



WILLING

Brooklyn

WESTON SECURITIES-WITSEC PROGRAM



JENNIFER BECKER

Willing Brooklyn

**Weston Securities-WITSEC
Program**

By

Jennifer Becker

Editing by Samantha Talarico

Copyright © 2023 Jennifer Becker all rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in case of brief quotations embodied in review and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Epilogue

-

Chapter 1

Brooklyn hunched over her keyboard, rereading her report for her boss, Mr. Banner, before deeming it acceptable, and hit the print button. She arched her back and gave a big sigh when it cracked several times. That's what she got for leaning over her computer for so many hours. She pushed her glasses up to rub her tired, strained eyes. They felt as dry as the Sahara Desert.

The fatigue of the day was catching up with her. The brief moment of closing her eyes had reminded her how tired she was. Brooklyn could have fallen asleep just like this. She was almost done, she reminded herself.

Brooklyn checked her watch, not at all surprised it was close to nine o'clock at night. She'd been working for Mr. Banner for four years, since she got out of college. It was supposed to be an intern position, and when his personal assistant just up and quit without a word, Brooklyn had volunteered for the position, hoping it would get her in Mr. Banner's good graces and move her up in the company.

How wrong and naïve she'd been.

It didn't take long for Brooklyn to realize why the last personal assistant had left. To say Mr. Banner was difficult was like calling a hurricane a light breeze. He was as cut-throat as people that worked on Wall Street, though he was much respected and revered. Mr. Banner was a private

contractor that collaborated with several government agencies, including the FBI.

Mr. Banner owned his own airfield and a fleet of trucks for importing and exporting construction supplies for building projects. He worked with several real estate developers and brought in the supplies. For the government, he sent out aid relief supplies or transported their equipment and weapons.

Brooklyn couldn't say it was all bad working for him. She was learning a wealth of knowledge from him. She'd traveled on private jets and gone to exotic locations while he did business dealings. She just wished he would let her do more than type reports and file paperwork.

You're a pushover.

No, she wasn't. Brooklyn sighed at herself. She totally was. She let Mr. Banner walk all over her. That was why she hadn't moved anywhere in the company in four years. Other interns she'd started with moved up or moved on. Not her. She was stuck in this rut of her own making.

Brooklyn pushed up from her desk, smoothing out her black pencil skirt. She just needed to get the report on Mr. Banner's desk, and she could go home and get some much needed sleep.

Brooklyn winced with every step she took. Her feet were killing her. They were impractical, but she loved her five-inch heels. It made her feel taller than her five-foot-three-inch frame. The price of beauty.

Retrieving the report from the copy room, Brooklyn was heading toward Mr. Banner's office when she heard the ringing of her phone that was sitting on her desk. During office hours it was silenced, but when she was alone, she had the ringer on in case Mr. Banner needed her for something. She couldn't hide a groan, fearing it was her boss. She may only be his personal assistant, but that didn't stop him from calling her all hours of the day for errands he needed done.

All she wanted to do was go home and sleep. A smile broke across her face seeing her best friend Morgan's name across the caller ID. "Hey," she answered.

"Hey."

"How's Miami?" Her friend was taking a much needed vacation. Brooklyn was overdue for one by several years. Business trips didn't count.

Morgan's brother Rick and his family lived in Miami. Their parents had died in a car crash a few years ago, so it was just the two of them. At least once a year Morgan would visit just to get away and lounge on the beach. She'd asked Brooklyn to go more than once, but she always felt as if she would be intruding on their family time.

"Sunny. Muggy. About a hundred degrees every day." Morgan made it sound horrible. It sounded nice to her.

"Aren't the beaches at least full of half-naked guys?"

"Eh," Morgan said, unimpressed. "They're a dime a dozen. What are you doing? Don't tell me, you're still at the office," her friend said sardonically. Morgan was a lead real

estate agent in Billings. She worked as long of days as Brooklyn did, but she wasn't called at all hours for odd requests; but then, Morgan set boundaries and ignored her phone past a certain hour.

Brooklyn rolled her eyes. Morgan knew her too well. They'd been friends since grade school when Morgan had saved Brooklyn from a bully on the playground. They had shared an apartment together while they both attended college. Now they lived a few blocks from each other.

Brooklyn wished she saw her friend more, but her schedule didn't allow much social life.

"I'm just finishing up. I'm grabbing my things and heading home." She set the report on Mr. Banner's desk and turned to leave when something caught her eye. "Oh no."

"What? Are you alright? Is someone there?" Morgan rapid-fired off question after question so Brooklyn didn't hear them all.

"No, nothing like that. You would hear a lot more fear in my voice if someone were here." Brooklyn went over to his coffee table and pushed some of the scattered paperwork to the side. "There's an envelope on Mr. Banner's table that he needs." Brooklyn groaned. Mr. Banner had been looking for this all day. Brooklyn had never seen him so frazzled before. Whatever it was, it had to be important.

"So, it will be there for him in the morning."

“If I don’t drop it off now, he’ll call me in the middle of the night or early morning for it anyway.” Mr. Banner lived a few miles away in a fancy apartment complex with a doorman and guard. It had taken an application and a background check just for her to get a spare key.

“Brooklyn, don’t do it. Don’t go over there tonight. Obviously it wasn’t that important, otherwise he would have stayed late to look for it. Just leave it on his desk to find in the morning.”

“It will take me two seconds.” Brooklyn grabbed the envelope and turned off the lights as she went. Their offices were in a three-story concrete structure in the middle of town. Mr. Banner didn’t want to pay for security. They had a front desk receptionist on the first floor, but that was it. The parking lot was at least well lit.

“And this is why you will always be his assistant. You’re a people pleaser for that ass,” Morgan whined.

“Well, that ass is who pays my bills. I have to pay my dues.” Brooklyn picked up her pace as she crossed the parking lot. Her keychain clenched in her fist with the keys between her knuckles.

“It’s been four years, Brooklyn. I’d say your dues were paid off long ago.”

This was an age-old argument they often had. One neither of them ever won.

“Well, I won’t be his personal assistant forever,” Brooklyn said more confidently than she felt.

“Uh huh.” Morgan didn’t sound convinced.

“Not that I don’t love talking to you, but is that the only reason you’re calling me at eleven o’clock at night? Is everything alright?” Brooklyn asked to change the topic. Her work was a sore subject.

Morgan sighed like she was lying down. “Everything is fine.”

Translation: Nothing was fine. “Did you get into an argument with Darlene?” That was Rick’s wife.

“No, I just feel restless. I thought a vacation would help, but I just feel...I don’t know.” Her voice sounded dejected.

Brooklyn’s heart went out to Morgan. She hadn’t been the same since her break-up with Jameson. It had been a break-up of her choosing, but that didn’t make it any easier. “Tell you what, when you get back, we’ll go have a couple of drinks, and I’ll even turn my phone off.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Morgan chuckled. It was the first time in the call that Brooklyn had heard her sound more like her old self.

Brooklyn pulled into Mr. Banner’s parking lot and got out. “I’m at Mr. Banner’s. I just need to drop this off and it’s off to bed for me. You should be in bed as well.”

“Soon enough. I’ll stay on the line until you get home.”

“Afraid for my safety?” Brooklyn chuckled, warmed by her friend’s concern for her. Not that she could do anything on the other side of the country.

“Crime rate might be low, but anything could happen.” Brooklyn knew that. She wasn’t blind to the crime of the world, but come on. What could happen to her? She was a mousy personal assistant. Nothing exciting ever happened to her.

Brooklyn heard something above her that sounded like a scream, and she looked up. “What the—?” she whispered, squinting, sure she was seeing things.

“What is it?” Morgan’s voice turned alarmed.

“Mr. Banner’s on his balc—” Her words died as Mr. Banner went flying over the balcony to land on the asphalt in front of her. “Holy shit.” Her voice came out in a whisper as she stared at her boss’s dead body in disbelief, unsure if what she was seeing was real.

“Brooklyn, what happened?” Morgan’s voice was frantic.

Brooklyn stared at her boss’s body. He laid face-down on the asphalt, his features concealed, but she had seen him as he fell and recognized his suit from earlier that day. “Mr. Banner jumped from his balcony.” Her gaze went back up to the balcony to see someone leaning over it. It was a man in all black clothes, but she could see his face and hair. The man stared straight at her. “Oh my god, someone else is on the balcony.”

“Brooklyn, listen to me.” Morgan’s voice was serious. “Run. Get in your car and go.”

Brooklyn was on autopilot. Her mind shut down. She spun on her heel, ran back to her car, and peeled out of the

parking lot as if she were being chased down though there was no way the killer could have gotten down from Mr. Banner's condo by the time she'd reached her car. He lived on the thirteenth floor.

“What do I do? Morgan, what do I do?” Her hands started shaking as adrenaline pumped through her system. Her eyes kept darting to the rearview mirror, thinking someone was going to be coming after her, but there was no one fish tailing it from around the corner or driving fast to catch up to her.

“Drive to the police station, get Jameson,” Morgan said calmly and rationally.

“What if he's not working?”

“Trust me, he's working.” If anyone knew Jameson's schedule, it was his ex. “I'll stay on the phone with you until you get there. I really hate being on the other side of the U.S. from you right now. I feel so useless.” Morgan sighed in obvious aggravation.

“Believe me, you're saving me from a complete breakdown.” She'd probably still be staring down at her boss's body if it hadn't been for Morgan prompting her to move.

Brooklyn was thankful it was later in the evening and there wasn't much traffic. It only took a few minutes to get to the police station where Jameson worked.

“Can I help you?” the female officer at the desk asked, her eyes wide in shock as she took stock of Brooklyn's

appearance. She probably looked a sight. Shaking and dazed.

“Detective Jameson Weston. I need Detective Jameson Weston.” Brooklyn gasped, trying to catch her breath as if she’d been running.

“What’s it regarding?” the woman inquired calmly. Brooklyn felt anything but; her knees were starting to shake.

“There’s been a murder.”

Chapter 2

Brooklyn rubbed the back of her neck, trying to ease the crick as she paced the confined interview room. It was a small, nondescript space that didn't look much bigger than her apartment bedroom. It had faded wide concrete walls and was furnished with a metal table that had a chair on either side of it. A metal ring was anchored into the center of the table. One wall was taken up by a mirror.

Brooklyn had seen enough crime shows to know it was a two-way mirror. Was someone watching her now?

They'd been holding her here for what felt like hours. After announcing there had been a murder, she'd been rushed to this room, and Jameson had showed up a few moments later. She'd told Jameson what she'd witnessed, only leaving out the part where she'd been on the phone with Morgan at the time.

He'd called in an officer to investigate the crime scene. After that, she'd left alone. More than once she feared they thought she was an accomplice to Mr. Banner's murder and were waiting to prosecute her.

Every part of her body was sore after a long work day, and their uncomfortable metal chairs didn't help. She longed to kick off her shoes, but she didn't trust the cleanliness of the linoleum floors. Surely they couldn't keep her here forever. Soon they would let her go, and she could

head home to take a shower and get some much needed rest.

She was thinking about banging on the door to at least ask for something to eat or drink when the door opened and Jameson and another man came in. The room felt even smaller with these two large men standing side by side.

The stranger was just as tall as Jameson, if not a few inches taller. He wore blue jeans and a forest green shirt with a black leather jacket. He was similar in looks and had similar attire, except that Jameson wore a red shirt.

The stranger was clean shaven with the same crystalline blue eyes as Jameson. His hair was close-cropped like a military cut. He looked so close to Jameson, they could probably pass for brothers.

She'd hung out with Jameson from time to time when he'd dated Morgan, but didn't know much about him. It was then she realized, while she'd been studying the stranger, he was looking directly at her.

Brooklyn immediately dropped her gaze and took a seat at the table. She hated people staring at her, especially her eyes. It made her uncomfortable.

"Miss Lewis, I'm sorry we kept you waiting so long. I was waiting for my associate to arrive. This is Connor, he's part of a security program," Jameson explained, keeping everything professional.

"So this is the secretary that reported the crime?" Connor asked nonchalantly.

“Personal assistant,” Brooklyn automatically corrected. She looked at Jameson, a feeling of unease creeping in. “Security? Why is he here? Have you already found who was behind this?” Her eyes widened in shock. That was fast. Even in movies, it took a while.

Jameson’s gaze darted away from her. That wasn’t a good sign. “A team and I went out and investigated the crime. It looks like suicide and not murder. There’s no sign of forced entry. There are no marks on his person to appear he’d been forced over the balcony. There was no blood to suggest he’d been injured.”

“What about Mr. Banner screaming? Surely suicides don’t scream,” she tried arguing.

“There was also evidence on the kitchen counter of past due bills, hints that he might be in debt.”

Brooklyn shook her head vigorously. “No, that can’t be. He wasn’t.”

“No offense, Miss, but how could you know that?” Connor asked in a condescending tone, like he was talking to a child and not an adult of twenty-five.

Forgetting about her insecurity about her eyes, Brooklyn glared up at Connor, not liking him one bit. “Because I’ve handled Mr. Banner’s finances for almost four years. I know how much he makes and how much he spends. Trust me, he’s very rich and nowhere close to being in debt.”

“People can hide secrets, Brooklyn,” Jameson said, finally using her first name.

Brooklyn narrowed her eyes into slits and growled, “I know what I saw, Jameson. There was someone on that balcony that pushed him. Mr. Banner would never commit suicide. I know this sounds bad, but he was vain enough, he’d never go out like that.” It irked her that he was treating her like some hysterical woman that didn’t know what she’d seen instead of an intelligent woman. “There’s also the fact, Mr. Banner was a very organized person. It’s why we got along so well. He would never leave his finances out. They were always kept in his desk at his apartment, locked up.”

“Okay, okay,” he replied in a placating tone that only irritated her more. “I just wanted to be sure before we proceed.”

“What do you mean, before you proceed?”

Jameson took a seat across from her while Connor remained standing. That was probably for the best. She didn’t think both men would fit across from her. Connor leaned up against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. “I’ve been a detective a long time, Brooklyn. I’ve been to a lot of crime scenes, and I have reason to believe Mr. Banner’s death may have been staged to look like a suicide to cover the murder, but since you knew him best, I wanted to talk to you first and make sure my instincts were right. Now, can you think of anyone who would want to hurt your boss? Any enemies? Bad deals?”

Brooklyn wanted to laugh at the irony of the question. Mr. Banner had made many enemies over the years. Rival competitors. Bad deals. “Sure, he didn’t make friends with

everyone. But enough to toss him over a balcony, I don't think so." That was the industry they worked in. No one was friends, but they didn't have personal vendettas against anyone.

"No one he's had a recent argument with?"

Brooklyn racked her brain. They'd been so busy over the past few weeks, but no one stuck out in her mind. "No."

Jameson leaned forward, his large frame extending over half of the table. He licked his lips nervously before asking, "I hate asking this, but I have to. Is there any chance Banner was doing under the table jobs or working with people he shouldn't."

Under normal circumstances, she'd be offended if someone questioned Mr. Banner's morals. He was a good man. He may have used underhanded means to get what he wanted, but he was an honest businessman. He didn't work with criminals. That much she was confident about. "No, he didn't."

Jameson nodded, taking her at her word. "Can you get me a list of all his clients over the past few months?"

"It's all saved on my computer at work. If we're done here, we can head over and I can get you the list."

Jameson glanced over his shoulder at Connor before looking back at her. "If you can just give me instructions, I'll take care of it myself. We think the best thing to do is put you in hiding now."

"What; why?" she asked, her frustration getting the better of her. It felt like they were talking round and round,

not getting anywhere.

“These people went through a lot of trouble to make it look like a suicide, and you’re a witness. Which means they will most likely come after you next,” Connor answered.

“I don’t know who they were. All I could see was that he looked to be in his mid-thirties; he had dark brown hair, short like yours, and facial hair.” That matched the description of almost every man she knew.

“They may not have seen you, but they know Banner and those that would come to his home. It’s a process of elimination. It won’t take them long to track you.”

Brooklyn fell back in her seat as their words sunk in. She’d witnessed a crime. Someone that tried to make a murder look like a suicide. Who could do that? Going home wasn’t an option. So where could she go? She didn’t have anywhere she could hide. No family. She would never jeopardize Morgan. She was at the mercy of these men.

Brooklyn nodded. “Thank you, Jameson.”

“For what?” He looked at her, puzzled.

“For helping. For not just saying it’s a suicide and washing your hands of it.”

Jameson looked uncomfortable by her praise. “Just doing my job,” he said gruffly.

“So what happens now?” She was ready to get this over with and bring the man responsible for her boss’s death to justice. “You said hiding, what does that mean?”

Connor was the one that answered. “That’s where I come in. We put you in witness protection until we can get to the bottom of this.”

WITSEC. She’d heard of it, had seen movies about it, but really knew nothing about it. “So you’re just going to stuff me in some safe house for who knows how long?”

“Essentially. Trust me, Miss Lewis. This is something my team has done many times. You’ll be completely safe. Only the person assigned to you and I will know where you are.”

That was reassuring. “You don’t think this is a little overkill? I mean, Mr. Banner was a businessman. This wasn’t a mafia hit or something.”

“We don’t know who’s involved. This is just a precaution for your safety.”

“How long will I have to be in hiding?” she asked Jameson.

“That all depends on what we find. It could be a few months.”

Brooklyn’s eyes bugged out of her head. “I’m sorry, did you say months? What do you expect me to do in the meantime? I have bills to pay. What do I tell my friend?” This was getting out of hand. A few days, maybe even weeks, she could understand. They had to find the criminals and evidence that someone had pushed him instead of him jumping. But months? She couldn’t hide for months. What would she tell Morgan?

“As far as communication goes, there can be none. We’ll have to confiscate all electronics. No cell phones, laptops, tablets, anything. We’ll move as quickly as we can. Bills will be taken care of,” Connor assured her. Not that it was working. She was sure there were things they were leaving out, but they wanted her cooperation.

“And what about when it’s over? When you find these people? When there’s a trial? I’m sure someone is going to want revenge for me foiling their plans.”

“If it comes to that, we’ll give you a new identity and relocate you. A brand new start,” Connor said matter of fact.

A new start. A new life. No more being Brooklyn Lewis. Her whole life over as if she had never existed. She didn’t like the sound of that at all. But what choice did she have?

“What if I don’t want that? What if I change my mind?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late to back out now, Brooklyn,” Jameson said grimly, as if he wanted to give her a different answer but knew he couldn’t.

Yeah, she was afraid he was going to say that. She couldn’t run away from this. It was too late for that now. The only thing to do was to push forward.

“I need to make a call first, unless you want to be the one to tell Morgan, Jameson?” She needed to tell Morgan what was going on. Obviously not where she was going, but that she would be off-grid for a while. It would be better to

have it come from her than ask Jameson to call her, but she would leave it up to the detective.

Chapter 3

The man was looking around for a quiet place to talk when his phone rang. This was a conversation that couldn't be overheard. He darted into a janitor closet and answered.

“Is it done?” his boss asked.

He'd only been working for him for a few months, but one thing he'd learned about his boss, he didn't take the word *no* well and failure even less. He'd never met him directly, only the occasional phone call when he needed a job done. An address or a name usually. This was the first time he'd asked him to commit a crime. He didn't like it, but he was in too deep now to back out. The only face to face contact he had was with the henchman, Henrick.

“It is. The evidence was placed, and the report was filed as a suicide as planned. You shouldn't have any problems,” he assured his boss.

“And the other thing?” Staging the suicide had only been half his task. He was also supposed to find some paperwork. His boss wasn't going to be happy about his failing. He'd questioned Banner about it, but the man had remained tight-lipped. Even up until he'd been pushed over the balcony. The man had had gumption, he'd give him that.

“It wasn’t at his apartment. I’ll check his office next. It could only be in one of those two places. I’ll find it,” he reassured him. He didn’t have a choice. If he failed, his boss would have him killed.

“What about the woman there that witnessed it?”

He shouldn’t be surprised his boss knew about that. Someone had probably been watching him to make sure the job was done. Probably Henrick; everywhere he turned, that man was watching him. It was creepy.

The woman had been a complication he hadn’t foreseen, but one he could overcome. “She won’t be a problem. She didn’t have much information.” His description, but it matched a million other people in the city. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. “With the report ruled as a suicide, the case is dead.”

“As you’ll be too if you don’t get rid of her. I don’t want any loose ends. Or for the police to decide to look further into the case.”

If someone did dig too deep, they’d see the evidence was all fake. He couldn’t afford for that to happen. “Don’t worry, sir. I’ll take care of her.” Her information wouldn’t be hard to get.

“For your sake, I hope so.” His boss hung up.

He stuffed his phone back in his pocket, trying to think of his next course of action. He couldn’t fake her suicide. It would look fishy and raise flags. Perhaps her car brakes could go out. A gas leak in her apartment. Whatever

he did, it had to be soon. The longer she was alive, the greater danger he was in.

Chapter 4

Drake didn't bother to look up from his yardwork when a car pulled up his long dirt driveway. It was a remote area, and only those who knew where he lived knew how to find him. And the only people that did were his family. Which were the last people he wanted to see. Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone and let him heal? He owned a cabin in the middle of nowhere for a reason. He wanted to be left alone.

But no, his family didn't get that.

It had only been a few months since the incident. Since his whole life had changed. He was angry and felt lost. He needed time alone to figure things out, but his family was as relentless as insurgents. They were always coming to confront him. To give him words of encouragement. To try and lure him back home so he could heal amongst family when he just wanted to be alone and lick his wounds in privacy.

The car door opened and shut. "Drake," a male voice called out.

Great. His older brother, Connor. The fatherly, overprotective brother. Just what he needed. "Go away, Connor. Tell Mom I'm fine," Drake responded, not pausing in his work. He wasn't, but that was beside the point.

"I'm not here about that." That gave him pause.

Drake looked over his shoulder. His brother was leaning against the hood of his black sedan. His eyes shielded behind large aviator frames. His hands in his pockets and a foot crossed over his ankle. He looked the picture of relaxed, but Drake knew him better than that. They were brothers. Blood. Had grown up together. No one knew them better than each other. Which was why he could tell his brother was anything but relaxed.

“What is it then?” His brain tried to think of all sorts of reasons why his brother was there. Mom, Dad, one of their other brothers.

“I need your help,” his brother, always serious, said stone-faced.

“Why?” He felt his anger rising. One amongst a million reasons why he was holed up here in his cabin. It didn’t take much to set his anger off. He wasn’t stable enough to be around people yet.

“I have a job—”

“No,” Drake’s answer was instantaneous, not even allowing his brother to finish his sentence.

Four of his brothers had started a security company three years ago when they got out of the military, using their skillset in security forces. They worked with private clientele and also lent their services to the government for witness protection. Several of his brothers chipped in when they could, but not Drake. He didn’t want any part of it.

Not only was he not a people-person, but security wasn’t his specialty. Reconnaissance was. He liked being

behind the scenes. A ghost. Playing babysitter wasn't part of his resume.

Connor pushed off his car and stalked toward him.
“Come on, Drake. I need you on this one.”

“No, you don't. Get one of the other guys to do it. Don't you have a team of people for this sort of work?”

“Everyone is booked.”

That wasn't surprising. Their company had made a name for themselves and were now highly sought after.

“What about Luther? Hell, even Finn.” He named off two of his brothers who didn't work for the company, but pitched in when needed.

“Luther is on deployment, and Finn is in aviation school.”

Huh, his brother had actually finished college and was doing something. He loved Finn, but the man changed his mind about his degree it felt like every other day. When they were kids, he wanted to be a police officer, then it was a fireman, then a tornado chaser, military. You name it and he said he wanted to do it. Even when he was graduating high school, he kept changing his mind. The last time Drake had seen his brother, Finn was in college and had joined ROTC.

He hadn't thought he'd been out of touch that long, but he did a lot of deployments and missions. He was gone more than he was home. He couldn't even remember the last holiday he'd been home for.

Their whole family was in government work. They were army brats, and almost everyone had joined. Brock and Macarthur had been rebels and joined the Air Force and Marines. Jameson was the only one who hadn't joined and instead became a police officer in Billings.

No one had stayed in for twenty years like their dad. They got their experiences and several deployments over with and left within six years. Drake would have stayed in and been a lifer, but life had had other plans for him.

"Please, Drake." Drake heard the desperation in his brother's voice. Connor wouldn't be asking him if he wasn't in a bind.

Drake pulled his hat from his head, using his forearm to wipe the sweat from his forehead before replacing it. It was a nervous tic he'd never grown out of.

"Jameson called me. This is pretty serious. He needs our help. Besides, it's not like you have anything pressing going on at the moment." Connor looked around, no doubt taking in the vast empty space.

"If you're so hard up to find someone, why don't you do it?" Drake grumbled. His brother was right. He wasn't busy. If anything, the solitude was making him worse, but that didn't mean he wanted to play babysitter. Maybe he could just throw them in a hotel nearby and could watch them from afar. The witness safe and he was left alone. Win for everyone.

"Someone has to run the company. Look, you're going to say yes, so you might as well save me the begging and just agree. Time is of the essence. Are you going to deny

helping your brother?” Connor gave him a knowing look that pissed Drake off.

Drake scowled at him. Mainly because he knew it was true. There wasn't much he would deny his family. Damn him for that. “I hate you.”

“That's only because I'm Mom's favorite.” Connor gave him a broad grin.

Drake laughed for what felt like the first time in years. “You wish. Everyone knows I am.”

“Should we call her and ask?” Connor asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“Hell no.”

“Because you know she'll say me.”

“Only because you're the one calling.”

Connor didn't contradict him because they both knew it was true. Everyone was her favorite. With seven sons, Drake was sure she'd wanted to murder all of them at some point, but she was always there for them. There was no favorite except maybe Finn since he was the baby and had needed the most hands-on. All his older brothers had tormented the hell out of him. It was a rite of passage. Finn had just been more sensitive about it than everyone else.

“What's the job?”

Chapter 5

Connor gave him a smug smile that Drake wanted to punch from his face. Mainly because his brother had goaded him into agreeing to this stupid job. It wasn't the first time, and sadly, it wouldn't be the last.

“Let me get her settled and I'll tell you the details,” Connor called over his shoulder as he opened the passenger door.

It was then Drake realized Connor hadn't been alone. Someone was in the passenger seat. A woman. He must be out if it if he didn't notice another person.

“You brought her here?” His voice cracked like thunder. This was his sanctuary. His safe haven. How dare his brother bring someone here without his permission first. He hadn't thought about where the witness would go when agreeing. He'd assumed in town. Not here.

Connor's features pinched as if he wasn't any happier about it. “I didn't have a choice. I knew you wouldn't come down from your mountain to protect her.”

Connor helped the woman out, and Drake almost tripped over his own two feet. She was beautiful. She appeared tall. Maybe five foot seven.

Brown hair that appeared to have blonde streaks that shone like spun gold in the sun. It was pulled back into a

tight bun. Not a strand out of place. She wore thick black-framed glasses. He couldn't tell her eye color because she kept her eyes downcast.

She stepped around the car door, and he gawked at her clothes. High heels, skirt, and a blouse. She stuck out like a sore thumb. This woman belonged in an office, not the mountains. She looked like a stiff wind would blow her over and she'd get upset over a broken nail.

“Really?”

He hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud until the woman's head shot up to look at him. Her eyes widened and her mouth formed in an O.

Connor glared daggers at him as he ushered the woman toward the cabin. “We came straight from the police station. We stopped to get clothes, but she wanted a chance to shower before changing.”

Drake was being an ass. He shouldn't have judged her based on her clothes. He had to remind himself that the woman had probably gone through something traumatizing to end up in witness protection.

“Apologies, I'll show you the way.” Drake guided them, making sure to grab his dark green long-sleeved shirt and pull it over his head before passing them. His brother was used to his scars, but the woman wasn't. No reason to scare her more thinking she was now holed up with Frankenstein's monster.

The cabin wasn't much to look at. It wasn't even a thousand square feet. He didn't need much. Drake had been

on the move so much since he'd joined the army that he'd learned to pack light and not get attached to materialistic things.

The cabin had a porch across the front with two rocking chairs on one side. A red door with one window to the right and two on the left. Inside was open concept with a small dining table built for four, the living room, and kitchen. It only had one bedroom and a bath against the back wall. He didn't have a television, but there was an old radio when he was in the mood for music. The living room had an old couch that folded into a bed that faced a stone fireplace. The kitchen was fully functional with a range and stove, full-size refrigerator, and microwave.

"The bedroom is here." He pointed to the closed door. He'd have to straighten up in there and get fresh linens while she was showering. Cleanliness hadn't been his top priority the past few months. Looked like that was about to change. The woman would probably scold him for leaving the toilet seat up. "The bathroom is here." He indicated with a pointed finger. "You can get freshened up while I talk with Connor."

When he didn't get a quick reply, Drake looked over his shoulder. The woman slowly walked through the house. Her eyes constantly scanning the room. He wondered what she thought of it but didn't ask. It didn't really matter. He liked his space and that was all that mattered.

"Ma'am," he spoke loudly to get her attention.

Her eyes snapped to his then quickly lowered to the floor. "Brooklyn. My name is Brooklyn."

Drake couldn't tell if she was naturally shy or if he was making her uncomfortable. His scars weren't pretty and had revulsed more than one person. The worst of it was on his back and arms. There was one deep scar that ran along the side of his cheek from one of his tormentors. It angered Drake every time he saw it in the mirror. A reminder of his failure. That had probably been his tormentor's intention. "I'm Drake. Why don't you go ahead and get cleaned up?"

She glanced over at her shoulder to Connor. Drake didn't know why, but it annoyed him that she looked to him for guidance. But it wasn't like he'd made the best first impression.

Connor gave her an encouraging smile that somehow came naturally to him even though he was the most serious of the brothers. Drake hated how easy it was for his brother to give it. Drake couldn't remember the last time he'd smiled or even had anything to smile about. "Go ahead, Brooklyn. I'll still be here when you get done."

Brooklyn nodded then hastened to the bathroom. Drake noted she gave him a wide berth and shut the bathroom door quietly behind her. He wasn't surprised when the door latch clicked. He could break down the door if he needed to, but let the woman have her privacy.

Connor gave him a head tilt and headed back outside. Drake followed. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like this talk one bit.

"How bad is it?" he asked before Connor reached his car.

“Hard to tell. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her boss was murdered, but the crime scene was staged to look like a suicide. Jameson called me to get her out of there while he investigated.”

“Shit.” No wonder she looked so scared. She probably saw the whole thing. He was not equipped to handle this right now. She needed someone with a gentle hand to ease her fears. He was far from gentle. He was overbearing and harsh. Too bad he’d already agreed to watch her.

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Any leads on who could want her boss dead?” The sooner they could find the perp, the sooner she could go back to her life and he could get back to his solitude.

“She gave Jameson a list. He’s looking into it.”

“How long is that going to take?” He didn’t want to have to babysit for long.

“Jameson is working as quietly and quickly as possible.”

“You think someone in the precinct is involved?” There was no other reason for the hush-hush unless it was an inside job.

“Anything is possible at this point. Jameson doesn’t want to leave anything to chance.”

“So you need to stash her until you can find who did it. Connor, if they went through to trouble of making it look like a suicide, and someone can prove otherwise, they will kill her and bury any evidence you have. These kind of people have eyes and ears everywhere. Probably right in

Jameson's precinct. They saw you take her and know you're related to him. It won't be hard to put the pieces together from there and track her to here."

"But they don't know about you," Connor said, placing both hands on Drake's shoulders. "I know you can keep her alive until he gets the evidence he needs. I couldn't think of anywhere safer for her to be."

Drake didn't doubt his skill level at keeping Brooklyn alive until then. He was damn good at what he did. His mountain was one of the most secure places in existence. He had booby traps rigged through the woods, security cameras, and an arsenal of weapons stashed in the house and throughout his property. Nothing was getting in or out without his knowledge. He also knew this mountain like the back of his hand. He had multiple exit routes charted out.

"I'm not worried about keeping her alive from them, but come on, Connor, she's a city girl." He spat the words out as if they were poison. "You saw her. She can't survive up here. Her first broken nail, she'll be begging to come down the mountain. Or trip and fall off the mountain. A million things can happen to her up here. I'm not a babysitter." His words ended in a growl.

A throat cleared from the cabin. Both men turned to see Brooklyn standing on the porch. She'd changed into a pair of grey sneakers, blue jeans that hugged her legs, and a loose teal shirt that emphasized her perky breasts. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders leaving a wet trail. She stood tall and erect, a stubborn tilt to her chin as she addressed them. The business woman was gone, and in her

place was a mountain woman. “Thank you, Drake, for the use of your shower. Connor, if it’s not much of an inconvenience, I’d like to leave.”

“Leave?” Connor gasped in shock. Drake almost chuckled. Few things surprised his brother; he’d planned for everything, but he hadn’t seen Brooklyn wanting to leave.

“Yes, I’d rather take my chances somewhere else than stay here and be *babysat*.” She spat the last word, her heated glare leveled at Drake.

Like hell she was leaving. Drake may not have wanted the job, and had doubts about her walking off the mountain, but she wasn’t going anywhere. She was his to protect. No one could protect her better than he could. She wouldn’t last a day without protection. He didn’t care what he had to do. She wasn’t leaving.

Chapter 6

“Now wait just a minute.” Drake started charging toward her like a bull that saw red, but Connor pulled him back.

“You’ve done enough. I’ll handle this.” Connor approached her as if she were a skittish foal about to bolt any second.

She remained rooted only because she knew there was nowhere else for her to go. They were in the middle of nowhere and only these two men had means of transportation. But if Connor thought for one moment she was going to stay in this man’s house when he thought she was no more than some dumb bimbo that couldn’t walk and chew gum at the same time and was in need of babysitting, he had another thing coming. She’d rather take her chances on her own than stay with him.

Brooklyn had some cash. She could find a hotel and hole up there for a while. It would be more welcoming than here.

“Look, Connor, I appreciate all you’re doing to help me, but I won’t stay where I’m not wanted.” The word babysitter was still ringing in her ears. She didn’t need babysitting. She wasn’t a child. Why had she trusted Jameson to oversee her safety?

Jameson had sounded so confident that Connor would take care of her safety, and he brought her here? To a man

who didn't seem like he could stand being in the same room with her? And this was the man that was supposed to keep her alive? Yeah, right. A grizzly bear would be more welcoming.

“Drake is rough around the edges and can be crass,” Connor came up the stairs, stopping a foot away from her, “but there is no one I trust more to keep you alive. Please, Brooklyn.”

Brooklyn looked up but didn't meet his eyes. He hadn't shirked at seeing them, but she still felt uncomfortable looking him in the eyes.

Brooklyn knew her options were limited. Jameson had been concerned enough about her safety, he'd kept her information out of their systems in case someone came looking for her. Her cell phone and laptop had been confiscated along with her wallet. However, she'd managed to smuggle some cash.

Connor had stopped at a second-hand clothing store to get her clothes, not daring to allow her back home in case someone already knew where she lived. She was at the mercy of these men.

Brooklyn's gaze drifted to Drake. He was rugged. That was the only word that came to mind. Testosterone oozed from every pore of his body. He looked like he belonged here in the woods. Surviving off the land. If anyone could keep her alive, it seemed he could.

A shaggy dark brown beard. Even his hair was long. His bangs framed his face falling in waves to his ears. The hair at the back was longer, almost brushing his shoulders.

His eyes were the same color as Connor and Jameson. Could they all be related? They all seemed to know one another very well. Connor had known where Drake lived. They were far from town and the nearest road. Only those that knew how to find this place would. She hadn't even seen a marking on the road to alert the turn off.

"I'll stay." What choice did she have? Brooklyn had every intention of staying alive, and if staying with Drake for the unforeseen future was how to do it, so be it. She was no stranger to moody men. Mr. Banner had made her immune to them. While the cabin wasn't large, the property was; she was sure she could avoid him for the majority of her stay.

Connor's shoulders drooped as if he'd been carrying the weight of the world. "Thank you."

"Will you be staying as well?" It would be crowded with three of them in this one-bedroom cabin; as it was, she didn't know where Drake would be staying. She had no intention of sharing the bed with him.

"No, I just came to drop you off. Drake is more than enough protection for you. No one can get on this mountain without his knowing."

That went a long way in ensuring she would be safe from outsiders. Drake looked more than capable of taking out a small army by himself. "How will I know when it's safe to come home?" He was just dropping her off like trash at a dump without a backward glance. What kind of protection service was this? She had no way to contact him.

“People are going to be looking for you, so the less communication we have for now, the better, until it’s safe. Drake may live in the middle of nowhere, but he has a satellite phone. I’ll be in touch with him when it’s time.”

Alone on a mountain with a man who thought of her as a walking disaster and no way to communicate with the outside world except for a satellite phone that she was sure Drake wouldn’t allow her to use. Great.

“Everything is going to be fine, Brooklyn. I promise,” he assured her.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” She hated that more than anything. Broken promises. She’d rather someone say nothing than promising something they couldn’t deliver.

“I’m not.” Brooklyn’s eyes fluttered up to see him looking at her earnestly. If her eyes made him uncomfortable, he didn’t show it. He didn’t even flinch. “I take protecting people very seriously, and you wouldn’t be with Drake if I didn’t think he could keep you safe.”

Brooklyn nodded. “He’s your brother, isn’t he?”

“He is. Jameson is as well.” He confirmed her suspicions.

“It must be convenient to have your brothers all working together.”

“Jameson will ask for my help from time to time for sensitive cases like yours. This is the first time I’ve asked Drake to help. He’s been in the army until recently.”

Brooklyn's eyes strayed to the man in question. They seemed to do that a lot since she'd met him. He wasn't personable, but she could appreciate his male physique. He was gorgeous, but not in the male model sort of way, but more earthy, natural.

He also reminded her of a wounded animal. He needed love and nurturing but wouldn't let people get close enough to him to help. He would require a patient hand to allow her near him. She didn't know why she was thinking that. It wasn't like she wanted to get to know him. The less interaction they had, the better.

Connor turned his head, following her line of vision to Drake. He'd gone back to his yardwork, seemingly oblivious to their speaking about him. Brooklyn had no doubt he was aware of both of them, he was just choosing to ignore them.

"Drake is prone to mood swings. Don't take them personal."

Brooklyn's top lip twitched trying to fight the smile forming. "I worked for a cut-throat business man for four years, Connor. Your brother's mood swings could hardly faze me. I'll be fine."

Connor glanced back at her, his eyes looking her up and down. There was no censure in his gaze, but appreciation. "Yes, I believe you will." A soft smile touched his lips. He looked younger and more relaxed like this. The worry lines around his eyes had faded. Dare she call him handsome. All three brothers were. If she hadn't been so distraught over witnessing a murder, she would have noted

the strong jawline, the plump bottom lip, his soft soulful eyes that hid their own secrets.

Brooklyn flushed at where her thoughts had turned. She was going to blame lack of sleep and traumatic experience for it.

“You should get going,” Drake said, his voice gruff as he came up the porch to stand next to his brother. Brooklyn jumped, not having heard him approach them. The man was stealthy. She would have to be on her guard around him.

Standing side by side, she could see the similarities easily in their equal height and eye color. There was hint of that strong jawline under all that scruff. The one difference was that Drake was much broader in muscle mass whereas Connor had leaner muscle.

Drake was a man used to physical labor to keep in shape, where Connor looked like he kept in shape from working out in a gym. Both men were deadly, and she was glad to have them on her side.

Connor nodded. Brooklyn wasn't ready for him to go yet, but understood why he had to leave. “Walk me to my car?”

Drake didn't answer but followed him to the vehicle. Brooklyn remained on the porch, her eyes looking out over the vast land that was to become her home for the next while. It was beautiful. The thick forests and craggy mountain cliffs in the distance. Birds circled high in the sky looking for prey. Brooklyn inhaled a deep cleansing breath of the cool, clean air.

As far as hideouts went, this was far superior to what she'd had in mind. She figured she'd get dumped in some fleabag motel in the middle of nowhere. Brooklyn didn't think she'd ever tire of this view. She could see why Drake liked it.

Brooklyn tore her gaze from the picturesque view when the car started and went back down the long drive, leaving her alone with Drake.

He didn't spare her a glance as he stomped past her into the house and came out a moment later with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" He couldn't just leave her. He was supposed to be protecting her. It was unlikely the killer had found her already, but wasn't his job to stay close in case and not go galivanting off into the woods?

"Hunting," he called over his shoulder, never breaking stride.

"You can't just leave me," she said, flabbergasted.

Drake stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "I thought you didn't need a babysitter," he challenged. Well, he had her there. She didn't need someone watching her every move, but she didn't think he would just take off the first chance he got. "Just don't walk off the mountain while I'm gone." He faced forward and disappeared into the trees a moment later as if he were a ghost vanishing through a wall.

Brooklyn wrapped her arms around herself, hugging her body. She'd never felt so alone as she did in this

moment. She was staying with a stranger in a new place and had no way to call for help. She really wished she could call Morgan right now. She'd be able to give her some sage advice.

Brooklyn went back into the cabin, her eyes scanning her new home. There wasn't much to look at. There were sparse furnishings. The walls barren. It screamed man cave. She turned to the kitchen and couldn't hide the grimace. Dishes were piled in the sink and across the counters. She didn't want to know how long those had been sitting there without cleaning. Judging by their owner and his appearance, it had been a while.

Brooklyn rolled up her sleeves and started digging through the cupboards looking for a scrub brush and soap. She may be stuck with this man, but that didn't mean she had to live in a pigsty.

Chapter 7

Drake stood next to his meat shack, bathed in shadows, watching his cabin. He'd been standing here for over an hour just watching her. The lights were already on and smoke rolled out of the chimney. He was surprised Brooklyn knew how to do that. She was more self-sufficient than he first pegged her for.

He saw her walking back and forth between the windows, a look of concentration on her face. Drake didn't know what she was doing in there, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. She'd looked irritated with him when he'd left. She was probably destroying his house to get even with him.

The sky was darkening. It was nearing sunset; it was time to go inside and face her. He'd left her alone for a few hours now. She was probably hungry. The rabbit he'd snared would feed them for a day or two, but he'd have to make a trip into town soon for other necessities. He hadn't been prepared for guests, and Connor hadn't brought any supplies. It was up to him to provide for them both.

He grimaced thinking of the condition his cabin was in. Normally he was a cleaner person, but since he'd come home, he hadn't had the energy. He just didn't care. Now he wished Connor had given him more warning so he could have at least cleaned up some of the dishes. He hadn't changed the bedding like he was going to either.

When Connor left with his parting words of “treat Brooklyn nicely,” he’d grabbed his rifle and retreated. Drake wasn’t nice. He wasn’t gentle or caring. Brooklyn needed protection, nothing more.

He hadn’t wanted to go too far in case Brooklyn got herself into trouble, but far enough away to find wild game. He hadn’t found any fresh tracks, but something had been in his snare. He’d already skinned it and quartered it. Now he didn’t have any other excuses for staying away.

He didn’t know what they’d have with it as he didn’t have anything in his cupboards except beans. It wasn’t the greatest meal, but they wouldn’t starve tonight.

Drake froze when he stepped inside. His eyes scanning around, feeling like he was in a stranger’s house instead of his own. The cabin was warm and clean. The hardwood floors gleamed like they were brand new and not decades old. His kitchen looked spotless. It was a complete transformation. Now it made sense why he’d seen Brooklyn walking back and forth so much. She’d been cleaning his house and organizing. Something that would upset some, but he actually liked it. It reminded him of the military. Neat and orderly.

That wasn’t all that was different about his house. Linkin Park blared from his stereo while Brooklyn danced and sang to it—albeit off key—in the kitchen. She hadn’t seen him come in. Probably couldn’t hear him over the music.

He was surprised hadn’t heard it when he was coming in. It had been a long time since any sound had come out

the cabin except for his angry bellowing. Drake just stood there in silence watching her. She spun around and bent over, looking in the fridge, her ass swaying in time to the music. His gaze was fixated on that ass. Damn, it was a handful and tempting him like a siren to a sailor. Begging him to come closer.

She whirled around and stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide in shock seeing him standing there. It was the first time he'd really seen her eyes. Before he could analyze them, she looked away and turned off the music. "I didn't hear you come in."

Well, it was his house. It wasn't like he had to announce himself. "I just came in. I hope you're hungry." He held up the meat to show her then noticed her blank expression. "I can go fishing tomorrow if you don't like it." Knowing his luck, she'd probably be a vegetarian.

"What is it?" she asked, her head cocking to the side in confusion.

"Rabbit."

"Oh, I've never tried it, but I'm willing." At least she didn't look disgusted about eating wild game.

Drake came around the island and set the rabbit on the cutting board before washing his hands. It had already been cut up into sections, so he just needed to season the meat. Rabbit was lean and not a lot of flavor, so he combined several seasonings together.

"I didn't know when you were coming back."

He realized he hadn't told her. It had been a while since he'd had to tell anyone his every move. "I always come back before dark. Can't find the house otherwise."

"Oh. Well, I was planning on making a salad for dinner since I didn't see anything else. But we can have salad as a side." She indicated the ceramic bowl with a tossed salad inside. "Or there are potatoes if you don't like salad."

Drake turned to her, confused. "I didn't have any of that." He hadn't gone into town in a few weeks. He'd just been living off of what he'd killed.

"Connor and I stopped at some store, Millie's I think." Her features scrunched as she tried to remember the name of the store. "We got some groceries there. I brought them in with my bag."

Huh, so his brother had thought ahead. "What else did you get?"

"Not much. Some other veggies and canned goods. There are potatoes and onions. Connor said you hunted, so he didn't buy any meat. I just didn't see any in the fridge and so I didn't know where it was stored or if you had any. I hope this is okay." Her voice sounded hesitant as if she felt she had overstepped cooking and was worried she had offended him.

"Salad is fine."

Brooklyn nodded and got to work getting the supplies and chopping. Drake was used to it only being himself. It

felt strange to have another person in his house. Especially one cooking next to him.

There was an awkward silence in the house now. He was used to the silence, but this felt different. It was heavy. If they were going to be stuck together for the next few weeks, he should at least try to be civil to her.

“Thank you for cleaning. I should have done it ages ago but haven’t.” It wasn’t lack of time, he just didn’t care. It had only been him. It wasn’t like he had anyone to impress.

“It’s fine,” she said, her focus on the cutting board. While his kitchen was a decent size, the workspace was small, forcing them to stand side by side.

Brooklyn’s arm brushed against his sleeve more than once. He found himself wishing he could roll up the sleeve and feel her skin against his. She already feared him, he didn’t want to scare her further by showing his scars.

This close he could smell her shampoo. He didn’t know what it was, but it was floral and sweet. He wanted to lean closer and take a deeper whiff. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d smelled something so feminine. She must have brought that too.

“I’m just going to grill these up.” He’d felt the necessity to tell her and retreated outside. He needed to get a hold of himself.

The night air was cool and helped ease his overheated blood. You would think he was a teenager with his first

woman instead of thirty with years of experience under his belt.

The rabbit meat was ready sooner than he was, but without wanting to burn it, he put it on a plate and brought it back in. Brooklyn had two plates ready with salad on them so he could transfer a leg and breast meat from one plate to hers and dump the rest on his plate.

“I should have asked how much you wanted or what section.” He had just split it in two and gave them each equal portions, but maybe she didn’t want that much.

“Drake.” She touched his forearm, and it felt like he’d been struck by lightning. He was rooted on the spot. He felt the heat of her touch through his shirt. “It’s fine. I don’t think I’ll be able to eat all of this, but I’ll try.”

He nodded mutely.

They sat down and fell into another awkward silence. He really was terrible company. Once again, he thought Connor had made a mistake in asking him to watch Brooklyn.

Drake observed Brooklyn take a small forkful of breast meat and sniff it tentatively before taking a small bite. She looked up at him, shocked. “This is really good,” she said sounding surprised.

Drake couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, the seasonings help, otherwise it doesn’t have much flavor.” He dug into the rabbit leg. He would have liked to have found a deer, but this would serve for now.

“I expected it to taste like—” She seemed to struggle with words, her nose scrunching up as she appeared deep in thought. “I don’t know, rabbity?”

“Rabbity? Is that a word?”

“Well, I don’t know what else to call it.”

“Gamey?” he supplied

“I guess that’s a better description.”

“If I killed a deer or an elk, then yes, it would be more gamey, but small game usually doesn’t have a lot of flavor on their own.”

“Oh,” she said softly, eating more of her rabbit, and they fell back into silence.

“Connor told me you’re a secretary,” he blurted out, seeking another conversation-starter.

“Personal assistant,” she corrected before taking another bite of rabbit.

He watched her face, waiting to see disgust at eating the bloody meat, but she appeared to enjoy it. “What’s the difference?”

“Secretaries do paperwork for several people, whereas a personal assistant works for one person. Primarily a head of a company.” Her words were automatic, as if she’d had to explain this often.

“Is that something you always wanted to do?”

Brooklyn’s fork froze midway to her lips. Her eyebrows puckered like she was in deep thought. “No, I had planned to make a presentation to my boss tomorrow, I

guess today actually. It was hopefully going to get me out of being his personal assistant and into sales. That's what I wanted to do with my career." Brooklyn set down her fork, her gaze focused on her plate. "I guess all those dreams are gone now."

The crestfallen look on Brooklyn's face broke Drake's heart. He knew that look well. He wore it every day. All he'd ever wanted to do was be in the military. His job had been a dream come true that had come to a screeching halt in the blink of an eye. Now he was left floating in an abyss like driftwood in the sea with no sense of direction, just at the mercy of the current.

"Jameson will find who's behind this. You'll get your life back and do sales or whatever it is that you want to do."

Brooklyn's eyes lifted and met his. He sucked in a breath seeing them fully for the first time. She immediately lowered her gaze. "I think I'm going to call it a night. It's been a long twenty-four hours. I'm tired." She pushed her seat back and headed for the bedroom.

Shit, he'd offended her.

"Brooklyn, wait," he called after her, staying in his seat.

Brooklyn stopped but didn't face him.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't." She was lying. He'd seen the look on her face when he saw her eyes. How she'd reacted. She was sensitive about them for some reason. So they were

different, but they were still beautiful. It was a shame she hid them behind glasses and kept her gaze on the ground.

“Well, I’m sorry just the same.”

She nodded. “Good night.” She retreated to the bedroom and closed the door.

Well, that could have gone better.

Chapter 8

“Lawry,” Jameson called out, shocked to see the officer here instead of in the field. He’d expected the office building to be deserted so he could investigate without anyone’s knowledge.

The man in question spun around like Jameson had spooked him. “Jameson, what are you doing here?”

Jameson hadn’t talked to Lawry much over the years. He was a few years younger and newly promoted to detective.

“I was about to ask you the same. I thought the Banner case was closed as suicide. Why are you at his office?” Jameson kept his tone questioning instead of accusatory, not wanting to reveal his own reasons for being there.

“It is, but I figured I’d come to see if there was anything else to support the case. Something we might have missed. What about you?”

Years of training and on the job experience under his belt, Jameson quickly answered, “I just wanted to talk to his staff members and see if anyone had suspected anything leading up to the death. I was hoping there would be a list of employees here. I couldn’t get ahold of Banner’s

secretary.” He couldn’t say he was investigating it like a murder. The less people that knew about that, the better.

“Of course. Well, I’m done here, so I’ll leave you to it.” Lawry walked away, bumping slightly into his shoulder.

Jameson watched him leave. Lawry was a good officer and took his job seriously. Jameson wished all the other officers were like that. He may lack experience, but he had a good attitude and paid attention to detail.

Jameson pulled out the list of clients Brooklyn had given him. It was lengthy. Who knew Banner worked with that many people in a few short months? The potential enemy list was long, and it was going to take a while to get through it. Hopefully where Connor had stashed Brooklyn, she would be safe for a while.

Using the logins Brooklyn had given him and following the instructions to get to the client list, Jameson pulled up the names. Retrieving a flash drive out of his inner coat pocket, he downloaded the files. While he waited, Jameson looked around Brooklyn’s desk. It was so neat and organized. Nothing out of place. Even her stapler and scotch tape dispenser were even with each other. His gaze snagged on a framed photo next to the monitor of Brooklyn and Morgan with their arms slung around each other, both grinning ear to ear at the camera.

They were dressed up in what looked like Halloween costumes. Brooklyn looked like Where’s Waldo and Morgan a fairy princess, her hair was in soft blonde curls. Her face adorned in pounds of makeup making it look bright and

sparkly. Not that she needed it. Morgan had a natural beauty that had first captivated him years ago.

Seeing her sent a pang to his heart. After she'd broken up with him, he'd disposed of all photos from her. Thinking it would purge her from his system. He worked more hours to keep himself busy and his mind away from her. It had been over a year since she'd left him, and he still missed her every day.

Would he see her because he was working Brooklyn's case? Would she call him for updates? He shouldn't want to hear from her. She'd left him. Her arguments had been sound, but that didn't take the sting out of her dumping him. Their relationship had been far from perfect, but he thought what they had was special. Obviously he'd been wrong.

A pop-up on the screen alerted him that the download was complete. Jameson pulled his thoughts away from Morgan and back to the case. Someone on this drive could be responsible for Banner's death.

While heading back to his car, Jameson couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Jameson's eyes scanned his surroundings, but he didn't see anyone. The parking lot was empty. Thinking it was nothing, Jameson got in his car. Just out of the corner of his eye, he saw something—or should he say someone...

Jameson only got a quick glance at them before they disappeared into the trees, not enough to get a description. He debated following but knew the person would be long

gone before he was out of the car. This case was getting more interesting. He was glad he'd had the foresight to send Brooklyn away.

~

His boss wasn't going to be happy. Not only was he no closer to finding what his boss wanted, but the woman was gone without a trace. None of her information was in the system. No name. No address. By the time he'd gotten off the phone with his boss, the woman had disappeared. Even the report was now missing.

He didn't know who'd taken her. Jameson knew though. He'd been the one interviewing her. Did he suspect the truth? He hoped not. Jameson was a good cop. He didn't want to have to kill him if he didn't have to, but if he started poking his nose into things that didn't concern him, he wouldn't have a choice.

Jameson was the only lead he had to finding her. He just needed to figure out where Jameson had stashed her. If not, Plan B.

Chapter 9

Brooklyn rolled over in bed and stretched out her arms and legs. Her fingers and toes spread out as wide as they could go. Ah, so much better. Morning sunlight streamed through the curtains, lighting the room. She glanced at her watch, her eyes widening in shock. It was almost eight o'clock. She never slept that late. The past twenty-four hours just must have caught up with her.

Now she felt refreshed and ready for the day. Only she didn't know what to do. All of her life, she'd had a plan or something to occupy her. Now she had nothing. If she was going to be stuck like this for the next few months, she'd go out of her mind.

Cleaning Drake's cabin had helped take her mind off things, but now what? She didn't have her laptop, so she couldn't work. Maybe Drake could give her a direction. A project he needed help with. She was a woman used to being busy.

Brooklyn's eyes drifted to the closed door. Drake was somewhere on the other side of it. His expression at seeing her eyes was still burnt in her memories. A reaction she'd seen more than once. A mix of horror and fascination. A reminder of how different she was.

Well, she was going to have to face him sooner or later. She couldn't hide in this bedroom until Connor gave

the all-clear. Her bladder was telling her that she couldn't hide in here forever either.

After a shower and a change of clothes, Brooklyn felt rejuvenated. Now it was time for coffee. The substance of life.

A cup and a note were waiting for her on the kitchen counter. Drake informed her that he was outside doing chores and to do whatever she wanted.

Well, wasn't he generous.

Brooklyn filled her cup and stepped out onto the porch. She couldn't hold in the sigh as she scanned the beautiful landscape around her. It truly was breathtaking here. Growing up in the country looked nothing like this. It was flat, dry, and barren. Here there were mountains and lush forests teeming with life.

She smiled against the rim of her cup thinking how much Morgan would hate it here. The woman hated nature. She was a city girl at heart. The beach was as close as she liked to get to nature. Even then, she complained if a fish swam too close to her. She could be such a girly girl at times.

Brooklyn could hardly call herself a nature enthusiast, but she did enjoy hiking when she had the opportunity. Now was as good a time as any. It wasn't like she had anything else to do. After she finished her coffee, she'd go explore.

Speaking of Drake, as if her thoughts had conjured him, the man in question walked across the drive toward

what looked like a storage shed. His focus was on the shed and he didn't see her. Was it her or did his hair not look as shaggy as yesterday? Even his shirt looked clean.

Her eyes perused the rest of his form, appreciating his powerful-looking thighs straining against his jeans as his long strides carried him across the ground. Once again he wore a loose long-sleeved shirt that did nothing to hide the sinew of muscles caged underneath.

It couldn't be comfortable. It was a warm summer day. Even she was wearing a tank top and already feeling flush.

Does that have more to do with the man than the weather?

He was handsome. Any woman with eyes could see that. The Weston men were all good looking. The scar across his cheek didn't deter from that. It made him look more rugged and dangerous.

Drake came back from the shed heading straight for the house. He was so absorbed in his own thoughts, he didn't notice her until he was on the porch. He turned to look at her, and her eyes dropped to her feet. He may have already seen them, but his reaction wasn't an experience she wanted to repeat again anytime soon. "Morning." His voice was deep and gravelly.

"Morning," she mumbled.

"How did you sleep?"

"Great, thank you." Better than she had in years. She didn't know if she could blame it on the soft bed or the exhaustion of the previous two days. "I almost feel guilty.

I'm usually an early riser. Up with the sun." She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a full night's sleep. Mr. Banner was usually calling her for something, or her brain wouldn't quiet for long. She was plotting out her day.

"You deserve it after everything that happened."

"Where did you sleep?" There was only one bedroom so the options were limited.

"On the couch," he said as if it weren't a big deal and had happened more than once.

"Oh, that couldn't have been comfortable. It's your house; you should take the bed. I'll take the couch." It was only fair for forcing him to take her in.

"You'll stay in the bedroom." It sounded like a command, as if his word was law. "That way if anyone breaks in, I'm the first line of defense. It's hard to protect you if I'm in the bedroom and you're in the living room."

That made sense.

"Besides, the couch has a pullout bed. It's not so bad."

"Good, I'd hate to think I was putting you out."

"Don't sweat it."

"This place is really something. Have you had it long?"

"A couple years, but it's been in the family longer. My grandpa gave it to me, but I never had much time to come here until recently; now I have all the time in the world to fix it up." He sounded bitter about that. As if he didn't want

to have to fix it up. Which was a shame. This place was incredible. It was like its own hidden world.

“I’m sure a place like this needs quite a few repairs.” It wasn’t like there was a town close by to call a handyman or get supplies. The closest town was almost an hour away. Not exactly convenient.

“Oh yeah. The roof, plumbing, keeping animals out. It’s a full-time job.”

“Well, I’m not one to sit around and be idle. So if you need help with anything, I’d be happy to assist.”

Drake leaned against the porch frame, his hands clasped in front of him. His eyes were studying her.

“What?” Why was he looking at her like that?

“Do you know anything about construction?” His eyebrows raised in question.

Brooklyn planted her fists on her hips. “No, but I can use a hammer and nails. It’s not rocket science.” She was adaptable.

Drake laughed. “You don’t have the first clue what to do. You’d hurt yourself or me.”

“It’s a hammer, not a bulldozer.”

“Both would be dangerous in your city hands.” A bulldozer she’d drive off the mountain and a hammer she could smash herself or him. Connor wouldn’t be happy with him if she got injured on his watch.

Brooklyn glared laser beams at him. “I’m not that inept. You can teach me. I’m sure someone had to teach

you.” One didn’t get those muscles by being idle. Her gaze fell between them, and she gasped. “Oh my god, you’re bleeding.”

Drake lifted his hands. They were covered in blood and gouges. He walked into the cabin without a backward glance.

Chapter 10

Drake stomped into the bathroom and washed the blood from his hands. There were several scratches and bite marks from the animal's struggles, but they weren't life threatening. Using soap and a good scrubbing, he cleaned his wounds.

Once clean, he stood with his hands braced on the sink.

Her mention of blood had broken whatever spell she'd cast over him and reminded him of what he was. A killer. His hands were stained in blood that no amount of washing would ever cleanse.

What had he been thinking joking with Brooklyn? Teasing her. But when she offered to help him, he couldn't help but laugh. Even in street clothes, she was still a city girl. She didn't belong in the mountains any more than he did in the city.

He needed to keep his distance from her. He was too volatile, too broken. What had Connor been thinking when he asked him to guard her? Maybe it was his way of pulling Drake from the abyss he skirted the edge of. Hoping that keeping Brooklyn safe would give him a purpose again and ease the anger.

He laughed without humor. Nothing could help him. The military found him useless. Even his family didn't know

what to do with him. His grandfather had suggested coming out to the cabin to heal. Once he saw the state it was in, he started fixing it.

It made him feel good building something from nothing. He'd always been good with his hands. But he couldn't hide here forever. He was thirty. Hardly old enough to retire. He had some money saved up, but it wouldn't last forever.

But what could he do? What was he without his career? The one thing in life he found pleasure in had been ripped away from him. The constant reminder of all he'd lost visible for all the world to see.

Most veterans wore their scars like badges of honor. They were hurt serving their country. Not him. His scars were a result of his failing to watch his flank. A lesson to never let his guard down.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. The scar glared back at him. He could hear his tormentor's laughs as he screamed in pain as the knife sliced through his skin. Rage consumed him, coursing through his veins, fueling his anger. His hands curled into fists. The urge to smash his fist into the mirror rode him hard.

His anger was shattered when the bathroom door swung open, almost connecting with the side of his face. Brooklyn stormed in like a fire-breathing dragon ready to do battle.

"What the hell?" he snarled like a caged animal.

"You're hurt. I want to help."

“It’s a scratch.” Had barely broken the skin. “I can take care of myself.”

“That could get infected.”

“I cleaned it.”

“Just let me help.” She huffed, sounding exasperated with him.

“I don’t need it.” The only woman who’d ever fussed about him was his mother. The attention made him feel uncomfortable. Especially over something so minor.

They both glared at each other. It was a silent battle royale. Neither blinking. Brooklyn caved first, throwing her hands up in disgust. “Fine, die of infection. See if I care. It’s not like I need you to keep me alive.” She spun around and marched out of the room.

“Where are you going?” he called after her.

“Out,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Fine, just remember what I said.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t fall off the mountain. As if I’m a dumb human being who can’t watch where she’s going. Ass.” The last word she mumbled, but he heard her just the same.

It was true. He was an ass. All she’d tried to do was help, and he’d pushed her away. Drake had been self-sufficient for as long as he could remember. It was why he’d been so good at reconnaissance. He was given orders and expected to carry them out. He didn’t need someone holding his hand or watching his back.

If someone had watched your back, you wouldn't have been caught.

Or they would have ended up in the same boat as him.

He should go after her. Not only to apologize, but to keep an eye on her. Not that he worried about her falling down the mountain, but there were dangers in the forest.

He bandaged up his hands and went outside, not at all surprised Brooklyn wasn't to be found. She was rightly pissed off at him and needed space. He darted back inside, grabbing his rifle before looking for her tracks. Years of honed skills picked them up easily and followed. Not that she'd tried hiding them. She didn't seem to know the first thing in trying to cover her tracks. He would watch her from a distance and only engage if needed.

Chapter 11

“Don’t fall off the mountain,” Brooklyn mimicked in a deep voice. “What an ass,” she grumbled as she stomped through the forest with no destination in mind. She just wanted to get far away from Mr. Grumpy Pants.

A voice in the back of her mind told her not to venture too far. The last thing she needed was to get lost and have Drake rescue her.

“Oh, he’d love that. Give him another excuse to think you’re dim-witted.” The man thought she was so dumb, she couldn’t find her way out of a paper bag.

Brooklyn was a far cry from a backwoodsman, but she knew how to put one foot in front of the other without falling down or walking off of a cliff edge in this case.

She didn’t know why his attitude bothered her so much. It wasn’t like Brooklyn was a stranger to moody men. Mr. Banner had had more than one angry outburst, not that he’d ever insulted her intelligence.

For some reason Drake’s attitude toward her got under her skin. His mood swings ranged from hot to cold in a second. He’d be pleasant to be around one moment and ready to bite her head off the next. God forbid you offered to help him.

She’d been concerned about his wounds and had only wanted to help. The gouges looked deep and painful, but

he'd brushed her off as if she were no more than an annoying piece of lint on his shirt sleeve.

Why had Connor thought it was a good idea for her to stay here? The man looked more than capable of keeping her alive, but Drake didn't seem to appreciate company. He looked like he'd rather be left alone. Not the best living situation for someone supposed to be keeping her alive.

Brooklyn was a firm believer in self-sufficiency, but everyone needed help every once and a while. She really wished she had her phone and could call Morgan. She'd be able to give her some advice on what to do. But she couldn't. Brooklyn was alone, so it was up to her.

Brooklyn stopped in the middle of a clearing and took a deep breath. She took another as the aromatic pines filled her lungs. She closed her eyes and listened to the birds chirping overhead. Squirrels yelling at each other as they darted through the forest.

She let the peace and calm sooth her. Much better. She couldn't get this back home. The city was always full of noise. Traffic, people. It was vibrant, and she loved it. It was full of life. She liked it out here too though. The quietness with just nature around you. It helped her clear her thoughts better.

"Alright, Brooklyn. You're a planner. All you need to do is come up with a plan that works for both of you." She could be rational about this. Her life had been turned upside down, and she was hiding to save herself, but that didn't mean she had to be miserable. She just needed to come up with a plan that would make everyone happy.

They couldn't exactly ignore each other. The cabin was small, and he was her protector. They were forced be around each other. She was adult enough not to give him the silent treatment. That would make the unforeseen future excruciating. Tiptoeing around each other as if they were walking on eggshells.

The thought made her laugh. She couldn't imagine Drake tiptoeing around her. She had no doubt he could be stealthy. She'd seen him disappear in the woods yesterday. Connor had told her that he was in reconnaissance. The man was capable of tiptoeing. But he wasn't going to do that around his own house.

Her humor vanished when a twig snapped behind her. She scanned the tree line around her but didn't see anything. It could have been a rabbit. Her heart began to race as her eyes darted around her, looking for the source of the sound. That's when she became acutely aware of how silent the forest was.

The birds that had been chirping only a moment ago were silent. Even the squirrels weren't bickering. That couldn't be good. The best course of action would be to slowly back up the way she'd come and get back to the cabin.

Only as she looked around, she couldn't tell which way that was. Everything looked the same. There were several openings into the trees from the trail. How did she know which one to use?

Tracks, the thought suddenly came to her. Surely she'd left footprints on the ground. She wasn't a stomper

like some people, but the earth was soft and she was sure left an imprint. There.

Brooklyn took a step when she heard a huffing sound behind her. It sounded big. Slowly she pivoted on her heel and looked over her shoulder. She regretted that decision when she saw a grizzly bear coming out of the trees about thirty feet away from her. “Oh shit,” she whispered.

It was huge. It was close to five foot on all fours. She didn't relish the idea of him towering over her when he rose to his hind feet.

The bear took slow measured steps as if it had all the time in the world. It growled, its massive paw swiped at the ground kicking up dirt.

Okay, think.

Bear encounters 101: don't run. Check.

What next?

“Stop, drop, and roll,” she whispered. “No, dummy, that's a fire. Come on, Brooklyn, think,” Brooklyn whispered to herself angrily. She should have had Connor or Drake give her some pointers if she ran into wildlife out here. She hadn't planned on encountering anything more dangerous than a squirrel.

“Brooklyn...” Brooklyn didn't know if she should be elated or irritated Drake had shown up. She was glad he was there, but she wasn't looking forward to the ‘I told you so.’ “Don't move.”

“Really? I'd thought I'd race him back to the cabin.” Fear was making her snippy.

“Move two steps to your left.”

That was an odd request. “Why?”

“I’m going to shoot it,” he said in a ‘duh’ tone as if it should be obvious.

“No, don’t shoot it.” Her voice rose. “Don’t you have some bear spray or something?” There was no reason to kill him for minding his own business.

“I don’t carry bear spray.” He almost sounded offended when she suggested it. “When I see them, I kill them. This one will make a nice blanket come winter anyway.” She detected humor in his tone. He was excited about killing this bear.

Forgetting about the bear for a moment, Brooklyn whirled on Drake and pinned him with a death glare. “Don’t shoot the bear,” she repeated through gritted teeth. “What if it’s a mother and has cubs?” She had kept thinking of it as a he, but it could be a female. She didn’t know how to tell the difference.

Drake grumbled something under his breath. “Fine, just slowly walk toward me.”

“What if it charges?” She looked over her shoulder at it. It hadn’t moved any closer, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t leap toward them any second.

“It won’t,” he said confidently.

“How do you know?” Was he a bear whisperer? Did he know what they were thinking?

“Do you always question everything?” he asked sounding exasperated. As if her question was annoying him.

Brooklyn planted her fists on her hips. Her own irritation rising. “Oh, I’m sorry if I like to have reassurance that my moving isn’t going to result in my being mauled to death.”

The bear made a huffing sound that had Brooklyn turning back around to face it. She squatted down and kept her eyes on the ground. She knew looking an animal in the eyes was a sign of aggression.

“It’s not showing signs of aggression, yet. It’s making huffing sounds instead of growling, and it’s not standing up. So, if you don’t make eye contact and back up slowly, it shouldn’t think of you as a threat and simply leave us alone.”

Oh. “Well, that wasn’t so hard to say, was it?” Drake didn’t respond. She glanced at him over her shoulder to make sure he hadn’t left her to face the bear alone since she kept questioning him. His focus was on the bear, his hands gripped the rifle, ready to kill the bear if it so much as made one more step close to them. Despite the danger she was in, she didn’t want him to kill the bear. It was only doing what nature intended. She couldn’t fault it for that.

Brooklyn backed toward Drake, her heart in her throat the whole time. She didn’t breathe until she felt Drake’s hand on her back.

“Just a little more and then you’re safe.” His voice was calm and smooth, doing a lot to soothe her nerves.

Brooklyn nodded and kept moving until she was back under the canopy of the trees. The bear prowled from side to side but never came after them. Once they were well covered by the forest and could no longer see the bear, Drake grabbed her arm and started walking. Her mind was in a haze as Drake guided her through the woods to the cabin with sure steps as if he took this path a million times. She'd never been so happy to see the cabin.

As soon as she reached the top steps, Brooklyn's legs felt like Jell-O that would no longer support her and buckled. Drake didn't let her fall. His arms wrapped securely around her waist, and he carried her inside and eased her onto the couch.

Brooklyn couldn't halt the tremors racking through her body. She had been through such trauma over the past few days, and it seemed as if it was all finally catching up with her. Hot tears burned her eyes. Brooklyn hated the weakness; she normally kept a tight rein on her emotions, but it was as if an old festering wound had been cut open and was finally being purged.

She cried until there was nothing left of her and then she felt drained and exhausted. Drake just held her close, giving her silent comfort. What he must think of her. Weeping all over him. He probably thought she was a weakling.

Brooklyn sat up, using the back of her hand to wipe the tears away. Good thing she didn't wear makeup. She'd look like a sodden racoon. "I'm sorry about that. I don't

know what came over me.” Brooklyn took a breath, realizing her tremors had faded. She felt better. Lighter.

“It’s the stress of the past few days catching up with you.” He said it so matter of fact, as if it were an everyday occurrence. “I’ll be right back,” he added and disappeared from sight. She didn’t know where he’d gone, but he came back a few minutes later with a coffee mug in hand, steam rising from the top as he held it out to her. “It’s tea,” he explained.

“Thank you.” Brooklyn grasped it gratefully and took a small sip. It tasted sweet and minty. “Go ahead and say it.” They might as well get it over with.

“Say what?” he asked, sounding confused as he took a seat next to her. The couch was large enough for three, but he pressed himself right against her. Their hips gently pressing together.

“That you were right and I was wrong. Though to be fair, I didn’t tumble over a cliff edge.” She made sure to point it out. That was very important.

“No, you did not.” He chuckled then grew serious. “Brooklyn, I never should have said those things. All I can say is I’m an ass who speaks before he thinks. I prejudged you unfairly. I’m sorry.”

Be still her heart. An apology. “I shouldn’t have wandered off so far.” If he was going to apologize, she should too. “I’m sorry I tried helping with your wounds.”

Her eyes strayed to his hands. He hadn’t bothered with bandages but left the wounds open and exposed. She

thought about suggesting he bandage them to stave off infection, but she didn't want to break their delicate truce. "May I ask what happened to your hands?"

Drake lifted one of his hands and turned it over palm up. There were just as many scratches across his palm as the back of his hands. "An animal."

"What kind of animal did that?"

"A rabbit."

Brooklyn gasped. "A cute little rabbit did that?" She found that hard to believe. They were so cute and fluffy. And small. She remembered the one they had eaten. There was hardly enough meat for the two of them. Then the scene from Monty Python and the Holy Grail came to mind.

"I warned you. Oh, it's just a harmless little bunny."

"Cute they may look, but they have teeth and nails that can do some damage."

She opened her mouth to ask what torment he'd done to the animal but stopped herself. Brooklyn didn't know Drake well, but tormenting animals didn't seem like something he'd do. "So why did the rabbit take its vengeance on you?"

"It didn't appreciate me saving it from a trap."

Not only had he rescued her today but a rabbit. The more time she spent with Drake, the more she didn't understand him. He was a very complex man. "Why did you save it? Don't you eat it?" Why would he save the food he intended to eat?

“Yes, it was a baby. Not enough meat. Didn’t seem right to kill him when I can wait a month or two for when he can be more than an appetizer.”

“That was very kind of you.”

“The rabbit didn’t seem to think so. Didn’t even say thank you.”

Neither had she.

Her eyes rose up to meet his unflinching gaze. “Well, on behalf of myself and the rabbit, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His eyes bore into hers as if he could see into her very soul. No one had ever looked at her with such intensity before. It was too much. She dropped her gaze back down.

“Brooklyn.”

Why did she have to like the sound of her name when he said it so much? His voice was deep and hypnotic. It made her think of carnal things. “Yes?”

“Look at me.”

She’d rather not.

Brooklyn was acutely aware when he leaned closer. The couch springs squeaked from the movement. The cushion dipped, pressing their thighs closer together. She heard the sound of his breathing. She could even smell him. He smelled of pine and all man.

“Please look at me.”

How could she refuse him when he’d asked so nicely? Brooklyn’s eyes lifted and held his stare.

Her mouth opened to explain her condition. That it was called heterochromia iridum. The doctors couldn't explain why one was icy blue and the other golden brown, but no words came out. It was as if his stare had rendered her speechless.

Her eyes got her a lot of stares. She remembered people teasing her as a kid and being called a cyborg. A freak of nature. Mr. Banner and Morgan had been some of the few people that didn't seem to care when they saw them.

Morgan told her she needed to be more confident about herself and embrace her differences. Brooklyn didn't like feeling different. She went out of her way to hide her eyes. Keeping them downcast and hiding them behind thick-framed glasses even when she could see perfectly without them.

His eyes looked deeply into hers. "Don't ever hide your eyes." His words spread a heat into her lower belly. Her heart fluttered against her ribcage.

As if pulled by a magnet, Brooklyn leaned forward. Drake mirroring her. Their lips touched. Just a butterfly touch, but she felt it all the way to her toes.

The next kiss was firmer. Her hand reached up to cup his scarred cheek. His powerful jaw clenched under her palm. Her finger skated over the angry-looking scar. She couldn't imagine the pain he'd suffered receiving it.

Drake pulled back as if shocked. In that instant, she knew the moment was shattered. He was retreating back

into himself. The intensity of his eyes was muted now. The soft corners around his lips hardened.

“Drake, I—”

Drake didn't wait to hear her apology. Without a word, he stood up and walked out of the cabin. His gun slung over his shoulder. Brooklyn remained on the couch, the mug still clutched in one hand. Her lips still tingling from where they'd touched. She stared at the door, willing him to come back to let her apologize. She should have known he was just as sensitive about his scar as she was about her eyes.

She thought about going after him but didn't want a repeat encounter with a bear. Drake might not be there this time to save her. She shuddered thinking about death by mauling. It wouldn't be pretty.

She'd leave him be. Give him time to cool. He'd come back. Probably not until dark. That would give her enough time to make a plan on how they would co-exist until Connor came back. Though at the moment, she hoped it wasn't for a while. Suddenly she wasn't in a rush to get back to her life in the city.

Chapter 12

Drake called himself ten kinds of stupid as he trudged through the forest. His feet leading him while his mind churned. Any animal in the vicinity would sense his ire and steer clear of him.

What had he been thinking kissing Brooklyn? She was a gorgeous woman, any red-blooded man would want to kiss her. The woman could tempt a saint, and he was a far cry from one of those. One touch of her lips and he'd been like a starved man in the desert and she a tall glass of water. But then she'd touched his scar and all thoughts shattered, fixating on the stark reminder of why he was hiding here.

The reminder of his failing. Of all he'd lost.

Drake growled low in his throat, wanting to punch something. Curse that damn scar. It had stolen so much from him. Now he couldn't even enjoy the touch of woman without hearing that taunting laugh in the back of his mind.

He couldn't get away from Brooklyn fast enough. To run away from the laughing—as if he could. She didn't deserve to see that ugliness.

Drake came through a clearing to a river. He came here often to fish and just clear his mind. Squatting down, he rolled up his sleeves and cupped the cool water and

splashed his face, hoping it would cool his ire. He reached down to do it again, but his gaze snagged on his scars.

Dark lines scissored across his wrists from the ropes that had bound him for three months. They had cut into his skin so deeply, the wounds had healed with the rope inside. Doctors had had to surgically remove them.

More scars snaked up his arms. He had just as many on his legs. His back was the worst. It had been flayed open from numerous whippings and other tortures. A hot poker had been a favorite tool to use. The skin was raised and leathery. He'd never forget the smell of burnt flesh.

As he looked out at the tranquil setting around him, his thoughts drifted to Brooklyn. Of mismatched eyes that reminded him of the bright blue sky above him and the rich soil and mountains beneath his feet. Heaven and Earth.

He could still feel the taste of her on his lips. Feel her heat seeping into him. Her soft hands clinging to him as she leaned on him for comfort. Drake couldn't remember the last time anyone had turned to him for comfort. It felt good to be needed. Too good. It had been so long. He had missed this feeling. He didn't realize how much he'd missed feeling needed and making a difference until it had been gone.

It was like a drug. He wanted more of that feeling. More of her. Damn his brother for knowing what he needed to finally pull his head out of his own ass.

Drake looked back down at his reflection in the water. His scar stuck out like a beacon. He touched it, remembering the feel of Brooklyn's hand on it. The look in

her eyes as she did. There was no look of horror or disgust. Only tenderness.

It was then he realized, he was just as sensitive about his scars as she was about her eyes. The fear and rejection they both felt when others looked at them. He didn't see an imperfection with Brooklyn's eyes. They were unique, different.

She had tried showing him the same gesture when she touched him. That his scar didn't bother her, and yet he ran like a coward. He was such a hypocrite. Telling her to not hide herself while he hid behind his long sleeves and prickly temper.

"No more," he said out loud. He couldn't hide who he was or what had happened to him. He may not like the scars, but he was stuck with them the rest of his life.

Drake wouldn't fail her like he had himself. He would keep her safe. Starting by going back. He shouldn't have left her alone like he did. There was a remote possibility of someone finding her here, but his job was to keep her safe. He couldn't do that if he was hiding away from her. He had to go back.

Feeling his steps lighter than they had been in years, Drake picked his way through the path back to the house. He was anxious to get back home to Brooklyn. The first thing on the agenda was to apologize. Not only for kissing her, but for leaving her. Not that he was sorry for kissing her. It was the best thing that had happened to him in years.

He was no stranger to women, but their encounters were brief and forgettable. They'd been nothing more than to blow off steam. Brooklyn was not. As much as she tried to keep herself in the background, she stood out like a beacon. When this was over and she went back to her life, he would always remember her. There wasn't a part of his cabin he wouldn't see her. His sheets would smell of her for days. His shower drain clogged with her hair. Before long, she'd complain about him leaving the toilet seat up.

The thought brought a smile to his face. He hadn't realized how alone he'd been until she arrived. In one day, she'd made his cabin feel like a home.

Home. He hadn't had a place to call home since he was teenager about to leave for basic. The army kept him mobile so much, he never had a chance to plant roots. This place felt more like home than any other.

Since he'd gotten out, he'd been doing repairs and making it his own. He could survive here through all seasons. Town wasn't too far; he could go there for supplies when needed. He wasn't hurting for funds. Always being on the go, Drake hadn't spent a lot of money, so all his paychecks just piled up. Not that he wanted to sit around idle. He could always help Connor from time to time when he grew bored and his projects were done.

He still didn't think he was cut out for protection work, but so far it was working out. Brooklyn was safe and tucked inside his cabin. He bet she wouldn't be outside anytime soon after that bear encounter.

Drake walked through the clearing, his cabin just in front of him, and came to a screeching halt. He closed his eyes, sure he was seeing things, and opened them again, but the image was still there.

Brooklyn stood in front of his wood pile attempting to chop wood. Her hair was up in a ponytail, stray ends just brushing her shoulders. He watched mesmerized as she brought the axe down, missing completely, and connected with the ground. The action bent her in half, pushing her ass out. Her perfectly round ass that would fit in his hands like a glove.

This woman was going to be the death of him. If she didn't kill herself with the axe first.

Chapter 13

Brooklyn tossed her hair over her sweat soaked shoulders as she cursed the log in front of her. She'd been trying to chop it in half for the past five minutes and all she'd accomplished was wood chips in her eyes and a sore back and arms.

This looked so much easier in the movies. Where was Captain America when you needed him? The man could just pull the logs apart with his bare hands.

She couldn't even put a dent in this log. The damn thing wouldn't hold still for her to chop it. It kept rolling away or the axe would get stuck in it.

It was a good thing she was in the middle of nowhere and no one could see her complete and utter failure at chopping wood. Drake would just use this against her as another reason she belonged in the city and not in the wilderness.

Maybe she should have tried something easier at first other than swinging an axe, like a hammer and nails.

“Need a hand?”

Startled, Brooklyn whirled around, the blade swinging with her momentum. She gasped in horror at how close Drake stood behind her. She was going to hit him; she couldn't stop herself.

Drake had much faster reflexes than her and grabbed the handle below the blade before it could injure him.

“I am so sorry.” She released the axe as if it were on fire.

“For butchering the wood or for trying to cut me in half?”

Brooklyn opened her mouth to protest when she noticed the crook at the corner of his mouth and the twinkle in his eyes. He was teasing her. “I wouldn’t have done much damage to you; the blade is dull.”

Drake stepped around her and raised the axe over his head then brought it down in the center of the log, splitting it in half.

“Show off,” she mumbled, upset he could do it so easily. She really had tried.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Really?” He was willing to teach her instead of criticize?

“Come here.” He maneuvered her right in front of him. His chest pressed against her back. “Stand like so.” He used his foot to hook the inside of hers and situated her stance further out.

Oh my.

Brooklyn was trying to concentrate on what he was showing her—she really was—but the kiss was still fresh in her mind, and now they were pressed up together from

pelvis to chest. She couldn't tell you her own name right now.

“Now, hold the axe like so.” Placing the handle back in her hands, he reached around her placing his hands over hers and showing her the proper way to grip it.

Drake released her long enough to put a new log on the stump and came back up behind her. “On the count of three, we'll strike. One...two...three.” She felt him inhale behind her. Brooklyn took in a breath to match and released it as they brought the axe down together, cutting the log in two.

Drake stepped away and came to stand next to her. “Now try it on your own.”

Brooklyn felt the pressure was on now. She lined herself up like Drake had instructed and lifted up the axe. Brooklyn could feel Drake's eyes on her. Watching her every move. Tuning him out, she brought it down.

Brooklyn stared in shock as the log spit in two. She'd done it. She couldn't believe it. She looked up at Drake, a broad smile on her face. His face split into a grin of his own.

“Good job.”

Brooklyn bit her bottom lip and looked back at the work she'd done. She'd never felt so accomplished before. Cutting a log in half shouldn't seem such a big deal, but it was something she could say she'd done on her own. It wasn't like all the proposals she wrote up for Mr. Banner for him to use the credit for.

“Thank you.” She wasn’t just thanking him for showing her how to cut wood. It was so much more than that. She thanked him for giving her a bit of independence.

“You’re welcome.” He took a step closer to her. “I’m sorry, Brooklyn. I’m sorry for leaving you alone. I’m sorry for being a dick all the time. And I’m sorry for kissing you.”

Her elation died a quick fiery death. She wasn’t sorry he’d kissed her. It had been brief, but it was one of the best kisses she’d ever had. If she were honest with herself, she hoped it would happen again. Obviously that wasn’t happening now if he was regretting it.

Brooklyn stiffened her spine and kept her features blank. She was no stranger to keeping her emotions bottled up and suppressed. “There’s nothing to apologize for.” She cleared her throat. “Do you need any more wood chopped up, or are there other projects you might need help with?”

“No,” he said gruffly then walked off toward the tree line. There was a small wooden structure there. She hadn’t explored it yet, so she didn’t know what was out there. Maybe it was the equivalent of his man cave. Whatever it was, it was rude of him to just walk away like that. Not that she was a stranger to his rapidly changing mood swings.

If he thought that she was going to be a good little guest and sit in the cabin and do nothing though, he had another thing coming.

Her eyes lifted to the sagging roof. She’d noticed a few dots of sunlight coming in through the ceiling of her bedroom. How hard could it be to patch up the roof? She saw a tool shed out back and a ladder resting against it.

She was going to prove to him that she could be useful and was capable of more than just cleaning and organizing the cabin.

Brooklyn was second guessing her decision to take on the roof as she pulled out the rickety wooden ladder that looked about forty years old. It hadn't been protected from the elements, so the wood was rotten and stained black. Cracks ran along the rungs. Would this thing even support her weight?

Honestly, she was more worried about the roof supporting her weight than the ladder. It looked just as old and in as rough of shape. Brooklyn found a hammer and nails along with a few shingles. How hard could it be?

She tested her foot on the bottom rung, bouncing up and down. So far so good. She went a few rungs when she felt the ladder jostle. Her hands dug into the wood to hold on as she used her body to stop the movement. She was only eight rungs up—halfway there. She could either go back down or keep going.

This was a terrible idea. She was starting to get down when an angry voice boomed below her, “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Drake's sudden appearance startled her; she lost her footing and slipped. She still had a grip on the rung at eye level and her other foot on a rung, so she didn't fall, but it was enough to get her heart rate up.

“Shit,” Drake cursed then she heard him moving.

“What are you doing?” She looked over her shoulder to see him coming up the ladder behind her.

“Saving you from your stupidity.”

“Are you crazy? This thing will never support both of our weights.”

Drake climbed the ladder like he was part monkey until he was right under her, his eyes glaring daggers up at her. “I’m crazy? I’m not the one climbing a thirty-year-old ladder.”

“Well, you are now,” she pointed out.

“Only to save you. What the hell were you thinking climbing it in the first place?”

“I was trying to fix the roof.”

Drake rolled his eyes. “Oh all the stupid, idiotic—” He stopped berating her when the wood cracked under them.

“Perhaps we can continue this stimulating conversation on the ground?” she asked, raising one eyebrow.

Brooklyn could have sworn she saw steam coming from his nostrils. “Fine,” he grumbled and stepped back down, waiting with his hands planted on his hips.

Brooklyn faced the house so he didn’t see her roll her eyes. He looked like an angry parent that had just caught his kid sneaking out of the house or something.

She was almost back down to the ground when the last rung broke under her foot. Her hands slipped, not prepared for her equilibrium to be tilted and she started to

fall, but strong hands snatched her before she hit the ground.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“I’m fine.” Her hands burned, and she was sure there was a splinter or two, but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction that he had been right. Again.

“Good, care to explain to me why you were attempting—and I say that word loosely—to get on the roof on an old ladder. Don’t you know you could have broken your neck?”

“I tested out some of the rungs. It’s not my fault you don’t have proper equipment.”

Drake quirked an eyebrow at her. “If you had asked or looked in the tool shed, I have a metal ladder hanging on the wall that’s brand new.”

“Oh,” she hadn’t looked in the tool shed that hard, “Then why is that ladder out?”

“It’s my grandpa’s. I just never got around to getting rid of it. It never crossed my mind someone would ever try to use it,” he replied sardonically. He really must enjoy pointing out all of her failings. She wasn’t off to a great start, but she could improve.

“Okay, I get it. I shouldn’t have been on the roof and using the stupid ladder. I’m sorry. Are you happy?”

“It’s not about being happy. My job is to keep you safe, and I can’t do that when you’re needlessly risking your pretty little neck.”

He thought her neck was pretty? Or she was?
Brooklyn mentally slapped herself. She should not be thinking about that. She didn't care what Drake thought of her.

"I don't like to sit around and be idle. I can only walk around so much. I need something to do."

"So you thought you would fix the roof?" His lip twitched like he was trying not to laugh. Brooklyn didn't hold back. It did sound funny when he said it out loud.

"I know I am not the construction type of girl, but at least I was trying."

"I'll give you that. Tell you what, I need to go into town. We need food, and I need some supplies. I want to build a better meat storage, and I need more shingles for the roof before the next rainstorm. How about you come with me?"

Brooklyn's eyes widened in shock. Was this a trick?
"You mean it? I can come with you? I'm not restricted to the grounds?"

"I need your help in picking out food. I'm not known for my selection."

That made her chuckle. She'd cleaned out the refrigerator. She knew he didn't eat much beyond meat and canned beans. She didn't mind meat, but she liked a little variety, and vegetables never hurt anyone.

"Have you ever thought of starting your own garden? Grow some corn or tomatoes."

“Can you really picture me farming?” he asked with a laugh.

Brooklyn eyed him up and down, trying to visualize him in overalls and a hat with a small shovel. A blush stained her cheeks at the heated look in his eyes. “No, I can’t.”

“We should get going. It takes about an hour to get to town, and I want to be home before it gets dark.”

“I’m ready to go.” It wasn’t like she had anything. No identification. Just some cash for emergencies.

“Maybe a jacket?” he suggested. “It could get cold.”

“I’m good.” It was a hot summer day. She didn’t know how Drake survived in long sleeves. She was sweating in a tank top.

He looked like he wanted to argue more but just headed off to the field toward the tree line instead. She followed behind him silently, not sure where they were going until he pulled back a green tarp and a truck was revealed.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to keep this closer to the house in the driveway?”

“I don’t drive into town often, so it’s easier to keep it out of the way.”

It wasn’t a new truck, but it wasn’t a thirty-year-old hunk of junk either like she’d seen of some farmer trucks in the past. It was well used with dents and scratches on it, but at least the bucket seat was comfortable and it had air conditioning. It was good enough for her. Not like she could

judge. She'd been driving the same car since high school. It was a little car that guzzled gas and leaked oil, but it got her from point A to point B.

“Can I ask you something?”

Brooklyn didn't miss the way Drake tensed next to her. “What's that?”

“Why did you move out here of all places?”

“What's wrong with this place?” he asked, glancing over at her out of the corner of his eye as they drove along the bumpy road. Drake drove with one hand on the steering wheel and the other resting on his lap.

“Nothing, it's beautiful, but you could pick anywhere in the world. Why a cabin in the middle of nowhere?”

Drake was silent for a moment. She could practically hear his thoughts turning. Just when she thought he wouldn't answer, he did. “When I got kicked out of the army, I felt lost and angry. I didn't have anywhere to go. I joined when I'd turned eighteen. I didn't want to move back in with my folks, and all my brothers had their own things going on; I didn't want to be a burden on them. Connor had suggested the cabin Grandpa gave me. It seemed like a perfect place to hide.”

Connor had mentioned he'd recently gotten out of the army. She recalled Drake's bitterness about having free time.

Maybe that's why you're here.

Maybe Drake needed her as much as she needed him. That's why Connor had sent her here. To give Drake a

purpose again. “So it was serendipitous.”

Drake’s lips pursed as he looked deep in thought. “I’ve never thought of it that way, but yeah,” he agreed, glancing over at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Do you think you’ll stay here or go somewhere else?”

“I like it here. I like the simplicity and working with my hands. I can actually sit back and relax instead of going off from location to location. I was never in one location for more than a few days.”

“That sounds lonely.”

“It was.” He nodded in agreement. “Though I didn’t think so at the time. I was young and enjoyed seeing the world. Not being tied down to one place.”

“I bet your family missed you.” An awkward silence fell over the cab. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.” She really needed to think before she voiced her thoughts sometimes. She didn’t know anything about him or his family other than Connor and Jameson. But it wasn’t like she knew if they were close or not.

“No, you’re fine,” he assured her, even giving her a lopsided grin. “My family has been trying to get me to come home for ages, but I never wanted to. Even now that I’m back, Connor is the only family member I’ve seen.”

That was so sad. Brooklyn couldn’t imagine going years without talking to her parents. She may not visit often, but she called every month to check in. “Is it just the three of you guys? You, Connor, and Jameson?”

“I’m sure my mom wishes.” Drake laughed. “There are seven of us. All boys.”

Brooklyn just gaped at him. Surely he must be joking. “Your poor mother.”

She expected him to be insulted by that statement, but he wasn’t. “I’m surprised we all survived to adulthood to be honest. We weren’t the easiest on her. She told us more than once, we’re the reason her hair turned white before she was forty.”

Brooklyn could imagine. Drake seemed like the troublemaker but blamed it on his siblings. Connor and Jameson seemed like the peacekeepers.

“Are any of you close with any of your siblings?” She’d grown up an only child and didn’t know what it was like to have siblings. The closest thing she had to one was Morgan.

“Connor, Jameson, Brock, and Macarthur are. The three started Weston Securities together.”

“What about your other two brothers?”

“Luther is still in the army, and Finn, the baby, just started pilot school.”

“So all boys and military.”

“Except for Jameson, the black sheep.” Drake chuckled. “He went straight into the police academy.”

“Still, your parents must be proud of all of you.” They all sounded so accomplished. Going after their dreams,

starting their own business after their careers in the armed services. She was jealous of them.

Drake shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal. "Enough about my family, what about yours? How many siblings do you have?"

"None, my parents didn't want kids. I was an oops." Drake gave her a sympathetic look she got often when she said she was an only child. "It wasn't all bad though," she assured him. "I had Morgan, my best friend. We met in kindergarten when kids were bullying me, and she threatened to beat them up."

Morgan was her best friend and like a sister. They had pretty much been inseparable their entire lives. She'd never felt lacking with siblings.

"I like your friend already."

Brooklyn smiled thinking about Morgan. She was a force to be reckoned with. Everything Brooklyn was too timid to be. She was loud and outspoken. Morgan wasn't afraid to hurt people's feelings. She told you how she felt. She was also a champion for those that didn't or couldn't stick up for themselves. Morgan didn't believe in injustice.

Brooklyn missed her so much. Morgan hadn't been happy about her going into WITSEC and living off-grid, but Connor had assured her that Brooklyn would be protected. Jameson hadn't spoken to her. Brooklyn thought he was still nursing a broken heart over Morgan dumping him.

It was a shame. They were perfect together. They were so different, but their differences were what made

them better people. Bringing them out of their comfort zones. Jameson had become more adventurous, and Morgan had mellowed out.

Morgan never told her why she'd broken up with him, and Brooklyn didn't ask. The break-up had upset Morgan just as much as him.

"Morgan is the best. I'm sure she's worried crazy about me."

"Do I need to fear for my life?"

"Only if she knows how to find you." Brooklyn was only teasing. Morgan was protective of her but knew she was in safe hands.

"Good thing only Connor knows where you are."

"Would he tell Jameson?" If Jameson knew, there was a chance Morgan would try to get the information out of him. She trusted Morgan to know where she was, but she didn't trust Morgan not to come charging to her rescue, and Brooklyn wasn't ready to end her time with Drake. Especially when he was being so agreeable and talkative.

Drake shook his head. "Connor takes protection very seriously. The less people who know where you are, the better. He's not going to risk telling Jameson and someone else learning where you are."

Just as she'd thought. "Have you heard from him or Jameson?" It had only been a day, but she wondered if there had been a break in the case yet. It felt so strange to be isolated and unable to communicate with the outside world,

to have to rely on Drake to be kept abreast of what was happening. She was used to being in the know.

“Anxious to get back to the city already?” There was an undertone in his voice that he wasn’t ready for her to leave so quickly either. He was up here all alone with just his thoughts to keep him company. Drake probably enjoyed the company as much as she did. Well, when he wasn’t calling her a dummy who walked off of mountains or all snarly.

“No, it’s nice getting a break from everything, though it does feel weird.” Uninterrupted sleep. No running around to make copies and coffee, setting up appointments and travel arrangements. It was nice taking her time. Though she was hardwired to always be on the move. It would take time to adjust.

“I was the same way at first. I was so used to moving from location to location that when I got out and didn’t have somewhere to be, I felt lost.”

“You look like you’ve got your bearings. You seem pretty busy now.” She didn’t know the condition the cabin had been in before, but she could see the modifications around the property.

Drake shrugged. “The projects help, but living from the land is time-consuming. You have to hunt your dinner, skin it, and hang it up yourself. If you need lumber to rebuild walls or firewood, you have to chop down the trees and drag them back.”

“You’re a very self-sufficient man.” He was like a living, breathing Jeramiah Johnson.

“I’m adaptable,” he corrected, cocking his head to look at her from the corner of his eye before focusing back on the road.

Kindred spirit.

Brooklyn hadn’t wanted to be a personal assistant when she’d gone to school for sales, but she had thrived at it because she’d adapted to it. Brooklyn came to learn she enjoyed the organization and the planning. While she wanted to prove herself in sales and had learned a lot on the job from Mr. Banner, she came to realize that she was capable of so much more. She feared the opportunity would never happen, until now.

Mr. Banner wasn’t around to hold her back, or herself. There was a chance she’d have to change her name and go further into hiding, but that didn’t mean she had to give up her dream of selling and building companies and their supply chain.

She would have to start school all over again, but it would be worth it if she could finally land her dream job.

“You okay over there?” Drake asked shaking her from her thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“My dream job.”

“Being a secretary?”

Brooklyn scowled at him, earning a chuckle.

“Personal assistant,” she corrected.

“Still don’t understand the difference.” He glanced over at her, appearing confused.

“Trust me, there is, but that isn’t what I was talking about.”

“Sorry, the sales thing, right?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of sales?”

“Land. Part of Mr. Banner’s job was buying and selling land for developers. When I applied to Mr. Banner’s company, it was supposed to be for a sales position, but his personal assistant up and quit without notice, so I offered to fill in.”

“Taking you from your dream.”

“It wasn’t all bad. I went with Mr. Banner on almost all of his trips, so I learned a lot of hands-on training from him that I wouldn’t necessarily have gotten had I just taken the sales position.”

“Well, hopefully now you can pursue that.”

She agreed..

“Here we are,” he announced as they pulled down what Brooklyn had to assume was Main Street. She had driven through it when Connor had dropped her off, but she hadn’t paid much attention to the surroundings.

It was something out of the fifties. Old brick buildings with large windows on the second floor. Canopies over the front door with the company name written on them. It was all parallel parking. There was even a clock anchored into

the sidewalk. Almost every vehicle was an old beat up truck or sedan from the older eras. Families smiling and talking as they walked down the street. There was even a grassy area with an octagon gazebo in the middle.

It was as if this town was trapped in a time capsule. She instantly fell in love with its quaint charm. It was nothing like Billings.

Drake pulled in front of a hardware store and turned off the truck. “We should have discussed this before, but we need to come up with a story on why you’re here.”

Brooklyn turned away from the window to look at him. “A story? Why would anyone care I’m here?”

“Have you seen the size of this town? Everyone knows everyone and their business. They aren’t big on strangers here and are going to want to know your story.”

Great, more awkward stares at her eyes, probably whispers. “Do they know yours?”

Drake pulled down the cuff of his shirt to cover his wrist and rested his hands in his lap. She didn’t miss the dark scarring along his wrist when he’d been driving. She wondered if there were others he was keeping covered. Probably. He was more sensitive about his scars than she was about her eyes. But then, his scars were easier to hide than her eyes. They stuck out like a sore thumb whereas he could wear a long-sleeve shirt to conceal his. All except for the one across his face.

“My grandpa used to take us up here for hunting and fishing as kids, so these people already know me.”

“Okay, so what do you suggest? Telling them I’m hiding from a killer who made my boss’s death look like a suicide doesn’t seem the best route.”

Chapter 14

Jameson signed in on the clipboard and let himself into the evidence room. He was missing something crucial; he was hoping going through Banner's case file would help bring this case to a close.

He'd gone through all the files that Brooklyn had given him, but everyone was accounted for on the night of the murder nor did they have a reason to murder him.

Who would benefit from Banner's death?

That was the million dollar question. Banner had a plethora of enemies, but none would benefit from his death. Banner had never married, and no children were ever recorded. Jameson had looked into Banner's will, and his money would go to some distant family member. The company was going to be split into a board of trustees.

Brooklyn wasn't a killer. He knew her. She was mousy and preferred to stay in the shadows. She didn't want the company, only to be a part of the sales team. She and Morgan had argued about that a million times.

There was also the fact the company security camera clocked her leaving the building at nine o'clock. From calculating the distance to Banner's house and Brooklyn's phone call, Brooklyn wouldn't have had enough time to drive to the building, kill him, and stage the scene before reporting it.

Jameson pulled the file and sat down at a metal table to start going through the report. There were photos of the crime scene. Papers strewn across the kitchen counter. According to Brooklyn, he used his office for paperwork and kept everything locked up.

His office at work was pretty immaculately clean as well to support that. But something else nagged at him. Talking to his co-workers, everyone said he was an aggressive businessman but well liked. No one said anything about depression. There was also no suicide note. Just the fake bills.

Jameson had double checked Banner's finances, and Brooklyn had been right. The past due notices were definitely fake. The man was a millionaire.

There was no sign of forced entry, which meant the person who'd killed him either had a key or knew Banner well enough to be let in. The place had been dusted for fingerprints, but only Banner's were found. The killer had worn gloves or wiped their prints before they'd left.

Who would have access to a key? Banner lived in a secure building that needed a badge to get in or the security guard had to call up to get permission from the homeowner to be let in.

That was it. The one thing he'd missed. Jameson packed up the case file and headed out. Please let this be the break he needed.

~

He was dead man. He had been looking for the file for his boss for almost two days now and was no closer to finding it. He'd gone back through Banner's apartment—top to bottom—as well as his office. He'd gone through the bastard's car. He'd even gone through the secretary's house. Nothing.

Banner must be rolling in his grave. Even under threat of death, the old man hadn't given up the location of the file. Apparently it was worth dying for. Well, for him, it was worth living for because without it, he was dead.

He was running out of places to look. His boss wasn't a patient man and would kill him if he didn't find it and kill the girl. Another thing that eluded him. How could someone just disappear off the face of the planet?

Jameson wasn't saying anything either. Either he didn't know or he was an accomplished liar.

Or he knows.

He was starting to suspect but couldn't prove anything. Besides, when Jameson had come to Banner's office, he'd stayed away from the case. He'd followed Jameson and tapped his phone. He didn't call anyone. It was pathetic really. The guy lived and breathed his job.

He liked his job, but he didn't live at the office. He liked having the break away from everything.

Focus.

Where else could the old man stash it? Or should he say with whom? That was it. That was why he couldn't find

it. The woman had it, and he had no idea where she was. But he knew how to lure her out of hiding. It was time for Plan B.

Chapter 15

What was a good believable story? Millie from the store named after her would for sure ask where Brooklyn had come from. She was the nosiest person he'd ever met. Earl at the hardware store wouldn't care, but his wife Edna would. Other people would openly stare and whisper. Brooklyn already hated people staring, and she was memorable. Not only for her eyes, but her warm personality. Maybe he should have left her at the cabin. If the killer happened to find his way here, they could stop in town and ask around about her. But it was too late now.

“We could say you're a cousin visiting.”

“Wouldn't these people know it was a lie since they know your family?”

That was a risk, but he didn't know what else to suggest. He couldn't say his girlfriend. He'd been hiding up here for the past few months. They'd know that was a lie. Family friend?

“We don't look anything alike, but if we say a distant cousin, maybe that could work. But why am I visiting?”

“Are you saying my award-winning personality isn't enough to make you want to visit, cousin? That there has to be another reason?”

Brooklyn's nose scrunched up like a bunny when he called her cousin. He had to agree. The word didn't feel

right. “I like to have details. It sells the story more.”

“Or too many details hints at a lie. To sell a good lie, you need half-truths and less details.”

“I’m not a very good liar,” she admitted.

“Then let me do all the talking.” He knew how to handle the people in this town. “You are my distant cousin visiting from the big city, wanting a break from the grind, and are spending a few weeks with me. There, simple.”

“I like it. So what do I do in the big city? Which big city do I live in?”

Drake shook his head. Damn woman and her details.

“What? I warned you. I like details.”

“Fine, you’re from Raleigh, North Carolina and work for a real estate agency.” It was somewhat close to her dream job. Buying and selling houses and land were close.

“I like it.” She beamed, and damn if he didn’t feel ten-feet tall.

“Good, let’s go.” Drake was out of the truck and almost to the hardware store door before he realized he was alone. He turned back to see Brooklyn following slowly behind him, her head downcast and her hands in her pockets. It was like the woman he was coming to know had disappeared before his eyes. One moment lively and the next a shell of herself.

Drake kept his mouth shut and held the door open for her. The bell above the door chimed and a head poked out a few aisles ahead.

“Drake, good to see you, son.”

“Hi, Edna,” he said warmly; on the inside he was cursing. Damn, of course she would be the one they saw first.

“What brings you in, darling, and with such pretty company to boot?”

“This is Brooklyn,” he introduced but kept himself between the two women so she couldn’t get a clear view of Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn, huh?” Edna came fully out of the aisle toward them, her gaze fixated on Brooklyn. Uh oh, he needed to distract Edna quick before she interrogated Brooklyn. He recognized that look.

“I need some roofing materials and new knobs for the doors.”

“You know where they are.” She waved behind her as she kept coming at them. “Ask the boys if you need help loading them in the truck,” she said, never taking her eyes off of Brooklyn. “Well, aren’t you a sight, Brooklyn. Tell me something, darlin, how did you end up with this riff raff?” Her gaze shifted to Drake, a warm smile tugging on her lips. “Don’t tell me. Drake, you finally found a woman to make an honest man of you.”

“She’s my cousin,” Drake answered for Brooklyn. “Come on, Brooklyn.” He held his hand out and was thankful when Brooklyn took it. He dragged her off before Edna could question them further.

“Cousin,” Edna squawked behind them. “I didn’t know you had a cousin.”

Drake growled when he heard Edna coming up behind them. Damn, the woman was relentless. “Yep, I do.”

“Where are you from, darlin?” Edna was born and raised in Texas until she met Earl on a trip and moved here over forty years ago and had never lost the accent. Drake had a feeling she emphasized it because she missed the state. Earl wasn’t big on travelling, so Drake didn’t think she’d been home since they’d married. At least not that she’d ever shared. She liked others to talk and she listened, not the other way around.

“Raleigh, North Carolina,” Brooklyn answered automatically.

“Wow, the east coast. You did come a long way. How long will you be in town for?”

“A few weeks. I needed a break from work, and Drake’s got an amazing cabin.” She looked over at Drake, giving him an aren’t-you-glad-I-got-a-background-story look.

“Doesn’t he?” Edna wrapped her arm around Brooklyn’s shoulder as if they were lifelong friends. Edna didn’t believe in the word stranger. They were just friends that hadn’t met yet. Her words, not his. “You know, his granddaddy built that cabin younger than y’all are with his bare hands.”

“I did know that. He did such an amazing job.”

“I myself haven’t seen it in ages, and this poor boy keeps coming down for supplies to fix it.” Edna turned a wary eye on him. “At least I hope you’re just fixing it and not remodeling. Oh boy, your granddaddy would be spitting mad if you remodeled it.”

“Calm down, Edna. I haven’t done any more than fix some of the plumbing issues.” He had remodeled the kitchen, but he wasn’t about to tell her that. He was proud of the work his grandpa had done to the cabin, but it was outdated and had been falling apart due to neglect. He’d had to make some changes and bring it up to date.

“Tell me, Brooklyn, is he telling the truth?” Edna squeezed Brooklyn’s shoulder.

“Uh...” Brooklyn looked around like a hare caught in a snare looking for an escape. Edna’s arm was still wrapped around her, so she wasn’t going anywhere.

“Wait a minute,” Edna said quietly and looked hard at Brooklyn. Brooklyn reared back, her need for escape imminent. Her eyes wide with fear. Drake reached for her again and pulled her to safety under his arm. Brooklyn burrowed into his side; he could feel her shaking. Damn Edna and her inquisitiveness, making Brooklyn feel uncomfortable.

He couldn’t say anything to her about it without drawing more notice to her eyes.

“Darlin, your eyes.” Edna squinted, not being shy about trying to get a better look at them.

“Uh,” Brooklyn said again and looked up at him for help.

“Is one—”

“We need to get going, Edna,” Drake announced, turning them around and walking away. It was rude, and his mother would bop him on the back of the head if she could see him, but it was for a good reason. “We still have to get the supplies here and go to Millie’s and get back before dark.”

“Well, I won’t keep you. It was so nice to meet you, Brooklyn,” Edna called after them; thankfully, this time she let them go.

“You too, Edna.”

“Oh,” Edna called out. “I almost forgot, the town is having a dance in the square tomorrow; you should both come, it’ll be fun.”

“We’ll see. Take care, Edna.” He pulled Brooklyn along to the aisle for roof supplies.

“She’s um...she’s something,” Brooklyn said quietly.

“Yeah, sorry I didn’t warn you about her. I usually see Earl working, and he doesn’t pay much attention to new people. Edna, on the other hand, gets as excited as a puppy meeting new people and learning about them.”

“She’s definitely got that big Texas personality.” Brooklyn chuckled. “Not a fan of personal space though.”

“She’s super friendly, but make no mistake, she can turn on you faster than a rattlesnake, especially to protect

the people she loves.”

“That sweet little old lady?” Brooklyn hiked her thumb over her shoulder, her face a mask of disbelief.

“Don’t let the sweet Texan drawl fool you. She might be pint-size like yourself, but she’ll open a can of whoop ass on anyone that says a bad word to her. One time, some boys were causing trouble in town. Graffitiing a wall. She grabbed them by the ear and gave them all a stern talking to.”

“Wow, she sounds a lot like Morgan. She’s nice to everyone except for bullies. Her brother is a chef at a restaurant, and she always brags about her knife skills that he taught her to anyone that gets lippy with her.”

She sounded like a hell of a woman, and he hoped to someday meet the woman Brooklyn talked about so highly. “How about you?”

“How about me what?”

“Do you have any knife skills I should know about?”

“You’ve seen me make dinner. No.” Brooklyn chuckled. “Definitely not. My skills extend to making reports and filing them.”

He didn’t believe that for a second. “You’re capable of a lot more than that. You should give yourself more credit.” If only she would realize her full potential.

Brooklyn shook her head in denial, but Drake wasn’t going to let this go. “Think about it. You reported a murder, got a description of the perp, wouldn’t back down when Jameson said it was a suicide. If that’s not enough, you faced

down a bear and wouldn't let me shoot it. You can do a lot of more than you think you can."

"Thank you." Brooklyn blushed under his praise. Her head dipped down, her chin almost to her chest. Her hands knotting in front of her.

He wasn't blowing smoke up her ass or just giving a line. He truly believed she was capable of more, but she allowed her own insecurities to hold her back.

Drake stepped closer to her, as if an invisible force was pulling him toward her. He hooked his finger under her chin and lifted, forcing her to look up at him.

Brooklyn's eyes dilated, her lips puckered waiting for him to kiss her again. He shouldn't. He'd told himself that he wasn't going to. Yet, how could he resist such a sweet temptation?

Drake leaned down to close the distance when a throat cleared nearby. Drake snapped his head back; Earl stood at the end of the aisle with one of his sons.

"Sorry to interrupt you and your *cousin*. Edna said you might need help loading roofing supplies into the truck."

Drake took a step back from Brooklyn. Shit, he'd forgotten for a moment they were in a public place and were posing as cousins. Obviously Earl didn't believe that for a second, but he knew the man well enough to know he wasn't going to question him about it.

"Thanks, Earl." Drake pulled out his list and began reading off what he needed.

Chapter 16

Brooklyn used the time while Drake spoke with Earl to get herself back under control. Her cheeks felt flushed and her heart still raced. She was mortified they'd been caught about to kiss in the store. She'd heard Earl's tone when he'd said cousin. He didn't believe it for a second. What had she been thinking?

She wasn't. That was the point. She had no sense of control over herself when it came to Drake. It was as if her brain shut down and her body took over. And all her body seemed to want was sex.

Lots of hot, sweating sex.

"Brooklyn?" Drake called out.

Brooklyn spun around. "Yes?" She kept her focus on the ground. She didn't want Drake to see she was hot and bothered worse than a moment ago. Nor Earl, especially after getting caught almost kissing her 'cousin.'

"You ready?"

"Yes." Drake held out his arm; she took it.

"Earl, the truck is parked out front. We're heading to Millie's now."

"We'll have everything loaded up by the time you're done," Earl assured him.

It was the first time Brooklyn saw Earl. He was older. Much older looking than Edna. His white hair was almost gone. Deep wrinkles around his eyes. He looked like he should have retired years ago, but pride wouldn't let him. Good thing he had his sons to help him.

“Thanks.”

Millie's was two blocks down. It was a small building, no more than a couple hundred square feet. The supplies were limited and ridiculously overpriced, but it was the closest option within a sixty-mile radius.

She remembered stopping in here for a few supplies with Connor. Well, he'd run in while she'd waited in the car. Connor had asked for her clothing size and came back within a few minutes with a couple of bags.

It seemed to have a hodge podge of supplies. Food, clothing, and interior decorations. It was a general store that catered to just about everything.

Drake pulled out another list from his back pocket and started loading the cart. Brooklyn made sure to sneak some vegetables in the cart when he wasn't looking. She'd seen his cupboards. She didn't know how he survived off of meat and canned food. She needed a more balanced diet.

They rounded the corner to the next aisle and came to a halt when a woman blocked their path. She looked about the same age as Edna.

“Hi, Millie,” Drake greeted.

“Hi, Drake. Edna told me your cousin was in town, and I just had to meet her.” Millie smiled warmly at her. “Hi, I'm

Millie, the owner of Millie's general corner." She held out her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Millie." Brooklyn shook it. Wow, the women around here sure were friendly.

Millie leaned close to stare at her. "Oh, Edna was right; you do have interesting eyes."

Brooklyn didn't like the sound of that. Interesting was different. Different wasn't always good. "Thanks?"

Millie didn't seem off-put about them and wasn't staring at them any longer. "You're welcome. You should be proud of them, dear."

"Most people are uncomfortable around them," she replied honestly.

"Pfft," Millie waved it off. "They're idiots, and you should ignore them."

Brooklyn smiled. It was hard not to like Millie. She was a woman who spoke her mind.

"So how long are you in town for?"

"I'm not sure yet. A few weeks."

"It must be nice you can just take time off like that without an expiration date. What is it you do for a living?"

"Uh..." It took her a second to remember what it was she was supposed to do for work. "I work for a real estate developer company."

"Oh." Millie stepped away from her as if her skin were poison. "You're not planning on trying to build some strip

mall out here or something? Scoping the area out for your boss.”

Brooklyn was stunned by the woman’s abrupt hostile tone. “No, like I said, I’m here on vacation.”

That didn’t seem to appease Millie. In fact she wagged a gnarled finger in her face. “Because if you’re thinking about expanding and adding a hotel, maybe something to draw tourists, you’re going to have a whole town of protestors on your hands. We don’t want to see the wildlife being forced from its home and for another building we don’t need. For tourists that are going to destroy the town with their littering. No, thank you. We like things just the way they are.” Millie finished her rant and gave her the stink eye.

Several shoppers stopped what they were doing to watch their exchange. Brooklyn was silent, looking around for an exit and escape from this crazy woman. It was Drake who came to her rescue once again.

“Millie, that’s not why Brooklyn is here. You shouldn’t go around accusing people of things,” Drake chastised her. The woman immediately backed down.

Millie took a deep breath and seemed to calm down. “Sorry, dear, I’ve lived in this town my whole life, and I like it the way it is. I don’t ever want it to change. I’ve been to the big cities and seen people destroying the land, and I don’t ever want to see that happen to this place. You said a developer, and I instantly went into protector mode. I apologize,” she explained, appearing calm like when Brooklyn had first met her.

“Think nothing of it, Millie.” Brooklyn smiled, not knowing what else to say. She understood the woman wanting to be protective of this place; it was beautiful. Like Drake had said though, she just went on the instant defensive. It was a bit alarming.

“Well, I’ll let you two get back to shopping. It was nice meeting you, Brooklyn.”

“You too.” She thought about how the woman had changed attitudes in a blink of an eye.

“Oh, we’ll see you at the town dance tomorrow, won’t we?”

“We’ll see, Millie.” Drake waved her off and pushed the cart down the aisle, not waiting to see if Brooklyn was following.

She was, just at a slower gait. Her eyes were glued to Drake’s ass. It was so tight and firm as he walked away. More like a swagger. She wasn’t the only one checking him out. Several women looked at his butt as he walked away.

She knew she shouldn’t take such an interest in Drake. He was her protector, and their time together was limited. She had never done casual, but after her recent brushes with death, she’d learned that life was short.

Brooklyn couldn’t be the secondary character in her life story anymore. She needed to take on the leader role. To learn to take chances.

She hurried her steps to catch up to Drake. He glanced over at her and gave her a panty-melting smile.

“Sorry about Millie. I guess I should have thought of a different job for you than developer. I didn’t realized she’d be so...”

“Passionate,” Brooklyn supplied.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “That’s a good a word as any.”

“A good thing you didn’t come up with a log company job.”

“She might have kidnapped you and strapped you to a tree.”

Yeah, no thanks. She’d hit her quota of near-death experiences.

Brooklyn spotted a payphone up ahead along the wall near the bathroom sign. She knew she shouldn’t. That she was supposed to be laying low, but she really wanted to talk to Morgan. Just for a second. One quick phone call wasn’t going to hurt anything.

“I’m going to use the restroom. I’ll catch up with you in a moment.”

Drake only nodded. It wasn’t like a killer was going to snatch her right there in the middle of a general store. No one even knew where she was.

Brooklyn walked off, heading for the bathroom; she looked back to make sure Drake had turned down an aisle and then moved over to the payphone. Luckily, a woman was coming out of the bathroom as she searched her pockets.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, I need to call my friend, and I forgot my cell phone. Would you happen to have some change?”

“Of course.” The woman dug in her purse and pulled out some coins.

People were so friendly here. “Thank you so much.” Brooklyn gave her a dollar for her quarters.

Making sure Drake was still out of sight, Brooklyn dialed Morgan’s number. “Come on, Morg,” she willed her friend to answer her cell phone. When she told Morgan she was going into WITSEC, Morgan threatened to get on the first flight back home.

She should be back. So why wasn’t she answering? Brooklyn would have figured she’d be glued to her phone in case Brooklyn called.

“Hi, you’ve reached Morgan’s cell. Leave me a message after the beep. Unless you’re my clueless ex, then drop dead.” Even after all this time, Morgan still hadn’t changed her voicemail. As far as Brooklyn knew, Jameson didn’t even try to contact Morgan anymore.

“Hey, Morg, it’s me just checking in. I just wanted to hear your voice and let you know I’m okay and really miss you. Can’t wait to get home and tell you all about it. Hopefully you’re not making Jameson’s life hell trying to find me. Hopefully, I’ll be home soon.” She hung up and went to find Drake. He was easy to spot as all the women ogled him as he passed by.

Brooklyn became acutely aware of all the stares they were getting. She thought they were aimed at Drake, but then she saw people looking at her, whispering to the person next to them. Her insecurity about her eyes reared its ugly head.

Her eyes lowered to the ground, her hands stuffed in her pockets. She was ready to get out of here and back to the cabin.

She could hear the snide remarks as they went from aisle to aisle.

Oh my god, her eyes.

What a freak.

Could you image staring at that every day?

Brooklyn wanted to crawl into a hole and bury herself. They weren't remarks she was new to, but it didn't sting any less. It seemed people sucked no matter where she went. So much for a friendly town.

Drake stayed close to her side, but other than that, he seemed oblivious to those around him. She didn't sigh in relief until Drake deemed the shopping list done and they were checking out.

"Hey, Drake," a woman behind them purred.

Brooklyn recognized her voice. She was one of the women who had been a comment about her eyes.

"Hi," he said; there was no warmth in his voice, only being polite.

“Will you be at the dance tomorrow? I’ll save you one.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

The woman glared at Brooklyn, as if it were her fault he was saying no, before her features smoothed and an easy smile crossed her face. “Well, if you change your mind.”

Brooklyn wanted to gag. Could the woman have been any more obvious? And her outfit. If she sneezed, her boobs would spill from her top. And Brooklyn knew for a fact the woman adjusted her shirt before talking to Drake.

What man would be drawn to fake boobs?

Brooklyn didn’t want to wait around and find out if Drake was. She grabbed half of the grocery bags and left. She could feel several pairs of eyes boring into her, the faint whispers behind her. It didn’t matter where she went, she’d always be treated like a freak.

Chapter 17

“The freak is gone, good riddance,” the woman said, earning several giggles.

Drake saw red. He’d been silent up until now, pretending not to hear their whispered poison filling the store. How dare they call Brooklyn a freak or ridicule her eyes. They were unique and different just like her, but that didn’t make them bad.

As much as he wanted to give Meredith Carnes a set down, she was the mayor’s daughter and the last person he wanted to get on the wrong side of.

Millie, on the hand, didn’t have the same problem.

She came around the front of their checkout counter with her arms crossed over her chest, looking like a fire-breathing dragon about to reduce Meredith to ash. “Who do you think you are, Meredith Carnes, to talk to people that way?”

Meredith looked stunned to be talked to so harshly. She was a spoiled selfish shit that no one had ever said boo to before. She knew it and exploited it. “Who do you think you are, Millie, talking to me that way? I’ll tell my daddy,” she threatened, sounding like a five year old instead of a woman in her early twenties.

“Better yet, how about I tell him how you terrorize just about everyone in this town?”

“Do not,” she pouted like a small child.

“How about Josie Green last week when you were calling her a horse face, or Sandy Bucket when she got that promotion and you said it was only because she fucked her way to the top? I’m sure everyone could have some choice things to say about you. Like if you got any more plastic surgery, there would be nothing real about you.”

Meredith’s face turned beet red as several people giggled. “Shut up, all of you.”

“No, Meredith. I think it’s time you shut that trap of yours.”

Meredith screamed and stomped her foot then ran out of the store.

“That felt good yet childish,” Millie commented.

“Someone was bound to say something to her. You just happened to break first.” Drake wished it had been him.

“I just hate good folks getting treated unfairly. Brooklyn can’t control her eye colors any more than the sun can rise in the east and set in the west.” Millie raised her voice so everyone in the store heard her. She wasn’t deaf to the snide comments any more than he was. He just chose not to engage in their cruelty.

“Agreed.”

“Well then, quit yapping with me and go get her. Poor thing looked about ready to faint when she ran out of here.” Millie shooed him out.

She didn't have to tell him twice.

"And I better see you two at the dance tomorrow," she called after him. Drake didn't respond mainly because he had no intention of going and didn't want to get into a conversation about it instead of finding Brooklyn.

He panicked at first when Brooklyn wasn't standing outside. Where could she have gone? There were only so many streets in town. Probably the truck.

He ran down the street, his stride awkward carrying so many bags. This was the most groceries he'd bought in ages. He hunted his own meat, so all he came to town for were canned goods. Brooklyn was adamant they needed vegetables and other foods. He hadn't been blind when he saw her sneaking them in when she'd thought he wasn't looking.

It wasn't that he didn't like them. Canned goods just preserved better. Perishables went quick, and he didn't like going into town more than he had to.

He sighed in relief when he saw her pacing in front of the truck. He stopped and waited for her to notice him.

Brooklyn was so focused on staring down at her feet, she bumped into Drake's chest. "Oof, out of the whole sidewalk, you stopped there." She glared at him.

"Well, if you looked up, you would have seen me," he chided as he put the groceries in the truck bed. "You okay?" he asked, softening his voice. She had seemed really upset it in the store and was just as agitated now. Drake had been

victim to their cruelty in the past. The whispered comments could cut just as lethal as a real knife.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Her reply snarky. That was her go-to defense when she was upset. He was the same way.

“After what Meredith said...”

Brooklyn snorted. “She’s not the first and won’t be the last.”

“It still upset you.”

“I’m surprised you even noticed.” She turned away from him, but he wouldn’t let her hide. Drake grabbed her bicep and turned her back around to face him.

“I pay attention to everything. I heard every word.”

His admission didn’t go over well. Brooklyn looked like he’d just run over her dog on purpose. He realized his error too late. By admitting he’d heard it, he told her that he didn’t care about her and her feelings. Which wasn’t true. He did, a lot.

“If it makes you feel any better, after you left, Millie gave Meredith a stern talking to. Everyone laughed at her, and she ran out.”

“Why would that make me feel better?” she asked, confused. He’d thought by her being humiliated like she had been, it would make Brooklyn feel better. Would he ever understand this woman?

“She got hers for making fun of you.”

“I don’t like being made fun of; why would I like someone else being made fun of? To feel that shame. To

have others laugh and make fun of you.”

She was so compassionate to others. He should have remembered that with the bear. She hadn't wanted him to kill it even when it could have killed her. She had such a big heart.

“Look at me.” He'd meant to be gentler with his tone, but he was tired of seeing her looking like a shrinking violet when she was anything but. She kept hiding behind her insecurity about the color of her eyes. She needed to embrace them.

Her eyes rose to meet his. “I'm looking at you. Now what?” There was a stubborn tilt to her chin as she stared at him defiantly. He wanted to kiss her so badly.

“Keep your head up. Don't cower. Don't give them the satisfaction.”

“But—” She started to protest, but he cut her off.

“No buts. You can't change your eyes; you might as well embrace them. So what if anyone stares or whispers. You're going to have to deal with it if you're going to pursue this dream job of yours.”

Brooklyn took a step back, her arms crossing over her chest. “You're one to talk.”

“What the hell does that mean?” He was trying to help her; why was she turning this back on him?

Brooklyn looked down at his arms. “You wear long sleeves to cover your scars. So I'm sorry if I find it a little hypocritical that you tell me to show the world my eyes and yet hide your scars.”

“They aren’t the same thing,” he replied gruffly, feeling defensive. They weren’t the same thing. She couldn’t compare the two of them like that.

“Yes, Drake, they are. You hide them as much as I hide my eyes. You don’t want people to stare and gawk at them any more than I want people staring at my eyes.”

Drake was silent. He didn’t have a ready comeback because she was right. He did hide his scars the same as she hid her eyes. It was unfair of him to tell her to show them off while he kept himself covered. He was a hypocrite.

Brooklyn didn’t wait around for a reply but got into the truck. Drake followed slowly behind. His mind mulling over her words.

“You’re right,” he said after turning the truck on, cool air filling the cab. It felt good after spending time in the hot muggy sun. “I do hide my scars. It isn’t because I’m worried about what other people will think though.” Brooklyn gave him a side eye that said she didn’t believe him. “Okay, not fully. I don’t want to hear the gasps of horror and people asking what happened. I don’t want to recount those moments of captivity. I already relive them every time I see them.” Drew lifted the cuffs of his shirt sleeves up to his forearms. “I can still feel the rope digging into my skin as I tried to free myself every day. I can smell my flesh being burned as they used hot iron on my back and other parts of my body. The worst is this.” He pointed to his cheek. “The man laughed as he did it. Every time I look in the mirror, I can hear his laughter as he did it.” He could feel the tug of flesh pulling every time he talked or smiled.

Drake closed his eyes in shame. He didn't know why he was dumping all of this on Brooklyn. She didn't need to hear all the ugly in his life. She was just so easy to talk to, and he'd never really talked to anyone about it. Not his therapist, not his family, no one.

"I hear everyone's mocking every time I look in the mirror. All the whispered words. Freak. Cyborg. Alien," she told him, her voice soft and gentle, belying her earlier anger.

It made him feel even worse for not standing up for her earlier. "We're two peas in a pod, aren't we? Both battling our own demons."

"I guess so. We could start our own club. Kind of like Rudolph and the Island of Misfit Toys."

Drake opened his eyes and looked over at her. "Honestly, I like it just the two of us."

Brooklyn smiled at him. "Me too."

"Let's go home." He hadn't meant for that to slip. It was his home, not theirs, yet she's what made it feel like home. He was actually eager to go there. With her, it didn't feel like a refuge to hide his wounds.

She'd been right to call him out. He did hide his scars. It was unfair of him to tell her to showcase hers while he hid his.

It was time for both of them to make some changes. And he couldn't think of anyone better to do it with.

Chapter 18

There were still a few hours of daylight left by the time they got back to the cabin. They hadn't spoken much on the ride back; both seemed to be absorbed in their thoughts.

Brooklyn knew she shouldn't have attacked Drake the way she had about his scars, but she'd felt cornered.

He seemed to take her words to heart though because he rolled up his sleeves to his forearms before he put the truck in drive. If he could make baby steps, so could she. Brooklyn took her glasses off and put them on top of her head.

She'd been wearing them for so long as a shield, it felt scary and foreign to be without them. Not that she needed them to actually see. Drake had been right though. If she was going to survive in the sales world, she was going to have to look people in the eye and not shy away. No one would ever take her seriously if she was always staring at her feet.

After Millie's set down, she was wondering if land development was the right path for her. She wanted to be in sales and design, but she didn't want to take animals from their homes or take away the resources. Building something new and improved wasn't necessarily better.

"I better get these put away," Brooklyn told him unnecessarily, grabbing several grocery bags. There was enough food here to last them a few weeks.

“I’ll help then we can get started on the roof.”

That gave her pause. “We?”

“You wanted to help, didn’t you?” he asked, now sounding unsure.

“Yes,” she replied quickly.

“Then the sooner we get these groceries put away, the sooner we can work on the roof. I heard someone mention there might be rain tomorrow.”

Say no more. “Sounds good.” She all but ran into the cabin to unload groceries. Brooklyn didn’t know if he actually needed help or if their talk sparked something in him. Either way, she wasn’t going to question being able to assist. “Alright, I’m ready.”

“Did you want to change first?”

Brooklyn looked down at herself. Was there something wrong with a tank top and shorts? They were patching the roof, not doing open heart surgery. “I’m fine.”

“A jacket maybe?”

What was his deal asking her to cover up? That was twice now.

“It’s like ninety degrees out.”

“Just thinking of your safety.”

Yeah, she wasn’t buying that for a second. “Well, I appreciate it, but I’ll take my chances.” She didn’t want to collapse in heat stroke off the roof.

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged as if it didn’t make a difference to him.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked twenty minutes later on the roof with a helmet strapped to her head.

“Safety, remember?”

Brooklyn scowled at him. “I don’t see yours.”

“I only had one. You need it more than I do.”

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be protecting me, so you should have it.” This was overkill anyway. Brooklyn unstrapped it and tossed it over the roof edge to the ground below before Drake could stop her.

He leaned to peer over the roof edge then back at her. “Was that necessary?”

“No, but I feel better.” She smiled broadly at him.

Drake shook his head but did crack a smile. “Fine, let’s just get this over with. It’s not getting any cooler.”

Sweat dotted Drake’s forehead and his shirt was already sticking to his back. She thought about suggesting he take the long sleeve off. *Baby steps*. He would take it off when he was ready.

“Okay,” she lifted the hammer up, “Show me what to do.”

“One, don’t do that.” He lowered her hammer down back to her side. “Don’t need you trying to take an eye out. Second, you need nails and shingles.”

“Got it, now what?” she asked, eager to learn more.

They moved across to the roof to a spot where the shingles were loose. “First, you need to pull up the old shingles.” Using the hooks from the back of the hammer, Drake lifted the old shingles off. They pulled free easily as if nothing was keeping them down. “Then get rid of them.” He tossed them over the edge to a tarp he had spread out below. “I’ll take them to the dump the next time we go to town.”

“Easy enough. If all you’re doing is replacing shingles, why did you get plywood?” she asked, starting to lift shingles and tossing them over the edge. It was easy enough work. The only downside was that it was hot as hell outside on an asphalt roof. The shingles burned her knees, but she wasn’t about to complain.

“In case the wood under the shingles is rotten; we can replace the wood so it doesn’t collapse down on our heads. I know for a fact, over the bedroom the plywood is rotted. You can see through it.”

It was fascinating to learn all the ins and outs of construction. Things she hadn’t thought of before. She’d always been so focused on the selling of properties and ordering the shipping supplies, not how they were assembled or maintained.

“How long will these new shingles last?”

“Depends on the weather, but a couple years at least. Provided a huge storm doesn’t take them out.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just replace the whole roof than pieces of it over time?”

“It would, but getting supplies for a big project like that isn’t easy or cheap.”

She supposed not since everything would have to be shipped out. Her brain started rattling off the numbers, and she sucked in a breath. Even for a small project like this, it wouldn’t be cheap. The location was the biggest problem.

“Where did you learn about roofing?” He seemed to have a wealth of knowledge which came in handy being alone out in the middle of nowhere.

“My grandpa. When we were kids, he brought us up here and taught us not only how to hunt, fish, but to maintain the cabin as well. Unfortunately, when it passed to me, no one ever came to check on it. So it’s slowly been falling into disrepair. Now I’m trying to fix it before it’s beyond repair and I have to tear it down and start over.”

“Would that be so bad? Start over. Do your own cabin how you want. Maybe make it bigger. Another bedroom for when your family comes up.” Or if he ever married and had kids.

“No, I like it the way it is.”

Translation: He liked it built for one. It was a tight squeeze for the two of them, especially the bathroom.

“Besides, my grandpa built this place with his own two hands in about three months. I don’t want to tear that down as if all his hard work meant nothing.”

“It wouldn’t be that way. It was built for what he needed at the time. Every person is different. There’s nothing saying you couldn’t tear it down and rebuild

reusing some of the wood or the same footprint. You have so much land, it would be easy to bump out a wall and make a bigger bathroom or add a bedroom. Or even make a larger window in the living room to let in more natural light.” She started rattling off little changes she would make.

“I don’t want to change it,” he reiterated, hammering a nail down harder than needed.

The cabin meant a lot to other people too. Brooklyn remembered Edna had gotten upset about Drake making minor repairs. She shouldn’t have pushed so hard for him to change it. Not everyone liked change. “So what did your grandpa do for a living?”

“He did television repairs.”

Brooklyn looked up as her hammer came down and hit her thumb instead of the nail head. She stood up and dropped the hammer as she shook out her hand and hopped from foot to foot, trying to alleviate the throbbing pain.

“Brooklyn,” Drake called out, concerned. He stood up and started to come toward her when the spot he stepped on groaned and cracked under his weight.

Drake lurched forward as his foot started to sink and landed right on her, knocking them both down. Drake twisted as they fell so she landed on top of him. Drake wrapped his arms around her as if he were cocooning her from harm. For a moment she feared they would start to tumble over the side of the roof, but Drake didn’t move. Their legs laid in a tangle mess. Brooklyn’s hands were braced on his chest. She could feel the heat from his chest

and the rhythmic beating of his heart. His grip around her eased, and he braced his hands on her lower back. She could feel his thumbs rubbing slow circles.

“I guess you found one of those rotten boards.” She tried making light of their situation.

“I guess so,” he murmured, appearing uncaring about the crack now in the roof. His focus was solely on her and then in a blink, that look was gone and he sat her next to him. “How’s your hand?”

“Fine,” she downplayed. She wasn’t going to tell him her thumb throbbed and her palms ached from the wood burn and splinters from earlier. He’d thought of her as a weakling before and was just now seeing her as capable of more. She didn’t want to change that image.

“Let me see.” He held his hand out for hers.

“It’s fine.” She stood up and went back to her abandoned hammer. She should have known Drake wasn’t going to drop the issue. He was unrelenting. He snatched one of her hands and turned it over palm up. She could have put up more of a fight, but what was the point?

“What the hell did you do? You have burns and splinters all over.” His voice was filled with worry. He took her other hand and saw it was in the same condition.

“It’s not that bad. It’s from the ladder. It doesn’t even hurt anymore,” she lied. Drake gave her a look that said he didn’t believe her for a second.

“After we finish with the roof, we’ll need to pull those splinters if we can. I also have a salve for the burns. It

doesn't smell nice, but it does the job."

"You're not going to tell me to go inside while you finish the roof?" she asked in stunned disbelief. Mr. I-Can-Do-Everything-By-Myself.

"No. Honestly, I could use the help. My grandpa always said faster isn't better than quality. Two people are better than one. The company's not that bad either." His lip tipped into a smile that set Brooklyn's heart racing.

Damn, that man had a devastating smile.

"Tell me about him. You were saying he worked in television repair." She asked needing to change the subject. Drake looked up to him. He sounded like a well-loved man in town. She had yet to hear a bad word about him.

Drake's eyes lit up. "He did. Thirty-five years. When he got out of high school, he joined the army, specialized in telecommunications. When it came time to reenlist, he got out but didn't know what to do next, so he just kind of travelled around. Lived the life of a bachelor. An old army buddy of his offered him the land for a fair price, so he bought this land and built a cabin in his early twenties. He lived off of the land until one day in town, he met my grandma. She didn't want to live in the cabin, so he bought a house in the city and started his own repair shop. They came up to visit for vacations. From there, the tradition was built that we came up in the summers and grandpa taught us survival skills."

"Which I'm sure came in handy when you all joined the military."

“It did. Though there wasn’t much call for fishing, but when I’d be on recon missions and could only take a small pack for survival, I learned to hunt for food and build my own shelters.”

“It sounds scary.” Only traveling with minimal supplies as you crept around enemy territory.

“It was what I was trained to do, but that’s all behind me.” He shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal, but Brooklyn could see the sadness in his eyes. He missed it. At least certain aspects of it. He had loved his job. She could hear it in the tone of his voice, and now he was lost.

Much the same as she was. Her boss was dead and that job aspect was gone. The company no longer existed. She didn’t know what she’d do when she went back home. Her life would never be the same after this experience. Working with Drake and talking to Millie, she was starting to rethink her career path. It wasn’t too late to find a new path. Drake would have to do the same too.

Chapter 19

Brooklyn was up bright and early the next morning. Her hands were still a little tender, but that salve Drake had put on them had helped even though it smelled something awful. Her back and legs were sore from squatting on the roof, but it was worth it when she looked up at the ceiling and didn't see any sunlight peeking through.

She'd done that. Well, it was a team effort, but still. And she found she really enjoyed it. Even if it was hot and sweaty work. Brooklyn was shocked Drake hadn't died of a heat stroke, but maybe with time the long sleeves would come off. It wasn't that she wanted to see what he hid under those baggy shirts. It was for his safety.

She tiptoed out of the bedroom thinking Drake was still abed and didn't want to disturb him, but the couch was empty and a blanket and pillow rested in the corner of the living room. Where was he?

"Morning," he called from the kitchen, startling her.

"Morning." She had to do a double look when instead of wearing his usual long sleeves, he was in a light blue t-shirt. She tried not to stare as he stirred something in a bowl and his muscles bunched and flexed. She knew he was muscular, but to see it finally instead of just feeling it was something else. "What are you up to?"

“Making breakfast.” She didn’t miss the weary look in his eyes. He was worried about her reaction to his scars. She wasn’t blind. The deep, thick scars on his wrists stood out. There were other scars scissoring across his forearms. Each sending a pang to her heart for him. She couldn’t imagine the torture he’d been through to receive them.

Drake had told her about being captured and the man that scarred his face. She didn’t want to think about the other scars he was hiding. She wished there was some way she could heal those for him. The best thing she could do was show him that they didn’t bother her. Maybe then he would start to feel more comfortable like she was not wearing her glasses.

“Want any help?” she offered, coming into the kitchen.

His eyes traveled over her body, making her feel naked instead of wearing a tank top and shorts, before returning to the bowl. “Sure. I was thinking eggs, bacon, and toast.”

“Sound good. Looks like you got eggs started, so I’ll do the bacon.”

“I can do that. Don’t want you getting splatter burns.” He abandoned the bowl and rushed to grab the bacon out of the refrigerator.

Okay. She didn’t know what was up with that.

“Well, since you’ve got bacon now, I’ll cover eggs. Morgan taught me how to make omelets if you want one.”

“Never had one.”

“It’s just eggs and veggies with meat, and it folds over on itself like its own burrito.”

“You do like your veggies.” He shook his head as he got to work heating the pan for the bacon.

And he liked his meat. “Veggies are good for you. But it’s not required in an omelet. You can have one without,” she offered. No sense getting into a disagreement over vegetables.

“No, veggies are fine.”

Then why did he make the comment? “Do you mind if I put on music? I like to listen to music when I cook.”

“Sure.”

Brooklyn turned on the old radio and found an oldies station.

They worked side by side, occasionally bumping into each other. Accidental. The kitchen was only so big, and both needed the stove, and when the music was thumping, her body started swaying.

“Can I ask you something?” Brooklyn asked after breakfast when they were both cleaning dishes.

“What’s that?”

“Could you teach me how to shoot?”

“You want to learn to shoot?” he asked slowly as if he hadn’t heard her correctly.

Brooklyn had to laugh at the look of shock on his face. “Why do you have to ask like that?”

Drake held his hands up in surrender. “I’m shocked to be honest. You were against me shooting the bear and now you want to shoot.”

He was never going to let her live the bear incident down. “That’s beside the point. You just told me so much about your grandpa taking you fishing and hunting, and I want to experience it too.” Really, she just wanted to spend more time with him. When he wasn’t being prickly, he was fun to be around. He had a funny sense of humor and was just fun to be around. She also needed a break from physical labor for a day. “And I’m not learning to shoot to go hunting, just self-defense. So will you?” She gave him her best puppy-dog face.

“I’ll take you shooting if you stop with the pout.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” She practically ran for the front door.

“Don’t you want to bring a jacket?”

Okay, seriously. What was up with him and wanting her covered up all the time? Was it possible he was finding her body tempting?

Brooklyn tested her theory and rolled her shoulders back, pressing her breasts into the front of her shirt. Drake’s eyes dipped to her chest. She saw his quick inhale of breath before he looked away. Oh yeah, he was attracted to her but fighting it. “No, I’m good.” A feminine thrill went through her. No man had ever looked at her the way Drake did. She liked it. “But I will pack us some water and snacks.”

She rushed through it and met Drake on the porch.

“So where are we going?” She hadn’t explored much of the area yet.

“A few mile hike. There is a clearing we can go to for practice.”

Chapter 20

Jameson slammed the phone down on the receiver harder than needed, but he was beyond frustrated. He'd been trying to get access to the visitor logs and security footage from Banner's apartment complex, but they were protecting it as if it were the crown jewels. Because Banner's death had been ruled a suicide, they weren't being forthcoming with the info.

He'd been forced to call a friend that worked for the district attorney's office. He was going to pull a few strings and get a warrant for them. It could still be days before he got it. Hopefully Brooklyn was holding up well wherever she was.

It was odd he hadn't heard from Morgan yet. Not because she wanted to talk to him, but to see when Brooklyn could come back. Everything was pending on his investigation. He was still no closer to finding out who'd killed Banner. He was more certain than ever now that Banner had been killed because Brooklyn's apartment had been broken into.

It could have been random, but Banner's death and then her apartment break-in were just too coincidental. The answers lay in the security logs. He just needed to get his hands on them.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling the hard scruff of a growing beard. It had been a few days since he'd

last shaved. He got like this when he worked on a case. Giving it his full attention. Jameson hardly slept and pored over the case over and over again, looking for anything he might have missed.

Some would call him obsessed—like his ex—but he was just dedicated to his job and justice. If something ever happened to one of his family members, he'd want someone dedicating their time to solving the case.

“Yo, earth to Jameson.”

Jameson started when Lawry appeared in front of him. “Lawry.” He nodded in greeting then frowned, seeing a large black eye and a red mark on Lawry's cheek that looked like claw marks, but they were too big to be from a cat. “What happened to you?”

“Training exercise. My partner got a little carried away.” Lawry waved him off.

“I'll say.” The guy looked like he'd gone a few rounds in the ring with Mike Tyson.

“Don't worry, I got a few licks in there too.” Lawry smiled good-naturedly.

“Glad to hear it. So, what are you up to?” It wasn't that he didn't like the guy. He hardly knew him, but he was starting to see him everywhere he went. It was odd since they barely crossed paths over the past year.

“Same thing, different day, and a new case. Actually, I wanted to get your input on this case, but you look pretty busy.” Lawry held up the case file in his right hand.

Jameson was always willing to help with a case. He needed it from time to time. The boss had been suggesting he take up a partner for a while now. Maybe he could consider Lawry. “No, I could use the break. What do you got?”

“It’s a missing person. The M.O. seemed similar to another case a few months ago, one you worked on actually. I was going to go through old case files to see if it could be related. Maybe you might remember something about it. Save me a trip.”

“Which case?” Jameson asked, his curiosity now piqued. He’d only worked on hundreds of cases over the years. It was hard to remember every single one.

“House break-in through the window. The assailant used the ladder along the side of the building to get in. No fingerprints, and neighbors didn’t hear anything.”

Jameson remembered it now. All women in their late twenties or early thirties. The women were kidnapped and found a few days later dumped at a trash dump site. They’d been assaulted and strangled to death. Jameson had never found the assailant, and the person had just stopped. Jameson wondered if they had been arrested or moved on to another town. Guess now he had his answer.

“I remember the cases, but we never had enough evidence. DNA didn’t match anyone in the system. What makes you think this is the same person?”

Lawry opened the file, the victim’s picture attached to a paperclip on the left side, the report and crime scene photos on the right. “If you look here—”

But Jameson wasn't paying attention to what Lawry was saying; his attention was stuck on the photo of the victim, one he knew intimately. "Morgan."

"Yes," Lawry confirmed, his eyebrows puckering in confusion. "Morgan Capron, do you know her?"

"I do." And that was all he was going to say on the matter.

"Shit, I'm sorry, man. I'll work extra hard to close this case," Lawry stuttered, trying to assure him.

Jameson snatched the file from his hands, his eyes scanning the report. "She went missing last night. Neighbors didn't hear anything. How did the perp get to her? The M.O. was through a cracked window, but Morgan kept her windows locked up tight. She carried pepper spray and took self-defense classes. Not to mention, she knew her way around a knife."

She had just come home the other day after he put Brooklyn in WITSEC. She hadn't come to see him yet but he knew she was waiting for news and wanted to be close at hand when Brooklyn came back. At least that was what Brooklyn told him when she called her. Morgan refused to speak to him.

Not that he had made any effort to contact her since she dumped him. He respected her decision to end things even though he hadn't agreed. Jameson refused to beg her to take him back. It was her loss.

"She doesn't sound like the perp's normal victim unless you count the age. Guess it's not the same guy."

Thanks for taking a look at it.” Lawry took the file back and saluted him with it and left.

First Brooklyn’s apartment was broken into, and now Morgan was missing. It couldn’t be a coincidence. The killer had somehow connected the dots. But why take Morgan? She didn’t know where Brooklyn was. He had to warn Connor, and he had to get a hold of that security footage and stop this guy once and for all.

Chapter 21

This woman was going to be the death of him. She was succeeding where his captors had failed with her tight tank tops and short shorts first swaying in his kitchen and now in front of him as they came to the clearing. Tempting him. Teasing him. It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. And now he was going to teach her to shoot. Standing close to her, breathing in her scent. Feeling her body pressed up against his.

He'd tried keeping everything professional between them. He knew he couldn't physically stay away from her, so he tried telling himself to treat her like a client, but the woman made it impossible.

Brooklyn was so easy to get along with. She was funny, smart, inquisitive, and didn't judge him. She'd shown him how brave she was when she'd started going without her glasses, showcasing her mesmerizing eyes. The least he could do was start to take some of his armor off too.

He'd been hesitant when she'd seen his bare arms, but she hadn't even blinked at the scars. In fact, she'd acted like nothing had changed. A weight felt like it had lifted from his shoulders. He wouldn't say he was cured by any means and wasn't still bothered by his scars, but they didn't have control over him like they normally did. It was a start.

He didn't feel like he was going to die of a heat stroke wearing long sleeves either, though even in a t-shirt, sweat

rolled down his back.

“Is this it?” she asked, planting her hands on her hips as she surveyed the clearing like a conqueror surveying her new land.

“It is. There’s an old stump down toward the other end of the field that we’ll use for target practice.”

“Alright, I’m ready.” Brooklyn reminded him of when he was younger. So eager to learn. “You’re not going to make me wear a helmet in case of stray bullets, are you?” Her lips tipped in humor, and he could see the laughter in her eyes.

Smart ass. If she were his— He didn’t allow himself to finish that thought. She wasn’t his. Soon, she would go back home. This was all temporary.

“No, but I did pack a jacket.”

Brooklyn rolled her eyes as she shook her head.

It was worth a shot. “Fine, let’s do this.” Drake looked up at the sky as a cool breeze blew by. It was still warm and sunny. They had a few hours yet until the storm came through. Plenty of time to teach her to shoot then he could go hunting. Not that they needed food, but it was always good to check the trails. Winters were harsh, and he liked to know where he should put his resources for tracking game.

He set up a few cans on the stump. “Are you right-handed or left?”

“Well, I write with my left, but I text with my right; I play tennis with my right—”

“We’ll do left,” he interrupted her, not needing a list of what she did with what hand.

Drake got her situated, setting the butt of the gun against her right shoulder. “You want it resting in the crook of your shoulder. It’s going to have some kick, so this will help stabilize it.” He guided her left hand to the forestock. “Left index over the trigger, but not until you’re ready to shoot. Spread your stance a bit so you balance your weight.” He hooked his foot with hers and pulled her right foot back.

Brooklyn followed his every direction without comment. Eager to learn.

“Now line up with the sight and find your target. Just relax your body; when you’re ready to shoot, take a deep breath in, and when you release it, squeeze the trigger.” He stepped back and waited.

Brooklyn stared intently down the barrel. After several moments, the gun went off. Brooklyn grumbled when the bullet missed the can.

“You hit the stump though. So that’s pretty close,” he praised her and held his hand out for the rifle.

“I want to try again,” she protested.

“I have to load a new round in.” He showed her how the bolt action worked to reload and helped her set back up. “Remember to relax. Don’t rush the shot.”

Brooklyn nodded, her hair tickling his nose. This close, he could smell her shampoo. He needed to pull away

before he did something stupid, like bury his head in her hair and breathe in her scent.

Drake jumped back before Brooklyn noticed something poking her from behind. Hoping distance would will his growing erection to ebb. He tried looking off at the scenery around him, but it wasn't helping.

The gun went off again. Drake looked at the stump to see how she did. One of the cans was missing. Brooklyn whirled around, elation written all over her face. Drake snatched the rifle from her hands before she hurt herself or him.

"I did it." She bounced up and down excitedly.

Was she trying to kill him? "You can keep shooting if you'd like," he replied, making sure not to look down at her bouncing chest.

Brooklyn nodded her head vigorously. This time she did the bolt action on her own and lined herself up.

For the next hour or so, Drake taught Brooklyn different positions to shoot from. From kneeling on one knee to setting up a tripod and lying down on the ground. She took to it like a fish to water.

"Is this the kind of stuff you did in the army?" she asked; her focus was on the target instead of him, so she didn't see him tense up.

Even though the military had been a huge part of his life, there were things he didn't talk about. Partially because he couldn't and others because he wasn't proud of

what he'd done. He'd always looked at it as a job, one he was good at. He had patience and skills.

“Not exactly. I had weapons training, but most of my job was watching and bringing back intel.” Or infiltrating and being a spy. There had been times he'd had to defend himself when he'd been caught, but she didn't need to know all that.

“Sounds kind of boring. Sitting around and just watching people.”

It wasn't so cut and dry, but he wasn't going to bore her with the details. “It wasn't all that bad. I worked with a great group of guys.”

“You weren't like the Lone Ranger?” she teased.

Drake chuckled, thinking of himself wearing a mask, bandana, and cowboy hat. Yeah, no, he was good. Maybe the horse, but no to the rest. “No, only if we were scouting. Easier to hide one person than a group of six. Otherwise we stuck to small groups.”

“Guess there's no I in team in the army.”

“No,” he agreed. “A lot can get past one person. Can't watch your twelve and six at the same time.”

Brooklyn looked at him over her shoulder, her face puzzled. “Your what now?”

“Sorry, your front and back.” He was used to being around military personnel, so they understood the lingo. Not with Brooklyn. She was as greenhorn as they came.

“Oh, I got it now. So you’re covering my six right now.”

Technically more than that. He was covering her whole person, aware of everything around them. “Yeah.”

Brooklyn rolled to her back to look up at him fully instead of craning her neck. Drake gulped. She looked like his biggest wet dream. A beautiful woman holding a gun. “So who’s covering your six?”

“You up for the job?”

Brooklyn pursed her lips looking him over. “I suppose. It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it.”

“I feel safer already,” he replied dryly, though he couldn’t say he’d be disappointed having her at his flank.

Her mouth opened in mock shock. “Have you seen how I’ve been shooting?”

“A regular Annie Oakley.” He winked.

“And don’t you forget it,” she warned with a pointed finger.

As much fun as he was having with her, the skies were starting to darken, and he still needed to go hunting. They’d spent more time in the clearing than he’d planned. “I think it’s time to pack it up. Do you know how to find your way back?”

Brooklyn stood up, brushing the grass from her butt. “Yes, why, aren’t you coming with me?”

“I need to go hunting.” He walked past her to pick up the rifle, disconnecting the tripod and storing it in the bag.

“Why? We just got groceries. The refrigerator and cupboards are stocked to the brim.”

“But we need meat. That rabbit is already gone.” He also needed to get away from her for a little while to get control of himself before he tossed her on the ground and laid claim to her.

“Okay, I’ll go with you.”

He thought about denying her, but she’d been having so much fun shooting. Not that he’d have her do the shooting. She wasn’t that proficient yet. “Alright, just don’t get upset when I have to kill Bambi’s dad.”

Brooklyn crossed a finger over her heart. “I promise not to push you off of the mountain for providing food for us.”

That made him laugh. Then he felt the cold droplets land on top of his head. He looked up as dark thunder clouds rolled in and the skies opened up. They were out of time. He’d thought they could stay ahead of the storm, but it was moving faster than he’d anticipated. The hunt was going to have to wait. These were no conditions to hunt. He’d done recon in worse than this, but he wasn’t going to risk Brooklyn’s health.

“Change of plans, we need to head back to the cabin.” He took her hand and jogged back down the path. They should have gone slower due to the mud starting to form, but he was more concerned about getting struck by lightning.

By the time they made it back to the cabin, they were completely drenched. It was a good thing they'd patched up the roof yesterday, otherwise they'd be swimming in the house before long. He'd been lucky since moving in that the weather had been mild.

"Well, that was unexpected." Brooklyn chuckled as she shook out her shirt that was clinging to her stomach.

Drake averted his eyes. Her clothes were plastered to her skin, leaving nothing to the imagination. Small droplets of water ran down her cleavage. "I thought we had a few more hours before the rains came, but I was wrong. Ah, why don't you go get changed while I build up a fire and get some tea brewing?" He darted into the bathroom and grabbed a towel and handed it to her.

"But you're wet too." She started patting her hair and chest with the towel, soaking up the moisture.

"A few minutes won't kill me. I'll change after you. Go on." He nudged her toward the bedroom, needing to get her far away from him. Having a door between them was good. A lock better. He made a mental list for the next time they went into town to get locks.

"If you're sure." She hesitated.

"I am," he assured her and turned around, heading for the fireplace. Keeping busy would be good. Instead of fixating on the woman getting naked on the other side of the wall. Of her standing naked next to his bed as she peeled her clothes from her body and used the towel to dry herself. Sticking one leg on the bedframe as she glided the towel down her slim leg and in back up to her core...

Drake cursed as the match he'd been holding burnt to the end, catching his finger and thumb. Tossing it on the wood pile, he struck another match and started the fire. It would be a little bit before the cabin warmed up. Now to start tea. He turned around and almost fell over as his gaze landed on his partially open bedroom door where he could see Brooklyn's side profile.

He didn't know if she realized the door was still cracked open and he could see her pulling her tank top over her head. He should say something. Tell her to slam the door shut, but his vocal cords had seized up. Even his limbs refused to move. He stood paralyzed watching her. As if she sensed his gaze, she looked over, and their eyes met.

Chapter 22

Brooklyn's heart raced as she watched Drake watching her. His gaze was hot and intent, watching her like a predator that had found prey. She hadn't planned on him catching her changing, but she couldn't say she was sorry.

She knew he was attracted to her. Just as much as she was attracted to him. So why keep fighting it? They were two consenting adults. While a relationship between them wasn't possible that didn't mean they had to live like monks.

A boldness she'd never felt before took over, and Brooklyn turned to face Drake fully. Reaching behind her, she unhooked her bra and let it fall. Her nipples hardened not only from the chilled air, but him. Drake's eyes stayed locked on hers; there was want and hesitation in them. His Adam's apple bobbing as he remained rooted on the spot. His hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. She didn't miss the hard outline of his cock through his pants.

It encouraged her to continue. Brooklyn unsnapped her shorts button and lowered the zipper. The soaked denim was harder to get off and probably didn't look all that sexy as she pried the fabric from her hips and was finally able to roll them down her thighs and kick them away.

Drake finally moved, his steps small, hesitant, as if he wasn't sure what to do. He pushed the door open fully, his

eyes drinking her in from her toes to the top of her head. Brooklyn reached out her hand to him and pulled him into the room.

She released him to grip the hem of his shirt and slowly lifted it. She watched his face for any sign of stress. He'd been so protective of his body, shielding her from his scars. She didn't want to rush him.

Drake gulped as the shirt rose to his chest. His chest rose and fell rapidly as his breathing sped up. Keeping her eyes locked on his, she leaned forward and kissed his chest. Drake sucked in a breath at the soft contact. She did it again and again. Drake lifted his arms, tearing the shirt off the rest of the way, and shook his hair out.

Brooklyn wanted to touch him, to explore the hard contours of his body she'd only seen glimpses of until now. He was a masterpiece. Scars and all.

Her hands hovered over his chest, her eyes seeking his for permission to touch him. He gave a barely distinguishable nod of approval. She started at his collarbone and slowly traced down his pecs to his stomach.

His poor body was riddled with different kinds of scars. Some were long and jagged looking, others small and round. She touched all of them, showing him without words that they didn't bother her.

She bypassed where he was straining for her attention to his sides. He jerked when she reached his sides. "I think someone is ticklish," she mused.

Drake stood up taller, staring over her head. "Never."

“Care to test that theory?” She grinned because he was totally ticklish and now he was going to try and prove her wrong.

Drake took a deep breath, like he was preparing for an assault. She didn’t want him tense like that. Instead of proving him wrong, she moved her hands to his arms and traced up his biceps back to his shoulders. Another time. There was no rush. But there was one thing she wanted now, something that had haunted her dreams.

Her head tilted back and she rose to her tiptoes. “Drake,” she whispered his name as if it were a prayer. His head lowered, and their lips met. It was just as electric as the first time. Drake stepped forward so they were touching chest to chest. Her body felt on fire.

After a moment, his tongue swept into her mouth, taking command. She opened wider for him. Showing him how much she wanted him. How much she wanted this.

Reaching down between them, she unsnapped his jeans and pushed them down with his boxers as far down as they would go. The tip of his cock jutted out from the waist of his boxers. Brooklyn dipped her hands in to cup him as Drake’s tongue slid between her lips. His fingers tangled in her hair and pulled her closer.

Drake groaned against her lips as she took him in hand. He was much larger than what she’d guessed. Her sex clenched in anticipation. To feel him pulsing inside of her. To be stretched to the point of pain. To be pounded into the mattress.

“Enough,” he growled, pulling his hips back and losing her grip on him.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Brooklyn feared she’d pushed him too hard too fast. That he wasn’t ready to make love to her for fear of his scars. That he would insist on putting on a shirt or waiting until dark. Or keep a wall between them so they didn’t get close like this again. Whatever it was, she would drive every one of his fears away.

“Nothing, but if you keep that up, I’ll finish long before I’m ready,” he panted against her lips as if he were a marathon runner trying to catch his breath.

Oh. That didn’t sound so bad.

Drake’s fingers coasted down her spine, breaking her out in goosebumps, until he cupped her bottom and lifted. Brooklyn wrapped her legs around his waist as he walked toward the bed. Every move grazed her soaking core against his cock head.

Her hips tilted, wanting him to impale her right here and now. Take her like a barbarian. Instead, he laid her down on the edge of the bed, prying her legs from him.

Brooklyn opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her with another kiss and leaned forward until she rested her back against the comforter.

“Don’t move.” Drake placed soft kisses down her neck and continued traveling down. His blunt teeth scraped over her perky left nipple before latching onto it and sucking it. Brooklyn’s toes curled as she felt a dual tug between her

legs. He turned his attention to her abandoned right nipple and paid it the same amount of attention.

“Drake, please.” She couldn’t take much more. Her legs moved restlessly. Her core felt empty and needy. If he didn’t move things along, she would take matters into her own hands. She felt on a knife’s edge ready to tumble over any second.

“Please what?”

She couldn’t say it. She wasn’t a vocal lover. Brooklyn was a willing participant, but she normally let the man lead. “Makelovetome,” she rushed out in a single breath.

“I will. All in good time.”

But she wanted him to make love to her now. She rotated her hips, grazing against his cock, hoping he would get the hint.

“Right now I want to learn and explore you. Every delectable inch.”

Well, she couldn’t argue with that. “Explore fast.”

“As you command.” Drake worked his way down to where she ached for him most. His hands glided along her thighs and pushed them wider to accommodate his wide shoulders.

Brooklyn’s back bowed, and she let out a shuddery breath as his tongue stroked along the seam of her sex before darting in.

Her fingers scrambled for purchase as he sent her hurdling toward a climax. It had been so long and he was so

skilled, knowing exactly where to apply the right amount of pressure. Her fingers gripped the comforter for dear life as her thighs quaked.

Drake seemed to know she was on the precipice. He applied greater pressure. The climax hurtled through her body like a freight train. She screamed long and hard as her entire body convulsed. Drake continued licking her through her crisis until she was weak as a newborn baby.

Drake kissed his way back up to her lips. "I think you killed me," she mumbled.

"Then I'll have to revive you so I can do it again." His lips sealed over hers. True to his word, within moments she felt her body come alive again.

She reached up, stroking his cheek, feeling his strong jawline as their tongues mated and dueled. Brooklyn lifted her knees on either side of his waist to cradle him between her hips. She felt the hard press of his cock nudging her entrance.

"Wait."

Drake froze above her like a statue, his face a mask of worry. "You changed your mind." It wasn't a question. He thought she was actually changing her mind at the last second. If she was prone to violence, she might hit him for that.

"No, you idiot. We need a condom." Hopefully he had one because she didn't. When she and Connor had stopped for things, condoms weren't even a blip on her radar. Now she wished she'd packed several boxes.

His face morphed from defeat to relief. “I completely forgot.”

She almost did too. The man had a way of distracting her. “Please tell me you have one.” She didn’t want to stop now that they were so close to making love.

Rain still poured on the roof. There wouldn’t be a trip to town any time soon, and she wasn’t going to risk their lives getting down the mountain for condoms.

“I do.” He pulled free from her and opened the top drawer of the nightstand and pulled out a box of condoms. “It’s unopened,” he said as if he felt the need to explain.

Brooklyn wasn’t going to judge him. She wasn’t a virgin, and she was sure he wasn’t either. All that mattered was here and now. “Well, let’s put them to use.”

Drake pushed his pants and boxers the rest of the way down, freeing his erection fully. Her gaze lowered to his cock. It was the first time she’d seen it. It was long, thick, and hard. She licked her lips as she imagined what it was going to feel like inside of her.

Drake had the box open and the condom sheathed in seconds. He came back to her, standing between her spread legs. His eyes raking over her body. Brooklyn didn’t cover herself. He made her feel beautiful, sexual.

“Come here.” Brooklyn pulled him down, not wanting to waste another moment. Drake didn’t resist her.

They groaned in unison as he thrust forward, his cock buried to the hilt. Her inner muscles pulsed at the welcome

intrusion. The stretch was tight. He was big, and it had been a while for her, but she loved it.

Drake didn't move as if he was afraid he was hurting her. It was hurting her more that he wasn't moving.

She flexed her inner muscles and dug her heels into the fleshy part of his ass to move him along.

Drake groaned. "Sorry. I need a second. Feels so good. You feel so good. I'm so close to blowing my load. It's been so long and, god, I want you."

That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her. "I want you too. No holding back. I want everything you have to give. I'm aching, Drake," she murmured, peppering kisses on his chest, her hands stroking his arms holding his upper body up. "Make the ache go away."

"Shit," he growled before he pulled back and thrust.

"Yes," she screeched, his cock hitting her g-spot.

"Fuck," he cursed and started jackhammering into her, holding nothing back.

She loved it. Brooklyn lifted her hips to meet him thrust for thrust. Her hands anchored around his biceps and held on for the ride of her life. The bed creaked and groaned under them. The headboard smacking the wall with every one of his devastating thrusts that was sending her hurdling toward another climax.

"Drake," Brooklyn panted. "I'm so close." Her hands rose to his back, wanting him closer. She noted the raised flesh. More scars. Poor guy. There was hardly a place that he wasn't covered in them.

As soon as she touched them, Drake flipped them over so he was lying down and she was straddling him. She knew why he'd done it, but the new position made him feel bigger and her feel fuller.

She leaned forward to brace her hands on his chest. At least here he was comfortable with her touching him. Brooklyn lifted herself up and down, setting the rhythm. Drake's hands gripped her hips, urging her along.

The cords of his neck strained, his face covered in sweat. He was close to coming. As close as she was. Brooklyn ground herself on him, using him to get herself off.

"Oh god." Her head flung back as her orgasm rippled through her whole body. Drake thrust a few more times before he roared his own climax. Ropes and ropes of cum spurted into the condom.

Brooklyn collapsed on the side of bed as Drake took care of the condom and cleaned them up. Afterward, he sidled up next to her, propping her head on his chest over his heart, her front pressed up against his side.

He folded the edges of the blanket over them, not bothering to get up and get under the sheets. That was fine with her. Her bones were liquid right now anyway.

She traced a finger over his chest, following some of the scars, while his own fingers rubbed up and down her spine. Both content to just lie there in silence. For once, Brooklyn's mind wasn't churning. She was relaxed, happier than she'd ever been in her life, and before she knew it,

she'd fallen asleep to the sound of the rain and Drake's heartbeat.

Chapter 23

Drake rolled over in bed; his eyes sprang open when he reached out and encountered an empty bed beside him. The sheets were cold. He sat up, blinking blurry eyes before looking for Brooklyn, but there was no sign of her.

By all accounts, she should still be in bed beside him. They'd both gotten little sleep. They'd made love throughout the night. Both passing out and reaching out for the other during the night to make love again. His body was tired and sore, and he loved it.

It helped sleeping in his own bed again and not the couch that was too small for his frame. Even with the fold-out bed, the mattress was thin and the metal bars that supported it dug into his back. He turned his head into the pillow and took a deep breath. It smelled of Brooklyn.

His cock stood at attention ready to go again. "I agree, but where is she?" he mumbled to himself and then he heard it.

Music was playing in the living room which meant she was in the kitchen.

Drake hopped out of bed, not bothering with clothes. He wasn't going to need them for long anyway. Brooklyn was like an addicting drug he couldn't get enough of. And she hadn't complained about his appetite for her. It was a

good thing they didn't have any neighbors except for wildlife. She was a screamer.

He loved how vocal she was, though it could be a problem in the dead of winter. She might cause an avalanche. Would she even be there that long? Best not to think too far into the future and just focus on the present.

Turning to the kitchen, Drake saw her. Her back was to him, stirring something on the stove. She was wearing one of his shirts. He could hear her singing softly and swaying in time to the music. The music was so low, not like that first night. She'd kept it low so he could sleep. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept past sunrise. Judging by the light coming through the windows, it was past nine o'clock.

He'd never slept so late before. Even during rehab and when he got out. The nightmares usually woke him. Come to think of it, he didn't have any last night. He hadn't slept much period because normally when he closed his eyes, the nightmares came, but last night: nothing. Only pleasant dreams. He had no doubt the reason for that was standing in his kitchen.

He didn't want to think about when she'd leave and he had to go back to his miserable living, hating everyone and everything. Right now he wanted to focus on here and now, and right now he wanted to greet Brooklyn.

He marched into the kitchen; Brooklyn whirled around shocked. "Oh, good morning," she said brightly, holding a spatula in her hand. Her eyes widened when she

noticed he wasn't wearing any clothes, his erection standing proudly.

He noted she only wore his t-shirt. It was a little large on her and came down to her mid-thighs. Was she wearing anything underneath? "Good morning," he murmured before dipping his head down and stealing a kiss.

She moaned against his lips and threw her arms around his neck, holding the spatula up and out of the way. Her other hand rested on the back of his neck, making sure to avoid his back. He'd freaked out about it yesterday when she'd touched it. His back had taken the worst of the beatings and was an ugly sight. He hadn't wanted to mar their lovemaking yesterday or see pity in her eyes. He only ever wanted her to look at him with adoration.

"I hope I didn't wake you." She tilted her head back to ask. He took the opportunity to continue kissing her neck.

"Not at all." It was the best sleep he'd ever had.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

"Famished." He gripped her butt cheeks and lifted her. Brooklyn wrapped her legs around his waist. He used the new position to grind his erection between her legs, making his meaning clear.

"I meant for food." She gave a scolding tone but did nothing to deter his attention, especially when her position placed her breasts at face level. He suckled a nipple through the shirt, happy there was no bra in the way, while fondling the other.

“I’m having my breakfast right now.” He had a moment of clarity to turn the burner off and set her on the opposite counter near the sink. He didn’t want to burn the cabin down. “Crème de la Brooklyn.”

He sank down between her parted legs, pulling her butt to the edge. He spread her legs as wide as he could. Her juices glistening in the overhead light. He glanced up at Brooklyn to see heat radiating in her eyes. Her mouth was open in anticipation; her chest barely moved as if she were holding her breath. She wanted this as much as he did.

He didn’t waste another moment. He buried his head between her legs, licking and sucking her clit. Brooklyn’s legs threatened to clamp around his head, suffocating him, but his shoulders kept his death at bay—but what a way to go.

Brooklyn gave a keen cry as he fucked her with his tongue, driving her toward a climax. After as many times as they’d made love, he knew what she liked and what drove her hurdling over the edge.

Right now, he had a burning need for her. He worked her quickly, focusing on her clit as he drove two fingers inside of her, rubbing over her secret spot.

“Yes...” Her head fell back, her heels resting on his shoulders as she rode his face until she came.

He shot to his feet, tearing the shirt from her body and throwing it to the floor. Brooklyn launched into his arms, their lips locking, their tongues dueling. She was just as frantic as he was.

It took his sex-addled brain a second to remember. Condom. They were in the bedroom, but he didn't want to leave her. His brain warred with his cock. Thankfully Brooklyn seemed to sense his dilemma and had been more prepared than he was. "Shirt pocket," she panted.

Drake bent down to retrieve the shirt and pulled the foil packet out of the pocket. "You brilliant woman," he praised, kissing her as he gloved up and drove inside of her.

"I like to be prepared." She wrapped her arms around his neck and her feet locked behind his back as Drake took her with deep, powerful thrusts. "Drake..."

He was going to reward her for the foresight too. "I'll take care of you." He braced a hand under her so she didn't rub her tailbone on the counter. The other hand held the back of her neck.

"Feels so good," she cooed, her inner walls squeezing his cock. He groaned, feeling his impending climax. Not yet, not until she came again.

It did feel good. She fit him like a glove, squeezing his cock just right. Each time they made love, it got better and better. Sometimes it was hot and fast, others it was slow. Right now, it was just a desperate need.

He had no rhythm as he pounded into her, unable to go slower. Brooklyn encouraged him, digging her heels into the tops of his butt cheeks. Her short, blunt nails digging into the back of his neck.

"I'm so close. More, harder. Right there," she husked, dragging him closer to seal her lips over his.

He was close too. He had to get her off before he came. It became a race. Drake wedged his hand between them, thumbing her clit.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted. “Almost there. So close. Oh god, Drake.” Her legs quaked just before she came, her whole body shaking as her release washed over her, pulling him with her.

Drake groaned her name, burying her head in her neck as he came in the condom. He rested like that for several moments, feeling light-headed and his legs shaky. Brooklyn wasn't in a hurry to move either. She sat there, running her fingers through his hair, humming softly.

He chuckled when he heard her stomach growl. Come to think of it, he was hungry too. He hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. Brooklyn had distracted him from his hunger, but now that he'd appeased one hunger, the other was rising to the surface.

Drake stepped back, helped Brooklyn down, and disposed of the condom. Her hair was wild, her lips red and swollen. Brooklyn rested against the countertop as if her legs weren't quite ready to support her just yet. She looked like she'd just been thoroughly fucked.

“How about some breakfast?” he asked, feeling lighter.

“I was making pancakes and eggs before you interrupted me.”

“I didn't hear you complaining a second ago. In fact, I heard yes, more, harder.” Brooklyn swatted his stomach

before swiping the shirt from the floor and draped it back over her body. That was probably a good idea. Hiding temptation.

“No, I didn’t complain, but now I’m hungry. So food before anything else. And coffee.”

“As madam wishes.” He kissed her lightly on the lips, and it turned into several kisses and his tongue trying to dart inside her mouth, but she thwarted his attempts and swatted him on the butt with a spatula she’d been using earlier and had completely forgotten about.

“Coffee and food first.” She held the spatula up like a weapon, waving it in his face.

Drake knew when he was beaten. He stepped around her and started coffee before running into the room to dress.

“I want to take you somewhere,” he said after they’d finished breakfast and cleaned the dishes. It was the least he could do after she’d slaved away making it and he’d almost caused it to be burnt.

“Sure, and then are we going hunting?”

They did need to go soon. “We can go hunting tomorrow.”

“I thought you said we’re out of meat.”

“We are, but we’ll be in town tonight, so we won’t need anything until tomorrow. We can get something to eat there.”

Her eyes widened in excitement. “The dance? We’re going to the dance?”

He didn’t really want to go, but he’d seen how excited Brooklyn had looked when Millie and Edna had mentioned it. “We’re going to the dance. It’s a big thing the town puts on every year. There will be food vendors, the carnival, and the dance.”

Brooklyn jumped up and down and kissed him. “Thank you. I can’t wait.”

“There’s one condition.” He gave her a stern look that Brooklyn didn’t even blink at.

“What’s that?”

“You only dance with me.”

“Done,” she agreed quickly then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“You’d better get changed before I take you right here in the kitchen again.”

“Mmm...”

“Behave.” He swatted her on her bare butt. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her again. He was totally up for it. His growing erection was proof of that, but they only had so many condoms left. They had to pace themselves before he ran out. When they went to town, he’d replenish the supply.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Brooklyn called out as she darted into the bedroom, leaving the door open.

He didn't know if it was an open invitation or to communicate. He made sure to stay in the kitchen regardless.

"It's a surprise," he called back.

"Will this do for our excursion?" she asked, stepping out of the bedroom. Turning left and right to show off her wardrobe.

Drake forgot to breathe. His eyes raked over her slim bare legs to the short, ruffled summer dress that stopped mid-thigh. It was a mix of white and blues with little designs too far away to make out what they were. It had spaghetti straps with a modest neckline, just teasing at the top swells of her breasts.

"God damn." The woman was going to be the death of him. Was it possible to walk around with a constant erection? He was going to find out.

"I take it you approve." She gave him a Cheshire grin, knowing full well he approved.

"Careful, darlin. That dress might not survive this afternoon." He might tear it from her body as he fucked her along the side of the river.

"I have another one. I didn't know what to pack, so I grabbed a hodgepodge of things."

He remembered the outfit she'd arrived in. It was a cross between a librarian and secretary with her tight shirt and sky-high heels. The tight bun and glasses. She was a far cry from that now. No more glasses and her hair down and

free. He loved gripping it as they made love. She made the cutest little mew sounds when he tugged on it.

He cleared his throat. "I'll get ready and we can go."

He gave her wide berth as he walked around her to the bedroom and rushed through getting dressed then went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. His hair was a wild mess from Brooklyn's grip on it.

It was crazy how long he'd let it get. In the military, he'd always kept it short like his brothers, but he hadn't cared much over the past few months. It had become a part of his armor, and now he didn't feel like he needed it, but he was coming to like it. He was wondering if he should cut it or leave it when Brooklyn appeared in the doorway.

"Looking for a bald spot?"

"My hair can withstand your tugging, woman." By the way she blushed, he guessed that wasn't why she'd been teasing him. Was she trying to call him an old man? He thought he'd shown her, but apparently she needed another lesson. "I was actually debating if I should get a haircut."

"I like it like this." She ran her fingers through it. When she did that, he liked it too.

"I'm used to it being shorter like Connor's."

Her head cocked to the side as she looked at him thoughtfully. "Then cut it, but personally I like it where it's at." She shrugged as if it made no never mind to her.

Then it would stay.

“I just need to smooth out the grip marks you left behind.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining earlier,” she copycatted his earlier words.

“And you never will.” He brushed out his hair so it was flatter before tying it back in a ponytail.

-

Chapter 24

Brooklyn followed Drake through the woods. His body was humming with excitement. It was contagious. Honestly, she'd been on cloud nine since she'd woken up in Drake's arms this morning. Oh, who was she kidding, since yesterday when they'd made love.

Her body was sore from their marathon sexcapade, but she wasn't going to complain. It was well worth it. Drake was a giving lover and made sure to prepare her even for their more vigorous lovemaking. He made sure she came at least once before he entered her and protected her body from rubbing on hard surfaces.

He was such a kind and thoughtful lover. He was a kind and thoughtful man too. He was still sensitive about her seeing his back, but she wasn't going to push him. If and when he was ready, she wanted to learn every part of him. Until then, she would enjoy what he was willing to give.

They walked for what felt like several miles. She was becoming curious where he was leading her. He was being very secretive. He didn't wear his normal backpack, but had a longer bag thrown over his shoulder. He stopped when they came to a river edge only a few miles from the cabin. Panoramic scenic mountain views around them.

“Here we are,” Drake announced.

“Drake, it’s incredible.” She spun around looking at everything at once. Everywhere out here was breathtaking. How was she ever going to go back to city views after this? Don’t think about it right now. Just live in the moment.

“I come out here a lot to think and—” He slid the bag from his shoulder and pulled out a pole. “Fish.”

“Oh...” She’d never fished before and didn’t have much interest in it, but from the look of elation on Drake’s face, she couldn’t tell him that.

“Have you ever fished?”

“I haven’t.”

“Then I’ll teach you.”

Maybe it would be like shooting. It hadn’t held much appeal to her in the beginning either, but she came to enjoy it.

Drake set up the pole, showing her a case of brightly colored hooks he called lures. Who knew there were so many different kinds and sizes? One looked like it had soft stripes on it. She reached out to touch it, but Drake warned her of the hook hidden inside of it. He showed her how to cast and handed the pole to her to try.

She did as he’d shown her, casting out into the middle of the lake.

“Now what?”

“You wait for something to strike and then reel it in.”

Sit and wait. How anticlimactic. She’d hoped it would be more fun like shooting, but she was willing to put up

with it for him.

“So what do you do while you wait for a fish to bite?”

“Think or just let my mind quiet for once.”

“Well, this is a great place to do it. What do you think about? Your accident?” He’d told her some of what had happened, but she was sure there was a lot he wasn’t telling her.

“Mostly, or when the walls of the cabin feel like they are closing in, I come here to relax.”

“I can see that. It is very relaxing up here. I’ve never felt so relaxed.”

“Is that a fact?” Brooklyn jumped. When did he come up behind her? Drake took the pole from her hand and set it in a stand buried in the ground. “It will hold the pole so you don’t have to,” he explained as he set a blanket down on the grass and guided her down. Her legs extended out in front of her while he sat behind her. His hand draped her hair over one shoulder, exposing her neck and shoulder.

“How convenient.” Her breath was shaking as she sat there, waiting to see what Drake would do next. She loved not being able to see him. Only feel.

He slipped the strap of her dress from her shoulder and placed a gentle kiss on her shoulder. Then another an inch closer to her neck.

“Drake,” she moaned, starting to tilt her head back to kiss him.

“Ah.” He stopped her, gripping her hair at the base of her neck. “Keep an eye on your pole. We don’t want a fish taking off with it.”

He wanted her to focus on a fishing pole now? Not likely, but she looked straight ahead anyway.

“How long does it take for a fish to bite?”

“Depends on the fish and the bait.” He resumed his kisses to the crook of her neck where her neck met her shoulder. “A fisherman needs to be patient. Good things come to those that wait.”

Was he talking about fishing or her?

“And if they aren’t patient?” Normally she was a patient person. She’d waited for years for an opportunity to move up in Mr. Banner’s company. When it came to Drake though, she was anything but patient. Already he had her squirming. Her legs rubbed together as liquid heat pooled at the apex of her thighs. She’d been a naughty girl and hadn’t worn any panties, hoping their adventure would end like this.

“They lose the fish.” He pulled away, making her moan at the loss. “But you’re patient, aren’t you, beautiful?” he whispered in her ear, making her shiver. She loved it when he called her beautiful. She felt beautiful. Her insecurity about her eyes was forgotten when he looked at her.

“Yes,” came out a throaty moan.

“Good girl.” His tongue darted out and licked her earlobe before sucking it, his blunt teeth nipping it, not

playful but enough to send a jolt to her core.

“Drake,” she hissed, reaching back for him, but he dodged her hands.

“Patience, remember?”

She nodded though she wasn’t sure how much more patient she could be. She was breathless and needy as if she were about to come out of her skin. He’d made love to her slowly before, but this was torturous speed.

“What happens if you wait?”

She licked her dry lips. “Good things.”

“That’s right.” Her other strap slipped down her arm. “Now a fisherman needs more than patience to catch a fish. He needs the right bait. Something to lure the fish to him.”

“Wha-what kind of bait?” She was having trouble focusing on his words as his fingers coasted down her arms, breaking out gooseflesh despite the heat.

“Something to catch their attention. It doesn’t have to be big, but moving.” He lowered the zipper of her dress down. She felt the material release from her body and sag down her front. Her breasts were the only thing still keeping it up.

His fingers slid inside the material around her side to graze the side of her breasts. “Some fish like bigger objects and others smaller.” His hand cupped her breast. “They’ll want to explore what it is and come up to it. Taking small bites of it to try and get it.”

His teeth nipped along the back of her neck as his finger and thumb tweaked and rolled her nipple before retreating.

Brooklyn moved restlessly against him. Her back arching to give him greater access, her hands gripping his knees.

“Drake...” He was killing her with his pace. He twisted her nipples as he bit the cord of her neck. A heady combo of pleasure and pain.

She wanted to cry when he released her. She was about to turn around and demand he fuck her when he gripped her hair at the base again, halting her protest. Reminding her without words of patience.

He’d better hurry up because she didn’t have much left.

“Now you can have all the patience in the world and the best bait, but you need to know where to find them; otherwise the other things are for naught.”

“Where do you find fish?” She honestly didn’t care, but if his explanation kept his hands on her body, she was all for it.

His hand extracted from her dress to snake down her thigh to the hem of her dress then back up to the juncture of her thighs. She smiled at his quick inhale of breath. He was pleasantly surprised by her lack of panties. “They like dark, deep pools waters where they can hide and wait for small fish to come by. So when you find those spots, you cast out over them.” He slipped a finger between her folds.

“This is where precision comes in. You have to know how to cast. Too soft and it won’t go where you want.” His fingers skated over her folds. “Too hard and you’ll go past the fish.” His fingers went down her thigh again before coming back up, just hovering over her sex. “But if you cast with just enough force, you’ll hit the spot.” His fingers sank in.

Brooklyn bit her lip as she moaned at the feel of him finally inside of her. Her muscles clamped down, trying to keep his digits inside of her.

“Now that you’ve cast out,” he continued whispering in her ear. “You have to get the fish’s attention. You have to move the lure.”

“H-how?” Her voice was shaking and harsh. She was on the brink of an orgasm. As if he knew, he kept the pressure light and teasing.

“You move it. You pull up.” His finger pulled out. “Then drop back down slowly.” Two fingers drove back into her. “And back up. You do it over and over again until the fish bites. Sometimes slow and others hard and fast.” His fingers plunged in and out of her. He’d worked her up for so long, she came almost instantly.

He continued to pump in and out of her until the last of her tremors faded and she was a pile of goo in his lap. “And that’s how you catch a fish,” he said as if he’d only been explaining the whole time and not playing with her at the same time. “Are you enjoying fishing yet?”

Brooklyn sat up and turned around to face him. He was sitting back on his heels with a wide grin on his face.

Probably gloating he'd gotten her off so easily. Two could play that game.

"I am. Though, I want to make sure I have the fundamentals down. You know me and details."

His grin slipped a notch. Brooklyn noted his Adam's apple bob. He knew he was in trouble now. It was his turn to be squirming. Bracing a hand on his chest, she eased him to a sitting position and straddled his waist. Her dress was cumbersome now that it was undone and drooping. She slipped it the rest of the way down her arms and let it pool to her waist.

"So you said I need patience?"

"Mmm hmmm," he agreed, reaching out to touch her breasts, but she swatted his hands away.

"Ah, ah, ah," she tsked, leaning back out of reach. "Patience, remember?" Mimicking his earlier words.

Drake huffed like a small child denied a toy but sat back on his hands. He was all hers to play with now. Oh yeah, this was going to be fun.

It was harder to get to his chest since he wore a shirt; it wasn't as easily accessible as her dress had been, but she could adapt.

She leaned forward, he anticipated the kiss and sat up to meet her, but at the last second, she dodged his lips and planted a kiss on his scarred cheek. He had denied her kisses; it was only fair to do the same to him.

She kissed along the scar to his hairline then to his ear. Her tongue twirling around the lobe before sucking it

between her teeth.

Drake groaned, his neck falling back as his hips arched up, rubbing his engorged cock between her legs. She almost forgot her plan to torture him the same way he had her, but tit for tat. She wanted him out of his mind like he'd had her.

Releasing his earlobe, she moved down to his exposed neck while her hands gripped the hem of his shirt and lifted it up his chest.

“Now what was next?” She pulled back and tapped her finger to her chin in thought. “Oh yeah, bait.”

Her hands slid along his chest and ribs while her lips left a trail of kisses down his collarbone to his pebbled nipples. “Depending on the fish, you need big bait or smaller.” Nipping and suckling one nipple, she plucked the other similar to how he'd done to her.

She could feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest as her hands snaked down to the waist of his pants. His breathing became heavier as if he were running a marathon. His hands were clenched into fists, gripping the blanket with a death grip. His knuckles were white from the strain. She smiled, knowing she had him on edge like he had her.

Brooklyn wiggled her way down his lap so her legs were over his knees, her lips following from his naval to his pant line. The bulge of his cock grazed her chin, begging for attention. She unsnapped his jeans—which was easier said than done—he cock wasn't making it easy.

He sprang forward like a jack in box toy, only held back by the cotton of his underwear. Brooklyn pushed the material down and gripped his length lightly like butterfly kisses. He was hard as steel and as soft as velvet. She could barely wrap her fingers around his girth.

“I’m trying to remember what’s next.” She scraped a nail down his length then cupped his balls. “Oh yes, where to find fish. Yes?”

Drake didn’t answer. Just bobbed his head.

“Where do they lurk again?” Her thumb swiped over the crown of his cock collecting a bead of cum that had leaked out. Her tongue darted out and followed the same quick path, picking up his salty, musky flavor. “Help me out here.”

“Dark, deep pools,” he rushed out.

“That’s right.” Brooklyn engulfed his length and took him as far back in her throat as she could. Breathing became a challenge so she tilted her neck and breathed slowly through her nose. She worked him slowly at first. The same punishing speed he’d used on her. She braced her hands on his hips as her tongue swirled and dipped as if she were savoring an ice cream cone.

Drake collapsed to his back as if his bones had turned to mush and could no longer support him. She knew the feeling.

Drake’s legs moved restlessly under her. He couldn’t widen his stance due to only his jeans being open and there wasn’t enough give. “Shit, Brooklyn. I can’t last much

longer. Fuck, your mouth feels so good.” He panted as if he couldn’t catch his breath.

“Mmm,” she hummed, not lifting her head.

“Ah,” he cried out at the vibration massaging his cock. She did again with the same response then suddenly Drake shot up and lifted her from his cock and pulled up so their chests touched.

“I wasn’t done,” she pouted, sticking her bottom lip out. She’d been enjoying herself and wanted to feel him come in her mouth.

Drake took her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked. “If I don’t get inside that tight fucking little pussy of yours, beautiful, in the next twenty seconds, I’m going to explode.”

Brooklyn’s sex clenched at his dirty words. She wasn’t going to say no to that. “Condom?”

He leaned to one side to pull a foiled wrapper from his back pocket. Brooklyn took the wrapper from him so he could shove his pants down to his thighs. The teasing mood was gone. Now it was hot and heavy.

As soon as the condom was on, Drake wrenched her hips forward and impaled her on his length. Not giving her time to adjust and just thrusting forcefully into her. Her hands clung to his shoulders, her head thrown back as he took her like a Viking. Conquering and taking what he wanted.

Drake wrapped one arm around her back, the other gripping the back of her neck as he pumped into her. There

was no finesse. No rhythm. She loved it. Wanted more.

“Harder. Fuck me harder, Drake.” She loved feeling him pound inside of her as if he couldn’t get enough. She felt just as out of control with him.

“You want harder, beautiful? I’ll give it to you.” He hoisted her from his cock and spun her around on the blanket so she was on her hands and knees. “Good?”

Besides her equilibrium momentarily disturbed, she was good. Better than good. “Yes, now fuck me already.” She yelped when he lifted the back of her dress and his hand smacked down on her upturned ass.

“What did I say before?” he asked, a hint of humor in his voice.

“You’d give it to me.”

Another smack to her opposite ass cheek. “Try again.”

“Patience,” she panted. She shouldn’t like this. It was degrading and childish. Spankings were for children, not full-grown adults. Yet she couldn’t deny she liked it. She liked the sting and lingering burn. Moisture pooled between her legs.

“Good girl,” he praised her then drove back in her. His hand tangled in her hair, pulling back. His legs braced outside of hers.

“Yes,” she chanted. So good, but not enough to make her come. She reached between her legs to rub her clit. Needing to get off. To burn off this fever that had taken over her body.

She rubbed herself in time to his thrusts. She was just on the precipice when Drake leaned over her back. “Are you playing with yourself, beautiful?” he whispered in her ear. “Naughty girl.”

His hips pulled back and his cock slipped free.

“Nooo...” She’d been so close.

“I’ll take care of you, baby. Don’t worry, but I want to see those beautiful eyes when you come. I want to watch them glass over as I make you come all over my cock.” Drake flipped her to her back and sank back in. Her legs fell open to cradle his hips. “There’s my beautiful girl.” He grinned, and Brooklyn felt like she was staring straight into the sun it was so bright. “Ready to come?”

Brooklyn nodded. She was more than ready.

Drake lowered himself down, bracing his weight on one hand, his other wedged between them to strum her clit in cadence to his thrusts. She reached up to grip his triceps, needing an anchor as the tingling started in her toes then coursed through her body as her orgasm ripped through her like a tornado.

Drake thrust a few more times then followed. He collapsed next to her and tucked her into his side, her head resting on his chest. She giggled trying to get comfortable. Drake’s shirt was tucked up under his chin making it uncomfortable to rest on him. He ripped it over his head and tossed it on the ground. There, much better.

“I think I like fishing,” she said, sighing in contentment. She didn’t think he would at first, but Drake

made it enjoyable. Though at the moment, she had no idea where her pole was or if a fish had taken off with it.

His fingers combed through her hair while she traced a nonexistent pattern over his chest. It was becoming one of their usual positions after lovemaking. “Oh yeah, why’s that?” She could hear the smirk in his voice.

“I caught the biggest fish in the river.” She giggled.

“Yeah, but I got the loudest.” She couldn’t deny that. She was rather loud. Good thing Drake didn’t have any neighbors. “How do you feel?” Her head was draped over his chest, her torso pressed against his side, and her left leg intertwined with his.

“Happy. Perfect. Content.”

“All that?” He chuckled.

“And more.” Was there a better word for bliss?

“Agreed.”

She gazed out over the landscape. Birds sang overhead, tall trees surrounded the little clearing. The constant flow of the river. Majestic mountains in the background. “This really is a beautiful place. Did your grandpa used to take you here?”

“Yeah, this is where I learned to fish.” He looked down at her.

“And now you’re carrying on the tradition of teaching me here. You always talk about your grandpa, what about your dad? Are you close?”

“Not really. Dad was a military man and gone a lot. Mom struggled with seven boys, so Grandma and Grandpa stepped in a lot to help. He’s the one that took us out into the woods and taught us how to live off of the land. He would teach us to follow tracks and build a structure if we were ever caught out in the woods. To find our way out if lost.”

“He sounds amazing. Is he still alive?”

“He is. He and Grandma live in the big city with my parents. They are up there in age and can’t live on their own anymore.” His voice dropped as if he were telling her a secret. “Don’t tell him that though.”

Brooklyn laughed to hide her sudden discomfort. She wanted to meet his grandpa and the rest of Drake’s family. To meet the man who’d made Drake into the man he was. Who’d taught him so many life skills.

She shouldn’t be thinking about the future. It was uncertain. Her boss’s killer might never be found. She might be forced to move somewhere else. There were so many uncertainties about her future, she didn’t want to think too far ahead, but she liked thinking about more time with Drake. Meeting his family. Meeting his other brothers. Even if she shouldn’t. “He sounds amazing. Whoa!” The pole Drake had leaned against the stand pulled, threatening to snap the thing in half.

“You got a fish.” Drake stood up, dragging her with him, and grabbed the pole before it went into the river. “Come take the pole. It’s your fish.” He held the pole out to her. She pulled her dress back up but didn’t have time to

zip it up before taking the pole from him. Drake stayed behind her, his hands over hers. “Now tug back to set the line. Alright, now start reeling in.”

It was a battle for several minutes of reeling and waiting. Reeling and waiting. It was worth it though when the biggest fish Brooklyn had ever seen dangled at the end of the line.

“What kind of fish is that?” she gasped in shock as Drake unhooked the fish and set it on the shore.

“The kind that will taste great for dinner.” He dug around in his bag and pulled out a knife.

“I thought we were eating in town.”

“It’s not for tonight. I can set it up in the meat storage, and we can have it another night.”

There was something to be said about hunting and killing your own meals. She wasn’t a fan of filleting it and ripping its guts out—she had Drake for that and could turn away when it got gross—but she felt accomplished when after a few hours, they had several fish pulled onto shore and ready for eating.

“So what did you think of your first fishing experience?” he asked, washing his hands in the river and cleaning off the blood and other body parts.

“I liked it. The only thing missing is a hammock or a bench. Don’t get me wrong, the blanket was nice, but something with a little more cushion would be nice.” Standing for hours while fishing could be taxing on the back.

“Something could be arranged. I like the idea of a hammock.” His voice turned husky, making her think of all sorts of things they could do with a hammock.

“Would Edna approve? She seems very protective of this place.”

Drake made a face at the mention of the woman’s name. “I’m sure a hammock won’t set her into a panic attack. I love her dearly, but she doesn’t like change. Even if it’s necessary. If you ever notice next time we’re in the store, she still has a rotary phone.”

“You mean the one you have to spin the number counterclockwise?” she asked, spinning her finger in the air.

“Yep,” he confirmed and started collecting their gear into the bag.

“Wow.” She’d seen them in antique stores but never in an actual store.

“She and my grandpa have known each other for years. He bought his supplies from her store, so she’s attached to the place and doesn’t want to see it changed.”

That explained the stink eye he’d gotten when he’d mentioned some modification. “Well, a hammock will only enhance the place and not change the flow of things. I’m sure even your grandpa would agree.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Let’s get going. I want to get these fish in the storage, and we need to get to town for the dance.” Brooklyn gathered the fish, and they headed back

to the cabin. If he'd liked this dress, she couldn't wait to see his reaction to the other.

Chapter 25

The carnival was set up just outside town in a large field along a tree line. A stage had been set up for the band, and the vendors lined up along one side as the carnival games lined up on the other creating the perimeter. Drake had gone to the carnival as a kid but never as an adult. Not that things had changed. It looked like the same vendors and booths were set up.

It was still Brooklyn's first time, and she looked at everything like a child as they walked hand in hand. She wanted to do and see everything, and who was he to deny her? He doubted he could deny her anything. He wanted to give her the world the same as she was giving him.

He felt alive again with her. He didn't feel broken and ugly. He felt whole again. Like his old self. He still hadn't let her see his back, but he was coming around to the idea. She hadn't flinched at his other scars.

She'd come out of her shell since they'd met. She didn't wear glasses or keep her head down, but looked everyone in the eye. Some people flinched and whispered, and he wanted to give them a talking to for her, but Brooklyn seemed oblivious to it, and he wouldn't ruin her night.

"What do you want to do first? Games, food, or dance?"

“Dancing,” she replied excitedly.

“Dancing it is.” He guided her across the field, weaving in and out of people, keeping himself between her and others. Not because he was afraid she’d get knocked over or lost in the crowd, but because he didn’t want other men panting after his woman. Especially with her hair curled around her shoulders and in another spaghetti strap dress with a heart shaped neckline. It was longer but had slits running up the legs to mid-thigh so every move she took her knee on down would poke out.

He’d been tempted to tell her to change when she’d emerged from the bedroom wearing that dress, but she looked so damn happy, he didn’t have the heart. As long as she stuck to his side, he didn’t have to worry about some idiot trying to drag her off.

The dance area was already crowded. Several groups of people stood along the sides and watched. He guided her toward the middle. Brooklyn stood frozen. Her eyes darting around her like a hare caught in a trap.

“What’s wrong?” Was someone looking at her funny?

“I don’t know the steps.”

“I’ll guide you.” He pulled her close and fell in step with the other dancers. He kept one hand braced on her hip and the other clasped with her hand as he guided her. Telling her the steps as they went.

Brooklyn stumbled a few times and stepped on his foot more than once, but the smile on her face was worth any minor discomfort.

The song came to an end. Both of them were out of breath and sweaty from the fast pace. It had been a long time since he danced, but he'd take any excuse to keep Brooklyn in his arms. A new song started, this one slow.

They swayed side to side hardly moving from their spot. "So you can dance, shoot, hunt, fish, and build. Is there anything you can't do, Drake Weston?" Brooklyn asked in a teasing tone with a wide grin on her face.

Make you love me the way I'm falling in love with you. He knew he shouldn't even be thinking about it. What they had was temporary, but it didn't stop his heart from falling for her. He didn't want her to leave. He selfishly hoped the killer was never found so she'd have to stay with him, but knew it wasn't fair to her. She had her dreams she still wanted to follow. She'd never mentioned anything about what she'd do after this. She may not want anything to do with him past here and now. Best not to dwell on it. "I'm sure there's one or two things."

"Don't tell me, your grandpa taught you to dance?"

"Grandma actually. She insisted all of us boys learn to impress the ladies."

"Well, you can tell her that she was right. I'm impressed."

There she went again, excluding herself from a future together. *You never asked her to stay with you either.*

He released her hand to wrap both arms around her lower back. She wrapped both hands around his neck and

rested her head on his chest. She fit him as perfectly as two puzzle pieces.

They almost went sailing when a couple bumped into them harshly. Only quick reflexes saved them from taking a spill.

“Watch it,” the guy yelled at them before dragging his partner to the other side of the dance floor.

“Dick,” Drake mumbled, staring after the guy. The guy looked barely twenty years old and two sheets to the wind. The woman he was dancing with glared over at them until she realized who he was and then her eyes widened in shock. Meredith. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and tried showing her body off to him as she danced around the idiot she was with. She looked like a stripper and the punk a pole. It did nothing for him.

Drake didn't understand what her obsession was with him. He'd never been more than cordial to her. Maybe wanting what she couldn't have? Well, she could keep on wanting because it would never happen.

“Forget about him,” Brooklyn said, touching his cheek to bring his attention back to her.

“Already did.” Why think about him when he had a gorgeous woman in his arms? “Tell me something.” He spun her out then pulled her back in.

“What?”

“Are you wearing any panties under that dress?” He'd come to realize Brooklyn liked it when he talked dirty, and she was becoming a voyeur and going sans panties lately.

He wasn't complaining, but he didn't want any of these other idiots to see what was his.

"I guess you'll just have to find out yourself," she said with a mischievous grin on her face.

He smiled wolfishly. "Is that a challenge, beautiful?" His hand drifted down from her back to her backside, but Brooklyn wriggled free of his grasp.

"You bet, soldier."

"Challenge accepted." The song ended and an upbeat tempo came on. They danced and swung around. And yes, his Brooklyn was pantiless. Something he'd take advantage of later.

They danced until they were both sweaty and needed a break.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry," she announced, holding his hand and leaning against his shoulder.

"Sure, what are you hungry for?" He'd get anything she wanted.

"I don't know. Everything looks so good."

"Then you'll try everything."

"Don't be silly." She laughed then sobered up when he didn't join her. "I could never eat so much." She looked around. "How about a cheeseburger and fries?" she suggested, looking at one food stand selling burgers.

"Done." He started to drag her off with him, not wanting to leave her alone.

“I want to go see a vendor over here. I’ll be right back.” She gave him pleading eyes. He didn’t want to leave her alone, but she was an adult and he couldn’t tell her what to do.

“Okay.” She leaned forward and kissed him soundly on the lips. Drake dragged her closer to deepen the kiss and show to anyone watching she was his. Yes, it was cavemanish, but he didn’t care. He was possessive and protective when it came to Brooklyn. “Hurry back,” he said when he finally let her up for air.

Her eyes were unfocused and her lips swollen. “I will.” She patted down her hair as she darted between people and disappeared. He was ready to chase her down and drag her back to the cabin, but she had been so excited to come. Soon. He still needed to stop at Millie’s and stock up on condoms. Could you buy condoms in bulk? At the rate they were going, they would need them.

Food. Dance. Condoms. Home.

He got in line to order food, his eyes scanning the crowd looking for Brooklyn. He didn’t like that he couldn’t see her. Where had she gone? He checked his watch. It had only been a minute. He was being paranoid for no reason. She was perfectly safe.

He ordered and stood near the truck waiting for his order. It had been five minutes. Where the hell was she? The carnival was only so big. The vendors didn’t have long lines. As soon as he got her food, he starting looking for her.

The food was barely in his hands when he took off the way he’d seen Brooklyn leave.

Chapter 26

Brooklyn backtracked to the stall she'd seen as they'd passed by. She had wanted to get something for Drake. She'd managed to smuggle her few meager dollars and hid them on her person hoping to find him something, and then she saw the perfect gift. He'd given her so much, and she felt she'd given him so little.

Not only had he kept her alive and saved her life from a bear, he'd helped her come out of her shell. Never would she have thought to take off her glasses and look people in the eyes. Sure, she still got some stares and people leaning close to whisper about her, but it didn't affect her like it used to. Drake had helped her with that.

"Can I help you?" the vendor asked as Brooklyn perused the merchandise.

"I'd like that one please." She pointed to the one she wanted.

"Lovely. I made these myself. My grandmother taught my mother and she in turn taught me," the woman explained, pulling it from the wall and handing it to her.

"It's beautiful. How much?"

"Ten ninety-five. I have charms you can add to them as well. You can choose one."

Brooklyn gave her the money and looked through the jar of charms. She smiled when she found the perfect one.

“This one.”

“Excellent. Is this for you or someone else?”

“My—” What did she call Drake? Boyfriend seemed too soon. Lover just sounded vulgar. Friend was too mild. “A special person in my life,” she finally said.

“He’s a lucky man.” The woman beamed.

“How did you know it was a man?”

“I have eyes, dear. I may be old, but they still work. You have the look of a woman in love,” the woman said knowingly.

She did? She cared for Drake and enjoyed spending time with him, but love? It was too soon, wasn’t it?

“Don’t look so frightened, dear,” the woman assured her, patting her on the back of the hand. “It happens to the best of us when we least expect it. Don’t be afraid.” The woman handed the bag and receipt to her.

“Thank you.” Brooklyn started walking back to the food truck where Drake should be waiting. Her mind was in a fog. Love.

She was so lost in thought, she collided with someone.

“Watch where you’re going, freak,” a big burly man yelled at her. It was the same guy from the dance floor.

“Pardon me,” she mumbled and tried to walk around him, but he blocked her path.

“I’m not done with you, freak.”

Brooklyn noticed the man wasn't alone. He had his arm draped over a woman she recognized from the grocery store. The one Drake had told her got a talking down to from Millie. Meredith was her name. Obviously the talk hadn't stuck. The girl just snickered.

“Didn't I tell you she was ugly? Men probably have to fuck her from behind because they can't stand looking at her.”

Brooklyn had had enough. She tried stepping around them but was once again blocked. Now they were just getting annoying. “Let me pass,” she said evenly when she was really more annoyed than anything. She wanted to get back to Drake before he worried about her.

“Why? No one wants you here, freak. People can't keep down their food having to look at your ugly face. You belong in a freak house, not out amongst good folks.”

“Well, if you find any good folks, let me know because I'm not seeing any from where I'm standing.” Brooklyn moved to walk past him, but the guy pushed her back forcing her to stumble. She barely caught herself before falling.

“You have a mouth don't you, bitch,” the guy snarled.

“Don't let her talk to us like that. Teach her a lesson,” Meredith egged him on.

“I know how to shut up a fat mouth. A big fucking cock. I bet it's the only one you've ever seen, you ugly as fuck bitch.” He started to grab for her, and panic set in. The

man was trying to grab her in a crowded place and not a single person glanced over at them.

She started to dart around him when a pair of arms caught her. The scent of pine hit her. Drake. “What’s going on here?” His gaze was focused on the guy.

“Ah, how sweet, the crippled comes to rescue the freak. Move on, man, before I squash you.” The man puffed up his chest trying to make himself look larger. Brooklyn could feel Drake stiffen next to her.

Drake was still a head taller than him and while he wasn’t as muscular, she had no doubt Drake could take him in a fight. Not that she wanted this confrontation to result in one.

“Let’s just go, Drake.” She tried pushing Drake away, but Meredith pushed from her companion to step in front of them. Her gaze on Drake.

“Hi, Drake. I’m glad you came,” she purred.

“Mer, what the fuck.” Her companion gaped at her, appearing confused his partner had abandoned him.

“Go play with the freak, Dwayne. That’s why I invited you.” She waved him off, still staring at Drake. “He’s the reason I came. Ready for that dance, handsome?” She tried sidling up to Drake, but he pulled Brooklyn closer to his side and stepped back.

“You’re picking that cripple over me?” Dwayne sputtered, appearing even more baffled.

Meredith turned on Dwayne. “Duh.”

Dwayne turned his bloodshot eyes on Drake. “You’re dead, cripple, and when I’m done with you, I’m going to fuck every hole of this freak of yours and throw her in the trash where she belongs.”

Drake pushed her behind him, creating a human shield. She’d hoped to avoid a fight, but this idiot had not only threatened to hurt Drake, but he’d also threatened to rape her.

“You touch her, you’re the dead man.” It wasn’t a threat but a promise. There was no stopping this now. All Brooklyn could do was pray for it to be over soon.

Both men glared the other down. Fists clenched at their sides. Waiting for some secret signal to attack. People continued to walk around them as if they weren’t there. How could people be so oblivious? Or were they purposely ignoring so a fight would break out? Give the mundane town some excitement.

They both took a step toward the other. Brooklyn braced herself for the violence.

“Stop it right now,” a deep voice doomed.

Both men turned to see who had prevented the fight. Meredith clasped her hands to her chest. “Daddy, thank god.” She was all sweet and demure, making Brooklyn want to hurl.

The sheriff stood unmoved, probably used to his daughter’s antics. His deputy stood next to him. The sheriff looked to be in his late forties. He had dark brown hair, peppered with grey. He had a thick handlebar mustache

that was still dark brown. He wore a tan uniform that fit his trim figure. He reminded her of the Andy Griffith show.

“Deputy Diaz, please take Meredith to my car.”

“Yes, sir.” The deputy stepped forward and all but dragged Meredith away.

“But, Daddy,” she whined while trying to break free.

The sheriff didn’t even glance in her direction but looked between Drake and Dwayne. “As for you two.”

“I did nothing, Sheriff,” Dwayne said quickly, holding his hands up in surrender. The quick movement threw off his balance and sent him stumbling into a cart for support.

“Drunk and disorderly. Drinking underage. Threatening to rape women. That’s just the past hour. Shall I go on?” The sheriff cocked an eyebrow at him. Almost daring him to contradict him.

Dwayne for once wisely kept his mouth shut.

Feeling that matter settled, the sheriff shifted his gaze to Brooklyn. “You alright, miss?”

She was shaking a little, but she’d survive. “I am. Thank you for coming when you did.”

“Millie would have had my head if I didn’t.”

Brooklyn looked around trying to find the woman in question.

“She’d been passing by the dance floor and heard knucklehead and Meredith talking. She figured I should break up the brewing fight instead of herself.”

That had been wise. Millie was sweet but older. She wouldn't stand a chance against Dwayne if he decided to use his fists.

“Did you want to press charges?”

Dwayne's eyes bugged and a bead of sweat formed at his temple. If she was the vengeful type, she'd threaten to just to make the guy squirm. “No.”

Dwayne wilted like a flower in the changing of seasons.

“You're still not off the hook,” the sheriff reminded him with a pointed finger. “I may not get you on that charge, but I've got plenty of others.”

“Come on, Sheriff,” Dwayne started to whine like Meredith had.

“You two enjoy the rest of your night.” He tipped his head to them and dragged Dwayne off by the arm.

“Are you sure you're alright?” Drake asked when they were left alone, rubbing her arms up and down in a comforting gesture.

“I'm fine. I was scared until you arrived. I knew you wouldn't let anything happen to me.”

Drake kissed her forehead and took a deep breath as if he were breathing her in. “Damn straight, I wouldn't have. I'm glad I got to you when I did. When I saw that punk going after you—”

“Hey,” she cut him off, clasping both of his cheeks and pulling him in for a kiss. “I'm okay. I'm here. You're here.”

We're fine." She didn't want Dwayne and Meredith to ruin their night.

He wrapped his arms around her. She could feel him relaxing as he held her. "You're right. Are you hungry? I brought your burger and fries."

She wanted something else now, but food would have to suffice at the moment. "I am. Afterward, can we go home?" She'd had enough of the carnival.

"Sure, after a quick pit stop at Millie's."

-

Chapter 27

Brooklyn had been a bit embarrassed when they'd stopped at Millie's and Drake had bought several boxes of condoms. If that hadn't been bad enough, he'd asked if he could get them in bulk. Who asked that? Millie thankfully hadn't batted an eye at the large order of condoms, though she did wink at her as they left. Nothing like the small town gossip knowing your personal business.

When they entered the cabin, Brooklyn tried to sneak into the bedroom to hide Drake's gift, but she should have known better than to try and be sneaking around with someone with a background in reconnaissance.

"What are you doing, beautiful?" he called after her.

"Changing?"

"I'll help." He started coming toward her.

"No," she said more loudly than she'd meant to. "I mean, I can do it myself."

"Don't tell me you're getting shy after all we've done." His voice dropped an octave as he advanced toward her slowly. Like a predator that had already cornered its prey.

Her cheeks burned thinking of all they'd done in just the past few days. Making love on the shoreline. Him fingering her in the truck on the way back.

“No, I just want a moment of privacy,” she tried to explain. She just needed a few seconds to hide his gift and then she was all his.

“Why are you being so secretive?” Drake took another step closer, looking amused instead of confused by her behavior.

“I’m not. Why are you being so inquisitive?” She backed up toward the bedroom.

“My curiosity is piqued.” He froze as if a thought came to him. “You’re not hesitant because of Dwayne, are you?”

“No,” she assured him. “He has nothing to do with it. I’ve honestly forgotten all about him.” Not fully. It’s hard to forget a threat like that, but she knew Drake would never have let anything happen to her.

She hadn’t thought about it at the time, but she could have screamed for help, and someone would have come to her rescue.

He was obviously relieved by her answer. “Good. So are you going to tell me what you were doing when he cornered you?”

She had wanted to wait and let it be a surprise. “No...”

“Does it have to do why you’re really sneaking into the bedroom?” He raised an eyebrow in doubt. Almost daring her to confess the truth right then and there.

She pressed her lips together.

“Tell me.” His voice was gentle, but she heard the order, nonetheless.

“You are as relentless as a dog with a bone.” She should have known she couldn’t hide this from him, but she’d hoped he would just let the matter go.

“Just tell me already. Or I’ll have to use other methods to get the answer.” His eyes dipped between her legs.

He was threatening to use sex to pry answers out of her. He wouldn’t. Brooklyn looked him over. He appeared casual, but underneath was still a trained military operative who specialized in getting answers. Yes. Yes, he would. The man was ruthless and wouldn’t stop until he got what he wanted. She would never win this little game of theirs.

“Fine, I was buying you something.” That announcement brought him up short.

“Me? You bought me something?” he repeated as if he needed clarification.

Why did he have to sound like it was a foreign concept? She was sure he’d received gifts before. “Yes.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know I didn’t, but I wanted to.

“Not to seem insensitive, but how did you afford that? I thought Connor took your wallet.”

“I had some cash I smuggled with me.”

His eyes softened, and he closed the distance between them. His fingers stroking back her hair from her face.

“Beautiful, you should save your money for something

important. Like a bus ticket in case of an emergency or something as important as your safety. Not me.”

“This is something important to me.” She licked her suddenly dry lips. The vendor’s words came back to her. “You’re important to me.”

“You’re important to me too,” he whispered before kissing her softly. Showing her with actions how much she meant to him.

Brooklyn felt her heart racing, threatening to beat out of her chest. That was as close as she’d ever come to professing her love to someone. She still wasn’t certain she was in love, but it was pretty damn close. The thought of leaving Drake when the killer was found made her sick to her stomach and her heart sore.

“Can I see it now or do I have to wait?” Brooklyn had to laugh at his eager expression.

“I bet you were a field day for your parents at Christmas and birthdays.”

“There were so many of us, our parents didn’t do gifts. My mom would make a big meal and of course Grandpa would take us into the woods.”

She hadn’t thought about buying gifts for seven boys. That would cost a fortune. She hadn’t been spoiled, but her parents had always gotten her gifts. “So this is like your first gift?”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t upset about this. You couldn’t miss something you’d never had.

“Well, you have to open it now.” She pulled out the package she’d stuffed in her bra.

“Hidden there, I would have found it rather quickly.” Drake laughed which made her laugh. It wasn’t the best hiding spot, but it wasn’t like this dress had pockets.

“You weren’t supposed to know about it, and this dress doesn’t have any pockets. I couldn’t think of anywhere to put it.”

“I would have found it that much faster if you had it somewhere else.” His grin broadened once again, reminding her of the car ride home.

“Just open it. It’s not much.” She felt the need to remind him as she handed him the turquoise tissue paper. She hadn’t kept the bag as it would have been that much harder to hide. Brooklyn waited with bated breath as he opened the paper and revealed the gift.

He held up the small dreamcatcher, about the size of his palm with an army soldier charm dangling from its chain. “To help with your bad dreams. I know it’s probably corny, but—”

“Brooklyn,” his voice cracked, so he cleared it, “Thank you. I love it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“To be honest, since we started sleeping together—and when I say sleep, I mean close our eyes and dream—I don’t have nightmares.”

“I’m glad.” She noticed he seemed to sleep easier but didn’t know if it had been because they’d exhausted each

other out or for other reasons.

“I’ll put it over our bed.”

Her heart skipped a beat. *Our*. Not his. Not hers. *Our*.

She followed him into the bedroom and watched him hang it above the headboard over the center of the bed. It looked like it belonged there.

“What do you think?” he asked, looking at her over his shoulder.

“Perfect.”

He left the bed to stand in front of her. His hands skimming lightly over her skin. “Now I can’t wait to go to sleep tonight and test it out.”

“It’s not that late. Whatever shall we do until bedtime?” She intertwined her fingers behind his neck and pulled him in for a scorching kiss.

“I might have an idea or two.” He plucked at her straps and lowered them down to her elbows.

“I do like the way your mind works.”

“Have I told you how much I love this dress?” He trailed a finger over the bodice, following the swells of her breasts.

“No...” But she could feel the evidence of it pressing against her abdomen.

“You look gorgeous in it. Showing off those sexy little legs. I’ll admit I was jealous seeing all the men staring at you tonight.” He stepped around to her back and unzipped her dress; it quickly pooled at her feet. The cool air felt

good against her overheated skin even as gooseflesh broke out across her arms. She stood completely naked except for her shoes.

“You had nothing to be jealous of.” She hadn’t noticed anyone but him. “And no one was staring,” she argued, at least none that she noticed. Then again, she’d only had eyes for Drake.

“I beg to differ. When we were dancing, I saw several men openly stare at you.” He swept her hair over her shoulder and started kissing her neck. Her head rolled to the side to give him better access.

“Are you sure it wasn’t at my eyes?” It was more a joke, but when he pulled back and stepped back in front of her, his face serious, she knew he hadn’t taken it that way.

He clasped her face between his hands. “They were staring at a beautiful woman, not worrying about your eye color.”

“When you look at me like that, I do feel beautiful.”

“Because you are,” he assured her. “You were just too afraid to show it. Hiding behind those glasses. Now the world can see what I’ve always seen.”

“A woman who might walk off a cliff?” she teased with a saucy grin.

Drake shook his head side to side. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?” He grinned, his thumb swiping over her bottom lip.

“Never.”

“Fair enough.” They fell together in a tangle of lips and limbs. Drake gathered her close, his hands skimming over her back, one hand gripped her butt cheek and squeezed.

Reaching between them, Brooklyn fought with his buttons. Out of all the times for him to wear a button up shirt instead of his normal t-shirts. Drake, sensing her struggle, pulled back but not enough to separate their lips, and helped unbutton his shirt.

Once he was free of it and it joined her dress, she got to work on his pants. Within seconds, he was as naked as she was. They fell into the center of the bed. Brooklyn opened her legs to cradle him.

“Hurry.” She wanted him now. Where were the condoms?

Drake pulled one out of thin air and gloved up. Instead of thrusting in and a race to the finish line, he probed her folds, gliding his cock over her clit in a gentle teasing motion before sinking into her.

Her hands came up to his shoulders as she held on for his masterful strokes. His broad cock stretching her vaginal walls and hitting her g-spot.

Drake leaned down so they were chest to chest, his head buried in her neck. One hand sank into his hair and the other wrapped around his back but quickly pulled back when she remembered how he felt about that.

Drake sat up, pulling her with him. Her legs wrapped around his lower back, his hands held her up at the waist as

he guided her up and down his cock.

“Touch me,” he requested, his teeth nipping at the cord of her neck.

“I am.” She didn’t understand what he was asking. She was touching him. There wasn’t a part of her that wasn’t touching him.

“No, my back,” he clarified. “I want you to touch me. Touch all of me.”

Brooklyn couldn’t breathe. He wanted her to touch him. He didn’t have to ask twice. Her hands went to his back. She didn’t linger over one spot long. She could feel the raised flesh from his shoulder blades down. So many scars.

Brooklyn scooted closer so she could wrap her arms around his back; her legs tightened around his waist as if she were hugging him. In a way she was. She turned her head and kissed his cheek, noting moisture there. “Thank you for sharing them with me.” She pulled from his back to grip both of his cheeks and peppered his face with kisses.

“They aren’t pretty.”

“Shh,” she kissed his lips to silence his protest, “They are a part of you as my eyes are part of me. We can’t change them. My feelings haven’t changed. I still want you, scars and all.”

He didn’t say anything, but she could feel the relief in his body. As if he’d been holding a part of himself at bay and now it was free; he was hold nothing back.

Drake flipped her around to her back so her head was near the foot of the bed. His thrusts turned more forceful as if he were chasing something. Brooklyn clung to him, her hands clinging to his back. Despite all the scarring, she could feel the sinew of muscles bunching and coiling under her hands.

“God, I don’t deserve you, beautiful, but hell, I can’t let you go. I need you. Always want you.” His hips snapped with vigor, one of his hands found hers and clenched into a fist on the blanket next to her head.

It felt like a declaration, but Brooklyn was too lost to focus on his words. “Want you too. Need you. Drake, I’m so close. Come with me.”

“I’m right there with you, beautiful.”

His hips rotated and hit a spot that had Brooklyn seeing stars as wave after wave of euphoria rolled through her body. Her only anchor, the man holding her. Drake groaned her name and thrust once more before she felt him pulsing inside of her.

Brooklyn laid on her side while Drake disposed of the condom. She was half passed out when she felt herself lifted then lowered back down, her head resting on the pillow and the blanket pulled up to her chin. A moment later, Drake snuggled in behind her. She rolled over so they were chest to chest, her arm draped over his side so she could run her fingers over his back and touch his scars.

Her eyes fluttered open to see the look of contentment on Drake’s face. She was sure she looked the same. She wished she had the ability to freeze time and

hold on to this moment. A word hovered on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it back, not wanting to shatter this moment.

Instead, she snuggled up closer, the word bouncing around in her head like a bouncy ball. There would be time to tell him. Connor had warned her that she could be here for months. She had all the time in the world to tell him she was falling in love with him.

Chapter 28

“Weston.” Jameson looked up from his desk as one of the deputies came up to him. “Package came for you.” The guy handed Jameson a manila envelope.

He looked at the address and smiled. The first in the past few days. “Finally.” It had taken an act of god to get it. Two days and a favor from the district attorney’s office.

Hopefully there was a lead in here because he was no closer to finding the killer and now Morgan’s kidnapper. Lawry hadn’t been around to ask if there were any new leads.

Inside was a disk and a photocopy of the guest registry. He checked the registry first. There was no name listed for around the time of the murder. Another dead end. Putting the disk in his computer, he hoped to have better luck. It was the only other lead he had.

Jameson skimmed through the footage to thirty minutes before the estimated time of the murder. The camera showed several angles of the lobby and the outside entrances. Since Brooklyn was on the phone with Morgan when it happened, he knew pretty close the time of the murder.

Ten minutes before Brooklyn was scheduled, a group of people came in through a side door. As the group went in one direction, one person veered toward the elevator.

They kept their head down so the camera couldn't see their face, but they matched the description that Brooklyn gave. The person made sure to keep their back to the camera until the elevator door closed. That had to be who had killed Banner.

Jameson couldn't tell who it was. The body frame looked male, but that was all he could detect.

Jameson kept watching when the security guard ran out. That must have been when Banner died. A few minutes later, a black figure came out of the elevator. Again, they kept their face down as they hurried through the lobby and out the door.

Jameson sat back in his seat. Damn, he was no closer to finding who'd done it. He was back to square one. He was trying to think of his next move when he saw movement on the camera. The security guard was at the desk calling someone, probably the police, when an officer was already on the scene. Jameson checked the time stamp. It was only a few minutes after the murder. Not enough time for a phone call and then police to show up.

The officer showed their badge and was led to the elevator. Jameson pulled up the report. The first officer reported on the scene was Lawry. The person on screen looked like him. The same body type as the killer. The description Brooklyn had given.

Jameson pulled out Lawry's schedule. He was supposed to be patrolling the other end of town. So what was he doing at Banner's house and how did he get there so

quickly? Unless he was already there. Either cleaning up his own mess or someone else's.

Shit, Lawry was the killer. Could he be the one who'd taken Morgan? Using the previous case as a ruse to see what Jameson would do. Reveal Brooklyn's location. It had to be Lawry. It was the only thing that made sense. No wonder he couldn't find evidence. There was a cop covering it up.

Sparring partner, his ass. It was Morgan who'd kicked his ass. But there was still the question of why kill Banner and take Morgan.

Jameson pulled out his phone and called Lawry, but it went straight to voicemail. He got up and headed to Lawry's floor. "Has anyone seen Lawry?" he asked the first person he saw.

"Not since last night. Said he got a break on his case and left."

He'd found Brooklyn.

Jameson ran out of the building, calling Connor along the way to his car. "I figured out who killed Banner. It was someone in the precinct."

"Who is it?" Connor asked, not needing to double check and make sure Jameson was certain. He knew Jameson wouldn't say he was certain without proof.

"His name is Lawry. Edward Lawry. Someone in the office said he left last night. Somehow he figured out where Brooklyn is." Jameson started the car and peeled out of the parking lot with no clear destination in mind. There was no

sense checking Lawry's address. He wouldn't be there, and the man wasn't dumb enough to hide Morgan there.

"Jameson, slow down. There's no way. Only I know where she is."

"Someone does. I don't know if he tapped the phones or connected that I had you arrange for her pick up so he's tracked you. All I know is he knows where she is. Trust me." Jameson was always known as calm and collected, but right now he was running off emotion which could be deadly. He needed to find Morgan, but in order to find her, he needed Lawry who could already have her for all he knew.

"I'll call who has her and relocate her to be on the safe side."

"Tell me where she is. I'm coming."

"That's not how this works."

"Damn it, Connor," Jameson snapped. Sibling fights were nothing new, but none of them ever crossed the line when it came to how to do their jobs. Until now. "Lawry kidnapped my girlfriend, ex, but that's not the point. He knows where she is. This is personal for me."

"Exactly," Connor argued. "Your emotions are high which compromises your judgement."

He knew that, but it didn't stop him from wanting to be on this case. Only Lawry knew where Morgan was. He had to find him. "Please, Connor. You know I would never ask you to breach your privacy contract, but I'm asking, as your brother."

“Damn it, man. You had to pull the family card.” Connor sighed in frustration. Jameson knew he was asking a lot, but he wasn’t giving up on this.

“I’m desperate.”

“I got that. Fine, she’s with Drake,” he mumbled, not sounding happy to tell Jameson where she was.

Drake, as in their brother. “You left her with our brother who just got kicked out of the army after being a prisoner of war for months?” Jameson replied in disbelief. Out of all the people working under him, why would Connor put him there?

“He’s highly trained to keep her safe, and he’s staying at the cabin. Far away from everything. It was the perfect place to put her,” Connor explained, almost sounding defensive.

He wasn’t going to argue about his brother’s poor choice in leaving Brooklyn’s safety in his mentally unstable brother’s hands right now. They had bigger things to worry about. Lawry had a head start on him. “I’m just trying to leave Billings. It will be two hours before I can get there.” Curse Drake for living in the middle of nowhere. Curse Connor for putting her hours away, even if it was logical. It was just going to take him that much longer to find Morgan.

“I’m actually on the road and can be there in an hour or so. I’ll try calling Drake. He’s got a satellite phone. I’ll warn him.”

“Be careful.” Lawry was a trained cop and had already killed someone. He wouldn’t hesitate to do it again to get to Brooklyn.

“You too.” Jameson hung up and punched the gas.

Chapter 29

Brooklyn woke feeling as if she were in a sauna. Drake was half draped over her. Her body slick with sweat from their combined body heats and the blanket. She unpeeled herself out from under him, feeling the instantly cool air. Ah, so much better. Drake didn't even twitch at her Houdini skills getting out of the bed.

She stood there watching him a moment before the cold and nature's call intruded. She opened the dresser drawer as quietly as she could and pulled out a tank top and shorts. She was just finishing with her morning routine when there was a loud banging on the door.

Brooklyn yelped at the sudden sound. The curtains were drawn, so she couldn't see who it was. She was debating whether to answer it or wait for Drake when he came out of the bedroom, his jeans on but unbuttoned and a handgun in his hand.

"Get in the bathroom and lock the door. Don't come out until I tell you," he ordered, his focus on the door and who was on the other side of it still banging on it.

Brooklyn obeyed without question, though she did grab a knife just in case before sealing herself in the bathroom.

She pressed her ear to the door, hoping Drake would be okay. She could make out two male voices speaking but

not who Drake was talking to. Obviously it wasn't the killer. Drake wouldn't invite the guy in.

"Brooklyn." She yelped when she heard Drake's voice just on the other side of the door. "Open the door."

Her fingers shook as she twisted the lock and opened it, sighing in relief to see Connor standing there with Drake. "You scared ten years off of my life."

"This wouldn't have happened if Drake had answered the satellite phone. I've been trying for almost an hour to get a hold of you." Connor scolded Drake like he were a small child instead of a full grown man just as tall as he was.

"I've had it off."

"Well, next time leave it on," Connor hissed then went to the window to pull aside a small section of the curtains and glance outside. "Brooklyn, pack your stuff. I don't have time to explain everything right now, but the killer has found you. May already be here. We have to go," Connor announced without turning to face her.

"I'm not leaving without Drake." She refused to go anywhere without him.

Connor's head whipped around and blinked at her as if not used to hearing someone argue with him. "Brooklyn —"

"No," she cut him off before he could spew some security bullshit. She didn't feel safe unless she was with Drake. "You assigned him to protect me and that's what he's going to do." She crossed her arms over her chest defiantly.

“We don’t have time to argue. Killer’s here, remember?” Connor appeared to be striving for patience with her but losing. Bully for him, she wasn’t relenting on this.

“And you trusted Drake to keep me alive. I trust him to keep me alive. I won’t go without him.”

“Beautiful, it’s fine,” Drake tried coaxing her while pulling her out of the bathroom toward the bedroom. “It’s for your own safety.”

“Beautiful?” Connor asked, but neither was paying him any attention.

“I’m not leaving without you,” she repeated, her hands digging into his arms, clinging to him, showing him that she wouldn’t go without him.

The corner of his lip tipped in a smile. “Fine, go get your stuff and we’ll go. Together.”

Brooklyn grabbed her things and was ready in minutes. She didn’t have much to pack and could come back for the rest another time. Connor opened the door and froze when a man stood near his car.

“Who the hell are you?” Connor demanded, his hand going to his gun holstered on his hip. Drake placed himself between Brooklyn and the newcomer as he peeked around his brother’s shoulder to see the intruder.

“Jameson sent me. I work with the local police. He said there was a killer after Miss Lewis. I came to offer my services.”

“Why would Jameson send someone when he knew I was on my way?” Connor asked. Brooklyn could see both he and Drake were tense. Obviously they didn’t believe this newcomer.

“Maybe he thought you wouldn’t get here in time?”

Brooklyn peeked around Drake’s back to see the man Jameson supposedly sent. Her eyes widened when she recognized him. “That’s him,” she whispered. “That’s the man that killed Mr. Banner.”

The newcomer’s demeanor changed when he caught a glimpse of her, and he pulled out his gun and fired. Brooklyn barely gave out a squeak when she was dragged to the floor and a weight slammed on top of her. Several more shots rang out.

The door slammed shut and then she heard movement, but she couldn’t see anything over her giant protector keeping her shielded.

“I can’t see him. He must be using the tree line for coverage. Damn, I should have shot first and asked questions later. Now we’re sitting ducks,” Connor grumbled. Obviously it was a family trait.

Drake eased off of her, and she could blessedly breathe again. He low crawled to the window next to Connor and took a look outside. “He took out your tires. Weapons?”

“I just have my pistol. You?”

“A rifle and pistol.”

Connor glanced back over at her huddled on the floor where Drake had left her. “We have to get Brooklyn out of here. Where’s your truck?”

Drake shook his head. “If he’s hiding in the tree line, he’ll pick us off if we go straight for the truck. We need to distract him so Brooklyn can get away.”

Excuse me? “No, we aren’t separating. We can get to the car together.” She started crawling toward them, but Connor’s lethal glare had her stopping.

“Drake’s right. If we drive now, Lawry will shoot out the tires or take out the driver. We have to distract him so you can get away.”

Drake and Connor seemed to have a silent conversation as they stared at each other before Drake nodded. “No one knows these woods like I do. I’ll distract him while you two make a break for it.” He pulled the keys from the hook next to the window and gave them to Connor. “I’ll give you the signal. As soon as you hear it, you run like hell and get her out of here.”

“No,” Brooklyn and Connor said at the same time.

“I won’t let you go alone,” Connor argued. “I’ll come.”

“Someone needs to protect Brooklyn.”

“No one is leaving me,” Brooklyn spoke up. “There has to be another way.” Drake crawled over to her, taking her in his arms. She clung to him like ivy. “Don’t leave me.” She didn’t care she sounded hysterical, she didn’t want them separated. “You said you’d leave with me.” Hot tears streaked down her cheeks. She didn’t want Drake to go and

face the killer alone. Fighting a bully like Dwayne was one thing. This was someone with a gun.

“Beautiful, stop. Breathe,” he said calmly, brushing the tears from her eyes with his thumbs. “Everything’s going to be alright.” He left her long enough to grab the rifle from the bedroom. “Take the rifle and go with Connor.” He kissed her softly on the forehead. “Everything’s going to be alright, beautiful. I’ll catch up with you guys.”

Brooklyn didn’t want him to leave her, but she knew arguing would only waste time. The killer could be getting closer to the house as they spoke. “Be careful.”

“Always am.” He gave her a quick kiss and started to pull back when she dragged him back to her lips, giving him a kiss he would never forget.

“I love you.” She hadn’t meant to tell him now, but she didn’t want to risk something happening to him and never getting the opportunity again.

“I love you too, beautiful.” He grinned despite the severity of their situation. “Now go on. I’ll find you later.” He left her to go to the bathroom and eased himself out of the window.

“You’re going to have to tell me what’s going on with you two when this is over,” Connor said coming up beside her.

What was between her and Drake was their own private business. “Let’s just get out of this alive.”

Connor nodded, realizing now wasn't the time for conversation. "Stay close behind me. We'll make our way through the trees to his truck. As soon as he gives the signal, we'll high tail it out of here."

A thought came to her. "If we have the truck, how will Drake get to us? Town is an hour away."

"I don't know. Maybe Lawry's car?" He shrugged. "Drake is resourceful. He'll find a way."

She was counting on that.

"Ready?"

Not really, but what other choice did she have? Brooklyn nodded, and they made their way out of the bathroom window.

Chapter 30

Drake stayed low and walked on silent steps as he made his way through the trees. He had an idea where the killer was as he made a wide loop to come up behind the guy. He hated leaving Brooklyn, but he trusted his brother to keep her safe.

I love you.

Her words still rang in his head, making his steps feel lighter than normal. Damn, he was one lucky bastard. When this was over, he was going to make things official. He wasn't going to let Brooklyn go. Even if it meant having to move to the big city and find a new job. He'd do anything for her. With his skill set, he could help Connor with assignments or find a job on the police force with Jameson.

But first, he had to find this Lawry guy. The woods were dense and vast. He could be hiding anywhere. Good thing he was trained to find people that wanted to stay hidden.

He stopped when he neared the driveway and took stock of his surroundings. The woods were quiet around him. The wildlife even seemed to sense the danger lurking around them.

Drake slowed down his breathing, trying to pick up footsteps or breathing. Anything that would help pinpoint where the killer was.

He heard something up ahead. He crept up using the trees and brush for cover. There was a shadowy figure hunkered down. That had to be him. He had a clear vantage point of the driveway. As soon as the truck would pass, he'd have a clear shot at the cab occupants or the tires.

Drake took his time as he picked his way behind the killer. There were lots of twigs on the ground that could give him away. He could shoot from here, but if he missed, he'd give the guy an advantage.

He could just make out a black jacket hidden amongst the foliage. As soon as he was close, he pounced and fell down on several broken sticks. Drake rolled to his side groaning in pain. Lawry had tricked him. He had sharpened several sticks and put them in the ground, hoping someone would jump on the jacket and impale themselves.

Luckily, Drake had jumped on the side and not center mass, so a stick had only gone into his shoulder and another scraped his side. Didn't mean it hurt any less. The stick hadn't gone more than a few inches into his shoulder. It took a little muscle and a lot of swearing, but he pulled it out. He'd have to dress it soon before he bled all over the forest floor. For now, he had to find Lawry. The man was still loose in the woods and going after Brooklyn.

Drake focused on the ground. There were tracks that he'd missed before. He'd been so focused on seeing the jacket, he'd missed the shoeprints leading away. This guy was cleverer than he'd thought. He followed the tracks, hoping to catch the killer before he found Connor and Brooklyn.

~

“So what kind of signal are we waiting on?” Brooklyn asked in a low whisper. It felt like hours when it had only been minutes as they waited next to a tree at the back of the house. Her ears strained for any sound that might indicate some kind of signal or tell her where Drake was. She hated just standing here doing nothing.

“You’ll know it when you hear it.” Connor’s eyes continuously kept traveling around them.

She turned to glare up at him. “Could you be any more cryptic?”

Connor glanced down at her, not in the least intimidated by her glare. “It’s a sharp whistle followed by two shorter ones. It’s something we all learned as kids.”

“Let me guess, your grandpa taught you.”

His eyebrows pulled together in confusion. “How did you know?”

“Drake’s mentioned him a lot. This was his cabin, and he taught you all how to survive up here. How to hunt and fish.”

“You and my brother got very chatty.”

Brooklyn didn’t know how to interpret his tone. He didn’t sound upset. He was good at hiding his emotions.

Always neutral. “We didn’t have much else to do.” Besides wild crazy sex.

Connor gave her a droll look. “I heard the love confession. You did a lot more than talk.”

“Do you have something against your brother being happy or just me?”

“Of course not.” He sounded affronted. “I love my brother. I was hoping protecting you would help bring him back to us. After his capture, he was so angry at himself and the world. I thought protecting you would give him a purpose. I’m glad to see I was right.”

“So it’s me you don’t like.” Wanting clarification for the reason he didn’t seem to approve of them.

“I don’t know you.”

True. “That’s not stopping you from thinking I’m not good enough for your brother.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it? Lay it on the line for me.” She faced him head on. She loved Drake, and she wasn’t going to let his overprotective brother come between her and happiness.

“You’ve changed since the last time we met,” he said, sounding mildly surprised.

“I have. Your brother has a lot to do with that.”

Connor sighed heavily as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Look, I have nothing against you. I just worry about my brother. Drake has been through

a lot. No one could get through to him after his capture. He was too damaged and volatile to be around.”

“And you thought that was a great environment to stash me?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. Not that it didn’t work out. But what if it hadn’t? Her so-called protector would have been just as dangerous as the killer after her.

“It worked out,” he said defensively.

“Then why the hostility toward me?”

“I’m worried about what’s going to happen when this is over. When you go back to your life and he’s still here. What’s going to happen to his mental state when you leave and there’s no one to pull him back from the brink of his depression?”

She didn’t have a ready answer. She’d been purposely not thinking about the future. Had avoided all talk and thought of it. Brooklyn had only wanted to be in the here and now. Her refuge was now over. The killer would be caught soon, and she couldn’t avoid the future any longer. She already knew she wanted Drake to be a part of it. The question was how. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life here, and he seemed to hate the city. She still had dreams she wanted to accomplish. Brooklyn couldn’t do them from here. She didn’t want to think about giving Drake up when she’d just got him.

A twig snapped behind them, making them both turn. A tree branch came out of nowhere and swung into Connor’s head with a sickening thwack. His legs wobbled then he collapsed on the ground.

Brooklyn stood in stock terror as Lawry came around the side of a tree. He tossed down the tree branch and pulled out a pistol from his side holster. “You have been nothing but a pain in my ass the past few days.” His eyes blazed with hatred as he stalked toward her.

Was he expecting her to apologize? Brooklyn took several steps back. The rifle was still in her hands, but she’d never raise it and shoot before he shot her first. “Why did you do it? Why did you kill Mr. Banner?”

“It was nothing personal.” Lawry shrugged with indifference. “Just a job that you ruined,” he spat venomously at her.

“So what now? You’re just going to kill me?”

“After you tell me where the file is.”

That question brought her up short. “What file?”

“Don’t play dumb,” he shouted. Brooklyn stumbled back, fearing he would just shoot her in anger.

“I’m not. I don’t know what file you’re talking about.”

“Your boss had a file I was supposed to retrieve. It wasn’t at his apartment or his office. That only leaves you to know where it is.”

Not necessarily, but maybe she could buy some time before Drake showed up. “I’ll help you find the file. I know where all the files are kept. Tell me what was in it.”

“I don’t know,” he said, sounding irritated. The hand holding the gun started to shake. He could shoot her accidentally if she wasn’t careful.

Okay, not very helpful.

“Okay, well, Mr. Banner kept files on his computer. We can go back to town and get it.”

Lawry scoffed at her. “Yeah, and have an army of police waiting for us. No thanks. I think I’ll just end you now and save myself the trip. If you don’t know where it is, it’s as good as gone anyway.”

The gun lifted and aimed at her chest. This was it. She was going to die. At least she’d told Drake that she loved him. Brooklyn closed her eyes, not wanting to see the end come. That’s when she heard a growl that did not sound man-made. She opened her eyes to see a bear coming up behind Lawry. It was the bear she’d seen a few days ago.

Lawry turned around as the bear stood up on its hind legs, towering over the both of them, and gave out a roar that shook her to her toes. She knew what direction Drake should be in. The truck was useless without the key, which Connor had. She may not be able to outrun the bear, but all she had to do was outrun Lawry. Hopefully it wouldn’t find Connor tempting.

Spinning on her heel, she took off across the yard for the opposite tree line. She heard a gunshot behind her and hoped the bear was okay. She didn’t know what kind of ammo killed a bear and didn’t want to turn around and find out.

Chapter 31

Brooklyn just kept running until her lungs hurt. She didn't see Drake and had no idea where to look for him. She rested against a tree trunk, trying to catch her breath and figure out where to go next, when she heard someone coming up behind her.

“Brooklyn,” Lawry called out. “I know you're here. Just come on out. I promise to make it quick like I did your friend the bear.”

Brooklyn's heart went out the bear. She peeked around the tree trunk and saw Lawry, looking no worse for wear with his pistol gripped in both hands, searching around the woods for her. His back was currently to her.

She lifted the rifle, using the tree to steady her. She was still far from a proficient shooter, but she should still be able to injure him.

“Come on out, Brooklyn. If you're hoping to wait for rescue, don't bother. Both of your protectors are dead. It's just you and me. One met with some spikes I set up and your other had his skull caved in.”

“Not quite,” a voice called out. Brooklyn felt her knees weaken when Drake appeared. She was so happy to see he was alive, she almost missed the dark spot on his shirt. He appeared to be wounded.

Lawry spun around ready to shoot, but Drake was prepared. He smacked the gun out of Lawry's hands and delivered a hard blow to his face. Lawry spun away, blood dripping from his lip and nose.

Brooklyn had heard the sound of cartilage breaking from over here. Drake packed one hell of a punch.

"You're supposed to be dead." Lawry looked around, either for his gun or an exit. Either way, he wasn't getting it. Drake wouldn't let him.

"Obviously not." Drake delivered another powerful punch to Lawry's stomach. Lawry fell forward but didn't stay down for long. He roared and drove into Drake's waist, knocking them both to the ground.

They wrestled around until Drake came out on top, straddling Lawry's waist and raining blow after blow to his face. Lawry caught one of his hands and pinned it to his side and drove a finger into his wound.

Drake cried out in pain, but it didn't stop him from bringing his free fist down. The impact wasn't as severe, and Lawry was able to get the upper hand, flipping them over and on top of Drake. Lawry's fist came down, aimed straight for Drake's wound. Drake caught the fist and twisted. Brooklyn could hear the snap of bones from her vantage point.

Lawry cried out in pain, and Drake flipped him over his body, sending Lawry sailing and rolling head over heels. Drake stood up and readied to take Lawry down again but stopped short when Lawry had a gun pointed at him.

Lawry smiled menacingly, knowing he finally had the upper hand. Brooklyn still had the rifle aimed at them. She lowered her head to the line of sight. Her hands shook knowing there was a life on the line. The man she loved. *Please don't miss and hit Drake instead.* Taking a deep breath, she released it and pulled the trigger.

A shot rang out as Lawry fell to his back. Drake whipped around, looking for the other shooter, and saw her.

“Drake,” she called out, setting the gun down and running up to him.

Drake met her halfway and held her close. “Thank god you’re okay.” He kissed the top of her forehead before pulling back and looking her over. Assuring she was okay with his eyes.

“I was more concerned for you.” She touched his shoulder gingerly, not wanting to further hurt him. Drake winced and pulled back.

“I’ll survive. Once we get him subdued, I’ll patch it up. Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, but your brother. Oh my god, Connor.” Brooklyn choked on the words, not knowing any other way to tell him. “Lawry hit him in the head with a tree branch.”

“I’ll survive,” the man in question said, coming up behind them slowly. His hand was pressed to his head as blood dripped down to his shoulder.

“Mom always did say you have a hard head,” Drake joked, coming over to him to assess the damage. Connor

waved him off and went over to Lawry to put a pair of cuffs on him.

“Nice shooting,” Connor commented.

“It wasn’t me. It was Brooklyn.” She beamed under the praise. She’d been so terrified that she’d hit Drake by mistake.

“Well, it’s a good thing your girlfriend’s a bad shot.”

“Why’s that?” She thought it was a pretty good shot considering she’d only practiced one time. She’d hit Lawry high in the shoulder, not that she would admit she’d been aiming for his chest.

“It’s not a bad thing. Lawry here kidnapped Morgan, and only he knows where she is. Jameson would be pretty sore if you killed him.”

“He did what?” Brooklyn shouted. She turned to Lawry and marched over to him, ready to beat the answer out of him, but Drake grabbed her and pulled her back.

“Easy, beautiful.” Drake smoothed a hand down her back while keeping a tight grip around her waist.

“He took Morgan,” she spat, though she didn’t need that reason to want to beat Lawry. He had uprooted her life even if it had deposited her in the arms of the man she now loved.

“I heard. And we’ll find her. He’ll talk,” he promised her.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what he’d do to extract information from Lawry. “Do whatever you have

to.” She wasn’t an activist for violence, but the man had no qualms wanting to kill her and kidnap her friend. She didn’t care what it took to get Morgan back. “She’s my best friend. She never should have been involved. He only did it to get to me.”

“Did he say anything to you?” Connor asked as he helped Lawry stand on his feet. The guy was raising a stink about the pain in his shoulder and the cuffs being behind his back, but everyone ignored him.

“Something about a file, but I didn’t know what he was talking about.” Then she remembered the file she’d found at Mr. Banner’s office. The one that was still with her things. Could that be it? Was that what Mr. Banner had been killed for?

“We’ll get to the bottom of it.” Connor escorted him through the woods back to his car. Another car pulled up the drive as they came through the clearing. The car was barely in park before the driver was out. Brooklyn recognized him instantly.

“Where is she?” Jameson grabbed the front of Lawry’s shirt and shook him.

“How did you get here so quickly?” Connor asked. “You said you were two hours away.”

“I broke a few speeding laws.”

A few? The guy had to be going well over a hundred to get here so quickly.

Drake left her side to pull his brother back. Jameson looked wild-eyed and might kill the guy with his bare

hands. Brooklyn had never seen him look like this before. Not even with the heinous criminals he put behind bars. Morgan's kidnapping must really be worrying him.

"We'll find out," Drake assured him.

"It was nothing personal," Lawry whined. "I just needed to get rid of Brooklyn and get the file."

"Well, now you'll spend the rest of your meager life in jail. A cop in jail won't survive very long," Jameson pointed out with glee as if he relished Lawry being punished behind bars.

Lawry, for once, looked remorseful. "Please, Jameson, I was only doing what I was told."

"Is that what you told my boss when you tossed him over his ten-story balcony?" Brooklyn would never get over that image.

"Why did you do it? Who are you working for?" Jameson demanded.

Lawry shook his head. "You might as well kill me now. I'm a dead man either way."

Jameson got into Lawry's face. "You're not getting off that easy. Now for the last time, where is Morgan?"

Brooklyn could see the defeat in Lawry's eyes. If he hadn't killed her boss and tried to kill her, Connor, and Drake, she might feel sorry for him.

Lawry gave him the address. Jameson didn't wait around but got back in the car and took off.

“We’re fine,” Connor called after the retreating car.
“Where’s your car?” he asked Lawry.

“Just down the drive. About a half mile.”

“You coming?” Connor asked Brooklyn and Drake.

“Give me a second.” Brooklyn ran inside the cabin to get the envelope from her bag. Sure enough, there was a file inside. It was someone that had come into her boss’s office a few months ago. Mr. Banner turned him down since the guy wanted him to do illegal work. Mr. Banner kept a file on all clients, even ones he denied. This guy had killed Mr. Banner and tried to get this file to protect his own hide. “This is what he was after.” Brooklyn handed the file to Connor.

Lawry glared at the envelope as if it were a deadly cobra about to strike him.

“This will come in handy,” Connor chuckled before pushing Lawry along toward his car.

“Wait, the bear,” Brooklyn said, stopping in her tracks.

“The one from a few days ago?” Drake asked, confused.

“Yeah, after Lawry hit Connor, the bear came. I heard Lawry shoot, and he said he killed it.”

“With his pistol? Not likely,” Drake assured her.

“But he said—”

“I didn’t kill it. I didn’t even hit it,” Lawry admitted.
“I’m desperate, not stupid. I would have only pissed it off if I had hit it. Have you seen *The Revenant*?” Lawry visibly

shuddered. “Yeah, I was not going to end up like that Leo guy.”

Brooklyn shuddered remembering that movie and the scene he was talking about. “Aren’t you glad you didn’t shoot the bear now,” she said to Drake as he held the front passenger door open for her.

“If it had come after you instead of him, no,” Drake said without pause, taking the seat in the back next to Lawry.

“But it didn’t. It protected me,” she responded, turning in her seat to face him.

Drake gave her a look as if she were delusional, but he wasn’t going to correct her. “I’m not sure that’s what the bear was doing.”

“Think what you want.” Brooklyn stuck her nose in the air. “I’ll think the bear was protecting me for protecting it against you wanting to shoot it before.”

Drake shook his head at her. “Life with you is never going to be easy, is it?”

“Where would the fun be in that?”

“She’s going to fit right in with the family,” Connor pointed out, getting behind the steering wheel.

“Yes, she is,” Drake agreed, a broad smile stretching across his face.

Epilogue

Jameson's tires squealed as he slammed on the brakes in front of the address Lawry had given him. It sucked that Morgan was in Billings and he could have saved himself the trip, but it had been worth it to find out where Morgan was and not wait around feeling useless while his brothers took down the perp together.

He got out and ran up the steps to the house and kicked in the door, not even bothering to check if it was locked or not. He was running on pure adrenaline right now. All sorts of horrible scenarios went through his mind of what had befallen Morgan at the hands of Lawry. He cursed himself for not seeing the signs.

He had befriended the killer and Morgan's kidnapper. Had even considered him to be his partner. He'd been duped.

"Morgan," Jameson called out as he searched all the rooms. Not a sound or a sight of her. He opened every door but nothing. He was about to call Connor and have him beat Lawry for lying to him when he saw a door in the kitchen that had a padlock on it.

Using the butt of his gun, he hit it until it broke. He tore open the door. It looked like a basement. He rushed down the stairs and came around the corner. It was dark, even the windows had been blacked out. He should have turned on the light.

He stumbled forward when something slammed into the back of his head. “Shit.”

“That’s what you get, asshole,” a female said before she took another swing to the head.

“Damn it, Morgan, it’s me. It’s Jameson.” He covered the back of his head from further abuse and moved further into the room and away from her.

“Jameson.” She tossed down her weapon that clanked on the concrete floor, sounding like a piece of plywood.

“Are you alright?” Though judging by her weapon, she was more than alright.

“Peachy. Besides that asshole getting the drop on me to begin with. We have to get moving. He’s after Brooklyn.” She started moving up the stairs.

“He’s already caught,” Jameson called up to her. “Connor is bringing him in.”

She stopped on the stairs, one foot hovering over the step. She looked down at him over her shoulder; he could see fear and hesitation in her eyes. That was new. He’d never seen her be anything but strong. “And Brooklyn?”

Ah, that explained her concern. “Safe.”

Morgan’s body sagged. “Thank god.”

“Let’s get you out of here.” Now that she was weaponless, he felt it was safe to approach, though she could do just as much damage with her fists and legs. He’d sparred with her in the past. The woman could hold her

own in a fight. No wonder Lawry had looked as bad as he had. “I’ll call for an ambulance.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m fine.” She waved him off and whether because she could or just to prove him wrong, she jogged up the stairs. “Nothing that won’t heal. I want to see Brooklyn.”

“She should be on her way down. She won’t be here for a few hours. Why don’t I take you to the hospital in the meantime?” Now that they were upstairs, he could see the bruises on her face and arms. Despite all that, she was still beautiful. An amazon warrior always ready to do battle.

He reached out to touch one of the bruises on her cheek, but she swatted his hand away before he could touch her. “I don’t want or need your help.”

Jameson stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. He should have known better than to try and touch. He’d lost that right a year ago. “Well, I’m offering it either way. I’m here for you.”

Jameson saw a crack in her façade. A moment where her eyes turned sad before hardening to stone. “Too little, too late, Jameson.” She brushed past him. He ran after her, but she was already gone. It wouldn’t be hard to track her down, but he let her go. He’d give her space and assure her that Brooklyn was safe when they got back before trying to talk to her again.

“You are officially a free woman,” Connor said a few hours later at the police station.

Brooklyn had a tearful reunion with a battered Morgan who’d been waiting for her but had since gone home. Lawry was in lock-up and the evidence filed. Police were looking for the man in the report to bring in for questioning. There was now an investigation into Lawry. Jameson said they’d found money transfers from an off-shore account. Between her testimony and the evidence now piling up against Lawry, her part was now done and she was no longer hiding. It felt good.

“What are you going to do?” he asked her.

Brooklyn looked over at Drake who was sitting in an interview chair next to her. He had his mask of indifference on, but she was learning to see through it. They still hadn’t discussed the future. It was now or never. “I haven’t decided, though whatever I do, I want it to be with you. Whether it’s here or at the cabin. I love you, Drake.” She rushed on, wanting to get it all out, not caring there was an audience. “I don’t want to lose you. Ever. I choose any life we can have as long as I can fall asleep in your arms every night and wake up in them. I’ll learn to be a pioneer woman and hunt and shoot with you if I must. I want to give us a chance. What do you say?”

Drake turned in his chair to face her and took her hands in his, bringing them to his chest. “Do you feel that? My heart beats because of you. You filled it with life and love again. I love you so much, Brooklyn. I want to spend

the rest of my life with you. I know how much you like the city and want a job like your boss. If that's what you want, I'll move here or anywhere else you want. Home is wherever you are." He lifted their joined hands up to kiss the back of her knuckles. "Just promise we can visit the cabin from time to time," he requested, looking hopeful.

As if she could deny him. She didn't want to live there year round, but she loved that place. She didn't want to part with it either. "Deal." They came together in a tangle of limbs and tongue. Her fingers clung to his back, ready to tear his shirt off and take him right there when a throat cleared behind them.

"Still here, folks." Connor waved at them. "I'd take that somewhere else. Those are two way mirrors." He pointed at the mirror behind them.

"Come on." Drake dragged her to her feet and started ushering her out of the room.

"Thank you, Connor. For everything," she said as they passed him.

"You're welcome. Thanks for bringing my brother back to us." He smiled warmly at his brother and clasped him on the shoulder.

"We'll be in touch. Though not too soon." Drake winked at her before dipping down and sweeping her off her feet and carrying her down the hallway. Brooklyn wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled at Drake; her heart was so full of love it was practically bursting.

“If we stay in the city, we’re going to have to move to some place more isolated.”

“Why’s that?” he asked, his focus ahead of them. Several police officers darted out of their way as if they sensed Drake wasn’t stopping for anything.

“My walls are thin. I don’t want my neighbor hearing us,” she whispered softly, looking around to see if anyone was watching them.

“They’ll only be jealous.”

Brooklyn had one elderly neighbor. She didn’t want to give Mrs. Petroski a heart attack. “We’re moving.” And that was final.

“Whatever you want, beautiful.” Drake smiled, his gaze briefly lowering down to hers before back up. She trusted him to carry her safely to the car.

“You. I only want you.” She sat up to kiss him on the cheek.

“You have me. Now and forever.”

Forever. She liked the sound of that.

Other books by Jennifer Becker

Delta Force Defenders
Guardians

Defending Hannah

Guarding Cora

Shielding Abigail

Embracing Linzy

Protecting Kinsley

Sheltering Olivia

Finding Destiny

Delta Force

Hiding Catherine

Finding Alexia

Holding Savannah

Rescuing Darcie

Seeking Fiona

Chasing Mia

Tracking Payton

O'Connell Brother Series
Series

Charmed by the CEO

Bewitched by the Businessman
Heart

Smitten by the Christmas Surprise

Hart Brother

Hart of Gold

Hart to

Rebel Renegades Series
Securities-WITSEC Program

Cherishing Shay

Adoring Zoe (Coming Soon)
(Coming Soon)

Weston

Willing Brooklyn

Craving Morgan