

A CREED BROTHERS NOVEL



BRAYTEN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.C. LYNN

Braxten

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to one of my favorite people. My aunt, Cindy Blakeburn. Thank you for supporting me right from the start. I love and cherish our relationship so very much.

Braxten is for you.

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PROLOGUE

Braxten

Thirteen years old

Deep in the woods, next to a dwindling fire, the stars blanket the dark sky, making the universe seem promising when in reality it holds nothing but pain and hardships. At least for my brothers and me.

Knox lies asleep on the other side of the warm flames while Justice leans back against a tree, carving a stick with his pocket knife as he keeps watch. We take shifts, knowing someone has to be on the lookout at all times. You never know what enemy will strike next, and for the three of us we can never be too careful.

It's been six months since we ran away from the group home we all met in, escaping that sadistic bastard Hobbs, the head guard who enjoyed inflicting torture on defenseless kids. Thanks to my brothers, he will never hurt another child the way he hurt me all those months ago.

That night, we fled with nothing but the clothes on our backs and even that was sparse. It's a decision I don't regret, but on nights like this, where the hunger pains are strong and defeat feels all too close, I wonder if we are any better off.

Every morning we wake up, hoping to survive another day. Fighting to eat, sleep, and stay warm. Stealing food, clothes, or these sleeping bags we are in now. It's a constant struggle, then I remember the beatings and know that anywhere is better than where we were, including the streets.

With sleep feeling so far away, I give up trying and climb out of my sleeping bag to relieve Justice from his position.

"What are you doing?" he asks as I take the spot next to him, his attention remaining on his steady hands.

"I can't sleep. You may as well go ahead and try."

He finally lifts his head, sparing me a glance. “What’s wrong?”

I shrug, not wanting to burden him with my dark thoughts.

“Talk to me, Brax.”

I relent with a heavy breath. “I don’t know, man. Sometimes I wonder if we’ll ever be better than this. If we will ever know what it’s like to live a normal life.”

“We’re already better than this and one day we’ll prove it to the rest of the world.”

Despite his reassurance I see the same worry in his eyes, the uncertainty of our future. Unless we catch a break, I don’t see how we will ever get off these streets.

“Besides, we have something that a lot of other people don’t have.”

“What’s that, one pair of underwear?” I joke, but it falls flat.

“No, each other.”

His words slam into my heart with a powerful truth.

He’s right. I wouldn’t trade him or Knox for a warm meal or an even warmer bed. My brothers are the family I never had. My own mother tossed me away like yesterday’s trash, whereas Justice and Knox would give up everything they have for me, just as I would for them.

They might only be a year older than me, but they have taken on the roles as my big brothers. They’ve taken care of me just as they promised they would when we made that pact six months ago. At times, I’ve caught them giving up their own food that we managed to steal just so I can have more.

Terrible circumstances brought us together, but destiny gave us so much more. Fate made us brothers, loyalty made us family. I’ll happily starve for the rest of my life if it means getting to keep the both of them forever.

A soft groan penetrates our conversation, the sound trailing into a tortured whimper. Both Justice and I look over at Knox

to find him tossing and turning with yet another nightmare. He gets them often. Whatever torments him is the same all the time, something he keeps buried deep inside. It eats away at his soul, haunting him on the darkest nights.

Justice and I have shared where we come from and how we landed in that group home, but not Knox. He's told us some of the shitty foster homes he's been in, but never anything about his birth parents. Anytime we broach the subject, a stark pain enters his eyes, demons like I've never seen racing to the surface. Something worse than what Justice and I have faced and we have faced some pretty horrific shit.

I might not remember my birth mother, but I know what it's like to be beaten within an inch of my life, to be locked in a dark closet for days without food or water by people who were supposed to give you a home.

We all have pasts that haunt us, but I have a feeling whatever torments my brother in those nightmares is beyond anything we can imagine.

When his thrashing becomes worse, Justice gets up and walks over to him. He bends down carefully, waking him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

My brother does not like to be touched, he flinches at the very thought. Any physical contact from even Justice and me is minimal and hesitant at best. His affliction and fear is another reason why I'm not sure I want to know what his nightmares are about.

“Knox, man. Wake up.”

“No.” The one word falls helplessly from his mouth as he's lost in the darkness that holds him prisoner.

Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, his body begins convulsing violently. His desperate screams for help pierce the night as his hands claw and scratch at the air.

Justice grabs his shoulders, pinning him down as his own panic rises. “Wake the fuck up!”

Knox comes awake on a roar, his fists striking out as he knocks Justice on his back, coming over top of him.

I shove to my feet, ready to jump in when Justice finally gets the upper hand, throwing Knox off. “Stop! It’s me, man. Justice.”

Knox snaps out of it, his shoes kicking up dirt as he scrambles backwards. Both Justice and I watch as he pushes to his feet, his haunted eyes wandering the dark as he tries to grasp reality. His chest heaves, body damp with sweat, while he stares back at us in terror.

“It’s all right, brother,” Justice coaxes gently, as if trying to calm a wild animal. “It’s going to be okay.”

Knox opens his mouth to speak, but quickly closes it. It isn’t long before his fear morphs into something else entirely, despair gripping his face. “She wasn’t supposed to love me like that.” The revelation falls into a gut wrenching sob, the anguish sending him to his knees.

My thundering heart sinks straight to my stomach.

Justice and I share a look, our horror reflecting the other’s. He moves first while I remain frozen.

Too scared to move, too scared to breathe.

He wraps an arm around Knox’s shoulder, reeling him in close as he whispers soothing words. It’s that rare touch that eventually has my feet moving.

Swallowing hard, I sit on the other side of Knox, my hand going to his shoulder as he continues to sob into his knees. The sound of his grief makes my own eyes burn.

If I could take his pain away and carry it as my own I would, but I can’t...no one can.

That night my brother told us a tale so horrific, so vile and twisted, it tarnished a part of my own soul, changing everything I thought I knew about the ugly world we lived in. I was so sure I had faced all the monsters this life had to offer, but I was wrong.

So very wrong.

Knox encountered a far greater evil than either of us could comprehend and it broke him beyond repair. From that

moment forward, Justice and I vowed he would never know fear and pain like that again. He would never be poisoned by someone's touch because we would be there to protect him.

From that moment forward, our bond became more than a pact.

It became indestructible.

CHAPTER ONE

Alice

Present Day

Bound and gagged, my broken body thrashes violently with every bump the vehicle encounters. Agony sears the flesh beneath my skin as the dirty, rough carpet scratches my tear stained cheek. No matter how hard I fight to escape the enclosed space, it's no use.

There's no way out.

Darkness taunts my conscience, threatening to sweep me into its deadly clutches. I now realize this is it, that my time on this earth has finally come to an end.

Most people are scared to die, but not me. I pray for it, yearn for its peace. All I want is to be with my mother and the angels rather than the monster I've been forced to endure since her death.

The blood that pumps to my heart slows with fear when I feel the vehicle come to a stop. Seconds later the trunk pops open, revealing a black sky and full moon. Everything is eerily quiet, only the distant sound of nature can be heard. Until the whistling starts, a bone chilling melody that haunts me at every turn.

His shadow appears like the grim reaper, the face of pure evil. He holds a crowbar, slapping the hard metal against his palm with a spine stiffening sound.

"Time's up, Alice."

My body trembles uncontrollably as he solidifies what I already suspected.

Sinister eyes peer down at me as a vicious smile curls the edge of his lips. "Your death will be my lure and I will finally get my revenge."

Revenge. It's what has driven every sadistic move he has ever made. A revenge that stole years of my life and now someone else will suffer the same fate.

His smirk vanishes, a cold, hard look entering his eyes as he raises the crowbar. "Payback is going to be so fucking sweet."

Without another word, he brings the hard steel down on my body, plummeting me into complete and utter darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Braxten

Sweat trickles down my spine, the hot sun searing me through my clothes as I ride the tractor through the thick crop, helping my father prepare for the coming fall.

Despite the early morning, I can't help but appreciate the acres of land that I've been lucky enough to call home since I was fourteen years old. All because one lone farmer took in three homeless teenage boys who sought shelter in his barn on a cold, rainy night.

We went from the streets, fighting every second to survive, to getting the home and family we had always longed for. Which is exactly why each of us is up at the ass crack of dawn, busting our asses to help maintain what will always be home. We might not share the same DNA or even the same skin color, but we are stronger than any of those bound by blood.

You fuck with one, you fuck with us all.

Something the founding families of our small, historic town found out the hard way when they decided to threaten my father and our home. All because of the millions of dollars of oil buried beneath this soil. Not many are still alive to tell about it, and it set a precedence for anyone else stupid enough to fuck with my family.

Veering right, I bypass Knox from where he stands in the crop, a cigarette dangling from his mouth as he hand rakes the left overs. I lift my coffee mug, giving him a smug smile that earns me the finger.

I chuckle, not the least bit apologetic that it's his sorry ass doing the hard labor today. It's only fair since I got stuck doing it last time.

As I near the edge of the property line something snags my attention, a flash of color out in the ditch. A scowl morphs on my face, the crumpled form bringing me to a stop.

Shutting off the tractor, I jump down and head in that direction. The back of my neck begins to tingle, tension winding through my body with every weighted step. It isn't until I'm a few feet away that I make out long, blonde hair and bare legs.

What-the-fuck?

Adrenaline spikes in my veins, propelling me forward. The sight I come upon stops me dead in my tracks. A young woman lies half naked and severely beaten, her wrists bound and nightgown partly torn from her black and blue body.

“Jesus.” The one word barely makes it past the bile inching up my throat.

I drop down next to her, feeling for a pulse. Seconds later she stirs with life, a soft, painful moan escaping her cracked lips.

“Hey, can you hear me?”

Her swollen eyes flutter open, revealing the most startling blue irises I've ever seen. The contrast is so unique I find myself ripped from the horror of this moment. They're as light as glass, yet blue as the ocean, submerging me in a sea of emotions I can't understand.

“It's you,” she whispers, surprise and recognition dawning on her battered face.

I blink down at her, having no idea who the hell she is.

“You have to run.” The warning is mumbled on a fearful whimper, her weak voice threading through shallow breaths. “He's coming for you.” It's the last she speaks before falling back into unconsciousness, her body going limp.

Shoving aside all of my unanswered questions, I sling her bound wrists over my neck, cradling her broken body in my arms, and climb to my feet. I forgo the tractor, knowing it will take too much time, and run back on foot to the house.

Just as I come up to the gravel pathway, I spot my father heading for the barn. “Dad!”

The alarm in my voice stops him mid-stride. He turns to see what I have in my arms, concern bringing him forward. “Son, what in high heaven...”

“Get the truck. We need to get her to the hospital now!”

Without further question, he races for his pick-up.

Justice comes running up on my left, shock twisting his expression when he sees what I carry. “What the fuck, Brax?”

“Call Craig,” I order, talking about the sheriff, who also happens to be a friend. “Tell him to send a crew out here. She was next to the culvert on the left sector.”

He reaches for his phone, dialing quickly as he heads for the house.

“And Justice.”

He turns back, his hard gaze meeting mine.

“Keep a close eye on Ryanne and Hannah. I think someone left her for us to find.” The knowledge burns within as I remember the last of her words to me.

His jaw flexes at the information. After a hard nod, he continues to his wife and daughter, phone against his ear as he awaits an answer.

When my father pulls up next to me, I climb into the back seat, holding the young woman close. Tires spin on gravel as the truck surges forward.

“Talk to me, son,” my dad starts calmly, a hell of a lot calmer than I feel. “Tell me what happened.”

“She was just lying there.” My words are barely audible as I try to make sense of it all. I gaze down at her battered face, taking in golden hair that’s stained with blood, and feel something dark take hold inside of me.

Behind all the bruises, she looks young—maybe early twenties. She’s small in stature, her broken body the most fragile thing I’ve ever held.

My mind races with all the things that could have happened to her, none of them good.

We arrive at the hospital almost fifteen minutes later, much quicker than waiting for an ambulance. I charge through the emergency doors, calling out for help.

A nurse rushes over to me, rolling a bed with her. Shock grips her face when she gets a look at the bound girl. “What on earth?”

“I found her like this,” I rush to explain. “She has a pulse, but it’s weak.”

Just as I lay the young woman down on the bed, she stirs to consciousness again. Her eyes open, meeting mine for another time stopping second.

“Please don’t leave me.” The plea quivers past her lips.

I reach for one of her battered hands, being pulled in by a force I can’t explain. Before I can make contact, another nurse runs over with an IV pole, pushing me back.

She begins roughly working to free the woman of her confines, aggressive enough that it drags a painful moan from the woman’s throat. Her eyes roll into the back of her head as she loses consciousness again.

“Be careful with her,” I snap, knocking the nurse’s hands away. “Can’t you see she’s hurt enough, goddamnit!”

Her flinty gaze lifts to mine, disapproval reflecting back at me. It’s a look my brothers and I get often in this town. Most of the time it doesn’t bother me, but right now it does because I have no doubt where her thoughts are.

“Stay out of our way, Mr. Creed, and let us do our job.”

Both nurses begin rolling the bed down the hall as they call for a doctor. I follow suit, refusing to break the promise I just made until the first nurse stops me cold, placing a hard hand on my chest.

“You will wait out here,” she orders stiffly.

“Forget it, lady. I’m not leaving her.”

“You are not allowed in this room. If you even attempt it, I will call security and have you removed from this hospital.”

“That’s not necessary.” My father comes to stand next to me, his hand landing on my shoulder. “Come on, son. Let them do their job. Let them help her.”

I hold the nurse’s disdainful glare and lean in close. Only then does some of her resolve slip. “If she isn’t breathing after you’re done with her, you won’t be either.”

Her eyes narrow further, but it does nothing to cover the fear that’s there. “Go have a seat. I’m sure the police will have questions for you.” She storms into the hospital room, slamming the door shut in my face.

It takes everything in me not to charge through it, consequences be damned.

“Come on, boy.” My father places his hand on my back. “Let’s go wait for Craig to arrive.”

I allow him to pull me into the waiting area, but I’m too restless to sit down. My feet pace a hole in the floor, my thoughts running wild as the woman’s earlier warning rattles in my head.

You have to run. He’s coming for you.

I have no clue who she’s talking about, but I am going to find out, and when I do, the bastard will feel the wrath of my vengeance.

A painful hour passes before Craig finally shows up. The downfall, he brings Russel Pierce with him, a deputy who worked closely with the prior Sheriff Toder. I can’t stand the prick, he’s as arrogant as Toder was and I have no doubt he’s just as corrupt. My brothers and I went to school with him and he’s always been an asshole.

“What in the hell is going on at the Creed farm this morning?” Craig says in greeting, exchanging a hand shake with my father then me.

I forgo one with Pierce as he does me, our hatred for one another mutual.

My father on the other hand is more polite and extends his hand. Pierce stares down at it like it’s poison because he’s a

racist fuck. Always has been.

I shoot him a look, almost hoping he doesn't accept it so I have a reason to knock him out. It would be a good way to unleash this anger I have spinning through me.

Eventually he accepts it, but it's stiff and quick.

"Did Justice fill you in?" I ask, my attention solely on Craig.

"The little information he could. Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Collecting my thoughts, I explain how I found her, but am unable to offer much more than he already had.

"We were hoping you'd have some answers for us," my father says. "Have your deputies found anything?"

"Not yet. No purse or wallet, no car nearby if there was a crash."

"It wasn't a crash," I say with certainty.

"How do you know that?"

I go on to tell him what she told me during those few seconds of consciousness.

Confusion grips his face. "Do you recognize her?"

I shake my head, but can't deny the instant connection I felt the moment she looked up at me with those pale blue eyes. She damn well seemed to know me.

"You sure about that?" The question comes from Pierce, the accusation in his tone clear. "Maybe she's someone you and your brothers have encountered before."

The anger that's been on simmer since rushing through the hospital doors quickly ignites to a boiling point. "What the hell are you getting at, Pierce?"

I know exactly what he's getting at and I dare the motherfucker to say it.

He shrugs. "Just wondering if this could be one of y'all's trysts. Maybe you got carried away this time..."

“You son of a bitch.” I lunge forward, grabbing him by the shirt before my father and Craig intervene.

“Knock it off, you two!” Craig manages to get between us, prying the bastard from my grip while my father holds me back.

I point at Craig. “Get him the fuck out of my face before I rip his fucking throat out!”

My father’s grip tightens on my shoulders in warning. “That’s enough, son. You’re better than this.” His voice is stern, but his eyes are filled with patience and understanding.

It calms the rage, something he’s always been able to do for my brothers and me.

“Go back to the station, Pierce,” Craig orders. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Pierce’s jaw clenches, our glares locking until the very moment he leaves the room.

My attention snaps to Craig. “What the hell were you thinking bringing him here? You know I hate that piece of shit.”

He stiffens at my tone. “He’s all I had available and it’s protocol, all right?”

“Fuck protocol. He’s as corrupt as Toder was and you damn well know it.”

“Well, until I have evidence of that, my hands are tied, but I’m keeping an eye on him. *You* on the other hand need to keep your fucking cool.”

“He was out of line.”

“Yes, he was, and I’ll deal with it. It won’t happen again.”

That’s where he’s wrong. I have no doubt it will. Pierce’s accusation won’t be the last once the town gets wind of this. Hell, even the nurse thought I was responsible when we rushed in.

Rumors have run rampant for years about my brothers and me. All because of a pact we made years ago. A bond we

forged for Knox's sake. That bond behind closed doors is far more sacred than anyone realizes. Despite that, we are not into binding women and beating the shit out of them.

The shrill sound of my father's phone breaks the moment. "Excuse me. I need to take this."

As he steps away, I drop into a chair, scrubbing a hand down my tired face. "I can't fucking believe this is happening."

Craig takes the spot next to me. "We'll get to the bottom of it. My men are combing through every inch of that place, if there is something to find, we'll find it."

Not for the first time am I thankful he's the Sheriff of Winchester now. I have no doubt if Toder were still alive I'd be behind bars before I even had a chance to explain. That asshole was always gunning for my brothers and me. The best bullet we ever released was through the center of that bastard's skull.

My father returns moments later. "That was your brothers." He pockets his phone before taking a seat on the other side of me. "They checked the surveillance cameras. There's nothing there."

Since the cameras only cover the entrance, I am not surprised they didn't see anything. However, the fact she was left near our property line in such a way to be found, yet far enough outside of it as to not trigger the alarm, has suspicion forming in my gut.

"What are the chances this could be personal?" Craig asks, sensing my thought.

My father shrugs. "I don't know how it could be considering we don't even know this girl, but after what my family has gone through the past few months, I'm not ruling anything out."

He's talking about the founding families. Even though most are dead or in jail, some are still walking free, wreaking their quiet havoc in this town. That said, I have a feeling this

doesn't have to do with them and the oil buried beneath our land. Not by a long shot.

“Someone left her for us to find,” I say, feeling my anger shift into something darker. “Whether it was by coincidence or more, doesn't matter. I'm taking it fucking personal.”

My father clasps my shoulder, sharing his agreement.

In the hours of waiting for the doctor, Craig receives a few calls from his deputies only to be told they found nothing. Not even a fucking foot print which means the asshole covered his tracks well. Our only hope now is for our victim to shed some light on who the hell she is and how she ended up this way.

By the time the doctor enters the waiting room, I'm practically crawling out of my skin. The nurse from earlier follows close behind him, her suspicious eyes directed right at me. I ignore them and focus only on the doctor.

“Doctor Carver,” Craig greets him with a handshake, clearly knowing the man.

“Sheriff.”

“How is she?” I ask, not bothering with pleasantries.

His gaze swings to mine, my chest locking up tight as I await the verdict.

“She's stable.”

I let go of a heavy breath, what feels like the first one I've taken since finding her.

“I won't lie, it was touch and go for a while. Her injuries are quite extensive.”

“How extensive?” Craig asks.

The doctor hesitates, flicking me a brief look. “Maybe it's best we talk about this in private.”

I straighten at the apparent brush off. “Now hold on just a goddamn minute. I'm the one who found her. I have a right to know what's happened.”

“He’s right,” Craig speaks, backing me up. “The Creeds are not suspects in this case. Any information you share with me will be shared with them anyway.”

The doctor nods. “I just wanted to be sure.”

Nurse bitch seems to disagree with the decision, if her pinched expression is anything to go by.

“She has a few cracked ribs, a ruptured spleen, and quite the concussion. We also discovered prior fractures that were never properly treated.” He clears his throat before speaking again. “She’s also quite scarred across her lower back and bottom. Not only is it obvious this girl has endured many years of abuse, I’m quite certain whoever left her there didn’t expect her to survive.”

“Son of a bitch!” I drive a hand through my hair, that blistering fury blooming within the darkest parts of my soul.

“Signs of sexual trauma?” Craig asks, sending all of that rage plummeting to the pit of my stomach.

My eyes fall closed as I prepare myself to hear the answer.

“No.”

My gaze snaps to the doctor, both shock and relief barreling through me. Considering the way her nightgown was, I assumed differently.

By Craig’s expression it seems I’m not the only one. “You’re certain about this?”

“I am. I ran several tests and per my own examination, her hymen is still intact.”

Another dose of surprise fills me and I begin to wonder if the woman is younger than I initially thought.

“When can I speak with her?” Craig asks. “I’d like to question her as soon as possible.”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s going to be hard for you to do.”

The doctor’s change of tone has dread coiling around my chest like a vicious snake.

“Why do you say that?” Craig asks.

“Because she has no memory.”

“Excuse me,” I jump back in, swearing I misheard him.

“She was in and out of consciousness throughout the examination, most of the time confused and disoriented, but the last time she was awake long enough for me to ask questions. Other than her first name she doesn’t know who she is, where she came from, or how she ended up this way.”

“Is that even possible?” Craig asks. “To remember her name but nothing else?”

“It is. We hold three different stages of memory. Encoding, storage, and retrieval. Usually when someone suffers memory loss due to injury they lose only one of them. However, when brought on by trauma anything is possible. It all depends where her fear allows her mind to go.”

“So there’s a chance she could regain her memory,” I say.

“It’s very probable, but right now she is too afraid to remember anything. Considering what she has been through I can understand why.”

Craig blows out a heavy breath. “If it’s all the same to you, doctor, I’d still like to stick around and talk to her.”

“Of course. I’ve sedated her for the time being, but we’ll alert you the moment she wakes up.”

“Thank you.”

With nothing left to say, the doctor leaves us with our conflicted thoughts.

“Well, this just keeps getting more fucked up by the second,” Craig grumbles.

“So, what do we do now?” my father asks. “There has to be a way we can help this girl.”

“There is,” I say, taking a seat in one of the chairs. “We wait.”

Craig shakes his head. “You go on home. I’ll wait and call with any information.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Annoyance sparks in his eyes. “You heard what the doctor said, she can’t give you any answers. Until she does, there’s no point for you to be here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Craig. Until she regains her memory, she has no one. No family or friends. I’m the one who found her, which makes her my responsibility, and I’m not leaving her.”

We become locked in a stare down until he sees the resolution on my face. He knows me well enough not to argue.

“All right then,” he concedes. “Who wants coffee?”

CHAPTER THREE

Alice

Everything hurt. My mind, body, and most of all, my spirit. I feel scared, lost, and confused as I sit within these hospital room walls. The machines next to my bed beep with life, yet I feel dead inside.

I awoke a short time ago having no recollection of anything, not even who I am or how I ended up this way. Anytime I try to retreat into my mind, to grasp some kind of memory, I'm met with a pounding behind my eyes and the echo of a sinister voice.

Time's up, Alice.

Shivers of fear travel across every inch of my bruised flesh. It's the only reason I believe my name is Alice. Anything beyond that is terrifyingly blank.

As much as I wish I knew how I ended up here—ended up like this—I'm almost grateful that I can't. I'm not sure I want to know what was done to cause me this much pain.

The nursing staff hasn't been able to tell me much either, but they said someone would be in to talk to me soon.

I appreciate how attentive they have all been, especially Linda. She has a kind smile and even more gentle touch. Something I'm incredibly grateful for considering the pain I'm in.

A light knock pulls my attention to the door. My head turns to find the doctor who has been overseeing my care ever since I woke up.

“Hello again, Alice. I have some people here who would like to speak with you. Are you up for it?”

I gently nod, then regret it when pain radiates through my head.

The doctor enters the room with three men following, all of them lining up at the foot of my bed. One of them is a uniformed officer, the other an older gentlemen with salt and pepper hair, weathered dark skin, and kind eyes. He offers me a small smile and a nod in greeting.

When my gaze pulls to the last man, my heart stops beating altogether. Our gazes lock and hold. With dark hair and even darker eyes, I'm held captive by a memory I can't quite grasp, but I swear I've seen him before.

His tall stature and broad frame somehow fill the space of the entire room. Despite the commanding presence he exudes, there is something I find calming about him. Something... comforting.

"Miss Alice, I'm Craig Clemson, the sheriff here in Winchester."

I manage to pry my gaze from the mysterious man and bring my attention to the sheriff.

"I would like to ask you a few questions if you're up for it?"

"Sure." My voice comes out rough and weak.

"Doctor Carver filled me in on your injuries and informed me that you have no memory. Is that correct?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"But you remember that your name is Alice?"

"I-I think so."

"So you're not completely sure about that?"

"No."

His expression remains impassive as he jots down notes on his pad of paper. I find my gaze drifting back to the younger man, his concerned eyes still trained on me.

"Who are you?" I finally ask, my curiosity forcing the words out.

The three men share a look before the sheriff asks a question of his own. “Do you recognize him?”

“A little,” I answer honestly.

“My name is Braxten.” His deep, smooth voice wraps around my conflicted heart, inciting a small measure of warmth. “My father and I are the ones who found you.”

“Found me?” I repeat, unsure what that means.

He nods.

“Where?”

“On the outskirts of our property.”

The reality that I was just lying on the side of the road like a piece of trash adds to the agony and confusion tearing through me. At least his familiarity makes sense now.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask, my vulnerability bleeding into the question.

Regret flashes in his dark eyes. “I’m sorry, I don’t.”

Swallowing painfully, I look around at the other men in the room. “Does anyone know who I am?”

Their solemn expressions give me the answer before the sheriff even speaks. “No, but we plan to find out.”

My eyes fall closed, a single tear burning down the side of my wounded cheek as defeat settles over me.

“I know this must be difficult for you, Miss Alice,” the sheriff says, making the understatement of the century. “But I promise we will get to the bottom of this. Is there anything you can tell me? Any recollection of events, words, or even a voice? Something that I could start with.”

Time’s up, Alice.

Icy terror floods my veins, the voice eliciting a pounding behind my eyes. I squeeze them shut and lift a shaking hand to my temple. “I-I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“That’s enough for now, Craig.”

My eyes spring open at the hard voice, colliding with the only person in the room who seems to anchor me from the fear.

Braxten's strong gaze never wavers from mine as he speaks again. "Give me a minute alone with her." He doesn't ask, he demands it. The same way his presence commands this room.

The sheriff hesitates for only a second before closing his pad of paper and slipping it into his pocket. "I'll be back to check on you later. If you have any questions or remember anything, let Dr. Carver know and I'll come back right away."

"Thank you," I whisper.

He dips his head. "Rest assured, we will get to the bottom of this."

All of the other men head out of the room, leaving me alone with the person who saved my life. Braxten moves toward me, his long, confident strides eating up the distance between us before he takes the chair next to my bed.

In a sudden move, he takes my small, beat-up hand into his large one. It catches me off guard, making me flinch.

His eyes lift to mine for two beats of a second before he carefully untangles my IV cord that's wrapped around my arm. "Better?"

I nod, feeling bad for my reaction.

"Listen, I know you're going through a lot right now, but I need to ask you something."

"Okay," I answer slowly, unsure of where this is going.

"When I first found you, you told me that I had to run. That someone was coming for me."

I frown, baffled by the information. "I said that to you?"

His gaze wanders my face. "You don't remember that either?"

"No, but in all fairness, I don't know much of anything right now. I don't even know who I am." Emotion bleeds into

every word that escapes my mouth.

“Maybe not right now, but you will.”

I wish I felt as confident as him, but at the moment all I feel is completely lost and helpless.

“I’m going to find out who did this to you, Alice, and when I do, they will fucking pay for what they have done.”

It’s more than a threat. It’s a promise.

The rage hardening his features should terrify me, but for some reason it doesn’t. If anything, it makes me feel safe because as of right now, this stranger is all I have in this unknown world I’ve woken up in.

With no memory or identity—I have no one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Braxten

I've faced down countless monsters in my short time on this earth. Some who have inflicted ever lasting scars on my body when I was too young and defenseless to do anything about it. Memories I'll never be able to forget that still haunt me on the darkest nights.

That terrified little boy who had no one though is long gone, and in his place is a man who exacts vengeance, sending every single one of them straight to hell where they belong.

As I sit next to the sleeping beauty, assessing her fading bruises while she rests and heals, I'm left wondering again what kind of monster is capable of doing this. To hurt someone as fragile and innocent as her.

It's been over a week and we are still no closer to finding out who the beautiful stranger is.

I'm a firm believer in fate, it stems from the string of life changing events that brought my brothers and me together when we needed each other the most. I have no doubt I was meant to find this woman just like my father found us on his land all those years ago. How or why I don't know, but like my father, I will protect her and keep her safe.

The vibration of my phone cuts off my thoughts. Shifting in my chair, I dig it out of my pocket and find Craig's number flashing on the screen.

Standing, I move to the corner of the room, keeping my voice low as I answer. "Yeah."

"By the way you're talking, I'm going to assume you're at the hospital again?"

He should know better than to ask this considering I've been here every day since I brought her here.

"What's your point, Clemson?"

“Nothing,” he grumbles, but it’s obvious he wants to say more. “She awake?”

“No. You got anything concrete for me yet?”

His huff of defeat fills the line. “No, and it’s a complete mind fuck, man. I can’t find anything on her. No missing persons reports on anyone with the name Alice either. I’m starting to wonder if it’s even her real name.”

I’ve wondered the same thing, but it’s about the only thing she feels strongly about and right now her instinct is all we have to go on.

“I also ran her DNA in the system and got no match. Which isn’t a surprise since I didn’t take her for a criminal.”

I grunt at the understatement. No way is this girl capable of anything illegal or corrupt. She’s way too innocent. What the doctor discovered in his internal exam only proves it.

“I know you’re not going to like this,” he continues cautiously, “but I think our next step is going to have to be putting her face out there for the world to see and hope someone recognizes her.”

Dread pools in my gut. “Not yet.”

“Brax, man. I don’t have a choice. I need something to go on here.”

“I don’t care what you have to do, Craig, just find another way.”

“How the hell do you expect me to do that when you don’t even let me talk to her, for christ’s sake? Any time I even begin to question her, you stop me.”

“Because she can’t answer any of your questions and you’re causing her distress,” I snap.

“What is it with you and this girl? I’ve never seen you act this way before.”

How can I explain it when I don’t even understand it myself? There’s just something about her, something that raises every single one of my protective instincts. Maybe it’s

because of the way I found her: broken, alone, and wounded. Maybe it's because I can relate to being thrown aside like yesterday's trash or beaten within an inch of my life. Or maybe it's something else, something more...

"Look, just hold off a little longer," I say, refusing to acknowledge his question. "Give her time to heal. She could regain her memory at anytime. The safer she feels, the more of a chance we have of that happening. She's not going to feel safe if her face is plastered all over the fucking place."

Silence spans the other end of the line for only a second. "Fine, but I'm not waiting much longer. I have a bad feeling about this, Brax."

"You and me both."

"All right. Keep in touch," he says, bringing the call to an end.

"I will. Talk soon." Hanging up, I drop my phone back in my pocket and link my hands behind my head, feeling tension mount in my shoulders.

"Braxten?"

I spin around at the soft, sleepy sound of my name and come face-to-face with an angel. A wounded one, but an angel nonetheless.

"Hey," I greet, coming to sit by her bed again. "How are you feeling today?"

"Mmm," she muses sleepily, her dark lashes sweeping across her bruised cheeks. "Okay, just more tired than anything. Have you been here long?"

I shrug instead of revealing that I've been here for three hours already. I come every day to sit with her, not wanting her to be alone, much to nurse bitch's dismay.

"I'm sorry," she says, seeing the answer on my face regardless of my silence. "It seems I'm always asleep when you're here."

"Don't worry about it. The more you rest, the faster you will heal. You getting better is all that matters right now."

She offers me a weak smile, and despite it's lack of strength, it has the power to knock me on my ass. "Thank you for being here. Even if I am always sleeping, it makes me feel less alone."

"I told you that first day I wouldn't leave you and I meant it."

Those blue irises search mine, a force pulling me into their crystal depths until she breaks the connection. "Was that Sheriff Clemson on the phone?"

"Yes."

"Has he found anything?" Hope edges her soft voice.

"Not yet, but he's working on it."

She nods, but there's no denying the disappointment on her face. "It's been so long I'm starting to wonder if anyone is out there looking for me. Maybe I have no one in my life who cares."

The loss in her voice has me reaching for her hand, the need to comfort her overriding all else. "I care."

A sad smile claims her face. "You're ridiculously sweet, Braxten Creed. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Nope, but I'll be sure to tell my brothers you said so. It can just be one more thing those bastards are jealous about when it comes to me."

A giggle floats past her lips like I hoped it would, the melody infiltrating my chest. It's a sound I suddenly ache to hear again.

She rests her head back on the pillow, her eyes never leaving mine. "How many siblings do you have?"

"Two brothers and a sister-in-law. I also have a really kickass niece. She takes after me."

The smile on her face never falters. "Well, if they are anything like you then I'm sure they are wonderful." Her gaze suddenly drops from mine. "You know, I don't think I have ever thanked you for saving my life. I might not know who I

am, but I'm grateful I'm alive to find out and that is all because of you. Thank you, Braxten."

I think back to the moment I found her lying there. Battered and helpless. It's an image that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

"You don't need to thank me, Alice. I'm just glad I'm the one who found you."

Her eyes lift back to mine, suspending time, the connection between us pulsating like a live wire.

"A social worker came to see me this morning," she blurts out.

The revelation has my back straightening. I don't like hearing anyone was in this room without me. "What did she want?"

"To talk." She begins fidgeting with her blanket, her delicate fingers plucking at the fraying thread. "She offered counseling and support groups for me to join. She also gave me the name of a women's shelter that is willing to take me in while the police continue to work on finding out more answers about my past."

Over my dead fucking body.

No way am I letting her be a part of the same system that failed my brothers and me.

"Dr. Carver says I've healed a lot faster than expected," she continues softly. "Sounds like I could be getting out of here in just a few days."

"You don't sound very happy about that."

"I am," she rushes to say. "I appreciate all of the help people have given me, the nursing staff have been amazing and so has Dr. Carver. Even Sheriff Clemson and of course... you." Her gaze drifts to her tangled fingers before shrugging. "I don't know, I'm just scared, I guess."

"Of what?"

Her eyes lift back to mine, fear radiating in the clear blue depths. “Of what awaits me when I leave here,” she whispers. “How am I supposed to walk outside these walls knowing someone out there possibly wants me dead?”

“No one is going to hurt you, Alice.”

A tear slips down her bruised cheek, the sight of it gutting me from the inside out.

“Come home with me.” The words leave my mouth without hesitation.

Surprise adopts her face. “With you?”

I nod. “My father’s farm is the perfect place for you to heal. It’s also safe. My brothers and I have that place rigged tighter than Fort fucking Knox, but even if we didn’t, no one would ever make it past us to get to you.”

The need to accept is written all over her face, yet she hesitates before shaking her head altogether. “I appreciate the offer, but...I can’t. I can’t do that to you, not after everything you have already done for me.”

“This isn’t up for debate, Alice.” I want to curse myself when she flinches at my hard tone. “Look, something brought you to me. Whether it’s by coincidence or more, doesn’t matter. I can protect you. I can also help find out who you are.”

Her eyes wander my face. “Why?” she whispers. “Why would you do all this? You don’t even know me.”

“Maybe not, but I know what it’s like to have no one.” The confession escapes me without thought. “I know what it’s like to be alone and scared.” I take her cold, fragile hand in mine as I helplessly watch tears slip down her battered face. “You can trust me, Alice. Let me help you.”

Her lashes sweep closed for the briefest second as she swallows hard. When she reopens her eyes, I see the answer before she even speaks it. “Okay. I’ll come home with you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Alice

I gaze back at my reflection in the mirror, taking in the fading marks that mar my skin as Nurse Linda helps me dress. Until now, I have been avoiding this moment, not only because of the brutal reality of my body, but because I didn't want to stare back at a stranger, much like I am now.

The face staring back at me is not one I recognize and it leaves me wondering who I am. Who do I belong to? Am I a sister? A wife? A friend? Is anyone out there looking for me?

I've been trying not to obsess over all these unanswered questions and instead be grateful that I'm still alive. I meant what I said to Braxten, not knowing who I am is better than never getting the chance to find out.

"Lift up." Nurse Linda clears the shirt over my head, plunging me into a moment of darkness. I carefully slip my arms through the sleeves as she begins combing my long, blonde hair over my shoulder and braiding it.

The hospital was kind enough to give me scrubs since the only piece of clothing I own is the shredded nightgown I was found in. They also put together a small care package for me with a few necessary toiletries. Their kindness and generosity will never be forgotten.

"There, let me see." Her hands gently grasp my shoulders before she steps back, that kind smile of hers always in place. "Beautiful."

It's a complete lie. There's nothing beautiful about me, not right now.

"Thank you for all you have done for me. I really appreciate it."

Her smile slips as worry takes over her face. "Are you sure I can't talk you out of this?"

This isn't the first time she has said this. She's made it very clear she does not like the decision I've made to stay out at the Creed farm.

"I have nowhere else to go, Linda." Misplaced shame fills my chest as I say those words out loud.

"You have options, honey. The state will help you or heck, you can even stay with me if you want."

My heart warms at the generous offer. "I appreciate that, I really do, but I don't want to put you in danger. Besides, I trust Braxten. He's been good to me and he's adamant he can help me find out about my past."

Her lips thin at the mention of his name, face pinching in distaste.

"Why don't you like him?" I ask.

"I know things about him that you don't. Things about that whole family. I don't trust them."

"What kinds of things?"

Her mouth parts as if she's about to tell me all the secrets she holds, but then thinks better of it. Shaking her head, she offers me a tight smile. "Never mind. It doesn't matter." She picks up my discarded hospital gown and walks out of the bathroom.

I fight to keep pace, wincing with every step before reaching out and touching her arm. "Please tell me, I want to know."

A dreary sigh escapes her as she sits on the end of my hospital bed. "A lot of rumors surround that family, especially those brothers. Rumors that I know for a fact are true."

"What are they?" I ask.

"Well, for starters, they share their women."

I blink back at her, confused. "Share?"

She nods.

"I don't understand."

“They have sex with the same girl at the same time.”

I tense and feel my cheeks heat, wondering how that’s even possible.

“It used to be all three of them, but I heard the one brother doesn’t participate anymore since he’s had a child. However, I know the other two do.”

“How do you know it’s true?”

“I know someone who spent the night with them. She had feelings for Braxten and he broke her heart.”

My stomach hollows out, an unfamiliar emotion taking root as she shares that information with me.

“They’re dangerous, Alice. They’ve even killed people.”

“Killed?” I squawk, my mind scrambling to process these unbelievable stories.

“They’re mercenaries. Sharp shooters. Whatever you want to call them,” she says, waving a hand through the air. “I also believe they are the ones who killed our prior sheriff along with the mayor only a few months ago. Despite what reports say, everyone in this town knows they are responsible for their deaths.”

This does not sound like the Braxten I’ve come to know. Is he intense? Yes, there’s an edge about him that screams lethal. But a murderer? I can’t see it.

“I’m not saying the mayor and sheriff were good people, but they didn’t deserve to die the way they did. Honestly, when he brought you in, I worried it was him who did this to you.”

The accusation knocks me out of my stunned state and I quickly shake my head. “No. Braxten wouldn’t hurt me. He saved my life. If not for him, I wouldn’t even be alive right now.”

I might not know him well, but I know him enough to know that. He’s been nothing but kind and gentle—protective even. He has sat here with me every day and watched over me, never leaving my side until he had to. Just like he promised.

“After the investigation the sheriff has done, it’s obvious he isn’t the one who hurt you, but that doesn’t mean he can be trusted. Why is he going to all this trouble for a stranger? I worry what he wants with you, Alice. You’re too innocent for the likes of him.”

“He just wants to help me find out what happened.”

It’s obvious by her expression she disagrees.

“Besides, it’s not like that between us. He doesn’t feel that way toward me.”

He couldn’t. Not after the way he found me.

“And what about you?” she asks.

The question catches me off guard. “What about me?”

“You said *he* doesn’t feel that way, but you never said that you didn’t.”

I shift from foot to foot, unsure how to answer that. There’s no denying Braxten is very attractive, but it’s more than that. I’m not sure I would consider it romantic feelings because I barely know him, but I do feel drawn to him for reasons I don’t quite understand. Of course, I don’t confess that to her.

“I can’t explain it, Linda, but...I trust him and I feel safe with him. Right now I need that. I...I’m really scared.” The admission falls on a choked whisper.

“Oh, Alice.” She takes me in her arms. “It will be okay. I have faith that the sheriff will get to the bottom of this. Craig is a good man. Let’s just hope it’s sooner rather than later.”

I hug her close, seeking comfort as I allow a few tears to escape. Despite my best effort of trying to be optimistic, I feel incredibly lost in this world right now.

“Am I interrupting?”

We break apart at the deep, masculine voice, my heart leaping in my chest to find Braxten standing in the doorway looking as strong and confident as ever. He wears a pair of well worn blue jeans and a grey T-shirt that accentuates his

warm skin tone. It's not too snug, but the thin material reveals the powerful body he has beneath it.

"Braxten," I speak softly, my voice cracking with nerves. "You're early."

"Just a few minutes." His eyes shift from me to Linda, narrowing in suspicion. "Everything all right in here?"

"Yes, I'm ready whenever you are." I look back at Linda. "Thank you again for everything."

She reaches into the front pocket of her scrubs and pulls out a hospital business card, handing it to me. "I've written down my personal number for you. Call me if you need anything. Understand?"

"I will."

After a parting hug, she walks up to Braxten and lifts her chin, her warm demeanor vanishing. "She needs to leave in a chair. It's protocol." She continues past him, intentionally ramming into his shoulder as she does.

He flashes me an amused smirk, not looking the least bit offended. "I think she has a crush on me."

I smile, thankful he isn't hurt by her coldness toward him. "Sorry about that. It seems she has become somewhat protective over me."

"That's something I can understand."

His words do weird things to my insides, sending a flutter to ripple through my belly. He does that often to me, makes me feel things, beautiful things, that I shouldn't be feeling.

He pushes from the door, amusement fading from his face as he walks into the room, every long stride bringing him closer and closer.

My breath stalls in my chest as he stops just before me, his large body towering over mine. I stare up at him like a deer lost in headlights, captivated by his overpowering presence.

Everything Linda just shared about him races to the surface and I find myself wondering if maybe I misjudged

him. If I'm making a mistake by trusting him.

That niggle of doubt evaporates when he lifts a gentle hand to my face, his thumb sweeping beneath my eye, eliminating the remainder of my tears. "Why are you crying?"

"Oh, uh...nothing," I tell him, licking my dry lips. "I'm fine."

His head tilts at the lie, those dark eyes of his seeing right through me. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," I answer honestly.

"To leave with me?"

I swallow hard, but answer truthfully again. "A little."

"Don't be. I'm going to take good care of you, Alice."

This is the Braxten I've come to know. This man standing before me. Not the one Nurse Linda has painted. Right now, I have to follow my heart, it's all I have and for some reason it's leading me to this man.

"Excuse me." A nurse appears in the doorway. "I was told to bring in a chair."

Clearing my throat, I step back from Braxten. "Yes. Thank you."

The nurse helps me into it while Braxten grabs the small travel bag the staff put together for me. Afterward, he takes over, pushing me out of the room and into an elevator full of people.

The ride down is silent. My fingers twist in my lap, head bowed at the feel of everyone's eyes on me. Once we leave the main doors and out into the fresh air, I squint against the blinding sunlight, but can't deny how incredible it feels on my skin.

Braxten wheels me over to a large, black truck that's parked close. As he opens the back door to put my bag inside, I push to stand out of the wheelchair and instantly regret it when I do. A sharp sound parts my lips and I falter on my feet.

He rushes to my side, placing a hand under my arm to help me. “When’s the last time you had something for the pain?”

“A couple hours ago,” I admit sheepishly. “Probably time for another.”

He nods. “We’ll get you one as soon as we get home.”

Home.

His home. Not mine because at the moment I don’t have one.

The cold reminder has pain pricking my heart.

He opens the passenger door and I stare up at the seat, wondering how I’m going to climb up without hurting myself. Before I can even attempt it, my legs are swept out from under me.

Gasping, I cling to Braxten’s neck, surprised by the sudden move. Our gazes lock, faces only an inch from the other’s. So close that I can feel his warm breath fan my cheek.

A handsome smirk tilts his lips. “Sorry, I should have warned you first.”

I snap back to reality, realizing I’m gaping at him like a fool. “It’s okay,” I murmur, sounding ridiculously breathless.

After placing me on the seat, he leans over, belting me in. His body crowds mine, heat enveloping me like a roar of flames. I get a whiff of his masculine scent and the incredible smell penetrates every one of my senses.

At the click of my seatbelt, he pulls back, meeting my gaze once more. “Okay?”

I nod, unable to form a coherent thought right now, let alone speak it.

His eyes are darker than they were a minute ago, more intense as he searches my face. It seems as if he wants to say something, but instead he backs out of my personal space and closes the door. Only then am I able to pull in a full breath.

“Get a grip, Alice,” I scold myself.

After climbing in on his side, he brings the truck to life then pulls away from the curb. I look out my side mirror, watching the hospital disappear in the distance, and know that it's now the first memory I have since waking up. Not a great one, but at least I have one.

“Do you live far from town?” I ask.

“Far enough.” He follows up the cryptic response with a crooked grin that expresses a small dimple on the left side of his cheek. It's a unique characteristic and I can't deny the way my pulse skips at the sight of it.

He really is very attractive. Strong cut jaw, perfect slant to his nose, his hair the perfect mix of slicked and mussed. I can see why he would be popular with women.

That thought leaves me with an uneasy feeling again.

“Alice?”

I blink at Braxten and quickly realize he's been talking to me. “Sorry, what's that?”

Thankfully, he looks more amused than annoyed. “I said, Craig called. He will come out to see you once you are more settled.”

“Okay.”

Hopefully it will be with a lead, but I'm not holding my breath. It's been two weeks and nothing has surfaced. It's as if I never existed. I worry if I don't recover my memory myself that I may never know who I am or where I came from.

Eventually, we turn down a backroad where nothing but cotton fields stretch on for miles, their white tufts gently swaying in the breeze. Lush greenery rise up along the horizon, surrounding the delicate expanse of softness as squirrels run up to their homes in the trees.

“Wow,” I murmur, taking in the picturesque view. “It's beautiful out here.”

“Yep. It's also quiet and secluded. Just the way we like it.”

I turn back to look at him. “You’re sure your family is okay with me staying with you, right?”

“Yes.” His response comes out a little impatient. Probably because I’ve asked this several times. I can’t seem to help it. I hate to feel like a burden, especially after everything he has already done for me.

“Well, if it does pose an issue, just know I can stay at the shelter. The social worker told me there was a room for me if I need one.”

His head turns my way, those dark eyes pinning me with a hard look. “We already talked about this, Alice. You’re staying with me so I can take care of you.”

Not for the first time I wonder why he’s doing all this. Why he would go to so much trouble for a complete stranger? Then his earlier words come rushing back to me.

I know what it’s like to have no one. I know what it’s like to be alone and scared.

The revelation came as a surprise. He seems like the kind of man who has never feared anything or anyone. It’s just another reason why I feel so connected to him and why I agreed to come home with him.

“I know things are scary for you right now, but I promise you’re safe with me,” he speaks again, mistaking my silence for something else. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“It’s not that,” I whisper, looking down at my lap. “I just don’t want to be a bother, is all.”

“You’re not. I want you there. I want you with me, okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good. Besides,” he adds, relaxing back into his seat. “My father loves a full house and even fuller dinner table. He’s happy to have another mouth to feed.”

The assurance puts me a little more at ease. Hopefully his brothers are just as kind as him and his father. It’s obvious by our few conversations that he is very close with his family.

After what Nurse Linda divulged, it seems they are even closer than I realized.

I stop that thought before it can go further.

The truck begins to slow as we approach a white fence surrounding acres of farm land. My heart swells with excitement at the sight of several horses grazing in the pasture.

“Is this it?” I ask, unable to hide the hope in my voice. “Is this your farm?”

“My father’s if you want to get technical, but yeah...it’s home.” He turns in, driving down a long, gravel road that’s encircled by green pastures and newly plowed crop.

My excitement further escalates when I spot the big, red barn in the distance. A chicken coop and pig pen are on either side of it, filled with even more animals.

“They’re incredible,” I whisper, enamored by them all.

“I take it you like animals?”

I ponder the question since I have no idea. Without thinking too hard about it, I answer by the warm feeling I have in my chest. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

The response seems to please him. “I’ll take you for a tour once you’re well enough.”

I flash him a grateful smile. “I’d like that very much.”

My attention reverts back to the window as a large, white farm house at the end of the driveway comes into view. Its southern beauty of black shutters with a large wrap around porch is absolutely breathtaking.

Braxten doesn’t continue in that direction though. He veers right at the last second, driving down another gravel road that leads to a smaller home on the property. This one is much more quaint, but has a wrap around porch with two rocking chairs and a swing adorning the rickety wood.

I absolutely love it.

Several feet away, another house sits, but this one is newer, a little bigger and not yet finished. Lumber and tools are

scattered across the lawn.

“My brother, Justice, lives there with his family,” he explains, pointing to where my attention is. “All of us just recently got some land from my father so we’re in the middle of subdividing.”

“How nice that you all get to live so close to one another,” I tell him.

“Yep. Couldn’t live any other way.”

There is deep meaning behind those words, but before I can scrutinize them too much he opens his door.

“Wait here and I’ll come around to help you.”

I nod, thankful for the offer since the pain has only gotten worse since leaving the hospital.

He grabs my bag from the back seat first, slinging it over his shoulder before opening my door. My hand rests on his shoulder to steady myself, but before I can attempt to use it as a crutch, he scoops me into his arms, lifting me right out of the truck.

Warmth seeps into my blood and I find myself winded once again. “You don’t have to carry me. I can walk,” I assure him, though I’ll admit it’s half hearted because I can’t deny how good it feels to be held like this. Warm and safe, a feeling I haven’t felt since waking up.

“Probably, but I’ll get you there faster.” He graces me with that easy grin of his and it elicits one of my own.

“I can’t argue with you there.”

Chuckling, he climbs the porch then opens the door and steps into the house. Once inside, he places me back on my feet and helps steady me before releasing my shoulders.

“Thanks.” I clear my throat when I hear how embarrassingly breathless I sound.

“Come on, I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.” He leads me past a small living room and kitchen before guiding me down a narrow hallway where two bedrooms and one

bathroom reside. Reaching over, he flicks the light on in one of the rooms, bringing it to a soft glow.

The first thing I notice is how neat and orderly it is. A large king size bed with a navy comforter and dark brown headboard is pushed against the wall. Matching nightstands sit on either side while another dresser with a mirror sits in the corner. There's a masculine touch to the room except for the long, white dress that lies on the bed, a thin, pink sweater resting next to it.

“My sister-in-law gave this for you to wear,” he says, gesturing to the outfit. “You can borrow clothes from her for now. I'll take you into town in a few days and buy you everything you need.”

This man's kindness knows no bounds. It seems he has thought of everything. Things I haven't. As much as I want to turn down his generosity, I know I'm in no position to do so. I don't know how yet, but I will find a way to pay him back for everything he has done for me.

“The bathroom is right next door,” he continues, “and kitchen is down the hall. Help yourself to anything you want.”

I gesture to the room across the hall. “Is that where you'll be sleeping?” My cheeks flame at the question for some silly reason.

“No. That's my brother's room.”

My spine straightens, unease slithering down the length of it. “Your brother?”

His eyes narrow in suspicion. “Is that a problem?”

“Of course not,” I force out quickly. “I just thought you'd be staying here with me, is all.”

“I am. I'll be on the couch.”

I shake my head, guilt striking me at the thought. “I can't let you do that. I'll sleep there.”

“No. You still need to heal.”

“I can sleep anywhere.”

“So can I.” His tone is firm and final.

“It’s not right, Braxten,” I argue softly. “This is your home.”

“And now it’s yours too.”

His words slam into my heart with a punch, meaning more than he can ever know. They invade my lost soul, suddenly giving me a place to belong.

“I’ve slept in far worse places than the couch, Alice. Trust me, I’ll be fine.”

My curiosity piques at the statement, but I don’t get the chance to ask him about it before he ends the argument.

“Go ahead and get changed.” He nods toward the dress. “I’ll go get you a glass of water so you can take your medication.”

“Thank you.”

After a final nod, he walks out, closing the door behind him.

I look around the empty room, taking in everything that is Braxten’s and become further intrigued by the man who saved my life.

Walking over to the dresser, I pick up a framed photo of him and his brothers with their father, each of them holding a large gun with black paint smeared on their faces. Despite the deadly machines in their hands, their love for one another and smiles light up the entire picture, Braxten’s father having the biggest one of all.

Not for the first time, I notice the difference in their skin color. All the brothers have relatively the same warm tone, but despite that, they too don’t look alike. It has me wondering what brought these men together and made them a family?

Placing the picture down, I turn to the dress on the bed and try to hurry before he returns. Unfortunately, getting undressed turns out to be quite the struggle. Every move is slow and painful, my aching body screaming in protest with every twist and turn.

It's long minutes later when I'm finally able to attempt the dress, but that proves to be an even more difficult task. I manage to only get one arm through before becoming stuck and tangled. A huff of frustration leaves me, a light sheen of sweat blanketing my skin from exertion.

The door swings open, startling me.

"Hey, I brought—" Braxten stops mid step, the sentence left unfinished when he finds me in the center of his room half dressed.

I hurry to cover the top half of myself. Unfortunately, the shame plaguing me isn't as easy to hide.

"Sorry. I thought you'd be finished by now," he says, but doesn't bother to look away.

"It's fine," I mumble, eyes cast down.

"Everything okay?"

I shake my head, unable to lie.

"What's wrong, Alice?" The question holds command, forcing me to answer.

"It's still really hard for me to dress myself." Humiliation threatens to swallow me where I stand.

"Why didn't you say something?"

I shrug then resume gazing back at the floor, not wanting to admit how embarrassing it is to be so reliant. I'm tired of feeling so helpless.

Several beats pass before I sense him approach. He puts the glass down on the dresser then comes to stand behind me, his fingers skimming the skin of my shoulder.

The sensations of his gentle touch dance along my senses in the most beautiful way, unknowingly soothing every wound I bear.

"There's a zipper here," he murmurs.

Further embarrassment plagues me.

How on earth did I miss a zipper?

He struggles to undo it because of the tangled mess I have myself in.

“Listen, I’m going to remove the dress. Once I have it unzipped you can step into it.”

I hesitate, terrified for him to see what lurks beneath the clothes, for him to see me at my worst. Then I remember how he found me and realize he already has.

“I won’t look,” he promises, sensing my internal battle.

Gathering my courage, I drop my hands from my naked chest. The fabric leaves my body like a heated caress, the cool air whispering over my nipples, triggering fiery sensations to erupt like a volcano. Add that to the man behind me, his warm breath on my skin, masculine scent invading my senses, and it all becomes overwhelming.

Both hot and cold.

Both terrifying and exhilarating.

All those sensations only heighten when he drops down behind me. Long seconds pass as he remains crouched there, never moving, never breathing. Not even making a single sound.

I stand stiff and frozen, wondering what’s taking so long. “Braxten?” his name quivers past my lips with question.

“I lied,” he murmurs.

Confusion grips me. Until his fingers graze my lower back, just above my bottom, right over where I know deep, vicious, white scars run crisscross over my skin. I haven’t seen them myself, unable to bear the sight of more wounds, but I’ve felt them. Knowing this is where his attention is has shame staking its claim once again.

I bite my lip to keep my emotions locked up and do my best to explain the little I know about them. “I was told they’re old wounds.”

He says nothing in return, but he doesn’t need to. In the next second, I feel lips graze the angry skin in the most gentle

manner as he presses a kiss, healing so much more than the wounds on my flesh, but the pain buried in my soul too.

My breath catches, shock rendering me immobile. The genuine act marks my back as deeply as the scars, but the aftermath is different. So very different. It's life altering, speaking so much more than words ever could, weaving deeply into my wounded heart.

I'm knocked from the moment when the sound of the zipper is finally released.

"Step back in." His voice is gruffer than it was seconds ago.

Once I've complied, he stands, pulling the material back in place and slipping the straps easily over my shoulders before he zips the dress all the way up.

I remain still, unable to move. Unable to breathe.

He steps around me, coming face-to-face as he slips the sweater up my arms next, covering what I wish no one would ever see, especially him.

Too late.

Fear hinders me from looking up at him, terrified for what I will find there.

Pity? Sympathy?

He doesn't let me hide. Not this time. He slips a finger beneath my chin, tilting my face up to his.

The chaos storming in his dark eyes thrashes through the confines of my chest. Too many emotions to name, but none of the ones I expected to find there. I see anger and I see pain, the same one I harbor deep inside, but most of all I see a parallel between us. Like maybe...just maybe, he understands what it's like to hurt too.

His hand lifts, fingers skimming my cheek in a loving touch. "There is no shame or pride between us, Alice. Next time you need help, you tell me. Understand?"

I nod.

“Good, now take your medication. I’ll wait for you outside, then we will go to the main house for dinner.” Without another word, he walks away, leaving my life irrevocably changed for a second time.

The air that’s been locked in my chest leaves me on a rush. With shaking hands, I reach for my medication in my bag and take it with the glass of water he left for me. Then I head into the bathroom and splash cold water on my face, needing to gather my composure before facing him again.

It’s mystifying how a stranger can affect me so deeply. How I can be so aware of one person.

Once I’m more collected, I leave the bathroom, only to be greeted by the sound of laughter. Following the infectious sound, I step outside to find Braxten swinging a young girl around by one hand and foot, her high pitched squealing triggering a smile from me. It doesn’t take long before I realize this must be his niece.

“Faster, Uncle Brax. Faster!”

“You better not puke on my shoes, little bit.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll aim for the grass.”

A giggle escapes me before I can stop it.

Braxten’s head snaps up, those dark eyes colliding with mine. They anchor me where I stand and the careful composure I had managed to gather fractures with just a look.

He slows the young girl to a stop before righting her to her feet.

“Awe man, why did you stop?”

His gaze never leaves mine. “We’ve got company, half pint.”

The young girl’s attention drifts to where Braxten’s is and a tiny gasp escapes her before she skips her way over to me. Excitement lights up her small face as she extends her hand. “Hi, Miss Alice, my name is Hannah J. Creed. I’m the niece.”

My heart completely melts at the polite greeting. I take her hand in mine, leaning over as much as I am able to. “Well, hello, Hannah J. Creed. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“You too. Welcome to the coolest family in Mississippi. Ain’t that right, Uncle Brax?” Her gaze moves to her uncle, her not so subtle modesty sweet and amusing all at once.

“You know it, kid.” Braxten walks over to join us, his heated eyes sweeping down the length of me, reminding me of our encounter minutes ago.

It has me shifting on my feet and fidgeting with my braid.

“Hungry?” he asks.

“A little.”

“Good. My father has been preparing all day.”

“You’re gonna love Papa Thatcher’s gumbo,” Hannah tells me before taking my hand and leading me toward the house. “It’s a special recipe that no one else knows. Well, except for me. He shares all his secrets with me because we’re tight like that.”

Braxten follows closely behind us, watching on with amusement.

“He’s entering the town’s cook-off this year and I just know he’s gonna win first place. Maybe if you’re feeling better by then, you can come too.”

I open my mouth to speak, but don’t get the chance since her mouth is moving a million miles a minute.

“It’s going to be so much fun. There’s a live band, games, and even a three legged race. Miss Gwen is entering her famous cornbread as well, something you will also get to try at dinner. It’s amazing. It will be your favorite out of any other cornbread you’ve had before. That is...if you like cornbread?” She looks up at me expectantly, finally giving me the chance to speak.

It’s an easy question, but unfortunately one I am unable to answer.

“Honestly, I don’t know, but I’m sure I’ll love hers,” I add, not wanting to sound rude.

“You probably will, but if not, don’t worry, I’ll feed it to the pigs after.”

Braxten’s chuckle drifts through the air while a small smile claims my lips.

Once we reach the house, Hannah releases my hand and bounds up the steps, charging through the front door. “Our company is here!” she announces.

I look back at Braxten.

“She’s a vibrant child who has a lot to say,” he tells me, that smirk lifting the corners of his mouth.

“I see that. She’s also very polite and not shy at all.”

He grunts. “Definitely not shy.”

“I admire that about her.”

I’d give anything to be that trusting. To not be afraid every time I turn around. It makes me wonder if I was ever like that. Was I always this timid and shy, or was I bold and outgoing?

Laughter floats from the house, yanking me from my thoughts. I gaze at the front door, feeling my nerves kickstarting all over again.

“If you’re not up for this, we can go back to my place,” Braxten says, watching me closely. “I can bring dinner there.”

A part of me wants to accept the offer, but knowing his father went to a lot of work has me refusing.

“No, this is fine. Really.”

He doesn’t seem all that convinced, but doesn’t argue. “All right. Come on then, let’s find out if you like gumbo and cornbread.” His hand finds the small of my back, the warm touch comforting as he guides me inside to the kitchen where his family sits.

“There she is!” Hannah announces, pointing directly at me.

Silence falls amongst the entire room, the tension so thick it could be cut with a knife.

“Told y’all she was pretty.”

The sweet compliment has my cheeks warming.

Braxten leans down, whispering in my ear. “The kid is also honest.”

My gaze lifts to his and I become captivated by the sincerity I find there. It baffles me how he can say that after seeing me the way he did only moments ago.

Braxten’s father walks over from the stove to greet me first, that kind and patient smile taking over his face. “Alice, it’s wonderful to see you again,” he says warmly, grasping my shoulders in a gentle touch. “Welcome to my home.”

The friendly greeting quickly puts me at ease. “Thank you for having me, Mr. Creed. I appreciate it very much.”

“Please, call me Thatcher.”

I nod. “Thatcher.”

“Let me introduce you to my Gwen.” He reaches for the woman he was standing with when I walked in, bringing her in close to his side. She has long, silver hair, dark blue eyes, and a smile that portrays the same caring nature as the man next to her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alice.” She softly clasps my hand between both of hers.

“Same to you, Gwen. I hear you make the best cornbread in Mississippi.”

She waves away the compliment, but Thatcher doesn’t let her.

“That she does. You won’t find any better.” He stares down at her with an unmistakable love that manages to fill the entire room.

Braxten points to a man seated at the kitchen table. “Over there is my obnoxious older brother, Justice.”

“Who also happens to be my daddy,” Hannah J. adds with pride, jumping up onto the man’s lap. Even if the little girl hadn’t announced it, I would have guessed. The resemblance between the two is unmistakable.

Justice has the same commanding presence about him as Braxten does, but the way he looks down at his daughter softens that hard exterior.

He sends a nod my way. “Nice to meet you, Alice.”

“You too,” I whisper shyly.

“Next to him is his wife, Ryanne,” Braxten speaks again, moving down the table. “She’s secretly in love with me and trying to find a way to let my brother down easy.”

The pretty woman with auburn hair rolls her eyes and stands from the table, revealing a slightly round stomach. “In your dreams, Creed.”

I chuckle at their playful banter.

She walks up to me, shaking my hand. “Hi, Alice. I’m glad to see the dress fits.”

My hands nervously smooth down the front of it. “It does. Thank you for letting me borrow it.”

“Of course. After dinner, I’ll get you something to wear for bed.”

Any lingering nerves I had subside with her kindness.

“And that ball of sunshine in the back corner there is my brother, Knox.”

My gaze shifts to where Braxten points next, my smile vanishing in an instant as I’m met with an icy glare. Tattoos cover most of the man’s skin, making him look even more intimidating than his brothers. However, unlike his brothers, I find no softness beneath that hard exterior, no warmth or compassion.

“Hi,” I choke out, a slight quiver edging my voice.

I’m reciprocated with silence. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear he hates me, but I can’t think of a single reason why.

Braxten walks over to where his brother sits and leans down behind him with an arm around his neck. “Hi, Alice. It’s nice to meet you. I’m a grumpy bastard. Don’t take it personally.”

Hannah and Ryanne giggle and it breaks some of the tension filling the room. It makes me feel a little better to know it’s not just me.

“Come, we will eat now,” Thatcher says, placing a warm hand on my shoulder.

I’m seated between Ryanne and Braxten. Dinner starts with Hannah J. saying grace and she even adds me into the prayer, thanking God for blessing her family with my presence. The young girl may be small, but her heart is big enough to move mountains.

Once eating commences, I find out that I do in fact like gumbo and cornbread. So much so that I have two helpings. Something that Braxten seems pleased about.

“So when are we going shooting again, guys?” Hannah J. asks around a mouthful of food as she makes eye contact with all the males at the table.

“You’re not,” Ryanne cuts in, tone stern.

“Come on, Mama. Uncle Knox just built a new gun. I wanna see it in action.”

“We will this week, baby,” Justice promises, undermining his wife. He tries to lessen the blow by sending her a charming wink.

Ryanne isn’t having it. “Why can’t y’all take her to play with the animals instead? She loves animals.”

“I take her to play with the animals,” Thatcher states defensively.

“This is true and I do love animals,” Hannah admits. “But I also love guns.”

Ryanne shakes her head, but there is no denying the smile she tries to hide. “Like father like daughter.”

“Exactly,” Braxten chimes in. “You need to stop fighting the legacy, Ryanne. She’s a Creed. A badass one at that.” He leans across the table, bumping fists with his niece.

The entire exchange has me smiling.

Despite the difference of opinion, it’s very easy to see just how close this family is. How much they all love each other. It makes me feel a little envious.

The rest of the dinner follows in the same manner, with more conversation and laughter, except from Knox. He remains quiet throughout, his cold, hard stare boring into the side of my face. I ignore it as best I can and focus on the others.

After dessert, Thatcher walks Gwen out to her car and it’s only then I realize they aren’t married. Ryanne tells me that they only recently reconnected after many years apart. The revelation takes me by surprise. The love reflecting from the two of them radiates a lifetime.

Hannah reaches for seconds of the chocolate cream pie sitting on the table before Ryanne stops her.

“You, little miss, need a bath,” she laughs, wiping the left over dessert off her daughter’s face before bringing her attention to me. “If you want to come to the house with us, Alice, I can get you something to wear for bed?”

I look over at Braxten, making sure it’s all right with him.

“Go ahead, I’ll meet you at the house shortly.”

“Okay.”

Before we leave, Hannah makes her goodnight rounds, starting with Braxten. She launches into his open arms and kisses his cheek. “Night, Uncle Brax. I love ya.”

“Love you more, half pint.” He blows a smacking kiss right back against her cheek that has her laughing out loud.

She races over to Knox next, but instead of hugging him like she did Braxten, she kisses her hand and gently lays it on the side of his face. “Love you, Uncle Knox.”

For the briefest second, I see that cold hard shell of his slip away. An almost pain and longing enter his eyes before he takes the young girl's hand from his face and kisses her palm back, an unspoken moment passing between them. "I'll see you tomorrow, kid."

The warmth that filled his eyes for his niece evaporates when his gaze shifts to mine, delivering another icy glare. Ducking my head, I bid everyone a quiet goodbye.

"I won't be long," Braxten promises.

I nod in his direction then follow Ryanne and Hannah out the door. Once outside, the young girl runs ahead of us while Ryanne hangs back with me, keeping a slow pace for my sake.

Dusk has begun to settle across the beautiful farmland and I'm struck by the peacefulness of it. It's so quiet that only the distant sound of nature can be heard.

"It sure is beautiful here," I muse softly.

"It is," Ryanne agrees. "This place is everything to Thatcher and the boys and it has come to mean a lot to me too. I couldn't imagine raising my family anywhere else." Her hand moves to her small baby bump, happiness radiating from her.

"How far along are you?" I ask, hoping I'm not overstepping.

"Only a few months, but some days it feels much longer." The admission is finished on a laugh.

"Well, you look beautiful and you have a lovely family."

That smile extends further across her face. "Thank you. It might be rough around the edges, but trust me, you won't find a more loyal family than this one."

"I can see that. You all seem very close, especially the boys. They are all so..." Silence fills the moment as I search for the right word. "Intense."

She chuckles at my poor choice of words. "They are intense, especially Knox." She directs a look my way, sensing my unease with him.

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

“Don’t take it personally. He’s like that with everyone, including me. He doesn’t trust anyone but his brothers and father.”

“And me!” Hannah J. yells back, clearly listening in on our conversation.

“And Hannah,” Ryanne adds, amusement coating her tone. “Once you get to know him you’ll see he’s not so scary. He’s just protective of his brothers, they all are of each other. They have a special bond, something no one can even begin to understand.”

It seems like she has a pretty good understanding of them and I can’t help but wonder just how close she has been with them, my mind drifting to the unthinkable. I quickly pull myself from the straying thought, knowing it’s not my business.

As we come upon her house, I reach for the railing and begin my careful climb. Ryanne quickly takes my free arm, offering support. “Let me help you.”

“Thank you.”

She assists me with every step and doesn’t release me until we enter the house. “Excuse the mess.” Her feet push aside the scattered tools at the front door, making more room to walk. “It’s still in finishing stages but livable.”

“It’s a beautiful home,” I say, taking in the open two story concept.

“Thank you. Do you mind if I start her bath first?” she asks, pointing to Hannah J.

“Not at all.”

“Thanks. I’ll be quick.”

Taking her daughter by the hand, she rushes her up the stairs. While she does that, I use the opportunity to walk over to the stone fire place and admire the family photos there. The one of Hannah J. and her uncles and dad covered in camo as they hold guns has a smile spreading across my face. The

sweet, innocent little girl fits in surprisingly well with the three intimidating men.

It's not long before Ryanne walks back into the living room, carrying a pile of clothes. "What do you prefer to sleep in?" she asks. "I have a nightgown, shorts and tank top, or pajama pants."

"A nightgown might be easiest for me to slip on, if that's all right?"

"Of course. Here you go."

As I reach for the silk nightgown she hands me, my sweater slips from my shoulder, revealing a black and blue mess.

Ryanne's gaze clings to the colorful wounds, a soft breath penetrating her lips before I quickly pull the sleeve back in place.

"Thanks," I whisper, unable to look her in the face.

"You're welcome." She clears her throat before speaking again. "Look, Alice. If you need anything, anything at all, you can come to me. Even if it's just to talk."

My eyes lift back to hers, seeing so much more than sympathy. There's almost an understanding.

"You'll come to learn the men on this farm can be extremely overbearing at times. It'll be nice having another woman around to visit with."

I return her smile and realize in this moment that I may have just made a new friend. "Well, I'll let you get back to your night," I say, deciding it's time to make my exit. "Thank you again for the clothes."

"Would you like me to walk you?" she offers. "Brax might kill me if anything happens to you."

I can't deny how my heart skips a beat from hearing that. "That's all right. I can manage on my own, but thank you anyway."

At her nod, I head for the front door.

“Miss Alice, wait!”

Stopping, I turn to see Hannah bounding down the stairs in a fluffy, pink robe. Running over, she hands me the large storybook she carries. “For you.”

“What’s this?” I ask in surprise.

“It’s the story of *Alice in Wonderland*,” she explains. “It’s about a girl named Alice who’s lost in a place called Wonderland, but makes friends along the way. I thought you might like to read it.”

I stare down at the blonde girl with bright blue eyes on the cover, seeing more of a resemblance than just the name. The thoughtful gesture has my throat burning with emotion. “I’d love to read it. Thank you, Hannah.”

“You’re welcome.” Stepping into me, she gently wraps her arms around my waist and hugs me carefully. “Papa Thatcher says sometimes the bestest friends are found on the rainiest days.”

My arm instinctively curls around her small body as love invades my soul. I look up to see Ryanne watching us with nothing short of pride for her daughter.

Feeling close to a blubbering mess, I whisper a final goodbye then leave out the front door. My attention is riveted on the book in my hand as I walk across the yard to the house next door.

Once on the porch, I take a seat in one of the rocking chairs and open it. Under the dim light, I begin reading and become lost in an enchanting place called...Wonderland.

CHAPTER SIX

Braxten

“I don’t trust her.” Knox’s hard voice breaks the silence around the kitchen table. “Something isn’t right with her story.”

He has voiced this from the beginning. Knox doesn’t trust anyone, especially females, but what he fails to realize is Alice isn’t just any stranger, she’s not just any girl. Not to me.

“She’s the victim here, Knox, remember? Not the enemy.”

“How can you be so sure of that?” he counters. “Why our land, Brax? Why does she remember her name and nothing else? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense,” I fire back. “I’ve seen the scars, man. She isn’t faking shit!”

The reminder of what I saw earlier, the deep, jagged grooves embedded into her skin, has rage igniting in my veins all over again. There is no doubt Alice has suffered at the hands of a ruthless monster for a long time.

The fear in her eyes is as real as the scars she bears. As real as the vengeance that burns in my blood.

“I have to agree with Braxten here,” my father says, backing me up. “I don’t believe this girl has any malicious intent toward this family. I think she’s even more lost and confused about this than the rest of us.”

“That may be true, but we still need to look at this from all angles,” Justice adds, speaking up for the first time. “There are a lot of scenarios to consider, one of them being that this very well could have nothing to do with our family. Her ending up near our property could be pure coincidence.”

“Then why would she say what she did to Brax?” Knox points out doubtfully. “She acted like she knew him.”

Justice shrugs. “She was disorientated. She could have spewed anything in that moment.”

“I don’t think so,” I cut in, my gut telling me different. “There’s something more here. I know it. I feel a connection to her which doesn’t make any sense because I know I’ve never seen her before.”

No matter how much of my past I have fought to block out, I’d never forget a face like hers.

“Maybe it’s more of an understanding than a connection,” my father voices thoughtfully. “If anyone can understand what this poor girl is going through right now, you boys can.”

That’s true. I know what it’s like to lose everything, to be alone and have no one, and now after seeing the scars, I can relate to her even more.

“I’ve decided we need more help with this,” my father continues. “More eyes and resources. Which is why I’ve contacted Agent Jameson.”

Ryder Jameson is the FBI agent who helped us expose the corruption of the founding families. He can be trusted and has resources that other law enforcements don’t.

“I gave him the little we had to go on and he said he would do some digging. In the meantime, we keep our heads up and eyes open. Trust no one and take no chances.”

“This is exactly what I’ve been saying all along,” Knox bites out. “So why are we trusting her? We’re not even considering that she could be the enemy.”

His continued, misplaced blame sends my temper flaring. “Would you knock it the fuck off already?” I bellow. “You don’t want to trust her, Knox, fine, but then trust me, goddamn it. I wouldn’t have brought her here if I thought for one second she was a threat to us.”

His jaw flexes in anger, cold, hard eyes unforgiving, but among his anger is fear. Fear of losing more than he already has. I know exactly where it stems from, the bond that has already taken a hit, one we all made for his sake.

Since Justice has left the circle, the bond hasn't been the same. Not nearly as frequent, but on nights when my brother's demons come back to haunt him, that's when the bond reforges.

I'm all he has left.

The reminder is like a bucket of cold water, dousing the anger burning beneath the surface.

"She's just like us, man." My voice softens as I try to make him understand. "How we were only years ago. Alone, scared. Only she has no one while we had each other. We need to protect her. Like dad protected us."

"What if she isn't ours to protect?" Justice says.

My gaze cuts to his. "What are you talking about?"

"What if she already belongs to someone else, Brax, have you thought about that? Maybe she was taken from them and they are out there looking for her right now."

I have considered the possibility, but it makes no difference to me. "If that is the case they didn't take very good care of her to begin with, did they? They lost their chance. Now it's mine and for as long as I'm still breathing I will make sure no one ever hurts her again." The vow rolls off my tongue with the same conviction I feel all the way to my core.

It sends Knox firing off like a loaded gun. "This is the fucking problem." He points at me, expression furious. "You aren't thinking clearly. You're thinking with your dick, not with your head."

He's wrong, it's so much more than that, but how do I explain the protectiveness I feel over her when I can't even understand it myself?

"Fuck this, I need a smoke." He pushes out of his chair, knocking it to the floor before storming out the back door, but not before I see that fear in his eyes for a second time and it has guilt threatening to swallow me whole.

"I got him." Justice stands and follows him out into the darkness of the shadows; a place where we have walked with

our brother time and time again.

I drop my head in my hands, regret weighing heavily on me.

My father grips my shoulder, strong and steady. “You’re doing the right thing, son. I’m proud of you for taking care of this girl.”

I turn my head, meeting his intelligent gaze that always seems to hold all the answers. “They don’t understand. They can’t. They didn’t find her the way I did. They haven’t seen her the way I have. She needs me, Dad. I can’t turn my back on her.”

“Of course you can’t.” He turns his chair, facing me head on. “Look, your brother is scared of change and there has been a lot of that lately in our family. It will take some time for him to adjust, but he will be okay. He’s stronger than both you and Justice give him credit for. He always has been.”

I’m not so sure about that, but he doesn’t know what we do, doesn’t know the demons that lurk within my brother, something that Justice and I have always battled alongside him. When the three of us are together, he’s less afraid. If he loses that, I’m not sure what will happen to him.

“It will all work out, you’ll see,” he adds confidently. “Right now, you just worry about being there for that girl and I’ll take care of the rest of y’all.”

It’s what he’s always done. Taken care of us, even when we didn’t make it easy for him. He didn’t have to love us but he did. A stranger, a man who never shared the same blood, let alone skin color, but he loved us more than anyone ever had. More than our own flesh and blood.

I peer back at him as one question emerges. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he says without hesitation.

“Why did you do it?”

Confusion slips over his face before I quickly elaborate.

“Why did you take us in all those years ago?”

He sits back in his chair, expression sobering with the weight of the question.

“No one wanted us. Not even our own parents. Hell, my mother threw me in a fucking garbage can and left me to rot.” The words leave me on a bitter laugh, tasting like acid on my tongue and infiltrating my chest with the pain I will always carry, despite never even knowing the woman. “But you, you took us in. Why?”

Dark eyes that are always filled with understanding hold mine, conveying a love that I’d never known until him. “Well, you know what they say, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

His words slam into my chest like a sledgehammer, making my throat swell like a motherfucker. My jaw hardens as I fight to reign in that emotion.

His hand grasps the back of my neck, forcing me to acknowledge what’s prevalent in his eyes. “You listen to me, boy. Blood means nothing, but love, love means everything, and loving you boys is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. You were always meant to be mine, Braxten, and nothing will ever change that. Ya hear?”

I nod because I’m unable to form any words at the moment. Leave it to my father to put it into perspective. To remind me that all the pain we endured was for something. Actually, it was for everything. For the family I was denied at birth.

“Come here.” He pulls me out of the chair and into his arms for a hard hug. “I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

He claps me on the back before pulling away. “Now go on and get out of here. Go take care of that girl. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I leave out the front door, forgoing a goodbye to my brothers. I’ll worry about them tomorrow. I’ve kept Alice waiting long enough.

Darkness shrouds me as I walk across the property, my thoughts and emotions raw from the aftermath at what just transpired in the kitchen. Between all the unanswered questions when it comes to Alice, and this new rift between my brother and me, I'm not sure where to go from here or how to make it right for us all. All I know is I will find a way, I won't turn my back on either of them.

My turmoil takes a fast turn when I come up to the house and find Alice sitting in one of the rocking chairs, her head bowed as she silently reads a book that lays open on her lap.

The porch light casts a glow on her that makes her look every bit of the lost, lonely girl I know she is. Something my brothers don't see.

She's so engrossed in the book that she doesn't hear my approach. Not until my boot lands on the first step, the wood creaking beneath my weight.

Her head snaps up. "Braxten." My name floats past her lips soft and startled. "You scared me. I didn't hear you walk up."

"Sorry. I didn't want to interrupt. You look engrossed in that story."

She tucks a stray blonde strand behind her ear. "Yeah, I guess I am."

I take a seat in the other chair across from her. "What are you reading?"

She lifts the book, showing me the cover of *Alice in Wonderland*. "Hannah gave it to me," she says sheepishly. "She thought I might like to read it."

With the fictional girl having long, blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and even the same name, I can see why my niece chose it. Even the tale is rather fitting considering the fucked up wonderland she has found herself in.

"Are you enjoying it?" I ask.

"Very much. It's exactly what I needed tonight."

“My niece is smart like that. She gets it from me,” I say, cracking a smile.

A soft giggle spills from her lips, the incredible sound infiltrating my chest. “She is and she’s very kind. Your entire family is.”

“Meh, they’re all right,” I joke.

Her sparkling blue irises hold mine in the shadows as she rests her head back on the rocking chair. “What’s your story, Braxten Creed?”

My cock stands to attention at the way my whole name falls past her lips. Soft and smooth, innocent and breathless, like how she would sound if I was pleasuring her in ways I know she’s never felt. Something I really shouldn’t be thinking or feeling when it comes to her, especially right now, but I can’t seem to help myself.

“What do you want to know?”

She shrugs, but the careless action doesn’t match the questions burning in her eyes. “What kind of life have you led that’s made you the man you are today? What brought you and your family together?” She pauses before continuing cautiously. “I noticed you all don’t look much alike.”

I smirk. “You noticed that, huh?”

She nods. “You’d never know it though. You all are so close, especially you and your brothers.”

There is something in the way she says that last part, something that I sensed from the moment I picked her up.

Something changed today at that hospital. She was more uncertain of me than she has been, more leery to leave with me, and the fear in her eyes when she heard Knox sleeps across the hall was real. I didn’t like it and I have no doubt that fucking nurse is to blame.

I relax further back into my chair, settling in to answer her questions, at least some of them. “My brothers and I have been through a lot together. We met in a group home when we were nothing more than kids.”

A frown adopts her expression. “A group home?”

“It’s a place where kids get dumped when no one else wants them. It’s hell on earth. At least this one was.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because the bastards running it enjoyed inflicting pain on the people who were forced there by the state.”

Pain fills her expression. “What about your birth parents? Where were they?”

“My mother was a strung out junkie who left me in a dumpster to rot with the rest of the garbage when I was only a few months old. I have no idea who my father is.” I’m impressed with how even my voice is as I reveal the very thing I don’t like to talk about.

“I’m sorry,” she says regretfully.

“Don’t be. As much as life sucked for a long time, I wouldn’t trade it for anything, because then I wouldn’t have my brothers and life wouldn’t make sense without them.”

The last of my words have a smile claiming her lips. “So, you all met in the group home, then what?”

“We ran away.” I forgo telling her why, though I’m sure she can figure it out. “We lived on the streets for a while. Got into a lot of shit and did things we probably shouldn’t have done, but it was all in order to survive.”

Concern masks her pretty face. “Where did you sleep?”

“Anywhere we could. Usually in the woods. Hidden where no one would find us. Until one night it poured like a motherfucker and we had no choice but to find shelter. That’s when we ended up here. We hid in the barn right over there.” I point at the red building that shelters the horses the way it sheltered us that night so long ago.

“So that’s how you met your father?”

“Yep. Thatcher thought we were stealing and charged in there with his shotgun locked and loaded.” I chuckle at the memory, remembering how we almost pissed ourselves while

we were staring down the barrel of that gun. “Thankfully, he didn’t shoot us. Instead he took us in, fed us, and gave us a place to sleep for the night. But one night turned into two, days turned into weeks, and months turned into the best family I could ever have.”

“Wow,” she murmurs, an almost wonderment filling her voice. “That’s tragic yet beautiful. Your father is a wonderful man.”

“We owe him everything. I don’t want to think where we would be if not for him. Which is exactly why I brought you here, Alice.”

She gazes back at me, her wide, hopeful eyes anchoring the moment.

“We’re going to take care of you like my father did us because we know what it’s like to be where you are. Despite what you’ve heard about my family, we aren’t the bad guys.”

Her chair stops its soft rocking, the flash in her gaze solidifying what I already knew. “I don’t know what you mean,” she feigns ignorance.

I prop a booted foot on my knee, and link my hands behind my head, giving her a smirk. “You’re a terrible liar, Wonderland.”

She lifts a brow. “Wonderland?”

I point to the book she holds. “It’s fitting, isn’t it?”

Her smile softens into a shy one before it vanishes altogether and she looks away from my prying eyes.

“What did she say to you?”

“Who?” she whispers, continuing to avoid eye contact.

“The nurse. I know she told you something.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because whatever she told you made you afraid of me and I don’t fucking like it.”

Her gaze finally pulls to mine, questions raging within. I know exactly what's on her mind, the rumor she was told, the very one that plagues my brothers and me wherever we go. But the question she asks isn't the one I'm expecting.

“She said that you've killed people before. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation.

The admission seems to surprise her and that sliver of fear I witnessed earlier returns.

“It was my job, Alice. I never killed innocent people. I killed the enemy.”

“Was?” she asks.

I nod. “We don't take missions anymore.”

It's a recent decision that was made, but I don't bother telling her that.

She licks her lips nervously before asking the next question. “Did you kill the prior sheriff and mayor?”

This time I do hesitate. Despite the fact that everyone pretty much suspects it, there is no evidence and I want it kept that way.

“Sometimes the enemies are disguised as the good guys,” I say instead.

“What does that mean?”

“It means the mayor was a corrupt son of a bitch who preyed on innocent women. One of them was Ryanne.”

She tenses at the information.

“He tried to take what didn't belong to him and my brother made sure he payed for it.”

“And the sheriff?” she asks on a quiver, almost sounding scared to hear the answer.

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees, never breaking eye contact with her. “Forty years ago, that bastard held my father down in a corn field and burnt the flesh from his bones.”

A subtle gasp leaves her as horror enters her eyes.

“He dismembered parts of his body and beat him until he was unrecognizable.”

“Why?” the question is choked out. “Why on earth would he hurt him like that?”

“Because he loved a white woman.”

She flinches as if she’s been struck, knowledge quickly taking over. “Gwen,” the name leaves her on a whisper.

I don’t bother confirming or denying since she already knows the answer.

The tears she was holding in begin to tumble down her cheeks, the pain as raw and real as the day I found her.

I push out of my chair and walk over to where she sits, kneeling down before her. My hands rest on her slender thighs, unable to squelch this need to touch her, even if it’s something as simple as this.

“They were the enemy, Alice. They made people hurt and suffer. They made the world unsafe and they both paid the price. Just like whoever did this to you. Whoever hurt you will pay the same price. They will regret ever laying a hand on you.”

Those devastating blue eyes hang on every word until the softest sob barrels past her lips and she throws her arms around my neck. “Thank you,” she cries. “Thank you for not leaving me, for keeping me safe.”

The tears dripping down my neck burn my skin like acid. My arms come around her gently, pulling her in close. “For as long as I’m still breathing, you’ll always be safe.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alice

Cotton fields pass by on a blur as we drive into town. I gaze out the side window, my thoughts wandering to all that has transpired the last few days.

Braxten has taken very good care of me, just like he promised he would. Between keeping me well fed and rested, to having Hannah J. stop by with more storybooks for me to read, I've been able to do nothing else but allow my body to heal. It wasn't until this morning that I felt well enough to leave the farm.

After the talk I had with Braxten on his front porch, I realized that I was right all along. He and his family are good people. Even Knox, despite the fact that he doesn't seem to like me very much.

Everything Linda said was somewhat true, but it was also misunderstood. All the boys have had a hard past, but it shaped them to be who they are today. Intense and on guard, but also fiercely loyal, especially to one another.

My heart still hurts to think about what they went through and what was done to Thatcher. I'm glad in the end they found one another and if I'm being really honest, I'm glad Braxten found me.

It's hard going to bed at night not knowing who you are. To wonder if anyone out there cares about you. But that night I went to sleep knowing one thing, that in this life where there are so many uncertainties, one remains: Braxten cares and I do have him.

At least for now.

"You're far away this morning, Alice. Lost in Wonderland?" The deep, amused voice elicits warm shivers across my skin and pulls my attention to the very man my thoughts are consumed with.

I love the reference he uses, even going as far as calling me Wonderland. It's more than fitting because since waking up I do feel like I've fallen down the rabbit hole. Lost in a wonderland that brought me here to this man.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

I flash him a reassuring smile. "Yes, everything is fine." Resting my head back on the seat, my eyes never leave his handsome face. "So, where are you taking me anyway?"

"To one of the boutiques in town. Gwen's friend owns it. She called to let her know we'd be coming in."

"Maybe we should check the shelter first," I suggest carefully, still hating for him to spend any kind of money on me after everything he has already done. "The social worker said they had donations I could look through."

"That's not necessary. Leave it for the people who need it."

My brows bunch in confusion. "Aren't I one of those people?"

"No. That's for people who don't have anyone. You have me. So you don't need them."

My heart swells at his generous words, but it's not enough to douse the guilt taking up residence in my chest. "I really don't like taking money from you, Braxten. You've already done so much for me."

"We aren't going to talk about this, Alice. I said I was going to take care of you and I meant it. I have the money. You need the clothes. We're leaving it at that."

My eyes narrow, his sharp tone and bossy attitude striking a chord.

It doesn't go unnoticed, his hard mouth kicking up in a sexy smirk. "I like that fire in your eyes, Wonderland. Looks good on you, but it doesn't change a damn thing. You don't want to start an argument with me. You won't win."

I quirk a brow, feeling more than annoyed by that statement. "Is that so?"

“Yeah and trust me, I always get what I want.” His voice drops an octave, the deep baritone traveling through every cell of my body.

I quickly turn my face away before he can see the heat creeping into my cheeks. By the low chuckle that leaves him, I wasn't successful.

Thankfully, it's only minutes later when we pull up to the boutique. I need to be out of this confined space with him. As soothing and comforting as his presence can be, it can also be overwhelming, especially for my emotions.

Unfortunately, my reprieve is short lived because Braxten walks over to help me down, his hands gently spanning my waist, burning my skin through the dress I borrowed from Ryanne again this morning.

“Thank you,” I mumble, avoiding eye contact as he places me on my feet.

“You're welcome. Now let's go buy you some clothes.” I'm taken by surprise when he grasps my hand in his, as if it's completely natural for him to do. In some weird way it does feel right. Like we've been doing it our whole lives.

There are a few people out and about, walking the sidewalk of the strip mall. I don't miss their blatant stares or curious looks. Braxten either doesn't notice or chooses to ignore them.

Their prying eyes fade once we enter the boutique. A bell jingles over the door, announcing our arrival. The place is quiet and empty, not a person in sight until an older woman steps out from around the corner. Her dark hair is perfectly in place, makeup flawless, and black dress tailored as if it was made just for her. Everything about her screams class.

“Braxten. I've been expecting you.” She offers him a smile and a handshake. “And you must be Alice,” she adds, extending her hand to me next.

I nod, returning her gesture.

“I'm Joanna. Gwen told me you are in need of some clothes.”

“Yes, please. Just an outfit or two will be fine.”

“Actually, an entire wardrobe,” Braxten cuts in. “Money isn’t an issue.”

I glare up at him, our gazes locking in a silent argument.

The woman is polite enough not to call attention to it. “Well, you’ve come to the right place. What exactly are you looking for? More dresses?” she asks, eyeing the outfit I am in now. “Or would you prefer more causal attire like jeans? Our fall line has just come in and there are some adorable items in stock.”

“All of them,” Braxten says before I have a chance to answer. “Anything she will need for the next few months is what she will try on.”

The man is really very bossy.

“Well, this is going to be a ball.” Joanna claps delightfully, realizing what kind of sale she’ll be making for the day. “Follow me and we’ll get you started.”

She leads us through the store, grabbing a few items of clothing from the racks we pass before taking us to the dressing rooms in the far corner.

After unlocking one door, she passes me the few dresses she grabbed. “You can start with these while I gather some more options for you.”

Before I can thank her, she hurries away like a woman on a mission. I walk into the dressing room, closing the door behind me, but end up hitting something hard. Turning around, I find Braxten standing there, his large body crowding mine in the small space.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I stammer out nervously.

“Helping you.”

My pulse skips at the thought. “Why?”

“Don’t you need help with the zipper on your dress?”

Right. The zipper.

I release a breath, feeling ridiculous. Even though I can move around much better, the zipper is still too high for me to reach in the back.

Nodding, I turn around and remove my sweater. His hand sweeps my long, blonde hair over one shoulder, the sensual touch of his fingers on my skin creating a frenzy of goose bumps.

Once the zipper is released, I wait for him to step away, but it doesn't happen. The heat of his body envelops mine as he leans down close, bringing his mouth to my ear. "Remember, Alice. No pride. If you need help, ask me."

My hard swallow penetrates the thick silence. "I should be able to manage. I made sure I took my medication before leaving."

"Good." His nose brushes my hair, making me suck in a sharp breath. "I want to see them all on you. Understand?"

I nod. I'll agree to anything right now if I can just get some room to breathe. I can't think when he's this close. My brain doesn't function properly.

Thankfully, the agreement sends him backing out of the room. Once he closes the door, I drop onto the stool in the corner, feeling lightheaded.

What is it about the man that makes me feel like this? Like I can't breathe. Like my skin is too tight for my body.

Like...I belong to him.

I shake my head at the last thought. Once I'm more composed, I try on the first outfit. A soft yellow sundress with a blue flower pattern on it. I praise the dress gods for the side zipper. The fabric is soft, dainty, and airy. I like it, but not without a sweater so I take the one I came in with and pull it on, even though it doesn't match. Afterward, I open the door and walk out to show Braxten.

His dark eyes travel down the length of me, leaving an army of sensations in their wake. His blatant scrutiny has me shifting from foot to foot.

“Do you like it?” he asks, his gaze back on my face.

“Yes.”

“Good. Me too.”

Joanna comes back at that moment, carrying an arm full of clothes. “Oh, that’s so pretty on you, dear.”

“Thank you.”

She eyes the thin pink cardigan I’m wearing. “Would you like me to look for more of those sweaters? I have a few different colors that would work well.”

I nod. “Please.”

“Sure thing. Here, take these.” She hands me the pile she holds, filling my arms with the mound of clothes. “I also got you some undergarments too,” she says, not even bothering to keep that information private.

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

Braxten watches me with that amused grin of his.

“I guessed on your bust size,” she adds, “but let me know if you need bigger or smaller. Nothing to be embarrassed about here.”

If only that were true. I’m so embarrassed right now I wish for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Once she walks away, I scurry to the changing room, refusing to spare Braxten a glance. I’m in such a hurry that I don’t pay close enough attention and run into the corner of the door, further humiliating myself.

His low chuckle trickles behind me. “You okay, Wonderland?”

“Fine,” I grumble.

“Let me know if you need help with those *undergarments*.”

I kick the door shut before he finishes the statement and it only makes him laugh more. I swear the man is out to torture me today.

After assembling the new clothing, I try on a pair of jean shorts with a white tank top and soft plaid shirt left unbuttoned. I instantly hate the outfit because of the bruises on my legs. They are an eyesore, showing me at my weakest. The fading ones on my face are hard enough to deal with, the last thing I want to do is expose any other ones.

Cracking the door open, I poke my head out to Braxten. “I don’t like this one.”

His somber expression never wavers. “Why?”

“I just don’t.”

“Show me anyway.”

I hesitate, not wanting to step out of this room in fear of who else might walk in. Instead, I open the door wider and let him see from a distance.

His eyes travel down my body, much like they did the first time, before climbing back up to my face. “What’s wrong with it?”

“You know what,” I whisper. “It shows too much.”

His knowing stare holds mine, seeing every single insecurity I can’t hide. “There’s nothing to be ashamed about, Alice. The bruises will fade, but the girl wearing them will always remain.”

His words are both soothing and heartbreaking. He doesn’t understand. He can’t. Not when he is as attractive as he is. As confident as he is.

Joanna comes walking back over with more sweaters. “Okay, I grabbed a cream one, a yellow one, and a—” She stops short, a subtle gasp escaping her when she sees what I wish to hide from the world. She recovers quickly, but there’s no denying the sympathy etched on her face, not even the polite smile can mask it. “I have the perfect cowgirl boots to pair with those shorts if you like?”

I look over at Braxten, expecting him to answer this one like he has everything else. He ends up surprising me.

“It’s your call, Alice. Whatever you want.”

Relief fills me that he does not fight me on this. “I think I’ll just stick to jeans and long dresses for now,” I tell Joanna.

“No problem. Why don’t I still grab those cowgirl boots though? They will look cute with a few of the jeans I have for you and they will be good for the farm. I’ll also grab a few other options as well.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

She hands me the sweaters and disappears once again, leaving Braxten and me alone.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I mumble, paying close attention to my feet.

“Really? Enlighten me, Wonderland. What am I thinking?”

“You’re disappointed in me.”

Silence expands between us before he climbs out of his chair and walks over to me, every stride determined until he’s standing right before me. My head tilts all the way back, throat growing impossibly dry.

“On the contrary, Alice. I feel a lot of things right now, but disappointment isn’t one of them.” His hand moves to my cheek as he peers down at me. “As much as I don’t think you should hide any part of yourself, I also know what it’s like to not want to put your most vulnerable moments on display for the world to see. So cover what you want. Hide what you will. Just not from me. We are different. Am I clear?”

I nod.

“Good. Now go try on the rest of the outfits. After you’re done we’ll go for lunch at the diner next door.”

My head slants inquisitively. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly bossy, Braxten Creed?”

The question triggers that easy grin of his. “Yeah, actually they have, and it’s something I take pride in.”

I smile back at him, thankful for the lighter moment. Our encounter comes to an end when Joanna brings several pairs of shoes, one of them the cowgirl boots she mentioned. I end up

loving them. Actually, I love all the shoes she brings, but I only choose two, much to Braxten's dismay. However, he makes sure I leave with way more outfits than necessary, including the pair of shorts. He said for when I'm more comfortable to wear them.

The man never gives up.

It isn't until we are at the counter paying that reality hits and my stomach twists at every swipe of the price tag. When the total is revealed, I feel down right sick. Braxten on the other hand doesn't even bat an eye as he hands her his credit card.

I manage to contain my composure until we're outside. "Fifteen hundred dollars!" I screech, turning on him. "Are you crazy?"

He shrugs. "We got a lot of clothes. I'm actually impressed it cost only that much. Besides, those *undergarments* are fancy," he mocks playfully.

I curse myself for the blush creeping into my cheeks and refuse to give him the smile he's looking for. "I'm serious, Braxten. It's too much. I only need half this stuff."

His playful demeanor vanishes, annoyance taking its place. "Are we going to argue about this all day? Because as much as I love this back and forth with you, it's starting to piss me off."

I gape at him incredulously. "I'm trying to save you money here."

"And I'm trying to take care of you," he snaps. "Why can't you accept that?"

"Accepting help is one thing, being a charity case is another."

"You're not a fucking charity case!"

"It sure feels that way!" I look away, not wanting him to see how hurt I am.

His frustration fades as he steps closer to me, gently grasping my shoulders. "You're not a charity case. I want to do this. I need to do this, Alice."

“Why?” I ask. “Why do you insist on all this?”

“Honestly? I don’t know, but I’m doing this just as much for me as I am for you. I have this insane need to take care of you. The way I wish someone would have done for me before my brothers and father came along.”

There’s something beautifully sad in the way he looks at me right now and it crushes the last of my resolve. “All right, but we need to set some ground rules.”

He grunts. “Sorry, baby. I’m not one for rules.”

His “baby” comment skips its way into my heart and takes off on a gallop. However, I don’t let it distract me and lift my chin. “Well, it’s the only way I’ll stop fighting you on this.”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest. “Fine. What?”

“No more going overboard and you will let me pay you back every cent when I’m able to.”

My determined stare never wavers from his as I stand my ground.

“I have a better idea. How about we argue about it over lunch?” He follows the suggestion with a handsome smirk that probably gets him out of trouble a lot.

I shake my head. “You’re impossible, Braxten Creed.”

“Yeah, I know.” He doesn’t even bother to deny it as he drapes an arm around my shoulders. “Now, let me feed you and we can find out what else you like to eat.”

I now see why he gets his way all the time. He’s hard to say no to. Despite his unwilling promise, I will pay him back for everything he has done.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Braxten

The lunch rush is in full swing when we enter the diner. Chatter filters throughout, waitresses bustle around to get the waiting patrons their food while music plays from the juke box in the corner. Regardless of the busy chaos, all eyes shift our way, checking to see who the newcomers are. The noise subtly dissipates, falling to hushed tones as they all eye Alice with curiosity.

Ah, the joys of a small town.

The looks and whispers are something I'm used to since my brothers and I get them wherever we go, sometimes with displeasure and other times not, depending on the crowd. Alice, on the other hand, isn't used to it, her body shifting nervously under the probing stares.

Taking her delicate hand in mine, I lead her toward an empty booth that's tucked away in the back corner. I'm not sure I've ever held a chick's hand before today, but with Alice I can't seem to help myself. It displays a sense of possession, feeding the primal instinct that has called to me since the moment I found her in that field, battered and helpless. I want everyone to know that the lost girl belongs to me.

A few people greet me with a nod as we weave through the diner, mainly fellow farmers who are acquaintances of my father. Alice keeps her head low, allowing her hair to shield half her face as she hides herself from the prying eyes. I don't like it, but I meant what I said earlier; if she wants to hide from the world that's just fine as long as she doesn't hide from me.

She slides into the booth first, placing her back to everyone while I take the spot in front of her. After grabbing her menu, she flips it open and covers the lower half of her face before leaning across the table and pinning me with those crystal blue eyes of hers.

“Why is everyone staring at us?” Her voice is muffled behind the plastic booklet she hides behind.

“I’m irresistible, Wonderland. They can’t help themselves.”

She lowers the menu, revealing a smile. It’s exactly the reaction I was looking for. “Bossy and arrogant,” she muses. “How charming.”

I chuckle, loving the sass that she’s tossing out today, not something I expected from the shy, timid girl, but I love it. It makes my dick just as hard as when I spotted Joanna ringing through those lace panties...I shift in my seat, trying to alleviate the sudden pressure at the center of my jeans.

“You want the truth?” I ask, straying back to her original question.

Black lashes sweep up as she gazes at me over the top of her menu. “Always.”

“They’re probably wondering who the beautiful girl is and what the hell she’s doing here with me.”

She scoffs, as if the thought is ridiculous. I scowl at the response and am about to call her on it, but Shirley shows up to take our order.

“Well, if it isn’t trouble,” the older woman rasps, her voice as rough as sandpaper due to the amount of cigarettes she smokes in a day.

Shirley Clandestine is a long time resident of Winchester. She’s rough around the edges and moody as hell, but she’s also one of the few of her time that actually like the Creeds.

“How’s it going, Shirley?”

“I’m still breathing, ain’t I?”

Amusement washes over me at her usual dry response. “Well, good thing, otherwise you wouldn’t get to serve me today.”

“I’m truly blessed.” Her southern twang drips with sarcasm before she pulls out her notepad and pen. “What will

it be, handsome?”

“The usual.”

“A coke and chicken pot pie.” She jots the order down before shifting her attention to Alice, her brows raising as if she’s just noticed the company I’m with. “Who the hell are you?”

Alice blinks up at her, caught off guard.

“Her name is Alice and she’s a friend of mine,” I tell her. “Be nice.”

She shoots a look my way. “I’m always nice.”

I grunt because we both know she’s full of shit.

She turns back to Alice. “Well, what do you want, sugar? I ain’t got all day.”

“Oh. Um, I’ll, um...” Alice stumbles over every word nervously. “I’ll just have whatever he’s having,” she rushes out, quickly closing her menu.

Shirley flashes her a knowing smile. “Honey, I don’t blame ya. I’d have whatever he’s having too.” After a wink in her direction, she gathers up the menus and walks away.

Alice lifts a slender brow. “A friend of yours?”

I chuckle. “She’s harmless. Forward, but harmless.”

“Well, she seems to think a lot of you, *handsome*,” she adds playfully.

A smirk eases over my face as I rest back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. “Jealous?”

“Of course not,” she denies, but the color that stains her skin contradicts the denial. It’s something she can never hide. It’s hot as hell and has me dying to know how far that innocent color runs...

Shirley returns moments later with our drinks, placing each one in front of us. “Your food will be out shortly.”

“You’re the best, Shirley. Have I ever told you that?”

“You’re a damn liar,” she barrels out, “but sweet.” She leaves me with a tap to the cheek before walking away again.

Alice shakes her head, but there’s a smile on her face.

“What?” I ask with mock innocence.

“Are all you Creed boys this charming or just you?”

“Just me. The other two are assholes.”

Laughter tumbles past her lips, but it fades quickly, her expression sobering with what she says next. “I noticed Knox hasn’t slept in his room since I came to stay.”

After the way our conversation ended the other night, I’m not surprised and I know he probably won’t. It makes me feel like shit, but until I can get him to see that the beauty before me is not the enemy, it’s for the best.

“He has decided to stay at the main house with my father for awhile.”

“Because of me.” She voices it as a statement not a question, hurt edging her tone.

“No. Not just because of you.”

It’s obvious she doesn’t believe me.

“Don’t take it personally, Alice. There’s a reason my brother doesn’t trust easily, but he’ll come around eventually and see what I do.”

“And what is it you see, Braxten?” The question hangs in the air as she peers back at me.

“A girl who is not so different than the rest of us,” I tell her, watching hope fill her soft expression. “A girl who needs us as much as we need her.”

Every word is the truth. I have no idea what the future holds, but I do know that she will be a part of it.

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

A soft smile steals her lips that has me wanting to kiss it right off her pretty face.

Just as the thought emerges, the door to the diner opens and in walks one of my biggest regrets.

Courtney Fabre searches the diner for someone and I have a feeling I know exactly who that someone is. My suspicion is confirmed when her gaze lands on me, a suggestive smile taking over her face.

Shit!

Every muscle in my body tightens as she makes her way over to our table. With overly done makeup, long, brunette hair, and fake tits plunging from the neckline of her tank top, she used to be a walking wet dream until she became a nightmare.

“Brax,” she greets me in that sultry tone. “It’s been a while.”

“Courtney,” I return, not bothering to hide my irritation.

“I’ve left you several messages the past few weeks and haven’t heard from you.”

“Been busy.”

She flicks an annoyed glance at Alice, looking her over with distaste. “With her?” The question sneers past her lips, ramping up my temper.

“That’s none of your business.” The warning in my voice is unmistakable.

Alice clears her throat, breaking the tension. “I think I’ll use the restroom. Excuse me.”

She makes an effort to stand, but I grab her wrist, forcing her to remain seated. “No. You stay. Courtney is leaving.”

Angry brown eyes cut back to me as Courtney refuses to take the escape I graciously give her. She crosses her arms over her chest, cocking a hip. “She seems a little innocent for you and Knox, are all you Creed boys going soft on me now?”

Alice stiffens beneath my touch and it sends me to my feet, forcing Courtney back a step.

“You don’t want to do this. Not now or ever. You knew the rules. Get over it and move on or you’re not going to like the consequences.”

No attachments, no promises. The rules are very clear, they always have been and unless agreed upon nothing takes place. She agreed, but since then she has gone back on it. I was nice at first, then stern, until I tried ignoring her all together. Obviously that didn’t work and what she’s trying to pull now won’t either.

“Whatever, call me when you get bored with her.” Spinning on her heel, she finally makes the smart move to walk away.

Anger simmers beneath my skin as I watch her leave the diner. Taking my seat again, I look over at Alice to find her staring out the window, embarrassment splashed across her face.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” she responds flippantly, but the ache in her voice is evident. “I should have asked if you had a girlfriend before coming to stay with you.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I tell her firmly. “She’s not even a friend.”

“I don’t think she knows that,” she whispers.

“She does. She just doesn’t want to accept it.”

She says nothing else, her gaze remaining trained out the window.

“Look at me, Alice.” The command is harsher than intended.

She turns her head and the hurt embedded in her eyes hits me like a punch in the gut.

“She means nothing to me. Got it?”

She nods, but it’s more than obvious she doesn’t believe me.

Shirley eventually brings us our food, and the tension only continues to hang over us like a dark cloud. All the earlier easiness we had this morning is completely gone.

It follows us on the ride home, the silence in my truck deafening and it pisses me off.

If I'm honest, I'm more mad at myself than her. Mad that I spent the night with that bitch in the first place. Mad that even if I wanted to explain the entire situation to her, I can't. Some secrets I promised to take to the grave, secrets I will never reveal to anyone, including her.

Once we arrive back at the farm, I find Craig's police cruiser parked at the main house. I pull up next to it and don't even have the truck shut off before Alice opens her door to make a fast escape.

"Wait for me," I tell her.

She stiffens at the order, but does as I say.

Climbing out of the truck, I walk around to the other side and take hold of her hips like I always do before lowering her to the ground.

I get no acknowledgment other than a murmured "thank you." Then, she tries making a run for it.

"Not so fast, sweetheart." Snagging her wrist, I force her back against the truck, bracing my hands on either side of her head.

She gazes up at me with wide, uncertain eyes.

"If you have something to say to me, then fucking say it so we can move on."

"I don't," she whispers, looking away.

"Bullshit!"

The heated retort sends her gaze snapping back to mine, that hint of fire I witnessed earlier returning.

"This is obviously about what Courtney said about my brothers and me. It's the one rumor you have been dying to ask

since I picked you up from that damn hospital and we both know it.”

She lifts her chin, realizing there is no point to deny it anymore. “Fine, Linda might have mentioned something about it, but it doesn’t matter because your dating life is none of my business.”

Her response only pisses me off more. “Let’s get something straight. I don’t date. I fuck. That’s all Courtney was and a bad memory is all she will ever be.”

“And what about me, Braxten?” she asks. “Is that all I’ll ever be to you? A bad memory? The girl you felt sorry for?”

“I feel a lot of things for you, Alice, but sorry isn’t one of them.”

Despite the declaration, I see the doubt in her eyes and I can’t blame her.

“Look, my brothers and I have a certain relationship. It’s complicated and I can never tell you all the reasons why, but I can tell you it’s changed. It’s not what it used to be and it shifted again the day I found you.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t.” Her voice cracks as sadness takes over her face. “Because no matter how much we pretend otherwise, I’m just the lost girl you found and it’s all I’m ever going to be.”

A single tear tracks down her cheek before she looks away again, the sight of it sucker punching me in the gut.

Grasping her chin, I force her wounded eyes back to mine. “That’s right, Alice, I’m the one who found you so you know what that means?” I don’t give her a chance to respond. Leaning down, I skim my nose across her soft cheek, hearing her sharp intake of breath as I trail my lips to her ear. “Finders keepers...”

I leave the sentence unfinished, not knowing how far to take it just yet. Pulling back, I find her gazing up at me with so much longing it’s about to bring me to my fucking knees.

Before either of us can say more, a bang sounds behind me, shattering the silence. Turning, I find Justice on the front porch, his hard expression putting me on alert.

“We got trouble.”

The urgency in his tone puts me in motion. Grabbing Alice’s hand, I pull her behind me, leading her into the house.

Inside we find my brothers, father, and Craig in the kitchen. Their solemn expressions have lead settling in my gut, heavy and hard.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

My father picks up a sheet of paper and hands it to me. “Take a look.”

Alice slides in closer, both of us taking in the computerized letter that’s titled: *Who is Alice?*

My blood begins to pump violently as I read the words before me...

A wounded bird unable to fly with no memory to piece together that fateful time.

Left for the wolves to find, the pack walked in blind wondering who this Alice is and what her mind has to hide.

Could it be that she was left to be found by a past that’s tied and bound?

A simple connection or more, perhaps they all have something to abhor. Come upon death’s door to find out what I have in store.

Alice’s fingertips grip my arm tightly, a slight tremble taking hold. My eyes lift from the paper to the others.

“A poetic fucker, isn’t he?” Justice mocks, the same fury I feel edging his voice.

“Where did it come from?” I ask.

“It was delivered with the mail this morning,” my father answers. “Obviously no return address, but I think it’s safe for us to presume that you finding Alice is not coincidental.”

It's something I had already known, something I felt deep down, but now that it's solidified it leaves me questioning everything and everyone. Who would be stupid enough to fuck with us and even worse, use Alice as a pawn to do it?

"As soon as I got the call from Thatcher I went to the post office and checked their surveillance cameras," Craig says, opening a folder that sits in front of him. "The clerk was able to pinpoint the time of delivery with this individual." He pushes an image across the table toward Alice and me, revealing a distorted picture of a guy wearing a hood who is clearly going to great lengths to keep his face hidden. "I know it's not much, but does anything jump out at either of you? Anything familiar at all?"

I shake my head and so does Alice. With this kind of image it could literally be anyone.

"Forget the picture for a moment," Justice says. "We need to focus on the riddle. It says our pasts are tied and bound. We have to know her from somewhere."

"Why don't we ask her?" Knox cuts in, his accusation clear. "It says her mind hides the answers."

"Back off, Knox," I warn.

Alice shakes her head. "I don't know anything, I swear."

I pull her against my chest, my narrowed eyes never leaving my brother. "We know that. My brother is just being an asshole."

Knox glares back, but lays off.

Alice lifts her face, her fear and confusion prevalent. "I don't understand. Are we connected somehow and don't know it?"

"I don't know, Wonderland, but we'll figure it out. I promise."

"Maybe the connection is someone you all know," Craig says. "You guys ever have a falling out with someone? Someone who could have a vendetta against you?"

We definitely have our share of enemies, it's impossible not to in our line of work, but there is only one person from our past that stands out. One that would be hateful enough to do this, but he's buried ten feet under, burning in hell where he belongs.

My brothers and I share a look, our thoughts reflecting the other's.

Justice shakes his head. "There's no way. It's not possible."

He's right. Hobbs is dead, we made sure of it. Months after we came to live with my father we looked up the group home and found out that it had burned to the ground the night we left. Hobbs' remains were all that was found in the destructive rubble.

The article stated there was a shortage in the wiring that sent the entire place up in flames, killing the head guard in charge, a trusted and well respected man who made it his life mission in helping the less fortunate.

Trusted and respected my ass. Fredrick Harlen Hobbs was a sick son of a bitch who fed off the pain of others. He inflicted some of the worst kinds of torture on innocent children.

I have no doubt that's why the place went up in flames. There is no way that fire was accidental. It was just a cover up to hide all the abuse and corruption that was going on in that hellhole.

Craig's gaze shifts between all three of us. "What's not possible?"

"Nothing," we all answer in unison.

"Look, if there is something I need to know, you fuckers better speak up now."

Silence slithers through the room, the quiet as stifling as the tension.

It's an answer none of us will give because it's just another secret from the past that we all agreed to take to our graves.

“If my boys say it’s nothing then it’s nothing,” my father breaks the silence, coming to our defense, like always.

It makes me feel like shit since we never told him the truth, mainly because we didn’t want to put him in the position of aiding and abetting criminals. More than that, we were scared we would lose the love and family we had finally found. It’s something we weren’t willing to jeopardize and we still aren’t.

Craig frustratingly relents. “All right then, let’s go back to when you all first met. If we want to assume what this riddle says is true, it has to do with all three of you. So how far back do we go?”

Justice decides to take the reins. “We met in a group home when we were fourteen.”

“Name?” Craig asks, writing on his notepad.

“It’s not around anymore.”

Craig lifts his head, eyeing Justice over his waiting pen. “Doesn’t matter, I still need the name.”

He hesitates for a long second before reluctantly replying. “South Haven.”

“Any enemies I should look at there?”

“Take your pick,” Knox says. “The assholes running it were enemies to us all.”

Craig cocks a brow. “Care to elaborate on that?”

“Nope.”

His jaw locks in frustration.

I decide to jump in and finish this once and for all. “Look, we were only there a few weeks. After that, we were on the streets for a while before finding our homeless asses here. And before you ask, the only people we pissed off during that time were the business owners we stole from to eat. That enough information for you, *Sheriff?*”

It’s a low blow and I know it. He’s always been more than that to us, but the truth is, this shit isn’t easy to talk about. It’s everything I have spent my life trying to forget.

Thankfully, Craig doesn't take offense. "It will do for now." He closes up his notepad with a snap. "I'll start with the group home then go from there. I'm also going to send out Alice's photo to other departments and see if any tips come in."

I open my mouth to reject the idea, but he holds a hand up, cutting me off before I can.

"He already knows she's here. He has an agenda and we need to figure it out before his next move. The only way to do that is to find out who she is."

I grit my teeth, knowing he's right. "Fine, but departments only. No media."

He nods. "You have my word."

"Thanks for all your help, Craig," my father says. "We appreciate it."

"I'll let you guys know as soon as I have something."

In the meantime, I have some plans of my own. Plans of digging into a past I never wanted to revisit again.

A past I will have no choice but to remember.

CHAPTER NINE

Alice

The events of the day roll through me like thunder clouds before a contentious storm.

I stare up at the ceiling of my borrowed room, sleep evading me as Braxten lays only steps away on the couch.

I've never yearned for the safety of his presence more than I do right now. I had been so close to breaking down and asking him to sleep with me tonight, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, not when I was already feeling so vulnerable. Besides, the last thing I wanted to do was add to his stress.

Things were so bleak after Craig's visit, everyone quiet and subdued. Among that quiet though was also anger. I could sense it in Braxten the most. See it in the rigidness of his body, the tight set of his jaw, the pinched vice of his clenched fists. It made me feel horrible, knowing my situation was the cause.

Sighing, I turn over and burrow in closer to my pillow. Sleep eventually finds me, but it brings no peace. Only a nightmare. It drifts from the deepest parts of my memory, pulling me into its terrifying darkness. There's no escaping it or the truth it unveils...

Cold metal snaps around my delicate wrists, creating a spine stiffening sound as I'm shackled to the whipping post that has become my eternal damnation.

Heavy black boots echo on the concrete floor behind me, my naked flesh recoiling at the feel of his dark presence.

"You've been a bad girl again, Alice. It's time for your punishment."

My head lowers in shame, soul crumbling in despair while I await the pain that will be inflicted.

I am the outlet for his rage and the demons he keeps locked inside. I pay for sins that are not my own.

He cracks the whip on the ground, making me jerk against my restricted chains, and it has fear rattling deep in my bones. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry." The unwarranted apology weeps past my lips, a sense of powerlessness leaving with it.

"Not yet, but you will be."

I brace myself for that first strike, but no matter how prepared I am, no matter how many times I've been through this, there is no preparing for this kind of agony.

It's life shattering.

I bite my tongue, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth as I fight to silence my cries. Lash after lash, the pain swallows me whole and I am no longer able to help myself. A desolate scream shreds my throat and bounces off the walls, drowning me in the fiery pits of hell.

I bolt upright on a blood curdling scream, despair gripping my chest in an unforgivable vise. My hands run along my body as I fight for breath, a cold sweat blanketing my skin. I expect to find blood, but all I'm met with are a battered heart and desolate tears.

"Alice!" My name rings out behind the bedroom door seconds before it crashes open with a thundering bang, almost ripping off its hinges.

Braxten charges into the room like an angered bull, taking in the dark surroundings of his room before rushing to my side. "What's wrong?" he asks, grasping my shoulders. "What happened?"

I open my mouth, but am unable to speak past the fear that clogs my throat. It robs me of breath, hindering every part of my soul.

"Breathe, baby." Braxten's hands lift to my face, his forehead resting on mine as he coaches me through whatever is happening right now.

My eyes fall closed, the warmth of his touch along with the soothing baritone of his voice bringing the calmness my

frantic heart craves.

“That’s it. Just breathe.”

The air in my lungs begins to regulate, exhaling past my lips at a normal pace. My eyes reopen, colliding with the strength of his.

“You good?” he asks.

I nod.

“Talk to me. What happened?”

The evil I just faced taunts my conscience, the scars on my body burning all over again with the truth. “I-I remembered something,” the confession escapes me on a broken whisper.

Braxten’s calm demeanor shatters as he grasps my shoulders once more, his grip firm yet gentle. “What is it? What do you remember?”

I hesitate, unable to speak the horror I just faced, to explain how the scars on my body came to be. “He...He hurt me, Braxten. He hurt me really bad.” A sob rips from my chest, the sound exploding through the room.

A heated curse flees him before he pulls me against his chest, letting me cry out all the pain tainting my soul.

“It’s okay. Everything is going to be okay. I promise.”

After the letter we received today, I’m not so sure any of us are going to be okay when this is over.

Leaning back, he brushes the hair from my wet cheeks. “I know you’re scared right now, but I need you to think really hard. Is there anything about him that you remember? Anything distinctive that could help us figure out who he is?”

I shake my head.

Defeat fills his expression and it kills me to know it’s my fault. Not only did I bring this threat to him and his family, but my memory holds the answers we all seek. A memory I’m starting to hope never returns. Not if its filled with memories like the one I just had.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Don’t,” he grits. “Don’t say that. This isn’t your fault.”

“But it is. The letter said—”

“Fuck the letter,” he snaps. “Fuck the letter and fuck him.”

My head lowers, knowing he doesn’t understand.

“Look at me!” His sharp order has my weary eyes snapping to his. “That letter changes nothing, do you hear me? Everything still stands the same. I’m going to take care of this, I promise.”

The knot in my throat aches further. “If anything happens to you or your family, I will never forgive myself.”

“Nothing is going to happen to us. I’m going to find the son of a bitch and take him out before he even has the chance.”

There is no arrogance in that statement, only confidence.

His hand moves to my cheek in a comforting gesture. “I got you, Alice. I swear it. I just need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

Covering his hand with my own, I lean into his touch. “I do. More than anyone in this world.”

Relief fills his expression before he pulls me against his chest again. “Good. That’s good.”

I hug him back, soaking in the solitude of his arms, never wanting to leave their warmth.

“Will you stay with me?” I ask, no longer holding back. I need him too much right now.

He doesn’t hesitate. “Yeah, Wonderland. I’ll stay for as long as you want me to.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say forever, because I only feel safe when he is near, however, I manage to hold that part back.

With his arms wrapped around me, he lays us down to face each other, his lips only inches from mine. Moonlight cascades

through the bedroom window, highlighting every strong feature he possesses. From his angled jaw, to his sharp cheekbones, to eyes that command attention at a moment's notice and portray strength from the demons he has had to overcome.

"Tell me more about you," I whisper, breaking the silence.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything." It's the truth. The more I am around him the more I yearn to know. I want to know the good, the bad, and the in between. I want it all. "Start with your job. What made you choose it?"

"My father." There's a note of respect and admiration in his answer. "He was a sniper in the military. The best there was. He taught us to shoot only days after we came to live with him and the moment he placed that gun in my hands." He pauses with meaning, shaking his head. "There's no words to describe it. It's like everything that was missing inside of me just fell into place."

The deep emotion behind that response blankets the room with a knowledge that only serves to intrigue me further.

"It wasn't just about learning how to shoot. It was about protecting ourselves and each other. Holding that machine in our hands, knowing we had the ability to take a life gave us our power back. We were no longer vulnerable."

A sharp pang infiltrates my heart to think of him or his brothers ever being vulnerable.

"So why did you stop?" I ask, remembering what he told me the other night on the porch.

"Justice doesn't want to leave Ryanne and Hannah which is understandable, especially with another child on the way. If one of us stays back we all do. It's a pact we made long ago. The three of us stick together, no matter what."

The confession is a reminder of the bond they all share, bringing the memory of the encounter with the brunette at the diner today.

She seems a little innocent for the likes of you and Knox.

The embarrassment and jealousy I felt in that moment is something I had no right to feel and I know it, but I couldn't seem to help it.

Maybe it's because for a short time that morning while Braxten and I walked into that boutique holding hands, I felt normal. Like I was just a girl out with a boy who maybe, just maybe, felt this same connection that I do. It gave me hope that he saw more than the bruises, that he saw more than the lost, battered girl I am. Those dreams were obliterated the moment that brunette approached. She was everything I'm not and it was a harsh slap back to reality that I needed.

Until...Finders keepers.

Those few words had me falling down the rabbit hole again, lost in the Wonderland that brought me to this man. A world that I wouldn't mind living in for the rest of time.

"We might not do missions anymore, but we still do our part," Braxten continues, bringing me back to the conversation. "Instead of taking out the enemy we build the very machines that destroy them."

It takes only a moment for realization to sink in. "You build guns?"

"Yep, and some pretty bad ass ones at that." The pride in his voice is strong. "As much as I miss the shot, it's the next best thing. It's also good to be home more. My father's getting older and needs our help here, though he will never admit that. The old man is a stubborn bastard."

I have no doubt Thatcher is just as happy to have his sons home. The love they all have for each other is palpable.

"I think it's wonderful you all have each other." There's no stopping the envy in my voice, it seeps through every word.

"You have us too, Alice."

As much as I wish that were true, this is his family and I have no idea who mine are. After the nightmare I had I'm not so sure I want to know either.

“Would it be awful if I didn’t remember?” The question drifts through the dark room on a broken whisper. “I don’t want to remember what happened to me, Braxten.”

His arms hug me closer, wrapping me in a protective blanket. “No, it wouldn’t be bad. You don’t have to remember anything if you don’t want to, because the truth is what happened in the past doesn’t matter. Only this. The here and now. This is what matters and I promise from here on out, you won’t know fear or pain again. Here with me, you will always be safe.”

The conviction in that promise burrows deep in my soul, sealing not only my fate, but the monster who continues to lurk, threatening to ruin it all.

CHAPTER TEN

Alice

The sound of birds chirping stirs me from my peaceful slumber. My eyes flutter open to find the morning sun streaming through the cracks of the blinds.

It doesn't take long before I realize the warmth I had enveloping me all night is no longer there.

Memories float to the surface, bringing forth the haunting nightmare that I know deep down was my reality. More than that, is the phantom feel of Braxten's strong arms as he held me through it all.

Arms that I got to sleep in for the entire night.

The way his calloused fingers dried my tears and his hushed words eased my fears, is something I will never forget. It's by far the best memory I have since waking up in that hospital, and despite the danger that still lurks, it fills me with a sense of hope for the coming day.

Throwing the covers off, I climb from bed, noticing the stiffness in my body is almost nonexistent now. The cool hardwood floor blasts the pads of my feet as I tiptoe to the bathroom for a shower. I'm so lost in my euphoria that I don't realize it's already in use. Not until I open the door.

I come to a jarring stop, the air leaving my lungs on a gasp at the sight I'm met with. A thin layer of steam blankets the room, fogging up the clear glass, but it does little to shield the powerful, naked man before me. Braxten stands beneath the hot spray, the water rushing down his hard body captivating me where I stand.

Unable to help myself, my eyes drift lower, exploring all that warm skin and lean muscle. It's then I see he has a large tattoo. A black and red dragon covers one side of his body, from his ribs down to his hip before disappearing behind him. The beast is a work of art, exuding the same power as the man

himself. It's beautiful and riveting, but not as much as what he's doing to himself in this moment.

With one hand braced on the wall, Braxten strokes himself, his shaft long and hard as he pumps from base to tip.

Oh—My—God.

Heat explodes through my body like a wildfire, spreading from the tips of my fingers to my toes, singeing me from the inside out. My nipples pebble beneath the thin silk of my nightgown, a foreign ache starting between my legs. I'm as horrified with myself as I am turned on.

I should walk away right now. Turn around and quietly close the door to give him the privacy he deserves, but I can't find it in myself to do it. I'm fascinated by the erotic sight. It's the most intimate and beautiful act I've ever seen.

"Alice." My name shreds his throat on a groan, yanking my gaze up to his face. "That's it, baby. Suck my cock."

Every part of me stills, including my breath. It becomes trapped in my lungs, passing back and forth in a fiery frenzy as I realize he's thinking of me in this very private moment.

It has me wishing that I was brave enough to strip down, open that shower door, and walk in there to make his fantasy a reality. Just the thought has the throbbing between my legs almost unbearable.

It splinters in a heart stopping second when he turns his head, his eyes meeting mine. Horror grips my chest as time comes to a stand still. I wait for anger to enter his gaze, maybe even disgust, but it never comes. It's as if he's known I've been here the entire time.

The thought only mortifies me more, but not enough to walk out. I'm riveted by the heat in his gaze, a silent exchange passing between us.

An unspoken promise.

His hand picks up speed, pumping harder and faster, those lean, corded muscles straining beneath his hot, wet skin. His gaze never leaves mine as he gives me a show.

“Fuck!” He lets go of another groan, his jaw locking, teeth baring like a wild animal as he reaches his release.

I can barely make out that part of him behind the clouded glass, but I wish I could. God, I wish I could see it all. Feel it. Touch it. *Taste it...*

My breath rushes out as fast and erratic as his, a sense of satisfaction filling me at the same time.

All too soon the incredible moment comes to an end, leaving a cold reality in its place. Tension blankets the room as I open my mouth, knowing I should say something. Do something... “I-I I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were in here.” The lame excuse tumbles past my lips before I quickly close the door and hightail it back to the room.

My feet pace a hole in the floor, hands moving to my flushed cheeks as I try to grasp what just happened, images of what I just watched burning hot and bright.

I not only invaded his privacy, but I watched and I liked it...

Oh god, I have to get out of here.

Desperate for escape, I hurry to the closet and grab the first sundress I see before throwing it on. Afterward, I slip my feet into a pair of sandals and bolt from the room, heading straight for the front entrance.

The creak of the bathroom door opening sounds behind me. “Where are you sneaking off to, Alice?” Braxten’s question stops me mid-step, the deep sound of his voice tickling my spine.

I spin around to find amusement splashed across his handsome face, no anger or embarrassment as there should be. Instead, he stands tall and confident in the doorway, a towel knotted low on his waist. It has my eyes drifting down the length of him again. I’m certain I’ve never seen anything so magnificently crafted in all my life.

“Running scared?” he asks, cocking a brow.

My eyes snap back up to his and I shake my head even though that's exactly what I should do. I should run as far and fast as I can, escape all these overwhelming emotions that I can't seem to process.

"Good. Wouldn't want you to get lost." He advances on me, those dark, predatory eyes piercing the very depths of my soul.

With every step he takes, I retreat until I bump into the wall and become trapped.

My head cranes back as he invades my personal space, the heat of his skin stifling, robbing all the air from the room. Air that I desperately need at the moment.

"Do you know what happens to lost little girls, Wonderland?"

God, I love it when he calls me that.

My heart bangs against my ribs as I shake my head again, unable to find my voice.

His face dips, nose skimming along my cheek in a heated caress until it reaches my ear. "They get eaten by the big bad wolf."

Oh gosh. I'm not so sure that's such a bad thing. Not if he is the wolf.

"Braxten." His name whispers past my lips on a needy whimper, my hand moving to the hard surface of his stomach as I fight to remain upright.

He leans back, his eyes storming with all the things I feel.

Before either of us can make any kind of move, the front door swings open with a bang, making me jump. A yelp escapes me, my heart leaping through two beats before taking off in a sprint.

Looking over Braxten's arm, I find Knox in the doorway, his unforgiving eyes taking us in the compromising position.

"Am I interrupting?" His voice is as cold as ever.

I quickly slip out from under Braxten's arm, suddenly feeling the need for distance.

"Actually, you are," Braxten says, his tone annoyed as he turns to face his brother. "You need something?"

"Yeah, I do." Knox's gaze bores into mine, his indication clear.

It turns the blood in my veins to ice.

"Knock it off, Knox!" The warning snaps from Braxten like a lashing whip. He steps in front of me, blocking me from view.

"What's wrong, brother? Not in the mood to share anymore?" Knox's response might be dry, but there's no denying the pain within each spoken word.

"Don't do this," Braxten says. "Not here. Not in front of her."

The two face off in a silent exchange, emotions that I can't even begin to name battling between them.

I hate that I am the cause of it.

The sound of small footsteps bound up the porch steps, interrupting the tense exchange. "Breakfast is ready," Hannah J. announces. She ducks her head under Knox's arm to peek inside, completely oblivious to what she just walked in on.

"Good morning, Hannah J.," I greet softly.

"Morning, Miss Alice." She takes in Braxten next to me, a frown adopting her face. "Uncle Brax, why are you naked?"

"Just got out of the shower, little bit," he tells her, but his gaze remains on his brother.

"Well, you better get dressed before breakfast, no one wants to see that."

A snicker escapes me before I smother it with my hand.

Braxten's gaze finally moves to his niece, the anger on his face slowly melting away as amusement takes its place. "I'll be sure to do that."

“You coming too, Uncle Knox?” she asks, looking up at him expectantly. “I put out your favorite syrup.”

“Maybe later, kid.” He backs out of the doorway, betrayal lurking beneath his narrowed gaze as he glares back at his brother. “I suddenly don’t have much of an appetite.” Turning, he heads down the rickety steps, leaving us in silence.

I chance a look at Braxten and find an undeniable pain on his expression. It has me reaching out to touch his shoulder.

His gaze meets mine, displaying a war of emotions, each one striking my heart.

“Wanna walk with me to the house, Miss Alice?” Hannah J. asks. “Uncle Brax can be a real slow poke at times.”

My gaze lingers on Braxten, unsure what he wants me to do.

“Go,” he urges gently.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, we’ll finish this later.” There is no denying the dark promise in his voice.

After a nod, I walk over and take Hannah J.’s outstretched hand in mine.

“See ya there, Uncle Brax.”

“See you soon.”

His words might be for his niece, but his gaze remains on me. The intensity of it can be felt long after the door closes, doing things to my heart that can no longer be denied.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Braxten

Solemn silence fills the morning as I sit with Justice and my father on the front porch of the main house, finishing my coffee from breakfast.

Alice left minutes ago with Ryanne and Hannah for a tour of the farm. It's something I wanted to do with her, but when my niece asked if she could take her I couldn't say no. It's probably for the best anyway. I need to clear my head after everything that went down with Knox this morning.

He stepped into dangerous territory and he knows it. I have no doubt he only did it to scare Alice and I hate to say that it worked. The unease that resonated on her face in that split second still has anger coiling through every inch of my body.

Among that anger though is an undeniable guilt because I also saw my brother's fear in that moment. Fear of change, fear of the unknown.

Fear of being alone.

All things I swore he would never feel again.

It's something I will need to deal with and soon, but first...

Find the threat and eliminate it.

"Alice is starting to remember." My gaze never strays from the scenery before me as I share the new revelation.

The sound of my father's rocking chair stills while Justice's head snaps my way. "What does she remember?"

He...He hurt me, Braxten. He hurt me really bad.

My fists clench, aching with the violence I long to unleash. I manage to shove it down before pulling my gaze away to look at my brother. "Nothing for us to go on."

He shakes his head, his disappointment apparent.

“And I want it to stay that way.”

He tenses, looking back at me. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t want her remembering anything anymore. Not after what I saw her go through last night. We need to figure this out on our own, got it?”

His steady gaze remains on mine, an argument brewing within, but whatever he sees in mine has him backing down.

His jaw ticks before he gives in with a nod.

My father cuts in, taking control of the conversation. “I took the liberty of faxing a copy of the letter to Agent Jameson. He’s going to have a criminal profiler take a look at it. We’ll see if he thinks there is any truth to what this riddle claims and hopefully even get a profile on what kind of person we’re dealing with here.”

“We’re dealing with a fucking dead man,” I grit, knowing that much is true.

After last night, my need for vengeance is even stronger. Remembering Alice’s terrified screams, the fear in her eyes as she told me how that bastard hurt her has my need for bloodshed ready to blow like a volcano.

My father leans over from his spot in his rocking chair, grasping my shoulder in a firm grip. “I know you’re angry, son, and I don’t blame you, but we must keep our wits about us. Hate is the enemy in all of this, we mustn’t let it poison our hearts. We need to remain strong and steadfast in our plan.”

“And what plan is that, Dad?” I ask, having a hard time keeping calm. “I can’t just fucking sit here waiting for Craig and Ryder to get answers. Not anymore. Not after yesterday.”

“He’s right,” Justice cuts in. “This asshole came knocking on our door and it’s time we answer it—with our barrels locked and loaded.”

My father holds up a hand. “Now, just hold on a minute. I’m not suggesting we do nothing. I spoke with Craig this morning about an idea I have and he thinks it’s a good one.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“That we all go to the cookout tomorrow at Oak Park, including Alice.”

I gape at my father, my jaw unhinging. “No fucking way. That place is going to be packed with people.”

“That’s precisely the point. If this bastard is watching like I think he is, it would be a good opportunity in catching him. Craig will post men around the perimeter of the park. Between them and us there would be more than enough eyes to search out anyone or anything unusual.”

I consider what he says, knowing if this was anyone else I would think it was a good plan, but this isn’t someone else. This is Alice. A girl I have sworn to protect at all costs.

I shake my head. “I don’t want her out in the open like that. I can’t risk it.”

“Being out in public is probably the safest place for her other than here,” my father counters softly.

Justice cuts me a look and I can tell he’s switched sides before he even says it. “He’s got a point, Brax. The chances of this asshole pulling anything with that many people around is slim.”

Because he’s a fucking coward.

If he wasn’t he would have delivered that letter himself. He also wouldn’t have hurt someone as delicate as Alice.

“Like you said, we can’t just sit back anymore. It’s time we make a move and this might be it.”

A harsh breath escapes my lungs before I begrudgingly agree.

“Then it’s settled,” my father says, standing from his chair. “We go into this with our eyes open and heads straight.”

We both nod.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna go in search of that brother of yours and find out why he didn’t join us for breakfast.”

The mention of Knox sends my already turbulent emotions into a tailspin.

“I’ll catch up with you two later.” After a clap to each of our shoulders, my father heads toward the gun shed. A place where my brother usually hides out, especially when he needs to blow off steam.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Justice says, pulling out a cigarette and lighting up. “Any idea why Knox didn’t show up for breakfast?”

“Yep,” I answer, but give him nothing else.

He cocks a brow, waiting for more of a response.

I decide to give it to him, knowing he won’t back down, and relay the events of this morning, giving him the condensed version.

A scowl slips over my brother’s face. “Knox did that?”

I nod.

Knox can be an asshole, we both know it, but for him to cross the line like he did with me...that’s not just uncommon, it’s completely unheard of. Maybe that’s why this is hitting so damn hard.

“He’s scared,” Justice says through a ribbon of smoke “He didn’t mean it.”

“I know that, but this isn’t Alice’s problem. She shouldn’t have to deal with the fall out of this. Our bond has nothing to do with her.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t.”

My gaze strays back to the property before us as I search for answers in the only place I have ever called home. “I don’t know what to do anymore,” I admit. “Our bond hasn’t been the same since you left, but we still had each other. He still had me.”

“Now he doesn’t?” He voices it as a question rather than a statement.

Staring back at my brother, I put words to a confession I have yet to voice out loud. “Now he doesn’t.”

The truth is, what went down this morning solidified what Knox and I already knew was coming, but weren’t ready to break just yet. I hate feeling like I’ve let him down, that I’m breaking a promise I never intended to break, but I also never expected Alice.

Waking up with her in my arms this morning was the best fucking feeling in the world. The feel of her warm skin against mine, the smell of her scent invading my senses...it made me want things I’ve never wanted before.

It also gave me the biggest fucking hard on which is why I decided to take a shower in the first place. The last thing I wanted was for her to wake up to my eager cock pressing against her, begging for things I know she’s not ready for. Or what I thought she wasn’t ready for, but after this morning I’m not so sure anymore.

The memory of those innocent blue eyes watching me as I jacked off in the shower flashes through my mind. I heard her when she first entered and knew there was no backtracking. I expected her to scurry out like a frightened doe when she figured out what I was doing, but she didn’t. She stayed, she watched, and I gave her a show worthy of a fucking Oscar.

Those pretty pink lips of hers had been slightly parted, cheeks flushing with desire, while her sweet little nipples pressed against the thin silk of her nightgown, just begging for my mouth...

It took everything in me not to pull her in that goddamn shower with me and give her a live reenactment of every filthy thought parading through my mind.

“You’re really serious about this girl, aren’t you?” Justice says, almost sounding surprised by it.

“Yeah, I am.”

Every day this pull only gets stronger, the need in my blood simmering into something that can’t be denied. I love to fuck as much as I love to shoot, but I can say with certainty I

have never wanted someone the way I want Alice. Not just her body either, but all of her.

“Look, I get it.” He exhales one final curl of smoke before putting his cigarette out. “I was in the same place months ago. I still struggle with the guilt of walking away. Some nights it eats at my fucking soul until there is nothing left.”

His admission takes me by surprise. I knew it was hard on him at first, breaking a decade long bond we all never expected, but I didn’t know he was still feeling this way.

“I don’t know, Brax, sometimes I wonder if...”

“What?” I press when he trails off.

He peers back at me, the same remorse I feel reflected in his gaze. “I wonder if we did him more harm than good by doing what we did.”

The impact of those words crush me like a ton of bricks. “What are you saying, you regret it?”

“Never,” he states. “I’ll never regret that time with you guys. It not only made us closer, it helped us all through those dark times.”

I’ll never forget the night we forged the bond. Justice and I had started screwing far younger than we should have. All three of us had an endless supply of women throwing themselves at us when we first came here. Even women who were far older than us.

They loved the forbidden.

It never bothered me because I used them just as much as they used me. They were my escape, masking the torment that lived inside of me from a lifetime of pain. I couldn’t get enough.

On those nights when Justice and I took what was offered to us, Knox sat alone. After learning of his past, we knew he wouldn’t ever make the move. Not if we didn’t show him how good it could be.

It was only supposed to be one time. One woman and the three of us taking what was offered, but that night we saw just

how deep those demons ran for my brother and it set in motion something that changed the course of our relationship forever.

“I might not regret it, but we should have thought it through more,” Justice admits. “We should have thought about the repercussions when the time came to end it. Because now, here we are, ready to move on, and he’s sitting alone once again.”

I swallow what feels like a thousand fucking razor blades, each one slicing my vocal cords. “So what do we do? How do we help him? We can’t just turn our backs on him.”

“Of course not. We’ll still be there for him, Brax, and we need to make sure he knows we still need him. We continue the bond, we just have to find another way to reach him.”

What if there is no other way? What if Justice is right and what we did actually caused Knox more harm than good?

I quickly shove the thought away. I don’t know how yet, but I will fix this. I will make this right for my brother because leaving him to fight his demons alone is something I can’t do.

I will slay every fucking one for him if it’s the last thing I do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Alice

Sunshine blankets the acres of farmland as I watch Hannah J. toss handfuls of feed for the chickens to eat. They all scatter about, chasing after the small pellets.

“Aren’t they amazin’, Miss Alice?” There’s a look of wonderment splashed on the young girl’s face that triggers my own.

“They sure are.”

“I call that one Little Frankie.” She points to the smallest one who waddles behind all the others, fighting to keep up. “He is the youngest and always gets left behind so I make sure to give him a little extra.” Jumping off the gate, she kneels down, feeding him from the palm of her hand while softly stroking its head with her other. “It ain’t easy being so small, is it, little fella?”

Ryanne smiles over at me. “These animals mean a lot to her. She’s very protective of them.”

“I think it’s wonderful.”

It shows compassion and that’s something we could all use more of in this world, even the tiniest of creatures.

Hannah peeks up at me, lifting the bag of food. “Would you like to feed them?”

I hesitate, wanting to accept the offer, but fear I’ll end up doing something wrong.

“Go on.” Ryanne encourages me with a bump to my shoulder. “It’s fun.”

“Okay.” Smiling, I walk over and kneel next to Hannah. “What do I do?”

“Hold out your hand.”

I do as she instructs, receiving a handful of pellets.

“Now make sure to keep it flat as a pancake.” Taking my wrist, she guides my hand inside the pen, offering them the food that rests in my palm. “Come on,” she coos to the small animals. “She won’t hurt ya.”

Three chickens slowly waddle their way over, pecking the food from my hand. The tip of their beaks tickle my palm and it drags a giggle from me.

Hannah J. smiles, the excitement in her eyes mirroring my own. “Isn’t it cool?”

“Very,” I agree.

“Papa Thatcher always says animals are some of God’s best creations and they can make the best of friends when you need one.” She gazes back at me as if knowing just how much I could use a friend, her wisdom as big as her heart. “Wanna meet the pigs now?” she asks.

“I’d love to.” I climb to my feet, wiping the dirt from my bottom.

“This way.” She takes off like a rocket, heading in the direction of the pigpen.

“Don’t run,” Ryanne calls to her retreating back. “You’re going to—” Her sentence turns into a gasp when Hannah trips, landing in a big pile of horse poop. “Fall...” Ryanne’s hands frame her face in distress. “Oh dear.”

I cringe as well, feeling awful for the poor girl.

Hannah rolls over and sits up, her face scrunched in disgust. “Yuck!”

Unable to help ourselves, Ryanne and I burst into laughter. Thankfully, Hannah isn’t offended, her own laughter mingling with ours.

“Help me, Mama. It’s so gross.”

We hurry over, pulling her to her feet.

“This is why I always tell you not to run,” Ryanne gently scolds. “Come on now, you need to shower and change.”

“But what about the pigs?”

“They’re gonna have to wait. You can’t do anything with horse poop all over you.”

“But, they need me,” she argues, visibly distraught. “They’ll worry if I don’t come at my normal time.”

“How about I keep them company for you?” I offer.

Hannah J. peeks up at me. “You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“That would be great. Thanks, Miss Alice.” She walks toward me for a hug but then thinks better of it. “Let them know I won’t be long.”

“I will.”

“And watch out for Gus,” she warns with a shake of her finger. “He can be a little stinker, but he’s got a good heart.”

I nod. “Gus. Stinker. Got it.”

“All right, let’s go so you can get back to it.” Ryanne takes Hannah’s hand, mouthing a “*thank you*” to me as she does then walks back to the house.

I continue over to the pigpen that’s located on the other side of the big red barn. There, I find four of the cutest pink pigs, all of them covered in mud.

“Well aren’t you guys just the sweetest.”

One comes running over to me, snorting as it does. Kneeling down, I carefully reach in and pet it, laughing as it pushes its dirty nose into my hand.

“You’re as filthy as Hannah J., maybe you need a bath too.”

His response is jumping into a puddle and splashing me with the dirty water. Shrieking, I jump back and shake myself off on a laugh.

The pig dances around, clearly amused with himself.

I plant my hands on my hips. “Let me guess, you must be Gus. Hannah warned me about you. Guess I should have listened, huh?”

Just as the pig runs to join his friends again, a noise drifts from the barn, yanking my attention there.

Curiosity sends me forward, the distressed sound getting louder with every step I take. As I reach the barn, I pull open the big double doors and gasp at what I find.

Several horses stand behind their gates, my entire world lighting up at the sight of them. There are a variety of colors. Black ones, brown ones, even an all white one. Some go about their day grazing hay while others rest and sleep.

One in particular stands out amongst the others, a helpless cry pouring from the animal as it restlessly dances in its closed confines. The heartbreaking sounds call to every part of my damaged soul, drawing me in closer.

I stop just before the gate and peer up into its beautiful face, feeling a certain kinship toward it. Tentatively, I lift my hand only to have it flinch back. It has me pausing midair. "It's okay," I soothe gently. "I won't hurt you."

Our eyes connect for a solid second, an irrevocable one that gives me the courage to reach out one more time. I manage to make contact this time, my hand landing on the side of its neck. Its restless nature instantly melts beneath my touch.

"There you go. See? Nothing to be afraid of."

A choppy breath escapes the horse's nostrils, its eyes closing as I stroke its neck in a soothing gesture.

"Well, I'll be damned..."

Startled by the sudden voice, I spin around to find Braxten's father standing just inside the open doorway. I quickly drop my hand and step back from the horse. "I'm sorry."

His head tilts at the apology. "What on earth for?"

"I was waiting for Hannah J. and heard the horses. I didn't mean to enter without permission."

He waves away my concern. "Nonsense. My home is your home. I told you that."

A smile graces my face, thankful to know I didn't overstep.

He gestures to the horse. "You like her?"

"Very much." I turn back to the incredible animal and gaze into her glossy black eyes. "What's her name?"

"Leela," he answers, walking closer. "It means wild and free."

The name seems rather fitting for the beautiful horse.

She stretches her neck out toward me, seeking my touch again.

I glance over at Thatcher, silently asking permission.

He nods. "Go on."

Stepping closer, I lift my hand again, this time petting her long nose. She seems to seek solace in the touch, so much so that she affectionately rubs her face against my cheek, melting my heart into a puddle of goo.

Thatcher props a boot up on the gated stall next to us, watching our interaction. "She sure does like you."

That statement pleases me. "You think so?"

"I know so. She never lets people get this close to her."

I frown, surprised to hear that considering how affectionate she is. "Why not?"

"She's got trust issues, been hurt."

I gaze at him, waiting for an elaboration.

"I got her two years ago from a rescue shelter," he explains somberly. "She was badly abused for the first half of her life."

The information slams into my heart with an indescribable pain.

"They were gonna put her down. Said she was a loose cannon and couldn't be trusted. I disagreed and turns out I was right. She's timid, but not dangerous. All she needs is a little TLC."

I peer up at the horse as I pet her, hating to know she has endured any unkindness. “How could anyone hurt something so beautiful?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing.”

The shift in his voice reverts my attention back to him. Kindness and compassion reflects in his eyes, his words clearly not only meant for the horse.

“Sometimes there’s no rhyme or reason for the cruelties we face, but I’ve come to learn that even the most heartbreaking times can lead us to where we are always meant to be.”

My gaze lands on his hand with the severed fingers, remembering that he has been dealt his fair share of heartbreak too.

“Braxten told me what happened to you all those years ago,” I speak carefully. “I’m sorry someone hurt you.”

He flashes me a sad smile. “Living in a world where the color of your skin defined you wasn’t an easy world to live in. Yet, here I am, forty years later, coming full circle with the only woman I’ve ever loved and raising boys who I love as if they were my own flesh and blood.”

The pride that radiates from him as he talks about his sons is liberating, something I could only hope to know one day.

Looking away, I clear my throat and say something I should have already said. “I’m really sorry for the trouble I’ve brought you and your family, Mr. Creed. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

Silence settles as I pay close attention to my sandaled feet.

“Maybe you didn’t. Maybe trouble brought you to us.”

My head lifts at his response, gaze meeting his once more.

“You see, I believe we all have a destiny, a certain path we’re meant to follow. Maybe this is yours.”

I think about his words and consider the possibility.

“What if I’m too lost to follow my path?” I ask, speaking the heartbreak of my reality. “How can I follow it if I have no

past to guide me?”

“The past doesn’t matter, child. Your destiny isn’t behind you. It’s in front of you.”

That powerful statement infiltrates my heart, anchoring me where I stand.

He moves in closer, taking my shoulders in a gentle grasp. “Some people spend their whole lives wishing they could forget their past, but you...you have a chance to start all over again. Be whoever you want to be. The possibilities are endless.”

There’s so much knowledge in his words, so much wisdom and guidance, it gives me hope for my future.

“You’re a wise man, Mr. Creed. I now know where your son gets it from.”

The love in his eyes shines as bright as the stars on the darkest nights. “Well, you know what they say. Like father, like son.”

I smile back at him.

“Come here, darlin’.” He pulls me in for a hug, his arms enfolding me in a warm and loving embrace. “I know you’re scared, and I can’t fault you for that. You’ve been through a lot, but there’s no need to fear. My son will take care of you. We all will because that’s what families do.”

Family, something this man has given me since I arrived. It makes the world I woke up in so much less lonely.

“Hey, old man, you moving in on my girl?”

Thatcher and I break apart at the sound of Braxten’s playful voice, my heart leaping in my chest at the way he refers to me as *his* girl.

“Nah, boy,” Thatcher chuckles. “Just showing her a little love, is all.” Holding my shoulders, he smiles down at me. “If you’ll excuse me, I have some business to take care of.”

I nod.

Once he walks away, I turn to Braxten and find him standing in the entrance of the barn. He leans against one of the doors, watching me in a way that has butterflies flocking in my tummy.

“Hi,” I greet lamely, my fingers fiddling with the edge of my dress.

“Wonderland,” he returns, an arrogant smirk tilting his lips. “What happened to your tour guide?”

“Oh, uh...she ended up falling in some horse poop on our way to see the pigs.”

His brows raise in surprise before a husky chuckle escapes him. “Only that kid would manage to land herself in horse shit.”

“It definitely wasn’t her best moment of the morning.” Smiling, I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear.

He watches the movement, the amusement on his face fading, leaving something more potent in its place. “I guess that leaves just you and me. What ever are we going to do with ourselves?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. Pushing off the door, he starts forward, every one of his strides slow and determined. Like a predator stalking its prey.

This would probably be a good time to tell him that I am supposed to be at the pigpen waiting for Hannah J., but I can’t seem to speak let alone move. The fierceness of his gaze renders me immobile.

It reminds me of this morning. Of the tension and need that took hold.

It’s an intensity I don’t know what to do with.

One that I secretly yearn for whenever he is near.

My pulse plays a frantic rhythm the closer he comes. The beat so loud it roars in my ears. That noise is breached when he reaches me, his arms going on either side of my head as he cages me against the stall gate, something he seems to do a lot.

“Do you have any idea what it does to me when you eye fuck me like this, Alice?”

Oh god!

Heat blasts through every cell of my body, sweeping through me like an atomic backdraft. I’m about to apologize, but I can’t form a coherent word at the moment. Not when his body heat is warming mine, his masculine scent invading my senses, his—

“There you are!”

My head whips to the side to find Hannah J. standing in the entry way, freshly showered. She wears a pair of skinny jean overalls, cowgirl boots, and a cowgirl hat, fitting the part of a true farmer.

“I couldn’t find you at the pigpen and figured you might have wandered in here.” Her gaze moves to her uncle and the compromising position he has me in. “Uncle Brax, you ever hear of personal space?”

I bite my lip, not knowing whether to laugh or cry right now.

By Braxten’s defeated groan he seems to be in the same boat. Pushing away from me, he walks over to his niece and sweeps her legs out from under her, hanging her upside down. “Have you ever heard of cramping someone’s style?”

Hannah laughs hysterically, holding her hat to her head as he swings her back and forth.

Eventually, he takes pity on her and flips her right side up, keeping her in his arms. She winds her tiny arms around his neck and gazes back at him with so much love and adoration that it fills the entire barn.

“Heard you fell in some horse shit,” he says, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“Yep, but I’m squeaky clean now and ready to finish showing Miss Alice around. You wanna come?”

Braxten turns toward me. “Actually, I was thinking about taking Miss Alice on a trail ride. What do you think?”

“That’s a great idea!” Hannah gasps excitedly. “We can finish the tour by horseback.”

Horseback?

“What do you say, Wonderland?” Braxten asks. “You up for it?”

“I would love to, but...I don’t know how. I’m pretty sure I have never ridden a horse before.”

“It’s fine, I’ll help you,” he tells me. “Besides, Hannah will ride with you and she’s a pro.”

“Sure am.”

Her confidence fuels my own. “Let’s do it.”

“All right!” Hannah leaps out of Braxten’s arms with excitement. “We saddling up, Trixie?” she asks him.

“You bet.”

“Can we ride her?” I ask, pointing to Leela.

Braxten shakes his head. “Not yet, but one day.”

I nod in understanding. As much as I love Leela, I’m just happy to get this opportunity. After a kiss to her nose, I make my way over to Trixie, petting her as Braxten and Hannah prepare her saddle.

“All right, Wonderland. You first.”

I come to stand next to Braxten, feeling both excited and nervous.

“Grab onto these and hold tight,” he says, passing me the reins. “Now, put your left foot into the stirrup.” Leaning down, he shows me where that is. After placing my sandaled foot inside he moves in behind me, grabbing my hips, the innocent touch burning beneath my clothes. By the hardness pressing into my backside, he’s not unaffected either.

His mouth dips close to my ear. “On three, you’re going to step off the ground and swing your right leg over. Got it?”

Swallowing hard, I nod.

“One, two...three.”

At the same time I step up, he gives me a boost. My dress hikes to my hips, but I'm too concerned with making sure I don't fall than to worry about what I'm showing.

"Whoa, this is way higher than I thought," I laugh nervously.

Braxten smirks up at me. "You good?"

"I think so."

He turns to face Hannah. "All right, half pint. Your turn."

"Yeehaw!" Grabbing the reins, she pulls herself up like a pro, though Braxten is there to help swing her leg over the large animal. She sits in the saddle just in front of me, her small head resting under my chin.

Braxten moves to the front of the horse, grabbing the lead. "You guys ready?"

"Yes," Hannah and I answer at the same time.

"Here we go."

He walks the horse out of the barn, leading us into the sunlight. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the brightness, but once it does I'm enraptured by the beautiful farmland, feeling like I am seeing it in a whole new way.

"Ain't it beautiful, Miss Alice?" Hannah J. voices, sensing my thought.

"Incredible," I whisper, awestruck.

"It is."

At the sound of Braxten's voice, I look down to find him watching me in a way that makes me feel as beautiful as the nature that surrounds us.

For the rest of the afternoon, we walk, laugh, and make memories I will cherish forever. For the first time since waking up in that hospital, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Braxten

Dusk has long since fallen as I head toward the gun shed, a place where my brothers and I construct the deadliest weapons used in the military.

Despite the upgraded security surrounding this property, I want more ammunition with me at the house. I have no doubt this asshole is just biding his time before he finally gets the courage to strike. When he does, I'll be waiting, trigger finger ready, barrel locked and loaded, but not before making him suffer first. He will bleed for every wound he left on Alice before I steal his last breath.

Entering the shop, I find all the lights on but no one inside. It doesn't take long to realize this is where Knox has been all day. Pieces of his next creation are scattered amongst the steel counter where several other finished projects rest, just waiting to be tested.

We're all good at what we do, but no one can build anything more lethal than my brother. He spends more time in here than the rest of us. It's just another way he fights the demons that plague him, a place he often seeks solitude. Which is why he has been in here all day, avoiding me and everyone else...

Shaking myself of the guilt that thought brings on, I focus on what I came to do.

Walking over to the locked cabinet, I pull down several rounds of ammunition, grabbing enough to take out the war that has been waged upon us. Just as I lock it back up there's a light rap on the door.

"Knock, knock."

Alice stands in the doorway, the outside light shadowing the night behind her. The glow along with the white dress she wears makes her look every bit as pure as I know she is.

An angel I want to corrupt as badly as I want to protect.

“Sorry to intrude. Your father told me I could find you here.” She tucks a piece of blonde hair behind her ear, the signature act making my cock stand to attention.

“You’re never an intrusion, Alice, I always want you around.”

A smile slips over her face as she walks inside, taking in the space with ample curiosity. “So, this is where the magic happens, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

She wanders around the open room, taking note of the sofa and seating area, before moving to the counter and trailing her delicate fingers along the cold steel, encountering Knox’s current masterpiece.

Her questioning gaze lifts to mine.

“A work in progress,” I explain.

She moves to another piece at the end of the counter where the surveillance monitors are, finding the mother of all machines. A Gatling. One of the best back in the day. Rapid-fire, spring loaded, and hand cranked. It could blow away an entire army within half a second.

She looks up at me again, eyes wide. “This one looks serious.”

“Very serious,” I reply, amused. “That’s for the more, shall we say...experienced.”

She doesn’t miss the double meaning, a pink hue spreading across her cheeks. “Experienced, huh?”

I nod, loving that she takes the bait. It’s like an igniter, fueling the flames that constantly burn between us.

“So, what would you start someone like me with?” she asks quietly. “Someone...not so experienced.”

The loaded question surges through my body like a live wire, the image of her holding the deadly weapon turning my cock even harder.

Stepping up to the counter, I slide in behind her, intentionally brushing her shoulder and smirk at the sound of her breath catching.

It's been like this all day, the tension between us mounting, taunting me with everything I want but am unsure she is ready for.

Fitting my hand in the small, hidden nook beneath the table, I let the computer read my finger print. A beeping sound ensues before the top flips up, revealing the stock we keep hidden beneath.

"Whoa." She steps closer, enamored by all that is revealed.

Reaching inside, I remove a smaller hand gun and point it upward before pulling back the slide. "Small to hold and lightweight to carry, but no less efficient."

She eyes the weapon hesitantly, but there's also no denying the fascination hidden there.

"Come here."

She follows the command, coming to stand before me.

I move in close, crowding her back as I place the weapon in her delicate hands. Her body quivers in response, fingers trembling as she accepts it.

My face turns toward her cheek, nose skimming the soft skin there. "Nervous?"

"A little," she whispers.

"Don't be. When you hold one of these in your hands, you wield all the control. You have the ability to take out any threat, to steal the enemy's last breath. There's no fear. No pain. Only power."

In a swift move, I turn our bodies, taking aim at the target pinned to the board and pull the trigger. She flinches at the snap, a gasp escaping her before realizing there's no bullets.

My mouth turns towards her ear as I lower our arms. "One day, I'll put a loaded gun in your hands, baby, but not until you're good and ready."

“Maybe I am ready.” The response tumbles past her lips in a breathless manner, the underlying meaning setting fire to the blood that pumps through my veins.

Keeping the gun in my hand, I bring the other up and gently wrap it around her throat, forcing her head back on my shoulder. “Be careful what falls from that pretty mouth of yours, Alice. It’s just you and me here. There’s no one around to save you this time.”

Quick, shallow breaths race past her slightly parted lips. “What if I don’t want to be saved from you?”

“What if you’re not ready for me?”

It’s my biggest fear, taking her too soon and fucking this up.

“What if I am?” she counters right back, despite the nerves drowning her voice.

A half chuckle, half groan escapes my chest. “Damn, Wonderland, you sure are being awfully brave right now.”

“Actually, I’m terrified,” she admits quietly. “But it doesn’t change what I want.”

“Yeah? And what is it that you want, Alice, hmmm? Do you even know?”

Her answer will either make or break this moment.

“Not exactly, but I do know that I like being around you. I-I like the way I feel when I’m with you.”

The confession has me pulling her in closer, every part of my body aching to touch hers. “And what is it you feel when you’re with me?”

“Warm,” she reveals. “I’m always warm when you’re near and cold when you’re not.”

Those words rock me down to my fucking core.

“I also feel safe. Like, I’ll never know pain as long as I’m with you.”

My jaw locks at the vulnerability lacing her voice. Turning my face into hers, I soak in the warmth of her skin. “That’s because you are safe with me, baby. I’d never let anyone hurt you. I’d kill anyone who tried.”

She relaxes deeper into me, her trust in me as pure and innocent as she is.

“Tell me what else you feel, Alice.” I want to know it all. Every thought, every desire, every wish so I can make it all come true.

“Things I can’t explain. Things I don’t think I have ever felt before,” she whispers, her nerves making another appearance. “Like sometimes, the way you look at me has my heart skipping a beat. And when you get really close, like now, I find it difficult to breathe let alone think. Even the slightest touch from you can make me completely breathless.”

My eyes close at the sincerity falling past her lips.

“But most of all,” she continues softly. “I get these feelings that consume every part of my body, making parts of me... they...”

“Ache?” I finish for her.

Biting down on her bottom lip, she nods.

“Where?” I growl.

Silence captures the moment before she expels a single word. “Everywhere.”

I decide to test that truth out. Bringing the gun up, I place the cold metal against the side of her neck.

Her sharp intake of breath pierces the air before I trail the tip of the barrel down her throat, passing it over her collarbone until reaching the top of her dress. The gun lingers along the swell of her breasts, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

“Here?”

Swallowing audibly, she nods again.

I drop the barrel into the top of her dress, sliding the steel over one bare nipple. “What about here?”

“Yes,” she gasps, the blazing sound shooting straight to my cock.

Pulling the gun out, I let it fall to her leg before slipping it under her dress and inching the cool metal up the inside of her naked thigh.

Her body stiffens, but she doesn’t get time to think about it before the barrel makes contact with the sweet spot between her legs.

“Oh god!” A fiery cry pushes past her lips the same time her knees buckle.

My arm tightens around her waist, keeping her upright. “Easy, baby. I got you.” I slide the tip along the seam of her panties, swiping it back and forth with firm pressure. “What I wouldn’t give to fuck you with this gun right now, but no way am I going to let a mere object penetrate what belongs to me.”

“Braxten.” My name flees her on a needy moan, a hint of confusion mixed in with it.

“I can take this ache away, Alice. Make it better for you. Do you want that?”

Her response is a heated mewl as she squirms against me, seeking the friction her body instinctively craves.

“Tell me,” I growl. “I want words.”

“I want it,” she expels on a panting breath. “I want you to touch me.”

Dropping the gun as if it’s hot metal after an active shot, I let it clatter to the floor before spinning her around.

Our gazes lock for a powerful moment before I stake my fucking claim, taking what I have wanted since she looked up at me in that field all those weeks ago—bruised, helpless, and so goddamn beautiful it changed my very existence.

The collision is like a bolt of lightning, striking the very ground I stand on.

I consume her gasp as she inhales my groan, the sounds colliding, creating the best fucking symphony that has ever fallen upon my ears. Just when I think it can't get any better, my tongue pushes past her lips and it's life altering. The taste of her is like liquid fire, incinerating me down to the depths of my black soul, sealing both of our fates forever.

“Goddamn, Wonderland,” I murmur against her pliant lips. “You taste like fucking dynamite, baby.”

Moaning, she winds her arms around my neck, fighting to get closer as she tries to match each stroke of my tongue.

My hands drop to her ass, cupping the supple flesh as I lift her off her feet. Her legs hug my waist as I walk us over to the sofa that sits in the center of the room, bringing her down on top of me.

She inhales lungfuls of air as my lips move down the exposed skin of her throat, licking, tasting, and biting as I try to fill this insatiable hunger that claws at me from the inside out.

My mouth follows the path of my hands as I slip the straps of her dress down her shoulders, exposing the white lace bra beneath. I lean back to get a look at her and groan. Smooth, creamy skin plunges from the top while pink little buds press against the lace, just begging to be touched.

My gaze lifts to meet hers. Lust and wonder rage in those crystal blue eyes, but so does her innocence.

My hand lifts, cupping the warmth that fills her cheeks. “We’ll take this slow. I’m going to take care of you, make you feel good. We’ll go no further than that, okay?”

A sweet expression softens her face. She encircles my wrist with her hand and leans into my touch. “I’m so glad you found me.”

The heartfelt words wash over me like a tidal wave, submerging me in a sea I never want to break free from.

“Me too, baby.” My voice is gruff. “More than you will ever know.”

My hand hooks behind her neck as I reel her in for a second time, taking what I'll never be able to live without again.

What I now claim as mine.

Within seconds she melts against me, any remaining inhibition she might have had obliterating with every stroke of my tongue. It has me reaching for the clasp in the middle of her bra and flicking it open, sending all that bare flesh tumbling free.

A growl shreds my throat at the sight I'm met with. "Look how fucking pretty you are." I cup all that warm skin in my hands, her tight, little nipples scraping against my palms.

Her head drops back on a harsh moan, back arching as she presses herself further into my touch.

"Feel good, Alice?"

"Incredible," she breathes out, wonderment laced within her voice.

"How about this?" Leaning in, I suck one candy pink nipple into my mouth.

The sound of her pleasure desecrates the air as she lights up under my touch.

"So responsive," I groan.

I spend time suckling the tight, little bud before moving to do the same to the other.

She grinds down on my raging cock like a greedy little vixen. "Please," she begs, the needy plea testing the limits of my control.

I shove my hand between us, dipping my fingers into the thin lace to explore all that hot, wet heat.

It sends her hips driving forward as another cry sails past her lips.

"Fucking soaked," I groan, pulling back to look up at her. "Tell me something, Alice. Were you this turned on when you

were watching me stroke my cock in the shower this morning?”

She stops all movement, her eyes shyly meeting mine before she gives me a single nod.

I smirk at her honesty. “Me too, baby. It made me so fucking hard. Do you know what I was thinking about?”

She shakes her head shyly, but we both know she’s lying.

However, I play along. “I imagined you were in there with me, down on your knees sucking my cock with your hot, little mouth.”

Her eyes fall closed, a look of ecstasy spreading across her face as if she’s imagining it in this very moment. When her eyes reopen, she confesses something of her own. “I wanted to come in with you, but I was scared.”

The admission is like gasoline, fueling the flames roaring beneath my skin. “You never have to be scared with me, Wonderland. I’ll always take care of you.”

She smiles back at me and it might be the prettiest smile I’ve seen on her yet.

This time she makes the first move, her head lowering as she gives me another taste of her mouth. I renew my efforts below, my fingers grazing over her swollen clit.

It drives her wild, her hips bucking against the touch as she chases the high she salivates for.

So sensitive.

So perfect.

So fucking mine...

I decide to give her a little more, slipping the tip of my finger into her snug entrance, just barely penetrating.

Her surprised breath trails into a moan as she moves against me, trying to take me deeper.

I hold back, refusing to break that thin layer of skin protecting her innocence.

“More,” she begs against my mouth.

“No, baby, we go no further than this.”

Ignoring me, she pushes down again, trying to force herself further on my finger.

It almost shatters what’s left of my control.

Growling, I slip my finger out and fist her hair with my other hand, slightly pulling her head back. “When the time comes, the only thing that is going to be breaking this virgin barrier of yours will be my cock. Got it?”

She nods, but there is no denying the disappointment on her face.

“But don’t worry, baby. I’m still going to make you feel really good.”

Switching the angle of my wrist, I prop the heel of my hand against her pussy, covering every inch of her hot flesh. “Ride it,” I order.

She peers down at me, cheeks flushed and gaze half-mast, before she obeys, pressing against my palm. I push back, meeting the motion, pulling a fiery gasp from her.

“Again!”

She follows the demand.

My other hand moves to her hip to help guide her, creating a rhythm she eventually finds on her own. “That’s it, baby. Fuck my hand, show me how bad you want it.”

Hot, little moans spill from her, every keening sound pulsing through my body like an electric current.

“One day you’re going to ride my cock like this, Alice. You on top, your pretty tits bouncing in my face, taunting me, as you take me hard and deep.”

“Please, Braxten,” she whimpers. “I don’t think I can take anymore...”

Taking pity on her, I twist my palm back and forth, applying more pressure and speed than she can handle and it

has her detonating like a fragile bomb.

Her pleasure catapults through the air as she cries out her release.

I look up, wanting to witness the ecstasy on her face, to drown in it right along with her, and that's when I see Knox standing just inside the doorway. His hand is on the handle as if he just entered.

Our eyes lock overtop an unbeknownst Alice, my entire body stiffening at the lust raging in my brother's eyes as he watches what's mine fall apart. More than lust, though, is a betrayal so strong it rips apart my chest.

As if sensing the war that battles within me, he abruptly turns and walks out, closing the door silently behind him. The finality of it sounds off with a boom, shattering what's left of the bond forever.

Alice collapses against my chest, unable to remain upright, her breathing hot and heavy, fanning my skin as she continues to fight for air.

"I got you." Pressing a kiss to her damp temple, I grab the blanket off the back of the sofa and cover her before laying us down, bringing her to lay on top of me.

Her fingers grip my shirt as she curls in, fitting as if she was made just for me.

The thought has my eyes shifting back to the closed door my brother just walked out of, guilt settling bone deep as I remember the pain on his face.

As much as it fucking kills me to know this moment has officially changed the trajectory of our future, after getting this small taste of Alice, I know it can't be any other way. For the first time in my life, I want something just for me. I refuse to share her and will be keeping her as mine and mine alone.

Forever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Braxten

13 years old

A sound pulls me from sleep. Blinking awake, I stare up at the dark ceiling of the room I sleep in and listen carefully, hearing a faint whimper. I look over at Justice and Knox, my two roommates whom I just met, and find them fast asleep.

“Guys,” I whisper. “You hear that?”

They don’t stir. They’re dead to the world thanks to that asshole Hobbs. He works us from sun up to sun down with little to no food or water to nourish ourselves. If you don’t work hard enough or fast enough, you will find yourself at the end of his wrath.

I’ve been placed in a lot of shitty foster homes in my life. I’ve dealt with everything from being ignored, to being at the end of a backhand, to even being locked in a closet for days, but I have to say that this group home is well on its way to being one of the worst, and I’ve only been here a week.

The assholes who run this place know it too, which is why they have all of our windows wired shut with security so no one can escape. If it was that easy, I would have left already.

Justice, Knox, and I arrived within a day of each other, the three of us forced to room together, and we have quickly become friends. They are two people I trust which says a lot because I don’t trust anyone.

A bang sounds below, breaking into my troubled thoughts. It’s so loud it rumbles the floor. Wondering what the hell is going on, I throw off the scrap of material they call a blanket and climb from bed.

My footsteps are quiet as I walk to the door. Turning the handle, I peek my head out to find the hallway dark and empty. That’s when I hear the mumble of a voice followed by a sharp cry.

With a confused scowl on my face, I leave my room and head down the stairs. It's not long before I realize the noise is coming from the basement.

Just as I reach for the door, heavy boots begin echoing up the stairs. Moving quickly, I sneak behind a corner just as Hobbs walks up.

A cigarette dangles from his mouth as he does up his belt and heads to the kitchen.

"Any left for me?" I hear Jones ask. He's second in command and can be as big of an asshole as Hobbs.

"Not tonight. Come out to the barn, we have other business to discuss."

Once the two of them head out the back door, I slide out from the corner I hid behind and walk down the cold concrete steps, listening for any other movement. What I end up finding has my stomach recoiling and bile inching up my throat.

One of the other kids who resides here crawls across the dirty ground, naked and bleeding, his back cut up something fierce.

Jesus.

I carefully move toward him. "Hey, man. You okay?"

His gaze whips to mine, eyes wild with panic. "What the fuck are you doing down here?"

"I'm here to help. I—"

"I don't need your help," he snaps harshly. "Get out of here before he finds you!"

I remain where I am, too shocked to move.

"Now!" His roar vibrates through the entire house.

Not wanting to get busted, especially for someone who doesn't want my help, I leave. I run up both flights of stairs and into my room, closing the door behind me. Justice and Knox are sitting up in their beds, the commotion finally waking them.

“We need to get the fuck out of here, you guys,” I tell them.

“What’s going on?” Justice asks. “Who was yelling like that?”

I tell them everything that happened and the sight I just witnessed. It has dread settling over their grim faces, the same one that’s wedged deep in my gut, as we’re forced to realize this place is even worse than we thought.

That’s when we decide to devise a plan. One that we will put in motion, but only when the time is right. Otherwise there will be no getting out alive.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alice

“**S**often your lips,” Ryanne instructs gently, holding a tube of pink tinted lipgloss in her hand.

I do as she says, allowing her to swipe the gooey moisture all over my lips.

We have spent the better part of the morning in her room getting ready for the town’s cookout we are attending today, something I’m incredibly nervous about. Not only for the threat that shadows our every move, but because it’s foreign territory. Besides the shopping trip, I haven’t left the seclusion of this farm. It’s become my safe haven as much as the man who brought me here.

A man I am falling harder for with each passing day, especially after last night.

The memory of Braxten’s touch dances its way through my heart. It was everything I imagined it would be and more. He not only brought pleasure to my body, but healing to my soul and it irrevocably altered our relationship.

It was bound to happen. This connection, pull—whatever you want to call it—could only go on for so long before we surrendered to it.

It was as inevitable as it was unstoppable.

As beautiful as it was liberating.

The feelings I have for him should terrify me, but for some reason they don’t. Maybe because when I’m with him everything wrong in my world seems to right itself.

It’s a beautiful place to be and one I want to live in forever...

“Perfect.” Ryanne beams, bringing me back to the present. “Now for some blush and we’ll be all done.” She grabs a few

more items from her bag, trading in the lip gloss for a black compact and a makeup brush.

“Thank you again for all your help,” I murmur, trying to remain still as she brushes some rose color on my cheek bones. “I’d have been lost with all of this, if not for you.”

I’m getting better at doing the every day things, but I don’t own any makeup and even if I did, I wouldn’t know where to begin.

“It’s my pleasure,” she says warmly. “Besides, I love having another woman to do this with. Not only is my daughter much too young, but she’d rather hang out with her uncles and father than do girly things with me.” By the affection in her voice, she’s clearly not bothered by it.

“I must admit she fits in rather well with the three of them.”

“That she does,” she agrees, a smile forming on her face. “I swear, she has each of them wrapped around her little finger, something I didn’t even know was possible before she came along.”

I have a feeling that little girl could shine light into the darkest soul. Her relationship with the three men only proves that.

It’s one of the reasons why I agreed to do the three legged race with her today since Ryanne can’t. When the little girl asked me to be her partner, her eyes wide and hopeful, I couldn’t say no. Not when she has shown me nothing but kindness and acceptance since I’ve arrived.

“Okay, I think we’re finished.” Ryanne steps back, giving me a once over. “Go ahead and take a look.” She gestures over to the floor length mirror across the room. “If there is anything you want me to fix just let me know.”

Climbing off the stool, I walk over and come to a quick stop, shocked at the reflection peering back at me.

Any remaining bruises I have are now covered with the makeup that Ryanne expertly applied, as if they never existed at all. The champagne eye shadow she used enhances my blue

eyes, making them stand out even more than usual. My freshly glossed lips are full and shiny, showcasing the natural pink hue. Add in my long, blonde hair tousled with waves and the long, peach colored sundress I'm wearing, I look nothing like the person who left the hospital a couple of weeks ago.

In this moment I look confident, happy...pretty even.

"Wow," I murmur softly. "I look so...different."

"You look beautiful."

I turn back to find Ryanne watching me with a kind smile that triggers my own.

"Thanks. Think I'll fit in and not look as lost as I feel?" I joke, but there is no hiding my insecurity.

"Sorry to break it to you, but you're showing up with a Creed which means you definitely won't fit in." There's a note of sarcasm in her voice as she takes a seat at her makeup table and does some finishing touches of her own. "They always manage to stick out like a sore thumb, drawing attention wherever they go."

"I believe it," I grumble, dropping down to sit on her bed. "The one time I went to town with Braxten, everyone stared at me like I had two heads."

"Don't take it personally. It comes with the territory," she says. "Sometimes it'll be over envy, other times resentment. The people in this town either love the boys or hate them, there is no in between."

I shake my head, dumbfounded by that knowledge. "I honestly can't fathom how anyone could hate them."

At first glance they may come off arrogant, intimidating, threatening even, but if you actually take the time to get to know them, you will find out very quickly there is so much more to them than that. There's a love, loyalty, and strength that can't be denied.

"There's a lot of history in this town, especially with Thatcher," Ryanne explains. "People never approved of him taking in the boys and it only added to the animosity. Though,

I'll admit the three of them didn't get off to a great start either. They got into a lot of trouble when they first moved here and they have garnered quite the reputation, especially among the women."

"So I heard," I murmur before I can think better of it.

Ryanne stops her task at hand, her eyes snapping up to meet mine in the mirror. The conflicting emotions there has guilt quickly taking over.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No, it's okay." Putting down her makeup brush, she walks over to the bed and sits down next to me. "I guess I'm not surprised you heard about it and to be honest, you will probably hear more. Some of it true, some of it not, but no matter what you hear, Alice, just know they're good people. They always have been."

"I know. Nothing anyone will ever say can change my mind about that."

"Good, because the bond the boys share is more than anyone knows. More than anyone could even begin to understand."

Not for the first time I wonder just how much she knows about it.

The question must show in my expression because a sad smile suddenly claims her lips. "Justice's and my relationship changed the bond and I have a feeling it changed again when you came along."

I think back to the confrontation the other day between Braxten and Knox in the living room and still can't help but feel guilty about it all.

"He likes you a lot you know," she adds. "I can tell."

"I like him too," I confess quietly.

Probably more than I should, but I decide to keep that part to myself.

“There’s so much I’m uncertain about in my life right now, but my feelings for him are about the only thing I am sure about. Even if I do feel completely out of my league.”

She snorts. “I’m married to Justice and still feel like that.”

We share a laugh before it softens into smiles.

“Thanks again, Ryanne. It’s nice having someone to talk to.”

“I’m really glad you’re here, Alice.” Reaching over, she gives me a hug and it only adds to the comfort invading my heart. “Try not to worry about today. We’ll have fun, you’ll see.”

I hope she’s right because knowing whoever is doing this could possibly be there watching our every move is absolutely terrifying.

“And who knows, maybe you will come home a champ from winning that race with my daughter,” she says, bumping my shoulder.

“Oh man, I don’t know about that.” I laugh. “I just hope I don’t embarrass her and take us down right at the start.”

“Trust me, it takes a lot to embarrass Hannah. You got this.”

The sound of the front door opening and closing breaks up our conversation.

“Ryanne!” Braxten calls out, the deep sound of his voice causing my heart to somersault in my chest.

“Up here!”

His booted footsteps coming up the stairs have us both standing from the bed. I run my hands nervously down the front of my dress, smoothing out any possible wrinkles before he appears in the doorway.

“Your husband is—” Braxten’s words stop mid-sentence as he gets his first look at me. “Whoa.”

The blatant reaction has a heat creeping into my cheeks.

“You were saying what about my husband?” Ryanne asks, barely holding back a laugh.

“He’s waiting outside for you.” His heated gaze never leaves mine as he answers.

“I guess that’s my cue.” Ryanne turns to me. “I’ll see you there?”

At my nod, she leaves the room, patting Braxten on the shoulder as she does, looking rather proud of herself. He doesn’t spare her a glance, his dark gaze still riveted on me, anchoring me where I stand. The heat embedded there is the same one I witnessed last night. It hums along my senses, claiming every part of my beating heart.

“Say something,” I whisper. “You’re making me nervous.”

“If you knew what I was thinking right now, you’d be even more nervous.”

His shameless confession has a shy smile floating across my lips.

With just a few strides, he closes the distance between us, pulling me into his arms for a heart-stopping kiss. One that lights up my very soul, giving it new life. The kind I am not sure I could ever live without now that I know just how powerful it can be.

His lips slow their restless assault before he pulls back, resting his forehead on mine.

My eyes remain closed as I bask in the intimacy of this moment for just a little while longer, loving the peace it brings. When I finally reopen them I’m met with all the beautiful emotions that reflect my own, but one manages to overshadow them all, darkening the moment.

“You sure you’re up for this?” he asks. “Because if not, just say the word and we will stay back here, just the two of us.”

I shake my head, refusing to take the out he graciously offers. “It’s important that we go. It could be our only chance

at catching whoever is doing this. Besides, I just spent hours in here getting ready, I can't let that all go to waste."

The joke is amiss, his eyes remaining tortured with whatever he's battling at the moment.

"I want to do this, Braxten," I tell him. "I need to do this. Not only to help find the threat, but I want to experience this. I want to know what it's like to go to a cookout. I want to know what it's like to do a three legged race." Pausing, I swallow thickly. "I want to know what it's like to feel normal, even if it's just for a few hours."

Whatever he sees on my face has him relenting. "All right, but I want you within arms reach of one of us at all times, do you understand? You go nowhere alone. Not even to the bathroom."

I nod. "I understand."

His thumb strokes my cheek as he gazes back at me. "I got you, Alice. You know that, right?"

I lean into his touch. "Yes, with my whole heart and soul."

That response seems to please him. "Come on, let's get this over with."

Taking his hand, I follow him out of the room.

Hopefully, whoever is doing this shows up today and the police can catch him so we can finally put this behind us once and for all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Braxten

Oak Park is filled with residents from Winchester and surrounding counties as we gather for the annual cookout that takes place every year. Nestled in the center of town with walking trails, marble fountains, and civil war monuments, it's the town's most historic landmark.

While everyone goes about their day eating, laughing, and socializing, my brothers and I keep watch, hoping to seek out the enemy. Several of Craig's men do the same, strolling the park and looking for anything out of the ordinary.

The bastard is here. I can feel it in every bone of my body. Whether he's out of sight or amongst the several unfamiliar faces, I have no doubt he's watching.

It makes me fucking nervous to have Alice out in the open like this. If it wasn't for her radiant smile, I'd consider hauling her back to the farm, but despite the circumstances, she actually seems to be enjoying herself.

From the moment we arrived, she managed to fit right in, just like she does in every other aspect of my life. Watching her help my father and Gwen serve food at their station, and seeing her laugh with Ryanne and play with Hannah, only drives home what I already knew. What I have known since the day I found her. She's meant to be here with me and my family.

She's meant to be mine.

"We need to talk," Craig says, pulling my attention to where he sits across the picnic table from my brothers and me. "I did some digging on that group home and came across some interesting information."

The mention of that shithole puts me on edge, but I keep my body poised and relaxed. "Yeah, and what's that?"

“Well, for starters, there is no record of any of you ever attending there.”

Shock anchors me in place, rendering me silent.

“What did you just say?” Justice asks, as if he heard him wrong.

“I combed through every person that ever entered that place and not one of your names was anywhere to be found.”

I exchange a look with my brothers, my disbelief reflecting back at me.

“I also find it mighty coincidental that right around the time the three of you left there, the entire place caught fire and the head guard was found bludgeoned to death among the ashes.”

The suspicion written all over his face is directed right at us.

“What the hell are you getting at, Clemson?” Knox asks, his tone annoyed.

“You know what I’m getting at,” Craig fires back. “I’m tired of getting the run around from you guys. It’s time you start talking and tell me the goddamn truth!”

Justice stiffens next to me, ready to blast back, but I hold up a hand, warding him off.

This one is on me.

“You want the truth, Craig? Here it is.” Leaning across the table, I keep my voice low, but the severity of what I’m about to unveil can’t be contained. “Hobbs was a sick son of a bitch who used to love to torture little boys before fucking them up the ass. He’d tie them to whipping posts and lash them until there was no flesh left on their bones.”

That sick feeling forms in the pit of my stomach as the memory from that night so long ago threatens to resurface.

“It didn’t matter how many of us begged for help, the state wouldn’t listen, and they would continue to bring even more

young boys to the twisted fuck. So yeah, he's dead, and the world is a hell of a lot better place for it."

The response has him backing down, his shoulders draining of tension. "Look, I don't need to know the details or even your involvement in this. Actually, I'd prefer not to know," he says. "I just need to know if this could have anything to do with what's happening right now."

"You said yourself he's dead," Justice reminds him. "I don't see how the two could be connected."

What he says is true, but the more time that passes the more my thoughts stray back to the group home. It's the only place the three of us have in common other than the streets, and now knowing there is no record of any of us being there, it's obvious this is where our attention needs to be. However, with Hobbs dead, who else would have a vendetta against us and where the hell does Alice fit into it all?

The conversation ends when Hannah comes running over with Ryanne in tow. I look over at my father's station that's close by and find Alice still at his side, helping dish out food to the long standing line.

My father says something that has both her and Gwen laughing. The sound of it washes away all the unrest plaguing me, leaving something so much better in its wake.

"Hey, guys!" Hannah greets us, jumping up onto Justice's lap. Ryanne stands behind them, leaning down to wrap her arms around her husband's neck.

"Well, hey there, Miss Hannah J.," Craig returns joyfully, masking any remaining tension. "You havin' a good time?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sheriff, but I sure do miss Amelia," she says, talking about her best friend who also happens to be Craig's daughter.

"She misses you too. Y'all can get together when she returns from her grandmother's next week."

"I can't wait!" She shifts on Justice's lap, turning to face him. "The race is gonna start soon. Y'all gonna come cheer me and Miss Alice on?"

“We’ll be there, baby,” Justice promises. “Front and center.”

Damn straight, and I’ll be hoping every damn person falls flat on their face so the two of them can take home the grand prize.

“You too, Uncle Knox?” Hannah asks, looking up at my brother hopefully.

His face is expressionless as he stares back at her behind his dark sunglasses. “Yeah, kid. I’ll be there.”

“Yay!”

I knew he wouldn’t let her down. Despite his feelings at the moment, there’s no way he’d turn his back on family. It’s why he is here now. It doesn’t matter that Alice’s arrival into our lives has wedged a void between us. He’d never bail on me, our bond is too strong. Just like I won’t bail on him, not when it matters most.

“We should hit the bathroom first,” Ryanne suggests to Hannah.

“Good idea. I’ve drank a lot of soda today.”

Justice stands with her in his arms, refusing to let them go alone.

“I’ll grab Alice and meet you guys over there,” I tell them.

“Okay, but be quick,” my niece orders. “No dawdling or kissing.”

“No dawdling,” I promise, “but no deal on the kissing part.”

“Fine, but not too many,” she says with a shake of her finger. “We only have a few minutes.”

I give her a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ryanne chuckles at our banter. “All right, Little Miss Bossy Pants. Let’s get moving or you’re going to be the one who is late.”

Once they walk away, I tell Craig and Knox I'll meet them on the sidelines, then head for my father's station.

Gwen is off to the side chatting with a friend while my father introduces Alice to Pete Baker, a long time fellow farmer. His arm is around her shoulders, a proud smile on his face as if he is introducing one of his very own children.

"Hey, there he is," my father boasts, announcing my arrival. "I was just introducing Pete here to the newest addition to our family."

Alice blushes, clearly flustered by the doting of my father.

"I see that." I turn to the farmer in greeting and extend my hand. "Good to see you, Pete."

"You too, Braxten." He returns a firm handshake. "Well, I'll let y'all get back to your day. Thanks for the gumbo, Thatcher."

"Anytime, Pete."

After a tip of his hat to Alice he walks off, taking his bowl of gumbo with him.

"You hungry, son?" my father asks. "There's a bit of cornbread left."

"I'm good, but thanks. We should probably head over to the race. I am under strict orders not to be late."

My father chuckles, already knowing who that came from. "Guess it's a good thing I just served my last bowl of gumbo then." He removes his apron, draping it on his station. "I'll grab Gwen and meet y'all over there."

At my nod, he walks away, leaving Alice and me alone. She turns that sweet smile of hers my way, knocking the wind right out of me. Unable to hold back a second longer, I reel her in and kiss it right off her pretty face.

By the time I pull back she's breathless. "Hi," she murmurs softly.

"Hey yourself, Wonderland. You having a good time?"

“Actually, I am,” she says, sounding surprised. “So much so that it’s been easy to forget why we’re here today.”

I’m glad one of us can.

“Everyone has been so nice and I’ve enjoyed getting to know Gwen more.”

My arms hug her closer. “I’m glad to hear people have been nice to you. Otherwise, I would have to kick their asses.”

She laughs like I hoped she would. “Well, you don’t need to worry about that. People have been very nice.” Her expression softens with what she says next. “It’s weird, but I’ve felt so comfortable at times that it feels normal. It almost feels...”

“What?” I ask when she trails off.

Vulnerability flickers in her eyes. “Like, maybe I belong here.”

The admission hits me like a sledgehammer, the impact of it jarring. “That’s because you do. You belong wherever I am.”

She bites down on her bottom lip, trying to hide the smile that wants to break free. “Does that mean you aren’t bothered by the way your father introduced me to Pete?”

I frown at the question. “Why would I be?”

She shrugs, but it’s obvious she was concerned about it.

“I think it’s time we clear a few things up here, Wonderland.”

“Okay,” she says slowly, clearly nervous.

“In case you haven’t figured it out yet, you belong to me, and because you belong to me that makes you part of this family, which is why my father introduced you that way,” I tell her, putting it bluntly. “It’s not something we take lightly. Once you’re in this family, you’re in it for good. There’s no changing it. You get what I’m saying?”

This time she doesn’t fight the smile, letting it ease over her face with all the beauty and grace she exudes. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Good, now let’s get our asses over to the race before that mini drill sergeant I call a niece comes looking for me.”

Her laughter sings through the air as I sling an arm around her shoulders and lead her in the direction of where the race is being held.

Despite the lighter moment, I can’t help but be watchful as we move through the crowded bodies. I take in each person, wondering if I’m looking into the face of our enemy.

“Alice!”

The sound of her name stops us mid-stride. Turning around, we find the nurse from the hospital pushing through the crowd toward us.

“Linda?” Alice gasps in surprise. Releasing my hand, she runs to meet the other woman, the two colliding in an embrace. “I had no idea you would be here.”

“I could say the same about you,” Linda says, breaking the hug to frame Alice’s face. “You look wonderful, honey. So happy and healthy.”

“I am. Thanks to Braxten.” The look she sends my way has pride inflating my chest.

The nurse glances over at me, her usual glare nowhere in sight. “Maybe I was wrong about you after all, Braxten Creed.”

I feel like telling her she was wrong, like so many other people in this town, but I remain silent because I don’t need her or anyone else’s approval.

“Are you here alone?” Alice asks. “You’re welcome to join us, if you are.”

“Oh, that’s sweet of you, but I’m here helping out a friend,” she says. “I’m headed over to their station now. But how about we get together sometime for coffee and catch up?”

“I’d love that.”

“Then it’s a date.” Smiling, she pulls Alice in for one final hug. “It’s so good to see you, honey.”

“You too.”

“You have my number. Give me a call and we will set something up.”

“I will.”

After a wave goodbye, Linda continues to her friend’s station while I grab Alice’s hand and hurry over to the race, knowing I am probably in big shit with my niece.

We end up making it just in the nick of time. The announcer, Peggy Dixon, is already introducing each participant. Hannah stands at the far end of the line, nervously searching the crowd for us.

Relief fills her expression the moment she spots us. *Hurry!* she mouths, frantically waving Alice over.

Alice releases my hand, her feet already on the move, but before she can get too far I snag her wrist, yanking her back for a quick, hard kiss.

“You got this, Wonderland.”

A sweet expression takes over her face. “Thanks.” Without wasting another second, she dashes off, taking her place next to Hannah.

Walking over to the crowded sidelines, I find my family front and center, and slide between my father and Justice.

“You doing okay, son?” my father asks, grasping my shoulder.

“Yeah, Dad. I’m good.”

Considering the day is almost over, I’m assuming the bastard won’t be making his move, at least not today. I’m not sure whether to be thankful for that or pissed off about it.

Peggy Dixon begins stating the rules while one of the organizers ties the ankles of each pair together. When he makes it to Alice and Hannah, the two of them grab hands, looking as anxious and excited as the other.

Justice doesn’t seem to fare much better. He’s so goddamn jittery next to me he looks ready to crawl out of his skin. “If

these assholes know what's good for them, they will back off and let my girl win.”

“Stop,” Ryanne laughs, giving her husband a playful elbow. “It’s just for fun.”

That may be true, but I know how much my niece wants that first place ribbon so I’m with my brother on this one. It’s also my woman’s first race and I refuse to accept anything less for her.

“The first couple to the finish line will not only win the ribbon, but also a hundred dollar gift card to the best restaurant in town.”

“Let’s gooo!” Hannah fist pumps the air as if she has already won.

It sends laughter across the crowd.

Peggy lifts the air gun above her head, signaling the countdown. “On your marks...get set...go!”

Hannah and Alice jump at the bang then leap off. They laugh hysterically, wobbling all over the place as they fight to keep pace with the others. It takes them a minute, but they eventually find their footing, their moves in sync as they keep their arms wrapped around each other to stay steady.

“That’s it, you guys,” Ryanne yells out. “Keep going!”

It’s a close race, Alice and Hannah neck and neck with another duo, contending for first place. Just beyond the halfway point the other couple falls, putting Alice and Hannah in the lead.

“Yes!” My brothers and I cheer in unison.

My father and Gwen clap their excitement while Ryanne overshadows us all, encouraging them on to the finish line.

They break through the ribbon, claiming first place. Cheers and applause erupt through the park, my family being the loudest of them all. Alice and Hannah hug in victory as the rest of the contestants filter through.

Just as they are taken up on stage to claim their prize, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Pulling it out, I pause at the private caller flashing on the screen, something that should not be able to come through this line.

Suspicion quickly forms. “Creed,” I answer, covering my ear to smother the noise around me.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the infamous Braxten Creed.” A distorted voice fills the line, taunting the rage I have buried in my soul. “It’s been a long time.”

“How the fuck did you get this number?”

My brothers and father snap to attention, the hard edge of my voice putting them on alert.

“Let’s just say I’m a resourceful guy.” Arrogance coats his tone. “It was a great race, wasn’t it? So intense and action packed, I was on the edge of my seat the entire time.”

Even though I figured as much, I hate knowing how close he is right now.

My gaze locks on Alice and Hannah before I make eye contact with Justice. He picks up on the signal and heads for the stage while my father keeps Gwen and Ryanne close.

Knox pulls out his phone, dialing Craig just as I go on the hunt.

I push through the crowded bodies, my gaze volleying back and forth as I search for anyone on a phone.

“I gotta say your niece is cute, Creed, a real go getter. I like her.”

The goad sends my fury to a dangerous level. “Mention her again and I’ll cut your fucking tongue out before I drain the blood from your body.”

“Oooh, struck a nerve,” he chuckles, the mechanical sound cackling in my ear. “Let’s talk about Alice then, shall we? She looks so beautiful and full of life out there. Tell me, is she still as innocent as when I gave her to you, or have you and your brothers corrupted her like you have every other whore in this town?”

My jaw locks, teeth grinding so hard I fear they are about to crack. “We’re not talking about her either. This is between us. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Now, that’s where you’re wrong. She is just as much part of the plan as the rest of you.”

“And what plan is that?” I ask, continuing to search through the mounds of people, catching one passerby on his phone. Grabbing his shoulder, I fling him around.

“What the fuck, man?”

When I realize it’s not him, I back away and head in another direction.

“Why revenge, of course,” he states matter-of-factly. “It’s something I have waited for, for a very long time.”

“Yeah? Well, I have my own plan for vengeance so why don’t we cut the shit and save ourselves some time. You tell me where you’re hiding and I’ll come kill you because we both know that’s how this is going to end.”

Another snicker rings in my ear. “You always were the cocky one. It’s something I used to admire about you.”

“That so?”

He hums through the line.

“I would love to join you on this walk down memory lane, but since you’re too afraid to tell me who you are, I am going to have to sit this one out.”

“Afraid,” he repeats, amused. “Is that what you think?”

“Damn straight and you should be. You have no idea who you’re fucking with. If you did, you would have never waged this war.”

“Oh, trust me, I know exactly who you and your brothers are,” he assures me. “I looked a long time for you all. If it wasn’t for the little town scandal involving your family a few months back, I might not have ever found you.”

“Why wait any longer?” I come to a stop, offering myself up. “We can finish this here and now.”

“Nah, that wouldn’t be as fun, but I must say, I’m surprised you haven’t figured out the connection yet.”

I grunt. “Yeah, well, your little riddle sucked.”

“Did it? How about this:

Fallen down the rabbit hole, the queen of bleeding hearts.

Wonderland is in peril, with life set to self-destruct.

Burning barns and bludgeoned souls, death is knocking like days of the ol’.”

The Alice in Wonderland reference proves just how close he has been watching, but it’s the mention of burning barns and bludgeoned souls that sends the organ in my chest plummeting into a sea of dread because it can only refer to one thing.

One moment.

One night

My feet become lead as realization sets in.

“You’ve made the connection, yes?” he asks at my silence.

“Maybe,” I grit, hating how thick my voice sounds.

“I think you have.”

“Why Alice?” I ask. “She has nothing to do with that fucking place or that night.”

“Isn’t that the million dollar question?”

The cryptic response has me reaching my breaking point.

“Enough with the games, motherfucker. Reveal yourself and let’s finish this.”

Heavy breathing hums through the receiver. “Find out who she is and you’ll find out who I am.”

The deafening click of the call ending leaves nothing but dead air passing back and forth in my lungs.

The haunting memories from my past trample through my mind like an angry bull. A past I had hoped I would never have to revisit. One that we all will now have to face.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alice

Fear has staked its claim, gripping me like an iron fist as I sit at the kitchen table of the main house and listen to Braxten fill in Craig, his brothers, and father on the chilling phone call he received.

As expected, our tormenter made another move, this time giving us a piece to the sadistic puzzle he has carefully crafted. That piece being the group home where the three boys met years ago. A time that clearly holds some very dark memories for them.

“Let’s go with the probability that this asshole is telling the truth,” Justice says. “This clearly has to do with Hobbs and what went down that night. What we need to figure out is who cared enough about that piece of shit to want to seek revenge after all these years.”

“And where she fits into it,” Knox adds, flicking a terse nod in my direction. “Considering it was an all boys home, I don’t see how she could have anything to do with that place.”

Braxten’s tormented gaze shifts to mine, his desolate expression tearing me apart. Whatever happened all those years ago still haunts him so deeply.

From the little I’ve gotten from the conversation it seems to involve this Hobbs person, the head guard in charge.

“I don’t know,” Braxten murmurs. “But he said if we find out who she is we will find out who he is.”

My heart hollows, hating to think that I could be part of their painful past.

Craig pulls out the tan folder he brought with him to the house. “This is everything I have been able to compile on the group home so far,” he says, opening the file. “I have a list of names of everyone who attended there the same time as you three, including the employees. I’m still waiting for the history

report on Hobbs, it should be coming in any time now, but I was able to pull everyone else's background along with a picture and updated info, except for one..."

"Who?" Justice asks.

Craig looks down at his notes. "A Keith Jones?"

"That piece of shit," Knox spits, his disgust for the man apparent.

Craig cocks a brow. "I take it you know him?"

"He was second in command," Braxten tells him. "He was close to Hobbs and could be just as much of an asshole."

"Do you think he could be capable of this?"

Braxten shrugs. "It's possible, I guess, but the Jones I remember was a follower, not a leader. I'm not sure he is smart enough to pull off what this guy has."

"Agreed," Justice says.

"Well, he might just be smarter than you think." Craig pulls out one of the reports from the stack that sits in front of him. "I was able to get his full history right up until the night of the fire. After that, there is nothing. No place of employment. No current address or telephone number. Not even a fucking credit card purchase. He has completely vanished."

"Could he be deceased?" Thatcher asks.

"Doubtful since I can't find a death certificate, but I will do more digging. In the meantime, we need to comb through every single one of these files and hope there is something else to go on."

He hands out a file to every person, pausing at me.

"I think it would be good for you to look too, if you're up for it?" he asks carefully. "Maybe something will stand out to you, seem familiar..."

"No," Braxten answers before I can. "She's been through enough already."

“It’s fine, Braxten,” I assure him, placing my hand on his arm. “I want to help. It’s the least I can do.”

“You don’t owe us anything,” he counters firmly.

He’s wrong, I owe them all so much, especially him, but I don’t use that argument.

“I owe it to myself,” I tell him instead. “To the girl I was before I woke up in the hospital.”

His jaw ticks, clearly still not liking the idea, but he doesn’t fight me on it. He nods at Craig, giving him the go ahead to hand me the file.

“Thank you,” I whisper, accepting the report. “What should I be looking for exactly?”

“Everything,” he says. “Where they came from, where they went after the fire, and where they are now. If there is a period of time that is unaccounted for, I need to know about it.”

With that understanding, we all open our files and begin to read.

The first person I read about is Todd Wilkins, a child who resided at the home the same time as the boys. It has everything about his past from his mother dying of an overdose when he was only five years old, to the abusive foster homes he suffered in before ending up at the group home.

It’s a very heartbreaking story, but thankfully, it ends on a happy note. The foster home he was placed with after the fire was a good one and the couple ended up adopting him. From there, he went on to earn a doctorate degree and is now happily married with a wife and three young children.

After looking through all the pictures, I grab another file. When nothing stands out to me in that one, I grab another, my hope dwindling with every stack I read through.

“I don’t even recognize half of these fucking people,” Justice grumbles, clearly frustrated.

“Same,” Knox adds.

“I remember him,” Braxten says, voice solemn as he pushes his folder toward his brothers. “That’s the kid I found in the basement that night.”

“Found?” Craig asks, looking for clarification.

Braxten nods. “The same night I found out what Hobbs was really capable of.” He doesn’t elaborate further than that, but he doesn’t need to, the trauma of whatever he saw is in the grim set of his expression.

Knox picks up the picture from the folder, reading the back of it. “Andon Denton.”

“Where is he now?” Justice asks.

“Says here he’s married and lives in St. George, Utah, coaching a high school football team.”

“Looks like he turned out okay,” Thatcher says. “Just like my boys.” The pride in his voice is unmistakable.

As I grab another file, a photograph falls out. Picking it up, I see it’s a group picture of four adult men and several young boys. All of them wear smiles, the lot of them looking like one big happy family.

I look over each person carefully, studying all the unfamiliar faces until one freezes me in time, their smile changing from friendly to cold and sinister.

Familiarity strikes hard, hitting me on impact. I spring out of my chair, knocking it over in my haste, and feel my breath start to race in and out.

“Alice?” Braxten shoves out of his seat and rushes to my side. “What’s wrong?”

His voice is distant, muffled by the thundering beat of my heart. I try to speak, but can’t, the panic gripping me is too strong.

Memories begin to assault me all at once, making it feel like my head is going to explode. Each one passes through at Mach speed, sending me hurtling into the past.

First, it's a memory of me as a little girl running around a big yard, laughing as I'm being chased by the man in the picture.

Daddy's going to get you.

The moment he catches me, he lifts me into his arms, telling me how much he loves me.

That memory quickly transitions into another. This one of a car crash that has glass raining all around me. The woman in the driver's seat stares back at me as we sail through the air, a look of love and regret drowning in the tears that fill her eyes.

Then comes the worst memory of all, the one of me being tied to a post time and time again. Though I can't see his face, the man who caught me in his arms flashes in my mind before I feel the burn of the lash across my back, leaving my skin raw and blood soaked.

You've been a bad girl again, Alice. It's time for your punishment.

The unfathomable pain engulfs me, drowning me in a black abyss.

"Alice, snap the fuck out of it!"

Braxten's hard voice penetrates the chaos of my mind. A sharp breath impales my lungs as I catapult back to the present. I find myself in Braxten's arms on the kitchen floor, the sound of my gut wrenching sobs exploding through the room.

"Breathe, baby," he murmurs, rocking me back and forth. "You're safe. I've got you."

"It's him," I choke out, barely managing the words. "He's the one who hurt me."

"Who?" he asks.

"In the picture," I gasp, still struggling for breath.

Craig quickly grabs the photo from the table and kneels before me. "Which one, Alice? Show me."

I point to the shorter, stockier man on the left, my finger shaking uncontrollably.

Braxten stiffens, his arms tightening around me. “No, that’s not possible. You’re confused, Alice.”

I shake my head. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” He turns me to face him, forcing my gaze to his. “It can’t be him because he’s dead. He has been for a long time. I know this because we killed him.”

I shake my head.

“Yes!”

“Listen to me,” I yell back, fisting the front of his shirt in a desperate attempt to make him understand. “He tied me up, Braxten,” I confess through a torrent of sobs. “He’d whip me until I lost consciousness. That’s what my nightmare was about the other night. I couldn’t see his face, but it was him, I know it.”

Something that can only be described as utter shock slips over his face before it morphs into pure anguish. The emotion sends my already desolate heart crumbling.

Craig pulls out his phone, making a call. “Sims, do me a favor and check my office to see if a fax came in that I’m waiting for. Yeah, thanks.”

Silence fills the room for only a second.

“I need you to scan it and email it to me immediately.”

“I have a fax machine in the office,” Thatcher says.

“Never mind. Fax it instead,” Craig orders, reciting the number back to his deputy before following Thatcher out of the room.

Justice and Knox stand around us, their arms crossed over their chests as they share the same look of haunted disbelief as their brother.

“Who is he?” I ask, the question barely a whisper because I have a feeling I already know, but I’m praying I am wrong.

Braxten's unable to speak, his jaw locked as he fights the emotions dominating his expression.

Justice ends up answering for him. "The man you just pointed to is Hobbs."

My eyes fall closed, despair consuming me.

Daddy's going to get you.

"Oh god," I hug my knees to my chest, feeling like I might get physically sick.

Braxten's arms hug me closer, but there is no warmth or emotion in the embrace. It's an automatic reaction—a robotic act—a cold empty shell.

Craig and Thatcher walk back into the kitchen just then, their somber expressions portraying what I already know in my heart.

"Well?" Knox asks, anxiously. "What the fuck does it say?"

Craig begins to read from the newest document he holds. "Fredrick Harlen Hobbs had been survived by his wife, Bonnie, and teenage daughter, Alice, until the two lost their lives in a car crash one year following his death."

The disclosure drops into the quiet space like an atom bomb, the sonic blast reverberating around the room as it's revealed that the blood of their tormentor runs through my veins.

"Though, only a few of the remains located in the charred wreckage could be identified as that of Bonnie Hobbs, Alice Hobbs was pronounced deceased as well, her remains presumed to be lost within the ashes."

A tortured breath leaves Justice, the one word sounding as broken as my heart.

Knox remains silent next to him, his hands balled into tight fists as his hatred for me becomes validated.

I choose not to look back at Braxten, knowing I won't be able to bear what will be in his gaze.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Justice says. “That crash was over ten fucking years ago. How does this much time pass without anyone knowing she’s alive?”

“Because he kept her hidden,” Braxten finally speaks, the sound of his voice as forlorn as the tension blanketing the room.

If the little I remember is accurate, I wasn’t just hidden, I was locked away, tortured in ways that will haunt me for eternity.

“Regardless, we know who she is now,” Knox says. “And if what she remembers is true, then she isn’t the only dead man walking. Hobbs is still alive and the bastard is out for blood.”

The spoken truth has me longing to curl in even closer to Braxten, but no matter how much I want to remain in his arms forever it will never happen, because what has been discovered has no doubt changed the dynamic of our relationship forever.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Braxten

Darkness shrouds the night as I sit on my father's back deck, casting its unforgiving shadows upon my soul. The demons from my past emerge with a vengeance.

"How does it feel, boy? You're not such a big shot now, are ya?" The whip cracked through the air before it landed another lash to my bare ass, tearing the flesh from my bones. Fear diluted the pain at the sound of his belt unbuckling. "I'm going to show you what happens to cocky little bastards like yourself."

My teeth clench together as I fight to keep the haunting memory buried, but it's no use. The helplessness I felt in that moment, the trauma that I still carry to this day burns like acid, never letting me forget. The same fucking scars that a girl I have promised to protect bears on her innocent flesh, all because we ran. Because we thought the monster was dead, burning in hell where he could never hurt another person. But it turns out we were wrong, so fucking wrong, and I have to live with that for the rest of my life.

The creak of the screen door penetrates my turmoil before my brothers step out, each of them taking a spot on either side of me.

"Talk to us, man," Justice says, breaking the bleak silence.

"There's really not much to say, is there?" Every word shreds my throat like tiny razor blades, my gaze remaining straight ahead.

"I think there is a lot to say."

Yeah, like the girl I would give my life for suffered years of abuse because of us.

Just the thought burns a whole in my gut.

Unable to sit a second longer, I push to my feet, my boots pounding the hard earth as I pace back and forth, fighting the monster that rages within.

“Don’t do this, Brax,” Justice says, knowing exactly where my thoughts are.

I come to a hard stop, squaring off with both my brothers. “Do what, Justice, huh? Admit that we fucked up? That we ran away without ever looking back and because of it, other people suffered at his hands? This is our fucking fault and you damn well know it!”

He shoves to his feet, coming before me in the blink of an eye. “The hell it is. No one knew this would happen. We left him for dead. We even checked after to make sure!”

“It wasn’t enough,” I roar. “We should have done more! She suffered because of us.” The fight drains from my shoulders, the last of my words thick with grief. “He hurt her because of us. Every mark she bears is our fault.” Liquid fire sears my eyes, leaking from the corners before I lose it altogether.

My brother hooks a hand behind my neck, reeling me in close as I drown in the guilt that suffocates me. Knox walks over, gripping my shoulder in silent comfort.

It’s just like that night so long ago. When everything felt so hopeless and all we had was each other.

“We were just kids, Brax,” Justice grits, his voice filled with the same regret tearing me apart. “We did the best we could, but we were just fucking kids. There was only so much we could do.”

“He’s right.” My father’s controlled voice penetrates the moment.

All three of us break apart and look up at the man who saved our very existence. He walks down the back steps, the dark encompassing him as he comes to stand before us.

“This is not your fault and what happened all those years ago wasn’t either.” The knowledge in his eyes as he gazes back at us is unmistakable.

“You knew, didn’t you?” I choke out. “You knew this whole time.”

He nods once. “It took a few months, but I eventually pieced together what happened and where you boys came from.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Knox asks before I can.

“Why didn’t any of you?”

We don’t make any move to explain, none of us sure how to voice what our greatest fear has always been.

“Do you not trust me?”

“It’s not that,” I rush out to say.

“Then why did you feel you had to keep this from me?”

Justice is the one to finally say it. “We worried the truth would change the way you felt about us.”

My father’s expression remains schooled, making it hard to distinguish his thoughts. “And what truth would that be? That you defended yourselves from a monster?”

“How do you know that’s what happened?” Knox asks. “For all you know, we were the monsters. You didn’t know us back then.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, boy. I’ve always known who you are.” His words fall heavy and hard, ceasing the moment. “I saw the fear in your eyes all those years ago. The pain, the fight for survival...I knew you boys had suffered. Just as I had. Which is why I did everything I could to protect you.”

The love he has always shown us fills the bleak night.

“You were the one who tampered with the records,” Justice murmurs, his head lifting at the realization. “You erased any trace of us from that group home, didn’t you?”

I look back at my father and see the answer on his face before he even speaks it.

“Yes.”

“Why?” I ask. “Why would you do that?”

“Because the night I found you in my barn—cold, wet, and scared—I knew I found three boys who needed me as much as I needed them, and I wasn’t going to let anyone take you from me.”

Emotion threatens to erupt all over again as I realize just how much our father sacrificed for us.

He steps closer, clasping Justice and Knox on the shoulders, forming a small circle between us. “I want you all to hear me now. Past, present, or future, nothing—and I mean nothing—you have done or will ever do could make me stop loving you. You get me?”

Knox drops his head, shielding his broken expression while Justice responds with a nod, his jaw locked up tight.

I swallow past the knot in my throat and manage to find my voice. “Yeah, Dad. We get you.”

My father pulls us in close, forming an unbreakable embrace. “We’re gonna get this son of bitch, boys. He will pay for what he has done and this time we’re gonna send him to hell for good. I promise you that.”

He might be the one to make the promise, but I am the one who intends to keep it.

His death will be by my hands.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Alice

A steady stream of tears slide down my cheeks, my hopeless heart somehow still beating with life as I sit next to Leela's stall, stroking the sleeping horse's neck.

I came here needing a kindred spirit, searching for some semblance of solace in the grim reality I now have to face.

I belong to a monster.

A vile person who inflicted pain not only on myself but others, including the one man I have come to care about most in this world. The same man who saved my life and promised to protect me. Only to find out he's been protecting the enemy.

The knowledge has another sob tumbling free. Hugging my knees to my chest, I cry for the loss of something that barely even had the chance to get started. Braxten will never be able to look at me again and I can't blame him. Not when he suffered at the hands of the man whose blood runs in my veins and I have no doubt he did. I saw it in his eyes, it was in all of their eyes. The demons—the anguish and...hatred.

So much hatred.

Footsteps sound behind me, penetrating my turmoil. I don't have to look to know who it is. Awareness floods every cell of my body, right down to my lost, lonely soul. It's the same feeling I always get when he's near. It has always soothed me, made me feel safe, but not this time because I know what's to come, and even though I can't blame him for it, I am not sure my battered heart can lose another piece right now.

Braxten kneels before me, but I keep my head buried in my arms. Unable to face what I will see—regret and the inevitable goodbye.

“Look at me, Alice.”

Despite his gentle command, I make no move to do so.

He gives me no choice. Breaking my arms apart, he forces my gaze to his, but what I find staring back at me isn't what I expected to see, yet it splinters my heart all the same. His broken expression is filled with an unfathomable pain, revealing every bit of his fractured soul.

"I'm so sorry," I expel through a fresh wave of tears. "So very sorry."

Confusion masks some of his hurt. "What are you sorry for?"

"For everything he's done," I cry. "This is all my fault."

"No, it's not. This is my fault, Alice. Not yours." His jaw flexes, breathing ravaged as he fights to restrain his emotion. "We left him for dead. We thought he couldn't hurt anyone else, but we were wrong. For that, I am the one who is sorry." His head lowers in shame, his despair suffocating the barn we sit in.

For the first time, I see him as the lost, scared boy he once was, his past surfacing stronger than ever.

"What did he do to you?" I ask, despite being terrified to hear that answer.

His head lifts, gaze meeting mine once more. Behind those demons is rage, a rage so strong it chills me to my bones.

"Nothing I didn't come back from. And nothing you won't either." Strength and determination slam down around him like a force field, smothering any lingering pain. His faith in me is stronger than my own.

"I always thought once I knew who I was and where I came from, I wouldn't feel so lost," I confess softly. "But the truth is, I've never felt more lost than I do right now."

Sympathy flashes in his eyes before his hand lifts to my face, fingers trailing across my tear stained cheek. "You're not lost, Wonderland. You're right where you belong. Here, with me."

I shake my head, not knowing how he can still be so kind to me. “How can you say that after knowing who I am?”

“Because it’s the truth, damn it!” Grasping my face between his hands, he presses his forehead against mine, his gaze penetrating. “I don’t care what that fucking report says. You don’t belong to him. You belong to me and that’s not going to change. Not now. Not ever.”

The beautiful vow is everything I longed to hear and more. A strangled sob works its way up my throat, but before it can burst free, Braxten’s lips claim mine in a time-stopping kiss.

I surrender to it and him, letting it change the dreadful fate that awaits us. It awakens something inside of me, a desperation I’ve never felt before.

Gripping the material of his shirt, I pull it up his sculpted back, needing more.

He quickly obliges, leaning back enough to help me clear it over his head.

His hands move to the front of my dress, fingers quickly working the tiny buttons free until he loses his patience and tears the material open with one swift pull, sending the dainty pieces scattering across the barn.

The savage act has my breath catching in my throat, but it evaporates altogether when he pulls me against him, skin-to-skin, and does nothing else but hold me for the moment.

My arms come around him as I savor the way our hearts beat as one. It’s an irrevocable shift in time that charges this already monumental moment between us.

Seconds later, his lips press against my neck, branding the skin there, before trailing down to the swell of my breast then lower, his mouth closing over my sensitive nipple.

An army of sensations explode through me. My head falls back on a moan, fingernails digging into his broad shoulders as I revel in all the feelings he evokes. He shifts his attention to the other breast, his tongue lashing and lips suckling until I’m a writhing mess.

“Braxten,” I whimper, my hips colliding with his as I seek to alleviate the ache between my thighs.

He doesn't hesitate to give me what I want. Reversing our positions, he takes me to my back.

My naked body sinks into the strewn straw while he climbs to his knees before me, his powerful chest on full display as he finishes removing my dress then panties.

The possession in his gaze as he stares down at me licks across my skin like a live flame, setting every inch of it on fire. I'm certain I've never seen him look as fierce as he does in this moment. As fierce and dark as the beast that snakes around his ribs.

When he reaches for his belt, my breath stalls, the sound of the clattering buckle matching the steady thrum of my pulse. “Be sure, Alice, because once we do this there is no going back.”

I may not be able to remember the past, but I am certain that I've never been more sure than I am right now. To prove it, I reach up, offering him my hand.

He accepts it, letting me pull him down on top of me, and the collision of our naked bodies is life-altering.

A growl shreds his throat as he buries his face into the soft skin of my neck. “This is what it was all for, Alice. The pain, the loss...it was to always end up right here. Just like this.”

His words sink straight into my soul with an undeniable truth. If all I had was this moment, his skin against mine, heart drumming to the same beat, I could leave this earth knowing that I had it all.

For long seconds, neither of us move. We stay just as we are, arms wrapped around each other, our torn hearts mending, overcoming the pain of a past that brought us here to this moment.

Eventually, his fingers interlock with mine before he raises our hands above my head. “You ready for me, baby?”

I nod, unable to speak past the ache in my throat.

Lifting up, he poises himself at my entrance, his dark eyes so captivating it's impossible to look away. "This is going to hurt, but only for a second." After the warning, he presses a gentle kiss to my forehead then pushes forward on one sudden thrust, penetrating what has never been broken before.

A beautiful pain rocks my body as he invades it, my mouth parting on a sharp gasp.

Braxten groans, dark and rich as he seats himself deep inside of me. "You feel that, Wonderland?" His hot breath slides against my cheek like warm silk. "I just made you mine forever."

Those few life changing words diminish the pain until it becomes nothing more than an afterthought.

With our gazes locked, he begins to move inside of me, each stroke deeper than the last. I become lost in the darkness of his eyes and see so much more than possession. There's a heart that beats parallel to mine, our broken souls mending to make a whole. All things I will treasure forever.

"You with me, baby?" he asks through gritted teeth, clearly restraining himself.

My hand moves over his chest, resting over the strong beat of his heart. "I'm with you. Always."

"Good. Tonight, I take you slow, but after this all bets are off."

I'll take him any way I can get him, no matter what way that is because I have no doubt every time with him will be more perfect than the last.

Clinging to his broad shoulders, I feel each corded muscle flex beneath my fingertips, every dip and valley of our bodies explored as we give ourselves freely in this moment.

Eventually, I find my own rhythm, my hips lifting to meet his. The bold move has him growling and thrusting deeper, hitting a part of me that sends shockwaves through every nerve ending of my body.

A moan escapes my lips, my back arching as I try to hold off.

Braxten senses it. “Give into it, Alice. Let it take you over, let it own you.”

I shake my head. “I’m not ready for it to end.”

The emotion in my confession has him stilling deep inside of me. His forehead rests on mine, dark gaze dominating. “It won’t,” he promises. “It can’t, because we’re written in the fucking stars, Wonderland. In fairy tales and dreams, nothing will *ever* change that.”

If I wasn’t so certain I was in love with him before, I am now. A smile steals my lips before I pull him back down, smothering it with a kiss.

It sets his hips in motion again, each skilled thrust hitting that forbidden spot deep inside of me. My mouth parts from his on a gasp as I feel myself losing the battle I was so hellbent on fighting, but what a beautiful battle to lose.

Pleasure races through every part of my body, my eyes falling shut as I sail to a place where only the most divine oblivion exists.

Braxten never slows his assault, his hips driving forward at an almost manic pace. Just as he reaches his release, he pulls out, teeth baring as he finishes outside of my body.

I instantly miss the connection.

Afterward, he gathers me in his arms and holds me close, the strewn straw embedded on us both. The heat of our naked bodies keeps us warm and content as we process the incredible moment that just took place between us, between two people who were merely nothing more than strangers up until a few weeks ago, but ended up being connected in a way they could never imagine.

“What’s got you thinking so hard?” he asks on a murmur, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Us,” I confess, turning to face him. “About how incredibly life-changing fate can be.”

He grunts. “You got that right.”

“I wish that somehow, someday, I could have met you back then,” I tell him on a whisper. “Because I’m certain I would have never lost a memory that had you in it.”

Regret slips over his face. “If I had met you all those years ago, you wouldn’t need to remember me because I would have never let you go.”

The impact of his words anchors my soul deeper to his.

“Maybe it was supposed to be like this. Maybe it all really has been for something.” The weight of my thoughts drifts through the air like a gentle breeze.

“It wasn’t just for something, Alice. It was for everything.” His words hang suspended between us, their magnitude like a siren piercing through the silence.

After everything he’s been through, at the hands of the man whose blood runs through my veins, I’ll never understand how he can look at me this way, say words like this, and mean them with every beat of his strong, resilient heart.

One thing I do know, is despite all of the pain and turmoil we’ve both endured, I have no doubt that we’re both exactly where we are meant to be. Here with each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Braxten

The morning sun pours through my bedroom window, casting its golden glow on the beauty next to me.

Alice's face is soft with sleep, the look of peace embedded in every feature, a complete contradiction to how I found her last night in the barn. Alone, scared, and...broken.

I swallow hard at the memory.

To find out that the girl who has come to mean everything to me comes from the very man responsible for our destruction all those years ago was a massive stab to the chest. Not because she has a part of him running through her veins, but because she suffered at his hands long after we did.

Because we thought he was dead, but we were wrong.

The truth rocks me for a second time. I will never forgive myself for it, but I will make it right. I will have my vengeance, not only for myself and my brothers, but for the angel sleeping next to me. That bastard will pay for every single wound he left on her if it's the last thing I do.

A clattering noise interrupts my thoughts, hushed voices following soon after.

Scowling, I slide from bed and throw on my jeans and T-shirt from the night before, then grab my phone off the nightstand. After one last look at Alice, I leave the room, closing the door quietly behind me.

The moment I enter the hallway, I'm greeted with a mouthwatering aroma. Those whispers grow with every step until I come face-to-face with my entire family. They move around my kitchen, preparing food and setting the table that rarely gets used.

My father stands at the stove with Gwen to his right who cuts up fruit. She catches sight of me first, a soft smile forming

on her face. “Well, good morning.”

“Morning,” I croak, sleep still thick in my throat.

My father looks up from his place at the stove, that trademark grin easing over his face. “Hey, look who’s awake.” Walking over, he pulls me in for a hard hug. “We thought we would bring breakfast to you this morning. Hope that’s all right?”

Breakfasts and dinners are a family staple that are never to be missed unless for good reason. What happened last night would be considered a good enough reason, but I know them being here has less to do with tradition and everything to do with loyalty, because that’s how this family works. When one of us is wounded, we all bleed.

“Yeah, Dad,” I finally say, the gruffness in my voice for an entire different reason now. “It’s more than okay.”

Ryanne walks over next, greeting me with a kiss to my cheek. “Morning.”

“Morning.”

Justice moves in after, pulling me in and clapping my shoulder. “You doing okay, brother?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks.”

Knox nods over at me from where he sets the table. The pain and betrayal that I have been met with the last few weeks are nowhere in sight. It gives me hope that our relationship isn’t irreparable after all.

Hannah bulldozes into me, almost knocking me over as she wraps her skinny arms around my waist. “Morning, Uncle Brax!”

“Mornin’, squirt.”

“We made your favorite this morning, biscuits and gravy. You think, Miss Alice will like it?”

I smirk down at her excitement. “I’m sure she will.”

“I can’t wait to try it.” A quiet voice adds behind me.

Turning, I find Alice standing at the end of the hallway. She wears a pair of form fitting jeans and a light pink sweater that hangs off one slender shoulder. Her hair is sleep tumbled and eyes tired, yet she's still the most beautiful sight I've ever laid eyes on.

"You're awake!" Hannah exclaims, running over to give her the same hug she did me.

Alice hugs her back, her smile fading when she takes in the rest of my family crowded around the kitchen. It's obvious she's worried about the reception she will receive after last night's discovery.

Ryanne is the first person to ease that fear by greeting her the same way she would any other day. "Good morning, Alice."

"Good morning."

My father moves in next. "You're just in time, darlin'," he tells her, dropping a kiss on her cheek. "Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

Alice smiles back at him. "It smells wonderful."

"Let's hope it tastes as good," he chuckles, walking back into the kitchen.

While everyone returns to their tasks, I move in for my own morning greeting. Grabbing her hand, I pull her in for a long, lingering kiss, her sweet essence settling deep into my chest.

It has me wanting to pick her up and haul her back to bed, breakfast be damned, but I manage to refrain myself.

Her eyes remain closed for seconds after, a soft expression dancing across her face before she finally reopens them, that shock of pale blue never failing to knock me on my ass.

"Hey, Wonderland." My voice tumbles out roughly, portraying every single thing she makes me feel.

"Hi," she replies sleepily.

“You didn’t have to get up,” I tell her. “You could have stayed in bed.”

“I know, but I’d rather be with you.”

Such simple words, yet they pierce me right down to my fucking core just like the girl in my arms.

“Come grab a seat,” my father orders. “Breakfast is ready.”

With Alice’s hand in mine, I lead her to the table, noting it’s going to be a tight fit. I’m about to take the empty chair next to Justice until I realize this would put Alice next to Knox. I decide to switch places, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable, but before I can, Knox pulls out the chair for her.

Silence falls over the entire room, the gesture shocking the hell out of us all, especially Alice. She gazes down at the chair then back at Knox, words evading her as much as the rest of us. Eventually, she takes the seat, uttering a quiet “*thank you*” as she does.

My brother doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t need to, the gesture spoke louder than words ever could.

After my father says grace, everyone digs in. Conversation settles around the table as hands serve, passing around the food that’s laid out before us.

There’s a host of things we should be talking about this morning, but we decide to keep it light and enjoy the meal for what it is: a moment of normalcy for my family. Something Alice hasn’t experienced enough of since she arrived into our lives.

“Can we go out for dinner tonight?” Hannah asks around a mouthful of food. “We could use the gift card me and Miss Alice won yesterday.” She smiles over at Alice, still riding the high from their victory.

Despite the shit storm that followed their win, she is none the wiser as to why we rushed out of there the way we did or the threat that lurks, something we have been protecting her from for as long as we can.

“Sorry, baby, but not tonight,” Justice says, attempting to let her down gently. “We’re going to be staying close to the farm for the next while.”

“How come?” she asks, genuinely perplexed.

“It’s just for the best right now, all right?” His tone brooks no further argument.

Her head lowers. “Yeah, okay.”

The disappointment in her voice crushes my brother as hard as it does me.

“Justice,” Ryanne speaks up quietly, her hand moving to his arm. “Maybe it’s time we tell her. If it’s all right with Alice?” she adds, looking in our direction.

Alice nods her approval while indecision battles on my brother’s face.

“It’s time, son,” my father says. “She needs to know so she can understand the importance of staying close to home right now.”

“Know what?” Hannah asks, her gaze moving over every single one of us. “What are y’all talkin’ about?”

My brother lets go of a harsh breath. “Come here, baby.” He pushes his chair back, making room for her to crawl up on his lap. “Do you remember the reason why Alice is staying with us?”

“Yeah, because she was in an accident and got hurt and can’t remember things so she needs our help.”

Justice nods. “Right. Except, what happened to her wasn’t an accident.”

Hannah peers back at my brother, confused. “What do you mean? If she wasn’t in an accident then how did she get all those owies?”

Justice hesitates, struggling to find the appropriate words. I can’t blame him, how the fuck do you explain this kind of violence to a six year old? Especially when all you have done is try to protect her from it.

“Because someone gave them to me,” Alice interjects softly, saving my brother from having to answer. “Someone hurt me, Hannah. That’s how I got these owies.” Her voice remains strong, but there is no denying the pain on her face. A pain that feeds the vengeance tainting my soul.

A tiny gasp escapes my niece, her shock quickly turning into devastation. “But why?” Her small lip quivers as she tries to understand. “Why would someone do that to you?”

“Because this person is a very bad man,” Ryanne says bluntly. “And bad men do bad things.”

“You don’t need to worry though,” Justice assures her. “We’re going to take care of it.”

He’s got that fucking right. Except the *we* will be *I* because no one else is getting the privilege of stealing this bastard’s last breath but me.

“It’s why we need to stay close to the farm for the next while,” he continues. “I don’t want you wandering past the property line for any reason, understand?”

She nods. “I understand.” Sliding off Justice’s lap, she walks over to Alice. “I’m sorry someone hurt you, Miss Alice.” A sob leaves her as she wraps her arms around Alice’s neck.

Emotion erupts around the table, affecting us all differently. My father, brothers, and I do all we can to hide the rage boiling to the surface, while Gwen and Ryanne discreetly blink back their tears.

“Thank you, Hannah,” Alice whispers, hugging her back. “I want you to know that your friendship has meant a lot to me. It has helped me heal.”

“Good.” She takes a step back, that Creed strength stiffening her backbone. “Don’t you worry about nothin’, we got you covered. No one messes with us and gets away with it, right, guys?” she adds, looking back at us.

“Damn straight.” I make a fist, knocking knuckles with her.

“You know what this family needs?” my father cuts in. “Some good ol’ fashion fun. We can do it right here at the farm. We’ll have a fire, roast some mallows, sing some blues, and rock out under the stars. What do ya say?”

“Count me in,” Hannah bursts out, clearly excited by that suggestion.

“And me,” Alice adds.

Gwen clasps her hands together in excitement. “That sounds wonderful. I’ll pick some strawberries from the garden and whip up some jam for those s’mores.”

“Can I help you?” Hannah asks.

“You most certainly can.”

“Then it’s settled.” My father nods. “We will begin preparing after breakfast.”

That sends Hannah jumping back into her seat and eating what’s left on her plate. I’m just about to return to my own food when my phone goes off in my pocket.

Pulling it out, I see it’s Craig. “Tell me you have something,” I answer, forgoing any kind of greeting.

“I just got a call from the Brampton Police Department in regards to the photograph I sent out of Alice,” he explains, referencing the town over from us. “Apparently, there’s an employee from one of the gas stations there who reported an unnerving encounter with a young woman who matches Alice’s description. It happened only a few days before she was left on your property. He is bringing her in to speak with me about it. I figured you’d want to be here.”

I’m out of my chair before I even respond. “We’re on our way.”

“See you soon.”

Hanging up, I pocket my phone and pull Alice to her feet. “Come on, we need to get over to the station.”

“A lead?” Justice asks.

“Maybe.”

“You need us?” Knox follows up the offer.

I shake my head. “You guys take care of things here. I’ll fill you in when we get back.”

“Be careful, son,” my father warns.

“Yeah, be careful, guys,” Hannah says, her small voice thick with worry.

“Don’t worry, I got this, squirt. You just help hold down the fort here, all right?”

“I will,” she promises.

Without another word, Alice and I grab what we need and leave out the front door.

My foot is heavy on the gas as I head for town and fill Alice in on the little Craig gave me, leaving out the part that the encounter was an “unnerving” one, not wanting to upset her further.

“Hopefully, whatever information she has will help us find him.” Her voice is soft as she gazes out her window, knee bouncing incessantly with her nerves.

Reaching over, I cover it with my hand, feeling it instantly settle.

She looks down at the touch, then over at me.

“We’ll get him, Alice, I promise.”

Her worried expression softens. “I know, I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“You’re not a mess.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, you are,” I agree, making her laugh. “But you’re a beautiful mess.”

That laugh transforms into a smile, a genuine one that has her relaxing back into her seat for the rest of the drive.

Twenty minutes later, we are walking into the station. The place is mostly quiet, only the receptionist who is on the phone and a few deputies are in today, one of them being Pierce.

Not what I fucking need.

Our icy glares lock for a fraction of a second, the collision dropping the temperature in the room. I break the connection first, not wanting to waste time, especially on him, then head for the hallway where Craig's office is located.

Pierce ends up beating us to it. He places himself at the entryway, blocking our path.

"Is there something I can do for you folks?" His expression is smug as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, you can get the fuck out of our way."

Alice tenses beside me, caught off guard by the hostile response.

"Fraid, I can't do that. Not without an appointment." He smirks. "But I'm sure our receptionist, Darla, would be happy to assist you with that."

A few of his buddies snicker like little girls, giving him the power trip he's looking for.

I move forward, crowding him back a step.

"Braxten..." Alice trails off nervously, clinging to my hand in fear.

"I don't have time for your shit today, Pierce. I'm warning you now, if you don't get the fuck out of my way, I'm going to embarrass you in front of your little girl gang."

His beady eyes narrow. "Careful, Creed. Threatening an officer of the law will buy you time behind bars."

"I don't make threats and we both know it." Leaning down, my voice lowers. "Keep this shit up and you're going to find yourself in the ground right next to your buddy Toder. And you know I'll get away with it, I already have."

Anger hardens his expression at the mention of the prior sheriff.

"You need a hand, Pierce?" one of the deputies ask.

He looks to his buddy, giving him a shake of his head.

“Smart move.” Without wasting anymore time, I walk past him, dragging Alice with me.

“What the heck was that about?” she whispers, nervously looking over her shoulder.

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

I know it’s not the answer she is looking for, but we’ve got bigger things to worry about right now. The day will come when I deal with Pierce, but not today.

Once reaching Craig’s office, I drop a light rap on the door then walk in.

A middle aged woman sits in one of the chairs with an officer standing next to her. She looks our way, her mouth parting on a subtle gasp when she gets her first look at Alice.

“You’re just in time,” Craig says, coming to close the door behind us. “Braxten and Alice, this is Lenora Davenport, the employee I was telling you about. And this is Deputy Hogan, the officer she filed the report with.”

Alice murmurs a quiet “hi” to both, while I nod in greeting. The deputy returns the gesture, but Lenora remains silent, her wide eyes fixated on Alice.

Eventually, she finds her voice. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure if it was you in the picture, but I am now. I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

Alice shifts on her feet nervously, not knowing how to respond.

Craig clears his throat. “As I mentioned earlier, Alice has no recollection of the past right now.”

Lenora shakes her head. “Of course. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Alice assures her quietly.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning, Ms. Davenport,” Craig says, taking a seat at his desk.

Nodding, she begins relaying the events that took place a few weeks ago. “It was close to midnight when the car pulled

in. I remember finding it odd that it parked around the back instead of the front, especially since the lot was empty.”

“Do you remember the make of it?” Craig asks.

“A brown Oldsmobile.”

The deputy cuts in. “By the description she gave, I’d say probably around late nineties.”

Craig jots that down then gestures for her to continue.

“Several minutes passed before they came in. The man wore a hat low on his face and made sure not to come too close. It was obvious he didn’t want me to see what he looked like,” she says. “He also kept the girl shielded from my view as he walked her to the restroom and waited outside the door for her. I realized then that something wasn’t right.”

“Did he acknowledge you at all?” Craig asks.

“Not at first, but I eventually greeted him and asked how his night was going. Surprisingly, he responded, quite pleasantly even, so I started to think maybe I was misreading the situation.”

It surprises me he went into a public place at all, especially with how careful he’s stayed hidden all these years.

“We began small talk and I asked if they were from around here and he said no, that they were just passing through,” she continues with a shrug. “Since he seemed nice enough, I dug a little deeper and asked where home was and that’s when he looked up at me from across the room...” She visibly swallows, clearly shaken.

“Take your time, Ms. Davenport,” Craig tells her gently.

She takes a second to compose herself before continuing. “I couldn’t see his face beneath the brim of his hat, but I felt his gaze, and the chill that ran down my spine is something I will never forget.”

The fear that resonates in her voice is the same one I’ve heard in Alice’s.

“The girl came out of the restroom then and he didn’t waste a second hurrying her to the door. Despite his effort to keep her from my view, she managed to look up at me from under her long, blonde hair and that’s when I saw all the bruises,” she pauses, her voice wavering. “They were awful, but they were nothing compared to the fear that was embedded there. By the time I shook myself from the sight, he had her out the door and that’s when I noticed she dropped something.”

She pulls out a folded up piece of toilet paper from her purse and hands it to Craig for all of us to see. In black marker there were two words: *Help me.*

“I was terrified, but I ran outside after them anyway, knowing if I called the police first, they would be gone. Unfortunately, it didn’t matter because by then, they were already driving away.” Lenora turns to Alice, remorse burning in her eyes. “I’m so sorry I didn’t act sooner. I should have went with my gut when y’all first walked in. I should have called the police then.”

Alice shakes her head. “It’s not your fault.”

“I was the one to respond to the call that night,” Deputy Hogan says. “The station’s video surveillance has been down for the last year, but I radioed every deputy that was on call to watch for the vehicle. Unfortunately, it was never seen again, at least not in our jurisdiction.”

Craig nods at the information before returning his attention to Lenora. “I know you didn’t get a good look at the assailant, but do you think this man could fit the description from what you were able to see?” he asks, handing her the photo of Hobbs.

She studies the picture carefully.

Every silent second that ticks by is excruciating.

“It’s possible, I guess,” she says, not sounding very convincing. “I really can’t be sure. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Craig assures her. “I appreciate you taking the time to come in and talk with us.”

“Yes, thank you,” Alice adds.

Lenora gives her a sad smile. “I hope the police find him and you get the justice you deserve.”

I refrain from telling her that she will because I plan to get it.

Lenora and the deputy walk out, closing the door behind them.

“Well, that wasn’t as helpful as I was hoping it would be,” Craig grumbles, leaning back in his chair.

That’s a fucking understatement.

“So, what happens now?” Alice asks.

“We wait for more information to come in,” Craig tells her. “I’ve reached out to the department that was in charge of the fire that took place at the group home. I’m waiting to hear back. Hopefully they can shed a little more light on what went down that night, especially with Hobbs being reported as deceased.”

“But he’s not,” Alice counters. “He can’t be. Not if what I remember is true.”

“That’s why I need to talk to them. I want to know what evidence they found to make that claim.”

“What about Jones?” I ask. “Any luck on finding out more on his whereabouts?”

I have a feeling if anyone knows where Hobbs is, it will be him.

“No, and I’ve exhausted all my resources which is why I’m going to contact Agent Jameson. Your father gave me his number. His reach is further than mine.”

That might be true, but even he has yet to come back with anything concrete which is a complete mind fuck to me because the Hobbs I remember was not this fucking smart.

“That said, I was able to find out more information about your mother,” Craig says, his gaze shifting back to Alice.

“My mother?”

With a nod, he grabs the file next to him and pushes it toward her. “You’re welcome to take a look, if you want.”

She moves to take it, but I grab her wrist before she can make contact. “Maybe you shouldn’t.”

She looks up at me, perplexed by the interference. “Why not?”

“Because some things can’t be unseen. Look what happened last night. What if it triggers another memory like that?”

“Then it does.” She shrugs sadly. “I can’t run from this anymore, Braxten. Good or bad, I need to know.”

If it was up to me, she wouldn’t ever remember another painful memory, she wouldn’t even fucking know pain exists, but I know it’s not up to me. Which is why I reluctantly release her wrist.

Taking the file from Craig, she sits in one of the chairs and opens it, sifting through each page as if they’re made of glass.

“She worked as a trauma nurse in the emergency department of the county hospital back in Tennessee,” Craig begins to explain. “That’s how she met your fath...uh, Hobbs,” he corrects himself. “He had been transporting an inmate from the prison he worked at due to self-inflicted injuries.”

Self-inflicted my ass. No doubt Hobbs was the cause.

“They didn’t date long before they got married and had you. Two years later, Hobbs was offered the job to run the group home so they took it and moved. Your mother never went back to work. She wanted to stay home to raise you, but she did volunteer at the local homeless shelter.”

“Really?” Alice whispers, continuing to sift through each page.

Craig nods. “From everything I could find, it seems she was a very kind woman. Anyone who knew her, loved her.”

It makes me wonder how she hooked up with a piece of shit like Hobbs.

Alice continues flipping through the pages until she reaches an 8 x 10 picture. The woman in the photo is a spitting image of the girl holding it. Her hair is the same color blonde but shorter, cut chin length; her eyes blue, but not as pale; and her smile...well, it's as pure as her daughter's.

Alice trails a finger down the side of the woman's face before breaking into a sob.

The painful sound shreds me from the inside out. Kneeling before her, I drop a kiss on her thigh, wishing it was enough to take the pain away.

"I wish I could remember her," she says. "Why can I remember only the bad? Why can't I remember the beautiful parts like her?"

"You will, Wonderland. Just give it time."

Pulling herself together, she wipes the tears from her face and looks to Craig. "May I keep this photo?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you."

After taking the photo out, she gives him back the folder.

"I know this must be frustrating for you, Alice, but we know more than we did a few days ago," Craig tells her. "Don't give up hope. Justice will prevail, I truly believe that."

It will because I'm going to eradicate the motherfucker, even if it's the last thing I do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Alice

Hot water pummels my naked body as I stand beneath the pulsing spray of the shower. Steam billows the enclosed space, soothing every inch of my aching muscles, including my heart.

After arriving home from the station, Braxten went to help his father and Justice chop wood for tonight's fire. So I seized the opportunity to take a shower, needing the alone time to collect myself.

To say that I am emotionally spent would be an understatement. I feel like I've been swept up into a tornado of never ending-turmoil. Add in the constant dead ends we continue to encounter, and it's as frustrating as it is defeating.

If only we could catch a break and find Hobbs—I refuse to call him my father—then we could all move on with our lives because that is what I want more than anything. To experience a life without fear and pain. To give and feel love freely. I want to take Thatcher's advice and figure out who I am. To rediscover my likes and dislikes, to find out if I have any talents, create new hobbies. I want to do it without having to look over my shoulder every second, and I want to do it all with Braxten because I could never imagine a life without him.

With that last thought in mind, I finish washing and shut off the water. Opening the door, I adorn my robe then leave the bathroom.

My wet feet leave a trail of footprints on the tile as I head into the bedroom and search through the closet for something to wear, unsure what attire is appropriate for a fire.

I end up deciding on a pair of black leggings and a long, thin, olive green sweater. Across the room, I grab a pair of underwear from the dresser, a smile forming as I choose something with Braxten in mind.

Shaking my head at myself, I close the drawer and look up, pausing at my reflection in the mirror, something I usually try to avoid.

I take in the mostly absent bruises on my face and notice something different about me, something that wasn't there when I woke up in the hospital weeks ago. The woman back then was a battered stranger who felt alone and empty.

This one, although still fearful of what lurks, has a sparkle of hope in her eyes that wasn't there before. She has memories now of just how beautiful life can be, all because of one man.

It makes me realize that the bruises on my face aren't the only wounds that are starting to heal.

Opening the top of my robe, I look over the rest of my body and find those marks have mostly faded too, becoming nothing more than a painful stamp in time.

It's a moment of victory that is short lived when I think about what marks my back. Scars that I have yet to see for myself because some things can't be unseen. I wasn't strong enough to face them then, but that was the woman weeks ago. Not the one now.

That thought has me bravely turning my back toward the mirror and dropping the robe further, letting the collar of it fall to my bottom, the silk material draping in the crooks of my arms.

Despite the bold move, I find my eyes closing in fear. Gathering every ounce of courage I have, I open them, a subtle breath catching in my throat at the sight I'm met with.

Long, white, angry scars run crisscross along my skin, the damage starting below my shoulder blades, descending to my lower back, and even further to my bottom.

You've been a bad girl, Alice. It's time for your punishment.

The remembrance of my nightmare floods to the surface, immersing me into a pool of emotions. Sadness, regret, and most of all, hatred. I hate him for what he has done. Not only to me, but to Braxten and his brothers as well.

I'm so lost in it all that I don't hear anyone enter the house until it's too late. The bedroom door that I thought was closed pushes open.

"Brax, what happened with—" Knox comes to an abrupt stop just inside the room, his cold, dark gaze taking in the mangled skin of my back that is openly on display.

Horror engulfs every fiber of my being, snapping me into motion. I hurry to lift the robe back in place, tying the belt tightly around my waist.

"I thought my brother was in here." The stone set in his expression never wavers, despite the ugly mess he just witnessed.

"He's out chopping wood with Justice and your father." The words are barely formed through the humiliation lodged in my throat.

The only response I get is a nod before he turns to leave.

"Wait!" I blurt out before I can think better of it.

His footsteps cease, but he doesn't turn around, his back continuing to face me.

Knowing there is no backing out now, I take the leap that I've been scared to make. "I just want to say that I'm sorry." My voice is quiet, despite my attempt not to cower. "Sorry for the trouble that I brought you and your family, sorry that I come from a horrible man who hurt you and your brothers, but most of all..." I swallow thickly, before forcing the most important words out. "I'm sorry for falling in love with your brother and that it hurts you."

The last comment has him turning around to face me, his sharp gaze colliding with mine. I begin to worry that I should have kept that last part to myself, but I can't take it back because I mean it.

"I don't want to take him from you," I continue softly. "I just want to love him too."

Silence descends as I wait for him to say something... anything, but all I get is the same emotionless look I always

do. My head lowers, heart plummeting as I realize this isn't going where I hoped it would.

“Yeah, well, maybe you and I have more in common than I thought.”

My head lifts at his response and I witness something in his expression that isn't usually there. The hard set to his jaw is still the same, his cold presence never far, but there is something else in the darkness of his gaze, something... vulnerable. Something that rivals the pain I bear in my soul.

Without another word, he turns and walks away.

His response might not be the approval I long for, but the small interaction is the most I've gotten from him yet, and I let that be enough for now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Braxten

Bright orange flames light up the night, the raging fire keeping us warm as the sound of my father's harmonica drifts through the air. His foot taps to the symphony, shoulders matching the rhythm, while my niece puts on a show, singing her little heart out.

“And it's hard.” She sways back and forth, holding a stick in place of a microphone, remnants of the s'mores she had earlier smeared all over her face. “Hard being just six years old.”

“Tell us how hard it is.” My father follows in tune, his mouth breaking from his instrument. “Tell us from your soul.”

“It's so hard,” she cries out, pouring all she's got into it. “But that's what makes me stronger.”

“Yes, it does.” He cheers her on. “Sing it, girl.”

Alice, Ryanne, and Gwen all clap to the tune while my brothers and I listen on in amusement.

I've said this before and I will say it again, it's a damn good thing she's so cute because the kid can't sing worth a shit, but she's got more soul than I've ever seen from anyone and according to my father that's all you need when you're singing the blues. It has also made every single one of us smile tonight—which was a feat in itself—especially for me because smiling is the last thing I've felt like doing since leaving the station.

I've been plagued with only one thought, one purpose, and that's to find the enemy and eliminate him in the most inhumane, unimaginable way.

Applause erupts arounds the fire as the song comes to an end.

“Thank you, thank you.” Hannah bows, a look of pride on her sticky face. “I will be back tomorrow night with my partner. Same time, same place.”

I smirk, loving that smart mouth of hers.

“Unless the audience would like an encore?” she adds, making eye contact with us all.

“I don’t think so,” Ryanne intercepts, pushing from her chair. “It’s time for this Little Blues Singer to get some sleep.”

My niece’s shoulders slump in disappointment. “Aw, Mama.”

“Don’t ’aw, Mama’ me, it is way past your bedtime.”

“Can I stay the night here with Papa Thatcher and Miss Gwen?”

“Honey, you don’t just invite yourself to sleep at someone’s house,” Ryanne gently scolds.

“But it’s not just anyone, it’s Papa Thatcher,” the kid counters, making a good point.

“That’s right,” my father says. “My home is her home, and Gwen and I would be delighted if she stayed, wouldn’t we, dear?” He looks to Gwen, beckoning for back up.

She nods. “We sure would.”

Hannah smiles up at Ryanne. “So, can I?”

Justice is the one to answer. “Yeah, baby, you can stay.”

The approval sends my niece leaping for joy. “Yesssss!”

Ryanne shakes her head at the turn of events, but her smile overshadows it.

“Go on and give your mama and daddy a hug,” my father tells her. “I’ll take you to get washed up, then Miss Gwen and I can read you a story before bed.”

After hugging Justice and Ryanne, she makes her goodnight rounds to us all then heads inside with my father. Gwen stays behind to clean up a few things before joining

them while Justice makes a fast exit with Ryanne, obviously eager to put their alone time to good use.

Standing from my chair, I'm about to do the same with Alice until Knox stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Got a minute?" he asks, gesturing towards the gun shed.

There's an unsettled energy about him that has me quickly agreeing. "Yeah, sure." My gaze shifts to Alice. "I won't be long."

"It's fine," she assures me. "I'm going to help Gwen clean up. I'll meet you at the house after."

Her understanding only reaffirms what I've always known: she's not only perfect for me, but perfect for my family.

Hooking an arm around her waist, I reel her in close, giving her a long, deep kiss with the promise of more to come.

It leaves her unsteady on her feet and a blush disappearing to places I can't wait to fucking devour.

Afterward, I run to catch up to Knox who is already headed for the shop.

Silence reigns as I fall in step next to him, the tension that's been between us these last few weeks mounting with every stride. It has him digging into his pocket for a cigarette and lighting up.

He takes a long, deep inhale, the fiery tip illuminating his face, enhancing the torment he lives daily.

A suffering I wish I could shoulder as my own.

"When are you going to quit that shit?" I ask, breaking the silence between us. It's something I give him and Justice hell for often, but the truth is, I don't mind it as much as I lead them to believe. It's a scent I associate with both my brothers. A scent that always brings me home.

"Never." He gives me the same response he always does before shooting me a look, a smirk following soon after.

It triggers one of my own. I pull him into a headlock, both of us laughing as we enter the shop. Flicking on the lights, I

see another piece has been started, its parts scattered all over the station Knox works at.

I turn to him in surprise. “A new one?”

He takes a long pull of his cigarette before nodding.

I lean against the cabinet across the room, folding my arms over my chest. “You’ve been spending a lot of time in here lately.”

He exhales the cloud of smoke that was buried in his lungs before speaking. “Yeah, well, it gives me something to do since you guys have been so busy.”

The jab isn’t amiss. “Never too busy for you, brother.”

His tortured gaze shifts from mine, refusing to acknowledge my words.

I don’t let him. Not anymore. “I mean it, Knox. I know things have changed since Alice showed up, but—”

“That’s a fucking understatement,” he grunts.

Annoyance begins to bubble to the surface, overtaking the guilt that’s been constantly plaguing me. “What do you expect me to say? It’s not like I expected this to happen, but I’m not sorry it did either, otherwise she would still be with that piece of shit.”

And not with me.

I decide to keep that part to myself, knowing this is hard enough on him.

“Nothing,” he mumbles, continuing to avoid my gaze. “I don’t expect you to say anything.”

“Then why did you bring me here?” I ask. “To tell me what a shitty brother I am?”

He acts completely indifferent as he puts out his cigarette. “That wasn’t the plan, no.”

“Then what was your fucking plan?” I ask, losing my patience.

“To say I’m sorry, all right?” he snaps, his black eyes a raging inferno as they meet mine again.

“Well, it’s a piss poor apology!”

“It’s not like this is easy for me,” he fires back. “I know what needs to be done, I know what needs to be said, and what I have to accept, but I can’t move on as quickly as you guys have!”

“You think this is easy for me? For Justice? It’s not, this is fucking us up too.”

“Well, you would never know it.” His voice cracks, portraying just how much he’s hurting.

It hits hard, easing the frustration festering inside of me, but not Knox. The vulnerable moment only embarrasses him, which in turn pisses him off even more.

“You know what, forget it. Just go.”

“No.” I remain where I am, refusing to let him push me away. “We need to deal with this, whether you want to or not.”

“I said leave!” His roar blasts through the shop before he grabs a mangled piece of metal off the counter and fires it across the room, putting a hole in the wall.

It’s the start of a complete melt down. Object after object is snatched off the counter and launched across the room with brute force.

“Fuck her, fuck him, fuck them all!” His anger from the present shifts into the pain of his past as he self-destructs before my eyes.

When he picks up the new piece he just finished, a project that took almost a year to build, I lunge forward, throwing him into the wall.

“Stop it!” I bellow, pinning him in place. “I’m not leaving. I’m never going to leave you because you’re my brother, and nothing or no one will ever change that, not even Alice. Do you hear me?”

His chest expands painfully, lungs heaving with the emotion he tries to contain, until the dam breaks altogether.

I pull him against me, wrapping my arms around his rigid body.

He fists the back of my shirt, his desperation more prominent than ever. "I'm sorry I'm so fucked up." His muffled words shred the inside of my throat, making it ache like a motherfucker.

Teeth grinding, I pull back, bringing us forehead to forehead, forcing him to see what burns deep in my veins. "I'd do anything for you, Knox. I'd walk through fire for you, bleed out the most painful fucking death for you...I'd die for you."

His blood shot eyes cling to every word I breathe.

"But I can't do the bond anymore." The words kill a part of my soul as I say them out loud. "I can't share her and I think deep down, you don't want me to. I think you're as done with this as the rest of us."

The truth of that statement reflects back at me. "You're right, but how am I supposed to say goodbye when you guys are all I have?" His head dips in an effort to hide his pain, but it bleeds through every word.

"It'll never be goodbye," I tell him. "I'm not going anywhere and neither is Justice. We will still slay every fucking demon with you. You still have me just like I still need you."

His gaze lifts back to mine, hope flickering within.

"I can't fight this battle without you, Knox. I need you to help me protect her. Can you do that?"

Agonizing seconds pass before he nods, giving me the response I long for. "Yeah, I can do that."

The air that's been locked inside my chest escapes with force. I pull him against me once again, feeling the bond between us reforging.

It will take time for us to adjust to this new reality, but I have no doubt we will because there's one thing that could never change, and that's our love and loyalty to one another. It will always remain indestructible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Alice

The kitchen is lit with a soft glow as I carry in the last remaining dish from outside, handing it to Gwen at the sink. “I believe this is the last of it.”

A kind smile graces her face as she accepts it. “Thank you for all your help, dear.”

“Of course, I’m happy to do it.” Picking up the tea towel, I begin drying what she has already washed.

“It was a fun night, wasn’t it?” she comments thoughtfully.

“It was,” I agree, thinking what a great distraction it was. “I especially enjoyed Thatcher and Hannah J.’s performance.”

A soft snicker escapes her. “They are quite the pair those two. I could listen to them every day and never tire of it.”

I could too, there was something so beautiful and heartfelt about it.

“But I enjoy spending time with this family in general,” she adds, love radiating through her voice. “They all have come to mean a lot to me.”

“Well, I understand that because I feel the exact same way.”

“And I know they do too, dear. My Thatcher tells me you fit in beautifully here, especially with his son.”

My heart bursts to hear her say that.

“He also told me you have quite the connection with Leela and that you have been a great help with the morning chores.”

“I’m glad he thinks so. It’s the least I can do until I am able to find a job and pay him and Braxten back appropriately.”

It’s something I wish I could focus on now, especially with me feeling so much better, but I know it’s not possible yet. Not

with the threat escalating the way it is.

“Knowing Thatcher and his boys, your help is enough for them,” she says. “But if you do ever decide to look for work, you just let me know. I have a lot of connections in town and I’d be happy to help you find something you would enjoy.”

“Really?” I gasp at the offer.

“Of course, dear, anytime.”

“Oh, Gwen, that would be wonderful. Thank you so much.” I pull her in for a hug, appreciating her generosity.

She returns the gesture, her arms a loving and gentle embrace. “I’m always here to help with anything you ever need.”

I now know why she and Thatcher are so beautiful together, their generosity towards others knows no bounds.

Stepping back, she keeps hold of my shoulders. “I know how unfair life can be, but I also know how beautiful it can be, especially when you are with the right people. I want you to know that you are. There are no better people in this world than my Thatcher and his boys.”

I’ve known this from the beginning, but after getting to know them all I believe it even more now.

“Am I intruding?”

Gwen and I turn at the deep voice and find Thatcher standing in the entrance of the kitchen. By the look of humbleness etched across his face, he overheard our conversation.

“Not at all,” Gwen says, keeping an arm around my shoulders. “We were just having some girl talk, is all.”

“Well, whenever you’re done, our sweet Hannah is ready for her bedtime story.”

She nods. “Let me finish these last few dishes and I’ll be right up.”

“Go ahead,” I tell her. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Are you sure, dear?”

“Absolutely.”

She smiles her appreciation at me. “Thank you.”

Thatcher walks over, dropping a kiss on my cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning, darlin’.”

“Yes, you will.”

I watch as he takes Gwen’s hand in his to lead her out of the kitchen. He leans down, whispering something in her ear, and whatever he says has her giggling and swatting at his arm as they walk out.

Smiling, I finish drying the rest of the dishes then put them away before leaving out the front door.

The scent of burning wood lingers in the air as I start my walk back to the house. I admire the quiet beauty around me, taking in the night sky that is littered with thousands of twinkling stars and somehow fall even more in love with this place.

The sound of a twig snapping in the distance pulls me to a quick stop. A moment of fear pulses through me. I look around, but find no one.

“Hello?” I call out. “Is someone out there?”

Nothing but silence fills the night.

I shake my head, feeling foolish. “It was probably just a dang squirrel, Alice.”

I continue my way home when I hear something else, something that sounds like muffled voices. Listening closely, I follow the sound and find myself nearing the wooded area that borders Justice and Ryanne’s place. I quickly realize it must be them.

“Did you guys get lost?” I tease.

Just as I make it to the edge of the trees, I stop dead in my tracks, shocked at what I find taking place in the woods. Ryanne is bent over at the waist, hands braced on the large oak tree in front of her, with her dress pooled around her spread

feet. It leaves her completely naked as Justice takes her from behind, savagely pounding into her.

“You love it when I fuck this hot, little pussy, don’t you, Ryanne?”

“Yes,” she whimpers. “So much.”

“Who owns it?” His voice is rough with unrequited lust.

“You do.”

“That’s right, baby. And when I am done fucking it I’m moving to this tight ass of yours.” He follows up the remark by delivering a light slap to her bare bottom.

Mortification washes over me as I realize what I have intruded on. Spinning around, I’m about to make a fast escape, but end up running into a solid brick wall. My eyes widen in horror when I look up to see that wall is Braxten.

His expression is indecipherable as he peers down at me, but I can only imagine what he must be thinking.

“Harder, Justice,” Ryanne pleads, the high pitched sound penetrating this already embarrassing moment. “Fuck me harder!”

Oh god.

Pushing past Braxten, I run to the house, making it there in record time. After bounding up the front steps, I charge inside and head straight to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

I stand in the middle of the room, my hands covering either side of my flaming cheeks as I fight to calm the wild beat of my heart.

How could I be so stupid? Why couldn’t I just mind my own business?

Braxten appears in the doorway, silencing my torment.

“I am so sorry,” I rush out the apology. “I didn’t know what I was walking in on and...” The explanation dies in my throat as he advances on me, slowly but surely, each weighted step reverberating through the room like a steady drum.

I begin to retreat, the sheer dominance on his face forcing each step until my back hits the wall, leaving me nowhere else to go.

That doesn't stop Braxten.

He closes in on me, his arms pinning on either side of my head. The intensity dancing in his dark eyes sears me to my core.

“Tell me something, Alice.” His voice is calm, too calm. “Are you sorry for walking in on my brother fucking his wife or because it turned you on?”

I stiffen in place, shocked by the accusation.

He flashes me a knowing smirk. “I saw it in your eyes, Wonderland. Saw it in the flush of your cheeks.” His hand lifts to my face, fingers softly grazing. “By the way your breath raced past your lips, much like it's doing right now.”

I shake my head, denying all of what he says.

“No?” He quirks a disbelieving brow. “So, if I shoved my hand into your panties right now, I won't find your pussy wet?”

His dirty words drag a moan from my throat that I try to stifle, but it breaches my lips, completely giving me away.

The reaction makes him chuckle. “That's what I thought.” His hand slips beneath my thin sweater, the warmth of his palm colliding with the naked skin of my stomach. “Tell me what you liked about it?”

“Braxten,” I whisper his name, his question embarrassing me further.

“Don't be shy, baby. There's nothing wrong with how you feel. I'm hard as fuck right now.” His bold confession doesn't surprise me, he's never been afraid to admit his feelings.

“Did you like that they were outside?” he asks, trying to coax me into the conversation. “Fucking where anyone might see them?”

Silence spans seconds as he waits for a response.

I finally nod, admitting it not only to him, but to myself. As horrified as I am, there is no denying that I was captivated by what I saw. It was desperate, untamable, real, and raw.

“How about what you heard?” he asks, his voice deeper than before. “Did you like hearing my brother talk dirty to her?”

You love it when I fuck this hot, little pussy, don't you, Ryanne?

Justice's words echo back to me, the replay sparking through my body like an electrical current.

Knowing there is no stopping now, I nod again.

The confession has Braxten fisting my sweater in his hand and dragging it upward. It leaves me no choice but to raise my arms as he removes it from my body, revealing the lilac lace bra that I chose to wear tonight just for him.

“What about Ryanne's position?” he asks, moving to the clasp that rests between my breasts. “Did you like how she was bent over? Her big tits bouncing as my brother fucked her from behind.” He follows up the explicit words by flicking my bra open and cupping the heavy mounds of my bare flesh in each of his hands.

My head drops back against the wall, his touch along with the erotic picture he paints igniting through my body like a dangerous accelerant.

“Answer the question, Alice.” He tugs on my nipples, delivering an exquisite pinch of pleasure. “Did you like it?”

“Yes,” I cry out, the heated response forcing past my lips.

He dips his mouth to my ear. “Do you want me to do that to you? Bend you over and fuck you so hard that you have no control over your own body?”

“God, yes,” I moan, my desperation pulsating within the response.

His lips graze the shell of my ear. “I do too, baby, and I will. I promise we will do all the things, but there is something

I need to do first.” He drops to his knees before me, driving his words home.

Anticipation fills me as he begins removing my leggings, shimmying them down my legs. I step out of the material and stand before him in nothing but my matching lace panties.

His hands skim up the softness of my thighs, leaving a blaze of heat in their wake. He leans in close, his nose nuzzling the center of my damp panties as he inhales deeply, a dark groan following the lewd act.

“Braxten.” His name leaves me on a whisper, both in need and wonderment.

His fingers tangle in the lace at my hips. “Be still now, Alice. I’m about to send you down that dark rabbit hole and tumbling into Wonderland.” Shredding the lace from my body, he buries his hot, wet mouth against my throbbing center.

A keening cry explodes from me, decimating the darkness of his room. My knees threaten to buckle, but Braxten is there to catch me. He holds me in place as he devours the most intimate part of my body like a starved animal.

I’m helpless against it and the pleasure it brings. It completely takes over, setting free every inhibition inside of me.

My hands dive into the soft strands of his hair, hips shamelessly bucking to the same rhythm of his mouth as I take what he so expertly gives.

“That’s it, baby,” he groans. “Fuck my face.”

The vibration of his dirty words roll through me, creating a ripple affect that sends me racing toward euphoria.

I whimper, letting him know I’m close.

He takes no mercy, his effort never ceasing as he laps, licks, and sucks until I can’t take anymore and I fall apart.

The sound of my release fills the room as I catapult into another realm, one where only the most incredible sensations exist. Braxten prolongs my pleasure for so long that my voice becomes hoarse from screaming with it.

When there is nothing left to take, he climbs to his feet, bringing his face level with mine. Lust rages in his gaze as he grips my jaw with a possessive hand and takes my mouth in a fevered kiss, drowning me in the flavor he just devoured.

“You taste that, Wonderland?” he murmurs against my lips. “This is what heaven tastes like.”

His words weave deep inside of me, burrowing there forever.

Lifting to the tips of my toes, I wrap my arms around his neck, never wanting this moment with him to end.

Our rivaling mouths never sever as he sweeps me off my feet and carries me over to his bed. The cool mattress dips with my weight as he places me down on top of it.

He breaks our connection, standing to his full height. Reaching behind him, he removes his shirt in one fluid motion, unveiling the powerful body he keeps beneath.

When his hands move to his belt, I reach out and grab his wrist. “Let me?”

Heat sparks in his dark orbs before his hands fall away.

Setting to my knees, I work to undo his buckle, my lips pressing to his bare chest, right over the steady beat of his heart.

It triggers a dark sound from him that only excites me further.

Once his belt is undone, I twist the button of his jeans and lower the zipper before pushing the material down along with his underwear.

His long, hard shaft springs free, the incredible sight as beautiful and strong as the rest of him.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips as I remember the fantasy he had the other morning in the shower. It’s something I desperately want to give him, to make him feel as good as he does me.

“Do it, baby,” he coaxes, sensing where my thoughts are. “Take my cock in your mouth and suck it.”

The rough need darkening his voice has me boldly leaning down and licking the flushed head of his cock, a hint of salt coating my tongue as I do.

A primal noise vibrates in his chest, the sound encouraging me to take the rest of him into my mouth.

With my hand wrapping around the base of him, I slide my mouth down as far down as I can go, which is only halfway, before I suck my way back to the top.

“Good girl,” he groans. “Just like that.”

I repeat the motion, trying to descend a little further this time, but don’t make it far before feeling him at the back of my throat.

Both of his hands sweep into my hair, gripping either side of my head to help guide me. When I take him in a third time, he keeps me in place and flexes his hips, sliding the tip of him down my throat.

I moan at the forceful act, feeling a new ache gather between my thighs.

“Like that, baby?” His voice is down right guttural.

I look up at him, conveying just how much.

He pushes forward again, hitting even deeper this time. My reflexes grip him, holding the tip of him in my throat as I instinctively swallow.

It shreds any restraint he had left. A growl rips from his chest as he sets a steady pace, pumping himself in and out of my mouth with quick, deep strokes.

I let him take over, completely surrendering myself to him.

He tugs my head back, forcing my gaze to his. “Yeah, you love it. Love my cock fucking this hungry mouth of yours.”

I do. I love everything about this moment. The intensity of it, his pleasure, and knowing I am the one giving it to him. To

know that I am capable of making him feel this way is incredibly empowering.

Unfortunately, it comes to an end all too soon. He pulls from my mouth, a regretful groan leaving him as he does.

I peer up at him, wondering why he stopped.

He cups the side of my face, his thumb swiping over my swollen lips. “One day, I will come in your mouth, but not today. Today I show you how much better it is than watching.” Without warning, he flips me around, placing me on my hands and knees before him.

Arousal pools in my belly, my fingers gripping the sheets in anticipation. I await the rush for when our bodies become one, but it doesn’t happen.

In a moment of silence, Braxten’s large, warm hand moves to my back, coasting over the jagged skin of my scars.

Humiliation burns as I think about the sight he’s met with, but it disappears the moment he replaces his hand with his lips.

My heart swells in my chest as he kisses each wound as if they are made of glass, the sudden act of tenderness changing this already charged moment into something even more beautiful.

After he cherishes every inch of my marred skin, he stands to his full height, positioning himself between my legs.

My head drops forward on a whimper as swipes the hard flesh through my wet center, coating it with my arousal.

“You ready for me, Wonderland?”

“Yes,” I moan.

He enters me in one single thrust. I weep at the connection of us, at how utterly beautiful it is.

“My favorite place to be,” he groans, stilling deep inside of me.

He’s my favorite place. Whether it’s in the safety of his arms or his body wrapped around mine. He will always be my

favorite place.

“Hang on, baby.” His fingers grip the soft skin of my hips as he sets a pace that completely dominates my entire being. I’m helpless against it and the onslaught of pleasure it brings.

“You take me so fucking good,” he growls.

I sob with every savage thrust he delivers, fingers clawing at the sheets.

“Look up, Alice!”

My head lifts at his order, gaze colliding with the mirror on his dresser. I gasp at our reflection, loving the erotic visual we create.

Braxten’s strong body flexes as he takes what he wants without apology, his defined muscles rigid from arms to abs, the beast decorating his ribs adding to the sensuality of this moment.

“Look at you,” he rasps. “Look at the way your pretty tits bounce as I fuck you. Even better than Ryanne’s.”

I clench around him, an image of her and Justice emerging. I’m horrified by it, but can’t seem to help myself.

“You know what else is better?”

He doesn’t wait for me to respond.

“This ass.” His heavy hand lands on my bottom, the resounding smack resonating around us.

I cry out at the delectable sting, reveling in the way it ravages my entire body.

“It’s good, isn’t it, Alice?”

“So good,” I agree, somehow finding my voice.

“Better than watching my brother and Ryanne?”

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“You know why?”

I don’t respond, worried what will come out of his mouth next. Not because I wouldn’t like it, but because I worry I will

like it far too much and I don't know how to deal with that.

“Because it's you and me, and there is nothing better than the two of us.”

My fear instantly melts away, his words leaving the most amazing feeling in its place.

“Especially when I am inside of you like this and hearing how much you fucking love it.”

His momentum picks up, gaining speed. The slap of our naked bodies sounds throughout the room, creating a symphony with the harshness of our breaths. The melody completely takes over, robbing the room of any silence as I near that precious edge.

He senses the change in me. “Fall, Wonderland. I promise to catch you.”

As if his words hit a release button, I come apart. Pleasure explodes through me like a deadly grenade, obliterating every fiber of my being.

Before I can come down from the high, he pulls out and flips me to my back, coming over top of me again.

His gaze finds mine in the dark as he pushes the damp hair from my face. “That's better,” he murmurs, the wild in his eyes softening into something more. “Need these pretty blue eyes on me.”

Before I can revel in the beauty of those words, he reenters me with a solid thrust.

I lose my breath at the reconnection, once again loving the way we fit so perfectly. Like a lost puzzle piece finally finding its home.

This time he rocks to a different tempo. This one not nearly as fast, but just as deep. So deep that I don't know where he ends and I begin.

My arms come around him, holding him close.

Every muscle in his body hardens as he fights release. “Jesus, I don't want to pull out,” he groans, pain resonating in

his voice.

“Then don’t.”

He stills at my quiet response. A heavy silence blankets the moment as he pulls back to look at me, the intensity of his gaze commanding mine. “Do you understand the permission you are granting me? Of the chance we take if I do this?”

“Yes, and I’m okay with it,” I tell him, meaning it. “I want all of you, Braxten, and anything that comes with it.”

His forehead falls to rest on mine. “You have me, more than anyone ever has, and that includes my brothers.”

The last few words of that statement take me by storm, embedding into my heart.

“But you want more, I’ll give you more.” He follows that up with a powerful surge of his hips, stealing every bit of air from my lungs.

I cling to his broad shoulders as he sets an almost savage pace. As if the permission set off something untamable inside of him.

My mouth parts from the intensity, nails digging into his skin as I accept every frantic thrust. It’s raw, wild, and the realest thing I have ever felt.

His stoned expression hardens as he continues to fight release. My hand lifts to the side of his face. “I promise to catch you too.”

Something flickers in the darkness of his gaze, something beautifully devastating, before he succumbs to the pleasure.

He groans long and hard, burying his face into my neck, his harsh breath cascading across my skin. I hold him through it all, loving the vulnerability from him.

Afterward, he lifts his head from my shoulder, our gazes locking in the darkness of his room. “What the hell did I ever do in this life before you?”

The question has a smile dancing across my lips. “Live without stalkers and death threats?”

He chuckles, the deep sound filling my heart. “Stalkers? Yes. Death threats? No. I am a Creed after all.”

His response has a laugh tumbling free.

Dropping a kiss on my smiling mouth, he pulls me up to the pillows and gathers me in his arms, arranging my naked body so its draped around his warm one.

“Need to shower before I get too comfortable,” I murmur.

“Not tonight.”

I frown at the quick rejection. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want any part of me washed off your skin.”

Little does he know, there is no amount of water that could wash him off of me.

Regardless, I give him what he wants and stay right where I am.

My fingers trace over the hard lines of his stomach and ribs, encountering the tattoo that marks his skin.

“Why a dragon?” I ask.

Time comes to a stand still before he answers. “Because it represents part of my culture.”

I look up at him, waiting for elaboration.

“My birth mother is half Japanese,” he explains vaguely, a shift happening within his tone. “Even though I want nothing to do with her, my father says it’s important to embrace your heritage. So, when my brothers and I decided to get our first tattoo together, I chose this.”

I nod in understanding. “That makes sense.”

“I don’t know about that, but I do like what it represents.”

“And what’s that?”

“Power, strength, and good fortune.”

I mull over those words and realize how incredibly fitting they are for him. Turning onto my stomach, I prop a fist on his

chest, resting my chin on it. “Know what I think?”

“What?” he asks, brushing a piece of hair out of my face.

“I think you represent that tattoo more than it does you.”

A handsome smirk softens his face. “I like the way you think, Wonderland.”

“What about your brothers?” I ask. “What did they get?”

“Justice chose a tribal design that represents his Brazilian heritage and Knox...well, Knox hasn’t stopped, as you probably noticed.”

“I have,” I say, amused.

He shrugs. “It suits him.”

I have to agree. It’s hard to picture Knox without all those tattoos.

With the subject on his brother, I steer the conversation in another direction.

“Did the two of you have a good talk tonight?”

“Yeah,” he says, but mentions nothing else.

“Did he happen to tell you about our encounter this afternoon?”

He stiffens beneath me. “What encounter?”

“Nothing serious,” I assure him. “He, just, uh...well, he walked into the room while I was changing and—”

“He what?” He sits up, practically throwing me off in the process.

“It was an accident,” I rush to tell him. “He thought I was you.”

He peers back at me, his hard expression indecipherable. “Start talking, Alice.”

“He didn’t see anything. Well...except the scars.” The confession escapes me on a whisper, my gaze falling with it.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug. "I didn't think it was a big deal."

It's a lie. It was a huge deal, I just didn't know how to bring it up.

"Was he nice to you?" he asks.

"Yes, he didn't say much, but he did make a remark about he and I having more in common than he thought."

Braxten visibly swallows, his expression becoming grave.

"He was hurt too, wasn't he?" I ask carefully.

He nods.

"Like you?"

"No, not like me," he says, gruffly. "Not like Justice, not like anyone else I know."

Including me.

He doesn't have to say it. I can see it in the torment on his face.

"Is that why you guys did it?" I whisper, finally asking the one question that has burned inside of me since Linda revealed all she did in the hospital.

"Mostly," he admits. "But not always. Sometimes it was just as much for Justice and me."

That hits harder than I care to admit. It also has me thinking about what I stumbled upon earlier in the woods.

"What about Ryanne?" I ask, hating the sick feeling that forms in the pit of my stomach.

His expression never wavers. "What about her?"

He knows exactly what I am asking, but is forcing me to say it. I don't hold back. Not this time. "Have you been with her?"

"Does it matter?"

Annoyance fills me as he continues to answer my questions with one of his own. "Yes it does, so please just answer me."

The look he gives me along with his hesitation is a punch to the heart, especially when I think about what just took place between us.

God. I am so stupid.

Grabbing the sheet, I cover myself, suddenly feeling exposed in the worst way.

“Don’t!” he warns.

“Don’t what?” The words barely make it past the thickness of my throat.

“This!” he snaps, pulling the sheet from me.

Glaring at him, I rip it back.

His jaw flexes. “Look, it’s not what you think.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “I may not be the most experienced person, but I am not a complete idiot.”

“I am telling you what happened with Ryanne was different. I didn’t fucking touch her.”

“How is that even possible?” I ask, my voice pitching in frustration.

“I watched my brother fuck her and got off on it, nothing else, nothing more!”

“Like what happened between us tonight,” I say, trying to hide the hurt in my voice.

“No, not like tonight.”

I shake my head, not believing him. It’s hard to when I think about all the things he just said during our intimate encounter.

He grabs my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “It was one time, Alice. Our goodbye to each other, that’s it. Is it fucked up? Yes. Is what we did for all these years fucked up? Probably, but that’s how we coped. It’s how we helped my brother through his trauma while working through our own. I get you might not understand it and you might not like it, but

you have to accept it because I can't change the past. That is not the future though. That part of my life is over...for good."

"Are you sure?" I ask, my worry making its way to the surface. "Are you sure you can live without having that kind of bond with your brothers? Especially Knox? Because I don't want to be responsible for breaking up something that means so much to you."

"It doesn't mean more than you." The conviction in those words matches what's prevalent in his eyes, easing the hurt inside of me. "We knew it would come to an end one day. We just didn't know when. At least, I didn't...until the day I found you." His hand lifts to my cheek, the warmth of it soothing every insecurity I have.

It changes the moment entirely and gives me the courage to say what I do next. "I confessed something to Knox today," I tell him on a whisper. "Something I probably should have told you first."

His expression remains impassive, but there is no denying the concern there. "Yeah, and what's that?"

"That I'm in love with you and that I was sorry it hurt him."

My heart pounds in my chest as he stares back at me, a complete lack of emotion still gripping his face.

"You told him that you were in love with me?"

I nod, beginning to regret the confession. Until the faintest smirk curls his lips.

"Come here, Wonderland."

Before I can anticipate the move, he lifts me, settling me over his bare lap.

A sharp breath impales my lungs at the feel of his hardening length between my thighs.

"Feel this?" He punctuates with a thrust of his hips. "This is what you do to me, every second of every day." Grabbing my hand, he slides it across his chest, bringing it to rest over

his beating heart. “And this? This has been yours since the day I found you.”

The sweet profession brings a smile to my face that disappears when he shifts beneath me, sliding himself inside of my body.

“Oh,” I exhale on a whimper, my swollen flesh gripping him extra tight.

He lies back, bringing his cock deeper. “Say it.” His voice is rough with the demand. “Say it with me inside of you.”

“I love you.” The three words leave my lips on a breathless whisper.

“Show me.”

I begin an uneven rhythm, trying to find momentum. His hands span my waist as a guide to help me, but it’s not necessary for long. My hips eventually take on a life of their own, falling in sync with every move of his.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasps. “Fuck me just like that.”

My hands brace on the hardness of his stomach, pain and pleasure becoming one as my hips swivel and swirl.

Reaching up, he cups the side of my face, and the way he looks up at me in this moment will forever be one of my most favorite memories.

His fingers trace their way across my skin before one pauses at my lips. “Suck it.”

Following the order, I taking it into my mouth, sucking it deep. The act incredibly erotic as he fills another part of my body.

His dark eyes glow bright in the shadows of the room before he pulls the finger out and drops his hand between our joined bodies. With that same finger, he slips it through my wet folds, teasing the hooded button that pulsates for relief.

My back arches, a heated cry fleeing past my lips. I move faster on top of him, chasing the high and before long I’m

tumbling down that dark rabbit hole once again, a place that has me feeling anywhere but lost.

Braxten follows right along with me, both of us finding that mind numbing pleasure together.

Afterwards, I drop down on top of him, completely and utterly depleted.

His arms come around me, holding me close. “I love you too, Alice.” The impact of those words whisper across my skin, bringing me to the one place I have searched for since waking up.

Home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Braxten

A piercing siren yanks me from sleep. My eyes spring open, the flood lights from outside lighting up the darkness of my room. Sleep quickly clears from the dark edges of my mind, throwing me into action.

Alice gasps awake, covering her ears. She looks over at me, her face a mix of panic and confusion as she sees me putting on my jeans. “What is that? What’s going on?”

“The security has been breached.”

“What?” she screeches.

I toss her my shirt. “Put this on.”

She follows the order, but asks a thousand questions as she does. Questions I don’t answer because there is no time. Instead, I grab the rifle next to my bed, double checking that it’s locked and loaded.

“Braxten, please answer me.”

I turn toward her. “There’s no time. Right now, I need you to do exactly what I tell you, do you understand?”

She nods, fear paling the color of her face.

“Let’s go.” Grabbing her wrist, I pull her from bed. “Stay behind me!”

Her trembling hands grab onto the back of my jeans as she follows me out of the room. I keep the rifle trained in front of me, surveying the space as I head for the front entrance.

Despite the adrenaline pulsing through my veins, I’m calm. Poised and ready, my body and mind trained for whatever awaits.

The moment I open the door, I’m blinded by the flood lights. My vision adjusts quickly and I find Justice on his front

porch, his own gun trained as Ryanne stands behind him in the doorway.

Justice motions for us to keep moving. “I got you covered.”

I head for the shop, but don't make it far before Knox comes barreling out, shot gun in hand.

“He's running!” he bellows, his quick feet never faltering. “East sector.”

I send Alice across to Justice. “Watch her!” My bare feet pound the hard earth as I take off running, making a wide berth from Knox in hopes of cutting the bastard off.

As I enter the woods, I dodge trees and duck branches, adrenaline pushing me harder and faster.

Eventually, I spot the fucker, his tall, dark form barely a shadow in the distance. Knowing he's too far to catch, I lift my rifle, bringing it to my shoulder. My scope brings him into focus as he runs for the vehicle parked up the road. I note it's a brown Oldsmobile, the same car Lenora described.

With this as my only chance, I steady my breathing, calming the wild rhythm of my heartbeat, then take my shot, aiming at the spot in his back that will blow a fucking hole right through his heart.

The second I pull the trigger, he swings left.

He grabs his arm, his pace barely slowing.

“Son of a bitch!” I pull back for my next shot, but he's already in the car, peeling away.

Knox appears on my right, firing off a shot of his own. He blows out a tire, but it's not enough to bring it to a stop, the speeding car disappearing in the distance.

“Fuck!” The word rips from the angry depths of my soul.

“Should I get the truck?” Knox's chest heaves, ready for battle.

I shake my head, knowing he will be long gone by then.

Turning around, we head back to the house in silence. The rage coursing through me festers with every defeated step I take, my mind working overtime as I take in what I saw through my scope.

We exit the woods, coming into view, and I find my father next to Justice. Gwen stands behind them with the others at the door, a scared Hannah clinging to Ryanne.

Alice pushes past my brother, relief exploding from her as she runs down the stairs, throwing herself at me. “Are you okay?”

I hold her close, offering her what little reassurance I can. “Yeah, I’m good, Wonderland.”

Knox makes eye contact with Justice and my father, delivering the news of our defeat with a shake of his head.

“Goddamnit!” Justice lashes out, punching the pillar of his porch, his rage mirroring my own.

Within that rage lies serious doubt because the intruder I saw through my scope was not Hobbs. I am certain of it. He was too tall, too fast, and too fit. Which means, we’re either not dealing with who we think we are, or we’re dealing with more than one threat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Braxten

Out on the front porch of the main house, I sit with my brothers and father, all of us lost in the torment of our thoughts as we discuss what took place in the middle of the night.

Alice, Gwen, and Ryanne fly a kite with Hannah to keep her distracted. She was pretty shaken up after the security breach, they all were, and I can't blame them.

The bastard is getting ballsier. He crossed a dangerous line by coming onto our land. What I can't figure out is why. He knows the place is rigged with security, where his car was parked proves it. He also had to know he would never make it past us. So what was his purpose in coming here? And why strike now? It doesn't make any sense.

It's all things I have tirelessly discussed with everyone, including Craig. He and his men were here until the early morning hours, combing through every inch of this place, including that prick, Pierce. He was the last person I wanted to see, but Craig said he needed the man power. I didn't like it, but he stayed out of my way and I stayed out of his.

In the end, the man power wasn't necessary because as usual there was little to no evidence to collect. They did, however, manage to get a sample of blood off the road from where I struck the bastard. Problem is, we need to wait for a DNA comparison and that will likely take weeks. Time we don't have.

I also know it will not come back as Hobbs, something that Knox also agrees with. We shared that thought with my father and Justice, but I've kept it from Alice, not wanting to cause her more fear and uncertainty.

"I still don't think we should write off Hobbs completely," Justice says. "All the clues we have been given lead to that night in the barn, something that only involved him."

“It might have involved him, but it affected everyone at that group home,” I remind him.

“Maybe, but I feel this is too personal for it to be anyone else,” he counters. “Besides, who cared enough about that asshole to go to these lengths to avenge his death after all these years?”

“From what I remember, everyone hated him as much as we did,” Knox says, adding in his own thoughts.

“Exactly. I don’t even think Jones would go to this much trouble, despite being Hobbs’ friend.”

My frustration mounts with all the doubt being thrown around. “I don’t know what to tell you. All I know is the guy we were chasing last night was not Hobbs. He didn’t look like Jones to me either, not from what I remember of him.”

“It’s been a long time since you boys were there,” my father says carefully, adding to the conversation. “You were all a lot younger back then. Maybe your perception of him is not as clear as you remember.”

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Justice muses. “Especially since I didn’t recognize half the files I went through.”

“Yeah, well, some things I will never forget.” A heavy silence falls with my statement.

Knox reaches over, grasping my shoulder.

Before either of us can say more, Hannah comes skipping over with her kite dragging behind her, the rest of the women following the tail end of it.

“Did you see how high we got it, Daddy?” she asks, jumping onto Justice’s waiting lap.

“I did. You did real good, baby.”

“Thanks. We’re going to show Miss Alice how to play croquet now.”

Alice smiles at the announcement, the halfhearted attempt doing nothing to mask the worry on her face.

The shrill sound of my father's phone ends any further talk.

"It's Agent Jameson," he says, hitting the call button. "Mr. Jameson, how are you?" There's a long pause before his gaze shifts to mine. "You do?"

The expression taking over my father's face brings on a surge of hope.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to pass you onto my son." He hands me the phone. "You're gonna wanna hear this."

Hope transitions into anticipation.

Justice kisses Hannah's cheek then tells Ryanne to take her back to play. Gwen follows, but Alice stays, her gaze anchoring on mine as I bring the phone to my ear.

"This is Braxten."

"Braxten, Ryder Jameson," the other voice says. "It's nice to finally meet you, even if it is over the phone. Sorry it has to be under these circumstances."

"Thanks, me too."

"Listen, I have some information for you. I was going to call the sheriff with this, but figured it would be best to fill you guys in first."

"I appreciate that. What do you have?"

"After doing some digging into the group home, I came across a case file we had in our system," he says. "Turns out, we had the beginning of an investigation started ourselves on the place and it pertained to the man in charge, Fredrick Harlen Hobbs."

I'm surprised by the revelation. Not only because that place was always held in such high regard, but so was Hobbs.

"I assume this was over the abuse allegations?" I ask.

"It had to do with a lot more than that. A hell of a lot more."

The transition in his voice puts me on edge. "Like what?"

“Selling on the black market.”

Dread stiffens every bone in my body. “Selling what exactly?” I ask, despite already having a pretty good idea.

Silence spans seconds before he shatters it.

“Underage boys.”

The revelation drops over me like a steel anchor, pinning me in place. “What the hell are we talking about here, Jameson?”

My brothers and Alice watch me closely, my response adding to the nervous energy stirring around us.

“I’m talking about the dark web. Snuff films, child pornography that features torture and rape, especially of young boys.”

The acid building in my gut starts a fiery path up my throat. My gaze drifts to Knox as I realize we unknowingly escaped some of the very things Justice and I promised to protect him from.

“There’s some other really sick shit that I won’t get into, but trust me, it’s bad.”

“And Hobbs was behind all of this?” I ask, struggling to wrap my head around it all. Not because I don’t think he’s capable of it, but I never thought him to be smart enough or connected enough to be part of something like this.

“Not all of it. From what I read, he was just a vessel. A means to the product, but they had hoped he would lead them to the higher ups,” he says. “The plan had been to put an undercover agent into that home, but they never got the chance before the fire happened. With Hobbs being pronounced dead and Keith Jones going off the grid, the investigation went cold. I’m assuming this is why Jones went to such great lengths to change his name.”

I tense at the information. “He did?”

“Yep, and this is where I finally have some helpful news to share with you,” he says, bringing a newfound hope to the

surface. “Keith Jones now goes by the name Jim Topher and you will never guess where he resides...”

My heart hammers so goddamn loud it pulses throughout my entire body. “Where?”

“Dalton County. About forty-five minutes north of you.”

“Son of a bitch!” I spit. “Tell me you have an address.”

“I do.”

After he rattles off the address, I thank him for his help then hang up and look to the others. “We got Jones.”

“Where?” Justice asks.

“Dalton County.”

Knox’s jaw locks. “Tell me we’re going?”

I nod. “We’re going.”

“I’m coming too,” Alice says.

“No fucking way.”

She flinches at my hard tone, looking as if she’s just been struck.

I pull her against me, feeling bad for the knee jerk reaction. “I’m sorry, Wonderland, but I need you to stay here where I know you will be safe. I have no idea what we’re walking into right now and—”

“Exactly,” she counters, stepping back. “You shouldn’t go either, none of you should. Let Craig handle this.”

I shake my head. “I can’t do that. This is our fight, Alice. I need to finish it so we can finally move on. All of us.” My hand finds the side of her face, fingers grazing the soft skin.

An army of emotions battle across her face, before one eventually takes over them all...acceptance. “I’m going to be worried sick about you,” she mumbles.

“You don’t need to worry about me, baby. I got this.”

“We all do,” Knox says, adding the reassurance.

It earns him a halfhearted smile from her.

“You boys go on ahead,” my father says, descending the porch stairs. “I’ll take care of things here.” He curls an arm around Alice, pulling her into his side. “We’ll enjoy the afternoon with some croquet while we wait to hear from you. Just make sure to keep us updated, ya hear?”

“We will,” Justice assures him.

My gaze remains on Alice, hating the worry reflecting back at me. “I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

She nods.

I leave her with a kiss goodbye. Justice does the same with Ryanne and Hannah, then we gather up our weapons of choice and head for the truck, ready to put an end to this once and for all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Alice

Fear plagues every cell in my body as I wait for word from Braxten and his brothers, the game of croquet offering little distraction. I've been doing my best to hide my worry, knowing it's important for Hannah, but it has been hard.

Ryanne went to lay down, something Thatcher insisted on. The late night stress and midday heat were getting to her. It left only the four of us so we decided to team up. Hannah and me against Thatcher and Gwen. It seems we make a good team because once again we come out on top.

"All right!" Hannah cheers, giving me a high five. "Let's play again!"

"How about some sweet tea first?" Gwen suggests, dabbing the sweat from her forehead. "This old girl could use a refresher."

"Old girl?" Thatcher looks around in mock confusion. "I see no old girl here."

"Oh stop," Gwen snickers, playfully swatting at him.

His smile is infectious as he throws an arm around her shoulders. "A cold glass of sweet tea sounds like a darn good idea to me."

"Me too!" Hannah says.

I nod my agreement.

"Great, I'll go make us a pitcher. Be back in a jiffy."

While she heads inside, I help Hannah gather up all the colored balls, both of us laughing as we race to see who can pick them up the fastest. One ends up slipping through my fingers, rolling toward the pasture.

"I'll get it," she says, chasing after it.

Turning around, I find Thatcher watching us, a look of genuine affection on his face.

“You doing okay, darlin’?”

“I’m trying to be,” I tell him honestly.

“That’s all we can do. At least for now.”

I nod, knowing he must be just as worried.

His attention suddenly shifts to something above my head, a look of concern following. “What in the high heaven...”

Looking behind me, I see a horse pacing wildly in the distance, the poor animal appearing incredibly distressed before it dashes across the road and into the woods adjacent from us.

“That’s not one of ours,” Hannah says, walking back over.

“It sure isn’t,” Thatcher agrees. “I think it might be Pete’s from down the road.” Pulling out his cell phone, he puts in a call to his neighbor, but gets no answer. “I better bring it here until I can get ahold of him.”

“Want some help?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I don’t want y’all past the property line. Wait here. I won’t be long.”

Hannah and I watch Thatcher head in the direction of where the horse was, eventually disappearing out of sight.

Hannah looks over at me and shrugs. “Wanna take some practice shots?”

“Sure.”

She lifts her mallet, pointing it toward the barn. “I’ll bet you I can hit my ball all the way past the pig pen.”

“I have no doubt you can,” I say on a laugh. “But show me anyhow.”

She does, sending the ball rolling past the barn.

I give her a round of applause, which seems to please her.

“Watch this one.” This time she really cranks back and smokes it. The ball hits a bump, veering to the left and bouncing over to the trees on the other side of the yard.

“Ooops. I didn’t mean to send it that far,” she giggles, running after it.

Dropping my mallet, I follow behind her, knowing she will probably need help finding it. “Watch your step,” I call out, remembering what happened the last time she ran across the yard.

She waves at me over her head, unconcerned, and makes it to the trees in record time. “I see it!” Her voice carries in the distance. “Holy moly, it went far. Too bad Papa Thatcher isn’t here to see this.”

At the mention of Thatcher, I glance behind me to see if there is any sign of him or the horse, but I find none. By the time I turn back around Hannah is out of sight.

“Wait for me please.” I jog up to the wooded area, wincing at the sharp ache in my side, a reminder that my body has still not fully healed. Once at the forest’s edge, I frown, seeing no sign of her. “Hannah?”

When I get no answer, I walk just inside the tree line, pushing a few stray branches out of my way.

“How far did you hit that thing?” Amusement fills my voice, but dies in an instant at the horrifying sight I come upon.

A deputy holds Hannah against his chest, his hand covering her mouth as she kicks and fights against him. I quickly register it’s the man Braxten had words with at the station yesterday, Deputy Pierce.

He points his gun at me. “Don’t make a fucking sound.”

“What do you want?” My voice trembles in fear.

“You.”

Confusion claims me at the response. Until yesterday I didn’t even know this man.

“Come with me quietly and I’ll let the girl go.”

My mind scrambles for a way out of this. I look to the right, the same direction Thatcher went, and wonder if I scream loud enough would he hear me.

“Don’t even think about it,” he warns, knowing exactly where my thoughts are. “Cause any kind of scene and there will be dire consequences for this little girl.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you doing this?”

“Look, I got no beef with you, but this family needs to pay and in order for that to happen, I need you to come with me. So we can do this the easy way or the hard way.” He turns his gun, pointing it at Hannah’s head now.

The devastating sight destroys me. “Please, don’t hurt her.”

“Then I suggest you do what I say and do it quickly.”

Hannah vehemently shakes her head, telling me not to do it, and the act of bravery only breaks my heart further.

My eyes close in defeat as tears fall helplessly down my face. “I’ll do whatever you say. Just don’t hurt her.”

“Walk this way...slowly.”

Knowing I have no other choice, I follow the order.

It throws Hannah into a frenzy. She kicks and fights even harder, forcing his hand to slip. “Don’t do it, Miss Alice!”

He wrestles with her, getting rough. “Settle the fuck down, you little shit.”

Anger replaces the fear inside of me. I run the last few feet toward them, my fists swinging. “Let her go, you bastard!” Using every bit of strength I possess, I manage to strike him in the face.

It stuns him for all of a second, giving me the opportunity to rip Hannah from his grasp. I shove her several feet away, her small body tumbling across the dirty ground toward the tree line.

“Run, Hannah!” I yell, just as I am grabbed from behind.

“You bitch!” His arms wrap around my waist like a steel band, painfully draining the air from my lungs.

“Alice!” Hannah sobs, her tear stained face covered in dirt as she struggles to her feet. “Leave her alone!”

“Run!” I scream again. “Go get help.”

This time she does as I say. Turning around, she runs as fast as she can out of the trees, calling out for Thatcher.

I continue to fight as I’m dragged in the opposite direction, hoping the struggle will buy me time. My feet kick his shins, nails dig into his arms, and teeth gnaw at his hand as he tries to silence me.

“Jesus christ,” he seethes, struggling to keep his grip. Just as we emerge from the trees, he yells toward his waiting squad car. “Get over here and help me, will ya?”

I don’t register the fact that he speaks to someone else until the passenger door opens and out steps the bane of my existence.

All the fight in me ceases, my body freezing in time as I stare into the face of my torturer. Someone my mind wouldn’t allow me to remember until this very moment.

“Hello, Alice. Miss me?” That sinister smile slips over his face, a smile I can’t believe I had ever forgotten.

I’ve been wrong this whole time.

“You’ve been a very bad girl. It’s time for your punishment.”

Those haunting words are the last I hear before I’m plummeted into darkness, one I had hoped I was free from forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Braxten

The address Ryder gave leads us to a run-down trailer park that's located just inside the county limits of Dalton.

Silence consumes the truck, our minds and hearts coming to terms with the fact that we are about to come face-to-face with one of the monsters from our past.

I've yet to tell my brothers everything that Ryder disclosed to me and I'm not sure I will. I might just keep it to myself forever because the last thing I want is to add to past traumas, and this particular information will, especially for Knox.

"There's Craig." Justice lifts his chin, gesturing to the squad car up ahead.

After much deliberation we decided to call Craig and fill him in, something we weren't sure we should do. Not because we don't trust him, but because we know he has rules to follow. My brothers and I don't follow rules—never have, never will—not when it involves our family. But Craig has always had our backs. If we ever need his resources, he doesn't hesitate to give them to us and we just might need them again now...

Knox lowers his window as I pull up next to the cruiser.

"That one there." Craig points to a yellow, rusted out trailer. "Not sure if anyone is home. I haven't seen movement yet."

"Time to find out." I drive forward, pulling into the lot, and park in front of the tipped over steel garbage can, its contents spilled all over the place.

The three of us tuck our weapons, knowing Craig will have a fit if he sees them, then climb out.

Craig meets us around the front. "Let me do the talking. Just to start with," he quickly adds. "You will have your turn, I

promise.”

As hard as it is, I agree. “Fine, but remember, Craig, this is our fight, and we are prepared to do whatever it takes to put a stop to this.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbles. “Just keep that part to yourself. I don’t want to know about it.”

Fair enough.

With that settled, we head up to the side door.

Craig knocks first, his knuckles rapping against the flimsy tin. “Mr. Topher,” he calls out, using the alias name. “This is the Sheriff’s Department. I would like to have a word with you.”

“Fuck off!” A rusty voice bellows behind the door.

Knox grunts. “That sounds like Jones, all right.”

“This won’t take long,” Craig assures him.

No answer.

I bang on the door this time, hard enough that I leave a dent. “Open the fucking door, Jones, or I’m breaking it down!”

Seconds pass before the creak of footsteps sound, the broken slats of the blinds splitting apart. Beady eyes take us in before the door swings open, revealing none other than Keith Jones, Hobbs’ second in command, one of the tormentors from our past.

He looks nothing like I remember. His tall frame is no longer bulky and threatening, but rather old and frail. What used to be a full head of brown hair is now thinning and gray. It’s as if he has aged several decades rather than just one.

Looking at him now, I can say without a doubt that he was not the person on our property last night. There’s no way. This guy in front of us couldn’t even run five steps without dying of a heart attack.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the bastards of Mississippi,” he greets arrogantly, making the blood beneath my skin simmer to a boil. “What the hell do you want?”

“Answers,” I tell him. “And we’re going to get them.”

“One way or another,” Justice adds.

A grin stretches across his aging face, showing off stained yellow teeth that look like they haven’t been brushed in months. “That so?”

“That’s right.” Craig cuts in, taking control of the conversation. “The Creeds have been getting threats for the past few weeks and last night someone trespassed onto their land. You don’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Nope, and can’t say I’m sorry to hear it either,” he says candidly. “Now, if there is nothing else, kindly get the fuck off my property.”

He begins to close the door, but I stop it with my boot, kicking it back into his face.

“Fuck!” His howl pierces the air as he covers his busted nose.

Rushing in, I grab him by the throat and throw him into the dirty recliner, pinning him there. “I’m done fucking around. I want to know who is behind this and I want to know now.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” he spits, the blood from his nose running into his mouth.

“Because whoever is doing this is someone from the group home you worked at,” Craig informs him.

“And since you just happen to live so close to us...” Justice lets the insinuation trail off.

“I didn’t even know you assholes lived near here until I saw you on the news a few months ago.”

“You’re lying.” My fingers squeeze his windpipe, cutting off his air supply. “It really wouldn’t take much for me to end your life just like this.”

“Easy, Braxten,” Craig warns.

I don’t heed it. I watch his face turn purple, thinking about all the horrible shit he and Hobbs did to so many of us. How

helpless they made us feel, all because they were bigger and stronger.

Not anymore...

I lean in close, watching his bloodshot eyes bulge from his face. "The tables have turned, motherfucker..."

"That's enough!" Craig yanks me back, forcing my grip from Jones' throat.

The son of a bitch doubles over, sputtering and choking.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Craig snaps, getting in my face.

Knox inserts himself between us, pushing him back a step. "Back off, Clemson. We told you this is our fight."

"Fighting and murder are two different things. We're not going to get anywhere if he's dead!"

"We're not getting anywhere now," I fire back.

"And you're not going to," Jones wheezes. "I'm telling you, I don't know anything."

"You expect us to believe that you living here is a coincidence?" Justice says, doubt laced in his voice.

"I don't give a shit what you believe. I'm telling you you're barking up the wrong tree."

"One of you is behind this," I say. "If not you, then Hobbs."

His eyes narrow at the mention of his friend. "Hobbs is dead. You three bastards know that better than anyone else."

"Not too hard to fake a death certificate," Craig says. "Alice was reported dead too, yet she is alive and well."

Jones tenses, his still purple face paling. "What the hell are you talking about? What about Alice? What's happened to her?"

If I didn't know better, I'd think he cared about her. Good thing I do know better.

“She was left for dead on the Creeds’ property weeks ago,” Craig tells him, much to my dismay. “Whoever hurt her is the one doing this and she believes it’s Hobbs.”

He shakes his head. “No way. He loved her more than anyone else in the world.”

“Hobbs didn’t love anyone but himself,” I spit, unable to hide my disgust.

“You’re wrong. Alice was his pride and joy. His little princess. He gave her everything. He’d never...” His words trail off, a look of realization dawning on every feature of his face. “Well, I’ll be damned.” A rusty chuckle leaves him. “I should have known that fucker would come back one day.”

His rambling baffles me.

“Who are we talking about here?” Craig asks.

“His kid.”

“Whose?” I question, still not following.

“Hobbs.”

“Yeah, asshole,” Justice snaps. “We established that.”

Jones’ gaze lifts to my brother’s. “Not his daughter. His son.”

Shock shoots through my entire body like an electrical storm, lighting me up from the inside out. “His what?” I ask, swearing I misheard him.

“His son. Stepson, actually.”

“Bullshit,” Craig fires out, calling his bluff. “There is no mention of any other children in his history report.”

“That’s because no one knew about him.” The truth is there in his eyes. “He was from a previous relationship Hobbs had. His mother died and the kid had no other family so Hobbs kept him. Not quite sure why since he hated him so much,” he says on a grunt. “He tortured that poor bastard every chance he got. It’s why he kept him at the home. He was his greatest kept secret.”

“Hold up,” I cut back in. “He was at the group home?”

Jones nods.

“Who was it?” Knox asks.

“Andon Denton.”

The reveal crashes through me like an avalanche, punching all the air from my lungs. I think about that night so long ago that took place in the basement.

This entire time I thought he was like the rest of us, but he was Hobbs’ son.

“The report we have on Denton says he’s married and living in Utah,” Craig tells him, still sounding unconvinced by this story.

Jones smirks. “I’m sure it does.”

“You saying he managed to falsify police records?”

“I’m saying he’s a slick son of a bitch who knows how to cover his tracks. Trust me, if someone hurt Alice, it’s him. He resented the hell out of her, hated her for getting all of Hobbs’ love and attention.”

Find out who she is and you will find out who I am.

This is what he has hinted at all along.

That knowledge burns within, changing everything we have prepared ourselves for.

“Where was he placed after the fire?” Craig asks.

Jones shrugs. “Hell if I know.”

His expression says otherwise, but I decide it’s not important. What matters is finding out where he is now and we aren’t going to find it here.

Instead of voicing that, I leave him with a final warning. Pulling my gun, I step forward, pressing it to the center of his skull.

“Jesus christ!” Craig mutters behind me.

Ignoring it, I lean in close to Jones, making sure he sees the hate I have raging inside of me. “If I find out you’re lying about any of this, I’m going to come back here and blow your fucking brains all over this place, got it?”

His gaze narrows, but his fear is undeniable. He is no longer in control, no longer stronger, and he knows it.

“Come on, man.” Justice grabs my shoulder, pulling me away. “We’ll come back if we need.”

Backing away, I turn and head for the door, feeling Knox and Craig close behind.

“See ya around, Jones.” Knox kicks over a lamp on his way out, slamming the door in his wake.

Outside, Craig lays into us. “Do you guys think for just one fucking second you could keep your cool?”

“Considering he’s still alive, I’d say we did a pretty good job at keeping our cool,” Knox counters.

Craig grunts, clearly disagreeing.

“Forget about it,” Justice says, cutting in. “We need to be discussing the fucking plot twist that’s just been revealed.”

“If what he says is even true,” Craig returns.

“It’s true.” I saw the truth in his eyes, in the shock that registered on his face when he heard about Alice. Even the motive he gave makes sense, in the most completely fucked up way.

Denton hated Alice for what Hobbs did to him and he made her pay for it. The same way I am going to do to him, but the vicious cycle ends there. With his death by my hands.

Craig’s work phone goes off at his hip.

Lifting it from his belt, he brings it to his ear. “This is the sheriff.” His entire demeanor changes in an instant. “Calm down and tell me what happened.”

The female voice on the other end of the line is in hysterics, her rambling indistinguishable.

“Hang tight, we’re on our way.” He ends the call, looking to my brothers and me. “That was Gwen, we need to get to the farm, now.”

Her name was the last I expected to hear and it puts us all in motion.

“What happened?” Justice asks as we run for our vehicles.

“I don’t have all the details, but it’s bad.” His tone leads me to believe he knows more than he’s saying, but I don’t waste time calling him out on it.

Jumping into my truck, I bring it to life. The engine explodes through the lot, the loud noise doing nothing to drown out the panic hammering in my ears.

I follow Craig’s flashing lights, the front end of my truck tailing his bumper as we speed down the backroads.

Justice tries calling Ryanne several times, but each attempt goes unanswered. “Fuck! Why the hell isn’t she answering?”

“Dad isn’t either,” Knox says, adding to the fear coursing through me.

My mind races with all the possibilities that could have happened, but I’m unable to fathom a single one. Not with my father there, not with the security we have.

Did someone get hurt?

That thought doesn’t make me feel any better.

We make it to the farm in half the time. I speed down the driveway of our home and find my father on the porch holding a hysterical Hannah while Gwen comforts an emotional Ryanne.

Dread strangles me when I don’t see Alice among them.

Hannah jumps out of my father’s arms and runs over to Justice as we all climb out of my truck.

“Daddy!” she cries, launching herself into his open arms.

“Easy, baby girl,” Justice soothes. “I got you.”

I bypass Ryanne as she runs to hug them both, my fast strides taking me up the porch steps to my father. “What’s going on? Where’s Alice?”

Guilt floods his dark brown eyes as he peers back at me.

“Where is she, Dad?” I bellow, panic threading through every word.

“I’m sorry, son,” he forces out gruffly. “He took her before I made it back in time.”

His words reverberate through my hollow mind like an echo, my brain struggling to comprehend. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s my fault,” Hannah says. “I’m the one who lost my ball in the woods. I didn’t see the bad policeman until it was too late.” Her sobbing confession only adds to the confusion spinning through me.

“What bad policeman?” Craig asks before I can.

“It was Pierce,” my father explains, breathing fire into my angry soul like a raging dragon. “It’s why I had Gwen call you and not the station, I didn’t know who we could trust.”

He starts from the beginning, telling us about the distraction of the horse, to Pierce using Hannah as a lure to get to Alice.

Every word he speaks, every detail he reveals, thrashes through my veins with a rage so profound it sends me spiraling. “Motherfucker!” My fist slams into the house window, shards of glass slicing through my hand and shattering around us. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

My violence puts me face-to-face with Craig. Grabbing him by the shirt, I slam him up against the house, ignoring the remorse on his face. “I told you! I fucking told you, you couldn’t trust him! Why didn’t you listen to me, goddamn it?”

It takes the strength of both my brothers to pull me off. Justice pins me against the railing, his face crowding mine. “Listen to me! I know you’re angry and I don’t blame you, but

you need to keep your fucking head straight. It's the only way we're going to get her out of this."

My lungs expand rapidly, filling with the fire of my rage and sorrow of my guilt.

I shouldn't have left her. I should have let her come with us.

"I'm sorry, son," my father chokes back. "I thought it would be safe for me to leave for those few minutes. It wasn't until I was past the property line that I realized our security had been tampered with."

"Tampered with how?" Knox asks.

"The trip wires were cut."

"How the fuck is that possible?" Justice fires out, turning to my father. "No one knows where they are but us."

Realization quickly sets in. "That's what last night was," I speak numbly, each word falling on their own accord. "The son of a bitch searched them out. He set them off to find out where they were."

My father nods, clearly already figuring that out. "Even the surveillance cameras in the shop had been messed with."

"Shit," Craig breathes out. "Pierce was in there today dusting for prints."

The consuming need for vengeance burns through me.

"As soon as I realized the security had been breached, I went back to the house and that's when I heard Hannah J. screaming," my father continues. "I grabbed my shotgun and ran like hell, but the damn car was already halfway down the road. Someone was with him though. I saw him through my scope."

Denton.

How he and Pierce hooked up I have no idea, but they are both going to suffer the wrath of my fury.

Craig walks away, pulling out his phone.

My father peers back at me, his gaze a black void. “My rifle was lifted, scope in focus, but I couldn’t risk taking that shot, not with her in the car.” His head lowers with remorse. “I’m sorry, I failed you both.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Hannah snuffles, walking up to me. “I tried to save her, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

At the explosion of her sob, I bend down and scoop her up into my arms, hugging her close.

“It’s not your fault, squirt. It’s not anyone’s fault here,” I add, directing a look at my father. “I’m going to get her back, I promise.” After a kiss to her cheek, I pass her over to Justice.

Craig walks back over, pocketing his phone. “I have a team on the way and I also called in State Troopers. Pierce’s squad car is off the radar, but they have the number and are on the look out.”

“He’s fucking dead,” I tell him, pointing at his chest. “You hear me?”

He nods, knowing better than to fight me on it.

I look over at my brothers. “We need to spread out. He can’t be that far. We search abandoned places, warehouses, motels, anywhere remote enough that would keep them out of sight.”

“I have a map of when Winchester was first founded,” my father says. “Several of the surrounding counties are on there. It will have original buildings, that might be a good starting place.”

I’m about to send him for it when my phone vibrates in my pocket. Adrenaline spikes in my veins, kicking into overdrive. Pulling it out, I don’t even look at the number, already knowing who it is. “Where is she, you son of a bitch?”

“You’re back, excellent.” The distorted voice is down right gleeful. “I must say, it was easier than I thought it would be, Creed. Though, having one of Winchester’s finest at my side helped.”

“I’m going to rip out your fucking throat, Denton, I swear to God.”

A long moment of silence fills the line. “So, you figured it out. And here I was hoping to reveal it in the grande finale.”

“The only thing that will be revealed is your heart when I carve it out of your chest.”

“I guess that means you’re ready to come knocking on death’s door.”

A rage induced calm settles over me. “I’m ready, motherfucker.”

“Good. Then listen up because I have two very important rules.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Alice

My bedroom door crashes open, startling me awake. I sit up on a gasp and find my mother next to my bed. She covers my mouth with her hand, forcing me to be quiet.

“He’s back.” Her whispered words wash over me like a bucket of ice water. She doesn’t need to confirm who she is talking about. The tremble in her voice says it all.

Andon...my stepbrother; a sibling I barely know because he’s been deemed unsafe for me to be around. It’s why daddy kept him in the group home he worked in, until the night he died. The same night that we were told Andon ran away, never to be seen again.

Until now...

“Oh, Mother...” a deep, mocking voice rings out, followed by booted footsteps coming up the stairs. “I’m home.”

My mother turns back to me, the fear in her eyes penetrating the darkness of my room. “We need to go, now.” Grabbing my wrist, she drags me from bed.

“Wait.” I resist the force of her pull, firmly planting my feet. “We should call the police.”

“No,” she snaps vehemently. “No police. Not yet.”

Before I can argue that decision, she leads me to my window, throwing the curtains open and removing the screen.

Icy fear flows through me when I realize she wants us to leave out my second story window. As she slides open the pane glass, I’m hit with hard pellets of rain.

It’s pouring outside.

“You go first,” she says, ushering me closer.

“Mom, I don’t understand,” I argue. “Why don’t we just call the police and—”

“Enough, Alice!”

I flinch at her snapping tone.

It has her breaking into a sob. “I’m sorry, baby.” She pulls me into a hug. “I know you’re confused right now. I’ll explain everything later. Just please, do as I say.”

A thundering bang explodes down the hall from my mother’s bedroom.

“Hurry,” she implores.

No longer hesitating, I slip a bare leg out the window, wishing I was in pajama pants rather than my sleep shorts and tank top. I grip the window frame as I find the slippery, wet trellis with my foot.

“Be careful,” she whispers. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Nodding, I begin my climb down, hurrying for my mother’s sake.

Hard rain assaults me from every direction, slapping against my exposed skin and soaking my hair.

Once I make it to the ground, I push the wet strands out of my face and look up to see my mother crawling out, her foot blindly searching for the trellis.

That’s when a dark figure appears above her, ruining the escape. He grabs my mother’s arm before she can make it far enough down.

“Mom!” My terrified scream blasts through the desolate night.

Looking behind me, I scan the empty streets and call out for help, but no one hears me over the storm.

I’m about to run back into the house when she manages to rip out of his grasp, free falling from the window. I charge forward to catch her, mildly breaking her fall as we both land on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I ask on a sob.

“I’m okay.” Despite the assurance, she struggles to her feet. “Come on!”

Taking my hand, we run to the car. At the driver’s side door, she drops to her knees and reaches in the wheel well for the spare key.

My gaze anxiously strays to the house, searching for any sign of Andon.

“Damn it, where is it?” my mother cries out in frustration.

Through the heavy rain, I watch the front door swing open.

“He’s coming!” I shout the warning, just as he appears.

“Got it!” Unlocking the car, my mom opens the door and shoves me inside before crawling in after.

I scoot backwards to the passenger side only to hear a loud crash on my window, the blow so hard it cracks the glass.

A scream rips from my throat as I look up into Andon’s wild eyes that can’t be described as anything else but manic...

When he winds back for another strike, my mother punches the gas, reversing out of the driveway like a bat out of hell.

Pushing to my knees, I look behind us and watch Andon’s dark form disappear as we turn the corner. It’s not until we are on the interstate that I turn back around and drop against my seat, expelling a shaky breath of relief.

“You okay, baby?” my mom asks, struggling through her emotion.

I nod, but the truth is I’m far from okay. Not after what just happened. Not when I have a thousand questions plaguing me.

I turn my head toward her. “What’s going on, Mom? Why didn’t we call the police?”

“I’m so sorry,” she cries, her face pinched in grief. “I never meant for this to happen. I never wanted you to find out.”

Confusion fills me. “Find out what?”

Her gaze briefly meets mine. “It’s about your father.”

“What about him?”

“I didn’t know, Alice. You have to believe me. I had no idea what was going on. I didn’t find out until after and even now... I’m still not sure I believe it.”

Her growing distress has my stomach churning. “Believe what, Mom?”

She doesn’t get the chance to speak again. Bright lights illuminate the car, blinding us both. I’m unable to comprehend what’s happening before the vehicle jerks from impact, throwing us forward in our seats.

A shriek leaves my mother as she tries to steady the wheel. Turning around, I look through the back window and find a vehicle tailing closely behind, getting ready to hit us again.

“Faster!”

My warning comes too late. This time, he rams us hard enough that it sends us crashing into the guardrail, the collision flipping the vehicle.

Everything happens in slow motion. Our screams fill the terrifying silence as the car turns in the air. I look over at my mom to find her gaze drowning in love and regret. A look that would haunt me for years to come.

The car lands in the ditch, the impact so significant that I am ejected from the vehicle. Pain radiates through my entire body as I hit the cold, wet ground with a thud.

I hear the sound of a car door opening in the distance, but I’m in too much agony to look.

Minutes later, a pungent smell penetrates my dazed senses, followed by a flash of heat. I finally manage to open my eyes and see the car I was thrown from on fire with my mother inside of it.

A whimper of despair leaves me. I want to scream, cry, and lash out, but I am unable to do anything except lie here in insufferable pain. Though, the torture of my body doesn’t compare to the one in my heart at the realization that my mother is gone.

Before that loss can sink in too deep, I'm picked up off the ground and thrown over a stiff shoulder, my broken body flailing as I am carried away from the only family I had left.

Icy, cold liquid drowns me, thrusting me from the past to present. I come awake, coughing and sputtering.

“Well, hey there, sleepyhead.”

My body shakes violently, teeth chattering as I look around the dimly lit space for the sinister voice. My vision struggles to adjust, but once it does, I find myself in a cold, empty barn. My hands are bound above my head, a stiff rope wrapped in rusty barbwire biting into the sensitive skin of my wrists.

I fight to remain still, a sound of distress leaving me as the tips of my toes scrape the dirty, rough ground just enough to ease the discomfort.

Degradation meets fear when I look down to see I'm half naked and displayed in the most shameful manner. A pose I am all too familiar with.

It all comes back to me, every sick and twisted memory of my suffering. Suffering that happened because of the sins of my father. Sins I have apologized and paid for, but it's never been enough.

“Up here, little sister.”

Tilting my head back, I find the dark silhouette of my tormentor. The catalyst to my destruction.

My stepbrother.

Several different levels of platforms are hung from the rafters, all of them connecting in some sort of maze. Andon jumps down from one to another, throwing aside the empty bucket that held the cold water he used to wake me.

He holds a small, black remote in his hand as he walks this way. His height is towering as he comes to stand before me. He's tall, but not as tall as Braxten. His jet black hair is slick with sweat and pushed out of his face, revealing a menacing grin that matches the chilling look in his eyes.

“I have to be honest, Alice. I didn’t think I would ever see you again.” He feigns sadness. “I was so certain I left you for dead and when you turned out to be alive, I thought it would fuck up my whole plan. But then you lost your memory and that plan turned into one hell of a fun game, wouldn’t you say?”

Anger emerges from the deepest parts of me, smothering some of the fear as I think about what he has done to Braxten and his family.

I didn’t think Andon hated anyone more than me, but when Braxten and his brothers were on the news months ago, I was proven wrong. He hated them just as fiercely, if not more. Why, I still don’t know, but that’s when a plan was put in place. One that would end my torture, only to begin someone else’s.

How could I have forgotten?

“You’ve been quite the bad girl, Alice,” he taunts. “Spreading your legs for the first guy to pay you attention. What would dear old Dad have to say?”

My eyes narrow at his taunt. “He’s going to kill you for this,” I tell him confidently. “They all will. You will never get away with it.”

He leans in close, bringing his mouth to my ear. “I already have.” The conviction in his voice sends my thundering heart into a downward spiral.

The door to the barn slides open, revealing Deputy Pierce. He walks in, carrying a large, red gas can. “Here it is.” He places it on the ground. “Now pay up what you owe me so I can get the hell out of here.”

Andon doesn’t turn to look at him, his gaze remaining on mine. “Not yet.”

“Come on, man. We had a deal. I helped you get the girl, but you are on your own for the rest of this shit.”

Andon directs a hard look his way and it’s enough to have the deputy backing down.

He turns to face me once again, his menacing smirk forming ice around my terrified heart. “It is time for the main event.”

Without another word, he hits a red button on the remote that has me being lifted, slowly and excruciatingly.

I cry out at the pain in my wrists, the rope tightening and the barbwire piercing as the weight of my body is fully suspended.

Down below, I find a circle of stones surrounding me with Andon adding wood to the middle, directly in line with my dangling legs.

Afterwards, he takes the gasoline Pierce brought him and soaks the logs liberally. The putrid smell coats my nose and throat, bringing forth the knowledge that I will not be getting out of this alive.

Weeks ago, I prayed for death, but now I fear it. I’m not ready to say goodbye to the new life I have found, but I will if it means saving the man I love and his family from suffering at the hands of Andon’s madness ever again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Braxten

The engine of my truck works overtime as I plow through rough terrain, following the coordinates I was given.

We were driving off road for so long that I was certain we missed something, but then it came into view—an old barn out in the middle of nowhere.

It's encompassed in complete darkness, depicting abandonment. No one would ever know that the woman I have fallen in love with is inside along with the madman who was stupid enough to take her from me.

A madman who is going to die for it.

The vengeance that's been brewing for weeks has taken over every cell of my body. It slithers beneath my skin, bringing on a steadfast calm for what's to come.

The rules I was given were simple. No cops, no guns. Which is why I lied to Craig and gave him a set of coordinates that would lead him in the opposite direction as us. I hated doing it, but it's better for everyone involved, especially him. This is going to end in bloodshed, including that of his deputy.

I pull up to the secluded barn, parking out front. My headlights flash on its rickety wood revealing one final riddle:

Welcome to Wonderland. Our time has come.

Want to find, Alice? Then join the Mad Hatter for some fun.

The time *has* come. Time for us to lay the demons from our past to rest, once and for all.

My gaze shifts to my brothers. “Remember, no matter what happens in there, no matter how this plays out, this bastard is mine. I will be the one to steal his last breath.”

Justice nods. “That's fine, but I want Pierce.”

As much as I would like to finish that asshole off too, I will give Justice that pleasure.

“Let’s get on with it then.” Knox opens his door first, just as anxious for retaliation as the rest of us.

Once out of the truck, we fall in step, each of us ready for the battle we’ve been preparing for.

Silence rains from the other side of the barn door. After a look to my brothers, I slide it open and assess the scene before entering.

A makeshift fire burns in the center of the room, its roaring flames a threat to the rotted wood of its shelter. It’s the only light in the room, the orange glow giving us a glimpse of the inside.

Different levels of platforms are strung from the rafters, their cables leading from one loft to another. Each one has been meticulously crafted and placed, creating a suspended maze.

The rest of the place is quiet and shadowed in darkness. I begin to worry the fucker isn’t even here and this was all a set up until the distant whimper of my name sounds from above.

I look up beyond the platforms and am struck with a desperation and horror unlike any other. It impales my chest like a cruel blade, piercing my rapidly beating heart.

Alice hangs from the highest rafter of the barren ceiling, displayed as nothing more than a sacrifice. Her face is stricken with despair as rivulets of blood run down her arms, dripping onto the rest of her half naked body.

“Jesus!” Justice is the one to speak because I have no words. They are lodged in my throat, suffocated by the agony tearing apart my chest.

All I can do is act. Shoving down the chaos of my soul, I charge inside and head for the lowest platform, my brothers following closely behind. Just as I am about to launch myself onto it, it’s lifted out of reach.

“Son of a bitch!” I spit, my hands just missing the edge.

“Surely you didn’t think it would be that easy.”

We turn toward the condescending voice and find none other than the enemy himself.

Andon Denton stands on the highest platform across the barn, holding a black remote in his hand.

Hate instantly engulfs me, my need for bloodshed escalating to a dangerous level. “Let her go, you bastard.”

“I don’t think so. We have a few things to discuss. Deputy Pierce!”

At the call of his name, Pierce walks out of the shadows behind us, his gun drawn. The weapon trembles in his hand, contradicting the control he tries to exude.

“You’re a fucking dead man.” Justice starts forward, ready to make him pay, when a desperate scream rips from Alice as she is dropped toward the raging fire below.

“No!” I run for the flames, prepared to burn among them if it comes down to it.

She comes to a jerking stop, the sound of her pain bringing Justice and me to a halt.

“One more step from either of you and she will meet her fate early,” Denton threatens, holding up the remote in his hand.

“Let her go.” The demand leaves me on a rush of panic. “This is between us. You don’t need her now that we are here.”

“On the contrary. She needs to pay just as much as the rest of you.”

“She’s paid enough, motherfucker!”

I think about all the pain she has endured in her lifetime, all the innocence she has lost, because of the sins of her father.

“She hasn’t...yet.” He directs his attention to Pierce. “I take it they came alone?”

Pierce nods.

“Good, then frisk them.”

He stiffens at the order. “What?”

“You heard me. I said frisk them.”

“No fucking way. There is three of them and one of me.”

It wouldn't matter if there was only one of us and he knows it.

“Don't worry about it. They know what's at risk.”

Alice.

I make eye contact with her, those crystal blue irises bright with anguish. They glow among the shadows that drown her. “I'm so sorry.” The unwarranted apology weeps past her lips, threatening to swallow me whole.

I'm the one who should be apologizing. I promised to protect her and I failed, but not again.

It's why I allow Pierce to pat me down and not snap his fucking neck like I want to. He finishes quickly, his fear overriding thoroughness.

Knox, on the other hand, doesn't find the same restraint I do. His foot strikes out behind him, catching the bastard in the gut.

Pierce doubles over, wheezing for breath.

“Oops, I slipped,” my brother deadpans.

Fortunately, the enemy across from us laughs, finding it funny. “Good one, but don't do it again.”

Justice heeds the warning, but utters a few words that has Pierce backing away quickly.

“They're clean.” He moves to the right of us, giving him the benefit of keeping all three of us in his sight.

“You actually followed my rules,” Denton expresses in surprise. “Smart choice.” He begins walking along the loft he stands on, drawing my attention to the pulley system that Alice is attached to, its axle connected to the end of his platform.

I make a mental note of the small escape door behind it that leads to the roof.

“I have to tell you, it’s been nice finding a friend in Deputy Pierce,” he says. “I knew when I saw the two of you go at it in the hospital that morning all those weeks ago we had something in common. Should have known there would be other people out there who hate you all as much as I do.”

“Trust me, we’ve had a lot of enemies cross our path,” Justice tells him. “Just none of them are still alive to talk about it.”

The bastard smirks down at us. “You three have always been so sure of yourselves. Aren’t you the least bit curious why I have carried this grudge on you all for so long?”

“Because you’re a fucking psychopath?” Knox tosses out candidly.

Denton’s amusement fades. “A psychopath is debatable, but I’m definitely fucked up, thanks to the three of you.”

“Bullshit,” I snap. “We all suffered at the hands of that piece of shit. It’s why we put an end to him. We did you a fucking favor!”

“Favor?” he snarls, grabbing onto the metal railing before him. “You really think you did me a favor? Have any of you thought for one second about what happened to the rest of us after you took off?”

“That’s not our problem,” Justice says. “We gave you the same out we gave ourselves. Fuck you, if you didn’t take it.”

“No, fuck you,” he fires back, his carefully controlled composure beginning to unravel. “Fuck you all for running and never looking back, fuck you for escaping what was supposed to be your fate, and fuck you for leaving me to take your place!”

The ramblings of his rage confuse us.

“You have no idea what was to become of you, what your fates should have been,” he continues, his demeanor calming.

“You were bought before you even arrived there, sold to the highest bidder.”

Dread begins to take form as I think about what I learned from Jameson earlier today.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Justice asks, not knowing the damaging information he’s about to set free.

“I’m talking about a hell that none of you can even begin to imagine. Except for maybe Knoxville.”

Knox stiffens at the use of his full name.

“Don’t listen to him,” I tell him. “He’s full of shit.”

Denton cocks a brow. “Am I?”

“Yeah, you are, so let’s stay focused on what this is about and that’s Hobbs.”

“You’re wrong. My rage for Hobbs has been dealt with, that’s what my baby sister was for.” He smirks, making my trigger finger twitch. “My rage for you three is about something entirely different. I actually think Knoxville here might just understand where I’m coming from more than anyone.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Desperation claws its way through me as I try to stop this conversation from going further.

My warning is ignored, his gaze drifting to Knox. “You were mommy dearest’s most prized possession, were you not?” He pauses dramatically. “Lights...Camera...Action.”

“Motherfucker.” Knox’s howl rips through the desolate barn, his demons propelling him forward.

I move quickly, my arms locking around him from behind, but not before Alice is dropped another few feet.

The sound of her scream drowns me in a helpless rage.

“You sick fuck,” I bellow, clinging to my brother. “This isn’t on us!”

“It’s all on you,” he roars back. “I was always meant to be safe, I was Hobbs’, but then you three bastards offed him and

ran like fucking cowards, which meant others had to take your places. Guess who one of them was...”

Silence fills the barn as the reality of his revenge is revealed.

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” he spits, practically foaming at the mouth. “For months I was tortured and fucked in the most depraved acts, all while being filmed for entertainment purposes for some sick bastards who made Hobbs look like a fucking saint!”

“Jesus christ,” Pierce mutters behind us, his shock evident.

My brother’s chest heaves in my arms, each breath he takes clearly painful.

“We didn’t know,” Justice grinds out. “How the fuck were we to know?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he rages, his crazed gaze drowning with the hatred that fuels him. “It still happened and it’s because of what you three did.”

“Get ready,” I murmur to Knox. “We’re going to make our move.”

His rigid body stills, bringing the calm before the storm.

“I swore the day I escaped that place I would seek revenge on you all.”

“Don’t do this, Andon,” Alice cries. “Please, don’t hurt them.”

My jaw hardens, her plea wounding the organ in my chest.

“Oh, I’m going to hurt them, little sister, but they’re going to watch you die first.”

I don’t give him the chance to make his move. Dropping behind Knox, I reach for the thin dagger hiding inside my boot and send it sailing through the air with the same precision I use through the scope of my gun, piercing into the wrist of his hand that holds the remote.

His howl of pain erupts through the barn as the small, black device flies out of his hand. Knox throws his knife next,

sending it into the center of his chest, the impact knocking him to his back.

Justice takes care of Pierce, kicking the gun out of his hand. It sends him running like the coward he is, knocking over a gas can as he does.

Embers from the fire ignite, sending flames to spread through the barn like wildfire.

“Shit!” The curse flees from Justice as we all back up, shielding our faces from the flash of heat.

Alice’s scream pulses through me, sending my gaze upward. I watch as flames crawl up the walls around her, drastically cutting our time in half.

“Hang on, I’m coming up!” My gaze shifts to Justice. “You go after Pierce! Knox and I have this.”

He heads out after him, dodging the blaze that threatens to engulf him.

My attention moves to Knox next. “She’s attached to that pulley,” I tell him, pointing to the wheel that the rope is connected to. The same place Denton still lays, unmoving. “I need you to find a way up there and wait for my call to release it.”

He wastes no time racing for the other side of the barn.

Fiery heat crowds me at all angles as I back up enough to make a run for the platform that was lifted from my grasp. I manage to grab onto the ledge enough to swing myself up. It teeters wildly beneath my weight, the rotted boards threatening to give way.

It has me jumping even quicker to the next platform, but this one is rigged to fall, the suspension snapping.

“Braxten!” My name leaves Alice on a cry.

I push off the crumbling platform, reaching the ledge above that brings me more inline with her.

“Thank god,” she sobs in relief. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good.” Unfortunately, I can’t say the same about her, not with the amount of blood dripping down her arms. It ramps up the urgency of this already dire situation.

I search for Knox through the billowing smoke and find he is still one level away from where he needs to be, the flames on his side threatening to close in on him.

With time depreciating and Alice still out of my reach, I break off one of the rotted boards beneath my feet and use the rusty nail sticking out to hook the knotted rope at her wrists.

The moment I start to pull her closer, she cries out in pain, quickly ceasing my efforts.

“It’s wrapped in barbwire,” she weeps, revealing where all the blood is coming from.

It sends the rage inside of me detonating like a catastrophic bomb. “That motherfucker!” Every muscle strains beneath my skin as I try to restrain myself from succumbing to the spiraling fury.

“Just go.” She coughs as smoke begins to consume her. “Before it’s too late for you.”

Ignoring that statement, I decide to try a different tactic. “I’m going to go above your wrists, but I need you to guide me. I need the nail to hook through one of the links in the barbwire.”

“There’s no time, Braxten. You have to leave now or—”

“Listen to me, goddamn it!” I snap. “Either we both leave this place alive or I die here with you. What’s it going to be?”

Her emotional eyes lock with mine, guilt and fear flooding their depth.

“I’m not leaving here without you, Alice.”

At my stern resolve, she pulls herself together and nods. “Okay.”

Reaching across the space between us, I blindly search for a snag within the wire, my eyes burning like a motherfucker as black smoke coats my throat and lungs.

“A little higher,” she chokes out.

I do as she instructs, persistence taking over at the raging heat closing in on my back.

It isn't long before I feel the nail hook.

“You got it!” she cries.

I begin pulling her in closer, moving her only a few inches at a time, the resistance of the pulley fighting against me.

I barely have her in reach when Knox yells from across the way. “Braxten, grab her!”

The panic in his voice has me looking over to see he has made it to the highest platform. Denton stands at the other end of it, using the knife I threw to cut the cable of the pulley.

Fear and desperation collide in a flurry.

Knox runs for him, but doesn't make it before the cable is cut.

Dropping the board, I reach for Alice's arm, my grip slipping from all the blood. “Son of a bitch.”

Blue eyes peer up at me from the roaring flames, piercing me with regret as she slips further and further from my grasp.

Just as I fully prepare to follow her down the fiery path, Knox makes a snap decision. He leaps off the platform, grabbing onto the other end of the cable in midair, his weight bringing Alice high enough for me to grab her around the waist.

“Fuck!” My brother's painful bellow is deafening as he realizes the rope is wrapped in barbwire.

With a sobbing Alice in my arms, I pull her onto the platform, my hand grabbing hold of the cable above her wrists to keep my brother from crashing to the ground. Adrenaline dulls the pain of the sharp barbs slicing into my hand.

Denton's roar of defeat blasts through the fiery barn, the madness of his rage exploding. I look over to see him jump from platform to platform, heading straight for us, the extent of his injuries never slowing him down.

“Shit!” I hurry to untie Alice’s wrists with my free hand, my fingers ripping open from the effort.

“Cut me loose,” Knox orders.

“Not yet!” I focus on the knotted rope through smoke burned eyes.

Alice helps me by shimmying her already cut up wrists out of the loosening bind, fighting through the agony.

“That’s it, baby. Almost there.”

“Goddamn it, Braxten!” Knox bellows again. “I’m jumping.”

“No, don’t! I have a plan.”

Just as Alice’s hands become free, our platform bounces on impact, Denton landing on the other end of it. I push her out of the way just as he lunges, my grip on the rope slipping as I fight to keep Knox suspended.

Alice moves quickly, grabbing onto the rope with both hands to help me, her cries of pain merging with the hot flames.

Denton and I grapple, my free hand throwing a few punches before wrapping around his throat while both of his move to mine.

“You are not getting out of this alive,” he snarls, his pupils blown wide as blood coats his teeth. “Even if it means dying in here with you.”

“You’re dying, motherfucker, but you’re doing it alone.”

The moment the choked words leave my mouth, a knife penetrates his shoulder, Knox managing to throw the last one he had.

The shock causes Denton to slacken his grip, giving me the opportunity I need.

A smile of victory slips over my face. “Say hi to Hobbs for me, you son of bitch.” Grabbing the slack of barbwire, I wrap it around the fucker’s neck and send him up.

The razor sharp barbs pierce his throat, his weight light enough to lower Knox toward the ground.

My brother keeps hold until the very last second then jumps loose, dropping the bastard into the fire below, his screams burning into eternity with him.

Alice throws herself at me, her frail frame shuttering with relief.

I hold her close, offering only a second of comfort. “Come on, baby. We’re getting the fuck out of here.” Shifting her in my arms, I climb to my feet and search for a way out, finding the entrance fully engulfed like most of the decrepit barn.

A crash below sounds over the roaring flames, drawing my attention. One of the side walls is smashed open from the outside, forming a space big enough to get through.

Justice and Craig shove their way inside, waving us over. “This way, hurry!”

Running to the other end of the platform, I find Knox waiting at the one below us, his arms outstretched as fire rages behind him. “I got her, I promise.”

I pass Alice down to him without hesitation, watching as he cradles her like fragile glass before handing her off to Justice on the ground.

Just as I make the jump down to Knox, the platform breaks, sending us crashing to the black covered floor. It dazes us for a only a moment, both of us rolling apart as we dodge the falling debris.

“Come on, we’re out of time!” Craig orders.

Pushing to our feet, we hurtle through the open ring of fire, escaping into the dark night.

Clean air infiltrates my lungs, making them heave like a motherfucker. I ignore the fiery sensation and grab Alice from Justice, dropping to my knees in relief.

She wraps her arms around my neck, her guttural coughs exacerbated by her shuddering sobs.

“You’re okay,” I murmur, reassuring myself more than her.
“I got you.”

Sirens wail in the distance as I watch Justice grab Knox in a bear hug, the blood of his wounds soaking through both of their shirts.

Craig stands over Pierce’s lifeless corpse, assessing his insides that are now on the outside of his body. A price he had to pay.

A price anyone will pay if they hurt the ones we love.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Alice

Waking up to the sound of beeping machines was something I had hoped not to encounter for a long time, if ever. Yet, here I am, in a dimly lit hospital room once again, my body blessedly numb thanks to whatever pain meds they have me on.

Though, the difference between now and weeks ago is the man pacing the small corner of my room is no longer a stranger. He's the man who owns my entire heart and soul. A man who, along with his brothers, risked it all to save me. Despite the fact that I am tied to the monster from their past and the tormentor of their present.

It's been a tough pill for me to swallow. I've always known Andon was evil, but not my father, not until I had to be the one to pay for his sins. I will never think of him again as the loving father I once knew, his memory forever tainted and unforgiven.

"Is it just me or are you having a serious case of *deja vu*?" I croak, my throat still raw from all the smoke.

Braxten spins around at the sound of my voice, his tortured expression softening with relief as he rushes to my bedside. "Hey, Wonderland." He sits in the chair next to my bed and picks up my battered hand with the IV in it, kissing my bandaged wrist. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just escaped death," I joke, hoping to lighten the moment.

It doesn't work.

Regret darkens his expression. "I'm sorry I left you. I should have let you come with us. I should have—"

"Stop." My hand lifts to his soot covered face. "You have nothing to be sorry for. You saved my life...again."

He shakes his head, refusing to accept those words.

“Yes,” I counter gently. “This was all bound to come to a head eventually. I’m just sorry it happened when Hannah was with me.”

His jaw locks down, the muscle pulsing beneath his skin. “Yeah, well, Pierce paid dearly for that one.”

A chill runs through me as I think about the gruesome sight of the deputy outside the barn. “How’s Craig dealing with it?”

Braxten shrugs. “I think he’s mad at himself more than anything else. He’s always known he’s a corrupt son of a bitch, but didn’t have the proof he needed. Now he does, not that it matters anymore since they are both dead and burning in hell where they belong.”

A sense of solace fills me at that knowledge, a heavy weight lifting off my chest to know I don’t have to look over my shoulder any longer.

“What about Knox?” I ask next, remembering all that he risked when he jumped on the other end of that cable. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s good. A little torn up, but if you ask me, it just adds to that asshole attitude he likes to cart around.” He follows up the joke with a smirk.

I burst into laughter, feeling the painful effect in my chest, but it quickly turns into a sob when I think about how many people have been hurt over this.

Braxten leans in closer, giving me the opportunity to wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m so sorry he hurt you. That they both hurt you all so much.”

I don’t need to elaborate on who the other person is that I am talking about, he knows.

“I would go through it all over again if it meant finding you.”

That beautiful confession only makes me more emotional. Probably because, I too, would suffer through it all again if it meant ending up right here with him.

“He’s dead, Alice. He can’t hurt you anymore. No one will ever hurt you again.” His lips brush my cheek as he kisses away my tears, his touch and words healing every wound I bear.

A knock on the door has us breaking apart. Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I look over and smile when I find Nurse Linda in the doorway.

“Well, look who’s awake.” Rushing inside, she pushes Braxten out of the way and moves in for a hug, her touch as gentle as ever. “I’ve been so worried about you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay...thanks to Braxten,” I add, glancing in his direction.

Linda pulls back, looking between us. “Okay, so I was wrong. Very wrong,” she admits. “And I’m glad I was.”

“Me too.” I smile back at her.

“Look, I can’t stay long, I’m headed to another department, but I wanted to check on you before leaving. Doctor Carter is on call. He will be in to see you soon.”

“Thank you.”

She touches my cheek in a sweet gesture. “One day soon we will go for that coffee.”

“I look forward to it.”

Before walking out she turns to Braxten. “Take care of her, Mr. Creed. And yourself.”

At his nod, she walks out of the room, leaving Braxten and me alone once again.

He turns to me with that handsome smirk of his. “I told you she had a crush on me.”

Another laugh flees me, this one throwing me into a painful coughing fit.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” He passes me the glass of water that’s next to my bed. “I shouldn’t be making you laugh.”

After a generous sip, I hand it back and relax into my pillows. “But I love to laugh, especially with you.”

His expression softens at that response.

“So what happens now?” I ask, unsure where to go from here. I’ve spent so many years of my life living in fear and being punished for the sins of my father, that I don’t know what normal is anymore, but I do know I want to find it with him.

“Now, we go home and live how we were always meant to.”

His response brings warmth to my heart and a smile to my face. “And how is that?”

“With you in my arms forever.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Braxten

Blues music drifts from the outdoor speakers as we gather for Sunday dinner out in the backyard on this unusually warm fall day. My father and Gwen stand at the barbecue grilling up a storm, while my brothers and I nurse our beers and watch Hannah, Ryanne, and Alice play a game of croquet. Something my niece is always asking to do lately.

For whatever reason, the kid loves it. I personally think it's boring as fuck, but there is no denying how much I enjoy watching Alice laugh and cheer as she kicks ass. Her smile is something I've grown accustomed to seeing more of and I love it. It's how she's meant to live.

Happy, healthy, and mine.

It's why I wasted no time when it came to making her my wife. It happened shortly after arriving home from the hospital. A small ceremony right here on the farm with family and close friends, Craig and Linda being among them.

It was a whirlwind of chaos, but I refused to wait any longer because I knew from the moment I found her that I would keep her forever.

Now I wait for the day that she will carry my baby, something we are not preventing from happening. We are leaving it up to fate since it has yet to let me down.

She also still needs time to heal, both physically and emotionally. I know some wounds will last a lifetime, but I will soothe those particular wounds every second of every day.

That said, she has come a long way in a short amount of time. So well that we have the constant argument over her getting a damn job.

She doesn't need to work because I will take care of her. I also know full well the only reason she insists on getting one

is because she thinks she owes me, which is the most fucking ridiculous thought ever.

In the end, we came to the agreement that she would help my father out more regularly on the farm. He's been teaching her how to train horses, something she has fallen in love with. He even gifted her Leela. Said she has a bond with that horse unlike anything he has ever seen before and it should be hers.

Some days, I swear she spends more time with the animal than me, but I can't be mad about it. Not when it makes her so happy.

"Another contract just came in," Justice says, reading off his phone. "This one is a tight deadline."

"Government?" I ask.

He nods.

Figures, they always give us little time, but they also pay out the ass for it so I don't complain.

"I can start on it tonight," Knox says.

"Yeah, he can do it in his PJs before bed since he lives there now," I joke, but am only half kidding. Ever since Gwen moved in with my father, he works all hours of the night before crashing on the couch.

I've told him several times that he can have his bedroom back. Even Alice has tried persuading him to move back in, but he has insisted he's fine where he is. It's one of the reasons why I moved forward with building on the sector of land my father gave me. This way he will be able to have the guesthouse to himself.

"Actually, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you both about." The change in my brother's voice alters the easiness of our moment.

"What's going on?" Justice asks.

"I got a job offer that would put me out in the field again."

Shock rocks me at the disclosure. "What job offer? What the hell are you talking about?"

“It was a call that came in yesterday. The offer was for the three of us, but I told them you guys were out for sure.” His gaze is on his hands as he fiddles with the beer bottle he has.

“Just us?” Justice says, a lot calmer than I feel. “I thought we all agreed we wouldn’t do missions anymore.”

“I know, but things have changed since then.” There’s no anger or resentment behind his words, just fact.

“What about what we have going here?” I ask, struggling to accept any part of this.

“I wouldn’t be gone all the time. I’ll still do my part when I’m home.”

I gaze back at his lowered head, unbelieving what I’m hearing. We all hate being apart from each other, but especially Knox. “I don’t get it, man. Where is this coming from?”

He shrugs. “Nowhere. I just figure it might be good for me to take it. I need to get used to doing more things on my own and it will give you guys some space with your families.”

“Fuck space,” I shoot back, unable to hold in my feelings on this conversation any longer. “Who the fuck wants space? I sure as hell don’t.”

“Same,” Justice adds.

Knox remains quiet. Though, I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t believe us or he doesn’t want to.

“Look, Knox. If you’re considering this because you really want to get back in the field then let’s talk about it,” Justice says. “But there is no way in hell you are doing this alone. We made a pact. We stick together, always.”

He shakes his head. “It was just a thought. If you don’t want me to do it then I won’t.”

“I don’t want you to do it,” I tell him, having no qualms saying that out loud.

“Fine, I won’t.”

“Good!”

An awkward moment of silence settles before I break it.

Slinging an arm around his neck, I bring him in close. “I tell you what, you don’t say shit like that to us again and I won’t say you wear PJs while you build guns,” I tell him. “There was no reason to get so sensitive about it.”

He gives me a playful shove. “Get the fuck off me.”

Justice and I chuckle, but despite the lighter moment, there is no denying how unsettling that conversation was and even more so that my brother considered the offer.

Certain aspects of our relationship may have changed, but one thing that remains steadfast is our love and loyalty for one another. I will never be okay with the thought of him leaving and I know Justice wouldn’t either. We still need him as much as he needs us.

“All right, y’all,” my father calls out. “Come grab a seat. Dinner is ready.”

The girls drop their mallets and head this way, my niece leading the three of them.

My gaze zeroes in on my woman as she laughs at something Ryanne says to her, and the unrest I was feeling moments ago eases. The late afternoon sun adds to the beauty that always engulfs her and it does all sorts of shit to the organ inside my chest. She’s always done that to me, but since making her my wife that feeling has only intensified.

A shy smile steals her face when she catches me eye fucking her and it makes me hard on the spot.

“Gotta staring problem, Uncle Brax?” Hannah calls out as they approach, obviously noticing it too.

Both my brothers chuckle.

I shoot Justice a look. “You have a mouthy kid.”

He grunts. “I wonder who she gets it from.”

I can’t deny that insinuation.

Standing, I jump off the patio then lean down and grab her by the leg, hanging her upside down.

She squeals and laughs uncontrollably as I shake her around.

“I do when it comes to my wife. You gotta problem with that, little bit?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,” she returns, giving me more shit.

I lift her even higher, bringing her upside down face level with mine. “You just bought yourself a spot into some horse shit, little girl.”

She screeches as I walk toward the barn.

“Please don’t,” Ryanne pleads, out of breath from the ever growing baby bump she has to cart around. “I’m not in the mood to wash horse poop off my daughter.”

I gaze down at my niece. “Saved by your mama.” Flipping her right side up, I keep her in my arms.

“And saved by a kiss,” she adds, laying a smacking one right on my cheek.

The kid is good, I’ll give her that.

Placing her back on her feet, she runs to grab a seat at the table. “I’m sitting next to Papa!”

I look over at Alice, extending my hand to her. “Can I sit next to you, Wonderland?”

A blush paints her upturned cheeks. “Are you going to behave yourself?”

I grunt. “Not with you.”

“Typical Creed answer,” Ryanne laughs as she climbs the patio stairs.

Alice places her hand in mine. “I would never sit next to anyone else, Braxten Creed.”

Whenever she says shit like this, I want to haul her ass home and bury myself inside of her for the rest of the night. I decide I am going to do exactly that as soon as we finish this meal.

We head on over to the table and take our seats, Alice easily taking the one that puts her next to Knox while I sit on the other side of her. My brother fills her glass with lemonade, not an uncommon gesture anymore.

It earns him a grateful smile and a bump of her shoulder as she says “thank you.”

The exchange might be normal to most, but it’s hugely significant to me. My brother has never had any form of relationship with anyone outside my father, Justice, and I, especially women. That changed when my niece came into the picture, and though Ryanne and him have found their own easiness, it’s not what him and Alice have found.

Whatever happened, it made my brother see her the way I always have, that she’s meant to be here with us. Though, I wouldn’t say he trusts her implicitly, I’d say they have formed a relationship that he has yet to have with anyone else outside our circle, and it means everything to me. It’s just another way I have been able to share her with him that doesn’t cross boundaries.

Just as we begin dishing our plates, my father stands, clearing his throat. “Before we start eating, I have an announcement I would like to make.”

Silence falls over the table, my brothers and I exchanging a look, wondering what the hell is going on.

He reaches down for Gwen, bringing her to stand next to him. “I have asked Gwen to be my wife and she has agreed.”

Excitement falls over the table, sending everyone out of their seats. Ryanne and Alice rush to hug Gwen while my brothers and I move for our father.

“Congrats, Dad,” Justice says first, clasping his shoulder.

“Yeah, about damn time,” I add, giving him shit.

“You’re telling me, boy,” he chuckles.

Knox extends his hand last. “I’m happy for you, Dad.”

Despite the gesture, we know this is just another change for my brother. After the conversation that just took place with

him, it has me even more worried where this new change might lead him.

“Thank you, son. That means a lot to me. I hope you boys will be beside me that day.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Justice assures him.

Hannah jumps into my father’s arms, hugging his neck. “I’m happy for you too, Papa Thatcher. You deserve the bestest, most greatest love of all time.”

“Oh, sweet Hannah J.,” my father’s voice thickens with emotion. “I have been blessed with the absolute best.”

“You sure have,” she agrees. “Can I be in the wedding party?”

Collective snickers sound around us.

“You sure can,” Gwen tells her. “We will have a special role just for you.”

“Anything you need, I’m your girl,” she says, jutting her thumb toward her chest.

Dinner commences as we take our seats again, conversation filled with the wedding they have in mind. By the sounds of it, my father plans to go all out, something they both deserve after what they have had to go through to get here.

I take in the ever growing family at my side and realize just how far we have all come. It has me thinking about words of wisdom my father once shared with the three of us when we first came to live with him.

We all have a destiny that we will one day reach, but sometimes in order to make it there, we have to weather the storms life throws at us before we can dance in the rain.

Looking over at the woman next to me, those words have a whole new meaning. After everything I have been through to not only find my father and brothers, but now my wife, I know I’d live through the hells I’ve endured a hundred times over if it meant ending up right here with everyone I love most.

Alice looks over to find me watching her, her happiness for my father and Gwen undeniable. “Hey, you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, Wonderland. I’m good.”

“Good, me too.” Smiling, she gives me a kiss before returning to her conversation with Gwen and Ryanne as they discuss wedding dress ideas. She doesn’t miss a beat as I watch her refill Knox’s near empty glass while my brother continues to eat his dinner quietly next to us.

Like I’ve always known, she’s not only perfect for me, but for my family too, and as a result, she will always know one very vital thing.

Unconditional love.

It’s what my father gave to my brothers and me since the day he found us hiding in his barn, and it’s all she will know since the day I put my ring on her finger.

It’s what it means to be a Creed.

Thank you for reading Braxten’s story. I hope you enjoyed it.

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And last, but certainly not least, bloggers/influencers, this is for you,

B~ Believe in us

L~ Lift us

O~ Open their hearts to us

G~ Go above and beyond

G~ Give us strength

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To all the bloggers who love and support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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About the Author



K.C. Lynn is a small town girl living in Western Canada. She grew up in a family of four children—two sisters and a brother. Her mother was the lady who baked homemade goods for everyone on the street and her father was a respected man who worked in the RCMP. He's since retired and now works for the criminal justice system. This being one of the things that inspires K.C. to write romantic suspense about the trials and triumphs of our heroes.

K.C. married her high school sweetheart and they started a big family of their own—two adorable girls and a set of handsome twin boys. They still reside in the same small town but K.C.'s heart has always longed for the south, where everyone says 'y'all' and eats biscuits and gravy for breakfast.

It was her love for romance books that gave K.C. the courage to sit down and write her own novel. It was then a beautiful world opened up and she found what she was meant to do...write.

When K.C.'s not spending time with her beautiful family she can be found in her writing cave, living in the fabulous minds of her characters and their stories.