

Damaged **SHADOWS**

SHADOWS LANDING SERIES



KATHLEEN BROOKS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAMAGED SHADOWS

SHADOWS LANDING #9

KATHLEEN BROOKS

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1

Granger Fox had thought being a sheriff in the small town of Shadows Landing would be a quiet job, an easy job. He was wrong.

Granger wrote on his pad, ignoring the protests coming from the traffic stop.

“I was not speeding.”

“No, you weren’t,” Granger said, agreeing with the driver, a woman in her thirties. She was driving a minivan toward Harper’s Bar. It was ladies’ night and her minivan was packed full of moms ready to have a night off. “You were going so slow that Landry Jr. passed you riding on the back of Bubba the alligator, and both Mr. Gann and Mr. Knoll passed you on their old man scooters. They’re almost ninety years old. And they passed you. Heck, Timmons even went by you on that stupid hoverboard thing of his.” Granger wrote the ticket and handed it to her.

“Obstructing traffic?” she gasped.

“Karen, it’s just a small fine or you can appear in court on this date to contest it,” Granger told her, preparing for what he knew was coming.

“I’m going to do that. I won’t let you get away with this,” Karen spat.

“Go ahead. But know that Mr. Gann and Mr. Knoll love going to traffic court and love it even more when they get called as witnesses.” Granger handed her back her license and registration. “Have a good evening, ladies.” Granger tipped his black cowboy hat and stepped back from the minivan.

“I’d have a good evening if he showed up at the bar tonight and did nasty things to me,” a voice from the back of the minivan said.

“Shut up, Sarah,” Karen snapped before rolling up her window.

Granger fought back a grin and headed for the sidewalk. From the shadows, a small figure appeared. The darkness faded and the white face of a cat appeared first, then a poof of white hair and a big, happy smile. “You’re such a dear, Sheriff. That was the best birthday gift you could ever give me.”

Granger gave the old lady in the cat sweater a wink. “You’re welcome, Miss Mitzy. Your daughter-in-law is a piece of work who can’t drive worth a damn. Yet another reason I am going to be a bachelor forever. Don’t want to get tied down to a woman like that.”

“You’re too good lookin’ a young man to be a bachelor forever. Any man who gives a ticket to an old lady’s mean daughter-in-law every time she comes to town deserves a woman who will spoil him.”

“You spoil me enough, Miss Mitzy.” Granger leaned down and kissed her wrinkled cheek. “Plus, it’s easy to give her a ticket when she somehow managed to cause a traffic jam in our little town. Happy Birthday.”

Miss Mitzy patted his cheek and took off whistling her way merrily down the sidewalk on her way to the knitting club. Now, to the next person to deal with. Granger turned to the young teenager sitting on the curb pouting.

“I told you, no alligator surfing during rush hour,” Granger said to Landry Jr.

Landry rolled his eyes. His father was in the military overseas and his mother was in charge of seven kids. Alone. She didn't need her eldest son bitten by Bubba the alligator or hit by a car. "Isn't that an oxymoron? Shadows Landing doesn't have a rush hour unless Karen holds up traffic."

Granger wanted to laugh, but he kept his cop face on. He pulled down his aviator glasses and narrowed his eyes at Landry. "Don't make me call your mom."

"Ugh," Landry groaned. "Fine. What's my punishment?"

"Don't think of it as a punishment. Think of it as learning to be a gentleman." Landry's father, Landry Sr., was a good man. He was just not present in Shadows Landing very often. Here, Landry's mother, Lydia, had help. A whole townful of people looking out for her kids and helping any way they could. Like now. "You're going to go across the street and escort every woman headed to the knitting club. Carry their knitting bags, accompany them up the stairs with a smile on your face, and practice your manners."

"Yes, sir." Landry got up and began to cross the street only to stop and look back at Granger hopefully. "But it was an awesome alligator surf, right?"

Granger felt his lips twitch. "Hell of a ride. My dashboard camera caught it and I'll send the video to you and your father. You've got his surfing skills. And Landry, meet me at my office as soon as you're done with the knitting club."

"Yes, sir." Landry jogged the rest of the way across the street and stopped to escort Miss Mitzy up the stairs with a smile on his face.

Granger crossed the street, sent the video to both Landry Jr. and Landry Sr., then grabbed the spare clothes from his office. His deputy, Kordell King, was on duty tonight, which worked perfectly since there was something Granger wanted to do. He sent a quick text to make sure it was okay and then headed out to the pit. That's what they all called the center of the sheriff's department. His and Kord's offices, along with two interrogation/conference rooms, lined the back wall and two side walls of the station. The front of the station was

closed off by Brenda's desk. No one could get back to the pit unless they got past Brenda. In the pit, there were desks for the part-time deputies, the file cabinets, and the massive dry-erase board that held the latest Most Wanted posters and cop news.

"Good thing it's still summer and the sun is still up late," Kord said, taking in Granger's change of clothes and handing him a bag. "Lydia dropped this off just now. Are you going to Folly Beach to catch some waves?"

Kord leaned a hip against the corner of Brenda's now empty desk. She'd gone home thirty minutes earlier. Kord was taller than Granger by an inch. Granger was six feet even but he had twenty pounds on Kord. Kord was crazy fit but built much more like a wide receiver compared to Granger's thicker build. Granger had played football in college as a running back. He might have gone pro, but ...

"Sullivan's Island."

"I still don't see what's so great about surfing. Give me a basketball or football any day compared to sitting on a board with sharks swimming around you." Kord gave a little shiver and shoved off the desk. "I'm going to go down to the bar and check out this new ladies' night thing Harper and Kerri have going on."

"Remember you're on duty," Granger called out as Kord opened the door to the lobby.

"Buzz kill," Kord said with a wink before heading out.

"Sheriff Fox? You wanted to see me?" Landry asked as he came into the lobby as Kord left it. They exchanged high fives as they passed each other.

"Yes, your mom dropped this off for you just a minute ago. Go get changed. You're coming with me."

"Where?" Landry asked, pulling a pair of board shorts and a rash guard shirt from a plastic bag.

"You do well enough surfing on alligators, so I thought we should see how you handle real waves. Get changed. We're going to Sullivan's Island for a couple of hours."

Granger saw the way Landry's eyes lit up. As the eldest of seven siblings, alone time was not something he got a lot of. Granger was surprised when Landry wrapped his arms around him for a quick hug and then ran to the bathroom to change.

Surfing had saved Granger when he'd lost football after the accident. He found solace in battling the waves. He could still feel whole when he rode. The wetsuits, long boardshorts, and rash guards also hid his damaged body. No one asked him why he wasn't taking off his shirt to swim. No one stared at the jagged scar on his leg if his shorts rode up because lots of them had scars from being smashed against rocks or coral. And now he was going to share it with Landry. The boy needed something of his own. Something to ground him when things got chaotic.

"I'm ready. This is so cool. I've always wanted to learn how to surf."

Granger headed to his SUV with Landry chattering non-stop beside him. Some days were good days. This was going to be one of them.



This was the worst day ever and it was never going to end. It was only ten in the morning and she was in New York City fighting an inane motion by opposing counsel instead of being in the Charleston office. However, Olivia Townsend didn't ever give opposing counsel the satisfaction of seeing how pissed off she was. She had the best poker face in the business for good reason. This case should have been over and done with but Robert Whitehall, the opposing counsel, was intent on dragging it out until the cows came home. His client was the CEO who'd been embezzling from a troubled company her client, Ryker Faulkner, was buying. The embezzlement came to light when Ryker's interest in the firm led to Olivia's review of the company's financials. Her initial review was unsatisfactory so she started digging and exposed the CEO's theft in short order. The company's board would rather sell privately and quietly to Ryker than engage in a public firing that would tank business. However, the CEO didn't want to let go of his golden eggs without a fight.

“I know the nuance of the case is hard to grasp for someone who only attended State Law School, but Miss Townsend’s lack of experience in finance law shouldn’t result in the undue burden she’s trying to impose on my client by demanding he produce seven years of documentation.”

Oh, that was *it*. Olivia stood as she addressed the court in her crisp, professional way. “What Mr. Whitehall has apparently failed to learn from his overpriced law school education is to always double-check the case law searches your paralegal performs for you. If he had, he’d have seen that last week an appellate court upheld the *Misner* case, ruling that seven years of personal financial statements from the CEO of a company accused of embezzlement is not an undue burden, but, in fact, required. A case whose facts are shockingly similar to Mr. Whitehall’s client, don’t you think?” Olivia asked Robert instead of the judge. “My client requires those documents to determine the full financial impact of damage done to the company he’s purchasing before the board and Mr. Faulkner can settle on a purchase price.”

“Your Honor,” Robert said, rolling his eyes at Olivia. “The board is illegally conspiring with Miss Townsend’s client and withholding my client’s salary and his bonus. Now forcing him to turn over records of this duration is, by law, an undue burden.”

“Mr. Whitehall,” the judge began, “in accordance with *Misner*, which *this* State Law grad read myself just last week, your client has two weeks to produce seven years of personal financial statements or be held in contempt.”

The gavel sounded and Olivia could finally head back to Charleston. It was Friday and all she wanted to do was go home and get to Shadows Landing for the weekend. She needed it. Nasty emails had been coming to her inbox for the past three weeks. They’d started off simple. *I like watching you in court and then thinking of me dominating you in every way.* Then they’d progressed when she hadn’t replied. *You can’t ignore me forever. I’ll enjoy training you how to show me the respect I deserve. You think you’re so powerful, but you’re not. You’ll learn that soon enough.*

When Olivia went to the small town of Shadows Landing, she could disconnect. She'd bought a cottage that backed up to the river just north of Charleston. It was her oasis in this crazy legal world. She felt safe there, even if she still got the emails.

"You think you won this, but you're too stupid to realize it's already over," Robert sneered.

"Over like your position on the top lawyers in New York City list that came out yesterday?" Olivia asked with a sweet smile. "I didn't see where you were on that list since I stopped reading after my name." Olivia took no crap from anyone but her brothers, but even they knew when to stop pushing her. This was one of those times. She'd flown to New York at five in the morning just for this completely pointless hearing. A hearing that lasted two hours when it should have lasted ten minutes. She had two busy billionaires on her client list who had flown her all over the country this week on business and now she was tired and had been called in on her one day off to put up with this asshole.

"You're a fucking cu—"

"Cunning lawyer, yes, I am. Thank you." Olivia turned on her high heels and strode from the courtroom.

Come to the office ASAP. Something's happening.

Olivia groaned as she read the text from her New York assistant. Olivia hated dramatics. And vague texting. However, after sending six different assistants running from the building in tears, Olivia found her match in Imani. The woman was only in her early twenties but took no crap from anyone. She didn't cower when Olivia handed her a stack of things to do or when she had to deal with the Robert Whitehalls of the world. She took the feedback Olivia gave her, not as a personal insult but as constructive ways to improve her job. That meant Olivia was willing to put up with the occasional vague text.

Leaving court now. What's going on?

Olivia's private car was waiting for her at the curb. After being attacked in New York City by a man pretending to be a

company driver, the firm had hired a full-time driver just for her whenever she was in the city.

“Apparently we need to get to the office ASAP,” Olivia said with a roll of her eyes to Eric, her driver. Eric was in his fifties, but, if not for the graying dark-brown hair and slightly gray scruff hiding some wrinkles, he would look thirty. A veteran, he’d retired after a thirty-year career in the military. Olivia was his only client. He said it gave him something to do while still allowing time off when she was in Charleston.

“What now?” he asked after he closed her door, settled himself behind the wheel, and pulled into traffic.

“No idea. Imani vague texted again.”

Girl followed by the big-eyed emoji began Imani’s latest text. *I’ll meet you out front. I’m tracking you.*

Normally that would be creepy, but all the corporate cars had GPS so the firm would know exactly when lawyers left meetings, court, and so on so that everything was ready for them when they arrived at the office.

“Did you make another paralegal quit?” Eric asked with a chuckle. “What number are you up to?”

“Seven, but it’s not as bad as it sounds,” Olivia said defensively.

Eric just laughed harder.

“Fine, it’s bad. But I thought Mateo was working out. He only cried the first week of work,” Olivia admitted.

“You should have been a drill sergeant. The military would love you.” Eric turned toward the law office as he grinned.

“The military already has a Townsend. Trust me, there’s not enough room for two of us,” Olivia looked out the window and saw Imani practically jumping up and down and waving her arms as if Olivia didn’t see her on the sidewalk.

Olivia didn’t wait for Eric to open her door, which earned her a glare from him when he caught up to her on the sidewalk, but Imani was already in full OMG mode. Her long black braids swung back and forth and her tawny brown skin

seemed to glow with energy. Her deep brown eyes were alive with excitement and her perfectly manicured nails flashed as she waved them around, talking a mile a minute.

“Mr. Kirkland brought in a new hire. Partner level, like you. And he’s hot. Like not my kind of pro basketball player hot, but like hot in a suit,” Imani said in a rush. Murray Kirkland was, for all intents and purposes, no longer practicing. He had started the firm and watched over his empire of attorneys here in New York while Kevin Hendrix ran the Charleston office. Nowadays, Murray was more interested in expanding to new markets than practicing law. Not that focusing on business wasn’t good. He was a good boss and had been a terrific mentor to her. He was in his early seventies and now usually left the hiring up to the other partners or HR.

“Am I not a hot man in a suit?” Eric asked as he looked down at his black suit with white shirt and black tie.

“You’re a silver fox and you know it. Your wife knows it, too. I’ve seen all those kids you have and that smile on her face,” Imani said before turning back to Olivia. “But the new hot lawyer says you two know each other.”

“Who is he?” Olivia asked as Eric sent a text to his wife telling her she was lucky to be married to a silver fox.

“Don’t know. He just flashed a smile when I introduced myself as your assistant and said, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing her again,’” Imani said in her best male imitation.

“I didn’t know we were hiring,” Olivia said as she waved good-bye to Eric and promised him she’d see him within an hour.

“No one did. Apparently, he comes with a big client. They’re waiting to *surprise* you with the announcement, but I know how you feel about surprises,” Imani said as they took the elevator to the top floor. “Mateo is using his best acting skills to distract them from my leaving to warn you.”

“I appreciate it. Surprises are never good.”

“I got your back, girl.” Imani said as the elevator door opened and Olivia felt her world spin. No, it couldn’t be.

2

“Olivia!” Murray Kirkland grinned as he beckoned her to the giant glass-enclosed conference room across the room from the elevator doors.

It wasn’t Mr. Kirkland who had her attention. It was the back of the man standing at the windows looking out over the city.

“Do you know him?” Imani whispered as Mateo shot from the conference room to meet them.

“It can’t be,” Olivia said as the man slowly turned.

“He says he knows you,” Mateo whispered as he took her briefcase from her hand. “His name is—”

“Mark Fleming,” Olivia finished as Mark turned to face her as she walked into the conference room. Mateo and Imani literally had her back as they followed her inside, not knowing if Olivia needed backup or not, which she appreciated.

“Olivia.” Mark’s voice was smooth and sexy as his eyes raked her from head to toe. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Damn,” Imani whispered.

“If you don’t want him, I’ll take him,” Mateo whispered, and Olivia just managed not to laugh.

“You’re not gay,” Imani hissed back.

“I could be for him.”

Olivia finally smiled. Mark thought it was because of him, but it was because of Mateo and Imani. Not that she wasn’t smiling at the blast from her past. “Hello, Mark. Long time. What are you doing in New York?”

“How do you know I haven’t already been here?” Mark asked as if he had caught her following his career, which she hadn’t been.

“I figured I would have heard if Simpson Global’s attorney was in New York since my clients know yours. Why are you in New York? Isn’t Simpson Global out of Atlanta?”

Mark grinned as he stepped closer, and Olivia felt the butterflies she used to feel when Mark looked at her that way. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m not with Simpson Global anymore. I was headhunted to another company.”

“Olivia, are you happy to see your old law school buddy?” Murray asked. He didn’t wait for her to answer before slapping Mark’s back and facing them both. “I’m sure you two have some catching up to do. Mark is our new partner. I want you to show him the ropes. As he said, he’s no longer with Simpson Global, but instead is the new counsel for Legion-Winter Conglomerate. They’re expanding into Charleston in addition to other cities around the world, and Mark and I thought we’d make a good fit. He’ll be their lead counsel and the firm will provide assistance in the form of junior partners and paralegals. We’ll give him a good home base to operate out of. Do answer any questions he has and give him tips on how to operate out of multiple offices. Mark will also be with you in Charleston from time to time. I was hoping you could take him down there when you leave today.”

“Of course, Mr. Kirkland.” Olivia waited for her boss to leave the room before turning to face Imani and Mateo. “Imani is my assistant and Mateo is my paralegal. This is Mark Fleming. We went to law school together.”

“We did more than go to school together,” Mark smirked and Olivia fought the unexpected urge to giggle like the young woman she’d been when Mark had first paid attention to her.

“Dish!” Imani said, not caring it wasn’t proper to gossip about her boss’s love life in the office.

“We dated for two years, but then I left for Atlanta and distance just happened,” Mark said with a frown. “Olivia was offered a job in Atlanta but ended up taking the one here. She was splitting her time between Charleston and New York for Kirkland and I was busy nonstop in Atlanta,” Mark said with a shrug.

“But here you are now. Together again,” Mateo said with a wink. Yup, she’d lost total control over her employees. However, they weren’t running from the building in tears, so she’d deal with it later.

“Yes, and now I need to get back to Charleston. This is my first weekend off in months and I plan to make the most of it.”

Imani and Mateo gave her a “go get it, girl” look as they walked off with their heads together, whispering about her lack of social life and the hunky ex now back in her life.

“So, Legion-Winter. That’s a big company. What will you be doing for them?” Olivia asked as she walked out of the conference room and headed for her office.

“They’ve charged me with their expansion plan. I’ll be flying around a lot, but they liked Kirkland Law because they have offices on the East Coast and their international contacts. It’s also impressive that SA Tech and Faulkner Shipping use Kirkland. I look forward to seeing if I can help with that since I have so much experience with Simpson Global and now Legion-Winter. I find Sebastian Abel and Ryker Faulkner inspirational.”

“Oh, did Mr. Kirkland not explain that?” Olivia asked.

“Explain what?”

“I’m the only senior partner who works for them. I have a team of junior associates doing what I need to help me with the caseload, but my clients like to keep things as close to the

vest as possible so, when it comes to the actual confidential legal work, it's just me handling it. I doubt you are interested in pulling filings and researching case law that I have the juniors doing," Olivia explained, trying to lighten the mood.

"I didn't realize that. I figured it was like most firms where there were teams involved." Mark did not look happy.

Olivia had always hated when he was upset. She slid right back into that girlfriend role even though she didn't feel like that title fit her anymore. "It's okay. You're not going to have time to work with me anyway. You're going to be the international lawyer for Legion-Winter. You'll be flying all over the world in your private jet."

Mark smiled again. "That's right. Mostly."

"Mostly?" Olivia asked, packing up her things for the next couple of weeks in Charleston. Well, unless Roger was an ass again and filed another motion.

"Yes. It's one of the main reasons I'm going to Charleston. I have a meeting with Ryker Faulkner to discuss partnering with Legion-Winter for our shipping needs."

"Excellent. Are you ready to leave now or do you want to fly down later? I don't know if you have an assistant yet, but Imani can arrange travel for you until you hire someone." Olivia asked.

"Now is good. They put my bags somewhere downstairs. I'll just grab them and meet you in the lobby."

The second Mark left her office, Imani and Mateo were on it.

"Is he single?" Imani asked.

"I don't know. It's none of my business."

"I think it is. Let me do my thing." Imani had her phone out and even with perfectly shaped long nails she operated it faster than Olivia could ever dream of doing. "Nope. No girlfriend, but lots of arm candy at events."

Mateo was now looking over her shoulder. "Is that him playing polo with a prince?"

And right there was one of the many reasons they'd broken up. It was all coming back to her now. Mark had been great, but he was used to being in charge. His family was wealthy. A third-generation lawyer, he was a disappointment to his country club Upper East Side parents because he'd gone to State instead of the Ivy League law school the other Fleming men had attended. Olivia had not been good enough for his parents. They'd made that clear when he'd finally brought her to meet them for dinner after their graduation. She didn't want to hurt Mark's feelings, but their disdain for her background, her station in life, had been a big reason she chose to take the Kirkland job. Or, maybe it was better to say it eased her guilt because she was going to take the job anyway. It was the right choice for her career, and while she felt a twinge of guilt, it had been what was best for her and sometimes you have to put yourself first.

They'd tried to make it work, but she and Mark were both ambitious and out to prove themselves. Their work schedules didn't allow for many days off and eventually they were planning when to see each other and were looking eight months out. It had been sad, but at that point they hadn't seen each other in four months and were immersed in work. Neither one had time to date locally, let alone long distance. It had ended amicably, but they'd never spoken again.

“Tell us all about the mile high club,” Imani called out right as the elevator doors closed. Olivia rolled her eyes. She told herself for the hundredth time that sass was better than tears or training a new assistant as she stepped into the lobby.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Olivia turned to see Mark pulling a large, silver hardcover suitcase with a matching hanging bag slung over his shoulder. Olivia smiled and almost laughed when Eric glared at Mark for opening the back door to the car instead of allowing him to do so. Eric was a bit protective of her after hearing all she'd gone through during the assault.

The ride to the airport went by quickly as Olivia told Eric about Mark and talked to Mark about how much she loved

Charleston. Before she knew it, they were on the plane on their way home. Well, to her home.



“Thanks for the lift.” Mark gave her that sexy little smirk of his as they walked across the tarmac to where her car was waiting. “Want to get dinner tonight? You can show me around the city some.”

“Sorry, but I don’t stay in the city during the weekends. I have a weekend cottage in Shadows Landing. I’m meeting some friends there tonight. Do you want me to drop you off at the firm’s condo?” Olivia offered, but already she was itching to spend the evening in Shadows Landing. If she rushed home now, she could spend the afternoon out on her dock. Just her, a blanket, a drink, and a good book. She couldn’t imagine anything better. Just then an ornery sheriff with hip-hugging jeans, brown hair that’d been sun-kissed, and dark blue eyes appeared in her mind.

“Olivia Townsend, blushing? Do you have a date tonight?” Mark teased as a second car joined them.

“No, nothing like that. It’s a girls’ night. Well, you have my number now if you need anything. Enjoy your weekend getting settled and I’ll see you at the office on Monday.”

“It’s really good to see you again, Olivia.”

“Yeah, you too.” Olivia waved goodbye and slid into her car. The scent of the ocean made her want to head to Shadows Landing immediately. However, there were things she had to do at her condo first. Like take out the trash. If she left that in her condo over the weekend, it would be a very bad thing.

Olivia sped down the interstate past Faulkner Shipping and into historic downtown Charleston. She drove down near Bay Street before turning onto Broad. The old houses with window boxes filled with bright flowers and their intricate iron gates were beautiful. She turned onto Rutledge Avenue and pulled into a private parking lot behind a palatial old mansion. The mansion had been turned into condos years ago. Thanks to some insider dealing, Olivia bought two condos and turned

them into one large one. She loved her home in the city. Her condo took up one full side of the old mansion and had cost a fortune, but the bonus she'd gotten from Ryker last year had made it possible.

Olivia unlocked and opened the door to the lobby, which was really the old vestibule that separated the entrance from the main part of the mansion, but was now used for waiting for cars and mailboxes.

"Oh, hello, dear. Playing hooky from work so you can visit Shadows Landing for the weekend?"

Olivia closed her mailbox and turned to see the owner of the building with her Yorkshire terrier on a leash and ready for her walk. A smile appeared naturally on Olivia's face. She adored the owners of the building. They were old Charleston society, straight out of history, with a streak of sass and an iron backbone that left Olivia in awe.

"Hello, Miss Tibbie. You know me so well. As soon as I change and take out the trash, I'm on my way to Shadows Landing to take the whole weekend off."

"Good. Working so much isn't good for a young lady."

"I promise, my health is just fine, Miss Tibbie," Olivia said, trying not to laugh.

"Oh dear. If you thought I was talking about your health, you really have no sex life. I have a grandson ..."

"Miss Tibbie! Are you prostituting your grandson out to me?"

Miss Tibbie tried to bat her lashes innocently, but failed miserably on the innocence part. "You can't be a male prostitute, can you? And don't you want me as your grandmother?"

"They're called gigolos and it's still illegal if you pay a man for sex," Olivia said, trying not to laugh. She put a hand to her heart dramatically. "You're killing me, Miss Tibbie! Who wouldn't want you as a grandmother?"

“Well, I’m not killing you, but your lack of a life is killing your hoo-ha. I’ll make sure E.F. stops by to see you next time he visits. Have fun in Shadows Landing, dear. Tell Ellery I want to see my little Chase soon. Great-grandma Tibbie wants to spoil him.”

Olivia held the door open for Miss Tibbie, and once she was on her way, headed for her condo. She kicked off her heels and took down her hair. It seemed as if her blonde hair was never down, but with it being in a twist all day it now cascaded in waves down to her shoulder blades. She watered her plants, took out the trash, and changed into short jean shorts with a cute brown belt and a loose white T-shirt. She slid on some flip-flops, locked up, and prepared to relax. Finally.

“Don’t you look pretty? Going to the beach?”

“Dax!” Olivia said, smiling at her neighbor across the hall. There were three condos on the other side of the house. Dax was in one, another was kept empty as a guest room for any of Tibbie’s friends and family, and the third was occupied by a physician. Dax was an engineer who did a lot of work from home and was her go-to neighbor when she was out of town and needed something checked on. “I’m off to Shadows Landing after a hell of a day. Week.”

“Work?” Dax asked, pushing his black-rimmed glasses up his nose. He was sexy in a nerdy way that some girl would love. He wasn’t muscular like Granger or refined like Mark. But there was something cute and sexy about the wrinkled shirt and slightly tousled hair look he had going on.

“What else would it be?” Olivia teased. She had no life outside work.

“Let’s grab a coffee when you get back. We’ll start the week off right.”

“Sounds good. Have a good weekend, Dax.”

Olivia heard his door close as she headed for the elevator. Olivia looked through the mail she’d gotten while she waited for the elevator. Bill. Bill. Law school asking for a donation.

Announcement of upcoming shows and exhibits for Ellery's art gallery. Then a letter with no return address.

The elevator doors opened and Olivia stepped into the small but elegant elevator as she ripped into the envelope with her finger. Inside, she found a folded piece of white paper, but the envelope was heavy. Olivia unfolded the paper and her stomach felt as if the elevator were plummeting. The letter was typed in big, bold letters and read:

YOU THINK YOU'RE SO SMART, BUT YOU STILL DON'T SEE WHAT YOU HAVE COMING. YOU'LL FINALLY GET WHAT YOU DESERVE AND WE'LL BOTH LOVE EVERY MOMENT OF IT.

Olivia tipped the envelope and out rolled a small, handmade doll with yellow yarn hair, a little red suit, and eyes made from black string X's landed in her hand. The doll stared blankly up at her with what looked like a corsage pin stuck in her heart.

Her hands shook and the doll dropped to the floor as the elevator door opened. Miss Tibbie's ancient Yorkshire terrier leaped forward, growling, snatched the voodoo doll up and ripped it to shreds.

"Oh dear," Miss Tibbie gasped. "Was that yours? I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over my little darling. Please let me buy you a new one."

A giggle escaped Olivia's lips as this Yorkshire terrier with barely three teeth left in its head managed to completely shred the doll and the black mood it had cast. Olivia bent and quickly picked up the pin to make sure the dog didn't eat it. Olivia tried to retrieve what was left of the doll but was thwarted when the dog tossed it to the side and peed on it.

"Oh my word!" Tibbie gasped, looking as if she might have a fit of the vapors. "I am so sorry."

Olivia stared for a second and then burst out laughing. "That made my day. Thank you. Have a great weekend."

Olivia took a doggie waste bag from Tibbie, picked up the nasty thing, and left the pee-soaked, shredded voodoo doll

where it belonged. In the trash.

3

“Thank you, Sheriff!” Landry Jr. waved from his front door as his mother stepped outside.

Lydia was a couple of years younger than Granger and had been married to Landry Sr. for fourteen years. They’d been high school sweethearts, possibly even middle school sweethearts if Granger’s memory was right.

“You didn’t have to do that, but I appreciate it.” Lydia’s hair was pulled back in a messy bun and the sound of children playing in the backyard of their small cottage house echoed around the neighborhood.

“He’s a good kid. I was happy to have a surfing partner today.”

Lydia didn’t head back inside. Instead, she leaned her forearms on the open window of his car door and leaned closer to Granger.

“I haven’t told them yet, but Landry’s tour has been extended another eight months. He was supposed to be home in three weeks. They’re going to be devastated.”

“When was he here last?” Granger asked, hoping Lydia wouldn’t cry. He didn’t do well with tears. They clammed him

up and led him to do awkward things like patting someone on the shoulder too hard.

“Almost eight months ago. I’ve been a wreck since he left. I’ve been binge eating and watching sappy romance movies. I had to get new clothes from all the chocolate, and I won’t even tell you how many pies I conned Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie out of. Last year he’d talked about trying to wind things down and come home. Maybe try for a transfer to the base in Charleston. I thought I only had this one last tour to survive, but now this. I was so upset I ate a whole BBQ pork bowl from Pink Pig while crying in my closet. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, just to explain how you saved me today. You called and asked to take Landry Jr. to something he’s been begging me to do for years, and it just made me realize it was all going to be okay. I’m not alone.”

“Want me to call Tamika to babysit and you can come to the bar with me? I’m meeting the guys, and the ladies are there for ladies’ night.”

“Oh, no. It’s Friday. I’m sure Tamika is busy waiting tables at the Pink Pig. It would be nice to have some adult time without the kids, though. I love them, but thank goodness I had my tubes tied after Leo was born.”

“I bet Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie would watch them. They do enjoy imparting their knowledge to the next generation.”

Lydia perked up. “I’ll call them right now. Well, if you don’t think the girls would mind me joining them?”

“Nope.” Granger held up his phone. “Tinsley said to meet them there as soon as the babysitters arrive.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Granger!”

Granger smiled as Lydia ran back into the house, issuing orders like a battalion commander. Landry Sr. would be proud.

Harper’s Bar was a mainstay of downtown Shadows Landing. Well, if you could call the couple blocks of Main Street a downtown. There was Gil’s Grub and Gas, the historical society called Daughters of Shadows Landing, Bless Your

Scarf boutique, Tinsley Faulkner-Kendry's art gallery with Savannah Faulkner's interior design business on the second floor, Darcy Faulkner's treasure museum, rival barbecue restaurants—The Pink Pig and Lowcountry Smokehouse, and a diner called Stomping Grounds. And, of course, the sheriff's station and courthouse. However, the linchpin, the anchor in more ways than one, of Shadows Landing was the church that sat in the middle of Main Street. It had been designed and built by the pirate founders of the town. There were secret tunnels, weapons, and more secrets than people buried there.

This was Granger's town and he loved it. It had been his sanctuary after that mess in college. When he parked his SUV and headed to Harper's, he knew he'd be stopped by every single person there and even if he didn't show it, it meant a lot to him.

"Hiya, Sheriff!" Magnum "Maggie" Bell, an Olympic sharpshooter, called out as she and her brother, Gage, walked toward the bar. Gage and Granger exchanged a nod as Granger opened the door for Maggie.

"Busy night at the bed and breakfast?" Granger asked. Their parents had turned the historic family estate into a bed and breakfast and events location. Lots of weddings were held there.

"Drunk groomsmen were getting handsy at the bachelor party," Maggie said with a roll of her eyes.

"You don't see me complaining about the drunk bridesmaids getting handsy," Gage complained. "But Mom wouldn't let me punch the groomsmen and steal the bridesmaids away, so here we are."

Maggie stopped short, making the guys nearly pile into each other. "Whoa, who is that?"

Granger looked to where Maggie was staring. It was a tableful of Townsend brothers. "Oh, we got another one," Granger said. It was as if the brothers all heard him and turned as one to glare at him.

Maggie giggled.

Gage shifted nervously from foot to foot.

Granger glared back.

“Hi, I’m Maggie.” Maggie gave a little finger wave as she struggled not to blush as five pairs of alpha male eyes turned to look at her.

The door to the bar opened and in strode Olivia, the Townsend brothers’ sister and object of their overprotective presence in Shadows Landing.

The first thing Granger noticed was how hot Olivia looked in cut-off shorts and a T-shirt. Her long legs were on full display and he didn’t know how a plain T-shirt could make her breasts look so amazing, but it did.

Olivia’s eyes widened and then narrowed at her brothers. “Forrest! What the hell are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet your brother?” the newest Townsend asked, standing to hug his sister. No one knew just how many brothers there were. Every time Granger asked, they just grunted or Olivia would mutter, “a lot.”

“Fine, hi. Now, what the hell are you all doing here?” Granger pressed his lips together to stop from laughing. He loved it when Olivia showed them who was boss. As much as they thought they were, Olivia ran roughshod over them.

“Kane and Hunter are looking at homes to buy since they’ve been visiting so often. I thought I’d tag along. Turns out I like it here. I may stay a while. It’ll be good to have the family all together again,” Forrest said before sitting back down with the rest of the Townsends.

“Oh, is this all of you then?” Georgina the bartender asked as she placed their drinks down on the table.

“I wish,” Olivia muttered and then Granger lost control of his laughter. Now six pairs of Townsend eyes glared at him, but he just sent them a wink before heading off to meet the guys by the dart boards.

“Who’s the guy giving Georgie looks?” Kord asked as he glared at the Townsends while taking a sip of water.

“The newest arrival. Forrest.” Granger looked between Kord and the cute bartender and shook his head. “Just ask her out, already.”

“I could give you the same advice. You’ve been over here for less than a minute and have snuck three glances at Olivia,” Kord challenged.

“Yeah, I never took you for a coward,” Wade Faulkner, Coast Guard rescue swimmer, treasure hunter, and Granger’s lifelong friend, taunted with a smile as Olivia went to join the nearby table of women.

“I could give you some intimidation lessons,” Tristan Durand, Granger’s friend and Edie’s new husband, said with a smirk.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re scary, Assassin Boy, whatever. I think I’m fine on the intimidation front,” Granger said, shooting the new guy a glare.

“Eh, I’d give it a *B*. Now, Ahmed ...”

All the guys groaned. “We don’t want to hear more about your man-crush on super soldier Ahmed,” Dare Reigns, Harper’s husband, said. Dare wasn’t exactly a pushover either. He was ATF and built like a tank.

The conversation turned to teasing Wade about becoming a father soon and talking about their wives. Granger and Kord were the only two without a woman in their lives, at least technically. Kord was head over heels for Georgie, but he’d never asked her out as far as Granger knew.

“You could have this, you know?” Gavin, the eldest of the Faulkners and the town’s only doctor, said quietly as he joined Granger for a game of darts.

“Have what?”

“A wife. A family. Love.”

Granger gritted his teeth and threw the dart. Bullseye. “You know better than most why I can’t. You know the saying? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame

on me. Well, I'm not going for my third strike. I learned after the first two."

"All it takes is the right woman to change everything."

Gavin walked away after dropping that tidbit of wisdom.

Granger knew he wasn't being a good friend. The rest of the night he pretended to listen, but his thoughts were on Olivia. He'd thought he'd hidden the worst of his scars from her, but Granger knew that while Olivia might have seen some of the puckered skin, she hadn't seen the invisible scars to his heart. Fool me once ... he'd been fooled, big time. Fool me twice ... and it had changed his life forever.

4

Olivia had a nice little buzz going on as she walked home. She hadn't driven tonight. Not when she lived only a ten-minute walk away and knew she'd be drinking. Her brothers had offered her a lift home, but she'd sworn she would be okay. However, as she walked home, she felt goosebumps break out over her skin. The prickle at the back of her neck told her she was being watched.

Olivia glanced around as if enjoying the scenery. It was probably her brother Hunter. He had a freaky set of skills. She'd love nothing more than to catch him. That would be years' worth of crap she could give him at family events.

Olivia climbed her steps and stopped when she saw the pretty pink box with a white ribbon around it. It sat by her front door looking all sweet, but there was nothing sweet about the way it made Olivia feel.

Trying to act as if it were completely normal to find a gift on her doorstep, Olivia unlocked the door, grabbed the box, and locked herself inside. Olivia turned on the lights and headed for the kitchen. She used a knife to slice through the paper and held her breath when she opened it.

A notecard was on top and Olivia paused.

For my love. I know you'll get all the good things coming to you.

Granger immediately came to her mind, but he'd never send her a gift box or call her his love. Not without talking to her. No matter how much she wished he would. He just didn't like her like that, and she needed to stop wishing he would.

Using the tip of her knife, she flipped the card off and found the box filled with chocolate. Olivia dropped down on a kitchen chair and cried. Whoever this person was, they were messing with her. No place was safe. Work, her apartment, her cottage, nowhere. He was harmless, then he wasn't. He was threatening, then he was nice. Whoever this was, he was shredding her confidence.

Olivia sucked in a deep breath and wiped her face. No. She refused to be a victim. She tightened her hold on the knife. Let him come, whoever he was. She'd handle this on her own. However, her head and heart were telling her to call Granger. Granger would keep her safe.

"No!" Olivia pushed up from the table. She tossed the box in the trash. "I can take care of myself. I will handle this like I have everything else. On my own and with calm, precise action."

Taking a deep breath, Olivia began to feel better. She'd had a great night out with her friends and she wouldn't let some asshole ruin it. Now, she was going to take a special bath and think of Granger while doing so, and then go to bed. Tomorrow was going to be epic and she didn't want to miss a moment of it.



Granger groaned as Olivia's tongue danced with his. He held her tight against him as they battled in their race for pleasure. Her lips were on his. His hands were on her ass and pressing her forward to urge her to ride him. Her hands were on his shoulder, running down his chest, and then to his scars.

"Granger?" Olivia's beautiful face changed from drunk with pleasure to horrified. Those perfect lips that had once

been kissing his turned into a sneer. “You’re grotesque!”

Granger’s eyes shot open. His heart was still racing from first the pleasure and then the agony of the dream. He groaned as he kicked the sheets off the bed and strode to the bathroom. He didn’t look down as he washed his body. His soapy hands ran over the puckered, jagged scars as the images of previous supposed girlfriends ran through his mind. The look they gave when they saw his scars or when they asked for him to wear a shirt while he screwed them. That’s all it had turned out to be in the end—a long string of quick hookups that involved nothing more than physical gratification for both parties.

That had been enough until his friends all started to fall in love. And then Granger met Olivia Townsend. He saw what was possible, at least until Olivia barged into his hospital room, her eyes widening as she caught a small glimpse of his scars. In that one moment, Granger knew he couldn’t have what his friends did. They weren’t damaged. He was.

Ryker had understood him the most, having gone through a horrendous experience with his high school girlfriend and then discovering women only cared about his money. But even Ryker had found love with his ER nurse, Kenzie. That left Granger on the outside of life once again. He was used to it, though. Always in the shadows looking out for those he cared about. It was his way of thanking them for all they did when he returned to Shadows Landing after college graduation. They gave him a home, friendship, and a career he loved.

Granger stepped from the shower and got ready for the Shadows Landing Pirate Festival, which was held every year on the day their town was founded. It was going to be warm, but Granger didn’t do shorts. Instead, he pulled on his jeans and the black athletic performance shirt for first responders to wear when it was hot out. Sheriff was emblazoned across the back in big silver block letters and a small sheriff’s star with *Sheriff* once again in caps was positioned on his left chest.

His whole department was on duty today. He, Kord, and one other would be wearing the official department shirts, but the other part-time deputies would be mingling with the town and tourists as they kept an eye on things.

Granger slipped on his aviator glasses and placed the black cowboy hat on his head before shaking off the last shreds of his dream and getting to work.

“You were an accessory to this.”

Granger smiled as he crossed his arms over his chest and looked up at the enormous banner over Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie’s pie table. A prince, a billionaire, an assassin, and two Special Forces badasses were all lined up. Naked. Except for Miss Winnie and Miss Ruby’s apple pie placed strategically over each man’s midsection.

“Yeah, I was,” Granger replied proudly.

“I should kill you for this. Look how they updated it after using it at the state fair. Now Prince Zain has an eye patch and someone put a parrot on my shoulder,” Tristan Durand complained. Most of the men in the photo actually lived in Keeneston, Kentucky, where the Faulkners had family. However, Tristan was a local now and quite recognizable.

“What’s the matter, Assassin Boy? Can’t handle a little birdie on your shoulder?” Granger teased his new friend. The government assassin from Europe had married Granger’s childhood friend, Edie, recently. “Personally, I like the wooden peg leg they gave Dylan Davies.”

Tristan smirked. “Yeah, that is pretty funny.”

“I almost forgot.” Granger leaned into the window of his department SUV and picked up a shirt. “This is for you.”

Tristan caught it when Granger tossed it at him and held it up. It was identical to the shirt Granger was wearing.

“New uni?” Tristan asked with a big grin.

“You’re on duty out here today so you need this. Your regular uniforms have finally come in and are at the station. You start the normal shift rotation on Monday.”

Granger shook Tristan’s hand and watched as Tristan navigated around everyone setting up their booths to tell his wife.

“It’ll be nice having a third full-time deputy,” Kord said, joining him as they watched people setting out arts, crafts, and baked goods.

“Yes, it will. It’s been a bit busy recently. Hopefully, now that all the Faulkners are married, we’ll see some peace.”

“Edie wasn’t a Faulkner and she brought a freaking assassin to town,” Kord pointed out.

“True,” Granger said, scanning the crowd until he found where Edie was kissing her husband. The young widow deserved this happiness and he was happy for her. “But that’s only a very small technicality. Realistically, she already was a Faulkner or at least related to them by marriage. Either way, I’m ready for some peace and quiet.”

“Peace and quiet will have to wait,” Kord said as the first tour bus arrived.

The street was filled with tourists and townspeople. Granger, Tristan, and Kord started walking their beats to make sure the tourists behaved. He wasn’t worried about the large man in nothing but overalls and packing a massive hunting knife. He wasn’t worried about the scrawny guy talking to the air. He also wasn’t worried about a short man with a knife so big it looked as if he was compensating for his lack of height. No, those were just the locals. Gator, in his customary overalls, removed alligators that wandered into town. Skeeter conversed with the pirate ghosts and ran a ghost tour company. Then Turtle was, well, he was just Turtle, and if you talked to him for more than two minutes, he’d tell you about his pecker being bitten by a snapper turtle and how it made his pecker bigger.

“Sheriff!” Granger turned to see Landry Jr. racing toward him with half of his siblings trailing behind. “Bubba has one of the Townsend brothers trapped. I told him I’d come get you but he told me not to. He tried kicking out at Bubba and, well, you know Bubba doesn’t take kindly to that.”

“He’s ornery,” little Lindsey said as she bit into a pink cotton candy that was bigger than her head.

“Which one? Bubba the alligator or Mr. Townsend?” Granger asked as he waved down Gator through the crowd.

Lindsey frowned as she thought very seriously about the question before turning to Lacy, her older sister. “Which one is ornery and which one is horny?”

Landry let out a long-suffering sigh. Lacy rolled her eyes.

“I think they both work for each of them,” Granger said, trying not to laugh.

“Mr. Gator!” Lindsey yelled as she threw herself around his tree-trunk-sized leg and squeezed.

Gator reached down and had her sitting on his shoulders in a split second. Lindsey giggled as Gator stole a bite of her pink cotton candy. “What’s going on?” Gator asked around a mouthful of cotton candy.

“Bubba has one of the Mr. Townsends trapped and he tried to kick Bubba,” Landry told him.

“And we didn’t know if that made him ornery or horny,” Lindsey filled in. “Do you know, Mr. Gator?”

Gator grinned and looked right at Granger. “I don’t. But I think you should ask Mr. Townsend.”

“That’s a great idea, Gator. Let’s go ask Mr. Townsend.” Granger grinned back at Gator and believed this might be the best pirate festival ever.

Lindsey held her cotton candy in front of her as Damon Townsend, the eldest of the known Townsend family, glared at Bubba.

“You shouldn’t have kids around this wild animal,” Damon growled.

“Oh, Bubba won’t hurt you. Much,” Gator replied.

“I wasn’t talking about the alligator.” Damon glared at Granger. Granger shrugged. So far, the Townsends were all bark and no bite. Well, that might change if he knew about the dreams Granger had about Olivia. However, while the

Townsend brothers were all big and imposing guys, Olivia was way more intimidating.

“How’s your sister?” Granger asked just to poke the bear.

Damon growled. Granger smiled.

“Mr. Townsend?” Lindsey asked as she twirled one long pigtail.

“Yes, sweetie?”

Huh, it looked as if Damon did have a heart under all the scowling and threats of violence he’d made against any man looking to date his sister, Olivia.

“Are you ornery or horny?” Lindsey asked.

Damon’s reaction was priceless and Granger wished he’d recorded it. Damon’s eyes bugged, his jaw dropped slightly in surprise, and then even Granger saw the tough man’s lips twitch into a smile. “Right now, I’m both, especially since Bubba is preventing me from picking up my date.”

“Sheriff Fox said you were both, too. He’s always right.” Lindsey beamed up at Granger and he felt like a superhero. If only Damon’s sister would look at him like that, maybe Granger wouldn’t be so ornery.

“Like recognizes like.” Damon sent the barb at Granger, but he was too busy promising Lindsey another cotton candy to care.

“Thank you, Miss Lindsey, for your cotton candy,” Gator said as he used it to bait Bubba. He waved the cotton candy under Bubba’s nose and the large alligator spun around so fast his tail knocked into Damon’s legs and sent him sprawling to the ground.

“That’s five dollars, Mr. Townsend,” Lindsey said with a frown.

“Five dollars for what?” Damon asked as Gator and Bubba walked off down the street. Every fifty feet or so Gator would toss Bubba a bite of cotton candy.

“For the swear jar. You just said some very bad words.”

Damon stood and reached into his wallet. He pulled out a twenty and handed it to her. “I’m paying in advance. Why don’t you use this to get some treats for all your brothers and sisters instead of running home to put it in the swear jar?”

“Thanks, Mr. Townsend!” Lindsey, Landry, and Lacy called out before running to meet their other siblings.

“That was nice of you.” It hurt Granger to say, but maybe Damon wasn’t the ass Granger had thought he was.

“They’re good kids,” Damon admitted.

“Lydia has it tough with seven kids. Her husband is in the military and his tour just got extended. The town helps raise them.” Granger didn’t know why he was telling Damon, but Damon was now part of Shadows Landing whether Granger liked it or not. He needed to know he was expected to look out for them, too.

Damon nodded. “I understand that. There were a lot of us Townsends and we looked out after each other, too. It would have been nice to have a town like this helping.”

“Just how many Townsends are there?” Granger asked, ready to finally resolve this issue as they walked toward Miss Winnie and Miss Ruby’s table.

“Wouldn’t you like to know? No, I think it’s better you don’t know how many of us will come for you if you touch our sister.”

Granger stepped forward and used the tip of his finger to push his cowboy hat up enough so that Damon could see his eyes. “I don’t give a shit how many of you there are. That would never stop me.”

“Stop you from what?”

Both men turned to look at the subject of their discussion striding toward them. Olivia’s blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She wore a simple T-shirt dress that somehow hugged all the right curves without showing any skin. Damn.

“From posing on one of these naked pie banners.”

Damon smirked and Granger wanted to punch him.

“Who is posing for Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie?” Kord asked, joining them.

“Granger,” Damon said, his smirk only growing.

“I’m totally in. I’m kinda hurt I haven’t been asked yet. We could do a law enforcement one and sell it to help the T-ball league we sponsor.” Kord was on a roll and Granger felt the blood drain from his face.

“No.” Granger’s tone was flat, expressionless.

“Oh, come on, Granger. Everyone else has done it.” Olivia was teasing him, but his smile fell even more.

“No. And that’s final.” Granger’s nightmare came roaring to life. He’d rather get shot again than to have photos taken of him where everyone can point and stare and pity him. “I have to get back to work.”

Granger didn’t look back as he strode off. He didn’t know where he was going, but it was far away from any talks about him stripping down for photos.

5

“What an asshole,” Damon muttered as Olivia watched Granger disappear into the crowd.

“Nah, man.” Kord sounded upset with himself. “He’s not. Ah, hell. I forgot for a moment.”

“Forgot that he was an asshole?” Damon asked with disbelief as the awful realization of what Kord meant hit Olivia.

“If you call Granger an asshole one more time, I’ll punch you myself,” Kord snapped. “You don’t know what you’re talking about and you need to shut up. Granger is the best man I know and I pushed when I shouldn’t have because it’s easy to forget what he’s been through.”

Damon crossed his arms and stared at Kord who just stared back as Olivia fought the urge to chase after Granger and apologize. But he wouldn’t like that. He wouldn’t want any attention drawn to him or the scars that she’d heard covered his body. And he certainly wouldn’t want any pity.

“And what has he been through that’s so horrible?” Damon asked and Olivia stepped in.

“He’s been shot in the line of duty,” Olivia told her brother.

“And stabbed,” Kord added. “And he almost died in a car accident. Some people aren’t ... understanding about what he’s gone through and look down on him for it.”

Damon grunted. Olivia knew that grunt. It was Damon realizing he and Granger weren’t so very different even if their lives had been.

“Damon, will you get me a slice of pie?” Olivia batted her eyes just as she did when she’d been a little girl and her big brother instantly softened.

Damon grunted again but took off for the line.

“Do people really look down on Granger for his scars?” Olivia asked Kord.

“Have you seen them?” Kord asked with surprise instead of answering.

Olivia shook her head. “Only enough to know he has scarring, but he covered himself quickly. I’ve only heard whispers.”

“Yeah, well, let’s just say some women in his past haven’t been able to look beyond them.”

Olivia felt her blood begin to boil at the thought of someone looking down on such a great man for that. “Then he’s been dating the wrong women,” she said, angry that he’d had to experience such superficial nonsense.

“Maybe that’s why it’s hard for him to trust a woman with his heart. Why it’s hard to take a risk and ask the woman he likes out.” Kord looked pointedly at her. “Maybe if a woman showed him those scars don’t define him, he could take a chance on love again.”

Kord’s words hit her like a punch to the gut. Everything became clear. The fight they had about women wanting picture-perfect men and not giving a man like him a chance. Granger didn’t think she’d want him because of his scars, when he was all she ever wanted, scars or no scars. She’d obviously kept her interest in Granger Fox a too closely guarded secret. Dammit, she was *done* playing it cool where Granger Fox was concerned.

Olivia reached out and squeezed Kord's hand. "Thank you. I believe I need to see the sheriff about something."

Olivia hurried off in the direction she'd seen Granger go. Darkness was settling in, and while the lights strung downtown kept the festival bathed in a warm glow, the shadows were dark enough that Granger could easily disappear if he wanted.

Olivia was taller than average, so she rose up on her toes to scan the crowd. She heard people calling out to her, but she just waved to them absently as she kept moving. Normally she was calm and collected and habitually examined and re-examined every move before she made it, but not now. Now nothing but instinct drove her and every instinct she had urged her forward. She had to tell Granger he was all she thought about, even when she tried not to. She had to tell him she had fallen in love with him the first time she met him, but she had thought *she* wasn't enough for him. It was time to risk it all and lay her cards on the table. Love was worth the risk.

"Where are you rushing off to?" Ryker asked as she blew by him.

"Have you seen Granger?" Olivia asked over her shoulder as she finally slowed down enough to talk to her boss and best friend.

"Yeah, he stormed off toward the marina. What's going on?" Ryker demanded.

His wife, Kenzie, rolled her eyes as if Ryker were just your average obtuse male and not one of the most powerful businessmen in the world. "About time. That way," Kenzie pointed toward the dock far off in the distance.

"Thank you!" Olivia called out as she quickened her pace. Her eyes scanned the marina. As they adjusted to the shadowed darkness of the park that sat between the road and the marina, she finally saw Granger's silhouette off in the distance. His back was to her as he stood with his hands in his pockets, staring out at the water.

Olivia's heart beat madly as she broke into a run. Granger was too far away for her to call out to, but she'd finally found him. She had to tell him how she felt about him and hoped like hell it was enough. It was an urgency unlike she'd experienced before. She felt as if she didn't tell him now, she'd never be able to and she'd lose him forever. They'd been dancing around their feelings for so long that it felt as if she didn't take this chance now, she might not ever do it.

Maybe it was her pounding heart. Maybe it was the nervousness that seemed to consume her mind and body. Maybe it was that she was focused solely on Granger, but Olivia never saw him. From the shadows of a tree, a hand reached out and clamped around her upper arm hard and yanked.

"It's time for you to meet your destiny," the hoarse voice whispered in her ear as his other hand pressed hard against her lips and nose, cutting off her air.

Olivia fought the panic that rose in reaction. However, her body knew what to do even before her brain registered it. Since being attacked in New York City, she'd taken self-defense lessons. Not only that, but she sparred with her brother Hunter whenever he was visiting. She was *not* going down tonight. Olivia was no passive victim and simply did not have time for this nonsense—she had to bare her soul to the man she loved, damn it.

She brought her knee up and then slammed her heel down onto the man's foot. The second it made contact, she threw her elbow back into his gut and twisted enough to free her mouth. "Granger, help!"

Olivia didn't wait to see if Granger would come for her. She knew he would. Instead, she focused all her attention on the man trying to drag her away. She kicked, swung, screamed, and cursed him to hell and back as she landed a couple of punches to his gut.

"Olivia!" She heard Granger's deep voice roar from a distance.

"Soon. Your destiny awaits and nothing can stop it."

Olivia felt him push her hard in the middle of her back. She stumbled forward, dropping to her hands and knees with the momentum of the shove. When she looked around, he was gone.

“Liv!” Granger was pulling her up and into his arms. “Are you hurt?”

Olivia refused to collapse. She had to show Granger she was strong. She wanted to match his bravery to show she was good enough for him. “I’m not hurt. I knew you’d come.”

“I’ll always come for you. Now stay here.” She saw that Granger’s eyes were scanning the shadows before flitting toward Main Street. “Stone! Keep her safe.”

“What?” Olivia asked, but Granger was already taking off after her attacker.

“What the hell is going on? You’re shaking like a leaf,” her brother Stone asked.

“It’s nothing,” Olivia said absently as she tried to find Granger in the darkness.

“It’s not nothing,” Stone said, keeping her pulled against his side. “Brothers!”

This was not what Olivia needed right now. She did not need a whole bunch of male posturing while they treated her like a child.

“What’s going on?” Kane asked as they descended on her.

“Olivia won’t say,” Stone said. “I saw Granger manhandling her and then he yelled at me to watch her and took off running. She’s shaking. Did that bastard upset you?”

“I knew I didn’t like him,” Hunter growled as his hands fisted.

Olivia ignored them all and kept her eyes trained on the darkness that had seemed to swallow Granger whole. She didn’t hear a single word the entire time her brothers were talking. Her entire focus was on the darkness as she willed Granger to reappear unhurt.

Finally, movement in the shadows drew her attention and, like a mirage coming to life, Granger stepped through the darkness and into the small amount of light the moon was casting around them.

“You asshole!” Damon swung a punch at Granger. Granger ducked the punch. Olivia punched Damon and chaos rang supreme.

“I don’t have time for your crap,” Granger said to her brothers between clenched teeth while all her brothers threatened him.

“Enough!” Olivia yelled over them. She took her hands and shoved her way between Hunter and Kane who had made a wall between herself and Granger. “Granger saved me, you idiots. I’ve had enough of this overprotective pissing contest. Granger would never hurt me. Ever. He’s a good man and the most competent sheriff I’ve ever worked with.”

Granger’s eyes subtly softened at the compliment, but then snapped back into full cop mode. “What happened, Liv?”

Olivia heard her brothers’ collective gasp. They thought she was going to go off on Granger for the nickname. She had hated it growing up, but the sexy way Granger said it as his eyes bore into hers left her speechless for the first time in her life.

“Liv?” Granger asked gently, prompting her to answer.

Olivia cleared her throat and did what she did best—chose her words with care to give nothing away. “I was walking toward the marina when somebody grabbed me,” Olivia told them about the attacker, what he did, and what he said. She noticed seven men’s jaws tighten in unison as she finished recounting what had happened.

“Do you know who your attacker is?” Granger asked.

Olivia closed her eyes as she remembered the attack. “I don’t. Although, I know I probably do since it seemed so personal. However, no one I know would attack me or send me those notes.”

“What notes?” Granger and Kane asked at the same time.

“Um, I’ve been getting some threatening emails and then some letters and a couple of strange gifts.”

“You have a stalker and didn’t tell me?” Granger practically yelled. “I thought you were smart, Liv.”

“I am smart,” Olivia shot back instantly.

“I agree with the sheriff on this one,” Kane said, crossing his arms and glaring at her. “Start at the beginning and tell us everything.”

6

Granger felt his blood pressure rise with each sentence. Olivia had been stalked for *weeks* and she'd never said anything to him about it. She was in danger and could have been kidnapped tonight, but because of her dislike of him she didn't say anything.

"Most stalkers know their victim," Granger said as soon as she finished her recounting. "But not telling me was stupid. I could have been hunting this guy already."

"Agreed," one brother said again.

Granger turned to the man who was as tall as his brothers, but wasn't nearly as muscled as Stone, Damon, and the other big one. He was more like the newbie brother. Clearly strong, but with lean muscle mass compared to *lift a car and throw it at you* muscles. "You I like. Who are you?"

"Kane. I know a little about this, *since it's my job*, so I'm equally annoyed with my sister about keeping this from us."

Granger felt a little relief. There was at least one Townsend brother he could talk to. "Law enforcement?"

"I was with the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit before becoming a private consultant," Kane answered.

“See, your brother agrees with me,” Granger said to Olivia with a smirk before frowning again. “We have a problem, though. He’s escalating. The previous harassment was done at a distance, but now he’s made contact.”

“Which means your life is at risk,” Kane said, picking up the explanation.

“My life is not at risk. He sent me chocolate for having a bad day. He’s not going to kill me. Right?” Olivia asked, looking to Granger and Kane to make her feel better about the situation.

“Liv, he just tried to kidnap you. What do you think will happen to his ego when you fight him, disagree with him, and flat-out refuse to do anything he says?” Granger asked.

Granger saw Olivia think it through and then accept what he said. She was very reluctant to ask for help, and he understood that. Olivia was fiercely independent. She was the one who normally swooped in and fixed everything, but now, for the first time since he’d known her, she was the one needing help. He bet she didn’t like the feeling.

“What do I do now?” Olivia asked.

“You show me all the notes and gifts so I can get a profile,” Kane said.

“And you’re not to be alone,” Granger added.

“We won’t leave her side,” Damon said on behalf of all five Townsend brothers.

Granger saw Olivia ready to argue that fact. “Just give us a little time to see what we can find,” he said, stopping her argument before it began.

“Fine,” Olivia grumbled. “But I think you’re all overreacting.”

“It’s because we all love you,” Damon said before leaning forward and giving her a loud smacking kiss on the cheek.

Granger didn’t know if he was in the *all*, but dammit, his heart had nearly stopped beating when he saw Olivia grappling with her assailant. He loved her. Loved her like crazy from her

first smartass comment through watching her command the world with the calm competence of a general. Some men might be intimidated by a strong woman like her, but Granger found it incredibly sexy. A woman would have to be strong to not run from his scars.

“Kane, let’s talk tomorrow. We can go over the evidence and see what kind of profile we can come up with.” Granger knew they wouldn’t let him play a role in keeping Olivia safe tonight, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to look out for her. The quicker he solved this case, the quicker she’d be safe and that was all that mattered.

“Sounds like a plan.” Kane paused and then held out his hand. “Thanks for saving our sister.”

Granger shook Kane’s hand and gave a little nod in reply. Olivia looked as if she wanted to say something, but her brothers bundled her off down the road toward her house.



Olivia stared up at the ceiling of her house. She’d heard Kane go to bed an hour ago. Her little house was packed with her brothers, but they weren’t who she wanted. She wanted Granger. He made her feel safe.

I’ll always come for you.

Granger said that to her. Did that mean there was a chance he wanted her as much as she wanted him?

Olivia kicked off the covers. She wasn’t going to be sleeping tonight. Not with the fear of a possible kidnapping hanging over her and not with her heart torn in different directions. She was used to getting what she wanted, but Granger wasn’t a court case to be won or a deal to be made. He was a man with a damaged past that needed healing. She wanted to be the one to heal him. To show him his past only made him into the man he was today. The man she was head over heels in love with but would he trust her enough to be that woman for him?

Olivia padded softly down the stairs. She passed the spare room where two of her brothers were sleeping. The other three

were spread out in the living room. She loved her brothers, she did. But right now, she needed space to think.

Olivia slipped out the back door and onto the screened-in porch. She curled up on the loveseat and looked out over her backyard. She could hear the river flowing a short distance away and it calmed her.

“Hello, Liv.”

Olivia jumped and was about to scream when a hand closed over her mouth. “It’s me. You’re okay.” Then the hand slipped from her mouth.

“Granger? What are you doing here?” Was he real or had Olivia manifested him?

“I’m watching the house. Did you think I wouldn’t be looking out for you?” Granger slipped back into the deep shadows of the patio. He had been sitting in a chair in the darkest corner. A chair that gave him a view of the entire backyard plus the door to the house.

“My brothers are here.”

“Yes, but they’re asleep. I’m not.”

“Do you really think I’m in that much danger?” Olivia asked and gave an involuntary shiver.

Granger stood and took a seat next to her. “Here, you’re cold.” He took off his zippered sweatshirt and draped it over her.

Granger’s scent enveloped her and she decided she didn’t need to correct him on her being cold. “Thank you.”

“Yes, I think you’re in danger. After what happened in New York, I’m not taking any risks with you. I almost lost you . . .” Granger trailed off as if he wanted to say more, but didn’t. Instead, he was quiet for a moment and then asked her, “Who do you think it could be? Anyone pressing for a date? Or maybe you pissed off the wrong lawyer or client?”

Olivia sighed. “I’m always pissing someone off. It’s literally my job. They get mad at me because I work harder, longer, and refuse to back down. William Huff, Sebastian’s old

attorney, is still pissed at me. Then most recent is a lawyer named Robert Whitehall out of New York City. He's been a big pain in my ass. Calling me names and threatening me with lawsuits, including just this morning. There's a list a mile long of attorneys I've pissed off this week alone.”

“I'll look into Whitehall. I'll also have Ryker let me know about any threats that could spill over to you.”

“Do you have to tell Ryker? He'll be even worse than you about protecting me. He'll probably put me in bubble wrap and hide me in some far-off land.”

She saw the slight flash of teeth in the darkness and guessed that was Granger smiling. “Yes, we need to know if he knows of any threats.” Granger paused. She felt his arm brush her shoulder for a brief second before coming to rest on the couch behind her. Olivia wanted to lean into it, into him. Have him wrap his arm around her so she could bury her head in his chest and shut everything else out. “Liv, why were you at the marina tonight?”

It was now or never.

“I was coming to find you.”

Olivia felt Granger go completely still next to her. She wasn't sure he was even breathing, but she understood the feeling. She was more nervous than she'd ever been arguing a case. There she could fall back on case law and cold, hard facts. Now she was opening her heart and handing it to Granger to either hold and keep safe or crush.

“Why?” he asked, his voice so low she barely heard it.

“I wanted to tell you that I think you shouldn't do Miss Winnie and Miss Ruby's naked banner.”

If it were possible, Granger grew even more rigid.

“I agree,” he said between clenched teeth.

“But not for the same reason.” Olivia reached out in the darkness and placed her hand on his thigh. She felt the warmth of the scarred muscle under his jeans as she touched him. “I

don't want you to do it because I want to be the only one seeing you naked, not the whole town.”

The silence stretched between them and Olivia thought she'd blown it, but Granger wasn't getting up to move. He still sat frozen in place.

“Why?” he finally asked again in that low voice of his.

“Because I have feelings for you, Granger. I have for a long time. If someone is getting you naked, I want it to be me. Heaven knows I've waited long enough for it. Do you have any idea how many dreams I've had about you? About us?”

She heard Granger swallow, but he still didn't move.

“What kind of dreams?”

Olivia shifted so that she faced him in the dark. She could see his outline, but not his expression and the darkness emboldened her as she ran her hand over his leg and to the waistband of his jeans. “The kind where we're naked together. The kind where I am yours and you are mine ... in every way. The kind that when I wake up, I'm so frustrated it's not real that I make assistants run from work and leave opposing counsel in tears. The kind where I wish I could always be asleep so I am with you.”

“Liv.” Granger's whispered voice held a hint of a plea. “I'm not like the men you date. I'm damaged.”

Olivia paused her hand over his well-defined abs. She moved it just enough to feel the puckered scars under his shirt. “No, you're not like the men I dated. You're so much more. You're mine. At least I hope you are.”

“Damn, Liv,” Granger said on an exhale the second before his lips crashed down on hers. He took her mouth hard, fast, and with a confidence she'd never felt before. She'd been with other men, but they all seemed ... less. And this kiss put her dreams to shame. This was *Granger*. He was in control and she was happy to melt to his command.

Granger's tongue mimicked the sex dreams she'd had as he pulled her onto his lap. Olivia went willingly as she straddled him on the love seat. Her hands were on his chest,

his were on her ass, and she gave herself over to the sensations she'd only dreamed about.

Granger's hardness pressed against her. Her hands moved to spear into his hair so that she could hold his lips to hers. Her breasts felt heavy and begging to be touched as she took over the kiss. Granger ceded control as Olivia rocked against him.

"Things will change in the light of day, but I'll take every moment with you," she heard Granger whisper before trailing his lips down her neck.

"No, Granger." The words came out harsher than she intended.

"Sorry. You're right. I was moving too fast." Granger's hands dropped from where they'd been pushing up her shirt.

Olivia made a frustrated noise as she found his face in the dark and cupped his face in her hands. "Listen to me. It won't change in the light of day because I fell for you in the light of day. Nothing about your scars will change how I feel. I don't have feelings for you because of how you look—I mean, you are incredibly sexy—but that's not why I like you. I like you for how much concern you have for your friends. You're loyal, you're smart, you're brave, you're *you*. That's what I want, Granger—you. And I'll take you in the dark or in the light and be proud to be by your side if you let me. But you have to accept one thing to make that happen."

"What?" Granger asked hesitantly.

"That I'm thankful for your scars."

Granger stopped breathing. "What?" he asked, clearly confused.

"Your past girlfriends didn't like them, right?"

"I can't blame them. There are a lot."

"I'm glad because otherwise you would be married by now. I wouldn't be able to do this." Olivia kissed him again. Granger was stiff as he processed her words, but then he grabbed her and pulled her tight against him. He buried his

face in her neck and placed the softest kiss where her shoulder met her neck.

“This can’t be real.”

“It’s very real. The question is whether you’re ready to reach out and take it. Take me. Are you ready, Granger?” Olivia asked.

Before she could answer a light in the house flipped on.

Granger’s face was suddenly visible. His lips were swollen from kissing. He had dark circles under his eyes from staying up all night to protect her. He needed a shave, but at that moment, tired, rumpled and unshaven was the sexiest he’d ever been.

“I better get going. Wouldn’t want your brothers to kill me before you’re safe.” Granger lifted her up and set her down next to him. He stood and paused as he looked down at her.

His fingers brushed tenderly against her cheek and Olivia leaned into his palm. Granger leaned down and placed the gentlest of kisses on her lips as her eyelids fluttered closed. “I’ll see you soon.”

When Olivia opened her eyes, Granger was gone.

Granger sat in his SUV down the street from Olivia's house and thought about the night. Not too many things could surprise him, but Olivia sure had. Could she really mean it? She wanted *him*? Him wanting her was a no-brainer, but he'd never entertained the idea that someone as smart, sexy, and sophisticated as Olivia Townsend could want him.

Then Olivia had basically asked him if he were man enough to make the next move. Was he? Hell yes, but he was also a man who had been twice bitten and therefore gun-shy. Talking to Olivia in the darkness of the night had made it seem otherworldly. They'd been freer to share their thoughts because they couldn't see each other. They weren't face to scar. Things always looked differently in the light.

Granger turned on his car to leave only to stop when he got a text from an unknown number. *He texted her.*

Granger put the car in drive and drove the few houses down to Olivia's. He turned into the drive and was running for the door before he even thought about seeing her in the light of the day for the first time since they'd kissed.

The door opened and Kane stood with Stone. "That was fast," Stone said. "She just got the text and Kane thought you'd like to know."

“I was on my way here to check on her. What did it say?” Granger asked, stopping on the porch when they blocked the door.

“You know I play a sport that isn’t scared of violence. Heck, fights are fun. However, I’ve never wanted to hurt someone more than that. To kill someone. I do now,” Stone said. He played professional hockey for the Charleston Pirates and was basically paid to be intimidating.

Kane frowned, too. “He’s escalating. Forrest isn’t familiar with this kind of thing, but he’ll do anything to protect his sister. Hunter is ready to hunt and eliminate. Damon’s world doesn’t exactly play by the rules either. He’s ready to go with Hunter. I’m trying to hold this together in a legal sense, but you must know my contracts don’t follow the law all the time either. I rescue kidnapped people. I hunt killers. And I don’t necessarily follow the law when I do so.”

“And Hunter and Damon? What do they do?” Granger asked, understanding what Kane was saying. If Granger didn’t hurry and take care of the threat, they would hunt down and eliminate the threat on their own.

“Hunter is in the military. That’s all you need to know. Damon fought for everything he has. He built up a motorcycle empire and earned respect from the motorcycle clubs and gangs who now beg him to do work for them. Let’s just say you don’t get to be at the top of your field by playing nice and buying them brunch.”

“Gotcha. Just know I’ll do whatever it takes to keep Olivia safe. Now, tell me what you aren’t telling her, which is why I’m guessing you’re keeping me out here instead of letting me in to see her.”

“Granger, I thought that was you. What’s going on over here?” Ryker asked as he jogged down the driveway. He was in athletic shorts and had obviously been out running. “I saw Olivia’s driveway packed with cars at six-thirty in the morning and worried something happened.”

“Liv’s in trouble. She has a stalker,” Granger said to Ryker before dismissing him. “What was the text?”

Kane looked at Ryker, but then focused his attention back on Granger. “He’s angry that she escaped and didn’t fulfill her destiny.” Kane paused and pressed his lips together briefly. “He’s moved from the taunting, *you should be mine* type mentality, to it’s time for her to pay for what she’s done. You’re also called out in the message. He knows you and Olivia have a connection. You might be at risk now, too.”

Damon and Hunter appeared in the doorway and looked out. “Did you tell him?” Damon asked Kane.

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to kill this bastard and I don’t want you getting in my way,” Damon growled.

“What, specifically, did the text say?” Ryker asked, pointedly ignoring Damon.

Hunter handed Granger the phone. Ryker leaned over his shoulder and read the message along with him. The names he called Olivia had his blood boiling. The descriptive way he was going to kill “her boyfriend” didn’t bother him nearly as much as what he threatened to do to her to *teach her a lesson* while he takes everything she loves from her and makes her watch as he does it.

Ryker cursed.

Granger looked at Damon. “I’ll help, but we’re doing this my way.”

“Yeah, right. Let’s see the sheriff get his hands dirty. Just stay out of my way, gold star.”

“There’s no one I’d rather have by my side in a dirty fight than Granger,” Ryker said with the commanding air of the billionaire businessman he was. “But, I also need Olivia safe and the more hands the better.” Ryker pulled out his phone and sent a series of texts. “Burner phones, cameras, and a short-term bodyguard are now in motion.”

“Kord and Tristan will be here soon. I’ve also contacted Peter, Dare, and Paxton,” Granger told them.

Damon crossed his arms over his muscled chest and glared. “I get the assassin, but the others can’t do anything.”

Granger held up his hand to stave off further objections. “Kord is good in hand-to-hand. Tristan, well, killed people for a living. Peter is the head of the FBI’s Charleston office. Dare is ATF and scary as hell. Paxton used to be with the FBI gang task force before heading up a white-collar division. These are all resources to keep Liv safe.”

“Stop calling her that. You haven’t earned the right to call her that,” Stone said between clenched teeth.

“That’s not what she said last night. You know, when I was here all night talking to her and you all were asleep inside.”

Granger expected the punch. He ducked the first one, but there were four of them. One was bound to land. However, Granger did manage to block three of them. In the end, it was Kane who got him. Sneaky bastard.

“If you’re done trying to beat up Olivia’s wannabe boyfriend, breakfast is ready,” Forrest said, sticking his head out the door and rolling his eyes.

“Trying?” Damon said, sounding insulted. “Doing.”

“You wish. It was four against one and only the brainy brother got me. I bet that hurts your ego. I didn’t even fight back. Ouchy. Want some ice for your bruised ego?” Granger taunted as he pushed by them to walk inside. “Mmm, smells great, Forrest.”

Forrest grinned as Granger followed him. “Do you know how many poisonous plants there are around here? Amazing what I’ve found.”

Granger looked at the food laid out and paused. There were mushrooms and green leafy things all over the place. Nah, Forrest wouldn’t poison him if there was a chance Olivia would eat it.

“Here. I made you a plate.” Forrest handed him a plate separate from the buffet-style food laid out.

“Thanks.” Granger accepted it and turned toward the group walking in. “Here you go, Damon. A peace offering.”

Damon grunted but took the plate. Granger winked at Forrest before grabbing a new plate and helping himself.

“Granger? Ryker? What are you all doing here?” Olivia asked. She had changed and was now in royal blue jogging pants and a gray State Law T-shirt. Her hair was in a messy bun and the beginning of dark circles were under her beautiful eyes. However, it was his sweatshirt jacket on her that elicited a strong reaction in him. It was as if she was announcing that she was his.

“Kane showed us the text. Are you okay?” Granger asked her. He was already by her side, having been instantly drawn to her as if they were connected. He’d stayed away from her for so long, but after last night he knew it would be impossible to ever do again. Even if she broke his heart.

“I’m fine. You didn’t need to come, but I’m glad you did.”

“I did need to come. I won’t let anyone hurt you,” Granger swore.

Olivia nodded, but she didn’t argue. She didn’t fight with him for being over-protective. She also didn’t acknowledge that he’d left her no more than ten minutes ago, which left him wondering where they stood in the early morning light of day.

“This is my one weekend off. I’m not going to let this idiot ruin it, whoever he is,” Olivia announced, making everyone at the buffet freeze in the act of getting food.

“What does that mean?” Ryker asked. “Are you saying I keep you too busy?”

“You and Sebastian keep me more than busy. There’s not a word for how busy you keep me. However, today is my day off and I intend to relax one way or the other. Stalker or not. Over-protective brothers or not.”

Ryker looked down at his phone. “Help will be here first thing in the morning. Think you can stay safe until then?”

“I know how to keep her safe for the day. No one will find her.” Granger had a plan. She wanted a day off and he wanted to spend time with her and keep her safe.

“That doesn’t sound stalkerish at all,” Damon accused Granger.

“I just want to relax. I don’t want to go into hiding.” Olivia looked ready to explode with frustration. Granger could tell the stress was getting to her no matter how strong she was.

“Do you trust me?” Granger knew it was a loaded question. It wasn’t just about keeping her life safe. It was about bringing all the things they talked about in the dark into the light.

“Always.”

“Then pack a small bag and bring a bathing suit. We’re going out. I’ll bring you back in twenty-four hours.”

Olivia put any arguments from her brothers to rest. She promised she'd be careful and would check in regularly. Ryker got them to stay put by asking them to assist with part of his team coming in later today, whatever that meant. At this point, Olivia didn't care who did what. She had a day off and was spending it with Granger.

While she packed, she heard Kord and Tristan arrive and then she got a text from both Harper and Tinsley asking what was going on and why their husbands were on their way over. Olivia promised to explain later as she didn't exactly know what they were doing coming over either.

“We’re looking for a male aged twenty-five to fifty-five. He’ll be educated. He’ll either be a narcissist or socially awkward. The connection is the desire to be in control. Former boyfriends or anyone who wanted a relationship but was turned down are at the top of the list. Start with every boyfriend or male close to Olivia. This person is known to her,” Kane explained as Olivia came downstairs to find a living room full of law enforcement personnel and brothers. “We’ve seen that this person often switches between love and rage and has a strong sense of entitlement. Nothing is ever this man’s fault. Olivia has given me a list of men she works with

and men she has dated. I've divided them up for you all to look into.”

Granger's focus had been on her the second she came into view and hadn't left her since. The rest of the men paid close attention to Kane.

“Report to both Kane and me as soon as you find anything. I've sent you his number,” Granger told them, still not taking his eyes off of her. “I'll be with Olivia until tomorrow morning. I can be reached by cell.”

“About time,” Kord muttered under his breath, but Olivia still heard him.

Damon frowned. Hunter crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Granger. Stone looked ready to punch Granger while Forrest narrowed his eyes. Kane was the only one who didn't look as if he wished death to the man she loved.

“I'll let you know if I think of anyone else,” Olivia said, gaining the attention of everyone in the room. “Thank you for helping me. I'm sure it's nothing, but I do feel safer with all of you knowing what's going on.”

“It's not nothing after that last text,” Granger said before Damon could even open his mouth to scold her.

“But now we're leaving and we can talk about it later.” Olivia kissed each brother on the cheek before she headed out the front door.

Granger led her to where his SUV was parked in the driveway. Her nerves got the better of her when she realized they'd be alone. She'd told him she liked him, wanted him, and then challenged him to find out if he was ready to have a relationship. However, Granger had never answered the question and now her heart was in his hands and he was silent on the matter. It was worse than waiting for a jury verdict.

“I'm assuming that since you had me bring my suit I'm getting wet.”

Olivia felt her face flame with embarrassment at the double meaning of what she said. Granger's slow grin let her

know he got it, too, but damn, that grin definitely made her wet and she didn't even have her bathing suit on yet.

"I live for getting you wet. Now, come on."

"Where are we going?" Olivia asked as Granger grabbed a bag from the back of his SUV.

"Down the street."

"Hmm. So is it the sun that does it?" Olivia asked as Granger took her bag in his other hand and started to walk down her driveway toward the road.

"Does what?"

"Makes it impossible for you to explain anything."

They turned down the road and the second they were out of sight of the house, Granger dropped the bags and pulled her into his arms. His lips were on hers, his tongue caressing hers while his hands ran down her back to pull her hips against his. "Sometimes we don't need words."

"Does this mean you like me?" Olivia asked with a grin.

"Hmm," Granger said with that same smirk he had when he said he lived for making her wet. He dropped one more kiss on her lips and then picked up their bags. "Let's go before anyone sees us."

Olivia's mind was going a mile a minute as she wondered what Granger was thinking. Before she realized it, she was at the scene of last night's attempted kidnapping, or whatever it had been. "Why are we at the marina?"

"This way."

Olivia rolled her eyes but followed him down to the row of docks. He walked by the police boat and stopped in front of a shining clean walkaround boat with four different surfboards strapped to the top of the cockpit. Several fishing rods were also secured on the twin-engine boat.

"All aboard." Granger stepped onto it and placed the bags on the bench before holding out his hand for her.

“Is this yours?” Olivia placed her hand in his and climbed aboard.

“Nah. I’m stealing it.”

When Olivia started in surprise, he laughed. It made her smile to see this side of Granger. She didn’t know he could tease and she certainly had never seen him this relaxed. “The cabin is under here. There’s a small kitchen with a table that can turn into a place to sleep, and then there’s a small bed to the right of the kitchen and then the head. It’s not much, but it’ll do for a day.”

Olivia was already opening the small compartment that hid the four stairs down into the kitchen. She had to duck her head as she maneuvered her way down, but this was great. “Oh, Granger. Do I have to come back tomorrow?” she called up to the cockpit.

“You can bring up our return date with your bosses.”

“Not my brothers?”

Granger shook his head. “Ryker’s my friend. I only care about his opinion. Although Kane is growing on me. Do you like boats?”

“I love them, but I never have time to go out on them. And, I wouldn’t know what to do if I had to drive one. But I love the water. I can’t think of anything more relaxing for me than the rocking of a boat, the sun, and the salt air.”

“Me too. Now, stay in the cabin while I get away from Shadows Landing.”

Olivia ducked back down into the cabin and looked around. There was a polished table with V-shaped cushioned benches around it. She was sure another cushion could be placed over the table and be turned into a bed. Two laminated photos were thumbtacked to the wall.

There was a photo of Granger with Gavin, Wade, Trent, Ridge, and Ryker Faulkner as teenagers. Olivia looked closely at the photo. The carefree smiles on Ryker’s and Granger’s faces were unfamiliar to her. This must have been from before the incident with Ryker’s ex-girlfriend. The one that had

changed his life. And it was clearly before Granger had left for college. They were all smiling and carefree. With Ryker's marriage to Kenzie, he was starting to find that happiness again. Would Granger if he ever allowed himself to love again?

The second picture was one of a sunset overlooking the ocean with the silhouette of a surfer riding a wave. To the right was what looked like a square in the wall. She had to bend down and crawl inside to find the bed. It was tight, but it was comfortable.

The boat's engines roared to life and a few moments later they were leaving the dock. Olivia took the time to dig the bikini out of her bag and change into it. She owned more courtroom power suits than any woman should, but that didn't mean she didn't like to let loose when she could. Her lingerie and her bathing suits were expressions of just that.

Olivia pulled on the small blue bathing suit that matched her eyes. The triangles slipped over her breasts and tied around her neck. The bottom had three strings that ran along her hips connecting the front and back of the suit together. She might have selected her most revealing bathing suit intentionally when Granger had told her bring one. After kissing him in the dark, all she wanted to do was see his face the next time they kissed like that. She hoped the bathing suit would tempt him into doing just that—sooner rather than later.

“There’s water in the fridge down there if you want any,” Granger called down. “You’ll be able to come up in just a couple more minutes. I want to get through the bay first.”

Olivia didn’t mind. She put on her sunscreen, grabbed a couple of waters, and dug out her sunglasses. She was going to relax today, stalker be damned. Tomorrow would be soon enough to figure out who was stalking her and why.

“Come on up,” Granger said as the water became a little choppier.

Olivia climbed up and into the cockpit. She hid her pleased expression under her rose gold aviator sunglasses when Granger did a double take. He might not want to talk about his

feelings, but there was more than one way to interrogate a man.

“Where are we going?” Olivia asked after taking a seat on the bench near Granger.

“Folly Beach. I thought I could teach you how to surf if you’d like. If not, we can just sit on the beach or hang out on the boat.”

“You know how to surf?” Olivia asked, surprised. She did not see that coming. Granger was never in shorts and hadn’t been on the river with the rest of the Faulkners when they swam.

“Yeah. I picked it up after college. But we can do something else if you want.”

Olivia noticed he was nervous. He was sharing a bit of himself with her and she wanted every bit of it. “I would love for you to teach me how to surf. I’ve always wanted to learn, but I never had a chance to do so.”

“Even as a kid?” Granger asked as they picked up speed now that they were on open water.

“Especially as a kid. My dad worked in manufacturing. My mother was a stay-at-home mom since she literally had a kid every year. Damon is the oldest and then she had Stone, followed by Hunter, me, Kane, and then the rest. Damon saw how much work our mom had on her plate, and our dad was working twelve-hour shifts, so Damon really raised a lot of us. As soon as we were potty trained, Damon took over, even though he’s only a couple of years older than I am. He walked me to school every day. He made sure I did my homework. He took Stone to skate on the frozen pond behind the house. It was Damon who did all of that,” Olivia explained, hoping Granger would better understand her brothers, because it did matter to her that they like each other.

“He introduced Stone to hockey? Smart.”

“Yeah. Stone was getting into fights at school. It might have been over me. I was a huge nerd. I still am. I was always reading and we didn’t have the latest, fashionable clothes.

There were so many of us and my mom made most of our clothes herself. Shirts, pants, skirts, pajamas, even coats and jackets—she didn’t try to do shoes or underwear but damn near everything else. It was all serviceable, nothing fancy but extremely well made. Anyway, when I was in fifth grade I started to get picked on. Stone took care of it. Damon took care of Stone. Do you have siblings?” Olivia asked.

Granger shook his head. “Only child. But Gavin, Ryker, and the guys were like brothers to me. Tinsley is like my sweet little sister and Harper is like the sister that could beat the crap out of you.” Olivia laughed. That was Harper to a *T*. “How did you end up in law school?”

“Well, starting in middle school I was at the top in my class. Damon and Stone would bring me a cupcake at the end of every semester to celebrate my grades. I tried to help Damon with his, but he told me to help Kane instead. Damon didn’t go to college. Neither did Stone. By that point, scouts were after him for Juniors leagues on his way to pro hockey and he’d rather run stats than algebra so he headed off to the minors while Damon worked as a motorcycle mechanic. Hunter went straight into the military at eighteen. The three of them would send home money so that the younger ones wouldn’t have to work during the school year. It allowed us to focus on our grades. I got a full ride to college and then to law school. So did the others. And if they were short anytime, Damon or Stone would pay the bill. Especially after Stone made the pros and Damon’s bike shop went national.”

“What about your parents?” Granger asked.

Olivia smiled at the thought of them. “Happy at this big retirement community in Arizona. Damon, Stone, and I bought them a villa there. They moved four years ago and have never been so happy, especially since they have limited mobility. Yours?”

“They’re down in Hilton Head. They, and some of their best friends, moved there when they retired. Like yours, they’re getting older and it’s hard for them to travel so I go down there to visit.” Granger looked at the shore and then pointed. “There’s where we are going to surf.”

Olivia followed where Granger was pointing. The beach was not commercialized and several surfers were catching waves.

“Are we going to stop here?” Olivia asked as Granger sailed by the beach.

“We go around the barrier island and up Folly River. I have a friend with a beach house that has a dock out back that connects to the river. We’ll tie up there and just walk to the beach.”

Olivia was so excited as she looked around that she could barely stand it. “They don’t have any clothes on,” she blurted out as they went by the tip of the island.

“Nudist beach. Wanna go?” He winked at her surprised expression.

“I will if you will,” Olivia challenged but saw Granger frown instead of smile. What could she do to get it through to him that she didn’t care about his scars?

Olivia considered the many ways to handle men. Sometimes you had to bash them over the head with something. Sometimes you had to give them a clue that makes them think the idea was entirely their own. And sometimes you had to seduce them into realizing something. Olivia had told Granger repeatedly that she didn’t care about his scars. So, head bashing was out. That left option two and option three. Gosh, she hoped it was seduction. Maybe she’d just skip option number two and head straight for seduction.

Granger turned the point at Folly Island and slowed his speed as he went upriver. “It’s beautiful here,” she said, looking around.

Granger grunted.

Olivia rolled her eyes.

Granger tied the boat to the dock and Olivia made her move. “Granger, could you put this on my back?” Olivia held the sunscreen out to him.

Granger didn't react outwardly, but she heard the groan he didn't mean to be audible when he ran his hands over her back and under the strings of her bikini. "Thanks," she said, turning to him. "Need me to get yours?"

"No. I wear a wetsuit when I surf. I'll be right back up."

Granger disappeared down into the cabin and Olivia wanted to curse. He would let her explore at night in the dark, she knew that, but for him to believe that she didn't care about his scars, it would have to be in broad daylight. She would get him naked one way or the other, even if it was the last thing she did before that damned stalker took her out.

9

Granger didn't know how he was going to deal with an erection and a wetsuit. By the time he yanked it on and up, he had himself under control, mostly. But damn, that bikini about did him in. He'd wanted to stop the boat, yank that small strip of fabric that passed for a bottom off and sink into her right on the floor of the cockpit. Or maybe he'd sit on the bench out in the sun on the open water and let her ride him.

Granger gritted his teeth. His erection was back. He closed his eyes and imagined what Olivia would look like when she saw his damaged body. His erection went down instantly. Yes, he liked her. Yes, he probably loved her. No, there wasn't a chance of a future for them. He knew Olivia thought she wanted one, but he wasn't for her. She'd challenged him to come and get her, but she needed someone smarter. Someone richer. Someone not scarred.

Granger cursed himself for letting his mind imagine a future with Olivia as he joined her up top. His wetsuit reached the top of his knees. It was short-sleeved with a zipper than ran on the diagonal from the outside bottom of his shorts, across his chest and ended at his neck. It covered his scars and that was why he used it.

Olivia sat with her arms stretched out and her head tilted back as she soaked up the sun. He'd never wanted something so badly as he wanted her.

"I brought up some towels," he said, interrupting her sunbathing. "If you carry them, I'll get the boards."

Olivia smiled and the damn wetsuit did nothing to hide, well, anything. Her eyes traveled down and rested on his growing erection. She licked her lips and Granger had to close his eyes and count to ten.

He held out the towels. Olivia took them and then hopped off the boat onto the dock. "Need me to do *anything* else?"

Granger paused in unhooking his boards. Did he imagine that inflection on the word *anything*? "Nope. I got it."

It only took him a couple of minutes to get the two boards down. Then they were on their way. They alternately walked in silence or Olivia asked questions about the area, his friend who owned the beach house, and if he'd ever surfed anywhere else.

Granger was settling back into their rhythm when the back door to his friend's beach house opened. "Granger, bro! I've missed you!"

Granger turned to see Kyle bound down the stairs with a big smile on his perfect face. They'd met surfing here and became friends. Kyle's family owned the beach house and they'd let him use their dock anytime he'd needed it.

"Whoa, you brought someone," Kyle said, coming to a stop in front of them.

Granger couldn't help but notice the differences between them. One, Kyle always smiled. Two, he was blond and blue-eyed compared to Granger's brown hair and gray eyes. The other main difference: Kyle never wore a shirt. Ever.

His tanned, unscarred body was on full display for Olivia to enjoy.

"Hi. You must be Granger's friend." Olivia looked at Granger with a smile. Kyle would be perfect for her.

“Olivia Townsend, Kyle Bridges,” Granger said by way of introduction.

They shook hands and it took everything Granger had not to beat up his friend who was blatantly checking Olivia out.

“I’m guessing you’re not from Shadows Landing,” Kyle said once his eyes came up from ogling Olivia’s breasts.

“Actually, I have a house there.” Olivia took a step closer to Granger.

Granger was so surprised he almost dropped the boards.

“I might have to visit Shadows Landing. What do you do there, Olivia?” Kyle asked.

Olivia’s smile changed. No one would notice, but Granger did. He knew all her smiles. This was the *don’t try to con me* smile. “I work in Charleston and New York. I’m a lawyer.”

“That’s great. I bet we know a lot of the same people. I work in finance. We’re always hobnobbing with the local attorneys. What kind of law do you practice? Family law?”

“Corporate,” Olivia said shortly.

Kyle looked impressed. “My office is downtown. We should meet up for drinks sometime. I bet we’d have fun.”

Olivia slipped her arm around Granger’s arm and smiled up at him. Granger froze, not knowing what she was doing. “We’ll have to check our schedule to see when we’re free. Granger can text you. It was great meeting you.” Olivia rose up on her toes and kissed Granger. It was long enough not to be mistaken for a friendship kiss, but not so long as to make Kyle uncomfortable.

Granger couldn’t believe it. That was a statement kiss. She was telling Kyle she was with *him*. “I’ll find us a spot.” Olivia smiled once more at Kyle and turned to leave. A moment before she did, Granger felt a smack on his ass.

Kyle and Granger watched Olivia saunter off down the beach. When she was out of earshot, Kyle punched Granger’s upper arm. “Bro! You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend or that she was smokin’ hot. I’m so sorry I hit on her. You’ve just

never talked about women before. I kinda thought you might be gay.”

“Nope. Not gay.” Granger’s mind was reeling.

“No shit! You lucky son of a bitch.”

Granger watched Olivia turn and wave to him. If only it were real, he would be the luckiest man on the planet. The way she moved closer to him. The way she said “we” and the way she kissed him … did that mean he really had a chance or did she do it just because she didn’t want to be hit on? He’d only know if he was completely honest with her. It was something he hadn’t done in a decade and wasn’t sure he was brave enough to do it now. However, Olivia was worth the broken heart.

Olivia fumed as she rolled the towels out on the sand. The nerve of that bonehead to hit on her when she was with Granger! Kyle was just like the men she’d dated, and while she’d gotten mad at Granger a little while ago for pointing out she was dating the wrong kind of men, he’d been right.

Not anymore. Seeing Granger standing side by side with Kyle, it was clear she only wanted Granger. Now, to get him to realize that. The thing was, she wasn’t used to seduction. Sure, she could be seductive with case law or cross-examination, but that was more like a rattlesnake luring its prey. She didn’t want to take Granger down or dominate him. She wanted the two of them to emerge the victors, not her the winner and Granger taking a loss. Anyway, it wasn’t the same as a courtroom battle at all.

She was bent over, straightening out the towel when the smack to her ass had her jumping up. She was going to kill that Kyle jerk. But when she spun around, she found Granger grinning at her. “Ready to get wet?”

Olivia stared at him. “I already am,” she muttered to herself. One look at that man smiling at her was all it took. It changed everything about him. He somehow became sexier, looser, more relaxed, yet even more in charge. Olivia felt her body heat, and if it weren’t for the family thirty feet away

down the beach, she might have torn off her bikini and begged Granger to take her.

“What?” Granger asked, but the smile grew as Olivia about jumped him.

“Nothing. So, how do I do this?” Olivia nodded to the surfboards on the sand behind them.

“We start with you lying on the board. I’ll show you how to paddle.”

Olivia went to the nearest board and lay down on her stomach. She almost moaned when he sank to his knees in the sand next to her and placed his hand on the small of her back. She was a powerful woman. She wanted to seduce him, but something shifted because she was no longer in control. Granger was. And she loved it.

His hand inched down to rest right above the curve of her ass as he instructed her. His thumb brushed slowly back and forth over the top edge of her swim bottoms and it was driving her wild, especially when his thumb slipped under the band and ran along her skin. Olivia didn’t know what had changed Granger’s mind about them, but if she was reading the signals he was giving off correctly, he was taking a risk and making the move she’d challenged him to. It was up to her to make sure he knew it was well received.

But seduction would have to wait. Olivia was always competitive so when Granger said not to worry if she couldn’t stand up the first time on the water, she shifted her focus to doing just that. She didn’t like to fail. Even at something she’d never tried before like surfing.

Paddling out was harder than she expected, but when they made it out past the breaking waves, she found peace unlike anything other as she sat on her board. “This is so nice. It’s like a different world.” She closed her eyes and took in the rocking of the board, the crashing of the waves, and feel of a whole world moving just below her. Fish, sharks, plants—an entire world just living their lives as she floated above them.

“Are you ready to catch your first wave, Liv?”

Olivia opened her eyes and saw the set of small waves coming in. “I’m ready. I’m going to ride it all the way in.”

Granger quirked an eyebrow in challenge. “You think so?”

“Wanna bet?”

Granger laughed. “I know better than to take a bet with you. I’ve never met a woman as determined as you are.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Good. Very good,” Granger assured her.

“Then, it’ll be a bet just for fun since you’re scared of losing,” Olivia grinned as she got ready to paddle.

“What are the terms?” Granger asked as he glanced back at the waves rolling in. “Get ready.”

“If I don’t stand up for three seconds or more, I lose and you get a boon of your choice. If I do stand up for more than three seconds, I win and get a boon of my choice.”

“That’s too vague, counselor,” Granger said in his cop voice that really did things to her that opposing counsel never could. “I’d never take a bet without the fine print clearly defined. Now paddle.”

“You’re smarter than half the lawyers I know,” Olivia said as she began to paddle. “Name your prize.”

“Ladies first,” Granger called out.

“I want to kiss you anywhere on your body that I choose,” Olivia called as she got ready to catch the wave. “Your prize?”

“Same,” Granger said, his voice deep and rough. He cleared his throat and called out, “Now! Pop up!”

Olivia popped up. She wobbled, her arms windmilling all over the place, but the idea of being able to kiss Granger wherever she wanted was a powerful motivation. One. Two. Olivia wobbled and almost lost her balance, but she slid her foot back to gain a more secure stance on the board. Three. Four. Five. Six seconds. Olivia hooted with joy at the rush of riding the wave, even if it was a baby wave. But when she turned to grin at Granger, she lost her balance altogether. Her

arms flew out, her feet went out from under her, and she fell backward off the side of the board.

Her butt hit the sand and then she got her feet back under her. She jumped up in the hip-deep water and laughed. “That was amazing! Let’s do it again.”

Granger couldn’t believe she’d done it. She won the bet. His blood was running both hot and cold. The fact that she wanted to kiss him made him hot, the idea she might get a glimpse of his scars made his blood run cold. He wanted to renege, but when Olivia stood up after falling off and laughed with such joy, he pushed the worry aside. This was everything he’d ever wanted. Someone to share this life with. Someone to talk to at night, someone to surf with, someone who would have his back—that was something Olivia had proven time and time again. She’d always had his back and he’d been a dumbass for not realizing what that meant. Could his most ardent wish come true? Could someone as amazing as Olivia Townsend actually want him?

“Then let’s do it again,” Granger called out. He turned his board around and paddled out. Olivia followed him with the biggest smile he’d ever seen on her face. It was then that he realized Olivia was completely relaxed and this was the first time he’d seen her like this. Just like him, she was always tense, focused, and driven. But here, with him, she was just herself, *Olivia*. Not Olivia Townsend, powerful attorney, making opposing counsel cry. Just like he wasn’t trying to keep his guard up around her anymore.

“Go! Go! Go!” Granger yelled for her. Olivia paddled hard and popped up. This time she was steadier as she rode the wave. Granger grabbed the second wave in the set and rode it in. When they met up they were both laughing and smiling at the joy of having fun together.

“More!” Olivia called out. “I bet I’ll get out there first.”

“Same terms?” Granger asked with a grin that let her know he had no intention of losing this time.

“Same terms. Go!” Olivia paddled hard, but Granger swept by her with his strong strokes.

“Hmm, now we’re even,” Granger said when she finally met him past the waves and sat on her board. “Does that mean our bets cancel each other’s out, counselor?”

Olivia shook her head with a grin. “Not a chance. It means I kiss you and then you kiss me.”

“I like the sound of that. How do you feel about strip surfing? If I land the first wave, you have to take off your top.”

Olivia raised her brows. “Do we need to paddle down to the nudist beach? It would look bad if the sheriff of Shadows Landing was arrested for indecent exposure.”

“True. Seeing me without my shirt is indecent. Small children would cry, women would scream.”

“And I’d be drooling, especially after that display of strength you demonstrated by beating me so badly out here.”

Granger shook his head, but a smile came on his lips. “Why don’t we do the stripping in private? Then I won’t have to explain to Ryker why his attorney is in jail.”

“Deal.”

Olivia turned and paddled to meet the next wave with all her might. Granger laughed, but he was already moving. There was no way he’d lose this bet.

10

Granger couldn't remember when he'd laughed so much. They'd surfed all morning and he'd won the bet, though the thought of them getting naked later tantalized him the whole time.

Kyle joined them at lunch and brought out sandwiches for everyone. He didn't try to hit on Olivia and the three ended up having a great time before Kyle hit the waves himself.

"I think I'll just hang out on the beach this time," Olivia said as she moved to lie down and soak in the sun. "I can't remember the last time I sunbathed. Now, go have fun on the big-boy waves with your friend."

Granger chuckled but looked around the beach. Folly Beach was popular with surfers and families, and that's exactly who was there today. Although, full isn't how he'd describe it. The nearest group was over a hundred feet away and he knew almost all the surfers. "I won't be long."

"Take your time. Enjoy yourself. Plus, you're incredibly sexy out there."

Granger winked at her and Olivia glowed. This couldn't be real, but he'd take every second he got.

Granger paddled out and met Kyle as they waited for a good set. “Bro, I googled your girl. I bow down to the master. How did you land a woman like Olivia Townsend? Is she the attorney for both Ryker Faulkner and Sebastian Abel? I’ve been trying to get someone from Faulkner’s office to return an email or a call about doing business with me for five years and she’s his attorney?”

“Yup. She’s one of the top corporate attorneys in the country,” Granger bragged. Olivia never said a word, but he might have an alert set with her name on the internet. He knew she’d been named the top attorney in New York City and top five in the country. He was beyond proud of her.

Kyle stared at him and then shook his head. “Sorry, bro, I’ve just never seen you smile. I’m happy for you, but I’m not letting you have my wave.”

With that, Kyle paddled for the first wave in the set with Granger right after him.



Granger looked out the front of the boat where Olivia was relaxing on the bow as he headed for Dewees Island near Isle of Palms. Dewees was small and the inlet near there was great place to anchor for the night. It was also a good place to get dinner.

Granger slowed the boat as he headed for the spot he had in mind. When he anchored, he prepared the bait and cast out his line.

“Can I use this one?”

Granger turned to see Olivia pointing to one of his fishing poles. Not only that, it was the correct pole to use for the fish found in this area. “You fish?”

“Remember I said Stone learned how to skate on the frozen pond near our house? Well, Hunter taught me how to fish in that pond. I haven’t done it for a long time but I always loved it. I found it very relaxing, even if I didn’t catch anything.”

“Sure. Do you need me to bait the hook?” Granger asked.

“I’ve got it.” Olivia reached into the bait bucket and expertly baited the hook. She sent the line sailing with a flick of her wrist, then let out a happy sigh.

“When was the last time you fished?” Granger asked her.

“It was when I met my ex-boyfriend’s parents after our law school graduation. They had this big fancy sailboat that was really a yacht and the staff was fishing, trying to catch this specific type of fish they’d requested for dinner. I decided to join them and horrified my ex and his family by doing so. To be fair, I’d already horrified his family by not being a socialite, so ...” Olivia shrugged.

“Who was this asshole?” Granger would happily laugh in his face for blowing his chance with the most amazing woman in the world.

“Mark Fleming,” Olivia told him. “We parted on good terms. Just grew apart. Now he’s back, though, so we’ll see if we’re still on good terms.”

“Wait, what do you mean, he’s back?”

“My law firm just hired him. He’s in Charleston, hoping to meet with Ryker since he represents Legion-Winter Conglomerate.”

“Could he want you back?” Granger was already adding his name to the suspect list.

Olivia shook her head. “No. He’s stayed in that socialite world. His dates don’t have jobs except to dote on him. His parents wouldn’t have it any other way. They made it clear they wanted a daughter-in-law who would put him up on a pedestal, not compete with him for clients.”

“There’s no competition. You’re the best attorney there is.” Granger didn’t even realize he’d leaned over and placed a quick kiss on her temple until she blushed and stammered out a thank-you. “I mean it, Liv. You’re the one who belongs on the pedestal. What you’ve achieved in your career is beyond impressive and you’ve stayed a good person and not become a condescending asshole.”

Olivia laughed out loud at that. “That actually means a lot to me. You wouldn’t believe the names I’m called on a daily basis. None of them are flattering.”

“I can shoot them all if you’d like.”

Olivia laughed again until there was a tug on her line. “I’ve got something!”

Yeah, his heart.

“Pull it in. Let’s see if you caught dinner.”

Granger grabbed a net and watched Olivia’s face fill with joy and wonder as she pulled up a redfish. “I did it! This has been the best day I’ve had in such a long time. You have no idea. Thank you, Granger. I know my brothers would have locked me down and made my life miserable, but you not only made me feel safe and protected, but you let me relax and have fun. Thank you so much.”

Granger felt like a superhero. “Anything for you. Now, let me go make our dinner.”

It didn’t take long for him to clean, fillet, and fry up the fish while Olivia pulled together a salad from the small fridge. Soon they were sitting on the bow of the boat, eating dinner and waiting for the approaching sunset.

Olivia pushed his hand away when he went to clear the dishes. “You cooked. I’ll clean up. I’ll be right back.”

Granger put his arms behind his head as he stretched out on the sunpad that covered most of the bow. Too bad this was a once-in-a-lifetime day. It truly had been the perfect day and the best part of everything had been Olivia. Getting to see all the different sides of her, Granger knew his heart was lost forever. The loyalty she’d always shown their friends was just the tip of the iceberg. She was funny, smart, caring, loved surfing and fishing, and wasn’t high maintenance like several former girlfriends had been when he’d been looking at a pro-football career. They’d latched onto him, hoping he’d be their ticket to a better life, but Olivia wasn’t like that. She was independent and had so much money of her own it actually made him a little worried. He was sure she was used to men

doing what women had done to him before the accident—using them. He never wanted her to think he'd use her because of her money or connections.

But today, money didn't matter. Jobs didn't matter. Only the two of them mattered and it had been better than any of his dreams. Too bad it ended in the morning.

“Granger?”

Granger turned to see Olivia walking around the side of the boat, all wrapped up in a blanket. “Yes?” he asked as she came to stand at the end of the sunpad so she was looking down at where he reclined, his legs stretched out in front of him.

“Do you think anyone can see us out here?”

Granger looked around. Not a house or boat in sight. It's why he picked the place. “Don't worry. He won't find you here. It's safe.”

Olivia shook her head. “I'm not worried about that. I know you'll protect me. It's just that I lost a bet and I always pay my debts.” Olivia dropped the blanket and stood before him completely naked. “I guess I'm not any good at strip surfing, but I'll get you next time.”

Granger just stared. He'd like to think he was smooth. It wasn't the first time he'd seen a naked woman after all, but this was *Olivia* and she wasn't just a woman. She was *his* woman.

“I wasn't going to collect on the bet.” His voice was rough sounding as if he were dying for thirst. What Granger was dying for was Olivia.

Granger's eyes trailed over her full breasts, down her stomach, over the flair of her hips, and his mouth might have watered at the sight of her bared to him. It was then he noticed the slight tremor to her body.

“Come here. You're cold.”

Olivia shook her head. “Not cold. Just nervous. This is the first time I've played strip surfing.”

“Well, you’re playing it perfectly. I’ll have to practice so I never lose again. Do you think you’re up for a game every day for the rest of your life?” Granger asked.

“You know I’m competitive, Granger. I plan on winning.” Olivia smiled and he could tell she was finding her confidence again.

“I know. It’s one of the things I love about you. You don’t give up. Even on me.” Granger paused and then let his lips spread into a grin. “Now, I believe I get to kiss you anywhere I want.”

Granger crooked his finger at her and about lost control when she came down onto her knees and crawled toward him. She sat back on her heels as if she were waiting for him to make his move. Granger didn’t keep her waiting.

Granger reached forward and placed his hand at the back of her neck. He pulled her forward slowly until her breasts were pressed against his chest and her hands were on his shoulder and chest. He gave her time to back away as he leaned forward and placed his lips slowly against hers.

Peace and a sense of rightness settled over Granger as Olivia gave a contented sigh and fell into his kiss. Olivia’s lips on his, Olivia’s body against his. It was even better than he could have ever dreamed.

Olivia rocked against him as he groaned into her mouth and he shifted the sweet kiss to a heavy, demanding one. He gripped her body tight to his and let go of everything he was holding back. Olivia practically climbed on top of him, taking the kiss from hot to nuclear.

Granger kept one hand at Olivia’s neck, then moved the other up her thigh, over the curve of her hip and toward her breast. He stopped just short, giving her enough time to pull away, but when she didn’t, Granger brushed the underside of her breast with his thumb, which elicited a soft moan from her.

Olivia never broke the kiss as he cupped her breast and Granger was only vaguely aware of her slowly unzipping his wetsuit. It didn’t register to him until her hands were on him.

He groaned with pleasure as her hands ran over his chest, but when they dipped down and covered his scar, he jerked back.

Her face was dazed with pleasure. Her eyes showed she wanted more. Granger yanked his zipper back up to cover his exposed scars. “Let me change really quick and we can get right back to this.”

When he’d been with women over the past few years, he’d just kept his shirt on and the lights out or taken them from behind. It was a system that worked. But this was Olivia Townsend and she wasn’t letting him get up. She pushed him back and shook her head.

“No, that wasn’t part of the bet. The bet was a kiss anywhere on your body. I won it. You gave me your kiss. Now it’s my turn.”

Icy tendrils of panic gripped his body and threatened to overwhelm him. His heart pounded as his throat tightened. His dream had just come true and now it was inevitable that the nightmare would, too.

Granger couldn’t look at Olivia as she unzipped his wetsuit. He turned his head away from her and closed his eyes as she bent her head to kiss him. Only she didn’t kiss him on the lips. Her hand was pressed against his chest and her lips closed in on the spot where his neck and shoulder met. She sucked gently and then nipped before trailing her lips down his chest. She never lifted her lips from his body as she slid down his body.

Granger closed his eyes. The feeling was so intense, but he couldn’t watch her eyes turn from desire to horror as she unzipped his wetsuit the rest of the way. The wetsuit fell open, exposing his entire body to her view. There wasn’t a shriek or an inhalation of breath, so Granger cracked his eyelid open enough to see the most erotic sight of his life: the top of Olivia’s head as she was kissing her way down his body.

Her hands ran over his scars and he slammed his eyes closed again. But then her lips followed and his eyes flew open in surprise. Olivia kissed the puckered red scar that ran from the top of his abdomen all the way down to mid-thigh.

He couldn't stop staring at her blonde hair falling against his stomach and draped over his erection as she kissed him.

Lying between his legs, kissing his scar, Olivia looked up at him and smiled. It was Granger who was left breathless as she bent back down and began to kiss her way up his body.

"Have we put this matter to bed now?" Olivia asked as her lips hovered right above his.

"Not even close," Granger said before crushing his lips to hers.

Granger pulled Olivia down to the sunpad and rolled on top of her. As the setting sun glowed around them, he stood up and stripped the wetsuit from his body and took a chance at love.

Olivia held her breath as Granger pulled off his wetsuit. Yes, he had scars. Yes, they were obvious and undeniable. No, they didn't define him. They seemed to enhance, not detract. Granger had survived that accident and those scars were the outward mark of his strength.

"You don't have to look at them."

Olivia's eyes shot up to his as she shook her head. "Yes, I do. I need you to see me looking at them. See me kissing them." Olivia pushed up onto her knees and placed soft butterfly kisses across his scars. "And see that I love them just as much as I love you. And I do love you, Granger Fox. So very much."

Olivia's heart stopped as if she were waiting for a verdict. It didn't come in the form of words. It came as Granger speared his fingers into her hair and pulled her to him. He showered kisses over her face before claiming her lips.

Olivia ran her hands over his body, but it didn't take long for Granger to turn her mind to only thoughts of each kiss, each touch, and the pleasure it brought.

"Granger," she panted as he looked up from between her legs. "Here."

Olivia reached for the blanket and laughed as she fumbled with it.

“Are you cold?” Granger asked, instantly reaching for the blanket.

“No,” Olivia laughed again. “I brought up a condom, but now I can’t find it.”

“Liv, we don’t have to. I’ll wait forever for you.”

Olivia’s lips twitched as she looked up at his very serious expression and fell even more in love with him at that moment. “I know you would, but let me clue you in on something. A woman doesn’t stand naked in front of a man if she wants to wait. I’ve waited long enough for you, Granger Fox, and I’m done waiting. Aha!” Olivia cried triumphantly as she held up the condom.

“Well, what kind of gentleman would I be to make the woman I love wait even a single second?”

Olivia’s gasp at his declaration of love was made simultaneously with his first thrust. Then Granger did way more than tell her he loved her. He showed her.

11

Granger held Olivia in his arms as he pulled the blanket over them. Her head rested on his chest as he stared up at the night stars from the bow of his boat. He played with her long blonde hair absently as her fingers brushed against the muscles on his chest. Granger glanced down at Olivia in his arms and smiled. This incredible woman loved him! He couldn't believe his luck. It had to be luck because there was no other explanation for why someone as perfect as Olivia would be with him.

"Will you tell me about the accident?" Olivia asked quietly.

Granger's hand paused from where it was running down her back. He hated telling his story. It brought him right back to the darkest time in his life.

"I was a senior in college and the big star of the football team. There was talk about a pro football career ahead of me. I had women throwing themselves at me left and right. I won't lie and say I didn't enjoy myself in college, but I was always careful, always. I had a fun night after a win with a woman named Kortini. If I'm honest, I didn't even remember her name, except it sounded like *martini*. But six weeks later, she showed up at my apartment with a positive pregnancy test, swearing it was mine. I immediately took responsibility and

she practically moved in. She said there was no need for safe sex since she couldn't get pregnant twice, but I was honestly so thrown by the idea of being a dad, I didn't sleep with her right away. I wanted to do the right thing. I was going to date her, get to know her, marry her, and become a good father.”

Granger traveled back to college in his memories. He saw Kortini's big smile as he told her his plans to build a future with her. “Kortini practically took over my life. At the time, I thought she was being supportive of my football career. You're not allowed to have a manager or agent in college, but she filled those roles unofficially. She kept the groupies away, talked to agents when I couldn't, and I thought it was because she loved me.”

“But she was using you,” Olivia stated rather than asked. “How did you find out?”

“I was driving home after a study session a couple of months later. It was just before finals and unlike some of my fellow teammates, I actually cared about my grades. It was late at night.” Granger closed his eyes as if he were right there that night. “I was taking a blind curve in the road. I never saw the headlights on my side of the road until it was too late. I was in a crappy little sedan I'd bought when I was sixteen. The vehicle that hit me was a monster pickup truck with a high cargo bed. I remember the impact like it was in slow motion. The truck hit me head-on and then spun around and slammed into my door. My leg was crushed and a large piece of scrap metal the guy was hauling lodged itself in my abdomen and upper thigh, causing internal bleeding.” Granger didn't feel Olivia's calming strokes as she tried to reassure him. He was back in the car. The sound of the horn's continual blare still echoed in his ears.

“I was in and out of consciousness so I don't know how long I was there, but a good Samaritan pulled up and called 911. The internal bleeding was so bad they didn't think I'd make it. I remember the red and blue lights. I remember the firemen cutting the door off and then slicing through my seatbelt. I remember the pain when they tried to get me out of the car. I blacked out after that. I woke up three days later after

more hours of surgery than I even know. Gavin, Ryker, and Kortini were in the room with me. I woke up to Kortini asking the doctor when I could play football again. I remember Gavin telling her football wasn't a concern right now. The concern was whether I'd live. I was drawn back under and the next time I woke, my parents were there. They cried when I opened my eyes. They told me the doctors didn't think I'd live but I'd pulled through. The drunk driver who hit me had died at the scene."

"And Kortini?" Olivia asked.

"I was moved from the ICU after a couple of days and eventually released to an in-patient rehab clinic. I asked my parents about her and tried to call her, but she never responded. Then, three weeks after the accident, she showed up at the clinic. I asked about the baby and she just rolled her eyes. There never was a baby and since I didn't have a football career, she just wanted to tell me she had moved on. She attached herself to a basketball player who had a chance at the draft."

"What ever happened to Kortini?" Olivia began tracing her finger over his scars.

When she did it, he realized he wasn't flinching anymore.

"I don't know. I never looked her up again. The next serious girlfriend I had, Ellen, thought I was being romantic by waiting to have sex. When we finally did, she cringed. She told me the scars weren't pretty like my face and asked to turn off the lights and for me to leave my shirt on."

"I want the full names of these horrible women."

Granger chuckled. "Are you going to hunt them down?"

Olivia nodded against his chest. "And destroy their lives for hurting you. There can't be many Kortinis. I'll find her."

Granger kissed the top of her head. "I've never had someone defend my honor before. It's very sexy."

"I'm glad you like it. Most men don't. They don't like that I'm smart, I have more money, and I'm not intimidated by

them. I don't bat my eyes and giggle and hope they rescue me from my boring life."

"Darlin', I don't think anyone would ever think you need rescuing or that your life is boring."

"You rescued me," Olivia said quietly.

"I did, but I have no doubt you'd have rescued yourself if I hadn't been there. And for the record, everything you just listed as what they don't like is what I love about you."

Olivia rose up and straddled him. The blanket fell from her shoulders and pooled around their hips. "You don't find a powerful woman intimidating?"

"Quite the opposite," Granger told her as he gripped her hips. "For me, a relationship isn't about who is in power. It's about being partners. It's about supporting each other so both can reach their dreams. There is no head of the house. There's the two of us loving, supporting, encouraging, and lifting each other up."

Olivia rocked her hips and Granger almost hissed. "You would hold my purse at events? You could handle dinner dates being canceled at the last minute when I needed to work on a case?"

"First, I have to work nights sometimes and emergencies always pop up at the worst time. Could you handle me having to put the citizens of Shadows Landing first sometimes? Also, I don't like being in the limelight but I would be proud and honored to hold your purse anywhere, anytime." Granger flexed his fingers to urge her to keep rocking her hips. "Plus, I'm a damn good cook. I can cook for us while you work on your cases."

Olivia smiled down at him. "First, I love the people of Shadows Landing, so of course I would support you in helping them. Second, cooking for me sounds lovely, especially since cooking really isn't my thing."

"Not as lovely as you are right now," Granger told her honestly.

With the moon shining down on her, Granger arched up into her as Olivia took the lead. He was man enough to see that a powerful woman didn't make him any less of a man. In fact, he believed it made him a stronger one.



Olivia leaned forward as her driveway came into view. "Who is at my house this early in the morning?"

"Everyone by the looks of it."

"No morning sex then," Olivia sighed.

"Darlin', what do you think the two and five in the morning sex was?"

Olivia smiled happily and Granger puffed up with pride. "Middle-of-the-night and end-of-the-night sex. I want right-before-work sex. It would make my day so much better."

"We could turn around and head to my house, but it's too late. We've been spotted." Granger wanted to roll his eyes, but it wasn't really his thing. Damon and Stone stood in the middle of the driveway with their arms crossed as they glared at Granger.

"I'll handle them," Olivia said, sounding like a pissed-off little sister.

"I've got it," Granger said with pure determination.

"Are you sure?"

"We have to come to an understanding at some point. Might as well be now."

Granger loved her and he would need to prove it to her brothers if this relationship was going to work. Granger took her bag and walked with her to meet Damon and Stone.

"Good morning," Olivia called to her brothers before patting Damon's arm. "Don't kill him."

"That sounds like we have a reason to kill him," Stone growled out as he turned narrowed eyes to Granger.

Granger watched as Olivia got their attention so that both brothers brought their heads down toward her. Granger couldn't hear what she said, but he saw Stone's eye snap to his and saw Damon's jaw tighten. Then she rose up on her toes and kissed each brother's cheek. She sent him a smile and walked into the house.

"You were supposed to keep her safe," Damon said angrily as Forrest, Hunter, and Kane rushed outside to backup Damon and Stone.

"I did. You just saw her. She's safe." Granger knew that was not what Damon meant, but he couldn't help but rib him.

"Not her heart. She told us she loves you." Stone looked ready to punch him and Granger knew enough to be ready for it. Stone was known as a tough enforcer on the ice and it would be foolish to think his fighting skill stopped there.

Granger nodded. "And I love her. So, we're good?"

"Like hell," a voice said from behind him.

Granger turned to see a man approaching. The same wide shoulders and dark hair that Damon, Stone, and Hunter had, but with the same blue eyes as Olivia, Kane, and Forrest. "Who are you?"

"Olivia's brother and it looks like I got here right in time." He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, but even Granger recognized the brand logos. They were high-end designer brands, which seemed to contradict the rough-and-ready-for-anything look of the man.

The door opened and Olivia rushed out. "Wilder, what are you doing here?"

"Damon told us what was going on, so I got here as quickly as possible. You're my sister and I'm here to look after you."

"I'm looking after her," Granger said, refusing to back down.

Ryker stepped out on to the porch, impeccably dressed in a suit that cost more than most cars. Next to him stood a woman

almost as beautiful as Olivia. The two could be sisters with their matching height and nearly identical blonde hair. Granger had met her a couple of times at weddings but was struggling to remember her name. He was almost positive it started with a *V*. “Can we save the dick-measuring contest for later? We have work to do,” Ryker called out.

“I’m an impartial party,” the woman next to Ryker said with a mischievous grin. “I’ll measure.”

Her blonde hair was up in a twist, her lips were red, and the outfit showed off a killer body. Not that Granger noticed, but several of the Townsend brothers did.

“Ew,” Olivia said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “The only dick I want to see is Granger’s.”

“Darlin,” Granger groaned as six angry Townsend brothers turned to him with fury in their faces and hands fisted.

“And we’ve got another one.” Kord stepped up next to Granger and smiled at the newcomer.

“Wilder Townsend.”

“Kordell King, nice to meet you. Welcome to Shadows Landing. Are you moving here, too?” Kord asked.

“Looks like I might have to in order to keep my sister safe.”

“Fam.” Kord nodded sympathetically. “I get it. But look here. Granger is my family, and although I like y’all, I got his back. We all do.”

“All?” Wilder asked skeptically before his attention was drawn to movement behind Granger.

Granger turned and saw the entire Faulkner family, the Bell family, Lydia and her children, as well as the knitting club coming down the driveway. “As I said, we’re family here in Shadows Landing and we look after our own. That includes Granger *and* Olivia,” Kord said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Granger didn't know what to say. He actually had to take a deep breath to keep his emotions from getting the better of him.

"We heard Olivia needed our help," Miss Ruby said while Miss Winnie nodded next to her. Miss Ruby's natural, curly black hair was covered with a silk scarf that matched her dress. Her face was round like her body and she exuded picture-perfect grandmotherly vibes while Miss Winnie was her complete opposite. She was as pale as a plucked chicken—which her body also weirdly resembled.

"And we're not so scared of you anymore," Skeeter said as he, Gator, and Turtle stood shoulder to shoulder with Miss Winnie and Miss Ruby. "We care more about our friends than about pissin' y'all off."

"Well, I'm pissed off," Harper said, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at Olivia. "Why the hell didn't you tell us you were being stalked?"

"We were taking—" Damon began but Harper held up a finger to silence him.

"Was I talking to you? No, I wasn't. I'm pretty sure your badass sister who makes grown men cry with a single look can speak for herself."

Granger didn't hide the smirk that came to his lips and that led Stone to take a step toward him.

Miss Mitzy stepped between them before Granger could go toe to toe and finally put this matter to rest. "When are you coming back to knitting club, Stone? I need to show you how to finish off the beanie you were knitting." She smiled up at Stone like a fond auntie.

"Wait," Wilder said with a grin. "Stone knits?"

"Anger management. My coach said I had to in order to keep myself out of trouble," Stone answered with a shrug.

Dare, Harper's husband, stepped up. His massive chest seemed to expand as he crossed his arms and stood next to Stone. "You have a problem with knitting?" he asked Wilder in a tone colder than ice.

“Are you serious right now?” Wilder asked as Damon silently shook his head in warning to his brother.

The sound of metal on metal was heard a split second before Wilder screeched and jumped a good three feet in the air. “You stabbed me in the ass with a knitting needle?”

Miss Mitzy put her needle back in her bag serenely. “I did. A prick for a prick. Now pay attention. Olivia is our girl. Granger is our boy. If you mess anything up for them, I know somewhere else I can stick it. Understand me?”

Wilder placed his hands in front of his package and took a step back. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now, I believe Olivia was about to tell us why someone so smart would be so foolish as not to tell us about this stalker.” Miss Mitzy stepped back to let Olivia talk.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal. I was wrong. I’m very sorry. I knew you all would help me, but I thought I could handle this on my own,” Olivia admitted.

“What’s being done to keep you safe?” Tinsley asked after she’d rushed to Olivia’s side to give her a hug.

“Granger is looking after me,” Olivia said.

“Hold up,” Kenzie, Ryker’s wife, raised her hand to put a stop to any misunderstanding. “Looking after you or *looking after you?*”

“I don’t think—” Hunter began to say.

“We know you don’t,” Maggie Bell said, cutting him off. “Just stand there and look pretty.”

“Or what? You’ll knit me to death?” Hunter challenged.

Maggie’s lips turned up into a deadly smile. She was an Olympic sharpshooter. Hunter didn’t know that he didn’t stand a chance against her because she stood there looking every inch the cute southern girl in sparkly flip-flops and a brightly colored sundress.

“Or, my sister will shoot your dick off from a mile away. Literally,” Gage said, crossing his arms and glaring at Hunter.

“Now, Olivia, you were saying?”

Granger couldn’t let Olivia face the town on her own. He stepped forward and slid his arm around her waist. She smiled up at him as if he were her hero.

“Finally! Thank the Lord!” A joyous shout rang out from the midst of the crowd gathered on the lawn.

“Reverend!” Olivia laughed but the atmosphere did lighten up as people called out their congratulations.

“Now, what do you need us to do?” Reverend Winston asked Granger once he’d made his way to the couple.

Wilder snorted in laughter. “What, you gonna pray for us?”

“Bro,” Damon whispered again as he shook his head.

Wilder turned to look at Damon and jumped again with a louder screech than before. “Are those *daggers*? Am I bleeding?”

Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie put their daggers back in their purses and shrugged complacently. “Olivia, you have enough brothers, don’t you? You won’t miss this one, will you now?” Miss Ruby asked.

“What the heck is going on here?” Wilder sounded equally shocked and bewildered.

“Bro, Shadows Landing isn’t like Los Angeles. You might want to just keep your mouth shut until you learn the ropes,” Stone said as he rolled his eyes at his brother.

“Bless his heart, he’s a city boy. That explains things,” Miss Winnie said as everyone from town nodded in agreement, and, quite possibly, pity.

“If I may interrupt,” Ryker said, getting everyone’s attention. “We have a plan to go over to keep Olivia safe.”

“Well, isn’t that why we’re all here?” Maggie asked with a roll of her eyes.

“That and because you think I’m pretty,” Hunter said with a cocky smirk.

Granger placed a kiss on Olivia's temple and whispered in her ear, "It might be fun having your brothers in town after all."

Olivia shook her head with a smile. "You're just saying that because you think Maggie will shoot Hunter."

"Maybe." Granger grinned at her and she laughed until Ryker cleared his throat.

"I brought in private security for Olivia for the next three days. That gives Granger and all law enforcement time to track this man down."

Wilder looked up at the blonde woman by Ryker's side and gave her the same cocky grin Hunter had given Maggie. Oh for crying out loud, could her brothers just behave for once in their lives?

"You could protect my body anytime."

Olivia had heard of the woman at Ryker's side, but somehow the two had not actually met before and she could just imagine the kind of impression her idiotic brothers were making right now. Ryker's companion cocked her head and wrinkled her nose in distaste. "So not my type."

"I'd like to see the man who is then." Wilder was still cocky as he sent her a wink.

"I don't think there's a man here who could handle me." The woman's lips turned up into a smile.

"Good thing I'm here then," another woman stepped forward with a smile.

"Blythe!" Tinsley called out delightedly, excited to see the petite woman from Keeneston who had helped look after Skye Jessamine-Faulkner when she had been in danger. Tinsley pushed through the crowd to run up and give the bodyguard a hug.

"Blythe! Oh my gosh, I'm so happy to see you and that you're Olivia's bodyguard!" Skye said, as she shoved past a confused Wilder and hugged the woman who had helped guard her.

“*She’s* the bodyguard?” Damon asked in disbelief, dubious that the petite, girl-next-door type woman could keep Olivia safe.

“Yeah, I’d like to see you keep her safe. Good thing I’m here.” Hunter crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head.

Olivia was about to say something when Blythe leaped from the porch, not head first, but feet first. Her legs scissored around Hunter’s neck and she used her momentum to spin to the side, sending Hunter flying as she landed on her feet. In two strides she grabbed Wilder’s arm, yanked him forward and flipped him over her shoulder. He landed hard on his back as she placed her boot heel on his crotch and smiled down at him. She gave just enough pressure that Wilder grimaced. “And that’s for hitting on my girlfriend.”

The townsfolk burst into applause while Veronica beamed at Blythe. Hunter got to his feet slowly and stood rubbing his neck as Blythe reached down to offer Wilder a hand up. “She’s good,” Wilder said. “Anyone with a girlfriend that hot has to be a badass.”

Blythe shook her head, but Olivia saw the smile on her face as Kane, Forrest, and Damon all stared dumbfounded at the woman who couldn’t be over five-foot-two and a hundred twenty pounds.

Hunter towered over her and held out his hand. “Hunter Townsend. Could you show me how you did that?”

“Blythe Kencroft. My pleasure. We’ll spar some before we leave. Now, Kane has me all up to date. I’m sorry, this is actually a romantic getaway for Veronica and me, and I have another client in three days, so let’s try to wrap this up before then, gentlemen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Granger answered for them.

Olivia saw someone she recognized in the doorway and waved. “Hey, Kale!” Kale Mueez was also from Keeneston. He was in his late twenties and a computer genius. Although now he looked as ripped as his super-soldier father, Ahmed.

“Good to see you again, Olivia.”

“Everyone, this is Kale Mueez. He’s put in a new security system.”

“I knew of a Mueez, but he’s older than you,” Hunter said.

“Ahmed,” Kale said matter-of-factly and Hunter looked surprised that Kale knew the name. “Yeah, that’s my dad. You probably know my sister, Abby Mueez-Davies and her husband, Dylan Davies.”

“Never met them, but they’re freaking legends.” Olivia had never seen Hunter gobsmacked before and quite enjoyed her serious soldier brother inches from full-on fanboy. “And you know my sister?”

“Yeah, we’ve all met at weddings and such. Now, I need to get back to Keeneston so let me show you how to use my system.” Kale gathered everyone around and went through the codes and how the system worked. “Call me if you need anything.” Kale then turned to Granger and reminded him he could run prints and pictures for IDs.

“Thanks, Kale,” Granger said, shaking his hand.

“Um,” Hunter said, almost shuffling his feet. “Do you think I could meet your father? He’s kind of an idol of mine.”

“That man can make you piss your pants with just a look,” Tristan called out. “And it’s freaking *awesome*.”

“I’m so jealous you’ve met him. I’ve applied for the training school in Keeneston, but haven’t gotten in yet,” Hunter said, suddenly best friends with Tristan and hinting to Kale to push his name up the waitlist.

“You do realize,” Ryker said, getting Hunter’s attention, “the Davies family that runs that training facility are our cousins, right?”

“No, why didn’t anyone tell me this?” Hunter looked distraught. “You think you can call them?”

“I think if you’re not an ass we can pull a lot of strings,” Ryker said as Kale messed around on his phone.

“Yeah, my dad loves meeting guys like you. Nice service record. How do you not know Walker Greene or Dylan?” Kale asked.

“What do you mean nice service record? My record is sealed.”

“Eh,” Kale shrugged. “Purple Heart, nice. Dylan has two.”

“That’s confidential.”

Kale smiled at him. “And yet I accessed it. Now, don’t be a dick or let your brothers be dicks to my friends and I won’t put in orders to ship you to Northern Alaska where you can be Bertha the polar bear’s new BFF. Got me?”

“I guess computer nerds can be badasses,” Hunter said as if he hadn’t just partially insulted him.

“Hunter, you and Wilder are going to be the death of me,” Olivia groaned. “Thank you, Kale. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“No problem. Also, I have twenty bucks riding on the probability that you and Veronica will take over the world in the next three days. Don’t let me down.”

Olivia and Veronica laughed and then looked at each other speculatively. “Could be fun,” Olivia said with a shrug of her shoulder.

Veronica slipped her hand through Olivia’s arm and turned her back to the house. “I’ll break out the wine and we’ll make a girls’ night of it later.”

Ryker shuddered visibly. Olivia laughed at him. This was going to be fun. She wondered if Veronica could help her with something else while she was here. After all, how hard would it be to find a girl named Kortini?

12

On Tuesday morning, Olivia was on her way to work in Charleston with Blythe and Veronica, all three running on too little sleep but still riding the good mood of their impromptu Monday night sleepover after Olivia had worked from home that day. Who'd have thought that three accomplished, high-powered, professional women would find so much in common or so much to laugh about? Meanwhile, Granger and all the law enforcement friends and her brothers went over the reports Kale had run on the past boyfriends and men she worked with in both the Charleston and New York offices.

“What a cute place,” Veronica said, looking up at the old mansion. “There’s just something so charmingly Old World about downtown Charleston.”

“There is for sure. I just need to run up and change. Then we can go to the office. Are you sure you don’t mind spending your vacation watching me?” Olivia asked as they headed into the lobby.

“Not at all,” Veronica assured her. “I’m going to walk around downtown and bring us all lunch. I’ve been scouting restaurants. It’s why I insisted B take the job. I want to do nothing but eat for the next three days.”

“Oh, excuse me.”

Olivia didn't realize she was blocking the door until she heard Dax. "Dax! These are my friends, Veronica and Blythe. Ladies, this is my neighbor, Dax."

"Girls' trip. Fun!" he said as he shook hands with them.

"We just got here," Blythe told him.

"But I think Olivia had more fun with her boyfriend over the weekend than she'll have with us." Veronica winked at her. "If we were home, we'd be betting on when you two get engaged. Our town has a little bit of a gambling issue, but only with people's love lives."

"That sounds interesting," Dax chuckled. "Where is home?"

"Keeneston, Kentucky," Veronica answered. "Well, we won't keep you. It's nice meeting you."

"You too!" Dax called out as he headed out the front door. "And Olivia, you, me, wine, and details on the new boyfriend."

"It's a date!" Olivia called out as she waved, but then looked at her phone and frowned. "That son of a bitch!"

"What is it?" Blythe was all business.

"My assistant and paralegal from New York City are here. They got word through the assistants' gossip chain that Robert Whitehall, the lead counsel for this asshole CEO, has flown to Charleston to file more lawsuits against Ryker." Olivia looked at the note from Imani, which included some very colorful words to describe Robert.

"Isn't he on your list of potential stalkers?" Blythe asked.

Olivia nodded. "My New York assistants are here to help my Charleston team with him. It can't be a coincidence that the threats from New York are showing up in Charleston when he suddenly arrives in town, can it?"

"I'll let the guys know." Blythe sent a text as they took the elevator up to Olivia's floor.

Olivia unlocked the door, but it was Blythe who went in first to make sure the apartment was empty. “It’s all clear.”

“She’s so cute when she’s in bodyguard mode,” Veronica whispered.

“Totally,” Olivia agreed before she got ready for the day. “Does anyone see my briefcase? And do you all smell something?”

“In here!” Veronica called out but then suddenly screamed, “Blythe!”

Olivia rushed into the living room with Blythe to find a panic-stricken Veronica holding up her blood-covered hands.

“What happened?” Olivia asked as Blythe moved to open her briefcase.

“Your briefcase is bleeding. When was the last time you opened it?” Blythe asked.

“New York, but I don’t think I’ve opened it since then.”

“That explains the smell,” Blythe said as she bent closer to it. “Grab some garbage bags, will you?”

Veronica was already at the sink, scrubbing her hands, when Olivia hurried into the kitchen to grab the bags. She handed them and a pair of rubber cleaning gloves to Blythe. She moved the case on top of the bags and then, clad in the bright-yellow rubber gloves, Blythe opened the case.

Olivia covered her mouth and nose as she choked on not only the smell but the sight of the dead rabbit. Blythe leaned down to look at a notecard pinned to the rabbit. *“This is what bad girls get. You’re next,”* Blythe read out loud before taking some pictures and sending them to Granger.

Almost instantly, Olivia’s phone rang.

“Are you safe?” Granger’s concerned voice came through loud and clear.

“Besides being very nauseated, yes.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. Shit, I should have been with you this whole time.”

“Blythe is here. Do what you need to so we can find who is behind this. It appears to have been put in my briefcase in New York.”

“Kane is looking over the names from New York that you gave us. But considering Robert Whitehall is now in Charleston, I say that moves him to number one. We’re finding out where he’s staying and paying him a visit.”

“Who’s we?” Olivia asked.

“Kord and I, and, um, a couple of your brothers.”

“You’re having male bonding time now?” Olivia rolled her eyes and saw Veronica and Blythe grin.

“Turns out we have some things in common, like wanting to beat the crap out of guys who hurt you. That’s good, right?”

“Of course,” Olivia said sarcastically. “I’ll just stop by the bank on the way to work and get bail money for all of you.”

“Stone won’t need any. He has to go to hockey practice.”

“You know, this conversation is too strange. What do you want me to do with the rabbit?” Olivia really didn’t know what to think of Granger and her brothers suddenly getting along. It was weird. Like, as weird as the dead rabbit in her briefcase.

Except the dead rabbit was a lot grosser.

“Peter said the FBI will assist since the stalking crosses state lines. We’ll come by and log it into evidence. I’ll text him right now. Don’t leave until he gets there. And promise you’ll just go to your office and stay there. I want you as protected as possible. Are you sure you don’t want to come back to Shadows Landing?”

“I’ll be fine, Granger. That’s the whole point of having Blythe with me. Plus, Mateo and Imani are in from New York and there’s no way they’d let anything happen to me.”

“Who are they?”

“My paralegal and assistant.” Olivia smiled and Blythe and Veronica each arched an eyebrow in question at her. “I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

“I’ll come by your office and pick you up at the end of the day.”

“Miss me already?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell your brothers. They’ll tease me. Call me if you need anything. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Love you, Liv.”

Olivia heard her brothers groan in the background. “Love you, too.” Olivia hung up and her smile slipped as she looked at the rabbit again. “FBI will be here soon to process the evidence. After they arrive, we can head out.”

It only took Peter Castle ten minutes to get to her apartment. The knock on the door had Blythe pulling her gun and Veronica winking at Olivia. “So-o-o cute,” she whispered about Blythe.

“Who is it?” Blythe asked as she stood off to the side of the door.

“FBI Agent in Charge Peter Castle.”

“Hold the badge up with both hands. Keep them there as I open the door or I will shoot you.”

“Now, that’s sexy,” Veronica whispered. Olivia grinned at her. She knew Peter Castle and could have told Blythe he was legit, but Veronica was enjoying the show so much she didn’t want to interrupt.

Blythe opened the door, checked his ID, then ushered him inside.

“Oh! Is this the boyfriend?” Dax called out as he carried his groceries down the hall toward his apartment.

“No,” Olivia said, stepping in to stop Peter from introducing himself as FBI. She liked her neighbor and all, but she didn’t want him involved. “This is my friend, Peter. Peter, this is Dax.”

Dax shook Peter’s hand and then his nose crinkled. “Nice to meet you, but man, you smell.”

“Oh, um,” Olivia’s brain searched for an explanation. “I left some chicken in the garbage all weekend. I’ll take it out on my way to work. Sorry. Hope it doesn’t stink up your apartment.”

“No problem. I have these great candles. They are very romantic and smell great. I might light them now. It’ll go over really well for my work Zoom.”

Olivia laughed along with Dax and hurried to close the door. “Well, there it is, Peter.” Olivia pointed toward the living room. “Can we go now? I like to think I’m a tough woman, but I am very close to throwing up.”

“Yeah. I’ll take care of this and call Granger with what I find. I may join him in his talk with Whitehall.”

Oh joy. She could just hear the motions being filed against her. Assault. Intimidation. What else would Robert stick her with? Of course, if he did do that, maybe Granger could arrest him and maybe she wouldn’t feel so scared anymore.

13

Of course, the very first person Olivia saw that morning was Robert Whitehall. She hadn't even walked into the firm's Charleston office when he ambushed her on the street. He had a mischievous grin on his face as if he were enjoying that he'd cornered her. The spark in his eye told her he couldn't wait to torment her.

"Just the woman I was hoping to see." Robert was practically gloating. "Turns out I also have jurisdiction in Charleston to file a second suit. Good morning, sweetheart."

Veronica crossed her arms and frowned. "Did you just call her sweetheart?"

"Feel left out, babe?"

Veronica raised one eyebrow.

"You must be Robert. I'm Blythe, and I'm so happy I got to meet you."

Robert puffed up. "The pleasure will be yours, babe."

"B, can you shoot him?" Veronica asked.

"It would be more fun to twist his balls off with my bare hands," Blythe responded.

“I’d rather beat him in court and ruin his reputation,” Olivia said sweetly.

“I’ll bet,” Veronica said with a mischievous grin, “that I can destroy this little man before B can rip off his penis *and* before you can file any kind of motion with the courts.”

“Oh, you are on,” Olivia said, pulling out her phone. “I can file electronically.”

Robert went to swipe at Olivia’s phone and Blythe moved so quickly that Olivia only saw a blur. Robert was flipped and on his knees, gasping for breath as Blythe held his hand in a twisted and very painful-looking way that made him sweat profusely.

“Done!” Veronica called out.

“Done?” Olivia asked. “What did you do?”

“I got his New York bar license suspended for thirty days.”

Robert began to fume and sputter, then gasped as Blythe pushed his hand just a little bit in the other direction.

Veronica looked down at him and batted her lashes. “You shouldn’t have solicited and then accepted sex from female clients in lieu of payment.”

Robert turned bright red, then ashen, and Olivia worried that he might have a heart attack. “How?”

Veronica bent down and cocked her head at him. “I know everyone and everything, Mr. Whitehall. I have contacts the federal government could only dream of. Between my knowledge and network and Olivia’s brilliance in the courtroom . . .” Veronica paused and looked up at her. “I assume you finished filing your motion?”

Olivia grinned. “I did. I’ve already filed a motion to have Robert kicked off the case and the suit tossed.”

Veronica turned her smile back down to Robert. “See, she’s brilliant. So, remember, if there’s something Olivia and I can’t handle, Blythe will just kill you. Women aren’t just sitting at home for your pleasure anymore, Mr. Whitehall. You

just haven't realized yet that we're already taking over the world."

"What's going on?"

Olivia turned to see Mark on the sidewalk about six feet away, looking worried.

"Just taking out the trash," Blythe said sweetly. While she still held on to Robert's arm, she held her hand out to Mark. "Blythe Kencroft. And this is my girlfriend, Veronica Pinckard. We're friends of Olivia's."

"Mark Fleming. I'm also a friend of Olivia's. What did Robert do now?"

"He called me sweetheart," Olivia said coolly and saw Mark start in surprise, then struggle to contain his laughter.

"Yeah, I remember you don't take kindly to patronization. One of the reasons you and my father didn't get along if I recall." Mark turned to the group and held out both elbows. "Ladies, it would be my honor to escort you inside."

Blythe bent and whispered something to Robert. His eyes bugged out and then he nodded before Blythe dropped her grip on him. Robert looked ready to murder them all, but he watched them walk into the building without saying a word.

The first floor of the law office held a large lobby with a receptionist whose job was solely to make clients comfortable and answer the phones. There were a few offices for paralegals and several meeting rooms. The second floor was for other paralegals and junior associates, and the third floor housed senior partners and their staff.

The elevator hadn't even opened all the way on the third floor before Imani and Mateo were speaking. "We saw everything," Mateo said, his eyes wide with delight.

"You! You are fierce!" Imani gave Blythe a high five.

"Imani, Mateo, these are my friends, Blythe and Veronica," Olivia introduced as they all walked toward her office. Mark said his goodbyes and headed to his assistant's

desk while the group moved to Olivia's office just a short distance away.

"Not that we aren't excited to see that Olivia actually has friends since in New York the only thing she does is work, but we still have the Robert issue," Imani told the group. "Here are all the motions he filed."

"Yes, but I've already filed a motion to dismiss, and it turns out Robert has a bigger issue right now: trying to keep his law license." Olivia sat behind her desk and pulled up her email. "I feel bad that you came all the way here, but I don't think I'll need your help with Robert anymore."

Mateo and Imani looked a little lost and Olivia had pity on them. "Why don't you take a couple of days off and enjoy your time in Charleston? That way you're here if I do need you."

Imani and Mateo were quiet for a moment before they turned to look at each other with equal parts surprise and suspicion. Olivia could see the light bulb go off as Imani gasped and spun back around to her. "You got laid!"

"What?" Olivia asked, surprised that Imani guessed so quickly.

"You're so right," Mateo said with a big smile. "Who is he?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "What makes you think I got laid?"

Imani held up her finger. "One, you didn't make anyone cry on your way in."

"Robert was practically crying," Veronica pointed out helpfully.

"That was because Blythe was twisting his wrist off," Mateo said, crossing his arms over his chest in a clear statement that he too believed she was getting laid and wasn't buying anything she was selling to deny it.

"Two," Imani said, holding up a second finger, "you're smiling the smile of a woman who had really good orgasms."

Even after dealing with Robert. Add those two facts together and that equals getting laid this weekend. So, who is he?"

Mateo dropped his voice and leaned forward. "Is it Mark? You're super-hot ex-boyfriend?"

"Whoa," Blythe said, jumping in. "You never said anything about Mark being an ex and why wasn't he on the list?"

"Because I just saw him for the first time in ages on Friday. I haven't spoken to him or seen him for years. The threats started way before then," Olivia said, dropping her voice and moving to close the door to the office.

"Threats? What threats?" Imani asked sharply, the teasing instantly gone from her voice.

"Don't worry, you two are cleared," Blythe told them.

"You thought we were threatening you?" Mateo asked, clearly insulted.

Olivia shook her head. "No, I know it wasn't you two, but you were cleared all the same." Olivia took a seat and laid it all out for them: the emails, the letters, the attack, everything. Well, not the sex. They didn't need to know that.

"Damn, girl." Imani sat down hard on the couch in shock.

"We need to put you in hiding or something," Mateo said, looking out at the office. "It could be anyone."

"That's why I'm here. I'm a bodyguard," Blythe told them.

"Are you a bodyguard, too?" Mateo asked Veronica.

Veronica shook her head. "I'm just here for the food."

Olivia let out a little laugh. Veronica might well be a long-lost sister if Olivia didn't know any better. They were certainly soul mate sisters even if the DNA didn't sync up. "I have an idea," Olivia said. "I need to get some work done. Imani and Mateo, why don't you go with Veronica and walk around the city some?"

"Perfect," Veronica said, smiling. "You will know what Olivia would like for lunch and I can find something for

Blythe.”

“I think I better stay here,” Mateo said, still glancing out at the people in the office as if one of them would come into the office and kill her at any moment.

“Remember, that’s why I’m here. Go. Have fun.” Blythe kissed Veronica goodbye and shooed everyone out of the office. “There. Now, you can get your work done.”



“That son of a bitch!” Granger yelled as the text came through from Blythe about an incident that had just occurred with Robert Whitehall.

“Let’s go pay him a visit,” Damon said, cracking his knuckles with anticipation.

“Good idea, but I promised Peter we’d go straight there.” It was so hard for Granger not to turn the SUV around and head to Robert’s hotel. Instead, he drove the next couple of blocks toward the address he’d been given. This was the first time he’d been to Olivia’s condo and it felt all wrong. He shouldn’t be arriving to log evidence of a crime. It also reminded him that, while Olivia had been on his boat, she hadn’t been to his house yet either.

“Hey, guys,” Granger asked the row of Townsend brothers in the backseat. “What’s Olivia’s favorite food?”

“Not rabbit,” Hunter said sarcastically.

“Why?” Damon wanted to know.

“I want to cook her dinner.”

“I don’t think I like how this went from *we don’t like you* to you thinking we can help you with romantic dates.” Damon sounded conflicted and it was clear he didn’t like it.

“I think it’s nice you asked. It’s clear you want to make our sister happy.”

“Shove it, Kane,” Hunter growled. “If you’d let me kill him the first time he put his hands on our sister, this would all be moot.”

“She’s a huge fan of Italian,” Kane answered, ignoring his brother. “You’ve never seen a woman eat more garlic bread in your life either.”

“Thanks, Kane.” Granger was already making a mental grocery list as he parked the car.

“Your bromance is more annoying than his relationship with Olivia,” Damon complained as they got out of the SUV and approached the building.

“You’re just jealous,” Kord said, slinging his arm around Granger and giving Kane a wink.

Damon shook his head, but not before Granger saw him smile. Kord and Kane committed fully to the joke as they walked onto Olivia’s floor. They might have been a little loud as a neighbor’s door opened and a man wearing a T-shirt with a graphic of black-framed glasses on it stuck his head out in confusion.

“Sorry for the noise,” Granger said to the man.

His eyebrows furrowed and he looked a little pissed off as they went to open Olivia’s door. “Who are you? Olivia isn’t at home right now, and she wouldn’t want you just walking into her place.”

Granger flashed his ID, even though his badge was pinned to his shirt above the chest pocket along with his nametag. “Sheriff Granger Fox, and you are?”

“Is Olivia hurt? Did something happen to her?”

“Why would you think something happened to her?” Granger asked instead of answering. The guy looked near panic.

“Why else would a cop be showing up at her place? I’m her friend, Dax.”

Kane snapped his fingers. “Yes, she’s mentioned you before. You help her with the mail and such when she’s out of town for work.”

Dax looked at Kane and took him in. “You must be the new boyfriend I heard about. You look like her type.”

“Ew,” Kane said, recoiling. “That’s my sister.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry,” Dax said, looking horrified. “Olivia usually tells me things, and I have heard of her brothers.” Dax looked over the men and confusion set in. “He’s the sheriff. It looks like you’re also with the sheriff,” he said to Kord, “you’re the brother, so who are you two?”

“Damon Townsend.” Damon shook Dax’s hand hard enough to make the man cringe.

“Hunter Townsend.” Hunter apparently took it as a competition and poor Dax almost went to the ground in pain.

“For the record, he’s the boyfriend,” Kord told Dax, nodding to Granger. “I’m Kordell King.”

“I’m just making a mess of things, aren’t I?” Dax laughed nervously. “I just didn’t see Olivia with a cop.”

“Who did you see her with?” Granger asked, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning.

“Honestly, someone who is an academic or professional.”

Damon snorted. “Then you don’t know Olivia very well. She gets bored with men who think more highly of their intellect than they should. She needs someone who isn’t afraid to call her on her bullshit and challenges her.” Damon paused, thinking over what he’d just said, then cursed under his breath as Kord’s smile grew and grew.

“Welcome to the bromance, big brother!” Kord smiled cheerfully as Kane grinned along with him.

“But, hey, while you’re here,” Granger said to Dax, “have you seen anyone visiting Olivia’s apartment or maybe trying to deliver something?”

“Besides you all, I haven’t seen her have a single guest the whole time she’s lived here. It’s why we became friends. I’m an engineer and work from home. Neither of us has much of a social life so we sometimes get a drink together or hang out. Although, I think I heard her door close on Friday after she left, but when I went to check no one answered, so I figured it

was the doctor down the hall,” Dax told them. “Are you sure she’s okay?”

“She is. She’s at work and we just stopped by for a moment before meeting her for lunch.” Granger turned just as Peter opened the door. “Nice meeting you,” Granger called out over his shoulder as they all headed into Olivia’s apartment.

It didn’t take Granger long to realize this apartment was shockingly similar to his home. They had the same taste in simple, clean lines.

“This is trippy,” Kord muttered, looking around.

“Yeah, the smell is pretty bad,” Damon said, trying not to gag.

“No, the apartment looks just like Granger’s place. Oh no! This is too much. Y’all have the same couch!” Kord burst out laughing.

Granger would have laughed, too, but he was looking at the evidence Peter had processed. “The note was pinned to the rabbit?”

Peter nodded and Kane frowned.

“The way he sliced the rabbit’s throat—it’s meant to scare. If he’d just broken the neck, the horror of it wouldn’t be as potent. The blood is more of a visual threat than just a dead animal. Between that and the *bad girls* in the note, something made him very angry with Olivia and he wanted to make sure she felt it,” Kane told them.

“This didn’t happen in New York either. It happened here,” Granger said, looking down at the blood and the note. “The blood would have seeped through the case within minutes. She wouldn’t have missed it. Plus, there’s the extra weight. Olivia would have noticed it when she picked up the briefcase. Dax said he heard her door open on Friday and I think that’s when the rabbit was killed and put in the briefcase.”

“Damn, you have to be right.” Peter headed into the kitchen and began looking at knives. “I’ll take the ones capable of doing the deed with me for forensic testing. Maybe

we can find a print if we're lucky enough that he used one of hers."

"There's a good chance he did. He'd like knowing she was using it when it had drawn the blood of something that scared her," Kane explained.

"Thanks, Peter. I'll stay if you want me to, but—"

"But, you want to see Olivia and make sure she's safe," Peter said to Granger. "I understand. Go. I've got this."

"Thank you." Granger rushed from the apartment with Kord and the brothers right behind him. After seeing the threat in person, all Granger could think about was getting to Olivia.

14

The receptionist stared up at them in awe. “You’re *all* here to see Miss Townsend?”

Damon winked at her and the woman blushed five shades of red.

“We’re her brothers,” Hunter said. “Well, not those two, but they don’t count.”

Granger sighed and wanted to roll his eyes but stopped when a commotion of chatter filled the lobby. Granger turned to see what was making that much noise only to find Veronica with a man and a woman he didn’t recognize, all talking excitedly and carrying many bags of food.

“Oh! You’re here,” Veronica said with a smile as she held up some bags. “I had a feeling you would be so I ordered food for everyone.” She leaned over to the receptionist and smiled. “They’re with us.”

Then Veronica sailed right on by them while the man and woman were left standing, looking at the group of men. “Holy hell,” the woman muttered as she took them all in.

Granger didn’t bother asking more. He just turned and followed Veronica to the elevator. A moment later they were all crammed onto the elevator together.

“I’m Imani. Miss Townsend’s assistant,” the woman said to the entire elevator.

“And I’m Mateo. I’m her paralegal from New York.”

“Yeah, you’ve been cleared,” Granger said.

“You’re the second person to say that to me today,” Mateo muttered. “I didn’t know I was under suspicion to begin with.”

“Everyone is,” Granger told him.

“I’m not working and my manners went right out the window,” Veronica laughed. “Sorry. Damon Townsend, Hunter Townsend, Kane Townsend, Kord King, and Granger Fox,” Veronica said, pointing to each of them. “Imani and Mateo from Olivia’s New York office.”

Imani looked as if she were eyeing an all-you-can-eat buffet as they got off the elevator. Mateo looked at each of them as if he were trying to solve a puzzle.

The parade making its way into Olivia’s office drew a lot of attention. People were whispering, heads popped up over cubicles, and office doors opened. Granger was last in line as they entered her office.

Veronica and Blythe were passing out food as a man in a suit came to the door. Granger disliked him instantly. He wore a look on his face of someone who always got what he wanted and knew it.

“Did I miss the party invite?”

“Mark, join us. I think they bought out the restaurant,” Olivia said, passing him a plate.

“You know my mother would be horrified if I didn’t have the good manners to join after being invited.”

“Mark Fleming, right?” Damon said, sounding more displeased than he’d ever sounded talking to Granger. “Thought I recognized you from the society page pictures.”

Veronica frowned delicately at that piece of news. “You’re Deandre and Clarence Fleming’s son?”

“I am. Do you know my parents?” Mark asked with a smile as he filled a plate of food.

“Yes.” That was all Veronica said.

“He’s also the asshole who was always too busy to meet Olivia’s family when we came to visit her at law school. Some boyfriend you were. What are you doing here?” Damon demanded.

Mark snapped his fingers. “I knew I recognized you from the photos at Olivia’s place. You’re Damon. You’re Hunter. You’re Kane.” Mark turned to Granger and frowned. “Are you Wilder?”

“I’m Granger.”

Mark frowned. “I know there’s a lot of them, but I don’t remember a Granger.”

Granger looked to Olivia to see if she was going to say anything, but instead of feeling anger at not introducing him, Granger saw her blush and smile at him. Her tongue licked her bottom lip and it was Granger’s turn to blush as Olivia’s eyes traveled downward.

“*That’s* the man you got laid by!” Imani suddenly called out. “Damn good choice. Did he use the handcuffs in his waistband? Tell me he used them, please!”

Mark’s eyes snapped over to Granger and then back to Olivia.

“You’re dating a sheriff’s deputy? Didn’t see that one coming.”

“Better than a stuffed shirt, spoon-fed mama’s boy who doesn’t have the nerve to introduce his girlfriend to his family or tell them to shove it when they didn’t approve of her family background when you finally told them about her, two years later. Also”—Hunter looked especially formidable with his arms crossed over his chest—“Granger is the sheriff and has more balls than you ever did. He didn’t run from meeting us like the coward you are.”

“The bromance keeps growing,” Kord said with a happy grin before turning to Mark and shaking his head. “That’s weak. These guys are cool. You missed out.”

Granger watched Mark. He stayed relaxed as he gave a shrug. “I’m sure they are. It just wasn’t meant to be.” Mark held out his hand to Granger, and Granger shook it. “No hard feelings. Olivia and I dated a long time ago. I’m glad she found someone to make her happy.”

“Why aren’t you part of Fleming and Fleming? They’re in New York, right?” Veronica asked.

“I’m sure you’ve heard that my parents have kept a tight rein on my life. I’ll put up with the demands of it for the most part, but I couldn’t work for them. The firm is full of Flemings and it would be miserable. You can only hear how much of a failure you are so many times a day.” Mark shrugged and Granger saw the others soften towards him a little bit. “Thanks for lunch.”

“I don’t know why it was hard for Mark to see you and Granger together,” Imani said between bites as they watched Mark leave. “You two have crazy sexual chemistry.”

“Nope, that’s it. I’m out. I’ll wait in the car.” Hunter set down his plate and left the office.

Olivia got a glint in her eyes that told Granger she was up to something. She leaned over the table, grabbed Granger’s shirt, and yanked him toward her. She kissed him thoroughly as her brothers tossed their plates on the table and left while grumbling about how gross that was.

Olivia was laughing by the time the kiss ended. “If I had known it was that easy to get rid of my brothers, I would have done that a long time ago. Although, I think they like you.”

“Why do you say that?” Granger asked.

“Because they left instead of beating the crap out of you for kissing their sister.”

“It’s the bromance,” Kord said calmly before taking another bite of his lunch. “But I notice I’m the only one left in here, so I’ll wait with the guys in the car instead of being the

third wheel. It was nice meeting you two,” Kord said to Imani and Mateo before leaving.

“Yeah, we should go out in the hall and plan our evening,” Blythe said as she and Veronica cleared out.

“Not us. We’re on vacation,” Mateo said before Imani gave him an elbow to the ribs. “Oh, yeah, let’s make sure we didn’t get any emails while we were out.”

Granger let out a laugh when the door closed and he was finally alone with Olivia. He moved around her desk and pulled her out of her chair. He took a seat and then patted his lap. Olivia sat down and put her arms around his neck and leaned into him.

“Are you okay?”

“Did you see it?” Olivia asked.

“Yeah, I did. I also know it wasn’t left in your briefcase in New York. It was placed in it Friday after you left for Shadows Landing,” Granger told her.

“He was in my apartment?” Olivia gave a shiver and he held her tight as if he could take the fear from her and carry it himself. “How do you know?”

“That much blood would have seeped through your briefcase within fifteen minutes. Also, I met your neighbor and he said he heard your door open and close after you left. He thought you had come back and went to knock on the door to see if you’d forgotten something, but no one answered. He figured he misheard and it was the doctor down the hall getting home.”

“But Dax didn’t see anyone? They would have had to have a code to get into the building.”

“He didn’t see anyone. Or someone could have just held open the door for him. Stalkers don’t have warning signs on them. Most of them look like good guys. Someone no one would think twice at letting them in. Given this, I think it’s best you stay in Shadows Landing at night. We have better security in place there and well, I’m there.”

Olivia leaned back and placed a light kiss on his lips. “You can’t protect me every hour of every day, Granger.”

“I know. But I can at night with you in my arms. So, how about dinner at my place tonight?”

“Are you asking me on a date?” Olivia asked with a big smile on her face.

“I am.”

“I’d love to.”

“Good. I’ll see you tonight.” Granger kissed her slowly for as long as he could. He heard a knock on the door and Olivia sighed.

“Back to work,” she said, as she got to her feet and headed to the door.

Granger enjoyed the view of Olivia walking away from him as she opened the door. Mark looked at Granger sitting at the desk and then back to Olivia. “Oh, sorry. I thought I saw everyone leave. I was hoping to talk to you about my upcoming meeting with Ryker Faulkner.”

Granger stood from the desk. He’d let Olivia get back to work. He had some grocery shopping to do. “I was just leaving.” Granger smiled at her. He wouldn’t kiss her in front of a colleague. He knew how she liked to keep things professional, so he wouldn’t put her in that position no matter how much he wanted to. “I’ll see you for dinner tonight.”

Olivia surprised him when she rose up and kissed him. It was quick, but it was filled with meaning. “Looking forward to it. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Liv.”

“Again, sorry to interrupt,” Mark said as he stepped into the office so Granger could leave. “I’m meeting Ryker Faulkner this week and need to be prepared.”

“Mark,” Olivia began to say, but Mark cut her off.

“I guess dealing with tough billionaires is a little outside your day-to-day, huh, Sheriff? I wish I didn’t have that stress,

but I know I'll get my deal worked out with Mr. Faulkner. It's why they pay me, after all."

"Good luck," Granger said to Mark before turning to leave. Olivia had kissed him and told him she loved him. He didn't need to measure dicks to know he was top dog and that made him incredibly happy. For the first time in a very long time, he felt something he hadn't in more than a decade: trust. He trusted Olivia and that mattered more than trying to puff himself up in the eyes of a guy he didn't care about.

"Mark, you just made the biggest ass of yourself," Granger heard Olivia say. "You were too busy trying sound superior to even think that perhaps having grown up in the same small town, Granger and Ryker would be friends ... best friends, in fact."

Granger chuckled to himself as he left. That's his girl and he was damn proud of her.

15

“And another thing,” Olivia said, poking her finger at his chest. “Stress? Do you think negotiating with Ryker is stressful? How about being shot while protecting an innocent woman, a woman who happens to be a friend of mine? If you make the wrong objection in court, the judge doesn’t shoot you, Mark. So yes, you sounded like an egotistical asshole, just like your mother.” All the reasons Olivia hadn’t fought for her relationship with Mark came roaring back. Although, it had looked as if she’d slapped him when she told him he was acting like his mother.

Mark’s face flashed with anger but then he frowned. “Damn. You’re right. Please tell him I’m sorry. I used to agree with you about my mother, but without you keeping me grounded … well, I didn’t realize how snobby I sounded.”

Olivia strode back to her desk and took a seat. Mark followed and sat across the desk from her. “I have to admit when I was approached with moving to this firm, I had hoped we might be able to give it a go again. I see I missed my chance. That doesn’t mean I won’t still flirt outrageously in hopes of changing your mind,” Mark said with a wink that had her laughing.

“Don’t bother. And don’t think Imani hasn’t filled me in on the latest news. I’ve heard all about you and our receptionist.”

Mark grinned then, too. “Always got to have a plan B. Now, anything I should know about before my meeting with Ryker?”



After Mark left her office, her day went nonstop until it was well past dark. Kevin Hendrix, Olivia’s boss in the Charleston office, asked her to fill in for a last-minute hearing. Stone stopped by the office after hockey practice to pick up Veronica and take her back to Shadows Landing.

Finally, at nine at night, Olivia and Blythe were heading back home.

“V said to just drop me at Harper’s bar. Granger just got there to settle a fight between some twit and Skeeter about a safe or something,” Blythe said. “At least that’s what I got from Veronica.”

“Yes, the town historian, Stephen Adkins, is a twit and Skeeter holds the combination to the rarest of the town’s historical records and artifacts. Every so often, Stephen gets uppity and talks down to Skeeter, who actually knows more history than any person I’ve ever met. And then Skeeter pulls his knife to get Stephen to shut up. Sounds strange, I know.”

Blythe gave a shrug. “Maybe if I hadn’t been living in Keeneston, but that makes sense to me. So, you and Mark had a thing, huh? Veronica found photos of you two at some law school functions. According to her, his parents are jerks.”

“Yeah, and they definitely didn’t want their son with a girl whose family didn’t come from their circle. When Mark didn’t stand up to them, then assumed I’d follow him to Atlanta without even asking, I realized it was over. The relationship had run its course. We parted friends, though.”

“Could he be your stalker?” Blythe asked bluntly.

Olivia thought about it and shook her head. “I don’t see him caring enough to do all that. He likes things just handed to

him.”

“You know, a good percentage of stalkers are previous or current partners.”

Olivia nodded. “I know. I’ll keep an eye on him and let you know if I get any creepy vibes. I still can’t believe they didn’t find anything on Robert.”

Granger had called that afternoon to let them know they had questioned Robert, and while he strongly disliked her, there was no evidence of him being in Charleston on Friday when they think the rabbit was put in her briefcase.

“Bad girl . . .” Olivia said almost to herself. “I don’t understand what I’ve done or to whom. These messages accuse me of being a whore. They accuse me of being a bad person and doing bad things. Then they send me a sweet present. I just wish it were over. You checked out Mark. You’ve checked Robert. You all checked out most of the men I’ve dated and most of the people at my firm. I don’t know who it could be and that’s the scariest part. If I knew whom I was facing, I could prepare. I could find their strengths and weaknesses. I could protect myself.”

“Are you able to protect yourself? I can give you some lessons.”

Olivia shook her head as she turned down Main Street and drove toward Harper’s bar. “I take lessons at the church and carry a dagger in my purse.”

Blythe laughed and shook her head. “I love that your church teaches weapons classes. Our priest is starting to do the same after hearing about it and visiting here for Edie and Tristan’s wedding.”

Olivia parked and they walked into the bar together. All seemed normal except for the fact Granger was sitting at a table full of her brothers and they were all laughing.

“Am I seeing things?” Olivia asked Blythe.

“I don’t know. I see Granger laughing with your brothers. But do you see Veronica leaping onto a large stuffed alligator?”

Olivia looked farther into the bar and froze. Veronica, with her flawless makeup, super-elegant fitted sundress, and killer wedges, got up off the floor, moved to the side and leaped back onto a six-foot-long stuffed toy alligator.

“That’s it! You’re a natural,” Bubba said proudly, as he hooked his thumbs into his overalls and beamed down at Veronica. “Now wrap the chompers. You gotta do that or he’ll ruin your manicure with a missing finger.”

“I’m hallucinating, right?” Blythe murmured before heading back to see what Veronica was doing.

“You ready for dinner?” Granger asked. She’d been watching Veronica and had missed Granger coming up to see her.

“Are you hanging out with my brothers?”

“Yeah. We were talking hockey. I don’t know zip about it, but Stone has me wanting to see a game.”

“Well, his season opener is in two days. We could go if you’d like.”

Granger shook his head. “Let’s see how things are going by then. How was work?”

“Busy as always. Mark apologized for being an ass to you.”

Granger grinned. “Only after you defended my honor.”

“No one messes with my man.”

Granger kissed her quickly but kept his hand cupping her cheek. “I like being your man.”

Olivia bit her bottom lip. She didn’t know if she should tell him the rest about Mark.

“Whatever it is, just tell me,” Granger said as he smoothed his thumb over her cheek sweetly.

“Mark also confessed he wanted to see if we could date again, but he said he sees I’m already taken.”

“I know.”

Olivia waited for the distrust, the anger, the kind of overreaction she'd seen from her brothers and former boyfriends, but it never came. "Wait, you know?"

"Guys can tell when other guys want what they have."

"You're not upset?"

"He can desire you all he wants. I trust you and that's all that matters to me.

However, we did check him out. Didn't find anything odd besides being a spoiled brat."

"And you and my brothers?" Olivia asked.

"Have found common ground. We all love you. That doesn't mean they didn't threaten me. It just means we're in agreement that as long as I don't hurt you, I get to live. Now, how about dinner? I have it warming in the oven."

"That sounds great. It's been a long day."

"I'll follow you to your house and then I can drive you to mine. Let's give Blythe and Veronica some time together. Although, now it looks like Gator is going to teach both of them how to wrestle an alligator."

"Then let's sneak out before anyone tries to get us to join them. I want you to myself tonight."

"Yes, ma'am."

Granger had her out the door in seconds, and just minutes later they were at her house switching cars.

Granger liked having Olivia in the car with him. They didn't even need to talk to fill the silence. Instead, in the silence, Olivia reached over and rested her hand on his thigh and then looked back out the window.

It was peaceful just being together.

It didn't mean Granger wasn't nervous. However, he refused to show his nerves when he pulled up to his house. He'd seen her condo in Charleston and the cottage here. There was no denying she made more money than he did. That didn't

bother him, but he just wanted to make sure he could make her happy—even with his house and his cooking.

It didn't make Granger feel any better when the first thing Olivia did when she walked inside his house was laugh. "Oh, Granger. This is too much."

All the insecurity came rushing back in that one instance. "You don't like it," he said, trying to keep all emotions from his voice. "I understand."

"Oh!" Olivia stopped laughing and reached for his hand. "No, not only do we have the same couch, but that painting," she said, pointing to his favorite print. It was an abstract print of a beach that had always just spoken to him. It made him feel relaxed and happy. "Did you go into my bedroom in my condo?"

"No." Granger didn't know where she was going with this.

"I have this painting. It's my favorite and it hangs in my bedroom so I can see it every morning."

Relief and understanding poured over him. "So, not only do we have the same couch, we have the same favorite painting."

"And the same paint color. I'm beginning to feel as if the universe wants to make it easy for us to move in together."

"Who are we to question the universe?" Granger asked with a grin as he pulled her close and began to kiss her softly.

"Mmm," Olivia murmured as she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back. "Even if it does smell incredible in here, I'd like dessert before dinner."

"It doesn't smell nearly as incredible as you," Granger said between kisses. "Now, let's go see if we have the same bed."

Olivia laughed as he easily swung her up into his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

16

They did get around to eating dinner, eventually. The lasagna was delicious. The company was perfection. Granger had never had a nude picnic in bed before. While he was still self-conscious about his scars, Olivia made it better. She didn't stare, but she also didn't pretend they weren't there. She honestly didn't seem to care and that made Granger comfortable.

They lay in bed talking and it felt so natural. Granger wasn't one to talk much, but with Olivia he wanted her to know about him and wanted to hear her thoughts on topics ranging from Stone's hockey season to what book she was reading.

Olivia's phone rang and their bubble burst. It was time to return to the real world.

"Hello, Sebastian. What can I do for you?" Olivia asked as she sat up in bed.

Sebastian Abel was a tech billionaire who'd formed a partnership with Ryker. Sebastian was married to one of Ryker's cousins from Kentucky, a cousin who happened to work for the president of the United States. A president who was also Sebastian's best friend. All of that was to say,

Sebastian was connected, intelligent, and Olivia's boss. If he called at one in the morning, she needed to answer.

"Yeah, I can get that filed within the next six hours. I'll make sure it's in before lunch their time." Olivia paused as Sebastian talked. "No, I'm okay. Ryker brought in Blythe and Veronica for the next two days and Granger is here. Along with a lot of my brothers." Olivia turned and smiled at Granger. "Yes, Kale was here, too. That's nice of you to offer. I'll let Granger know. If he feels it's needed, I will take you up on the offer."

Olivia hung up and then looked guiltily at Granger. "I need to go home and work."

"I gathered," Granger said. He was already reaching for his jeans. "I'll sleep on your couch while you work. Kale will have a report for me ready in the morning as well, so it'll be good for me to meet with your brothers. Wilder didn't join us in Charleston yesterday, and I only got to say a couple of words to him at the bar. What does he do?"

"He owns his own chain of very exclusive nightclubs around the world," Olivia said absently as she pulled on her panties.

"Would I know them?"

Olivia pulled her skirt up. "You would only know them for pictures of celebrities coming and going from them. They're named WET. Wilder Elliott Townsend."

"Yeah, I know them. I've read rumors about them."

"I can neither confirm nor deny them, and Wilder only laughs when people bring them up. Okay, I'm ready."

In the middle of the night Shadows Landing was equally peaceful and spooky. You could hear the river, the sounds of nocturnal animals, and take in the great scents of water, grass, and flowers that instantly relaxed you. It was spooky because sometimes you could swear that figures moved in the often-present fog. Shadows Landing had been founded by pirates and Skeeter swore he talked to them. He said several enjoyed their afterlife here in town. Granger wasn't a paranormal

believer for most things, but he'd felt the icy caress of Anne Bonny and there'd been too many unexplained events that only added up to ghosts keeping watch in Shadows Landing. Luckily, they seemed content to spend their afterlife protecting the town and those who lived there—just like Granger did.

However, as he walked toward his SUV, an icy chill ran over him right before a gust of wind rustled the tree leaves. Suddenly a van shot by him. It was flying toward Charleston, swerving from one lane to the other.

"Get in!" Granger ordered Olivia as he flipped on his light bar and siren and peeled out of the driveway. "You're going to be a little late to your house. I hope that doesn't mess things up for your work."

Olivia had a death grip on the door but otherwise looked relaxed. "I have an hour or so to spare."

"They're going to get themselves killed. Or worse, kill someone else. It's probably a drunk driver or someone on drugs." Granger floored the SUV and took off after them.

As he approached the van, his resolve hardened. "That's Lydia's van. Someone probably stole it." The taillights came on as the driver slammed on the brakes. The van fishtailed and Granger cursed. Luckily it didn't flip as it finally came to a stop. "Stay here."

Granger had his gun and flashlight drawn as he ran to the driver's side door. "Raise both hands and put them out the window. Now!" Granger ordered. Two hands poked out and then a blood-curdling scream sounded.

"Help!" a voice inside the van screamed.

Granger swung wide so he could keep his gun trained on the driver and finally get a view of the driver. To say he was shocked would be a gross understatement. "Landry, Jr.?"

Landry's face was a mix between frantic and determined. In the front seat next to him was ten-year-old Levi. "Granger! It's my mom," Levi called out.

Another scream sounded from inside the van and Granger was already spinning to open the side door before the scream

ended. What he saw left him momentarily stunned. Lydia was lying on the bench seat with Lacy on the floor holding her hand. Leah was in the back row watching Lindsey, Lyle, and Leo. Everyone wore expressions of abject terror.

“What’s going on?” Granger asked everyone.

“Mama’s tummy started hurting really bad. We tried Dr. Faulkner, but he didn’t answer the phone. Then we called 911 but at night it goes to Charleston and Mama can’t wait for an ambulance,” Lacy explained. “Landry said he could drive us. He’s been practicing in the church parking lot to show Daddy when he gets home.”

Lydia groaned and then let out a long, low, raw groan, her eyes closed tight. Sweat covered her brow. Her face was red and she had her hands on her stomach and her legs slammed shut at the knees.

“Lydia, is it your appendix?” Granger asked as he climbed up into the van.

“Yes. I just need it out,” Lydia said as her body finally relaxed.

“Mama even peed her pants a while ago, so she must be really sick,” Leah told him.

“Peed her pants?”

Leah nodded. “She was making dinner and just peed in the kitchen. I didn’t know girls could pee standing up. Levi said only boys could do that.”

“Lydia,” Granger said slowly, climbing up into the van that had several rows of bucket seats to fit all the kids. “Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?”

“Can’t be,” Lydia said between pants. “Tubes. Tied.”

“Lydia, you’ve had seven children. You have to know you’re pregnant. How far along are you?” Granger asked.

“Nope. I refuse to be pregnant. It has to be my appendix.” Lydia slammed her eyes shut as another contraction ripped through her. Her scream brought Olivia running up to the van.

“Oh my gosh. Lydia, I didn’t know you were pregnant.”

“Not pregnant. Appendix,” Lydia ground out through gritted teeth once the contraction passed.

“By my count, your contractions are less than a minute apart. Unless you plan on pushing out your appendix, I think a baby is going to appear very soon,” Olivia said, looking every inch the calm and in-control woman Granger had seen at the hospital when he’d been shot. Only her shaking hands gave her away. She was petrified.

Lydia crossed her legs and shook her head. “I refuse to be pregnant! Nope, no way will a baby be boooorn!” Lydia bore down and Lacy screamed as Lydia squeezed her hand.

Granger turned to a worried-looking Olivia and got her attention. “There’s a medical kit in the back of my SUV. Bring it to me. Then call an ambulance and someone who can watch the kids.” Granger didn’t know if she heard him because Olivia was staring at Lydia and hadn’t acknowledged him. “Olivia?”

“My mom did that. That animalistic noise. That baby is about to be born right here. I’ll get everything you need.” Olivia pulled out her phone and called 911 as she ran to the SUV.

“Okay, kids. Everyone out of the van. Make sure you’re in Park and then turn off the engine, Landry,” Granger ordered as calmly as he could.

Leah unbuckled car seats and Granger lifted the kids out of the van. Landry Jr. and Levi helped Leah keep the kids together off on the side of the road. Olivia ran back carrying the medical kit and looking completely in control if you didn’t notice her nervously trembling hands. “An ambulance is on its way and a babysitter is coming.”

“Great,” Granger said, grabbing the kit and pulling out surgical scissors, gauze, a clamp, and medical gloves. “Take Lacy’s place so she doesn’t get a broken hand. It might be easier if you sat behind Lydia so she can sit up and lean back against you.”

“Come here, sweetie.” Olivia held out her hand and helped Lacy down. “Do you have your mom’s phone? It might be a good idea to call your dad and let him know he’s about to have a baby.”

“I told you so,” Landry said, crossing his arms and glaring at Lacy. “Every time Dad comes home we get another brother or sister.”

“Look!” Levi pointed. “Cars.”

Granger heard the cars racing down Main Street toward them. Two by his count, he couldn’t see who they were, though, so he went for his gun just in case.

Olivia looked in the window behind her and smiled. “Kids, your babysitter is here,” she called out happily as if they were going to have a grand ol’ time tonight.

Granger locked his gun back in place and put on the medical gloves when Lydia let out a scream.

“I know that sound. You’ve got maybe ten minutes, but probably less.”

“Damon?” Granger said, looking to Olivia with surprise. “You asked Damon to babysit?”

“He practically raised us. He’s been through this more times than Landry Jr.” Olivia told him from where her legs were spread on the bench seat and Lydia’s back was leaning against her front. “Thanks for coming.”

“I brought backup,” Damon said with a nod of his chin to where Blythe and Veronica were standing behind him.

“Daddy won’t answer his phone. I’ve tried six times,” Lacy said, getting worried.

“Because Daddy knows Mommy is going to castrate him,” Lydia ground out between contractions.

“Where’s your daddy?” Veronica asked.

Lacy shrugged.

“I hope he’s in hell!” Lydia yelled before rattling off Landry Sr.’s deployment information.

“I’ll get him on the phone for you. Give me three minutes,” Veronica said as if it was no big deal seven children were on the side of the road as their mother was giving birth.

“Okay, kids. I’m Mr. Damon. I brought a big truck and that means you get to ride in the back. But only if you’re over eight years old. The little ones get a special treat and get to ride up front with me and pick the music. We’re going to have a slumber party at my sister’s house with some of my brothers. If you ask real nice, Mr. Kane will make you sandwiches and Mr. Wilder will have a dance party for you.”

“I want a dance party!” Lindsey called out as her younger siblings looked just as excited.

“Mom?” Landry Jr. asked.

“Look after them and mind the Townsends. I’ll call when my appendix is out. I love you. You were very brave tonight. Now, go. I’ll be okay.”

Granger could see Lydia was struggling not to push as Damon rounded up the kids. Before the last one was in the truck Veronica had Landry Sr. on video call.

“Who is this? What’s going on? Did the president of the United States really order me to call my wife?”

“I’m Veronica. Yes, the president did because you didn’t answer your phone.”

“I’m at a top-secret location. Is Lydia okay? Why do you have her phone?”

“I’m just holding it.” Veronica lowered her voice before she turned the phone around. “And be supportive or I will have you on latrine duty for the rest of the year, do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Veronica smiled. “Here’s your wife,” she said happily before flipping the camera around right when Lydia let out a groan.

“Lydia? Are you hurt?”

“I’m going to kill you!” Lydia yelled. “Let’s be romantic and rent a hotel room in Charleston before I leave,” she said, mimicking her husband. “Now I have an appendix about to burst.”

Granger had to hide his smile as he pushed up Lydia’s nightgown.

“Hey, Landry. Been what? Eight months since you were here?” Granger asked. “Guess what you left behind before you left?”

“Appendicitis?”

“Hi, I’m Olivia. I feel as if the appendix talk is causing confusion. Landry, your wife is in labor. We thought you’d like to see the birth of your baby.”

“Baby? Lydia isn’t pregnant. She can’t get pregnant. She had her tubes tied after Leo.”

“Well, obviously they didn’t double knot them because that is definitely a head coming out!” Lydia yelled.

Blythe put on a pair of gloves and Granger asked for towels, shirts, anything they could get to catch the baby. Veronica took off her cardigan and Blythe found two towels in the back of the van. Granger slid a towel under Lydia as Landry began Lamaze with Lydia. Olivia held her hand and gently told her what a good job she was doing.

Granger refused to show how nervous he was. He’d never delivered a baby, but he wasn’t sure if Lydia could handle anyone who wasn’t one hundred percent confident right now. “Okay, the head is crowning.”

“No shit!” Lydia bellowed and Granger bit his lip so he wouldn’t smile.

“Take a deep breath, Lydia. Then push with the next contraction,” Granger instructed, trying to remember his training.

Granger had been told it was like catching a football, and he hoped like hell he didn’t fumble. He had his hands poised

to catch as the head slowly emerged. Granger cringed. That looked like it hurt. A lot.

Lydia changed her breathing and then she let out a low, deep, primal moan. Granger was ready as the baby seemed not to move any further out and then slowly the shoulders emerged. Then things went fast. Lydia screamed. The baby slid out and Granger caught it.

It took a second for him to realize he'd done it but there in his hands was a real live baby. A baby who wasn't crying.

Granger's training kicked in. He turned the baby on its belly over his forearm and lowered his arm so that the head was slightly lower than the rest of its body. He used the palm of his free hand to firmly but gently tap the baby's upper back.

Lydia was saying something. Landry was saying something. Who knew who else was saying anything because the whole world melted away as Granger worked on the baby. It only took a couple of taps and Granger's fingers were suddenly coated with slime. Then he felt the baby take in a big breath and let out a very healthy-sounding cry.

"Here's a towel," Blythe told him as she held out her arms to hold the baby while Granger placed a clamp and cut the cord. Then he used the towel and some gauze to clean up the baby before placing it in Veronica's cashmere cardigan.

"Congratulations, Lydia and Landry. It's a girl." Granger stepped carefully up into the van and placed the most precious baby into her mother's outstretched arms.

"Oh, Landry. She's much cuter than my appendix."

Landry was crying, Lydia looked serene, and Granger was just so glad he didn't drop the baby.

"Granger? What's your middle name?" Lydia asked.

"Lennon, why?" Granger asked.

Lydia looked at Landry who smiled and nodded before answering. "Lennon, meet your godfather," Lydia said, holding the newborn out to Granger.

17

Seriously, what was it about a man holding a baby that leaves a woman a quivering mess of hormones? Olivia hadn't been able to stop thinking about Granger delivering little Lennie and then holding her so carefully since that night. He looked awfully good holding a baby.

She was still thinking about it two days later as she walked back to her office after a meeting. Blythe and Veronica were sitting on the couch waiting for her. Olivia was surprised by the sadness she felt when they stood up to hug her goodbye. They'd been with her for three days, and while she'd thought it was silly to have a bodyguard, she had felt safer. Not only that, but she'd become better friends with Blythe and she'd made a sister of Veronica. Sometimes you just meet a person and know. Just as Olivia knew from the very first with Granger, when she met Veronica she knew she had a friend for life.

"I'm going to miss you so much." Veronica hugged her tightly. "And we want a wedding invitation. Plus, you have to come with me to the United Nations Gala. We can make diplomats cry. We'll have so much fun."

Olivia laughed as she hugged her friend back. "Sounds like a perfect girls' night out. I can't wait."

“If you need anything, anything at all, just call. Promise?” Veronica asked.

“Promise.” Olivia hated to admit it, but she didn’t have many close friends. She’d never had time for that kind of friendship until she became a part of Shadows Landing not that long ago. Having Veronica and Blythe with her had let her really experience true friendship. “And you call me if you need me. I’m happy to bail you out of jail, take over the world, or just share a bottle of champagne—anytime.”

Blythe and Veronica hugged her one final time as Olivia heard Imani greet Granger and Kord. The men didn’t interrupt the goodbyes, but waited out in the hall. “That settles it,” Veronica said. “You’re moving to Keeneston. Sebastian lives there, part-time anyway, and you’re his attorney, too.”

Olivia laughed. “I don’t know if I can do that, but I will promise to visit.”

“Ladies.” Kord came into the office only when Blythe and Veronica moved to pick up their suitcases. “I’ll get those for you. I’ll be your escort to the airport. If you ask nicely, I’ll let you play with my siren.”

Imani sighed out in the hall.

“Not like that!” Kord said quickly, clearly embarrassed as Blythe and Veronica laughed.

“Oh, we know.” Blythe patted his arm as she headed out of the office.

“What do you mean by that? What do you know?” Kord asked.

“That you have a thing for that cute bartender,” Veronica said with a shrug. “And she has a thing for you, too. Quite the coup, Kord. It’ll be the talk of the Vineyard.”

“Do you know Georgina?” Kord was suddenly standing very rigid as if he were trying to protect her even from afar.

“I know her family. Don’t you?” Veronica asked.

“She doesn’t like to talk about her family.”

“Interesting. I think you’re good for her, Kord. Now, grow a pair and ask her out. Toodles, y’all!” Veronica spun on her heel and strode out with a wave of her perfectly manicured hand, leaving Kord to chase after her.

“Well, that’s interesting.” Granger closed the door behind him before placing a kiss on her lips. “Have you had a good day?”

“Busy as always, but good.” Olivia was still thinking about Georgina. “Do you know Georgina’s family?”

Granger shrugged. Olivia glared at him until he answered. “Not my story to tell.”

“Ugh.” Olivia rolled her eyes. “I guess I understand that. Now, I have a surprise.”

“Is it you spread out naked over your desk?” Granger asked as his hand went to the button of his jeans and paused as if waiting for her to answer.

“That’s not the surprise.”

“Bummer. So, what is it?” Granger asked as he sat down in the chair across from her desk.

Olivia opened her drawer and pulled out two tickets. She handed them to Granger and waited as he read them.

“These are tickets to the Pirates’ game tonight. It’s the season opener and it’s been sold out since last year.” Granger looked closer at the tickets. “Holy smoke, these are right on the ice.”

“It does help that the star center of the team is my brother. I thought since it had been quiet for the past three days that we might go on a regular date. You up for it?” Olivia asked.

“I’d love to. I do need to talk to security and the Charleston police before I go. I need to make sure they’re aware of the situation and that I’ll be armed. Then I’ll feel better about going.” Granger pulled out his phone and made the calls.

Olivia texted Stone to thank him for the tickets and when Granger gave her the thumbs-up, she told her brother she’d see

him there. It had been a while since she'd seen him skate in person, but tonight he'd have the whole Townsend cheering squad with him.

"I'm about to wrap up for the day. Want to grab dinner, then go back to my place so I can change, then head to the game?" Olivia was in a suit, and while she did feel as if she lived in them, she would prefer to wear her brother's jersey as she cheered him on.

"That sounds good. Ridge was telling me about a food truck the other day that sounded great. Or do you have a place in mind?"

"I was thinking more like Port. It's right down the street so we can walk. Plus, I've been craving their warm brownie with homemade bourbon caramel ice cream. Ryker got me hooked on it. Now I'm seriously craving it."

"Liv, I'm not dressed for Port. Hell, I don't even know where my tie is. We could do pick-up and take it home."

Olivia felt bad. She hadn't thought about the dress code. She was so used to being with men who only wore suits. Granger's standard uniform was jeans and a polo with SHERIFF written across the back and a gold star embroidered on the chest. And he looked damn good in it.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't even think about that. The food truck is fine."

Granger took out his phone and began to text as Olivia gathered her things and turned off her computer. "Do you think you can get a reservation at Port?" he asked out of nowhere a moment later.

"Yes. But what about your clothes?"

"I got it handled." Granger held out his hand and she slipped hers into it. "Are you ready for our date?"

"I am! This is so exciting. You have to get a dessert, too. They're amazing. And the game is going to be so much fun. I haven't seen Stone play in more than two years."

“I’m strongly considering the idea that we should skip dinner and order the entire dessert menu instead,” Granger told her and her heart skipped a beat. Well, it could be her stomach, too. When she’d had dates before that made it past dinner, they always claimed they were too full for dessert and she was left unsatisfied in more ways than one.

Mateo and Imani joined them as they rode the elevator to the lobby. As usual, the lobby was already closed and most of the staff had already left for home.

“What are you two doing tonight?” Granger asked them as they went out the front door and paused on the sidewalk.

“We thought we’d hit up a club a little later tonight. Have any recommendations?” Imani asked them.

Sadly, Olivia didn’t. She didn’t have much of a life, daytime or nighttime, until recently. “Hold on. Let me ask my brother.” It only took Wilder twenty seconds to get back to her. “Okay, my brother said this is the club you want and he’s put you on the VIP list.”

“This is too cool. How did your brother manage this?” Imani asked when she looked up the club. “This is like the most exclusive club in Charleston.”

And her brother was looking to buy it. But that was top secret. Only his lawyer knew. Lawyer, as in Olivia. “My brother knows a lot of people in the nightclub world.”

“Which brother?” Mateo asked.

“Wilder,” Olivia answered.

“Is he a promoter or something?” Imani asked.

“Something.” Wilder may have named the clubs after himself, but not many people knew that.

“Mr. Fox.”

“Holy grandmother of leather,” Imani whispered at the impeccably groomed older woman who had just stepped out of a car double-parked in front of the building.

“Here you go.” Elsa, Ryder’s personal assistant, handed a garment bag over to Granger and Olivia about cried in the middle of the sidewalk. Granger had borrowed a suit from Ryker just so she could get the dessert she wanted. Never would she imagine Granger could be so caring.

“You spoil me,” Olivia said quietly as to not embarrass him before giving him a kiss. She couldn’t help it. She wanted to do things to him that would get her arrested if she did them in public.

“You should spank him for it,” Elsa said seriously.

“You mean *thank* him,” Mateo corrected while trying not to laugh.

“I mean spank. Don’t contradict me or you’ll get one, too.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

Elsa ignored Mateo and turned to her. “Call me if you need anything else.”

Elsa disappeared into the waiting car as fast as she’d appeared before them. Only the garment bag and the gaping mouths of Olivia’s assistants remained as evidence that she’d been there at all.

“Did she say for you to *spank* Granger?” Imani asked slowly. “Who was she?”

“You didn’t recognize the commanding voice?” Olivia teased. It was as if a bulb had gone off over Imani’s head.

“*That’s* Mr. Faulkner’s personal assistant who calls me? Oh my gosh, she’s like a dominatrix or something. She’s in full leather … in the summer!”

“Not *something*,” Granger told her. Olivia was trying really hard not to laugh as she saw the pieces fall into place for Imani.

“Mr. Faulkner’s personal assistant is a dominatrix?” Imani gasped.

“Would you cross her to demand a meeting?” Olivia asked.

Mateo burst out laughing, as did Imani. “That’s brilliant,” Mateo said between gales of laughter. They were still laughing as they walked away.

Granger laid the garment bag across the backseat of his SUV and unzipped it. Inside were a dress shirt, blazer, and tie. “Elsa said I couldn’t borrow a suit. The one Ryker usually keeps at the office is at the dry cleaners.”

“I’ve seen plenty of men in jeans there so long as they have a jacket and tie.” Olivia was woman enough to admit she was dying to see him dressed up. There was just something about a man in a dress shirt that turned her on. Especially someone like Granger who would actually fill it out nicely.

To her surprise, Granger pulled off his polo while standing right there on the sidewalk next to the open door of his SUV. People driving by couldn’t see him, but the people walking on the sidewalk behind her got an eyeful. Several women stumbled and it wasn’t because of the scars he forgot to hide. It was the ripped muscles. The way they stretched when he reached into the SUV to pull out the dress shirt and then flexed as he turned to look at her while he put the white dress shirt on was definitely enough to stop traffic. She was lucky he was on this side of the car or there would have been a rush-hour pile-up.

Olivia loved tracing the indentation of his muscles and how they curved and flexed as he moved. Granger raised an eyebrow and Olivia heard giggling behind her. She turned to find no fewer than eight women staring.

“Hi, I’m Jade,” a cute girl in her early twenties said with a wink. “I love your V. My friends and I are going out for a drink. Care to join us?”

Her friends looked as if they were all in the same sorority. They giggled. Olivia didn’t feel anger. Instead, she felt pride. She was proud of Granger for changing his shirt in public. Any other guy would have done it without thinking twice, but a week ago, Granger wouldn’t have. And he was hers. That made her smile even more.

“Sorry, girls. But I’m taken with this beautiful woman here, whom I’m escorting to dinner tonight.”

“Lucky,” one of the girls whispered before they finally walked off.

“Well, they got one thing right. *I am* lucky,” Olivia said as Granger used the reflection in his window to tie his tie.

“So am I. I have you. Now, do I pass?” Granger asked, turning so she could see him.

“I’m thinking we should skip dinner and head back to my place. It’s not far.”

Granger grabbed her hips and pulled her toward him. “I like the sound of that, but I know better than to get between a woman and her chocolate. Plus, you got me in this tie, so we’re going.”

Olivia stuck out her bottom lip. “But now I want you out of it.”

Granger slid his hand over hers as he laughed. “Chocolate, hockey, then a night of sex. Does that sound good?”

“Like the perfect date.”

Olivia and Granger were shown to a table in the back. It was near Ryker’s normal table, which was, in fact, occupied by him and Mark. Ryker excused himself from the table and joined them for a moment.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your date.” He didn’t sound the least bit sorry, which amused Olivia. “Tell me about Mark.”

Ryker always got straight to the point.

“You know his parents are the Flemings of New York. They’re entitled assholes. Mark has his good days and his bad days. I know he was counsel for Simpson Global, but I’m not sure why he left.”

“I’m inclined not to do business with him. I just don’t like him, and I

feel as if there’s something he’s not telling me.”

Olivia nodded. She understood. “You don’t need my permission.”

“The fact you’re not correcting me about my perceptions is all the answer I need. Thank you.” Ryker paused and looked at them both. “This is weird seeing you two together.”

“Why?” Granger asked, immediately defensive. Olivia saw that little bit of doubt creep into his eyes and wanted to strangle Ryker for his bluntness.

“Because you all were taking so damn long dancing around each other that I thought it would never happen.” Ryker turned and walked back to his table without another word. Granger laughed and, when the waiter came by, he ordered the entire dessert menu before Olivia could stop him. Not that she would have tried.

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Granger had never eaten only desserts for dinner, but if the happy sounds Olivia made eating some of each dessert was his reward, he'd do it more often. Ryker and Mark had finished their dinner meeting, but not before Granger caught Mark glancing their way several times. Mark could want Olivia all he wanted, but it wasn't going to happen. He might have said he was over it and had moved on to the receptionist, but Granger knew better. How? Because Granger had looked at Olivia with that same kind of longing. But Ryker was right. The two of them had been dancing around their attraction since they first met. They just had to get around finally taking a chance on love. Now that Granger had, he was never letting Olivia go.

"Our seats are right down there." Olivia led the way down the arena stairs toward the ice.

"Are your brothers joining us?" Granger asked and realized he'd asked because he hoped they would. The bastards were growing on him.

"They are." Olivia stopped on the stairs and turned around with something that looked like fear in her eyes. "I should have asked. Is that okay? It's not exactly romantic, but we're

family and we haven't seen Stone play in so long. If you want, we can go to the suite."

"Liv, it's fine. I'm glad they are. Don't tell them, but I kind of like them."

"Really? I know they can be a pain in the ass, but they're good guys."

"Really," Granger promised her. "After all, they chased off your dates while I was being too stupid to ask you out."

"I was stupid, too. I could have made the first move so you'd know I was interested in you a long time ago. But we can make up for it now. Here's our row."

Granger looked at the first row of seats right up against the boards. People were staring at them wondering who they were to have such good seats as they sat down. "Where are your brothers?"

Olivia rolled her eyes and pointed up and behind them. Granger followed and saw a suite full of men and women. "Aren't they cold?" Granger asked of the women who were wearing shockingly little clothing for being in an ice rink.

"Puck bunnies."

Ah. That made sense now. "Want a beer? I don't know if they have wine."

"Who drinks wine at a hockey game?" Olivia asked, her horrified expression making Granger laugh. "I'll take a large beer. Thanks!" Olivia waved up to her brothers, who saw her and began to disengage from the bunnies.

Granger kept an eye on the crowd as he walked up to get the beer. No one was drawing his attention or looking suspicious. No one was looking at Olivia and the only people paying him any attention were some women.

"Did Olivia run you off already? The anthem hasn't even started," Damon asked and his brothers all shook their heads.

"What are you talking about? I'm just getting us some beer."

The Townsend brothers groaned.

“We’ll see what you’re really made of by the end of the game,” Hunter said cryptically before they all squared their shoulders and headed down the stairs.

Granger grabbed the beers and found that the brothers had moved Olivia and him to the middle seats. Olivia was protected on both sides by a wall of Townsends. Granger passed by Kane and Damon and then took a seat. Wilder and Forrest sat on Olivia’s other side.

“Here you go, Liv.”

Olivia looked up and smiled. She took the beer and then focused back on the players circling the ice. Suddenly she slammed her free hand against the plexiglass. “Hey, Twenty-Two, you might want the ambulance on standby. Your legs are so weak they’ll snap faster than your stick when the Pirates take it from you and beat you with it,” Olivia yelled as the Charleston Pirates fans cheered her on.

Shocked, Granger felt his mouth drop open. Beside him Damon sighed. “She’s not wrong. I think Miss Mitzy could squat more than him.”

“Hey, Twenty-Two! You got yoga pants and a messy bun on under that gear?” Olivia yelled as she smacked the plexiglass again when he skated near her.

The announcer introduced the singer for the anthem and as the opposing team skated by, Olivia slammed her hand into the plexiglass again. “Hey Twenty-Two, enjoy your last minutes standing. You’ll spend more time on your back than a puck bunny.”

Wilder high-fived Olivia as the fans behind them cheered.

“She’s just getting started,” Damon warned as they all stood for the anthem.

Granger had thought football players talked a lot of smack. They had *nothing* on the woman next to him. Olivia looked perfect in skinny jeans and her brother’s jersey, but the level of trash-talking left him reeling between shock and laughing his

ass off. This perfectly put-together, always composed attorney to billionaires chirped better than any of the hockey players.

The player she'd been chirping all night lined up a shot. The stick slapped the puck and sent it flying toward the Pirates' goalie. Olivia grabbed Granger's arm and cringed, but with reflexes faster than Granger had ever seen, the goalie reached out and caught the puck.

"Hey, Twenty-Two!" Olivia yelled as she beat on the plexiglass. "That shot was so weak you probably need help carrying your own equipment bag!"

As the periods went by, Granger watched Stone masterfully control the pace of the game. When the puck was passed to Stone after a missed shot, he set off on a sprint down the middle of the ice, his two wingers sprinting with him.

Stone didn't look at the puck as he surveyed the ice. He charged toward the net and drew the defenders to him. At the last second, he passed the puck to the left wing, who shot and scored.

Olivia screamed and what was left of her beer sloshed over as she beat on the plexiglass. "That's it, Stone!"

Stone looked over from the mass of players celebrating the goal and pointed to her. The puck bunnies groaned, not realizing it was his sister who was pointing back and heaping on the praise.

And then the action was off again. Only this time when Stone got the puck and charged up the middle, the defenders didn't collapse on him.

"Shoot it!" Olivia and all her brothers and most of the stadium yelled.

Stone did. He let loose a punishing slap shot that sailed into the top right corner of the net.

"Another red light?" Olivia taunted the opposing team of the red light going off, indicating a goal. "When did we get to Amsterdam?"

Damon nudged him. “Well, you’ve made it to the third period and haven’t run for the hills. That’s longer than any of the others have made it.”

“I must admit. I’m equally in awe and terrified of this side of her,” Granger whispered back before Olivia leaped up again as number 22 skated toward them with the puck.

“Hey, Twenty-Two! Are you gonna score tonight or should I get you a box of tissues and some lotion?”

Number 22 faltered in his skating and Stone slammed into him. The men crashed into the plexiglass in front of Forrest. This time number 22 got the full Townsend treatment.

Frustrated, he dropped his gloves and slammed a fist into Stone’s face. Stone was ready for it and was already swinging back. The Townsends pounded on the plexiglass, egging their brother on. It didn’t take long for Stone to lay number 22 on his butt.

As the crowd began to calm down, Olivia looked down at number 22 and then at her brother with a mischievous grin. “Hey, Twenty-Two! You call that fighting? I’ve whopped Stone worse than that!”

“You know this bitch?” Twenty-two yelled at Stone.

Granger thought Olivia would lose it. Instead, she grinned victoriously.

“That’s my sister, you asshole.” The gloves came off again and Stone hit 22 with a cross as he held onto his jersey.

As the game got back into full swing, the visiting team was getting desperate. They were taking any shot they could, even if it was a bad one. The clock was winding down as they took another shot. The goalie caught it, but a television time out was called.

“Hey! You all better be glad this game is only three periods. I’m running out of Midol to hand out to your team.”

Number 22 glared at her. Olivia smiled triumphantly.

“That’s the league’s leading scorer,” Olivia told Granger, finally sitting down for a couple of minutes. “And they’ve held

him scoreless tonight.”

“Liv, I think *you* held him scoreless. The Pirates should make you part of the team.”

“They can’t afford me.”

Granger laughed and leaned over to kiss her. Their lips met and then they were torn apart as Olivia jumped up. “That’s it, Stone! Go! Go!”

Stone had a breakaway and was flying down the ice. He reached back and swung his stick. The puck flew so fast it was hard to see. Then the back of the net caught the puck and the red light spun as Stone scored his third goal of the night.

After being mobbed by his team, he skated by his family and held out his finger, pointing to them all. The Townsend family cheered loudly. Olivia was jumping up and down, but when Stone got close enough, she called out, “Good thing you got that last goal. Now you can use that hat to cover up your horrible haircut.”

Stone grinned, exposing his mouthpiece and winked at her. A minute later the game buzzer sounded. The Pirates won 5-0.

“That was a hell of an opening game,” Damon said as they all stood and cheered on the players as they exited the ice. “Should we go meet him?”

“Yes, but I have to run to the restroom first.” Granger had seen Olivia amped up after winning in court. That had nothing on the high she was on right now.

“Me too,” Wilder told her.

“Let’s just all go on the way to the players’ area,” Kane said over the still cheering crowd.

“You should have been the hockey player. You talk better trash than Stone,” Granger said, holding his hand out for her to take. He didn’t want to get separated from the crowd.

“I’m a horrible skater. I tried, but I’m like a deer on ice out there. Legs and arms go in four different directions. Stone’s so embarrassed. If I would go out on the ice, I’d need one of

those kiddie walkers to keep me upright. However, I am excellent at chirping.”

“I’ll wait for you out here. Yell if you need anything, my little bird.”

Olivia laughed and headed into the ladies’ room.

“I guess we better get used to the idea of you sticking around,” Forrest said as his brothers headed into the men’s room. “If you can still love her after seeing her at a hockey game, you’re the one.”

A stupid amount of pride filled Granger over that. He was earning each brother’s trust and respect. But could he really be the one for Olivia? He knew she was the only woman he’d ever thought about marrying, but maybe it was too soon to think about marriage. Certainly Olivia loved him and he loved her, but that was different from marriage. Marriage took a partnership between two people that Granger had never experienced before. Trust, compromise, support … those were all things that marriage needed. Yet, he did trust her. They’d already compromised on things and he definitely supported her with her career. But would she support him staying in Shadows Landing when half of her career was in New York City?

Granger looked to the bathroom and then at his watch. What was taking so long?

19

Damn. This line was forever long. There really needed to be two women's restrooms for every men's room in every large venue in the country. They had the advantage of peeing standing up in a big long line.

Thoughts of Granger kept her occupied as she waited and waited and finally got a stall. She'd never changed who she was for a man and while her brothers gave her crap for her alter ego, Hockey Olivia, the trash-talking loudmouth, she was determined that someday a man would love her for it. That hadn't happened so far, but Granger didn't leave after the first period, which was longer than any other man had lasted.

A woman bumped into her and Olivia rolled her eyes as she saw the opposing team's jersey on her. She only talked crap to the players, not the fans. No matter how many names they called her, she was always civil there. It wasn't their fault they cheered on the wrong team. Well, it was, but maybe they didn't know any better.

"OMG, don't you just *love* Stone Townsend?" a girl who couldn't be more than seventeen said from Olivia's other side as they washed their hands. High school was a little young for the normal crushes Stone got, but not by much. Please don't let this cute girl be a puck bunny in training.

“I do. I take it you do, too?”

“Yes. My dad said he wasn’t worth the money the Pirates are paying him, but have you seen his stats? He’s set to have the best year of his career. Last year he had ninety-three points. Like a good center, it was a one-to-two ratio. Thirty-one goals and sixty-two assists. He’s going to break one hundred points this year for sure. I mean, three goals tonight and two assists. He’s amazing,” the girl rattled off, correctly for that matter.

“Do you play hockey?” Olivia asked as they dried their hands.

“No. I want to be a sports agent.”

“That’s great. We need more women sports agents. Who are you here with?”

“My dad. He’s a huge Pirates fan. He worked double shifts for a month to afford the tickets for tonight’s game.”

“My name’s Olivia. What’s yours?” she asked as they walked out of the restroom.

“Charlie. Well, Charlotte, but my dad calls me Charlie and everyone else does, too.” Charlie’s light brown hair was in a ponytail and she wore Stone’s jersey, just like Olivia. She even had his number on her cheek in blue. “Well, it was nice talking to you.”

“Wait,” Olivia said as Granger and her brothers joined her. “Where’s your dad?”

“Right there.” Charlie pointed. A man stood watching the restroom doorway carefully.

He looked nervous when all of Olivia’s brothers and Granger joined his daughter. “This is my boyfriend, Granger. Granger, will you introduce Charlie to my brothers while I say hi to her dad?”

Olivia smiled at the father as Granger began talking to Charlie. She walked over to the father and held out her hand to shake it. “I met your daughter in the restroom. She said she

wants to be a sports agent and that Stone Townsend is her favorite player.”

“Yeah,” he said skeptically. “She loves hockey. Her mom and I are divorced and her mom remarried when Charlie was real little and moved to California. I didn’t know what to do with a little girl so I had her watch hockey with me. I played in a beer league and she came to all the games. But it wasn’t the playing she liked, it was the players. She got really into contracts, caps, and stats. Now she apparently accosts women in the bathroom with it.”

“It’s great.” Olivia loved passion in young women when they wanted something. “Want to make her dreams come true?”

“Of course I do,” the skepticism was back in his eyes.

“Is she going to college?”

He puffed up with determination and pride. “If I have to work three jobs, she will. She’s starting her senior year of high school and has straight A’s going back to middle school.”

“Then why don’t you both follow me?”

“Wait, who are you?”

Olivia smiled. “Did I forget to say? I’m Olivia Townsend. Stone’s sister. Now, want to meet him and the team?”

Charlie’s dad didn’t believe her. That was okay. Connor McKinley was a nice guy who, as Kale’s quick background told her, worked construction and picked up a second job as needed at night. He’d dropped out of high school when his high school sweetheart had gotten pregnant with Charlie. His ex-wife had had an affair and Connor ended the marriage. The ex-wife had quickly married up and moved out. She only saw Charlie once a year for a week during the summer.

This was what came with the privilege Olivia had earned with her own hard work. She got to help others. If she could help a girl follow her dreams, that was exactly what she was going to do.

“Where are we going, Dad?” Charlie whispered when she finally stopped talking stats with Olivia’s brothers long enough to realize they’d just walked through security and into the restricted players’ family-only area.

“I told Miss Olivia how hard you work at school and she wanted to do something to say good job.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed, but then her eyes went wide. “Stone Townsend,” she whispered.

Olivia turned to smile at her brother who was walking toward them after being interviewed by the news crews. He was still sweaty as he wrapped Olivia up in a hug. “I see my sister has abducted my fans.” He turned to Charlie and grinned. “Great shirt. Want me to sign it?”

Charlie nodded her head, but then stuck out her hand. “Hi, Mr. Townsend. I’m Charlie McKinley and in six years, I want to be your agent.”

Stone gave Olivia a quick look that said he understood. Then he focused all his attention back on Charlie. He held out his hand and shook hers. “Miss McKinley. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I see exactly why my sister brought you to meet me.”

Charlie turned to Olivia in surprise. “Sister?”

“That’s me. I’m Olivia Townsend, this knucklehead’s smarter sister.”

Stone shrugged. “It’s true. Do you know she was the first person in our family to go to college and now she’s a big shot attorney for Ryker Faulkner?” Charlie’s eyes got bigger. “It’s also true that I know my sister very well. If she brought you to meet me that means she sees a lot of potential in you and I’d be stupid not to help in any way. Liv? Have you reached him yet?”

Olivia looked down at her phone and the text she’d been waiting for came through. “Yes. It’s all worked out.”

“So, Miss McKinley, why wait six years to learn about being a sports agent? How about you start next summer as a sports agent’s intern?”

The shock on Charlie and her father's face was all the thanks Olivia needed.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked.

"Do you know Finn Williams?"

Charlie nodded. "Of course. He's the best agent around. He's with the Simpson-Williams Agency and he's your agent."

"That's right. And he's just offered you a summer internship, all expenses paid. He trusts my sister, too." Stone said that last bit as if it were a secret. "Give Olivia all your information and Finn will be reaching out. Now, how about a picture with my future agent?"

Olivia almost cried as Charlie's dad wiped the tears from his cheeks. Stone introduced them to the team and Charlie impressed them all with her knowledge. Olivia was happy to stick to the background, but the players all wrapped her up in bear hugs as they thanked her for getting into the opposing team's head.

"I think you're going to be required to be at every game," Granger laughed as he pulled her against his side.

Olivia snuggled up to him as they walked through the bowels of the stadium to the parking garage where her special pass for players and their families let them park in a restricted section.

"I don't know if you could handle it. You didn't yell once."

Granger chuckled. "I think you yelled enough for both of us. Plus, I was having too much fun watching you."

Olivia saw Granger looked around the parking garage as soon as they entered it. Always on duty.

"I'm glad you came with me. It was fun to have you hanging out with us. I know my brothers can be pains in the ass, but I do love them."

"They're good guys under all the bluster. Lydia told me Damon tucked the kids in and even read them a bedtime story when he watched them. I don't care how much of a dick he can be to men trying to date his sister. A man who is nice to

kids, animals, and the elderly is a good man. And you're a good woman. You just changed Charlie's life."

"I see a lot of myself in her. I just gave her an opportunity. It's up to her to prove herself." And she would. Olivia knew with determination like that Charlie would accomplish anything she set out to do.

Olivia went to snuggle closer to Granger as they walked toward the SUV when Granger suddenly turned his back to her and shoved her backward, all in one motion. "Run back inside!"

Olivia couldn't even process what she was seeing as a man with a baseball hat and a face covering grabbed for where she'd just been. Olivia screamed as the attacker turned his attention to Granger who was now between her and the attacker.

"Run, Liv!" Granger ordered as he faced off with the attacker who'd pulled out a knife. A knife that he looked very comfortable with.

Olivia felt like a coward for doing it, but she ran. Her brothers couldn't be far away and they'd help Granger. "Help!" Olivia screamed as loud as she could.

She looked over her shoulder right before yanking open the door to the stadium and saw Granger raise his arm to deflect a slash of the knife. The blade sunk into Granger's forearm. Olivia let out a scream she didn't even know she could make as she yanked open the door.

The man turned and began to stalk toward her, but even though Granger was bleeding from the large gash across his forearm, he wasn't out of the fight. Granger grabbed his gun from the small of his back and leveled it at the man.

"Sheriff's department," Granger said loudly. "Drop the knife. You're under arrest."

His voice was remarkably calm as Olivia glanced down the long hallway. "Help!" she yelled as loud as she could. She didn't want to leave Granger.

"Liv?" she heard from off in the distance.

“Damon! Help!”

Olivia’s heart beat almost out of control in her chest that tightened as she saw the blood dripping from Granger’s arm to the cement floor. The man slowly turned from where he’d been staring at her to face Granger.

Then everything happened in slow motion.

The man raised his hands as if to surrender, but at the last second, he charged forward. The knife swung down to stab Granger in the side. Granger fell backward to escape the blade and fired two shots.

Olivia didn’t know if she was screaming or if it was her brothers who had burst through the door. The man froze for a second and then fell backward onto the cement.

“I got her,” Damon said, wrapping his arms around Olivia and pulling her back into the hallway as her other brothers rushed forward and into the parking garage.

“Granger!” Olivia fought like a madwoman against Damon’s strong hold.

“Liv, stop fighting me.” Damon’s voice was calm and in control, but Olivia was anything but.

She wrestled against him. Kicked, screamed, and threatened until her body went limp and tears threatened to overtake her.

“Are you done?” Damon asked as he held her. “Granger needs you to be level-headed, Olivia. Can you give him that?”

Olivia took a deep, body-shaking breath. The tears that had just threatened to spill were replaced with anger. “If that son of a bitch isn’t dead, I’ll kill him myself.”

“There’s my sister. Now let’s go see how Granger is.”

“Damon,” Olivia reached out for her brother. “Thanks for being here.”

“We’re family. We might have been apart for a while, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have each other’s back.”

Damon opened the door and Olivia's attention was all on Granger. He was alive and sitting against a car door. Hunter had his belt off and was making a tourniquet on Granger's arm. Forrest held Granger's arm up over his heart to help with the bleeding. Kane was on the phone with the 911 operator. Wilder was talking to a security guard who had run in from the parking lot entrance.

No one was paying attention to the man lying on the ground. Olivia rushed by him and dropped to her knees by Granger. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"I'm good. Are you okay?" Granger asked, more concerned about her than the bleeding gash on his arm.

"I'm safe. Now, let me get you to the hospital."

"I can hear emergency services. Before I go, I want to see who this is." Granger nodded to the man dead on the ground.

"I'll take care of it. You just let the EMTs check you out."

Police and an ambulance filled the parking garage. Granger was being ushered to the ambulance when Olivia caught the eye of a handsome man in his mid-to-late forties wearing a rumpled suit striding toward them.

"Aw, shit," she heard him whisper under his breath before addressing her in a neutral, professional tone. "Miss Townsend. Who are you here defending tonight?"

Granger shrugged off the EMT to join them, even as Olivia wanted to order him back into the ambulance.

"Detective Chambers." Olivia held out her hand and shook the hand of the detective who had gone after her friend Darcy for killing another treasure hunter. "I'm glad it's you who got the call."

The surprise on Detective Chambers's face almost made her smile. "Miss Townsend, I'll take that as a compliment. Now, who are you representing and what happened? Or are you going to have them refuse to answer?"

Granger started to open his mouth, but Olivia reached out and squeezed his arm. He instantly quieted. "This is my

boyfriend, Sheriff Granger Fox of Shadows Landing, and I will be representing him through this questioning.”

Chambers started in surprise. “You’re dating a sheriff?”

“I am.”

“But you’ve made half my force cry.”

“Not the good half. You’ve never cried, Detective.”

Chambers’s lips tilted up. “So, what have we got?”

Olivia’s brothers had all joined but kept quiet as Olivia recounted the details of the attack. “That’s when Sheriff Fox pulled his gun, identified himself as law enforcement, and attempted to arrest him.”

Chambers waved over a patrolman. “Get the tapes from security,” he ordered the patrolman.

“The man went to kill Sheriff Fox and only then did Sheriff Fox fire his weapon exactly two times,” Olivia finished. “Now, I need to get him to the hospital. He’s lost a lot of blood. However, I also know he won’t leave until you unmask the man. So, can you please do that right away?”

Chambers nodded to the forensic team who had just arrived. A man fully gloved pulled off the baseball cap and put it in an evidence bag before slowly removing the mask. “Do you know who it is?” Chambers asked them.

Olivia took a step forward. In fact, everyone took a step. Her heart was heavy. Her stomach dropped. Panic threatened to overtake her again.

“I have no idea who it is,” she said with more frustration than she ever felt.

“What about you all?” Chambers asked the rest of them.

All her brothers shook their heads.

Granger took a photo of the man’s face with his cellphone but also shook his head. “Will you let us know when he’s been identified?” Granger asked as he let the EMT approach him again.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital in a little while. Don’t leave until I speak with you.”

Granger nodded in agreement. “Detective, call Special Agent in Charge Peter Castle of the local FBI office. He knows what’s going on and will want to work with you.”

“Normally I don’t like the Feds, but Peter’s a good guy.” Chambers turned to a group of officers standing nearby. “Give our brother an escort to the hospital,” Chambers called out as two motorcycle cops ran to their bikes. “Take care of him, Miss Townsend.”

Olivia gave him a tired smile. Chambers was a good cop and he’d survived the scandal that had resulted in half the police department getting fired when Gavin Faulkner and Ellery exposed the corruption. Olivia knew she and the detective were similar in a lot of ways—tough but fair. It’s why she was glad it was Chambers who had responded. He would gather evidence and then make a finding. He wouldn’t jump to conclusions and that’s what they needed right now.

Olivia climbed into the back of the ambulance. All the emotion she’d bottled up—to make sure Granger was protected and the fear of being attacked—threatened to overwhelm her again. Granger held out his hand and the second she placed her hand in his, the world was right again. He’d saved her life and now she’d make sure he was taken care of.

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“Oh shit, it’s Miss Townsend.”

Olivia smiled as the fear of her reputation ran from the nurses to doctors in the hospital. What they didn’t know was it wasn’t she who triggered all the fear. It was one little old lady. Olivia had called Miss Tibbie, who was on the hospital board. She, then, had woken the chief surgeon and that was all before Olivia texted Ryker who was a major donor. Olivia herself wasn’t the driving force of power, but she was the one who could organize it all at the drop of a hat. She’d do that and more to make sure Granger was well taken care of.

The chief surgeon approached them as they were wheeled through the emergency department. He cleared his throat and Granger’s gurney stopped. “Sheriff Fox, we’re ready for you in surgery. Miss Townsend, Mr. Faulkner has a private room for Sheriff Fox. The nurse will take you there to wait while I take a look at his injuries.”

There were times to be a badass bitch and then there were times to be gracious. This was one of those times. Olivia reached out and placed her hand on the surgeon’s arm. “Thank you, doctor. I’m sorry for calling you out so late at night.”

The doctor blinked as if not knowing what to do. “Um, thank you, Miss Townsend. I’ll take good care of him.”

“I know you will. Thank you again.” Olivia turned so she could lean down and kiss Granger. “I’ll be waiting for you. I love you.”

“Love you, too, but don’t worry, I’m fine. I just need some stitches. I’ll meet you shortly.”

Olivia held it together until Granger was behind the surgery doors. Then the tears began to stream silently down her cheeks and she began to shake from head to toe.

“Oh, bless your heart.” The nurse wrapped her up in a hug. “I’m Jen, Kenzie’s friend. She told me to look out for you. Come on, honey, let’s get you to the room where you can sit down. I’m sure it’s been quite the night.”

Ryker’s wife had worked the ER night shift before marrying Ryker and had apparently been calling in her own favors tonight.

“Th-th-thank you,” Olivia said, trying to calm herself.

“It’s different when you love them, isn’t it?”

Olivia took a deep calming breath. “He saved me. Again.”

“Lucky you. He’s a keeper.” Jen led her into a giant room. “Now, I understand that you have a reputation to uphold. Need me to leave in tears or call you a bitch?”

Unexpected laughter burst from Olivia’s mouth. “Thank you, Jen, but that’s not necessary.”

Jen smiled and looked down at her phone. “Do you know a bunch of very large, scary-looking men? They’re demanding to see you and Granger.”

Olivia nodded. “My brothers.”

“Don’t worry about your reputation, then. They’re only enhancing it. I’ve got to see this.”

Jen took off down the hall and Olivia dropped down into a chair. Moments later, her brothers filled the room with Jen bringing up the rear and staring at them all in wonder. “Are you Stone Townsend?” Jen asked, tapping Stone on the shoulder even though they were all asking Olivia questions.

“Yeah, autographs only if Granger’s okay. Now give my family some privacy, please.”

“Yep, your rep is good,” Jen said, giving Olivia a wink. “I’ll give you all a minute and go check on our patient.”

“Thank you,” Olivia called out before turning back to her brothers. Before she could say anything, she was yanked out of the chair and into Damon’s arms.

“Don’t ever do that again. I about had a heart attack when I heard you screaming.”

Olivia could only grunt as Damon squeezed her tightly to him, her face buried in his chest. When he finally let up, it was only for her to end up in Stone’s arms. She was hugged tightly by each brother before they finally let her say anything.

But before she could thank them, Jen was back. “Granger is getting stitches right now on his forearm. It will take a while. It’s not serious, but it did hit a blood vessel. The doctor also found a second stab wound on his side. It was small and pretty shallow, so it should only require a handful of stitches. The chief surgeon is fixing the blood vessel, but plastics will be stitching up the rest to minimize scarring.”

Olivia’s face fell. His scars. He couldn’t have more scarring because of her.

“Don’t worry,” Jen said, patting her hand. “In three months, you won’t even see the scar. These docs are that good.” Jen looked down at her phone and rolled her eyes. “Ryker and Kenzie are here with, well, more people. No wonder we were instructed to put you in this room. It’s the biggest one.”

Jen hurried from the room as Olivia chewed on her bottom lip.

“It’s good news, right?” Forrest asked. “Why do you look so worried.”

“It’s just that I don’t want him to have any more scars.”

“That’s pretty shallow of you, sis,” Wilder called it as he saw it.

“It’s not me,” Olivia gasped. “I don’t care about that, but _____”

Olivia didn’t get to finish as Ryker strode into the room as if he owned it. And well, she did know he paid for it with a hefty donation. “Gavin and Kenzie have gone off with Jen to surgery to see our patient.”

Ryker surprised her by pushing past her brothers and yanking her up into another tight hug. “Are you hurt?”

Olivia shook her head. “Granger saved me again.”

“I’ve already talked to Sebastian,” Ryker told her. “We’re canceling all your trips. You’re to stay in Shadows Landing until this is over. No work unless it can be done from home. Got it?”

“But your businesses,” Olivia began to protest.

Ryker crossed his arms and looked ready for an argument. “You and Granger are my two best friends. No business is more important to me than your safety.”

Kord, Edie, and Tristan arrived shortly after Ryker’s group, who had taken the helicopter. Slowly, the room filled with more and more Faulkners and their spouses. Everyone was talking, but Olivia wasn’t listening. Instead, she was wondering who could have been behind this and was it now over?

Her phone rang and Olivia rushed to answer it. “Hold on,” she told the caller as she casually excused herself from the room. Out in the hall she closed the door behind her and then gave the phone call her full attention. “Kale, what is it?”

“I see Granger is in surgery.”

“Yes, for his arm and a small wound on his side.”

“I know, I’m watching it. I hacked the hospital’s cameras. He’s awake and doing well. Talking to Gavin and Kenzie. He’s also well enough that he texted me the picture of the man who attacked you both.”

“Is it my stalker? Who is he?” Olivia wanted this to be over and she had no idea who was behind this.

“Private contractor out of New York. Anthony Caprice,” Kale told her. “He’s kind of an independent contractor for when criminals want something done, but don’t want it tied to them. I’m sending you his information, but it looks like your stalker probably hired him to either kill you or kidnap you. I’m more inclined to believe he was supposed to kidnap you after seeing how he was going for the grab in the parking garage, but Granger blocked it.”

“Dammit.” Olivia hissed and sent a nurse scurrying down the hall. “So, we’re no closer to finding who is behind these attacks?”

“I think we can clear any past boyfriends or dates. I think we need to focus on other lawyers and their disgruntled clients. Kane agrees, at least that’s what Granger texted. I’m going to ask both Ryker and Sebastian to send me a list of names. Can you think of anyone to add to this list?”

“Robert Whitehall and his client are at the top of my list. I know he was cleared, but I can’t shake the feeling that it’s him. I have several I’ve made cry or who have cussed me out from both Ryker and Sebastian, but those were one-time deals. William Huff called me a bitch for beating him out of the contract when I met you and Alex, but if I have to think of everyone who has cussed me out, I don’t know how long it’ll take.” An unpleasant thought went through Olivia’s mind. Could it be?

“One other possibility and I hate even saying it. My own boss here in Charleston, Kevin Hendrix, isn’t too pleased with me. He tolerates me because I kept Ryker as a client and brought Sebastian and all the money associated with them into the firm. But Mr. Kirkland wants to phase out Hendrix to a more background role and make me the face of the firm in Charleston. There’s talk of making me heir apparent and an equal partner with Hendrix and Kirkland. Hendrix doesn’t like being pushed aside and has been trying to pawn shitty cases off on me, which he can do since he’s technically my boss. Then I’m too busy and he’s offered to take over Ryker again. Ryker had hired Hendrix originally but asked for me after we worked together once. However, Kirkland knows I’ll start my

own practice if I don't get moved up in the company and doesn't want that to happen."

"Office politics can be murder. I'll start looking into it." Kale hung up and then Olivia went back to waiting.

It took hours. People were talking all around her, but Olivia didn't hear them. She'd sent Kale several names ranging from Robert, William, and Kevin, then added the lawyers for two large international companies based out of New York. Hilderbran and Coppage. The more Olivia thought about it, the more she pushed Kale to look into them. They were dirty lawyers. They rode the ethics line and stepped over it too many times to count, but always managed to weasel their way out of it. They had several ties to Russian crime families who were the so-called legitimate owners of these companies with massive Russian government contracts to be the exclusive sellers of oil and natural gas. Sending a contractor to grab her wouldn't be out of the question for them.

The last time she'd run into Hilderbran and Coppage, she'd beaten them in court over intellectual property their clients had stolen from Ryker and Sebastian. It was a knock-down, drag-out legal battle, but she'd won and their clients had to pay almost a hundred million dollars to Ryker and Sebastian.

She also put Imani on the task of building a list. An hour later, Imani had sent a list of over fifty attorneys or their clients who would want to harm her. Olivia frowned. Was she really that hated? She was good at her job. She might beat them in court, but she was always ethical about it. Which was way more than lots of those attorneys could say.

"Knock, knock!" Jen called out cheerfully. "Y'all have more company."

Olivia glanced around the packed room. There wasn't room for more company. Then Lydia rushed in with all of her children, including little Lennie who was sound asleep in a sling strapped to Lydia's chest.

"Is Sheriff Fox going to be okay?" Landry Jr. asked nervously. The poor kid was so pale he looked as if he was

going to faint.

Olivia called him over to her and took his hands in hers as Lacy went over to Forrest and Levi went to Kane. Damon let Leah and Lindsey crawl up on his lap. Hunter put his arm around Lyle. And Stone tossed Leo over his shoulder, making the boy giggle.

However, Landry Jr. was trying so hard to be a man to even think about giggling like some of his siblings were. “He’s going to be fine. He’s just getting some stitches.”

His lower lip trembled. “Are you sure he’s going to be okay?”

Olivia nodded. “He had a knife wound to his arm that required the doctor to stitch up a blood vessel. Do you know what that is?”

Landry nodded. “I learned about it in biology. Are you sure he didn’t lose too much blood?”

“I’m sure. But that’s where blood donors come in. Someday you can donate when you’re old enough. The doctors might have had to give Granger a bag of blood, but that surgery is already done and the plastic surgeon is stitching up his arm and a small wound on his side. Landry,” Olivia said with a touch of authority in her voice to make sure the boy was paying attention, “he’s going to recover completely and I’m sure he’ll take you surfing the second he can. Would you like that?”

Landry tried to slyly wipe his eyes as he nodded.

“Well, we found the party,” Gavin called out from the door a second before Kenzie pushed Granger in on a gurney.

Granger was clearly taken by surprise to see the room full of people. Especially since he didn’t even get all the way into the room before Landry ran across the room and flung himself onto Granger’s uninjured side. “You’re alive!”

Olivia was tough. She’s survived an assault that landed her in the hospital. She handled threats and attempted kidnappings. But having Granger harmed and then seeing

Landry's lanky body shaking as he silently cried into Granger's shoulder left her in tears.

Olivia wiped her eyes and looked around. She wasn't the only one in tears. Lydia was stroking Lennie's head as tears streamed down her cheeks even though she didn't make a single sound. The Faulkner wives were smiling, but their eyes were red. Harper, as strong as she was, had red eyes, but refused to let a tear fall as she gently punched Granger's leg. "I think I say this for everyone. Don't do that again!"

Granger's eyes hadn't left Olivia's since he'd been wheeled in. As everyone talked around them, he mouthed, "I love you," and Olivia finally began to relax. He was okay. All the reassuring words she had told Landry were true.

"I love you, too," she mouthed back from across the room.

"Landry," Kenzie said in full nurse mode. "Why don't you help me move Granger's bed into position?"

"Then I want to see Sheriff Fox's stitches. Did they hurt? Are you going to have a big scar?" Levi asked.

It was only then that Olivia realized Granger was shirtless in front of everyone and no one seemed to notice his scars. Well, until Levi asked and then Granger went to grab a blanket, only to realize he had none on the gurney. He was clothed solely in a hospital gown that was draped over his waist and that was it.

"You want to see some scars, do you?" Stone asked. "Don't ask pretty boy there. He only has a couple. Check these out." Stone shoved his pants down abruptly and Jen about fainted. A nasty scar ran across his thigh just below the hem of his boxer briefs. "I caught a skate here. They stapled it up on the bench and I still played the rest of the period."

Olivia silently moved across the room as everyone stared at Stone until she reached Granger. She kissed him on the forehead, but Granger was already yanking up the gown to show his leg.

Leah pointed at Granger and giggled. "You and Mr. Stone are twinsies."

Olivia looked down at Granger's now exposed thigh. They both had scars on the same leg in almost the same spot.

Olivia felt Granger chuckle. "That we are. Mine's a foot long. How big is yours?"

"No way. Mine is totally bigger. It took over twenty staples to close it," Stone said, crossing his arms and not paying attention to Jen who was taking photos with her phone or the sudden increase in the number of nurses and several female doctors in the room. Olivia was pretty sure the old lady in the wheelchair wasn't supposed to be there either.

"Oh, are we whipping it out and comparing sizes?" Forrest said as if it were a challenge before dropping his pants.

A candystripers fainted.

"Chainsaw." Forrest pointed to his calf.

"Okay, let the real man in this room end this," Hunter said as he pulled off his shirt.

Olivia saw the aide who had been pushing the old woman grab her oxygen and take a big puff.

"IUD," Hunter said to the web of scars on his side.

"Now you and Sheriff Fox are twinsies, too!" Leah giggled.

Hunter moved over and pushed Olivia out of the way so he could pose next to Granger. They both looked over each other's scars.

"You might be right, Leah," Granger said with a smile. "I think we are twins."

"Now you and Mr. Hunter and Mr. Stone are BFFs," Leah said with the surety of a ten-year-old. "I'll make you matching friendship bracelets."

Stone pulled up his pants and the entire group by the door groaned. Then he squatted down in front of Leah and held out his pinkie. "Do you pinkie-promise to make us one?"

Leah nodded her head very seriously and hooked her pinkie with Stone's. "I'll do it tonight!"

“Excellent,” Hunter said. “Forrest and I have to leave soon. I don’t want to leave without it.”

“You’re leaving?” Lacy asked Forrest.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be back soon. We all will,” Forrest said with a grin. “I just bought a lot this morning in Shadows Landing. Ridge is going to design my new house and Trent has promised to make me some furniture.”

“And I’ll be back in a couple of months, too,” Wilder said. “Turns out I’m a local business owner. I like the vibe here so I’ll be moving in the next six months or so after I get things settled in Los Angeles.”

“Can we have a dance party when you come back?” Lindsey asked him.

“Of course!” Wilder held out his hands and set Lindsey’s feet on top of his before whisking her off into a dance around the room.

“Hey, what about me?” Kane asked. Lyle and Leo turned and leaped up on him.

“You already live here, silly,” Leo said with a giggle. “I saw you take down the sold sign near Mr. Ridge’s house when I was riding my bike.”

“You bought a house?” Olivia gasped. How was she the last to know this?

“Happy, sis?”

Granger was no longer glaring at her brothers, and they were no longer threatening to kill him. Granger, Hunter, and Stone were now scar triplets and BFFs. They weren’t giving her crap about her love life and in fact were all here to check on Granger. Yeah, she was happy.

“I am. It’s nice to have you here. I can’t wait to meet the women you bring home now that I’m here to look out for you all,” Olivia said with a sweet smile that had all her brothers looking rather nervous. Oh, this was going to be fun.

“Oh goodness, did we miss it?” Miss Ruby asked as she, Miss Winnie, and Miss Mitzy hustled in. “We heard there were

naked men in here.”

“Oh, hello, Sheriff!” Miss Winnie blushed. “Quick, Ruby, get your phone out. We can have Landry photoshop a pie in later.”

Granger yanked his gown up and everyone laughed except Ruby and Winnie who pouted. Granger reached up and covered the hand Olivia rested on his shoulder with his hand. They shared a smile and Olivia knew everything was okay. More than okay. She was part of this quirky community along with the man she loved and her family.

21

Granger wanted to go home, but Olivia wouldn't let him. Instead, he was being fussed over by Miss Tibbie as they entered Olivia's building. He'd told Liv he would rest better at home, but because he had an early morning checkup with the surgeon, she insisted they spend the night in Charleston. She didn't tell him it was because it was closer to the emergency department in case anything went wrong. After he was cleared tomorrow, they would head back to Shadows Landing and stay there until whoever was behind this was caught.

"Let me get the elevator for you." Miss Tibbie was doting on him, having promised to bring down a home-cooked meal for them. "And Elijah has promised to send down his favorite bourbon."

Granger couldn't complain about the bourbon.

"Miss Tibbie, what's ..." Dax stood at his open door staring in surprise at Granger's bandaged arm. "What happened?"

"Just a little scratch," Granger said, trying to shrug it off. He didn't like or want this attention.

"Stop. You're a hero. Someone attacked me and Granger stopped them," Olivia said proudly. Okay, having Olivia think

he was a hero was pretty nice.

“No! Is it like what happened in New York? Thank goodness your boyfriend was with you.”

“What do you know about New York?” Granger asked, not liking the awful memory he had of racing up to New York City after hearing Olivia had been attacked. He’d punched a wall in Sebastian’s building when he’d seen her bruised and battered. Never again would anyone touch her, but someone didn’t know the lengths Granger would go to in order to protect her.

“She told me all about it. Then I brought her soup for a week when she got home,” Dax explained. “Her jaw hurt too much to eat solid food.”

Well, now Granger felt like crap. He wanted to be that man for her and he’d let his belief that Olivia wouldn’t want to prevent him from being there for her when she had needed him the most.

“You’re a good friend, Dax. Thank you for looking out for Liv.”

“Of course. Do you need anything?” Dax asked, nodding toward Granger’s arm.

“I’m good. Thank you.”

Granger moved to head inside when Dax stopped Olivia. “I grabbed your mail. Let me get it.”

Granger headed inside with Miss Tibbie as Olivia waited by the open door. A moment later Olivia came in with a stack of mail and a small padded envelope. “What did you get me?” Olivia asked as she tossed the mail on the kitchen counter and ripped into the padded envelope.

“What do you mean?” Granger asked, but the answer to his question was in Olivia’s hand. “What is that?”

Inside was a photo of the two of them walking to Port restaurant hand in hand with red block letters written on it.

“You might think she’s yours, but she’s always been mine,” Granger read out loud.

“Oh mercy me,” Miss Tibbie gasped as she placed her hand over her heart.

“There’s more,” Olivia said with a gulp. Her hands shook as she pulled out a fancy note card. It was white and on the front were a bride and groom embossed in gold foil. Granger looked over her shoulder as she opened it. It had Olivia’s full name and read: *Save the Date for our Marriage*.

“Is that why someone is trying to kidnap me? To marry me?” Olivia asked as she set everything down on the countertop.

Granger slipped his good arm around her waist and pulled her against him. “No one is going to kidnap you. I won’t let that happen.”

“And I won’t let anyone kill you,” Olivia promised. The tremors of fear radiating through her body evaporated in an instant. Instead, Granger felt her turn to steel with determination. Good, that was better than being afraid.

“Tomorrow we’ll be back home and regroup. I’ll turn this over to Peter to see if they can get any evidence from it. We’ll find this person one way or the other.”

Olivia nodded. “Go on the offensive.”

“If you want.”

Olivia turned to face him with pure resolve in her eyes. “I’ll do whatever it takes to bring this bastard down.”

“Oh no,” Miss Tibbie sighed. “I’m going to have a new neighbor when you two get married, aren’t I?”

Olivia laughed and Granger didn’t know what to think about that. Was she laughing at the idea of marrying him, because right now he wasn’t? He knew he never wanted to live another day without her by his side.

“Just because we get married doesn’t mean I won’t need to keep my house here in Charleston for long work nights or,” Olivia turned and winked at him and all fears he had vanished, “when we stay late watching hockey games. I do believe I’m going to be a season ticket holder.”

Miss Tibbie's face lit up. "Excellent. Remember, Tibbie makes a lovely baby name. Now, let me go get your dinner. You must be starving!"

Granger didn't even notice when Miss Tibbie left. He was smiling too much. "So, you want to marry me, huh?"

"Is that you asking?" Olivia asked instead of answering.

"Oh, darlin', trust me when I say, you'll know when I do."

Granger pulled her against him and kissed her with all the love he had. Love a stalker couldn't threaten. Love that had only grown, ironically, because of this situation. If only the stalker knew when he had put Olivia in danger, it had pushed Granger past his fear of rejection. The thought of losing Olivia without her knowing how deeply he cared for her had been too much. But, threatening what they had wouldn't stand, either. Enough was enough. Granger was going to find this threat and handle it because he had a future to plan with the woman he loved.



Granger had to admit that Olivia's little cottage was starting to feel like home. After getting the all-clear from his doctor in Charleston, he left with care instructions to give Gavin. He and Olivia stopped at the grocery store on the way to Shadows Landing. Now all his favorite food and drinks were stocked in the kitchen. Then they'd stopped at his house and he'd packed up clothes and toiletries that Olivia not only made room for, but left plenty of room for him to add more things. When he wasn't looking, she'd packed sheets, blankets, and even grabbed his pillow and two of his favorite coffee mugs. They'd all been waiting for him in the back of his SUV when he'd brought down his duffle bag.

It further helped that their interior design choices were so similar that Granger felt as if he'd decorated the place himself. He'd only been at her place for four hours and it felt as if he'd been there forever. They'd somehow silently moved in with each other because both of them knew this wasn't just for a couple of nights.

Now Granger was working in the kitchen with Kord and Tristan while Olivia worked in her home office. His friends seemed to be just as at home as Granger was and he wondered what Olivia would think about hosting guys' poker night here.

"Exactly how do you plan to go on the offensive?" Kord asked.

"I could use my previous talents," Tristan suggested. He'd been a government assassin and right now it didn't sound like that bad of an idea.

"About that," Granger started to say. "We're not going to assassinate anyone, but how would you draw a target out in the open so you could get the job done?"

"Ah, I see where you're coming from." Tristan thought about it and Granger knew he wasn't going to like what Tristan said when the assassin cringed a little. "You bait the trap."

Granger didn't like it.

Kord let out a low whistle. "Just like when we need to move a gator. You set the bait and wait for them to take it. When they do, you're there to grab them."

"Or shoot them. I'm okay with shooting them in this situation," Tristan added.

"No, we're not shooting anyone unless we have to. The main objective is to keep Olivia safe." Granger ran a hand over his face. His arm was throbbing but he couldn't think of himself right now. "I don't want to put her in danger. What about a bait-and-switch?"

Tristan nodded. "You could send Olivia into a building, then have her exit out the back, leaving us behind in the building. She would never be in contact with her stalker."

"But what if he just sends another kidnapper?" Kord asked. "Then our lead would be at an end."

"Only if we kill him. Hopefully, if we're waiting inside the building for him, we can capture him alive and question him,"

Granger told him. “But you’re right. It’s not a sure thing that the actual stalker will come.”

Granger’s phone alerted him to movement out front. The video was clear. They had company. Luckily it was exactly who they needed. “Kane’s here. Let’s see what he says.”

Kane knocked on the door, but then walked in without waiting for the door to be answered. “Hey, sis!” he called out into the house. Olivia called out a greeting from her office but didn’t see him.

“What’s the latest?” Granger asked as Kane set down a stack of files.

“Luckily my sister hasn’t dated that much in the past year. I have cleared all of them. Doing some research online, her dates were all a bunch of egotistical wannabe playboys, but they don’t fit the profile. I listened to this Kale guy and started on the people she’s around at the office and then the list of opposing counsel. The good news—we have suspects.”

“And the bad news?” Granger asked, because he knew there was some.

“My sister pisses a lot of people off. Besides Mateo, there’s not a single one that doesn’t fit the profile. Lawyers can be real assholes,” Kane said, frustrated. “Look at this.”

Kane tossed out several files. Granger picked up the first one and opened it.

“Hendrix, this is her boss, right?” Granger asked.

“Yes. Total narcissist. Fits the profile.” Kane pointed to the next file. “Olivia’s ex from law school, Mark, total dick. Fits the profile.”

“Is that your professional term for it?” Kord asked with a grin.

“Yes, but he’s also egotistical and entitled. He or his family has smeared past girlfriends who said bad things about him. So, fits the profile.” Kane said before pointing to another file. “William Huff. Ego for miles and, after Liv got Sebastian Abel as a client, told anyone who’d listen that she slept her way into

the job. Then you have Robert Whitehall, who, while we have cleared him, is still running his mouth about Olivia and how she's going to get what she deserves. Then these two are special."

Kane opened the files. "Hilderbran and Coppage. They have ties to the Russian mob and the Russian government and we know how those guys feel about not getting their way. And when it's a woman who's stopping them from getting what they want, you can guess what they'll do to Olivia to punish her. Then there're all of these." Kane dropped a massive folder held together by a thick rubber band. "These are all the attorneys or their clients who have a grudge against Olivia. I've only made it through a handful of CEO clients and their attorneys, who all lost and bitched about it. They all fit the freaking profile. I've never seen anything like this."

Granger frowned. He knew what this meant. "Then we have to do it."

"Damn," Kord cursed. "I hate it, but I don't think we have any choice."

"Yes!" Tristan said, pumping his fist. "Do you know how long it's been since I've been on a mission?"

"Whoa, what are you all talking about?" Kane asked before Granger explained their idea of making Olivia more accessible for another attempted kidnapping in order to catch the stalker. Kane was already shaking his head. "No way will you use my sister as bait."

"It's not up to you, Kane." Granger turned to see Olivia standing behind them. "I told Granger I want to go on the offensive. I'll do it. I don't want to be afraid anymore. I'm angry. So angry that this person thinks they have any kind of right to dictate my life and to threaten not only me, but Granger. I'm done sitting back waiting for the next text message or the next threat."

Kane shook his head. "Damon is going to lose his shit. You know that, right?"

“I know. I’ll talk to him.” Olivia took a deep breath. She frowned as she looked at all the files. “What do I need to do?”

22

Granger sat on the back porch as Damon cursed, yelled, threatened, and then finally sat down hard in a chair. “And Olivia wants to put her life in danger like this? Wait, don’t answer that. Of course she does. She was never one to make someone else do her dirty work. Even as a kid. She’d stand up to a bully herself. She would catch the spider and take it outside. She’d never have anyone do something for her when she could do it herself.”

“I need your help, Damon.”

“Anything.”

Granger leaned back and held his injured arm to his chest. The damn thing hurt like crazy, but the pain was manageable with over-the-counter pain relief. Luckily, he suffered no nerve damage or any loss of range of motion. It just hurt, but he could deal with that.

“The game plan is to lie low here in Shadows Landing for a couple of days. We will go to Harper’s bar or out to dinner after a day or so. I want him to think we’ve relaxed, thinking the threat is gone. Olivia will tell her assistants to leave all her messages and files she needs on her desk. She’ll tell them she’ll come and get them after hours before heading home to her condo. She’ll tell them I think the threat is gone and that I

killed the stalker in that parking garage. They will then tell the office. We're hoping it will get to the right ears. Olivia will then go back into the law office. I will sneak in the back before she gets there and have eyes on her from the second she walks into the building. I want law enforcement in the building with me. Arresting him is the objective. However, I want you and your brothers to be with her the second she leaves the building." Granger explained.

"She'll walk in the front. I'll come out of hiding and go up in the elevator she was supposed to be in. Kord will walk her out the back door and hand her off to you, then take the stairs up to her floor. The idea is for me to walk into the office—the most likely place for an attack—and have Tristan, Kord, Dare, Paxton, and Peter all in position around the floor in case the stalker comes in behind me. Imani will be setting up hidden cameras in the morning. I've already given her instructions on how to do that. You'll have access to the live feed. I know Olivia will want to see it. What do you think?" Granger realized he wanted Olivia's brothers' thoughts on this. He already felt bad putting Olivia in danger, but if the plan worked, she'd never actually be in danger.

"Do you think you can have her protected the entire time she's in the building?"

"I do."

"Then let's do it." Damon paused and Granger saw his lips purse as if he were thinking of saying something, but didn't want to. "I, um, trust you."

Granger's smile spread into a big grin. "So, you like me, huh?"

Damon glared at him. "I didn't say that. And you'll never be good enough for Olivia."

"Oh, I already know that part. So, do I call you bro now?"

Damon somehow managed to glare harder, deeper, darker. "We are not family."

"Yet." Granger gave one last smirk and left Damon sputtering.

There was another problem he needed to solve, and he had an idea of who could help him.



“Sit. Stay.” The order was punctuated by the firm slap of a hand on a desk.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Granger sat right down as Elsa, Ryker’s dominatrix of an assistant, walked back to his office. A minute later, she came back. “Mr. Faulkner will see you now, even if you don’t have an appointment.”

Elsa held open the door and Granger walked through it. He was torn between running past Elsa or giving her a wink. The wink won out and he was rewarded with the slightest twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

“What are you doing here? I thought you’d be with Olivia.” Ryker, straight to the point as always.

“Kord and Tristan are with her. I need,” Granger cleared his throat, “your help.”

“Of course. Anything to keep Olivia safe.”

Granger cleared his throat again. “It’s not about her safety.” Ryker looked intrigued but didn’t say anything. “I figured you’re her best friend and know her the best.” Now Ryker’s eyebrows rose, but he still didn’t say anything.

Granger felt like an idiot but got the rest out. “Look, I don’t want to mess this up. I need help picking an engagement ring for her.”

Ryker blinked. Then he smiled. “Elsa,” he barked into the intercom. A second later, Elsa was standing at the door. “Cancel all my appointments for the day. I’m going out.”

Elsa didn’t hesitate. She just nodded once and went to cancel the appointments.

“She’s scary,” Granger whispered.

Ryker just smiled bigger. “I know. I love it. Now, I know the jeweler Olivia got the rings from for my cousins. We’ll

start there.”

Granger stared at the rows after rows of engagement rings. They all looked pretty much alike, but then the salesperson started talking about carats, clarity, color, and cut. Granger’s eyes glazed over.

“What the hell is he talking about?” Granger whispered to Ryker.

“I have no idea. Remember, Olivia picked out the ring for me to give to Kenzie. We might need backup.” Ryker reached for his phone as he spoke and started texting.

Wade Faulkner was the first to arrive. “What’s the emergency?”

“Granger needs help picking out an engagement ring.”

Wade paled. “But, it’s for Olivia and she has perfect taste in everything.”

“I know, that’s the issue,” Granger groaned.

“Never fear, Trent is here!” Trent Faulkner sauntered in along with Ridge. The smirk Trent wore on his face said he was ready to give Granger shit for whatever this was. “What do you need my help with?”

“Granger needs an engagement ring for Olivia,” Wade told him.

“But Olivia is perfect. You can’t afford perfect. Hell, Ryker can’t afford perfect.” Trent’s eyes glazed over as he stared at the rings.

“You’re married to America’s Sweetheart. You’re telling me you can’t help pick out a ring for Olivia?”

“I’ve seen Skye away from Hollywood where she’s just Skye. I’ve never seen Olivia not completely perfect and ball-busting in every way,” Trent argued.

“Step aside. I got this.” Ridge walked up to the counter and looked at several of the rings. The jeweler started with the Cs again. Ridge turned back to them. “I don’t get this.”

“You know who you’re going to need to call,” Ryker asked with a slight grimace.

“No,” Granger groaned but placed the call anyway.

Thirty minutes later, the jeweler gasped. A wall of Townsend brothers stood in front of the display case all looking as equally flummoxed as Granger.

“Wait,” Granger said, stopping the jeweler in the middle of his cut, color, carat, etc. talk. “Who are you?”

A man Granger hadn’t seen before with blond hair and blue eyes just like Olivia’s turned to look at him. “Oh, I’m her brother.”

“There’s another one?” Wade asked, just as confused as Granger felt.

“Where did you come from?” Granger asked.

“I just flew in from Boston. Haven’t even seen Olivia yet. The guys picked me up at the airport and brought me straight here.” Well, at least he wasn’t threatening Granger like the rest of them had.

“I’m Granger. The one who plans on proposing to your sister.” Granger held out his hand and the man shook it.

“Rowan Townsend. Nice to meet you.” The man held on to Granger’s hand as he leaned forward so that it looked almost as if he were going to kiss Granger on the cheek before he spoke. “I’m incredibly skilled with a scalpel and no one will think the top pediatric surgeon in the country would kill you. Just remember that.”

Yup, he was a Townsend. And he was as baffled by the contents of the display cases as everyone else there.

Okay, it was time to call in the big guns. Granger pulled out his phone and placed the call. “I need your help.”

This time when the jeweler gasped it was either because America’s Sweetheart stood in front of him with a wall of women from Shadows Landing or it was because of Miss Mitzy’s shirt where she’d cross-stitched a cat wearing a comical look of surprise on it.

“Are you ...?” the jeweler stuttered.

“Skye Jessamine Faulkner, yes. If you help us find the perfect ring, I’ll take a picture with you.”

“No, not you.” The guy waved her off. “Pardon me, ma’am, but are you Mrs. Elijah Cummings?”

Miss Tibbie smiled pleasantly at the salesman. “Yes, I am.”

“Who’s she?” Wilder whispered to Granger.

“She’s the queen of Charleston society. If word got out that Miss Tibbie bought jewelry from this store, they’d see a flood of society matrons coming in and buying everything out and then their husbands would come in and buy everything else for their wives.”

“Huh. Think she’d help me with the younger society people to get them into my club after I reopen it?” Wilder asked.

“She knows *everyone* who is anyone in Charleston. She’d help in an instant as long as you invited her to opening night. Don’t let her age fool you. She’s helped out in an undercover gang operation before. She loved the excitement.” Granger enjoyed the shocked look on Wilder’s face.

The jeweler began his spiel again and only Harper looked slightly dazed by the end of it. The women began to chatter, point, and finally there were only ten rings left.

“Okay, Granger,” Miss Mitzy said, waving him and all the men over to the display case. “We’ve got it narrowed down. The rest is up to you.”

“What am I looking at?” he asked. They all were sparkly.

Miss Ruby chuckled and Miss Winnie blessed his heart.

“We made it easy for you,” Miss Tibbie said, patting his hand reassuringly. The color and clarity are perfect in all of them. Meaning, they’re good quality. Now, let’s narrow down the cut. That’s the shape. Which do you think Olivia would like?”

Granger looked at the rings in all different shapes. This was easier now that there weren't a hundred in front of him. "Definitely not the heart. And not that one that has a million diamonds on it. She's not flashy like that."

"I thought you said he doesn't know our sister that well," Rowan said to Hunter.

The wall of women turned, and as if watching a tennis match, looked between Rowan and Hunter and then back to Rowan.

"Oh, we have another one," Tinsley said with a shrug before the wall of women also shrugged and turned back to Granger as they waited for him to continue.

"That's not the reaction I usually get," Granger heard Rowan mutter as Stone laughed at him.

Back to the rings. The diamond band was pretty, but that was more for the wedding day, not an engagement. He then cut the one he called *yin* and *yang* because of the shape the two diamonds set together made. "I think the round one or the rectangle one."

"The rectangle one is an emerald cut," the jeweler added quickly.

Granger nodded as he looked between the final two. "They're classic and

elegant. That's her." Granger's eye kept going to the emerald cut. It just spoke to him. He could see it on her finger. "I want the emerald cut one. It's just unique enough, just like she is."

"Damn, he's good," Forrest said to his brothers.

Kane nodded. "Very good reasoning skills."

"He knows Olivia well," Wilder agreed.

"You know what this means," Stone said and Damon grunted.

"I didn't think we'd ever see this day," Rowan said into the silence.

“What day is that?” Miss Mitzy asked.

“The day our sister found a man we won’t kill,” Stone said and Granger thought there might be a little misting to Stone’s eyes.

“Yet,” Rowan added.

Granger laughed and Rowan looked at him skeptically. Rowan’s hair was cut perfectly. His skin was flawless. His nose clearly hadn’t been broken. He was in a sport coat. And while he was tall and muscular like Kane and Forrest, he looked like he probably golfed. “I’m sorry, but you’re a little late to the game. You’re too preppy to threaten me after Damon. It just doesn’t hold the same level of menace.”

Rowan glared. The rest of the Townsend brothers laughed and punched him as they teased “the baby boy” of the group. Ah, Rowan was the youngest brother.

“You’re teasing me?” Rowan asked Forrest. “You’re my freaking twin. You’re three minutes older than me.”

“They’re twins?” Savannah muttered. “I didn’t know there were twins.”

Granger didn’t either. Hell, he didn’t even know if this was all of the Townsends or not.

Damon held out his hand and all the teasing stopped. Granger looked down at it and knew what it meant. He was honored. He took Damon’s hand and shook it.

“Welcome to the family,” Damon said. “Now, if you hurt her, I’ll be the one to kill you and you know that. Not the pretty doctor down there, but me. Got it?”

Rowan rolled his eyes, but Granger knew Damon was serious. “I wouldn’t expect anything else, bro.”

Damon growled. Granger grinned. All the people currently stuffed into the jewelry store cheered.

Granger paid for the ring and held the little box in his hand as they all headed outside. His friends’ wives all hugged him. The women he’d grown up with like sisters of his own all hugged him. Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie promised to bake

him a celebratory apple pie. The Faulkners shook his hand. The Townsends threatened him, but did it with a smile as they welcomed him to the family.

Ryker turned to him and surprised him with a hug. “Just so you know, you’re my brother, too. Now, don’t mess up the proposal.”

Ryker slid into his sleek sports car and roared off back toward his office.

Miss Ruby and Miss Winnie pulled up in Miss Ruby’s tank of a car and paused by the sidewalk. It was then that Granger realized Miss Mitzy was behind him.

He held out his arm and offered to walk her to the car. Miss Mitzy hooked her hand through his arm and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “You’re like a son to me, do you know that? Your parents moved at the same time my son left town. I was lonely and you never thought twice about stopping by my house on the way to work to have a cup of coffee or help me bring in the trashcan.”

Granger had always thought he’d been so alone after the accident. Ryker, with internal scars of his own, had understood some of what Granger went through. But other than that, Granger always thought he was alone. He knew he wasn’t before the accident. He had been friends with all of the Faulkners and many others from town. But somewhere along the way, he’d withdrawn, thinking they wouldn’t want him like the women he’d dated didn’t want him. Even when they were nice and included him, he felt like an outsider.

When he’d been elected sheriff, he’d found a new purpose in life. The town hadn’t abandoned him, and even if they were just being nice because they felt sorry for him, it was more than others had done for him. His purpose was to keep the town safe and it was easy to do and keep himself at a distance. But he’d been completely wrong. He’d never been on the outside looking in. He’d been in their embrace the whole time. They weren’t pitying him. They were supporting him.

“And you’ve been like a mother to me.” Granger leaned down and placed a kiss on Miss Mitzy’s cheek. “Thank you

for always feeding me.”

Miss Mitzy patted his cheek. “Now you have someone else to feed you.”

Granger winked at her. “You say that, but Olivia can’t cook.”

Miss Mitzy puffed up. “Never fear, I’ll make sure you don’t starve. I’ll just have to teach the poor girl how to cook. And in the meantime, you stop by for breakfast anytime you want.”

“You know,” Miss Ruby called from the driver’s seat, “if you don’t want us to spill the beans to Olivia, there’s something you could do for us.”

“And what’s that, Miss Ruby?” Granger asked, crossing his arms over his chest and trying to look intimidating.

“We need a new pie ambassador. Just one little shirtless photo.”

“Nope,” Granger said as he fought the smile tugging at his lips.

“We’ll tell Olivia,” Miss Ruby said with a smile and a bat of her eyelashes.

“And I’ll think about taking a closer look at that okra plant that’s in a pot on your back patio. You know, the one that has never produced okra.”

“Well, I still use it in my gumbo,” Miss Ruby snapped, knowing her blackmail attempt had just been shut down.

“Good try, though,” Granger said, leaning down to the window and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, ladies, for helping me out today.”

“Anything for you. Now, how about you send your young lady to the knitting club tomorrow? We’d really love a chance to chat with her,” Miss Winnie said from the passenger’s seat. “Dare and Stone will be there.”

“That should work, but I’ll need to ask her.”

“What a good husbandly answer already,” Miss Mitzy said with a wink. “But we’ll expect her there anyway.”

Granger waved them away and then it was just him and a blue velvet box. He let out his breath and opened the box to look at the ring. He loved her without a shadow of a doubt. He knew she loved him, too. Then why was he more nervous asking Olivia to marry him than at the prospect of facing a stalker who wanted to kill him?

23

Olivia looked up from her computer when she heard the alarm being disarmed. She placed her hand on her dagger from training class at the church. When she glanced at her phone, she saw video of Granger pulling up the driveway.

Tristan knocked on her door and stuck his head in. “As you probably know already, Granger’s home.”

“Thank you for staying with me while he worked a lead.”

“Anytime. And don’t worry. We have everything in hand for the bait-and-switch.”

Considering Tristan had been a government assassin, Olivia felt pretty safe. This was going to be easy and then it would be done. Finally, she and Granger could think about a future together and how that would look and work.

Olivia looked out the window and saw Kord hugging Granger. Huh, that was weird. Kord was certainly all about the bromance. Just the memory of Kord telling her brothers made her smile.

Olivia’s phone rang and she saw it was Imani. “Hey. Is something going on in the office?”

“Girl, don’t you know it. Mark and the receptionist disappeared for twenty minutes. Hendrix is pissed, and I mean pissed, that you’re not here. Mateo and I have taken up residence in your office saying we’re doing work on New York cases for you. We’ve told everyone you are sick and staying home for a couple of days, but you’ve mentioned coming in after hours to pick stuff up so you don’t infect anyone.”

“What did Hendrix do?” Olivia asked.

“He came into the office already blustering about how you think you’re so important and then came to a stop when he realized he was yelling at me. Asked where you were. I told him you were out sick and working from home. He’s calling Mr. Kirkland.”

“Anything else?” Olivia asked, pinching the bridge of her nose to ward off the headache she felt coming on from Hendrix.

“Yeah. Mark came in before disappearing with the receptionist. He was pissed, too. Didn’t tell me about what, though. Asked when you were going to be back because he wants to have it out with you in person. Then, to top it all off, everybody’s favorite peckerhead is back. Robert snuck in when the receptionist was screwing Mark and stormed into the office. Just like Hendrix, he drew up short when he saw I wasn’t you. I saw he had papers in his hand. Looks like he’s not giving up on his client. Or he’s suing you. One or the other.”

Olivia pinched the bridge of her nose harder. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, you got a package from Russia.”

“Don’t open it! Call the FBI!”

“Already did,” Mateo’s voice called out. “Agent Castle is on his way. Oh, here he is. We have Olivia on speaker.”

“Hey, Olivia.” Peter sounded in complete control of the situation, whatever it might be. “I need the room,” he told Imani and Mateo.

“We’ll be right back!”

“Are you afraid it’s a bomb?” Olivia asked.

“No. I’m afraid it has ricin or anthrax. It’s in an express envelope so a bomb would be hard. I’m suiting up and have a handheld portable X-ray machine with me. It looks like a camera. I’ll scan it and run swabs on it before I open it. Gotta love technology.”

The door to her home office opened and she looked up to see Granger coming in. “An express package from Russia just arrived at the office. Peter is checking it out.”

Granger nodded and leaned against the desk as they listened to Peter work.

“Swabs are all negative. X-raying now.” No one talked.
“Huh.”

“Huh, what?” Granger asked.

“Hey, Granger. X-rays are all clear. There appears only to be a letter and a smaller piece of paper and a paperclip inside. Want me to open it?”

“Yes,” she and Granger said at the same time.

Olivia gripped Granger’s hand and leaned forward. Was it a threat? “What is it?”

“It’s a job offer. Wow, and they enclosed a check for five million dollars as a signing bonus.”

Olivia wasn’t surprised by much, but this was a huge surprise. “They don’t want to kill me?”

“Nope. They were so impressed with how you beat them that Hilderbran and Coppage suggested their clients hire you. It’s an offer for you to join their firm.”

Stunned, Olivia sat back in her chair. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Considering I’m holding a check for five million, give me a reason you shouldn’t take it,” Peter said.

“Russian mob.”

Peter sighed. "Yeah, that's a good reason."

"Thanks for getting there so quickly, Peter," Olivia said as she heard Peter taking off the protective gear and shoving it in a bag.

"No problem, Olivia. I'm going to get out of here as quickly as possible." She heard the zipper of the bag close before she heard the door to the office open.

"Who are you?"

Olivia bolted upright in her seat at the sound of Hendrix's voice.

"Mr. Hendrix," Imani's voice said. "I told you, Miss Townsend isn't in the office today."

"This is still my firm and if I want to know who this person is, I have the right to ask," Hendrix snapped.

"Peter Thistle," Peter answered smoothly. "I'm a potential client, although, after meeting you, I'm not sure if I want to be. I've left a letter for Miss Townsend on her desk, Imani. Make sure she gets it when she's back in the office, will you?"

Olivia leaned forward as if that would help her know what was going on in the office. "You should have sent him to me," Hendrix lectured Imani. "Not everything is about Olivia Townsend. Plus, she's not taking new clients."

"Take it up with her regular assistant. I'm just here from New York helping with this Whitehall matter."

Hendrix made a frustrated noise and then the room was quiet.

"I told you everything was happening today. It's more hoppin' here than in the club your brother got us into and that was something else. I gotta go. He looks like he's coming back and I'm going to squish him like the little bug he is." The line went dead and Olivia stood up.

"I have to get into the office. Imani shouldn't be handling this. It's my mess."

"You're not going, Liv."

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Olivia was pissed and she knew she was taking it out on Granger, but he was there and she wasn’t at the office where she needed to be.

Granger didn’t move from where he leaned against the desk. “Liv, if you go now, you’ll ruin everything. I won’t have backup in place. Your brothers won’t be in place. Nothing will be in place. All this work will be ruined. Now, tell me, do you really think Imani can’t handle Hendrix? I think it’s Hendrix who should be worried.”

Olivia paused and then a giggle burst out. “You’re right. She can handle it. Hell, she thrives on these situations. She’s the only assistant I’ve had who hasn’t cried.”

“Aw, that’s the woman I love. The one who reduces all her assistants to tears.”

“It’s your fault!” Olivia was trying to be stern, but it wasn’t working.

“Me? How is it my fault?”

“I loved you and you wouldn’t even give me the time of day. I was, um, frustrated.”

Granger reached out and grabbed her by the hips and pulled her to him. “Well, then. It is all my fault. I better make sure you’re never frustrated again. Let’s see if I can make you so happy you bring them coffee and muffins the next time you go into work. Can you imagine?”

“Mmm, that would be fun. And I feel how hard you are.”

All of a sudden Granger pushed her off of him.

“What was that?” Olivia asked.

Granger looked slightly panicked before abruptly shoving his pants down. “I just didn’t want to wait a second longer. Now, come here.”

Granger spun her around and lifted her onto the edge of her desk. He shoved the bottom of her casual sundress up and then they were nothing more than a wild frenzy of lips, tongues, hands, and “oh my gods.”

Granger picked up his jeans and folded them so the ring box was hidden. Olivia looked rumpled and very well pleased as she lay back on her desk with a smile on her face.

“Yes, I think you’re just going to have to go to work with me every day so I don’t get frustrated,” she practically purred.

Granger paused. Yes, the sex had been a distraction, but it had also been mind-blowing. And there was something to be said about frustration.

“If you worked from home, we could.”

Olivia pushed herself up to sit. “What? Why would I do that?”

“Hendrix is mad because Kirkland wants to make you heir apparent, right?”

Olivia nodded. “Right.”

“But what do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“Liv, do you want to be the heir apparent?”

Olivia paused and he could see her thinking it over. “I worked hard to get my name on the firm and I’m almost there. It’ll probably be a few more years but ...”

“So, start your own. You have the only clients you need in Ryker and Sebastian. No Kirkland. No Mark. No Hendrix. You could run it how you wanted. You could have partners or not. And your name would be on it.”

“It’s not that easy. I have a team of researchers and junior lawyers at my disposal.”

“So, hire them away or hire your own.”

“The capital to set it all up would be astronomical. I need a private jet. I need office space. I need at least four junior attorneys and just as many paralegals.”

“I’ve never asked, but don’t you have that kind of money?” Granger felt weird talking about money, but if she was going to his wife, he needed to make it not weird. It was

important they be on the same page. “Look, I know I don’t have the same savings as you do, but I have a decent retirement fund that could help you start up and enough money in savings to pay Imani for a year. Now, I can’t help with the plane, but most of the time don’t you just use Ryker’s or bill him for it? You’re not actually paying for the plane. The client is. I mean, isn’t that how law offices work?”

Olivia stared at him as if he were speaking in a foreign language and now he felt self-conscious. He shouldn’t have said anything. He didn’t live in her high-powered corporate world.

“You’d give me your retirement to start my own firm? You could lose it all on me,” Olivia finally said, awed.

Granger was already shaking his head. “Darlin’, I’ll always bet on you.” Granger leaned forward and placed a kiss on her lips. “Sorry if I overstepped.”

“No,” Olivia said, stopping him. “I just can’t believe you’d do that for me.”

“I’d do anything for you.”

Granger had meant to give her a moment to get dressed, but then she reached for him and he had to toss his jeans out of reach unless he wanted to propose right then. Olivia pulled him to her and kissed him so deeply that the five minutes since the last time they made love seemed like an eternity.

“I love you,” Olivia said between kisses as she pushed him back onto her chair. “Let me show you how much.”

Olivia straddled him and took control of the pace. All he had to do was sit back and enjoy. And try not to blurt out a proposal as she quickly drove him toward the brink.

24

Olivia looked up at the church and frowned. “But I don’t know anything about knitting.”

“I think they just want to spend time with you,” Granger told her.

“I know, but I want to spend more time with you. We could go back into my office. I have to admit that chair might be my new favorite piece of furniture.”

They’d had sex in her office twice yesterday. Today she’d pulled him in three times. She couldn’t get enough of him. Now that he was comfortable around her with his scars, she loved the way he could flip from the powerful lover taking control to handing that control right over to her.

They’d had to get creative since his arm was still hurting. That made missionary a no-go. But they were having fun discovering oh, so many alternatives. She had to admit she was addicted to him.

“I’ve heard knitting club can get a little risqué. Think of me and I’ll be waiting for you after class. Besides, I have some ideas for that yarn.”

“Ew, stop kissing my sister,” Olivia heard Stone say from behind her.

“It’s romantic,” Edie said, playfully poking him with her elbow.

“Come on, or we’ll be late.” Dare walked by her, and Olivia just had to shake her head. Dare and Stone were big, muscular guys and seeing them carrying bags with yarn and knitting needles struck her as hilarious.

“I brought you a little starter kit,” Edie said as she took Olivia’s arm and pulled her up the stairs.

Olivia cast a glance over her shoulder and Granger gave her a little wave goodbye.

“Don’t worry. He’ll still be there when you get out of class.” Edie looked to Dare and Stone and dropped her voice to a whisper. “That good, huh?”

“What’s good?” Olivia asked. Edie rolled her eyes. “Oh!”

Olivia flushed and Edie laughed.

“Hello, Olivia. We’re so glad you could join us.” Miss Mitzy patted the chair between her and Miss Ruby. “Come sit with us.”

“Here you go,” Edie said, pulling a smaller bag from hers and handing it to her. “They’re the pros. They’ll get you started.”

Edie took a seat between Dare and Stone. Olivia saw that Stone was showing Edie something he was working on. Yeah, this was just surreal.

“Miss Ruby,” Olivia asked slowly. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but your pillow looks like a penis.”

“It *is* a penis, dear. I would think from all the time you’ve been shacked up with Granger that you’d know what one looked like.”

Stone choked. Olivia felt her face turn five shades of red.

“Maybe she’s a lights-off girl, Ruby. Is that it? Do you not know what you’re doing?” Miss Winnie asked. “You know. If you touch a penis right here,” Miss Winnie pointed to the

underside of the penis around the frenulum. “That will get the job done.”

Dare was looking very interested in his project. Stone looked ready to bolt and Olivia couldn’t blame him.

“Yes, I’m familiar with the male anatomy.” There was a nice diplomatic answer.

“What’s the matter, hon? Can’t you say dick?” Miss Winnie asked.

“I always liked cock better,” Miss Ruby said as she knitted away on the giant penis. “Makes it sound tall and proud.”

“Pecker always sounded fun.” Miss Mitzy joined in, then looked thoughtful. “I wonder, a cock is a pecker, but is a pecker a cock?”

“Now, if you want it to sound big, you go with anaconda,” Dare said, not looking up from his knitting.

“In our day, they called it a trouser snake,” Miss Winnie said, shaking her head. “Never leave men up to naming it. Dare is a case in point.”

“What? What’s wrong with anaconda? And that’s not my name for it, just one I’ve heard.”

“No woman wants to think about a snake during sex. You think a woman wants something that will hiss and bite as she’s working it?” Miss Mitzy asked.

Stone dropped his knitting. Olivia just stared. She had no words.

“But a chicken is okay?” Dare asked.

“A chicken won’t kill you. Plus, ever seen an angry cock? Looks just like your pecker,” Miss Mitzy said as the other women all nodded.

“Skin flute. I remember that one,” Edie said. “You’re right. Men shouldn’t be in charge of naming anything.”

“Disco stick was big in the ‘70s.” Miss Ruby added.

“Third leg, tree trunk, python, tripod,” Miss Winnie shook her head. “That’s just called being delusional.”

A bark of laughter slipped out and Olivia pressed her lips together to stop another round of laughter.

“I mean, why name it at all? We don’t name our boobs,” Edie asked and all eyes turned to Dare and Stone.

“The only name mine has is *my wife’s*,” Dare said.

The women all smiled at him. “Such a good boy,” Miss Ruby said as the woman nodded.

“I don’t think we should ask Stone. His is probably the one-eyed monster.” Miss Winnie rolled her eyes.

“Bunny buster,” Stone said and everyone went quiet and stared at him. “Because of the puck bunnies.”

“What do bunnies have to do with hockey?” Miss Mitzy asked.

Olivia was shaking now with suppressed laughter.

“That’s the nickname for women who want to sleep with all the hockey players. Puck bunnies. They do it like bunnies with anyone who has anything to do with a puck.”

“That’s actually not a bad name,” Miss Ruby said finally.

“I think we need to judge for ourselves if it lives up to the name. Let’s see it,” Miss Winnie said and Olivia lost her battle to suppress her laughter with one look at Stone’s face.

Olivia couldn’t believe how much fun she was having. Oh, she couldn’t even knit a row yet, but the conversation was worth it. The time flew by and soon everyone was packing up.

“You boys go on. We’ll walk Olivia out to the hall,” Miss Ruby said. However, it sounded more like a command.

“It’s okay. We’ll wait,” Stone said as he and Dare sat back down.

“You can wait in the hall. We need a little girl time. Go on,” Miss Winnie said firmly, shooing them out. “There are six weapons within easy reach if something happens. Just close

the door on your way out and we'll meet you there in a jiffy, unless you want to hear us talking to your sister about playing hide the salami with Granger.”

Stone popped up and headed for the door. “Yeah, we can wait in the hall.”

Olivia watched as the guys hurried from the room. “Tonight was so much fu—.” Olivia was cut off when she turned around and three knitting needles were at her neck. “I know I didn’t do well with the knitting. I promise, I’ll work on it.”

“Oh, dear. Don’t do that. It would be a crime to torture the yarn like that,” Miss Ruby said.

“There’s no hope for you as a knitter, dear.” Miss Winnie just added insult to injury.

“Then, why the needles?” Olivia asked the trio of old women.

“Granger is like a son to me,” Miss Mitzy told her. “And we’ve heard the threats leveled daily by your brothers to him. But you need to know Granger is not alone. He’s ours and we look after ours.”

Olivia was too shocked to watch what she said. “You don’t like me?” she blurted out.

“Oh, no, dear. We do like you. Very much,” Miss Ruby told her.

“But Granger is our boy. You have your brothers looking out for you,” Miss Winnie told her.

“And we look after Granger,” Miss Mitzy told her coolly. “It’s a two-way street. Granger hurts you and your brothers take care of it. That’s what family is for. But if you hurt Granger, you’ll deal with us. And remember, we have more life experience. We’ve been there and done that before it was even a thing. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The needles dropped away from her throat. “Good. Now, we’re so happy for you two. I’ll drop off a breakfast casserole

tomorrow for you.” Miss Mitzy patted her cheek. “It’ll be nice to have a daughter I actually like.”

“Um, thank you?” Olivia asked, now thoroughly confused.

“You’re welcome, dear. See you in the morning and maybe I can show you how to put together some of Granger’s favorite dishes.”

Miss Mitzy headed for the door and Olivia was still rooted to the floor. “Her daughter-in-law is Satan’s mistress. It’ll be nice for Mitzy to have a daughter to dote on. Now,” Miss Winnie said, “what do we have to do to get a picture of Granger shirtless holding our pie?”

“If you could just get him to stand in front of the window when he’s changing, we could make it work. Landry Jr. is teaching us Photoshop,” Miss Ruby told her as she and Miss Winnie linked arms with Olivia and began to march her from the room.

“I don’t think Granger would appreciate that.”

“A pie a month. That’s our deal.”

“What about Stone? I bet I could get Stone to do it.” Yes, Olivia was totally fine with throwing her brother under the bus.

“Olivia, everyone has seen him without his shirt on. Hell, he’s on billboards all across the state half naked. We need fresh meat. We saw Granger before his accident and he was a work of art, but that man has only gotten better with age.” Miss Winnie had no idea how right she was about Granger only getting better with age.

Olivia sighed as she remembered licking those abs just two hours ago.

“That tells me it’s even better than we remember, Win. Fine, twenty-four pies for the year,” Miss Ruby offered.

“Now you’ve brought something to the table I can work with. I’ll think about it and get back to you.” Olivia stopped at the door and closed it before they could leave. She turned to the two older women who looked a little surprised about now

being locked in with her. “Thanks for loving Granger so much.” Then Olivia bent and kissed each of their cheeks. “And I promise, I’ll spoil Mitzy like crazy.”

“You’re a good girl,” Miss Ruby said, patting her cheek.

“But I will put a needle through your eye if hurt Granger,” Miss Winnie said before patting her other cheek.

Well, at least Olivia knew where she stood, and it was fine with her because she loved Granger just as much as they did.

25

This was it. This, hopefully, was the night to trap her stalker. There'd been no communication from him since Granger had killed the man sent to abduct her. Now it was dark out and she was driving into Charleston with Paxton Kendry in her backseat.

"Just act natural," he said from where he was hidden on the floorboard. "Park right out front so everyone can see you. Can you test your wire?"

Olivia nodded. "Testing. Testing. One, two, three. This is Olivia. Can you hear me?"

"Paxton here. I have her loud and clear," Paxton said. He was silent for a moment. "Olivia, everyone is checking in and can hear you. No one is following you either. So far, so good. Undercover work is just acting. You perform like an actor in court all the time. You've got this."

"Thank you. I'm pulling up." Olivia pulled up to the curb. There were some lights still on in the building, but all of the employees should be gone by now.

She grabbed her briefcase and took a deep breath. Paxton was still in the car and would be the entire time. Granger and

Kord were in the lobby. Her brothers were out back. Tristan, Dare, and Peter were upstairs. She was thoroughly guarded.

Olivia opened the car door and strode purposefully toward the office. She used her key to unlock the glass door. Inside, the receptionist's small lamp cast a warm glow over the darkened office.

From the shadows in the back of the large room, two figures moved. Olivia would recognize Granger anywhere. He was on the right and Kord was on the left. They began to walk toward her, but then froze at the same time Olivia heard the door to the building being yanked open behind her.

Olivia spun around in time to see Kevin Hendrix's angry face in the glow of the lamp. "The heir apparent has finally shown herself," Hendrix spat. His face was red, his tie was partially loosened, and nothing but pure hatred shone in his eyes. "You conniving bitch."

Olivia stood her ground. So, it *was* Hendrix. Anger for the pain Granger went through. Anger for the way he'd made her afraid. Anger for the worry he put her brothers through. All of it rushed to the surface. While she wanted to level him, she kept her calm. What Hendrix didn't know was that Paxton was creeping up to the front door and Granger and Kord were just a short distance away.

"And you're a miserable old asshole. What do you want, Hendrix?"

Hendrix pointed his finger at her face, and she wondered what he'd do if she bit it off. It was less than an inch from her face as he jabbed it at her. "You and Murray think you're going to take this firm from me, but you have another thing coming. I'll kill you first if you think you'll push me aside."

"I never tried to push you aside, but managing partner was promised to me when I came on board here. You were right there next to Murray when we signed the paperwork in New York years ago. Why did you do it? Why did you come after me?" Olivia asked.

“This is my kingdom. I’m not just going to hand over the keys to a bitch who slept her way into clients. I heard Sebastian’s wife is a top government official. I wonder how she’ll feel about her husband’s attorney fucking him to get business.”

Olivia actually laughed at Hendrix’s snarl. “You want to know why you’re about to lose the keys to your so-called kingdom? If it weren’t for my clients and me, the Charleston office would have closed two years ago because of your poor management and inability to win cases. I’ve never slept with a client and you know it. And everyone knows you pay your secretary twice what you pay junior associates because she sucks you off every afternoon.” Hendrix’s expression turned molten as he sputtered. “Is that the sound your secretary makes? How does your wife, always out and about in Charleston society, feel about that?”

“You’re dead. You’re fucking dead,” Hendrix growled as he lunged for her.

Olivia stepped back right as two hands grabbed her and spun her away. The sound of a fist connecting seemed to echo around the lobby a moment before Hendrix was tackled to the floor.

Olivia turned to see Granger holding on tight to her while Kord rubbed his jaw and Paxton pulled out a pair of cuffs. “Kevin Hendrix, you’re under arrest for terroristic threats, assault, attempted kidnapping, and assaulting an officer. You just punched a sheriff’s deputy. Now, get to your feet.” Paxton hauled Hendrix up to his feet.

“I want a lawyer,” Hendrix demanded as Paxton read him his rights.

“First good decision you’ve made in years,” Olivia said as she held on to Granger’s hand.

The door to the stairs burst open as Dare, Peter, and Tristan came running out. From behind her, she heard her brothers entering. Police sirens were in the distance and Detective Chambers strode in still looking rumpled. “Looks like I’m late to the party.”

“We’ll fill you in down at the station,” Peter told him. “Thank you for your help.”

“Anytime. I have a car for him right outside.” Detective Chambers took custody of Hendrix and perp-walked him out the door.

Finally. Finally, Olivia could breathe. It was over.

Granger slipped his arm around her shoulder. “Let your brothers take you home. Kord and I will need to go with Paxton to the police station. I’m sure we’ll have to give a statement, and I want a chance to interrogate him.”

“I’ll drive you home,” Damon said before holding out his hand for Granger. “Thank you all for everything you did to keep my sister safe.”

Granger shook Damon’s hand and kissed Olivia quickly on the lips. “I’ll text you, okay? I’m sorry I have to go.”

“I understand, Granger. I’ll see you at home. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Olivia was ushered out by Damon, Hunter, and Stone. “Kane’s going to tag along with your boyfriend,” Damon told her as they all got into her car. “Then Rowan, Wilder, and Forrest are headed back in my car.”

“Thank you. You’re the best brothers a girl could have. I probably don’t say it enough, but I love you guys.”

“Aw,” Hunter said, reaching over the seat and ruffling her hair. “We love you too, sis.”

The adrenaline that had been coursing through her body was gone and all that was left was enough energy to stay awake for the car ride home, then crawl into bed. It was over. She could finally sleep.



Olivia woke to the sound of her phone going nuts. The moment it would stop ringing, it would start right back up. She stretched out in bed and realized Granger wasn’t there. It was strange how fast she had gotten used to sleeping with him.

The phone went off again and she grabbed it.

“Imani, is the building burning down?”

“Close to it. Robert is here and causing one hell of a scene. I’ve threatened to call the cops, so he went out onto the sidewalk and started yelling, which is worse.”

“What does he want?” Olivia asked. She was already up and moving. She pulled her favorite red power suit from the closet and her black designer heels. She was done dealing with dicks. She’d castrated one last night and she was more than willing to do it again.

“He says he has the right to serve you and that you’re a coward hiding from him. He’s suing you and he’s letting everyone know why he’s suing you and calling you quite a few names.”

“Get him to the conference room now. I’ll be there in forty-five minutes.”

Olivia pulled her hair into a French twist, applied just enough makeup to cover the dark circles under her eyes from the stress, and then went with bold red lips. She hoped she reminded Robert of the devil herself when she sent him to hell.

“Where are you going?” Rowan asked from her kitchen table.

“Work emergency.”

“I’ll come with you. Kane’s still at the police station with Granger. Wilder was at the club most of the night. Damon has a business meeting. Stone’s at a team workout and I don’t know what Forrest is doing, but I’m here and bored. Let’s go.”

“You’re bored?” Olivia asked as she tossed her briefcase into the backseat.

Rowan shrugged. “I’m used to being on call almost constantly. I don’t have much downtime. I’m usually at the hospital by five in the morning. By this time, I’ve performed two surgeries.”

“Ever think of starting your own practice?” Olivia asked as she drove toward Charleston. She’d been thinking about it a

lot since Granger brought it up.

“Kind of hard for a surgeon. However, I wouldn’t mind having some time off now and then. Are you thinking of going out on your own?”

“I am. Granger gave me the idea. After all this with Hendrix, having Mark in the office, and then just office politics in general. The idea is growing on me.”

“About time.” Rowan sent her a smile. “We all thought you should have done that years ago.”

“Really?” Olivia asked surprised. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “As if you would have listened? You were determined to climb the ladder to the top. But, look, Wilder has his own business. Damon has his. Kane is on his own now, too. You have help if you need it, but considering you helped them set up their businesses, we figured you knew that. We are here to help if you ever want it, nevertheless.”

“You took time off to protect me when I was in danger. Thank you, Rowan. I know it’s not easy for you to find that time.”

“I’m glad I made the time. I got to see you, hang with the guys, hear your plans, and meet Granger.”

“Do you like him?” Olivia asked.

“We all do. Damon tried like hell to scare him off. He knew right away that Granger liked you. That’s where Stone and Hunter came in. They were furious that they couldn’t scare him off. But he also earned our respect. I got a little time to talk to him. Anyone who would give his life for you is good enough in my book. Plus, he’s funny as hell with Damon. Those two bicker like an old married couple with their threats back and forth.”

Olivia laughed. Rowan was right and it made Olivia so happy that Granger fit in with her crazy brothers. “What about you all? You never tell me what’s going on personally. You just interrogate my dates.”

Rowan shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t have much time to do anything but dodging every female in the hospital and out of it. Everyone wants to land a doctor. Boston is great and all, but I must admit, I’m really enjoying my time here.”

“Ryker and my landlady have an in with the hospital if you ever think about moving.”

“Think Ryker can get me a tour today without telling the hospital who I am? I don’t need it getting back to Boston that I took a look, especially since I don’t think I’m looking to move, but I just want to see what else there is.”

Olivia tossed her phone to her brother. “Text Kenzie Faulkner. She’s Ryker’s wife and used to work there. She can take you around unofficially and cover for you.”

“I’d like that.” Rowan sent the text and handed her back the phone. “But none of the guys have anything serious going on. Everyone is really focused on their careers. It’s apparently a family trait.”

“Nothing serious doesn’t mean nothing,” Olivia teased. Rowan shrugged again. “Every date you all gave me crap for and now I just get a shrug. So not fair.” Olivia leaned forward as she approached her office. Imani was pacing out front. Never a good sign.

“Girl.” Imani looked panicked and this was the first Olivia had ever seen her not thrive on chaos. “This place is a mess. Word spread about Hendrix. Some attorneys loyal to him have already quit, dumping their caseload onto junior associates who are freaking out. Then Robert has been screaming from the conference room constantly, calling you toxic and out to destroy male attorneys. He found out about Hendrix and is trying to lead a revolt in your own firm to oust you. Mr. Kirkland is flying down from New York, and well, it’s just a hot mess in there.”

Olivia squared her shoulders. This was more than a battle. This was war and one she refused to lose. Her reputation was on the line and she’d just about had it with these arrogant assholes.

“Duck and cover,” Rowan whispered to Imani. “I know that look. Blood will flow. Tears will be shed.”

And Rowan was right. There would be no concessions.

“Get Veronica Pinckard on the phone. We have some unfinished business to see to.” With that, Olivia pulled open the door and strode onto the battlefield.

26

Olivia walked into the building and was hit by the similarities to high school when the teachers all had subs. No one was doing any work. There were pockets of gossipers and she thought *Lord of the Flies* was suddenly a possibility as all the male junior associates were huddled around looking as if they were planning on lighting the computers on fire and roasting a paralegal.

Olivia put her fingers to her lips and let out a sharp whistle. Everyone froze and looked at her. The leader of the junior associates, an arrogant douche named Geoff, straightened up and strode toward her. Olivia knew a power play when she saw it and was ready to shut it down real fast.

“Murray Kirkland is going to be here in two hours. I suggest you grow up and stop gossiping like teenagers. Get to work before he arrives or you’ll be out of a job. There’s no comment on Kevin Hendrix as it’s an active investigation. If you feel the need to listen to Robert or don’t want to work for me”—Olivia pointed to the door—“then there’s the door. Otherwise, get to work.”

Geoff stuck his hands in his pocket and gave her a dismissive look. “I think it’s you who needs to go.”

Olivia smiled slowly and Geoff took a step back. “And let me guess. You could step up to fill my spot?”

“Well, I won’t sleep with Ryker Faulkner to get him to be my client, but his wife sure is hot.”

“Geoff,” Olivia said, pausing, “since you’re such a top-notch legal mind, can you tell me what ‘at-will employment’ means?” That was the moment Geoff realized two things. One, he was dispensable. And two, Olivia had the power to dispense with him. “Also, tell me my win rate in defamation cases I’ve brought before the court. Oh, I’ll give your little brain a break and tell you. One hundred percent. Now leave. You’re suspended for the rest of the week. Give Imani your key to the building. You’ll get it back on Monday if Mr. Kirkland decides if he wants you back.”

Imani held out her hand. The entire office was deathly silent.

“Do you need me to make you hand over your key?” Rowan asked, stepping up from behind her and towering over the junior associate.

Geoff dug into his pocket and shoved the key at Imani. “Fucking cun—”

“Cunning lawyer, yes. I hear that a lot. You’re on notice that your employment is under review. Goodbye, Geoff. I’d advise seeing if Robert is hiring. Oh, wait. His license has been suspended.” Olivia waited while Geoff stormed out. “Anyone else want to accuse me of sleeping with a client?”

Heads ducked and suddenly everyone was very busy. Good. One battle down. Olivia turned to Rowan. “Just another day in the office.”

“I hate to ask this, but Kenzie texted that she can take me on a tour this morning. She’s going to pick me up in thirty minutes. But if you want, I can postpone it,” Rowan said.

“Why don’t you wait with Imani outside the conference room? I can handle Robert. It’ll be good for him to see you in case he decides to lose his temper. I should be done by the time Kenzie arrives.”

Rowan and Imani flanked Olivia as she calmly opened the door to the conference room, sending another junior associate scurrying, having been caught talking to the enemy. Rowan glared at Robert and then closed the door.

People said standing was the power pose, but Olivia always found sitting was better. She took her time pulling out the chair and sitting down, gracefully crossing her legs and lacing her fingers together before looking up at Robert and simply raising an eyebrow at him.

Robert smirked. “I’ve stolen another junior associate. You’ll be left with no one by the time I gut this firm. You try to take my license and I’ll ruin your life. Things are in motion already. You thought you were so clever. But you never even saw it coming, did you?”

Olivia put a serene smile on her face and just waited. If she knew Veronica, it wouldn’t take long. Her phone buzzed and she looked down at it.

Unknown caller. Hmm.

Call me now.

“Nothing to say?”

“Oh, I have plenty to say,” Olivia said, slowly uncrossing her legs and standing up. She placed her fingers on the table and leaned forward. “When someone threatens something, they’d better be ready to follow through. I already have. I’ve filed an ethics complaint with the bar. You have a disciplinary hearing next week. Further . . .” Olivia strode to the door and opened it. Imani placed the paperwork in her hand. “You’ve been served. This is a civil action for the damage you’re trying to do to my reputation. There’s also a harassment claim attached.”

“You can’t serve me. I’m serving you!” Robert shoved his own papers at her.

“You see, this is the problem with attorneys. Too much paperwork. Now, I have an idea. We make this all go away when you retire and live out your life at the seaside with your wife.”

Robert laughed and Olivia pulled up the email from Veronica. “When I said you’d better be ready to follow through, it meant I already followed through. Here’s evidence of you using your firm’s escrow account to embezzle client funds. And to go along with the ethics complaint, here’s a sworn affidavit from a junior associate that he attended all continuing legal education classes for you and you’re more than six years out of date with your hours. That’s a big no-no, Bob.”

Robert was so pale she wondered idly if he’d pass out.

“Those are private. How did you get those?”

Olivia shrugged. “Does it matter? What matters is what I do with them. Now, I’m tired of putting up with your bullshit. Walk out of this room, stop talking about me, and never practice law again. Or I follow through on these suits and ethics complaints. Your call.”

“What assurances do I have you won’t send that?”

“None. If I hear that any of your clients haven’t been paid in full as you close down your firm, or if I hear you’re going after me again, I send the evidence. Now, are we done here? I have a call I need to make.”

Olivia crossed her arms over her chest and waited. She could see all the emotions playing out on Robert’s face until he finally looked resigned. “You’re such a bitch.”

Olivia smiled as she moved to open the door. “Thank you so much. I’m very proud of it. Bitch or not, I’m still top dog.”

Robert stormed from the room. All hushed conversation on the first floor ceased as they watched him storm through the front door and, hopefully, leave forever.

“Hope he wasn’t a client,” Kenzie said as she walked in.

Olivia smiled at her friend and then introduced Rowan.

“Are you sure you’re okay here alone?” Rowan asked.

“Yeah. Hendrix is in jail and Robert is out of my hair. For the first time in months, I am okay. I’ll be in my office when you’re done. Just meet me there.”

Olivia waved goodbye just as Mateo raced off the elevator.
“Mark is looking for you.”

“Tell him he has to wait. I have a call I need to make, then he can see me.” Olivia was in full boss mode. If this was to be her last day at Kirkland Hendrix, so be it.

“We’ll run interference for you,” Imani said as they rode the elevator up to her floor.

Sure enough, the second the elevator opened, Mark was there. Imani and Mateo slid forward and blocked Mark as Olivia strode to her office. “Give me thirty minutes, Mark.”

“Like hell. Olivia!”

Olivia turned and locked the door before taking a deep breath. A message from an anonymous number never sat well with her. She sat back and sent a text giving them her direct office line. Less than ten seconds later, her phone was ringing.

“Who is this?” Olivia asked instead of saying a greeting.

“Miss Townsend, I don’t know if you remember me. My name is Nico Saccone.”

Olivia’s eyebrows rose. “The head of the Saccone crime family?”

“Head, yes. Crime, no. With some help from Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Abel, the family is invested only in legitimate ventures now. However, I am still very connected and when I heard your name come up, I paid attention,” Nico said, sounding every inch the mob boss he claimed he wasn’t.

“How did you hear my name?” Olivia asked.

“There’s a restaurant a lot of ... *extended family* has breakfast at several times a week. Your name came up because someone put a hit on you.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. But since I owe Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Abel a great deal, I figured I’d warn you.” Ryker had said Nico was a good guy trapped in a bad family. Now that the rest of his family was either retired or in jail, Nico had taken the Mafia

enterprises and turned them legit. As much as Olivia wanted to write this off, Nico wouldn't be wrong about this and she needed to trust him.

"Someone tried to kidnap me three days ago. The sheriff killed him. The man was named Anthony Caprice. Does that ring a bell?" Olivia asked.

Nico made a sound that said he did. "Yes. He did dirty work for anyone who paid. The trouble is, this hit was sent out two days ago. It's not Anthony. That means the person who sent the hit is still out there."

"Did anyone take a contract on me?"

"No one I could find and especially not after I made it known who your connections were. Apparently, no one wanted to get on the wrong side of Ryker or Sebastian after what went down with the Charleston docks."

"I think I'm okay then. My boss down here, Kevin Hendrix, was just arrested for hiring Anthony and trying to kidnap me. He was mad about office politics."

"Hold on," Nico said and the line went quiet.

Olivia looked out the large windows and saw Mark glaring at her. He was leaning against a desk with his arms crossed. At least he was waiting for her to finish her call.

Several minutes later, Nico clicked back on. "It's not Hendrix."

Olivia felt the ground fall out beneath her. "What do you mean it's not Hendrix?"

"I asked around. Hendrix is from and has only lived in Charleston. The man who tried to put out a hit isn't Southern. I was able to find out it was a man claiming to be a lawyer, but there was no mistaking his accent. He's a New Yorker."

Olivia's eyes went back to Mark as a feeling of pure dread filled her. She'd been wrong. They'd all been wrong. It wasn't Hendrix who was after her.

Olivia turned her back so Mark couldn't see her or the phone. "Thank you, Nico. Ryker said you were a good man. I

appreciate the call.”

“Let me know if I can be of service in any way.”

“You’re legit, remember?” Olivia reminded him, although she appreciated the offer.

“Yeah, but I know a lot of people who freelance. I’ll call if I can find anything else. Be safe.”

“Thanks, Nico.” Olivia didn’t put the phone’s handset down. Instead, she pressed the hook down to end the call and dialed Granger’s cell.

The phone rang and rang. Olivia tried not to show her nerves. Her stomach rolled and pitched. Her leg began to bounce madly even as she tried to calm herself.

Voice-mail.

“Granger, it’s not Hendrix. I think it’s Mark, and he’s about to come into my office.” A tapping sound caused Olivia to turn. Mark stood tapping on the window. “I can’t stall him anymore. Granger? Hurry.”

Olivia hung up the phone and stood up. She smoothed down her skirt and took a deep breath as she crossed the office. She stared at the locked door for a moment, then squared her shoulders and opened it.

“What is it, Mark? As you can see, I’m really busy.” Olivia held the door wide open as Mark marched inside.

The second Olivia moved to her desk, Mark turned to the door and closed it. Then with the flick of his wrist, he locked it. He strode over to the large windows and with a twist, closed the blinds. No one could see her. No one could help her.

“We need to talk,” Mark said, closing in on her.

Granger, Detective Chambers, and Peter sat across the table from Kevin Hendrix and his attorney. Granger was tired, irritated, his arm throbbed, and he wanted to be with Olivia instead of here.

“My client wishes to clear things up. There are apparently charges being brought against him that he doesn’t understand,” the attorney stated. “My client is clear that he allegedly threatened Miss Townsend, which is where terroristic threatening came in. He’s clear that he allegedly accidentally struck an unidentified sheriff’s deputy and that’s where the assault charge came from. However, you got us stumped on the kidnapping charge. Who has my client allegedly attempted to kidnap?”

“Olivia Townsend. Twice. He tried to have her kidnapped from Shadows Landing and then sent, most likely the same man, to grab her the other night,” Peter answered.

Granger watched Kevin Hendrix closely. The look of utter shock on his face left a pit in Granger’s stomach.

“I never tried to kidnap Olivia. Why would I do that?” Hendrix sputtered before his attorney quieted him.

Peter slid a photo of Anthony Caprice across the table.
“You don’t recognize him?”

“Oh my god, is he dead?” Kevin looked like he might throw up.

“Cut the crap, Hendrix. You were about to attack Olivia. You threatened to kill her. You had the means and motive to hurt her. What were you planning to do after you kidnapped her?” Granger demanded.

“I never wanted to kidnap her! I wanted her to quit so I could work on Faulkner shipping cases. Therefore, I was shitty to her and gave her crappy cases.” Hendrix’s attorney tried to quiet him again, but it didn’t work. “I won’t have her take me down for something I didn’t do just to clear the way for her to take my job.”

“Mr. Hendrix,” Granger said coldly. “This man stabbed me and I shot him. He is dead. This isn’t some office politics bullshit. This is attempted murder of law enforcement and the attempted kidnapping of a lawyer you’ve openly wished was gone. Do you see how much trouble you’re in?”

“I’ll take a polygraph. I never tried to kidnap Olivia. I never hired anyone to do so either.” Hendrix crossed his arms over his chest and glared at them.

“But you did threaten to kill Miss Townsend and you did punch a deputy,” Peter stated.

“Fine, you got me. I’ll plead no contest and pay a fine. It’ll be expunged by the end of the year. But I sure as shit didn’t kidnap anyone and I certainly wasn’t involved in anyone dying.”

“This is why I hate representing other attorneys. Kevin, shut the hell up,” his attorney groaned. “Gentlemen, we need a moment of privacy.”

Granger stood up and followed Peter and Detective Chambers from the interrogation room.

They didn’t say anything until they were in the small conference room. Granger cursed and slammed the door shut. “I don’t think Hendrix is our guy.”

“I don’t either,” Chambers added as he ran a hand over his face.

“Where’s Olivia now?” Peter asked.

“At home. I’ll call her and let her know. I’ll send Kord over to stay with her.” Granger took out his phone and saw a voicemail from a number he didn’t recognize. He sent a text to Kord and then listened to the voicemail.

“It’s Mark Fleming and he has Olivia trapped in her office!” Granger shouted as he was already yanking open the door and running for his car. The office was only five minutes away. “I’m coming, Liv,” he muttered as he took the stairs two at a time down to the parking garage.

“What are you doing, Mark?” Olivia asked as she grabbed a pen from the top of her desk and palmed it. It was an expensive metal pen she could stab him with if she needed to.

“Me? You’re the one burning bridges left and right. Robert Whitehall.” Mark held up his finger. “Kevin Hendrix.” He held up another finger. “Geoff what’s his name.” He held up a third finger. “And me.”

“You?” Olivia blinked. She hadn’t done anything ... oh. “Let me guess. Ryker wouldn’t do a deal with you.”

“No, and I have no doubt it was you behind it. You’re doing this because you’re stuck in this hot and humid little town with a nobody hick sheriff when you want to be the top lawyer in New York. You’ve already ousted Hendrix. The empire is yours. Why did you need to mess with my work? Look, I know you’re mad about how I ended things, but I’ve been thinking. We were the power couple in law school. We can be the power couple in New York. Just call Ryker back and get my deal back on.” Mark stood across from her desk and glared at her. “Call him, Olivia.”

Her cell phone rang. She saw Granger’s name pop up. She reached for it, but Mark grabbed it first and silenced the call, then held the phone behind his back.

“Ryker makes his own decisions, Mark. I had nothing to do with that. Maybe it’s because we both could tell you’re not

being completely truthful. You're lying about something. What is it?" Olivia demanded. Granger would know she was in trouble when she didn't answer her phone, even if she hadn't left the message.

Mark pursed his lips and looked as if he might refuse to answer. Finally, he ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Okay, I admit it. I was wrong. I should never have listened to my mother and allowed us to break up. I asked her for the family ring. I was going to propose, but she said you'd never amount to anything. That a Fleming had to have a woman of worth on his arm to be taken seriously. I knew you were smart. You've always been brilliant. But I was pissed when you didn't take the job in Atlanta. You should have followed me, but you had to stay in New York and focus on your own career. Getting in with Ryker was how I was going to show you we were meant to be."

"Why didn't you follow me to New York? Why should *I* be the one to take a backseat to your career?" Olivia didn't care that he was probably going to kill her. She was furious. "I took a backseat to you for years. I downplayed my grades so you wouldn't feel bad about yourself. I revised your papers when you slept so you wouldn't get bad grades and yell at me about how unfair the profs were. I laughed at your jokes, went out with your friends, and was there for you when you needed coffee because you were studying for a big test. It was always all about you. Did it ever occur to you that I was also studying and working hard? That it would be great to have a boyfriend who supported me and celebrated with me instead of competing with me? I'm done taking a backseat, Mark."

"So, you're slumming it with a small-town sheriff?"

Olivia saw red. "That small-town sheriff has more character in his pinky than you have in your entire being. Granger is a good, brave, honest, and trustworthy *partner* who has never done anything but love me and try to protect me. He believes in me, loves me for who I am, and not what I can bring to his status. In our relationship, there is no backseat because we are holding hands, side by side."

"You were mine, Olivia."

“And you blew it. Granger only wants my love. You only want my status. But I have to know. Why did you do it, Mark?”

Olivia held her breath as Mark’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “I listened to my mother instead of my heart.”

“Your mother told you to kidnap me? Did you really think you’d win me over by sending those horrible notes and then kidnapping me? That I would have some kind of Stockholm syndrome and fall madly in love with you?”

Mark cocked his head at her, then reached for her. Olivia scurried backward, slamming into the bathroom door. “Come here, Olivia.”

Olivia shook her head. She reached down for the knob and turned it, yanked the door open, and sidestepped Mark’s reach.

Olivia opened her mouth to scream for Imani when a hand covered her mouth from behind. She saw Mark’s confused look a moment before a silencer went off right by her ear and Mark fell, bleeding, to the office floor.

“It’s time to get what you deserve,” a deep voice rasped by her ear.

“Turn on the cameras!” Granger ordered Peter as their car flew out of the garage. He had to get there in time. The idea of Olivia in danger and him not there to protect her was almost too much to handle. “Call the office. Call everyone!”

“I’m working on it,” Peter snapped. Granger had never believed time could slow until the woman he loved was in danger. It had to be a marvel of modern quantum physics, but Granger could swear it had been forever since he listened to that voicemail.

Behind him, a stream of police cars with Detective Chambers leading the way followed him through the Charleston streets.

“Got it,” Peter said. “Mark is in the office and they’re talking.”

“Is Olivia okay?”

“Yes, and I don’t see a weapon. Give me your phone so I can make all the calls I need to.”

Granger pulled his phone from his pocket and handed it to Peter who got to work.

“Shit,” Peter cursed a moment later.

“What?” Granger demanded. No matter how badly he wanted to look at the feed, he couldn’t take his eyes off the road. Not when he was driving this fast.

“Mark is advancing on Olivia. He has her pinned. What the hell?” Granger growled in frustration as Peter leaned closer to the phone. “Holy shit. Mark’s been shot.”

“Olivia shot him?”

“No, someone was hiding in the bathroom and now he has Olivia.”

“Who is it?” Granger pressed his foot down and laid on the horn as he cut in and out of traffic.

“I have no idea.”

Olivia felt the heat of the hand on her mouth. She felt the moisture of breath on her neck. She felt the cold metal of the gun held to the base of her skull.

“You took everything from me, you little slut, and now I’ll take everything from you. I knew I was right. I knew you were screwing Ryker and Sebastian. Just a little toy to be passed between the billionaires. I’ve been hearing rumors of it since you landed Ryker as a client. Robert isn’t the only one saying it, but he was the first to believe me when we commiserated over having to deal with you months ago. Now you’re going to get what you have coming.”

Olivia tried to remember to breathe, but her brain was working a mile a minute. Mostly because she had no idea who was holding her hostage.

Olivia wouldn’t beg. Instead, she fell back onto the habits she had when negotiating. Keep calm and keep quiet.

“I must say that I’m curious about what kind of screw you are that you could get powerful men like Ryker and Sebastian to hire you.”

The door handle moved, but Mark had locked it. Hope sprung up. Could Granger already be here? “Miss Townsend?” Imani called out.

“If she comes in here, I’ll kill her. Understand?”

Olivia nodded and the hand slowly moved from her mouth to clasp her throat. It was a threat, but it wasn’t enough to choke her. “Imani, I’m in an important meeting. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Do you need me to take notes? And you have a phone call.”

“Please take a message. We’re reaching an agreement, so I’ll call you in when I need you.”

“Are you ...?”

“I’m sure. Thank you,” Olivia said, putting a little more demand to her voice.

Imani stopped trying to open the door and Olivia was left on her own with a killer.

“Will you let me check to see if Mark is alive?”

“Why would you do that? He’s just another man you used and discarded. I heard about that, too. How you dated him in law school because of his last name.”

“Contrary to your opinion of me, I do think of others.”

The man laughed. “I don’t give a shit about Mark Fleming. I came for revenge and I’m going to get it.”

Olivia tried to turn her head to see who was holding her when she was shoved forward. She tripped over Mark’s foot and landed hard on her desk, sending her purse to the floor as her chest hit hard against the wood. Her hands spread wide and her butt stuck out as her feet were still on the floor. The man came up behind her. She felt him against the back of her

legs and her ass. He bent so his face was right behind her ear. “Payback is a bigger bitch than you are.”

He grabbed her skirt and Olivia went wild.

She raised her devil’s mistress black stiletto and slammed it down on the man’s foot and the same time she rolled to the side to escape him.

“*Huff?*” Olivia finally saw the man with the gun pointed at her, cursing as he hopped on one foot. “I don’t understand.”

The lawyer looked incredulous. “You don’t understand?” His voice was rising in anger. “I had everything before you showed up. I was making bank as Sebastian Abel’s attorney. Expensive dinners, basketball tickets, women. You name it, I had it. Then you and your damn widgets came along and you made me look like an idiot. It was a billion-dollar deal we were working on, even though Ryker and Sebastian didn’t tell us what the deal was about. You said to negotiate it as if it were widgets. No one gives a crap about widgets, but you made me look bad in that negotiation. Sebastian fired me because of it and you took my place. All those doors were closed to me. The credit I had was called in. The women, the tickets, the loans—they all disappeared because of you! I lost everything! My house, my wife, my Rolls Royce.”

William Huff aimed the gun at her. “Now, get over here and beg me for your life.”

“Why? You’re just going to shoot me.” Olivia needed to stall. She needed to give Granger time to get here. No matter how scared she was, she knew Granger would come.

Olivia glanced at her purse on the ground under her desk. Wait, she didn’t need to wait for Granger. She had Shadows Landing.

Olivia dropped to her knees. “You’re right, William. You said it in your notes, right? I’m bad.”

“You are and you’re going to pay. How did you like my voodoo doll? I made it myself.”

“You’re so clever. I knew immediately it was me.” Olivia shuffled forward on her knees. It made bile rise to the back of

her throat to say these things, but she had a plan. The reason Olivia was successful was that she'd do anything to get the job done. She put in the hours. She put in the research. She worked her ass off. She planned for every contingency. And just because she was a woman, they said she only got to where she was because she spread her legs. Screw them. Olivia stopped at Huff's toes and looked up at him. "Is this what you want? Me begging?"

"Damn right it is. Get ready to pay the price for disrespecting me."

Granger practically ripped the door to the law firm off the hinges as he yanked it open. His gun was drawn and people screamed and hit the ground.

"Granger!"

Mateo was waving him down by the stairs. "She's upstairs in her office. Imani tried to get in, but Olivia wouldn't unlock it."

"Who is this man?" Peter asked, turning his phone so Mateo and Granger could get a good look. It was the first time Granger could see it since he'd been driving. He didn't recognize the man holding the gun pointed at Olivia who was on her knees in front of him.

"That's William Huff. He was Sebastian Abel's attorney before Olivia showed him up. Sebastian fired him and hired her," Mateo watched horrified as Olivia scooted forward on her knees. "Is Mark dead?"

"Does Imani have a key?" Peter asked, ignoring the question about Mark.

"We don't need a key." Granger didn't wait for Peter. He had to get to Olivia now and if that meant breaking the damn door down, he would do just that.

Peter and the police behind him might have called to Granger, but he couldn't hear it. All he could hear was Olivia's voice on his voicemail and the image of a gun to her head as she begged for her life.

“Oh, thank God!” Imani whispered as he burst onto Olivia’s floor. Everyone else looked at him questioningly, but Imani held up her fingers to her lips to quiet them. “A surprise stripper for Olivia. Thought it would loosen her up a little,” she said in a loud whisper. People nodded and giggled. Granger didn’t give a shit.

“I can unlock—”

“Get back.” That was all the warning Granger gave Imani before he kicked the door to Olivia’s office so hard it came off the hinges.

Olivia placed her right hand across her chest and over her heart. “I’m so sorry I’ve been bad, William.”

She lowered her left hand to the floor and slowly crept her fingers toward her purse. She didn’t dare glance at it. Instead, she kept her eyes on William. “Tell me what you want me to do to make it up to you. To show you how right you are?”

“There’s no making it up. I’m going to take everything from you and then kill you. With you out of the picture, Sebastian will come crawling back. Hell, I’ll probably land Ryker’s account, too. I’ll be able to name my price. All my debts, gone. All the doors that slammed in my face will open again. I’ll show them all just like I’m going to show you how no one disrespects William Huff.”

Olivia felt the hilt of the dagger that was peeking out the top of her spilled purse. She just needed a little distraction.

The distraction wasn’t little. The door to her office exploded inward, flying back so hard it crashed into the wall. But it was exactly what Olivia needed. She leaned to her left as William turned to look at the door. Her hand closed over the dagger. The golden hilt warmed in her hand. William swung the gun and aimed it at Granger. Olivia let out a blood-curdling scream and shoved the dagger into William’s stomach.

Granger saw the gun swinging toward him as he rushed into the office. Olivia screamed and shoved a dagger deep into the man’s gut at the same time Huff fired his gun. Granger fired

his almost instantaneously. Huff's shot went wide and slammed into the wall two feet from Granger's head.

Granger's shot hit the mark. A single shot right between the eyes was all it took. The man Mateo said was William Huff fell back, dead.

"Granger!" Olivia cried. She tried to scramble to her feet, but her legs were shaking so badly that she fell backward away from Huff's body.

Peter, Chambers, and what looked like half of Charleston's police department raced into the room, but Granger didn't see them. He raced to Olivia and dropped to the floor. He pulled her into his arms and realized they both were shaking. Olivia was talking, but he couldn't hear her from where he was pressing her head to his chest.

"Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?"

"I knew you would come," Olivia said with a sob before burying her head back into his neck.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Miss Townsend," Detective Chambers said. "This other guy? Was he involved too?"

Granger saw Chambers pointing to Mark.

"Is he dead?" Olivia asked.

"No, ma'am, but he needs a hospital."

Olivia shot to her feet and moved to Mark and picked up her phone where it had fallen onto the carpet. The tears were still wet on her face, but they were no longer falling. "He might be an asshole, but he's innocent. Get him to the hospital! Where are the EMTs?"

Nothing could have made Granger more relieved than seeing his Liv taking charge. It meant she wasn't hurt.

Granger took her hand in his and pulled her back to him. "I'm guessing you won't let me carry you out of here?"

"Like a damsel in distress? I don't think so."

Granger kissed her. She was the strong, fierce love of his life.

“What the hell is going on?”

Granger broke the kiss as he and Olivia spun to her office door.

“Mr. Kirkland,” Olivia drew herself up professionally. “I hereby give you notice of my resignation.”

28

“Miss Townsend!” The nurses in the emergency room ran toward her instead of away from her. That was a change.

“Right, this way, Miss Townsend,” a nurse said as she helped Olivia into a wheelchair and rushed her into a private room.

“How is Mark Fleming?” Olivia asked as Granger walked beside her.

Granger had insisted she come to the hospital to be checked out even though she felt fine. Mateo and Imani had taken care of her while Granger had quickly been cleared of the shooting. Luckily, it was all on video that Huff had shot at Granger and was a very real threat to Olivia’s life. Olivia had argued to go home, but by that point even Mr. Kirkland had demanded she go to the hospital to be checked out.

“I will check on him for you and be back in just a jiffy. But first, let’s get you into the bed and take your vitals.”

Olivia looked at Granger questioningly. What was going on? There were now three nurses in the room, all trying to help her into the bed. She wasn’t used to this. She was used to tears and them hiding from her.

“So, um, would you like me to notify your brothers?” the first nurse asked in her most professional manner. “I’m sure they’ll want to check on you.”

Ah, so that was it. Suddenly the phrase of catching more bees with honey than vinegar made sense. It was more like, catching more nurses with sexy brothers than with threats of their jobs. Olivia could see where she’d erred in the past.

“Olivia?” Rowan called out as he and Kenzie rushed into the room. “I leave for thirty minutes and you end up in the hospital? Let me see your chart.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir, but only doctors can see the charts.” The nurse batted her eyes at him. “Are you one of her brothers?”

“I am. Dr. Rowan Townsend.”

The nurses sighed in unison and Olivia rolled her eyes. Rowan ignored them and looked at the machine taking her blood pressure, oxygen levels, and pulse. “What’s happened? What are your symptoms? Are you injured?”

Her brother was all business now. One of the nurses might have orgasmed on the spot judging by the sound she made.

“I’m fine. We caught the guy. Granger got to him before he could hurt me.”

“I know. Last night. He’s in jail.” Rowan said, snagging a stethoscope from a nurse who looked like she was willing to hand over her scrubs as well.

“Turned out we were wrong,” Granger answered for her. “It was an attorney from New York. He shot Mark Fleming, who is in surgery. Then he was going to kill Olivia, but she stabbed him in the stomach.”

Rowan’s eyes went wide. “You killed him?”

Olivia shook her head. “Nope. I just stabbed him. Granger killed him when Huff tried to shoot him. Now, can someone tell me how Mark is?”

“I’ll go check,” Kenzie said as she pulled out her phone. In thirty seconds, all of Shadows Landing would get the update.

“Everything looks normal,” Rowan told her as a doctor strode into the room. He looked from Rowan to Olivia to the nurses, then to Granger.

“I think I’m the one who is qualified to say that. Now, tell me what’s going on, Miss Townsend.”

“If my brother says I’m good, then I’m good. I’d like to go home after I check on Mark.” Olivia was already pulling the oximeter off her finger.

“No offense to your brother, but I think a doctor should make that call.”

Rowan held out his hand. “Dr. Rowan Townsend.”

The doctor blinked and then blinked again. “Wait, the pediatric surgeon from Boston?” Rowan nodded and that gave Olivia the distraction she needed to get the rest of the leads off her.

Olivia looked up at Granger. “Get me out of here. I’m about to fall apart and I don’t want to do it in front of the entire hospital.”

Granger held out his hand and helped her from bed. “Doctors, I’m taking Miss Townsend in for questioning. Thank you for verifying her good health.”

Then Granger put his arm around her and ushered her from the room before anyone could stop them.

“Olivia!” She turned at the sound of Kenzie calling her name. Kenzie jogged toward them looking confused. “Where are you going? Everyone is on their way.”

“I need to interview her while the incident is fresh in her mind,” Granger told her. “And she got the all-clear medically.”

“Oh, okay. Well, Mark is in surgery, and it looks like he’ll make it. I’ll text you updates when I get them.”

“Thank you,” Olivia told her friend. “And please, send everyone home. I’ll see them in Shadows Landing later.”

Kenzie must have seen that Olivia needed space. “Gotcha. Call if you need anything. Take care of her, Granger.”

Granger wrapped his arm around her and propelled her straight into his SUV. Olivia began to shake from head to toe as he drove away from the hospital.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she took deep, gasping breaths. It wasn't until all the tears had fallen that she realized they'd stopped and were parked overlooking the water. "What are we doing here?" Olivia asked.

"I know you need some time to process everything and I also know that people will find us at your condo, your house, or my house. They'll all mean well but ... So." Granger pointed out to the water.

Olivia leaned forward and watched a boat come into the marina. "Is that your boat?"

"Ryker brought it down for me. Let's go."

Olivia grabbed Granger's hand to prevent him from leaving the car. "Thank you."

"Darlin', I'll do anything for you. Even help you escape a hospital and hide out at sea." Granger leaned over and kissed her quickly as Ryker tied up to the dock.

"Olivia!" Ryker called out the second he saw her. She couldn't believe it as he ran to her and wrapped her up in a tight hug. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good."

"Peter told us what happened. Damn that William Huff. Sebastian is beside himself. Well, as beside himself as Sebastian gets."

Olivia smiled at that. She couldn't imagine the stiff, serious, and unflappable billionaire as anything other than completely put together.

"There is more." Olivia took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but you two might need to find another attorney. I resigned."

Ryker was quiet for a moment. Then a brilliant smile spread across his handsome face. "About time. Sebastian and I have wanted you to have your own firm for quite a while. Hendrix was always an ass, and while Kirkland is a good guy,

I hate being paraded around like the jewel in his firm's crown."

"I have a non-compete for six months. You two can't go six months without an attorney."

"It'll work out. If anyone can break a non-compete, it's you."

"Thank you, Ryker. You're more than a client. You know that, right?" Olivia said as those damn tears threatened again.

"And you're more than my lawyer. I'll make sure everyone in Shadows Landing gives you a little time. Peter will fill everyone in. Kenzie or I will text with any updates. Otherwise, just take a moment to breathe."

Olivia nodded as Ryker turned and thumped Granger on his back. "Good job keeping our girl safe."

"Tell everyone we'll be back in Shadows Landing tomorrow." Granger tossed Ryker his keys before he reached out and took Olivia's hand.

They walked down the dock hand in hand. With each step farther away from town, with each minute the boat moved farther away from shore, the easier it became to breathe. "I don't have anything to wear for a day on the boat," Olivia realized as she shrugged out of her suit coat. Granger was piloting the boat toward the open water swiftly and surely.

"Good," Granger winked at her and the rest of the boulder that had been sitting on her shoulders crumbled.

Olivia shimmied out of her skirt and sat back in her blouse and panties. The wind whipped through her hair, the morning sun shone on her face, and she could finally take some deep breaths and feel free. It was over. She'd left the firm, so no more pissing contests with Hendrix. No more pouting from Mark. And no more office politics. Huff was dead and the jumping at shadows could stop.

Wind whipped around her as she closed her eyes and leaned back. One door had closed and another was opening. This was a pivotal day not only because of the arrest, but this was the first day of her new life as her own boss. Olivia had

thought the idea of starting her own firm would scare her. Instead, she felt nothing but excitement. She was ready for this new challenge.

Olivia opened her eyes and watched Granger steer the boat. His back was to her as he navigated the waters. His arm was still bandaged, but he wasn't letting it stop him. He'd rushed headfirst into danger, knowing Huff was armed, just to save her. Olivia knew he would come. That faith in him and their relationship had given her the courage to take matters into her own hands, strangely enough. Olivia felt as if she could do anything with Granger's support.

From the first moment she met Granger, Olivia had felt as if he were man enough to love her, to support her, to not be intimidated by her but to look beyond that professional armor and get to know her. They'd both needed time and space for some growing and self-reflection before they could be together. But now? Now there was no stopping them. A feeling filled Olivia that was hard to describe. It was like a warm blanket that soothed her, yet lifted her up. It was the knowledge she was loved and trusted unconditionally. She wasn't afraid of messing up with Granger. At some point, she would. But she trusted him to catch her if she stumbled and help her right herself because it was the same as she'd do for him. Olivia closed her eyes again. Instead of darkness, she saw nothing but the light of a happy future.

Granger cruised through the ocean until he found the perfect spot that balanced privacy and a view of Charleston. The need to get Olivia far away from the chaos of that morning had led him to ask Ryker to bring the boat down.

Granger turned to find Olivia curled up on the bench, sound asleep. The worry, the fear, and the drive to protect her at all costs, finally calmed. She was safe and that was all that mattered. His heart could finally resume beating at a normal pace.

Granger quietly opened one of the storage bins and pulled out a tarp. With a couple of clamps, he turned the back of the boat into a shaded retreat so that Olivia wouldn't burn as she napped. She needed sleep after the adrenaline dump she'd had

that morning. He was still struggling to get over the fear of almost losing her. But one thing he learned from the day was that if you loved someone, let them know.

Granger pulled out the ring box he still had in his pocket and smiled. He loved Olivia more than life. There was no point in waiting. However, he'd do it right. Granger sent a text to put his plan in motion. He thought he'd be nervous, and he was, but it wasn't for fear of rejection. The feeling was the excited nerves you got before a big game. The kind where you know something great is going to happen, but it's just not there yet.

Granger washed up as he waited. He pulled out a pair of swim trunks, no longer bothering to hide his scars as he climbed back on deck. In the distance, a Coast Guard speedboat raced toward him. When it came closer, the engine cut off and Granger tossed a rope.

"I got everything you asked for," Wade whispered as he glanced at where Olivia lay, still sleeping in the shade. He handed over the giant bag and Granger quickly hid it below deck before coming back up to untie the boats.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Wade smiled and nodded. "Anything for a friend. Can't wait to hear all about it at poker night tomorrow. Kord is hosting." Then with a wink, Wade shoved off.

While Olivia slept, Granger watched the tide and thought about the perfect speech, but nothing seemed to live up to Olivia. How could he describe how much he loved her? It wasn't possible to put into words how much he cared for her and what it would mean to be her husband.

Granger still didn't know what he was going to say when Olivia woke up two hours later. She looked so sweet and soft when she was rumpled from sleep. Granger couldn't stop himself from cupping her cheeks and kissing her. "Have a good nap?"

Olivia smiled and stretched like a cat in the sun. "I can't believe I fell asleep. I feel so much better. It's this ocean air. I

might be a boat-life girl,” she laughed.

Boat life did suit her. Olivia looked more relaxed than he’d ever seen her. “Do you want to talk about today?”

Olivia shook her head. “Nope. This morning is over and this afternoon is a new start. I dreamed of my own firm.”

Granger sat down next to her and pulled her against him. Olivia snuggled up to him, holding on to the arm that he wrapped around her as she leaned her back against his chest. “Tell me about it.”

“I want my firm to be in Shadows Landing, but I don’t know where. I guess I’ll have to run it out of my house, but I want to ask Mateo and Imani to move there with me. There’s one attorney from New York and one here in Charleston I’d like to ask to join me from different firms I’ve met along the way. The one in New York can live there and hire her own paralegal.”

Granger rested his chin on the top of her head as he envisioned it. “And the attorney in New York, do you trust her enough to help out and actually represent you in court?”

“I think so. Same with the one here in Charleston. They’re young and hungry but have been around enough to have experience. I would trust them with some of the small things to start. That is, if Ryker and Sebastian okay it.”

“I’m sure they will. They trust you. If you trust these attorneys, I’m sure Ryker and Sebastian will, too. I do have a suggestion, though.”

Olivia tilted her head back so she could look him in the eye. “What’s that?”

“Across South Cypress Lane, two doors down from Lowcountry Smokehouse is an old historic house. It would be perfect for your law office.”

Olivia shot up and spun around so she was fully facing Granger. “Really? That beautiful white house? Is it for sale?”

Granger nodded. “Yes, the white house. It’s not technically for sale. However, I think the owners would be receptive to an

offer since they don't live there full-time, just a couple of months out of the year now. When they came in to pay the tax bill on it last year, they'd mentioned the possibility of selling in the near future."

"Oh, Granger!" Olivia threw her arms around him and hugged him. "It would be perfect! Thank you for supporting this."

"Liv, I'll support you no matter what."

Olivia kissed him with so much passion he about lost control and took her right then and there in the open. Olivia tipped the scales when she reached down and peeled off her blouse. Then all thought fled and Granger was led by his emotions—his love, his desire, and his passion for the woman in his arms.

"Hurry, the sun is about to set!" Olivia called to Granger who said he was going to scare up something to eat.

Gosh, she felt free. She was naked on the bow of the boat as the sun began to set behind Charleston. They'd made love, swum out to a sandbar, and talked about their future all day. They'd turned off their phones, stowed them in the cabin, and hadn't looked at them once. The afternoon had been pure bliss.

Olivia turned from watching the colors paint the sky as the sun set when she heard Granger coming up from the cabin carrying a bag from Port. He reached in and pulled out two plastic champagne flutes and handed them to her. Then he pulled out a bottle of champagne.

"To celebrate new beginnings." Granger popped the cork and poured. Olivia sipped the bubbly as pure happiness filled her heart.

"And now for dinner. I hope it'll do. It's all I have." Granger reached into the bag and pulled out four containers that looked like the to-go containers from Port.

"How did you go to Port while I was sleeping?" Olivia asked.

"Port came to us." Granger popped the lids and Olivia laughed. It was all of her favorite desserts from Port.

“This is perfect!” Olivia exclaimed, eagerly diving in with her fork. “But seriously, how did you do this?”

“Wade brought it out to me while you were napping,” Granger admitted.

“This was just what I wanted. Thank you.” Olivia leaned over the desserts and kissed him.

Olivia really didn’t think she could possibly be any happier as they ate on the sunpad, had a fork fight over the last bite, sipped champagne, and watched the setting sun over the coast. Olivia licked the last bite from her fork. Granger was gallant in defeat and let her have it.

Olivia turned to him to thank him, but froze. Granger sat facing her with an open velvet box in his hand. Inside the box was an elegant emerald-cut diamond ring. “I tried to come up with something fancy to say, but that’s not me. What I want you to know is that I love you and I’ll love you forever. You gave me hope when I had none. You gave me love when all else seemed lost. You, Olivia Townsend, have my heart and soul in the palm of your hand and there is no one I trust more with them than you. Will you marry me?”

Olivia hadn’t realized she’d dropped her fork. She hadn’t realized she’d shoved the dessert out of the way. She only knew she had to get to Granger. She had to be in his arms. “I love you.”

“Is that a yes?” Granger asked as he hugged her tight.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Olivia shouted happily before kissing him.

At some point, the most perfect ring was placed on her finger and then she was screaming *yes* again and again well into the night.

29

Morning came too soon. Olivia scrolled through her messages as Granger piloted the boat back to Charleston. Imani had a running commentary of everything that went down at the office after she left.

Hendrix was fighting to keep his partnership. Kirkland was demanding a meeting. Everyone had a theory as to Olivia's involvement and what actually went down in her office.

Veronica texted that Robert had announced his retirement and had sold off an expensive car last night. His clients were being paid what they were owed. She'd also texted that William Huff had been in debt for up to five million dollars and had been running high on loans from some very bad people who were calling in said loans. Huff, of course, had blamed Olivia for it all.

Kenzie texted that the hospital had been in an uproar when she'd left. Ryker had smoothed it over, but Miss Tibbie was beside herself and almost had a fit of the vapors when she rushed in and saw the empty bed. Mark had a successful surgery and was scheduled to talk to both Kirkland and Peter Castle this morning. Mark's first words upon waking had been asking about her and then he asked Kenzie to tell Olivia how sorry he was for what he'd said. Mark had had no involvement

in the stalking, but that didn't mean Olivia was ready to forgive and forget.

The dock came into view and Olivia felt herself tense up. Then she looked down at her ring and smiled. She was loved. She was happy. She was going to follow her dreams with the man she loved right by her side. No matter how bad today got, light was at the end of it when she got to come home to Granger.

"What do you have to do today?" Olivia asked as Granger put away his phone to dock the boat.

"I have to go to police headquarters this morning and meet with Detective Chambers and Peter to give my official statement. The shooting will be reviewed to make sure it was justified."

Olivia nodded. "You want me there with you?"

"I'll call if I need you, but I'm already getting messages that the prosecutor and mayor have reviewed the video from the camera we had in the office. It caught everything and my statement is the only thing needed before they sign off on it. What about you?"

"I need to meet with Kirkland. Then Imani arranged for my statement to be taken at the office. And I think I'm going to start packing up my office. First, I need to go to the condo to shower and change. Then I'll be ready to face this very long day. Tonight, though? You, me, Shadows Landing?"

"Of course. I think we'd better show up at Harper's to celebrate our engagement or there may be a riot."

Granger jumped onto the dock and held out his hand for her. "I can't think of a better way to celebrate our engagement." Olivia stepped onto the dock and kissed him. She loved walking hand in hand to her house together. They didn't need to talk. They were simply in the moment. The birds, the sun, the salt air, and their love.

That all changed when Miss Tibbie caught them unlocking the condo's door. "Oh my dear girl! Tell me you're not hurt."

“Hurt?” Dax asked, opening his door after he heard Miss Tibbie cry out in the hall. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Ugh. No sneaking in and out of her condo today.

“I’m not hurt. Granger saved me. Again.” Olivia hugged Miss Tibbie and felt the fragile older woman tremble a little beneath her touch. “I promise, I’m not hurt at all and the guy who was stalking me is gone.”

“You were being stalked?” Dax asked, looking confused. “Wait, and the guy who was stalking you is dead?”

Olivia nodded. “Granger shot him.”

“Olivia had the situation in hand. She was very brave.” Granger looked at her in a way that made her heart race.

“Oh my! I see you have another situation well in hand.” Miss Tibbie grabbed Olivia’s hand and looked at the ring. “Congratulations, my dears!” Olivia was pulled down into a hug and as she was hugging Miss Tibbie, Granger joined in.

“You’re getting married?” Dax asked. Olivia nodded as Miss Tibbie hugged them tightly. “Congratulations.”

Miss Tibbie finally released Olivia and Granger so she could hug Dax and he could shake Granger’s hand.

“But now I have a mess to clean up at work. We’ll talk soon,” Olivia promised them both.

After a quick shower and another round of celebratory sex later, Olivia kissed Granger goodbye at the front door of her office. He was going to the station and then would take the boat back to Shadows Landing. He’d meet her at her house when she finally returned home today so they could celebrate with the town.

“Got your armor on?” Imani asked before she let out a shout when she saw the ring. “You definitely got your armor on!”

Olivia squared her shoulders and marched to the boardroom. Lawyers of all ranks, paralegals, and assistants all tried to act busy, but they were eavesdropping on the argument going on inside the room. Olivia didn’t bother knocking. She

opened the door to the raised voices and strode in as if she owned it.

“Good morning, gentlemen. As promised, my letter of resignation.”

Olivia tossed a folder filled with the documents she’d worked on at home just an hour ago. Hendrix was elated. Kirkland looked remorseful.

“Please reconsider,” Murray said, coming up to her. “You’re my heir apparent. This company will be yours someday.”

“Over my dead body,” Hendrix spat.

“Hendrix, the board is going to vote you out and take your management shares for your abysmal behavior. We have ethics clauses, as you well know, that you violated. You attacked an attorney physically and verbally. You have no say in this discussion.”

Hendrix looked as if he were going to argue, but then he grinned suddenly. “Like hell the board will get rid of me. Not when I represent Faulkner Shipping and SA Tech. Don’t forget Olivia has a non-compete clause and I was the attorney for Faulkner Shipping first. With her gone, Ryker will come back to me.”

Olivia sat down and crossed her legs. “Why do you men think that? Strange that that came out of both your mouth and William Huff’s. It almost makes me wonder if you two had conspired against me.” It was an empty threat, but it was more than enough to get Murray’s attention. “As for my non-compete, I’ve included a release form for you to sign releasing me from said non-compete along with my letter of resignation.”

“Like hell!” Hendrix shouted. “Faulkner Shipping and SA Tech will not go with you. They’ll be mine.”

Murray picked up the folder and opened it. He read the letter and then the agreement Olivia had included. His lips teased up into a rueful smile as he shook his head. “You’re the best lawyer I’ve ever worked with, Olivia,” he said, ignoring

Hendrix. “I’ll talk to the board. We’re holding an emergency meeting tonight in New York. Hendrix, your attendance is mandatory. Olivia, I see congratulations are in order. I’ll call you about your non-compete. Either way, I’m going to miss you. Promise to stay in touch and invite me to your wedding.”

Olivia felt more emotional than she’d expected. It was hard to end this part of her career, but it was necessary. She surprised Murray when she hugged him. “I learned from the best. It’s not personal.”

“I would have been disappointed in you if you didn’t do it. I’ll see it’s done. We owe you that.”

“I’ll make sure you get an invite to the wedding, and I hope we can get together when I’m in New York.” Olivia squeezed his hand and smiled at her mentor.

“Anytime. Now, go wrap things up while I do the same.” Murray glanced at Hendrix, who was fuming. The meaning was clear. Hendrix was out.

“What the hell? How could you let her out of the non-compete? The Charleston office will shrink by seventy-five percent if we lose Faulkner Shipping,” Hendrix was yelling as Olivia strode from the room.

“Because she promised to indemnify the firm for your assault against her. Further, there are statements from Ryker Faulkner and Sebastian Abel that said they would never work with us again either way. But if we part on good terms with their attorney by dropping the non-compete, they would look favorably upon that.” Murray then had some choice words for Hendrix, but the door closed and Olivia smiled. She was free to start her own firm. Ryker’s and Sebastian’s letters to the board bordered on blackmail but never crossed the line. The threat was clear yet never made. If the board wanted to keep the New York office strong, they’d give Olivia what she wanted and no one would trash the firm. Ryker and Sebastian would smile and say they loved working with Mr. Kirkland, but their lead attorney decided to start her own firm to dedicate all of her time to them. No one would question it. The firm would save face and they wouldn’t need to worry about losing

clients over it. It was really a win-win. Kirkland saw that. Hendrix didn't. But that wasn't Olivia's problem any longer. She had her own firm to start.

The day flew by. Olivia was questioned by Peter and Detective Chambers. She was assured that Granger had been cleared and he'd acted in both self-defense and defense of her.

Mark called and apologized. He asked her to stop by. She declined his invitation to visit but when he heard about the engagement, he decided to accept defeat. He'd wished her well and told her he was going to take a job in London as in-house counsel for Legion-Winter.

Olivia drove home to Shadows Landing and, for the first time in weeks, opened the door to an empty house. Her brothers weren't underfoot. Granger, Kord, and Tristan weren't there. It was blissfully empty—a testosterone-free zone for the first time in ages.

Olivia opened the windows, turned on the music, and changed for the engagement party. Granger would pick her up in an hour. She poured herself a glass of wine and headed to the end of the dock. Here she could relax with the breeze and the sound of the rolling river to soothe the last of her frazzled nerves.

“I guess I wasn't enough.”

Olivia was so startled she dropped her wine. The glass shattered as she looked up at Dax.

“Dax?” Olivia put her hand to her heart. “You scared me to death. What are you doing here? Enough for what? What are you talking about?”

“All the gifts I sent you. I was the one who looked after you. I was the one who loved you. I was the one who courted you. Then you go off and get engaged to that sheriff?”

Olivia's hands began to shake as she saw the anger and hurt in Dax's eyes. “Gifts? William Huff sent those threats to me.”

“I didn't send threats. I sent gifts. The chocolate. The flowers. The bath salts. Those were all from me, even if you

never thanked me for them.”

“*For my love. I know you’ll get all the good things coming to you,*” Olivia recited the note that had been in the chocolate box after her bad day at work. “You never signed them. I had no idea you felt that way about me.”

“I was being romantic, but who else could it be sending them to you?” Dax shouted at her. “Everyone else had let you down or run away. *I* was the constant in your life. *I* was the man you turned to when you needed help. *I* was the one you trusted into your condo and into your life. Me! But then *he* shows up and you forget all about me. Forgot about all of our dates. All about our growing bond.”

“Dates?” Olivia was really confused. “We never went out on dates. We were friends. Neighbors.”

“Do friends drink wine together? Do friends treat each other to coffee? Do friends come over when you’ve had a bad day? You don’t do that unless you’re in love.”

Olivia had thought the threats mixed with the acts of kindness had been Huff messing with her. She’d thought he’d been a typical abuser—hurt you and then apologize for it. But she’d been wrong. They’d all been wrong. For it hadn’t been just Huff stalking her. Dax had been, too. While they each had completely different motivations, her situation was still just as dangerous because Olivia’s engagement shattered the delusion Dax had created in his mind. They’d gone out for coffee only once. They’d drunk wine in her apartment twice. There were no dates. No romance. Nothing but what she had thought was a casual, neighborly friendship.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t see that from your point of view. You’re a wonderful man, just not the man for me.” Olivia needed to walk a fine line between kindness and assertiveness to deescalate the situation.

Dax stomped his foot on the dock. The boards reverberated with his anger. “I am the man for you! You just don’t see it. But you will.”

“No, Dax. I won’t.” Olivia said with a little force behind her words. “Right now, you haven’t crossed the line into illegal stalker behavior, but if you contact me again or threaten me in any way, you’ll end up in jail. Do you understand? I don’t want to call the police, but I will.”

“You’ll call your fiancé to arrest me when you’re supposed to be my fiancée? You’re mine, not his or have you just been playing the whore?”

Dax reached for her. Olivia reacted without thinking and punched Dax right in the nose as hard as she could. “I am so sick of men calling me that just because I don’t do what they want. Did you ever think about what *I* want? Did you ever stop to think that because I never tried to kiss you, I never asked you to be my boyfriend, I never wanted you romantically, that maybe, just maybe, you didn’t get the right to demand I be yours? Grow the hell up! When a woman isn’t interested, *she’s not interested*. Take it gracefully and move on. And yes, all those things you listed … that’s exactly what friends do!”

Dax stood holding his nose. Blood dripped between his fingers. His eyes were wide and watering.

Hisssss.

Olivia looked down to the riverbank and saw Bubba crawling from the water. His mouth opened wide as if he sensed the tension. “Dax, meet Bubba. He loves the scent of blood.” She made that up on the spot. “Leave now and never talk to me again. Got it?”

Bubba hissed again and began to lumber toward the dock.

“I hate you! You broke my heart.” Dax took off running and Olivia plopped down on the chair in a state of shock.

She opened the Tupperware container she kept out on the dock and tossed Bubba a piece of jerky—a trick she’d learned from Kenzie. Bubba’s jaws snapped shut and he sauntered away, sliding back into the water with what appeared to be a smile on his face.

Within minutes, she’d placed a call to her condo building maintenance in Charleston and they swore they’d change her

locks before Dax could get back in town. Olivia explained the issue to them and knew it would be taken care of. It would be awkward with Dax living there, but her home was here now.

Heavy footfalls sounded on the boards of her dock and Olivia spun, prepared to do battle once again. Stone was striding toward her and gave her a nod before dropping into one of the Adirondack chairs.

“So, the dorky guy with the bloody nose.”

“Dax. What about him?”

“He happened to run right into us as we were coming to check on you. He was crying and blabbering on about you being a whore. Apparently, he’d been sending you gifts and you dumped him for Granger. He thought you were his.”

“He told you all that?” Olivia was surprised. She thought Dax would slink back to his condo never to be seen again.

Stone looked relaxed, but Olivia knew better. “Well, after we asked him a couple of questions.”

“Is he alive?” Olivia asked.

“Probably.” Stone flexed his hand. His knuckles were red. “Your fiancé got the first one. We took care of the second one. No jail time, but I think justice was served. Also, it looks like you’ll get a new neighbor. Wilder bought his condo since Dax decided it would be a good idea to move to another state and start over.”

“No! He didn’t.” Olivia didn’t care about the fact her brothers beat the crap out of Dax, but she sure as hell cared that her brother was moving in across the hall from her.

“He misses his sister. We all do.” Stone grinned and Olivia punched his shoulder and he laughed. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“No.” Olivia shook the Tupperware tub of jerky. They heard a splash from below and Stone turned to look over the dock.

“Oh shit!” Stone leaped up. “That’s a huge alligator.”

Bubba looked up at Stone, opened his mouth, and hissed.

“This is what I’ve got.” Olivia shook the jerky container again and Bubba lumbered out of the water and toward the dock.

“You’re crazier than Damon if you think this is funny.”

“What, does a little ol’ alligator scare you?” Olivia asked as she opened the container. Bubba paused and opened his mouth wider to catch his treat.

“That thing isn’t little!” Stone was starting to panic and it was glorious.

“Maybe Shadows Landing isn’t for everyone. Wait until the ghost of Anne Bonny gives you a little pinch.”

“Are you seriously trying to scare me with ghost stories? Alligators, yes. Ghosts, no.”

The wind picked up and rustled the leaves as Olivia tossed a treat to Bubba. His jaws snapped shut and Stone jumped a little as he swiped at his butt. “Yeah, okay, I’m out. I’d rather beat up Dax than this.” Stone hurried down the dock sideways so he could keep an eye on Bubba while swatting at his butt as if something, or someone, were pinching him.

She tossed another piece of jerky to Bubba. “Maybe it won’t be too bad having them here.”

30

Granger sat with his arm around Olivia as they laughed so hard they almost cried. Stone was recounting his encounter with Bubba and the wind that pinched him as he ran. The town had shown up at Harper's to celebrate and it was everything Granger could ever want. His friends, his town, and his love all together.

“When’s the wedding?” Georgie asked as she set down a round of drinks.

Granger looked to Olivia. “Tomorrow?”

“Oh, no!” Damon shouted. “My sister deserves more than a quickie wedding. I want flowers, a big dress, champagne,” Damon ticked off.

“You don’t drink champagne,” Olivia pointed out helpfully.

“And a full bar. No skimping. I want the whole shebang. Got it?” Damon pointed to them both. “Doves. Would doves be too much?”

“Bubba likes doves,” Gator told Damon as he hooked his thumbs in his overalls. “Did you know alligators can jump six feet and snatch a bird right from the air?”

“No doves,” Stone said with a shiver. “No Bubba either. In fact, I think an indoor reception sounds lovely.”

“Kenzie and I would love to host the reception,” Ryker said, earning a glare from Damon.

“She’s my sister. We can host it at my house,” Damon shot back.

“She’s my best friend. We’ll host it at my house,” Ryker countered.

“So, you want to elope, right?” Olivia whispered to Granger.

“Not a chance in the world. I want the flowers and dress, too. Although I was thinking something elegant that teases me all night instead of a poofy princess.”

“Yeah, princess isn’t really my thing.”

“You could have it at the Bells’, right?” Kord suggested.

“There’s my best man saving the day.” Granger grinned as he pointed at Kord. “How’re the Bells’?” Granger asked Olivia.

“That would be aesthetic AF,” Timmons, the man-bun-wearing millennial employee of the Bells’ bed and breakfast said, looking totally shook. “That gives me all the feels.”

“We’d love to host,” Maggie said before glaring at Hunter, “even if all your brothers come.” Hunter had foolishly disrespected Maggie’s ability to shoot. He didn’t realize she was an Olympic shooter and Maggie still hadn’t felt the need to tell him, bless his heart.

“But Olivia and Granger are my best friends. I have to do something,” Ryker said, looking for all the world like a pouting billionaire.

“You will be. You’ll be my man of honor,” Olivia said. Granger almost laughed out loud at the look on Ryker’s face. They’d discussed it, and while Ryker was Granger’s best friend, so was Kord. However, Ryker and Olivia had world domination on their side so Granger figured Ryker Faulkner as the man of honor would be perfect.

Ryker stood up without saying anything. He walked around the table, leaned over, and wrapped his arms around Olivia. He pulled her out of the chair and into a bear hug. “I’d be honored.”

“Will you wear the dress I have picked out?” Damon asked.

Ryker shot him the middle finger.

“I’ll provide the music,” Wilder said. “Trust me. I found a great local band that will be perfect.”

“I have a turtle that dances,” Turtle said. Granger knew Turtle was serious but the Townsends didn’t. They all laughed until Turtle showed them the video of the monstrous snapper bobbing his head around to heavy metal. Then they weren’t laughing anymore. They all looked slightly stunned.

Forrest cleared his throat. “That’s quite something.”

“He’s a big boy now. But look at this when he was little.” Turtle found a picture and turned it around.

The brothers squinted and leaned forward. Ellery groaned. Gavin pursed his lips together.

“What’s he biting?” Forrest asked, carefully.

“My willie!”

The brothers jumped back as a group and crossed their legs. “Yeah, no turtles, dancing or otherwise,” Damon said, laying down the law.

“We’ll make the pies, even if someone hasn’t fulfilled her bargain,” Miss Ruby grumbled.

“What bargain?” Granger whispered to Olivia.

“Oh, the one where I get a shirtless picture of you in exchange for two pies a month.”

“Two! Why didn’t you say so?” Granger said.

“I wasn’t going to sell you out for some pies,” Olivia whispered back.

“Two pies a month, Liv! You don’t turn that down.”

“You’ll take off your shirt and let them take a picture of you?”

“Two. Pies. A. Month. Enough said.”

Olivia laughed and shook her head. “This is going to be one interesting wedding.”



The wedding was beautiful.

Granger stood at the front of the church with Kord by his side. Ryker walked down the aisle with Lindsey and Leah, their flower girls, tossing rose petals left and right. Lacy and Landry had been ushers, showing people to their seats as they entered the church and were now holding the doors open for the bride’s processional march.

Granger stared as Damon walked Olivia down the aisle.

Granger’s heart pounded as he took her in. Her blonde hair was in a low, loose bun covered by an elegant long lace veil. The dress was simple, but so elegant she could be a princess.

But then all of a sudden, the doors to the church crashed open.

“Stop!”

Everyone gasped at the woman who had interrupted the ceremony. She looked right out of college with dark hair and stormy gray eyes that resembled Damon. Did Damon have a daughter?

“Penelope!” Olivia gasped in surprise. “You made it!”

“I couldn’t miss my big sister’s wedding!” Penelope cried out as she ran forward to hug Olivia.

“There’s another one?” Kord whispered to Granger as everyone else in the church turned to look at the door to see if another Townsend was coming.

Penelope helped straighten Olivia’s gown and fixed her veil before hurrying and sliding into the pew next to her brothers.

“You didn’t tell me you had a sister,” Granger called out to his bride.

“You only ever asked how many brothers I have,” Olivia called back. There was his saucy attorney. Always the fine print.

Reverend Winston cleared his throat and got everyone’s attention once again. “Any other Townsends we should be aware of?”

“No, that’s all of us,” Damon finally admitted.

“Are you sure?” Reverend Winston pressed.

“Yes, just the nine of us,” Damon replied.

“You sure there’s not a long-lost brother or sister to round out the number to ten?” Reverend Winston asked. Everyone in the church looked as if they still believed one more would be coming.

“No, I’m very sure. There are just nine.”

“Mommy,” little Lyle said, tugging on Lydia’s arm. “If you have one more baby we’ll be just like the Townsends.”

“Like hell,” Lydia snapped, then froze, horrified, her eyes wide as she looked up to see Reverend Winston using the Bible to cover his laughter. “Sorry. Do go on with this beautiful ceremony.”

The music started back up and Olivia finished her wedding march down the aisle. Granger’s eyes were back on his blushing bride as he took her hand in his. “You know what happens if you mess up.” Damon whispered one last threat.

A low clicking noise started and Olivia and Granger turned to see Miss Mitzy, Miss Ruby, and Miss Winnie with their knitting needles out. They tapped them together and then pointed them at Olivia before smiling innocently.

“What’s that about?” Granger whispered to his bride.

“Just your friends looking out for you. You look so handsome in your tux. I’m glad we didn’t elope or I wouldn’t

have seen you in it. We might need a moment alone between the ceremony and reception.”

“Anything my wife wants, she gets.”

Reverend Winston leaned forward and said softly. “Let’s make her your wife first, okay?”

“Then make it the short version, Rev,” Granger said as Olivia laughed.

Reverend Winston married them in under five minutes.

Granger grabbed Olivia’s hand. People cheered. Rose petals were thrown. Granger and Olivia ran down the aisle laughing and full of love.



Kord stood at the bar as the band played. People were milling around and chatting since the bride and groom were late for their own reception. The Townsends seemed to have calmed down since Olivia was so happy with Granger. Slowly, the town was starting to approach them with the caution they’d have if the brothers were marauding pirates. Something the town actually had a strong history in.

Now Gator was teasing Stone over his fear of Bubba. Turtle was showing Penelope the picture of the snapping turtle dangling from his dick. Skeeter was talking to the wind, so it was probably one of the pirate ghosts. Somehow that didn’t seem weird anymore.

What did seem weird was the way Georgina seemed to be hiding behind the Faulkner women. Granger might give Kord crap for not asking Georgina out, but Kord knew women. And this woman was hiding something. She had *unavailable* practically stamped across her forehead. While there was definitely a spark between them, there was also something big blocking any chance he had with her.

That was okay, though. He was a patient man, and he had a feeling Georgina would be worth the wait.

Kord set down his drink and made his way over to the large group of women. “Ladies,” he said, putting on his

carefree attitude that seemed to relax Georgina the most. “I was hoping one of you could dance with this poor bachelor who couldn’t find a date to his best friend’s wedding.”

Harper rolled her eyes and was about to call him on his bullshit when a very pregnant Darcy shoved Georgina forward. “Georgie, take pity on the man and dance with him. I would but I can’t see my feet.”

Georgina blushed and stammered. Kord thought she might say no, but then she took a deep breath and smiled up at him. “I’d love to.”

Kord held out his hand and felt like a hero when Georgina put hers in his as he escorted her to the dance floor. The band changed songs and a slow one came on. Talk about good timing.

Kord pulled her close, but not so close that she might get skittish. After a moment he felt her relax under his touch. “You know, I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

“I’m sure you are.” Georgina smiled up at him and Kord almost tripped over his own feet.

“I’m also a good friend. If you ever need one.”

The smile fell from her face and Kord about kicked himself. “I might need a friend,” she whispered almost absently.

“You have one in me, Georgie.”

“Thank you, Kord. I ...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Granger and Olivia Fox!” the singer of the band called out. Everyone clapped and cheered as a beaming Olivia and Granger walked into the reception hand in hand.

“Townsend-Fox,” Damon corrected automatically.

Georgina shook her head at Damon’s antics. Although, it was true. Olivia was hyphenating her name. The sign above her law firm door already read Townsend-Fox in black lettering against the white brick.

“What were you saying?” Kord tried to get Georgina back on track, but she just shook her head and turned her attention to the newlyweds who were cutting the cake.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Let’s go get some cake!”

Kord enjoyed the fact that Georgie took his hand in hers and wanted him to join her, but he also knew a woman who said she was fine was anything but fine.



Olivia kissed her brothers’ cheeks and hugged her little sister. Both her parents and Granger’s had attended via video chat, but had decided the travel would be too hard on them. Olivia’s brothers had filled in just fine and made today the day of her dreams. Flowers, big dress, and no doves.

But now it was time to have her husband all to herself.

“The plane is fueled and waiting,” Ryker told her. He stood, looking elegant in the man of honor suit she’d picked for him. He’d worn it and never complained. He’d even thrown her a bridal shower and a bachelorette party. A party that would never be spoken about again.

“Are there strippers on the plane?” Olivia asked because after the bachelorette party she couldn’t be too sure.

“Define stripper.”

Olivia smacked his arm as he laughed. “No, no strippers or escorts to carry you around on a throne.”

That had been so embarrassing. When the bachelor and bachelorette parties had combined, Ryker had hired male strippers to carry the women into Wilder’s newest club on a litter like something out of ancient Rome and wait on them hand and foot. Granger had been amused. Damon, less so. However, she also noted a string of women vying for Damon’s attention. One of them had to be a stripper. It was just the law of averages, after all.

Veronica was next to Ryker and amusement sparkling in her eyes. “I appreciate the sexy women you got to attend Blythe and me. Very thoughtful.”

“It was the only bachelorette party I’ve been to recently where weapons weren’t involved, but it was still so much fun,” Blythe added. “You did a good job as man of honor.”

“I agree. It was the best. You have a future in this if you lose your billions,” Veronica said before turning from Ryker to Olivia. “Now, go enjoy your honeymoon. And Kale and I have a little present for you.”

Veronica handed Olivia an envelope. Olivia opened it. Inside was a report on Kortini.

“Do with it what you will,” Veronica told her with a wink.

Olivia glanced at the report. Kortini was just as she’d imagined. Well, look at that. Her husband had relocated here for a job and she was currently trying to break into Charleston society. “Excuse me for one moment.” Olivia kissed her husband’s cheek and walked to Miss Tibbie.

“I have a favor. It’ll sound childish and petty, but I’m okay with that.”

Miss Tibbie’s eyebrows rose as Olivia handed her the papers. “Who is this and what can I do?”

“She’s the one who hurt Granger after his accident. I don’t want her to get so much as a toehold in Charleston society.”

“Revenge on your husband’s behalf is what most of Charleston society is. Consider it done.”

Olivia kissed her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Now, shoo. You have a honeymoon to start.”

Olivia tossed the envelope in the trash, mission accomplished. She put her arm around her husband who was still talking to the group and smiled up at him.

“The resort staff will greet you at the runway and drive you to your suite,” Sebastian told her and Granger. “Enjoy. If we need anything for the next ten days, we’ll call Imani.”

“You all still didn’t have to give us our honeymoon, but thank you.” Olivia rose up and kissed Ryker’s cheek and then

Sebastian's. "And thank you for being Townsend-Fox's first clients."

Sebastian didn't smile, but Olivia could tell he thought about it. Sebastian had sat her down and apologized for Huff. He'd felt personally responsible for the attacks. Olivia had told him she didn't blame him, but she'd noticed Sebastian had been a little softer since then. Of course, his wife, who was snuggled up to his side, might have something to do with it, too.

Olivia's brothers joined them. They shared an easy comradery with Granger now. A bromance, according to Kord, and Olivia loved it.

"Gentlemen, my wife needs me. Thank you for helping plan the wedding, Damon. It was as beautiful as my bride. And yes, I know, you'll kill me."

Granger took her hand and ran as Damon hurled an affectionate threat after him.

The flight attendant had smartly poured the champagne, set out a basket, and disappeared as soon as they boarded the plane.

"Wife," Granger growled as he crooked his finger toward her.

"Husband." Olivia sat back and crossed her legs. This was a negotiation and she never lost.

"I said, come here."

"Oh, I'll be coming soon but not before you strip for me," Olivia told him. "I've been dreaming of you slowly yanking that bow tie free and unbuttoning that shirt since I saw you in the church."

"Like this?" Granger slid the bow tie free from its knot until it hung loosely around his neck. Then he yanked the dress shirt from his tuxedo pants. Olivia watched as Granger slowly undid the buttons on his shirt until she could count the ridges of his abs and see the *V* his muscles formed disappear beneath the black waistband of his pants.

“Mmm.” Olivia licked her lips. “It’s just missing one thing.”

Granger put his hands on his hips, pushing the shirt back, clearly exposing his ripped muscles. “What’s that?”

“This.”

Quick as a wink, Olivia reached into a basket by her seat, pulled out an apple pie, set it on the table in front of him, and snapped a picture with her cell phone before Granger knew what was happening.

“Wife!”

“Twenty-four pies *and* brownies for our birthdays.”

“And worth it,” Granger laughed as he lunged for her. He scooped Olivia out of the seat and carried her, laughing, into the bedroom at the back of the plane. The pie could wait. Their happily ever after couldn’t.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Brooks is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author. Kathleen's stories are romantic suspense featuring strong female heroines, humor, and happily-ever-afters. Her Bluegrass Series and follow-up Bluegrass Brothers Series feature small town charm with quirky characters that have captured the hearts of readers around the world.

Kathleen is an animal lover who supports rescue organizations and other non-profit organizations such as Friends and Vets Helping Pets whose goals are to protect and save our four-legged family members.

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