



SINGLE MOM'S

*Sparkle*


HER GLOW UP HAREM, BOOK 2

KAI LESY

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SINGLE MOM'S SPARKLE

A CONTEMPORARY  
REVERSE HAREM  
ROMANCE

**KAI LESY**

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# DESCRIPTION

*“We adore you and your little girls. We can’t risk losing you.”*

**I clutch my pregnant belly. “What aren’t you telling me?”**

I was a homeless single mom.

Stranded on an icy road with two little girls.

Then we found a loving home with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke.

The men of my dreams showed me I was truly deserving of love.

And they protected us from my abusive ex husband.

But everything changed when I became pregnant...

The three of them are keeping something **BIG** from me.

The kind of secret that could take away everything I hold dear.

**I’ll be damned if I put my little girls through danger. Never again.**

**Is this the beginning of the end?**

**Or can we somehow overcome the biggest hurdle yet?**

“It’s going to be okay. *Right guys?*”

That’s what I asked Kellan, Fallon, and Luke when I first broke the news of my unexpected pregnancy a few days ago.

They were surprised and somewhat pale-faced for the better part of a minute, which had me worried. But then all three broke out in huge smiles before hugging and kissing me. They said they were happy and eager for us to build a family together, and I wanted to believe them.

I still do.

Yet I’m not sure if it really is going to be okay. Maybe I was lying to them and trying to appease myself when I said those words. I still mutter them every once in a while to the woman in the mirror—if only to reassure her.

I never meant for any of this to happen.

I never expected to find myself stranded on the side of a road, in the middle of a Nebraskan snowstorm, with two daughters in tow while running away from my abusive ex-husband. I never expected to find refuge in the arms of three handsome ex-Navy SEALs.

They sheltered and safeguarded us, even to the extent that they had to see to it that my ex-husband, Daniel, was no longer in the picture.

Scoring a positive on a pregnancy test a couple of weeks ago wasn’t in the books, either.

Love has a funny way of showing up when it's least expected, though I'm not sure love is going to be enough. The shift in Kellan, Fallon, and Luke's behavior since they learned about the baby has been undeniable. I've been seeing less and less of them—they always seem to be busy or traveling or stuck in the meeting rooms of the mansion's east wing. Even Annie and Miley have started asking about them, saying how much they miss them and the amount of time we used to spend together.

I've been resisting pressing my flight-or-fight instinct button, but I don't feel like I have a choice anymore. My head is a blur, my heart is in turmoil. I am restless, and fearful of losing the stability I thought I'd managed to build here in this wonderful place.

I've decided to pack a bag for the girls and me—just the essentials until I find a rental apartment for the three of us—and to leave the mansion behind. It's a hasty choice, driven by my mind's need to take control of the situation, since my soul is torn and hopelessly in love with these men.

"Come on, Avery, you don't have to go," Helen says as I carry my suitcase down the hallway toward the stairs. "Do the boys know?"

"No, they don't know," I reply. "I have tried talking to them about it, but they keep giving me the busy card—a meeting here, a drug bust there, a car to tow somewhere else—and another day passes that I am unable to address my concern with their recent change in behavior. Let's be honest, Helen, it's not something to be discussed over the phone, is it?"

She gives me a sad look. "No, it's not. But honey, this is abrupt and a little bit extreme, too. You're pregnant."

"I don't feel welcome here anymore." I sigh deeply, my hands shaking as I build up the courage to carry the suitcase downstairs.

"Avery, they're just busy, especially after that whole incident with Daniel. It took a toll on them, too, you know. You need to be a little more patient with them."



“They can tell me all of this themselves,” I say, and I know that deep down she’s right. But my fears are far too strong and deep-rooted, my desire to protect myself and the girls from further heartache and disappointment having a strong hold on my judgment. “If they want me to stay, they could at least find the time to tell me.”

“This is wrong,” she shakes her head slowly, the dismay evident in her otherwise soft voice. “Avery, you’re not using your head.”

“Oh, but I am. It’s my head that I’m actually using for the first time since I got here. Helen, I’ve got a good gig going with the interior decorating, and I make enough money to support myself and the girls. I was never supposed to stay here forever, no matter what our feelings were in the aftermath of what happened with Daniel.”

That dreaded day when my worst fears came true. My ex-husband snatched my girls out of their school, killing two Wolfhound Security agents in the process. Then he abducted me, holding all three of us hostage in a remote cabin. If Kellan, Fallon, and Luke hadn’t stepped in he would have surely killed me and most likely himself, leaving our girls locked in a room alone and terrified.

They saved us. Luke had no choice but to do the unthinkable. But none of that weighs as much as it should if I feel like I can’t trust them going forward, if I don’t get the reassurance I so desperately need in order to stay in the mansion. I don’t want to live lonely in an occupied house, waiting for morsels of their time and attention.

“Please, Avery, at least wait until they get back tonight,” Helen tries to plead with me again.

I give her a long look, fully aware of the love she has for Kellan and Fallon in particular. She’s their aunt, after all, and she’s been more of a mother and a parent to them than their actual parents ever were. Elizabeth and William Cassidy chose their dirty business practices and fattening their family fortune over their sons a long time ago. They’re also responsible for the financial ruin that ultimately killed Helen’s husband and

left her a destitute widow. She's been by the boys' side ever since, and I can't blame her for speaking in their favor. To be fair, I'm not so sure that I'm doing the right thing—the more she speaks, the more confused I get. The weight of the suitcase feels heavier than it did five minutes ago.

“If I don't do this now, I'll keep hanging around and finding excuses to try again tomorrow,” I tell her. “I have to go. I won't be a desperate woman begging for attention they don't have to give.”

Yet as soon as I reach the ground floor and brace myself to leave, the front door opens. Kellan, Fallon, and Luke come in, leaving me breathless and wordless as I try to find the courage to walk out the door.

“Helen called us,” Kellan says upon noticing my confusion.

I give Helen a sour look and she responds with a shrug. “What was I supposed to do, honey? I've been trying to talk you out of it since this morning but clearly it didn't work. You left me no choice,” she says.

“Don't be cross with her,” Kellan says, his gaze fixed on me.

I can't tell if they're angry or worried, scared or just being their usual, surly selves. They've been so damn difficult to read since they saved me from Daniel. It seems they are trying hard to mask the trauma, to give me the impression that they're fine and in complete control of their lives, of the life we've built together. But I can see through the cracks, even though they are trying to protect me from the dark. That entire ordeal took a toll on all of us.

“Avery, what are you doing?” Fallon asks, his voice low, his tone heavy.

“I need a break,” I reply, though I'm not sure if those are the right words to say. My earlier resolve is slowly dissolving as my anger and anxiety are gradually subsiding, causing even more confusion. “I just need to get out of here.”

“Why? You have everything you need here,” Kellan says. “Including the three of us.”

“Avery, you’re pregnant with our child,” Luke adds, his sandy brow furrowed above his deep blue eyes.

“Ever since I told you guys about the pregnancy, you’ve been aloof and distant. Always busy, always out of the house, never around when I need you. Something is going on, and none of you are willing to talk about it. I’m thinking I’ll be better off on my own, if only for a while. I won’t stay where I feel like I’m a burden.”

The guys exchange worried glances and take a deep breath in unison.

Fallon looks at Helen. “Would you be so kind as to take the girls upstairs to their room?” he asks her. “They won’t be going anywhere today.”

“You don’t get to decide that” I protest.

“Avery, the four of us need to talk,” Kellan cuts in. “It’s best if Annie and Miley are with Helen while we do that. Let them enjoy some playtime in the comfort of their room.”

“Fine,” I tell him, since talking to them is all I’ve wanted for a damn week now. I nod slowly and watch as Helen gently guides my girls upstairs, a peculiar sense of relief washing over me.

Once Helen and the girls are upstairs, Luke takes my hand and the four of us head to the second floor, as well. They take me straight to our playroom, our safe haven, our lovemaking nest. It’s been over a week since the four of us have been in this room. But the anticipation is already building up, making my insides squirm and my panties ridiculously wet.

Kellan is the first to come closer, unbuttoning his sheriff’s uniform shirt while his eyes undress me—it’s his brother’s hands that are putting his thoughts into action, though. Fallon is right behind me, this mountain of a man with hard muscles and a gigantic erection subtly wedged between my butt cheeks. Luke watches us intently, fingers working on his silver-plated belt buckle. He’s just come back from a meeting, dressed in one of his fine-tailored suits. I feel small and

feminine, a puddle of arousal and the focus of their absolute desire.

“What thought process led you to want to leave us?” Kellan asks me.

“I’m angry,” I mumble, my voice raspy.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Fallon growls as he nibbles on my earlobe. It sends darts of pure electricity through my whole body, my nipples perking against the lacy fabric of my bra—the next item to come off and land on the floor along with my jeans, boots, and t-shirt. “You hear me, Avery? We’re not letting you walk away from us at the first sign of discord.”

“Are you saying that my pregnancy is a sign of trouble?” I shoot back, but then he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck and I melt in his strong arms while his fingers dig into my hips.

Kellan squeezes my breasts firmly, nipples pinched between his index finger and thumb until a whimper escapes my throat. He kisses me, ravenously and shamelessly, our tongues clashing as my legs part slowly so that Fallon can get rid of my panties, too.

“The fact that you’re pregnant is only cause for joy, babe,” Kellan whispers against my lips. “Don’t ever doubt that, not even for a second. That’s our child growing in your womb. Doesn’t matter who contributed the genetic material, mind you. He’s ours. And so are you.”

Luke swoops in and pulls me into a kiss. “Don’t think for a second that we’re not happy about it.”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” I retort, trying to resist, but he licks and suckles my lower lip, while Fallon holds me in place. Still standing, I begin to tremble as he grinds into me from behind.

Kellan starts kissing my breasts, taking each in his mouth, lovingly licking every inch of tender, delicate skin. The atoms in my body come alive, friction causing heat to spread throughout. This is it, the last of my defenses crumbling as I surrender to my three men. I was a fool for believing I could

just leave. I think I knew that from the moment the idea popped in my head, and yet I tried it anyway. It's almost amusing to think about now.

"Get on your knees," Kellan tells me, and I am compelled to obey.

I kneel on the plush, cream-colored carpet as the three of them stand in front of me, cocks huge and hard and ready to be serviced. My hands run slowly up and down their thick, veiny shafts, my fingers picking up droplets of precum for me to taste while I look right into their eyes. "Mmm, delicious," I manage, then take Kellan in my mouth first while stroking Luke and Fallon.

Listening to the gruff sounds coming out of their throats and watching their muscular chests move as they breathe in and out, I revel in their excitement as I deep throat each of them like a hungry tiger. I loosen the back of my throat and relax my jaw so I can take as much of these men as possible. I feel Fallon swelling in my mouth, veins twitching slightly against my tongue. This man is ready to explode, so I pull back and grin, silently beckoning him to claim me.

"You will unpack your bag," Fallon says, lifting me off the floor. "And you will put everything away where it belongs."

"Yes, sir," I giggle as he guides me closer to the bed.

"You will bend over, now. I wanna see that gorgeous pussy of yours," he adds.

"Yes, sir."

I do as I'm told, and I can feel his hot breath caressing my slick folds just before he slides his tongue through them. Tiny fires ignite, the passion coursing through my veins as my knees buckle. I hold on tightly to the edge of the bed as Fallon eats my pussy, then Kellan, then Luke, who takes his sweet time fucking me with his tongue.

I feel three fingers enter me, stretching and priming with each thrust, then curling as he pulls out. I moan harshly as Kellan guides my hand around the front so that I can work my clit into a much-needed frenzy. They love watching me touch

myself while they possess me in every possible way. I'm all theirs for the taking, every single part of me, and I love every second of it.

"Tell me, Avery, how does this feel?" Luke asks, heat dripping from every word.

"So good, baby. So fucking good!" I moan, bringing myself closer to the edge.

Fallon and Kellan get in front of me, kneeling on the bed so I can suck them both, harder and deeper while Luke takes me from behind. I feel him go in, spearing me with his full length as I wrap my lips around Fallon's monstrous cock.

"Make yourself come," Kellan says, hissing as I take him next while feverishly stroking Fallon. "Look me in the eyes while you do."

"Yes, sir," I reply.

Our gazes are locked as Luke fucks me hard and deep. I welcome Kellan's engorged manhood down my throat, listening to Fallon's ragged breaths as I bring him closer to climax. The possession is complete and feral as Luke slaps my ass with every thrust, pounding into me until I cry out in sweet agony, exploding all over him as my orgasm has me unraveling at every seam.

I come hard, begging and screaming for more, holding Fallon and Kellan's cocks tighter in my hands and sucking the tips until I feel them pulsating, until their seeds fill my mouth, the delightful saltiness glazing my tongue. Luke smacks my ass one last time, and it stings in the best possible way as I clench him tightly inside me, squeezing him dry of every last drop.

Damn I've missed this.

And yet I still have no answers to ease my concerns, my doubts left unresolved.

I don't have any regrets, but I feel uneasy as I descend from the heavens. The afterglow will be long and sweet. They will claim me again and again until the morning sun turns the eastern sky into a canvas of pinks and oranges.

All they did was buy themselves some time.

If I can't bring myself to trust them, how will a relationship between us ever work? And if they can't trust me enough to tell me what's truly got them so glum and evasive, how will anything between us last? How will we be able to raise three children together if they're holding back on me?

I know I can't leave, and I don't know why I ever thought I could, despite my weak attempt the other day. Helen is over the moon, and the girls are too busy with school and roaming freely around the massive house to notice anything's amiss. Kellan, Luke, and Fallon have begun spending a bit more time with the girls so there has been effort on their part in that sense. What irks me is that they've yet to open up to me about what is clouding their minds. They continue to be quiet, distant, and secretive. Something is definitely going on, and I've decided I'll have a better chance of finding out what that is if I stick around.

I've reduced myself to stalker-like status. Here I am, driving two car lengths behind Kellan's department-issued vehicle through North Platte, feeling terribly guilty but unable to stop myself from doing it at the same time. I'm due to pick up some supplies and the sheriff's office is on the way to the store, so that's why I chose this route. That's what I'm telling myself anyway.

I'm parked just down the road from the sheriff's department, shrinking behind the wheel with my eyes glued to Kellan as he exits his car and makes his way toward the front entrance. It's mostly clerks and local deputies changing shifts that are



moving about at this hour. His deputies greet him with broad smiles and claps on the shoulder as they pass.

I'd hoped the new year would mark the beginning of better things to come, especially after what happened with Daniel. My heart was ready to open up and finally be happy, but I can't understand why my men have been so cagey. If they won't tell me, I'll find out the truth on my own.

Kellan stops upon reaching the bottom of the front steps, checking his phone before going up. I notice a frown knitting his brow and a shadow crossing his wild, green eyes as he looks at the screen. Just then, a woman comes up to him from behind, a tall, voluptuous vixen with long red hair and a generous smile. She's tucked into a cream-colored winter coat, one that shows off her hourglass figure, her long legs accentuated by the brown leather heels she's wearing.

She is beautiful, I'll give her that. Likely in her mid-forties and definitely a gym bunny. I don't know why I feel this subtle pang of jealousy in the pit of my stomach as she gently taps Kellan on the shoulder. He turns around but he doesn't seem all that happy to see her. Instead, he appears unsettled as he offers her a faded smile, then an even deeper frown.

He says something to her, but I'm not a lip reader. All I can do is analyze their expressions and body language, and even that doesn't yield much.

Whatever the redhead is telling him, Kellan doesn't look happy to hear it. But she seems kind and keeps a constant smile on her face, often touching his arm or his shoulder. She even laughs lightly at one point, and her palm briefly rests on his chest.

Kellan doesn't pull back. He doesn't reject her physical gestures and I don't like it one bit.

In fact, it's making me angry. Unreasonably angry.

"Who the hell is she?" I ask myself. "And why is he letting her get so fucking close?"

Is this redheaded beauty behind the recent stonewalling? Do Fallon and Luke know her? Dammit, I was supposed to get

answers from this incognito endeavor, not get more unanswered questions—especially not the uncomfortable kind. The more I watch Kellan and the woman talk, the more uneasy I become. It gets to the point where I can't even look at him anymore, but I can't pull myself away, either. I need to know where this is going.

Soon enough, I witness the direction.

Kellan looks up and down the road, as if to make sure nobody sees him before taking the woman by the elbow and not-so- gingerly guiding her down the side alley where the service entrance to his office is located. They disappear out of sight, but certainly not out of mind.

Is this another woman that my men are hiding from me?

Oh, God, the mere thought is enough to send me spiraling in every wrong direction. All I can do is sit behind the wheel and wait for the sudden bout of anxiety to work its way out of my system before I can turn the key in the ignition.

What the hell is going on here?

As luck would have it, I manage to land a remodeling job that afternoon. It's a client referral from Hershey, a new project for a lady named Charlene Maddox, who has just moved back into town and would like her home redone. If this gig comes through, the payout will be generous enough for me to afford a new car. I'd love something bigger for the whole family. Kellan, Fallon, and Luke already have offered on several occasions to update my vehicle, but I find security in knowing that I can provide for myself and my babies, especially with a third one on the way.

Hershey is smaller than North Platte but it's a thriving community filled with tall townhouses that feature spacious backyards and wide windows. It's mostly home to small business owners and local factory workers. I pull up outside the address I received via text and take a moment to look at the house.

The façade is off-white with a red tile roof and unkempt front garden. From the looks of it, the place has been neglected for a few years, at least. The garden stones are covered with muck, most of it frozen over the winter, and the trees could use a trimming. I'm betting the gutters are clogged, too. If the exterior shows such signs of neglect, I am looking forward to seeing what the interior has to offer.

"The grittier, the better," I mutter to myself. I love a good makeover. I'm always excited to start a new project, every room glowing with possibilities, especially when the client is open to my ideas.

I feel a smile form as the front door opens but it immediately vanishes from my face when I recognize the red-haired woman that was talking to Kellan earlier as the homeowner. She's wearing a low-cut white shirt and tight, high-waisted jeans that only serve to amplify her Aphrodite-like curves. Again, why do I feel green with envy like an insecure teenager all of a sudden?

"Hi," I manage, trying to find another smile for this lady.

She lights up like the sun, her eyes big and sparkling blue, her makeup perfectly applied. It's as if she walked right off the cover of a beauty magazine, not a hair out of place. "Hi! Avery, right?" she asks, boldly making her way down the steps to greet me. "I'm Charlene. Charlene Maddox. We spoke on the phone."

"Right, yes!" I reply. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Charlene."

"Likewise. Please, do come in. Let me give you a tour of the place."

We shake hands, and she squeezes mine firmly before I follow her inside. Just as I had hoped, the interior of the two-story house is in need of some love and care as well. The wallpaper is old and parts of it have started to peel away. There are water stains in the ceiling corners, and the wooden floors could do with a complete stripping. *Walnut, I'm feeling a walnut vibe here...*

"So, you didn't tell me much about the house when we first spoke about it," I say as she takes me through the foyer and the dayroom first. My gaze wanders everywhere, registering every detail and every inch in need of fixing. It's a beautiful home, but it has been left to fade over the years. "Just that no one has lived here for some years and that you were moving in."

"Well, that's pretty much the whole gist of it," Charlene says, her voice as smooth as a smoked tumbler of Irish whiskey. "I've been away. Almost five years, to be specific. I never got the chance to renovate before I left. My parents used to live here, but they passed away and to be honest, I didn't really have the courage to come up here after I buried them."

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. Time heals,” she says, as she escorts me to the ground-floor bathroom, the guest room, and then the kitchen with its adjacent dining room. “I’ve decided to settle down in Hershey, and since I had this property already, it felt like such a shame to let it rot. I figured I could invest in a decent remodeling rather than selling and buying something new.”

“I don’t see any reason in selling,” I reply. “The structure seems sound and sturdy. The newer construction guidelines aren’t as strict as they used to be, which is why many builders have invested less in good quality materials. They don’t make houses like yours anymore.”

“So, you agree that I should keep this one.”

“Absolutely. It’ll hold for another hundred years at least. Stone foundation, right?”

Charlene nods once. “You are quite perceptive, consider me impressed.”

We head upstairs and go through each of the bedrooms, the master bathroom, and the study, before moving outside to a terrace overlooking a spacious backyard in dire need of a capable gardener. She takes the time to tell me a bit more about the house and its history, about how invested her parents were in the place and how pretty it used to be back in the sixties and seventies, before her mother’s health started taking a turn for the worse.

“Each of these rooms has a story to tell,” I conclude as we make our way back into the dining room, where Charlene serves tea and biscuits. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until the first bite. “I don’t know much about your vision yet, but can I make a suggestion?”

“Of course. Your input is priceless at this point.”

“I’d try to keep as much of the original aesthetic as possible. Mid-century houses have a particular charm, and the brutalism of that age has transferred beautifully into contemporary minimalism. For example, I’d go for natural woods and

greens, subtle earth tones, and plush, creamy shades for the textiles.”

“Oh, I agree. White walls?”

“White-ish. Warm whites, not the hospital kind.”

Charlene laughs lightly. “No wallpaper, then?”

“The bedrooms would look nice with a simple pattern. I could go through my sample books and give you a selection to choose from. It really depends on what you want,” I tell her, smiling. For a moment, I forgot how touchy-feely with Kellan she’d been earlier. “Just wondering, what made you come back to Hershey, Charlene?”

She gives me a long look, and I find it difficult to read her expression. I’m not sure if she is uncomfortable or annoyed, but she definitely isn’t happy that I asked the question. Yet she pastes on a dry smirk and leans back into her chair. She takes a long sip of her tea before pulling in a deep breath.

“It’s a long story,” she breathes. “I went through a rough patch, let’s call it. And moving back here feels like coming home to everything I knew and loved most. To familiarity and folks who meant something to me a while back. I’m rekindling old friendships while meeting new friends, too. I’m hoping you’ll be one such new friend, Avery.”

I don’t know why I feel so unsettled by her words other than the fact that she was overly familiar with my boyfriend earlier. Shaking the thoughts away, I decide to play certain cards close to my chest and put on a friendly smile instead. It’s a good gig, no matter who this lady is. And the better I get to know her, the more I’ll understand her dynamic with Kellan.

“I think we’ll get along just fine,” I finally say. “I’d be happy to work on this project with you if you’ll have me.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely have you,” she laughs lightly, reminding me of when I saw her touching Kellan’s chest. “How soon can you start? And what do you need from me?”

“A down payment, first of all. I’ll send a contract over by email before the day’s end,” I reply. “We can then go over each room and make a list of materials for every stage of the

process, so we can agree on a budget aside from my fees. And as soon as we're in sync with everything, I can get started the very next day. I've already got a good working relationship with the local suppliers."

"That sounds wonderful!" Charlene exclaims.

Just then the front door opens. "Charlie, I'm home!" a man calls out.

"Come on, let me introduce you to Toby—my assistant and close friend. You'll be liaising with him on the details for this. I'll sign whatever you need me to sign, but he'll be the one paying on my behalf, checking in with you, and assisting with whatever you need."

"That sounds reasonable." I chuckle softly as we get up.

In walks Toby, a tall man with brown eyes and short, brown hair styled in a military cut with a deep lateral fade. He smiles, but only with his mouth, and it's borderline creepy despite the warmth of his voice as he reaches out a hand for me to shake. "Hey, there. You must be Avery."

"And you must be Toby."

"That I most certainly am."

"I was just telling Avery how glad I am that we'll be working together on this house, and that you'll be the one liaising with her on everything," Charlene tells her assistant.

Toby nods in agreement, then looks at me again. I take a moment to measure him from head to toe—he's as tall as Kellan and clad in black, army-style pants and a sweater, a thick winter jacket over top. He doesn't strike me as the preppy personal assistant type. If anything, he's muscular, gruff-looking and broad-shouldered enough to intimidate purely by presence. He lacks the finesse and gentleness one would actually prefer in their front-of-house staff. Yet he's going to be my point of contact going forward. I've had weirder clients.

The timing of Charlene's return could not have been worse.

I got a text from her parole officer mere minutes before the guys and I met with Avery and found out she's pregnant, I knew our troubles would be far from over. I wanted nothing more than peace and love by Avery's side. The four of us and her sweet little girls. The six of us. Well, now seven. It sounded too good to be true.

"She wasn't supposed to get out this early," Fallon mutters as the waitress brings our coffees over. Luke wanted us to meet here, in North Platte, rather than back at the mansion where Avery might overhear. I still feel guilty, though, especially after everything we've been through with her. "What the hell happened, Kellan?"

"I have no idea how the parole board reached this decision," I reply, shaking my head slowly.

Luke adds sugar to his latte, a frown etched deep into his features. "She took a plea deal for twenty years. This doesn't make any sense. How did she only serve five out of twenty?"

"It was probably good behavior," I say.

"And a fat cat lawyer with the right strings to pull," Luke adds.

Fallon is seething, and I can certainly understand why. "What are we going to do? The fact that she's out would've been manageable. But I hear she's moving back to Hershey; her parents had a house there."



“Which means she will be coming around, one way or another,” Luke sighs.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we get there,” I say.

“How about we cross it now?” Fallon shoots back, giving me a dark glare. “Kellan, Avery is already suspecting that there’s something wrong. She almost left once, and the three of us aren’t handling the situation very well. We should tell her about Charlene.”

I shake my head. “No way. No. Avery is still reeling after what happened with Daniel. She’s got the girls going through trauma counseling, for God’s sake.”

“She’s also pregnant with our child,” Luke says.

“Precisely. She really doesn’t need to know about Charlene at this point,” I insist.

Fallon runs a hand through his short, black hair. “What do we do, then? Avery can obviously tell we’re on edge. We’re distant. We don’t even know how to look her in the eye anymore. And it’s not like we ever cheated on her—”

“Yet that’s precisely how this feels,” Luke remarks with resounding bitterness.

“We’re keeping Charlene away from Avery for a reason,” I remind them. “She did a lot of damage before we got her arrested. She was determined to hurt us in every possible way. Imagine how she must be feeling now, after five years in prison.”

“Avery has got enough on her plate,” Luke says. “The pregnancy is taking a toll on her nerves. She’s already scared and constantly worried for herself and the girls, no matter how much we reassure her that everything is okay with us.”

When Charlene accosted me outside the station, I could see it in her eyes—the contempt. She was smiling and seemingly warm and friendly, apparently happy to see me and eager to put that ‘ancient history,’ as she called it, behind us. But her eyes never lied, not even for a second. Charlene has no respect for the rule of law and she’s proven that repeatedly. It’s all an act, and I do see where Fallon is coming from as far as Avery

is concerned. We will protect our woman no matter what, and I'm hoping that what Avery doesn't know can't hurt her. Avery's presence in our home is considered a secret—no one at Wolfhound Security would ever disclose her whereabouts.

“Avery doesn't need additional stress with her pregnancy,” I say after a long pause. “We can handle Charlene. Honorably, I think. We just need to keep her away from the mansion. As far away from our circle as possible.”

“Do you think Mom and Dad had something to do with her early release?” Fallon wonders aloud. “They would definitely have the juice to bypass the District Attorney on this. Nobody called us about Charlene's parole hearing and they should've. Right?”

“From what the parole officer told me, the DA was caught off guard by the board's decision. Nobody thought they would approve Charlene's early release. So, if our parents were involved, we should be looking at any connection between them and the parole board.”

“We all know that their tentacles run deep,” Luke says.

Our parents' influence is like a cancer, slowly but surely eating away at the integrity of my county. Long before I even joined the police force, I knew that our family name stood for power, influence, and corruption. The Cassidy's were always a driving force, stomping on anybody who ever got in their way or tried to stop them. Bribery, racketeering, fraud... if only I had enough evidence, I'd do away with them once and for all. Unfortunately, my mother and father have learned to cover their tracks—particularly since my brother and I left the family to join the Navy. They'd expected the two of us to take their place at the helm of the dynastic conglomerate, but Fallon and I could never stomach all that dirt and illegality. Especially me. I was always the righteous little fucker who got in their way.

I'm pretty sure Dad breathed a sigh of relief when I left town. He sure wasn't happy to see me when I came back and got elected Sheriff of Lincoln County. I've been a thorn in their heels since, but I have yet to gather enough evidence against

them for a RICO bust. It's been a hard pill to swallow, knowing that I'd have to do everything in my power to make sure that it all ends with them.

The worst part is that Luke is right. Their influence runs deep, and Charlene was a good friend and business partner to them long before we ever met her. My parents would benefit the most if Charlene restored her Lincoln County operations.

"Should Charlene go back into business, she'd have so many eyes on her," I say. "And given the open case files I've got on Mom and Dad, I'm not sure it would be in either of their best interests to be suspected of further association. Sooner or later, a dime would drop."

"Nobody can know about Avery," Fallon replies. "Not Mom, not Dad, definitely not Charlene. How do we keep Avery safe? Think about it, Kellan. It's not like we can keep her on lockdown in the mansion. She's got work projects. The girls' school stuff. A life to live. Sooner or later, they're gonna catch on to her. They'll figure it out. They'll know she is with one of us."

"It would be worse if they knew she's with all three of us," Luke sighs.

"Charlene," Fallon says. "She'd know something was up."

"Dammit, we can't tell Avery yet," I cut in, angry enough to have to think twice before slamming my hand on the table. "Let's see what Charlene is up to first. She's not an idiot. She's a smart woman—she'd know better than to start stirring up shit so soon after her release."

"I'll put a pair of eyes on Mommy and Daddy Dearest, too," Luke says. "We need to know if they cross paths with Charlene over the next couple of weeks."

"And in the meantime, we continue to let Avery do her thing," I reply. "I don't like this any more than you guys, but she is still healing from that fucking nightmare with Daniel. I don't want her to get the wrong idea—to pack up and disappear one night because she's scared that she'll lose us or that we're hiding something, even though we are. Still, she can't know

about Charlene. I'll figure out the best way to tell her, I promise. Just... not yet."

Luke can't help but smile softly. "It's not Avery who's afraid of losing us, it's you who's afraid of losing her if she finds out about Charlene."

"Aren't you?" I ask him.

He nods once. "A little. But she's a smart girl, Kellan. I think she deserves more credit than what we've given her in this matter."

"I need more time," I insist. "A couple more weeks, just so I can get my feelers out and observe Charlene's behavior."

Fallon leans back into his chair. "Has she asked about us?"

"Who?"

"Charlene, obviously," he scoffs. "When she came up to you at the station. Did she ask about us?"

"Yeah. She just wanted to know how you were doing."

"Why did she come up to you in the first place?" Luke replies, giving me a curious look.

I can't help but exhale sharply, pressure gathering in the pit of my stomach as I recall that entire moment. "She said she wanted to bury the hatchet. She said that she didn't hold a grudge against us for doing her dirty, quote-end-quote. That the past should stay in the past and that she understands what she did was wrong."

"Let me guess, she's repented," Luke half-smiles and takes a long sip of his coffee.

"Pretty much. I am not buying anything until I find out what she'll be doing in and around Hershey, of course. But in Charlene's defense, she never reached out to any of us while she was in prison. And according to her parole officer, not a single call was made from the prison switchboard to any of our parents' known phone numbers. Maybe she will just keep a low profile and leave us alone."

“That’s wishful thinking,” Fallon says. “The bitch is up to something.”

“We’ll know if she is,” I assure him. “And we’ve got a big-ass security firm we didn’t have before to work on this. Charlene’s going to have the police breathing down her neck for a while, and I’m damn well going to make sure she stays put and uncomfortable until I deem it safe for us to tell Avery about her.”

I’m grasping at the illusion of control and I know it. I’d never admit it to Fallon or Luke, but I think they suspect as much. Even so, I do appreciate them for sticking by my side and agreeing to holding off on telling Avery about her. They may not trust my judgment, but at least they respect my decision. I only hope that decision won’t cause more trouble down the road.

I am so ashamed of this slice of my past, of our past. And given the delicate nature of our relationship with Avery right now, not to mention her physical condition, I don’t want anything to add unnecessary stress to her day-to-day life. She deserves peace, love, and affection. Not ghosts slithering out of prison to haunt us.

I’m not comfortable with any of it, but I don’t feel ready to tell Avery the whole truth yet. And I sure as hell am not ready for the consequences it could bring.

Kellan's hesitation has me on edge. While I understand his reservations, I'm well aware that it could still have a negative impact on our relationship with Avery. I don't like the way he's been handling his parents, either causing Fallon to feel powerless and frustrated. I know that Kellan can push the envelope from a legal standpoint though, if only to keep Elizabeth and Bill Cassidy on their toes and as far away from us as possible.

We've been playing it too safe where his parents are concerned, and I reckon it's time to pay those two a visit. Charlene's early release was no accident and it sure as hell wasn't a coincidence. I'm willing to bet they had a part to play in it, and the timing is more than suspicious given the last conversation that Kellan had with them. They're pissed off and territorial, and I've no doubt they're bound to try and hit us first.

If there is one thing I learned from my time in the Navy, it's that sometimes it's better to rattle the enemy before deciding to go to war against them—if only to gauge their immediate reaction, to get a better estimate of their resources, and to have a clear idea of what they are truly capable of when cornered.

After settling the week's affairs with our security company, I take a couple of hours off and drive up to Hershey.

Just a few miles north of town, the Cassidy's have a ranch they like to stay at during the winter season. The snow stays thick out there and the ranch hands herd the cattle along the outer fences during the day, leaving Elizabeth and Bill with the

house and the back gardens all to themselves. They built a lovely little gazebo by the pond and fitted it with thermo-insulated glass panels so they could sit out there comfortably while staying at the ranch in the winter months. It offers a splendid view of the entire property—a property once owned by their Aunt Helen and Uncle Maurice. I never forgot the dirty games that were played in order for the Cassidy's to get their hands on the land, and neither has Helen. Someday, she will get it all back. I'll make sure of it.

But until then, I put on my nicest smile and drive through the wide open front gates, moving at a low speed to better analyze my surroundings. Just as expected, the ranch hands are busy herding cattle—mere dots on the wavy eastern horizon. The dogs are loose, but they're friendly. It's only after dark, when the gates close, that they become veritable and fearsome guardians.

The house appears modest from afar. A sprawling single level construction with a low-ceiling and oak wood paneling that sports generous windows and an even more generous patio. I remember Helen telling me about how she and Maurice built the whole thing from the ground up—the two of them and a couple of builders from Hershey, to be specific. A lot of love and labor went into this place, and it irks me to see it befouled by her sister and brother-in-law, two of the county's least liked people.

Slowly, I get out of my car and make my way up to the front steps, well aware that the Cassidy's are watching me from behind one of the dainty lace curtains. I can feel their eyes on me. Hell, I can almost feel their hatred burning right into my skin upon reaching the front door. I don't even have to knock.

Elizabeth cracks open the door, a sour look on her face. "Luke Hayden!" she exclaims. "What are you doing here?"

"It's good to see you, too, Mrs. Cassidy," I reply with a broad smile. "Can I come in?"

"What for?"

"I just wanted to have a chat with you and Mr. Cassidy, if that's alright," I explain, keeping a friendly tone to my voice

despite the nausea unfurling in the back of my throat. It still boggles my mind that two great men like Kellan and Fallon came from this wretched couple. The apples couldn't have fallen farther from this gnarly old tree. "I think you'll both want to hear what I have to say."

"Where are my sons?" Bill cuts in, appearing behind Elizabeth with a heavy glower deeply embedded into his wrinkled, sun-burnt face. "Why are you here?"

"I thought you were the epitome of the term civilized," I shoot back with a cold grin. "Yet I'm still standing out here in the cold."

Bill grumbles something about unannounced guests but moves out of the way. Elizabeth lets out a tired sigh as she steps aside, motioning for me to come in. "By all means," she says.

As soon as I'm in the open living room, I take a few seconds to study the space. It's nice and tidy, with plaid patterns and expensive wood furniture, plenty of throw pillows and rare art prints scattered across the walls. Most of the décor isn't theirs, though. I recognize some of the objects that Helen told me about—decorative pieces that Maurice brought back from his trips to the Caribbean. A couple of ebony idols, bronze statuettes, and about a dozen ivory miniatures of Yoruba deities she's still thinking about and wishing she could get them back.

"Alright, you're inside," Bill snaps. "What do you want, Mr. Hayden?"

"I'm sure you know by now that Charlene Maddox is out of prison," I begin, turning around to face them. For a brief moment I imagine them as a seemingly harmless couple of well-to-do pensioners that they're trying to portray. The loose jeans and Angora sweaters do a decent job, but the predatory looks in their eyes remind me of wolves ready to attack their prey. Only I'm not the prey; I'm the fucking hunter ready to take them both out if I have to. "Seeing as she was a close friend and business partner of yours, I wanted to make sure that you're aware of the repercussions, should you try any of your old plays again."



Elizabeth and Bill exchange nervous glances, but the old man lets loose a crude cackle as he defiantly crosses his arms. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he says. “Is that why you’re here, boy? To threaten us?”

“I don’t do threats, Mr. Cassidy. I’m simply warning you that it’s only a matter of time before the authorities come down upon you with the full strength of the law. When that happens, you’ll want to have as few verifiable criminal associations as possible.”

“Has Kellan said anything?” Elizabeth asks, a brief flicker of longing burning in her green eyes. “Why are you here telling us this instead of him?”

“I think you both know the answer to that,” I reply bluntly. “And I am not one who normally meddles in your family’s affairs, but I don’t like where things are going. Charlene needs to find another place to stay, and the two of you should be talking some sense into her.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about Charlene’s position,” Bill narrows his eyes at me again. “What’s your endgame, boy?”

Apparently, I’m not Mr. Hayden anymore, I’m now simply “boy.” He’s pissed. Good. I want him angry, nervous, and with a slippery tongue, so I just keep on smiling. “Mr. Cassidy, whatever Charlene is up to, I’m sure you have a part in it. Or at least some kind of input. I need you to make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid. Kellan has already made it clear that he wants nothing to do with her and neither does Fallon. I certainly don’t. I hope she intends to live a clean and lawful life from here on out. Preferably, somewhere far away from us.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and tell her that yourself, then?” Bill replies. “We’re not Charlie’s keepers.”

“You were her business partners. You should’ve gone to prison with her five years ago, but somehow you dodged that. I also know that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, so I’m willing to bet that Charlene would be more than happy to restart her old operations across Lincoln County, provided she

has some initial financial support. The court froze all of her assets so she's not getting a cent back from any of those accounts."

"What are you accusing us of?" Bill asks.

Elizabeth shakes her head and moves closer to the window. "He wants us to keep Charlene away from them. From the boys."

"I want you to keep her out of trouble," I correct her though I don't want Charlene coming anywhere near us, especially Avery.

"We are not doing anything illegal or inappropriate," Bill says, holding his saggy chin up high. A few decades ago, this man could charm half the county with just his smile. Stripped of his youthful, good looks, a victim of time, all Bill has to show for now is old age and a shitty character, both hidden behind a fat bank account. "And as far as Charlene is concerned, our friendship with her is our business and nobody else's. Whatever it is you're after, you're not gonna get it here, boy."

"I want peace. I want my best friends' parents to stop giving them so much grief," I tell him. "Do you think you can do that?"

"And I want you to stop sticking your nose into my family's business. Do you think you can do that?" the old man snaps back like a striking cobra snake.

"I'd love to be able to do that, but given your history, given Charlene's history, it's a hard no on my part. Mr. Cassidy, Mrs. Cassidy, let me make myself clear—I say this on behalf of your sons but also on behalf of Wolfhound Security—do not try anything funny or there will be hell to pay. Your own sons will destroy you if you don't stop what you're doing."

Elizabeth gives me a long and startling look. Something has shifted in her demeanor. There's a coldness that trickles down my spine, and I can't help but wonder—is this the same look she used to give Kellan and Fallon when she wanted them scared and helpless as little boys? Because I'm sure it would

have worked rather well. “How is Avery?” she asks, her voice as sweet as poisoned honey.

“Excuse me?” I ask, my breath cut short.

“That blonde you’ve been shacking up with. Avery is her name? With the two little girls?” Elizabeth replies, half-smiling. “How is she doing? How are Annie and Miley getting along with the other kids in school? I hear Samson’s kids are bullies and they just love pulling girls’ pigtails.”

My blood runs cold as I understand the veiled threat behind each word. She’s not mentioning Samson’s kids without reason. Samson is a former service member himself, but unlike me, Kellan, and Fallon, he opted for less savory dealings to build his post-military fortune. The sheriff’s department has a couple of open murder-for-hire case files on him but all the evidence they’ve got so far is circumstantial. I didn’t know his children were going to the same school as Annie and Miley, though. That’s new information, and Elizabeth isn’t simply letting it slip. She wanted me to know.

I say as calmly as possible, “Avery is none of your concern. And I hope this is the last time I hear Miley and Annie’s names coming out of your mouth, as well, or there will be consequences.”

Elizabeth laughs lightly, briefly glancing back at her husband. “The snake is rattling,” she says.

“Do not threaten me or the people I care about,” I reiterate. “I may choose to handle things legally most often, but I will not hesitate to do what your sons don’t yet have the nerve to do, if push comes to shove. Don’t think for a second that Samson scares me. I’ve killed worse for less, and you both seem to be forgetting who I am and where I come from.” I take a moment to look at them both, noticing the expressionless faces and dead eyes. “Don’t fuck with me, because believe me when I tell you, you really don’t want me fucking with you.”

“I think you need to leave now,” Bill declares. “You’ve said your piece.”

“I mean it. About Charlene, about everything. Don’t be stupid. This isn’t the sixties and seventies anymore. It’s a new day, a new age, and your old bullshit won’t work as smoothly as it used to,” I warn them.

“Get. Out.”

I nod once and head for the door, fully aware that they’d shoot me dead where I stood if it weren’t illegal. But they’ve gotten away with worse, so there’s no point in fueling the flames any further. Bill is right; I said everything I came to say. The message has been received though not well, which was to be expected. I can only hope they will think twice before they reach out to Charlene in the coming days.

“Oh, Mr. Hayden,” Elizabeth calls out just as I open the door to leave. I pause in the doorway and give her an over-the-shoulder glance. “We know about your history with Charlene. We know about you and our sons, I mean, and what you like to get up to when you think nobody’s looking. The three of you forget we’ve been around much longer than you have. The people here know us, they fear and respect us, even if you don’t.”

“What is your point?” I reply.

“It means I don’t like being threatened either,” Elizabeth says, and it suddenly becomes clear—it’s not Bill that I need to be afraid of, it’s her. She’s the devil in disguise. “I wouldn’t think you’d want all sorts of unsavory rumors floating about town regarding your past, Mr. Hayden. Perhaps you’ll keep that in mind going forward.”

I’ve got nothing left to say at this point. I’d hoped I’d gain some insight with my visit. I did, but not the kind I’d hoped for. The Cassidy’s are clearly dangerous players—ruthless and well connected. At least I now know how low they’re willing to go in order to get what they want. I also know that they definitely have some kind of new business dealing flourishing with Charlene, otherwise they wouldn’t have pricked up as harshly as they did. They wouldn’t have mentioned Avery and the girls, either.

If there is one thing the Cassidy's hold sacred, it's their family reputation. While they may no longer be on the best terms with their sons, they wouldn't allow nasty gossip about their sexual exploits to soil their good name. The fact that Elizabeth felt the need to mention Avery and Charlene in less than a minute and solely for the purpose of rattling me speaks volumes. The gloves have come off, it was only a matter of time.

At least I now have a clearer picture of what it is we're dealing with. Kellan will be upset when he finds out that I paid his parents a visit, but he'll be better off knowing what I found out. I think Fallon will understand. Of the two brothers, Fallon is the one with far less empathy left for his parents. Kellan still hopes to use only the law against Elizabeth and Bill, but I have a dark feeling looming in the back of my mind, one that says they won't go down easily, or quietly.

They will do everything in their power to destroy Kellan and Fallon before their sons have the chance to destroy them first. And I'll be smack in the middle of it. I'm not comfortable with going down the darker road in order to protect the ones I love but I will. Without hesitation.

Things at home are the same as I left them the other day. I keep giving Kellan an opportunity to tell me about Charlene Maddox, but he and the guys continue with their usual attitude—warm and attentive, loving and sweet. They are dominant and passionate in the bedroom, yet they still haven't given me anything to go on. We are all thrilled to be having a baby. We're also thrilled to be free of Daniel, and my girls are happy and going about their lives, gradually recovering from that gruesome day. Yet I can't shake the feeling that there is an underlying shadow hovering that nobody wants to talk about.

I would like to get whatever it is out in the open while I'm still early in my pregnancy. The last thing I need is unnecessary stress as I grow closer to my due date. It's such a scary and wonderful experience, and both Annie and Miley are so excited about having a kid brother or sister. Yet I continue to feel like I'm going through it alone and that everything could go up in smoke somehow. I don't think I'll be able to shake the feeling as long as my men continue to keep secrets from me.

Since there's nothing more I can do until I have a direct confrontation with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke, I decide to focus on my working relationship with Charlene Maddox. If they won't tell me anything about her, I'll find out for myself while also scoring a pretty ambitious design project. Her house is a great way for me to further develop my interior decorating brand and given that she's got purpose for each of the rooms, I get to play on the creative side of things. I do like that she's been open to most of my suggestions.

The following Monday, I pull up in front of Charlene's townhome and climb the steps. Toby greets me with an open door and a broad smile. "Good morning, Avery," he says. "Ready to get this show on the road?"

"Only if the materials were delivered on Friday," I reply with a chuckle.

"Worry not, I was here when they delivered everything," he says. "I checked the list you left me and there's nothing missing."

"Oh, good. Then we can definitely get the show on the road."

He's wearing dark jeans and a black sweater, his short brown hair combed neatly and his stubble freshly shaved. He smells of almonds and musk, and he always smiles when our eyes meet. I don't know if he's just friendly by nature or if he's flirting.

"Shall we do coffee first?" Toby asks. "I just made a fresh pot."

I'm already in my prewashed overalls and work sweater, but coffee does sound good. "You know what? I could use a hot cup of joe right about now."

"Follow me," he says, and I follow him into the kitchen.

To my delight, he has already laid out and taped plastic sheets throughout the house to protect the original floors from any plaster or paint that might fall during the work process. Charlene has yet to decide if she wants to keep the original hardwood or replace it. I can understand the emotional attachment, and the current floor could survive for another decade if cleaned, sealed, and buffed properly.

"So, how long have you been living in Hershey?" Toby asks as we sit out on the back porch to enjoy our coffee.

It's still cold during this time of the year, but it's nothing my fur-lined boots and woolen sweater can't handle, especially with a sweet and milky hot drink to get my engine running.

"Oh, I don't live in Hershey," I reply, cautious in the details I offer regarding my personal life. "I've got a place just outside

of North Platte.”

“Easy drive, though. Makes sense.”

“Yeah. And you? Hershey native?”

Toby shakes his head. “Nah, I moved here with the job.”

“With Charlene, you mean.”

“That is correct.”

I give him a wry smile. “So you like the job?”

“The job and the employer,” Toby replies. “Charlene may seem like a complicated and sometimes difficult woman, but she is strong and determined. Ambitious and driven. No matter what life throws at her, she always manages to come out on top.”

I can hear the admiration in his voice. “So, how long have you and Charlene been in Hershey, then?”

“Only a couple weeks,” he says. “I rent a place just down the road from here. Since being her personal assistant requires my presence on a daily basis, I needed a pad with easy access to her home and office.”

“Charlene has an office in Hershey, too?”

“She’s not using it yet,” Toby replies. “I think she’ll want to do most of her work from here.”

“Precisely what I was thinking, given that we agreed to make the ground-floor guest room a home office,” I say before taking a long sip of my coffee. “Does Charlene know anyone else in town? I understand this used to be her parents’ house, so I assume she grew up here.”

Toby eyes me intently for what feels like an exceedingly long minute. I wonder if he’s trying to decide whether he can trust me or not. Part of me stings with guilt because of my personal, ulterior motive in getting to know more about Charlene. “Charlene was away for a few years. Out of state. Before that, most of her work focused on North Platte and the surrounding areas, but she didn’t live in Hershey. She had another place just outside Maxwell.”



“I see. What made her come back here, then?”

“I think Charlene can answer that question when you sit down for coffee again,” Toby replies, half-smiling. “Frankly, I’m more interested in getting to know you, Avery. Is it hard to do all the dirty work yourself?”

I laugh lightly. “I don’t intend on doing all the dirty work by myself for much longer. I’d rather focus on the design, the acquisition process, the logistical side of things. You know, creating the interiors and overseeing the implementation. But since I’m still quite new in the business, I had to start my brand from the ground up.”

Toby nods slowly, smelling his coffee before he practically downs half the mug. “Consider me impressed. Most women would balk at this kind of physical labor. It’s a lot of heavy work, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but you get used to it. Of course, if there’s something I can’t physically do, I will pay someone to help me. For example, if Charlene decides that she wants to take out the old flooring, I’m not gonna be the one pulling hardwood or cracking tiles wide open by myself,” I tell him.

Toby seems like an interesting guy but for all his friendliness and apparent openness, I’ve got a vague feeling that he’s the kind of person who keeps every card close to his chest. “Where are you from, originally? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“North Carolina,” he says, not missing a single beat. “Charleston.”

“That’s funny. You don’t have that North Carolinian twang in you,” I giggle.

“I grew out of it years ago. I traveled a lot before I moved to Hershey,” he replies, then finishes his coffee and gets up. “Come on, Avery. I’ll help you get started if you want. I’ve got a couple of hours to spare before Charlene comes back from her meeting.”

I take one last sip of my mug and let him take it back into the kitchen, watching him closely. Toby is big and well-built, I’m

guessing a former athlete or perhaps ex- military where physical combat was a must. I can tell from his demeanor and the way he carries himself, though his gait isn't as unyielding as Kellan or Fallon's.

"Were you in the military?" I ask him as we go into the living room. It's the first room on my to-do list. "Oh, you even brought everything in here!" I exclaim upon noticing the materials and the paint cans set up on a black tarp in the corner.

"I even placed the paint to match its corresponding room, so you won't have to carry the cans all over the place," he replies, then narrows his brown eyes at me. "What makes you think I was in the military?"

"I don't know. From the way you walk, I think? I know a few veterans, and you remind me a little of them."

"Well, you guessed right. I was in the Army, but it was only for a few years."

I give him a warm smile. "Thank you for your service."

Toby looks away, eager to avoid the topic from what I can tell. He points to one of my toolboxes. "Need anything from in there?" he asks.

"Not yet. I need to strip the walls first. This is solid brickwork, not the usual, flimsy plasterboard. It'll take a while," I tell him.

Once I get started on chipping off the first layer, Toby watches me for a while, not saying another word. But the silence starts getting awkward, so I decide to give him a metal scraper so he can help with the second wall.

"I was wondering when I'd get the chance to get my hands dirty," Toby laughs.

"You said you wanted to help."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I like this part," he says, seemingly eager to get started. "It's been a while since I've done this kind of work."

I give him a sideways smirk. “Let me guess—it’s been lattes and quick brunches ever since you started working for Charlene.”

Again, Toby pauses, choosing his words. I’ve got a feeling that there’s a lot left unspoken in this conversation. I’m sure it has everything to do with the fact that I’m virtually still a stranger, and as Charlene’s PA, Toby has every reason to be protective and perhaps even suspicious. From what I’ve learned so far, her line of work is in the financial industry, and that usually comes with sharp and ruthless competition, especially where investments are concerned.

I’m hopeful that he will eventually open up more, and my desire to figure out what role Charlene plays, or played, in Kellan, Fallon, and Lukes lives will be revealed. If she’s been away for a few years, I imagine that means she’s been away from them, too.

“Mostly lattes and quick brunches, yes,” Toby decides to keep me out of the inner circle for now.

But that’s okay. I’ve got time and plenty of patience. We’ve only just started on the first room. Heck, by the time I’m done with the ground floor, I reckon I’ll know more about Charlene and Toby, possibly even get some answers regarding my men.

Until then, however, I will keep my head down and my questions as little intrusive as possible. I don’t want the wrong kind of spotlight on me. Not in this town. Not after everything I’ve already been through.

The conversation during dinner feels stale.

“Wow, you hit every flavor on the menu here,” I say as I fill my plate. “I’m gonna walk out of here a happy woman. Thank you, Helen.”

“Thank the butcher in North Platte, honey,” she replies with a satisfied grin. “He went to a lot of trouble to get us this cured ham all the way from Omaha.”

“Seriously?” I am genuinely surprised. “How’d you get him to do that?”

“Oh, I told him I’ve got a little nephew on the way and his momma likes prosciutto,” Helen laughs.

Kellan smirks. “I’ll give you credit, Auntie, you are shameless *and* resourceful.”

“Hey, it was worth it,” Fallon chimes in, inhaling two slices at once. “This stuff is the food of the gods. I love it.”

Luke glances my way with a warm smile. “How do you like it so far, Avery?”

“Does my silence say nothing?” I shoot back with a mouthful.

Meanwhile, Annie and Miley get busy on their plates. Annie is much daintier about her meals than Miley, but it’s only a matter of time before my youngest picks up a couple of habits from her older sister. As far as Annie is concerned, food is perfectly edible no matter how you eat it—with your bare hands, silverware, or simply your face, directly off the plate. She’s always making me laugh with how messy she can get.

“I can see cleaning you up is going to be a pain,” I tell Annie, trying not to laugh.

In the meantime, Miley chews her food thoroughly and observes her sister with a mixture of amusement and endearment. “Momma, she’s dirty,” my older daughter declares.

“Aren’t we all?” Fallon sighs most dramatically. “I say we screw the cutlery altogether.”

“Momma, more bread please!” Annie calls out, one hand toward the bread basket.

I give her another piece, then shift my focus back to the guys. Helen has finally taken a seat at the table, paying attention to my girls so I can finish my dinner in peace. Ever since she learned about the pregnancy, Helen has been even more attentive, making sure all of my needs are met before anybody else’s. My girls are her priority, but I have noticed that she has been spending more time in the house with us than ever before.

“So, Avery, how’s this new project you’re working on going?” Kellan asks after a while.

“It’s going well. A big house with plenty of rooms,” I reply, averting my gaze. I hate lying and I hate telling half-truths even more. “It’ll keep me busy for at least a month. Possibly two if the client decides to replace the flooring throughout.”

“Who’s the client?” Luke glances my way with a curious gleam in his eyes.

“Oh, a lady in Hershey. It used to be her parents’ house,” I say, having trouble swallowing my food at this point. The disadvantage of having a conscience, I guess. “How are you three doing? How’s work?”

And there it is. The awkward silence I knew would eventually ensue. There is something they’re actively avoiding talking about and it has them pulling up resources from Wolfhound Security. I can tell from the number of analysts working in the east wing lately. Twice as many as before, while the phones are ringing off the hook. I don’t go there too often, but I can

hear the buzzing of those busy bees whenever I come down the main stairs.

“We’ve got a couple of new contracts,” Fallon says, eyes fixed on his plate. “And a few issues to deal with on the side, but nothing we can’t handle.”

“What issues?” I innocently ask.

“Old faces who picked the wrong time to come back,” he replies.

It draws a heavy sigh from Kellan. “The sheriff’s department has been keeping me busier than usual,” he says, looking to change the subject. “Now that the winter is thawing away and people are venturing out, we’re seeing a bit more crime than last month. I’ve got the deputies out on patrol more, especially around Maxwell. There’s a meth lab there that I’m looking to shut down, but I need more evidence before I can go to Judge Reese for a warrant.”

“Judge Reese. Isn’t that—” Luke tries to say something but Kellan bluntly cuts him off.

“Yeah. I’m not a fan of his, but he’s the one currently handling the county, so it’s not like I have a choice,” he says.

I give them a curious frown. “What’s wrong with Judge Reese?”

“He gave a favorable review to someone he helped put away about five years ago,” Kellan says. “It helped convince the parole board to grant an early release with which I don’t agree. But it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Nothing is ever for me to worry about, but I don’t say that aloud. There’s enough tension hanging over the dinner table as we speak, as we try to eat, pretending that everything is okay between us. Even after all we’ve been through and despite the fiery lovemaking, there is still secrecy, still things left unspoken. I realize that I’m partly responsible because I’m holding back, too. I’m not sharing the whole truth either, and they know it. I can see it on their faces, and I feel it deep within.

Nobody's being entirely honest. We're all pretending that there's nothing to be concerned about. Yet everything we say and do comes with an underlayer of discomfort and I hate it. I power through the rest of dinner, kiss my girls goodnight, and let Helen take them upstairs.

"I'll give Annie a quick bath before I put her to bed," she tells me.

"Thank you," I reply with a warm smile.

"Goodnight, everyone," Helen says with Annie and Miley glued to her arms. They wave goodbye as she takes them out of the dining room, and I take a minute to listen to the sound of their giggles and receding footsteps.

Seconds pass in awkward silence as I try to think of something else to say. Kellan pretends he really likes his lemon cheesecake, though I can tell from the slightly sour look on his face that it's definitely not among his top favorite flavors. Fallon scrolls through his phone, not even remotely interested in dessert. Luke refuses to take his blue eyes off me, the shadow of a smile testing his lips.

"I think I'm gonna go upstairs," I finally say, choosing to leave the rest of my cheesecake for another time. "Let you guys enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Are you okay, Avery?" Kellan asks, visibly concerned.

I don't want to argue, we've already had this conversation. They tell me there's nothing going on. I tell them that there is definitely something going on. I get angry. They get frustrated. But it never goes anywhere. Whatever it is, they're either going to tell me when they're ready, or I'm going to find out for myself.

"I'm okay, just tired," I reply with a soft nod, then excuse myself and go upstairs.

But it's not my room I'm headed for. No, it's the playroom. I need time alone in there, so I can blow off some steam. There's just too much swirling around in my head. Too many thoughts and unverified suspicions, concerns, and frustrations. The pregnancy could be having an impact of its own on my

judgment, I'm not sure. Or it could be the years of physical and emotional abuse I endured while I was married to Daniel. It could also be a combination of both, along with the certainty that my men aren't being entirely forthcoming about something.

Either way, I know I can rely on my time alone in the playroom to ease my nerves. I've done it many times before, especially when the guys were away on a business trip. Oddly enough, it's the first time I'm doing it while they're all in the house.

Slowly, I take my clothes off and pick out one of the vibrators from the nightstand drawer. My mind is riddled with unsavory thoughts, so I close my eyes as I lay on the bed, dissolving into the silken covers for a sweet minute. It smells of lavender and roses in this room. Of body oil and sex. Of spicy nights and orgasmic release. I love this place.

I start touching myself, hoping to get my body to a space where this frayed mind of mine can follow. Massaging my breasts, I take my time with myself, squeezing and pinching my nipples hard until the stinging sensation translates into a myriad of electrical spikes running through my flesh, until liquid heat pools between my legs and starts trickling down onto the sheets.

Moaning softly, I spread my knees and turn the vibrator on, listening to its steady hum as I press the tip against my clit. My core tightens as I burn from the inside, tension gathering in my lower belly with each second. I don't even hear the door open as I press the tip harder against my swollen nub, using my spare hand to hold my breast tightly in anticipation of a much-needed release.

"Playing by yourself?" Luke's voice pours into my ear.

I'm startled, but I don't move. I simply open my eyes to find him standing beside the bed, his fingers already working his shirt buttons. The blue pools of his gaze have darkened into a stormy ocean, shadows dancing and desire flashing through them as his lips part slowly.



“Yes,” I whisper, but don’t let go of the vibrator. It’s doing something to my senses, removing every inhibition as I watch my man undress.

His cock stands up under my attention, swollen and thick and dying to be inside me. He strokes himself and watches me as I please myself. “I would like to see what happens next,” Luke says. “If you don’t mind the company.”

“I never mind the company,” I reply, my voice low and raspy.

“Then show me what you like.”

“You already know what I like.”

“Show me anyway.”

Despite the issues we’ve been having, issues we haven’t exactly addressed, our sexual chemistry is more intense than ever. So I slide the vibrator deep inside me and turn it up to its maximum level. My insides shake as I move my spare hand down to work on my clit while I thrust the toy in and out, my pussy clenching.

“Harder,” Luke says, hand locked tightly around his cock as he bites his lower lip.

I fuck myself harder as he commands, fingers flicking over my swollen nub until I lose my breath altogether. My eyes never leave his. My hips tilt upward as I torture myself in the most satisfying way with the toy, bringing myself closer to the edge. Closer and closer, until I’m about to explode.

I see a devilish grin blooming across Luke’s face. “Are you about to come, my love?” he asks.

“Yes”

“Stop.”

I blink several times. “What? Why?”

“Give it to me,” he says.

“Not yet,” I tell him, continuing to pleasure myself. This was meant to be “me time” and quite frankly, he’s interrupting. I’m going to finish what I started before giving in to him. I come

hard, screaming out, continuing to rub my clit and thrusting the vibrator in and out of my pussy.

Before I can say or do anything, he drags me down, ass on the edge of the bed, and pulls out the vibrator, spearing me with his full, glorious length while pressing the vibrator's tip against my clit.

"Oh, God!" I cry out.

"Hold me tight," Luke grunts, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

I hold on for dear life as he turns the vibrator up and brings me back to the top of the mountain, thrusting himself deeper and harder inside me.

"Dammit, Avery, you're fucking perfect... so fucking tight and wet... so hot and needy... I love it. I love you," Luke says.

"I love you, too," I manage. "Oh, fuck... FUCK, harder... fuck me harder!"

I moan loudly as a shattering orgasm blows through me like a hurricane, shaking me to the core. I clench myself tightly around him, desperately welcoming every thrust as he fills me with his seed, roaring like a lion as he comes.

"Oh, wow..." is all I'm able to mumble as I unravel like a thread, still shaking from the powerful climax.

My mind is blank. I needed this. How did he know I needed this? How did he know that I needed him? My anger has dissipated and I feel like a ragdoll.

As Luke kisses me, his lips soft and sweet, his tongue playful, I realize that it's only a moment's high that he's giving me. Our troubles are far from over. Outside this room, there are still secrets and things left unsaid. There is still frustration and silence. But in here, at least for now, at least for tonight, I get to simply let it go.

Luke is hard again. "I'm not done with you yet, Avery."

"Good."

I'm not done either. I want my body owned and consumed, my heart filled. I want my breath gone and my skin gleaming with passion. And as Luke tosses the vibrator aside and gets down on his knees to lick my ridiculously slick folds, I brace myself for madness. It's what I desperately need tonight.

Avery is understandably concerned, and I get it, but we can't tell her anything yet. Charlene's return to Lincoln County is no coincidence. It's deliberate. I can tell from the way she accosted Kellan outside the sheriff's office. She's looking to get back into our good graces, but I don't trust her. I will never trust her again. I made that mistake once, and I almost lost myself. We all did.

Charlene was supposed to be a closed chapter, forgotten and buried. The shame we felt, the betrayal, the misery that followed... it took the three of us a long time to heal our bruised egos and learn to trust people again. Especially a woman we genuinely cared about. Her return is anything but auspicious, and now the three of us must prepare for whatever it is she's bringing back into our lives. It's nothing good, I'm certain of it.

"Are you sure you want to keep this from Avery?" Marcus O'Neill, our Director of Operations, asks as soon as we sit down in his office to go over the intel he's uncovered so far. He was with us when the truth about Charlene came to light, and he helped us liaise with the FBI in order to bring her down. "She'll figure it out, eventually. It's only a matter of time before Charlene shows up on your doorstep."

"I'm hoping she'll be back in prison way before then," I tell him, shaking my head as I go through his laptop folders. I find the one I need and click it open. "Besides, I'm pretty sure there's a ban in place for her where our security system is

concerned. Our guys should be able to pick her up from the gate.”

“Yes, facial recognition cameras at the front, plus the ones on the porch,” Marcus agrees. “We do have a problem, though.”

“What’s that?”

I kind of already know the answer, judging by the handful of flimsy image and document files available for me to peruse at this point.

“There’s not much to go on right now,” he says. “She doesn’t even have a bank account open in her name. Charlene is completely off the radar this time around. We don’t know where she’s living, who she’s working with, or where she’s getting her money from. Kellan said she was very well-dressed for a woman who just got out of prison.”

Outside, the beginning of spring is grey and sullen, a perfect match for my overall mood. There isn’t enough lovemaking in the world to drown out the gloom of Charlene’s return, and it makes me feel terrible for Avery. I love her. Kellan and Fallon love her. Deeply. We are determined to keep this marvelous woman in our lives, yet until we figure out Charlene’s endgame, the tension is fucking suffocating and messing with our dynamic.

“I had a brief conversation with Agent Freely. You remember him, right?” I ask Marcus, and he nods once. “He said the injunction on Charlene’s accounts is still in place. All of her assets are frozen, and until further notice, they will stay frozen. So, whatever money she’s using, it’s likely cash or from associates’ accounts. Her parents are dead, but she still has a sister, Corinne Maddox. We should look into her, check her financials from top to bottom.”

“Would it be wise to put a detail on Charlene anytime soon?”

I think about it for a moment. There are risks to such an endeavor, but the payout would be justified. We do need to know more about her every movement and nip any threat in the bud. I’m confident Kellan and Fallon would agree. Of course, Kellan would protest at first, but Fallon would

definitely be on board. I'm not sure which of us despises Charlene more, though I reckon it would probably be a tie between the big guy and me. Kellan has always taken the more noble path with a forgive-and-forget approach—that is, until she showed up outside his workplace. We've got too much to lose if we allow Charlene to get too close, and that snake knows precisely which nooks to sneak through.

“Do that,” I tell Marcus. “Make sure they're discreet, though, just assign one agent. A female in an unmarked car. We don't want Charlene to get suspicious anytime soon. Have her keep an adequate distance, no matter what.”

Marcus goes through a roster of available agents who would be able to undertake the mission. “Should we put a tracker on her car, too? Just in case our girl loses her.”

“We need something small and untraceable. Charlene will likely be paranoid after how things went down between us.”

“I've got a couple of devices from my buddy at Langley. State-of-the-art stuff. As small as a fingernail and just as slim.”

“Yeah. Worth a shot. But only if she can get close enough to Charlene's car without being seen. That woman does not get her own hands dirty. She probably has an associate working with her,” I warn Marcus. “That's who we need to be careful about.”

“We'll monitor everyone she meets with, even if it's just for a minute,” he assures me. “How are you feeling, Luke?”

I know the meaning behind his question and I can't blame him for asking. What happened with Charlene was so awful and filthy, we all did our best to put it out of our heads and move on but it was deeply personal for me. I lean back into my chair and stare at the laptop screen for a while, trying not to let my mind slide into the past.

“I'm angry,” I finally say, my voice low and cold. Chills trickle down my spine, the memories flooding back in with a ruthless vengeance. “When we met Charlene, we didn't know

the repercussions, Marcus. We had no idea of her connections.”

“How could you have known? She was always the secretive type. And you do understand how dark money flows, man.”

“Yeah and I should’ve been more careful. I should’ve had you looking into her from day one. Maybe we would’ve found out sooner.”

“You had no reason to suspect her,” Marcus insists. “Luke, you had absolutely no way to immediately link her to those fuckers in Iran. Yet she knew exactly who you were from the moment she first shook your hand. She knew, and she kept her mouth shut.”

“What was she supposed to say?” I scoff. “Hi, I’m Charlene Maddox and I’m partially responsible for the submarine explosion that cost you your leg?”

Marcus frowns, a deep shadow creasing between his brows. “She had money flowing all over the Middle East while you and the guys were on active duty. You didn’t even know her then.”

“Fair enough. It doesn’t make what she did right, though, does it?”

“No, it does not.”

“It was illegal. It was treason. And the fucked up part is that as soon as I found out, I knew I had no way of nailing her for it. I couldn’t prove her connections there.”

“You got her on fraud and embezzlement, though,” Marcus points out. “The best we could do was nail her for the domestic activities.” I know he’s trying to make me feel better, but I can still remember how frustrated he was when we sat down and went through all the evidence we’d managed to gather against Charlene. Everything we had regarding her dark money movements was circumstantial at best, and it wasn’t enough for a treason charge.

“Yeah and how did that work out in the end?” I ask, already knowing the answer. “She went to prison for five years, released early for good behavior. We couldn’t even tie the

Cassidy's back to her. We never cut the head off the snake, and here we are, doing it all over again. Trying to nail her down for good."

"I've got a feeling it'll be different this time around."

"Pray tell," I mutter.

"We've learned a lot from that episode. We know she's hiding something, or things, plural. Let's go with the plural here, because a woman like Charlene Maddox has an ego the size of the Empire State Building. We can be sure that she's back with a purpose, and the fact that the older Cassidy's were rattled by your visit is telling enough. She's working with them again. We know who to watch and what to watch out for."

"Fair enough."

"We also have better surveillance tech than we did five years ago, and we're aware that the snake is trying to slither her way back into the garden," Marcus adds with a wry smile. "Whatever she's up to, we'll get her. Charlene thinks she's the smartest person in the room. That was her undoing before, and it'll be her undoing again. You can't cure arrogance, Luke."

He makes a multitude of valid points. But it's Avery I'm worried about. "She'll figure out Avery's role here," I tell him. "She will attempt to get close to her, to try and hurt her."

"Charlene will never be able to get that close," Marcus says. "I could have a secondary detail keeping an eye on Avery and the girls, too."

"Kellan and Fallon will be pissed."

"But do you really think they'll say no, given that the three of you are so determined to keep Avery in the dark about Charlene?"

Good point. "Okay. Do that, then. Have a pair of eyes on Avery and the girls as well. But make sure they're discreet. If Avery realizes we're tailing her, she'll fly into a panic, especially after what happened with her ex."

"Don't worry about that. Here's what I'm thinking—let me keep watch on Charlene, first. Let me figure out who she's



meeting with and where. And if there is any overlap with Avery at any point, even by a couple of feet, I'll put a security detail on her, too," Marcus suggests. "How does that sound?"

"Smart. Thank you, my friend."

I'd thought surveilling Avery was a thing of the past. Daniel is dead and buried. That was supposed to be the end of it. I never expected Charlene to get out of prison so soon, and I certainly didn't think she had the audacity to come back here the way she did. Her actions scream purpose and intent, of a plan she's likely hatching. And if she's targeting the three of us, she will be looking for soft spots to hit.

There is no softer spot than Avery and her little girls.

I had to kill a man in order to protect them, and I still have nightmares about that. I had plenty of kills during my Navy service, and I've done my best to place Daniel in the same batch of dirty fuckers who had it coming. I don't want to ever have to do that again, though. I don't know how much more of my own soul I can sacrifice in order to keep the woman I love safe—especially when I'm trying to keep her safe from a woman who once had her own place in that same fucking soul.

You don't get over that kind of betrayal. You simply swallow the hurt and you move on.

But like Marcus says, when the snake tries to slither back into the garden, what are you supposed to do? You keep an eye on it, and if needed, you grab a shovel and sort that shit out.

The first week on Charlene's project turned out smoother than I had originally anticipated. Her parents' house is old, and I'd expected necessary work on the pipes before I could go in with my work on the walls. But according to the plumber I brought in, the bones in the place are good, and the copper pipes are in excellent condition. Charlene also decided to keep the original flooring, which makes the rest of my job easier.

I'm done with the living room, and I've moved all of my tools into the ground-floor bathroom, the room I'm starting on next. A mason helped with removing the original tiles from the walls. We're preserving the floor tiles, though—they're large and beautiful ceramic pieces that only need a good steam and grouting before applying a coat of high-traffic varnish to bring out their original teal color. The best part is that I've found wall tiles that match that particular shade, and I love their minimalist design.

"How are you coming along?" Toby asks one afternoon just as I add more adhesive to the wall prior to affixing another tile under the bathroom sink. "Do you need anything? Coffee?"

"I'm cutting back on my coffee intake these days," I reply with a smile. "Maybe some tea? Something green? Or ginger, if Charlene has any in the pantry."

"I'll go check."

I listen to his footsteps echoing through the bare house. Charlene is staying at a nearby hotel while I work on the place,

but she does come in once a day to see how I'm coming along and to chat. She strikes me as a solitary creature. I don't know where she's been, but she loves losing herself in our conversations. She's friendly and warm, always curious about me and the girls. I haven't told her where I live or who I'm with, and I am keeping that a secret by default, but I have shared bits and pieces of my past with her. I figure if I want her to open up to me, I need to do the same, even if it's only in very small amounts.

Toby has been warming up to me, too. More every day.

"Charlene will be coming by tomorrow," he says as he brings me a mug filled with steaming ginger and honey tea. The scent alone is enough to have me drooling, so I take a break from my work and sit on the wooden stool I keep by the finished wall. "She's got a few errands to run today, so she asked me to stick around, instead."

"Well, thank you for keeping me company," I reply with a smile, then take a sip of my tea. "Where is she off to?"

"Oh, here and there. Bank stuff, mostly."

He always keeps the details out of any Charlene-related conversation. Then again, he's her PA. He's supposed to be mindful and discreet. I wonder if she's made any other visits to Kellan. My men are just as secretive as before, but I've stopped badgering them about it. We spend our nights entwined in furious lovemaking, yet as soon as the sun comes up, I feel like I'm on the outside again, looking in. It's not a feeling I wish to get used to. At least I've got this project to keep me busy. Perhaps I can get close enough to Charlene to try and find out the truth from this end.

"She's really nice," I say after a while, feeling Toby's eyes on me. "I've got a feeling that she's had her fair share of troubles before coming back to Hershey."

His gaze darkens in a most unsettling way. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how to describe it. It's more of a feeling, really. I've been through the grinder myself, so I think it's easier for

me to recognize the emotional scars on people. Charlene strikes me as the kind of woman who's been through some things, too. I think it's in the eyes. You know, a window to the soul."

"She's a good woman," he says, gradually relaxing. I don't know what he was expecting me to say, but I can tell he's aware of details from her history that had him on edge for a moment, probably worried I'd learned something on my own. "There aren't any others like her in this world, I'll tell you that much."

"Yeah, I like her. She's fierce. You were right about that."

"She knows what she wants." Toby pauses for a moment, his expression illuminated as he looks at me again. "Say, Avery. How about we go grab dinner tonight? There's a lovely diner just two blocks over. It's small and cozy, and they make one hell of a pecan pie. I barely discovered it myself after a weeks' worth of sleazy takeout."

I can't help but laugh. "That's the trouble with small towns in Nebraska. The local restaurants seem too quaint for the food to be good, and the chain restaurants are mediocre, at best. Thank you for the invite, Toby, but I'm afraid I'm gonna have to pass. My girls are expecting me for dinner tonight."

"You have kids?" His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, indicating that he and Charlene don't discuss me, at least not on a personal level. Otherwise, he would've already known about Annie and Miley.

"Yeah, two gorgeous little girls."

"What about their dad?"

It feels like a dagger to the heart, but it doesn't hurt like it used to. It's probably because that hole was filled by three incredible men. "He's dead," I tell Toby.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." He doesn't sound sorry, though.

"It's okay. We weren't on the best of terms," I say. "How about you? Any family?"

I can tell I've struck a nerve. He lowers his gaze and slowly moves away from the bathroom door. "Nah. No living family that I know of, anyway."

"No kids?"

He shakes his head. "No wife, either. I never got that lucky," he chuckles dryly, then nods at the far end of the hallway. "I'm gonna grab a bite to eat from the fridge. You can join me, if you want. Charlene had sub sandwiches delivered earlier this morning."

"Thanks but I think I'll finish this wall first. You go ahead, though."

Once I'm alone again, I go over the entire conversation in my head, picking up on the subtlest of signals, trying to understand more about Toby and Charlene. They have an interesting dynamic—they seem intimate, yet their language when referring to one another is always placid and neutral, like a typical boss and employee relationship. But the looks he gives her are often warm and soft, and in return she slips him a delicate smile, just enough to get his eyes shining for a moment.

I think he's got feelings for her, which makes his demeanor toward me all the more curious. He likes to flirt with me, though I never engage. This is the second time he has asked me out. I've yet to pull the boyfriend card on him, but I will if I have to. Or maybe I should just let him buy me dinner. Maybe it would be a good opportunity to get him to open up more about Charlene. Like Helen once told me—a drunken man's words are a sober man's thoughts.

At the same time, I'm thinking there's another way for me to test the situation. If Kellan and the guys have an intimate knowledge of Charlene Maddox, then they would definitely know about this house and who it belongs to. Perhaps I need to turn things up a notch, if only to precipitate a clear answer.

I take my phone out and text Kellan, kindly asking him to pick me up after I finish work. I blame it on my car, though Fallon will surely have it checked and figure out there's nothing wrong with it. But hopefully by then, I will know more.

*Sure, babe. Give me the address and I'll be down there at six,*  
Kellan texts back.

I send him the address. A minute later the little check mark appears indicating the message has been read, but he doesn't respond. Anxiety takes over and I wonder if he recognized the address. If not, perhaps he doesn't have such an intimate knowledge of Charlene, after all.

The minutes go by in heavy silence as I continue to work. I lose track of time until a hard knock on the front door has me jumping out of my skin. I stand up, wide-eyed and surprised, and I see Toby darting past the bathroom. I hear the front door open and Kellan's agitated voice.

"Where is she?" he asks.

My heart's thumping all of a sudden. What's happening? I check my watch and see that it's only noon. Kellan wasn't supposed to be here until six. I suddenly realize that he definitely knows this address. It makes my stomach churn as I brace myself for the incoming fallout. I've poked the hornet's nest, and now I must face what's coming, so I put on a cool face and walk out of the bathroom.

"Where's who?" Toby shoots back.

His shoulders look broader than usual, his large frame loaded with tension. He blocks my view of Kellan, but I still catch a glimpse of him in the doorway. He's trying to get in, and the fact that he's in his sheriff's uniform doesn't seem to faze Toby in the least. I find that curious.

"Avery!" Kellan shouts.

"I'm here," I reply as casually as I can, though I'm literally shaking on the inside.

"Come on. We're leaving," he says as soon as he sees me.

I'm confused. "Excuse me? I'm not done. You said you were picking me up at six."

"You know this guy?" Toby looks back at me, apprehension drawing deep shadows across his face.

My cheeks burn hot as I give him an awkward smile. “Toby, this is my boyfriend, Kellan.”

“You’re dating the Sheriff of Lincoln County?” Toby asks with clear surprise, but I can’t tell if he’s annoyed or amused as his gaze bounces back and forth between Kellan and me.

“Who the hell are you?” Kellan asks him.

“None of your concern,” Toby firmly shoots back. Whoa, where is that attitude coming from? What the hell did I start, and how do I end it before somebody gets arrested or worse? The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I get closer, eager to diffuse the tension sooner rather than too late.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” I step in, making sure I’ve got my phone and keys in my overall pockets. Everything else can stay until I get back to the job tomorrow. Getting Kellan out of there is pretty much all I can think of. “I’ll see you in the morning, Toby.”

Toby doesn’t seem too happy with my statement, however. “Are you sure, Avery? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay, I promise,” I say to him, doing my damned best to ignore Kellan’s furious breathing and pitch-black glower as he watches us. “I think my man and I need to have a conversation, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?” Toby asks again.

“She’s sure,” Kellan hisses as he grabs my arm.

I’m stunned as he not-so- gingerly yanks me out of the house and over to his car—the marked department vehicle ostentatiously parked outside and blocking my old Citroen in the driveway. “Kellan, what the hell?” I manage, but he doesn’t even look at me until we’re both in his car and moving away from Charlene’s house.

The seconds roll by in unbreathable silence as I study his profile and notice the muscle furiously ticking in his jaw, his hands gripping the wheel so tightly that his knuckles are white, the angry look in his green eyes casting shadows everywhere he looks.

“Dammit, Kellan, what was that about?” I croak, breaking into a cold sweat. “You pulled me out of a job, and you were rude to Toby.”

“Toby? That’s his name?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he the client?”

“No. He’s my client’s personal assistant. Kellan, you need to talk to me here. What’s going on?” I ask again. Whatever it is, I’ve got a feeling it’s worse than I had imagined. “Why’d you come over in such a rush and practically drag me out of there?”

Kellan doesn’t immediately reply. All I can do is watch him drive, the car shooting through thickening traffic as he gets us out of Hershey and back into North Platte. By the time we reach the mansion, the tension between us has only gotten heavier. As we pull up, I see Luke and Fallon’s cars also parked by the front steps, and I begin to understand. This is some kind of emergency meeting or intervention, and it most definitely has something to do with Charlene. What on God’s green earth did I set into motion when I sent him that text?

“Are you going to talk to me at all?” I ask as he gets out of the car. He rushes over and literally pulls me out of the passenger’s seat. He’s still angry and firm with every gesture, and I feel like a kid who got caught cheating on a chem test or something. “Kellan!”

“Wait until we get inside,” he replies tersely.

I’m practically flying up the front steps and bursting through the front door with him. Fallon and Luke are waiting for us in the ground-floor study. The looks on their faces cause me to be even more confused and downright scared out of my mind. I remove myself from Kellan’s grip, officially insulted and boiling on the inside.

“Okay, I’m here. What the fuck is going on?” I snap. “I was in the middle of a job. What came over you, Kellan?”

“You need to quit,” Kellan says, hands on his hips.



I give him a confused look. “Excuse me?”

“You can’t work on that house, Avery,” Kellan insists.

“And why the hell not?” I ask. “Do you know my client personally or something?”

And there it is. The horror so clearly imprinted on their faces as they stare at me, utterly bewildered. One second turns into two and then three. And still not a single word from any of them. I take it as an opportunity to confront them since the cat is out of the bag and clawing at my face, metaphorically speaking.

“I saw you with her outside the sheriff’s office,” I tell Kellan. “I had no idea who she was at the time, but when I arrived at my prospective client’s house and she answered the door, I took the job. Since none of you will tell me what’s going on, I figured I could work it out on my own. Because that’s where we are in this relationship obviously—keeping secrets and lying by omission.”

“Avery, you need to quit,” Luke cuts in, his blonde brows furrowed with concern. “This is way more complicated than you think. We’re just trying to keep you safe.”

“Safe from what?” I demand.

“Dammit, Avery, will you just listen to us for once?” Kellan pleads, genuinely exasperated. “You can’t work for that woman. You need to stay away from her.”

“I will ask you again. Why?”

“There’s ancient history that you want no part of whatsoever,” he says.

“What does that even mean?”

Fallon exhales sharply. “Ugly history, Avery. The kind you don’t want to know about. Just stay the fuck away from her. We’ll cover whatever she’s paying you for that job.”

“It’s not your money I need. It’s the truth,” I shoot back.

“Avery, we can’t tell you. Not now,” Luke tries to plead with me. “We’ve never lied to you. We’ve never given you reason

not to trust us.”

I shake my head vehemently. “Until now. You’ve obviously been keeping Charlene a secret from me. Is she the reason why all of you have been so on edge lately? Because it certainly looks that way to me.”

“Okay, yes,” Luke finally concedes. “But it’s not for the reason you might be thinking. Please, Avery, just trust us on this. Charlene Maddox is not the kind of woman you want to be involved with in any way. Stay away from her.”

It’s not enough. They’re not giving me enough of an explanation, and my hunger for the truth only grows stronger with every second that goes by. I feel wronged. Blind-sided. Forced to live in a darkness I’m not comfortable with. And it’s not right. We’re supposed to be a team, a family. We’re supposed to be able to tell each other everything, even the hard stuff, the nitty and the gritty we don’t normally tell other people.

“This isn’t fair,” I tell them, tears glazing my eyes. “Why did I have to resort to this kind of tactic to barely get a reaction out of you three? Why did it have to come to this, when you could’ve just told me the truth from the beginning?”

“Because you’ve been through enough already,” Kellan says, shaking his head slowly. “We’re only trying to protect you, Avery, I swear. We’re doing the best we can.”

“Do better,” I snap and walk out of the study.

As evening falls over the house, an uncomfortable silence fills its sumptuous halls. Kellan, Luke, and Fallon went to dinner somewhere in town, advising Helen to look after me and the girls before they left. We order pizza for comfort's sake, finishing off the rest of the lemon cheesecake for dessert. Once my babies are bathed and tucked in to their beds, Helen and I go back downstairs to have a cup of tea.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Helen asks me as we settle in the dayroom, both of us sinking into one of the large, brown leather sofas while a DIY show runs in the background on the wall-mounted TV.

"Talk about what?" I reply, staring at the screen. I think I've seen the episode before, but it doesn't really matter. I just need something to keep my eyes busy.

"Whatever argument you and the boys had earlier," Helen says. "They didn't mention anything, but it's written all over your faces. It doesn't take a mentalist to read the four of you, you know."

"Oh, Helen," I sigh deeply, setting the tea aside. I turn to face her on the sofa. "What can you tell me about Charlene Maddox?"

Her expression droops. She thinks about it for a moment, running a hand through her curly, grey hair. "So that's what this is about," she says, her tone dropping a few degrees. "No wonder the three of them have been so strung out lately."

"You know Charlene, then."

“Everybody in Lincoln County knows Charlene,” Helen replies. “But not for the reasons you might think Avery. It’s a complicated history. If the boys didn’t want to tell you about her, please, believe me when I tell you you’re better off not knowing.”

“They said the same thing. I don’t get it. Helen, this is why I almost moved out the other week. I deserve the truth.”

“The truth is ugly.”

“Yeah, I heard that, too.”

Helen gives it another moment’s thought then downs half of her tea in one gulp, gathering the nerve to finally give me more than what I’ve received so far. “Okay. There are aspects that I cannot share with you. Things that Kellan, Fallon, and Luke need to tell you themselves when they’re ready. But I can tell you that Charlene was notorious in Lincoln County. She still is, but I’m surprised I didn’t hear about her return sooner. I thought she’d gone away for twenty years.”

“Gone away where?” I ask.

“Prison.”

My blood runs cold. “Whoa. Twenty years? What for? She never mentioned that.”

“Financial crimes, crimes that hurt a lot of people,” Helen says. “She betrayed the boys. She lied to them. She was in cahoots with my sister and my brother-in-law. Avery, Charlene Maddox is an awful woman, and I agree with my nephews—you need to stay as far away from her as possible.”

“But why wouldn’t they tell me about her?”

“They care about you, honey. They care about you enough to protect you from whatever, and whomever, might try to come and disturb this little corner of heaven that you’ve managed to build here together. Charlene is a nasty chapter they thought was closed. Certainly not one they imagined would reopen so soon.”

The more I hear, the more confused I become. I’m having a hard time reconciling the Charlene I know with the Charlene

that Helen and the guys have told me about. It just doesn't make any sense, and I'm starting to think the issue runs much deeper than just financial crimes. "Why was she released from prison so early, then?" I ask Helen.

She rolls her eyes. "Heaven knows who bribed who for that to happen, because there's no way a decent and functioning parole board would've ever allowed her to get out of prison so soon."

"And Kellan and Fallon's parents are involved with her?"

"They were and probably still are. We're not sure, but knowing them, I'm certain they're rekindling that old friendship as we speak. Charlene could never be tied back to the Cassidy's, not in the eyes of the law, anyway, but hopefully someday the whole truth will come out, and they'll all end up behind bars and stay there, where they belong." Helen pauses for a moment, closing her eyes for one deep breath before she looks at me again. "But there is something you need to know and I'm going to tell you, even though it should be on Kellan, Fallon, and Luke to disclose. I just hate this tension between the four of you, so I'm hoping if I tell you, you'll understand why they're so adamant for you to keep your distance from her."

"Tell me."

"Avery, it was Kellan, Fallon, and Luke who put Charlene Maddox in prison. They're the reason she got arrested in the first place."

The words hit me like bricks, each one harder than the last as the greater picture comes into focus. It's got me wondering if Charlene knew who I was when she hired me. She couldn't have. She doesn't know where I live. And my name means nothing around Lincoln County with the exception of my interior decorating work. But if she *does* know, then I am now a target if her endgame is revenge.

A few days later, I get a call from Toby. I'm surprised he didn't reach out sooner, especially after the manner in which I left Charlene's house. I would've expected Charlene to call, but I'm guessing Toby told her about Kellan's intervention. She probably understood my position and the issue that arose when Kellan found out about my work with her. Nevertheless, I agree to meet with Toby over coffee at a small but delightful little bakery in Hershey—a neutral ground.

"Thank you for coming," Toby says as the waitress brings us tea for me and a latte for Toby, along with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and hazelnut wafers. "I'd like to apologize, first and foremost."

"Toby, if anybody needs to apologize, it's me," I reply. Soft jazz music pours through the surround sound as I try to formulate a proper response for a man who has been nothing but kind to me. "I didn't know there was bad blood between Kellan and Charlene. I didn't know they had any history whatsoever. All I did was text him the address, since he'd agreed to come pick me up after work."

Toby doesn't need to know about my motivation behind it all. I stirred up this shitstorm, so the least I can do is try to diffuse it as much as possible on my end. Toby gives me a long, sullen look, despite the warmth in his voice.

"Avery, you don't need to apologize. After I spoke to Charlene and told her about the incident, she asked me to give you some

space before asking you to meet me here,” he says. “She may have a bad rep in this town, but most people don’t know the whole truth.”

“And what is the whole truth, exactly?”

Toby sighs deeply and takes a long sip of his coffee, his eyes never leaving mine. “Charlene made some terrible mistakes in the past. She was misguided, overly ambitious. She never had a mentor to keep her on the straight and narrow, so to speak. Over the years, she made a lot of money, but it was never enough. Her talents were in high demand. It got to a point where she lost control of the entire system that she put together. She got in over her head.”

“I understand she was sentenced to twenty years in jail, Toby. That’s a lot for financial crimes.”

“Yeah. She had a crappy defense lawyer, what can I say?”

“I also understand that she was involved with Bill and Elizabeth Cassidy, business-wise,” I reply, carefully analyzing his reaction, yet the man doesn’t yield a single micro-expression. “They don’t have a good reputation, either.”

“As I said earlier, Charlene has made plenty of mistakes,” he replies. “She’s not proud of her past, but the parole board deemed her fit to be rehabilitated, and that’s all that should matter in the end. She’s keeping to herself, doing her best to rebuild her life and move on. And she feels terrible for the way you fell right in the middle of it, Avery. Charlene had no idea that you and Kellan were an item.”

I narrow my eyes, hoping to give him the impression that I’m not rushing to buy into this story just yet. “Why did she go see him at the sheriff’s office? He’s one of a few who helped put her away, isn’t he?”

“She’s just trying to mend broken bridges,” Toby says. “There’s no ill intent there, I promise. All she wants to do is renovate her parents’ house, move in there, and live out the rest of her life in peace. She doesn’t like conflict and she doesn’t want to fight with anybody, but she also knows that she needs the law on her side going forward. It makes sense

that she'd want to make amends with the Sheriff of the county she's living in, don't you think?"

That's a fair and reasonable argument.

Toby goes on to tell me about how awful prison life was for Charlene. The beatings, the bullying, the viciousness of her fellow inmates. He swears she's not the ambitious vixen she once was. Prison humbled her in more ways than one. She has learned her lesson, and now she just wants to figure out what she's going to do with her life. Since she is prohibited from any financial dealings, Charlene can't even open a bank account these days, which is why Toby and her sister appear on all of the official documents. She's looking into a way to rehabilitate herself in that sense, too, he tells me. A good lawyer should help, or so he hopes.

I can tell that he cares deeply about her. Perhaps more than a PA should. It makes me doubt the sincerity of the messages that she's trying to send me through him. Toby may be too involved emotionally to be thinking clearly. Then again, who should I believe? Kellan, Fallon, and Luke have also acted shady about this situation. They kept her a secret, lying to me while still telling me that everything was okay when it obviously wasn't. I had to resort to minor scheming just to get a reaction out of them, hoping for a morsel of truth.

"My point is, Avery, if you still want the remodeling job, it's yours," Toby says. "Your tools are still at the house. You can come back any time you wish. But if you decide to drop the project, Charlene won't hold it against you, and she won't demand a refund on that advance, either."

"I don't know what to say," I reply, careful not to make a decision on the spot. It's good money and I'm enjoying the work. Things are still complicated with my men and there are still plenty of unanswered questions. I have to be honest with myself and cover my own ass, no matter what and regardless of my feelings for them. "Toby, I like Charlene, I really do. But if this job is going to cause tension in my personal life—"

"Hey, I get it," he cuts me off, half-smiling. "And so does Charlene. All I'm asking is that you take some time to think



about it. There's absolutely no rush. And whatever you decide, we will respect and honor our prior arrangements. You have my word."

"Thank you. That's reassuring. Gosh, this is so messed up..."

"Tell me about it. I had a mind of smacking the Sheriff right then and there when I saw the way he yanked you out the door."

"Please don't hold it against him. Kellan is so gentle and righteous. For him to become angry, well, it takes a lot, which is why I understand that the issue with Charlene runs deep and painfully so. He was acting out of character, and it's probably because I sort of blindsided him. He didn't know I was working for Charlene."

"Even so, Avery. Are you sure he's the right guy for you?"

There was a time when I would've laughed at such a question. But given how things have been spinning out of control lately, maybe it's something I need to think about. Kellan, Fallon, and Luke took me in and protected me and my girls. When I needed them the most, they were there. Yet from the moment I told them about my pregnancy—a moment that unfortunately coincided with Charlene's release from prison—I've started to see a side of them they didn't show me before. Maybe I should've been more cautious with my heart.

None of that matters at this point, though. What's done is done, and I'm in too deep. Heart, body, and soul. I can either fight for what we have and accept that my men will tell me the whole truth when they're ready, or I can walk away now. But every fiber in me screams against the thought of leaving them behind, especially since I'm carrying their unborn child in my womb. It's a delicate situation, to say the least.

"He's a good man," I reassure Toby. "Truly. I think I'm the one who created a mess that day."

"If you ever feel unsafe—"

"Don't even worry about that," I cut him off, not liking the tone of the conversation and fully aware that Kellan is kindness incarnate. There's not a sliver of truth in Toby's

suggestions. “If there is one thing I can tell you with certainty, it’s that I am safe with him. I’m a domestic violence survivor. I went to hell and back with my ex-husband, and I never thought I’d be able to trust another man after that. But when Kellan came into my life, he reminded me that not all men are like my ex-husband. He took care of me. He still does. I feel safe and loved with him. Please, Toby, don’t think for a second that I’m not in a happy and healthy relationship because I am. It’s his history with Charlene that has added unnecessary tension, that’s all.”

My statement silently involves Luke and Fallon too. But that is our secret. I’ve never been happier, despite the recent turmoil.

“You make a fair point,” Toby concedes. “I’m glad you’re happy and safe with him, then.”

“You’re both good men,” I tell him. “And Charlene is lucky to have you by her side. Thank you for reaching out to me, Toby. I mean it. I will think about the whole remodeling gig, too. I’ll be honest, I like that house and I would love to be the one who finishes the job. But I do need to think about it. Really think about it.”

“I totally get it,” he says. “Whatever you need in the meantime, Avery, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The better part of my week is spent less in the shop and more driving around Lincoln County with Kellan, looking into everything we can about Charlene. Where she goes, who she talks to, who she works with. Luke has a detail on her in the meantime, but we're following closely the trail of breadcrumbs she leaves behind—whether on purpose or not, that remains to be seen. She's a tricky woman, and I doubt prison has made her kinder.

I'm not buying the whole reformed criminal act, either.

She lied through her teeth before and I've no doubt she'll do it again. Hell, her money moves damn near got us killed on that submarine and Luke lost his leg. Charlene didn't know who we were at the time, but the fact that she willingly helped finance mercenaries in foreign, hostile countries speaks volumes. When she did find out who we were, she never said a word. She never had the intention of being truthful. She deceived us, betrayed us. I will never forgive her, nor will I forget.

"How is Avery?" I ask Kellan as we're driving through North Platte. "I haven't seen her since yesterday morning."

"She's okay. Helen said she's looking into other home projects in the area," Kellan replies, his eyes fixed on the road.

The trouble with us twins is that we can often feel each other on a deeper level. We resonate with one another in ways that most people cannot. His anxiety echoes with mine. His tension

creeps through my bones. My anger weighs on his shoulders. We've been this way for as long as I can remember.

"You feel bad about the way you dragged her out of Charlene's house, huh?" I let a heavy sigh roll off my chest. It's been there for a while, now. Another will take its place soon enough.

"I'm not proud of myself. And I've apologized to her more than once. I still feel like shit."

"Be glad it was you who got to her first, and not me. I would've started something with that Toby asshole."

Kellan smiles vaguely. "I've got Luke looking into him. We've got a tail on the guy, but he's a slippery motherfucker. He finds a way to lose us whenever he leaves Hershey. I don't know how he does it."

"He's a professional," I reply. "Don't believe a word he says to Avery. I don't trust him."

"You don't trust anybody."

"I trust you. I also trust Luke, Avery, Helen, and Marcus. I don't trust a prick who is willingly working for someone like Charlene Maddox though," I say.

There's plenty of traffic for us to wade through, but I don't mind. The more time I spend in the car with Kellan, the less time there is to let the anger get the better of me. If there is one thing I'll always be grateful for, it's my brother's presence. He's an expert at pulling me out of a dark spot, and Charlene's unexpected return has thrown me for one hell of a loop.

"I wish she didn't have to know," I add after a long and heavy pause.

"Avery?"

"Yeah."

"I agree. But it's inevitable," Kellan replies. "We will have to tell her the whole truth, eventually."

"Eventually."

"But not today."

“Not tomorrow, either” I say as I check a roughly drafted to-do list on my phone. “Who else are we supposed to meet with today?”

Kellan frowns slightly. “Charlene’s parole officer. He’ll have most of the information we need.”

“Do you think he’ll tell us everything?”

“You keep forgetting that I’m the Sheriff of Lincoln County,” he shoots back with a confident smirk. “If ever there was a time for me to abuse the scope of this badge, this is it.”

“Alright, then. Full speed ahead,” I reply with a cool grin. But the memories keep flooding my brain, turning me inside out and pricking me with slivers of guilt and resentment. I need to say it again and aloud, if only to keep myself from unraveling. “I’m serious, Kellan. We can’t tell Avery everything. She really doesn’t need to know all the details.”

“Fallon, the three of us already talked about this, and as much as I hate to admit it, Luke made a good point earlier today,” my brother says. “It’s better if Avery hears everything from us and not Charlene. We’ve already fumbled it once with her by not telling her about Charlene in the first place. Look at how the universe fucked us over with that home renovation project. What were the odds, huh?”

“What were the odds, actually?” I ask, thinking about the circumstances of Avery’s hiring from a considerably different angle. “That is a good question. How much do you think Charlene knows about us?”

“Enough to put two and two together if she ever finds out where Avery lives.”

The thought hits me like a punch to the gut that I could roll the car window down and puke. “Avery can’t know,” I say it again.

“Fallon don’t push it. You know we have to tell her. It’s the right thing to do.”

I hate to admit it. I don’t want to. But it’s true. It also comes with a whole lot of shame, the kind of shame I spent years burying into the darkest recesses of my mind. Everything that

happened with Charlene is a failure on my part, on *our* part, but on my part, especially. We never should've let things get to the point that they did. And now she knows more about us than she should putting Avery in a delicate position.

Once we're done talking to Charlene's parole officer, I leave my brother to the rest of his official duties for the day and head back to the house. There's too much information swirling about in my head—unfinished thoughts and unanswered questions, unknown details about Charlene and her associates, and loose puzzle pieces that don't fit together. I'm sure our parents could help connect most of the dots, but they're closely guarding their own empire of filth, and they see us as the enemy. There's no way I could get the old man to talk and just the thought of looking my own mother in the eyes fills me with dread.

The house is quiet in the evening. The girls have gone to bed and I find Avery in her home office, poring over spreadsheets and tapping away on a keyboard, inputting data from scribbled notes on her desk. I love seeing her in this mode—the bubbly blonde with a sharp business mind who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty in order to get the job done. I think it's what draws me to her, more and more.

It takes her a while to notice me standing in the doorway, but when she does, a smile stretches across her full lips, and it's as if the sun itself is greeting me from behind that desk.

"Hey, you," Avery says, setting the work aside as she gets up.

"Hey, you," I reply and take a step forward.

She's wearing jeans and a flimsy silk top in shades of soft and dark pink, but it's the absence of a bra underneath that's got my cock hard and aching for her. Unaware of the immediate effect that she has on me, Avery comes closer with a mixture of shyness and concern. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"I am now."

"Oh," Avery mumbles, pink roses blooming in her cheeks.

"I'm sorry about the other day. We will tell you everything when the time is right, I promise," I say to her though it feels

like I'm lying to myself by saying the words. I know she needs to hear them, and doing the right thing for Avery supersedes any sense of shame that comes with the lesser choices in my past. "Don't think for a second that we're keeping you out of the loop because we prefer it that way."

"All I can do is trust your judgment," Avery sighs. "It's not like I can force you to tell me everything."

"You could try," I shoot back with a cool smirk, if only to take some of the edge off.

I didn't seek Avery out to argue with her. I sought her out to love her, to hold her tight, and to reassure her that she is ours, through and through, no matter what. I've got this uneasy feeling telling me to brace myself, that life may decide to throw a major curveball at us in the coming days ahead.

"How could I possibly force you to do anything?" Avery laughs lightly.

She hasn't caught on yet, so I close the distance between us, measuring her gloriously curvy figure from head to toe before I lose myself in the soft, blue pools of her eyes. "You're a resourceful woman, Avery. I'm sure you can think of ways to make me do your bidding."

"Ah, I see," she says, her lips curling into a mischievous smile.

There it is, that flicker of naughtiness that has my blood coursing hot through my veins.

"Let me see if I've got this right, then," Avery says, cupping my manhood with both hands. I could tear the clothes off her in an instant, but I decide to allow her to lead instead. "You'd be willing to do whatever I want?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On what it is that you want."

She thinks about it for a moment, then looks me right in the eyes, her lips slightly parted. "I want you to make me come until I can't take any more."

“Wow, you had that locked and loaded, huh?”

“Think you’re up to it?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve proven myself already.”

She nods once and slowly gets down on her knees, quick to peel my pants off. My cock springs free and hungry for her while I take my shirt off. I watch her mouth open wide to receive me—the wet warmth enveloping me wholly, forcing my blood to rush downward.

Her tongue presses against the shaft, the veins bulging as she tastes me, as she suckles on the head and swallows the first few drops of precum while I run my fingers through her hair.

Avery meets my gaze with the look of a vixen before she deep throats the fuck out of me until I’m about to explode.

“Dammit!” I hiss and grab her head with both hands, keeping her in place while I thrust myself deeper, enjoying every sound as I feel the back of her throat relaxing to fully receive me.

She locks both hands on my cock, lips wrapped slickly around the tip, and starts stroking and sucking me harder and harder at the same time. My knees are fucking jelly as I shove my hands through her hair but only to pull her back before I come in her mouth.

I lift her up from her knees and quickly strip her bare. I walk her over to the desk, sweeping off notebooks and papers to clear a spot before setting her on the edge, legs thrown over my shoulders as I kneel.

“Make me come,” Avery commands me.

I dive right in, my gaze fixed on her full and tender breasts as I eat her pussy ravenously. I lick and drink her dry, my tongue sliding between her folds over and over before I stop to suckle on her swollen clit.

“Oh, Fallon, yes... right there, baby...” she moans, her head falling back in ecstasy.

I slip a couple of fingers in, probing her pussy, priming and stretching her for more. I curl them with each movement, thrusting deeper, finger-fucking her into the sweetest madness.



I press my tongue against her taut nub and feel her explode all over my face.

“That’s it, baby, come for me,” I coax her.

“Oh, God, yes Fallon. I need you inside me now.”

It’s all I need to hear. She’s not yet finished with the orgasm, so I want to give her another one right away. I love her screams of sheer agony and delight when I take her from one climax to another. I stand and quickly kick off my pants, then spear her with my full length, my thumb rubbing her clit into a frenzy.

She screams as I pound into her, as I sheathe my cock deep inside her, harder and faster until sweat pours down the both of us, arousal glistening and trickling down my thighs as I feel her clenching, her pussy tightening and squeezing me with every thrust.

“I’m coming!” she screams, and I cover her mouth with mine, eyes open and never leaving one another as I listen to her ragged breaths and moans, as I feel her climax hitting me like a fucking tidal wave.

I go deeper, harder, faster. I let myself go entirely, fucking her like a mindless animal, feeling her pussy swallow me whole as I release my seed inside her. My senses are filled with the slapping of skin on skin, sweat on sweat, and the throbbing of heartbeats that echo between us.

As our orgasms subside, I rest my forehead against hers as I playfully lick and nibble her lips.

I am hers and she is mine, ours. No matter what.

At times I feel like they're using the physical aspect of our relationship to keep me sated and tired enough to stop waiting for them to tell me the whole truth about Charlene and whatever it is that happened in the past between them. I'm not going to wait too much longer before I insist on their full disclosure. I'm a big girl, I can deal with it, and I'm tired of feeling like they are handling me with kid gloves. I'm still trying to decide whether or not I'm going to finish the home renovation project for her.

Kellan, Fallon, and Luke will be furious if I go back without telling them, but it isn't really up to them. I am my own woman, and until I know exactly what sort of threat Charlene poses I'm going to keep an open mind about her. Besides, I'm pretty sure I've got a Wolfhound tail on me, watching my every move, making sure I stay safe. It's just a sensation, but given their determination and expertise, I wouldn't be surprised if my instincts turned out to be right on the money.

I know Charlene is still waiting for an answer on the project, albeit quietly. I haven't heard anything from Toby in a couple of days.

I wake up late one morning to find myself alone in bed, the three of them gone already.

They left me a cup of coffee on the bedside table, along with a loving note to let me know that I'll be seeing them for dinner later.

Grinning, I hop into the shower, taking my time beneath the hot stream allowing the water to warm my skin and activate my senses. I slip into a pair of jeans, a multicolored sweater, and matching socks before heading to the home office to check my mail. The service staff brings up every envelope addressed to my interiors company first thing every morning. My girls are in school, and Helen is out running some errands, giving me some time to myself.

Which is good, because I need the peace and quiet in order to finally make a decision regarding Charlene. It's time for me to pick a lane and stick to it.

Morning sickness this time around isn't as bad as my last pregnancy. Annie sure loved making her presence known from the first few months, but this little guy or girl seems content to quietly grow inside me, ever hungry. The cravings, on the other hand, are getting stranger with each passing day. As I go through my mail, I think about pickles with a side of plum jam on a slice of toast.

My mind keeps jumping back and forth between last night's insane lovemaking session and the downstairs pantry, where I'm pretty sure I saw a couple of jars of pickles and jams aching for my attention. While contemplating whether or not I want to give in to my cravings, my gaze settles on a manila envelope with my name scribbled in black Sharpie on the back. All of the mail that I get at the mansion is addressed to my company name, never my personal name.

"That's odd," I mutter as I turn the envelope over a couple of times.

There's no return address. As I tear it open, I feel my heart come to a sudden halt. My breath leaves me before my brain has a chance to recognize what I'm looking at.

Large prints of candid shots—Luke, Kellan, Fallon—and Charlene. At a bar, laughing and drinking, kissing. Nausea unfurls in the back of my throat, and it's definitely not morning sickness.

Another picture shows them in a bedroom, Kellan's, by the look of the wallpaper. They're naked. "Oh, God," I quiver and

throw the photos as far away as I can.

They scatter and fall to the floor, snippets of moments past, moments sent my way solely for the purpose of tearing my heart wide open. This is it. This is what they've been holding back. The ugly side of the truth. They weren't just foes in a legal sense. They were lovers.

I knew I wasn't the first, but to see that Charlene had also been with them hits me hard and deep in the worst possible way. This is a different kind of betrayal, one I didn't expect. Why didn't they tell me when they found out I was working for her?

Could it be that they still have feelings for her? Unresolved matters? They claimed they were keeping me in the dark for my own safety, but after seeing the photos, I'm starting to believe it's got nothing to do with my safety.

Sickened by the photos and the realization that my men have deliberately betrayed my trust, I let my logic take over. I need to cover my own ass. Professionally, financially, emotionally. I jumped from one bad relationship with a narcissistic psychopath to another relationship where secrets seem to be growing like oranges in a grove.

I have to get myself and my girls away from here. I need room to breathe.

I can't be here for another second. Not one more fucking second. The anger is too much to bear. The betrayal. The embarrassment. Oh, God, Charlene looked me dead in the eyes and told me about her past relationships, and not once did I put two and two together.

"I need to get out of here," I gasp and grab my bag.

Five minutes later, I'm in the girls' room, packing a suitcase and making sure I've got some of their favorite toys to bring along. Wherever I'm going next, I have to make sure Miley and Annie don't feel too shaken by the sudden change of environment. They've been through enough, but dammit, I can't stay a second longer.

A week seems a lot longer when you're dodging calls, texts, and emails from your three boyfriends. They came home that day expecting to have a nice dinner and another steamy session in the playroom, until they went upstairs and found the photos in my office.

They knew why I left. And now, they want to explain.

I asked for the truth so many times, and now they want to talk to me about Charlene, after I've learned said truth from a stranger. To say that I'm angry would be an understatement. Yet every day that I'm not with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke is miserable. I know I wouldn't be feeling such hurt, such misery, if I didn't love and care for them as much as I do.

Annie and Miley are so confused. I can't blame them. They were used to the mansion and the people there. It was our home, and I took them out of there without a reasonable explanation. I'm renting a small townhouse in Hershey for the next couple of months. They shouldn't have to pay for my emotional damage, for the guys' secrecy and mistakes. They're innocent in all of this.

It tears me apart on the inside but I don't regret my decision.

Kellan, Fallon, and Luke should've gone about things differently. They should've told me the whole truth from the very beginning.

"Momma, when is Kellan coming to see us?" Miley asks me one morning as I'm getting her and Annie ready for school.

Annie is being particularly fussy, and I know it's because she hasn't seen Fallon in a week. He always reads her a bedtime story before sleep. I feel awful for having to do this, but I can't allow anyone to hurt me anymore, and I want to teach my girls that they deserve honesty and respect from every relationship.

"I don't know, honey," I tell Miley. "I need you to put your coat on while I get your sister into her uniform."

"Where is Kellan?" my eldest daughter insists, a subtle frown pulling her brows together.

"Miley, we'll talk about it later, I promise. But please, help me out here."

She lets out a dramatic sigh before noticing me struggling with Annie. I've managed to pull half of her clothes on. Like a little grownup, Miley comes over to help, keeping Annie distracted with silly faces, making her sister laugh until I manage to get the whole outfit on.

"Thank you, sweetie," I tell her, then plant a kiss on Annie's forehead.

"Momma! I want Fallon!" Annie moans.

I have to keep them distracted until we reach the school. There are moments when their outspoken need to see the guys has me feeling like I'm not enough, even though I understand precisely what's going on. I know that the girls miss the attention and security of the guys, but I need to get my life sorted first.

"We'll see Fallon and Kellan soon," I say as I take both of their hands and walk them out to the car.

Once I've got them strapped in their seats, I take a deep breath and try to figure out what the hell I'm going to do next. It's been a long week. I miss them so much, but I'm still angry. The worst part is that they've put me in a position where I really have to consider picking up Charlene's project again—it's easy and good money. I need that to cover my expenses, at least for a while, until I figure out my next steps.

"Dammit," I curse under my breath as I look at my surroundings.

I know Hershey well enough, but I still feel like an outsider at times. I have ever since Kellan rescued me off the side of that road in the middle of a wretched snowstorm. I miss the feeling he and Fallon gave me—the safety, the sweetness, the security of their embrace. The assured manner in which they took me into their lives. Why'd they have to keep secrets from me?

Tears sting my eyes. I've cried myself to sleep so many times already, I can't do it again. If I'm to do this on my own, I must gather all of my strength and pull myself together. It's just me and my little girls again. Well, me, my little girls, and the baby growing inside me, this tiny human who will need me so very much.

I drop the girls off at school, leaving specific instructions with their teacher that I will be the only one allowed to pick them up at the end of the day, I meet with Toby at the same café as last time. It's not a decision I've made lightly, but the situation demands that I revisit the project and accept Charlene's offer, even though I now know what she was to my men.

"I'm glad you decided to meet," Toby says, smiling warmly as I join him for a cup of hot hibiscus tea. He's wearing a black suit and tie, slightly more casual than what I'm used to seeing him in though still appearing to be custom-made to fit his tall, broad frame. "How've you been, Avery?"

"Not as well as I would've liked," I reply with a half-smile. "But I'm ready to talk business again, if Charlene will have me back."

Toby watches me intently for what feels like forever, gauging my every movement. He then leans back into his seat, visibly relaxed. "She would like nothing more than to have you come back to us," he says, though I find his choice of words rather odd. "I know we'll make a great team going forward."

"Good. I'm ready to get back to work as soon as tomorrow. Given you already have all the materials you need for me to complete the project, there's not much else to discuss in terms of logistical details," I reply.

"That's true. So, how've you been, really?"

I give Toby a confused look. “Wait, is that it? Just a welcome back, Avery, have a cup of tea, and tell me how you’ve been? Seriously?”

“What did you expect?” he chuckles softly. “Both Charlene and I understood your situation. We gave you all the space and time you needed to make your decision. Trust me when I tell you she’s going to be very happy that you’re taking on the project again. Nothing else matters.”

It’ll be awkward as hell to face her, now that I know of her intimate history with my men, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I have to be able to support myself and my girls. I can’t and I won’t allow anyone to hold any kind of power over me ever again—not even the three men I still love so deeply that it hurts.



We know Avery well enough to understand that she wouldn't come back home with just a simple apology. It's a delicate situation and we know that we are in the wrong. I let my hesitation damn near ruin everything. It all seems so ridiculous now that she's taken the girls and moved out.

We know where she's living and what she's been up to though.

Luke wouldn't have it any other way. Avery may want space and independence, but she's still in danger. Someone sent her those photos at the mansion on purpose, and it's got Charlene's filthy fingers all over it. The photos were taken closer to the end of the relationship. The ones outside the mansion must have been the handiwork of a photographer she probably hired which adds a new dimension to her motive. The ones taken in the mansion were from our phones. We didn't mind having mementos of our time together back then. She obviously saved copies somewhere.

Either way, this was a declaration of war.

Luke, Fallon, and I will stand united and prepared for whatever she brings to the battlefield. I was certain she was up to something though I feared she'd try to hurt Avery more than anything. I didn't expect her to stoop so low with photographic evidence.

As soon as we learned that Avery was meeting with Toby at a coffeeshop in Hershey, I grab Luke and Fallon then head over there. It's time for this Toby guy to understand that he and

Charlene can't play dirty games. Not here, not on my turf. And not with our woman. We sit outside for a while, watching them through the coffee shop window. They seem comfortable with one another, sipping tea, laughing and talking.

"I'd love to snap his neck," Fallon grumbles from the passenger seat.

Luke chuckles from the backseat, his eyes also fixed on the coffee shop window. "Fellas, we have to do this the smart way, first. If he doesn't get it the smart way, we'll move on to the hard way. Alright?"

"I'm well aware," I say, shaking my head. "She's gonna be so mad."

"She's already mad, but she needs to know we haven't gone anywhere," Luke insists. "We can ask her to come back, but you know she won't."

"That fucker needs to know she's not alone and vulnerable," Fallon says. "He needs to see us. The three of us. He's Charlene's dog, so he more than likely is aware of our past relationship with her. It won't be such a shock for us to walk in there right now and ruffle his feathers a bit."

"There will be no ruffling of feathers," Luke cuts in.

"No ruffling," I reiterate.

A minute later, we walk into the coffee shop and right up to their table. As expected, my heart damn near explodes when Avery sees us coming, her blue eyes big and round as saucers, her sweet lips parted in surprise. I can tell that she's been crying lately, and it makes me feel fucking miserable. What has me back into focus, however, is Toby's complete lack of a reaction.

He just looks at us. Not in fear. Not in contempt. There's no emotion whatsoever. I don't like it. It's unsettling. *He* is unsettling, and we don't have enough intel on him yet to understand where he's coming from and what he's truly up to.

"What are you doing here?" Avery asks, her gaze bouncing between the three of us.

“Avery, we need to talk,” I tell her, keeping my voice low and soft.

“Here?” she croaks, nervously looking around.

Fallon raises an eyebrow and nods at Toby. “It’s not like he’s not privy to sensitive information where the four of us are concerned. Who do you think sent you those photos?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Toby calmly replies.

But Avery clearly isn’t playing this game. “I’m not doing this here. And I won’t allow you to insult my client, either. Please, leave. The three of you, just leave. Now.”

“Your client,” I say the words again, fighting an itch to punch Toby in the throat. “So, you’re going back to work for Charlene.”

“I need to look after myself,” she replies.

Toby doesn’t move. He is too still for my comfort. Yet another red flag in an increasingly more alarming situation. I make plenty of mental notes as I observe his behavior, his silence, and the way in which he ferociously analyzes each of us in a fashion similar to our own. Around us, the other patrons continue on without so much as a care toward the silent conflict unraveling at the table.

I must be careful with how I continue to address the situation, no matter how badly I want to see Charlene back behind bars where she fucking belongs. I’m not letting anybody ruin our relationship with Avery.

“Avery, you don’t have to do this,” Luke tries to reason with her. “We can go back to the house and talk about everything, down to the last shitty detail, if that’s what you want, and then —”

“Now you want to talk?” she shoots back with a deep frown.

“Yes,” he holds his own, and quite admirably so.

“After I begged the three of you, several times, to tell me everything,” she says, shaking her head in dismay. “I’m not sure I’ve got any energy left for talking at this point. I can’t

trust the three of you anymore. You made it clear that you are comfortable lying to me and keeping secrets.”

Fallon sighs deeply. “We should’ve told you everything. You’re right. But you have to admit, or at least accept, that we found that difficult, given the situation.”

“The truth is the truth, no matter what,” Toby cuts in.

That’s where I draw the line. “I need you to get the fuck out of here.”

“Excuse me?” he asks, his voice but a whisper as he looks up at me.

I point to the gun holstered on my belt. “Get the fuck out. Don’t make me say it again. And don’t think for a second I won’t use it.”

“You’re an officer of the law,” he replies.

“That’s not the card you wanna play right now,” I say.

Avery clears her throat. “Toby, it might be best if you do leave. I’ll see you soon enough, though. I promise. And I apologize for this. Please know they do not speak for me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Toby replies with a wry smile, then carefully removes himself from the table, casually exiting the coffee shop.

Once he’s gone, the air seems clearer if only for a second before Avery’s unbridled anger shows in her eyes as she looks up at us. “You’ve gone far enough,” she says.

“And we’ll go even farther to keep you safe,” Fallon replies. “You don’t understand, Avery. This is bigger than you and us. Charlene is trying to pit us against each other.”

“And why should I believe anything you say?” she asks.

Luke takes a deep breath, trying to be the more reasonable one among the three of us. It’s a difficult mission, I’ll give him that. I should be the more levelheaded one here, but seeing those photos in our house, seeing the empty drawers in Avery’s room, no longer hearing Annie or Miley’s giggles as

they run down the stairs every morning has done something to me. I need my family back.

“Avery, please. Let’s just go home and sort this out,” Luke says.

“No, I’m not going back there,” Avery insists. “There’s a fracture between us, Luke. You three didn’t trust me enough to tell me the whole truth, and someone else beat you to it. Their motives don’t matter, not to me anyway, and not at this point. What matters is that you had the opportunity to do the right thing and you chose to keep me in the dark.”

“We were doing it to—” Fallon tries to cut in, but she waves a hand to silence him.

“You were doing it to protect yourselves, not me,” she says firmly. “I need some time to think. I need to be on my own for a while. My girls are fine and I will take up as much work as I need to in order to support myself and them.”

I shake my head slowly. “You’re still pregnant with our child, Avery. You can’t cut us out. We have to help you. We want to help you.”

I see her waver ever so slightly.

“Maybe in time I can learn to trust you again,” she says quietly.

It feels like a small victory of sorts. It’s not what I wanted but Avery is entitled to her emotions and reactions. As much as I hate to admit it, she’s right. We should’ve been the ones to tell her the whole truth about Charlene, about how she inserted herself into our lives and made us think we could really have something together. About how we actually believed she was happy to be shared by three men in every possible way. She had ulterior motives, backup plans and long-term strategies. Charlene got close enough to try and keep us blind from what she was doing—with her shady financial dealings, with my parents, and with other nefarious players in Lincoln County. Too bad we couldn’t see then what we can so clearly see now.

Her web of deception stretched far and wide, which is why we haven’t been able to prove her involvement in certain crimes.

The fact that we haven't been able to link her to the Iran incident hurts the most, particularly for Luke. But all that aside, it was our pride that got in the way this time around. We should've bitten that fucking bullet and told Avery everything from the beginning. It's too late to change anything now. What's done is done. We can only concentrate on moving forward.

I don't feel bad for intimidating Toby the way I did. He's hiding something. A whole side of himself that I can't yet see. I don't like how close he's gotten to Avery, either. And no matter how much I insist, Avery will do what she feels she has to do in order to protect herself and the girls. At this point, I think she may be trying to protect herself and the girls from us, too, the three men who betrayed her trust. It's a hard pill to swallow, but this is what we're dealing with.

We need to be smarter than Charlene, quicker than Toby, and especially patient with Avery.

"Alright," I say, nodding slowly. "Can we at least come visit? Say hello to the girls and let them know we still love them?"

"I guess so," Avery concedes, the anguish in her voice loud enough to stab me right in the heart.

Luke offers a timid smile, a tad more pleased than Fallon with this conclusion. "We'll fix this," he says. "We'll rebuild everything and we will talk about it, Avery. You deserve to know our side of the story. Just... please be careful about Charlene. She's not what she seems."

There's that flicker of doubt in her eyes again and I fucking hate it. It's got Fallon's fists balled tightly at his side. He's got a mind to drive out and find Charlene and put a bullet in her head if that's what it takes to keep Avery safe. But he knows that's not right or smart. Charlene has done enough damage already. I squeeze his shoulder and give him a reassuring nod.

All we can do is bide our time, be thankful for the small wins, and rehash our strategy in order to get our woman and our girls back. Every day they spend away from us is a day they're dangerously close to an enemy we can't yet crush.

I find Toby waiting outside my rental place as I pull into the narrow driveway. Spring is finally starting to show up more as bright green buds fill the branches of every tree. The front garden is riddled with flower sprouts, the first bulbs of the season as the last of the snow begins to melt away. It's getting warmer, too, which makes my days a lot easier, especially when it comes to dressing Annie and Miley for school. I'll be picking them up in a couple of hours. Until then, however, I need to figure out what I'm going to do with Toby and Charlene after the coffee shop conversation.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Toby as I get out of the car.

"I was worried about you," he says. "Avery, I know you trust your boyfriend and whatnot, but that was not the kind of behavior I'd expect from the county Sheriff."

My cheeks burn hot. If I'm to go on what Kellan and the guys said back there, Toby definitely knows about our complex relationship. Is he pretending to be ignorant to that whole discussion, or is he playing a part? Not knowing who to trust absolutely sucks.

"It's a bit more complicated than that," I say. "Toby, whatever happened between Charlene and the guys, I think we can both agree that we somehow got dragged into it. Regardless of intentions on both sides here, I'd rather keep the conversation focused solely on the home remodeling project."

"You're right," Toby concedes.

"Listen, Toby, about the project—"

“They talked you out of it,” he sighs with visible disappointment.

“No, they didn’t. I just need a few days.”

He nods and takes a couple of steps back, hands in his jacket pockets and a half-smile lingering on his face. “I understand, Avery. Believe it or not, I understand the complications of love, more than you might think. I’ll let Charlene know that you’re not ready to restart just yet.”

“I can still refund the advance if she doesn’t want to wait.”

“No, no, that’s out of the question. You need that money more than Charlene. And like I’ve said before, you’ve done work on the house already,” he replies. “It wouldn’t be ethical. Besides, we want you back. Just take care of yourself, yeah?”

“Thank you for your concerns, Toby. I’ll keep them in mind, I promise.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, then,” he says.

The uncertainty of every dynamic in this situation has my nerve endings flaring, my reflexes shaken, and my core beliefs lost under a thick shadow. Who do I trust?



I t doesn't take long for the guys to come visit.

Mere hours later, my rental home is filled with cheers and laughter as Annie and Miley cherish their sweet time with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke. They jump from one set of strong arms to the next, hugging and showering each of them with love.

My fridge and pantry are fully stocked, thanks to Kellan. Helen's babysitting fees are covered for the next month, thanks to Luke. And I've got a new security system installed, with cameras at every point of ingress and wireless transmission, thanks to Fallon. They're really coming through for me and they're covering all the bases, making my work and day-to-day life a lot easier.

A few hours later, I walk out from my kitchen into the living room where Kellan and Luke are seated. After I gave the girls their baths, Fallon asked if he could read them a story and put them to bed.

"They're sound asleep," Fallon declares as he comes back downstairs. Annie and Miley have their own room on the upper floor, where he also installed several motion activated cameras. "Then again, they've had a lot of excitement this evening," he adds with a grin.

"Oh, yeah, unpacking the groceries was a titanic job," I chuckle, sinking into one of the armchairs with a cup of hot cocoa in my hands.

“Hey, they did a fine job,” Kellan replies with a warm smile. I can see his love for my daughters twinkling in the green pools of his eyes. They missed Miley and Annie. The girls missed them, too, and I can’t help but feel a tad guilty about that. “I’m constantly amazed by how much energy they can muster throughout the day.”

“Particularly before bedtime,” Luke quips, then looks at me. “How are you feeling, Avery?”

“Better, thank you. It takes a while to adjust.”

They exchange nervous glances before Kellan mentions the elephant in the room. “Have you reached a decision regarding Charlene’s project?”

“I’ve asked for another few days before I start back.”

“So you’re really going to keep working for her?” Luke asks.

“I’m leaning toward it, yes.”

Fallon shrugs, moving closer to my armchair. “Then you’ll see for yourself, why we wanted you to stay away from her, Avery. Soon enough you’ll figure it out. People have a way of telling on themselves.”

“So, are we going to talk about it?” I ask, the room suddenly filled with tension, the kind that crackles like lightning whips in the air. “About the three of you and Charlene that is.”

“Do you want us to talk about it?” Kellan replies, shifting in his spot on the sofa so he can face me better. “Because there isn’t much to talk about, in the end. You already know most of the story. We were together five years ago. It only lasted for a few months before we found out what Charlene was doing and the kind of people with whom she was involved.”

My heart stings whenever I think about it. “Did you love her?”

“No,” Luke says firmly, shaking his head. “There was affection, sure. We wanted it to be more, yes. Charlene gave us the impression that it was mutual. For a second, it looked like it was headed somewhere good, but once the truth started slipping through the cracks, once we understood precisely the

kind of person she was, whatever we felt at the time fizzled away.”

“And were you still together when you started building a case against her?”

Again, my men look at each other with a mixture of concern and doubt, possibly even a smidge of shame as Fallon takes the lead. “Yes. We know it wasn’t our proudest moment, but it had to be done. We had to keep her close in order to do a proper investigation. And even then, we couldn’t get all the information we needed to put her away for good. But it was better than nothing.”

“I imagine she felt betrayed.”

“No more betrayed than I was when I learned that her dark money funded the mercenaries who blew up our ship,” Luke says, his brow furrowed. The grief in his once sunny blue eyes echoes deep within me as I begin to understand the impact that Charlene’s actions had on their lives. I remember when they told me about the submarine incident. They were seriously injured, and Luke nearly died, losing his leg that day. Luke continues. “And Charlene knew we’d been on that ship. She knew she was partially responsible for what happened.”

“Avery, Charlene has a history of funding extremist groups across the world for a variety of reasons, most of them having to do with making more money for herself,” Kellan says. “We couldn’t prove most of it, and what we could prove was easily dismissed as circumstantial. We were able to nail her on enough domestic issues to get her arrested, but even that wasn’t our best shot. Obviously.”

I nod slowly, taking everything into account as I analyze their expressions. I see the regret. The sadness. The shame.

“That’s horrible,” I say after a long pause. “I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about,” Luke replies, running a hand through his sandy blonde hair. “At the end of the day, Charlene didn’t do anything to you. You don’t have any personal reason to keep your distance from her. If one was to follow pure logic, she should be given a second chance now

that the system has deemed her fit to be rehabilitated. I admit, we have our past issues with her that may cloud our judgment, but you do need to know everything, Avery, so you can make an informed decision about your collaboration with her, who you're dealing with."

"Even if you decide to keep working with Charlene, at least you'll be aware of her dark side and what she's into," Kellan adds. "But we will respect whatever choice you make."

"That being said, I'm gonna have my eyes on her at all times if you do decide to work with her," Fallon mutters, a muscle ticking in his scruffy jaw. "I don't trust the bitch."

I didn't think we'd reach this milestone so soon, but it's a step forward for us. They're giving me the space to make up my own mind, and they're ready to stand by my side no matter what I decide.

The evening dissolves into a few more beers for the guys and another hot cocoa for me. We watch a movie and talk about the past couple of weeks—my business plans, their new clients, and the work they do outside of Wolfhound Security. I'm learning that there's been an uptick in drug-related crimes across Lincoln County, and that Kellan intends to increase the number of deputies, sending them out on more frequent patrols, to get a better understanding of how the problem is spreading and who's funding the dealers.

I'm on the couch as the film's end credits roll across the screen, with my head resting on Kellan's shoulder while Fallon massages my feet.

"It's good that we get to spend time like this," Luke says, sitting on the sofa's armrest. He's close enough to reach out and touch my face, lovingly caressing my cheek. "I've missed you."

"We've all missed you," Kellan adds, craning his neck to gaze deep into my eyes.

I'm so soft and warm with his arm around me, yet I feel Fallon's fingers pressing deeper as they work their way up my calves. The muscles relax under his firm touch, tiny fires

started in their wake that spread through my skin and reach my core, where a nuclear reaction begins to unfold. Before long, my clothes are on the floor along with theirs, and I'm on my back with my knees up as Kellan licks my pussy, lapping and suckling my clit while Luke massages my breasts.

"I've missed you, too," I whisper as he closes his mouth around one nipple, teeth grazing softly.

Fallon gets closer, one knee resting on the sofa's edge as he offers his glorious cock for a tasting. I take him in my mouth, licking the swollen tip and parting my lips wider, as he slides deeper. I listen to Fallon's ragged breathing and the slick sounds of Kellan eating me out. I'm stretched and probed, fingers curling inside as he presses his tongue against my tender nub. I can feel the heat dripping from me, warm drops trickling down my bottom as Kellan feeds on everything I have to offer.

"What do you want tonight, Avery?" Luke asks, taking a moment to look at me.

My vision is hazy, my arousal at peak levels as I let myself go and allow my men to satisfy my every whim. I was in dire need of an explosive release, one only Kellan, Fallon, and Luke are able to give me, so that every atom of my being becomes ignited with pure pleasure.

"I want you inside me," I tell him.

Kellan lifts me up and off the sofa in the blink of an eye. A split-second later, Luke sits down, his cock huge and throbbing with desire, a drop of salty dew lingering on the engorged tip. Kellan lays down on the floor so I can straddle him while Fallon comes up from behind. He holds my breasts, squeezing tightly as he and his brother fill me to the brim.

I muffle my cries of sheer ecstasy as I suck Luke hard, as I ride Kellan and Fallon fucks me from behind. My pussy is stretched in the perfect way. I hold Luke's cock, stroking tightly with both hands as I lick the whole shaft and take him deep down my throat, over and over again until I feel the veins twitching, his balls as hard as rocks.

My hips sway, my tender clit grinding against Kellan, the pressure building up to a devastating orgasm as Fallon goes harder inside me. My release comes in a few harsh breaths, just as Luke lets go and shoots his liquid heat into my mouth. I drink every drop as I come with him, losing myself, as my men fuck me and claim me and take me to newer heights of unbridled pleasure, of shameless debauchery.

Fallon pulls my hair, tilting my head back as he goes harder. Faster. Deeper.

Kellan grunts like a beast as I feel him exploding inside me. His brother soon follows. Our bodies connected, our souls intertwined.

I'm overflowing with love, wrapped within the arms of my men. I've missed them. We have a long way to go before we can truly fix what was broken, but I had missed the security and the madness of their love. I had missed our unbridled passion and reckless abandon the most.

I will take everything they give me until I can bring myself to trust them again.

Over the next couple of weeks, in between school pickups and minor home improvement jobs across North Platte, OB-GYN visits and the occasional lunch date with Helen, days and evenings spent with Annie and Miley either at the park or at home playing, watching cartoons and educational shows on TV, my men keep coming by.

I don't mind it.

Truth be told, I have been feeling odd lately. It could be subtle paranoia inspired by their many warnings about Charlene, or it could be that my senses are heightened because of the pregnancy. Either way, there are moments when I feel like I'm being watched. I tried blaming it on the security camera system that has eyes on every angle in and around the house, but that's not it. I feel followed even when I'm out and about.

More than once, I've find myself looking over my shoulder, wondering if I really did hear those steps behind me. There's never anyone there, though. Only my shadow. Only innocuous

passersby. After returning home from grocery shopping one day, I get out of my car and carry my groceries inside, feeling as if someone is breathing down my neck. I turn around for the umpteenth time, but there's no one.

Once I'm inside the house, I instinctively lock the door. I look forward to the evening, when I know one or two or all three of my men will be with me and I'll truly feel safe again. How did we get to this point? How did I find myself in a spot where I'm equal parts protected and afraid, determined and confused, exhilarated and doubtful?

It doesn't make sense.

Love rarely does.

A few more days pass in relative silence, although not without the usual dose of suspicion. I'm hyper-aware and hyper-vigilant, always anxious for nightfall and the comfort of Kellan, Fallon, and Luke's strong arms. I try to keep myself busy and distracted in order to avoid true solitude. I make my way through Hershey, driving slowly as I approach the easternmost neighborhood. I've picked up a small remodeling job in the area and I'm eager to get started.

Behind the wheel, the world looks different. It must be the spring sun, glowing brighter and illuminating everything. It's as if I can see the houses better with their trimmed hedges and flowering trees. The driveways and sidewalks with their tiny cracks and crevices. The mailboxes on the curbs and the wind chimes hanging from every porch. Life seems tranquil in Hershey. Quiet and uneventful.

Yet a shadow looms in the back of my mind.

As I look in the rearview mirror, I suddenly notice a car behind me that wasn't there before. A dark green sedan. It seems familiar though I'm not sure why.

I take a left turn, and the sedan follows. Another turn, and it follows.

Three blocks later, it's still a couple of cars behind me. I can't make out the driver's face. I decide to try and ease my nerves, convince myself that it's only a coincidence that the green car is heading the same direction I am. I go on another tour of the



neighborhood, careful of my surroundings while also keeping an eye on the sedan.

A few turns later, and it's still there.

"This doesn't feel right," I mutter to myself and wonder if I should call Kellan and tell him about it. But as soon as I pull up outside the Johnsons' place where I'm scheduled to meet them and discuss their remodeling project, the dark green sedan drives away and disappears at the far end of the street. I caught a glimpse of the license plate, though I'm not sure how useful that will be.

I may have overreacted. The driver could have been lost.

If I tell Kellan about it, it'll prove his point about my safety. And if I can't feel safe on my own, I will never feel safe anywhere. That's not the kind of life I want to have. If I decide to go back to the mansion, and live with them again, it needs to be on my terms and with my mind at peace. I don't want to go back to them because I don't feel safe when I'm alone.

That would mean trading one trouble for another.

If I'm to tell Kellan that I was being followed by someone other than Wolfhound Security, whose unmarked vehicles and out-of-uniform agents I know by heart, then I need more than just a hunch. I need proof.

We finally have a lead on a meth lab operation in Brady. There's a few houses on the outskirts of town that were abandoned and reclaimed by the local council, but the absence of funding to refurbish and rent them out—along with the absence of prospective, respectable tenants—has left the units empty and derelict. Or so we'd thought until some of the local residents and neighbors started complaining about unsavory individuals being spotted in the area.

Loitering, broken beer bottles, vile threats being shouted for consecutive days—it's enough of a pattern to have me driving down to Brady so I can see for myself. I park my car further up the road, closer to the residential area and the local school, then slowly walk back toward the houses in question. I've had my deputies roll past a couple of times every day for the last week or so, but nothing emergent occurred.

I go around the block once, checking the backyards for any dogs. Meth labs usually have a hound or two outside. They keep the poor animals out all day, always on high alert, knowing that the dogs will bark if anyone approaches. The yards are empty, so that's one box I cannot tick at this point. Back at the front of the trio of suspected units, I take my sweet time analyzing the neglected front lawns, the mailboxes overflowing with unopened envelopes, and the porches where dust and grime have gathered over the winter, along with a plethora of spiderwebs and other creepy crawlies.

“Come in, Chief,” Marlon reaches out through my walkie talkie.

“Talk to me,” I tell my deputy and await his response while keeping an eye on the window of the house in the middle. It looks dingy and close to its breaking point. A funny smell persists by the front door.

“We’ve had movement reported in Brady for the past hour,” Marlon says. “One of the neighbors called our dedicated hotline.”

“Did they describe a suspect?”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

“Go on,” I reply, rolling my eyes. I’ve heard some funky descriptions coming from these folks. At one point, I was convinced we were dealing with an Invasion of the Body Snatchers—eyewitness accounts can be sketchy sometimes.

“Tall, dark, and handsome.”

I can’t help but smile. “I don’t suppose they mentioned a sheriff’s uniform?”

“That would’ve been amazing,” Marlon chuckles. “But just keep an eye out, Chief.”

“Sure thing. I will keep an eye out for a tall, dark, and handsome suspect. Over and out.”

I check the front door and find it’s unlocked. A squatter’s paradise. Slowly, I listen to the silence creeping out from the house as I push the door wide open, letting the daylight flood the front room, revealing a sea of tossed papers, plastic wrappers, crumpled aluminum foil, and rat droppings. That’s the smell I was picking up earlier. They’ll need a solid round of pest control in here before they strip the place clean, otherwise they’ll never be able to rent this house out to anyone again.

“Sheriff’s Department. Is anybody here?” I call out.

Nothing. No movement. Not a single sound. As I enter, the floorboards creak under the weight of my boots. A shadow lingers in the corner of my eye but when I turn around, there’s nothing there. Just old furniture covered in dirt and more rat

feces. Crinkling my nose, I try to get the smell out of my focus as I continue my tour of the silent house.

The kitchen is just as filthy, if not worse. The backdoor is wide open and barely hanging from its rusty hinges, the screen already fallen and gathering dust outside. There are footprints all over the floor—sneakers, judging by the impression—and fairly recent.

“Lincoln County Sheriff,” I say, louder this time. “Is anyone here?”

Still, no answer. The sight of discarded needles and syringes in the trash can have my instincts flaring, though. Bingo. Something was definitely going on here, but it could’ve been just junkies using the place to get their usual fix. Then I notice the kitchen scale and pieces of plastic wrap left on the counter with sprinkles of white and brownish dust, and I’m certain a lab test will reveal trace evidence of narcotics. I’m guessing crack and heroin. This isn’t the uppity neighborhood that it used to be.

Checking the bathroom, I find signs of life, sort of. Someone used the tub earlier. Droplets of water are still drying, leaving yellow spots on the pale blue enamel. There were definitely people in here, but they’re gone now. Whether they left in a rush because they saw me coming or they left earlier without a care in the world, I can’t be sure.

Upstairs, it’s a different story.

The two bedrooms are clean. The furniture has been cleared out, with the exception of a single bed and a table. I find more wrappers and crinkled aluminum foil, a waste basket filled with an abundance of potential evidence, and more powder on the tabletop with notable scratches.

A post-it note left on the windowsill catches my eye. For a moment, I’m so drawn to it that I don’t hear the man coming up from behind. I feel the blow to my side and the heat spreading through my ribcage. I curse under my breath and try to turn around so I can confront my assailant.

I barely see the brown eyes before the butt of his gun connects with the side of my head.

Stinging pain. Red lights.

The smell of musky aftershave. The taste of blood in my mouth.

I lose my balance and fall to the floor. His boots keep kicking me, harder and harder. I feel my ribs cracking. The pain is unbearable. Cold sweat seeps through my pores, my vision hazy and my breath uneven as each inhale feels like torture, like nails scraping through my trachea. I hear the black boots walking away, but then he turns around.

The sound of the safety being clicked off on the gun.

The faces of all the people I love and hold most dear flicker past my fading eyes.

I expect to hear the deafening blast of a gunshot.

But it never comes.

Only darkness.

\* \* \*

“KELLAN, HONEY, PLEASE WAKE UP.”

A woman’s voice pulls me from the darkness. Where am I? It feels nice and warm, but it’s not where I remember myself to have been. It’s strange. It’s as if a whole chunk of time was stolen, snatched right out of my grip, and now I’m staggering through the shadows, trying to find my way back into the light.

“Kellan please, wake up.”

It’s not Avery. Her tone is softer. Sweeter. Like honey on toast. It is familiar, though, and it’s beckoning me to her. She knows me. Do I know her?

I was in Brady. Marlon was warning me about a suspect, but I didn’t see anybody down there until it was too late. Until I was attacked. *Attacked*. He came at me hard. *The gun*. He had a gun, and steel-toed boots that rammed into my ribs most viciously. That’s why every fucking breath hurts. Why my whole body feels like it was set on fire. Why my eyes are

struggling to open and why I feel as if I've been through twelve rounds with a heavyweight champion.

"Kellan, wake up."

Finally, my eyes peel open. They sting like hell. There is nothing but acute discomfort everywhere. Not a single good feeling. Not even the relief of being alive. I thought I was a goner. White lights blind me from above. Overhead neon strips. The smell of bleach and... *fuck*, I'm in the hospital.

"Kellan."

"Charlene?" I manage, my voice barely a whisper as I recognize the bright red hair and the soft features that once captured my body and my mind. I recoil from the memory, though. Fear and disgust blow through me like a strong winter wind, chilling me to the bone. "What are you doing here?"

"I came as soon as I heard," Charlene says, taking a cautious step back.

I'm in a private room. I know these pale green walls all too well. I'm in North Platte General. I can hear the nurses' calls through the PA system, calling for doctors and other various needs. I'm hooked to a machine that's monitoring my vitals. There's an IV drip going into my left arm. Fuck, every inch of me hurts, and I have no idea why Charlene is by my bedside.

"As soon as you heard what?" I ask, trying to make sense of it all. "How long have I been here?"

"Less than an hour," she says. "I overheard somebody at the station. I was down there looking for you, actually."

"Where's my brother?"

"I think he's on his way. The nurse said all your next of kin have been notified. I made sure they called Avery, too."

I give her a confused look. Since when is Charlene Maddox so sweet? Even when she first came up to me after getting out of prison, I could tell she was ready for a brutal fight despite her fake pleasant smile and brazen physical touching.

"What the hell is going on here?" I groan as I try to sit up, but the pain keeps me pinned down in an uncomfortable position. I

got my ass handed to me, and I don't know who to go after.

"Try not to move too much," Charlene says, the concern etched deeply across her face. "I'm going to leave soon, don't worry. I don't want Fallon to see me here. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Who found me?"

"I think one of the neighbors. I don't have all the details, Kellan, but given everything that has happened between us, I felt like I had to be here when you woke up so I can tell you I didn't have anything to do with this. I swear."

I give her a hard, cold look. "Why would I suspect you, Charlene? That was just a routine check of a suspected drug house."

"Even so. With Avery likely to come back to work on my house, with the tension that is still ever present between us, and, well, given my history..." Charlene lets out a heavy sigh, pausing for a moment. "I just felt the need to tell you that. I mean well, Kellan, I promise. The past is in the past, and I don't hold a grudge over what happened. You were just doing your job, and I was in the wrong. I see that now."

Her hand rests on my shoulder. It's supposed to be comforting, but all it does is add more tension to my already suffering body. I don't know how to react, nor do I know what to say to her. I'd like to believe the words coming out of her mouth because it would make everything easier. But something doesn't feel right. Something doesn't click. It's as if one of the pieces in the puzzle is damaged and won't fit anywhere.

Avery comes in, and all the tension seeps out of me. "Kellan, oh, my—" she pauses in the middle of the room upon noticing Charlene beside me. "Charlene?"

"I was at the station when the call came in," she replies with a vague smile. "I'll get out of your way. Sorry."

"No, it's okay," Avery says, but I can see the shadow of doubt darkening her wide eyes as her gaze darts between us.

"Leave," I tell Charlene.

She nods once, then gives me one last squeeze on my shoulder before walking out with her head down. I don't know what to believe anymore, but I do know I'm more at ease now that she's gone and Avery is here. I turn my focus to her—what a sight for sore eyes this woman is, especially after what I have somehow survived. Damn, I'm one lucky SOB.

“What happened?” Avery asks, coming closer with slow, shy steps.

I reach out, and she takes my hand, so I pull her even closer, desperate to feel her touch, to smell her perfume, to see her clearer. “I got ambushed,” I tell her. “I don't know the details yet, nor do I remember much at this point, but it'll come to me. Where are my guys?”

“Your deputies? They're all outside in the waiting room, worried sick about you,” she says. “Fallon called. He's only a few minutes out. Luke is on his way, too. I just got a call from the hospital, they said you were here but didn't tell me anything other than that.”

“I'm glad you came,” I tell my woman with a soft smile.

“Why was Charlene here?”

“I have no idea, Avery, I swear. She was here when I woke up.”

“Well, I'm glad you're okay. The doctor said you'll make a full recovery, but that you got banged up pretty badly.”

“Let me guess, broken ribs?” I ask, and Avery nods once. “I can feel that with every single fucking breath, dammit.”

“Three, to be exact. Luckily, none of them punctured your lungs, so all the pain aside, he says you'll be okay, provided you get plenty of rest and time to heal properly.”

“I'll be fine, Avery. I've recovered from way worse,” I say, trying to reassure her.

“I was so worried,” she says, moving closer. “I thought you... oh, God,” she shudders, bursting into tears. I can't take it.

I pull her in and kiss her softly on the lips, tasting her sweetness, feeding on her kindness and letting her very spirit



refill my frazzled soul. “I’m okay, Avery. I promise. It’ll be rough and painful for a while. You’re gonna have to be on top for at least a few weeks,” I shoot back with a playful smirk.

Avery chuckles lightly, wiping her tears as she begins to relax, her hand glued to mine. “I’m afraid to even hold you right now.”

“I’ll be fine. Fallon will make a whole lot of terrible jokes at my expense. Don’t take any of it seriously. We used to call him Nurse Ratchet back in the service. Great at giving first aid, terrible with moral support.”

“And Luke?”

“Oh, Luke is like Mother Goose. He will smother me and bring me hot tea. He’ll ask if I need another pillow, he’ll liaise with the doctors. A micromanager, through and through.”

“Or a very efficient girlfriend,” Avery giggles.

“I’ve got you, though,” I say, trying to put the whole incident out of my mind, if only for a minute.

Avery glances back at the door, then gives me a worried look. “Do you want me to have your deputies come in? They really want to see you. I guess they have a lot of questions about what happened. I didn’t understand much when I first came in, but they said you were checking out a drug den?”

“I was actually there looking for a meth lab,” I tell her. “Just another day on the job, babe.”

“Who attacked you? Did you see them?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t see much before I was attacked. But he had a gun. He pointed it at me when I was down. He could’ve killed me but he didn’t.”

“Thank God,” Avery says, her voice lower, her tone getting colder. “He must’ve had a reason. Do you think it was one of the dealers you’re looking for?”

“I don’t know anything right now,” I tell her.

But whoever that was back at the house, I will find them.

One way or another, I'll figure out who they are and what they were doing there. If it's something drug-related, it's only a matter of time before I take down the whole ring. I'll use Wolfhound Security resources on top of everything else if I have to. I'll hire more deputies and cleanse the entire fucking county of this plague until the people feel safe again. Until children can play in their yards and out on the sidewalks without stumbling into mindless junkies or aggressive dealers or getting accidentally stuck by discarded needles.

The situation is spiraling out of control, and the local council isn't helping. I took an oath when I accepted the sheriff's badge, and I intend to keep it. Down to the last word.

But if this isn't drug-related, if this somehow circles back to Charlene in one way or another, I will rain down fire and fucking blood upon her. I will forsake every oath I've ever taken, and I will go dark side on her ass for bringing this sort of trouble to my doorstep. I never asked for any of this. She's the one who lied, who snaked herself into our beds and our lives. Whose dark money damn near got us killed back in Iran.

I don't know if she came to the hospital out of genuine concern or to find out how much I remembered. Either way, I won't leave a single stone unturned. I will find the truth, no matter how far I have to go. The problem I'm facing now, however, is that I don't yet know whether the attack on me was an isolated incident or the first of many to come.

**M**y brother barely made it out of that drug den alive. Whoever attacked him, they wanted him to know that they could've killed him but chose not to. That was a power play, and I have dealt with people like that before. But they've never dealt with someone like me, otherwise, they would've known better than to go after Kellan.

He chalked it up to his drug-related investigation, but Charlene's presence at the hospital has me suspicious. Her behavior is suspect, and I am certain that woman wasn't there purely out of concern. I can smell bullshit from miles away, and Charlene reeks of it. She can cover herself in layers of expensive perfume and fine silk but I will still catch that wretched scent of hers. I'm not buying the reformed criminal act, either.

I don't believe in coincidences.

In the years that Kellan has been Sheriff of Lincoln County, he's had his fair share of perps trying to come at him. He has dealt with aggressive actions before, but nothing like this. This was premeditated and well-thought-out. He never should've gone in there alone. He knows that, now. All we can do is keep our eyes open and our senses on high alert from here on out.

The puzzle pieces are still scattered across the board for the time being. They will make sense soon enough. Until then, I decide to carry on with my life as usual. We've got a baby on the way, a woman to win back, and two little girls who need us. I think we need them more than they need us, but that's not something I'll say out loud just yet.

Kellan is out of the hospital and recovering back at the mansion. He goes into the office once a day, but only for a couple of hours and only to make sure his deputies are hard at work on finding the fucker who attacked him. We've got a tighter security detail on Avery, though she isn't aware of their presence. We've got eyes on the school, as well. The last thing I need is another Daniel trying to come at them in order to hurt Avery or us. It's better to be prepared for the worst and hope for the best.

"Any news on Toby?" I ask Luke. We've been on the phone for the past twenty minutes, talking about the current developments. I've just closed my garage and I'm headed down the street. Around the corner, my car is waiting, wedged at the end of an alley. One more security measure, just in case. "Do we know where he's from, at least?"

"Not yet. I need his fingerprints," Luke replies, and I can hear papers shuffling in the background. "One of us needs to get close enough to lift at least a partial from him."

"That means getting close enough to Charlene. I can't tell you how much my skin crawls at the thought of that," I shoot back with a dissatisfied grumble.

Glancing around, I see nothing out of the ordinary. Just a typical evening in North Platte—people walking up and down the street, going in and out of various shops and cafes, supermarkets and drug stores. Some have just finished their shifts while others are only beginning theirs. The bars and pubs are open and some of the town residents have taken to a drink or two before going home. Slowly but surely, spring is thawing away at Nebraska's frozen cheeks, and it's nice to see the place coming back to life after a particularly hard winter.

The evening darkness and dim streetlights are making it hard for me to see everything clearly, but my instincts are sharp and so are my senses. Our training isn't something that simply wears off.

"Toby's been trying to get pretty close to Avery," Luke says. "Why not approach him from that angle instead?"

"I don't think he's a fan of ours."

“He doesn’t have to be. One of us just has to be with Avery when Toby’s around. We could lift a print off a mug or something.”

“Fair enough. I’ll see what I can do.”

Luke exhales sharply. “I don’t like this any more than you do, Fallon, but we have to be careful. As long as Charlene is on the loose, she could turn out to be a problem.”

“I know. I know! I fucking hate it, though. We were doing so good.”

“And we will get back there again. Sooner than you know. As long as we watch our backs and make sure Charlene has no way of hurting us or Avery.”

We agree to catch up later at the house, and I hang up as soon as I turn the corner into the narrow alleyway. There’s an emergency light above the service door right next to where I parked my car, but it’s out. The shadows appear longer and darker. A troubling sensation creeps up my spine, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The air smells dank, and it feels colder than it should be for this time of the year.

Footsteps echo behind me.

I turn around so fast that he doesn’t realize I’m already on to him. I see the knife coming. The silver metallic glint of the blade as it flashes out, its sharp tip reaching for my gut. I jump to the side.

He comes at me again.

I can’t see much, dammit. He’s dressed all in black. A balaclava on his face. Black jacket and jeans. Combat boots. Black gloves. All fucking black except for the knife. He’s shorter than me, and he’s a fast motherfucker.

“Come at me,” I hiss as he misses again.

He mimes a direct hit, then throws out a left hook that almost catches me in the ear. I hit back, an intended uppercut to the chin but I miss.

He slashes at me once more before his knee comes up.

This prick is determined to hurt me. I'm bigger and slower but I'm stronger. Which means that all I need is one blow to take him out, and I've got enough anger in me to want to break him into little bits and pieces. He moves to the side, and I move with him.

I don't see the hand reaching for his jacket pocket.

I only see it come up and feel the pepper spray hitting my face.

"Fuck!" I cry out and jump back as the poison burns into my eyes. He didn't get me directly, but he got enough to temporarily blind me. I only have my ears to guide me, now. I'm fucked if I'm not able to block what's bound to follow.

His boots scratch across the asphalt.

He's coming closer.

I throw a punch, just to keep him at bay. I manage to open one eye, and I see the blade coming from the left. I slap his wrist with enough strength to hear him grunt from the pain as he drops the knife. This is it. My single opportunity to make this moment count. I tackle the fucker, but he's strong, way stronger than I suspected.

I can't lock my arm around his neck. Shit. He's wriggling out of my hold like a cat possessed by the Devil. I punch him in the gut, and I try to get him into a lion's chokehold, but he's a slippery bastard. We go at it for what feels like forever until he knees me in the groin. A hot flash of pain shoots through my whole body.

"Hey! What are you doing?" someone calls out from the street.

I'm close to falling to my knees, but I'm able to see my attacker as he bolts away. He rushes to the other end of the alley, running as fast as his legs will carry him. He left the knife behind. Relief washes over me as I lean back against my car, panting and struggling to catch my breath.

"Hey, man, are you okay?" the young busboy asks me. I know him from the diner next door. Good kid in his early twenties. "Fallon?" he croaks upon recognizing me.

“What’s up, Trent?” I reply, my voice ragged. “Thanks for spooking that asshole.”

I can barely see him, my eyes stinging and constantly tearing up. But at least the assailant is gone. One thing is for sure, though—what just happened was no coincidence. Someone is definitely gunning for us. They are determined to either take us out or at least down long enough for an agenda to be fulfilled. Whoever it is, they’re about to find out they fucked with the wrong Cassidy’s.

“What happened? Who was that guy?” Trent asks.

“I don’t know, buddy, but I’m definitely gonna need to check your CCTV footage,” I tell him. “Assuming he’ll show up on it.”

“Need me to call the cops?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. My brother’s home. I’ll talk to him directly.”

“Okay. Do you need anything?” Trent asks.

I rub my eyes with my jacket sleeves, increasingly uncomfortable with the prospect of getting behind the wheel in my condition. We’ve got eye drops and a solid first aid kit back at the house. I’ll need to use that before I can trust my vision to drive.

“Yeah, actually. Can you give me a ride home? I can’t see shit.”

It’s been a long time since someone has driven me home, but this is a stark reminder of how vulnerable I can become in an instant if I’m not careful. Fucking hell, I thought I *was* careful. At least I didn’t get stabbed. It’ll make for a bitterly funny story someday, though. The night the mountain got maced. Oh, yeah, Luke will get a kick out of it.

\* \* \*

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, both my brother and I are noticeably better. Kellan still has trouble moving, but at least he’s able to breathe easier. We haven’t told Avery about the guy with the knife. We agreed that she doesn’t need to know.

Not yet anyway. I was able to get right into a shower and wash the mace from my eyes before she knew anything was amiss.

We also agreed that the two of us need to talk to our parents again. This time, however, we're using a different, more aggressive tone. We find them at their ranch, riding their horses back from the pasture while the ranch hands bring the cattle in from grazing out in the wide, northern field. Mom seems surprised to see us standing outside their house, but I think Dad saw us coming since word of Kellan's incident first got out. Yet neither bothered to even text us, to ask if we were okay. That in itself speaks volumes.

"Ah, behold, my wandering sons," Dad says in a smug tone as he gets off his horse.

Mom, on the other hand, is all smiles and giggles, rushing to hug us. I step between her and Kellan as if out of instinct. "Don't," I tell her. "Broken ribs, remember?"

"Right, right," she sighs and stands back, hands fumbling through her coat pockets. "How are you two doing? Kellan, shouldn't you be in bed, still resting, honey?"

"Since when do you care?" I shoot back.

"Don't talk to your mother that way," Dad interjects, joining the conversation as Peter, their stable hand, gingerly guides both of their horses back to the stables.

The evenings are still cold, particularly out here in the open field. But the smell of spring is in the air thanks to the blooming cherry and magnolia trees that line the road from the front gates of the property to the ranch house. Slowly but surely, life is coming back to the land. I just don't like what it's bringing along with it.

"We need to talk," Kellan says, his tone stern and heavy as he leans against his car.

Mom looks at him, then at me before she whips up a pleasant smile. "Sure thing. Come inside. We'll make you some tea."

"We'd rather stay out here," Kellan replies.



She was expecting him to be the amiable and compliant one, and she's giving me the stink eye, thinking I've finally rubbed off on Kellan. It's been a while since I've seen my parents face-to-face. I only wish it were under better circumstances, but those better circumstances never happened, nor will they. It took me longer than it took Kellan to truly accept who the Cassidy's are, what they're about, and what they are capable of, including toward their own sons. No one is safe if Mom and Dad are determined to protect their fortune and web of deception they've weaved.

Corruption has been running in our family for so many generations, and my brother and I really are the odd ones out. We're considered the black sheep because we turned tail as soon as we were eighteen. Dad had expected us to take hold of our trust fund and join the Cassidy business. Instead, we went to military school, we joined the Navy, and when we came back, we teamed up with Luke and started Wolfhound Security. Kellan joined the police force and ended up replacing the old Sheriff which, in turn, has been causing heaps of trouble for our parents since they no longer have the same leeway in the eyes of the law.

Though they are weary of us, our mother continues to act as if we might suddenly change our minds and join the empire every time we come to visit. Thus, the fake enthusiasm, hugs, and offers of tea. It's only a matter of time before the Feds gather enough evidence against them. Only a matter of time before Kellan and I end up seeing our parents in prison. Until then, however, we need to play our cards right. They can still be dangerous. They're still well-connected and there are too many criminal figures across Lincoln County who benefit from their presence and ongoing so-called business activities.

"What's this about?" Dad asks, defensively crossing his arms as he looks at Kellan. He can't even stomach meeting my gaze.

"You know what this is about," I say. "Something is going on, and you two are definitely connected to it."

"Oh, my Lord, Bill, do you hear what our son is saying?" Mom gasps, bringing a hand up to her chest for an additional

measure of drama.

“Somebody tried to kill me,” my brother replies. “And somebody attacked Fallon, too.”

They look at us with a mixture of outrage and disbelief. For a moment, I’m actually tempted to believe their reaction is genuine. “You?” Dad asks me. “Who got the drop on you, boy?”

“They didn’t get the drop on me,” I say. My ego still stings from that fucking mace spray. “I fought them off.”

“Did you see his face?” Dad replies.

“Are you okay, honey?” Mom asks, concern etched across her face.

A long time ago, I would’ve been easily softened by this expression of hers. But I’ve learned that she can be a convincingly good actress when she needs to be. In old age, they’ve both learned to really milk the most out of their “friendly neighborly pensioner” vibe, particularly in the eyes of the law.

“I’m okay. And so is Kellan. He had it way worse,” I say.

Kellan cuts in. “We’re here to ask you some questions because there are one too many coincidences already, and we need to clear the air.”

“Son, you can ask us whatever questions you want,” Dad replies, shaking his head slowly. “We’ve got nothing to hide.”

My brother chuckles dryly. “We all know that’s not true but okay, we’ll go with that. Let’s start with the simplest one. Have you had any contact with Charlene Maddox since she got out of prison and moved back to Hershey?”

Mom and Dad exchange curious glances. “No,” Mom declares. “Absolutely not. We know not to associate with criminal elements these days.”

If the situation weren’t so fucking serious, I’d be rolling on the ground at her response, laughing my ass off. But I keep my emotions to myself and watch my brother as he continues with his brief but surprisingly efficient interview.

“Alright. Have you heard from her at all? Has she tried reaching out to you?”

“No,” Mom says.

That’s a bald-faced lie. They’d be the first ones Charlene would call. Kellan just doesn’t have a warrant to scour through their communications—yet. He gives me a quick look, as if to quietly assure me that he knows they’re not being truthful, then continues his focus back on our parents.

“You would tell us if she does reach out, right?”

“Of course,” Dad says.

“Do you know any of her associates? Can you give us a couple of names to look into?” Kellan asks.

Mom frowns slightly. “Honey, do you think Charlene had something to do with the attacks on you and your brother?”

“I have my suspicions.”

“We don’t know who she’s hanging out with these days,” Dad says. “But I can certainly look through my email archive and give you a couple of names she might’ve dropped from years ago.”

“You need to understand something,” Mom feels the need to add. “We may have our differences, the four of us. Legal and personal differences. Arguments. You can even call them conflicts, though you two are the ones who are constantly trying to go to war with us.” Ah, there it was, the victim card I didn’t miss. “But there is one thing that your father and I would never do, and that is hurt our own children. The buck stops there, okay? You are our sons. Our flesh and blood. What happened to you is awful, and we would never allow nor condone such actions.”

Kellan gives me another brief look, and Dad notices.

“Boys, you’re both pigheaded and stupid as hell sometimes, but your mother and I raised you. We brought you into this world, dammit. I have accepted that you’ve both decided to be ungrateful and defiant, I have. I would never in a million years allow anyone to hurt you, though. And for what it’s worth,

I've already started asking around regarding your attacks. Once I find out who it was, they'd better hope you get to them first. No one hurts a Cassidy and lives to brag about it."

"That's mighty noble of you, Pop," I reply with a wry smirk.

"I mean it," he snaps, throwing an angry glare back at me. "I could smack you myself. I could curse you out. I could do plenty of things to still make your life miserable if I wanted, but I would never pay someone to hurt you. Get it through your thick head, Fallon."

Kellan nods slowly. "Good. I'm glad we've cleared that up. And I'm also glad to know you feel this way. Regardless of our legal skirmishes, I wouldn't want to have to look at you as suspects for the attacks on us. Dad, please, do send me whatever names you can think of which I may be able to connect to Charlene. I'm hoping I won't have to go after her again, but if I do, I'll need all the intel I can get."

"Of course," he says.

"Don't you two want to come inside, though?" Mom insists. "It's been so long since the four of us have been together like this."

I can't help but smile. "Together like this? You mean like you two playing the innocents while we suspect you of potentially being involved in attempts made on our lives?"

"Fallon," Mom exhales sharply, her shoulders dropping in defeat.

"Thank you for the invitation," Kellan politely interjects. "But we need to be on our way. I have to warn you both, though—stay away from Charlene. Don't buy anything she might be selling. Keep your noses clean. You've got plenty of suits already breathing down your necks."

"You don't need to remind us of that," Dad grumbles and waves us away as he turns and walks back to the ranch house. "Come on, Lizzie. I'm hungry, and these two ungrateful bastards aren't sticking around."

"Nice to see you again, too, Dad," I quip and get into my brother's car.

Mom lingers, watching, as Kellan slips into the driver's seat and starts the engine. The shadow of a smile flutters across her face. I catch a glimpse of it in the sideview mirror just as we drive out and leave the ranch house behind us.

Minutes pass in silence while Kellan keeps his eyes firmly on the road. I can see the muscle flexing in his jaw.

"Did you believe them?" he asks me.

"Maybe. They made a valid point back there," I concede with a frustrated groan. "But then that would mean Charlene did this without their consent or knowledge."

"*If* she did it. We can't prove anything yet."

"I know. But whether she did it or not, Mom and Dad have her in their sights, now."

He briefly looks at me. "Do you reckon they'll confront her about it?"

"Oh, I'm sure they've already spoken. I didn't buy the whole no-contact nonsense," I say. "I don't know if they addressed this issue in particular, but—"

"If they haven't, they will absolutely address it now," he says. "Dad's honor compels him."

"Honor," I scoff. "There's not a single honorable bone in that old bastard's body."

"Okay, his ego. His ego compels him." Kellan lets a heavy sigh roll out from the bottom of his chest. "I wish they'd done things differently. I wish they'd listened to us when we first came back. You know we're gonna have to put them both away, eventually."

"I know."

But let's take our problems out one at a time. Mom and Dad will still be here when we're done with Charlene or whoever it is behind these attacks."

"One problem at a time," I echo his words, my mind slowly drifting back into the cold and dark arms of the past. I always

feel so ambiguous after I see my parents. It's so damn uncomfortable.

My stomach feels heavy, and so does my heart. We were kids. We deserved better. And that is something our parents will never be able to fix or undo. The damage they did is everlasting, but we've grown better and stronger despite their abuse, despite their toxic manipulation tactics and narcissism. And we've started building a better and stronger family of our own. A family that we will go to the ends of the earth in order to protect.

I will burn everything down. Every fucking bridge. Every fucking person that stands in our way. There's not a single doubt in my mind about it. And there isn't a single doubt in Kellan or Luke's minds, either. We're on the same page. Avery, the girls, and our unborn child must be protected at all costs. Whoever came after us will more than likely try to get to them, too.

But they'll have to go through me first.

Seeing Kellan in that hospital bed did one hell of a number on me. There are things happening around us, things that the guys are doing their damned best not to tell me about. I don't like the secrecy, but I think I finally understand why they're so keen to protect me by keeping me in the dark. Just knowing that somebody wanted Kellan hurt or worse is enough to have me living every day on a razor-sharp edge. My existence would be easier if I didn't know. I guess ignorance really is bliss.

But the downside to ignorance is not seeing the trouble when it's headed my way. It's better to be aware, prepared, and understandably scared than completely unaware and unprepared when tragedy inevitably strikes.

With that in mind, I let my men handle their affairs and the ensuing investigation into Kellan's assault. All I can do is focus on my life, my work, and most importantly, the two wonderful little girls I'm raising. Besides, I've got a third bundle of joy on the way. There simply isn't enough bandwidth in my brain to deal with everything that is going on. Armed with patience and deep breaths, I leave the house and get behind the wheel, checking the time on my phone.

It'll be another twenty minutes before Annie and Miley get out of school, so I take the longer route through Hershey in order to get there. Yet there's still this constant, nagging feeling that I'm being followed, so I consistently check the rearview mirror. Before long, two cars behind me, I see it. That same

dark green sedan. A few more turns, and I look again. Still there.

“Who the hell are you?” I whisper. Given what happened to Kellan, I can’t help but make unpleasant connections. What if this green sedan is linked to the attack at that stash house? What if there’s some sort of conspiracy unraveling against us? What if I’m simply losing my mind?

It’s shameless to hound somebody like this. But then again, it could just be a coincidence. It could be another Hershey resident and I have no proof that it isn’t. Shaking the thoughts away, I decide to be careful nonetheless, so I give Helen a call and ask her to meet me outside the school.

I pull up and check the rearview mirror again. The sedan isn’t there anymore. Either I lost them or they simply went on with their day, paying no mind to a raving lunatic like me.

“You’re lucky I was just down the road, running some errands,” Helen quips upon seeing me.

I give her a long, tight hug, and try to think of a way to make myself appear less rattled while I figure out another way to prove one or more of my theories wrong. “I need a favor,” I tell her. “Can you take the girls out for ice cream and have them stay with you at the house for the night? I’ll pay double for the night hours.”

“Honey, is everything okay?” Helen asks, visibly worried as she carefully analyzes my face.

“Yes. Yes, I promise. I just need some time to myself, and you’re the only one I trust with Annie and Miley. I need to clear my head, think things through.”

“Are you sure, Avery?”

“Yes. Just for the night, and I’ll be by in the morning to pick them up. They have an overnight bag always ready in the trunk of my car, I’ll give it to you.”

She nods slowly. “Okay. Leave them with me, no problem at all. I’m always happy to spend time with those two firecrackers, anyway.”



“Thank you, Helen. I’ll buy you a Greek dinner at Niko’s Tavern when I get a bigger paycheck,” I reply, laughing lightly.

“Don’t worry about that, Avery. Do your thing, clear your head, and please patch things up with the boys. They are utterly miserable without you at the house.” Helen sighs deeply, and I can only respond by lowering my gaze for a long second. I know they’re miserable, as am I. But I made a decision and I need to enforce it, otherwise I lose respect for myself.

“We will figure things out,” I tell her. “We’re just going through a phase, working on some issues, as you already know. But we will find our way back to each other.”

“I sure hope so. What the four of you have is unique, I’ll say that much.”

“I got lucky, yes,” I reply. “But they also need to understand that I have boundaries. Boundaries I can never let anyone cross again. They need to trust me enough to tell me certain things, and I need to know that I can trust them to be fully honest with me. I’ve already lived with a lying narcissist, Helen. I can’t go through those motions again.”

“Oh, honey, believe me, I get it,” Helen reaches out and hugs me tightly for a long, sweet moment. I welcome the embrace and the affection that comes with it.

Once I make sure she has my girls in tow along with their overnight bag, I kiss the three of them goodbye and go on another drive around town to clear my head—and to see if that green sedan shows up again.

But my ride through Hershey is lonesome and quiet. There’s a little bit of traffic as people are coming from their jobs and kids are getting out of school. The streets are narrow and congested, yet I don’t spot the sedan anywhere. Content that I may have simply overthought the situation again, I head back home with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke swirling through my mind.

It's strange that we don't live together anymore. It only took a few months for me to become so hopelessly addicted to them. Only a few months for my heart and my body to become irreversibly bonded to theirs. Even with their nightly visits, I still feel like a baby bird that has just fallen out of the nest, bare and lonely out on the sidewalk. I get out of my car and my body involuntarily freezes for a second.

There's that tingling sensation again, chills running down my spine as an unseen presence looms somewhere nearby. The evening falls in shades of blue and purple across the sky, stars shyly twinkling as they emerge into the growing night. There are people around—neighbors walking their dogs, a couple of joggers darting down the street, the next-door kids riding their bikes—yet it doesn't feel safe. I'm definitely being watched.

I look around, over and over again. I make eye contact with passersby, but none rattle me as much as the unseen presence insists on rattling me. Tension gathers between my shoulder blades as I clutch my phone and keys tightly, the keychain jingling as I make my way up the front steps of the house. The sooner I get inside, the better I will feel.

“Avery.”

A woman's voice startles me, prompting me to stop and spin on my heels as she approaches. I don't even recognize her at first, but then it dawns on me. The red hair, the bold blue eyes, the crimson lipstick, the tall and thin physique. “Charlene,” I breathe, my heart skipping a beat. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm so sorry,” she says, her shoulders dropping underneath her brown leather coat. Only then do I see the gift basket she's holding filled with French tarts, a bottle of French wine, and a selection of hors d'oeuvres in fancy packaging. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

“It's okay. I just wasn't expecting you.”

“I know, and it doesn't help that I came out of nowhere,” Charlene laughs nervously. “My car is parked down the street. I wasn't sure you even wanted to see me.”

“Why wouldn't I want to see you?”

She shrugs and hands me the basket. “Please, accept this token of my gratitude and appreciation, Avery. You deserve it and much, much more.”

“Oh, Charlene, you shouldn’t have,” I reply, my cheeks flushed as I take the gift basket and set it on the porch. “What’s going on?”

Charlene comes closer, a shy smile resting on her pretty face. My stomach tightens in her presence, which is something that has never happened before. But ever since Kellan’s incident, I’ve had an increasingly harder time trusting people—especially her—whom my men have already and persistently labeled as potentially dangerous. I can only roll with the punches and be cautious.

“Avery, I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Charlene says. “Or, on a foot neither of us knew was there. Thing is, I didn’t know who you were when I approached you for the remodeling project. And my business with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke ended years ago in every sense. I need you to understand that. I would never do anything to cause you or the guys any sort of trouble or discomfort.”

“Thank you for saying that” I reply, my gaze never leaving hers.

“I also needed to clarify something. Yes, I have a criminal record. And yes, I served time in prison, but I promise none of my wrongdoings were of a violent nature,” she says, frowning slightly. “I had nothing to do with what happened to Kellan. I didn’t have any reason to do such a horrendous thing in the first place. I know they suspect me, but I can’t live another day like this. Another day with you thinking the worst about me.”

“Charlene, I don’t think anybody suspects you, per se,” I try to appease her. “I think it’s more about looking at everybody with a criminal record who might have a bone to pick with Kellan. In your case, he did help put you away.”

“That he most certainly did. I had it coming, though. Avery, I was out of control. Selfish, unkind, greedy, ruthless. I got in with the wrong people, and I did terrible things just to fill my bank accounts with money I didn’t even need,” she says,

lowering her gaze. I'm sure it's genuine shame that I see in her eyes, and I can't ignore the tinge of sorrow currently staining my soul, either. I feel for Charlene, for the reformed criminal who seems sincere in her regrets. How painful it must be to see yourself in the mirror and realize how many people you've hurt with your actions, with your selfishness. "I did wrong, Avery. And I didn't care who got in the way until I met Kellan and his brother. Luke, too. They must've told you awful things about me."

"Nothing that can't be verified," I reply bluntly.

"Yes, well, they have other suspicions, too. Things I can't prove that I didn't do, things they can't prove that I *did*. But at the end of the day, I need you to understand something, Avery. I'm not a bad person. I've done some bad things, yes, but I am trying to do better, to rebuild my life and to make a decent living. My criminal record does not, and should not define me, and I would really like to keep working with you."

"Toby spoke to me about that. I apologize for not getting back to you yet. There's just been so much going on and—"

"That's okay, I get it. What if I sweeten the deal and double what we agreed upon?" Charlene cuts me off. "You've got two beautiful little girls to raise, rent to pay, and I know how hard it can be for a single woman to carve her own path through this difficult world."

"I'll be honest, Charlene. Despite everything that has happened, you've never personally done me wrong. So there really isn't any reason for me to turn you down," I say. "I've been trying to make a decision while also being respectful of Kellan and the guys' wishes, of their history with you, and their feelings regarding this entire dynamic. I've weighed everything over and over, and I think it's best if we part ways and move on with our lives. Please know that my decision is not a reflection of your character or your past, but rather of my needs and my feelings."

She checks her phone, then slips it back into her coat pocket. A shadow flutters across her face, but then she looks up at me and smiles, eager to conceal whatever must've caused her to

change her expression. “Avery, I’m going to keep the offer on the table for sixty days. If you decide you want to come back and work on my house, I will double your fee. But in the meantime, please know that I won’t hold this against you, nor will I demand a refund on that advance. I know there was always good faith here. Please at least consider finishing the project.”

“I promise I will,” I say, offering a soft, warm smile.

Charlene nods once before turning and heading back to her car. Oddly enough, as soon as she is gone, I feel like I can truly breathe again. The darkness of the late evening envelops my surroundings, yet I take comfort in it. The pressure I’d felt gathering in the pit of my stomach earlier is starting to slowly dissolve. Perhaps it’s the resolution on the remodeling project and the tone of the conversation that has eased my senses somewhat. Yet I still get a nagging sensation of danger when it comes to her.

I don’t like the feeling, and something tells me I need to continue to be vigilant and careful.

Everyone at Wolfhound Security is on edge, and they have more than enough reason. If the attempt on Kellan's life seemed like something random and unrelated, the attack on Fallon changed the gameboard altogether. We're on high alert—we've doubled our security detail around the mansion, and I've got people watching Avery and the girls, twenty-four-seven. I've got eyes on Charlene, too. Toby is a slippery bastard, though, and I've yet to pick up his trail. He's hiding something and I don't like him.

He's way too good at keeping people off his back. Particularly my people, who are trained to shadow suspects and dig up sensitive information without anyone noticing. Yet they're having trouble pinning him down, figuring him out. I'll know everything there is to know about him, eventually. Nobody can elude me forever. Not when there's so much at stake.

"My boys are telling me that Fallon will be staying late at the shop tonight," Marcus says as we walk out of the house together. We've spent the whole day scouring government databases for more information on Toby and Charlene, as well as whatever details we could find about the stash house's previous owners. There's got to be a connection somewhere, but we have yet to yield anything useful. "And Kellan is with his deputies, preparing a raid on a suspected gang in Brady," he adds. "He's hoping they'll point him in the right direction once he's got them cuffed in the interrogation rooms back at his office."

"What about Avery?" I ask.

“At home, with the girls. Helen had them the night before. Oh, and Charlene paid her a visit yesterday,” Marcus replies. “The conversation seemed normal. A little tense, but given the recent events, I can’t fault Avery for being more cautious than usual.”

“Where are your men stationed?”

“Just outside her house, in a black SUV, as per the protocol.”

“Good.” I tell him. “I think Charlene might be trying to rope Avery back into working on her house. See what you can find out about that, and have your agents keep checking into picking up a better line on Toby, too.”

“Sure thing. It’ll be trickier without a warrant, but I’ll need a couple of days just to see where Charlene is going and how long she’s away from the house, on average. Based on that, I can arrange a brief scouting session.” Marcus pauses at the top of the stairs and looks around. “Man, I do love that spring is finally coming back around. I was tired of all those blizzards.”

“It was a harsh winter, even for Nebraska.”

“Where’s your car?” Marcus asks.

I nod at the parking lot. “Over there.”

He follows my gaze and spots the new model I bought the other day. A grin slits his face, a glimmer of excitement glowing in his brown eyes. “Luke, is that the Aston Martin you’ve been talking about?”

“The one I said I’d buy over the past couple of years but never did? Yeah, that’s it,” I chuckle.

“What’s the occasion?”

I can’t help but let a deep sigh escape from my chest. “Honestly? With the latest incidents in our midst, I’ve been having a carpe diem type of existential crisis, and I figured why the hell not? I’ve been talking about it for so long. I love that model, and mind you, it did cost me a pretty penny. But it was worth it.”

“I’ll bet you can’t wait to take Avery out on a ride, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Until then, however,” Marcus replies and shoots me a cool smile, “How about I get it out of the parking lot for you? I’ll bring it down here to the bottom of the steps. For your convenience, of course.”

“You just wanna drive it for a hot second,” I shoot back with a laugh.

“Busted.”

I give him the keys. “Knock yourself out, Marcus. You might as well take it for a spin around the property, if you want.”

“Damn, Luke, she’s a beauty,” he mumbles. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where’s he off to in such a hurry?” Kay, one of our interns asks as she joins me outside. She hands me a file to look over. “This is what we’ve dug up on that stash house so far. I’ll go back in and keep rummaging through the archives, but I figured you’d want some light reading for tonight.”

“Wow, Kay. You’ve been here a month and you already know me so well,” I chuckle softly.

“You’re not a complicated man, boss,” she quips.

“He’s just taking my Aston for a test drive,” I add, watching her as she keeps watching Marcus.

“That is a nice car, I’ll give you that,” she says.

Marcus waves at us, keys jingling in his hand. “Hey, Kay! If you ace your weekly review this Friday, I might convince our boss to let me take you out for a ride in this sexy thing!” He laughs as he jogs off toward my car.

“I don’t think he’s joking,” I mutter.

Kay smiles broadly. “I don’t think I mind.”

Marcus gets behind the wheel.

*BOOM.*

The explosion is so sudden, so unexpected.



My heart jumps. My whole body bucks. Kay screams from the bottom of her lungs. I hear the grief and the agony in her broken voice. That's my Aston Martin that just blew up. With Marcus in it.

"No," I hear myself whisper. My voice is gone.

My heart is breaking into a billion little pieces.

Everything happened so fast yet so slow at the same time, a giant tower of orange flames rising upward. The blast is so powerful, it sends the Prius and the SUV next to it flying over the others. The sound of scraping and clanging metal scratches my ears, making my stomach tighten. I feel like I am going to be sick.

Time comes to a sudden halt as I try to make sense of what just happened.

Agents rush outside, alerted by the explosion. Kay runs down the stairs, crying and screaming. I am frozen on the spot and realizing, ever so slowly, that *I* was supposed to be in that seat, in that car. My hands on the wheel. My skin burning, my whole being disintegrating in the heart of that wretched obliteration. I'm the one who was supposed to die today.

Once the shock of Marcus' death wears off, numbness set in.

One week ago, Luke's Aston Martin blew up with Marcus behind the wheel. It was a twisted kind of bad luck because the intended target was Luke. Somebody tried to kill him, and they killed Marcus instead. That's something I still can't quite wrap my head around. The mere thought makes me want to puke. First, Kellan. Then Fallon. And now, Luke.

Someone is coming for my men, nearly succeeding every time.

Marcus' funeral is a solemn but crowded affair. The whole of Wolfhound Security is present at the burial service, along with a couple dozen folks from all over Lincoln County who knew him personally. Some of the firm's clients are also in attendance, people who worked with Marcus and held him in the highest regard.

My eyes sting, flooded with tears as I stand beside his casket, Kellan, Fallon, and Luke right next to me. Helen has my girls farther back, and she is just as devastated. She's known Marcus since he first came to work for the guys. Annie is too young to fully understand, but I've explained the basics to Miley. She knows it's a funeral, and so she does a surprisingly good job of not only staying quiet and solemn, but also of keeping her little sister in check.

Marcus was beloved by everyone, and he will be sorely missed.

I watch the crowd in silence as the priest goes on with his service. Familiar faces. Foreign faces. A sea of them, all carrying a mask of sadness as they watch Marcus' coffin go into the ground. The United States flag that draped his coffin is expertly folded by fellow Navy officers and handed over to his mother—beyond distraught, yet poised and graceful as she accepts the flag with trembling hands. A twenty-one-gun salute sounds off as the Naval officers stand straight and salute.

Luke moves closer to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. She looks up and gives him a sad nod, then shifts her focus back to the grave as tears continue streaming down her cheeks.

Once the service is over and most of the attendees have left, Fallon escorts Marcus' mother to a waiting car driven by one of his agents, another in the backseat. They will escort her to the after-service luncheon being hosted in North Platte.

Kellan and Luke gently pull me aside, while Helen takes my girls back to my car.

“Avery, you're not safe at all with us,” Kellan declares.

“What do you mean?”

“I hate to admit it, but you did right by moving out. You should stay there for a while longer.”

“It's not why I moved out,” I remind him.

He nods. “I know. I'm just saying our relationship, our issues, our future... all of it needs to pause for a second while we figure out what's going on.”

“Are you breaking up with me?” I manage, my throat closing up.

“No. God, no,” Luke steps in. “No, Avery. But we've talked and we've agreed that we need to keep a certain distance from you and the girls, at least until we find the fuckers who did this.”

“It means we won't be coming around to see you for a while,” Kellan adds, sounding so pained and miserable, it's tearing me

apart on the inside. “We’re paying extra attention to your security detail. You and the girls will never be without cover.”

“Don’t think I didn’t spot them in their black SUV,” I shoot back with a grumble.

“You weren’t supposed to not see them. That’s the whole point. We want whoever is doing this to see that you’re never alone, that you’re always protected,” Kellan says. “We’ll make sure Helen has an extra agent watching her, too. And we’ve also dispatched a whole team over to the school.”

“Thank you,” I mumble.

“I’m not sure there’s anything to thank us for,” Luke sighs.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him.

He shakes his head, eyes closing for a moment. I’d give anything to never see such pain in them ever again. “Horrible. It was supposed to be me behind that wheel.”

“You’re not responsible for Marcus’ death,” I remind him.

“I don’t know how to stop feeling responsible, though.”

“Luke, the only person responsible is the fucker who set up that explosive device in your car,” Kellan says, squeezing his best friend’s shoulder. “And we will catch him. Sooner or later, we’ll catch him. My guys in the bomb squad said there’s enough trace evidence for us to track some of the ingredients back to a manufacturer or at least a distributor. We may have enough to find solid leads before anybody else gets hurt.”

Luke gives him a sour look. “That’s great. But it doesn’t change the fact that Marcus is dead, and nothing is gonna bring him back.”

“What about Charlene?” I ask. “Are you able to implicate her at all?”

“No,” Kellan says with a short sigh. Every deep breath still causes him pain, his ribs still healing from the stash house attack. “But I still advise caution going forward.”

Charlene did say that she never hurt anyone physically, and that should be enough of an argument in her favor. But she did

fund brutal mercenary squads across the world over the years. By proxy, she is, in fact, responsible for the deaths of many innocent people. And if the guys' suspicions are true, she is also responsible for the submarine explosion that cost Luke his leg and nearly killed all three of them. So Kellan is right to advise caution. In light of everything that has happened, it's hard for me to keep a clear head and a functioning logic.

"I was thinking," Kellan adds as he watches Helen put Annie and Miley into the backseat of my car, strapping both of them in. "What if Helen comes over to stay with you and the girls for a while?"

"What for?" I ask.

"Company. An extra person in the house can't do any harm. A single mother with two children is a more vulnerable target, even with our guys watching you. I think Helen would feel safer with you, too," Kellan says.

Luke nods in agreement. "Oh, man, I didn't even consider that. Helen must be scared out of her mind, though she hasn't said a word about how she's feeling."

The three of us glance back at her. She can almost sense us watching as she straightens her back and stands up tall before closing the door of my car. Under the timid spring sun, Helen's hair looks like a spool of silver thread, styled smartly under a black hat. Her face is pale, her eyes puffy from crying, yet she still finds the strength to smile at us.

Despite all the recent adversity, this woman somehow keeps finding enough energy to put on a gentle face while my girls sit in the backseat, giggling and pinching one another. The guys are right—Helen needs us as much as we need her, and we all need peace and comfort.

I have to admit that having her stay with me and my babies for a while is a good idea.

"I'll talk to her," I tell Kellan and Luke. "You're right. She should move in with us, at least until all of this blows over."

"And you need to keep your phone on at all times. You need to let our agents follow you around—forget the pride, no

stubbornness, and no little Miss Independent tantrums, either” Kellan replies with a slight chuckle. “I know you’re tempted to go at it alone in the coming days, but Avery, this has gotten way too serious, way too fast.”

“No, I agree,” I say, feeling my shoulders drop with a mixture of concern and disappointment. I would like nothing more than to say I’m safe under Wolfhound Security’s umbrella and with Kellan, Fallon, and Luke by my side. But it’s obvious that this formula isn’t as foolproof when there’s someone out there determined to kill them and do God-knows-what to me and my girls. “I’ll stay vigilant. I’ll keep to more crowded areas and I’ll make sure the agents know where I’m going every time I leave the house.”

“Good,” Luke says. “We need all hands on deck for this.”

All of this is so fucking awful. We were supposed to be working on our relationship after Daniel died, building something beautiful together, having a baby and raising Annie and Miley as a family. I was supposed to restart my interior design career, to develop a portfolio of satisfied customers, to find fulfillment in my profession after years spent living under the boot of a man whose sole purpose in life was to destroy me.

My men were supposed to grow their company and expand, to clean up Lincoln County of its drug and gang-related problems. They were supposed to focus on putting Elizabeth and Bill Cassidy away, to find justice for Maurice, Helen’s dead husband.

Helen was supposed to live out the rest of her days in peace and comfort, away from her wretchedly abusive sister and her equally terrible brother-in-law. Without kids of her own, she was supposed to find solace and joy in helping me raise mine.

And yet here we are, scared out of our minds, grieving and trying so hard not to cry as we bid a good friend farewell and watch another as she tries to be kind and brave in the face of extraordinary misfortunes. It’s one thing to deal with toxic relatives and even an abusive ex-husband like Daniel, and it’s

a whole other thing to find yourself in the crosshairs of a cold-blooded, highly calculated killer.

“Avery,” Kellan says, breaking me out of my heavy, troubling thoughts. “We’re going to be okay.”

“How are you so certain after everything that has happened?” I ask, holding back another round of tears as I look up at him and Luke. Fallon joins us, dark-eyed and sullen but present enough to pick up on the tone of the conversation. “None of us are safe anymore.”

“But we’re not alone. We have each other,” Kellan insists.

“And yet we can’t even be together,” I scoff.

Fallon offers a wry half-smile. “You’re the one who moved out.”

“Not funny,” I retort.

“It kind of is,” he says. “But it worked out for the better. I wouldn’t have wanted you or the girls at the mansion when Marcus...” His voice trails off as he looks at Luke. “I’m so sorry, man. I know I’ve said it so many times already, but I am sorry.”

Luke nods slowly. “It’s okay.” He takes a deep breath and gives me a warm smile. “Kellan is right, though. We can’t guarantee that we’re all going to survive what comes next. We don’t even know what it is that’s coming, but you are not alone, Avery.”

Why do I feel so lonely, then?

I already know the answer to that. I’m scared and it’s eating away at me, inch by inch. I only hope we untangle this nightmare before anybody else gets hurt.

I still can't shake the feeling that I'm being followed, and it doesn't involve the Wolfhound Security agents. I'm more than aware of them. Over the course of a couple of weeks following Marcus' funeral, I have grown increasingly wary and jumpy. Constantly looking over my shoulder. Obsessively checking and doublechecking that I've locked everything—doors, windows, even my car when it's parked at home. Glancing everywhere and scanning anything that pops into my field of vision to make sure it doesn't become a threat to me.

Marcus' death has added sharpness to an edge I was already having a hard time navigating.

What's worse is that Kellan, Fallon, and Luke have been keeping their distance from me, just like they said they would. They're hoping to keep any aggressor away by leaving me and the girls out of their lives, hoping that whoever is watching will believe that we are no longer involved. It's supposed to be a temporary measure, but it still hurts like hell. I know I was the one to leave the mansion in the first place, but I had good reason, and it was never meant to invoke a permanent distance between us. It was only meant to reset some boundaries.

One night, Luke sneaks out of the mansion to come and see me. I welcome him with arms wide open while Helen and my girls are sleeping upstairs.

Quiet like mice, we settle in the living room for some hot tea and leftover blueberry pancakes—my cravings have gotten more intense lately. This baby bump is starting to show through my looser fitting clothes, too. I hope we are able to get



our life and balance back before the baby arrives. I don't want our child to be born in the midst of chaos and attempted murder.

"You look beautiful," Luke says, his gaze lovingly set on my face.

We sit on opposite ends of the sofa, some show playing on the TV in the background. The lights are on overhead but dimmed, which gives the room a soft, golden glow.

"Thank you. I don't feel so beautiful these days, but I'm sure it's just my hormones acting up," I say, smiling gently. "How are you, Luke? How are the others?"

"Good, for the most part, anyway. We miss you and the girls, of course," he sighs deeply. We talk on the phone every day, but it doesn't beat spending actual time together. "Kellan and I have all hands on deck investigating everything we can about the attacks. It's hard because we're also trying to grieve Marcus' death without losing our nerve."

"Are you making any progress in your investigation?"

He shakes his head slowly. "Not as much as we'd like." There are certain aspects of the process that I know they're not sharing with me. I assume it's meant to protect me, but I wish I could help them. I wish I could get them closer to a conclusion. The longer we have to live like this, the more it hurts. "But we'll get there, eventually," Luke adds.

"So, still no word on the guy or guys who attacked Kellan and Fallon, either?"

"Not yet. We've picked up some fingerprints to run through the system, but no match so far. I think it's only a matter of time, Avery." He pauses, his eyes searching my face. "How are the girls?"

"They're on track for now. Getting used to their new home, even if we agreed it's going to be temporary. They go to school, they take their naps and eat their veggies. But they miss you guys, terribly."

"We miss them too, trust me."

I can't help but sigh deeply. "I hate this hiding part... you sneaking out to come and see me. It's weird."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"God, no!" I exclaim, my heart beating a tad faster. "No, please, stay."

He nods. "I get it. I don't like the sneaking around, either. It's not like we have a choice, though. Once we catch these fuckers, we'll resume our lives. Until then, it has to be like this."

"I know, Luke, and I completely understand," I say. "It doesn't make it any less pleasant."

He inches closer, a devilish grin stretching his lips. "If you think about it, this does have a forbidden fruit kind of vibe to it. Incognito. Without anyone knowing it's our dirty little secret."

"What are you doing, mister?" I quip, feigning outrage. But my core is already on fire under his burning blue gaze. He closes the gap between us and I barely have a moment to set my mug down before he takes me in his arms and showers me with hot, hungry kisses.

"Oh..."

"I can stop, if you want."

"Quit it with the reverse psychology," I whisper and suckle on his lower lip, his blonde beard bristles tickling my chin. "You already had me at the forbidden fruit analogy. I'm hungry, Luke. Oh, so hungry."

"We're going to have to be quiet, my love."

"Helen is a sound sleeper, and the girls have had a full day. A train could crash into the ground floor of this house, and they'd simply roll over in their dreams," I say.

Luke's gaze darkens as his fingers dig into my thigh. "Ah. Well, that's good to know."

Before long, our clothes are on the floor, and we're making love like lunatics in hiding. Skin on skin, soul to soul, our

hearts abandoned unto one another while we consume every drop of love offered and taken. I've missed him so much, and I will miss him even more tomorrow when we have to continue pretending.

“Good news and bad news,” Kellan tells me as I walk into the sheriff’s office.

He’s seated behind his desk, a thick wall of glass separating him from the bullpen. His uniform gives him a posture of authority over the place, but he looks tired and downright drained. I can’t blame him. He’s been at this for weeks, barely sleeping, and eating whatever pops up along the way while he’s out driving, scouring the whole county for information about our attackers. But to hear him say he’s got any kind of news, I like the sound of that. It’s better than the silence we’ve been dealing with for far too long.

“Hit me,” I say. “I can’t take another day of nothing.”

“I know what you mean. The fingerprints we lifted came back with a match for both the drug den and the knife.”

“Same guy?”

This is more than good news. It’s one hell of a breakthrough. Kellan nods and turns his computer screen around showing me a mugshot, but the guy doesn’t seem familiar at all. A rough and frazzled meth-head from Ohio who somehow ended up doing time here in Nebraska. I don’t recognize the name nor his gang affiliations.

“Owen Yates?” I say his name aloud, but still nothing comes to mind. “Who the fuck is Owen Yates?”

“Well bro, that’s the bad news. It’s more like who the fuck *was* Owen Yates?” Kellan replies, leaning back into his chair after he opens a few crime scene photos for me to look at. “He was

found dead earlier this morning outside of Sutherland. Dumped in the back of a car, to be specific. His prints were already in the system, but it wasn't until this morning that we got a match on both attack locations.”

“How did he die?” I ask, staring at the lifeless eyes of a man who tried to kill my brother and me, briefly wishing it had been me who ended that fucker.

“Strangulation,” Kellan says. “The ME says a thin metal wire was used. Professional method, according to his expertise.”

“Professional?”

He gives me a dark look. “Hitman. Killer for hire. Mercenary. You pick.”

“How tall is he?” I ask, still trying to ascertain whether this really is the guy who came at me that night or not. My assailant was fast and focused, determined and agile. This Owen Yates fella looks like a fucking trainwreck. It doesn't make sense.

“About five-eight,” Kellan says, and there it is. The doubt in his voice. He's thinking the same thing.

“It's not our guy.”

“It has to be,” my brother insists. “He was at the drug den, and he was holding the knife, too. Most importantly, both sets of fingerprints were fresh, so he was at both locations around the time of both of our attacks.”

I shake my head. “But that could be unrelated. The alleyway where I keep my car is public. Lots of folks pass through there of a questionable nature. Not to mention your drug den, Kellan.” I point to his computer. “Drug addict. Drug den. Hello.”

“Explain the metal wire, then,” my brother shoots back. “That's sophisticated and calculated. Who the hell kills a meth head with that kind of technique? Out there in the streets, beefs get sorted with knives and guns with their serial numbers filed off, Fallon. This was something else, entirely.”

“It's not our guy,” I shoot back.

“He could be connected. I say we dig into this and see where it leads.”

I can't disagree with the possibility of a connection, though. “My guy was over six feet tall. Yours, too. And from both our experiences, it's clear we're talking about the same individual. Well versed in close combat. Fast. Light on his feet. Has some military and mixed martial arts training. And in both instances, he had an opportunity to kill but he wasn't going for the kill. He was quiet. This guy,” I point at Owen's mugshot again, “this guy I would've seen coming from miles away.”

“We have an even bigger problem at this point,” Kellan says.

“But we do have a lead. Which is more than what we had yesterday,” I try to encourage him.

But the pained look in my brother's eyes has my stomach tightening ever so slightly. “We can't prove a connection to Charlene yet. Owen Yates seems to be a drifter passing through Lincoln County who stuck around, either because he didn't have any money to move forward or because he found a good meth supplier here. But there is absolutely no overlap anywhere with Charlene, nor with any of her former, known associates.”

I don't like hearing that. Then again, there are a lot of things I don't like about the very existence of Charlene Maddox. I was foolish enough to want her in my life once. There's no way I'm making that mistake again, not after the lies, the deceit. Not after everything that happened between us. And especially not since Avery came into our lives and changed us all for the better. I want her as far away from us as possible. Behind bars for life would be ideal.

Yet we can't pin anything on her, and I'm not a fan of fabricating evidence. We do this right, or we don't do it at all. I take a seat in the guest chair in front of Kellan's desk, letting my whole weight sink into the plush cushions until I can feel the pressure seeping from between my shoulder blades. I've been holding on to too much for too long.

“I don't believe in coincidence,” I tell my brother. “Charlene getting out of prison, these attacks and Marcus' death, there

has to be a link somewhere. I'll bet my life on it. But if we can't prove anything, what other choice have we got at this point?"

"We keep digging," Kellan says. "We keep digging but we accept things for what they are. Whoever was gunning for us, they weren't in it to kill us. Whoever attacked me could've easily put a bullet in my head back at the drug den. He had a clear shot. Point blank."

"Come to think of it, mine tried a little harder to stab me," I grumble, replaying the whole incident in my mind's eye. "But Luke's car, that was fully intended to obliterate the driver. And they knew it was Luke's car. That was clear intention to kill."

"Either Luke is at the top of somebody's unsavory list, or each of the attacks was a buildup to the explosion."

"Why?" I ask.

"To instill terror and uncertainty, maybe?" Kellan shrugs. "Either way, we need motive. And we need to figure out what role Owen Yates played in all of this. Like you said, I don't believe in coincidence, either. Yates was at the drug den, and he had contact with the knife used in your attack. There has to be a reason for him to pop up on our radar, and the fact that he was killed before we could find him is telling."

I nod slowly. "Somebody didn't want him talking."

**A**lthough Charlene offered me sixty days to change my mind, I decided to contact her before the deadline. I've thought long and hard about everything and it wasn't an easy decision to come to. The reasons behind this move are more complex than financial—the guys are more than happy to help me with finances, to support me through every day and make sure my girls and I have everything we need. But they also understand and respect my desire for financial independence.

I started this project and I intend to see it through, start to finish. I don't want to quit in the middle of my creation and besides, I could use more photos of a finished home for my portfolio. I want another satisfied customer added to my roster, more examples of my work that I can show to potential clients.

"Thank you for having me over," Charlene says as I open the door for her. "You've got a lovely little place here," she adds with a warm smile.

"Oh, I didn't decorate this," I reply.

"It doesn't matter. It's nice and homey," Charlene says. "Here, these are for you."

She hands me a box of Belgian chocolates, neatly wrapped in transparent foil and bound with red ribbons. My mouth is already watering, my cravings be damned. "How'd you know? I've been thinking about chocolate and hazelnuts since I woke up."

"Oh, it must've been a stroke of luck, then," she laughs.



I guide her into the kitchen, grateful to be home alone for this meeting. Helen is driving my girls to school, and she will be stopping by the farmer's market before heading back here.

Charlene waits for me to start, quiet and polite, her gaze constantly wandering up and down my growing figure. I'm wearing jeans and the largest knit sweater I could find, but I don't think I can hide my baby bump for much longer.

"Charlene, I've thought about it. Long and hard, might I add, and I've decided to come back to finish your project, if you'll have me."

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" She lights up like the sun, a beaming smile dancing across her face. "You won't regret it. And I'll keep my word, Avery. I'm doubling your fee for this. You deserve it."

"You don't have to do that," I reply. "It's bad enough I stalled the project for so long."

"Nonsense. Besides, you've got a little one on the way, and you're living here alone," she says, knocking the air out of my lungs. "You need all the help you can get, Avery."

"Hold on, what?" I manage.

Charlene laughs lightly, then pops a chocolate into her mouth, steam slowly rising from the coffee mug in front of her. "I wasn't born yesterday. You keep trying to hide it, but a woman knows. Your posture, your bump, your glow... I can tell. Plus, you're drinking decaf. I see those prenatal vitamins over there, too," she adds, pointing at the bottles I keep near the fruit basket. "Two and two makes four, doesn't it?"

"Oh."

"I guess congratulations are in order," she says, her smile never wavering. But she's only smiling with her lips, not her eyes. I could be reading too much into it, letting her history with my men cloud my perception, but I don't think I am. "Do you know which of the three strapping gentlemen is the daddy yet?"

I give her a red-faced, wide-eyed look, and Charlene laughs again. "No."

“That’s okay. I’ll bet they’re equally thrilled.”

“Thank you.”

“But I have to ask, why are you still living here, and not back at the mansion with them? Wait, do they not know you’re pregnant?”

She sounds genuinely curious, so I allow myself to go with the flow and see where the conversation leads. “They know. But in light of everything that has happened, we agreed we’re better off living separately for the time being,” I reply.

“That makes sense,” Charlene agrees. “Do you know if they’ve made any progress in their investigation?” Her smile fades slowly as her gaze settles on my hands. “Marcus and I weren’t the best of friends, truth be told. But he was a good man, and he didn’t deserve to die like that.”

“I haven’t spoken to the guys in a while,” I reply, careful not to give her the impression that we’re still in constant contact, thus making myself more vulnerable than I already am. “We don’t know where this is going or what’s going to happen next. But I’m sure they’ll tell me if there is anything I need to be made aware of.”

I know they would’ve said something if they found a connection between Charlene and their attackers. They would’ve warned me again to keep my distance from her. But based on our most recent conversations, it has become more and more evident that Charlene isn’t connected to any of this, as much as the guys hate to admit it. I guess it would’ve been easier to blame her for these horrors and send her back to prison. It would’ve made their lives, and mine, a lot easier with the ex-girlfriend out of the picture.

Yet the universe doesn’t work that way.

“I’d love to meet your girls,” she says as I kindly escort her out after going over some details regarding the remodel. “Annie and Miley, you said?”

“Yeah.” I think about it for a moment. “One day soon.”

“That would be wonderful. You know, Avery, I have nothing but respect and admiration for you. A single mom raising two

girls and building a career like yours takes guts and grit. It's one of the reasons why I wanted to keep working with you."

"Thank you, Charlene. I only hope you'll be happy with the end result. After all, you're the one living there," I reply with a dry chuckle.

I do want to finish that house. It may be counter-intuitive, given who she is and who she used to be. But Charlene hasn't only been kind in words, she's been kind in deeds, too. And like every other person regaining their freedom, she deserves a chance.

It took a while, but I finally manage to get a line on Toby. All I needed was one minute, one window of time, where he wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder in order for my guys to keep tracking him through town. By the time I arrive at the café in Hershey, he's still waiting in line for his drink to be prepared by the young, newly-trained barista. The girl is slower, so the queue is longer than usual, but it works in my favor, giving me opportunity.

Outside, my agents are in an unmarked sedan, parked across the street and out of clear sight. They know to keep following him and to try to do their best to not lose him. They will, eventually, because he's a slippery SOB, but for right now, I've got him. And I intend to make the most of this encounter.

I walk up to him just as he turns around with his freshly brewed coffee. I move a little too fast for a man who's too busy smelling his caffeine-infused nectar to notice me, and it works like a charm.

"Oh, shit, I'm so sorry!" I say as I intentionally bump into him.

The coffee cup hits the floor, the liquid spilling all over. Toby stills, hands lingering in the air as some of the drink drips on his leather jacket. "Dammit," I hear the barista girl croaking from behind the counter.

"I'm so sorry," I repeat and grab a handful of napkins from a nearby table, offering them to him.

“It’s fine,” Toby hisses, his voice low and flat, but his eyes never leave me. “Luke? I know you.”

I pause and give him a curious look, feigning gradual recognition. “Toby, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Again, so sorry about this,” I quip and grab the coffee cup from the floor. I make a move to toss it in the bin by the bar but do a sleight of hand instead and slip it into my jacket pocket. It’ll make a bit of a mess, but I’m content that I actually got what I came for. “I didn’t even see you. My mind has been a blur. I’ll buy you another one,” I add and ask the second barista to fix my so-called mistake while the first brings a mop and a bucket around.

The entire time, Toby just stands there, watching me like a hawk. It’s a bit unsettling, but it doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve got him. Soon enough, I’ll know who he really is and where he came from. He’s not working for Charlene by accident. I don’t trust that woman and I certainly don’t trust a guy that’s willing to work for the likes of her. Whoever he is, I’ll figure him out. And if I so much as smell a threat, I will eliminate him without hesitation. A line was crossed with Marcus. A line I intend to wipe clean, no matter what.

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

“Yeah, just drenched in coffee,” he replies sharply. “You don’t have to apologize again, though. I got you the first few times.”

I laugh, feigning nervousness as I pay for his drink and hand the new cup over. More customers are entering the line as the young barista keeps mopping the floor. “Here you go. I hope I’ve made up for my transgression. My mind’s been a blur for a while, now.”

“I can only imagine,” he says. “I’m sorry about your loss. Word travels fast and loose around here. Was it your friend who died?”

“Friend and colleague,” I sigh, doing everything in my power to maintain a pleasant attitude. Whether or not this guy had

anything to do with what happened, I still have to act carefully, thinking twice before I speak.

“I hope you catch the bastard who did it,” Toby says after a long and awkward silence. “Blowing a man up like that takes a cold heart. Those kind of people shouldn’t be allowed any kind of freedom.”

“Yes, I agree.” I give him a hard look.

“You said you’re investigating, right? I read your statement in the local newspaper the other day.”

“Yes. I’m helping Kellan and the sheriff’s department, to be specific,” I tell him. “Sooner or later, we’ll find out who did it. And when we do, I doubt the law will be able to help him.”

Toby nods slowly. “Good. I like this county. I’d hate to leave because of its unhinged criminal activity. Charlene deserves some peace and safety, too.”

“How has Charlene been lately?” I ask, shifting the conversation into a slightly more comfortable direction while I analyze every single micro-expression that sneaks across his face.

“She’s good. Happy, actually. Avery decided to come back and work for us after all,” he shoots back with a smile, and I have to admit, I’m blindsided and unable to react.

Avery didn’t mention that over the phone when we spoke earlier. Although the three of us made it clear that we would respect her decision, it still irks me to the bone that she decided to go back. I wish she’d have told me, at least.

There’s too much on my mind already, and we’ve got agents watching her, so I focus on the now, on what I can change or prevent, then offer to shake Toby’s hand. “I’m glad to hear that, Toby,” I tell him with a placid smile. “I know Avery will do a marvelous job. I gotta run, though.”

“Me, too. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Hey, least I could do,” I laugh as I walk out of the coffee shop.

I catch a glimpse of my agents watching me from behind the wheel of their car. Giving them a slight nod of confirmation, I head back to my SUV and get in. Not long afterward, I see Toby heading down the street, and he meets my gaze. In the absence of words, the eyes of men can say many things.

I reckon he thinks he's still skating freely under the radar. Little does he know I have a trick up my sleeve, or rather, in my coat pocket.

I will uncover the truth. Nothing and nobody can stop me.

As night falls over Hershey, I allow myself to rest for the evening. My girls are sound asleep in their room, and I think I can hear Helen snoring from the guest room down the hall. It makes me smile as I put my head down on the pillow and leave the phone on the nightstand on silent mode. It's been a long day, but I've managed to go over the whole project with Charlene. I'm starting back on Monday, and I can't wait.

Even though there is a lot on my plate and a lot of nasty things have been happening, I've come to the decision that I am done putting my life on hold because of it. If anything, I should be looking forward to every day with a bright smile on my face and a kick in my heels. I've come a long way since that night on the side of the road when I thought me and my girls would freeze to death, praying to every god to keep my girls safe, at least.

Closing my eyes, I listen to the silence of my room and the occasional hum of a car driving down the road. The glow from the streetlights pour through my window, but it doesn't bother me. I've gotten used to it. My mind wanders back to Kellan, Fallon, and Luke. Our playroom in the mansion. The countless hours of lovemaking, their hands reaching, exploring, touching me in forbidden places and making me cry out their names in ecstasy. I miss them so much it hurts.

Something goes bump downstairs.

My heart skips a beat. I remember locking the doors.



Footsteps on the ground floor. The hardwood creaks under considerable weight. I sit up and pay close attention. Silence, then another creaking sound. I don't like this. I check my phone. No service.

“What the...” I mutter, a sense of alarm lighting up every nerve in my body as I get out of bed.

Carefully, I step out of my room and look down over the staircase railing. All I see is strips of darkness wedged against strips of amber streetlight flowing in through the windows. My pulse is racing as I stand there for a while watching, listening.

I gasp when I see a shadow moving.

My first instinct is to run, but where? I'm on the top floor. Helen, Annie, and Miley are still up here, comfortably snug in dreamland and completely unaware of someone lurking downstairs. I can't call anyone. All I can do is grab the baseball bat I keep under my bed—a habit I picked up since I first left Daniel—and make my way down the stairs.

Slowly.

Quietly.

Holding my breath as I look around.

But there's nothing.

I reach the bottom of the stairs and head into the living room first. There's no one here. No creaking sound, either. Could I have imagined the whole thing? Stress and paranoia can do that to a person, especially after what I've been through.

“What are you doing with that bat?” Toby's voice slips through the darkness so swiftly and subtly that I barely register it.

I whirl around to find him standing just a few feet away, dressed in his usual black—jeans, turtleneck sweater, gloves and boots. This man is not here by accident. He's here on a mission, and my brain can't compute the sudden shift of his purpose. He's Charlene's assistant. He's the sweet and friendly guy who helped me out, who offered me comfort and support when I thought I'd have to make it on my own.

“Toby,” I manage, my instincts finally kicking in. “What are you doing here?”

“Do you actually think a little thing like you is going to do any damage with that bat?” he chuckles dryly, the coldness in his eyes sending shivers down my spine.

“What are you doing in my house?” I ask again, louder and hoping that Helen will hear.

He laughs and tries to grab me, but I swing the bat outward to keep him at bay. “Oh, so you’re gonna play hard to get, now,” Toby quips.

“Stay away from me!” I cry out.

Upstairs, I hear a door opening and Miley calling for me. “Momma!”

“Don’t come out of your room, honey!” I shout.

“Avery?” Helen asks, her bare feet padding across the floor.

“Call the police!”

“What’s going on?” she replies.

“Call the fucking police, Helen!” Toby shoots back but his eyes never leave me.

I try to hit him, but he manages to dodge away. He grabs the bat and pushes it off to the side, leaving me vulnerable. It’s all Toby needs to throw a right hook and punch me. The blow is hard, my ears ringing loudly as I stumble backward.

“Helen!” I scream, my vision getting hazy. I can hear her coming down the stairs.

“Oh, my God!” she cries out.

Toby takes out a gun and clicks the safety off. There’s a loud POP and I can hear Helen wailing, followed by a series of heavy thuds as she reaches the staircase landing but not of her own accord. Toby comes closer to me and growls, “Game over.”

“Why are you doing this?” I try to fight him off, but he hits me over the head with the gun, a sharp, red pain flashing through

my brain before I feel the cold muzzle pressed against my temple. “Don’t shoot,” I breathe, suddenly aware of how this will end if I keep fighting him.

Fear freezes the blood in my veins. My joints feel stiff, my muscles tight.

“We’re leaving, Avery. Now,” he hisses.

“Okay,” I mumble, devastation burning through me as he forces me out of the house.

I cannot stop him, nor can I check on Helen. I see her on the floor, panting as blood pools beneath her, seeping into the carpet. I hear my girls crying upstairs, and I can’t get to them, either. All I can do is comply. I don’t know who Toby is anymore, or what his endgame is, but I can now clearly see the connection that Kellan, Fallon, and Luke have been trying to make all along. If Charlene had nefarious intentions from the very beginning, Toby is the weapon she planned on wielding against me.

“Don’t say a fucking word,” he says. “Get in the car.”

The night air is cold against my skin. I comply with each of his requests; I was taught to never antagonize my abductor if he’s got leverage over me. I would say a gun pointed at my head and my girls left unprotected is more than enough leverage. I can only pray that Miley remembers what I told her about calling 911. I desperately hope that one of the neighbors heard the gunshot, yet I don’t see any lights coming on.

I’m screwed.

I t doesn't take long for the greater picture to come into focus as I'm taken over to Charlene's townhouse. I should be more shocked as I see her sitting in a chair in the middle of an empty living room, some of my paint cans still lingering in the corner, covered with plastic sheets. I should be angrier, too, but I'm surprisingly calm after what just happened. My mind lingers back at the house, on Helen and my babies. This shouldn't have happened, yet it was all clearly premeditated.

Charlene's acrid smile finally fits her face perfectly as she sees Toby bringing me in.

"Took you forever," she says.

"Had some trouble picking her up," Toby replies.

"Who the fuck are you people?" I grumble as I look at each of them, ultimately recognizing them for who they truly are. Bitterness inevitably glazes my tongue as every word of caution from Kellan, Fallon, and Luke comes back to haunt me. "They were right about you."

"Oh, don't take it so personally," Charlene replies. "Honestly, I didn't want things to get to this point. I was hoping it would go smoother, but recent events beyond my control have pushed me here. Had I known you were pregnant sooner..." she trails off.

Toby forces me to sit in a spare chair, making sure to keep me in place with plastic cable ties. He tightens the restraints to the point where it hurts my wrists and ankles. The heat has been turned off and it is cold in the house. Charlene is well dressed

in jeans and a thick woolen jacket, comfortable in her seat as she smiles and looks at me. There's a manila folder in her hands that she's clutching close to her chest.

"What the hell is going on here?" I ask, unable to think of anything else to say.

"What's going on is that I'm finally getting what I'm owed," Charlene replies bluntly.

"I don't understand," I shake my head slowly.

Charlene looks at me, then at Toby, then checks her phone. "Hold on, everything will become clear in a moment. They're here."

"Who's here?" I ask.

Toby scoffs. "Your knights in shining armor."

Kellan, Fallon, and Luke burst through the front door and storm right into the living room, but Toby points his gun at my head and clucks his tongue.

"Nah-ah-ah!" Charlene quips as she waves a finger, not getting out of her seat. "We're keeping things civilized here. Welcome, gentlemen."

"I should've known you'd try to pull something like this. It's low, Charlene, even for you," Kellan says, then gives me a worried look. "Are you okay?"

"I... yeah. He shot Helen," I manage, tears coming down my face and my voice trembling as I remember our friend bleeding out on the floor of my house. "The girls are still there with her."

Fallon gives Toby a deathly glare. "I smelled your bullshit from the beginning."

"Charlene, what is this?" Luke asks, trying to keep himself and the Cassidy twins calm. "What are you hoping to achieve here?"

Charlene stands up, a wicked smirk stretched across her red, glossy lips as she hands him the manila folder. "I always said you were the only one with enough common sense for me to

actually do business with,” she replies. “Long story short, Luke, my darling. You’re handing Wolfhound Security over to me tonight, or I will have your girlfriend’s brains splattered all over the very walls she painted.”

The words hit me like a hammer, none of them making sense.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Fallon gasps, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“You were right,” I tell my men. Sitting in the middle of the living room, shivering from fear and cold with my wrists and ankles bound, just highlights the fact that much more. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry, honey,” Charlene replies with a slight grin. “You had no idea with whom you were dealing. And I’m not talking about me or Toby here. I’m talking about these three manly men. I knew they’d be too ashamed of their history with me to ever share it with you. It didn’t take long to figure you out, though, Avery. You’re a good girl. You mean well.”

“It made you the perfect target,” Kellan mutters, his gaze constantly bouncing between me, Toby, and Charlene. He’s looking for a way to diffuse the situation. To disarm Toby and regain control.

But I’m not sure how that’ll happen. Toby planned this rather well. And I definitely bought his good guy act. I was such a fool, and it got people hurt. I can’t stop thinking about Helen and my girls back at the house. God, I hope someone called the police. I hope someone is taking care of Helen.

“So, all this was to get Wolfhound Security?” I ask Charlene. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t understand,” she replies. “The five years I spent behind bars were not wasted. I bid my time and studied

my adversaries. I understood that Kellan, Fallon, and Luke would be a problem going forward, and I was honor-bound to pay them back in kind for taking everything away from me. So, I drew up a plan and considered every possible scenario. That is what a good strategist does.”

“Don’t move, or she’s dead,” Toby hisses from behind me just as Fallon tries to take a step toward us. “I’m not kidding. I will kill her.”

“Yeah, we believe you,” Kellan replies, raising up a hand to halt Fallon.

Charlene takes a step forward. “Listen, boys. No one has to get hurt here. I came back to reclaim my seat and my fortune. I only want Wolfhound Security. It’s got enough capital and a high value on the stock market. I’ll sell it and use the money to restart my own business. It seems like a reasonable compromise for what your do-good bullshit cost me.”

“Do-good bullshit?” Luke scoffs. “Charlene, you were financing terrorist groups abroad. You embezzled and defrauded the shit out of Lincoln County before we even met you. Did you really think we’d just sit back and let you destroy more innocent lives over money?”

“You knew who we were before we knew who you were,” Kellan adds. “You deliberately lied to us. You inserted yourself into our lives and our bed. What did you expect to happen once we learned the truth? That we’d simply roll over and let you keep fucking around with people’s money and livelihoods?”

Charlene rolls her eyes. “None of that matters anymore, though, does it? It’s done. What isn’t done is my retribution. The government seized all of my assets and froze my accounts. So, here we are. Hand over Wolfhound Security, and we’ll call it even. The three of you are smart. You can start anew. I’ve got a criminal record and the law giving me a constant stink-eye.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Fallon says.



“No, I’m just being practical.” She nods at the manila folder, now in Luke’s hands. “Sign each page on the dotted line. Toby will act as an official witness. Once that’s done, I’ll take ownership of the company, including all of its accounts and assets, and the mansion in its entirety. I will, of course, give you boys a week to pack up whatever you need and move out of there. And then that’s it. You’ll go your way, and I will have my way.”

“Charlene, any signature made under duress is not legally binding,” Kellan replies. “Even if we do sign tonight, you won’t have a leg to stand on.”

“You can either be civil about it, or I can add more pressure to the wound,” she says. “I can hold on to Avery here until you submit to me completely. You thought you won, but you didn’t. I’m merely proving that you can’t come for the queen and miss, darling. You had your chance, and now it’s my turn. Sign, or Avery dies.”

“You’ve lost your goddamn mind,” Fallon says, shaking his head.

Pure hatred burns in the green pools of his eyes. There is a lot that he’s been keeping inside since Charlene’s return. I can see that so clearly now. I wish I had trusted my men, but instead I let my own past wounds cloud my judgment. We are all in this situation because of that. This cannot be the end, though. Charlene has a plan that she intends to see fulfilled. Toby is but one man with a gun against three former Navy SEALs. I’m the only reason why he’s not dead yet.

“It’s really very simple. You won’t be able to prove any kind of duress,” Charlene adds. “Toby has initiated a cell phone jamming signal that is keeping your phones out of service. So, there will be no evidence.”

“Toby shot Helen,” I hiss, my blood boiling.

Charlene heard me the first time, and it’s clear she doesn’t like hearing it again. “You’re going to have to prove it. You see, my criminal record aside, I’ve got some top-notch lawyers ready to drag whatever it is you’ll want to bring my way

through dozens of courts until y'all die of old age. I've done my homework this time around."

"Wow, Fallon is right, you really are delusional," I sigh harshly, then look at Toby. "Do you understand what you've gotten yourself into?"

"He understands," Kellan interjects. "I don't think Charlene understands."

"There you go again, trying to be the smartest person in the room," she says. "It's done, darling. Just sign the papers and hand Wolfhound Security over to me. My lawyers will take care of the details, and I will make sure you are adequately compensated for the sale."

"I thought you were smarter than this," Kellan says. "I didn't think you'd resort to putting a gun to a pregnant woman's head in order to get your hands on our company. Shooting Helen certainly wasn't a smart idea. Assuming you get away with this whole signature nonsense, there will be evidence back at Avery's house. Someone is going to get arrested, and that someone is pointing a gun at my girlfriend's head. How do you think that'll work out?"

"Not to mention the attacks and Marcus' death," Luke adds. "We've been gathering evidence, Charlene. It will all link back to you, it's only a matter of time."

"I knew you'd bring that up," she says. "I didn't have anything to do with any of it, though."

"You're a liar," I spit.

"Kellan, I had nothing to do with the attacks," Charlene insists. "My only goal was to get close enough to Avery to figure out what leverage I could hold against you so you'd sign your company over to me. If anything, I'm pissed off because the attacks actually forced me to go to this particular extreme, of which I'm not proud of but do consider necessary. It wasn't supposed to go down like this, but as soon as they started coming after you, I knew you'd look at me."

Kellan, Fallon, and Luke exchange curious glances. I can't help but notice the flickers of bitter amusement in their eyes.

Yet Charlene sounds serious. I'm actually inclined to believe her, for some reason.

"How well do you know your employees, Charlene?" Luke asks, giving Toby a brief look.

"I trust Toby with my life," she says. "He proved himself trustworthy a long time ago. He's the reason why any of this was possible to begin with."

"Do you know his real name?" Luke asks her.

It dawns on me that they know something that Charlene doesn't. It's obvious from Luke's tone of voice, from the confidence with which he's steering her into a realm of doubts and unpleasant possibilities. And I can tell from the growing look of concern on Toby's face that he's on to something.

"What are you talking about?" Charlene says. "It's Tobias Jones."

"That is correct," Toby adds.

"It's actually Tobias Masterson," Luke says. "You see, Toby, we ran your fingerprints. They weren't easy to pick up, but we managed to do it."

"The coffeeshop," Toby mutters, though I'm not sure what he's talking about.

"Sharp as a tack, this one," Fallon chuckles.

The more they talk, the more beads of sweat I see blossoming on Toby's forehead and the deeper the wrinkles of doubt and concern on Charlene's face. They're hitting a soft spot, and it is starting to hurt. Kellan slowly raises his hands in a defensive gesture.

"You see, Charlene. You're not as smart as you like to think you are," he says.

"Toby Masterson hails from Wyatt, New Mexico," Luke continues. "Raised in the juvenile system, he joined the Lobos Locos when he was fifteen. Now, normally, they would've made him get the gang-affiliated tattoos to prove he was one of them, but the Lobos thought they had better use for a pasty white boy if he didn't stand out with Lobos ink."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Toby says, but I can see his knuckles turning white as he grips the gun tighter in his hand.

“Eventually, he went down for manslaughter. According to the case files, he could’ve been tried for murder but the evidence for premeditation was considered circumstantial,” Luke says. “After a few years in prison, Tobias Masterson got out early for good behavior.”

“Oh, look, that’s something else you two have in common aside from being remarkably functional sociopaths,” Kellan quips.

“But he couldn’t go back to the Lobos anymore, since the local police had eyes on him, and the feds were closing in on the gang and their cartel affiliations,” Luke continues. “So, what did Tobias Masterson do? Why, he faked an entire academic record and lied his way into a military base. He didn’t last long, though. The Army isn’t for spineless murderers, after all.”

“You shut your fucking mouth!” Toby snarls and turns the gun on Luke.

Luke smiles broadly. “Go ahead, shoot me. Ruin all of Charlene’s good work here. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.”

“Toby, what the fuck is he talking about?” Charlene croaks.

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” Luke says. “Toby here isn’t who he says he is. Tobias Jones doesn’t exist. And we’ve got the fingerprints to prove it.”

Suddenly, the air in the room shifts into something dark and heavy. Shivers trickle down my spine, and it’s not because of the low temperature. It’s because an ugly truth is starting to rise to the surface, a truth that Charlene wasn’t equipped or prepared for. The scary part is that it’s forcing Toby into a corner, and I know all too well how a cornered beast reacts.

I swore to myself that I would never allow anyone to make me feel helpless ever again. For the past five minutes, I have been quietly grinding my cable ties against the chair's wooden legs. Fortunately, they're carved with edges, so I've got something to work with. I can feel the ankle ones gradually loosening as the plastic slowly gives way. It's the wrist ones I'm worried about, since my hands are tied behind my back, but at least Toby can't see how hard I'm working to loosen them up. I only need a few more minutes.

"Tobias Masterson was never actually in the Army," Luke says. "He lied his way into Fort Williams, and then did some time for that, too. By the time he crossed paths with you, Charlene, he was already a new man, let's say. New identity, new home in a different state. He managed to go off the grid. But then he met you, and I think something deeper began to form—"

"Shut the fuck up, I said!" Toby shouts, increasingly agitated.

It's enough to get Charlene out of her chair and even more visibly worried. "Toby?"

"Oh, he loves you, that much I can tell," Kellan says. "That much we could all tell from the fierceness with which he protects you."

"You see, Charlene, once we got his fingerprints and a decent CCTV shot of him, we were able to run him through our facial recognition system," Luke adds. "We found him chatting up a certain Owen Yates at a bar in North Platte, and from there we

were able to trace the two of them across the county. Owen Yates's fingerprints were found at both Kellan and Fallon's attack locations. And then Owen was found murdered. Crime scene techs picked up some hair and fibers off the guy. I reckon we'll match them to Toby's DNA. We've already matched them to hair and fiber particles found on the bomb debris from my car."

Charlene gasps as she starts putting two and two together. "No."

"I've got you, you son of a bitch," Luke growls, his blue eyes never leaving Toby's. "Wave that gun around all you want, but we both know you're fucked."

"Toby, what are they saying?"

"They're saying I did everything I could to avenge you," he tells Charlene. "There's nothing I won't do for the woman I love. You wanted Wolfhound Security. You wanted them rattled. I rattled them."

"You killed people!" Charlene snaps, the shock and horror finally seeping through her features until she becomes as pale as a sheet of paper. "Oh, God, Toby, I didn't want any of this. I just wanted Avery where I could use her against them."

Toby shrugs, then laughs nervously. "Well, you've got her."

"And now two murders can be linked back to me!" she shouts.

"They won't be. Just get them to sign the company over. I'll kill them all, get rid of the bodies, and you'll have Wolfhound Security all to yourself, just like you wanted," Toby says. "There's no other way."

Charlene shakes her head slowly, the horror setting in as she absent-mindedly touches her face. "I can't believe this is happening."

"You mean you can't believe your plan to commit more crimes is going wrong?" Kellan says. "You thought you were getting payback. Instead, you have been digging yourself into a hole even deeper than what put you in prison in the first place."

"You should've stayed out of Lincoln County," Fallon adds.

“Toby, you shouldn’t have done this. You shouldn’t have done any of this,” Charlene says, almost breathless as she tries to approach him, but Toby is spiraling into a panic and decides to point his gun at anyone stepping toward him, including his boss.

“Stay back,” he says. “I need to think.”

“What’s there to think about?” Luke goads him into a deeper frenzy.

Meanwhile, I’ve just snapped one of my cable ties open, and the second one soon follows. My ankles hurt, and I can feel the blood dripping downward, warm and wet, but at least I’m almost free. To my right, mere feet away, is a toolbox I left behind. In it, I know are several screwdrivers—each long and sharp enough to cause damage to a man’s flesh if I can get my hands on them in time.

Things are about to devolve into pure chaos. That much I’ve learned from my past experience and from the way my men have approached the situation so far. I know I need to be quick and determined, decisive with each action I take. My survival might depend on it. I intend to go home to my babies tonight.

“You killed two men,” Charlene mumbles.

“Charlene, I’ve loved you from the moment we first met. You will crush anybody who stands in your way, but you’re limited by a moral code that you simply don’t need,” Toby tries to reason with her. “All I did was get these fuckers off your back long enough for you to work your magic on Avery. We wouldn’t have gotten so close to our goal if I hadn’t done what I did.”

“Toby this isn’t love,” she says. “I think you were very misguided.”

“Really, little Miss Perfect? Doing time for embezzlement is where you draw the line? Murder is a buzzkill for you?” Toby snaps, somewhat offended. “I’ve been at your side through everything over the past few months. I’ve seen you suffer; I’ve seen your heart bleed over what these fuckers did to you. If

anything, I'm just sorry I didn't kill all three of them when I had the chance!"

"Oh, Toby," Charlene shakes her head in dismay. "I do believe you misunderstood. Although my crimes in the past were horrible, I would never bring such atrocities so close to home. I didn't know the people that were killed as a result of my assistance in funding those extremist groups. Killing people I actually know is not something I would entertain."

My second tie pops loose. I give Luke a quick nod. It's the sign he's been waiting for.

Fallon picks up on it and grabs the manila folder from Luke's hand, tossing it at Toby. The gun goes off with a loud *BANG* and Charlene screams, but the bullet goes astray, lodging into the wall. It's enough to have Toby distracted for a split-second, and Fallon takes advantage, charging at him full speed.

Charlene tries to run out of the room, but Luke tackles her. She hits the floor with a hard thud, whimpering while Kellan takes out a pocketknife and cuts my wrists free.

"Are you okay?" he asks me.

Fury is surging through me, red-hot and unstoppable. A sudden clarity makes my vision sharper and my muscles tense. "I will be in a moment," I hiss and rush over to my toolbox.

Fallon and Toby are fighting. The gun is on the floor, but none of us can reach it, and they're moving too fast and chaotically to anticipate what will happen next. I only have a few more seconds to change the outcome of this terrible moment, so I grab one of my screwdrivers and lunge at Toby.

"Avery, no!" I hear Luke shouting, but it's too late.

The screwdriver goes deep into Toby's thigh. He cries out in agony, throwing his head back in a reflexive reaction. It's all Fallon needs to throw a left hook with all his might and strength. Toby falls flat on his face, blood pooling under his leg. Fallon wipes some of his own blood from the corner of his mouth, his left eye gradually reddening and swelling.

As if automated by pure instinct, I tear off a strip of my shirt and tie it just above Toby's stab wound, the screwdriver



wobbling as I tighten the knot. He moans while I make sure he doesn't bleed to death.

Kellan reaches me in a split-second and scoops me into his arms. "You're gonna be okay," he whispers. "You were incredible, Avery."

"Yeah, *now* I'm gonna be okay," I reply with a slight grin.

"This can't be happening!" Charlene moans, face pressed against the hardwood flooring as Luke slaps on the cuffs Kellan had thrown him.

Police sirens howl in the distance, getting louder with each passing moment.

I'm shaking as the adrenalin begins to wear off.

Fallon has Toby thrown over his shoulder as he joins Kellan and Charlene outside, but Luke stays behind with me, his arms wrapped tightly around my torso, his heart thudding against mine as he plants sweet kisses on my forehead.

Once Kellan's deputies arrive, the madness begins to subside, and my heart returns to a more regular beat. Two ambulances have arrived on site. One to take Toby away with a police escort, and one for me. The paramedics check my vitals to make sure that both me and the baby are alright. Aside from a higher than usual blood pressure attributed to the stress of the situation, they decree that I'm fine and don't need to spend the night in the hospital.

I get an ice pack for my bruises, bandages for my wrists and ankles, and a mild sedative that will not affect my baby. I am thankful it's not any worse than that.

"I'm getting tired of this crap," I tell Kellan, Fallon, and Luke once they're done giving their statements.

Leaning against the passenger door of Kellan's car, I find myself comforted once more by their presence. I rest my head on Kellan's chest, finding love and safety in his embrace.

"We didn't think she'd do something so insane," Kellan says. "I'm so sorry you had to go through all this. We should've done a better job protecting you."

“Wasn’t there supposed to be a security detail parked outside my house?” I ask, suddenly startled by the prospect of two more Wolfhound Security agents dying because someone was out to get me.

“Toby kept them distracted,” Luke exhales sharply. “He arranged for a diversion, paying some hood kids from the southern edge of town to mess with Pike and Langley, your detail for this evening. Rest assured, they will be thoroughly reprimanded.”

“I don’t know if they’re to blame,” I say.

“They bear a certain degree of responsibility,” Luke replies. “You were their precious cargo, and instead of keeping an eye on you, they wound up chasing hood rats down the road. Avery, it’s unacceptable.”

Fallon clears his throat. “It had been so quiet at your place for so long, they probably didn’t think anything was going to happen. Besides, from what Pike told me, those little fuckers managed to steal some of the GPS tracking equipment they had in the car.”

“What about Helen?”

“She’s in the hospital,” Kellan says. “She’ll be okay. When Pike and Langley came back, they heard Miley screaming from inside the house. Helen just got out of surgery; I spoke to her attending physician. It was a through and through, no vital organs affected. And the girls are okay, too. They’re with our agents at the house.”

“I still can’t believe all of this happened. It’s like a scene out of a thriller movie.”

“Yeah, I would’ve gone for a smarter villain, though,” Fallon chuckles dryly.

“I’m confused. How did Charlene think she was going to get away with any of this?”

Kellan lets a heavy sigh roll from his chest. “From what she told me, just before I put her in the back of the deputy’s car, Charlene figured my parents would apply the right amount of

pressure—financial, legal—anything they could to keep Fallon and me tethered and unable to retaliate.”

“It’s still delusional,” Fallon insists. “Charlene should’ve known better, or at least enough, about the three of us to understand that she can’t just waltz in and terrorize the people we love in order to get us to submit to her maniacal whims.”

“Keep in mind, Charlene was drunk on the illusion of control,” Kellan adds. “She didn’t account for Toby going off on his own the way he did.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t suspect anything either,” I say.

Kellan thinks about it for a moment. “I think she did, but her ego kept her blind and focused solely on getting close enough to you.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s over. It is over, right? She’s going back to prison?”

“Oh, yeah, and then some,” Kellan replies.

Luke plants another kiss on my temple, then Fallon cups my face with both hands and tenderly kisses my lips as I begin to relax. Granted, that mild sedative is starting to work its way through me, as well.

“And we’re going to get back to our lives, one way or another,” Luke says. “Or, better said, our life together.”

“Right,” I mumble in my sleepy haze.

“Will you be coming back to stay with us? We do miss you, Avery. More than words can express,” Kellan says.

Their gazes settle on me—three pairs of eyes overflowing with love and affection. I feel like such a fool, now, such a reckless fool. This was all so crazy. Calculating on Charlene and Toby’s part. Confusing enough to throw my senses for a loop. Yet I didn’t stop loving these men, not even for a second. And while I do accept the bitter taste of my own hesitation, I’m relieved to see how things turned out. This whole thing could’ve torn us apart but instead, I think it’s only made us stronger.

Stronger together.

“I’m coming back. Our child needs the whole family,” I tell them. “And I need my men with me, now more than ever.”

“You’ve got us,” Fallon says. “You’ve always had us, baby.”

I let them hold me close and tight as the red and blue lights flicker behind us. The crime scene techs will be here a while, turning Charlene’s house upside down. I’m sorry I won’t be involved in remodeling the house anymore, but I’m not sorry as to the reason why. I’m sorry she turned out to be such a horrible person, but I’m not sorry that she will suffer terribly for what she did to us. I know Kellan will make sure she never gets out of prison.

None of that matters anymore, though.

I have a relationship to focus on. A family to put back together and to build up, stronger than before. I have myself to work on, my girls to take care of, and another baby on the way. Tomorrow is never guaranteed, and I almost lost my tomorrow tonight. I will protect what I have with the same ferocity I went after Toby’s leg just an hour ago. I’m done sitting on the sidelines. My alphas need me at my full potential, and so do my children. Their love makes me feel invincible.

Summers in Nebraska are getting hotter with each passing year. And being closer to my due date has July feeling like a genuine oven. There's a state-of-the-art air conditioning system throughout the mansion, but every time I go out, the hot air hits me like Hell's lashing tongue.

I don't normally leave the house in such scorching weather, but it's a special occasion.

Helen and my men have just come out of the courthouse near North Platte's townhall. I was in first thing in the morning, testifying at Charlene and Toby's trial. With Helen and the guys' testimony, it's a sealed deal.

"Toby got life without parole," Kellan says as we all take our seats at a café terrace across the street from the courthouse. "He's lucky the D.A. didn't want to go for the death penalty."

"What about Charlene?" I ask.

"Thirty years minimum, no early parole," he replies.

Helen winces as she shifts in her chair. She is fully recovered from her gunshot wound, but the weeks she spent in a hospital bed have had a negative impact on her muscles and joints. A woman like Helen is used to moving around a lot, particularly in her advanced age, so any time spent in complete repose will affect her mobility and flexibility when she starts moving again. But I'm glad she's okay. Soon enough, she'll be running circles around my girls again. "Let them both rot in prison for all I care," she grumbles. "I can't play in the pool with Annie and Miley because of them."

“Now, now, Helen, you heard what the doctor said. You just need to take it easy, and you’ll be hurling beer kegs by fall,” Fallon replies, half-smiling.

“I’d better. Otherwise, who’s gonna help poor Avery here with miracle number three?” she shoots back, nodding at my ginormous belly.

I feel like a bloated balloon these days. Motherhood is not without its perks, but damn, it does take a toll on the body. I don’t regret a single moment, though. Heck, in fact, I think I’m gonna miss the mindless cravings and having this sweet little baby nestled inside. But soon enough, I’ll have another little human to raise, and this time, I’ve got three strapping dads to help me.

“Hey, are you completely forgetting about us?” Kellan asks, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “We didn’t just donate the genetic material, you know.”

“You’d better stick by her side,” Helen jokingly warns them. “Or I’ll string the three of you up like turkeys for Thanksgiving.”

We can’t help but laugh. The shooting may have hindered Helen’s physical mobility, but her mind and her tongue are as sharp as ever. Annie and Miley are back at the mansion in the care of agents Pike and Langley. After the Toby debacle, they felt so bad that they offered to babysit my girls whenever Helen isn’t available, and given that the first two months of post-op had her laying mostly in bed, the guys had their work cut out for them.

“Listen, we’re a team,” Luke says. “We got in this together, and we’re gonna stick through it. Speaking of, don’t you have a baby shower to organize?” he asks me.

“Who for?” I reply, somewhat confused. “It’s not like I have any friends around here.”

Helen scoffs. “Why, thank you.”

“Sorry, Helen. So, a baby shower for one? Is that what you’re asking?” I say, chuckling softly.

Kellan's gaze softens. "You've got more friends in Lincoln County than you know, Avery. And you deserve a baby shower. You deserve all those great moments you never got in the past, before you came to us. You deserve to be loved and spoiled, to be cared for and protected. We're here to do just that and more, baby."

"I'm overwhelmed," I say, melting in my chair. "And I would positively kill for some lemonade."

Fallon raises his hand, signaling the waiter to come over and take our order. "Say no more, my love."

"Hey, what about Elizabeth and Bill?" Helen asks after the waiter leaves our table. "Their names were repeatedly mentioned during the hearing. Is the D.A. really trying to go after them this time?"

"Key word is trying," Kellan replies. "We'll help however we can, but I'm not sure it'll stick just yet."

"There have been rumors about them possibly being linked to a drug trafficking ring," Fallon says, his brow furrowed as he's still trying to wrap his head around that nugget.

We'd heard about this through the grapevine. A whisper here, a rumor there, but nothing concrete. Just enough to horrify Bill and Elizabeth's sons. "We're looking into that in the meantime. One way or another, we will nail them to the wall, Helen. Rest assured, Maurice's downfall and death will not go unavenged."

"Whatever happens, happens," Helen concedes. "As long as we're happy, safe, and thriving, I'm not sure anything else matters."

"I'd like nothing more than to agree with you on that," Kellan says. "But the truth is, our parents' influence is still casting deep and ugly shadows over the county. I can't allow them to keep getting away with this. And if these more recent allegations are true, then I have no choice but to go after them with the full force of the law."

"I'll be helping through Wolfhound Security, as well," Luke adds. "We've got the tech and the specialists to cast a wider

net. Trafficking has been a rising issue across Nebraska, and we need to nip this in the bud before the government authorities find themselves overwhelmed. I'm talking about the federal agencies, statewide."

"We'll figure it out," Fallon says. "We've gotten through worse."

Though not as bad as having to put their own parents behind bars. I barely remember mine at this point. They're a sad memory, a ball of terror and misery tightly wound in the back of my head—the source of every insecurity that first pushed me into the arms of a monster like Daniel. I still think about Lauren, my kid sister. She was only twelve when I left. The years have gone by, and I haven't heard anything from her or from our deadbeat parents. I put it all behind me. I had no choice at the time, but lately, Lauren has been crossing my thoughts more and more.

"What's wrong?" Kellan asks. He has a way of noticing when my mind wanders.

"Nothing. Just thinking about my own family. Gosh, we really don't get to pick'em, do we?"

"No, but we do get to pick the ones we build our new family with," Fallon says. "And I'm proud of us, just so you know. Proud of you, Avery, in particular. I still can't get over that whole screwdriver-into-the-thigh move you pulled on Toby."

I laugh lightly. "Looking back now, I'm astonished by my own reaction."

"You were pissed off," Luke says. "I would've done the same or worse."

The waiter brings our order over, and I dive right into my ice-cold lemonade while Helen works her way through an ice cream sundae. The doctor did say she should be more mindful of her blood sugar these days, but after everything she's been through, none of us around the café table have the courage to tell her not to eat that small mountain of frozen dairy goodness.

"It's like tasting heaven," she mumbles with a mouthful.



“Hey, we should take the girls out for ice cream later, too,” Kellan suggests. “There’s a new gelato shop open in Hershey. I’d love to give that a try.”

“And I love that you think about Annie and Miley,” I reply.

“And we love you and the girls too much not to think about building more moments like this,” Luke says, then leans in for a sweet kiss.

I love that they love us so much. I love that we’ve managed to survive such terrible moments, only to come out smiling brighter. I love that we have, in fact, become stronger together. We’ve each had our trials and tribulations. Our demons and insecurities to vanquish. But when push came to shove, when danger knocked on our door, when others tried to tear us apart, we still found our way back to each other.

Avery is dangerously close to her due date for what we're about to do, but we know she won't resist. We couldn't wait any longer, either. She deserves for us to make an honest woman out of her, and she deserves to have all the security and balance that we can offer.

Fallon, Luke and I leave Helen with the girls one summer evening while we take Avery out for a drive. We use one of Luke's convertibles, an emerald-green BMW that gives Avery the pleasure of feeling the late July wind blowing through her hair as we drive south of Lincoln County to French Couture, a high-end restaurant that I've managed to rent for the night.

No other guests, just the four of us and the service staff.

I chose this place because it's beautiful and because Avery actually redesigned the whole restaurant a couple of months ago. She loved working here, and she couldn't stop talking about the fancy menu with its rare French wines and fabulous desserts. We figured if there was a perfect spot to propose to her, it would be here where her creative labor exudes from every wall and sheet of fabric.

It's like walking into a 1930s French bistro.

The lights are dim, the Tiffany-style lamps casting an amber hue over the white silk tablecloths and the Bohemian crystal glasses. The chairs are dressed in soft cream velvet, while every single corner of the dining room is overflowing with fresh peonies and roses, their scent filling the air as we take our seat at the round table in the middle.

Candles burn high in their silver-brushed candelabra. Avery is beside herself, her blue eyes wide and glowing with delight.

“You guys rented this whole place for us?” she asks as the waiter pulls her chair out for her.

I love this pregnant look on her. I love her curves, clad in pale blue satin tonight—the dress hugs her full breasts tightly, falling loosely to the floor while a thin layer of dainty white lace covers her creamy shoulders and bare back. I love the pink gloss of her lips and the way in which her blonde curls fall over one shoulder. She looks like a character from a Jane Austen novel, plump and beautiful and carrying our child. If I could love her more, I would probably suffocate without her.

“It’s a special occasion,” I say.

Wine is poured into our glasses, water into Avery’s. Soft French music plays in the background.

“A special occasion?” Avery asks. “How so?”

“Charlene’s appeal was denied. She’ll do the full thirty years,” I say.

Avery looks at each of us for a moment, and I can see the relief filling her gaze as a smile slowly blooms on her beautiful face. “Wow, she’s really out of our lives?”

“Forever,” Luke says. “We wanted to celebrate with you. Given your current condition, we figured you could use some great news.”

“The best news will come when my water breaks,” she giggles, “but this will have to do until then. I’m glad she’s getting what she deserves, though.”

“She deserves way worse for what happened to Marcus, but I’ll settle for what she got,” Luke says.

The conversation gradually flows into the future. Our plans for the life that we intend to build together, and the strategy we put in place to further develop Wolfhound Security.

“I understand you’re getting a new Director of Operations in?” Avery asks during dessert.

The feast so far has been exceptional, just like she advertised since she first glanced at the menu and long before the doors were even open to the public. But what makes me the happiest is the delight with which she has worked through the courses, enjoying every flavor and spice to the fullest. It's been heaven for her senses, which is precisely where I want Avery tonight. In heaven by our side.

"Yeah, he's starting next month," Luke says. "I recruited him out of the DOD. Andrew Stanton. Brilliant guy. I can't wait to work with him."

"We met him when we were still in the Navy," Fallon adds. "He was in the Marine Corps, but we briefly intersected during a couple of field missions off the Persian Gulf Coast. Solid guy. As solid as they come."

"I'm glad you've got that position covered," Avery says. "Marcus is a hard man to replace."

"Speaking of positions in need of covering," I interject, not wanting the vibe to dive into grief over our friend's premature demise, "there's one we haven't discussed yet."

"Oh?" she asks.

The guys and I get up from our seats, and I set the ring box on the table in front of her. We kneel in front of her at the same time, our hearts thumping in frantic unison. We've talked about this for days, and we couldn't think of a better way to make Avery understand how serious we are where she's concerned.

"My gosh," she gasps, realizing what's about to happen.

"We need a wife, Avery," I say, my voice trembling slightly.

"We need you as our wife."

"Marry us, and we'll spend the rest of our lives making you and our children happy," Luke adds.

"We want to spend the rest of our days with you," Fallon says.

"From the moment I met you, I knew you were special," I tell her. "Different. You wear your soul's scars with grace, you move forward, ever forward, like a river. You never linger."

You're always flowing, learning, growing. I've never met anyone like you, and these months we've had together tell me that what we have is truly special. Let's make it special forever. Marry us, Avery, and you'll make us the happiest men in the world."

Avery's eyes fill with crystalline tears as she nods slowly. "Of course I'll marry you."

It's all we need to hear to slip that diamond ring on her finger and whisk her into our arms, showering her with kisses and sweet caresses until we practically melt into one another. She cries with joy, bliss rolling down her pink cheeks in twinkling stars. I'm overwhelmed and ecstatic, filled with so much happiness that my heart feels too big for my ribcage.

"I'll marry you," she says it again.

"Good," I reply.

"But how is it going to work? I can't marry all three of you," Avery replies, and for a moment she seems genuinely worried.

It prompts a chuckle out of Fallon. "We agreed to let Kellan marry you legally," he says. "On paper, you'll be Mrs. Cassidy."

"But in reality and particularly in the privacy of our mansion, you'll be Mrs. Cassidy twice-over and Mrs. Hayden, too," Luke says. "How does that sound?"

"It sounds fantastic," Avery says, beaming like the sun. "It's more than I ever imagined or wished for. I love you all so much."

\* \* \*

"I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!" she cries out again, this time in our playroom as I fill her to the brim.

She's on her knees, on the bed, naked and glowing in the moonlight as the engagement ring glistens on her finger. Luke and Fallon stand at the edge, facing her, as she takes them in her mouth one at a time, her lips stretching, her jaw loosening while she works each of them closer to the edge.

I lose myself inside my woman, inside our woman, feeling my cock pulsate and grow thicker, harder, in the velvety wetness of her perfect pussy. We're careful given how far along she is, but we couldn't resist a moment like this. We couldn't resist claiming our future wife tonight, particularly after she had the courage to say yes.

"I love you," Fallon whispers as she deep-throats him into sheer madness.

"I love you," I groan as I feel myself unraveling, fucking her harder and deeper.

My fingers dig into her generous hips, her curves trembling with each thrust. She tightens and clenches my cock, squeezing me. Her orgasm sends my senses into a frenzy, and I come hard. I let go and spill my seed with each harsh pounding just as she drinks the last of Luke's climax.

I could do this forever and for ten more lifetimes. I could never get tired of us, of sharing her in this fashion, of taking her every which way until her body and her soul dissolve into ours. This is what we've been fighting for. This is what we're ready to kill for, whether she knows it or not. We've proven ourselves, more than once, and we will do it again, over and over, until there isn't a single shred of doubt left in Avery's heart.

"You are loved," I whisper as we come down from the heaven we've built tonight with sweat and arousal, with love and desire. Basking in the afterglow, the four of us lay in bed, panting and smiling as the summer moon shines bright through the window. "You will always be loved, Avery."

Always.

Epilogue: Avery

I used to joke about how it was taking forever for the little guy to come into the world, but now that he's here, I'm sort of itching to do it all over again. It's crazy, I know. Well, not that crazy, considering how virile and generously endowed my men are. The odds of me getting pregnant again are pretty high, but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now,

however, I plan to make the most out of the moments with my perfect little baby.

“Momma, he’s cute!” Miley exclaims from Fallon’s arms.

“Hi baby!” Annie says, pointing her little finger at her newborn baby brother. Luke is holding her, while Helen tries hard not to cry.

Kellan sits beside me, unable to take his eyes off the bundle of joy that was born less than two hours ago. “Holy hell, Avery, he’s perfect,” he says, brimming with love.

“He is, isn’t he?” I reply.

I’m exhausted. My whole body hurts. The labor itself was surprisingly short. The delivery was smooth, thank heaven for the effective epidural. I watch him, swaddled in white cotton, his face pink and his eyes closed, a tuft of black hair darkening his tiny head.

“Pretty sure we’re dealing with another Cassidy,” Helen giggles, the tears now flowing freely down her cheeks. “Congratulations, honey. May he bring you nothing but happy moments.”

“Well done, momma,” Fallon leans in to kiss my forehead.

“You’re a star,” Kellan tells me. “Our house is going to get much, much louder now.”

We laugh, and the baby coos and squirms in my arms.

“Have you picked a name yet?” Helen asks.

“Marty!” Miley says. “He’s gonna be Marty.”

“Someone was watching Back to the Future last night,” Fallon chuckles.

“We’re naming him Marcus,” I declare after a deep breath. “Marcus Hayden Cassidy.”

Luke seems surprised. Granted, I never told him my plans regarding the baby’s final name. Only Fallon and Kellan knew about it, and they wholeheartedly agreed.

“Whoa,” Luke manages, giving me a long, softening gaze.

“We figured we couldn’t use both family names for the baby, legally speaking,” I say. “But we could still use Hayden as a middle name. I want him to have both family names. He’s our baby, no matter whose genes he has.”

“Marcus Hayden Cassidy,” Luke says the name out loud.

“Marcus would be thrilled,” Fallon replies, a sad smile testing his lips.

“You never cease to amaze me, Avery,” Luke says.

I can’t help but smile, gradually dissolving into the mattress. For a hospital bed, this one is remarkably soft and comfortable. I could sleep here for days, uninterrupted. My eyes feel heavy. It’s taken all the energy out of me, delivering this gorgeous bitesize angel.

I know this is only the beginning of greater things to come.

Extended Epilogue: Avery

A year can go by in the blink of an eye when you’re busy. And boy, have I been busy.

Marcus is turning one soon. Annie is growing bigger and louder every day, while Miley is becoming quite the posh and pretty little lady—courtesy of Kellan’s incessant spoiling. Only the best clothes, shoes, and accessories for his little girls, he says. We couldn’t afford this kind of stuff before. I used to scrounge for scraps, struggling to feed my kids while running away from an abusive ex-husband. But the universe was kind enough to reward me for those trials and tribulations. It has also taught me an important lesson: what was will never be again; what will be is not yet promised; the only thing that matters is what is. We use what is in order to build what may be.

And so, with that in mind, I’ve spent the past year forging ahead.

My interior design business has taken off. I’m getting more projects in and around Lincoln County, and my newly developed website has sent me out-of-state, as well. Helen is like a second mother to my children, making sure they’re always taken care of and loved while I do my work, but when



I'm home, I take advantage of every minute that we can be together.

It is a joy watching Marcus grow. Soon enough, he'll be bolting through the mansion and giving Pike and Langley a run for their money. They're nuts about him, though. They'll forgive anything.

Wolfhound Security is also following an upward trajectory these days. Andrew Stanton, the new Director of Ops, is a force to be reckoned with, and his influence and expertise can already be seen across the board according to Luke. One morning, I'm invited to join a meeting over coffee. Luke, Kellan, Fallon, and Andrew are present in the room, while a screen features Bill and Elizabeth Cassidy's portrait photos.

I'm surprised that I was even asked to join the conversation since I don't have anything to do with their security business. Kellan picks up on that, ever the perceptive lawman, and smiles as he pours me some coffee.

"We needed you here so you know what's coming," he explains.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Andrew here has a very old bone to pick with our parents," Fallon replies. "We didn't know that until he joined the company."

Andrew offers a slight nod. "I didn't want you thinking I had some kind of ulterior motive. I do respect what you guys do here. It's why I accepted the job offer in the first place. But I have to admit, I didn't mind it one bit when you said that you were building a case against the Cassidys. You, their sons, of all people."

"Okay, so what's going on here?" I ask, increasingly curious.

Luke goes through a series of slides on the screen. Photos of various streets from Lincoln County. Candid shots of Bill and Elizabeth. Mug shots of known drug traffickers. It is enough to paint a clearer and bigger picture as I remember previous conversations about these people. "You know we've been

looking into those trafficking ring allegations ever since Charlene and Toby were arrested,” Luke says.

“I do, yes.”

“Well, we’ve got a line on a couple of leads,” Fallon adds. “And Andrew here knows the right people at the DOD to help open some previously locked doors for us. Just enough to get us closer to a fruitful investigation.”

“It is becoming clearer that our parents are connected to the Black Pearls, a notorious ring that operates across the Midwest,” Kellan says. “We think we can build an actual case against them. And if we do that, if we do get them this time, we might even succeed in nabbing at least some of the ring’s lieutenants. We’ll be gunning for the leaders, too, of course. We plan to do everything we can to stop these people.”

“My little sister fell in with the Black Pearls about six years ago,” Andrew says, his gaze dropping. His voice is lower, somber even, as he reminisces about a past I don’t know much about. But I can certainly understand his concern and sense of importance on the matter. I left a sister behind, and I left her in the care of narcissistic abusers. “She was spotted at various locations, including some owned and operated by the Cassidy’s, but I’ve yet to find her.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Luke confidently assures him. “The point is, Avery, shit is about to go down. We’re going after Bill and Elizabeth with everything we’ve got. And we need to make sure that you are aware of what’s coming. We want you and the kids to be safe.”

“You think they’ll try to hurt us?” I ask, still reeling from our last episode with Charlene and Toby.

“We’re not sure,” Kellan admits. “Family does mean something to our parents. And they don’t take kindly to threats against the children. I don’t know, truth be told. There’s a lot I’m still learning about the people who raised us.”

“But you’ll be protected,” Fallon reassures me. “We’re not letting anybody get close enough to hurt you ever again. That, I can promise, Avery.”

I nod slowly, giving each of the men at the table a long and pensive look. “I understand. And I trust your judgment completely,” I tell them. “Somebody needs to stop these people. I may not know precisely what Andrew is going through with his sister and the Black Pearls, but I have a sister of my own. I know what it’s like to not be able to protect her when she needed me the most.”

Kellan reaches across the table and gently squeezes my hand.

“We can look into Lauren’s whereabouts, whenever you’re ready,” he offers.

“Maybe it’s time we do that,” I concede.

I’m scared of what they might find. All these years that I’ve been away, there must have been so many times when Lauren needed her big sister, and I wasn’t there for her. I was trapped in a web of my own, struggling to regain my freedom and my autonomy, my dignity. My life.

I now have a good home, a gorgeous and surprisingly big family. A career and people who genuinely, deeply care about me. Children who fill my heart with joy and my soul with hope. I keep going back to Lauren, wondering about her, wishing she’s somewhere better off, at least.

Hoping.

With Kellan, Fallon, and Luke by my side, I know I’ll get the answers I need. Maybe I’ll even get my sister back. The universe has had a way of surprising me over the past couple of years. Maybe there’s room for one last shot. For an opportunity to make my wonderful family even bigger. I know Lauren would fit right in.

The End

If you loved Single Mom’s Sparkle, then you will love book 1 in the series, [Single Mom’s Glow Up](#). If you’ve already read both books check out [Tapped Out Single Mom](#).

# SINGLE MOM'S GLOW UP (PREVIEW)



***“You shouldn’t be here in the middle of a storm.”***

***“I had no choice, Officer. My husband is a dangerous man.”***

**His jaw clenches in anger. “Did he hurt you?”**

In the middle of a winter storm - I’m stranded and desperate.

I have no food or money to feed my two little girls.

If I’ve ever needed a miracle it’s NOW.

A Sheriff’s car pulls up.

This man is a giant *by no exaggeration*.

Sheriff Kellan makes a phone call to his twin brother, Fallon.

The two of them waste no time getting my girls and I out of the harsh cold and into their car to meet their best friend, Luke.

Just like the brothers, Luke is a war veteran and as mesmerizing to look at as a Greek statue.

I’m shocked when Luke says we can stay ‘for as long as desired’ in this breathtaking lodge - where he runs his million dollar business.

I should be grateful but my husband is a dangerous man with connections.

Could this all be a ticking time bomb?

Or do decent men *actually* exist in this harsh world??

**Considering the rush of emotions I feel when these three ex-military alphas melt like puppies for my little girls...**

**And the way they look at me with such admiration and a yearning...**

**I can’t help but wonder: Do happily ever after’s exist outside of cheesy romance novels?**

*This is a sexy, stand-alone reverse harem romance filled with humor, danger, and generous amounts of love. It also contains blistering hot MFMMM, ménage fun times, in single and multiple partner scenes so HOT they’re bound to melt your kindle! HEA guaranteed.*

# PROLOGUE

“Undress for us,” Kellan whispers, then takes a step back.

**W**e lose our layers at the same time, watching one another as our clothes hit the floor. The shoes and boots go first. Then the pants and shirts. My lingerie is the last to fall as I stand naked and ready before them. Their eyes darken with desire as they move closer, lips parted as shadows dance across their faces.

Their dominant presence overwhelms me in a way I can't even describe.

Kellan stands tall and strong, muscular and gorgeously fit. I admire the tattoos and the narrow dip of his hips while my hands gradually work their way up my own body. I feel the need to touch and squeeze my breasts as I shift my focus onto Fallon, this mountain of a man with a gargantuan cock and a hungry look in his eyes. He could crush me in the palm of his hand if he wanted to, yet his touch is so soft and delicate, I practically melt when his fingers find my nipple and pinch it, ever so lightly.

My breath hitches as I gaze up at Luke, my whole body quivering as he smiles and trails kisses down the side of my neck. He's a beautiful soul, a handsome man, a provider through and through. His prosthetic and his scars only serve to amplify him in the best possible way. If anything, I want him even more because of it, not less.

I touch his chest, letting my palm splay across the blonde curls covering his rippling pecs, trailing my nails back and forth.

Fallon takes my other hand and guides it down to his cock. I grab hold and welcome the firmness, the enormous girth. I lick my lips, dying to feel him inside me once again. Kellan cups my pussy gently, getting a feel for what awaits him.

“I love how you’re always ready for us,” he says, his fingers sliding between my wet folds.

My swollen nub instantly reacts to his touch, my core tightening as he teases me.

“Your skin is so soft,” Luke adds, then kisses my shoulder. He bites into it, gently at first, until my nipples perk up under Fallon’s hungry eyes.

“Are you a good girl, Avery?” Kellan asks me.

I nod once. “I’m a very good girl.”

“Then get on your knees,” he commands me.

Without hesitation, I kneel as they close ranks in front of me, cocks twitching with anticipation. I know what they want, and I do it gladly, willingly, hungrily. I take each of them in my mouth, never breaking eye contact as I relax the back of my throat and loosen my jaw to get as much in as possible. Slowly but surely, Kellan fills my mouth and I feel the veins swelling along his shaft.

I taste the precum on his tip, licking it off, eager for more.

“Fucking hell,” Luke curses under his breath as he shoves both hands in my hair to hold my head in place. “Take it, baby, all of it.”

And I do. He fucks my mouth with decisive thrusts, and I take him in, deeper and deeper until I can barely breathe. Tears trickle down my cheeks, but they’re nothing compared to what drips down the insides of my thighs as Fallon takes his turn. He’s the biggest and the thickest. My lips stretch as I feed on him, as I suck and lick him into a frenzy, holding the base of his cock with one hand while I massage his hardened balls with the other.

“You’re a fucking natural,” Kellan whispers when he retakes control.

Deep-throating me, he smiles like the devil as he claims my mouth, deeper and faster and harder. I’m so wet, I’m dripping, hoping that they don’t intend to let me suffer for much longer. Before I can register the shift in our positions, I find myself back on my feet and bent over the bed.

Luke’s hands run up and down my back as he fucks me from behind, with Fallon and Kellan kneeling on the bed in front of me. With their engorged cocks in each of my hands, I moan and whimper as I blow them, ravenous in my exploits and licking every glorious inch. Luke thrusts himself deeper and harder inside me, stretching and filling me to the brim.

“Oh, God, don’t stop!” I cry out when his hand slips around my hip and finds my clit screaming for attention. The orgasm rocks me to the very core of my existence as he pounds into me, harder and harder until I unravel, feeling as if I just broke apart into a billion little pieces.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he growls as he fucks me senseless. I melt against him while Kellan and Fallon keep my mouth busy.

They take turns, giving me everything they’ve got. When Fallon spears me with his full length, I come again, arching my spine as he grabs a handful of my hair and gently pulls my head back. He gives it to me with perfection, each thrust intensifying my orgasm, my pussy overflowing with sweet juices.

Kellan gets on his back and I climb on, riding him, as Fallon massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until a third climax washes over me. My flesh is like melted butter, my skin hypersensitive, my core unraveling as I fill myself with Kellan. It’s delicious and mindless madness as I surrender to them.

“I want you in my mouth,” I tell Luke at one point, dazed and hungry for more.



I'm standing now, bent over as I suck him hard and fast. Fallon takes me from behind again, while Kellan is beside us with one hand between my legs, stroking himself and my tender clit at the same time. Fallon grunts harshly as I feel him come, feel him spilling his seed with deep thrusts. My knees are weak, but I don't want this to end.

"Take me, Kellan," I whimper, then look up at Luke. "I want you, too. Inside me. Fill me up."

Luke smiles and bites his lower lip, one hand caressing my face as Kellan claims me yet again. I'm shivering and crying tears of joy as I suck Luke while Kellan comes with a hefty burst. I revel in the slapping sound of skin on skin, my heart singing as I clench myself tightly around him, squeezing him dry. By the time Luke finishes inside me, I'm somewhere up in the heavens, held firmly by Fallon and Kellan.

I need them to keep me upright while Luke takes what I gladly and gleefully offer.

I need them to consume me, to turn me over, to squeeze my ass and fondle my breasts, to run their fingers through my hair, to kiss me relentlessly as Luke explodes into a fucking frenzy and pounds me into oblivion.

I don't ever want this night to end.

It was only just beginning.

### Two Weeks Earlier

“M omma?” my daughter calls out from the backseat of my car, now deceased Citroën, to be specific. “We’re cold!”

“I know, honey,” I reply, trying to make myself heard over the howling of a raging winter storm. “Keep your sister close and stay under the blanket!”

Miley is only five years old but smart enough to know when to listen to me. Annie is three and doesn’t understand what’s going on. Hell, I’m even baffled as to how we got to this point, but I had no other choice. This is what I get for trying to work things out with a narcissistic psychopath. I never should’ve married Daniel. I never should’ve stuck around for as long as I did. That’s all part of the past, though and that’s where it will stay. Besides, there is nothing I can do to change it. All I can do now is look forward and make a better life for my kids.

We’re a few feet away from Johnson Lake, stuck on the side of the road with too many miles between us and the next town. My car died, and I am nowhere near capable or equipped to fix it myself. To top it all, this snowstorm has me stranded and unable to walk all the way to Lexington with my daughters to an overnight shelter. The snow is too heavy, the wind is biting cold, and I can barely see ten feet ahead of me.

It’s the middle of winter in Nebraska. What did I expect?

“Mommy is trying to find a way to get us somewhere nice and warm,” I tell my daughters, hoping they can hold on for at

least a couple more hours.

We only have what little heat the engine delivered before the car died, so I told Miley to keep the windows up so we can preserve that for as long as possible. I keep looking around, praying for a pair of headlights to appear from either direction but even that could end up being a double-edged sword. What if it's Daniel?

I smacked him over the head pretty good with that lamp. I would've bashed it all the way in, but Miley and Annie were screaming, terrified of their own father. He wasn't supposed to be able to find us and I don't understand how he did. The restraining order didn't faze him in the least. He just wanted to hurt me, to make me suffer for having had the audacity to divorce him.

Shuddering, I check my phone again. The battery is drained, and the screen is black. We're stuck out here on the side of the road in a Nebraska snowstorm, and I don't know whether I can rely on the kindness of strangers. With this low visibility, it could be Daniel who finds us. And then it'll be over. I've no doubt he will kill me. I hit him with the lamp, I grabbed my daughters, and then I drove off as fast as I could, not caring about the thickening snowstorm at that point. I had to survive. I had to put some distance between us and him.

My girls are huddled together, shivering under the blanket. I reckon most of the warmth has faded by now and they are relying on one another's body heat. We've been out here for maybe half an hour, and I haven't seen a single car or truck drive by. Who would be nuts enough to drive in this weather? Well, me, obviously. I would've tolerated Daniel hitting me. I would've tried to talk some sense into him, at least until I could call the cops, but when he laid his hands on Miley, I just snapped.

"I didn't have a choice," I mutter through gritted teeth, my jaw clenched as my whole body involuntarily bucks against the freezing cold.

All I have to keep me relatively warm is this hooded winter parka of mine and the boots I managed to slip into before I ran

out the door. The three of us were in our jammies when the bastard broke in. Everything happened so fast. My arm still hurts from where he grabbed me and my cheek stings from where he slapped me so hard I saw stars. I'll take the cold of winter over being anywhere near Daniel ever again. But my babies... we won't last much longer if we aren't rescued soon.

Eventually, I'll have to get in the back with Miley and Annie so I can give them what's left of my own dwindling body heat. It'll drop dramatically below zero later in the night, and I doubt we'll survive until morning if the weather reports turn out to be accurate. But I will do whatever I can to give my daughters a chance to make it, even if I don't.

Less than four hours ago, we were eating mac and cheese and watching a Tom & Jerry marathon on TV. We'd only just moved to Campbell. I liked that town. It was small, quiet, and far enough away from Daniel to allow me to sit comfortably in the evenings while planning for the weeks ahead of my already frazzled life. Damn Daniel for ruining things again.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as I see a pair of headlights approaching. For a moment, my heart stops beating altogether. Terror grips me until I realize the car is coming from Hershey, not Campbell. Daniel would be coming from Campbell, where I left him bleeding on the floor.

I start honking my horn, my muscles heating up with every frantic motion. I hope the driver can see me through this dense snowfall and hear the horn blaring over the wind. The lights get brighter, and the car starts coming to a slow halt. A heavy sigh leaves my body as I recognize the Sheriff's red and blue lights glowing overhead. I can hear the tires sliding on the snow as the car gets closer. "Thank God," I mumble as I cautiously open my door.

I freeze again when I see this mountain of a man getting out from the driver's seat. Holy hell, he's massive. Tall and broad-shouldered, made even bigger by a thick winter jacket with a brown fur collar. I see the badge on his leather belt. The woolen cap with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department logo just above his forehead. Then the piercing green eyes that seem to be able to look right into my soul.

“Are you alright, ma’am?” the man asks as I open my door a little more to talk to him.

“No, I am anything but alright,” I reply with a trembling voice. “My car died.”

He looks inside the car and spots my girls in the backseat. “Are they your children?”

“Yes. We’ve been stuck here for a while. Not a car in sight,” I say.

“Where were you coming from?”

I have the sudden fear that Daniel has woken up and called the police to say I’ve kidnapped my own children.

“Ma’am where were you coming from?” he asks me again, this time more sternly.

“Does it matter?” I shoot back, my shoulders squared. I have no idea what I’m trying to do here other than protect my children. “Officer, we just need some help, please. Maybe a jump start.”

The man looks at me with the kind of intensity that has my skin tingling all over. He’s handsome and then some. Olive skin, soft lips, just enough stubble to make my fingertips feel ticklish. I can imagine layers of rippling muscles underneath that uniform. *Snap out of it, Avery.* “Where were you coming from?” he insists, speaking more slowly this time, enunciating each word.

“Does it matter?” Two can play this game.

“Momma, we’re cold!” Miley cries out from the backseat.

“Dammit,” I curse under my breath. “Campbell. We were coming from Campbell.”

“Alright,” the man replies. “And where are you headed?”

My shoulders drop. I’m exhausted from constantly being afraid all the time, so wary of danger because of Daniel. This truly could be just an officer of the law doing his job. He’s supposed to ask questions. He’s supposed to get as many details out of me as possible in order to make an informed

decision. I'm seeing Daniel's flying monkeys everywhere these days, and it's hindering my efforts to keep my own daughters safe. My eyes sting as tears threaten to make everything worse.

"As far away from my ex-husband as possible," I say, a knot tightening in the back of my throat.

The man stills and narrows his eyes at me. "Did he hurt you?"

"My daughter, too," I nod slowly. "Listen, if you can't help me out with the car, could you at least give us a ride into the next town? My phone's dead, but I've got some cash, just enough to keep us in a motel or something until the morning."

"There are no motels anywhere nearby. The closest one would be in North Platte," the man says.

"Could you take us there?"

"I need to know your name, first."

I scoff. "Do I have to get arrested in order to put a roof over my daughters' heads tonight?"

"That's not necessary," he says. "I just need a name."

"I could try and punch you. That'll get us an overnight stay in jail, right?" I'm willing to do whatever it takes at this point. Either the snowstorm caused my brain to short-circuit, or I really am that desperate.

"A name."

"What's yours?" I reply instead. "How do I know Daniel didn't send you? He's probably looking for me right now."

"Ma'am, I'm Kellan Cassidy, Sheriff of Lincoln County. No one sent me," he says firmly, sounding somewhat offended. Not that I can blame him. "I knew there might be trouble on the roads tonight on account of this weather, so I decided to do a slow and steady tour of the main roads before I head back home for the night. It seems as though my instincts served me well since I found you. Chances are you won't get another car driving by at least until the morning. Entire sections of this road have already been closed, blocked off by snow."

I look around, and all I see is a sea of white underneath a gray sky. Somewhere beyond, I know there's Lake Johnson. It's close enough, but the constant snowfall makes me feel cut off from anything and everything. I'm alone out here, alone with two babies who depend on me for their safety.

"Can I see your badge, Sheriff?" I ask politely. "I just need to be sure."

The sheriff nods and takes the badge off his belt, then brings it forward with cautious steps. I notice his other hand is resting on his weapon. I inspect it quickly and allow myself a sigh of pure relief. "I would like to help you," he says. "The temperatures are set to drop well below zero before dawn."

"Thank you, Sheriff. Can you take us to the police station at least? Or a motel in North Platte?"

He comes closer as he replaces his badge, his gaze softening as it settles on my face. I must look like crap.

"Is Daniel your husband?" the sheriff asks.

"Ex-husband. I have a restraining order against him. But he came after us anyway."

"Did that happen tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

Miley pipes up from behind me. "Momma! Are we going home?"

"Oh, God, I need to get them out of this cold," I burst into tears. This is it. My breaking point coming at the worst possible time. I can't control my body from shuddering as I drop my head on the steering wheel and start crying my heart out. "I had to get away from him but the car... I knew I'd need to get a mechanic to check it before I took it out on the road again but Daniel... my girls... we need help." And then it hits me. "Oh, no, no. NO!" I cry out as I frantically pat my coat's pockets.

"Ma'am, you need to calm down," the sheriff says, crouching down beside my car door.

“I left my wallet in Campbell. Daniel has my wallet! My ID, my driver’s license... oh, no, no, this can’t be happening. My bank cards. Whatever cash I had left. Oh, God, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

The sheriff opens the door a bit wider and takes me by the shoulders. “What’s your name?”

“Avery, Avery Madison,” I manage between sobs.

“Okay, Avery. Can I call you Avery?”

“Yes.”

“Avery, I need you to listen to me very carefully now,” the sheriff says. “You need help, you need a place to stay, and it is more than an overnight stay at the police station could provide.” I look up, barely able to see him through the rivers of tears constantly flowing from my eyes. “I’d like to help you, if you’ll let me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t have any cash or cards. You said it yourself. You left your wallet behind when you were understandably fleeing for your safety,” he says. “You need a warm place to stay, at least for a few nights until you sort out a new driver’s license, new bank card, and anything else you’ll need. Shelter and food for yourself and for your daughters is first and foremost. Do you agree?”

I nod slowly. “Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Kellan,” he replies, a warm smile sketched across his lips. “I can help you. There’s a place I know where you would be the safest. Will you let me take you and the girls there?”

Blinking the tears away, I try to process every word coming out of his mouth. “Where is that, exactly?”

“It’s just outside North Platte,” Kellan says. “It’s a big house, top notch security. It’s the HQ of a security firm, but one whole wing doubles as a private residence. There’s a room available for you and your girls. And once we get you settled in, we can work on getting your life back, one step at a time.”



All I can do is stare at him in sheer disbelief. My mind draws a repetitive blank as I try to think of something to say but nothing comes. What's the angle? Maybe there isn't one. Maybe the sheriff of Lincoln County is honestly offering me much needed help. I can hear Miley weeping behind me, Annie crying next to her. I can't falter. I can't hesitate.

My babies depend on me.

“Okay,” I finally say. “But I’ll pay you back for everything.”

“You don’t have to worry about that right now,” Kellan replies as he lets go of my shoulders and stands back up.

“You’re too kind.”

“Come on, let’s get your girls in the backseat of my car where it’s warm, the heat is on.”

Shaking like a leaf, I get out of my car and open the back door, bending down to help the girls out. Miley is the first to move, quickly wrapping her arms around my neck. She’s shivering, poor thing, mumbling something about it being so cold that her teeth keep clattering. Kellan joins us with a pair of blankets he fished out from the trunk of his vehicle, wrapping one over Miley.

“Go with the sheriff, honey,” I tell her. “He’ll get us warm in no time. I have to get your sister.”

“Okay, Momma,” she replies, her head already resting on his shoulder as I hand her to him.

For a split-second I watch my daughter as she so eagerly relaxes in his arms, and a peculiar kind of warmth fills my heart. We might actually be okay. Maybe it’s just fickle and treacherous hope toying with my senses, but at least my girls will be warm tonight.

“I’ll call my brother to come and tow your car,” Kellan says as he carries Miley over to his vehicle.

I get Annie from the backseat. She's awake and cranky, but as soon as I wrap her in the second blanket and shower her cold, pink face with kisses, she calms down long enough for me to move her safely and smoothly to the warmth of the sheriff's vehicle. Miley holds her close, constantly whispering words of comfort like the wonderful big sister that she is, and it's all I can do to stop myself from breaking down again. They both deserve better than this.

I walk back toward my car where Kellan is just ending a call. "Thank you so much," I tell him as he puts his phone away.

The wind is blowing harder now, each flake smacking my face like a tiny blade. I pull the hood of my parka over my head, having completely forgotten about how cold I am. My toes hurt. Kellan frowns as he sees me wrap my arms around myself in a tight hug.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "My brother will be here in twenty minutes. He was on his way back to North Platte after an emergency job with his pickup truck. Lucky for us."

"I'm not sure what qualifies as luck anymore," I reply.

The intensity of his gaze makes my body light up from the inside. How am I even able to register these reactions when I've been in fight-or-flight mode for so long? Kellan comes closer, his green eyes searching my face, while I can't help but admire the soft line of his lower lip.

"I have an extra blanket in the trunk," he says. "That is, if you want to stay out here. The passenger seat is heated. Up to you, Avery."

"A blanket would be great," I tell him. "If I get in the warm car now, I'm pretty sure I'll pass out."

He nods, smiles subtly, then goes back to his car. I watch him tread carefully across the snow, each step echoing determination and strength. Kellan returns with a third blanket which he gingerly drapes over my shoulders pulling me closer as he brings the corners together for me to hold.

"Thank you."

He makes sure I'm sufficiently bundled, then takes his phone out again. "Give me your ex-husband's name and description. I can put a BOLO out on him and make sure he's apprehended sooner rather than later."

"Daniel Madison," I say, wondering if a BOLO would be enough to stop that bastard from coming after us again. "Once I get my phone charged, I can send you more details," I add. "Like social security number, pictures, that kind of stuff."

"License plate number, last known address, any official court documents will all be helpful," Kellan says. "We'll sort the rest out tomorrow at the station. But the name and a description should do for the time being."

"Six feet tall. Medium brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium build. Works for a finance firm. Or did. I don't know anymore. I don't keep up."

"I suppose the divorce was messy," he says.

I nod once. "It was, but I didn't have enough evidence to keep him away from the girls. So, the court granted him visitation rights once every two weeks. Until he hit me. That's when I got the restraining order."

"When was the divorce finalized?"

"Five months ago."

"And when did you get the restraining order?"

I need a moment to remember the exact date. "December first. Last week. We moved to Campbell as soon as I got it."

"Does he still have visitation rights for the girls?"

"No. Temporarily suspended, pending a court hearing. I'll need to file some papers for that. Damn, I need a lawyer. I need a lot of things." And I'm about to hyperventilate as the prospect of going through the court system again fills me with anxiety. "I thought I'd put him behind us."

Kellan looks at me with kindness, not pity. "Listen, forget about him for now. At least for tonight. Give yourself some peace. You and your daughters have been through enough."

I look again at my surroundings. We're still in the middle of nowhere during a terrible snowstorm, yet there is a sense of safety wrapping itself around me, and I can feel my whole body gradually relaxing. Granted, this blanket is definitely helping, but so is Kellan's overwhelmingly masculine presence. I wonder if the universe saw me in desperation and decided to give me a break this time.

"How old are the girls?" he asks as we wait for his brother to reach us.

"Miley is five. Annie is three. Although Miley is way more mature for a kid her age. Or mellower. Whatever it is, I'm thankful, because I doubt I would've been able to handle two wound up girls in these circumstances."

"And what do you do? For a living, I mean."

"I'm an interior designer, though I didn't start my career until after I got divorced," I say with a heavy exhale. "I've been taking on clients here and there, mostly remodeling projects. I handle everything from top to bottom—carpentry, plastering, painting. I do it all."

Kellan gives me a long and curious look, a glimmer of fascination in his eyes. "You do the hard labor too?"

"I can't afford to pay additional contractors. But I'm really good at it. I used to help my dad out a lot on his remodeling jobs when I was a kid so I'm familiar with the work."

"What about you?" I ask Kellan. "Did you always plan on becoming the sheriff of Lincoln County?"

"Not really. My parents figured I'd take over the family business, but I decided to join the Navy instead."

"Oh. Quite the twist," I chuckle softly.

He smiles, but there is a tinge of sadness shadowing his expression. "Yeah. It was an intense and eye-opening experience, to say the least. But then I got my honorable discharge and came back here. I joined the Police Academy and saw how poorly the whole county was doing in terms of law and order. I wanted to do something; it was almost like a

calling.” He pauses upon seeing a pickup truck approaching us from the north end of the snowy road. “There he is.”

“Your brother?” I ask, immediately aware of the tension in my voice.

“You’re safe with us, I promise,” Kellan replies gently. I reckon he can tell I’m still on edge.

It’s only when his brother pulls over and gets out of the car that I realize this could very well be the spiciest visual Christmas present I never imagined I’d get. Kellan’s brother is almost identical, albeit significantly larger, taller. An even greater mountain of a man with equally striking green eyes and dark hair. He’s dressed in charcoal gray overalls and a thick black turtleneck.

“This is Fallon,” Kellan says.

Fallon definitely lives at the gym or deadlifts a dozen tractor tires every morning just for kicks. I feel so tiny by comparison. Then again, at five-foot-five I’m practically minuscule compared to these two. I can’t help but lick my lips as I gaze at them, unable to look away.

“Hi, Fallon,” I mumble.

He grunts something that sounds like ‘Hi’ before he glances over at my old Citroën. “That it?”

“Yeah. We’re not sure what’s wrong with it,” Kellan tells him.

Fallon walks over to my car and opens the driver’s door. The keys are still in the ignition, so he tries to get the engine started, checking the dashboard with each turn. “I think it’s the electrical system,” I blurt out when Fallon gets out of the car and decides to look under the hood next. “There’s no power whatsoever. It’s done this before.”

“Possibly,” he replies, giving me a steady, dark look.

I imagine this is what a deer caught in the headlights feels just before the inevitable impact.

“You’ll have plenty of time tomorrow to look at it,” Kellan tells him. “I’m gonna take the girls back to the house for the night.”

“That’s sensible,” Fallon replies, then glances my way again. “I’ll give you a diagnostic tomorrow after I check everything.”

“Thank you so much,” I reply.

Kellan gently nudges me with his shoulder. “Come on, time to go. Your girls need warm food and a decent bed to sleep in.”

All I can do is follow him back to his car as the snowfall thickens and the winds howl even harsher against the white night. Once I’m in the passenger seat, seatbelt fastened, I find myself depleted and sinking into an unexpected dream state. I catch one last glimpse of Fallon pulling his pickup truck closer to my car so he can anchor it to his pulley before my eyes surrender and darkness beckons me.

I’m not sure how long I was out, but I awaken just as we are pulling up outside a ginormous mansion—a magnificent colonial-style construction set within a sprawling beautiful garden. The hedges are all covered in snow, much like the rest of the property, but I can imagine this place on a hot summer’s day, greenery everywhere beneath a clear, blue sky. The building itself is U-shaped, with a dark-red brick façade and French windows, wrought iron terraces on the first and second floors, and white stone columns adorning the porte-cochere.

“Are you doing okay?” Kellan asks as he takes the keys out of the ignition.

“Yeah. I must’ve dozed off.”

“You did and that’s a good thing. It means you felt safe enough.”

I lose myself in his eyes for the better part of a minute until I remember my girls are in the backseat. One quick glance as I catch my breath and smile, seeing both of them fast asleep and wrapped up in their blankets, their plump cheeks pink with warmth. “I think I can put them straight to bed,” I whisper. “We did manage to eat something earlier before...” My voice trails off as the horror of what happened returns to haunt me.

Kellan takes my hand in his and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “That’s alright,” he says. “Their room is ready, and so is yours.”

“Hold on, two rooms? That’s too much, Kellan. We can just use a single room for the night.”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty of space for the three of you. Just relax tonight and tomorrow we will deal with your ID, bank cards, and your car, along with whatever else you need.”

I don’t like this feeling of helplessness. “I... I don’t know.”

“Accept the kindness of strangers,” he says. “It won’t cost you anything, Avery. It’s literally the least I can do.”

“What about your brother?” I ask. “I don’t expect him to fix my car for free.”

“He owes me a favor.”

I scoff and nod toward the mansion. “And what about this other guy who lives here? Does he owe you a favor, too?”

“As a matter of fact, he does,” Kellan shoots back with a confident smirk that has me hot and slick between my legs.

“Oh, great. So, what, you’re just going to cash in on all your favors for me, a total stranger? That’s too much.”

“It’s my decision,” he says. “All you have to do is let others take care of you and your girls for once. What have you got to lose?”

Not much at this point. He’s right, I need help. I need to keep my babies safe and fed while I rebuild my life. And if Kellan is willing to help me, why the hell not? I will need to find out what the conditions are, the details. I’m hoping there isn’t a catch, but even if there is, it can’t possibly be worse than freezing to death on the side of the road or having to deal with Daniel ever again. I shudder at the mere thought. And to think I was ready to give that man my whole life. For better and for... gah. Lies. All lies. I married a monster, and this is the price I have to pay.

Kellan takes Annie while I handle Miley as we make our way across the driveway and up the stairs leading to the front door of the mansion. We’re greeted by a tall man with dazzling blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.



“Avery, this is Luke,” Kellan says.

Luke gives me a polite nod, his gaze softening at the sight of my daughters sleeping soundly in our arms. “Welcome, Avery. Consider this your home for as long as you need it,” he says.

He’s in his mid-thirties, I’m guessing, much like Kellan and Fallon, and he is just as well-built. His jeans hug his muscular thighs, while his sweater is taut across his chest and shoulders. The term eye-candy comes to mind.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I reply humbly. “We’ll be out of your hair in no time, I promise.”

“There’s absolutely no rush,” Luke says, a smile testing his lips. “Come on, let’s get the little ones to bed first, and then we can talk about what you need.”

Kellan gives me a quick wink. “I know where he keeps the good scotch.”

I smile as I follow the two men inside, although I struggle to breathe once I take in the enormity of this place. The foyer is huge, with an elegant marble floor and modern wood planks on the walls. There’s plenty of nineteenth century art hanging everywhere, the gilded frames carrying subtle marks of the passage of time. Every side table features mother-of-pearl inlays, and there are Chinese-style vases everywhere, each loaded with an assortment of surprisingly beautiful and finely crafted faux flowers. As an interior decorator, I can’t help but register all these marvelous details.

We go up the stairs and down a dimly lit corridor in the west wing of the mansion. The girls’ room is decorated in a classic western style, with oak and walnut furniture, plaid patterns in shades of brown and green, and soft linen curtains hung over tall windows. There’s a bed big enough for both girls to comfortably sleep in, and as we settle them in together, I kiss each of my daughters on the forehead, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I have friends who come to visit occasionally,” Luke says as I carefully close the door behind me and join him and Kellan in the hallway. “Some of them have small children, so I’ve made

sure I could provide them with all the comforts of home. As soon as Kellan called, I knew I'd be able to accommodate the three of you."

"Again, I cannot thank you enough for this," I reply.

"And again, please, don't worry about it. We've got service staff coming in on a daily basis to clean and cook, so your girls will be well-looked after," he says.

My heart is growing to the point where it feels as if it might explode. This really is too much, but I am too overwhelmed and exhausted to argue. Besides, I shouldn't. I need to accept the kindness of strangers, just like Kellan said. So I offer a nod of appreciation and a soft smile. "They'll be hungry when they wake up." "We should call Helen," Kellan tells Luke.

"Who's Helen?" I ask as we make our way back down the stairs and into a lounge area on the ground floor.

"My aunt," Kellan says. "She'd be happy to help and she's an excellent babysitter."

"Oh, I can't afford a babysitter. I can look after my girls."

The sheriff takes a seat in one of the massive leather armchairs by the window, pointing at the other one next to him. "Make yourself comfortable."

"I'll cover the babysitting expenses," Luke says, walking over to a beautiful ebony cabinet with hand-painted doors. I notice a subtle limp as he moves, but he doesn't seem to be in any kind of pain. It must be an old injury.

"Why on earth would you do that?" I ask, my breath faltering.

Luke gives me a sideways glance as he takes out three tumblers and a bottle of Laphroaig whiskey, bringing everything over to the coffee table in front of us. "Because you need some time for yourself," he says. "Come on, Avery. I know enough about what you've been through to understand that you could use the respite. It doesn't cost me much, and Kellan's aunt could also use some paid work."

"I'll pay you back," I insist.

“I’m not worried about that,” he says and pours a generous amount of whiskey in each glass. I’m immediately enthralled by the smokey fragrance that accompanies the dark amber liquid as it settles.

I shake my head. “I insist. I pay my own way,” I say stubbornly.

He nods and gives me a soft smile. “Alright, but until then, rest assured that all of your needs will be taken care of.”

I can’t help but question their generosity, though. I look over at Kellan. “Why are you all doing this?” I ask. “I mean, your brother is fixing my car. Your friend here is giving me a place to stay and food, not to mention a stiff and delicious glass of whiskey which, by the way, I’m probably gonna finish that bottle tonight. And you made all these calls on our behalf... why? I understand kindness and generosity, but it still feels like it’s over the top.”

“Avery, let me tell you a little story about us,” Kellan says, his gaze bouncing between Luke and me. His friend takes a seat on the couch, quietly sipping his whiskey as he watches us with curiosity. “Luke, Fallon, and I were Navy SEALs. Far from home, always in combat mode, always fighting and watching each other’s backs in the most hostile places on Earth. The three of us have been through unimaginable moments together and have come close to death more than once. Hell, we damn near lost Luke during our last mission.” He pauses and finishes his whiskey in one gulp, then pours himself another. “We’ve seen what violence does to innocent people. And we’ve seen what happens when those innocent people don’t get the help they need. So we made an oath upon returning to the states.”

“We swore to help those in need, no matter what,” Luke continues. “It costs us little to nothing to do it. It’s pennies, Avery, I promise. Barely a blip in the bank account.”

“Judging by the size of this manor, I believe you,” I mutter, then give Kellan a frown. “You don’t have to go out in this blizzard again, do you?”

“I live here,” Kellan says.

That has me stumbling for a reply. “What?”

“We all live here. Luke, me, Fallon. The west wing is ours. The rest of the place is dedicated to our security business.”

“Hold on, I thought you were the sheriff of Lincoln County.”

“I am. But I’m also a partner in Wolfhound Security, which is Luke’s company.”

“*Our* company,” Luke corrects him with a half-smile before he looks at me again. “When we came back from the service, I had enough money saved to invest in this property. It was being auctioned after the bank repossessed it from a defaulting former owner. Kellan and Fallon pitched in with money of their own, and we decided to invest in a private security business. The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office pays for our services once in a while, but the bulk of our clients are corporate giants from both the states and overseas. I’ll give you a tour of the place tomorrow, though my point is you’re safe here, Avery. You’re safe and taken care of until you’re able to get back on your feet.”

“Our honor demands it,” Kellan says, never taking his eyes off me.

I feel tiny, sinking into this chair, unable to say anything. They’re being genuine, and I have to accept that there are still good people in this world. Decent people who are willing to help me without wanting anything in return. It just so happens that these guys are also hot as a midday in August, and my body is responding in ways I’d forgotten it could to the presence of a man.

A couple of hours go by as we talk about my situation and how I got to this point. I figured that if I’m to be protected, they need to know more about Daniel and our relationship. Both Luke and Kellan listen quietly as I tell them about my troubled adolescence, both making sure my glass is never empty. I’ll give the whiskey credit—it has loosened up plenty inside of me, and not just my tongue.

“After Dad died, my mom remarried soon after. I’m sure they already knew each other, ” I pause to take another sip. “Point

is, after that, things went downhill quickly. My mother stopped listening to me, paying attention to me. It was all about Greg and his big plans, his feelings. That we should be thankful for Greg, that we'd be poor and miserable without him. It didn't matter that he had a drinking habit or that he liked coming into my room without being invited."

"Did Greg ever touch you?" Kellan asks, his voice low and his eyes as dark as the night outside.

It has stopped snowing, but there is no moon in sight. Only a black sky over a sea of sparkling white. It's eerily beautiful and comforting to admire from the warmth of this armchair. "No. He never had a chance. I was about seventeen when he first tried anything," I reply. "But whenever he came into my room, I made sure to ask him loudly what he wanted so my mom could hear. She was crazy jealous, even of her own daughter. Like I would actually try and steal her new husband away. I have no idea what made her change so drastically, but I reckon Dad's death sort of broke her beyond repair."

"And you said you moved out of the house as soon as you turned eighteen?" Luke confirms.

"Yes. I met Daniel through a friend. He was an instant charmer. He was quick to woo me, to make plans, to plant ideas of a future together." I sigh deeply. "I was scared and desperate to get away from Greg. Mom wasn't really there anymore, physically or mentally, and she'd started drinking as well. I had to get out of there, and Daniel made me believe that I would be safer with him."

"What happened after you moved in with Daniel?" Kellan asks.

"Oh, it was good for a while. He love bombed me in all the right ways. Made sure I was hooked. He even helped pay for design school. Once I got my degree, I was eager to get my career going, to pay him back for what I'd thought was kindness, love, and much needed support. But then I got pregnant with Miley, and Daniel insisted that I become a stay-at-home mom, that I could do interior design once Miley got bigger."

“I’m guessing you became pregnant the second time around just as you were preparing to focus on your design career again,” Kellan concludes, slowly shaking his head.

“Bingo.”

“Was he abusive the whole time?” Luke asks.

“No, not right away. Well, not physically anyway. I know now that abuse comes in many forms. Whenever I resisted him, whenever I went against his word, he’d find ways to punish or to sabotage me. I was raising Miley and Annie on my own. We couldn’t get a babysitter because Daniel wouldn’t pay for one. I didn’t have any friends because he wouldn’t let me.”

“Why would you need friends when you had Daniel?” Kellan exhales sharply.

“Precisely. But like you said earlier tonight, none of that matters anymore. I managed to get away from him. And I found myself in the company of good people tonight. So, here’s to you, Kellan. Here’s to you, Luke. And here’s to Fallon, too. I just hope he can do something about that old car of mine.” The three of us clink our glasses together before taking another sip of whiskey.

Luke checks his watch, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Well, I’m off to get some shuteye. Early start in the morning. Avery, please, we mean it when we say stay as long as you’d like. There’s no rush. You’ve got the time and space and resources here to do anything. Just make sure you allow yourself to rest.”

“Thank you, Luke.”

He gives Kellan one last nod, then slowly gets up and walks out. I listen to the sound of his receding footsteps, registering the slight difference in his rhythm. There’s definitely something off with his right leg, though I dare not ask what. Given that they were in the Navy together and based on the few details that Kellan let slip during our earlier conversation, I can only assume that Luke is living with a service-related injury that left him with that subtle limp.

Silence falls over the room for a short while as my gaze wanders around.

An entire wall is covered with bookshelves—all precious or first editions, judging solely by the intricate engravings on the spines and the high-quality leather binding. There are plenty of sculptural bookends sprinkled in between, likely collected from their overseas travels. I see East Asian motifs, African totems, and Polynesian patterns here and there, along with various vintage weapons mounted in glass cases.

“It’s been a long day,” Kellan says, pulling me out of my brief reverie. “You must be exhausted.”

“I am, but that catnap I had on the way here pulled the dial back a bit,” I giggle, noticing that my glass is empty. “You’re right, though. I should get some sleep. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Oh, I wasn’t implying that at all,” Kellan replies. “I’m just surprised you’re still able to walk and talk after what you’ve been through tonight and being out in the freezing cold for so long. The Nebraskan winters aren’t known for being gentle on the human body.”

I get up and find myself wobbling. “I guess I’m not that good at the walking part anymore.”

In the blink of an eye, Kellan bolts from his seat and catches me before I fall. I remain soft and gooey in his arms as he holds me, my body burning hot against his. Our lips are dangerously close. Our eyes shadowed and hooded. The alcohol must be working some kind of voodoo on the both of us, because neither can pull away.

I can feel his heart thudding against mine.

“I think I’m still stiff from the cold earlier,” I whisper.

“I won’t let you fall,” he says softly. His rock-hard body has me anchored safely, each muscle twitching nervously beneath his sheriff’s uniform.

“Thank you,” I reply.

“You’re welcome,” he says, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I should go upstairs. My room is next to my girls' room and I know I should sleep. But I cannot pull myself away from this sizzling man, and I don't think he's ready to let go of me yet, either. Time slows down as we look into each other's eyes, flames burning within. The fire consumes me from the inside to the point where I can no longer take it. Whatever is about to happen, I'm going with it. I deserve to allow myself this moment, to feel good and forget, even if just for a moment.

"I might kiss you," Kellan says.

"I'm hoping you will." *Where did that come from?* Never mind. Can't take it back.

He captures my mouth in a kiss. It's sweet and tender at first, breathing one another in. Eyes close as our tongues slip through, tasting, discovering. But then a ravenous hunger strikes, and we're devouring one another. My God, he is delicious. His tongue swirls and wrestles mine. My pulse starts racing as his hands move up and down my back, fingers digging into my hips. He pulls me closer, and I feel him hard against my core, ready to consume me.

"Oh, wow..." I manage as he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck.

I'm still wearing my velvety pink jammies from our Campbell place, which is actually a good thing, because all Kellan has to do is tug and... there goes his hand, right under my panties. He lets out a hiss of a sigh as he peers deep into my eyes while his fingers slide between my slick folds. "Fucking hell, Avery. You're so wet."

I gasp as his fingers explore me while his other arm wraps tightly around my waist, holding me firmly in place. "Oh... Oh, right there."

It's been so long since I've felt a man's touch. The last man to touch me turned out to be a despicable monster. Every intimate moment I've ever had with Daniel has been soiled by the ugly truth of his nature, and so I am compelled to create a new and sweeter memory with this man standing in front of me. Kellan kisses me once more, deeper this time. It's intoxicating.



My hands rest on his shoulders, my mind ablaze as I try to get them to move. I'd love to get under his shirt, to feel his skin against mine, but I'm grounded where I stand. He's got me paralyzed, my legs parting gradually as his fingers continue working me closer to the edge. I'm panting, my breasts pressing against his rippling muscles as one finger slips inside.

"Ah," I whimper against his lips, my eyes wide open as I look at him.

He's loving every second of this. A devilish smile slits his handsome face as a second finger goes in. I'm gushing like a river as he licks his lips, his breath ragged as I feel his cock twitching against my belly.

"I think you need this," Kellan says. "I want to see you come."

"Oh, Kellan."

He's got the base of his palm pressing my clit while a third finger penetrates me. I hold on to him tight as the pressure builds up inside my core, every nerve ending alight while I try to remain standing. He is right about one thing—I desperately need this release, and he's determined to make that happen. "Deeper," I whisper. "Harder, please..."

"Gladly," he grunts and starts finger-fucking me mercilessly.

I hear the wet sounds of my pussy as he works me into a blinding frenzy. The orgasm rocks me to the core and I cry out in agony and ecstasy, the waves rippling through me until my knees give out. And just like that, all the turmoil I've endured up to this point dissipates in a colorful cloud of blinding sparkles, my heart exploding as he teases my pussy and squeezes every last drop of pleasure out of me before pulling his hand back and licking his glistening fingers. He stares into my eyes as he does so and it's so hot, I nearly come again.

He gives me a moment to recover but he never lets go. He simply holds me close, watching, analyzing every feature of my face as I try to take all of him in. I didn't expect tonight to end this way, but I knew from the moment I met Kellan that I wanted him. Badly. All of him. To my shame, I'm craving his

brother, too. And Luke is a morsel on his own. *Good grief, Avery, the snowstorm must've burned your brain circuits.*

“I think it’s time you get some sleep.” he says gently.

I nod, suddenly exhausted beyond reason. I’m confident that I’ll be having sweet dreams.

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