



*Secret Triplets
for Christmas*

HEART
of
HOPE

AJME WILLIAMS

AN EX-BOYFRIEND'S BROTHER HOLIDAY ROMANCE

SECRET TRIPLETS FOR CHRISTMAS

AN EX-BOYFRIEND'S BROTHER, HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

AJME WILLIAMS

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

DESCRIPTION

THEN

Oliver

She was meant to be mine all along.

When I let my foster brother have the girl of my dreams, I never expected to find him in a pool of his own blood... in his now ex-girlfriend's house.

In a night of weakness, I soothed his ex, Lindsay McKinnon, fighting my own feelings that have been brewing like a winter storm. But when I realize what I've done to my brother, I know I have to leave that world behind... along with innocent, beautiful, sassy Lindsay.

It's what's best for her.

NOW

Lindsay

He's the one that got away.

Five years after he left me with my heart broken, Oliver Quinlan is back, and as annoyingly handsome as ever. And he's here to protect me...

There's no denying that I'm in danger, and that Oliver is eager to help.

But I'm a single mom of adorable triplet girls now.

One of them is named after her daddy...

Olivia.

PROLOGUE

Lindsay

The house was quiet, which shouldn't have felt unusual since for the moment, I was living alone. My roommate, Miranda, had moved out in February and in a strange twist was now married to my father and had a baby two months ago, in September.

After Mira moved out, I invited my boyfriend, Liam, to live with me. At the time, I was sure he and I were made for each other. Since I had an extra room and he'd been living with his brother, Oliver, I invited him to move in too.

But it wasn't long after that Liam began to change. In his quest for money and power, he got involved with the wrong people, and it started months of my kicking him out and then taking him back in a belief that he had changed.

The last time I kicked him out was nearly a month ago, mid-October, and to help make sure he stayed gone this time, Oliver volunteered to move out too, giving Liam no reason to come by anymore.

I felt bad about it. For months, Oliver and I did our best to get Liam on the right track, and in those months, my feelings for Liam shifted from love to pity. But I had plans that didn't involve trying to keep Liam from ruining his life, or worse, getting killed. I'd done my best to completely cut him out, and I had, except for a brief encounter at a Halloween party two weeks ago.

All that to say that my home should have felt empty, and yet for some reason, a crackle of fear rose up my spine as I entered after my work day as a collections assistant at the Gardner Museum. I walked through my condo, turning on all the lights as if it would scare the Boogie Man away. I finally made it to my bedroom, flipping on the final light and scanning the room before I saw Liam on the floor in a pool of blood.

I let out a scream, knowing I should go to him. Or maybe I should run away in case an intruder was in the house. But I was unable to do either.

A hand came around, covering my mouth as another arm banded around my body, tugging me roughly. “You’re going to be next, sweetheart.”

Panic swept through me, and I did my best to scream again as I thrashed and tried to free myself.

“Lindsay. Lindsay, wake up.”

I startled awake, bolting up. Sitting next to me on the bed was Oliver. His hand brushed my wild hair out of my face. “You had another nightmare. But you’re safe.”

It was just a dream. A nightmare.

Except part of that nightmare had been real. I had come home two weeks ago to find Liam dead in my bedroom. I couldn’t figure out why he was there. He’d been out of my life for over a month, minus the passing encounter at Halloween. So, why was he here?

But unlike in my nightmare, nobody else had been in the apartment after I found him. I had called the police and then Oliver.

For several days after the incident, I stayed with my father and Mira, but I couldn’t let Liam’s murder stall my life. So, after hiring a cleaning crew, I returned home.

I was fine until the sun set and the darkness creeped all around me.

One night a few days ago, Oliver showed up wanting to check in with me, and I asked him to move back in, at least for a little while. The poor guy had to endure my nightmares, but he never complained. I liked to think that by helping me, it was helping him as well, but that was probably just a selfish justification to lean on him.

As my nightmare subsided and it settled in my mind that I was safe, the endorphins tanked, and with it came the shakes and the crying. Oliver wrapped his arms around me, and I gave myself to his strength.

Once that was done and my tears subsided, I lay back, rubbing my eyes, feeling foolish for not being stronger.

“Are you all right now? Do you want me to get you some water?” He started to stand, and I couldn’t tolerate the idea of his leaving me right now.

My hand shot out, gripping his wrist. “Don’t leave.”

He laced his fingers with mine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

That wasn’t completely true. Oliver had just been offered his dream job at a Silicon Valley tech firm. Within the week, he would move west, and I felt a profound sadness about that. In fact, I felt it even more deeply than I felt the loss of Liam, which made me feel guilty.

I was sad about Liam’s loss for sure, but by the time it happened, I didn’t love him anymore. Oliver’s leaving felt like I was losing my best friend. A part of me.

I held his hand, looking up at the man who’d come to mean so much to me since meeting him through Liam and especially as Liam changed. Where Liam had the body and the looks that would make him a successful underwear model, Oliver’s good looks were more subtle.

He was the quintessential tech nerd, which wasn’t to say he wasn’t handsome, because he was. But one had to look for his attractiveness because he wore his hair, and often his beard, shaggy. He had Liam’s height, nearly six foot three, but his build was leaner, lankier, and usually hidden in a faded superhero T-shirt and jeans.

What really made Oliver stand out was his goodness, his genuine caring. Liam never appreciated that about him, and although I hated to admit it, I hadn't either until Liam started having his troubles and Oliver and I worked together to help him.

"Can you stay here with me?" I asked.

His head cocked to the side, his brows pulling together in a quizzical expression. "I am here. I'm just down the hall."

I shook my head. "No, I mean here, with me."

He scanned my room, but I wasn't sure why.

When he turned his attention back to me, he said, "I suppose I could drag a chair in here or something."

I was pretty sure that Oliver wasn't a virgin, but sometimes, he acted like one. It was sweet that he worried about sharing my bed.

I smiled. "No, right here." I patted the bed. "It's okay. I promise I won't attack you in your sleep."

A reddish hue flushed over his cheeks. He hesitated, and I could only think it was because he'd think it was wrong of him to spend the night with his brother's ex-girlfriend. But in this moment, I needed him more than I needed the guilt over trying to forget Liam and using his brother to do so.

Finally, he acquiesced, standing from the edge of the bed and walking around to the other side to lay down on top of the covers next to me.

I turned over, looking at him, our faces close, so close I could see the spark of gold in his green eyes. "Do you think the nightmares will ever end?"

His fingers brushed along my cheek as he stared at me with such tenderness. "Someday. I suspect that once the case is resolved, we'll be able to put it behind us." He shook his head and then leaned forward, giving me a kiss on the forehead. "It kills me that you had to find him."

"I still can't figure out why he was here. Maybe I should've changed the lock, but he had no reason to be here

that I can think of.”

“You’ll make yourself crazy trying to figure Liam out. He was changed.”

“The police think he might have startled an intruder, but I don’t think that’s true.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so either. And by now, I doubt the police think that as well. They’re well aware of what Liam was into.”

A shudder went through me to think that a man I had once loved could let himself get lost in organized crime.

“Right now, you need to think good thoughts. You’ve got a great family. You’ve got a great job. Your future is bright.”

I gave him a wan smile because his words warmed all the bitter, cold places of my heart. I snuggled closer to him and was thankful when he held me, making me feel tethered to the world when only moments before, I felt it falling away.

I tilted my head to look up at him. “Thank you for everything, Oliver.” I rested my hand on his cheek, feeling the stubble that grew there. “I don’t know how I would survive all this without you.”

“You’re a strong woman, Lindsay. You’d be fine. But I’m glad I can be here for you. To be completely honest, I’m the one who needs you. Liam was all I had, and I failed him.”

My heart squeezed tight, aching for Oliver. At the same time, I felt guilty at my selfish grieving and relying on Oliver while not paying enough attention to his loss.

“You didn’t fail him. You went above and beyond, but in the end, Liam made his own choices.”

His lips twitched up, but his expression was still sad. “Thank you for saying so.” For a moment, we stared at each other, and I felt a calmness come over me as I looked deep into his green eyes.

“Do you think you can sleep now?” he asked.

I nodded. “But promise me you’ll stay here.”

He smiled. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise." He leaned in again, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. It was tender and sweet, and this time, my heart ached for a whole other reason. And because it did, I kissed his cheek back. And then for no reason except for the fact that I needed him, I pressed my lips against his.

For a moment, his entire body tensed. Mortified, I started to pull away and hoped he'd still stay after I apologized. But then his lips softened, his arms around me tightened, and the kiss deepened.

He pushed me back, and my entire body shuddered in anticipation. I needed this. I needed connection. I needed something to fill the darkness in my life.

His hand slid under my night shirt, cupping my breast. I arched into him, moaning at the sensations rushing through me. My hands roamed his body, tugging at clothes until he and I were both naked. I felt out of control. Not wild, but just lost in sensations and need. He must have too because didn't say anything, didn't look at me as he explored my body. His lips trailed down, stopping only to suckle my nipples, making me writhe beneath him. Then he continued down, down, pushing my thighs apart.

My pussy clenched in anticipation. Yes. I needed this. Wanted this. Wanted Oliver. Only now had I realized just how much I wanted him. How I'd been wanting him for some time.

Guilt at betraying Liam tried to intervene, but I blocked it. I was done with living my life according to what Liam wanted or needed.

Oliver's tongue slid through my folds, and all thoughts vanished. There were only me and him and the pleasure coursing through me. My fingers threaded through his hair, holding him to me as I rocked, seeking my release.

His thumb flicked over my clit as his tongue laved my pussy walls. Sparks flew. Pressure mounted until I soared, crying out as pleasure flooded me.

He let out a groan, continuing to lick and suck until finally, in one fast move, he was over me, thrusting hard and deep. My breath caught at the fullness of him. For the first time in so, so long, I felt whole. I wrapped my legs around his hips and moved with him. The need built again as he pistoned in and out, in and out. We were in sync. Our bodies and something more connected. I never wanted this moment to end.

He let out a growl, driving in and grinding against me. It sent me shooting to the stars again. My body shuddered and I held him tight, wishing this feeling could go on forever.

“Oh, fuck.” He collapsed and rolled off me.

“What?” I asked breathlessly, not liking the tone. Like he regretted what just happened.

His head turned to me, and I was sure I saw regret in his green eyes. But he managed a smile. “Nothing.” He tucked me in close. “Get some sleep.”

I didn’t believe him, but I didn’t argue. I settled in next to him. “You won’t leave?”

“No.”

BUT HE DID LEAVE. I woke up the next morning, not only to an empty bed but an empty house. At least he left a note.

Dear Lindsay,

You’ll think me a coward, and you’d be right. But I can’t stay in Boston any longer. My life here was shit except for a short time when Liam met you and you brought lightness to a dark soul. All my life, my only goal had been to protect Liam, and I failed him. And now, I’ve betrayed him.

It’s time for me to move on and away from all this pain. I’m heading to California early to start my new life. I hope that you won’t be too angry with me. You’re a wonderful woman, with so much life and love to give. My leaving will help free you from all the pain Liam caused, and you can move on too.

Oliver

I CRUMPLED THE LETTER UP, intending to throw it away. I was angry with him for leaving me like this. But mostly, I was angry at myself for believing he'd felt something for me beyond being Liam's girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend, actually.

But then I smoothed out the paper, and my heart ached for Oliver. He and Liam had a difficult life growing up in foster care due to an abusive mother. I didn't think Oliver was to blame for Liam's fall, but I understood why he'd feel that way. And I also understood why he'd want to leave it all behind.

In the end, I tried to think of our night together as a sweet moment in time when two lost souls connected. I focused on my life, spending time with my dad, Mira, and baby Grayson. I dedicated myself to my new career.

A month later, I discovered that my night with Oliver gave me more than a sweet memory. I was pregnant.

Initially, I planned to call Oliver, not because I needed anything from him but because he had a right to know. But I didn't call. I re-read his letter, feeling his pain, knowing that in California, he was finally living his dream, a dream he'd put off for Liam. I didn't want Oliver to sacrifice for me or a baby. I didn't want to force him to return to a place that only brought him pain.

I rethought that stance when I learned I was having triplets. Three babies at once!

I called his number, hating that this was going to get in the way of his new life. The call went to a disconnected message. I thought about trying to find a new number or email, but the fact that he'd canceled his old number and gotten a new one told me he'd wanted to cut himself off from here. From his old life. From me.

That was okay. I didn't need money or support because my father, Mira, and Duncan, my father's friend who was like an uncle to me, would be here. I could do this.

In June, two months early, I gave birth to three beautiful little girls. Interestingly, in the same month, I read that Oliver

had struck it rich with an app and founded his own tech company. It solidified my belief that I'd done the right thing in not telling him he was a father.

Lindsay – five years later.

“Freeze, you little Rugrats!”

The laughing and squealing and shouting came to an immediate halt as my three 4-year-olds froze in various states of movement. Cassie ended up on one leg, losing her balance and falling to the floor.

“You’re not frozen, Cass,” her sister Georgie said.

“If your lips are moving, you’re not frozen either, Georgie,” I said.

Her eyes rounded and she made an “oops” sound.

Only Olivia remained perfectly quiet and still.

My children were named after famous women artists—Cassie after Mary Cassatt, Georgie after Georgia O’Keefe, and Olivia after Olivia De Berardinis, or so I told people. I thought De Berardinis’ work in cheesecake art was fun, but in truth, she was named after her father. It turned out to be a suitable name as she was very much like him, quiet and kind.

Of course, everyone thought Liam was their father. And maybe it was wrong to let everyone, including Oliver, believe that. But by the time I discovered I was pregnant, Oliver had gone. He promised me he’d stay and be there for me, but in the end, he had to follow his dream. And who was I to stop him from that? Especially since I knew that his staying would only keep him enmeshed in the ugliness of his brother’s life. A life that I was a reminder of.

There was no doubt in my mind that Oliver regretted our night together. He believed he betrayed Liam, and I imagined that was part of what drove him away to California earlier than planned. Between that and the loss of his brother, I couldn't blame him for wanting to get away.

And I couldn't bring myself to bring him back. Granted, when I learned I was having triplets, I had a moment to reconsider. But I had all the emotional and financial support I needed. Not that I took money from my family. My father was wealthy, but I wanted to support me and my girls.

During my pregnancy, I grew up so much. So much so that I left a potential dream job as a collections assistant and instead found work in commercial art at an advertising agency. Over the last few years, I proved myself to the point that I was now the art director. It wasn't my ideal job, but I didn't hate it. It was full of challenges, and I was still able to be creative.

“Olivia, you are released, and you may go get dressed.”

Olivia gave me a sweet smile and hurried off to the room she shared with her sisters.

“She always wins,” Georgie complained.

“Cassie, I now release you, and you can go get dressed.”

Georgie turned to me, scrunching her face up and jamming her fists and her hips. “Why do they always win?”

I knelt in front of her, putting my hands on her little round cheeks. “Because you can't stop moving or talking. If we ever have a contest where the person who moves the most or talks the most, you'll be triumphant.”

Her eyes rounded. “Really? Can we play that?”

“Why don't you see if your grandpa and gran-Mira will play it with you? Remember, you're having a sleepover over there tonight.”

My father and Mira would probably not like to hear that I suggested the kids play a game that involved movement and noise, but better at their house with them than here with me. At least at their house, it was two against three. With just me,

it was one against three and while I believed I was a good mother, it didn't come without its challenges.

“Now you can go get dressed.”

She ran off to her room, which gave me a moment to pour the cup of coffee that was already brewed because of the timer I set last night. I learned early on that being a parent involved routines, schedules, and systems. Now that my girls were four years old, we had that all down to a T. The first three years were a huge struggle, but now that they were in prekindergarten, things had become a little bit easier.

They were old enough to do many things on their own, like getting dressed. Because they were in school, I saved on the exorbitant amount of daycare money that I could now put into college savings for them. Even so, I couldn't have done it without my father, Mira, and Uncle Duncan. With them, I had support and babysitters.

As I drank my coffee, I pulled their lunches packed last night from the fridge and checked each of their backpacks to make sure they had everything they needed. By the time they came to the kitchen ready to eat their breakfast, I was on my second cup of coffee and they were packed to go.

After breakfast, we piled into my SUV, with the third row seat to help keep them separated due to squabbling, and I drove them to school. At the drop off, I gave each a kiss and told them I love them and handed them over to their teacher. Then I headed off to work.

Once at my desk, I went through the progress of all our active campaigns, checking data and seeing if there were any questions or concerns from the team or from the client.

Once I was done with that, I moved on to campaigns that were in planning or the implementation stages, responding to client questions and making sure the team and the client were on the same page.

Mid-morning, I had a meeting with a potential client, and I quickly reviewed all my presentation points and then headed out to meet them in the conference room. When that meeting

was over, I was at my desk, taking information from another potential client. My mind was awl with ideas, and I was glad the girls would be at my dad and Mira's tonight so I could get started on them.

At two o'clock, I contacted Mira to make sure that she remembered she was picking up my kids, along with her son, my half-brother Grayson, from school today. As usual, she acted offended that I would have to remind her, but I was a mother. I wasn't going to leave anything to chance.

"Your dad is wondering how long before the kids are going to be able to play something other than Candyland. The guy really has an aversion to that game," she said.

I snorted. "Tell him he has to suck it up or teach them a new game. In fact, ask Georgie about a possible game."

There was silence on the other end. "What sort of game?" Mira's tone suggested that she knew the game probably wouldn't be better than Candyland.

"Just ask her. And thank you for taking them tonight."

Sometimes, they took the kids just for fun because they wanted to, but other times, they did it because I needed a break or had something else going on. That something else going on usually involved a business meeting, taking care of something with the house, or just needing a respite.

"You know we'll have fun. What about you?"

"You know me. I'm going to use the evening to start planning a new proposal for a client I really want to get."

"I was really hoping you were going to say you're going on a date."

"You have to stop thinking that." I never dated, much to Mira's consternation. But aside from the fact that I was too tired and had too many responsibilities to date was the fact that I was certain there was no man out there who would want to take on me and three kids. Don't get me wrong, my girls are awesome, but raising them was a bit like herding cats.

“At least you could tell me that you’re going to drink wine and watch romcoms or something.”

I laughed. “It’s quite possible that’s on the agenda for later.”

The rest of the day was pretty straightforward. I met with my team and worked on the overall creative design of our marketing campaigns. I was fortunate that I had great graphic designers and copywriters working with me. This might not have been my dream job, but the work environment was positive, which made it worthwhile. That and the good salary I made.

After work, I headed home, making a stop at the grocery store for wine and ice cream. Mira was right. I deserved a little pampering once I finished my work.

I arrived home, a basic little bungalow in a nice, established neighborhood. I’d been able to buy the home last year, all on my own, despite the fact that my father kept indicating he’d help me buy one. The house wasn’t huge, but it had three bedrooms—one for me, one for the girls, and a third used as a playroom. It was cozy, warm, and inviting, with a large yard for them to play in and kids in the neighborhood.

Like me, most families in the neighborhood worked during the day, and we all began arriving home around the same time, waving as we passed each other on the road or calling out a hello when we got out of our car.

I pulled my car into the garage, closing the door behind me and then heading to the door that entered the mudroom off the kitchen. I unlocked it and stepped in. An unsettled tingle ran down my spine. For a moment I stopped, my breath held as the sensation of déjà vu overtook me. It was only then I realized that all the items in my mudroom were strewn about. Every bin, the laundry, all of it.

Like an idiot, I moved into the kitchen, where all the cupboards and drawers were open and glasses were shattered on the floor. I looked beyond the kitchen into my living area and noted it too was in shambles. Sofa cushions were on the floor, the foam spilling out as if they’d been cut.

Slowly, I backed out the door and into the garage. I hurried to my car, locking myself in, and started hyperventilating. What was happening? All I could think about was Liam dead in my bedroom, which made no sense.

I poked the button to open the garage door and backed out and parked along the street. I don't know why that made me feel safer, but it did. I pulled out my phone and called 911.

Oliver

“**Y**ou’re a real-life rags to riches story. A Horatio Alger. What’s that like?”

I looked at the interviewer from the entrepreneurial magazine and mustered a smile, not because I was happy but because thinking of my past only brought pain. No amount of success and wealth soothed it. How did one go about healing a childhood filled with abuse and chaos?

I’d been fortunate to have learned at a young age to keep my head down and indulge my interest in knowledge, especially around computing, two things that often got me bullied and beaten up, sometimes by my own dad. I suppose that was what ultimately led to my success, but what really saved me was my younger brother, Liam.

When I was eight and he was four, we were sent to our first foster home. The family was all right, but they had other foster children who made sure we knew who the true boss of the house was.

That was when I first determined I needed to protect Liam, a role that I took on practically to the exclusion of everything else. I was the one who helped him with homework and made sure he graduated from high school to keep him from following our foster siblings into a life of crime. He was so smart, and between a scholarship, government money that helped foster kids get an education, and my working my ass off, he was able to go to college. While I graduated from high

school, I skipped college to work and watch out for my younger brother.

And it was going so well... until it didn't. Liam always had stars in his eyes, always wanted wealth and power, and I guess he got tired of trying to earn it the honest way. No matter what I did, or what his girlfriend Lindsay did, we weren't able to stop him. And now, he was dead.

Not only had I failed him, but not long after his death, I slept with Lindsay.

Just thinking about it now made me sick. It didn't matter that I'd been in love with her. Hell, I'd fallen for her practically the moment I met her. It didn't matter that by the time Liam died, she'd broken off with him and cut him out of her life, just as she should have, based on his behavior.

All that mattered was that she had belonged to him. Liam, for all his faults, did love her. She was the only reason he made attempts, feeble as they were, to leave the bad elements behind. He'd failed, but that didn't mean I had any right to Lindsay. She might have been done with him, but he loved her until he died, and I'd betrayed him by taking something that was his.

I gave my head a quick shake to rid it of the past. This was exactly why I didn't like doing interviews. I'd left Boston five years ago with a plan to never look back. There was nothing there except pain and guilt. In California, I rebuilt my life. The first year here, I worked for a tech company and reinvented myself, at least on the outside. The truth was, no matter how expensive my haircut or my clothes, deep down, I was still that scrappy nerd from Boston.

This discussion wasn't therapy, not that I had tried therapy. This was an interview, so I was going to give him the story that he wanted, the story that wasn't a lie but also wasn't the whole truth.

I gave a small shrug with my attempt of an affable smile. "I've been very lucky."

The interviewer cocked his head to the side. “Surely, you don’t attribute all your success to luck?”

I shook my head. “No. I worked hard. But no one gets to where I am without the involvement of others. I was blessed to have great opportunities and mentors along the way.”

“Do you suppose your past had any influence on your drive or your work ethic? Has the loss of your brother, whose murder has never been solved, had any influence?”

Jesus fuck. I tried to maintain the smile as I worked to come up with a suitable answer. The truth was, if Liam had survived, I doubted I’d be here. Perhaps that was the worst guilt out of all of this. My success came at the loss of my brother.

“I don’t know psychology. I don’t know if I would have been the same type of person if my past were different. The loss of my brother was significant, and I really couldn’t tell you if it drove me to my success. I’m not one who looks to the past. I’m always looking ahead.”

He jotted down notes and I rolled my eyes. My answer was filled with nothing, but perhaps when he wrote it in the article, it would seem poignant.

Thankfully, the interview moved on to focus on my business life and other areas of my personal life, such as it was. I had no personal life to speak of because I was 110% focused on my company.

We had surpassed three million dollars in earnings this last year, and I set my goal to hit billionaire status within the next five years. My days and nights were filled with trying to plan and execute ideas for technology that could make the lives of people better.

Invariably, in interviews, there was a question about balancing work and family, but I didn’t have a family and didn’t plan to have one. What was the point? I didn’t have much to offer except money, but I wasn’t interested in having a woman in my life who only wanted me for my money.

That wasn't to say I didn't have the occasional hookup, but to be honest, most times, my hand in a hot shower was all I needed when the urge struck. And to be perfectly frank, that didn't happen very much either because every time I did, I thought of Lindsay. The woman could get me off even in my fantasies, but the event was always followed by guilt. I hadn't been strong enough to resist her at a time when she was most vulnerable. Continuing to jack off to her felt wrong.

When the interview finished, I left my office, letting my admin know that I was going out for a while. I went to the company locker room and changed into running clothes and headed out for a long run, hopefully, to sweat away all the pain and bitterness coursing in my blood.

December in California was nothing like December in Boston. Not that California didn't have seasons, but to my estimate, there were only two—summer and winter with short transitions in between. Not that I was complaining. I didn't miss the cold or humidity of Boston.

As I began my run, I tried to let my mind and body drain the negative energy the interview brought up. But the Halloween decorations reminded me that it was almost the fifth anniversary of my brother's death. The murder hadn't been solved, and I was resolved in knowing that it likely wouldn't be.

Again, I tried to push those thoughts away, but instead, Lindsay came to mind. I wondered what she was up to. It would've been easy to find out, but like I said, the minute I left Boston, I shut that door behind me and locked it tight.

Finding out about Lindsay's life would only keep the wound in my chest open, the guilt driving me mad. Perhaps it was wrong of me to close her out of my life. Liam loved her, and maybe I should have looked out for her or at the very least, kept tabs on her. But I knew she didn't need me. She was an amazing woman, so full of life. She savored every moment. She was also smart, and she had family around her to support her. I had no doubts that she was strong and successful in whatever she was doing.

Unable to control my thoughts, I put on the pair of earbuds I'd shoved in my pocket and used my phone to turn on a business podcast. If I were lucky, that would drown out my thoughts.

By the time I returned to the office, I felt better. Most of the negative energy had been cleared from my body. I returned to the locker room, taking a shower and dressing.

In the last five years, I had moved away from my old jeans and superhero T-shirts, which wasn't to say I was wearing a double-breasted suit, either. I'd briefly tested the Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg wardrobe of jeans and a shirt, but I didn't like the monotony and couldn't really understand how choosing your clothes in the morning would clutter the mind so much that it would make it hard to run a business. While I did sometimes wear jeans, I mostly wore slacks and a button shirt, without a tie or coat. It gave me just enough air of authority to earn the respect of those around me or those I needed something from, like bankers.

I returned to my office realizing it was the end of the day. Most of the staff were heading out. When I got to my desk, there was a note on a pile of papers left by my admin. I appreciated that she knew that I would continue to work after hours and had set aside the work she felt I needed to focus on.

After that, I would go back to my personal passion projects, the current one being a computer system that would help protect the social security numbers of foster children. It was shocking how many of these kids aged out of foster care, only to learn that their credit was shit because somebody had stolen their social security number and used it to get credit. But my quest was personal, too. Liam's social security number had been stolen and his credit ruined, which was part of why he'd turned to joining old friends in crime.

I had no clue whether my idea would work because it would rely on the government's and social workers' willingness to keep tabs on and flag questionable use of a foster child's social security number. But I didn't need to know that my passion projects would have a successful outcome. I

just needed to create them and hope that others would recognize their benefit.

At eight o'clock, I left the office and returned to my modest condo where I pulled out leftover Mexican take-out from the night before. As I ate, I scrolled my newsfeed, looking at current sports scores even though I didn't like sports. That had been Liam's love, and it was something I did for reasons that made no sense to me, but I'm sure a shrink would have thoughts about it.

My phone dinged, and I used my finger to scroll down from the top of the phone to open my notifications. The message came from a blocked number. I was getting ready to block it when I noticed the first line in the message had Liam's name. I poked the message and read:

LIAM MIGHT BE DEAD, but I still want what's mine.

I STUDIED THE MESSAGE, completely lost as to what it meant. But then an unsettling feeling knotted in the pit of my stomach. I grappled with whether to respond, but ultimately, curiosity won out.

I DON'T KNOW what's yours, but I'm certain I don't have it.

THE RESPONSE CAME SECONDS LATER. *We'll see about that.*

I IMMEDIATELY USED all the tech skills I had to figure out the source of the call, but there was no doubt they were using a burner phone which likely would end up at the bottom of a body of water when this call ended.

I sat back, running my fingers through my hair, wondering what this meant. I had donated everything of Liam's except for a few small trinkets before I left Boston. But they were things

from his childhood, like the baseball from when he hit a homerun in Little League. I had nothing of his as an adult, nothing from his life of crime.

WHAT IS it that you're looking for? Maybe I can help you?

A MOMENT LATER, he replied. *Play dumb if you like. But I will have what's mine.*

I STARED AT THE MESSAGE, trying to decide if it was as ominous as it seemed. Finally, I opened my email and drafted a quick note to the last detective who was on my brother's case along with the screenshot of the text. Maybe this information would mean something to him, or perhaps it might put new life into the case.

That night when I went to bed, I had a difficult time falling asleep, afraid that the dreams would come. Dreams of not being able to save Liam. Sure enough, when sleep overtook me, the nightmare began again. The one where I was trying to reach Liam but my legs couldn't move. But this time, when I finally did reach him and I was able to look down, crying out over his dead body, I saw that it wasn't Liam. It was Lindsay.

Lindsay

It felt like forever before the police arrived. By then, I was shaking like a leaf. Who had been in my house? God, what if the girls and I had been home?

The police finally arrived, and both officers listened as I told them what I'd found, then they went inside to take a look. I didn't need to see that mess again, so I waited outside. A few moments later, one of them came back out, asking me more questions.

"We'll talk to the neighbors to see if they saw anything," he said to me. I couldn't imagine that would provide any useful information since most people were gone during the day. But I nodded anyway.

"We've called in a detective, who will be here shortly. He'll want to go over your statement again. I know you probably don't want to go back in there, but we need to have some idea of what was taken."

He was right. I didn't want to go in there again. But I would.

"If you'll just wait here, Detective Donovan will be here in a minute."

Once again, I nodded and leaned against my car as the officer returned to the house.

A few moments later, a car pulled up behind mine. A dark-haired man in his mid-thirties wearing jeans, a button shirt,

and a coat stepped out. He approached me, extending his hand. "I'm Detective Flynn Donovan. Are you Lindsay McKinnon?"

I shook his hand. "Yes."

He looked up at the house and then back at me. "I'm just going to run in and take a look and talk to the officers who are here. Then you and I can take a look together so you can let me know what's missing. After that, I'll get your statement. Alright?" He was professional, and yet, his eyes were friendly, concerned.

He trotted up to the house and entered it. A few minutes later, Detective Donovan exited, waving his arm for me to join him. "I know it's unsettling, but we really need to know if something was stolen."

I sucked in a breath and stood up straight, ready to face the destruction of my home. Since we were at the front door, we entered the living area. A part of me hoped that the mudroom, kitchen, and living area were the only rooms hit. That hope died when I entered the girls' playroom.

"Oh, God." My hand covered my mouth as shock overtook me. Who'd ransack a playroom? The toy boxes were turned over, their toys strewn everywhere. Art materials were dumped from their bins. Pictures on the walls were on the floor, the glass and frames broken.

"Some sick fucker to do this to a kid's room," Detective Donovan quipped.

That was the understatement of the year.

We moved on to the kids' room, and like the playroom, it was a mess. Even the bunk bed that Georgie and Cassie slept in was knocked on its side. Olivia's trundle bed was torn apart. To see it struck fear deep into my soul.

"I don't suppose your kids had anything worth stealing?"

I shook my head. "No." I swallowed as we moved on.

"Do you have any guns?"

My head swiveled toward him as we moved toward my bedroom. "What? No. Of course not. I have three little girls."

“Drugs?”

I gaped at him. “No!”

“I’m sorry, but I have to ask. Most people who break into homes are looking for something of value. Money or things that they can sell for money, or drugs and guns.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “And you’ve decided that I don’t have money or things that could be sold for money?”

He gave me a sheepish smile. “Do you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

We entered my bedroom. My gaze immediately went to the wall that held the art piece my father and Miranda bought for me for my birthday. It too was on the floor, the back of the frame gone, but the picture remained.

I went over to my jewelry box, and while it had been pawed through, as far as I could tell, nothing of value had been taken. Not that I had a ton of expensive jewels, but on occasion, my father had bought me a necklace or earrings that had diamonds or gold.

“None of my things of value have been taken. It could be that they didn’t know that piece of art was expensive. I don’t know how they would miss the jewelry.”

Detective Donovan studied the art piece and then came over to my jewelry box, using his finger to sort through what was in there.

“How about alcohol?”

“Alcohol?” People broke into other people’s homes for booze?

I shrugged and made my way back to the kitchen, trying to ignore the mess. Why would somebody do all this destruction? There was no way I would get it all cleaned up before the girls were supposed to come home tomorrow.

I pushed that away for the moment as I entered the kitchen. I reached up to the cupboard over my refrigerator to open it. “I have wine and vodka. They still seem to be there.”

“Have you made any enemies? Somebody who would just want to come in and trash your house?”

Did I? I couldn't imagine that I did. I got along with everyone at work. My neighbors and I were friendly. “No. At least not that I know of.”

“I'd like to take your statement, which we can do at the station, or maybe it would be less stressful if we went out for coffee. There's a nice little place not far from here.”

I nodded, appreciating his sensitivity to my situation. I agreed to meet him there. As I drove over, I called my father to tell him what happened.

“Jesus, Lindsay. Are you okay?”

“I'm a little rattled, but I'm grateful that neither I nor the girls were here.”

“Come here and stay with us tonight. Do I need to come get you?”

“No, I'm going to meet with the detective to give my full statement. And then I'll be over.”

“Do you want me there? Maybe I should call you a lawyer.”

“Why would I need a lawyer because my house got burglarized?”

“I don't know. I'm worried sick.”

I smiled, knowing that my father still saw me as his little girl despite my being twenty-six years old.

“I'll be fine, Dad. I'll be over in a little bit.”

I arrived at the coffee house and ordered decaffeinated tea thinking I didn't need any more stimulants in my body. I sat with Detective Flynn at a small table and recounted my day.

No, nothing unusual had been going on in the last few days or weeks.

No, I didn't see anything unusual that morning.

“It’s probably kids,” Detective Flynn said once I finished answering all his questions.

It made no sense to me. “Why would kids break into my house and mess it up?”

“It could have been some sort of peewee gang initiation. Maybe they were looking to steal something but didn’t find anything they wanted.”

It still made no sense to me. Did peewee gangs really exist?

“But I will look into it. We’ll take some fingerprints and see if anybody in the neighborhood saw anything. We’ll look to see if there’s any similar incidents going on in the area or even the city at large.”

I held my warm cup between my two cold hands, but I was sure that the nippy December air wasn’t what was chilling me to my bones. “Your tone makes it sound as if you probably won’t find out who did this.”

He gave a shrug. “Probably not. I would recommend getting some new locks.”

I frowned. “How did they even get in? I’m certain I locked my door.”

“Maybe you just thought you did. It’s not uncommon.”

“I have a security system. I didn’t even get a warning on my phone.” As I realized that, my fear ramped up. Whoever got in had to know how to get past the security. Surely, that couldn’t be kids.

Detective Donovan’s brow furrowed. “That is strange. We’ll have one of our tech people take a look. I assume that it also has visual, in which case we’ll need the video.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling more unsettled. I liked it better when we thought it might just be kids.

“How long before I will be able to go in and clean it up?” Even as I said that, I wondered if I’d ever be able to feel safe in my home again. After I’d found Liam murdered in my home, I’d tried to continue to live there. It was a personal goal

to beat my fear. But once Oliver moved away, I found it too hard to live there. For a short time, I lived with dad and Miranda, and then I moved into an apartment until I was able to buy my home last year.

“It’ll be a day or two. That will allow us to go through everything with a fine-tooth comb. Maybe one of our intruders dropped something.”

“Intruders? Plural? You think there’s more than one?”

“Just a figure of speech. Could be one person. Could be a crew.”

I took a sip of my now tepid tea. I couldn’t wrap my mind around what happened.

My phone pinged with a notification. I pulled it out of my purse, checking the message. It said it was from a blocked phone, but Liam’s name appeared.

LIAM MIGHT BE DEAD, but I still want what’s mine.

MY HEART RACED as adrenaline shot into my veins.

“Is something wrong?”

I looked up at Detective Donovan, my mind spinning out of control. Why was someone messaging me about Liam? Why on the same day my house was ransacked?

Memories came flooding back to the night I found Liam, including the one where I thought perhaps Liam was looking for something in my house. Or maybe hiding it.

But I didn’t live there anymore. I moved out of there nearly five years ago. Surely, I would’ve noticed having something of his or something out of place when I packed everything up?

Detective Donovan’s hand rested on my forearm. “Hey. What’s going on? Could that be related to your break-in?”

“I don’t know.” My voice quavered. I handed him the phone to show him the text.

“Liam?” He glanced up at me. “Who is Liam?”

“He was my boyfriend. He was murdered five years ago. Liam Quinlan.”

Detective Donovan’s brows rose. “Liam Quinlan? Really?”

I nodded, curious about his reaction. “Why?”

“I knew Liam—or more accurately, his older brother Oliver—back when we were kids. I heard he’d been murdered and that it hadn’t been solved.”

I nodded.

“Do you mind?” He motioned his hand toward the phone, indicating he wanted to take a closer look at the message.

“Please. Maybe I could figure out who it’s from.”

His brow furrowed as he began to poke and scroll and type into my phone. A few moments later, he handed the phone back to me. “It’s likely from a burner phone. I hope you don’t mind that I took a screenshot and sent it to my phone. We’ll see if maybe these two incidents are related. But I’ll also send it over to Homicide. Perhaps this could help them in Liam’s case.”

“Do you think it’s related?” I couldn’t see how, and yet, how could it not be?

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Did Liam have something of someone else’s and this person thinks you have it?”

I shook my head. “Liam and I had broken up by then. He’d moved out. I’ve moved twice since then and haven’t ever seen anything that wasn’t mine or the girls’.”

“You might have something and not know it.”

The only things I had that people thought were Liam’s were the girls. That idea shot my fear into the stratosphere. Who would want them? Why?

“Or it’s not related. It’s my job to figure that out. Will you be alright? Do you have a place to go? Should I call someone for you?” Concern etched his face.

“I’m going to go stay with my dad and stepmother. My girls are there already.”

“If you’d like, I can escort you over.”

I managed to smile. “Thank you, Detective Donovan. That’s very nice, but not necessary.”

“Please, you can call me Flynn.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a business card and a pen and started writing on the back. “The front of the card has all my professional numbers including my professional cell phone. Here on the back is my personal number. If you think of anything or you need anything, let me know.”

I took the card and studied it. I couldn’t deny the feeling of security it gave me to have access to him. “Do you always give your personal number out?”

He shook his head. “No. In fact, this might be the first time. But Oliver and Liam were friends of mine. I owe them, and especially Oliver, my life. He helped me get out of what was going to be a very bad life of crime.”

The memories of Oliver filled my heart. Memories of the gentle, kind, quiet man who would’ve done anything to save his brother. It didn’t surprise me that he had also helped Detective Donovan.

“Thank you.”

On the drive to my father’s house, I tried to think of how to explain to the girls why I was there instead of home. Maybe we had a flea infestation and I needed to have the home bombed with insecticide. No.

Maybe I could just tell them I missed them. But then I wasn’t sure how to explain that we couldn’t go home for the next few days.

Maybe I needed to tell them the truth, but I didn’t want to scare them. I didn’t want them to go to bed every night

wondering if someone was going to break into the house and destroy their things.

When I arrived, my dad greeted me at the door. “Miranda’s with the kids in the back. I wanted a minute to talk with you and see how you are. I’ve got some wine in the kitchen. Or something stronger if you need.”

I arched a brow. “You’ll do anything to get out of playing Candyland, won’t you?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Instead, he studied me. “Really, Lindsay. Are you okay?” He pulled me into a hug, and I got the feeling it was more to soothe him than me.

I hugged him back. “I’m okay. They suspect it’s just kids.”

Inwardly, I winced, knowing I was lying to my father. Maybe not lying, but not telling the whole truth. The text message unsettled me, but maybe it was just a coincidence. Either way, whatever that person was looking for, I didn’t have it.

I got a glass of wine and assured my father that I was okay and a competent detective was on the case. Then I did my best to put it out of my mind as I went to see my girls, hugging them tight, grateful that they were safe.

Later that night in bed, I thought about Liam. What did the person who texted want? Was it related to why Liam was in my house the night he was killed? If that was the case, it could be why my home was broken into. But what were they looking for? Whatever it was, I didn’t have it. Surely, by not finding it, the intruders would give up, except that text came after my home was ransacked.

Why would they think I had anything, away? Liam and I were estranged by then. The most likely person to have whatever they were looking for was Oliver.

Oliver. I sighed. Thinking of him brought up so many emotions. Sadness at not having him in my life. Hopefulness that he was happy. I knew he was successful, but was he happy? And of course, guilt at not telling him about the girls.

I turned over, not wanting to feel guilty. I'd made my choice, and it was the right one. Oliver left and never looked back. He'd never called or texted. A part of me felt hurt by that. I'd thought I'd meant more to him. But the other part was glad that he'd been able to escape a life of pain and build something new. It told me that I'd made the right choice in keeping the girls from him and letting everyone believe they were Liam's. But now, I had to wonder if the thing Liam had that the person who texted wanted was my girls?

Oliver

It was just after seven in the morning when my phone rang. I was already at the office, sitting at my desk having joined the Five AM Club not long after I moved to California. Those early morning hours were always my most productive of the day.

I picked up my phone, checking the caller ID, and was surprised to see the detective from the Boston Police Department assigned to Liam's case. Granted, I had emailed him a copy of the weird text I received last evening, but to be honest, I didn't think it would go anywhere except maybe into my brother's file.

I poked the answer button. "Oliver Quinlan."

"Mr. Quinlan, this is Detective Riker from the Boston police. I was calling about that text you received yesterday."

"I take it that it means something?"

"It definitely means something, although to be honest, I'm not sure what. But since your anonymous texter isn't just reaching out to you, I'm thinking this could be an opportunity to find out who killed your brother."

I sat back in my chair, curious about his statement. "This person is texting other people? Is it from the same burner phone?" Technology could do a lot of things, but I was still dubious about whether the phone could be traced. And if it could, I doubted it would be found.

“They are from the same phone. The first messages went out before yours. We’ve been able to figure out they are in Boston, but we suspect that the phone—”

“Has been dumped.”

“Right. We also suspect that if this person is serious about finding whatever Liam had, he’ll be in touch again. It’s possible that this person has broken into a home in search of whatever it is he’s looking for.”

An unsettled feeling slid up my spine. “You think whoever this is has broken into a home?” My mind scrambled to think of whose home that could be. Surely, it was one of his buddies in crime? At the time of his death, Liam had been sleeping on the couch at a friend’s house. I had invited him to come stay with me once I stopped renting the room from Lindsay, but by then, he was in too deep with the gang he hung with. He knew I disapproved of his choice and decided to stay away. Not a day went by when I didn’t chastise myself for not going after him. He was twenty-one years old, and in my anger, I decided that if he wanted to throw his life away, he could. If only I’d gone after him. If only I’d tried harder.

“Yes. We’re not completely sure that this break-in is related except for the fact that the victim also received the same text hours later.”

I swallowed the ball of fear that started to rise. “Are you able to tell me who the victim is?” Please let it be one of Liam’s scumbag friends. Not that I wanted bad things to happen to other people, but I hoped to hell that Liam’s life of crime wasn’t putting Lindsay in danger.

“It’s Liam’s former girlfriend, Lindsay McKinnon. Do you know her?”

Jesus fuck. I pressed the palm of my hand into my temple as guilt and fear roiled in my gut. “I knew her when she was seeing my brother. Is she alright?”

“Yes. She wasn’t home at the time of the break-in. Whoever it was pretty much took everything apart in the house, and then

hours later, she received the same text as you. I don't suppose you have any idea what this person is looking for?"

"I have no idea." I wondered if this guy was on his way to California to search my place. I hoped so because I hated the idea that he could still be a threat to Lindsay.

"Maybe whatever this guy is looking for got mixed up in Liam's things. Maybe you have it and don't know it."

I stood, walking to my office window, trying to deal with the growing panic. "I don't see how. Everything that I had of Liam's was tossed or donated. The few things I kept were from when he was a kid. They have no value except to me." I thought back to the call I got from Lindsay five years ago. The terror in her voice as she told me that she'd found Liam in her house, and he was dead. My first thought had been a drug overdose, although Liam hadn't been known to do drugs. To find out he was murdered was a shock. And yet at the same time, I suppose there had been a part of me, based on who he was hanging out with, that knew he could end up dead. With someone looking for something that Liam apparently had, I now had to believe there was a reason he'd been in Lindsay's home when he hadn't been living there. The question was, was he hiding it there when he died, or had he already hidden it there and he was back to get it? I couldn't be sure that the answer to that question really mattered.

"Is there any chance they found what they were looking for in Lindsay's house?"

"We suspect not, considering the text to her came in after the home had been ransacked. Have you gotten any texts like these before? Or maybe received communication in other ways?"

"No."

"Have you noticed anyone else hanging around your office or around your home who could have been suspicious?"

"No." At least, not yet. But I had to consider this person could be heading my way. Or maybe there was someone suspicious around. I hadn't been on lookout for somebody

who looked out of place. It was completely possible that someone had been lurking and I had no idea.

“Well, we’ll be looking into this. If you can think of anything, or if you get any more messages, please let me know.”

“I will.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Wait !” I couldn’t let him end the call without knowing what Lindsay was doing. Jesus. If she was in trouble because of Liam, then I had let her down too by not looking out for her.

“Lindsay. Liam’s girlfriend. I know you said she was okay now, but is she safe?”

“My understanding is that she’s with her father and stepmom until she can get her home cleaned up. But I don’t know her plans. She’s working with another detective on the break-in. Like I said, we’re not sure Liam’s murder and this break-in are related.”

I sat back feeling somewhat relieved that Lindsay was with her father. I didn’t know Brett McKinnon personally. I’d met him once on New Year’s Eve five years ago. What I did know was that he was a father who doted on his daughter, and he would do whatever it took to keep her safe.

“Like I said, if you think of anything, let me know. Otherwise, I’ll be in touch.” With that, he hung up.

I tossed the phone on my desk and paced by my window as I ran my fingers through my hair, chanting *fuck, fuck, fuck*. I felt compelled to do something but didn’t have the slightest idea what I could do. Lindsay was safe and the police were on the case. That should have satisfied me. But it didn’t. Not even a little bit.

As I paced back and forth, I came to the realization that when it came to knowing and understanding Liam, I was the only one who truly knew him. We had no parents since our father was incarcerated for life and our mother died at the hands of another abusive man who was also in prison. I remembered finding out about that when I was fourteen and

Liam was ten. We used to fantasize about our dad and mom's killer seeing each other in prison and beating each other until they were both dead. Morbid, I know, but they both deserved it. My mom wasn't a saint, but she didn't deserve to be killed at the hands of someone she cared for.

So there was just me. The only deep link to Liam. To find who was texting us, the police needed someone who'd been involved with Liam up until the end. That person was me.

I exited my office, finding my admin just putting her purse in her desk to start the day. Thank God she was always on time.

"I have to go to Boston. Whatever I have on the calendar needs to be canceled or rescheduled."

She blinked at me in surprise but then nodded. "For how long?"

"How long?"

"How long will you be gone? How far out do I need to cancel or reschedule your meetings?"

I shook my head. I wasn't usually a spontaneous person, and I was now realizing how much I wasn't considering in my rush to get back to Boston. "I don't really know." For a moment, I stood at her desk, thinking about how I was going to make this work. At this point, with Lindsay's life at risk, I didn't care about my business or the money. But I had responsibilities to the people who worked for me.

"I'm going to take my laptop and I'll work remotely." It wasn't like I didn't have other remote workers.

"Of course." Her head tilted to the side. "Is everything alright, Mr. Quinlan?"

I rolled my shoulders in an effort to relieve the tension. "I don't know. I'm worried that it's not, so I need to go home."

Thankfully, she didn't ask for any details.

"From now on, I'll be communicating with you directly. I'm going to rely on you to help me get messages out to the team as needed."

“I’ll take care of it.”

I returned to my office, gathered up my laptop and all the paperwork I thought was important, and shoved it all into my laptop case. As I headed down to my car, I researched flights to Boston, booking the next one out that I could reasonably get to on time.

Once home, I made a beeline for my room, pulling a duffel out of my closet to pack. It was one of the few times I wished I’d gone with the Steve Jobs/Mark Zuckerberg wardrobe system as it would have made it easier to pack. I tossed a couple of pairs of jeans, a pair of slacks, T-shirts, and then remembering December in Boston was cold, I included two fleece pullovers.

I grabbed my grooming kit from the bathroom and tossed it into the bag. I gave my condo one last check, making sure everything was secure. For a moment, I wondered if I’d come home to a trashed condo if this guy texting me wanted to come look here. I didn’t have much of value, so I wasn’t too worried one way or the other.

I headed out the door, leaving my car there and instead ordering a rideshare to take me to the airport. It saved me the hassle of long-term parking, plus, the ride could drop me right at the terminal.

The next few hours flew by, and before I knew it, I was sitting in business class as the airplane powered down the runway to take off. I wondered if I should’ve called anyone to let them know I was coming. But who? I had no family there. I doubt the police would care except to warn me away from getting involved. Perhaps I should let Lindsay know I was coming. After all, the whole purpose of returning to Boston was to do my duty to Liam by protecting her.

Lindsay

My girls stood lined up in front of me in the bathroom as I inspected them. Dressed. Teeth brushed. Hair combed.

“Cassie didn’t wash her face,” Georgie tattled.

“I did so.” Cassie glared at Georgie and then turned to me.

“Did you use water?” I asked.

“No.”

I pulled out a makeup remover wipe and handed it to her. “Use this.” Cassie wiped her face and handed the wipe back to me, and I tossed it in the trash.

“How much longer do we get to stay with Grandpa and Gran-Mira?” Olivia asked.

Today was our second day at my dad and Mira’s house, and I was still struggling with what to tell them about it. I hoped that I’d be able to get my home cleaned up and our lives back to normal soon.

“At least one more night,” I said cheerfully.

“Yay!” they said in unison.

I was relieved that they were okay with staying and didn’t ask why.

“Now, let’s get breakfast and get you to school.”

Georgie bolted from the bathroom, with Cassie following. Olivia trotted behind them. It was so strange to have conceived them at the same time but they were so different. Then again, while they looked similar, they weren't identical. Georgie was loud and energetic and often the ringleader when trouble was occurring. Cassie was no church mouse, but much of her energy came from trying to keep up with Georgia. Olivia was the quiet, reserved child. She would rather read than run and was usually smart enough not to get caught up in Georgie's mischief.

I followed them to the kitchen, where Grayson was already at the table eating, and Miranda was cooking breakfast.

"Eggs and bacon, girls?" she asked.

"Eggs are slimy." Georgie made a face.

"Yeah." Cassie copied.

"Not mine."

"You don't have to do that," I said to Miranda. "They're happy with cereal."

"I like eggs," Olivia said.

"I was already making them." Miranda put eggs and bacon on plates and set them on the table.

"I want cereal—"

"You'll have eggs," I told Georgie. I gave her my don't-argue face.

She huffed out a breath but didn't argue.

"Hey, Linds, I can take the girls to school today if you like. That will give you time to handle things."

I was glad Miranda didn't reveal what things I needed to handle. "That would be awesome, thank you."

"Of course. You'll keep me posted, right?"

I nodded. "I'm going to call in to work and let them know what's up and then deal with..." I glanced at the girls. "Things."

My father entered the kitchen. “What’s all this commotion?”

“It’s just us, Grandpa,” Georgie said around a mouthful of bacon.

He feigned a frown. “Who let you munchkins in?”

The girls giggled. “You did.”

He grinned. “How is everyone this morning?” He kissed Miranda, hugged me, and then went to kiss and hug Grayson and the girls.

“We’re going to school with Gran-Mira and Grayson,” Callie told her grandfather.

I imagined to the outside world it was odd that my father had a son who was less than a year older than his grandchildren. It was weird, but in a wonderful way.

“Girls are gross,” Grayson murmured.

“We are not!” Incensed, Georgie punched Grayson in the arm.

“Hey! Georgie!” Immediately, I pulled her from her chair.

“He said—”

“I know what he said. But we don’t hit.”

“Gray, don’t be mean,” Miranda chastised her son.

“You need to say you’re sorry,” I told Georgie.

She made a face but turned to Grayson. “I’m sorry for hitting you.”

“Next time someone says something you don’t like, what are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m not going to hit.”

“Good. Now finish your breakfast.”

When they finished, I helped Miranda herd the kids out the door to go to school. Once they were gone, I returned to the kitchen, ready to deal with the day.

“Here, sit down.” My father gestured to the kitchen table where a mug of coffee waited for me.

I sat, taking a sip of the warm brew. Then I pulled out my phone and called work, letting them know I wouldn’t be in today. After that, I researched cleaning services that would help me clean up my home once the police gave me the all-clear to return.

“When will you be able to get into your house?” my father asked, concern etched on his face.

“I don’t know. Soon, I hope.”

He started to say something but was interrupted by my phone ringing. The caller ID showed it was Detective Riker, Liam’s homicide investigator. It had been a while since I’d heard from him. It would be nice if his call was to tell me someone had been arrested for Liam’s murder, but I figured his call was related to my house break-in and the text.

“Hello?”

“Ms. McKinnon, I’ve just spoken to Detective Donovan regarding your break-in and the text message from yesterday. I’d like to discuss this further with you as part of my investigation into Liam’s murder. Would you be able to come in later this afternoon?”

A flutter of nerves skittered along my spine as the reality that this could be related to Liam’s murder settled in. “Of course, Detective. I’ll be there.”

When we hung up, I sat for a moment. The feelings of fear and sadness from five years ago resurfaced.

“Hey.” My father took my hand and squeezed it. “What was that about?”

I’d minimized the situation last night but knew I couldn’t do so any longer. “That was the detective investigating Liam’s murder. He heard about the break-in and wants me to come talk to him.”

My father’s brow knitted. “I thought they said this was kids.”

I shrugged. “They did until I got a text from someone indicating they wanted something that Liam had of theirs.”

“What?” My father’s tone was filled with annoyance. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Denial, maybe. I didn’t want to worry you needlessly.”

“Jesus, Lindsay. I’m your father. I worry. That’s what I do.”

I laughed. “I know. I’m sorry.”

He pursed his lips at me. “It goes without saying that you can stay here with us for as long as you need.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it. I don’t want you returning home if this break-in has anything to do with Liam’s murder.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to return home if that was the case either. I remembered all the sleepless nights following Liam’s murder where I worried the killer would return.

But I didn’t want to be a victim and let others dictate my life. “I hope the detective can help me figure out whether I’m in danger.”

“Regardless of what they find, you should consider getting a better security system. And find out why yours failed.”

I nodded. That was another item on my list for today.

THAT AFTERNOON, I drove to the police station hoping I’d get news that would allow me to relax and bring my girls home. As soon as I entered the building, a uniformed officer escorted me back to a room, where I found Detective Donovan already waiting.

He stood, giving me a friendly smile. “I hope you don’t mind my sitting in. I figured if my and Riker’s cases overlapped, it would be easier for us to talk to you together.”

“That’s fine. It’s nice to have a familiar face.” That was true. Plus, he’d known Liam as a child so he was invested in

solving the murder and this current mystery.

The door opened and Detective Riker entered. He looked about the same from when I saw him last year during a follow-up to Liam's murder investigation. Perhaps with a few more wrinkles and gray hair, but still, the air of confidence that he'd solve the crime.

"Ms. McKinnon, thanks for coming in."

"Of course. Anything to help."

He motioned for me to sit, and Detective Donovan held out a chair for me.

Detective Riker sat across from me. "Let's get right to it. Has anything come up missing from your home? Any idea what the intruder was after?"

"Not that I was able to see when I looked yesterday."

"Your statement to Donovan yesterday was that you weren't aware of having anything of Liam's that anyone would want."

"I don't have anything of Liam's at all. He and I were broken up when he died. He'd already moved out."

He reviewed notes in a file then looked up at me. "Is it possible that he hid something important? It might still be hidden, and you don't even know you have it."

"Based on the state of her home, I doubt it. Every room was torn apart," Detective Donovan said. "If there was something hidden, they'd have found it."

I shuddered as I remembered the state of my home. Even my girls' room was invaded. "I've moved twice since Liam's murder and have never come across anything while packing that was his or could have hidden something. I can't imagine what he'd need to hide in the first place."

"Evidence of illegal activity—cash, weapons, drugs. Anything that would implicate him or his associates?"

I tried to think of items I owned that could hide the items he suggested, but nothing came to mind.

“No. Is it possible that the break-in isn’t related?” I knew it was wishful thinking, but I was getting more and more fearful of this situation.

“I doubt it,” Detective Riker said. “When you factor in that Mr. Quinlan got the same text—”

“Oliver?”

“Yes. He received a text not long after you did, and both came after your break-in.”

“It’s possible our burglar is on his way to California to search his place,” Detective Donovan said.

“Maybe,” Detective Riker conceded. “But Quinlan doesn’t believe he has whatever the culprit is looking for either.”

I swallowed as the realization that Oliver was involved in this too washed through me. Were the police going to want him to come back to Boston? The thought of Oliver here, near my girls, made my heart race.

“Will he have to come here?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Right now, there’s no need.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and sent a silent prayer that they’d be able to resolve this situation without involving Oliver.

“I imagine you knew Mr. Quinlan?”

I wasn’t sure what Detective Riker’s question had to do with anything. “He was Liam’s brother and they were close. For a short time, when Liam lived with me, Oliver rented the extra bedroom.”

“Maybe Liam hid the item in his things?” Detective Donovan suggested.

“At the time Liam was murdered, neither of them lived there.”

“Could he have hidden the item before he moved out and was back to find it?” Detective Riker thought out loud.

“Maybe, but I’ve never found anything.”

“Well, our guy knows it’s not in your house and won’t likely be back.” Detective Donovan sounded surer of that than I felt.

“We don’t know that.” Detective Riker contradicted him. “It sounds like they think she could still have whatever they’re looking for.”

“He was thorough. I doubt he plans to look again.”

“Any idea how he got past my alarm?” That was the most unsettling. I felt more vulnerable without the security of an alarm.

“Techs are still working on it, Lindsay. But we’ll figure it out.” Detective Donovan gave me a reassuring smile. “I’ll personally make sure you and your girls are safe.”

Detective Riker arched a brow at him but didn’t say anything.

“Thank you, Detective Donovan. Can you tell me when I can start cleaning up my home?”

“Tomorrow morning. We’ll be done processing the scene by then. I can meet you there if you’d like. Perhaps as you clean up, you’ll find something.”

“Good idea,” Detective Riker agreed.

“Alright.” It seemed unlikely that I had anything of Liam’s, and yet, if I did, I wanted it to be found and given to the police so I could end this unsettling situation.

“Thank you for coming in, Ms. McKinnon. I’ll let you know if I have more questions or any news to share,” Detective Riker said.

I rose from my chair. “Thank you.”

As I left the room, thoughts of Oliver clouded my mind. Bittersweet memories played like a movie reel in my head. Five years ago, I’d seen Oliver as a wonderful big brother to Liam and a good friend to me. Now, looking back, I recognized that my feelings were more than just friendly. I

didn't know when it had happened, but I'd fallen for Oliver. Had he stayed in Boston, I'd have told him about my pregnancy and maybe things would have been different for all of us. For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to imagine a life where he and I were a family with the girls. I had no doubt he'd be a wonderful father. My heart squeezed tight knowing the girls wouldn't know his love and generosity. But that was the reality. Oliver had left to escape his painful past and the guilt that haunted him, and in doing so, he left the possibility of us.

I pushed those thoughts aside. There was too much at stake to dwell on the past. I refocused on getting my home cleaned up and finding answers about my security system as I made my way out of the police station.

I waited for the elevator to take me downstairs, texting my father to let him know all was well and that I'd be able to get back into my home to start cleaning tomorrow.

When the doors opened, I looked up, ready to step into the elevator. My heart stuttered and I gasped. "Oliver."

Oliver

I walked into the police station, the grief and shock hitting me hard in the chest just as they had five years ago when I got the call that Liam had been murdered. Since my plane landed, I'd been bombarded with painful emotions, but this one stole my breath. Why had Liam insisted on following a life of crime?

Another memory assaulted me. This was the one when I'd come to the police station to pick up Liam and learned that Lindsay had been with him when he was arrested. Luckily, she hadn't been arrested, but when I learned that Liam's friends had drugged her, apparently to make her sleep while they did their dastardly deeds, my head exploded. That lovely, sweet, vibrant woman was too good for Liam, and I told him so once I paid his bail and got his ass home.

"What the fuck is it to you?" he'd demanded. "Fucking hell, Oliver. Do you have a thing for Lindsay? You want to fuck her? Is that what you do in your room at night? Jack off to thoughts of my girl?"

My fist flew out before I knew it. It caught him in the jaw, sending him reeling. He looked at me with the same shock that I felt. I'd just struck my brother.

"Don't you insult her like that." I acted as if I were defending Lindsay's honor, but the truth was, I had, a time or two, masturbated to thoughts of Lindsay like some fucking pervert.

He shook his head in disgust. “You’re just like the rest. You don’t know what the fuck is going on and don’t give a shit.”

“I do give a shit, Liam. All I do, all I’ve done my entire life, is give a shit about you. You’re the one who doesn’t give a shit about you.”

“You don’t know anything,” he sneered. “You know what? I’m outta here. I don’t need this bullshit.”

He brushed past me, heading to the door of the shitty little hellhole I’d been able to get for us when Lindsay had enough and kicked him out. She said I could continue to rent the extra bedroom, but aside from the fact that Liam needed me, it would be wrong to stay when I was in love with her.

“Liam. Don’t go.” I strode after him. “I’m sorry for hitting you. I’m sorry we had such a shitty life. But God, you’re so close to breaking free from it.”

He shrugged. “You’re the one who wants to break free. I know I’ve held you back from that. I relieve you of whatever duty you feel you have to me. Go. Take that job in California.”

“I’m not going to leave you.” Panic filled me. I was losing him. The idea of being alone in the world was fucking terrifying.

“So don’t. I’ll leave you.”

That was the last time I saw Liam... at least, alive.

I did my best to push those memories and the guilt away as I stepped into the elevator to ride up to the floor where Detective Riker worked. I needed information about Liam’s murder and the ominous text Lindsay and I had received.

Lindsay. When I wasn’t reliving the horrors of losing Liam, I was haunted by Lindsay. Since landing in Boston last night, I’d been second-guessing myself and this trip. I didn’t want those old feelings for her rekindled, especially when I couldn’t act on them without betraying my dead brother.

The elevator car arrived on my floor. I sucked in a breath, working to get myself focused on the task at hand. The

elevator door slid open and I stepped out right into the path of Lindsay. My breath caught at the sight of her. She was as stunning as I remembered.

“Oliver.”

A flood of emotions washed over me and it took me a minute to find my voice. “Lindsay. Hello.” Should I hug her? Shake her hand?

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I, uh, came to talk to the detectives about Liam’s case.”

We stood staring at each other awkwardly. Suddenly, she stepped over to me, giving me a hug. The warmth of her body, the sweet scent of her, stirred up long-ago yearning that I couldn’t afford to have.

As she stepped back, I resolved to keep the ugliness of Liam’s life away from her. “I’m sorry, Lindsay.”

She cocked her head to the side. “For what?”

“For whatever Liam has dragged you into.”

“It’s not your fault.”

I studied her, noting that while she was still as beautiful as ever, her blue eyes didn’t sparkle like before. Right now, they were tired and wary. I couldn’t blame her. Five years ago, she found my brother dead in her home. And now this. Ominous texts and her home broken into.

“Is there anything I can do? I understand you had a break-in. Can I replace anything? Fix anything?”

She gave me a wan smile. “That’s not necessary, Oliver, but thank you.” There was a distance, a detachment from her voice. “I just hope they realize I don’t have whatever they want.”

“I hope you’re right.” But I remembered Detective Riker saying she got her text after her home was searched, which to me said they didn’t find what they were looking for.

“I’m surprised you’re here. The police said there was no need for you to come.”

I shrugged, telling myself I was an idiot to feel like she was telling me she didn't need me around. "I want to know what's going on and do what I can to help."

She glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry, Oliver, I've got to go." Was she just giving me a line? God, how pathetic was I? She probably had a job. Maybe a husband and kids. But as she started toward the elevator, the need to not let her go drove me to stop her.

"Wait, before you leave, can we meet up later? Maybe grab some coffee?" After all, I was here to protect her from Liam's past. "We could compare notes, see if anything makes sense."

Lindsay hesitated. "Alright, but just for a bit."

We agreed on the place and time, a small coffeehouse that had been popular when she and Liam were in college. Then she hurried away, leaving me feeling like she'd have been just as happy to have made this our one and only contact.

I took a deep breath and turned my focus to the task at hand—getting answers. I strode toward a group of officers.

"Detective Riker?" I asked the nearest officer, who pointed me in the direction of a tall man with graying hair.

"Didn't expect you here," he said as I approached.

"I want to find my brother's killer and end this game someone is playing with our lives."

He nodded and led me to a desk. He motioned for me to sit. "I don't suppose you have any information since we last talked? Have you received another text?"

"No. But whoever this is, I can't imagine they're done, and I'm concerned, especially for his girlfriend."

"We just spoke to Ms. McKinnon."

"Did you learn anything?"

He shrugged, and I knew he was making the decision to keep some information to himself. "While it's likely the texts and break-in are related to Liam's murder, we don't actually know that for sure."

I arched a brow. “How can they not be related?”

“What I’m saying is that whoever this is, he might not have killed Liam. Perhaps he just knows that Liam had something and now he wants it.”

“Why take five years to figure that out?”

“I’m considering the possibility that the texts are from someone who has been incarcerated and is now out.”

I suppose that made sense. What the hell did I know? I wasn’t a cop. “Have you talked to his old friends again?”

“Trying. You know how it is with talking to cops.” He cocked his head to the side. “Any chance you’re still in touch with your old friends from the neighborhood? Maybe they’ve said something to you.”

I shook my head but decided maybe I would face the demons of my past and see who I could find from Liam’s old crew. “I haven’t been back for five years.”

“How long are you in town?”

“I don’t know. As long as it takes to make sure Lindsay is safe, I suppose.”

His brow furrowed. “I didn’t realize you and Ms. McKinnon—”

“I feel obligated to look out for her for Liam.”

“That’s nice.”

Yeah, well, based on my short encounter with Lindsay, I got the feeling she didn’t care that I was here. I couldn’t blame her. I’m sure I brought up memories and feelings she didn’t want to experience.

“Will you keep me in the loop?” I asked.

“Sure. And let me know if you remember anything or hear anything.”

I rose from the chair and shook his hand. “Of course.” With that, I left his desk, feeling no closer to answers than before.

“Oliver!” A male voice called out, and I found myself wrapped in an unexpected hug from Flynn Donovan. Wow, speak of people from the old neighborhood. Memories of foster care and shared struggles flooded back.

“Flynn.” I looked at him, wondering if he’d been arrested.

He laughed and as if he knew what I was thinking, he said, “I’m a detective, not a perp.”

“Good to see you on the right side of the law.”

“Thanks to you, man.” Donovan grinned, slapping me on the shoulder. “So, you’re here about Liam?”

Was he on the case too? “Yes. I don’t suppose you have any information?”

“Not specifically about Liam’s case. That’s Riker’s.” He nodded toward where Detective Riker still sat at his desk.

“I just spoke with him.”

“Ah... good. Did he tell you he’d just talked to Liam’s girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“It’s pretty shitty that some asshole has roped her in. They tore her home apart. Did you know her?”

Guilt filled me again. “Yes. To be honest, I feel protective of her. I don’t want Liam’s mistakes to fuck up her life, especially after all this time.” My brows furrowed. “Are you involved in the case?”

“I’m investigating the break-in. Since it could be related to Liam’s murder, Riker and I are conferring.”

“Do you have any leads on the break-in?”

He shook his head. “So far, no, except whoever it was bypassed her security. We’re looking to see if there’s anything. Perhaps it caught the perp surveilling the property prior to the break-in, that sort of thing. But they were able to shut it all down when they broke in.”

“They? Do you think it’s more than one person?”

“Don’t know yet. Do you by chance know what they’re looking for?”

I shook my head. “Not a clue.”

“Well, we’ll figure it out. We usually do,” he said good-naturedly.

I smiled, pleased to see he’d made a good life for himself. Why hadn’t Liam been able to do that? “It’s good to see you, Flynn. Will you keep me posted on the case?”

“Sure thing.”

As I left the station, the chilly wind outside mirrored the cold feeling inside me. The idea that someone could bypass a security system bothered me. Whoever was behind this had connections and skills, and they’d targeted Lindsay.

I used my ride-share app to order a car to take me back to my hotel. Sitting in the backseat as the car navigated through busy streets, I gazed at familiar landmarks, each one stirring up a mixture of pain, guilt, and regret. Again, I wondered if I should have just stayed in California. The police seemed competent, and Donovan’s involvement gave me a small sense of relief. After all, he knew people Liam knew. They grew up together.

But being back in Boston reminded me of how I’d failed to keep Liam out of trouble, and that thought weighed heavily on me. I owed it to him to make sure Lindsay was okay. I couldn’t fail her too.

Once back in my hotel room, I let out a sigh, letting all the crazy feelings and thoughts come out now that it was safe to do so away from people. I grabbed water from the mini-fridge and stared out the window, watching Boston bustle below me. I took a sip of water, wishing the cool, clear liquid could wash away the past and all the shitty feelings with it.

I couldn’t shake the image of Lindsay at the police station. Seeing her stirred up a storm inside me. It was like something inside me had been asleep for the last five years and those brief moments with her had awakened it.

Good God, she was still stunning, and yet, something was different about her. She came off as more guarded than I remembered. Once upon a time, she was an open book, her effervescent personality drawing people in like moths to a flame. Was this change in her a response to this case? Or had she simply evolved over time?

My impression was that she looked well, and yet, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd fucked up by leaving her. Abandoning Lindsay after Liam's death had been one of the hardest decisions of my life, but I hadn't known how else to cope with the chaos inside me. Failing my brother had been hard enough, but betraying him by sleeping with his former love... that was a burden I couldn't bear.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration and regret gnawing at me. Had I fucked up by coming? Deep down, I knew the answer. I was here to make things right—for Liam, for Lindsay—and my feelings didn't matter, even as I knew this would be a difficult situation to navigate. As much as I wanted to deny it, my feelings for her had never waned. They'd simply gone dormant and now were roused. I'd have to control that.

I let out another sigh as I contemplated the daunting task of controlling my feelings around Lindsay and reconciling my past with my present.

Glancing at my watch, I realized I had time before meeting Lindsay. I needed to clear my head and focus on something else, even if just for a little while. Picking up my phone, I dialed the office. I figured checking on my little empire was just the distraction I needed.

“Oliver, everything's running smoothly,” my admin assured me. “But Tech Security wants a conference call as soon as possible.”

That didn't sound good. “Thanks. Put me through to them now.”

When the line connected, Buddy Curtis, the head of my cybersecurity department, picked up. “Hey, Oliver. Sorry to bug you when you're out of town, but I wanted to let you

know about an attempted breach. The odd thing was that whoever it was appeared to only be interested in you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. They left little breadcrumbs that suggested they were poking into your files.”

The hairs on my neck stood up. Was this a break-in like Lindsay’s? If so, that suggested that whatever Liam had was something that could be filed digitally. Or maybe they thought I stored the location of whatever Liam had.

“Did the hacker want something specific?” I asked.

“Can’t say for sure. Listen, I’ve arranged for a new phone and laptop to be sent to your hotel. Should be there sometime today. I suggest you stay off your current devices since I’m not there to check them.”

“I’ll pull the batteries from both when we get off the phone.” A thought crossed my mind. “Have you ever worked with home security systems? Can they be hacked?”

“Depends on the system. Hard-lined ones can be if the phone cord is cut or Wi-Fi ones if they’re jammed. But it would take someone skilled. Home security is usually pretty good.”

“Thanks, Buddy.” I hung up, my concern growing. Whoever was messing with Lindsay and me wasn’t some everyday thug. They knew what they were doing, and that made them even more dangerous.

BOSTON WAS dark and cold in December. I pulled my coat tight around me as I stepped out of the car I’d ordered to bring me to the coffeehouse. The biting air felt good, like it was clearing out my senses. But the minute I stepped into the coffeehouse, my chest tightened in anticipation. Fucking hell, my nerves were like a teenager’s on their first date. I did my best to push the feelings down, but they refused to stay buried.

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped me. I glanced around and found a small table near the window.

Sitting down, I watched the door, waiting for Lindsay to arrive. I drummed my fingers on the table nervously, trying to keep my thoughts in check. It wasn't working. Memories of the past mingled with the uncertainty of the present, making it nearly impossible to focus on anything else.

She stepped through the door, and a whoosh of yearning and sadness and guilt flooded my senses. Unrequited love was a bitch.

Lindsay

It had taken me all afternoon to get over the shock of seeing Oliver at the police station. In many ways, he looked the same. His green eyes were still kind, filled with compassion. But at the same time, he was different. His hair was shorter, and while not styled, per se, it didn't look unkempt. He still wore a beard, but it was shorter and well-groomed. Even his shoulders seemed broader, making me wonder if he'd started working out. The thought of him lifting weights made my heart flutter unexpectedly, which annoyed me. I couldn't afford to be attracted to him again. To fall for him again. The truth was, for a moment, I was filled with happiness at seeing him again. I'd given into it for a moment and hugged him. But then I remember that the die of our life was cast five years ago when he left. When I let him go, knowing I wouldn't see him again.

I suppose that was why I was curt with him. He probably thought I was rude, behaving like that and then running off. The happiness at seeing him quickly morphed into panic as I realized he was in Boston, which increased the possibility that he'd learn about the girls.

It appeared that lying was going to be a part of my life right then. I'd lied to Oliver about needing to be somewhere. Then I lied to my father and Mira about having a work issue that would require me to be out tonight when I asked if they could watch the girls. And I was prepared to lie to keep Oliver from knowing about Georgie, Cassie, and Olivia.

Several times since leaving the police station, I'd thought about canceling because I was afraid of how it would go. But I didn't have Oliver's number. Plus, while I was going to do all I could to keep my distance from Oliver, I couldn't be so self-centered as to not connect with him when he had to be hurting about coming home to deal with Liam.

I stepped into the coffee shop, nervous anticipation skittering along my nerves as I scanned the room for him.

My gaze landed on him. He smiled and waved.

I did my best to smile back as I walked over to the table.

He rose and held a chair out for me. "I haven't ordered anything yet. Wasn't sure if you still liked chai lattes."

"Still do." How sweet that he still remembered. For a moment, I thought that this little reunion would go okay, that it would be like old times before Liam died. But the minute I sat down, the awkwardness that had existed between us at the police station grew again. I was relieved when a server came over to take our order.

"Two chai lattes, please," Oliver told the server. "Extra cinnamon on mine."

WHEN SHE LEFT, we sat staring at each other. I'd hoped he'd start the conversation, and I got the feeling he was wanting the same from me.

"California must be amazing. How's life there?"

"Can't complain. The weather is great, and business is thriving. I've been able to build a good life."

Relief flooded my system at hearing he was happy and successful. It helped reduce the guilt I felt about not telling him about the triplets. I reminded myself that his freedom and happiness were why I'd let him go and kept him in the dark about the girls. I still intended to keep the secret and hoped he would deal with Liam's business soon and return home.

"Do you have a family?"

He shook his head. “Work is my family.”

Weirdly, I was relieved by that too. I didn’t much like the idea of Oliver with another woman. I’d have to get over that.

“Do you live near the beach?”

He laughed. “No. Not all of California is on the beach. But I’m not too far from it. The state really does have a little bit of everything. Beach. Mountains. Desert.”

“Wine.”

“Yes. Very good wine.”

“I’m glad that you’re doing well and are happy. After everything...” I looked down, wishing I wasn’t about to bring up the saddest parts of Oliver’s life.

“I tell myself that Liam would be happy for me too.”

My head snapped up. “I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t know. The last time I saw him, he was telling me to leave, but it was because he was angry at me.”

I put my hand over his, his warmth seeping up my arm before I was able to think better about touching him. “You knew Liam. He could be quick to anger but even faster to forgive and make a joke.” I squeezed his hand and then released it.

The server came with our drinks, and I was grateful for the interruption.

“Maybe. Enough about me, though. What about you? Are you still working at the museum?” he asked once our server left.

“No, actually. I’m the creative director for a marketing firm.”

His head cocked to the side. “That’s a surprise. I always saw you as a museum curator or something. At one time, didn’t you want to start a business?”

I laughed. “At one time, I wanted to do a lot of things.” But becoming a single mom to triplets at the age of twenty-

two required that I grow up. “I like my job. It’s different, but I can still be creative and I work with a great group of people.”

“And how’s your dad?”

“He’s great. He and Mira are still blissfully married. They have a boy, Grayson, who is about a year older—who is five.” Holy crap, I nearly told him that Grayson was a year older than my girls.

“Was that a shock for you to have your dad with your best friend?”

“Shock is an understatement.” I laughed, glad to talk about them and not me. “It was strange at first, but they’re really happy, and they have a little boy together. That’s all that matters to me—that my family is happy.”

“Of course. Family is everything, isn’t it?” His expression was filled with sadness and I realized that he didn’t have a family. The only person he had was Liam. Self-loathing filled me because he did have a family. He had three little girls whom I was hiding from him.

He forced a smile. “What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

The question caught me off guard, and I hesitated for a moment. “Ah... not now. My life is full. Work... like you.” God was going to strike me dead for all these lies. “Did you learn anything at the police station?” Yes, I was a coward, changing the subject.

“No. They’re assuring me that they’re looking into everything. Do you have any idea on what they’re looking for?”

“None. I just hope they’ve given up looking for whatever they want in my home.” I sipped my latte, wishing the warmth would sooth away the unsettled feeling that someone had been through everything in my home.

“God, I hope so.” He leaned forward, a shadow of guilt crossing his face. “Lindsay, I can’t help but feel responsible for all this. Liam’s past coming back to haunt you.”

“It’s not your fault. And honestly, I don’t even know why you’re here. The police have it handled.” This time, I braced for the bolt of lightning God would strike me with as I encouraged Oliver to leave Boston.

“Because I care, Lindsay. Liam loved you, and I... I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

But I hadn’t loved Liam. Not at the end. By the time Liam died, my heart was with Oliver.

“It’s not your job to keep me safe. You have no duty to me because of Liam.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Liam used that same word... duty. He said he relieved me of my duty when he walked out.” His hands wrapped around his mug as he looked into the hot beverage.

I didn’t like making Oliver feel more pain or guilt, but at the same time, it was true that Oliver had no obligation to me. “The point is, I’ve moved on. You’ve moved on. All that is in the past. I’m fine. I don’t need you here to protect me.” My heart twisted with pain as I said the words, but I knew it was for the best.

“Moved on, huh?” He looked away, hurt flickering in his eyes. He turned back. “I’m not leaving until I know what’s going on and that this won’t impact your life. I owe it to Liam. If he were here, he’d be making sure you were okay. I know he fucked up with you, but he loved you.”

The hurt inside me deepened as I realized he wasn’t here because of any feelings for me but merely because of his brotherly bond with Liam. Feeling hurt about that was stupid. There was no reason for Oliver to be here for me, not after all these years.

My first instinct was to point out that Liam wasn’t here. And if he were, I had doubts that he’d be helping me. I believed he cared for me, but he cared about money and power and whatever he’d been caught up in when he died more than me.

“Truly, Oliver. It’s lovely that you feel that way, but I’m fine and the police are doing all they can.”

His jaw tightened. “Well, I hope you’re right about the police handling things. We don’t need any more trouble than we already have.” He rolled his shoulders, something I remembered he did to give himself a moment. “Maybe we could go over what we know about the case so far, then.”

“Okay.”

“I guess all we really know is that we both received text messages, and your home was broken into.”

“Right, but nothing was taken, and I haven’t heard anything since.”

“I understand your security was bypassed.”

That was unsettling. I relied on it to keep me and the girls safe when we were at home. “Yes. Detective Donovan said he’s looking into how that was done and if there was anything recorded that could help.” I remembered Detective Donovan sharing that he credited Oliver for helping him. “He said you were friends.”

“He was more friends with Liam. To be honest, I’m surprised he’s a cop. I guess he was willing to listen to me when Liam wasn’t.” Pain flashed again in his eyes. He gave his head a quick shake. “When you return home, you’ll want a new system. I could arrange for someone to install it.”

“Thanks, but really, there’s no need. My father is already planning to build Fort Knox around my house.”

“Alright, if you’re sure. But if you change your mind, let me know, okay?”

“Sure.” But I wouldn’t. “I’m guessing you have no idea who this person texting is.”

He shook his head. “Not a clue. I wish I did. I’m thinking of visiting the old neighborhood and Liam’s old haunts and see if I can learn something.”

“Surely, the police have already done that.”

“Liam’s friends wouldn’t talk to the police. Maybe they’ll talk to me.”

“It could be dangerous.” A chill ran up my spine imagining a world that Oliver didn’t live in. How strange that I wanted him out of my life but still needed to know that he was alive and well and happy.

“I can handle myself.”

Oliver didn’t seem as nerdy or reserved as he had five years ago, but neither did he put off Alpha male vibes like Liam had. “Sure, but you were never one of the tough guys.”

His head jerked back. “Wow, so now I’m not a real man, huh?”

I couldn’t decide whether he was joking or really offended. “Of course not! That’s not what I meant. I know you’re a real man.” Heat came to my cheeks as those words brought me back to five years ago when he’d tenderly and intimately touched me.

He arched a brow, making me wonder if he was thinking about that night as well. “Good. Because I may not have been the toughest guy around, but I’ve always done whatever it took to protect my family.”

“Oliver, you don’t have to prove anything to me or anyone else. I know you’re strong and capable, but we don’t know what we’re dealing with. You should let the police handle it. You have a business and a life in California. You shouldn’t let Liam get in the way of that again.”

Annoyance flashed across his handsome face. “Please don’t tell me how to feel or what to do regarding my brother.”

I sighed, hating that I’d offended him yet knowing that he couldn’t live his life anymore worrying about Liam or making amends for Liam. That was why he went to California. So he could live his own life.

“I’m just saying that you don’t have to sacrifice your life... your goals. This isn’t your fight.”

“No, it’s Liam’s, but he’s not here, which makes it mine.”

“Liam wouldn’t want that. I don’t want that.”

“Look, Lindsay, I understand what you’re saying, but I can’t just walk away from this. Especially when you’re caught in the middle.”

“I don’t want you in this, Oliver. Not for me.”

He rolled his shoulders, looking briefly out the window. Then he turned back to me. “Did I do something?”

My brow furrowed. “No. What do you mean?”

“I can’t help but feel like you want to get rid of me.”

I swallowed. The longer I sat here with him, the greater my guilt grew about my secret, the harder it was to justify my decision to keep him in the dark. Then again, he could be in danger. He was a closer link to Liam than I was. Surely, he would be the next target now that he was back in town.

“I just don’t want you to give up your life out of a sense of duty. Not to me, anyway.”

“It’s not to you.” His words were clipped, and I felt them like tiny daggers in my chest. “It’s for Liam.”

Frustration boiled over. “Liam and I were done when he was killed. I hate to say this because I don’t want to hurt you, but I didn’t love him anymore by then.” *My love had been replaced by a love for you.*

“I know that, but like I said, I’m here for Liam. I want to know the truth. The truth about who killed him and what’s going on now. And maybe you didn’t love him anymore, but I sure as hell know he loved you. That’s why what we did—” He bit off his statement, his jaw tightened.

I looked down, hating his regret for that night five years ago. God, if he knew what came of that night, that he got the woman Liam loved pregnant, the regret and guilt would be even greater. It was another reason to keep the secret, right?

“If seeing me brings up all your regret, then you should go, Oliver.”

“Judging by how hard you’re trying to get rid of me, I’d say you’ve got some regrets too.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t regret that night. Even without the girls, I wouldn’t regret that night. But especially since that night created my three little angels, there was no way I’d regret it. “I hate the idea that you look at me and wish you’d never been there that night.”

“That’s the problem, Lindsay. I might regret betraying my brother, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

My breath hitched.

He let out a frustrated growl. “The point is, I’m staying whether you want me or not.”

I didn’t respond, knowing he’d made his decision.

We finished our coffee in silence, the tension between us palpable. My mind was racing about what he meant by saying he’d do it again. Had I made a mistake by letting him go? Would things be different now if I had just told him the truth all those years ago? Should I tell him the truth now?

I quickly dismissed that idea. Maybe back then, things could have been different, but not now. He didn’t feel anything for me now except a duty to Liam. That was what he said. So no, I had to keep the secret. But his intention to stay filled me with worry. What would I do if he discovered the truth about our daughters?

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” I rose from my chair. “It was good seeing you again, Oliver.”

He stood too. His expression seemed to be filled with emotion but I couldn’t read it. “You too, Lindsay. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

I nodded and turned away. I stopped for a moment when I stepped outside, the cold air whipping me in the face like a slap. Like a punishment. But I’d come too far to turn back now. The past was gone. That was why he’d left. To escape. He was back now only because of Liam. Once this situation was over, he’d leave Boston and go back to the place where he could escape the pain of his past.

Oliver

Fuck, fuck, fuck. If I weren't in a public place, I'd have thrown my latte across the room. I'd totally fucked up with Lindsay. All because I was pissed off—no, hurt—that she didn't want me around. Of course she didn't. Why would she?

God, I hoped she didn't read too much in my statement that I'd have fucked her again. I only said it because she looked hurt that I regretted it. Ugh! Fuck.

I paid our bill and headed out into the cold. "Fuck," I murmured under my breath as the chill seeped in straight to my bones. California had made me soft. Maybe I should go home. I wasn't needed here. Lindsay didn't want me here. The cops didn't think I needed to be here.

Then again, Detective Riker asked about the old neighborhood. If there were a chance to finally find out who killed Liam, I had to stay.

I returned to my hotel, grabbing dinner from room service and then turning on the TV, planning to do something mindless to stop my brain from spinning. Unfortunately for me, Lindsay filled every space in my synapses.

If seeing me brings up all your regret, then you should go, Oliver. I hate the idea that you look at me and wish you'd never been there that night.

There was regret, but heaven help me, I never wished that I hadn't been there that night. It had been wrong. She was Liam's love. She was scared and hurting. Worse, I couldn't stop the feeling that I'd taken advantage of her when she was vulnerable. But the truth was that I'd needed her as much as she'd needed me that night.

I'd never forget the sound of her screams waking me. I was sure someone was in the house. I ran to her, ready to rip the head off whoever was attacking her.

But it had been a nightmare. A nightmare she had because of my brother and his terrible choices.

I rested my head back on the couch, closing my eyes as the memory of that night, bittersweet and so fucking sad, came back to me.

“LINDSAY. LINDSAY, WAKE UP.”

She startled awake, bolting up. Wild fear in her eyes broke my heart.

I brushed her hair out of her face. “You had another nightmare. But you're safe.”

It took a moment for her to orient herself. Once she did, her body shook and she cried. I wrapped my arms around her, wishing I could make all this madness go away. Eventually, she lay back, rubbing her eyes.

“Are you all right now? Do you want me to get you some water?” I started to stand but her hand gripped my wrist.

“Don't leave.”

I laced my fingers with hers. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“Can you stay here with me?” she asked.

I cocked my head to the side, wondering if she forgot that I was staying there. It was only for a few days until she felt safe again. Then my plan was to take the job offer in California. I was so eager to get away from Boston and all the misery, although leaving Lindsay wouldn't be easy. At the same time,

I knew leaving her was necessary for my own sanity. It didn't matter how much I'd grown to care for her, to love her. She was Liam's.

"I am here. I'm just down the hall."

She shook her head. "No, I mean here, with me."

I scanned my room, looking for a chair or something I could sleep in. "I suppose I could drag a chair in here or something."

She smiled sweetly. "No, right here." She patted the bed. "It's okay. I promise I won't attack you in your sleep."

Heat inflamed my cheeks. It took me a moment, but eventually, I gave in. It was selfish of me to think only of myself when she clearly needed comforting. I went to the other side of the bed and lay down on the covers.

She rolled toward me, our faces close. "Do you think the nightmares will ever end?"

I brushed my fingers along her cheek. "Someday. I suspect that once the case is resolved, we'll be able to put it behind us." I kissed her forehead. "It kills me that you had to find him." What the fuck had Liam been doing here, and why had his killer followed him here?

"I still can't figure out why he was here. Maybe I should've changed the lock, but he had no reason to be here that I can think of."

"You'll make yourself crazy trying to figure Liam out. He was changed." Frustration gripped me that I hadn't been able to save him.

"The police think he might have startled an intruder, but I don't think that's true."

I shook his head. "I don't think so either. And by now, I doubt the police think that as well. They're well aware of what Liam was into."

She shuddered, and all I wanted to do was rid her of all this ugliness.

“Right now, you need to think good thoughts. You’ve got a great family. You’ve got a great job. Your future is bright.”

She gave me a wan smile and snuggled closer to me. It was shocking how much I wanted to be her hero. To keep her safe.

She tilted her head back to look up at me. “Thank you for everything, Oliver.” She pressed her hand on my cheek. “I don’t know how I would survive all this without you.”

I was in such awe of this woman. “You’re a strong woman, Lindsay. You’d be fine. But I’m glad I can be here for you. To be completely honest, I’m the one who needs you. Liam was all I had, and I failed him.”

“You didn’t fail him. You went above and beyond, but in the end, Liam made his own choices.”

I knew she was right, and yet, I couldn’t help but think there was more I could have done. I could have not hit him. I could have fought harder to have him stay with me instead of letting him go.

“Thank you for saying so.” We stared at each other for a moment until the desire to kiss her shocked me back to reality. “Do you think you can sleep now?”

She nodded. “But promise me you’ll stay here.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” I leaned in again, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek. As I pulled away, she kissed my cheek. And then, inexplicably, she pressed her lips to mine. Every cell in my body lit up as her soft lips brushed over mine. I tensed to fight the desire and then I failed. The taste of her was too much to deny. I fell into the kiss, wrapping my arm around her to take it deeper. Lost in her, I pushed her back on the bed. She held onto me like she needed me. Was that what this was? Two lost souls looking for connection? Maybe for her, but for me, this was months and months of unrequited love coming to the forefront.

My hand slid under her night shirt, cupping her breast. I was warm and soft and full, and all I could think about as she arched into me was touching and tasting all of her. She moaned as her hands roamed my body, tugging at my clothes.

Soon, we were both naked, hands and lips everywhere like we were afraid this would end prematurely. In the back of my head, warning bells clanged. She was Liam's. But then her hand cupped my dick, and the thought was gone.

I had no illusion that after this, Lindsay would be mine. I knew this moment for what it was—a single moment in time, so I was going to savor it. My lips trailed down her body, stopping to suck her nipples until she writhed beneath me. Then I continued my journey down her sublime body, pushing her thighs apart.

I slid my tongue through her folds, her taste exploding on my tongue. Her fingers threaded through my hair, holding me to her, making me determined to make her feel good. I flicked my thumb over her clit as my tongue laved her pulsing pussy walls.

She cried out, her body tensing as her essence covered my tongue. I groaned as her taste and cries made me so fucking hard. But I ignored it as I continued to lick and suck. Then, unable to deny myself any longer, I covered her body and thrust inside her, hard and deep.

Her breath caught, and for a moment, I wondered if I hurt her or perhaps this wasn't what she wanted. But then she wrapped her legs around me, rocked against me, and desire consumed me. I wasn't a virgin, but neither was I Lothario. I realized that my sexual experiences, while nice and satisfying, hadn't come close to what I was experiencing seeped inside Lindsay.

I pistoned in and out, in and out, hoping to hell she would come again, that I'd be able to feel her pussy as pleasure rocked through her again. We moved together, and with each thrust I felt like she was more a part of me and I wished this moment would never end.

I hit the peak, growling as I drove into her, ground against her. She cried out, her body shuddering, sending the most amazing shockwaves through me. She gripped me, holding on as our orgasms reverberated through us, between us.

And then it was over and the guilt and self-loathing were immediate. “Oh, fuck.” I rolled off her. What the fuck had I just done?

“What?” she asked, her voice still breathless.

I didn’t want her to see my regret, so I smiled. “Nothing.” I pulled her close to me. “Get some sleep.”

Thankfully, she didn’t press me. Instead, she settled in next to me. “You won’t leave?”

“No.”

BUT I DID LEAVE. In the early morning dawn, I left her bed. Second only to burying my brother, leaving Lindsay was the hardest thing I’d ever done. I felt like a coward. I tried to appease my guilt at having fucked her and then leaving her by writing a note. It was no wonder she didn’t want to see my face now.

I scraped my hand over my face as if that would rid my guilt and shame.

The worst thing was, seeing her again, all the feelings I’d had five years ago rushed to the surface. They hadn’t faded. The admiration, the awe, the love, the desire... it was all here as strong as it had been the day I walked out on her. Perhaps that was my punishment for leaving. But how could I have stayed? It wasn’t like I could make her mine. She’d been Liam’s. That made her off limits to me.

THAT NIGHT, I had a restless sleep. The memory of sleeping with her came to me in a dream, followed by the nightmare of Liam being angry at me for taking what was his. By the time I woke, I knew I had to get the situation here resolved. I needed to figure out what the fuck was going on, make sure that Lindsay was safe, and then go home and leave all this behind again.

Lindsay

I used the drive home from the coffee shop to push the disappointment at how my meeting with Oliver dissolved into the reminder that everything was about Liam for him. I thought back to the night he stayed with me. He'd been so sweet and tender. Was it my youth or my silly romantic fantasies that made me think he cared for me? I understood now that his kindness to me was out of duty to Liam. Was the sex too? That seemed unlikely. No, that was probably because he was hurting and needed comfort too.

By the time I walked into the warmth of my father and Mira's home, I was focused on my family. The scent of fresh cookies quickly brought me into the moment.

"Mommy!" Three little voices chimed in unison as my girls came running into the hallway.

"We're making cookies," Georgie gleefully shared.

"They smell delicious."

"Come see." Cassie took my hand and dragged me to the kitchen. There, I found Mira cleaning up a sprinkle spill.

"Look, Lindsay." Grayson held up a Christmas tree-shaped cookie covered in sprinkles and candies.

"Wow, Gray, that looks amazing."

"Look at mine, Mommy." Georgie and Cassie picked up cookies and shoved them in my face.

“Lovely. And what about you, Olivia?”

She held up a star-shaped cookie that like her was reserved, with frosting and a light dusting of golden sugar. She was the artist in the family.

We spent the next hour laughing and playing together, the girls proudly showing off the sugar cookies they continued to decorate. My dad volunteered to get the kids ready for bed, and I helped Mira clean up the mess in the kitchen. Then I said goodnight to the girls, feeling so grateful for the life I had. Yes, I’d suffered some trauma, but out of that I got my three sweet angels.

With the girls asleep, I ventured downstairs to find my father and Mira sitting in the living room, sipping wine by the flickering fireplace. My father looked at her like she was the center of the universe. It was still weird to see him look at her like that. As long as I didn’t think about them having sex, I did pretty good at seeing my father as Dad and Mira as my friend, not step-mother. I’d told Oliver the truth when I said what mattered most was that they were happy. And I wouldn’t deny that I was a little envious. What I would do to have a man look at me the way my father looked at Mira. He loved her from deep in his soul.

“Get a room,” I joked as I entered the living room.

My father’s cheeks turned red.

“Later.” Mira motioned to the bottle of wine and an extra glass on the coffee table. “Come join us.”

I poured a glass of wine and then settled into an armchair opposite them.

“Any news?” my father asked, his voice heavy with worry.

I sighed and then recounted my visit to talk with Detective Riker and Detective Donovan. I sipped my wine, trying to decide whether I should share the only new tidbit I had. “Oliver is back.”

“What for? Did the police want to question him?”

“He got a text like I did. The police told him about my break-in, so now he’s here out of some archaic sense of duty to keep Liam from messing up my life or something.”

My father frowned. “That sounds honorable. Why do you seem bitter about that?”

Did I sound bitter? I’d have to do a better job to appear neutral. “I’m not bitter. It’s just that he’s been through so much already. He’s finally been able to live his own life. Why drag him back into all this?”

“It is his brother, and the murder was never solved,” Mira pointed out.

“I know. I just don’t want him to get hurt.”

“You always were a soft-hearted girl,” my father said. “But consider that you’re doing the same thing he is... protecting him from Liam.”

No, I wasn’t. I was trying to protect my lie. But I’d let my father believe that.

“I can’t sleep.” Grayson interrupted our conversation.

“Hmm,” Mira said, one brow arched. “Perhaps too many sprinkles.”

My father laughed and rose from the couch. “Let me handle this. Come on, buddy, let’s get you back to bed.”

As they left the room, Mira refilled her wine glass and offered me more. I wasn’t going anywhere so I let her top off my glass.

“So, how did Oliver seem?” she asked as she sat back on the couch.

Handsomer. More assertive. Still sweet. I shrugged. “He doesn’t look like a schlub anymore.”

“Does he look as rich as he is?”

I shook my head. “No, just not as messy.”

She sipped her wine, studying me over her wine glass. I shifted in my chair, wondering what was going on in her head.

“You know, I always thought he had a thing for you.”

“What?” Thank God I didn’t take a drink or I’d have spat it out. Did she know about our night together? No. How could she? I never told a soul.

She shrugged. “Remember New Year’s when you dragged me along and Liam dragged Oliver along?”

I nodded. I remembered how Liam was excited when he learned my father was at the club and desperate to meet him. It was something that made me wonder if Liam was using me to get access to my father, to his power and influence and money. I also remembered how pissed off my father seemed when he learned we were there. Of course, I later learned he was pissed to see Miranda with Oliver.

“Yes. Why?”

“I just remembered thinking that he was smitten with you.”

“Why would you think that? He was supposed to be your date that night.”

“It was the way he looked at you. And the way he looked at Liam when Liam was being a doofus. Like he felt his brother should treat you better.”

“You’re delusional.” I sipped my wine, hoping it would hide the crazy thoughts and feelings I was having at this revelation. Could it be true? How could it? Surely, he would have said something, especially after we’d slept together. But then I remembered... Liam. Oliver wouldn’t have done anything that hurt Liam.

“His eyes never left you, Lindsay. And the way he smiled when you talked... It was obvious to me that there was something between you two.”

“No, there wasn’t.” There really wasn’t.

She shrugged. “Well, maybe not between you two, but I’m certain he felt something. Maybe for you it was just friendship. I know you two were good for each other after Liam died.”

“I think you’re seeing something that wasn’t there. We were friends. We were working together to try and keep Liam

out of trouble. That's it."

"Sometimes, we don't see what's right in front of us."

I smirked. "Your brain is addled on love."

She flashed a grin. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

That night in bed, I replayed what Mira had said along with my memories. I'd never gotten the vibe that Oliver liked me more than as a friend. At that time, I was with Liam, and while the relationship had just started to hit the rocks, I was thinking of a future for us. Granted, as the year progressed and Liam's behavior got worse, I spent more time with Oliver and grew closer to him. It wasn't until after Liam's death and Oliver stayed the night with me that I realized my feelings for Oliver had grown. What if I'd said something to him that night? Would he have listened? Would he have stayed?

I shook my head. I knew then as I knew now that Oliver had to go. He needed a fresh start. He needed to live his life.

THE NEXT DAY, I called in to work and told them I'd need the week off. Luckily, I had lots of leave time, so it wasn't an issue.

Once the girls were off to school, I drove over to my house since Detective Donovan said I could begin the process of cleaning it up. My stomach knotted as I surveyed the wreckage in my home. How was it possible that such carnage could invade my home again? Especially the place where I was supposed to keep my girls safe.

"Knock, knock. Hey, Lindsay. I thought you could use some company."

I was startled at Detective Donovan's arrival but couldn't deny the sense of security that having law enforcement there brought me.

"Detective Donovan. Do you have news?"

"Please, call me Flynn. Nothing new, I'm afraid. But I thought I'd stop by to see if you needed help. Maybe you'll find something is missing after all."

I couldn't imagine what that would be, but I was happy to have help. "Thank you."

Piece by piece, we sifted through the rubble, working to salvage what little remained of our once-happy home. And though the process was painstakingly slow, it also brought with it a sense of accomplishment. Soon, I would have my home back and life could go back to normal.

Unfortunately, as we examined each room, I didn't come across anything strange or missing.

"No luck?" he asked when we finished the last room, my bedroom.

"None." I sank against the wall feeling defeated. If we couldn't find out what was going on, the person who did this, who might have killed Liam, would remain free. Plus, it would mean Oliver staying longer.

Thinking of Oliver, I wondered if he'd been any help. "I saw that Oliver Quinlan was here. Is he helping?"

"Oliver? No, we didn't ask him to come back. Then again, maybe being home will help jog his memory or something."

"Maybe," I murmured, still scanning the chaos for any clue as to what had been taken. Noting my painting hanging askew, I straightened it. It was the only item in the room that was in its right place. Little steps.

"I'm not surprised he's here."

"Really?"

His comment reminded me how Flynn had known Oliver and Liam. I supposed by the time I met Liam, they'd gone their own ways as I'd never met Flynn.

"Oliver practically raised Liam since he was a kid. He dedicated his life to it. To be honest, I was surprised he moved away."

"I think he was ready to live his own life."

Flynn shrugged. "Maybe. Or get away from the world that caused him so much loss and pain. I'm no shrink, but I know

grief makes people do rash things sometimes. But with the case coming to life again, I'm not surprised he's back. He needs this solved. He'd see it as a duty to Liam."

Duty. There was that word again.

"Looks like we're done here." Flynn surveyed the room.

"I guess." There was still a lot of cleaning to do.

"It's too bad you didn't find anything missing or something our perp wanted."

"I hope that means they'll leave me alone."

He gave a nod. "You haven't heard from them since the last text, right?"

"Right."

"Chances are they've moved on. Oliver is a more likely target."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Or Liam had other friends and acquaintances. I'm planning to talk to Darcy Patrick. She just got out of jail for identity theft."

I studied Flynn. "Who is Darcy Patrick?"

"He was Liam's go-to when he wanted a good time." His eyes widened as if he'd just realized what he was saying. "I mean... I..."

I held up a hand to stop him. "Liam and I weren't together the last few months of his life."

His smile was forced, and it made me wonder if Liam had been cheating on me. "Still, it can be awkward to hear about new women."

It wasn't for me. It told me that while I was sad for Liam, I was over him emotionally. I had been before he died.

"It's not awkward for me. I hope he was happy with her."

He let out a laugh. "Like I said, it wasn't love that brought them together... if you know what I mean."

Not wanting to talk about Liam's sex life, I pushed away from the wall and headed out to the main living area.

"I need to get cleaners in so the girls and I can move home."

"What have you told them about Liam?" Flynn asked.

I stopped short and looked at him, wondering why he was poking in my business. I suppose he and I had been friendly.

"I haven't really told them anything. They're young." The truth was that I couldn't bring myself to tell them their father was dead because he wasn't. But neither could I tell them the truth. When they asked, which wasn't often, I just said he was gone and then would change the subject. I didn't feel too bad that they didn't have a father in their lives. I grew up without my mother and it was fine. Plus, I had my father and uncle Duncan, who wasn't really my uncle. He was my father's friend and business partner. The two of them had been all I needed in a father figure, and they were enough for my girls as well.

"Liam was a good kid who got lost," Flynn said. I got the feeling he wanted me to tell the girls about Liam's good parts, not the bad ones.

I nodded. "He was."

"Well, I should go. Do you need anything?"

"No. Thank you for your help. I appreciate it."

"Not a problem. You call me if you happen to find anything."

"I will."

With that, he left me standing amid the wreckage. I wanted life to go back to the way it had been before this break-in, but as I surveyed my home, I recognized that it was a metaphor for my life. I might be able to clean up this physical mess, but how would I clean up my personal life? How could I go back to life before when the past was determined to hold me back?

I CLOSED up and left the house, tugging at my coat and huddling deeper into my scarf as the cold air hit me. Winter in Boston could be brutal made palatable because of the holidays. That made me think of Christmas. While I'd already done most of my shopping, I figured a visit to shops could distract me from my problems and remind me of the joy of the season. Since I was a child, my father and I had been going to the cabin for the holidays. I always loved it, the fresh scent of trees and snow. Plus, I was convinced that the fireplace there was bigger, which meant Santa could bring more presents. There was only one year that I didn't make it. It was the year I'd fallen madly in love with Liam and wanted to be with him every second of every day. I feigned car trouble so I could avoid it. Worse, I'd waited until Lindsay was on her way to the cabin before telling her I wasn't coming. Or maybe not worse because as it turned out, she and my father hooked up. I shook my head at that thought. *TMI.*

As I walked through the crowded streets, festive decorations and twinkling lights wrapped the city in warmth. People bustled by with bags filled with gifts, their breath visible in the crisp air.

I entered the toy store hoping to get some children's art materials for the girls, and especially Olivia. As I maneuvered the cart around the crowded aisles, I literally ran into one overflowing with trucks and swords and other boy toys.

"Excuse me—Duncan?" Seeing Duncan, I realized it had been awhile since we'd connected. I eyed his cart. "Wow, Duncan, you're really going all out this year. Is that all for Grayson?" Duncan didn't have kids of his own. Instead, he spoiled me, Grayson, and my girls.

"Lindsay!" Duncan was built like a bouncer, big, brawny, and bald, but he was as sweet as cupcake. His eyes twinkled with delight as he hugged me. "Actually, this load is for someone else."

"Oh?" I wondered if Duncan had a woman in his life who had a child. That would be something. I'd never known Duncan to have a long-term relationship with a woman.

“I’m going to be a dad. Well... a foster dad.”

“What? Wow. I had no idea. When did this happen?” How was I so out of the loop?

“Only recently, but it’s something I’ve been considering for a while.”

“Does Dad know?” I hoped it wasn’t my fault that I was unaware of Duncan’s plans. It would prove how self-absorbed I’d been.

“Oh, sure. He wrote me a letter of recommendation. After all, I’m your godfather.” He winked.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know about this. I feel terrible for not being more present in your life lately.”

He put his arm around me, tugging me close. “Hey, don’t worry about it. You’ve got a full life with your girls. Plus, I heard about the break-in. Listen, do you need any help around that?”

“No. I’m good. Thank you.” I grinned at him. “You’re going to be an amazing dad.” And I meant it.

His smile beamed. “Foster dad, but yeah, I can’t wait. He’s six years old and his name is Aiden. He’s had a pretty shitty life so far, and I plan to give him a Christmas he won’t forget.”

I thought of Oliver and Liam growing up in foster care. Liam had said most of his families were okay, while a few weren’t. To me, the crime was how often they were moved. Why? Kids need stability. Then I considered that someday, Aiden would be moved, and looking at Duncan’s happiness, I could only imagine how painful that would be.

“Aiden is a lucky kid.”

“If I’m lucky, I’ll be able to adopt him.”

“I hope you’re both lucky.”

“Hey, let me pay for these and we can go grab a hot chocolate like we used to when you were a kid and had time for your old Unkadunk.”

I laughed at the name I used to call him. “That would be wonderful, Unkadunk.”

Once he paid for his items and stored them in his car, we found a little diner where he ordered hot chocolate and pie for each of us. The warmth from the cup seeped into my hands as I listened to Duncan talk about his plans.

“Ever since we started those kids’ programs at the gym, I’ve become more aware of the challenges some of these children face. It opened my eyes, and I realized that being a foster parent could make a difference.”

My father and Duncan owned the gyms together, but since my father had another company and Duncan was so good at running the business, he did most of the work. Five years ago, Duncan added children’s programs and a kid’s camp during the summer as part of the gym’s offerings. He started at one gym here in Boston, then spread to the rest of the gyms in Massachusetts and then beyond.

“That’s fantastic. I’m so happy for you.”

“Well, I figure if I’m not married by now, my prospects for having kids the old-fashioned way are low. So why not give a home to a kid who doesn’t have one?”

In some ways, it sounded like something Oliver would do. I suppose in some ways, he had with Liam, except that Oliver had been young and for a time had given up his hopes and dreams.

“Enough about me, though. How have you been? What’s the deal with this break-in and Liam?”

I sighed, not wanting to bring down the joyous mood. “Just that. It appears that someone from Liam’s past is searching for something and thought I had it.”

“But you don’t?”

“No.”

He frowned. “Why would they think you had it? You and Liam had been kaput by then.”

“Probably because of where he’d been when he died.”

Duncan winced. “Right. Sorry to mention it.”

“No. It’s okay.”

“You don’t suppose this has to do with the girls, do you?”
He voiced the fear that I’d been working to not think about.

“I don’t think so. They went through everything in my house. Plus, I didn’t know I was pregnant when Liam died.”
There I was, lying to people I loved again. Not about not knowing I was pregnant. The truth was, I wasn’t pregnant when Liam died. I was lying about Liam being the father of my girls.

“Right. Good. Have you talked to Oliver?”

His question caught me off guard. I was sure Duncan was aware of Oliver, but his comment made it seem like he knew Oliver.

“I know he got a text like I did, and he’s come back to Boston.”

“Poor guy to have to be dragged into all of this again. Well, poor you too, but Oliver, that kid had it rough.”

“I didn’t realize you knew him.”

“Sure. Years ago, I hired him to help with some computer issues at the gym. The guy was working his ass off to care for Liam, as you know. He didn’t want Liam to have too much college debt. His dedication to Liam was admirable, and so whenever I had computer issues or could refer him to someone, I did.”

How did I not know this?

We chatted a bit longer and then parted, Duncan home to wrap presents for Aiden and me to get my girls from school.

Later that night, after the girls were in bed, I discussed Christmas plans with my father and Mira for our yearly trip to the cabin. I had a moment to wonder whether Oliver would still be here then. The idea of his being alone on Christmas made me sad. Was he always alone on Christmas now that Liam was gone? A yearning to invite him to Christmas with me and my family welled in my chest. Oliver was a good

person who deserved love and family. But of course, I couldn't invite him. Not if I didn't want him to know about the girls.

Guilt flared hot and piercing in my gut. What sort of woman was I to keep Oliver in the dark about his daughters? I began to doubt my strong reasonings about my choice. What had made perfect sense now felt wrong, and I didn't like the type of woman it suggested that I was.

Should I tell him the truth? To what end? Would he stay in Boston and be a father to them? Would he want them to come to California? Would he be angry and try to take them from me? Or would he look at the girls as a mistake?

It was cowardly of me, but now more than ever, I wished Oliver would go back to California and never look back again.

Oliver

Having sexy fantasies about Lindsay wasn't helping my situation. It was time to get to the bottom of what was going on and then return to my life in California. The first stop was the old neighborhood. It didn't matter if we were home with our parents or in foster care, Liam and I had always been in or around this area of Boston. This was where the quintessential working-class poor, adjacent to the poorest of the poor, lived. My impression was that it was filled with heartache and pain, but it was entirely possible that it was just my life.

While money could make life easier, it wasn't the source of happiness. I imagined there were people in the neighborhood who were perfectly happy.

My family hadn't been that. Our father drifted in and out of jail, leaving scars on our mother each time he came home. When he finally got locked up for life, we were left with our broken mother. But she didn't last long either. She found another asshole to knock her around, and he ended up killing her when I was ten and Liam was six. I spent my life trying to shield Liam from the darkness of this place, but in the end, I couldn't save him.

"You sure you want to come here?" my rideshare driver asked as he pulled up in front of the neighborhood pool hall.

"Yes. Thanks."

My driver pulled to the curb, his eyes scanning the area as if he expected to be carjacked. I gave him a tip to help offset the discomfort. Then I exited the car, looking at the tired building with the flickering neon sign. I sighed as the memories continued to roll in, one after the other. When I was just a kid, my mother would send me here to find my father when he wasn't in jail. As teenagers, Liam and I found ourselves drawn back to this place, maybe because it was the only interesting thing going on in the area. It was far from the ideal hangout for teenage boys.

Taking a breath to shore up my resolve, I entered the pool hall, glancing around at the familiar sights and sounds—dim lighting and the smells of stale beer and cigarette smoke. The place was mostly empty. One person was at a pool table, surveying his last shot. Another man sat back in the corner as if he was trying to hide from the world.

Behind the bar stood Frankie, who'd been the bartender for as long as I could remember.

I stepped up to the bar.

Frankie looked at me, at first with no expression, but then recognition and surprise came. "Well as I live and breathe. Oliver Quinlan."

I mustered a friendly smile. "Frankie. Long time no see."

"No shit. I heard you made your fortune. Did you lose it? That's the only reason I can imagine you'd return to this hellhole." I'd always liked Frankie. When I'd aged out of foster care and had to leave, it was harder for me to watch over Liam. At fourteen, Liam found himself attracted to trouble usually found here, but Frankie would try to keep him on the straight and narrow, going so far as to make Liam do his homework.

"This place brings back memories."

"Memories you'd rather forget, I imagine. I'm still in shock about Liam."

I took that as my opening. "That's why I'm here. I'm trying to figure out what happened."

“Ah, well, if the cops can’t figure it out, don’t know how you will.” He wiped down the area in front of me. “What’ll you have?”

I wanted answers, but I’d start with a beer. Once Frankie served me, I asked, “Do you have any idea what Liam was involved in?”

Frankie pursed his lips but kept moving around, wiping down a part of the bar he’d already cleaned. “I make it my business not to know people’s business.”

I had no doubt that Frankie knew everyone’s business. The problem was that sharing the business could be deadly.

“Liam didn’t confide anything with you?”

“Nope. Not that I remember.”

“Who can I talk to who might know something and be willing to talk?”

Frankie shrugged. “Maybe Johnny.” He nodded toward the man in the corner.

I left a hefty tip for Frankie. Maybe he’d change his mind about keeping closed lipped before I left. I picked up my beer and headed toward the man in the corner.

“Be careful, Oliver,” Frankie warned. “Nothing you find out will bring Liam back.”

I nodded that I understood but continued on to the man. As I approached, I realized it was Johnny Walters. Liam and I had been in foster care with him at one time. Another set of memories rushed in. This one was of trying to protect Liam from a beating when our foster mother accused him of stealing her wedding ring. The husband had taken it and pawned it, but she wouldn’t believe that. I had the urge to heed Frankie’s warning, not to avoid trouble but to avoid the ghosts of my past.

“Johnny.”

He looked up, and like Frankie, his expression showed surprise. “Oliver Quinlan. What the fuck brings you back here?”

I nodded toward the chair, and he nodded back that it was okay for me to sit. “Checking out the old haunts.”

“Why? We all heard you’re a bigwig in California.”

“I do alright. But I’ve heard from someone who knew Liam and so I’m back to find out who and why? Are you still with the Back Bay Crew?”

He tensed and looked around the pool hall, then shook his head. “Nah. Not since I got out of jail the last time. I’ve got a job making auto parts. Ended my shift an hour ago and am taking a little break before heading home to my girl. She’s got a baby on the way.”

“Congratulations. Let me buy you another beer to celebrate.”

“Nah, that’s okay. She doesn’t like it if I have too much.”

“I was hoping you could tell me what Liam was into when he died.”

Johnny scanned the pool hall again. “I’m no snitch.”

“I’m not a cop. I’m like you. Someone from the neighborhood. I just want to know why Liam died.”

“I don’t know anything.” He took a long gulp of his beer. I suspected he wanted to finish and get out. I had until he drank the last drop to get information.

“Did he say something?”

“Not to me.”

Mother fucker. “What about rumors?”

He shrugged and drank another gulp of his beer.

“Help me, Johnny. Liam was my brother. He was all I had.”

Johnny winced and blew out a breath. “Liam made some enemies with the crew.”

“How?”

He took another long swig of his drink. “Some thought Liam was snitching.”

“What? Like, to the cops?”

He nodded.

“About what?”

“That I don’t know.”

“Do you have a guess?”

He arched a brow. “No.”

The pool hall door swung open, letting bright light in that made me squint. Johnny’s eyes darted toward the person walking in, his body tensing. I followed his gaze, spotting Darcy Patrick as she strolled in. At one time, she was the most beautiful woman Liam and I had ever seen. She had taken my virginity when I was sixteen. I remembered Liam gushing after she’d given him a blow job for his sixteenth birthday. Not long after, he lost his virginity to her as well. Jesus, twice, Liam and I had shared a woman. I pushed that disturbing thought away.

“You should ask her.” Johnny interrupted my thoughts.

“Darcy?”

“She and Liam were close.”

“When?” That was news to me.

“Always,” he said in a tone that suggested he was surprised I didn’t know. My brother had a lot of issues, but surely, he hadn’t been cheating on Lindsay.

“Thanks.” I rose and with my beer headed back to the bar. “Buy you a drink?” I took the barstool next to Darcy.

Frankie gave me a look that suggested he didn’t like me poking my nose in the wrong business with his patrons but didn’t say anything.

“Oh, my God, Oliver Quinlan.” She looked me up and down, and I swore I could see dollar signs spin in her eyes like a slot machine. Up close, I noted that despite her only being three or four years older than me, hard living had aged her. Not that she wasn’t good-looking, but there was a hard, tired edge to her.

“Absolutely, you can buy me a drink. Vodka tonic, Frankie.” Her long red nail ran down the front of my T-shirt. “Me and Ollie want to catch up.” There was no missing the hint of innuendo that catching up could get me a fast fuck in the bathroom. At sixteen, having never had an orgasm given to me by a woman, that prospect had been exciting. Today, it made me pity her.

Frankie set the drink in front of her “No doubt, Oliver has important things to do that don’t involve us.”

“What can be more important than home?” She sipped her drink and sighed as if savoring it. “You know what I miss most in jail?”

“What?”

“Booze and dicks.” She winked.

“You just got out of jail?” I asked.

“Yep.” She sipped her drink.

I waited for her to say more, but when she didn’t, I asked, “I got a text from a friend of Liam’s.”

“Hmm.” Her tone was disinterested.

“After five years, it’s strange, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’m trying to find out what Liam was up to that five years later, someone is contacting me.”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Rumor is that you and Liam were close.”

She made a face. “Yeah, until that rich bitch took him.”

She had to be talking about Lindsay.

“He tried to be like you, you know. Escape this place. He thought she’d help him do it.”

I believed Liam loved Lindsay, but I had no doubt that he saw her father’s money and connections as a way to get more in life.

“But he couldn’t stay away, you know.” She sat up, thrusting her tits out at me. “He always came back.” Jesus, fuck, please tell me he didn’t cheat on Lindsay. And if he did, that he used a condom.

“So, you and Liam were a thing then, huh?”

She shrugged as she used a stirrer to move her ice around her drink. “Sometimes. When that bitch of his would kick him out.”

“So you know what he was up to, then.”

Her gaze pierced mine. “What are you getting at, Ollie?”

I shook my head and nonchalantly took a sip of my beer. “Nothing. Just trying to find out what was going on before Liam died.”

She drank her vodka tonic. “Another one, Frankie.” She turned to me and held out her hand. “Money talks.”

I pulled out my wallet. Before I came down here, I’d emptied it of credit cards and most of my cash, knowing it would be at risk in this place. But I brought enough that I could pay Darcy for information. I handed her two twenties.

“That’s it?”

“There could be more. What do you know?”

Frankie gave her another drink and then made himself scarce. Johnny had already left, leaving only the pool player who didn’t seem to be paying us any attention.

“Liam had something against Wally.”

“Wally?” I scanned my brain to figure out who Wally was.

“Wally Creighton.”

My brows shot to my hairline. “Wally Creighton? He was Liam’s foster dad until he aged out.”

She shrugged.

“So, what does Wally have to do with what happened to Liam?”

She rolled her eyes. “Liam didn’t like the scam he was pulling.”

My brain was spinning a million miles a minute. “Wally was in the gang?”

She pressed her index finger to her nose. “Right.”

How the fuck did a gang member get approved for foster parenting?

“What was the scam?”

She looked around the bar area. “You’re asking too many questions.”

I pulled out another two twenties, setting them on the bar. She eyed them, but I kept my hand on them, not intending to hand them over until she told me everything she knew.

“Wally’s into identity fraud. That fucker is why I ended up in jail. Anyway, Liam accused Wally of stealing his identity. That’s how he does it, you know? Foster kids’ information. He also looks up dead people and uses their information.”

When we’d first learned that Liam’s social security number had been stolen, I’d been shocked at how little there was we could do about it. We could report it to a government agency, but it wouldn’t actually investigate. Same with the police. And in my research, Social Services didn’t do anything to prevent such theft or help kids clean it up if it did happen. Foster kids had enough trouble at eighteen and being thrust out on their own. A ruined credit score made it impossible for them to do just about anything. Hence, my effort to create a program that would help all these agencies.

“How did Liam know it was him?”

“I don’t know that he knew for sure. But he joined up... you know. And when he learned Wally was involved, he put two and two together.”

“What did he do?”

“I told him to do nothing. Wally isn’t someone you fuck with, you know?”

We were getting off track here. So far, I hadn't heard anything about snitching, so maybe something else was going on. "So Wally killed Liam because Liam was pissed at him?"

She put her fingers over my mouth. "Shush! You talk too loud." She glanced around the bar again. "I don't know who killed Liam. Whoever it was probably didn't like that Liam was talking to the Feds."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"No. Not for sure. Maybe Wally spread that so the crew would get rid of him. But knowing Liam... it might be true. He was always more Boy Scout than Goodfella."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. My mind raced, trying to make sense of this new information. Could Liam really have been working with the Feds?

If this was true, why hadn't Liam confided in me? Surely, I could have helped him. Or, I'd have talked him out of it. Talking to law enforcement was a sure way to get killed. Liam would have known that, and yet, according to Darcy, he'd done just that.

"Thank you, Darcy. This helps." I gave her the two twenties and then an extra one for an even one hundred dollars.

"Anything else?" She licked her lips suggestively.

"No. Thank you."

"Your loss." She turned back to her drink.

I left the pool hall, ordering a rideshare to pick me up. My mind reeled with the implications of her words. The possibility of Liam being involved with the Feds turned everything on its head. Here I'd thought Liam had fallen in too deep with the wrong crowd and his criminal ways brought about his end. Now, I had to think that while yes, he joined a bad group, the end had come while he was trying to do the right thing. What had driven him to take such a dangerous path? And how could I not have known?

When I arrived back at the hotel, I sat at the table scribbling down notes about my conversation with Darcy, trying to piece together the puzzle that was Liam's last days. I wondered if I should call Donovan or Riker with what I learned. Then again, maybe they already knew Darcy's information and were keeping it to themselves.

As I surveyed all my notes, my phone buzzed. I glanced at it, half expecting it to be work.

STOP DIGGING, Oliver. Give me what is mine.

I STARED AT THE TEXT. Has this fucker been following me? Had I put Frankie, Johnny, and Darcy in harm's way? No. They had their own connections to these assholes that had nothing to do with me.

IF YOU'D TELL me what you want, it would make this go easier, I texted back.

FIND IT OR ELSE.

I WANTED to ask or else what, like a petulant teenager, but considering this guy probably killed Liam and had Lindsay on their radar, I decided it would be better not to provoke him. The question was, had this guy texted Lindsay? Maybe it was time for us to meet and go over Liam's last weeks and months together to get a better sense of what he was doing. Had he been meeting with the Feds? Did he have evidence and that was what he hid? Wouldn't Lindsay have found it if he had?

Then the only way to find out was to call Lindsay and hope that I hadn't been too much of an asshole that she wouldn't agree to meet with me again.

Lindsay

I woke up with a plan to clean my house so I could get the girls home in their own beds as soon as possible. But after yesterday, I realized the task was going to take longer than expected.

As the kids were getting ready for school, I found my father and Mira kissing in the kitchen.

I gave them a moment and then cleared my throat.

“We’re busy,” my father murmured.

“I’ll wait.”

Mira pulled away. “Did you need something?”

“I just want to ask if it’s okay that the girls and I stay here until I get the house cleaned up. It’s going to take me longer than I thought. I just don’t want them to see the mess and become scared.”

“You know you’re always welcome,” Mira said.

“Within reason,” my father joked. “You can stay as long as you need. Do you need help with the house?”

I shook my head. “No. I need to go through everything. Then I’ll hire help.”

Once I took the girls and Grayson to school, I headed over to my house, psyching myself up to see the destruction and begin clearing it away. I walked through the front door and

surveyed the mess. Toys were strewn across the floor and books were ripped from their shelves, pages torn and scattered.

“Here we go,” I muttered under my breath, picking up a torn throw pillow and tossing it over into what would become the throw-away pile. As I continued to sift through the debris, I made several piles—throw away, fix, and keep. Some of the keep items I’d put away if it was a fast and easy task. Others would be put away later.

With the living room nearly done, I was getting ready to take a break when my phone buzzed with a text notification.

Have you found it yet? Give me what is mine.

MY HEART RACED. An overwhelming sense of unease crept over me. Did they know I was going through my things? Was I being watched? The thought sent shivers down my spine. It was also clear that whoever was responsible for this still believed I had something of Liam’s.

I considered asking what I needed to be looking for but decided it wasn’t safe to engage with this person.

Instead, I called Detective Donovan.

“Don’t worry, Lindsay. I’ll be right over. Keep the doors locked and don’t open them for anyone but me, alright?”

“Alright.”

Not long after, Detective Donovan knocked on the front door. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I haven’t heard anything more.”

“Can I see?”

I showed him the phone. “I was thinking that whoever it was could be nearby, watching me.”

“I’ll take a look around. Let me start inside, just in case.”

Oh, my God, the person could be in the house?

He began to examine the house methodically, moving from room to room with a careful eye. I trailed behind him, feeling

like I was in a slasher movie. He checked windows and doors, occasionally peering out into the yard.

“It’s okay inside. Let me check the outside.” He left through the front door and several minutes later returned through it. “I didn’t find anything suspicious, but I’ve called to have an officer keep an eye on the house while you’re here.”

I felt safer knowing that. “Thank you, Detective. I really appreciate it.”

“I already told you to call me Flynn, remember?” A ghost of a smile played across his lips. “And it’s my job to help, so don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, right.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you. How about a hand?”

“I’m sure you have other work.”

“This will be double duty. It’s still possible we’ll get something that will help solve who did this and you’ll get your home cleaned up.”

“I guess I wouldn’t mind the help, if you’re sure?” I figured he could easily identify the broken and torn items that needed to be tossed or fixed.

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t sure.”

Together, we sifted through the debris, this time placing broken belongings into piles for trash and salvage. It seemed to me that everything in the house needed to be dealt with. Utensils and food in the kitchen. Cushions and decorative items in the living room. Toys and sheets in the girls’ room. The only items not touched in the house were wall hangings.

We worked in companionable silence, the sound of sorting and cleaning filling the air. I was grateful for Flynn’s presence as it made the task before me feel a little more bearable, and of course, safer.

We made it to my bedroom, where I folded clothes strewn about and returned bedside table items back to the drawer, giving a silent thank you that I had already tossed out my

vibrator when a year ago, Georgie had found it and ran with it through the house.

I sighed as I looked at the picture my dad and Mira had gotten for me hanging on the wall. It was slightly askew, so I straightened it. “Have you noticed that the only things the intruder didn’t touch were the items hanging on the wall?” I asked Flynn.

He stopped, glancing at the picture. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Do you think that means anything?”

“That whatever it is our intruder is looking for can’t be hidden in a picture.” He sighed as he surveyed the room. “Getting closer to the bottom of this mess.”

“Feels like it’s never-ending.”

“Look at it this way. Every item we deal with is one step closer to normalcy.”

“You’re an optimist.”

He shrugged as he grinned. “The thing about a job like this is that you can see your progress, which helps motivate you to keep going. If only other parts of life were like that, right?”

I supposed. Or maybe I was a pessimist because all I could see were lots of piles that needed to be managed.

THAT NIGHT, I came home to Dad’s exhausted. Even so, I made dinner as a thank you to my dad and Mira. After our meal, we all congregated in the living room where Mira had Christmas crafts for the kids. I joined in, loving that we had joined the holiday traditions my father started with Mira’s new traditions.

My phone rang and immediately, I tensed. Was my intruder stalking me? I pulled out my phone and saw it was Oliver. I wondered if he got a text today too.

“I need to get this.” I stood and headed to the kitchen.

“*Lindsay, hi.*”

“Is something wrong?”

“I got a text today. Did you too?”

“Yes. They still want whatever Liam had.” I couldn’t say I was relieved that Oliver got a text, but I was glad I wasn’t alone.

“I was hoping you’d agree to meet with me again. I got some new information and I think we need to put our heads together to piece together Liam’s last few months. If it would be easier, I can come to you.”

No. He couldn’t come here where the girls were. “I can come to your hotel. It’s not a problem.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I can be there in twenty minutes.” The call ended, and I scrambled with an excuse to tell my family.

“Everything alright, Linds?” My father entered the kitchen, concern on his face.

“Uh, yeah, Dad. I just... I have to go back to work for a bit. Turns out they can’t go a week without me.” I hated lying to him, but neither did I want to worry him and Mira.

MY MIND RACED as I contemplated what Oliver could have learned. He must have done digging on his own because surely, Flynn would have told me if he’d had new information. I parked in the hotel garage and headed up to Oliver’s room.

When I knocked, the door opened revealing Oliver in jeans and a T-shirt. It had been his usual wear when I knew him five years ago, but he wore it so much better now. I could actually see the lines of his pecs. His biceps strained the sleeves. I gave my head a shake. I wasn’t here to notice how good Oliver looked now.

“Hey, Lindsay. Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. What did you find out?”

“I wasn’t sure if I took you from dinner. Are you hungry? I can order room service.”

“No. Thank you.”

He gestured toward the small table set up in one corner of the room. “I have my notes here.”

I followed Oliver to the table where papers were spread out, covering the surface. I scanned the various documents, photos, and scribbles as I tried to make sense of it all.

“I went to where Liam and I grew up. There’s a pool hall there—”

“Frankie’s?”

He cocked his head to the side. “You know it?”

“Liam brought me once.”

Oliver’s expression hardened. “That is no place for a woman like you.”

I arched a brow. “Like me? Are you saying I’m too sheltered? Too delicate?”

“I always seem to offend you when I’m thinking the opposite.”

“It was my bad-girl phase. If it makes you feel better, Liam didn’t want to bring me there either. I just wanted to know him. All of him.”

Oliver nodded. “You love him.”

“At that time, yes.” Our gazes caught for a moment.

Energy crackled until Oliver turned away. “I saw Johnny, a guy Liam and I knew from foster care. He was once in the crew but is apparently out now, working a legit job with a family. He said that Liam ruffled a few feathers because he was a snitch.”

I frowned. “You mean like talking to the cops?”

“Yes. Then I talked to Darcy, who... well, that doesn’t matter.”

I smirked. “She’s the one who gave him his first blow job.”

Oliver gaped. “He told you that?”

I shook my head. “No. She did.”

Oliver continued to stare at me in shock.

“I told her that she must not be good at it since I was giving them to him now.”

He choked.

I laughed with embarrassment. Why was I telling him this? “I can’t believe I told you that.”

“I can’t either.”

“You have to remember how I was back then. I was more spontaneous and in-the-moment than I am now.”

His eyes softened. “I always loved that about you.”

I swallowed, surprised by the emotion I felt from him. Did he mean love-love or just he liked my personality back then?

He cleared his throat. “Anyway, she said Liam was pissed at Wally Creighton. The Creightons were the last family Liam was placed with before he aged out of foster care. Did he ever mention them or Wally to you?”

I scanned my memory, but it was blank of anyone named Wally. “No. Why was Liam mad at him?”

“Turns out, Wally was part of the crew, running scams using foster kids’ social security numbers.”

“Oh, wait. Liam did tell me that someone had stolen his identity and ruined his credit. That’s why he had to live with you. He didn’t have the credit to get his own place or utilities.”

I nodded. “We couldn’t afford a lawyer, which was really what you need to clean up credit after identity theft. We filed a police report, but we didn’t know who did it. We sent the report to the credit agencies, but we still hadn’t cleaned up the damage.”

“So did this Wally guy take Liam’s identity?”

“I think so, but Darcy also said that Liam was rumored to be talking to the FBI.”

My brows rose. “Really?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No. He never said a word.”

He looked over the paperwork. “The thing is, it might not be true. Wally could have started the rumor knowing it would get Liam taken out.”

“What do you think?”

He looked at me, and in his eyes I saw all the torment that came from guilt. “I’m afraid he was talking to the Feds and didn’t tell me. I’d yelled at him the last time I saw him. He told me I didn’t understand anything. What if he meant this?” His hand gestured to the papers. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

The urge to hug him, to soothe his pain, was more than I could resist. I wrapped my arms around him. For a moment, it was like five years ago right after Liam’s death. Not the night we slept together, but the nights before when a hug helped temper the darkness. He settled into the hug for a moment and then abruptly pulled away.

“Thanks.” His gaze went to the papers.

I looked at them too, thinking back to the last months of Liam’s life, searching my memory for any clues or hints that he’d been talking to the FBI, that instead of going deeper into the dark side, he’d been working to stop them.

“Oliver. Do you think whoever did this to Liam could be after us too?”

“I got my text not long after I left the pool hall. I had the feeling they knew I was there and why.”

“I got mine while cleaning my house.”

Concern filled his face. “You shouldn’t do that alone. It might not be safe. I can help you.”

“I called Flynn—Detective Donovan—and he came over. Plus, he said he’d have police to watch the house.”

Something like disappointment crossed his face.

“Did you talk to him about this?” I asked.

“I haven’t yet. A part of me thinks they know but it doesn’t give them anything to use in terms of an arrest. The thing is, there has to be something Liam said or did that can help us here. That’s why I invited you over. I thought we could put our heads together and go through everything we remember. Any small detail could be important.”

I couldn’t imagine knowing something that could help, but maybe Oliver was right. Maybe together, we could think of something that didn’t seem important but now, with a new context, it would be. And if there was, then we’d be all that much closer to ending this nightmare and going back to our separate lives.

Oliver

I was second-guessing asking Lindsay to help me in figuring out what was going on now and who killed Liam. If we were being watched, that couldn't be good. While I couldn't be sure our mysterious texter was Liam's killer, it seemed impossible that this wasn't related to Liam's murder. I wanted to keep Lindsay safe, not expose her to more danger.

I also wasn't a fan of Donovan spending a lot of time with her. Sure, he had his shit together, but Lindsay was my responsibility, not his.

She sighed and walked away from the table, looking like she was thinking. She took a seat on the couch and looked up at me. "You know, if there was a change in Liam near the end, it happened around the arrest."

"A change for the worse," I murmured. "I can't believe he got you caught up in all that." I moved to the couch and sat an acceptable distance away from her. Not that the scent of her didn't reach me and trigger the yearning that she'd awakened with the hug earlier.

"That was during my live-life-full-throttle stage, remember?"

God, was she referring to telling Darcy she'd been giving Liam blow jobs? Another swell of envy burned my gut. "You liked the bad boy?"

She nodded. “I suppose I did. But Liam wasn’t bad. He had an edge sometimes. Mostly, he seemed lost.”

I looked down, wishing I had a drink. “I was never able to help him find his way.”

“Hey.” She took my hand. “You’re not God, Oliver. Goodness, you were just a kid yourself. You did the best you could. And you know what? I think Liam did too.”

I sucked in a breath, wishing she was right. “How do you think he changed after the arrest?”

“I can’t be sure. We went on a whiplash-type on and off situation. I cared for him, but I couldn’t put myself around the people he was hanging with.”

I squeezed her hand. “No one blames you for that.”

“But he’d get in touch with me. He’d tell me he was working to make things right. I’d believe him and take him back, only to find out he was hanging with his old crew. I supposed I interpreted that he was doing better to mean he was staying away from trouble.”

“I remember all that. I was there.”

She nodded and smiled. She shifted closer to me, resting her head on my shoulder. Instantly, I was taken back five years ago to a time in which Lindsay and I would sit like this and try to figure out how to put Liam back on the right path.

“The last time I saw him was at a Halloween party, just a few weeks before... well, you know.”

I rubbed my cheek over her head. “I know.” It still gutted me that she’d had to find him.

“He told me he wanted to make things right. At first, I told him that I’d heard that song and dance before. He said there was a lot going on and he couldn’t give me the details, but soon, he’d be in a different situation. He looked tired and desperate, and I remember my anger waning as I wanted to help him.”

It was a reminder to me that even with all their troubles, they loved each other. What a fucker I was to want her.

“Did he say anything that could help us now?”

She hesitated.

“Lindsay?”

“Not that stands out now. We talked, shared a few drinks, spent some time together... it was nice reconnecting with him after so long.”

That had to mean they hooked up. I pushed away the jealousy, which left the guilt that only a few weeks later, I was the one hooking up with her.

“So, why do you think he was different?”

Her head tilted up at me. “At the time, I was thinking his being with the crew or gang or whatever was like an addiction. He liked the thrill of it and so he kept being lured back.”

I nodded as that had been my take.

“What if he was trying to get evidence to give the FBI? What if his saying that he was trying to make things right was about that?”

She had a point. I rubbed my temples. “God, I wish I’d known he was in trouble. Why didn’t he tell me anything?”

“Maybe he was trying to protect you or me or both of us. Or maybe he wanted to prove something to you—that he could handle things on his own.”

“I hate that. He didn’t need to prove anything to me.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around my arm and leaned on my shoulder again.

“I was so harsh with him then, so pissed off that he got you involved in his nefarious activities. He probably didn’t tell me because I was such an asshole then.”

“We can’t know what was going on, Oliver,” she said gently. “And beating yourself up about it won’t help.”

“This whole situation just feels... unbearable.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Remember the night we played that guessing game and he made his hand like a phone

and held it up to his ear and said it was a fruit and we both guessed banana?”

I laughed. “Why did he think a phone motion would make us think of fruit?”

She shrugged. “I suppose it looks like one of the old-fashioned landline receivers.”

I smiled, enjoying having a happy thought about Liam. “Remember when he tried to replicate your dad’s spaghetti recipe?”

She snorted. “Oh, my God. He had no clue that he needed to boil the pasta first.”

“I guess I should have taught him to cook.”

“He’s lucky you knew how. The guy would have starved.”

Our laughter filled the room, temporarily pushing away the darkness of the moment. When the laughter subsided, the tone turned bittersweet. We sat quietly, lost in memories of a time when life seemed simpler, more fun. When our biggest concerns were keeping Liam’s grades up and remembering whose turn was it to buy the beer.

“Those days seem so far away now,” I said, not hiding the sadness from my voice. “But I’m grateful for those times.” I looked down at her. “I’m grateful for you, Lindsay. You made him so happy.” And me too, but I wasn’t sure I should say that.

She tilted her head up toward me again. “Me too.”

I stared at her, marveling at her beauty. Her strength. My gaze drifted to her lips, and I wanted to kiss her so fucking badly I ached with it.

I jumped up, worried I wouldn’t be able to fight the impulse. “I need a drink. You want something?”

She seemed surprised by my sudden movement. I was afraid she’d take it as a cue to leave.

“Wine, maybe?” Please, don’t go.

She hesitated for a moment but then nodded. “Okay. One glass.”

Thank fuck. I poured her a glass, giving it to her, and mixed myself a bourbon and water.

When I sat back down, I made sure I wasn't too close.

"Cheers to beers." She held her wine up to me.

I laughed. "Jesus, he used to say that, didn't he?" I clicked my glass against hers.

"I couldn't ever get him to drink wine," she said.

"He did like his beer."

"What do you think he'd say if he knew we were here now?"

I looked over at her, wondering where her question came from. The question felt deep, but I didn't have a deep answer. "He'd wonder why I don't have any beer."

Her lips twitched upward, but there was still a sadness in her eyes. Who knew where they'd be if Liam had lived. Maybe they'd be married and have kids.

"I think he'd be glad that we're still friends and sad he isn't here with us. Especially you."

She looked down at her drink. I thought back to what I'd said to her in the café. How rude I was.

"Lindsay, I have to apologize for my behavior the other day."

She shook her head. "No, it's—"

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, but the regret I have about our night together is only partly about Liam."

She sipped her drink but studied me over the rim of her glass. I got the feeling she was nervous about what I might say.

"The truth is, you were scared and lost and vulnerable, and I feel like I took advantage of that."

Her eyes widened like she was expecting something else.

"I've always thought a great deal of you. Admired you. I hate that I touched you like that when what you needed from

me was simply to hold you and listen.”

“Oliver, you didn’t take advantage of me. I was the one who initiated things. I guess I should be sorry that I put you in a situation to feel like you’d betrayed Liam.”

Interesting that she worded it like that. She should be sorry, but it sounded like she wasn’t sorry. What did that mean?

“Maybe we just needed to connect?” she said softly.

I nodded, but I’d needed so much more. Or at least, I’d wanted more. I’d wanted my brother’s woman. I’d wanted to love her and provide for her.

“It wasn’t bad, was it?”

My attention jerked to her. “Bad?”

Her cheeks blushed. “I don’t mean the sex. I mean having done it. Even if Liam had been alive, it wouldn’t have been cheating. I don’t feel guilty, Oliver. Should I?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. All I wanted to do was reach out and pull her to me. To reassure her that she’d done nothing wrong.

I downed my drink instead. “No. You don’t need to feel guilty.”

“Then you shouldn’t either, right?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Liam loved you. I should have respected that.”

She looked down. “He’d gone back to that Darcy chick.”

I arched my brow. “How do you know?”

“After our night together on Halloween, he left with her.”

I frowned. That didn’t make sense. Unless... “She’s the one who told me about his reporting to the FBI. Maybe it had nothing to do with his feelings for her.”

“I’m not jealous, Oliver.” She gave me an exasperated sigh. “I’m trying to tell you that Liam and I were done by the time he died.”

Then why did she sleep with him on Halloween? I mean, she hadn't come out and said it, but she'd definitely implied it. "So, what was Halloween?"

She flinched. "It... ah... I don't know. Like a last goodbye, I suppose."

Why was she saying all this? It was fucking with my head... with my heart. "Why do you need me to know all this?"

She swallowed hard as she stared at me. Finally, she put her glass on the table. "I don't know. I should go."

Goddammit. I was fucking up and wasn't sure how or why. I reached out, taking her hand to stop her from standing. "I'm sorry, Lindsay. Surely, you've always known that I'm terrible at understanding women. I'm trying to act right, but I'm fucking up."

She patted my hand. "It's fine, Oliver."

A tsunami of panic washed through me. In desperation, I cupped her cheek with my hand. "I needed you that night, Lindsay. I... ah..." Jesus fuck, what did I say? Should I tell her how I felt? How seeing her again has made it clear that my feelings for her are still as strong as ever?

"I needed you too." She leaned in, pressing her lips on mine. I supposed that she only intended it to be a sweet, comforting kiss. But the minute her taste hit my lips, all-consuming need hit me.

I slanted my head, running my tongue along the seam of her lips, fully expecting her to pull away in shock. Instead, she opened for me, inviting me in.

Love mixed with guilt, longing with confusion. The scent of her filled my nostrils as I took the kiss deeper. I shouldn't be doing this. But God help me, I couldn't stop. Not when she let out that sexy little groan. Not when her fingers threaded through my hair, holding me to her.

My tongue danced with hers. Fiery explosions of need coursed through my blood.

“Lindsay,” I murmured, “tell me you want this.” I needed to hear the words. She wanted me. Needed me. Not Liam. Not Donovan. Me. How pathetic was that?

“Oliver.”

She didn’t say she wanted or needed me, but it was my name on her lips. I let go of control and instead, like I had five years ago, I let desire and need take the reins. My hands slid under her top, finding her skin soft and warm. I pushed her clothing away until her tits were free, filling my hands, making my mouth water.

My moves were frantic, erratic. I was driven by the fear that she’d push me away. I wanted to drown in her as much as I could until that moment came. But with each touch, each kiss, she pulled me closer.

When we were both naked, I pushed her back, laying my body over hers, savoring the soft, silky warmth of her skin radiating through mine. I kissed her hard and deep. It seemed impossible that she wouldn’t be able to taste my need for her, my love for her.

I hooked her leg over my hip, opening her to me as my dick found its way to her entrance. Fucking hell... I was burning up with need.

Her fingers dug into my ass, her hands pulling hard until I sank into her hot sweetness. Emotion whipped through me. Feelings of love. Rightness. Peace. Home. It was enough to bring tears to my eyes because even now, I knew she’d never be mine. Not really. Maybe she and Liam had been done, but he was still between us. He would always be between us.

Lindsay

This shouldn't be happening, and yet, I couldn't stop it. Oliver was seeped inside me, filling me, and it was the sweetest perfection. There was something about the way Oliver looked at me, touched me, that was unlike anyone else I'd been with. Not that I'd had a lot of lovers. The last had been Oliver. Before Liam, there had only been two others, both boyfriends, not hookups. How strange that Oliver was a hookup both five years ago and now, but the experience felt deeper, fuller.

My mind was having a tug-of-war. I was desperate for him to understand that my romantic love for Liam had been gone by the time I'd hooked up with Oliver. At the same time, I tried to make him think Liam and I slept together on Halloween. Liam and I had connected on Halloween five years ago, but we'd only talked. I remember thinking how tired and rundown he appeared. I thought it was from living a harder, more dangerous life, and I suppose I wasn't wrong. I just hadn't realized then that he was walking a dangerous line by essentially being a mole for the mob.

Oliver groaned as he withdrew and thrust in, forcing my guilty thoughts away and pulling me into the present.

“God, Lindsay.”

The desperate need in his voice sent shivers through me. I wrapped my legs around his hips and focused on the

sensations of his fingers caressing my skin, his lips along my neck, his dick pulsing inside me. I felt all of it deep in my soul.

No, I shouldn't be doing this because being like this made me yearn for him. But I couldn't have him. So this moment, while lovely and pleasurable, was also unbearably sad.

He kissed me again, and I drank in his taste, his scent, his touch. I wanted to remember it forever.

“Fuck... I'm going to come... Lindsay...”

“Yes. Now.” I arched into him, and when he drove into me again, sparks ignited like a flash fire through my blood.

He let out a feral growl and pumped hard and fast, filling me with his essence. We rocked, we bucked in the pleasurable dance of desire. I wanted to let go, to savor the sweetness of the moment. But the shadow of my lie hung over me, preventing me from fully enjoying it.

He collapsed over me, his breath unsteady as he kissed my neck. My heart pounded in my chest, still racing from the intensity of our encounter. The warmth of Oliver's body and his tender touch was both comforting and agonizing as I tried to untangle the web of emotions of desire and guilt that swirled in a confusing mass. I ached to grab hold of him and never let him go, but I couldn't. The reality of my situation hit me like a bucket of cold water. Like Liam, I was playing a dangerous game. Maybe I wasn't risking my life, but I was risking my girls. Risking my heart. Risking hurting this lovely man if he learned the truth.

My breath stalled as my deception weighed heavily on my chest.

He lifted his head. “Are you okay?”

“Fine... just lost in thought.” My voice faltered, betraying the turmoil eating me alive.

He studied me and then shook his head as he began to rise. “I'm sorry—”

I pressed my hand over his mouth. “Don't. Don't tell me you regret this, that you think you've betrayed Liam.” I let the

anger of that push out my guilt. Anger was easier to deal with than guilt.

He sighed. “You’re the one who has regret in her eyes. I’m only apologizing because I can see that you regret this.” He stood and held out his hand to help me up.

“Not regret, but... we can’t do this again.”

I saw a flash of pain in his eyes, but then he nodded and handed me my clothes. “Okay. You’re right.”

There was something in the way he so easily agreed that stung a little, even though I was the one setting the boundaries. It made me realize how easy it would be to fall for him all over again and how I couldn’t afford to let that happen.

“I’ll give you a moment.” He walked away, and while I appreciated a moment to get my thoughts and feelings under control, I knew he needed time too.

I dressed, and when he returned, he was wearing a robe with the hotel logo on it. He went to his mini-fridge and pulled out a bottle of water and brought it to me.

“Thank you.” I took a sip and tried to think of a way to leave without it being hurtful or awkward.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Just thinking about things.”

“Like what?”

“Life. Choices.” I realized that five years ago, I would have told Oliver everything that was going on inside me. That was how it had been between us. I told him everything, and he’d always been there for me. But of course, I couldn’t do that now.

He sighed. “Sometimes, we have to make difficult choices, and it’s not always clear whether they’re right or wrong.”

“Have you ever made a choice you regretted?” Once I said it, I knew the answer. He’d told me he felt like he’d let Liam down. He’d regretted having sex with me five years ago. At this point, he probably regretted having sex tonight.

“Of course. But I’m realizing that we can’t change the past no matter how much we wish we could. We can only learn from it and move forward.”

“Move forward?” I had an image of me and Oliver and the girls, smiling and laughing and happy. That was a forward place I’d like to go, but how could that happen when my secret blocked the path? The longing to tell him everything and free myself from the burden of lies burned in my gut. And yet, I couldn’t take the risk of what could happen by revealing the truth.

“Whatever is bothering you, Lindsay, remember that you don’t have to face it alone. You have people who care about you and want to help.” I appreciated that he wasn’t pushing me for details. And he was right. I had my father and Mira... except they didn’t know the truth either.

I nodded. “Thank you, Oliver.” I wanted to hug him, to seek comfort in his arms.

For a moment, we stared at each other. Finally, Oliver said, “I’m thinking about going to the FBI to find out if Liam was talking to them as Johnny and Darcy suggested. If you’d like, I can let you know what I find out. Or if you’d rather we stayed apart... I’ll understand.”

The thought of not seeing Oliver again sent an unexpected stab of pain through my heart. As much as I tried to convince myself that walking away from him would be for the best to keep my secret safe, some part of me still craved his presence. How could I want him to leave and yet need him to stay? How could I resolve this without risking his opinion of me or custody of my girls?

He smiled. “It’s fine, Lindsay. I can let Donovan know what I find, if anything.”

“Actually, I want to go with you to the FBI.”

The surprise in his eyes told me he hadn’t expected my response. To be honest, I was a little surprised myself.

“I want to be involved and stay informed,” I said.

“Alright. I’ll call them tomorrow and make an appointment. Is there a time I should try for?”

“I took the week off. I need to clean up my place.”

“Is that something I can help you with?”

God, how I wanted to say yes. But he couldn’t enter my home without seeing evidence of the girls. “I’ve got it under control. But thank you.”

WHEN I RETURNED HOME that night, sneaking into my father and Mira’s house felt absurdly foolish. It was like I was a teenager trying to avoid getting caught. But I wanted to avoid talking to my dad or Mira and risking their figuring out that I’d had sex with Oliver. I wasn’t sure how they’d do that, but the fear was there anyway.

I checked on my girls, kissing their sleeping faces goodnight, and once again grappled with the guilt of keeping their father in the dark.

I tiptoed out of their room, doing my best to keep the door quiet as I closed it.

“Since when do you work evenings?” Mira’s voice startled me. I hesitated, caught between a lie and the truth.

Mira’s head cocked to the side, her eyes narrow and assessing. “Are you dating? And if so, why the secrecy?”

“The work was really about those texts and an update on Liam’s case.” That wasn’t a total lie. “I just didn’t want to worry Dad or you.” I looked away, hoping she would drop the subject.

“Now I am worried.”

“See? It’s fine, Mira.” I thought about telling her what Oliver had learned about Liam’s possibly working with the FBI, but that would only heighten her worry. “I’m heading to bed. There’s still a lot of cleaning to do at my house.”

“Be careful, Lindsay.”

“I will. Goodnight.”

As I lay in bed, my thoughts returned to the night's events. For a moment, it had felt like old times, talking to Oliver and remembering the good times in our past with Liam. I could feel the warmth and security growing inside me like it had five years ago when Oliver had become my confidant, my protector, the man I fell for. Perhaps that was why I gave in and had sex with him. It had been about needing to feel cared for, connected to another human being like I had with him years ago.

At the same time, I felt close to him. The possibility for us was gone, extinguished by the lies I held onto. When I made my choice five years ago, the decision felt right. But now, the lies were burning a hole in my gut. What sort of person kept a man from his children? His children from their father? Especially a father who was filled with love?

I fell asleep, my thoughts a whirlwind of regret and longing. What stood out was what a terrible person I was to keep Oliver from the only family he had left.

Oliver

The scent of Lindsay's perfume lingered in the air even though she'd left nearly an hour ago. When she left, I ordered dinner and tried to watch TV, but all I could think about was her. For a short time tonight, we were back to the way we were five years ago. Friends. Confidants. And for me, a man in love with his brother's girlfriend.

Being inside her was a heaven I'd only felt once before, the last time I was with her. Five years ago, I had held her like I had tonight, but the weight of our actions had been so much heavier then. At least for me. Liam might have been dead, but in my mind, Liam's claim on her heart made her off limits to me. But for her, it had been different. Yes, they'd broken up by the time I was with her, but I was certain she still loved him. She just couldn't be with him when his life appeared to be careening out of control. But tonight, she said she didn't love him anymore by then, although if she didn't, why had she hooked up with him only weeks before?

If I'd known for sure that she wasn't in love with Liam, could I have done something different to make her mine back then? Would she have accepted my love?

I shook my head. Even if she didn't love him anymore, I knew Liam had loved her. He might have fucked up, but he cared for her, and even in his death, I couldn't take that from him.

So even as I was seeped inside her body, her hot breath on my neck as her pussy pulsed around my dick and the urge to spill my deepest feelings for her sat on the tip of my tongue, I'd said nothing.

I rubbed my temples and considered a stiff drink. I was making myself crazy going over the situation again and again. It was time to let go of the past and focus on the task at hand—finding out what had really happened to my brother.

With a sigh, I clicked off the TV and went to the table where all my papers and notes about Liam's case were scattered. The chaos on the table mirrored my thoughts, but I was determined to make sense of it all. I scanned each document, looking for details that might help piece together the puzzle of my brother's life before his death.

Liam had always been a bit of an enigma, even to me, especially in his last months. In many ways, he'd been like Lindsay growing up, an open, carefree spirit despite the pain and chaos of his childhood. That had turned to recklessness in his teenage years, but I'd been able to steer him toward school while working my ass off to pay for the part of college his scholarship didn't cover. Perhaps it was Lindsay's wealth that had him focusing on money and power and looking for an easy way out through the Back Bay Crew. Not that I blamed her. Of course, I didn't. But something changed in Liam, and I hadn't been able to keep him focused. He graduated college, but he hadn't found a real job, and nothing Lindsay or I said persuaded him to find one.

And now I had to reconcile my thinking he'd been lost with the notion that he'd tried to save himself, redeem himself by turning against the crew. It gutted me that I didn't know, that I hadn't been able to see that his distress near the end wasn't that he was pissed at me but that he was in serious danger. He had to know it. The idea of his being afraid and still doing what needed to be done tormented me. Fuck! I owed it to him to find answers.

The information on the papers never changed, never revealed something that could help me. So I put them aside. It was time to dig deeper into the past.

I researched gangs and organized crime five years ago in Boston. I found articles detailing turf wars, drugs, and unsolved murders, but not identity theft. Had Liam reached out for help, and no one gave a fuck? After all, if Social Services or the government cared about foster kids, they'd do something to prevent theft of their social security numbers and the demolition of their credit. At the very least, they'd have a process for fixing it. Hell, resourceful, sophisticated people had a difficult time cleaning up their credit after identity theft. How was an eighteen-year-old kid aged out of foster care supposed to deal with it?

Knowing I needed to find out whether Liam had talked to the FBI, I researched the Boston FBI office. Initially, I tried to find out who would be the head of identity theft crimes that Liam might have talked to. Since specific agents weren't listed on their website, I made note to reach out to the special agent in charge tomorrow morning. I had to consider that I'd be given the brush off, but now I wasn't some poor ex-foster kid making my way in the world. I had money, which meant I had influence, and I'd use it to call my congressman or senator if I needed someone to help encourage the FBI to help me.

I shook my head. "What the fuck did you get yourself into, Liam? And why didn't you tell me?" Guilt gnawed at me. If I'd been more present, more attentive, maybe things would have turned out differently for Liam.

I was getting ready to call it a night when my phone buzzed. Glancing at the caller ID, I saw it was my tech guy, Buddy.

I hoped this wasn't a serious business issue. I didn't have the head space for work right now. "Hey, Buddy."

"I hope it's not too late, but I have some news about that hack attempt."

"It's never too late for that. What did you find?"

"I managed to trace the breach back to Boston."

"Really?" My heart raced as the implications settled in. "Do you know what files they were trying to access?"

“No. Not yet. To be honest, I’m not sure the hacker did either. They were haphazard, like they were searching for something but didn’t know where to look. I’m still investigating, but since you’re in Boston and this hack came from Boston, I figured I should let you know.”

“I appreciate it. Keep digging and let me know what more you learn.”

“Will do,” Buddy promised before hanging up.

Setting my phone down, I scribbled notes about the call and the hacking attempt on my notepad. If this intrusion was related to what the mystery texter was looking for, perhaps Liam had stumbled upon data that could shed light on the criminal activities he’d been involved in. Or maybe the hacker was searching for any communications I’d saved from Liam, hoping to uncover some hidden clue. It was impossible to be sure, but one thing was clear. I needed to learn more about the world Liam had been immersed in.

Staying up late into the night, I continued to pore over the documents and files scattered across the table, wishing I’d paid more attention to what was going on with Liam before he died.

I finally hit a wall. Exhaustion forced me into bed, my mind still churning over the information and my guilt at failing Liam. Sleep came slowly, dragging me down into a restless slumber.

All of a sudden, I was standing in the alley by Frankie’s pool hall. The air hung with ominous danger. My heart race.; My eyes darted around. What was going on?

“Is this all you’ve got?” Liam’s voice echoed through the alley, tinged with disgust and anger. He stepped forward, his blond hair disheveled and his mischievous smile replaced by a scowl. “You don’t know anything, do you? You never did.”

“Liam.” He was standing right there. I reached out, needing to touch him, but he stepped back. “I’m trying to help now. I’ll make it right, I swear.” Desperation filled me. This was my chance to make amends. To put things right.

“Too little, too late,” he spat. “You gave up on me. Wrote me off.”

I shook my head. “No. Never. I wanted the best for you.”

He scoffed. “You wanted Lindsay. And with me out of the way, there was nothing stopping you.”

“Please.” My heart shattered under the weight of his condemnation. “I didn’t know. I didn’t understand what you were going through.”

“Didn’t want to understand, more like. You just thought the worst of me.”

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn’t. It hadn’t occurred to me that he was trying to bring down the crew. “Why didn’t you tell me what you were doing? I could have helped you.”

“More like help yourself to Lindsay. But she’s mine. I might be gone, but she’s mine.”

The dream shifted, and suddenly, I was no longer in the dark alley. Instead, I was in Lindsay’s old home, standing in her bedroom, watching her sleep. She moaned and flailed like she was having a nightmare. I stepped to her, desperate to wake her and comfort her.

She held me and I held her. Soon, I was inside her, savoring the sweetness of her body. She moaned. “Liam.”

Fucking hell.

A dark chuckle sounded from the foot of the bed. “I told you. She’s mine.”

I jolted awake. A fresh wave of guilt and shame washed through me. It was a dream and yet very real. It was a brutal reminder of just how much I had failed not only Liam, but Lindsay as well. If I wanted to make things right with Liam, I had to put an end to my feelings for her and instead finish what he’d started.

If she planned to be involved in this, I’d have to make sure that we stayed friends, helping each other just as we had when Liam was alive. Untangling myself from the sheets, I rose from bed and began my day, starting with a cold shower, not to

dampen sexual desire but to blast away the remnants of the dream.

Dressed and focused on the job at hand, I called the FBI office in Boston, navigating my way through a maze of automated options and transfers. It took longer than I would have liked, but eventually, I found myself speaking with a female agent named Veronica Marsden. She wouldn't give me any information, yet she agreed to meet with me later that morning. That had to mean there was something to the rumor of Liam talking to the Feds, right? It was a small victory but one that I held onto. I was determined to make amends to Liam.

I sent Lindsay a text message telling her about the appointment and asking if she'd meet me beforehand at the coffee shop. I wanted to share the information Buddy had given and perhaps come up with a game plan on talking to Agent Marsden. She responded that she'd meet me at the shop in thirty minutes.

After hanging up the phone, I grabbed my coat and headed out to meet Lindsay. I found a table and waited. When she walked in, my heart skipped a beat. She was so fucking lovely. And smart. And brave. And Liam's.

"Hey." I tried to keep my voice casual as she sat in the chair across from me. "I took the liberty of getting you a chai latte."

She smiled, though I could see the shadows still lurking behind her eyes. "Thank you." She wrapped her hands around the mug. "So, you got the appointment."

I nodded, taking a sip of my coffee before telling her about how I believed the attempted hack into my computer was connected to the guy looking for whatever Liam hid.

"It makes no sense to me why our anonymous texter won't tell us what he's looking for. But I'm wondering if it's some sort of data."

"Data? You mean like a ledger or something?"

“Maybe. Or perhaps it’s some other type of evidence that can be saved digitally. If that’s the case, it could be printed on paper as well. Have you ever come across anything like that among Liam’s belongings?”

Lindsay shook her head, frowning. “No. I’ve never had any of his belongings.”

“If he was hiding it, perhaps he hid it in your belongings.”

She blew out a breath. “Maybe, but I’ve never found anything.”

“Maybe this meeting with Agent Marsden will shed some light on who Liam was talking to in the FBI five years ago and what he’d gotten his hands on.”

“I hope so. I’m ready for all this to be done.”

It was stupid for me to feel her words like a stab in the heart. Like she was saying she was ready to be rid of me. Just because I felt the pull toward her like I’d never felt for any woman didn’t mean anything. She wasn’t mine. She didn’t want me. Truthfully, it was a good thing that she was ready for this to be over. The sooner this was done and I was back in California, the better for the both of us.

Lindsay

I stared into my cup of coffee because looking at Oliver made it hard for me to focus. We were here to talk about Liam and find out what was going on. The truth was, I was feeling so lost and confused that it made it difficult to focus. I was still reeling from last night and having had sex with Oliver. I was shocked I did it, and at the same time, it had felt so natural. Being with him had always been comforting. He was like a shelter from the storm, and all I wanted to do was lean into him, be wrapped up in him. And maybe I could have except for my secret. I should tell him, and yet, I couldn't figure out how. Or more accurately, how could I justify not telling him about the girls? I knew it was selfish and wrong, but fear of what would happen is what kept my mouth shut. Fear of losing his care and respect. Fear that he'd take my girls.

“Are you alright?” Oliver's words pulled me from my thoughts.

“Sorry, just thinking.” I forced a smile and took a sip of my coffee.

“About last night?” His voice was tentative, as if he wasn't sure he should bring it up.

If I was going to get through this, I had to ignore my yearning and my guilt. We had to deal with the situation and then move on, go back to our lives.

“Actually, about your laptop. You said you think Liam might’ve hidden something important in it.”

He sucked in a breath and looked down as if he was disappointed in my response. “Liam wouldn’t have hidden anything on my laptop. I didn’t even have it when he died. I suspect our texter thinks maybe Liam sent me something that I’ve saved.”

“Do you think the FBI will tell us anything?”

“The fact that someone is willing to meet with us makes me think Johnny and Darcy were right. But who knows?”

I tried to be optimistic as we finished our coffees and headed to the bureau. We went through a series of security protocols and were led to a room where a woman in the FBI’s signature blue suit entered the room. She couldn’t have been much older than me, early thirties, maybe, with long auburn hair tied back in a ponytail. She wasn’t what I thought of when I imagined FBI agents.

“I’m Agent Marsden.” Her voice held a no-nonsense attitude as she extended her hand across the table to us.

“Oliver Quinlan, and this is Lindsay McKinnon.” Oliver shook her hand and then I did.

“Have a seat.” She sat across from us, setting a folder on the table. It was closed and didn’t have any markings. “How can I help you?”

Oliver looked over at me and I nodded. “I’m looking for answers about my brother, Liam Quinlan.”

Agent Marsden’s expression remained impassive. “And you think the FBI has those answers?”

I frowned. Why were we here if the FBI didn’t have answers?

“I don’t know. That’s why we’re here. The fact that you’re meeting with us tells me there are answers here,” Oliver said.

Agent Marsden leaned back in her chair, studying us each in turn. “What can you tell me about your brother?”

Oliver and I glanced at each other again.

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to be asking you?” I couldn’t help but feel a bit defensive.

She didn’t respond.

“We have learned that Liam may have been working with the FBI,” Oliver said.

“I see. For what reason?”

I was confused. We were here for information, but instead, we seemed to be giving it.

“I don’t know for sure, but we suspect it was an identity theft scam that targeted foster children.”

“Did Liam tell you this?”

I found it interesting that Agent Marsden used Liam’s first name. Had she known him? Was she the agent he’d been talking to?

“No.” Oliver looked down, and I could feel his guilt and regret at not knowing what Liam was doing before he died. I put my hand on his and gave it a squeeze to comfort him.

He glanced at me, giving me a wan smile.

“He was killed before I knew anything about it.”

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing, and I wondered what she was looking for as she scrutinized us. “It’s been some time. Why are you here now?”

“As I said, we want answers.” Oliver didn’t hide his annoyance that Agent Marsden was being so evasive.

“Answers to what?”

“What the hell?” Oliver let out an exasperated breath. “If you don’t know anything, you could have told me that on the phone.”

“What answers do you think we have, Mr. Quinlan?” Agent Marsden didn’t seem fazed by Oliver’s outburst.

“My brother was murdered, and at the time, he was apparently talking to the FBI. I want to know if that’s true. I

want to know what was going on and why five years later someone thinks I or Lindsay have something of Liam's."

Agent Marsden's brows rose, the first sign of interest in us. "Has anyone been in touch with you? Who?"

Oliver leaned forward. "Is it true? Was Liam talking to you?"

"Have you found anything unusual in Liam's belongings since his death?"

I glanced at Oliver, knowing he had to be irritated that she was ignoring our questions.

"No," Oliver said through gritted teeth.

Agent Marsden turned her attention to me as if she wanted me to answer the question. I shook my head.

"What makes you think he was talking to the FBI?"

"Are you going to help us?" Oliver was about at the end of his rope with the agent.

"Rumors," I said, thinking if we answered her questions, maybe she'd answer ours. "Oliver was told that the people Liam was hanging around that time were suspicious of him. One specifically mentioned that he might have been talking to the FBI."

Oliver glanced at me, and I got the feeling he didn't like my revealing so much, but how could we get answers if we didn't play along?

"Did they know why they suspected Liam?"

Oliver sat back in his chair, practically rolling his eyes in irritation. "Liam's last foster family was apparently part of the same crew Liam was hanging around with. Wally Creighton was apparently stealing and then selling the social security numbers of his foster kids. Liam was likely one of them. I'm sure Liam was pissed to find out Wally was the one who fucked up his credit."

Agent Marsden tapped her fingers on the folder as she considered what Oliver shared. "Why didn't he go to the

police?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Oliver stood and paced the room. I’d never seen him like this. I wished there was something I could do to help him. “You’re the fucking FBI. You know how identity theft works. No one gives a shit. The only reason to tell the police is to have the report sent to credit reporting agencies. No one investigates it. The Department of Social Services doesn’t do anything. And clearly, you don’t either.” Oliver looked at me. “This was a waste of time, Linds. Let’s go.”

I looked at Agent Marsden, my eyes pleading with her to give Oliver something that would help him.

“What did you hope to gain by coming here?”

Oliver looked at her like she’d grown a second head. “We’ve told you twice. We want to know if Liam was working with you.”

“Why? What would it matter?”

“Jesus fuck.” Oliver turned away.

I knew part of the answer was personal. Knowing that Liam was helping the FBI would change how we saw him in those last days.

“It could be why he was murdered. His murder still isn’t solved,” I said.

“It is possible he was killed because he was involved with murderers?”

“Yes!” Oliver slapped his hands on the table. I flinched but Agent Marsden didn’t. “They killed him to keep him quiet.”

“And what will knowing that bring you? Are you seeking closure or something more?”

“Why won’t you answer our question?” Oliver ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. I felt the same. We were desperate for answers, but it seemed the truth was still frustratingly out of reach.

“All you have is a rumor. Is there someone Liam confided in? Someone he trusted?”

The question was like salt on Oliver’s wound. I knew it hurt him that Liam hadn’t talked to him.

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps you’re not aware of all his activities,” Agent Marsden suggested smoothly. “Have either of you considered the possibility that Liam was actively participating in something illegal?”

“Not in this,” Oliver insisted. “Liam was trying to do the right thing.”

“By talking to the FBI?” Agent Marsden leaned in, studying Oliver intently. “Do you have any proof to back up this claim? Something beyond a rumor?”

“Proof?” Oliver hesitated, glancing at me for a brief moment before returning his attention to Agent Marsden. “No.” He sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and as he did, I could see he was giving up on Agent Marsden. “Come on, Lindsay. Maybe we can talk to Donovan.”

I started to stand.

“Who is Donovan?” Agent Marsden asked.

“What does it matter?” Oliver said with disdain.

“Isn’t Detective Riker the one investigating your brother’s murder?”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed. “How would you know that? Unless you were involved with my brother.”

She sat back again. “I was the agent Liam was talking to.”

Finally, I thought.

“He said he knew of an identity theft ring that targeted foster children. He showed his own case as proof, but of course, while his identity had been stolen, there was no proof his foster father had taken it.”

“That’s it?” Oliver asked.

“We spoke several times. Liam would share with me what he was learning, but unfortunately, he didn’t manage to uncover substantial evidence before his passing. We were in contact, but I couldn’t officially involve the Bureau without concrete proof.”

“Did Liam have any leads or suspicions about who might be responsible?” Oliver asked.

“Other than Mr. Creighton, he didn’t mention anyone specific. He thought it might go deeper, but he never had the chance to find out.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything that might help us understand what happened to Liam?” I asked.

“Sadly, no. As much as I want to help, there’s nothing more I can divulge.”

Oliver clenched his fists, frustration evident on his face. “Something doesn’t add up. Someone broke into Lindsay’s house, and my laptop was hacked.”

Agent Marsden raised her eyebrows, clearly intrigued. “What do you think they were looking for?”

“Maybe whatever Liam had found. Evidence he wanted to give to you.”

“Are you saying someone connected to this scheme could be after you two?”

“They want what Liam had, and they think one of us has it.”

“By ‘it’, what do you mean?”

“He’s never said,” I told her.

“Why do you think it’s related to this case? After five years, it could be anything.”

“This is the only thing we’ve come across that fits,” Oliver said. “Why now, we don’t know, but if Liam was talking to you about a member of the crew and trying to find evidence, this has to be what our anonymous texter is looking for.”

“Did either of you find anything unusual in Liam’s things?” she asked, now much more involved and animated.

“No,” I said.

Oliver shook his head.

“Same here,” Oliver added, rubbing the back of his neck. “But if we find that evidence, then we’ll likely find Liam’s murderer.”

“I strongly advise you both to be cautious. If someone is after what Liam knew, they won’t hesitate to target you if they think you have it,” Agent Marsden warned.

“Shouldn’t the FBI be doing something about this?” I asked.

“Without tangible evidence, our hands are tied.”

Oliver’s jaw tightened. “You’re the fucking FBI. Isn’t it your job to investigate and find the clues and evidence?”

“Mr. Quinlan—”

“He was a twenty-two-year-old kid who you expected to do *your* job, and now he’s dead!”

He wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t see how his accusing her of failing Liam would help us.

“Mr. Quinlan, I understand your anger, but there were limitations to what I could do without solid evidence.”

“Limitations?” Oliver scoffed. “It’s not bad enough that he had endure a foster care system that allowed him to be fucked over, but now he’s a victim who slipped through the cracks of this messed up system?”

“Oliver, please, let’s just go.” I rose from my chair, reaching for his arm.

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he exhaled sharply, his eyes still locked with Agent Marsden’s.

“Fine. Let’s leave. We’ll find the truth ourselves.”

“Wait.” Agent Marsden held up a hand, hesitating for a moment before she spoke again. “Your brother was incredibly

brave for coming forward. And determined.” She gave us a wan smile. “He talked about maybe trying to join the FBI once all this was done. When I heard he died, I continued to look into his accusations, but then I was reassigned because there simply wasn’t enough to justify keeping me on the case.”

“Of course not.” Bitterness dripped from Oliver’s words. “Why bother? No one ever cared about us before. Why start now?”

My heart ached at the pain in his voice, the raw hurt that came from a lifetime of feeling abandoned and invisible.

I squeezed his arm gently, trying to offer some measure of comfort, but it felt woefully inadequate. “Oliver, we’ll figure this out. Together.”

“Let’s go.” He pulled away, jerking the door open and storming out of the room.

“Thank you for your time, Agent Marsden,” I said as I followed him to the door.

“Before you go, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I glanced at the door, where Oliver had left moments earlier. His anger was palpable. He needed me. But something in Agent Marsden’s voice had me lingering.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but you need to know if you’re going to continue to push this or look for whatever someone is asking you for.”

I looked out the door, wanting to call Oliver back, but he’d disappeared.

“Liam had believed that the scam was bigger than Wally Creighton. He stumbled on something that he felt would give me the proof I needed to get a full team on the case. Unfortunately, he died before he could bring it to me.”

“You’re not really telling me anything we don’t already know.”

She sighed, the tug-of-war of sharing more than she should playing out in her dark eyes. “I don’t know what he found, Ms.

McKinnon, but I suspect it was a list or documentation that named names and outlined the scam.”

I thought of how earlier, Oliver speculated that whatever Liam had, it could be on paper or stored digitally.

“I don’t suppose you have an idea of where he kept it?” I asked.

“You would know better than I would. All he said was that it was safe and that the writing was on the wall.”

I frowned. “He said that specifically?”

She nodded. “At the time, I thought it was just a figure of speech. Maybe it was, but when I heard he died, I went to where he was living and all his haunts, looking for a clue written on a wall. Nothing.”

“Can you do anything about this?” I asked.

“Officially, no. My hands are still tied. But unofficially... I’m passing this information to you because I care about what happened to your boyfriend. I want to see justice done too.”

“Thank you, Agent Marsden.”

“Be careful, Ms. McKinnon. These people are dangerous. Don’t hesitate to call me if you find anything or feel in danger.” She handed me her card.

“Thank you.”

With a nod, I turned and hurried out of the office. I had to find Oliver and help him through this difficult moment but also share what Agent Marsden said. Maybe Oliver would know what Liam meant by “the writing is on the wall.”

Oliver

My heart pounded in my chest as I paced in front of the FBI building. I was so fucking pissed at Agent Marsden. Yes, Liam was my responsibility and I failed him, but she was the FBI! She let an untrained kid do her job and got him killed.

“Oliver.” Lindsay’s voice called out to me. I worked to calm myself but failed. When she reached me, her blue eyes studied me. More frustration filled me. Like Liam, Lindsay was another failure in my life.

“Can you fucking believe it? It’s her job to investigate the bad guys, but she had Liam do it and got him killed.”

“She didn’t kill Liam,” she said softly.

“No. It was Wally Creighton.” Anger surged again. “I think it’s time I paid him a visit.”

“Oliver, no.” Her fingers gripped my arm. “Confronting Wally won’t help. In fact, if he killed Liam, it could just get you killed too.”

What did it matter at this point? My life had been filled with nothing but guilt since Liam’s death. Sure, I’d made my fortune, but what good was money? It didn’t bring Liam back. It didn’t get rid of guilt and shame at failing and betraying him. It didn’t make it okay to pursue the one source of happiness in my life, Lindsay.

“At least I’ll die knowing the truth,” I said bitterly.

Her eyes flashed with panic. “You can’t mean that.”

I shrugged.

“God, Oliver...” She looked at me with a mixture of fear and desperation. “Let’s go back to your hotel. We’ll go over your notes, fill in what we learned today.”

“We didn’t learn shit today.”

“But we did. Well... maybe. We know for sure that Liam had been in touch with the FBI and who. And after you left, Agent Marsden told me something Liam said to her.”

All the chaos in my mind stopped for a moment as I turned my attention on Lindsay. “What?”

“First, she said Liam had found something. She didn’t know what it was, but she suspected it was names or something that outlines how the scam worked and who was running it. He made her think the scam was bigger than just that Wally guy.”

That didn’t seem like anything helpful. All it did was piss me off more that she didn’t help Liam.

“He said the evidence was safe and that the writing was on the wall.”

“What does that mean?”

“She wasn’t sure. She did say that after he died, she went to all the places she thought he’d been and tried to find a clue on a wall.”

I frowned. “More likely, he meant the evidence was clear... or...” My stomach roiled. “Wally knew he had it and could see the gig was about to be up.”

“Maybe. But if that is the case, we need to give him a wide berth. We need to let professionals deal with this.”

“You mean like Agent Marsden?” I scoffed. “She didn’t do shit. She won’t do shit now.”

“But maybe Flynn or Detective Riker will. We should talk to them.”

I frowned, not wanting to admit she was right. What I really wanted to do was to find Wally and pound his face in until he confessed, a fight I'd likely lose.

“Let's go back to your hotel. We'll be safe there, and we can start looking into old friends who might be involved or whom he might have hidden the evidence with. It's possible we're not the only ones getting messages.”

I hadn't considered someone else getting messages. That made me think of Johnny and Darcy, but surely, they would have told me if they were getting texts about Liam.

Not sure what to do next, I let Lindsay lead me to her car, and she drove us back to my hotel. As she entered the lobby with me, heading to the elevator, a new issue grew. The last time we were together, I'd fucked her again. Even now, the memory of our bodies intertwined made it difficult to breathe.

More than that, though, I wanted to hold her. I felt like a man tumbling through space, lost and out of control. Touching Lindsay made me feel whole, tethered to reality.

We reached my room, and I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I was fine and she could leave, but instead, I invited her in.

“I wonder if we could figure out why all this has started again now,” Lindsay said as she went directly to the table where all my notes sat.

I shrugged and sank on the couch, closing my eyes, feeling so fucking tired.

“Did this person not know about Liam's findings and just found out?” she pondered.

“Maybe they were in jail,” I quipped.

“Yes, that could be it,” she said with enthusiasm. “So, who recently got out of jail?”

I opened an eye. “I didn't really mean that—”

“But it could be, Oliver. Do you know anyone just out of jail?”

“Darcy did, but it was like an eighteen-month stint. She didn’t go to jail until three years or so after Liam.”

“Oh, my God.” She stared at me with wide eyes. “She just got out for identity theft.”

All of a sudden, energy kicked in. “She blamed Wally.” I jumped up from the couch. “How’d you know about why she was in jail?”

“Flynn told me he was going to talk to her and mentioned it.”

“Flynn?” It wasn’t the first time she’d referred to him by his first name. Jealousy surged through me.

“Detective Donovan.”

“I know who he is. Why are you calling him by his first name?” I reached her at the table.

She shrugged and stared at me with confused eyes. “He told me to.”

My head cocked to the side. “Is he hitting on you?”

“What? No.” She turned back to the papers on the table. It could be that she was dismissing me because I was off base. But it could just as well be because I hit the nail on the head.

“It wouldn’t matter if you liked him. I mean, he probably wouldn’t like what we did last night, but you were clear that it wouldn’t happen again.”

She gaped at me, and I had to admit, my words shocked myself too. “What is wrong with you?”

Fucking hell. I scraped my hands over my face. “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes softened. “We’ll figure this out.”

I nodded and did my damndest to get my mind right. But holy hell, thinking of Donovan and Lindsay together made me crazy.

“I guess the question is whether Darcy knows that Liam had something. She’s the one who told me about the FBI.

Maybe she was at the bar to find out what, if anything, I knew.”

“How’d she know you’d be there?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe she’s the one sending the texts.”

“Still, why now? Why not after Liam died? Like you said, she had time before she went to jail.”

I had no clue. “Darcy’s more likely to be someone who takes orders, so perhaps Wally or whoever has told her to find Liam’s information.”

“She’d still help Wally after he caused her to go to jail?”

“If she’d get a payout, probably.”

Lindsay thought for a moment. “What if she knew where Liam hid the evidence but couldn’t get to it for some reason? Now, she’s out of jail, the heat is off the case, and she wants it. It could be her way out of the crew.”

“The reasoning is solid, but I’m not sure Darcy wants out or whether she would risk her life like that.” A terrible thought came to me. “Jesus, it’s possible she told Wally about Liam.”

“Would he have told her his plans? Surely not. He’d have told you, right?”

I wanted to think so, but now I couldn’t be sure. My anger and frustration at him had pushed him away. Would he have trusted Darcy with his secret? Liam was a smart kid, but he was alone.

“I don’t know.” The fact that I didn’t killed me. I headed to the minibar to get a drink, hoping the hotel staff had refilled it. “Want something to drink?”

“Water?”

I pulled out two little bottles of whisky and one of water. I handed her the water and then went back to the couch. Just as I sat, my phone pinged with a text.

I imagined it was work, but the disruption was welcome. My mind and emotions needed a break. I pulled out my phone

and opened the message.

YOU'RE ASKING FOR TROUBLE. Stop snooping around. Give me what is mine.

I GLANCED UP AT LINDSAY.

Her brows pulled together. “What?” Just then, her phone pinged as well. She pulled it out. “*You’re asking for trouble. Stop snooping around. Give me what is mine,*” she read.

I nodded.

I turned back to my phone.

When I find it, how do I get it to you?

I needed to find out who this asshole was.

I’ll know when you find it and let you know.

“Whoever it is, they know we went to the FBI. They’re following us, or at least one of us.”

Lindsay shivered.

KEEP PUSHING and you’ll regret it.

IT WOULD BE EASIER if you told us what you wanted. I was getting sick of this bullshit.

STOP POKING your nose where it doesn’t belong and find what I want.

“FUCKING HELL.” I tossed my phone onto the coffee table and poured the little bottles of whiskey into a glass. “Why not just tell us what they want?”

“Maybe they don’t know either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. They knew Liam had something incriminating, but in five years, they haven’t found it. And of course, if we knew what it was, it would be easier to narrow down the search, but they don’t. Maybe they can’t because they don’t know what Liam had.”

That made sense. Buddy told me the hacker had been trying to wander around my files as if they weren’t sure what they were looking for.

“The question is, how are we supposed to figure out what it is if even they don’t know?”

“I don’t know.”

I picked up my phone, about ready to tell this asshole off, but stopped myself. I read the messages again, recognizing that whoever it was seemed to be keeping tabs on me or Lindsay or both. The danger of the situation suddenly became all too real. I looked over at Lindsay. She was once again sifting through the papers, doing exactly what the threatening text asked us to stop doing.

“You need to leave and stay away from me, Lindsay.”

“WHAT?” Again, she looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language.

“With my connection to Liam’s dangerous world, you could get hurt.”

“Oliver, I’m already involved, with or without you.”

My agitation grew, fueled by fear and frustration. “I’ll tell them I’ll find whatever they want, but they have to leave you out of it.”

She smirked. “I doubt they’ll listen.”

“I’ll make sure that they do.” I wasn’t sure how, but I would.

“We’re in this together.” She turned back to the papers, ignoring me.

Desperation grew. I had to make her leave. “I don’t want you here.”

She tensed and looked at me with sharp eyes. “Do you think being rude will get rid of me?”

I hoped so. “Liam visited me in a dream last night. He was angry at me for not listening to him. But you know what really pissed him off? Fucking you.”

She flinched, and her eyes flared in surprise and pain.

“He told me to stay away from you.”

“He wouldn’t be like that.” Her voice was flat.

“Our last encounter wasn’t exactly pleasant. We fought, and he stormed out, saying I didn’t know anything.”

“He was probably just stressed. He always looked up to you and loved you.”

I stared into my whiskey, wishing things could be different but knowing they couldn’t. “He accused me of having a thing for you... of jerking off to you.”

Her gasp told me I was successful at shocking her. If only she’d get pissed and leave. “Why are you doing this?”

I hated being such a jerk, but I had to keep her safe.

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re just trying to make me mad so I’ll leave. It won’t work, Oliver.”

“He wasn’t wrong, Lindsay. And it’s fucked up. I shouldn’t have fantasized about fucking my brother’s girl.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have fucked her either.” She was pissed, but not enough to leave. No, she was standing up to me.

“No, I shouldn’t have.”

She took a deep calming breath. “Did you know that Liam was jealous of us?”

That took me by surprise. “What?”

“He told me once that he wished he could be as close to you as I was.” She walked closer and sat on the couch.

Having her so near made my pulse quicken, but not in anger or fear.

“And that Halloween before Liam’s death... he and I...”

“You and he what?” Except I knew the answer.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re not going to get rid of me, Oliver.”

I was overwhelmed with emotions. Fear. Anger. Frustration. Desire. Love. “The truth is, Lindsay, that I can’t be with you and not want you.” I hadn’t wanted to confess that, but I needed to get her away from me to protect her and my sanity. “It’s fucking torture to suppress it. It was hell five years ago, and it’s worse now.”

She swallowed, her lovely blue eyes staring at me in sadness and surprise. “Maybe I should leave, then? Give you some space?”

“Yes. Please. Just go.”

She stared at me for a moment and then rose from the couch. She went to the table to get her purse and then started toward the door.

She stopped, turning to look at me, tears glistening in her eyes. The only time I’d ever felt like such a piece of shit was when I’d learned Liam died and I remembered how hard I had been on him.

“It was hard for me too.”

“What?”

“Falling for my boyfriend’s brother. It was hard for me too.”

Slowly, I rose from the couch. “What are you saying?”

She let out a breath. “God, Oliver, how can you be so dense? I’m saying that I felt the same... that I feel the same.”

There was no reason for her words to change the situation, but they did. In that moment, it was like sunshine reached my heart, filling my chest with warmth and joy.

I went to her, sliding my hand along her face, cupping her cheek.

“But there’s something you need to know—”

I shook my head, then crushed my lips to hers.

“Oliver,” she insisted.

“You’ve already said all I need to know.”

Lindsay

For all his calm and gentleness, Oliver had a way of sending my senses into a tizzy. At first, I couldn't understand why he was telling me that he'd fantasized about me. Clearly, he wanted me to be upset by that. The truth was that it was a relief. It told me he liked me too back then. And it excited me. I understood he wanted me to get away from him, and if I were smart, I would have used the excuse so I could save myself from having to reveal my secret. But I couldn't. Not when he said he couldn't be with me and not want me.

It's fucking torture to suppress it. It was hell five years ago, and it's worse now.

I hated how tortured he was, so I went to leave. But I couldn't do that either. He'd opened up to me, and I owed it to him to do the same. I wondered how he'd feel about me when he learned the truth? I started to tell him, but he shut me down. Oh, sure, I could have tried harder, but when he swept me up in his arms and carried me to his bed, all I wanted was the intense passion he'd promised. And so I kept the truth to myself.

There were no words as we undressed. The way he looked at me, his green eyes filled with desire and maybe love, stole my breath. His lips took mine passionately. Thoroughly. I was sure I'd never been kissed like that in my life. It was like this

time, he had permission to show me all of him, and he wasn't going to hold back.

He took his time, like he had an eternity. Each kiss, each touch, I felt it down to my soul. As much as I loved it, it also brought guilt and fear. He was open to me and I was still hiding.

"Lindsay," he whispered against my belly as he trailed his kisses down. He nudged my thighs open, settling between them. He let out a groan. "You're so pink and pretty."

I'd never had a man talk about my sex being pretty. But that was Oliver. He had a way of taking something that could be dirty or sordid and turning it into a thing of beauty. His tongue flicked over my clit, making me hiss as pleasure spiked.

I ran my fingers through his hair, holding him there. He lapped and sucked my pussy until my hips were gyrating, moving on their own.

"Come, Lindsay. I want to drink you up."

His words along with his tongue sliding inside my pussy walls sent me soaring.

"Oliver!" I cried out.

Instantly, he was over me, his lips hard on mine. "Thank you."

My orgasm was still humming through me but I managed to say, "I think I should be thanking you."

He stared down at me, and there was no mistaking it now. He loved me. I could see. I could feel it. "You said my name."

"I did." I wasn't sure why that was so significant to him.

His fingers brushed along my cheek. "You said Liam in my dream."

My heart ached for him and how devastating that would have been. I'd never thought of Liam in the times we'd been together. Did he think I had? "It was a dream. I'm with you, Oliver."

He kissed me again, his fingers lacing through mine as he brought them over my head. "Say my name again."

"Oliver."

He growled with approval, pressing his hips and sinking deep inside me. I arched, wanting to take him deeper. Deeper still. If we could connect soul deep, then maybe he'd forgive me for not telling him about the girls. Maybe his love would be bigger than his feelings of betrayal.

I realized that I needed to show him how I felt too. I pushed him until he was on his back. I straddled him, taking him inside me again.

"Yes, fuck yes. You're so beautiful." He levered up, his fingers sliding through my hair, gripping it and tugging until my head fell back. His lips found my neck, kissing and gently suckling.

I rocked, feeling him pulse inside me.

"More," he demanded. He lay back, his fingers gripping my hips. "Give me more. Give me everything."

I held his gaze, hoping he saw in my eyes what I saw in his. I placed my hands over his on my hips and I moved, watching his green eyes cloud with wild desire.

Soon, I was lost in sensation. I rocked and rode him, my head falling back as I reached higher and higher.

"Yes, baby... right there... oh, God... ,come on Lindsay... come." His thumb brushed over my clit as he bucked up, hitting me in the perfect spot. Stars burst. Fireworks. All the clichéd orgasm descriptions rocketed through me.

"Yes!" he yelled as he moved under me, filling me.

I collapsed over him, my pussy still squeezing, his dick still pulsing even as the rest of my body was completely boneless.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me a way that I thought meant he'd never let me go. And I didn't want him to. But he couldn't really hold me until he knew the truth. My secret would always be between us until I told him.

“Lindsay.” He murmured my name as he kissed the top of my head.

My heart raced, but now it wasn’t from the erotic exertion. It was from the fear of telling him the truth.

I lifted my head. “Oliver, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Shh.” His lips pressed against mine, silencing my confession. He rolled until he could tuck me into his side. “I know there are things we need to talk about, but right now... I just want to savor this moment. Let’s just have this moment, can we?”

I wanted the moment too. Once I told him the truth, the love I felt radiating off him could be gone. Dead forever.

“Okay.” Reluctantly, I let the words he needed to hear die on my tongue. I closed my eyes, nestling closer to him, savoring his warmth, his strength, his love.

I STARTLED AWAKE, wondering where I was. Oliver’s steady breath, his arms holding me, brought me back to the present. My mind reeled at Oliver’s confession. My heart ached to follow where this moment could bring us. I wanted to lay here with him, wrapped in his arms, forever.

The cast of the sun in his room had me wondering about the time. I glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. The numbers blinked back at me—2:47 PM. Panic fluttered in my chest. I needed to pick up the girls from school.

I turned to look at Oliver, sleeping peacefully. Seeing him like this, vulnerable and open, the guilt gnawed at me that I still hadn’t told him the truth. At the same time, a small sense of relief washed over me that I needed to leave and therefore would be spared from telling him about the girls, if only for a little while longer.

I unwound myself from his embrace, hating the loss of his touch. I tiptoed across the room, gathering my clothes and sliding them on as quietly as possible. I hesitated for a

moment, looking back at Oliver. My heart thumped hard. I wanted this man. Right now, he was mine, but who knew what would happen when he learned he was a father?

I searched for a scrap of paper and pen to write a note for Oliver, and as I wrote a lie about needing to check in at work, I hated myself even more. I folded the note, my fingers tracing the creases as if trying to smooth away the lies it contained. Placing it on the pillow next to his head, I studied his peaceful expression, memorizing every line, every curve.

I MADE it to school just as the kids were being released. I waited in the pick up line, watching for my girls and for Grayson to appear. When it was my turn, all four clattered into the car, filled with news about their day.

“Mommy!” Georgie’s voice rang out, her green eyes, so like Oliver’s, sparkling with excitement.

“Hey, baby, did you have a good day?” I got out of my SUV to make sure the kids got their belts on.

“Yep. Ms. Kilmer says it’s going to snow. Is it, Mommy?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t checked the weather in a while.

“There’s no school if it snows.” Cassie held her hands up, but I wasn’t sure if it was happiness about not having school or because I was checking her belt.

“I like school,” Olivia said. I imagined Oliver had been the same way. He didn’t go to college, but he liked learning.

Once all the kids were buckled in, I climbed back into the driver’s seat and headed home. The afternoon was normal. So normal, it was almost easy to forget that I was being harassed by someone from Liam’s past and I’d fallen for Liam’s brother all over again. After snacks and checking backpacks, we made Christmas cookies. I watched the kids as they made a mess of frosting and decorations. I remembered once trying to make cookies the Christmas I skipped out on my dad and Mira. I’d bought all the ingredients to make it at Liam and Oliver’s cramped apartment. Liam couldn’t get into it. He said it was

lame, which had hurt my feelings. Later, Oliver shared that they'd never made cookies, and I realized that my cookie making brought up how Liam and Oliver hadn't had a loving family growing up. Oliver, on the other hand, did help me decorate cookies. I could see him now with the girls, helping them, gushing over them.

"Look, Mommy." Georgie held up a tree-shaped cookie covered in red and white sprinkles.

"Gorgeous."

"What about mine?" Cassie asked, holding up a gingerbread man-shaped cookie with lopsided eyes and mouth.

"And mine," Grayson echoed, holding his star-shaped cookie.

"They're so beautiful, I don't know that we can eat them."

"Yes, we can!" Georgie bit the top off her tree.

"How about you, Olivia?"

Her brow was furrowed as she carefully put each element on her tree cookie. "It's crooked."

I looked at her decorations. "How can that be? It looks to me like everything is in the right place."

I tried to have it all cleaned up by the time Mira and my father got home. Unfortunately, the sprinkles had gotten everywhere. Luckily, they weren't the type of people to get upset about such things. They both oohed and ahed over the cookies, my father stealing one as he prepared to make dinner.

After dinner was more holiday fun, with a Christmas movie on TV and my father's famous hot chocolate with peppermint, the alcohol kind for the grownups, and a candy cane for the kids. By the time bedtime came, I was exhausted.

"Goodnight, my cutie patooties." I tucked the girls in.

"Can we stay here for always?" Georgie asked.

I found her question odd. "You don't like our house?" God, had she found out what happened?

“It’s always fun here.”

“I miss my bed,” Olivia said.

“I miss my toys,” Cassie echoed.

“You know that Grandpa and Gran-Mira are happy to have you any time, but soon... hopefully next week, we’ll be back at our house.” I kissed them each. “Good night.”

“Good night, Mommy,” they said in unison.

I slipped away from the girls’ room and made my way to the kitchen. I planned to have a glass of wine and settle in for the night.

“How’s things with your house?” my dad said as he joined me.

“Tired of us already?” I joked.

He smiled, but his eyes were serious. “Never. I’m worried about your safety. Have you figured out how someone got in without triggering your alarm?”

“Not yet, but the police are on it.” I poured myself a glass of wine. “Want one?”

He shook his head. “I promised Dunk I’d meet him at the gym at 4:30 tomorrow.”

“Morning?” That was the middle of night as far as I was concerned.

“Yes. I’m heading to bed.” He kissed me on the head. “Goodnight, Linds.”

“Goodnight, Dad.”

I took my wine to the family room with my laptop, deciding I’d catch up on what was happening at work. I didn’t want to be too far behind when I returned in a few days.

“Hey, Lindsay.”

I looked up to Mira entering the family room. “What’s up?”

She sat in a chair opposite me, tucking her legs under her. That told me she was ready for a talk.

“I just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing?”

I’m being harassed. I met with the FBI today. Oh, and I’ve had sex with Liam’s brother twice in the last few days. “I’m fine.”

“Any news on the case?”

“Not really. We did learn that Liam had been talking to the FBI.”

“We?”

“Oliver and me.”

“I didn’t realize you two were spending time together.”

I shrugged like it was no big deal. “We both cared for Liam.”

“And the FBI is involved. That sounds like this situation is getting more dangerous.”

For some reason, I felt defensive. “What are you saying? Are you implying I’m putting you in danger?” God, for all I knew, I was.

Her eyes narrowed in confusion. “Not at all.” She studied me. “Are you okay? It feels like you’ve been distracted a lot. I know this whole situation must be unsettling, but your dad and I are here for you, you know?”

I blew out a breath. The truth was, I was unsettled, but not about this issue with Liam. It was Oliver and the girls. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.” The weight of my secret pressed against my chest like an anvil.

“What’s going on?”

My gaze locked onto Mira’s concerned eyes, and I knew she was the one person who could help me shoulder this burden.

“Could I tell you something and you not tell Dad?”

She arched a brow. “I don’t know, Lindsay. He’s my husband and you’re his daughter. It’s a bit of a double-whammy there.”

I swallowed, trying to decide whether I should proceed or not. Hiding the truth was why I was in this predicament. If Oliver and I had any hope, the secret had to come out. Not just to Oliver, but to my family as well.

“I have a secret and it’s a big one.”

“Okay. I still can’t promise I shouldn’t tell your father.”

I nodded. “I know.” I set my laptop aside and picked up my wine. I wished I’d brought the bottle with me.

“I’m listening.”

I pulled in a deep breath. “It’s about the girls.”

Worried etched her expression.

“And Liam.”

She waited as I found the courage to share the truth that only I knew. “The thing is, Liam isn’t their father.”

Both her brows shot up. “What?”

“It’s Oliver.”

For a moment, she gaped. “How is that even possible?”

“After Liam’s death, I was afraid to be in my apartment alone, so Oliver stayed... in the extra room, but one night, after a nightmare... well...”

Mira rose from the chair and came to sit with me on the couch. “Does he know?”

I shook my head. “No one does. When I found out I was pregnant, he’d already moved to California. This place, all it had was painful memories for him. He was finally pursuing his dream and I didn’t want to keep him from that.”

She tried to keep her expression from looking disappointed but failed. “That wasn’t for you to decide for him.”

“I tried to call him when I learned I was having triplets, but his number was changed. I had you and Dad, so I left it at that.”

She was quiet for a moment. “So, why are you sharing this now?”

“The thing is, Mira, I’d fallen for Oliver five years ago. By the time Liam died, I cared for him and wanted him to get his life together, but I wasn’t in love with him. I loved Oliver, but he had to go. I knew that. He knew it too.”

“Has something changed?”

“It turns out that he cared for me too.”

“Ah... so now there’s a possibility of something.”

I nodded. “I think so. I mean, he lives in California and I’m here, but there’s something there... but will it still be there if I tell him about the girls?”

“If? There is no if, Lindsay. You need to tell him.”

“I know. But I’m terrified. What if he doesn’t forgive me?”

She put her arm around me. “I know what you’re going through. I went through it with your dad.”

I sniffed. “It wasn’t the same. My dad was a jerk to you. Oliver hasn’t ever been anything but wonderful to me.”

She smiled. “Still, your dad is a good man. But I was afraid, like you are. I was afraid of your finding out too. But I loved him. He loved me. We love you. Love wins in the end.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not helpful, Pollyanna.”

“If Oliver loves you, he’ll understand and forgive. But you know, even if he doesn’t, he has a right and a responsibility to the girls.”

“That’s my other fear. What if he’s so mad that he takes them away?”

She gave me a chastising stare. “If he’s so wonderful, he won’t. Especially since he knows firsthand what it’s like to be taken away from parents.”

I had to hope she was right. I sighed, my stomach twisting in knots as the reality of my situation settled in. “I just... I can’t shake the feeling that this might be unforgivable.”

“However he responds, you know that your father and I are here for you, right?”

“Thank you, Mira.”

That night, I lay in bed trying to work out how I would tell Oliver about the girls.

So... remember that night we slept together five years ago? Funny thing... you knocked me up. With triplets.

Or

Oliver... you're a father to three beautiful girls.

I shook my head. It didn't matter how I told him. The news would be shocking. He'd feel betrayed. I had to hope Mira was right and that his love for me was bigger than his anger.

Oliver

I woke up with a start and confusion about where I was. I opened my eyes, noting I was in my hotel room. In my bed. Naked.

Lindsay.

My head whipped to the space next to me as the memory of making love to her came back. Beside me, the bed was empty. I frowned. Had it been a dream?

I noted a piece of paper on the pillow and picked it up.

I HAVE SOMETHING AT WORK. Talk soon. - Lindsay

I WAS DISAPPOINTED she wasn't here but pleased that my time with her hadn't been a dream. No... touching her, making love to her, that had been real. And this time, it had been different. It wasn't overlaid with guilt or questioning whether it should be happening.

I checked my watch and noted it was late afternoon. I laughed, thinking how delightful it was to have sex and a nap in the middle of the day. My heart swelled with happiness wondering what this new phase between us would bring. Was there a chance for us? And if so, how would that work? Would she be willing to come to California or would I need to return to Boston?

Normally, I recoiled at the idea of returning to Boston permanently. All I'd known here was pain. Nearly everywhere I went in the city, I was reminded of that pain and of losing Liam. But right now, lying in my warm bed with Lindsay's scent lingering on my sheets, the idea of coming home, coming to her, filled my chest with hope.

How was she feeling? God, I hoped she was okay. Here I was, planning our future, and for all I knew, she'd lied about having to go to work. Maybe she left because she regretted being with me. Yes, she'd told me that she had felt the same about me, but that didn't mean she wanted a future with me. Her note said, *talk soon*. Was she just saying we'd connect again soon or was there a deeper meaning?

I recalled how she'd said she needed to talk to me. She'd said it twice, once before and once after sex. The first time, my need to hold her outweighed wanting to talk. The second time, my fear of what she might say had me stopping her. At that moment, I wanted to savor the feeling of love. Perhaps I should have given her the words. If she knew I loved her, would that make a difference?

I realized that I'd turned the corner when it came to Liam and Lindsay. I was ready to let go of my guilt and fully love Lindsay. But to do that, I needed to put my past behind me, which included dealing with whatever Liam had that someone wanted. I had to take control of the situation. Be proactive. I decided I needed to take care of two tasks, convincing the texter to leave Lindsay alone by telling him I'd find whatever it was Liam had and returning to California for a brief trip to search through the few of Liam's belongings I had. It seemed like a long shot, but then again, if Liam had hidden something, it could have been in the few items I'd kept of his.

I didn't want to leave now that things were moving with me and Lindsay, and yet, until this was behind us, we couldn't move forward. I had to hope that Lindsay would be safe while I was gone. I had to convince whoever was following us around that I was the key to what he wanted, not her.

I rose from bed and dressed, feeling remarkably energized and hopeful for the future. I couldn't remember the last time

I'd felt like this. Hell, maybe I never had.

Once dressed, I returned to the table with all my paperwork and where I'd left my phone. I picked it up, planning to text the person who was harassing us. I considered the possibility that the texter had already disposed of the phone he used for the last communications with us. If that was the case, it'd be much harder to negotiate with him. But I couldn't waste any time worrying about that. Hoping he hadn't tossed the phone yet, I drafted a message.

Whatever Liam had, I'll find it and give it to you. Just leave Lindsay alone.

Sending the message, I hoped it would be enough to keep Lindsay safe while I traveled back to California. The thought of leaving her behind didn't sit well, but it was necessary to ensure her safety.

Next, I researched flights to California. I found a nonstop flight leaving at seven tonight. If I hurried, I could make it. I booked the flight, and since I had clothes at home, I didn't bother packing a bag. I grabbed my coat, my wallet, and my phone and rushed out to the rideshare I ordered. On the way, I messaged Lindsay to let her know I had to return to California but that I'd be back. I wondered if I should have called her. I wanted to. I wanted to hear her voice. But that fear that her leaving while I slept meant she wasn't feeling for me like I felt for her prevented me from calling. I didn't want to hear that in her voice or have her outright tell me we couldn't be together.

The one call I did make was to Donovan.

"*Giving up?*" he asked when I told him I had to return to California.

"Not at all. I'm wondering if I have whatever this fucker is looking for. I'm going to find it. In fact, I messaged whoever it is and told him I'd hunt it down as long as he left Lindsay alone."

"*What did he say?*"

"He hasn't said anything yet."

“Chances are that phone is gone. He probably didn’t get the message.”

“That’s why I’m calling you. Can you look out for Lindsay while I’m gone?”

There was a pause. *“Yeah, sure. What’s the deal with you two?”*

What was the deal? All I knew for sure was that I loved her and was finally ready to pursue that love.

“I just want to make sure she’s okay. She’s innocent in this. It’s fucked up that Liam has brought this on her.” This was the first time I’d let my anger at Liam’s choices get to me since before his death. Even if he was trying to do good at the time of his death, he shouldn’t have involved Lindsay. Why the fuck had he been at her home that night?

“Of course. I’ve had someone watching her place. If she goes over again to clean up, I’ll make sure she’s protected. I helped her the other day hoping we’d find something.”

Envy reared at the idea of Donovan spending time with her, but I had to put that aside. He was a cop. He was from the old neighborhood so he understood Liam’s world. He was the best person to watch out for Lindsay.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

THE FLIGHT WAS UNEVENTFUL. Seven hours later, I landed in San Francisco. It was two in the morning in Boston, but only eleven Pacific time. By the time I entered my condo, it was twelve thirty, and while fatigued, I was also keyed up to find what Liam had hidden. I tossed my keys on the table by the door and made a beeline to the closet that stored Liam’s items. I’d pawed through them before and hadn’t seen anything, but I didn’t look that closely either. If Liam had taken something to bring the crew down, he’d have hidden it well. I’d need to look deeper.

“Alright, Liam, what did you leave behind?” I set the box on the coffee table and sat on the couch. I pulled out the

baseball he'd a homerun with in Little League. It didn't seem likely it would be a hiding place, but I studied it and then set it by the box. There was a worn baseball glove that I put on. Memories flooded back of watching Liam play baseball. He'd been good. So good that part of his scholarship for college was for baseball. An injury ended his team days and had us scrambling to pay for the last two years of college. We'd done it, and so it was all the more tragic that he hadn't lived to fulfill his potential.

Shaking my head of the memories, I used my fingers to search the inside the glove for anything that could be hidden there. A jump drive? In the index finger, I felt something soft, like paper. My heartbeat ramped up. Was this it? I was able to get the small folded up paper out. It seemed crazy that this old, worn paper could be what got Liam killed. What could be on it?

I unfolded it, careful not to rip it.

Inside was smeared lipstick that I guessed was a kiss from a girl. Disappointment filled me even as I smiled. Liam had carried the kiss of a girl in his glove. It was sweet. I wondered which girl it was. He hadn't been dating Lindsay yet when his ball playing days ended, so it was likely Debbie or Katie. Maybe it could be Darcy, but I doubted it. She didn't seem the type to kiss a piece of paper for Liam to carry with him for good luck.

I set the glove aside and dug back into the box. Next was a stack of comic books with yellowed and dog-eared pages. At one time, Liam had loved superheroes. That was until he grew up enough to realize that there were no benevolent saviors of the downtrodden. I flipped through each, looking for papers, notes, anything out of place, but there was nothing.

I pulled out a photo of me and Liam when he graduated from high school. I'd been the only family of his to attend. We stood with our arms around each other's shoulders, grinning like we had the world at our feet. I remembered hoping that Liam recognized the significance of his achievement. Sure, I'd graduated from high school, but I immediately got a job so I could better help Liam and his future. High school graduation

was the first step to a life beyond the pain we'd endured. That dream died when Liam did. It was probably why the photo was hidden away instead of out where I could see it.

I continued through the next few items, but nothing stood out as something the texter would want. No notes. No ledgers or papers. No jump drives. Nothing.

“What did you take, Liam? And where did you put it?” I asked the photo.

It occurred to me that Lindsay's home had been searched, but mine hadn't. Had whoever it was come here but wasn't able to get in? It wasn't that easy to access the building, much less my condo. Or had the person known that it wouldn't be here? But if that was the case, why text me? Unless Liam had sent whatever it was to me, which would explain the attempts to get into my electronic devices.

Exhaustion finally caught up to me and I headed to bed. Despite being tired, I lay for a long time, unable to sleep. I was disappointed that I'd made this trip for nothing. By being gone, was I going to stop the momentum she and I had been building? Should we even be building it? When I'd left this afternoon, I'd been so certain that I could put Liam in the past and move forward. But as I lay in bed realizing that I was no closer to solving this issue with Liam, the dream I'd had the other night came back to me. He'd warned me to stay away from Lindsay. Was it just my guilt manifesting as a haunting vision, or was there some truth to it? Did he really want me to keep my distance?

What if Liam had succeeded in his plan? Would Lindsay have forgiven him? Would she have taken him back? She suggested that was a possibility when she hinted that she and Liam hooked up on Halloween before he died. Perhaps those feelings she said she felt for me were only because I'd been there for her.

“Jesus fuck.” I scraped my hands over my face, frustrated at the way my mind was fighting with itself. If I wanted a future with Lindsay, I'd need to confront and resolve these feelings. To give our relationship a fighting chance, I'd have to

let go of Liam and his memory, no matter how painful that might be. But how?

Finally, sleep came and it was a relief. Lindsay appeared, looking gorgeous and sexy with her long blonde hair hanging down her back, her face turned upward as she rode me to ecstasy. I watched her, thinking she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“You're a hypocrite.”

Liam's voice blasted through my dream. Lindsay evaporated. My heart shattered.

“What?”

He stood at the end of my bed. “You blame me for all this. For bringing danger. Yet look at you. Three thousand miles away, safe in your fancy condo.”

“I'm trying to find what you had so she can be safe.”

He scoffed. “I was killed in her apartment, not reminiscing over my baseball trophies.”

Oh, fuck. “What did you hide? Where did you hide it?” Even in my dreaming state, I knew it wasn't him, but I asked anyway.

“What do you care? I'm gone and now you can have her. That's what you wanted.”

“No.” I reached out to him. “Not for your life, I didn't.”

He shrugged and pain seared my chest. Had he died thinking this? Thinking I'd abandoned him? Of course, he had. My last words to him were in anger.

“I would trade places if I could,” I said.

“I know.” His words gave me some relief. He seemed to know that I loved him, even as he was pissed at me.

His image started to fade.

“Liam. You have to help me.”

“I was at Lindsay's when I was killed.”

I bolted awake. Liam had been killed in Lindsay's home after he had moved out. I knew this, but for some reason, perhaps because she hadn't found anything, I didn't realize the significance. Whatever Liam had, he'd have given it to her. She didn't know she had it. Maybe she didn't have it anymore. But whoever killed Liam, whoever was texting us, knew Liam had been there. And because of that, Lindsay was in graver danger than I'd considered. God, what an idiot.

I jumped out of bed, noting that it was just after five thirty in the morning. I dressed in the clothes I wore yesterday and grabbed my phone to book a flight back to Boston. I had to return to get to Lindsay.

Panic grew when I saw that Boston was under siege by a snowstorm. There were no flights available until further notice. I called a charter company, hoping I'd find one willing to risk the flight, but they too said there was nothing they could do.

I tossed my phone on the bed and paced as dread consumed me. What the fuck had I been thinking to leave her? I needed to get back to Boston. I needed to go through Lindsay's things with a fine-toothed comb. But what if whatever it was wasn't there? She'd moved since then. It was likely lost in a dump. How could we convince this guy that it was gone? It wasn't a threat to him.

The only thing I could think to do was talk to Wally. Surely, Liam had implicated him in something.

My phone beeped with a message.

Did you find it?

Finally, a response.

Not yet, but I will if it's out there to find.

My hands trembled as I waited for another response.

Hope for Lindsay's sake that you find it.

Lindsay

“**M**ommy, Mommy, Mommy!”

I was startled awake as Georgie called my name. I barely had my eyes open before I was tackled by not one, but three little girls.

“It snowed!” Georgie squealed.

Not an emergency. Olivia cuddled up close to me, while Georgie and Cassie sat on their knees.

“Can we go out and play in it?” Cassie asked, clasping her hands together over her heart as if in prayer.

“Oh... I don't know.”

“Why?” Georgie whined.

“Well, for one, you're in your pajamas. You don't even have shoes on.”

“We'll get dressed.” Georgie was scrambling off the bed, with Cassie following her.

“You need a warm breakfast too.”

“Okay,” they called as they headed out the door.

“What about you, sweetie? Do you want to go in the snow?”

Olivia shrugged. “I want to play on the computer.”

My heart filled. She was so like her namesake, Oliver. I remembered when I'd visit Liam and Oliver was always tapping away on his laptop. I used to tease him that he'd never fall in love if his attention was always on the screen. I guess I'd been wrong, as I'd ended up falling for him. Of course, that happened as he and I grew closer as we tried to help Liam.

"You get dressed and have breakfast. Then we'll see about some computer time, okay?"

"Okay." Olivia slid out of bed and trotted out of my bedroom.

For a moment I lay in bed, not wanting to get out from under the warm covers. Delaying starting the day, I reached for my phone, wondering if there was more news from Oliver. I'd been surprised last night to get his text saying he was heading back to California. For a moment, I was hurt that he'd just disappear like that. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't some relief as well. Maybe he'd stay there, and I wouldn't have to tell him about the girls. My conscience chastised me for that. I had to tell him no matter what. That was clear now. As it was, my stomach was twisted with guilt at not telling him already.

Checking my phone, there was no message from Oliver. With a sigh, I left the warm comfort of the bed and started my day.

After getting dressed, I headed to the kitchen where my father was already making breakfast. Miranda and Grayson were watching the snow fall from the window.

"Grandpa, it snowed!" Georgie bellowed as she hurried to my father.

"Did it?" He looked out the window and I laughed. I loved how playful he was to the girls. I further justified my decision not to tell Oliver about the girls because my dad was a father-figure to them. But now, I realized how much I was denying the girls and Oliver.

"Well, look at that. I'll get the shovels and you can shovel us out."

"I can't shovel," Georgie exclaimed.

“We’re too little, Grandpa,” Cassie added.

“I can try,” Olivia said, her face serious as if she didn’t realize my father was teasing her.

“How about breakfast instead? I’ve got waffles.”

“Yay!” the girls said in unison.

Once we were fed and bundled up, we stepped outside into a genuine winter wonderland. To be honest, having grown up in Boston, snow didn’t hold the appeal that it did for people who didn’t experience it every winter. Sure, it was pretty, but it was also cold, wet, and made getting anywhere a challenge. Luckily, I had nowhere to go. School was closed. I was still off from work. All of us, me and the girls, my dad, Mira, and Grayson built a family of snowmen complete with scarves, hats, and carrot noses. We also made snow angels and finished with a snowball fight.

Afterward, we headed inside, shedding our wet clothes and putting on sweats. My dad made a fire in the fireplace, and Mira made hot chocolate. We spent the rest of the afternoon doing Christmas crafts, except Olivia, who I finally allowed to play on the computer.

Later that night, Dad read Christmas stories to all the kids. In a feat of wonder, he managed to carry all four kids, each dangling off him in precarious ways, to their rooms. I pictured Oliver trying to do the same. Would the girls be enthralled with him like they were with my father? Would Oliver be as loving and devoted to the girls?

“How did he do that?” I marveled.

“He still works out.” Mira waggled her brows.

“Stop!” I held up my hand. “You know I love that you and my dad are happy together, but I don’t want to know how you like my dad’s physique. TMI, Mira. TMI.”

She laughed. “Sorry. I can’t help myself sometimes.”

Once the kids were in bed, I hid out in my room, wrapping Christmas presents. It was only ten days until the big event

and I had tons to wrap. I'd just finished taping a bow to a present when my phone rang.

I picked up my phone seeing it was Oliver. My heart did a little flutter knowing he was calling.

“Hey. How’s your trip?”

“Long and fruitless.” He sighed. “I searched everywhere, but there was nothing unusual among Liam’s things.”

My heart went out to him as I pictured Oliver rifling through his brother’s possessions, looking for clues. It couldn’t have been easy to deal with all the emotions and at the end, have it be for nothing.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Have you heard from whoever has been texting us?”

“No.” Just to be sure, I checked my texts. “Why? Did he text you?”

“Good. He shouldn’t bother you anymore.”

“Why? What happened?” I worried that Oliver had done something reckless.

“Nothing. Everything is okay. Listen, I wanted to come home but—”

“It’s been snowing.”

“Right. But I’m told flights will resume by tomorrow.”

“It’s finally stopped snowing here, so as long as the runways are clear, you should be able to get home... uh... back to Boston.” This wasn’t his home. Not anymore. Remembering that had me wavering on telling him about the girls. How would custody and visitation work with him in California?

“How was your day?”

“You know how it goes... a snow day. There were snowmen, snow angels, and snowballs, followed by hot chocolate while our fingers and toes thawed.” I cleared off the

wrapping materials from my bed and then climbed under the sheets, settling in to talk to Oliver.

“Sounds fun.”

I wondered if Oliver and Liam had snow days like this. I always got the impression that their foster parents hadn't been very involved in their lives. But surely, they'd been able to play in the snow.

“Liam and I, along with a couple of our foster siblings, tried to make an igloo.”

“How'd it go?”

“Not too good.” He laughed and it sounded like a happy memory. The line was quiet for several minutes. It was almost awkward. “I can't stop thinking about you.”

A sweetness filled my heart. “Oh? What are you thinking about?”

“Ah... well, admittedly, some of it is X-rated.”

My girly parts flared to life. “Goodness.”

“Is that a good goodness or an Oliver is a pervert goodness?”

“I'm just thinking that it might be uncomfortable for you.”

“Extremely.”

Electricity crackled around me as our conversation took an erotic turn. “Did you really used to fantasize about me?”

He was silent for a moment, and I worried I'd ruined the moment. After all, he'd felt shame at having fantasized about me while I was with his brother.

“Yes. I did. What do you think about that? Do you think it was wrong?”

“No. To be honest, I'm intrigued and flattered. Will you tell me what you fantasized about?”

He let out a groan. “Are you sure you want to know?”

Oh, boy, do I ever. My body was humming with excitement wondering what he imagined about me that got him off. “I'm

sure, but if you're uncomfortable, I understand."

There was silence, and I suspected he was trying to decide whether he wanted to reveal so much to me. Considering the secret I was keeping, it was unfair of me to ask him to give over so much of himself.

I was about to let him off the hook when he said, "It was usually you on your knees giving me a blow job."

Immediately, I pictured it. I was on my knees, that long, thick dick of his jutting out, begging to be licked and sucked.

"Were you standing or sitting?" I asked.

"A little of both. Sometimes in the shower."

I was there, the hot water sluicing down my skin as I took him in hand, stroking him.

"Are you hard?"

He let out a frustrated growl. "You know I am."

"You should take care of it." Inside, I was wondering where this sexual bravado was coming from. Not that I never gave a man a blow job or had phone sex. I'd never initiated it, though.

"Are you wet?"

Nervous embarrassment skittered over my skin. "Yes."

"You should take care of it."

"I will if you will," I challenged.

"Talk dirty to me, Lindsay."

"We're in the shower and I'm on my knees. My tongue is licking around the rim."

"Oh, fuck yeah..." The sexual excitement in his voice made me wish this were a video call.

"I'm sucking the tip and then my lips are sliding down your dick. I'm taking you deeper, deeper... and sucking hard."

He groaned. "Fuck... suck it, Lindsay."

"Mmm... your dick is so good, Oliver."

“More... more. Fuck, I’m almost there.”

“Your dick is hitting the back of my throat. My fingers are stroking under your balls, forward and back... forward and back.”

“Fuck!” He let out a grunt, and for a moment, the line was silent. “Yes, yes...” He groaned, mixed with harsh breathing.

My fingers immediately went under my panties, and I rubbed my clit as I imagined him coming, wishing I were there to lick it up. “Mmm... there’s so much. You taste so good.”

He growled again. “I’m coming so hard.”

“I’m drinking it all.”

Moments later, his breathing steadied. “I want to hear you come, Lindsay.”

I bit my lip, embarrassed and excited and hoping no one heard me. “What are you doing to me?”

“Whatever you want, baby. Do you want me to suck your clit?”

My hips rose off the bed. “Yes.”

“My tongue is licking it, flicking at it. God, you taste so good.”

My fingers rubbed furiously over my hard nub. “I’m almost there.”

“You’re straddling my face, fucking my face...”

Immediately, my orgasm slammed into me. The image of me riding his face set me off. “Oliver! Oh, God.”

“Are you coming?”

“Yes... oh...” My entire body shuddered as pleasure reached every cell.

For a long moment, the line was quiet. I nearly thought the call had been dropped.

“I’ll be home soon,” he said in a low voice.

He referred to Boston as home. Hope and love and joy filled me.

“I’ll be waiting.”

THE MORNING SUN streamed through the blinds, stirring me from dreams of Oliver. I stretched slowly, recalling our late-night conversation with a smile. I could see something growing between us. It made me happy, even as I worried I’d lose it all because of my deception. I had to hope that Mira was right and that if Oliver cared for me, he’d understand and forgive me.

After a quick shower, I gathered up the girls and we headed to the kitchen. This time, Mira was serving breakfast.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“He headed to the gym to work out with Duncan. I think Duncan needs a pep talk. Impending fatherhood is freaking him out a bit.”

“He’s going to be awesome.” I had no doubt about Duncan’s ability to love a child.

“Listen, I’d like to have me and the girls back home by tomorrow since I have to return to work on Monday. Can you watch them for me? I know I’ve been asking a lot—”

“Of course I’ll watch them. But your dad is worried about you. Is it safe?”

“Yes. I’ll have the alarm checked. Besides, I think they’ve given up on my having whatever Liam had.” I remembered that Oliver asked if I got a text. While he didn’t say it, I got the feeling he had and I hadn’t, which meant they were leaving me alone, right?

“Just be safe. The girls will be fine here with me and Grayson.”

“Thank you. I owe you.”

ONCE THE GIRLS WERE SETTLED, I drove over to my house. The snow was piled up, but the roads were passable. I hoped that meant Oliver would be able to make it home.

The living room was just as I'd left it when Flynn and I were here last. My furniture was back in place, and most of the mess was either put back or tossed away. But there were still more rooms to put back right. I headed to the kitchen, sighing at the amount of work still left to do there. I'd gotten all the broken items swept up and thrown away, but there was still more to put away.

My phone beeped with a notification. I tensed, wondering if the texter wasn't done with me after all. I saw Oliver's name and relaxed.

At the airport. Boarding a 6 a.m. flight. See you this afternoon.

I grinned with butterflies in my stomach. It was nearly nine in the morning here. The flight had to be five or six hours, which would put him here around two or three in the afternoon.

Have a safe flight.

Pocketing my phone, I went back to work. Hours passed in scrubbing and sorting. By early afternoon, the place looked habitable again. It was nearly one in the afternoon when I'd finally made it to my room. I wanted all the rooms the girls would see the most to look like nothing had happened, so I did my room last since they saw it the least.

As I cleaned up my room, I thought about Oliver's failed mission to find something of Liam's at his home. That meant the threat, whatever it was, was still out there. Had I missed something when going through my stuff? Surely, I would have known if Liam had hidden something with me. Or that if he had hidden something, it was gone, tossed when I moved out of the apartment we'd shared. After all, I'd been through my home several times since the break-in. I hadn't found one thing of Liam's that I still had.

I sank onto the edge of my bed, exhausted and concerned that maybe this home wasn't safe to bring the girls to. I scanned my room, wondering what, if anything, I was missing. How could I get the threat off me and the girls?

My gaze caught the piece of art Mira and my father had bought me years ago. I remembered how the person who came into my home didn't appear to touch anything hanging on the wall, but this piece of art had been crooked. Had they looked there or just accidentally bumped it on their way to tossing my bed?

I rose and took the art piece off the wall. I set it on the edge of my bed, investigating the back. In examining the brown paper covering the back, I noted that one section was taped. My heart raced even as I told myself I was being ridiculous. Still. Had Liam hid something in my art?

The writing is on the wall. Agent Marsden's reporting of what Liam had told her came back to me.

Holding my breath, I removed the tape and carefully lifted the paper. Underneath was a manilla envelope. My hands shook as I opened it. The information didn't make sense. Names. Numbers grouped in threes. Dollar amounts. But then it came to me. The numbers were social security numbers. This had to be a list of either foster kids and their social security numbers or a list of buyers of the numbers and the price.

I found it. And with its discovery, my fear level rose. Someone killed Liam for this. I scanned my room as if the killer would be waiting there. My thoughts were scrambled as I tried to figure out what to do. Should I take it with me? No. I didn't want this anywhere near my family. Should I call Flynn? Or maybe I should call Agent Marsden.

My phone beeped and I jumped at the sound. My heart raced as I nearly came out of my skin. Did the person know I'd found it?

I picked up the phone and saw Oliver's name.

Just landed. Heading back to hotel.

I needed to see Oliver. He was a part of this and should be involved in deciding what to do with the materials.

Can I meet you there? I rushed from my room, stuffing the envelope into my purse.

You have to ask? I'm hoping for a repeat of last night but in person.

I smiled, but it was difficult to be excited about his text since I was carrying the information that had led to Liam's death.

I locked up my house and hurried to my car, locking the door once I was in.

On my way. I have a gift for you. Perhaps I watched too much spy TV, but I was afraid to tell him what I found over text.

Will you give me a hint?

I sat in my car wondering if I should play coy or simply tell him. Finally, I texted back, *The writing was on the wall.*

Oliver

Holy hell. I read the text again.

The writing was on the wall.

At first, I was confused. I thought we were texting sexual innuendo. After last night, when I'd come all over my stomach and chest as Lindsay talked dirty to me on the phone, I was ready to have the real deal. So what had the writing on the wall meant? Did she want me to fuck her against the wall?

And then it came to me. The day we'd met with Agent Marsden, Lindsay had said the agent reported Liam telling her the writing was on the wall. That had to mean Lindsay found what Liam had hidden. And now I was scared shitless for her. It was as if time stopped as I waited for her to arrive.

Finally, a knock came on the hotel door where I'd been standing and waiting from the minute I understood her text. I yanked it open. She was like a vision, her cheeks still pink from the cold outside. Her hair was tied back, but loose strands were curling around her face.

I reached out, tugging her inside my room, looking down the hall to make sure she hadn't been followed.

"Oh, my God, Oliver." She shook as she fumbled with her purse.

Emotion swept through me. I pulled her to me, holding her tight. My hands cupped her face and I kissed her, firmly, thoroughly. All of a sudden, Liam and his hidden evidence

weren't important. Only Lindsay was important. I knew it the minute I landed in Boston today and instead of dreading being here, I felt like I'd returned home.

I lifted my head and stared down into her lovely blue eyes. "You're okay?"

She nodded. "I think so. I just... when I think about what happened to Liam because of this—"

Admittedly, I didn't like her mentioning Liam. From her lips, he was the man she'd loved. The man she'd fought to help. Even knowing that she said it was over between them, I couldn't be sure this wasn't reigniting her love now that she understood he wasn't simply throwing his life away.

I stared at her.

"What?" she asked as she looked up at me.

"I don't want Liam to be between us anymore."

She cocked her head to the side. "Does that mean you don't want what he hid?"

I shook my head. "It means I want to put the past behind us. Deal with this situation and then move on."

She stepped back and my heart stuttered in my chest. Were the words coming out wrong?

"You mean go back to California." She gave her head a quick shake and smiled. "Yes, of course. That's your home."

I put my hands on her arms and pulled her toward me. "No. I'm not saying this right. I'm saying that I want you, but I need for all this to be behind us. For Liam not to be between us."

Her eyes softened. "The only one putting Liam between us is you, Oliver."

My heart burst open. God, I wanted this woman. I wanted her now and forever. And even if I was the one grappling with Liam, there still was the issue of whatever she found.

"We need to deal with this. What did you find?"

She pulled an envelope from her purse. I took it, pulling out the papers and reading them. “This is what he wanted to give to Agent Marsden. Proof that foster kids’ social security numbers were being sold.”

“I couldn’t decide if those were kids’ names and their numbers, or the buyers’.”

I scanned the pages. “My sense is that it’s the kids’.” What I couldn’t see was anything tying this to Wally or anyone else.

“Does that mean it’s no good? Liam took it and was killed for nothing?”

The idea of that burned in my gut. “I don’t know. Maybe Agent Marsden can find more from this than I can.”

“So you think we should give it to her? Not to Flynn or Riker? Or to whoever is texting us?”

I studied her, wondering the right course of action. “If we give this to the person texting us, all these kids could be scammed. I don’t know about you, but I can’t do that. These kids are going to have a hard enough time when they leave foster care at eighteen. They don’t need fucked up credit to make it impossible for them to survive.”

She nodded, and I was glad to see that she was okay with not handing the papers over. Giving them the person harassing us would make life easier for us, but she didn’t want that. Not at the expense of these kids’ futures. If I hadn’t loved her already, I would have fallen for her then and there.

“So, do we give it to Riker? Maybe he can use it to find out who killed Liam.”

There was a part of me that wanted to do just that. I wanted someone to pay for taking my brother. But another part of me, the part that felt guilty for failing Liam, wanted to make a different choice. “I think we should give it to Agent Marsden.”

“You want to finish what Liam started?”

I nodded. “I owe that to him. Plus, if she can use it to stop the scam, maybe it will lead to his killer.”

“Okay. Let’s give it to Agent Marsden.” She still looked a little keyed up.

“I need a drink. How about you?”

She nodded. “I’m a little shaky.”

“Come sit. I’ll get us a drink.” I led her to the couch and then went to the mini-bar. I grabbed several bottles of whatever was there and two glasses, returning to the couch.

“I’ve got vodka, bourbon, tequila... more vodka.”

“I want the bourbon.”

I opened the little bottle and poured it into a glass. I poured vodka in mine.

I held my glass up, wanting to make a toast, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

She clicked her glass against mine. “Cheers to beers and to Liam. God... how brave he was. I wonder if he was afraid.”

I wasn’t a stranger to guilt, but in this moment, it was different from the usual feeling like I’d betrayed and failed my brother. I’d become so focused on wanting Lindsay, I hadn’t considered what Liam was going through in his last days. I’d thought his erratic and emotional behavior was related to his anger at me for pushing him to leave the crew. But now I had to consider it was fear. He’d put his life on the line, and I had no idea.

“Why didn’t he tell me?” I looked into my vodka, shame filling me.

“I don’t know.”

I felt completely gutted. He didn’t trust me? He didn’t think I’d help him?

The crook of her finger hooked under my chin. “His not telling you isn’t a reflection on you.”

“Isn’t it? If he trusted me, knew that I had his back, he’d have told me.”

“He knew you had his back. Of course, he did. You sacrificed everything for him. If I were to guess, I think he knew he’d disappointed you and he wanted to make it right, prove to you that he could live his potential like you wanted him to.”

“Fucking hell...” I downed my drink.

“What?”

“I shouldn’t have ever been disappointed. What sort of fucked up person am I that—”

“Oliver. Liam made choices that got him in trouble. Nothing you did or didn’t do led to this. He knew that. I know he did. You can’t keep punishing yourself over this. You said you want to move on. You won’t if you don’t forgive Liam and yourself.”

She was right. I brushed my fingers over her cheek. “I want to move on. I want to move on with you. Is that even a possibility?”

Her blue eyes blinked and then looked down. My heart dropped, thinking her answer was no.

“It is, but there are things we need to talk about.”

All I heard was, “It is.” That was all that was important to me. I pulled her to me, kissing her.

“Oliver—”

“We don’t need to talk now.”

“It’s important—”

“I know we can’t move on with all this between us right now, but right now, can’t we just be together?” I kissed her again, willing her to let go of the need to talk. “I missed you,” I murmured against her cheek. I took her glass, setting it on the table as I pushed her back on the couch.

“Is this just sex?”

Her words stopped me short. “What? No.” I realized that maybe she wanted to talk to hear me say the words I hadn’t yet

been brave enough to tell her. “Lindsay, I love you. God, I’ve loved you so long.”

Her lips parted on a gasp. Was her surprise an indication of something good or bad?

“Oliver, I—” A ringtone about BFFs interrupted her. She blew out a breath and pushed me away as she reached for her purse. “I’m sorry. That’s Mira. I need to get it.” Her eyes were on me as she poked her phone and brought it to her ear. “Hello.”

She stood, turning away as Mira spoke.

I sucked in a breath, wondering if I’d fucked everything up. Should I backtrack and take back what I said?

“I’m on my way.” She slipped her phone into her purse. “I’ve got to go.”

“Is everything alright?” I stood to walk her to the door. Her leaving was going to save me from trying to figure out how to salvage what I’d fucked up. “Is your dad okay?”

She looked at me in surprise and then nodded. “Flu, probably. But she wants me to pick up some things.”

I nodded. She and her father were close. “I’ll call Agent Marsden.”

“Okay.” She opened the door. “I’m sorry I have to go like this.”

The tightness in my chest loosened at her words because I felt she meant it. “I understand.”

She lifted on her toes and kissed me. “We’ll talk later.”

It occurred to me that this wasn’t the first time she’d wanted to talk. Perhaps it was time I let her. What was I afraid she’d say, anyway? “Next time we see each other. I promise.”

When she left, I finished her drink and poured another vodka. Then I pulled out my phone and called Agent Marsden. She was cautiously excited about what Lindsay had found.

“I want to finish what Liam started and put whoever killed him in jail. Can you do that?” I asked her. “I don’t want to

give you this if you can't."

"I'll do what I can, Oliver."

"It's possible someone is watching me and Lindsay. How can I get this to you?"

"I can't meet you until Monday. Is there a place you can put the documents for safekeeping?"

I was annoyed by her answer. This was life and death. Shouldn't she be able to get these documents now? Or send someone?

"I'm not comfortable keeping them."

"This isn't an official investigation right now. I'm not in a position to send someone, and I'm out of town."

"How does it become official?"

"I hope your documents will be what I need. Is there a safe at the hotel?"

I knew I had one in my room, but I considered that the hotel safe might be a better spot. "Yes. I'll store them until Monday."

"Good. I'll be in touch on Monday to get the documents."

After the call, I gathered the envelope to take it to the hotel safe. But then I got to thinking that I was about to hand over something someone had been willing to kill for. Something that the person texting us was growing more threatening about getting. Maybe I should have another copy just in case.

I pulled out my new phone and ran a scan to make sure it was clean of bugs or malware, and then I took a picture of each page, encrypting them as I saved them.

When I finished, I felt unsettled. When Lindsay brought the envelope, I thought finally, this issue would be resolved and I could move on. I could resolve my guilt around Liam and give myself to Lindsay. But now I realized Lindsay and I were in a most dangerous and vulnerable state. If this went sideways and Lindsay got hurt, I didn't know how I'd be able to live with myself.

Lindsay

I left Oliver's hotel room, rushing to the elevator and not breathing until the door closed and I was heading down to the lobby. Relief washed over me as I realized I didn't have to tell Oliver about the girls tonight. But guilt quickly followed. He deserved to know the truth. Not only had I not told him, but I'd lied to him about why I had to leave. My father wasn't ill. Georgie was.

I hurried to Mira and my father's house, doing my best to change my focus from my guilt at not telling Oliver about the girls to mother mode.

When I entered, Mira met me. "Georgie is resting in her bed."

"Does she have a temperature?" I asked as I shed my coat and hung it in the closet.

"Just a small one. I gave her some pain reliever and she's been sleeping. The rest of the bunch are in the family room. They don't show any signs of sickness, but you know how these things are."

I nodded. Chances were, the other kids would come down with whatever Georgie had. Hopefully, I wouldn't.

"Thanks, Mira." I headed to the girls' room. Georgie lay in bed sound asleep. My little busybody was completely quiet and relaxed. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I brushed her hair away from her forehead.

“Mommy?” Georgie mumbled, her blue eyes fluttering open.

“Hey, sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“I threw up.”

“I’m sorry. How do you feel now?”

She shrugged and nestled deeper into her pillow. “When can we go home?”

“I’m hoping it will be tomorrow. Do you miss your bed?”

She nodded. “And my room and my toys.”

“You rest, and tomorrow, hopefully, you’ll be back in your own room.”

“Kay.” Georgie’s eyes closed again, and her breathing evened out as she drifted back to sleep. As I watched her, I realized I too wanted our lives to return to normal. We’d be back in our own home soon, but what would happen between Oliver and me? Would he understand when I finally told him the truth about the girls?

I kissed Georgie’s forehead and then left her to sleep. I checked on Cassie and Olivia who were watching a Christmas movie in the family room.

“Georgie threw up,” Cassie announced when I entered the room.

“So I heard. How do you all feel?”

“Good.” Cassie turned her attention back to the movie.

“How about you, Olivia?”

She held up her index finger. I moved toward her, studying her finger. “Did you hurt it?”

She nodded. “Cassie closed it in a drawer.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Cassie frowned at Olivia as if she was tired of having to discuss the situation.

I kissed Olivia’s finger. “I think it will be okay. I’m going to help Mira in the kitchen, okay?”

The kids turned their attention back to the movie, which I took to be their approval.

The aroma of Mira's homemade lasagna filled the kitchen.

"Smells delicious."

"Thank you. Duncan is coming by for dinner tonight." Mira sliced a loaf of bread she was preparing to slather with butter and garlic.

"Oh, good. I want to hear more about his becoming a foster parent." I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"I think he's going to be terrific."

"Me too. Do you need help with anything?"

"Nope. Brett has already made a salad."

"Where is Dad?"

"He's napping."

I snickered. "Old man."

"Yeah, well, chasing after four four-year-olds is no easy feat."

I was used to running after three of them, so perhaps I'd grown accustomed to the fatigue. I imagined if Oliver were here, would he help corral the girls? Get them ready for school?

"So, how are things at the house?" Mira's question brought the seriousness of my situation into focus again. But I didn't want to worry Mira or my father by disclosing what I'd found. It was in Oliver's hands now, anyway.

"It's nearly there. I plan to move us back home tomorrow."

Mira turned from her bread prep to look at me. "There's no hurry."

"I know, and I appreciate that, but I need to get my and the girls' lives back to normal. I have to return to work on Monday, and it would just be easier to get into our routine again."

"If you're sure."

“I am.”

“So this is where the magic happens.” Duncan strode into the kitchen with a wide grin on his face, cradling a bottle of wine.

“Unkadunk.” I slid off the stool I’d been sitting on to give him a hug.

“Let me get this bread in and I’ll go wake Brett.”

Duncan arched a brow. “Wake him? The man is getting old.”

I laughed. “I said the same thing.”

“Yes, well, you’ll see, Duncan, when your foster son moves in with you,” Mira said on her way out of the kitchen.

“That is exciting.”

Duncan radiated with happiness. I hadn’t realized how much he missed not having a family. “I can’t believe it’s happening. I’m a nervous wreck.”

“You’re going to be great.”

My dad joined us, and after razzing him about his nap, I had Cassie and Olivia help me set the table. I checked on Georgia again, finding her still sleeping, then I joined the others for dinner.

“So, are you ready to become a dad?” my father asked as he slid his bread through the lasagna.

“I think so. I’m already planning our first Christmas together. We’ll have a big tree, stockings by the fireplace... I want it to be perfect for him.”

“Sounds magical.” I was genuinely excited for him. “You’re going to be an amazing father.”

“I hope so. You know, I don’t think he has very much.”

“Does he have toys?” Cassie asked, her mouth covered in red sauce.

“I don’t think so. Not too many.”

“I can share,” Olivia said.

Duncan gave her a sweet smile. “You’re very kind. I hope you all—you too, Grayson—will be friends with Aiden.”

“Does he like cars?” Grayson asked.

“I don’t know.” Duncan let out a giddy, nervous laugh. “I’ll be finding out soon.”

“Is the adoption set?” my father asked.

Duncan let out a frustrated breath. “Things are moving, but bureaucracy is a bitch... excuse my language, kids.”

“But that’s why he’s coming to live with you, right?” I remembered Liam telling me all the times he and Oliver had to move as foster kids for reasons they never understood. I didn’t want Duncan to grow attached to Aiden and then have to lose him.

“That’s the purpose, yes. But at first, it’s just a foster placement.”

Thinking about Liam reminded me of what he’d been doing at the time he was killed. While his attempt to stop the crew from stealing foster children’s social security numbers was five years ago, that didn’t mean it wasn’t still going on. It was clear that Agent Marsden hadn’t done anything about it.

“You know, Duncan, you should check Aiden’s credit score.”

Everyone looked at me like I’d started speaking in tongues.

“He’s a kid. He doesn’t have credit,” Duncan said.

“I know, but...” I didn’t want to reveal all that Oliver and I had learned, but I wanted to keep Aiden safe from having his future ruined by these unscrupulous people. “Liam’s social security number was stolen and used when he was a foster kid. It ruined his credit, and it took him and Oliver a long time to fix it.”

“Surely, Social Services looks after that for the children,” Mira said.

I shook my head. “Not as a matter of course.”

“Really?” My father’s expression was incredulous.

“Unfortunately, yes. There aren’t many safeguards in place, so it might be a good idea to keep an eye on Aiden’s information.”

“Huh. That’s not something they taught during my foster care classes. Thanks, Lindsay. I’ll check into that.”

I offered a small, reassuring smile.

The conversation turned to the holidays and Duncan preparing for the influx of gym members who always came at the beginning of the New Year. My mind stayed on Aiden and all the other kids that Liam had been trying to protect. I knew it was a risk for Oliver and me to hand over the papers I found to the FBI instead of giving them to the person who’d been texting us. I had to hope that Agent Marsden would be able to put a stop to it all and that we’d all be safe.

AFTER DINNER, I checked on Georgie again. The coolness of Georgie’s forehead against my lips reassured me that her fever had subsided. Tucking the blankets around her, I brushed a lock of hair away from her face.

After a game and a book with Cassie and Olivia, I got them ready for bed too. I gave them goodnight kisses and then stepped out of the room, ready to relax and prepare for tomorrow. I had a lot to do if we were going to return to the house.

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke early, heading to the kitchen to find my dad and Mira already in the kitchen making breakfast. All the kids, including Georgie, were at the table.

“How is it that I’m always the last one up?” I gave each of my girls a kiss on the head and then made a beeline for the coffee.

“You always were a sleepyhead,” my dad teased.

Mira put breakfast on the table and the kids dug in.

“Miranda says you plan to move home today,” my father said to me.

“Yes. I need to go over and finish cleaning up a few things first.”

He looked at me with fatherly concern. “Are you sure it’s safe? What’s going on with the case?”

I didn’t really know except that if the culprit had been found, Flynn would have let me know. But with the papers Liam hid found and the FBI dealing with it, all should be fine, right?

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“Why don’t I go with Lindsay to the house and help her get it ready, and you can stay with the kids?” Mira said, joining us.

Mira was a great friend, but I imagined she was ready to have me and the girls out of her hair.

My father nodded. “I could take them to see Santa.”

“You’re braver than me,” Mira quipped. “Between the snow and it being so close to Christmas, it’s going to be a mess.”

“It’s not like it’s Christmas Eve,” he said. “Besides, I am brave.”

I laughed.

Once I got the girls ready, they left with my father and Grayson while Mira and I drove over to my house. Dad said he’d bring the girls home later that day. I didn’t have much time to make sure everything was close to the same as when the girls last left it.

“It doesn’t look bad,” Mira said as she walked through my living area. “I was expecting something worse.”

“You should have been here a few days ago.”

“Should we get started?” Mira asked.

“I left all the cleaning equipment in the kitchen.”

We started the laborious tasks of sweeping, vacuuming, and tidying. I was just wiping down the countertop in the kitchen when there was a knock on the door.

I opened it to find Flynn.

“Hey there, Lindsay.”

“Flynn, hi. Do you have news?” Wouldn’t it be a stroke of luck that not only had I found Liam’s papers, but also, Flynn had found the person who’d broken in?

“No, sorry. Thought I’d check on you.”

I wondered how he knew I was here. Then I remembered he said he’d have police watching my place.

I held the door open so he could enter. “All is well. I plan to move me and the girls back in today.”

“I take it you still haven’t found anything?”

I hesitated, not wanting Mira to overhear our conversation. “Nothing. But thanks for checking.”

“Of course. Just doing my job.” He glanced around the room, then locked eyes with Mira. “How are things going here?”

“Almost done. Flynn, this is my friend, Mira. Mira, this is the detective trying to find out who broke in.”

“Nice to meet you. Any chance you’ve figured out who it is?” Mira said, giving him a friendly smile.

“You too, and no, I’m sorry to say.”

Mira looked at me with concern.

I rolled my eyes. “We’ll be fine. Won’t we?” I asked Flynn.

“I’ll make sure you and your girls are safe.”

“See?”

Mira didn’t look convinced. “I’m going to finish up in the kitchen.” She left me alone with Flynn.

“Must be nice, getting back into your own home,” he said.

“Definitely. The girls and I need our routine. Routine is synonymous with peace of mind.”

He laughed. “I can imagine. I have to tell you, raising three girls on your own... that’s got to be a challenge.”

“It has its moments,” I admitted. Honestly, without my father and Mira, I wasn’t sure I’d have survived those first two years.

“Although, I imagine had Liam lived, you’d probably still be doing most of the raising on your own.”

I frowned, surprised by his harsh assessment of Liam. Then I wondered how he knew... or suspected... that Liam was the girls’ father.

“What makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “He always lived a little too much in the moment. It made him reckless.”

He wasn’t wrong, but Liam had his attributes as well. “He had a big heart.” And he was brave, I’d recently discovered.

“Maybe.”

“I thought you and Liam were friends,” I said.

“We were. And I don’t mean to speak ill of him. I liked him. A lot. I just find it hard to see him as a father of three.”

I wasn’t sure why I was pushing this conversation. The truth was that Liam wasn’t a father of three. Oliver was. Another truth was that I was glad that Oliver was their father. He was the man I’d grown to respect and love.

“I guess we’ll never know,” I said, a bit more tersely than needed.

He held up his hands. “I’m sorry if I’m being insensitive. I’m sure Liam would have done the right thing by you and the girls.”

I found that statement odd, although perhaps he knew Liam and I hadn’t been together at the end.

I nodded, but in my mind, Liam's doing the right thing had been trying to get the FBI to investigate the Social Security scam.

"I'll leave you to it," he said.

"Thank you for checking in," I said, following him to the door.

"Happy to do it. Let me know if you find anything that can help us put this asshole away."

"You'll be the first."

Once he left, I headed to the kitchen where I found Mira rummaging through my fridge. "You need groceries."

"I can do that later."

She shut the door and looked at me. "I heard you talking to the detective. It made me wonder if you'd told Oliver the truth about the girls yet."

My gut clenched in guilt. "No. Each time I try, I'm thwarted."

She arched a brow. "How hard are you trying?"

"You have no right to judge me," I snapped, feeling defensive.

She sighed. "No. But I'm not judging. I want you to be happy, and carrying around this secret isn't making you happy."

"I plan to tell him the next time I see him."

"Which will be when?"

Ugh. "I don't know, Mira. I'm sort of busy right now."

She stepped to me, placing her hands on my arms. "This is adding more stress. Waiting isn't going to make it easier. In fact, it will likely make it worse."

Considering it had been five years since I learned I was pregnant, I didn't think telling him today versus tomorrow would make a big difference. The damage was done.

"I just... I don't want him to hate me."

“Oh, honey.” She gave me a hug. “Hate is a strong word. Plus, it’s not like you kept the girls from him out of spite. He’s the one who left, who cut off all access to him.”

“I could have tried harder.”

“Right. While you’re dealing with Liam’s death, working, and growing triplets.” She shook her head. “He may be hurt, but at least he’ll know the truth.” Her face then contorted into concern. “What will happen with visitation? Will you send the girls to California?”

“I have no idea, Mira.” The whole situation was more than I could think about.

She took my hand and led me to the table and we sat. “When I learned I was pregnant, I went through all this as well. I was so sure your father wouldn’t want the baby. He didn’t want me—”

“Except he did.”

“It was complicated. Just like your situation.”

“Yeah, but in the end, it all turned out for you.”

“Do you think Oliver cares for you?”

I thought back to what he told me yesterday. How he wanted to put the past behind us and move forward with me. “Yes, but that could change.”

“If he loves you, he’ll find a way to understand and forgive you. That’s what Brett and I did. You can do it too.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am. I feel it in my bones.”

I laughed.

“I know. How about you invite him for Christmas?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.” Recognizing how much Mira and my father had done and continued to do for me and the girls, I wanted to repay them. “Speaking of Christmas, what if you and Dad go up a few days early, just the two of you? You

can leave Grayson with me and we'll all come up on Christmas Eve?"

Mira's eyes lit up. I tried not to think that she was likely imagining sexy stuff with my dad. "That sounds wonderful. I'll talk to Brett about it." She smiled warmly at me. "It's going to be a magical holiday, Lindsay. Just wait and see."

"From your mouth to Santa's ears." I rose from the table. "But first, I need to finish getting this place ready for the girls' return."

As we continued cleaning, my thoughts drifted to Oliver. Could he return to Boston to be a father to the girls? Could we have a life like Mira and my father? A life filled with love, laughter, and family? If there were a Santa Claus, that would be my Christmas wish.

Oliver

I woke up that Sunday morning, the weight of Liam's documents pressing on my mind. It felt like I was on the cusp of a life I'd never dared to dream of. One which included Lindsay. But to get there meant dealing with Liam's past, as well as my own issues about loving the woman my brother loved first. But none of this would be dealt with until tomorrow, when Agent Marsden was back and I could hand Liam's documents to her.

Needing a distraction, I decided to work out in the hotel gym. As I ran on the treadmill, sweat dripping down my face like I was trying to purge my guilt, I couldn't help but question whether I was putting too much faith in Agent Marsden. She hadn't been able to help Liam. And in checking the documents, I couldn't see that there was anything linking Wally or any crew members to the scam. Was she just going to tell me what she'd told Liam? She needed more proof? If that happened, chances were good that whoever was texting would still be looking for the documents. Lindsay and I wouldn't be free.

Maybe it was time to talk to Flynn Donovan. After all, he knew Liam and the crew from our foster care days. That and he was investigating Lindsay's break-in, which had to be related.

After the workout, I returned to my hotel room and showered. Then I called Donovan, setting up a time to meet

him in a bar in the old neighborhood. I considered calling Lindsay as well, to let her know about Agent Marsden and the meeting with Donovan, but held off. I really had no news to share, so I'd wait.

Just after noon, I entered the rundown bar. The scents of stale beer and cigarette smoke greeted me as I made my way over to Donovan and slid into a well-worn booth.

“Oliver, how's it hanging?”

“Donovan.”

A waitress took our beer orders and moments later returned with a mug for Donovan and a bottle for me.

Donovan held up his bottle. “Cheers for beers.”

I laughed as I clicked my bottle against his glass. “Damn. Liam lives on through that.”

“He was the life of the party. Remember when Liam stole Old Man Peterson's car and me and him drove that thing around all night?”

“How could I forget?” It was the first time Liam had been stopped by the cops, although that time, no charges were filed since Liam agreed to fix Old Man Peterson's roof.

“Did you know the only reason we got caught was that Liam had to help a stray dog?”

“Classic Liam, always had a knack for finding trouble.” And it ultimately killed him.

“You were no saint. Remember when we broke into Smitty's corner store and found the crate of candy? We thought we'd hit the jackpot.”

I snorted. “Liam wanted to eat it all and you wanted to sell it at school.”

“Meanwhile, you were trying to remove the box from the inventory on his computer.”

That was my first and last foray into crime. Somehow, we'd escaped detection and I was grateful. The whole experience scared me straight.

“Man, we’ve come a long way since then.” Donovan raised his glass, a toast to our shared past. “It’s hard to believe it’s been five years.”

The bittersweetness of the fond memories with the reality of Liam’s death filled me as we continued to laugh and reminisce about Liam and the challenges we’d faced together growing up as foster kids.

“I’ll tell you what, Oliver. If not for you, who knows where I’d be,” Donovan said.

“I’m glad I made a difference. I’m glad you make a difference through your work. Speaking of which, any chance you have news on the case?”

He sighed as he mindlessly wiped the condensation from his glass. “Nothing yet. It’s one of those fucked up situations in which we need to wait and hear from the guy texting you.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I wanted to be proactive. Take charge. It wasn’t right that we were in a holding pattern, waiting to see if and when we’d be contacted again.

“What about the security on Lindsay’s home? Did you figure out how that was breached?”

“I don’t have the details on that yet, but Oliver, you know it’s not impossible to fuck with home security.”

“Sure. I know guys from the old days who used a phishing scam to get login and passwords on security systems. Charlie Haden once used a two-dollar dongle that fucked up the system when it got close.”

I swirled the beer in my bottle, feeling the cold seep into my fingers. It was a metaphor for the cold I felt chilling my veins. The type of cold that signaled danger. I reminded myself to check to see if Lindsay’s security could be improved. It was disturbing to think how easily someone could violate her home.

“Hey, relax.” Donovan sat back and smirked. I supposed it was confidence, but it came off as smugness. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

“I like your confidence.”

“Since you’re here, did you find anything useful on your trip home?”

I hesitated, weighing the pros and cons of telling Donovan about the papers. My fingers tapped against the side of my bottle, an action that did not go unnoticed by him. I settled for a half-truth as I met his inquisitive gaze.

“Some papers.”

Donovan sat forward. “Like what?”

“Can’t say much. Don’t want to mess things up before Agent Marsden investigates.”

“Oh, hell, you’re bringing the Feds in? You can’t do that to me, Oliver. Don’t you trust me?”

“Trust isn’t the issue here. It’s about honoring Liam.”

He sat back again, his brow furrowed as he took a sip of beer. “So, it’s evidence of something. It has to be.”

“What do you know about it?”

Donovan’s jaw clenched as he looked to the side. I wondered what he was trying to sort his thoughts about. Finally, he turned back. “There were rumors.”

“About?”

“About Liam talking to the Feds. I don’t have the details. By then, I was out of the crew, but I still had a few connections. He was seen as a traitor.”

“What about you? You became a cop. Isn’t that seen as a betrayal?”

He shrugged. “I got some shit for sure. But I’ve never tried to put them in jail. I was assigned a different area on patrol, and now, my investigations are mostly break-ins and drug deals, but nothing related to the crew.”

“Do you know who killed him?”

Donovan’s eyes were pained. “No. Don’t you think I’d say something if I did?”

“I need justice for him, Donovan. And I owe it to him to finish what he started.”

He nodded. “Okay, fair enough. But I can help. In fact, you shouldn’t be around this at all. Look what happened to Liam. Are you sure about putting your life on the line for this?”

I didn’t want to die, but I couldn’t let this stand either. “Like I said, I owe it to Liam.”

“It’s not just you, though, is it? Lindsay’s been targeted, her home ransacked. This could be dangerous for her as well.”

I felt sick at the idea. “We’ll always be targets until this is finished. I have to trust the FBI is going to handle it.”

Donovan made a jerk-off motion with his hand. “They’re a bunch of government bureaucrats. Let me help. I can take the papers, and me and Riker can figure out how to use them to get justice for Liam and keep you and Lindsay safe.”

I hesitated. Donovan’s argument made sense. He was more invested in the case having known Liam. Plus, there was already an official investigation. Two, actually, the break-in and Liam’s murder.

But Liam had gone to the FBI, not to the police. I knew from my own research that the FBI was the better option to stop identity theft, which had been Liam’s goal.

“I need to stick to the plan, but I am worried about Lindsay’s safety. Do you think you or some of your men could keep an eye on her?”

“Sure. Of course. I was there earlier today.” A soft smile played on his lips that I didn’t like. “She didn’t mention anything about finding papers, so I guess you had them all along, eh?”

I shrugged.

“I’m just saying, that could help protect her if whoever is following you two knew about the papers and that you had them.”

He had a point. “I’d still like someone to watch out for her.”

He grinned, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Not a problem. Watching Lindsay isn’t a hardship. She’s easy on the eyes, if you know what I mean.”

My gut tightened. My knuckles turned white as I gripped my glass. All of a sudden, I didn’t want Donovan anywhere near Lindsay.

“The only reason I haven’t asked her out is her kids.”

My brain screeched to a halt. “Her kids?”

He cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowed in confusion. “Yeah. Three of them. All girls.”

What the fuck?

“You didn’t know?” Donovan looked genuinely surprised.

My mind raced, trying to process this new information. Why hadn’t Lindsay told me about her kids?

“I... ah...” My heart was racing at the possibility that the kids were mine. I’d loved her five years ago and done so without a condom. But no. She would have told me... wouldn’t she?

“I’m shocked that you didn’t know. You’re Liam’s brother, after all. Those kids are your nieces.”

I stared at him, trying to wrap my brain around this news. I struggled to comprehend how Lindsay could have kept something like this from me. Surely, there was an explanation. It had been five years since Liam died and I left. Surely, she’d met other men. One of them had to be the father. It didn’t explain why she’d never told me about the kids.

“Are you sure they’re Liam’s?”

“Yep. She and I were talking about it earlier today.”

My hands clenched into fists as confusion gave way to hurt and anger. How could she not tell me she’d had Liam’s children?

“Listen, Oliver.” Donovan leaned forward, his gray eyes intense. “Considering Lindsay was brought into this and she

has three little girls, that's a lot at risk. Consider giving me the papers so we can keep them safe."

My brain had difficulty following what he was saying. He was back to the papers. "I don't have them on me," I said absently.

"Are they safe? Can we go get them?"

I shook my head. "I've already talked to the FBI."

His eyes flashed with annoyance. He sipped his beer. "Okay. I hate losing to those mother fuckers. But I can help if you'll let me."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." I felt like I was out of my body. My thoughts and emotions swirled in a whirlwind. Liam's murder. The current threat. Lindsay. Her and Liam's kids. It was all too much to take in at once.

I downed the last of my beer. "Thanks for meeting with me, Donovan. I need to go." I rose from the booth, pulling out my wallet and tossing two twenties on the table.

"Everything okay?" His eyes narrowed in concern.

"Yeah, just... I need to take care of something. I'll catch you later, alright?"

"Sure thing, man. Let me know if you change your mind about the papers."

As soon as I left the bar, the bitter afternoon air felt like a slap in the face. What the hell was going on? How could Lindsay not tell me about her children? Liam's children.

I ordered a rideshare and gave the address for Lindsay's father's home. By the time we pulled up to the brownstone, my anger and hurt were at volcanic levels. I'd given her my heart. Poured out my soul. And she'd hidden a part of Liam from me.

I knocked and rang the doorbell, but no one answered. Then I remembered that Donovan said he'd seen Lindsay earlier in the day. That had to have been at her place.

Luckily, my rideshare hadn't left and I was able to get back in. After a search on my phone, I learned Lindsay's address and had the driver take me there. The time didn't settle me down.

We pulled in front of Lindsay's home. I paid the driver and stepped out onto the sidewalk, my heart pounding as I made my way to the front door.

I knocked sharply on the door, my hand trembling with a mix of anxiety and anger. What would I say? How could she explain this away?

The door swung open.

"Oliver." She smiled and for a moment, it short-circuited my brain. Her brow furrowed and then her expression morphed into worry. "What are you doing here?"

"Is it true?" I'd never been an aggressive man, but I pushed my way into her home, wanting to see the living embodiment of my brother.

"Is what true?"

The house was quiet. Clean and tidy. There were no signs of children. Had Donovan been wrong?

I turned to her. "Your kids. Are they Liam's?"

Her eyes widened and her lips parted, but no words came out. She hesitated, and that was all the confirmation I needed. The truth etched itself across her face like a map of betrayal.

"Why didn't you tell me? Jesus, fuck, Lindsay. I lost all my family. Liam was all I had and then he was gone. But he had children? A part of him lives, and you didn't say anything?" I realized that I'd been fucking her, the mother of Liam's children, and it made me sick to my stomach.

She looked stricken, shaking her head slowly. "No, Oliver. They're not Liam's."

It took a moment for her words to sink in, and when they did, my anger morphed into sadness and embarrassment. "I'm sorry... I, uh... I was told they were Liam's."

She swallowed. “Everyone thinks that.”

That was an odd statement. Why wouldn't she correct that if it was wrong?

Her hands shook as she stepped toward me. “The truth is, Oliver, you're their father.”

When I was eight years old, my father, pissed that I'd poured his bottle of bourbon down the drain, put me outside in the bitter winter cold and dumped water on me and made me stand there until it froze. The water had felt like daggers slicing my skin, but the cold made me numb. That was what I felt right now. Daggers piercing my heart, my soul, the pain so fierce everything inside me went numb. The world as I understood it, or perhaps wished it would be, crumbled. Shock and disbelief filled me. Who was this woman? How could she have kept this from me? Why did she keep it from me?

My pain and anger grew as I realized that despite our time together over the last week, she was never going to tell me.

“How could you be so cruel? You're truly evil.”

Lindsay

No, no, no. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. Not that I hadn't anticipated hurt and anger, but he was supposed to hear about the girls from me.

I was blindsided by Oliver showing up at my house. When I first saw him on my doorstep, my heart filled with happiness to see him. But quickly, I panicked, wondering if he could see into the house and notice that children lived here. And of course, that was followed by guilt because I needed to tell him about the girls. But somebody had beaten me to it, and now, pushed back on my heels, I had to answer for the secret I'd been keeping for five years.

“How could you be so cruel? You're truly evil.”

His words didn't impact me as much as the expression on his face. The man was completely gutted, and it was my fault. Not only that, but he also looked at me as if he didn't know me. Like I was a monster.

I scanned my brain, desperately searching for words that could make this right and knowing there were none.

“I'm sorry, Oliver, but I can explain—”

“Explain? What possible reason could there be for you to keep the fact that I'd fathered children from me? Is something wrong with me? All I ever did was love you, and you do this?”

Love? I couldn't imagine the depth of my guilt getting any worse, but to hear that he loved me ratcheted it up to a whole

new level.

“Love her? You’ve been gone for five years.”

I turned as Mira walked into the room, concern etched on her face.

“It’s okay, Mira.” I turned back to Oliver, his expression blazing with heat. I wanted to reach out and hug him, to comfort him, but since I was the source of the torment, I kept my hands to myself.

I took a breath and did my best to gather my thoughts. “You left here, trying to escape all the pain—”

“And because of that, I forfeit my rights as a father?”

I shook my head, wondering how my decision had made so much sense when it was made, and now it seemed so callous, so cruel and evil.

“You could’ve called.”

“She did. But apparently, you changed your number,” Mira snapped.

I lifted my hand, hoping to stop Mira. I appreciated her support, but I really needed to be the one to do this. “It’s okay —”

“You know what, Oliver, I am sorry for the difficult childhood you had and the loss of your brother, but you left here and never looked back. You left Lindsay to deal with the aftermath of Liam’s death. Apparently, you slept with her before you left, and then you ran away and changed your number. Did you ever call?”

His jaw tightened. “That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have known.”

“Maybe not. But Lindsay had more important things to worry about than you. She was pregnant with triplets, for God’s sake. She had to move so she wouldn’t have to continue to live in the place where Liam was murdered. She had to make sure she had a job that would allow her to raise these girls. So boo-hoo for you that there was no room in her life to hunt you down when you clearly didn’t want to be found.”

I turned to Mira, putting my hands on her arms. “Thank you for all your support. I love you for this, but I really need to handle this.”

She glanced at Oliver, giving him her version of the evil eye. She looked back at me. “I’m going to be in the other room if you need me, okay?” She looked at her watch and then back at me. “Your father will be here in twenty minutes or so.”

I understood her meaning that the girls would be there too. She turned and headed back toward the kitchen.

I turned back to Oliver, wishing I had done everything differently but knowing that at this point, it didn’t matter.

“Why don’t you come into the living room, and we can talk?”

“About what?”

“What do you want, Oliver? Do you want to know why I made the decision I did?”

“What would it matter? What reason could there be for you to make it?”

Feeling exasperated and exhausted, I said, “Then why are you here? If you don’t want answers, then maybe you should just go.”

“So you can continue to keep the kids from me? No fucking way.” He walked past me into the living room, his head scanning the room in a way I took to mean that he was looking for the girls.

“They’re not here. They’ll be home shortly.”

He stood at the opposite side of the room. I hated how vulnerable he looked. “I guess I’ll wait.”

Mira poked her head in the room. “I’ll call Brett and tell him to take the girls to our house.”

Oliver’s hands fisted at his sides. “You can’t keep them from me.” There was anger in his voice, but also so much pain that it broke my heart.

“I’m sorry that you are hurting, Oliver, but my first priority, Lindsay’s first priority, is those girls. Meeting you and finding out who their father is when you’re like this will only scare them to death. Do you want that?”

Once again, I held my hand up toward Mira. “It’s okay. They can come. I’m sure Oliver will be okay to see them.” I looked toward him, hoping I was right.

He turned away from me toward the back sliding door out to our back yard. His shoulders rose and then settled down as if he were taking a deep breath.

“Would you like a glass of water?” I asked.

He turned. “No.” His voice lacked any affect, as if all the life had gone out of him. That bothered me more than his anger.

“I might have something stronger, but it’s just wine.”

He shook his head.

For a long moment, we simply stood and stared at each other. I hated how he looked at me as if he didn’t know me.

“I’m sorry, Oliver. At the time —”

“Did you really try to call?”

I had no illusion of a future with Oliver except for co-parenting the girls. At that realization, a sliver of fear rose up my spine, wondering if he was going to try and take them from me.

I pushed it away for now. In this moment, I needed to give him complete honesty. “When I first found out I was pregnant, I didn’t know what to do. I wanted you here with me, but all I could think about was the last time I saw you, the despair on your face and the hope that you’d be able to leave all this pain behind and finally pursue your dream. I didn’t want the pregnancy to take that away from you. I wanted you to finally live your life.”

Anger grew in him again. He pointed his finger, jabbing it at me. “That wasn’t your decision to make.”

“I can see now that maybe it wasn’t. And maybe it’s not a good excuse, but I was twenty-one years old and it was months after finding Liam murdered in my bedroom, weeks after you told me you had to go. You abandoned me—”

“This is not my fault.” Heat flared in his eyes.

I held my hands up in surrender. Until the words had come out of my mouth, I hadn’t fully understood how I’d felt when he had left. I wished he’d stayed, of course. And I really did want him to find himself and his dream.

But deep down, I felt he’d left me. “I’m not blaming you, Oliver. I’m just trying to explain.”

“So far, I haven’t heard that you called me.”

“When I learned I was having triplets, I couldn’t imagine how I would manage on my own. And yes, maybe that was the wrong reason to decide to reach out to you, but it is what it is. So, I called the number I had, only to find that it was disconnected. It was around Christmas when I finally told Mira and my father that I was pregnant, and they helped me through it all.”

“It’s not like I went to Mars. You could’ve found me. Your father has the resources to hire someone, for fuck’s sake.”

“Maybe I should have done that.” The words were difficult to get out because essentially, he was confirming to me that he hadn’t wanted to be found. He wanted as far away from Boston and me as he could get. Only the pregnancy mattered enough to him that I should reach out to him.

As much as that hurt, in some ways, it was also a consolation. He hadn’t loved me, despite what he’d said earlier. Not really. Not the kind of love that would’ve had him stay. That meant I wasn’t really losing anything.

“Donovan thinks they’re Liam’s kids. Is that what you told everybody?” he asked.

I looked down, wondering how long it would be before I suffocated from the weight of guilt. “I never outwardly told anybody they were Liam’s. I just never corrected them.”

He flinched as if I had hit him. “So, this last week, all this time we’ve been together, you never mentioned them. You were never going to tell me.”

This time, I did move toward him, reaching for him, but he stepped out of my way. “I was going to tell you. I started to so many times, but you kept telling me you didn’t want to talk.”

He let out a derisive laugh. “Once again, it’s my fault.”

“No. It’s my fault. You should’ve heard it from me. I was afraid.”

He put his hands on his hips, his eyes narrowing as he glared at me. “Afraid. Of me?”

“I was afraid of this. Of losing you.”

“Losing me? You say that as if you ever thought of me as yours. What was all this, Lindsay? A pity fuck? A way to get close to Liam through me?”

My jaw dropped in shock. “No. No.” I moved toward him again. “I told you that my love for Liam had died that summer. I cared for him and wanted him to get his life together, but by then, I had already fallen in love with you.”

His breath hitched, and for a moment I thought I had reached him. But then his eyes turned dark, dismissive. “Now you’re lying to me. If you loved me, you would’ve told me that you were pregnant. At the very least, you’d have told me about them now.”

Mira came out of the kitchen. “Brett is pulling into the driveway. As far as I can tell, you are in no state to see these girls.”

I closed my eyes, gathering my strength. I opened them, looking up at Oliver. “Why don’t you sit down on the couch and try to hide your anger at me?”

“You don’t want your daughters knowing what you did?”

“Hey!”

“It’s alright, Mira. I’m going to tell them the truth, but they don’t know you. And before you say it, I know that’s my fault.”

But if they walk in here and look at you now, all they would see is a man who hates their mother, and that's going to make it hard for them to open up to you. And yes, again, before you say it, that's my fault, but if you're going to be a father, you're going to need to learn to put them first. They need to come before your anger at me."

His jaw tightened and he turned away for a moment.

"I'm going to go meet them at the door and bring them in to you, telling them the truth. What happens after that is up to you."

I left Oliver in the living room, making my way to the small foyer near the door. My father stepped in, and his concerned expression told me that Mira had either called or texted him.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Where are the kids?"

"I left them in the car for a minute because I want to know what's going on."

"I'll go get them." Mira passed us, heading out the door.

"I don't have a lot of time to explain right now, but Oliver has learned the truth about the girls."

"That they're Liam's?"

I shook my head. "That they're his."

For a moment, my father stared at me blankly. "Did Miranda know about this?"

"Only recently. And before you get mad at her, I promised her that I would tell you."

"How is he taking it?"

I shook my head. "Not well. I've told him he needs to pull it together if he wants to meet them now."

"You and I are going to have a talk later. First, though, I'm going to have a talk with him."

My father started to pass me, but I put my hand on his forearm to stop him. “Please don’t upset him. He has a right to know the girls and the girls to know him.”

My father arched a brow. “If you’d figured this out sooner, we wouldn’t be in this position.” His words were yet another jackhammer into my guilt.

“But at this moment, I don’t care very much about your or his feelings. I care about the girls, so I’m going to talk with him.”

I nodded and released his arm and turned back to the door and stepped out onto the porch just as the girls came running up.

“We got to see Santa today, Mommy.” Georgie reached me first.

“I asked for art supplies,” Cassie said right behind her.

We moved aside as Mira and Grayson entered the house. Then I squatted down to give them all hugs, doing my best to hide my tears. In a moment, everything was going to change, and I couldn’t be sure that it was for the better. At least not for me.

“What about you, Olivia? Did you tell Santa what you wanted for Christmas?”

“She told him—”

“Olivia can tell me what she wants, Georgie.”

Olivia gave me a sheepish smile. “I told him I want my own computer.”

I smiled, giving her a hug as I imagined Oliver and Olivia tinkering away on a computer together. It was probably something I would never witness because when they were with him, I wouldn’t be there.

I pushed away my tears. “Listen, girls, there’s somebody I want you to meet.” I infused as much excitement as I could into my voice.

“Who is it?” Georgie asked, her wide blue eyes glittering with excitement.

“Well, come inside.”

I took Cassie and Olivia by the hand because of course, Georgie was already running inside. I inhaled a breath as I walked toward the living room to introduce my daughters to their father.

Oliver

I learned at a young age, right after that ice water incident at eight years old, how to dull my emotions. By then, I had learned that good feelings were fleeting and the bad ones could only get you in trouble if you expressed them. Only Liam's death had pierced the wall I'd put around my emotions.

Walking away from Lindsay five years ago had been a close second.

But right here, right now, standing in the living room, having discovered she'd kept my children from me, there was no dulling the pain and anger swirling inside me. I tried to listen to what she said, but I only found her excuses to be selfish. She said I had abandoned her. She insisted that she loved me. But I understood now that they were just words to try and make what she did not sound so bad. Hell, she tried to make it my fault. Clearly, I didn't know who Lindsay was. Had she always been like this and I hadn't seen it?

I heard commotion at the door, little voices chatting away, and the pressure in my heart built as I realized I was about to meet my children. Jesus fuck. I was a father. I sucked in a breath.

“Are you ready for this?”

I looked up from where I'd been sitting on the couch trying to gather my thoughts. Brett McKinnon entered the room. I stood, more out of automatic good manners than respect.

“Because if you can’t keep it together, we’re going to have to do this another time. I understand that you are pissed off at Lindsay, and I’ll be honest, I don’t blame you, but these little girls are innocent.”

I gave him a curt nod to let him know that I understood. “I’m fine.”

He studied me for a moment. “What Lindsay did was wrong, but why ever she made this decision, you can bet she thought it was best for everyone around.”

I rolled my shoulders to keep the angry tension away. “The reasons she gave me don’t justify my missing five years.”

Brett gave a short nod. “I imagine from where you’re standing, it doesn’t. But let me ask you this. Clearly, you slept with my daughter, and surely, you’re smart enough to know that whenever you fuck a woman, there’s a possibility of a pregnancy. Now, if I remember correctly, you left town. Did you ever call her? Did you reach out to make sure she was okay?”

My gut tightened, and I hated that while I still felt Lindsay was wrong, there was some truth to his statement. I figured she’d be okay because she had her father and Mira. She didn’t need me.

Just then, a little blonde girl came bursting into the room. My breath stalled in my lungs. My knees felt weak, so I sank down on the couch again.

A moment later, Lindsay appeared with two more girls. They were all blonde and blue-eyed, but not identical.

The first girl skidded to a halt, wrapping her arms around Brett’s legs and peering out from behind him. The other two girls lagged behind Lindsay, looking at me with uncertainty. Had she told them who I was? Did they not want to meet their father?

Brett extricated himself from the girl. “Go stand with your mom. I’m going to let you all have some time.”

He strode out of the room, and the little girl who had been wrapped around him hurried over to Lindsay. Lindsay stopped

about three feet away from me and then dropped down to her knees, gathering the three little girls close. I had this quick flash in my brain that this was my family... or could have been my family.

The little girl who had been holding on to Brett put her hand to Lindsay's ear and leaned in to whisper.

"I'm going to introduce you now." Lindsay looked up at me, and her girls stood next to her, waiting expectantly. Lindsay was quiet, and I wondered if she was having a hard time figuring out how to explain the situation.

"I guess the best way to do this is just to get it out," she said with a nervous smile. "Girls, this is Oliver. He's your daddy."

The little girl who'd been holding onto Brett looked at me, then at Lindsay, with wide, round eyes and mouth. The second little girl's brows furrowed in confusion. The third child was difficult to read, mostly because she was hiding behind Lindsay.

"Oliver. This is Georgie, Cassie, and this one..." She reached behind her to pull the third little girl out. "This is Olivia."

For a moment, I could only stare at them. They were like little angels. A miracle. How was it possible that I could have helped make three precious little beings?

I cleared my throat. "Hello."

"Do you mean that you got married and he's our daddy?" the one she called Georgie asked.

"No. I mean that he's your real daddy."

Georgie looked up at me, her brows pulled together. She put one hand on her hip as she stared at me. "Where have you been?"

Her quip might've been funny if it wasn't so damn tragic.

"You can't be upset at him," Lindsay told them. "He didn't know about you until today."

The child she'd called Cassie looked up at her. "Why not?"

"Because I didn't tell him."

I had to hand it to her, she certainly knew how to tell the truth to her girls. Why couldn't she have done that for me?

"Why not?" Georgie turned from her back to me. "Is something wrong with you?"

"Georgie!"

But it was too late. I felt the child's words like a knife in the heart because I had to wonder if there was something wrong with me. Maybe Lindsay let everyone believe they were Liam's daughters because he'd been the true love of her life.

"There's nothing wrong with your daddy. He's a good and kind and sweet man. And I should have told him about you. I'm not going to go into why, but just know that Mommy regrets it. She regrets it because it hurts him and it hurts you. But that's Mommy's fault, right? That's not your daddy's fault."

Each time she said the word Daddy, it made my heart jump.

"So I know that you're going to be really excited to get to know him."

The little one she'd called Olivia, who still seemed skeptical of me as she eyed me warily, tapped Lindsay. "What if he doesn't like us?"

"Oh, baby." Lindsay pulled the little girl in for a hug. "He already loves you. Can't you see it?"

Four sets of eyes looked at me, and I had no idea what my expression was, but I hoped it was love. What I felt was awe and a little bit of terror that I would be a shitty father.

"How about we get something to play so you can spend time with your daddy?" Lindsay said.

Despite how pissed off I was at her, I was grateful that she seemed to know what to do.

“Candyland!” Georgie said.

“Yeah, because Grandpa won’t play that anymore,” Cassie echoed.

Lindsay looked down at Olivia. “What do you think? Candyland?”

Olivia gave a nod.

I’d only known these girls for a couple of moments, but already, I was weeding out their personalities. Georgia reminded me of Liam, gregarious and outgoing and mischievous. Cassie made me think of Lindsay with her willingness and excitement to go along with others. Olivia made me think of myself, introverted, cautious.

Georgie sprinted out of the room with Cassie following her and Olivia behind. I ran my hands through my hair, blowing out a breath as Lindsay stood.

“I know this doesn’t change how you feel about me, but I hope that you won’t take it out on them.”

I resented her for busting the ball of contentment I had in the moment. “I think you forget that I’m not the cruel one here.”

She jerked, but then she lifted her chin. “I’ll make sure they’re settled and then leave you to get to know each other.”

Georgie came zooming back into the room with her two sisters behind her. She put the game on the table and pulled off the box top, tossing it behind her.

“I’m red,” she said.

“You always get to be red,” Cassie said.

“What color do you want to be, Daddy?” Georgie asked me.

For a moment, I was blindsided by her calling me Daddy. “I like yellow.”

“Olivia likes yellow.” Cassie reached into the box, grabbing it as if defending it from me. She handed it to Olivia.

Olivia looked up at me. “You can have yellow if you want.”

I shook my head. “You should have yellow.”

“Here, you can have green. That’s what Grandpa usually uses.” Georgie thrust the green plastic piece toward me.

I took the player and set it at the beginning of the route. Georgie handed me a stack of cards. “You have to shuffle them and then put them down on the board.”

My lips quirked up, remembering how Liam used to be so bossy like this.

“I’ll leave you all to have fun.” Lindsay left the room, and the minute she wasn’t there, I started to panic. What if I didn’t know what to say? What if I didn’t know what to do?

Luckily, it was clear that the girls knew what to do. Or at the very least, Georgie did. She was a take-charge kind of girl.

“Where do you live?” Georgie asked me as she fixed the placement of the cards I’d set on the board.

“Well, I’m from Boston, but I live in California now.” Suddenly, I wondered how this was going to work. How was I going to be their father when I lived 3,000 miles away?

“Is that why you didn’t know about us?” Cassie asked.

Remembering that it would be wrong to speak poorly of their mother, I nodded. “I think that was part of it.”

Georgie frowned at me. “So when you go home, will you forget about us?”

I looked at these girls who just a few hours ago I didn’t know existed, but now, I knew without a doubt, I would love until my last breath. “Not at all. I want to be your father.”

“Are you going to move in with us? Because mommies and daddies are supposed to live together,” Georgie said.

I cleared my throat again, not knowing what to say. I looked toward the doorway that Lindsay had disappeared through, wishing she’d come back in and save me.

“Not all mommies and daddies live together,” Cassie said as she lifted a card that had two green squares on it and started to move her man.

“So you’ll be like our weekend dad. That’s what Joseph Little has,” Georgie said.

I didn’t like the idea of that either, but I didn’t have an answer. I wouldn’t until Lindsay and I talked.

I decided maybe it was time to change the subject. “Besides Candyland, what do you girls like to do?”

“I like to do all sorts of things,” Georgie said, drawing her card and moving her gingerbread to a blue square.

“I like to do art. I asked Santa for art stuff today,” Cassie said. It was another piece like her mother.

“And Olivia likes—”

“Mommy says you’re not supposed to talk for Olivia,” Cassie interrupted her. That also seemed like something Lindsay would have done. Cassie turned toward her sister. “You tell him, Olivia. You tell him that you like computers.”

Olivia looked up at me and nodded.

“You like computers?”

She nodded again.

“I do too. Matter of fact, my job has to do with computers.”

Olivia’s eyes rounded, and she looked at her sisters and then at me.

“What do you do?” Georgie asked.

“I have a business that creates apps. But what I really like is to program.”

We continued to talk and play the game, and before long, Olivia was over on my side of the table, sitting next to me.

The sweet moment was broken when Lindsay walked back into the room. “We’ll be having dinner soon. Will you be staying?”

All three girls jumped up. “Please, Daddy, please, Daddy, stay.”

I glanced at Lindsay, wondering what she thought of the fact that I had won the girls over. She had a soft smile and tears in her eyes, and for a moment, I felt guilty about wishing that the girls’ affection for me would hurt her.

The sound of a phone notification went off and Lindsay reached into her pocket. She pulled it out and looked at the screen. Her entire body tensed, and I went on alert. Just then, my phone beeped as well. I pulled it out and looked at the screen.

I WANT WHAT LIAM HAD. Your time is running out.

I LOOKED UP AT LINDSAY.

Her father walked into the room, clapping his hands. “Spaghetti’s on.”

“Yay! Come on, Daddy.” Georgie grabbed my hand and tried to pull me toward the kitchen.

“I’ll be right there,” I said, knowing I needed to check with Lindsay about the text.

“Yes, you girls go in and get seated. Gran-Mira and Grayson are already there.”

Brett frowned. “What’s going on?” He looked at Lindsay. “You get another text?”

She nodded and looked up at me. “He says time is running out to give them what Liam had.”

“That’s it. You and the kids are coming back to the house with me and Miranda and Grayson. There’s no way I’m leaving you here with that maniac still out there.”

“The girls and I can’t continue to live like that. We need to go back to our routine. I have to go back to work tomorrow. They need to go to school.”

“You’re willing to risk all your lives on that? You’re not safe here.”

“I’ll stay.”

The two of them looked at me almost as if they’d forgotten I was there.

“I’m pretty certain that’s a bad idea, given the way you feel about my daughter,” Brett said.

“I’m hurt and then pissed off. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want her and the kids to be safe. I’ll stay here, and tomorrow, I’ll hand over the papers to Agent Marsden.”

“Papers? You mean you found the thing that Liam had?”

Lindsay closed her eyes, and I realized she hadn’t told her father the extent of everything. Considering the papers were found here at Lindsay’s home, I thought I should invite them all to stay in the hotel with me. They’d all be safer there.

But Lindsay had said she wanted to bring normalcy back to the kids’ lives.

“Yes, we found it, and we’re giving it to the FBI,” she told her father.

“Maybe you should give it to this fucker who wants it. It’s better than risking your lives.”

For a moment, I wondered if he was right.

“We can’t do that. We have to put an end to this,” Lindsay said. “Detective Donovan has people watching the house to protect us. If Oliver wants to stay, we have his protection as well. We’ll be fine.”

Brett stared at her hard, clearly not liking her stance but apparently deciding there was nothing he could do about it. “It’s time to eat.” He left us, heading toward the kitchen.

She looked up at me. “I know that you’re angry with me, but I’m going to trust you to keep the girls safe, that we’re doing the right thing by giving the papers to agent Marsden.” She turned and left me standing in the living room wondering if I really knew what the hell I was doing.

A little head popped out from the kitchen, looking toward me. “Are you coming, Daddy? I saved you a seat next to me,” Olivia said.

I smiled and strode toward her, holding out my hand to take hers and silently vowing to her and her sisters and to God that I wouldn’t fail them the way I’d failed Liam. I would protect them with my life if it came down to it.

Lindsay

To say dinner was tense and awkward was an understatement. I knew it had to be a million times worse for Oliver, but the girls were intrigued by him. And it was amazing how shy Olivia had taken to him.

After dinner, Oliver and the girls along with Grayson went back to the living room to finish their game of Candyland while I helped clean up in the kitchen.

I washed pots while my father dried, and Mira dealt with clearing the table. With only adults in the kitchen, it appeared, my father decided it was okay to discuss my sex life.

“You slept with your boyfriend’s brother?”

I ground my teeth. “Ex-boyfriend. Liam and I had broken up way before I was with Oliver.”

“It’s still weird, don’t you think?” My father looked toward Mira, probably for support in his opinion, but Mira was smart enough not to give him any.

I turned toward him. “First, I did it because I love him, and second, it’s not any weirder than sleeping with your daughter’s best friend.”

My father’s eyes narrowed. “It is a little bit weirder.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not.” This time, I was the one looking to Mira for support, but she lifted her hands in a gesture that said she wasn’t going to get in the middle of it.

“You said you love him, present tense. Is that the case?” he asked.

I turned back to scrubbing a pot. “It doesn’t really matter anymore.”

My father put his hand on my shoulder. “Love always matters, Lindsay. It’s worth fighting for.”

My eyes welled with tears, but I didn’t want to break down crying.

“Did you hear when he said all he had done was love you?” Mira said as she came to stand next to my father.

“He says that, but then he left. Whatever love he had for me, it wasn’t stronger than his need to get away from the memories here.”

“What about now? You made it sound like you two were starting to develop something new,” Mira asked, helping my father dry.

I rested my hands on the edge of the sink, willing strength to fill me because this conversation caused so much ache in my chest that it was hard to breathe. “I think it’s safe to say that whatever was building is now destroyed. Now, he and I are going to have to figure out how to share the girls.” My voice trembled as I thought about the possibility of losing them altogether. I had to hope that Oliver’s bitterness wouldn’t result in his trying to get back at me. He didn’t seem like the type to do that, but if I felt the level of pain and anger he was feeling, I might feel vengeful too.

“Whatever support you need from us, you have. You know that, don’t you?” My father gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Even if that means going to court.”

I nodded and shoved my hands back into the soapy water and took out my fear on the pot.

“We need to get going. Are you sure you’re going to be okay here with the girls and Oliver?” Mira said.

“I’m sure.” In truth, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know how the night would progress with Oliver, but I owed it to him to give

him as much time with the girls as he wanted right now. Plus, after the text we received, I felt safer having him here.

AFTER MY DAD, Mira, and Grayson left, I busied myself with the final cleanup in the house, letting Oliver and the girls enjoy their time together. But eventually, it was time to get them ready for bed. They whined, wanting to spend more time with Oliver, but they complied when I reminded them that it was a school night. Oliver read them their bedtime stories, and once it was time to go to sleep, I went in and gave them a kiss good night. But with the girls now sleeping, what was going to happen between me and Oliver? Was he going to resume expressing his anger at me?

After I shut the door to the girls' room, I found Oliver back in the living room, cleaning up the game.

"I can sleep here on the couch," he said, not looking up at me. "It'll be a good vantage point if someone tries to come in. I've been meaning to contact somebody about improving your security here. I'll be sure to do that tomorrow."

On the one hand, I was glad he wasn't yelling at me, but on the other hand, I hated how distant he felt.

"Thank you. I'll get some blankets and a pillow."

Once he was settled on the couch, I retreated to my bedroom and got ready for bed. I replayed the last five years and the last five hours of my life, desperately wishing I'd made a different decision about the girls. But it was too late now. I wondered if I could do what my father suggested and fight for love. I didn't think so. The pain and anger in Oliver was too great. There was no way he was going to forgive me.

The next morning, I woke up and went to wake the girls up, but their beds were empty. I had a moment of panic, worried that someone had come into my home and taken them from me. My first thought was the person who texted, but then I considered Oliver had taken them. He wouldn't do that, would he?

I rushed to the living room, stopping short when I saw all three girls sitting quietly on the coffee table while Oliver slept on the couch. I watched them for a moment, filled with happiness that the girls now had their father and Oliver had them. I made a *psst* sound to get the girls' attention and then motioned with my hand to get them into the kitchen.

"When is he going to wake up?" Georgie said in annoyance.

"I don't know. But you three need to get ready for school. What would you like for breakfast, cereal or toast?"

Each of the girls put in their orders, and I got to work preparing their breakfast. I had just set it on the table when Oliver made an appearance.

He rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. "I was out like a light."

"Daddy!" All three girls shouted and jumped from their chairs, running to hug him.

I gave them a moment and then urged them back to the table. "We don't have a lot of time. You need to finish up your breakfast and get dressed."

I put a pod in the coffee maker to brew a cup for Oliver.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

I handed him the cup of coffee. "Just help me keep them corralled. We need to be in the car and off to school in twenty minutes."

He took the cup of coffee, his green eyes watching me. I wondered if he was searching for something. I wanted him to find the part of me that loved him, the part of me that wasn't a terrible person for having kept the kids from him.

"Thanks." He turned and went to the table to sit with the girls.

I was sure Oliver thought he was helping, but the girls were especially excited around him, which made getting them ready for school more difficult than usual. Finally, I had them

strapped into their seats. We were a little late, but we could still make it to school on time.

Oliver stood beside my car while I was in the driver's seat. I rolled the window down, realizing he didn't have a car. "Can I take you somewhere?"

He shook his head. "I've ordered a ride. I'm heading to the hotel to wait for Agent Marsden's call. I'll hand the documents to her today."

I nodded. "Keep me posted."

He continued to stand there, and I waited for him to say something. The moment grew into an awkward silence. Finally, I said, "If you'd like, you can come back over for dinner tonight."

"Yay!" the girls all cheered.

Oliver glanced back at them and smiled, and it occurred to me that it was the first time I'd ever seen him smile like that. It was full and bright, like it was emanating deep from his soul. As beautiful as it was, it only served to make me feel even worse. I'd denied him this pleasure.

He stepped back from the vehicle and waved as I pulled out of the driveway and started to school.

In the back, the girls chatted away about Oliver, but my mind was only half on them. Instead, I ruminated on the mistakes I had made and searched for a way to make amends.

I pulled up to a stop sign, stopping, and with no traffic coming, I proceeded into the intersection. A motion to my left had me looking out my side window to find a large black SUV was barreling toward us. Panic surged, and I put my foot on the gas to get out of his way. A nanosecond later, my entire body jerked. Pain shot through me. My head hit something hard, and darkness consumed me.

LIGHT FLICKERED, as did my consciousness. There was movement, but my brain was foggy. Confusion surrounded me.

“You’re alright, Miss McKinnon.”

I opened my eyes and coherence slowly followed. Looking around, I realized I was in a hospital. “What happened? Oh, God! My girls!”

A hand patted my forearm. “Your girls are fine. They’re both with a nurse and a social worker, being treated for a few cuts, but they’re fine.

Relief settled in until her words sank in. The woman started to step away, but I grabbed her forearm. “Did you say both?”

She nodded. “They’re fine. A little shook up, but physically fine.”

“I have three girls. Three.”

The nurse’s expression dropped, and she looked over to a nurse on the other side of the room.

Oh, God. One of the girls was missing.

I started to get up, but the nurse closest to me pushed me back in bed. “You can’t go anywhere right now.”

“I have to find my daughter.”

“You’re in no condition at the moment to find her. The police are here waiting to talk to you. Let me get them now.”

The other nurse hurried out, and the one with me said, “We’ll give you a moment to talk to the police, but then we need to take you for a few tests.”

She left, and a moment later, Flynn came in. “Lindsay, are you alright?”

“They took one of my girls.” My words came out on a sob. Terror filled me. “You were supposed to protect us.”

“I know. We’re trying to find her.”

“How did this happen?”

“My guy was watching your house, not you and your family. It didn’t occur to me that this could happen. I’m sorry.”

It was easy to blame him, but this was my fault. I should have handed over those documents to the person texting me.

“We’ve been able to talk to a few witnesses who indicated an SUV purposefully ran into you and a man got out, took one of the girls...” He looked at a notepad he was holding. “Olivia. And drove off.”

I shook my head. How could this be happening?

“I was wondering if you had gotten another text or something?”

I needed to pull myself together for Olivia’s sake. “Last night... but...” I looked around. “I don’t know where my phone is. But Oliver got a text too.”

“I’ll go see him, let him know what’s going on. Maybe it’s time you and he handed those papers over.”

I nodded, thinking the same thing.

“I told Oliver I could help him.” He shook his head.

“Please find Olivia.”

“We’ll find her.” Flynn was exiting my room when my father rushed in.

“Lindsay!” He hurried to me. “Are you okay?”

“They took Olivia.” I started to weep.

My father wrapped me up in his arms. When I was little, he could always make me feel safe, but while I appreciated his comfort, the agony of what could be happening to Olivia wasn’t anything that could be soothed.

“Mira is with Georgie and Cassie. I’ll put calls into whoever I have to call to make sure everyone is out looking for Olivia.” He pulled back. “Is there any chance that this is Oliver’s doing?”

I frowned, at first not knowing what he meant. “Oliver wouldn’t cause an accident and kidnap one of the girls.” But I remembered wondering if he’d taken them when I found their beds empty.

“No. I don’t see him doing that.”

“Maybe he’s behind this whole thing about Liam.”

I shook my head. “He has the papers. If that were the case, he’d have what he wanted.”

My father still didn’t look convinced.

A nurse came in. “We need to take you for some tests now.”

My father hugged me. “We’ll find Olivia, Lindsay. I promise.”

I tried to smile, but it was hard because I knew that wasn’t a promise he could make.

Oliver

Was I still angry at Lindsay for her decision not to tell me she was pregnant and had the girls? Yes. Absolutely. But this morning, the pain of it felt less like I was being gutted and more like a dull ache. I hated how much I had missed of the girls' lives, but I understood that by dwelling on my pain and anger, I'd be ruining the moment. And in this moment, I was the father of three sweet four-year-old girls. From the instant I'd seen them, I was deeply in love with them and committed to doing everything I could to be a father to them. In order to do that, I was going to have to put my hurt and anger on the back burner.

Lindsay and I were going to have to figure out how to make this work, and I anticipated that it was going to be difficult. Even if I made the decision to move back to Boston, which I felt was likely to make it easier for the girls, that didn't mean Lindsay and I were going to be able to set up a custody situation that suited us both. To be honest, I wanted to bring them to live with me full time, at least for the next four years. But I knew I couldn't let my resentment toward Lindsay dictate how I handled this. I needed to do what was best for the girls.

Once I saw them off to school with Lindsay, I waited in the cold for my ride share and then had it take me back to my hotel. During the ride, I checked my messages, noting I hadn't heard from agent Marsden yet.

When I arrived back at the hotel, I retrieved Liam's documents from the hotel safe and then headed up to my room.

Back in my hotel room, I made another cup of coffee and pulled out my laptop. I couldn't remember the last time I did any work, and I wondered if I still had a company to run. Checking in with work would distract me as I waited to hear from Agent Marsden.

I began working my way through an inordinate amount of emails when my phone buzzed with the notification. The fact that the number was blocked told me it was that asshole who was after us. I pressed the message notification and immediately, an image of Olivia appeared. Her face was crumpled in tears. My heart stalled in my chest.

"What the fuck?"

A new message popped up.

Give me what's mine and I'll give you what's yours.

My hands shook with equal parts terror and anger. Was this some sort of sick joke?

The first thing I needed to do was figure out if it was real, and the best way to do that was to call Lindsay. I started to dial her number when my phone rang.

I poked the answer button. "Who is this?"

"Are you playing some sort of fucked up game with us?" the man on the other end of the line said.

"Who is this?" I demanded again.

"It's Brett McKinnon, and I want to know where my granddaughter is."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This wasn't a sick joke. I jumped up from the chair, needing to pace as I tried to pull my thoughts together. "I don't know. I just got a text with a picture of her. Oh, Jesus."

"You don't have her?"

It occurred to me that Brett was already aware that something was up which meant he knew more than I did. “No. What the fuck is going on?”

“While taking the kids to school, someone rammed into Lindsay’s vehicle. She and Georgie and Cassie are at the hospital, but Olivia is missing.”

“I have to give them the papers. That’s what they said.” Why hadn’t I considered something like this could happen?

“You have to do whatever you have to do to get her back. Do you hear me? You fuck this up and I’ll make sure you never see those girls again.”

If I fucked this up, I’d deserve to never see them again.

My phone buzzed, indicating I had another call. A quick glance at the screen told me it was Agent Marsden. “It’s the FBI agent. I’ll call you back.” I hung up with Brett and answered the call from Agent Marsden.

“Are you at the hotel? I’m on my way over. I’ll be showing up as a courier. It will look like you’re giving me business materials to deliver for you when you give me the papers you found.”

“That motherfucker took my daughter.”

“What? You have a daughter?”

I tried to pull myself together, but it was difficult. “Yes. And she was kidnapped, so I’m sorry, Agent Marsden, but I have to hand over the papers to them. I can’t lose another person.”

“Don’t be rash, Oliver. I’m on my way.”

“I don’t have time for these games. I have to save her.” A well of emotion had me sinking to my knees. All I could think about was how I’d failed Liam. I couldn’t fail Olivia too.

“You have no guarantee that if you hand those papers over, your daughter will be safe. When I get there, we’ll talk. We’ll come up with a plan.”

“Whatever plan you had didn’t work out so well for Liam.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Liam gave his life for whatever is in those documents.”

“There’s no fucking way he would have given my daughter’s life for it, though.” But I had to consider that she was right. I couldn’t be sure that by handing over the papers, Olivia would be delivered unharmed.

“How do you know she’s still alive?”

“What the fuck?”

“I’m sorry, Oliver, but it’s possible... we need proof of life.”

I was going to be sick. I could feel the bile rising.

“I’ll be there shortly.”

I ended the call and rushed to the bathroom where I emptied my stomach of the coffee I’d consumed that morning. With shaking legs, I returned to the living area of my suite and got a bottle of water.

At the knock on the door, I tossed it aside and rushed to it. I yanked it open.

“Donovan?”

He arched a brow. “You look like you’ve gotten bad news. I guess you’ve heard about the accident?”

I nodded. Why was he here?

“I spoke to Lindsay. She’s distraught.” He shook his head. “Five years later, and Liam is still wreaking havoc.”

I furrowed my brow. “That’s not helpful.”

“No. But it’s true.” He nodded toward my room. I opened the door to let him in. “You know, we could get these motherfuckers if you’d let me help. Have you handed over the papers to the FBI yet?”

I shook my head. “She’s on her way.”

He nodded and then looked around my suite. “So, you have them here?”

“Yes,” I said absently. I couldn’t get my brain to work.

“Let me help you finish this, Oliver. The FBI can’t do anything quickly or quietly. I know all the players in Liam’s life. Some of them help me out from time to time with information. I can help you get Olivia back for Lindsay.”

I was tempted.

“It would be shitty if Liam’s daughter had to pay for his actions.”

My daughter. Not Liam’s. But that wasn’t important to share now. “What can you do?”

“I can make a few calls. See what the word is in the crew. Who had a hard-on for Liam’s list.”

“Do that.”

“Where are—”

“You make the calls first.”

For a moment, he stared at me but then nodded. “Alright.” He took out his phone and moved toward the window.

I found my tossed water bottle and picked it up. Most of the water was soaked into the carpet so I got another water from the fridge.

Liam’s list?

I stopped mid-sip. Had I told Donovan the papers were a list? Maybe.

I took a sip of water.

No. I hadn’t given Donovan any details about the papers. So how the fuck did he know it was a list?

I glanced over at him, and a new sort of sickness burned in my gut. Donovan had once run with the same people Liam did. He knew how to disable security systems or at least knew people who could. As the detective on the case, he’d been able to go through Lindsay’s home after the break-in. He was being

pushy about wanting to be involved. I could put that off to not wanting the FBI to have the case, but it could also be very possible that he was involved in all this.

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Donovan knew all the crew members, and yet there wasn't a sense of his being treated like a traitor for joining the police. That had to mean that the crew wanted him there where he could inform them of investigations or manipulate information and evidence.

Jesus fuck.

What I didn't know was why now? Why five years after Liam's death had his papers become so important?

I pulled out my phone and called into my voicemail to record. If I was going to die here, I wanted to make sure Donovan and everyone around him were brought down.

Donovan put his phone in his pocket.

"Well?" I asked, setting my phone on the table.

"I'm told that the girl is fine."

I frowned. "If you know someone who knows where she is, we need to go get her."

He held his hands up as if I were a feral animal ready to strike. I supposed I was. "I can't just go in guns blazing, Oliver. You know that."

"So, what do we do?"

He gave a shrug. "We can hand over the papers. Use it to draw them out so I can arrest them."

"You do know that I don't give a shit about the papers, right? I just want Olivia back."

He gave me a reassuring smile. "Then hand them over. If you'd like, I can take them and do it for you."

"They're okay with a cop?"

He flinched, and I worried I might give away what I'd realized. "I should do it. They might suspect something if I

don't."

He nodded. "I can follow you, be your backup."

I blew out a breath. "I just don't understand why this is happening now? Why didn't they try to get the papers when Liam died?"

Donovan shrugged. "Who can understand the crew, eh?"

I shook my head. "There has to be something."

"There's been inner warring going on in the crew. Maybe someone learned about them and wants to use them to bring Wally down."

"Wally? He's the head of the crew now?" I didn't remember Darcy sharing that with me. "Is he still a foster parent?"

Donovan's eyes narrowed. "That's what you're worried about?"

"Aren't you? You're a cop, for Christ's sake."

As if he just remembered that, he nodded. "Yes, of course. What I meant was, shouldn't we be focused on the girl?"

"Yes. So, what's next?"

"I assume you got a text? Text them back and tell them you'll meet them with the papers on Howard Street. There's an old warehouse there that the crew uses."

I picked up my phone and sent the text. A second later, a reply came back.

30 minutes

"They said to meet in thirty minutes."

"We should go, then. You've got the papers?"

I nodded. As I went to pick them up, I had this feeling I was about to die. If Donovan was a part of this, all he had to do was kill me now and take the papers. I realized that I wasn't so afraid of dying as I was of missing out. Of not having more time with the girls. Of not finding forgiveness for Lindsay and telling her I loved her.

I went over the desk, opening the drawer. The envelope was there, along with paper and envelopes.

“I’m going to take a piss, then we can go.”

For a moment, I felt like God was on my side. I scribbled a note, planning to leave it for Agent Marsden at the front desk. I put the time and place on Howard street. I also gave her access information to my voicemail.

“Ready?” Donovan asked.

I picked up the packet while I shoved the envelope in my pocket. “You don’t want them?”

“You insisted on handling it, so you will.”

“I wonder if Darcy is a part of this,” I said, although I wasn’t sure why. What did it matter now?

“Why would you say that?” Donovan arched a brow at me.

“She was friends with Liam. And she blamed Wally for her incarceration.”

“Could be.” He shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets. It was a move that suggested nonchalance, but I wasn’t buying it. “Maybe instead of worrying about all that, we focus on getting the girl back. Then I’d suggest you go back to your billions of dollars in California and put us all behind you again.”

That might have been nice except my life was now in Boston. Or was it? Olivia’s situation was my fault. I’d insisted on finishing what Liam started even while knowing it was likely what got him killed. What had I been thinking?

I headed to the door.

“You should leave your phone here,” Donovan said. “It could be used to track you. You don’t want the FBI fucking things up by going in guns blazing.”

I didn’t like the idea of not having my phone. I also didn’t like that I couldn’t figure out whether Donovan was being legit or not. But I didn’t have much choice but to listen to him

if I wanted to keep my suspicions about him a secret. I set the phone on the desk, disconnecting from my voicemail.

I followed Donovan out of the suite and into the elevator. We arrived at the lobby, and I started toward the front desk when I saw Agent Marsden in a courier uniform.

“Shit, I forgot,” I said to Donovan. I walked over to her. “Are you the courier to meet with Oliver Quinlan?”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked from me to Donovan. “Yes, sir.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out an envelope with a paper I’d scribbled on quickly before I left the room. “Here’s my package. Make sure it gets delivered.”

Then I moved on toward the exit with Donovan to where he said he’d left his car. I had to hope to hell that she knew what to do with the information and could help me save Olivia.

Lindsay

The good news was that I was going to be able to go home. The bad news was that it took forever for the hospital to put together my discharge papers. As a result, I was still lying in my hospital bed while my daughter Olivia had been kidnapped by some maniac.

Mira brought Georgie and Cassie to me, and the two of them cried and shook in my arms as I pulled them close and held them. Eventually, they fell asleep, but I kept them close. I wouldn't let them out of my sight ever again.

Mira sat in a chair in my room looking as helpless as I felt. My father paced, occasionally leaving the room and then returning. I had no idea what he was doing, but whatever it was, it wasn't calming him down, which continued to leave me agitated. He did tell me that he had talked to Oliver, who indicated that he had heard from the kidnapper. I hoped and I prayed that when Oliver talked to Agent Marsden, they would find a way to save my baby. I wondered if Flynn had talked to Oliver yet and if he'd be able to help as well. I hated that all I could do was hold my girls and hope for the best.

The door opened, and I hoped it was the nurse with my discharge papers. I wanted to get out of this hospital and to go out looking for my daughter. Not that my father would allow that. I knew that he and Mira would make me go home with them. At least the girls would be in a place they could feel comfortable and secure.

But it wasn't a nurse who entered my room. It was a young man dressed in a dark suit. Immediately, I tensed, wondering if this was someone related to whoever had taken Olivia.

He held up a badge. "My name is Agent Langdon, with the FBI. Agent Marsden has sent me to talk to you."

"Have you heard anything yet? Have you saved my daughter?"

My father and Mira stepped up to my bedside, as eager as I was for news about Olivia.

He shook his head. "Agent Marsden is coordinating a plan. But she's working off unusual information and was hopeful that you would be able to help."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Agent Marsden was supposed to meet Mr. Quinlan at his hotel to receive some documents his deceased brother had hidden that apparently revealed a scheme by which social security numbers were stolen and sold."

I nodded. "They didn't meet?" If they hadn't that meant that Oliver had decided to hand the paperwork over in exchange for Olivia. A part of me was relieved and yet still worried. There was no guarantee that once they got the papers, they would release Olivia. In fact, considering that these people had killed Liam, it was possible that both Olivia and Oliver could end up dead. A cold shiver ran down my spine.

The girls began to stir in my arms. "Mommy?"

"Why don't I take the girls to get something to eat?" Mira said.

Both Georgie and Cassie clung to me. "I don't want to leave my mommy."

I kissed them both on the head. "Everything's going to be just fine. You go with Grand-Mira and get some food while I talk to Mr. Langdon. I'll be here when you get back. I promise." They looked skeptical but complied.

I mouthed a thank you to Mira for understanding that the kids didn't need to hear all this. My father looked torn but

decided to stay with me, for which I was glad. I couldn't be sure my mind was working right, and I wanted him to hear whatever Agent Langdon was going to ask me about.

"Did they not meet?" I asked him.

"When Agent Marsden arrived, Mr. Quinlan was leaving with another man that we've identified as Detective Flynn Donovan. I understand that you know him as well?"

I nodded. "He was the detective investigating who had broken into my home."

The agent gave a quick nod. "Mr. Quinlan approached Agent Marsden, who was dressed as a courier, her cover in meeting with Mr. Quinlan to pick up the documents. Mr. Quinlan approached her, asking if she was the courier, and then handed over an envelope to her, but it wasn't the documents."

My brow furrowed. "Why would he act as if she was the courier at that point? Especially if he was getting help from Donovan and going to make the exchange?"

"That was a question that we asked as well. According to Agent Marsden, she had talked to Mr. Quinlan earlier, and he had told her about the kidnapping. Agent Marsden had told him to stay there, that she was on her way, and they would figure out a plan. So she was surprised that he was leaving."

"If he didn't give her the documents, what did he give her?"

"The envelope had a location which we determined as a warehouse. We think he was letting us know where he was going to hand off the documents in exchange for the child. The second was a phone number and password that happen to be to his voicemail."

I looked at my father, wondering if he was able to make sense of any of this. He looked as confused as I felt.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, we have gone ahead and called in and listened, and apparently, it is a recording of Quinlan and Detective

Donovan. We have a few ideas, but I want you to listen to it and see if you have any thoughts on what it might mean.”

He tapped something on his phone, and I heard Oliver ask, “Well?”

“I’m told that the girl is fine,” Flynn said. The recording went on until Oliver asked about Darcy and Donovan asked him why he’d bring her up.”

Oliver told him about Darcy’s anger at Wally, which Donovan didn’t sound interested in. Then Donovan told Oliver to leave his phone, and the recording ended.

Agent Langdon looked up at me.

I shrugged. “It sounds like they’re talking about how to turn over the papers so that they can save Olivia.”

“That’s our take too. But we’re wondering if you notice anything in Mr. Quinlan’s voice? Or anything unusual about the conversation?”

“Oliver sounds tense, but of course he would be.” I thought about the conversation again. “It was sort of unusual, though, that Donovan was offering to take the papers. I mean, it’s one thing if he was going to take them to investigate, but he made it sound like he was going to make the exchange. But Oliver’s right, why would the crew be open to working with him since he’s with law enforcement?”

The agent’s brow arched, telling me that I had hit on one of the issues that they had been wondering about as well.

“We did also think it was unusual that if Mr. Quinlan was with the detective as he was leaving the hotel, why didn’t he introduce the agent and the detective? Granted, law enforcement agencies don’t always like to work together, but generally, in the case of a missing child, those sorts of rivalries are put aside. Yet he kept Agent Marsden’s cover.”

“Holy hell, you’re thinking Donovan is a part of this,” my father said.

My jaw dropped. “Oh, my God. Flynn knew Liam back when they were kids and even just before he was killed. I think

they hung out with some of the same people, people who were in the crew.” I closed my eyes at the memory of how helpful Donovan was in helping me search and clean up my home. “I let him in my home. He was helping me clean things up, but if he’s a part of this, he was looking for the papers.”

The agent nodded. My father let out an expletive and took my hand.

“But if that’s the case, why didn’t Donovan just take the papers from Oliver when he had the chance? Why was Donovan offering to make the exchange if he could just take the papers?”

“We have had the same question, and what we’re thinking is that if he took them by force, he’d out himself and reveal his connection to the crew. It’s in his and the crew’s best interests that his connection stay hidden.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Now, I wasn’t just worried about Olivia but about Oliver as well.

“We have a couple more questions that we’re hoping you can answer. First of all, they mention Wally, which we suspect is Wally Creighton who is now head of the crew. He’s also the one we know Liam had suspected of stealing social security numbers of foster children to sell them.”

I nodded. “That’s what Oliver had learned.”

“Did he learn it from the person he referred to as Darcy in this recording?”

“He talked to two people. Once was Darcy... Darcy Patrick. She and Liam had known each other... I think they were friends, maybe more. I think Oliver said that Darcy was recently let out of prison. The other person’s name was Johnny... I think. He used to be with the crew, but he isn’t anymore.”

Agent Langdon wrote down notes in his notebook.

“What do you think this all means?” I asked.

“We’re just trying to get a sense of all the players and how they might fit together.”

“If this Wally person is behind this, then he would have Olivia. Can’t you go to his house?”

“Agent Marsden is doing everything that she can. However, our intel is telling us that this Darcy woman had a beef with Creighton.”

I just stared at him. “I don’t know what all this means.”

“There’s a reason Mr. Quinlan made this recording and passed it to us. He mentions this Darcy woman specifically and seems to think that she’s involved. But if she went to prison because of Creighton, why would she then be telling him about these papers if she was angry at him? It would seem more likely that she’d want the papers for herself. Or to use them against Creighton. We do know that there is an internal power struggle going on in the crew.”

I didn’t know if it was the accident or just the stress of the situation, but it took a moment for the neurons in my brain to fire coherently. “So, you’re saying that maybe this Wally person isn’t involved in all this. That it’s Darcy and someone else. Maybe Flynn?”

He nodded.

“What does all this mean for us? What are we supposed to do?” my father said, frustration lacing his tone.

“The best you can do is give us any information that you might have. Rest assured that we are focused on getting your daughter back safely.”

“I think that’s all I know. I never actually talked to Darcy or that Johnny person. It’s only what Oliver told me. I’ve talked to Flynn many times, but I never once got the feeling that he was a part of this. But if he is, I suppose it makes sense. He was helpful in getting my house cleaned up and having somebody watch it. I suppose he was really watching me to see if I found what Liam had hidden.”

Agent Langdon put his notes back into his coat pocket. “I’m going to relay this information to agent Marsden. I’ll be in touch.”

He left, and I squeezed my dad’s hand. “This is my fault.”

My father's eyes darkened. "None of this is your fault. If it's anyone's fault, it's Oliver and Liam's. They brought these people into your life, Lindsay."

"But I trusted Flynn. If he's a part of this, maybe I should've just given him the papers. That's all they wanted. He could've taken them, and all this would've stopped, and Olivia would be in school with her sisters like she should be." The fear and pain overwhelmed me and I wept.

My father shook his head. "You can't blame yourself for this. You need to focus on getting better and preparing to bring Olivia home."

The door opened and the nurse came in. "You're ready for discharge."

I got out of bed, ignoring the throbbing in my head and the aches in my body from the accident. I was going home, and I was determined that somehow, I would have all three of my girls with me before the night was through.

Oliver

I didn't know what the fuck I was doing, but I had to do something. I sat in the car next to Donovan as he drove us over to the warehouse. As we turned on Howard Street, my phone beeped. I opened it and saw a text from Olivia's kidnapper.

“Jesus fuck. They've given me a new address.”

“Where?” he asked.

I rattled off the address.

“It's practically on the other side of town,” Donovan said. But he made a U-turn, and we headed toward the new location.

“Why would they do that?” I asked.

Donovan shrugged. “Perhaps they knew you'd been talking to the FBI. They want to make sure you didn't somehow let them know where you were going.”

My jaw tightened and I looked out the passenger side window. Had Donovan realized the courier was Agent Marsden? Or maybe I was just being paranoid about Donovan.

We continued the ride in silence, although the war in my brain was deafening. Anger and guilt. Hurt and regret. But mostly, terror. If this went wrong, Olivia could be killed. For the first time since he died, I cursed Liam for getting involved with these people. Yes, I was proud of him for trying to get his life together and do the right thing, but even five years after

his death, his actions were bringing danger to Lindsay and the girls.

We pulled up to the new location, which looked more desolate and abandoned than the one on Howard Street.

Donovan pulled to the curb. “This is it. You got the papers?”

I nodded, expecting him to demand them. Instead, he nodded toward the side door of the warehouse. “If this goes well, Olivia’s in there. Just hand the papers over and you should be okay.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked. Wasn’t he supposed to sneak in and apprehend the kidnapper?

“I’m going to wait until you have the girl and the kidnapper walks out. Then I’m going to arrest them.”

I didn’t like that plan, but I had no alternative. I exited the car. A cold wind blew, and I felt it deep in my bones. I hoped it wasn’t a sign that things were going to go very, very badly.

I walked up to the side door and opened it. I peered in. The place was mostly empty and dark, with the only light coming from dingy windows.

I stepped inside. “I’ve got the papers. Where’s Olivia?”

I heard movement behind me. I whipped around.

“She’s fine, Oliver. You don’t think I’d really hurt a child, do you?” Darcy stepped out, and next to her, holding her hand, was Olivia. The girl saw me and let out a soft cry.

“Here’s the papers, Darcy. Give me Olivia.” I rushed toward her, but Darcy held up a gun pointed at my chest.

“Everything’s going to be just fine, Oliver. You drop the papers on the ground and I will release Olivia.”

I didn’t have much choice, so I tossed the papers and held my breath. Thank God, Darcy released Olivia’s hand. “Go ahead.”

Olivia ran toward me. “Daddy.”

I squatted down and wrapped her up in my arms, turning my back to Darcy to protect my daughter. Olivia whimpered against my neck, her little arms holding me painfully tight.

“Now all you have to do is stay here for five minutes. After five minutes, the two of you can leave.”

I was going to ask how Olivia and I were going to get out of here because in my mind, Darcy was about to leave with Donovan. He was either her accomplice or he'd arrest her.

At this point, I didn't give a fuck what they did. All that mattered was that I get Olivia safely home. I held her tight, trying to soothe her, my heart breaking for how her little body shook in my arms.

I heard the door open and shut. I waited, as Darcy instructed. “It's okay, baby. You're going to be okay. We're going to wait here a little bit longer.”

I had no idea how long I'd been standing there, but deciding it was plenty of time for Darcy to leave and Donovan to do whatever he was going to do, I made my way to the door. I was several feet from it when I heard three loud shots delivered in succession.

I immediately crouched down, covering Olivia in fear that bullets were about to come through the door. Tires screeched as if a car were driving away. Jesus, had Donovan killed her?

I had to consider that whoever it was might come looking for us. I kept low as I moved away from the door. I found a room that Darcy had been likely waiting for me in. Inside was a desk and chair, illuminated by a window. Carefully, I peeked out toward the street, where Donovan's car still sat parked. Next to it lay Darcy's motionless body. And in the driver seat sat Donovan with a bullet hole in his forehead.

I turned to the desk, reaching for the phone. I held it up to my ear, hearing the dial tone, and gave a prayer of thanks as I dialed 911.

“We're going home, baby. We're going to be just fine.”

Thirty minutes later, I was in a police station holding a terrified Olivia. I told them I'd answer all their questions once

Lindsay picked up Olivia. I wanted to get Olivia as far away from this horror as I could.

It was another half-hour before Lindsay came rushing into the room where the police had put me and Olivia. My heart cracked open to see the fear and desperation on her face. She had a bandage on her head and bruises on her face. It reminded me that this all started with a car accident.

“Mommy.” Olivia slipped from my arms, running to her.

Lindsay dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around the girl and weeping.

Olivia was safe, but for some reason, I still felt like an epic failure.

“Daddy came and got me. He told me we’d be okay. And we were.”

“I know, baby. I’m so glad.” She lifted her gaze to me. “Thank you, Oliver. Thank you.”

Detective Riker came in, followed by Agent Marsden.

“We have a lot to talk about,” Agent Marsden said.

“I’ll tell you everything once Lindsay takes Olivia home.”

Lindsay stood, picking Olivia up. She looked at me. “You’ll come by when you’re done?”

I gave her a noncommittal nod.

“Make sure that you do.” She turned and left the room.

When the door shut behind Lindsay, Agent Marsden sat across the table from me. “I’m curious whether you saw who killed Detective Donovan and Darcy Patrick?”

Scraping my hands over my face, I turned my attention to her and Detective Riker.

“No.”

Hours later, I’d given my statement and then some. The questioning went back to the first text I’d received, and even back five years ago to Liam’s actions.

I was about at my limit when Agent Marsden slid my phone across the table. “I hope you don’t mind that we broke into your hotel room to pick this up. We plan to keep it for evidence. However, I wanted you to tell me what you think about a text that came in just as you arrived here at the police station.”

What the fuck? Surely, this ordeal was over. I picked up the phone and opened my messages and clicked the top message.

I LET you and the girl live. You owe me. Go back home and let all this go.

I LOOKED up at Agent Marsden. “I don’t know what this means.”

“Do you want to hear my theory?”

I nodded.

“I think Donovan and Darcy and perhaps a few others are trying to take over the crew from Wally Creighton. I suspect they wanted what Liam had to try and blackmail Wally or somehow use it against him. Or maybe they were just going to sell the information to make money so that they could take over the crew. We believe Wally Creighton somehow found out about it and was following you, killed Detective Donovan and Darcy Patrick, and got the documents. We think this text is from him and he’s asking a favor of you.”

I sat back, raising my arms in surrender. “I don’t have anything. All I had was the papers and those are gone.” But then I remembered I’d taken pictures of them and now I had to decide whether or not to reveal that. I quickly decided not to. This text was a threat. It meant that Lindsay and the girls could still be in danger if I helped Agent Marsden.

“Are you all right, Mr. Quinlan?”

I sucked in a breath and sat up straight. “I’m fine. Creighton or whoever this is doesn’t have to worry about me. I

don't know anything. I don't have anything." I slid the phone back to her.

She picked up the phone and set it next to her files. "As I said, we'll be taking this for evidence, looking at all the texts and everything."

I nodded my understanding.

She cocked her head to the side. "There's a part of me that wonders, Mr. Quinlan, if perhaps you made a copy of the papers that we believe Mr. Creighton just killed two people and possibly your brother for."

I shrugged noncommittally. For all I knew, Riker was in on this. Or somebody watching through the two-way mirror was in on this. My only goal right now was to distance myself from this situation.

Agent Marsden studied me for a moment and then gave a nod. She gathered the phone and her papers together.

"This is part of our case as well," detective Riker said.

Agent Marsden stuffed all the materials into her briefcase. "This is now a federal case involving organized crime and identity theft. Of course, if we learn anything that will help solve Liam Quinlan's murder, we will definitely let you know."

She gave me one last look, and a part of me felt she was telling me she knew what she'd find on the phone, assuming her tech team could decrypt the photos. I gave her a nod to let her know I understood. Liam had trusted her, and I was now going to do the same.

There was only one more thing to do if I was going to insure Lindsay and the girls' safety. "Before I leave here, do you have a piece of paper? Would you be willing to deliver something to Lindsay McKinnon for me?" I asked Agent Marsden.

"Sure."

Detective Riker ripped off a piece of paper from the pad he had in front of him and handed me a pen. I wrote Lindsay a

note trying to explain everything. When I finished and signed my name, my heart shattered into a million pieces. I folded it up and handed it to Agent Marsden.

I left the police station, feeling more exhausted than I had in my entire life. I had no phone, but Detective Riker was kind enough to order me a car. When I got back to my hotel room, I sank onto the couch, too tired to get the drink I craved. My head sagged back into the couch and I closed my eyes. As soon as I had the strength, I was going to leave Boston for good.

Lindsay

When I was discharged, my father drove me and the girls home. Mira left briefly to pick up Grayson from school but then came back to my house. When the call came in that Oliver and Olivia were safe, my father took me to the police station. Seeing my baby again after a day of being so afraid brought me to my knees. I knew I'd never be able to repay Oliver for his heroism. I hated to leave him behind, but I had to get Olivia home.

When Georgie and Cassie reunited with Olivia, the three of them hugged each other and cried. Then I scooped them up and brought them to the couch and we sat and cried together. That was where I was now because there was nothing else I could do but sit and savor having my children with me.

"I'd feel better if you came back to the house with me and Miranda," my father said as he sat in a chair across from us, watching us. I imagined he was holding a vigil, like a guard keeping us safe.

I shook my head. "The girls need to be in their own space. They need to have some semblance of normalcy."

He frowned. "They know me and Miranda. They know our house."

I stood my ground. "This is their house."

His jaw tightened. "Then we're all going to stay here with you."

I wouldn't deny that I was glad to hear that. If Oliver came over and stayed as well, it would be a crowded and probably tense house, but we'd all be here together, alive and well.

As the evening wore on, my father and Mira made dinner. We ate together, but the mood was quiet and somber. I hadn't heard from Oliver, and I wondered how much longer he was going to be questioned.

The girls were exhausted, so I put them to bed in my bed and lay with them until they finally fell asleep. I was tired myself and decided I'd just crash for the night as well, but my father appeared at my door.

"The FBI is here to see you."

I carefully extricated myself from the girls and left my bedroom. I checked my watch and noted that it was late with still no word from Oliver.

I entered the living room where Agent Marsden and Agent Langdon stood.

"How is your little girl doing?" she asked.

"She's still pretty shaken up, but she's happy to be with her sisters. Thank you so much for whatever you did to save them."

Agent Marsden grimaced. "I'm sorry to say that's all on Mr. Quinlan. He took it into his own hands to deal with this, and it's fortunate for him and your daughter that everything turned out okay."

I nodded. I didn't have any details of what had gone on. I'd only heard murmurs of a shooting and that Detective Donovan and Darcy were victims. Once I heard Oliver and Olivia were okay, the other details didn't really matter.

"I know it's late and it's been a hectic day for you, but we need to tie up a few loose ends."

"I'll go make some coffee," my father said. He left without waiting for their response.

I motioned for them to sit. Agent Marsden sat in the chair my father had been in earlier, but Agent Langdon remained

standing, pulling his notebook out. I sat on the couch, tucking my feet under me.

Agent Marsden asked me about the accident, whether I'd seen anything unusual that morning or noticed anything about the vehicle. I hadn't. I reiterated what I had told agent Langdon earlier about what Oliver had mentioned to me about Darcy and the other guy named Johnny.

My father brought coffee and lingered as I continued to answer their questions. I told them everything I could remember about the time I spent with Flynn.

"Do you think one of them killed Liam?" I asked.

Agent Marsden shrugged. "It's possible. But we believe that Detective Donovan and Ms. Patrick were actually working against the man we think killed Liam or arranged Liam's murder."

I didn't like hearing that. That meant that Liam's murder was still unsolved. It was wrong, but I hoped that things would go back to how they were before. I wanted Liam to be in my past. But what did that mean for me and Oliver? Or, more specifically, Oliver and the girls?

Agent Marsden pulled out a sheet of yellow paper from her bag and set it on the coffee table in front of me. "Mr. Quinlan asked that I deliver this to you." She rose from the chair. "Agent Langdon and I will show ourselves out. It's possible that we'll have more questions later, but you've been very helpful tonight. Thank you."

I reached out and picked up the paper and then looked up at them. "Is Oliver all right?"

She nodded. "I think he's shaken up like everyone else. He was extremely cooperative today, and I imagine he's planning his return home."

Home?

The agents left, and my father took their coffee mugs back to the kitchen.

I opened the sheet of paper and read the note that Oliver wrote.

LINDSAY —

I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for Liam. I'm sorry that I abandoned you and in doing so, abandoned the girls. I won't deny that it's still painful that you hadn't told me about them, but I can't blame you either. Liam and I had the misfortune of being conceived and raised in toxicity. I had thought we could escape it, but I was wrong.

Liam brought danger into your life, and that danger still exists through me. The only way for you and the girls to be safe is for me to get as far away from you as I can.

I GASPED and my hand covered my mouth. What was he saying?

BUT I WANT to leave you and the girls with a few things. First of all, while I know you don't need any financial help from me, I'm hoping that you will accept some. It's not just an obligation to the girls that I feel. I want to be a part of their lives, even if it's just helping them be able to do all the activities they want to do or go to college or have a fancy wedding.

I want you to know that I think you're a tremendous woman and an amazing mother. The girls are beautiful, and I'm in awe of all you've been able to do to raise them.

I also want you to know that I love you. I have loved you practically since the moment I met you. The guilt of betraying my brother, especially after the night we made love, was why I left. It was wrong, and I'm sorry.

I wonder if things had been different, if there would've been a place for you and me and the girls in this world. The four of you have done well without me, and I know that you will continue to do well.

I imagine you're going to feel like I've abandoned you again, but it's the only way I can keep you all safe, keep you away from the ugliness of my and Liam's lives.

Love always,

Oliver

ANGER BOILED deep in my gut. I crumpled up the paper.

“Is there a problem?” my father asked as he came back into the room. Mira followed him with Grayson.

“He’s leaving again. After everything, he’s leaving again.”

My father frowned and Miranda stopped. “Grayson, go get your jammies on. I’ll be right there.” Grayson headed down the hall while Mira came over next to my dad. “What’s wrong?”

“Oliver just wrote me a letter saying he’s leaving us for our own good. Can you believe that?”

Miranda arched a brow. “Are you going to let him do that?”

What else could I do?

Miranda patted my father on the shoulder. “I bet you if you asked nicely, your dad would let you borrow his keys.”

Of course. I had to go to him. I jumped up. “Can I, Dad?” If I were lucky, Oliver wasn’t already on a plane heading back to California.

“What about the girls?” my father asked.

“You said you’re staying here tonight. You can stay with them.”

“It’s the middle of the night, Lindsay.”

“You’re the one who told me love was worth fighting for.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I was at Oliver’s hotel door, banging on it. It took a minute, but he finally opened it. The man

looked exhausted and completely gutted. While part of me wanted to hug him, I let the anger lead as I muscled my way into his room.

I tossed the wadded-up letter at him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He let out a long sigh, trudging back to the living area of his suite and sagging onto the couch. “I told you. I’m leaving.”

“You can’t meet your daughters and then abandon them. I get it that you don’t love me. Which, by the way, I wish you would stop saying. You didn’t love me back then and you don’t now. But your daughters—”

He looked up at me with heat in his eyes. “Don’t tell me what I feel. Everything I said in that letter was true. I loved you. I still love you. But I’m bad for you and I’m bad for the girls.”

“None of this is your fault, Oliver. It’s Donovan’s and Darcy’s fault. Even Liam’s, but not yours.”

He rubbed his hands over his face. I couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone who looked so despondent.

“Do you know why Donovan and Darcy are dead?”

I shook my head. “No, but I don’t care. If they were the ones behind all this, if they’re the ones who took my baby, I don’t care.”

“They’re dead because someone else in the crew killed them. Killed them and took the papers.”

“So? They’ve got the papers. They have no reason to bother us.”

“They do if the FBI is going to open a case. “

“But they don’t have the papers. They don’t have anything more than they had five years ago when they decided that they didn’t have enough evidence to do anything.”

“I got a text that suggested Olivia and I were alive only by their grace. I need to let this go or you’re in danger. It is

gutting me to leave you and the girls. But I'll do it in a minute if that's what it takes to keep you safe."

My anger quickly vanished, and instead, hope and the need to soothe him replaced it. I sat on the couch, taking his hand in mine. "You don't have to leave. All you have to do is stop talking to the FBI."

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it, and I felt his love, his warmth wrap around my heart. "I took pictures of the papers. Pictures that are on my phone. I didn't tell Agent Marsden that they were there, but she has my phone for evidence, and she suspected that I made copies. That means they're going to find them. I don't know if it's going to help their case, but at this point, she's said they're going to look into the crew. I have to go."

I heard the resolve in his voice, and it angered me. I let go of his hand and rose from the couch. "You can't do this to your daughters."

He looked at me with tears in his eyes. "I don't have a choice, Lindsay."

Tears streamed down my face, but I wiped them away defiantly. "It's almost Christmas, Oliver. We've all been through a traumatic time. But with Christmas around the corner, it's our chance to bring back the magic back into those girls' lives. But you're just going to walk out on them?" I shook my head. "I wish you'd never heard of them. I wish they'd never met you."

The pain in his face was acute, like I'd stabbed him in the chest. A part of me felt bad for saying something so cruel, but at the same time, my anger at him felt justified.

"I loved you too, Oliver. I loved you that night we conceived our daughters. I loved you when you came back. The tragedy is that I love you still. But I will never forgive you for this." With nothing more to say, I left.

Oliver

Feeling like somebody had cut my heart open and rolled it over broken glass was a pain that I had never felt before.

But it didn't matter. I would learn to live with it just as I had learned to live with all the other pain in my life. The only thing that mattered was Lindsay and the kids' safety. So, I didn't follow Lindsay out of the room when she told me she would never forgive me. As planned, I was on a plane the next day, returning to California.

I went back to work, doing all the things a CEO of a company who'd been gone for a week would do, which was mostly catching up, putting out fires, and barking orders at people. It was just a few days, but most of my staff were keeping a wide berth from me.

Two days before Christmas, I was working at my desk while down the hall, my staff were celebrating with an office holiday party. My admin had encouraged me to poke my head in to say a few festive words, but that was impossible. There wasn't a festive cell in my body.

I considered heading home to work when my phone beeped. Like a Pavlovian dog, I tensed, wondering what threat I was going to receive. I hadn't gotten any texts since I'd left Boston, but that was likely because I'd gotten a new phone since the FBI had my old one. But I wouldn't put it past anyone in the crew to hunt me down.

I recognized the area code of Boston. I poked the button and saw that it was a video call. I turned on the video and held up the phone.

Blue eyes and blonde hair and cherubic smiles filled the screen. “Oh, hi, Daddy!” Cassie waved her hand furiously.

“Not so loud, Cassie. Grandpa says we have to be quiet,” Georgie chastised.

My heart squeezed tight at the sight of them. I wished I could reach through the phone and hug them. Then I wondered how they were calling me, and why weren’t they angry at me for leaving?

“Olivia.” Georgie pulled her sister until all three little faces filled the screen.

Emotion choked me, and I barely managed to say hello.

“Is that where you live?” Georgie asked, her eyes looking as if they were taking in my surroundings.

Olivia leaned forward, her face filling the screen until her lips were on the screen and I realized she was giving me a kiss. Jesus fuck. How did a man survive emotion like this?

“You got spit on the phone.” Georgie’s hand wiped over the screen.

“Daddy? Will you be here for Christmas?” Cassie asked. “We’re going to the cabin.”

God. Was this my punishment?

I checked my watch. It was nearly seven here, which meant it was almost ten back east. “You girls are up late.”

“Grandpa says we have to be quiet so that Mommy doesn’t know we’re up,” Georgie said.

“Mommy says she and Gran-Mira are helping the elves.” Olivia finally popped in, and I was so happy to hear her voice. I couldn’t imagine that she’d forgotten the terror that happened to her, but I hoped she would be able to live her life without it haunting her every moment of the day as it did for me.

“Have you all been good for Santa?” I made a mental note to send presents and then immediately questioned it. I wasn’t supposed to be in their lives.

“Yes. Mommy says that Santa can see us in his magic snowball. Is that true?” Cassie asked.

“If your mom said so, then it’s probably true.”

“Okay, girls, we need to get you back to bed. If your mom finds out that I got you up, she won’t be happy.”

“But you’re Mommy’s daddy, Grandpa. You’re the boss of her,” Georgie said.

I laughed, as did Brett on the other end of the line. “I’m not sure I was ever the boss of your mom. Now scoot to bed. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay. Bye, Daddy.” The girls chimed their goodbyes and blew me kisses. I blew them kisses back and wondered if it was possible to die from heartbreak.

Brett’s face appeared on the screen. At first, it was a side view as if he was watching the girls to make sure they were doing what he told them to.

Then he turned to look at me and in his eyes, I saw disappointment and anger. “I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing—”

“How did you even get this number?” I scraped my hand over my face.

“I’m resourceful.”

“Did Lindsay put you up to this?”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Lindsay would skin me alive if she knew I was doing this.”

It was strange how much that hurt, which was stupid because I was the one who left. I’d told her I couldn’t see her, and she listened, just like she had the last time. Well, maybe she did try to call last time, but clearly, her father had the resources to hunt me down and she hadn’t five years ago.

I shook my head because it didn't matter anymore. In the end, she was right not to tell me. And while I couldn't imagine not ever having met the girls, I couldn't deny a part of me wished I didn't have to endure this never-ending heartache.

“To be honest with you, Oliver, I didn't think much of your brother. I felt like he was using her to get ahead in the world. And I especially didn't like it when I had to go pick her up at the police station because of him.”

I had no response because I couldn't blame him. Liam cared for Lindsay, but it was true that part of her appeal was that she came from a good family with money. It was one of the reasons I liked that he had fallen for her. I had seen her as his way out. But in the end, all that happened was that she had been dragged down into our toxic lives.

“Now, I can't remember meeting you, except perhaps at some function, so I didn't have any real impression of you, but I can tell you that right now, I think you are the biggest fucking asshole and a coward. Five years ago, you fucked my daughter and then left her pregnant with triplets. And maybe you didn't know about that, but you pulled a wham, bam, thank you, ma'am on her. I wouldn't have called you either.”

I closed my eyes, wondering how it was possible to feel any worse.

“But the way Lindsay tells it, she wasn't pissed that you ghosted her. No, she let you go because she wanted you to live your life. Pursue your dreams. But you know what I see? I see a whiny little bitch.”

I flinched at the venom in his words.

“I see a man who isn't really a man because a real man wouldn't tell a woman he loves her and then leave her. He wouldn't get pissed off at not knowing about his kids, have his kids love him, and then abandon them.”

My defenses rose, but I had no comeback because he wasn't wrong. I'd done all those things.

“If it's true that there's still danger out there, then you really are a fucker because now, you've left them all

vulnerable.”

I swallowed. “They’re not in danger if I’m not there.”

“That’s bullshit because if it were really true that there was a hint of danger, you’d have moved them out of Boston. They’d be much safer there with you in California.”

I blinked because I hadn’t even considered that.

“Look, I get that you had a shitty childhood, and I can’t imagine what it was like to have lost your brother the way you did. But Son, you have to stop letting the world dictate your life. You need to grab that bull by the horns and take what you want. You can tell me right now that you don’t want my daughter or to be a father to those girls, and I will accept that, and you will find papers on your desk tomorrow morning that you can sign to relinquish your rights. You want to be cut off from them? Let’s do it.”

Holy shit. Brett’s words slashed through me. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t want to. I’m okay with your being gone because you’ve proven to be unworthy. But I hate seeing how much pain my daughter is in. I hate how often those girls ask when you’ll be back. You’re breaking everyone’s heart here, Oliver, and if it can be fixed, then I’m gonna fix it. Whatever you decide, I expect to know before Christmas. There’s no way in the world that I’ll let you ruin those girls’ Christmas. Do you understand?”

I swallowed and nodded.

“Good.”

The phone went dead, and I sat at my desk feeling numb. Was I a coward? I suppose I was, but that was only because I wanted to protect Lindsay and the girls from my and Liam’s past. Didn’t he know that being away from Lindsay and the girls was slowly killing me? Every day, I woke up and it was like another part of me was dead. It wouldn’t be much longer before there was nothing left.

I didn’t doubt that whoever texted me had sent a threat. But maybe I could tell Wally or whoever texted that I

understood the message and that I wasn't going to fuck things up for them. I couldn't even if I wanted to.

So now, the only question was whether I was a man who could give Lindsay and the girls everything they deserved. My initial response was no. I was a broken person who came up in a broken life. But I knew I could be whole. I knew it because I'd felt it the times I'd been with Lindsay and the girls.

Lindsay

Although the original plan had been for Grayson to stay with me and the girls at my house while my dad and Miranda went up to the cabin a day ahead of us to get ready for Christmas, we all agreed that we needed time away from the city. We needed the solitude and comfort that came from being at the cabin. We needed to be together as a family and celebrate the joy of Christmas, and this year, the extra joy that we were together and safe.

Well, at least most of us were together. Oliver wasn't here, and each time I thought of that, I was equal parts angry and sad for him.

We came up yesterday, settling into the cabin, which was a bit of a misnomer since it was nearly large enough to be considered a mansion. Even so, it felt rustic and cozy, and when we'd finished decorating the tree and the rest of the house, it was almost enough cheer to make me forget that less than a week ago, my baby had been kidnapped.

Today was Christmas Eve, and after a day of fun in the snow and making holiday treats, it was about time to put the girls to bed. Along with Grayson, the girls put out a plate of milk and cookies near the fireplace for Santa's snack.

"You're going to put the fire out when you go to bed, right?" a worried Georgie asked as she looked at the flames in the fireplace.

“Of course, baby. But even if we left it going, Santa’s magic.”

All the girls looked at me, their blue eyes twinkling. “How much longer before he’ll be here?”

Grayson sidled up next to them with a tablet. “Let’s look at the satellite.” All four of them looked at the screen as the NORAD Santa site tracked Santa’s Christmas Eve ride around the world.

“He’s getting close.” Georgie bounced with excitement.

“I’ve got hot chocolate. The grown-up kind and the kid kind.”

We each took a mug, and I settled into a chair watching the kids, feeling grateful for this moment. I told myself to remember this feeling of gratitude. I couldn’t ever take life for granted again.

There was a knock at the door and all of us jumped.

“I wonder who that could be?” Mira asked.

My father stood, striding to the door. “I’ll answer it.” He looked through the window next to the door. He jerked, turning to look at me.

“What?” I asked.

He opened the door.

“Ho, ho, ho. My magic snowball tells me there are some good children here.”

All four kids jumped up, rushing to the door. I stayed rooted in the chair because while the man looked like Santa, he sounded like Oliver.

“Santa’s here, Santa’s here.” The kids jumped up and down and clapped.

Oliver stepped into the house, taking the bag off his shoulder and setting it down on the ground.

Olivia got up close to him, her eyes narrowing as she looked up at him. She held out her index finger, making a

come here motion toward him. Oliver squatted down to her and she took hold of his beard, pulling it down.

“Daddy?”

At that, the other kids stopped pawing through Santa’s sack to look at him. Georgie ran over, pushing the hat and fake hair off Oliver’s head.

“Daddy is Santa Claus?” Cassie asked.

He shook his head. “No. I’m just an elf. Merry Christmas, baby.” The girls rushed into his arms. Oliver buried his face in between them. Then he looked up at Grayson. “Do you have a hug for me too, Grayson?”

Grayson smiled and hugged Oliver.

“I guess I’d better go make some more hot cocoa,” my father said.

Finally finding my bearings and realizing I didn’t know what this meant that Oliver had shown up, I stood. “I’ll go make the hot chocolate. Santa Claus can help me.”

Oliver looked down at the kids. “Give me a minute to talk to your mom, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Hey, kids, how about a game of Candyland? I’m sure your grandfather would love to play with you.”

My father shot Mira a look but then smiled. “Candyland it is.”

I led Oliver to the kitchen. A part of me wanted to throw myself in his arms, but instead, I crossed my arms over my chest. “What’s going on, Oliver?”

He scratched his chin, and I wasn’t sure if he was thinking of what to say or if it was an itch from the Santa beard he’d been wearing. “I fucked up, Lindsay.”

I stared at him, willing the hope that wanted to bloom in my chest to stay down. “I know that. I know you know that. But it doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

He let out a breath as he looked down. Finally, his green gaze lifted to mine. “When you and Liam were together, aside from the fact that I was jealous as fuck, I had the feeling that you were too good for him while at the same time knowing that you would be able to elevate him. I wanted that for him.”

My jaw tightened. “We’re back to Liam?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m just trying to explain. The thing is, the same is true for me. I am not good enough for you —”

“News flash, Oliver. That’s not for you to decide. I decide who is good enough for me. And I’ll be honest. The way you always run off, I wonder if maybe you’re right.”

He flinched and took a step back. For a moment, I thought maybe he was going to turn and leave again.

“Why don’t you fight for me?” I said, even though I hadn’t wanted to. “And if not for me, fight for the girls?”

This time, he took several steps toward me. His eyes filled with tears. “That’s why I’m here, Lindsay. I don’t deserve you or them. I’ll be honest, I’m scared to death that I’m going to bring more ugliness with me. But God help me, I can’t live without you or the girls.”

I found it difficult to guard my heart from the sincerity I heard in his voice and saw in his eyes.

“Five years ago, I should’ve told you how I felt. My mind was fucked up because you’d been Liam’s. I betrayed him. I felt like I’d taken advantage of you. I couldn’t deal with that and so I ran. And because of that, I lost five years. And I’m not just talking about the girls. I’m talking about five years with you.”

The final shreds of the wall I tried to erect fell away. “So, what happens now?”

His hands took my arms and pulled me against him. “Here’s what I’d like to have happen. I’d like you to forgive me. I’d like to hear you tell me you love me again. And I would like to have a life with you and the girls. In that order would be great, but if not, I will take whatever I can get.”

“If we do this, Oliver, you can’t run. You can’t leave those girls because they love you so much. I don’t know what you see in yourself that you think you don’t deserve us. They idolize you. I don’t know if you noticed, but they were happier to see you than they were to see Santa.”

He looked down, so I pressed my palm to his cheek, lifting his head to look at me. “I forgive you. I love you. And I want you to be in our lives.”

His lips came down on mine so fast, I could barely take a breath beforehand. But who needed to breathe when the man I loved was finally mine?

I didn’t know how long we were there, but at one point, I heard my father clear his throat.

“I was a little worried I’d walk in here and you two would be naked, and that would’ve traumatized me forever. But it’s getting late, and we think the kids should go to bed.”

Oliver and I pulled away, but Oliver’s green eyes stayed on me, staring at me with love and awe. Finally, he asked, “Can I help put the kids to bed?”

“You’re their dad. Of course, you can help put them to bed.”

With Oliver there, the girls were keyed up, and with that and Christmas Eve, it was a challenge to get them down. But finally, they were in their beds, sound asleep.

When we got back downstairs, my dad and Miranda were just finishing putting all the presents under the tree and eating the cookies and drinking the milk for Santa.

“Everything all right?” my father asked.

I took Oliver’s hand and grinned as I looked up at him. “Christmas came early for me and the girls.”

“Aww, that’s so romantic.” Mira sighed.

My father growled. “If you hurt any of them, I’m going to make you sorry.”

I rolled my eyes at my dad.

“If I hurt them, I’ll deserve it,” Oliver said, squeezing my hand.

“I’m exhausted, Brett. Let’s go to bed.”

My father narrowed his eyes at her as if he recognized, as I did, that she was trying to get him out of the room so that I could be alone with Oliver.

My father acquiesced, and they headed upstairs, leaving us alone in the living room. Oliver pulled me close and started kissing me again. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him tight. My plan was to never let him go.

The kiss was thorough, loving, and slowly turning hotter. I felt the swell of his erection against my belly. “My goodness, Santa. It feels like you have another package for me.”

He laughed as he trailed his lips along my neck. “Santa has a fantasy of making love to you in front of that gorgeous fire.”

I pulled back and shook my head. “No, not there. I’m pretty sure that’s where my brother Grayson was conceived. I try to make it a habit not to have sex anywhere my dad and Maranda have had it.”

He made a face. “I guess that would be weird.”

“Good news is that the girls sleep in the room that was my room when I was growing up. So now, my bedroom is down here, off the kitchen.”

His smile was nearly feral. “Are you saying that we can make love and I don’t have to worry about your father kicking my ass?”

“Yes. And maybe I should tell you that if you don’t make love to me, I’m going to kick your ass.”

His thumb brushed over my lower lip. “I’m more terrified of you than him, so show me where this room is.”

I took his hand and led him through the kitchen and to the back room. He scooped me up into his arms and then laid me on the bed, his body covering mine.

He looked down on me with those gorgeous green eyes. “I was scared shitless that you wouldn’t forgive me.”

“I love you, Oliver.”

He closed his eyes as if he were savoring my words.

“Do you forgive me?” I asked, realizing I needed to hear him say the words.

“Yes, of course. I understand now. This was my fault.”

“Not all.”

“Mostly. I handled it all wrong, and I’m sorry.” He dipped his head and kissed me. “I love you, Lindsay. It’s always only been you.”

His words were the final salve on my heart.

His hands caressed my body. His lips kissed and nipped my skin as he removed my clothes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured after each kiss. “So fucking beautiful.”

I sank into his warmth, into his love, letting it wash through me and make me feel whole again.

Then I wanted a turn, so I pushed him back and used my hands and lips to discover every inch of him. When he’d had enough, he pushed me back and settled his body over mine.

“Look at me, Lindsay.”

I opened my eyes as he took my hands and held them over my head.

“Do you see how much I love you?”

I nodded.

He kissed me. “Can you taste it?”

“Yes.”

He pressed his hips forward, his body sliding into mine. “Can you feel it?”

I arched into him. “Yes. Yes, Oliver. Can you feel it?”

He rocked against me. “Yes, baby. Oh, fuck. You feel so good. I’ve never, ever in my life felt so good.”

I hoped that we had a lifetime where I could make him feel good. Where I could have all the pain of his past healed by my love.

We moved together, and for the first time, my heart and soul were fully open. The pleasure was intense, not just in the sensations but also the emotions.

“Oliver,” I gasped as tension coiled tight, tighter.

“Yes, baby. I’m here. Come for me. Come, and take me with you.”

He drove in, his body grinding against mine. I cried out and arched as pleasure surged through me.

“Yes, Lindsay.” He grunted, moving in and out of me as his orgasm overtook him.

As the delicious sensations dissipated, he kissed me and held me tight.

“Promise me you’ll never leave,” I said.

He looked down at me, his fingers caressing my cheek. “I promise I’ll never leave.” He gave me a lopsided grin. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

I smiled back even though I had no clue what he meant. “What does it mean?”

“It means you have to marry me.”

My breath hitched.

“I have a ring. I wasn’t sure when I’d give it to you.”

I laughed. “Were you waiting to gauge my response to you?”

He gave me a sheepish smile. “Yes. The response is pretty good.”

“Only pretty good?” I squeezed my pussy around his cock.

He hissed. “It was fucking fantastic. Do you want the ring now?”

I pushed him back. “Not yet. I want to give you another response.” I rose over him, rocking over his dick.

He growled in response, his fingers digging into my thighs as he arched up into me. “You still haven’t answered me, though.”

I leaned over him, my lips inches from his. “Yes.”

EPILOGUE I

Oliver

The time that I felt the most scared in my life was when I walked into that warehouse trying to save Olivia. The second time was showing up at the cabin to win my family back. The girls acted as if I had never left, which made me wonder what Lindsay had told them.

Lindsay needed a bit more convincing. But of course, she did. I hadn't proven myself to be the man she and the girls needed. But I vowed that I would spend the rest of my life making sure that I did my damndest to make it up to her.

The next day, I felt a poke, and as I stirred, I saw it was still dark out.

"I hear the pitter patter of little feet. It's time to get up," Lindsay said from next to me.

I groaned. I hadn't had a lot of sleep, but that was because I kept needing to make love to Lindsay. "It's still the middle of the night."

"Get used to it, Daddy. Little kids get up early on Christmas."

Christmas hadn't been like that when I was growing up, at least not at my house. In foster care, Liam and I sometimes had families that made cookies and would have presents. But others didn't. I realized that Christmas could be different from now on. My entire life would be different. I needed to embrace

that and be grateful for the love Lindsay and the girls brought into my life.

I rolled out of bed and looked at my watch. “It’s not even five in the morning.”

Lindsay tossed me the pants from the bag I’d packed for this trip. “Merry Christmas, Daddy.”

We exited the bedroom and passed Mira in the kitchen. “Coffee is almost ready.”

In the living room, the four kids were bouncing with excitement around the Christmas tree and Brett was making a fire in the fireplace.

“Mommy, Daddy, look what Santa brought.” Georgie motioned to the tree.

“My goodness, you’ve all been very good children this year, haven’t you?” Lindsay said.

Growing up, I’d heard about Christmases like this, usually from TV, movies, or books. I always wondered if they were true. But now, as I sat and watched the love and joy and excitement of a family on Christmas morning, I thanked God that I was there, that I’d been brave enough to get on the plane and come here.

On the flight, I knew there were a lot of decisions that needed to be made, including whether or not we stayed in Boston. Seeing Lindsay and the girls with Brett and Miranda and Grayson, I knew that they were an important part of Lindsay’s and the girls’ lives. We would stay in Boston.

So now, my decision was whether I moved the headquarters of my company to Boston or sold it. To be honest, I was leaning toward selling it because I wanted as much time as I could get with Lindsay and the girls to make up for all the time I’d lost.

Once the presents were opened, the intensity and the room’s activity settled, although the volume was still high as the kids played with their new things. While Olivia and I played with the kid-oriented tablet I bought her, Georgie

strummed a ukulele as Grayson played bongos, and Cassie and Lindsay colored. Life was so fucking perfect.

Mira and Brett were in the kitchen making Christmas dinner, so when a knock came on the door, Lindsay rose to get it. She looked through the window by the door and then let out a little squeal.

“It’s Unkadunk. And he’s brought his little boy, Aiden, with him.”

The kids looked up for a moment but then went back to their brand-new, shiny toys. Lindsay opened the door, letting Duncan in.

“Merry Christmas,” Duncan said in his loud, booming voice. When I first saw Duncan years ago, I had thought he could be an enforcer with the crew. He was big and bald, and if he wanted to, he could look lethal. Although, at the moment, with his wide smile, he made me think of Duane “The Rock” Johnson.

“This is Aiden, my son.” He put a meaty hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Lindsay looked up at him with glee in her eyes. “It’s done?”

He shook his head. “No. Legally, he’s my foster child. But as far as I’m concerned, he’s mine.”

The boy looked around the room. His expression showed intrigue at all the toys, and yet there was still hesitation, even fear. I recognized the look because I’d seen it in Liam and other kids we’d been in care with. But Aiden was lucky. I could see that Duncan was going to provide a loving, nurturing home for Aiden. I just hoped that it lasted. Liam and I had been moved so many times, and every time, it was scary.

Lindsay knelt down and gently talked to Aiden, inviting him to come play with the other children. “My dad mentioned that you might come by, so we have gifts for you too. Would you like to open them?”

A second later, Georgie had grabbed a present and run over to him. “This one’s for you.”

Aiden looked up at Duncan, who gave him a smile and a nod. Aiden took the present and followed Georgie to the tree where the rest of the children were playing.

Mira and Brett entered the room, giving Duncan a hug and wishing him a Merry Christmas. They said hello to Aiden and congratulated Duncan on his fatherhood.

Duncan finally turned his attention to me. His expression turned dark, proving that yes, indeed, he could look lethal. “Welcome to the family, boy. I suppose it goes without saying that if you—”

I held up my hand to stop him. “If I hurt them, I will hunt you down and you can make me pay.”

Duncan laughed and thrust his hand forward to shake mine. “I like you.”

The day wore on, and we enjoyed each other’s company. At dinner, we sat around the table enjoying delicious food, and I couldn’t remember ever feeling so much love existing in a single place.

It made me think of Liam and how he could have had this.

“Let’s go outside for a minute,” Lindsay said to me.

I looked at the others around the table.

“Just us.”

I stood and followed Lindsay out the back. There was a large deck and a hot tub.

“It’s cold out here. Is something wrong?” I asked, pulling her close to keep her warm.

“No. I got the feeling you were thinking about Liam.”

I nodded. “I wish he could’ve experienced something like this.”

She smiled up at me. “I hate that he didn’t get a chance, but maybe we need to consider that if not for Liam, we wouldn’t be here. The girls wouldn’t be here.”

I hadn't thought of it like that. If Liam were alive, I wouldn't have ever told her how I felt and I definitely wouldn't have slept with her. That meant the girls wouldn't exist. That thought was unfathomable.

"It's hard to think that my brother had to die for me to have this—"

"It's not that—"

I pressed my fingers to her lips. "My point is, a wise person once told me that I had to take the bull by the horns and live my life. I loved Liam. I miss him so much. But I'm going to live, Lindsay. However we got here, I'm going to savor it."

Her smile was brilliant. It shone brighter than the moon and stars that glittered above us. I reached into my pocket to pull out the ring I'd been carrying around all day.

"You already said yes, and I'm going to hold you to it." I held it out for her, hoping she liked it.

It didn't seem possible, but the wattage on her smile increased. "I was wondering when you would give it to me. I was about to tell you that I was going to hold you to it."

I slid the ring on her finger. We looked at each other. Our grins widened. Together, we said, "Cheers to beers."

"Thank you, Liam," I said as I leaned forward and kissed the woman who'd brought love and laughter and three little angels into my life.

EPILOGUE II

Duncan

I sat at the Christmas dinner table, feeling grateful and a little in awe at all the love. Love I hoped to fill my new foster son, Aiden's, life with. The boy was quiet, and I worried sometimes that he was afraid of me. Many kids were. Even some adults. I couldn't help that I was 6' 5" and nearly two hundred and fifty pounds of mostly muscle. Perhaps being bald didn't help. But deep down, I was a man who made love, not war.

"You know, Brett, it wasn't that long ago that it was just you, me, and Lindsay at Christmas dinner."

Brett laughed. "I can't remember that."

"That's because you're old, Dad," Lindsay joked.

Brett was my best friend and business partner. More than that, he was like a brother. He'd invited me to Christmas dinner the first year he had custody of Lindsay, and I'd been coming ever since. Five years ago, Brett added a new wife and son. Was it weird that his wife was twenty years younger? A little. It was weirder that she'd been Lindsay's best friend.

But Lindsay, always a warm soul, had been okay with the arrangement. If they were happy, she was happy. But then Lindsay turned up pregnant, and over the last four years, her three girls joined the festivities. Today, it appeared the family was complete. Oliver, the triplets' father, was here, and from where I stood, he and Lindsay looked as in love as Brett and Miranda were.

In fact, after a short stint outside, Lindsay returned engaged, with a fancy diamond ring to show for it. I was happy for her, although I'd have no problem ripping Oliver's arms out if he hurt her or any of the triplets.

I filled out this growing family because now, I had Aiden. Finally, I was going to be a father. It might be nice to have a mother for him, but I hadn't been lucky in love. I had great luck with sex, but love and happily ever after alluded me. I don't think I was asking for too much. I wasn't one of those men who wanted to take care of a woman. Sure, I wanted love and perhaps to be needed, but I liked independent women. Strong women. Sure and confident women. Too many of the women I met seemed like that at first, but then they'd discover the size of my bank account, and all of a sudden, they were like a Stepford wife. Compliant. Subservient. Taking my interests as their own.

I thought back a few weeks ago to the sexy, fit woman who came to the gym to work out. She didn't get a membership and instead paid for a day pass. At first, I watched her to make sure she knew how to use the equipment. But it wasn't long before I was watching her because she was like art in motion. She was strong, lithe, and yet had curves where they mattered. She moved like a cat.

As the owner, it was my job to make sure she was having a good experience. She must have felt the snap and crackle between as well. She gave me a sexy smile and let me work out with her. Before the night was through, we were in the sauna, and she was riding my cock like a fucking rodeo star. It had been a long time since I'd come that hard.

And then she was gone. I had no name. No number. She was like a phantom.

“Can I have a cookie?”

Aiden's small voice broke through the memory. I gave my head a shake. I shouldn't be thinking about women when I was a father now. “Of course. But say please.”

“Can I have a cookie, please?”

“Here, Aiden.” Lindsay held the plate for him.

The boy scanned all the cookie choices. Soon, his face began to crumple.

“What’s wrong?”

He shrugged and looked down.

“There’s a lot of choices there,” Oliver said.

I looked up at him, thinking so what?

Lindsay looked at him too. “Is it too much?”

Oliver shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe he just needs to be told he can take any one he wants.”

I looked at Aiden. “Is that the problem? You’re worried about taking the wrong one?”

He pointed to a Christmas tree cookie filled with icing and sprinkles.

“If you want that, take it.”

“It’s the last one,” Oliver said quietly.

“You can have it,” Lindsay said. “It’s okay.”

Aiden finally picked up the cookie.

“Oliver was a foster child too,” Lindsay reminded me.

Oliver shrugged. “New home means new rules. Some homes have crazy rules and crazier consequences.”

Holy hell. I turned to Aiden. “If you have a question, ask me, okay? I won’t hurt you. I know I’m big, but that means I can protect you. Okay?”

Aiden didn’t look convinced, but he nodded.

“Good. Tell me, is that cookie good?”

One side of his lip quirked upward. I realized I hadn’t yet seen him smile. Even with all the Christmas gifts, he was intrigued by them, but it was almost like he didn’t believe they were for him.

Dinner and dessert were finished, and I stayed in the kitchen to help Brett with the dishes. We roped Oliver in to help us.

“I’m glad you came around, Oliver,” Brett said.

“Thank you for helping me see the light.”

“You can make it up to me by doing the dishes. I’ll dry.”

Oliver stepped up to the sink.

“I guess that means I clear.” I picked up platters from the table. I’d nearly finished clearing it off when Lindsay entered the kitchen.

“Ah... Duncan? Someone is here to see you?” She seemed nervous. She looked at Oliver. “It’s Agent Marsden.”

Oliver tensed and immediately went to her.

“What the hell? Why does the FBI want to talk to me?”

“She didn’t say. She just apologized for interrupting Christmas and said it was important.”

I looked at Brett, who shrugged. “Alright.” I went to the living room to meet this Agent Marsden. “I understand you need to see...” My last words got stuck in my throat. At the door was the gym goddess I’d fucked a few weeks ago. She wore dark pants and a blazer. Her red hair was pulled back. She looked professional, official, and yet, sex appeal radiated off her.

Her eyes rounded when she saw me, but just as quickly, her expression turned neutral.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your Christmas. But are you the foster parent of Aiden Brennan?”

“Why does the FBI need to know that?”

“As I said, my name is agent Marsden. I’m working on a case involving organized crime and identity theft.” She glanced over toward Oliver and Lindsay and then back to me.

That made no sense unless it was related to the break-in Lindsay had a few weeks back.

“What does that have to do with Aiden?”

“I believe Aiden was a witness to the murder of a police detective and another woman. I’m here to interview him and protect him.”

I stepped in front of Aiden. “It’s my job to protect Aiden.”

Mira jumped up. “Come on, kiddos. Let’s go to the kitchen and get more cookies.” She looked at me. “Aiden should come too.”

I nodded and nudged him to go with the other kids and Mira.

When I turned back to Agent Marsden, she said, “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Aiden is my boy. I’ll protect him.” What a disappointment that the woman I couldn’t stop dreaming of was a Fed. Not that I had anything against law enforcement, but well... let’s just say I had a few negative encounters with cops when I was growing up.

Her green eyes flashed with wild heat. It was almost the same heat I’d seen the moment she’d impaled her sweet pussy over my dick in the sauna.

“Unkadunk?” Lindsay said, putting her hand on my arm. “These people took Olivia. You should take them seriously.”

“Took Olivia?” I turned to Brett.

He gave me a pained expression. “When I was MIA, I was dealing with shit, including Olivia’s kidnapping. Then it was just wanting to get the family settled and the holidays prepared. I’m sorry I didn’t mention it.”

I turned back to Agent Marsden. “Is that true?”

“The murder took place while Mr. Quinlan was rescuing Olivia. Right outside the building they were in. I believe Aiden was in the car when the shooter drove by and killed the kidnappers.”

“Seems like that’s not a bad thing,” I said.

“Dunc,” Brett said. “She’s saying the boy saw this. Even if killing Olivia’s kidnappers is good, having the boy witness it isn’t.”

He had a point. “So, what do you want?”

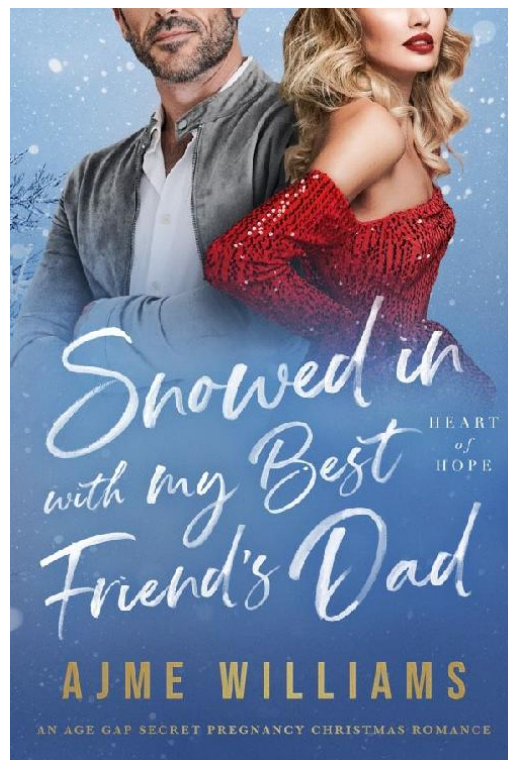
“I told you already. I want to talk to him and protect him.”

“Not without me.” I pulled myself up to my full height and stuck my chest out. I always made people back off.

Agent Marsden raised an eyebrow that said, *you don’t scare me*. With a dismissive purse of her lips, she said, “Then I guess we’re stuck together.”

Waiting for Duncan’s story?

That one’s coming soon. Meanwhile check out [**Snowed In with My Best Friend’s Dad \(Miranda and Brett’s story\), here.**](#)



I never meant to hookup with my best friend’s dad... But when we’re forced together during the merriest time of the year, I end up falling into his bed... and into his heart.

He may be a jerk, but Brett McKinnon is also totally irresistible. And off-limits... forever.

My friend would never forgive me for sleeping with her father...

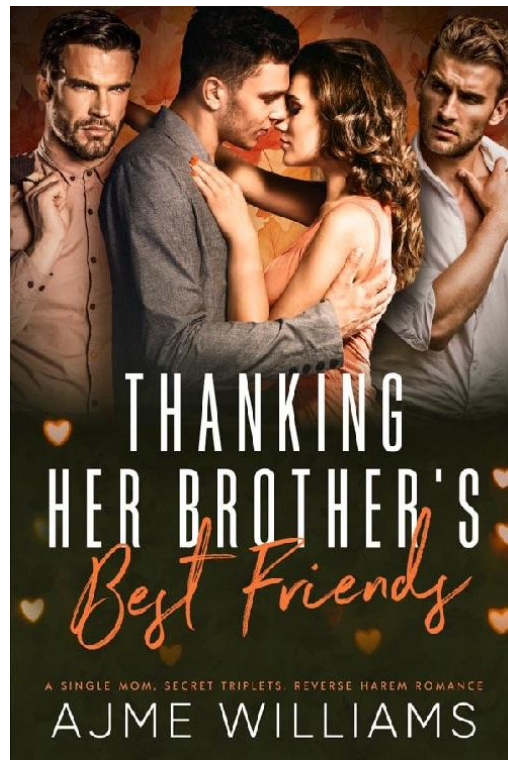
Much less if she found out our heated encounter left me pregnant with Brett's baby. A man who is old enough to be my father.

I grew up with nothing and worked hard for everything in my life. This surprise pregnancy feels like a curse destined to ruin my life along with Brett's.

That's why I'm never, ever telling him.

GRAB HERE!

THANKING HER BROTHER'S BEST FRIENDS (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

Being a national sensation failed to prepare me for a life of scandal that comes with sleeping with three men at the same time.

I have a son to consider. What was I thinking?

They are just not any men. *They are my brother's best friends!*

Aiden is the hottest introvert I've ever met. He makes me want to cuddle next to him on the couch all night long.

Dominique's strength feels like protection. His arms touch my curves and bring out the joy that I haven't felt in years.

And **Niall's** charisma and love for music has me dancing like a teenager.

My over-protective brother would lose his mind... along with the rest of the country.

My toxic ex has made it impossible for me to consider love, let alone love with three men.

But Aiden, Don, and Niall make me want to smash my past and risk my future.

Especially now that I have three more babies to be grateful for this Thanksgiving.

And with my growing belly, this secret is just impossible to hide.

PROLOGUE

Selene

I needed a sign.

My eyes closed as I hummed along to Coldplay's *Let Somebody Go*.

I wondered how the lyricist had felt when he'd written that line—and whether love always had to be equal to the pain.

Today, on the most successful streak of my career, all I could think about was going home and hoping my marriage would not fall to ruins. That my son would not lose his father.

It would be the biggest failure of my life.

Which was perplexing because, on the face of it, things had never been better. Take today, for example. I'd had a very, very successful day of meetings.

My patisserie posse was over the moon because we'd won the *BakeMaster* accolade for being the best pastry shop in all of Boston for three years running.

The accolade was the most prestigious one in the entire country in my profession. The irony, however, was not lost on me. I was no Master, but Mistress probably didn't do the role justice.

It should have, but these were the little ways in which the world kept telling me that if you were born a woman, you learned to make do with what you could.

Not that I'd listened to what society had tried to teach me. My whole life was the product of an extended rebellion.

I stared at my phone screen as the latest updates from *CBS News Boston* unfolded.

We'd come a long way from the little shithole I grew up in to today, where Ayanna Pressley had catapulted to an influential congresswoman serving Massachusetts's seventh congressional district. It wouldn't be as important if she were another whitewashed figure.

But no, Pressley was a woman of color who came from a complex background. Her mother had worked multiple jobs to support the family.

Her father struggled with addiction and spent most of Pressley's childhood incarcerated.

He did redeem himself with those degrees and that professor role he got, but the marriage ended in divorce anyway.

"Times sure have changed, haven't they?" I said to no one in particular. Chloe, sitting next to me in the Fortuner, grinned.

"You could say so. I guess it doesn't apply to the scars we still carry around."

Chloe gave me a knowing pat on the shoulder. "Don't do that to yourself. Don't go back there. Look where you're at right now."

I wanted to. I let my gaze hover over the cars moving through the busy roads, their caterwauling a strange contrast to the whimsical tunes being belted out by street musicians.

Pedestrians strolled the sidewalk, their eyes lit and mouths open in animated conversation. I liked to wonder what they were talking about.

A little girl and her mother walked hand-in-hand. The girl was pointing at a candy shop, eagerness in her eyes. On the other hand, the mother kept looking at her watch and then back at her child.

Hers was an expression of urgency but also tender love. She finally nodded and picked her up, and the two of them disappeared through the door to the shop.

Struck by an unconscious thought about the biggest love in my heart, I smiled. I would do the same thing for him.

It didn't matter if I was late to my show or to an award ceremony. Oliver always came first.

My heart ached to be back home as soon as possible and rescue him from his father. Not that I didn't love the man, but he wasn't great fun to be around.

"I can't wait to see you become Boston's Nigella Lawson," Chloe said, her voice carrying a pitch of excitement. "It's gonna be literal food porn."

I sighed. "I don't know if I'm gonna be all that good. It's a steep reputation to live up to."

Chloe snorted. "Are you kidding me? You've got this nailed like no chowderhead ever could! Selene, you rose like a literal goddess from the ashes of broken-down trailer parks filled with unemployment and drug pushers. You went to Cordon Bleu. Girl, I don't know why you keep putting yourself down like that, but as long as I'm here, I'm gonna keep holding you up and putting you back on the damn pedestal, just where your sweet BBW ass belongs."

This made me chuckle. Chloe Nguyen was a direct import from Japan, where she'd grown up with her African American mother and Asian father.

Now twenty-seven, she moved to Boston five years ago to study culinary arts and wound up apprenticing under me. The day I hired her, I knew she would be much more than just another employee.

Her acumen was sharp, her tongue sharper. You don't get people like that often. She showed me parts of myself that I couldn't bear to bring out. Because I . . . even with everything I'd achieved in my thirty years on this Earth, I was inadequate.

Nothing could convince me otherwise.

There was so much I still had to do. So much I needed to build for the fire in my heart, the song in my veins, my son. I needed to make an empire for him.

And time just wasn't long enough.

The Southie I'd grown up in belonged to working-class Irish Americans.

It was one of the oldest American neighborhoods, and the people who made it home were mostly immigrants who needed to flee from the potato famine that struck Ireland in the 1800s.

Imagine living in a neighborhood where every damn person is somehow connected to the other. You literally began your conversations by saying, "Do you know . . . ?" It was expected that each of us had to be related to someone from the other end of town.

Living in Southie branded me the day I made my appearance in Greenwood Hospital on the Lower End.

In 2014, a news article debated the possibility of changing "Lower End" to "Broadway Village".

I grimaced at the thought.

You could try to take the classism out of the name, but you couldn't take it out of the minds of the people who defined my childhood. Even at the time, the city side of South Boston was undergoing gentrification at lightning speed. One day, it would go on to become one of the highest-valued realtor locations in Boston.

My childhood was spent in the West Side, or, like I said, the Lower End. This little stretch was dominated by housing projects. My family lived in a row house near a traffic circle separating Old Colony from Old Harbor.

I was the youngest of five children.

I did not know much about my father, but from what I'd gathered—and word travels quickly when you're in a town where everyone knows each other—he was a gifted student who met my mother at South Boston High.

He had the mouth of a Boston cabbie and a reputation for being a notorious charmer.

And my mother, bless her soul, was always soft when it came to men. She liked to think that her validation depended on the men in her life finding her beautiful.

There were days I worried I'd inherited that from her. On those days, Chloe was my refuge.

Anyway, Dad died a month before I was born. Again, I only heard what had happened, but it was an overdose. But Mom used to tell me he was a good man, never had an affair, and never had eyes for anyone but her and the children.

I liked to believe that. I liked to believe that he was the singular manly angel in her life before it went to shit because each guy she brought home after that routinely abused her and us kids.

When I finally escaped, I thought I'd never forgive her.

But there are occasions when I feel I may have been a little too hard on her. She was the product of poverty, multiple jobs, and running after kids she didn't ask to have. It couldn't have been easy.

I was glad I didn't feel the same way for Oliver, though. To me, he was my sunshine. Maybe part of the reason I clung to him so hard was because I could never get pregnant again.

"Hey," Chloe said, her soft voice jolting me out of my golden hour flashback. "You okay?"

I shook my head. "Yeah, no. I'm fine. Just had to go back for a minute there. But I'm alright now. I can't wait to tell Dave the news."

She grimaced. "Sure. I'm happy he gets to know he's living with a prodigy. But don't get your hopes up, okay? You know how he is."

Chloe, like everyone else in my team and life—barring my older brother, Ben—thought that I was wasting my time around Dave.

They believed I was destined for more incredible things. They could be right, but likely because they didn't understand the need. I had to think he would come around and see that my successes weren't hinged on his failing at life.

He'd come to a point where he honestly thought that he couldn't keep up with me because I was becoming too "common". That was what he liked to call people who made it on their own. He believed I'd do better if I stayed at home, cooked his meals, and tended to our son.

But I was stubborn. I wouldn't leave him—growing up in a Southern Baptist home had taught me to stick it out no matter what—but I wouldn't let him command my life.

"You should leave him, you know." Chloe scowled heavily. "Good for nothing asshole that he is, I can guarantee he's going to throw a hissy fit when he hears Netflix has given you your own show. He'll say shit like you don't deserve it, you're gonna mess it up . . . you know where I'm going with this, Sel."

I did. But my family wouldn't. Ben would be the one having the hissy fit if I brought up the topic of divorce. Marriage was the most sacred of unions to him—even if we'd grown up knowing nothing but failed relationships. And I adored Ben.

He was more than my older brother. He was the only one in my family I still had any connections to. I cherished that.

"Ben would be the one throwing the hissy fit if I left him, Chloe."

"You Southern Baptists," Chloe grumbled.

"You should try speaking to the Lord sometimes," I teased her, knowing full well that Chloe was an absolute non-believer.

"Hey, the last time I prayed to the Lord, I asked him for a martini instead of a miracle," she replied before breaking into an infectious bout of laughter that caught on to me.

The driver banged a Uey, and I was home in five more minutes.

My penthouse in Seaport was a far cry from the rowhouse of my childhood. It was one of the most secure residences in the city.

I'd left no stone unturned when it came to surveillance and comfort. My son would have the best of the best.

I said goodbye to Chloe and asked the driver to drop her home. On the way up, my mind was full of all the possibilities that were about to unfold.

"Please, God," I murmured. "Give me a sign. Show me he's still with me, and he still wants to fight for our son and our marriage. Don't let him give up on me."

It was as if I already knew he wasn't going to give me an easy time. Dave had been a different man when I was new to this city. He was one of the first friends I'd had. This was before he gave in to alcoholism, the Irish scourge.

It began with one drink, and he was hooked. There was a time when he was on the route to becoming one of the best gastronomic chefs in Boston. But restaurants refused to hire him when he gave in to his vices.

He became a liability—misbehaving with customers, messing up orders, believing he was a god. In the service industry, all of this pointed to a man unhinged. Soon, he was unemployable. Not before the media ripped him to pieces, though.

I still thought part of the reason he hated me was that the media portrayed me as someone relatable, someone easy to fall in love with—while he was often shown as the singular impediment in my life.

They thought they were doing me a favor by stirring the pot of my marriage. They refused to believe all they were doing was causing me a world of pain.

I stepped into the living room, running a trembling hand over my sleek ponytail. A sigh escaped my lips as I stepped out of my Louboutins and felt my feet touch the soft ground.

Modern and minimalist, my home's clean, neutral lines welcomed me like a haven.

“There you are.”

His drawl told me everything I needed to know. Against everything I’d decided, I felt my blood begin to boil. It wasn’t even seven in the evening, and my husband lay sprawled on the couch, his eyes red, his hands nursing his favorite mistress.

“Are you out of your mind?” I hissed. “Where’s Ollie? Why aren’t you watching him, Dave?”

“Oh, shut up!” He tossed the empty glass in my direction. But I’d long practiced dodging his antics, so I moved deftly. It hit and shattered against the north wall, shards ricocheting across the room.

“Look how fat you’ve gotten,” he hissed, leering a smile at me. “I’d still do you, but no one else will. Is that why you’re still here, Sel?”

“Or is it because of that two-faced fucker of a brother you have? Did you read the *Daily Herald*?”

He mimicked a girlish, high-pitched voice. “*Our beloved Kitchen Goddess deserves so much better than the drunkard she’s made her home with! Vote if you think there’s something going on between her and Andy Cruz!*”

He got up but decided he wasn’t feeling stable enough and dropped back down before pointing an accusing finger at me. “I thought you were working with Andy Cruz on a new project. Is this your project?”

He scoffed. “Getting close and sticky in the kitchen? Do your customers know you’re serving them a side of his nasties?”

I felt my ears go red. “Andy is nothing but a colleague,” I replied tartly, refusing to let him get to me. “You know that as well as I do. I refuse to have this conversation with you right now, Dave. Talk to me when you feel sane.”

I tried to walk past him, but he reached out, pulled my hand, and pushed me down on the floor in front of him.

“That’s where you belong,” he hissed. “At my feet. Have you forgotten it was me? I gave you your fucking wings. I was

your friend. Look what you've gone and done to us."

I held my tears back, knowing full well they were wasted on him. "Dave," I said, trying to still be gentle. "Don't do this. You know I love you. You know I want us to survive, to get through this—for us, for our child."

"*Pshaw.*" He snorted, pushing me backward. I fell back on the carpet. This time, I got up, dusted my skirt, and sighed.

"I'm going to bed."

"Go to a whorehouse where you belong, cunt. And don't talk about me being here for you or that boy. Everyone knows you both hate me and want me gone. He's nothing but a little shithead, anyway."

There. That was the exact moment that blew my fuse. I had this little quirk from my childhood—maybe it was born of a base urge to keep myself safe, no matter what.

I reached into my skirt pocket and withdrew a sleek pocket knife. In a quick second, I was next to him, holding it against his throat.

He let out a scruffy chuckle. "Whatchu gonna do, Sel? Kill me? *The Kitchen Goddess loses it in a fit of passion and murders her husband!* That's some headline."

"I'm not going to kill you, Dave," I whispered, my eyes burning. "But you say one bad word about Ollie, and I'm gonna cut your face up so bad your whore from two doors down will scream and run when she sees you next. Now, fuck off. Get out. Come back when you're sober."

It hit him where it was meant to.

He hoisted himself from the couch and muttered profanities all the way to the main door. I could still hear him cursing as he headed to the elevator, likely to end up in the arms of one of his one-night stands.

I shivered and closed my eyes. I wouldn't think of that. Instead, I spent the next thirty minutes cleaning the living room. I didn't want Oliver to wake up to this.

A tiny shard of glass pricked my finger as I cleared the clutter that had become my life.

I ignored the jab, and once I was done and had taken a shower, I slowly made my way up to my son's bedroom.

I opened the door and found him sitting on his bed. He looked at me with bleary, doe-like eyes. "Dada okay?" he asked, his tone a little sad.

How my heart broke.

I climbed into bed with him. "He'll be okay when he comes back home, darling. How was your day?"

He shrugged his little shoulders. "Was ok. Marla said I getting good in math. I learn tables."

I hugged my little boy, reveling in the sweet smells of bubblegum shampoo and honey on his skin. I couldn't ever be near enough or hold him close enough. "You're going be the best little mathematician."

"But I want to go space," he quipped, giving me a toothy little smile.

"You'll be amazing no matter what you do, Ollie." I kissed the top of his head and opened a book to read to him.

He fell asleep on page five, where a wizened old wizard told a little adventurer that the world would always hold magic for those who believed.

I read the line again and again after my son drifted off. At some point in the night, my eyes closed as well.

The following day, I woke up to a number of messages on my phone. Most of them were congratulations from my friends and extended family for bagging the show.

Ben's frantic text said he'd proposed to his childhood sweetheart, Abigail. And there was something from Dave. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

But deep inside, I'd already known this was going to happen.

I deserve better than staying at home with a little brat and watching you live the life of my dreams.

Sorry, Sel. I'm leaving you.

SELENE

Three Years Later

There were worse things than not being the maid of honor at my brother's wedding. Abigail had reserved that spot for her best friend, and honestly, I was fine with it.

We got along because we both loved Ben, albeit in different ways. I wanted Ben to be free and have his own life. Abigail was the kind of person who needed him around every second of her day—and that was okay too.

In fact, I think that was what Ben preferred. He liked the idea of being grounded to someone.

“Sel, you look so pretty,” Abigail said as I stood in front of her in my lilac bridesmaid's dress. I'd kept my red hair loose, allowing it to just blow in the ocean air. A pair of diamond huggies clung to my ears.

I didn't want to take any attention away from the bride today. And she looked stunning in her pristine white gown, her eyes shining with the prospect of the future.

“Forget me,” I replied. “Look at you. you could literally be a fairy walking down the aisle. Ben's lucky.”

“Oh,” she replied, giving me a smile. “That's so sweet of you to say. I know this will happen to you again! Just be open to options, you know?”

Chloe took a sharp breath beside me, but I flicked my hand, willing her not to pull one of her classic stunts and say something ridiculously inappropriate.

This was how Abigail and I spoke for the majority of our association. I knew I'd learn to love her as a sister-in-law, but hell, I'd never like her.

She reminded me of everything I wanted to leave buried in the past.

About an hour later, we gathered around the venue.

"Uncle Ben looks handsome," Oliver said. I wholly agreed with him as I watched Abigail walk down the aisle to marry my brother. I was unabashedly weepy.

The tangy aftertaste of happily ever after mingled with salt from the ocean and settled on my skin and lips. I was so proud of my brother.

"Do you know why Uncle Ben married Abigail, love?" I asked Oliver, playing with the rush of red curls on his head. My son was growing into a beautiful little boy.

He was a bit gangly for his age, but with those hazel eyes and fierce, shocking crop of ginger hair, he could light up any room.

"Because he loves her?" he replied innocently.

"That, and because they are best friends."

The bride and groom exchanged vows upon a wedding aisle adorned with delicate rose petals and embellished in coral and gold shades.

Rustic wooden chairs flanked the aisle, each complete with billowing fabric in soft pastels dancing in the summer breeze.

"This is a dream wedding," Chloe said, letting out a sigh that sounded a bit like a grunt. "I swear, if I ever get married and I don't do it near the ocean, send me to jail or kill me before I walk the aisle."

"I can't kill you, Chlo."

"Oh, what good are you?"

Beyond the aisle lay the majestic expanse of the Boston Harbor. The azure waters of the calm Atlantic glistened under the sun's setting glow.

It was a picture-perfect melding of bronze and honey-lemony-yellow. It reminded me of the sunsets I used to enjoy with Ben when we were kids.

This was a little weekend luxury for us. Anytime I needed a break from home, he'd bring me near the ocean, for this was where I felt the most alive.

"Sel, one day," he'd say as we strolled the Harborwalk. "One day, you're gonna be old enough to make choices. I want you to do something that makes you happy, but also, don't stray too far from your roots."

That was always Ben. He was the family's loyalist. I liked to think that he had to be that way because he grew up faster than the rest of us kids.

By the time I was twelve and he was sixteen, he was more of a parent to me than my mom.

I learned cooking from him. He mastered the basics at a young age because he needed to take care of us.

But the day I stepped into our stuffy little kitchen, its expanse rife with the smells of garlic slowly roasting on a stovetop, I knew I'd found heaven. I was about three or four years old at the time.

From then on, I'd stuck to him like a leech whenever he went into the kitchen. I loved being around food. It was so vibrant, freeing, colorful, and lush—it reminded me of everything my life could not be at the time.

"I'm going to be the greatest chef in the world," I'd vow, giving him a little grin as he'd hand some sweet treat he'd gotten for me.

It was usually whoopie-pies, these cake-like crumbly sandwich cookies that had a creamy marshmallow filling in the center. I could still taste the sugar on my lips if I closed my eyes.

I'd experienced a world of luxurious dining from then to now, but nothing would ever come close to the fulfillment of eating a whoopie pie on the Harborwalk.

“Chef, huh?” he’d tease me. “You gonna go abroad and do fancy courses?”

“I sure am. And I’m gonna learn to bake, and then one day, I’ll have my own little shop. You can come and get all the goodies for free, Ben. I’ll never charge you!”

He’d stopped and turned me around so I faced him. His silhouette was mirrored against the backdrop of a blood-red setting sun, and it cast a strange halo over him, almost like he was on fire.

“Then hold fast to that dream because you gotta get out of here, Selly. When the time is right, you need to work hard enough to make that dream of yours come true because the longer you stay here, the staler you’ll get.”

I admit it. I didn’t fully grasp the meaning behind his words then, but looking back on things, Ben was the sole reason I managed to get out of Boston, even with the scholarship.

My mother refused to hear of it—it was unfathomable to her that a girl could actually leave her home turf and go to a foreign country to achieve shit. She wanted me to marry and settle down and give her grandkids.

This was part of the reason she never got to meet Oliver. Like I said, Southie had changed. The scars . . . they remained the same.

“Just look,” Chloe said, taking my hand and pointing to the horizon. Waves rhythmically lapped against the shore.

Against a setting sun cast in gold and scarlet, a smattering of colors unfolded in the sky.

All at once, it came alive in shades of vibrant pink, fiery orange, and soft purple against an indigo expanse. The sun cast a fiery sheen upon the water.

Suddenly, I could not tell the difference between the sky and the sea.

“They’re making their vows,” I whispered, leaning forward. Oliver moved closer to me as if by instinct so we

could listen to Ben and Abigail make their promises to each other.

The sweet words were tinged with the hope of forever. I never found it cliché because what would we have without these words? I wished . . . but no, I would not think about the divorce today. That was done.

We finished the final procedure last week. Dave had been mercifully sober during the proceedings. I'd allowed supervised visitation on the grounds that he went to counseling.

I was pretty sure that'd end up in complete and utter failure.

He was a changed man, but not in a good way. He'd grown thinner than before, with all the bearings of an alcoholic whose life had gone to shit. Last I heard, he'd found himself a job in another country. Good for him.

"Hey." Chloe nudged me gently. I cast my eyes at her, and I knew she could see the sadness in them.

"You did your best, Sel."

We watched Ollie jump up from his chair and run toward the newly-married couple.

"Did I? Maybe the knife bit was overkill."

"I'd have actually cut him up instead of just threatening him," she snapped back. "He had the gall to insult your kid. That's the person he's supposed to be protecting. All he's ever done is make you feel like crap, Sel. And he keeps blaming his failures on you and Ollie. Tell me you can see that?"

I could. "I know, Chlo. It's just not easy. Not with the background I have."

Even Chloe understood this. As one of the few Southern Baptist families with an origin point from Southie, I'd been indoctrinated and inundated with ideas regarding the sanctity of marriage.

People in my extended family didn't care if I lived separately from my husband, but the second the topic of

divorce cropped up, I was into taboo territory.

Love and respect were secondary to social commitments, and by agreeing to Dave's request, I'd pretty much alienated myself from all my family except Ben in one fell swoop.

Even Ben—there were times when he kept asking me to reconsider and speak with Dave and sort things out. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that this was no one-way street.

"It's going to fall in place," Chloe replied after a moment's silence. "But right now, can I interrupt the cloudy skies in your head with a bit of a sunny forecast?"

I grinned. "Fire away."

"There's this absolutely dreamy guy who can't take his eyes off you. He's just sitting two chairs back, but don't make a fool of yourself, for God's sake."

Of course, I did just that. I turned my head back immediately, hoping to scare off said man with a glare. But the face that my gaze landed on left me stumped for a good second.

I knew he'd be here. He was, after all, one of my brother's three best friends. Plus, it was his restaurant—Harvest and Hearth—that had done the catering for the event. But I'd never get used to having him around.

He raised the glass in his hand to me, his smile lazy and devilishly charming.

And I could feel this churning in my stomach that made me want to do sinful things. I turned my face forward, my cheeks furiously red.

The bride and groom moved to cut the cake, which had come straight from my pastry shop. It took me about a day's time to make, and I couldn't be happier with the result. From the looks on the faces of the guests, it delivered in taste too.

Lunch was an equally glorious affair. I could have lived on the lobster rolls alone, but everything else—the decadently lush chicken marsala, the tender prime rib roasted with

seasonal vegetables, and the delicately baked scrod—screamed perfection.

Dessert was a sweet surprise, fresh Boston cream pies.

“Oh my gosh, these are so good!” I rolled my eyes as the sweet cream exploded on my tongue. “I’m glad I didn’t do the desserts because this is better than anything I could have come up with.”

“That’s high praise coming from the best pastry chef in all of Boston.”

I wheeled around, almost dropping my plate in haste at the sound of the honeyed baritone that sounded way too close for comfort. Aiden Brown was standing in front of me, that same lazy grin on his face.

Oh, God, he was handsome. He was built just the way I liked—steel but with a touch of human softness. He’d grown a chestnut stubble to complement his unruly hair, and his green eyes bored into mine.

It was like he had X-ray vision and could totally see what I’d look like without this skimpy satin number on me. I felt the same way I had when Ben brought him over from school one day.

I’d trailed after the two of them like a lost puppy. When I’d finally gone to get Aiden my last pie from the fridge, I’d overheard him calling me “Chubby Selly” and asking Ben when I’d leave the two of them alone.

I was eleven at the time, and I still considered this my first heartbreak.

“I always give credit where it’s due,” I replied tartly. My internal monologue was doing stupid stuff to my brain cells.

Tell him you still have a crush on him.

God, look at how cute he’s gotten.

How the fuck are you not kissing him?

I had this irresistible urge to toss the plate of food aside and bolt from there, but before I could do any such thing, Ben

strolled up to me with Abigail on his arm.

He was being trailed by the other two of their fantastic four—Dominic James and Niall Donovan. I couldn't take my eyes off the boys.

It struck me as ridiculously unfair that they'd all struck the genetic lottery while I felt like an overheated casserole on my best days.

“What is this, some kind of a hunk fest?” Chloe hollered, and for once, I couldn't blame her.

Dominic was so chiseled he looked like he'd been cut from the most expensive marble by the Maker himself.

Jet black hair, messy curls, sinful chocolate eyes.

And every inch of Niall's arms was covered in tattoos. He could be in a band with that messy bun and those fuck-me-right-now blue eyes.

The three of them looked like they were the male versions of *Charlie's Angels*, and for once, I wouldn't mind being Charlie himself.

Make no mistake—I knew the limitations of my upbringing. I made my peace with it on most days, even the most conventional parts of it. It didn't mean that I agreed with any of it.

And right at that moment, I was getting a good old-fashioned reminder of all the ways I'd wanted to be loved by men who knew what they were doing.

“Look how you've grown up,” Niall said. His voice sounded like aged wine and something akin to the deepening of the night. “And become all gorgeous too.”

Immediately, the defensive streak that was primary to my nature came through. “Really? So you're saying I don't look like ‘chubby Selly’ or smell like day-old clothes and stale bread?”

The men exchanged glances and a quick grin. “Nah,” Aiden drawls. “You don't. But you still got that wildcat streak in you.”

Ben cleared his throat, clearly not liking the direction in which the conversation was going. Abigail was already casting dagger eyes at his friends.

She was likely wondering about the ways in which she could keep Ben from spending too much time with them. I pitied her for that—nothing would keep my brother away from these three.

“Sel, stay for the night?” Ben asked, his tone slightly reproachful. “It’s hardly any fun if you’ve got to leave right now.”

I shook my head but leaned in to hug him. “You know how it is, Ben. I have to be on set at six in the morning. And Ollie needs to get some sleep.”

All this while, Ollie remained steadfastly hooked to my skirt, but when Aiden leaned down in front of him and whispered something in his ear, he broke out into peals of laughter. I looked at Aiden suspiciously.

“What did you just tell my son?”

“Just boy stuff,” he replied. I wanted to whack him for his audacity. But I hadn’t heard Ollie laugh like that in a long time.

“Abigail.” I turned to my sister-in-law, wanting to end the evening on a peaceful note. “You’ve never looked more beautiful than you do tonight. I’m so happy for the two of you.”

“Oh, I’m just looking forward to when I’ll be maid of honor at your next wedding!”

Way to go, bitch.

I decided I’d had enough of her backhanded compliments and kissed Ben’s cheek before picking Oliver up and heading toward the exit. It was getting late, and I needed to put him to bed and get some work done before the morning.

On the way to the car with Chlo, Aiden caught up with me. “Hey, can I take a minute?”

“I don’t have one.”

“How about half a minute?”

I groaned and stopped in my tracks. Chloe disengaged Oliver from my arms and carried him back to the car, a smug smile on her face. I knew she'd be asking about him and the other two the second I got in.

“What? What do you want, Aiden?”

Aiden continued looking at me for what felt like much more than thirty seconds.

“It's just . . .”

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to finish his thought.

“I thought it was stupid of Abigail to say what she did. And I think you're doing an amazing job for yourself. You don't need a man to complete you. Maybe you need one or a few to . . .” He teased over the words lightly. “Show you a good time.”

Oh, God. I knew I was turning my least favorite shade of beetroot red.

I should have felt scandalized. I should have thought of all the boundaries. But all I saw at the moment was this green-eyed hunk who was saying something that made me feel more alive than I'd ever felt, even with Dave.

“That's . . .”

“Scandalous?” he asked, chuckling. “What's life without a little scandal now and then, Selene? From what I remember, you always liked being the rebel.”

With that, he turned around, whispering a low tune under his breath. I watched him walk away, the twinge between my legs growing and stretching into my belly.

I tried to shake off the feeling of being unbalanced and made my way to the car. True to my prediction, Chloe immediately bombarded me with questions about Aiden, Niall, and Dominic.

“Chlo, you gotta stop badgering me,” I finally groaned. “I don’t know what they want. They’re fucking gorgeous, but Aiden . . . those boys are bad.”

Luckily for me, Oliver was sound asleep.

“So, why can’t you have somethin’ good with bad boys? What are you, a grandma?”

“Do you know how wrong this could go?”

“All I know is all of them looked like they could eat you up.”

End of preview. [Get the full story here.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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