



# Blue-Eyed *A Hero*

A Willow Cove Novel

THERESA PAOLO

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BLUE-EYED  
*Hero*

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BLUE-EYED  
*Hero*

THERESA PAOLO

Dedicated to my walking pad.

You were always there  
even when I was shoving chocolate in my face.

# Chapter 1

The season hadn't even begun. Reid Silva still had a week until Memorial Day, the official kickoff to tourist season, yet idiots had already started causing havoc in his town. If this call was any indication of what the season would hold, he was going to need more coffee, a couple more bottles of whisky at the end of the night, and a never-ending supply of ibuprofen to deal with the headache that was Allison Winters, local TV news reporter and a royal pain in his ass.

She moved toward him with purpose and determination. Her heels clicked along the boardwalk, her navy power suit tailored to perfection. Someone who looked that good should not be an annoying thorn in his side.

Her camera guy, Larry, hurried behind her, attempting to keep up with her pace, but even though she was in five-inch heels, she was a gym rat, unlike Larry, who ate donuts for breakfast. His gut hung over his waistband and jiggled as he picked up speed, almost nearing a jog. *Almost.*

Reid liked the man. Despite his habit of shoving the camera wherever Allison told him to, he was a good man, honest, who picked his kids up from school and went to all their soccer and baseball games. Still, there were many times—too many—when Reid nearly ripped the camera from the poor guy's hands. He understood Larry had a job to do, but Reid couldn't be on camera. Keeping his identity a secret didn't only protect him, but the entire town. They did not need his past showing up in Willow Cove. It was simple as that.

“Sheriff,” Allison said, using his title now that they were on camera—a title she would never use if it was just the two of them speaking, which was perfectly fine by him. He didn't want to be known as the sheriff. He was an officer of the law,



and titles were just political bullshit he couldn't be bothered with. He never would have taken the position if Simons didn't decide he wanted to retire after thirty years.

"Go away, Allison," he said, not hesitating to stop. No. If he hesitated, she would use that tight little body of hers to block his path. So he kept moving with determined strides.

Not that it deterred her. Within seconds, she was beside him, shoving a microphone in his face. The scent of coconut that was so distinctly her smacked into his senses. "Can you tell us what the dispute was over? Was anyone arrested?"

He sighed, unintentionally inhaling her scent. He shifted, doing his best to ignore how good she smelled. He needed to get her away from him, and there was only one way to handle little Miss TV Reporter. "Fuck. Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh, and fucking shit."

Allison growled and dropped the hand holding the microphone to her thigh. A loud smack echoed through the early late spring day. Her plump lips parted on an annoyed exhale. "Damn it, Reid! You know, I can't use any footage on air if you curse."

"I know," he said with a smile. He thought she would have learned by now—it had been ten years for crying out loud—but every time one little thing happened in this small town, she insisted on forcing his hand. She had yet to get him on camera, and while her persistence was somewhat admirable, he wished she would give it a damn break. "Nothing happened, so you're not missing much."

Just a bunch of jackasses arguing over a girl. The fact that it was six am, and they were still drunk from the night before, made Reid think he'd need to add another round of patrols to the boardwalk after the bars closed.

"I can't have nothing to report, Reid. You got to give me something. Please."

He stopped walking and turned to the pain in his ass. She tilted her head, her long black hair falling out from behind her ear. Why he wanted to swipe it into place was beyond him. “Look, it was a stupid argument. No punches were thrown, no weapons were drawn. Just verbal diarrhea from a bunch of drunk twenty-one-year-olds who can’t hold their booze.”

Her eyes, the color of his favorite whisky, lit up. “I can spin it.”

He had no doubt. The woman could make watching paint dry into a two-hour special event, and people would watch. When she wasn’t being a pain in his ass, she was a natural charmer people instantly liked. Even him, not that he’d ever admit it to her.

“Go for it.” He started walking, surprised when he didn’t hear her shoes clacking on the boardwalk behind him. He should be relieved, but some strange part of him wished she was chasing after him.

Clearly, he wasn’t in the right state of mind. He needed a cup of coffee and to get to the station before making his rounds through town.

He walked into the Local Bean and gave a wave to Cami, the owner and friend. She greeted him with a bright smile. The strawberry blonde hair she’d been sporting for a while was gone and back to her signature platinum blonde.

“How’s it going today?” she asked.

“Throw a shot of espresso in there, will ya?”

“A double cafe macchiato it is. Must be a rough morning.”

“I’ve had worse.”

Cami brought over the to-go cup and slid it across the counter. She gave the counter a quick wipe, then tossed the towel over her shoulder. Her arms crossed over her chest, and

she nodded toward the wall of windows overlooking the boardwalk. “Wouldn’t have something to do with a certain TV reporter now, would it?”

“What do you think?” He took a sip of his hot drink and closed his eyes for a brief second as the caffeine worked its way through his system, only for Allison to fill his mind. He hadn’t had a moment of peace in ten years since meeting her.

He handed the exact change over to Cami.

Cami smirked. “She’s just trying to deliver the news to the good people of the town. Keeping us informed. I appreciate that.”

“At least one of us does.”

“Here.” Cami turned away and opened her pastry display. She grabbed a pair of tongs and pulled out an oversized chocolate chip cookie that Reid occasionally treated himself to. “On the house.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“I know, but I think the citizens of Willow Cove will thank me for it later.”

“Very funny.”

“Besides, don’t you have a meeting with the mayor today?”

“I do.” He would be going over his budget and trying to find a way to kindly ask her for an increase.

“Then consider this a good luck cookie.”

He took the bag and held it up. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. Now you better run. She looks distracted at the moment.” Cami nodded toward the boardwalk.

Without a glance in Allison’s direction, Reid hurried out of the coffee shop and straight to his cruiser. He put the cookie on

the seat beside him, took a sip of his coffee, then headed for the station.

Ten minutes later, he was in his office, going through incident reports and trying to determine if he had the budget to up the patrols along the boardwalk. Curiosity tugged at his gut, though, so despite his resolve, he clicked on the local news.

Sonny St. Clair, the local weather guy, pointed to a map, declaring clear skies for the next few days.

*Great.* Most people loved clear skies and sunshine, but for Reid, it meant the perfect weather for people to do stupid things. “Back to you, Sandra.”

The forty-year veteran smiled at the camera. Her hair and makeup were perfect as always. At sixty-three, the woman still had the spark that most likely got her in that chair in the first place. “Thank you, Sonny. We’re going to go to the boardwalk where Allison Winters is reporting live. Allison?”

Reid finished his coffee, tossing the cup into the garbage beside his desk. Allison came onto the screen, her eyes locked onto the camera as if they were staring into his soul. Her lips parted, and his mind drifted to the boardwalk, reminding him of the scent of coconut. He wondered if she’d taste as good as she smelled.

“Fucking hell.” He thrust his hand through his hair.

“Thank you, Sandra,” Allison’s voice grabbed his attention. “I am here on the main boardwalk of Willow Cove after an altercation broke out in the early morning hours, involving two men who were under the influence. I was assured by our local sheriff there were no injuries, but it still begs the question. How safe is our boardwalk for the children?”

Reid’s eyes widened, and he jumped from his chair, slamming his hand on the desk. Pain radiated through his arm,

but it had nothing on the fury rushing through his blood in a heated rage.

“With the first official weekend of summer only a week away, how can we guarantee the safety of the community when the bars close and the police are nowhere to be found? Must we not forget it was less than two months ago when I was held at gunpoint at one of our local hangouts. And not even a month since one of our locals had her car vandalized by angry trolls.”

Reid jabbed his hand toward the TV, ramming his finger into the off button, before throwing the remote across the small space. “I’m going to kill her!”

Judy, one of his deputies, poked her head into his office. “Everything okay, boss?” It was a nickname she started calling him when he told her not to call him sheriff or worse, by his last name.

His jaw tightened, and he attempted to take a calming breath. “If you get a call later about me committing murder, it’s not a prank.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, and he knew she was thinking of a witty reply, but he’d clearly caught her off guard. “Want me to disinfect the cell in anticipation for your arrival?”

“That’d be nice. Thanks.” He grabbed his keys and stormed toward the door.

“Hey boss,” Judy called.

“Yeah?” He stopped and turned toward the three-year deputy who still had stars in her blue eyes. “Don’t kill anyone.”

“No promises,” he said and headed straight for his cruiser.

## Chapter 2

Back at the studio, Allison sat at her desk and flipped through the stack of fan mail. Usually it was older women trying to set her up with their sons, grandsons, or whoever they had in their family, but still, she got a kick out of them and always made sure to send a handwritten note with a thanks but no thanks. Without her fans, she'd be a nobody, and she knew that. Though, there were also the heartless souls who ripped her to shreds on social media, pointing out every blemish, split end, and whatever else they could pick apart. Those lovely people also gave her the despised nickname of “the babbler” since she apparently over talked in interviews. Whatever. She was just making the interviewee comfortable, and it worked.

She ignored the naysayers for the most part, but she couldn't help but check her social media, searching those comments out. Sometimes she liked to heart the comment or leave a simple thank you just to show them no matter what they said, they wouldn't break her spirit.

Deciding against social media, she stuck with the envelopes, opening the first one on top and laughing when Marla from Crescent Lane invited her to a Memorial Day cookout to meet her nephew. She put the letter aside into the need-to-respond pile. Next was a letter from some creep telling her how hot she was. That letter went into the do-not-respond pile—aka the garbage.

The next envelope didn't have a return address. She turned it over and slid her envelope opener under the flap. The white paper was ripped into a small square. The words were typed which wasn't completely uncommon, but not her norm.

She scanned the words, and a chill ran down her spine.

*You think you're so perfect. But you ain't.*

*The world would be a better place without a bitch like you.*

*Watch your back. The time is near.*

She stared at the words until they blended together into an ugly swirl of black. It wasn't the first angry letter she'd received, or the first death threat, but there was something about this particular letter that grabbed at her throat and choked the air from her lungs.

"Hey, Allison." Sonny walked over, and she shoved the letter into her bag.

His light gray suit and the blue and green tie with matching square pocket showed his impeccable style. He smiled, his dark brown hair slicked back. He was a good-looking guy with a charming air about him the local woman ate up. He was a couple years older than her, living the bachelor life, but had asked her out on several occasions. She'd said no. Dating a coworker sounded like a recipe for a disaster. Besides, if she were to grab Sandra's coveted anchor seat after she retired—whenever that would finally be—Allison needed to keep her relationships strictly professional.

He nodded toward the letter. "What was that?"

"Oh nothing. What's going on?"

"I heard the higher ups submitted your online bullying segment to the Maine Press Club Award for consideration."

A smile curved her lips. He was being nice, but she'd take it. "They did.." She didn't mean to squeak, but she'd been floating on cloud nine since she'd found out.

"You're going to win it."

She laughed. "We don't even know if I'm in the running yet."

“It was a great segment that really highlighted the growing threats of online bullying. It’s current, it’s brave, and it touches those heart strings. You’re a shoo-in.”

She crossed her fingers and held them up. “We’ll see.”

He knocked on her desk and sauntered away.

She shoved the rest of the letters in her drawer, and an unsettling pit formed in her stomach. What if there were more letters like the last? A lump lodged in her throat, but she swallowed it. There was nothing to be concerned about. It was a silly letter, probably by some jackass looking to get a rise out of her. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.

It was just that she was still on edge after the whole gun incident at Scoops, and this had been the first viable threat since then. Up until that day, she had never experienced real fear. Fear like that didn’t just go away. It clung to her, sneaking in at the worst time and reminding her that while she felt unstoppable, some idiot could end her at any minute.

It was getting late, and she wanted to get out of the office and get home.

Her heels clicked on the tile floor as she made her way through the entrance of the building, waving at Tom, the security guard, as she went.

“In a hurry today, Miss Allison?” The sixty-four-year-old Army vet asked. Tom had been a staple in the building as long as she’d been with the station. She always felt safe with him manning the entrance. Now she wondered if someone showed up with the intent to harm her, if Tom would be able to subdue him without getting hurt himself. He had the credentials, but he’d also been out of the military for twenty years.

The thought bounced around her head, and she tried to focus on Tom’s question. “Lots to do today. Want to get a head start. But tomorrow, I want to hear all about that



granddaughter of yours.” He was a grandpa to a girl who adored him. Maybe it was time he retired or got a nice, safe job. Then again, security at their office usually comprised Tom greeting people at the door. Maybe she should tell him about the letter...

No. She was being ridiculous. There was no need to make a fuss over it.

“You bet!” Tom exclaimed, and Allison made a mental note to make time to talk with him tomorrow.

She waved again and pushed out into the early afternoon. The sun warmed her instantly, a reminder that summer was just around the corner, and with her schedule, she’d have time to enjoy it. So what if she had to be at the station at five am? She was out the door by one on most days and had the rest of the day to do whatever she pleased.

Today, however, she didn’t want to go to the gym or browse the shops in town. She wanted to get home behind her locked door until the anxiety of that letter fizzled out.

“Allison!” Her name was a bark across the parking lot. She jolted at the unexpected sound, and she expected fight or flight to kick in, but instead she froze.

This was ridiculous. She wasn’t some timid girl who ran from fear or, in this case, became paralyzed by it. Heck. That incident that had filled her with fear was also the same incident in which she held a gun to a crazed gunman. Fear or not, she was strong.

Still, she wasn’t stupid. She positioned her bag close to where she kept her pepper spray—her gun was at home in the safe box— and pivoted on her heel. The tension in her shoulders eased when she saw Reid’s handsome face. She loosened her grip on her bag even though anger twisted his lips into a sinister scowl. Reid she could handle no matter how snippy he got.

She plastered on her news anchor smile and gave him a cutesy wave. “Oh, hi there, Reid.”

He stormed toward her. Oh, he was definitely angry. “Don’t you hi there, Reid me. What the fuck, Allison?”

She looked at her nails and tried to act cool despite the six-foot-plus man coming to an abrupt stop only inches from her. “It’s good to see you, too.”

“No, it’s not,” he snapped. The words filled with daggers, but words just like in that letter, couldn’t hurt her. She stood her ground. “What the hell is wrong with you?” His voice rose, echoing across the empty parking lot.

“Depends who you ask,” she answered, knowing damn well it would only add fuel to his already burning fire. She loved to stoke his flames. She could even go as far as calling it a personal hobby of hers. There was just something about watching Mr. Authority lose his cool.

He pointed his finger. Most people would cower, but not her. Reid was prickly, but he was also harmless. He leaned toward her before angrily dropping his arm to his side and turning away. Just as she expected.

“Damn it. Why must you—?” He cut his own words off. “Did you do it because I didn’t grant you a damn interview?”

“Do what?” She honestly didn’t know what he was so furious about. With Reid, it could be a million things.

He ran a hand through his very short, dark blond hair. It complimented his blue eyes and was in strong contrast to the dark stubble that sometimes peppered his face. Some men looked unkempt with a five o’clock shadow, while it only added to Reid’s mysterious sex appeal.

“I have a meeting with the mayor in two hours. What am I supposed to say to her after you completely threw me and my department under a bus on bullshit claims?”

Oh. Her segment about the bars and the boardwalk. “The claims technically aren’t bullshit. If you had patrols on the boardwalk, that altercation could have been avoided.”

His large chest heaved with an inhale, an obvious sign he was trying to keep his cool, but Allison knew it was only a Band-Aid to his frustration, and she found pleasure in ripping that bandage off.

“Do you have the money to give me to make that happen? My budget is already spread thin, and I was trying to figure out a way to do just that when your damn segment came on the TV.”

Her head snapped up, and she met his stormy gaze. “You were watching my segment?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m just surprised, is all. You do everything in your power to make it impossible for me to put you on the news, yet you watch it.” There weren’t many things that surprised her, but Reid tuning in to watch her definitely did.

“I was curious to see how you were going to spin the damn story, and good thing I watched, or I’d be broadsided when I walk into the mayor’s office.”

She shrugged. “I was just asking a question.”

“You’re so full of shit and you know it.” And the Band-Aid was off. She could meet him toe to toe, but it pissed him off more when she acted impassive.

She rolled her eyes as if he was being overdramatic, which he was. It was simple, really. “Use it to your advantage, then. Tell the mayor in order to increase patrol you need a budget increase. You’re welcome.”

He stepped toward her, his chest rising and falling with his ragged breaths. His blue eyes narrowed, locking on hers. She

swallowed at the intensity and tried to ignore the heat that flooded her core.

“Don’t act like you did me a favor. What about the people?”

Her eyebrow arched as she met his glare head on, refusing to back down. “What people?”

His arms lifted like he wanted to choke her. His bicep pressed against his sleeve, stretching the material of his uniform. She bit her lip, wondering what those arms would feel like wrapped around her.

Shaking the thought from her head, she focused on the irritated pull of his brow. She stifled a laugh, and his arms fell to his sides. “The town. You made me seem like I’m incompetent in my role as sheriff.”

Of course. Typical male. Worried about his competency and nothing else. She loved battling with him, but this was ridiculous. “It was one little news story, for crying out loud. You are looking way too far into this.”

“I don’t think I am. How can people trust me to protect them and their town with you putting doubt in their minds?”

It all made sense now. Reid drove a hard bargain most of the time, but he also took pride in the respect he garnered from the town. People looked up to him, trusted him, relied on him, and he was afraid she of all people would tarnish that. Did he not realize how nearly impossible that was? As far as the people were concerned, Reid was the perfect sheriff.

“Look, Reid, while I would love nothing more than to stand here and argue with you all day, I have things to do, and you have a meeting with the mayor to get to.”

“You’re infuriating!”

“You’ve mentioned that before.” Only every time they were within a five-foot radius of each other.

She reached into her bag and pulled out her keys. The letter fell out and floated to the ground. Before Allison could snatch the paper up, Reid retrieved it. He held it out to her, then his hand snapped back, his blue eyes darting across the page.

His jaw turned to granite, the veins in his neck bulging and tightening. He stepped toward her, his big frame dwarfing her. He waved the paper in her face. “What the fuck is this?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you curse entirely too much?”

“Don’t play games with me right now. What is this?”

She sighed. “It’s nothing.” She attempted to snatch it back, but it was fruitless.

The tides shifted in Reid’s blue eyes, turning the frustrated clear blue to a dark and stormy combination of anger and concern. “When did you get this?”

“Today, but it could have been in the mailroom longer.”

“Jesus, Allison. Were you not going to report this?”

“It’s just some asshole getting his kicks, and I refuse to let him win.”

Reid’s long finger pointed to the paper in his other hand. “This is a serious threat.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“And I think you’re under-reacting. Did you show your boss?”

She waved him off. “No. It’s not necessary.”

“Allison.” He stepped toward her, surrounding her in his masculine scent of wood and ocean air. She swallowed,

refusing to inhale deeply. His hand rested gently on her arm, showing how much larger he was than her. The storm in his eyes cleared to blue skies, and he leveled her with his gaze. “What if it is serious?”

She refused to allow herself to fear some jackass. “It wouldn’t be the first time, and I’m still standing to talk about it.” But the fear that still clung to her pushed itself to the surface, and an annoying voice in her head questioned if this threat was different. After her report at Scoops and Victor going to jail for a slew of charges, some people in town weren’t exactly happy with her. They thought her report that made national news cast a dark cloud over Willow Cove. The fact she brought it up on air every chance she got... well, that didn’t help either.

She’d hoped the online bullying segment she did would help people forget about the previous big story, but that only secured their belief that Allison was giving their town a bad rep. It wasn’t her fault assholes showed up in Willow Cove. She couldn’t *not* report on it. It was her job. Those people need to get over it.

She wouldn’t tell Reid, though. He’d blow it out of proportion, and her boss would take her off the road. And then what? Sandra hadn’t retired, so her seat was firmly taken. Allison would have nowhere to go, and jobless wasn’t an answer for her.

“You’ve been threatened before?” he asked, and the incredulous tone mixed with the concern in his gaze nearly brought her to her knees. It reminded her of the last time he dropped the veil between them and showed genuine concern. It only took her almost dying at gunpoint, and it was worth it. It had only been a single moment out of the thousands shared over the last ten years, but that moment had touched her in a way she still daydreamed about.

Though, touched or not, there was nothing he needed to involve himself in. “Yup,” she said, forcing a brave smile. “So, as you can see, it’s nothing to be concerned about. Like I said, just another asshole.”

She went to take the letter from him, and he held it out of her reach. Even in five-inch heels, he towered over her. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to hold on to this.”

“Whatever. If it makes you happy, keep it. No skin off my back.” She was just going to throw it in the trash when she got home. Honestly, she had no idea why she hadn’t already.

He didn’t move, and his eyes lingered on her, heating her body under his unwavering gaze. She circled around him to her car. She needed to get away from Reid so she could think straight. “Good luck with your meeting.”

“If you get any more of these”—he waved the letter in the air between them—“please let me know.”

“I will,” she said, refusing to look more into his concern, and got in her car

A tap on the window jolted her, and she clutched her chest. She hated that she was jumpy. Hated that she gave this threat any creditability. Not anymore. She straightened, and Reid’s handsome face peered down. She turned the car on and lowered the window. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I just wanted to say be careful.”

The kindness of his tone cut straight through the residual fear and engulfed her heart with warmth. Maybe beneath the gruff exterior and constant snark, he actually did care about her.





## Chapter 3

The mayor's office was on the far end of town, away from the tourist areas and by a private beach only accessible by town residents. Reid pulled into the parking lot and killed the engine. He adjusted his silver-blue uniform sleeves and ran a hand down the front buttons. Mayor Joan Sands was always impeccably dressed, and Reid couldn't help but think she judged people by appearance.

With a deep breath, he headed inside. He stopped at the front desk, manned by Ruby Duran. Her blonde hair was piled on her head, and her black eyeliner curved out a couple of inches past her eye. She gave a dainty wave, and Reid smiled. The youngest of the Duran family at twenty-four, she'd been working as the mayor's assistant since she graduated high school.

"Hi Reid. She'll be just a minute. She's finishing up a call."

"Great. How's your parents?" he asked.

"They're doing good! Dad's recovering nicely from his surgery but driving my mom crazy. She can't wait for him to get back to work." She shook her head and laughed.

Kevin Duran had slipped on a patch of ice outside his office over the winter and shattered his shoulder.

"Once he's all healed up, he'll be better than ever and thrilled to get back to work, I'm sure."

"That's what he keeps saying. If he'll just do his physical therapy, but you know him. Stubborn mule."

Reid chuckled at the accurate description. Reid had known Kevin as long as he'd been in Willow Cove.

The phone rang, and Ruby answered. She nodded and placed the phone on the receiver before folding her hands on the desk and smiling. “She’ll see you now.”

“Thanks, Ruby.” Reid headed toward the mayor’s office, knowing exactly where it was. “Tell your parents hi for me.”

“Will do,” Ruby said.

Reid knocked lightly on the dark mahogany door.

“Come in,” Mayor Sands called.

With one more glance down his shirt and black pants, he pushed the door open and stepped inside. Joan Sands sat behind her oversized desk, her white hair fluffed into a stylish bob without a single hair out of place. Her makeup made her look ten years younger than her fifty-eight years. Her black suit jacket was tailored to her thin frame and sat over a white silk blouse. She took off her rectangle tortoise shell framed glasses that probably cost more than Reid could fathom and placed them on the desk.

“Sheriff Silva,” she said, using the last name he’d gone out of his way to keep under wraps. Near impossible when he was elected sheriff, but he’d managed so far.

“Mayor, as I’ve said time and time again, call me Reid.”

With a nod, she grabbed a stack of papers and pulled them close. “Sheriff Silva,” she started, and he slumped into the leather chair. “I see you’re asking for more money in your budget.”

“I am.”

“And why should I grant you this request when your department was just humiliated on our local news?”

Reid tried not to cringe, but his shoulders tightened. Allison could have made that report any day. Why did it have to be today, of all days? Today, when he needed the mayor’s

vote of confidence in his department and his ability to do his job. Why would she throw money at someone she thought was incapable of his position?

“Mayor, with all due respect, you have known me a long time, and you know that my number one priority is the safety of this town and not just the residents, but any person who steps within our town limits. That report was... a headline—a desperate reporter who needed to make something out of nothing.”

“That desperate reporter is a beloved member of this community, a person who is trusted and whose words hold weight.”

His jaw clenched, and his fingers curled into his pants, causing them to wrinkle.

“Understood, but she also will do anything for a story, even if it means exaggerating the circumstances.”

“Did she exaggerate the fact that she was held at gunpoint?”

“That was an isolated incident between family members Allison got involved in. She never should have been there.” He had been working the case, getting to the bottom of who was terrorizing Krissy Turner and her ice cream shop. He would have figured out it was her cousin, but Allison put the pieces together faster than he did, then stupidly took it upon herself to drive the case forward instead of going directly to him. She was lucky she wasn’t dead.

The memory still haunted his dreams.

“Still doesn’t fix the fact that she was and continues to put doubts in people’s minds. You add in that last news story about the online bullying that manifested into property damage in our town and received national coverage, and we have a problem.”

He scratched the back of his neck, trying to control the frustration coursing through him. If he lost this extra funding, Allison would hear about it. Maybe he could find a way to let the people know she was the reason for the lack of patrols. A turn of the tides sounded like a great idea. Give her a piece of her own medicine.

“That incident was also isolated and...” While he hated to admit it, he had no choice. “Allison’s story actually... helped.”

“Agreed, yet it did not help with the doubts of our residents.”

Reid put his hands on the chair, ready to push himself up. There was no way he’d get the funding now.

“However,” the mayor said, and he focused his attention on her. “There was a reason I personally suggested your bid for sheriff, so this is what I’ll do.” She scanned over the paper in her hand, most likely the email he had sent with the amount he requested and how those funds would be allocated. “I’ll increase the budget on one condition.”

“I’m listening.”

“I need you to make a statement, assuring the good people of our town their safety is your number one priority and they have nothing to worry about as tourist season comes upon us.”

“I’ll release a statement as soon as I get back to my office.”

“I need you on TV to deliver the message. You are the face of safety in our community, and the people need to see you.”

“Everyone in this community knows who I am.”

“For those that don’t. This is nonnegotiable. Make the statement on air or you don’t get the money.”

“No disrespect ma’am, but that money is necessary in order to promise the citizens I’ll do what I need to do.”

“Exactly.”

“But how can you—?”

“It’s politics.”

“I fucking hate politics,” Reid mumbled under his breath.

The mayor’s eyebrow arched upward. “I’m sorry. What was that?”

“Nothing. I’ll make the statement.”

“Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting with the governor, and I don’t want to be late.” Mayor Sands stood and held her hand out to Reid. Forcing a smile, he shook the woman’s hand. “I expect that statement on tomorrow’s news.”

Reid held in his sigh as he walked away from the mayor and out to his cruiser. Now he needed to find Allison so she could help him fix this disaster. And somehow, he needed to go on TV while also hiding his identity.

*Great.* How the hell was he supposed to do that?

## Chapter 4

Yoga wasn't exactly Allison's exercise of choice, but her sister, Luna, always managed to convince her to take a class at least once a week. Her ass appreciated it; the rest of her not so much. It was hard for her to be quiet for an hour, especially when her sister was right next to her, and she just wanted to chat. For Luna, it was heaven, while for Allison, it was her definition of hell. But with their busy schedules, if she didn't submit to a weekly yoga class, she didn't know how often she'd get to see her older sister.

"Watched your segment about the fight on the boardwalk," Luna said as they walked into the class and laid their mats on the floor.

"What'd you think?"

Luna tilted her head, pressing her lips together—a sure sign she was holding back harsh judgement.

"What?" Allison exclaimed as she plopped on her mat and crossed her legs.

"You were a little harsh on the sheriff, don't you think?"

"On Reid? Please. A wrecking ball couldn't be harsh on him. Nothing phases him." Though he had been furious with her earlier. Still, she helped him spin it, and she was positive it would only help him secure the extra money he was after.

Luna raised her arm above her head, stretching behind her back. "You not so subtly questioned his capabilities."

Allison fiddled with the bracelet Luna had given her in the parking lot. Presley, her niece, had made it for her, using shades of blue and purple beads. "I was doing my job. I'm a

reporter, and I report the news. I didn't say anything that wasn't true."

"You didn't exactly speak the truth, either." Luna put her hands in her lap and rolled her neck. "Don't forget, Reid saved your ass not two months ago."

"Krissy and I had it under control. Reid just handcuffed the asshole."

"After you got knocked out cold, then texted Reid to come help you."

"I don't need a recap. I was there."

"All I'm saying is you should cut the guy some slack. Willow Cove is about as safe as you can get."

Allison bit her lip. Would Luna still think that if she saw the letter Allison had received? Even if Allison thought it was nothing, there was still that nagging voice in the back of her head telling her it could be a viable threat. She wouldn't tell Luna, though. Luna being a single mom of a twelve-year-old girl just on the brink of PMS and hormones had enough on her plate to worry about.

"He'll survive," Allison muttered just as the instructor strolled in. Becca was all limbs, lean and graceful, who could bend her body into positions Allison could never imagine.

"How are we today?" she asked, clapping her hands together as she moved to the front of the class.

This was the time Allison usually hated, when her conversation would be cut off and she'd spend the next hour becoming one with her body, but today she welcomed the silence.

She listened to Becca and got into position, letting her mind free of thought and focused on her breathing.

An hour later, sweaty, tired, and ready to crash, Allison and Luna walked out of the yoga class. Luna's phone rang as soon as they were in the parking lot, and Luna juggled her keys and mat to answer.

"Hey baby," she said, waving to the phone.

Allison poked her head into the shot and waved at her niece, who was looking more and more like Luna every day. "Hi!" Allison's voice squeaked across the parking lot.

"Hi Aunt Allison! Did you get the bracelet from my mom?"

Allison held up her wrist, showing off the beaded design. "Sure did. I love it."

"Yay!"

"Are you ready for the dance?" Allison asked, then gave her best attempt at the newest dance moves she had seen on social media.

"Please don't ever do that again," Presley said, and Luna laughed a little too loudly.

Allison shrugged. "Hey, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm cool."

Presley tilted her head, her long brown hair falling to the side. "Maybe ten years ago."

"Oh, burn!" Luna exclaimed, and Allison shoved her shoulder. "I'm pretty sure that term is older than ten years."

"The difference is I know I'm old," Luna said, and Presley nodded.

"Fine. I'll keep all my dance moves to myself," Allison said. "And you can be on your own for the dance."

"I'm okay with that," Presley agreed. "But I was hoping you'd help me get a dress."



“I thought I was getting you one.” Disappointment laced Luna’s words.

Presley’s cheeks swished back and forth. “Mom, if you picked my dress out, it would be pink with ruffles and probably have a unicorn on it.”

“What’s wrong with unicorns? You love unicorns.”

“I did when I was ten.”

Luna turned to Allison. “When she was ten. Do you hear her?”

Allison patted her shoulder. “Welcome to the teen years, sis. Where everything is uncool, especially *you*.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Okay, I got to go. I love you, P bug. I’ll call you, and we can go get a dress this weekend, but only if your mom can come.”

“Only if she promises no ruffles.”

Luna held her hand up. “I promise.”

With a laugh, Allison blew a kiss to the screen and hugged her sister before heading to her car. Her mind flashed to the letter Reid had taken from her, and a shudder ran through her body. She tried to shake it off, but an unsettling feeling landed in the pit of her stomach.

Her eyes scanned the area, looking for anything out of the norm, but the usual crowd of people from yoga filtered throughout the parking lot, getting in their cars and driving away.

She checked her backseat, making sure there wasn’t someone hiding, then jumped in the car and locked the doors. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed in her seat.

“You’re being ridiculous,” she muttered. “It was just a letter from an idiot. Nothing more.”

With one last glance around, she reversed out of the space and turned onto the main road. She had a few errands to run, so she stopped at the grocery store, then went to the pharmacy to pick up her birth control pills. Not that she needed them. It had been too long since she had sex, but better safe than sorry.

Right now, her career was her number one focus. She wasn’t ready to settle down and have a kid just yet. She had her own ambitions to fulfill first, and she was getting closer. Once Sandra retired, and she could sit in the coveted anchor chair, she’d be ready for the next step in her personal life.

All her errands for the day completed, she headed home. Her eyebrow arched as she neared her house and spotted a police cruiser parked in front. She immediately recognized Reid as she drew closer.

“What the hell does he want?” she asked out loud with a sigh.

She threw the car in park and jumped out, going right to her trunk and ignoring the six-foot-two muscled man strolling toward her. She didn’t need to look up to know he was close. His presence was overwhelming, blocking the sun and radiating dominance.

“What can I help you with, Reid?” she asked as she grabbed her grocery bags. “And if you’re here to yell at me again, I’m not in the mood.”

He pushed his aviator sunglasses onto his head, revealing those ridiculously blue eyes of his. “It *is* about your damn segment, and I need you to fix it.”

She dropped her bag and let her hands fall to her sides. “And what exactly do you want me to do?”

She met his steely gaze and held it. His jaw ticked, lips pressed into a straight line. With an exaggerated sigh, she turned to her bags and scooped them up. “My frozen vegetables are going to melt, so while I would love to continue our glaring contest—”

“I need you to let me make a statement live on air.”

She froze. “Wait a minute. You want to go live?” She’d only been trying to get him to do that for a damn decade. Even when she thought she had him, he managed to evade her and instead call her at the station to give a statement. He called her infuriating, but he was calling the kettle black. She’d made it her life mission to get the grumpy sheriff on air, and now he was handing her the interview on a platter.

“That’s what I said.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why now?” He had to be playing an angle. There was no way, after all this time, he was giving in unprompted.

He scratched at the back of his neck, something he did when he was frustrated or stalling. “The mayor won’t give me the increase in my budget if I don’t.”

A laugh bellowed out of Allison. “Oh, that’s just perfect.” Another laugh burst free.

“Are you done?” He looked not too pleased, but she was downright tickled by the situation.

“Not yet.” She continued laughing while he rolled his eyes and glanced down the street.

“Okay, I’m good.”

“So tomorrow?” he asked, and she shoved her bags into his arms. “What the hell is this?”

“Since you need a favor from me, you can help me carry these inside.”

She was pretty certain he groaned, but she grabbed the rest of the bags and kept walking. He needed something from her, and she didn't want to make two trips. She'd done enough of a workout at yoga. Besides, he should be thanking her for not giving him a harder time, especially after everything he'd put her through over the years. All she wanted was a measly few words from him, but no, he'd just start sprouting curse words like a damn sprinkler, making all her footage unusable.

She opened the door and punched in the code to her alarm. Reid gave a nod, as if he was pleased she had an alarm. She was just happy she remembered to set it. He stepped into her house, filling the small foyer. He scanned the space, then his gaze darted toward the living room.

"Have you been aware of your surroundings when you've been out?" he asked.

There was no way she was going to tell him about her momentary freakout in the parking lot. "I told you. That letter was nothing. Just a stupid viewer, sending pointless threats. Just like all those jerks on social media." She headed to the living room and steered left past the dining room and into the kitchen.

"Wait. You've received other threats online?"

Allison put her bags down, then grabbed Reid's and placed them on the counter beside the others. "Not threats per se, but people say terrible things. I'm used to it."

"What kind of terrible things?" His concern turned the dark blue ring around his eyes darker.

"Go on any of my social media accounts and read the comments. I delete most of them, but sometimes I forget to check, and by that time it's out of control, or my fans are defending me, so I stay out of it."

"I don't have social media."

Every now and again she'd search his names in hopes of finding something new about him, but her searches always came up empty. "I know you're old, but you're not that old. Get with the times, Reid."

"I'm thirty-eight. I'm not old."

"Depends who you ask. My niece would consider you ancient. But don't take offense to it. I'm thirty-two, and she thinks I'm ancient. Basically, anyone over the age of twenty-three."

"That's depressing."

"Tell me about it."

Reid scanned her kitchen, and she realized this was the first time Reid had ever been in her home. "So uh... this is my house." She swiped her hand across the space.

"It's nice. It's you."

"What exactly is me?"

He nodded to the words she and her younger sister Samantha stenciled on the wall when she had first moved in. "Live. Laugh. Love?"

"I know it's cliché, but it's what life is all about, no? It's a great reminder to see it every day."

His eyebrow arched, and it she hated to admit it was quite adorable. "In case you forget."

At least it was until words came out of his mouth. "Shut up." She put the eggs and milk in the fridge, then rested against the counter. "So the statement. What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. I just need to say what I have to say."

He needed a favor, yet he continued to be difficult. The man really was infuriating. "I'm trying to work with you here,

but you really make it hard.”

“I’ll leave the logistics up to you.”

“At first I thought outside the station, but I’m assuming you’re trying to connect with the people, so it would probably be best to go where the people are.”

“The boardwalk.”

“Exactly. It’ll be a great backdrop, and it’ll put you in familiar territory.”

“Fine. I’ll meet you on the boardwalk, then. What time?”

“Six?” She got to the office at five and was always on the road by five thirty for the six am show.

“I’ll be there.”

“Great.”

“Great. See you then.” He turned for the door, and she should’ve let him go, but her conscious got the better of her. Or maybe it was more than that. Having Reid in her house felt oddly right.

“Hey, did you want to rehearse what you’re going to say?”

“Nope. I know what I’m going to say.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do, but being on camera is different from rehearsing in front of your mirror.”

“Do you honestly think I rehearse anything in front of my mirror?”

“You? Probably not. Why don’t you get there a couple minutes early, so we can do a test run?”

“Fine.” He continued his trek to the front door. She followed behind, admiring his confident stride and the way his pants hugged his ass. He stopped as he pulled the door open. His large build filled the doorframe, blocking her view of the

outside. “Lock the door behind me and reset your alarm. You can never be too careful.”

“Goodbye, Reid.”

She watched him walk away. She couldn't help herself. The man filled out a uniform rather nicely. When he got in his cruiser, she gave a wave, then closed the door, locked it, and reset her alarm. Better safe than sorry, after all.

## Chapter 5

Swirls of orange and blue painted the sky as the sun began its ascent. Reid arrived twenty minutes early to meet Allison. He didn't sleep much and figured he could grab a coffee at the Local Bean before making his stupid statement to appease the mayor.

Cami flipped the closed sign to open just as Reid approached. Her head tilted and a curious eyebrow arched as he stepped inside. The smell of coffee permeated the air, and he inhaled as if the scent would give him a jolt of caffeine that he definitely needed to get through the next hour.

"You're here early," Cami said.

"I have an interview with Miss Winters at six."

Cami nodded. "I'll make it a double then."

"That would be great. Thanks."

She moved with ease behind the counter, grabbing the necessary items to make his usual coffee. When finished, she slid it across the wood grain, and he handed over a five. She rang him up, and when she went to give him his change, he waved it off.

She dropped it into the tip jar he knew she didn't keep for herself but gave to her younger employees who needed it for college. "Good luck today."

"Thanks, I'm going to need it."

He tipped his hat and headed onto the boardwalk, absorbing the serenity of the early morning hours before the boardwalk came to life with people, and the only noise was the crashing of waves and the seagulls overhead. He sat on a



bench, kicked his foot onto his knee, and closed his eyes, taking a second to relax.

“Good, you’re early!” Allison’s voice broke through his quiet moment.

He popped one eye open and watched as she click-clacked her way across the boardwalk in shoes that belonged on a runway and not on the planks of wood she could easily catch her heel on. Her toned legs poked out of a purple knee-length dress that hugged her perfect curves, and her black hair fell in waves over her shoulders. She looked good, like always.

She held a tumbler in her hand and took a sip as she came to a stop in front of him.

“Is that a Bruins tumbler?” he asked, noticing the distinct logo.

“It sure is.”

“You like hockey?”

“Love it, actually. If you had social media, you’d know I never miss a game.”

He did not peg Allison Winters in her too high heels as a hockey fan. Definitely not a fan of his favorite team.

“Me neither,” he admitted.

She held the hand up that didn’t have the tumbler out at him. “Wait. Are you saying we have something in common?” That same hand slapped against her chest. “I can’t believe it.”

“Okay, you can take the sarcasm down a notch. It’s too early.” Even if he found her sarcasm oddly attractive.

“Is someone not a morning person?”

“I’ve been up since four.”

“Oh. Me too.”

“Look at that. Something else we have in common.”

She tapped her shoe against his boot. “Was that a joke? I feel like that was a joke.”

He bit back the smile trying to force its way onto his face. “It’s whatever you want it to be.” He looked down the boardwalk. “Where’s your camera guy?”

“He’s coming. Getting all the equipment, but I thought I’d go over a few things with you before he shows up.”

He put his foot on the ground and glanced at her. She didn’t have a hair out of place. Her lips were lightly glossed and dark lashes accentuated her eyes, highlighting the dark brown ring that surrounded the whisky-colored hue. “Like what?”

“Like what you’re going to say.”

“I already told you. I know what I’m going to say.”

“Yes, but don’t you want to rehearse it?” Her hands landed on the sexy curve of her hips, a clear sign she was getting annoyed by him. Her eyebrows drew together, and her lips pursed as if she was trying to keep from chastising him about not being properly prepared.

“Didn’t we already have this conversation? I don’t need to rehearse it. I’m going to say what I have to say and that’s it. No questions, no nothing.”

She shrugged in that passive aggressive way of hers. “If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

She was so stubborn. She probably wanted to know what he’d say so she could find a way to spin it and weave her own story. He wasn’t here to help her make another headline. He just wanted to get the money added to his budget so he could

properly protect the people of the town and continue to make Willow Cove a safe destination for summer visitors.

“Here comes Larry.”

“Good.” He was ready to get this over with and get on his way. He had his rounds to make before heading into the station.

“Ready, Larry?” Allison asked as the man drew closer. He had a donut in one hand and the camera in the other.

“Yup, all set.”

Allison took a sip out of her tumbler before placing it on the ground by Reid’s foot. She cleared her throat and made a few weird noises. Reid looked at her like she was nuts.

“I’m warming my voice up.”

“Because the nonstop talking you’ve been doing since you got here wasn’t enough?”

“If I didn’t know you, I’d say you’re a grump in the morning, but since I do, I know this is just your normal jolly disposition.”

Ignoring the jab, he pulled his hat over his eyes and pushed his sunglasses into place.

“Aren’t you going to take those off?” She motioned to his face.

“No.”

“But don’t you want people to see you? Make it feel like you’re talking directly to them.”

The truth was, he didn’t want anyone to see him. He couldn’t be noticed on TV. If he was, it would possibly be a matter of life or death. He wouldn’t bring that kind of danger to Willow Cove.

“I’m good. Let’s just do this.”

Allison nodded to Larry, and he shoved the rest of the donut in his mouth before he propped the camera onto his shoulder. He pointed at her and gave a thumbs up.

“Good morning, this is Allison Winters reporting live at the boardwalk with Willow Cove’s one and only Sheriff Reid who is here today to discuss the safety of the town and the people after a chilling incident two months ago, a string of criminal mischief, and the recent brawl that happened on this very boardwalk.”

Reid’s eyes rolled, and he was glad he was wearing sunglasses. He should have known any which way she could squeeze those little tidbits in she would. Exaggerating for ratings and making their town—the safest in the state—out to be a danger zone. It was ridiculous, and it was time the nonsense stopped.

She shoved the mic in his face, turning to try to get a better angle, but he wasn’t having it. He was there, he was going to speak, and they didn’t need to get a good glimpse of him. It was better that way. For him, for the town, and for his promise to keep everyone safe.

“I met with the mayor yesterday regarding increasing patrols throughout the town during what is expected to be a very busy summer season. She has given me the green light, and I will be implementing the necessary changes today. I also would like to take a moment and to remind you that the incidents Miss Winters continuously refers to were isolated, and there is no longer any threat to any of the citizens of our town.” Allison’s nose scrunched, but he continued. “I’d also like to say that Willow Cove has always been a safe town, and as sheriff, I will make sure it stays that way. Thank you. I hope you all have a safe, healthy, and fun summer.”

Allison brought the mic to her mouth, and once again, he should have known it wouldn’t be as simple as making a

statement.

“Does that mean the mayor has increased the budget for the police department? And if so, is she cutting funds from another department?”

His teeth ground together, and if his brain wasn't thinking of a million ways to throw Allison off the boardwalk into the water, he'd be concerned about chipping a tooth. This was exactly why he hated live TV. He couldn't walk away in a huff or start throwing curses out. They were already too deep into this circus.

He cleared his throat and straightened. “That is something you would need to discuss with the mayor. My concern is my department and that it's properly taken care of so we can continue to do our job and serve the good people of our town.”

“But you have to wonder if another department head is going to be incapable of taken care of their department if their funding is decreased.”

His nails dug into his palms, but he tried to keep from scowling or lashing out and giving Allison a piece of his mind. “Again, my concern is my department, and if other departments have problems with their funding, then they will also need to take that up with Mayor Sands. Thank you.”

He peered over his glasses, not using words, but insisting she end the interview now. His gaze must have said everything he hoped, because she turned to the camera. “There you have it, folks. The sheriff assures us our town is safe and we can all enjoy our summer with ease. This is Allison Winters reporting live. Sandra, back to you in the studio.”

Larry made a motion, letting Allison know the camera was off, and Reid snatched his coffee off the ground and headed away from the reporter before he throttled her.

“Reid!” she called out after him, but he kept walking.

He heard her heels click-clacking their way after him, and if he wasn't a grown man, he would have broken into a sprint and gotten the hell away from her.

“What?” he demanded as he pivoted.

She came to a halt, her tight body flinging backward, so she didn't collide with him. She adjusted her black hair that fell in her face, swiping it behind her ears. “I was just going to say I think that went really well.”

“Oh, is that what you were going to say? What about trying to throw me under the damn bus again?”

“I didn't.”

A laugh bubbled up and burst out. “Then what the hell was all that questioning about budgets?”

Her eyebrows furrowed, as if she was genuinely confused. She was either a grade A actress or she was completely clueless. But after years of watching her spin stories, he knew damn well it sure as hell wasn't the latter. “It was an honest question and something the people would want to know.”

“Really? Because I don't think the people give two shits about funding. At least not until you put it in their damn head. Now they're going to be wondering.”

“So let them call the mayor's office.”

Reid ripped his hat off and thrust his other hand through his hair. “You don't get it, do you? You put this drivel out there, thinking you're doing the public a favor, but all you're doing is hurting people.”

“That is not true! I'm seeking the truth and providing people with the facts.”

“Like how you were held at gunpoint, making our town out to be some dangerous place. When you didn't care to include the fact that I told you not to get involved, that you

took it upon yourself to insert yourself into that situation. That if you would have kept your damn nose out of it, and let me do my fucking job, you never would have been knocked out or had a gun pointed at you.” The anger he’d been holding in for the two months exploded out of him, and as the last words poured free, he sagged forward as if the exertion of admitting the truth was too much for him to take.

“You’re just mad I figured it out before you did,” she snapped, and so did his patience.

“I’m done here.” He swiped his hand in front for emphasis, then walked away, refusing to look back. Annoyance rattled his bones, but relief settled in when he didn’t hear the damn click-clack of her shoes behind him.

He didn’t have time for her nonsense, anyway. He had shit to do.

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After a very long day, he headed toward the docks to unwind with a beer and his closest friend.

Marco Moretti was sixteen when he came into Reid’s life. Reid had been twenty-four, new to Willow Cove and the local police station, and had seen himself in the kid. They’d been in each other’s life ever since, and somewhere along the way, the hotheaded teenager became a loyal friend—the best, as far as Reid was concerned. He could rely on Marco for anything.

Reid spotted him pulling his boat into its slip. Marco had manned the boat for some time and continued to do so despite his custom furniture making business taking off to an all-time high. He’d told Reid he’d never give up lobstering. It was who he was, and furniture building just happened to be a hobby that turned into something bigger and profitable.

“Hey,” Reid said as he approached.

Marco tossed him a line, and Reid grabbed it, securing the rope to the dock cleat.

“Saw you on TV,” Marco said as he pulled up a six-pack he always had tied to the end of a line off the docks. He handed him a can, and Reid cracked open the local ale. He took a long swig. “I didn’t have a choice after Allison’s report the other day. The mayor insisted on it.”

“The mayor, huh?” Marco whistled low. “Bet that was a fun conversation.”

“Delightful as always, but not nearly as delightful as the five hundred phone calls I had to field today because Allison had to turn my statement into a Q&A.”

“Let me guess. Everyone’s scared you’re taking their funding.”

“Bingo!” Marco laughed, and Reid rolled his eyes. “Screw you.”

“Someone has their panties in a bunch.”

Reid squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I know. It’s just that damn woman. She’s driving me nuts.”

“You know what I did with the last woman who drove me nuts?” Marco asked.

Reid took a sip of beer and eyed him from the side. “What’s that?”

“I married her.”

Reid barked out a laugh that echoed across the water. “Marry her? I can’t even stand to be near the woman. Marry her.” He laughed again. “You’re out of your damn mind.”

“I’m just saying all that bickering makes for the best sex you’ll ever have. Hands down.”



“I’m never going to find out.” There was a reason he’d never been in a relationship. Though now that Marco put it in his head, he couldn’t help but wonder what Allison would look like stripped out of her professional dresses and blazers, splayed across his bed, hair fanned out around her, nipples hard...

No. Never happening.

Besides the fact that he couldn’t stand her most days, she was way too intrusive. She’d want to know things about him, things he didn’t tell anyone. There was a reason he kept his past to himself. He and everyone he knew was safer that way.

Marco took a swig from his beer, eyes focusing on the water. “Do you see yourself settling down ever?”

“No.” It had been a long time since he’d run from his past, but the fear still pricked at the back of his neck, and he’d never willingly put someone in danger just because he stupidly fell in love. It was better to be alone.

“That’s a shame. I think you and the reporter would make a cute couple.”

“A cute couple? Did you turn into a fourteen-year-old girl overnight? What is up with you?”

Marco shrugged. “I’m happy, and I want the same for you.”

Reid glanced at the man but remembered the kid he’d helped so many times over the years. “I appreciate that. And I am happy. In my own way, and I’m okay with that.”

“If you change your mind, let me know. Aubrey has a friend she’s been asking to set you up with.”

“Oh!” Reid exclaimed. “That’s what this is all about.”

“No, I just thought I’d throw it out there and see if you bite. You didn’t, so now I can tell Aubrey to stop asking.”

Marco grinned to himself. “Besides. I’m pretty sure you’re in love with someone else.”

“Don’t make me push you in the water.”

Marco held his hands up. “Now, would the sheriff really push someone into the water?”

“Piss me off enough, and you’re damn straight I will.”

“Considering the water is still fucking cold, I’ll shut my mouth.”

“You made the wise choice.”

The conversation turned to sports, and Reid settled into the easy discussion, but his mind kept wandering to Allison. He definitely wasn’t in love with her. He simply couldn’t be. But the thought of her naked body haunted his mind well into the night.

## Chapter 6

Allison got in her car and headed toward her sister's house to bring Presley dress shopping. She probably should have made a larger cup of coffee, but she had hope she'd be able to help Presley find the perfect dance attire before lunchtime. She sent up a silent prayer and focused on the road.

Luna lived seven minutes away, but with tourist season on the horizon, the drive time would double if not triple by the middle of summer. Luckily, it was still early in the year and only a few cars drove the main strip past the boardwalk toward the other side of town.

She pulled up to Luna's single-family ranch and parked in the driveway. Just as she climbed out of the driver's side, Presley skipped outside, arms in the air, wristlet in her hand. Her long hair was straightened, and Allison knew she probably spent a ridiculous amount of time getting it just right. She wore clear lip gloss since Luna refused to let her wear anything tinted. She looked like the preteen she was, but to Allison, she would always be that five-year-old girl with pigtails, who loved to play hopscotch and watch Disney movies.

"You're late," Presley said as she continued skipping toward the car.

Allison turned the gold watch on her wrist. "By a minute."

Presley rolled her eyes. "Still late."

"Your mother isn't even out of the house yet. I'd say she's the one who is late."

"Mom's always late. You never are."

"I know, just one of the reasons I'm better than her."

“I heard that!” Luna called out from the porch step, and Allison looked at Presley as they both giggled.

Luna hurried out of the house, juggling her keys, bag, and an extra-large cup of coffee. She managed not to drop anything, yanked the door shut, and met them at the car.

“You got that?” Allison asked as Luna held her wallet, using her chin and chest as she zipped and unzipped different sections of her bag.

Luna dropped her keys in one of the openings then let her wallet fall from her chin right into the bag. She looked up, a smile on her face. “All good.”

Allison got into the driver’s seat. Luna followed, dropping into the passenger seat, and Presley took up her usual spot behind her mom. Allison waited to hear the clicks of seatbelts before she put the car in drive. “Dress shopping, here we come.” Allison caught Presley in the rearview mirror, a smile spreading wide across her face.

Oh, to be young again, when the only care in the world was what to wear to the school dance and not trying to figure out who sent a threatening letter. Allison didn’t want to even think about it, but the way Reid had reacted made her wonder if she needed to take the threat more seriously.

He was a cop. Being overly protective and concerned with matters was his job. Of course he’d freak out over the letter, and it’s not like she’d had any others show up since. It was a onetime thing by someone who clearly had nothing better to do with their lives.

Feeling better on the matter, she shoved any thoughts of that stupid letter to the back of her mind and focused on her day with two of her favorite people.

“Do we have a style in mind?” Allison asked, glancing at the rearview and catching Presley’s similar whisky-colored

eyes. All her siblings had some sort of green in their eyes, but Allison, like Presley, did not. She told Presley it was because they were special.

“There’s this purple dress I saw online that is one shoulder and has like a band of like satin that goes around the middle.” Each word was filled with more excitement than the previous.

“I told you, no shoulderless dresses,” Luna said, and Allison watched Presley deflate in the backseat.

“Why not?” Allison asked, knowing damn well her sister would give her hell, but she didn’t have a direct view of the deflated sixth grader. “One-shoulders are very classy.”

“Not for a twelve-year-old.”

“It’s better than strapless, and correct me if I’m wrong, didn’t you wear a strapless dress to your sixth-grade dance?” Allison tossed Luna a smirk and was met with daggers.

“You did?” Presley’s head poked in between the seats. “Then how come I can’t get the dress I want?”

“Sit back.” Luna let out a sigh. “I’m going to kill you,” she mumbled under her breath, and Allison had no doubt she’d get the speech about undermining her as a parent.

Allison shrugged. It’s not like Presley was asking to buy a string bikini. Sometimes Luna was a little too strict for the poor girl. Allison understood the challenges and extra worries she carried as a single mother, but she wasn’t going to lose control of Presley by letting her get a harmless dress.

“Why don’t we just let P try it on, and we’ll go from there?”

Presley bounced in her seat. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“Of course you do,” Luna groaned.

“There’s no harm in trying it on. For all we know, Presley will hate it.”

“Fine,” Luna said, turning to face Presley. “You can try it.” Presley’s face lit up, and she clapped in rapid succession. Luna’s finger shot up. “But...”

“There’s always a but,” Allison chimed in, and with a sigh, Luna rolled her eyes.

“But if it doesn’t look appropriate for a sixth-grade dance, you’re not getting it. Understood?”

Presley nodded. “Understood.”

“Good, so no arguing or teaming up on me.” Luna swung her eyes to Allison, and even though she wasn’t looking at her sister, she felt the heat of her gaze.

Allison held her hand up. “Promise.”

“Me too,” Presley said.

Everyone settled into their seats, and Allison caught Presley’s eyes in the rearview again. Allison gave her a wink, and Presley gave her a conspiratorial smile. They really did make a good team.

“Watch out!” Luna yelled.

Allison whipped her head to the road and slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing a white ball of fluff. Her entire body jolted forward, hair flying around her. Her heart slammed against her chest. A loud thump echoed through the car as she glanced up, only to catch those familiar blue eyes. Reid’s hands rested on her hood, and she was about to shout what the hell was he thinking, but before she could get her mouth to work, he was off running.

“Are you okay?” Luna asked, then turned to Presley.

Presley nodded, and Allison’s gaze followed Reid as he ran full speed up a driveway. “What the hell is he doing?” She pulled to the side and put the car in park.

“What are *you* doing?” Luna asked.

“I’m going to investigate.”

“I think the sheriff has it under control.”

“I’ll be right back. Stay here.” Whenever Reid was afoot, there was a possibility of a story, and she wasn’t going to sit back and wait for the rest of the town to pick up on it before she did.

Allison got out of the car and jogged, wishing she opted for sneakers instead of the heels she was donning. A flash of black fur followed by a blur of white darted out of the driveway, and Allison hurried. She put her head down, making sure not to get her heel caught in any cracks, and slammed headfirst into a brick wall.

At least it felt like a brick wall. Her hands landed on the tan uniform top, her fingers momentarily appreciating the hard ridges beneath. Who knew Reid was hiding solid rock beneath his uniform? She blinked up, his scowl at lethal levels, and while most anyone would be intimidated, she was oddly turned on by the intensity.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

She cleared her throat, dropped her hands from his chest, and stepped back, giving herself some much needed distance. “Trying to figure out what you’re doing.”

“If you must know, I’m trying to catch Charlie, Mrs. Pierson’s dog.”

Allison glanced to the leash in Reid’s hand, realizing a collar was attached but no dog.

“You lost Mrs. Pierson’s dog?”

“I didn’t lose the damn dog. He saw a cat and broke his collar.” Reid’s gaze scoured the area while he spoke.

Allison went to make a sarcastic comment when she spotted the furball. “There he is!” she declared as she ran full

speed toward the escaped pup.

She kept her eyes on the dog, ready to pounce, but her foot sunk into the street, her body contorted, and she crashed into the hard pavement.

“Allison!” Reid’s rough tone carried through the mid-morning air.

Pain vibrated up her ankle and into her calf. “Son of a bitch, that hurt.”

She was in the middle of the road and should probably move, but she took a second to center herself. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. A cold, wet sensation swiped up her cheek, and she opened her eyes just as Charlie’s tongue came in for another swipe.

Ignoring the pain in her ankle, she grabbed the dog and held him against her chest.

“Are you okay?” Reid asked, dropping to his knee. He cupped her cheek, the heat of his hand sinking into her skin and spreading through. The unexpected gesture had her blinking at him, unable to speak. “Allison?” His blue eyes narrowed in concern. The scowl that she thought was a permanent fixture on his face drooped into worry.

“I caught Charlie.” She held the fluffball up like he was an Emmy.

Reid wrapped the leash around Charlie, making a makeshift collar, and tucked the pup under his arm. His other arm reached out to her. She took his hand and let him help her up.

“You could have seriously hurt yourself,” he grumbled.

“I got the dog, and that’s what was important.”

“I could have got the dog without you nosediving into concrete.”



“I didn’t nosedive, thank you very much.” She went to walk away, but as soon as she put pressure on her foot, her knee buckled. She swayed, but before she could go down, Reid was beside her. His strong arm wrapped around her waist, and she leaned into him.

“Take Charlie,” he said.

She could barely walk, so she didn’t think she could manage holding the dog, too. Reid thrust the fluffster into her arms, and with Charlie’s goofy grin coming at her, she couldn’t deny him. She took the dog, and Reid bent, scooping her into his arms in one fluid movement.

“Hey!” she exclaimed. “Put me down.”

“You can barely walk.

“I can walk just fine. I just needed a minute.”

“You can still have your minute. No one is stopping you.”

Charlie licked her face, and she turned to get away from the over eager tongue, which only put her face mere inches from Reid’s. The air between them sparked. His jaw was set in its usual stone, his blue eyes softening even if for only a quick flash before focusing on the road in front of them.

“Someone really needs to fix that damn pothole,” he snapped as he picked up speed and stormed toward her car.

“I’m sure not many people are out running in the street.” She focused her attention on Charlie, holding the little guy against her chest and giving him scratches behind the ear.

“No, but I already know a few people who have gotten flat tires in the last couple of weeks. The town should have taken care of it by now.”

“You’re buddy buddy with the mayor. Why don’t you give her a call?”

“Yeah right. If anything, thanks to you, I’m on thin ice with Madam Mayor. It’s best I steer clear of her for a bit.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You got the funding.”

“Along with a million phone calls asking if my budget was going to affect this group, or this club, or that one. My entire day was shot to shit, thanks to you.”

“I’m just out here ruining your life, aren’t I?”

“Something like that.” A tiny smile quirked at the edge of his mouth, and Allison silently fist bumped the air. He was always so stoic, and any positive reaction she could get out of him was a small victory.

Luna jumped out of the car. “Oh my God. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Allison leaned into Reid. “Can you put me down before my sister has a coronary?” When he didn’t as much as loosen his grip, she swatted his chest. “Now. I had my minute. I’m good.”

Gently, he lowered her, and she handed him Charlie, who greeted Reid with several licks to the face.

“No kisses for you,” Reid said. “You lost that privilege when you took off.”

“You’re a big fat meanie,” Allison said and took Charlie’s face in her hands, raining kisses all over the fluffball.

“Allison!” Luna said, and with a deep breath, Allison turned toward her worry wart of a sister.

“Luna, I’m fine.”

“Let me run Charlie back to Mrs. Pierson.” Reid hurried down the sidewalk toward Mrs. Pierson’s house.

“What was that all about?” Luna asked.

“Charlie’s collar snapped, and he took off after a cat.”

“I’m not talking about the dog,” Luna said.

Allison turned her hands out innocently.

“I’m talking about you being swept up into Reid’s arms.”

“I fell in a stupid pothole. I should have taken a page from your book and worn sneakers today. Maybe I would have, if I knew I’d be chasing down a sheriff and a little white ball of fur that has the speed of the Roadrunner.”

“Is that all it was?”

“What else would it be?”

Allison went to take a step and bit back the wince.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re limping.”

Before she could process what was happening, Reid’s arms scooped her up and hoisted her into his chest. Where did he even come from? This was getting ridiculous. She’d be lying if she didn’t appreciate the warm, hard chest to rest on. She resisted the urge to snuggle into it and crossed her arms over her chest, at least pretending like she was not amused by the big grumpy sheriff coming to her rescue.

It was definitely in his wheelhouse. Reid loved to be the knight in shining armor, even when it was completely unnecessary.

He walked them to her car, Luna hurrying to open the door. Reid placed Allison in the driver’s seat.

“She should get that ankle looked at,” Reid said to Luna as if Allison wasn’t right there.

Allison waved her hand in the air. “I’m fine!” She didn’t need either of them fussing over her.

Luna ignored her protests. “Then we’ll go home and you can elevate it, put some ice on it.”

“No. I promised Presley a dress, and she is getting a dress.”

“Hang on,” Reid all but barked as he jogged away.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Luna asked.

“For the hundredth time, I’m fine.”

“We can go tomorrow,” Presley said, and Allison turned to her.

“Absolutely not. It’s just a little twisted ankle. I have endured much worse.”

“Here.” Reid ducked down and placed an ice pack on her ankle. The cold bit into her skin, and she hissed.

“You’re fine, huh?”

“It’s cold. Next time, give a girl some warning before you just drop ice on her bare ankle.”

He didn’t even try to hide his massive eye roll. His hand ran up her calf, and her body immediately reacted, shifting toward him and never wanting his touch to go away.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her tone too breathy as his hand moved to her ankle. He removed her shoe and held her foot up to inspect it.

“It doesn’t look like anything is broken.”

“I could have told you that.”

“I told you these things are dangerous.” Reid held up her shoe as if it was a lethal weapon when, in fact, it was a very beautiful Christian Louboutin she spent entirely too much money on.

She snatched the shoe from his hand and held the heel facing him. “Want me to show you just how dangerous they

can be?”

“Maybe I should drive,” Luna said.

“I am perfectly capable of driving. You two are making this into a bigger thing than it needs to be. Can you both just leave me the hell alone?”

“Who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?” Reid cracked, and Allison shot him a glare.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Luna added.

“I do not need you two teaming up on me.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Allison, I got your back,” Presley said, and Allison turned her hand behind her for a high five.

“Thank you, P. At least someone sane is on my side.”

Reid glanced up at her, still crouched from taking her shoe off. His blue-eyes danced with humor, and he shook his head. “You sure you can drive?”

“If you ask me again—”

“As the sheriff, it is my duty to keep people safe, so if you can’t drive, you are not only putting you and everyone in this car in danger, but others on the road and sidewalk.”

“Sidewalk! Reid, back off. I’m fine.”

“Okay. Take it easy. No more running in these things.” He held up the shoe, and she snatched it out of his grasp. She held it over her shoulder, and Presley took it from her.

“I have a pair of sandals back there, P. Can you hand them to me?” Presley handed over the completely flat sandals and Allison slipped them on her feet. “Now if you’re done harassing me, officer.”

“Sheriff.”

“Potato Patato.”

“Have a good day,” Reid said and went to shut the door before stopping. “I wanted to let you know I sent that letter out to be scanned for fingerprints, and I finally got the results back. Unfortunately, they didn’t find any.”

“Oh okay,” she said, hoping to end the conversation before her sister stuck her nose in. The last thing she needed was Luna to get wind of this.

“What letter?”

*Too late.*

Allison glared at Reid and shook her head.

“The threatening letter some lunatic sent Allison at the station,” Reid said as Allison sliced her hand repeatedly across her neck. Clearly Reid didn’t understand subtly. Maybe she should slap a hand over his mouth.

“Threatening letter?” Luna’s hand landed on her chest, and she looked at Allison with too many questions flashing in her brownish green eyes. “Why is this the first I’m hearing about it?”

“It’s nothing,” Allison assured her.

“It’s not nothing,” Reid stated with a little too much bite behind his words.

Allison swung toward him, shot out of her seat, wincing as pain shot through her ankle. She used her body to block her family out. She was closer than she expected. His intoxicating scent drifted over her. Heat radiated from him, his blue eyes like ice ready to cut into her. “It’s nothing,” she repeated, glaring at him head on, challenging him to keep talking.

Luna worried about too damn much as it was. It was best to keep her in the dark. Especially when it was nothing more than a single letter from a stupid jerk who had nothing better to do with their time.

“Officer Reid, I thank you.”

“Sheriff,” he corrected her.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have a dress to buy.”

“You haven’t received any other letters then?”

“No!” Seriously, she needed to resort to desperate measures, but the concern in his eyes unexpectedly touched her heart. “Look Reid, it was one letter. One. And I haven’t received any others. If I did, then I might be concerned, but I haven’t, so can we just let it go?”

He met her gaze, his blue eyes churning like the ocean waves. “Fine, but if you receive any sort of threat, letter or internet, I want to know.”

“Fine.”

“Enjoy your dress shopping.”

Allison inhaled as she watched him walk away from the car, her eyes lingering a little too long on the way his uniform pants hugged his backside.

Luna cleared her throat, and Allison jumped.

“Ready?” Allison asked.

“We’ve been ready. You’re the one who is staring—”

Allison held her hand up, cutting her sister off. “Let’s go get that dress.”

She put the car in drive and gave one more glance at Reid as he got in his cruiser and pulled away.

“So what letter is Reid talking about?”

She was going to kill him.

## Chapter 7

Allison sat outside the dressing room with Luna. Her ankle was better, but it still hurt every now and again. Though, the feel of Reid's hand still lingered. She swore she could still smell his scent and feel his warmth against her side. She hated being a damsel in distress, but being in his arms... it was nice. Really nice.

Luna fiddled with her bag on her lap, eyes focused on the dressing room door, a frown on her face. At least she stopped pestering her about the damn letter.

"You really are hoping she hates that dress, huh?" Allison asked, happy to get her mind off Reid.

"It's not that I hope she hates it, because let's be honest, you and I both know she's going to love it. It's just that..." Luna looked at her hand that fidgeted with the strap of her bag.

"What is it, Lu?" Allison bumped her shoulder with her elbow.

"Did you see the price tag on that dress? And I know she's going to want shoes, too." Luna's eyes drifted to the rows of shoes beside them.

Realization dawned on Allison. Luna didn't care that the dress was shoulderless on one side. She cared at the cost, but was too proud to admit that fact to her daughter. Allison mentally slapped herself for not picking up on Luna's motives sooner.

"And it's not that I can't afford it," Luna was quick to add. "But I can buy a weeks' worth of groceries for a hundred bucks. Pay the water bill. Pay my cell phone bill. Half the cable bill." She ticked each item off on her fingers.



“I’m sorry,” Allison said. “I wouldn’t have encouraged her.”

Luna’s head tilted, and she turned her attention to Allison. “But that’s what you do. I tell my daughter no, and you tell her yes. I tell her maybe, and you tell her definitely.”

“Lu,” Allison said. “It’s not like I do it to spite you. It’s those damn puppy dog eyes of hers. They’re dangerous. How do you say no to them?”

Luna laughed, and the tension between them evaporated just like that. “It’s hard, but you learn not to look directly at them.”

“But they’re like magnets.”

A smile spread wide across Luna’s face. “Fight the pull.”

“Mom,” Presley’s voice floated between them, and they both turned.

Luna gasped, pressing a hand against her heart. “Sweetheart, you look beautiful.” Tears pressed against Luna’s lids, and Allison refrained from making fun of Luna for crying at everything. Presley really did look beautiful. The dress fit her like a glove, and the color made her shine.

“Does that mean I can get it?” Presley asked.

Allison held her breath with Presley as they waited for Luna’s answer. After a moment, Luna nodded. “You can get the dress.”

Presley let out a loud squeak and threw herself into Luna’s arms. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

A tear slipped down Luna’s cheek, and she swiped it away. “Now go get dressed.”

Presley disappeared into the dressing room, and Allison turned to Luna. “You didn’t fight the pull.”

“Did you see how excited she was? I couldn’t take that from her.”

Allison nodded. Ever since Presley’s dad took off, Luna always tried to compensate in order to keep the tears out of Presley’s eyes, even if it meant not being able to pay the water bill.

Presley skipped out of the dressing room, and Allison held her hand out. “Here, give me the dress and go pick out a pair of shoes.”

Presley let out another squeak and made a beeline right for the shoe displays. Allison turned on her heel and headed toward the register.

“What are you doing?” Luna asked.

“I’m buying my niece a dress.”

“No,” Luna protested, as Allison knew she would. “I told you I can afford it.”

Allison placed the dress on the counter and smiled at the cashier before turning to Luna. “I know you can, but I want to do this. Consider it Presley’s sixth grade graduation present.”

Luna sighed, eyes darting to the ground. When she looked up, her eyes were coated in unshed tears. “Thank you.”

“Too bad you couldn’t hook your eyes up to a faucet. You’d save yourself a lot of money on your water bill,” Allison joked, then reached into her bag and handed Luna a tissue.

“Jerkface,” Luna said, taking the tissue.

Allison laughed at the juvenile name calling and bumped Luna’s shoulder with hers. “Love you, too, poo poo head.”

Allison handed her credit card over to the cashier and signed her name when prompted.

“Are you Allison Winters?” the cashier asked.

Allison put on her best smile. “I am.”

“I’m a huge fan.”

Luna sighed. “Please don’t inflate her head any more than it already is.”

“You shush, my head is not inflated.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m sorry about my sister. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. I was going to write to you, actually.” An unexpected chill ran down her spine as the words from the threat bounced around in her mind. “It’s just that you see there’s this pothole on my street. Where I live. And the town has promised to fill it, and it’s been months, and it’s still not filled. Just the other day, Mr. Delancy got a flat tire.”

Allison exhaled in relief. “You’re on Barnacle Lane, aren’t you?” Allison asked.

“How’d you know?”

“Let’s just say I had a run in with that very pothole myself.” Along with one very sexy sheriff.

“Oh no. Not you too. Did you get a flat?”

“No, just a twisted ankle.” Allison waved her hand. “Long story. I’ll talk about it tomorrow on my social media. Don’t worry about the pothole. I’m on it.”

“Really?” the cashier exclaimed.

“Absolutely. The town should have taken care of it, especially if you’ve reported it.”

“Oh, we did on several occasions.”

Unbelievable. Allison was used to getting things done when the town ignored requests. She prided herself on it,

actually. Sometimes she swore the town waited until she made a fuss before doing anything. But this pothole was a danger, and it shouldn't have been brushed off.

“What’s your name?” Allison asked.

“Anna Gaines.”

Allison slid a business card across the counter. “This is my contact info. Send me an email with a picture of the pothole, and I’ll make sure we have it filled by month’s end.” She wanted more proof, so when she pitched the story to her boss, it didn’t seem like just a personal vendetta.

Anna scooped up the business card and held it to her chest. “That would be amazing. Thank you.” Anna took the dress in her hands. “Now, let me get this wrapped for you.” Anna wrapped the dress in tissue paper before placing it in a bag and handing it to Allison. “Thank you again, Ms. Winters.”

“Allison, please.”

“Allison. Thank you.”

Allison gave a smile and turned away, with Luna beside her.

“You really think you’ll get that pothole filled?” Luna asked.

“When have I ever not gotten my way?”

“Good point. Your stubborn ass won’t let it go.”

“Nope.”

“Are you going to call the sheriff and ask him for a statement?” Luna asked, glancing at her nails in an attempt to be nonchalant, but she was as subtle as a bull in a China shop.

“I don’t know. Maybe. It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Can you stop trying to play matchmaker? You have never been good at it. The sheriff and I are definitely not compatible.” It didn’t matter that he smelled like heaven, or that being in his arms had felt oddly right, making her wonder what else that body was capable of.

“Why not? The heat that comes off you two is pretty hot.”

“That would be suppressed rage,” Allison said.

Luna laughed, and Allison walked toward Presley, who was holding multiple shoes in her hand.

“Well, that was painless.” Allison held up the bag with the dress. “I thought we were going to be here all day.”

“That heel is way too high.” Luna pointed to a pair of stilettos in Presley’s hand. Presley pouted and sulked over to the display where she found the shoe. Luna took a deep breath. “We’re not in the clear yet. It’s shoe time.”



## Chapter 8

Reid had a feeling Allison was lying, or at the very least, wouldn't tell him if she received another threat. He was completely aware she thought he was overreacting, and maybe he was, but he wasn't someone who took chances. Not when he knew the dangers that lurked around every corner of society.

For her sake, he hoped if there was another letter, she would do the right thing and let him know. He wouldn't hold his breath, though.

He took the thin gold chain he wore around his neck in his hand and ran his thumb across the cross. *Please let it be nothing.* He tucked the cross his mother gave him when he was only seven back into his shirt and continued to his cruiser.

He headed to the station and pulled into his reserved spot in the lot. The mayor had let him know this morning she approved his extra funding. Now he had to rearrange schedules and speak with his deputies about overtime.

It was times like this when he missed just being a deputy. He liked patrolling, and though he still did, there was all the extra paperwork always waiting for him at the station. He couldn't escape it, and he refused to be anything but good at his job, so he hopped out of his cruiser and went inside to tackle all the administrative bullshit.

"Hey, boss," Judy said as she walked by him holding a newspaper in one hand and blowing on a fresh cup of coffee, reminding him he never grabbed a cup when he was down at the boardwalk.

"Fresh pot?"

"Yup, just made it."

“Thanks.” His eyes landed on the front page of the paper and it took everything for him to keep himself from lashing out. “Are you done with the paper?”

“Actually, I am. I was about to throw it in the recycling bin.”

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” Judy handed him the paper, and he purposely did not look at the headline. “They let some mob guy out. Lot of people up in arms about it.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Anytime, boss.”

Judy went to walk away, and Reid threw his hand up. “Oh, Judy?”

“Yeah?”

“The mayor approved the extra funding, so there will be some overtime in your future.”

“Great! I could really use the extra cash. Load me up.” She was one of his best deputies, still a little too naïve for his tastes, but she was good at what she did, while also bringing a positive approach to every citizen she encountered. He wished he could offer her more, but he simply didn’t have the funds. At least the overtime would help out.

“You got it. I’ll let you know the new schedule by the end of the day.”

“Perfect.”

Reid hurried into his office and shut the door. Placing his coffee on his desk, he slapped the newspaper down beside it. His eyes landed on the picture of a man he knew many, many moons ago, a man who was not only a danger to society, but one of the reasons Reid had fled home for the small town.



With the familiar eyes glaring at the camera lens on the front page of the paper, Reid wondered if going four and a half hours north was far enough. Then again, if Louie wanted him dead, he could have moved to Antarctica and Louie would still find him. With him released from prison, only time would tell.

Reid flipped open the paper and read the article. There was little to no information as to why Louie was released, only the list of charges that put him there in the first place. He had a forty-year sentence and didn't even serve half of it. It didn't make any sense.

He thrust his hands through his hair and stared at the paper. There was only one person who could give him more information, but he couldn't call him now.

Disgusted by the news, he flipped the paper shut and disposed of it in the recycling bin. Louie's eyes caught him as he went to walk away, and Reid couldn't help but laugh. He'd spent the last decade and a half hiding from a past, and now his past was staring him in the face, mocking him, reminding him of one simple reality—there was no way out.

He stormed away from the bin and went back to his office, losing himself in paperwork until it was time to call it a day. Between Allison earlier, then the news on Louie, his nerves were shot to hell.

He made a few stops on the way home, following up on a few favors he had made with some of the townspeople, helping Mr. Wilcox mow his lawn—helping because although Mr. Wilcox was physically incapable of doing the task, he refused to accept his condition and barked orders to Reid the entire time. Then he changed Mrs. Hillmans's tire so she could get to her doctor's appointment in the morning.

He grabbed the to-go bag off his seat and slid out of his cruiser. He scanned the street for any unfamiliar vehicles, then the yard for anything out of the ordinary. When he came up

empty on all accounts, he went inside. He locked the door, then dead bolted it before checking the window he had opened this morning to make sure he had locked it.

He'd been getting too comfortable lately, but he couldn't be careless anymore, not with Louie out on the streets again. He put his to-go bag on the counter and moved to the fridge. In a cookie jar on top of the fridge, he fished out the burner phone he had hidden, and dialed the only number he ever called on it.

The phone rang a couple of times before a familiar voice came over the line. "Hey. I was wondering when I'd be hearing from you," Angel Garcia, his old partner from Boston, said.

"I've been busy," Reid said. "I would've called sooner."

"I'm guessing you heard."

"How'd he get out? He was supposed to be doing a forty-year sentence. He's served fifteen."

"Word on the street is he worked with the feds to take down Big Danny Kearney."

"Idiots. They release a fucking monster just to take down a coward."

"That coward pulls the strings. Ever since—"

"I know. But Louie the Screwy Higgins back on the street is dangerous for everyone. He's a loose cannon."

"You're preaching to the choir, bud."

Reid thrust his hand through his hair. "It's fucking frustrating."

"Tell me about it, but there's nothing we can do. It's out of our hands with the higher ups who are using him for leverage."

“He’s going to strike again. It’s only a matter of time. Prison doesn’t change someone like that.”

“That’s the feds problem now. If anyone gets killed, the blood will be on their hands, not ours.”

“I just wish there wouldn’t be blood on anyone’s hands,” Reid said, knowing how naïve that sounded.

“We all do, but unfortunately, they know what they’re getting into when they join. You, of all people, know that.”

Reid inhaled, thinking of all those he loved and lost as a kid. How one day they’d be there and the next no one talked about them as if they never existed. It was a cutthroat life, and it was why he did what he did to get away, but with Louie on the streets, he feared he might find him and rope him back in.

“You don’t think he’ll come for me, do you?”

“Luckily, you’ve pretty much stayed under the radar the last ten years. You have no online presence. You call me from a burner phone, for crying out loud.”

“Louie is old school. I doubt he’d even know how to use a damn computer. He’d find me the old-fashioned way.”

“You have no paper trail. And you don’t go by your given name. Nobody knows where you are, Connor. And I doubt Louie would be able to find you. Honestly, I don’t even think he’ll try. With your dad dead now, and the possibility of Big Danny Kearney getting pinched, the mob is scrambling, fighting over power. Goddamn civil war amongst them. No one will think twice about you.”

Except Louie was a vindictive son of a bitch who didn’t let his enemies get away for long. With him on the streets, it was only a matter of time before he revisited his old hit list—a list Reid had no doubt he was at the top of.

“Besides, if it’s true about Louie. If he sold out Big Danny Kearney to get out, he’ll have to go into hiding himself, until shit blows over. I wouldn’t worry about him. At least not yet.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“When have I ever not been right?” Angel said in his most arrogant tone.

“Still a cocky fuck, I see.”

“Always.”

Cocky, but a good fucking guy who’d had Reid’s back from the very beginning, all the way back to their days at the academy when they were two twenty-two-year-old kids ready to change the world.

“Continue living your life, brother. If I hear anything, I’ll get in touch.”

“How’s Marla?” Reid asked. While he wasn’t able to go to Angel’s wedding, he’d had the honor of meeting his new bride during a weekend trip to New Hampshire. It had been good to see his old friend and nice to meet the woman who had flipped his world on its head.

“Great actually. Pregnant.”

Reid froze mid fork to mouth. “No shit, huh?”

“Just found out last night. It’s early still, but fuck. I’m going to be dad.”

“That’s really great. Congrats, man. I’m so happy for you.” And he was, but for some reason an empty pit opened in his stomach. He accepted long ago he could never have a family, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want one.

“Thanks. Still getting used to the idea. Never saw this for myself, you know?”

Neither of them did. It was probably why they grew so close so quickly. They both came from fucked up backgrounds, and they swore they'd never drag any innocents into their lives. But when Angel met Marla, he was as good as gone.

“You're going to be a great dad. You had the worst, so you know everything not to do.”

“Damn straight. I'm going to be nothing like my old man. I'm going to treat my kid right. Give him a good life. Make sure he's happy and shit.”

“I have no doubt you will. Now don't let me keep you any longer.” Any contact with him put Angel in danger. They'd gone years walking a tightrope by staying in touch, but now that had to end. With a baby in the mix, Reid couldn't chance it.

*Pregnant.* Angel's word echoed in his head as if it taunted him. Reid would never have the chance to prove he was nothing like his father. But by staying single, not dragging someone he cared about into the messed-up web of his life, that was his proof he was better than his father.

Still, Reid longed for companionship, for someone to hold after a long day at the station, to argue with over whose turn it was to empty the dishwasher. He closed his eyes, imagining a life he would never have, though he was surprised when the woman of his dreams turned out to be the one and only Allison Winters.

It was Marco's fault for putting that stupid thought in his head.

He laughed. Their personalities wrapped together in one tiny package would be a nightmare, but... it would also be one hell of an adventure.



## Chapter 9

*Another boring day in Willow Cove.* Not that she completely minded. Allison loved the small town, but when she was trying to snag a seat as news anchor, she needed something juicier. Something that would cement her name as one of the best this town had ever seen. That was never going to happen reporting on the missing stop sign at the intersection of Stepping Stone Lane and Wild Goose Road. She had the pothole story lined up next, which was going to round out her riveting day of reporting.

Too bad there wasn't another scandal like when Harley Love moved to their small town to escape harassment and internet trolls, but the trolls followed her, escalating the harassment. Or when Victor Turner held her and his cousin hostage over an inheritance dispute. Now that was riveting stuff, award worthy content that got her national attention. Now the only attention she had was Larry as he pointed the camera at her and motioned for her to begin speaking.

She went through her rehearsed narrative, explaining the situation of the missing stop sign, then signed off to her viewers. "This is Allison Winters for WC News."

Sandra took over at the station, and Allison dropped her camera smile along with her hand holding the microphone to her face.

"One down, one more to go," Larry said, taking the camera off his shoulder and heading to the news van. He was in a hurry to get done on time so he could take his youngest to a three o'clock showing at the movie theater. It was fine by Allison. She wanted to hit a spin class around the same time, anyway.

Though the most recent letter she received weighed heavily in her pocket. She should have called Reid, reported it to him, but he was already up in arms about the first one. She didn't need to add fuel to that fire. This letter was also typed, no return address and no identifiable markings to trace its origins. Allison checked. She might not have a lab to dust for fingerprints, but she was thorough in her investigations. Still, she saved the envelope in a sandwich bag just in case and would have slipped the letter in with it, but Sonny had popped up to talk to her, and she'd panicked and quickly shoved it in her pocket.

"Ready?" Larry called through the passenger window from the driver's seat.

Allison shook her head, getting her mind back in the game, and hopped in the van. "Ready. Onto the next." She took her phone out and scanned through her social media feeds, responding to comments, and ignoring the rude ones that questioned if she's pregnant. *No, just ate a lot of carbs the last few days, but thanks for noticing.*

Lots of comments asked how Larry was doing, so she turned her camera onto him. "Larry, say hi to the followers."

His cheeks reddened as they always did when she turned the tables and put him in front of the lens. He waved. "Hi everyone."

"What are you going to see today?" she asked.

"The new Marvel movie. Heard it's great. Really looking forward to it." Larry gave a thumbs up, and Allison laughed.

She turned the camera on herself and explained where they had just left and why and where they were off to now. "So hopefully, bringing media attention to the stop sign and the pothole, we'll be able to get things fixed for you sooner rather than later. If you have any issues you need help with, please



message me and Larry, and I just might wind up in your area of town.” She waved at the camera and posted the video.

Messages immediately started coming in, and Allison jumped right on them, responding and making notes for issues to look into further for future stories.

A few minutes later, Larry pulled the van to a stop along Barnacle Lane. The pothole was impossible to miss since someone decided to... plant flowers in it. A laugh bubbled out as Allison took in the lovely yellow and orange mums poking up from the hole.

“Do you see this?” she asked Larry, pointing to the little garden in the middle of the road.

“Just when I thought I’d seen everything,” he said. “Let me get the camera.” He slipped out of the driver’s side and went around to the back.

Allison took out her phone and snapped a picture and video of the pothole garden to post on her social media accounts. People were going to love this.

“You’re here!” Allison turned to see Anna.

“I am. You didn’t tell me about this.” She motioned to the flowers. Though it must have been a recent occurrence.

“Oh.” Anna nodded, a smile spreading wide across her face. Humor filled her dark eyes. “That is courtesy of Mrs. Trainor. Her husband has gotten two flat tires in the last two months, and she got so angry he kept hitting the pothole. She grabbed her potting soil and got to work yesterday afternoon. She said if he couldn’t see the yellow and orange flowers, she was forcing him to get an eye exam or she’d hide his keys.”

A laugh burst out, and Allison fell into a giggle fit. “That is great,” she said. “Is Mrs. Trainor home? I would love to interview her. She seems like she’d be great for television.”

“She is, and she would love that. I’ll be right back.”

“Perfect. I’ll be here. Thanks.”

Anna hurried two doors down to a Cape Cod style home with white siding and black shutters. The house was lined with flowers in two flower beds on either side and along the stone path walkway that led from the driveway to the front door.

“We about ready?” Larry asked.

“Give me two minutes. I’m getting the woman who planted this lovely garden to interview.”

Allison crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for the woman. She closed her eyes, tilting her head up to the sky and basked in the warmth of the sun on her face.

The sound of a car door jolted her out of her moment of serenity, and she swung her gaze behind her. A familiar cruiser had pulled up and an even more familiar ass was bending over and reaching into the backseat of the cruiser.

She walked over to Reid, her heels click-clacking on the pavement.

He turned, hoisting the bag on his shoulder, his arm muscles straining against his shirt with the effort. She paused for a moment, taking him in before continuing toward him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to fill the damn hole.” He dropped the bag of whatever he was carrying on the ground and let out a rush of breath. “But I see someone beat me to it.” He nodded to her foot, concern filling his gaze. “How’s the ankle?”

“It’s fine.” She waved him off. “I didn’t realize pothole repair was in your pay grade.”

“It’s not, but one of my deputies got a flat tire this morning and was late for his shift. Normally I wouldn’t have minded,

but he has to pay for a new tire, and the guy is already struggling.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Over the years, she’d heard the locals rave about Reid for taking care of things for them, but she’d never thought much of it. As gruff as he could be, he had a big heart beneath that uniform.

“We’re all just trying to get by,” he said, snapping her to reality. “Sometimes a little help doesn’t hurt is all. Not a big deal.”

“But see, I think it is. Local officer—”

“Sheriff.”

She ignored his correction and kept going, knowing damn well it pissed him off. “Taking it upon himself to fill the town’s potholes. Let me guess, the money came out of your own wallet, too.” Reid didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. “I knew it.” She snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “I have an idea. Larry, get the camera!”

Reid’s blue eyes darkened, his lips curving downward in an unmistakable sign of disapproval. “What the hell are you doing?”

She patted his chest, momentarily shocked by the hard strength beneath her hand. Her fingers itched to keep exploring, but she snapped her hand away. “You’re my new story.” Everything about it was perfect. Reid Silva wasn’t just the town hero, he was an all-around good guy despite his, at times, prickly personality. Plus, he had a face for TV, if he’d just stop being so damn camera shy.

“Absolutely not,” Reid stated, without an ounce of gratitude in his tone.

Didn’t he realize she would be doing him a huge favor? “Oh, come on. You need to get into the mayor’s good graces,

and what better way than for her to see you taking it upon yourself to better the town?"

"I already got my budget increase. I can't give two shits about what the mayor thinks."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?" Allison planted her hands on her hips and stared Reid down, or at least tried to. The man was a stone, cold statue who didn't budge.

"The answer is no."

"Ready when you are," Larry said from behind her. A smile spread across Allison's face, and she turned around to her cameraman. She'd interview Mrs. Trainor in the next segment. Right now, she was going with the story that guaranteed a bigger reaction. Besides, maybe she did feel a little bad about how she spun that story on the boardwalk. Reid wasn't incompetent as sheriff. If anything, she felt safer knowing he was the one protecting the town. Now it was her turn to pay him back and right her wrong.

"I'm ready," she said to Larry, taking her microphone in her hand. Larry counted down, and at one, Allison began. "This is Allison Winters here on Barnacle Lane, where a pothole has been wreaking havoc on the citizens and their tires. While here, I have bumped into none other than the local hero and our very own sheriff. He has come here on his own dime to repair this destructive pothole."

Larry panned the camera down, hopefully getting a good shot of the garden pothole.

"Sheriff Reid," Allison said and turned to Reid, microphone out, except he wasn't there. She gasped at the empty space and scanned the area for the ungrateful jerk. She was doing *him* a favor here. She even called him a local hero, for crying out loud. He could have at least had the decency to stick around. "Sheriff Reid," she said one more time, trying to keep the unease from shaking her voice.

Somehow, the sheriff disappeared into thin air. *Think.* Allison was a reporter and good at her job because she was quick on her feet. She plastered a smile on her face and stared right at the camera. “It appears the sheriff has been called away.” Her eyes landed on Anna and Mrs. Trainor coming up the sidewalk behind Larry. “We’ll get to him later, but now let’s talk to the person who informed me of this treacherous hole, and the woman who turned it into a garden while she patiently waits for the town to do their job and repair the tire popping crater.”

Allison conducted the interview, and by the end, she was happy with the report, but definitely not happy with a certain sheriff.

“This is Allison Winters for WC News. Back to you, Sandra.” She held her smile until Larry signaled she was off, then let out a loud breath as he lowered the camera. “Can you believe Reid took off like that in the middle of a broadcast?” she said to Larry, who was checking his watch. They had plenty of time before his movie started.

“The guy’s told you; he doesn’t like being on camera.”

“I was going to make him look like the town hero. A pure good-for-the-soul spot on the afternoon news.”

Larry shrugged. “I don’t think Reid cares about any of that.”

She rolled her eyes, unable to control the movement. “Everybody cares about looking good to the public.”

“Some people are more private than others. Maybe it’s time you respect his wishes.”

“Really Larry, throwing the guilt trip at me? What happened to always doing what you have to in order to snag the best story?” Larry was the one who encouraged her to go

after the leads, to push her way to the front and ask the questions that needed to be answered.

He shrugged. “Guess with my daughters getting older, and I see how much of their lives are being put on the internet, I have to respect someone who wants to keep their privacy in a time when everyone is posting what they’re eating for dinner.”

“Spoken like a true old man.” Allison winked, and Larry let out a big belly laugh that shook his whole body.

“I really am getting old. I just don’t understand kids these days.”

“Keep talking, Larry. You’re getting older by the second.”

“All I’m saying is maybe Reid is on to something. We don’t need to tell the world all the details of our life.”

Larry headed to the van, and Allison’s thoughts drifted to the letter in her pocket. She didn’t need to pull it out to know what it said. She’d memorized it before shoving it away.

*I saw you yesterday at Joe’s Lobster House.*

*I was surprised. You’re usually only there on Wednesdays.*

*You order a lobster roll and fries but never finish the fries.*

*I watch you and wonder what would happen if I put arsenic in your ketchup.*

*Maybe one day we’ll find out.*

She swallowed as she recalled the typed words. Her mind lingering on arsenic, and then Wednesday. The only time in the last two weeks she had gone other than her usual day was when she was with Luna and Presley. Was this sicko there? Watching her with her sister and her niece? Or did he just see her social media and was trying to scare her?

She hadn’t thought much about it earlier, but now the letter weighed not only her pocket down, but her mind as well. If

Reid had stuck around, maybe she would have shown him. She reached for the letter, slipping it from her pocket when her phone vibrated in her other pocket. She shoved the letter back in place, forced the threatening words to the back of her mind, and smiled at Presley's face on the screen.

"Hey P bug."

"Help," Presley whispered.

Her heart slammed against her chest, every worst-case scenario filling her mind. Did the psycho go to Presley? Did she put her niece in danger? She swallowed the lump making it impossible to catch her breath. "What's the matter?"

"Mom wants to do my hair for the dance."

Allison let out a relieved breath, but her heart still battered her chest. She inhaled deeply, trying to let all the negative thoughts go.

Her niece had always had a flare for the dramatics. Allison liked to think she got in from her. "What's wrong with that?"

"She has flowers. *Flowers!*"

Allison had to keep herself from laughing. She could imagine Luna trying to make Presley look like a five-year-old flower girl. "Oh, I see your dilemma."

"Yes, so you need to help me."

"I just have to stop at the station, then I'll head over." She'd have to miss her gym session, but she'd just go for a walk around her neighborhood after dinner.

"Hurry!" Presley said before the screen went black.

With a shake of her head, Allison laughed while jogging to the van. After all, Larry had a movie to get to, and she had to save her niece from her flower wielding sister.

## Chapter 10

Reid's phone rang, and he fished it out of his pocket, surprised to see Allison's number flashing on the screen.

"Reid," he said.

"Reid!" He'd never hated the name until she said it with such panic in her voice.

"What's the matter?" he demanded, with a little too much bite in his words.

"I got a package. It's... I... It's better if you just saw for yourself. Can you come to my house? Please."

"I'm on my way." He started to jog down the boardwalk, still grasping the phone, listening as a loud sigh of relief rushed through the speaker.

"Thank God," she said so faintly, he almost missed it over the clatter of his keys.

Less than ten minutes later, Reid pulled into Allison's driveway and jumped out of his cruiser. He hurried to the door, fist raised to knock, but Allison flung the door open. Fear cut lines around her eyes, and her lip quivered slightly before she bit down on it. The need to comfort her was strong, but she'd called him for a reason. He was here on duty.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"In the kitchen." She pointed down the hall, and he made his way to the overly bright white kitchen with subway tiled backsplash. The box sat on the white wood island with the dark wood top.

Reid peered inside, then closed the lid. "It's definitely a tongue, but it's not human. If I had to guess, cow." He looked



around the kitchen and spotted what he was looking for. He grabbed a pair of tongs off a hook and used them to pick up the letter. He read the message, his blood heating with each word until all he could see was red.

*I've been watching you for a while.*

*I especially like the mornings when you sit on your front porch, drinking your coffee.*

*Yellow looks good on you.*

*I imagine tying the belt of your robe around your neck, cutting off the oxygen, and finally taking away your voice.*

“Do you have a Ziploc?”

“Of course.” She retrieved one from a drawer. She turned to him, opening the plastic sandwich bag, and he dropped it in.

“I’ll bring this to the station and see if we can find any fingerprints on in.” He sealed the bag and placed it on the counter. “If we’re lucky, we’ll get a hit.”

“What are the odds?”

“Hard to say. Depends what kind of person we’re dealing with, and if they’re smart enough to cover their tracks.” Screwy Louie’s face popped into his mind, and his gut twisted. The threatening letters escalating to more pressing threats were right in line with Louie’s sick twisted games, but what would he have to do with Allison?

Unless Louie somehow connected the dots and found him, knew he had a working relationship with the reporter, or maybe he saw the interview and recognized him. His mind spun as every scenario blossomed in his head, one more convincing than the last.

“They’re smart enough to know where I live,” Allison said, knocking him out of his thoughts and turning his attention to something that’d been bothering him for days now.

He held back his rising temper. “It’s not exactly like you keep it secret. I checked out your social media accounts. Anyone could eventually put it together. Just from going through a few of your videos, I figured out your exact schedule.” It was reckless and dangerous.

“Not likely,” she said with her nose turned up.

“Let’s see. Tuesdays you go to yoga with your older sister between two and three. You go to lunch at Joe’s Lobster House every Wednesday with Larry. You pick up your niece from school on Fridays. You sit on your porch most days between four and five before you have dinner at five-thirty.”

“Wait a minute. You got all of that from my social media accounts?”

“Yes.” This was the exact reason he didn’t put anything on the internet. It was like leaving little crumbs for people to pick up and follow. “You have your entire life documented. Do you have any idea how dangerous and stupid that is?” The words were out before he could stop them, his temper overtaking any formality.

“You think I’m stupid?”

Typical. She would twist his words. He went to throw back a retort, but when he looked at her eyes, and realized the bite in her tone didn’t match, he stopped himself. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It sure as hell sounded like that.”

He thrust his hand through his hair, trying to control the frustration beginning to brew. She’d already gone through enough today. She didn’t need him to lecture her. “I’m sorry. I’m letting my emotions get the better of me.”

“What emotions?”

“*What emotions?*” he scoffed. “Allison, you have had several threatening letters sent to you and now a fucking cow tongue.” It was a viable threat and possibly his fault.

“I didn’t know you cared.” She crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her pert nose upward.

“Of course I fucking care!”

Her head lowered, her pretty eyes wide. “I thought you hated me.”

“You’re an annoying, pushy pain in my ass.”

She rolled her eyes and dropped her arms to her side. “That’s real nice. Thanks.”

“But that doesn’t mean I don’t care. If anything... I care too much.” The admission should have felt like a mistake, but it eased the tension in his shoulder blades.

She sucked in a ragged breath, and her whisky-colored eyes locked on his. “Since when?”

“Damn it, Allison. Since the first day I met you. You were what, twenty-two, bright eyed and bushy tailed, so full of hope and positivity. The total opposite of everything I was at that time.” She was damn beautiful and nearly knocked him off his feet, and when she opened her mouth, proving she was a force to be reckoned with, he knew then she’d always have a hold on him. And she did, even if she was a proverbial thorn in his side.

“I’d argue not much has changed.”

He laughed. “No, it hasn’t.” He smiled, pressing his lips together. “After that first meeting, I swore to myself I’d do everything in my power to keep you that way.” His world had been shadowed by the dark side of humanity, making him hard, bitter, and unable to see the Brightside in most cases, but

Allison. She was sunshine personified, bringing light into his world of darkness. He never wanted that light to go out.

“And how the hell did you plan on doing that?”

“By keeping the town safe. Keeping you from getting into the line of fire.”

“Well, that backfired.”

“No shit. I also realized you’re a pain in the ass who stops at nothing to get what she wants.” With determination in her too expressive eyes, she’d steamroll anyone to get the story she wanted, but she’d do it with a smile on her face, never losing the upbeat personality that captured him from that very first day.

“True.” She lifted one shoulder. “I was young in my field, and I had something to prove. Some days I feel like I still do.”

“You have nothing to prove. You’re great at your job and people love you.”

“Do they?” She motioned to the box on the counter. “I have a cow’s tongue that says otherwise.”

Reid stepped toward her, taking her chin in his grasp. An unexpected jolt of electricity shot through his arm and straight to his damn heart. Fuck. He ignored the overwhelming urge to kiss those taunting lips and focused on what he wanted to say. “A few assholes doesn’t mean anything.” He ran his thumb gently across her jaw, and she blinked up at him. He could see a future, a life with her driving him insane while also making him insanely happy, but that was a future they could never have. Not if he wanted to keep her safe. “I should go.”

He turned to leave, and Allison grabbed his bicep. “Reid.” Her voice filled with raw emotion that clawed at his very soul. “Don’t go.”

## Chapter 11

Genuine fear lit her eyes, and this time she didn't push it away. She revealed her true feelings to him, letting him into a vulnerable side of her he wasn't sure even existed.

He had to get the letter to the station, but he couldn't leave her. Not now. Not when she looked so scared. "I can stay."

"Really? Because you don't have to if you have plans or something else to do. I'd call my sisters, but I don't want to worry them just yet. And Luna has PTA tonight anyway, then Sammy usually meets up for drinks—"

Reid held his hand up. "I can stay." He leveled his gaze with hers, not wavering.

"Okay, you'll stay." She bit her lip and spun toward the stainless-steel fridge. "You hungry?"

And just like that, the vulnerability was masked, packed back up and shoved away.

"I can always eat."

"Good, me too."

"Let me get rid of this first." He took the tongue out to the trash and disposed of it. He doubted he'd be able to get any fingerprints off of it anyway. He tried to ignore the similarities of the tongue to Louie's past threats, but the gnawing at his gut wouldn't cease.

He hurried back into the house, already being gone too long. Allison was genuinely scared, and knowing that not only pissed him off, but made him desperate to make her feel safe.

She grabbed a bunch of containers from the fridge and placed them on the counter. "I have meals delivered to me for

the week. Just makes life easier with my schedule. What do you want? We have chicken and mixed veggies, salmon and asparagus, buffalo chicken burger with sweet potato mash.”

“I don’t want to eat your dinner for the week.”

She swatted her hand. “Don’t worry about it. I always order seven and usually only eat five, anyway.”

“What do you do with the leftovers?”

“I bring it to the station and either have it for lunch or give it to someone else. People never say no to free food. Now what will it be?”

“Considering there is no red meat and potato option, I guess I’ll go chicken burger.”

“Good choice. One of my faves.”

“Then I’ll have one of the others.”

Allison rolled her eyes. “Oh please. You’re staying here with me, sacrificing your evening. The least I can do is give you something you want to eat.”

“Want to eat is pushing it,” he said with a laugh.

“It’s healthier. Your body will thank me later.” She froze at her words, and he swallowed the unexpected desire that surged to the surface. She snatched the container and spun with purpose, heading straight to the microwave.

He cleared his throat, trying to ignore the images of his body and hers pressed together, skin to skin, hot and sweaty from working out years of pent-up sexual tension.

It was Marco and his damn comments. Reid was living a perfectly happy life, never thinking of Allison beyond their colorful exchanges, and that all changed after Marco opened his mouth. Next time Reid saw him, he was pushing him in the water.

Though, if he was honest with himself, Marco only brought to the surface what had been there for years. Didn't matter. He was still pushing the bastard into the water.

He yanked at his collar and tried to focus on anything other than the sweet curve of Allison's mouth, the way her brow furrowed as she tapped the time on the microwave, or the way her ass looked as she bent over to place the food inside the microwave.

Holy hell, he needed to get a grip.

"What made you decide to be a reporter?" It was a good question which begged his own question. "All these years, and I never asked."

She closed the microwave door and turned, leaning her tight ass against the counter. "I took a journalism class in high school, and I loved the investigative journalist angle, but I realized I hated to write. I originally thought I'd be on the front lines of war-stricken countries, reading the news while bombs detonated behind me, putting my life on the line to make sure I got the story. Doing whatever it takes, you know?"

The thought of her willingly risking her life sent a shiver down his spine, though he could imagine her taking charge and getting the facts to the people. "Then how'd you wind up staying in Willow Cove?"

Willow Cove was far from a war zone. It wasn't exactly free of crime, but no town could be, no matter how small.

"I had an internship at the station in college and when the internship was up, they offered me a job. I couldn't turn it down. It was a great opportunity to gain some experience, really wet my feet before swinging in the big leagues. But by the time I thought I was ready, I was comfortable. My niece was getting older, starting to be her own person, and I couldn't imagine not being around for all her milestones." She shrugged. "So I stayed."

He had no idea what it was like to be so close to family to sacrifice everything. If anything, he was the opposite. He sacrificed everything for the rift in his own family.

“Any regrets?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not a single one. Besides, could you imagine me trying to steer clear of a war zone in the shoes I wear? No. Small town is just fine with me.”

“You still crave the danger though, or you wouldn’t carry a gun. You wouldn’t have investigated into Victor.” Ice ran down his spine just thinking about when she put her life in danger for a damn story.

“I still love the investigative part, and I don’t think I’ll ever get bored with that. It keeps things interesting. And the gun... this isn’t the first time I’ve received death threats.”

“What?” Reid’s eyes widened. “You told me it wasn’t a big deal.” How had she never told him this before? It was what he was there for! To protect and serve the people of the community. She was part of the community. Hell to him, she was one of the biggest parts of the community.

The thought was like an uppercut to the gut. Since when did that happen? Yes, she was very much a part of the community and even his daily life, but the biggest part... Come to think of it his favorite days were the ones when he got to argue with her, even if she pushed every single one of his buttons and made him want to rip his hair out, it was the highlight of his day. He looked forward to it.

She waved him off. “Because it’s not a big deal. Nothing has ever come of them, but they did scare me enough to want to protect myself.”

“Fucking hell, Allison.” Reid ran his hand over his face. “Were the threats letters?”

“A few. Some comments by anonymous users.”



“Do you still have them? The letters?” Maybe he could determine a pattern, get to the bottom of this investigation. See if Louie had anything to do with this, or if there was someone else out there threatening another woman he cared for.

“No, I threw them out. Why?”

Of course, she threw them out. His temper licked at the edges, threatening to boil over, but he inhaled deeply, letting his breath out slowly before speaking. “I wanted to see if there were any similarities with the current ones.”

“Those letters I received years ago. Do you think it could be the same person?”

“I don’t put anything past anyone.” Besides, if he could make a connection and prove the letters from the past were linked to the current ones, he could most likely rule out Louie. But without the letters, Louie was still a viable suspect.

“I’m a public figure, Reid. People love to hate me. Social media just makes it easier for them.”

“Then why do it at all?”

“Because for the ones who do like me, who do care, they’re important to me. And maybe you can’t understand this because it’s so far out of your norm, but those people... we created our own little community and in a weird way I consider them in the same way I do my neighbors. I cheer their accomplishments, I get to watch their families grow through pictures and posts, and they do the same with me. Willow Cove is a small town, but social media has made it even smaller. It’s made it so I can connect with people on a level I never would have just by passing them on the boardwalk or in line at Scoops. Which is why no troll or death threat is going to keep me from my community.”

She was right. It was so far out of his norm, and he didn’t think he’d ever fully understand. But clearly, it was important

to her. How could he take that away? At least now she clued him into what was going on, and he could keep his eyes on her. It also gave him an excuse to watch her videos, get to know her beyond the woman who loved to shove a microphone in his face.

She let out a huff and straightened. “Besides, look at the last troll I took on. Harley hasn’t heard a negative peep since our story aired. If anything, people love her now. She’s an icon of strength.”

Allison managed to flip that entire story, giving Harley a voice when hers had been completely taken away. It was one of the many times Reid had been impressed with her ability to wield words and use the power of them to make a lasting impact. The tattoo artist was now free of the trolls.

The microwave beeped, and Allison jumped. Maybe she was a little more scared than she was letting on. She hurried and pulled the container out. He walked over to help.

“Hot!” she exclaimed, and he got out of her way so she could drop the container on the counter. She shook her fingers, and he laughed before reaching for her hand. She gasped when he took her small hand into his, running his finger along her too soft skin.

“You okay?” He examined her hand, making sure she had no burns.

She nodded. “Just hot.”

He blew at the tips of her fingers, hoping to bring her some relief. She inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling with the action. It was impossible not to stare, but he tore his eyes away and met her gaze. “You should run it under cold water.”

She bit her lip and nodded before the haze in her irises cleared. She yanked her hand back. “I’m fine.”

He smiled. “I thought you’d be a pro at this, considering you eat them every night.”

“I’m usually more careful, but you distracted me.”

“Oh, it’s my fault, is it?”

“Isn’t it always?” She flashed her signature smile that could persuade anyone to talk to her, but he knew better. Her real smile wasn’t nearly as tight.

He glanced at her, willing her fake smile away, but her eyes locked on his. Electricity snapped through the air, and he tightened his fists at his side. If he unleashed his hands, he would grab her by the waist and yank her until her body was pressed firmly against his.

He imagined she’d fit perfectly there, but he’d never dare test his theory. There was a reason he was here—a reason he’d never pursued her in the past. “Fork?”

Allison’s head tilted, eyes masked with confusion. “Huh?”

“Fork. Unless you want me to eat with my hands.”

“Oh! Right.”

He moved to get out of her way, but they both went right. He quickly went left, but so did she.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, and she smiled her real smile. “You stay here while I go this way.” She slunk around him toward the drawer near the fridge, yanking it open and retrieving a fork. She spun on her heel and held it up. “Here you go.”

He took the fork, avoiding her eyes and that damn smile. He plopped on the stool and pulled the scorching hot container toward him and waited.

The microwave started up again, and Allison stared at it, her back to him. He didn’t want to look into her eyes again, but staring at her perfectly tight ass was not much better.

She went to the fridge and took out a bottle of wine. “Want some? Or I have beer in the fridge. I keep it stocked for when my brother stops by.”

“I’ll take a beer.” Whisky would be better, stronger, but he would take what he could get. He went to get up, but she waved him into place.

“I got it.”

She retrieved a beer and handed it to him. He looked at the label. “This is from that brewery in Red Maple Falls,” he said.

“O’Reilly had mentioned it, so I picked some up for my brother. He loved it.” O’Reilly was his buddy from the beginning days of his law enforcement career. He’d recently stopped by their small town while looking for his girl’s brother, who had been missing. It’d been nice to see a familiar face from that part of his life, especially a face that never betrayed him or brought harm to him, but someone who had always had his back. He was the only person other than Angel that Reid kept in touch with, only because O’Reilly was damn good at tracking people down. If O’Reilly wanted to find him, he would.

“How is it?” Allison pointed to his food.

The mention of O’Reilly sent him down memory lane, and Allison’s words drew him out. “What?”

“The food. How is it?”

“I haven’t tried it yet.”

“Too hot?”

“No, I’m waiting for you.”

Her eyebrows rose, and her lips curved up in a sexy grin that had him shifting. “You really are a gentleman, aren’t you?” She passed him a bottle opener, and he cracked the top off, focusing on the cap and not her lips.

“My mom taught me manors, is all.”

“Your mom. You don’t talk about her. Actually, come to think about it, I don’t think you’ve mentioned her.”

“Not much to talk about. She’s dead.”

Allison’s hands landed gently on the countertop, her head tilting slightly. “I’m sorry to hear that. How’d she die?”

There were two answers to that question—the one that made the papers and the truth. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Allison placed her elbow on the counter, resting her chin on her hand, and leaned into him. Her whisky-colored eyes locked on his and narrowed. “One day, I’m going to figure you out.”

“That’ll never happen.”

“Then you underestimate my reporting skills.”

He shook his head. “I don’t doubt them, but even the most skilled reporter would have trouble.”

Her eyebrow arched. “What are you hiding?”

The first twenty-two years of his life. Every member of his family. A last name that would give him away in a heartbeat if he went by it. Allison would never know those things unless he told her. If he had to tell anyone, though, she’d be his only choice. She didn’t always respect his wishes on other matters—hell she never did—but with this, he knew she would. Because if she didn’t, that would put his life in jeopardy and while she was quick to gamble her own, she wouldn’t risk his. It was a bet he’d take any day.

And while he wanted to lift the burden of holding onto this secret for so long, for living a life of a man who didn’t exist before he showed up in Willow Cove, he couldn’t. If Allison knew, she’d be in even more danger than she already was.

The microwave beeped and Allison jolted again, letting a little squeak slip from her throat. Normally he'd find it adorable, but right now he knew she was suppressing her fears. She could act like she wasn't scared, even believe she wasn't, but the fact that she didn't want him to leave proved she was.

"Don't burn yourself this time."

"Haha. Very funny." She grabbed an oven mitt before taking the container out of the microwave. She placed it on the counter across from him and sat. "You can eat now."

They ate in silence for a few moments. The chicken burger was better than he expected. He should have known. Everything that had to do with Allison was better than expected. His mind drifted to the vision of their bodies pressed together, and he shifted in his seat.

"I have a birthmark on my ass. Right cheek," she blurted, and his head snapped up.

"Come again?"

"Sorry." She waved her hand. "It was awkward silence which I hated and I just made it more awkward."

He loved the crimson that spread across her nose and cheeks. He loved that she seemed so out of her element right now. The confident Allison Winters was embarrassed, and there was no way in hell he was letting it go. "Isn't a birthmark an indicator of how you died in a past life?"

"Oh good. I died of a stab wound to the ass in a past life then. Awesome."

"It's possible. Bad infection. Conditions in the past weren't exactly sanitary."

"Well, I'd have you know my ass is very clean and quite nice, thanks to a regiment workout schedule, so can we please

move on?”

Oh, that was not happening. “I rather like this topic and have to agree. Your ass is quite nice.” He shouldn’t have said it, but at this point he was leaning toward the fuck-it end of the spectrum.

Her eyelashes fanned down before popping up. “I didn’t know you were looking.”

“Any hot-blooded male would notice.” It was impossible not to. Everything about her was perfect.

“Is that so?”

He shrugged. He’d already said too much.

“Okay then. What about you?”

“Do I have a birthmark on my ass? No. At least, not that I know of. Don’t spend much time looking at it.”

“Why not? Your ass is quite nice as well.”

Surprise slammed into him, but he refused to let it show. “You’ve looked?”

She mimicked him and shrugged, taking a sip of her wine, eyebrow raised. “So, do you have a birthmark or any scars?”

“No birthmark, but I do have a scar.”

“Where?”

He shifted and unbuttoned his shirt. Allison watched him, eyes curious as he unbuttoned a few more and slid his shirt over his shoulder, revealing the scar he’d had for fourteen years.

Her eyes widened as she moved closer. She reached out, dragging a single finger over the raised skin. His body tensed beneath her touch... not because he didn’t like it; he liked it far too much.

“Is that a scar from a bullet?”

He nodded, his jaw clenching as she circled her finger once more over his skin.

“Someone shot you? Why?” Her gaze met his, terror present in her eyes. He hated that he put it there.

“It was before I came to Willow Cove. I worked Boston PD. That’s where I met O’Reilly.” He kept the rest of the story to himself. He couldn’t tell her all the details without revealing his past.

Her finger lingered for a second longer, and it took everything he had not to wrap his arm around her waist and hold her close, bury his face into the sexy curve of her neck, and feel her heat mix with his own.

“Did it hurt?” she asked.

“Like a bitch.”

“If it was a few inches.” She slid her finger across his chest, and his entire body tightened to stone. She stopped, resting her hand over his heart. “You could have died.”

The strength to keep his hands to himself wavered. He reached up, linking his fingers through hers. “I could have, but I didn’t.” Unfortunate for the bastards that wanted to see him at the bottom of the Charles River. He survived the shot and got justice over and over again.

Back then it was a victory, but now, he knew better. He might have survived, but he still died that day. It was a harsh reminder, but one he needed. He loosened his hold on Allison and let his hand fall to his side. “We should finish eating before our food gets cold.” He forced a smile and turned his head to the little bit of sweet potato mash he had.



## Chapter 12

Allison tiptoed by the couch and went to the kitchen. She always loved her open floor plan, but now she wished there was a barrier to separate her from the sleeping wall of man. Attempting to be as quiet as possible, she retrieved her coffee mug, but as she pulled it out, the handle smacked another mug and a loud clang echoed through the space. She cringed, turning to check on Reid.

His eyes opened, and he stared at her. She wished she had finished her makeup before coming out.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

He ran a hand over his face. Morning stubble poked through, making him look devastatingly handsome. “No.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Please.”

“Man of few words in the morning. All right.” Allison moved to the coffeemaker and got to work. “Did you sleep at all?” She grabbed another mug for Reid.

“I got about two hours. You?”

“About the same.”

“I have a meeting with the office of special events to go over the summer event calendar to make sure we have proper safety protocols in place.”

“I didn’t realize how many meetings you have and that you’re not just out on the road fighting crime.”

“There’s a lot of other things the job entails, but I prefer to be on the road.”

“I know socializing with other people must be exhausting for you.” She winked and handed him a mug with WC News station’s logo on it.

“Funny. Anyway, I’m going to have one of my deputies tail you.”

She shook her head. “That’s not necessary.”

His blue eyes met hers, and the seriousness of his gaze had her momentarily forget what they were talking about. “Allison, we have no idea what this person is capable of, and until we catch whoever it is, I will have eyes on you.”

Oh right. The damn creep. “Reid, be realistic. You can’t sleep here every night. I’m sure you have a personal life. I don’t want to get in the way.”

“The only thing in my life is my job, and right now you are part of my job.”

“Is that all I am? A job?” The words slipped out before she could stop them, but she was happy they did. The only way to break through Reid’s armor was to chip away at it.

Those damn blue eyes softened, and she might as well get the mop and clean up the melted puddle she was about to become.

“No.”

She waited for him to elaborate, give her more than the one word, but he didn’t.

“Fine if you think I need a tail, then you better tell him to stay out of my way and to keep his distance. I report the news in this town. I don’t want to be the news.”

He let out a sarcastic laugh.

“What?” she demanded. It was too damn early for his bullshit.

“Nothing.”

“Oh don’t give me that. What is so damn funny?”

“That you don’t want to be the news, yet you’ve spent months harping on the Scoops incident. Seriously, I don’t think there’s a day that goes by you don’t bring it up.”

She exhaled a little too loudly. “That was the one time I have been recognized outside of this community on my hard work and dedication, so I’m sorry if I like to talk about it. It’s nice to be appreciated. That story got me a raise, made me viral, and put me that much closer to getting the job I have been coveting since I walked into the station on my very first day as an intern.”

“You are appreciated,” he said, and the annoyance that had filled her dissipated. “People love you, Allison. Current situation excluded. But I see the way people try to get closer to you when you’re on assignment. How they go out of their way in the morning just to say hi to you because you’re shooting nearby. You might not have all the awards. But you have the respect of many people, and that’s more valuable than anything you can prop up on a shelf.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Well, don’t get used to it. You just happen to catch me before my day turned to shit.”

“Way to be positive.”

“When you have to deal with Mrs. Sneider calling to report her neighbor for cutting the flowers on his side of the fence first thing when you walk in the door, then you can talk to me about being positive.”

She reached up, and he didn’t budge when her finger landed at the edge of his mouth. “You love it. Your smile gives you away.”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to touch people?” he asked.

“No. Hugs are required for passage into the house.” She let her hand drop, though she missed the connection it had created. “I’m guessing you didn’t come from a very affectionate family.”

“My mom was, I guess. My dad didn’t show love. Only disappointment.”

From the way his blue eyes darkened and his lips curved downward, it was enough to know they had two very different childhoods.

Yet despite what sounded like an unpleasant childhood, Reid had plenty of love to give. He might not show it in the form of hugs, but the fact that he was standing in her kitchen, drinking coffee from her mug at an ungodly hour proved it.

Her eye caught the time on the microwave. “Oh no! I’m running late.” She guzzled the rest of her coffee and ran into her bedroom. She had a morning routine that she’d perfected over the years, but one misstep and the whole thing derailed. She could do her makeup and hair at the studio. She brushed her teeth, grabbed her makeup bag and dry cleaning, and ran toward the door.

“You can lock up, right?” she asked.

Reid met her at the door. “I’m ready.”

“You don’t have to leave right this second. You can go brush your teeth. I have extra toothbrushes in my bottom drawer. You can relax.”

“I found the toothbrush.”

“You went through my drawers?”

“Do you have something to hide?”

“No, but...”

“Look, I want to get to the station and get a few things done before my meeting. Besides, if you think I’m letting you drive to work alone, you’re out of your fucking mind.”

She didn’t have time to argue, so she rolled her eyes, hoping it conveyed everything her words couldn’t at the moment. “Fine. You can follow me.”

“Good. Let’s go.” They both went to their separate vehicles. “Oh, and Allison?”

“What?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder and ignoring how damn good he looked in the shadows of the streetlights.

“Drive the speed limit. I don’t want to have to pull you over.”

“Fuck off, Reid.” She dropped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. He waited for her to pull out of the driveway and when she did, she pushed a little harder on the accelerator, smiling the entire way to the station.

## Chapter 13

Allison had the pep in her step that she had from the moment she got out of her car this morning and watched Reid shake his head. It was stupid, really, but speeding away from him had felt good. He was strung so tight, and any way she could ruffle his feathers, she was damn well going to.

She and Larry just finished up her newest segment: Willow Cove's Weekend Hot Picks, where she informed the viewers of all the not to miss weekend events in their small town. This week she got to highlight all the Memorial Day activities going on in the area, and for a small town, it was a lot. All of which she would be attending just as she had her entire life.

It was the official kickoff to summer, and she looked forward to the Annual Lobster Festival, as well as the fireworks and the memorial service held at the Town Hall. But before any of that, she had her parents' annual barbeque.

It was only a few hours before she had to meet Luna for yoga. Normally, she'd be dreading it, but today she was looking forward to stretch out some of the tension in her body. She wasn't used to letting things bother her, but the tongue really threw her for a loop. She was used to people saying horrible things to her online, even receiving threats in the mail, but they had never come straight to her house and never consisted of anything other than paper and bad penmanship.

She glanced around the fairgrounds as if she could spot a threat if there was one, and even if she could, what was her plan? Run after the person and beat them with her microphone? Not terrible, but not the best plan either.

"Hey Allison." Harley Love, Willow Cove's newest tattoo artist, waved as she strutted toward her. Her black and purple

hair bounced against her ample chest with each step. Her tattoos were on display in a black tank top that cut low. The woman was full of curves and sass and someone Allison respected.

“Harley, just the woman I was hoping to bump into.” Allison gave her a hug

“You looking to get a tattoo?”

“Not yet, but I wanted to let you know I am being considered for an award for the segment I did on you.”

“That’s wonderful. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, but it’s more than that. If I get the nomination, even more people will know your story, and it can highlight your organization.” After the story aired, Harley received so many messages from people who had experienced the same sort of online bullying, and it made her want to do something. She started an organization that provided resources for those dealing with similar situations.

“That would be great. Any recognition for the organization and to highlight the issue is a major win for us.”

“Fingers crossed I get it.”

“You’re not only going to get it. You’re going to win it.”

“You’re the best.”

Harley smirked. “I know, but hopefully you’ll still think that when I abandon ship now.”

“Huh?”

“I have to get back to Garrett, so good luck.” Harley gave her another quick hug, then headed away, leaving Allison confused. She turned around and had to stifle a laugh.

“Allison!” Martha from Mind, Body and Soul called her name, and Allison offered her a smile.

Martha moved toward her, her long, flowing shirt cascading behind her in a swirl of white and blue.

“Martha, how are you?” Allison asked as Martha stopped in front of her. She lifted her hand, her bangles sliding down her arm in a clatter.

“Got to catch my breath. You think all the sex I’ve been having would help to strengthen my lungs. I need to eat more chestnuts. Anyway, at least I know my thighs are getting stronger.”

Ever since Martha’s relationship with Joe became town knowledge, she never shied away from telling anyone who would listen all about their sexcapades. At least someone was having sex.

“Okay, I’m good. You’re just the woman I had hoped to see.”

“What can I do for you, Martha?”

“Connie put my booth all the way at the far end of the fairgrounds this year. That cheapskate was mad I didn’t give her a discount the last time she was in my store. I’m a business. Not even a whore house puts out for free, you know what I’m saying.”

Allison didn’t even skip a beat. “For sure. Have to make your money.”

“Exactly. I knew you would get it.”

Allison still didn’t understand what her part was in all of this, though.

“So I hoped you could highlight my booth, get me some air time. I can do an interview with you and talk about all my new products. I have a new salve for jock itch. You know it’s that time of year with all the sweating going on down there. I have an aloe-based moisturizer that is great for after a day in



the sun. I have some Fenugreek pills that are known to enhance your libido and improve sexual function.”

“Okay,” Allison said. “Why don’t we skip all the sex drive stuff and stick to the things that go with the summer theme, and maybe don’t say jock itch on air.”

Martha huffed. “Pretty soon you won’t be allowed to speak on air. You’ll just have to sit there and look pretty. Though you would have no problem in that department, dear.”

“Thank you, Martha.” Allison turned toward the crowd, scanning for a familiar face. “Let me grab Larry, and we’ll meet you at your booth.”

“Once you think you get to the end, keep walking and then walk some more. That’s where you’ll find me.”

“You got it.”

Martha inhaled deeply and put her hand over her eyes, blocking the sun. “Maybe I should invest in a scooter for this weekend.”

“Come on, Martha. Use those thigh muscles!”

Martha straightened and headed toward the horizon. Allison spun around and searched for Larry. He wasn’t exactly easy to miss. He was a large man with a liking for anything fried. Bingo.

She headed to the food truck they had finished interviewing earlier, where they let them sample their fried Oreos and funnel cake lobster poppers. Allison was skeptical, but the funnel cake was delicious, and from appearances, she’d wager to say that Larry agreed.

“Larry,” she said, and he turned with his hand at his mouth, the lobster funnel cake half in. “Need to do one more shoot.”

He nodded and shoved the rest of the funnel cake into his mouth.

“You didn’t have to—” She shook her head with a laugh. “You might want to grab a napkin or three.”

Monica, the food truck owner, handed him a pile of napkins, and Larry took them gratefully, wiping his face down.

“Larry,” Allison said, and when he looked, she pointed to his shirt that was covered in crumbs. He swatted at his chest, and Allison stifled a giggle. Some things never changed.

“I’m looking forward to seeing your girls,” Monica said to Larry.

“They’re looking forward to it, too. Your truck is always the first place we stop.”

“You’re too sweet.”

Allison smiled and gave Monica a wave while she waited for Larry to get into motion. Finally, he joined her and they made their trek across the fairgrounds to Martha.

“She wasn’t kidding,” Larry said. “Connie really screwed her here.”

“Connie should know better than to underestimate Martha.”

“Oh, she’s going to make her life a living hell.”

Martha was a free spirit who believed in peace, love, and happiness, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have a vengeful bone in her body. The truth was, Martha didn’t play nice with those who didn’t extend the same kindness she exuded. The only one she ever put up with was Joe, but even then, she still got her jabs in and spent more times rolling her eyes at the poor man.

“You made it!” Martha exclaimed as they approached her booth. It was a standard booth, but Martha always managed to

create a peaceful vibe that was both inviting and intriguing.

“It looks great,” Allison said.

“Yes, and now we need to get everyone to see it,” Martha said.

Allison scanned the booth, trying to determine the best place to stand in order to showcase all of Martha’s products. She settled on standing smack dead in the middle, so Larry could get a good focus on all the things that surrounded them.

“You ready?” Allison asked.

“You bet your cute tush I am.”

With a smile, Allison held her mic up and looked directly at the camera. Larry counted down from three, and at one, he pointed at her.

“Hi this is Allison Winters, reporting from the Mind, Body and Soul booth at this year’s Lobster Festival. I have the owner and beloved member of our small town, Martha, here with me. She has some great products to help kick off your summer right.”

Allison continued the introduction then turned the microphone to Martha, who was a natural. Out of her peripheral, she spotted a familiar uniform. Her first reaction was to be annoyed by the sexy officer, wondering what comment he’d have today, but the fact he stayed with her last night without even a second’s hesitation warmed her heart where he was concerned.

She finished with Martha, signed off to the camera, and lowered her mic. Just as her arm dropped, Reid stepped into the frame.

“What are you doing here?” Allison asked. “If you’ve come to be my own private security, I can assure you I am

fine.” Even if she was more paranoid than usual. She’d never admit that to Reid, though.

“Just the man I wanted to see!” Martha exclaimed.

Reid leaned into Allison, his breath caressing the curve of her ear. “I wasn’t here for you.”

“What can I do for you, Martha?” He pushed his aviators onto his head.

Martha sighed. “Such pretty eyes. I don’t understand why you had them covered during your interview. Give the people of this town what they want.”

Allison’s eyebrows rose, and she shot Reid an I-told-you-so glare.

“The town does not need my eyes,” Reid said matter-of-factly. “Is that why you called me here?”

“No.” Martha waved her hand. “I called you because Connie placed me all the way over here in bumblefu...dge and I want to make sure I will be safe, considering how far back I am from the rest of the festival.”

She wasn’t exactly alone. Willow Cove insurance had a booth across from her and a local carpet cleaner had the booth beside her.

“I can assure you that you will be perfectly fine here. You have nothing to worry about.”

Martha inhaled. “I hope so. Normally I wouldn’t think twice about it, but after Allison’s brush with danger and the attacks on Harley, I can’t not think about it.”

“Both incidents were personal. Allison’s brush with danger.” Reid’s eyes might not have rolled, but his tone sure did. “It was her own doing. The incident was between Krissy and her cousin, and he is now in jail. As for Harley. She was being targeted by a social media mob that had nothing better to

do with their lives than harass some stranger they knew from the internet. Since Allison put a spotlight on their childish and outlandish behavior, Harley has reported no more incidents.”

This time Reid shot her a look that was less I-told-you-so and more I-hate-you. She smiled and waved, which gave her the eye roll she’d been waiting on.

She could let Reid handle this himself, but maybe he was right. She did kind of get him into this mess. The least she could do was help him out.

“Martha, Reid is right. You have nothing to worry about. He and his station have a glowing track record and continue to serve our community, putting the people’s safety as their number one concern.”

Reid glanced, the hard set of his jaw softening as he mouthed, “Thank you.”

She nodded. “Besides, after my segment runs, you’ll have a steady flow of customers throughout the entire festival. I can guarantee it.”

Martha clapped her hands together, her bangles clacking with the motion. “That’ll show Connie!”

“I predict next year you’ll have your usual spot back,” Allison said. Martha hugged and thanked her before she and Reid headed away from her booth. Larry was already in line for another food truck.

“What does she have to show Connie?” Reid asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No, not really. I don’t even know why I asked.”

“Because deep down you really do care about town gossip.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I’m not arguing with you.”

“Why? You’re so good at it.”

He let out a loud breath and yanked his sunglasses on, covering his pretty baby blues.

“Martha didn’t give Connie a discount, so Connie punished Martha by putting her booth at the ends of the earth.”

“I said I didn’t care.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

He cracked a smile, and she swore she saw a pig take flight. “You should do that more.”

“What?”

“Smile. It makes you less intimidating.”

“I’m not intimidating.”

Allison’s laugh carried across the festival grounds. “I have this theory you’re the reason the crime rate is so low in our town.”

“Me?” he exclaimed, his voice actually going up an octave.

“Yes you. I think people are too scared of you.”

“Nobody is scared of me.”

She pressed her lips together and arched an eyebrow. “Terrified is more like it.”

“You’re being ridiculous. I am not terrifying.”

“You’re a big, hulking man who is shrouded in mystery.”

“Mystery? I’m the sheriff of a town that would win gold if gossip was an Olympic sport. I can’t piss without the town knowing.”

“It’s not about your current self, but your past. Nobody knows anything about where you came from. You just showed up one day.” The investigator journalist inside of her thought about digging, but she never did. She was never really sure why either, but now, looking beyond the dark lens of his glasses to the eyes beneath, she realized. She didn’t want to find out about his past through research; she wanted him to tell her.

“My past is no one’s business.”

“Where were you born?” she asked, ignoring the finality in his tone.

“None of your business.” His glare told her to stop, but she never backed down from him before, and she wasn’t about to start now.

“Why don’t you want people to know? It’s just a town or a city. You can even tell me the state.”

“Drop it.”

“Why?”

“Because I fucking said so.”

She jolted at the intensity of his words.

“I’m sorry. Just drop it, okay? Digging into my past will throw you into a shitstorm you can never be prepared for. Let. It. Go.”

Normally she’d argue, bite back with refusal and indignation, but the flash of fear and desperation that passed through his voice and across his features had her lips staying firmly shut. She nodded.

“Thank you. Now, since I’m here, have you gotten any more letters?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ll be at your house by eight.”

Her head whipped back. “I don’t remember inviting you.”

“I don’t need an invitation. I’m not coming for a fucking party. I’m coming to make sure you’re protected.”

This was getting out of hand. Reid couldn’t be her personal security guard. It had been nothing but letters, and yes, a disgusting cow tongue, but the perpetrator had yet to show face, and from past experience, she doubted they ever would. Just some asshole trying to rile her up. She was done being scared.

“I appreciate your concern. I do. But I’m fine.”

“Right now you are. That doesn’t mean tonight you will be.”

“Stop with the scare tactics. It’s not going to work on me.”

“I’m not trying to scare you. I’m trying to make you see reason.”

“Ditto.”

It was more than Reid playing bodyguard. She wasn’t sure if she could handle him in her house again. She liked sitting across from him while they ate dinner. Liked having coffee with him this morning. She didn’t want to get used to having him around because when this was over, and she knew it would be, they would be back to this. Rivals who tolerated each other. To think they could be anything more... she didn’t think she could handle the disappointment if the red-hot chemistry between them sizzled out. But she knew if they spent more time together, that chemistry would eventually explode. She wasn’t ready for those consequences, either. She had a feeling Reid Silva wasn’t someone a girl got over easily.

“Why are you always so fucking difficult?”

“Why do you always curse?”



He thrust his hand through his hair, then scratched the back of his neck. She wondered if he ever gave himself scratch marks with how often he did so. Her mind slipped into the gutter as she imagined her own nails sliding up and down his back.

“At least let me stop by so I can do a proper walk through and make sure everything is okay. Then I’ll leave. Promise.”

“Fine. But I swear to all that is holy if you get in my house and refuse to leave, I will—”

“You’ll what? Talk me to death?”

“Sometimes I really hate you.”

“Good. It’s better that way.”

And with that, he walked off, disappearing into the fairgrounds.

## Chapter 14

He hoped Allison heeded his warning for once. Though he knew it would be a cold day in hell if she did. That woman didn't know how to not be nosey. It was in her blood. He couldn't keep her from snooping around in his past, though he was pretty sure she would come up empty. He'd covered his tracks and took all the precautions to bury his past. It helped when he had an in with some of the heads of the FBI.

He had to get away from her before he told her exactly why she needed to stay out of his past. The truth was exactly what he needed to hide from her. It was bad enough that the person threatening her was resorting to tactics that related directly to that very past. He hoped it was a coincidence, but he experienced enough in his life to know nothing was ever a coincidence.

He couldn't tell Allison without telling her everything. It was a last resort scenario. He just needed to get her to understand the potential severity of the threats. It seemed an impossible task.

She had watched after him as he left, but he was used to being tailed. He could lose an entire army of people if necessary. At the right moment, he slipped out of her line of sight, and turned back to see her, standing there, hands on hips and a pissed off curve of her sexy lips.

No. Her lips were not sexy.

*For fuck's sake. Get it together.*

The fairgrounds seemed safe as always, people milling around but friendly and no confrontations, so he went to turn to head back to the station. He had a shit ton of stuff to go over

with his deputies to make sure the weekend went off without a hitch. His attention was drawn to Allison, though.

The slight breeze tossed her dark hair, and she bent down as a little kid approached her and handed her a piece of paper. She offered the kid a smile and waved him off. Her teeth slid over her lip as she unfolded the paper.

Allison's eyes widened for the briefest of seconds, but then she put on that fake smile, and Reid thought it was a false alarm. But all the color drained from her face, and the smile faltered. Reid ran across the fairgrounds, scanning his surroundings, searching for someone waiting in the shadows. He ripped the paper from her hand and looked down at the letter.

*I see you, but can you see me?*

“What did that kid say?” Reid demanded.

Allison shook her head, noises sputtering out, but no coherent words.

“Allison!” The command snapped her to attention.

“He said someone asked him to give this to me.”

“Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To find that kid.” Reid grabbed her hand and started running through the grounds, weaving in and out of vendors who were still setting up.

“Reid!” Allison called out, and he glanced to see her stumbling to a stop. “I’m not exactly in the best footwear.”

He looked down at the too high heels. “You are getting death threats. Don’t you think you should wear shoes that would make it easy for you to run?”

“If I actually thought I was in danger, maybe.”

He shook the paper at her face. “You. Are. In. Danger. Get it through your pretty little head.” He hoped it was some jackass just messing with her, but he couldn’t ignore the pit forming in his stomach that Louie could be behind this. The tongue was a signature Louie move and then the notes... He loved psychological warfare and making his targets terrified before he pounced.

“Maybe it’s just some asshole, trying to scare me.”

“Are you scared?”

Her eyes met his, and she didn’t need to say anything. Words meant shit now. He could see the fear in her whisky-colored eyes. Whoever was doing this to her was going to pay.

“We’re going to find who’s responsible, but first we have to find that kid. Do you know who he was?”

“No,” Allison said. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Me either. It could have been a tourist or someone visiting from out of town.” He had been so focused on Allison, he’d lost track of the rugrat. He scanned the area, focusing on all the nooks.

“Uh, Reid?” Allison said.

“Yeah? Do you see him?”

“Um. No. But...” She held their entwined hands up. “People are starting to look.”

He glanced around at the booths, and Allison wasn’t kidding. Mary Potts leaned into Catherine Hagel, whispering something as she stared at them with what looked like hopefulness.

Reid quickly dropped Allison’s hand. It had been so natural to grab her, he didn’t even think twice about it. Now the entire town was going to have them married off with two kids by the end of the day.

He thought it was hard to keep a cover in Boston. Boston had nothing on Willow Cove. That only played into his benefit, though. He stormed over to Mary Potts, making sure Allison was right beside him. He wasn't letting her out of his sight again. He didn't give a shit if she didn't like it. She'd just have to deal with it.

"Mary, how are you?" he asked, putting on his best sheriff smile.

She stumbled and forced a smile, leaning away from Catherine. "Good. It's good to see you two together."

Ignoring her, he pressed on. "Have you seen a boy about yay high?" He held his hand up to his waist. "Brown shaggy hair, wearing basketball shorts and a green shirt?"

"Why yes, that's Dolly and Ed's grandkid. He's here visiting with their daughter. Cute kid."

"Where is Dolly and Ed's booth?" Reid asked, cutting through the small talk.

She pointed to their left. "Just over there."

"Thank you." Reid hurried over, hearing Allison cursing as she tried to keep up with him.

Dolly and Ed lit up as they approached. "What do we owe the pleasure?" Ed asked. "We get both the sheriff and our very own local star."

"Aww Ed, you flatter me," Allison said.

"Your grandson," Reid barked.

"Did he do something wrong? He's only six." Dolly rested a hand on her chest.

"He gave Allison a piece of paper with a note on it. I just wanted to know where he got it from."

"Surely it wasn't him," Dolly said.

“He handed me the note, but the handwriting was definitely an adult,” Allison offered. “I just want to know who sent me the kind note so I can thank them.”

Reid swung his gaze to Allison, and she crinkled her face in an adorable demand. Fine. He would let her lead. She was better with people, anyway.

“Oh.” Dolly laughed. “Reid had me a little worried there.”

“He needs work on his delivery,” Allison said, staring right at him with a smug curve of her lips.

“Sorry,” Reid mumbled.

“Danny is with my daughter getting fried Oreos. He loves his sweets, that boy.”

“Who doesn—”

“Thank you.” Reid grabbed Allison’s arm and yanked her away before she could finish speaking. He didn’t have time to discuss Oreos. They had to figure out who the letter came from.

“Rude much?” Allison said, and he swung his gaze toward her. She tumbled slightly, but quickly straightened.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Maybe if you acted, oh I don’t know, human, you wouldn’t have to dish out apologies like crab legs at a buffet.”

He stopped, and she stumbled into him. “Crab what?” What the hell was she even talking about?

“Nevermind. Look, the kid’s over there.” She nodded toward a line of people at a food truck, and he spotted the kid. He reached for Allison, but she held her hand up.

“You drag me one more time, and I will hit you.”

“You’d really assault an officer?”

“I thought it was sheriff??” she snapped. “And to answer your question, yes, if his name is Reid, and he keeps yanking me along.” She stormed past him, and he hurried to keep up. Now she decided to move with purpose.

They approached the boy and his mom, who were at the window, placing their order.

Allison came to a stop and turned. He grabbed her shoulders to keep from plowing her down.

“Let me do the talking,” she said.

“No.”

“Look, I want to find out just as much as you do, if not more, who is responsible.”

“Then let me do the talking and figure it out.”

“Excuse me, finding out the scoop is kind of my thing.”

“And enforcing the law, protecting the citizens of this town, and maintaining a safe environment is mine.”

“Now that we have our job descriptions out of the way.” Allison huffed. “Just let me talk. You can chime in, but I think it’ll be a little less scary if I’m the one who approaches.”

“Fine.”

“Really?”

“Well, it’s either that or stand here, wasting precious time. Now go.”

She patted his chest, and he ignored the instant heat that radiated through him, the electric current that had him swallowing against the desire to hold her there. “Always the charmer.” She turned on her heel and made her way to the mom and son duo.

He was eager to get answers, and it took every ounce of self-restraint he had not to jump in, but as soon as Allison

approached, he knew she had this under control. She was friendly but direct, unlike him, who would have forgotten about the pleasantries.

While Allison spoke, he listened, but his eyes scanned the surrounding areas, looking for someone who appeared to be observing Allison.

Allison crouched down to the boy's height and spoke kindly to him, but the boy didn't have much to say other than a big guy with a baseball hat gave him the note. That about narrowed it down to more than half of the people around.

She thanked the boy and the mom before walking away. "Well, that didn't help."

"We just have to keep our eyes open, and you need to let me know if you get any more letters."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If I didn't see you, didn't snatch that letter out of your hand, would you have shown it to me?" Her lips pressed into a straight line, and he let out a perturbed breath. "That answers that."

"You didn't even give me a chance to process what happened before you came over, all alpha douche bag and swiped it."

"Alpha douche bag? Real nice."

"Just calling it as I see it."

Was it that hard for her to realize he was trying to protect her? That the idea of her having some psycho targeting her made his skin crawl. And that it could all lead back to him... If anything happened to her...

"Anyway, this has been fun, but I have to go."

"You're not going anywhere," Reid stated.



Allison's eyebrow arched, and she laughed in his face. "If I don't show up at the family barbeque, this mystery stalker will be the least of your worries."

"Then I'm going with you."

"Oh no. That is one hundred percent not happening."

"Either I go with you, or you're not going."

"Newsflash sheriff, I'm not in your custody, so I don't have to follow your demands."

He thrust his hand through his hair and tried to take a calming breath. "Why must you be so damn difficult?"

"If you go with me to my parents' barbeque, my entire family will be looking at us like Mary and Catherine, except we can't ignore my family and play it off. They will be on you like flies on shit."

He grabbed her upper arms, gentle enough not to hurt her, but firm enough to get her to listen. "I need you to take this more seriously. This can be a real threat on your life, Allison."

She blinked up, and after a few seconds, she lowered her gaze to his. He nearly stumbled when the TV ready façade was gone, and what was left was a woman who was trying to hold it together. Her lip twitched, eyes watered, and she shook her head. Her eyes slipped shut, long lashes fanning toward the apples of her cheeks.

"I know, Reid. Trust me. I know. But the minute I start living in fear is the minute the asshole wins, and I won't let them win. So I am going to pretend like that little note exchange didn't happen, and I'm going to my parents' barbeque."

She stepped back, and his hands fell to his side. "Allison..."

Allison held her hand up. “Reid, please.” She turned, but he couldn’t let her walk away, couldn’t let her out of his sight. Maybe he was being crazy and overbearing, but what other choice did he have? If she was in genuine danger, he needed to protect her.

“Maybe you’re looking at this wrong,” he called after her.

She spun toward him, hand landing on her hip. “Go on.”

“Maybe in order for you to take this seriously, you need to look at it through your reporter lens. Pretend this was happening to someone else. What would you do? What would you advise them? You could be the story this time. More so than with the Scoops incident and more than with Harley’s story.”

“Three back-to-back stories to go national.” Her eyes lit up as he swore he saw the gears in her brain clicking into place. “To have one, let alone two, is unheard of. Can you imagine three? Maybe I wouldn’t have to wait for Sandy to retire. Maybe we could co-anchor or I could fill in for her more often. Oh, this could be good. This could be very good.”

“See, make it work to your advantage.” This went against everything he honestly believed, but if it was the only way to get her to cooperate, then he’d tell her exactly what she needed to hear. “Let’s work together to get you that story.”

She held her hand out. “Deal”

## Chapter 15

Reid's plan sounded like a good idea at the time, but now, sitting in his cruiser outside her parents' house, she was having second thoughts.

"Are we going in?" Reid asked.

"Yes, I'm just trying to prepare myself."

"Prepare yourself for what?"

"The twenty questions my mom is going to have when we walk through that gate. Or the inquisition from one or both of my sisters. The judging eyes from my brother. The comments from my father."

"I thought you liked your family."

"I love my family."

"Then what the fuck is the problem?"

"It's complicated. We're in each other's business all the time, and they can sniff out a lie almost instantly."

"Then tell them the truth."

Allison shifted in her seat. "I can't do that."

"If you're in danger, then they should know."

She leaned her head back until it hit the headrest. "If they think I'm in danger, they will be on my ass twenty-four seven. Forget about being home alone. My father will make me move back in here."

"Maybe for the time being, that's not such a bad thing."

Allison spun toward him, finger out and inches from his face. "No." She loved her parents, but there was no way in hell she would move home after seven years on her own. She liked

leaving the lights on and putting the heat up to whatever temperature she wanted. She liked not having to share a bathroom or leaving a dish in the sink until the next morning if she was too tired to care.

“Allison, is that you?” Mom’s voice floated across the yard, and Allison took a deep breath before turning to the window and waving. Mom stood there with her hand over her eyes, blocking the afternoon sun. She was in her usual summer attire: a pair of capris and a matching patterned top, this one navy blue and white.

“Let’s do this,” she said and got out of the car.

“Are you okay? Why are you in a police car? Are you hurt? You didn’t get yourself in trouble again, did you?”

Reid came up beside her, and she looked at him. “Let the twenty questions begin.” She moved toward her mother and gave her a hug. “Hi Mom. You know Sheriff Reid.”

“Yes, of course.” Mom glanced between them, her eyebrows pulling toward the straight bridge of her nose. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s nice to see you, Mrs. Winters.” Reid flashed that charming smile he should let loose more often. Allison stared at him for a moment, memorized by how it transformed his entire being.

“Please call me Cynthia. Now tell me. Is Allison in trouble? I know she can get herself into situations because of her job. She’s always been a stubborn one.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Hey!” she snapped at Reid. “I am not stubborn.”

Mom and Reid laughed. Oh good. Now they were teaming up on her. She knew this was a bad idea. “I am not in trouble with the law, Mother.”

“Don’t call me Mother. You do that when you’re annoyed at me, and there will be none of that today.”

Allison went to roll her eyes and Mom snapped her finger at her as if she felt a shift in the air and knew the roll was coming. Allison settled with a sigh. “Reid is helping me with a story.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that is all.”

“I just thought if you weren’t in trouble with the law, maybe you were bringing a man home to meet the family.”

Reid stiffened beside her, and she waved her hand in the air. “Stop trying to marry me off to every man I’m with.”

“So, you two are together.”

“No! Mom, please. We are working on a story together, nothing more.”

“Then what’s this big story that your work has to carry over to your family time?”

Allison shot Reid a look. They hadn’t exactly ironed out the details. The truth was not an option, but how the hell were they going to spin this?

“It’s for summer safety,” Reid said. “Many of the calls I get called onto in the summer are barbeque related, so I told Allison I’d tag along, as long as that is okay with you, and we can go over all the things at a barbeque that can turn out to be a call to my station and or a trip to the hospital.”

The tension that had slithered up her back and into her neck released. The lie came out of him effortlessly and was better than anything Allison would have come up with.

“Oh my.” Mom rested a hand on her chest. “Well, I hope we don’t give you too much material to go off of.”

“In all the years I’ve worked this town, I’ve never been called to your house, so I can assure you, you do everything just fine. I figured being at a barbeque will jog my memory of other cases I’ve dealt with over the years.”

“Well then, come on. Your father already has the ribs on the grill. I told him to hold off until later, but you know how they’re his favorite.”

“You never come between my dad and his ribs.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Mom said with a laugh.

Mom headed toward the backyard and Allison leaned into Reid. “Nice save.”

“You looked like you were gasping for air, so I thought I should throw you a line.”

“Well, I appreciate it. Besides, I could never lie that easily.”

Reid’s body tightened, his jaw turning to granite in the sun. “Sometimes a lie is necessary for the bigger picture.”

She stared at him a moment, wondering what was beneath the million layers he hid beneath. He’d always been mysterious and kept to himself, and no matter how hard she tried, she could never breakthrough his outer shell.

There was so much more to Reid than met the eye, and she only hoped one day he’d finally let her in. She grabbed his hand before they entered the backyard. His gaze drifted to where their fingers intermingled. She ignored the sudden rush of electricity that snapped through her. She’d worry about that another time. “Remember not to mention the whole stalker thing to any of my family.”

“I already told you I wouldn’t.”

“I know.” She glanced at the ground, kicking at a dandelion. “Also, I just want to…” Her words stuttered on her

tongue.

“Just want to what?”

She didn't want to believe she was in danger, but she couldn't ignore the signs any longer, especially since Reid wouldn't let her brush it off. “Thank you.”

“I told you I wouldn't say anything. You don't need to thank me.”

“Not for that. For wanting to protect me. I know I have been a royal pain in your ass for years, so I guess I just...”

“I never thought I'd see the day.”

“When I admit to being a pain in the ass?”

“Well, that, but also to see you speechless.”

“I'm not speechless.”

“I think you are. But message heard loud and clear. And Allison?”

“Yeah?”

“You're welcome.”

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she slipped it out. Her eyes scanned over the email before she clicked into it. An excited gasp tore from her mouth, and she slapped a hand over her lips.

“What is it?” Reid was on her faster than a crow on roadkill. “Did you get another threat?” he asked, and she glared at him, hoping her parents didn't hear.

“No, I got the nomination for my story on online bullying.”

“That's amazing. Congratulations.”

“Oh my god!” Allison threw herself into Reid's arms. He caught her effortlessly, holding her close.

“You deserve it.” His breath brushed her ear, sending a heated chill down her spine. She inhaled, taking in his intoxicating scent. His hold loosened and she glanced up at him, an impenetrable smile curving her lips. “Thank you. This is unexpected and amazing.”

“Is there a reason we’re hanging out in the corner?” Sammy asked as she approached. Her eyes widened when she spotted Allison with Reid’s arm still around her. “Sheriff, I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

He dropped his hold and stepped back. “Me and your sister are working on a story together.”

“Is that so? A story.”

“Y-Yes.” Reid stumbled on his words, which Allison found oddly sexy. “And your sister has, um.... She has some great news.” He scratched the back of his neck. It was adorable to see him so flustered, and if she was a horrible human being, she would continue to let him try to piece words together, but she wasn’t a monster.

“I’m up for an award!” Allison exclaimed and threw herself in Sammy’s arms.

“That’s awesome! I’m proud of you, big sis.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you proud of her?” Xan’s booming voice echoed across the yard.

“Allison is up for an award.”

“Good for you,” he said as he went in for a hug from Sammy. Xan stopped in front of Reid, his dark eyebrows pinched together as he held out his hand not holding a case of beer. “Sheriff.”

“Call me Reid, please. It’s good to see you.”



“You too. There a reason you’re at my family’s barbeque? No offense, but not exactly the person you want to see. Is someone getting arrested?”

“None taken, and no.”

“He and Allison are working on a story together.” Sammy’s eyebrows rose, and Xan nodded like he didn’t buy that for a second. Her brother was always suspicious and especially overprotective of his sisters.

“It’s true,” Allison said. “Barbeque safety. It’s a story I’m putting together and who better than to tell us the dos and don’ts of barbequing than our very own local sheriff?”

“Does Dad know this?” Xan asked.

“Not yet, but Mom does, and she may have told him already.”

“Sure she has.” Xan laughed. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m not following,” Reid said.

“Dad’s been barbequing for forty years. You think you’re going to tell him what not to do?” Xan laughed again. “Sheriff or not, he’ll have your ass out of here before you can blink.”

Reid tugged at his shirt collar, and it was probably the first time in all the years Allison knew him that he looked somewhat uncomfortable. “I’m not going to tell him what not to do.”

Allison punched Xan in the shoulder. “He’s just going to tell me stories about incidents he’s dealt with over the years. I figured an actual barbeque will help jog his memory. Now stop being an ass.”

“I wasn’t being an ass.”

“You were being an ass,” Luna said from behind them.

Xan swung around. “You just got here. How do you even know what we’re talking about?”

“I’m going based on past experiences.”

Xan’s lips parted like he was going to retort, but then his eyes landed on Presley. The ogre had a soft spot for their niece. “P!” He bent down and grabbed Presley in a bear hug, swinging her back and forth.

Presley laughed and swatted at his chest. “Don’t you think I’m too big for this?”

Genuine hurt flashed in Xan’s eyes. “No, you’ll always be my little P.”

“Your little P just went to the school dance.”

Xan straightened. “You didn’t dance with any boys, did you? I want names.”

“Uncle Xan, even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.” Presley skipped away and went right to Grandma.

Allison, Luna, and Sammy all laughed at Xan who pointed at their niece.

“Did you hear that?”

Luna patted his chest. “Welcome to life with a teenager.”

“Who said she could be a teenager?”

Allison laughed as the group moved farther into the yard. Reid stood beside her and nodded toward the crazy bunch she called family.

“You’re lucky,” he said.

“If you want to consider it that,” she joked.

“No, you are. Take it from someone who has no one.”

Allison’s heart tightened and cracked. This man had always been a pillar of stoicism, and now she wondered if it

was just a wall he hid behind to hide the fact that he was alone in the world.

She rested her hand on his arm and gave it a squeeze. “You have me,” she said. “Even if I am a royal pain in your ass.” His lip quirked, and she silently celebrated. “Now come on. It’s time I introduce you to my dad and his ribs.”

## Chapter 16

Reid couldn't remember the last time he was so full, but Geoff Winters knew how to cook a rib. The man was a genius behind the grill. If he hadn't peeled himself away from the table where the plate sat in front of him, taunting him for just another bite, he would have given in over and over again.

He also needed distance from Allison. The more time he spent with her, the more he... liked her. He'd always kept her at a distance, never crossing the boundaries he had set in place all those years ago when they had first met. Being around her lately and watching her amongst her family, he needed to be careful because she was the kind of woman who could turn his entire world upside down with a single smile.

Xan walked up to him with two beers in hand. He offered him one and normally he'd turn it down, but he wasn't on the clock, and one beer for a man his size would be out of his system in an hour.

"Thanks." Reid accepted the beer and used his bottle opener key chain to pop the top. He didn't like a lot of junk on his keys, but this keychain came in handy.

Xan tipped his bottle to his mouth and took a sip. "Are you dating my sister?" he asked and lowered the bottle.

"No." Reid didn't even hesitate. He and Allison were far from dating. Hell, they only just barely started tolerating each other even if he could imagine her on his couch, in his bed and at his table in the morning.

"Good, because I didn't want to threaten a cop." Xan took another swig from his beer. "But don't think I wouldn't."

"It's admirable how you care about her."

“She’s my sister, of course I do. They drive me fucking nuts, and as kids I wanted to kill them more than not, but truth be told, Luna, Allison and Sammy are more than sisters. They were my first friends, first enemies, first coconspirators. And as much as it pains me to admit, they know me better than anyone. It’s kind of nice having people who will call you on your bullshit.”

“Not to discredit the bond you have with Allison, but your sister seems to do that with everyone.”

Xan barked out a laugh. “I like you. Not many people can see through Allison’s charm.”

“Oh trust me, she doesn’t waste her charm on me.”

Xan tipped his beer bottle toward Reid. “That, my friend, is where you’re mistaken. If anything, she amps it up around you, which is why I thought you two might be dating.”

Reid looked across the yard until his eyes settled on Allison. She was talking with her sisters and she threw her head back in a laugh, exposing the silky tanned skin of her neck. Her face lit up, eyes filled with amusement, and she’d never looked more beautiful.

God, if something were to happen to her. They may not have always gotten along, but somewhere along the way, she’d become a permanent fixture in his life. And not like a door handle or a light switch, more like a beautiful piece of art he handpicked to be in his space. She was special, and that was why he needed to protect her at all costs. Even if it meant going against her wishes.

“There is no barbecue story,” he said.

“So you are dating?”

“No. I’m here because Allison has been getting threats in the mail and most recently had one handed to her at the fairgrounds.”

Xan's head snapped to him, and he stepped in front of Reid, blocking his view of Allison. "She told you not to say anything?"

"I argued with her, but she's—" Reid shook his head.

"A stubborn pain in the ass who thinks it's no big deal."

"Bingo."

"Honest opinion. Do you think she's in danger?"

"I don't know. The threats aren't what I would consider mild. This person seems to know her schedule and really wants to scare her."

"Is he? Scaring her? Because she talks a big game, but she also slept with a nightlight until she was twelve."

Reid thought about how she had grabbed his arm and asked him to stay. How he slept on her couch because she didn't want him to go. That night, he had seen genuine fear in her eyes. "In the beginning, no, but I think she is. Yeah."

"Fuck." Xan ran a hand through his short dark brown, almost black hair.

"I'm only telling you because while I will try to stay with her or have a tail on her as much as possible. I can't always have eyes on her. She doesn't want Luna or your parents to worry and I get that, but—"

"You did the right thing by telling me. Maybe I can hire her a bodyguard."

"They're expensive." Not to mention, Reid wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea of Allison having some guy following her around twenty-four seven. He'd seen the bodyguard with Kevin Costner. He knew how this could turn out. If anyone was going to be her bodyguard, it would be him.

Xan laughed and rubbed at the scruff on his chin. "I can afford it. Trust me."

Reid didn't realize the construction business paid so well. Then again, from what Reid knew, Xan owned the company and was the go to for all the rich tourists looking to buy summer homes in their small town.

"Not that I don't think that's a good idea, but I think between me and you and my deputies, we can handle this."

"It's not bad enough she almost got shot a couple of months ago. I swear she's probably thrilled about this whole thing, trying to figure out how to make it a news segment."

"Oh, you know it, but I think she's waiting for the dust to settle, so she doesn't worry your family."

"Always the righteous one, protecting everyone. If you'll excuse me." Xan moved toward the table and rested his hand on Allison's shoulder, bending down and saying something in her ear. Allison looked at him, then shot her narrowed gaze across the lawn toward Reid. Oh, he was in trouble.

Allison smiled at her sisters, pushed from her chair, and followed Xan into the house. She was going to be pissed, but Reid had to do what was right in order to protect her.

When she stormed out of the house, her whisky-colored eyes firmly focused on him, pink pouty lips turned into a pissed off scowl, he wondered if his life was the one in danger.

"You told my brother!" she whisper-yelled as she approached him. She came to an abrupt stop in front of him and gave a quick smile over her shoulder. It was obvious she didn't want the rest of the family to hear. She was a good actress; he'd give her that. "How could you?"

"Yes, and I would do it again, so go ahead and yell at me all you want."

"I asked you for one thing. One!"

"And I didn't tell your parents or Luna. You're welcome."

“Xan isn’t much better!”

“Look, I can’t always be around to protect you. It makes me feel better. Knowing someone else who cares about you can help keep an eye on you.”

“I’m not some child. I don’t need a babysitter. My brother is talking about getting me a bodyguard, as if that won’t draw a ton of attention to me.”

“I thought you liked attention.”

She raised a finger and poked his chest. “Watch it, buddy. You’re already on thin ice.”

He grabbed her finger and held it, noting the vast difference in size from his own. “Are you threatening an officer of the law?”

“No, I’m threatening the jackass who ratted me out to my brother.”

“That’s one in the same.”

She ripped her hand from his hold. “How could one person be so good looking yet so punchable at the same time?”

Reid didn’t want to crack, but his mouth betrayed him. “Good looking, huh?”

“Haven’t we already established this? Yes, you’re good looking, but you also have a face I want to punch.”

“I didn’t realize you were so violent.”

“I’m not. Apparently, you bring it out in me.”

“I already told him you don’t need a bodyguard.”

She scoffed. “Clearly you don’t know who you’re dealing with. My brother can give two shits what anyone else has to say. If he thinks he’s doing the right thing, then a small army wouldn’t be able to stop him.”



Maybe a bodyguard wasn't such a bad idea. Allison would be safe, and Reid wouldn't have to worry about her, and he could focus on the case and trying to determine if Louie had anything to do with the threats. It all sounded very reasonable, but he couldn't stop thinking of Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston. If Allison was going to defy anyone, it would be him, not some random stranger who had no idea how she took her coffee or that she threw her head back when she laughed hard.

Allison turned toward her family and, with an uneasy smile, wrapped her hand around his wrist and yanked him around the side of the house.

"What are you doing?"

"My family was starting to listen. I can't risk them hearing any of this conversation."

"You're being crazy," he said, and the fire that lit her eyes told him that was absolutely the wrong thing to say. She was always so prim and proper on air, putting on a show for her viewers, but with him, there was no show. She was just Allison, infuriating, button pushing, beautiful, sincere Allison.

He swallowed down the desire rising in him, begging his hands not to grab her and crash his mouth to hers. Devour her in a kiss that would drive them both over the edge they'd been teetering on for so long.

"If anyone is crazy, it's the asshole who's sending me meaningless threats." Her lip quivered, and she turned from him.

"Hey," he said, and this time he didn't ignore his desire. He embraced it. He took Allison in his arms and held her close. "We will catch the bastard."

She didn't put up a fight, just nuzzled into his chest. "I'm sorry."

“For what?”

She shifted, blinking up at him, but staying in his arms. “I’m usually much stronger than this. I don’t let people break me. I’m just... tired.”

“Two hours not enough?” he joked.

She shook her head. “I didn’t even get that. I went to bed and stared at the ceiling, listening for every single noise and freaking myself out until my alarm went off.”

“You should have woken me up.”

“It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. “You’re coming home with me tonight.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“What are you going to do?” She straightened, head tilting in confidence.

“If it comes down to it? I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you.”

“You wouldn’t.” She stepped back, glaring at him.

“Test me,” he said, and a familiar smirk curved her lips before she returned to her family.

## Chapter 17

Much to Reid's disappointment, he didn't have to carry Allison out of her family's barbeque. She willingly left with him. Though his imagination filled in the gaps of what could have been. Her tight body pressed against his shoulder, his arm dangerously close to her ass.

"I need clothes," she said.

"You can wear something of mine."

"Come again?"

"Just say this asshole is watching your house. If you go home and get a bag, he might follow you, defeating the purpose of staying at my place. By going straight to my place, we don't give the jerk a chance."

"I guess that makes sense. Wish you would have clued me in earlier. I have tons of clothes stored in my parents' basement. I could have grabbed a few things."

"Then your parents would have asked about the clothes. My way is less complicated."

"Except I need to get home tomorrow with enough time to get dressed and to the festival."

"I will get you to the festival on time."

Her eyes raked over him, lingering for far too long. "I know you will."

He nodded and kept his focus on the road, occasionally glancing around at the houses they passed to make sure everything was in order. Every couple of minutes, he checked the rearview mirror to make sure they weren't being followed. There was nothing suspicious, but he didn't let his guard

down. There was someone out there, trying to instill fear in Allison, and he had no idea how far they would go.

He'd learned a long time ago there were people in the world who didn't have a heart. Who were controlled by darkness and acted on impulse. At least Allison would be under his roof tonight, where he could assure her safety. He only hoped Louie wasn't lurking in the shadows. An icy chill ran down his spine at the thought.

Reid turned into his driveway, following the path to his house that was set back from the road and surrounded by trees. The location was why he'd chosen the house in the first place. It was secluded, but also not very close to any neighbors just in case danger showed up at his doorstep. He'd hopefully be able to keep it contained.

But in the fourteen years he'd lived in Willow Cove, the danger he'd left behind never found him. At least not until now. Now there was a chance that he'd gotten comfortable, taken his mind off of the endless possibilities of torture by those that wanted him dead for what he did.

"Nice place," Allison said as he put the cruiser in park. "Can never see it from the street. Only adds to that whole mystery persona you have going on."

"If you say so." He got out of the car and waited for her before he walked up the front steps to the door. He unlocked the knob and then the deadbolt. Holding the door open for Allison to step in, he turned behind him to disable the alarm.

"It's like Fort Knox getting in here," she said with a laugh.

"Nothing more than precautions," he said. "With threats on your life, I'd think you'd understand."

"Well, yes, but you aren't the one being threatened, and Willow Cove is pretty safe." He couldn't help but to detect the sad waver in her tone.

“Does it bother you that you live in a safe place?”

“Not at all.” She tucked a dark strand behind her ear, her eyes scanning across the foyer toward the living room and kitchen. “It just gets a little boring when it comes to being a reporter.”

“You’d prefer warzones and disasters?”

She tilted her head, hair falling over her left shoulder. She swished her lips, and he failed at keeping any erotic thoughts at bay. “I told you, I once thought I’d be one of those reporters, but I can’t say I’d prefer it. Our town, for the most part, is boring, but boring isn’t so bad. To be honest, I’d take boring over hiding out from some possible threat.”

“I thought you, of all people, would love the excitement of it all.”

“Normally I would, but it’s more than me now. My fear for my family is high. Having you at the barbeque today?” She shrugged. “I just knew you wouldn’t let anything happen to them.”

“If I remember correctly, you didn’t even want me to go.”

She laughed, the sound echoing in the small space, bringing joy to the home for maybe the first time since he’d moved in. “When have I ever made things easy for you?”

His gaze lingered on her too perfect mouth slightly quirked at the edge, taunting him, and eliciting an X-rated movie reel of possibilities in his mind. He glanced up, meeting her whisky-colored eyes that challenged him more times than anyone else in his life. “Never.”

The slight quirk lifted, a full smile blossoming and lighting up her entire face. She stepped toward him, wrapping him in an instant heat along with her mouth-watering scent of coconut. Her hand rested against his chest. “At least you can count on me to liven up the boring.”

Electricity snapped in the space between them. His hand covered hers, holding it against his chest. A slight gasp slipped from her lips, and it took every ounce of restraint to keep from pinning her to the wall and claiming her mouth as his.

Her stubborn gaze met his, boring into him. His jaw tightened as his resolve dwindled. If anyone was capable of pushing him to his breaking point, it was her. He swallowed, searching for control, even though his body begged him to let loose.

She blinked, her lips parting slightly, a silent invitation that he wasn't strong enough to resist. He stepped closer to her, and she moved with him until her back was against the wall. His fingers slid between hers, the rapid beat of his heart impossible to miss. She closed her hand over his, linking them together.

This was a slippery slope, and he needed to retreat, but those damn lips had been torturing him for years. He just needed to taste them, just once, feel her surrender beneath him, feel what it would be like to fuel the fire that had simmered between them since the moment he laid eyes on her.

He dipped his head, promising himself just one taste. The swift intake of her breath was a direct line to his dick. It hardened beneath his pants, pressing against the zipper.

“Reid,” she said, and he never loved the name more. Her eyes held his, and she gave the tiniest of nods as if she was giving them full permission to surrender to each other.

He dipped his head, ready to claim her. A loud crash echoed through the house, and Reid put his body between Allison and the door. He reached for his gun, looking out toward the front door.

“What was that?” Allison asked.

“Stay here,” Reid said, training his gun on the door and moving at an even pace. Normally he'd just look, but with

everything that had been happening, he wasn't taking any chances. Not when Allison's life was in his hands.

“Like hell, I will.”

“Allison,” he barked. “For once in your life, can you fucking listen to me?”

She moved next to him, holding her own gun out like this was an audition for Charlie's Angels.

“What in the hell are you doing? Put that away!”

“If you're armed, why can't I be armed, too?”

“I'm a trained professional.”

“I think I've proven I'm more than capable with a gun.”

She managed to help take down one inexperienced criminal, and she thought she was fucking Dirty Harry. He needed to investigate, but he also needed to prove to Allison how life didn't play out like the movies. The good guy didn't always win.

In one quick motion, he holstered his gun, then grabbed her wrist and pinned her hand holding the gun to the wall. His other hand held her in place. He pressed his chest to hers, slipping his leg in between her thighs. He bent down to her ear. “Seconds,” he said. “That's all it takes for shit to go south.” He clenched his jaw, holding back the anger surging through him. “If I was anyone else, you'd be dead. Don't ever make yourself that vulnerable.” His lip brushed against the edge of her ear, and he pulled back.

Her sharp stare met his, but she didn't say anything.

“Now please do as I say and stay here.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

He loosened his grip and stepped back, reaching for his gun and disappearing out the front door. It was probably

nothing, but with Louie on the loose, he couldn't chance it. He needed to check for himself. He only hoped Allison listened to him and was safe inside.

A planter had shattered on the stone pathway that led to his backyard. He rounded the house and spotted the culprit—a black cat with odd patches of orange arched against his workbench. He holstered his gun and grabbed the bag of cat food he had in an outside storage bin, along with a bowl.

“Did you knock over that planter?” He poured food into the bowl and placed it on the ground. The cat waited until he stood before approaching the bowl. For over a year, he'd been trying to catch the damn thing to get it to the vet and checked out, but she was a feisty little thing.

“Who do we have here?” Allison asked, and he closed his eyes and sighed.

“I thought I told you to stay in the house.”

“Afraid this cutie might attack me?” Allison bent down, but kept her distance. “I didn't know you had a cat.”

“I don't. It's a stray.”

“That you just so happen to have food and a bowl for.”

“She's been coming around for the past year. I couldn't let her go hungry.”

Allison stood up, her eyes meeting his. “You really are a good person, Reid.”

“Doing what's right shouldn't be the basis of a good person.” He was far from good. His bloodline was a long list of criminals and feeding a stray, or walking a woman's dog, didn't change his genetic makeup.

“Humble, too, which almost makes it annoying.” Allison spun on her heel, bending to the cat. “Have you named her?”

“No.”



“Why not?”

“She’s not mine. I just call her the cat.”

“I hate to break this to you, but it looks like she’s adopted you. Might as well honor her with a name.”

“I’m not naming the cat.”

The cat finished eating and moved toward Allison, arching her back against her leg and... purring.

“Are you kidding me?” Reid exclaimed. “I have tried to get near that damn cat for months, and you’re out here for two seconds, put no effort into it, and she’s all over you.”

“Have you met you?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that you’re a little intimidating. She’s probably just scared of you. I know I was the first time I met you.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true.” Allison held her hand to the cat and waited patiently.

“You bark more than you talk. We’ve already established you have a permanent scowl. And you radiate this air of power and authority. You’re intense, and that can be intimidating to many people.”

“But you’re Allison Winters. You shove microphones in anyone’s face as long as it’ll get you a story.”

She laughed gently, her hand still out and waiting patiently for the cat. Reid had never been that patient. After thirty seconds, he’d give up. The cat tilted its head and ran it across Allison’s hand. Reid watched, transfixed by this little miracle. Allison smiled but didn’t try to pet the cat. She relinquished all control of the situation, allowing the furry feline to test the waters.

“In the beginning, it was blind confidence. I had something to prove, and that’s all that mattered. But whenever I dealt with you, I’d have to sit in the van for a few minutes to calm down my beating heart. Get myself back together.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know you then. I just knew you as—”

“The pain in the ass.”

“Pretty much, and you still are.”

“I’m not anything if not consistent.”

“Do you still have to sit in the van after dealing with me?”

“My heart races with you for an entirely different reason. I don’t need to calm my nerves. I need to cool myself down.”

“So now it’s just blind rage toward me that heats you up.”

The cat gave one last purr before scurrying off into the surrounding woods. Allison stood. “I thought it was,” she said. “But I’m beginning to realize *that* heat is something entirely different.”

He had no idea who moved first, but his hands thrust into her hair, pulling her close. His mouth slammed against hers with an urgency he couldn’t explain. A tiny moan slipped between their lips, the sound a spark to the kindling simmering inside him.

Fire erupted in his veins, spreading through him like an out-of-control wildfire. He couldn’t stop it if he wanted to, and he did not want to. Allison’s fingers curled into his shirt, pulling him closer, slanting her mouth over his and taking everything he had to give. His hands slid down the perfect curves of her ass and squeezed. She lifted with him, and her legs wrapped around his waist.

He kissed her, placing her on his workbench. A few tools crashed to the ground, but neither broke the kiss. Her heel

pushed into his ass, bringing his erection right to her center. She grinded against him, her nails digging into his neck. Desire spiraled through him, stealing his breath and any ounce of control.

His fingers hooked her shirt and yanked it over her head. His heart stuttered at the two perfect mounds covered in red lace. He swallowed, unable to look away, rendered completely dumbfounded at her beauty. He'd imagined so many times what she would look like beneath her perfectly tailored dresses and suits, but this...

*Fuck.*

## Chapter 18

Allison grabbed his face, urging him to her. Their lips crashed, igniting a new hunger inside her. Years of untapped sexual chemistry exploded as desperation poured into the kiss. Desire swirled through her like a tornado, destroying her resolve, fueling fires throughout her body, and sweeping her up in a moment she would never forget.

“You’re making it really hard to stay in control.”

He’d always been wound so tight, like a rubber band ready to snap. She wanted to be the one to make the final tug, watch him unravel in her arms, see the stoic demeanor give way to the beast inside him. She knew he was in there. She just needed to lure him out.

“I don’t want you to be in control. I want you wild and free.”

“Don’t say that, or I’ll fuck you right here.”

“I don’t care where you fuck me, as long as you do.”

“Allison,” her name was a swear on his lips, sharp and final.

He was exactly where she wanted him. She kissed a path along his neck, nipping and licking her way toward his ear. Her hips ground against his rock-hard erection, making it perfectly clear what she needed. She took his earlobe between her teeth, and he inhaled a ragged breath. Satisfied, she continued, tilting her mouth over his ear. “Fuck me.”

His blue eyes turned almost black. The veins in his neck bulged, his jaw strained, pulling his skin tight. She bit her lip, shimmying her ass against the hard wood beneath her. Tiny

sparks of pleasure rolled through her as her clit rubbed against her shorts.

“Please,” she said, and the rubber band snapped. Reid grabbed her head, slamming his mouth to hers. His other hand shoved into her shorts, slipping beneath the lace. She spread her legs around his hips, arching into his touch. He swiped a finger through her folds, and she moaned.

“So wet,” he said, his voice gruff and sexy as hell.

“Proof that I’m ready for you.”

He shook his head, and she narrowed her gaze.

“You’ve tortured me with this tight ass.” His fingers slipped beneath her shorts and dug into her bottom. “For ten years. It’s my turn to torture you.”

“I—” Before she could hit him with a witty comeback, he thrust his finger inside her. Her body bowed, pressing into his palm.

“Do you mean to tell me this is how I get you to stop talking?”

She wanted to tell him to shut up, but words evaded her, her entire body too focused on the slip and slide of his finger. The sparks of pleasure every time he slid against her clit.

His slight laugh filled the space between them, full of amusement. She rode his hand and grabbed his erection, evening the playing field. His laugh mixed with a grunt, and her lips curved into a smile.

“Two can play this game,” she managed before he hooked his pointer and pleasure exploded, ripping through her with a force so hard and fast all she could do was ride it out.

His mouth took hers, his tongue swiping across the seam before thrusting inside. She matched his need, their tongues moving in rhythm with his fingers.

She thought she'd be done, spent from the orgasm that ripped through her, but she wanted more. Needed more. The desire only grew with each swipe of his tongue and stroke of his touch. She fumbled with his belt, desperate for him to be inside her.

He grabbed her wrist, holding her in place. His mouth tore from hers, his breaths coming out in ragged pants as he rested his head near her ear. "Not yet."

"I never took you for a masochist."

"I'm not."

"You said you want to torture me, but I can feel how hard you are. I know it must hurt. Let me make it better."

He brushed her hair behind her ear, a tender gesture that didn't match the moment. But that was Reid, a walking conundrum she still couldn't figure out. "Do you always get your way?"

"Pretty much." She reached for his buckle again, but he was faster.

He snatched her hand. "Not today." A wicked gleam flashed in his eyes, and he captured her mouth in a mind-numbing kiss that had her pressing into him. His hands slid to her ass and the support of the table vanished. With long strides, he headed for the house.

He flipped the lock on the door, then made his way through the house, only stopping when his knees hit the bed, and he placed her in the middle of the mattress. He set his gun on the nightstand and came down on her, all strong and powerful male, hovering over her like a fantasy come to life.

He kissed her, dragging his mouth down her neck until he stopped at the red lace. "Pretty."

Her nipples strained against the material, desperate for his touch. His tongue slid across the edges as his hand lowered her strap. Her nipple popped free, tightening against the warmth of his breath. He captured the taut bead between his lips.

Sweet pleasure wracked her body at the gentle swirl of his tongue. She thrust her fingers into his hair, holding him there, never wanting him to stop the delicious assault. With a flick of his fingers, her bra came free, exposing her completely. He tossed the strips of lace across the room and took her in his mouth. Erotic pain shot through her as he pinched her other nipple between his forefinger and thumb.

Tiny eruptions detonated beneath her skin. Heated desire racing to her core as he dragged his mouth across her stomach. When he hit the waistband of her shorts, he grunted, then ripped the button open, yanked the zipper down, and tugged her shorts off.

His eyes fixated on the single strip of red lace. A guttural growl rumbled in his throat as he took her in. She swallowed, writhing against the dark gray comforter. "Taste me." The words were a desperate plea that barely sounded like her own voice.

Tendrils of heat whirled up her stomach as he ripped the material aside. A warm wisp of air swept across her swollen bundle of nerves, and slowly, Reid lowered his head. If he wanted to torture her, he was succeeding. Her body was primed, ready for him, and begging her to find release in any way.

She lifted her hips, urging him to claim her with his mouth. "Please," she begged. "I can't take it anymore."

His large hand splayed across her stomach, and he pressed until her back was flush with the mattress, and then his tongue attacked, swiping and swirling. The room around her spun, everything blurring into nothingness as all she could focus on

was the skilled laps of his tongue. Heated pleasure rushed over her as he slipped a finger into her wetness. Her back arched as if she was ascending to heaven. Light burst behind her eyelids, and she wondered if she was at the pearly gates.

Reid held her in place as he continued his attack, slipping another digit inside of her and thrusting in sync with his tongue. Then she exploded. Sparks flew out in a hundred directions, awakening every nerve ending, causing her to convulse as her orgasm tore through her.

Reid's name flew from her mouth. Her fingers dug into the comforter, afraid if she didn't hold on, she'd float away. Her body convulsed, absorbing every ounce of pleasure. Reid placed a gentle kiss to her clit, then moved up her body, cupping her face and looking down at her.

She ran her thumb across his lip, and he kissed the pad. "So much for torture."

"I've never tasted anything so sweet. I couldn't stop myself."

"I'm not complaining." She smiled. "Actually, I do have one complaint."

"I'm not surprised."

"Why do you still have clothes on?"

He glanced at his shirt and the bulge in his pants.

She fumbled for his belt. "Can I?"

"Yes." The single word was a gruff growl that made her feel powerful. She kissed his mouth, then shifted until he was beneath her. She pulled his belt through the loops and tossed it. Her fingers curled into the hem of his shirt, and she yanked. He sat up, giving her a little help.

She glanced at the strong chest sculpted to beautiful perfection. Her hands itched to touch him, and she didn't deny



them, resting her fingertips on his pecs and dragging them over the hard ridges of his abs. He gripped her waist, but she swatted him away.

“You had your turn. Now it’s mine.” She slid down his body, and the blue of his eyes darkened. She bit her lip, loving how he looked at her. With a single glance, he made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. She kissed his chest and continued, dragging her tongue over the firm ridges.

She stopped at his pants and lowered his zipper.

He fisted the comforter and shook his head. “This is fucking torture.”

She smiled. “Isn’t that the point?” He groaned as she hooked her fingers into his boxer briefs. “And for the record, you started this game.”

His cock sprang free, and her eyes widened as she took in every inch. Her tongue slipped out, swiping across her lip, knowing exactly what it wanted, but she couldn’t give in that easily to her own desires. She needed to torture him first.

She ran her thumb across the tip, coating it with the slick precum. Meeting his gaze, she brought her thumb to her mouth and sucked. “Mmm.”

“Fucking hell,” Reid growled.

Oh, this was way too much fun. She settled in between his legs and arched until her ass was in the air. His sudden intake of breath told her it had the desired effect. She gripped the solid steel length, lowering her head. His body pressed up, trying to close the gap, but she tilted away from him.

Another growl made her smile. Torturing Reid was quickly becoming her absolute favorite pastime. She parted her lips, moving toward the tip. Her tongue swiped along the smooth head and quickly retreated.

“Allison,” he ground out.

“What?” For ten years she’d known Reid, and for ten years she’d watched him hide behind his stoic wall, never dropping the veil, always standing strong against anything. Now, with a single swipe of her tongue, she watched that very veil fall.

She loved the power, loved knowing she was able to get him to break. “Did you want this?” She ran his cock across her lips, slipping her tongue against the crown before taking him into her mouth. She moaned as his heat radiated to her cheeks.

His entire body tensed beneath her as she took all that she could manage, then ever so slowly pulled up. The slight jerk of his hips spurred her on, and she picked up speed, her hand following the path of her lips.

“*Fucking hell,*” Reid barked, his fingers digging into her shoulders and yanking her body up his. “Enough of that.”

She fluttered her eyelashes. “Did you not like it?”

“You know damn well I liked it too fucking much.” His words were clipped as he crashed his mouth to hers, devouring her and leaving her breathless. With one quick movement, she was beneath him. He reached over to his nightstand and ripped open the drawer. He brought his arm back, holding a condom.

Lifting her hips, she pressed against him, shifting up and down, telling him exactly what she needed. He tore the foil open and sheathed himself.

She didn’t think she’d ever recover from her orgasm, but with this gorgeous man above her, his cock resting just outside her, she was desperate to feel him. Impatient, she reached for him.

He smiled, swatting her hand away. “I got it from here.”

“Are you—” Her words were lost to a cry that tore from her throat at the intense pleasure as he pushed inside her. His

hips moved in fluid strokes, driving her to the edge faster than she wanted, but she couldn't hold back, couldn't stop the waves of ecstasy crashing into her, forcing her to give up the reins of control. She was a prisoner to his body.

His thumb brushed her clit, and the wave she had been cresting slammed into her, throwing her off kilter, knocking her out of reality and throwing her into utopia.

Her nails dug into his back, holding tight as colors swirled around her, and life as she knew it would never be the same.

## Chapter 19

Reid lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling and holding Allison against him. He did not have that on his bingo card for today. He took a deep breath, letting the aftershocks die down and trying to find reality. For the last hour, reality hadn't existed. He was in a damn fantasy, staring at Allison and her amazing body and mouth.

He swiped his finger along her kiss-swollen lips. "I am not surprised you know how to use your mouth so well."

She pressed up, resting her arm on his chest and her chin on her arm. "Are you really poking the you talk too much stick at me right now?"

He laughed, feeling at ease for the first time in a very long time. "I am."

She pinched his side. "You think you're real funny, don't you?"

He let his laugh answer for him.

Allison sat up, dragging the comforter with her, covering her beautiful body, and looked around his room. "You know... All these years we've known each other, and I still don't feel like I know anything about you."

"What's there to know?"

"I don't know. What's your favorite movie?" she asked.

"Die Hard," he said without hesitation.

She snorted. "Predictable."

A smile lifted his lips. "What does that mean?"

She shrugged, then leaned over and scooped up his shirt, wrapping herself in the oversized material. "It's just no

surprise, considering every guy wanted to be John McClane.”

“I didn’t want to be John McClane.”

Her gaze shot to him, and her head tilted. Did she have any idea how adorable she looked right now? Sex ruffled, kiss swollen, and completely comfortable in his bed. His dick jumped at the sight, and he was surprised it still had any life to give after the last hour.

“Everyone loves Bruce Willis in that movie, and he’s great, but I loved the cop, Reginald Vel Johnson. It’s what made me want to go into law enforcement. He controlled the scene, worked together to take down the bad guy. Proved I didn’t need to be in direct line of the action to make a difference.”

She tapped a finger against her lip. “Okay, definitely not predictable.”

“What about you? Favorite movie?”

“Working Girl with Melanie Griffith. I doubt you’ve seen it.”

“I know it. Lot of hair in that movie.”

She laughed. “So much hair! I am happy that style has never come back.”

“Never say never.”

Her finger jutted out at him. “Bite your tongue. The ozone can’t handle another decade of Aquanet.”

An unexpected memory hit him out of nowhere. “My mom used to fumigate the entire house when she got ready. I can still taste it.” It was as if it was only yesterday when he was on the floor playing with his cars, and she was in the bathroom getting ready for the day.

Allison crossed her legs beneath her and leaned on her hand. “Why don’t you talk about her more? Your mom.”

“She’s dead. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“How’d she die?” Reid shot her a look, and she held her hands in front of her. “Sorry. It’s the reporter in me. I know you don’t want to talk about it. I just...”

“Can’t let a story go.”

“This isn’t for a story. This is me and you talking. I just want to meet the man beneath the mystery.”

“Until you realize the ratings it could get you.”

She took his hand, squeezing. “Fuck the ratings. I wouldn’t do that to you, and you know it.”

He hadn’t spoken about it to anyone in years. It was another secret from his past he’d left behind in Boston. He’d gotten his revenge and while he always thought it would bring him peace, it never really did. The only way he’d ever be able to was if he could turn back time, but since he wasn’t a time traveler or someone who could manipulate time and space, he was stuck with the regret. The guilt. Everything that had consumed him from that day so long ago. If only he was there. Maybe he could have done something. Maybe things would have been different.

Maybe... nothing would have been different at all.

“She was killed,” he finally admitted. It’s not that he expected a weight to be lifted off his shoulders, but maybe for the tension he’d been carrying for almost thirty years to lessen.

Allison’s head whipped back, eyes widened, and he worried she’d fall off the bed. He was about to reach for her when she blurted, “Killed?”

He’d already stepped toward the edge. He might as well just jump now. “Shot in a botched robbery when I was nine.”

The gasp was unexpected. Allison, being a seasoned reporter, knew how to control her emotions. It was something

they shared in common. Her hand landed on her chest, the determined glint in her eye softened into compassion. “I’m so sorry. That is awful. I had no idea.”

“How would you?” He shrugged it off just as he’d been doing since the day his dear old dad sat him down and explained to him his mother was dead, and things were going to change. It was the day he stopped being a boy. He became a man at nine, because if he didn’t, if he continued to rely on comfort and love, he wouldn’t have survived.

“True. You’ve always been very secretive. I didn’t even know your last name for the longest time. You barely use it. I just knew you as Reid.”

“Reid is actually my middle name.” He’d been going by it since the day he left Boston and moved to Willow Cove. No one knew his real name except for Angel and O’Reilly.

“Wait. What?” Allison’s voice creeped up a few octaves. “Then what’s your first name?”

“Connor.” He took a deep breath and finally spoke the name he hadn’t in one and a half decades. “Connor Reid Flynn.”

“Connor Flynn?” Her eyes narrowed. “No.” She tilted her head and leaned back. “Not Connor Flynn as in Rory ‘the Diamond’ Flynn’s son?”

She was good. He’d give her that. His first reaction was to spew a lie. Hell, he’d been living one for fifteen years. He was sick of lying to everyone, though. Sick of not being able to talk about who he really was. Allison was probably the worst person to share this information with, but maybe it would help open her eyes. Help to get her to understand the severity of the situation. Besides, he wanted to tell her. If he wasn’t already sitting, the realization would have knocked him on his ass.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Rory Flynn is my father.”

Allison's head practically snapped off her shoulders, eyes widened, mouth opened. "Rory "*The Diamond*" Flynn was *your* father?"

Reid nodded. It wasn't something he talked about, ever. It was a secret he had kept since moving to Willow Cove. His true identity could get him killed, so he moved out of Boston, started going by his middle name, and tried to create a new life for himself. He was still close enough to keep an eye on things in Boston, but not close enough to be detected. Or at least, he thought. "That would be him."

Allison exhaled, blowing her black hair up and out of her face. "Wow. He was one of the biggest mob heads in the city's history. Taking him down was epic. I had an entire class in college where we dissected the case and the media coverage around it." Her eyebrows pinched together. "His son... he had dark brown hair."

"Dye." He went to a salon a few towns over every few months. Mainly in the winter. During the summer, it managed to stay lighter longer.

Allison's eyebrow lifted. "Dye? You dye your freaking hair! Do I know anything about you that's real?" She jumped from the bed and turned her eyes on him. It was probably a bad time to tell her how damn good she looked in his shirt. "Why the hell do you dye your hair?"

"Same reason why I hate being on TV. If someone recognized me..."

"You don't want anyone to know that your father was in the Irish mob? Think they might think you're crooked, huh?"

If it were only that simple. He wouldn't have to sleep with bolts on his door and a gun under his pillow. He wouldn't have to look over his shoulder and watch the world around him under a microscope. "No, I'm afraid someone might try to kill me."



“Kill you. Why?”

It was his ultimate secret. Though, the people who shouldn't know were the only ones who did, other than O'Reilly and Angel and a few others deep in the sting. “I'm the reason my pops got put away, and they know it.”

Allison held her hand up and shook her head. She locked her gaze with him and realization flashed in her pretty dark eyes. “Wait a minute. You were the rat who worked with the feds? You took down the biggest crime organization in the history of the city. So many players were taken out of the game and thrown into cells. The entire organization crumbled.” Her words were like a mumble as she worked the puzzle out.

He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. “I did what I had to do.”

Allison shot to her feet. “Why didn't you ever tell me this? Jesus Christ, Reid. I could've got you killed, you idiot!” She ran a hand through her hair and paced back and forth.

“It's not exactly something you tell people.”

“Maybe if that someone was running her mouth on television and shoving a microphone in your face, it might've been a good idea to clue her in!”

“I managed other ways.”

She came to a stop in front of him. “By cursing and ruining every segment I tried to put you in.”

“It was effective.”

She spun away and started to pace again. “Unbelievable. I never would have forgiven myself if something happened to you.”

Reid moved toward her. “Are you saying you care about me?”

Her hands flung up in the air, landing loudly against her thighs. “Of course, I care about you, you moron! I’ve cared about you from the moment I met you as that bright-eyed reporter just out of college and ready to conquer the world. You were this hot cop who carried himself with authority and poise. I had a major crush on you, even if you did scare the hell out of me.”

“Had?”

“Yeah, then I got to know you and realized you were an asshole.”

“Is that so?” She glared at him, but he looked beyond the glare and saw what he’d been hiding from for so long.

He was in love with Allison Winters.

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Allison held Reid’s gaze, refusing to be the one who broke first. He had been hiding this massive secret from her, and she was pissed. She understood. He did it to protect himself, but for crying out loud, it was information that was kind of important.

Now they’d finally succumbed to their explosive chemistry, and should be basking in the afterglow, she was faced with the fact she could have got the bastard killed.

If that happened, she never would have been able to forgive herself.

He snaked his arms around her sides and tickled her.

“I’m an asshole, huh?” he said.

His hand moved up her sides, and she twisted and pulled, trying to get away from him, but he was stronger. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding! Please stop.” Laughter floated through her and around her. His torturous movements slowed into a smooth caress over the bare skin of her stomach, sending heat

to her core. She relaxed against him, savoring the feel of his rough fingertips sliding up and down her sides.

She turned in his arms, glancing at those blue eyes. “Reid,” she said just as he bent his head, grabbed her face, and captured her lips with his. A slight squeak slipped from her mouth, but instantly turned into a moan as his tongue darted past her lips to hers.

Her fingers slid across his stomach, determined to feel each hard ab that had taunted her from a distance for so long. She was too consumed in pleasuring him earlier; she didn’t get a chance to fully explore. Hard and slick muscles tightened beneath her touch. She trailed her nails up his side, and his hands shot down her body, grabbing her ass and lying her on the bed. He lowered over of her, mouth on hers instantly, and the hard press of his erection settled between her legs.

She lifted, arching her back to grind against him. He growled against her lips, ripping his mouth from hers and leaving a path of fire along her neck as he kissed his way from the column to the crook.

“How is this possible?” he asked.

The fog cleared from her head, and she looked up, locking with those baby blues. “How is what possible?”

“I shouldn’t be this hard after we just...”

She cupped his face. “Nothing is normal when it comes to us,” she said just before his mouth descended and made her forget her own name.

Desire spiraled into her, but they were in the middle of an important conversation. He was finally opening up to her, telling her his secrets that he had held closely for so long. She wasn’t going to let him distract her with sex, no matter how good the sex was.

She reached deep, finding the strength to place her hand on his chest and hold him at bay.

“Tell me more about your past.”

## Chapter 20

His lips parted, but he didn't speak. He'd been guarding the information for so long, shoving it down deep, refusing to let it surface, that it took several attempts to let the words flow freely.

He sat on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath, preparing to let Allison in to a life he'd tried to bury for so long.

"I joined the force as soon as I could. I was twenty-one when I got my badge. Within a few months, I was working to take down the mob. Particularly my father. He foolishly thought I joined so he would have someone on the inside."

"Why did you join? I mean, why were you so determined to end your father's reign? Did you not have a good relationship?"

"That's the thing. We did. He was there for me when my mom died. Comforted me, raised me, made me want for nothing. He was front row at my high school graduation. He bought me a brand new Mustang for my first car and taught me how to drive."

"Then what changed?"

"I found out what he did. Who he really was." Silence spread between them, and Reid inhaled, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Remember how I told you my mom was killed in a botched robbery?"

"Yes."

"I found out it was meant to look like a botched robbery. It was really a hit put out by my pops."

Allison gasped, her hand landing squarely over her lips.

“See, Mom had been Pop’s mistress for years, but he had another wife. Still, Mom was loyal... until she wasn’t. Pops kept swearing he’d leave his wife even more so after I was born, but when the promises continued unfulfilled, Mom’s loyalty started to waiver. She began seeing someone else. That someone else just happened to be a rival of Pops. And she started talking. Sharing insight and all that. My pops killed my mother in cold blood while she was walking home from the grocery store. He might not have pulled the damn trigger, but her death is on his hands.”

“How old were you when you found out the truth?”

“Nineteen.”

“I’m sorry, Reid.”

“It’s the past.”

“Just because it was the past doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt like hell.” She took his hand and squeezed, and the gentle gesture shot heat to his heart, melting the ice that had been there for so long. “What happened to you after your mom was killed?”

“Dad took me in. His wife couldn’t have children, so she was happy to step in as my stepmother. She raised me, acted as if I was hers, and we were the happy family my mom always wanted and never got.”

“What happened to her?”

“When Pops got pinched, she knew it was me who ratted. She threatened to kill me if she ever saw me again.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“The funny thing is, as angry as she was, as hurtful as her words were, I knew she was just as hurt. As fucked up as the whole situation was, I knew she loved me, and truly thought of me as her son.”

“Have you tried to reach out?”

He shook his head. “Even if she doesn’t kill me, word would get out. I’d be back on the radar for too many who want my head on a platter. When I left Boston, I had to cut ties with everyone.”

“Just like that, you walked away? You don’t keep in touch with anyone from your past?”

“Everyone from my past are criminals. Well, except for one. My old partner, Angel, we keep in touch. I call him using a burner phone, and he keeps me posted on what’s going on in Boston. I talked to him last week. His wife’s pregnant.”

“Why do you sound sad about that?”

Reid licked his bottom lip. “He has a wife, and he’ll be a dad soon. I feel like it would be reckless for me to continue reaching out to him. If anything were to happen to him... I’d never forgive myself.”

“But all those guys have been put away. It’s been years. Surely you aren’t in danger anymore.”

He’d told her everything, so he might as well not stop now. And maybe if Allison knew the whole story, she’d understand his concern. “One of the guys. Screwy Louie.”

“I’ve heard of him. He messes with his victims’ minds before killing them.”

Reid nodded. “Yeah, like sending tongues.”

Allison’s eyes widened, and her hand flung out in front of her. “Wait. Do you think? No. That’s ridiculous. That’s crazy.”

“Is it? Is it that crazy to think that Louie got out, found me, and now he’s fucking with someone I know? Seems very fucking plausible to me.”

“But why me, Reid? Until tonight, we were frenemies at best.”

He lifted his eyebrow. “Frenemies?”

“Yes, so why would Screwie Louie come after me?”

“I don’t know, but until I do, we need to be very careful. Louie is not someone you dismiss. Once you’re on his radar...” He couldn’t finish the thought. To finish it would mean it was possible, and while he was always someone who was a straight shooter, he couldn’t say this out loud. Not when Allison was in front of him in nothing but his shirt, the feel of her touch still lingering on his skin.

“I don’t think it’s Louie. I think it’s all a coincidence.”

“That’s because you don’t know Louie.”

“And you know him too well.”

“Which is why I know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“It’s why you don’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve finally figured you out. You are driven by fear.”

“I’m not in the mood for reporter games, Allison.”

“This isn’t a game, Reid. Your entire life since you left Boston, you have been living in fear, just waiting for someone to find you.”

“That’s not living in fear. It’s knowing my fate.”

“Bullshit. Angel was a part of the takedown. He isn’t hiding. He’s married, about to be a father.”

“He wasn’t the son of the biggest fucking crime ring leader who took him and all of his associates down.”

“Fine, I’ll give you that. Angel wasn’t. But still, if they wanted revenge, wouldn’t they have gone after anyone they could? Use Angel to lure you out. It’s been fifteen years, and no one has tried a damn thing, yet here you are dead bolting your door in Willow fucking Cove. One of the most boring



towns on the east coast and trust me, I know. I report on it every day.”

Frustration itched at his palms and he thrust his hand into his hair. He grabbed a pair of sweatpants and yanked them on before heading to the kitchen.

“Are you really walking away from me?” Allison called from behind him.

He ripped open the cabinet where he kept his whisky and took the bottle down. He was tempted to drink straight from the bottle, but he didn’t want Allison to psychoanalyze him.

“Admit it,” she said, coming to a stop on the other side of the island.

With a shake of his head, he poured a shot worth into the glass and tossed it back. The welcome burn slid down his throat, and he closed his eyes for a second to gather himself. He pointed his glass at her before taking another swig. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think I do. Figuring people out is basically my job.”

“No, you don’t, because you don’t know what I saw. What I know. If you did, you’d never leave your house. You’d be scared, too.”

“So you admit it. You’re scared.”

“Don’t twist my words around.”

“I’m not. I’m using your words.”

“Yeah, against me!” He slammed the glass on the counter, a loud clink echoed around them.

“I’m just trying to understand you.”

“Well, don’t. If I wanted that, I would have seen a shrink.”

He tipped the glass to his mouth, and warm hands rested against his back. He didn’t want to look at her right now. Only

this woman could bring him to pure ecstasy one minute and the next make him want to throttle her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, kissing his shoulder blade. “I just hate that all these years, you’ve been out here in this house all alone, just waiting for someone to come in here and kill you.”

“I’m fine.”

Her fingers curled into his side, and she urged him to turn toward her. He sighed, putting his glass on the counter. Her eyes blinked at him, and he wasn’t expecting the empathetic gleam. He was ready to fight. He knew how to fight, but this... this he wasn’t any good at.

She cupped his cheek, and he turned his head to kiss her palm. “I’m sorry, too.”

“For what? I was the one who poked after you finally opened up to me.”

“It’s just been so long since I’ve spoken about this with anyone. And yeah, maybe I have been scared all along, but Allison, that fear? It’s nothing compared to the fear of you getting hurt.” A lump lodged in his throat, and he swallowed it. “I took down people who were professional killers and didn’t even blink an eye, but that day at the ice cream shop when you called me... I’ve never known fear like that. That day when I picked up a random piece of paper for you and saw someone had threatened you. I wanted to lock you away and keep you safe. And then that day you called me in a panic about the tongue. I wanted to track down the bastard who did it and kill him, so I never had to see that fear in your eyes again. So, to answer your question. Yes, I’m scared, but I’m not scared of what you think. I’m scared of losing you.” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “I lied. I told you the town kept me here, but the truth is I had planned to leave after five years. I started making plans, thinking it was a good time to switch it

up. I hadn't been found, but the longer I sat, the more likely I would. It was time."

Her eyes locked with his, and his world stopped just like it did that first day he met her. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because a bright-eyed reporter showed up to one of my calls, trying her hardest to get a story, and I knew she was going to be trouble, and there was no way I was going to let herself get into trouble without me there to protect her."

Allison's lip quirked, eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I didn't take you for a storyteller. But damn, you had me."

"It is a story. It's our story. And it's all true."

A tear slipped from her lid, and he caught it with his thumb, brushing it away.

"I always thought you hated me."

"It was a love hate relationship."

Allison's eyebrow arched, and her arms wrapped around his neck. "Are you saying you love me?"

He lifted her up, placing her on the counter. Her black hair fell over her shoulders, covering what the shirt didn't. She was so fucking beautiful.

"My love comes with a burden I could never let you bear."

She took his face in her hands and wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him close. "I don't care."

"I do."

"Lucky for you, I never listen. Truth is whether you love me or not"—she shrugged—"it won't change the fact that I love you, and I probably have for a while. I've just been too damn stubborn to see it."

His heart stuttered in his chest. He'd made a point to keep people at a distance, only letting a select few in. Love wasn't

supposed to be in the cards for him, but looking into those whisky-colored eyes, he should have known he was a goner the very first time they glared at him.

“You, stubborn?” he joked, but really all he wanted was to wrap her up in his arms and never let her go. Keep her safe from whatever danger was coming for them.

She pushed his chest, and he caught her hand as he dipped his head and captured her lips. He might not be able to get the words out, but he could damn well show her.

## Chapter 21

Allison woke up feeling refreshed and ready for round five with Reid. The man was insatiable, and she wasn't complaining. Eventually, they had to drag themselves out of bed to go to the festival. If she didn't show, her family would wonder where she was and send out a search party. If they found her in Reid's bed, Mom would have started planning their wedding.

Wedding. It was an odd thought. For so long, Allison never thought she'd meet someone and settle down, but she was starting to realize that no one was ever right because they weren't Reid. Until now, she hadn't even known that she'd compared every single man she'd dated to him. It was subtle, but her subconscious had been working overtime without her knowledge.

Not that she planned on marrying Reid. In hindsight, even though she'd known him for over a decade, she barely knew him at all. Though she knew his heart, and for her, that was the only thing that really mattered.

They pulled into the festival and past the designated parking spaces to a private sector for the patrols. Reid put the cruiser in park and turned to her. "Remember to be on the lookout. Always be aware of your surroundings. Don't let your guard down."

Allison held her hand up. "Save the lecture, officer."

"Sheriff."

"I know. I just like to see you get all pissy over it."

"You're a pain in my ass."

She leaned toward him and smiled. "And you love it."

His hand snaked around her head and pulled her close until their lips came together. A girl could get very used to this.

He rested his forehead against hers. “Just be careful.”

She kissed the tip of his nose. “You have nothing to worry about. I’ll be with my entire family. Let anyone try to break through that wall of people. And if they do, my mother will run them off with her flipflop.”

“This is serious.”

Allison patted his chest. “Lighten up, Sheriff.”

“Where are they meeting you?”

“Presley will insist they get fried Oreos as soon as they get here, so I know I’ll find them there.”

“I have to check in with my deputies and make sure there are no issues.”

“I think I can manage without you.”

“I’ll get someone to walk you.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“After everything I told you, how could you think it’s not?”

“Because I don’t think Louie is the one messing with me.”

“How can you know that?”

“I don’t for sure, but my reporter instincts have kicked in, and I’ve been thinking about it. The first threat I received was before Louie got out.”

“He could have had someone send it.”

“Fine, but then that begs the question, why me? Why not go to you directly?”

“It’s not Louie’s style. He likes to freak people out.”

“But how would he know I’d tell you any of this? That’s a big gamble, and for someone as malicious and vindictive as him, I don’t think he’d leave things up to chance.” When Reid was in the shower, she descended into an internet research rabbit hole and learned everything there was to know about Screwy Louie. And while there were some similarities to Louie’s style, that did not mean someone else wasn’t copying it.

“Allison.”

She held her hand up. “I think your past is skewing your perception on this.”

“Regardless. There is still a threat out there. Still someone who has made it known they want to see you hurt. Louie or not, you’re still in danger. I can’t just let you walk around like you’re not. That’s how my mo—” He stopped himself, but Allison knew what he was going to say.

She cupped his cheeks, and it was as if she was staring at that nine-year-old boy who lost his mom all those years ago. “Saving me won’t bring your mom back.”

Reid turned from her. “You think I don’t know that?” He inhaled and let it out slowly. “I can’t watch another woman I care about...”

His words trailed off, but she didn’t need them. She knew exactly what he was going to say. Without thinking, she threw her arms around him, pulling him close and kissing his neck. “You won’t.” It was an impossibility to know for sure, but there was no way the universe was finally going to bring them together to only tear them apart. At least she hoped...

She had no idea how long they stayed there, wrapped in each other’s arms. Not once did she think about the people who might see them. As far as she was concerned, she and Reid were happening, and there was no use in trying to hide it at this point. So if one of the members of the gossip mill saw

them, they were just saving them time with getting the word out.

He pulled back and kissed her nose.

She smiled. “You know. I never asked you. Why Willow Cove?”

“I got in my car and started driving. I wanted to go away from any big cities and out of Mass. I always loved the water, so I stuck to the coast. Stumbled upon this place. Drove right by the police station while driving in and decided to stop and see if they were hiring. I knew it was a long shot, but I had nothing to lose. I was shocked as shit when Simons told me there was an opening. I didn’t think I’d stay long. A year, maybe two, before moving to the next place. I just assumed I’d always be on the run. But this place. The town has become my family. At first, I tried to keep to myself, keep a low profile, just do my job and survive, you know?”

Allison smiled. “Not in this town.”

“I learned that pretty quickly. Little by little, the people in this town started pushing through those walls I had erected, and I finally said fuck it.” He shrugged. “They’re all good people here. I picked the right place to disappear.”

“Did you ever wonder if the town picked you?”

He laughed and rubbed at his chin. “I never looked at it like that. Maybe. Which is why I can’t let anything happen.”

“Try to stay positive,” she said, giving him a quick kiss. “I’ll see you later.”

She went to get out of the car, and his hand wrapped around her wrist. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

“I’ll come find you when I’m done here.”

“Take your time.”



With a nod, they parted and got out of the car. Allison headed toward the festival while Reid made his way behind the scenes. She waited until he was out of sight and detoured. Until this bastard was caught, she couldn't live her life and Reid couldn't find peace. It was time she drew the asshole out.

Slipping her phone from her bag, she tapped into her social media. Her notifications lit up her phone. Ever since the creep mentioned her routine, she hadn't posted. Her fans were wondering where she was and if she was okay. Now was the time to let them know.

She held the phone up and hit record.

"It's been a minute since I've come on, and I just want you all to know that I am okay. I've just been busy with work and life. But big news. I am up for an award on my story about online bullying! I am so excited and can't wait for the ceremony. I will, of course, bring you along every step of the way. In the meantime, I am at the Lobster festival today and hope you will come out and say hi. I'm doing a little behind the scenes, away from the crowds." She turned the camera to the desolate area she was in, showing the festival in the distance and the water to her left. "Happy Memorial Day Weekend. Be safe." She posted the video and, with a deep breath, made her way into the festival.

If all went according to her plan, the asshole would show up, and she could finally take him down.

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Reid checked in with all his deputies and made sure everything was running smoothly. Safety was his number one concern, and he'd do everything in his power to make sure the event went off without a hitch.

He was about to head into the festival and find Allison when he heard her name behind him. He turned, but she wasn't there. Judy held her phone with a smile on her face.

“What’s that?” Reid asked, nodding to the phone.

“Oh, just Allison Winters. I watch her stories all the time. She hasn’t posted in a while.”

“Let me see that.” He held his hand out, and Judy handed him the phone. She leaned over and started the video from the beginning, and Reid watched as Allison spoke, then scanned the phone around her surroundings. What the hell was she doing? Had she not learned anything from the last threat? This bastard was tracking her, most likely through her social accounts, and now he knew exactly how to snag her.

The camera came back to her, and she stared into the screen. He knew her long enough to decipher her looks, and this one was very much a come get me glare. With a quirk of her lips, she winked and the video ended.

“What the hell is your game, Allison?”

“Excuse me, boss?” Judy asked, and Reid shook his head.

“Nothing. Can you tell when she posted this?”

“Yup. Just pointed to the top at a tiny number. Looks like an hour ago.”

Shit.

He shoved Judy’s phone back at her, mumbled a thanks, and took off. An hour was more than enough time for the culprit to see that post and show up. Hell, it was enough time for the asshole to have already taken her.

He slid out his phone and called her. By the second ring, he went to voicemail.

*Son of a bitch!*

He broke into a jog, hurrying through the crowd and ignoring the hellos and waves directed at him. He needed to find Allison and make sure she was okay. A fresh wave of fear

slammed into him. Visions of his mom lifeless on the sidewalk flashed in his mind.

His heart battered his chest as he scanned the festival, trying to find Allison through the crowds of people. It had been an hour since she posted that video. What if Louie had already showed up and snatched her? What if he was too late? What if he let another woman he loved die?

Allison had mentioned fried Oreos but neither she nor anyone from her family were in line. Where else would they go? There were food trucks throughout, tables for local businesses everywhere, and even a small carnival of rides and games at the far end of the field.

A booming voice echoed across the space, announcing the start of the boat parade. Reid changed direction and followed the crowd toward the water before stopping.

“Hello, Sheriff!” Martha’s voice rose above the surrounding chatter. She waved, her bangles sliding up her arm while her other arm was securely wrapped around Joe’s.

He gave a nod and mustered up a smile.

“Coming to see the boats?” she asked.

“In a bit. I have something to do first. Have you seen Allison, by chance?”

Martha’s eyebrows rose and her head tilted. “Looking to meet up for some more private time?”

“Excuse me?”

Martha swatted her hand. “No use hiding it. Mary saw you two being mighty comfortable in your car earlier, and I just have to say it’s about damn time.”

That was something he’d have to deal with later. Right now, Allison’s safety was the only thing that mattered.

If Allison posted that video to draw the bastard out, she wouldn't be with the crowd. No. She would be far away from everyone.

“Got to go.” He turned directions, Martha's laugh fading as he jogged away from the crowd, heading straight toward Martha's booth.

Allison hadn't scanned the water. She was scanning the booth at the far end of the festival where, at the moment, there was little to no foot traffic. He got to Martha's booth, but he didn't see her.

He spun around, scanning the area, searching every nook for her dark hair and whisky-colored eyes.

“Allison!” he barked around the rising panic.

His hands shook as every worst-case scenario played out in his mind. He looked around the area again, hoping he missed her. Hoping like hell he was overreacting, but with each second that passed, he couldn't ignore the very possibility that she got exactly what she wanted.

He swallowed his nerves and took a deep breath. She was here, she had to be. He spun around and came to a halt. Allison stood in front of him with a smile on her face.

“Hey stranger,” she said.

Relief surged through him fast and hard, and he cupped her cheeks, slamming his mouth to hers. Every worst-case scenario filtered away as her lips moved against his.

“Well, hello to you, too,” Allison said when he pulled away breathless, his forehead resting on hers.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” he demanded.

She tilted her head away from him and looked at him as if he was nuts. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm not a fucking idiot. I know what you were doing.”

“I’m not following.”

“I saw your video!” His voice boomed and carried away with the slight breeze. “You were trying to lure the bastard out.” He had more to say, but rage and fear strangled his words.

She shrugged. “Maybe I was, but it doesn’t matter. It didn’t work. I’ve been here for over fifteen minutes and nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter!” He stepped away, thrusting his hand through his hair. “You could have been taken.”

“But I wasn’t.”

“But you could have been!” He rested his hands on his knees and tried to slow his racing heart. “If something happened to you...” He shook his head as fear and regret slammed into him. “You don’t know what he’s capable of. You could have been...”

Her hand rested on his back and she bent to him, urging his chin up until he towered over her. “I’m okay.” She reached into her bag and pulled something out. “I have my pepper spray.”

“Pepper spray?” He all but laughed. “Louie had guys spray him on purpose. That wouldn’t stop him.”

“Oh.” She put the spray back in her bag. “Well then, I have this.”

“Where the hell did you get a taser?”

“It’s to protect myself. I thought you’d be happy.”

“Just like with the gun, if it winds up in the wrong hands...” His stare glared down at her, his breaths coming in fast, hard inhales.

She took his face in her hands and kissed him, making him forget his anger. Damn her. He snaked his hand around her

waist and pulled her tight, letting her feel just how crazy she made him.

She broke the kiss, and he growled his disapproval. Her lip quirked, and her thumb brushed across his cheek. Whisky-colored eyes softened. “I’m sorry.”

“Did Allison Winters just apologize?”

Her eyebrows rose and fell. “Don’t get used to it, but yes. I want this to be over, and I didn’t think how it would affect you. After everything you told me, I should have talked to you first, but—”

“There’s always a but.” He laughed.

“You would have told me no.”

“You’re damn right I would have.”

“See! But let’s be honest. He’s either going to make a move when the opportunity arises, so we can wait until he does, or we can control the situation and plan it.”

Reid shook his head. “No.”

“You didn’t even hear me out.”

“Because you’re going to suggest we use you as bait, and that’s not going to fucking happen.”

“It’s the only way.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Reid.”

“Allison.”

“It’s going to happen, so you need to get on board.”

His jaw ticked and tightened. “How can I? Ten fucking years of wanting to know what it was like to have you in my arms, and now that I do, how can I risk it?”

“Because deep down, you know it’s the only way.”

He rested his head against hers, inhaling her coconut scent and letting it calm him. “There has to be another way.”

Her fingers ran through his hair. “There isn’t it. And the longer this person is out there, the more likely they’ll hurt someone I love, and I can’t put my family at risk. We need to end this.”

“If we do this, then we’re doing it my way.” He took out a criminal ring of mobsters, he could take down a single person.

“Okay,” she said, and sealed it with a kiss. He pulled back, and she arched her eyebrow. “What?”

“You’re never this agreeable. What’s your angle, Winters?”

“I don’t have one. I want this to end, and I know you can make that happen.”

“You have a lot of trust in me.”

“It’s been ten years of building that trust. I know you’ll never let anything happen to me, even before I gave you the best sex of your life.”

He barked out a laugh and crashed his lips to hers, devouring her in a kiss that made his cock harden. “Can you get away for a bit? Remind me about how good the sex is?”

“I think I can slip away.”

Her phone beeped, and she slipped her phone out, looking at the screen. “What is Luna talking about? Cat’s out of the bag? Does she know about the stalker?”

Reid remembered his conversation with Martha. “About that...”

Allison’s chin tilted, eyes locking on his.

“Someone saw us making out in the car. Our secret is out.”

Allison wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him close. "I never wanted it to be a secret."

He kissed her then, showing her exactly how he felt about it, then scooped her into his arms. She let out a squeak of surprise before nuzzling into his chest.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and headed toward his car before he took her in the middle of the festival.



## Chapter 22

Reid didn't think he'd make it home, not when Allison's hand kept slipping across the console and landing on his straining erection. He removed her hand twice, afraid if he didn't, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the road in front of him. How would that look? Getting into an accident because he was too focused on getting jerked off.

"Allison," he snapped, but this time he didn't remove her hand. She grabbed him over his pants and rubbed her hand up and down his length. "You're going to be the death of me."

She removed her hand. "Well, we wouldn't want that now, would we?"

"I'm going to make you pay for this."

She wiggled in her seat. "Promise?"

He pulled into his driveway, slammed the car in park, jumped out of the driver's side, and rounded the car. He swung Allison's door open, but before he could bend down and scoop her up, she was in his arms. Her lips met his with determination, syncing immediately and driving him mad.

He pinned her against the car, his mouth dragging down her neck and sucking at the crook. A moan echoed around him as she shifted, pressing into his growing erection. She rocked against him, shooting a raging desire through him. A frenzied desperation took over. He needed her. Needed her now.

Impatience settled into his bones and he scooped her up, her legs immediately wrapping around him, her heels digging into his ass. Long strides took him to the door, and he fumbled with the locks and alarm while Allison continued to torture him with sensual strokes of her tongue against his heated skin.

Once the door was open, he flung it shut, trapping Allison between the hardwood and his body. Her fingers trailed his shirt, yanking at the hem before he separated slightly and let her rip his shirt over his head.

“Better,” she said, running her fingers down his chest as her mouth found his again.

Last time he managed to control himself enough to get them to the bedroom, this time control was lost. He was lucky he got them in the house.

He dipped his head, trailing his mouth to the low cut of her shirt and following the rise of her perfect mounds. His fingers itched to touch her, sliding up her curves and yanking her shirt down to reveal a white lace bra.

White was the sign of innocence, but there was nothing innocent about Allison. She was a minx, who took what she wanted, and he would give her whatever she desired.

Her body arched, pressing her tit toward his mouth. He ripped the white lace away and slashed his tongue across her beaded nipple. A cry tore from her mouth, her hands grabbing at his hair, holding him there. He swirled his tongue, nipping and sucking. Allison’s hold tightened, little bursts of pain throbbing in his scalp.

The button on her shorts popped open with a flick of his fingers, and he yanked at the zipper. His hands dipped inside, pulling the material over the round curve of her ass.

Her legs unwrapped from around his waist, and he lowered her to the ground. She kicked her shorts across the room, and her hands fumbled for his belt. With a grunt, she yanked the belt free, undid his zipper, and shoved his pants to the floor.

She reached for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and hoisting herself up his body. He held her, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her ass.

“I need you now,” she said against his mouth. “I’m on the pill and clean.”

“I’m clean.”

“Good, I can’t wait. Please.” Her words were a plea, the desperation sinking into his heart. For a second, he stood there, looking deep into those whisky-colored eyes, wondering how the hell in the world did he get so lucky to have his dream girl in his arms.

She was a pain in his ass, drove him absolutely insane, but he would take that any day over someone who didn’t challenge him. Someone who didn’t stand up for herself. He loved her mouth even if she never shut it. Loved that she was unapologetically herself.

He’d been a broken man for so long, but whenever Allison was near, he didn’t feel so damaged. It was as if just being near her helped fuse the pieces of his ragged soul back together. He had no idea what was going to happen next. They had threats and his past that he no longer could hide from. But he didn’t want to hide anymore. He wanted to be free of the burden, so he could love Allison the way she deserved.

She traced her fingers along his face. “What are you waiting for?” A smile quirked at the corner of her lip, and the frenzied desire slammed into him.

He hoisted her leg higher and swiped a finger through her folds to make sure she was ready. Wetness coated his pointer, and he positioned himself at her center. He kissed her, pouring every ounce of himself into the kiss, showing her how much he needed her because words were never his thing.

She kissed him back with the same intensity, swiping her tongue across his lip and coercing her way to find his. She was a force to be reckoned with, and she was his.

Their tongues met in an erotic swirl of give and take, and when a moan slipped from her lips, mumbling against his mouth, he thrust into her.

White lights exploded behind his eyelids as he sunk deep into the silky sweet heaven that was Allison. Her hands grabbed at his neck as if she was trying to forge them into one. He held her against the wall, thrusting in and out.

Her slick walls tightened, and the little control he managed to contain exploded. His grip constricted, squeezing her ass as he pounded into her.

“Oh Reid,” Allison cried out, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck, holding on, as he lost himself in her completely. “Harder,” she begged, and the animal inside of him roared to life. He let go of her ass, and she slid down his body. He spun her around, planting her hands on the door. His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her head to him as he kissed her neck.

“Don’t ask for what you don’t want,” he said.

“I want it,” she whimpered. “All of it. Fuck me hard, Reid.”

With his foot, he kicked her legs apart, pressed her back until her ass arched in all its beautiful perfection. He slapped her cheek, and she let out a squeak that spun into a needy moan.

He grabbed his swollen cock and placed it at her entrance, swiping the engorged head through her wetness. God, he wasn’t even inside her, and she felt fucking amazing. A need so reckless and impatient slammed into him.

He drove into her, sinking deep into her heat. Her two perfect tits bounced with the movement. He took them in his hands and pounded into her, losing himself to the softness of her skin.

She was all curves and angles, and he wanted to touch every one, kiss every inch of her. His head dipped, kissing that spot on her neck she loved so much. She cried out, pushing back into him and taking every bit of him.

“Fuck, Allison. I’m not going to last much longer.”

Her muscles tightened around him, damn near sucking the life out of him. Pressure built in his balls, but there was no way he was falling without her. He found her swollen bundle and rubbed circles. She inhaled sharply, biting it off with a curse. Her arms went lax against the door, and with his other hand, he pinched her nipple.

Ripples ran across her back as she jerked at the force of her orgasm. Incoherent words sputtered from her mouth, and he pushed a finger into her chin, urging her toward him as he devoured her mouth.

Her body went limp, and his grip tightened on the indent of her hips. He plunged deep, over and over. The pressure exploded, shattering his world and sending shockwaves through his entire body.

He shook against her, ragged gasps replacing the sound of slapping skin. His chest pressed into her back, slick with sweat, and his hand landed on her stomach, pulling her close to him. She turned in his arms, grabbing his face and kissing him.

“That was fun,” she said.

A laugh bubbled up inside him and burst free. He’d never been so fucking happy in his life.

## Chapter 23

Reid stood in Allison's living room, waiting for her to come out. They had agreed to not put any plans into motion until after her award ceremony. She wanted to nab the son of a bitch, but this award was important to her. He realized that even though she was a force in the field, for her, she still felt the need to prove herself. This would be another way to show the world that Allison Winters was more than just a small-town reporter. He was happy to support her.

"You ready?" her voice drifted down the hallway.

"I was ready twenty minutes ago."

Her laugh was like an ice pop on a hot summer day, refreshing and addicting.

The click-clack of her heels followed her down the hallway. She stepped into the living room and he was rendered speechless. She was an absolute vision in an off the shoulder black silk that hugged every perfect curve. A high slit revealed her toned legs and her usual too high heels, but he wasn't complaining. They made her legs look a mile long, and he imagined those legs and shoes wrapped around him tonight.

He adjusted himself, and Allison's eyes caught his movement, a smile curling at the corner of her mouth.

"You look fucking beautiful."

"You look pretty damn sexy yourself." She gave him a sultry wink and met him halfway. He went to kiss her, give her a preview of what was in store for tonight, but she held her finger up between them. "I don't want to mess up my lipstick."

"Fuck your lipstick," he grunted just as he took her mouth, claiming it as his. He backed her up until she was against the

wall. His fingers crept beneath the slit of her dress, sliding across her thigh and cupping her ass. Her hands reached up for his shirt, then stopped.

“While I want nothing more than you to take me against the wall, I don’t want to be late,” she said. “I want to absorb every moment of tonight, and when I win, we can come home and celebrate.”

He fixed her dress, letting the black silk fall into place. He kissed her forehead, then lined her mouth with his thumb, wiping away the smear of lipstick.

With a smile, she ran a finger across his mouth. “You look like you were making out with a clown.”

“I doubt a clown would have an ass like yours.”

“The birthmark does make it pretty unique.” She winked at him again, and it was like a direct link to his dick.

He swallowed. “Keep doing that, and my dick’s going to break free of these pants.”

She laughed. “I would love to see that.”

His hand snaked around her waist and he pulled her against him, snuggling the crook of her neck. “Later.” He kissed the spot and let her go. “Come on. Let’s get you that award.” He held his arm out to her, and she hooked her own through the slit.

“Let’s do this.” She spun away from the door.

“The car’s that way,” he deadpanned.

“I know, but I almost forgot.” She grabbed something off the coffee table and held it up. “The bracelet my niece made me. She said it’ll bring me luck.”

“Good thing you didn’t forget. You need all the luck you can get.”

Allison poked him in the side. “Take that back.”

He took her face in his hands, kissing her nose. “You don’t need luck. As far as I’m concerned you already won.”

“Now I just need the award as proof.” She kissed him, took his hand, and headed out the door.

Twenty minutes later, they were in the venue. A fancy catering hall on the outskirts of town and right on the water. They entered, and everyone seemed to know Allison. She smiled and waved, introducing him to too many people, though he tried to remember them all.

He spotted a bar and visibly relaxed. Allison immediately noticed.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom to freshen up.” She kissed his cheek. “I’ll be right back. Get me a wine.”

He waited in line, looking around at all the faces, making sure nobody looked suspicious or that Louie didn’t happen to make a surprise appearance.

The bartender pointed at him, and he ordered a glass of wine for Allison and a whisky for himself. He handed over his card, then slid the drinks out of the way. He sent Allison a text, letting her know the drinks were secured. He waited for a silly reply, but she was probably too busy fixing her makeup.

He took a sip of his whisky and looked around at the crowd. Most people were dressed to the nines, but none of them could hold a candle to Allison.

Too much time passed, and he glanced at his watch to make sure it wasn’t just his impatience. With the two drinks in his hand, he made his way to the bathroom.

A woman walked out, and he caught her, nodding to the bathroom door. “Could you tell me if there’s a woman in there in a black dress, dark hair?”



“No, I’m sorry. A few blondes and a brunette in a pink dress.”

“Thank you.” Maybe Allison already went to the table without him. He glanced into the main room but didn’t spot her. Maybe there was another bathroom. He made his way to the opposite side of the building.

“Do you know if there’s another bathroom?” he asked a woman dressed in black pants and a white top.

“Yes, just around the corner and down the hall.”

“Thank you.”

His phone rang as he headed there. He put the drinks on a ledge and snatched up his phone. The station’s number flashed on the screen. “Hello?” He continued to scan, searching for Allison. Leaving the drinks behind. He headed to that other bathroom.

“Reid, it’s Judy.”

“What’s up, Judy? I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“I know, and I hate to bother you, but someone called the station looking for you.”

Reid froze. “Who?”

“Said his name was Angelo, and it was an emergency. He needed to talk to you as soon as possible.”

Ice ran through his veins. Angel wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency. “Thanks Judy. I’ll call him back.” He ended the call and immediately dialed the number he had memorized years ago, just in case.

“Reid?” Angel’s voice came through the line. “Thank God.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Louie. He’s gone missing. He didn’t check in with his parole officer. He could be dead or he could be looking to settle old debts.”

“Fuck!”

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Allison, I’m at an event with her, and I can’t find her.”

“The reporter?” He hadn’t told Angel much about Allison, but he supposed he mentioned her enough for Angel to know who she was.

“The woman I’m going to marry.” Marco was right. She drove him nuts, but he couldn’t imagine life without her, and if Louie had her, he would kill the bastard like he should have done fifteen years ago. Instead, he let the court system provide justice. But what kind of justice was that when the psycho was let out back on the streets? Even if he did provide info to the feds, he was a dangerous individual who did more than what the authorities even knew. Reid knew, though, which was why he had to find Allison.

“Shit man, I didn’t know.”

The line went silent.

“I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t, and like I said, Louie could be dead.”

“But he might not be. That bastard has escaped every attempt on his life.”

“He’s older now. Slower. He’s been out of the game for years.”

“Still, he might have her. All the letters, the tongue.”

“Okay, you need to fill me in.”

“I need to find her.”

“You need to get your head on straight in order to do that, so start talking.”

He didn't have time to talk. Every second wasted was a second Louie had. But Angel was right. His head wasn't on right. He wasn't thinking straight. He needed a plan.

He could tell Angel everything, figure it out, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep looking while he did. So he started from the beginning while he searched every hallway and door in the building.

## Chapter 24

Allison fluffed her curls one more time, leaned in, and checked to make sure there was no lipstick on her teeth, then left the second-floor bathroom. There'd been a line at the two downstairs, and she didn't want to miss the start of the show, so a waitress alerted her to another bathroom that had little to no traffic.

She rounded the corner, and a hard poke to her back froze her in place. The roundness of the barrel was undeniable.

"Make a sound, and I will hunt down and kill your entire family, starting with that niece of yours."

She closed her eyes for a brief second and reached deep for a sense of calm. With a gun pressed into her back, she didn't want to react irrationally. She needed to keep her cool. "What do you want from me?" she asked, keeping her tone even.

"Walk and act natural."

"It's kind of hard with a gun in my back," she snapped.

"Watch your tongue." There was a sick, almost giddiness in his tone.

"I got your present," she stated before putting one foot in front of the other. She plastered a fake smile on her face and walked. She kept her eyes ahead while she brought her wrist in slowly to her center. She slipped the bracelet off that Presley made her and let it slide from her hand and down her dress to the floor. Hopefully Reid would find it.

"I thought you would like it."

"Oh yes. Who wouldn't love a cow's tongue showing up on their doorstep?" She didn't even bother keeping the

sarcasm at bay.

“You’re lucky it wasn’t yours,” he snarled.

They walked through a back area, and Allison came to a stop by a door. “Where are we going?”

“Keep walking.”

Panic rose inside her. The minute she left this location, the chances of Reid finding her decreased.

She already dropped her bracelet, and she had nothing left to leave without this asshole noticing. If she could only get to the pepper spray in her bag. She might have a chance.

She hadn’t been able to get a look at him, but his voice was too young to be Louie. She had no idea who he was or what the heck he wanted with her, but she couldn’t risk her family’s life. It might have been a baseless threat, but she couldn’t know for sure. She wouldn’t take the chance. Not when Presley could get hurt.

Her pepper spray was important, but maybe she could use that as a distraction. She swung her clutch up to her other hand and flipped it open.

“Hey!” the asshole smacked the bag out of her hand, spilling the entirety of her bag to the floor. “What are you doing?” He jabbed the gun into her back.

“I was getting a cough drop.”

“You lying bitch.” He kicked her ankle, and her leg buckled, pain radiating up her calf. She managed to keep standing, though. “Pick it up. Now.”

She bent down and gathered her belongings.

“Give me that.” He pointed over her shoulder at the pepper spray. “You think I’m an idiot.” He snatched it out of her hand. “Now hurry up.”

She tossed her ID and cash in the bag, along with her comb and lip gloss. Leaning forward, she used her body to cover the lipstick. She made a to do about closing the clutch, then stood, hovering her foot over the lipstick and hoping like hell the bastard wouldn't see it.

“Go!” he demanded, jabbing the gun at her back again. If he didn't have a gun, she would have kicked him in the balls.

“Where am I going?” she asked.

“Walk.”

“Not much of a talker. Got it.”

“You don't shut your fucking mouth.”

“I did get most talkative senior year of high school.”

A sharp pain exploded in her scalp. He yanked her hair, pulling her toward him. Hot breath rushed over her ear. “Shut up, or I'll kill you.”

“You could have asked nicely,” she muttered, knowing damn well it was probably best to keep her mouth shut, but she couldn't help it. The words were out before she could stop them.

He shoved her hard in the back, and she stumbled on her heels. She needed a plan, but in the meantime, she hoped Reid found her trail. At least he had a gun. All she had as a potential weapon was her stilettos and she imagined she could do some major damage with the spiked heel. But she'd have to wait for her moment. Too soon, and she could wind up with a bullet in her chest.

It would help if she knew who this guy was. He wasn't Louie, she knew that much, but who the hell was he? She could ask, but he did just tell her to shut up. She'd ask, but after she knew where they were going.

He shoved her hard again. This time, her heel tripped up on the pavement and her balance swayed. She went down hard, a burning pain shooting through her knee where gravel skidded across her skin.

“Get up!”

She took the opportunity to glance up and get a good look at her captor. He had brown hair, brown eyes, a young face. She squinted, wracking her brain for any memory of this kid. And he was a kid. No older than twenty-two.

“Who are you?” she finally asked, unable to help herself. She was a reporter, and this was a puzzle she needed to figure out.

“The person who is going to shut you up for good if you don’t get up and do exactly as I say.”

She held her hands up in front of her and got back to her feet. “Where do you want me to go?”

“That van. Back doors open. Get in.”

Oh no. She’d seen probably every murder documentary, and getting into a van was a death sentence. This was textbook kidnapping, and if you asked her, completely unoriginal. Which is why she knew he was nothing more than a copycat.

Reid had been so adamant it was Louie, but it never felt right to her. The tongue was signature Louie, yes, but it was in every case study on the guy, and any jackass could find that information from a quick internet search. This guy was nothing more than a wannabe criminal. But what was his angle? Why her?

“I said get in the van!”

“Why?”

“I told you stop talking!” He shoved her again, and she bit back the anger surging inside her. Her fists clutched at her

side, and if she wasn't scared about getting shot, she would nail her knuckles into this little shit's face. "Either get in the van or I kill you, then go find your niece."

Her jaw turned to stone, teeth ground together. If he as much looked at Presley, she would destroy him. If she was already dead, she'd come back from the grave and haunt his ass up until his very last breath. Then she'd meet him on the other side and follow him around for eternity, never once shutting her damn mouth.

With a deep breath, she opened the door of the van. The back had been completely gutted except for a fold up chair that was laid on its side. "Get in!"

Heels and a dress were not the best outfit to be stepping into the death trap, but she had no choice. She thought about Presley and her sweet, innocent face. This guy might be making baseless threats, but she didn't know.

She stepped up, hoping like hell Reid would come out of the building and knock this bastard out. But they were in a loading zone, and all that surrounded them was the silence of the night. She lifted her leg and hoisted herself into the van, looking around for any sort of weapon or out.

The guy jumped in behind her, spinning her around and shoving her to the floor. Honestly, if he rough-housed her one more time, she didn't care if he shot her; she was clawing his face.

He whipped out a pair of handcuffs and slapped it on her wrist, securing the other end to a hook on the van's floor.

"Now this is what's going to happen." He bent down, his beady eyes meeting hers. "You're going to log on to your social media, and you're going to post a video rescinding your nomination."



“Excuse me?” She didn’t care if he had a gun trained on her. She earned that award, and she wasn’t going to let some punk take that away from her. “And why the hell would I do that?”

“Because it’s all bullshit. You winning an award for a story about bullying when *you* are the bully.”

“Me?” Allison exclaimed. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I was minding my own damn business when you forced me into the back of this van.”

His body stiffened and his dark eyes turned black as death. “You are going to rescind your nomination and withdraw from the award.”

“Why do you care so much about my award?”

“Because you don’t deserve it!”

“Says you.”

“Says every person’s life you’ve destroyed with your mouth and all that bullshit that comes out of it.”

What the hell was he even talking about? She didn’t destroy lives. She reported the news.

“I’ve never destroyed anyone’s life. You must have me mistaken for someone else. I report facts.”

“Bullshit!” His voice boomed in the small space. “You destroyed my life. My family.” He pointed the gun at her, hand shaking, finger way too damn close to the trigger. She needed to keep him talking. If he was talking, he’d be too distracted.

“I’m sorry, but I have never met you, so how can I have destroyed your family?”

“Your stupid story. My life was great. My mom was a star on the internet. People loved her, adored her, until you turned everyone against her.”

She stared at him, slack-jawed, trying to find the missing piece that would make this all make sense. Then it clicked fast and hard. The award. The story. Allison exposed a woman who had been attacking one of Willow Coves' own. Harley had gotten entangled in a love affair with a rich and powerful older man. She thought she found the one only to discover he was married with a kid. The wife, a fitness influencer, found out and turned against Harley, sending her entire fanbase to destroy the innocent woman, all while pretending her husband was the victim. It was disgusting and downright cruel.

If anyone destroyed the woman's life, it was her good for nothing husband. Not Harley and definitely not Allison. This kid was as misguided as his own mother. Guess the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

"Your mom, she's the woman who was going after Harley?"

"My mom was the woman whose life was destroyed because of that slut!"

She wanted to correct him, tell him Harley was far from a slut. She was a good human being that was manipulated and lied to by his father. But to do that would upset him further, and since he was the one with the gun, she chose, for once, to keep her mouth shut.

"So you are going to withdraw your nomination. Tell the world the truth."

"And what's the truth?"

"That you made that story up, embellished the details to make yourself look like the fucking hero. That the villain in all of this is you, and my mom and dad are innocent bystanders. Just collateral damage in your attempt to be recognized beyond your sad, pathetic little town."

Words bubbled to the surface, but she bit her cheek to keep from letting her anger say something that might worsen the situation. If he wanted her to make a video. Fine, she would do it. But only on one condition.

“I’ll make your video. I’ll withdraw my nomination, but only if you leave my family out of this.”

His lip curled in a snarl, nose scrunching as he glared at her with angry eyes. “Deal.”

## Chapter 25

Reid hung up with Angel. He was calling in every favor they had. Reid didn't have hard facts yet, but his gut told him Allison wasn't just casually making her rounds. She was missing.

He ignored the fear clawing its way up his throat and turned his emotions off. If he was going to find her, he didn't have time to panic. He needed to think.

He headed toward the other bathroom, knocked on the door, and let himself in, checking each stall. An announcement overhead alerted the ceremony would start in three minutes. Allison would never willingly miss that. She'd been so excited about it the last few days, so confident she would win.

He hurried out of the bathroom, and his eye caught on something on the floor. He bent down and took Allison's bracelet into his hand. She was here, and if he knew her, she dropped this on purpose. But where did the trail lead?

There were several bends and each one of them led in a different direction. He followed the first bend, and his phone rang. He snatched it out of his pocket, and Luna's name flashed on the screen. Maybe Allison called her or maybe she knew where Allison was. Maybe there was an emergency and Allison's phone died. "Luna?"

"Reid, hey. Allison's not answering her phone. Do you know why she's withdrawing her nomination for the award?"

"What are you talking about?"

"She just posted a video on her social media that she's withdrawing and that the story was fabricated for her own gain. Which is bullshit."

He thrust his hand into his hair. He didn't want to worry Luna, and he knew Allison wouldn't want her to know she was in danger. "I have no idea, but I'll find out."

"Aren't you with her?"

"She went to the bathroom. Can you send me that video?"

"Reid, what aren't you telling me?" Luna's mom voice, as Allison once called it, kicked into full gear.

Fuck. Allison was going to kill him, but what choice did he have?

"Someone has been stalking her, and now I can't fucking find her." The control he had of his emotions slipped and fear laced his words.

Luna gasped. "She's been kidnapped?"

"It appears so, but Luna. I promise you I will find your sister. But I need that video. It might have a clue."

A few sniffs came over the line. "I sent it."

Reid looked at his phone, the notification flashing on his phone. "Okay Luna, I will find her."

"I trust you, and I know Allison does, too. Don't let her down, Reid."

"I won't."

Reid hung up the phone and clicked on the video. The stupid thing wasn't loading. It was the twenty-first century, yet cell service still sucked in their small town. He headed for the door, picking up speed when he came to a halting stop. A lipstick case grabbed his attention. He bent down and took the cap off. He'd know that color anywhere. It had been smeared all over his mouth earlier.

The lipstick was right next to the door. Reid ran out into the parking lot, scanning the area. "Allison!" He yelled, but no

one responded.

He clicking into the video, hoping for a clue. Hoping for a fucking miracle. While the video loaded, visions of his mom bounced in and out of his head. The pictures of her dead body he'd found in his dad's office a few weeks after the murder. His dad had told him he was having his guys look into it to find her killer. Meanwhile, he was the killer the whole fucking time.

Allison's face drowned out the past, pushing forward, but then her whisky-colored eyes went lifeless, a hole in her head, expanding and oozing blood. No! He wouldn't let himself go there.

The video loaded, and he hit play. Allison's face came on the screen. Her hair was a little disheveled, but other than that, she looked okay. But there was that fake smile, forcing its way onto her face. Her eyes lacked their usual brightness, and she looked like she was staring directly at him, trying to tell him something. But what?

He stopped looking at her and scanned her surroundings. He squinted and peered closer. Was she in a van?

A loud bang echoed through the parking lot, and he snapped his gaze toward the sound, his eyes landing on a van.

## Chapter 26

Allison saw a chance and took it. Headbutting always looked so much easier in the movies. A throbbing ache vibrated through her head, shooting shards of sharp edges around her forehead. Her surroundings dimmed, coming in and out of focus. She blinked, trying to center herself, but it was damn near impossible.

“You bitch!” the little shit snarled. He inhaled, taking deep breaths, his body amping up as if he was the Hulk. Except he didn’t turn green, and his shirt didn’t rip away. He was still the same misguided little shit as before.

“I made your video. Now let me go.”

“I can’t do that now, can I?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll just go running to that cop boyfriend of yours, and I’m screwed.”

“I won’t.”

“Liar!” He lunged at her, hands curling as if he was already imagining her neck in his grasp. She kicked up, nailing him in the balls. He stumbled back, and she kicked again, but he was just out of her reach. Damn it. Pain cut into her wrist as the handcuff restricted her.

She slipped off her shoes, holding one as a weapon, and hurled the other one at the asshole’s head. The spike of the heel hit her target, drilled him right in between the eyes.

He stumbled, slamming into the wall of the van. A loud clang and a bang echoed around them as he tripped over the chair he’d forced her into to film that stupid video. First thing she was going to do was delete it. She did nothing wrong, and

he was just a spoiled brat who was pissed Mommy's sponsors were dropping her left and right, digging into his spending money.

She yanked at the handcuff, wishing like hell she had worn an updo today. But no, she wore her hair down because she knew Reid liked it that way, and now she was without a bobby pin. Of course, pleasing a man would backfire on her in the most epic of ways.

She pinched her fingers together, cupping her hand and making her hand as small as possible. She tried like hell to get free of the metal cuff, but the ring was too tight and her hand too large.

It was only a matter of seconds before he was back on his feet, ready to get his revenge. She didn't think this through very well, but she found a chance and took it. Her only hope was that this kid was all bark and no bite. Still, he was the one with the gun—a gun that had fallen from his grasp and was now on the floor between them. If she could just get to it.

She leaned forward, a wave of nausea slamming into her as the pain in her head radiated around her like a halo. Everything around her tilted and spun, putting her on a ride she did not want to be on. Fighting through all the wrong sensations trying to make her sit still, she fought against her restraint, stretching as far as she could, but it wasn't enough.

She stuck out the shoe she still wielded as a weapon, hoping to give her the few inches she was short. The heel touched the handle of the gun, and a new wave of confidence brought her to the surface. She could do this. This wasn't her first rodeo. The first time some jackass thought he could point a gun at her and get away with it.

He had another thing coming. There was no way in hell she was walking away from this. If he released her now, she would run to the police. He knew this. The only option was to



kill her, so his secret died with her. But there was no way in hell she was going to die in the back of some scuzzy van.

She was Allison Winters, for fuck's sake. She took down the last guy who attempted to silence her. Just within reach, she tried to make herself stretch as far as possible, silently thanking Luna for all those stupid yoga classes.

Her body inched closer to the gun, the shoe finally getting a better angle to drag the weapon toward her. She hooked the heel around the handle.

“No!” the asshole barked, and launched himself at the gun.

The door of the van ripped open, and Allison met Reid's blue eyes just as a gunshot echoed through the small space.

## Chapter 27

The sound was an assault on Allison's ear drums. A loud ringing made it impossible to hear or to think, but she didn't care. "Reid!" she screamed. Her body was desperate to see him, to get in his arms, flung forward only to be yanked back on her ass. Her wrist was still cuffed to the damn van.

"Reid!" she cried, tears pouring down her face. One minute he was there and the next minute he was gone. The little shit rolled on the ground beside her, wailing something about her being a bitch. She scurried to her knees and peered through the door out to the dark sky.

Reid popped up from below, and her shattered heart kicked into a panicked beat. "Reid!"

He jumped into the van, taking her face in her hands. "Are you okay?"

Looking into his blue eyes, feeling his warmth seeping into her cold, wet cheeks, she told him the truth. "I'm fine."

He kissed her forehead, and she winced as pain spread down her head and into her face. Reid's jaw tightened. "I'm going to kill him."

The kid moaned, rocking back and forth on the floor.

"Technically, it's my fault. I headbutted him."

His attention snapped to her eyes, and he shook his head. "You are a feisty little thing. Thank heavens for that." He kissed her, smashing his lips to hers, then pulling her into a tight embrace. "I thought I lost you."

She drew back, cupping his jaw. "I wouldn't let that happen."

“Who is he?” Reid asked.

“The son of the woman who was bullying Harley.”

He turned from her, grabbing the kid’s shoulder and turning him onto his back. “You shot yourself.” Reid shook his head, removed his suit jacket, and used it to tie a tourniquet on his leg.

Allison was tempted to tell him to just let him bleed out, but Reid was too good of a guy to do that. Despite the hell this asshole just put her through, he’d do right by him.

“Where are the keys to the handcuffs?” Reid demanded in a tone that only an idiot would refuse.

“Pocket,” he groaned.

Reid reached into the asshole’s pocket and retrieved the key. He spun to her and released her from the restraints. She ran a hand over her wrist, trying to wipe away the pain. Reid took her hand in his and looked over the ugly red swelling. His jaw set again, and his Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“The minute I saw your face, I was and still am.”

He thrust his phone at her. “Call your sister while I call this in.”

“My sister?”

“Luna may have called when she saw the video. I had to tell her.”

“Reid!”

“I had no choice. You were missing, Allison.”

She rolled her eyes. “She’s going to flip out on me.”

“When she’s done, thank her. The video made me realize you were in a van. She helped save you.”

“I think I had the situation under control before you got here.”

He kissed her again. “I have no doubt. Now call your sister.”

Allison first deleted the video, then called Luna and spent ten minutes assuring her overprotective, worry wart sister that she was perfectly fine. Two ambulances showed up and several police cars. A little excessive, and probably every vehicle that the town had. Emergency lights lit up the dark parking lot.

Reid was speaking to Judy and Allison finally hung up with Luna and sent a text.

She walked over to Reid and Judy, and Reid wrapped his arm around her. “You need to get evaluated by the EMT’s.”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t give a shit what you think. Let the professionals make that determination.”

“You’re such a control freak.”

“No,” Judy said. “He just cares too much about you.” She gave Allison a wink before walking over to Landon, the little shit’s real name, and tossing a stack of tickets on his chest before the EMT’s loaded him into the ambulance.

Allison let Brian check her out, going through all the motions before agreeing with her, and letting Reid know she seemed perfectly okay. He gave her an ice pack for her head.

“You should take it easy for a couple of days. You don’t appear to have a concussion, but be on the lookout for any of the signs.”

“I’ll watch her,” Reid stated in a way that there was no room for discussion.

Another van pulled into the parking lot, and Allison hopped out of the ambulance.

“What the hell are you doing?” Reid demanded.

She ignored him and smiled as Larry hurried toward her with his camera. He held out her microphone. “You okay?” he asked, and she nodded at her photographer.

“I’m perfect,” she said.

“Good, let’s do this.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” Reid exclaimed.

“Reid, get out of my shot, or I’m interviewing you.” She knew the threat of Louie still hung, but also knew it was enough to get Reid to move.

At the end of the day, she had a job to do, a job she loved, a job she would never trade for anything in the world, not even an asshole who was convinced she ruined his family. If he didn’t handcuff her to a van and make her record a video against her will, she might feel bad for him.

But he tried to destroy her. Threatened her life and her families’ lives. He was the villain of this story. Not her.

“Three, two.” Larry pointed at her, and it was go time.

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Reid shouldn’t be surprised. Allison could be the one with a bullet in her leg, and she’d still manage to hold that microphone in front of her face and speak to the camera. It was who she was. Being a reporter ran through her veins.

So while she should be taking comfort in his arms, he knew he could provide that for her later. Right now, she needed to be Allison Winters.

He watched her with awe. The red lump on her head appeared to be growing, and her wrists were starting to turn

black and blue, but she didn't seem to notice. She was laser-focused on the story and bringing the news to the good people of Willow Cove.

"This is Allison Winters reporting live from The Ballroom at Water's Edge. Have a good night."

She dropped the microphone to her side, and Larry quickly took it from her grasp. "You nailed it," he said, but concern filled his gaze. "You sure you're okay?" The photographer that was always on her heels to catch the latest headline really did care for her. It made Reid happy to know she had someone to watch over her when he wasn't around.

"Larry, I'm fine. Now get back to your family. Tell them I'm sorry I dragged you away from game night."

"Join us next week and all will be forgiven."

"You know I can't turn down a Larry and company game night. I'll be there." Allison glanced at Reid and smiled. "Hey Larry, can I bring a date?"

Larry looked over his shoulder at Reid. "The rumors in town are true." He smiled. "Of course." Larry walked toward him and held out his hand. "Thanks for keeping our girl safe again." Reid shook his hand. "But if you hurt her, I will kill you."

Reid bit back a laugh. "Are you threatening an officer?"

"For Allison, I would threaten the president."

Reid patted Larry on the back. "Good." Both men looked at each other, a silent understanding passing through them before Larry headed off into the night.

Allison walked toward him, and he held his arm out to her. "This night is not how I expected it would go."

"It's still early."

“What do you mean?” she asked, glancing at him with a raised brow.

“Let’s get back to the party and watch you win that award.”

She looked at her phone. “I deleted the video, but the award was called already.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Once I secured the scene, I spoke with the person in charge. I told him I would control the scene without causing a disruption to the event if they were willing to hold off your category until the end.”

A smile spread wide across her face, and she tossed her arms around his neck. “Have I told you I love you?”

“Yes, but I don’t think I can ever hear it enough.”

“Good, because I’m going to keep saying it. I love you.” She kissed him, and he held her close before she drew back. “Now, let’s go get me that award. I don’t know about you, but I think I deserve it more than ever.” She fluffed her hair. “Do I look okay?”

Her head had a lump the size of an orange, black mascara streaked her cheeks, and her dress was wrinkled and sitting crooked. It showed her strength—the fighter she was and continued to be. It showed her resilience. It showed the real Allison. “You never looked more beautiful.”

## Chapter 28

Reid lay in bed, holding Allison in his arms, thanking the universe that she was still here. The kid who kidnapped her was inexperienced, and that gun he accidentally shot could have easily put a bullet into Allison. Reid was counting his blessings that didn't happen.

Allison's award sat on his nightstand. She had wanted to keep it close. See it when she fell asleep and be one of the first things she saw when she woke, other than him, of course.

He still laughed about the crowd's reaction when she took the stage, looking as if she'd just come out of the warzone. She had, and she was more than happy, to tell her tale. His girl got a standing ovation in the end, and he had clapped the loudest.

She picked up her cell, and he knew she was scrolling through her social media feeds. Her segment had aired last night in a breaking news flash. People had been texting and calling her most of the night. Thankfully, she had put her phone on silent, and he got to give her body a thorough check and kiss every bruise and ache.

A smile spread across her face, and he touched the corner of her mouth. "I love your smile."

She kissed the pad of his finger. "Tell me what else you love about me."

He moved his hand and brushed her hair behind her ear. "I love how your hair falls over me like a curtain when you're riding my cock."

She gasped. "Such a dirty mouth." Her teeth slid over her bottom lip. "I like it. Keep going."



His touch traced along her ear and over her collarbone. “I love how when I kiss right here, you tighten around me.”

Heat prickled his skin, and a desperate want settled in his veins.

His finger moved, gliding across her skin and circling her taut nipple. “I love how your nipples react to me.” He bent his head, swiping his tongue across the tightened bead. He pulled back, blowing gently. Her skin puckered. He switched to the other, repeating his actions. Her nipples peaked, as if trying to reach for his mouth.

Not one to disappoint, Reid brushed his thumb across one while he swirled his tongue around the other. Her body arched, and he reached beneath her, grabbing a handful of her ass. “I love your tight ass.” He squeezed her flesh and her butt rubbed against his palm.

His tongue slid down her stomach and to her legs. He kissed the smooth skin of her inner thigh. “I love how you wrap these around my head when I’m about to make you come with my tongue.”

A moan rumbled up her throat, and she arched off the bed. He was barely touching her, but she reacted as if his hands were all over her body.

“Keep going,” she begged.

He settled his mouth right above her sex before dipping his head and kissing the swollen bundle of nerves. His tongue lashed out, and she shook before he shifted, swiping his tongue through her folds.

A sharp inhale of breath echoed throughout the room. He loved how she reacted to his touch. Loved how she never held back for him. He smiled against her just before he thrust a finger deep. She slammed her hands down on the bed, grabbing fistfuls of comforter.

“I love how wet you are for me.”

“So wet,” she moaned.

He slid his finger out, and his lips moved up her body. She pouted, letting him know she disapproved of his retreat. He looked up at her and smiled as he placed a kiss on her stomach, her nipples, then her mouth.

His hand found her waist. “I love this curve.” He tightened his hold. “It’s like it was shaped for my hand alone.”

He kissed her again and pulled back, her whisky-colored eyes boring into him. And all those little random visions of a future he thought unattainable didn’t just pop into his head, but flooded his mind. Allison in a wedding dress, walking toward him with that beautiful real smile of hers. Kids that shared her eyes and spunky personality, running around a front yard in Bruins jerseys. A life of sitting together on the porch after a long day, and growing old together, watching as their kids grew older and eventually their grandkids took the honors of tearing up the yard.

Her lips crashed to his, and she kissed him with everything she had. “I love you too, Connor Reid Flynn Silva. And maybe, I always have.”

“Marry me.”

“What? We just started dating.”

He ran a thumb over her nipple, loving how she wiggled against him. “And a decade of fighting. I think we’re ahead of the game.”

She laughed, her head falling back, her chest pressing forward. Unable to help himself, he dipped his head, taking the tight bead in his mouth. She moaned and rocked her hips against his erection. He swirled his tongue and, with a kiss, drew away from temptation.

“Allison Winters?” He looked up into those beautiful eyes that never could hide her true feelings from him. “Marry me?”

She swished her lips back and forth. “I don’t know. You don’t even have a ring, and I know you didn’t ask my dad.”

“Nothing about us is conventional.”

She smiled, lifting her head and kissing him. “And I hope it never is.”

“Marry me.” He swiped the head of his cock against her folds, and her teeth slid over her lip, her body bowing into his.

“You drive a hard bargain.”

He tweaked her nipple, and she pushed down, trying to take what she wanted, but he needed an answer first.

“I could be driving into you, if you just tell me if you’ll marry me.”

She cupped his cheek, running her thumb across his stubble. Every shitty thing that had happened in his life dissipated, and all that remained was the happiness that Allison brought him. He could die now and he would consider himself blessed.

“Of course, I’ll marry you.”

She lifted to kiss him, but he thrust into her, her cries causing her head to fall against his neck. He found a steady pace and lifted her face to his. She held his gaze as he pumped in and out of her, thanking the universe for giving him the ability to endure the heartache, turmoil, and downright shitshow that was his world for so long.

His life was far from a fairytale, but somehow, despite it all, he found his happily ever after.

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“Oh my god,” Allison said on a gasp.

“What is it?” Reid’s heart stopped, his head snapping at her. She held her phone, mouth agape. “What?”

She turned her head slowly, eyes meeting his wide with... he wasn’t exactly sure.

“It’s Louie. He’s dead. They found his body a few hours ago.”

Reid sat up, Allison moving with him. Louie wasn’t a good person by any means, and some would say he deserved to die, but for Reid, it was more than a death; it was a liberation. His biggest threat was gone. He grabbed Allison’s phone and read the article.

It was almost too good to be true. After all this time, all this fear, and Louie was no longer a threat. He’d been the last of the old school world. Did that mean... was Reid finally free?

He reached over and grabbed his cell, calling Angel. Angel answered on the second ring. “You heard the news?”

“Is it true? They didn’t fake his death and put him in witness protection or some bullshit like that?”

“He’s dead.” Silence spread over the line, both aware of how monumental this moment was. “No more hiding. It’s official.”

“How can I be sure? There might be someone else.”

“From what I hear, there’s a new generation emerging. They don’t give a shit about the past. They’re ready to move on and do things their own way. They are the ones to worry about now, and you have no ties to them. If anything, what you did benefitted them. No one’s coming for you, Connor.”

Connor. It had been so long since he heard that name, but that identity, that wasn’t who he was anymore. He would come out of hiding, but he would forever be Reid.

“What are you going to do now?” Angel asked.

Reid looked at Allison and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’m getting married, starting a family.”

Allison’s eyes widened, and she sucked in an adorable breath.

“Oh, and Angel. Save this number. No more burners.”

“I expect a visit from your ass soon.”

“You got it. Talk soon.”

Reid hung up the phone and tossed it before he lifted Allison onto his lap.

“A family, huh? I didn’t agree to kids.”

He tickled her sides, eliciting a loud screech from her. “If you don’t want kids—”

She pressed a finger to his mouth. “I do, but not right away. Let’s get married first.”

“I can agree to that.”

Her arms snaked around his neck, and she wiggled against his growing erection. “Doesn’t mean we can’t practice.”

“I plan on it.” He nipped her neck before flipping her beneath him and settling his cock at the juncture of her heat. He thrust into her, freeing himself of the past, letting go of all the shit that tried to break him. None of that mattered now.

He stared down at the woman he loved, probably always loved, and knew, whatever the future held, as long as Allison was by his side, he’d be one lucky bastard.

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Mad About Matt,  
Book 1 in the Red Maple Falls series. ~**



# Chapter 1

Growing up the oldest of six, Matt Hayes knew a thing or two about all the places teens went in Red Maple Falls to break the law. It might have been seventeen years since he graduated high school, but other than the clothing and hairstyles, not much else had changed. So, when he slowed his patrol car to a stop on the outskirts of the old barn on Chestnut, he already knew the source of Ms. Wilkinson's noise complaint.

With a population of nine-hundred-and-twenty-two, there wasn't much crime. Every now and again there would be a domestic dispute up at the old Wheeler cabin or Old Man Simpson driving his tractor drunk down Main Street in no more than his underwear, but nothing ever life threatening or earth shattering. Nothing like the big city cops who dealt with armed robberies and gun-wielding criminals on a daily basis.

It was small town life, and Matt wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. He loved knowing the address of every person in town. Loved that his entire family was close by—with the exception of his baby sister, who was currently chasing her dreams in New York City and his younger brother, who was backpacking across Europe. He even loved that his best friend from childhood was the local fire chief. Matt was what the locals called a "lifer." He was born in Red Maple Falls, and he would die there... and he would do so with not a single regret.

He grabbed his flashlight and headed toward the abandoned barn. Music and chatter echoed through the night like a guiding path that brought him directly to the main doors. The padlock he placed on it a few weeks ago was lying broken on the ground.



It's not that he was too old to know there wasn't much for a teen to do in Red Maple Falls on a Saturday night, but this barn wasn't exactly the safest place to hang out. The beams were rotted, the foundation cracked, and it was full of rusting farm equipment that would cause more than a scratch and a need for a tetanus shot.

He stepped through the door and held up his flashlight, not expecting a frenzied panic to ensue. The word sheriff was whispered like a swear word from both directions as the sound of swift movements and clanking bottles joined the mix.

"Freeze!" he called out to the shadows dodging into the darker corners of the barn.

He mentally shook his head. Kids. Did they really think they'd be able to hide, and he would just leave? It was his job not only to protect the town of Red Maple Falls, but also its citizens.

"If you come out right now, I won't personally escort each one of you home to your parents," he said, knowing that threat would work for most of the town's young adults.

Slowly, and not without a few heated whispers, the shadows materialized. Shelly Grist was first to step forward. Her usual fair skin was brightened red as she cast her eyes to the ground. She fidgeted with her hands and shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Carrie Fleming was next, followed by Greg Atman. They stood next to Shelly in the same awkward stance. Al Ruiz and Henry Lutz joined them shortly after. Jake Johns stepped out last, his shoulders set back with way too much attitude for a kid his age.

Everyone in town knew Jake's story, and Matt felt sorry for him even if he knew that would be the last thing Jake Johns would ever want from anyone. He was a tough kid, smart too,

but he was slowly self-destructing, and there was little anyone could do to help.

Once all the kids were lined up in front of him, Matt urged them to get out of the barn. The structure had stood for a hundred years, but he wasn't taking any chances. There was a reason for the no trespassing signs.

He flashed his light on those very signs. "Can you read that?" he asked the group.

The girls and Al nodded, Greg gave a quick yep, and Henry shrugged.

"Are you insinuating we can't read?" Jake asked with his usual tough guy tone.

"Jake, stop." Carrie grabbed his hand and tried to pull him back with the rest of the kids. There was a sparkle in his eyes when he looked at her, but he quickly shook his hand free from her grip and stood on his own.

Matt had seen that sparkle many times in the eyes of his two brothers and also the poor saps who dated his sisters. Jake Johns, Red Maple Falls rising bad boy, had it bad for

Carrie Fleming. It was information Matt could use to his advantage.

"I'd listen to the lady," Matt said, locking his gaze with Jake's. "You might not care about having the Sheriff escort you home, but I'd wager she does." Matt glanced over to Carrie. "Am I right?"

"Yes," she said softly and Jake's eyes dropped to the ground. His shoulders slumped forward and he let out a loud exhale, as if the realization that he would let her down weighed heavily on him.

Matt sympathized with the kid. Once upon a time, he knew what it was like to love a girl who was out of his league. If

Jake was lucky, he'd make a run for it before he got in too deep and his heart was broken beyond repair.

"We weren't doing anything wrong," Jake stated.

"Never said you were, but this building is condemned for a reason. Trust me, I know there's not a lot of places to go around here, but I don't want to see any of you getting hurt. So please do me a favor, and stay out of the old barn."

He received a collective nod, even Jake who stepped back to stand next to Carrie. Matt scanned his flashlight across the property and toward his police cruiser. "I don't see any cars, so is it safe to say you walked here?"

"Yes, sir," Carrie answered. "We cut through the woods from my house."

"Then head on back." He motioned his flashlight toward the large expanse of trees lining the property. The teens hesitated for a moment then began to move. "And another thing," Matt called out. "If I catch any of you drinking and driving, I won't be so nice. You got that?"

The group nodded.

"Good. You can go now."

They hurried off toward the trees. Born and raised in these parts, the woods were as much a part of you as your own family, so Matt wasn't too concerned about them disappearing into the darkness.

He waited a few minutes to make sure they didn't double back before he got into his cruiser and pulled away, making a mental note to replace the lock. With no streetlights, Matt depended on his headlights and own knowledge of the area. He was about to turn onto the dirt road that would bring him back to civilization when a call came over his radio.

“What’s going on, Martha?” Martha, his secretary and dispatcher, had been doing this job for twenty plus years and liked to remind him of such every time he questioned her. She was set in her ways and refused to change what wasn’t broken. It was a topic of contempt between them when Sheriff Green had retired and Matt had taken over. But as much of a pain in the ass as Martha was, she was efficient and loved her job as much as he did.

“The alarm down at Sweet Dreams Bakery is going off.”

Matt’s heart skipped a beat. Sweet Dreams Bakery was owned and operated by the only girl who ever gave him that sparkle Jake Johns was sporting earlier. Shay Michaels, a petite little thing with long brown hair—he wanted nothing more than to wrap his fingers in—and big hazel eyes that could burn right through to his soul. She was the star in many of his dreams.

Ever since that day, twenty-one years ago, when he laid eyes on her as she stepped out of her grandparent’s car onto Main Street with those tiny jean shorts, he was a goner. She lived in New York, but visited her grandparents every summer. Matt looked forward to that first week in July every year until she stopped coming, and then he dreaded the memories that time of year churned up.

Shay was a city girl at heart, and Matt knew that. He also knew that Red Maple Falls would never be enough for a girl who lived amongst sky scrapers and crowded sidewalks. It took him a while to realize Shay Michaels needed someone who could promise her the world, and all he could promise was a simple life in a small town he would never leave.

Seventeen years ago, he let her go, and nobody was more shocked than he after all those years of being MIA, Shay came back to Red Maple Falls to stay. Her return was a mystery and the town gossip for weeks. Though, just as the girl he

remembered would, she took it in stride. Her smiles only grew when she suspected someone was talking about her.

A few short months later, she opened Sweet Dreams Bakery and was an instant success, selling everyone on her upbeat personality and her now famous maple bacon cupcake—a cupcake that won top billing at the annual Town Festival, beating out Terry, of the Happy Apple, and her famous apple tart.

He'd avoided the tiny section of Main Street as best he could. He had nothing left to say to Shay Michaels. There'd been occasions when they bumped into each other—small town and all, it was kind of impossible not to, especially when she was good friends with his sister.

With all those years between them, he was surprised she even remembered him. The boy from Red Maple Falls she made believe was her future before she stomped on his heart and turned him bitter.

It didn't matter she was the last person he wanted to see. She was a citizen of the town now, and her business was a part of the community. He had no choice but to push aside their past and make sure everything was all right.

He took a deep breath, clearing his head and getting back into the right mind set.

“Did you call Shay?” Matt asked Martha a moment later. When building alarms went off in Red Maple Falls, nine times out of ten it was an accident and nothing to be concerned about.

“I did,” Martha said. “It wasn't her.”

While break-ins were rare, it did happen on occasion, which meant he needed to approach this as if it were a viable situation, just in case.

“She's on her way there now.”

Matt's heart kicked into overdrive, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. "What do you mean she's on her way?"

"I told her I'd send you over, but she said it's her shop and if someone had the... the um... balls to break into her shop, she was going to make them sorry."

The girl might only stand at an inch or two over five feet, but she packed a lot of punch in that tiny, tight body of hers. He'd almost feel bad for the intruder if she got there before he did.

Wait. What if it was an intruder? A trained criminal who would take no prisoners, and she's storming in there like Joan of Arc ready to fight a war? A rush of panic shot through him, causing his hands to tighten on the steering wheel.

"Son of a bitch," Matt mumbled under his breath as he slammed his foot on the gas and headed toward Sweet Dreams Bakery.

In Red Maple Falls time, Main Street was only five minutes away, but in real time it was a good twelve minutes from where he was. Shay lived roughly ten minutes away and already had a head start.

Matt flipped his lights on and flew down the road, kicking up dirt and rocks in his wake. It was a quarter to ten and most businesses on Main closed at seven. If Shay got to the bakery before him, there'd be no one to help her if she needed it.

Violating too many traffic laws, he made it to the bakery in nine minutes. The street was empty except for Shay's bright red Mini Cooper, and he pulled his cruiser right beside it.

He flung his door open and, with his hand on his gun ready to hurt anyone if they hurt Shay, he ran to the front entrance. The door was unlocked so he let himself in, immediately wishing he wore sunglasses for the sensory overload caused by the pink and white everything.

Unable to focus, he squinted against the brightness, taking in the flipped chair to his right. He retrieved his gun and moved quietly toward the register. The shelves were covered in flour, chocolate chips scattered across the counter, and pans knocked from their perch lay haphazardly across the floor.

A slight sniffle caught his attention, and he rounded the counter to the kitchen to find Shay sitting in a mess of flour and a path of destroyed cupcakes, her head hanging in defeat.

“Shay, are you okay?” he asked, squatting down to her level, but on alert in case the culprit was still lurking. “You aren’t hurt, are you?” He rested his hand on her, but she stayed quiet. “Dammit, Shay, answer me.”

She blinked up, tears glistening in those beautiful hazel eyes, and suddenly, all those years between them didn’t exist. God, he wanted to take her in his arms and protect her, find a way to make the tears his own so he could bear the pain for her.

Her hands fell limply to her sides as she let out a loud puff of peppermint breath.

“It’s ruined.”

A tear escaped her lid and slid down her cheek. This time he couldn’t help himself. He reached out, swiping a finger across the wet streak. “Don’t cry.”

She inhaled deeply and straightened her shoulders. “I’m good,” she said, getting to her feet as if she’d flipped a switch. She wiped her hands against her thighs, leaving white streaks of flour across black leggings. The material was practically molded to her skin, highlighting every perfect curve.

He shook his head, reminding himself he had a job to do, and that job was not checking out Shay Michaels.

“Did you see the person who did this?” he asked.

She shook her head then glanced around to the disaster that was her kitchen. “No. I checked the register. They didn’t take any money.”

“Did they take anything?”

“No.”

“They just destroyed the place and left?”

“Appears that way.”

“Do you have surveillance cameras?”

She cocked her eyebrow and her hip. “What do you think?”

His eyes lingered on the soft curves of her lips long after she stopped speaking. He had a lot of thoughts running through his head, like how they were the softest lips he’d ever kissed. How she was the single most beautiful woman he had ever seen. How he still couldn’t believe after all those years of not seeing her, of not knowing where she was in the world, she was right there in front of him that very second.

All the animosity he felt toward what they once had vanished as he looked into her sad eyes. He cleared his throat, bringing him back to reality and warning himself to keep it professional. “I can see if they left any fingerprints on the door.”

“What’s the point? They didn’t steal anything. Just made a mess and ruined all the cupcakes I made for Tommy Kramer’s sixth birthday party tomorrow.”

The point? Nobody destroyed a bakery for no reason, especially if they didn’t steal anything. In his line of work, he’d learned that there was motive behind everything. Somebody broke into Shay’s shop tonight, and the question was, not only who, but why?



Retaliation was at the top of his guesses. Someone who felt Shay had wronged them and wanted to hurt her in the best way they knew how. The little bakery on Main was Shay's life, according to his sister, and if someone wanted to find a way to unnerve her this place was an easy target. "Do you have any enemies?"

Her eyes widened. "I get along with everybody here. Why would you even ask that?"

"If they didn't steal anything, then it would appear that whoever did this was trying to send a message. Maybe you don't have any enemies here, but what about in New York?"

**End of Excerpt**

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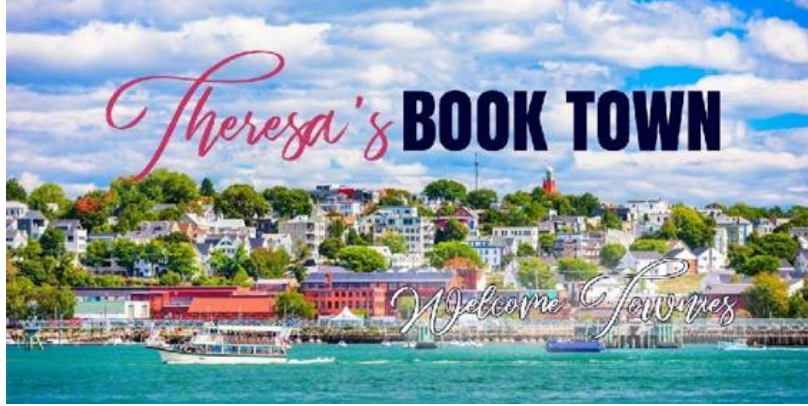
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## About the Author



Theresa Paolo lives on Long Island, NY with her fiancé and their fish. She is the author of NA and Adult contemporary romances. Her debut novel (NEVER) AGAIN, released in Fall 2013 with Berkley (Penguin) and the companion novel (ONCE) AGAIN released Summer 2014. Mad About Matt, the first book in her new Red Maple Falls series, released March 2017.

She loves to write heartfelt romances with a dash of fun and a side of spice. When she's not writing, she's reading, brewery hopping, daydreaming, wasting time on Pinterest, or can be found chatting away on Twitter and Facebook.

She writes YA romance under Tessa Marie.

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