

UNLIKELY ALLY

THE VIOLET CARTER SERIES (BOOK 3)

B.P.
STEVENS

Unlikely Ally

Violet Carter Series book#3

BY: B.P Stevens

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Description

Amateur detective Mason Carter is determined to uncover the truth behind his sister's murder no matter the cost.

With a nudge in the right direction from a familiar but unknown source, he makes it a step closer to getting the truth. For Mason, the truth leads back to the very beginning—his father's hometown. Following a dangerous trip down memory lane and on the brink of answers, Mason becomes a possession of the Beauford family.

Meanwhile, his father has decided to let go of his grudge toward his son to save him from the trouble he is chasing. Little does he know, he is too late. Mason is kidnapped and subjected to unimaginable torture at the hands of Damien Beauford. After days of physical and mental abuse, Mason is offered a chance at freedom—only it is by an unlikely ally.

The joy of his newfound freedom is short-lived as he finds himself right back into a war zone with the very family he has just escaped. Back against the wall, Mason is forced to be brave and resourceful when it seems impossible.

When he thinks he's seen it all, Mason is left with another question when a woman bearing an uncanny resemblance to his sister shows up. This suspense series will leave you on the edge of your seat!

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Next Time, I'll Mind My Business

Lydia

My motorcycle purred in a way it hadn't heard in years. It made me appreciate it a little more.

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck bristling with anticipation in the wind. If I thought I had been driving recklessly before, I hit a new high. I cranked the throttle, and the engine roared even louder. The scenery flies by too quickly to make out anything. The wind pushes against me and my bike, trying to slow me down. I ignore it and go even faster. I knew the risks if I fell off at this speed, but the thrill of the ride—and the importance of what I am going to do—pushes me to keep going.

I'm not sure how much time I have to spare to stop Mason from marching to his death. It's not something I want to think about, but I know I have to be realistic.

The tall cross on the large white building indicated I had returned to my neighborhood. It's been a few years since I've been inside the building, but I can recognize it anywhere. I gradually began to decelerate. A few seconds later, I realize how good of an idea it is because my bike starts to shake in a way that I had forgotten was possible. I'm aware that the engine is slowly getting too hot. It reminds me why I stopped using this metal contraption in the first place. As if sensing my disdain at the moment, the motorcycle begins to sputter. Even

though I am driving at the speed of a turtle, I'm still thrown off of my Dodge and into the bushes ahead. I hit the ground with a thud, and my bike skids a few feet away.

When I've recovered from the hit, I scramble to my bike. I try starting it up but get nothing but a coughing response—stupid bike. The engine is probably wrecked. I should have gotten rid of this thing years ago. I kick my bike to the side in an angry outburst before having to stand it up so I can roll it back to my house.

I brush a few specks of dirt off my clothes, checking my body for any new bruises to add to my collection. Thankfully, there are none. I grip my Dodge and roll it down the street, my sour mood deepening as I realize I'm going to be even more behind schedule now.

Scarcely into my walk, I begin to sweat buckets. There is no sunlight out to add to my misery, but the weight of my load is more than enough to heat me. Still, I can't bring myself to let it go. Me and my sentiments. The only silver lining is that no one is around to witness my mortifying display.

About twenty-five minutes later, I arrive at my house covered in sweat and dirt. I throw my bike in the garage without a second glance. The car will get its debut from here on out. I unlocked the front door and got to work diligently on my laptop, sifting through the information until I find Mason's new address. Although he has been off my radar since I sent him the last letter, I never imagined he was spending his time moving out of his parent's house.

After going through all of his social media accounts and finding nothing significant, I decide to go old school and trace his location through his IP address. I have the settlement and street he's moved to in less than ten minutes. I give myself a mental high five for my excellent detective skills and write the

address down. I stick it in my pocket before rushing to the bathroom.

Once I'm in, I splash my face in cold water to wake me up. Afterward, I prepare a sandwich and grab a handful of money out of the metal safe under my bed. I may or may not need it, but I prefer to be prepared. I fail to recognize I'm gnawing at my nails again until it's time to unlock the door. It's something I rarely can control, particularly when I become anxious.

I step out the door and start my journey, this time in my car. I drive until the address I have for Mason is a few miles away. Everything leading up to the destination seems normal enough, but after the hour mark, the area becomes increasingly desolate. The once vibrant cityscape is now replaced with buildings that are blocks apart, then miles. It's so still and quiet that it almost feels like I'm in a vacuum of space, except for the occasional sound of a dog barking from some unseen corner. Had it not been my fault Mason was about to make a stupid decision, I wouldn't be doing this.

A few more uneasy minutes later, I'm in his new neighborhood. A sense of unease trickles through my body as I drive down the street and see that many of the windows on the houses are covered with shutters. It's like the people living here do not want to be seen. Five minutes later, I'm at the end of the long street and in front of Mason's new address.

I switch off my car engine before walking up to the door, hoping that whoever's home isn't asleep—which is crazy when I think about the fact that it's so early in the morning. I am about to give a loud knock when the door suddenly swings open, revealing the face of an irritated man.

“What could you possibly want from me?” His voice drags out with a giant yawn. The bags under his eyes tell me he's been up for a while, and I can't help but feel embarrassed that I'm further depriving him of sleep.

“I’m a friend here to see Mason,” I say with a nervous smile. He looks at me as if I’m a lunatic. Obviously, he’s not in the mood to answer my questions, but I don’t plan on leaving until I get some answers. After a few tense moments, he tells me exactly what I have been dreading.

“Mason is out of town.”

I groan in frustration, knowing I have a new journey ahead. Although disappointed, I thank the man for his time and start walking back to my car. All of the suspense I feel from the uncertainty is killing me. Having a sudden light bulb moment, I spin on my feet, yelling out to the man. The door is shut again.

“Excuse me,” I speak even louder, rushing up to the door and pounding on it. There isn’t an immediate answer, which makes me think he is deliberately ignoring me. Suddenly, I hear the lock click, and I take a step back. I know he’ll be angry, but I don’t scare easily.

“What?” The harshness that comes at me is warranted.

“When did he leave?” I ask condescendingly. I know I’m making him angry, but choose not to give it any thought.

“A while ago.” Before I have time to reply, the door slams in my face. I know attempting a repeat won’t get me anywhere, so I remain still. A while ago could mean anything from a day to ten. I couldn’t help but let out a heavy sigh, knowing that I had to find him or his body.

Automatically, my hands move to my lips to bite my nails, but I resist the impulse. It’s bad enough that Mason has gone to such a place of vice, but now I had to do the same. I deserved it for giving in to my curiosity. Next time, I’ll just keep my nose out of other people’s affairs.

Still sitting in Mason's yard, I look up his father's hometown, knowing precisely that it is where he went. A few seconds later, a map of Rose Hill takes up my screen. I'm not too thrilled at the fact it's a reasonably decent-sized town. Finding Mason will be a little difficult, especially if he is keeping a low profile.

I zoom in, pinching the screen. Anxiety washes over me as I discover the drive will take almost three hours. Driving when I'm feeling sleepy is dangerous, and I can already feel the fatigue starting to set in. Drawing in a few deep breaths, I pull away from the yard and make my way to Rose Hills. The faster I can get this done, the better.

Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen

Mason

As my eyelids flutter open, I'm met with complete and utter darkness. It's challenging to keep track of the duration I've been here, but I'm certain it's been at least five days, maybe longer. The air is stale. Since yesterday, I can swear I've heard the sound of whispers echo in this building. It's hard to determine if these people are real or not. Even my judgment is off.

My stomach rumbles loudly, desperate for nourishment, yet it's the least of my worries. With each passing day, my legs and arms grow weaker, making it increasingly difficult to have any optimism about finding a way out of this place. At least I have water to look forward to drinking. Although I'm being fed, Damien is sure to give me a drink every two days. "Keeping me alive long enough to kill me," he calls it. It's not as if I have any other choice, but it doesn't make the prospect any more appetizing. I'm so thirsty that my tongue feels like sandpaper. Each swallow I make feels like I'm tearing chunks out of my throat.

I attempt to get comfortable, knowing that it's not a possibility. The walls of my prison are rigid, and they rub against my injured, sore skin with each movement of my body. Even the small grains of dirt on the ground cause pain. I take my mind off things for a moment by looking out of the tiny window in the warehouse. I can see a sliver of the outside

world, but it's too far to reach. The sky is a murky gray, and the clouds are so heavy that they almost completely blot out the sun. If I squint hard enough, I can make out a few faint, wispy lines of light peeking through the gaps in the clouds. It's not much, but it's something.

The sound of quick footsteps knocks me out of my very temporary distraction. I wince, my swollen eyes closing even more as a reflex, and turn toward the sound. Perhaps it was Damien and his group coming to finish me off. A morbid part of me wished it were the case—at least I'd be out of my misery—but I know it's not. They were there again to torment me, questioning me with numerous queries that I had no response to. It would be predominantly about my father and why he came to town. I guess I understand why they believe I would know about my father's movements, but unfortunately, I am just as ignorant as them.

The footsteps outside grow louder, and I feel my stomach twist in knots. When the door finally creaks open, it's slow and nerve-wracking. I force my eyes to stay open as the midday sun floods the room, temporarily blinding me. When my vision slowly comes back, I can see a silhouette of a figure in the doorway moving toward me. I swallow the sharp lump in my throat and wait for the person to make their presence fully known.

The lights flick on. They don't make much of a difference, but it's the first time I've seen anything other than darkness in days.

The person moves forward, followed by another. The sound of chains rattles as they move closer. When they reach the center of the room, I see that it's Damien leading another prisoner in my direction. Although he is just arriving at this place, he already looks defeated. His clothing is torn and dirty, and he has a string of bruises covering his entire face. A previous beating, no doubt. Damien locks his prisoner up a

few feet away from me. An air of superiority crosses his face as he notices me sitting there, motionless. The same smugness had been there when he and his gang of misfits attacked me. His eyes burn into mine as he moves closer, a malicious smile now on his lips that makes my stomach turn. I want to launch myself at him in a desperate attempt to take out some of my frustration, but I'm too weak. He knows this too.

“Don't worry; it's his turn today.”

He exits the room as quickly as he entered, leaving the stranger in the same condition I am in—chained to the wall and barely breathing. The lights go out, and the door slams shut loudly. I wait a few minutes until I'm sure Damien is really gone before letting my guard down a little.

I am spared another day. But why?

“Hey,” The prisoner speaks up, making me whip my head in his direction. I try to adjust my eyes to the dimness and look over at the new prisoner to get a better idea of what he looks like. The majority of his face and features are obscured by darkness, but I can tell he's staring back at me. I can also tell how tall he is, even sitting down. When he calls me again, I answer.

“Yes?” I answer back in a raspy voice. It feels like my vocal cords are tearing apart when I speak. I'm tempted not to say anything further, but a conversation is better than the silence that has been absorbing me these past however many days in this warehouse.

“How long have you been in here?” His voice is as dry and grating as mine. I think for a moment before I answer, trying to remember how many sunrises I think I've seen. I have been falling in and out of consciousness regularly, so there's no telling how accurate I would be. I figured a better way to keep

count was by how many beatings I have received—or remembered.

I take in a deep breath, my chest burning with each exhale, and finally answer him. “I don’t know, maybe five days. It’s hard to keep track in here.”

I close my eyes, turning away from the man silently. Although it is probably good for my sanity, I feel too weak to continue the conversation. I listen to the sound of the chains clinking against each other on my arms. It’s a constant reminder of how dire my situation is. I continue to stay in the same position, straining to keep my spirits up.

“What are you in for?” I ask, trying to distract myself.

His answer is simple and to the point. “Murder and attempted murder.” He shrugs his shoulders like it’s no big deal. I wonder how many times he has committed these crimes.

“If you don’t mind my prying ... who was it?”

“One of Arthur’s nephews. They nearly beat me to death too.” He spits something I assume is blood. I can’t help but notice how proud he sounds of himself. Doesn’t he know that is a death wish? I had heard plenty of stories at this point, reports of Arthur’s retribution, and for much less. The whole town is terrified of him. Then a thought hits me. I’m not in a position to judge. I’ve made just as many stupid mistakes. And who would pay for them?

I pose my internal question to the man. “Do you have any relatives?”

He shakes his head in response and says he has none. I can tell it makes him sad, but it’s a positive in the long run. They would be the ones to bear the brunt of his errors.

Still, I understand his pain since I've also lost someone close to me. I thought about it. At least I still have my parents. Even if our relationship is a strained one, I know they have my best interest at heart and will always be there when I need them.

"I'm sorry," I reply. He ignores my pity and goes on to question my reason for being here with him. "Snooping around their family."

"Aren't you a brave one," he says sarcastically. I can't help but smile, knowing he's reminding me of my recklessness. It isn't long before the muscles in my face start to spasm a bit from underuse.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asks. I don't have to think about my answer before responding.

"Not really. Some blanks are filled, but the big picture is still unclear."

"The big picture being ..."

"My sister. Someone in their family murdered her, and now I'm trying to find out who."

"What do you plan to do once you've found out?" His tone insinuates something dangerous. I nip his train of thought by quickly retorting, "Take them to the police."

The hearty laugh that follows makes me feel a little foolish. "The Police? Are we talking about the Beauford family anymore?" He chokes and spits again. "You'd be better off seeking revenge yourself. The police are just another tool in their pockets to keep their secrets." His words hit like a ton of bricks.

He was right. The local authorities have never been any help to me. Why would they be any different here? They are most likely mixed in with the Beauford family, just like many people in town. But what else could I do? On my own, I was not strong enough, nor was I prepared to go up against a family as powerful as the Beaufords.

“I’ll have to figure things out as I go along. Finding out which one of these low lives killed her is the first step. I can’t even seem to do that.” I sigh.

“It was Damien.” He says flatly.

“What? How do you know?” My voice wavers a little. I’m now paying full attention.

“Everyone knows he is the family’s hitman. The whole family has enemies, but not all want to get their hands dirty. This is where he comes in. You’ve seen firsthand how merciless he can be.”

“On more than one occasion,” I murmur. “Would you believe it if I told you I saw him show mercy as well?”

“Damien? Mercy? Now I understand why you’re here. You’re naive.”

“I—

“I’ve witnessed him killing with no hesitation. Whatever you saw must have been an act because no one’s ever seen him do anything but kill.”

I think of my incident with Damien and how I was so quick to label him innocent. Sure, he spared my life, but he shot and nearly killed someone else. To boot, he beat someone

senseless right after. He is no saint, but I still couldn't wrap my head around one thing.

“If he's so merciless, why are both of us alive?”

Suddenly, the chains on the other prisoner begin rattling violently. “This is surviving, not living. Look at us! We're beaten to a pulp and waiting to be killed. I'm not sure why you find it so hard to believe it's him. You can have Stockholm syndrome all you want, but I want to get out of this place and be as far as possible from Damien and his mini mafia.”

“Good luck with that,” I retort. “These shackles are not going to fall off. You'd break every bone in your hand trying to escape them, but you're free to try.”

I listen as he wrestles with the shackles like I did when I was first thrown in here. No matter how strong he is, popping out of steel is impossible. After he works himself up, I hear him kissing his teeth.

“I may be naïve, but I know my limit,” I tell him. He sighs out loud but doesn't bother saying another word to me. If he manages to live past a few days, he'll understand why my spirit is broken. “By the way, you never told me your name?” I ask.

“Luke. You?”

“These days? Trouble magnet.”

Jump Scare

Lydia

I pull into the gas station's parking lot, my tires screeching, and throw my car into park. When I unlock my phone again, I begin going over the map, peering at the intricate lines, symbols, and landmarks on the screen. I am so lost trying to memorize it that I'm unaware when a shiny white sports car pulls up to the gas station behind me. The windows are rolled up, and there is a constant hum from the music playing loudly on the inside. The car itself looks vintage, but not in an old way. It looks old-school but costly, like the type of cars people collect. The driver of the car carelessly parks it sideways, blocking me in. I'm tempted to argue with the owner of the vehicle and find myself stepping out of my car in annoyance.

Seconds after I exit, someone steps out of the car and turns his back to me. I can see the long, expensive coat he's wearing, and the expensive sunglasses perched atop his head. Judging from appearance alone, he's probably arrogant, most likely wealthy. I keep walking, my feet slamming hard against the ground. The man turns a little, and the sun reflects off the shiny object in his hand. He holds it up to his ear, growling into it. I stand a few feet away, listening to the heated conversation. The tone of his voice makes me rethink my anger, so I stop in my tracks and take in the words coming from his mouth.

"Why did you take so long to inform me about this?" The man nearly shouts into the phone. He begins talking more rapidly as his frustration grows, and his suit becomes more disheveled with each wild gesture he makes. After a few

moments, he slams his phone against the side of his car and takes a deep breath.

The man whirls around, and I quickly bow my head, embarrassment heating up my face. I slowly lift my eyes to the man's face, and the feeling of a tight fist clenching around my heart is unmistakable. It's Arthur Beauford.

Once the initial shock of the situation wears off, I hurriedly duck my head and jump back into my car, trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible. With my heart pounding, I rummage around in my car as if I'm looking for something. From the corner of my eye, I can feel his piercing gaze upon me, but I don't dare to look up. I'm willing to linger in my vehicle in order to evade any type of conversation. But he abruptly returns to his conversation, not giving me another thought.

He speaks in a much calmer tone now, and I'm able to make out snippets of his words, but they start to fade away, and he disappears on his way to the convenience store inside the gas station. I want so badly to drive off, but I'm still stuck in the parking lot. I wait until, uneasily, he returns a few minutes later, still on his phone. "I'll take care of his nosy son later; he's not a real threat, especially since my nephew has him locked up in the warehouse. Don is who we need to worry about." He takes his keys from his pocket and gets back into his car.

"Find Don Carter. He can't leave here alive." His words linger in the air as he hangs up. After what seemed like an eternity, he pulls out of the parking lot, leaving me to try and figure out what warehouse he was talking about.

I remain in my car, completely immobile and terrified. His tiny admission provides more than enough evidence to deduce what is going on. Both Mason and his dad are in town. Mason is somewhere being held against his will while his father is

being hunted at this very moment. I gaze at the location where his car was only moments ago, speaking out loud, “I’m not sure what Don Carter has done, but he doesn’t know the kind of trouble he’s in.” Can’t their family keep away from danger?

As I try to make sense of the situation, I’m faced with the moral dilemma of who to save first. I get the feeling whatever problems Don has found; he’s had them coming for a while. It was Mason who was innocently sucked into all of this. From what I’ve learned of his reputation, Don can take care of himself. Mason has already been found and captured. The apparent answer slaps me in the face, as if I am crazy for even asking. All it takes is for Arthur to change his mind, and his life will be snatched away. I can’t allow it.

After spending the last few hours going over the map in detail, I eventually conclude that there are only two warehouses in Rose Hills. This makes it much simpler for me to figure out Mason’s location. I scan the map once more before deciding that the closest option would be the best.

I have no idea what to expect when I arrive. Would there be men stationed around it keeping guard? Do they even think Mason is capable of escaping? It’s hard to say. I’ve never met Damien before. I don’t know how his brain works. He could be well thought out or a complete airhead. For my sake, I hope he’s the latter. If he’s anything like his father, I’m in for a long and arduous ride.

After carefully following directions, I arrive near where the warehouse should stand. It’s not a residential area—which makes sense considering what goes on inside. It’s a large building that’s easily visible from the street. I don’t drive directly up to it, but instead, park about two blocks down and walk the rest of the way. I’m not sure if anyone is watching, but I don’t want to take the chance.

As I approach, I look for people and vehicles, both of which are not around. The warehouse looms over all the trees surrounding it. The walls are covered in ivy and moss, and the windows are boarded up. I creep closer to the front of the building, constantly looking over my shoulder. A thicket of trees surrounds the entrance, and the door is barely visible. It looks abandoned, which makes it the perfect place to take a prisoner. I walk around the building, searching for windows or another entrance.

As I make my way around the side of the building, I spot a window low enough for me to look through. I try to get a glimpse of what's inside, but it's too dark, and I can't make out much. It looks like I'll have to go inside. I carefully walk around the building, keeping to the shadows of the trees until I see another door come into view. I am cautious not to make any noise as I make my way over to it. Despite the presence of a chain on the door, it appears to be unlocked. I slowly open it, peeking my head inside. It's completely dark inside, and I can only make out the shapes of objects. I walk further into the darkness, carefully feeling my way through. I get past the main room and make it into an open area before my feet land on something sharp, and it crunches loudly. The murmuring that comes from across the room causes me to pause, my heart pounding in my chest. There are people inside.

"Hello?" A man's voice calls out. My eyes dart around in the darkness, looking for a place to hide. I move swiftly but quietly, navigating my way through large boxes and crates. The entire time I can hear multiple feet rushing behind me. Soon, the last of the evening light from outside allows me to see a few feet ahead and exit the building. I slam the door shut on whoever is chasing me and sprint behind the nearest tree.

As I hold my breath, I wait anxiously for the door to reopen. When it does, my heart starts to beat much faster. I can make out the sound of them moving around in the forest for a while before they eventually decide to turn back. When the person returns to the warehouse, they ask someone else to exit,

and I hear them rush off. After waiting a few seconds, I take a peek out from behind the tree to see who is there. As far as I can tell, it appears to be a couple of teens with spray cans in their hands—most likely, meaning that Mason is not here at this warehouse.

To be completely sure, I go inside and check. I use the flash from my cell phone this time to illuminate the dark room. There's graffiti on the walls with messages such as "don't trust anyone." I roll my eyes but continue scanning the place. It's quiet, eerie, and dank. I probe deeper, checking all the rooms inside and finding nothing but corroded barrels, broken machines, and beer cans strewn across the floor. There is nothing of any value, and certainly not Mason.

With a sigh of resignation, I leave the warehouse, feeling a little defeated. The other warehouse is located on the other side of town, an hour's drive away. Not wanting to waste any more time, I run back to my car and begin the journey. Despite feeling exhausted from the night's events, I pay close attention to detail, making sure I don't miss any turns.

Taking note of my surroundings helps the time pass by less anxiously. Nothing really stands out to me until I catch a glimpse of Mason's car parked outside what seems to be a bar. For a brief minute, I slow down, but I don't even think for a second that Mason is inside since he is sober. I'm just curious to know who's driving his car. Nevertheless, I move on.

There is no time to chase behind a criminal right now. I have to focus on finding Mason, and fast.

With the sun setting and the streets becoming darker, I realize I need to hurry if I want to get to the other warehouse while there is still some light left. I don't want to be caught off guard by any surprises; I'd much rather face whatever I have to out in the open during the daytime. Unfortunately, I know that won't be the case.

As I expected, when I finally reach the second warehouse, it's pitch black outside. I am only able to recognize the warehouse because it's the only building in the vicinity. A dying streetlight nearby is trying its best to illuminate the area, but it's not enough. Occasionally, I use my flashlight, briefly turning it on when I require it and immediately turning it back off to save battery life. I do this until I arrive at the entrance, which is left wide open, leading me to believe that somebody has recently been here. I silently pray that, if it had been one of the Beaufords, they have now gone.

With a feeling of relief that I don't have to fumble around in the dark, I can see the light shining inside. I move in cautiously but still manage to be taken aback by the dramatic shift in the temperature. Inside, this building has to be about fifty degrees hotter than outside. A few feet away from where I stand are two metal posts with chains on them. The floor beneath it is stained with dark red liquid. My hands immediately fly up to my mouth in shock. *Am I too late?*

I stare at the floor again, this time noticing fresh drops of blood in a trail leading outside. I tell myself to be optimistic. Maybe he managed to escape. If that is the case, he couldn't have gotten very far. Maybe there is still a chance for me to find him.

A Turn of Events

Mason

Whssshh

I inhale deeply. The air is thick and heavy, like a heavy blanket of humidity. I can feel the sweat dripping off my forehead, and my vision is blurred. I sum it up to two reasons—the deprivation of light, or my body trying to decide which functions are most important.

Breathing is becoming increasingly difficult, and I can barely keep myself upright without effort. When the sound of Luke's sputtering disappears for a while, I take it that I'm alone. I can't even remember when it happened. Still, it's easy enough to guess what happened to Luke; he is dead, and soon I will be too. I cough, and this time a slimy liquid comes up with it. For the first time since arriving there, I am thankful for the lack of light. I probably would have gagged if I had seen what came out of my body.

I inch away from the pile next to me. The little movement makes me dizzy. I shut my eyes to get some relief from the feeling but soon feel myself nodding off. I'm not sleepy, but the heat and my inability to breathe are making my body shut down involuntarily. I'm halfway into unconsciousness when the sound of crunching outside startles me. A moment later, the door screeches open. It might be Damien, but I have very little energy to express the fear bubbling up in me.

I muster the courage to look up, but struggle to make out the outline of the person who walked into the room, leaving the lights off. From the blurry shape I can see, the figure is too little to be Damien. They seem to look directly at me. As they approach, my vision doubles, and I feel my head tilt back until it slams into the wall. It takes me a second to realize that I'm vomiting again—or trying to. Nothing comes up. The figure is directly in front of me when my dry heaving is over. I can now clearly make out the body of a female. Something is glinting in her hands. Just as she raises it over me, the door creaks again, and she disappears.

Now in the doorway is another silhouette. This time, it's a man. I don't get a chance to see his face because he's too quick. One second he's there; the next, he's charging toward me. Even so, I don't flinch. I wait for the distinct voice before I conclude who it is in my mind.

“Oh, Maassoonn.” The voice taunts, and I begin breathing a little heavier. The footsteps making their way toward me are slow and deliberate. Damien kneels down in front of me and rattles the metal restraints on my hands. It causes pain to sear my chest and arms. I can only grit my teeth and wait until he's finished.

“You were unconscious when your little friend was taken. We killed him, by the way.” He slaps my face twice, and I flinch. The stinging sensation lingers in my eye. I blink a few times to try and clear the blurriness. He walks over to turn the lights on and returns holding a knife. He twists and turns the blade a few times before pointing it at my chest. The anticipation is excruciating, and I can feel the sweat dripping down my forehead. I refuse to break my gaze and give him satisfaction. He steps closer, and I can smell the strong scent of alcohol on his breath. I had never truly comprehended how terrible it is.

He drags the sharp edge of the blade over my chest and pauses at my neck, lightly piercing the skin. I can sense the

trickle of my blood running down my torso as I wait for him to finish what he started. Fortunately, his phone interrupts him before he gets the chance. He points the knife at me before taking his phone out of his pocket. His face contorts in an instant. Whatever the person on the other end of the call is saying must be important because he ups and leaves at that very moment, not even bothering to turn the lights off.

Immediately after the thick doors shut abruptly, the female—who I had thought was only a figment of my imagination—returns. She rushes up to me and takes out the little item I saw her holding. It turns out to be a key. She inserts it into the lock and jiggles it around a couple of times.

“Why isn’t it working?” she says, frustration lacing her voice. Shamefully, it’s only then that I realize what she is doing. She checks the key again before sticking it back into the hole in the shackles. My heart races as I watch her frantically turn the key in the lock. I feel my arms tense as she works, and then suddenly, with a click, the shackles fall away from my wrists. I am free! Before I can take in the moment, she grabs me and drags me out of the warehouse. We run, stumbling over each other in our haste to escape. I can feel her grip on me tighten as we race away from our captors.

The woman leads me to a small blue van. I’ve seen this vehicle before but never knew who it belonged to. When I’m settled into the passenger seat, she hops into the driver’s seat and wastes no time cranking up the engine. She spins the wheel hard, sending us reeling away from the warehouse. I take the opportunity to question my savior as we speed away.

“Why are you helping me?” I ask, my voice cracking mid-sentence. She seems to be lost in her own thoughts, and it takes her a few moments to register my question. When she does, worry lines gather on her forehead, and she keeps her eyes on the road ahead.

“Who are you?” I speak up and suddenly understand why she hasn’t answered me. My voice is just a chapped whisper and not as loud as I had thought. I tap her arm, and she glances at me before slowly returning her attention to the road again. This time when I ask her name, she purposely hesitates. I know all too well the look on her face; she is ashamed of something. I can feel the tension in the air as I wait for her to answer me.

“Sophie,” she says, her voice now imitating mine. “I’m Sophie.”

“No last name?” I ask, watching her sigh heavily in response.

“Beauford.” Her voice is barely audible.

The color drains from my face, and I clutch onto the door handle as my breath comes in short gasps. It feels like I am back in the warehouse. “I don’t understand,” I say, my voice chopping from the strain on my dry throat.

“I’m Arthur’s daughter.”

“No, I don’t understand why you’re helping me.”

“I get it. I’m from a rival family.” She smiles as if what she is saying is nonsense and not the reality of her life. “We all deserve help ... We all make mistakes and need a second chance.”

I could feel myself starting to get worked up. It hurt, but I couldn’t help it. “Mistake? What mistake?” I raise my voice. Her face immediately displays embarrassment. “I was only trying to find out what your crazy family did to my sister. It wasn’t a mistake, and I don’t regret it.”

She is collected in her response. “You’re not wrong, but I mean it is a mistake because now you’re on their radar. You put a big target on your back.”

“So, if you think I’m so stupid for choosing this, why did you help me? Aren’t you putting yourself in a bad light with them?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

Sophie shrugs her shoulders and sighs. “I may as well be a stranger. I’m the odd one out. I don’t belong, and I definitely disagree with their methods.”

I size her up and down. I wouldn’t be falling for the old “a Beauford saved me, so they aren’t all bad” gag again. Damien completely ruined any sliver of trust I could ever have in that family. I keep my gaze out the window, watching the trees, then the sunset. The colors are brilliant, almost too beautiful for this ugly world.

I slowly and steadily progress my hand towards the door handle. I had plotted to escape as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Even at risk of injury, I would rather take my chances alone than with a Beauford. The thought of one of them being so close to me causes me to become uneasy and uncomfortable. “Let me out.”

“What? Don’t be silly, it’s not safe for you to be roaming around—”

She stops speaking when I grab hold of the wheel.

As soon as the car comes to a slow enough speed for me to safely escape, I open the door and jump out, my heart pounding in my chest like a hammer against an anvil. But my muscles aren’t ready for the sudden impact as my feet hit the ground, and I stumble, barely managing to roll away from the middle of the street. I lay there for a few moments, my breath coming in ragged gasps, until I hear the sound of another car

driving toward me. I scramble to my feet and take off wherever my feet will take me. For a moment, I wonder if Sophie has turned around or if she even cares enough to come after me.

Still, I keep running as far away from the road as I can. My lungs burn and my legs ache, but I don't stop. I push myself until I can no longer hear any cars and collapse beneath a large tree. Exhausted, I lay there for a moment, taking a much-needed break.

In a few minutes, the sun will have completely vanished, and I'll be hidden in the darkness of night. I feel a slight sense of relief and comfort, knowing that no one knows my location. I let my body sink deeper into the soil and find myself staring up at the first stars making an appearance in the sky.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, allowing myself to relax for the first time in weeks.

It is fleeting. The reverberating sound of metal being shot out of a gun immediately knocks me out of whatever brief state of peace I may have felt at that moment. I can't help but recognize this sound all too well.

I struggled to my feet, listening intently for the sound of another shot. Was it criminals having a squabble, or was it related to me somehow? Being as unlucky as me, my guess is the latter.

A Modern-Day Duel

Don

My son is my world. I've always done everything I can to protect him and keep him safe, but it seems like no matter what I do, something always manages to slip through the cracks. I've tried to keep him away from danger, but it seems like fate has other plans. Every day, I have to fight the thoughts in my head telling me that he's dead and it's because of me. I kept too many secrets and was never supportive enough. I take a few seconds to reflect on everything—nothing but anger and regret bubbles inside me. I know I've been far too hard on him, but a pity party won't help me get him back. I need to think critically. My feelings are a non-factor. They serve no purpose. Despite knowing that, I can't shake the one feeling that keeps clinging to me.

The hot water cascades down my back, stinging my skin and providing a brief respite from my racing thoughts. I take a few moments to clear my head, but the burning anger and regret quickly return. I know I've been too hard on him, but there's no time for self-pity. I need to focus on the task at hand—finding him before it's too late. Every day is another day he could need my help. One hour could mean the difference between life and death. I need to be proactive.

I slam the faucet in and quickly towel off, my mind racing. I don't know why I'm in such a hurry, but I'm dressed and ready to go in less than three minutes. I survey the room, my few belongings scattered around me. My gaze falls on the duffle bag I've brought along, and I feel a pang of longing—if only I could use its contents. But I won't be making any rash decisions that could end badly.

I'm angry, but I'm trying to stay level-headed. I'm not in my town and need to keep in mind that at any moment, someone could try to kill me, especially when I don't have too many allies around here. Although I'm sure Pete and his companions would help if I were to ask, I don't want to stick them in between Arthur and me. It's a war zone. They have families and friends that need them. Just because I screwed up mine doesn't mean they have to.

I grab the duffle bag and rifle through it, searching for the most lethal yet practical weapon. As soon as I make my choice, a quiet clattering from outside the front door fills the room. Someone's here. I inch closer, my duffle bag in tow. I'm in the dark about who's on the other side of the door since there are no windows in this cheap motel to give me a clue. I stand there, waiting, my heart beginning to speed up in my chest. I can feel the tension in the air. I hear a click that tells me someone has managed to get in. Whether they'll find what they're looking for is another matter entirely. I take a shallow breath and steel myself for whatever might come next. I'm not sure if I'm ready, but I'll face it head-on anyway.

The door creaks open, and I stand behind it, waiting for the intruder to come in. Soon a pair of gloved hands appear, gripping a gun. I slam the door shut, trapping half of the body in my room and half outside. The person lets out an earsplitting scream and the gun clatters out of their hand to the floor. I kick it away before pointing my own weapon at their chest.

“Wait,” the man pleads. “Don't kill me.”

“Are you alone?” I demand, my voice like a whip. He hesitates before answering. I tighten my grip on the trigger, giving him the motivation to speak.

“Yes—but Arthur knows I'm here. If I don't call him in the next minute, he'll just send ten more people here.”

“I’ll spare your life,” I reply, and relief washes over his face. “Call him and tell him I’m not here.”

The man quickly dials a number on his phone, his hands shaking as he speaks. I mouth to him to make it believable, and he tries his best to keep his composure. It’s funny to me that even cold-blooded killers get scared when the heat is on them.

After a few seconds of poorly convincing Arthur, the man hangs up and looks at me with pleading eyes.

“He won’t be sending anyone,” he says. “But I can’t guarantee he won’t come himself.”

I nod and step back, lowering my gun. “Go,” I say, gesturing to the door. He flies to exit, but at the same time, I hear a vehicle outside with a very distinguishable sound. The second the door opens I see a flash of red before the sound of a trigger being pulled echoes and the intruder slumps to the ground. I quickly tear through my duffle bag and find a small homemade explosive.

Bullets whiz through the door while I focus on setting the timer to the shortest amount of time possible. Ten seconds. I wait for the hail of bullets to die down before I start the timer. Once I do, I grab my bag and sling it across my chest. I know it will slow me down, but it’s my only form of defense.

The sound of car doors opening pull me back into the present. I reach for the doorknob and turn it. The bomb ticks in my hands, and I count down the seconds. Four ... Three. I throw the bomb out the door and slam it shut, shielding myself from pieces of debris that will come raining down in a few moments. I hunker down, my bag pulled tight around me, and wait. It takes a second before the men outside realize what’s happening. The sound of screaming and running follows.

When the force of the explosion hits, I can hear the metal from Arthur's car being blown to bits. The second the shockwave dissipates, I get up, my bag still clutched tightly in my hands, and open the door. I'm met with a wall of smoke and the smell of burning rubber. The people who were standing here before are gone, and there is nothing but silence. I make my way toward the car and see what's left of it. Bits of metal and glass scatter the ground. I can see a piece of the car's hood with an emblem in the center. There is blood splattered over it. I don't waste any time before I sprint down the corridor to the side where I parked my car.

I jump in, crank the engine, and slam the gas pedal to the floor. I know Arthur and his goons will be after me soon, but I'm safe for now. Little do I know, I'm driving straight into a hail of bullets. They whizz past my car and shatter the windows. I swerve and duck as more shots are fired at me, narrowly avoiding them.

My heart is racing as I try to make my way out of this mess. I can hear the sound of sirens in the distance, but they seem to be getting closer. I know that if I don't get out of here soon, I'm going to be in a lot of trouble. I try to focus, but a shower of bullets begins to rain down on my windshield and I'm forced to push the car into reverse. It jerks suddenly before tucking back from the force of my foot on the gas pedal.

I hit a bump that I can only assume is one of Arthur's men. Bullets and shells continue bouncing off the car until the tires burst and I'm forced to face the music. With one swift motion, I slide my duffle bag off my shoulder and begin pulling out everything I have. I hop over the driver's seat into the back and take cover behind it. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to hold them off, but I'll try to take out as many of them as possible.

I point my machine gun forward, toward the source of the threat. Light and smoke erupt from the tip as I fire off shots left to right. I can hear the sound of streetlights being shot and

the lights slowly fizzling out. It adds another element to the already dangerous surrounding. I'm squinting hard trying to make sure I don't get any sneak attacks, but the smoke is so thick that I can barely make out what's happening a few feet away, let alone in the distance. What really keeps me sure I'm clear is the fact that I can hear the chaos as Arthur's men scramble for cover.

So much adrenaline is rushing through my veins that I can't make out if I've been shot or grazed when I feel heat against my skin. The only thing my mind allows me to focus on is the night sky that lights up with the orange glow of gunfire every few moments.

Soon, the rain of bullets slows down and then halts. I continue firing off shots in the darkness, hoping that my aim is accurate. The now pitch-black night sky provides a blanket of cover for my pursuers, making it difficult to know where they are or if they are still here. I don't let the sudden calmness persuade me to get out of the car. I stay put and reload my gun. I put my finger firmly on the trigger and glance around. I guess we are playing hide and seek now.

I survey the scene from inside the car. There are bodies scattered across the ground and the air stinks of gunpowder. My eyes constantly dart around, searching for any sign of life. But there is nothing. No sound or movement.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of an engine in the distance. I freeze in place, not daring to move an inch until the sound fades away. After what feels like an eternity, I finally relax and decide to take a closer look at the carnage around me. I may have gotten rid of Arthur's goons, but Arthur's body is yet to be uncovered.

I pull myself out of the back seat and scavenge for my things. Once I have them in my possession again, I open the

car door and take a small step out. It feels as if time has stopped. Everything is still, the only sound being my breath.

WHOOSH

I hear a loud bang and something whizzing past me. The streetlight flickers on, illuminating a silhouette of a man in the distance. His weapon is leveled with my head as he shoots one bullet after another.

When the skin on my face tears open, I know he is too close for comfort. Frantically, I dive behind my car, crouching low with my back pressed against the cold metal. The man yells something at me that I can't make out, but with each second it becomes a little clearer.

“We both know how this ends, Don. You've had a good—” Arthur's voice cuts out as I reach over the car and fire off a few shots. Arthur retaliates, his anger getting the best of him. When I hear him curse out loud, I know his ammunition has run out. This is my only chance to make it out alive. With an adrenaline rush, I spring up, leaving everything I have behind, and race toward the nearest alleyway. My feet pound against the pavement as I sprint for my life. I can hear Arthur's footsteps behind me, but I don't dare look back.

The darkness of the night is illuminated by the occasional streetlight. I can make out the shapes of buildings and cars as I run, but everything else is a blur—including the reason why I'm running and not ending this once and for all.

I can hear Arthur close behind me, the thud of his steps creating a drumbeat that reverberates in my chest. He must've stumbled across another weapon because I can hear the sound of gunfire again. I zig-zag and manage to outmaneuver him, but I get the feeling I'm running out of time. Our cat-and-mouse chase continues through the alley, with me dodging dumpsters and leaping over crates, desperate to put some

distance between us. The streetlamps flicker on and off as I run, casting eerie shadows across the walls.

I wish I had been paying attention to where I was going because I skid to a stop after realizing I've reached a dead end. With my back against the brick wall, I take a deep breath and prepare myself for what I've been avoiding. A confrontation.

The only way out is past him. I take a few steps back and look around for something to use as a weapon. But there is nothing. Nothing but the darkness surrounds me.

Casualties of War

Mason

I force my body to limp faster past the buildings and alleyways, my heart pounding in my chest. I can hear the bullets whizzing past me, and I know that I'm running out of time. I can feel the nagging uncertainty in my gut—it's related to my father. When an explosion goes off nearby, the certainty becomes undeniable. There is no doubt in my mind that my father is at the center of whatever war is going on outside.

I push myself harder, desperate to reach him before it's too late. My side feels like it's on fire, but I ignore the pain and keep running until the sounds of firepower resonate loudly in my ear. I continue on and round a corner. What I see makes my heart stop. The street is lit up by sudden flashes of light. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but the sight of it feels like a movie scene. A stray bullet whizzes past me and hits a rock, splitting it apart. It reminds me of how real this is. I know I have to get to my father, but I can't do it without a plan.

I find a relatively safe place to hide behind a building and stay close to its walls. I use my time there to think out my next move, which is difficult to do since there is so much noise and destruction going on around me. After not being able to come up with anything remotely sensible on the spot, I decide to keep along the outskirts of the building and try to get as close to the scene as possible. As I get closer, I notice shards of glass covering the ground. They stick to my feet, and for the first time in days, I realize I'm not wearing any shoes. I don't even try to remember what happened to them. Things like shoes become nothing more than a passing thought when you are constantly fighting for your life.

I brace myself to stand on the sharp debris and keep moving. When a shrill scream pierces the air, it sends a chill down my spine. I know I am close to the source of the conflict, but I can't see anyone. I listen again, and it seems like the fight is moving away.

I dash forward, my heart pounding in my chest. Ten feet later, I reach the next building and spot my father's car in the fizzling streetlights. It's riddled with bullet holes, and the windows are shattered. There's still no sign of movement or people around, just an eerie silence that hangs in the air. I take a deep breath and run towards the car, my mind racing with scenarios that could have taken place.

Was my father inside the car when this happened? Where is he now? I can feel my heart in my throat as I get closer and closer to the car, not knowing what I'll find when I reach it. I hope it's not his body. Our family doesn't need another death.

When I'm close enough to the car, I duck to the ground in case the person who destroyed it is still around. With no weapon or strength to fight, I am in a bad position. I carefully approach the side of the car and spot a duffle bag on the ground, covered in something thick and wet. With trembling hands, I unzip it and find an array of deadly firearms and ammunition. The sight of them makes my stomach turn. I have no way of knowing who these weapons belonged to—Arthur or my father. I pray for my sake that they were my father's, but I can't be sure. Either way, finding something in the bag could be beneficial.

I fumble through the weapons, my hands shaking. I'm embarrassed that I don't know more about guns, especially considering who my father is. After what feels like an eternity, I find something I recognize and fumble with it in the dark, making sure I know how it works. It's a handgun. My father taught me about them when I was younger. At the time, I couldn't have cared less about guns, but now I'm grateful that I listened.

I take a deep breath, knowing that I might be forced to use this in order to protect myself or my father. I can barely hold it up, thanks to my frail state. Besides that, the thought of having to shoot someone makes me nauseous. Why did I have to be so emotional about everything? Going forward, I'd like to change that.

I shake myself out of my spiraling thoughts to check the barrel of the pistol and see if it's loaded. It is. Holding the butt of the gun, I proceed toward the other side of the street. A few bodies lay in the street, unmoving. My initial thought is to check if anyone is alive, but there are two things holding me back. One, I know I can't leave my dad out there on his own, and two, there's no way to differentiate if they are an innocent bystander or a murderer tied in with the Beauford family. I guiltily push the thought of helping anyone except my father out of my head.

I move along in the shadows, determined to be of any kind of help to my father. A motel becomes visible up ahead, and as I pass the door, I notice that it's filled with bullet holes too. Further up ahead, something is burning—a car, by the looks of it. There isn't a body, but doors and wheels lay disassembled across the ground. It must've gotten like this during the big explosion earlier. At least my father isn't the only one who lost something tonight. Even the ground is charred. When I finally look up again, I notice the sound of open fire has been replaced by an eerie silence.

I involuntarily tense up but keep walking. The only thing fueling me now is adrenaline. I keep my hand gripped tightly around my only defense. As I reach the edge of the street, more rubble and heaps of bodies cover the ground. Whenever the media gets a hold of this incident, it will make headlines.

I try not to look down as I stumble past, my feet sloshing against the thickening blood that paints the streets. The further

up I go, the more I gag. I'm not cut out for the direction my life is heading.

When I finally get past the horror scene and across the street, I begin to compose myself. I can hear the sound of talking just up ahead before a resounding shot is fired. I rush towards it, my feet pounding against the pavement. It leads me down an alley. By the time I make it to the end, I see a figure in the near darkness. I creep up along the side of the wall, trying not to make even the slightest sound. Every nerve in my body is on edge.

"It's about time we ended things, Don," the man says.

All at once, awareness hits me. It's Arthur. I aim at his back and close my eyes. I can hear my heart beating in my ears. I remind myself that this is the only way I will be able to save my father. I don't think about the action; I just do it.

I know it's over when the man falls to the ground, and the street is silent again. I'm stuck in place even when my father runs up to me and takes the weapon from my hand.

I allow my arms to lower. Both fear and relief course through my body. I look away from the body, not wanting to face the reality of what I have done.

My father stands in front of me awkwardly. The streetlight glares in his eyes, making everything he feels surface through them. As usual, he doesn't say anything to me. I expected as much. What I don't expect is when he embraces me in a tight bear hug. I know this isn't his way of expressing his emotions, and it makes it more impactful. Although the strength of his hug feels like pouring alcohol on open wounds, I don't want him to let go. This past week has shown me how quickly your life can be snatched away—how you could leave without making things right with the people who are the most important to you.

Releasing all the pent-up frustration in my body, I allow my arms to wrap around my father. I can feel tears threatening to spill over and I try my best to contain them. Lately, I have been facing lots of harsh realities, some of which make me rethink my judgment. Spending a day in the shoes of my father makes me more understanding of his actions. I would never agree with many of them; I'd be a liar to say I didn't get the reasoning. Once you find yourself in this lifestyle, it's hard to get out. There's always a burden to carry, an enemy to look out for, and people who will never understand, judging from the outside. No wonder he is so detached. When my father finally pulls away, it's too quick for me to look in his face again. He wipes his face and scours the alley.

“We should go. When the rest of the Beaufords realize what has happened here, I want to be far, far away.”

I nod in agreement. We walk away from the alley with my father's arm wrapped around me tightly as if shielding me from the world. We continue walking until we have blended in with the darkness and, in doing so, have disappeared from the scene. We walk in silence back to the motel so he can gather what's left of his belongings. I wait outside in case anyone else shows up. While waiting, I decide to look for my father's duffle bag. I find it exactly where I left it, sitting in blood. I pick it up and begin to haul it back to the motel.

The sound of a cough a few feet away alerts me that someone is still alive among the ruins.

As I cautiously move closer, I can make out the figure of a woman lying face down on the ground. Her clothes are sodden with blood, but I can tell that she is breathing still. I quickly assess the situation and do what I can to make sure she stays alive. To my surprise, she is conscious but clearly disoriented. Her face is turned toward me in a way that makes her neck look broken.

As I approach her, her eyes flit around wildly. She tries to raise her head and speak but only manages to sputter out blood and clench her fist in response. I can almost feel the pain she is going through, and I do my best to reassure her. I tell her that help is on the way, and I promise her that I will stay with her until she gets the medical attention she needs. It's a promise I can't guarantee, but if it brings her peace, then it's the least I can do for her.

I speak constantly, hoping to keep her awake, but after a while, my words don't seem to register. I call out for my father and flip her on her back.

She stares into my eyes with a look of desperation, and I feel a deep sense of sorrow for her. Her hair sticks to her facial features in a matted and sweaty mess. Even in her state, I can see the color draining from her face and tell that she is going into shock. Soon, her eyes roll back as she stares up at me, hyperventilating. I call for my father again, lift her slightly, and brush her hair away from her face. When I take in her features, I can feel my eyes widening like hers. I have to fall back to the ground to collect myself.

Even in the dim light of the moon, I can see that she is a replica of my sister.

A Narrow Escape

Mason

“Dad!” I nearly fall over, unable to believe what I’m seeing.

“Mason?” The confusion in his voice is also laced with fear. When my father finally locates me, he hurries to my side and kneels beside me. His eyes meet mine and he sees the pain that I’m feeling. He doesn’t understand my sudden change of attitude until he takes one look at the woman lying on the ground. His face pales as if he’s seen a ghost.

Taking a deep breath, he turns to me, placing his hand gently on my shoulder. His face scrunches with all the questions he has, but he manages to push them down and shake off the shock more quickly than me. He starts to take over the situation, feeling her pulse and inspecting her wounds. I sit there, struggling with the emotions that are overwhelming me.

“Mason.” My father nudges my shoulder. He is asking me to hold her steady while he searches for the origin point of her injuries. I comply, my eyes still never leaving the woman’s face. I can feel the warmth of her skin cooling against my hands. She doesn’t have much time left in this condition. I can feel the urgency in my father’s movements as he probes her. I’m just surprised he takes the time to look into her injuries. With everything going on, I wouldn’t blame him for wanting to leave the area as soon as possible. Internally, I know his sudden compassion has a lot to do with the fact that this woman could be Violet’s twin. Maybe he thinks letting her die would be like letting Violet die twice. At least, that’s how I am feeling.

With one final inspection, my father finds a single gunshot wound in her abdomen. It looks lodged between her ribs. I

watch as he removes his shirt and wraps it around her torso as a makeshift bandage. She groans in pain before her eyes flutter rapidly, and she shakes with a wave of shuddering breaths.

“Dad,” I whisper, barely audible above the sound of her labored breathing. Although this woman is a complete stranger, I can’t help but feel connected to her.

With a determined look in his eyes, he takes a few steps back to evaluate her. There’s a familiar glint in his eyes. It’s the determination that I know will get us through this.

“She needs to get to a doctor. The wound isn’t too bad, but she’s bleeding out.” His voice is now a scary calm. It makes me wonder how many similar situations he’s been in.

With a sudden but gentle motion, he takes her away from me, placing her tenderly in his arms, and begins walking along the street. I’m thankful because the pain in my body is finally starting to set in. Despite this, I manage to push all my emotions aside long enough to emulate my father’s resolve and go through the motions. I grab the duffle bag next to me and follow him to the nearest vehicle.

“Break the windows,” he orders me. At this point, I’ve stopped questioning anything he tells me to do and just listen. I grab the nearest rock and shatter the windows. The car’s alarm sounds off, but it’s the least of our concerns. I take the duffle bag and chuck it through the window before unlocking the doors. My father places the unconscious woman in the backseat, and I quickly hop in the driver’s seat.

My fingers quickly go to work on the wires below the steering wheel, crossing and hooking them together. I can feel the tension radiating off of my father as he stands over the woman. Although he is mainly making sure she doesn’t die, I can tell he is also watching his own back.

I tug one final time on the right wire and the engine roars to life. This is all my father needs before he makes his way to the driver's seat and I slide out of it. I make my way into the backseat to watch over the stranger. My father speeds out of the parking lot and down the street. I can see people walking along the sidewalks, going about their lives, oblivious to the danger that we are in. It makes me a little jealous. That jealousy soon melts away into nervousness as blue and red lights light up the night behind us, confirming that either Arthur or the bloodbath we left behind has already been found. Things would get ugly from here on out.

My father's face is expressionless as he drives, which means he is deep in thought, no doubt considering all of the possible outcomes of our situation. I can only imagine what he must be thinking; if Arthur is really dead, then it means that we have started something that will not end in Rose Hills. Something that would haunt us until we moved countries or died.

For a while, the only sound we can hear is the engine's roar and the occasional thud of a stray rock against the side of the car. I keep my eyes focused on the woman's face as I cradle her head. She is now unconscious. Every few minutes, I check her pulse and heart to make sure she hasn't succumbed to her injuries. I briefly look out the window and watch as we pass the highway exits and the familiar street signs. I don't bother asking why we aren't heading to the hospital in town. We are on the radar of criminals and police. After the big altercation, the hospital would be the first place they'd expect us to go. We'd be like sitting ducks.

I'm not sure how long we drive, but eventually, my father turns down a long dirt road and stops in front of an old barn in the middle of nowhere. He tells me to stay in the car with the woman while he asks a friend for a favor. He exits and disappears behind the building. I find myself taking in the barn to distract myself from the reality of my life. The building is brightly lit on the outside and has a modern look to it. There

are no cars in sight, but it's clear someone is here because I can hear the sound of heavy equipment further into the tall fields that surround the area. I can't imagine what kind of person would want to live this secluded from people.

A few minutes later, my father emerges from the side of the building with a man. He appears to be older, with a weary face. His eyes are sunken in, and his hair is pepper and spice. He looks as if he has seen much in his lifetime. Despite his face being lined with age, his posture is steady and strong. He and my father walk closer, pointing at the car and talking for a few minutes before they rush briskly back to the barn and open the doors.

Afterward, they return to get the woman I'm holding. Together, they move her gently into the large wooden building before my father motions for me to follow them. I get out of the car and follow them into the barn, where I find a makeshift bed, blankets, clean bandages, and other medical supplies. I get the feeling that people come here often for situations like this. It's probably a safe haven away from the prying eyes of law enforcement for criminals. My father's friend quickly begins tending to the woman's wounds while we watch silently. Over the next hour, he removes the bullet, stitches her up, and cleans the wound impressively. Noticing my fascination, my father explains that the man is a retired doctor and that this isn't the first time they've done something like this. This causes me to raise an eyebrow because I would've never pictured my father as the nurturing type. After tonight, I suppose that will change.

Once satisfied with his work, the elderly man suggests we let the woman rest for a while, undisturbed. We all head outside and onto a picnic table nestled under a tree. My father and his friend catch up on lost time while I third-wheel their conversation. I don't mind since my mind is preoccupied with a million things like who this woman could possibly be, the fact that we're on the run, and the most persistent question—is Damien really the one that murdered Violet?

About an hour into the conversation, the rain starts to pour down with ferocity, forcing us back inside. We settle again, sprawled out in the middle of the room. My father so graciously offers to tell the story of his friend. The man simply shakes his head as if he's been forced to listen to this story on numerous occasions. My father goes on jokingly anyway.

“He started practicing medicine in the war-torn country of Syria.” His voice is naturally gravelly. “He was one of the lucky ones who was able to make it out alive. He had to stitch up his own foot with a fishing line and a bone.” He goes on, erupting with laughter. Pretty soon, we all join in chuckling at my father's antics.

We are so loud that it causes the woman to stir across the room with a deep groan. It's a sign she will regain consciousness soon.

“I don't expect her to come to for a few days.” The old man says as he rushes around the room gathering ointments and other medications. “These will help with the pain.” He explains as he begins injecting something into her wound. I look away. The sight of it must've been too much for me to handle because my head starts to spin before I collapse.

When I wake up again, I'm alone in the room with the strange woman from earlier. She is still asleep, but her face looks more relaxed, and her breathing is even. Her clothes are also different than I remember. Instead of the torn, blood-ridden clothes she had been wearing before, she now has on a gray t-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans.

When I sit up, a sense of confusion washes over me as I realize I am wrapped in bandages, and my body feels restrained. As if suddenly getting a delayed message that I am in pain, a splitting headache comes on. It brings the details of the last few days and my own injuries to mind. My father must have seen that I was taken care of while I was asleep.

I sit up with a pained expression, my stomach growling. I must have been out for a while. I'm surprised I'm still alive after everything we've been through. These past weeks have taught me that I'm a lot more resilient than I gave myself credit for. I've managed to survive a kidnapping, starvation, regular beatings, gun fights, and even saved my father's life. I deserved whatever time I spent sleeping. I only wish it felt like I was getting better.

I hobble outside into the warm sun. Immediately, I see my father sitting in a chair under a tree. He's on the phone talking, but he catches me somehow from the corner of his eye. Still as observant as ever. He ends his call and walks over to greet me.

"You're awake."

"You bandaged me up?" I answer him with a question.

"Sure did." He folds his arms with a smile. I hadn't noticed before, but his cheek is now scarred. Its edges blackened. I stare at it until he brushes his finger against it. "Grazed by a bullet. Lucky me."

"You should play the lottery." I retort. My stomach gurgles again loudly, and he laughs out loud before heading toward the barn. I follow him, but to my surprise, we enter a large house behind the barn. "Has this been here the entire time?" I ask. He nods yes and leads the way into a spacious kitchen. Almost instantly, the smell of food hits my nostrils.

I sit down, and without asking, my father serves me a plate of toast, eggs, and bacon. It doesn't sit for three seconds before I scarf it down. Noticing my intense hunger, my father begins to whip up more food that I happily finish. My food settles a bit before I finally speak again.

“Does Mom know where you are?” I ask him. It’d be kinda wrong to keep her in the dark.

“Vaguely.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“I told her I was in my old hometown, but not because I was looking for my suicidal son.” He narrows his eyes at me.

“Sorry. I didn’t think you cared enough to come looking for me.” The look on his face tells me my words hit a nerve.

“Of course I do. You’re my son.”

“How did you know I was here anyways?” I ask, washing my food down with orange juice.

“I found your note. Thank God you’re so careless.”

“Touché.” I smile before clearing my throat. My father looks at me expectantly.

“So, about *her*.” I push my plate away. “Do you know who she is?” More specifically why she looks exactly like Violet, I think to myself.

“Not a clue.” He rubs his head. “She doesn’t have a piece of ID anywhere, not even a phone. In this day and age.”

” It’s like she’s a ghost.” I sigh out loud.

“Exactly. She’s been out cold, so I haven’t been able to talk to her yet.” He pauses for a second. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what happens when she wakes up. I’ll be right

back.” He stands up and tries to exit the house without addressing the elephant in the room.

“Dad, I’m pretty sure you’ve noticed that this woman ...” I think about how to phrase my statement. Either way, I know he’ll hate it. “She looks exactly like Violet.” I don’t ask him why, because I know he’s smart enough to gather that’s the direction my question is heading in.

He’s standing in the doorway, shoulders tensed. My mother and I usually avoided alluding to Violet because it filled him with dread. His posture relaxes seconds later, but his gaze is far off. Once again, I’m left to wonder what is going on in his head. Without a word, he walks off out of the house.

I allow him to cop out and put the subject on ice for now. We have had more than enough to deal with over the past few weeks. I decide to head back to the barn where I could keep an eye out for the strange woman. I want to be there when she wakes up.

You're Questioning Me?

Mason

I make my way outside and back into the barn with painful strides. The ache in my stomach and back only seems to intensify now that my stomach is bloated with food. It makes me walk sluggishly. I make it back to the barn a few minutes later and inspect it. Everything is exactly like I left it, except for the woman who is asleep on her side with her face toward the door. For someone with a bullet wound, I'd expect less tossing and turning from someone with a bullet wound. I walk up to her and collapse onto the stack of hay next to her. It's itchy and uncomfortable, but not the reason I can't sleep.

I sit up and face the woman, my eyes searching for answers on her face. I hover over her, studying her features closely as if she were an experiment. I'm taken off guard when her eyes suddenly fly open. I jump back, feeling startled. Her gaze is intense as she looks up at me. Her eyes dart around the room a million miles per hour, but she doesn't utter a word. They finally settle on me, and I watch her face flash with different emotions.

“Who are you?” I ask.

She struggles to sit up, but the agonizing pain in her abdomen quickly stops her. She grabs her shirt and lifts it to verify the damage. Her stomach is covered in bloody bandages from the bullet wound. She spends a few seconds inspecting her injury before lifting her head to look me in the eyes. I don't hesitate to rattle off the questions that have been plaguing my mind since I came into contact with her.

“Who are you? What is your name?” I repeat the question, trying to press her for an answer. Her face quickly contorts into a scowl of annoyance.

“Are you questioning me? Can you tell me where I’m at?” Her voice was like a toxin. I step back once more, amazed by her abrupt outburst. Despite her current state, she still manages to look menacing. It’s too bad I’m all out of fear at the moment. It seems confusion is the only emotion I can muster up.

“Honestly, I don’t even know. Friend of the family. Now your turn.” I answer her as truthfully as I can. I don’t really know anything about who we are staying with besides that he’s a doctor and that he’s my father’s friend. If my father trusts him, then so do I. She pinches her nose bridge, clearly not impressed with my answer.

“I’m Lydia,” she says. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been trying to catch up with you, Mason?”

“Wait. How do you know my name?”

“Well, who do you think has been sending you all of those helpful letters?” She leans on her side to face me with a wince. “And this is how you repay me. Do you know your mother bit me like a rabid raccoon?” She asks. “Anyway, that’s not even the major thing. I was nearly shot dead by involving myself in all of this. Next time a case like Violet’s comes up, I’ll ignore it.” She makes a swiping motion with her hand.

I try to register the words coming out of her mouth. She was B. I turned my gaze at her. Her eyes are puffy, but her resemblance to my late sister is still striking. It threw me off a little. I could feel a rush of emotions threatening to crash over me, but I fought it off with questions for Lydia.

“How do you know Violet?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why do you care? I mean, you went through all of that trouble to help me.”

“It’s complicated. I never meant to become this involved. Her case was just so interesting to me.” She stares off at nothing. After a few seconds, she’s realized she blanked out and finishes her thought. “Now I finally understand the saying *curiosity killed the cat.*”

“What were you doing in town?”

“You’re just full of questions, aren’t you?” She scowls before sighing. “I guess I owe you an explanation. I’m a CIA agent sent to find you and bring you back to them.”

“Really?” I say with mild sarcasm. Shamefully, a sliver of fear runs through my body at the thought of it being true.

“No. I was looking for you. To stop you from getting killed by the Beaufords. Big mistake.” Her facial expression goes animated.

Although I still didn’t understand why she would go to these lengths for curiosity, I let it go. I have only one more pressing question for her, but I can’t bring myself to say it out loud. Why did she look exactly like my sister?

“Okay, since you seem to know everything about me, why don’t you tell me something about yourself?”

“There’s not much to know.”

“There’s something to know about everyone. I’m ready to assume the worst. You being so secretive doesn’t help.”

“Assume the worst about me, coming from a family of murderers and liars. That’s rich.” I cringe internally at her

words. They were true. The most hurtful part is that I'm joining the legacy.

“Fair point. But you could be the exact same, or worse.”

She bites her lip. It looks like she's trying to hold back another comment. I give her a few moments before I finally speak up. “Look, I understand you don't want to associate with my family's reputation. That's understandable. We all have our struggles, but I saved your life. That should count for something.”

“It does.” She rubs her arm. “But there really isn't much I can say about me.”

“How about your family? We wanted to contact someone, but you don't even have as much as an ID or cellphone. What's up with that?” I ask.

I notice her expression stiffens. She lets out a small sigh, a sign that she doesn't want to talk about it, but she answers anyway. “I have a cell phone. I also have *a family*.” The words slip out with a hint of disdain. “I left them behind once I turned eighteen. Don't like talking about them,” she adds as an afterthought. I can tell she's uncomfortable, so I don't push the issue. I know from experience how hard it is to talk about a difficult family situation.

We sit in silence for a few minutes.

“So, what else do you know about me?”

“You're rehabilitated. Proud of that.” She smiles. I smile too. For some reason, it felt like Violet was telling me this and not a total stranger.

“Have you ever noticed you look a lot like her?” I think aloud.

“Her?” She asks before the realization dawns on her. “You mean Violet?”

“Yea, you kinda have the same face, at least to me.”

“I guess.” Her face is blank and she starts staring off again.

That’s when the outlandish thought I’ve been trying to dodge makes its way center-front in my mind. *Is it possible that my father has other children?*

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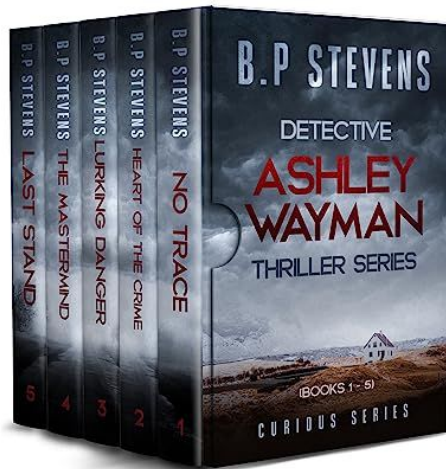
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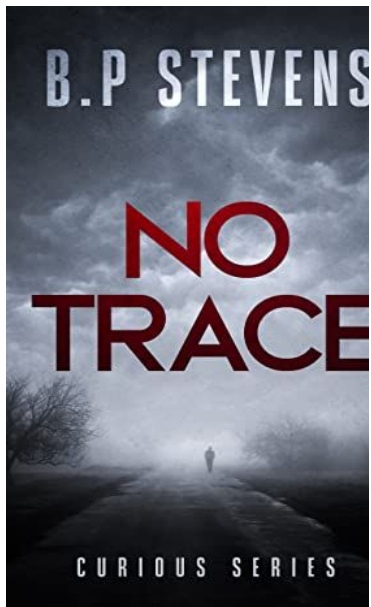
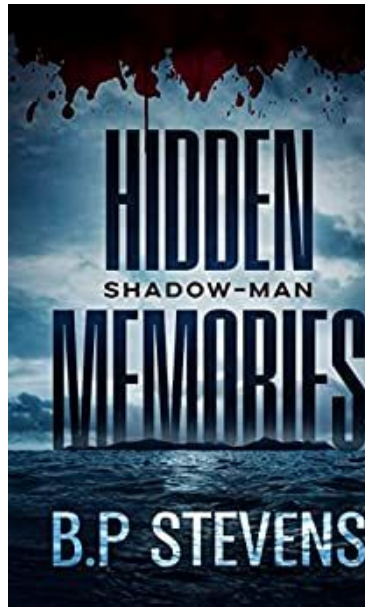
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B.P Stevens lives in Ontario Canada and enjoys writing mystery thriller books. He has always enjoyed reading books. Whether it be as a teenager reading for hours on end or now as a father reading to his children. From his home in Ontario, he just can't seem to stop writing books and that's okay with us!

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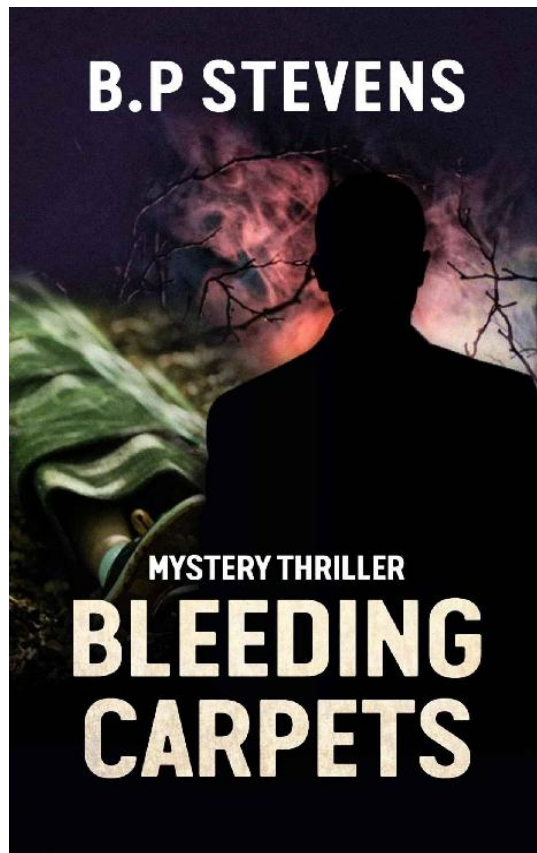
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