. "But they're friends. This is Ky and you know Jake. They only want the girls safe."

"So," Ky said, crouching down, trying to make his enormous body small. "What's our next move?"

Zak looked at the trailer again. Several seconds ticked by in silence.

"I'll lure Jessica out," Anna said. She hadn't even realized she'd had the thought until the words were coming out of her mouth, but she knew it was a good one. "While she's distracted, you guys get the girls to safety."

"Anna, no—"

She whirled on Zak. "Do you have a better plan?"

His lips compressed into a thin line.

"Okay, then." She didn't give him the chance to protest and started

toward the house, picking a two-by-four off the ground on her way. “Be ready to move.”



The window in the trailer’s front door shattered in an explosion of glass.

Anna.

She must’ve gotten out of the trunk somehow.

Bella tried to get in front of her mom, but Jessica was like a train when she got like this, single-minded in her anger. There was no stopping her.

Jessica tore from the trailer, and three gunshots exploded through the night air.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“What was that?” Poppy asked.

Bella pushed her sister down behind the musty couch. “Stay here, Pop. Keep your head down.” Grabbing a knife from the dingy kitchen, she ran to the door with absolutely no plan whatsoever until she emerged onto the concrete stoop and saw Anna, weaponless, facing off with her mom.

“Let the girls go, Jessica.”

“I won’t let you steal them from me, you cunt!”

God, Mom was going to shoot.

Bella was only a few steps behind and saw Jessica’s finger tightening on the trigger. She had to do something and raised the knife, plunging it down with all her strength. It stuck in the flesh of her mom’s shoulder and the blow jarred up her arm, making her stumble. It didn’t go as deep as she expected and didn’t stop Jessica at all.

Mom screeched and spun toward her with the blade still protruding from her back. It was like she didn’t feel the pain. Her wild eyes flashed with betrayal as she raised the gun. “Why, Belladonna? Why would you hurt your mother like that? All I ever did was love you.”

Bella raised her hands in defense. If Mom came any closer, she’d punch and kick and bite to get free. “If you loved me, you never would’ve hurt me. Real moms take care of their kids.”

“I *am* a real mom! I took care of you the best way I knew how.”

“Yeah, well. It wasn’t good enough.” She’d think later that antagonizing

the crazy lady with the gun was probably not the best idea, but, in that moment, she was done placating. “I hate you. Poppy hates you. You *suck* as a mother.”

Several things happened all at once in a frenetic blur of movement. The gun exploded. Someone screamed—was it her voice? Anna’s? Jessica’s? Or maybe all of them at the same time. She flinched back, braced for pain, but none ever came, and a huge shadow dove in front of her, pulling her to the ground.

Hoodie Man.

At first, she thought the bullet had missed them both, but then he coughed, and blood sprayed from his mouth.

No, no, no.

Bella touched his face. Yes, he’d kidnapped her, but he’d been kind and gentle—which was more than she could ever say about her mother. He wrapped an enormous arm around her and dragged himself close, using his body as a shield as the bullets kept coming in a frenzied spray. Even injured, he was still trying to protect her.

Who *was* he?

Another man in a hospital gown appeared from the woods and charged at Mom.

Jake!

He got a hold of the gun, and, for a moment, it looked like he was going to win the fight. But his strength faded fast, and Jessica twisted out of his grasp. Hatred warped her pretty face into something deformed and ugly as she shoved the barrel against his head and pulled the trigger without a second’s hesitation.

“They are *my* girls!” Jessica screeched as he fell lifeless at her feet. She kicked his body. “Mine. Mine. Mine! You shouldn’t have tried to take them from me. They belong with me. And you—” She whirled on Anna, who had taken cover behind the car when the bullets started flying. Zak was there now, too, holding his dog’s collar with one hand while shielding his girlfriend with his body.

Jessica pulled the trigger again.

The gun clicked.

Zak grinned and rose to his feet. It was a mean smile. If Bella hadn’t seen for herself that he was a good man, she would’ve been terrified of him.

“Ranger,” he said coolly. “Attack.”

A dog-shaped bullet slammed into Mom's side. She tried to shake him off and when that didn't work, she tried to hit him with the butt of the gun. He ignored the blows and lunged, his teeth ripping open her cheek and nose. She dropped the gun and clutched her face with a haunting wail of agony, and it was enough of a distraction for Zak to grab her from behind. He shoved her to the ground and sat on her, his metal knee pressing into her back. She shrieked and flailed, but it was useless.

"Good dog," Zak said, breathing hard. "Good mutt."

"Bella!" Anna flew to her side and pulled her out of the bloodstained dirt, patting her down, looking for injuries. "Oh my God! Where's the blood coming from? Where are you hurt?"

"I'm okay." But as she spoke, she realized she didn't sound okay. Her voice was hollow. She shook her head and stopped Anna's frantic inspection, clasping the woman's hands in her own. "No, really. I'm okay. It's not mine." She nodded to the man on the ground. "It's his. He saved me."

Hoodie Man.

But his hoodie was dark and sticky with so much blood now.

She let go of Anna and knelt next to him. He was so familiar, and not only because she'd spent three weeks as his captive. It was a visceral familiarity like she'd always known him. "Thank you."

He coughed and blood bubbled up from his mouth to splash on his chest. "Had... to... protect you."

"Why?" She studied his face. His dark, almond-shaped eyes glazed over with pain. His full lips tried to smile for her, but twisted into a grimace instead. The shape of his nose was—

Oh.

She touched her own nose and suddenly realized why his features were familiar. She saw them every time she looked in the mirror.

Her heart pounded painfully hard and tears she couldn't control burst from her eyes as she reached for his hand. "Are you my dad?"

"Yes." His smile was like hers, too, but now it was bright red with his blood. "I've been looking for you for fifteen years, Makyla."

chapter **thirty-five**

ZAK WATCHED the coroner pull a sheet over Jake Beckett's body and swallowed back an unexpected rush of emotion. The man had only wanted his girls safe. That was all any father wanted.

True, the girls *were* safe now. Jessica was going to prison for a long time, so maybe Jake thought giving his life for it was an acceptable trade-off.

Zak shifted his attention to the departing ambulance as its siren blasted through the night. They were rushing Ky to the high school football field for a life flight to the closest trauma center two hours away. He might not survive. His blood pressure had already crashed once while they were loading him onto a stretcher.

Jesus.

Zak pressed his fingers to his eyes, but Ranger wasn't about to let him mope and shoved that big wedge head underneath his arm, looking for pets. He laughed softly and hugged the dog.

Yes, there had been a lot of bloodshed tonight, but it was over. Bella and Poppy were safe. Anna was safe.

Anna sat with the girls while they gave their statements to police, but then had to let them go with CPS. He could see the heartbreak all over her face as the social worker's taillights faded into the darkness.

She would've been an excellent mother.

It pained him that she never got the chance. And that he never got the chance to see if he was any good at being a father. Would he have given his life for his daughter like Jake and Ky had for theirs?

Yes.

Without a doubt.

He never met her, but he'd trade places with her in a heartbeat if it meant

she'd be alive and happy now.

And he wanted to meet her.

He walked over to where Anna sat in the back of another ambulance, a blanket draped over her shoulders. "Where's our daughter buried?"

She pulled the blanket tighter around her and squeezed her eyes shut. "Can we not do this right now?"

"I need to know."

She pushed out a breath. After a long moment, she looked at him with sad, exhausted eyes. "In the family cemetery on the hill behind the house."

"Did you give her a name?"

"Bella," she whispered and stared at the empty road as if she could will the social worker's car to reappear. "Her name's Bella, too."

Oh, shit.

He swallowed down a messy mix of anger and grief, but it stuck in his throat. "You should've told me about her the moment you found out you were pregnant."

In a burst of anger, she popped to her feet and squared off in front of him. "Yeah, but what would you have done differently if you had known?"

"I don't know. You never gave me the chance to figure it out."

"Well, *I* know." She pushed against his chest. He didn't move. "You would've done exactly what you did when your ex-wife miscarried. Nothing. You just kept right on going like nothing happened, nothing changed."

The words accomplished what her push hadn't. He took a step back. If she had stabbed him in the heart, he would've been less surprised. "How do you know about that?"

"I was friends with Jillian, remember? She came home for a bit after the divorce and she knew what I'd gone through with my baby, so we bonded in our grief."

"Did she know...?"

"No, she didn't know the baby was yours. Nobody knew. I never named the father. But she told me how you ran off to another war zone when she miscarried, and it only reaffirmed that I'd made the right call by not telling you."

"That's not—I didn't run. I was deployed and couldn't say, 'no, sorry, my wife just miscarried, and my marriage is in shambles. Maybe next time.' That's not how the military works, and Jillian knew that when she married me."

“Yes, she did. But it wasn’t the deployment that killed your marriage. You avoided her calls for six months. You can’t tell me you were surprised when you got home, and she served you with the divorce papers.”

“I wasn’t, but—” He stopped short and took a second to calm himself. This wasn’t going well. “No, we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about us.”

“There is no us. You made that quite clear before you stormed off to go drink yourself to death.”

“Anna, I didn’t—”

When he reached for her, she backed away, hands up in defense. “No, stop. I can smell it on you. I signed your community service papers earlier tonight. You’re free, but if you’re so determined to kill yourself, I’m not letting you adopt Ranger. He doesn’t deserve your bullshit after clawing his way back to life. He needs an owner who wants to live. You’re too dangerous.”

Zak didn’t bother telling her that Ranger had enjoyed every second of the danger tonight. He’d loved rescuing the girls. *That* was what had breathed life into him. And he loved cadaver detection. His yellow eyes shone with excitement whenever he caught a scent. His tail didn’t stop wagging the entire time his nose was to the ground. He needed that purpose in his life.

So did Zak.

And now she was taking it away from them both.

He snatched the leash from his belt and knelt in front of his dog. Ranger watched him with worried eyes as he clipped the leash on. He rubbed the dog’s ear and his throat closed up so he couldn’t say any of the things he wanted.

You saved me.

I love you.

Both of you.

He glanced over his shoulder at Anna. She’d turned away, but only halfway. Tears tracked silently down her cheeks.

Ranger pushed his wet nose against Zak’s cheek, and it was only then he realized he was crying, too. He swiped at his face with the back of his hand and hugged Ranger for a lot longer than he’d intended.

He didn’t want to let go.

Eventually, Anna gave a light tug on the leash, and he stood, letting Ranger go to her side. He couldn’t look at them as he walked away, but

Ranger's questioning whine sent fresh spikes of pain through his heart.

Anna was right. The dog would be better off. He was too much of a disaster to take proper care of him.

Hell, he could barely care for himself.

She'd find a good family to adopt Ranger. Maybe he'd even land on a ranch with cattle to herd. He'd love that way more than sitting around watching Zak drink.

He'd be fine.

Question was, would Zak be okay without him?

chapter **thirty-six**

ZAK SCOWLED into his beer as Ash took the stool next to him. “Checking up on me, *Ashley*?”

He wasn’t drunk enough to deal with the man right now.

In fact, he wasn’t drunk at all.

When he’d walked into the Mad Dog and signaled to Rose for a beer, he’d had every intention of getting shit-faced and forgetting the entire night. But the beer had sat in front of him since it arrived, untouched, sweating onto the cocktail napkin. He had zero urge to drink it.

“Actually, no,” Ash said and glanced toward Rose. “I just stopped in for a drink on my way to check on Anna, but I’m glad to see you’re staying out of trouble. We’ve had enough of that tonight.”

The urge to ask about Anna was overwhelming, so he asked about Bella and Poppy instead. “How are the girls?”

“Scared, sad... but coping. They’re at a hotel with one of my deputies tonight and will go into foster care tomorrow.”

“With Anna?” There he went, asking about her anyway. He couldn’t help himself. Dammit.

Ash shrugged. “That’s for CPS to decide, but I think they’d be stupid not to let those girls stay with her.”

Zak agreed wholeheartedly. Poppy was an orphan now, and Bella might end up one if Ky died. And even if he survived, would he be in any shape to care for a traumatized teen? The girls would need a lot of love and patience to work through this experience, and Anna had both qualities in spades.

“Any word on Ky’s condition yet?”

“Still in surgery,” Ash said. “When he went in, the doctors were hopeful he’ll live. Whether he’ll walk again is another story. The bullet damaged his

spine.”

“Damn.”

“What you three did was dangerous, reckless, and probably illegal.” He waited a beat for Zak to meet his gaze. “But thank you for saving my sister.”

Zak glanced away and picked up his beer. “I fucked things up with her,” he muttered and set the glass down again without drinking. “And I don’t know how to fix it.”

“For one thing, you don’t need this.” Ash grabbed the beer and downed it in several long gulps. He made a face and set the glass down with a thunk. “Ugh. Warm as piss. How long have you been sitting here?”

“Hours,” Rose said from behind the bar. “Get him out of here, Sheriff. He’s brought the whole place down with his mood, and I’m about to close.”

“No, I’ll walk.” Zak pushed up from the bar and, just like the last time he was here, his prosthetic caught on the stool’s legs. He stared at it for a second, then shook his head and pulled it free. “I was gonna get a new one of these things so I could hike with Anna and the dogs without it locking up on me.”

Ash watched him fit the leg back into place. “You still should. Get a new leg. Go for a hike. Get a new dog. You don’t need Anna to live.”

Zak snorted. “Easy for you to say. You’ve always had her right by your side since the day you were born. What would *you* do without her?”

Ash stayed silent.

“Yeah, exactly.” He paid for his beer and left Rose a generous tip to make up for all the times he’d stiffed her. “See you around, Ash.”



Back at home, Anna cleaned the blood off Ranger, gave him and Winston an early breakfast, and then, finally, let herself break down. She collapsed on the couch in her trashed living room, and that was where her brother found her sobbing hours later.

“Oh, AJ.” He scooped her up and hugged her. “It’s all right.”

“They might not let me foster the girls now,” she said between sobs.

“I know.”

“I couldn’t save Zak, either. I was a fool for trying.”

He winced. "I feel like that's my fault. I shouldn't have mentioned the baby, but he was pissing me off and I spoke without thinking."

She wiped at her face. "So you always knew Zak was her father?"

Ash squeezed her against his side. "Of course I did. You really thought you could run around with my best friend for an entire summer and I wouldn't notice? I could see the little hearts dancing around your head every time you looked at him."

"You never said anything."

"Because he made you so happy. And you made him happy. I thought it was a good thing. I stupidly thought you two were meant to be."

She bumped him with her shoulder. "Back when you still believed in silly things like love."

"What can I say? I was a dumb kid."

"You can be a dumb adult sometimes, too." She shook her head. "I always wondered what happened between you and Zak. Couldn't figure out why you suddenly hated him when you were always like this." She twisted two fingers together, then sighed. "It's so obvious now, but I never put the pieces together."

"He hurt you. More than that, he destroyed you."

"No." She ducked out of his arms and faced him. "He hurt me, yes, but it was no different from any other teenage girl getting her heart broken for the first time. Under other circumstances, I would've moped for a bit and then moved on. Teenage love isn't meant to last, and I would've realized that. I *did* realize that, and never held it against Zak. You forget he was just a kid, too. No, what destroyed me was losing my baby, and he had nothing to do with that. He didn't even know she existed until today."

"So if you forgive him for breaking your heart, why push him away now? He loves you. And, as much as it galls me, I know you love him."

Anna looked down at Ranger and Winston, snuggled side-by-side in Winston's bed. "Because he was drinking again tonight. If he doesn't love himself enough to stay sober, how can I trust him to stay alive? I can't watch him self-destruct. That would destroy me."

Ash popped to his feet and paced for a few minutes, then stopped in front of her, hands bladed on his hips. "Okay, I'm probably going to regret saying this. He went to the Mad Dog tonight."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course he did. Was he drunk and disorderly?"

"No." He held up a hand, stopping her. "Zak had one beer in front of him

that he hadn't touched. He's not the same man I dragged out of that pub this summer, and I know that's because of you and Ranger. You think you can't save him, AJ, but you already have. Don't give up on him now."

chapter **thirty-seven**

BY THE TIME Zak walked the five miles home from the Mad Dog, dawn lightened the sky over the mountains to the east.

It had been a long night.

One of the longest of his life.

The only other night that had lasted longer was after his rescue when he was in the hospital in Germany waiting to see whether he'd keep his leg. He'd thought his life was over then.

And now Ky would face a similar night.

He'd have to talk to the guy, offer a shoulder to lean on. A night like that could fuck you up for years.

Something moved across his porch as he approached and he stopped short in the driveway, tensing until the animal came into the light.

Yellow eyes.

A smile spread across his face. "Hey, mutt. You miss me?"

Ranger wagged his whole body.

A car pulled into the driveway behind him. He didn't have to turn to know it was Anna. He always knew when she was nearby.

"Hi," she breathed. "Ranger escaped again."

"I see that." He turned to her. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and the bruise on her cheek had turned a deep, ugly purple. "Can't keep him away from me."

She ran a hand along the top edge of her car door. "Maybe... we shouldn't."

His chest swelled, but he didn't dare give in to the hope. "What are you saying?"

She shut the door and came toward him, stopping with only inches

between their bodies. She laced her fingers with his. "Let's go visit our daughter."

The grave was so much smaller than he expected, the headstone just a simple plaque in the ground with the name Bella Elyse Rawlings carved on its smooth surface. Anna had recently left fresh flowers, and she bent to clear away some of the fallen petals.

She gazed up at him. "Here she is."

Jesus. It hurt so much more than he expected. He knelt in the grass and pressed his hand against the cold stone. "What did she look like?"

Anna pulled a slim photo album from her jacket pocket and sat beside him. "I have pictures if you want to see her."

"Yes. Please."

She handed him the album.

He opened it and wasn't sure if the sound that escaped him was a laugh or a sob. "Jesus, she looked like me. Look at all that hair."

"She had your lips, too. That pout." She reached over his arm and turned the page, pointing to a close-up of the baby's face. "She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

He exhaled. "Yes. Too beautiful for this world."

"Maybe that's why she couldn't stay." Anna covered his hand with hers. "I love you so much. It was a mistake not telling you about her sooner, but I can't change the past. I can only hope you'll forgive me, so we can try for a future."

"God, Anna." He set the album aside and pulled her into his arms. "I've already forgiven you. I love you, too, and want a future with you more than anything."

She stiffened. "You should know I can't have more kids."

He rubbed her back in soothing circles. "Then we'll adopt. Dogs. Kids. We'll take them all in. I already know of two girls who desperately need a loving home." He looked at the gravestone again. "And I think our Bella would approve of having another Bella around here to watch over us. I mean..." He met her gaze again and pushed her hair back from her face. "If you want me to stay."

Her smile was dazzling. "Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, I don't know, you might want to foster me first and see how it goes before you make that commitment. I'm a bit feral." He growled, doing a fair imitation of Ranger, and lowered his mouth to hers. "You might have to

housebreak me.”

“Mm.” She returned his kiss. “Can I swat you with a rolled-up newspaper when you do something wrong?”

He pulled back and stared at her in mock horror. “You’d never do that to a dog.”

“Because even the worst dog I’ve ever met is better behaved than you.”

“Fair point.” After another kiss, he pushed to his feet and held out a hand to her. “Now let’s go rescue our girls and bring them home.”

epilogue

One Year Later

“SO, does anyone want to start today?”

When nobody else immediately spoke up to answer Dr. Firestone’s question, Zak opened his mouth, but no words came out. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants and Alfie the Psychic Dog trotted over to dance in front of his chair. He picked the dog up and nuzzled those soft ears, taking comfort in the contact.

Thank you, he told Alfie silently, then blurted to the group, “Last night was the one-year anniversary of the night I tried to kill myself.”

Donovan gave a low whistle. “Zak Hendricks coming in hot. You gotta warn us when it’s gonna be one of these heavy sessions, man.”

Everyone ignored him.

“What did you do?” Dr. Firestone asked, shifting in her seat to face him. “Did you mark the occasion in any way?”

“Yeah, I went to my parents’ house for dinner. It was the first time in... I don’t even know how long. Anna and the girls went with me.”

Dr. Firestone smiled. “How’d it go?”

He drew a breath and thought back to dinner. His dad hadn’t seemed to know how to talk to him and his mom wouldn’t stop fussing over Anna, Bella, and Poppy. He let his breath out in a whoosh. “It was awkward at first, but actually wasn’t too bad. I spent so much time pushing them away, I forgot I love them. I’ve missed them. We’re going to have dinner over there more often—once a month to start, so we can all get to know each other again. They really enjoy having more grandkids to fawn over.”

“What do the girls think of them?”

“Bella was reserved. She’s still having a lot of trust issues, so she kept them at arm’s length. I hope that will change the more she’s around them. But Poppy?” He chuckled. “She reveled in their attention and already has Dad wrapped around her little finger.”

“That little girl has *everyone* wrapped around her finger,” Sawyer said with a big grin. “Including you, Hendricks. She’s gonna be a heartbreaker.”

Zak winced. “Believe me, I’m well aware. I’m already stocking up on rifles and ammo to keep away asshole teenage boys.”

“Weren’t you the king of asshole teenage boys?” Donovan said.

Horror bloomed in his gut at the thought. “Oh, Jesus. She better not bring

home the teenage version of me.” He’d need a lot more ammo. Were chastity belts still a thing?

“And what about your siblings?” Dr. Firestone asked, deftly steering the conversation back to the topic at hand. “Were they at dinner?”

He wiped a hand down his face and shook his head. “Uh, no. They’re all less forgiving than Mom and Dad. I have a lot further to go with them—especially with my brother, Taj—to prove I’m in this for the long haul.”

They’ll come around, Pierce signed. *Even Taj.*

He nodded. “I know they will, and I don’t blame them for their reluctance to accept the new and improved me. I haven’t given them much reason to trust me over the last few years. Or, honestly, even before that. I’ve always kinda been a shitty brother to them, and I’ve been downright cruel to Tehani.”

“Tell us about that,” Dr. Firestone said. “Why do you think you were so much worse with her?”

He closed his eyes. Damn, this hurt to admit. “Because every time I looked at her, all I could think was, *this is your fault.*”

“But she’d just a kid,” Sawyer said. “What were you blaming her for?”

“My life and the shitty way I thought it turned out. I shouldn’t have pinned any of it on her, but after I saved her over in Afghanistan, it felt like I lost every-fucking-thing while she got this whole new great life. It hurt to see her happy, and I hated her for a long time because of it. But last night, I finally apologized. She forgave me.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that. I know an apology doesn’t make up for the way I’ve treated her, and I still catch myself slipping back into that ugly mindset, but I’m doing my best to connect with her. It’s part of this whole new year, new me thing I’m working on.”

“Speaking of new you,” Donovan said and nudged his prosthetic with the toe of his boot. “Nice shiny toy you got there.”

“Yeah, you like? I can run, hike, ski—hell, even rock climb with this. It’s awesome.” He pulled up his pant leg and kicked the blade out for everyone to see.

Well, everyone except Sawyer, who could maybe see it if he wiggled it around a bit? He still wasn’t sure how the guy’s superpower worked.

He dropped his pant leg and took a moment to smooth it down over his prosthetic. He’d been looking for an opening to bring up the idea that had been itching at the back of his brain for weeks, and figured now was as good

as a time as any. “So... guys? I have a proposition for you.”

“I’m flattered, man,” Donovan said, “but you’re not my type.”

Zak ignored him. “Something Veronica said during my first session with the group has stuck with me.”

Veronica glanced around, uncertainty in her dark eyes. “What did I say?”

He nodded to Zelda, snoozing comfortably beside Sawyer’s chair. “You said you wanted a Zelda. At the time, I thought you were ridiculous for thinking a dog could help you.” He stroked a hand over Alfie’s head. “But then I met Alfie, who is a better therapist than any human. No offense, Doc.”

Dr. Firestone grinned. “None taken. I happen to agree.”

“And then Ranger changed my life in ways I couldn’t have imagined at this time last year. He gave me love I didn’t know I needed and a purpose I didn’t know I was missing.” He tilted his head toward the door of the community room and the lobby beyond it. “There are a lot of dogs out there that need people, and a lot of people in here that need purpose. That purpose could be a fast-response tactical K9 unit— search and rescue, narcotics detection, disaster response, and more. We could create that here at Redwood Coast Rescue. We have the skills.”

“But won’t that be expensive?” Sawyer asked. “With Anna still fighting Monarch in court, where would we get the money for it?”

“We’ll have to do a shit-ton of fundraising.”

I’m in, Pierce said.

Donovan patted the air in a slow-down gesture. “Hang on. We’re all broken, busted, used up pieces of trash that the military threw away, and you want us to become a doggie A-Team?”

Dr. Firestone sighed. “Donovan, we’ve talked about this. You’re not broken or trash.”

“Am I still a Marine?” When nobody answered, he nodded. “Yeah, so what good am I?”

“There’s more to life than being a Marine,” Sawyer said. “And maybe this project of Zak’s is exactly what we need to prove that to ourselves. I’m in, too.”

“Me, too,” Veronica said, surprising everyone—including, it seemed, even herself. Her eyes widened for a split-second, but then narrowed. After a moment, she nodded. “Yeah, I’m willing to try.”

“Nah.” Donovan pushed out of his seat and strode to the door. “I’m out.”

Zak handed Alfie to Veronica, then followed. “Hey, Van, hold up. Can I

show you something?”

Donovan halted, one hand on the exit. “You’re not changing my mind.”

“I know. But, c’mon. Humor me for a second.”

Donovan grumbled, but trailed him to C-Wing. He hesitated just inside the door. “What are we doing here?”

“We got a new resident I thought you should meet.” Zak motioned to the first kennel in the row. “Say hello to Spirit.”

Donovan scowled at him for a long moment before scoffing and walking forward. When he spotted the dog, he recoiled. “What the fuck’s wrong with her?”

A black and white border collie sat in the middle of the kennel with her head cocked at an odd angle. She wobbled to her feet, and her feathered tail swept excitedly through the air.

“She was surrendered to us because she had a brain tumor.”

“Nope.” Donovan nearly steamed-rolled over Zak in his haste to leave. “I’ve seen enough.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Zak shoved a hand against his chest, pushing him toward the door that led outside to the agility yard. On the way, he paused long enough to open the kennel. “Come on, Spirit.”

Donovan watched the dog with a horrified expression as she wobbled down the hall, nearly smacking into the wall several times.

But when Zak opened the outside door and Spirit got a taste of freedom, her legs straightened, and her body stretched to its full length. She took off like a bullet and ping-ponged around the agility yard in a black and white blur.

Donovan’s jaw actually fell open. “How...?”

“The brain is a mysterious thing, even in dogs. The tumor was benign, but it was putting pressure on things, causing her balance issues. We removed it, and she’s been improving daily, but the amazing thing is, when she runs, a switch flips in her brain and it’s like nothing was ever wrong. Sasha—”

“That the sexy vet’s name? I’ve been wondering.”

Leave it to Donovan Scott to get hung up on that.

Zak rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sasha is the rescue’s vet. She believes Spirit will make a full recovery and Anna thinks she’ll make an excellent search and rescue K9.” He gave it a minute, letting Donovan watch the dog run, then faced the man. “So, is she trash? Should we give up on her because her brain’s a bit scrambled or should we see what else she’s capable of?”

Donovan growled low in his throat. “I know what you’re doing, Hendricks.”

“Is it working?”

His jaw slid to one side. “You bastard.” He held out a hand for her leash. “I want to see what she’s capable of.”



The Redwood Coast Rescue adventure continues with Donovan Scott’s book, **[Searching for Risk](#)**.

And if you’d like to see how it all started, you can read about Zak’s rescue in **[Honor Reclaimed](#)**.

For more information on Tonya’s upcoming releases, please subscribe to her **[newsletter](#)**.

searching for risk

part one

ignite



I am only a spark: Make me a fire.

Amado Nervo

episode 1: what happened to darcy?

Hey there, Truth Seekers! Welcome to Cold Truth, the podcast that's all about uncovering the mysteries of cold cases. I'm your host, Alexis Summers, and I'm thrilled to be taking you on a journey into the baffling case of Darcy Cantrell - a teenage girl who vanished without a trace.

Now, I know true crime can be a bit heavy, but don't worry - I'm here to guide you through the twists and turns of this intriguing case, and I'll try to keep things as light as possible.

So, pop in your earbuds and get ready to join me each week as we unravel the chilling truth behind Darcy's disappearance.

Darcy Cantrell never expected to live a long life. She never expected to be famous, either. Not with where and who she came from. Her mom, Sissy, had struggled with addiction her whole life and died of a heroin overdose when Darcy was only nine. Her dad, Franklin, was an abusive asshole when he was home—which, thankfully, as a commercial fisherman, wasn't often. She was mainly left to fend for herself, and she preferred it that way.

I know we say this next thing a lot in true crime—so much, it's become a cliché—but in this case, there's no other word to describe Darcy. She was stunning and she could light up a room—when she wanted to. At eighteen, she wore her dark hair in a shaggy, shoulder-length bob and had piercing gray eyes that changed color with her mood. She was tall and thin and if she'd been born into another family, she might have gone on to be a model or an actress, capitalizing on her beauty. All of the boys wanted her. Many of the girls were jealous of her and, in the way of teenagers, were often petty and mean.

But Darcy was a tough cookie—she had to be to survive—and she didn't tolerate bullies. Trevor Ponce, one of her classmates, recalls the time in

middle school when she received a school suspension for punching Mark Salas, the class bully who stole Trevor's new iPod. When I spoke to Trevor via phone, it was obvious he still looked up to Darcy as a hero. All of the outcasts did because she stood up for them when nobody else would.

"She was cool," Trevor said. "But not like in the same way as the popular kids. She didn't try to be—she just was. Effortlessly."

Even Mark Salas, now a CEO, came to respect her: "Everyone knew you didn't mess with her. She'd take you down and not think twice about it, but she'd also have your back if you needed her to."

Darcy made okay grades in school, but teachers often said she could've done better if she'd applied herself. She didn't participate in sports or after-school clubs. She was fine with admirers, but she didn't want friends. All she wanted was *out*.

Out of the cliquy school.

Out of the shabby trailer she lived in.

Out of the small town of Steam Valley, California.

But she never got the chance to leave.

On the chilly, windy night of October 26, 2007, Darcy's on-again, off-again boyfriend, Donovan Scott, convinced her to go to Hidden Beach—a difficult-to-access strip of sand tucked away in a cove, where local kids often had parties. It was their senior year, and the roughly one-hundred students from Redwood Coast High's Class of 2008 had a mean case of senioritis. There were parties every weekend, and this weekend was no exception. The teens lit a bonfire, drank cheap beer and wine coolers, reminisced about the last three years, and wondered what life would be like after high school.

Darcy hated it. By all accounts, she wanted to leave within minutes of arriving. Her boyfriend wanted to stay and drank heavily, ignoring her pleas to take her home.

Around 1:30 AM, witnesses saw a fight break out between Darcy and Donovan, a troubled kid from a troubled home with a hair-trigger temper. She reportedly slapped him and ran off into the vast wilderness of the Northern California redwoods. Drunk and angry, he followed her.

She was never seen again.

Fifteen years later, Darcy Megan Cantrell is famous. She's an urban legend local kids tell each other around a campfire on Hidden Beach. She's a ghost story, an unsolved mystery that has plagued law enforcement for years. But ask anyone in town, and they'll tell you the cold truth: she was murdered,

and they know *exactly* who got away with it.

So, what really happened to Darcy? Did she finally run away as she'd always dreamed? Did she get lost on her way home and succumb to exposure in the rugged mountains? Or did something more sinister happen? And if she died that night, is Donovan to blame, or were there other suspects who were never investigated?

One thing's for sure—this case is anything but simple.

Stick with me this season as we delve deep into Darcy's story to see if we can uncover what really happened to her.

In the meantime, make sure to hit that subscribe button so you don't miss out on any future episodes of Cold Truth. And, as always, if you have any information that could help solve this case or the others we've discussed, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Until next time—stay safe, stay curious, and never stop seeking the truth.

chapter
one

Present Day

“FIGURED YOU’D BE HERE.”

Donovan Scott bit back a growl of annoyance as his former best friend and current pain-in-the-ass boss emerged from the winding path onto the beach. He picked up the stick his border collie, Spirit, dropped at his feet and gave it a hard toss. She streaked after it in a blur of black and white and endless energy. “You wasted your time tracking me down. I’m not going to that fucking costume party.”

“It’s not a costume party. It’s a masquerade ball,” Zak Hendricks said as he crossed the sand. His dog, Ranger, raced out in front of him to join Spirit in the surf. “I’m assured there’s a difference. And, yes, you’re going.”

“What are you going to do, Leg-o-less. Carry me there?”

“If I have to. My wife wants all of Redwood Coast Rescue in attendance. The *whole* team, and, like it or not, you became part of the team when you accepted Spirit’s leash.” Zak stopped next to where he sat in the sand and watched the dogs play. “She’s doing well?”

“She’s perfect.” Nobody would know Spirit had a benign tumor removed from her brain six months ago. It had affected her balance and ability to walk, but she recovered fast as soon as it was gone. Now she was a happy, healthy dog who loved to run and lived to sniff out explosive materials for a bite of her favorite treat: hot dogs. She was originally supposed to be a search and rescue K9, but her knack for bomb detection had been a welcome surprise since Donovan would’ve made a shitty SAR K9 handler. Explosives, he knew. He had been an EOD tech in the Marines, and even though he’d gotten himself blown up, he still liked bombs better than people. In his experience, they were less volatile.

“No more dizzy spells?”

He didn’t know if Zak was asking about him or his dog, so he kept his mouth shut and his gaze focused on Spirit. Still, he could see the shine of Zak’s prosthetic leg out of the corner of his eye. While the guy seemed to have accepted the disability now, it was an uncomfortable reminder of how broken the whole so-called team was.

Of how broken Donovan, himself, was.

Yeah, he had dizzy spells. They were happening more frequently, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it because his brain was Swiss

cheese.

When he didn't respond, Zak turned to study the beach with a faint smile. "Lots of memories here."

Donovan followed his gaze. The beach hadn't changed much since they partied here as kids. It was a fingernail of sand tucked against almost vertical cliffs. Someone long ago had dug the fire pit and pulled large driftwood logs up around it to use as seats. He could still see Darcy sitting on one of the logs, her arms crossed, her eyes flashing with hatred. That had always been the problem with her—her line between love and hate was razor-thin, and it was impossible to know which side you stood on at any given time.

Now, ashes smoldered in the pit, sending up a thin curl of smoke. High schoolers had been here partying last night, but there was no other sign of their presence. That was one of the only hard and fast rules of Hidden Beach. You packed out what you brought in.

"Almost fifteen years," Zak said after several beats of silence.

"How the fuck would you know?" Anger heated his blood, and he welcomed it. Yeah, anger was so much better than sorrow and regret. It was easier. Always had been. He supposed that was the problem with him and why he and Darcy had been doomed from the start. "Weren't you off saving the world or some shit when it happened?"

Zak had graduated the year before and was already an Army Ranger deployed overseas when Darcy died, or else he might have been a suspect, too.

Or probably not.

Ash Rawlings, the third member of their Terrible Trio, had still been around town at the time—hell, he'd even been at the party that night with his high school girlfriend—and nobody ever considered him a suspect, despite his fling with Darcy the previous summer. But Zak and Ash were both from upstanding, well-respected families. Zak's mom was the high school principal, and his dad was the history teacher and the lacrosse coach who led the Wildcats to the state championship multiple times. Ash was the heir of the town's founding family. The two of them always got away with everything, receiving little more than a slap on the wrist for their teenage troublemaking.

Donovan, as the kid from the wrong side of the tracks, never had that luxury. When they got a scolding, he got a beating. When they were grounded, he was tossed in county jail. It was part of the reason he'd grown

to hate his former best friends over the years.

Zak's lips flattened into a grim line. "C'mon, Van. Everyone knows about Darcy's murder."

Donovan growled. "That fucking podcast."

"It started long before the podcast, buddy."

"Yeah, but it's stirring up all this shit again."

Zak said nothing. He just stared out over the waves.

"I didn't kill her."

"Never thought you did."

"Then you're the only one in this goddamn town to think that. If you want people to fork out money at this fundraiser shindig, you'd be better off not inviting the town pariah."

Zak finally glanced over at him again, one brow arched. "So why come back here at all? You could've lived anywhere after your medical discharge. You didn't have to come home."

Because his mom needed him. But Zak had been estranged from his family until recently and wouldn't understand that reasoning. "Because I'm a masochist."

"Then think of the charity ball tonight as another form of self-torture."

Fuck, he'd walked right into that, hadn't he? He stood and brushed sand off the back of his jeans. "I'm not wearing a costume."

Zak grinned. "Oh, yeah, you are."

chapter two

TONIGHT WAS THE NIGHT.

Sasha LeBlanc was going to seduce a man for the first time in her life.

After years of crushing on Sheriff Ash Rawlings, she was finally going to make her move. Anna Hendricks, her best friend and Ash's twin sister, convinced her it was the only way anything would ever happen because Ash was too focused on keeping the citizens of Lost County safe to think about dating.

A hard worker. A good man.

He checked all the right boxes—kind, stable, good family, steady job. It was just a bonus he was also gorgeous. Stormy blue eyes. A square, too-serious face. He was from a long line of cattle ranchers and had the lean, strong body of a cowboy. She loved when he helped his sister around the rescue because he always rolled up his sleeves, showing off muscular arms sprinkled with dark hair. She had a weakness for men with sexy arms. He also had nice lips, the bottom fuller than the top, and the few times she'd seen him smile, he'd stolen her breath. While his sister's hair was a flaming copper, his neatly trimmed light brown hair and beard glinted with just a hint of red in the sun.

The perfect man.

At least, he was according to the life plan Sasha had meticulously plotted out for herself. She'd accomplished everything else on her list, so it was time to find a good husband and have a family, and she couldn't think of anyone better for the role than Ash Rawlings.

Luckily, Anna happened to agree and had been trying to play matchmaker for over a year now.

And tonight was finally the night.

Sasha studied her reflection in the full-length mirror. The silky black dress was like nothing she'd ever worn before. It shimmered faintly purple every time she moved, had a slit in the curve-hugging skirt almost up to her hip, and another plunged alarmingly between her breasts. A sheer cape spilled down her back from the shoulders and also sparkled with every movement.

Would Ash like it? He seemed like a very reserved man. A gentleman. Maybe she was showing too much skin.

"I don't know. Is it too much?"

Anna looked up from the tabletop mirror she was using to do her hair. She'd curled her copper hair and pulled it back into a complicated knot secured with jeweled pins that matched her deep blue dress. The elaborate blue and gold feathered bird mask she planned to wear sat on the vanity beside her and seemed to wink at Sasha.

"Honestly," Anna said after a contemplative beat, "I don't think it's enough."

"I don't want Ash to think I'm—" She broke off and glanced at Anna's seventeen-year-old foster daughter, Bella, who was sorting through a makeup kit on the bed. She was never sure how much she could say around the girl. Bella had lived a hard life and was more world wary than most teenagers, but she was still just a kid. Should they really be discussing this in front of her?

Bella smirked. "You don't want him to think you're what, sexy? Well, you should because when he sees you in that dress, his head's going to explode."

Flushing, Sasha turned back to the mirror. "I don't want him to think I'm easy."

"You're trying to seduce him, right?"

Sasha looked at her best friend for help, but Anna only shrugged.

"She's not wrong, Sash. My brother is a lot of things, but he's not a monk. He likes easy. Prefers it, in fact."

Was her face on fire? Because it felt like it was on fire. She was so far out of her comfort zone with the dress. With seduction. With... this whole plan. But she wasn't going to find a husband while buried in work at her vet clinic, though she would rather express a hundred anal glands—easily her most hated part of the job—than go to a party and seduce a man.

Stick to the plan.

That had been her mantra throughout her life.

Everything will be okay if you stick to the plan.

Her carefully curated life checklist had never failed her, so she just had to suck it up because she'd decided months ago that Ash was meant to be part of the plan.

And suck it in because, God, this dress clung to everything. She turned sideways and studied her profile in the mirror, smoothing her hands over her belly. She inhaled, but it was no use. "Are you sure I shouldn't wear Spanx?"

"I thought you wanted him to get you *out* of the dress tonight?" Anna asked.

"Spanx is *not* sexy," Bella added.

"But it shows a lot of... lumps."

"Honey, no." Anna sighed with obvious exasperation. "Those aren't lumps. Those are curves that most women would pay good money for—me included—and you got them naturally. Show them off!"

Sasha exhaled and turned away from the mirror. "I wish I could've lost more weight."

"You don't need to." Anna grabbed her shoulders and made her face the mirror again. "Look at you. You're *gorgeous*."

"Like a film noir femme fatale," Bella said. "Oh, wait!" She rifled through the massive makeup kit in front of her. She'd recently taken an interest in special effects, and Anna had encouraged the hobby by practically buying out the nearest Sephora. The girl had been through a lot in her young life, and even after finding a safe place to land with Zak and Anna, she'd struggled. She didn't trust easily. She was behind in school and had trouble making friends.

Sasha remembered how that felt. Whenever she looked at Bella, she saw an echo of her teenage self—the whole reason for her meticulous plan. Did Bella have a checklist, too? Or was she normal?

Bella held up a tube of dark red, almost black, lipstick. "You *have* to wear this."

No, it was too bold. Too dark. With her extremely fair skin and dark hair, the lipstick would probably make her look all pale and washed out like Wednesday Addams—a taunt she'd endured throughout high school—but Bella looked so hopeful holding it out, she couldn't say no. She dutifully applied it. The color was matte and made her lips look somehow bigger, and... okay, Bella was right. It did bring a glamorous old Hollywood vibe to her costume.

“Perfect,” Anna said. “Now, the hair. What do you think, Belle?”

Bella got off the bed and circled Sasha, eyeing her up and down. “We’ll lean into the femme fatale look and sweep it back, fluff it out, pin it up like in those old movies.”

Anna grinned. “With your mask on, nobody will recognize you.”

That’s the point.

As Anna and Bella worked magic with her thick mass of hair, she tried to imagine she was someone other than a shy, awkward, overweight veterinarian. She was Greta Garbo. Rita Hayworth. Ava Gardner. She was beautiful, glamorous, and mysterious. She was...

Going to be sick.

“This isn’t going to work.”

“Yes, it will. I know my brother. He won’t be able to resist you.” Anna crossed to the bottle of champagne she’d had chilling in a bucket in the corner of the bedroom and popped the cork. She returned with two bubbling glasses. “What you need is a little liquid courage.”

Sasha accepted the glass with a shaking hand and clinked it with Anna’s, then downed it in three long swallows.

“Yikes,” Bella said. “It’s gonna take *a lot* of liquid courage, Mom.”

“Yeah, I see that.” Anna took the empty glass back and refilled it. “Good thing I bought two bottles.”

chapter three

THE MASQUERADE BALL was held in a rented ballroom at River's Edge Casino, and Zak had left hours ago to coordinate the set-up while Anna and Sasha got ready. Bella drove them to the casino since they'd polished off most of the champagne before ever leaving the house.

Sasha's head felt floaty, as bubbly as the champagne, and she couldn't stop smiling. Her cheeks were probably flushed—they always got red when she drank—but at least she had the lacy Venetian mask to hide that.

"Be good," Bella said as she dropped them off at the casino's entrance.

"I'm supposed to be telling *you* that," Anna said.

"But I didn't pregame with an entire bottle of champagne, and I'm spending my night watching Disney movies with Poppy and Grandma Paksima. So I'm telling *you* to be good."

Anna laughed and leaned back into the car to kiss Bella's forehead. "Give that to Poppy." She added a second kiss. "And that's for you. Let me know when you get to your grandparents' house."

"I will. Bye, Mom. Love you!"

"Love you, too." Anna stepped back and exhaled long and slow as she watched the car until it had turned out of the parking lot. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Oh, no. Oh, shit. I can't cry. I'll ruin the fabulous job Bella did on my makeup."

Sasha hooked her arm and leaned into her side, offering support. "Is that the first time she's said she loves you?"

"Yes." Anna's lips trembled. "Poppy says it all the time, but I didn't think Bella ever would."

Sasha thought of the precocious six-year-old with blond hair and enormous blue eyes that Zak and Anna had officially adopted six months ago.

The girl was as bright and happy as her name suggested, and a lot of that had to do with Bella shielding her from the worst of their shared trauma. The girls were raised as sisters, but they weren't blood-related. Due to a lot of complicated circumstances, Zak and Anna hadn't been able to adopt Bella like they had Poppy, who was an orphan, so they were still only the older girl's foster parents. And Bella was about to turn eighteen, aging her out of the traditional foster system and into a transitional group home. Sasha knew Zak and Anna were desperately jumping through all the legal hoops to adopt her before that happened.

"Poppy had a lot less trauma to work through than Bella."

"Because Bella is so smart and strong and resilient. She's such a good kid. And now I just want to protect them both from all of it." Anna started to wipe at the tears in her eyes but caught herself. "Dammit. I'm *not* going to cry. Tonight's a good night. A happy night."

Sasha turned her toward the casino's door. "Exactly. No tears. You'll go in there and dance with your handsome husband and have fun while you raise boatloads of money for our rescue."

Anna gave a watery laugh. "Well, I don't know about boatloads, but the ticket sales were beyond anything we expected. With any luck, the silent auction and donations will put us over the top of our stretch goal."

"*Boatloads* of money," Sasha insisted.

"Yeah, okay. Boatloads." She gave a sly sideways smile. "And you, my friend, are going to snag yourself a handsome sheriff tonight, and then we'll be sisters."

The nerves fluttered again, and Sasha pressed her free hand to her belly. "Maybe don't start sending the wedding invitations just yet. He has to notice me first."

"Oh, he will. *Everyone* will. Believe me, Sash, you look amazing."

The ballroom was filled with a cacophony of colors and textures. Anna had outdone herself with the decorations. An expansive buffet of delicious treats and appetizers lined one wall, and a bar was tucked away in the corner. On the stage in front of the dance floor, a small jazz band played a lively tune, electrifying the air. Many of the masqueraders mingled among the high-top cocktail tables in shimmering fabrics and intricate masks of feathers and sequins. Others had already taken to the dance floor, laughing in their partners' arms. Overhead, chandeliers cascaded droplets of light into the crowd below.

Anna wasn't over-exaggerating the number of ticket sales. It looked like the entire town had turned up to support Redwood Coast Rescue, and Sasha's heart swelled at the thought. Zak and Anna had worked hard to make RWCR an asset to the community, and people were finally taking notice.

The night felt alive with possibility.

"Oh, there's Zak." Anna pulled her toward one of the tables, where Zak stood with Pierce St. James and Sawyer Murphy, two other members of Redwood Coast Rescue's tactical K9 unit. Pierce wore a plain black mask that covered the lower half of his face and the extensive scars on his neck, and Sawyer had on an eyeless cyberpunk mask that made him look like an android. Even Zelda, Sawyer's seeing-eye dog, was dressed to impress in a silver tutu that sparkled with green twinkle lights.

"Ladies," Sawyer said with a gallant bow. "I'd say you look beautiful, but I'm blinder than usual tonight." He grinned as he tapped his eyeless mask. "But I bet you're both putting every other woman to shame."

Pierce said something in sign language. He was unable to speak due to injuries he received while serving in Iraq. Sasha had been trying to learn to sign so she could talk with him, but she didn't know enough of the language yet to translate what he said.

"Yeah, don't get any ideas," Zak replied and pulled Anna possessively into his side. While the two other men simply wore tuxes with their masks, he had gone full pirate with his costume, even replacing his usual prosthetic running blade with a peg leg. He cut a dashing figure in the long red jacket with gold trim. A huge tricorne hat sat at a jaunty angle on his head, and his half-mask was a freakishly realistic gold skull.

In a past life, he absolutely had been a pirate, Sasha decided. He looked too much the part to have been anything else.

"Wow," he said and gave his wife an appreciative spin. "Look at you, gorgeous. My favorite parrot."

She poked his chest. "I better be your *only* parrot."

Aww, they'd coordinated. Now Anna's bird-like costume made a lot more sense.

Sasha glanced away from the couple as they kissed, a hollow ache blooming in her heart. She wanted what they had—that sweet, easy intimacy with someone who saw all her flaws and accepted her anyway. She scanned the crowd for Ash, but she couldn't pick him out of the sea of jesters and plague doctors. Her gaze snagged on a man in the corner dressed all in black,

his silk shirt loosely laced at the collar, showing off impressively wide shoulders and the hint of a tattoo on his chest. His demon mask completely covered his face, leaving just his square jaw and dimpled chin visible. Definitely not Ash because he didn't have a beard, but she found herself watching him a beat too long anyway. He lifted his drink in her direction, and she realized she was staring.

Oh, shit. Now she'd have to avoid Demon Man all night.

Face burning, she turned away from him and accepted a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Her head was already fuzzy from the bottles she'd shared with Anna, but she needed to quiet the damn nerves fluttering in her belly. As she sipped, she continued scanning the crowd, but she was still too aware of Demon Man's gaze on her.

She had to focus.

She was on a mission.

She took another sip of champagne. She needed to find Ash, and fast, before she lost the nerve. But where was he? She should've asked Anna what his costume was. Perhaps he opted not to come to the party after all.

Her gaze found its way back to Demon Man, who was now stalking across the room toward her. She tried to look away but found that she couldn't.

"May I have this dance?" he asked, holding out his hand. He was a perfect gentleman, but she hesitated and stared down at his extended hand. It was big and powerful and somehow menacing. She imagined it spread possessively across her lower back. Then imagined it sliding lower...

Maybe it was the anonymity of the masks they both wore that made her feel bold, or maybe it was the champagne fizzing her blood, but she placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor.

She wasn't a dancer. Nobody would ever call her graceful, but she easily fell into the rhythm of the lively music with him. The man could *move*, and it was sexy as hell. Who knew she was attracted to men who could dance? She sure hadn't.

Soon enough, she stopped worrying about his hands skimming over the lumps and bumps her dress didn't hide. She stopped worrying if she was going to step on his foot. She laughed as he spun her out and back in. It was kind of... fun.

God. When was the last time she'd let herself have fun?

As the music slowed, his muscular arms wrapped around her waist and

tugged her close. Her face flushed with heat, and this time it had nothing to do with the champagne. It was a pleasant warmth that spread throughout her body to tingle in her fingers and toes. This wasn't part of the plan, but as she stared up at his masked face, she found herself losing all sense of reason. Dancing with a stranger in a demon mask was so out of character, but she wasn't ready to stop. It was too exciting. Exhilarating.

And yet, even as they danced, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

It wasn't until the dance ended and Demon Man pulled away from her that she finally saw him. Ash. He was standing near the door, dressed in a simple black cloak, talking to Zak. He looked like a shadow in the dimly lit room, but she knew it was him. He still had his Lost County Sheriff's uniform on under the hastily donned cloak. Probably Anna's doing. She wouldn't let anyone—even her brother—enter without a costume.

Sasha's heart skipped a beat as she realized what she had just done. She had danced with this dangerous stranger while Ash—the perfect man, the one who checked all of the boxes in her tidy life plan—had been there all along.

Dammit, she had to focus.

The plan was to seduce Ash, not Demon Man.

Stick to the plan.

“Thank you. That was fun, but—” She tried to extricate herself gracefully, but Demon Man caught her hand.

“Where are you going?” His voice was a low rumble that sent sparks through her nerve endings as he drew her in close. “I'm not done with you yet.”

“I... uh... need to go.” A faint protest, her voice barely above a whisper. She could see his dark eyes burning with intensity under the mask and found herself almost hypnotized by his gaze. “I was waiting for a friend, and he's here now, so—”

“Forget him.” He leaned in closer, his breath hot against her ear. “Come with me.”

It was a mistake, but she didn't protest again as he led her away from the crowd and into a darkened corner of the room. Demon Man trapped her against the velvet-draped wall with his big body, and his stubble scraped her cheek as his lips hovered inches above hers. His hand curled loosely around her neck, his thumb tracing her collarbone up to her fluttering pulse.

But he didn't kiss her.

God, she wanted him to kiss her.

Her hand automatically came up to his shoulder as if she meant to push him away, but then slid down his tattooed arm. Fascinated, she traced the lines of ink carved into his skin with her fingertips. His muscles tightened under her touch.

He made a sound of pure male need, deep and primal. His hands slid down to her hips, then around to her ass. He pulled her against him, and there was no mistaking his arousal. The ridge of it pressed against her stomach as he skimmed his lips from the corner of her mouth to her neck. He breathed in deeply as if trying to inhale her like a drug.

She was in trouble. She was veering way off her predetermined route here, but what would it hurt just this once? Then she could go back to checking off boxes on her tidy plan.

No.

No.

Her eyes popped open in shock. Those wayward thoughts had to be the champagne talking. This man was *not* part of her plan. When she went off plan, bad things happened. The last time, she'd lost the most important person in the world to her.

Never again.

She forced herself to step back.

He growled softly and stepped forward, crowding her against the wall. She pressed her hand to his chest and felt his heart beating as hard as hers under her palm.

“I have to go,” she said again, more firmly.

Demon Man didn't reply right away, but the stubborn look in his eyes said he wasn't ready to give up on her, and he was debating how hard he should push. And, if she were honest with herself, it wouldn't take much of a push. She was insanely attracted to this man—more attracted than she had been to anyone—and she hadn't even seen his entire face yet.

He was dangerous.

So, so dangerous.

After several breathless beats, he leaned in close, and his lips brushed her ear. “Find me later,” he whispered before backing away and disappearing into the crowd.

Sasha stood there for a moment, her heart racing as she tried to remember how to breathe.

What just happened?

And why did she want to follow him now?

Yeah, that definitely had to be the champagne's influence.

chapter four

SHE CAUGHT sight of Ash again, and she knew what she had to do.

Stick. To. The. Plan.

Time to go for what she wanted. If she could sizzle on the dance floor with a stranger, she could be bold enough to ask Ash on a date.

She threw back her shoulders, lifted her chin, and made her way over to him. She tapped his shoulder. “Hi,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Ash turned to face her, his eyes widening in surprise as he took in her dress. “Sasha?” The surprise shifted to appreciation, then into the spark of male interest she’d always wanted from him. A smile spread across his handsome face. “Wow. You look... amazing.”

“I like you. I think we’d make a great couple. Would you date me?” The words fell out of her in a jumbled rush on one breath. Crap. She inwardly winced. There was a line between boldness and tactlessness, and she just took a running leap over it. “Um, I mean... dance with me?”

Ash glanced at his companions, and her face went hot as she realized she didn’t know the men standing with him. Which was worse—embarrassing yourself in front of strangers or friends? She wanted to melt into the floor and suddenly, desperately wished she’d taken Demon Man up on his offer to leave.

“Yeah, I’d love to dance with you,” Ash said, surprising her. “Just give me a second?”

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

He turned back to the two men. They were dressed similarly to him, with uniforms under their cloaks. His deputies, she realized. They were trying to keep the grins off their faces and remain professional.

Oh, God. She wandered away while Ash issued their orders. Her face was on fire, and her nerves were back. She snagged another champagne glass from a passing waiter. Funny how she hadn't felt even a hint of the nervous butterflies when she'd danced with Demon Man.

Then Ash's hand was in hers, and he was leading her to the dance floor. Her heart pounded so hard in her chest that she was sure he could feel it through their clasped hands.

This was it. The moment she had been waiting for. The moment she had planned for.

She drew a breath to calm her racing thoughts and focus on the moment as he took her into his arms, but from the corner of her eye, she saw his deputies fan out into the crowd. "Are you working?"

"No," Ash said too quickly.

"You're in uniform. You only wear your uniform when there's a problem." Otherwise, he usually wore jeans and a button-up to work. "What's wrong?"

He exhaled hard. "Okay, yes, I'm working. But don't tell Anna. One: she'll lecture me about always working. And two: I don't want her to worry."

"Worry about what?"

"We received information about a potential attack on the fundraiser tonight."

"Who would attack a fundraiser?" Her eyes widened. "Monarch?" Anna was in an intense legal battle with the development company over land that had been owned by the Rawlings family since the Gold Rush days. "They wouldn't stoop that low."

"I wouldn't put it past them," Ash muttered but then nodded toward two men in expensive tuxes and simple black masks. "But Mark Salas and JT Tennison are both here, so I doubt it's them."

She scowled at the Monarch CEO and Chief Legal Officer. "Why would they buy tickets to a fundraiser meant to raise money to fight them?"

"Because JT's a sycophant who worships the ground Mark walks on, and Mark's a smug jackass. Always was in high school, and he's only gotten worse with age and success."

She was a year younger than Ash and had kept to herself throughout school, preferring to focus on her grades rather than social events. They hadn't run with the same crowd, but she did vaguely remember Mark ruling over his classmates as prom king, like the position actually came with God-

given monarchical power. “He always wore polo shirts with popped collars.”

“He still does, if that tells you anything.”

“Ew.” Then a thought struck that had her jaw falling open. “Wait. Did he name his company Monarch because he was elected prom king?”

Ash laughed. It was a deep, rich sound. “You know, I never thought of that, but probably.”

“Wow, that’s really pathetic.”

“Pathetic is a good word to describe Mark, but he’s not the kind of guy who’s going to call in a bomb threat. He prefers to sue people to get his way.”

“So, who would threaten the fundraiser?”

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Probably just kids, but I’m not taking any chances. I have deputies stationed at every door and a bomb-sniffing K9 unit from the state police patrolling the grounds. Like I said, it’s probably nothing, but this is my sister’s baby. I’m not taking chances.”

She loved that he cared so much about Anna and her many passion projects. His protectiveness was sweet.

The music slowed, and Ash pulled her closer. He smelled nice, like the woods after a rain, and she relaxed into his arms. He was a good dancer, his touch gentle but confident.

Nothing like Demon Man, who had been all rough edges and primitive need. That was what made him so dangerous—his unpredictability, his wildness. Ash was safe, reliable—a good choice for a life partner.

But was that really what she wanted?

Yes.

Yes, of course.

Safe and reliable was better.

And while she couldn’t deny that the dance with Demon Man had been the most exciting thing she’d ever done, she couldn’t risk another deviation from her plan. She’d lost too much already.

As if conjured by her thoughts, Demon Man appeared at the edge of the dance floor. He still wore his mask, but she could tell by the flat line of his mouth that he disapproved of her current dance partner. His dark eyes all but burned her skin. Her heart thundered as she met his gaze over Ash’s shoulder, torn between Ash, the safe choice, and Demon Man, the wild card.

Dammit, it shouldn’t even be a debate. She shouldn’t be looking at him. Shouldn’t be entertaining the idea of leaving Ash after this next dance and

going to him—but she couldn't help it. There was something about him that drew her in, something magnetic that made her feel more alive than she had in years.

She imagined that was how bugs felt right before they got zapped.

When the song ended, Ash didn't let her go. She pulled her gaze away from Demon Man and made herself focus on Ash. He leaned down, his breath warm against her cheek, and for a heart-stopping moment, she thought he was going to kiss her.

Did she want him to kiss her?

Yes.

No.

“Anna’s watching,” he said, his voice a sexy rumble in her ear.

Sasha glanced over at her best friend, who gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up. She laughed and buried her burning face in Ash's shoulder. “Oh my God. She looks like the Cheshire Cat.”

He grumbled low in his throat, but it was good-natured. “She’s very pleased with herself right now. She’s been telling me to ask you out for years.” He pushed a loose strand of hair back from her face and smiled. “I’m an idiot for not listening to her sooner.”

The nerves swarmed back. “Oh. Well, uh, don’t tell her that, or you’ll never hear the end of it.”

The radio at his belt squawked with chatter. He cursed under his breath before letting her go. “Sorry, I have to—”

“No, don’t apologize. I get it. I’m always on call, too.” The nearest emergency animal hospital was almost two hours away, and sometimes a patient just didn’t have that long. She and two other vets in town took turns being on call for emergencies, and it wasn’t unusual for the answering service to contact her at all hours of the night.

Ash walked backward a few steps, seemingly reluctant to leave. “Do you want to get dinner sometime when I’m not...” He trailed off and waved vaguely in the direction of his deputies, who were both trying to get his attention. “You know, being pulled in five directions at once?”

She hesitated, glancing over at Demon Man. He was still watching her, his eyes dark and intense. It was as if he was daring her to come to him, to embrace the danger that he represented.

But she couldn't do that. She had to stick to the safe and reliable choice.

She faced Ash again. “Yes, I’d like that.”

He smiled, relief evident in his expression. “Great. Call you tomorrow?”

“Okay,” she said faintly.

With a final, quick smile—he really was handsome when he did that—he jogged off to answer the radio and deal with his deputies, leaving her alone on the dance floor with her racing thoughts.

She’d finally done it. She got Ash to notice her. So why did she have knots in her stomach?

She took a deep breath and turned to go find Anna—and nearly ran into Demon Man. He was right there, crowding her space, and she didn’t care. The uneasy knots loosened.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Dance we me,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Her gaze flicked over to where Anna was standing, hoping for an intervention to stop her from making a horrible decision.

Anna wasn’t there anymore.

Crap.

She stared up at the contours of his mask, the sharp angles that gave him an imposing air. She knew she should say no and walk away, but something inside her wouldn’t let her. Maybe it was the thrill of the danger, the excitement of the unknown. Maybe it was the way he made her feel when they danced, like she was the center of his world.

Whatever it was, she couldn’t resist.

And then the decision was made for her as he took her hand and pulled her close. The music had started again, a sultry, sinuous beat that matched the way Demon Man moved against her. He was all rough edges and primal need, his hands gripping her waist as he dipped her low, his face so close to hers that she could feel his breath on her lips.

She should push him away, should tell him to stop, but she couldn’t find the words. She felt like she was caught in a spell, her body moving in perfect sync with his. It was too much, too intense.

“You’re dangerous, you know that?”

“That’s why you like me,” he said with a wicked grin as his big hands roamed over her butt. “You want to feel something real. Something wild.”

Yes, it was true. She’d always wanted to be the kind of person who embraced adventure and thrived on the unexpected. He could help her unlock that side of herself if she let him. There was no safety net with him, no plan to follow, no neat little checkboxes to mark off.

It was thrilling.

And terrifying.

As they moved together, she allowed herself to be swept away by his touch, his lips, his blatantly carnal energy.

Suddenly, he spun her out and pulled her back tight to him, his hand trailing down her spine as the music reached its crescendo. He was aroused. She could feel the bulge of his erection pressing into her stomach, and dampness pooled uncomfortably between her thighs.

He growled softly. “You want me, don’t you?”

She should deny it, but she couldn’t. The heat between them was too intense. She nodded just as the music ended.

“Then come with me.”

Sasha hesitated and looked for Ash. He was gone. Anna was gone. Even Zak. Nobody would see her sneak away with this man. Her mind screamed that it wasn’t a good idea, but her body had already made its decision. She felt daring with him—like she could do anything. It was a heady feeling. Dangerous. But, at that moment, she didn’t care.

chapter five

SASHA'S PULSE quickened as he held out his hand. His eyes danced with amusement behind his mask, and at that moment, he truly looked demonic. She should refuse the temptation. She should leave his arms and wait for Ash, because he was the right man for her, not this stranger who set her on fire with just his touch. She had to say no. She had to be smart, stick to her plan. It hadn't failed her yet—

She nodded.

His lips twitched into a smile as his hand wrapped around hers, his grip firm and warm. For a moment, she forgot everything else as they walked together toward the door leading out to the casino floor.

He took a keycard from his pocket.

He had a room at the hotel.

Her heart raced while they waited for an elevator. She was both trembling in anticipation and filled with trepidation as the doors opened and they stepped inside.

Was she really going to do this?

She sneaked a glance at him, at his strong jaw and the muscles that strained his shirt and his big hands. Anticipation zinged through her.

Yes, she was really doing this.

The elevator ride lasted forever and not long enough, the space between them crackling with electricity. He said nothing, and other than his hand around hers, he didn't touch her again until they were safely inside his room. Then he pushed her up against the closed door and fastened his mouth over hers, hungry as if he'd been dying for a taste of her all night. He held her still while he commanded her mouth, and all she could do was stand there and melt under the siege.

When she was breathless, he finally released her face and gripped her hips, hauling her hard against him as if to imprint himself on her skin. She dug her fingers into the sinewy muscles of his forearms and wrapped her leg around him, pulling him even closer so there would be no space between them. His kiss alone was enough reason to stay—he was wild and hot, just as she imagined.

He broke away from her mouth to trail his lips down her neck. She tilted her head back, giving him better access to the sensitive skin. He bit down gently, eliciting a husky moan that startled her. She didn't make sounds like that, but he seemed to like it. He grabbed her ass and lifted her up like she didn't weigh over two hundred pounds.

She squeaked in surprise. "Oh my God. Put me down. You'll hurt yourself."

His dark, amused chuckle sent shivers racing over her skin. "I want both your legs around me."

She tried to obey, but the dress was too tight. Embarrassment stung her cheeks. "Uh, I can't. My dress—"

With a frustrated growl, he set her down long enough to reach around her. But instead of the zipper sound she expected, the fabric tore. She gasped into his mouth as the dress fell off her, ripped nearly in two. Then he had her in his arms again, and her legs were wrapped around his waist as he carried her to the bed. He lay her down and hovered over her, his eyes locked onto hers. He still wore the demon mask, and the illicitness of it sent a thrill through her.

His thumb stroked over her lower lip. "I'm only asking this once. Are you sure?"

She nodded. She was going to combust if he didn't keep touching her. She reached up to pull him down for another kiss, their lips meeting in a fierce battle of tongues. His hands roamed over her body, leaving trails of fire. He hooked his fingers into her thong and dragged it down.

For once, she wasn't self-conscious about her belly or her muffin top or her jiggy thighs. How could she be when he worshiped her with his hands and mouth like she was a goddess?

As they broke away for air, he murmured in her ear, "You're mine now."

She nodded again, her eyes wide as she watched him rise from the bed. He took his time unlacing the shirt at his collar and shrugged it off, revealing a thickly muscled chest. Dark tattoos snaked from his powerful shoulders,

down both arms to his wrists. He tossed the shirt aside before nudging off his boots.

When he reached to take off the mask, she sat up and grabbed his hand. “Leave it. Please.”

He leaned down, his lips hovering above hers. “Does the angel want to be fucked by the demon?”

A chill scraped down her spine. Her nipples hardened, poking through the thin lace of her bra. “Yes.”

He left the mask in place and held her gaze as he unzipped his pants. She watched with amazement as he pushed them down his powerful thighs and kicked them away. His cock was thick and long, and her mouth watered at the sight of it. On impulse, she reached out, wrapped her hand around the heavy length of him, and squeezed. She had no idea where the boldness came from, but she liked feeling the power of him, the heat. Liked that she was in full control of this demon of a man, and they both knew it.

She stroked her hand up, squeezed, and then down again, watching his face. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, his jaw tight with tension. She leaned forward to lick the hollow of his throat. His deep groan sent a rush of wetness between her thighs.

He gripped her head and kissed her hard. She wrapped her hand more tightly around him, moving up and down, then twisted her wrist to glide over the silky skin of his tip and back down once more.

With a growl, he caught her wrist. “Fuck, you’re a naughty angel.” His voice was ragged. “Not like that. I’m not coming in your hand. I want inside you.”

He grabbed a condom from the bedside table and ripped it open with his teeth. She licked her lips, watching as he roughly rolled it on.

He positioned himself above her and leaned down to kiss her, his tongue tangled with hers as his knees pressed her legs apart. When he finally broke the kiss and positioned himself at her entrance, she let out a choked cry. He was so big. He pushed the head of his cock inside and paused. She looked up at him, trying desperately to catch her breath.

“I’m going to fuck you slow,” he growled. “Because you’re tight. And sweet. And I want to feel every inch of you. But when I’m close to coming, I’m going to shove myself in deep and fast.” He thrust forward, and a whimper escaped her as her body accepted him. “And I’m going to come. Because I’m your demon, and that’s what a demon does—he fucks and fucks

you hard until he comes. And then he does it all over again.”

She closed her eyes and tried to keep her breathing even. He was right. She hated it, and yet she loved it. She hated herself for liking what he was doing to her, but she loved the way he spoke of it.

As if he had done this to a thousand women before.

As if he did not have a soul.

When he began to move, she arched beneath him, digging her hands into his arms to pull him down on top of her. But he didn't give her what she wanted. He drew out almost all the way and then pushed back in, slower than before, a little deeper but still not all the way.

Every stroke shoved her closer to the edge. His chest rubbed against her nipples, sending little zings of pleasure down to where they were joined. She buried her face in his neck and gripped his hips, wanting him to move faster, deeper, harder.

But he kept up the torturously slow rhythm.

He kissed her again, his tongue tangling with hers, soft and demanding all at once. She wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him closer. She was so close to the edge that she didn't know how she would survive.

He grabbed one of her hands and forced it to his mouth as he continued to move in and out of her, torturously slow. “Play with your clit, angel.”

Her face grew warm as she slid her fingers down between her thighs. She gasped, embarrassed by the pleasure and the wetness. He stopped moving and withdrew her hand, licked the tip of her finger. She moaned softly as he replaced her hand on herself.

“Harder,” he said.

She rubbed the bud harder, faster.

“You're so hot, angel,” he said, punctuating each word with a thrust. “So fucking hot. I could stay inside you all night. All fucking night.”

She moaned against his neck as another zing of pleasure shot through her. Her eyes squeezed shut and she arched against him, meeting his hard thrusts. She was so close, so close.

“That feels so fucking good. I know you're close, I can feel you squeezing. It's so fucking tight. Come on my cock, angel. It's time to come.”

Her body obeyed, the orgasm hit her fast and hard. Her hips bucked up and she screamed against his neck as his cock slid so deep inside her she wildly thought she'd never get him out.

Then she couldn't think anymore as pleasure took over and the room

spun. His movements grew rough, wild. He wrapped one hand over her hip and pulled her leg to his waist as he slammed into her over and over, jerky and uncontrolled. His grunts became deeper, yet he didn't slow down.

He stiffened above her, and she knew he was close.

He threw his head back, his neck muscles corded. In that moment, she could see the demon in him, and he was beautiful. She wrapped her hand around his neck, drawing him closer for another hard kiss as he finally came.

When they both stilled, he bit her neck. Then he licked the sting away and kissed the spot.

“What was that?” she rasped.

He shook his head. “Nothing, angel. I'm just marking you. Remember? It's what demons do.”

He pulled out of her and took off the condom, leaving the bed to dispose of it in the bathroom.

When he returned, his eyes were heavy behind the demon mask. He pulled it off, and she glanced away. She didn't want to see his face and ruin the magic of what had just happened. It was better if they stayed strangers. He slid into bed behind her and pulled her back against his chest.

Oh, God. What had she done?

She started to get up, but his arms tightened around her. His breath tickled the back of her neck. “Where do you think you're going?”

“I should go find my friends before they leave. They're my ride home.”

“Oh, angel,” he said, his voice dripping with mock sadness. “You'll stay here tonight. I'm not done with you.”

He was already stirring again, lengthening against the back of her thigh, and her body hummed with anticipation, ready for round two.

She had no idea how she'd gotten herself into this mess. She was always so cautious, always planning ahead, and yet here she was in a stranger's bed, wanting more than she should. She wanted to stay with him, wanted to explore the depths of his eyes and the texture of the hair on his chest. She wanted to wrap her hand around his hardening cock again and taste him when he came.

But what if Anna was looking for her? Or worse, Ash? He definitely wouldn't want her after finding her in bed with someone else.

On one hand, she felt guilty for betraying her own convictions. But on the other, she couldn't help but be pulled in by his presence, captivated by the thrill of their embrace and the pleasure it brought her. She wanted more—

more of the thrill, more of the pleasure, more of the passion.

“I should go home.” But even as she said the words, she knew she wouldn’t. She didn’t want to leave her demon’s embrace yet.

“Mmm. Stay.” The seductive timbre of his voice sent chills of desire rippling through her body.

She hesitated. Would it be so bad if she stayed? This need for him didn’t make sense. She never even asked his name.

“What’s your name?” Her breath hitched as his rough hand trailed lightly down her hip.

He nuzzled her ear and dipped his fingers between her legs. “Do you often have hot sex with men you don’t know?” She couldn’t tell if it was amusement or annoyance in his voice.

“No.” She gasped and arched into him, pushing against his touch, desperate for more. “This is the first time.”

His deep rumble of laughter resonated through her body as he began to trace circles around her aching clit. “But that’s not true, is it? Because you *do* know me.”

No, she didn’t. She couldn’t. She never would’ve done this with someone she knew because how could she face him every day with such intimate, carnal knowledge of his body?

He was a stranger.

He had to be.

She closed her eyes and grabbed his wrist with the intention of removing his hand, but didn’t follow through. Instead, she let him continue to tantalize her with his skilled fingers. “No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. Say my name, Sasha.” He continued to circle her clit as he waited for an answer, but instead of giving him one, all she could do was moan. His voice dropped low in anticipation. “C’mon, who’s your demon? Say my name, and I’ll let you come.”

The pleasure was deep and relentless, but he held back just enough pressure to keep her from release until his name left her in a pleading gasp. “Donovan.”

A triumphant growl rumbled from his chest. He sped up the movement of his hand, replacing his thumb with two fingers. “Say it again.”

Desperate now, she cried out. “Donovan, please!”

He pinched her clit between his fingers, and the orgasm ripped through her like wildfire. She was still pulsing as he wrapped his arms around her and

tucked her tight against him.

“That’s right, angel,” he murmured into her hair. “That’s right. And you’re mine now.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. She couldn’t be his. He wasn’t part of the plan. Tonight was only meant to be a short, wild detour.

But even as the halfhearted denial crossed her mind, her body softened and molded against his. Her eyes drifted closed, and she gave in to the pull of a blissful, sated sleep.

episode 2: the search

Hey there, Truth Seekers! Welcome back to Cold Truth, the true-crime podcast that dives deep into the most challenging cold cases. I'm Alexis Summers, your host, and today we're continuing our investigation into the disappearance of Darcy Cantrell, the teenage girl who vanished without a trace. In our last episode, we explored Darcy's life. Now, we'll be examining the efforts made to find her and bring her home. So, grab your detective hats, and let's get into it!

Sheriff Jerald T. Tennison Sr., or Sheriff Jerry as he was known around Steam Valley, was a twenty-year veteran of the Lost County Sheriff's Department and in 2007, he'd recently won a hard-fought election to the sheriff's seat. On Halloween day, he was waiting in line at the local coffee house for his morning caffeine hit when he received a call about a missing teenage girl.

It had been five days since the party at Hidden Beach.

Nobody noticed Darcy was missing until she didn't show up for her waitressing shift at The Grove. The diner's owner, Gwenda Prescott, was instantly worried. It wasn't a secret that Darcy wanted to leave town, but she'd already made plans with Gwenda to stay and work full-time through the summer tourist season after graduation because she needed money. She showed up for every shift and often picked up extra hours before and after school. In the three years she'd worked for Gwenda, she'd called off only a handful of times and never no-called-no-showed. So when calls to her cell phone went unanswered, Gwenda decided to contact the police.

Law enforcement was very familiar with the Cantrell family. Sheriff Jerry had responded to many domestic disturbance calls at their trailer over the years and had been first on scene when Sissy overdosed. It was a rough

environment for a child to grow up in, but nothing could be done since Sissy always refused to press charges against her husband, and Darcy never complained of abuse after her mother died, even though she often showed up to school with unexplained bruises.

So, of course, Sheriff Jerry's first thought was that Darcy had run away. Nobody would've been surprised if she'd decided to leave. At eighteen, she was legally an adult and could disappear if she wanted. The sheriff's office simply had to confirm that she'd left willingly, then they could close the case.

Franklin Cantrell was at sea and hadn't seen his daughter in nearly two weeks, but he gave his reluctant permission via radio for a search of the house—a search that would ultimately leave investigators with more questions than answers.

Darcy's suitcase was in the closet with a thin layer of dust on top, and she'd been in the middle of doing laundry. A load still moldered in the washer. Her purse was on her dresser, and inside, they found her cell phone and eighty dollars in ones and fives—tips from her Friday evening shift—along with her ID and debit card. They found more tip money stashed in a shoebox under her bed, totaling five hundred dollars, and bank statements that showed she had another thousand in savings. A call to Sheriff Jerry's wife at the credit union proved her account remained untouched.

If Darcy had left of her own accord, she'd at least have taken her money.

Where was she?

So, things start heating up in the search for Darcy Cantrell. Our trusty town sheriff is now on the case, talking with witnesses and retracing Darcy's last steps. He knew they were starting the search with a huge disadvantage. The first few days after a person disappears are the most critical—and Darcy had already been gone for nearly a week.

But it didn't take long before he noticed a pattern in the witness statements. One name kept popping up – none other than Donovan Scott, the town troublemaker. This guy's got a reputation a mile wide for causing chaos and getting into fights. Sheriff Jerry even threw him in jail a few months prior for vandalism, but the charges were dropped, and he walked away without punishment. Sounds like a solid first suspect, right? Especially since Donovan and Darcy were next-door neighbors and known to date.

So the sheriff headed over to Donovan's house. His mom claimed he wasn't home, but Sheriff Jerry was not convinced. He decided to wait it out, and sure enough, after a few hours, Donovan made a run for it out the back

door. I mean, who does that? It's suspicious as hell. Did he really think he was going to get away?

So, they catch the kid and bring him in for questioning. At first, he's denying everything. He doesn't know Darcy that well. He's never been to Hidden Beach. He doesn't know anything about anything. But as Sheriff Jerry dug deeper, Donovan's story started to fall apart. He eventually admitted that he had attended the party at Hidden Beach with Darcy and that they had gotten into an argument. He claimed that Darcy had left the party on her own, and he hadn't seen her since. But the sheriff suspected the kid was lying through his teeth.

So, what does Sheriff Jerry do? He gets a search warrant, and investigators start combing through the Scott house. And let me tell you, what they found was disturbing. There were bloodstains on the underside of the carpet in the living room that someone had attempted to clean. And—get this—a baseball bat in Donovan's closet with traces of blood on it. Not looking good for Donovan, right? The kid was getting nervous and more belligerent, but as he tried to come up with excuses for the blood stain and the bat, Sheriff Jerry saw the fear in his eyes.

The sheriff knew he had found his main suspect.

And... that's where I'm leaving you for today's episode. We dove into the search for Darcy Cantrell and the various leads that were pursued to try and uncover her whereabouts. It's a frustrating and heart-wrenching case, but we won't give up until we find the answers. Join me next time as we take a closer look at Donovan Scott. Until then, stay curious, stay safe, and keep searching for the truth.

chapter **six**

DONOVAN SCOTT.

Sasha's eyes popped open in horror. She must have dreamed last night, right? Oh, please, let it have been some kind of ultra-realistic sex dream about the town's most notorious bad boy.

Though she wasn't usually prone to sex dreams, ultra-realistic or otherwise.

And she'd never had a dream that left her wet and throbbing between her legs.

And she'd never woken up to a dream holding her in thick, tattooed arms.

The demon mask he'd worn last night still sat on the nightstand, staring at her with blank eyes.

"Does the angel want to be fucked by the demon?"

Oh, God. Oh, shit.

What had she done?

Head pounding, she carefully lifted his arm from her waist and slid off the bed. She hadn't noticed last night, but the hotel room was actually a suite with a seating area in addition to the bedroom with the king-sized bed they'd thoroughly rumped. Sliding doors divided the two spaces, and they sat open.

Where were her clothes? She needed to find them and—

She spotted her dress thrown over the couch, but when she picked it up, her heart sank. It was torn almost in two down the back along the zipper. She couldn't wear it without showing everyone her ass. She dropped it and picked her thong off a nearby lamp. It was also shredded into two pieces. If anyone saw what was left of her clothing, they'd think she'd been attacked by a feral animal rather than undressed by a man.

A man with very big, talented hands.

A man who had made her scream—

No.

She shut down the memories. She had to go home and forget this ever happened, but she couldn't very well creep out of here naked.

The black shirt he'd been wearing last night lay in a heap on the floor. It didn't suit him. She knew from seeing him around Redwood Coast Rescue that he was a leather jacket and jeans kind of guy. Zak must have blackmailed him to get him to dress up in costume for the ball.

Well, it was better than nothing. She grabbed it and pulled the shirt over her head. It hung on her, skimming her thighs. The satin was cool against her skin, making her nipples pucker, and the deep V neckline showed off more cleavage than her dress had. She tried to lace the string tighter, closing the gap. It was no use.

It wasn't often she felt petite, but Donovan was a big man with broad, powerful shoulders. She remembered the way he'd picked her up like—

No, dammit.

“Where are you going?”

She jumped at the rumble of his sleep-roughened voice behind her and clutched the V-neck closed as she spun toward him. He was still wearing nothing but his tattoos, and he was hard, his morning erection jutting shamelessly. The man was all diamond-cut muscle, his broad shoulders narrowing into a defined V at his hips. Every inch of him was perfect, which made her feel even more self-conscious. She was strong—she had to be to treat horse-sized dogs, vicious chihuahuas, and angry cats—but her muscle was hidden under a comfortable layer of fat she couldn't get rid of no matter how much she exercised and dieted. She was soft and round in all the places he was hard and flat. She held the gaping neck of the shirt tighter and tugged on the too-short hem.

He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe as his gaze roamed down her body. His lips quirked. “I saw all that up close last night, angel. No sense in covering up now.”

Her headache roared back, reminding her exactly how much champagne she'd drunk. “I need to go home, but *you* ripped my dress.”

“You were taking too long getting out of it.”

“Oh my God.” Heat burned her cheeks. She was probably tomato-red. She turned away and gathered what was left of her clothes. “Last night was such a mistake. What was I thinking?”

“Showing up in that dress, you were thinking you wanted to get laid. And you did.”

“Not by you!”

His smirk faded, and a dark shutter fell over his features. He pushed away from the wall and prowled toward her. “Then by who?”

She refused to feel bad. She’d just been telling the truth, after all. “It’s not important.”

“It is to me.” He backed her against the wall and caged her in with a palm planted on each side of her head. “Who were you trying to seduce?”

She tilted her chin up and kept her lips pressed firmly together, but she didn’t need to answer. She saw the moment he connected the dots. Something vulnerable flickered in his eyes, there and gone in a blink, then his lip curled in disgust.

“Ash. Of course.”

Okay, dammit, she did feel bad. “I’m sorry. You’re just not—”

“What? Civilized?”

“My type.”

“Angel, with the way you screamed last night, I’m *exactly* your type.”

“I was drunk.”

“No, you weren’t. Tipsy, maybe, but I wouldn’t have taken you if you were drunk.”

“Well, there’s a difference between sexual compatibility and—”

He gripped her chin in his hand and stared down into her eyes. “You think you want the sheriff, but he’s too good. You’d be bored of him within a month because he’ll never make you as wet as I can. Are you on birth control?”

God, she felt like she was on a tilt-o-whirl with this man. Her head was spinning. “What?”

“It’s an easy question. Are. You. On. Birth control?”

“Uh... yes.”

“Good.” His mouth dropped to hover over hers as his free hand dipped between her legs. “Because we’re out of condoms, and you’re not leaving here without my handprint on your ass and my cum leaking down your leg.”

chapter seven

IT WAS the wrong thing to say. Donovan knew it as soon as the words left his lips.

Anger flashed in her eyes. “You can’t talk to me like that.”

“You liked it last night.”

“That was last night.” She shoved a hand against his chest. “Now back off.”

He held up his hands, took a step back, and told himself the rejection didn’t hurt. His dirty mouth hadn’t bothered her when he was her demon. He’d worn that stupid mask, and she’d been able to convince herself he was someone else. But now, in the harsh light of dawn, she couldn’t deny his identity anymore, and she was disgusted.

Had he really thought this would go any differently?

Chin lifted like a queen staring down at a peasant not worth her time, she stepped past him. “I’m leaving.”

Sasha grabbed her tattered dress and stepped into it. A pity. He liked the way she looked in his shirt and the way the hem rode up just enough to give the occasional tantalizing peek at the lush globes of her ass. The dress was obviously ripped, but the shirt was long enough to keep her from indecent exposure. She walked to the door.

Fuck. Donovan exhaled hard and rubbed his hands over his head. This woman had starred in all his X-rated fantasies for over a year—ever since he first saw her at Redwood Coast Rescue—and now she was walking away.

He couldn’t let her leave like this, with indignation snapping in her eyes. Especially if this was the only night they were going to have together. He didn’t want the beauty of it to be soured by regret.

“Hey, Sasha, wait.”

She paused with her hand on the doorknob. “What?”

“Do you have a ride?”

She was silent for a beat. “Zak was my ride.”

“I’m sure he’s gone home by now.”

“It’s fine. I’ll figure something out.”

“I can drive you home. Just give me a minute to dress.” He went to the bedroom and grabbed fresh clothes out of his bag.

“My car’s at the rescue,” she called after him.

“Then I’ll drive you there.” He pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt and then hesitated a beat, staring at the rumpled bed. Goddammit. This was not how he’d wanted the night to end. He shouldered his bag and returned to the living room to find Sasha still standing by the door, her arms wrapped around herself as if she was cold.

“You don’t have to—”

He waved aside her protest as he stuffed his feet into his boots. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m heading that way anyway. I have to pick up Spirit from the kennel.”

At the mention of his dog, some of the tension eased out of her spine. “How is she?”

Okay, if she was more comfortable talking dogs, then he could talk dogs. Luckily, Spirit was one of his favorite topics. He opened the door and waited for her to go out ahead of him. He took the Do Not Disturb hanger off the knob and tossed it into the room before shutting the door.

Sasha stood in the hallway, self-consciously plucking at the deep-V collar of his costume shirt. He could’ve offered her another shirt from his bag, but he liked the view. And if this car ride was all the time he had left with her, he was going to be a selfish bastard and enjoy it.

“Spirit’s perfect,” he replied and started toward the elevator. “It’s like she never had that tumor. She loves agility and aced her explosives detection training. We finished the twelve-week course a few days ago, and we’re just waiting on the certification paperwork to go through.”

A smile softened her expression as she fell into step next to him. “I’m relieved to hear that. I was so nervous during that entire surgery. Poking around the brain like that is always scary.”

He stopped abruptly, and she nearly walked into him. She peeked around him as if expecting to see someone they knew up ahead.

The hall was empty.

She released her breath in a whoosh, then her brows wrinkled with

confusion. “What’s wrong?”

He faced her. “You did Spirit’s surgery?”

“Um...” Her gaze bounced around like she wasn’t sure how to answer and was looking for an out. “Yes?”

He didn’t know why that hadn’t occurred to him. Of course she had done the surgery. She was the rescue’s vet, and she’d been overseeing Spirit’s recovery before he decided he wanted to be her handler. Spirit had a follow-up visit at the clinic two months ago, but Zak had taken her since he’d been in San Francisco re-certifying in explosive ordnance disposal, so he’d never talked with Sasha about her recovery before now. “You saved her life.”

Now she just looked befuddled. “Uh, I don’t know about saving her life. The tumor was benign. But we definitely improved the quality of her—”

“You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

Color flooded her cheeks. “I was just doing my job, Donovan. Nothing amazing about that.”

She didn’t see it. Was her self-confidence really so low that she didn’t know how amazing she was? “Angel, my entire life has been about destruction. I destroy everything I touch—but you? You fix. You heal. You care.”

“I’m just a vet,” she protested.

He shook his head, refusing to let her dismiss herself so easily. Not when he was so determined to make her see how amazing she was. He slid a hand under her chin and tilted her face up to his. “You are a hero.”

Her lips parted in surprise, and she stared up at him with wide brown eyes that made his chest tighten. But then she blinked, and her expression closed down. She was determined to shut him out.

She pulled away from him and lifted her chin, her spine straightening. “We should go.”

He wanted to make her see the truth. He wanted to kiss the hell out of her and then take her home—to *his* home—where he’d kiss her some more. She deserved all his kisses and anything else she wanted, as far as he was concerned.

But he stepped back. He would let her have space until she was comfortable with him again.

He followed her to the elevator and pushed the button for the parking garage. Silence stretched between them, and he was ready to do something—anything—to break it, but he didn’t want to push the issue again.

The elevator doors slid open, and the scent of oil, dust, and concrete flooded in. Fluorescent bulbs flickered to life on the ceiling, revealing a large, mostly empty garage with a few cars parked at random intervals. He led her to his Jeep and suddenly, desperately wished he'd taken the time to clean it. He and Spirit had practically been living out of it while attending the K9 explosives detection training course, and the interior looked like it. He quickly stuffed several empty fast food bags into the backseat and threw Spirit's favorite blanket over them.

At least the car was relatively dirt-free, with only one muddy paw print on the dashboard.

Sasha eyed him. "Are you sure you have room in here for me?"

He stepped back, holding the door open for her. "Positive."

She smoothed her hands down the skirt of her dress, then looked up at him with a pleasant smile that seemed to be pasted on her face. Like he was a stranger she had to make small talk with and not the man who fucked her until she screamed his name mere hours ago. He shut the door and circled the hood to the driver's side. When he slid in, Sasha still had that fake, customer service smile in place.

"I'd love to hear about the explosives training. I bet it was fascinating. I've always wanted to do search and rescue with Anna, but my schedule doesn't allow for it."

He didn't want to talk about his job when it felt like it was barely one conversational step above talking about the weather—just something inane to fill the silence. She was clearly shutting him out. He'd wanted to take care of her tonight. He'd wanted to give her pleasure and protect her from the ugliness of his life. He'd wanted to make her feel special.

He shrugged. "It was training."

She glanced over at him as he started the engine. "That's it?"

"After spending your entire adult life in the military, one training's very much like the rest." Though, he had to admit, having Spirit by his side made it a more pleasant experience than most of the training he endured as a Marine.

"You did explosives in the military, too, right?"

When he raised a brow at her, she glanced down and picked at the hem of the shirt. "I heard Zak and Anna talking about it once. They said you got blown up."

Donovan returned his attention to the road. He didn't like talking about

his past, but at least she'd moved beyond the fake smile and small talk. "Yeah, I did. More than once, actually."

Her eyes widened, and he could see the questions forming in her mind. He braced himself for them, knowing full well that he had to be honest with her if he wanted any shot at a second night.

"More than once?"

"I was in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was blown up by an IED in both places. The first time, it just knocked me out, gave me a concussion. But the second one...that one did some real damage." His hand tightened on the steering wheel as his chest constricted at the memory. "I lost my mind."

Her hand fluttered up to her throat and he felt her gaze trace the rope of scar tissue along his temple as surely as a caress. "You lost..."

Why was his mouth suddenly so dry? He tapped the scar. "Traumatic brain injury."

"I'm so sorry," she said softly.

He shrugged it off, trying to keep his voice steady. "It was a risk of the job. I knew what could happen when I signed up for it."

"But that doesn't make it any less painful," she said, and he could hear the pity in her voice.

No, it didn't make it any less painful. But he didn't want her to feel sorry for him. He wanted her to see him as more than his scars and his past. "It's in the past," he said firmly. "I'm here now, and I'm whole."

She turned to face him. "Are you?"

He wasn't sure if she was talking about his physical or emotional state, but he knew the answer to both. "Yes," he said. "Having Spirit with me helps. She's...she's like my anchor, you know? She keeps me grounded."

Sasha nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on him. "I could see that whenever I saw you two together at the rescue. I could see your bond. She's an amazing dog."

Donovan smiled, the tension in his chest easing slightly. "Yeah, she is."

Silence fell between them, but it felt different now. More companionable as he navigated the winding coastal road. The sky was a canvas of deep blues and purples, fading into a soft glow to the east.

But it was too early for dawn.

Sasha sucked in a sharp breath. "Is that...?"

chapter eight

“FIRE. FUCK!” Donovan pressed the gas to the floor and burned rubber up the hill toward RWCR, jumping out of the vehicle the moment it rocked to a stop in the circular drive.

Flames engulfed the fields behind the barn and Sasha’s clinic and crawled up the mountain toward the tree line. If the fire reached it, the entire town would ignite. It was moving fast, roaring as it consumed smaller trees and dry brush. Embers danced in the air, sparking more fires in the too-dry grass.

Shit, this was bad. The whole damn county hadn’t seen a good rainstorm since spring.

The heat was palpable, the air thick with smoke. The acrid smell of burning wood and vegetation overwhelmed the senses, and Donovan blinked hard against the sting of it.

The fire licked toward the barn, and tendrils of smoke rose up from the back of the building as the side wall caught. The columns grew taller and thicker as he drew closer until they completely filled the sky with a gray blanket that obscured the stars.

He grabbed Sasha’s shoulder, pulling her back, away from the burning building. “Go to the house! Make sure Zak, Anna, and the girls are safe.” The house was farther away from the wall of flames. She’d be safer there.

Her face was white with fear, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. “The dogs...”

“I’ll get them. Do you have any overnight patients at the hospital?”

She blinked at him like she didn’t understand the question.

“Sasha, focus!”

She shook off the shock. “No. No, we’ve been doing renovations, so I sent all of my hospitalized patients to Dr. Richards in town.”

“Okay, good.” The doggie daycare and hotel were closed down for the same reason, and all of the adoptable pets had been sent to either foster homes or the county SPCA until the renovations were complete. So that meant there were only two dogs in their rehab wing right now: the scarred Golden Retriever, Matilda, and the newest resident, a black German Shepherd named Dante, a state police K9 who had been wounded on the job when his handler was killed. And, of course, Spirit. He’d left her here in her old kennel since he’d planned to be gone all night.

Jesus. Spirit was in there. His heart jumped into his throat as he turned toward the building.

Sasha grabbed his hand. “Be careful.”

He gave her fingers a quick squeeze. “I will. Go wake Zak and Anna.” It was weird they weren’t already awake and trying to save the dogs themselves, but he couldn’t worry about them right now.

He had to get to Spirit.

He raced toward the barn’s front door, but intense heat pushed him back. Ashes rained down on his head like snow. The fire was deafening now, a crackling roar that blocked out all other sounds. He circled the building, searching for another way in, but the flames licked at every window and doorway.

Finally, a small window caught his eye. Its glass was shattered and blackened from the fire, but there were no flames dancing beyond it. Without hesitation, Donovan sprinted towards it and hurled himself through the jagged opening, slicing open his arm on the glass. He was in the conference room where he attended group therapy every week. The smoke hit him like a physical blow, threatening to overwhelm him, but he gritted his teeth and pressed on through the lobby to C-wing, where all the dogs who needed a bit of extra love were housed.

The entire backside of the building was engulfed now, and the roof creaked ominously overhead. As he approached the kennels, a sense of dread filled him. What if he was too late? What if—

But then he saw a flash of gold fur in the first kennel. Matilda. The poor dog had already been badly burned once before and was tucked into the corner, pressed against the wall, her high whine barely audible above the fire. This was going to set her rehabilitation back by months.

He grabbed a leash and opened the kennel, but Matilda wouldn’t move. He gave up on the leash, picked her up, and draped her over his shoulders.

Dante, in the next kennel, was growling, his dark fur standing straight up along his spine. Shit. He'd need the muzzle, but he didn't have time to wrestle it on the dog.

Spirit stood in the middle of her kennel, eerily silent. She was usually a vocal dog. He opened her kennel and called her, but she didn't move. Her tailed tucked between her legs, and she crouched low, flattening her ears to her head.

On his shoulders, Matilda started to struggle, her claws ripping into his shirt and skin.

He couldn't get them all out.

"Van!"

Relief crashed through him at the sound of another human voice. He didn't even care that it was Ash fucking Rawlings.

"Van, where are you?"

"C-wing!" he called back, then coughed hard as smoke filled his lungs.

Ash appeared in the doorway, covered in soot, backlit by an orange glow. "Let's go! We're going to lose the barn."

"Get Dante. I'll take Matilda out and come back for Spirit."

"There isn't—"

But Donovan didn't hear the rest. He sprinted out the back door into the agility yard. The fire was close. Too close.

"Sasha!"

She stood out in the driveway, the fire dancing orange over her horrified face as she watched her vet clinic ignite, but she turned toward him at the sound of her name. He heaved Matilda up over the fence. "Get her in the Jeep. Get out of here!"

"Wait—"

He couldn't. He turned and ran back toward the barn. He passed Ash coming out with Dante over his shoulders. The shepherd wasn't wearing a muzzle, but he wasn't growling either. Whatever Ash had done to win his trust worked.

Ash tried to catch his arm. "Van, don't—"

He shook off the grip and plunged into the barn. The heat was intense now and scorched his face. The smoke had grown so thick that it felt like he was breathing in a hot blanket, but he had to keep moving. If he stopped, the flames would swallow him whole, and Spirit would die. He could hear them crackling around him as he forced himself to keep going despite the fear that

was urging him to turn back. His courage had kept him alive as a boy, and he drew on every ounce of it now.

The sound of Spirit's frightened whimpers guided him through the dense, black smoke. His eyes streamed with tears. His skin blistered. His lungs screaming for fresh air, but he wouldn't abandon his girl.

If they were going to die like this, they would be together.

Through the haze, he saw Spirit's small form huddled in the far corner of the C-wing hallway, her fur singed and her eyes wide with terror. She had left her kennel after all but hadn't known which way to go and instead ran toward the fire. Now she was trapped.

He took a step toward her—

And the ceiling crumbled on top of him.

Pain lanced through his skull, as bright as the fire, and his vision swam with black spots. His jaw throbbed as if someone had punched him in the face, and then he realized that, yeah, something had. The floor. He staggered to his feet and reached through the flames for Spirit's collar. Her fur was hot, and she bared her teeth at him like he was the one causing her pain.

“Hey, sweetheart. It's okay. I'm here now.”

She whimpered and inched toward him, tentatively licking his hand. He pulled her into his chest, trying to shield her from the heat. “Shh, I'm here. I'm here with you.”

His mind fogged, and his limbs grew heavy. He'd lost consciousness enough times to know he was losing the battle to stay awake. But with the fire at their backs and death heavy in the air around them, if he closed his eyes now, that would be the end of Donovan Scott.

No more fighting with his scrambled brain.

No more group therapy sessions that prodded at all his old wounds until he bled.

Wood popped and crackled and groaned around them as the fire chewed through more of the structure.

No more fucking podcasts digging into his life.

The air dried out in his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

No more training with Spirit.

No more nights with Sasha.

He forced his eyes open. No. He wasn't going out like this.

He staggered to his feet, and pieces of the ceiling fell off his back. At least none of the debris was on fire. He turned his back to the flames and

pushed slowly down the hall, shielding Spirit with his body. His throat was raw, and his skin felt like it was being flayed from his bones. His vision kept clouding over, and he couldn't think straight anymore. All he could do was move. One foot in front of the other.

He had to get to the other end of the hall. He had to get outside.

The floor cracked beneath his feet, and flames kissed his ankles. He stumbled, then caught himself and started moving again. He could see the outline of the door through the smoke. All he had to do was get through it. Just a few more feet...

Something wet nudged his arm. He looked down at his girl. Spirit was struggling to keep her eyes open. When she gazed up at him with such love and trust, it felt like a punch to his gut. His tears evaporated off his face as they fell. Fire caught his sleeve, and he batted at it. The hallway tilted and he crashed into the wall.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of yellow—another person?

He tried to call out to them, but the smoke strangled him. The figure just stood there with the flames reflected in its dark bug eyes, watching. It was grinning. He couldn't see its mouth under the—mask? Was it wearing a respirator? But he knew it was smiling at him, enjoying his struggle.

No, it couldn't be a real person. Nobody but him would be crazy enough to run into this fire. He was hallucinating, losing what was left of his fractured mind. He fought against the blackness that was dragging him under, no longer certain which way was up.

And Spirit had gone limp in his arms. He staggered and dropped to one knee. The door was too far away.

The fire was winning.

No!

With a burst of desperate adrenaline, he shoved to his feet and hurled himself through the door. The grass outside was wet and felt amazing on his burning skin. He lay there for a moment, head spinning as he sucked in lungfuls of air. It was still laced with smoke, but it was cleaner than what he had been breathing inside.

Pain pierced his side with each shallow inhale. He touched his ribs gingerly and felt a sticky warmth there. He winced. He didn't know how bad it was but suspected he needed urgent medical attention sooner rather than later.

And Spirit still hadn't moved.

Desperation clawed at his throat as he again tried to call out for help, but his voice was nothing more than a wheeze. He heard voices. Figures filled his hazy vision. Sirens echoed off the mountains in the distance, and hope fluttered within him as he closed his eyes.

He could let go now.

Help was on its way.

He drifted, caught somewhere between consciousness and sleep, and thought of Sasha. The way she'd felt under him in bed. The horror in her eyes when he finally took off that damn demon mask and she realized who she'd spent the night with. Her reaction had hurt, but he should've expected nothing less. He was the town pariah, after all. The delinquent from the way wrong side of the tracks. The suspected killer.

Forget that he'd lost all but the thinnest shred of sanity serving his country. Forget that he had poured his heart and soul into Redwood Coast Rescue since Zak handed him Spirit's leash and recruited him to the new tactical K9 team.

This fucking town couldn't let go of the troublemaking kid he'd been.

As the ambulance arrived and the paramedics rushed to his side, he heard a voice in the distance. A woman's voice. He liked the sound of her saying his name.

"Donovan, can you hear me?" someone was asking him. Not the woman. He wanted her voice back. "We need to get you to the hospital. You've been badly burned."

He nodded, but his head felt weirdly floaty like it wasn't connected to his body. He drifted again. Opened his eyes sometime later to see the sterile white ceiling of an ambulance. Spirit was still nestled against his chest, licking his cheek. Her warmth and weight were a comfort.

And the woman's voice was back, alternately soothing and snapping out orders. That was a comfort, too.

He closed his eyes again, feeling his heart rate slow as he floated away. In his dreams, he saw the figure in the flames staring at him. It wasn't human. It was an omen, something ominous looming on the horizon...

Something that was going to change everything.

episode 3: the main suspect

Hey, Truth Seekers! Welcome back to Cold Truth, the true-crime podcast where we dig deep into cold cases and, hopefully, find new leads. I'm your host, Alexis Summers, and in today's episode, we're going to talk about Donovan Scott, the main suspect in Darcy's disappearance, and his suspicious past.

So, you won't believe this, but about six months before Darcy vanished, Donovan was actually the prime suspect in another death. But before we get to that, we need to go back in time to understand exactly who Darcy's boyfriend was.

Donovan Kevin Scott was born on June 11, 1990, to Ellen and Rueben "Rooster" Scott. His parents were high school sweethearts from San Francisco and got married at age seventeen when Ellen discovered she was pregnant. Rooster dropped out of school and worked as a dock hand while Ellen finished out her senior year, graduating mere days before they welcomed their son. Unfortunately, neither came from supportive families and since they couldn't afford childcare, they made the decision to have Ellen stay home, which strained their relationship and finances even further. The city was too expensive and getting more expensive every year.

They needed to move.

Just as Donovan was about to enter elementary school, Rooster was offered a position on a crabbing boat up north. It seemed like the fresh start that the young family needed. They settled into a trailer park outside the scenic town of Steam Valley and quickly made friends with the family next door: the Cantrells.

From that day on, Donovan Scott and Darcy Cantrell were inseparable.

Like Darcy, Donovan was searching for a way out. Unlike Darcy, he

decided early on that school was his ticket to freedom—specifically school athletics. He had enough raw talent for baseball that by his freshmen year of high school, college recruiters were already sniffing around. But with high school came trouble. Donovan couldn't seem to stay out of it, and the recruiters moved on to less risky candidates.

As the kids grew, both of their homes became more volatile. Rooster started drinking heavily and quit his crabbing job to open his own recreational fishing charter. Money was beyond tight because Rooster spent every penny he made at the town bars. Ellen worked full-time at a nearby truck stop and cleaned houses on the side to try and make ends meet.

In the eight-year period between the Scotts' move to Steam Valley and Donovan hitting puberty, records show he and Ellen visited the hospital an astounding total of one-hundred-and-fifty-three times for various injuries. That's nearly *ten visits* per year for each of them.

A broken arm— “He fell out of a tree.”

A black eye— “I slipped in the shower.”

A knocked-out tooth— “He crashed his bike.”

Cracked ribs— “I tripped while taking out the garbage.”

Everyone knew what was really happening behind the closed door of their trailer, but like Sissy Cantrell, Ellen never pressed charges against her husband for the abuse. And like Darcy, Donovan never mentioned it to anyone—not even his closest friends, Zak Hendricks and Ash Rawlings, knew how bad it was.

But Darcy knew.

She wrote about Donovan extensively in her diary, which was “accidentally” leaked to the public during the investigation. Little of what she wrote was flattering, especially in the last few turbulent months before she vanished.

Here's an excerpt from Darcy's diary entry from April 9th, 2007:

“Van finally won a fight. He knocked Rooster flat-out with his baseball bat. If Rooster ever puts another bruise on his mom, he said he'd kill the fucker. He loves Ellen so much. I wonder if he'd do the same for me if I asked him. I'd give him the bat and watch him bash Dad's head

in, and wouldn't feel anything. But I don't think he loves me that much. Sometimes, I think he'd rather bash MY head in."

Ominous, right?

Well, it gets worse.

Weeks later, Rooster's boat was found floating off-shore, empty but still running. His body washed up on the beach at Lost Rocks State Park the following day.

Cause of death?

Blunt force trauma to the head.

It had people talking, and even Darcy wondered in her diary if Donovan had made good on his threat.

However, an autopsy showed Rooster's blood-alcohol level was more than four times the legal limit—a level that would be almost fatal for most people—and the medical examiner ultimately listed the manner of death as accidental. The consensus by investigators at the time was Rooster had taken his boat out while drunk and fell overboard, where he was thrown against the rocks by stormy seas.

Case closed.

But ask anyone in town what happened to Rooster Scott, and you'll get the same answer: Donovan killed him.

Now, fast forward to Darcy's disappearance, and it seems like Donovan might be the main suspect again. But we'll get to the reasons for that in the next episode, where we'll continue our investigation. Thanks for listening, and don't forget to subscribe for more true crime stories. And as always, stay curious, stay safe, and keep seeking the truth. See you next time!

chapter nine

THREE DAYS.

Donovan had been unconscious for three whole days and counting.

Sasha stayed at his bedside, leaving only when the nurses kicked her out at night. Then she went home and paced and worried until she could go back the next morning. She took comfort in the fact that his doctors hadn't seen the need to transfer him to a bigger trauma hospital.

On the afternoon of the third day, Zak and Anna stopped by. They both looked exhausted, but their concern for her when they stepped into the room was palpable. What did that say about how she looked?

"Hey, Sash," Anna said gently and squeezed her shoulder. "When was the last time you ate?"

When she didn't answer right away—because she honestly couldn't remember—Anna pulled on her hand. "C'mon. Let's go get some fries."

"Oh. I don't know—"

"Zak will stay with him." She sent a meaningful look at her husband, and Zak nodded.

"Yeah, I'll hang out and chat with him."

Still, she hesitated. "What if—"

"If he wakes up," Zak added, "you'll be the first to know. Go on."

Down in the cafeteria, Sasha picked a salad over fries but regretted it instantly. The lettuce was wilted, and there was only one sad cherry tomato on top. She poked at it with her fork. Maybe if she doused it in ranch dressing, it wouldn't be so bad. "Is the fire still burning?"

Anna took a sip of her milkshake and sat back in her seat with a heavy sigh. "Yeah. The whole mountain is on fire. They estimate it's at fourteen thousand acres now and still growing, but it's burning east, so they don't

think the town is in danger. At least not yet. I hate that this fire carries my family's name. The Double R Fire. For Rawlings Ranch. Zak says it's because they're named for where they're first reported, but it sucks. Why couldn't they have called it... I don't know... the Hella Hot Fire or the Smokin' Squirrels Scorch? Honestly, anything would be better than slapping my family's name on it."

Anna often rambled when she was upset, and she had every right in the world to her anger and sadness right now, so Sasha just rolled with it. "What about The Humboldt Heatwave?"

"Oh, that's a good one. The Trinity Toaster."

"The Shasta Sizzler?"

"That sounds like a burger." Her lower lip trembled, and tears spilled over. "Oh. My kitchen. I'll never make dinner there again. I loved my kitchen."

Sasha's heart ached for her best friend. She'd lost the clinic she'd spent her whole life working toward, and it felt like she'd lost a limb. She couldn't even imagine how it must feel to lose everything you owned. "I know, sweetie. I'm so sorry. Is anything salvageable?"

"No." Anna pulled her straw out of her milkshake and jabbed it back in. "It's all gone. The barn, your clinic, my parents' house. All of my pictures. Our daughter's grave..." Her voice cracked, and she trailed off.

Sasha reached for her hand. "Are you okay?"

Anna sniffled and swiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I don't know. I was considering selling the land to Monarch—"

"No, you can't! It's all insured, and we'll rebuild, bigger and better than before. It's not like we didn't need new facilities anyway. That's why we were renovating in the first place. Now we'll be able to build to our exact specifications. We can make my clinic bigger, expand the training facility, and give Zak's team their own space."

Anna sighed. "Logically, I know all of that. But the amount of work it'll take... it's daunting. And what about you? You can't go months without working while we rebuild. You'll lose all your patients."

"Don't worry about me. Dr. Richards said I could work out of his practice in town until I have my own clinic again. He's cut way back on his hours in preparation for retirement and never hired another vet after I left, so my old office is even still available. It'll be okay." She squeezed Anna's hand. "We'll get through this. You don't have to sell."

“I know. And I wouldn’t. I don’t know why I even said that. This land has been in my family since the Gold Rush, and I’m not giving it to some corporation to develop into hotels and condos that will price people out of town. I just spiraled for a couple of days, but then Zak reminded me this morning that we didn’t lose everything. We still have Bella and Poppy and both of our dogs. We’re so lucky they were at his parents’ house that night. And we’re lucky we decided to stay there after the fundraiser instead of going home. We could’ve slept right through it, and then we would’ve orphaned the girls again.”

A chill scraped down Sasha’s spine. “Oh, don’t say that.”

“But it’s true. We were so lucky. And we’re lucky that Zak’s brother digitized the pictures of our daughter, so we at least still have those. We’re even lucky that we’ve been doing those damn renovations, so we didn’t have a full house at the rescue. And, thanks to Donovan, the dogs that were there are safe.”

Now Sasha’s eyes flooded with tears. “He ran in there without a second thought to his own safety. He was so determined to get to Spirit and the others. It was incredibly brave.”

Anna scowled. “And incredibly stupid.”

“Would you rather he not have gone in for the dogs?” Wow, where had that surge of defensive protectiveness come from? Anna was right. It had been stupid and risky. She even had the exact same thought as she paced in front of the barn and watched it burn with Donovan inside. She’d cursed him and feared for him and told herself if he lived through it, she’d never sleep with him again. She didn’t need his kind of danger in her life.

So why did she feel the need to defend him now?

“No, of course not,” Anna sighed. “I’m glad he saved them. But, still, it scared Zak. He won’t admit it, but he loves the guy, you know? He’s pissed that Donovan took the risk without backup.”

“Really? He didn’t look mad.”

Anna released a soft huff of laughter. “He gets angry when he’s scared, and I’m sure he’s bitching Donovan out right now. But it’s fine. He’ll get over it when Donovan wakes up.”

The knot of dread that had been tying up Sasha’s stomach for the last three days tightened painfully. She pushed her salad aside. “*If* he wakes up.”

“He will.” Anna said it with absolute certainty and waved a hand, dismissing the idea that he wouldn’t. Then she deftly changed the subject:

“How are the dogs? I haven’t had a chance to go to Dr. Richards’ and check on them.”

Did best friends get any better than Anna? Sasha seriously doubted it, because nobody else could’ve known she desperately needed the subject change. “They’re good. They all have burns, but nothing life-threatening. Spirit definitely got the worst of it, plus smoke inhalation, but she’s already healing.”

Better and faster than her owner.

Dammit, why wouldn’t he wake up?

She cleared her throat and forced her wandering thoughts back to the dogs: “Uh, Dante’s been a bit of a problem. He’s still in guard mode, not letting anyone close to his kennel. And, unfortunately, Matilda is back to cowering in the corner of her kennel.”

Anna groaned. “Dammit. All that work we’ve done with her...” She snapped her fingers. “Gone. I’ve really loved seeing her come out of her shell, and now she’s going to retreat even farther into it.”

“She’ll bounce back,” Sasha said, trying to inject as much certainty into her voice as Anna had about Donovan waking up. “She’s already proven she’s strong and resilient.”

“Yeah, it’ll just take a lot of work. And now I’ll have to disrupt her more and find a new place for her to live while we rebuild—”

“I’ll take her.” The words surprised Sasha even as they popped out of her mouth. She hadn’t had a pet since her fourteen-year-old black lab passed away from cancer last year, and she hadn’t planned on getting another one any time soon. But this felt right.

Anna looked at her, stunned. “You sure you’re ready for another pet? I thought you were still grieving for Roscoe.”

She nodded. “I’ll always grieve. He was my boy, and I miss him every day, but I think it’s time.”

Anna’s eyes welled up again. “Thank you so much. That’s such a relief. One less thing I have to worry about. Now I’ll just have to find someone who can handle Hurricane Dante.”

“Give him to Ash.”

Anna nearly choked on a sip of her milkshake. “Oh, yeah, he’d love that. I can hear him now...” She deepened her voice, mimicking her twin: “I don’t have time for one of your lost causes, AJ.”

“He’ll take him, though, if you ask. He’ll do anything for you.”

“Yes, I know he would, but he has a lot going on with this fire. I can’t ask him to take Dante on, too. Not now, at least.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, both lost in their own thoughts. Tears dripped down Anna’s cheeks again, and Sasha was at a loss of what to say to comfort her.

“Okay, enough sad talk.” Anna swiped away her tears with both hands, then leaned forward conspiratorially. “Time to spill the tea. You and Donovan? Um, excuse me, ma’am, when did that happen? Was it at the fundraiser? And what about Ash?”

Sasha groaned inwardly. She’d expected the questions but had hoped recent events would put them off for a bit longer. Especially since she still wasn’t sure how she felt about the whole Donovan thing. It was easier to focus on his injuries than what came before and what could potentially happen after. “It... didn’t happen.”

“Sash, you were wearing the man’s shirt that morning over your *ripped dress*. Don’t you try to tell me it didn’t happen. C’mon, I thought we were friends!”

“Okay, okay.” Sasha laughed. “Don’t give me those puppy eyes. I can’t take it.”

Anna batted her lashes. “Then spill.”

“I mean, yeah. It happened, and it was...” She couldn’t even find words for it and made an exploding motion by her temples.

Anna smirked. “Yeah, I bet it was.”

“But we’re not a couple. It was a semi-drunken one-night thing.”

“Says the woman who has sat at his bedside for three days.”

“What, I’m not allowed to be worried?” Her hands clenched on the table as she replayed images that she feared would be etched in her mind forever – a wall of flames devouring the mountain, a lone figure walking out of the barn with a dog in his arms, engulfed in smoke and fire, his jacket disintegrating as he emerged. “I watched him walk out of a flaming building while *on fire*. His jacket *melted*.”

Anna’s eyes softened. “Of course you’re allowed to worry.”

“If it were you or Zak or Ash or any of our friends, I’d still be here.”

“Okay.” Anna held up her hands. “Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Sasha closed her eyes and took a moment to rein in the unexpected surge of defensiveness. “No, I’m the one who should be apologizing. I’m sorry I snapped. I’m tired.”

Anna reached across the table and gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "We all are, honey."

"There is something between Donovan and me," she admitted with a sigh. "I just... don't know how to classify it. And until he wakes up and we can figure it out, I'd rather not discuss it."

"Okay, fair." Anna pressed her lips together and made it all of two heartbeats before blurting, "But Donovan? I know he's hot as hell, but... I mean... you know the rumors about him."

"I'm aware." Everybody in town knew the rumors, and everybody in town had their theories. Until the other night, she'd never really had an opinion about it. While Donovan and Darcy were in her graduating class, she'd only known them in passing. And at the time of Darcy's disappearance, she'd been too wrapped up in her own trauma to care.

But now?

A man who would risk his life to save three dogs couldn't also be a cold-blooded killer. Of that, she was certain.

"And what about Ash?" Anna asked. "You finally caught his eye at the fundraiser. I know he's planning on taking you to dinner when things calm down around here."

A sharp pang of guilt twisted in Sasha's chest. "Ash is great, but he's not..." She searched for the right words. He was not... what? Donovan? Well, obviously. They were two very different men. One was by the book and the other had burned the book a long time ago. "I don't want you to think I'm leading your brother on. I'm not. When things settle down, I'll tell him. It's just... Donovan... he makes me..."

"Feel?" Anna suggested.

"Yes," she breathed. "All the things."

Anna nodded slowly. "I get it. It was the same for me when Zak came back into my life, despite all the warning bells telling me I shouldn't get involved with him again."

"But that turned out okay."

"Yes, it did. After a lot of drama and other stuff. But Donovan... in a lot of ways, he has more baggage than even Zak."

Sasha snorted a laugh. "Nobody has more baggage than Zak Hendricks."

"Well, maybe that was true a couple years ago, but now, he's in a better headspace than me most days. The point is, I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I appreciate that, but I know what I'm doing." She hoped. "I can take

care of myself.”

Anna grinned. “Damn right, you can. That’s one of the many reasons I love you.”

Sasha smiled back, grateful for the subject change. “Love you too, Anna. And thank you, again, for letting me take Matilda. I’ll pick her up on my way home tonight.”

“I couldn’t think of anyone better for her, Sash. And hey, like you said, we’ll rebuild. We’ll come back stronger and better than ever.”

Sasha nodded but couldn’t shake the feeling that things would never be the same. The fire had destroyed everything, and yet it seemed to have ignited something within her. The feelings she had for Donovan were more than just physical attraction that she could ignore. She cared about him in a way that she couldn’t explain. But did he feel the same way?

But for now, all she could do was sit and wait by Donovan’s bedside, hoping he would wake up soon.

When Zak and Anna left, she reached out and took his hand again. She traced the lines of his palm, wondering what he was dreaming about, and his fingers twitched beneath hers. She gasped, staring down at his hand. His fingers twitched again. She leaned in closer, watching as his eyelids fluttered.

Donovan’s eyes slowly opened, and he blinked a few times. His lips parted, and a small groan escaped him.

“Donovan?” she whispered.

His gaze fastened on her, and for a moment, he seemed to struggle to remember who she was. But then, his eyes widened with recognition, and he smiled weakly. He tried to speak, but no sound came out, and he coughed, wincing in pain.

Sasha reached for the glass of water on the table, holding it to his lips, helping him drink. Relief flooded her and brought a rush of tears to her eyes. “You’re okay. You’re okay now.” She leaned down and pressed her lips against his cheek, the rough stubble of his three-day beard scraping against her skin. “God, you scared me.”

“Sasha…” His voice was nothing more than a gravelly rasp of sound. “What happened?”

“The fire,” she said softly. “You saved the dogs.”

“Fire?” His brow furrowed as if he couldn’t remember. “Is everyone okay?”

She nodded. “They’re all being taken care of. But you—you have some

serious burns.”

He looked down at his bandaged arms and winced. “Yeah, I remember now.” He groaned as he tried to sit up.

She quickly stood and placed her hand on his chest, urging him to stay still. “No, don’t move.”

He looked at her, his gaze intense. “How long have I been out?”

“You were more than just *out*. You were in a coma for three days. The barn’s ceiling collapsed when you were still inside, and you have a bad concussion.”

“Great,” he muttered. “More scrambled eggs.”

“What?”

He shut his eyes. “Nothing. Just explains why I’m seeing two of you.”

“Only two?”

“Yeah, I think so. But...” He squinted at her, then his eyes shifted to the corner of the room. He stared like he saw something there. She looked over her shoulder, a chill racing down her spine. The corner was empty.

Her stomach twisted with dread. He’d already suffered a major brain injury. What if this knock on the head had done more irreparable damage? “You just need some more rest. Let me get the nurse to check on you.”

He caught her hand before she could turn away. “Is Ash here? I need to talk to him.”

“I think he was a little bit ago. I’ll go see if he’s still here and get a nurse.” She stood and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. As she approached the nurse’s station, she heard someone call her name. Turning around, she saw Ash at the other end of the hallway by the elevators.

“Sasha,” he said, concern heavy in his tone, “is everything okay?”

She nodded. “Donovan woke up. He’s asking for you.”

His expression darkened at the mention of Donovan’s name. “Of course he is. But I meant *you*.” He reached for her hand and gently squeezed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Guilt twinged. “But, uh, Ash? I actually need to talk to you about something...”

“I’m sorry, can it wait?” he asked, his gaze locked on Donovan’s room. Tension radiated off him. He was in work mode, and the anxiety that had been tickling at the back of her brain for days changed to an icy fear.

She glanced from him to the door and back. “What’s going on?”

Ash’s gaze stayed on the door. “I don’t trust him. He’s always been

trouble.”

“I know he has a past, but he saved the dogs, Ash. He’s in the hospital because he risked his life to protect them. Not many other men would do that.”

He exhaled hard and finally looked away from the door. He tried to gentle his expression, but he was still all pissed-off cop. “Listen, I know it seems like he’s a good guy under all that swagger, but I’ve known him a long time. He’s bad news, Sash. Please, just do me a favor and stay away from him.”

Her stomach twisted at the intensity in his voice. She had known he didn’t like Donovan, but she hadn’t realized how deeply he felt about it. “Didn’t you used to be friends? What happened between you two?”

“Ask him.”

“I’m asking you.”

He clenched his jaw. “It’s not important. What’s important is that you stay away from him. He’ll only hurt you in the end.”

“I don’t believe that. Donovan has been nothing but kind to me.”

“That’s because he wants something from you,” Ash spat out, his eyes flashing with anger. “He’s not a good guy, Sasha.”

“Why are you saying this now? What happened?”

A nurse walked by right then and disappeared into Donovan’s room. Ash took her by the arm and led her over to the elevator. He lowered his voice. “Listen, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I need you to be safe. Okay? So if I tell you this, you’ll stay away from Donovan and let me do my job without worrying about you?”

She hesitated a beat, then nodded. “Okay.”

He took a breath and let it out in a slow exhale. “Okay. A group of hotshots fighting the fire uncovered a body on the mountain. It’s badly burned, and there’s no telling if we’ll get any DNA, but we strongly suspect it’s Darcy Cantrell.”

“Oh my God.” She lifted a trembling hand to her mouth. “You found her?”

chapter ten

AS SASHA STEPPED out into the hall, Donovan closed his eyes and let the world slip out of focus. The pressure in his head was intense, and he saw it pounding with each pulse of blood behind his eyes. He sank back into the flattened pillows propped behind him, but that didn't help. A wave of dizziness washed over him, and his stomach lurched.

Fuck. He was not going to be sick in front of Sasha.

He swallowed back the surge of bile and turned his gaze toward the door, careful not to move his head or look at the corner of the room.

Where was Sasha? She still hadn't returned.

"She's not coming back," the hallucination said.

Jesus fucking Christ. He had to get a grip. "You're not really there."

In the months after his TBI, he'd had night terrors that seeped into his waking hours. Visions so real, he'd once attacked a guy in a bar because he thought the man was a terrorist wearing a bomb vest. He thought he was past it—it had been a long time since his last hallucination—but apparently, this concussion had triggered them again.

Darcy Cantrell was *not* standing in the corner of his hospital room. She'd been gone for a very long time.

Vanished.

Dead.

He took deep, even breaths, just like his therapist had taught him. But the more he tried to control his breathing, the more he felt himself slipping into a panic attack. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his heart raced, banging around in the too-small confines of his chest. His fingers dug into the sheets by his hips.

"That won't work, Van. It never works." Darcy's ghost scoffed as she

moved into his line of sight. She looked exactly the same as the last time he saw her: dark hair up in a ponytail with her bangs swept to the side, big hoop earrings sparkling at her ears, a short gray denim vest over a black shirt, and a thick, studded black belt circling her hips. As always, when she appeared to him, she only wore one of her red canvas shoes. Her other foot was bare. “You can’t breathe me away. You’ll never get rid of me.”

“You’re not real. You’re just a figment of my fucked up brain. Not real. Not real.” Eyes squeezed shut, he repeated it to himself, over and over, until his breathing slowly returned to normal. He opened his eyes once again and scanned the room, taking note of every little detail in an attempt to ground himself in reality. The bland gray walls, the beeping machines, the sterile smell of disinfectant in the too-cold air.

And Darcy wasn’t here.

The sheets—too starched and white. The blanket—too thin and scratchy. The hospital gown—too stiff and rough against his raw, burned skin. The tape holding the IV in his hand itched.

And Darcy. Wasn’t. Here.

But Sasha should be. Where the hell was she?

A figure appeared in the doorway, long hair in a ponytail. The panic surged back, and he opened his mouth to scream at her—

No, not Darcy.

Just a nurse. He snapped his mouth shut and told himself to fucking relax. He’d gotten through this once. He could do it again.

The nurse took his vitals and made a big fuss over the fact he was awake, like popping his eyes open was an Olympic sport and he’d just won gold. He tolerated her poking and prodding with barely-restrained impatience.

Fuck, he hated hospitals.

When she finally left with the promise of bringing back a doctor, another figure stepped through the door.

But it wasn’t Darcy again.

And it wasn’t Sasha, either.

Ash.

Right. He had asked to see the guy but couldn’t help the bitter resentment that it was the sheriff and not the woman he wanted.

“What did you want to see me about?” Ash asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Uh...” He struggled to organize his jumbled thoughts into a semblance

of sanity. “The fire. It was arson.”

Ash’s lips thinned, nearly disappearing under his beard, which was usually neat but now looked like it needed a weed-whacker to trim. “How do you know that?”

“Because I saw—” He stopped and glanced at the corner again. It was still empty, but now he was doubting himself. Could he trust anything he saw right now? Maybe he hadn’t actually seen the figure in the flames, watching everything burn. Maybe it was like Darcy. Not real.

“What did you see?” Ash prompted.

He started to shake his head, but the knife of pain through his skull put a quick end to that. He sucked in a sharp breath. “I don’t know. It might have been nothing, but I thought I saw someone in the barn with me.”

“If anyone was in that barn, they’re dead now.”

“No, he had on turnout gear.” Even as the words left his mouth, he knew how crazy they sounded.

Ash made an exasperated sound. “That was Tiago Jimenez. He happened to be driving by when your dumb ass ran back into a burning building, and Sasha flagged him down. He pulled you out of there.”

Had he?

Donovan tried to replay those long minutes trapped inside the barn, but it was all jagged images and blurs of movement. “No. No, that’s not right. I... I got myself out. I carried Spirit out.”

“*Tiago* carried Spirit out, then went back in after you when the roof collapsed.”

“No. That’s not what happened.” He tried to get up, but again, the one-two punch of pain and nausea had him sinking back into the bed. “Ash, I’m telling you. That’s not right.”

Ash narrowed his eyes. “You have a TBI and a concussion. Your memory is not reliable right now.”

Donovan gritted his teeth. He *could* trust his own memories. He had to trust them because without them, who was he? “I know what I saw, and it wasn’t *Tiago* coming to the rescue. Whoever it was, they were just standing there. They were watching the place burn. Enjoying it. I couldn’t see his face, but I know the bastard was smiling.”

Ash held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. I’ll investigate and see if there is any evidence backing up your claim of arson.” Sorrow flickered in his eyes, there and gone in an instant. “But, Van, there’s already a shit-ton of

trouble bearing down on you. Don't make things worse for yourself by telling people that you see things that aren't there."

He wanted to argue, but the fight was draining out of him. The pain roaring in his head was getting to be too much. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe through it. When he opened his eyes again, he was relieved to see that the corner of his room was still empty.

But then he noticed something else. Sasha still hadn't returned.

"Where's Sasha?" he asked, panic tightening his chest.

"I sent her home," Ash said.

"Why?"

Ash's gaze was molten. "Why do you think? You're poison, Donovan. You always have been. Don't infect her, too."

Donovan gritted his teeth. He was sick of people treating him like he was some kind of disease to be avoided. "You're only saying that because you want her."

"I'm saying it because she's a friend, and I don't want to see her dragged down into your dangerous bullshit."

"My dangerous bullshit? I didn't start the fire. I just ran into it to save my dog. And your sister's pet projects."

"You didn't have to do that. You could've waited for help."

"You did it, too."

"Only because Sasha said you'd gone inside. I did it for you, jackass. And instead of staying safe, you ran right back into the flames."

"Yeah, I did. There wasn't time to wait, and losing those dogs would've crushed Anna. I wasn't going to let that happen. That's what friends do, Ash."

"You're not my friend anymore, man. You're just someone I used to know."

Donovan shook his head in disbelief, and the motion nearly made him throw up. He swallowed hard, ordering his stomach to stay put. "You know, for a cop, you're a judgmental asshole."

"And you're just an asshole."

"Fuck you."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

Ash took a step forward, his fists clenched. "You've got a lot of nerve talking to me like that, considering everything you've done."

“And what exactly have I done?” Donovan shot back. He was so fucking tired of being blamed for everything that went wrong in this town.

“You know damn well,” Ash snarled.

“Go on. Say it. You think I killed her. You think I killed Darcy.”

“I don’t think. I *know* somebody killed her because we just found her body burned to a fucking crisp, and I know you were the last person to see her alive.”

“Wait.” The air left Donovan’s lungs like he’d been punched. “You found her?”

“We won’t know for sure until the DNA comes back, but yes. We think so.”

He leaned back against his pillow and exhaled hard. It might have been a sob, but he wasn’t going to own up to it in front of Ash.

They’d found Darcy.

After all these years...

Fuck. This was going to get bad. “I never should’ve come back to this goddamn town.”

“No,” Ash said flatly. “You shouldn’t have, but you did, and now I suggest you don’t try to leave.”

If he were smart, he *would* leave before the inevitable arrest happened. But if he left, he’d never see Sasha again.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Why should he? This was his home, and he’d done nothing wrong.

“Good,” Ash said and turned to the door. “Because we’ll be talking again real soon.”

part two

burn



When passion is mutual, there is always the danger of the fire burning to ashes.

Beryl Bainbridge

episode 4: the crime scene

Hey there, welcome back to Cold Truth, the true-crime podcast where we dive deep into cold cases to uncover the truth. I'm your host, Alexis Summers, and in today's episode, we're going to talk about a potential crime scene. Specifically, a spot in the woods near Hidden Beach where her shoe was found, and blood was splattered on a tree trunk.

As we previously discussed, Donovan Scott was the main suspect in Darcy Cantrell's disappearance. And while there isn't concrete evidence linking him to the crime, the potential crime scene could provide us with more information about what happened to Darcy on that fateful day.

First of all, let's talk about the location. Hidden Beach is a remote spot in the woods, not accessible by car. To get there, you have to hike around two miles on a path through the woods, and the final descent to the beach is steep and slippery. Not only is it a popular party spot for teenagers, but hikers and nature enthusiasts also frequent it. But they're not the only ones. Because of its remoteness, it's also known to attract some unsavory characters. There have been reports of drug activity and vandalism in the area, so it's not exactly the safest place for an 18-year-old girl to be alone.

And remember: Darcy did leave the party by herself. Donovan followed later, and the estimates of the time gap between the two of them leaving varies greatly—some witnesses say it was a handful of minutes, while others say it was longer, like at least a half hour.

Now, let's focus on the details of the potential crime scene. On the morning of Nov 5th, 2007, a local jogger stumbled upon a red canvas shoe in the woods near Hidden Beach. The jogger reported the discovery to the police, who later confirmed it belonged to Darcy Cantrell.

When investigators arrived on the scene, they immediately noticed

something odd about the area where Darcy's shoe was found. The ground was disturbed, large gashes left in the dirt with a scatter of broken twigs and foliage all around. It looked like there had been a struggle, and it didn't end well.

Sheriff Jerry Tennison immediately called in a search team, including cadaver dogs, and they discovered something even more alarming: blood on a nearby tree trunk. The tree was right off the trail the kids used to get to the beach. Darcy absolutely would've passed it if she was going back up to the parking lot to leave. And it wasn't just a little bit of blood, either. It was a significant amount, splattered in a way that suggested it had been flung from something—like a bat? —hitting someone hard in the head. The spatter was tested, and it was later confirmed to be Darcy's blood.

This new information gave investigators a better picture of what may have happened to Darcy Cantrell on the day she disappeared. She was walking away from the beach, ascending the trail toward the parking lot, when she was caught off-guard and hit on the head from behind by a heavy, blunt object. Even so, she didn't go easily and lost her shoe in the ensuing struggle. But we didn't expect anything less from our girl Darcy, did we? She was a fighter right until the end.

Unfortunately, while the discoveries suggested that foul play was involved, the search was eventually called off due to a lack of more evidence.

And that's it for today's episode of Cold Truth. We've uncovered some startling new evidence that points to a potential crime scene near Hidden Beach where Darcy's shoe was found, and blood was splattered on a nearby tree trunk. It's clear that this case is far from being solved, and we'll keep digging to uncover the truth behind her disappearance.

Thanks for tuning in, and don't forget to subscribe for more updates on this and other true crime stories. Remember to stay curious and stay safe, and keep seeking the truth!

chapter eleven

IT HAD BEEN two weeks since Darcy's body was found.

Fourteen entire days.

And so far, there had been no mention in the news. Surprising since that fucking podcast seemed to gain new listeners by the day. Ash must have a gag order on his deputies. And it probably helped that the Double R Fire still dominated headlines. It had burned over a hundred thousand acres, destroyed over four hundred structures, and was still chewing up land to the southeast. Every time Cal Fire seemed to have it leashed, it broke the line and kept right on raging, leaving the entire town holding its breath. One shift in the wind and the fire could change course and rip through Steam Valley.

Donovan could see the nerves as he climbed out of his Jeep at the Mad Dog Pub. Townspeople were less polite, and tempers were short. Smoke clogged the air in a yellow haze, turning the sun an eerie red and covering everything in a fine layer of grit. The dry air reeked of burning wood, but it wasn't the pleasant scent of a campfire. It was sharp and bitter and left a metallic taste on the tongue. Everyone wore masks or bandanas to try and keep the shit out of their lungs.

Mad Dog's owner, Rose Galasso, stood behind the bar, hand-drying a rack of beer steins. She looked over at him when the door opened. "Hey, Van. They're all in back. Your usual?"

"Thanks."

"Club soda and lemon coming up." She set down the stein and towel and picked up a tall, narrow cocktail glass.

He studied her as she prepared the drink. She was a beautiful woman, with black hair cut in shaggy layers and shockingly blue eyes. Her breasts strained the fabric of her cropped Mad Dog Pub shirt, and she had almost as

many tattoos as he did. She was tough—some might even call her a bitch, but he'd always liked that about her. She seemed like the perfect woman for him, but after one ill-advised night together when he first returned to town, they both realized they'd be better off as friends.

And she'd never revved his engine like a certain shy veterinarian who was avoiding him and dodging his calls. He'd let it slide while he healed, but no more. He was seeing Sasha later today for Spirit's follow-up vet appointment, and he was going to make sure she remembered just how explosive the chemistry was between them.

Rose slid him his drink, drawing his attention back to her. "How are you feeling?"

He took a sip of his club soda and lemon, savoring the tartness on his tongue as he considered how he wanted to answer the question. The news of Darcy's death had hit him hard, harder than he'd care to admit. Part of him had always hoped she did run away like investigators first suspected, escaping town like she'd always dreamed of.

"I'm hanging in there," he said finally. "Mostly healed."

Rose studied him over the bar, her gaze sharp and assessing. Shit, she knew.

"You heard about Darcy?"

She nodded. "The rumor mill's working overtime. People are saying bones were found in the woods off Quarry Road, at the edge of Rawlings' land."

So, soon, everyone would know. Including the press. The fire wasn't going to distract them for much longer. "Thanks for the heads up."

"No problem. You've already been through a lot. If you ever need to talk..."

He appreciated the sentiment but shook his head. "Thanks, Rose, but I'm not much of a talker." It was true he preferred to keep his emotions to himself. It was something he'd learned early on, growing up in a household where vulnerability was seen as weakness.

She smirked. "Which is why you go to therapy, right?" She tilted her head to the back room. "I think they've already started."

He raised his glass to her. "Yeah, figure that one out. A bunch of wounded vets with substance abuse issues meeting in a bar to talk about our feelings and shit."

She laughed. "These are strange times we live in."

“The strangest. Thanks, Rose.” He made his way toward the back room, the sound of hushed voices growing louder as he approached. The therapy group used to meet at Redwood Coast Rescue, but obviously, that wasn’t going to work for a while. The Mad Dog was the only other place in town with an available room that wasn’t a church—they preferred to keep the meetings secular.

This would be his first time back since the fire. He’d been coming to these meetings for a few years now, so why was he nervous? He took a deep breath and pushed open the door, stepping into a circle of men and women all seated on mismatched chairs and bar stools.

Dr. Amelia Firestone ran the therapy sessions. She was a smartly dressed woman with silver-streaked hair and had recently started wearing stylish, black-rimmed glasses. She was soft and kind like a grandmother and yet somehow managed to handle a room full of stubborn, hotheaded veterans with the skill of a matador.

She smiled warmly when she spotted him. “Donovan! Welcome back.”

All eyes turned on him.

Zak, seated next to Dr. Firestone, lifted his chin in greeting.

Next to him sat Sawyer Murphy, a fellow Marine who was semi-blinded when a sniper’s bullet got past his helmet and fucked up his brain. He could still see movement, but as soon as that movement stopped, he was sightless again. On the floor between them was Zelda, Seeing Eye Dog extraordinaire. She’d traded in her tutu from the fundraiser for her typical service dog vest with a handle on the back.

“Oh, great,” Sawyer said. His voice was laced with sarcasm, but he was grinning. “Grumpy’s back?”

“Hey, someone has to counteract your sunshine and rainbows optimism, Daredevil.”

Sawyer snorted a laugh. “Pretty sad that I’m considered the optimist in this group.”

Beside Sawyer was Pierce St. James.

“*You okay?*” he signed, his forehead creased with concern. He’d lost his ability to speak due to shrapnel severing his vocal cords, and the whole group had learned ASL so he could participate in their sessions without feeling isolated.

In their world, isolation was a killer.

“I’m good,” Donovan assured and grabbed a bar stool from the stack in

the corner.

Pierce's eyes narrowed.

"For real, man. Stop looking at me like I'm gonna break. It'll take more than a fire and a bump on the head to get rid of me." To prove it, he grinned at the group and held out his arms. "Miss me?"

"Like a case of the clap," Zak deadpanned.

"Ew," Veronica Martens said. She was seated at Dr. Firestone's other side and didn't usually talk much during their sessions. She looked at the doctor with disgust. "Why are men so gross?"

"Okay, enough joking around," Dr. Firestone said, taking charge of the conversation. "Let's start with check-ins. Who wants to go first?"

They went around the circle, each person sharing their struggles and successes from the previous week and Donovan let himself relax into the familiar routine. He'd missed this, missed these people who understood what he'd been through and didn't judge him for it.

But as the session wore on, his thoughts kept drifting to Sasha. He wanted to see her, touch her, feel her. He needed to know if they still had a chance. Maybe he'd ask her out for dinner during Spirit's appointment, or maybe he'd just kiss her and see what happened.

He was a man of action, after all.

"Donovan?"

He blinked. Shit. How long had his mind been wandering? By Dr. Firestone's tone, it wasn't the first time she'd said his name.

"Sorry." He shook his head and remembered too late, it wasn't a good idea. He'd told Rose the truth—he was mostly healed, the burns on his arms and chest now fresh pink scars, marring his tattoos. But his head was still all kinds of fucked up.

Or more fucked up than usual.

At least he hadn't seen Darcy's ghost again since the hospital.

And he still hadn't spoken, which had everyone in the room looking at him with varying degrees of concern.

He opened his mouth, but found he didn't know what to say. Did he mention the hallucinations? No, better to keep that to himself.

Finally, Dr. Firestone spoke again, her eyes kind. "I'm sorry to hear about the possible discovery of Darcy's remains."

His heart nose-dived into his stomach, but he tried to shrug it off like it was no big deal. "I'm glad she was finally found."

“Are you worried about the sheriff’s investigation?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Okay, that’s okay.” Dr. Firestone shifted gears smoothly. “Why don’t you tell us about your injury?”

“The fire? There’s nothing to tell.”

“No. Your TBI. I don’t think you’ve ever told us how it happened.”

His chest constricted as he glanced around at the group. “I’m sure I have.”

“Nah,” Zak said. “At least, not since I joined.”

Pierce shook his head.

“Yeah, I haven’t heard it,” Sawyer agreed.

“Your turn,” Veronica said with a mean sort of glee in her dark eyes. “You forced me to tell my story. You’re not getting away without telling yours.”

He rubbed his palms on his jeans. Panic, his old friend, wrapped its arms around his chest and squeezed. He wasn’t ready to talk about it. He’d never been ready to talk about it with anyone. But he’d been coming to these meetings for years, and he owed them something. They’d all shared their stories, they’d all bared their souls to one another. It was only fair that he did the same.

Donovan took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment before he began. “We were supposed to sweep and clear an insurgent hideout. Routine shit, or so we thought.” Suddenly restless, he popped to his feet and ran a hand over his buzzed hair. “But then I found that fucking door. It was booby-trapped, like always. No big deal. I had disarmed hundreds of those things before. But this one was different. This one had something else, something I didn’t see until it was too late. A secondary device.”

The memory plowed into him like a train, sending him right back to those mountains. He swore he felt the ground shake under his feet again. He could taste the dust in his mouth, could hear the screams of his men. The coppery scent of blood and the acrid scent of fuel mixed in an overpowering stench that he could still smell. It was forever branded into his nose.

Dr. Firestone’s voice was soft, coaxing. “What happened, Donovan?”

“It exploded.” The words came out strangled and he cleared his throat as he sank back to his seat. “I don’t remember much after that. Just bits and pieces. There was a lot of smoke, and it was hot. I remember feeling like I was on fire. And having just been on fire, I can confirm it still sucks.”

Zak winced. “Not funny, Van.”

“Too soon,” Sawyer agreed.

“Go on,” Dr. Firestone prompted. “What happened next?”

Tears prickled at the back of his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. He was a Marine, dammit. Marines didn’t cry. “I don’t know. I was... I was thrown. Like I said, I don’t remember much. Just pain then...nothing. We never knew what kind of explosive they used in that second device, but it was powerful. It killed two guys on my team and left me with my brain scrambled.”

He didn’t want to talk about it anymore, but the group was silent, waiting for him to continue.

Several seconds ticked by and he couldn’t stand silence. His ears always started ringing again when a room was too quiet, so he filled it with more words: “Ammonium nitrate is a common explosive used by insurgents. It’s odorless, which is why it’s so hard to detect. They mix it with other explosive materials to make it even more deadly. I smelled kerosene right before, so maybe that’s what it was. Ammonium Nitrate Fuel Oil. Just good old ANFO. The tried and true method to get rid of pesky American infidels. Or it could’ve been—”

“Donovan,” Dr. Firestone interrupted gently. “Do you blame yourself for missing the second device?”

Donovan’s head snapped up, and he stared at her for a long moment before he answered, his voice hoarse. “Every goddamn day.”

“*You know it’s not your fault, right?*” Pierce signed.

He scowled at the guy. “I should have seen it, but I didn’t. And because I didn’t, I failed my team, killed two men, and fucked up my head so badly I’m seeing my dead ex-girlfriend in the corner of this fucking room.” He stared at her. Darcy smirked and wiggled her fingers at him.

Everyone else turned to look at the corner, then looked at each other in shock.

But not Dr. Firestone. She nodded as if she had expected that answer. “It’s okay to feel guilty, Donovan. It’s a normal reaction to a traumatic event. And hallucinations are a common symptom of TBI, especially when you’re under stress. And you’re under a tremendous amount of stress right now, on top of suffering another concussion. But it’s important to remember that what happened in Afghanistan wasn’t your fault.”

He snorted. “But what happened to Darcy was?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said, her voice even.

“You didn’t have to. I see it all over your face.” He stared at the group, and betrayal cut through his gut like a blade. He stood up abruptly and his stool crashed to the floor. “Fuck this. I’m done here.”

As he strode from the room, he could feel the weight of their stares on his back.

He didn’t need this therapy shit. He didn’t need to be reminded of all the things he had lost. He just needed to forget. He slowed as he passed by the bar, where Rose was laughing with a patron. He could walk over, set down his empty glass, and ask for a real drink. Then he’d forget...

“Hey, Van,” Zak called. “Wait.”

No.

Fuck.

What was he thinking? He’d been sober for almost three years and wasn’t going to blow that streak now. Not over this.

He turned away from the bar and faced the man who was once like a brother to him. “If you’re going to say—”

“Yeah, you don’t want to hear it, so I should save myself the breath. But I’m saying it anyway. We’re here for you, man. We’ve all been through some shit, and we’re all still standing.” He smirked and tapped his metal leg. “Even if it’s with some extra help. You don’t have to face any of this alone. You have a solid support system in the team. Use it.”

Jesus, he was suffocating. He needed air. He needed to get out of there.

Without another word, he shoved through the pub’s door. The smoke had gotten worse while he was inside. It stung his eyes and scraped the back of his throat with every inhale. He looked at the unnatural yellow glow over the mountains. It was afternoon. The sun was to his back, making its slow descent toward the ocean. That glow was all fire, and it looked closer than before.

The whole fucking world was burning, and he wanted a drink. He wanted to sink into the seductive arms of alcohol and drown his sorrows and forget.

But he refused to throw away three years of sobriety.

The vet clinic where Sasha now worked was just down the road. He smiled to himself and strode for his Jeep.

There were other ways to forget.

chapter twelve

“HEY, MARY-LISA?” Tablet in hand, Sasha stepped out of the treatment room and approached the reception desk where her Jill-of-all-trades receptionist had set up shop. “I need you to contact Coco’s mom with an estimate. I just went over the bloodwork with her and let her know I’m seeing a few things that have me concerned. Coco’s liver enzymes are elevated, and her white blood cell count is also high, which makes me think there’s some kind of infection in there, but I’m not sure if the infection is causing the liver issues or vice versa. I’d like to schedule an abdominal ultrasound to get a better look at her liver, and I’m also going to start her on antibiotics to treat the infection. I’ll want to run another CBC after the course of antibiotics, but—”

The door to the clinic opened, and she lost her train of thought as Donovan stepped in with the energetic Spirit at his side. It was the first time she’d seen him since Ash told her to leave the hospital, and he looked good. Of course, she knew he was healing. Anna had kept her apprised of his recovery, but seeing him now, healthy and whole, lifted a weight off her shoulders she hadn’t even realized she’d been carrying.

“But...?” Mary-Lisa prompted, glancing up from her computer.

“Oh. Um.” She moistened her suddenly dry lips and stared down at the tablet. Coco’s chart might as well have been in a foreign language for all the sense it made. She blinked and forced herself to focus. “Right. Sorry. Forgot what I was saying.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Donovan smirk.

She ignored him. “Um, so Coco’s mom is concerned about the cost. Can you work up an estimate for the ultrasound and antibiotics and give her a call? You might want to add in the second CBC, too, so she’s not surprised by it.”

God, why was the room suddenly too small, the air too hot? She glanced at Donovan again but turned away when she felt heat creeping into her cheeks. Donovan's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer, his eyes searching her face. She couldn't read his expression, and it made her uneasy. She turned back to Mary-Lisa, trying to ignore the flutter in her stomach.

"Sure, I'll take care of it," Mary-Lisa said. "Is there anything else you need from me before I go to lunch?"

"No, that's all, but it can wait until this afternoon. Go ahead and lock up. I just have one more patient, then I'll take my lunch in my office."

She turned to Donovan with a bright smile. Her customer service smile. It pulled at her cheeks and only softened when she gazed down at his dog. "Hello, again, Spirit."

Spirit side-eyed her hard and pressed closer to Donovan's legs. Funny—the dog loved her when she wasn't wearing the white lab coat, but whenever she had it on, she suddenly became Public Enemy Number One. She straightened and faced Donovan again. "If you'll follow me?"

He nodded and followed wordlessly to an exam room.

When the door shut, he finally spoke. "Hi, angel."

Oh, God. He was right there, directly behind her. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck and his voice was like a caress down her spine. Her nipples peaked uncomfortably against her bra.

She turned to him and found herself pressed against his chest.

"Good to see you up and about," she said, trying to sound casual. "How's your recovery going?"

He skimmed his knuckles over the curve of her cheek. "You can drop the customer service act. I'm not a customer."

She glanced down at his dog. "She's my patient. You're her owner. That makes you a client."

Donovan leaned closer, his lips almost touching her ear. "Why did you disappear on me in the hospital?" His thumb brushed over her bottom lip, and she parted them slightly.

"I didn't want to intrude," she said breathlessly.

"You could never intrude." He leaned in, his lips just a hair's breadth away from hers. "I've been thinking about you, angel. Dreaming about you."

Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely hear him over the rush of blood in her ears. She shivered at the feel of his breath on her skin, her body reacting to him in a way that she couldn't control.

“Donovan, please,” she whispered, trying to push away from him.

But he held her in place, his hands reaching around to grip her hips. “Please what?” His voice was low and husky, sending a shiver down her spine. “‘Please keep touching me like this?’ ‘Please show me how much you’ve missed me?’ Because I have missed you, angel.”

She closed her eyes, the sensations he was evoking overwhelming her. She could feel his erection hardening between them. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

“I—I have to examine Spirit.”

“No, you don’t. She’s fine. All healed. I’d be the first to tell you if there was a problem.”

As if to prove his point, Spirit huffed before strutting over to the door and pawing at it. When it didn’t open, she sat down and glared at them like, “*Can we go already?*”

“She does look good,” Sasha conceded. “Her burns have healed nicely, and I can see she’s already growing hair back. But, Donovan, I can’t—”

“You can and you will.” His mouth swooped down and claimed hers in a kiss that was tender and fierce all at the same time. His tongue slid into her mouth, caressing and tasting her.

God, she’d missed him.

Her arms went around his neck, her fingers scrubbing over his short hair as she deepened the kiss, her body pressed tight to his. He pulled her hips closer, and she rocked against him, feeling him hard against her belly.

Donovan broke the kiss and pressed his lips against the sensitive skin below her ear. “I need you, angel, so much. I need to feel you, to know you’re with me again.”

She heard the front door shut as Mary-Lisa left for lunch and closed her eyes. Was she really going to do this here, at work? And not even at her own clinic, but her mentor’s—the place she’d started her veterinary career at?

Yes.

She took Donovan’s hand. “My office.”

His grin was all smug masculine pleasure. “Lead the way.”

Spirit sulked after them as she pulled him through the treatment room to the small office in back.

As soon as they were inside, Donovan pushed her against the door, his mouth hot and demanding on hers. She moaned, her fingers digging into his shoulders as he lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His

mouth left hers and trailed hot, sucking kisses down her neck and collarbone, his hands caressing her ass through her scrubs.

She arched her back, rubbing herself against him. “Donovan...”

“I know, angel,” he murmured against her ear. “I’ve got you.”

She gasped as he dropped her back to her feet and spun her toward her desk.

“Hang on to something.”

“Why?” She tried to look at him, but he kept her turned away with one hand on her back, pressing her against the desktop. His fingers dipped under the band of her scrub pants and her legs wobbled. She grabbed the edge of her desk as he pushed a finger into her.

She heard the door open at the front of the clinic, and voices carried back. She froze. “Oh! Wait. We can’t. Someone’s back from lunch already.”

“Then...” He brushed her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck, sending a cascade of chills over her skin even as fire ignited in her belly. “You’d better be silent.”

A second finger joined the first, pumping until she was soaked, and a needy moan slipped from her mouth. His free hand slid up around her neck and clamped over her mouth as his fingers left her channel to circle her clit.

She felt trapped, caught between the desk and his hard body as he tortured her in all the most delicious ways, and she didn’t want to escape. She clawed the desktop and cried out against his palm.

Donovan laughed softly, his breath a warm caress on the side of her neck. “You’re not staying silent. You want me to make you come right here at work, don’t you, my naughty angel?”

He lightened the pressure on her clit. Balancing on the tip of climax, she whimpered and grabbed for his hand, desperate to keep his fingers there.

“But if I finish you off now, will you still be ready for me later?”

Oh, God. She’d never not be ready for this man. All he had to do was look at her from across a room and she needed a change of panties. But she couldn’t tell him that because of his hand clamped over her mouth, so she ground her butt against his erection. He growled, buried his face against her neck, and gave her what she needed. He held her tight as she exploded.

“Fuck,” he breathed and removed his hand from her mouth. “I want to lay you down on this desk and fucking ruin you.”

You already have.

That thought brought her back to herself, and she stepped away from him,

adjusting and retying her pants. She trembled all over with the aftershocks of orgasm, but tried to keep the quiver out of her voice. “That was... very unprofessional.”

He smirked. “Spirit didn’t mind.”

She glanced over at Spirit, who was watching them from the dog bed in the corner. The border collie actually rolled her eyes, and the huff she gave was full of disgust. “I think she minded quite a lot.”

“Ah, she just doesn’t like sharing me.” He snaked an arm around her and pulled her against his hard body. He was still turned on, the ridge of his erection straining the front of his jeans. “Come over later.”

Not a question but a self-congratulatory statement.

She sighed. “Donovan—”

He silenced her with a hard kiss. “Don’t say no.”

God, she was so screwed. There was no way she could say no to him. She’d never been able to say no to him.

If she indulged tonight, would he still be in her bed come morning? It felt like there was a big black hole in her chest.

“I’ll try.”

He frowned. “Try?”

“I can’t promise—”

“I’m not asking you to promise anything. Just show up.”

She nodded.

“Good.” He kissed her again and called for Spirit, who popped to her feet with an eager swish of her tail. He started for the door, but paused with his hand on the knob and frowned at her desk. “Is that all you’re eating for lunch?”

“What?” She looked at the protein shake and apple, and her cheeks flushed. “Um, yeah. I’m on a diet.”

“Hm.” His frown deepened into a scowl as he left.

Sasha drew a shaky breath and sank into her desk chair, every nerve ending still tingling with the aftereffects of being so thoroughly satisfied. Desire made her want to press her hand to the juncture of her thighs and rub to relieve the ache already growing there again. But she couldn’t do that. She had to eat lunch and catch up on charting. She had hospitalized patients to check on and six more appointments this afternoon. She had to pull herself together.

Okay.

She straightened her clothing, blew out a breath, and smoothed back her hair. She could do this. And she'd worry about Donovan Scott later.

chapter **thirteen**

THE DRIVE HOME was filled with Sasha and Donovan loved it. He could still taste her kiss and her scent was all over his clothes. He'd loved burying his face in her hair as he kissed her neck and stroked her to climax.

He grinned.

He had so many plans for her tonight, but that was hours away still, and he was too keyed up to sit around waiting until she got off work. He cleaned the house, but it didn't take long. He was too much of a Marine still to be a slob. He changed the sheets on his bed and threw in a load of laundry, then checked the time.

It had only been a half hour.

Jesus.

He rolled his shoulders, but it didn't help to relax him. It had been a long time since he felt this psychically charged, like a taut rubber band about to snap. He needed to work off some excess energy or else he'd break his bed when he finally got Sasha into it.

He looked at Spirit. She sat by the door with her leash in her mouth. Her tail thumped hopefully.

"Fine. We'll go for a quick run." With the haze of smoke in the air, it'd suck more than usual, but he couldn't deny the dog's utter joy at the word "run" and chuckled as she went crazy with excitement. She streaked back and forth across the living room, using the couch as a trampoline to launch into her bed by the fireplace. She grabbed the dog bed and tossed it into the air, then in a blur of black and white fur was on the couch again. The cushions squeaked as she hopped back and forth like her paws were spring-loaded. She'd been cooped up in the house too long while she healed. She deserved the run. They both did. He'd stick close to the coastline, where the smoke

wasn't too bad.

Donovan clapped his hands. "C'mon, let's go run."

Spirit barked and hopped over the back of the couch, skidding to a stop in front of him.

"Ready, girl?"

She impatiently tapped her feet as he grabbed his phone and keys. He looped her leash over his shoulders like a bandolier. He didn't expect to need it, but the fire had him nervous. He didn't know how she'd react if one sparked nearby and wanted the ability to keep her close.

He opened the door, and they took off, jogging together down the hill toward the beach where his life started falling apart.

By the time they reached the sand, Spirit had worn herself out from doing laps around him the entire way. She collapsed and rolled in the surf, letting the waves lap at her sides.

Donovan sat on a piece of driftwood and looked out to sea as he willed his breathing to even out and the stitch in his side to ease. That had been a rough run, his first since he'd been cleared by his doctor two days ago. He was going to need a minute to recover. Luckily, Spirit didn't mind. She loved the beach.

As he watched the waves break against the sea stacks, he thought about Darcy, and the last time he'd seen her here on this beach. His heart ached for the girl he'd let walk away so long ago. He'd never stopped thinking about her or wondering what had happened to her.

And now he finally knew.

Darcy was dead.

Murdered.

Grief gathered in the back of his throat like a sob. He swallowed it down. He was an adult; he was a warrior. But part of him still loved the damaged girl Darcy had been. That was the worst thing of all. He was pathetic.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and dug his knuckles into his thigh to distract himself from the pain in his gut. Maybe if he ignored it, it would go away. Or maybe he could finally fix this, the worst of his mistakes. Maybe he could make it right. Maybe...

There was no maybe.

Spirit, soaked and sand crusted, nudged his leg with her nose and whined at him.

"I'm okay, girl." He took off his running shoes and walked down to the

wet sand above the tide line. With the wind blowing inland, there was almost no smoke. He could breathe here and savored the clean scent of the ocean.

Cold water lapped at his ankles, but it did nothing to cool the turmoil inside him. He'd never allowed himself to grieve for Darcy. It had felt wrong when he hadn't known her fate. For fifteen years, fifteen long years, he'd held out hope that maybe, just maybe she was still out there somewhere. And now that he knew she wasn't, the pain was almost unbearable.

But here, in the place he'd last seen her alive, he could mourn. He could say goodbye. He needed to say goodbye if he wanted more than a series of hot hook-ups with Sasha. He needed to be a better man for her. He needed to be worthy of her.

He stood there longer than he expected, lost in his grief until his feet went numb in the cold water. Then he drew a breath and swiped at his eyes with the backs of his hands. Spirit sat at his side, staring up at him with concern. He reached down to rub her head.

"I'm okay now. Really."

She eyed him with obvious doubt. If dogs could talk, she'd be saying, "*Yeah, right, dude. You're a mess.*"

"Ah, but I'm your mess, sweetheart. Aren't you a lucky dog?" He glanced out over the ocean again, but this time, he didn't feel the crushing weight of grief or regret any longer. He turned back to his dog. "Let's go home and get you dinner. Sasha's coming over tonight, so you'd better behave, you hear me? Show her what a good girl you are."

Spirit huffed and flounced on ahead of him, her tail swishing haughtily. That was probably a no, but he decided to take it as a yes. She'd come to love Sasha. How could she not? The woman was sweet, funny, and sexy as hell with all those curves she hated. She was also strong, with a backbone of steel hidden behind a facade of shyness. And she had a heart the size of California that she gave out to friends and animals indiscriminately. He hoped there was a little piece available for him. He knew Spirit already had one.

Halfway up the path, his skin suddenly prickled with goosebumps, and he stopped moving.

Something was wrong here.

He stared into the woods, searching for the source of the off-note. But nothing moved, and Spirit didn't seem alarmed as she nosed through the brush on the side of the path. And, still, he couldn't shake the feeling someone was out there, watching him.

He cursed under his breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as a headache roared to life in his skull.

Just paranoia, he told himself. It was just another fun side effect of his TBI, like the headaches and hallucinations and memory lapses.

Spirit popped up out of the brush, carrying something in her mouth. She trotted over to him, tail wagging, so proud of herself for her find.

“Hey, girl. What do you got there?” He knelt and held out a hand. “Let me see it.”

And she dropped a woman’s red canvas shoe into his palm.

chapter fourteen

SASHA HADN'T EXPECTED to find Donovan on her porch when she got home. She'd done her best not to think about him all afternoon and now, here he was, sitting on her steps, his motorcycle parked in her driveway.

"Hi," she said cautiously and stepped out of her car. "I thought I was coming to your house."

"I wasn't sure you knew where I live."

"It's a small town. I could've figured it out."

"Okay. I wasn't sure you'd come." His voice had a strange hollow note in it that was concerning.

She walked over and picked up his helmet, placing it on her lap as she sat beside him. "You made it very hard to say no."

"Yeah," he whispered. "I can be a pushy bastard when I want something."

"I'm not complaining." She studied his profile as he stared out at the gathering dusk on her street. She could tell he wasn't seeing the three other houses she shared this cul-de-sac with. "What's wrong?"

He laughed but there was no humor in it. "Do you want a list?"

"No, I don't need one. Darcy," she guessed.

He said nothing for five solid seconds, then exhaled hard and hung his head, scrubbing his hands over his short hair. "Ash told you to stay away from me because of her. You should listen. He thinks I'll poison you, too."

She hesitated only a beat before lacing her fingers through his. "No, you're not poisonous. You're not colorful enough."

He looked at her, surprise obvious in his dark eyes.

"Aposematism," she explained. "It's the conspicuous markings or bright colors animals develop to warn predators of toxicity. The brighter the colors, the more toxic. Now if he'd said you're venomous..." She tilted her head,

considered. “That I might believe.”

A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “Want me to bite you and find out?”

She patted his hand. “Pretty sure you already did that, and I survived, so not venomous either.”

The tension eased out of his shoulders as he leaned in and kissed the side of her neck, sending a cascade of shivers through her. “We might want to try it again. You know, for science.”

Oh, God, she wanted to pull him inside and take him to bed, but her protein shake and apple hadn’t been enough for lunch, and she was starving.

She let him nibble at her neck for a moment longer, then shifted away. “Dinner first.”

Even as she said the words, her stomach gave an embarrassingly loud growl.

He swore and stood, lifting her to her feet. “I’m taking you out.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” He started to pull her toward his motorcycle, but she resisted.

“Oh, wait. You mean, like, right now? I have to change out of my scrubs. And feed my dog.”

He paused. “You have a dog?”

“Matilda. I asked Anna if I could adopt her after the fire.”

Without releasing her hand, he changed directions and went to her door. “How is she?”

“Scared. You know, with all the smoke in the air, it’s probably like a never-ending flashback for her.” It was a little difficult to dig her keys out of her purse one-handed, but she managed it. Donovan took the keys and unlocked the door, holding it open for her to go in first. “I’ve been keeping her in my laundry room with an air purifier running, just hoping to mitigate some of the trauma.”

His expression darkened. “If I ever meet the bastard who tied that sweet baby to a tree and set her on fire, he’d better run. Fast. Because if I catch him, I’ll tie *him* to a tree and see how he likes it.”

“He deserves it and worse. I just don’t understand how anyone could harm a defenseless animal like that.”

“It takes a special kind of evil.” He stayed by the door as she crossed through her kitchen to the laundry room.

Matilda wagged a tentative greeting, but when she spotted Donovan, she

went still like a deer in headlights.

They didn't know for sure a man had tortured her but assumed as much by the way she cowered whenever a man was near—unless it was Zak. He'd worked with her as she healed, and she adored him. But all other men terrified her, which, dammit, Sasha should've considered before she opened the door and let her out.

Except then Matilda did something amazing. Her tail started whipping the air, and she made happy little crying sounds as she crawled toward Donovan.

“Hi, pretty girl.” He knelt and opened his arms to her. The dog threw herself at him, wiggling and whimpering with joy.

“Okay,” Sasha said, stunned. “Wow. She really loves you. She must understand that you saved her.”

“Yeah, well, we're survivors aren't we, Mattie? Like recognizes like.” He showered the dog's muzzle with kisses, and Sasha's heart melted into a puddle. If she weren't already falling hard for this man, she would have plummeted right then.

After one last kiss on her scarred nose, he straightened. “Tell you what. You go shower and change, and I'll run home for Spirit. I'm sure Matilda would enjoy the company.”

Twenty minutes later, she was waiting out on her porch in jeans, boots with short heels, and a black wrap blouse that camouflaged her belly while still giving flirty glimpses of her cleavage. She'd spent way more time standing in front of her closet deciding on an outfit than she normally would, but now she worried she'd gone too casual. Or not casual enough? Or too flirty?

She heard the growl of his motorcycle before he turned onto her street. She'd expected him to switch to his Jeep since he was bringing Spirit back with him—but nope. Spirit rode behind him with her paws up on his shoulders, wearing a dog-sized helmet and goggles over her eyes. Her ears flapped in the wind while her tongue hung from her mouth in a wide doggie grin of excitement.

“You taught your dog how to ride a motorcycle?”

His eyes sparkled as he took off his helmet. “Well, she is my dog, and this is my primary mode of transportation in the summer. Of course she rides with me.” He climbed off the bike and unstrapped Spirit from her harness. She jumped down and zoomed in happy circles around the yard.

Sasha watched with a grin. “You two are good for each other.”

“Yeah, we are. I’ve even forgiven Zak for manipulating me into taking her.”

“That’s how you ended up with her?” She laughed and shook her head. “Why am I not surprised?”

He whistled for his dog. Spirit streaked over to him in a black-and-white blur, but sat patiently as he removed her helmet and goggles. He ruffled her ears. “All right, girl. Let’s go in and say hi to Matilda. Your mission tonight is to keep her company and make sure she doesn’t get scared.”

Spirit’s whole demeanor changed. She went from bouncy puppy to work mode. If dogs could salute, Sasha had no doubt Spirit would.

Donovan tossed her a treat from his pocket. “Good girl.”

“Wow. Does she speak English?”

“When I tell her she has a mission, she knows she needs to listen up.” He led Spirit inside. When he returned a few minutes later, his eyes roamed appreciatively over her. “You’re testing my control with that outfit, angel. Ready to go?”

Heat rose to her cheeks. “Yes.”

She had no idea where they were going, but she couldn’t care less. As long as she was with him, nothing else mattered. He laced his fingers through hers and pulled her down to the driveway.

When she realized where he was headed, she put on the brakes. “Why don’t we just take my car? It’s going to be dark soon and—”

“You can ride a motorcycle in the dark. That’s why it has this.” He tapped the headlight and grinned. “C’mon, I know you have a naughty risk-taker in you. I saw her at the fundraiser.”

Now the heat in her cheeks was an inferno. “That wasn’t me. Not really.”

“I think it is.” He held out his helmet and nodded toward the orange glow above the mountains. “C’mon. Don’t you want to live a little before this fire burns us alive?”

She scowled and snatched the helmet from his hand. “That’s really not funny.”

“Wasn’t trying to be.” He took the helmet back and fitted it over her head. “I learned a long time ago that life is too damn short not to live it to the max. If you spend every day worrying about the what ifs, you miss all the spontaneous beauty of the right nows.” He lifted the visor and leaned in to kiss her nose. “And some things are worth the risk.”

She eyed the Harley suspiciously. “I don’t know that a motorcycle is one

of those things.”

“That’s because you’ve never ridden one. Don’t trust me?”

She shouldn’t. All the evidence said she shouldn’t. But, dammit, she did. She trusted him with her life—which, if she got on that motorcycle, would be in his hands.

Donovan swung a leg over the seat, his muscles flexing as he kicked back the kickstand and straightened the bike. He’d changed clothes, too, and now wore a leather jacket over a plain T-shirt and jeans. She admired the way the leather wrapped his biceps. He looked like a man who worked hard for what he had, and that made her feel even more self-conscious. She tugged at the neck of her shirt, trying to hide her ample cleavage. She worked out—not consistently, but she wasn’t a complete couch potato. She also tried to eat well, but she had a sweet tooth and loved ice cream. She’d always been chubby as a kid, and it just seemed like no matter what she did, she was destined to remain a chubby adult.

So why did he want her when he could walk into a gym and have his pick of women? She decided right then she’d renew her gym membership.

He patted the seat behind him expectantly.

“Oh, God.” She drew a breath and climbed on, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her body tightly against his. His low growl of approval was drowned out by the throaty grumble of the engine.

“Hang on tight, angel,” he said over his shoulder, and before she had a chance to second-guess this idea, he gunned the throttle.

The bike shot out of her driveway, and Sasha let out a squeak of alarm. She pressed her helmet against his back, squeezing her eyes shut. Because of the helmet, she couldn’t hear his laughter, but she could feel it shaking his chest.

She couldn’t help but laugh despite her nerves. This was insane. She was on the back of a motorcycle, holding onto a man who made her heart race. It was exciting and terrifying all at once.

As they tore down the winding road along the ocean, Sasha’s grip on Donovan tightened. The wind tugged at her clothes and the roar of the engine was deafening, but her fear slowly turned to exhilaration. The thrill of the ride was overwhelming, and she was intoxicated by the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She opened her eyes and looked around, taking in the scenery. The sun was setting in the smoke-hazed sky, casting an eerie red-orange glow over the ocean.

Donovan was right - this was the right now, and it was beautiful.

He steered the bike into a sharp curve, leaning deep into it, and Sasha pressed herself tighter to him, savoring the hardness of his back against her breasts and the sensual vibration of the engine between her legs. A shiver raced through her. She had never felt so alive and yet so vulnerable before, but she wanted to feel more. She slid her hands down his stomach, fingers dipping into the waistband of his jeans.

She smiled against his spine at the growl that rumbled through him and trailed her fingers lower. He shifted slightly, allowing her more access. Her heart pounded as the tips of her fingers brushed against the hardening length of him. She knew she shouldn't be doing this while on a motorcycle, but the thrill of the moment was too much to resist. She squeezed him gently and he let out a low moan.

Donovan turned his head slightly, his eyes meeting hers over his shoulder. The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile, but there was a hint of warning in his gaze. She was treading on dangerous ground, but she couldn't help herself. She wanted him in the worst way, hadn't stopped thinking about him since his visit to her office this afternoon.

The bike slowed as they pulled up to a scenic turnoff hidden from the road by a line of trees. Donovan shut off the engine and turned to face her, his eyes smoldering with desire. He pulled off her helmet and tossed it aside, then cupped her face in his hands and leaned in. His lips captured hers in a heated kiss as his hands roamed over her body, igniting a fire within her as dangerous as the one on the horizon. If she wasn't careful, it would consume her, but he tasted of adventure and risk, and at that moment, she didn't care if she went up in smoke.

Sasha broke the kiss, gasping for breath. Donovan's hands were still busy, exploring every inch of her body, and she could feel herself growing wet with desire. She wanted him so badly it hurt.

"Donovan," she whispered, her voice shockingly husky with need. She'd always had a low, throaty voice, but now it sounded downright sexual.

He lifted his head. "What do you want, angel?"

"I want to suck you."

She'd startled him. Actually, she'd startled herself, too. She'd never been so honest about her desires with past lovers.

He gripped her shoulders and eased her back. His eyes were dark and intense as he stared at her, his breathing as ragged as hers. Then he groaned.

“Jesus. You’re trying to kill me.”

She stroked her fingers down his shaft again and reached to unbutton and unzip his jeans. He moved his knees wider apart, giving her room. With one hand, she squeezed his erection and with the other, she cupped his balls, weighing them in her hand. She leaned down and licked the drop of pre-cum off the head of his cock. He shuddered, and she did it again, this time flicking her tongue over the head.

His fingers delved into her hair. “Fuck. I can’t take much more of that.”

She gave him a wicked smile. “You can take more.”

And she sucked him into her mouth.

She had never been so bold before, but this was Donovan and he brought out a boldness in her that she’d never known existed. She became a shameless slut, giving him oral sex on the side of the road. She’d had no idea she had it in her, but she loved it.

This was nothing like when she’d made love with previous boyfriends. This was fiery and intense, and she wanted to consume him. She wanted to suck him dry.

She could feel him watching her, his gaze eating her up with so much desire that it made her wetter. She stroked his shaft faster, working him with both hands, and taking him as deep as she could. He tasted so good, a salty sweetness, and she craved more.

As she took him deeper and deeper into her mouth, he started to moan.

Donovan tried to pull her off, but she only gripped his hips tighter and held on. She loved the feel of him, the taste of him, and loved how powerful she felt. She dragged her tongue along the underside of him, licking from root to tip until he was shaking in her arms. She lifted her gaze and found him watching her with eyes that had gone black with hunger. He groaned and his muscles tensed. She was going to make him—

His hands tightened in her hair, pulling her head back until her lips were no longer touching him. “I want to come in your pussy, angel.” His voice was all growl. “Not your mouth.”

In one swift movement, he lifted her off the bike and turned her to face it. Sasha watched over her shoulder, her heart racing with anticipation, as he stripped off her jeans and took himself in hand, probing at her entrance. She licked her lips and pressed her hips back against him, moaning as he entered her in one slow stroke. She was slick and hot for him and took all of him.

Her hands curled around the edge of the leather seat as he withdrew

almost completely and then pushed into her again.

He groaned. “Do you have any idea how often I’ve thought of doing this to you again?” She could hear the raw desire in his voice as he punctuated each word with a thrust. “Every day, every fucking hour, since the night of the fundraiser. Even when I was in the hospital, I lay in that bed at night and fantasized about you.”

“Oh, God, Donovan. Me too. I couldn’t stop.”

“Did you touch yourself when you thought of me?”

“Yes.” She spread her legs as wide as she could, and pushed her ass back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust and loving the way his breath grew ragged.

“Touch yourself now.”

She didn’t move.

He nipped at the back of her neck. “I’m not going to let you come if you don’t touch yourself.”

She squirmed against him as a wave of frustration washed over her. She was so close, but he kept pulling back when she needed harder and faster. “Ugh! You’re a horrible lover.”

He chuckled. “Yes. But I’m *your* horrible lover. Now, touch yourself.”

She glared at him over her shoulder. “No.”

He stopped moving, his cock deep inside her. “No?”

“You touch me.”

“Deal. But you’ll pay for it.” He reached around her front and found her clit, rolling it between his fingers. She whimpered as the familiar tingle began deep inside her.

“That’s it, angel. Come for me.”

Her orgasm hit her hard, spiraling out of control within seconds, and while she was still riding the high, he withdrew from her and spun her around, dropping to his knees in front of her. She swayed on her feet. Donovan gripped her thighs and pulled her down until her butt touched the bike seat, then he buried his face between her legs.

She cried out as he sucked and stroked her swollen clit in the same rhythm he’d been using to fuck her. He was as relentless as he was merciless, bringing her back to the edge of orgasm twice and then stopping, leaving her a gasping, trembling puddle.

“Donovan.” His name left her lips in little more than a whimper.

He nibbled her inner thigh. “Now, what do you want, angel?”

She ran a trembling hand over his head. “You. Inside me. Right now.”

Donovan grinned and kissed his way up her body. When he reached her lips, he softened the kiss to a tease. “Will you touch yourself when I ask next time?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Good girl.” He turned her back toward the bike, kicked her legs wide, and filled her again. He grabbed her hips, fingers biting into her skin, and shifted his angle, his thrusts became more urgent, wilder. She leaned forward, resting her forearms against the seat, and met him thrust for thrust. When the orgasm hit her, it was all she could do to stay upright, her body shaking hard with her release.

He dropped his head to her shoulder and groaned, his fingers digging into her hips as he pushed into her one final time, deep and hard, and shuddered.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face to her spine. She could feel his heart beating wildly against her back as their ragged breathing slowly evened out. Her body felt boneless, and she was only vaguely aware of their surroundings. She was leaning over a bike seat on the side of a highway, with his cock still deep inside her, but it didn’t matter.

“Jesus, Sasha,” he whispered, his voice raw. “I’m never going to get enough of you.”

He kissed her shoulder and her neck, but there was no urgency to it. He was kissing her, touching her like she was a precious gift, not a trophy. She’d never felt so cherished in her life.

They stayed like that for several long, comfortable minutes until her damn stomach let out another embarrassingly loud grumble.

“Oh, fuck. You need food.” He withdrew from her and straightened, reaching down to help her from the bike. “I got distracted.”

“Me, too.” She sighed and melted into his arms and raised her mouth to his in a kiss that tasted of sex. “Worth it.”

Just then, Donovan’s stomach joined hers in voicing its disapproval. They stared at each other for a beat, then burst out laughing. He tucked himself back into his jeans and waited for her to pull herself back together, then held out her helmet. “C’mon. Let’s go eat.”

chapter **fifteen**

THEY MADE it to the restaurant on the outskirts of town much later than anticipated, but that meant they had missed the worst of the dinner rush. Donovan felt a bit shaky as they were seated, but whether that was from his lack of food today or the mind-blowing sex, he couldn't begin to guess.

Sasha's cheeks were flushed, and her hair was mussed. She looked exactly like what she was: a well-loved woman. As he watched her study the menu, he decided he wanted to make her look like this every day for the rest of his life.

Yeah, he was a goner.

He loved her.

Hell, if he were honest with himself, he'd loved her from the second he'd first set eyes on her at Redwood Coast Rescue. His memory sucked most days, but that moment he remembered with the clarity of a photograph. He had been needling Zak after a group therapy session, trying to get a rise out of the guy because Zak's sudden Zen attitude had bugged the hell out of him. The side door leading out to the agility yard swung open, and Sasha and Anna came in with Matilda on a leash. They were deep in a discussion about the dog's recovery, but Sasha had glanced his way as they passed. It had been like a punch to the gut, all of the air forcefully leaving his lungs, and he devoured every detail from her dark hair in its bouncy ponytail to the curvy hips and ass that tested the limit of her scrub bottoms. Her smile was so bright and genuine, he was dazzled and swore his heart had skipped a handful of beats. He hadn't even known her name yet, but he'd known she would be his.

She was smiling at him the same way now and lowered her menu. "What?"

He shook his head. “Just thinking about the first time I knew you were mine. You had on the same pink scrubs you were wearing today.”

“When was that?”

“You and Anna had taken Matilda out to the agility yard to exercise, and you were talking about how well her burns were healing with a lot of medical jargon—which is hot as fuck. I was with Zak in the kitchenette behind the reception desk, and you smiled at me.”

Her eyes rounded. “But that was over a year ago.”

“I was waiting for the right time to make my move.”

He didn’t think it was possible, but her eyes got even wider. “The fundraiser. Oh my God, that wasn’t a fluke, was it? You had a hotel room. You kenneled Spirit for the night and got a room at the casino. That whole time, you were planning to seduce *me*?”

“Well, the plan came about after Zak blackmailed me into going, but... yeah. I went there with the intention of getting you into my bed. I was tired of waiting for you to notice me.”

Sasha’s mouth dropped open, and he worried for a moment that he’d said something wrong. But then she started laughing, a deep, throaty sound that had him grinning in response.

“And I went there thinking I’d seduce Ash! We both had seduction plans.”

A few weeks ago, the man’s name would’ve sent a spear of jealousy through him, but this relationship they were building felt too damn secure for Ash to rattle. “Glad I won.”

Her eyes softened as she reached across the table for his hand. “Me, too.”

He held on to her for a moment, then regretfully pulled his hand back and picked up his menu again. “What do you want?”

“A burger. A big, juicy burger with cheese and bacon and all the bad-for-you stuff. But...” She sighed. “I’ll probably get a salad. My diet, you know?”

Yeah, he wasn’t about to let her do that. When the waiter came to take their orders, Sasha did indeed order a salad. He ordered two bacon cheeseburgers with fries.

“Wow,” she said as the waiter walked away. “Hungry?”

“Yeah, but one’s for you.”

She groaned. “Donovan, I’m trying to be good.”

“I don’t want you to be good. I want you to be fed. You’re gorgeous the way you are, and I hate the thought of you starving yourself to fit someone

else's definition of a beautiful woman." He leaned across the table and lowered his voice as the hostess led a group of men past their table. "Besides, we burned a helluva lot of calories earlier, and I have plans to burn more when we get home."

Her cheeks flushed a charming pink, and she opened her mouth, but he never got a chance to hear her reply.

"Donovan? Donovan Scott, is that you?"

One of the men broke away from the group and walked over to their table. He was tall and leanly built, with deep-set dark eyes and a sprinkling of gray at his temples.

"Tiago." Donovan stood and met Tiago Jimenez's outstretched hand with his own. "Hey. I hear I owe you one for making sure I didn't end up barbecued."

The Hispanic man threw his head back and laughed. It was a big sound, too loud for the hush of the restaurant, and drew several glares from other patrons. "Yeah, you're just damn lucky my date went so well that night, or else I would've already been home asleep." He turned his charming grin on Sasha. "Speaking of dates, I don't believe we've met."

Donovan glanced back and forth between them and wondered if his scrambled brain was playing tricks on him again because they must have met. Hadn't Sasha flagged him down during the fire? Then again, that night had been crazy. It was possible Tiago just didn't recognize her now.

Sasha narrowed her eyes in question at him, and he realized a beat too late that his silence had gotten awkward.

She stood and offered her hand. "Hi. I'm Sasha LeBlanc."

"Oh, right. The vet. My sister—" Tiago broke off, and a deep, heavy grief flashed in his eyes before he hid it. He determinedly plastered his smile back in place, but it was less charming now, strained around the edges.

Donovan's heart clenched with a brief, hot spike of sorrow. Before succumbing to her heroin addiction, Chrissy Jimenez, Tiago's sister, had been part of the Paws for Vets therapy group, trying to work through the sexual assault she'd suffered at the hands of a superior officer while in the military. Her death had been a blow to them all because she had seemed to be one of their success stories, then, out of the blue, she stopped coming to the group. Less than two weeks later, she was dead from fentanyl-laced heroin.

Tiago cleared his throat. "Sorry. My sister's cat was a patient of yours."

Sasha nodded, radiating empathy. "Yes, Gizmo. His new owner still

brings him to see me. I was very sorry to hear about Chrissy's passing. I liked her."

"Everyone loved her." He stared at Donovan for an uncomfortably long moment. "Isn't that right?"

His throat constricted. "Yeah."

Chrissy had been one of those people who drew others to her with her bubbly personality and radiant smile. Even after the trauma she experienced while in the Army, followed by an addiction to painkillers that eventually led to heroin, she never lost that sparkle.

Donovan had been drawn to her, and they'd become fast friends. They would've been more if circumstances were different when they met, but at the time, they had both been supremely fucked-up individuals barely holding themselves together. Neither could've spared the emotional bandwidth for a relationship, though they had both wanted one. They'd flirted, dancing dangerous circles around each other right up until a couple of months before Chrissy's death.

He swallowed back the lump of guilt suddenly blocking his throat. He hadn't thought about Chrissy once since Sasha came into his life. "I never got the chance to tell you how sorry I am about Chrissy. I saw her just a few hours before and she seemed like her usual self. I wish she would've told she me she was struggling. I wish I'd have seen it."

A dark shadow passed over Tiago's face. "She knew the risks every time she stuck that needle in her arm, but she didn't stop."

"I wanted to help her."

"Yeah, man. We all did." He sighed and glanced over to the table his friends had settled at. "I'd better get back. We're headed out to the fireline tomorrow, so this will probably be our last good meal for a while. Sasha, nice meeting you." He nodded to her, then clapped a hand on Donovan's shoulder. "And you stay out of burning buildings, *comprende?*"

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about that. It was a one-time deal. I'm not pressing my luck again."

When Tiago was gone, Sasha sank back to her seat and studied him over the table with concern in her eyes. "That upset you."

He nodded. No sense in hiding it. "Chrissy was a good friend."

"Tiago seems to think you two were more than friends."

"He might think so, but it wasn't like that. Chrissy and I liked each other. We flirted—a lot. But I was still fighting a losing battle with my demons, and

she had hers. We both knew if we took that step beyond friendship, it'd destroy us."

"That was very rational of you."

He tapped his temple with one finger. "Yeah, well, when your brain's full of holes, sometimes all you can do is cling to the remaining rational bits and hope they're enough to keep you afloat."

Her expression softened, and he glanced away, staring hard out the window. Unfortunately, it was dark enough outside that all he could see was his own reflection, but that was better than the pity he knew was in her eyes.

The waiter arrived with their dinners, and they both picked at their plates in uncomfortable silence.

"You know, I'm not the only one with issues," he said finally.

Sasha raised an eyebrow. "I never said you were."

"Zak had more issues than Playboy."

She exhaled a soft chuckle and popped a fry in her mouth. "True."

"And I saw Ash a little bit ago. He looks like hell."

"He has a lot on his plate."

"Yeah, and I just loaded on more," he muttered and scowled down at his dinner. He'd lost his appetite. "Can't decide if I shot myself in the foot or not."

"What happened?" When he hesitated, she reached over the table and squeezed his hand. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

He lifted his head and met her gaze. Instead of pity, he saw understanding, which was somehow worse. "I want to tell you everything. I just don't know that I should. I don't want you to think less of me."

"Hey." She squeezed his hand again. "If this is about Darcy, I know you didn't kill her."

"Then you'd be one of the few people in town to think so." But, he decided, he would tell her the truth. She deserved to know everything about the man she was sleeping with—even the bad parts. "Before we came over this afternoon, Spirit and I went for a run to the beach to burn off some of her energy. We hung out down there for a bit—maybe forty-five minutes. We didn't see anyone else around, but on the way back up the trail, she found a red shoe."

Sasha inhaled. "Like Darcy was wearing when she disappeared?"

"Exactly like that. It couldn't have been hers, though. It was too new, too clean. But I contacted Ash, and he took it into evidence. I'm sure it was

someone's sick idea of a joke. They saw me out running and decided to put the shoe on the path to torment me."

Her brows drew together. "But it's not like people just carry red canvas shoes around with them. That seems very deliberate. What does Ash think?"

"I already told you what he thinks. Even if he's not convinced I'm a killer, he still doesn't think too highly of me."

"Why? You used to be so close. I remember the three of you—You, Zak, and Ash—were inseparable in high school."

He lifted a shoulder and raised his glass to his lips. "We grew up, grew apart."

"No, it's more than that. What happened?"

"It's..." He set his glass down without drinking. "There was a night a few months before everything happened with Darcy. We were out doing stupid teenage shit, and the sheriff caught us. He threw us in county lockup and threatened all kinds of charges, from trespassing to criminal mischief. Zak's parents came for him, and the sheriff let him go with barely a warning. Ash's parents came, and same thing..."

When he trailed off, she nodded in understanding. "But not you."

"My parents didn't come. Even if they had, I doubt the sheriff would've let me go. I'm not town royalty like Ash or from a respected family like Zak. I was just trailer park trash. The kid from a broken home on the wrong side of the tracks, who would probably not amount to much. The sheriff even said so. He said he expected to see me behind bars more often than not."

"He was wrong."

"But that's the thing—he wasn't. At least, not then. I was on a bad path. All three of us were, but Ash and Zak had get-out-of-jail-free cards because of their last names. They had more chances to get right than I did. That night, sitting by myself in a jail cell, I realized if I stayed in town after graduation, the sheriff's words would come true. A self-fulfilling prophecy. I'd end up hitting the revolving doors of county lock-up just because of who I was and where I came from and because nobody expected anything more from me. So, I stopped talking to Ash and Zak and enlisted in the Marines."

"And then Darcy," Sasha said. It was a matter-of-fact statement, not a question.

"Yeah, and then Darcy disappeared, and I thought, fuck, I'm too late." He gave a rough laugh and shook his head. "The sheriff eyed me right from the beginning and I was sure he was going to railroad me into a life sentence. But

he never made the arrest. I graduated, went off to join the Marines, and never planned to look back.”

“So why did you come back?”

Grief clamped a hand around his windpipe and made speech impossible for a long moment. “My mom. She had breast cancer and needed help. I was a mess myself, but—I came home for her. I started going to therapy for her. Got right for her and took care of her until the end.”

“Did she pass recently?”

He sucked in a sharp breath and wondered if it would always hurt to think about his mom. “March. She, uh, actually went into remission for a bit after I came home and was doing great—and then she fell and broke her wrist, and they found that sneaky shit had come back and spread to her bones. She was gone less than three weeks later. She was only fifty. She should’ve had so much life left.”

“I’m so sorry.” She picked up a napkin and tore off a small piece of it, then another and another until she had a little pile in front of her. “I lost my dad when I was seventeen, days before my eighteenth birthday.”

“Does it still hurt? Because I can’t think of Mom without my chest seizing up.” He thumped a fist to his chest. “Even the good memories hurt.”

Sasha reached for another napkin and started shredding it, too. “I know what you mean. My dad used to take me fishing with him every summer, and I loved it. But now, every time I see a fishing pole or a crab pot, all I feel is sad. It does get better, and the good memories become a little more sweet than bitter, but it never goes away. I still miss Dad every day.”

Donovan caught her hands mid-rip and set the napkin aside, then turned his palm toward hers and laced their fingers together. “Tell me about him. What was he like?”

“Oh.” She laughed softly. “He was larger than life, you know? He had an infectious laugh and really kind eyes, all wrinkled at the corners. His hair was all white—I never remember it any other color—and he wore it long, in a ponytail down his back, but when he woke up in the morning, it stood up every which way, like he’d been shocked in his sleep.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He was, but he had his demons, too. Like so many of the fishermen around here, he drank too much and partied too hard when he was on shore. But he never neglected me. I always came first when he was home, and he showered me with affection—I think because he felt guilty for being away

for weeks at a time and leaving me with a nanny.”

It was similar to his and Darcy’s childhoods, he realized with a start. But also so very different because Sasha probably always looked forward to her dad’s return from the sea, while he and Darcy had always dreaded theirs. “Where was your mom?”

Sasha shrugged. “Who knows? She left when I was five or six. Dad was quite a bit older than her, and he made a good living—had his own fleet of boats—so she probably had visions of being a trophy wife when they got married and didn’t realize what she’d actually signed up for. He served in Vietnam and struggled with depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts. Eventually, Mom couldn’t take it anymore and moved to LA, chasing dreams of stardom, I guess. She just left and forgot she had a husband and daughter. Not that I think life would’ve been better with her there. She was young and didn’t want the responsibility. So, it was just Dad and me against the world.”

Just like him and his mom after his dad died. He cherished the memory of those fear-free days, as short as they were. “That sounds nice.”

“It was for a while. He always told me I was his rock. I was what kept him going...” She trailed off and stared out the window at the parking lot. He felt her drifting too far away from him, back into dark memories, and squeezed her hand.

She looked at him and gave a sad smile. “But, in the end, even I wasn’t enough. He shot himself, and I’ve always felt guilty because I wasn’t there. I was supposed to have been there. He was on shore, and we’d made plans for the weekend, but I canceled at the last minute to go to San Francisco with a friend.”

Now he was starting to understand her obsessive need to plan everything. She thought she could mitigate heartache with a checklist.

“Angel,” he whispered and waited until she looked at him again. “If he was in that dark of a place, it would’ve happened whether you were there or not. You hit that edge, and it’s almost impossible to pull back from it.”

Her eyes swam with tears. “Have you ever been at that edge?”

He should lie. He knew he should, but found he couldn’t. Not to her. “Yeah. I was right there, staring over.”

“But you pulled back.”

Shit, he shouldn’t have said anything. He sighed heavily and stared hard at the table between them, unable to meet her eyes. “No, I didn’t. The gun misfired. I reloaded to try again, but the phone rang—Mom calling to tell me

she was sick. Her cancer is the only reason I'm alive right now."

"Donovan," she said softly and tightened her grip on his hand. "Promise me, if you ever get to that edge again, you'll talk to me. Or if not me, then Zak. Or Sawyer. Pierce. Veronica. Dr. Firestone. Even Ash—just someone. Promise me."

He stared into her eyes and gratitude overwhelmed him in a rush. This woman, who had suffered so much herself, was offering him a lifeline.

"I promise," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "I won't keep it inside again."

She studied him with a mix of concern and tenderness, then finally nodded. "Good. I believe you."

Jesus, he loved her. He wanted to pull her across the table and kiss her, to feel her soft lips against his, to forget everything else in the world. But he knew if he started, he wouldn't be able to stop, so he settled for raising her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles instead.

"Eat, angel. Your food's getting cold."

episode 5: the interrogation

Hey, Truth Seekers! Welcome back to another episode of Cold Truth. In the last episode, we talked about the potential crime scene where Darcy Cantrell's shoe was found along with blood splattered on a nearby tree trunk. Today, we're going to cover the interrogation of Donovan Scott by Sheriff Jerry Tennison. So grab your coffee, and let's listen to part of the recording.

[Sound of interrogation room door opening and closing]

Sheriff Tennison: Mr. Scott, thanks for coming in today.

Donovan Scott: I didn't have a choice, did I?

Sheriff Tennison: Don't you want Darcy found?

[Silence]

Donovan Scott: [softly] Yeah.

Sheriff Tennison: We just want to ask you a few more questions about the night she went missing. Can you walk us through your movements that night after the party?

[Sound of Donovan shuffling in his chair]

Donovan Scott: I left shortly after Darcy stormed off. I tried to find her, but she was already gone. I figured she got a ride from someone, so I went home.

Sheriff Tennison: Alone?

Donovan Scott: Yes.

Sheriff Tennison: And you didn't try to contact her after that night?

Donovan Scott: No. I was pissed. I didn't want to talk to her.

[Sound of papers shuffling]

Sheriff Tennison: Mr. Scott, you know why you're here today?

Donovan Scott: No.

Sheriff Tennison: We found blood at the scene where Darcy Cantrell's shoe was discovered, and it matches your blood type. Would you like to explain how that happened?

Donovan Scott: That's not possible. I wasn't there.

Sheriff Tennison: Well, your blood was.

Donovan Scott: Then someone planted it!

Sheriff Tennison: C'mon, Donovan. This isn't a movie. Look at it from my position. You were arguing with her at the party. Witnesses say that you were visibly upset, and that Darcy pushed you away.

Donovan Scott: We had a disagreement. She hit me, but I didn't lay a hand on her.

Sheriff Tennison: That's not what we heard from some witnesses. They said they saw you and Darcy walking toward the woods together. And then, a short while later, they heard a woman screaming.

Donovan Scott: [angry] Fuck them! They were all drunk. I didn't take her into the woods. I told you, I left alone. I never saw her again.

Sheriff Tennison: Okay. Did you stop anywhere on your way home? See anyone that could give you an alibi?

Donovan Scott: The gas station on Main and Fourth. I bought a bottle of water, a bag of chips, and cigarettes. Check the cameras.

Sheriff Tennison: We do have surveillance footage that shows you at the gas station alone, but you hung out there for a long time. A suspiciously long time—long enough that the night clerk worried you were working up the courage to rob him.

Donovan Scott: No! I just didn't know what I wanted. And I didn't want to go home yet.

Sheriff Tennison: Did you return to the beach later that night?

Donovan Scott: Why would I?

Sheriff Tennison: See, here's what I think happened. You followed Darcy into the woods to try to make amends after the fight, and things got heated again. Maybe you pushed her, and she fell, hit her head, and didn't get back up? I bet that made you scared, with you all set to join the Marines after graduation. The military won't take a murderer. So, you hid her, went to the gas station to establish an alibi,

then went back after the party was over and buried her. All you gotta do is tell me where she is, and this will all be over.”

Donovan Scott: I didn't hurt Darcy. I love her. I wanted to marry her until that night.

Sheriff Tennison: You don't still want to marry her?

Donovan Scott: She turned me down.

Sheriff Tennison: And that made you mad, didn't it?

Donovan Scott: Why do you think we fought?

Sheriff Tennison: Mad enough to hit her? Did you take your baseball bat with you to the beach that night?

Donovan Scott: What? No! Jesus, I'd never do that to her or any woman. I'm a fuck-up, but my mom taught me better than that.

Now I'm going to stop the recording here because the interrogation goes on like that for several hours, with the sheriff throwing out theories, trying to wear Donovan down. But the kid never wavers in his story. It seems like he might even have a solid alibi, but the evidence found near Hidden Beach still raises too many questions.

One quick note: the blood Sheriff Jerry mentions did not actually match Donovan's blood type—it matched Darcy's—so the sheriff was either mistaken or purposely bluffing about that in hopes of getting a confession.

So, could Donovan be telling the truth? He sounds sincere enough, but we know from past cases that skilled liars often come off as the sincerest witnesses until something finally breaks through their facade.

But we also have to consider the possibility that Donovan is innocent and someone else may have been involved in Darcy's disappearance. There were a lot of other kids on the beach that night. Is there another viable suspect we haven't considered yet?

Join us next time as we keep digging for answers. Until then, I'm Alexis Summers. Stay curious, stay safe, and keep seeking the truth.

chapter **sixteen**

ASH RAWLINGS SANK into his office chair and closed his eyes, letting his head fall back, and his shoulders relax.

Half his county was burning, and the other half just hadn't caught fire yet.

He was running on fumes, and he didn't see an end in sight. Cal Fire was losing the battle with the Double R and had called in smoke jumpers and hotshot crews from as far away as Alaska. Towns to the east and south had been evacuated, and he'd had to deal with two dipshit looters in Shasta Springs last night as the fire raged toward town. His overtime budget was maxed out, and his department was spread impossibly thin.

And, on top of it all, he had a flaming hot cold case sitting on his desk that he hadn't even had the chance to look at. He could probably put it off until the worst of the fire threat was over, but he didn't dare. He wanted to have something concrete before the story broke because, thanks to that podcast, it was going to be a media circus.

Groaning, he dragged his hands over his head and sat up, jiggling his mouse to wake the computer. He needed to go home, get some sleep, but even if he tried, he didn't see it happening. He was too wired, so he might as well take the next few hours to go over the initial investigation into Darcy Cantrell's disappearance—especially since he didn't have much to go on for his own investigation yet. The fire had threatened the county morgue, so he'd had the body flown to San Francisco for an autopsy. So far, he hadn't received results. He imagined she was low on their priority list since it was an old case, and they probably wouldn't get much information from a pile of charred bones.

An uneasy chill tapped-danced down his spine at the memory of those bones being loaded into a body bag. The blackened skull with its blank eyes

and macabre grin was going to haunt his nightmares for years to come.

That skeleton used to be Darcy.

A girl he'd known since kindergarten.

A girl he'd dated very briefly during one of her and Donovan's many breaks. Those two had been off more than they were on. They were a toxic match, but something kept pulling them back together—until she disappeared.

Jesus. He really didn't want to think Donovan had anything to do with it, but he'd been at that party on Hidden Beach. He'd been a year older than most of the kids there, graduated but still figuring out what he wanted to do with his life. Amanda, his girlfriend at the time, had dragged him to the party. He'd seen the explosive fight between Donovan and Darcy and heard Donovan's drunken rants about how she'd "be sorry." He'd watched Donovan storm off into the woods after her.

But was Donovan capable of hurting her?

No. Not the Donovan he'd once loved like a brother. He knew that without a shadow of a doubt, but he also knew alcohol changed people. Donovan's father had been proof of that. Rooster Scott had been an affable, well-liked man when he was sober but was mean as a snake when drunk.

Donovan had drunk a lot the night of the party. He'd played multiple games of beer pong and flip cup, knocked back several rounds of shots. If he was anything like his father, it was possible he hurt her in a fit of rage while under the influence of all that alcohol.

A pit opened in Ash's stomach as he navigated to the right file in the department's database— *2007 Missing Person/ Suspected Homicide-Cantrell, Darcy Megan*. He opened the report and started reading through the initial investigation.

It was thin.

Hell, downright emaciated.

"What?" He rubbed his eyes and scrolled through it all again. Maybe he'd missed something due to exhaustion or—

Nope. That really was the whole thing. At least, it was all he had. An entire investigation boiled down to a few short reports, a single recorded interview with Donovan—and not even the first one Sheriff Jerry conducted—and a handful of crime scene photos. There was no DNA, no fingerprints. He didn't even know what evidence the former sheriff had used to secure the initial search warrant for Donovan's house.

This couldn't be all.

Ash had worked with Sheriff Jerry for years before the guy retired. He had a reputation for toughness, holding his deputies to the highest of standards, and he was a thorough investigator. Ash had seen him as a mentor, and this kind of sloppy police work wasn't like him at all.

Ash reached for the phone on his desk but stopped when he remembered it was almost midnight. And that was when he hit a wall, physically and mentally. He groaned and rubbed at the back of his neck with both hands. He had to shut down for a few hours, or he was going to crash.

Tomorrow. He'd call Jerry first thing and get this sorted. And he had to bring Donovan in for another interview.

He again reached for the phone. Got it all the way to his ear before he remembered the time and dropped it back into its cradle.

Tomorrow, he reminded himself.

Darcy had already been dead for fifteen years. As much as it bothered him to wait, one more night wasn't going to make that much of a difference to her.

chapter seventeen

“WELL, LOOK WHO’S BACK,” Zak said, completely unsurprised, as Donovan stepped into the room minutes before the therapy session was scheduled to start. “What happened to, and I quote, ‘fuck this. I’m done here?’”

“Told you, we always come back,” Sawyer said. “I’d say it’s like an abusive relationship, but it’s kinda the opposite of that.”

“*Feels abusive sometimes,*” Pierce signed.

Donovan ignored them all and took his seat without a word.

“Welcome back, Donovan,” Dr. Firestone said gently. “How have you been?”

Her expression was pleasantly blank—did they teach that expression in shrink school? —but he could still see the doubt in her eyes. And maybe a little fear. She thought she was talking to a man who had gotten away with murder.

Shit. He shouldn’t have come back, but he was here because—well, this ragtag group of veterans was all he had for friends. And with Sasha at work and the rescue out of commission, he was bored.

He forced his jaw to unlock. “I’ve been good.”

“Just good?” Zak prompted with a knowing smirk.

Donovan flipped him off, but there was no heat in it. “Yeah, okay. Better than good. I’m in my first real relationship since before my TBI, and it’s...” He couldn’t think of the right word. “Beautiful” came to mind, but the guys would laugh at him if he said that, so he settled on: “Amazing. She’s amazing.”

He couldn’t help but smile as he thought of Sasha. They’d spent every night of the last week together, sometimes at his place but usually at hers. He loved going to bed with his arms around her every night and waking her

every morning with soft, slow lovemaking. He enjoyed flexing his rusty culinary skills to make her lunch every day because he hated the thought of her trying to survive on a protein shake and a piece of fruit. Her eyes always lit up when he walked into the clinic, like she was surprised he'd come. He hoped that in forty years, she'd still look at him like that when he brought her lunch.

"He has little hearts dancing around his head, doesn't he?" Sawyer said. "I can hear them doing the samba."

"*He's a goner,*" Pierce said. "*First Zak and now him? Is there some kind of love flu going around?*"

Because Sawyer could still see movement, he usually understood most of Pierce's sign language, but not today. "He's a what?"

"Goner," Donovan supplied, amused despite himself. "He said I'm a goner. And fuck you, dude. I'm gonna put money down on you catching that love flu next."

Pierce's eyes bugged. He shook his head and waved his hands in the universal signal for *oh, hell, no!* Then he signed, "*I'm perfectly happy with my bachelorhood, thank you. And Raszta doesn't like strangers.*"

"How is the mop dog doing?" Zak asked, settling back in his seat.

Pierce had taken in Raszta, a Hungarian Puli, to train for urban search and rescue when they started their little doggie A-Team a few months ago. The dog's coat formed natural dreadlocks, and he looked like the love child of a bear and a mop.

"*Razzy's the best.*" Pierce's face grew animated as he signed, which was weird because the guy almost never cracked a smile. "*He's crushing his disaster certification training. My disability has slowed us down, but we're figuring ways around that.*"

"That's fabulous," Dr. Firestone said. "I'm so happy both you and Raszta have found a purpose."

"*He's exactly what I needed to keep going,*" Pierce said.

"Spirit, too," Donovan said. "I wouldn't be in a position for a relationship with Sasha now if it wasn't for her."

"Is this the part where I say I told you so?" Zak asked, then his grin dropped away. "Man, I miss having the dogs here with us."

"I miss Alfie," Veronica murmured, speaking up for the first time all session.

Donovan had to admit he missed the little guy, too. Dr. Firestone's

psychic Papillon, with his butterfly ears and psychedelic bowties, had always been a great comfort during these sessions. Alfie always knew who most needed some snuggle therapy, which made the heavier stuff easier to discuss. He definitely could've used some Alfie comfort during the last session. Maybe then he wouldn't have let his temper get the best of him.

"I'm working on finding us a more permanent meeting spot that allows all the dogs and not just Zelda," Dr. Firestone said. "But until then, we have to respect the health code here—"

"Uh... hey, guys?" Rose cracked the door open and poked her head in. "Sorry to interrupt, but you might want to see this."

Donovan's stomach dropped like he was on the first hill of a rollercoaster, but there was no corresponding rush of adrenaline to make the feeling better. It was all dread.

They got up and followed Rose out to the bar, where she picked up a remote and increased the volume on one of the TVs.

"Breaking news this afternoon, as authorities have discovered a body in the woods near the town of Steam Valley. The body is believed to be that of missing eighteen-year-old Darcy Cantrell, who disappeared in 2007. However, an autopsy and DNA testing will be required to confirm the identity of the remains. According to sources, firefighters found the body in the ashes left by the devastating Double R Fire, which could make identification more difficult."

They showed the picture of Darcy that had been used time and again since her disappearance—a school photo of a smirking girl with dyed-black hair and flat eyes lined in heavy black makeup. It looked like a mugshot, and it wasn't the real Darcy. It didn't show her wicked sense of humor or the big heart and bravery that compelled her to stand- up for the outcasts.

"Darcy Cantrell's disappearance has been the subject of a popular ongoing podcast," the anchor continued, "and a vocal group of fans recently started an online petition demanding answers as to why investigators' main suspect, Donovan Scott, remains at large. While it is too soon to say what led to Miss Cantrell's disappearance and possible death, this discovery is a tragic development for a community already devastated by the wildfire—"

"Turn it off," Donovan said and sank into a chair at one of the high-top tables. He scrubbed his hands over his head. "Fuck."

"What can we do?" Sawyer asked.

Donovan lifted his head to stare at the three men. Veronica, as usual, had

hung back and still hovered by the door to the back room. “Does anyone have a time machine?”

“*If I did, I wouldn’t be stuck using sign language to communicate,*” Pierce signed.

“And I wouldn’t be blind,” Sawyer said.

Zak stared pointedly down at his metal leg.

“Yeah, okay, I get it.” Donovan chuckled, but there was no humor in it. “Fresh out of time machines.”

“What if we investigate ourselves?” Zak suggested. “Our tactical K9 program is on hold until the rescue is rebuilt, so we have nothing but time on our hands and we have the skills. Pierce and I could poke around town while Sawyer does some research online—”

“I do love internet sleuthing,” Sawyer said.

Zak gestured toward him in a sweeping motion, a nonverbal, “*See?*”

Donovan held up his hands. “Slow down, Uno. How is poking around town and reading a bunch of true crime blogs gonna help? And Ash won’t like it.”

“Fuck Ash. What?” Zak asked when everyone just stared at him. “He’s my brother-in-law. I’m allowed to call him out when he’s being a jackass. We were all friends once—hell, basically brothers—but I haven’t seen him doing jack-shit to help clear your name.”

“Because,” Ash said with barely restrained patience as he pushed through the front door of the pub, “my job isn’t to clear his name. It’s to find the truth.”

Rose scoffed and gave up on wiping down the bar. “Yeah, okay.”

“Do you have a problem with me?” Ash snapped, which surprised the hell out of Donovan. He glanced at Zak, who whistled softly and backed up a step, hands raised as if to say, “*Nope, I’m staying out of this.*”

Ash was usually a stoic man, quiet and shuttered, communicating mainly in grunts—unless it was with his sister. Anna was the only one who could get under that hard outer shell he’d built around himself. Except, apparently, Rose Galasso could, too, because Ash was simmering with aggravation now as he planted his feet, crossed his arms, and faced off with her. He looked rougher than he had when Donovan saw him earlier in the week, with his hair sticking up from multiple agitated passes of a hand and heavy shadows darkening his eyes. The fire and investigation were getting to him, fraying his nerves.

Someone needed to slow him down before he self-destructed.

“Yeah, you know, I do have a problem with you, Sheriff.” Rose slung the towel over her shoulder and planted her hands on her hips. “You talk all high and mighty about truth, but the sheriff’s department doesn’t exactly have a stellar reputation when it comes to finding the truth, especially when dealing with society’s most marginalized people.”

“Maybe that was true under the last administration,” Ash admitted, though it seemed to pain him to do so. “But I’m going to start changing things around here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Good luck with that. Do you even *know* this town? Have you ever actually sat down with any of the people here and asked them how they want things to change?”

“No,” he said, voice tight, his patience obviously on its last fraying thread. “I haven’t exactly had time for fireside chats.”

“Make the time.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll add it to my to-do list right after I corral the media, figure out who killed Darcy Cantrell, and protect everyone from this wildfire—which, it was just confirmed five minutes ago, was started by arson, so my list just grew exponentially longer because now I have to find a fucking arsonist. But be honest, Rose. You can’t really be too concerned with the state of our town and its marginalized people when you opened a pub here to profit off our rampant alcoholism.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She snapped the towel off her shoulder and stormed away, slamming her office door hard enough to rattle the bottles on the shelf behind the bar.

“Yikes,” Pierce signed.

“That sounded like a conversation Zelda and I want to nope out of,” Sawyer agreed and started toward the door with Zelda leading the way. “See you guys next week. Unless you do decide to investigate, then I’m in.”

Ash swung toward the remaining group, his eyes intense as a muscle twitched under his beard. “Nobody here is investigating any-fucking-thing, got it?”

Zak gave a noncommittal shrug and also walked toward the door. Pierce hesitated, then followed.

“I mean it, Hendricks!” Ash’s voice boomed after them. “We may be family now, but that won’t stop me from throwing your ass in jail for obstruction.”

“Your sister will love you for that,” Zak called back, unperturbed.

Ash groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a raging headache. “Of all the men she could’ve married...”

Dr. Firestone took the long way around Donovan but patted Ash’s arm soothingly as she passed him. “You know he just likes pushing your buttons, Sheriff. Don’t let him see how much it bugs you, and he’ll eventually stop.”

“Easier said than done, Doctor.”

“I know.” She gave a sympathetic smile as she left.

The front door clicked shut, leaving Donovan and Ash alone in the bar.

Donovan was still waiting for that next rollercoaster hill. It was going to be a killer when it finally came, and he suspected Ash was here to push him over the edge. “So... the fire was arson?”

Ash paced a few steps, his hands bladed on his hips. “Yeah. Someone doused the back of the barn in accelerant and struck a match.”

“At the risk of sounding like Zak—I told you so.” But he couldn’t find any joy in being right. “There was someone in the barn with me that night.”

Ash parted his lips to protest, but Donovan held up a hand, stopping him.

“And it wasn’t Tiago coming to my rescue. I don’t know why he lied, but I saved myself, and Sasha didn’t know him. We saw him out to dinner the other night, and she didn’t recognize him as one of the firefighters she flagged down. You need to talk to him again because his story isn’t adding up.”

Ash growled and continued pacing. “Don’t tell me how to do my job.” After several minutes dragged by in silence, he stopped moving, took a deep breath, then finally met Donovan’s gaze. “I need you to come in for questioning regarding Darcy.”

There it was—the second rollercoaster drop. And this hill catapulted him straight into his worst nightmare. “Are you arresting me?”

“If I were going to arrest you, you’d be in cuffs already. This is just a routine follow-up.”

“Routine, my ass.” He thought of the chicken teriyaki rice bowl he’d asked Rose to store in the fridge under the bar. He was already running late to take it to Sasha for lunch. “Does it have to be right now?”

“No, but I’d appreciate it if you could make an appointment with my secretary within the next two days.” Ash dug a card out of his wallet and held it out. “The number’s on there.”

He didn’t make a move to accept the card. “Okay.”

Ash exhaled hard in exasperation. “I shouldn’t have to tell you how urgent this is, Van. With that podcast stirring up the public, we need to get ahead of the press on this, and the only way to do that is if you talk to me.”

“I understand.”

Ash held out the card again.

He waved it away. “I don’t need it. Give me an hour, and I’ll come in. I want to get this over with.”

Ash studied him with narrowed eyes for several moments. Finally, he gave a curt nod. “One hour. Please don’t do anything stupid like skip town.”

Donovan breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m not going anywhere. I loved Darcy. It was a stupid, toxic, teenage kind of love, but she was my first everything, and I still care about her. I want to know what happened to her more than anyone.”

Ash’s expression softened. “I know you do. But, speaking as your friend and not the sheriff—”

“I though we weren’t friends.”

Ash growled at that but continued, “I have to warn you that things are about to get ugly.”

“I know.”

“One hour, Van.”

“I’ll be there.” He watched Ash leave, his mind racing. Unlike Sheriff Jerry Tennison, Ash had to know he was innocent, so why did agreeing to the interview feel like a step toward the gallows?

Fuck.

He had to go to Sasha, tell her what was happening, and prepare her for the worst. And he should probably contact a lawyer. He never called one when he was interviewed as a dumb eighteen-year-old—a mistake he didn’t plan to make a second time.

He had a lot to do in only an hour.

Since Rose was still in her office, he stepped behind the bar himself to retrieve Sasha’s lunch. When he straightened from the fridge, he found himself face-to-face with a ghostly pale woman. She had huge dark eyes and hollow cheeks—a walking personification of the word haunted. He stumbled back a step in shock before his busted mind realized it wasn’t actually a ghost or another goddamn hallucination.

“Veronica.” Her name left him on a hard exhale of relief. “Jesus. Warn a guy before you go sneaking around.”

A bit of color returned to her cheeks. “Sorry.”

Veronica Martens was an agoraphobic mess of a human, but she had ventured out of her comfort zone to join Redwood Coast Rescue’s K9 unit, which he had to give her credit for. Given what she’d survived, it was brave of her even to try. But in the end, it proved to be too much, and she retreated back to her home, emerging only for their group therapy sessions. Really, it was amazing she’d set foot in the Mad Dog at all—even if it was only for therapy while the pub was closed.

“I thought you left.” He hadn’t seen her since Rose interrupted the session and assumed she’d crept out of the back to avoid all the drama.

“I was going to, but...” She hesitated and hunched in on herself.

“Are you okay?” He started to reach for her shoulder, remembering a half-second too late that it was the wrong move to make. The poor woman had been brutally raped while in the military and didn’t trust men. Their group was exposure therapy for her.

She flinched back. “Sorry. I should go.” Pulling up the hood of her sweatshirt, she nearly sprinted toward the door.

He hurried around the bar to catch her. “Vee, wait.”

To his surprise, she did stop. She drew a breath that shook her thin shoulders, then slowly turned back to him. “I should’ve mentioned something sooner, but I wasn’t sure it was my place. Before she died, Chrissy told me something about—” She broke off and glanced nervously around. She reminded him of a rabbit, constantly searching for threats, ready to run at the first hint of one.

He shook his head, not understanding where she was going with this. “Hang on, you mean Chrissy Jimenez? Our Chrissy from group.”

“Yes. She was the closest thing I had to a friend. We bonded over—” Veronica bit down on her trembling lower lip, then drew another deep, fortifying breath. “Over our shared trauma. Right before she died, she was... you know, working the steps. She was trying so hard to get clean so she could hold the military accountable for what happened to us, and she was on number nine—making amends to people she’d wronged. One of those people, she said, was you.”

“But she never wronged me.”

“She said you didn’t know about it.” Her gaze lifted briefly to the blank television, and suddenly, he understood.

He sank down onto one of the bar stools, stunned. “Chrissy was at the

party on Hidden Beach.”

Veronica nodded.

“Holy shit.” He hadn’t known Chrissy back then. She’d been new in town, having transferred to Redwood Coast High School just a few months before. He didn’t meet her until much later, after they’d both returned home broken from their military experiences. “She knew something about what happened to Darcy. That’s why she thought she had to make amends.”

Another nod.

He jumped off the stool so fast it tipped over. “Did she tell you what she saw?”

“I’m sorry.” Veronica shook her head and retreated to the door. “I don’t know what good this information does now, but Chrissy was deeply sorry for hurting you by not speaking up back then. I just thought you should know.”

chapter eighteen

“THIS IS REALLY GOOD,” Sasha said and took another bite of the teriyaki bowl. “Like, Michelin-starred restaurant good. Where did you learn to cook?”

Donovan raised a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Mostly Mom. She loved her kitchen.”

She speared a piece of broccoli. “That was one of the first things Anna said to me after the fire—how much she’d loved her kitchen. I’ve never had an attachment to mine, but if you keep cooking meals like this in it, I might —” She broke off and poked him with the handle of her fork. “Earth to Donovan.”

“Sorry.” He put the lid back on his bowl and returned it to the bag. As much as he loved their lunches together, his stomach was too tied up in knots to eat.

Her smile faded. “What’s wrong?”

All right. No putting it off any longer. “Ash wants me to go in for questioning regarding Darcy.”

Sasha sucked in a deep breath, then pushed back her shoulders like she was preparing for a fight. “We knew this was coming.”

“There’s more.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“I was over at the Mad Dog for group when Ash came in to request an interview. After he left, Veronica approached me and said something that...” He trailed off because he still couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

“Okay, Donovan. Now you’re scaring me.”

“Sorry, angel. I don’t mean to. The news just knocked me for a loop and I’m still processing it.”

“News about Darcy?”

“And Chrissy Jimenez.”

“What?”

“Chrissy was at the party that night. I think she witnessed what happened to Darcy, but she was too afraid to say anything at the time. She was going to, though. That’s what Veronica told me. Chrissy was at the making amends part of the 12-step program and she was going to come forward.”

“But then she died.”

He nodded. “All this time, we’ve been thinking it was a tragic accident. That her addiction got the best of her. But her death is too convenient to be a coincidence.”

Sasha’s eyes widened, and she set down her fork with a clatter. “Are you saying that someone killed Chrissy to keep her from talking about what she saw?”

“It’s possible, right? I’m not just grasping at straws here?”

“More than possible. Donovan, this is huge.”

“But do I tell Ash about all this? I don’t have any evidence other than Veronica’s hear-say. Can I trust him to look into this?”

“Ash is a good man, and I know he’ll listen. But,” she added after a beat, “I also know you think my opinion is clouded by the crush I had on him. So, what does your intuition say?”

Donovan turned his gaze inward and took stock. His intuition told him that Ash was a good cop, but it also said there was something deeply wrong with the whole situation. The web of lies surrounding Darcy’s—and now Chrissy’s—deaths kept getting more tangled and he was starting to suspect a cover-up.

“I want to believe that Ash is on the level, that he’ll do the right thing. But I can’t take any chances. This is too important and it’s all too murky, too... complicated. Ash does not like gray areas.” And he couldn’t bring himself to trust Ash completely—not when the stakes were this high. He needed to find proof before he could come forward with any of this information. “I feel like we’re missing something big, something important.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” Donovan said. “But I do know one thing. I need to find out what happened to Chrissy. If she was killed because she was going to talk, then we need to find who did it—because that person will clear me of Darcy’s murder.”

“Then let’s do it.” She stood and gathered the remains of her lunch.

“Don’t you have patients to see?”

“I was going to surprise you and take the afternoon off.” She gave a sheepish smile and shrugged. “So... surprise!”

He caught her around the waist and pulled her down onto his lap. “Accompanying me to an interrogation was probably not the afternoon you had planned for us, was it?”

“No, I had sexier things in mind.” She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “But that can wait. Let’s go clear your name first.”

As they left the clinic, a woman with sleek blond hair and glasses leaped from a nondescript sedan parked near his Jeep. The plate was from out of state, indicating a rental. “Mr. Scott, could I have a moment of your time? I’m Alexis Summers with the Cold Truth podcast—”

Donovan’s shoulders tightened, but he didn’t turn toward the woman’s voice. He put a hand on the small of Sasha’s back and guided her toward her car.

“We heard a body’s been discovered that could potentially be Darcy’s and—”

“I have nothing to say.”

“Seems like an innocent man would have a lot to say.”

“No comment.”

“Don’t you want your side of the story told?”

“Nope.”

Alexis grabbed for Sasha’s arm.

Donovan growled and swung Sasha out of the way, planting himself between the two women as a shield. “I said no comment.”

Alexis was undeterred. She stood on her toes to address Sasha over his shoulder. “Dr. LeBlanc! Do you know what he’s been accused of?”

“Leave. Now.” His jaw was clenched so tightly he couldn’t get out more than those two clipped words.

Sasha laid a soothing hand on his arm and stepped from behind him. She faced the podcaster and gave her best customer service smile—the one that said you’re-a-fucking-idiot-but-I-have-to-be-nice—and he fell even more madly in love with her for it.

“Yes, I’m well aware of the accusations,” she said. “I also know he didn’t do it, and you can quote me on that. He doesn’t owe you or anyone an explanation. Now leave us alone before I call the police. This is private property.”

Alexis backed away, throwing her hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Fine, but just remember, Mr. Scott, the truth always comes out in the end.”

Donovan watched her go, his hands trembling with anger and the afterburn of adrenaline. He took a deep, steadying breath and turned to face Sasha, who was staring up at him with a mixture of concern and admiration. She believed him, and that was all he needed to know.

He pulled her into his arms and lowered his forehead to hers. “I love you.”

She froze, going rigid in his arms.

Shit, too soon. He realized it the moment the words left his mouth and wished he could call them back. He didn’t want her to feel obligated to say them before she was ready.

“Donovan...” She backed away, and her gaze darted around the parking lot, looking everywhere but at him.

A pit opened in his stomach. “I know. I shouldn’t have said that, but it kinda feels like I’m on death row about to take that final march, so I wanted you to know. Just in case this goes very wrong.”

“Don’t say that.” She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. “And I do have feelings for you, but it’s—I don’t know if it’s—I’m not ready to—” She broke off like she couldn’t figure out how to continue.

“Hey, angel.” He hooked a finger under her chin and lifted, waiting until she opened her eyes before he spoke again. “It’s okay.” He brushed his thumb across her cheekbone and leaned in to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. “We don’t have to put a label on anything right now. Let’s just take things one day at a time, yeah?”

She nodded, her relief palpable. “We should go. You don’t want to be late to meet Ash.”

“Yeah,” he said on a hard exhale and took a second to fortify himself. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.”

episode 6: darcy's last words

Welcome back, Truth Seekers. I'm your host, Alexis Summers, and today, we'll read an excerpt from Darcy Cantrell's diary, which sheds some light on her relationship with Donovan and her plans for the future.

Oct 26, 2007

Van's leaving. He signed up to join the Marines. He's going to boot camp right after graduation.

I HATE HIM!

This wasn't the plan! We're supposed to escape together! But the fucker is leaving me here in this shitty little town to rot. He said it's only for a little while. He said he'd come back for me after boot camp, and we can get married and then I can go wherever he gets stationed. He'll get me a ring tonight to prove he's serious.

But then what?

That doesn't sound like an escape to me. That sounds like the same trap both of our moms fell into. Marry young. Pop out a kid we don't really want. Struggle for money our whole lives until he starts drinking every night (he already drinks too much) and we end up in some shitty trailer park in the middle of fucking nowhere, working back-breaking, minimum-wage jobs to barely pay the bills.

I don't think Van would ever hit me, but I bet both of our moms thought the same thing when they got married. Whatever.

I don't need him.

I have \$1500 saved and made another \$80 in tips tonight. Winter will be slow at the diner, but I can make up for it at the truck stop, and if I stay here and work full-time through tourist season, I'll have enough money to go anywhere by the end of summer.

Goodbye, Cali-fucking-fornia!

I'm thinking New York City. I could get lost there, and nobody will ever find me. I'll become someone else. Someone happy. I really just don't want to be me anymore.

Okay, I've made up my mind. I'm going to break up with Van tonight at the bonfire. I don't want to go, but it will be worth it to shoot him down in front of all those stupid kids from school he thinks are his friends.

I'll hurt him before he can hurt me.

PS - Van just called. He's on his way to get me. He said he got a family ring from his mom. It was his grandma's or some shit. And now I'm having second thoughts. I hate him for ruining all of our plans, but he's going to give me his grandma's ring! How could I not still love him, too?

PPS- He's here. I might rip this out and burn it when I get back. Or maybe I'll just leave tonight and never return. We'll see what happens.

Could this prove that Darcy ran away? Or could it be a clue to something more sinister? We know that Donovan Scott was the last person seen with her before she disappeared. And now, with this diary entry, we have reason to believe that Darcy may have been planning to break up with him and leave

town on her own. We also know from the interrogation recording that Darcy really did go through with the breakup at the bonfire, and Donovan admitted he was angry at her. Could Donovan have been jealous of Darcy's plans to leave without him? Could his motive have been to prevent her from leaving?

Furthermore, Donovan was uncooperative during his initial questioning with Sheriff Jerry during the search of his home. Remember, he lied about his whereabouts on the night of her disappearance and seemed evasive when asked about his relationship with her. While this all points to him as a suspect, some could argue that he was just a scared teenager who had a history of bad encounters with the sheriff. We must remember that to this day, he has not been charged with a crime and is innocent until proven guilty.

It's all speculation at this point, but one thing is for sure: Darcy's last words, as recorded in her diary, paint a picture of a young woman who was unhappy with her life and desperate for a change. Did she finally make that change on the night she disappeared? Or did something more sinister happen to her?

And that's it for today's episode of Cold Truth. We explored the last words of Darcy Cantrell, and while we can't say for certain what happened to her, it's clear that her relationship with Donovan and her desire to escape played a big role in her final moments. But the question remains: is Donovan Scott guilty or not? Some believe that Sheriff Jerry may have focused too much on Donovan and missed other potential leads. We'll explore that and more in our final episode.

Stay curious, Truth Seekers, and stay safe. See you next time!

chapter **nineteen**

THE LAWYER WAS ALREADY WAITING in the parking lot beside the sheriff's department. He walked over as Donovan parked and stretched out a hand. "Donovan Scott? I'm Callum Holden. I believe you spoke with my secretary about needing representation."

"Yeah." He climbed out of his Jeep and accepted the strong handshake. "I know it's short notice. Thanks for coming." When Sasha climbed out of her car moments later and joined them, he placed a possessive hand on her back. "This is Sasha. We can talk freely in front of her."

"Good to know. Hi, Sasha." Holden smiled warmly at her, but it wasn't warm enough to spark off the possessive beast living in Donovan's chest. He didn't feel the need to mark his territory because Holden didn't come off as a threat.

The lawyer had sandy blond hair swept back from an open face that inspired honesty. His suit was nice but a little rumpled, like he'd worn it for one too many days in a row. He kind of reminded Donovan of Winston, Zak and Anna's goofy Golden Retriever, but his reputation as a defense lawyer was more like that of a pit bull. He was mean and persistent and exactly the kind of man Donovan wanted in his corner.

Holden looked over at the blocky building that served as the main office of the Lost County Sheriff's Department and gave a little wince. "I would've liked more time to prep beforehand, but I reviewed the basics before coming over. We got this. I'm good at winging it." He pulled a notebook from the bag on his shoulder and grabbed the pen tucked behind his ear. "So, let me get some things straight before we walk in there. I understand that you're being questioned about the disappearance of your ex-girlfriend."

"Yeah. I've been their only suspect since it happened."

“So why are they dragging you in now? It’s been... what? Fifteen years?”

“This isn’t the first time they’ve interviewed me. I was brought in twice for questioning back when Darcy disappeared. I was eighteen and scared and stupid and never asked for a lawyer.”

“Okay. I’ll see about getting hold of those interviews. Now, I know this is a difficult and stressful situation, but I want to assure you that I’m going to do everything I can to protect your rights and defend you against any charges that may be brought.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Sasha reached for his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “You probably hear this all the time, Mr. Holden, but he’s innocent.”

“Oh, please, just Cal.” He glanced back and forth between them, then looked at their tightly joined hands. He nodded, a smile kicking up the corner of his mouth. “You’re right. I do hear it all the time, but I don’t always believe it. This time? I do. It’s a nice change of pace.” He went back to making notes. “Do you know what kind of questions they’re going to ask?”

Donovan shrugged. “Not really. Ash just said he wants to talk to me about what happened. He said it’s routine.”

Cal’s eyebrows winged up. “You personally know the sheriff?”

“We were friends in high school.”

“Okay. Yeah, we can work with that. Before we go in, a few more things.” His whole demeanor suddenly changed like he’d flipped on the switch in his brain labeled work, and Donovan saw a glimpse of that pit bull. “Remember your Miranda rights—you have the right to remain silent and the right to an attorney. If you don’t feel comfortable answering a question, or if you need time to think about your answer, you can say that you want to speak to me first.”

“Got it.”

“You want to be honest and straightforward but don’t give away any information that could be used against you. It’s important to be calm, clear, and consistent in your answers.”

“I can do that.”

“If they try to pressure you or intimidate you, we’re out. You have the right to be treated fairly and respectfully, and I’ll make sure that happens.”

Sasha exhaled a deep breath. “Thank you for that, Cal. He needed someone other than me in his corner.”

“It’s my job.” Cal checked the time on his phone. “And now we’d better

head in.”

“Oh, God.” Sasha turned into his arms and hugged him tightly around the waist like she didn’t want to let him go. “I’ll be waiting right here for you.”

He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair, drawing strength from her conviction in his innocence. He wanted to tell her he loved her again but kept his mouth shut and instead kissed her lightly before stepping back.

He faced his lawyer and squared his shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Ash was surprised to see the lawyer. He hid it, but Donovan knew him well enough to see the flash of shock as Cal introduced himself.

“I appreciate you coming,” Ash said and waved a hand at the table between them. “Please, have a seat. I’ll try to make this as quick and painless as possible.”

“Isn’t it a bit unconventional to have the sheriff handling this interview by himself?” Cal said in a light, conversational tone as he pulled out a chair and sat.

It’s because Ash is a control freak. But Donovan didn’t say that out loud. He didn’t figure it would help his case to piss off the sheriff right from the jump.

“My deputies are all busy in other parts of the county dealing with the fire,” Ash said evenly.

“Hm.” Cal produced a small digital recorder from his briefcase and set it on the table. “I’ll be recording this, too, if you don’t mind. Or even if you do mind.”

“That’s fine. This is just a routine follow-up to clarify a few things.” Ash pulled out the chair across from them and sat. He started the official recorder and quickly listed off the date, time, and names of everyone present. “Okay, let’s start at the beginning: the party on Hidden Beach on the night of October 26, 2007. Tell me about that night.”

“You should know, Ash. You were there.”

“I want to hear it in your own words. For the record.”

Donovan drew a breath and rehashed it all—the ongoing fight with Darcy about him joining the Marines; her dismissal of his marriage proposal; the blow-up fight at the party, where she slapped him before taking off into the woods; his unsuccessful attempt to find her; his stop at the gas station before going home.

Seemed like, after fifteen years, it should be easier to talk about, but

reliving that night still left a black hole in the center of his chest.

Ash nodded. "Okay. There's one more thing I have to ask about. The blood found in your home, on the floor, and on your bat."

Cal held up a hand. "If Darcy Cantrell was killed in the woods near Hidden Beach, then I don't see how this question is relevant."

"It's relevant if it's the murder weapon," Ash said flatly.

"Except it's already a well-established fact, verified by multiple witnesses, that my client didn't have his baseball bat with him that night."

Ash's lips thinned, and aggravation flashed in his eyes, but none of it seeped into his voice. "Very well. Is there anything you'd like to add?"

Donovan opened his mouth but then glanced at his lawyer. Might be better to run this by him first. "Can you give us a minute?"

Ash grumbled low in his throat but shut off the recorder and left. After a quick conference with Cal, they let him back in, and he restarted the recording.

Cal stood. "Sheriff, my client has potentially pertinent information to the investigation, but he requests his source remain anonymous."

Ash's eyebrows winged up, and there was a whole lot of "*what the hell?*" on his expression before he shuttered it. "Depends on the information."

Donovan spoke up. "The person who told me this doesn't need to be involved. Their identity has nothing to do with the information they provided."

Ash's silence stretched for several uncomfortable moments. "Fine. Go on."

So Donovan told him about the connection between Chrissy Jimenez and Darcy Cantrell.

"Jesus." Ash jabbed the stop button on the recorder and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table as he assaulted his scalp with both hands. "Van, that's now two women you've been involved with dying under suspicious circumstances, and you were the last person to see both of them alive. You gotta know how that looks."

"I wasn't involved with Chrissy," Donovan said.

"Bullshit. Everyone saw you two circling each other. If she hadn't died, it would've happened eventually, and we both know it."

"No, we decided we were better as friends. Nothing more."

"Did she not come forward in 2007 because she was protecting you?"

Donovan scoffed. "Why would I tell you about this lead now if she had

stayed silent for fifteen years to protect me?”

Ash opened his mouth, but Cal cut in. “If you plan on pursuing this line of questioning any further, Sheriff, we’re walking out the door.”

Ash sighed and leaned back in his seat, locking his hands behind his neck. “Fuck,” he said softly after a moment. “I knew there was something off about Chrissy’s overdose, but I couldn’t put my finger on it, and there was so much else going on at the time with Zak and Anna, Bella and Poppy—I just took it at face value. I should’ve looked at it closer. Fuck!” he said again with feeling.

“Ash, c’mon, man,” Donovan said. “You couldn’t have known it had anything to do with a fifteen-year-old missing persons case. Nobody could’ve. Chrissy was a drug addict, and, unfortunately, addicts overdose all the time. We had no reason to think it was anything else.”

Ash shook his head, his shock evident in his usually closed-off expression. “I can’t believe she knew what happened to Darcy. All these years, she knew and didn’t say.”

Donovan couldn’t blame him for his consternation. He’d had a similar response when Veronica told him the news. “Yeah, but I bet she said something to her brother. They were tight, and I told you Tiago’s been hiding something. You need to talk to him.”

“Is it possible she didn’t say anything because she was protecting her brother?” Cal suggested.

Ash and Donovan both shook their heads.

“He wasn’t at the party,” Donovan said. “He was only... what? Thirteen or fourteen at the time?”

“Sounds about right,” Ash said. “But as soon as he’s back from the fire, I’ll bring him in for an interview.”

“Well, Sheriff,” Cal said. “Is my client still a suspect, or is he free to go?”

Ash scowled at the lawyer for a moment, but then his gaze shifted to Donovan, and the scowl faded. “I’ve never considered you a suspect. Like I said, this was routine. It had to be done, and now I’ve crossed you off my list.”

Cal smirked, picked up his digital recorder from the table, and clicked it off. “Thanks, Sheriff Rawlings. That soundbite will be immensely helpful in court if you change your mind and decide to charge my client.”

Ash’s face dropped as he remembered there wasn’t only one recording device in the room. The guy really must be exhausted—he wasn’t usually one

to make sloppy mistakes like that.

Out in the hall, Ash caught Donovan's arm as he passed. "Hey." He nodded toward the lawyer's back. "I'm glad you hired a lawyer this time. If this goes sideways, Cal Holden is the right man to have in your corner."

chapter **twenty**

ASH WATCHED Donovan and Cal cross the dispatch center, then pause in the lobby to shake hands. He'd been telling the truth—he was glad Donovan had secured Cal Holden as a defense attorney. Cal was a massive pain in his ass, which meant he was excellent at his job. But he was also honest and always played within the rules of the justice system—bending them sometimes, but never breaking them. Lawyers didn't get much better than that guy.

Ash glanced around the dispatch center, taking in the rows of computers and the scatter of whiteboards. The dispatchers had a row of cubicles where they kept a finger on the pulse of the community, but the rest of the room was dedicated to his deputies. Several large maps of the county and surrounding areas covered the walls. The space was usually buzzing with activity, but, today, it was silent save for the low murmur from the dispatchers in the corner. All of his deputies were in the field, dealing with the fire.

He crossed the lobby and walked down the short hall to his office. On his desk sat the old paper file folder of Darcy's case that he'd dug up from the cold case archives. He grabbed it and the keys to his Tahoe. The former sheriff had been dodging his calls, but he knew where to find the man.

He drove to the golf course north of town, both surprised and disgusted to see the parking lot almost full. There was a fire raging to the south, and smoke hung thick in the air, but Christ forbid the country club types skipped their 18-holes.

He technically belonged to this club. He had a legacy lifetime membership since his several times over grandfather, flush with cash from the Gold Rush, had been one of the founding members. But he'd never had the patience for golf. Or for the snooty people who frequented this place.

He badged the guy at the reception desk, but it didn't get him anywhere

until he tapped into his inner Karen and demanded to speak to management. As soon as the manager spotted who was causing the ruckus, her entire demeanor shifted from pleasant, placating customer service representative to sycophant yes-woman, and he supposed there were some perks to being a legacy member. He was considered royalty here.

The manager pointed him toward the bar and restaurant overlooking the golf course, and he stalked through the tables, his mood souring with each step as he approached the table closest to the wall of windows. The former sheriff sat there with his son, Jerry Tennison Jr., or JT as he was often called, and Monarch Development CEO, Mark Salas.

The three of them were deep in conversation and didn't notice his approach until he tossed the file down in front of Jerry.

JT flinched at the slap of the file on the table.

Sheriff Jerry looked a little green as he stared down at it like it was a snake coiled to attack.

But not Mark Salas. He simply leaned back in his seat and offered his trademark smug smile. "Sheriff Rawlings. We don't see you around her often enough." He waved a hand at the empty seat at their table. "Care to join us?"

"You," Ash said and shoved a finger in the guy's face. "Are the entitled fuckhead with more money than brains who has been terrorizing my sister for over a year. I wouldn't dine with you even if we were the last two men on earth and you were on the fucking menu. I'd starve first."

Mark's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "It's just business, Sheriff. Nothing personal."

"It feels fucking personal." He turned his back on the asshole and stared at the former sheriff. "We need to talk."

Jerry cleared his throat. "Uh, well, can it wait? I'm in the middle of lunch and—"

"No, it can't wait. It's waited fifteen years." He opened the file and jabbed the picture of Darcy that the news kept flashing every few hours. "She's waited long enough."

JT stood up abruptly, his napkin sliding off his lap and fluttering to the tiled floor. "I, uh, need the restroom. I'll be back."

Ash ignored the little weasel. JT had never had a backbone, and, for a lawyer, he was shit at confrontation. Maybe that was why he'd gone into corporate law.

He pushed Jerry's plate aside and replaced it with the file. "What the hell

is this, Jerry? You tested the blood at the crime scene for blood type but not DNA. You didn't test the shoe. You didn't test the blood stain at Donovan's house. What about the bat? Why didn't you take it into evidence? You never even got Donovan's DNA or fingerprints." Both were on file now thanks to Donovan's service in the Marines, and he'd already sent them to the lab to be tested against the scant evidence collected in 2007, but that didn't negate the fact that Jerry hadn't done his job correctly.

The former sheriff's eyes skittered away. "Times were different back then. Policing was different. It didn't seem like a pertinent move at the time since we never had enough to arrest him."

"You could've at least asked during one of the interrogations if he'd provide them."

Jerry scoffed. "That kid was trouble with a capital T and had one massive chip on his shoulder. He wasn't going to provide anything willingly."

"He would've if it cleared his name."

Jerry said nothing.

"Then, today, the lab goes to check all of that evidence out of storage to see what we can still test, and it's just... gone."

"Stuff gets lost all the time, son. It's unfortunate, but it happens. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

Ash slapped a hand on the table, caging him in his seat. "C'mon, Jerry. You taught me everything I know. You're not a sloppy investigator, but this case file is so thin it barely needs a paperclip. So what happened?"

"Nothing happened. I investigated by the book, but without a body, we just never had a case."

"We have a body now." He'd have to be blind to miss the panicked flick of Jerry's gaze toward Mark. He shifted, positioning himself between them. "Why are you looking at him?"

"Sheriff Rawlings," a smooth voice said behind them. "This is hardly the time or the place for an interrogation."

Ash growled and straightened, turning to face the state attorney general. Thomas Parker was in his mid-fifties but still had the trim build of a younger man. His graying hair was always neatly combed back from his sharp, hawk-like features. JT stood directly behind the man with a self-satisfied look on his skinny weasel face.

"Tom, I suspect there's been long-standing corruption in my department, starting with the former sheriff here. I'm well within my purview to question

him.”

Tom’s too-white smile remained genial, even as his eyes flashed a warning. “Maybe just not at the club, hm? This has always been neutral ground. Your father and grandfathers would come here to settle disputes, not start them.”

“This is an investigation, not a dispute.”

“If you suspect corruption, my office will be happy to investigate,” he said, his voice still smooth as silk. “But this right here? Ash, this is dangerously close to police harassment. You should take a breath and leave before you do or say something you’ll regret.”

Ash glowered at him for several heavy seconds, then glanced at the former sheriff. Jerry was staring at the picture of Darcy with tiny beads of sweat gathering at his thinning hairline. Ash looked at Mark, who was utterly relaxed back in his seat, still wearing that smug grin.

And, in his gut, he knew he was looking at Darcy’s killer.

It explained so much—like why Monarch had been so desperate to get their hands on Rawlings land. The same land where her body was uncovered. Almost as if Mark knew she was there and had wanted to make sure she remained missing.

“I just remembered,” Ash said softly and picked up the file. “*You* were at the party that night, weren’t you?” He didn’t say more, didn’t level accusations. He wanted evidence first, but he also wanted Mark to know his days as a free man were numbered.

Mark’s grin slipped just a fraction.

It was all the confirmation Ash needed. He smiled at the four men, and he knew it was a predator’s smile from their wary expressions. “Have a nice lunch, gentlemen.”

chapter **twenty-one**

THE NEXT FEW days passed in a slog. As predicted, the media went nuts over the discovery of Darcy's body. The fire mostly kept reporters from flooding into town, but that didn't stop the talking heads on all the big stations from continuously rehashing the case, flashing that mug shot-like school picture of Darcy next to an actual mugshot of Donovan from when he was arrested for a bar fight a few years back.

People in town were looking at him differently. He'd never been welcomed back with open arms, but there had always been a layer of civility in their dislike. Now, many of them were downright hostile toward him. And he couldn't shake the sense that even Sasha was pulling away from him. They continued sleeping together every night, but she was quieter in the evenings than usual.

Who could blame her?

This was all a lot of stress for a fragile new relationship. Maybe he needed to back off, give her some space. He'd been too pushy, too demanding. He'd had a year to come to terms with his feelings for her, but she'd only had a few weeks. Coupled with everything else, it was a lot to deal with. He needed to give her more time, let her think things through.

Yeah, tonight he'd sleep in his own bed. Without her.

Goddammit.

When she left for work, he shut Matilda in the laundry room with a kiss on the nose and her air purifier going, then took Spirit home.

The house was too quiet. Too still. He instantly missed the distinct tippy-tapping of Matilda's paws on the hardwood floor. He missed Sasha's favorite perfume—summertime berries with notes of vanilla—that seemed to saturate every soft surface in her house. His place smelled of man and dog and faintly

of the wildfire smoke that still hazed the air.

Donovan sat on his couch and looked around. Although his living room had big windows that let in a lot of light, the walls felt like they were closing in on him. He felt trapped.

Even Spirit seemed sad. She wasn't her usual bouncy self. After roaming the house, looking in every room, she settled down by the door with a big sigh.

"You miss the rescue, don't you?"

She turned her puppy dog eyes up to him and gave another sigh.

"Yeah, me too."

They'd spent every free moment at Redwood Coast Rescue, training or running in the agility yard. And now it was all gone, burned to the ground because some asshole decided to light a fire during a drought.

He couldn't imagine how Zak and Anna and the girls felt now, having lost everything.

Some friend he was. He'd been so wrapped up in his own shit that he never even went to see if they needed help with anything.

He popped to his feet and called for Spirit but stalled out halfway down his front porch steps. He didn't even know where Zak and Anna were living right now. With Zak's parents? A hotel? Had they rented a place somewhere? He had to find out before he dropped by for a visit. And should he even be dropping by unannounced, given his current status as persona non grata in town? Probably not.

He glanced back at his house.

Nope, he wasn't going back inside. He continued on to his Jeep. There was a small dog park over by the high school that had a few agility obstacles. He could take Spirit there and run her through a few times.

Even though it was nearing the end of October, it was still warm and dry, without even a sprinkle of rain forecasted. The fire still raged on the horizon. They were going to lose the entire county if it didn't rain soon.

Nobody else was at the park, which he was thankful for. He unloaded Spirit and ran her through the agility course three times before settling into throwing her ball for her.

By the fifth time she brought the ball back and dropped it at his feet, he felt eyes on him. He glanced over his shoulder, hoping it was just his brain injury revving up his paranoia but fearing it was that podcaster coming back to bug him.

It was neither.

Bella stood there, frozen in surprise, with her backpack on her shoulder. She wore a lot of—in his opinion—unflattering make-up, and in the weeks since he last saw her, she'd cut off her blond dreadlocks. Her hair was now a springy cap of dark curls punctuated with shocks of fire-engine red.

She scowled at him. "What are you looking at?"

"Hey, it's a public park, kid." Donovan shrugged and scooped up the ball Spirit dropped at his feet. "I'm just playing with my dog." He nodded toward the high school, just barely visible through a line of trees. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"School sucks." Bella draped herself over the fence and watched in fuming silence as he threw the ball again.

Spirit took off like a rocket after it and had it back at his feet in seconds.

After a few more throws, Bella said, "She's really... focused."

"Yeah, she loves this ball."

Another beat of mulish silence passed, then the girl blurted, "Anna says I'm not focused enough on school."

"Is it my face?" Donovan wondered out loud and threw the ball again. "Does my face scream, *I wanna hear all about your problems?*"

Like he didn't have enough of his own.

She scoffed. "You're an asshole."

"I've been called worse." He had every intention of ending Spirit's play session and getting the hell away from the girl, but then he thought of Darcy. Maybe if she'd had someone to talk to—an adult in her life that really listened—things would've ended differently for her.

Aw, fuck.

"So it's back to 'Anna' now?" he asked, keeping his tone disinterested. "Not 'Mom'?"

"I don't know," she muttered and climbed up to sit on the fence. "I bet she wishes I was more like one of her dogs. Easy to train, listens to her every word."

Spirit dropped the ball at his feet and stared at it intensely as if daring it to move again. He smirked down at her. "You obviously haven't met my dog. She does what she wants, when she wants, and nobody's gonna tell her different."

"Not even you?"

"She listens to me. Eventually. Grudgingly."

“So you’re saying I should listen to Anna?”

“I’m not saying a damn thing, kid. Just telling you about my dog.”

She was silent for several seconds, and he hoped maybe that was the end of it. He’d tried. Wasn’t his fault she didn’t want to listen to him any more than she did her foster parents.

But then Bella hopped down from the fence and walked toward him. She picked up the ball and gave it a good, hard throw. Spirit flattened herself out and shot across the park, missing the catch by inches.

“I know she’s right,” Bella said finally. “But I’m no good at school. I’m so far behind everyone my age. They think I’m stupid.”

The flash of anger caught him off guard. He threw the ball harder than necessary—not that Spirit minded—then faced the girl. “Who said that? I’ll flatten them.”

Hope flared in her eyes. “Could you?” Then she groaned and shook her head. “No, I don’t need you to rescue me. It’s just... the mean girls. Every school has them.”

“Hate to tell ya, it’s not just schools.”

“Oh, so I get to hear their bullshit for the rest of my life? Great.”

“Yeah, but it changes. You’ll learn not to care what they think.”

“I don’t care now.”

He raised a brow at her.

She shrugged. “I don’t.”

“Uh-huh.” He tugged at one of her short curls. “Are they the reason for this?”

She ducked away and ran a hand over her head. “Hey, you don’t know what it’s like.”

“Nah, I get it, kid. More than you know. I grew up the same way. The outcast, the poor kid, the troublemaker.”

She blinked in shock, and some of the hostility drained out of her. “Was your mom evil like mine? I don’t mean Anna,” she added quickly. “Anna’s amazing. Annoying but amazing. I mean my real—” She stopped. “Well, I guess she wasn’t even my real mom, was she? I don’t know what to call her. Jessica? The woman who raised me? If you could call it raising. Whatever. *She* was evil. She killed my real parents. I know Ky is technically still alive, which is why Zak and Anna can’t adopt me, but he’s practically brain-dead because of some infection or... I don’t know. They don’t think he’ll wake up. Do you think he’ll wake up? If he does, I’ll have to go with him, and I don’t

want to. Yeah, he's my real dad, and I'm sure he's great, but I don't know him. If he doesn't wake up, but he doesn't die, then I'm stuck in foster care until the system forces me out into some transitional group home. I can't leave Poppy. And I don't want to leave Zak and Anna. But we don't have a home anymore, so maybe they want me to leave. Maybe it would be easier for them to take care of Poppy without me around fucking things up with my bad attitude. Do you think I should leave?"

She finally paused to suck in a shaking breath, and Donovan exhaled softly with relief. He practically had whiplash from trying to follow the girl's line of thinking and decided to answer her first question, which was less of a landmine than the others.

"It wasn't my mom," he said.

She impatiently wiped at her face with her sleeves and the heavy makeup around her eyes smeared. "What?"

"The evil one in my family? It wasn't my mom. My dad was an asshole who dealt with his shitty life choices by drinking himself stupid and beating on his wife and kid."

"Oh." She swallowed hard, but at least she seemed calmer now. "What happened to him?"

"He's dead. He got drunk and fell off his boat."

"Good."

"Yeah. It made life easier for Mom and me."

Bella released an explosive sigh, and her shoulders dropped, heavy with more weight than a teenager should ever have to bear. "See, and I thought getting away from Jessica would make life easier for Poppy and me. Poppy's doing so good. She's thriving. For her, it's like nothing ever happened. Anna and Zak are Mom and Dad, and it's just... like, in her mind, that's how it always was. I don't think she remembers our life before."

"That's good, right? You should want that for her. She doesn't need to remember."

"I know, but... it was just the two of us against the world for so long. I miss that sometimes."

What did he say to that? He was so far out of his league with this conversation. "Don't you think you should be telling Anna this and not me?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug. "You're easier to talk to. You get it. You're like me."

No, he wasn't like her, but she was like Darcy. He saw so many

similarities between them it made his heart ache. They had the same scrappy toughness, the same take-no-prisoners attitude. The difference was Darcy never had a chance, while Bella had a strong support system of people who loved her and only wanted the best for her—even if she didn't realize it.

He released a pent-up breath and squeezed the back of his neck to ease the tension creeping up into his busted skull. "All right, kid. Give me your phone."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she slid the phone from her back pocket and passed it to him.

He tapped in his number and saved it to her contacts before handing it back. "You can call anytime, okay? I'll always answer. But you need to tell Zak and Anna how you're feeling. Tell them about the mean girls at school—everything."

Bella rolled her lip between her teeth. "Are you going to tell them?"

"Only if you don't." He held out a fist. "Deal?"

She sighed in the way only teenagers could, somehow imbuing that single exhale with irritation and *oh-my-God-you're-so-lame*.

But then she rolled her eyes and bumped his fist with hers. "Fine. Deal."

chapter **twenty-two**

SASHA SLOWED to a walk near the dog park and breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted exactly who Bella was speaking with.

Donovan.

When Anna called her in a panic saying Bella had left school and she couldn't get a hold of her, and she and Zak couldn't leave the meeting they were in, Sasha had handed off all of her afternoon appointments and jumped in the car to search for the girl. And when she'd pulled into the high school parking lot and saw Bella in the park, talking to a hulking shadow of a man, her heart had nose-dived into her stomach. She'd grabbed her pepper spray from her glovebox and bolted down the path with every intention of going Auntie Bear on the perv.

But it was just Donovan.

Thank God.

As she drew closer, she caught the tail-end of their conversation, and her heart melted. He was such a good man. He didn't see it because he'd never been given the chance to see his worth. The local gossips didn't see it because they didn't want to—it was more fun to gossip about the town's bad boy. And the media only saw a big, tattooed man with hard eyes and a troubled past.

But she saw his heart, and it was pure gold.

And she loved him for it.

God, she'd been so stupid these last few days for silently freaking out about his confession of love and pulling away from him. She'd started worrying that he was like her dad, using her as a rock to anchor against his problems. And what if, like with her dad, she wasn't enough to keep him here? What if his demons got the best of him, too? If she let herself love him,

would he eventually take a gun to his head and leave her alone and devastated? She wouldn't survive that grief a second time.

Did she really want to risk that?

Yes.

And no.

Dammit. She should've talked to him and aired her concerns so they could work through them like adults instead of pushing him away and burying herself in work. She'd blame it on the fact she was new to this whole relationship thing. She'd spent so much of her adult life laser-focused on school and then on her job that she'd never had more than a casual fling before him.

She'd have to make it up to him.

She quickly tapped out a text letting Anna know Bella was safe, then opened the gate to the dog park and stepped inside. Spirit dropped her beloved ball and raced over, her tail waving like a happy flag.

Sasha bent to give her a full-body scratch. "Hi, girl. I'm happy to see you, too."

Both Donovan and Bella looked over at her.

Bella made a face. "Mom sent you?"

"You scared her."

"I wasn't running away or anything like that." At Donovan's gentle nudge, the girl rolled her eyes and scooped up her backpack. "I guess... I just need to talk to her. Can you take me to her?"

"Pretty sure Anna would kill me if I didn't." Sasha held open the gate to let Bella out, then added, "Go up to my car. I'll be there in a second."

Neither she nor Donovan spoke again until Bella was too far away to hear.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she said back.

A hint of a smile curved the edge of his lips as he nodded to the can of bear spray in her hand. "That's some heavy-duty firepower."

"Oh. Yeah, well..." Heat rushed into her cheeks, and she tucked the can into the pocket of her scrubs. "I thought you were a pervert."

His eyes twinkled. "Only for you, angel."

She exhaled a laugh and stepped forward, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Thank you for those things you said to Bella. She needed to hear it from someone impartial."

He pulled her in tight to him. “She reminds me so much of Darcy. I kept thinking if I didn’t hear her out, we’d be finding her body in the woods somewhere, and that would ruin Zak.”

She pulled away enough to cradle his stubbled cheeks in her hands. “You’re a good man, Donovan Scott. A good friend.”

He leaned into her touch. “Jesus, Sasha. I’ve missed you.”

“I know.” She stood on her toes to kiss him lightly on the lips. “And that’s my fault. I was all up in my head and pulling away, and that’s not what I want for us. We should talk about everything.” She glanced toward Bella’s retreating form, then back at him. “Right now, I have to take her to Zak and Anna. They were in arbitration with Monarch’s CEO when the school called. It sounds like the company is no longer interested in the land and is trying to get them to drop the counter-suits they’d filed. It’s weird they’d suddenly lose interest, right? If anything, you’d think they’d be more interested after the fire because they don’t have to clear as many trees for the resort.”

“Unless they were after the lumber.” Donovan’s lip curled. “Fucking Mark Salas. He’s probably cooking up some other slimeball scheme to get what he wants.”

“Ugh, I hope not. Zak and Anna have been through enough.” She stepped back from him but didn’t release his hand right away. “I need to go back to work after I drop Bella off. I threw all of my afternoon patients at poor Dr. Richards, and he’s getting too old for that heavy of a caseload. But can we have dinner later?”

He raised her hand to his lips. “I want nothing more.”

She almost said she loved him. Almost blurted it out right there in the dog park, but bit down on her tongue at the last second. They had to talk first.

She released his hand. “I’ll see you later.”

Up in the parking lot, she found Bella leaning against her car with tears trailing silently down her cheeks.

“Oh, sweetie. What’s wrong?” She knew better than to touch the girl—Bella didn’t like hugs—so she stepped up to the driver’s side and unlocked the car door.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I just feel so... lost,” she said, her voice small.

Sasha leaned against the car and bumped her shoulder to Bella’s. “You know, it’s okay to feel lost sometimes. But you’re not alone, okay? You have your parents and grandparents. Your sister. Me and Donovan and the rest of

Redwood Coast Rescue. We all love you very much.”

Bella rested her head on Sasha’s shoulder. “It’s just...everything is so fucked up. Mom and Dad not being able to adopt me. The fire. School. I don’t know where I fit in. I feel like a burden.”

“You’re not a burden,” Sasha said firmly. “You’re family.”

Bella gave her a tentative smile, but Sasha could tell she was still struggling with something. “What’s really going on, Bella? You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

Bella hesitated for a moment before blurting out, “I think I might be gay.”

Oh, wow. Sasha’s heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t been expecting that. “Okay,” she said calmly. “It’s fine if you are. And if you’re worried Zak and Anna will reject you because of it, they’d never. Not in a million years. They love you and they want you to be happy. And you know Zak’s sister—your Aunt Zara—is gay and everyone accepts her and loves her just as she is.”

“I know. I’ve talked to her about it some, but I didn’t tell her I am. Or think I am. Or whatever. Just pretended I was curious.”

“Well, you should tell her. She can help you deal with all the things us straight people can’t understand. And you should talk to your parents about it.”

“I’m scared,” Bella admitted, her voice trembling. “What if they don’t accept me because I’m not blood-related like Zara is? What if they think there’s something wrong with me? Or I’m, like, sick or something? What if they decide I’m not worth the trouble of keeping?”

Sasha rubbed her back soothingly. “Hey, listen to me. You are not wrong or sick or anything like that. You are perfect just the way you are. And if anyone ever tells you otherwise...” She ventured a guess: “Like the mean girls at school?”

Bella nodded miserably.

“They’re the ones who are wrong. And as for your parents, there is no way in hell they’d ever give you up. They are fighting tooth and nail to adopt you.”

Bella wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “Thanks, Sasha. You always know what to say.”

Sasha smiled at her. “That’s what honorary aunts are for. You ready to go see your parents?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Sasha slid behind the wheel and Bella climbed into the passenger’s seat.

Just as she was about to turn on the engine, Spirit came streaking toward the car, barking like crazy.

Bella froze with her seatbelt half buckled. “What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard her make that sound before.”

She saw Donovan racing up the path behind the dog. He was waving his arms and shouting something.

She rolled down the window and at first couldn’t hear him over Spirit’s frantic barks. Then his shouts registered.

“Get out of the car! Out of the car! Bomb!”

Sasha’s heart dropped like a rock into the pit of her stomach, and she very slowly unfastened her seatbelt. “Bella. Don’t touch anything and get out slowly and carefully.”

Bella pushed open her door and slid from the seat—

“No!” Donovan’s voice boomed across the lot.

And, too late, as Bella jumped out of the car, Sasha realized what he’d actually been shouting...

Don’t get out of the car.

chapter **twenty-three**

DONOVAN'S HEART stopped when he saw Bella dive out of the car. He held his breath, waiting for the explosion...

Nothing.

Okay. Bella's seat wasn't rigged.

He grabbed the girl and ushered her over to his Jeep, parked at the far side of the lot. She was gray-faced and shivering so hard her teeth clacked together. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Is Sasha—did I hurt Sasha? I didn't know."

"It's okay. Sasha's okay."

"I thought you said to get out. Sasha said to get out." She dissolved into sobs, and he didn't have time to comfort her.

He grabbed his bomb kit—you could take the Marine out of EOD, but you could never take EOD out of the man. He'd carried this damn kit with him everywhere since his discharge, and for once, he was grateful for his paranoia.

He still couldn't believe Spirit had caught the scent of the explosives from so far away. The wind had shifted, and she'd stiffened, raising her nose to the air, going from ball-obsessed pet to explosive detection K9 in a heartbeat. She'd cleared the dog park fence in a single bound and raced up the hill toward the parking lot. As he chased her, he saw his Darcy hallucination standing by Sasha's car, smirking at him, and he'd known what was happening even before Spirit signaled on the car.

"I'll get her out," he told Bella. "Keep Spirit here with you and call 911."

The girl was still sobbing, but she nodded and wrapped her arms around Spirit.

Bomb kit in hand, he raced back to Sasha. "You okay, angel?"

“I-I don’t know. Am I sitting on a bomb?”

He peered through the window. He could see the pressure plate rigged under the driver’s seat and wires leading to something beneath the dash. “Sasha, sweetheart, I need you to stay calm and keep your hands where I can see them. Don’t put them on the wheel. We don’t want to risk triggering anything. Cross them over your chest and stay as still as possible.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “I am. I’m sitting on a bomb.”

“Yes, but I’m going to get you out of there. This was my job for over a decade, remember? And I was damn good at it. The best. You couldn’t be in better hands.” Except his hands were currently shaking. He closed his fingers into fists at his sides so she wouldn’t see.

She nodded, wide-eyed, and he got to work. He spread his tools out on the pavement and carefully opened the door, kneeling to get a better look at the pressure plate. It hadn’t detonated when Sasha sat on it, so it must have been rigged to blow when she got up, meaning there had to be a trigger switch somewhere. He had to find that switch first and disable it without jostling the bomb.

Sweat stung his eyes, but his hands were thankfully steady again as he traced his fingers along the wires from the pressure plate. He found the switch on the floor by Sasha’s seat near the lever that worked her gas cap—a small button disguised to look like a harmless piece of plastic, but to anyone who knew what they were looking for, it was an unmistakable red flag. When she sat down, the button completed a circuit that sent a signal to arm the detonator. As soon as she tried to leave the seat—boom. It was a simple but effective design.

“Stay still a little longer,” he said softly. “Almost done.” He exhaled a long and slow breath to calm his hammering heart, then snipped the wires leading to the button. “Okay. Got the trigger. Now for the detonator.” He followed the wires from the plate along the edge of the door. They disappeared into the dashboard. “Fuck.”

“What?” Sasha said, her face draining of color. “I didn’t like the sound of that fuck.”

“I thought the detonator was under the dash, but it’s up inside. I’ll have to dismantle the dashboard to get to it.”

“Oh.” The word left her in a terrified squeak. Tears fell from her eyes with every blink. “Okay. Insurance should cover that, right?”

Goddammit, she was in shock. He wanted to touch her, comfort her, but

knew better. “Hey.” He waited until her gaze slid toward him. Her eyes were glassy and showed too much white. “I won’t let anything happen to you, angel. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” Her answer came without hesitation.

“Okay. I’m going to walk over to my Jeep, check on Bella, and get my bigger toolbox.”

She nodded in a tiny, jerky up-down motion. “Hurry.”

At his Jeep, Bella still sat in the backseat in wide-eyed shock, her arms tightly around Spirit’s neck. “Almost done,” he assured her.

She nodded, but he could tell she hadn’t actually heard him. She was miles away.

He returned to Sasha with his toolbox and slid a headlamp onto his forehead as he knelt beside the driver’s seat. “I’m going to pry the cover off this side panel. I’ll have to get in real close to see what I’m doing, and it’s going to be awkward, but don’t move. No matter what, don’t move.”

Again, she gave the tiny, jerky nod that was more with her eyes than her head.

He made short work of the panel and easily found the detonator—a small device about the size of a cell phone, with a series of buttons and switches on the front, nestled deep in the wiring of the car. But, thankfully, not wired into the car. It was one of the most sophisticated detonators he’d ever seen, with multiple fail-safes built in to prevent tampering. It was a testament to the skill of whoever had built it.

One wrong move and he’d lose Sasha forever.

He reached in and gently removed the detonator from its hiding spot. A light started flashing rapidly.

Okay. It didn’t like that.

And he had zero interest in waiting around to see what that light meant.

He had to move fast.

He could feel Sasha’s eyes on him, watching his every move as he examined the wiring. He could hear the sound of his own breathing, ragged and uneven. He was sweating profusely, but he didn’t dare wipe his brow.

This was sophisticated work—master-level bomb-making—but it had been installed fast, because Sasha was only down at the park for ten, fifteen minutes, tops. Which meant the master bomb maker hadn’t bothered with all of the fail-safes.

Lucky for him.

Using his wire cutters, he snipped the wires he could tell were the least threatening. Then he moved on to the more dangerous ones, and each snap of a wire breaking sent a thrill of fear through his body. He flashed back to Afghanistan, to the one time he hadn't been the best at his job, and his hand faltered.

No.

Fuck.

He couldn't let his mind wander. He had to focus. Had to breathe. One mistake could cost him his life and the lives of Sasha, Bella, and Spirit. It could damage the high school he graduated from and possibly hurt teachers and students inside.

He could not let that happen. He reached in with his free hand to support his wrist and kept working.

Finally, the last wire fell away, and the detonator stopped flashing just as the first wail of a police siren tore through the air.

Donovan let out a deep sigh of relief, checked to make sure there were no other triggers he may have missed, and then pulled himself out from under the dashboard. He turned to Sasha, who was still sitting rigidly in her seat, weeping in silent, shuddering gasps.

He reached out and took her freezing hand in his. "It's over, angel. You're safe now." He helped her from the seat and caught her when her legs gave out.

Sasha leaned into him and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. He felt each tremble that jolted through her and each frantic beat of her heart. He ran a hand down her spine. "Shh. You're okay."

"You saved me." Her eyes lifted to his, full of equal parts terror and wonder. "I-I can't believe that just happened. Why would someone want to kill me?"

Donovan's jaw clenched as anger sparked hot inside him. *To hurt me.* He didn't say it out loud. He was afraid she'd pull further away from him if he gave that thought voice. Not that he'd blame her if she did. Hell, maybe she should stay far away from him because obviously someone in town was pissed about him and Darcy and that fucking podcast. Someone dangerous thought he got away with murder and wanted to hurt him for it.

Over Sasha's head, he watched as Ash's Tahoe slammed to a halt, blocking all other cars from entering the parking lot. More deputy vehicles filed in behind the sheriff, clogging the street and setting up barricades

around the school.

It was going to be absolute chaos soon, with parents showing up, rightfully demanding to see their kids. If he had kids, he would chew through the police barricades and tear down walls with his bare hands if he thought they were trapped and in danger.

Jesus. First, this fucker set fire to a dog rescue, and now he put a bomb near innocent kids.

Whoever did this was going to pay.

Ash ran over to them, and he looked even more frazzled than he had during the interrogation days before. He had a coffee stain on his button-up shirt, his hair and beard were both a wild mess, and his eyes were crazed with fear. “Bella?” he demanded.

Donovan lifted his chin toward his Jeep. “Spirit’s with her.”

Ash started in that direction but stopped short. “The device?”

“Disarmed.”

Ash raced toward his niece, cursing in a creative string that Donovan would’ve found hilarious if his own fear hadn’t suddenly beat out the adrenaline and overwhelmed him. He tightened his grip around Sasha and pressed his face into her hair, blinking hard to keep back the tears burning in his eyes.

“It’s okay,” he repeated over and over, as much to assure himself as her.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Ash and Bella. The sheriff held his niece tucked securely under one arm and held his free hand out for a handshake. His expression was a mixture of gratitude, terror, and rage. “Thank you, Van.”

Donovan nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and accepted the handshake.

“It’s not safe to stay here,” Ash said and hugged Bella to his side. “Can you follow me down to the station and give a statement?”

Again, he could only nod. He’d go anywhere if it meant getting Sasha as far away from the bomb as possible. He returned his attention to her and rubbed soothing circles on her back.

“Hey, angel. Did you hear Ash? We need to get out of here,” he said gently. “Can you walk?”

Sasha nodded, still holding onto him tightly. He helped her to her feet and led her over to his Jeep. Spirit was still sitting in the back and licked Sasha’s cheek as she settled into the passenger seat.

Donovan climbed behind the wheel and waited for Ash to bundle Bella into his vehicle before pulling out of the parking lot. As they drove away, the chaos of the scene faded into the background, and he focused on Sasha. He reached over and took her hand, lacing their fingers together. She was still trembling, and her eyes were wide and unseeing. He knew the fear and adrenaline would linger long after the danger was over.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “You’re safe now. We’re going to the sheriff’s office, and you can give your statement. Then, I’ll take you home. You can take a hot shower, crawl into bed, and rest. I’ll stay with you all night.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice hoarse from crying. “If you and Spirit weren’t there...”

He didn’t even want to consider that. “I’ll always be there for you, angel. Always.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Sasha’s hand gripping his tightly.

When they arrived at the sheriff’s department, he escorted her inside and stayed close as she recounted the events to a deputy in one of the interrogation rooms. Afterwards, Ash met them in the front lobby. It was a well-lit area with blown-up photos of local scenery on the walls and a large wooden desk at the center. The department’s receptionist was busily typing on her computer, not paying them any attention except to offer a distracted smile as the sheriff walked by. Ash had changed his shirt into a wrinkled gray button-up and finger-combed his hair and beard, but he still looked exhausted.

“How’s Bella?” Sasha asked.

“Shaken, but Zak and Anna are with her in my office now. They’re shaken, too. And pissed. So am I.” His fists curled at his sides. “This is the second attack on my family in less than a month.”

“Do you have any leads?”

Ash nodded and looked at Donovan. “It’s Tiago. You were right. I tried to track him down, but he never reported to the fireline like he was supposed to. I did talk to his captain, and Redwood Coast Rescue isn’t the first time he conveniently arrived on the scene of a fire before everyone else.”

“So he’s a classic firebug, setting fires to be a hero.” Donovan thought back to the figure standing in the flames. “Except RWCR broke that pattern. He didn’t save anyone there. He just watched it burn.”

Ash pressed his lips together in a grim line. “Seems like his only goal

now is destruction. He's gone AWOL, and he took a shit-ton of explosive material with him when he left."

"Does he have explosives training?"

Ash nodded. "He's part of their hazardous materials team."

"That explains the sophistication of the set-up in Sasha's car. It wasn't done by an amateur. There were all kinds of fail-safes in place. He didn't have time to activate them all, but with his training, he'd have the expertise to create something like that."

"We know he's responsible for the arson at RWCR but don't yet have any definitive proof he planted the bomb," Ash said. "The bomb squad has taken it into evidence, and the explosives in it are a match to some that he took. We're dusting it for fingerprints."

"But..." Sasha shook her head. "Why would he plant it in *my* car? I barely know him. Only met him that one time."

Ash didn't answer and simply stared at Donovan, passing him the conversational ball.

Yeah, okay, that was fair. This was his mess, after all.

He turned her toward him and rubbed his hands up and down her arms. "It's because of me, angel. To hurt me. For some reason, I think Tiago blames me for his sister's death, and this is him getting revenge."

"You were the last person to see her alive," Ash said. "It's an easy conclusion to jump to from the outside."

Sasha broke out of his arms and paced a few steps down toward the front door, then swung back. "This is all... too much. I-I really need to go home and sleep."

"Okay, I'll take you."

She held up her hands and backed up a step, widening the distance between them. "No. Please. I need—to not be near you right now. Ash, would you mind driving me?"

"No, of course not. Let me grab my keys." He walked toward the hall to the left of the lobby and disappeared through the door at the end marked with his name.

Donovan waited until they were alone again before he spoke. "I didn't hurt Chrissy."

Sasha closed her eyes. One of the deputies had brought her a fleece blanket during questioning, and she now hugged it tighter around her. "You say that a lot. You didn't hurt Darcy. You didn't hurt Chrissy..."

“Because I didn’t.”

She opened her eyes and met his gaze for an instant before focusing on the floor between them. “I... want to believe you.”

“But?” he prompted because he heard the unspoken one at the end of her sentence.

“I’ve been listening to the podcast.”

Fuck. He should’ve known curiosity would get the better of her. “It doesn’t paint a flattering picture of me. Or, for that matter, of Darcy.”

“I know.”

“It’s twisting the truth for ratings.”

“Probably. But...” She released her breath in a sigh that moved her shoulders. “I don’t know how I feel about it, Donovan.”

His heart cracked right down the middle. He clutched his chest, wondering for an instant if he was going to keel over right there in the lobby. “You don’t believe me anymore.”

“It’s not that. It’s...” She waved a hand around them, encompassing the lobby, the hall of offices to the left of them, and the dispatch center to the right. “All of this. Even if you are innocent, I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can live with this constant shadow of suspicion and threat of danger. Are we going to end up in one of these interrogation rooms every few days for the rest of our lives? Are they going to pull you in for questioning every time a girl goes missing or a body turns up?”

He dropped his arms helplessly to his side. “We could leave. We don’t have to stay here.”

“But this is my home. All of my friends are here. My patients. My life.” She stopped pacing and met his gaze. “I’m not walking away from this relationship for good, okay? I just... this is a lot. I need a second to breathe and—”

“What, make a plan?” His laugh was bitter. “You can’t plan love or life. A checklist isn’t going to keep you from getting hurt or experiencing grief again. A list won’t bring your dad back, Sasha.”

She flinched. “That was low.”

He knew it. And he didn’t care because he was in pain, bleeding out from the deep cuts each of her truthful words had inflicted.

But he also knew he couldn’t let her go. Not yet. Not without a fight. “I’m sorry,” he said, taking a step closer to her. “I didn’t mean that. I’m scared. Scared of losing you. Scared of losing everything.”

“Me, too,” she whispered but still backed toward the door. “But I think... for now, we need some time apart.”

His heart sank. Time apart? Was this the beginning of the end? “How much time?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Donovan watched her push through the door and disappear into the haze of smoke outside. His heart was like a lead weight in his chest, crushing his stomach into knots and weighing down his lungs so he couldn’t draw a full breath. He wanted to run after her and take back everything he’d said in the last five minutes, to hold her close and beg for her forgiveness, but he knew that wouldn’t change anything.

He’d defused the bomb, but the damage had already been done.

He sagged against the wall and closed his eyes, forcing himself to take a deep breath before he passed out from oxygen deprivation. He needed to find a way to clear his name and prove to Sasha that he was innocent. He couldn’t blame her for her doubt or for wanting distance after today, but he couldn’t lose her— not when she was the best thing he’d ever had in his life.

Footsteps approached from the direction of Ash’s office, and he opened his eyes to find not only Ash but also Zak standing there. He could still see the boys in the two men—the brothers he’d once loved like family. He missed them.

Zak’s expression was full of sympathy. “I’m sorry, man. That was rough.”

Donovan rubbed a hand over his face, pushing away the tears he refused to cry. “Seeing that doubt in her eyes was like a knife slicing me open.”

Zak nodded. “I get it. Anna looked at me like that once, and it felt like a death blow. I didn’t think we’d recover from it, but we did. And so will you and Sasha.”

“Not unless I can clear my name.”

They both looked at Ash.

He held up his hands in protest but then dropped them back to his sides—almost like the move had been an involuntary reaction. He gave a long-suffering sigh. “Yeah, I’ll help you clear your name, and I know exactly where to start. I have to take Sasha home, and you should take your dog home,” he said to Donovan. “But then how about a ride-along?”

Zak grinned. “Will I get to kick some ass with my shiny leg?”

“No,” Ash said and turned away. “You both will be there as witnesses

only.”

“You could deputize us—”

“Fuck, no,” Ash said with feeling.

part three

extinguish



“For what can be more noble than to slay oneself? Not literally. Not with a blade in the guts. But to extinguish the selfish self within, that part which looks only to its own preservation, to save its own skin. ”

Steven Pressfield

episode 7: questioning the investigation

Hey there, Truth Seekers! Welcome back to Cold Truth. In our last episode, we read an excerpt from Darcy's diary, which shed some light on her state of mind leading up to her disappearance. Today, we'll be discussing the investigation and some of the criticisms that have been raised about it.

Now, right from the beginning, Sheriff Jerry was pretty focused on Donovan Scott as a suspect, and some critics argue that he didn't explore other leads enough.

What other leads, you ask? Well, there were reports of a suspicious-looking vehicle in the area around the time of Darcy's disappearance. The make and model of the car were never identified, and it's unclear whether it was ever even investigated. Why didn't Sheriff Jerry follow up on that? Could this have been the vehicle used to transport Darcy's body or possibly even used by the abductor to take her? We may never know.

The anonymous phone call that police received, claiming to have information about Darcy's whereabouts, is another lead that was not taken seriously. What information did the caller have, and why did they choose to remain anonymous? Why didn't they ever try to call back? Was this call made by the perpetrator, or was it a genuine attempt to help with the investigation?

There were also reports of a man with a red beard seen in the area around the time of Darcy's disappearance. This man has never been identified, and it's unknown whether he was ever questioned. Could he have been involved, or was he simply a witness? Either way, it seemed like someone should've spoken to him, but for some reason, Sheriff Jerry dismissed this possible suspect early on and instead focused entirely on Donovan.

And what about the crime scene? Critics have pointed out that

investigators called off the search of the surrounding woods too soon, and other areas where Darcy could have potentially gone were never searched at all. Instead, all of their efforts focused on the area where her shoe and blood were found.

Now, remember: this case is still open, and it's possible that other leads are being pursued that haven't been made public. When asked about the case, the current sheriff, Ashley Rawlings, was hesitant to comment and only said it was an ongoing investigation that he and his deputies are taking very seriously. He also said that he hasn't ruled out any suspects but that they aren't currently investigating Donovan Scott.

Does the new sheriff believe that the investigation was too narrowly focused on Donovan and that other leads were not pursued as aggressively as they could have been? Sure seems that way.

Donovan did go on to join the Marines and served as an explosive ordnance disposal tech for thirteen years until he was medically retired in 2021 following a traumatic brain injury. His military record was spotless, but unfortunately, he picked up his old troublemaking ways as soon as he returned home. In 2022, he was charged with assault for attacking a man at a bar in Steam Valley. He was court-ordered to attend therapy for anger management, PTSD, and substance abuse. However, it's important to note that erratic behavior isn't uncommon with TBIs and does not necessarily reflect on who he was as a teenager. It is possible that Donovan was wrongly accused, and if that's the case, I can't imagine what this all has been like for him.

He declined to be interviewed for this podcast.

So, what do you think? Do you believe Donovan is guilty, or do you think the investigation was too narrow in its focus? Who else could be a potential suspect? There are still many unanswered questions surrounding the disappearance of Darcy Cantrell, and while we may never know exactly what happened to her that night, we can honor her memory by making sure she's not just a forgotten cold case. Darcy doesn't have any family left. Her father died of cancer in 2011, never knowing what happened to her. So it's up to us as truth seekers to continue the search and, hopefully, find justice for her.

And with that, we come to the end of Cold Truth's investigation into the disappearance of Darcy Megan Cantrell, but please remember that there are countless other cases like Darcy's, where victims have been left without justice, and families left without closure. It's important to continue to raise

awareness and advocate for those who can no longer speak for themselves.

Thank you for listening to Cold Truth. I'm Alexis Summers reminding you to stay curious, stay safe, and keep seeking the truth.

chapter **twenty-four**

“CAN I just say I strongly advise against this,” Cal Holden said from the backseat of Ash’s Tahoe.

“Noted,” Ash, Donovan, and Zak all said at the same time.

“And ignored,” Zak added cheerfully.

Cal raised his eyes to the ceiling as if asking a higher power for patience. “Then why am I even here?”

“Because I hired you to cover my ass,” Donovan said. “So, cover it.”

Cal winced. “You know I’m not that kind of guy, right? No offense. I like you, and you’re okay looking and all for a dude, but I’m all about the ladies.”

Zak grinned over his shoulder from the passenger seat. “And he’s a smart-ass. Good. You’ll fit right in, Holden.”

“Not sure I want to fit in with you guys,” Cal muttered and sank back in his seat as the Tahoe stopped in front of Monarch Development Corp’s main office. “People around you tend to disappear. Or get shot. Or firebombed. I like my bacon extra-crispy, not my skin.”

Ash grumbled low in his throat and shut off the car. “Just what I need, more smart-asses in my life.”

Zak chuckled. “Ignore the bear in the driver’s seat. He forgot to hibernate, and he’s grouchy.”

Ash pushed open his door. “Remember, you are not deputies. You are here solely as witnesses.”

“Uh,” Cal said and held up a finger in the universal gesture of hold on a second. “If I’m here to cover asses, I’d recommend you deputize them.”

“Fuck,” Ash muttered. Then, “Fine. You’re all deputies now. Happy?”

Zak pumped a fist in the air and followed him to the sidewalk.

Donovan didn’t move. He couldn’t seem to make his limbs work,

couldn't grasp the door and shove it open.

"You good?" Cal asked and squeezed his shoulder.

He shook his head. "What if this doesn't work? I've lived with this hanging over my head for so long... I can't imagine it finally being over."

"Hey, Ash Rawlings is a man with a plan, and he never fails. It's fucking annoying. All the defense attorneys I know shudder in fear when they see his name on a police report because he is a solid cop with a superior arrest record and a reputation for dotting all of his Is and crossing all of his Ts. And jokes aside, as your lawyer, I'm here to tell you this will work. Your name is about to be cleared, man."

Donovan sucked in a breath and forced his hand to move from his knee to the door handle.

"That's the spirit," Cal said.

The three of them spread out and followed Ash into the building like a defensive line. The secretary's smile fell away when she spotted them approaching, and she grabbed the receiver of her desk phone.

Ash placed a hand over hers. "No need to call security, ma'am." He produced a rolled stack of papers from his back pocket and handed them to her. "I have a search warrant for Mark Salas's office."

The secretary's eyes widened as she scanned the warrant. "I-I'll call Mr. Salas and let him know."

"I'd appreciate if you didn't," Ash said and took the warrant back from her. "We'll be heading up now."

The elevator ride up to the top floor was silent, the tension in the small space palpable. Donovan was surprised the others couldn't hear his heart trying to beat out of his chest. This was it. This was the moment he had been waiting for, the moment that would clear his name and free him from years of unjust suspicion.

As they stepped off the elevator, they were met with a sleek, modern office space that seemed to go on for miles. Glass walls separated various departments, and people in suits bustled around. Donovan followed Ash, Zak, and Cal as they made their way to Salas's office.

Ash knocked briskly on the door, then pushed it open before anyone could answer. Mark was sitting at his desk, his eyes glued to his computer screen. He looked up at the intrusion, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "What the hell is this?"

Ash ignored the question. He simply held up the search warrant and

tossed a pair of latex gloves at Zak. “Toss the place.”

“With pleasure,” Zak said, his smile all teeth as he pulled the gloves on. He moved around the office, rifling through drawers and files.

Mark half-rose from his desk. “You have no right— “

“We have a search warrant, Mr. Salas,” Ash said. “And a lawyer here to verify we do everything by the book.”

Mark’s eyes flicked to Cal, then shifted to Donovan, who stood at the back of the group. “And what’s the basis for this search?”

Ash stepped forward, his face set in a grim line. “We have reason to believe that you were involved in the murder of Darcy Cantrell. It’s all there in the warrant. Feel free to read it.”

Mark sat back down and reached for his phone. “Fine. Go ahead and search.” His smirk faded into a scowl as he dialed. “But I’m calling my lawyer.”

“Yeah, get JT up here,” Ash said and pulled another pair of gloves from the pocket of his Lost County Sheriff’s Department jacket. “It will save me the trouble of tracking him down to arrest him.”

Mark shook his head, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Sheriff. I had nothing to do with Darcy’s murder.”

Donovan suddenly had a flash of the younger Mark wearing sunglasses, even though it was dark, and layered polos—light blue and pink—with the collars popped and a tie knotted loosely around his neck. He’d been drunk and obnoxious and had flipped a card table full of red Solo cups after losing a round of beer pong. He’d hit on Darcy as she stormed away. She’d ignored him...

...and then he’d followed her into the woods.

Donovan remembered it so clearly now and played it over in his head like a movie on repeat. He remembered Darcy scowling at the tiny diamond in his grandmother’s ring and slapping him when he said she was acting like a bitch. He could almost still feel the sting of the slap on his left cheek. He remembered watching her run off into the woods and seeing Mark follow after her with JT chasing close behind. He remembered bitterly thinking Mark and Darcy deserved each other before turning away and downing his beer.

He stared at Mark across the desk and wanted to put a fist through his conceited face. His fingers curled at his sides. “You followed her. What did you do to her, you bastard?”

Mark's face twisted in anger, and he stood up from his desk. "I didn't do anything to her. You killed her, you piece of shit trailer trash, and everyone knows it."

"Then why did you follow her?" Donovan pressed, taking a step forward.

"I don't have to answer that," Mark said.

"Well..." Cal said, drawing the word out. "Yeah, technically, you don't. Fifth Amendment and all that. But you're under suspicion for murder, and I try to tell my clients to avoid pleading the fifth when they can. It always makes you look guilty."

Mark clenched his jaw, then slowly sat back down at his desk. "Fine. I followed her because she was acting weird. I thought she might be sneaking off to do drugs or something."

"And did you find her doing drugs?" Ash asked.

Mark shook his head. "Nope. I couldn't find her, so I went home."

Donovan's blood started a low boil. "You're lying. Darcy watched her mom die of an overdose. She didn't do drugs."

"But she sold them. And more," Mark added, his greasy smile slithering back into place. "Ah, I see you didn't know she'd been whoring herself at the truck stop when she wasn't spreading her legs for you. She was a slut. You ask me, she got what she deserved."

Donovan felt like he'd been punched in the chest. "She wouldn't..." He trailed off because, as much as it hurt, he heard the ring of truth in Mark's words.

More than anything, Darcy had wanted to escape, but she needed money to do it. How often had she complained that The Grove didn't pay enough? She was so afraid she'd be stuck in Steam Valley forever that she absolutely would have turned to selling drugs or even her body if it meant she could leave sooner.

He squeezed his eyes shut, his heart aching for the girl he'd once loved to distraction. "You killed her." He knew it without a doubt.

Mark chuckled and spread his hands. "Even if I did, you can't prove I was there that night."

"Watch me," Ash said, his voice low and dangerous. "Zak, check his computer. We're looking for any files related to Darcy Cantrell."

"Wait, I have a better idea," Cal said and pulled out his phone. He scrolled for a moment and then grinned like the cat who ate the canary and held up the phone so everyone could see the screen. "Look at that. Someone

forgot to set their Facebook to private. And, oops, also forgot to go back and delete all of their embarrassing party pictures. If I'm not mistaken, that douchebag playing beer pong on Hidden Beach on October 26, 2007, is you, Mark. And *that...*" He pinched his fingers on the screen, zooming in on the girl in the background of the photo. "...is Darcy Cantrell."

"So what if I was there? Doesn't mean I killed—" His eyes popped wide as Zak pulled a decorative box off the bookshelf and flipped the lid.

Zak stared down into it for a moment, then looked up, his face grim. "Ash."

Ash crossed to him, looked into the box, and grabbed his handcuffs. "Mark Salas, you're under arrest for the murder of Darcy Cantrell."

Donovan held his breath and crossed the room in three long strides. He didn't want to see what had put that grim horror on his friends' faces, but he knew he'd never find peace if he didn't look.

In the box, under a dirty red canvas shoe, was a handful of photos that had obviously been printed at home by a LaserJet printer. They were sloppily cut and yellowed around the edges, but they clearly showed a girl on her knees, her clothes torn off. Her hands were tied behind her back with the tie Mark had been wearing that night. One of her eyes was swollen shut, but the other brimmed with tears as she pleaded with the person behind the camera.

Donovan strode across the office, yanked Mark out of his chair, and slammed a fist into his face until he had two black eyes to match the one Darcy sported in the picture. Then he let the asshole drop to his feet and walked away.

"I didn't see that," Cal singsonged and deliberately looked up at the ceiling.

"No?" Zak said, his voice cold. "Because I did. He was clearly resisting arrest and getting violent with a deputy. Right, Ash?"

"That's exactly what I saw," the by-the-book sheriff said without a flicker of hesitation and clicked the handcuffs around Mark's wrists.

"Fuck," Cal muttered. "I knew I'd regret coming here. At least read him his rights."

Donovan ignored them all and shoved through the office door, nearly knocking JT into the wall. When the little shit tried to slink away, he grabbed him by the collar and threw him into the office. Because JT Tennison had been in those photos too, eagerly participating in the rape and murder of an innocent girl.

“There’s the other one,” he said through his teeth, then strode away. He took the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator, and made it out into the smoke-heavy air before his knees gave out.

He sank to the sidewalk, and that was where Zak and Cal found him minutes later. They didn’t say anything, simply picked him up, one man under each of his arms, and carried him to the Tahoe as several other deputy cars pulled in.

Zak slid into the seat beside him. “You okay?”

Donovan flexed his fist. His knuckles were split and bruised. “I think so.”

Zak nudged his shoulder. “Bet that felt good, didn’t it? I’ve wanted to punch Mark fucking Salas since high school.”

The knot in his gut uncoiled, and the tension he’d carried for fifteen years left him with a small laugh. “We all wanted to punch Mark in high school.”

“And you finally got to do it.” Zak made a fist and punched his palm. “Now I’m gonna punch him in court. He’s going to pay for all the distress he caused my wife and kids.”

“Ooh,” Cal said as he slid into the front seat. “That sounds fun. Can I help with that?”

“Of course.” Zak grabbed his wallet and pulled out a dollar bill, which he passed to Cal. “Here’s your retainer. You’re officially Redwood Coast Rescue’s lawyer.”

Cal opened his mouth but closed it again without saying a word and leaned back with a groan. “Aw, fuck. What have I gotten myself into?” But he pocketed the money as Ash jumped into the car and cranked the engine. “Whoa, Sheriff. Where’s the fire?”

Ash stared at him for a beat, then pointed to the horizon where flames danced. “The wind’s shifted.”

chapter **twenty-five**

THE FIRE WAS HEADED DIRECTLY toward town.

They had to evacuate.

Now.

Despite Ash's protests, Donovan jumped into his Jeep the moment they reached the sheriff's office and burned rubber home. He'd lost everything else good in his life. His mom. Sasha. He was not leaving his dog behind and losing her, too.

He left the Jeep running in his driveway and sprinted toward his house. It didn't register that his door was open or that Spirit was barking from somewhere deeper in the house, along with another dog. All he saw was Sasha standing in the living room, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Angel, what are you doing here? We're under evacuation orders." He crossed to her in several quick strides, but she flinched back when he reached for her.

And then he saw it.

The vest half-hidden under her coat, strapped over her scrubs. The cylinders, the wires.

"Donovan," she whispered, voice quivering. "He's here somewhere."

He dropped to his knees in front of her and carefully pushed her coat aside to get a closer look at the bomb vest. "Tiago?"

She nodded. "He called my answering service and said a dog had been found badly burned on the side of the road. I-I grabbed Matilda because I didn't want to leave her alone and went to work and—and he was waiting."

"Did he hurt the dogs?"

She gave a jerky shake of the head. "He shut them in the garage." Tears spilled from her eyes. "I don't know where he went, but he didn't leave. He

put this thing on me and said—he said he wants to watch you lose everything.”

“Okay, angel. It’s okay. Can you lift your jacket and turn for me? Let me see the back of the vest.”

She sucked in a shaking breath, but lifted her coat and slowly turned in a circle.

Fuck. It had the same switch as the car bomb, and this time, the bastard had armed all of the fail-safes. Donovan’s heart pounded in his ears as he took in the details of the bomb. Tiago had really outdone himself this time. There was no way he could disarm it without setting it off. One wrong move and Sasha would be blown to pieces. He couldn’t let that happen.

His bomb kit was still in his car and, with the fire eating its way toward town, he didn’t have time to go get it. He stood up and looked around the room, searching for something, anything, that could help him. His eyes landed on his butcher block. His knives weren’t as sharp as they should be and had seen better days, but they were all he had handy.

Without thinking twice, he grabbed the entire block off the counter and set it on the floor in front of Sasha.

“Okay, angel,” he said, his voice calm and steady. “We’re going to get this thing off you. But I need you to trust me.”

Sasha nodded, her eyes never leaving his. He could see the fear in them, but he could also see the trust and love she had for him. It gave him the strength he needed.

“Okay, now listen to me very carefully,” he said. “I need you to stay perfectly still. Don’t move a muscle. I’m going to try and cut the wires on the vest, but I have to be very careful. If I cut them in the wrong order, it could trigger the bomb.”

Sasha nodded again, biting her lip so hard that it started to bleed.

He reached down and chose a medium-sized knife from the block, testing the edge with his thumb. Not sharp enough but all he had. He studied the vest, trying to make sense of the tangle of wires and cylinders, then took a deep breath and began to cut. The first wire snapped under the blade, and something on the vest beeped.

“Donovan?” Sasha’s voice was barely a whisper.

“I’m here, angel,” he said, his voice steady. “It’s okay.”

He cut the second wire and then the third, his fingers steady despite the thunderous pulse of his heart.

Another wire, and the beeping increased in frequency.

“Donovan,” Sasha said, her voice trembling. “Please hurry.”

“I’m almost done,” he said, his own voice shaking now. He cut through two more wires in quick succession, going too fast, getting too sloppy. The knife slipped and there was a sharp hiss followed by a loud pop. He froze for a second, his heart in his throat, but then he saw that the cylinder he had pierced had only been a dummy.

Sasha sobbed. “Oh, God. Donovan, the fire—”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a wall of flames devouring the woods around his house. It roared like a wild animal. The dogs howled in the garage.

“I need another minute.” He was almost there, he could feel it. Just one more wire and—

The front door crashed open, and Tiago stepped inside, a gun in his hand. “Get away from her. You can’t disarm it. You clip that last wire, and we’re all dead.”

Donovan stepped back and raised his hands slowly. “We’re all dead if we stay here much longer.”

“Good. I’ll enjoy watching you burn, but this time, I’ll stay until the end and make sure the job’s done.”

“Tiago, man. Why are you doing this?”

“Because you murdered Chrissy so she wouldn’t tell everyone you killed Darcy, and nobody in this fucking town cares! She was just a drug addict. Another sad overdose. Nobody was doing anything about it, so I took matters into my own hands.”

“I didn’t kill Darcy. Mark Salas did. He was just arrested for it. And I didn’t kill Chrissy, but you’re right— someone did, and I’m working with Ash to figure out who.” Donovan risked a glance at Sasha. “Let her go, Tiago. This isn’t going to solve anything. Chrissy wouldn’t want this. She liked Sasha.”

Tiago shook his head, his finger tightening on the trigger. “You took everything from me. Now it’s your turn.”

A crash sounded from the back of the house, and Tiago swung toward it for a split second, but it was enough of a distraction for Donovan to make his move. He hit Tiago at the same time as a furry, dog-shaped bullet. The three of them slammed into the floor, and Spirit sank her teeth into Tiago’s arm. He released the gun with a scream. Donovan rolled away and came face-to-

face with a stack of explosives.

Fuck.

Tiago had rigged the entire house.

And the fire was getting closer.

“Don’t move!” Donovan yelled at Sasha, who had been knocked to the ground during the scuffle. “The whole house is a bomb!”

Tiago scrambled toward the gun and Donovan knew he had only seconds to act.

He grabbed a knife from the block on the floor and lunged at Tiago, plunging the blade into his chest. There was resistance and he leaned into it, then a pop as the knife broke through. Tiago gasped and fell back, his eyes widening in shock as he clawed at the knife sticking out of his chest. His movements slowed, then his hands dropped to his sides, and he exhaled one final time before his eyes glazed over with death.

Donovan stared down at him in disbelief. He had just killed a man.

Again.

But there was no time to dwell on it. The nightmares would have to come later.

He turned to Sasha as fire crawled up his living room wall and grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet. “We have to go. Now!”

“The vest!”

He swore and grabbed another knife. He wasn’t careful as he sawed through the straps holding it on her because—hell, they were as good as dead anyway if they didn’t get it off before racing through the inferno bearing down on them. The vest fell to the floor with a thunk, and Sasha jumped away from it.

“Matilda!” She spun toward the garage at the back of the house.

Since the fire was coming from the front, he decided it was as good a direction as any. “Spirit! Let’s go!”

The door between the kitchen and garage hung off its hinges. Later, he’d be impressed that Spirit had managed to break through, but now he just jumped over the wreckage and followed Sasha into the garage.

She had Matilda up on her back, the big dog’s front paws wrapped tightly around her shoulders. “Where do we go?”

He spotted his bike and then looked at the back door that led out to his patio and beyond that, a cliff dropping into the Razorrock River. He opened the door, then climbed onto the bike and offered her his helmet.

She followed his gaze and horror bloomed across her features. “Donovan. No.”

The ground shook as the first explosion of what promised to be a firework show ripped through the house.

“Fuck,” Sasha said on a sob and jumped on the back of his bike, pulling on the helmet.

He grabbed Spirit and hoisted her up in front of him, then revved the engine. “I’m so sorry, Sasha. Hang on to me if you can.”

“Just go!”

They careened through the back doorway and raced along the narrow path between the house and the cliff. They made it halfway down the path when a massive explosion shook the ground beneath them, and his house splintered, raining down as deadly shrapnel.



The path gave way beneath the tires.

Sasha shrieked and wrapped her arms around Donovan’s waist, hoping that Matilda’s claws digging into her shoulders would keep the dog on her back as the superheated air whistled past her ears.

They were going to die.

Another jolt shook her as the bike hit a ledge on the side of the cliff, somehow still upright. They bounced like a ball from one rocky ledge to the next before suddenly plunging into the icy river.

Sasha gasped and sucked in a lungful of water. She swam to the surface, gagging as Matilda’s claws dug deeper into her shoulders. Somehow the dog was still clinging to her back like a huge fuzzy book bag.

The poor girl was going to need a lifetime of doggie therapy after this.

She coughed and searched for Donovan. She didn’t see him, but Spirit was there, her little black head bobbing in the water next to the crashed bike, paws paddling frantically.

Sasha went under again. When she surfaced, she ripped off the helmet that kept weighing her down. “Donovan!”

He popped up downstream and coughed hard, spitting up water. His head was bleeding, and his eyes looked dazed, but he was in one piece. She swam

over to him.

“Get to shore.” His voice was strangled as he pointed to the far shore, opposite the fire. “Over there.”

They half-swam, half-bobbed across the river, then crawled up the steep, muddy shoreline and collapsed in the mud. On the ridge overhead, the fire snapped and growled, as if angry they had escaped. Smoke clogged the air, and the sky had deepened to an apocalyptic red.

Sasha extracted Matilda from her back. She was bleeding where the dog’s claws had dug into her shoulders, but she didn’t care.

They were alive.

They were relatively safe down here in the canyon with the cold water feet away.

She took a moment to breathe and hug her dog, then crawled over to Donovan.

His eyes were closed, and blood poured from a gash in his temple. He groaned softly as Spirit worriedly licked at his face.

“Oh, God. Your head. You should’ve worn the helmet, not me!” Sasha probed around the wound. It looked like he’d been hit by a piece of his house when it exploded. “Are you okay?”

He winced. “Should be... asking you... that.”

“I’m not the one bleeding.”

He opened one eye to squint at her.

She shrugged. “Much.”

“Sasha,” he said suddenly, his voice cracking.

She clutched his hand. “Yes, I’m here.”

“I did it. I’m sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I killed.”

“Yes. You did. Well done.” She cringed. That didn’t come out right. “I mean, you had to do it. You were defending us. You did what you had to do.”

“Not him.”

She stared at him for a stunned moment. “You didn’t kill Darcy. Or Chrissy. I know you didn’t.”

“No.” He held her gaze, his eyes filled with pain. His pupils were different sizes, which was not a promising sign. “My dad.”

“Oh.” But she wasn’t surprised, was she? She’d known it when he told her the story of his family over dinner. And the podcast had only confirmed

her suspicions. “The blood on your bat and in your carpet. You were protecting your mom, weren’t you?”

He nodded but winced and raised a hand to his temple. “He was going to kill her.”

“You did what you had to do then, too. Nobody in the world would hold you accountable for protecting your mom.”

“I love you,” he whispered, and his eyes rolled back, and his limbs started to jerk.

Oh, God. He was having a seizure. She tried to protect his head from slamming against the rocky shore as best as she could until it passed. When he finally went still, there was little color left in his complexion.

“Donovan. Oh, no. Please.” She cradled him and kissed his cheeks, his nose, his lips. “No. Please. I love you, too. Please, come back!”

chapter
twenty-six

Three Months Later

DONOVAN SHUFFLED through the front doors of the ballroom and instantly spotted his angel across the dance floor, shimmering in a pale silver gown as she laughed with his team. Everyone was there—Zak and Anna, Bella and Poppy, Sawyer and Zelda, Pierce, Ash, Cal, and even Veronica, though she looked like she wanted to bolt.

But Donovan only had eyes for one person. It had been a month since he was released from the hospital, and his doctor had given him tentative permission for sex. And he planned to make the most of tonight.

It was New Year's Eve, but this ball was more than a celebration to welcome in the next year. It was marking the start of a new era for Redwood Coast Rescue and the entire town of Steam Valley. It was a celebration of survival and renewal.

Donovan crossed the room in measured strides, his cane tapping the floor like a drumbeat. His balance was shit since the surgery to relieve the pressure in his cracked skull, but he took comfort in knowing that Spirit had bounced back from balance issues after her brain surgery. He could do it, too.

When he reached Sasha, he held out a hand. "Angel, may I have this dance?"

Sasha's smile was as bright as the chandelier overhead. "And speak of the devil," she said over her shoulder to Zak and Anna. "Here's mine come to tempt me away."

He growled low in his throat, pulled her in tight against him, and fastened his lips to hers.

"Oh, get a room, you too," Anna said playfully.

Donovan glanced over his woman's shoulder at their group of friends, then focused in on Sasha's mouth again. "Okay." He grabbed her hand, and she laughed as he pulled her toward the door.

"Hey, Van!" Ash called after him. "Don't forget the other thing we have to do tonight."

"Yeah, give me a couple hours," he called back.

Zak snorted. "That's optimistic, pal. You've been in the hospital for months. It'll only take a couple minutes."

Donovan flipped him the bird.



Sasha giggled all the way up to the room—the same room, she noticed, as their first night together. Her devil never missed a single detail.

As soon as they stepped inside, Donovan dropped his cane and pulled her body flush against his, running his hands along her curves. His fingertips sent a shiver up her spine as he lowered his lips to hers again, exploring her mouth with an urgent need. The heat of his body seemed to envelop her, and she could feel the intensity of his desire, like an electric current running through them both. He cupped her face with both hands and nibbled lightly on her chin, then her neck as his expert fingers worked the laces on the back of her gown.

He wanted her, and he wanted her now.

And, God knew, she wanted him.

But she hesitated and pushed gently against his chest until he pulled back. These past few months had been a terrifying touch-and-go as the doctors worked to mitigate the damage he'd done to his head. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"More than okay." His eyes crinkled in amusement, and he kissed the tip of her nose as he slid one side of her dress off her shoulder. "I had an appointment this afternoon and got the all-clear for sex. That's why I was late getting here."

He slid the other strap off her shoulder, and the dress fell to her waist, her breasts spilling out. He cupped one in his hand, plumping the nipple with the rasp of his thumb. With a male sound of appreciation, he leaned down and licked it, then sucked it into his mouth. The hot suction shot sparks of pleasure directly to her core, and she had to bite her lip in order to keep from moaning out loud.

She had never felt like this with anyone before. His every touch lit her body on fire, and she couldn't wait to spend the rest of her life burning for him. She ran her hand through his hair, feeling the scar of his surgery under her fingers.

God, she almost lost him.

If not for a smokejumper noticing them by the river and calling in a rescue team, she would have. What she thought was just a shrapnel wound

had, in fact, been a fractured skull. He'd come close to dying several times that first night. As the fire raged through town, she sat beside him in the ICU of a Sacramento hospital, holding his hand and urging him to fight. The first time his blood pressure crashed, she realized she was an idiot for pushing him away. The second time, she promised she'd never push him away again if he'd just live through the night.

Now, three months later, she had every intention of keeping that promise. She pulled him closer to her chest, moaning softly, encouraging him to suck harder. His possessive grasp tightened on her hips, and he backed her toward the bed, laying her down.

“Do you want my mouth, angel?” As he spoke, his lips moved lower, trailing blazing kisses down her stomach. “Or my fingers?” His hands followed his mouth, caressing her thighs, and then stripping off her thong.

She gasped as he nudged her legs apart with his shoulders and dragged his tongue along her slit. Her core ached, and her entire body tensed as the orgasm built to a peak.

Donovan alternated using his tongue and his fingers, teasing her and making her want more but pulling back just as she trembled at the precipice. She moaned, desperate for him to fill her. Fingers, tongue, cock—she didn't care as long as he stroked the ache inside her. She wrapped her arms around his head, holding him closer. His low chuckle zinged pleasure straight up through her core, and she bucked against his tongue.

Suddenly, he surged up over her, propping himself on his arms as he stared into her eyes. “No, I know what you really want. My cock inside you, pumping until you scream.”

Anticipation made her tremble. “Yes.”

“My naughty angel.” His fingers tangled in her hair, tugging ever so slightly as he leaned in to capture her lips. His kiss devoured her, his tongue exploring with a hunger that had her gasping. She could taste herself on his lips, and it was exhilarating.

Donovan growled low in his throat and broke the kiss, taking his cock in hand. He teased the flared head through her wetness before sinking into her, pressing her into the bed, taking possession of every inch of her skin.

He moved with a slow, steady rhythm, his hands still tangled in her hair as he stared into her eyes. His gaze was so intense, so possessive, and she loved it. The air seemed to stand still between them when they were this close, and she could feel with every cell of her body how much he wanted

her.

How much he loved her.

Her back arched, and her legs quivered as the tension built inside her. His hips moved faster, driving her closer to the edge, and a moan escaped her lips as the sensations reached their peak. She hung there, suspended for an endless moment, then the cascade of pleasure took her over.

When she came back, she found him still pumping into her, his movements growing more ragged with each thrust. He tucked his arms under her and pulled her tight against him as if he couldn't get close enough. His body trembled before finally, with one last thrust, he groaned and released, burying his face in her hair.

Outside, the sun made its lazy descent toward the horizon. No longer blood red, it painted the sky in different shades of magenta and cast soft orange light through the window to spill over their bed. Donovan's skin glowed against hers, his natural tan contrasting sharply with her pale complexion.

No other man had ever possessed her heart, body, and soul as he did.

He still clutched her tightly against him, but he'd shifted to his back so as not to crush her, pulling her on top. His fingertips grazed her shoulder, setting off new little sparks along all of her nerve endings. His heart thumped loudly under her ear, and she smiled as she nuzzled in closer to him and inhaled deeply. He smelled of cedar and rain—such an improvement from hospital antiseptic—and she swore she got a buzz just from breathing him in.

“You're mine,” he whispered, his voice soft yet firm.

She let out a deep sigh as she melted into his arms. “Yes.”

“I love you, Sasha.”

Love, shockingly bright and all-encompassing, filled her chest and spread warmth throughout her entire body. They had both lost their homes in the fire, but it didn't matter. His presence was the only thing she needed. Wherever he was had become the place she belonged in the world.

And they'd rebuild something better.

Together.

“I love you, too,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. No hesitation. No worries that she was making a mistake. Donovan Scott may not have been anywhere in her original life plan... but now she couldn't imagine a life without him in it. And she was willing to risk it all to stay with him. “Let's get married.”

She felt his lips curve into a smile by her temple. “So marrying the town bad boy is on your checklist now? You want me in a tux for a big June wedding?”

She straddled him and ran her hands up over his tattooed chest. “Fuck the list.”

He laughed, the sound booming through the room. “I’d rather fuck you.”

She jumped off the bed, shying out of his reach. “You can do that again right after we fly to Vegas tonight and get married by Elvis.”

Rolling, he propped himself up on his elbow and watched her pull her dress back on. “Elvis, huh?”

“Or whoever. And wherever. I don’t want to wait. I’m done playing it safe.”

“That sounds perfect.” He slid off the bed and kissed her shoulder before helping her re-lace the dress. “Book the flights.” When he turned her to face him, his smile faded. “There’s just one thing I have to do first.”

“Meet Ash?”

“Yeah.”

“I know. Go get it over with and come back to me.” She hated the sudden sadness in his eyes and cupped his cheek, offering a smile. “I’ll be at the airport waiting to whisk you off to Vegas and make an honest man out of you.”

His grin returned. “Oh, angel. You got your work cut out for you.”

epilogue

FROM THE FRONT seat of Ash's Tahoe, Donovan stared at the row of brightly painted Victorian homes on a quiet street in San Francisco.

The robin's egg blue one in the middle was their target.

He rubbed at the back of his neck as tension clamped around his spine. "You're sure she's in there?"

"Positive," Ash said. "She and her husband bought it when his company moved here from New York last summer. You ready for this?"

"No, Goddammit." But he shoved out of the car and strode across the street, his cane too loud on the pavement, each tap echoing like a gong inside his barely-healed skull. He'd pushed himself too hard tonight, but he didn't regret it. He'd missed months with Sasha as he recovered from his injuries. He couldn't wait to get this over with so he could return to her.

But he hesitated at the door. Did he really want to know...?

Yes. Fuck it. He deserved to know.

He lifted a hand to knock.

When the woman answered, all the air left his lungs. It was like getting bitch-slapped with the past. She had haunted him in nightmares and hallucinations for years, and now here she was in the flesh. She looked the same, but also so very different—older and more polished, her hair now blond and her belly heavy with pregnancy. But she had the same eyes, the same sad smile.

"Darcy."

She froze at the sight of him and lifted her face toward the ceiling as if in prayer. But the Darcy he knew had never been the praying type before.

Finally, she stepped back and waved him inside. "Hi, Van."

His lungs wouldn't expand, and all he could manage was one strangled

question. “Why?”

Tears flooded her eyes. “I just wanted to disappear and become someone else.” She held out her arms and motioned to the clean and bright living room. A diamond bracelet sparkled on her wrist, matching the massive rock on her ring finger. “I’m Mrs. Stella Barclay now, a socialite and CEO’s wife, and I’m expecting a baby with the man I love.”

“So, you got everything you ever wanted.” He shook his head. “And Chrissy’s dead now because she helped you escape.”

She dropped her arms. “Chrissy’s dead because she was a heroin addict.”

“Yeah, she was an addict, but she was also clean and sober.”

“So was my mom,” she spat, and there was the old bitter Darcy he remembered peeking out from under her polish. “For a while, every few months, she’d get clean, but then fucking Frank would hit her again and—” Her gaze shifted away from his as those tears spilled over. She slapped at them in annoyance. “We both know it only takes one time. One slip up.”

“No, not Chrissy. She was strong and determined. She was working the program. Before she died, she told a friend that the military had to be held accountable for her sexual assault. She said it happened to far too many women, and she wasn’t just standing up for herself—she was standing up for her best friend, too. When I heard that, I assumed she meant a military friend, but it was *you*. Because of what Mark and JT did to you.”

Darcy flinched.

“What really happened to her, Darce?”

She exhaled a long, slow breath and sat down on the snow-white couch stretching in an L across the living room. She didn’t speak right away. Just stared off into space and rubbed a hand back and forth over her round belly. “She just had to stay quiet about me. That was all I wanted, but then that fucking podcast came out and started pointing the finger at you again, and Chrissy said she was going to come clean. I told her it was no big deal. It would blow over like it always did—”

“No big deal?” He took a step forward, hands bunched into fists at his side, but stopped himself from touching her. That wasn’t why he was here. “I’ve lived with this hanging over my head for fifteen years, Darcy. I’ve woken up every morning since you disappeared, wondering if this would finally be the day I was arrested. I’ve lost friends, missed out on job opportunities, and the entire country thinks I got away with murder. My mom died thinking I was a killer. She never said anything, but I saw how she

looked at me when she didn't think I'd notice. Like she was afraid of me. Like I was my father's son, after all. But, yeah, it's no big deal that you're alive. Fuck you."

She burst to her feet, moving faster than a pregnant woman should be able to. "I couldn't come back. You, of all people, know that town was hell for me. And after Mark and JT attacked me—I wanted you all to hurt as much as they hurt me."

"Including Chrissy?"

"No! Chrissy was kind. Probably because she didn't grow up in that cesspool like the rest of us. She found me beaten and brutalized and left to die, and she could've kept walking because she didn't know me. She'd only been at our school for a few months. But she stopped and helped. She wanted to call the police and take me to the hospital, but I begged her not to. If I accused two of the town's golden boys—one of them, the sheriff's son—of rape and attempted murder, nobody would've believed me. So, Chrissy took me to her house."

"And her parents didn't notice?"

She lifted a shoulder. "She was like us. Her parents were never around and didn't care what she was up to. They never knew I was there."

"What about her brother, Tiago?"

"I never saw him. I don't think he ever knew. I only stayed with her for a week until I was strong enough to leave. She stole money from her mom for me, and I made her promise she'd never tell anyone where I'd gone, then I got on a bus to LA and never looked back." Her features twisted in disgust. "Until that podcast. And your therapy group and Chrissy's twelve fucking steps. She thought we wronged you and wanted to make amends."

"And you didn't want to."

"If the truth came out, I'd lose everything. My husband..." She looked down at her belly. "He doesn't know where I came from. He's the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I couldn't risk losing him." She stopped and drew a deep breath. "Last year, when he was in Japan on a business trip, I went back to Steam Valley to talk some sense into Chrissy. She wouldn't listen, so I had to keep her quiet."

"By sticking a fucking needle of fentanyl in her arm?"

She bent double over her belly. "I didn't know it was tainted. I just remembered how my mom was, how she'd forget everything and only cared about her next high, and thought if I got Chrissy addicted again, she'd forget."

I didn't mean to kill her, Van."

Donovan closed his eyes and rubbed his chest because it felt like his heart was cracking in half. Part of him, the damaged boy he'd once been, still loved the damaged girl she'd been. "God, Darcy. She was your friend."

"Oh, don't give me that holier-than-thou bullshit. You'd have done the same in my position because we're the same brand of fucked-up."

He opened his eyes and studied her—and, yeah, there was the ugly. It had always been in her. She could dress it up and polish it, but she'd never shed it. It had been one of the things that had attracted him to her in the first place because he'd always thought it was in him, too. How could it not be, given their similar backgrounds?

But Sasha had shown him that wasn't true. She'd seen good in him from the beginning, but he was only now starting to realize she was right. Yeah, he'd come from trash, but he'd never sacrifice an innocent life to save himself and move up in the world. Yeah, he was damaged, but Sasha loved him anyway.

And she was waiting for him so they could start a life together.

But first, he had to finish this.

He walked to the door and opened it. Ash waited on the other side. "Did you hear all that?"

"What?" Darcy said, panic in her eyes as she struggled to get off the couch. "Van! What have you done?"

"Loud and clear," Ash said and stepped inside, his handcuffs already open. "Darcy Cantrell, you're under arrest for the murder of Christina Jimenez."

Donovan watched until the San Francisco PD cruiser disappeared down the street with Darcy inside, then exhaled the air trapped in his lungs.

Ash joined him on the sidewalk. "You doing okay?"

He gave it a second before he answered, checking in with his feelings. He felt... nothing. At least, nothing concerning Darcy. She was still dead to him, he realized, but he was no longer grieving.

He nodded and glanced over at Ash. "Can you take me to the airport?"

Ash cocked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Sasha's there. We're flying to Vegas tonight and getting married."

Ash stared at him for several heartbeats, then gave a small laugh. "Of course you are. I'd expect nothing less from you."

"It was Sasha's idea."

“Really?” He shook his head in wonder, but said, “Yeah, man, I’ll give you a ride. Congrats. She’s a good one.”

Donovan grinned. “Too good for me?”

“Absolutely.” Ash lightly punched his shoulder. “But after all this shit, you deserve some happiness. Now let’s go meet your bride.”

“Hey, Ash,” Donovan called as the guy turned away. “You deserve to be happy, too. Maybe take a vacation, huh? Before you burn out.”

Ash just grumbled something under his breath and opened the driver’s side door of his Tahoe. “You coming or what?”



Darcy was booked.

Tiago was dead.

Sheriff Jerry had admitted to misleading the investigation to save his son, who had come home that night covered in Darcy’s blood.

Mark and JT were flipping on each other and trying to wiggle out of their charges since the woman they allegedly killed was still drawing breath—and actually now booked into the women’s wing of the prison they currently called home. But they weren’t getting out. They still had to face rape charges and probably attempted murder. The photos Mark had kept all these years were too damning to ignore.

Ash sighed as he dropped into his office chair and wondered how many other cases had been mishandled under Jerry Tennison’s watch. He had to investigate everything Jerry touched now—re-examine the closed cases, and take a good, hard look at all the open cold cases.

And he knew exactly where to start.

He created a new folder on his computer and dragged over the picture of the burned bones from the Cantrell case file. He labeled it.

2023- Double R Fire Jane Doe.

When preliminary tests indicated the bones belonged to a female who had once broken her wrist, everyone was sure the DNA would come back matching Darcy—including him. The plate in her wrist and the resulting scar had been a well-documented fact in her file. He’d never even considered the body might be someone else until the DNA test results came back negative

for Darcy Cantrell—but, surprise! Darcy’s DNA *was* a match for a woman currently living in San Francisco.

What a fucking mess.

“I’m sorry, Jane,” he whispered. “I promise I’ll find you justice.”

He stared at the picture a moment longer. The blackened skull grinned at him.

Then he got back to work.

searching for justice

part one

hate



From the deepest desires often come the deadliest hate.
— Socrates

chapter one

“SO, I’VE BEEN THINKING...”

Elbow deep in suds, Rose Galasso lifted her gaze from the sink where she had been washing beer steins and watched her slightly tipsy aunt slide onto one of the bar stools. Rainbow Rodriguez met her girlfriends for drinks at the Mad Dog Pub every Tuesday night, and she always drank too much, then hung out until her partner, Rose’s chef, Marcel Dupont, closed the kitchen. But the kitchen had closed an hour ago, and Marcel had left alone, so the pair were either fighting or Rainbow was up to something.

Going by her speculative tone, it was the latter. “Scheming is more like it.”

“Me, scheme? Never!” Rainbow was as colorful as her name suggested, with big dark eyes and an explosion of dyed red hair that spiraled out from her head in tight corkscrews. She often adorned her curls with beads and feathers and wore so many bracelets it was impossible for her to move quietly.

And, yes, Rainbow was her given name. They were from a long line of proud granola-crunching hippies, and while Rose had shied away from that lifestyle as a teenager, both her aunt and mom had embraced it. It was how she ended up with a name like Ambrosia Wildflower Galasso. She’d always hated it and, as soon as she entered middle school, started insisting she be called simply Rose.

She dried her hands and turned to face the woman who had raised her through those awful, angsty teenage years. “You’re always scheming, Auntie. It’s one thing I love about you.”

“Well, not this time.” Rainbow propped her elbows on the bar, her many bracelets clinking as she leaned over. “I’ve just had this thought that won’t

leave my head. What if that Jane Doe uncovered by the wildfire last fall is your mom? You should go to the sheriff's office and offer a DNA sample for comparison. I could go do it, but I read the results are more accurate with a sample from a child than a sibling."

Rose sighed. She supposed she should've seen this coming. Since the discovery of the unknown woman's remains, the town's rumor mill had been churning double-time about her identity. Some people said she must have been a lost hiker, while others claimed her death was drug-related because she was found on Murder Mountain. The conspiracy theorists posited she was a victim of The Shadow Stalker—the urban legend serial killer that children had been scaring each other with for decades, who was about as real as the Hookman or Sasquatch.

But whoever the woman was, Rose doubted she was Harmony Galasso.

"The sheriff won't reopen Mom's case. As far as the state of California is concerned, they got her killer: my dad."

Her aunt's cupid-bow lips dipped into a frown. "Have you seen him recently?"

"It's been a couple of weeks. The pub was slammed last week, and I couldn't get away to visit, but he called yesterday. I plan to go out tomorrow."

"How's he doing?"

She raised a shoulder. "You know, it's prison. Same old, same old. They do have him working in the library, though, which means he's in his happy place. Surrounded by books."

Rainbow exhaled a pent-up breath. "Oh, I should go visit."

"He'd like that."

"I know, but it just ... it makes me so sad to see Pete in there. He loved your mother, despite all of her many faults. He would've killed himself a thousand times over before harming a hair on her head. But they convicted him without a body, so if we can prove the Jane Doe is Harmony, Sheriff Rawlings will have no choice but to reopen the case, and maybe your dad will win an appeal."

Rose shook her head. "Even if we proved it, there's no guarantee the sheriff will listen. And even if he does, the chances of Dad getting an appeal are slim to none. He's been in there for thirteen years."

Rainbow's expression softened. "I know it's a long shot, but we have to try. We can't just give up on finding out what happened to Harmony or

getting justice for Pete.”

“I just don’t know if I can handle the disappointment if it doesn’t pan out again.”

“Hey, I understand,” Rainbow said, placing a comforting hand on her arm. “And you need to focus on taking care of yourself. You’ve been so caught up in work, you’re neglecting your own well-being. This place doesn’t have to be your life.”

Rose scanned her pub with its eclectic mix of booths and high-top tables. Vintage dog posters decorated the walls, along with framed photos of many of her patrons’ dogs. The brick fireplace was quiet and cold now but had been crackling merrily earlier in the evening to ward off the damp February chill. She’d made some updates since taking over five years ago, but the deep burgundy upholstery on the chairs was showing wear from their many years of use. She couldn’t bear to change them, though. Her dad had chosen those chairs back when he owned the pub. Back when her mom was alive, and their lives were still perfect.

She looked at her aunt. “But I love this place.”

“Of course you do, but you also need to find balance in your life. Take a day off, go for a hike, and do something that makes you happy.”

Her gaze landed on a picture of her dad. Back then, Pete had a full head of dark hair that he wore in a long tail down his back. He wore his favorite tie-dye Grateful Dead t-shirt, shorts, and his ever-present flip-flops as he held her up on his shoulders while he slung drinks to his customers. He’d been happiest behind this bar. At one time, so had she, but lately, it felt more and more like work.

“Well ... maybe I do need a break. A hike isn’t a bad idea.”

“Good. It’s supposed to be beautiful tomorrow. Don’t open and instead go soak up some nature vibes.” Rainbow gave one decisive nod, then grinned sloppily. “And who knows? Maybe on that hike, you’ll stumble onto a clue that will help crack your mom’s case wide open.”

Rose laughed. “You really are optimistically delusional, aren’t you?”

“Hey, it’s better than being pessimistically realistic.”

Rose turned to put away the clean beer steins and tried to ignore the anxiety swirling in her stomach. The possibility of finding her mother’s remains after all these years was both exhilarating and terrifying. She had been searching for answers since she was a teenager. What would she do when she finally had them? Could her dad get a new trial? But what if the

Jane Doe wasn't Mom? She didn't want to get her hopes up. Or, worse, what if she was Mom and the evidence only proved that Dad was guilty?

Throat suddenly dry, Rose grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge under the bar and twisted off the cap. The cool liquid soothed the heat of her nerves. Maybe Rainbow was right about more than her needing a day off. Maybe it was time to confront the past and try to find some sort of closure.

"Okay, I'll do it," she said, setting down her water with a decisive thunk. "I'll give a DNA sample."

Rainbow beamed at her. "That's my girl. We'll go to the sheriff's office after your hike tomorrow and sort this out once and for all."

Rose scoffed. "I doubt that. Our esteemed sheriff is a fuckwit."

"Well, even fuckwits can surprise you sometimes. And at least he's dedicated to his job, unlike that lazy-ass Jerry Tennison. Janine Roberts—remember her? She's the sheriff's secretary and says he has case files stacked this high on his desk." She lifted her hand up over her head, obviously exaggerating the height. The movement threw off her equilibrium, and she nearly fell off her stool. She righted herself with a giggle. "Who knows, maybe he'll even find a chill pill buried in there somewhere. If not, I can always recommend the best indica strains for stress relief."

Rose chuckled, shaking her head at the ridiculous mental image of the sheriff smoking a joint. "Could you imagine Ash Rawlings stoned? I'd pay to see that just once."

"I don't have to imagine. I saw it plenty when he was a teenager. He was quite the hell-raiser back in his day with Zak Hendricks and Donovan Scott. The Terrible Trio. They were my biggest customers for a while, and that was before cannabis was legal for recreational use."

Rainbow had a legal marijuana farm on Mt. Humboldt and ran the town's only dispensary, but Rose couldn't picture the sheriff as one of her customers. It was like imagining Hitler as a baby—just wrong.

"Okay, now Zak and Donovan, I believe. Those two are still hell-raisers. But you're telling me uptight, by-the-book Sheriff Ashley Rawlings the Third didn't always have a stick up his ass?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you." Rainbow grinned and laced her fingers together under her chin. She was in her gossip queen element right now. "He was the worst of them because he was spoiled rotten as the heir to the Rawlings empire. He could've gotten away with murder back then and nobody would've batted an eye."

Rose didn't think it was possible, but she disliked the man even more now. "What a hypocrite."

A thoughtful expression crossed Rainbow's face. "I think something happened that scared him straight." She held up a hand to stop Rose's next question. "And before you ask, I don't know what it was. Which is crazy, yes, because I always know what's going on around this town. But right around the time he turned twenty, he stopped the hell-raising and joined the Sheriff's Department. Shocked the ever-loving hell out of everyone, even his parents. Lee—his dad, the second Ashley Rawlings—wanted him to take over the ranch, but he was adamant about becoming a cop. Maybe it was that whole mess with Donovan being accused of murder? That happened around the same time." She finished her drink and nudged it across the bar. "I just don't know. Wish I did. Whatever happened, bet it's juicy."

"Refill?"

"Isn't it closing time?"

Rose scanned the mostly empty bar. The kitchen had closed when Marcel left, but one guy still sat in the back corner, picking at a cold plate of fries while he scrolled on his phone. He had barely touched his beer. Whatever he was doing on that phone must be very important or extremely fascinating because nobody could resist Marcel's parmesan fries, and her prize-winning Mad Dog Ale brought people in from all over the state.

She walked over to the end of the bar and rang the bell hanging there for last call. The man didn't even look up. She shrugged and returned to her aunt. "One more?"

Rainbow squinted one eye at her, then groaned. "The room's tilting. I'd better take water."

"Coming up. You're not driving, are you?"

"No, I'm walking to Marcel's."

"Ah, so you just stayed behind to ambush me about the DNA."

"I don't ambush."

"Uh-huh." As she took the empty glass and filled a fresh one with water, Rainbow leaned in and lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"Speaking of Marcel, have I told you about the hot new guy that's been coming into my store?"

"Another ambush. Two in one night. You're on a roll."

"I don't ambush! I..." She rolled her hand in the air, searching for the right words, and her bangles clinked together. "Nudge you gently in the right

direction.”

“Well, that gentle nudge was a sloppy segue, Auntie. Marcel is a big teddy bear, but he isn’t hot. He’s too hairy.”

“Says you. I like my men looking like Sasquatch. I love running my hands through all that chest hair after we—”

“Ew. No, I don’t want to hear it.”

Rainbow grinned wickedly. “Then let me tell you about the hot new guy coming into my store.”

Rose rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at her lips. “Are you trying to set me up again?”

“What? No, of course not.” The mischievous glint in Rainbow’s eyes belied her words. “When have I ever tried to set you up?”

“Carlos. John. Warren. Jason. Mike.” She ticked them each off on her fingers. “And what about Wesley, the convicted felon? Remember him?”

Rainbow winced. “I’ll admit I misjudged Wesley’s character.”

“No offense, Auntie, but other than Marcel, you have horrible taste in men. And, honestly, the guys who frequent your store are not my type.”

“Okay, so I was mistaken all those other times, but this guy is totally your type. He’s a horror writer. He’s not a pothead—he only comes in for CBD oil to help with an old injury. And did I mention he’s hot? Like…” She fanned herself. “Hot, hot. He’s asked about you, too. I guess he’s been in here before and was bowled over by your beauty.”

“Oh, please.”

“He asked if you were single.”

“Of course he did.” Rose wasn’t unaware of her beauty or that most men found her sexy. She heard it from drunk tourists every night during the summer months, and during the slower winter months, she still got it from the dumb local kids who frequented the pub on weekends. And she was not above weaponizing her looks, wearing tight clothes that showed off her figure and applying careful makeup every night to enhance her best features—the bright blue eyes she inherited from her dad, the sharp cheekbones she inherited from a Yurok great-grandmother on her mom’s side, and the full, pouty lips she got from who knew where. She learned from the moment she stepped behind a bar, the sexier she looked, the better the tips. It was always startling when a night passed without a man attempting to sweep her away to his bed.

Though having one of those guys approach her aunt outside the pub was a

first. She had to admit that intrigued her. “And what did you tell him?”

“I said that was none of his business,” Rainbow replied, grinning. “But then he said he knows I’m your aunt and asked my permission to ask you out.”

“How very Victorian of him.”

“I may have said yes.”

Rose groaned. “I’m not in the mood for dating right now.”

“Understandable,” Rainbow said with a nod. “But just keep it in mind. He’s a nice guy. It doesn’t have to be anything serious. I don’t even think he’s here long term. He’s renting the Hendricks family’s old cabin on Bluff Road while he finishes his next book, so he’ll probably be gone by the end of summer. It couldn’t hurt to get out and have some fun. Like I said, you spend entirely too much time in this bar.” She pushed up from her stool. “Do you need help closing up?”

Rose glanced toward the man in the corner booth again. The weirdo still hadn’t looked up from his phone. “No, you go on home. I have it covered.”

Rainbow gave her a long hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Go home and get some rest. Drink some more water. You’re going to regret all of that sangria in the morning.”

“Oh, don’t I know it. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will. Thanks, Auntie.”

Rainbow grabbed her bag and headed to the door, giving one last wave before disappearing into the night. Thankfully, Marcel only lived a few blocks away. She’d give it ten minutes, then call him to make sure Rainbow got there safely.

She took a deep breath and returned to the bar, assessing what needed to be done. A few empty glasses scattered the tables and the other end of the long, u-shaped bar. She grabbed a bus bin and collected them, wiping down surfaces as she went. As she made her way to the back corner, she noticed the man was still on his phone, but now he was muttering to himself.

“Excuse me?” she said.

He didn’t move. Didn’t acknowledge her.

Weird.

Maybe he was wearing headphones she couldn’t see under his beanie cap.

She waved a hand in front of him, trying to get his attention. “Sir? We’re closed.”

The man gazed up, his eyes bloodshot and unfocused.

Rose backed up a subtle step, not liking the look of him. A chill raised goosebumps on her arms. “Are you okay?”

“Are you Ambrosia Galasso?”

Her heart rate spiked. No one had called her by her full name in years. “Who’s asking?”

The man’s face twisted in anger. “Answer the damn question. Are you Ambrosia Galasso? Yes or no?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” she replied, keeping her voice cool and steady despite her thundering heart. “We’re closed. You need to leave.”

The man stood. He was rail thin but towered over her. “Answer me!”

Dammit, she shouldn’t have let Rainbow leave. There was power in numbers, and this guy had obviously been biding his time until she was alone.

Stupid.

She took another step back. She kept the baseball bat behind the bar for when her clientele got too rowdy, but it was on the other side of the room. “Yes, I’m Ambrosia Galasso. Now leave, or I’ll call the police.”

The man’s lips twisted into a sneer. He pulled out a knife, the blade glinting in the dim light. “Someone wants to meet you.” He motioned toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Like hell.

She took another step back toward the bar. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

The man lunged forward, the knife coming too close to her face for comfort. “Don’t make this difficult.”

Okay, she was done with subtlety. She turned and sprinted for the bar. Grabbed the baseball bat and swung with all her strength as he gave chase, hitting him in the shoulder. He crashed into the shelves, sending bottles of booze shattering to the floor. He dropped the knife and cursed, clutching at his arm. She grabbed her phone and dialed 911, keeping her eyes on the man.

“911, what’s your emergency?” The operator’s voice was calm and professional.

“There’s a man with—” Something hit her upside the head and shattered, raining glass and alcohol down on her. She stumbled and fell to the ground. Her vision swam as she watched the Johnnie Walker King George V bottle fall to the floor in pieces. Blood drizzled down her face, but she didn’t know

if she was seeing red because of it or the rage that exploded inside her.

This fucker came in here, threatened her with a knife, busted up hundreds of dollars of liquor, and then broke a special edition, five hundred dollar bottle of scotch...

Over. Her. Head.

She grabbed the bat with both hands and, with a shout of pure rage, surged to her feet, swinging again, aiming for his head. He ducked and lunged at her middle, shoving her into the bar. Pain flared through her side as her ribs cracked against the bar rail, but she ignored it and kicked out, hitting him in the shin and causing him to stumble.

It was the distraction she needed.

She broke free from his grasp and made a run for the door, her head throbbing with each step. Bile surged up her throat, but she couldn't take the time to be sick. She had to get outside. She was at the edge of town but close enough that someone had to be awake nearby to hear her screams for help. The man cursed behind her, but she didn't dare look back to see if he was giving chase.

She burst out into the cool night air and saw a car idling at the curb, its headlights glaring. For one hopeful moment, she thought she was safe. It had to be Marcel picking up Rainbow, or maybe some passerby who heard the ruckus in the bar...

She shielded her eyes against the headlights with one hand and waved at the shadows inside the car with her other. "Help!"

A man climbed out of the driver's seat and stared impassively over the door.

No, this wasn't someone here to help. This was the person the skinny man inside wanted her to "meet."

The skinny man caught up. He blocked her path and grabbed her by the arm, propelling her forward. "Get in the damn car."

She swung the bat at him again, but a powerful hand caught it and ripped it from her grasp. Through the stream of blood clouding her vision, she saw the man from the car, and he was wearing a mask with a white skull painted over his nose and mouth. He raised the bat.

She lifted her arms to cover her head. "If you want money, take whatever's in the register. It's yours. I don't care."

His lips curled into a smile under the mask as he swung. Pain burst in a white explosion behind her eyes, and she collapsed to the ground, losing the

fight to keep her dinner down. She retched until her ribs ached and her head spun, and she heard him laughing softly as he approached her. She tried to crawl away, but her limbs weren't cooperating. He shoved her over with his boot and stared down with cold eyes.

“Please... don't...”

The last thing she remembered before the darkness claimed her was the man's hand closing around her throat.

chapter two

“YOU HAVE A SERIAL KILLER, SHERIFF RAWLINGS.”

Ash Rawlings looked up from his computer as Alexis Summers burst into his office with his flustered secretary, Janine, hot on her heels. He closed his eyes for a moment against his nearly constant headache and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’m so sorry, Ash,” Janine said. “I tried to—”

He sighed and waved his secretary away. “It’s fine.” He’d put off the true crime podcaster for months, but it was time to deal with her meddling. “Hello, Ms. Summers. I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“I’m staying until I get some answers.” Alexis drew a thick binder from the oversized bag on her shoulder and slapped it down on his desk, which was already overflowing with old cases he’d pulled for review. A stack of the files fell to the floor. He watched it happen, watched them slide and scatter, but couldn’t find the energy to care. He’d been working eighty-plus hours a week and pulling all-nighters almost every night for months.

He shifted his gaze back to the podcaster. “What answers?”

“You have a serial killer who has been using your county as his hunting grounds for over twenty-five years,” she said point-blank.

He groaned inwardly. Of course she’d latch on to that urban legend. A serial killer on the loose would make for an interesting podcast and better ratings. Forget that he was already inundated with “boring” crimes to solve, and his department was still dealing with the aftermath of the wildfire that had ripped through the county last fall. “Do you have proof?”

She pointed to the binder. “Thirty-three women, all murdered or missing since 1998. That’s too many for a county of less than one hundred thousand people.”

“Ms. Summers, we’re a big county with a small population and lots of places to hide. Many people come here for the sole purpose of disappearing.” When she opened her mouth, no doubt to protest, he held up a hand. “Yes, I’ll readily admit we have a problem with murder, but that doesn’t mean they’re all connected.”

Alexis leaned forward, her eyes fixed on his. “I’ve been investigating this for months, Sheriff. Talked to families, friends, witnesses. I’ve looked at crime scene photos, medical examiner reports, and police reports. There’s a pattern here, a clear one. These women fit a specific profile: young, vulnerable, and alone. They were runaways, drug addicts, or sex workers. And all of them were last seen in this county before they disappeared. Including the Jane Doe uncovered on the mountain in the fire debris. I believe she might have been the first victim.”

Ash rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t just drop everything and chase after a theory, no matter how compelling. He had a department to run and fifteen years’ worth of cases to review since the previous sheriff had turned out to be a corrupt asshole. “What exactly do you expect me to do with this information?”

“Investigate,” she said with exasperation. “You honestly don’t think it’s weird that so many people—so many *women*—have disappeared here?”

She was right, dammit. Probably not about there being a serial killer at work, but the number of people going missing around here was an enormous problem. He’d been so focused on putting out fires for the last six months—literally and figuratively—that he’d let too many other cases fall through the cracks. He’d let down too many victims and their families. He was supposed to protect his people, and he was failing. It was unacceptable. And that knowledge fucking hurt.

But he wasn’t about to let the podcaster know that.

He kept his face impassive and gave her his standard press conference spiel. “We are investigating all open cases, Ms. Summers. We’re also reviewing all the closed and cold cases from the previous administration to ensure those investigations were handled correctly. If you go on your podcast and start talking about a serial killer—”

She huffed out a breath that fluttered her honey-blond hair. “Look, Sheriff. I know what you think of me, but I’m not looking to make headlines here. I don’t want to get famous over other people’s misfortune. My only goal is to give voice to victims who can’t speak for themselves.”

He stared at her for a stony beat. “Like Darcy Cantrell?”

She pressed her lips into a grim line. “That was ... unfortunate. But Darcy’s case wouldn’t have been solved at all without my podcast drawing your attention to the problems with the initial investigation.”

“You accused my friend of murder.”

“No, I never once accused Donovan Scott of anything. The former sheriff did that, and I simply stated the facts of the investigation as I understood them. But if you had listened to any of the episodes, you’d know I also pointed out inconsistencies and inaccuracies whenever I saw them. I always made sure to mention that Mr. Scott had faced no charges, and that you didn’t consider him a suspect.”

“You almost ruined his life. He was innocent, but people were signing petitions to have him tossed in jail. They called here nonstop, clogging up the phone lines, demanding I arrest him. They threatened me, my deputies, Donovan, and anyone close to him. All because of your podcast.”

“I’m—” Her voice broke, and she glanced away. It was only for a second, but he saw the deep regret in the movement and softened a little toward her. After all, she was just doing her job, same as him. He didn’t like her job or agree with it, but he couldn’t fault her for wanting to do it to the best of her abilities, and the evidence, as flimsy as it was, had all pointed at Donovan.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said finally. “I truly am. That was never my intention. I simply wanted Darcy found—just like I want these other women found. You have to admit, thirty-three women in twenty-five years is a lot for one rural county. Something else is going on here, and I want to find out what it is.”

“Why? You’re not from here. You have no ties to this community or even this state. So, why do you care so much?”

She blinked in surprise. “Because...” She seemed to search for the right words. “Nobody else cares.”

Her words hit a nerve. Frustration and guilt twisted into a knot in his chest. “Accusing me of not caring about what happens in my community isn’t the way to get my help.”

“I-I didn’t mean you specifically, Sheriff. Just—”

“Listen to me closely, Ms. Summers.” Ash planted his hands on his desk and slowly rose to his feet. “You are not a law enforcement officer. You will not investigate these disappearances, and if you try, I will arrest you for obstruction of justice. If you’re right and there is someone in my county

killing women, it's too dangerous for you to go poking around. I'd rather see you in a jail cell than up on my case board, understand?"

She stayed silent.

"Do. You. Understand?"

She growled softly in frustration. "Okay, fine. I won't investigate—as long as *you* will. You can have all of my research." She slid the binder toward him, her expression intense but sincere. "This is your chance to bring justice to families who have been waiting for years. And to stop this serial killer from taking any more lives."

He stared at her. "You can't keep going around saying there's a serial killer. People will get scared and then angry. It will cause chaos."

She didn't squirm, didn't flinch. She just stared back, her chin jutting mulishly.

Jesus. She reminded him of his sister. Anna got that same expression when she wanted something. And if Alexis Summers was anything like his twin, he would not win this battle.

Finally, he exhaled hard and rubbed a hand over his beard before reaching for the binder. "Okay. I'll look at your research, Ms. Summers. But I can't promise anything."

She nodded, satisfaction glimmering in her eyes. "That's all I ask, Sheriff. Just don't dismiss this outright. Lives are at stake."

With that, she walked out of his office, leaving Janine, who was still hovering in the hallway outside the door, to scurry in her wake.

Great.

Janine was an excellent administrative assistant, but she was also one of the town's biggest gossips. Rumors of a serial killer in town would hit Roger's Market within an hour and The Grove by dinnertime.

This was going to be a clusterfuck.

"I don't want to hear a word about this on your podcast," he called.

Alexis Summers didn't respond. He hadn't expected her to, but fully expected her to ignore the command.

Ash stared at the binder on his desk for a long moment, then pulled up Jane Doe's case file on his computer. The fire had badly damaged the remains, but a forensic anthropologist in San Francisco determined the skeleton belonged to a female in her mid-to-late twenties who had given birth at least once and had Hispanic and/or Native American ancestry. Jane Doe had a surgical plate placed to fix a break in her wrist prior to her death, but

corrosion had eroded the serial number. Radiocarbon dating suggested she likely died ten to twenty years ago, and there was no obvious cause of death. Her hyoid bone was fractured, possibly indicating strangulation, but it was impossible to say whether that happened at the time of death or if it was damaged later. A partial DNA profile was obtained but matched nothing on file.

He opened Alexis Summers' binder to the first victim she had listed: a twenty-two-year-old Native American woman named Maria Ayunli Socktish, who disappeared in June 1998. The age, timeline, and ancestry all aligned with his Jane Doe. Maria had a four-year-old son, but he was taken away from her in 1997 because of her struggles with substance abuse. At the time of her disappearance, she was trying to get him back. She was reported missing when she didn't show up for a custody hearing. So, another similarity—Jane Doe was likely also a mother. Nothing indicated Maria had ever broken her wrist, but she could have been treated at a reservation clinic, where medical records were often lost or incomplete. He'd have to check on that.

A sense of dread settled heavily in Ash's stomach. He couldn't ignore this, even if he wanted to. He had a responsibility to the people of his county to keep them safe, and that meant looking into every lead, no matter how far-fetched it might seem. And if there was even a slight chance that a serial killer was snatching women, he needed to find out who it was and stop them before anyone else got hurt.

He took a deep breath and flipped through the binder. Alexis was thorough. He had to give her that. She had pages and pages of detailed notes, witness statements, and even crime scene photos.

"Fuck," he whispered and gazed up at the county map on his wall. Binder in hand, he grabbed a box of pushpins from his desk drawer and walked over to the map, marking the locations of each disappearance. They scattered the county, but there was a heavy concentration around Mt. Humboldt to the northeast—right where they had found Jane Doe in the fire debris.

In the middle of the Emerald Triangle, locals called Mt. Humboldt "Murder Mountain"—a moniker he'd always thought was tongue-in-cheek because it was a place of outlaws and backwoods justice. While many people went missing up there, it was usually because they wanted to disappear. There was an untold number of marijuana farms on the mountain and in the surrounding hills, both legal and illegal, and the outfits often hired transient

workers— “trimmigrants”—to trim the buds. Most of the people reported missing eventually came off the mountain and returned to their lives.

But these thirty-three women had stayed gone. They ranged from age sixteen to twenty-four, were all Native American or Hispanic, or looked like they could be with brown skin and long, dark hair. Alexis Summers was right—these weren’t just random disappearances. He couldn’t deny the pattern. It was there, in black and white, staring him in the face. This was someone preying on vulnerable women, someone who knew the area well and who knew how to stay hidden.

Lost County had a fucking serial killer.

He picked up his phone and dialed his chief deputy sheriff. “Hey, Wright. Get me a list of every single sex offender in the county and their whereabouts for the last twenty-five years. I want it on my desk by the end of the day.”

“Yes, sir,” Wright replied.

“I’m headed out to the old gas station on Route 10—”

“Why? Did something happen out there? Do you need backup?”

“No. I’m just reviewing an old case and want to see the crime scene in person. I should be back within the hour, but if I’m not, just leave the list on my desk.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

chapter three

ASH HUNG UP THE PHONE, tucked the binder under one arm, and grabbed his jacket. He needed to get out from behind the desk before his ass started growing roots in the chair, so he might as well check Alexis's research. He stopped in the records office and put in a request for Maria Socktish's case file. It was before the former sheriff's time, so he hadn't pulled it for review—Tennison was only a deputy in '98—but now he wanted a look. Had Tennison been involved in this case, too? If so, did Ash have to pull everything the man touched during his nearly forty-year law enforcement career rather than just the cases he handled as sheriff?

The idea was daunting. His desk was already piled chest-deep with cases for review.

Since Ash hadn't found the Socktish case in the computer's database, her file must still be on paper. The department was digitizing old cases, but the process was laborious. Hopefully, records would get it back to him faster than their usual sloth pace.

That done, he drove north to the last place Maria Socktish had been seen alive. The area was a desolate stretch of highway, too deep into the redwoods to attract tourists. A lone gas station sagged on the side of the road, its two pumps long since dry. Before the state built the highway, this road had been a major trucking route, and this gas station was often used for drug deals and prostitution because it was easy to access but remote enough not to draw unwanted attention. It was a badly kept secret that the owner was always willing to keep his mouth shut for a price. That guy had died years ago, and although the station shut down after the highway opened and rerouted traffic, it was still a hotbed for drugs. The nearby transient camp meant his deputies responded to drug overdose calls out here multiple times a month.

Ash parked his Tahoe and got out, his boots crunching on the gravel. He checked his phone—no signal. He looked around and imagined what it would have been like for Maria to be out here, alone and vulnerable. Trapped by poverty and desperate choices. It made his blood boil.

Had she come out here to buy drugs? Or was she in such a bad situation she'd needed to sell herself to survive?

According to Alexis's research, a couple from Seattle on a road trip stopped at the station to fill their RV on June 12, 1998, and saw Maria talking to a man in a black San Francisco 49ers baseball cap. The couple went inside to use the bathroom and buy some snacks, and when they returned, Maria and the man were nowhere to be seen.

Had the man taken her? Or had she gone willingly?

Ash glanced up and down the road, bringing up a mental map of his county. If someone hiked through the forest from the gas station, it was only a few miles to where Jane Doe's remains had been found.

Could Jane Doe actually be Maria Socktish?

A chill clawed down his spine and raised goosebumps on his arms. The air was cold and damp today and even cooler under the canopy of trees, but with his lined Lost County Sheriff parka zipped up to his neck, it couldn't account for the chill.

Someone was here, watching him from the cover of the thick forest.

He inched his hand toward the holster at his hip and released his gun. The weight of it was a comfort as he turned toward the gas station.

Movement.

Something big darted through the deepening shadows of evening. Not an animal. It was too early in the year for bears, and deer didn't run on two legs.

Human.

"Sheriff's Office," he called. "Come out with your hands up!"

The person—man? —wasn't even trying to be quiet anymore. He crashed through the underbrush, getting further away with every second Ash hesitated. Way out here, people only ran from the police if they were up to no good. He should know. He, Donovan, and Zak had been on the other side of this equation often enough as teens, with the sheriff hot on their heels due to some act of criminal mischief or another. So, even though whoever was crashing through the trees now probably had nothing to do with Maria Socktish, they also weren't just out for a leisurely hike.

Fuck.

Ash took a step to give chase, but a noise from inside the gas station drew his attention. It sounded like a groan or a soft cry of pain. Was someone injured in there? He edged around the corner of the building, heart pounding as he peeked through the boarded-up window.

There was a lump on the floor under a green fleece blanket. It shifted, and the blanket fell away, exposing a slim, tattooed arm and a hand with bright red nails.

A woman.

“Sheriff’s Office!”

No response.

He flattened his palm against the door, surprised when it opened easily. He stepped inside and approached the woman slowly, gun at the ready. She lay with her back to him, unmoving. He knelt beside her and checked for a pulse. Weak, but it was there. He gently shook her shoulder.

“Ma’am? Can you hear me?”

Still no response.

He moved around her to get a better look. Her wrists and ankles were both bound with tape. She was dressed in jeans and a tight black crop top featuring a sneering dog in a fedora. The thorny stem of a rose tattoo stretched across her ribs and peeked out from under the edge of the shirt, and his heart nosedived into his stomach.

He knew that tattoo.

That shirt.

Those dagger-like nails.

Rose Galasso, owner of the Mad Dog Pub, and a massive pain in his ass. She was loud, obnoxious, disdained law enforcement, and always glowered at him like he was a lump of dog shit on the bottom of her high-heeled boots. The feeling was mutual. He couldn’t stand her most of the time, but that didn’t mean he wanted to see her hurt.

“Rose?” He pushed her black hair back from her face with a hand that trembled ever so slightly, and her head lolled to the side. Her usually golden complexion was too pale, and the red lipstick she always wore was smeared in a ghoulish slash across her faintly blue lips, but she was breathing. He set down his gun and clasped her face in his hands, running his thumbs over her high cheekbones, willing her to open her eyes. Dried blood clumped her hair together in thick, tangled strands. His fingers brushed a fresh wound on the side of her head.

“Rose, can you hear me? C’mon, open your eyes. Wake up and tell me what a bastard I am.”

She didn’t move.

Swearing under his breath, he let go of her long enough to grab his phone and check the screen again—still no signal.

The forest outside was silent except for the rustling of leaves in the wind. He had to go back to his Tahoe and use the radio to call for help, but he didn’t dare leave her alone. As he sat there on his knees, debating, something crashed at the back of the building.

He grabbed his gun and spun toward the sound. A tall figure in a hooded jacket stood at the gas station’s back door, his face shrouded in shadow. He had a strange energy about him that had Ash’s skin prickling with a warning.

“Hands up,” Ash demanded.

The man melted farther back into the shadows.

“Stop moving! Put your hands up!”

The man didn’t comply. He just stood there, watching with an eerie calm. That stillness triggered something in his memory, and he lowered his gun a fraction. “Shane?”

Suddenly, the man smiled. He could only see the barest hint of it, a flash of white in the shadows, but it made his blood run cold. It wasn’t a friendly smile. It was a smile that screamed of danger and violence.

No, this wasn’t Shane Trevisano, the reclusive former SEAL who lived off the land out here. Shane was a weird guy, but he never made Ash’s hair stand up on his arms like this.

The man lunged forward, his gloved hand wrapping around Ash’s wrist, forcing his gun hand up. Their eyes locked for an instant as each man tried to force the other away. Ash was fast and strong, but his attacker was, too. The man struck out with his elbow, and Ash saw stars as it made contact under his eye.

The man twisted his arm behind his back and shoved him face-first into the wall. He grunted in pain as his abused cheekbone scraped the rough surface, and he felt hot breath on his ear as the man leaned close.

“You’re not welcome here, Sheriff.” The voice was low and menacing. He didn’t recognize it. “Better run back to town before you get hurt.”

The grip on Ash’s arms tightened, and he grunted in pain. The way this guy moved with such fluidity screamed of someone who was trained in combat. He was outnumbered and outmatched, with no backup and no way to

call for help. And Rose still lay bound and unconscious on the floor.

He needed a plan, and he needed one fast.

“Who are you?” he asked, trying to buy time.

The man chuckled darkly. “Someone who’s been watching you. Watching all of you. And let me tell you, Sheriff, you and your little band of dog lovers are in over your head.”

Did he mean Redwood Coast Rescue? Or Anna, Zak, and their girls? “Leave my family out of this.”

“Your family?” The words dripped with hatred and bitterness. “Before we’re done, I’ll rip your fucking family apart, you sanctimonious prick.”

The grip on him tightened and anger, hot and bright, overtook his momentary panic. Didn’t this fucker know he was in control? He was always in control, even now. He kicked his leg back and made hard contact with the man’s shin. Heard a satisfying crack, and the man stumbled back, releasing his grip.

Ash turned around, ready to face the bastard head-on, but the man was already running toward the gas station’s exit. His first instinct was to give chase, but he couldn’t leave Rose alone. Instead, he rushed to her side, carefully removing the tape that bound her wrists and ankles. She stirred slightly, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She was still alive. He scooped her up in his arms. She was lighter than he expected. She wasn’t a big woman, but she was always so formidable during their verbal sparring matches, always larger than life. It seemed wrong for her to be so small and fragile in his arms.

He carried her to his Tahoe, gently laying her across the back seat. He shut the door and jogged to the driver’s side, his heart pounding in his chest. He needed to get out of there and call for backup. As he turned the key in the ignition, the man in the hooded jacket stepped out from behind the gas station. Ash gunned the engine and peeled out of the parking lot, his eyes locked on the man in the rearview mirror.

Who the hell was this guy? And why did he have Rose? Was he working alone, or was there a larger threat waiting down the road?

Ash grabbed his radio and filled dispatch in on what happened, then checked his phone again, relieved to see a strong signal. He tapped his sister’s name. When she answered, the surge of relief left him lightheaded. Or maybe that was the blow he’d taken to the head. Jesus, his face throbbed.

“Anna, are you with Zak?”

“Uh, no, he’s out with Donovan—”

Panic took him in a stranglehold. Zak was combat trained and could protect Anna and the girls if anyone tried for them, but if he wasn’t there...

Fuck.

“AJ, go to my office, lock yourself in with the girls, and don’t leave until either Zak or I get there.”

“Uh, okay.” She sounded confused, but at least she wasn’t protesting. “Where are you?”

He lifted his gaze to the rearview mirror, checking on Rose in the backseat. “On the way to the hospital. Rose Galasso was attacked.”

Anna’s voice turned sharp. “What? Is she okay?”

“Unconscious but breathing. I need you and the girls safe until I get there. And if you see anything suspicious, call 911 and stay inside. Got it?”

“Got it. I’ll call Zak and have him come home. You be safe, too, big brother. And keep us updated,” Anna added before hanging up.

Ash shoved his phone in his pocket and focused on the road, his grip on the steering wheel white-knuckled. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being watched, that danger lurked behind every tree, around every bend. He glanced in the rearview mirror again, half-expecting to see the man in the hooded jacket tailing him.

The road was empty.

He gritted his teeth, his grip on the steering wheel tightening until his hands ached. Fuck with him, fine. He could take it. But you didn’t mess with his family.

He made it to the hospital in record time, screeching to a stop in front of the emergency entrance. Nurses rushed out with a gurney, and Ash helped them lift Rose onto it. One nurse tried to shoo him away, but he refused to leave. His stomach twisted into a weird knot at the idea that she might not be okay. Who would bitch at him every time he walked into the Mad Dog Pub if she wasn’t there? He could admit, if only to himself, that he enjoyed their verbal sparring matches. He always came away from them feeling exhilarated, buzzing with adrenaline like he’d shotgunned multiple energy drinks.

Ash paced the waiting room, guilt eating him alive for not being able to protect Rose. As sheriff, it was his job to maintain safety and order, and he had failed. He let her down and he couldn’t stand it.

He called back to his office and found that Zak had arrived to take Anna

and the girls home. Zak was pissed. He wanted answers, and Ash had none to give. He'd have to call them later, but for now, he asked Janine to transfer him to his chief deputy, Walter Wright.

"Hey, boss," Wright said. "I put that list of sex offenders on your desk."
Shit.

Had Rose been raped?

The air left his lungs like someone had punched him, and he stopped pacing. Her attacker had been fully dressed, and so had she, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. His hand tightened on his phone until it creaked a protest.

Jesus. He needed to breathe and loosen his grip before he busted the damn thing. And he needed to answer his chief deputy. With considerable effort, he unlocked his jaw. "Yeah. Thanks. Uh, I need deputies and a crime scene unit out at the old gas station on Route 10."

"What happened?" Wright asked. "You okay?"

His face throbbed. He probed his sore left eye and sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth.

Yeah, maybe he shouldn't touch it.

"I'm fine. Rose Galasso was attacked. I found her out there, bound and gagged, and confronted her attacker, but he got away. I'm waiting at the hospital to see if I can get a statement from her. I'll send you a description of the guy. Check local cameras, see if anyone saw him. And send someone to watch my family. I don't want them alone."

"Got it. I'll call you back as soon as I find something."

Ash hung up and sank into a chair, taking deep, even breaths to calm himself. Everyone always thought his sister was the Rawlings with a temper, but that was only because he'd made it his mission to keep a tight lid on his. But right now, he was dangerously close to an eruption. If Rose had been raped, he didn't know how he'd cope with that news. If he was unable to keep the people in his personal orbit safe, he didn't deserve the sheriff's badge.

After what felt like an eternity, the doctor emerged from the ER, her face grave.

Ash's heart sank and his voice came out weirdly hoarse. "Is she okay?"

The doctor sighed. "She's in rough shape."

"What are her injuries?" Before the doctor could throw some bullshit about HIPAA at him, he held up a hand. "You don't have to go into specifics."

An overview is all I need to know for the investigation.”

The doctor hesitated for several seconds, then relented. “She suffered a concussion from a blow to the head. I pulled shards of glass from the wound, which makes me think the weapon was a bottle of some kind.”

“Did you save the shards?”

She nodded.

“I’ll need them for testing.”

“All right. The patient also sustained a beating on her face and body. She has contusions all over and at least one broken rib. She was heavily drugged with an opiate, almost to the point of overdosing, but we gave her Naloxone and she’s breathing on her own now. We’ll need to monitor her closely for the next twenty-four hours.”

“Rape?”

“No evidence of it, as far as I can tell.”

Ash exhaled, surprised at the strength of the relief flooding through him. “Can I see her?”

The doctor nodded. “But only briefly. And Sheriff?” She tapped her cheek below her left eye with one finger. “After you see her, I want to take a look at that.”

He waved her off. “It’s nothing.”

“Your eye is swelling shut.”

Huh. That explained why his depth perception was off. “Later.”

She led the way to Rose’s room, and Ash’s heart pounded uncomfortably in his chest as he followed. Rose lay on the bed, her face swollen and bruised, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath. It was wrong. She should be snapping at him for not doing his job right. Needling him for not paying attention to his town. Snarling at him for looking at her wrong or breathing in her direction or whatever other heinous crime she thought he had committed that day.

He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her, taking her cold hand in his. “Who did this to you?”

chapter four

WHEN THE DOCTORS assured Ash that Rose would not wake until morning, he reluctantly gave up on sitting there watching her breathe and drove to his office. He sank into his chair and shut his eyes, soaking in the silence.

But his reprieve was short-lived.

His sister burst into his office with her husband close on her heels.

Anna gasped when she saw him. “Oh my God, Ash! Are you okay? Why aren’t you at the hospital?” She picked up the compress the doctor had given him and tried to press it to his eye. “Why aren’t you using this?”

“I’m fine.” He waved her away. “It’s just a black eye. Stop fussing, AJ.”

“Fussing is what she does best,” Zak Hendricks said and propped a shoulder against the door frame. He eyed Ash up and down. “You look like hell.”

Ash took the compress Anna kept shoving at him and, to make her happy, pressed it to his eye. “Thanks, man.”

Zak glanced at his wife and then straightened. “Nah, I mean it. When was the last time you slept?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“That’s it,” Anna declared, hands on her hips. “You’re taking Dante.”

Ash sighed heavily and set the compress down. “We talked about this. I’m not taking in one of your lost causes.”

“Dante is not a lost cause. He’s a trained police K9. Yes,” she admitted, holding up a hand to stop any further protest, “he had some anxiety issues after his previous handler was killed, but we’ve worked through them, and he’s ready to work again. He needs to work again, and you need someone to protect you.”

“I don’t need—”

In typical Anna fashion, she steamrolled over his protest. “You’ve been saying you want to invest in K9s for the sheriff’s office, so you don’t have to keep asking the state police to borrow theirs. So start with Dante. Give it a trial run. What could it hurt?”

Ash looked at his brother-in-law for help, but Zak only shrugged.

“We both know you won’t win this argument with her. Or *any* argument,” he added under his breath with an eye roll.

Anna jabbed her husband in the stomach with her elbow. “Behave.”

“Why are you always poking me with that boney elbow of yours, woman?” He rubbed his stomach. “I’m just stating facts.”

Ash eyed the pair of them. “Trouble in paradise?” He hoped not. He didn’t have the energy to beat the hell out of Zak today, but if they were fighting, he’d be morally obligated as Anna’s fifteen minutes older big brother.

“Nope,” Anna said cheerfully. “He’s just annoyed because he was being an ass this morning, and I told him so.”

“Very colorfully,” Zak muttered.

She ignored him and poked a finger at Ash’s nose. “And now I’m telling you so. You’re being a stubborn ass. Take Dante. You’ll like him. He’s exactly like you.” She softened her voice and folded her hands under her chin, giving him the pleading puppy eyes he could never resist. “Please. If only to make me feel better. I want to know you’re never going into another situation like today without backup.”

Shit. How could he say no to that? “Fine.”

He already had a constant throbbing headache. What would it matter if he added on one more?

Anna’s face lit up, and she clapped her hands together. “Thank you! You won’t regret it.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see. I’ll come over later and pick him up.”

“You don’t have to. He’s in the car. I’ll go get him and fill you in on everything you need to know.” She hurried out.

Ash groaned softly and stared up at the ceiling. “Of course he’s in the car because she knew I wouldn’t say no.”

“Did you really expect anything else?” Zak slapped him on the back. “Good luck with this one, brother. He’s an escape artist like my Ranger, but with a worse attitude.”

“Are you fucking with me? Ranger almost bit off my arm once.”

Zak merely grinned and trailed his wife out.

As he waited for them to return with the dog, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at how easy their relationship seemed. Even when they were arguing, they were always so in sync, finishing each other's sentences and laughing at inside jokes that he wasn't privy to. Except for his twin, he'd never had someone like that in his life. Someone who knew him inside and out and accepted him for who he was, flaws and all. He didn't begrudge Anna's hard-won happiness with Zak, but he kind of missed the days when it was just the Rawlings twins against the world.

Anna returned with Dante on a leash, and— Jesus, the German Shepherd was massive and muscular, with sleek black fur and an intense gaze that seemed to pierce through him. He'd never admit it out loud, but the dog was intimidating as hell.

Dante was well-trained, though, and immediately sat at attention beside Anna, awaiting further orders. His gaze darted around the room, assessing his surroundings, before finally landing on Ash. If he wasn't mistaken, that was the look of a predator zeroing in on prey.

"Here he is," Anna said with a grin, holding up the leash. "Meet Dante."

"Yeah, we've met." He knelt and offered his hand. "Hey, boy. Remember me?" He had saved the dog from a burning barn during the wildfire last fall when Redwood Coast Rescue's facilities got overwhelmed. Dante had seemed smaller then, cowered by fear. Now he sniffed Ash's outstretched hand with the suspicious thoroughness of a cop patting down a suspect. His gaze returned to Ash's face, and his lack of trust was obvious. His ears flattened in displeasure as Anna gave a brief rundown of his training, habits, and commands.

Yeah, this animal wasn't a lost cause at all. Sure.

He should know better than to believe his sister when she pulled her puppy dog eyes out of the arsenal to get her way. "I'm sure he'll be an asset to the sheriff's office."

"He will," Anna agreed. "And he'll keep you safe for me. Just remember to give him plenty of exercise and attention, and you'll have a loyal companion for life."

"Great." He tried to keep his tone casual even as the weight of this additional responsibility settled heavily on his shoulders. He had enough on his plate without having to worry about a dog. But he'd agreed to this, so Dante was his problem now.

He watched Anna and Zak leave before turning to face the dog sitting at his feet. Dante eyed him with suspicion and a hint of hostility.

“My sister could get away with murder, you know that?”

Dante only tilted his head to the side and let out a grumbling woof.

“Man of few words. I like that.” Ash sighed and sat behind his desk, picking up the compress again and wincing as he pressed it to his eye. Maybe a little extra protection wouldn’t hurt. He just hoped he didn’t regret this decision.

chapter five

I'M ALIVE!

Rose opened her eyes and stared up at the white ceiling above her bed. She instantly knew that she was in a hospital. Her head throbbed in time with her heart and the rest of her... she didn't know where the pain was coming from. She felt like every cell in her body had taken a beating, and she wouldn't be surprised if her skin was now one enormous bruise.

How am I alive?

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, and she squeezed them shut to keep more from flowing.

Skinny man.

Knife.

Struggle.

Blood.

Masked man.

The images came in rapid-fire succession, playing out on the backs of her eyelids. She sucked in a sharp breath that had pain singing through her ribs and fisted her hands in the blanket.

Somehow, she survived. Whatever vile things the masked man had planned for her, he hadn't accomplished them. She was alive and safe and—

Not alone.

Panic blazed through her at the sudden awareness of another presence in the room. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she wasn't safe, and this was part of his twisted plan. Maybe—

But she was in the hospital.

And the other presence didn't feel threatening.

She turned her head on the pillow and blinked until the hulking figure

backlit by the windows came into focus.

Sheriff Ash Rawlings.

What?

He was the absolute last person she expected to see at her bedside, but there he was, sitting at a small table by the windows, surrounded by paperwork. He glared at the documents, looking characteristically grumpy and uncharacteristically mussed.

Rose tried to speak, but her throat was dry and raw. She cleared it and tried again. “Sheriff,” she croaked out.

Ash jerked, clearly startled. He looked up from his work and met her gaze. For a moment, his stormy blue eyes flickered with a range of powerful emotions before he schooled his expression into blankness.

“Rose,” he said, his voice gruff.

She couldn’t make sense of it. Why would Sheriff Rawlings be in her hospital room? Did he know what happened to her? Was he here to arrest her for something?

She tried to sit up, but the pain in her ribs made her gasp and fall back on the pillow.

Ash was on his feet in an instant, moving to help her. She leaned into his strength as he lifted her gently and stuffed pillows behind her back to prop her up.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice was a little stronger this time, but still barely audible.

His expression darkened. “You were attacked, and I need to get your statement.”

“So you’re working from my hospital room?”

He glanced over at the files. “I, uh...” He cleared his throat and shuffled the stack into a neat pile that he stuffed into a banged-up leather briefcase. “I’m on my lunch break.”

Rose studied him for a moment, taking in the dark circles under his eyes and the wildness of his usually well-kept beard. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days, and she didn’t believe his bullshit excuse. Ash Rawlings wasn’t the type to take lunch breaks, especially not during an investigation.

“Do you remember anything at all?” he asked, pulling a notepad from the back pocket of his jeans. She recognized that notebook—the one he’d carried as a new deputy thirteen years ago, though the dark green leather cover looked considerably more worn now.

Rose closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. The memories were fuzzy, disjointed, but she did her best to piece them together.

“There was a man in the back booth of the pub all night,” she said finally. “I told him I was closing, but he wouldn’t leave. He was really skinny, and I think he was high on something. He had a knife. We struggled...” She trailed off.

“Do you remember anything else about him? Any other physical traits?”

She started to shake her head, but stopped when the room spun around her. She lifted a hand to her temple and found her head bandaged. “I don’t remember.”

“Was anyone else there before you closed? Did anyone else see him?”

“My aunt.”

“Rainbow Rodriguez?”

“She left a few minutes before, but she was very tipsy. I doubt she remembers him.”

He didn’t seem happy at this news. Then again, that was nothing new. She’d never seen the sheriff happy. “Do you remember anything else about the guy?”

“No, but there was a second man waiting outside.”

“Can you describe him?”

“He wore a mask.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“I... I don’t think so. I told him he could have the money in the register. He hit me and...” Her fingers touched her neck. The skin there felt tender. “I think he tried to strangle me.” She dropped her hand and looked at Ash. “Did you stop him?”

His expression gave nothing of his thoughts away. “You said this happened at closing time on Tuesday? Around two a.m.?”

God, the way he stressed the day of the week made her think she was unconscious a lot longer than she realized. “What day is it now?”

“Friday morning.”

She’d lost days. Why couldn’t she remember anything from that time? It was just a black hole.

“Rose?” he prompted.

“Uh... yes. Sorry. But it was midnight. The place was dead, so I was going to close early.”

Ash scribbled something in his notepad before pocketing it. "All right. If you remember anything else, let me know."

He turned to leave, but Rose's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. The contact sent a jolt of electricity up her arm, and her heart thumped against her abused ribs as she looked up at him.

"Wait," she said, voice still too hoarse. "How did I escape?"

He was silent for a long time. It seemed like he was wrestling with himself, like he didn't want to tell her the truth. When he finally spoke, his voice was tight. "I found you at the old gas station on Route 10 on Wednesday evening."

"So I didn't escape?" Her stomach churned at the news. "He had me for over a day?" What had he done to her during that time?

Ash turned back, his eyes narrowed. "Why do you say he?"

Uncomprehending, she stared up at him through a sheen of tears. "What?"

"You just said he not they, but earlier you told me there were two abductors."

"I... don't know why I said that." But even as she spoke, she knew it wasn't true. "I guess the first guy just seemed like a lackey. He wasn't in charge."

"You got the impression he answered to the second man, the one in the mask?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why the masked man would take you out to the old gas station?"

She closed her eyes and tried to think. Everything was so fuzzy, her head stuffed with cobwebs that muffled her thoughts. "I'm sorry. I don't."

He stared at her for a stony second. "Do you have a problem with substances, Ms. Galasso?"

"A problem with... what?"

His gaze dropped to her bare arms, and dread filled her belly. Despite the pain it caused, she lifted her arms and stared at the fresh track marks in the soft flesh there. "I've never..." The tears she'd been trying so hard to hold back flooded her vision and spilled over. "What did he do to me?"

His blue eyes hardened, a fire of simmering rage sparking to life in his irises. His hands remained still at his sides, but the intensity of his stare was enough to make her tremble. Just as suddenly as it had come, the emotion

disappeared, and he stepped forward, cupping his hand around her shoulder in gentle support.

“I don’t know yet,” he said, and his usually indifferent voice was now filled with warmth. “But I give you my word— I will find out.”

She stuffed her arm under the sheet. She couldn’t look at those marks any longer. “Your word doesn’t mean a damn thing to me, Sheriff.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t break my promises.”

“You already broke one. Years ago. Remember?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I’ll need to interview you again soon.” Once again, he turned away as if to leave.

Dammit, she was being an ungrateful bitch. She was angry and turning it on him, but he didn’t deserve it—this time, at least. He’d been nothing but kind to her today. If he could table their shared animosity for the moment, she should, too.

“Wait.” She swallowed hard, trying to maintain her composure while emotions ran wild inside her chest. “Thank you.”

He nodded once and grabbed his briefcase. “I need your permission to review your medical records,” he said, back in cold cop mode. “I need to know exactly what they did to you.”

“Okay.”

The thick muscle in his jaw tensed as he pulled open the door, his broad shoulders rigid with tension. “I’ll call your aunt, let her know you’re awake.” She expected him to leave after that, but then he paused and looked back at her with an expression so soft she hardly recognized him. “The bastard will pay for hurting you.”

chapter

six

WHY DID EVERYTHING HURT?

Rose surfaced to consciousness in a confused daze, her body covered in cold sweat, her heart beating like it was trying to drill out of her chest.

Where was she?

Why did it feel like her skeleton wanted to jump out of her skin?

Slowly, memories came back in jagged pieces. The men—skinny, twitchy guy and the cold man in the mask. Beating her. Dumping her on an old mattress. Injecting her, filling her veins with poison.

Oh, God.

That jittery, jumpy feeling was withdrawal.

The craving crawled under her skin, an insatiable itch that ached all the way down to her bones and begged to be scratched. Sweat beaded on her forehead as her legs twitched uncontrollably, as if they had a mind of their own.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she clenched her fists in frustration. She felt trapped in her own body, a prisoner of the torment she never asked for.

She shuddered and attempted to sit up, but a wave of nausea hit her, and her stomach churned. Even the slightest movement feel like a monumental task.

She had to move. She had to leave. She had to do... something... anything... to make it stop.

She struggled to get out of bed, but her legs wouldn't cooperate, like they weren't even connected to her brain anymore. One second, she was standing, trying to shuffle toward the door, and the next, she collapsed. The sudden impact sent a sharp pain shooting through her abused body, and she cried out.

“Rose!” The door burst open, and Ash stood there, his enormous

shoulders blocking out the hallway lights, his gun in hand. When he spotted her on the floor, he holstered the weapon and knelt in front of her. “What happened?”

She tried to speak, but all that came out was a weak groan. If she didn’t feel so awful and her thoughts weren’t so chaotic, she’d probably have been embarrassed about Ash seeing her like this, so weak and vulnerable. As it was, she was just grateful for his strong arms banding around her, pulling her upright. He leaned her against the side of the bed. The room spun like a carnival ride around her, and she groaned softly.

Ash’s expression darkened with concern. “I’ll get the nurse.”

“I’m fine. Just a little dizzy.” A blatant lie. The only thing holding her upright was her one shaky arm looped around the bed rail. “Let me get back in bed.” She slowly stood and tried to take a step forward, but her legs gave out, and she crumpled again.

Ash caught her this time, holding her close as she trembled against him. Was that his hand stroking down her hair? She leaned into him like a cat seeking a cuddle. She shouldn’t let him touch her like this. She shouldn’t find his touch so soothing. This was Ash Rawlings, after all. The man she’d spent her entire adult life hating with the fire of a thousand suns.

“You’re okay.” His tone was gruff, but somehow also soothing. He didn’t say more, but it didn’t matter. His arms were strong and safe, and she needed to feel safe right now.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I can do this.”

“Do what?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Help me back to bed.”

He grumbled low in his throat, but lifted her gently to the bed. As he set her down, she caught a whiff of him—outdoorsy, a little like rain on wood, like a man who enjoyed spending time in the forest. Not cologne. It was too subtle for that. Just his natural scent with a fresh hint of soap. For a moment, she forgot about the withdrawal and just breathed him in, wanting to stay close forever.

But then the withdrawal symptoms returned with a vengeance, and Rose squeezed her eyes shut, dropping her head back to the pillow. A whimper escaped her throat.

Ash stepped back, giving her space. She appreciated the gesture, but also felt an odd pang of sadness at the loss of his warmth.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Just ... stay here. I need you here.” The words came without her thinking, surprising her. But there was truth in them. The thought of being alone right now terrified her.

Ash hesitated, but then took a seat in the chair next to her bed, his eyes fixed on her like he thought she might die if he looked away for even a second.

The way she felt, maybe she would.

They sat in silence for a while, Rose fighting with her body and Ash watching her intently. The cravings ebbed and flowed, like waves crashing on the shore. Each time they hit, she dug her nails into her palms and tried to breathe through it.

Suddenly, Ash stood up. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere by yourself. You’ll fall on your face again.”

Rose watched him leave, wondering what he was up to. But before she could venture a guess, he returned with a tray in his hand. On it was a bottle of water, a sandwich, and a small bag of chips.

“Figured you’re hungry.” He set it on the bed table and rolled it over to her. He had never been this kind to her before, and she didn’t know how to react. Probably better not to cry the tears suddenly blurring her vision.

“Thank you.”

The smell of fresh bread and roasted turkey wafted from the sandwich. She took a small bite, savoring the flavors as they exploded in her mouth. It was then that she realized just how hungry she was. Despite her efforts to keep them back, the tears streamed out anyway, dripping down her cheeks as she ate. They were made of equal parts gratitude and shame. She had always prided herself on being strong and independent, but now she was reduced to a shell of her former self. She couldn’t even think of a decent insult for Ash, and insulting him was one of her favorite pastimes.

Ash watched silently as she ate. His expression gave nothing away, stern as always, but there was something in his eyes she’d never seen before—a softness, maybe even a flicker of understanding.

When she finished, he asked, “Feeling better?”

The food had helped to distract her, and a small spark of hope warmed her chest. She *could* get through this. The crawling, itching, aching—it wouldn’t last forever. She just had to hang on until her body detoxified. “Yes. Thank you.”

“All right.” He gathered the tray. She couldn’t read his expression and his

voice was cop flat again. "I'll be right outside the door if you need anything else."

She didn't want to be alone again with the cravings and caught his arm. "Why are you here?"

He looked down at her fingers wrapped around his wrist, then carefully extracted himself and stepped back. "You're under twenty-four-hour guard until we can be sure the men who attacked you won't try again."

"But you're the sheriff. You have deputies for this kind of thing."

"I do," he said with an edge of annoyance in his tone. "But I wanted to make sure you were safe myself."

Rose studied him for a moment, searching for any hint of insincerity, but found none. There was a softness to his expression that she had never seen before, and it made her heart race in a way that had nothing to do with withdrawal.

"Why are you being so kind to me?"

"Maybe I'm a decent guy."

"You're a lot of things, Ash Rawlings, but decent isn't one of them."

"Then maybe I just don't like to see you suffer."

"That's funny because I suffer every time you walk into my pub and threaten to pull my liquor license."

Was that a twitch of a smile under his beard? "Yeah, well, I have a job to do."

"And I have a business to run."

They stared at each other, neither willing to back down first. The smug bastard. How dare he act like he cared about her now when he had caused her so much trouble in the past? She opened her mouth to tell him off, but he beat her to it.

"I know we've never seen eye to eye, but your doctor told me what that fucker did to you and the next few days are going to be hell for you. I want to help you get through it."

"Why?"

"Because I know what it's like." Without another word, he walked out and positioned himself outside her door, a grumpy mountain of a sentry.

She gaped at his broad back. Ash was always so put together and in control. How could he know what withdrawal was like? Was he an addict? But he was the sheriff. He was supposed to be a pillar of the community, a role model for others to follow. If he was an addict, it would be a scandal that

could destroy his career. And he'd be a hypocrite of the worst kind, forcing others to abide by his strict laws in public while breaking them in the privacy of his home.

But... no. She couldn't picture that. Maybe he meant he knew what it was like because as a cop, he saw people suffering from addiction and withdrawal all the time? That made more sense.

Either way, Ash Rawlings was not a man to be trusted, no matter how sympathetic he seemed to her plight. He'd put on the compassionate act once before and then destroyed her life.

Fatigue settled over her like a heavy blanket, sapping her energy and leaving her drained and hollow. She settled against her pillow and thought about all the times Ash had come into her pub, threatening to shut her down and take away her livelihood. But now, he was here, watching over her, making sure she was safe. It was a strange turn of events, one she never thought she would see.

As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, Ash looked at her through the small rectangular window in the door. Their eyes met and held for a moment before he turned away, his expression unreadable.

There was more to that man's story than he was letting on.

She shouldn't care. She had her own demons to battle and couldn't afford to get sidetracked by his.

The silence in the room was heavy, broken only by the occasional rustling of the sheets as she shifted in bed. She closed her eyes, willing herself to fall asleep, but her mind wouldn't quiet down. Jagged memories of the men attacking her kept replaying in her head, like a never-ending nightmare. And it only got worse when she finally fell asleep because then her imagination took over, filling the black hole in her memory with the worst scenarios it could come up with. She knew they'd pumped her full of drugs, but what else had they done to her in those two days?

When she woke from a restless sleep, Ash was gone. She wondered if it had all been a weird dream until she saw the deputy stationed in front of her room. It hadn't been a dream. Ash Rawlings *had* come to the hospital and sat with her overnight.

Surely a sign of an impending apocalypse.

chapter seven

AUNT RAINBOW and Marcel stopped by mid-morning, and Rainbow flew into the hospital room on a comforting cloud of patchouli and pot, her bangles clicking together like castanets as she wrapped Rose up in a hug.

“Oh, my baby.” She pulled back to examine Rose’s face. Tears and anger filled her dark eyes. “What did they do to you?”

“I’m okay.”

“You are most certainly not! Look at these bruises. Dammit, I should’ve stayed and helped you close. I just had a feeling. I know better than to ignore my feelings.” She squeezed Rose again, too tight, making her wince. “I swear, if I find out who did this to you—”

“Rainy, let the girl breathe.” Marcel gently pulled Rainbow back and Rose gave him a grateful look while her aunt turned her outrage in his direction.

“She needs care!”

“And she’s getting the best care here.” Marcel winked at Rose, but he wasn’t quick enough.

Rainbow scowled at them both, then gave his long, wiry gray beard a little punishing tug. “Behave.”

He held up his hands. “I always behave.”

Rose smiled at the pair of them. They’d been a couple for years and had the easy intimacy that came with a long relationship. They were perfect for each other, though they couldn’t be more different—Rainbow with her beads and feathers and bangles and Marcel in black leather, looking like an enforcer for an outlaw motorcycle gang. He was a stocky man, equal parts fat and muscle, and had hair everywhere except on his head, where a skull tattoo decorated his scalp over his left ear.

The sight of it sent Rose careening back to the bar, and the man with the skull mask standing over her, raising the bat. She curled her hands into the blanket beside her legs and tried to breathe. It wasn't even the same kind of skull. The mask had been very realistic, while Marcel's tattoo was almost cartoonish.

It. Wasn't. The. Same.

Shit, if every skull tattoo she saw set her off, she'd need to find another line of work. Just about every other man who came into her pub had one.

"You okay, Rosie?" Marcel asked.

She nodded, but it was a lie. Her head was pounding, and her stomach churning. She couldn't draw full breath. The walls felt like they were closing in on her.

"I need... I need to get out of this room." She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, swaying slightly. Rainbow tried to help, but she waved her away. "I'm sorry, but I need to be alone right now." She couldn't hold herself together much longer and didn't want her aunt to see her fall apart.

Rainbow blinked in surprise, but stepped back and folded her hands in front of her.

"We'll come back later." Marcel slid an arm around Rainbow and guided her toward the door. As they stepped out, he added in an off-handed tone, "There's a nice garden out behind the hospital, Rosie. Nice place to walk."

God, she could kiss the sweet man for that.

Rose took a deep breath and steadied herself on her feet. She could do this. She needed to do this. She waited until she was sure they were gone, then slipped out of her room. In the hallway, the deputy that was supposed to be guarding her was nowhere to be seen.

Good.

She didn't want company. No nurses fussing. No aunts worrying. No deputies with their guns and their flat, scanning eyes. She needed solitude. Just for a few minutes, so she could process everything and breakdown if she needed to.

She shuffled unsteadily down the hallway towards the stairs. She made it down the stairs without incident and started to feel steadier, more like herself. She headed for a door marked EXIT, but as she reached for the handle, the door swung open, and Ash stepped inside.

"Where's your guard?" he demanded.

She crossed her arms defensively over her chest. “I hit him over the head and snuck away.”

“You did *what?*” A vein throbbed in his temple. He looked about ready to pop an artery and she scoffed.

“Wow, you really have a low opinion of me, don’t you? He’s fine—I assume. He wasn’t there, so I took the opportunity to slip out. I need some fresh air.”

“You need to rest.”

“Don’t tell me what I need. I can’t stay cooped up in that room all day. I’ll go nuts.” She tried to squeeze by him, but he blocked the door with his muscular arm and scowled down at her.

“I *will* carry you back upstairs.”

“Touch me, Sheriff, and I’ll scream rape. I doubt you’ll win reelection if everyone in town thinks you’re a pervert.”

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t test me, Ambrosia.”

The way he said her full name sent a shiver of awareness down her spine and she stepped back in shock.

No, that wasn’t desire.

Not for Ash Rawlings.

It had to be another withdrawal symptom.

She reclaimed the step. “I’m going outside.”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Then come with me.”

His scowl darkened. She glared right back, undaunted.

A muscle jumped under his beard. “Fine.” The word sounded like he’d had to rip it from deep inside his chest.

Rose rolled her eyes, but didn’t protest. She needed to get out, and he was probably right—she shouldn’t be alone, even as much as she wanted it. She wasn’t the steadiest on her feet and what if the men came back to finish the job they’d started? She wasn’t about to make herself an easy target.

They stepped outside into the bright sunlight, and she took a deep breath of the cold, fresh air. It was invigorating after a day of canned, antiseptic-stained hospital air. She felt alive again.

Ash motioned her over to a bench in the small garden. “Sit.”

She obeyed without protest since her legs were starting to wobble, and sank down onto the bench beside him. They sat in silence for a few moments, watching cars go by on the busy street beyond the garden.

Before long, Rose found her gaze wandering to him. She knew women found him attractive—he'd been voted Most Eligible Bachelor in the county after his election. And, despite their contentious history, she could see why. He had broad shoulders and a hard, well-worked body. His eyes were a fascinating blue that sometimes looked gray, and his reddish-brown beard only added to the appeal of his rugged features.

Okay, bad blood aside, maybe she was attracted, too.

"You know," she said, breaking the silence. "Maybe you're not so bad, Ash Rawlings."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that a compliment from the sharp-tongued Ambrosia Galasso?"

"Take it however you want. But..." She looked down at her lap and picked at a stray thread on her hospital gown. "Thanks. For being there last night. Watching out for me."

He shrugged. "It's my job."

"No, it's not. You could have assigned one of your deputies to guard me, but you didn't. You stayed with me all night. And now you're back."

Ash looked away, his jaw tense. "I know what it's like."

She frowned. He'd said that before, and it didn't make any more sense to her now. "What happened to you, Sheriff?"

Ash hesitated, his gaze laser-focused on the road. "Let's just say I've had my fair share of demons to battle. Some things you can never forget, no matter how hard you try."

"Yeah, I get that." He must know that he was one of her demons. He'd destroyed her life, taken away everything that had made her feel safe—but now, in a strange twist of fate, *he* was the only thing that made her feel safe. And, dammit, she was curious about him, wanted to know what made the man tick. "Do you... have experience with addiction?"

He grumbled like an annoyed bear. "I'm not going to bare my soul to you, Rose. This isn't group therapy. I'm only here as a law enforcement officer, protecting the victim of a crime."

She smiled. Honestly, she'd expected nothing less than that answer. "Fair enough."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, which was fine by Rose. She was content to just enjoy the cool breeze and the bright sunshine. It was a welcome respite from the dark, dreary hospital room.

Suddenly, Ash stood up, his hand going to the gun at his hip.

“What?” She followed his gaze and saw a man walking toward them. For a moment, she flashed back to the skinny man watching her with wild, bloodshot eyes.

“Do you know him?” Ash asked.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “No, I’ve never seen him before, but—”

“But what?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Yeah.”

The man was tall and muscular, with a shaved head and a chin full of dark stubble. His eyes were dark and intense, and there was a wild look in them. “Little Rose Galasso,” he said. “I’ve been lookin’ for you.”

“What do you want?” She was proud of herself for how strong her voice sounded.

He took another step closer, and Ash positioned himself in front of her with his gun now drawn.

“Sheriff’s Department,” he said, his voice cop-flat. “Stop where you are and show me your hands.”

The man sneered and took another step forward. “This is between me and the girl. We have unfinished business.”

A chill scraped down her spine. She couldn’t remember ever seeing this guy before, but the way he was looking at her made her feel like he knew her intimately. Had he been there when she was held captive? Had he pushed the heroin into her vein? She took a step back, bumping into the bench, and almost panicked when she realized she was trapped.

“I said stop,” Ash repeated.

The man laughed and a blade flashed in his hand. “Make me.”

Ash didn’t hesitate. He fired a warning shot above the man’s head, causing him to duck and cover. Ash took advantage of the distraction and lunged forward, tackling him to the ground.

Rose watched in horror as the two men wrestled for control of the weapon, grunting and cursing as they rolled around on the pavement. She reached down and grabbed a nearby rock. She raised it above her head, ready to strike the man if he got the upper hand.

But there was no need.

Ash pinned him to the ground and handcuffed him before hauling him back to his feet. “Get up, asshole. What’s your name?”

The man spat on the ground. “None of your fuckin’ business.”

Ash shoved him towards the street. "Fine. We'll do this the hard way."

For the first time, Rose noticed Ash's Tahoe parked in a space on the street. She watched in numb shock, trembling with the adrenaline rush as he shoved the man into the backseat and slammed the door shut.

Ash walked back to her, his gaze searching hers. "Are you okay?"

She couldn't find her voice right away and nodded. "Yeah. I just...who was that guy?"

"I don't know," Ash admitted, his gaze finally leaving her to scan the parking lot. "But let's get you back inside so I can find out."

chapter eight

BACK AT THE STATION, Ash sat down across from Dirk “The Crusher” Whitfield. The Crusher had a rap sheet as long as the state of California and an IQ as small as his dick. He was a member of the Golden State Nationalists, a white supremacy group who believed heartily in God, Guns, and Freedom, and thought the Nazis were the good guys.

Ash had dealt with guys like him before. Dirk’s stunning lack of intelligence, combined with his inflated sense of self-importance, made him either extremely dangerous or highly malleable.

Ash was hoping for malleable.

“I know my rights,” Dirk sneered. “You can’t hold me. I was just talkin’ to the girl. I didn’t do nuthin’ wrong.”

“You were planning on it.”

Dirk leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his massive chest. “Can’t arrest me for plannin’ sumthin’, Sheriff.”

“So you admit you were at the hospital today to hurt Rose Galasso,” Ash said and opened the file he’d brought in with him. It was empty, only for show, but Dirk didn’t know that. He pretended to make a note. “Who put you up to it?”

“Wait. What are you writin’? I ain’t admittin’ nuthin’.” Dirk glanced around like he expected help to materialize out of the walls, but no help was coming because he’d neglected to say the magic word: lawyer.

“Don’t play games with me,” Ash said very softly. “I’m not in the mood. Who sent you to take out Rose Galasso?”

Dirk’s thick neck muscles bulged as he leaned forward. So he’d opted to try intimidation. Dumbass.

“I ain’t sayin’ nuthin’,” he spat, his breath reeking of stale cigarettes and

greasy fast food. “You can’t prove any-fuckin’-thing. I was just mindin’ my own business.”

“I was there, asshole. I watched you approach her, and you had a knife in your hand. You wanna try that statement again?”

Dirk remained silent. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He swiped at it with one meaty arm. “I ain’t no snitch. You can’t make me talk.”

“Let me remind you, Dirk, California has a three strikes law, and you have way more than three strikes in here.” Ash leaned back in his chair and tapped a finger on the file. “That’s a minimum of 25-years-to-life with no time off for good behavior. If I tack on attempted murder, you’re going away for the rest of your miserable life.”

Dirk’s gaze flitted around the room again as if searching for a way out, and Ash could all but smell the fear rolling off the man in noxious waves. For all of his tough talk, Dirk Whitfield was not a tough guy. Misdemeanors and non-violent felonies littered his record. He was a lackey, and Ash would bet his inheritance that Dirk knew the skinny guy who attacked Rose. In his experience, lackeys tended to run in packs like hyenas.

“So,” he prompted. “You wanna try again?”

“I don’t know nuthin’,” Dirk said after another stubborn moment.

Ash stood up, his chair scraping against the linoleum. “You do know something. And you’re going to tell me. Because if I like what I hear, maybe I won’t add on an attempted murder charge. Maybe I’ll change it to simple assault, a misdemeanor. That’s six months in county jail. Your choice, Crusher.”

Dirk shifted in his seat, his eyes darting around the room one last time. He was cracking and it only took another second of tense silence before he broke. “It was some rich guy called Chester, okay? Chester Duran. He paid us to do it.”

“Chester Duran,” Ash repeated. “Who is he and why would he want to hurt Rose?”

“I don’t know,” Dirk said, his voice sulky. “I swear I don’t know. Someone just said he’d pay to make her go away, so I thought I’d make some easy money.”

“Where did you meet this Chester?”

“I didn’t. I’ve never seen the guy.”

“So how do you know he’d pay?”

“It’s all over at The Palace. Everyone’s sayin’ how he’s stupid rich and

needs the chick who owns the Mad Dog dead and he'll pay whoever makes it happen. That's all I know. I swear on my mother."

"You'd sell your mother for the right price."

Dirk flashed a mouthful of yellowed teeth. "Hell, yeah, I would. She's a bitch."

Ash sat back in his seat and processed this new information. He had never heard of Chester Duran before, but it was obvious that whoever he was, he had some kind of grudge against Rose. Was Duran the one who had attacked her? He'd have to do some digging and talk to Rose, find out what she knew about him. But for now, he had what he needed to put Dirk behind bars.

"Okay," Ash said and stood. "You're under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder and attempted assault with a deadly weapon. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used—"

Dirk exploded up from his seat. "Hey, wait. You said it would just be assault!"

"I lied." Two deputies burst into the room, and he motioned to The Crusher who looked... well, crushed. "Get him out of here."

When Ash emerged from the interrogation room a few minutes later, he found Callum Holden leaning against the wall, waiting for him.

"You know I could pull that lie apart in court and make you look like the bad guy," Cal said conversationally and took a drink from the bottle of Diet Coke in his hand.

"You his lawyer?"

"Fuck no. I don't defend scumbags."

Ash raised a brow at him. "You're a defense attorney. Aren't they all scumbags?"

"No, not all of them. Donovan isn't. Zak ... sometimes isn't."

Ash snorted a soft laugh at that. Somehow, Zak had roped the infamous Cal Holden into working as Redwood Coast Rescue's lawyer.

"But," Cal continued, "I do have a list of no-gos so I can do my job but still sleep at night, and white nationalists are near the top of it right under child rapists."

Ash nodded in agreement. "Dirk Whitfield is a piece of shit, but he's just a low-level criminal hired to do someone else's dirty work. Have you heard the name Chester Duran?"

"No, can't say I have. You think he's the one who attacked Rose?"

"News travels fast."

“Small town, my man. It’s all anyone’s talked about since yesterday and people are pissed. Everyone likes Rose—well,” he added with a smirk, “everyone except you. But I know you wouldn’t hurt her, so is Duran the guy or what?”

“It’s possible. Hell, probable. The chances of two different people trying to kill her in the same week are slim. It’s looking like someone has a contract out on her head, but I need more information.”

“I can do some digging on my end for you. See what pops out of the muck?”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Cal took the final swig of his drink before tossing the empty bottle into a recycling bin. “No problem. But I have a fee, you know. Can’t afford to work pro bono with a gazillion dollars of student loan debt hanging over my head.”

“Give your receipts to payroll and I’ll make sure the department approves it.”

“Good man.” Cal clapped him on the shoulder before heading for the door. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Hey,” Ash called after him. “Why were you here if not to defend Dirk? We don’t have any other potential clients for you here right now.”

Cal just grinned over his shoulder and pushed through the door.

Ash grumbled under his breath as he headed back to his office. He needed to draft up some kind of zero tolerance fraternization policy before Cal fucked his way through all the women employed by the Sheriff’s Department.

Not that it would help.

He’d seen the guy work and, along with being a hell of a defense attorney, Cal was as smooth as Casanova. All he had to do was grin with that mischievous twinkle in his eye and women flocked to him. And, somehow, shockingly, he was still friends with every single one of his ex-lovers, so at least when he moved on to his next flavor of the week, Ash wouldn’t have to deal with any lovers’ quarrels in the office.

The fraternization policy could wait.

He dropped behind his desk and pushed aside the pile of administrative tasks he had to do. The list of sex offenders his chief deputy had gathered for him days ago sat on top. Maria Socktish’s file had also appeared while he was out, but he had to back-burner the serial killer theory for now, because as much as his gut told him the podcaster was right, he had no solid evidence to

investigate yet. And Rose's attackers were still out there, apparently now hiring other people to do the job they'd botched.

Ash pulled up Chester Duran's name on his computer. Not much came up in the search results. There was a Chester Duran listed as a real estate agent in Eureka, but that didn't seem right. Why would a moderately successful, thirty-something real estate agent with a wife and two young kids want Rose out of the way?

Still, he should look into the man just to be safe.

Next, he found a Lester Duran with a long criminal record who had done time for assault and battery. And look at that. He also had ties with the Golden State Nationalists out in Sacramento. Dirk might have been confused or misheard, and *Lester Duran* was the one who had offered money for the hit. The shared connection with GSN even made it likely. Ash made a mental note to look into it further and then kept digging.

Another name popped up—Chester “Chet” Montgomery-Duran, fifty-two years old, heir to the Duran Fitness empire and the vast portfolio of Montgomery Industries, LLC.

Interesting.

Ash knew nothing about Montgomery Industries, which appeared to be a multi-billion dollar manufacturer of sealants and adhesives, but he probably still had some Duran Fitness DVDs packed away in the back of his TV stand. For a while there in the mid-teens, Duran's program was a huge fitness trend, with everyone from soccer moms to A-list celebrities and sports stars singing its praises. He'd bought the DVDs from a Facebook ad during a bout of insomnia late one night and then never used them.

Chet Montgomery-Duran stood to inherit two fortunes, one from each of his parents. So why would he want Rose, a nobody pub owner from a small town, dead?

Ash scrolled through Chet's social media, but it was full of mundane posts about golfing and dinner parties and fancy charity galas. He had no criminal record, and his home address was in Los Angeles. There was nothing to indicate he had any connections in Lost County or to Rose.

Dead end.

Frustrated, Ash leaned back in his chair and rubbed a hand over his face. He wasn't getting anywhere. At this rate, he'd have better luck knocking on every Duran's door in the county and demanding answers.

Just as he was about to give up, his phone buzzed with a text from Cal.

Found something interesting. Meet me at the brewery in a half hour

What the hell? Just tell me now

Arrow Tree. Half hour.

“Jesus.” Ash pulled on his jacket and grabbed his keys from his desk. Whatever Cal had found must be something big if he wanted to meet in person instead of just sending a message.

When he arrived at Arrow Tree Brewery, Cal was already there, nursing a stout at the bar while he scrolled on a laptop. He nodded as Ash approached and gestured for him to sit.

Ash waved off the bartender and sank into the chair. “Why meet here?”

“Because your office walls have ears,” he said, sliding the computer across the bar. “And not all of them are friendly, if you catch my meaning. I’d rather word not get back to this guy that I’ve been fishing for information about him. He’s got some seriously powerful connections.”

Ash scanned the documents on the screen, but he already knew what he’d find. “Chester Montgomery-Duran.”

Cal nodded. “Better known as Chet. Is that not the most pompous name you’ve ever heard?”

Not anymore pompous than Ashley Sutton Rawlings III, but he didn’t like reminding people of his full name, so he kept his mouth shut and continued scrolling.

There were photos, surveillance footage, and even some transcripts of phone calls. Duran had some shady dealings with a number of known criminal organizations, including the Russian mafia.

“Son of a bitch,” Ash said under his breath. “So he is behind this.”

“It certainly seems that way,” Cal agreed.

“Where did you get all of this information? Nothing popped on him in my searches.”

“A magician never—”

“Don’t finish that sentence.” Ash sent him a glare, and he snapped his mouth shut, then shrugged.

“Okay, ruin my fun. One of my clients is going into witness protection after testifying in a federal case and I got to know the agent in charge quite well.”

“Let me guess, the SAC is a woman?”

Cal grinned. “She owed me a favor. I asked her to look and *voila*.”

“But what does any of this have to do with Rose?”

And why would Duran’s first hitman threaten Ash, his family, and the rest of Redwood Coast Rescue?

It didn’t make sense.

He shook his head. “Why would an heir to a billion dollar empire want a small town pub owner dead badly enough to send multiple hitmen after her?”

Cal raised his beer in a salute. “That, my friend, is the multi-billion dollar question.”

chapter **nine**

ASH OPENED his eyes and was blinded by the splash of morning light spilling through the windows. He blinked and rubbed a hand over his face, glancing blearily around a room that was all bland whites and blues with too-harsh overhead lights.

Where the hell...?

Then his brain kicked online.

Hospital.

Rose.

After his meeting with Cal, he'd returned to his office to tackle the administrative work piling up, then dug into all of the information Cal had given him on Duran. He'd left work late and stopped by the hospital on his way home to check in with the deputy guarding Rose's room.

All quiet. Nobody else suspicious made an attempt on her life, which was a relief.

Then, against his better judgement, he checked on Rose and found her deep in the throes of withdrawal. She'd begged him to stay, and so he had. He must have fallen asleep in the chair beside her bed.

Damn.

His back protested as he sat upright, and he massaged a crick from his neck muscles. He shouldn't have come here. Shouldn't still be here. And definitely should leave before Rose woke up...

But she looked small and fragile in the bed. Her complexion, usually a glowing bronze, was too pale against the bright white sheets. Her black hair stuck to her face in sweaty hanks. His heart squeezed uncomfortably as he watched her chest rise and fall with each breath.

At least she was finally sleeping.

At least, according to her doctor, the worst of the withdrawal was probably over.

Last night had been hell for the both of them. Watching her suffer had conjured up all the memories he'd shoved into a box in the back of his mind and locked away. Memories he had no intention of revisiting.

He took a deep breath and stood, the stiffness in his joints protesting. He walked over to the window, squinting against the bright sun. He stood there for a long time, hands linked around the back of his neck, just breathing, exhausted despite having just woken up. The view was nothing special—a parking lot and some trees with slivers of a pale blue morning sky visible through the branches—but it was a relief to focus on something other than Rose for a moment.

Seeing her like this wasn't right. Rose was loud and annoying and brazenly sexual. She should be arguing with him, needling her way under his skin in the way only she could, not curled into a tiny ball in a hospital bed, begging him to stay with her. The memory of her desperate sobs pissed him off, sparking a flame of rage inside his chest that he mercilessly squashed.

He turned around to look at her again. She was still sleeping peacefully. He walked back over to her bed and took her hand in his. It was cold, even though the rest of her was sweating.

"I'll find whoever pumped all that poison into you."

But to do that, he had to leave. Go home, shower, and head into work.

Why was it so hard to release her hand?

Ash forced himself to let go of her, walked out of the hospital room and took a deep breath, the smell of disinfectant and sickness thick in the air around him.

"How is she, Sheriff?"

He shifted to look at Mike Conti. The deputy sipped from a cup of coffee emblazoned with the logo of the hospital's cafe. The sight of it made Ash desperately crave a cup of his own. "She's sleeping now."

Conti sucked on his teeth. "Poor thing." Then he eyed Ash. "You should go home and get some sleep, too. If you don't mind me saying, you're looking rough, Sheriff."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

He had no intention of doing that.

He made his way down the sterile hallways and out to his Tahoe, moving on autopilot. As he drove, his thoughts turned to the past, to the memories he

had buried deep inside. Memories of a time when he had been young and stupid, cocky and entitled, and desperately in love with a girl who was taken from him.

The rage inside him burned hotter with every passing mile, and by the time he arrived home, he was practically shaking with it.

He had to get control.

Bad things happened when he lost control.

Ash stumbled into his home, slamming the door shut behind him. He went straight to the shower, stripping off his clothes and letting the water wash over him. It was scalding hot, almost too hot, but he didn't care. He needed to feel something other than rage and despair, but the roiling emotions were relentless, pounding inside his skull like a hammer against steel.

As he stood under the water, his mind drifted back to her. Mandi. The girl he had loved with every fiber of his teenage heart. A young woman lost to the same drug that had nearly taken Rose.

He closed his eyes and let out a guttural scream, the sound echoing off the tiles. He wanted to smash, break, hurt just to release the anger that threatened to consume him.

Something knocked into the bathroom door.

He froze. Was someone here, coming for him now? Naked and unarmed, he was at a distinct disadvantage. He shut off the water and listened. For several long seconds, he heard nothing but the water dripping off him onto the tile under his feet.

There.

There it was again.

A scratching sound, like a dog was—

Fuck.

Dante.

He'd been so consumed with Rose's case, he'd forgotten about the damn dog.

He wrapped a towel around his waist, his muscles still taut with tension despite the heat of the shower. He opened the bathroom door and found the German Shepherd waiting for him, brown eyes narrowed in annoyance.

"Hey." He stared down at the dog and guilt heated the back of his neck. "Sorry I forgot about you."

Dante huffed with disapproval and walked away.

Ash took a deep breath and strove for calm. He couldn't afford to lose

control again, not with Rose in the hospital and a killer on the loose. Or potentially killers if Duran decided to hire the job out again.

He had to get back to the office.

In his bedroom, he pulled on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve Henley, then headed to the kitchen to make himself a thermos of coffee. He stopped dead in his tracks in the hallway.

“What. The. Fuck?”

His living room was trashed. Holes chewed in the drywall, end tables upturned. His leather couch had been shredded to ribbons, the stuffing scattered across the room. He’d been too up in his head to notice the chaos earlier, but now he wondered how he’d missed it. It looked like he’d been burglarized by a tornado. He scowled down at the dog. Dante hacked up a big pile of vomit at his feet.

Was drywall poisonous?

Shit, Anna was going to kill him.

He scooped Dante up, carried him out to the Tahoe, and drove straight to his sister’s.

Redwood Coast Rescue was still recovering after the fire that had devastated town last fall, but Zak and Anna had made fast progress. They’d opted to buy a prefabricated house to replace the old Rawlings’ family farmhouse and then threw all of their time, money, and effort into rebuilding the dog kennels, Dr. Sasha Scott’s vet clinic, and a search and rescue training center. After only five months, they were almost up and running again.

And Anna called him a workaholic. He was pretty sure neither she nor Zak had taken a moment’s break since the fire.

He remembered the day he and Anna had founded the rescue. It was originally just a non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing animals in need and had been a dream of hers since she was a kid. After their parents died, he’d helped her turn that dream into a reality by giving up his half of the land they’d inherited. They’d worked tirelessly together to convert the old barn from the defunct Rawlings Ranch into dog kennels and the old corrals into agility yards.

Now, Redwood Coast Rescue was one of the most successful animal rescue organizations in the country, with a team of dedicated volunteers and a soon-to-be state-of-the-art facility. Zak’s team of tactical K9s were also gaining national recognition even though they’d only been training together since last summer.

With everything destroyed in the fire, Zak and Anna had been able to build exactly what they needed this time, instead of retrofitting a ranch. The new facility was a series of buildings laid out in a sun pattern, connected by walkways, with the welcome center in the middle. The doggie daycare and hotel—the money-makers that helped pay for everything else—were front and center when Ash pulled his Tahoe into the bigger, newly paved parking lot. Sasha’s vet clinic was off to the left with its own designated parking spaces and the training facilities for Zak’s tactical K9 team were tucked back behind the other two buildings. Beyond, the team had constructed different environments to train dogs in, including a large rubble pile they called “The Pit” and a simulated city nicknamed “Dogville.” They’d planted trees and reseeded the grass and now Redwood Coast Rescue was a sprawling, shiny new beacon of hope on a landscape still blackened by wildfire.

He hadn’t thought to bring Dante’s leash, so he draped the dog over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry and found Anna alone in the vet clinic, painting colorful paw prints on the wall. She had headphones in.

“AJ.”

She didn’t hear him and continued bopping to her music.

He raised his voice. “Anna!”

She spun around and almost slapped him with the paintbrush. “Ash! What the hell?” She pulled out her headphones. “Warn a girl next time.”

“I need help. Is Sasha here?”

She narrowed her eyes at him and his cargo, then sighed and put down the paintbrush. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.” He set Dante at her feet. “This aptly-named demon dog destroyed my house.”

His twin smirked. “C’mon. You’re being dramatic.”

“AJ, he ate my couch.”

She looked down at the dog with a soft expression. “Did you snack on his couch?” she asked in the tone women only used for babies and cute things as she ruffled Dante’s big ears.

“And the drywall. Then he threw up, so Sasha needs to make sure he’s not going to die on me.”

She scowled up at him. “Have you been feeding him?”

“No, Anna. I thought he could feed himself.” He scoffed. “Yes, of course I’ve been feeding him.”

“Walking him?”

He snapped his mouth shut.

“Training with him?”

Shit.

“Taking him to work with you? He’s a working dog, Ash. A highly trained police K9. He gets bored when he has nothing to do. And when he gets bored, he gets destructive.”

Ash grumbled, his frustration mounting. “I’ve had a lot going on. You know that.”

“I do know that, which is exactly why I gave him to you. He forces you to slow down to not only take care of him, but yourself.” She looked him up and down. “You look like shit, Ash.”

He grunted in response, trying to keep his face impassive. His twin could read him like nobody else on Earth, and he didn’t want her to know he felt like he was losing his mind.

Anna fisted her hands on her hips. “You need to slow down,” she said, enunciating each word. “When you get like this—”

“I know, I know.” He dragged a hand over his beard, smoothing down the flyaways. “But I don’t have time for the dog right now.”

Anna’s gaze softened. “Okay, this isn’t your normal overdrive mode. What’s going on?”

He hesitated, considered lying for a half second, but then sighed with resignation. He never could lie to his sister. “They drugged Rose with the same shit that killed—” He stopped himself from saying her name, but Anna already knew.

She set a hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry, Ash. Are you okay?”

“I’m not the one in the hospital going through fucking withdrawal.”

Anna flinched. It was a small movement, but it made him feel like an ass. He hated hurting his sister in any way, and reminding her of that turbulent era of their lives always hurt her because she’d had her own demons to slay at the time.

“Sorry, I—”

She waved him off. “Is Rose okay?”

“She’s stable, and the doctors think she’s through the worst of it now.”

“Then why so glum?”

“Because I can’t fucking find the bastard that did this to her.”

“And you think losing your shit is going to solve that?”

His frustration boiled over. “Anna, I can’t deal with a lecture right now. I

just... I have to get to work.”

She sighed and rubbed her temple. “Okay, fine. The clinic here isn’t quite finished, so Sasha’s still working in town for the next few weeks. I’ll take Dante there for a check-up. But you need to sort your shit out, Ash. You can’t keep going like this.”

“You’re one to talk. Have you stopped for even a second since the fire?”

“No, but the difference is, this was only a short term project, and the end is in sight. We had a goal to rebuild in six months and, once it’s done, we plan on taking a few weeks off before reopening. But you? You don’t stop. Ever. You’re going to work yourself into the grave just like Dad did.”

He pressed his palms to his tired eyes, then dragged his hands up over his head, scooping back his hair. “AJ, that’s not fair. Mom and Dad died because a drunk driver—”

“No, they died because he was such a goddamn workaholic that he had to drive three hours in the middle of the night to get back to the ranch. They wouldn’t have been on the road at all if he just would’ve taken one day off.”

“Anna—”

“I do not want to watch you destroy yourself like that.” She shoved through a door and disappeared deeper into the unfinished clinic with Dante trailing after her.

Ash stood there for a moment, staring at the empty space where his sister had just been, feeling like a piece of shit. Anna was right. He was spiraling out of control, and he knew it. He couldn’t keep ignoring the fact that he was barely holding it together. He needed to take a step back and reassess his life. But he didn’t know how to do that.

He didn’t know how to stop.

chapter
ten

13 Years Ago

GRAVEL CRUNCHED under Ash's new boots as he approached the house a half-step behind Sheriff Jerry Tennison. He tried not to let his nerves show, but his hands were sweating. It was only his second day on the job and his khaki uniform shirt felt too stiff. The wide-brimmed hat was awkward on his head, and the green tie was strangling. He'd only found out this morning that most deputies wore their collars open and kept the tie only for more formal events. As soon as he got back to the office, he was taking the fucking thing off.

The shiny badge on his chest seemed to weigh fifty pounds.

"All right," Tennison said, pausing on the sidewalk in front of the Galasso house. "Missing person: Harmony Galasso, thirty-five, mixed race, Hispanic and Native American. She was last seen yesterday afternoon around 1400 by her husband, Peter, before he went to work at the Mad Dog in town. We get a lot of missing persons calls—usually it's bored housewives running off with their lovers or hikers who don't return on time. The Redwood parks have rangers to handle most of those kinds of calls, but everything else in the county falls to us. And we're still called in to assist the rangers occasionally."

Ash studied the house. It was small and old, desperately in need of a new coat of paint and new windows, but it was clean. Brightly painted flower boxes overflowed with blooms on the porch rails. Someone obviously loved the place and cared for it as best as they were able. "Is this a missing hiker?"

"No. Just giving you an overview of the kinds of missing persons calls we get. Keep up, son."

Ash clenched his jaw at the sheriff's condescending tone and reminded himself he was lucky Tennison had agreed to take him on as a deputy trainee, given his turbulent past as a juvenile delinquent constantly running afoul of the sheriff. He'd only gotten into the academy in the first place because Tennison had some friends in Sacramento and put in a good word.

"This," Tennison said on a heavy sigh and hiked up his pants by his belt loops, "is probably a case of a disgruntled housewife. Harmony Galasso has a... reputation. She's fucked around on her husband for years and I'd bet my badge she's shackled up somewhere with some guy. She'll turn up. I'd say in ninety percent of these cases, the quote, unquote missing person reappears as soon as they realize we're looking for them."

“And the other ten percent?”

“We either find their remains or don’t find them at all.”

Before joining the Sheriff’s Department, Ash hadn’t realized that sometimes people just vanished and are never found. And it happened with alarming—to him—frequency, though the sheriff didn’t seem too perturbed by the fact. Even one of his high school classmates, Darcy Cantrell, had vanished almost two years ago. He thought she’d be found sooner or later, but now, given the time that had passed, he doubted it. He learned at the academy that the first forty-eight hours were the most critical when someone goes missing—if no solid leads were found in that time, their chance of recovery was cut by half.

Tennison stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the squeaky screen door. A girl with big blue eyes and long black hair answered. Barely a teenager, she was skinny with knobby skinned knees under ripped shorts. She all but disappeared inside a too-big *Twilight* T-shirt. She was as pale as one of those vampires, too, save for the delicate skin around her eyes, red and blotchy from crying.

“Hi,” she said softly. “I’m Rose. Are you going to find my mom?”

Ash’s chest tightened, old grief welling up like bile in his throat. He knew that raw, hollow look in her eyes. He saw it every time he looked in the mirror.

“Yes, we will.” He ignored Tennison’s glare. Yeah, maybe it was a lie, but the girl needed reassurance right now, not the harsh truth.

“Okay.” Rose held the door open, letting them pass. “Dad’s in the living room. He’s pissed off.”

A lanky man with long hair and bloodshot eyes paced the threadbare carpet, clutching a half-empty bottle of whiskey. Peter Galasso. Ash knew him from all the times he, Zak, and Donovan had tried to sneak into the Mad Dog as teenagers.

Rose perched on the arm of the sofa and watched her father pace. “Daddy, the cops are here.”

“About fucking time,” Galasso muttered and took another drink from his bottle. “Though I don’t know what good it’ll do.”

Rose’s gaze slid to Ash, and for a moment, he glimpsed a flicker of hope behind the sorrow. His resolve strengthened.

I will find your mother, he vowed silently.

No one deserved to live with the torment of uncertainty.

Tennison cleared his throat. “Mr. Galasso, this is Deputy Trainee Rawlings. We have a few questions about your wife’s disappearance.”

Pete whipped around, eyes blazing with fury. “I called hours ago. Where have you been?”

“We got here as fast as we could, Pete.”

Ash scowled at the back of the sheriff’s head. That was a lie. Before coming here, they’d been on an extended lunch break, with Tennison spending a good hour flirting with Rainbow Rodriguez at the coffee shop, and before that, they had been puttering around the office. If Peter Galasso really called hours ago, they could’ve been here right after his call.

Apparently, Peter sensed the lie, too, because he snorted with disbelief and took another drink. “Typical.”

“Dad.” Rose leapt up, grabbing his arm. “Please, just talk to them. For Mom. So we can find her.”

Pete whirled on his daughter, face reddened. “Face it, Wildflower. Your mom ran off with one of her boyfriends. She abandoned us.”

Rose flinched back like he’d slapped her. She dropped her hand from his arm and with fresh tears streaming from her eyes, ran deeper into the house.

Ash exchanged a glance with the sheriff. Tennison pulled him out of the living room, back into the foyer hallway.

“Go deal with the kid,” Tennison said under his breath.

Ash glanced down the hall. “Uh... shouldn’t a female deputy—”

“Do you see any female deputies here?” When Ash didn’t respond, Tennison nodded. “Go talk to the kid. Kids always know more than the parents think. Find out if there was trouble in the marriage.”

“You think he knows where his wife is?”

“If he does, it’s because he put her there.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Rule of thumb, son. If the wife didn’t leave of her own accord, it’s always the husband’s fault. So go talk to the kid and find out what Pete Galasso doesn’t want to tell us.”

Ash watched Sheriff Tennison return to the living room, then sucked in a breath and headed down the hall where he saw the girl disappear. He found her in a room so full of color it burned his retinas. The walls were bright purple, decorated with twinkle light strands of various colors and more *Twilight* posters—what was it with that movie and preteens?

Rose sat on her bed with her legs curled up to her chest and her face

pressed into her knees.

He tapped on the door frame. “Hey there, Rose. Mind if I come in and talk to you about your mom?”

Rose sniffled and swiped at her huge, impossibly blue eyes. “Uh, yeah, sure. Come in, Deputy Rawlings.”

How strange to hear himself called that. *Deputy Rawlings*. It was a joke. He still felt like a kid himself—he couldn’t even have a legal drink for another two months—and now he was meant to keep the citizens of this county safe?

Jesus.

He cleared his throat, stepped into the bedroom, and took off his hat. “I know this is a tough time for you, but I’m here to help. Can you tell me what happened and when you last saw your mom?”

“I...” Her voice trembled. “I don’t know exactly. Last night, she was here. But when I woke to go to school, she was gone and she wasn’t here when I got home, either. Her car’s still here, and she left her phone at home, too. I’m really scared, Deputy Rawlings. Something’s wrong, I just know it.”

“I get it. This is a scary situation, but we’re doing everything we can to find your mom. Can you think of anything unusual that happened before she went missing? Anything that seemed off yesterday before you went to bed?”

Rose chewed on her lower lip. “Well, she was acting different lately. She seemed upset sometimes and was always on the phone, but it was like she didn’t want me to see her. She always hung up real fast. I thought it was just... I don’t know. Grown-up stress or something.”

Ash nodded and pulled a brand new notebook out of his jacket pocket. It was a refillable one with a dark green leather cover that his mom had bought for him when he graduated from the academy. He flipped open the stiff cover to the first page. “Good, that’s important information. Thank you for telling me. We can look into it and see who she was talking to. Did your mom have any close friends? Or maybe not even friends, but people she spent time with recently?”

“I guess... there’s Auntie Rainbow. Her sister. They used to talk a lot, but I haven’t seen her around lately. Maybe she knows something?”

Ash jotted down a note. “Okay, your aunt is Rainbow Rodriguez?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll reach out to her for sure. Anyone else your mom spent time with or mentioned often?”

“No.”

“Okay.” He hesitated. Now came the tricky part. He tried to gentle his voice. “How are your mom and dad together? Do they fight a lot?”

“Not really.”

But her gaze slid away as she spoke and Ash thought, *shit*. Tennison was right. She knew more about her parents’ marriage than she was letting on. He pulled the chair out from her desk and sat down, trying to make himself look smaller, as non-threatening as possible. It wasn’t all that long ago that he’d been thirteen. He hadn’t been much older than Rose the first time he, Zak, and Donovan had a run-in with the sheriff’s office, and he clearly remembered how intimidating it was talking to the deputy while he waited for his parents to come get him. He didn’t want her to be afraid of him.

“You know,” he said conversationally. “It’s okay if your parents fight. My parents love each other a lot, but even they still fight sometimes. One time, my mom kicked my dad out of the house all because he kept tracking mud into her kitchen from the barn. But he apologized and they made up. Fighting’s just something married people do occasionally. It’s normal, but I do need to know if your parents fought recently. It could be important to finding your mom, okay?”

Rose hesitated and rolled her lower lip between her teeth again, then nodded. “Okay.”

“So do they fight sometimes?”

Another nod.

“Recently?”

“Last night, when they thought I was sleeping, I heard Dad yelling at Mom. He called her a—” She stopped. “A bad word. Something I’m not supposed to say.”

“You can say it to me. You won’t get in trouble. I’m sure I’ve heard it and worse.”

She picked up a cat-shaped pillow and hugged it to her chest. She looked so very tiny in that bed surrounded by pillows and stuffed animals, with her black hair falling in a curtain over her face. His heart hurt for her. If Tennison was right, her life as she knew it was over. He wished he could shield her from the nightmare, but that wasn’t his job. His job was to protect the community and if Peter Galasso was a killer, then he’d have to shatter this girl’s life to keep everyone else safe.

She sucked in a sharp breath and let it out in a rush. “He called her a

slut.”

Ash tried to keep the surprise off his face. “Does he often call her names like that?”

“No. I think that was the first time.”

“Do you know what they were arguing about?”

“No.” She stared at him with those startling blue eyes. “My dad didn’t hurt her, if that’s what you’re thinking. He would never.”

Ash held up his hands in a calming gesture. “I’m just trying to figure out what happened to your mom, and we need to consider all possibilities, no matter how scary or unrealistic, okay?”

“Okay,” Rose said, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I’m telling you Dad wouldn’t do something like that. He’s too nice and he loves my mom.”

Her words held the ring of truth. Was the girl just in such deep denial she believed it? Or was she right, and Tennison was already focused on the wrong person? Ash wasn’t experienced enough to know, but his gut said something about this situation wasn’t right. “Can you think of anyone else who might know something about your mom’s disappearance?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“If anything comes to mind, call me or Sheriff Tennison. We’re here to help you.”

Rose nodded, but she still looked scared and uncertain.

Ash wished he could do more to reassure her, but there wasn’t much he could do at the moment. He squeezed her shoulder gently before standing up. “I’ll let you get back to resting. Try to take care of yourself, okay? If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, Deputy Rawlings,” she said softly, her gaze fastened on her cat pillow.

Ash headed toward the door.

“Deputy?” she called.

He glanced back. Her eyes were red and puffy, her voice hoarse like she was trying to hold back tears. “I just want my mom back. I want everything to be like it was before.”

“I know, Rose. I’ll do everything in my power to make that happen. I promise.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

Ash made his way back to the living room where Tennison was still

talking to Pete Galasso. He caught the tail end of their conversation.

“...and you need to come down to the station for questioning,” Tennison was saying.

Galasso paled. “What? Why? I’ve been here this whole time.”

“We have reason to believe you may know something about your wife’s disappearance that you haven’t shared with us. We need to ask you some questions and get your statement on the record.”

Galasso looked like he was about to bolt.

Ash stepped up, blocking the doorway. “Sheriff’s right, Mr. Galasso. We need to talk to you about your wife. It’ll be easier on your daughter if you come willingly.”

“I haven’t done anything!” he protested, but his voice wavered.

“We’re not saying you have,” Ash said, deciding to play the young, understanding deputy to Tennison’s harsh, jaded old-timer. “But we need to investigate all possibilities. It’s in your best interest—and your daughter’s—if you cooperate with us. She’s shaken up. She wants her mom back.”

Galasso glared at him, but then his expression crumpled into grief. “You don’t think she ran off. You think she’s dead.” He looked at Tennison. “Oh, Jesus. You both think she’s dead and I killed her.”

“Did you?” Tennison asked, point-blank.

Ash managed to keep his wince off his face. He was so new his uniform buttons still had a shine, but even he could see the sheriff was approaching this family all wrong.

Galasso’s jaw tightened. “I want a lawyer.”

“As is your right. Deputy Rawlings, take him to the station and make sure he’s allowed to contact his lawyer.”

“Yes, sir,” Ash said, and motioned Galasso out the door. As he folded the man into the backseat of the squad car, he glanced up at the house.

Rose watched them from her bedroom window. Tears trailed down her cheeks, but she wasn’t sad. She was pissed.

Fuck.

Ash shut her father into the car and felt her gaze burning into his back as he circled the trunk and climbed into the driver’s seat. Guilt twisted his gut into knots.

As he drove away, he tried to shake off the feeling that he was doing more harm than good. Rose was just a little girl, caught in the crossfire of her parents’ issues. He didn’t want to cause her more sorrow, but it was his job to

find out what happened to her mother...

No matter how uncomfortable or painful it might be for her.

chapter
eleven

Present Day

ROSE GRIPPED the cold metal doorknob of The Mad Dog, her knuckles turning white. Her heart pounded as she stared at the familiar red door and flashes of her abduction played on a loop in her mind.

The skinny man...

The struggle...

Liquor bottles shattering...

The skull mask...

The bat coming down...

No.

She *had* to go back to work. She loved this pub and wouldn't let them steal this from her.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Rainbow asked for the millionth time.

She didn't look back at Rainbow, too afraid her aunt would see the stark fear in her eyes. Summoning every ounce of courage she possessed, she twisted the knob and stepped inside. She'd expected to find a mess, but the floor was clean, the shelves behind the bar tidy.

"Marcel and I cleaned up for you," Rainbow whispered.

Rose blinked back tears and breathed in the familiar scents of old wood and stale beer and, for the first time since this nightmare started, she relaxed.

She was home.

She finally faced Rainbow and smiled. It didn't feel forced, but she also knew it didn't quite reach the normal wattage of her smiles. That would change, though. With time, she'd be herself again. "It's okay. I'm okay. You don't have to follow me around. I know you have work to do."

Rainbow looked around the pub and twisted her hands together. She rocked anxiously from side-to-side, her long skirt swishing around her legs. The woman was never still or silent. She was always swooshing and clinking and chiming and jingling.

Rose crossed to her and grasped her hands, stilling her anxious movements. "Auntie, I *am* okay. I promise. I'm stronger than this. They can't break me."

"Oh, I know you are, baby." Rainbow's eyes filled with tears, and she gently touched the bruise Rose had tried to hide under layers of concealer.

“You’re the strongest person I know, but it’s my job to worry.”

Rose kissed their clasped hands before releasing her. “Well, worry from your shop. I’m opening soon and I can’t have you infecting the patrons with your nervous energy.”

Rainbow exhaled and stepped back, waving a hand at her face to dry her tears. “You’re right. You’re right. I’m giving bad vibes.” She glanced back at the door where the newest sheriff’s deputy stood guard, silent as a statue. “You’re well protected and Marcel will be in later, so I need to chill. I’ll go to my shop, have an edible.” She held up a finger. “But you call me if you need *anything*, understand?”

“I will.”

Rainbow fussed for a minute more, then thankfully left.

Rose breathed a sigh of relief, turned toward the bar—and spotted the empty place on the shelf behind where the bottle of Johnnie Walker King George V once sat. The memories came crashing back, blinding her with the intensity.

The bottle slamming into her head.

The metallic taste of fear in her mouth.

The sour smell of his breath...

Rose blinked, forcing the flashback away. It was just an echo, a ghost that couldn’t hurt her anymore. She was safe now. In her own pub, the one her father had loved and left her when he went to prison. She needed this place, needed the routine and purpose it gave her life again. If it meant facing shadows around every corner, she’d face it with a smile.

They. Weren’t. Going. To. Win.

Shoulders back, she walked behind the bar and lost herself in the mundane tasks of opening. She took inventory and put in an order with her supplier to replace all the broken liquor bottles. She dusted and ran a damp rag over the scarred oak surface of the bar, finding a new divot where the skinny man’s knife had hit during the fight. She traced it, fingers trembling slightly as panic flared in her chest. She dropped the rag over the fresh wound and stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself.

Breathe.

She sucked in a breath and held it until she got lightheaded. Her heart pounded as she gripped the edge of the bar, her knuckles turning white. The panic was right there, lurking beneath the surface of her fragile composure, waiting to pull her under again.

You're okay.

Breathe.

She exhaled in a rush.

Just then, the pub door swung open, and Ash walked in.

Rose jumped, then cursed herself.

Dammit, she *was* okay.

She plastered on a scowl even as her heart banged around in her chest.

“What are you doing here?”

Ash paused on the threshold, scanning the dim interior, his brow furrowed. “You’re not supposed to be back at work yet.”

“What, did my babysitter tattle on me?” She thought of the string of deputies who had been her constant companions over the last week since she left the hospital. She hadn’t even known the current one could talk. He’d trailed her silently from her apartment above the bar to the front door of the Mad Dog, where he planted himself like a bouncer at an exclusive club.

Ash’s face remained stoic. “Deputy Conti reported when you left home, as is his job.”

She bristled and snapped up the rag. “I’m fine. The doctors cleared me.”

“Like hell they did.” Ash strode toward the bar, boots thudding ominously on the worn floorboards. “You can’t even go into town without having a panic attack.”

“So he told you that, too, huh?” Her attempt at grocery shopping last night had been a nightmare. She’d jumped at every unexpected sound and all of the concerned well-wishers had worn on her last fragile nerve. She ended up abandoning her basket and running out of the market near tears.

Ash’s scowl only darkened. “What makes you think you’re ready to run the pub again? Not to mention, someone out there still wants you dead. You’re not opening tonight. You need to lock up and go home.”

Anger ignited in her chest, thankfully burning away the fear. Anger, she could handle. “I don’t need you telling me what I can and can’t do, Sheriff.” She flung the rag onto the bar with a defiant snap. “This is my pub, and I’ll open it whenever I damn well please.”

Ash stopped in front of her, close enough that she could see the concern etched into the lines around his eyes. It softened her, and then pissed her off because she softened. His concern for her well-being stemmed only from his obsessive need to protect everyone in the county. It had nothing to do with her personally, and it shouldn’t make her feel all soft and melty inside.

She *hated* this man.

He'd ripped her family apart.

She had to remember that.

He bladed his hands on his hips and stared at her for a long time. "Ambrosia." His voice was soft, but still held the snap of command. "You've been through hell, and you need time to heal."

"Look at you, pulling out my full name. You're not my father, *Ashley*." Because she knew he hated it, she leaned on his name. "You took my father from me when I was barely thirteen, and I don't need your pity now. What I need is for you to leave me the hell alone and let me get to work."

Ash sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not going anywhere until I'm sure you're okay."

The rage bubbled over. "You want to know why I'm really not okay?" She leaned across the bar, heart pounding, but whether from the lingering effects of panic or anger she didn't know. "You. Took. My father. From me!"

He shook his head. "I was just doing my job."

"By railroading an innocent man?"

Annoyance snapped in his eyes. "By arresting the man all the evidence pointed to."

"Whose?"

"What?"

"Whose evidence pointed to him? Yours? Did you personally collect it?"

"No, of course not. I was a deputy for all of two days when it happened. I only did as I was told."

Rose trembled, unable to contain the fury and anguish. The panic had retreated for now, eclipsed by the storm of emotions churning in her. "Well, did you ever think maybe what you were told was wrong? Maybe my mother's killer is still out there and *he*'s the one who attacked me."

She'd surprised him. She could see it, though his face had gone blank. He honestly hadn't made that connection.

"Your dad was convicted for Harmony's murder," he said finally. "I didn't do that. A jury of his peers did."

"He was convicted because you and your incompetent Sheriff's Department decided thirteen years ago that he did it and made sure all the evidence backed you up."

"I would never manufacture evidence."

"What about the former sheriff?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

“We all know how honest he was.”

“And I’m doing everything in my power to right his wrongs. I understand you’re hurting, but that doesn’t change the fact—”

“Do you?” she interrupted. “Do you really understand what it’s like to have your life torn apart?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. He was striving for patience, but she didn’t want his equanimity. She wanted his annoyance, his temper—one he so rarely unleashed, but that she knew burned as hot as her own.

Anger was easier than fear. Easier than the messy mix of emotions this man evoked every time he scowled at her.

“I’ve seen my fair share of tragedies, Ambrosia,” he said, his voice low and even. “And as for your mother’s case, we followed the evidence we had at the time. If new evidence comes to light, I’ll reopen the investigation.”

Rose scoffed. “Like you’re going to take the time to investigate anything more complicated than a traffic violation.”

Something that resembled anger flashed through his carefully neutral expression and vicious satisfaction surged in her. At least she had finally gotten a rise out of him.

“You know I take my job more seriously than that.” The words were coated in ice.

“Then prove it. Test my DNA against the Jane Doe you found last fall. The one from the fire.” She stared at him, daring him to refuse her request. “If you find a match to my mom, then explain how Dad killed her and buried her up on the mountain when he only had a half hour gap in his alibi for that day.”

He was silent for a moment, then exhaled hard and dragged a hand over his beard. “Fuck.” He paced a few steps away. Stopped. Swung back. “It never even crossed my mind Jane Doe could be Harmony. Come with me to the station and give the sample. I’ll put a rush on it and if it’s a match, I’ll reopen the case.”

She should feel triumphant. Finally, after all these years, she might get some answers. But she was just exhausted by it all, and then the fear crept back in.

What if the DNA didn’t match?

What if it did, but it also proved her father really was the killer?

If that was the case, who else would want her dead?

During the long hours of suffering in her hospital bed, she’d convinced

herself that the men who attacked her had to be tied to her mom's case somehow. It was the only thing that made sense. But if Dad was guilty...

No. She pushed the thought away. She knew her father. Yes, he used to drink too much, and party too hard—but he was gentle at heart. He wasn't a killer. She couldn't think anything else. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity.

"Fine," she said, pushing herself away from the bar. "But I'm coming back as soon as we're done. The pub is opening tonight, with or without your approval."

chapter twelve

ASH HAD every intention of returning with Rose to the Mad Dog and convincing her to keep the pub closed, but as soon as they arrived at the station, work inundated him. His secretary reminded him he had to be in court that afternoon to testify about a drug bust, then he had back-to-back meetings until dinnertime, and he was overdue on half a dozen administrative tasks.

He couldn't leave and Mike Conti's shift was just about over, so he sent Ralph Jenkins with her—not his first choice for a bodyguard, but everyone else was already out in the field. Jenkins was nearly at retirement and had given up on any kind of fitness regimen years ago, but hopefully just having a deputy stationed at her door would act as a deterrent.

By the time Ash finally left work at almost one a.m., his mood had gone from salty to sour. His head ached. All he wanted was to go home, take a hot shower, and scrounge up some food. Maybe drink a beer and plant himself in front of the TV for some mindless entertainment until he fell asleep.

But someone needed to stay with Rose, and he didn't trust Jenkins.

Rightfully so, as it turned out.

The pub was closed, so he took the steps up the side of the building to Rose's apartment and found Deputy Jenkins slumped in a chair by her door, head lolling to the side and mouth gaping open as he snored like a goddamn foghorn.

Ash gritted his teeth, fury simmering in his gut. The lazy bastard was part of the old guard, and had escaped the purge after the last sheriff's corruption had been exposed precisely because he was too lazy to have been involved in any of the shoddy police work—but this was the last straw. Ash had decided to give him the benefit of a doubt, but he didn't deserve to reach retirement.

Ash strode over and roughly shook the deputy awake.

Jenkins startled, blinking blearily. “Wha—what is it?”

“Badge,” Ash growled and held out a hand.

“Sheriff.” He scrambled to his feet and his belly jiggled under his sloppily buttoned uniform shirt. He swiped a sleeve over his sweaty face. “I-I-I was just—”

“And gun. You’re fired.”

“Wait, what? I—”

“Now.”

Jenkins looked stunned, and a hint of anger blazed in his eyes. But he was too lazy to act on it. He’d probably be at the Arrow Tree talking shit tomorrow, but Ash didn’t care. He was done tolerating incompetence and laziness on his watch.

Jenkins hesitated for a moment, then fumbled with his holster, unclipping the weapon and handing it over to Ash. His eyes darted around nervously, as if searching for some way to talk his way out of this, but Ash wasn’t in the mood to listen. He took the gun and tossed it onto the chair where Jenkins had been sleeping.

“Go home, Jenkins. You’re done here.”

Jenkins shuffled away, his head hanging low. Ash didn’t feel any satisfaction from the man’s shame. He was too preoccupied with the anger and frustration that had been building up inside him all day.

The door creaked open behind him.

“What’s going on?” Rose emerged from the apartment in an oversized T-shirt, tousled hair tumbling over her shoulders. Her gaze landed on the badge and gun, and she arched a brow. “Did you fire him?”

“It was long overdue.”

“I can see why. He was... unpleasant. He smells like onion and snores like a chainsaw symphony.”

“Well, he’s gone. You can get some rest now. I’ll keep watch.”

“My hero.”

He ignored the snide remark and stepped forward, forcing her to back into her apartment. “Get inside. It’s not safe for you to be answering the door.”

She visibly bristled. “I don’t want a babysitter.”

“Too bad. You’re stuck with me until we figure out who attacked you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. But I’m still responsible for your safety.”

“Even if I don’t want your help?”

“Especially then.”

She rolled her eyes and turned away. “Fine. If you’re staying, you’re not sitting out on the landing snarling at everyone like a gargoyle. You can have the couch.”

Ash followed her to the living room, taking note of the way the T-shirt clung to her large breasts as she walked. She wasn’t wearing a bra and her nipples poked against the thin cotton, inviting his mouth to—

No.

Shit, what was he thinking?

He forced himself to look away and studied her apartment. A chaotic clash of colors and quirky flea market furniture, it reminded him of her childhood bedroom, only without all the teenage fandom memorabilia. Though he recognized the cat-shaped pillow in the papasan chair. It was the same one she’d hugged during his interview with her all those years ago, now faded and frayed.

The sight of it made his brain short-circuit for a minute. Of course he knew this Rose with her fuck-me body and sassy mouth was the same Rose as the skinny girl with the skinned knees and *Twilight* obsession, but seeing the childhood pillow in her adult living room really hammered that fact home.

He had *no right* to look at her as anything other than a victim who needed protection.

He did a quick patrol around the small space, peeking into her bedroom and bathroom—ignoring the dark floral spice of her scent clinging to the air in both places—and checking to make sure all of her windows were shut and locked.

“So, what now?” she asked when he returned to the living room. “Do we just wait for someone to come after me again?”

“We’re not waiting. I’m going to find out who attacked you and make sure they can’t hurt you again.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “And how do you plan to do that?”

“I’ve got a few leads I need to follow up on, but I need your help.” He pulled out his notebook. “Let’s go over everything again.”

She pressed her palm to her forehead like he was giving her a headache. “I don’t remember anything. I told you that.”

“Maybe something will come back to you. Or maybe there’s something

you didn't think was important at the time, but could be the key to solving this."

She looked skeptical, but he saw the gears turning.

"Let's start with enemies. Do you have any?" he asked, pen posed above a fresh page.

"Besides you?"

"You know what I mean. Anyone that would want to cause you harm? Patrons of the pub you pissed off? Old boyfriends?"

She flapped her arms in exasperation. "Oh, c'mon. We went over all this in the hospital."

"You were also recovering from a vicious attack and dealing with withdrawal at the time." He decided to ignore the way she rubbed self-consciously at the track marks on her arm. "Going over it again might shake something loose."

She sighed heavily, went into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of rosé from the small beverage fridge tucked into the island. "Wine?"

"I'm on duty."

"When aren't you?" She poured herself a full glass and took a deep drink.

He glanced away because the long line of her throat led his gaze down to her nipples. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed how attractive Rose was, but he'd always pushed those thoughts aside. It wasn't appropriate, especially not with their age gap and history. But with her scent still lingering in his nose and the way that T-shirt clung to all the right places... he was having a harder time ignoring the attraction.

"You wear that badge like a shield, Sheriff," she said and topped off the glass before returning to the living room. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

His sister.

All the time.

But he wasn't about to get that personal with her. "Can you think of anyone who might want to hurt you?"

"I told you before, no." She sank into the papasan chair and picked up the cat pillow, hugging it to her chest just as she'd done at age thirteen. "I don't have problems with anyone. I like everybody."

"Except me?"

She smirked and curled her legs up under her nightshirt before picking up her wine glass again. "Except you. But unless you hired a hitman..." She let the thought trail off.

“It wasn’t me.”

She shrugged. “Well, I guess we’re out of luck. I honestly don’t know who would want to hurt me.”

“What about ex-boyfriends?”

“I haven’t dated in... God, three years? And my last ex and I weren’t serious enough to lead to this. I think he’s married now.” She shook her head. “No, this must have something to do with Mom’s murder. The night I was attacked, my aunt and I were talking about the Jane Doe and about me giving my DNA for comparison.”

“In the bar?”

“Yes. Maybe that sparked something. Made someone nervous.”

“Was there anyone around to overhear?”

“I mean... maybe? It was right before closing and we weren’t busy. There were five or six people in there, including my aunt and the skinny guy who first attacked me.”

Ash scribbled the information, flipped to a new page, and realized he was running out. He’d need to buy another paper refill soon. “Who else was there?”

“Uh. Let’s see.” She looked up at the ceiling as if trying to bring memories of that night back into focus. “We closed at midnight that night. Sophie Foley and May-Lynn Tapia were there from eight until about eleven-thirty-ish. They were drinking those light seltzers that taste like someone is whispering the flavor from the next room over. Sophie just had a break-up. It was a guy-bashing girl’s night, but May-Lynn didn’t want to corral kindergarteners while hungover the next morning, so they left before last call.”

Ash looked up from his notes. “You remember all that, but can’t recall anything after the initial attack?”

She shrugged, drank more of her wine. “I’m a bartender. I’m trained to remember patrons. Their favorite drinks, their food orders. Their spouses’ and kids’ names if they have them. Their hopes and dreams and worries. People drink when they’re sad and when they’re happy, so I’m there during all their ups and downs. And,” she added with a smile, “they tip better when they feel valued.” Her smile faded. “As for the attack... part of it is the drugs they gave me inducing amnesia, or so says my doctor. But I think another part of it is I just don’t want to remember.”

He stared at her for a beat. She looked fragile, curled up like that in the

chair, hugging the cat pillow. God knew she wasn't—farthest thing from it—but seeing her like that put a need inside him to wrap her up in a bubble so nothing could hurt her again.

He didn't like it.

He cleared his throat, looked back down at his notes. "Who else?"

She exhaled a sharp breath. "Um... Larry Lamb and Gordon McDaniel. They're two of my regular seat warmers and left right before last call."

Ash looked at her again. "Did you say Larry Lamb?"

"Yeah." She set her wine on the end table and uncurled from the chair. "Why?"

"He was the main eyewitness against your Dad."

"What? Larry?" A frown creased her forehead. "I never saw his name in any of the reports."

"Yeah, that was Tennison pulling his usual shit, keeping his buddy's name out of it. He was Witness A for the prosecution."

"Wait, that was Larry? But Witness A said he saw Dad putting something that looked like a body into his trunk. He lied. Dad wasn't even home when he said he saw him."

Dread unfurled in Ash's chest. "How do you know he lied?"

"Because I was there. I was home alone at that time. I even talked to Larry. He was out gardening."

"And you told Tennison?" Because, dammit, it was the first time he was hearing any of this.

She nodded. "And Dad's public defender, but it never came up again after that. They wouldn't let me in the courtroom for the trial, so I didn't know. God. Larry? And now that bastard comes into my bar every night. He looks me in the face and jokes with me and—and he's one of my best tippers. How could he...? You don't think he...?" She trailed off and abruptly shoved to her feet. "I'm tired. Can we finish this some other time?"

Ash closed his notebook. "Sure."

She didn't look at him as she walked by. "There are blankets inside that ottoman. If a fat furball tries to smother you in your sleep, it's just Fanta, my cat."

"I don't plan to sleep."

"Fine. Do whatever."

Because he wanted to reach out and catch her hand, he stuffed both of his into his jacket pockets along with his notebook. But he couldn't help calling

out, “Rose.”

She stopped in the doorway of her bedroom, but didn’t look back.

He suddenly couldn’t think of what he’d meant to say. Something comforting, or reassuring, but he’d never been great at that. So he settled on, “Good night.”

She murmured something that might have been a “good night” then disappeared into her room, firmly shutting the door behind her.

Ash exhaled and leaned back on the couch. As he did, the cat she’d mentioned poked its head from behind the chair she’d just left. It was fat and as orange as a blazing fire, with a thin white stripe under its nose that looked like a cartoon villain mustache. It eyed him like it was waiting for him to sleep so it could attempt murder.

He eyed it back. “Don’t get any ideas. I’m not falling asleep, cat.”

Fanta padded over and jumped up on his lap. It circled a few times then curled up, purring happily. He rubbed a hand down its back and thought of Dante. He hadn’t asked Anna how the dog was doing, and guilt ate at him for it.

“I think I’m more of a cat person,” he told Fanta.

The soft warmth of the cat’s body combined with the hypnotic motor of its purr eased the tension from his neck and shoulders.

Yeah, he decided, leaning his head back against the couch. He was definitely more of a cat person.

chapter thirteen

SOMETIME IN THE middle of the night, the sound of the front door opening startled Ash out of a doze. He wasn't asleep, but he wasn't fully awake when the man stepped over the threshold.

Ash jumped to his feet and raised his gun, feeling fuzzy and sloppy. He was moving too slow. If this was the guy he'd faced in the woods, he might have just gotten both himself and Rose killed.

Fuck.

"Hands up! Get down! On the floor now!"

The shadow froze, then slowly raised his hands. "Ash?"

Wait. He knew that voice.

He turned on the light. "Zak?" He lowered his gun and stared at his brother-in-law in disbelief. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Zak looked like hell, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy, his hair standing up like he'd assaulted it with both hands. His shoulders drooped in defeat. "I just... needed somewhere to crash."

"So you came *here*? Why aren't you home?" A knot of dread twisted up his stomach as he glanced between Zak and Rose, who had appeared in her bedroom doorway still wearing that thin oversized T-shirt. Her nipples pebbled in the cool air. He had an irrational urge to throw a blanket over her and that pissed him off.

He turned that anger on Zak. "You better not be fucking around on my sister, Hendricks."

"What? No! That's not— I just—" He lifted his hands in defense, but didn't seem to know what to do with them and dropped them back to his sides.

"Wow, Sheriff. You think so highly of me." Rose disappeared into her

room for a second, then came back dressed in a robe. She went to Zak's side, taking his hand and leading him over to the couch. "I told Zak—and everyone else in his therapy group—that my couch is always open to them. Judgement free, so put that scowl away."

As she passed, Ash caught her scent—that heady, feminine spice that had his cock swelling inappropriately. Thankfully, she'd put on the thick robe that covered her down to her knees, so at least those nipples couldn't distract him anymore.

He holstered his gun and, while her back was turned, surreptitiously adjusted himself. She didn't notice but Zak did, and a small smile ticked up the corner of his mouth.

Dammit.

"Did you and Anna have a fight?" he asked before Zak could open his mouth and say something stupid about his unruly dick.

Zak groaned and buried his face in his hands. "It's my fault."

"Why?"

Zak just groaned again and leaned back against the couch cushions, eyes closed.

Rose headed toward her kitchen. "How about a drink?"

"Not everything can be solved with alcohol," Ash said. Zak hadn't had a drop of alcohol in nearly two years and, if nothing else, Ash planned to keep the man dry for his sister's sake. "He's sober."

Rose made a face at him over her shoulder and pulled a six pack of cola from her fridge—the good stuff in glass bottles. "I'm well aware he's sober, Sheriff. I was there when he bought his last drink." The soda bottles clinked gently as she extracted three from the cardboard carrier and returned the rest to the fridge. She picked a magnetic bottle opener shaped like the Mad Dog's bulldog logo from the fridge's door and expertly flicked off each of the caps. "I watched him make the choice that it was his last and was so damn proud of him for it. Then I watched you finish the beer for him so he wouldn't feel obligated, and I was damn proud of you for that, too."

She pushed one of the sodas into his hand, careful not to let any part of their skin brush, then continued on to the couch. "But Zak's not falling off the wagon tonight. I've been a bartender long enough to know when someone's at that edge, and he isn't. He's just pissed at himself and afraid he fucked up the best thing in his life and needs someone impartial to talk to. Since I was his bartender during some of the worst years of his life, I felt like

the safest choice.” She knelt in front of Zak and offered the bottle. “Isn’t that right?”

Zak smiled faintly as he accepted the soda and clinked the neck of the bottle to hers. “Nailed it.”

“So.” She sat down on the carpet in front of him and pulled her legs up under her robe, looping her arms loosely around her knees. Her drink dangled from one hand. “What’s up?”

Zak glanced in Ash’s direction and, if he wasn’t mistaken, that was shame on the guy’s face.

“Nah, ignore the broody Neanderthal in the corner. Just pretend we’re sitting at the bar late one night after closing and I’m feeding you glass after glass of water to sober you up. It’s just us again. Talk to me like that.”

Zak took a long drink of his soda. “It was easier to talk when I was wasted.”

“I know,” she said sympathetically. “But I also know you prefer your life now that you’re sober.”

Zak nodded, his eyes fixated on the bottle in his hand. “Anna... she just... wants me to be healed.”

“Of course she does. She loves you.”

“No, not like—I’m not saying this right.” He set aside his drink and rubbed his hands on the thighs of his cargo pants. “Okay, let me start over. Last fall, I overheard her telling Sasha that I was in a good headspace, like my baggage didn’t exist anymore. Which, some days, it’s true. I feel great and I can forget what those bastards did to me over in Afghanistan. But that’s not every day. And ever since I heard her say that, I’ve been... I guess, hiding.”

“Have you mentioned this in group?”

He shook his head. “I’m supposed to be the poster child of success. I pointed to all the training I did with Ranger and told them all this K9 shit works. That having this purpose with the dogs helps. That it heals.”

“It does,” Ash said and returned to his seat on the couch. “I was the most skeptical of everyone and you proved me wrong. I watched it heal you. And Donovan. I’ve watched Pierce come out of his shell because you gave him Raszta and freaking Sawyer attempting things a blind man probably shouldn’t be doing. The training you guys are doing with those dogs does heal.”

Zak looked at him again but this time, there was no shame in his eyes. It

was all misery. “But it’s not the miracle pill I made it out to be. I still have nightmares. I still wake up soaked in a cold sweat, desperate to not fall back asleep. I still flash back to my captivity—all those moments I thought I was dead, all the moments I *wished* I was dead. It’s all up here still.” He tapped his temple. “But Anna thinks I’m healed. I’m all better now because I have her and the girls and Ranger and the group. So I’ve been hiding all that darkness. It’s eating me alive and I’m taking it out on her and the girls. They don’t deserve that.”

Rose nodded. “And, tonight, you said something you regret.”

“Yeah.” He looked away and swallowed hard. “I told her that I didn’t want to be with them anymore.”

“Ah, shit.” Ash scrubbed his hands over his face, then let them fall to the back of his neck. “That’s why she was crying when I called earlier. I knew something was wrong, but she wouldn’t tell me.”

“They deserve someone who isn’t living a lie,” Rose said firmly. “Your wife and daughters deserve to know every part of you, Zak. They deserve the good, the bad, and the ugly. They deserve you—all of you.”

“I’m not sure I know how to be all of me.”

“Jesus, you’re an idiot,” Ash said. “AJ doesn’t care if you’re a little fucked up. If we’re honest, she likes fucked up. My sister knew exactly what she signed up for when she married you.”

“The Queen of Lost Causes,” Zak murmured with a faint smile. “But what if…” He trailed off, then exhaled and tried again: “I’m not sure I can do this. I’m not sure I can be the husband she wants or the father the girls need. What if she gets sick of the night terrors and mood swings and the constant war I’m fighting with myself? What if I backslide so far that I take a drink? We have Bella and Poppy now. She has to put their needs first—and I’m not saying she shouldn’t because I love those girls and want nothing more than for them to be safe and happy. But if I fuck up, she’ll have to make a choice between me and them.”

Rose reached out and took his hand, squeezing his fingers gently. “It’s bad, isn’t it? The nightmares?”

His eyes were full of anguish. “I can feel myself spiraling and I’m afraid to reach out for help. I’m afraid I’ll drag them down with me. I won’t expose them to this. I won’t poison them with my darkness.”

“You’re not alone, you know. You’ve got me. And Ash.” She nodded in his direction. “And you’ve got the guys from group, too.”

“What if they can’t help me this time?”

“They won’t be able to fix you,” Rose said. “That’s not their job. They won’t fix your nightmares or take away the panic attacks. They won’t give you a magic pill that takes away the memories. Those things don’t exist. But they will be there for you and if one person can’t help, then we’ll get you someone that can. But, Zak, if you don’t reach out and try, then you’re going to lose everything.”

“You’re right,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I can’t keep hiding like this. I need to face my demons and talk to Anna. I need to tell her everything and hope that she understands.”

“She will,” Ash said with absolute certainty. He knew his sister better than anyone. Zak might not be able to see it, but his worries were unfounded.

“She loves you,” Rose added. “She’ll understand.”

chapter fourteen

POOR GUY.

Rose walked Zak out and waited until she heard his truck's engine roar to life before shutting and locking the door. She turned and found Ash right behind her, his arms crossed over his chest. His face was a carefully blank mask, which she was learning meant he was pissed.

A muscle flexed under his beard. "Exactly *how many* other people have keys to this place?"

She shrugged and tried to shoulder by him. "Just friends."

He caught her arm. "So you don't know."

"I never needed to know. My door's usually open. Now let go of me."

As if just realizing he held her arm, he released it and stepped back. "Jesus. Why do I have to keep reminding you that someone tried to kill you?"

"You don't. I'm well aware."

"Twice," he stressed, holding up two fingers.

"Yes, I know."

"I don't think you do, Ambrosia. Once is usually all it takes. You got lucky twice. Odds say you won't get lucky a third time, which is why I'm trying to prevent the bastard from having another shot at you." He dropped his head forward and sighed in exasperation, rubbing a hand around the back of his neck. "All right. Pack a bag." He eyed her cat, who was sitting on the back of the couch, watching Ash like he was a god. "And the orange beast."

"Why?"

"You're staying at my place until we can get someone in here to change your locks."

Rose frowned. "I don't need to stay at your place. And I don't need you to stay here. I can protect myself."

He raised an eyebrow and motioned toward the door. “Clearly not if everyone and their fucking brother-in-law has a key.”

Rose bit her lip. She knew he was right, but she hated the idea of being dependent on anyone, especially Ash.

“Fine.” Without another word, she headed to her bedroom, grabbed a duffel bag from her closet and tossed in a few essentials. She wouldn’t be gone long. She’d call a locksmith first thing and schedule an appointment to update her locks.

She hesitated, then grabbed a small handgun from the drawer of her nightstand and slipped it into her bag. She had never used it before, but she felt better knowing she had some form of protection besides the grumpy sheriff. She didn’t want him to know, but she *was* scared.

Before leaving her room, she took a moment to pull on jeans and a hoodie over her nightshirt.

Ash was waiting for her by the door, his own duffel bag slung over his shoulder. Fanta was clinging to his chest, looking up at him with adoration. He stroked a hand over the cat’s head and his expression was as gentle as she’d ever seen it. He was so handsome when he smiled like that, all his hard edges softened.

A weird warmth spread through her chest. She wished he’d smile at her like that.

Wait.

Oh, hell, no.

She just had to zip her libido back up because she wasn’t going to fall for the fucking sheriff.

“Huh.” She opened the hall closet and pulled out Fanta’s carrier. “Always knew that cat had horrible taste in men.”

It really wasn’t Fanta’s taste she had to worry about.

She pulled Fanta out of his arms and tucked the yowling feline into the carrier, then went to the kitchen to grab several cans of cat food from the pantry to add to her duffel.

His expression shifted back to grim cop. She couldn’t see him as Ash when he looked like this. Ash was the guy who’d been snuggling her cat moments ago. The man in front of her now was The Sheriff, capitalized. Gruff and flat-eyed. All business.

“You ready?” he asked.

Rose nodded, slinging the bag over her shoulder and picking up Fanta’s

carrier.

The night air was cold and crisp, but Rose barely felt it as she hurried to keep up with Ash's long strides. His Tahoe was parked in the alley behind the bar, and he opened the passenger side door for her before circling the hood to the driver's seat.

The drive was mostly silent, except for the occasional protesting meow from her cat. Rose couldn't shake the feeling of unease blossoming in her stomach. She knew she was safe with Ash, but the fact he thought she needed to leave her home was unsettling.

Ash's house was a sprawling ranch tucked on a gated property deep in the redwoods. It sat at the end of a long dirt driveway, with a wide, welcoming porch and a large yard. The wood siding was such a deep, rich color, it looked black in the moonlight. In the valley below the house, the town's lights sparkled. She bet if she walked out onto his back porch, she'd clearly see the Mad Dog at the edge of town.

Ash led her inside, flicking on the lights as they entered. The house was tastefully decorated, with neutral colors and modern furnishings, but it lacked any personal touches. It felt empty and sterile compared to her cozy, cluttered space and she felt a pang of sympathy for him. No doubt he was too busy working to bother with furnishing his home.

"This is nice," Rose said, trying to make conversation. She paused and looked at the living room. A brick fireplace dominated the wall between two floor-to-ceiling triangular windows, and a large-screen TV hung over the mantel. There were two leather chairs in a neutral beige and a coffee table, but—

"Where's your couch?"

"Dog ate it."

"A dog ate your couch?"

Ash grunted in response, setting his bag down in the entryway. "I'll go get you some towels and show you where you'll be sleeping."

Rose nodded, setting Fanta's carrier down on the floor. She unzipped it far enough to reach a hand inside and rub the cat's head. "It's okay, buddy," she whispered. "We're safe."

She didn't know if she was trying to convince Fanta or herself.

When Ash returned with the towels, he led her across the living room and down a short hallway to a spare bedroom. "You can sleep here," he said, opening the door. "You'll want to keep the cat in here when Dante gets

home. I don't know how he'll react."

"Dante?"

"One of my sister's pet projects she railroaded me into taking. He's kenneled at the rescue because he ate the couch. And the drywall. For all I know, he might eat the cat, too."

"Okay."

"The bathroom is back through the living room, just off the foyer. My room is here on the left if you need anything."

Rose nodded, taking the towels from him. "Thanks."

Ash hesitated for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, but then he just nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Rose took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She was relieved to be in a safe environment, but it was awkward being in Ash's house, especially with the weird sexual tension that had been crackling between them all night. She set the towels on the bed and crossed to the window. From here, she could see nothing but the dark, dense trees that surrounded the house. She should feel safer out here, in the middle of nowhere.

She didn't.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the creeping fear.

She was safe here with Ash.

Untangling the cat from his carrier, she set him on the bed and began to unpack her bag. She pulled out her laptop, charger, and a few books, but hesitated when she reached the handgun.

Should she tell Ash she had it?

If she did, would he take it from her?

But she needed to feel safe, and the gun was the only thing that made her feel even remotely secure. She tucked it under her pillow and tried to convince herself that she wouldn't need it.

chapter **fifteen**

ROSE BOLTED AWAKE, scaring Fanta off the end of her bed. No, wait. This wasn't her bed. Wasn't her room.

Where was she?

Panic grabbed her in a chokehold.

Oh, God. She hadn't gotten away. Her captors still had her, and they were going to do horrible things—

But... no, that wasn't right either.

She stared at the outlines in the unfamiliar room and her suitcase by the dresser slowly came into focus. Fanta peeked out from behind it, his eyes reflecting back the soft moonlight filtering in from the window, wide and wary.

She was at Ash Rawlings' house.

She was safe.

Shivering from a cold sweat, she pulled her knees to her chest and buried her face in them. The nightmares were getting worse as the weeks dragged on, not better. She'd told Zak to reach out for help, while here she was, drowning.

Now who was a hypocrite?

But the difference was, Zak had the Paws for Vets therapy group to lean on. She wasn't a veteran, so that option was out. She couldn't talk to her family. She didn't want Rainbow to worry, and no way was she telling her dad she'd been attacked and was now suffering a traumatic stress reaction.

No. She had to handle this on her own. Which was usually how she preferred it, but right now, she ached to confide in someone.

As if sensing her thoughts, Fanta padded across the floor and leapt onto the bed, pushing his head under her arms, seeking a scratch.

“Yes,” she told him and rubbed a hand over his head. “I know I have you, but sometimes I need someone other than a cat.”

Someone who could hold her through the worst of the after-nightmare fear and tell her it would be okay.

Someone like Ash.

No.

God, where had that thought come from?

She didn't even like the man.

Disgusted with herself, she flung off the covers and pulled on her robe. She crossed to the door and when she opened it a crack, realized that the house wasn't silent. A low buzz of conversation floated from the living room. She backtracked for her phone and checked the screen. It was almost 3 a.m.

“He's not still working, is he?”

Fanta mewed and patted down her pillow before curling into a fluffy orange ball in the divot where her head had been. She smiled at the cat then slipped out into the hall and followed the sounds. As she got closer, she realized he wasn't having a witching hour meeting with one of his deputies, after all. The TV was on, casting a blue glow over the otherwise dark room, the volume low. He sat in one of the leather chairs with his back to her, dozing if the angle of his head was any indication. He was going to have a hell of a neck ache when he woke up.

She moved closer.

On the coffee table in front of him sat more paperwork. Seemed like any time she saw him lately, he was surrounded by stacks of it. She turned one file toward her and read the name on in. Maria Socktish. Under that was one labeled Harmony Galasso.

Mom.

She itched to open it up and read what was in the official police reports, but she knew better. It'd just piss her off and she was too exhausted.

Ash jolted awake with a snort. Which was adorable, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

I don't like him, she reminded herself firmly.

“Rose?” He came half out of the chair, but sank back when she curled up in the other chair across from him. He fumbled through the files for the remote and paused the TV. “Did I wake you?”

She had no intention of telling him about her nightmares, so she just shrugged and looked at the frozen image on screen. A pretty, blood-spattered

blonde ran from a hoard of zombies, screaming silently. It was very low budget, but, she realized, it wasn't just something that had come on while he was sleeping. It was a movie, a DVD he'd deliberately chosen. The case sat open on top of the player, and she walked over to pick it up.

She smirked at him. "*Zombocalypse Wow!* Isn't this awfully lowbrow for you, Sheriff Rawlings?"

"You're one to talk." His voice was rough with sleep. "I seem to remember a bright purple bedroom plastered in *Twilight* merch."

She rolled her eyes. "I was a kid. You're allowed to like dumb things as a kid. But this?" She held up the DVD case. "I expected better from you."

He groaned and rubbed both hands over his face, mussing his beard. "Can we not do this? I'm too tired."

She frowned down at the bad artwork on the DVD's case, then set it aside. "I wasn't making fun."

"Yeah, you were."

"Okay, fine. But I didn't mean—"

"Yeah, you did." He reached for the remote again, presumably to turn the movie off, but she got to it first and held it out of his reach.

"Why horror?" she asked, suddenly intrigued.

He leaned back in the chair, and glared at her with bleary eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you watch horror movies? You're a cop. You see the real thing all the time. You don't need fake scares."

Ash shrugged. "It's a way to escape. To feel something other than the constant stress of this job. And it's not like I can't handle the sight of fake blood and gore."

"I'm not saying you can't."

"You're saying it's lowbrow."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just... it surprised me."

"Why?"

"I don't know." She turned the remote over in her hands a couple times. "You seem like the type that would watch documentaries on the evolution of the justice system or something."

He laughed softly. "Jesus. I'm not that boring."

"I didn't say boring."

"But that's what you meant."

"Stop telling me what I mean." She rolled her eyes. "But, yes, I thought

you were as boring as white bread.”

“White bread is good.”

He said it so deadpan, she couldn't help but laugh. “Was that a joke?”

“I don't joke.” But his cheek twitched under his beard. “I'm boring, remember?”

“You're not boring... exactly. You're just so serious all the time, I never expected to find you enjoying campy, low budget horror movies.”

“It's mindless,” he said abruptly and motioned to the stacks of files on the table. “This fucking job. There's always something else to do, something else to worry about. Sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in it, like there's no end to the darkness, but these dumb movies help me forget about the real horrors out there. I don't have to think about murder or corruption while watching zombies get their brains bashed in. It's... perversely soothing.”

She held out the remote, allowing him to take it from her. “I get that.”

“Do you?” He sounded skeptical.

“I mean, not exactly the same thing, obviously. But I do know what it's like to have your mind running in circles. To feel like you're drowning in... stuff.”

“Stuff,” he repeated, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah. Stuff.” She turned to go back to her room. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't be barging in here in the middle of the night.”

He waved away the apology. “I wasn't sleeping anyway.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You looked pretty out of it to me.”

“I was just resting my eyes.”

“Uh huh. Then I'll go so you can continue resting your eyes.”

He stared at her a beat. “Stay. Please.”

She ignored the flutter in her belly at his soft words and sank into the empty chair again, pulling her legs up under her robe to keep them warm. She looked at the stacks of paperwork. “Are you sure you're not overworking yourself?”

He sighed, a deep, heavy sound. “You sound like my sister. I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.”

“I'm a mess, okay?” he snapped, his frustration palpable. “Is that what you want to hear? That I don't have my shit together? Because I don't. The more I look into your mother's case, the more I think we fucked it up and sent an innocent man to prison. And I can't seem to get any leads on who attacked you. And I have to review every single case my mentor ever

breathed on because I can't have his stink on my department. Then there's that podcaster running around town, chasing serial killer urban legends and the kicker is, I'm afraid she's actually on to something. And tonight I find out my brother-in-law is thinking of leaving my sister. It will destroy her. I had to watch that destruction the first time he walked away when we were teenagers. I won't watch it again. I'll have to kill him and then I'll end up cellmates with the former sheriff. Hell, maybe that would be for the better." He exhaled a hard breath that sounded like a bitter attempt at a laugh. "The tighter I try to hold this town and my family together, the more they both fracture."

The pang of empathy for him caught her by surprise. It must be hard, carrying the weight of the town's problems on your shoulders day in and day out. She didn't envy him that burden. "Maybe you're hanging on too tight."

"What do you mean?" Exhaustion weighed down his voice.

"You're trying to control everything and everyone around you, and it's driving you insane. You can't carry the burden of everyone's mistakes and problems on your shoulders. It's not fair to you, or to them. Sometimes, things just happen, and you have to roll with it."

"Do I look like the kind of guy that can just roll with it?" he asked. "If I let go, everything falls apart. I'm the only thing standing between this county and lawless chaos."

At first, she thought he was joking again—it was so hard to tell with him and his deadpan humor—but then she realized he truly believed that. She shook her head in awe.

God, the ego on this man!

"You're such a hypocrite. You broke the law. Many times, if local gossip is to be believed. And you weren't punished."

"No, I wasn't, but I should've been. Someone should've held me to the same standards as everyone else and not put me up on a fucking pedestal because of the family I was born into. Someone should've told me no, and they never did, and someone I cared about died because of it. So, yes. I'm a hypocrite, but I'll be damned if I let some stupid kid make the same mistakes because I didn't tell him no."

"What mistakes?"

He shut down. "Forget it."

She studied him for a long moment. She was usually good at getting a read on people—came with the job—but he was still a complete mystery to her. "You don't actually believe you're the only thing standing between us

and chaos?”

He didn't respond.

She rolled her eyes. “You have a whole team of deputies who are more than capable of handling things when you can't. And you have to trust that the county, the town, and your family, are strong enough to handle their own problems sometimes.”

When he opened his mouth to argue, she cut him off. “I'm not saying to let chaos reign. I'm saying that you can't control everything, and you'll exhaust yourself trying. You can only do your best and trust that others will do theirs.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, then eyed her with suspicion. “You're being nice. Why are you being nice to me?”

Her stomach twisted. “I don't know,” she said honestly. “Maybe because you stayed with me when I was hurting. And because I know what it's like to feel like you're drowning, and no one seems to notice. Or maybe because you're a good man, even if you drive me fucking crazy most of the time.”

He chuckled softly. “*I drive you crazy?*”

“You know you do.”

“Ditto, Ambrosia.”

The soft, growly way he said her full name sent a bolt of lust through her belly. She uncurled from the chair. “I'm going back to bed.”

She had to get away from him before she did something entirely inappropriate.

chapter **sixteen**

"THE SHERIFF WON'T BE HAPPY."

Rose sent Deputy Mike Conti a big smile over her shoulder as she unlocked the front door of the Mad Dog. "Is he ever?"

Conti tilted his head in consideration. "Point to you. But I'd still prefer not to piss him off. I'd like to keep my badge."

"Jenkins only lost his because he was sleeping on the job."

"That doesn't surprise me at all. His lazy ass should've been fired years ago. Here, let me go in first." Gun in hand, he nudged her aside and pushed open the door. He came back a moment later. "It's clear."

She rolled her eyes and stepped through, flicking on the light. "I could've told you that."

"Better safe than dead."

"Point to Deputy Conti." She sketched it in the air and started back to her office.

He took up his position on the stool by the door. "Just Mike, please."

"Okay, Just Mike." If she had to be stuck with a babysitter, she could do worse than the affable Mike Conti. Like Jenkins. Or Ash. She definitely couldn't deal with him right now. She was too raw, too wired, too... everything. "Do you want a water or soda? Coffee?"

"Nah, not yet. Thanks, though." He watched her start her opening procedure: checking stock, giving the bar another wipe down, counting the cash drawer. "Need help with anything?"

"Nope." She needed the busy work. She hadn't slept a wink after leaving Ash last night, too twisted up about the weird bolts of lust she'd experienced around him and too afraid the nightmares would drag her under again.

Mike looked at the sign on the front door. "I thought you opened at one."

Do you always get in three hours before opening?”

“Not always. On Wednesdays, I have a group that comes in to use the multipurpose room.” She didn’t tell him it was a therapy group. The Paws for Vets group was the main reason she was so determined to open today. After Zak’s visit last night, he needed the session today.

And so did she, if they’d have her, because she couldn’t keep living with panic constantly humming under her skin, ready to rear its ugly head at the slightest provocation.

The first to arrive was Sawyer Murphy with his seeing eye dog, Zelda. He was always early, and they’d fallen into playing a “guess that drink” game—she’d mix a new mocktail for him and he’d have to guess what it was by smell. Today’s concoction was pineapple-ginger punch: pineapple juice and ginger beer, blended with a little bit of lime juice and garnished with mint.

All of the group were recovering addicts, so she’d made sure to beef up her non-alcoholic drink menu when they’d started using her pub as their meeting place after the fire last fall destroyed Redwood Coast Rescue. With RWCR’s new facilities about finished, she imagined they’d go back there for meetings before long. She’d miss them all when they did.

Sawyer paused at the end of the bar and grinned in her direction. “I smell pineapple and ginger and a hint of lime.”

She set the finished drink in front of him. “From all the way across the room?”

He tapped his nose. “I have a super sniffer. Like my dog.”

Zelda’s tail whipped the air and Rose bent down to give the chocolate lab some love while Sawyer tested the drink.

“Shit, Rose. That’s good.”

“It’s pineapple-ginger punch. I’m thinking of adding it to the menu. Both an alcoholic and the non-alcoholic version.”

“You should. What are you thinking for the alcohol?”

“Maybe tequila? Make it margarita-ish.”

He took another drink. “It’ll sell. In both forms.”

“Can I try it?” Mike asked and Sawyer jolted, spilling his drink on the bar.

“Jesus.” He looked toward Mike’s voice. “I didn’t realize anyone else was here.”

“My babysitter,” Rose said and grabbed a towel to wipe up the spill. “Ash’s orders. That’s Deputy Conti.”

“Mike,” Sawyer said in greeting and raised his glass in his direction. “Make some noise or move next time I come in, unless you wanna give me a heart attack.”

“Sorry, Sawyer.”

He turned back to the bar and slapped down a twenty. “Get the man a drink. On me.”

Rose sighed and tried to push the money back at him, but he wouldn’t take it. “You know you don’t have to pay during group.”

“Consider it a tip then. For your beauty.” He blew her a kiss, then followed his dog back to the multipurpose room.

“You can’t even see me, you shameless flirt. For all you know, I’m cross-eyed and snaggle-toothed.”

“Beauty goes beyond looks,” he called back. “And you *are* beautiful.”

And she melted. If she were a different person, she’d snap the sweet man up before another woman got to him. But given the star of her recent fantasies—Ash freaking Rawlings—her libido apparently wasn’t interested in sweet.

As she made the ginger-pineapple mocktail for Mike, Dr. Amelia Firestone arrived at the same time as Pierce St. James. Both liked coffee—black for Pierce and cream and sugar for the doctor.

“Hi, Rose,” Dr. Firestone said. “How are you?”

Oh, that was a loaded question. There was so much she could say to answer that, but she wanted to wait until everyone arrived before she asked to join them. “I’m okay.”

The doubt in Dr. Firestone’s kind eyes said she didn’t believe that for a second, but she didn’t press. She accepted her coffee with a smile and headed back.

Pierce lifted his mug and nodded his thanks as he followed the doctor. He couldn’t speak and Rose didn’t know the sign language he used to communicate, so their interactions were always brief.

Next to arrive was Donovan Scott. He was a simple drink kind of guy—club soda and lemon. He eyed Mike as he came in, then hitched a thumb over his shoulder at the guy. “Ash’s idea?”

“How’d you guess?”

“I know Ash.”

She studied him as she prepared his drink. He’d been seriously injured during the fire, but he looked good now. Maybe a little less muscular than he

used to be, but healthy and happy. She nodded toward his wedding band as she set his drink in front of him. “Marriage looks good on you, Van.”

He grinned. “It does, doesn’t it?”

She laughed. “How’s Sasha?” His new wife was the town’s best veterinarian.

“Good. Busy getting ready to move back to the Rescue. She can’t wait to get into her new clinic. Dr. Richards is wearing on her last nerve at the hospital in town.”

“Well, it’s hard working for someone else when you’re used to being the boss.” She’d been her own boss since she took over the Mad Dog and couldn’t imagine answering to anyone else. It was difficult enough following Ash’s rules, and those were meant to keep her safe.

“Don’t I know it,” he said as the door opened, and Zak stepped in. “Especially when that someone else is a tyrant.”

“If my employees weren’t such assholes, I wouldn’t have to be a tyrant,” Zak said. He looked haggard and drawn, more like the man he’d been two years ago when he’d been at rock bottom. He nodded at the deputy. “Hi, Mike.”

“Zak.” Mike nodded a hello, then went back to reading something on his phone.

“Asshole is my default setting,” Donovan said good-naturedly and took a swig from his glass. “You knew that when you hired me for your doggie A-team.” He started back to join the others, but stopped and spun around. “Oh, Rose. Before I forget, Sasha wanted me to remind you your cat is due for some vaccines.”

Tears rushed into her eyes and clogged up her throat. She was so grateful they were all treating her like normal. She hadn’t known what to expect, but this simple, every day interaction was such a relief. She didn’t want to be handled like fine china, because the more delicate people were with her, the more she felt like she’d break.

“I’ll make an appointment,” she finally managed.

“No need. Just pop in to see the new clinic when you get the chance and Sash will squeeze you in.” He walked away, leaving just her and Zak in the bar. And of course Mike, but he was ignoring them.

She turned to Zak. “How—”

The door opened again, and the final member of their group walked in. Veronica Martens never asked for a drink. She rarely ever spoke. She kept

her head down, her shoulders hunched, and hurried into the back room.

That woman had shields for her shields.

Zak tapped his knuckles on the bar. "I should get back."

He made it to the door of the multipurpose room before she worked up the courage to speak again. "Wait."

His shoulders stiffened. "I don't want to talk about last night."

"It's not that." She stepped out from behind the bar and walked over to him, her heart pounding so hard he must have heard it. "I..." She looked at the closed door in front of them and felt ridiculous. "Never mind."

Zak studied her for a long moment, then pulled open the door. "You want to come in?"

"I..." She bit her lip and glanced inside. She'd recently purchased a long reclaimed wood table for the room, but the group members had pushed it against the wall and were busy placing the chairs in a circle. "Will they have me?"

"Ask them."

chapter seventeen

“HEY, GUYS,” Zak said, taking his usual seat between Sawyer and Dr. Firestone. “Rose wants to ask us something.”

Everyone turned to look at her. She took a deep, steadying breath. “Uh, I know I’m not a veteran, but I was hoping I could sit in on these sessions? Because—” Her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. “Because I need help and I don’t know where else to go.”

“Of course,” Dr. Firestone said. “You’re more than welcome, as long as nobody has any objections.”

“It’s okay if you do,” Rose added quickly. “I get it. I won’t hold it against you.”

“You’ve helped all of us plenty in the past,” Zak said. *Including me last night*, his eyes said, though he didn’t add that out loud. “None of us would ever object to helping you just because you didn’t serve.”

A murmur of agreements went through the group. Pierce jumped up and grabbed another chair, inserting it into the circle between his seat and Sawyer’s. He waved her toward it, his hazel eyes solemn but earnest. She resisted the urge to hug him.

“Thank you.”

“Do you want to start by telling us a bit about yourself?” Dr. Firestone asked. “What brought you to us? You can go into as much or as little detail as you want.”

She took a fortifying breath and sat in the offered chair. “I’m sure you all know I... I was abducted.” She motioned toward the door. “Right out front there while I was closing one night. They had me for a couple days and we’re pretty sure they meant for me to die. They even sent someone after me at the hospital, but Ash was there and stopped him before he got close enough to try

anything.”

A low growl rumbled through the room. She glanced up, startled, but couldn't pinpoint which of the men it came from. But for the first time, she saw their rage on her behalf. The four men all but steamed with it. They'd done such a good job hiding it outside this room, she hadn't realized how much her abduction had pissed them off. Even Veronica and Dr. Firestone looked upset, though Dr. Firestone did a much better job of keeping her expression pleasantly neutral.

“Ash better catch the bastards who did it before we do,” Donovan said. “They'll fare better with him.”

She blinked at them, then glanced over at Zak. “You have RWCR looking into it?”

“Of course I do, Rose. You're one of us.” His lips quirked. “But maybe let's not tell Ash? It'll piss him off.”

Sawyer held out his arms as if embracing the whole room. “This is the chamber of secrets. Nothing said here leaves these four walls.”

Donovan snorted. “Of course you're a Harry Potter fan.”

“Hey, you caught the reference.”

“Anyone born in the nineties would catch that reference.”

Sawyer's pale eyes narrowed. He wasn't quite looking at Donovan, but in his direction. “I bet you're a Slytherin.”

“I have no idea what that even means.”

Sawyer leaned toward Rose as if to divulge a secret. “Definitely a Slytherin.”

“Boys. Focus.” Dr. Firestone shifted toward Rose and smoothly guided the conversation back on track. “That was a very traumatic event for you. How are you coping?”

She tried for a smile. It felt weak and tired. “Okay I think? I don't remember much, but I'm having nightmares about what I do remember. And maybe about stuff I don't. It's all twisted up in my head and I don't know if what I'm dreaming is real or if I'm just imagining the worst case.”

“It could be a bit of both. That's very normal,” the doctor said gently. “You're processing the trauma.”

“Yeah, I figured, but...” She brushed a strand of hair away from her face as the memories clawed at the edges of her mind. “During those days they had me, they kept me subdued by injecting me with heroin against my will.” She pushed up her sleeve and held out her arm so they could see the fading

bruises.

“Fuck,” Donovan said and popped to his feet, pacing away from the group.

Rose watched him go. He’d lost a close friend—a former member of this therapy group—to a heroin overdose. And like Rose, Chrissy had been injected against her will.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He swung back, his jaw set, his expression a storm cloud. “Don’t you dare fucking apologize. Not to me, not to yourself. You didn’t ask for any of this. It’s not your fault.”

Rose lowered her gaze to her lap as a strange mix of gratitude and guilt washed over her. “I know it’s not,” she said, her voice small. “But... but sometimes I can’t help feeling like it is. Like I could’ve done something to prevent it. Or like I brought it on myself somehow.”

Donovan shook his head. “You couldn’t have prevented it and worrying about whether or not you could’ve is a waste of time and energy and sanity. Believe me, Rose. I know what it’s like to blame yourself for things beyond your control. But the truth is, sometimes you just have to take the punches as they come and then find a way to get back up on your feet when it’s over.”

Hadn’t she said something very similar to Ash just last night? It had been so easy to dole out that sage bit of advice, but not so simple to follow it herself.

She touched a spot on her face where one of the bruises had turned a sickly yellow. She’d done her best to hide it with make-up that morning, but she knew it was still visible. “How do I get back up?”

Donovan shook his head. “Unfortunately, I can’t tell you that.”

“It’s for you to figure out,” Dr. Firestone said. “But we can help. How are you feeling?”

“I guess I’m getting better,” she hedged. “Everything is healing like it’s supposed to.”

“Physically, yes. But what I meant was how do you feel inside? Bodies heal faster than minds, so other than the nightmares, how has the experience affected you? How do you feel about it?”

Rose searched for words to express the cauldron of emotions bubbling over inside her. “Helpless, violated, angry, scared— there’s no easy way to sum up how bad it feels. Withdrawal is hard enough on its own, and then every craving I have feels like another violation all over again. I’ve never

even smoked pot before, and now suddenly my body is telling me I need this drug that terrifies the hell out of me.”

Dr. Firestone leaned in, her voice still like a gentle, motherly caress. “Rose, what happened to you is... unimaginable. And your feelings of helplessness and confusion are completely valid. But remember, you don’t have to go through this alone.”

Rose’s heart swelled with gratitude for the empathetic response of the group. She hadn’t expected this kind of acceptance. Not that she thought they’d turn her away, but she figured there would be an invisible, impenetrable wall between them because she wasn’t a veteran and had never seen war like they all had. But they had opened their arms and, amazingly, she felt safe here when she hadn’t felt safe anywhere since waking up in the hospital.

Except, maybe, in Ash’s presence.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just... don’t know what to do. I can’t stop thinking about it. I’m afraid to go to sleep.”

Sawyer reached out, seeking the arm of her chair. When he found it, he trailed his fingers down her arm until he landed on her hand. He gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze. “I know how you feel. I was afraid to sleep for a long time, but Zelda, here, helps me with my nightmares.”

At her name, Zelda’s tail thumped on the floor.

Sawyer smiled at the sound, his love for the animal plain in his sightless eyes, then asked, “Have you considered getting a therapy dog?”

Rose shook her head. “My cat would never forgive me.”

“Huh. I never pegged you as a crazy cat lady.”

“Well, I may be crazy, but I only have one cat.”

Everyone chuckled and the tension in the room eased slightly.

Donovan sat back down, his expression softening as he studied her. “Have you talked to anyone about it? About what happened to you?”

She swallowed hard. “Not really. I mean, the police, obviously. And Ash.” She realized her voice had gone weirdly soft and dreamy on his name and cleared her throat.

Dammit, she didn’t like the man.

“My aunt knows I was attacked,” she continued. “But I haven’t told her all the gory details. She’s already worried enough. And my dad... if you don’t know, he’s in prison, so it feels cruel to tell him when he’s stuck there and can’t do anything to help.”

“That’s understandable,” Dr. Firestone said and adjusted her tidy wireframe glasses. “It’s very common for victims to want to shield their families from the trauma, but it’s important to reach out to those around you who care about you. And if you don’t feel like you can tell your friends or family everything, then I urge you to find someone you can talk to.”

“You talk to us,” Zak said, then leaned forward, his eyes bright with intensity. “And never forget you’re a fighter, Rose. You survived this, and if you ask me, what you went through was more horrific than any war because you didn’t sign up knowing you could pay the ultimate price. We all knew we could come out of the military broken or not at all. We accepted the possibility of trauma when we enlisted. But it was forced on you, so that makes you more of a warrior than any of us.”

Pierce waved to get her attention, then pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. His thumbs worked furiously over the screen, his eyes darting between the letters and her face.

After a few moments of silence, he held the phone out to her. In bold letters on the bright screen, it read:

Zak’s right. I served in Iraq. Shrapnel from an explosion injured my neck and I lost my ability to speak, but I knew it was dangerous going in.

A mix of frustration and acceptance flickered across his expression before he continued typing.

During my recovery, I became addicted to pain pills. For years, I needed them to function. When I finally decided to get clean, withdrawal almost killed me.

Rose’s heart went out to him as she studied the scars that cut across his neck. With an injury like that, it was no wonder he became hooked on pills. She couldn’t imagine what getting clean must have been like for him. Her own experience had been hell, but the doctor told her she was lucky she had only been exposed to the drug for a few days—long-term opiate addicts had a much harder time with withdrawal and eighty-five percent of them relapsed within a year.

Pierce returned his attention to the phone.

It was my own stupid choices that put me in that situation. You were violated. You didn't choose any of this, but you're handling it better than I did.

Tears brimmed in her eyes. She felt raw and exposed, but also comforted. There was solace in knowing that she wasn't alone in her turmoil. "I'm so sorry for what you've been through. To have your voice taken away, and then to struggle with addiction... it must have been incredibly difficult."

Pierce nodded and typed a response.

It was brutal. I had to re-learn to communicate.

He set down the phone and signed something, then looked at Donovan.

"He said that it was a long and hard road," Donovan translated as Pierce continued to sign. "He had to first figure out he wanted to live, then he had to learn to communicate again before he could kick the addiction. But he made it through with the help of therapy and support groups like this one."

Pierce picked up his phone again and looked up at her directly while he typed.

You can heal, too.

"Thank you for sharing your story," Rose said, touched by his honesty. "It gives me hope. And thank you all for your understanding and offers of support. It means... so much to me."

Pierce's hazel eyes were warm as he looked up from the keyboard and smiled, then he went back to typing.

We're all in this together. Each of us carrying our own burdens, but we find strength in the bond we've formed as a therapy group and a team. When one of us is feeling weak, the rest of us step in and share our strength. So whenever you need someone to lean on, know that you have us. We'll support you while you try to find your footing again.

Rose lifted her gaze from the phone's screen and without saying a word, extended her hand towards Pierce. He took her hand and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

She looked at each person in the room, taking in their battle scars— Sawyer's sightless eyes, Zak's missing leg, the rope of scar tissue running down the side of Donovan's head, and Pierce's destroyed neck. Veronica,

who hadn't spoken once since she entered the room, whose scars were all internal and so deep, she hid under oversized sweaters and tried to make herself as small as possible. And, still, she was here. She was trying.

They were all survivors, in their own ways.

Maybe Rose could be, too. She'd already lived through the hardest part—the attack. She could defeat the nightmares. She could conquer the constant, low-level pull of her body toward a drug she didn't want. And whoever was trying to kill her—well, she was prepared now. They wouldn't catch her off guard again. If they tried, she'd beat them, too.

"I got back on my feet with exercise," Donovan said after a moment. "It's not a cure-all, but I find it helps. I like to run with my dog. It's a chance to work out the frustration and anxiety and clear my head."

"It's hiking with Zelda for me," Sawyer said.

Pierce mimed strumming a guitar.

Donovan's brows shot up. "I didn't know you played guitar. Are you any good?"

Pierce shrugged.

"It's Ranger for me," Zak said, his voice just a bit strained. "Training him, watching him learn new skills." A smile ticked up the corner of his mouth. "And also helping the rest of these assholes train their dogs at the Rescue. I like having a purpose."

Except, she knew, even having found his purpose, he was struggling. She opened her mouth to urge him to lean on the group, but she didn't get the chance.

"Reading," Veronica murmured, surprising them all. "I like light, fluffy rom-coms. It's escapist and I always know it's going to have a happy ending, so there's no anxiety."

"I read, too," Dr. Firestone said. "Cozy mysteries—for the same reasons Veronica likes romantic comedies. I also love mindless reality TV. It's a guilty pleasure. We all have our coping mechanisms. You just have to find what works for you."

Just like Ash and his campy horror movies.

Rose considered it. She'd never been much of a runner, and she liked to read occasionally, but definitely not rom-coms. She didn't have a dog and doubted Fanta would be good at search and rescue. Reality TV was a big no, as was learning an instrument. While her Dad could play anything he picked up, the musical gene had skipped a generation with her.

“I’ll try hiking,” she decided. It was something she already knew she enjoyed, so maybe it could be her escape, her coping mechanism.

“I’ll go with you.” Ash’s low voice rumbled through the room, flushing her with an uncomfortable warmth. She looked up to see him staring at her intently from the doorway.

“If you want,” he added.

Her heart leapt into her throat. The idea of being alone in the mountains with Ash, doing something not related to her abduction or his investigation—something that was dangerously close to a date—was both thrilling and terrifying. But maybe it was exactly the distraction she needed. Someone to help chase away the demons.

Except this man was one of her demons.

She couldn’t let herself forget that.

“No thanks.” She was thrilled when her voice came out steady and just a bit icy. She stood and addressed the group. “Thank you all for listening to me.”

“Come back next week,” Dr. Firestone said.

“I’ll think about it, but I have to get the bar ready to open now. Thanks again.” She started toward the door, but Ash still blocked it. She stared him down. He stared right back, his face set in stone, until Dr. Firestone delicately cleared her throat.

“Sheriff. Rose has work to do.”

He finally broke the staring contest to glance over at the doctor, then stepped aside.

Rose hurried out of the room, bypassed the bar and ignored Mike’s questioning look. She shoved into the kitchen and leaned on the prep table, sucking in multiple steadying breaths. Marcel wouldn’t be in for another hour, so she was blissfully alone amid all the cold stainless steel appliances. It was a fitting place for her, because now that she was away from the cozy embrace of the therapy group, she felt all cold and echoey inside just like the empty kitchen.

chapter eighteen

OF COURSE she went to work.

Ash didn't know why he was surprised. The woman was too damn stubborn and determined to make herself a target.

Or give him a heart attack.

Which was nearly what he had when he walked into the Mad Dog to find the door unlocked and the pub empty.

No Rose. No Deputy Mike Conti, who was supposed to be guarding her with his life.

Ash's blood pressure shot through the roof, and he thumbed his radio with the intent of calling an 11-99 and getting every LEO within radio distance here—but then he heard the toilet flush in the men's bathroom. He whirled toward it as Mike stepped out, wiping his hands on a paper towel.

"Where is she?"

Mike frowned. "What—?"

"Rose! Where is she?"

"Sheriff, she's—"

"If something happened to her while you were taking a shit, Conti, I will not only have your badge, I'll make fucking sure you never work in law enforcement again."

"Rawlings!" Mike made his name into a whip. "Relax. She's safe. She's in the back room with Zak, Donovan, and the rest of them. I figured nobody would get to her through them, so I took a bathroom break."

Oh, Jesus. Why couldn't he breathe? "She's...?"

"Safe. I wouldn't leave her unguarded." Mike nodded toward the back room. "Go see for yourself."

Heart still pounding in his ears, he walked over to the door. He would've

shoved it open, if not for recognizing Zak's voice, followed by Rose's and then Donovan's. He took a second to calm himself, leaning his head against the wood and letting the sound of her muffled voice slow his heart rate.

"Man," Mike muttered. "You got it bad, Sheriff."

"Shut up, Conti." He drew another deep breath, released it, then cracked the door and slipped inside. Pierce was typing on his phone, then showing it to Rose. She wore her cropped, too-tight Mad Dog t-shirt, but had thrown one of his flannels over it. The sight of her in his shirt unlocked that fierce protectiveness again. She looked small and sad and vulnerable. She was none of those things—not the Ambrosia Galasso who poked and needled and teased him until he didn't know if he wanted to kiss her or bend her over his knee.

Or both.

He hated the fear he saw in her. He hated that the sick bastard who put it in her was still out there, and he was no closer to catching him.

Then Donovan said something about exercising, and his mind dove straight back into the gutter as he pictured Rose sweat-slicked and panting. The only man exercising with her in any capacity would be him.

"I'll go with you."

Rose looked up at him with wide, startled eyes. He chose to ignore Donovan's knowing smirk and Zak's soft snort.

"If you want," he added, realizing he'd sounded too possessive.

"No thanks." The ice in her tone should've frozen the flames inside him. Unfortunately, all it did was make him burn hotter.

He was tired of her not listening. Tired of her testing him at every turn. She would listen. She would submit.

As she said her pleasant goodbyes and made her escape, he stalked after her... and found her in the kitchen looking like one strong wind would blow her apart.

He muttered a curse under his breath and went to her. "Rose."

She sucked in a breath and looked up. Her eyes were hollow, the bruises on her cheeks bleeding through her makeup.

Ash's heart clenched at the sight of her battered face. He reached out to touch her cheek, but she stepped back.

"Don't," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He dropped his hand. "I'm not your enemy, Ambrosia."

She shook her head and turned away. "What are you doing here, Sheriff?"

I'm plenty protected without your sparkling presence."

He hesitated. Maybe now, with her so vulnerable, wasn't the best time to do this. But then, was there ever really a good time to find out if a long-buried body belonged to your mother? No, probably not.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "I have the DNA results."

She whirled back to face him, her eyes wide. "Already?"

"I told you I put a rush on it."

She reached for the paper, but stopped. "Have you looked?"

"No. I printed off the email and brought it to you. Figured you'd want to know as soon as I do."

She stared at the paper, her hand still half-outstretched to take it. Then she sucked in a breath and snatched it. Seconds ticked by in silence as she read.

The longest seconds of Ash's life.

"It's her," she whispered, and tears flooded her eyes, spilled over. "Oh my God. It's Mom."

Ash shut his eyes and saw the blackened, grinning skull of Jane Doe on the backs of his lids.

No. Not Jane Doe anymore. Harmony Galasso.

He opened his eyes and took the paper from Rose's trembling hand, read it through. The results were about as conclusive as DNA got. The Jane Doe was maternally related to the provided DNA sample.

He nodded. "All right. I'm reopening your mom's case."

She laughed, but it was all bitterness. "So, wait. You tore apart my family, and you expect me to just forgive you for that because you've decided to actually investigate?"

"No, I don't expect forgiveness, but I also won't feel guilty for doing my job."

"See, that's your problem, Sheriff. You think your job is black and white. Someone breaks the law, and they go to prison, end of story. But you forget that's never actually the end of the story." With that, she turned and walked away.

Ash watched as her long strides carried her across the kitchen toward her office. He had always believed that his duty as a sheriff was to uphold the law, no matter the costs. But maybe, sometimes, the costs were more than justice was worth.

"Rose, wait."

She turned back to face him, her expression guarded as he caught up to her.

“I know I can’t make up for what happened to your family,” he said, his voice low as the noise level at the front of the bar grew. The therapy group was leaving. “But I want to try. I’m reopening your mom’s case because I want to find out what really happened to her. I need to know how she ended up on the mountain and if your father didn’t put her there, I need to find who did.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why is it so important to you?”

He wasn’t about to tell her that the betrayal on her face when he showed up to arrest her dad had haunted him for thirteen years or that every time he closed his eyes, he saw her mother’s blackened skull grinning at him.

He skimmed his knuckles across her cheek. “Because it’s important to you.”

Her too-red lips parted in a soft gasp. “I don’t like you, Sheriff.” But even as she said the words, she leaned into his touch.

“I know. I don’t like you very much, either.” He circled a hand around the back of her neck and dragged his thumb over her bottom lip, smearing away the lipstick that somehow both irrationally infuriated him and tantalized him.

Jesus. He shouldn’t be touching her like this, but he needed to. Because while the girl she’d once been haunted his nightmares, the woman she was now had starred in all of his recent fantasies.

“I hate that I’m so damn attracted to you,” she whispered.

“I know.”

Her exhale ghosted over his thumb. “I don’t understand why we’re doing this.”

“Neither do I.” He bent his head and pressed his lips to hers, tasting the bitterness of her anger and the sweetness of her mouth.

She didn’t respond at first, but then her fingers curled into the fabric of his uniform shirt, pulling him closer as she angled her head to deepen the kiss.

It was wrong, so wrong.

Dammit, he was a lawman, and he shouldn’t be getting involved with a victim like Rose, especially not while he was investigating her mother’s case. But he couldn’t help himself. The pull between them was too strong, too intense.

When they finally broke apart, they were both panting for air. Ash looked

into her eyes and saw a mixture of surprise, desire, and something else he couldn't quite place.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, his voice rough.

"No," Rose agreed, but she didn't move away from him. "But you did."

He didn't know how to respond, so he just stood there, their bodies pressed together so tightly he could feel the excited beat of her heart against his chest.

It was a mistake.

A huge mistake.

But as Rose looked up at him, her blue eyes shining, he realized it was a mistake he desperately wanted to make again.

Ash forced himself to release her and step back. "I need to go. I have work to do."

Rose nodded, not looking at him. "Yeah. I have to open the bar."

"Don't go anywhere without Conti," he said. "He's glued to your side, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

The way she said that had his cock stirring behind his fly. He had to get out of here before he bent her over that prep table and did indecent things to her right here in her pub's kitchen.

He spun on his heel and marched resolutely toward the door.

"What about my mother's case?" she asked suddenly. "Does this mean my dad will get an appeal?"

"I don't know yet." His tone was gruffer than he'd intended, and she deserved a better answer. He stopped and turned back. "It won't make up for what happened to your family, but I'm going to do everything in my power to find out what really happened to her."

She nodded again, her expression unreadable. "Okay. I'll see you at home."

The words sent a weird thrill through him. Home. Of course, it wasn't really her home. It was only a temporary arrangement while he tracked down the bastards who hurt her.

Jesus, he had so much work to do.

"Yeah. See you at home." He didn't look back, but he could feel Rose's eyes on him as he walked away.

Outside the bar, he climbed into his Tahoe, his head filled with thoughts of the woman he shouldn't be attracted to. Kissing her had been a mistake,

but his self-control was non-existent when it came to her. She was smart, tough, and fiercely independent. Annoying and infuriatingly sexy. A woman who knew exactly what she wanted and weaponized her beauty to get it. He admired her for it, even as he struggled to reconcile the woman with the girl she'd once been. The girl whose life he'd ruined.

She was eight years younger than him—twenty-six to his thirty-four. Did that make him a cradle robber? Was she too young for him? But age didn't seem to matter when they kissed. Their chemistry was undeniable, and he found himself drawn to her like a bug to a zapper.

Likely with the same disastrous results.

Jesus.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge her from his thoughts. It didn't matter if he was too old for her. Yes, he was attracted—with that body and those lips, every straight man in town was—but so what? He didn't like her as a person. He felt bad for what happened to her when she was a kid, for losing both her parents in such a traumatic way, but he. Didn't. Like. Her. And he wasn't going to let his self-control slip around her again. He refused to be controlled by his dick.

He parked in his space in front of the Sheriff's Department and headed inside. There were a few deputies milling about, but Ash ignored them and made a beeline for his office. He closed the door behind him and sank into the chair behind his desk.

Time to focus.

Now that he had a name for Jane Doe, he planned to go over Harmony Galasso's case with a fine-tooth comb.

Someone in that file had to know what really happened to her.

chapter
nineteen

13 Years Ago

ROSE'S HEART raced as she opened the door to find Deputy Ash Rawlings and Sheriff Tennison standing on her doorstep.

Her dad came to the door behind her, and she'd never seen the look on his face before as he stared at the two cops. "Rose, please go back inside."

"What's going on?" Confusion and fear mingled in her belly, making her nauseous, and she wrapped her arms tightly around herself. "Is there any news about my mom?"

Deputy Rawlings met her gaze and his sad expression had tears rushing into her eyes. "Hi, Rose. We need to talk. Can we come in?"

"No." Letting them through the door felt like she was inviting in something bad, something potentially evil like the vampires in her favorite TV show.

"Let them in, Wildflower." Dad set a hand on her shoulder and gently pulled her back, allowing the two cops to enter the living room. The air grew heavy with tension, the familiar space suddenly suffocating.

This was wrong. They shouldn't be here. They should be out looking for Mom.

Sheriff Tennison's gaze hardened as he addressed her dad. "Pete, you know why we're here."

"No," Dad replied but something in that one soft word said otherwise.

"You're under arrest for the murder of your wife."

Dad didn't look surprised. Tears glimmered in his eyes and his voice quivered. "I didn't... I would never hurt Harmony. If you think she's dead, then her killer is still out there. Please, don't do this, Jerry."

"You have the right to remain silent..." The sheriff repeated the words she'd heard on so many cop shows and snapped a pair of handcuffs around Dad's wrists.

No. This couldn't be happening.

"It's okay, Wildflower," her dad said in the same soothing voice he used when she had a nightmare.

Yes. It was just a nightmare and she'd wake up at any moment.

Just a nightmare.

"Call Auntie Rainbow," Dad called over his shoulder as the sheriff pushed him toward the door. "Tell her to come get you. It'll be okay. I

promise.”

It wasn't a nightmare.

Tears welled up in Rose's eyes as her world crumbled before her.

“You can't take him!” She turned to Deputy Rawlings. “Please, tell them. Tell them my dad couldn't have done anything!”

He stepped forward, his eyes filled with compassion. “I know this is hard to accept, but—”

“You promised to help us. You promised to find my mom!”

“We're doing our best to—”

“Arresting my dad is your best? He didn't do anything! Please—” Her voice cracked, and her knees wobbled.

Deputy Rawlings caught her arm before she collapsed and gently guided her to sit down on the couch. He got her a glass of water and knelt in front of her. “Rose, we're not giving up on finding your mom.”

“But you think she's dead. If Mom's gone, Dad's all I have.”

“I'm so sorry.”

He was so nice. Soft-spoken and gentle, with kind blue eyes.

And how she hated him.

She threw the water in his face and jumped to her feet, bursting through the front door in time to see the sheriff drive away with her dad in the back of his car.

“Rose, stop!” Hard arms banded around her and dragged her back inside. She kicked and clawed and felt blood well under her nails. Good. He deserved to hurt just as much as she was.

He dumped her back on the couch and stepped away before she could kick him. His cheek was bleeding, but his eyes were still soft and filled with sorrow. It made her despise him even more.

“You stupid fucking cop! I *never* should've trusted you! I hate you!”

He dodged the pillow she threw at his head. “I understand your anger and confusion, but we have to follow the evidence and unfortunately the evidence right now points at your dad. We owe it to your mom to find the truth.”

She glared at him, her chest heaving with sobs. “You owe it to my mom to find her killer, not arrest my dad for something he didn't do!”

Deputy Rawlings sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I know this is hard for you, but we have to be thorough in our investigation.”

“All you care about is your stupid investigation. You don't care about my mom or my family.”

“That’s not true,” he said firmly, his eyes locked on hers. “I care about finding justice for your mom and for your family. For *you*. But sometimes justice is hard and painful. Sometimes it means facing the truth, even when it hurts.”

She hated the tears streaming down her face and swiped at them. “I just want my dad back.”

“I know,” Deputy Rawlings said gently. “And we’ll do our best to find out what really happened. If your dad is innocent, we *will* prove it. But we can’t ignore the evidence we have now.”

“What evidence? You haven’t even told me what it is!”

He hesitated, his eyes flickering with guilt. “I’m sorry. I can’t share that right now, but please know we are following all leads.”

Rose scoffed, pushing past him and pacing the room. “You don’t even know for sure that she’s dead. Maybe she ran off like Dad said. Maybe she just got tired of living here and fighting with Dad and taking care of me and —”

“I’m sorry, Rose.”

She wanted to scream at him, to lash out again and hurt him, to give him some of the pain eating away at her heart. But she was suddenly too tired. Broken. Lost. She sank back to the couch.

“Can I at least go with him?” she asked in a whisper.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Deputy Rawlings said, his voice tinged with regret. “But I promise to keep you updated on the investigation, okay?”

Why did he have to be so nice? She wished the crusty old sheriff were here instead. She wouldn’t feel guilty for scratching Sheriff Tennison.

The screen door squeaked, and Aunt Rainbow burst into the room in a cloud of pot smoke and patchouli oil, her face twisted with worry. She rushed to Rose’s side and pulled her into a tight hug, the bangles on her wrists jangling.

“Oh, baby, what’s going on?”

Rose buried her face in her aunt’s chest and cried.

chapter
twenty

Present Day

THE ITCH WAS BACK.

It woke Rose out of the first sound sleep she'd had in over a week, clawing at the back of her mind, whispering ugly, seductive things to her. She could take a pain pill. That wasn't as bad as sticking a needle in her arm. People took pain pills all the time. It would ease the itch. Settle her mind.

What could it hurt?

Then she remembered Pierce's story. His addiction.

Everything. It would hurt everything. If she caved, they won. Whoever they were. Her attackers may not have killed her, but if she gave in to the itch, then they would accomplish something even worse. They would destroy her.

And she refused to let them have that.

She lay in bed and breathed through the withdrawal pangs, focusing on Fanta purring on her chest. Her dreams came back to her in bits and pieces. She'd dreamt about Dad's arrest. She hadn't done that in years.

God, she'd hated Ash that day.

And every day after.

Until recently.

It wasn't hate anymore. Was it even still dislike? She wasn't sure, and couldn't pinpoint exactly when her feelings had changed. Or maybe they had been changing, softening for all these years.

She got out of bed and walked to the window, her bare feet cold on the hardwood floor. Ash's property lay several miles north of town, nestled deep in the redwoods. His house had been one of the lucky ones last year, escaping the fire that scorched acres of land to the south and east of town, and the forest around the cabin was still lush with life. Silver mist curled through the trees as gray clouds, heavy with rain, hung low in the sky.

She loved this kind of weather. Cool and foggy with misty rain. It was one of her favorite parts of living in Northern California. The perfect day to stay inside and indulge in a little self-care.

But if she stayed inside today, she'd lose her mind.

She rubbed her arms, trying to shake off the tingling sensation crawling beneath her skin. She couldn't do this on her own anymore. She needed a distraction.

She slipped into her robe and cracked open her bedroom door. Ash's door was shut, and she heard no sounds inside. It was almost nine a.m. Would he sleep in this late?

No way. Not Sheriff Ash Rawlings. He was probably already at work, and she'd find the affable Mike Conti posted up in the living room.

To her shock, it wasn't Mike she found asleep in one of the two chairs that Ash owned—he really needed to buy another couch—but rather the sheriff himself. Like her first night here, Ash was slumped over a stack of paperwork, his neck bent at an uncomfortable angle. No horror movie on the TV this time, though.

She stood in front of him, watching his chest rise and fall with each deep breath. Did the man ever stop working? Did he ever sleep in his own bed, or did he always fall asleep in front of mounds of paperwork?

She studied his face. A square, too-serious face. He didn't always have all those frown lines, she remembered. When they first met thirteen years ago, he'd still been boy-like in many ways. Unjaded and clean-shaven—hadn't started growing the beard yet—with a deputy uniform so new it had sharp creases from the package it had come in. Asleep, he looked more like that younger version she remembered, less weighed down by the responsibilities of his job and his role in the community.

She'd been too young at the time to appreciate his rugged handsomeness, but as an adult she thought about him more often than she cared to admit. His lips, especially. He had lips made for kissing, the bottom slightly fuller than the top.

A thin, barely noticeable scar sliced down his cheek, disappearing under his beard. She traced it with her finger and his eyes opened. Dark blue, like the ocean sky as a storm rolled in. He stared at her for a groggy second before his gaze sharpened.

He sat up and winced, rubbing at his neck. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She again traced the scar. "Is that from me? When I scratched you the day you arrested Dad?"

Lust flickered in his eyes. She saw it clearly before he shuttered his expression. She also noticed the growing tent at the front of his sweatpants.

"Something to remember you by," he murmured.

"Like you could forget me."

"Christ knows I've tried." As soon as he spoke, his eyes widened like he hadn't meant to say that.

Huh. She liked sleepy Ash. His guard was lower than fully awake Ash. “Really? Because I never got the impression you’ve thought about me at all.”

“I don’t,” he said brusquely. “I didn’t. You were a kid.”

“I’m not anymore.”

“You’re still nearly a decade younger than me.”

“Eight years.”

“Exactly. So I don’t think about you in any way other than as a member of this community I need to protect.”

Her gaze dropped pointedly to his lap. “Uh-huh.”

Ash sighed and adjusted his position in the chair to make his erection less noticeable. He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Stop it. I can’t spar with you right now. I’ve been up all night dealing with paperwork. So much fucking paperwork.”

“Right,” she said, feeling awkward all of a sudden. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He looked at his watch. He was the only thirty-something man she knew that still wore a watch. Not a fitness tracker, but an actual silver watch with a black leather band. “I should’ve been at work hours ago.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not if you didn’t sleep.”

“I slept.”

“No, you catnapped over a pile of paperwork.”

He frowned at the papers strewn about, then gathered them up and set them aside. He stretched and yawned, and his T-shirt hitched up, showing off corrugated abs and a line of hair that disappeared into his sweatpants. Her pulse quickened at the sight, and heat pooled in her belly.

“Did you need something, Rose?” he asked. If he noticed the sudden flush in her cheeks, he didn’t acknowledge it.

She quickly looked away. Why was the sight of his abs more of a turn on than his morning erection? She’d been amused by the tent in his pants. But that hard stomach and line of hair did all kinds of things for her.

“I just...” Her voice came out strangely husky and she swallowed. “The itch.”

She knew he’d understand without more explanation.

His expression softened. “Is it bad?”

“It’s not bad. More... annoying,” she decided.

He said nothing for a long moment. “I’ve been where you are.”

Rose turned to look at him, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Withdrawal.” His eyes fixed on some distant point over her shoulder, like he was staring into the past. “It started as a social thing when I was a teen—someone would show up to a party with a handful of pills from their parents’ medicine cabinet, and we’d all take them. I thought it was harmless fun. Then my sister lost her baby when we were eighteen, and she was so sad. Just a... shell of herself.” He rubbed a hand over his heart. “It hurt me, seeing her like that, so I gave her all of my strength during the day, then fell hard into the drugs and partying at night to cope.”

Rose couldn’t believe what she was hearing. He’d hinted at it back when she was in the hospital, but she hadn’t believed it then. She still couldn’t wrap her mind around it. The Ash Rawlings she knew was always in control, never showing any vulnerability. And now he was confessing to her that he had been an addict? It didn’t make sense.

“Why are you telling me this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Guess I want you to know that it gets better. That itch might not ever go away completely but it becomes easier to ignore.”

“Do you still have it?”

“Sometimes.”

Rose stared at him, taking in the lines etched into his rugged face. She saw a hint of the pain he had endured, the battles he had fought, and the strength it took for him to open up to her.

“I had no idea,” she whispered, in awe of him.

He shrugged again, his expression guarded once more. “It’s not something I talk about.”

And that, she realized, was the end of the conversation. She wanted to ask more questions, but knew he wouldn’t answer them. He’d pulled those shields of his back up.

She looked down at the stack of case files on the coffee table and picked up the top folder. It was the same one she’d seen her first night at his house.

She held it up. “Who’s Maria Socktish?”

Ash let out a breath that sounded a lot like a sigh of relief. He leaned back in the chair and rubbed at his eyes. “That podcaster, Alexis Summers, thinks there’s a serial killer in Lost County, and that Maria was the first victim.”

“Wow. And you believe her?”

“Not entirely, but her research is compelling,” he admitted, his tone full of grudging respect. “I haven’t had a chance to look too far into it. That’s what I was doing when I found you out on Route 10—walking through

Maria's last steps. That gas station was her last known location."

"She was never found?"

"No."

"Huh. That does seem to happen a lot around here." She dropped the file back on the stack. "My line of work can get hectic, but even at my busiest, my to-do list has never included hunt down a possible serial killer."

He yawned again. "It'd be weird if it did. You're a bartender."

"Pub owner," she said with mock outrage. "And it'd be like one of those cozy mysteries. The scrappy pub owner getting reluctantly sucked into a murder investigation." Which, she realized, wasn't too far off from her real life and the reminder sent a sizzle of panic down her spine.

Coping mechanism, she reminded herself. Like Pierce's guitar or Dr. Firestone's reality TV. She just had to find her own. "I'm going on a hike."

Ash's drooping eyes popped open. "It's supposed to rain."

She grabbed her phone from the pocket of her robe and checked the weather. "Not until this afternoon."

"That's not a good idea. It's not safe."

"If you don't think so, you could come with me. Protect me from any big, bad trees that might want to hurt me." When he looked about to protest, she added, "You said you would."

He groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache. "Jesus, Ambrosia. Why do you insist on making yourself a target?"

She thought she'd pinned down his moods when he called her by her full name— annoyed, frustrated, angry. But she heard something else in his tone this time: fear.

"That's not my intention." She swallowed hard to dislodge the sudden lump in her throat. "I don't plan to give them another shot at me, but I can't sit around this house any longer when my skin is prickling, and my mind keeps telling me it wouldn't hurt if I took something just once to make it all stop. I need a distraction. So." Her laugh came out more bitter than she'd planned. "We can either fuck or go on a hike."

Ash's gaze was electric as he rose from his chair, and her heart suddenly hammered against her ribcage. She yearned for him to cross the space between them and pull her against his hard chest. Her mind replayed the kiss yesterday and a tingling sensation swept through her as her nipples hardened in anticipation.

"Hiking it is," he said, voice rough, and turned away.

She told herself not to be disappointed. But... why shouldn't she be? She saw his desire in his eyes. The heat had nearly scorched her robe right off her body.

“Or...” She caught his hand. “We could do both.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Rose, we can't... I can't get involved with you.”

“Involved?” She scoffed. “That's such a complicated word. Neither of us wants involved, but I think we're both adult enough to admit we want each other. We're consenting adults and we want each other. So give me one good reason why we shouldn't.”

When he met her gaze, his eyes were flinty again, cop hard, no hint of the heat left. “I don't fuck women who are vulnerable.”

She dropped his hand and crossed her arms over her chest. “I'm not.”

“Yes, you are.”

The flush that washed through her had nothing to do with desire. It was all anger now. “No, I'm the queen of the vulnerable. I'm the person everyone else comes to when they need comfort or advice. But who do I go to when I need help? Who helps me when I'm the one who's hurting? No one. I'm not vulnerable because I can't afford to be, so don't you dare use that as an excuse.”

“It's not an excuse. It's a boundary. I won't take advantage of you.”

“I'm not a child,” she snapped. “I know what I want. And right now, what I want is you.”

“I can't give you what you want.” The words rumbled out of him as he prowled toward her. She'd never seen this side of him before. He looked dangerous, like a predator zeroed in on easy prey.

Heart racing, she backed up until she hit the wall by the fireplace. “Why not?”

“Because you have no idea what you're asking for.” He trapped her against the wall with a hand on either side of her head and leaned down until his lips almost brushed hers. “I'm not gentle.”

“What if I like it rough?”

“You've been hurt enough.”

“I dare you to hurt me, Sheriff.”

He caught her chin between his fingers and tilted her head up. “No.” His voice was all edges, little more than a growl. “If we ever fuck, it'll only happen because you finally shut that smart little mouth and submitted to me.”

The heat emanating from his body was scorching as he pressed up against her, pinning her to the wall. The anger she had seen in his eyes earlier had been replaced by a white-hot desire that sent a thrill racing through her, burning away the lingering craving for that damn drug, and the ever-present cold tendrils of fear.

She knew she should still be scared. Someone wanted her dead, and her only protection was this gruff mountain of a man who had ripped her family apart. She'd never met anyone who could simultaneously piss her off and turn her on like Sheriff Ash Rawlings. It was maddening and thrilling and exhausting all at once.

She pushed up onto her toes and sank her teeth into his lower lip. "I don't submit."

His too-serious eyes raked over her, and she was half-surprised her robe didn't disintegrate. He caught her around the neck and pinned her to the wall to keep her from biting him again. His lip was bleeding, and he ran his tongue slowly over the cut.

"We'll see about that."

The words sounded like a promise, even as he released her and stalked toward his bedroom. The door shut behind him with a resounding thud.

She sagged against the wall and sucked in a breath, pressing a hand to her thundering heart.

We'll see about that.

Oh, she was going to take great pleasure in proving him wrong. Control freak that he was, he thought he was at the wheel of this thing between them, but he wasn't. Not with the way he'd looked at her, held her...

He thought he was dangerous, but she knew the difference between a man who intended to truly hurt her and one who simply wanted to blur the line between pleasure and pain. She held his reins, and he was going to submit to her first.

He just didn't know it yet.

chapter **twenty-one**

ASH EMERGED from his room a half hour later, showered and dressed in his uniform, to find Rose in the kitchen waiting on the coffee pot to finish brewing. She'd set out two mugs—a ceramic one for her and his stainless steel travel tumbler. She'd also changed into her “uniform”—if you could call it that. Her breasts strained the limits of the Mad Dog Pub top. The shirt's cropped hem showed off her tight stomach and the tendrils of a tattoo on her ribs. Her jeans hugged her hips and ass like a second skin. The “uniform” left little to the imagination. She'd put on make-up, somehow making her eyes look bigger and bluer, and the bold red of her signature lipstick drew his gaze as she closed her mouth around a banana.

Fuck.

He glanced away as he crossed to the fridge and grabbed a yogurt. He couldn't look at her or the erection he'd dealt with in the shower would pop right back up.

His lip still stung from where she'd bit him. He ran his tongue over the spot and despite his efforts in the shower, his cock stirred. It had a mind of its own lately.

This wasn't going to work.

Hell, he couldn't even breathe the same air as her without getting hard. He'd been an idiot to think he could keep her here and still do his job with a level head. He had to get her out of his house.

“I'll call the locksmith today about replacing the locks at your place.” Then he'd assign more deputies—capable, married ones like Mike Conti—to protect her until this was over.

“I already called a couple days ago,” she said. “They're booked up for the next two weeks. I took their first available appointment for the eighteenth.”

He could not wait that long. “I’ll call in a favor.”

“Ready to be rid of me, Sheriff?”

“Yes.” He didn’t turn around to see her reaction, but felt the air change like an electrical storm was gathering. The hair on his arms stood at attention in warning. She was going to try something, push all his buttons again until she found the one that made him snap like he had in the living room.

The way he’d backed her into the wall and told her she’d submit...

Jesus.

It went beyond unprofessionalism and into exploitation. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she was vulnerable. And the things he’d wanted to do to her whenever she challenged him had to be borderline illegal.

He’d wanted to order her to her knees and make her suck his cock. He’d wanted to bend her over the chair and spank her ass until it was as red as her mouth. He’d wanted to order her to spread her legs so he could bury his face between them and eat her pussy until she came all over his face.

He wanted to make her beg for him.

By God, he wanted to hear her beg.

He’d imagined it all in vivid detail as he’d stroked himself to an unsatisfactory climax in the shower.

At the memory, a hot pang of longing shot through him. It would have been so easy to give in to that desire. She was willing, he was willing... they were alone.

He closed his eyes and told himself—again—he could not go there with her.

Not with Ambrosia Galasso.

Never with her.

Too bad it wasn’t tourist season. He could take a night off, walk into the Arrow Tree Brewery, and find a willing woman to help sate this need Rose had awakened in him. Except when he tried to insert a nameless, faceless tourist into his fantasies instead of Rose, he didn’t get the same visceral, gut-punch surge of need.

Then his brain inserted Rose right back in—*where she belongs*, it insisted—and his cock stirred again.

She touched his back and a bolt of heat sizzled from her fingers, through his blood, and down into his cock. He almost groaned. Just barely bit it back before the sound escaped his throat.

“Why the uniform today?” she asked, her voice like a seductive caress.

Yes.

Work.

He had to focus on work.

It took every ounce of strength he possessed to step back out of her reach. He grabbed the carafe and filled his travel mug to the brim with coffee. "I'm going to the prison."

"What?" She retreated and he could draw a full breath again without her scent invading his head. He finally faced her.

She crossed her arms over her impressive breasts and glared at him. Fury snapped in her bright blue eyes. "You're not talking to my dad."

"He's already agreed to meet me."

She scoffed. "He's in prison. You think he has the choice to say no when the sheriff wants to talk to him?"

This was better. He could handle angry Rose. It was sassy, seductive Rose he couldn't deal with. "I gave him the choice. He agreed."

She held up a finger in warning. "You are *not* telling my dad about the attacks."

"I'll tell him whatever I need to get answers."

"No." She threw the banana peel in the trash, then grabbed another of his travel tumblers and poured her coffee from her mug into it. "I'm going with you."

He eyed her. "Not dressed like that."

"No shit." She shoved her cup at him as she passed. "Give me five minutes."

chapter **twenty-two**

PETE GALASSO LOOKED nothing like Ash remembered.

Thirteen years ago, he was the typical coastal hills hippie. His hair had been a sandy brown, long but well cared for. Likewise for his beard. He'd worn tie-dye Grateful Dead T-shirts, "drug rug" sweaters, a floppy wide-brimmed hat, and sandals year round. He'd always had a wide, toothy smile for anyone who walked into the Mad Dog, even for three underage boys looking to sneak a drink with fake IDs—not that Ash, Zak, and Donovan would know anything about that. Pete's laugh had been the kind that made everyone around him join in.

But now, he looked...

Old.

Beaten down.

Exhausted.

His hair was still long, but now a greasy yellowish-gray. His smile was half the wattage as it used to be. Deep lines grooved his mouth and eyes.

Blue eyes, the same color as Rose's.

"Wildflower," Pete said with obvious surprise when the guards led him in and sat him down across the table from Ash and Rose. "What are you doing here?"

Rose waited for the guards to lock his cuffs to the table, then reached for his hands. "Hi, Daddy. I was overdue for a visit."

Pete's gaze slid to Ash. "Yes, but why...?" He let the question trail off and squeezed her hands back. "It doesn't matter. I'm glad you came. I've missed you."

"I know. I'm sorry it's been so long. I've been... busy."

Pete's expression clouded at the short pause in her words. "Oh, my little

wildflower. You're lying. I can always tell when you're lying." He looked at Ash again. "What's going on?"

"Daddy—"

"Sweetheart, let the sheriff answer please."

Ash cleared his throat and pulled out the case file he'd brought with him. He set it on the table and opened the cover.

Pete turned a sickly yellow color. "That's Harmony's file."

Rose squeezed his hand to get his attention. "We found Mom."

"You—" Pete blinked, and tears flooded his eyes, spilled over in a rush. "You finally found my Harmony, Sheriff? You brought her home?"

"We did," Ash said, making sure to keep his voice even. The man's genuine show of emotion touched him more than he'd expected. "We discovered her remains near Bear Gulch Road after the wildfire last fall. She was a Jane Doe until Rose offered a sample of her DNA earlier this week for familial testing and her identity was confirmed."

"Dear God." He laid his head down on the table and sobbed. "You found her," he repeated over and over, his voice muffled by his arms. "You found her."

Rose was crying now, too. She obviously wanted to hug her father, but the armed guard by the door stopped her when she stood. All she could do was hold on to Pete's hands over the table and cry with him.

"Mr. Galasso," Ash said when the tears slowed. "I have some questions if you're willing to talk to me."

"I've been willing to talk for thirteen years." Pete swiped at his eyes, making the chains around his wrists rattle. "The problem was always nobody was ever willing to listen."

"I'm listening now."

Pete lifted his soaked, bloodshot gaze to Ash's face and studied him for several long minutes. "I believe that. Okay. Ask your questions."

Ash took a deep breath before starting. He knew this would be a difficult conversation for Rose to hear, but it needed to be done. "Can you tell me about the last time you saw Harmony?"

Pete sighed heavily, his whole body seeming to deflate with the weight of the memory. "The night before I reported her missing. Harmony and I had been fighting because—" He glanced at his daughter, who gave an encouraging nod.

"Whatever happened between you, I can take it. I'm not a kid anymore."

“Oh, my girl. All grown up.” Pete nodded and wiped away a stray tear. “Harmony wanted a divorce. She had a lot of affairs throughout our marriage, and she was seeing someone in LA. She wanted to leave me for him and take Rose with her. We were both pretty drunk. I know I said some awful things to her, but she was there when I went back to the pub. I didn’t get home until almost 4 a.m.”

“Was she in bed when you got home?” Ash asked.

“I honestly don’t know. I slept on the couch.”

“What about the next morning?”

“No. I never saw her again.”

“What did you do that morning?”

“I woke him up,” Rose said. “I was getting ready for school and needed lunch money and Mom wasn’t there.”

Pete nodded in agreement. “I had a massive hangover. No, that’s not true. I was still drunk. I spent more time drunk than not in those days. One of the hazards of running a bar.” He gave Rose a smile full of shame. “I’m so sorry for that.”

She returned his smile. “It’s okay. You were never a cruel drunk and all I have are fond memories of those days before—” She stopped and glanced at the case file. “Before Mom died. Besides, I think I turned out okay.”

Pete grunted. “No thanks to me. That was all Rainbow.”

“It was both of you.”

“So Rose woke you,” Ash said, steering their attention back to the question. “Then what?”

“I was awake long enough to see Rose off to school, then went back to bed since I didn’t need to open the bar until the afternoon. But I only slept for a half hour longer. Or maybe an hour, tops. My neighbor started working in his yard and it woke me up, so I went to the pub and started drinking again with some friends.”

So far, his story lined up with the one he’d told thirteen years ago. It had always bothered Ash that there was only that one hour of time unaccounted for. Both the previous night and the rest of that day, Pete’s whereabouts had been corroborated by many other people. “And you didn’t see or hear from Harmony at all that day?”

“No.”

Something in his voice dinged on Ash’s cop radar. “Are you sure?”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t know. I’ve replayed those two

days over and over in my head for years and... okay, listen. It might be nothing. Like I said, I was still drunk, but I think she came back while I was in bed. I think I heard her voice and someone else's."

Ash studied Pete's face, searching for any sign of deception. All he saw was pain and regret and crushing sadness. He picked up the initial report and scanned it. "You didn't report that."

"It all happened so fast, I didn't remember until I was already behind bars for life."

"Memory can be faulty. People often recall things that didn't happen with startling clarity."

"I'm aware, Sheriff. I've read the studies—I have nothing to do in here but read. And, like I said, I was drunk. It's why I didn't mention it before."

Ash set the report aside. "Was it a man's voice? A woman's?"

"I don't know. I just heard voices talking. One was definitely Harmony because she laughed. She had a very distinctive laugh. I was still pissed off, so I rolled over and went back to sleep."

"Then what made you think she was missing if you heard her voice?"

Pete closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as if remembering that day gave him a headache. "When Rose got home from school around four, she called me at the bar and said her mom wasn't home. Harmony was supposed to be there in the evenings for Rose, and she wasn't. I tried calling her cell phone, but it went right to voicemail. It worried me. Despite the problems in our marriage, she was a good mother. She loved our girl and never would've abandoned her like that."

"What did you do when you realized she wasn't home like she was supposed to be?"

"I panicked. I called all her friends, all our family. Nobody knew where she was. Then I called the sheriff, and you know the rest."

Ash did know. Even without reviewing the file, he remembered it all. Maybe because it was his first case as a deputy. Or, more likely, because it had never sat right with him. "Do you know the name of the man Harmony wanted to leave you for?"

Pete laughed. It was soft and laced with old bitterness. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"Chet Duran."

Rose sat back and blinked in shock. "Of Duran Fitness? The billionaire?"

“The one and only.”

Ash had suspected as much. “One more question. Did you load anything into your car before leaving for the pub that morning?”

“No, I—” Pete frowned in thought. “Wait. It wasn’t that morning, but later that afternoon. Before Rose got home from school, I stopped back in for a minute to pick up a delivery I mistakenly sent there rather than to the pub.”

“What was the delivery of?”

“Napkins, straws, toilet paper, cleaning supplies—that kind of stuff. I loaded it up and left again. Was there all of ten minutes. Didn’t even go into the house.”

“Thank you.” Ash stood and sent a meaningful look at Rose, silently urging her to tell her dad about the attacks. “I’ll let you two talk.”

As he stepped out into the hallway, he heard Pete ask, “What’s going on, Wildflower?”

Ash walked into the observation room next door, where Cal Holden stood in front of the one-way glass with his arms crossed and a deep frown on his face.

“Well?” He tossed the file down and then propped his ass on the edge of the table and watched Rose through the window. Even without the intercom turned on, he could tell she’d decided to fill Pete in on the events of the last few weeks.

Frown still in place, Cal turned toward him. “He’s innocent.”

“I’m starting to think so, yes.” Ash scrubbed his hands over his face. “Jesus. I put him in prison for life.”

“Not you. Tennison.” Cal spat the former sheriff’s name like it tasted bad. “I reviewed the case and that bastard’s stink is all over it. The convenient witnesses—one of whom stayed completely anonymous?”

“It was Larry Lamb,” Ash said. “The neighbor doing yard work.”

“What, did the judge conveniently forget the Sixth Amendment?” Cal looked even more disgusted. “And all the so-called evidence that suddenly showed up right before the trial? Circumstantial bullshit. I mean, so what if Pete purchased cleaning supplies and heavy duty garbage bags? The guy owned a bar. Sure, he did some shady deals at that bar, but it was all white-collar shit, and he had a gambling problem that, apparently, nobody thought to investigate. He definitely made enemies there that could’ve targeted Harmony to make a point. And of course he’d have a life insurance policy on his wife. Most married couples do. And don’t get me started on that shit-for-

brains public defender he was assigned. Pete never stood a chance at a fair trial.”

“What are his chances of an appeal?”

“Hell, I’ll get the conviction overturned on the Sixth Amendment violation alone. And then I’ll help him sue everyone involved in this farce.”

Ash winced, but he’d known that was coming. “So you’ll take his case? I’ll pay for it.”

Cal held up a hand. “No, this one’s pro bono.”

“Thought you don’t do pro bono work.”

“I’m making an exception.” He looked at the window again. “Are you going to LA to talk to Montgomery-Duran?”

“If I can get a face-to-face with him. I doubt he’ll just agree to a meeting with a rural county sheriff, especially if he was involved in Harmony’s murder. You worked in LA for a while, didn’t you? You wouldn’t happen to have any connections...?”

“If I had connections to a billionaire, do you think I’d be living here, defending drug addicts and petty criminals for what amounts to minimum wage?” Cal snorted. “If I could get a sit down with one of the world’s richest men, I wouldn’t have to worry about those student loan payments.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

Ash stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. “I’ll think of something.” In fact, an idea was already brewing, thanks to something Cal had said.

One of the world’s richest men...

Didn’t Zak have a connection like that from his military days?

In the other room, the guard led Pete away. Rose sat at the table for a moment longer, obviously pulling herself back together. Then she swiped at her face with her sleeves and got up.

Ash met her in the hall. Her face was splotchy, her eyes red, and she looked unsteady on her feet. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her until she felt steady again.

Instead, he motioned to Cal. “Do you know Callum Holden?”

“He’s come into the pub a few times, but I don’t think we’ve ever been officially introduced.” Rose sniffed and offered a polite, albeit watery smile. “I know you helped Zak and Anna with the girls’ adoptions when they were hitting snags with the courts over the custody of Bella.”

“I sure did. Hi, Rose. I’m Cal.” He gave that charming, panty-dropping

smile of his and instead of holding out his hand for a shake, he passed her a handkerchief.

Where the hell had that come from?

“Thank you.” She wiped her face. “Are you here visiting a client?”

Ash curled his fists at his sides to keep from punching the man who was going to give Rose the thing she wanted most in the world—her dad’s freedom. “He’s taking Pete’s case.”

Her eyes widened. “What?” She turned to Cal. “Oh, no. I’m so sorry if Ash gave you the wrong impression, but I can’t afford—”

“Ash offered to pay,” Cal said.

“You did?” Those eyes swung back to him and filled with tears again.

He both loved and hated the reverence he saw there. “He turned me down. He’s doing it pro bono.”

She faced Cal again. “You are?”

“I can’t take money from someone who has been wrongly convicted,” Cal said softly. “It wouldn’t be right. Your family has suffered enough.”

“I-I don’t know what to say.”

And, in fact, Rose said nothing more as Ash led her out of the prison. She stared silently out the car window at the ocean as they twisted along the coastal road back to Steam Valley.

Ash let her have the silence and instead played over Pete’s interview in his mind.

He knew Harmony had still been alive the morning of her disappearance because a couple who lived down the street were out for a run at dawn and had stopped to speak to her when they saw her watering the flowers on her porch. So at some point between then and when Rose woke for school, she left the house and was never seen again. That left only one hour of Pete’s time unaccounted for that day—the hour he was supposedly asleep after Rose left for school. And he thought he’d heard Harmony at their home during that time speaking to someone.

Had she returned with the person who killed her?

The neighbor, Larry Lamb, out doing yard work later that morning, claimed he saw Pete load something that looked like a body into his car. But Pete wouldn’t have had time to kill Harmony, load her body into his trunk in full view of the neighbor, drive her up the mountain and bury her, then return to open the Mad Dog early. But, Ash supposed, Pete could have stashed her body somewhere then buried her later. With nothing more than charred bones

left of her, it was impossible to establish an exact time of death or whether she was moved after death.

But that scenario didn't ring true to Ash. Pete didn't kill her. His instincts had told him as much thirteen years ago, but he'd been too green to trust his gut back then. Now he knew better.

The whole conviction hinged on Larry Lamb's testimony.

Ash made a split-second decision and detoured off the main highway onto a road that would take them to the Galasso family's old neighborhood.

Rose finally looked at him. "Where are we going?"

"To talk to Larry Lamb."

She stiffened. "About?"

"What he really saw that day."

"It's a waste of time." She shook her head. "He won't change his story."



He changed his story.

Rose couldn't believe it.

Larry came out onto his porch when they pulled up, almost as if he'd expected them. He always looked a little sad with a hang-dog expression of droopy eyes and sagging jowls, but now he was downright grim as he watched them get out of the Tahoe.

He nodded to Ash. "Sheriff." Then he looked at Rose, but she noticed he couldn't hold her gaze. "Rose. I'm mighty sorry for what happened to you."

"Thank you. I'm okay now."

"Good." He still looked at everything but her. "That's good."

"You know why we're here," Ash said, making it a statement rather than a question.

Larry scrubbed a hand over those jowls, then gave a sigh that moved his shoulders. "Suspect so. You want to know what I saw the morning her mama"—he nodded toward Rose—"vanished."

"Why didn't you ever tell me you testified against my dad?" Rose asked.

He lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I felt bad. I felt stupid. Jerry Tennison—we went way back. We were in kindergarten together, for chrissakes. I've known him all my life, so when he took my words and

twisted them to fit what he saw was the truth—well, I had no reason to doubt him. Maybe what I saw was what he thought I saw. Figured he knew better’n I did, so I said what I said. But, honest to God, I don’t know what I saw. Pete was there and he was putting stuff in his trunk, but I didn’t see what it was and couldn’t tell you what time it was when I saw him. I was working in the yard. Always lose track of time out there, you know?”

Ash took a card out of his wallet and passed it to Larry. “You need to call this man, Cal Holden, and tell him exactly what you just told us.”

Larry frowned at the card. “Am I in trouble?”

Rose glanced over at Ash. He was pissed. She could see it in the jumping muscle of his jaw, but he somehow managed to keep his voice gentle when he said, “You do the right thing, call Cal, tell him what you told me, and as far as I’m concerned, we’re good. Okay?”

Larry nodded. “I really am mighty sorry about all this.”

Back in the car, Rose watched Larry through the windshield as Ash backed out of the driveway. He was pacing his porch, the card in one hand while he held a cell phone to his ear with the other. He looked worried, almost child-like, as if he still expected to be scolded.

“I never noticed it before because he’s always drunk when I see him, but he’s...” She searched for a way to put it that didn’t sound cruel. “He has an intellectual disability, doesn’t he?”

And there, finally, was the anger, thrumming in Ash’s voice. “Making him the perfect witness for Tennison to mold.” He banged a fist on the steering wheel. “Fucking Tennison.”

She looked out the side window as they passed her childhood home. It looked nothing like she remembered it. The new owners had built on an entire second story and painted it a soft blue. The porch no longer sagged and had also been painted bright white—but, she noted, her mom’s beloved planters were still there along the railing. She hoped they still bloomed with color in the spring and summer. Mom would want that.

At the thought, she smiled and looked at Ash. “Thank you.”

He glanced her way, then did a double take and his expression softened, the anger draining out of him. “Just doing my job.”

“No,” she murmured. “You’re doing so much more.”

He said nothing for a long moment. “Thirteen years ago, I made you a promise to find out what happened to your mom. One I never intended to break. It was past time I did my job and fulfilled it.”

She couldn't explain why her heart sank at his words. Of course she was just another case for him, another victim he had to protect. She'd known that from the beginning, so she had no right to feel disappointed.

No.

That was bullshit.

After everything that had happened between them in the last few weeks, she had all the right in the world to be annoyed at the distance he was trying to put between them.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window. "I'm more than just your job, Sheriff, and we both know it."

part two

love



“Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.”
– Zora Neale Hurston

chapter **twenty-three**

A WEEK after visiting her dad, life almost felt normal again. Of course, she still had Mike Conti shadowing her when Ash wasn't around, but there had been no new threats and, as far as Ash would tell her, no new leads.

Rose was thrilled. Maybe it was over. Maybe she could finally put it all behind her and focus on her dad's appeal. Cal Holden was pulling together an air-tight case of police corruption and wrongful conviction. He was confident they'd win. It was a hopeful spark of light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

But Ash didn't think it was over yet, and he was frustrated. His mood darkened with each passing day, like a thunderhead building during the summertime, sizzling with electricity. She was holding her breath, waiting for the lightning strike. When it finally came, she had a feeling it was going to scorch them both.

Ash had taken to working at the pub when Mike's bodyguard shift ended. He set up a mini office at the end of the bar with his laptop, radio, and stacks of files and paperwork. More than one patron had raised a brow at him when they walked in. Having the sheriff as a permanent resident in her bar probably hurt sales, but she had to admit—if only to herself—that she enjoyed having him there. Even when he was a grump. Which was most of the time.

Business was slow today, so as she washed glasses and wiped down the bar top, she kept one eye on him, watching him work. The way his eyes narrowed in concentration, the way his fingers moved over the keyboard with a practiced ease, and the way he muttered under his breath when things didn't go his way, all fascinated her. Tension radiated off him like a heat wave. His jaw was set, and his eyes were like flint, hard and unyielding. His deputies

came and went throughout the day, bringing crisis after crisis, and he handled it all with cool, calm deliberation.

Around three p.m., a man she'd never seen before came in. He was tall—almost as tall as Ash—with short dark hair, dark eyes, and a fair amount of scruff on his chiseled jaw. He carried a leather laptop case on one shoulder, and wore ripped jeans and a dark green thermal shirt under a chunky cable knit cardigan. On any other man, that cream-colored sweater would look grandfatherly, but this guy more than pulled it off. On his muscular frame, it even looked sexy.

Her gaze slid to Ash again as she tried to picture him in a similar sweater. Nope. Didn't work for him. He was a flannel kind of guy when he wasn't wearing his uniform.

Sexy Sweater Guy glanced around, and she got the sense he was looking for something, but then he settled into the booth nearest the fireplace, where joyful flames danced and crackled, warming away the damp March chill.

Since he chose a booth instead of the bar, she grabbed a menu and a place setting, then poked her head into the kitchen. “Looks like you have a food order incoming.”

Marcel slid off the stool he was perched on. “About time. I'm bored stiff.”

“Slow day.”

“Because your grumpy boyfriend out there is killing business.”

She sighed in exasperation. “He's not my boyfriend. I don't even like him.” *Much*, she added silently.

“Yeah, right,” Marcel muttered and rolled his eyes as he stuffed his long graying beard into a hairnet. He waved her away. “Go get me a food order, Rosie. Before I start growing cobwebs back here.”

Ash looked up from his work as she walked by, and she felt his gaze on her all the way to the corner booth.

“Hi,” she said to the newcomer. “Can I get you something to drink? Anything to eat?”

Sweater Guy smiled as she set the menu down in front of him. He had a movie star smile of bright, even teeth that had to be the product of childhood braces. “I've heard the parmesan fries here are to die for.”

“It's Marcel's specialty.”

“I'll take a plate. And...” He studied the menu. “Do you have a beer suggestion?”

“What do you like?”

His polite smile spread into a grin. “Anything as dark as my soul.”

She laughed. “Okay, then. You want the Bulldog Stout. It’s *my* specialty.”

He arched a brow. “You brew it here?”

“No, we don’t have the space for it. Maybe someday, but for now I have a contract with the brewery outside of town.”

“Okay, I’ll try it.” He handed the menu back to her. “You can wait and bring it with the fries. Thanks.”

Once again, Ash’s gaze tracked her across the room.

“Who’s that?” he asked, his voice all growly possessive, as she walked past him to give Marcel the order.

She scoffed. “A customer. One you better not scare away.”

A muscle ticked under his beard.

She ignored him, gave a crestfallen Marcel the order— “Really? Only fries?” —then waited in the kitchen until it was complete. When she returned to Sweater Guy’s table with his food and beer, he was typing intently on a laptop. He gave her a distracted smile and another, “Thanks,” but he seemed off in his own world, so she left him to it and went back to cleaning.

An hour later, Marcel closed up the kitchen and left with the promise to come back if business picked up that evening. She doubted it. Nobody had come in since Sweater Guy, and he was still typing away, oblivious to his surroundings.

Rose noticed his glass was empty and walked over to offer him a refill. At first, he didn’t seem to hear her, then he blinked, and his gaze focused.

“Sorry.” He winced, shook his head as if to clear it, and closed the computer’s lid. “I get caught up. Just the bill, please.”

She handed him the slip from her pad. “So, you must be the writer my aunt was telling me about.”

He smiled as he checked the total, then dug a twenty out of his wallet. “Keep the change. How can you tell?”

“Thanks.” She tucked the bill into her jeans pocket and nodded toward the table. “The laptop. The notebooks. The faraway look for the last hour, like you were in another world.”

“Guilty as charged. And you must be Rose.” His smile turned into a charming grin. “Yeah, Rainbow has told me all about you, too, but I doubt anything your aunt has said is the truth.”

“So you didn’t ask her permission to date me?”

Another wince. “No, can’t say I did, but she makes sure to tell me you’re single every time I go into her shop.” His gaze shifted over to Ash. “Except that doesn’t appear to be true, either, judging by the sheriff’s scowl.”

She glanced over at the bar. Yep. Ash was scowling.

Was he jealous?

Good.

She turned back to the writer and gave her most flirtatious smile. “No, that’s just his normal expression. He only wishes we were together.”

“Ah. You might want to tell *him* that.”

“Oh, believe me, he knows. What about you, writer? Are you single?”

“Very.” There was no mistaking the spark of interest in his dark eyes, but then his gaze strayed over her shoulder to Ash again. “But, while you’re a beautiful woman, I, unfortunately, don’t have time to date right now.” He tapped his fingers on the lid of his computer. “Deadline.”

“What do you write?”

“Horror, mostly, but my current work in progress is a police procedural.” He held out a hand. “Connelly Davis.”

“No shit?” Rose was never a horror fan, but her father was, so she tried to read whatever he was reading to feel closer to him. He called it the “Reading Between the Bars” Book Club, which she didn’t find amusing in the slightest. “I read *Dreadwood Manor* with my dad a few years ago. Seriously creepy. It gave me nightmares for weeks.”

“I always love to hear that, but...” Connelly winced. “Please tell me you’ve read some of my newer stuff. *Dreadwood* was my first, published when I was barely out of high school, and it’s... immature.”

“Honestly, I didn’t know you were publishing anymore.”

“I took a break for a while—bounced around a bit, did the college thing, did a stint in the military.” He lifted a shoulder. “But I couldn’t stay away from my first love, so here I am.”

“Dad will be thrilled when I tell him I met you. He’s a huge fan.”

“Well, I’ll be here most afternoons plugging away at this manuscript. Tell him to stop by, and I’ll buy him a beer. Which was excellent, by the way.”

Her heart twisted. Most people around Steam Valley knew her father was in prison, but every once in a while, she’d run into a situation like this with someone who didn’t. She always found it was easier to bluff her way through the conversation than try to explain the truth. “He doesn’t live here, but I’ll

tell him you said hi.”

“In that case...” He dug in his bag and pulled out a hardcover, opening it to the title page. “What’s his name?”

“Pete.”

Connelly signed it, then held it out to her. “Give him that. It’s my next release, out this fall.”

She glanced down at the cover. It showed a shadowy figure rising out of a blue-gray mist. She read the title out loud: “*The Shadows Within*. Looks phenomenally creepy.”

“It’s about The Shadow Stalker. Have you heard the legend?”

“Of course. *In shadows so deep, the Stalker hides. Fear his presence, where moonlight dies,*” she recited the first verse of the nursery rhyme in an ominous tone, then laughed. “You can’t live around here and not know it by heart.”

He nodded. “That rhyme captured my imagination when I first heard it as a kid and never left my head, so...” He motioned to the book. “I wrote about it.”

“My dad’s going to love this. He used to scare me around the campfire with those stories.”

A throat cleared. They both turned to see Ash standing there, his arms crossed over his chest. His scowl had deepened, and Rose had to stifle a giggle. She loved getting under his skin.

“Everything okay, Sheriff?” Connelly asked, his gaze flicking between the two of them.

“Just fine,” Ash said, his tone clipped. “Rose, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I’m busy with a customer,” she said, all sweetness.

She didn’t think it was possible, but Ash’s scowl deepened further as he glowered at the writer. “I’ll wait.”

Connelly raised his hands in surrender. “I met my word count, so I’ll get out of your hair. Nice meeting you, Rose.”

“Thanks for the book for my dad.” Rose smiled politely as Connelly gathered his things and headed to the door.

Ash stalked after him, and as soon as Connelly was gone, he locked the door, closing them into the empty bar together.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “It’s the middle of the day. We’re not closed.”

He turned his scowl on her. “What the hell was that?”

“What was what?” Rose asked innocently, though she knew exactly what he was talking about.

“You were flirting with him.”

She shrugged. “He’s cute, and he writes horror. What’s not to like?”

“You’re mine,” Ash said, his voice low and possessive.

Rose rolled her eyes. “I’m not anyone’s property.”

“You’re my responsibility.”

Heat flashed through her in a weird mix of anger and want. This man really thought he could claim her in one breath and then walk it back to an obligation the next. He thought he could kiss her like he wanted to devour her, promise all kinds of dark, thrilling things, then pretend nothing had changed between them. He was an arrogant, uptight jackass, and if he thought he could control her, he had another thing coming.

“I’m not a damn job,” she snapped. “You’re in charge of the county, Sheriff, not me. And you made it quite clear last week you have no interest in fucking me, so I can flirt with whoever I want.”

“Ambrosia,” he began in a tone laced with warning. “Listen to me—”

“No. You listen. You don’t get to have it both ways. You can’t have me on a leash when it’s convenient for you, and then act like you don’t care the rest of the time. It doesn’t work like that.”

Ash stepped closer to her, his eyes darkening. With anger or desire? It was anyone’s guess. His gaze dropped to the signed book, and he plucked it out of her hand, set it aside. “Then tell me how it works.”

She could feel the heat emanating from his body, and she couldn’t help but move closer. “You either want me, or you don’t. You can’t have half of me.”

“You know I want you,” he said, his voice rough, his fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides like he wanted to grab her. “But I can’t touch you for so many complicated reasons, and I’m doing my best to be responsible, even when your scent is all over my house, my clothes, filling my head and driving me crazy.”

“Fine, be responsible.” Rose took another step closer, her chest practically brushing against his. “Be cold and professional, but at least stop walking away every time I enter a room. Stop making me feel like I’m just some obligation you have to fulfill. Stop pretending like you don’t feel anything for me.”

His gaze dropped to her lips and then lifted back to her eyes. She saw the hunger there, the need, and it filled her with a sense of power.

She had him exactly where she wanted him.

“You want me to stop pretending?” Ash growled, his hand clamping onto her chin. “Fine. I’m done pretending.”

chapter **twenty-four**

ASH CAUGHT her chin in his hand and made her look up at him. The anger was still there, burning bright, but something else was behind it now. Something hotter and more dangerous than hate.

She smiled like a cat that had just caught the mouse in her claws. “You want to take out all of your frustrations on me, don’t you?”

Desire and anger swirled inside him as he leaned in closer. “You have no idea,” he growled, his hand tightening around her chin. “But it’s not just frustrations I want to take out on you, Ambrosia. Trust me, you won’t enjoy it.”

Rose’s smile only widened as she leaned in closer to him, her breath hot against his ear. “How do you know?”

“Because I want to punish you for flirting with that asshole in front of me. I want to show you just how much power I have over you.” His grip tightened even more, and she let out a gasp of pain, but it only seemed to fuel her desire.

“You have no power over me, Sheriff.” With a sudden movement, she broke free from his grasp and pushed him up against the wall, her hands roaming down to the buckle of his belt.

Ash let out a low groan as her hands worked expertly, undoing his pants and pulling them down to reveal his hard length. Without hesitation, she sank down onto her knees in front of him, taking him into her mouth and swirling her tongue around him.

Oh, Jesus.

He should pull her away. Put a stop to this before they crossed a line they couldn’t return from. He should—

Her tongue swirled over his tip and his brain short-circuited.

Fuck it.

He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her up to her feet, slamming her back against the wall. She let out a gasp of surprise and pain, but it only seemed to excite her even more.

“You think you can just play with me like that?” he snarled. “You think you can just take what you want without consequence?”

Rose’s eyes blazed with desire as she looked up at him. “Yes.” She reached down between them and wrapped her hand around his throbbing shaft. “Because you like when I do.”

“Fuck,” he breathed, and his lips crashed down on hers in a fierce, hungry kiss.

It was a dangerous game they were playing, one that could explode out of control at any moment. But he didn’t care. He wasn’t a man right then—he was an animal that only knew one thing.

Her.

His mate.

He pulled her away from the wall and bent her over the bar, his hands cupping her breasts through the tight fabric of her cropped t-shirt. He skimmed his lips over her neck and bit down harder than he intended to, leaving a mark on her skin.

Rose cried out and shoved her ass against him, her fingers digging into the scarred wood of the bar top. “Yes.”

“You like that, Ambrosia?” Ash slipped his hand down to the waistband of her jeans and popped the button open. He traced the line of her panties along her hip and leaned in to bite her shoulder as he slid his fingers under the damp fabric.

She moaned and pushed up onto her tiptoes as he parted her. She was hot and swollen and already so wet. His cock throbbed. He wanted to kick her legs open and bury himself to the hilt, but settled for rocking his hips against her ass as he slipped his fingers inside her.

“Yes,” she said again, the word barely more than a whisper.

He pressed her clit with his thumb and a quiet, desperate sound slipped from her lips. She pushed her pants further down her legs and bent forward to pull them off, giving him a clear view of his fingers in her wet, dripping pussy.

Goddammit. He wanted to punish her, not pleasure her. He pulled his free hand back and smacked the round globe of her ass hard.

Rose gasped and whimpered and pushed her ass higher as if begging for more.

Ash paused, his hand raised. He needed to make sure she knew who was in control. “Do you want more?” he asked, his voice like ice cold steel.

“Yes,” she moaned.

“Okay.” He bent over and traced his tongue over the red mark he’d left on her skin. “But you’re going to beg for it.”

“Please, Ash,” she said, her voice breathy and soft. “Slap my ass again. I want you to mark me like a fucking animal.”

He rewarded her with a soft slap, this time on the other cheek, and she let out a guttural moan. “Yes. Again. Make me feel it.”

With his teeth bared, he smacked her again, harder this time.

Rose cried out and her walls clenched hard around his fingers. She was loving this, and he almost lost control. He was shaking the effort of holding himself still.

“Tell me,” he growled. “What do you want me to do to you?”

“I... I want you to— to—” She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes glazed with lust and something more. Submission, he realized, and his cock kicked in anticipation.

“You want it? You want me to fuck you hard, right here on the bar? Tell me you want me to fuck you like the bad girl you are.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Sheriff. Mark me. Make me your slut.”

Ash groaned. It had been too long since he’d had a woman, much less one as responsive as Rose. She really was Ambrosia—a fucking taste of heaven and he couldn’t deny himself any longer.

He smacked her again and as she moaned, he removed his fingers from her and positioned his cock at her entrance.

Rose cried out as he plunged in, her voice hoarse. “Oh, God. Finally.”

“Shut up.” He fucked her hard and deep, his hips smacking against her rear as his fingers dug into her waist. She wasn’t gentle either. She pushed back against him, urging him deeper with each thrust. He pulled at her hair, her throat, her breast—whatever he could reach.

“I want to hear you,” he growled in her ear, his teeth gritted. “Tell me you submit.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Please, Ash. Anything. Just... harder. Fuck me

harder.”

“Good girl.” He slammed into her until the bar was covered in a thin layer of sweat under her and he could feel it dripping down his back. “Now come for me.”

Rose climaxed with her hands clutching at the bar top and her head thrown back as she coated his cock with her juices.

“Yes. That’s it. I’m going to come on your back, and I want you to feel every drop.” Unable to hold on any longer, he pulled out and his seed spilled across her back in long, thick spurts. She cried out and collapsed forward, leaning against the bar until her breathing slowed.

He stared at the red hand prints he’d left on her ass, and the cum pooling at her lower back, and thought, *fuck, what did I just do?*

“Wow,” she murmured. “That was…”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice thick as he grabbed a towel and wiped her off. “It was.”

She pulled up her pants, then turned and took the towel from him, dropping it to the floor. “Do you want a drink? I need a drink.”

Ash pulled up his zipper, wincing as it dug into his still-sensitive cock. “Yeah.”

She grabbed a bottle from the shelf behind the bar. “Bourbon? Or would you prefer a beer?”

“Bourbon’s good.” He found himself staring at her ass as she poured them each a healthy dose of the golden alcohol. The way her jeans hugged that perfect inverted heart was almost as erotic as seeing her without them on. As was the knowledge that under that denim, her cheeks were pink with his handprint.

“So…” She turned to him and held out his glass. “Who knew the uptight sheriff was a closet Dom?”

“Fuck,” he hissed and took the offered bourbon. He downed it in one gulp and then stepped around her to pour another. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

“But it did. And I liked it. A lot more than I expected, if I’m honest.” She motioned with her glass, indicating the towel on the floor between them smeared with his cum. “And I’m pretty sure you did, too.”

Jesus. Not only had he fucked the one woman in town he couldn’t stand, but he’d done it in her bar. They must have broken all kinds of health codes. Maybe even a law or two.

“You don’t know me well enough to know what I like,” he said, keeping his tone cool and even.

“But I know men.” Her gaze dropped pointedly to the towel again. “And most men don’t spill like that if they’re not having a good time.”

Pain shot through his jaw as he snapped up the towel and stuffed it in the trash. He was grinding his teeth hard enough to crack a molar. He forced himself to relax and drew a calm, measured breath. “I don’t like to lose control like that.”

“Hm.” She leaned against the bar that still sported her handprints and sipped her drink with a thoughtful expression on her face. “So what you’re saying is it won’t happen again?”

“It shouldn’t have happened in the first place. I don’t fuck women like—” He broke off, realizing a half-second too late that what he’d been about to say was cruel. Why did his mouth always spout off before his brain around Ambrosia Galasso?

“Women like me?” Rose smirked and set her glass down. “It’s okay. I get it. I’m not your usual type. So, what kind of woman do you fuck, Sheriff?”

He downed the rest of his drink. “Women who don’t demand more. Or ask questions.”

“I see.” She switched her glass to her other hand and held out her fist. “Fist bump?”

Ash stared at her. “What the fuck kind of thing is that to say?”

“Well, I know you’re not a high five kind of guy.” Her eyes glinted with laughter. “C’mon. Fist bump.”

He continued to stare at her, at a loss for words. This woman was something else. “Why?”

“To break the tension and see how you respond to the unexpected. I’m trying to get a feel for who you are under all that gruff growliness.” Her gaze was direct and unflinching. “You know everything about me—all of my deepest, darkest secrets. And you’re right, I know next to nothing about you except you fuck like you’re trying to exorcise your demons through your cock.”

Heat rushed into his face. Jesus, was he actually blushing? She wouldn’t notice it in the bar’s dim light with his beard as thick and wild as it was, but he turned away on the pretense of dumping his empty glass in the nearby sink. He wanted another drink, but he knew better than to indulge. His parents had died when a drunk driver slammed into their car, and he’d seen

too many friends in this town succumb to alcoholism. So, like everything else in his life, he kept a firm grip on his drinking habits, never allowing himself more than two.

“And, after what we just did, I think it’s only fair I get to know you a little bit more, don’t you?” She held out her fist again, waiting for him to bump it.

With a sigh, Ash faced her and hit her fist with his. To his surprise, she caught his wrist and stepped into his personal space.

“And maybe,” she whispered, her breath hot against his lips, “you need a reminder that you can’t control everything. Especially not me.”

She stood on her toes and pressed her lips softly against his. He wasn’t prepared for the bolt of heat that ran through him. It was hot and sweet, a forbidden pleasure that was like a drug. He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent, a warm, spicy smell that was going to be the end of him.

He tried to pull away, but her lips clung to him.

He gave up trying to escape and settled into the kiss. She tasted like the smoky caramel of the bourbon, and it was only after he was able to tear his mouth from hers that he realized he was already drunk—not from the alcohol, but from her.

“You should go,” she whispered, her fingers still wrapped around his wrist. “Before you do something you regret.”

“I already regret it.” His voice came out gruffer than he’d intended. He cleared his throat, extracted his wrist from her grasp, and stepped back out of her reach. “And I’m not leaving you alone when someone tried to kill you a few weeks ago.”

She shrugged and took her glass to the sink to wash it. “I’m not worried.”

“You should be. Someone tried to kill you,” he repeated, enunciating each word. “Why aren’t you more upset about what happened? You had a bottle smashed across your head. That bastard tied you up and dragged you out into the woods and pumped you full of heroin, for fuck’s sake.” He watched her as he spoke, looking for any sign of distress. But she appeared calm, her shoulders relaxed as she washed and dried their glasses. “Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I mean, yeah, it hurt, and it was terrifying, but my sheriff in the shining Tahoe saved me before the sick fuck could do whatever else he had in mind.” She replaced the clean glasses on the shelf, her cropped shirt riding up to show the thorny rose tattooed to her ribs.

He wanted to trace that design with his tongue and—
No.

He walked around the bar, putting another physical barrier between them before he did something stupid.

Again.

He rubbed a hand over his beard. Fuck, he was tired.

Rose grabbed a clean towel from the stack under the bar and started wiping away the last evidence of their mistake, buffing her handprints out of the oak bar top. “Besides, Sheriff, I’m a survivor. I survived losing both of my parents in one go. I survived multiple mystery illnesses in my teens that should’ve killed me. I’ll survive this, too. It’s what I do.”

Wait.

What?

He didn’t like the tone of her voice. It was... resigned. Like she expected to spend her entire life simply surviving.

“What illnesses?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She finished cleaning the bar and draped the towel over her shoulder. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“If it has to do with your safety, then it is something for me to worry about—” When she merely smirked at him with those ungodly sexy lips, he broke off and shook his head in exasperation. “Jesus, I don’t know why I’m wasting my breath arguing with you. You’re never going to listen. You’re a stubborn ass, and you’re going to do whatever the fuck you want.”

Her expression didn’t change, and her answer was simple. “It’s my life.”

“Jesus, Rose.” He stalked around the bar toward her, but she didn’t back away or so much as flinch.

“Oh, so it’s back to Rose now?” She clucked her tongue. “Pity. I was starting to like having you call me by my full name. You make it sound so dirty.”

His fingers curled into fists at his sides. He wanted to strangle her. And at the same time, he wanted to scoop her up and tuck her away in his home so nobody could hurt her. “Someone has tried to kill you,” he repeated through his teeth. “Twice.”

“I know that,” she said evenly, but he could hear anger edging into her voice. “I was there.”

“Then what the hell is wrong with you?”

Those ice-blue eyes burned with sudden fury. “Nothing is wrong with me,

Sheriff. And nothing is wrong with you. We fucked. I enjoyed it. You did, too. End of story.”

He growled. “You are the most infuriating woman I’ve ever met.”

“That’s what they tell me.” She cocked her head to the side. “You know what I think? I think I’m not just a job to you anymore and that pisses you off. You’re actually worried about me. You’re worried I’m going to get hurt again, aren’t you?”

“Dammit, Ambrosia. Don’t make my job harder.”

“And back to my full name again.” She chuckled and glanced down at his pants. “Your job’s not the only thing I’m making harder.”

She was trying to distract him, and it was working. The woman distracted him just by existing. How the hell was he supposed to keep her safe when he couldn’t even keep his eyes off her long enough to scan for danger?

His jaw ached. He really had to stop clenching his teeth around her, or he’d need to visit his dentist. “Regardless of my body’s involuntary response to you, I am a law enforcement officer, and I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“And, in return, I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you have a good time.” She sauntered closer and trailed her fingers up his chest, toying with his buttons. He shivered, the unexpected touch of her fingers and the scent of her fucking with his head. “So, you see, I think we make a good team.”

“I don’t know that I agree.” He took her hand and removed it from his shirt. He couldn’t deny how much she was affecting him. “You’re going to get yourself killed one of these days if you don’t start taking this shit seriously.”

“You really are worried about me. That’s sweet.”

“It’s not sweet. I’m doing my job.”

“You did more than your job just now.” Her gaze slid back to his crotch. “And you did it really, really well.”

“Rose.” He caught her hand as she reached for his fly. “Enough.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going to take you back to my place and fuck you until you can’t walk.”

She grinned at him. “Promise?”

Ah, hell. There went his mouth again, saying shit before his brain told it not to. “Rose—”

“I don’t need you to fix me, Ash. I’m asking you to fuck me. For now.”

Just for now. Is that too much to ask?”

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers. Finally, he let out a ragged sigh. “Fine. But we’re not getting involved. I mean it, Rose. If we keep doing this, it’s just sex. It’s—”

The front window shattered.

Rose turned toward it in surprise. “What?”

“Get down!”

chapter **twenty-five**

SHOCK FROZE ROSE to the spot as she realized what that rapid staccato sound was.

Automatic gunfire.

Ash was already moving, shoving her to the ground behind the bar as bullets tore through the window and wall, shredding wood and glass and raining liquor down over their heads. He grunted in pain as they fell, but still covered her body with his own. Something wet and warm spread across her shoulder. She lifted a hand to the spot, but found the blood wasn't coming from her.

"Ash!" She tried to push him off, but he remained steadfastly still, his heavy body pinning hers to the floor.

"Stay down," he growled.

"You're bleeding!"

"I'm aware." He one-handedly wrestled his weapon out of its holster and finally lifted his weight off her as police sirens started up in the distance. He ran to the door, weapon held aloft in his left hand, blood dripping down his right arm at his side. He returned fire and tires screeched on pavement.

Then it all stopped.

Rose swayed to her feet in a daze, her ears ringing, her heart pounding so hard she wouldn't be surprised if Ash could hear it, too. She took in the destruction around her—wood splinters and broken glass littering the floor, the smell of liquor thick in the air from the broken bottles, bullets embedded in the walls.

Her home.

Her sanctuary.

Ruined by violence.

Again.

Tears blurred her vision, and she tried in vain to blink them back. Why was this happening to her?

“We’re clear,” Ash said, but she noticed he didn’t re-holster his weapon nor move away from his guard stance by the door. “I think I hit one of them.”

She watched blood drip from his arm onto the floor.

“You’re bleeding,” she said again. Was that her voice? It sounded hollow and faint, like she was whispering through a long tube.

He glanced back at her. “Sit down, Rose. You’re in shock.”

She righted a stool, but one of the legs gave out before she could sit. She stared down as a small metal object dropped out of the wood and rolled across the floor.

A bullet, flattened by its impact with the stool.

Her legs gave out and she sank to the floor. Tears flooded her eyes and spilled over. She couldn’t stop them. She wrapped her shaking arms around her middle and bent double as the sobs tore from her.

“Shit,” Ash muttered, but stayed put beside the door, gun at the ready. “Hang on, Rose. Hear those sirens? My deputies are coming. They’re almost here...”

She heard him continue in a soft, soothing voice, but the words didn’t register. She couldn’t stop crying. Couldn’t catch her breath.

Then he was there, his arms tight around her, pulling her close. The smell of his blood was almost overpowered by the alcohol soaking their clothes. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her hot face into his chest.

“It’s okay,” he murmured into her hair. “You’re safe now.”

He held her tight and let her cry, but he didn’t let her collapse completely. He kept her up, supported her, as she poured out all her fear and pain. So much for the tough act she’d been putting on moments before the bullets started flying. She cried until her throat was raw, then cried some more.

When she finally ran out of tears, Ash continued to hold her, stroking a hand up and down her back in reassuring circles. No one had ever supported her like this, been there for her when she was weak. She never realized how much she’d wanted this in her life until now.

It terrified her.

Slowly, she realized they weren’t alone. At least four of his deputies were there, guns drawn as they secured the area.

And the therapy group was arriving for their afternoon meeting. She'd forgotten that was today.

One of the deputies held up a hand to stop them, but Ash waved them in. "It's okay, Wright. Let them pass."

"What the hell happened here?" Donovan asked, gingerly stepping over the broken glass. Zak and Pierce were right behind him.

She didn't have the energy to repeat the whole series of events, so she just told them, "Someone shot at the bar."

Pierce grabbed his phone from his back pocket and typed:

Are you okay?

He held it up for her to read.

She nodded. "Ash is bleeding."

"How bad is it?" Zak asked, looking at his brother-in-law.

"Good question." Ash grimaced as he peeled off his jacket and shirt, revealing a broad chest covered in tight, hard muscles and a smattering of hair the same reddish-brown color of his beard. He held up his arm to examine the wound. "It's just a graze."

"Jesus," Zak said. He leaned over the bar, grabbing a towel from the clean stack she kept on a shelf under there. He wadded it up and pressed it to the wound. A former Army Ranger, he had extensive battlefield medic training and had dealt with all kinds of injuries. "Any lower and you wouldn't be standing here right now."

Ash took the towel from him. "Nah, it went through the door first. By the time it hit me, it didn't have the power to do any real damage."

"Still, you're going to need stitches."

"Fuck that."

"Then at least sit your ass down and let me bandage it before you bleed all over."

Pierce said something in sign language and Zak scowled down at the splatter of blood on the floor. "Yeah, looks like he's already done that. Grab more towels."

"I got 'em." Donovan jumped over the bar and found the stack. He started mopping up the blood while Pierce tapped Rose on the shoulder.

He held out the phone again. It now read:

Are YOU okay?

Numb, she could only nod.

Pierce slid out of his canvas jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She hadn't realized she was cold until the warmth wrapped around her. It smelled like his cologne—a spicy, earthy scent that was calming.

The sweet man. She wished she could communicate with him better. “Thank you.”

Ash watched their exchange with a faint scowl while Zak worked on cleaning his wound, then impatiently pulled his shirt back on the moment it was bandaged. He started toward her, but the sight of the blood stains on his shirt made her stomach roll.

“I need to go,” she said, voice cracking, and took an unsteady step in the direction of the door.

Ash stopped her, concern written all over his face. “It’s not safe out there.”

“I can’t stay here.”

“You’re not leaving without me, and I have to stay with my deputies while—”

“I can’t stay here!” She was horrified at the hysteria in her voice, but she couldn’t dial it back.

Donovan stepped forward, his expression grim. “We’ll escort her,” he assured Ash, then gentled his voice as he turned to her. “Make sure you get home safely, yeah?”

Except this bar *was* her home. Would she ever feel safe here again? And she couldn’t go to Ash’s house if he wasn’t going to be there. She didn’t want to be alone right now.

Zak must have read her mind because he spoke up. “How about you come to the Rescue until Ash is done sheriffing?”

Ash opened his mouth as if to protest, but then must have thought better of it. “Take my Tahoe. It’s armored.” He rubbed his big hands over her shoulders, down her arms. “Is that okay?”

Rose nodded, grateful for the offer. She grabbed her purse from behind the bar and followed the group out of the building, stepping over broken glass and debris.

The street outside was a chaotic mess, with police cruisers and ambulances blocking the way. She felt like she was in a warzone and guilt and shame washed over her for causing all of this commotion. And that pissed her off. She had nothing to be ashamed about. She hadn’t done this.

The man— men? —who wanted her dead were responsible.

Were they out there in the gathering crowd, watching their handiwork, checking to see if they had finished the job? She shuddered at the thought and scanned the crowd, looking for anything out of the ordinary. But it was just the townspeople, the men and women she saw every day.

And Connelly Davis.

He stood behind the police barricade, watching everything unfold with a slight frown pulling his dark brows together. When he noticed her watching him, he hitched the strap of his computer bag up on his shoulder and walked away.

Ash and Donovan cleared a path through all the police cruisers and emergency vehicles, while Pierce and Zak flanked her on either side. She was still shaking so hard she felt like the whole world was vibrating.

Zak put his arm around her shoulders. “You okay?”

She gave him a weak smile. “I’ve never been shot at before.”

He laughed as if she’d said something funny, but she wasn’t joking. It was unnerving, being a target. She’d never felt so helpless.

“You get used to it,” he said.

She stared at him in horror. “I don’t want it to happen enough to get used to it.”

He inclined his head. “Fair enough.” He nodded toward Ash, walking with purpose several steps in front of them. “Don’t worry. Ash’ll figure out who did this.”

She looked up at him, searching his warm brown eyes for any sign of doubt or disbelief, and found nothing but genuine conviction.

They reached the Tahoe and Ash handed Donovan his keys, then pulled open the back door for her. Before she could climb in, he wrapped his good arm around her waist, tugging her gently against his side. He leaned down to kiss the top of her head. “We’ll talk when I get home, okay?”

chapter **twenty-six**

DEPUTIES FOUND the body of one of the shooters laying in the middle of the street a block away from the Mad Dog. Ash had known he'd hit one of them but hadn't realized his aim had been so deadly. The bullet had ripped open the guy's neck—a wound that most likely spouted like a geyser, which was why his “friends” decided to cut their losses and shove him out of the car.

Ash had seen the make and model of the car—a late nineties Ford Taurus with peeling red paint and extensive rust on the fenders—as well as the first half of the plate. Surveillance cameras in front of The Mad Dog and the bank on the corner would likely give them the other half.

These idiots weren't going to get far, and Ash couldn't wait to get them into his interrogation room.

“Sheriff!”

Ash groaned and turned toward the familiar voice. Alexis Summers shouldered through the crowd of nosy onlookers, her sharp eyes scanning the crime scene, missing nothing behind those stylish glasses. “I've been trying to reach you.”

He motioned to the scene with his good arm. “I've been busy.”

“I see that.” Her blond brows slammed together. “Do you often have drive-by shootings in Steam Valley?”

“No. And I'm not talking to the press. No comment.”

“I'm not—” She caught his sleeve as he turned away. He glared down at her hand, and she let go. “I'm sorry. I just wanted to know if you've looked into—”

Jesus, if she said “serial killer” in front of all these people, he would have a riot on his hands. He ducked under the barricade and muscled her away from the crowd. When they were out of earshot of the local gossips, he

stopped and faced her.

“Listen. I started to look into it, and you may be on to something.”

She opened her mouth, and he held up a hand to stop her.

“But, right now, I have more pressing matters to deal with.”

“What’s more pressing than a serial—”

He motioned for her to lower her voice.

She glanced around, then finished in a hiss. “A serial killer?”

“A *possible* serial killer,” he corrected. “If the same man is responsible, and I’m still not convinced of that, then your research indicated there hasn’t been a new victim in at least eight years when he previously took one every six months. So he’s either dead, or in prison, or he’s moved on, and in that case, as callous as it sounds, he’s not my problem until the FBI come knocking on my door.”

She scoffed. “Just because I haven’t found more recent victims, doesn’t mean they’re not out there. He goes for women nobody will miss. Women without family connections or local roots.”

“Ms. Summers, I understand your concern. I do. But somebody just shot up my town.” He waved a hand at the street. “My people are scared. I can’t take my very limited manpower away from this to investigate a bunch of cold cases on the off chance they could be connected.”

Her stubborn chin hitched up. “Then I’ll investigate.”

Ash sucked in a breath and strove for patience, but his fucking shoulder hurt, and he was terrified for Rose, and he was just so damn tired. “You said it yourself—if a killer is out there and he’s still active, he goes for women without local ties. That’s *you*. So my previous threat still stands. I will put you in jail if you try investigating this on your own.”

“You can’t just ignore it, Sheriff!”

Her raised voice drew several curious stares. He gave the looky-loos his back and walked her farther away from the growing crowd.

“I’m not,” he said through his teeth. “I will investigate, but it’s not the biggest threat to public safety right now.”

She looked toward the barricades and the sheet-covered body on the street beyond, and the mulishness drained from her expression. “I’m sorry. I know you have a lot on your hands.”

“I *will* investigate,” he repeated. “I started before all this bullshit began, and I will pick it up again as soon as I’m able.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Ash got a sinking feeling in his gut as he watched her walk over to a rental car parked on the side street. That acquiescence had come too fast, and she never promised not to look into it herself.

Goddammit. She *was* going to investigate. Nothing he said or did would stop her— short of throwing her in jail, but he'd only be able to keep her for forty-eight hours before he'd have to charge her with a crime or let her go. It'd only slow her down and give him more paperwork to do.

He muttered a curse and turned back to the crime scene just as Jonah Sullivan, his undersheriff, called out, "What the hell, Ash? You were *shot*?"



By the time Ash finally made it to his sister's house that night, it was late. He'd stayed at the crime scene until Jonah forced him to go to the nearest ER and get his shoulder treated, which took hours.

Anna's house was quiet and mostly dark when he let himself in with his key. The place still had that new house smell. He gave himself a moment to miss the old yellow farmhouse they'd grown up in, with its creaky floors and huge wraparound porch. It had been nearly a hundred years old and needed a lot of work, but it had always felt like home, even when he no longer lived there.

This new house was nice enough, he supposed. It was bigger than the farmhouse, with four bedrooms, an office, and an attached two-car garage. It had high ceilings and an open floorplan, and a pretty front porch—not a wraparound—of stone and wood.

But it felt like a stranger's house. He didn't feel his parents here. Dad had never fixed this porch. Mom had never fretted over the paint color of these walls. The realization was like a punch to the gut, knocking all the air out of his lungs. He stopped short in the foyer and fought back a sudden rush of tears. It was like losing them all over again.

He took a deep breath and shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't think about that now. He had to focus on the case.

On Rose.

He walked through the house, checking to make sure Anna and her family were asleep. He found her in the master bedroom, snuggled up on the king-

sized bed with her adopted daughters, Bella and Poppy. Winston, Anna's Golden Retriever, was curled on the foot of the bed and thumped his tail lazily before rolling to his back and continuing his snooze.

Zak and his dog Ranger were conspicuously absent.

Ash's heart ached for them. Zak needed to get his head out of his ass before he lost the best things he'd ever had.

In the guest room, he found Rose curled up on the bed, sound asleep. Anna's text earlier said she'd made Rose take a sedative, so it wasn't a surprise she was out cold. She had her arms around Dante, who, for a vicious police K9, looked perfectly content with his current role as a body pillow. He wanted to kick Dante out and let Rose use him as a pillow instead, but he was too keyed up to lie down, so he backed out of the room and closed the door.

Was it weird to be jealous of a dog?

Hell yeah, it was weird.

Ash made his way back downstairs to the living room and slumped down on the couch. He rubbed his injured shoulder, grimacing at the pain. He'd refused to take any pain meds at the hospital. Anything stronger than ibuprofen was a slippery slope he had no interest in setting foot on again.

Still, he needed something to numb his senses, something that would help him forget how badly today could've ended.

What if he hadn't been there?

What if he hadn't given in to his desires and shut and locked the door?

Would the shooters have come inside the pub, guns blazing? Rose wouldn't have stood a chance if they had.

The what-ifs had been playing on repeat in his mind in vivid, gory detail all night, and he needed to silence them. He needed just a few hours of peace.

He popped to his feet and went to the kitchen, where he knew Anna had a stash of her favorite tequila. She wasn't much of a drinker, but she loved to indulge in an occasional margarita with her best friend, Sasha, after a hard day's work. And, since Zak was a recovering alcoholic, she'd keep it somewhere he wouldn't think to look...

Ash found a bottle under the sink, hiding in the mop bucket. Ha. Did he know his sister or what? He didn't bother with a lime or salt. He just wanted the burn of the liquor to numb his thoughts and poured some into a glass—then decided to hell with the glass. He sat at the counter and took the shot, followed by a swig straight from the bottle. The tequila burned, but he welcomed the pain. It was better than the pain in his shoulder. He took

another swig, relishing how it scorched on the way down, and leaned back on the stool, his mind finally quieting.

At least, until his thoughts drifted back to Rose. The way she'd felt as she'd given into him. The way she'd taken everything he had and begged for more...

"Fuck," he muttered as his body stirred. He took another swig of tequila. He couldn't tell if it was the alcohol warming his body or the hot memories.

He never should've touched her, but he couldn't regret it. If he hadn't been there, if he hadn't locked the door so he could have his way with her without interruption—

The image of her hiding behind the bar, her eyes wide with fear, punched him in the gut all over again. He wanted to protect her, to keep her safe. But how could he do that when he was barely keeping himself together?

The house's silence was interrupted by the front door opening. Ash jolted upright, reaching for his gun before remembering Jonah had taken it as per protocol in an officer-involved shooting.

Zak walked in, looking haggard and defeated. Ranger, as always, was right at his heels.

"Hey," he said as he crossed the living room into the kitchen. "Saw your truck. How's the shoulder?"

"It's fine."

"Stitches?"

"Ten."

"Told ya."

Ash settled back into his seat. "Where were you?"

"Ah." He exhaled hard. "I'm sleeping on a cot in the Rescue's main office. Literally in the doghouse, but..." He shrugged. "I deserve it."

"You weren't drinking, were you?"

"No." He nodded toward the tequila. "But I see you found Anna's stash."

"You're not supposed to know about it."

Zak cracked a smile. "I let her think I don't know she hides it in the mop bucket because she feels guilty for having it. I told her it's fine. Having it in the house won't make me fall off the wagon or anything. Tequila was never my poison of choice."

"No, that was Jameson."

"Exactly. But she could even have that if she wanted, and I still wouldn't touch it." He met Ash's gaze over the island, his dark eyes serious. "I'm not

going back there. I go back there, I die. And believe it or not, I'm not ready to die."

Ash's throat tightened. Man, his emotions were all over the place tonight. But he got it, even more than Zak knew. He'd been in the same place once, at that crossroads between life and death, addiction and health.

He lifted the bottle in toast, then took a swig to loosen the knot in his throat. "Glad to hear it."

Zak raised a brow. "You might want to think about slowing down there, man."

Ash snorted. "Now, this is a reversal. You telling me to slow down."

"If you want, I can drag you out of here, cursing the whole time, and dump you into bed." Zak's tone was self-deprecating. "Bring it full circle."

"Nah." He capped the tequila and stood, wobbling only slightly. Despite Zak's reassurances, he decided to take it with him. To his mind, it was better to remove the temptation altogether. He knew he wouldn't be safe alone in a room with an opioid. "I'll walk, thanks."

He almost reached the stairs before Zak called, "You know RWCR has your back, right? Yours and Rose's. She's one of us, and this is starting to feel personal."

"It *is* personal." He paused with one foot on the bottom step and glanced toward the kitchen island. Zak hadn't moved, still stood there backlit by the soft under-cabinet lights. "I want to bring the team in on the investigation. Think we can get everyone here tomorrow for a briefing?"

Zak nodded and pulled his phone from his back pocket. "I'll send out a text now. Ten?" He eyed Ash, then shook his head and started typing. "Nah, noon. You're gonna hate yourself in the morning."

"Appreciate it." His head was already pounding from the tequila. He took another step but then paused again. "Zak?"

"Hm?" he said without looking up from his phone.

"Don't blow it with my sister. I like having a brother-in-law, even if it *is* you." Ash didn't wait for an answer and continued up the steps to Rose's room. The second the door shut behind him, he set the tequila on the dresser, then stripped out of his jeans and crawled onto the bed, pushing Dante out of the way.

"Move it, dog. She's mine."

Dante eyed him, gave a disapproving huff, but finally hopped off the bed. Rose stirred slightly when Ash pulled her into his arms and tucked her

against his chest.

“You’re safe,” he murmured into her hair and ran a soothing hand up and down her back until she settled again. “Nobody is going to hurt you while I’m around.”

But he couldn’t protect her forever. He knew that he couldn’t always be there to keep her safe. And the thought of losing her was unbearable.

So he had to make sure he got the bastards before they had another shot at her.

chapter **twenty-seven**

ROSE GASPED AWAKE and bolted upright in bed, the tendrils of the nightmare losing their grip on her as she surfaced, fading back into the darkness.

Oh, God. Would she ever sleep through the night again?

She reached out, searching for the comforting form of Dante beside her, but discovered his furry body had been replaced with the hard, strong body of a man.

Ash.

He sat up and wrapped an arm around her, dragging her back into the nest of blankets and tucking her against his body. “Shh,” he murmured, his breath warm against her neck. “You’re okay.”

She exhaled, snuggled into his arms, and closed her eyes. She was safe with him. Protected. The tension seeped out of her, the panic slowly subsiding.

His fingers traced soothing circles against her back. “Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Not really. Just a nightmare.”

Ash tightened his grip around her. “You don’t have to keep it to yourself. I’m here for you, Rose.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It’s always the same. I’m back in the pub, and they’re coming for me. Just these dark, faceless shadows, and I can’t escape.”

His jaw clenched, the muscles in his arm tensing. “It’s not going to happen. I won’t let them near you again.”

“I know.” She turned her head to look at him, the glow of the moon casting his face in shadows. “But what if they come after me when you’re not here?”

“They won’t,” he said, his tone hard with conviction. “I’m glued to your side until we catch them.”

She nodded. She believed him, but the fear still lingered.

“Hey.” He cupped a hand under her chin and made her look at him. “I will catch them.”

“I know.” Her breath caught in her throat as Ash’s thumb rubbed over her lips and a flame ignited deep in her belly. She shouldn’t be feeling this way—not for him—but as much as she wanted to keep hating him, her body betrayed her, responding to his touch in a way that turned blood to liquid fire and made her crave more.

Ash’s dark blue eyes flickered with something she couldn’t quite place. “You’re trembling.”

“It’s just the nightmare,” she said, trying to pull away. But he held her close, his hand sliding down to the small of her back, pulling her even tighter against him.

“Let me help.” His voice was rough with desire, and then his lips were on hers.

The kiss was gentle at first, a meeting of mouths that sent shivers down her spine. But his tongue traced the seam of her lips, requesting entrance, and she opened for him, moaning softly as their tongues tangled together in a dance as old as time.

The need between them was palpable, a living thing that filled the room with its intensity.

Ash’s hands roamed over her body as if he couldn’t get enough of her. He traced the curve of her hip, skimmed up under her T-shirt, over her breasts. He teased her nipples until they hardened into tight little peaks.

She gasped and tangled her fingers in his hair as she kissed him back with equal heat. She knew it was wrong to want him, but she couldn’t resist the pull—not when his hands seemed to be everywhere at once, stroking her hair, sliding down her back to grip her hips, pressing her closer until there was no space between them, and she could feel the hard ridge of his erection through his boxers.

He rolled her onto her back, his body a solid weight over hers. She should feel crushed, but she didn’t. She was cocooned by him, safe and protected.

His caresses moved up her body. Higher and higher, until his hands clasped her face. He tilted her head to the side to expose her neck, and then he was kissing her there, right below her ear, his teeth scraping against her

skin.

“Ash.” His name left her on a needy exhale.

“Ambrosia.” Her name was like a purr in his throat as his mouth moved lower, finding the pounding pulse point at the base of her neck.

She arched into him, sliding her hands down his back, careful of the bandage on his shoulder. “Oh, I want you.”

“Not yet.” He sucked a nipple into his mouth through her T-shirt while one hand skated down her side until he reached the waistband of her panties. He dipped inside and she moaned as he brushed over her clit in a feather-light caress. His fingers were rough, his movements sure as he traced the folds of her sex, dipping into her wetness before returning to circle her clit.

Rose fell back against the pillows, her arms flung out on either side of her head in surrender. Ash was in control now, just as he always liked to be, and she had no interest in challenging him.

She rocked her hips against his fingers until her legs trembled and heat seared away the last lingering slime of the nightmare.

But it wasn't enough.

She needed more.

Needed to feel him inside her. Stretching her. Filling her.

“Ash.” She slid her hands over his shoulders and down his back then up under his shirt to explore the ridges of his abs. “Please. I want you inside me.”

“Not yet.” He sat up, dragging her with him, her back pressed against his chest. He pulled her T-shirt over her head, leaving her naked except for her underwear. He palmed her breast in one hand and slipped his other down the front of her panties, tracing a finger between her slick lower lips. “So damn wet already, but I want you weeping for me when I enter you.”

He dipped a finger inside her, then added a second. She gasped and arched her back, grinding her ass against the hard ridge of his cock.

Ash growled in her ear and pressed a thumb against her clit. “You like that?”

“Mm.”

He rubbed slow circles over the sensitive nub while his fingers continued to thrust in and out of her, slow and steady. Her breathing grew ragged as her orgasm mounted. She whimpered and reached behind her to sink her hand into his soft hair, pressing her face against his neck as the tension coiled tighter and tighter. His beard scratched her cheek as she rode his fingers and

it only added to the eroticism of the moment.

And then she shattered, the orgasm ripping through her like a blade, hot and sharp.

Ash held her, still stroking her as she gasped through the last of the spasms.

“Now you’re wet enough.” His voice was all growl as he turned her to face him. At some point as she was coming apart, he’d freed himself from his boxers and now his cock stretched toward her, long and thick.

She wanted to taste him.

As her body still hummed with pleasure, she scooted down in the bed until she could trace her tongue over his tip and lick away the drops of pre-cum. She glanced up to see Ash’s head tipped back, his eyes closed, his throat working. She took him fully into her mouth and he groaned.

“Shit, Rose.”

She cupped his balls in one hand and sucked him in long, slow pulls. He was thick and salty and oh so good.

His hand tangled into her hair, and he tugged lightly at the strands. “Aw, fuck. I’m going to come.”

“Let me taste you.” She sucked harder. His grip on her hair tightened until she had to release him or risk a bald spot.

“No. I’m not finishing like that.” He pulled her legs up over his hips and paused for a moment. His eyes were dark, his face taut. “Look down, Ambrosia. Watch how you take me.”

Her breath caught on a moan as she watched him slide into her with one hard upward thrust of his hips. She gripped his shoulders and lifted herself off him, mesmerized by the sight of him withdrawing almost to the tip and then slamming back in. “We fit together.”

“Yes.” He caught her lips in a searing kiss, his tongue plundering her mouth as he fucked her with hard, deep strokes. His thumb found her clit again, and circled in time with his thrusts.

“Oh, God,” she gasped.

“Come for me, Rose,” he said in a low rumble. “Let me feel that tight little pussy clamp around my cock.”

The orgasm ripped through her even harder than the first. She tightened around him until he groaned her name and buried his face in the crook of her neck as he emptied into her.

Ash collapsed back against the pillows, dragging her with him, his body

still buried deep like he didn't want to break the connection. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her breath came in ragged gasps. Her throat ached from crying out, her skin was damp with sweat, and she couldn't remember ever being so sated.

Before, at the pub, he'd insisted this was just sex. They were just fucking, scratching an itch, releasing the tension that hummed between them any time they were alone together.

But she'd been fucked before. What they'd done together in the bar before the shooting—*that* had been fucking.

But this?

This was something else entirely.

chapter **twenty-eight**

ASH LAY in bed for a long while after Rose drifted to sleep, listening to her soft, even breathing. Every once in a while, she'd twitch and whimper—even in sleep, she was frightened, and it broke his heart. He soothed a hand over her hair and pressed his lips to her forehead until she settled.

Dante came over to the bed and lay his head on the mattress, watching her with worried brown eyes.

“It’s okay, dog,” Ash murmured. “She’s okay.”

Dante huffed. He stared at Rose for a moment longer. Then, deciding she must really be okay, he plodded over to the door and scratched at the frame.

“Gotta go out?” Ash carefully slid his arm out from under Rose. He climbed out of bed and tucked the blanket around her before pulling on his jeans. He opened the door for Dante, then grabbed his T-shirt from the floor and dragged it on over his head as he followed the dog out into the hall.

The house was silent. A glance at his watch told him it wasn’t even dawn. Everyone was still in bed. Hell, he should still be in bed, too. He’d managed maybe two hours of sleep, tops.

Ash moved quietly downstairs, his head pounding with each step—but whether that was from the tequila he’d overindulged in last night or general stress was anyone’s guess. Probably a bit of both.

To his surprise, he found the kitchen lights on low. He wasn’t the only one up.

Anna sat at the island, a hardcover book open in front of her, though she wasn’t reading it. She stared off into space as she sipped on a mug of coffee.

He didn’t want to startle her, so he made sure to make more noise on the last few steps. Dante barreled down the stairs and ran past her, disappearing through the dog door into the backyard. Through the kitchen window, he

watched Dante greet Anna's dog, Winston.

Anna glanced over and gave a tired smile. "Hi."

"Hey." He nodded toward her mug. "Any more of that?"

"I made a whole pot."

"It's a start." The way he felt now, he'd need gallons of the stuff to make it through the day. He strode over to the coffee maker and got a mug down from the cupboard. When he turned back, steaming mug in hand, he found Anna staring off into space again. "You okay, AJ?"

She shook her head and closed her book. "I think Zak..." She trailed off and her gaze travelled over the island to the empty lowball glass he'd left there last night.

"No," he said and picked up the glass, depositing it in the sink. "That wasn't Zak. I broke into your stash when I got in."

Anna exhaled hard. "I shouldn't have it in the house."

"Anna, I talked to him last night and I don't think he's going to backslide."

"I hope you're right," she said in a hollow voice. "I can't bear to see him go through that again."

"Hey, he's stronger than either of us give him credit for. And if he does slip, he's got us. We'll pull him through, just like last time."

"He said he wanted to leave me." Tears flooded her eyes and his heart clenched. He hated seeing his twin in pain. Her pain always stung like it was his own.

"No, he doesn't want that. He loves you." Ash put down his mug and crossed the kitchen to wrap his arms around her. She leaned into him, her body shaking with sobs. He held her tightly, rubbing her back as she let out all of her emotions.

They were a lot alike, the Rawlings twins. They both bottled everything up until the bottle couldn't hold any more. The difference was, when Anna's bottle broke, she sobbed. When his broke, he broke things.

"I'm scared, Ash," she whispered against his chest when the crying jag passed. "What if I'm not enough this time? I'm so scared of losing him again."

"Hey." He caught her face in his hands and thumbed away her tears. "Listen to me, okay? I've known Zak a long time. He was my best friend for years and I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty, he only said that because he's scared, too. He's terrified of letting you down, which is why he

tried pushing you away. It's also how I know he will not drink again, whether or not you have tequila in the house. He's had plenty of chances to leave in the last few weeks, but has he?"

Anna sniffled. "No."

"Exactly. He's still here." He tilted his head in the general direction of the Rescue. "Sleeping out there with the dogs."

After a few minutes, Anna winced, brushing at the damp stains she'd left on his shirt. "Sorry for crying on you."

"Never be sorry for that." He pressed a kiss to her temple. "That's part of my job as your big brother."

She laughed and poked his stomach. "You're only fifteen minutes older."

He let out a wistful sigh. "The best fifteen minutes of my life."

"Liar." She balled her fist and socked him in the stomach, then hugged him. "I love you."

He returned the hug and, for a moment, everything in him settled. "Love you, too, AJ."

The dogs returned, pushing through the doggie door one at a time. Winston nudged his food dish across the floor. Dante just sat in front of his and glowered at them both.

Anna laughed and pulled out of his arms. "The princes are demanding breakfast."

While she went to the pantry and filled both of their bowls with kibble, Ash picked up his mug and took a long drink. He watched the dogs eat, smiling at Winston's wholehearted enthusiasm and Dante's more measured bites.

Damn. That dog really was just like him—grumbly and suspicious and restrained. And Dante liked Rose, protecting her with a fierceness that was reassuring.

Ash breathed out slowly and accepted he'd been defeated by his sister yet again. "Okay."

Anna lifted a brow and picked up her own coffee. "Okay, what?"

She was smirking. She already knew what he was going to say next.

He nodded to the dogs. "Show me what Dante can do."



Feeling eyes on her, Rose slowly opened her own, a smile curving her lips. She expected Ash, but instead found a little girl standing beside the bed in pajamas, eyes sleepy and blond hair a mess.

Oh shit.

Rose reached for the blanket and was relieved to find her naked body already covered. “Uh, hi, Poppy. How did you get in here?”

Six years old and as pretty as the flower she was named for, Poppy studied her with serious blue eyes. “Are you going to marry Uncle Ash?”

“Uh...” Rose looked around for help, but found she was alone with the girl. Even Dante had abandoned her. “N-no. Why would you think that?”

The girl’s brows drew together in confusion. “But you slept with him.”

Oh, God. Rose’s thoughts stuttered to a halt. How did she even respond to that?

“You only sleep in the same bed with someone when you’re going to marry them,” Poppy continued sagely. “Like Mom and Dad. Everyone knows that. Well, but sisters don’t count. I sleep in Bella’s bed all the time. Family doesn’t count,” she decided with a nod. “But Uncle Ash isn’t your family so you must be going to marry him.”

“I-I...”

“Poppy!” Seventeen-year-old Bella rushed in and scooped up her sister. “You don’t go into people’s bedrooms without asking! I’m so sorry,” she said to Rose, her light brown skin flushing with embarrassment as she dragged Poppy out and shut the door.

Rose leaned back against the pillows with a relieved laugh.

Ash was going to hate this.

She couldn’t wait to tell him about it.

She dressed and wandered down to the kitchen to find a fresh pot of coffee had been brewed and a mug waited on the counter next to the cream and sugar. Somehow, she knew that was Ash’s doing. As she poured herself a cup and doctored it, she looked out the back window and spotted him with his sister in the agility yard, working with Dante.

Rose settled into an Adirondack chair on the back deck to watch the training session. Dante dodged obstacles, traveled over ramps and across saws, and ducked into tunnels until he found Ash hiding inside one of them. He gave a vicious bark and lunged as Ash tried to run. Dante clamped his teeth into the thick padding on Ash’s arm and dragged him to the ground.

Wow. That was one powerful dog.

When the training ended, Ash and Anna both congratulated the dog, fawning over him until his tail wagged. Then Ash looked up and spotted her. He said something to his sister, gave the dog one more ear scratch, and crossed to the gate that separated the agility area from Zak and Anna's backyard.

"Uncle Ash!" Poppy flew past Rose and raced across the yard, her ponytail swinging. She flung herself into Ash's arms with a shriek of pure joy.

"Popsicle!" He scooped up the girl with his good arm and swung her, making her giggle. The smile that broke across his face would've knocked Rose back a step if she weren't already sitting down. She'd never seen him smile before. She'd seen plenty of smirks and scowls, but not that full blown smile that lit up his eyes and turned him from a stoically handsome man into devastating charmer. He didn't smile like that often enough and it really was a shame for all womenkind.

Anna walked up the porch steps and dropped into one of the chairs. Her smirk was very much like her twin's. "He's handsome when he smiles, isn't he? He doesn't do it enough."

Shit. Had she spoken out loud? "No, he prefers scowling."

"Yeah, he's taciturn and grumpy more often than not." She nodded toward Ash as he swung Poppy upside-down until her blonde hair brushed the grass. Their combined laughter brightened the gloomy morning. "But it's only 'cause he's trying to protect that soft heart of his. He's a good man, Rose."

Rose side-eyed her. "So's your husband, but you're making him sleep out with the dogs."

Anna's smile faded and she took a sip from the mug of coffee waiting on the arm of the chair. "Maybe. But he can be a real jackass, too."

"So can your brother."

Now her smile returned full-blast. "That's true." She lifted her mug and clinked it against Rose's. "Here's to jackass men and the stupid women who still love them."

Rose nearly choked on her coffee. "I don't love Ash. I barely even like him."

"Mm-hm."

"No, really. It's fifty-fifty whether I'm going to punch him or kiss him every time he walks into my bar."

Anna's eyes sparkled. "I'd say that's more sixty-fourty for kissing, wouldn't you?"

Now it was her turn to scowl because, dammit, Anna was right. The harder she tried to hang onto her hatred for the man, the less she actually hated him. And how could she dislike a man who made his niece squeal with laughter like that?

"Maybe more like seventy-thirty," she admitted grudgingly.

"It's a start." Anna settled back and watched Ash and Poppy play for a moment. When Zak came out of the Rescue's office and joined them, her eyes went misty. "Zak wanted to leave."

Rose was used to people telling her their secrets. It came with the territory of owning a bar. She shifted in her seat to give the other woman her full attention. "I know."

Anna sniffed and swiped at her eyes. "Oh, right. Sorry, of course you knew. I forgot he went to your place when we had that fight."

"My door's always open. For any of you." Except could she even leave her door open anymore? Did she even have a door to go back to? She shoved those worries away for later consideration. Right now, it was a relief to focus on Anna's problems rather than her own. "He was pretty torn up."

Anna sucked in a shaking breath. "Yeah, Ash told me. And... it's not all his fault. That fight? When he said he wanted to leave? I pushed him to that. I think... I wanted so badly for him to be okay, that I forgot he isn't. And he probably won't ever be. I made him feel like he had to put on a smile and hide everything, and that's not what I want."

"What do you want?"

"For him to talk to me when he's hurting, like he did when we first got together. For him to lean on me."

"Have you told *him* that?"

"I tried but... I think we're both too raw right now."

Rose reached for her hand. "I knew Zak at his worst. I saw him come into the pub every night and drown himself in alcohol, and so I can tell you he doesn't really want to leave you. If he did, he'd be long gone, not sleeping out in the kennel with the dogs."

Anna laughed softly. "Ash said the exact same thing."

"Ash has his moments of genius."

"Oh, God. Don't let him hear you say that. You'll never hear the end of it."

“We’ll keep it between us. Did he also tell you that you’ll have to be the one to reach out to Zak?”

Her smile faded. “No, he didn’t say that.”

“Well, it’s true. Because when Zak’s spiraling, he doesn’t know how to reach for help. He digs deeper into his depression and isolation until he hits rock bottom, and then he keeps right on digging. I watched him do it before from behind the bar. Don’t let him do it again.”

Anna sighed. “It’s exhausting.”

“I know it is.” Rose thought of the little itch at the back of her brain that she couldn’t shake since her abductor pumped her full of heroin. She’d never touch the stuff, but that little itch came with a seductive voice that whispered, *what if...?* And now she understood her patrons better—the ones who came into the bar because they had to, not because they wanted to. Zak also had that itch, but it was accompanied by the depression, anxiety, and night terrors of his PTSD.

“It is for him, too, but you love him, and he loves you, and nobody ever said love was easy.” She squeezed Anna’s hand before dropping it as the door opened.

Bella poked her head out. “Hey, Mom? Poppy snuck into Rose’s room this morning and asked if Rose was going to marry Ash.”

“Oh, that girl.” Anna made a sound that was half-laugh, half-groan and leaned back in her chair. She smiled across the yard at her younger daughter. “Sorry about that. She has no concept of boundaries or personal space. We’re working on it.” Then her smile turned sly as she slid a glance in Rose’s direction. “It’s a good question, though. My brother has been a bachelor long enough. I was going to play matchmaker, but I like you for him better. You keep him on his toes.”

Rose felt heat rush into her cheeks and took a long drink from her coffee because she knew she was blushing.

“Oh my God, Mom,” Bella groaned and rolled her eyes. “You’re just as embarrassing as Poppy. I’m going to Hannah’s.”

“Be careful,” Anna called after her. “Keep your phone on you. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Bella scoffed, but it was good-natured. “Oh, c’mon, is that really the best warning you can give me? You got pregnant at my age.”

“Luckily, you’re smarter than I was.”

“And gay. So, no, I won’t be getting pregnant.” She stepped out onto the

deck to kiss her mom's head. "Love you."

"Love you, too." Anna watched her go, then laughed. "Our Bella is smitten with this new girl in town, Hannah Edwards. It seems to be getting serious. First love." Her gaze traveled back across the yard, where Zak now had Poppy up on his shoulders and was galloping like a horse while the dogs chased him. "There's nothing like it."

"The Scotts are here," Bella called from somewhere deeper in the house and a second later, Donovan Scott burst through the door and scooped Rose up into a rib-crushing hug. Over his shoulder, she saw Ash's smile fade. He crossed the yard and mounted the steps in several long strides.

"Van." His tone was laced with warning.

Donovan ignored him, set her back on her feet, and looked her up and down with narrowed eyes.

"You scared him," Sasha Scott said from behind her husband. "I had to practically tie him down to keep him from going on the hunt to find the shooters."

"Bet he enjoyed that." Rose didn't get the smile from either of them that she'd hoped for. Donovan really did look worried, so she stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I'm fine, tough guy. Really."

"Van," Ash said again and stepped between them, a low growl coming from deep in his chest. "Office. Now."

chapter **twenty-nine**

“OKAY,” Donovan said as soon as they stepped through the door into Redwood Coast Rescue’s new office. At his voice, his dogs, Spirit and Matilda, lifted their heads from their cuddle pile in the corner and gave happy wags. Donovan sometimes left them at the office when he and Sasha had a date night so they wouldn’t be lonely.

He smiled at the pair, then swung around and pinned Ash with a scowl. “What the hell was that?”

“Nothing.”

“That was not nothing. I gave Rose a hug and you looked like you were plotting my murder.”

“I often plot your murder,” Zak said and flopped into the squeaky new leather chair behind his desk. Ranger, the golden-eyed demon dog who once tried to take a piece out of Ash’s hand, did some doggie yoga stretches in his bed before lumbering over to his person for an ear scratch. Zak complied automatically without missing a conversational beat. “You have a very murderable face, Van.”

Donovan pointed at him. “Don’t start. I have questions for you next, and hiding behind snark is not going to work.” He motioned to the cot in the corner that had very obviously been slept in, then shook his head. “Jesus, when did *I* become the reasonable one?”

Zak held up his hands in surrender. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s talk about Ash’s issues. He’s much more interesting.”

Donovan grumbled low in his throat, but focused his attention back on Ash. “So, I repeat, what the fuck was that? Did you think I was sliding in to make a move on Rose?”

Ash let out his breath in a frustrated exhale. “No.”

“Good, because in case you forgot...” He held up his left hand and wiggled his ring finger where he wore a plain platinum band. “I’m happily married to the most beautiful woman in the world, and I would never betray Sasha like that. And even if I weren’t married, I’m not the kind of asshole who takes advantage of a woman while she’s vulnerable.”

Was that what he’d done last night? Ash wondered. Had he taken advantage of Rose while she was at her most vulnerable? Because that was the one thing he told himself he wouldn’t do.

Fuck.

“Rose is my friend,” Donovan continued. “She’s been a good friend for years, and she has gone through one trauma after another lately. I’m allowed to comfort her. Unless she says otherwise, I’m allowed to hug her.”

Disgusted with himself, Ash crossed his arms over his chest and returned Donovan’s glare. “I don’t know what it was. Sorry,” he added grudgingly.

“You don’t know?” The question dripped with doubt.

“Yeah, I said I don’t know, okay? I don’t fucking know what’s wrong with me.” Unable to stand still any longer, he started to pace the length of the room. “The thought of another man’s hands on her—even a happily married man’s—makes my blood boil. And the idea of someone hurting her again makes me lose my goddamn mind.”

Donovan and Zak shared a long look.

“He’s got it,” Donovan said, all serious like a doctor giving a terminal diagnosis.

“Yep,” Zak agreed. “Told ya he’s more interesting. I believe we’re witnessing the fall of Lost County’s most eligible bachelor, Sheriff Ash Rawlings.”

Donovan nodded. “We should have popcorn for this show. Better yet, sell tickets.”

“There’s gonna be a lot of unhappy single ladies in the county when they find out.”

Ash stopped pacing and glowered at the two of them. “What are you two jackasses going on about?”

Donovan grinned. It was all teeth with just an edge of mean. “You, my man, are in love with Rose.”

He scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t do love. I don’t have time.”

Zak let out a low whistle. “You are so full of shit I’m surprised you’re not choking on it. Every time she so much as breathes in your direction, you go

all soft and gooey.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yep, like a marshmallow.” Donovan nodded again. What was he, a bobble head? “It’s time to admit it, dude. You’re in deep. You might as well start picking out china patterns and kids’ names now.”

A muscle in his cheek twitched. His jaw ached from how tightly he was gritting his teeth. How could they be so certain that he was in love with Rose? Sure, he was worried about her safety, and the sex was the best he’d ever had, but love?

No. That was a whole other level. One he had no interest in going to.

He tried to come up with a witty retort, but his mind was blank. All he could think about was the way her hair smelled like something dark and spicy and floral all at once and how the gentle curve of her body fit so perfectly against his as he held her close.

Kids’ names?

Fuck.

Donovan and Zak erupted into raucous laughter.

“Look at his face.” Donovan gasped and bent double, clutching his ribs as tears streamed from his eyes.

“Like he’s chewing glass.” Zak snorted, which set them off again until they were practically rolling on the floor. The dogs thought they were playing and joined in with a chorus of happy barks. Spirit jumped around the room like her feet were spring-loaded while Matilda let out a howl.

“Wait, what did we miss?” Sawyer asked from the doorway as he and Zelda stepped through. Pierce was right behind them with his dog, Raszta, who looked like the love child of a bear and a mop. The dogs all sniffed each other and wagged in greeting.

“Apparently, Ash is falling in love with Rose,” Zak said with barely contained glee.

Ash tried to deny it again, but the teasing had planted a seed of doubt in his mind. Maybe there was something there, something more than just physical attraction. But he wasn’t ready to admit it yet, not even to himself.

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. “Why is this news?”

Ash whirled on him. “What?”

He shrugged. “I’m a blind man, and even I can see you’re head over heels for her.”

Pierce nodded and signed, “*It’s obvious.*”

Ash let out a frustrated growl. “You want to hear this briefing or not?”

“Typical Ash,” Zak sighed.

“All work and no play makes Ash a dull boy,” Donovan agreed. “And you used to be the instigator of all our mischief. What happened?”

“I grew up,” Ash said through his teeth. “Something you two dipshits have yet to do.”

Zak and Donovan looked at each other again, then shrugged.

“Meh,” Zak said.

“Growing up is overrated,” Donovan added, but waved toward the whiteboards at the front of the room. “But I want Rose to be safe, so let’s hear it. Who do we have to kill?”

“We’re not killing anyone.” Ash walked over and opened the file he’d brought in with him. He taped a photo of a skinny kid with spiky blond hair on the whiteboard, then turned to face the group.

The dogs all settled in beside their people, looking for all the world like they were paying attention to the briefing, too. He found himself wishing Dante was at his side—after seeing what the German Shepherd was capable of, he had nothing but respect for the animal—but was glad the dog seemed intent on protecting Rose and was sticking close to her.

“This is Dale Shields,” he told the room. “He’s the suspect we found dead after yesterday’s shootout. When Mike Conti showed Rose his picture last night, she confirmed he was one of the men who first attacked her three weeks ago at the Mad Dog. Shields was an active member of the Golden State Nationalists and has been known to run with the Erickson brothers, Gethin and Isaiah. We suspect they were the other shooters yesterday, and Gethin is likely the second attacker from three weeks ago, though Rose couldn’t positively identify him.” He pinned two more photos up next to Shields. Gethin Erickson was a tall man with hard, dark eyes, a shaved head, and a bristly sprig of a goatee sprouting from his chin.

Donovan whistled. “Tell me you’re a neo-Nazi without telling me you’re a neo-Nazi.”

“*His brother looks like an accountant,*” Pierce signed.

Ash stepped back and studied the photo. Isaiah Erickson did look like an accountant, complete with a bland haircut and square, black frame glasses. He was slightly smaller than his younger brother, but no less mean. Either one of them could have been the man Ash confronted at the old gas station on Route 10.

“Do we think this is race-based?” Donovan asked. “Is GSN attacking Rose because her mom’s family is of Hispanic and Native American ancestry?”

“It’s possible. That is their M.O.,” Ash said, but then shook his head. “It doesn’t sit right with me, though. Rose passes for white, so unless they know her family tree, she’s not the most obvious target in the community. If their motive was purely race-based, why wouldn’t they attack the Salazars and the Arrow Tree Brewery or Ajani Wilson and her art gallery or the Williams family and their restaurant? But Rose is the only one they’re focusing on.”

“*Like it’s personal,*” Pierce signed.

“Seems that way. Motive aside, we need to keep in mind that both of the Ericksons are extremely dangerous, but Gethin is the more volatile of the two. He’ll be the one wanting to go down in a blaze of glory and become a martyr for the cause. We can’t give him that opportunity.” He waited to make sure he had everyone’s full attention. “This will not become another Waco or Ruby Ridge.”

“How do we take them down without it turning into a bloodbath?” Sawyer asked. “They’ll be armed to the teeth.”

“Go in fast and quiet with a small team,” Zak said and looked at Ash for confirmation. “That’s why you want us in on it. For back-up because we’ve been trained in military tactics.”

“Exactly,” Ash said. “I don’t have the manpower and my deputies don’t have your level of training. And—” He stopped short.

Donovan’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t know who you can trust.”

He hated to admit it, but it was true. There were still deputies in his department who were loyal to Tennison. He needed to clean house, but he couldn’t do that until this was over. “The only guys I trust implicitly are Jonah Sullivan and Walter Wright. And of course Mike Conti, which is why he’s guarding Rose today.”

His biggest fear was that once GSN realized what was happening at their compound, they would send people after Rose in retaliation.

“Aw, Ash.” A slow grin spread across Zak’s face and for the first time in weeks, he sounded more like his usual sarcastic self. “Are you deputizing us again?”

Ash bit the inside of his cheek to stop the smile. “For the duration of this investigation.”

“At this rate, you might as well just give us badges,” Donovan said.

“Not a fucking chance.”

Sawyer raised his hand. “Uh, not to point out the obvious, but...” He pointed to his face. “Blind.”

“Ish,” Zak muttered. “You can see movement.”

“Yeah, but I still wouldn’t trust my faulty eye-brain connection in the middle of a raid. So, unless you want to dig a bullet or two out of me—”

“Tempting.”

He ignored Zak. “What can I do to help?”

Ash nodded. He’d already considered it and had a plan. “I hear you’re good on a computer.”

A smile ticked up the corner of Sawyer’s mouth. “I have my moments of brilliance.”

“More than brilliance,” Pierce signed. *“He turns the screen reader speed up so fast, it sounds like another language.”*

Sawyer turned toward him and focused on his moving hands, then grinned. “Coding is another language, my man. But, yeah,” he said to Ash. “I’m good. Not as fast as I used to be when I could see, but I still get the job done.”

“Good,” Ash said. “I need as much information as you can dig up on Chester Montgomery-Duran and Harmony Galasso. And any connection to GSN, Dale Shields, and the Erickson brothers. We’re arresting them for yesterday’s shooting, but my gut tells me this is all somehow tied to Harmony’s murder. I just need proof.”

“Got it.”

“Do it all above-board. Nothing illegal. And you can forward everything you find to Cal Holden. He’s defending Pete Galasso now, and plans to file an appeal to get his conviction overturned.”

Sawyer nodded. “Glad to help.”

Ash returned his attention to the rest of the group. “And while he’s doing that, Zak, Donovan and I will approach the GSN compound with the arrest warrant. I want Spirit sniffing for explosives and Ranger...” His gaze dropped to the yellow-eyed dog. “I want him looking like he’s going to rip off important body parts if we let him off leash.”

Zak reached down and rubbed Ranger’s radar dish ear. “You hear that, mutt? You get to play bad cop to Ash’s good cop.”

Ranger’s tail wagged.

“You, too, Zak,” Ash said. “I want you to scare the shit out of them.”

Zak's grin was full of menace. "Oh, I plan on it."

"Pierce, I need you and Raszta to hang back with my deputies on the road and make sure we don't have any squirts. Anyone tries to make a run for it, let the mop dog do what he does best and herd them back."

Pierce always had a poker face, but now his expression was downright deadly. "*And watch your deputies, too?*"

"You got it. I know people talk around you thinking you can't hear them. I want to know what they're saying behind my back. I want to know who I can trust in my department."

Pierce nodded.

"One more thing," Ash said and faced his brother-in-law. "Zak, I need you to put me in touch with Tucker Quentin."

Zak choked on his coffee and set the mug down on his desk with a thunk. "What makes you think I know how?"

"You know guys who work for him, right? The team that rescued you from Afghanistan?"

"I mean, I haven't stayed in touch with any of them. I didn't want the reminder." Zak ran a hand back and forth over his short hair, then sighed. "My buddy Greer probably knows how to reach them. He's the one that sent them after me. Or, hell, he might even know Quentin personally. I could call him, but he's gonna want to know why?"

"Fair enough," Ash said. "I need a sit-down with Chet Montgomery-Duran, and I've had no luck getting through the layers around him."

"And you think Quentin can get you in?"

"I'm assuming billionaires run in the same circles."

"You know what they say about assuming..."

Ash spread his hands. "At this point, I'm desperate enough to look like an ass."

Zak shrugged. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

chapter thirty

AS THE BRIEFING WRAPPED UP, Ash pulled down the photos and returned them to the file. “I have to go brief the deputies I’ve selected for this. We’ll meet you at that old gas station on Route 10 where I found Rose, and head up the mountain from there.”

And now that he thought about it, it made sense that GSN would stash Rose there, the perfect halfway point between town and their compound. It also made sense that they’d threaten him, his family, and Redwood Coast Rescue. Tennison had a very hands-off approach to the mountain people, which Ash suspected was the reason for the disproportionate amount of crime in such a rural region.

Which reminded him...

He hung back as the others filed out, then slid his cell phone from his pocket.

She answered on the first ring. “Sheriff.”

“Ms. Summers.”

“I didn’t expect to hear from you,” Alexis said. “Are you finally looking into the possibility of the Shadow Stalker being more than an urban legend?”

He smothered the spike of annoyance. “It’s on my to-do list.”

“Uh-huh.” A pause. “So why are you calling?”

“There’s another case you might be interested in podcasting about. It’s right up your alley—sex, billionaires, Neo-Nazis.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “You’ve piqued my interest.”

“Have you ever heard of Harmony Galasso?”

“No.”

“She was murdered thirteen years ago, and her husband was convicted, sentenced to life in prison. You should look into it.”

“Why? It sounds pretty straight-forward.”

“Because he was convicted without a body.” He waited, letting that sink in before he hit her with his ace in the hole—the thing he knew she wouldn’t be able to resist. “And we just identified the Double R Fire Jane Doe as Harmony Galasso.”

Alexis sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re kidding.”

“I don’t kid.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that about you, Sheriff.” A longer pause, heavy with suspicion. “Are you telling me about this just to keep me from investigating the Shadow Stalker?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “But also because I believe Pete Galasso is sitting in jail for a murder he didn’t commit and any publicity he can get will help him get an appeal. You can contact his lawyer, Callum Holden, for more information.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks for the tip.” It sounded like she was typing something in the background, and he hoped that meant she was already looking into the case.

“Good.” He started to hang up. Paused. “And Alexis? You didn’t hear any of this from me.”

“I’m sorry, Sheriff,” she said, all sweetness. “Hear what?”

He grunted a laugh. “Yeah, let’s keep it that way.”

Ash stepped out into the hall to find Zak leaning against the wall and Donovan standing there with his arms crossed over his chest.

Donovan’s deep scowl said he’d overheard the conversation and disapproved. “Why are you making deals with the devil?”

Ash pocketed his phone and started for the door. “She’s not the devil.”

Zak pushed away from the wall and followed, hooking a thumb over his shoulder at Donovan. “Uh, are you forgetting she had the whole fucking country ready to lynch Van for a murder he didn’t commit?”

“Which is why I’m giving her a chance to redeem herself.” Ash stopped walking and turned to face them both. “Van, you know what Pete Galasso’s been living with. You lived it, too. The only difference is he actually got convicted and has lost over a decade of his life. And, fine, Ms. Summers may be the devil, but she’s the devil I know, and using her to get the word out about Pete’s wrongful conviction can only help his case.”

Donovan’s mouth was open to argue, but he snapped it closed without making a sound.

“I fucked up thirteen years ago by going with what Tennison said and not listening to my gut. I destroyed Rose’s life. Now I’m trying to fix it, and I’ll use any weapon in my arsenal to do so. Including Alexis Summers and her podcast.” He met Donovan’s gaze. “So if you have a problem with that, bow out now.”

“No,” Donovan said after a tense moment and sucked in a deep breath. He exhaled through his nose, then shook his head. “No, I get it. If Sasha were in Rose’s position, I’d do the same.”

Ash glanced around Donovan to Zak. “We good?”

Zak held up his hands. “If Van’s good with it, I’ve got nothing to say.”

“That’d be a first.”

Zak’s lips quirked and he elbowed Donovan. “Hey, he’s not just falling in love. He’s already gone splat at the bottom of that cliff.”

Ash growled, turned on his heel and marched down the hall, shoving open the door that led outside. He ignored Donovan and Zak’s laughter. He wanted to go get his dog and his woman and take them home where they’d be safe.

And that thought brought him to an abrupt halt like he’d hit a brick wall.

When had Dante become his dog?

And Rose definitely wasn’t his woman.

He gave his head a shake to dislodge the idea and strode into the misty rain of the afternoon. Rose stood by the gate that connected the RWCR facility to Zak and Anna’s backyard. She looked exhausted and beautiful in her navy coat and black leggings, the rain making her black hair cling to the pale curve of her cheek. The bruises there were fading, but still too noticeable for his liking, and his heart lurched with something that he refused to name.

And that pissed him off.

He didn’t want to be in love with her.

It would complicate things, make it harder for him to do his job. He didn’t have the time or energy for a relationship. And yet here he was, standing in the rain and staring at her like an idiot, feeling something he wished he could deny.

Anna and Rose glanced over at his approach.

“Hey,” Anna said, her brows drawing together with concern. “Is everything okay?”

He nodded stiffly and forced himself to look away from Rose before he said something stupid. “Yeah.”

“Then why are you pissed off?”

He didn’t answer his sister’s question, and instead turned to Rose. “I’m taking you home,” he said, voice gruff. “Mike will be there to guard you, and we’re taking Dante with us.”

Anna gave him a strange look, but didn’t say anything.

Rose frowned. “Are you going after GSN?”

“Not until I take you home and make sure you’re safe.”

Rose’s expression softened. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

They made their way through the yard and house and all the way to his truck in silence, with Dante trailing them. Ash left her side long enough to load the dog into the back of the truck, then slid behind the wheel. She already had the heater blasting to ward off the cold March air.

It was the first time they’d been alone together all morning, without the buffer of family and friends, and as he pulled out of the circular drive in front of Zak and Anna’s house, the silence between them hummed with tension. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. He tried to focus on the logistics of the upcoming raid, but it was hard to focus when he could feel Rose’s presence next to him, could smell her natural perfume mingling with the rain.

“Thank you for last night,” Rose said finally, her voice quiet. “I was in shock still, I think. I needed the distraction.”

Distraction?

Okay, if she wanted to call fucking each other into exhaustion a simple “distraction,” he could roll with that.

Ash grunted in response, not trusting himself to say anything more. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. He’d never felt this before—this need to protect someone with everything he had. Not even with Anna, and he was notoriously overprotective of his twin. But this was something more. Something deeper, primal.

And he didn’t know how to deal with it.

They drove the rest of the way to his house in silence, and he was relieved to find Mike Conti already waiting when they arrived. He needed the buffer of another person.

“Sheriff,” Mike said and touched the brim of his hat in greeting. He’d opted to go with his full uniform instead of jeans and a T-shirt today, which Ash appreciated. It made this feel more official. Because the idea of leaving Rose alone with a man—even a happily married man like Mike—rubbed him

the wrong way.

He nodded back. “Deputy Conti.”

“Hi, Mike,” Rose said. “I’m sorry you’re sidelined for the big raid, but I’m glad you’ll be here with me.”

Ash told himself not to grit his teeth at the warmth in her tone when she spoke to the man. It didn’t mean anything. She was just being friendly.

Mike shrugged. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit disappointed, but my wife’s happy I’ll be safely out of the line of fire. She made cookies.” He hitched his chin toward the house. “As did most of the other deputies’ wives. Some casseroles, too. You won’t be running out of food for a while. The whole force is just sick over what happened at the Mad Dog yesterday. They all wanted to pitch in.”

Rose all but melted and wrapped her arms around the deputy for a quick hug. “Aw, that’s sweet. Thank you.”

Once again, Ash found his throat closing up. What was wrong with him? He didn’t do emotion. But he always thought of his deputies as just that—his deputies. Now he realized they were as much his family as Anna and Zak and the girls. And maybe he should have more trust in them. “Thanks, Mike.”

“No problem. Now go kick some scummy skinhead ass for me.”

“That I can do.” Ash circled to the back of his truck, and opened the door to let the dog out. Dante poked his head out as soon as the hatch opened and gave a slight wag.

Ash took his face in his hands and looked him in the eyes. “You better not eat the rest of my furniture. Or the cat. I like the cat.”

Dante huffed and Ash couldn’t help the smile that twitched on his lips. The dog looked so annoyed by the restrictions.

“You keep her safe, okay? I’m trusting you with—” He stopped himself because he’d been about to say, “the woman I love.” Which was ridiculous. That was Zak and the guys getting into his head. He finished, “I’m trusting you with her.”

Something like determination flickered in Dante’s eyes. Those were cop’s eyes, hard and flat. He’d seen that look often enough in the mirror.

“Yeah, good dog.” He gave Dante’s ear a scratch then let him jump out. Dante bounded towards the house, nose to the ground, tail straight up like a warning flag.

Already on the job.

Very good dog.

When Ash closed the truck's hatch, he found Rose standing right there within arm's reach.

"Ash." She caught his hand. "You'll be careful?"

He met her gaze, his heart wrestling with something big he didn't dare name. "I'm always careful," he said finally.

Rose gave him a small smile. "Yeah, well, you say that, but you weren't yesterday. You got shot, and I don't want you coming back to me with more bullet holes. I... I care about you. A lot."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "I thought you hated me."

"It's a fine line between hate and love." Holding his gaze, she leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. It was over before he fully realized what she was doing, but the warmth that radiated through him at the contact was undeniable.

She laughed softly. "And I know it's crazy, but I crossed over that line sometime in the last few weeks." Her fingers trailed over his lips then stroked his beard. "I just didn't realize it until now."

He wanted to close his eyes and lean into her touch, but he couldn't. If he let himself, he wouldn't want to leave her, and he had work to do. Work that would, hopefully, end with her attackers behind bars.

Then, maybe, he could explore which side of that line he still stood on.

"Be safe, Ash," she whispered. Her grip tightened on his hand, and he realized that she was scared. Scared for him, for RWCR, for the other deputies, for herself. And that only added fuel to his need to protect her.

"I will," he said, forcing the words out through his tight throat. "I promise."

The feeling of her touch lingered long after she stepped back, and he climbed into his truck. As he pulled out of the driveway and made sure the gate to his property was closed, he stole a glance in the rearview mirror.

She'd retreated to the house, but still lingered in the doorway, watching him leave.

"Go inside, Rose."

As if she'd heard his plea, she shut the door.

He let go a relieved breath. She was safe. Mike and Dante would make sure of it. Now he had to make sure she stayed that way.

He pulled out onto the quiet road and tried to switch his brain over to cop mode. He couldn't let his feelings for her cloud his judgment, not when the stakes were so high. But that was easier said than done. He couldn't shake the

feeling that he was heading toward something dangerous—but whether that was the upcoming raid or the thing between him and Rose, he didn't know.

Either way, he was in deep trouble.

chapter **thirty-one**

THE SIGN POSTED at the front gate of the Erickson home warned, TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT, and looked as if it had been used for target practice. Ash grabbed a pair of bolt cutters from his trunk and snipped the chain holding the gate closed.

“Charming,” Zak said when he slid back in behind the wheel of his Tahoe. “Really leaning into the hillbilly stereotype.”

“It’s not an empty threat.” He shifted the truck into gear and lifted his foot off the break, edging through the gate. Behind him, two deputy cars followed, while two others blocked off the road. “They will shoot first, ask questions later.”

“Then they better be damn good.” Zak drew his gun and rested it on his good knee. “They take a shot at me or my dog, that’s the only one they’re getting.”

Ash eyed the gun. “You’re not gonna go all cowboy on me, are you?”

“I didn’t survive Afghanistan by being a cowboy.”

No, but he had been taken prisoner by the Taliban because he’d strayed from his original mission. It was cruel to point that out, so Ash kept his mouth shut and focused on the road.

The narrow dirt driveway beyond the gate wound deeper under the canopy of the soaring redwoods and the landscape seemed to grow colder and more desolate.

“Don’t like this driveway,” Zak muttered. “It’s a fatal funnel.”

A cliff dropped off the mountain to one side of the road and the other was a steep uphill climb. No doubt GSN had chosen this location to hole up for this very reason.

Ash cracked his window. Rather than the typical hushed sounds of the

forest, the thump of a heavy bass beat vibrated through the air.

They were close.

When they cleared a tight bend, several trailers came into view and one old cabin that had seen its best days back during the Gold Rush.

Ash stopped the truck in front of the cabin and stepped out. This high up on the mountain the air was cold and damp, heavy with mist, and his breath clouded as he waited for everyone to fan out into position around him.

Donovan led Spirit near GSN's vehicles and along the sides of the barns and trailers, searching for explosives.

Zak and Ranger took up position several paces behind him.

"Ranger," Zak said softly. "Mean face."

The dog widened his stance and his lips peeled back in a fair imitation of Cujo.

This was the moment of truth, and Ash steeled himself for what was to come. He reached into his pocket and took out the envelope that contained the arrest warrant, then stepped up onto the groaning porch and pounded a fist on the door.

The music abruptly cut off.

He pounded again.

Moments passed, and he dropped his free hand to his gun.

A gruff voice called, "Who the fuck's out there?"

"Sheriff's Office. I have a search warrant for the property." He decided to let them discover the arrest warrants on their own. He didn't want to give them any excuses to shoot.

The voice inside fell silent for a few seconds, and then the door swung open with a loud creak. The smell of pot and cigarette smoke wafted out, only slightly masking the chemical stench of harder drugs.

The man who stepped out wasn't either of the Ericksons and Ash hadn't ever seen him around town. He was short and stocky with a shaved head. Bands of tattoos wrapped his thick arms and a swastika stood proudly on the side of his neck. He regarded Ash with cold, hard eyes, then his gaze shifted to Zak and Ranger and his shoulders visibly tightened.

"You got no jurisdiction here, Sheriff."

"Last I checked, you're in my county." He shoved the search warrant at the guy's chest and tried to muscle through the door, but the skinhead wasn't moving.

His mouth twisted into a cruel smile as he dropped the paperwork without

looking at it. “Whatever you’re looking for, you ain’t gonna find it here.”

That was probably the truth. He wouldn’t be surprised if GSN had cameras all along their driveway and had seen the convoy of Sheriff’s Department vehicles coming.

Ash pushed harder against the door, but the man didn’t budge. “I suggest you step aside before I make you.”

The guy’s hand twitched towards his waistband.

Ash stepped back, drew his own weapon, and aimed it at the man’s chest. “Hands where I can see them.”

The skinhead hesitated, then slowly raised his hands in surrender. But he was still smiling, and the flash of yellowed teeth sent a skitter of fear down Ash’s spine.

“Ash,” Zak said under his breath and Ranger growled a warning.

He risked a quick glance back. Men had poured out of the trailers and surrounded Zak, Ranger, and his deputies. The only reason they hadn’t closed in was Ranger straining on the end of his lead, all but foaming at the mouth.

“We’ll give you one chance,” the skinhead said. “Leave now, or you won’t leave at all.”

Ash cursed under his breath.

This was a trap.

And he had walked right into it.

The skinhead moved suddenly, grabbing a gun from his waistband. He had it only halfway out when Ash pulled the trigger. The shot echoed through the forest and the man crumpled to the ground, clutching his chest.

The gunfire was all the signal that GSN needed. They swarmed, and the world exploded into chaos.

Ash dove off the porch, ducking behind a nearby woodpile as bullets whizzed past him. The sound of Ranger barking and Zak shouting orders filled his ears.

This was a battle he wasn’t sure they could win, and guilt tightened his chest. He had made a fatal mistake in underestimating GSN’s numbers.

Had he led his friends to slaughter?

No. He couldn’t afford to think like that, couldn’t let his emotions freeze him up. He had to come out on top, or else this homegrown terrorist group would only become bolder and more dangerous. They’d already shot up town once. There was no telling what they’d do next if he lost this fight.

He took a deep breath and peeked around the woodpile, scanning the area

for any sign of the enemy. He spotted a group of GSN members huddled behind a stack of hay bales, reloading their weapons.

Ash aimed his gun and opened fire, picking off several of the skinheads before they could react. Many of them were wearing body armor, and the shots only incapacitated them.

Zak shouted something unintelligible, and Ash turned to see him sprinting towards one of the trailers. He could tell from the way Zak was moving that he was injured, and that only made Ash more determined to finish this fight as quickly as possible.

He began to advance, firing his weapon as he went. The gunfire was deafening, and he could barely hear himself think. But he had to keep moving, keep fighting, or else he was dead. And so were his friends.

Movement at the edge of his vision caught his eye and he turned just in time to see a man charging towards him with a machete. He pulled the trigger. No hesitation. The man fell to the ground and didn't get back up. He hadn't been wearing body armor.

But there were more of them, too many to count. They were coming at him from all directions now, and Ash knew he was in trouble. He was just about to make a break for it when a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him down to the ground behind a rusted out Chevy Impala on cinder blocks.

It was Zak, his face streaked with blood and sweat. "You're bleeding."

Ash glanced down at himself. Blood soaked through his shirt behind his bullet proof vest. "Must have popped the stitches." He eyed Zak. "So are you."

"Bullet grazed my thigh." Zak propped himself up on the car and ran his hands over Ranger. The dog flinched at every pop of gunfire. "This is fucked."

"I thought they'd hole up in a standoff, not outright attack. I underestimated their stupidity."

"Yeah, well, I think we're the stupid ones right now. Your fucking deputies scattered like rodents when the shooting started." Reassured that his dog was okay, Zak checked his weapon. "How are you on ammo?"

Ash checked his gun, found it empty, and reloaded. "Don't have enough."

"Yeah, same. Shit."

"Have you seen Donovan?"

Zak's expression was grim. "No."

Ash cursed under his breath. "We have to find him before—"

A deafening wave of sound crashed through the trees, followed by an explosion that rocked the mountainside. Ash and Zak hit the ground on their bellies, covering their heads as a rain of debris showered over them. Ranger barked and hunkered underneath the car, his tail tucked between his legs.

“Found him,” Zak said.

Ash shook his head. The world had gone muffled save for the ringing in his ears. But as his hearing cleared, he realized it really had gone quiet.

GSN had stopped shooting.

He peeked around the car. Flames consumed what was left of the main cabin and at least four bodies of GSN members littered the ground. One of them was on fire and, given that he wasn't moving or screaming in pain, he was probably meeting his idol in hell right about now. The remaining survivors had apparently made a run for it.

With any luck, Pierce and the deputies left behind on the road would round them up.

“Fuck,” Ash said softly and holstered his gun as his gaze snagged on the tan and green uniform on one of the bodies.

Donovan stepped out from behind the cover of a trailer with Spirit trotting happily at his heels. His grin was malicious as he studied his handiwork. “Nice.”

Ash straightened and helped Zak to his feet.

“Jesus, Van,” Zak hissed, limping a little as he put weight on his non-metal leg. “Trying to blow us off the map?”

Donovan shrugged. “Worked, didn't it? They stopped shooting.”

Ash walked over to his deputy and knelt, gently rolling him over. His heart sank when he saw the man's blank eyes staring up at the sky.

Chief Deputy Walter Wright.

One of the only people in his department he trusted.

Wright's gun lay inches from his hand. He'd died from a bullet to the head, but judging by two bodies next to him, he'd taken his murderers with him.

“Fuck,” Ash said again and swiped at his burning eyes.

“He was a good man,” Donovan said softly.

“Yeah, he was.” Ash pushed to his feet. “I need to call the state police for backup. Hell, maybe the FBI, too.” He turned toward the deputies slowly emerging from their hiding spots. Anger burned a hole through his gut. These assholes ran and hid while Wright stood his ground and gave his life because

of it. “Someone cover Wright’s body and secure the perimeter. We have a long night ahead of us.”



Ten dead, including Gethin Erickson.

Six wounded, including Zak. Ash made him go to the hospital, then called Anna to ensure she didn’t hear the news through Steam Valley’s grapevine. She thanked him profusely and he had no doubt she rushed to the hospital to be at Zak’s side.

They’d be okay. If he had any doubts before about it, he now knew for sure they’d pull through this rough patch in their relationship.

Pierce and the deputies had managed to round up three runners on the road, one of whom was Isaiah Erickson. He was immediately arrested and taken to the county jail, where he was fingerprinted and booked on a host of charges.

Three hours after the shootout, Ash walked into an interrogation room at the prison and sat down across from the man who had tried to kill Rose multiple times. He was boiling with rage by that point, but somehow managed to keep his tone cool.

“Why Rose Galasso? Why did you, your brother, and Dale Shields shoot up her pub yesterday?”

Isaiah’s lip curled into a sneer. “You killed my brother. Why the fuck would I answer your questions?”

Ash sighed. Of course it couldn’t be easy. “No, your boneheaded friend, Jackson Duvall, killed Gethin when he decided to pull a gun on a law enforcement officer. Duvall’s dead, too, in case you’re wondering.”

“You had no right to be there.”

“I had a warrant. That gave me the right.” He laid out the pictures taken of the Mad Dog after the drive-by and of Rose’s injuries after her abduction. “It was you out at the old gas station that day, wasn’t it?” Now that he was face-to-face with the man, he was sure of it. “What was the plan there, huh? Shoot her up with heroin until she overdosed? Make her look like a drug addict so the sheriff wouldn’t look too closely at her death?”

Isaiah crossed his arms over his chest, making his chains rattle, but said

nothing in response.

“Well, I have a news flash for you. I’m not Jerry Tennison.” He leaned over the table and stared into the man’s eyes. “I look closely at every-fucking-thing. By tomorrow, I will know everything there is to know about you. I will know everyone you’ve ever spoken to or fucked or made deals with, and I will use it to bury you for hurting Rose and killing one of my best deputies.”

Isaiah scoffed. “I’m not afraid of prison.”

“You should be. I hear rats don’t survive long behind bars.”

“I’m not a rat.”

“Doesn’t matter. If I whisper the idea in the right ear and have enough circumstantial evidence to back it up...” He trailed off.

“Lawyer,” Isaiah said, and his mask cracked—only slightly, but Ash saw the fear underneath.

It was enough.

For now.

He gathered up the photos and walked out without another word. Donovan and Pierce waited for him in the hallway, along with Cal Holden.

He groaned when he spotted the lawyer. “Jesus, Holden. Don’t tell me you’re that asshole’s lawyer.”

“Nah. Told ya, I don’t defend skinheads.”

“So, what, you just hang out at prisons all night for fun?”

Cal grinned and tilted his head toward Donovan. “Van called me. He thought you might get something pertinent to the Galasso case.”

Ash shook his head. “Not tonight. We need to let Erickson stew for a while, then he might talk. *Might* being the operative word. He’s pissed enough about his brother, he could decide to clam up entirely.”

“He’ll talk. He’s a rat,” Cal said without a shred of doubt in his voice. “Been around enough of them to know. But how did *you* know GSN had one?”

Ash dragged a hand over his face. He was exhausted to the bone and his brain was starting to feel sluggish. He needed about a week of sleep to feel remotely human again. “ATF called me an hour ago. They’re pissed I fucked up an ongoing investigation for them and heavily implied they have an informant among my prisoners. I took a stab in the dark. The other guys we have are all either burned out drug addicts or just plain not smart enough to make that kind of deal with the feds. Process of elimination pointed me to

Isaiah.”

Cal nodded. “If he’s talked before, you can all but guarantee he’ll talk again if he thinks it will save his neck. Whoever his lawyer is, they will also see the value in a deal.”

“Good. But not tonight,” Ash repeated around a yawn. “No more work tonight. Let’s all go home.”

“Wow,” Donovan said and whistled. “Ash wants to stop working— and look!” He spread his hands. “The world hasn’t ended.”

“Fuck you, Van.”

He grinned. “I’m sure my sexy wife will as soon as I get home.”

In the parking lot, they all went their separate ways to their vehicles, but Pierce hung back. Ash stopped walking and studied the man. He watched Donovan and Cal go, then his hands started moving.

“You wanted to know about your deputies?”

Ash was still learning sign language and it took him a moment to process the question. “Yeah. What did you overhear?”

“The ones you left with me are mostly okay.” Pierce signed slowly so Ash could follow, but then pulled out his phone and started to type.

But I’d get rid of Matt Howell and Vince Houston if I were you.
They were bitching about how you fired Jenkins and think you
should leave Tennison’s cases alone.

Ash wasn’t surprised. “They’re part of the old guard. All three of them— Jenkins, Houston, and Howell—were hired by Tennison long before I joined the department.”

They’re worried about what you’ll find if you keep digging. I got
the feeling they’ve done some corrupt shit, too. Ross Black is
also iffy. He never said anything outright against you, but he
was agreeing with everything Howell and Houston said. You
definitely have a dirty house, Sheriff.

“I know.” He just hadn’t realized how filthy it was until tonight. He’d already canned all of the deputies that ran from the firefight, but he knew he’d be handing out more pink slips soon. “And I plan to do a thorough spring cleaning as soon as things calm down around here.”

chapter **thirty-two**

ROSE FELT the bed dip and sighed in relief as Ash's arms slid around her waist. "Is it over?"

He grunted a reply, curled around her and buried his face in her hair.

"Ash." She tried to roll over to face him, but he held her tighter. Her heart squeezed with a mixture of fear and worry. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"A good deputy died today." His voice was muffled by her hair. "Maybe one of the only good ones I had. I lost control of the situation and he paid for it with his life."

She tried to roll over again and, this time, he let her. His eyes, when he opened them, were wet with tears.

"Oh, Ash. I'm so sorry." She stroked her fingers over his beard. "But you shouldn't blame yourself."

"I lost control—"

She silenced him with a finger against his lips. "You can't be in control of all things all the time."

He kissed the pad of her finger, then pulled it from his lips and laced their hands together. "I have to be. When I lose control, bad things happen to the people I care about."

He couldn't truly believe that.

She sat up on her knees and scowled at him. "Oh, c'mon." When he only stared back, his stormy blue eyes serious, she blinked in shock. "Really? I never expected that kind of magical thinking from you."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "It's not magical. It's true." He also sat up and stared sightlessly at the wall over her shoulder. "I'm not— I'm not a good man, Rose."

She doubted that. Bad men didn't worry about whether they were good or

not. But it was true that he was nothing like she thought. She'd always thought of him as kind of shallow, with a one-track mind and a monochrome view of the world. But he was so much more complex than she'd given him credit for, with a darkness in him that she couldn't quite comprehend. She had always been drawn to danger, and maybe that was why she found him so attractive. That darkness was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

She took his hand in hers. His skin was rough, calloused from years of hard work. She traced his knuckles with her fingers, trying to soothe him.

"I'm not afraid of your darkness, Ash," she said softly. "I want to understand it."

He turned back to her, his eyes blazing with intensity. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"You said that to me once before, and I liked what I got." When he didn't respond, she leaned in and kissed him on the lips. "I want to see all of you, the good and the bad."

Ash hesitated, then pulled his hand away and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He combed both hands through his hair then locked them behind his neck and leaned forward with a groan that sounded a lot like pain.

But not a physical pain.

Rose waited, steeling herself for whatever he said next. Because she knew he would tell her—he was going to give her a peek behind his shields, and she didn't want to react the wrong way when he did.

"I was out of control as a kid," he said after several long minutes of silence. "Partied all the time, drank too much, did any drugs I could get my hands on. I was aimless, had zero ambition. Figured I didn't have to put in any effort because my future was already decided for me. I had a massive trust fund and, someday, Rawlings Ranch would be mine, too. I didn't give a fuck and had no intention of changing."

He took off his shirt and she noted the new bandage on his shoulder with spots of blood seeping through. She wanted to ask about it, but kept her mouth shut. There would be time for questions later. Right now, he needed to talk.

"But there was this girl," he said and balled up his shirt like he was trying to strangle it. "Amanda. Mandi. She was gorgeous. Smart. And she loved me despite the fact I was an entitled shithead. She was going places, you know? Had that go-getter attitude and the will to make her dreams happen. She was accepted to school in San Francisco, wanted to be a pediatrician and treat kids

with cancer. How selfless is that? I still wonder what she saw in me.”

Probably the same thing I see, Rose thought, but still didn’t speak.

“I was such a loser.” His abrupt laugh was full of bitterness. “I didn’t think so at the time, but looking back— Jesus. I was constantly goading Zak and Donovan into stupid things, getting them into trouble, never realizing that they didn’t have the shield of the Rawlings last name and legacy to hide behind. Zak got it easier because his family was well-respected, but Donovan...” He shook his head. “Would he have been accused of murder if not for all the shit I made him do over the years? I put him on Jerry Tennison’s radar and Tennison couldn’t get me or Zak, so...” He trailed off, shrugged. “He went after Donovan at the first opportunity.”

“What happened to Mandi?” Rose asked when he stopped speaking, realizing he was working his way around the story rather than through it.

Ash took a deep breath and finally met her gaze. “I killed her.”

“What?” she breathed. She’d been expecting him to say something else, something less horrifying. But the reality of his confession hit her like a bucket of ice-cold water. Nothing could have prepared her for it.

“I killed her.” His face was a mask of pain and sorrow. “She would come home between semesters to be with me. We’d party all summer, then she’d go back to school. I got her hooked on Oxy and when she went back to school, she couldn’t afford the pills anymore, so she turned to heroin. She lost her scholarship, ended up homeless. Her parents went down to the city to find her and bring her home, get her help... but all they did was bring her back to me and the pills. I kept taking her out to parties, feeding her more drugs. I thought her parents were being overprotective and ridiculous and I didn’t see the problem right up until the night I couldn’t wake her up. She kept asking for more and more pills and I kept giving them to her. She died in my arms.”

Tears streamed down his face as he spoke, his voice trembling with each word, and her heart ached for him.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, reaching out to take his hand once more. “That’s a heavy burden to carry.”

Ash shook his head and yanked his hand away. “I don’t deserve your sympathy. I made a choice that ruined her life, and it killed her. When I realized what I’d done, I got clean and joined the Sheriff’s Department. You called me a hypocrite once. I am. The worst kind.”

Rose didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t imagine the regret and self-

hatred he carried every day. “That’s why you know what withdrawal feels like.”

“Hell. Pure hell.” He winced. “I get why Mandi couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t have been able to either if I wasn’t so determined to make her death mean something. She was supposed to help people. Kids. I took that from the world, so I wanted to make sure I gave something back. I couldn’t go to med school. I didn’t have the grades or the patience. But I could be a cop and maybe protect people like I was supposed to protect her.” He pulled his badge off his hip and tossed it aside. It landed on the bed and bounced onto the floor. “But no matter how many people I help or lives I save, I’m still a fucking monster underneath who doesn’t deserve this town’s respect or trust. Maybe that’s why my deputies are all turning on me. They sense it in me.”

“No,” Rose said firmly. “You’re not a monster. You made a mistake as a kid. A terrible one, but that doesn’t make you a monster. You’re still a good person, Ash. I know it.”

He looked at her, surprise obvious in his bloodshot eyes. “How can you say that? I ruined your life, too. I helped tear your family apart when I *knew* what we were doing wasn’t right. And I didn’t speak up. You should hate me.”

She winced. Couldn’t stop it. For years, she had thought that way. He’d arrested her dad for her mom’s murder, so it was his fault she ended up an orphan. It was his fault she no longer had a family. She’d held on to that flame of anger for years and fanned it into hatred every time she saw him, without ever really analyzing it.

Was it Ash’s fault her mom was murdered?

Was it his fault her dad had been so wrapped up in shady dealings at the bar that he looked guilty?

Was it his fault her mom had multiple affairs and her parents’ marriage was falling apart?

No, no, and no.

Ash hadn’t been there for any of that. He’d only stepped into her life after everything had already crashed down around her. She’d blamed him because it was easier than blaming Pete or Harmony.

She sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. It was time to grow up. “You were just barely an adult yourself, in a new job, doing what you were told.” And, she realized now, probably still reeling from the grief of Mandi’s death. “I don’t hate you, Ash. I don’t think I ever really did. I was angry and hurt

and looking for someone to blame. You were the easiest target.”

Ash stared at her for a long moment, then closed his eyes as if in relief.

Rose squeezed his hand, trying to convey all of her complicated feelings in that one gesture. “But now I see you. I see the man who has dedicated his life to helping others, who has saved countless lives and made a difference in this world. I see the man who is working himself to exhaustion trying to make up for his mistakes. That’s the kind of man I want to be with, Ash. One who is flawed, but who strives to be better. One who knows what it’s like to fall and pick himself back up again.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her, tears still spiking his lashes. Then, slowly, he leaned in and kissed her. It was a raw kiss full of emotion—pain and need, longing and regret. She felt all of it, and she responded with equal passion. She wrapped her arms around him, tangling her fingers in the short hair at the back of his neck, and pulled him closer.

Ash deepened the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance to her mouth. She eagerly obliged, tasting the earthy flavor of his lips, the saltiness of his tears. She wanted to soothe away his pain as he had done for her the night before.

But he broke away, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and stared at her with reverence. “I don’t deserve you, Ambrosia.”

“Stop saying that,” she said. “You made mistakes as a teenager, but that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to be loved. You deserve love and happiness just like anyone else. And you didn’t kill Mandi. You didn’t force her to take the pills, right? She made that choice herself. You didn’t follow her to school and force the heroin on her, either. Those were her decisions.”

“But if I hadn’t—”

“She would’ve been introduced to drugs while in school. I mean, San Francisco? You really think she wouldn’t have tried drugs while there? C’mon.”

His eyes widened. “That’s not—”

“Shut up, Ash.” She held up a hand, stopping him. She wanted to make sure he heard this next part loud and clear. “You have this idealized, angelic version of Mandi in your head—and I’m sure she was amazing, but there also had to be something a little broken in her to push her toward the drugs to begin with. And even if you hadn’t come along, that broken bit would’ve surfaced eventually.”

He opened his mouth, but again, she stopped him, pressing a finger to his lips. “I’m not saying that to diminish her memory. I’m saying it to help you

see that you're not solely responsible for what happened. You were a part of it, yes, but it wasn't all on you. She probably would have found her way to the drugs with or without your help, so you can't keep blaming yourself. And now I get why you try to control everything and everyone around you, but shit happens, Ash. You can't control life. If you keep trying, you'll drive yourself crazy and push everyone you love away."

Ash stared at her for a long moment, then took her hand away from his mouth and cupped it to his cheek, leaning in. The gesture reminded her of her cat, when Fanta sought comfort.

"How did you get to be so wise?" he murmured.

She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I wouldn't go that far, but I'm starting to see my own mistakes a bit more clearly and I have so many regrets, too. Look at how I blamed you for my parents' fuck-ups for years. But I forgave you, so it's time to forgive yourself and move on."

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers. "You've forgiven me?"

"How could I not?" She smiled softly. "So now it's your turn."

"I don't know how."

"You let Mandi's memory be a source of strength, not a cause of pain, and you keep being the amazing cop that you are." She retrieved his badge from the floor, pressing it into his hand, closing his fingers over it. "Keep helping people. Keep making a difference. And..." Her heart pounded as she stepped closer and wound her arms around his neck. "You let me love you. Because I do, Ash. Somehow, you made me fall out of hate with you and into love."

chapter **thirty-three**

ASH SUCKED IN A SHARP BREATH.

She couldn't mean that.

But the look in her eyes told him she did.

It was pure adoration, love, trust—everything he had never allowed himself to feel for a woman, every huge, terrifying emotion growing inside his chest. All of it reflected back at him in her gaze.

He could have this. He could have her.

He was so unworthy of her love, but he could try to be.

“I—” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself to be brave, but the L word caught in his throat. “I want to make you happy.”

Rose leaned back to look at him. “You do?”

He nodded, his heart racing. “It scares the hell out of me, but I know that I want to be with you. I want to be the man you deserve.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as she took his face in her hands and pressed her forehead to his. “You already are.”

Ash felt something shift in his chest when she kissed him. Maybe it was the guilt that had been crushing him for so long finally beginning to lift. Or maybe it was the realization that he could love and be loved despite his past mistakes. Whatever it was, it made him feel lighter, freer. He pulled her close, savoring her soft curves.

Rose responded eagerly and he surged to his feet, shifting their positions, laying her down on the mattress. He explored her body with his hands and mouth until he found her already bare under her nightshirt, already wet for him. He shouldered her thighs apart and dove his hands under her ass, rising her to meet his lips. He wanted to taste her, lap her up until she came, screaming his name...

But she resisted.

She pulled on his hair until he was forced to look up.

“No,” she whispered. “Not your mouth. I want your cock inside me, now.”

His hips rocked forward of their own volition, pinching his aching cock against the bed. Who was he to say no to that?

Ash took a deep breath to steady himself, but the intoxicating scent of her filled his nose, and made him giddy. His restraint crumbled. He ripped his boots and pants off and pushed her thighs apart again with his hips. She was more than wet. She was soaked, all but sobbing for him. He positioned himself and she whimpered as he dragged his tip back and forth along her slit.

“Ash.” His name was nothing but a sexy plea on her lips.

He slipped into her wet, tight sheath and held there, trembling, his fingers clamped around her hips as he struggled for control. The head of his cock was buried so deep inside her, she pulled at him with each ragged breath she took. He wanted nothing more than to pound into her until he found release, but if he didn’t slow down, it wouldn’t last. He wanted to savor this.

He rocked back and shuddered at the sensation of her body sucking on him, trying to hold him. He slid almost out of her and then ground back in until his balls slapped against the sexy curve of her butt. Over and over, he worked himself in and out of her, watching the play of emotions on her face.

She reached down and clutched his ass, pulling him deeper. “More. Fuck me harder.”

His balls tightened in anticipation and heat gathered along his spine. His control was slipping. He wasn’t going to last, so he clamped his hands around her hips and began to piston into her.

She let out a gasping cry. “Ash! More.”

Yes. That was exactly what he wanted, too. Harder and faster, until the bed creaked and the headboard thunked on the wall. She trembled and pushed back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, the muscles of her pussy clenching tighter around his cock every time he pulled out. He was so close to the sharp edge of his own climax—too fucking close.

He reached out to grab a handful of her hair, giving it a harsh tug. “Are you going to come for me, Ambrosia? Are you going to come on my cock like a good girl?”

She moaned. “Yes. Ash, please.”

“No, you’re not. Not yet.” He released her hair and pulled out of her, watching her writhe on the bed as if in pain.

“Come back,” she whimpered.

“No.” He grinned and settled between her thighs, spreading her legs wide and reaching under her. He found her clit and began to roll it between his fingers, pushing down on it with his palm to give her a little extra pressure. She gasped and her hips jerked, but he held her in place. He leaned down and licked her hard little nub, and she went rigid.

She came apart with a scream.

Her body shook and her pussy throbbed around his fingers as he continued to press down on her. As soon as she settled, he lifted his head and pulled her back up to a sitting position. He hooked a hand behind her neck and brought her in for a kiss, making her taste her sweet juice and the salty muskiness of their combined sex.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tight, her lips moving eagerly with his.

“Ash, please,” she murmured between kisses.

He grinned. “Please what?”

She squirmed and, still quivering with aftershocks, rubbed her wetness against his throbbing shaft.

It almost killed him, but he pulled back. “You don’t already want more, do you?”

Her eyes flashed. “I want all of you.”

“My greedy little Rose. With petals so soft...” He stroked one hand between her legs, swirling his fingers through her wetness, while the thumb of his other hand brushed back and forth over her lower lip. She sucked the digit into her mouth, and a dark mischief glinted in her eyes moments before she bit down.

Hard.

His cock kicked against the bed in response, and he growled. “But with so many thorns. I adore that about you.” He rolled over, shifting their positions so that she was on top. “Ride me. Let me watch you.”

She dropped onto his length without protest, taking him deep, all the way to the root. Letting out a sexy little moan, she began to move, grinding her clit against his pelvis with each downstroke, ass flexing with each lift. He lifted himself enough to swirl his tongue around one nipple, sucking it in the way he knew drove her wild. Then he turned his attention to the other one

and relished the feel of her next orgasm building deep inside her. She whimpered and ground down on him, her breath coming in short gasps.

No. He didn't want it to be over yet.

He picked her off him and shifted positions again, dragging her up to her hands and knees so he could take her from behind. Her cry as he drove in deep tightened all of her muscles and nearly pushed him into his own orgasm.

"Ash..." She all but sobbed his name and her arms trembled. "I can't... I can't..."

"I'm here, Ambrosia. Right here with you. Let's fall together." He banded an arm around her waist and kept his strokes strong and deep, pushing on through the blazing pain in his shoulder. He wanted to feel it, use it to push himself over the edge. He was so close that he would come the moment she did.

He ground his teeth together and tried to hold on, but when she let out a breathless scream, oblivion rushed over him with the force of a hurricane. As the pleasure wracked his body, he leaned in and bit the back of her neck. She let out another little cry and a primal satisfaction filled his chest.

He'd left his mark.

She was his.

He released her neck and buried his face in the crook of her shoulder, whispering her name into her skin. She collapsed onto the bed, sated and sweaty. His arms felt like noodles, and he eased himself down, careful not to crush her with his weight as he rolled to his side and dragged her limp body with him.

He chuckled. "Are you still alive?"

She exhaled a dreamy breath. "Barely." She laid a hand on his chest, and he covered it with his own.

Rose fell asleep fast, but he didn't mind. He couldn't remember the last time he was this content. His shoulder ached and he knew he should move, but he didn't want to wake her. He wanted to hold her like this—his heart beating against her palm, all of his senses filled with her—until the end of time.

His eyes drooped and he felt himself drifting.

No.

Wait.

He had one thing left to do to ensure she felt completely safe again.

Prying his eyes open, he groped for his phone on the nightstand.

chapter **thirty-four**

THE NEXT MORNING, as Ash guided the Tahoe into the parking lot in front of the Mad Dog, Rose's face lit up just as he hoped it would.

All of Redwood Coast Rescue was there—Zak and Anna sweeping up the broken glass; Sawyer and Veronica painting the new door the same bright, deep red as the old; Donovan and Sasha hanging the new sign; and Pierce and Cal filling in bullet holes in the brick wall with mortar.

“What...?” Rose jumped out of the car and pressed her hands over her mouth as tears overflowed her eyes. “What are you guys doing?”

“You're early,” Zak grumbled and limped a little as he straightened with a dustpan full of glass in his hand. He dumped it in the trashcan beside him. “You were supposed to bring her by after we finished.”

Ash shrugged. “She was impatient to get here and assess the damage.”

Rose whirled on him. “You knew about this?”

“It was his idea,” Anna said and stopped sweeping when Zak slid an arm around her. She leaned into him, and he pressed a kiss to her temple.

They were okay again.

They would *always* be okay, Ash realized and his relief at the sight of them together morphed into wonder. No matter what life threw at them, what arguments they had, what sorrows befell them, Zak and Anna would always figure it out. They'd survive. They'd thrive.

Together.

He glanced over at Rose. Could he have that with her?

His sister grinned at him, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Of course she knew exactly what he was thinking—she always knew. It was the curse of twindom.

He ignored Anna and lightly touched the nearly faded bruise on Rose's

cheek. “I didn’t want you to be reminded of what happened. I wanted it erased, so you could start fresh.”

“Ash!” She squealed his name and flung herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing him repeatedly on his lips, nose, eyelids, forehead.

Okay, this reaction was even better than he’d hoped.

He laughed and let her rain her love down on him, soaking it all in, enjoying every second of it until someone cleared their throat. He let Rose slide down his body until her feet touched the ground, but kept an arm around her as they faced their friends.

“So,” Cal said after a long moment and wiggled a finger in the air between them. “You two...?”

“Yes,” Ash said. The word came out more forceful than he’d intended, but he wanted to make damn sure the panty-dropping playboy knew she was off-limits now.

Cal grinned. “I saw that coming. Anyone else see that coming?”

“We all did,” Donovan and Zak said at the same time.

“Even me,” Sawyer added.

“Oh, ignore them.” Sasha stepped forward and looped her arm through Rose’s. “Come see what we did inside. I hope you like it.”

“We had to move a few things around...” Anna took her other arm and, together, the two women guided her toward the pub’s door. She smiled over her shoulder at Ash, shining as bright as a sunbeam with happiness, lighting up the foggy, gray day.

Donovan snorted. “Okay, wipe that goofy look off your face and get your ass over here. I need help with this plywood.”

Ash shook his head slightly. He did have a goofy look on his face. He could feel it. He crossed to the sheet of plywood leaning along the wall of the wheelchair ramp. “Didn’t you call the glass guys?”

“Yeah, but you wanted a custom window with the Mad Dog logo on it. That’s going to take some time. Until then, we have plywood or plastic. And plywood is safer.”

Ash would never argue with anything that made Rose safer. It was already going to be hard enough letting her come back to work. He picked up one side of the plywood and helped wrestle it up the ramp to the window. He opened his mouth to ask Veronica—since she was the closest person with sight—if they had the whole window covered, but she wasn’t paying

attention to them. She stared across the street and the color drained out of her already pale face.

Ash turned to see what had frightened her and scowled when he spotted Connelly Davis standing there, watching them.

Veronica's reaction coupled with the fact the writer conveniently disappeared right before the drive-by was enough to set off all of Ash's warning alarms. He dropped the sheet of plywood.

"Hey!" Donovan fumbled the other side. "Ash, what the fuck?"

Ash ignored him and strode across the road. "Who are you?"

To his credit, Connelly didn't flinch back even though Ash had several inches on him. Unperturbed, he met Ash's gaze. "I already told you, Sheriff."

"Bullshit. You expect me to believe you're some hotshot bestselling author who just blew into town to finish a book?"

"Would you like to call my agent? I can give you his number."

Ash let the snarky question slide. "And you just happened to show up while all this shit"—he motioned back toward the bar—"is happening in my town?"

"That's exactly right. I don't know what all this shit is and I'm questioning my choice of vacation spots."

"Vacation? I thought you were finishing a book?"

That finally broke through his facade of calm. Just a bit, but Ash saw the flash of uncertainty in his eyes as his gaze strayed back to Veronica.

Ash stepped into his line of sight again and crowded him, backing him into the brick wall of the hair salon. "Who are you really and why are you here? And you better think long and hard about your answer, because if you have *anything* to do with these attacks on Rose—"

"I don't." Connelly exhaled in defeat and dug his wallet out of his laptop case. He handed Ash a Washington State driver's license that listed his name, Connelly James Davis, and gave his address as Seattle. "I *am* an author, and I *am* finishing a book, but I could do that anywhere. I came here for Veronica. Vee," he called to her, and his voice changed, softened. "Tell the trigger-happy sheriff you know me."

Ash looked over at her. "Do you know him?"

"We grew up together." She still looked like she'd seen a ghost, but now seemed resigned about it. She pulled her sleeves over her hands before crossing her arms defensively. "What are you doing here, Connelly?"

He broke away from Ash's grip and started toward her, but stopped

several feet away when Zak and Donovan blocked his path. He glowered at the two men, but quickly turned his attention back to Veronica. “Your dad’s worried about you. *I’m* worried about you. We let you run away and hide, but we want you to come home.”

She shook her head. “I am home.”

“Vee.” He tried to get closer, but again Zak and Donovan blocked his path and, this time, Cal joined them. Pierce and Sawyer flanked Veronica, like they planned to whisk her to safety if given the signal.

Connelly growled in annoyance. “Who the fuck are these guys?”

“Leave,” she said so softly it was almost inaudible. “Please.”

“You heard her,” Donovan said.

“Bye,” Zak added.

Connelly glared at them for several seconds, but then looked at Veronica. Tears tracked silently down her cheeks. He held his hands up and backed away. “It’s time to stop hiding now, Vee. I’m not letting you disappear again.” He turned and shot a narrow-eyed glare at Ash before walking away.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Veronica said and hurried away in the opposite direction of Connelly.

Nobody moved for a moment, until Zak’s phone rang, and he stepped away to answer it.

Donovan frowned at Veronica’s retreating back. Her head was down, shoulders hunched. “Is this something we need to be worried about?”

“Not sure yet.” Ash watched as Connelly tossed the computer bag into the backseat of a sleek BMW X7 and slid behind the wheel. Anyone could fake a driver’s license. He’d run a background check as soon as he was back in the office, to make sure the author was who he claimed to be.

“One problem at a time,” Zak said, ending his call and coming back to the group. “Ash, you got your meeting, but you need to be in LA this afternoon.”

Ash’s heart clenched with dread as he looked toward the open door of the Mad Dog. Things had been going so well that, for a few hours, he’d forgotten Rose still wasn’t safe.

But, hopefully, after this meeting, she would be.

LA was a ten hour drive. Even if he jumped in the car now, he wouldn’t make it. He pulled out his phone and navigated to his favorite travel app. “I’ll see if I can book a flight.”

“No need,” Zak said. “Quentin is sending a plane.”

Donovan whistled. “Can you imagine having that kind of money? Just

snap your fingers and send a plane anywhere in the world? Shit.”

Ash hesitated.

“Hey.” Zak grasped his shoulder. “Go. We’ll make sure she gets home safe.”

Ash started toward his truck. “If I’m not back tonight, have Mike Conti stay at my house with her.”

“We’ll handle it. Go and finish this.”

chapter **thirty-five**

ASH DROVE HOME and packed a duffle bag, then changed into his uniform before going to the airport. He didn't know exactly what waited for him in LA, and wanted to look as official as possible.

The private plane was small, a cushy eight-seater. It was surreal stepping off the jet in LA and having a car and driver waiting for him right there by the hangar. He watched the city pass in the golden light of the setting sun. He'd only been here a couple of times—once doing the tourist thing with his parents and Anna when they were kids, and once for a LEO conference.

How was this city, with its endless concrete, golden sun, and tropical palms, in the same state as the mountains and huge trees in his cool, mist-shrouded county? The two places looked like they belonged on different planets.

He much preferred his version of California.

The driver left him at the entrance of a hotel that looked to be having some kind of black-tie gala. He'd never felt so out of place anywhere in his life.

A tall blond man waited in the lobby, chatting with a group of guests in glittering gowns and tuxedos.

Tucker Quentin.

Ash would recognize him anywhere. During Quentin's short-lived movie career as a heartthrob in the early 2000s, he'd starred in a couple of Ash's favorite horror movies. He'd always played the dumb blond jock who died in the most ironically hideous way.

He was older now, of course—had to be nearing forty—and carried himself like a man who was comfortable in his own skin. He was surprisingly muscular with wide, heavy shoulders, but his tailored dark gray tux

downplayed that fact.

Quentin spotted him, excused himself from his group of admirers, and strode over, holding out a hand. His smile was straight and perfectly white, made for Hollywood.

“You must be Sheriff Rawlings.”

Ash accepted the handshake. “Mr. Quentin. I appreciate your help in this matter.”

“Please, call me Tuc. It’s not a problem.” He held out an arm, indicating they should walk. “Any friend of Zak’s is a friend of mine. How is he?”

They stepped into an empty room, and his demeanor shifted, almost like he dropped the mask of civility. Underneath, Ash glimpsed a warrior—same as Zak or Donovan. While he’d known Quentin’s many businesses included private military contractors, he hadn’t expected Quentin to be one himself.

“Okay, no bullshit. How is Zak really?” Tuc asked again, his tone less cultured and more direct. He shook his head and crossed to the bar along one wall. “I still regret we didn’t get him out of there before he lost his leg.”

“He’s okay.”

Quentin arched a brow. “Last I heard, he was drinking himself to death.” He held up a decanter of golden liquid. “Drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m technically on duty.”

“So am I.” He eyed the decanter, swirling the liquid inside. “Truth be told, I’d rather be up to my ass in mud with my men, hunting bad guys, but duty called and I’m here schmoozing as the billionaire philanthropist instead. But fuck it. I need to be drunk to get through these galas nowadays.” He nodded and poured himself a healthy glass, then motioned with it to the arrangement of leather furniture in the corner. “Have a seat, Sheriff. Your interview subject will be here shortly.”

“You can call me Ash.” He chose a chair and sank into it. “Duran’s coming here?”

“Luckily, I didn’t have to pull any strings at all. He had already RSVP’d to this thing, so I just had my people arrange a meeting.” Tuc lounged back in the other chair and balanced his glass on his knee. “So Zak’s really okay?”

“Yeah. There have been some bumps in the road, but for the most part, he’s doing great. He’s not drinking anymore. He married my sister, and they adopted two girls. He’s running a team of tactical K9s and their handlers now.”

Tuc sat back and closed his eyes, exhaling softly. “Thanks, I needed to

hear that. So often what my men and I do ends badly. We had one that just —” He stopped. Shook his head and took a long drink. “Anyway, it’s good to hear a happy ending for once.”

Ash studied the man. Tucker Quentin was nothing like he’d expected. Under the polish, he looked tired, beaten down by the horrors of the world. He could use his obscene amounts of money to insulate himself from those horrors, but instead, he walked into them and tried to fix them.

And in doing so, he’d helped rescue Zak.

Ash’s respect for the guy ratcheted up several notches. “I know my sister would want me to thank you for going over there and digging Zak out of that hellhole. You brought him home and gave her a second chance at her first love. And you gave me one of my oldest friends back. Even if he came home a little busted, it was better than him not coming home at all. So thank you.”

A smile ticked up the corner of Tuc’s mouth. Not the Hollywood smile, but a real one. “I imagine neither one of us hear that enough in our lines of work.”

Ash chuckled. “That’s the truth.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my men. It will mean as much to them as it does to me.” He took another drink. “Why do you want to talk to Chet Duran?”

Since Tuc had been so straightforward with him, Ash decided not to mince words. “I suspect he’s funding a neo-Nazi group in my county. And potentially behind multiple attacks on a local businesswoman.”

Tuc studied his glass, considering. “Huh.”

Something in his tone tweaked Ash’s cop instincts. “You know him, right? What’s your read?”

“Know is a strong word,” Tuc said after a moment and finished his drink. “We’re acquaintances. He shows up to my galas to up his social cred. I sometimes go to his if I’m not busy and it’s for a good cause. The Montgomery-Duran family are everything I hate about this part of my life—selfish, entitled, and massive suck-ups to anyone they think can pull them up another rung on the social ladder. Chet’s never had to work a day in his life. He suckles the teat of his parents’ empires and thinks he’s somehow superior because of it. But the operation you’re describing? That’s ambitious. I think he’s too lazy to pull something like that off.”

Ash thought it through. “He could just be the wallet. The money behind the attacks.”

“He could.” Tuc’s phone gave a discreet buzz, and he pulled it out of his

jacket pocket, checked the screen. “Looks like we’re about to find out. He’s here.”

Ash stood up as the door opened and revealed Chet Duran. He was in his fifties and of average height, but still in good shape, with the honed body of a much younger man. Probably one of the perks of being an heir to a fitness empire. He wore a perfectly tailored tux, and his streaky blond hair was slicked back, giving him an air of confidence that bordered on arrogance. He walked in, his shoulders squared, and his eyes darting around the room, assessing everything and everyone.

“Mr. Duran,” Tuc said, standing up and walking over to him. “Thank you for coming.”

“Quentin. Always happy to support a good cause.” Chet nodded, his eyes flickering over to Ash, and then back to Tuc. “What’s this meeting about?”

Tuc gestured to Ash. “This is Sheriff Ash Rawlings of Lost County up north. He has some questions for you regarding the recent attacks in his jurisdiction.”

“Attacks?” Chet’s lips twisted into a smirk. “Where even is Lost County? I’ve never heard of it.”

Ash stepped forward and kept his voice low and measured as he said, “We have reason to believe you may be funding a domestic terrorist group called the Golden State Nationalists.”

The smirk remained on his lips, but his eyes gave him away. He was panicking. “I’m sorry, Sheriff, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the crap, Duran,” Ash said. “We’ve linked your financial transactions to the group.”

“What?” Under the outrage, he seemed genuinely puzzled. “I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about, Sheriff. I’m a philanthropist. I donate to many causes, but I would never support anything as despicable as white supremacy.”

Tuc spoke up. “Chet, I’ve known you for a while now, and I have to say, I’m disappointed to learn about these accusations. I might have to reconsider some of my business dealings with your family.”

Chet scowled, his fists clenching at his sides. “I’m not involved with this. I don’t know who this sheriff thinks he is, but—”

“What do you know about the recent attacks on a woman named Rose Galasso?” Ash interrupted.

“Galasso?” Chet’s indignation vanished and in its place was an

expression of absolute devastation. “I-I need to sit down.” His legs wobbled as he walked over and sank into one of the chairs. He dragged a hand over his face. “That’s a name I never thought I’d hear again.”

Ash dropped into the chair opposite him. “How do you know it?”

“I...” He glanced at Tuc. “I had an affair with a woman by that name. Harmony Galasso. It was...thirteen or fourteen years ago.”

Finally they were getting somewhere. “How did you meet Harmony?”

“At a bar in San Francisco. She was beautiful. It was—” His voice caught. “For me, it was love at first sight. I’d never experienced anything like that before. I didn’t care that she was married.”

“Are you aware that Harmony Galasso was murdered?”

“Yes,” Chet said softly. “Her husband found out about our affair and killed her for it. I heard about it on the news a week after it happened. I was out of the country at the time, if you want to check. Italy. I didn’t know why Harmony wasn’t answering my calls until I got back to the States and saw the news.”

Ash nodded, taking in the new information. The man was actually heartbroken. It was written all over his face. “I’m sorry for your loss, but we have reason to believe that Rose Galasso, Harmony’s daughter, is being targeted because of you and your connection to GSN.”

Chet shook his head. “I told you, I’ve never had anything to do with neo-Nazis. I’m not that kind of man. Some of my best friends are black. If they got money from me, it was under false pretenses. The only person I’ve given money to up there is Harmony’s daughter. I set up an account so Rose would be taken care of. I know that’s what Harmony would’ve wanted.” He pushed out of his chair. “We’re done here.”

After Chet stormed out, Ash sat back in his seat and frowned in thought. Rose had never mentioned Duran or the money he’d supposedly sent her, and she would have if she thought it was somehow tied to the attacks.

Tuc walked over to pour himself another drink, then leaned against the bar and took a sip from his topped-off glass. “Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“I don’t know. None of it is adding up.” Ash scrubbed his hands over his face then pushed to his feet. “But I gotta get back.”

“My jet’s still waiting for you at the airport.” Tuc held out a hand. “It was good meeting you, Ash.”

“Likewise.” He accepted the handshake. “I have to say, you’re not what I

expected.”

Tuc chuckled. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

chapter **thirty-six**

ROSE SAT in the middle of Ash's bed with Connelly Davis' new book open on her lap. Dante snoozed at her side and Fanta was curled up on her legs, purring softly. Dad wanted her to read the book before she gave it to him so they could discuss it, but she was having trouble concentrating on the words.

She picked up her phone, but sighed when she didn't see any notifications. Ash should be landing soon. He'd called almost an hour ago to let her know he was back on the plane and on his way home, but he wouldn't say more, and she was itching to know what he'd learned.

She just wanted this to be over. She wanted her pub back. Her life.

Finally, she gave up on the book and marked her page with the inner flap of the dust jacket. Dante lifted his head and looked at her as she picked up the cat and scooted off the huge bed.

"Let's go see what Mike's doing." Still holding Fanta, enjoying the deep rumbles of his purr, she walked out into the living room.

At first glance, everything seemed normal—the two chairs, the missing couch, Ash's ever-growing stack of files on the coffee table.

Except Mike wasn't there.

She opened her mouth to call out, but then heard the front door creak slightly as it opened.

This wasn't right. Nobody should be here, and Mike had no reason to go outside.

Heart in her throat, she silently backtracked to the guest room and shut the door behind her. She set Fanta down, then crossed to the nightstand where she'd hidden her gun that first night here. She grabbed the ammo and loaded it in easy, practiced movements. Her dad was a hippie, all about peace and love—but Pete Galasso had also refused to let his daughter grow up at the

base of Murder Mountain without learning how to handle a gun.

She clicked off the safety and eased out into the hallway.

Voices. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but they were both men.

"Mike?"

The voices stopped.

"Is everything okay?" she asked from the hallway, then moved without making a sound across the living room toward the foyer where Mike and the other man were.

"Everything's fine," Mike called. "It's just another deputy stopping in to check on us."

Liar. His voice was strained, raspy and uneven with nervousness.

It wasn't over.

After everything Ash had sacrificed to keep her safe, she was still in danger—and that danger had finally come for her.

A wave of exhaustion washed through her. For a split-second, she thought about laying down her weapon and just letting whatever was about to happen, happen. But then she thought of Ash coming home and finding her body in his living room. Or, worse, never finding her at all. It would destroy him. He'd work himself to death looking for answers.

No. She couldn't let that happen. She wasn't giving up.

She sucked in a breath and let it out in a calming whoosh before swinging into the foyer with the gun raised.

Mike stood there with the door wide open. A shadow loomed out on the porch.

Cold air seeped inside and swirled around them, raising goosebumps on her skin. Or maybe that was just her fear. "What are you doing?"

Mike glanced back at her with guilt written all over his face. "I'm so sorry," he said softly. "I like you, Rose. I do, but I need the money. I have gambling debts. If I don't pay them off, I'll lose everything."

Her heart bungeed to her stomach and back up into her throat, but she was proud that the gun didn't wobble in her hand. "What money? I don't have any money."

"He says you do." Mike opened the door wider, letting the shadow on the porch come inside.

The first thing she registered was the gun.

The man had a gun.

And... she knew him.

He wore a black mask with the GSN skull printed on it, but it didn't matter. She'd recognize that beard anywhere.

She knew him.

She'd trusted him.

She'd trusted them both.

"Oh my God," she breathed.

A dog-shaped bullet streaked past her, Dante snarling as he charged her attackers. Mike grabbed for his service weapon as Dante flew toward him, teeth bared.

He was going to kill the dog. He was going to—

Rose didn't think.

She pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed in the small space, leaving her ears ringing. For a heartbeat, nobody moved.

Then Mike staggered back, his eyes impossibly wide in shock as blood bubbled from his mouth. He sank down the wall, leaving a streak of blood behind him. He died before he hit the floor.

Dante, realizing Mike was no longer a threat, changed course and went for the other man, but he was ready for it. He already had his weapon aimed.

She held up a hand. "No, wait—"

And the gun went off.

The bullet hit Dante in the chest, and he fell to the ground with a thud.

"No!" With tears streaming down her face, she swung her gun toward the man, but she was moving too slow. He was ready for it and grabbed her arm, twisting until the gun fell out of her hand. He kicked it away and pressed his own weapon to her temple.

"I'm sorry, Rosie," he said, his familiar voice muffled by the mask. "I really am."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"I didn't want to." He almost sounded regretful. "But you have something that belongs to me."

She gritted her teeth, hating the way her body trembled with fear. "What's that?"

"The pub."

chapter **thirty-seven**

THE JET HAD JUST LANDED when Ash's phone rang.

"Rawlings," he answered without looking at the ID.

"You need to get back here," Zak said, his voice tight, urgency radiating from every word. "Now."

A chill scraped down his spine. "What happened?"

"Mike Conti's dead."

The dread morphed into a hot sizzle of panic. "Where's Rose?"

"Gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"Hang on." There was suddenly a lot of noise on Zak's end—barking, shuffling, voices.

Ash held his breath and prayed. He grabbed his bag and ran to the front of the plane, pacing the aisle as it finished coasting to a stop.

Gone.

Not dead.

Zak wouldn't have minced words if she were dead, too.

He hoped.

God, please, not dead.

He exited the jet as soon as the flight attendant opened the door, jumping onto the stairs before the ground crew had them locked in place. He clambered down them and broke into a run across the tarmac.

By the time Zak returned to the phone, he was out of the small regional airport and racing across the short-term lot to his Tahoe.

"It looks like Mike was in on it," Zak said. "Your security system recorded the whole thing. A man in a black GSN mask knocked on the door and Mike let him in."

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! I trusted that bastard.”

Were any of his deputies trustworthy? Pierce had told him he needed to clean house, but he was starting to think he needed to burn the whole house down and start again.

“Yeah, well, he got a bullet in his heart for his efforts,” Zak said. “Rose shot him.”

Ash staggered to a halt. “She... *what?*” He hadn’t even known she had a gun.

“She shot Mike to protect Dante. When we find her, remind me to tell her she’s a badass.” There was another pause, some muffled voices and shuffling in the background, then he came back to the line. “I’m mobilizing RWCR. Donovan, Spirit, Pierce, and Raszta are searching in town, starting at the pub. Anna and I are headed into the woods around your house with Ranger and Winston. Sawyer’s coordinating at base. I’ll lose signal on the mountain, so you’ll want to contact him, and he can radio me. How far out are you?”

If RWCR was mobilizing, then they believed Rose was still alive.

Ash dove into the driver’s seat of his truck, tossed his bag in the back, and cranked the engine. It was usually a forty-minute drive from the airport to Steam Valley. He flipped on his siren and peeled out of the lot. “I’ll be there in twenty and I’ll get deputies there to help with the search. Where is Dante?”

Zak’s voice was grim. “The masked asshole shot him before he took off with Rose.”

A vise clamped around Ash’s windpipe. “Is the dog...?” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Zak understood anyway. “We don’t know. Your security camera showed him getting up after they left and wandering out into the woods.”

“Zak.” His voice broke. “Find her. Find them both.”

“We’re on it, brother. Get here.”

Less than twenty minutes later, he pulled up to Redwood Coast Rescue as a cold rain drizzled from the dark sky.

Sawyer was in the new command center in front of a computer setup that was like something out of a spy movie. Zelda waited patiently between his feet, watching his every move. Despite his blindness, he navigated between the computers effortlessly and juggled the many various elements of the search so that it ran like clockwork.

The biggest screen on the wall showed a map of the area sectioned into

blocks. Some were filled in green, some yellow, but most were red.

“Sawyer,” Ash called so as not to startle him. He shook rain off his jacket. “What’s the situation?”

Sawyer glanced toward his voice and held up a finger. He tapped his earpiece and told someone to move on to search grid 1C, then pulled the earbud out, letting it dangle over his shoulder. “We’ve searched the woods, but so far the dogs haven’t found her scent and the people haven’t found any signs of her. We’re expanding the grid now.”

“What about Dante?”

“Zak and Ranger picked up his scent from your house and tracked him through the woods to Bear Gulch Road, then lost him.”

Ash cursed under his breath. “Bear Gulch Road? That goes up the mountain.”

And it was where Harmony’s body had been found. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Which is why we’re expanding the search grid.” Sawyer grabbed the earbud and shoved it back into his ear, replying to someone on the radio before typing a command on his braille keyboard. A section of the map changed from red to green.

Ash stepped over to study the map. “What does all this mean?”

“Green is searched and cleared,” Sawyer said. “Yellow means searched but with potential hits. Red is unsearched.”

There was a lot of red on that map. “Fuck.”

Where was she?

“We will find Rose,” Sawyer said without a hint of doubt. But Ash heard what he wouldn’t say—that she might not be alive when they did.

Jesus, his chest hurt. He rubbed a hand over his heart.

He wanted to go out to every one of those red squares himself. He wanted to rip the county apart, rock by rock, tree by tree, until she was safe in his arms again. But he wasn’t trained in search and rescue—at least, not like the guys of Redwood Coast Rescue. He had to trust them to do what they were good at.

He’d help more by doing what he was good at—being a cop.

Ash spun away from the map. “Keep me updated.”

“Where are you going?” Sawyer called after him.

“The prison.”



“Why Rose?”

Isaiah Erickson’s lip curled into a sneer. “Didn’t that dumbass Crusher already tell you? It was Duran’s order.”

“Yeah, except that’s a lie. I flew to LA and spoke with Chet Duran. He doesn’t know you or GSN. So who is giving you orders to kill Rose?”

Isaiah stayed mulishly silent. He wasn’t talking.

This was a waste of time.

Ash strode out of the room and paced the hallway outside. There had to be a way to get Erickson to talk. Just had to find the right strings to pull, buttons to push, but he needed more information first. He grabbed his phone and saw several missed calls from Sawyer.

Heart drumming painfully, he tapped Sawyer’s name and raised the phone to his ear. “Did you find her?”

“No. Shit, I didn’t think—sorry.”

He refused to feel disappointment. They *would* find her. “It’s fine. What did you need?”

“You ran out of here before I could tell you what I found while you guys were getting shot up yesterday. The money connection between Duran and GSN? It doesn’t flow in a straight line. Which you gotta expect, especially if he doesn’t want anyone tying it back to him. But here’s the weird part—it went from a personal account with Rose’s name on it into a business account for the Mad Dog Pub.”

Ash stopped pacing. “What?”

“Yeah, really weird, right? This account had millions of dollars in it until yesterday. Almost ten. I started thinking if Rose knew about that money, would she be living in a shabby apartment above her hole-in-the-wall bar and driving a nine-year-old car that breaks down if you sneeze at it? Doubtful. So I kept digging. Duran deposited the money in larger amounts to Rose’s account, then smaller amounts were transferred out into the business until that first account was empty, then even smaller amounts went out to the Erickson brothers and GSN. But the GSN transfers are new. The money has been going into this funnel since Harmony’s murder, but the transfers out to GSN only started recently.”

Jesus. Duran hadn't been lying about sending money to help care for Rose. "How recently?"

"Uh... about five years ago."

So the transfers to GSN started when Rose turned twenty-one and took over the Mad Dog. Another piece clicked into place, but Ash still couldn't see the whole picture yet. "Sawyer, who controlled the pub in the eight years between when Pete was arrested and Rose came of age to run it?"

"Good question. Hang on."

Ash heard the clicking of a keyboard in the background, then silence. It stretched for a long time, and he bounced on the balls of his feet with impatience. "Sawyer?"

Finally, he came back. "Looks like the pub transferred to Rose's aunt, but Rainbow didn't have much to do with the day-to-day operations."

"So who did?"

"Uh... yeah, she hired the chef to manage it. Marcel Dupont." Sawyer went silent, then whistled. "And guess who has a lengthy criminal record and family ties to GSN? The Ericksons are his fucking cousins."

And there was the string he had to pull. "Where's the money now? Still in the pub's account?"

"Far as I can tell, it was all transferred offshore yesterday."

And *that* was the button to push to get Isaiah talking. "Send everything you found to my email." He rattled it off.

"Done," Sawyer said.

"I owe you one." Ash hung up and shoved back into the interrogation room. He sank into the chair across from Isaiah and leaned back like he didn't have a care in the world. "Did you know Duran sent nearly ten million dollars to help take care of Rose after her mother's murder? He's a smarmy, entitled piece of shit, but I have to say this for him, he really did love Harmony."

Isaiah's eyes narrowed, but he still didn't speak.

"Your cousin told you it was less, didn't he? He told you he was giving GSN everything because he only wanted the bar when you killed Rose."

"That's not—" Isaiah bit off what he'd been about to say and shook his head.

"Not true?" Ash finished for him and took out his phone to access his email. He pulled up the relevant documents and set the phone on the table so Isaiah could see the screen. "See, I have the paper trail to prove it. In reality,

Marcel was pocketing all that money for himself. He needed Rose dead to hide his theft because with me looking into her mother's murder again, that bank account was sure to come to light. Isn't it convenient for him that you're in here facing a life sentence, your brother is dead, and so are most of your GSN friends? It's almost like he knew you'd fail in your attempts to kill Rose and I'd catch you, put you away. Solves a big problem for him, doesn't it? Now he doesn't have to share the money."

Isaiah clenched his teeth so hard, Ash could hear the man's molars grinding.

"And there's only one thing standing in his way of millions: Rose herself. He didn't actually expect you'd succeed, so he must've had a plan to end this. How would he do it? Where would he take her?"

Isaiah's gaze dropped to the phone again. "I want a deal."

"She'll be dead before your lawyer can get here, and if she dies, your information becomes worthless. You won't get a deal."

Isaiah sat back and crossed his arms. "Then I'm not talking."

"You're willing to rot away in prison—probably in solitary because your life will be in danger when the other prisoners figure out you've been snitching to the feds—while Marcel gets to disappear with millions to some tropical country without an extradition treaty?" Ash nodded and picked up his phone, straightening away from the table. "That's one way to handle this. Me, personally, I'd be pissed. Family or not, I'd want revenge. But..." He shrugged and turned to the door. "I guess you're a better person than I am."

His hand was on the knob when Isaiah spoke up. "Wait."

Ash glanced back.

Isaiah was grinding his teeth again. After several beats of silence, he said, "Make him pay and I'll tell you everything."

chapter **thirty-eight**

IT WAS MARCEL.

Rose couldn't believe it, but now that she was faced with the truth, all the pieces fell into place. He left early the night of the first attack, stating that business was too slow for him to stick around. He left again right before the drive-by, citing the same reason.

He'd known what was about to happen both times.

Even in the hospital, when he and Rainbow had visited her, he'd been the one to suggest she take a walk in the hospital's garden. He'd sent that thug after her. It was pure luck Ash had stopped by when he did, or else she would've been there alone and weak and unable to defend herself.

Easy pickings.

But his thugs had failed all three times, so now he was here to finish it himself.

After leaving Ash's, he drove her up the mountain and stopped in front of a tiny A-frame. They were up high enough that snow formed big pillows around the cute house. The place looked so innocuous, like hundreds of other vacation rentals in the area, but dread twisted her stomach into knots.

If she went in there, she'd never come out again.

Rose kicked at him as he reached into the backseat to drag her out, and managed to land a solid blow to his stomach. Marcel grunted. He backed up, but only long enough to pull his gun.

He motioned toward the house with the barrel. "Out."

She stilled and held up her hands. "Please, don't do this. We're friends. You're like an uncle to me."

His expression was full of disgust and... was that hatred? It contorted his face into something unrecognizable. How had she not seen it in him before?

Again, he motioned with the gun. “Get inside.”

She decided to comply. At least for now. She was still only in her nightshirt and a pair of cotton pants. She didn’t have a coat or shoes and would freeze if she tried to run.

The house was one small room with an overhead loft. While it looked like a cute vacation rental on the outside, inside was dirty and smelled musty. The carpet was threadbare and faded and the furniture looked older than she was. A large, tattered flag, bearing the unmistakable symbols of neo-Nazi ideology, hung prominently over the fireplace.

It didn’t make sense.

Marcel was dating her aunt, who was part Mexican and part Native American. How could he love Rainbow and also be a member of GSN?

He shoved her to the floor and her head bounced off the wood planks as she landed. She saw stars. Every instinct screamed she should run, but he’d only catch her again if she tried. Her best bet was to stay calm and make him think she was unconscious. He obviously wasn’t ready to kill her yet—if he’d wanted her dead, he would’ve shot her right there in Ash’s foyer when he shot Dante, but he seemed to be waiting for something or someone first.

Playing possum gave her time to think. Plan. Maybe she could even buy enough time for Ash to find her, because she had no doubt he would.

Marcel stood over her. His breathing was heavy, and she could feel his eyes scanning her body. She had to fight the urge to flinch away from his touch as he lifted her chin.

His thumb brushed over the nearly faded bruise on her cheekbone. “Those idiot cousins of mine did a number on you. I’m sorry for that. They weren’t supposed to torture you.” He actually sounded regretful, which made her stomach twist.

She opened her eyes and stared straight into his. “If you’re so sorry, why are you doing this to me?”

“You took the bar from me.”

She blinked in shock. That was what all this was about? He said it so matter-of-factly, like it was a perfectly reasonable explanation for trying to kill someone. “It was never yours, Marcel. I know my aunt made that clear when she hired you. You were a placeholder until I could legally run it.”

“Your aunt,” he spat the words like they were distasteful. “She never intended for you to live long enough to take over the pub. Or inherit your money.”

No, she couldn't believe that. Rainbow loved her. Had raised her like a daughter. Her aunt would never do something so insidious. "You're full of shit."

"Oh, Rosie." He gave a bitter laugh. "Why do you think you were sick all through your teenage years? She was poisoning you. You have no idea who Rainbow is or what she's capable of."

A chill blasted through her. She sat up and her head spun. She thought for a moment she'd be sick, but nothing came up.

Something creaked and groaned at the front of the cabin, like footsteps crossing the old porch. Marcel whipped around toward the noise, and she took full advantage of his distraction. She bolted for the door, grabbed the handle, pulled it open—

Marcel caught her by the hair, dragging her backward until her scalp screamed, and tears popped to her eyes. He pressed the barrel of his gun to her temple.

Oh, God. This was it. He was going to kill her.

Rose sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for the bullet. Except it didn't come.

Marcel made a strangled sound—a choked-off scream? —and dropped her. For several precious seconds, she lay on the floor, stunned, unable to process what she was seeing. A furry black animal had barreled through the door and clamped onto Marcel's arm with big teeth. His gun clattered to the ground, and he screamed as he tried to punch the—

Dog?

Yes, dog.

Dante!

The amazing canine had somehow followed them up the mountain with a bullet wound and was still trying to protect her.

Rose's brain finally came back online, and she stumbled to her feet. She reached for the gun, but Marcel saw her going for it and kicked it. It slid deeper into the house, away from the front door.

Dante's eyes locked on her. He still hadn't released his bite and blood dripped from his muzzle to the floor. She swore she could hear his voice telling her to run.

Which was stupid.

He was a dog.

Maybe that was her own voice.

Maybe she should listen.

She didn't want to leave him, but realized Dante was in a better position to defend himself than she was. Her bare feet slipped on the cold wood planks of the floor as she scrambled outside. She gasped at the blast of frigid air and stumbled to a halt in the ankle-deep snow.

Shit.

She'd forgotten about the snow.

Even if she followed the road down, she'd freeze to death before she made it below the snow line.

She looked back at the cabin as something crashed inside. Her chances were slim in the forest, but better than staying. Staying was an automatic death sentence.

She ran. The woods were intimidatingly dark. And quiet. And cold.

"Rose!" Marcel's voice boomed through the trees behind her. "Stop!"

She didn't stop and, a moment later, a gunshot tore through the silence.

No!

Dante.

Her heart ached and a sob slipped from her throat. She ran until she couldn't feel her feet anymore and every sawing breath sent ice chips into her lungs. Only then did she slow to a walk, her teeth chattering and her body shaking. She pulled her arms inside the T-shirt, hugging her chest, trying to preserve as much body heat as possible, but it was no use. The cold gnawed at her bones as snowflakes danced in front of her eyes, swirling around her head like a halo of glowing white stars.

She could barely see through the darkness, but she had to keep moving downhill, one step in front of the other, or else she would freeze to death. She stumbled forward, her legs heavy with cold and fatigue, plunging into the snowdrifts as though walking through an ocean of pudding. Her toes burned with each footfall as they dragged across the ground.

But she had to keep moving.

One step.

And the next.

And the next.

All the way down the mountain until the snow was gone and she found help.

Until she found Ash.

She imagined his arms closing around her, holding her tight, his warmth

radiating through her until she wasn't cold anymore. She pictured him scowling at her as he scooped her up and carried her to safety—her grumpy, uptight, workaholic sheriff. The man who scowled more than smiled, but also unapologetically played pretend with his niece. The man whose smile put the sun to shame when it finally did make an appearance, and whose rare laughs made her belly flutter. The man she'd spent half her life hating and wanted to spend the rest of her life loving.

Oh, how she wanted to see him again.

The forest was eerily silent, and it seemed like every tree was closing in on her, threatening to swallow her whole.

But then, suddenly, it wasn't silent.

A car engine?

She lifted her head and squinted against the headlights spearing through the darkness.

Ash?

Hope surged, sending a fresh blast of adrenaline through her. She ran towards the vehicle, waving her numb arms, her legs screaming in protest with every step. She knew it probably wasn't Ash, but at this point, she didn't care who was behind the wheel.

All she knew was that it was her salvation.

The truck slowed, then stopped as her legs finally gave out and she crumpled to the snow in the middle of the road.

The driver's side door popped open. "Rose?"

She let out a sob at the familiar voice. "Auntie."

But Rainbow didn't move out from behind the car door. "Fuck."

Rose's heart turned to lead in her chest. "Auntie?"

"Goddammit. That fucking man can't do anything right." Rainbow slammed the car door shut and reached into the bed of her truck, pulling out a shotgun.

"Auntie, what's going on?" Her voice came out in barely a whisper, small and child-like.

Rainbow didn't answer. She simply strode towards Rose, shotgun in hand, her expression grim. She stopped two feet away and raised the gun, pointing it directly at Rose's face.

"I'm sorry, baby."

Rose sat rooted to the spot, reeling with disbelief. Her beloved aunt. The woman who had raised her and soothed away her nightmares in the awful

months after her mom's death and her father's arrest. The woman who had taught her to make a mean cocktail and bake an award-winning pie. Shown her how to knit and garden and fish. Taught her to love and laugh at a time she thought she'd do neither again.

The woman who had loved Rose since she was a baby and had patiently endured all her teenage antics. The woman who always said she would do anything in the world for her...

That same woman was now pointing a gun at her face.

chapter **thirty-nine**

THE GUN SHOOK in Rainbow's hand. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. Harmony just wouldn't listen to reason. She took you for granted. She took Pete for granted. I was trying to help you. Trying to save you."

And, suddenly, everything made sickening sense.

Rose dropped her hands. "You killed Mom. Your own sister!"

Rainbow cursed under her breath and lowered the gun, her ever-present bangles sliding down her wrist. Rose used to find comfort in that sound, but now all it made her think of was bones clicking together and she shivered harder.

Rainbow knelt down, her eyes softening as she took in Rose's disheveled appearance. "Oh, baby. You're so cold. Come on, let's get you into the truck and warmed up and I'll explain everything."

Rose pushed her hands away. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Please. I don't want to hurt you. That was all Marcel's doing. He got greedy and stupid. But I love you. I loved your dad. I swear, everything I did was for you."

Rainbow reached out to touch her arm and Rose flinched away. "How can you say that? You killed my mom. You let Dad go to prison."

Rainbow's face hardened, her lips flattening into a thin line. "That wasn't supposed to happen, but Tennison..." She trailed off, shook her head. "Please, let's just get in the truck and I promise you'll understand—"

The sound of another engine rumbled in the air.

Rainbow's complexion paled and she scrambled back to her feet, swinging the gun toward the incoming vehicle.

Rose looked up to see a familiar Tahoe barrel toward them. It pulled over in a cloud of snow, and Ash stepped out. As more sheriff deputies clogged

the road behind him, he strode toward them, gun drawn. His expression darkened as his gaze went from the shotgun to Rose trembling on the ground.

“Rainbow,” he said gruffly. “Put down the gun and lace your hands behind your head.”

Rainbow’s eyes darted between Ash and Rose. “Sheriff, please,” she said, her voice choked with emotion. “You don’t understand.”

He didn’t lower his weapon. “I understand perfectly. You killed your own sister out of jealousy, and you were going to kill Rose, too, for money.”

“That’s not—” She grabbed Rose’s shirt and hauled her to her feet, pointing the shotgun at Ash. “No, you don’t understand. I was trying to protect her! I didn’t want her to end up like my bitch of a sister. Harmony was selfish and entitled and used people until she got what she wanted from them, then she threw them away like trash. She didn’t deserve a daughter. She didn’t deserve Pete. I loved him so much and not only did she steal him away from me, she gave him the one thing I couldn’t—a daughter. I loved our little Ambrosia Wildflower from the moment I saw her and knew I’d do anything to protect her.”

Rose felt strangely calm. Maybe she was going into shock, but the whole thing was like a movie scene—something playing out on a screen in front of her, rather than actually happening to her.

“Auntie, you’re holding a gun on me. This doesn’t feel like protection. This doesn’t feel like love.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Rainbow sniffled. “This isn’t what I want.”

“What do you want?” Ash edged a slow step forward.

“I want her to understand this was all for her.”

“Then tell me what happened,” Rose said.

“You don’t want to know the details.”

“But I do. Help me understand. What did you do to my mom?”

“I dreamed about it for years,” Rainbow said after a pensive second. “The perfect murder.”

Rose shut her eyes and pictured her mom—the soft black waves of Harmony’s hair, the freckles across her nose, the smile that crinkled that nose and made her eyes squint. She’d been a free-spirit, as wild and untamable as the forest surrounding their home. Harmony had danced barefoot in the rain and sang songs to the moon and wove dandelions into Rose’s hair and gave the best hugs.

God, she missed her mother.

“I lured Harmony to my farm,” Rainbow continued, oblivious to the memories. “It was easy. She was so angry at Pete. He was in the bedroom, sleeping off another night of drinking, so I offered for her to come stay at my place. Once she was there, I slipped a fatal dose of fentanyl in her favorite dandelion tea. Marcel—he worked for me back then, before he went down to the city and made a name for himself as a chef. He helped me bury her body deep in the woods where nobody would ever find her. I figured everyone would think she finally ran off with her rich lover like she always threatened to do.

“But then everything went wrong. Pete was arrested. And then convicted. And I couldn’t tell the truth without implicating myself, so I took you in and tried to shield you from it.” Her arm squeezed tighter around Rose’s waist. “But Marcel knew about the money, and he wanted the pub.”

“I don’t understand,” Rose said and shook her head. “I don’t have any money.”

“But you do, baby. Harmony’s lover sent it. Jesus, she had that rich fool wrapped around her little finger. You weren’t even his kid and he still sent you millions.”

Rose noticed Ash had slid another step closer. His eyes met hers and through the swirl of snow, she saw the fear and worry. She also read his thoughts loud and clear: keep her talking.

“But Marcel could’ve taken the money,” she said. “I wouldn’t have known.”

“The problem was Harmony’s body,” Ash said. “Rainbow knew I’d investigate. She knew I’d find the money and it would lead me to Marcel, and then to her.”

“That’s not what happened.” Rainbow backed up a step and dragged Rose with her. “Stop moving!”

“Why did you encourage me to give my DNA?” Rose asked, drawing her aunt’s attention away from Ash. “You knew it was mom. You knew she’d be identified when I did.”

Emotions flickered across Rainbow’s face. Sorrow. Regret. “I had hoped Pete would finally be cleared. I never meant for him to be arrested. I thought he’d get out and maybe we could pick up where we left off before Harmony.”

Rose nodded as if that made perfect sense. “And Marcel didn’t like that. He saw his golden goose slipping away and decided to kill me and steal the money.” She turned and fully faced her aunt. Rainbow swung the gun from

Ash to her and back. She hated the fresh flood of tears blurring her vision, but this hurt. Every word of the confession was like a knife twisting deeper into her heart. “Did you know his plan?”

“Not at first,” Rainbow admitted. “Not the first time. But he convinced me...” She trailed off and her hand shook harder.

Rose fleetingly thought she should be worried that the hand holding the gun was trembling, but she was too cold, too numb. “He convinced you it was the only way to get away with mom’s murder. Kill me, steal the money, and run. You were going to let him kill me. I loved you like a mother, and you tried to have me killed.” She let the tears in her eyes fall. “He said you poisoned me when I moved in with you. Is that true?”

“I-I... no. That was a mistake. He convinced me to do it.” Rainbow stared at her with big, unblinking eyes, then looked down at the gun. “Oh my God. What am I doing?” She opened her hand and let the weapon fall to the snow. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Ash and his deputies swarmed forward, and he kicked the shotgun away. “Rainbow Rodriguez, you’re under arrest for the murder of Harmony Galasso and conspiracy to commit murder.”

Tears streamed down Rainbow’s face while Ash handcuffed her.

Rose watched in numb silence as he led her aunt away, handing Rainbow off to one of his deputies. Her legs gave out suddenly, but Ash was right there, catching her in his arms, holding her close.

“You’re safe now,” he murmured, rubbing her back soothingly. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here. I’m—” He shoved her behind him at the rustle of sound in the bushes to the right of the road. He raised his gun, then lowered it when Dante limped out. The dog’s black muzzle was blood-stained, and he had a fresh wound on his back hip, but he was alive.

He. Was. Alive.

And that was when Rose lost it. The tears exploded from her until she was gasping. Ash held her through it, his arms banded around her.

Finally, the sobbing fit slowed to hiccups and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. Her tears had frozen to her face, but she felt lighter. “I’m just so cold.”

Ash pulled off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders before scooping her up and carrying her to his Tahoe. His jacket smelled like him, she thought and nestled into the warm fleece lining. The scent was clean and

comforting, mingling with the bitterly cold mountain air.

As Ash settled her into the passenger seat then helped Dante into the back, Rose closed her eyes and leaned her head back, the events of the past few hours replaying in her mind. She still couldn't quite believe her aunt had been capable of such heinous acts. The betrayal cut deep, leaving her raw, aching. Would she ever be able to trust anyone again?

But then she felt Ash's hand close around hers, warm and steady.

Him.

She could trust him. She hadn't always known it, but it had always been true.

She opened her eyes and looked over at him, taking in the strong lines of his face, the grim set of his mouth. Her sheriff. "I love you."

He barely glanced at her as he turned the Tahoe around and weaved it through the cluster of police cars. "You gave me fifty gray hairs tonight."

"I know."

His hands tightened on the steering wheel until it creaked a protest. "No, you don't." He sounded pissed. "I don't love easily or gently or—fuck, I don't know. Sweetly."

She thought of their time in bed together and the memories warmed her more than the blasting heater that he'd turned up to surface-of-the-sun hot. "I'm very aware of that fact, Ash."

"I'm possessive as fuck and jealous and—Goddammit." He pulled the truck to the side of the road, shoved it into park. He fanned his fingers into her hair and sealed his mouth to hers in a hard, breath-stealing kiss. It was urgent and hungry and demanding, and Rose melted into it, losing herself in the sweet taste of his desire, his tangy desperation, his bitter fear. He pulled her tightly to him as if he was afraid to let her go.

And, finally, for the first time since this nightmare started, she felt completely safe.

They broke apart, both gasping for air, and Ash rested his forehead against hers. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion.

"You won't lose me," she promised and stroked a hand over his beard. "Take me home and love me in your possessive, jealous, unsweet way."

He kissed her again, soft this time despite his claims that he wasn't gentle, then carefully set her back in the passenger seat. He shifted, adjusting the bulge at the front of his pants before pulling the truck back out onto the

road.

“No.”

She straightened. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You and Dante are both going to the hospital. No arguments,” he added when she opened her mouth to do just that.

“I take it back. I might hate you again.”

Ash’s scowl twitched into a smile. “I’ll risk your hatred if that’s what it takes to get you checked by a doctor.”

“Yep. Definitely hate you.” She slumped in the seat and frowned until Dante poked his head forward and nuzzled her cheek with his wet nose. She gave him a pat. “Oh, not you, handsome. I could never hate you. You’re the best doggie in the world, unlike your daddy, who is the absolute worst because he insists on being reasonable instead of taking me home and fucking me senseless. I hate him so much.”

Ash’s low laugh warmed her belly. “I hate you, too, Rose.”

chapter **forty**

THE NEXT WEEK was spent in a whirlwind of police interviews with every alphabet soup agency in the states and at least one from Canada.

Marcel had been busy in his off-time from the pub with everything from illegal gambling to drug smuggling.

Ash had dropped Dante at Sasha Scott's clinic to be treated for two gunshot wounds, then settled Rose in at the hospital to be treated for frostbite. As soon as he was certain she was safe and sound with all of Redwood Coast Rescue standing guard, he returned to the mountain. His deputies found Marcel's body at a cabin owned by GSN, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. That was the shot Rose had described hearing as she ran away. Marcel had known the jig was up and decided to end it.

Ash couldn't say he was sorry Marcel was dead, but he hated that the bastard had escaped justice.

Rainbow was another story. She wouldn't escape. She confessed to everything again at the station, on record, detailing how she'd killed her sister out of jealousy—though she still insisted it was out of love for Pete and Rose. But when Ash pointed out the inconsistencies in her story, she changed her tune and started crying victim. It was all Marcel's plan from the beginning. He abused her. She was afraid of him and did what he wanted—including poisoning Rose as a teenager—out of fear for her own safety.

Whether or not that story would fly in court was anyone's guess.

The moment Cal Holden had her confession in hand, he worked his lawyer magic and within days, a judge overturned Pete's conviction and exonerated him of all crimes. After thirteen years behind bars, Pete Galasso was a free man.

As long as he lived, Ash would never forget the absolute joy on Rose's

face as she flung herself into her father's arms with no glass or chains between them. Rose sobbed and hugged her dad like she never wanted to let him go. Pete cried, too. Even the judge looked misty-eyed. Ash, standing at the back of the courthouse, slipped outside before anyone could see his tears—but he wasn't stealthy enough.

Cal followed him out. "Do my eyes deceive me, or did the big, gruff sheriff shed a tear?"

Ash scowled at him. "Shouldn't you be inside celebrating with your client?"

"Not my win. I barely did anything." He lifted a shoulder and glanced back at the courtroom doors. "Besides, Pete and Rose deserve this time together."

Which was the exact same reason Ash had slipped away. His scowl only deepened. "You know, you make it very difficult to dislike you."

"What can I say? It's a superpower."

"I'll still try."

Cal's grin was quick and full of amusement. "Knock yourself out, big guy. I'll just make you like me more."

They walked outside together in silence, but then Cal paused on the sidewalk and eyed the growing crowd of reporters gathering in the parking lot.

"Better go share the good news," Ash said and headed toward his Tahoe.

A faint line of worry formed between Cal's blond brows, and he caught Ash's arm. "Wait. That podcaster you sent to me—"

"You better not be about to thank me. She wasn't a gift. She was a means to an end."

"Oh, come on. Give me some credit. I don't fuck every woman I talk to." He dropped his hand from Ash's sleeve and looked at the reporters again. "I haven't heard from her."

Ash shrugged. "Sounds like she ghosted you. I get that must be a new experience, but I can assure you it happens to all of us mortal men at least once in our lives."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Sheriff."

The guy was actually concerned. Ash saw it written all over his face, which had a little alarm bell ding at the back of his mind. For all of Cal's faults, he wasn't usually an alarmist. If he was worried about Alexis Summers, he had a reason.

Ash fully faced him again. “When did you last speak to her?”

“Two days ago. I told her about Pete’s hearing, and she wanted me to pull some strings, get her a seat in the courtroom despite the media ban. With Pete’s permission, I pulled those strings, because I believe in what Alexis is trying to accomplish with her podcast. But she didn’t show today. After the judge gave his ruling, I texted her the outcome.” He held out his phone so Ash could see the red undeliverable bubble around the unsent text. “Her phone’s not just off—it’s been disconnected.”

“So she forgot to pay her bill.”

Cal arched a brow, his expression dubious. “You’ve met the woman, right? She lives on her phone. That’s not something she’d forget. Listen, I’m not telling you how to do your job, but I have an excellent nose for trouble, and something about this situation stinks.”

“Alright, I’ll put out an APB and have my guys check in with her contacts. Maybe she’s just off the grid for a bit.”

Cal nodded, but the tension in his shoulders didn’t ease. “Thanks, Sheriff. I just... can’t shake this bad feeling. Nothing short of an apocalypse-level disaster would’ve stopped her from being here.”

“I’ll look into it,” Ash said and clapped Cal on the shoulder before continuing to his Tahoe.

As he drove away from the courthouse, he glanced in the rearview mirror, saw Cal still in the same spot, and a sense of unease settled over him.

Alexis Summers was a pain in the ass, but she didn’t deserve to have something happen to her.

He’d told her not to go poking around. What if she’d found proof that the Shadow Stalker was more than an urban legend? What if she’d discovered something that made her the target of a serial killer?

Goddammit. Now he had to go through every case she’d researched with a fine-tooth comb. Even if just to make sure her disappearance wasn’t somehow connected.

By the time he made it home, it was late. Much later than he’d anticipated. Dante was probably eating his remaining chairs.

Since Dante’s wounds both proved not to be life-threatening, he’d been bringing the dog to work with him every day, but with the court hearing, he’d opted to leave Dante home today. As he pulled into his driveway, he promised himself he’d spend time with the dog tomorrow, come hell or high water. Dante deserved that much from him.

He gathered the box of old case files from his backseat and made it halfway to his front door before his exhausted brain registered the person sitting there.

Rose.

“Jesus.” He nearly fumbled the box in surprise. “Why aren’t you with your dad?”

“I was, but he fell asleep on my couch. I think it’s the first decent sleep he’s had since Mom died, so I left him to it.” She nodded to the box. “Another case?”

For some reason, the question strummed on his nerves. “Crime never stops.”

“No, I guess it doesn’t. So, what is it this time?”

Again, the question, and the tone she’d asked it in, needled him. Was she doing that on purpose? He ground his teeth. “The podcaster, Alexis Summers, has disappeared. Her family hasn’t heard from her, and she’s missed her last two check-ins with her boss at the network she works for. Her sister just flew in from New York to report her missing officially.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” She stood and brushed off the back of her jeans, then looked pointedly at his front door. “Are you going to invite me in? It’s cold out here.”

He frowned. “You should go home. Get some rest. You’ve had a long day. Spend time with your dad.”

“I love Dad, and I can’t even put into words how happy I am that he’s free... but he’s not the one I want to spend time with.” She took the box from his arms and set it on the ground, then stepped forward and ran her hands up over his chest. “You’ve been using work to avoid me. Avoid this conversation.”

His heart thumped and not just because of her hands creeping under his shirt, her fingers tracing the waistband of his jeans. She was right, and they both knew it. He’d been using work as a shield since he drove her off that mountainside a week ago. “I’m not avoiding it. I just thought—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Stop thinking.” She dragged that finger over his chin, down his neck, and flattened her hand over his heart. She had to feel it beating like a war drum, but gave no indication. “And just tell me what’s in here. Do you want me?”

“I...”

“It’s a simple question, Sheriff,” she said, her voice low and husky. “You

either want me, or you don't. You can't have half of me."

She'd given him that ultimatum once before, and they'd ended up fucking on the bar at the Mad Dog. The hot memory tightened his stomach and his cock stirred.

"You know I want you, but we can't... You shouldn't want..." His thoughts splintered as her fingers dipped inside the front of his jeans and brushed lightly over his lengthening erection. "Aw, fuck." He caught her hand before he lost all reason and moistened his suddenly dry lips. "Rose, it's more complicated for us than—"

"Complicated?" She scoffed and removed her hand from his pants, which allowed him to suck in a full breath again. The oxygen helped restart his stuttering brain, and he extracted himself from her embrace, stepping back from her reach.

"You know it is. There's a large age gap between us. A lot of bad history and, recently, nothing but danger and trauma. The way you feel now could just be a product of that. We need to slow it down and—"

Her eyes flashed with indignation. "That's such a cop-out, Ash."

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm just trying to be reasonable here."

"Well, I don't do reasonable. I don't do slow." She poked his chest. "With me, either you're all in, or you're not. And if you're not, then you need to let me go."

Fuck no.

The thought was immediate and visceral. The mere idea of letting her go, letting some other man have her, twisted his stomach and made him physically ill.

And, he realized, that should tell him everything he needed to know about his feelings for her. They weren't reasonable, and he didn't care.

Ash's jaw tightened, and he stepped closer to her, crowding into her space, snaking a hand around her waist and dragging her against him until their bodies melded from chest to knee.

"I'm all in, Rose. Every damn part of me. I can't let you go because I'd lose my fucking mind and shoot any other man who touched you like I want to right now."

She gasped softly and pressed against him. "Then show me."

He cupped the back of her head and brought his lips down on hers. It wasn't a gentle kiss, but a mashing of lips and teeth and tongues. It was a

brand. A claim.

Her hands went to the front of his jeans, and she gave a quick tug, snapping the button free. Before he could react, she'd pulled down the zipper and slipped her hand inside. Her fingers closed around him, tight and hot, and he groaned as she began to stroke him, slow and steady.

He slipped his hand down the back of her jeans, under her panties, and cupped her ass. His fingers found her, and she was already wet.

"Inside. Now." He stepped back out of her reach and lifted her until she had no choice but to circle his hips with her legs. He carried her toward the front door and fumbled with the key when she bit his earlobe. She laughed against his neck.

Swearing under his breath, he tried to shove the key into the lock again with a trembling hand and finally got it in, twisting it hard enough to bend the metal. He all but kicked the door open, carried her inside, and turned, pinning her against the door as it closed. The need was clawing at him now. His skin was on fire.

She was laughing, gasping, as he pulled her shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. He kissed her again, but then he needed to see her, needed to be sure she was here and whole. It was all he'd wanted to do this entire week, all he'd denied himself because he was so damn scared her feelings would fade with the adrenaline of the last few weeks. He couldn't lose her, so he'd convinced himself it was easier if he kept his shields up and didn't let her any closer.

Of course, this was Rose. His strong, fierce, sharp-tongued Ambrosia. She wasn't going to let him hide behind those shields, and he loved her for it.

Jesus, he loved her.

He dragged his mouth down the column of her throat, over the curve of her shoulder and past the edge of her bra.

Rose gasped again and her head fell back against the door as her fingers fisted in his hair. She pulled him tighter against her and he obliged, latching onto her nipple through the lace. He rolled it in his mouth until she moaned and arched against him.

He reached back and undid her bra, freeing her gorgeous breasts, then bent to take the hardened nub of her nipple into his mouth again. Her fingers tightened in his hair, her nails digging into his scalp.

He couldn't get enough of her. His hands were everywhere, sliding to her hips, then her thighs, pushing her jeans down so he could get to her panties.

He was frantic, his hands shaking as he skimmed the material off her legs.

She gasped when he pressed his face against her cleft, inhaling deeply. He parted her with his fingers and pushed his tongue inside, groaning at the sweet taste of her.

“Ash, please.” She tangled her fingers in his hair, drawing him closer.

He slid his tongue down her seam, then pushed it inside her. So sweet and wet. Her juices dripped down his chin while she made little mewling sounds that prickled over his skin like a caress. He slid two fingers inside her and thrust in and out, matching the rhythm of his tongue against her clit.

She threw her head back, and her body bowed toward him. “Oh, God, it’s so good.”

He was relentless, kissing, licking, sucking until her knees buckled. He grabbed her ass, and her fingers were still tangled in his hair, holding him against her. She was moaning, begging, pleading, and he was ready to give her anything she wanted.

Anything she needed.

He sucked her clit hard between his lips and she came with a sharp cry, her nails digging into his scalp and her hips jerking against his mouth. He held her there at the peak, prolonging her pleasure until she was gasping for air. He loved making her come. Wanted to make her come over and over again until she couldn’t walk out of this house.

As she eased down from the orgasm, he stroked her thighs with his hands and lapped gently at her slit with his tongue, soothing her.

“Please, Ash.” Her voice came out soft and breathy. “I need you inside me.”

He needed it, too, more than he needed his next breath. He dragged his mouth up her body, detouring to trace the rose tattoo on her ribs with his tongue, then he took her other nipple between his lips and sucked just as he had with the first.

She arched into him, her hand flitting down his abs to his zipper and yanking it down with a rough jerk. “Your clothes. Take them off.”

He shoved his jeans down to his thighs, then stood back to watch as she kicked her panties and jeans the rest of the way off. She was totally naked and the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He stepped closer, backing her against the door once again, and she reached for him, locking her arms around his neck.

She tugged at his lower lip with her teeth. “I love you.”

His heart stopped for a second. It wasn't the first time she'd said the words, but it was the first time he'd really heard them. The first time he really believed them. They sank into him and lit up every dark corner of his soul. He'd never loved anyone—at least, never like this. It was deep and fierce and burned him from the inside out.

He said nothing—couldn't form words around the knot in his throat—so he caught her hips and lifted her onto his aching cock. He'd just have to show her how he felt with his body.

Rose cried out, her head falling back against the door. Her inner muscles clenched him like a fist.

So fucking hot.

He lifted her and pulled out, dragging his tip over her sensitive clit. She whimpered and lowered her head to watch the joining of their bodies. Once he was fully seated in her again, he raised her chin with a hooked finger and claimed her mouth. He was starving for her—for her taste, her scent, her skin.

All of her.

He began to move. She was tight, so tight, and she fit him perfectly. He couldn't get deep enough, couldn't be close enough. She clawed at his shoulders and cried out as he thrust into her harder, again and again.

“You're mine, Ambrosia.” His voice was a near growl. “Mine. No one else's. Say it.”

“Yours.” She arched her back and circled her hips, her fingernails digging into his shoulders. “Only yours.”

“Mine,” he repeated, and he meant it in a way he'd never meant anything before. “Only mine, because I love you and I'm not letting you go. I fucking love you.”

“Ash,” she gasped, and he felt her walls clench around him. “Oh, God, Ash. I'm coming again.”

“Yes.” He slid his hand between them and found her clit, rubbing it with his thumb until a shudder rattled through her. “Come for me, my love. Come hard.”

He took her mouth, kissing her fiercely, swallowing her scream as her muscles rippled around him and sucked his own orgasm from him. He thrust into her one last time, burying himself as deep as he could, and let go.

As her orgasm faded, he pulled out and lifted her from the door, then carried her through the silent house. Dante lifted his head, and if dogs could scowl, he would absolutely be scowling now.

Hang on, Ash mentally told the dog as he carried Rose down the hall to his room and laid her on the bed. She was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes glittered.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “I have to let the dog out. Don’t go anywhere.”

She sighed and stretched. “Wasn’t planning on it. Even if my legs weren’t noodles right now, you’re stuck with me.” She tilted her head to the side and gave him a look he could only describe as sly. “After all, haven’t you heard the news?”

He frowned. “What news?”

She laughed, and he stepped back to eye her suspiciously because that was a scheming kind of laugh. “Rose... what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything, I swear. But you should really try to be more in the know, Sheriff. Maybe start hanging out at the pub more often. You’ll hear all the juicy gossip then.”

He shook his head. He was still fuzzy from the mind-shattering orgasm and his brain wasn’t keeping up. “What are you talking about?”

She blinked innocently. “Why, Sheriff, I’m talking about your fiancée.”

The air left his lungs in a whoosh. “I don’t have a fiancée.”

“Well, according to the town grapevine, Ash Rawlings and Rose Galasso just got engaged.” Her tone was mockingly serious as that damn smirk played on her lips. “Congratulations to us.”

He shook his head again.

Opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Opened.

Closed.

“The look on your face.” Rose fell back against the pillows, laughing so hard she wheezed, and tears leaked from her eyes. “It’s like you’re... you’re...” She couldn’t seem to come up with the right word.

“Chewing glass?” he suggested and felt the corner of his lip twitch with a smile.

“Yes. That’s exactly it.”

“Jesus.” He walked from the room and called to the dog, letting Dante out into the backyard to do his business.

Ash waited and stared out over the yard. Beyond his property line, down in the valley below, Steam Valley twinkled in the moonlight.

That fucking town with its busybodies and gossip mongers. Now he'd have to go back to work tomorrow and correct everyone. Because no doubt the entire town was already buzzing with the rumor.

Unless you don't correct them...

No. That was ridiculous.

He'd bet his badge the rumor started with Janine, his secretary. The woman was scarily efficient, but she was also a hopeless gossip. And if there wasn't any juicy gossip to spread, she was not above creating some.

Fuck.

She must have overheard Anna telling him it was okay if—

Dante woofed. He had already trotted back inside and now sat in the kitchen, eyeing Ash like he was crazy for standing naked in the cold.

Ash pulled the door shut and looked down at the dog for a long moment, considering. "Anna did say it was okay."

Dante cocked his head.

"Do you think she'd say yes?"

Dante turned his head in the other direction, his ears perked.

Ash strode to the coat closet in his foyer and eased open the door, tugging on the string to turn on the overhead bulb. The bankers box on the top shelf was all he and Anna had left of their parents after the wildfire destroyed their family farmhouse last fall. A handful of photos, some old ranch documents, Dad's favorite 49ers ball cap, and...

He pulled out the ring box. The blue velvet had worn thin over the generations. He flipped it open and stared down at the engagement ring—rose gold with diamonds and pearls clustered around a central garnet. It was old, but still glittered and sparked, even under the weak light of the closet. It had belonged to his paternal grandmother before Dad gave it to Mom. And before that, his paternal great-grandmother had worn it. He didn't know how far back it went, or when the first Rawlings man gave it to the woman he loved.

He closed the box and looked at Dante, who had followed him to the foyer. "Anna gave her approval."

Dante pushed his nose against Ash's hand—the one holding the box—as if saying, "Go for it."

Ash shut off the closet light and closed the door.

Then, ring box in hand, he walked back to the bedroom to continue the long-held Rawlings tradition, giving the ring to the woman he loved.

epilogue

ALEXIS SUMMERS HAD NEVER BEEN SO cold in her life.

The man—no, he wasn't a man. Monster. Demon. Evil incarnate—had snatched her in broad daylight as she climbed out of her car at her hotel. She didn't know how many days ago. She'd initially tried to keep a tally, using the clock on her fitness tracker to scratch the days into the wall, but the tracker had died, and her concrete prison didn't have windows to give her any indication whether it was night or day. So she sat there in the cold, damp dark of her cell, shivering uncontrollably, wishing she had never come to this godforsaken corner of the world.

God, she'd been so stupid.

So smug.

Thinking she was so smart.

Thinking she was invincible because her honey-blond hair and public persona meant she wasn't the Shadow Stalker's type.

But she was wrong.

Oh, so wrong.

He didn't have a type.

And he didn't have a soul.

Because he wasn't human.

In shadows so deep, the Stalker hides.

Fear his presence, where moonlight dies.

Alexis had always thought of herself as a strong and independent woman, but that was before she had been taken by this monster. He had beaten her,

tortured her, and violated her in ways she couldn't even bring herself to think about. She was a broken shell of her former self, with no hope and no way out. She didn't even have the energy to cry anymore, and just passed the hours numbly, gazing into the darkness, wishing it would swallow her up.

For the first few days of her captivity, as the cold first settled into her bones and made her ache all over, she tried to conjure up memories of warmth and light to keep her spirits up. She thought of the cozy fireplace in her childhood home, the hot summer sun on her skin during beach vacations, the warm embrace of her sister. But she could never hold onto the memories long, each thought quickly replaced by the reality of her situation.

*Beware his bunker, hidden and dark,
Where he preys on souls, leaving his mark.*

The Stalker came to visit her every day. He never spoke, and always wore a balaclava, never showing his face.

But his eyes...

She'd see his eyes every time she closed hers for the rest of her life. Those cold, black eyes always watched her with feverish intensity as he violated her.

Again and again and again.

Alexis tried to fight him at first, but he was too strong. Then she tried to avoid him, huddling in the corner of her cell whenever he came near. It never worked. He always got what he wanted. And soon, he'd want her dead just like Maria Socktish and the thirty-two other woman he'd destroyed.

It was only a matter of time before she became his next victim.

On the last day, after The Stalker finished with her, he left her cell unlocked, the door hanging open. She could see a hallway beyond, and dust floating in the faint orange rays of a setting sun. She didn't move, didn't dare to hope that he was letting her go.

It was a trap.

A trick.

He had to be out there, waiting to punish her if she tried to leave.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor and her heart began to race. She thought she could see a shadow moving through the darkness, skirting around the dusty light beams. Fear gripped her chest, and she began to shiver again, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

The Stalker stepped into view. He was carrying a hunting rifle on his shoulder and threw a small bundle into her cell. It landed with a loud thunk. She cowered back.

“Dress.”

She blinked at him. It was the first word he’d ever said to her. She edged closer to the bundle and realized it was a winter coat, snow overalls, and boots. She didn’t even care that they were bloodstained and scrambled into them, wrapping the coat tightly around her shoulders.

The Stalker stepped back from the door and held out an arm, inviting her into the hall.

And, suddenly, the rest of the nursery rhyme came back to her with startling clarity:

*In woods so still, his hunt begins,
Fear his presence, where moonlight thins.
One by one, his tally grows,
For in the shadows, his secret shows.*

She backed into the wall. “No. Please...”

He raised the gun and pointed it at her head. “Run.”



Will Alexis become the subject of her own podcast?

Find out in the next Redwood Coast Rescue book, [SEARCHING FOR REDEMPTION](#).



Curious about what’s coming next from me? [Sign up for my newsletter](#). It’s the best way to keep up to date on all of my upcoming books, events, and

more. Subscribers also get sneak peeks at my works in progress and exclusive giveaways.

Thanks for reading!

also by tonya burrows

Searching for Rescue
Searching for Risk
Searching for Justice
Searching for Redemption
Searching for Shadows

Northern Rescue

Northern Escape
Northern Deception
Northern Salvation

HORNET

SEAL of Honor
Honor Reclaimed
Broken Honor
Code of Honor
Reckless Honor
Honor Avenged

HORNET: Class Alpha

Fragmented Loyalty

Wilde Security

Wilde Nights in Paradise
Wilde for Her
Wilde at Heart
Running Wilde
Too Wilde to Tame