

He
Saw
ME FIRST



New York Times Best Selling Author
MELODY
ANNE

He Saw Me First

Book One

By:

Melody Anne

Dedication

This is dedicated to Emmy McCormack. This series would've never happened without you. I can't imagine not knowing you and having you in my life.

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Note from the Author

I've evolved a lot in my writing over the past 12 years. I love what I do creating stories. I love getting involved with the characters and feeling like I know them. In this series, I do know some of the characters as I've modeled some after real people with their real stories. Some of the real people in this one are Dan & Cheryl, Emmy and Eric, and Boomer Write who was my high school principle. No, this isn't their real lives, but there are similarities in how they look and their personalities. Look for more of all of them in the upcoming books.

This story practically wrote itself. I didn't want to touch a subject like child sex trafficking because there is zero romance in that, but it's real. I went through my own tragedies as a child. I didn't allow it to shape me, but it's something I'm very aware of. I thought it was time to shed some light on it. We can heal from anything we go through in life. We don't all heal the same, or in the same timeframe, but we're stronger than we realize. We can break free from any binds that try to hold us down. We can't do this alone though, but only with loving people around us.

Ravish Oregon is fictional, but the area is very much how the small towns are along the McKenzie River in Oregon. It's a stunning area that I love to visit. I adore living on the Oregon Coast. It's a world away from the rest of the world. As you can probably tell from my writing, I don't like big cities. I was born and raised in Florence Oregon, moved a few times, and now I'm back to spend the rest of my life in my small town. I like to travel and see the world, but I love living in a place that I can't go to the store without running into someone I know. Some might hate that, but for me, it's heaven. Even if I want to

be alone, I never feel alone. There's always someone close by if I need a friend.

My husband is such a huge help with these stories. He's so supportive and gives me a lot of great ideas. I live my own romance that I appreciate every single day. I have the love of my life, a term I used to mock (Yep, the romance writer mocked that term) but now I realize how true it is. It took us each over 40 years to find that love, but our journeys before each other were what shaped us into who we are now so we'd be ready to accept a true love story. We're imperfect, and wonderful, and he inspires me to be a better person every single day. I love my life. I love my family. I love my friends. And I love you!! I hope you love this new series. It has some moments in it that are hard to face, but that's how the real world is. I want to write something that touches me and others. The epilogue is my favorite one I've ever written. I smiled a lot writing it.

Much Love,
Melody Anne

Books by Melody Anne

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Prologue

I feel nothing as I look at the man on the floor at my feet. Have you ever truly heard silence before? I know this is a weird thing to ask, but really, have you ever actually heard silence? It's such an odd sound ... and yes, it's a sound. If it weren't, horror movies wouldn't do as well as they do. We're so used to constant noise surrounding us that it's both eerie and unmistakable when there's an absence of sound.

The knife is clutched in my hand, and I look at it with an odd sort of detachment as blood slowly trickles down the shining silver blade. My gaze follows a trail of blood on the smooth silver surface. It doesn't drop in a straight line but makes a zigzag pattern on the two-inch wide blade until it reaches the sharp tip. The beads of blood pool for an endless second before falling from the edge in a single drop.

I watch in slow motion as the droplet of blood descends.

Splash. It hits the pool of blood already on the floor. A small ripple occurs, then smooths out before another drop splatters on top of the first. The sound is oddly soothing.

A moan interrupts my peace. I turn and my gaze travels up the legs, past the torso, and to the face of the man I call ... father. His dark brown eyes blink at me as his mouth gapes open. He tries to speak, but he can't ... his vocal cords have been severed. He sort of looks like a fish out of water, his

mouth opening and closing ... fear and realization present in his eyes.

Sound returns as I hear sirens in the distance. Should I run? Why? I don't want to run. I don't want to hide anymore. I don't want to live this life. I've lived in this hell for fourteen years ... well, at least I think I've lived for fourteen years. I only remember the past nine. The first time my father hurt me I was five years old, and every day since then ... I remember the branding on my shoulder ... I remember it all.

"You can't hurt me anymore," I tell him.

He opens his mouth again. The blood on the floor oozes toward my white sneakers, already stained crimson. I step back. I don't want to stand in his blood, not out of morals ... never out of morals. He's made me bleed before; it's fitting for it to be his blood on me now. This time I've made him bleed ... this time it's his blood on my hands instead of my blood on his. I wasn't cruel like he's been ... I simply protected myself from him ... I finally said enough is enough.

The sirens draw closer.

Tires screech to a halt, then I hear the sound of feet moving outside the massive front doors of my home. I don't move. There's a fist pounding against the door as red and blue lights stream through the enormous front windows of the vast mansion in the McLean neighborhood in Washington, D.C.

"Police! We're coming in!" a voice shouts. I still don't move.

There's an ear-piercing sound as something smashes against the thick, ten-foot-tall doors. They are hit again ... and

one of them flies open, slamming against the window beside it, glass shattering. I stare at the chaos as men surge into the substantial front foyer.

I'm still holding the bloody knife. I don't know if my father is still alive and attempting to make sounds. I'm focused on the armed men rushing toward me. You'd think I'd be afraid, but I'm not. I'm so used to pain that nothing scares me anymore. I can't remember the last time I cried ... I believe I'm broken ... that I've been broken for a very long time.

"Drop the weapon," a man shouts.

I don't move. I don't drop the knife, but I don't hold it up in defense. I stand and wait to see what will happen next. It's like I'm watching this happen instead of being present in the moment. Will they shoot me? Would that make this better? I can't be saved. I've asked before, and no one will save me. This is the only way to be free.

"Drop the weapon," a man shouts again.

I don't even realize I do as he demands, but then I look down in surprise as the bloody knife clatters against the blood-soaked marble floor.

Interesting.

I'm so used to being told what to do that I can't stop myself from obeying. If I live, will this always be who I am? Somehow, that thought repulses me more than anything else that's happened.

Before I have time to blink, arms grip me. I know the feeling of being grabbed quite well. My arms are thrust behind my back and the familiar steel of handcuffs latch around my

small wrists and tighten. I feel no pain as they cut into my flesh. I know how to ignore the pain and take myself to another place in my mind as I'm abused.

I look at my father one last time as two men grip me, one on either side. I smile when I realize my father is still looking at me ... but his gaze is void. There's no longer life in those cruel brown irises of his.

He's dead.

My father is dead.

No matter what happens from this point forward, I'm free ... at least from one of the many monsters who have abused me. You never know which monster will be just around the corner, though. They are everywhere, and they come in all shapes and sizes. They aren't who you might think they are. And you wouldn't believe me if I told you my story ... but I'll tell it anyway ... even if it kills me.

"She killed him," a woman gasps as she rushes out to us.

"Ma'am, are you the one who called?" one of the officers asks as he looks at the visibly shaken woman.

"Yes," she cries as she stops a few feet from my father. She looks down in horror. She's quite a good actress.

"Name?" the officer asks.

"I'm Isabella Moore. The man on the floor is my husband." She then looks at me, hatred in her eyes. "That monster *was* our daughter. She's no longer anything to me." She never was my mother — it just took me a long time to realize that.

The room goes silent.

“Take her away. I don’t ever want to see her again,”
Isabella snarls.

The officers begin pulling me from the house while another officer stays behind talking to Isabella. I don’t know what will happen next ... and I don’t care. I won’t ever have to be in this house again. Nothing else matters.

Chapter One

Fourteen Years Later

Step inside,

Walk this way,

You and me, babe,

Hey, Hey.

Smokey red lights turn on, a beam shining directly on Samantha and me as we stand still, my back to her chest, her arms wrapped around me, my head down. I've done this routine a thousand times, and there's no fear as I get ready to perform ... and that's precisely what it is ... a performance. This isn't who I am, but a character I'm playing to get what I want.

No, what I want is too simple for words. I'm getting my soul back ... and the only way to do this is by selling a few pieces of it first. I won't ever be whole again, but I'm okay with that because I've never been a complete person. I shattered long ago ... and no glue in the world is strong enough to put me back together again. Doing what I'm doing will at least start the process. It not only gives me power, it gives me the funds I need to be free.

Pour Some Sugar on Me plays in the background as my dancing partner and I begin our choreography. Her hands slide over my stomach, lightly brush across my covered breasts, and

caress my cheeks. She leans over my shoulder, her face close to mine, bringing her lips within kissing distance as I open my mouth. Before our lips touch, I turn and do a pirouette, extending my long shapely legs.

I face her as she wears a men's white shirt half unbuttoned, and a blue tie with a bowler hat on her head, keeping her blonde tresses bundled beneath. I'm wearing a sleek two-piece dress that's easy to remove. Both of us have on four-inch heels and stockings with garters.

We're on stage ... and we have a packed house ... as usual in the exclusive club only attended by the elite in society. We take stripping to a whole new level ... and I can't say I don't enjoy it. It may not be something I'll do forever, but it's given me the gift of what I want in life ... and I'm very good at turning on the men I think of as the monsters they are. I've gained power from doing this, and once you know my story, you'll understand why I need this in my life.

I glide to Samantha and place my hand on her chest, sexily pushing her backward. I walk forward while she glides away until her knees hit the edge of a chair. She slides down, and I turn, gripping the sides of the chair and swinging my hips over her lap. I lean back, bringing my leg forward as she lifts a hand and glides it down my body. I turn my head, and this time her lips brush mine in a flash ... before I stand.

I circle the stage as she watches ... the audience leaning in so they don't miss a moment. I grip the pole and haul myself up before dropping backward and twirling. I hear a moan from the crowd. I upright myself, leap down from the pole, then slide my hands into the bottom of my top, slowly pulling it

over my head, leaving only scraps of a lace bra covering my breasts.

I walk back to Samantha and reach out, gripping her tie and pulling her from the chair. She grabs ahold of me, and we circle the stage together in a dance before I push back again, then turn and bend in front of her. She runs her hands down my backside before pulling me against her and circling her hips.

I moan as I look out at the crowd. I don't normally notice the people watching us. I pretend to notice them, but I rarely do ... however, not this time. For some reason my gaze is drawn to a man sitting in the middle of the room, a glass gripped tightly in his fingers, his eyes on me alone.

We stare at one another for an endless moment, a shiver rushing through me. I miss my step as the connection between us nearly takes my breath away. I shake it off as I rip my gaze from him.

He doesn't matter ... none of the men gazing at us matter beyond the green notes in their hands they willingly throw at us. I'll give them all a show, but they're the ones truly stripping. We're stripping away their money, their pride, their relationships ... their identities. We don't beg them to come to us, they willingly rush through the doors to give all of themselves until they are left bare.

They are a tool we'll use until we break them ... and then we'll move on to the next ... and the next ... and the next.

Samantha barely blinks as I miss another step. She knows things happen, and she knows how to recover. The audience won't miss a beat as they're too busy staring at the skin we're

displaying. We go right back into our routine as she gazes at me before pulling off her tie, slipping it between her legs, and swinging her hips back and forth. I move to her and rip her shirt open, pushing it off her shoulders. She grips my face and leans in close ... before both of us turn away and I wrap my arms around her from behind as we swirl our hips together.

You gotta squeeze a little, squeeze a little,

Tease a little more.

Easy operator come a-knockin' on my door.

Samantha reaches for the clasp of my bra and slings it off before covering my breasts with her manicured fingers. I lean my head back and sigh as we move toward the pole. She lets go of me before slinging her own bra off, leaving us nearly naked, only a thin pair of thongs and garters covering us.

We grip the pole and wind around it, moving in perfect sync. We slide down, then press our hips together on the floor as we lean back and arch our backs.

Take a bottle, shake it up.

Break the bubble, break it up.

Pour some sugar on me ...

A mist opens above us and fine water droplets drip down, wetting our skin. Samantha leans up, slides over, and pulls me into her arms as our slick skin molds together. The crowd cheers as the song continues and we move on the stage floor.

We curl up in each other's arms and lean in for a kiss ... and the lights go out. The crowd groans as we rise, quickly

sneaking away to the back room without anyone seeing our exit.

“What in the heck happened out there?” Samantha asks as she grabs a robe and covers herself while I do the same.

“I don’t know. I met this guy’s gaze, which threw me off my game for a minute.”

“Oh, was he hot?” she asks, moving toward the curtain as if she wants to look out.

I laugh. “He was unusually hot, but we see hot guys in here all of the time,” I say with a wave of my hand. “This isn’t exactly where I’d ever hook up with someone. They’re all pervs.”

“Yeah, of course. If people knew I’m a mechanic in real life living about two hundred miles from here they’d lose their fantasy of me. I need this money, and I’m damn good at stripping,” Samantha says with a laugh.

“Well, my bookstore is almost finished, and it won’t be long till I’m done with this life,” I tell her. I trust this girl. I don’t share my other life with many people, especially in this world, but I like Samantha.

“It’s almost open. Yahoo!” she says with an excited giggle before she gives me a bear hug that’s anything but sexy. We’re different people on stage for the men staring at us. We put on an act for the masses, but it’s not who we are in the real world.

“I hope the store does well enough that I can leave this life behind forever,” I admit.

“Don’t leave me, you’re the only partner I can work with,” Samantha says with her perfected pout in place.

I laugh. “Your pout only works on the sex-crazed men out there.”

“Hey, don’t knock sexiness. I bet you’ll sell more romance books in your little store than anything else. Besides, every story is a love story, even if the book is a thriller. If there’s no love interest, what’s the point in living or saving the planet? Sex and romance sell in every area of life.”

I shake my head. “Yes, sex sells, that’s for sure, because underneath our cool exterior, we’re all a little sick and twisted inside. We need something exciting to stimulate us.”

She gives me a sly smile. “That’s what my handy dandy vibrator is for. It doesn’t talk back to me like men do, and it always gives me a perfect orgasm, unlike the fumbling idiots who only worry about their own pleasure. The day I find a real man to rock my world will be the day I eat a grasshopper.”

“I’m going to remember that and hold you to it,” I tell her.

“You’re such a pot to my kettle. You hate men,” she says.

“I don’t hate men ... I just don’t trust them.”

I keep smiling, but my gut clenches. I’ve been through horrific things in my life. No one in this new life I’ve been living for fourteen years knows the pain I’ve suffered. I don’t use it as an excuse to stop living, but it’s certainly kept me closed up. I haven’t had one real relationship that’s lasted.

Samantha might be the only person I come close to calling a friend. People have come and gone, but I trust Samantha. I can’t say the same for anyone else. I hope that trust never shatters. But if it does, it won’t destroy me. I’ve been through

worse ... through so much worse, however, it would suck to lose her.

“We better get out there and make the rounds. I want to leave early tonight,” Samantha says.

“I hate this part,” I tell her.

“Me too, but the crazies want to see us on the floor, and that’s where the big tips come in,” she says.

“It’s crazy we make so much money dancing and showing our bodies to strangers. I mean seriously, in a world full of porn, they still come to watch us live. I’m not complaining, but it’s insane that men pay us so much and don’t even get to touch us.”

“Except for the lap dances,” she points out. I groan. I hate those more than any other part of my job. “I do love my work, though. I feel sexy,” Samantha says with a wink.

She’s right. We have to go out on the floor quickly to profit from our performance. We change into our skimpy bralettes and short skirts, paste seductive smiles on our lips, and grip hands as we walk from the back of the stage.

All eyes are on us as we move across the crowded floor. I lean over and give Samantha a sexy kiss that all of the men can see before we let go of each other and move to opposite corners of the room.

Hands come out and brush my sides, ass, and legs, not enough to get the men kicked from the exclusive strip club with a hundred-dollar cover charge, but enough to annoy me. I don’t show my displeasure. I stop and chat, give a few public

lap dances, and collect thousands of dollars in only an hour's time.

I'm almost finished when I turn and run into a brick wall of a chest. I give the mandatory innocent giggle as I look up ... and the sound gets trapped in my throat. It's him ... the man I spied while on stage.

"Hello," he says in a deep, dark voice that sends pulses straight to my core. I can't remember this ever happening to me. Usually, a man's voice sends shudders of displeasure through me. Who is this man, and why am I reacting this way? Why does it feel good instead of repulsive? What in the hell is happening? I push this all down as I plaster a fake smile on my lips.

"Hey, Sexy. Want a dance?" I lift a finger and trail it across his hard chest. I don't break character, but keeping my breathing steady is difficult. Holy hell, he's dangerous. I want to run ... and run far. I learned long ago I can survive any situation. I won't let my strange reaction to this man cost me money.

"I'd like to take you out of here," he says, his eyes smoldering.

I take a step back from him. "That's not going to happen. I'll give you a nice dance that will give you sweet dreams ... but there are no overnights."

"Everyone has a price. What would it take to get you alone for an entire night?"

My strange attraction to the man disappears ... thankfully. Now, I have his number, and I'm not interested in selling my

body. Sure, I sell it to the highest bidder to watch me dance, but I don't sell actual sex. Implying that instantly turns me off. I step forward without fear, or at least, certainly showing none.

I press my ample breasts against him as I run a nail along the back of his neck and lean forward, our lips only a couple of inches apart. His hardness presses against my stomach. It takes all I have not to flinch away. I've done this for too long to be jumpy. I have this.

"I'm far too pricey for you, sugar. Jenny is available for an all-nighter, though." I point out another of our girls who will make men beg for mercy for a hefty price tag.

I bite my lower lip, then laugh as I release him and turn to walk away. He grips my wrist, not aggressively, just enough to stop me. I turn and raise my brows. I'm still not worried. We have the best of the best bouncers in this place, and I'm not some sweet, innocent little thing. I can take down any man in this club. I'll never be a victim again as long as I live. I'll die before letting that happen.

"I think our story is just beginning, Cassandra." I lose all my breath. Before I can say another word, the man lets me go and walks away. I stand in shock as he leaves.

Finally my feet move, and I don't pretend to flirt with anyone else as I quickly make my way across the busy area with men catcalling me. I don't stop moving until I'm safely behind closed doors.

How in the hell does that man know my real name? Who is he? What does he want? For the first time in a long while ... I feel fear, real fear. I quickly change, gather my things, and

leave. My eyes are glued to my rearview mirror as I exit Boise, Idaho.

I have a long drive home, and it's almost midnight. I don't care. I want the security of my small town that's a whole other world away from the nightlife I've worked for the past ten years. It's only twice a month now, but for a long time it was nightly ... my only way to survive.

Soon ... very, very soon, I won't have to strip anymore. Soon, all of my dreams will come true. I'm in a new place with a new name and life. My past can't come back to haunt me. It can't. I refuse to let it. I'm so close to getting what I've searched for. There's no way I'm letting anything get in my way now.

This man doesn't really know who I am. He's just better than the average Joe. That's all. He figured out my name. No big deal. At least he doesn't know my birth name. If that happened, there wouldn't be anywhere far enough for me to run to.

I finally realize no one is following me and put on a Ruth Cardello audiobook, sit back, and enjoy my quiet ride home. Once I'm out of Boise, it's green pastures. I'm going to be okay. It's all going to be okay. There's no other choice, not when I'm this close to getting exactly what I've been striving to get for the past fourteen years.

Chapter Two

Our journey through life takes us down different paths: some we love, and some traumatize us. I can unequivocally say my journey hasn't been easy, but it's shaped me into who I am today. Given a choice, I wouldn't choose the life I've lived, but I can't take any of it back, so all I can do is move forward and appreciate how far I've come.

I have a choice to wallow in what's been done to me or to prove those evil abusers wrong and live happily for the rest of my life. It's easier said than done, but I try each and every day to truly live. I still wake up with a knot in my gut as I tense, fighting back panic before I remember I'm safe now, no one is coming after me ... and nobody is going to hurt me. I wonder if this insecure feeling will ever go away.

It's taken ten years to get to where I am now, but I did it. I pull out my license and look at the name, Cassandra Montana, twenty-eight years old, one hundred forty pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes. I'm no longer Tina Moore. I'll never be her again. I've grown into a woman, and my past will stay where it belongs ... in the dark.

Sweet relief fills me as I walk through my new town toward my bookstore and coffee house. Indescribable joy washes over me as I visualize the brightly colored shelves filled with books. I did this all on my own. I created a business, a dream come true.

I landed in Ravish, Oregon six months ago. I knew I'd live in Ravish for the past five years, but it took this long to get here. I had to establish a business for this small community so the population would respect me. It's the only way I'll get exactly what I want ... and desperately need.

I finally earned enough money to pay cash for my little corner building on the town's main street. When a person pays cash, some become suspicious, but I told the realtors I don't trust banks and I'm not too fond of financing, so I waited to buy until I could fully pay for it. That explanation might not work in a city, but they nod in agreement with me in a small town. Small towns are worlds apart from cities. They're like two countries, sometimes separated by as little as thirty miles.

Ravish has a population of about two thousand people. It caters to many tourists all summer, as its location along the fabulous McKenzie River makes it an ideal vacation destination.

The town is full of charismatic people and many charming businesses. I walk past The Clark Family Fishing Tackle Shop and see Micah Clark out front, setting up a display with his trusty silver lab, Bass. I wave, and he smiles and waves back, then walks over to greet me.

"Hello, Cass, it's another beautiful day. Are you going to do some fishing?"

"You know how well I do at fishing," I reply with a laugh.

"We all have to begin somewhere. I promise before long I'll have you fishing like a pro."

“From your lips to God’s ears,” I tell him, making him laugh. This man always seems happy.

He returns to work, and I continue walking. I’ve taken up fishing since coming to town, but I’m hopelessly terrible at it. Micah’s a great guy and plenty helpful, but he’s a bit of a flirt and makes me nervous. He’s tanned all year round with dirty blond hair, a constant five-o-clock shadow, and twinkling green eyes. He’s lean and muscled in all of the right places, and I think more women shop at his store trying to purchase him than the items they walk away with. He’s managed to avoid their hooks so far.

As for me, the last thing I want is to date anyone in this town. That’s not my mission. I do love Lloyd, his crotchety employee. I swear he’s a hundred years old. I can sit with Lloyd for hours on end listening to his stories.

Not far from Clark’s is Eye of the Storm, a fabulous bar and restaurant where all of the locals gather to listen to country music and line dance to Jason Aldean on Friday nights. The owner, Dillan Scott, is one heck of an intimidating man. I’ve heard he’s a former biker gang leader who once took lives.

I don’t know if it’s true since he’s only in his late thirties, but the man has a mile-wide stare with the darkest brown hair I’ve ever seen and eyes that makes me think he takes one look at me and knows every little secret I’ve ever tried to desperately hide. He’s huge, too, with arms the size of ordinary people’s legs and a jaw I don’t think a brick could break. I don’t go there every week, but often enough to know the bartender, Emmy, and a few of my neighbors. It’s undoubtedly the local hangout for gossip.

The next block over from the bar is Ravish High School, which I find quite amusing. Nothing like a bar and school within walking distance. I guess this only happens in small towns. It's not a large school, but the kids always do something or other in town. I like the principal, Mr. Wright. He's a hoot to chat with over coffee. His many stories about this town fascinate me. I have yet to figure out Mr. Wright, but I'll know all of his secrets before too long.

I like to know who's around me. No one is the same in public as they are behind the safety of their closed doors, but you can get a bit of an understanding of them if you speak to them enough. I've become adept at seeing more to a person than what they're trying to portray. It's saved my life more than once.

Across from the bar is the Ravish Pony Express. It's a U.S. post office, but it's called the Pony Express, which I find humorous. This town likes to live like it's back in the eighteen hundreds, but I don't mind at all. Some advancements haven't made the world a better place. I can't imagine not having internet now that we have it, but at the same time, it's taken the purity out of many wonderful things. I hope they never change the post office's name.

Neil Majors, who's pretty dang sexy with his dark red hair, green eyes, and fabulous shoulders, is the postmaster, and he obviously loves his job. Many ladies in town keep boxes at the post office, so they have an excuse to go inside and chat up the very flirty postmaster.

"Cass," a voice calls.

I turn and laugh. “I was just thinking about you,” I say as Neil sidles up.

“I hope it was naughty thoughts,” he says with a wink.

If I thought he meant the words, I’d probably run, but I know he can’t help but flirt, it’s built into his DNA. He’s helped me not to be so distrustful of all men. I’ve learned some who flirt don’t want anything from me, it’s just who they are.

“You have enough single ladies in town with dirty thoughts about you to keep you happy,” I tell him.

“Does that mean you’re single?” he asks. There’s a waggle of his brows and just enough heat in his eyes to tell me he’d pounce if I showed actual interest ... but he won’t do it without my consent.

“Nope, not single. My bookstore is my one true love,” I tell him, which I’ve said repeatedly. I’m careful not to offend any of the men hoping to take me out. That would mar my good reputation in a town of people who all know each other. I’m the newcomer and don’t need to stand out too much.

“I’ll be here waiting for you,” he tells me.

“You better deliver the mail first or you’ll have a riot on your hands.”

He waves his hand in the air. “The mail is already out. I’m manning the counter today,” he assures me.

“Well, that will make all of the ladies happy.” He laughs as he moves to the entrance of the post office. If I were going to be interested in a man, I’d be a fool not to take him up on his

offer of a date. He really is cute ... but so many of the men are. This town is a firefighter calendar come to life.

Next to the post office is the police station. The first time I walked down this street I stopped and gaped at the giant sign on the front lawn. I had to look twice ... then I laughed. The sign reads: Ravish City Police Department in small letters, then Crime and Punishment Center in bold letters with a large set of handcuffs nailed beside it.

The Police Chief, Dan Spangler, has a hearty sense of humor. Then again, there isn't a lot of crime in Ravish. An occasional drunk and disorderly, a domestic dispute here and there, and definitely speeders, but other than tourists getting too rowdy on a Friday night, this town is about as American Apple Pie as it gets. I hope I never have to leave. Feeling this safe after years of terror is wonderful.

The fire department is next to the police station. It has its own sign, competing with the police station. Their sign reads: You start 'em. We hose 'em. Right below that is a sign that reads: Somebody call 911. Shorty fires burning on the dance floor. I smile each time I pass by and automatically start singing the dang song.

The grocery store in town is Cans and Nuts, which again makes me chuckle. The owner, Ethan Sawyer, is an Italian-German, caramel-skinned, blue-eyed, dark-haired grumpy old man who's been married to the same woman since they were seventeen. He might be cranky, but I adore the man. I love watching him play chess with Micah at the store and listening to the two banter.

A mechanics garage and auto parts store is located on the far side of town, aptly named Loose Screws. The owner, Booker Washburn, is in his thirties, incredibly tall at six foot five inches with sleek brown skin, stunning hazel eyes, and muscles that make all of the ladies drool. I swear each business owner in town just gets hotter and hotter.

“Hey, Cass, why are elevator jokes so classic and good?” Oh yeah, he’s also a jokester. You can’t pass by him without a daily dad joke. I love it.

“Why?” I obediently ask.

“They work on many levels.” He starts laughing, and I join him.

“Hey, Booker, what do you call it when a group of apes starts a company?”

“Hmm, what?”

“Monkey business.”

He bends over, laughing. It’s the first time I’ve flipped a joke back to him. I may be starting to become a genuine member of the town. Perhaps I do belong here.

“I might need to rename my shop,” he says.

“I think it has a good ring to it,” I agree. A customer pulls up, and I move along.

Next to Booker’s place is Safe Harbor Church, where Pastor Chad ministers. I’ve gone a few times but worry I’ll be struck by lightning every time I enter the building. I like the sense of calm and serenity it gives me. They also have an incredible youth program.

Across the street from the church is a vast building, Mountain Fitness. Now, this is the fanciest, most elaborate gym I've ever seen in my life. Not only does it have a pool, steam room, hot tub, and all of the best workout equipment any athlete would drool over, but you feel like you're in a spa whenever you walk inside.

This fancy gym is only in this Podunk town because the owner, Derek McConnel, moved here about five years earlier. I heard he has a tragic story in his past, and coming here has been healing for him. He wanted to build the ultimate gym and live in a place like Ravish. The town might be small in numbers, but all of the residents use the gym so it has plenty of members. Derek's a beast of a man who I heard does muscle competitions. I can see why. Holy hell, he's yummy.

As you walk inside the front doors, you're hit with the aroma of a tropical vacation. Several staff members dress nicely, and there's a clothes section where you can stock up on fitness attire. They have childcare with school-like programs, a chiropractor on site, a cold tub, and the shower rooms are enough to make any woman weep with high-end accessories, hair dryers, straighteners, curling irons, and hair products.

At the end of a day at the gym, you can go to the café, with indoor and outdoor seating, to order healthy food and smoothies or grab-and-go protein boxes. Membership is a little pricy, but well worth it. I've stopped every day I've been in town while getting my business ready.

I do my workouts, shower, then spend hours in the café eating, drinking, and doing all of my internet business. It's

been heaven. I'll come back even with my own business up and running.

Luckily, my bookstore is just around the corner from the gym. Yes, I have a coffee counter with pastries and quick snacks, but nothing that competes with this gym. I like the owner, and he's been more than helpful while I set up my bookstore. He also has some impressive clients driving or flying in, some seriously impressive clients like Cam Hanes and David Goggins. If they trust him to train them, he must be a superstar.

On Call Advantage is an extension of his building, a private medical practice everyone in town uses. The nurse practitioner who owns and runs it is Stephanie, who everyone adores. Gayle is the counselor who isn't afraid to put teens in their place when they're getting out of hand, and she does a lot of work at the high school.

There's something great about a small practice versus going to a large hospital where you're simply a number. Here the staff knows the patients inside and out. Stephanie is constantly saying she needs to hire more providers because she's so busy, but she's also picky and wants more than someone with a degree, she wants her providers to truly care about their patients.

I finally walk inside the doors of Safe Haven Books. The gym inspired me, and I take a deep whiff of vanilla at the entrance to my store as I look around. The shelves are filled, and the café in the center of it all looks better than any at the Barnes and Noble stores I was inspired by. I want this to be a daily hangout for locals. They can come inside, buy a book,

sit, visit with their neighbors over a cup of coffee, and then come back the next day — a safe haven for all.

I placed a help-wanted ad in the mailboxes last week and hope I have a good turnout for interviews today. I only need three or four employees to begin with. If we're really successful, I can add more. My goal for the store goes beyond retail sales, though ... they go so much further than that.

I go to my office, and it doesn't take long for the first applicants to arrive. Many are probably more curious about meeting me than actually interviewing, but I don't mind. The more people trust me, the easier it will be for me to fit in. I take myself out of my comfort zone and interview for a few hours, pleased that I have some great options.

As the end of the day nears, the bell on the door chimes. I look up and see a young, sweet-faced blonde girl walking inside with a big smile on her pink lips. My heart thuds a bit at her youth. I'm never going to get used to seeing teen girls without my heart breaking all over again as I think about my daughter I never saw again after she was ripped from my arms.

"Hi, you must be Ms. Montana," the girl says. "I'm Madison, but everyone calls me Mattie, spelled with T's after my dad, Matt, and I'm going to be your best employee." The young lady holds out her hand.

"Hi, Mattie, it's a pleasure to meet you," I say. I take a deep breath. "What makes you my best employee?"

She beams at me. "I know I'm a teenager, but I've worked hard ever since I could barely walk. My parents say I have a great work ethic. There's no job I'm unwilling to learn, and I pick up on things quickly. I have a four-point GPA and take

honor classes. I volunteer in town and have many references. I want a real job now. I'm in classes during the school year, but I can work evenings, weekends, and all my breaks, including any hours you want in the summer. I'm going to be a doctor someday so I have to start saving now."

"Wow, that's quite the résumé." I'm sufficiently impressed with this beautiful child.

"Here's my résumé," she says as she hands over a crisp folder. I take it from her and open it to see a perfectly typed résumé that lists everything she's been talking about. She is impressive.

I smile as I look back at her. "You're hired," I say, my voice somewhat choked. "As a matter of fact, you're officially my first employee."

The girl's eyes widen as she looks up at me with a huge smile and what appears to be hero-worship in her eyes. I'm no hero, but I'll take it. She launches forward and wraps her arms around me before quickly stepping back.

"Sorry, I know that's unprofessional, but I'm so happy. This is my first real, hourly-wage job, and I can't wait to prove myself."

I fight tears as I look at her. What would it have been like to raise my daughter? What joy her parents must've had in getting uninterrupted years with this beautiful child. My child was taken from me, and that pain never ends. Maybe ... just maybe ... being in this town will finally be what heals me. Perhaps all of my dreams will come true. I deserve it. I've suffered long enough, and though my sins aren't repaid yet, I'm still a child of God, and I know there's nothing my child

would do that I wouldn't forgive. That gives me hope that I'm worthy of a free life ... a beautiful life ... a life filled with happiness.

I'm almost there ... I can feel it. I'm going to get what I came for ... and nothing will stop me.

Chapter Three

Fourteen Years Ago

This place is strange. I've seen rooms like it on television, not that I was allowed to watch much TV, but being in one of the rooms like I saw on Law and Order is odd. I feel like I'm in my own show. It's surreal. After a couple of days, I should feel something, but I'm still numb. Then again, I've been numb for a long time, so it isn't anything new.

A man walked in about ten minutes ago, introducing himself as the district attorney, and I have yet to listen to him. I don't even know what a district attorney is other than the man who's supposed to go after bad guys ... which apparently is me. I do know he's not my friend ... no man is my friend. I have no desire to speak to him. It won't help anyway, nothing ever helps.

"Ms. Moore, are you going to answer?"

I finally look at the man sitting across from me. He's nobody special ... just a man, like all men, who have abused me my entire life. I give him a blank stare. I have no idea what he wants me to answer. My body is here physically. But my mind is somewhere else entirely.

Where am I? What is my life going to be like now? I don't know. The only thing I'm sure of is I won't go back home. What does this mean? No clue. Where do I go from here? That's still up in the air.

“Ms. Moore?”

“Yes?” I finally say. The sound of my voice is odd as if I don’t recognize it. Have I separated from myself? Maybe. If I can stay numb I might survive, not that I care all that much either way.

“Ms. Moore, why did you kill your father?”

My facial expression doesn’t change. Should I tell the truth? I’ve tried before, and all that got me was more punishment. My father’s a very prominent man ... scratch that, my father was a very prominent man. He’s nobody now. He’s dead ... exactly how he should be. I wish all of them were dead. I don’t want to take their lives with my own hands, but the world would be safer if they were gone.

“I can’t tell you why,” I finally say.

He lets out a sigh. “Why is that?” he asks. He seems to care, but all of the men have seemed to care ... until the lights go out, until their clothes come off. All of them thought what they were doing was okay, all of them thought I was nothing more than a toy for them to play with. They probably even thought I liked it. Whatever they needed to believe in order to justify their depraved behavior. They’re all monsters in ten-thousand-dollar suits. Is this man any different? I doubt it.

“You’re all the same. Even those who said they wanted to help haven’t,” I tell him in my constant monotone.

“We’re not all the same, Ms. Moore. I want to understand what would drive a fourteen-year-old girl to take her father’s life.”

“You won’t understand,” I tell him. It’s not an accusation; it’s simply the truth.

“I could give it a shot. I hear a lot of cases from many people. You have no one else on your side right now, so why don’t you try trusting me? You have nothing to lose by doing so.”

We gaze at each other for long moments. I sigh. A part of me wants to tell him everything and see if he’ll help. I’ve asked for help before. No one cares. All that matters is money and power, and I have neither.

He opens the folder on his desk and then stares at me with sadness. I don’t believe him. I don’t think he’s capable of feeling sorrow for me. I’m nobody to him. Well, that’s not exactly true. I’m a case file he needs to close. He’s the DA for Washington, D.C., and has a job to do.

“Do you know you’re pregnant?” he asks.

My face drains of color as I look at him. I’m only a child, although my innocence left long ago, but in age, I’m still a child. How is my body capable of carrying a baby? My hand automatically goes to my stomach. It has gotten a little bigger this past month, but I don’t pay much attention to my body. It’s been nothing but a tool for others since I was five years old, so why should I care about it? It’s never belonged to me ... and it likely never will.

I can’t comprehend a baby inside me. Was this baby the little stirrings I’ve had the past few weeks, the odd sensation I’ve been feeling? I’ve had all sorts of sensations in my body my entire life. That’s what happens when a person’s abused as much as I’ve been.

“Ms. Moore, did you know you’re pregnant?” he asks again. His voice is gentle, but I still don’t believe he cares.

“No,” I finally say.

“Then you don’t know how far along you are,” he states.

“No.”

“We’re going to get you in for an ultrasound. We think it would be best for you to abort the child,” he tells me.

“No,” I say.

He looks at me in shock. “Ms. Moore, you’re a child yourself, incapable of raising a baby, and besides that ...” He pauses as if he doesn’t want to finish talking.

“I’m going to jail,” I finish for him.

“Yes, you will go to juvie,” he tells me.

“What will happen to my baby?” I ask. I don’t care what happens to me, but now that I know there’s a child, I actually ... I care. How is that possible?

“I think you should get an abortion,” he says again.

“That’s not an option,” I tell him. I don’t know my options, but killing this innocent child won’t happen as long as I can stop it. I wonder if I’ve been pregnant before. I wonder if the beatings I’ve received have killed other babies. It’s certainly a possibility. It’s something I’ve never given any thought to.

“We can’t force you to have an abortion, but if you choose to have the baby, you’ll deliver while incarcerated. The baby will immediately be taken from you,” he tells me.

“Who will take the baby?” I ask.

“It will be adopted,” he says.

“Can I choose?”

He shakes his head. “Your rights are limited in juvie.”

“Will they be good people who won’t abuse my baby?”

Now tears fall from my eyes. How can I protect this child? My parents didn’t protect me, so how can I expect strangers to love this baby they have no bond with?

“Parents adopting babies normally can’t get pregnant and desperately want a child. I think you should abort, but if you’re adamant about it, the baby will go to a good home.” His demeanor softens, making me hope I can trust that he’s telling me the truth about this at least.

“You can’t guarantee that,” I tell him.

“No, nothing in life’s guaranteed.”

I lean back. “I don’t care what happens to me, but please make sure my baby is safe. I haven’t been safe most of my life. I’ll confess everything and take my punishment if you promise to keep my baby safe.”

The man has tears in his eyes. He glances down, and when he looks back up, he nods. “I’ll do everything within my power,” he tells me.

I give him a semblance of a smile. It’s all I have in me.

“Why did you kill your father?” he asks more gently.

I told him I’d spill all. I take a breath. “I didn’t want to be touched anymore.”

“What do you mean by touched?” he asks. He looks as if he doesn’t want to hear the answer. I’m sure he doesn’t. Maybe

all men aren't monsters, but I have yet to see any good ones.

"He beat me, stripped me, and used my body," I say.

"Do you believe he's the father of your child?" he asks, trying to look calm, but not covering his horror.

I shrug. "I don't think so. He hasn't done ..." I pause as a shudder runs through me. "He hasn't done that in a while. There's another person who claimed me exclusively this past year."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"A friend of my father decided I was his. He came to the house at least once a week, sometimes up to three times. After he took me the first time, he wouldn't let anyone else touch me. It didn't stop my father's fists on me, but he was more careful so the other man didn't know it was happening. I was his toy, and his alone."

"Who is this man?" he asks, leaning forward.

"I won't say. It doesn't matter. Nothing will happen to him. Nothing will happen to any of them."

"If this baby's DNA matches we have proof and can prosecute," the man says.

I shake my head. "I won't say. It won't go well for me."

He leans closer to me. "I want to help you, Ms. Moore—"

"Don't call me that. I don't want that monster's name anymore," I interrupt.

"I understand. What do you want me to call you?"

"Can I pick anything?" I ask.

“Sure,” he tells me. I don’t care if he’s humoring me. I don’t want to be Tina Moore anymore. I never want to be her again. She’s broken, damaged, irreparable. I can’t be her anymore, not with this child inside me.

“How about Sassy? It’s a name I read in a book once, and I like how it sounds.”

“Okay, Sassy, let me help you. Tell me the names of the men who’ve abused you.”

“I won’t,” I tell him again.

“I might be able to get you out of serving time if this is self-defense.”

I shake my head. “I’ll go to jail or my baby and I will be dead anyway. They won’t let me be free. You have no idea how powerful these people are.”

We go back and forth for a while, but he doesn’t break me. Our interview ends, and I’m taken to the hospital ... in cuffs. I’m used to wearing cuffs. They don’t hurt me anymore.

Soon I’m lying on a table, and a cold gel is smeared on my stomach. Then, miracle of miracles, a sweet thumping sound fills the room. The nurse turns the monitor toward me, and I see a form on the screen moving around inside my stomach.

“Here’s your baby,” the nurse says as she smiles at me.

I see a perfect little head and the shape of a tiny face. My baby. This is my baby. The nurse doesn’t know I’ll never get to keep it, but she knows I’m in trouble as I have cuffs on and an officer standing next to me.

“It looks like you’re twenty weeks along and you’re having a little girl,” she says. She’s smiling but also looks sad. I’m not surprised. She might not know I’m fourteen, but it’s evident I’m young ... too young to be having this baby.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Would you like me to print a picture?”

“Yes, please,” I say. I’m shocked to find tears streaming down my cheeks. I can’t remember the last time I cried. It’s been a very long time, though, that I know for sure.

I’m taken back to the juvie center, where I’m left alone. They let me keep the picture. I stare at it long into the night and then tuck it away. I’m twenty weeks along, and they say most pregnancies go to forty weeks. That means I get to hold my baby for another twenty weeks before she’s ripped away from me.

I didn’t want a baby, and I definitely know who the father is, but I don’t care about any of that. All I care about is the next twenty weeks. I have something to live for. I’m no longer hopeless with no desire to live; I have a reason to survive. This baby won’t be abused like I was. I don’t care what I have to do, I’ll find her someday. I’ll do my time, get out of here, and then I’ll find her. I don’t care how long it takes.

I place my hand on my stomach and smile. “You’ve made me want to live,” I whisper.

I feel a thump in my belly. She hears me. She knows I’ll keep her safe. We’ve already bonded. I won’t get to name her. I don’t know if I’ll get to hold her once she’s born, but for now, she’s mine ... and mine alone. No one can take that from

me. Who did this to me doesn't matter. He doesn't want her. He'll destroy her if he finds out about her. He wants no proof of what he's done ... of what a monster he is.

I'll never tell them who he is ... he's too powerful. She'll never make it from the hospital if he knows. I'll beg the DA to keep my pregnancy a secret. I'll confess to killing my father, and there won't be a trial. I'll do whatever it takes to protect my baby girl.

I didn't think about what would happen when I killed my father, I just needed him to stop hurting me. I shouldn't be shocked at this, though. This is my life for now, and I need to focus on my baby girl.

"We'll be together for another twenty weeks ... and one day we'll be together again after you're born. I promise," I tell my little girl. I finally fall asleep, smiling for the first time in many years.

Tomorrow is a new day. The day after that is another new day. One day at a time. Each one will get better and better until one day I'll be free as a new person. I can survive anything now that I have a reason to live.

Chapter Four

Greyson

I despise strip joints. I know, I know, that's what all men have to say, but I truly despise them and the desperate men who need to sit in the audience and stare at barely legal women as they remove their clothes.

Maybe I hate them because I've never had a problem finding a woman to satisfy my needs. If anything, I have a problem getting rid of women. This might sound arrogant, but I am who I am, and I was blessed with good genetics, a hell of a work ethic, and a body that's been described as a combination of Chris Hemsworth and Jason Momoa. Personally, I think they want to be more like me.

I smile as my dark blue eyes blaze before I run my hand through my short dark brown hair. I move up to the doors of the said strip club and make my way inside. I might hate strip clubs, but there's one woman I need to see, and so far, this is the only location I know of to find her.

I step up to the front desk. This isn't a club you walk right onto the floor. No, that would be a run-of-the-mill club. This place is exclusive with a hundred-dollar door fee.

"ID please," the giant bouncer says with zero expression.

I pull out my license. Greyson River, thirty-four years old, six-foot-three, two hundred pounds of pure muscle. I hand

over a crisp hundred. The man waves me through.

It's Friday night, a week after I saw Cassandra for the first time ... in person. I knew who she was before I stepped foot in the club's doors a week earlier. My reaction to her wasn't at all what I was expecting, though. That shocked me from that very moment. I still don't know what to think about it all.

I'm always a composed man. I know what I want, and I go after it. There's no doubt about that. I also always get my man, or woman, in this case. Okay, when it comes to romance, it's always a woman. Hey, I like what I like. But in life and in work, whoever and whatever I want ... I get.

Now Cassandra Montana has entered my life ... and my plans have altered. I don't want to want her, but I can't remember the last time I've had such a visceral reaction to a woman. The fact that she turned me down and easily walked away has only made my hunting instincts that much greater. Maybe I'll need to bed her before all is said and done. There's nothing that says a person can't mix work and pleasure. As a matter of fact, that's what makes this world so great. We can have our cake and eat it too.

I move to the same table I sat at the week before and order a Johnnie Walker Blue Label. The waitress smiles, knowing the tip is going to be huge with this expensive of a drink. I'm a man who likes only the finest things in life, and I'm not afraid to pay for them. That shows in the five-thousand-dollar loafers and ten-thousand-dollar suit I'm wearing. My job doesn't pay for my shoes or suit, but nobody here knows who I am or what I do for a living. They don't need to know anything about me.

Being incredibly wealthy doesn't mean I don't take extreme pride in my work. I'm not afraid to get dirty when the day calls for some dirt beneath my nails. It does mean, however, that I can appreciate the finest things life has to offer, and I'm not afraid to take what I want.

I watch the show for the next hour, not turned on by a single woman who appears on stage. I give distant smiles to the dancers who approach my table, and they quickly figure out to move past me. There's only one woman I'm here to see tonight. I'm frustrated I have yet to figure out where she lives or works beyond this place. She's sneaky. I admire that in her. If she was easy to hunt, I'd grow bored quickly. The last thing that can be said about Cassandra is that she's easy.

What's my plan when I have her in my presence again? I don't need a plan. The fact she easily walked away from me last time was a fluke. I'm not an easy man to escape. It was our first meeting, though, so I give myself a break. Tonight will go differently ... I guarantee it.

The lights go low, and the stage lights up ... and Cassandra's partner shows up ... alone. She does a sexy number that has every man in the audience leaning a little closer. She does her twirling and gyrating, and my eyes narrow. Where's Cassandra? Her partner, Candy, or some other stripper name, looks up and meets my gaze. I practically hear her intake of breath. I can't imagine what she's seeing in my expression right now — frustration, anger, determination. I'm sure all of this and more.

Candy, as I'll call her, finishes her performance, then exits the stage. I know the routine now, know that she'll be making

her rounds on the floor real soon. I pull out five hundred-dollar bills and hold them in my hand, in view, resting on top of the table.

Candy comes out and flirts her way across the floor before reaching my table. I meet her eyes as I scoot back my chair. She gives me a seductive smile I can see right through. This is her game face, and she knows how to make men pant. It's too bad I'm not interested in her. I think she'd be easier to land.

She straddles my lap and sits, her breasts close to my face as she effortlessly slips the bills from my fingers and they disappear into a little pouch glued to her body. The practiced look on her face falters as she rotates her hips on my lap.

I'm not going to lie, she's sexy, and I'm affected ... slightly. She presses her breasts against me as she rotates her hips. "What can I do for you, sugar?" she purrs, real lust in her eyes and voice.

I smile, not moving my hands to touch her. I know the rules of the club. I also don't want my hands on her as sexy as she is. I want them on only one woman. Since laying my eyes on Cassandra, I haven't found a sexier female.

"How about you tell me about your partner," I say with a genuine smile, an innocent smile, a look that assures her I'm a good guy ... which I'm not. Her gyrating stops, and I know I'm about to lose her. I reach into my coat and pull out five more hundreds. Her eyes widen a little. I'm sure this is the biggest tip she's getting tonight. The men here pay a lot, but not a thousand for one woman, not unless they're taking her home.

“I don’t talk about other women, but I do give one hell of a private dance,” she tells me as she leans forward, putting my face in her cleavage as the money I’ve just pulled disappears. She scoots her hips even closer to me and really grinds. You’d think I’d be sporting some major wood. I might feel a bit of arousal, but not enough to perform. How can I want this woman when I’m thinking of another?

She stands and turns, sitting back down on me and taking my hand to wrap around her. I allow this as I’m curious how far she’s willing to go for money. She places my hand on her chest and squeezes her fingers over mine as she lets out a moan, her head leaned back against my shoulder, her butt digging into my groin ... I don’t think she’s faking her desire.

“Want that private dance?” she huskily asks. Yep, her lust is far more real than an act. There’s no doubt I could have this woman tonight ... just as I can have any woman I want ... except for Cassandra. That will soon change.

“I’d love one,” I tell her. I might get her to talk if we have our own room together. She stands, excitement in her eyes. She takes my hand and leads me through the club, through a set of doors guarded by two large men who give me firm eye contact, letting me know nothing better happen without consent. Candy leads me to a small room with a couch and a table. Before she pushes me onto the sofa, the waitress comes in, sets down a fresh glass of scotch, and then disappears, the door clicking shut.

Music plays, and Candy gives me my own private show as she gyrates in front of me, moving on and off my lap before standing and tossing her tiny bra away, her breasts out in the

open. She climbs on my lap again as I pull out more hundreds, laying them on the table. She doesn't bother putting them away now that she has me in private, just gives me a dance worthy of more hundreds. I need her to trust me, so I wait to bring up Cassandra again.

The dance goes on for fifteen minutes with her all over me. Her lips come near mine, and her tongue finds my neck. I should be aroused. I should be offering her thousands to bend her over the very plush couch. But I'm only waiting to ask where Cassandra is. I'm insane.

She finishes as I drain the last of my drink. She's on my lap with her breasts inches from my face as the waitress slips back inside, discreetly sets down a fresh glass, then saunters back out of the room after Candy hands her a hundred-dollar bill. They work well as a team.

"I don't offer more to many, which you can believe or not, but for you, I'm offering the entire night," Candy tells me.

I give her a seductive smile as I touch her for the first time, my large hand splayed on her back. She leans in as if to kiss me, and I easily block it as I lay my head against her shoulder. She smells like candy so the name is fitting.

"How much for a private party with you and your partner?" I ask, the lust real in my eyes at the thought of Cassandra giving me this same dance. I have to remind myself I'm not offering money for a dance, I just need to get Cassandra alone for ten minutes ... that's the job.

Candy stiffens the slightest bit before she composes herself again. I'm sure they're asked for this a lot after one of their sexy performances. She smiles before licking my neck again.

She's good at picking up on cues and can see I don't want her mouth on mine.

"She's not here tonight, but a dance can be arranged for next Friday," she tells me. I see the gleam in her eyes. She knows I want her partner bad, and she's deciding how much I'll pay. I decide to make sure it happens. I'm not even showing my frustration at going another week before seeing Cassandra again.

"Five thousand for one hour," I tell her.

She's shocked, but covers her reaction quickly. Then she gives me a genuine smile as she climbs off my lap.

"Damn, you're either the sexiest stalker I've ever had the pleasure of dancing for, or you have it bad," she says with a laugh. She moves over, grabs her top, and puts it back in place. "Then again, a lot of men have it bad for Cassandra. I think it's the untouchable aura she puts out. It's not an aura; she won't have sex with you."

"I might have it a little bad, and I've been known to change the toughest of minds," I say. What's that going to hurt? A little honesty might get me more of what I want. I take out a few more hundreds and toss them on the table. The night has cost me thousands, and I have to wait another week ... but it's well worth it.

"Well, the pleasure has been all mine, sugar. I'll see you in a week."

With that, she puts the rest of the money away and slips from the room. I wait a few more minutes as I finish the rest of my drink, then walk from the room and see the smirk on the

bouncers' faces. I wave before I exit the club. Candy was nowhere to be seen. I paid her enough so she can go ahead and make her way home without any other lap dances.

I don't like that I have to wait a week before I see Cassandra again. Patience is a virtue, though, and she's worth the wait. I can already tell the lines between work and pleasure have been drawn and erased. When I come back I won't need to be on the floor ... I'll go straight to the private room. Candy left me the instructions at the host station. I wonder if she's going to warn Cassandra ... I hope not. I want to see her face when she enters the room and sees me.

Cassandra and I have just begun our dance. It might be off to a slow start, but all of the really good dances begin that way. Soon, we'll come to the chorus, and rockets will flare.

Let the games begin.

Chapter Five

“Another day, another dollar.” I laugh as I put the finishing touches on my makeup at the long table with girls sitting on either side of me. This room is nicer than most strip clubs, yet still the same. There’s a large table in front of a long mirror with a lot of lights where we change from our everyday lives into the sophisticated sex kittens the men in the club want to see. If they saw us as we truly are, they’d be disappointed. Outside of these walls we look just like their wives and girlfriends.

The difference is we sell seduction and sex. We put on an act for a length of time to make them kneel at our feet. We don’t complain about bills or about them leaving the toilet seat up. We’re their wet dream come to life. As soon as we walk out of these doors, we’re right back to being their wives and girlfriends, just the same as every other woman in the world.

If the men in the many clubs understood that, they’d stop paying us, stop participating in the game. That might be good for family life, but it wouldn’t be so good for my bills.

“A lot of dollars,” Samantha says as she finishes her lipstick, then sends me a kiss through the air.

“Yeah, Samantha smoked us all last Friday in tips. Tonight, it’s on for who can be the ultimate seductress,” Stephanie says with a sexy look.

There's undoubtedly competition between us to get the attention of the men with the deepest pockets, but there are enough pervs to go around and keep all of us in a life of luxury. The younger women tend to clean up quite nicely; I'm almost considered an old maid in this business, but I don't look my age, and I have moves some of these women have no clue how to pull off, so I'm not worried. I don't want to do this much longer. It's time to pass it on to the next generation. In a club like this, some of the men want women a little older, a little more sophisticated in their eyes. This isn't a dollar-tip sort of place.

"We have a private dance before our stage performance in a few hours," Samantha tells me.

"Already?" I ask.

"Yep, a date last Friday was disappointed to have only little old me. He wanted us both," she tells me with a wink as she flutters her hands up and down her stunning body.

"Ohh, is it the super hunk who paid you thousands?" Stephanie asks with real lust in her eyes.

"Yes," Samantha replies with a sigh.

"Oh, you're lucky," Stephanie says dramatically. "I want a turn with him. I'd be willing to do it for free. That man is as hot as they come."

"And filthy rich," Peggy says. "I looked him up, and it seems he's from old-world money, the kind no person can ever hope to spend." She must've bribed the bouncers at the front to get his name. I'm not interested enough to find out. Okay, I

might be a little interested, but I won't let myself follow through on my curiosity.

“Then we won't mind taking some of it off of his hands,” I say as I paint on bright red lipstick. I'd never wear this color in real life.

“We sure will,” Samantha says. “Let's give him a show he'll never forget. I think we can make him spill.”

“Gross,” I tell her. “I don't want any stickiness on me.”

All of the ladies laugh. “I'll get hot and sticky for that man,” Peggy assures us.

“You're all sex addicts. No wonder we work here. We're too shameless to be anywhere else,” I say with another laugh. It's time to have our game faces on so we get the last of the giggles out of the way.

Samantha and I put on a few layers so we can do a good strip show for the man with deep pockets, then we make our way through the club. A few men hand over bills as we pass by and make us promise to stop by later. Of course we tell them we can't wait. It's a good thing I only do this twice a month now. I'm losing my energy for it. It's getting more and more difficult to pretend I want these men.

We pass the bouncers, then make our way to the primo private suite. This room is for the longer shows with its own pole inside, a bathroom with a shower, and a personal waitress who slips drinks in through a door in the wall behind the table. This is the room where a lot of things happen.

“He knows we aren't having sex with him, right?” I ask. Samantha has never steered me wrong, but I've also never

performed in this room before. I won't admit I'm nervous, but I am growing a little concerned as we stand in the hallway.

She smiles. "He knows," she assures me. "Though, I'd do this man in a second if he wanted me. He's that hot."

I'm concerned by her words. Samantha might play the seductress, but she's a good person. She doesn't sleep with clients. The two of us might be the only women in the building who haven't taken a client to a hotel room. I've never been tempted, and Samantha is a country girl at heart. We both know this is nothing more than a game where the winner gets paid the most.

"He has eyes for only you, but he knows the rules. I'm not at all worried," she tells me.

As she opens the door, I immediately know who it is. I want to turn and run, but I haven't run in ten years, and I'm not about to start now. If this man wants to pay us thousands to perform for him, he'll get a hell of a performance ... and that's all he'll get. He might be sexy as hell and have all of the women in here panting, but I can guarantee he's never met a woman like me before.

We move inside the room, and he's sitting on the couch. He doesn't even look at Samantha as his gaze takes me in from head to toe. Our eyes meet for several long moments, and I feel an extra little thump in my chest. Holy hell, he hasn't even touched me and I'm already getting hot and bothered. How in the heck am I going to get through the next hour of entertaining this man?

"Welcome back, Cassandra," he says with pure sex in his voice. Then again, most men I've encountered have the same

voice. They see a woman as their own personal doll to do with what they want. I've learned how to exploit their needs and use them to my advantage.

"Since you have my name, do I get yours?" I ask, just as huskily. I tell myself it's all part of the performance.

"Greyson," he tells me.

"Like Russell," I say with a smirk.

"He doesn't compare to me," he says, and the confidence radiating off him certainly makes his words true.

"Okay, Greyson, what are you expecting in the next hour?" We might as well get the business side on the table and out of the way.

"To be entertained," he says with smugness. There's a line between confidence and arrogance, and this man has no idea what a line even is. He knows exactly who he is and has every right to feel as he does.

"We can do that, sugar," Samantha says.

"I'm well aware of that, Candy," he tells her with a wink, finally acknowledging her for the first time.

"Let's get the rules out of the way," I say as I sexily slide across the room and sit beside him, placing my hand on his thigh. Samantha sits on the opposite side, caressing his chest.

"Yes, rules," he says, once again giving me his full attention.

"In the private room, you get a little more freedom with touching, but if we're uncomfortable with something, we'll simply remove your fingers from where we don't want them.

Under no circumstances do the hands go into this area,” I say as I take my hand and run it between my legs. He watches with a hint of lust as I touch myself. I take a little longer than usual as I give him a wicked smile.

“If we’re happy, we don’t mind a little touching here,” Samantha says as she wraps her finger over his knuckles and guides his hand over her chest before moving it to whisper across my breast, which makes me jump the slightest bit as my nipple hardens. What in the actual hell? This doesn’t happen to me ... I mean, like ever. It never happens to me. I’ve been touched a lot, and I don’t respond. I just make the men think I respond. This man is dangerous, just like I knew he was the first time I laid eyes on him.

“That’s only if we think you’re being ... a ... very ... good ... boy,” I slowly say as I lick my lips.

“Oh, I assure you I’m the best,” he tells me as his fingers flex over my chest. Samantha can see my expression and moves his hand down to rest on her thigh.

“As for the rest, Jennie will bring you as many drinks as you like without you asking, and we’ll all have some fun,” Samantha says.

“What about talking?” he asks.

“You can talk as much as you like,” I tell him as I run my finger down his chest.

“I’ll just sit back and relax for now,” he says. He does just that as he leans into the back of the couch. I give him a smile as I rise. Samantha joins me, and we turn on the music.

I don't look Greyson in the eyes as Samantha and I perform a well-honed routine. We slowly remove each other's clothes, leaving us standing before him in tiny bras, thongs, garters, and stockings. I slide around the pole as I lean back; Samantha runs her hands over my body.

We turn as her lips brush mine before she drops to the floor and arches her back in a way that makes most men drop to their knees. That's when I make the mistake of looking over at Greyson who isn't watching Samantha ... his eyes are on only me. There's something hot about it, something that makes this strange desire in me grow.

I move across the room and straddle him. I tell myself I'm doing it for the tips, but I like sitting on him. I grab the back of his head and pull him forward, letting his lips glaze over the humps of my breasts, just skirting my nipples. I arch my back while scooting forward, and feel his enormous erection pressing against me as my chest pushes forward.

“What do you do when you're not here, Cassandra?”

I've been asked this before. “What makes you think I do anything other than this?”

He chuckles as I take his hand and place it at my throat, instantly stopping his laughter. I let go of his hand as I swirl my hips against his arousal. He runs his hands between my cleavage and down the flatness of my stomach before stopping at my panties. Never have I wanted a man to go lower, to soothe this ache I feel right now. I want him to, though, so much so it's throwing me off my routine.

“I have a feeling there's a lot more to you than you like showing the world.”

His words make me inhale sharply. I don't like this road he's trying to take me down. I refuse to speak to him, which means I need to make him unable to talk.

I circle my hips again, and he wraps his hand around my back and caresses the hot, bare skin. Samantha comes up behind me and wraps her arms around me, covering my aching breasts. I give her the slightest shake to tell her not to remove the clasp on the front of my bra. I don't want to be that exposed with this man. Yes, he's already seen my breasts, but not while I'm pressed against him. She leans down, kisses my neck, then moves beside Greyson on the couch. I turn around and circle my hips over him as he holds my sides with his hot breath on the back of my neck.

I rise, do a slow spin, then lift my foot onto his lap, my toes feeling his erection. He lets out a groan, then seems shocked the sound escaped. I lick my lips, smile, and curl my toes, making him stiffer. It seems I'm making this man of steel come undone ... and strangely, I like it.

“Undo the garter clips,” I whisper huskily.

His hands circle my thighs, intensifying that sweet ache in my core. This is all rehearsed, this is something we've done a thousand times before, but I've never had this reaction. I'm becoming more confused and trying to push the feeling away.

He slowly undoes the clips, one by one, then places his fingers in the thigh-high stocking before he peels it down my leg, his fingers caressing me in every sensitive place I didn't know I had before tonight.

As I lift my foot, he peels the stocking away before giving my foot a firm rub that feels like absolute heaven. I'm a little

shaky when I meet his gaze while putting my foot on the floor and lifting my other to his lap. He performs the same routine, and I'm almost a puddle at his feet when he finishes. I spin away before I reveal how much I desire him. The line between performance and lust blurs more by the second.

Samantha leans against him as I climb the pole, doing a few slow spins back down. She wears a big grin before she rises, moves to me, and swings around the pole. We dance together, our hands caressing each other before she does a slow spin away. She then winks at me before she exits the room. I stop, confused.

“This isn't our routine,” I say.

“I made her an offer she couldn't refuse,” he tells me.

“What do you mean?” I ask. He's thrown me off. I'm getting a lot of firsts with this man.

“I want to be with you alone,” he says.

Samantha wouldn't take offense to this. It's happened before both ways. It's been evident since we entered which of us he has eyes on, but I was comforted having my friend in here. I have over half an hour left with this man, and I'm wondering if I can keep my hormones or my act in place that long.

A small part of me likes that he only wants one woman. Too many men want multiple partners. I've seen it all too often before. It's one of the things that helps me keep my distance. His eyes on me alone might be my undoing.

“Well, sugar, then I'll give you a great show,” I say, recovering fast.

“Greyson,” he tells me.

“What?” I ask as I move toward him.

“I like my name on your lips,” he says, his voice incredibly husky.

“Okay, Greyson,” I say. This is just a performance, this is just a performance, I repeat over and over as I turn around and sit on him again, giving him the best lap dance he’ll ever get.

He’s hard beneath me as I twirl and let his hands rest on my waist. His thumbs sit at the curve of my breasts, and I ache all over as I mimic sex, the only things keeping him from entering me are his pants and a tiny scrap of satin barely containing me.

“I’m going to take you out,” he huskily whispers.

“I don’t date,” I say.

“You don’t date?” I can see he’s having a hard time keeping the conversation up ... unlike the hardness pressing against me.

“No, I don’t date.”

“Anyone? Ever?” It’s clear he doesn’t believe me.

“Nope, not ever.” We gaze at each other for several moments. He grins.

“I’m going to break your non-dating streak,” he assures me.

“Good luck,” I tell him, gaining my confidence back. If there’s one talent I have, it’s the ability to turn men down while still turning them on and continuing to tip me with nice crisp hundred-dollar bills.

I get up again, needing to break our connection, and he pulls out a wad of hundreds, throwing them on the table, reminding me I'm being paid very well for this act. There's lust in his eyes that I've seen a thousand times in other men, but with him, unlike with others, it causes a reaction inside me.

I want the money. I need the money. But I also want him. I'm horrified and ... elated at the thought. I didn't think enjoying a man with what's been done to me was possible. I figured that part of my life was broken long ago, never to be fixed again. I'm not running from him anymore. I'm taking what I want.

I smile and walk back to him before sliding down and straddling him once more as I lift his fingers to the clasp of my bra. I told him if he was a good boy he'd get to touch me more, and he's indeed being a good boy. He doesn't have to be asked twice. He flicks the clasp like an expert, and my breasts spill from my bra, which he slowly peels from my shoulders.

I feel wet heat between my thighs, something I've never felt before, as I swirl my hips against his arousal. He groans again, this time louder as he reaches up and cups my breasts. I lean down and lick his neck. He tastes fantastic, like spice and whiskey with a hint of pine. I gently suck the skin before turning, finding our lips only centimeters apart.

His hands cup my breasts, making my nipples stiff and achy. I gasp at the sensation as he closes the gap between our mouths and kisses me. I never have, and I repeat, never kissed a man in this club. I don't stop him as he deepens the kiss, his tongue tracing my lips before plunging inside my mouth.

This time I moan, and it's not an act. I continue rubbing my core against him as he holds one of my breasts, squeezing, kneading, and making me quiver while his other hand circles my back, keeping me on top of his pulsing arousal.

Our groans increase as I move faster against him, not understanding what I'm feeling. I don't want to stop, though. This is me ... not an act. I'm following my body's desire and pushing against him as I seek relief. Our kiss deepens as his fingers pinch my nipple, and I grind against him, heat smoldering, hotter and hotter.

He tilts my head as his fingers do things to my nipple I didn't think possible. He's squeezing, pinching, rubbing, and building a delightful fire inside me. I press my hips harder against him as I rock back and forth, the tingling sensation throbbing in my core.

Relief.

Relief.

Relief.

"Please," I gasp against his mouth, not understanding what I'm begging for.

He deepens the kiss as he pushes his hips higher, helping me grind against him. His tongue is masterful as he owns my mouth and pinches my nipple.

I push hard against him, then rip my mouth from his as my back arches, and I cry out in pleasure. My body starts shaking; heat and lightning rocket through me, and my core tingles in something I can't describe. I'm panting as he bends down and takes my nipple in his mouth, sucking, licking, and nipping

while I shake on top of him. Sweat is beading on my body, and I tremble so badly I couldn't move if I tried.

After what feels like hours, the throbbing stops, and I sag against him, my body spent. What in the hell was that? I need to move, but I'm not sure I can. I think I just experienced my first orgasm. What in the hell have I missed for twenty-eight years? Okay, for at least ten years of my life.

I was victimized and tortured, but I've never felt pleasure before. No wonder sex sells. No wonder so many pay so much for it. If this is the end result, I get why there are sex addicts. How have I performed so well over the years without knowing exactly what this feels like? This could change everything in my life.

"Cassandra?" Greyson asks after a solid few minutes of silence. I realize I've been plastered over him without moving. I slowly lift my head, still shocked at how good that felt. My body is jelly right now.

"Yes?" My voice is raw.

"I'm dying here," he says, his voice barely contained.

That's when I realize I'm pressed against him, and he's still as hard as a boulder.

"Oh, sorry about that," I tell him. Then for some reason I begin to giggle. I start, and there's no stopping me. It might wipe out any more tips I'm going to get from him, but I can't stop laughing. It takes a couple of minutes to get myself under control. Then I climb from his lap and stand before him on shaky knees, wearing nothing but my minuscule panties which

weren't any protection from the friction of our bodies rubbing together.

I look down and see the enormous bulge in his pants. I should have empathy for him, but at this moment, I don't. Too many men have abused me. It's befitting that I found pleasure ... and he's found none.

"There's a bathroom through that door if you need to relieve yourself," I tell him. I've said these words in other rooms many times before. Nine times out of ten, when the men realize I'm not going to take care of the problem for them, they've taken the bathroom option. We even have a little screen in each room with porn-on-demand so they can finish with an X-rated show.

"How much do you cost for the night?" he asks, lust ... and something else that scares me more than sex, burning in his gaze.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, hating the fear in my voice.

He looks as if he's contemplating what he should say. I want to reach down and demand he tell me. There's more to this man than meets the eye, and that's why he's more dangerous than anyone I've known before.

"I want to talk ... with our clothes on. I want an entire night."

I take a breath as I gain strength. I'm stronger than this. I'm not a victim anymore. I can and do say no all of the time.

"I'm not for sale ... at least beyond a dance," I tell him.

He still has fifteen minutes, but I'm not going to refund him, and I'm not staying. I need a break before I go out there and perform for a roomful of horny men.

"Everyone has a price," he insists. "What's yours? Ten thousand?"

I barely manage to keep a gasp from escaping. I shake my head. "Nope."

He eyes me as if there's no price he's not willing to pay. "You got a happy ending. Don't you think I should get mine?"

"You're free to take your own happy ending just like I did," I say, feeling the sass return to my body. What's funny is I'm tempted. I've never had good sex in my life. I've never had consensual sex. Would having consensual sex change how I feel? Would it give me back more power? I don't know, but I'm afraid to find out. It might send me over the edge of the life I've spent years building. It's too risky.

"Twenty-five thousand," he says. I realize he's dead serious.

I don't know what to think as I stare at this man who makes me feel things I've never felt before. I'm speechless, but I want him. One word finally escapes my mouth before I have time to think about it, before I have time to tell him no.

"Done," I tell him. I turn and walk from the room. What in the hell did I just do? What did I just say? Did I agree to have sex with him for twenty-five thousand dollars? No, I couldn't have done that. It's not possible.

I don't have time to analyze it. I need thirty minutes alone before my next performance. I'm sure he'll be in the audience

waiting for me. What will I do? I'm going to come to my senses ... I'm sure I'm going to remember exactly who I am ... before it's too late.

Chapter Six

Greyson

I don't leave the room until my hour plus a few more minutes is up, and I'm still half erect when I walk out. I've never before reacted to a woman the way I responded to Cassandra Montana. I also know I have to have her. I won't function properly until I do. I don't think she planned on having an orgasm, but when she exploded in my arms it took all I had not to explode with her. That hasn't happened to me since I was fourteen making out in the back of my car.

I have far more self-control than most men. I take pride in my control. I don't desire a woman so much I can't think of anything but her. In this case, with this woman, though, I'm obsessed. I have to have her. Even with this knowledge, I'm slightly disappointed she accepted my offer so quickly.

I need to bed her, as well as get information from her, but I like this chase. I like the seduction. I love having her in my arms, and tasting her for the first time was heaven. Now, I want to spread her thighs and bury my face in her sweetness. I need to taste every inch of her and have her come again and again beneath me. Once she's done that, I'll take her hard, make her mine ... for the night ... only the night. Then I can purge her from my system and do what I've come here to do. I knew I'd have to get close to her ... but I wasn't planning on getting this close. I didn't expect to want her.

I enter the club floor and take a seat in the middle of the room. It will take all I have to watch her on that stage, knowing every eye on the floor is on her. Of course her partner is hot and sexy, but no one compares to Cassandra. I don't want other men watching her, which is absolutely ridiculous as this is her job, where I found her. She's not mine. I don't want her to be mine. I want to taste her, to rock her world, then to be done with her.

I'm disappointed she accepted sex for money, but I won't turn it down. I have enough money to burn, more than enough. What I don't have is her naked beneath me. I want to take her in every position I've ever enjoyed before. I have a feeling it will be different with her. I have a feeling she's a once-in-a-lifetime partner. Maybe it will take more than one night to appease my raging appetite for her. I don't care. I'll take as much as I need to purge her.

I won't feel guilty as she'll get more than enough satisfaction from our mating. I'll please her so much she'll beg me to stay ... many women have. I can walk away without a backward glance, though. Once I've gotten what I want and need, I won't have to stick around for more. It becomes monotonous by then.

It doesn't take long for the lights to dim on the stage, and I sit back and wait. When they come back on Cassandra and Samantha are in place, this time in Old West clothing. They do their performance, and I can't take my eyes off Cassandra. A few times she glances out, and our eyes meet. She licks her lips and smiles just for me. That doesn't stop other men from hollering and throwing money on the stage. I clench my fists and fight the urge to go up there and carry her off. I could take

these bouncers. I could have her now. I will take her anywhere ... anytime.

I want to take her away from this life. I want ... I stop myself. What in the hell am I thinking? This is insane. I know who she is ... or I have an excellent idea of who she is. I need to bed her and move on. That's all it is. I don't care if these men look at her. They've done it a thousand times before, and she's not mine to protect. She's mine to own for a night, and that's all.

No matter how much I tell myself this, I still clench my fingers into tight fists. I want the performance to be over. It finally comes to an end with bubbles falling over the two women as they're wrapped in each other's arms. The lights go off, and I let out a sigh of relief.

I have another drink as Cass and Candy appear on the floor and make their way through the room. I force myself to stay in my seat as Cassandra slides onto other men's laps, throwing her head back and dancing for them as she collects more and more money.

When I think I can't take another second of watching her with other men, she makes her way to me. She smiles as she sits on my lap, making my erection jump back to life as I circle my hand around her and pull her close. I want to taste her nipple again so badly it's taking away my breath.

"Careful, Jimmy doesn't like it when men get touchy," she warns.

I give her a forced smile. After watching other men touch her for the past hour, I'm not in the best of moods. "I gave

Jimmy one hell of a tip when I came out of the private room,” I tell her with a smirk.

“Oh, buying off my protection. Tsk, tsk, that’s not playing fair,” she says. A sparkle in her eyes tells me she’s not all that worried. I have a feeling she can protect herself just fine. I might have to test that theory. I think hot, rough sex with this woman is just what the doctor ordered.

She gives me a modified lap dance before dropping a note on the table and ignoring the hundreds I have sitting there for her.

“This one’s on the house,” she says before she turns and saunters away. I’m not sure if she will change then meet me or how this will work. I just know I’m closer than ever to taking her from this room and making her mine. I smile to think anything has been on the house. I can positively say this is the most expensive sex I’ll ever have. Then again, I’ve never paid for sex before. I’m paying for so much more than sex right now, though, she just doesn’t know it yet. When she figures it out, I have a feeling more fireworks are going to burst in the sky. I have a feeling Cassandra doesn’t like getting fooled.

After she’s out of view, I drain the rest of my scotch, then tell the waitress, who’s immediately at my table, to bring me water instead as I hand her a bundle of bills to pay for my drinks and tip. I finally pick up the note, figuring it’s the instructions for the rest of our night. I’m confused as I read the words written on the front.

Deal or No Deal.

What the hell?

I open the note, and on the inside, it says No Deal, then has a kiss done in lipstick next to it. I stare at the words for a moment, then laugh. Sure, my dick isn't appreciating the situation, but she just turned me down ... and for some strange reason I like it a hell of a lot more than I should.

Cassandra might not realize it yet, but she's just activated the lion inside of me, and with two little words, she just made me the most dangerous predator she's ever dealt with. I'm officially on the hunt and won't stop until I get my prey.

I know she's won tonight, but I'll have the ultimate victory in the end. I can't wait to see how this game ends. One thing I know for damn sure is it will end with a big explosion that will rock both of our worlds. I'll make damn sure of that.

I rise and exit the club. I didn't get what I came for, but I got enough to keep me happy ... until my phone rings. I look down and let out a sigh. What in the hell am I going to say?

"Yes," I say shortly.

"What in the hell is taking so long?" comes the thundering voice on the other end of the line.

"You and I both knew this was a long game," I reply.

"There are limits," he replies.

"I'm closer. I'm sure it's her," I say.

There's a long pause. "How sure?"

I take a breath. A part of me wants to protect her and keep her far away from the coming storm. I brush this feeling aside. It's absurd I'm having these thoughts.

"Ninety percent sure," I reply.

“Make it a hundred percent,” the voice says before the call disconnects.

I walk to my vehicle in a far worse mood than I was only a few minutes ago. This is so damn complicated, which I usually love. For some reason I’m not loving it now. It can’t have anything to do with Cassandra, I assure myself. I know I’m wrong, though. I’m too close, and it’s only just begun. How in the hell will I feel about it if we do sleep together? I shake my head. I can’t think about that. I have a job to do ... and it will get done ... the stakes are too high for it not to happen.

I push all doubts from my head as I drive away from the club. It’s time to up my game. We’re running out of time ...

Chapter Seven

The bell over my door sounds, and I look up to see a new customer walking inside. I smile as the woman comes to the coffee counter.

“Hi, I’m Cheryl Spangler, the police chief’s wife, and I’ve been dying to come here, but I was out of town helping my mother for the past month,” the cheerful woman with long black hair and sparkling green eyes says at a rapid pace. There’s no shyness to her, just as there isn’t with a lot of the people in this unusual town.

“Hi, Cheryl, I’m Cassandra, the owner. I’m delighted you’ve come. Let me give you a coffee on the house since I think the world of your husband.”

She laughs. “Oh yes, everyone loves Dan. He does, however, get into trouble here and there with the upper levels in the department.” I start making her coffee.

“Why is that? I can’t imagine him getting into trouble for anything,” I say, meaning it.

“Oh, he likes to show pictures he shouldn’t share with the public. He also gets in trouble with me from time to time. Believe it or not, he got called out to a house on the outskirts of town because a person reported their neighbor had an alligator as a pet in their home.”

“What? Are you kidding me? Who in the heck would want an alligator for a pet?” I ask in horror.

“It was only a baby, about a foot long, and my darling husband actually asked me if we could keep it. I shut him down. Not only are we not allowed to keep alligators as pets in Oregon, which was why he was called to the house in the first place, but I don’t want one of those reptiles in my house.” She shudders. “I prefer to be the predator. I don’t need anything in my home hunting me.”

“I can’t believe anyone would want one.”

“Well, people have all sorts of exotic tastes, which is great, but we don’t need a bunch of alligators getting released into the wild and multiplying, bringing them permanently to Oregon. We have enough creatures to worry about as it is,” she says.

“Would they survive? I can’t imagine how when it’s so much colder here than in the South.”

“All living creatures have a way of adapting so they can live,” she points out.

I finish making her coffee, make one for myself, then join her in the little sitting area with my favorite comfortable chairs. One nice thing about my job is I’m the boss and can take a break anytime I feel like it. Getting to know my customers is the best marketing I can do.

“Tell me more about yourself,” I insist. When the shop isn’t crowded, I like to sit one-on-one with my customers to get to know them. The more they trust me, the easier it will be for me to stay in this delightful town.

“My life isn’t all that interesting beyond my husband’s crazy work stories. On the other hand, my fourteen-year-old daughter is driving me to drink.”

It takes all I have not to tell her I’d give anything to have my teenage daughter in my home driving me crazy. “I’ve heard teenagers are like having aliens in your home,” I say instead, with a forced laugh.

She sighs. “It used to be so easy, but I don’t know how to reach her anymore. How can I fight the internet, social media, and the other kids who are determined to get into trouble? Even in our safe little town, the bad still reaches her. I thought raising her in Ravish would be enough protection to save her from the big bad world, but there are so many monsters around, and they hide behind every doorway and sneak inside from the palm of our children’s hands. It seems we have no power in raising our children anymore.”

I feel her pain. No, I have no influence in my daughter’s life as she was ripped from my arms as a baby, but I personally know exactly how many monsters are out there. I know they don’t bother to hide in the dark anymore. Morality has been turned upside down, giving too many wins to the bad guys. They smile into cameras before they close their doors and do horrific things. I can’t think about what’s still happening. I broke free, but barely survived. There are so many who are never seen again. It’s excruciating to know it’s happening to so many children, and I’m powerless to stop it.

“I’m sorry you’re struggling,” I tell her, not knowing how I can help, even though everything within me wants to do just that.

“This is a serious conversation for our first meeting. I’m sorry,” Cheryl tells me, her cheeks flaming.

“You can vent to me anytime. I’ve seen the dark side of life,” I tell her.

“Did something happen to you?” Cheryl asks.

I freeze as I give her a big smile. “Something has happened to most of us sometime in our lives. My story isn’t unique,” I lie.

She gives me an assessing look that tells me she isn’t buying it. I instantly respect her more when she doesn’t push the issue. “I have a feeling you and I are going to be friends,” she says. Her phone buzzes. She looks down and sighs. “That’s my darling husband saying he’s about to be locked up if I don’t come home. I think he’s close to locking our daughter behind bars to keep her from getting into trouble.”

“Ugh, this is so tough. If you show me a picture, I’ll keep an eye out for her now that I know what you’re going through.” She smiles as she pulls out her phone and shows me several pics of her daughter, smiling and looking like every other happy teenager in the world.

“I appreciate this. Maybe other positive role models will do more for her than any words I can say,” Cheryl says.

She stands, and I walk her to the door. We say goodbye, and then she’s off. I’m barely back inside when sirens sound in the distance. Even after fourteen years, the sound still sends chills through me. I wonder if this will ever stop. Then again, reacting to sirens isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

When I was fourteen and heard the sound, I wasn't capable of feeling anything. Now I feel a lot. I spent time behind bars and never want to do it again. At that time of my life, juvie was the safest place I could be, which is quite sad. It wasn't a good time there, though. I did grow up, that's for sure, I grew up more than any fourteen-year-old child should. I'm no longer that child. I have to remind myself of this a lot lately.

I force myself to smile. Maybe my next dance routine will be to sirens. I'm sure that will make more than my own heart race, and maybe help set me free in my own mind. How many men who come to the club can say they have clean hands? I bet not many of them. They aren't coming to the club with pure intentions, that's for sure. I know a lot of what happens down that red hallway of the club. I know what happened to me down that hallway.

I shake off that, though. I won't think of Greyson while I'm in Safe Haven Bookstore. This is my happy place. This bookstore is what's going to make my life better. This is where I finally figure out exactly who I am and settle down to live the rest of my life free from drama and pain.

"Cass, come look at the new display," Mattie demands.

She's been working for me for a month now, and the girl has talent ... major talent. I've given her more and more responsibility with each shift she works. This past week, she's been in charge of the children's section.

I follow her to the front corner of the floor. I gasp. "Wow, Mattie, this is amazing."

"I know," she says, beaming with pride.

“You’ve done a lot on a five-hundred-dollar budget.”

I look at the comfortable space in the front window of the store. As patrons walk past, they can look in the window and see a perfect children’s area. Six small colorful bean bag chairs are arranged around a large armchair with a pastel rainbow-colored table beside it. Hanging from the ceiling are clouds with miniature raindrops dangling from them attached by fishing line. Above the clouds is a sunshine cutout, and a beautiful rainbow with all of the colors running through them.

There’s an L of bookshelves stocked with the colorful spines of children’s books and at the end of each shelf is a bin with finger gadget toys and stuffed animals from characters in the books.

“I went to Wendy’s secondhand store and got the bean bag chairs that came in last night. I cleaned them so they’re as good as new. Derek had this chair on Facebook Marketplace, and the table is from my house. My dad helped me build it five years ago, but I’ve redecorated to more mature things, and it fits the sunshine and rainbow theme better. I also got the gadget toys at the secondhand store. Kids listen more if they can play with something in their hands. I ordered the stuffed animals from Etsy. It will be fun for story hour to see animals from the kids’ favorite books.”

She’s practically jumping up and down in her excitement.

“You’ve done all of this in a week. I can’t imagine what you’re going to do next,” I tell her.

“I want to do a young adult section in the back corner. The adults have the coffee area, and the kiddos have this section. Kids my age need a cool area where we can kick back.”

“I couldn’t agree more. That should be your next task,” I tell her.

The sirens get louder, and we turn to see two large trucks pass by.

“What’s happening?” Mattie asks as she walks to the front door.

“Let’s find out.”

Mattie and I walk outside to see two fire trucks and a cop car about a block down the street. We instantly smell smoke. I turn and lock my doors, and then we move side by side to where a crowd is gathering.

“What’s going on?” I ask when I see Micah Clark, the fishing store owner. His trusty dog, Bass, is at his side. He has to be the most well-behaved dog I’ve ever seen. He doesn’t run off or bark at the townspeople. He’s not only Micah’s dog but the entire town’s favorite pet.

“I don’t know yet. There’s a fire by Booker’s garage.”

“Oh no! Is everyone safe?”

“I assume so since the building’s fine,” Micah says.

“We only have one mechanic in town, so I hope it doesn’t hit his shop,” Lloyd says as he moves up next to us.

“Shops can be rebuilt, people can’t be resurrected,” I tell Lloyd, who is scowling as he looks over the crowd, trying to figure out exactly what’s happening.

“I drive a 1960 Dodge, I need Booker,” Lloyd tells me.

“Some people said strangers were hanging out behind the shop down at the river. I’m wondering if they had anything to

do with this,” Dillan Scott, the bar owner, says. For such a large man he sure came out of nowhere. I take the slightest step toward Micah. Dillan makes me incredibly nervous. If anyone in town knows any gossip though, Dillan’s the one to share it.

“I heard the same rumors about strangers in town,” Boomer Write, the high school principal, says. He has shocking white hair that always makes him stand out in a crowd. He also has a voice very fitting to his name. I’m sure when he makes announcements at the school, the kids sit up and listen.

“We have strangers here all the time,” I remind them. “Heck, I’ve only been here about six months, and I’m not starting any fires.” I have to stand up for outsiders since I’m still not a fully accepted member of Ravish, Oregon. Some of these communities are harder to get in with than a cult hiding from the law.

“We love tourists, it’s what keeps us operating,” Micah says. “But these fellows looked like they were up to no good.”

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“For starters, they were wearing suits. Who in the hell wears a suit in Ravish? This is a small community for fishing and rafting. We don’t trust suit-wearing types,” Neil Majors, the postmaster, says.

I laugh. “Pastor Chad always wears a suit,” I point out.

All of the men scoff. “The pastor doesn’t count.”

“We all count in God’s eyes,” Pastor Chad says as he joins our conversation. Dang, these people are good at sneaking up

from seemingly nowhere. I need to remember this in case I ever want to gossip. I better do it far from town.

“Yes, Pastor, we are, but some people won’t be turning to God, instead taking a high-speed elevator to the basement,” Neil says with a laugh.

“Everyone’s redeemable,” Pastor Chad says with a smile.

“We’ll have to agree on disagreeing about that,” Neil says.

I silently agree with Neil. There are a lot of people in this world who deserve a one-way ticket to hell. My father was one of those men. He was about as evil as a person can get. I’ve seen the dark side of mankind, and I’d be happy never to see it again. I don’t understand it. When a baby is born, that child is perfect in every single way. What makes a person go from infinite innocence to utter corruption? I’ll never get it, especially when I think that Hitler was a baby, as was Jeffrey Dahmer. Gross. A shiver rushes through me.

“Those two guys came in for drinks earlier. They sure looked like they were up to no good to me,” Ethan, the grumpy store owner, says as he joins in. Our little circle is getting bigger by the second.

“Why’d they look suspicious?” I ask. “It sounds like the rumor mill is getting out of hand.” They don’t acknowledge my protests.

“They looked all official like maybe government types right down to the aviator sunglasses they wore in the store,” Ethan says with disgust. “They’re always trying to mess with my business and throw so many damn regulations on me that a man can’t run a proper business.”

“They want us to be safe,” I tell him.

He waves his hand in the air. “Trust me, Cassandra, we’re plenty smart at figuring out what’s right for our town. We don’t need no damn Washington bureaucrats to tell us how to run our own businesses.”

“I have to agree with you on that,” Neil says.

Ethan glares at him. “You’re a postmaster, which means you are one of those bureaucrats,” he says.

“I’m just trying to make a living,” Neil says with a friendly smile. “I don’t have any loyalty to Washington and their minions.”

“Whatever,” Ethan says before he turns and walks away. He heads in the direction of his store.

“I might not be a fan of bureaucrats either, but I don’t see them starting any fires,” Derek, the gym owner, says as he joins us. Derek is as large as Dillan, but for some reason Derek doesn’t scare me like Dillan does. Who knows why I have these reactions on a regular basis? Maybe it’s a mutual pain in his eyes that he tries to hide as much as I try to hide my own. Our souls may be aligned. Whatever it is, I like Derek, and I love his gym.

We all continue to speculate while the fire department puts out the blaze. I can’t help but smile as their logo with shorty fires burning on the dance floor winks at us from the side of their bright red truck.

“Well, this is somewhat anticlimactic,” Neil says when the last of the flames are put out, and the crowd begins to dissipate.

“It’s good that it was this easy to put out,” I tell them.

“You always like to live on the bright side of life,” Neil says.

“That I do. Life’s too short to be negative.” I don’t add that I’ve spent far too many years without smiling. I don’t want to go back to that place ever again.

“We don’t get a lot of excitement here so I wouldn’t mind a little drama. It would make my games with Ethan much more interesting,” Neil says, making everyone laugh. “Micah isn’t the only one who can beat him in a chess game.”

“You guys are always sparring, but you keep getting together,” I remind him.

“Sparring keeps our minds sharp,” Neil says.

Dan Spangler stops his police cruiser near us and steps out. For once he isn’t wearing a smile. This wipes all of the ones on our faces away.

“What’s going on, Sheriff?” Ethan asks.

“We don’t know yet. We need help finding those two gentlemen several of the townspeople are talking about. Booker told me he saw a black Escalade pull away about ten minutes before he noticed the smoke.”

“You mean there might be some truth that the fire could’ve been started on purpose?” I ask.

“We aren’t ruling it out,” Dan tells us. “We can’t find evidence of that, but we’re just beginning to look. We want to question those men.”

This causes a shiver to run down my spine. I know this has nothing to do with me, and I won't show a reaction because I don't want this town to know I'm from D.C. I don't want them to know what happened in my past to lead me here. I'm sure if there were any Washington types here, it has nothing to do with me.

Heck, the government has all sorts of agencies in America that have no clue I exist. I still don't like it. I have to remind myself that my past won't come back to haunt me or bite me on the ass. I'm safe. I've been safe for a very long time. I'm no longer that scared girl on the run. I've been smart. I didn't link anything back to my old life, and I don't attach anything to my new name. I'm careful with everything I do so I can stay safe. I don't think anyone wants me but, like most of the people in this town, I don't trust people from my old life. They have too much power, and they use it to eliminate their enemies without a soul knowing it is happening.

"Everyone is heading out, and we have lots of people in town. Should we go back to the store?" Mattie asks, pulling me from going down the rabbit hole of hysteria.

"Yes, that's a good idea," I tell her. I take another second to glance out at the field by Booker's place and another shiver runs through me. I shake it off. I'm being stupid. I have nothing to worry about. We start to walk.

"Sometimes you get a look in your eyes that makes me wonder if you need a friend to talk to," Mattie wisely says. I'm shocked at how perceptive this child is.

"I think we all have traumas in our previous lives," I tell her with a smile. "I get lost in my head sometimes, but I'm

fine.” I’m more broken than I could ever say, but I won’t share that with a child. No kid should be forced to grow up too fast because adults can’t conduct themselves properly.

“My mom always says that we can look fine on the outside while we’re boiling over on the inside. I like you, Cass, and I love working for you. I want you to know that if you ever need to talk I might be young, but I’m a good listener.”

I have to blink back tears at the kind words of this child. I stop and pull her to me for a hug. She doesn’t hesitate to wrap her arms around me. One tear falls as I pull away. I laugh as I wipe it from my cheek.

“I’m okay, Mattie, I promise. It means the world to me that you’re here for me,” I tell her.

“They aren’t just words, I mean them. We take care of each other in Ravish. It’s why I’m so glad to live here.” We begin walking again, and though I haven’t talked to her about anything I’m holding inside, I feel better with her assurances that everything will be okay.

We return to the store where several of our usual patrons patiently wait for us to open back up. They want to gossip about all of the commotion, and they want coffee and donuts to do it with. As I open the door, I paste on a smile, then I’m too busy to worry about anything over the next few hours.

I’m sure this is nothing to worry about anyway. I’ll forget all about it in a day or two. The whole town will. No harm came to anyone. The men were probably looking at land and most likely flicked a cigarette, never knowing a fire had started.

It doesn't really matter, we all have real lives to look after. We aren't in a fiction novel where monsters lurk behind every corner and conspiracy theories need to be tracked down. This is the real world where regular life has no twists and turns. If I tell myself this enough, it will be true.

I'm finally relaxed, safe, and somewhere I can call home. I couldn't be any safer than I am in my bookstore ... in Safe Haven.

Chapter Eight

Fourteen Years Ago

The pain is unbearable as the doctor tells me to push. Everything within me wants to resist. I don't want to push my daughter from the safety of my womb. Once she's out of my body she's no longer mine. They tried to get me to do a C-section because of my age, but I refused. I'd rather die giving birth than have her pulled from my body without being able to hold her at least once. With a C-section, I might not get to hold her at all. They very well could take her away while I'm being stitched up. That's unacceptable.

No matter how much I fight labor, my body eventually does what it's made to do. I can no longer resist the feeling to push ... then comes searing pain. I feel my little girl sliding from me, and I hear the sweetest sound on earth ... her first cry.

I can't help but smile as she wails at the doctor, letting him know she's as unhappy to be pushed into this world as I am to let her escape the safety of my womb. I cry tears of sorrow and joy as the doctor lays her on my chest and a nurse wipes her tiny body. I look down into her perfect face as she screams.

"You're okay, little one, you're with Mama," I whisper. As soon as she hears my voice, the wails stop, and she nuzzles against me. Her tiny warm body on mine is a feeling I'll never

forget. It's so perfect and meant to be. I need to hold on to this feeling as long as I can or I'll never make it after she's gone.

Though I'm only fourteen, I've been through more in my short life than most adults could possibly think about happening to another person. Holding my daughter is the first time I've felt at peace. I never want to let her go. She's so precious, and touching her is surreal instead of feeling her move inside me.

"Angel, I'm going to call you Angel," I say. She's snuggled against me. I know I don't get to name her, but to me she'll always be Angel, my guardian angel, the only thing that saved me from my miserable life. She was what convinced me to live when I had no other reason to do just that.

"Let's see how much the baby weighs," the sweet nurse, who's been with me ever since I was brought to the hospital, says. I grip my daughter a little tighter.

"Will I get her back?" I ask with panic.

"Yes, darling, the scale is right here in the room. Let's get her measured and bundled, and we'll place her right back in your arms."

Reluctantly I let go of my daughter. This nurse has to know my story. She has to realize this baby has a family waiting to adopt her. I don't know who the adoptive parents are or where she's going when she's ripped away from my arms. That doesn't mean I won't try to find her, but I will have to let her go for now. I want to enjoy every precious second I can before that happens.

Because of my age I'll remain in juvie until I'm eighteen ... then I'll be out with my record sealed. I haven't had time to figure out what I will do after that, but my daughter will be three years and four months old when I'm set free. She'll still be young. Maybe, just maybe, I can get her back. The DA says there's no chance of that happening. However, I have nothing but time until I'm out of here. I might be able to figure out a way to make it happen.

"It looks like your daughter is five pounds, six ounces, and nineteen inches long. She's a bit on the small side, but her vitals are good. We're going to keep her in the hospital an extra day or two to make sure everything is okay with her," the nurse tells me.

She places my baby back in my arms, this time wrapped in a sweet pink blanket. Her little eyes are open, and I cradle her close as we gaze into each other's eyes for long moments while the doctor delivers my placenta.

"Will she be with me?" I ask as I look at the nurse. Both the nurse and doctor look at me with sadness. This tells me they're aware of my situation. I'm grateful they haven't talked to me about it while I was in labor and now while I hold my sweet Angel.

"She doesn't need to go to ICU as her vitals are good," the nurse says. She seems not to know what else she can say.

Tears fall down my cheeks. "I'm sure you realize I'm in juvie. They're taking her away from me as soon as you give the go-ahead," I say as I sob. I try so hard to hold back my tears. I don't want my daughter to sense my immense sadness. I don't want our only moments together to be painful. She

won't remember me, but something inside of me wants something inside of her that will always seek out her mama.

“Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. Yes, we're aware of the cops, but we don't know why you're in juvie,” the nurse says as she moves to my side and places her hand over mine.

“I'm guilty, but there was a good reason for doing what I did. I'm not a monster, I promise. There's no way I'd ever hurt this baby. She's the only person on this planet I love. I just want to hold my daughter for a little while,” I sob.

The nurse gives me the kindest look anyone has ever given me, and then she looks at the doctor. They share a wordless conversation I don't understand.

“Dr. Murphy, it appears our patient is bleeding too much,” the nurse says.

“Yes, I see that, Nurse Loraine. We're going to have to keep her in the ICU for a few days,” he responds.

“The baby looks a little jaundiced as well,” she says. I stare at my daughter with worry. Then the doctor speaks again. I don't understand what's happening, but something is going on between the doctor and nurse.

“Yes, I agree. Baby Angel will also need to be in the ICU.”

“I'll let the officers know she and the baby will have to remain in our care for at least forty-eight hours,” Nurse Loraine says before she squeezes my hand, gives me a sad smile, then walks from the room, leaving me with the doctor who applies stitches to me.

“We're giving you two days,” he tells me. “For recovery.” I realize what they've just done, and more tears pour down my

cheeks. They've given me a gift they didn't need to give: their compassion. They've done this without knowing my story. They've done this because they are kind and good.

It's my first proof that some people can indeed be good humans. I may never see anything like this again, but these strangers have given me the greatest gift I've ever been given — the only real gift I've ever been given. Nothing else will ever compare.

I barely notice as the doctor finishes stitching me up. I'm then moved from the delivery room to the ICU with limited staff. The officers are still outside my door, but they aren't in the room with me, giving me a little time of peace with this perfect daughter of mine.

Nobody takes my baby girl, and I get to spend the next forty-eight hours with her with no cops, no social workers, and nobody taking her away. I nurse and hold her, never putting her down, not even for a nap. She sleeps in my arms and remains there when awake as we gaze into each other's eyes.

It's Angel and me, and I make a lifetime out of these two days to help me survive the next few years. I don't know when or if I'll see her again, so I'm going to memorize every little thing about her. She's my precious baby, and I'm in love with her.

She has a perfect little birthmark on her right side near her hip that looks like a strawberry. Her hungry cry is the most adorable sound I've ever heard, and she has ten perfect fingers and toes. She's far too good for me. Even knowing she will most likely be better off in someone else's home, I never want to let her go. I can't give her anything, even if I were released

from my prison term, but no one will love her as I do. That has to count for something.

Our forty-eight hours together ends far too soon. In the blink of an eye my baby is ripped from my sobbing arms, to be given to strangers, and I'm again placed in handcuffs and taken back to detention.

The first night without my daughter I cry for ten hours straight, dehydrating so severely I'm taken to the infirmary. I try to find a will to live, but it's so hard when my breasts ache with the need to feed my child, my ears hurt with the absence of her cry, and my heart is ripping in two.

How does anyone give up their child and survive? How can anyone endure this much pain? I've been physically hurt before. I've been mentally and emotionally broken. Nothing, though, absolutely nothing compares to the pain I'm feeling right now. How can I wake up each day knowing she's gone? How can I wake up, forgetting for a brief second that she's gone, and still move after that? How will I make it without her?

After the first week, my will to survive starts to return. I have to live. I have to live long enough to find her. She's mine no matter what anyone says. She's my baby, and I will find her. They will pay ... all of them will pay ... because I'm going to bring the whole thing down. I don't know how or when, but I'll get my revenge on the monsters who have done this to Angel and me.

Once my determination is set, I close my eyes and sleep. I can do anything with the hope of seeing Angel again. She's my reason to live. Nothing anyone does from this point

forward can break me ... I'm a mother searching for her child ... nothing trumps that ... not even the elite of the world. They won't win in the end. They can have their short victories, but the battle is mine, and I'll be the one standing on top when all is said and done.

With my new mission firmly formed in my mind, I make plans. There's so much to do in just over three years. When I leave this place, I won't be lost. When I leave this prison, I'll know where I'm going and what I will do. I have time to figure it out, but I don't have time to waste. Every second of every day counts. If I want to live ... I have to fight. Taking my baby from me has created more of a fighter than anything else has done up to this point. I'm going to fight even if I lose in the end. I'll at least go down with my pride in place. They haven't stripped me of all of my free will. They tried, but they lost.

Chapter Nine

The music is blaring in the club, and the audience is on the edge of their seats. I stand and wait. Today's show is a solo for me. To speak honestly, when I began stripping, it was exciting. I felt in control like the stage was mine to do what I wanted, and all of those below me were my slaves. After years of having zero control of my life the feeling was euphoric.

This feeling has changed over the years. I transform my routines and push myself to be the best, to make the most of my time, but even with that, it's not the same. It's not that I'm bored, however, I'm tired of showing my body, I'm tired of men staring at me, lusting after me, and wanting to take something from me.

For years, I was the one taking from *them*, but as I draw closer to self-sufficiency I know this part of my life will permanently close ... but not tonight. Tonight, there will be hundreds of men looking at me, fantasizing about me, and hoping to catch my eye. They think I want all of them, and they're hoping to be chosen. They've watched me over and over again, and they still have hope to be chosen to be mine for the night.

I love my body. This isn't something I could always say, but I work out, dance, and push myself. I love the muscles and how I move in ways many others can't. Sometimes when I'm

on stage I forget anyone is watching ... it's just me and the music that takes me to another place.

I also have to admit I get a thrill when doing a move, arching my back, spiraling down the pole on center stage, spreading my legs, and watching the hunger in the men's eyes whose gazes are for me alone. I've never been turned on by it ... until Greyson ... but I've enjoyed the power of doing what I do. I've enjoyed the control I've had over men watching me.

Tonight, my song is *Rock with You*. I'm wearing a pair of cut-off jean shorts that hug me quite nicely, a plain white button-down shirt that's tied in a knot halfway up my stomach, a cowboy hat, and bright pink leather cowboy boots. I step onto the stage and sweep the crowd with my gaze while taking a deep, healing breath.

The place is full as it always is. Some are here for me, knowing I'm only here two days a month, some are regulars, and some are first-timers. I'm pretty good at figuring out who is who. Men surround the stage, some leering, some touching themselves, some too drunk to focus on anything as I always do the late show. I smile, looking as if I'm basking in their attention. It's all a game I've perfected. I always make the final winning move. I'm so good at it that they don't even realize it's happening.

I saunter to the end of the stage, slowly dropping down on all fours and doing a catwalk to the men, bringing my covered chest close to one of the bachelor party men's faces. I lean back and slowly untie the knot on my shirt, then undo the buttons one by one as the man looks on.

I pull one sleeve off, then the other. Beneath the shirt, this time I'm only wearing sparkling pink pasties instead of a bra. Eyes widen as they gaze at my perfect natural breasts. I make eye contact with several men, who gaze adoringly back at me. I give a wink before I rise to my feet.

I slide back to the center of the stage and take hold of the pole, easily climbing it before twirling around with one leg hooked, one arm out, my body swaying perfectly. I hit the floor and swing my hips, making love to the pole before I lean in and slide down, my body arching as I reach the floor. I turn, leaning against the pole as I cup my breasts and spread my thighs, planting my feet on the floor and thrusting my hips high in the air.

I rise, undoing the button on my shorts and taking the zipper down. I slowly peel my jean shorts away, taking my time as I caress my shapely legs from thigh to toes. I kick them away, standing before the crowd with my hot pink thong and matching pasties glittering in the dim light. I turn and bend, my ass high in the air as I play peek-a-boo with the crowd who are trying to be more reserved but still moaning as their eyes stay glued to my every move.

The coolness of the air conditioning along with the hot spotlights hitting me makes my skin tingle with heat waves and goosebumps. I rub my hand across my breasts, down my flat stomach, and over my covered core, causing the eyes gazing back at me to glaze over. I grow more brazen, just as I always do at this point in my routine.

I strut across the stage and lie down on my back, my upper body propped up by my elbows. I turn my head with a come-

hither expression and meet the gaze of ... Greyson. I gasp ... but recover quickly. I knew he'd be here, so I don't understand why my heartbeat starts thundering at the sight of him.

He's wearing a scowl as his gaze bores into me. He's looking at my face, not my body, and he's tense. Does he think he has a right to me? Does he think our last dance ... my first orgasm ... makes me his? He's sipping on an amber drink, and looks like he wants to destroy every man in this club. His tongue swipes out and traces his lips, and I feel a twinge of heat rush through my body.

I blame the stage lights, the music, and this new awakening of my body. I don't break eye contact with him as I turn, spreading my thighs and arching up even more. The other men in the club lean closer, their gazes all over me, but my eyes are for Greyson only. I'm playing a dangerous game with him ... and I can't seem to stop.

I rip my gaze away and rise to my feet, dancing my way back to the pole. I lean against it, stretching my hand above my head, my right hand caressing my body while swinging my hips in a seductive arch. I feel wet heat between my thighs, and I breathe out, my gasps natural this time. I rub my breasts, shocked at how hard my nipples are beneath the pasties. They're aching ... painful ... leading my gaze back to Greyson as I picture his tongue on me.

I show an O of pleasure I don't have to fake as I slowly peel away the first pastie, tossing it aside before moving to the other side and doing the same. I then lean against the pole as I cover my breasts with my palms, both to tease and to relieve

the ache I'm feeling. I move my hands into my hair as I twist my body around the pole.

I don't look at Greyson again. I'm afraid if I do I'll orgasm right on this stage. What a beautiful feeling I've missed out on my entire life. I don't know what to do about it, though. I know he'd take me if I let him, but I've never wanted to be taken by a man. I shouldn't want it now.

I rip myself from the pole, my routine altered as I try to sift through these aches my body is feeling. I drop to my knees and crawl to the end of the stage. As money is tossed my way, I lie down and cover my breasts. I twist my body, opening my legs, shutting them, and touching myself all while thinking of the man whose eyes are for me alone.

The end of my act arrives, and I lie on my back as I lift my legs high in the air. Slowly, I spread my thighs and reach for the ceiling. I place my hands on my thighs, rubbing downward across my core, then plant my palms on the floor and lift my hips high with my head thrown back. I pump my hips a few times before the lights go out and the crowd claps in pleasure.

I rise on shaking knees and exit the stage. I don't go to the main backroom. I can't talk to anyone right now as I'm confused about how and what I'm feeling. I can't seem to catch my breath as aches flow through me. I go to one of the private changing rooms. This club is built for sex. The owners want us to please our patrons, want us to bring them to dark rooms and ensure they come back again and again. I never take advantage of the rooms. I'm worth more than a quick screw.

Ten minutes pass before there's a knock on the door. I still haven't caught my breath. I don't answer immediately, and there's another knock.

"Yes," I finally say, my voice throaty.

"You have a private dance," Jimmy calls, apology in his tone. He knows how much I hate private dances. They're what pay us the most, though, so I power my way through them. There's no doubt in my mind who this dance is for. Can I get through another one? It doesn't matter. If I want out of this life, I have no choice. One positive is I won't have to work the room having all of the men's eyes on me, their hands groping for me. One good private dance can make up for multiple men pawing me.

"Okay, ten minutes," I call. I have to put on some clothes ... so I can take them off again. "A few hours left, and this is over for two weeks," I whisper as Jimmy's footsteps fade. Soon, this part of my life will be over for good.

I leave my private sanctuary and get ready for act two ...

Chapter Ten

Greyson

It takes all of the control I've learned throughout my life, and massive training to stay in my seat as Cassandra dances on the stage in front of a room full of men who are lusting after her. I'm unsure what I feel about this woman, but I don't like men looking at her. I don't like sharing a room with them.

I want her for me, and me alone. I'm smart enough to quit lying to myself by saying this is nothing more than a job. There's something about her that makes me want to know more. Something makes me want her as a person ... and that has nothing to do with the work I'm here to do.

Finding information on a person has never been difficult for me ... until Cassandra. Finding this place took me nearly six months. I still need to find out where she goes when she leaves here. It's starting to piss me off. Not only is it messing with the job I have to do, but I don't like being thwarted. I'm not used to it happening.

My sexual attraction toward this woman makes matters that much worse. I was going to wait until the end of the night to speak to her this time. That was until the group of men next to me put all of their money together to buy a private dance with her. I stopped that instantly by taking an hour-long dance for myself. This woman is costing me a lot of money ... and I

don't care. I do care about getting information from her. How do I get her to trust me, though, when she thinks I'm no better than any of the other men who come to this place night after night wanting sex? It seems an impossible task.

Cassandra Montana didn't exist before ten years ago. Who is she really? Is she the person I've been searching for? I'm damned well going to find out even if it's the last thing I do. I move to the private room I was in with her before. This time Candy won't be with her. This time I'll have her for the entire hour. I'll maintain my professionalism. Dammit, I'm a thirty-five-year-old man. I think I can maintain self-control. If I can't, I need to hang it all up.

The door opens, and Cassandra steps inside, wearing a short pink skirt, a shirt that hugs her breasts while barely covering them, and a pair of black heels that make her mile-long legs look even hotter. She saunters into the room not showing me what she's feeling about this private dance. Her expression is neutral, that of a seductress who's undoubtedly hard to obtain ... but not impossible.

"You're paying a lot for private dances," she says as she stops two feet from me.

"You're worth it," I reply.

She recovers quickly, but I see the look of disgust on her face. She doesn't like being bought. I don't understand why she's stripping if she hates being paid for. Maybe this is one of the questions I'll get answered. Perhaps she likes the game and power, but she feels this connection between us and doesn't like that I'm in the same category as the rest of the men here.

She's about to get the surprise of her life because I'm nothing like those men. I don't think she'll like me any better if she knows exactly who I am, though, as I'm far more dangerous than all of those men who only want sex from her ... I want so much more.

"Of course I'm worth it, I'm the best," she tells me as she licks her lips in a perfected siren's gaze. She does it well as I'm more than ready to steer my boat straight into the rocks she's calling me to.

I sit back and sip my scotch. "Why do you dance if you hate it?"

"Your hour is ticking by. Do you want to waste it by talking?" she quickly replies.

"It's my hour, and maybe I want to talk," I tell her. I see confusion in her eyes. "Why don't you have a seat?" I'm on one side of the couch leaving her room to sit without having to touch me. I've thrown her off.

For the first time since meeting her she looks confused ... and slightly ... relieved. She sits on the other side of the couch, a few feet separating us. I turn so I can look into her face. I don't reach for her. I continue sipping my drink.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asks.

"Where do you go when you aren't here?"

She smiles. "I'm not telling you that." I push the button calling the server who appears in seconds.

"What would you like to drink?"

She gives me a Cheshire grin before turning to Monica. “Bring a bottle of 2001 Catena Zapata Estiba Reservada.” Monica grins before looking at me for approval. I nod. She leaves. Cassandra has just ordered a thousand-dollar bottle of wine, possibly expecting a reaction from me. She won’t get one. I like fine wine. It’s a good order even if it was meant to see how I’d react.

The wine is brought in before more conversation happens. Monica pours two glasses and then slips from the room again. Cassandra takes a sip and lets out a sigh. I have a feeling she doesn’t get the chance to drink with her clients too often. They certainly aren’t paying for good wine if she does drink with them ... or more likely pretend to drink with them so she can stay sober and in control while they get drunk and lose their inhibitions, giving her everything in their wallets. Besides, they’re paying for dances and hoping for more. They don’t want to waste time drinking and chatting.

“Okay then, what do you do when you aren’t here?” I ask.

She contemplates for a moment. “I work,” she says with a little smirk.

“What do you do for a living besides this?” She thinks about it, and I can tell she’s trying to decide if telling me will give too much away.

“I work at a bookstore,” she says.

“That’s interesting. Why a bookstore?”

“I love reading,” she says with a shrug. She crosses one leg over the other, and I feel a twitch down below. Down boy, that’s not what this is about.

“What do you like to read?”

“Everything. I don’t like limiting myself. I read mysteries, thrillers, romance, and self-help. I love audiobooks so my hands can be free, but sometimes I want to curl up in a cozy room and turn the pages with my hands.” As she speaks about reading, she grows animated, and I get a glimpse of the real her. I give her the slightest smile. She seems to catch herself and composes her features again as she raises her glass and takes a deep swallow of wine.

“I’m a Jack Reacher fan,” I tell her.

“I’ve read that series. It’s great,” she says.

“I think many of us have fantasies of saving the world.”

“I don’t need to save the world, but I don’t mind saving a few people. Some truly need rescuing.” She seems sad as she says this. Again, though, she composes her features. I’m beginning to hate how well she hides her emotions. I’m starting to realize with each moment that she’s the one I’ve been seeking ... and I’m not happy about it.

“If we can say we’ve saved even a single person, we’ve left this world a better place than when we entered it,” I tell her.

“Do you actually believe that?” she asks, her expression intense as if my answer matters. I take a moment to think about it.

“Yes, I mean it. I think all people should be protected, and those who wish to do harm should be locked away. Lines get crossed, and I won’t pretend to know how to fix the world, but if we all had a bit more humanity this world would be a much better place to live.

She nods. Her glass is empty, and she looks at it with surprise. I grab the bottle and refill her.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” she asks. There’s a bit of a twinkle in her eyes. There’s no doubt she doesn’t trust me, but maybe I’m crumbling a little of the perfectly built walls she has around herself. I feel guilty because if she knew why I was here she might never trust another person again.

“I don’t need to get you drunk. I’m simply enjoying fine wine with an interesting woman,” I say.

“What do you want from me? Men don’t return again and again, spending as much as you’re spending without wanting something in return.”

I decide to give her a mix of truth and lies. “I want you. There’s no hiding that fact since you’ve danced on my lap, feeling my reaction to you. I want to know more about you as well. It’s not just sex ... it’s more than that.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Do you think I’m going to have sex with you?” There’s a challenge in her eyes.

“I think it could happen,” I say with confidence.

“I might strip for money, but I’ve never fucked for it.” She’s obviously passionate about this because I’ve never heard her swear, not that I’ve been around her all that much.

“I don’t want to pay you for sex, but I know how this game is played. If I want your undivided attention in this club I have to pay. It’s just money, it doesn’t matter to me.”

She scoffs. “Only people with money say foolish things like that. Why don’t you use your money for something useful like feeding and housing people?”

I smile. “I make donations, but that statement is what’s asinine. I take pride in earning money and feeling good as I do it. I don’t mind giving someone a helping hand, but for people to tell me how I should spend my money is arrogance on their part. People have to earn every dollar they have. Sure, welfare is necessary, but those given all they have don’t have pride in what they own. It takes ambition and motivation to make a community. If all of the people want to be given everything, you have no one left with anything to give.”

She contemplates my words for several moments as she continues sipping her wine. “I can see your point,” she tells me. “I’ve worked hard for what I have. I’ve never been given anything in my life. I don’t want to be given things. I love earning all I have.”

“I’m sure some want to strip, but I don’t think it’s the life you want forever. You do it to make a lot of money so you can do something else you love. Why should anyone expect you to give up what you’ve earned doing something you might not want to be doing? Sure, you can make a lot more doing it than working at a grocery store or restaurant, but that doesn’t take away from the fact you’ve earned it on your own.”

She chuckles. “That’s very true. It’s also not the way I’ve thought about it before. I won’t strip much longer.”

“What will it take for you never to have to do it again?” I ask.

She eyes me, and I can tell she’s trying again to decide whether she wants to tell me the truth. She finally shrugs, seeming to view me as less of a threat.

“Another fifty thousand. With your private dances, that might not take as long as I thought it would.” She laughs, trying to act casual about her words. I see pride in her eyes that she’s come this far and is nearing the end.

Now I’m the one smiling. She seems to shrink away at the brilliance of my expression. Victory is near. I’m sure the confidence in my expression is what’s making her want to rebuild the wall between us.

“Done,” I say.

Confusion takes over her expression.

“What do you mean?”

“You need fifty thousand to quit. Done. I want a weekend. I’ll pay fifty thousand.”

Her mouth drops open, and her fingers shake before she tightens them around her glass. She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it again. I don’t say another word. I wait her out. I know she needs to process this.

A full minute passes ... and then another. She’s trying to decide if I’m serious. Yes, I have enough money to hand fifty thousand dollars away without it touching me. No, my job wouldn’t advise me to do this. This moment, though, has nothing to do with my job. I can try to tell myself it does, but this is personal ... this is all about me.

“You’ll pay fifty thousand dollars for two days?” she finally says as if she needs clarification.

“Yes, I will.”

“Why?”

“Because I think about you twenty-four/seven. Maybe a weekend will end this obsession I seem to find myself in,” I tell her. That’s a partial truth. I want my desire for her purged, but I still have a job to do. I know that won’t be over after a weekend with her.

“If I say yes?” she asks. I can see she’s on the fence.

“It begins tonight,” I tell her. I hadn’t planned this when I entered this room. But now that the opportunity has come up I don’t want to back away from it. She sits beside me, her heart thundering so hard I can practically see it. I can certainly hear her quickened breath.

“Sex?” She says the word as a question.

“I’m not going to lie. I’d love to have sex ... with you. I also won’t force it.” She seems surprised.

“You could be a serial killer who will get me out of here, and I’ll never be seen again.” She says this with a smile, but I also see fear in her eyes. Her reaction confirms more than anything else who she is. I shouldn’t do this. I should back out, take the choice away ... but I can’t.

I pull out my wallet and hand her my ID. She takes it with trembling fingers.

“You can tell everyone here you’re leaving with me. They have a copy of my ID, a copy of my credit card, and lots of videos of me with you. I’d be a foolish criminal if I planned on murdering you or raping you. I don’t know about others, but my idea of a good time isn’t getting myself raped in prison. I wouldn’t do well behind bars ... I’m too pretty.”

She's quiet again, and I know she's fighting an internal battle. One weekend could end her life of stripping. I refill our glasses as we sit in silence for the next five minutes. She finally looks at me, and now it's my heart thundering as I see the decision in her eyes.

She doesn't say anything, just nods. I see shame in her expression, but behind that is the most strength I've ever seen from any person in my life. She has goals, and nothing will stop her from obtaining them. I don't want to respect this woman, but that's precisely what I feel for her. Could I have sex with her, knowing she'll hate me for it ... even if she consents? The real question is can I resist it if she wants to do it? I don't know if I'm that strong.

"Let me put in my resignation," she says as she stands. "I'll be ready in thirty minutes."

She walks from the room, and I'm practically shaking as I stay right where I am on the couch. This is what I want. There's no way she can go an entire weekend without me getting some much-needed answers. I drain the rest of my wine. I can't afford to get drunk, but I need something to calm my nerves.

I don't leave the room as I think about what's happening. I better act fast if we're leaving in thirty minutes. What comes next? I sure as hell have no idea, but if there's one thing I'm great at, it's adjusting to last-minute changes. No matter how much I prepare for something, a wrench always seems to get thrown in my path.

This time, the wrench isn't going to give me nightmares. No, this time, I quite like what's happening. It's unexpected,

but I'm not unhappy about it. I finally smile when I answer my phone. My weekend just got a hell of a lot better.

Chapter Eleven

What am I doing? Who am I? I lean against the wall in the bathroom as I take in deep breaths and slowly let them out again. I've hidden in a bathroom while trying to recover from a situation a thousand times, but I've never been this close to an actual panic attack. Have I just agreed to let this stranger do pretty much anything he wants for the next two days for fifty thousand dollars?

No. No. No. No, I didn't say anything he wants. I said I'd spend two days with him for fifty thousand dollars. That's different than getting anything he wants. I need to look at this like a two-day lap dance. I've given private dances to men before that made my skin crawl. This is just another job ... that's lasting for two days.

I take in another long breath, my heart thundering, but the raw panic beginning to dim.

The man is correct about the club having all of his information. If he's planning to kill me, he's doing a very poor job of it so far. His face is all over our cameras, and we have his ID. Sure, he could still kill me, but with the amount of money he obviously has, he doesn't seem like the type of man who'd care to spend even a single night in prison. Even the ultra-wealthy can't get away with murder ... can they?

What does he want? This can't be about bedding me. There's no way a man will pay fifty thousand dollars for sex. I roll my eyes at this thought. I know for a fact there are men in here who've paid far more than fifty thousand dollars for dances and sex.

Of course, that's not for a single night, but for months upon months of coming here on a nearly daily basis. I'm sure there are premium escorts who get paid thousands per hour. Some of those pimps have approached me. They might not call themselves pimps, but that's precisely what they are. Just because the price tag is in the thousands instead of twenties doesn't change what it is. Have I just become a prostitute?

No. I didn't sell myself. I've sold my time over a weekend. That's different. It's a job. I have to tell myself this to avoid running out the door. I don't want ever to be sold again. Of course, I *was* sold again and again when I was young without ever seeing money. This time I'm in control. I'm the one who says what happens. I'm not a victim.

I can do this weekend and then never strip again ... unless I want to do a show in the privacy of my own home just for me. I love to dance. I always do it in my house because I go to a happy place while dancing, setting myself free. The money Greyson's offering will forever change my life. It will mean I can put all of my energy into my new business and finally be done with pleasing men. I can have my daughter ... or at least try to let my daughter know and like me enough to know her.

"It's just another job," I tell myself.

It's just a job. I don't know why this is bothering me so much. Maybe I don't want to know why it's bothering me. If

I'm honest, it's because this man of all men makes me feel something. It's never happened to me before. I don't like men; I don't like the fear I still feel in their presence. I don't like that they're generally stronger than I am, and I can't trust them.

With all of that considered, I don't get the desire I feel toward Greyson. I understand him wanting me. I make lots of money from men desiring me. It's my reaction toward him that terrifies me.

"Let's do this," I whisper, not allowing myself to think about it any longer.

I walk from the bathroom, go to the locker room, wash away my stage makeup, put my hair in a ponytail and through a baseball cap, change into a pair of worn jeans and a sweatshirt, then step into my favorite pair of tennis shoes. Maybe seeing the real me will scare Greyson away and take the choice out of my hands. Then I can say I tried and failed ... not my fault.

"Jimmy, tell the man in the VIP room to meet me outside," I tell my favorite bouncer. He looks surprised. I understand why. I've never left with a man since I've worked here.

"Sure thing, Cass. Is everything okay?" he asks.

I let out a small laugh. "I'm not being kidnapped, I promise."

"If you get into trouble, you better call me. I don't care what I'm doing, I'll be at your side," he says.

"I know you will. You've been amazing to me and all of the other girls working here," I say before standing on my tiptoes

and kissing him on the cheek. For a man who sees an incredible amount of skin daily, this makes him blush.

“You’re one of the good ones,” he tells me, then turns and walks away before I can say anything more.

I look around the room with girls rushing in and out as they get ready to hit the stage or come back from a performance. Samantha isn’t here tonight, but I have her number. Maybe I’ll invite her to stay a weekend with me sometime. I don’t easily call someone a friend, but I can make an exception for her.

I pack the limited items I want and then walk from the strip club for the last time, feeling a mixture of emotions: relief, sadness, triumph ... fear. This has been my life for ten years. I’ve wanted to stop for quite some time, but now that the moment’s here I’m unsure how I feel. I’ll have plenty of time to come to terms with my emotions after this weekend is over. I’ll email my resignation so they can fill my spot in two weeks.

I go through the back door without looking back again. After standing outside for about two minutes, I see Greyson’s long-legged stride as he comes from the front of the building. He halts as he sees me, then moves forward, a grin on his lips.

“Much better,” he says as he picks up the bag at my feet and holds out his hand for me to take.

I hesitate, but he waits. How will I get through an intimate weekend with him if I refuse to even hold the man’s hand? I let his fingers wind through mine and sigh as a spark sizzles through me. He squeezes, and I think he’s feeling the same electricity.

He leads me to a new Escalade and places the bag in the back, then holds open the passenger door. I don't give myself time to change my mind; I climb into the luxurious SUV, and he shuts the door. Our weekend has officially begun.

He climbs inside and pulls out of the parking lot in seconds. He seems to know I'm on the edge so he'd better sweep me away before I can change my mind and run from him.

"Do you have the money?" I ask. I feel cheap doing it, but that's why I'm here.

He chuckles. "I'll run to the bank in the morning. I've already put the request in," he tells me. He was busy in the time I left him alone. It took closer to an hour than thirty minutes so he had plenty of time.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"We have about a two-hour drive. We're heading to McCall, to the Shore Lodge."

I try not to show a reaction but I've been working in this area too long now not to know about Shore Lodge. It's nestled in the idyllic Salmon River Mountains in McCall, Idaho. It has unrivaled amenities, incredible scenery, and vast outdoor activities. I spent a day up there once but never stayed as I've been saving from before I was even out of the juvenile detention center.

I've never splurged on myself, having one goal from the time my baby was ripped from my arms ... getting her back. In four years she'll be eighteen. Maybe she'll ask the records to be unsealed. I specifically signed papers to allow that to

happen any time she'd like to know her biological mother. I want her to find me.

There's nothing I can do about my daughter right now, but maybe, just maybe, this weekend won't be so bad. Greyson hasn't demanded more than my time so far, though he's made it more than clear he'd be happy to have sex. It's not like I'm a virgin ... far from it ... even if it wasn't my choice, so if I do choose to have sex with him, it's not a big deal. People do it all the time. Many people like it. I've never understood *why* they like it ... until that orgasm that blew through me while on this man's lap.

We're heading to an incredible place, and unless he plans to tie me to the bed and beat me, I might even enjoy myself. Then again, I've been beaten so many times before there's nothing he could do to me that would break me any more than I've already been broken.

‘You can relax, Cass. I won't ask you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable,’ he tells me, his voice calm for the first time since I met him.

I chuckle. ‘You already have,’ I tell him.

He briefly looks at me before focusing on the road again. ‘I know. I'm not proud of how I've come to have you in this vehicle, but I don't regret it. I want this weekend.’

‘We all want a lot of things. That doesn't mean we always get them.’

‘I have you with me,’ he reminds me.

‘Yes, you have me with you.’ He wins this battle, but I'll still be the ultimate victor, I assure myself.

I wait, but he doesn't remind me of how much this is costing him. I appreciate it. I want to pretend there isn't a hell of a lot of money on the table between us. He wants a fantasy, and I want to pretend I'm not a whore. I inwardly cringe. It doesn't make me a whore to accept money for my time. It's actually ridiculous we live in a world that labels women who make money with their bodies.

I can literally go into any bar, club, park, or anywhere else in the country and point to a man and tell him I want to rock his world, and that's perfectly okay. But if that man then hands me money, I'm suddenly committing a crime. It makes no logical sense. We all pay for sex in one way or the other, whether it's with time, money, emotions, or our bodies. We pay for sex, but the women who want to get something back from it are labeled.

What I choose to do with my body is no one's business but mine. I'm not hurting anyone by dancing. If I decide to have sex with this man, that isn't a crime, so how can someone step in and put me in jail if I have sex for money? If I simply choose to go to the resort and this man lavishes me with gifts, no crime is committed, but if he hands money over, a crime is suddenly on the books. Some laws are meant to be broken because they never should've been written.

He keeps the conversation light as we travel up the mountain. In the blink of an eye, we arrive, and I look at the glittering lights glistening off the pristine snow. I can't keep a smile from shaping my lips upward.

"I've never been here before. I searched and lucked out that a room was available," Greyson tells me.

“Nice search,” I say.

“I’m a little impressed,” he admits. I don’t want to like a single thing about this man, but the fact he isn’t being arrogant about staying in a beautiful resort is getting to me. He seems to appreciate this place as much as I do. I’m sure he’s stayed in all of the best places worldwide, but this is new for me.

We move inside the impressive lobby where only a few staff members are milling about, cleaning. It’s three in the morning so it goes to reason the patrons would be in bed. I’m grateful I washed away my war paint before coming. I’m undoubtedly underdressed, but I don’t mind. At least I’m not in sequins and five-inch stilettos.

Greyson checks us in, and I have to look away so my reaction doesn’t show when the clerk hands us the executive suite keys. Greyson and I both have duffle bags. I’m not sure what’s in his as this trip wasn’t pre-planned, but mine only has a pair of workout clothes, my favorite stripper outfits, and a lot of makeup. I left most of my outfits and war paint at the club with a note telling Samantha she could have it all.

Greyson refuses help, and we walk to our room. I’m starting to shake now that reality sets in. My stomach rumbles loudly; I’m starving. Dancing always makes me hungry. I usually swing by a fast-food place on my way home from the club. I wasn’t even thinking about food on our drive though ... I was too nervous.

“I’ll order room service,” Greyson says.

“That was quite loud,” I say with a chuckle. I’m shocked to be laughing with this man. I’m even more surprised my nerves are ebbing.

Greyson opens the door and we step inside the beautiful room. Our dining and seating area has a perfect view of the lake. A small set of stairs ascends to a spacious bedroom with only one large bed. I gulp but don't say anything.

Greyson immediately goes to the phone but I don't pay attention to what he orders. They don't normally do room service, but with the tip he handed the front desk clerk, they're making an exception. I've noticed that those with money are never denied anything they want. I still don't think it would be worth it to be mega-wealthy. Too many games are played when people reach a certain income status, and I want nothing to do with it. I saw the corruption it brings firsthand.

I walk into the large bathroom and know I've died and gone to heaven. There's a beautiful soaking tub, a separate shower, and a marble-top vanity. I peek back out as Greyson hangs up the phone.

"Would you mind if I take a bath while we wait for food?"

He smiles as he moves to the closet. "That's a great idea. Holler if you need me to scrub your back."

"I think I've got it," I tell him.

He pulls out a robe, then moves to his bag and produces a T-shirt. "This is a surprise trip so you probably don't have anything to wear," he says as he hands me the two items.

"Thanks, no, I don't have anything appropriate for this place," I admit.

"What you have on is perfect," he tells me. "But don't worry, they have a shop."

I smile before closing the bathroom door. I move to the tub and start filling it, adding a strawberry shower gel to the water. The room immediately smells like heaven. I strip, then wash my panties in the sink and lay them on a towel to dry. I run the hair dryer over them to speed the process, then the tub is ready.

I sink into the tub and let out an audible sigh at how good it feels. My place in Ravish is lovely but very small and there's no tub, only a shower barely big enough for one. It's perfect for me, but if I could have this tub in my home I'd take a bath every day of my life.

I'm in the tub for about thirty minutes when I hear a knock on the suite door. My stomach rumbles loudly as it realizes food is near. I drain the tub and jump from it, quickly drying myself before throwing on deodorant and spritzing myself with one of my favorite scents. It's such a habit, I do it before I realize it's done. I don't want Greyson thinking I'm prepping for him. Ugh, this is complicated.

I put on his shirt which hangs halfway down my thighs, then slip on my mostly dry panties. The robe is soft and cozy, and I make a tight knot, giving me a sense of modesty. It isn't like this man hasn't seen nearly every inch of my body ... but that was at the club ... this is the real world, and I don't want to feel exposed.

By the time I step from the bathroom, the table is full of food and a bottle of champagne is chilling in a silver bucket. I take a look at the label and can't stop my gasp. This man likes the best of the best. It's a 2009 Louis Roederer 'Cristal' that goes for around \$900 a bottle.

“Champagne?” he asks as he lifts the bottle.

“I’d love a glass,” I tell him as I sit.

“Take whatever you like on the table.”

I immediately reach for one of the wraps. It’s all cold food as I’m sure the grill has been shutdown for quite some time. For this man, they’d probably fire it up again, but then they’d have to call in cooks, which could delay our food.

We have an assortment of wraps, salads, chips, cookies, and fruit. I take my first bite of the wrap and sigh in pleasure. He hands over a glass of champagne, then holds his glass up from across the table.

I stop eating as I raise my glass in the air. “To a stress-free weekend,” he says.

I smile. “I can drink to that,” I say as I clink my glass against his. I take a sip and let out another sigh. “I can’t imagine there are people in the world who live like this daily.” The words are out before I can think to stop them.

“I’d think living this way all the time would take the joy out of it,” he says, surprising me.

I chew down a few more bites and drain my champagne before I respond. He refills my glass.

“You obviously have a lot of money,” I say. “Do you not live this way every day?”

He laughs. “There’s no hiding the fact I have a lot of money. It’s something I inherited. My real life and my real job are like a lot of peoples. I have a normal house and do ordinary things. Yes, I like nice vehicles and enjoy great food,

but no, I don't drink thousand-dollar bottles of champagne daily, and I certainly don't hang out at resorts every week. The snobbiest things I do are play golf on great courses, sail occasionally, and fly planes."

I can't help it, this time I laugh more heartily. "Oh, that's all you do?" I mock, but it's good-humored.

He shrugs. "I don't do those things all of the time, just once in a while," he says in defense.

"Well, that's not so bad then," I tell him.

"How do you let off steam?"

I'm feeling pretty good at this moment. My hunger's been abated, and the champagne is calming the last of my nerves. I lean back as I munch on a strawberry before taking a swallow of my drink. "I love to hike, and I've gone rafting, which is fun. I read any chance I get, and I'm a bit obsessed with working out."

"We all have to let off steam. Some of us just do it in different ways. I love hiking. I've got a hell of a sense of direction so I love going off trail."

"I've never wanted to camp out in the middle of nowhere, and my direction isn't all that great so I've never attempted difficult hikes." I don't add that I spent months living on the streets in a tent, and camping isn't my idea of a great time. I don't ever want to be homeless again. I had money when I walked from the juvie place, but I had to ensure it lasted until I could make more. I had to invest in items to start stripping, and contrary to what some might believe, it took a while to earn good money. I won't ever be poor and afraid again.

“I love camping, but I have to admit, I’ve gotten spoiled through the years, and when I have limited time for vacation I want to make the most of it, so I haven’t been in a tent in a lot of years.”

“Yeah, if I had a choice I’d pick this place any day of the week over a tent with no bathroom and no tub. That tub was heaven. When I die, I hope heaven is the Supernatural version where everyone has their own perfect section. Mine will be a cabin in the woods. It doesn’t even need to be large, it just needs to have a huge tub, a comfy bed, and endless food.” I stop and look at him in horror. “I hope we get food in heaven. It’s supposed to be paradise, so it would suck if we no longer needed food. In heaven we should be able to eat anything and everything without worrying about calories, cavities, or cancer.”

Greyson throws his head back and laughs. “I’ve never watched Supernatural, but I might have to check out their version of heaven. It doesn’t sound all that bad.”

We finish our champagne and I yawn, suddenly more exhausted than I’ve been in a long time. The sun is just beginning to rise, a bit of light showing on the lake’s horizon.

“Ready for bed?” he asks, and I’m tense all over again.

He holds up his hands. “It’s been a very long day for both of us. There’s one bed, but it’s large and you can build a wall of pillows down the middle of it if you like.” I gaze at him in shock. He rises. “I’ll go ahead and build the wall. Let’s get a few hours of rest. Tomorrow, or later today actually, is going to be busy.”

I stay at the table as he goes up the steps to the large king-size bed, takes a few pillows, and runs them down the center, creating a wall. I rise on slightly shaky knees and move to the bed. I think about leaving the robe on, but I want a good few hours of sleep and know the robe will twist around me.

Greyson closes the curtains, turns off the lights, then climbs into bed, turning so his back is to my side of the bed. I'm not sure how I feel about this. I should be elated. I don't want to have sex with this man. I don't want to snuggle against him. I'm only here because he's paying me.

I climb into bed and curl up around a pillow, placing my back to the pillows in the center of the bed. Why do I feel rejected if I'm only here because he's paying me? What in the world is wrong with me?

Will that question ever be answered? I close my eyes ... and within seconds I'm out faster than a boxer hit by Mike Tyson.

Chapter Twelve

Bacon and coffee wake me. My mouth waters as I shoot up in bed, looking around, panicked over where I am. It takes a solid ten seconds for the previous day to come back. I tend to wake with a bit of panic on any given day, but being in a new place enhances the feeling. I'm alone in the large bed and the curtains are open with sun shining into the room. Snow sparkles on the ground surrounding the lake.

I hear movement and Greyson peeks in. "Good, you're awake. Breakfast arrived a minute ago. We have to be out of the room in an hour so eat fast and get ready," he tells me, seeming to be in a great mood.

"What time is it?" I ask, my voice husky ... from sleep, not hormones.

"It's one in the afternoon. I figured we're off schedule so our bodies will want breakfast instead of lunch."

"Dang, we're at this amazing place and we slept half the day away," I say with a bit of disappointment. I'm bummed about this. But we're here because of him. This isn't a vacation. I need to remember that. It's hard to do when I'm snuggled in the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, staring at a man who's even sexier with a bit of stubble on his face.

“We didn’t get to bed until nearly six so I don’t think six or so hours of sleep is asking for too much,” he tells me, then ducks away. I reluctantly climb from bed and make my way to the bathroom.

I look longingly at the tub, but there’s no time for that. Instead, I put my hair in a knot and jump in the shower. Five minutes later I climb out and dress in yoga pants and a sweatshirt, leave my hair up, and don’t worry about makeup. I usually throw on mascara and lipstick, but I don’t want Greyson to think I’m dressing up for him ... not that my clothes would give him that idea.

Greyson’s sitting at the table with his plate nearly cleared. He pulls the silver cover off my plate and I give him a real smile. It’s loaded with hashbrowns, eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, and gravy. Toast and bagels are on other plates, along with a fruit bowl.

“Yummy,” I say before diving in. I burn a lot of calories every day and have no problem eating to replenish them. I have to keep fit ... or I used to have to keep fit, for dancing. I guess I no longer have to worry about that. Even if I won’t be dancing for the public anymore, I’ll still dance for myself, and I won’t want to quit working out. That means I’ll get to continue to eat as much as I want.

“What’s the plan for the day?” I wasn’t sure if we’d stay in this room the whole time with him hoping for sex, but it doesn’t appear that’s his plan. I’m not at all disappointed he’s not trying to seduce me ... nope, I’m very, *very* glad. If I tell myself this enough it will be true.

“We’re going to get nice and relaxed, then have a fabulous dinner,” he tells me.

I’m confused. “How are we getting relaxed? I don’t golf, sail, or fly planes.”

He laughs. Damn, I like his laughter. I like it way too much. Knock it off! Yes, I’m admonishing myself in my own brain. If I start talking aloud to myself I might have to admit I’m a little crazy. I don’t see anything wrong in having complex conversations in my own head. What others don’t know can’t hurt me.

“We’re not doing any of that. It’s the wrong season.” He stops. “Well, we could take a flight as it’s a beautiful day today, but don’t worry, we’re not doing that. We are, however, spending the day at the spa.”

“The spa?” Great, I’m a parrot now along with everything else wrong with me.

“Yep, the spa. I need a massage,” he says.

“Massage?”

“Yes, massage,” he says.

“We’re getting massages?”

He laughs. “You aren’t a morning person, are you?”

I shrug. “It might take me a little longer to process things in the morning,” I admit.

“I love mornings. I’m my best at dawn. I might slow down a bit by sunset, but I usually can’t wait to start a new day.”

I finish my plate with disappointment. I’m still hungry so I grab a blueberry bagel, spread a liberal amount of cream

cheese on it, then take a bite. I swallow before speaking.

“I don’t trust morning people. No one should wake up happy. It takes a while for our systems to become alert. For those strange people who wake with a clear head and ideas flowing, I wonder if they even sleep. I think they might actually be robots getting rebooted every night.”

Greyson laughs. “I promise there’s nothing automatic about me. You can check anywhere on my body you like to verify.” He winks and I can’t help but let my gaze travel over him before I realize what I’m doing and focus on my bagel instead. “If you ever want to catch me off guard, though, wait until I’m nice and relaxed in the evening. Then you can probably talk me into anything.”

“You’re giving me ammo to use against you,” I warn.

“I’m not scared,” he tells me. I have a feeling not much scares this man.

“I don’t think I am either,” I admit. He rewards me with a smile. I wonder for the thousandth time what I’m doing. Am I flirting with him? Am I blurring the lines between a client and ... and something more? This is a road I don’t have time or the emotional energy to travel.

We finish most of the food on the table and Greyson rises. I stand and let out a groan. “I might’ve eaten a bit too much,” I admit as I rub my stomach.

“Uh oh, you might fall asleep on the table and miss your massage,” he tells me as we move to the door.

“No way, I’m not missing a minute of my first massage.”

“You’ve never had one before?”

“No, but I’m looking forward to it.”

Greyson holds the door for me as we leave the room. Only a few people are around as we move through the resort. We soon come to The Cove. From the second we walk through the front doors I don’t want this day to ever end.

Greyson checks us in, then we’re separated as I’m shown the women’s locker room. I’m given a locker that has a robe and slippers inside. I strip down and put the robe on, then move out to the sitting area where Greyson is waiting. It doesn’t take long before we’re called to separate rooms.

Within fifteen minutes I realize my heaven aspirations have just changed. My day starts with a clear-water scrub where the lady takes raw cane sugar infused with fruit and herb extracts and rubs it all over my body, making me feel like an entirely new woman.

She then massages every square inch of me with aromatherapy oils, using long, flowing strokes, kneading sore muscles as I turn to jelly. Nothing has ever felt this good. I’m glad I didn’t know about it, or I might’ve wasted thousands of dollars coming to spas over and over again. I have goals and can’t afford to frivolously spend money. Two hours pass before I can blink my eyes.

She leaves the room so I can get up and put my robe back on. I’m a little shaky on my feet and need a minute to focus before walking. I’ve never been this relaxed. When I’m sure I won’t fall over, I emerge from the room, drinking my glass of lemon water.

“Go use the restroom then I’ll lead you to your next treatment,” she tells me.

“There’s more?” I gasp.

She smiles. “Oh yes, there’s more,” she assures me.

“I’m not sure I can take much more. I might get so spoiled nothing else will ever be good for me again.”

“I’ve heard this before,” she says.

I float into the bathroom and look in the mirror at the grin on my lips. I might not be able to wipe it away. Am I this easily seduced? Maybe, but I don’t feel bad about it. I don’t think it’s possible to feel bad about anything right now. Any tenseness I might’ve had has been erased by masterful hands stroking me all over.

I’m led into another room with dim lighting, soft music playing, and another table waiting.

“This is your forest-flora facial. Switch your robe for this towel and lie down on your back with your head resting here,” she tells me. “Gina will be in shortly.”

I change into the towel that clips into place above my breasts, then climb beneath the covers on the heated bed. If I stay awake for this entire facial it will be a miracle. I now wish I hadn’t eaten such a big breakfast. Between the food and the pampering, I’m barely able to keep my eyes open.

Gina soon taps on the door then walks inside. “Good afternoon,” she says with a bright smile.

“Hello,” I reply, my voice mellow, my eyes heavy.

“We’re doing the full treatment today with a strawberry rhubarb hyaluronic serum pack. We’ll do two masks and a lip

and eye repair. By the time you exit this room you'll feel like a brand-new woman."

"I already do," I tell her.

She begins and I let out a sigh as she washes my face, then proceeds to put different lotions and serums on it. When my mask is in place she gives my head a massage that has me groaning in delight. When the second mask is on, she gives me a shoulder, arm, and hand rub that sends me over the edge of ecstasy. How in the world have I gone this long without experiencing this much pleasure? Maybe, just maybe I can budget this in once in a while if I'm careful.

I might nod off a little on the final massage of my feet, but I don't even regret it. By the time she finishes, I can barely move. My skin has never felt softer, and when she helps me sit up and shows me my reflection in a mirror, a soft smile lifts my lips. I'm glowing. I've heard this term before, but I've never seen it on me. There's no other word to express how bright and healthy my skin looks, other than glowing.

"We're done with the treatments now, but Mr. River has reserved the immersion pool for the next two hours so you can finish off with complete muscle relaxation.

I'm led back to the locker-rooms where I find a brand-new bright red bikini waiting for me. It's not a lot of material, but I've worn less. It takes me longer than normal to change into the perfectly fit bikini as I'm so relaxed I'm not moving too fast.

I slip the robe on over the bikini and Gina is waiting for me outside. She leads me to the immersion pool where Greyson is leaning back in the saltwater.

“Come inside, it’s even better than the tub,” he tells me, not even opening his eyes. Gina disappears.

I throw off my robe and step into the hot water. I hate to lose all of the oils that have been rubbed over my skin, but there’s no way I’m giving up the opportunity to enjoy this pool. I sit across from Greyson, lean back, and close my eyes. I fall asleep in seconds.

I wake when I feel an arm around me and immediately straighten, trying to orient myself. “I’m not putting the moves on you, I’m saving your life,” he tells me with a chuckle, staying right where he is beside me.

“What?” I’m utterly confused.

“You were out so hard you were snoring, and your head was starting to limp to the side,” he tells me.

“I don’t snore,” I gasp.

“Of course you’re more worried about snoring than drowning,” he tells me with a chuckle.

“Well, I don’t want to drown, but I’m sure I don’t snore,” I say. I’m too relaxed to pull out of his arms. What does it hurt, anyway? Nothing, it doesn’t hurt anything, I tell myself. It actually feels pretty good if I’m being honest.

“Okay, you were ... hmm ... purring,” he says after a bit of hesitation.

“Purring?” I look at him, very aware his face is only a few inches from my own.

“Yes, if I had to describe the sound, I’d say it resembles a *very* happy cat.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say.

“It was quite adorable. If it wasn’t for the near-drowning situation I could’ve listened for the entire two hours.”

I know it’s better I don’t respond to that statement. “How long did I sleep?” I do feel a little more alert now.

“An hour,” he says.

“What? Really?”

“Yep. I had to move beside you after about five minutes. You didn’t budge.”

“Thanks for saving my life,” I say, my gaze getting caught by the hunger in his eyes. “And thanks for the spa. It’s the best day I’ve ever had.” These aren’t just words. I mean them. I’ve never had such a wonderful day.

“It’s been my pleasure,” he tells me. He looks down at my lips. I feel that strange sensation in my stomach again, and then it circles out with little zips of electricity hitting my core and breasts. It’s a good thing my chest is below the waterline because my nipples are beading even in the hot water.

“I’m going to kiss you, Cass,” he says. He’s warning me so if I don’t want it to happen I can turn away. I don’t turn anywhere.

He leans down and the first brush of his lips against mine reaches all the way to my toes. His arm tightens for a moment before he relaxes his muscles. He presses harder against my mouth and his tongue brushes my lips. A shiver rushes through me even though I’m sweating in this water.

Without my consent my arm lifts. I place my hand against his rugged jaw and lean closer as his tongue slides past my lips. He deepens the kiss, his fingers winding in my hair as he tugs me closer. My body shifts and I lean against him, my breasts brushing his chest, making my nipples throb painfully.

The kiss goes on and on and I'm hotter on the inside than the outside. His arm moves down my back and I'm shifting as he pulls me over him, leaving me straddling his lap. I shift forward and his arousal pushes against his shorts. It makes the ache in my core more intense.

Both of his hands wind in my hair as he tilts my head. I grip his shoulders, holding on tight. Our kiss grows hotter, hungrier, and more intense. We're holding on to each other for dear life.

I lose my breath and have to wrench my lips from his. It takes another twenty seconds for me to find the strength to open my eyes. When I do he's gazing back at me. His hands have loosened in my hair and he's gazing at me with something in his eyes I can't read.

"I wasn't planning that," he says, his voice breathless and husky.

"For not planning, it was pretty hot," I say, my own voice matching his.

He looks shocked at my words. His lips twitch, then he laughs. He pulls me to him and hugs me.

"I enjoy you, Cass," he says, a chuckle still in his voice, his hands rubbing my back as the hug lasts for several long seconds.

It's such a strange sensation having him hold me in an almost friendship hug while his arousal presses against me, and my body tingles from our hot kiss. I don't know how to process all of this.

I finally pull back. "You aren't horrible," I admit. This makes him laugh harder.

"Well, I'll take *not horrible*; it's much better than *predator*," he says. He then scoots me back. "I've got to move before I embarrass myself like I nearly did the last time you were on my lap." He winks. His words immediately remind me of our first private dance. That ended quite well for me ... not so well for him.

"I'm starving. I don't know how after the monstrous breakfast we had this afternoon, but I think all of the massaging burned all of my calories," he says.

My stomach rumbles. "Now that you mention it, I'm hungry too."

"Good, because we have reservations in an hour. I bet I can move it up."

"It might take me that long to get ready. I'm moving slowly after all of this pampering."

"Take all the time you want. I'll meet you out front," he tells me. He lifts his hand and caresses my cheek for one second before he fully lifts me off his lap. I stand on wobbly legs as he rises. I can't help but look down at the impressive bulge in his shorts. Do I really want to resist him tonight? Do I still want that wall of pillows between us? I should think an

emphatic yes, but I can't get myself to even think the word, let alone say it aloud.

We go our separate ways to the locker rooms. Slowly I strip down and take a long shower, washing away the salt water. Their products are top of the line, and I wash my hair twice, condition it, then step from the large shower, my skin soft and red. I rub lotion over my body, my skin tingling.

I move to my locker where a stunning dress hangs on the outside with a note attached. Tears fill my eyes. Dammit, don't do this. Don't do this. Don't do this. Don't fall for this. Don't start liking the man. This is just a dream, that's all it is. Enjoy it, but don't get emotional.

I keep telling myself this as I slip the deep blue dress on, the material soft, sliding over my skin and molding to me in all the right places. I feel beautiful. I do a little spin and let out a squeal. I'm grateful no one else is in the room.

By the time I dry my hair I'm an entirely new woman. I think the massage and facial took five years off my body. I'll take it. It's not like I'm old, but I haven't had the easiest life, and today completely rejuvenated me. I'm going to look back over this day as the best dream I never could've imagined. I can fight it all I want, but I've never had a day like this, and it's okay for me to appreciate it.

It's easily an hour before I come out into the main lobby of the spa to find Greyson sitting back, reading something on his phone. He immediately stands.

"You're gorgeous," he says with awe.

I've heard these words before, but I've never believed them. Sure, the men at the club think I'm beautiful, but that's because I'm a dream, the ultimate woman with a lot of makeup and the perfect skimpy clothes to create a vision of a woman instead of a real one. In this moment I feel like he's looking at the real me . . . and he likes what he sees. The lines I've promised myself I won't cross get crossed. I want to shout out a mayday, but I'm too relaxed to do it.

"You look quite handsome," I admit.

He's wearing a crisp white button-down shirt with a tie matching my dress and black slacks that fit him to perfection. His outfit is finished off with an expensive pair of Italian loafers. A lot of people don't notice shoes. I do. I like everything about how this man looks.

"My lady," he says as he holds out his arm. I don't hesitate this time as I place my arm though his. I look up to see the two ladies at the counter dreamily smiling at us.

To the rest of the world, we probably look like a happy couple on a fabulous romantic getaway. It would shatter them if I told them he picked me up at a strip club and is paying me for this weekend. That thought makes my stomach hurt so I push it from my mind. Let me pretend for a little while longer. Tomorrow the real world will push back too hard for me to ignore. For today, I want to live the dream.

Greyson and I walk through the resort turning heads as we make our way to The Narrows Steakhouse. It's beautiful with low lighting and perfectly set tables. We're led to a corner where a waiter appears with a drink menu.

"Do you have a preference?" Greyson asks.

“You choose,” I tell him. He has better taste than I do, and I’m still in dreamland. Making decisions seems too difficult right now. He gives me a dreamy smile then takes a few moments to peruse the menu.

“We’ll take the 2010 Chateau Margaux from France,” he says.

The waiter barely shows a reaction, but it’s there for a moment, making me curious. I discreetly look over, then choke on my water. It’s a \$4400 bottle of wine.

Greyson pats my back. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine,” I tell him. It seems this man might be even wealthier than I imagined. That doesn’t change anything. Tomorrow I’ll walk away from him, never to see him again. His status in life doesn’t affect me. I need to enjoy this wine, though, because it will certainly be the last time I’ll ever have anything that comes close to it.

The waiter comes back with the wine and warm bread and butter. I grab a piece and liberally butter it while Greyson tries the wine.

“Perfect,” he says. Our waiter, Jean, pours us both a glass. He then leaves us to choose our food. “Get everything you want.”

“You might regret those words,” I warn. “I’m suddenly ravenous.”

“Me too,” he says.

When the waiter comes back he must think we’ve never eaten before. We start with oysters and seared diver scallops. We both get lobster bisque and skip the salads. Then he orders

a thirty-eight-ounce Tomahawk Prime Rib that there's no way he'll be able to finish, lobster tail, and truffle mac and cheese. I have the rack of lamb and wild forged mushrooms.

We chat as we eat our way through several courses. He shares bites of his food with me, one of the hottest things I've done with a man ... and that's saying something since I'm a stripper ... or a former stripper ... and have done many things with men. I share bites with him as well, and the longer our evening goes on, the hotter and weaker I get. I can always blame the wine, I assure myself ... except I'm not even close to drunk.

We finish off our night sharing strawberry shortcake and key lime pie. I'm full at the end, but this time neither of us polish off our food. We eat until we're a little past comfortable, then force ourselves to stop.

I can lie to myself only so much because I'm very aware of what I *really* want tonight. I don't want to desire this man, but I realize I don't feel I owe it to him. No, I feel like I owe it to myself. I've never voluntarily had sex with a man. The closest I've gotten to that was the last time I sat on Greyson's lap and found pleasure.

Can I take what I want? He wants it too, but he's not pleading with me, not guiltting me, not forcing me. It's up to me. Will I panic? Will I get to the point of no return and change my mind? Will I feel invaded? Will I feel abused? There's only one way to know.

"Are you ready to go up or would you like to take a walk?" Greyson asks, having no idea what's going through my mind.

“I’m ready to go to our room. Can we get a bottle of champagne to take with us?” I stop and give him a firm look. “A bottle that’s a lot less expensive than that one.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “We can do that.” There’s constant hunger in his eyes, but I see more humor in his gaze than anything else right now. I don’t see a single thing in his eyes that tells me he expects to get lucky tonight. That makes me want to do this even more. I stand, feeling ... anticipation.

“I’m going to the restroom for a minute,” I say. I feel a twinge of guilt at the cost of this weekend. He planned this, and he doesn’t seem to even blink at the mounting costs.

When I come back, he’s waiting. “Our champagne is on the way up,” he tells me.

“Thank you, Greyson,” I say, meaning it with all I have.

“It’s truly my pleasure,” he says. A bit of confusion flashes in his eyes but is gone so fast I wonder if I’ve imagined it. Why would he be confused? Everyone has secrets. I’m more aware of that than most. What are Greyson’s secrets?

We walk to our room, and I push the questions away. I don’t need to know his secrets. He’s only a blip in my life. He’s here today, and he’ll be gone tomorrow. I’m okay with that. It’s exactly what I need right now. I’m ready for him to enter my life ... and I’m ready for him to exit it. For now, though, the night is mine. I know exactly what I want to do next ...

Chapter Thirteen

I step inside the luxurious bathroom and lean against the counter as I gaze at myself in the mirror. My heart's racing, my skin is flushed, and I feel an ache in my body that only seems to grow more intense.

"You can do this," I whisper.

Why am I so nervous? Maybe because I want something I've never wanted before. I'm a master seductress, but I'm a tease. The entire purpose of stripping is to make men want more ... without giving it to them. For once, though, I want something more. This isn't about Greyson, this is about me. I smile at my reflection.

I freshen up before stepping from the bathroom. I was going to change, but tonight I don't want to be a stripper, I want to be a woman. I want him to sweat, to want, to need more from me than I've given another without me giving a show. I want him to want Cass, not the siren at the club.

When I step from the bathroom, Greyson is sitting on the couch in the main area of our room. He has the champagne bottle open and chilling on ice with two filled glasses sitting on the table. I walk toward him, enjoying having his full attention.

"More food?" I say as I sit next to him, only a few inches between us.

“We can’t have delicious champagne without chocolate covered strawberries,” he tells me.

I bend down and pick up a strawberry, one of my favorite treats. I bring it to my lips and slowly lick it, watching the flash of heat in his eyes. I take a bite, savoring the flavor before sipping my champagne.

“This has been a pricy day for you,” I tell him, inwardly cringing.

This entire weekend is costing him a tremendous amount of money. I want to tell him to keep the fifty thousand. If I do that, though, I have to return to the strip club in two weeks. The thought of doing that turns my stomach. Now that I made the decision to be done with the place I can’t imagine going back.

“I’d pay five times as much. This is the best day I’ve had in so long that I can’t remember a better one,” he tells me, making my heart thump a little harder.

“Be careful, I might get used to it,” I tell him, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’m more than willing to make this a regular thing,” he says, an intensity in his eyes that scares me ... that tells me he might be speaking some truth.

“Let’s not think about tomorrow. Today has been perfect,” I say. I finish my strawberry and drink champagne, sipping now instead of guzzling. I want to savor every minute of this last night with this man who’s changing the way I think about men.

“I don’t want this weekend to be our last,” he tells me.

I reach out and place my hand on his leg. He tenses as I trail my fingers up and down his slack-covered thigh. Damn this man is hard all over. He's incredibly fit and I like touching him. I wonder how he'll feel pressed against me. I've sat on him, but we haven't laid down together. Will we tonight? I hope so.

"We've had today, and we have tonight. Don't get greedy," I tell him, my fingers trailing higher up his leg. I take another sip of champagne as I gaze at the bulge in his pants. The more I touch him, the tighter his pants become. It's fascinating watching him get aroused.

"We could have more," he says, his voice growing breathier.

"This isn't *Pretty Woman*. The wealthy, conflicted hero doesn't sweep in and save the stripper," I tell him with a smile.

His gaze is intense. "Real life is far more fascinating and multi-faceted than movies. We can have our own story."

"Oh, I have a story," I tell him.

He refills our glasses then places an arm behind me as his fingers sift through my hair. It gives me goosebumps. I shift a bit closer to him, loving the heat from his body and the feel of his fingers on me.

"What's your story, Cass?" he asks.

"I don't share my story," I tell him.

"I want to know it."

"Everyone thinks they want the truth. They think they want the down and dirty, but if they truly knew all the scars most

people carry with them, they'd run screaming. Trust me, you don't want my story. You'd lose the fantasy you've created in your head of me. It's odd but I like the fantasy. I want to be this woman tonight with no problems, no scars. I want to be whole."

It's the most honest thing I've ever said to anyone. I don't regret it, don't want to take the words back. There's something about this man that makes me want to trust him. It's foolish, but I can't seem to help myself.

"I have a lot of scars," he says.

"On you scars would be sexy," I say. My fingers climb higher and the back of my hand brushes his bulge before I move back down again. I certainly notice his intake of breath.

"I think scars make us unique. Those without scars haven't gone through tough challenges. How can we build character if we're never put to the test?"

I smile. "That's a great way to look at life. Maybe I'll make it my motto."

"I'm not going to give up," he assures me.

"I don't take you as a man to give up on anything. But even a man like you can't have everything he wants."

His fingers tangle in my hair as he pulls me closer. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. I'm a very determined man."

"I have no doubt about it. But you've never met a woman like me. I'm stronger than I look."

"Oh, I have no doubt about how strong you are."

I take a breath, then set down my glass. I take his away and set it on the table. Rising from the couch, I move in front of him and straddle his lap. He immediately wraps his arms around me and rests his hands on my lower back.

“What do you want from me?” I lean down and huskily whisper these words in his ear before I trail my lips across his neck. I taste his skin and enjoy the thrill of the shiver rushing through him.

“Anything you’re willing to give,” he says, his voice low and dark. His fingers clench behind me and one of his hands runs up my back and rests on my neck.

“What if I want to give it all?” I ask before sucking the skin of his shoulder as I move back a couple of inches and reach the top button of his shirt.

“You have me so mesmerized I’d give it to you,” he says.

I kiss my way back up his neck, then across his jaw. I flutter my lips over his before moving to the other side of his jaw and down his neck all while unbuttoning his shirt. When I get to the last one, I spread the shirt open, then lean back so I can admire the beauty of his hard pecs. I run my fingers over his chest and down his flat abs. His stomach quivers.

“Kiss me, Cass,” he demands. I love that he’s letting me take the lead. He promised he wouldn’t take anything I don’t want to give, and he’s proving how good his self-control is. Can he keep this up? How far can I push him before he snaps? Am I playing a game I might regret?

My hands move down his arms, then unclip one cuff. I do the same on the other arm, all while looking in his darkening

eyes. Pushing his shirt past his arms, I toss the material aside. I cup his head then lean forward.

His lips instantly move beneath mine and his fingers tighten in my hair as we kiss. Our mouths mold together as our tongues meet. We tease and nip and build awareness between us until we're both ready to explode. I shift my hips over his arousal and press myself against him, my ache growing.

His fingers find the zipper of my dress and he slowly pulls it down, his fingers trailing the skin on my back. I pant against his mouth as he deepens our kiss, both of us growing more aroused. The zipper stops just above my butt and his hand slides inside to rest on my hot skin. He clenches his fingers again.

He wrenches his mouth from mine, both of us panting. His hands move to my shoulders beneath the thin straps of my dress. I look him in the eyes as he moves the straps down my shoulders, pushing the dress away. It flows to my waist, leaving me bare before him.

His eyes trail away from my gaze as he takes in my breasts. His hands cup me, my nipples beaded and hurting. He runs the pads of his thumbs across them, and I gasp at the sensation. I look at his large hands covering me. It's the hottest thing I've seen. I love how his hands look on me. He opens one hand and leans forward.

His mouth covers my nipple and he licks, making me moan. His teeth graze my sensitive flesh before he sucks hard, making me breathless. I call out his name, begging him for more. He moves to my other nipple while cupping the one he's left aching. My core presses against him as I reach for release.

He leans back and I grab for his head, wanting to pull him back to me. Our gazes meet again and he smiles, the look of a hunter in his eyes. It doesn't scare me, it makes me hungrier.

He stands and I wrap my legs around him, the top of my dress hanging behind me as he walks to our bed. He gently sets me on my feet and my dress falls off, leaving me in nothing but my panties. He steps back and his eyes caress me from head to toe.

"You're so absolutely beautiful," he says in awe.

"You're wearing too many clothes," I reply, my voice unrecognizable.

He gives me a hungry smile before reaching for his pants. I'm fascinated as he undoes the buttons, then reaches into the waistband. I've never had a man strip for me before. My legs are shaking as I step back and practically fall onto the bed. He smiles as he pushes his pants and underwear down. I can't take my eyes away.

He pushes past the large bulge in his pants and my mouth waters when he frees himself, his spectacular erection finally free. I wondered if I'd feel fear when seeing him naked ... but all I feel is desire. How much different would my life be had I not suffered the abuse I've been put through?

I can't think about that right now. I want to be in *this* moment. I want to enjoy sex. I want this man, and I need him to want me. I want us to be partners, neither of us using the other. This is mutual, and it's good.

"You are ... are ... you're beautiful," I gasp as he kicks away his pants, confident as he stands before me, naked and

fully aroused.

“You do this to me with every move you make,” he says.

He comes to me and throws the extra pillows off the bed, then lifts me and lays me down in the center of the bed before joining me.

“Let me show you what real pleasure is,” he says.

He straddles me, turning our bodies so his full weight isn't on me. I wrap my arms around him as he kisses me again, this time with more hunger. I kiss him back just as passionately. I need him. My hunger surpasses any doubts still lingering.

He rips his mouth from mine, and I whimper until his lips trail down my neck. He takes his time, licking, sucking, and nipping my nipples before he moves lower. Part of me wants to stop him, but I can't get words through my throat. He licks the skin on my lower stomach and I'm so turned on I can't stay still. This is too intimate, but I can't say no. Everything within me wants what he's about to do.

He pulls my panties off, kissing his way down my legs. He spreads them as he moves back up, his tongue trailing along the inside of my thigh. He bends my knees and spreads me as his hot breath whispers across my heat.

I feel the slickness of my arousal as I shake beneath him. “Mmm,” he murmurs, the sound vibrating against my thigh. He then kisses the edge of my core and my back arches.

“Greyyyyy,” I moan, my hands planted on the bed as my torso twists. I don't know how to deal with the sensations. I've never felt anything close to this. It's like lava is flowing inside

me, needing to escape. I'm hot, shaking, and aching everywhere.

His tongue runs up my slick fold, grazing the bundle of nerves screaming for attention. I let out a moan as my skin vibrates. He lifts his fingers and massages the lips of my core before he spreads me open, his hot breath reaching my achiest parts.

"Please," I say. I'm practically weeping as he draws this out.

Just when I think I can't take another second of the torture, his mouth presses to my core and sucks before his tongue circles. I scream as my body tenses. It feels so good; it's almost too much. There's a thin line between pleasure and pain and I'm right on the edge.

His tongue swipes along my folds and he sucks my bundle again and again as I writhe beneath him, holding on with all I have. A few more masterful strokes of his tongue makes me explode. Fire blazes inside me as wave after wave of pleasure rushes through me ... but he doesn't stop. He keeps licking as he sticks two fingers inside my heat, my walls squeezing him as I come again. It lasts so long I nearly black out.

The strokes of his tongue slow, and I jerk beneath him as he pushes his fingers in and out of me. And then he sucks my bundle again and I'm shocked as one orgasm ends and I immediately start feeling the heat build again. What in the world is happening? I try to pull him away, but I don't have the strength and he seems to be on a mission.

I can do nothing but lie back and let him take me up another mountain. He builds my pleasure again, knowing just

how hard or soft to touch me at each moment. It doesn't take long before I fly over the edge once more. He's still not done. He touches me, kisses me, licks me, and nips my skin over and over again until I whimper in defeat, my body spent. I'm a wreck by the time he climbs up my body, his tongue gently swiping my nipples before he moves higher.

Then he's beside me, the hunger in his eyes so intense it nearly burns me. He cups my cheek then leans over and gently kisses my lips.

"Seeing the sheer pleasure in your face is the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed," he whispers.

"I can barely move," I tell him, in awe of how I'm feeling. I'm sure this will be a night I relive nightly for a very long time to come.

"Then I've done my job right," he says with a touch of smugness.

We lay together as I recover my breath. His hand rests on my stomach, his fingers gently caressing me. Unbelievably, a twinge of heat builds again at the simple touch of his fingers against my hot skin. I don't understand why we aren't having *actual* sex now. I can feel his hardness against my leg and he's pulsing, my thigh is getting wet as he drips ... but he's completely controlled in how he's gently touching me.

"What about sex?" I finally ask when he still doesn't move.

He leans over me, bends down, and gently kisses me before moving back. "Tonight's about you, not me," he says. His voice has a trace of pain in it. There's no way he can be this turned on without getting relief.

Something flows through me at his words. Not only is he not forcing me, but he's unwilling to even give me what I want. I don't know what to do with this. A surge of energy rushes through me as I sit up.

"What do you mean?" I ask. He gazes at my breasts for a moment before meeting my eyes.

"I want you. Don't doubt that for a second. As you can see and feel, I'm so hard I could break through a metal door. But this weekend is about you. It's about you being free from having to strip, free to make your own choices, free to feel ultimate pleasure. It may seem like I'm paying for your time, but that's not at all what I'm doing. I'm paying for your freedom. You're not free if we have sex. You won't ever forgive me. You might think it's fine, but you won't later. I won't have sex with you this weekend as much as it pains me to come to this conclusion."

I don't know what to say. The resolve in his face and the tone of his voice makes me know he means it. Even if I climb on top of him, he's not going to have sex with me, not with this fifty-thousand dollars looming over us. I won't ever understand this man. I assume all men are evil, but then Greyson storms into my life, changing everything I've believed to be true. I come to a firm decision.

He might not be willing to have sex, which both frustrates and relieves me and I don't understand, but there are other ways of bringing him pleasure. I've never willingly sucked on a man before. Tonight, I'm going to.

Before I give him a chance to think about it, I move, straddling his lower legs. I lean forward, taking his large

arousal in my hand and squeezing. He lets out a moan as he tries to push me away. I won't let it happen.

I lower my head and take him in my mouth, and his entire body jerks off the bed as he tenses from head to toe. Sweat breaks out on his skin and he's shaking beneath my touch.

"Cass, you don't ..." His words end in a moan as I suck him hard, taking him farther into my mouth while my hand squeezes his base hard. I move my head up and down on him while I circle his head with my tongue.

"Cass!" he yells as I feel him start to pulse. Heat shoots into my mouth as he releases, his body trembling, his skin on fire. I take it all before slowly pulling back and swiping my tongue across his tasty head, making him jerk again.

I'm utterly pleased as I move up beside Greyson and lie down. He immediately pulls me to his side, then reaches down and pulls the covers over us. We don't say a word to each other for a long moment. Then he surprises me when he chuckles.

"Well, it's good I put my foot down on sex, because that was sadly fast. If I'd entered you I might not have gotten past the tip before I exploded," he says. He then laughs harder, his chest shaking, making my head wiggle as I lie against him. I start laughing too, enjoying a moment of true happiness.

"I have to admit I'm a little arrogant, knowing I turned you on so much you exploded in a few strokes," I tell him.

He reaches down and swats my butt. You'd think this would make me tense, make me afraid. I'm not scared with him, though. Instead, it oddly turns me on. What is it about

this man that takes away my fear and worries? How I'm feeling about him *does* scare me, though.

"We *will* have sex, just not tonight," he promises.

I don't want to ruin the moment. I don't want to tell him he's never going to see me again. Tonight, we're in a bubble, and I want the bubble to last forever ... or at least until the morning slams back into us. The real world will come soon enough.

"Thanks for today, Greyson," I whisper.

"It's truly my pleasure," he says.

I close my eyes. As much as I don't want this perfect day to end, I can't stay awake any longer. I fall asleep tucked against him, his heartbeat soothing, his hands protective. I'd be the happiest woman in the world to never wake from this beautiful dream ...

Chapter Fourteen

It's been two weeks since Greyson dropped me off at my vehicle at the club with a bag full of money and a kiss goodbye. He assured me it wasn't going to be our last time together. I kissed him back with real feeling. I didn't tell him he was wrong. I simply said goodbye, climbed in my vehicle, and drove away.

There's a part of me that hurts at the thought of never seeing him again. But he's a complication I don't have time for. Besides, I have no desire to have a relationship with *any* man, I have other things to focus on. I have a plan and I can't let anything get in the way of that.

Even after two weeks I have no regrets about my weekend with Greyson. Being with him was more healing than any amount of therapy I've received. Being with him taught me that all men aren't monsters.

It also showed me I can feel pleasure instead of pain. It taught me that I might actually like sex. Then again, I can't imagine being with any other man, so I might never know if I like actual sex. I sure as hell love the foreplay when it's done by a man wanting to please me instead of harm me.

Once a woman's been with a man like Greyson, they're ruined for life. Will I ever look at another man the same? Since coming back, I looked at a few of the men in town who

flirt with me. I moved closer to them, even flirted a little to see if I felt anything close to how I felt with Greyson.

Nope. Not even a spark. At least there's also no fear ... not even around Derek, who's huge. If any man was going to intimidate me, it would be the Mountain Fitness owner, Derek McConnel. But he's a big teddy bear and doesn't inspire fear in me.

I've relived my weekend with Greyson over and over again. I dreamed about him and woke up in a sweat. He awoke something in me I always thought was broken ... and I still walked away from him. I'm more broken than I realized I was. It has, however, given me hope that someday I might be normal. Besides, it would be too painful for me to try to stay with him and realize he's as much a monster as the rest of them. I'd rather have the fantasy and ache every night than have my fantasies about him shattered.

"Are you listening to me?" Mattie asks.

I turn and see the young girl standing on the other side of the coffee counter with her hands on her hips.

"Sorry, I zoned out." I laugh before I move to finish making the coffee.

"You've been acting weird for a couple of weeks. What's going on?" she asks as she assesses me. Dang, this girl would make a master interrogator. She notices things many teenagers don't see.

"Hmm, you've also had moments where you have a goofy smile on your face." Her eyes widen as she says these words.

“What?” I finish the coffee and hand it over to the customer just as the door opens and a group of giggling teenagers come inside.

“Hi, Shay, Amber, Lisha,” Mattie says before turning her attention back to me. “Were you with a guy that weekend you took off?” My cheeks instantly flame.

“Why do you think that?” I gasp. I’m not willing to lie, but I’m certainly not going to share my love life with a teenager. Heck, I’m not going to share it with anyone for that matter. I don’t have a love life I remind myself. I had a weekend, not a love weekend, just a weekend.

“I know the signs. I have friends with single moms, and even though I’m young, I still get crushes. When a boy I like looks at me a certain way I get all dreamy. You’ve had that dreamy look all over your face for two weeks. I can’t believe it took me this long to figure it out. I blame homework. It’s been rough this year while taking AP classes,” Mattie says.

“There’s no boy,” I tell her. That’s not a lie. It was a weekend and I’ll never see him again.

“I don’t believe you. There might not be a guy right now, but you leave a lot of weekends. I think there’s a guy somewhere,” she says.

“Are you tracking me?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Yes, of course. You’re the best boss in the world and I like you,” she tells me, filling my heart with warmth.

“I like you too, Mattie, and I’m still not discussing boys with you,” I tell her.

“Come on. I’m bored. Spill,” she demands.

“Fine. I did spend time with a guy, but it’s done now so there’s no dreamy looks and I’m not acting weird,” I say. “You should be a detective when you grow up.”

“I know. My mom says I’m great at digging information from everyone. Law enforcement isn’t out of the question when I grow up. I doubt it though. They aren’t paid enough for all of the BS they have to deal with.”

I laugh. “You sure don’t act your age,” I tell her.

“I hear that all of the time. I think it’s because my parents are older and I’m an only child. I was a miracle baby. My dad died a few years ago and it was horrible. It’s just me and my mom now and she’s the greatest woman in the world.”

“I can’t believe I haven’t met your mom yet. The way you talk about her makes me know she’s pretty amazing.”

“She’s the best. She can do all of the old-time things like gardening, canning, and sewing. If we ever end up in an apocalypse, Mom and I will be just fine. We have enough canned food to last a lifetime.”

“It’s sad that a lot of those skills are getting lost,” I tell her.

“I know. It’s because of budget cuts that schools don’t teach a lot of home stuff. Mom complains about that a lot. But she does free classes for any kids or adults who want to learn,” she says.

“Maybe we can have a time here when we teach,” I suggest.

Her eyes brighten. “That would be so dang cool. I know my mom would do it and I’m a great helper. She taught it all to me. I don’t love sewing, but I do love canning. It fascinates me

how we can grow our own food, then can it to make it last for years. We rotate all of our stuff because we have more and more each year. Mom gives a lot to other people too. She believes all communities should help those who need it most. The neighbors will come and help her with the garden, so it's become a thing."

"Wow, that's pretty amazing, Mattie. Have your mom come see me and we'll set something up," I tell her.

"I will as soon as I'm home tonight," Mattie says. Then her smile falters as she sends me an annoyed look. "You successfully changed the subject. I see what you did there."

I throw my head back and laugh. "No, I'm really excited to do activities at the store. I want this to be a true community place. We also sell lots of books on gardening and canning so it's a win/win for us," I say.

"Okay, but don't think I'm going to give up on what happened with this mystery guy."

"Nothing happened. It's a one and done," I say.

"A one-night stand?" she asks.

I gape at her. "No, it wasn't a one-night stand. Ugh, I wish the internet was never created. It's made kids grow up far too fast. You shouldn't know about one-night stands."

"I'm not a baby, Cass," she says with a laugh.

I hear more giggling and turn to see the three girls over by the front window. An older boy on the other side is signaling them. Lisha moves forward and sends him a kissy face. Chills run through me. I realize Lisha is Cheryl's daughter ... the one who's been making bad choices.

I move a little closer and check out the man flirting with her. He has to be in his early twenties. A shiver rushes down my spine. I've seen that look on a man's face before. I don't know for sure what's going on, but I've seen enough in my life to feel this girl is being groomed. Maybe all of them are. Her friends, Shay and Amber, don't seem to be interested though. All of the focus is between Lisha and the boy outside, who's clearly too old to be flirting with her.

I watch as he turns and sends a signal to someone who's out of sight. My stomach turns. I move to the three girls and step in front of Lisha, blocking her view of the guy outside.

"Hi girls, how are you doing today?" I ask brightly.

Lisha looks around me then frowns. I turn and see the guy quickly walking away. He doesn't want to be caught. This makes me even more suspicious.

"We're good, Ms. Cass," Amber says.

"We're just hanging out this weekend. Mattie said you have a student discount so I want a good book," Shay says.

"Me too," Amber says.

"Mattie, why don't you show Shay and Amber your new YA display?"

"Sure," Mattie says. She takes Shay and Amber away. Lisha goes to follow them.

"May I chat with you?" I ask. "I'll make you a drink on the house."

Lisha smiles. "Sure, that's great," she says. Everyone loves to get something free. I just need a few minutes of her time.

We walk over to the coffee counter and I have her take a seat while I move behind it.

“What would you like?”

She looks at the menu board. “May I have a dirty chai?” she asks sweetly. I can see she’s on the verge of womanhood and she’s part rebellion but still has a sweet side to her. If she’s not helped quickly that sweet little girl could be ripped away forever.

“Who’s that boy outside?” I casually ask. I have to tread carefully. I remember how afraid I was while I was being manipulated and abused. There’s a side of me that’s pure defense. This is different for Lisha. Her parents aren’t selling her, a groomer is coming after her.

“His name’s Ryan. He’s so cute,” she tells me with a blush.

“How old is he?” I ask, keeping my tone light.

Even with my softer voice I see shutters close over her eyes and her shoulders stiffen. “His age doesn’t matter. In another five years no one would blink at an age difference,” she tells me. I’m well aware this is something he would’ve said to her. It breaks my heart how easy it is for these groomers to brainwash a young, vulnerable child.

“May I tell you a story?” I ask.

She looks suspicious but curious. Her arms are now crossed but she’s still sitting with me as I take my time making her drink. I move over and grab a cookie and hand it over. She takes it with what looks like reluctance.

“Sure,” she finally says, then takes a bite of the cookie. I can hear Mattie, Shay, and Amber giggling in the back corner

of the store. Hopefully Mattie keeps them there for a while.

“I wasn’t lucky like you when I was a little girl. I had truly bad parents. Have you ever heard the word groomer?”

She nods. “When I was in that horrible world with my parents, I saw a lot of groomers. I met the men who trained the groomers. They’d find young boys and young men and teach them what to say to girls to get them to come with them. They’d teach these boys how to find vulnerable pre-teens and teens. Then they’d break them down, and make them think they couldn’t survive without them. Very sadly, a lot of these girls would forever disappear from their homes to never be seen again. They weren’t killed though, instead they were treated to lives that made them wish they were dead. They suffered abuse, their bodies not belonging to them, and many horrific men doing unimaginable things over and over again. I was one of those girls. I haven’t told another soul in this town my story, and I hope you don’t share it because I’m one of the lucky ones who got out and I don’t want to live in the past. When I think about what was done to me, I can’t breathe. I cried every day. I was abused so bad I nearly died several times. I know this is a lot to tell you, but when I see a potential situation of grooming, I can’t sit back and say nothing. If something were to happen to you I’d never forgive myself for letting a child be taken the way I was, with no choice. In my case it was my parents who were the monsters and sold me again and again. You have great parents, but that doesn’t mean the monsters in this world won’t come for you.”

Lisha looks at me with a bit of fear and some defiance.

“Ryan isn’t a groomer,” she tells me, though the fierceness in her voice is gone. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Oh, sweetie, this isn’t about me. I’m only telling you so you know where I’m coming from. I didn’t meet the boys those men taught. I met the men they were working for. They’d openly brag about a new boy and how many girls he’d led to them. Child sex trafficking is so much more prevalent in this country than anyone imagines. They often go after runaways and kids they think no one will miss. But they’re getting bolder with the world becoming so corrupt. They’re trying to change the name for pedophiles to ‘map’ for minor attracted persons. That should scare every parent. This world thinks it’s okay for children to be abused. As an abuse victim, I can tell you it’s absolutely not okay. You’re young and vulnerable and want love and attention. You can have it all. You can have the love of your life. If you get dragged into that despicable world though, it will break you, and it could make you forget about all of your dreams ... if you survive it.”

Part of me wants to back off. Am I taking this too far? That boy scared me, and with what her mom told me, I feel like this is urgent.

Lisha gets tears in her eyes. “Ryan isn’t a trafficker,” she insists. I hand over her coffee and she lifts it and takes a sip as she wipes away a tear.

“How old are you, sweetie?” I ask.

“Fourteen, but I’m almost fifteen. I’m not a little kid. I can tell when people lie to me,” she insists.

“You’re certainly not a little kid. You are, though, a beautiful young woman. That boy, who has to be about twenty

with a youthful face, a fake smile, and bright eyes, is the point person. He'll next try to get you hooked on drugs, and then before you know it, someone will come and take you. I can't say this will happen for sure, but I can tell you to be aware of what's happening. I can't stop you from talking to him, just as your parents can't. Teens are smart. They know how to sneak around, and they know how to keep secrets. That's okay. However, I want you to memorize my phone number. I'm writing it down right now. If you come in tomorrow and can tell me my number, I'll give you a free drink every day for the rest of the year. That way, if you get yourself into a situation, you can call me. I don't care if it's three in the morning, you call me. I *will* come to you without question. I won't yell at you, I won't judge you. I'll just come and get you."

"You'd tell my parents," she says, though she takes the note and looks at the number as if she's already trying to memorize it.

"I have the upmost respect for your parents, but if you need saving in the middle of the night, no, I won't tell on you. I'll encourage you to tell them. You need someone you can call when you're scared, though, so please let me be that person. Watch for signs, Lisha, please. If he's telling you things like age doesn't matter that's a bad sign. You're absolutely right that it won't matter after you're an adult, but it does matter now because you're a child, a beautiful, talented, amazing child. We adults are meant to protect you. We're supposed to make sure you reach adulthood. It's getting harder to do that with everything in the world so messed up. Child trafficking and child molestation is never okay. Not ever. There's never an excuse for it. Children need to grow, they need to keep their

innocence at all costs. They have the rest of their lives to be adults.”

“I’m tired of being treated like a kid. I’m growing up,” she insists. There’s no more anger in her tone. She’s acting more her age with a little whine in her voice. I have to push back the smile that wants to pop out.

“I didn’t go through normal childhood emotions. My parents made me grow up too fast. My innocence was taken from me at the age of five.” Her eyes widen and she looks horrified.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“That horror you feel for five-year-old me is the same horror I feel at the thought of traffickers getting their hands on you. That’s how much I care.” I reach over and take her hand. She doesn’t pull from me. I made a little progress. That’s enough for our first time talking.

“I still think he’s fine, but I’ll memorize your number,” she tells me as she smiles. “This is a good dirty chai. It would be stupid of me not to take advantage of free drinks.” That impish look tells me this girl is going to be trouble for a very long time. My hope is it’s the good kind of trouble.

“Thank you for listening. I know you didn’t need to. Do you want to talk about anything else or ask any questions?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m good. I appreciate the cookie and drink though.” She hops down from her stool.

“Have fun, Lisha. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell her.

She waves then leaves to join her friends.

I hope I'm wrong about Ryan, but everything screaming in my gut tells me I'm not. I hope she dumps him, and if not, I pray she memorizes my number and can get to a phone to call me ... before it's too late.

Chapter Fifteen

Thirteen Years Ago

I've been in this hell for a year. The passage of time is fickle. Before juvie, time seemed to go slower than a snail on the side of a house. Incarcerated, it cruises along. I'm not sure if it's because I feel safer here than on the outside or because I'm used to the routine. It's funny to feel safe because things still happen, but it's not daily and it's not nearly as bad as my life was before.

Is it always perfect? Not by any means, but I'm used to bullies, they don't bother me. I've been in a few fights with girls wanting to prove themselves, but it's nothing I can't handle. I'm difficult to intimidate or hurt. Nothing can happen to me that hasn't already. Juvie is paradise compared to the mansion I grew up in. Even the rotten guards are nothing compared to my father ... and others.

I humorously laugh at the thought of my old home. Most of the girls here are from horribly poor neighborhoods and homes that should be condemned, a lot of the reason they're in this place. They grew up in abusive homes like me, but not in elite districts in Washington, D.C. I never talk about where I grew up. They're foolish enough to be jealous. Some would covet the life I lived, even with the abuse.

In their defense, they were abused on the floor of a broken trailer with no running water while I at least had bathing facilities. I had to look and smell fresh before my abuse.

The night guard, who's picked on me for months, decided I did a terrible job cleaning the bathrooms. Instead of lying in bed reading a book, I'm on my hands and knees, scrubbing the large tile floor. She said I can't use a mop since I did a crappy job earlier with it.

I'm aware this is a form of degradation ... but she doesn't realize it doesn't bother me. I'd love to be reading a book right about now, but I tell myself a story in my head as I'm on my hands and knees, scrubbing an already clean floor. It's not mansion-marble-floor sparkling, but it's dang clean.

Most of us like to take our time cleaning; it's better than being in our cells, bored for hours on end. One little fight breaks out and we're locked down for at least a week. Cleaning a large bathroom with multiple showers is a good break from the eight by ten cells we spend so much of our time in.

"You need to scrub that spot again," the guard says.

I sigh as I look up. She left about thirty minutes ago and I hoped I'd get to do the rest of the bathroom in peace. Apparently not. The good thing about the bathroom: there are no cameras like in the rest of the building. I don't want videos of me showering, even though that's nothing new — there are many videos of me bathing over the years — but the downside of no cameras is things sometimes happen in here that all of us wish wasn't happening.

Girls have been known to get into fights, sexually harass one another, and try to do any number of acts I don't want to think or talk about. I hate being here alone with a guard, which thankfully doesn't happen too often. I'm too smart for it. But tonight it's late and nobody else is around. I can't complain about the situation ... no one cares. I'm the criminal and this guard, Stacy, is the law.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. I scrub the already clean floor without argument. The key to a decent day is to not argue, even if I know the guard is on a power trip and is one-hundred-percent wrong. In here, we're *always* wrong. No need to try to dispute that.

"I like seeing you right where you are," Stacy says. I don't bother looking up, but I see her from the corner of my eye. The snatch is leaning against the wall, chewing on something as she stares at my ass. That's nothing new. Not all predators are male. I've seen my share of evil women who get off on hurting young girls as much as men do.

That makes me think of my daughter. She's eight months old now. I'd give anything to be with her on her first birthday. Has she started crawling? Do her adoptive parents love her? Where is she? I can't believe how much I miss someone I only knew for two days. Well, I got to know her for twenty weeks and two days. She's a part of me, and I'll never be a whole person until she's once again with me.

"Get up," Stacy commands.

Am I done? I sure as heck hope so. I'm close to tears and want to go back to my bed and shed some tears. I try not to think about my daughter because it breaks my will to keep

going. I miss her. I do think of her enough to keep my will to survive, so I can one day see her again.

I rise. Stacy doesn't move from the wall, her gaze trailing over me. What now? I know how to take a hit, but I really don't feel like it tonight. Then again, maybe some physical pain will make the emotional rawness not hurt as much.

I start to move toward the door.

"Stay where you are." I immediately stop. I look to the floor. I know better than to make eye contact. I'm not sure what's happening, but it can't be good.

"Strip," she tells me.

I look up shocked.

"Why?" We're not supposed to question any order from the guards, but I don't get what she's wanting.

"You don't ask why. I told you to strip. Do it before I lose my temper."

I shake my head. "I don't want to," I tell her.

It's been a year since I've been abused by an adult and I don't want it to happen again, to be touched or leered at. Not again. She takes a menacing step toward me and I don't move. She comes closer.

"I said strip," she growls, close to my face.

I won't let a single tear fall. I focus on rage instead of panic and fear.

"No," I say again. If I tick her off enough, maybe she'll simply punch me and walk away.

The slap across my cheek comes without warning and it stings. It's been over a year since I was slapped. I forgot how much it hurts. When abuse is daily, you're used to it. When it hasn't happened for a while, you forget the pain.

Before I can even blink, she slaps me again on the same cheek. This time it takes my breath away. She grabs my hair and yanks my head back. There's a gleam in her eyes I've seen many times before. She loves this, loves the fight, loves to dominate another person. I start to shake. I should stop now, she might lose interest if I don't resist. But I can't stop myself.

"Don't touch me," I cry.

She smiles and I struggle against her hold. She pushes me against the wall, my body slamming into the hard tile, the back of my head hitting so hard I see stars.

"You don't tell me what to do. I'm *your* boss. I can do whatever I like, anytime I want. You're helpless. You can make this easy or you can fight. I don't care which you choose. In the end you'll do exactly what I want."

"Screw you," I snap.

She slugs me hard in the stomach. For the first time since delivering Angel, I'm grateful she's no longer inside me. I nearly puke with the force of her punch but I still struggle against her. The woman laughs.

"Oh, I will screw you. I'll do anything I want to you," she says.

She mashes her mouth against mine and I bite her lip. She lets out a yelp then pulls back far enough to punch me in the

face. This time the hit is so hard I crumple to the floor. She kicks me several times while I'm on the ground.

Sadly, I know this feeling. My body is breaking. The fight is no longer worth it. I curl up and wait for it to end. When I'm too weak to fight, she drops down next to me and rips at my clothes. I taste blood in my mouth, but I don't focus on that.

In my mind I'm back at the hospital, holding my baby girl. As this evil woman runs her hands over me, my mind leaves the room and goes to another place. I barely hear her groans as I tune out her words. I have no idea how long the abuse lasts because I'm no longer in this room with this wretched woman. I don't feel her touch me, don't hear her moans of pleasure. I'm in my happy place where I'm cradling my baby to my chest.

It's not this woman's hands on me, it's my child's soft head nuzzled to my chest. Pain sears through me as she gets rougher, but I don't come out of my mind. I push away the pain, push away the violation. It's harder now because it's been so long since it last happened, but I know I can do it. She continues groping and touching with fingers, hands and her mouth as I lie motionless, praying for it to end.

Finally her hands are off me and she moves away. I don't stir.

"Clean yourself up. You have ten minutes to get back to your cell or things are going to get worse," she says.

Stacy puts her clothes back on, her face flushed, her eyes bright with excitement. She loved every second of this abuse. How many girls has she done this to? Has anyone ever turned her in? I doubt it. Nobody gets in trouble for what happens to

us in here. We're troublemakers and no one cares. I didn't know it got this bad though. I thought I was relatively safe in this prison.

She starts to leave then turns back to me one more time. "Let me give you a piece of advice. This one is free. You'd best learn how to play if you want this place to be a good experience for you. I can get you things and make your life better ... or I can make your life a living hell. It's your choice. If you tell anyone what happened, you'll be dead of a self-inflicted suicide before you have time to blink."

She smiles before exiting the room. I lie on the floor for a few seconds before I achingly rise to my feet. I hurt all over. The wounds will eventually heal. It's my mental health I'm worried about. I don't know if I'll ever feel whole again after everything that's been done to me. Will I ever live a normal life?

I shower, then wear my towel back to my cell, making sure I'm there in time. A fresh set of clothes are on my bed. I put them on, wincing as the rough fabric rubs against new wounds.

She said she can make my life a living hell, but it already is. There's nothing she can do that hasn't already been done to me. She can't break me any more than I've already been broken. Within five minutes of returning to my cell, she comes back and takes my tattered clothes away. There will be no evidence of what was done to me tonight. No witnesses. It would be my word against hers, and she's knows it.

I lie down but it's hours before I fall asleep. I'll be out of here someday, and people like her will never hurt me again.

The time will come. I just have to wait. I need to have patience. Someday soon, it will all be better ...

Chapter Sixteen

Greyson

I'm sitting in my office about to shove my fist through my computer. I shut the laptop and lean back in my chair, covering my face and letting a growl escape. Dammit. Dammit. Dammit. How in the world is it this hard to find one person? Cassandra might think I won't hunt her down, but she's sadly mistaken. I'm frustrated beyond measure right now, but that doesn't mean I'm giving up. I just need to punch something, pull myself together, and then get back to it.

It's been almost two months since I let her escape. What shocks me more than anything is she's become so much more than a job. I want to know this woman. She obviously doesn't trust easily, which scares me, because that means she is who I think she is. That's not a good thing, not with the people who want her found.

These people are monsters ... and they never fail. I had no idea the depths they'd be willing to go to silence people. It horrifies me. I've been on this job for a year now. Several others have failed where I'm succeeding, or was succeeding until two months ago. I've already gotten closer than anyone else ... that's because I'm the best.

I've never become obsessed with someone though, and words can't describe how I feel about Cassandra Montana any way other than obsessed. She's on my mind the first thing in the morning when I wake up, then continues to walk through my mind all day. I fall asleep thinking of her, and even then, I don't get a break, because I dream of her, of what happened and what more I want to happen. I can't get her out of my mind.

It's more than that, though. I can't put my finger on what it is, but I want to know her secrets, her dreams, her plans in life. I want to know what all has happened to her that she has a haunted look in her eyes ... even if it kills me to know. What was it that led to her stripping? What did she go through in her young life to make her who she is today? She's strong, determined, stubborn, sexy, and I want to know why ... and yes, I desire her as well, which is the main reason I'm so damn confused.

I understand desire. I've wanted many women in my life. I've never hungered after someone the way I hunger for her though. It's messing with my normally rational brain. I don't like it. I also don't like that I can't find her. It's seriously ticking me off.

There's a knock on my door and a timid intern peeks her head in.

“Sir, can I come in?”

I look at her and she takes a step back. I try and wipe the scowl from my face.

“Have I been such a monster that the staff is afraid of me?” I ask. Her eyes widen and she opens her mouth to speak, then

shuts it again as if she doesn't know what to say. Okay, maybe I have been a bit grumpier than usual. "Come in, Halley." I let out a sigh.

She ignores my question, probably a wise decision. If I've been this much of an ass, her honest answer might make me snap. I don't like being this man. I'm not a bad guy, I don't usually lose my temper, and I don't treat those below me like crap.

"Did you have something you need to talk about?" I ask, making sure my tone is friendly even though it's coming through clenched teeth.

"Yes, sir, I think we might've found Cassandra," she says as she slowly moves forward. I sit up ramrod straight in my seat.

"Let me see," I demand.

She sets the papers on my desk then quickly steps back. Ugh. She's not going to make it in this world if she's this easily intimidated. I'm not a damn monster, I'm just in a bad mood ... for two months. I don't feel like babying the interns right now ... not at all.

"Anything else?"

"No, sir, that's all."

I don't bother with a goodbye as I look at the papers. Halley turns and disappears. I have ten people in the building with me, five interns and five staffers. If this girl found the information I've been looking for, she's getting a fast-track to full employment.

I read through the information and see Safe Haven bookstore and Ravish, Oregon. I flip to the next page and see a

few grainy images. It's hard to see as they're from security cameras, but as I get to the fourth page, I smile. I know that profile incredibly well. Thank you, facial recognition.

I throw the papers down, open my laptop to the State of Oregon business page, and do a search. It takes a while as the name on the sign of her business isn't the same as what she has it registered under. That's what's been holding me up.

I click through several more sites with the information on the papers Halley gave me, and soon I'm confident Cassandra's in Ravish, Oregon. I've finally found her. She's smart, very smart. She wants to stay hidden, and she's done a damn fine job of it. Her building was paid for with cash and her business is registered under a different name, but now I know where she is. She's good ... but I'm better with a hell of a lot more resources at my fingertips.

I stand, feeling much happier than I did when I came in this morning. I'm smiling as I walk out to the main room of the building I've been working from for too long. The people look up, all of them seemingly shocked at my happy expression.

“Okay, okay, I know I've been grumpy for a while now. I don't like being stumped. I'll make it up to all of you. Take the rest of today off. Tomorrow I'll order pizza and sweets. I'll be heading out of town.”

There's a cheer from the staff and I'm not sure if it's for the food or the fact that I'm leaving. I decide not to ask. Nothing will alter the good mood I'm in right now, but no one wants to hear that others can't stand them, not even a confident man like me.

I practically skip from the building. I have bags to pack and a drive to make. I've been in Idaho for quite some time. I've been in the wrong state. I lift my phone to make a call as I sit in my vehicle ... but I hesitate.

For the first time in my life I don't want to file a report. I lift the phone again, telling myself I'm being a fool ... but I still can't dial the number. I set my phone down. I tell myself it's because nothing's verified yet; I don't have concrete information to report. It has nothing to do with what I'm feeling about Cass on a personal level, nothing at all.

I lose my smile for a minute, but it comes right back as I start driving home. I'm going to see Cass again real soon. I wonder how she's going to react. I know she doesn't like being attracted to me, and I know she doesn't trust me, but I have a feeling she won't be as upset as she might want to be at me coming back into her life. She might even be happy about it.

We're both going to find out. What am I going to do once I see her? What will I do if it turns out she's the one I've been looking for? Hell, I know what I need to do ... but if that's the case, why in the hell am I hesitating? I'm sure this is just a fluke. I'll be fine. As a matter of fact, when I see her again, I'm probably going to be underwhelmed at what I feel.

I'm sure this is nothing more than liking the chase. Now that it will be officially over, I'll lose these strong feelings toward her. That doesn't mean we don't have to have another night or three together, it just means I'll get her out of my system just as I've gotten out every other woman I've been with. I don't get attached.

There are many men out there who say they're going to be eternal bachelors, but when it comes to me, it's a fact. I'm not getting married. I watched the nightmare of my parents' marriage. They fought all of the time. Their divorce was horrible. To this day they hate each other.

What's odd about my parents is, on their own, they're both nice people. They're happy, peaceful, and loving. But there's something about them being together that brings out their dark sides. They say and do hateful things, and they turn into people I don't recognize. Apart they're wonderful, together no one should be near them in case of a nuclear explosion.

That's why I won't get married. There's no way I want to turn into the same man my father turns into when he's around my mother. There's something about saying "I do" that changes a person. I can list a thousand other examples, but this line of thinking is killing my good mood, and I don't need to go back to the dark side.

I'm happy right now, even if my bubble might soon pop. For now, I don't want to worry about problems. I pull up in my driveway and park. I can get rid of this condo now. I'll turn in the notice before I head out. I don't have much here. It's a furnished month-to-month rental. I never know how long I'll be on location. I'm ready to get out of Boise. I'm sure the staff is ready too. This place is too cold and too foreign for them. They've complained more than once.

I decide to wait before I fully pull the operation out of Boise though. I don't need to be here, but operations can still be. When I pull the operation, I have to tell the uppers why, and then I'm not sure what will happen. I'm the front man. I

never worry about what happens after I've done my job. This time I'm worried. Maybe it's time for me to retire. I do this job because I love it, not because I need the money. Right now I'm not loving it so much.

I walk inside, my good mood officially gone. Dang it. That didn't last long. I immediately get to work. It doesn't take long to pack my clothes and gather the few personal items I have here. I print out my typed thirty day notice I've had ready to go from the moment I rented the place, then pack my items in my vehicle.

I drop my letter and house keys in the manager's mail slot and head to my SUV. I have about an eight-hour drive to my new location so I want to get on the road. I won't head straight into Ravish since it's a small town and I don't need to make a middle-of-the-night entrance into town, but I want to get close. Tomorrow or the next day I'll see Cass again. Damn, I hope fireworks happen. I hope they explode and then I hope they go out. My obsession will end soon. This will all end soon, I assure myself.

I click on music to drown out my thoughts and hit the road. Ravish, Oregon, here I come.

Chapter Seventeen

My phone rings at two in the morning, instantly waking me. I swing my feet over the side of the bed as I lift the phone, seeing an unknown number flashing. I hit the green button.

“Hello.” My voice is hoarse from sleep.

“Cass,” a shaky voice says.

Any last vestiges of sleep are gone as I recognize Lisha’s scared, shaking voice.

“Lisha, where are you?” I ask as I jump to my feet, moving straight to my dresser. I put the phone on speaker and grab a pair of sweats, a bra, and shirt.

“I need help, Cass,” she whispers as she sobs, absolutely breaking my heart.

“I’m coming, Lisha, but I need to know where you are.” Throwing on a sweatshirt, I move to the kitchen and grab my purse and keys, and then immediately walk to my door and move outside.

“I don’t know where I am.” She’s sobbing so hard it’s difficult to understand her words.

“I need you to send me a ping of your location. You have an iPhone, right?” I calmly ask, even though I’m anything but calm.

“Yes, yes, I do,” she says, fear and a bit of relief in her voice.

“Do you know how to send me your location?” I don’t know how I’m keeping my voice so calm when I’m freaking out. I guess it’s because I know if I lose it so will she, and then the monsters might come after her. I have to hurry. I know how quickly a child can be taken, I know how many arms to this trafficking business there are. These are monsters in the highest positions of power. It’s horrible.

“No,” she says with another sob.

“It’s okay, I’m going to walk you through it. Take a deep breath. I’ll tell you step by step. Put me on speaker. I’ll whisper.”

“Okay,” she says. “Done.”

“Good, Lisha, good. I’m sending you a quick message. Open it as soon as it comes in.”

Her quiet sobs are all I hear for a second. “It’s here.”

“Okay, I need you to click on my name at the top.”

“Done,” she says, her voice still shaking.

“Do you see the words, *share my location*?”

A few more sobs escape. “Yes.”

“Click that and it will ping me exactly where you are.”

“Okay, I just did. Please hurry.”

She’s still crying, but I understand her a little better. A new message comes in on my phone. I click it and the map pulls up, giving me her address. Then a scream comes over the line.

“Lisha, is that you?” I ask, not able to keep my panic out this time.

“No, it’s a party. I don’t know who’s yelling. Everyone is drunk and high. There’s a lot of people here. I’m not feeling good, Cass. I can barely keep my eyes open,” she says with another heart-wrenching sob.

I start my car as I load the map on my screen, the call now playing through my speakers. “Don’t hang up, Lisha. I’m driving now. It says I’m ten minutes from you, but I’m going to cut that time in half,” I assure her.

“Okay,” she says, her voice groggy.

“Lisha, I need you to stay awake. Take me off speaker so no one can hear me.”

“Okay,” she says. Her sobs have stopped, and she now sounds like a zombie.

“Do you know what drug you took?”

“No,” she whispers, her voice fading. I push down on my gas pedal as I approach a road that leads up the mountain. I take corners at twice the speed I should. I hear the party before I turn another corner, finding a couple of dozen vehicles parked in front of a large house. There are kids stumbling around. They don’t even turn to look at my vehicle.

“Where are you, Lisha. I’m here.”

“You’re here. I don’t see you,” she says. I’m barely able to hear her.

“Where are you?” I repeat.

“I don’t know,” she says. “A bathroom, but I don’t know where.” She seems to grow a little more alert as fear creeps into her voice again.

“I’m coming,” I say. I burst into the house; the music loud, and kids all over the place, drinking, partying, and oblivious to everything around them. First, I need to get to Lisha, then I need to call the sheriff. Lisha isn’t the only one in danger here.

It takes me about three minutes to rush through every downstairs room. I fly up the stairs and spot the same kid who was eyeing her in the coffee shop. He sees me, the first to notice an adult in the house with them. His eyes widen and he runs down the hall. I don’t have time to deal with him right now. I push open three more doors before I find Lisha curled up in the corner of the bathroom. She looks up with half-lidded eyes.

“Cass,” she says on a sigh.

“I’m here,” I tell her as I rush forward. “Can you walk, Lisha?” I most likely can carry her, but it won’t be easy.

“I don’t know. I don’t feel good.”

I put my arms around her and lift. She shakily rises to her feet. I wrap my arm around her waist and hold on as we slowly move forward. She’s wobbly, but able to move with me. As we make our way down the stairs more of the kids take notice of us. They turn away, most likely trying to hide their faces. I don’t want any of them trying to run away so I don’t scream at them, telling them what fools they are. If they flee they might never be saved. The cops need to come and get the monsters hosting this party.

It takes a solid ten minutes for me to get Lisha out of the house and loaded into my car.

“I’m sorry, Cass,” she says with a sob as she slumps against the window in her seat.

“It’s okay, Lisha. I’m not upset with you at all. I just need to get you help. Please try and remember what you took,” I practically beg.

“I had a couple of drinks then I wasn’t feeling good. I didn’t take any drugs. I never have. Ryan wanted me to just like you said, but I didn’t want to. I’ve heard a lot of kids are dying from fentanyl and I’m too scared to accidentally take it.”

“That’s very smart, Lisha,” I praise. “You had two drinks?”

“I promise all I had was two drinks.”

“It sounds like you got the date-rape drug. I’m going to call Stephanie,” I tell her, then take a breath. “I need to call the police too. They have to break up this party before other girls get hurt.”

She starts crying all over again. “My dad will kill me,” she wails.

I reach over, grab her hand, and squeeze. “I promise you your dad won’t be upset with you. Neither will your mom. You made a mistake going there, but you did the right thing when you called me, and all they’re going to feel is relief that you’re safe. The minute you realized you were in danger you did something about it. Will you ever go back?” I gently ask.

“I told them I was staying with Amber. I lied,” she says.

“They won’t care about that right now. Lisha, I haven’t steered you wrong yet, have I?”

She shakes her head. She’s terrified, hurting, and sick. It’s breaking my heart. “Let me call Stephanie so she can meet us at the clinic,” I say. She nods.

I dial Stephanie, who has a twenty-four-hour hotline for emergencies just like this.

“Hello,” she sleepily says.

“Stephanie, this is Cassandra Montana. I have Lisha with me and I think she received a roofie.”

“I’m on my way,” Stephanie says, her voice instantly alert.

I speed up as I make my way to On Call Advantage. I reach the clinic and rush from my car to go to Lisha’s door. As I’m getting her out, Stephanie quickly drives up and jumps from her car.

“Let’s get her inside,” she says.

I stand back while Stephanie takes charge, taking her blood pressure, listening to her heart, and doing medical things I have no idea about. She looks competent, and I take my first relieved breath since that call woke me.

Leaving Lisha in Stephanie’s capable hands, I dial Sheriff Spangler, who must’ve also been sleeping because his voice is groggy. I have no idea what hours he works but as the main sheriff, it’s probably during the day.

“Sheriff, this is Cassandra. There’s a party that needs broken up. Roofies are being given,” I tell him as I rattle off the address.

“Hold on,” he says. I hear him relay the message to his officers before he comes back to the phone. He’s not at all annoyed at me directly contacting him instead of calling the station.

“Thank you, Cass,” he tells me. “How did you know about it?”

I take a deep breath. “Sheriff, your daughter was there. She called me,” I say. He cuts me off before I can add more.

“Is my daughter okay?” he practically shouts.

“Dan, what’s going on?” I hear his wife ask in the background.

“I don’t know yet,” he says, panic in his voice. He’s a professional, but all rationality flies out the window when a loved one isn’t safe.

“Sheriff, she’s okay. I have her with Stephanie at On Call Advantage.”

“We’re on our way,” he says and the phone goes dead. I check on Stephanie and Lisha, who seem to be doing okay. I then move back outside and wait for Dan and Cheryl. They arrive in minutes.

“Where’s my daughter?” Cheryl demands, tears on her cheeks.

“She’s inside with Stephanie. I promised her you wouldn’t be mad at her. As soon as she realized she’d been drugged and was in danger she called me. She’s safe now,” I tell her parents, hoping I can keep my promise to the young girl inside.

Chery's shoulders droop as Dan wraps an arm around her. She's sobbing. "I need to pull it together before going inside," she says between sobs.

"We aren't mad at her. We're scared. We've seen the signs but we haven't been able to stop this from happening," Dan says.

"It happens to many good parents. It's not so easy to resist the pressure from peers. I honestly think this has scared her enough to put her back on the right path," I tell them.

"You're an incredible woman, Cass. There's not a thank-you in the world big enough for us to show our appreciation," Dan says. "Your word is good with our daughter. She won't get in trouble for this because she did the right thing while aging us ten years."

I give the two of them a wobbly smile. "Let's go inside. I'm going to stick around for a while to make sure she's okay," I say.

"Yes, of course," Cheryl tells me. She pushes away from Dan and wraps her arms around me. "Thank you so much. You're my hero."

I can't stop a few tears from escaping as Cheryl and I walk inside arm in arm with Dan behind us.

"I'm so sorry," Lisha says as the three of us appear in the exam room.

Cheryl drops to her knees beside the bed Lisha is lying in. She grabs her daughter's hand. "Oh, sweetie, we're so grateful you're okay. We're thankful you had someone you could trust to call. Your father and I would die for you. There's nothing

you can do to change that. Please, please, just take care of yourself. I grew you from scratch inside my body, and the thought of anyone ever hurting you, destroys me. You're my world, little girl." Cheryl is barely able to get all of the words out through her tears. Dan turns as he wipes his own cheeks and I have a waterfall streaming down my face.

I stay with them for the next hour as Stephanie sends her blood out for rushed labs and gives her an IV. She already looks much better by the time I leave. There's no way I want to go back home. It's six in the morning, so I walk the short distance to my bookstore.

I move straight to the coffee counter and make an extra strong mocha, then bring it to the corner and curl up in my favorite chair. I manage to keep the tears at bay for about ten minutes before I start sobbing again.

I don't hear my door open, but I feel a hand on my shoulder, making me jump. It's a good thing I set my coffee down or it would've ended up all over me and the older man standing in front of me.

"Hello, Cass, I'm Ray Spangler, Lisha's grandfather," he says. His eyes are red and he looks a little wobbly as he takes a seat across from me.

"Is she still okay?" I ask as I wipe away my tears and try to keep more from falling.

"Yes, because of you," he tells me. Dammit, another tear falls. I wipe it away with frustration.

"That's good. That's very good," I say. I pick up my cup only to have something to do with my hands. "Would you like

a coffee?”

“No, I’m good. I just want to chat for a minute,” he tells me with a smile.

“Of course,” I say, though I’m not sure I have more words to say to anyone. I’m so raw right now I can barely speak. This is too close to home; it’s absolutely breaking my heart.

“I worked in the SVU division in LA for thirty years. I saw the worst of humanity in that job. I never thought it would touch my own granddaughter, but monsters are everywhere. With my job, you’d think I’d be more aware, and I’d have prepared my granddaughter better. It took you, though, to keep her safe. I’m so grateful to you; words can never express my thankfulness.” He goes quiet a moment and I look to the floor. I don’t know what to say.

“I’ve seen many tragic ends for beautiful young women, and I have a good idea you have a story of your own. I won’t push you to tell me about it and I won’t share my feelings with others, but I wanted to let you know if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m a really good listener. You gave my family a true gift today. If ever there was a survivor from this type of life, it’s you, and sometimes we bury our hurts so deeply we don’t realize they’re still inside of us.”

I give up and let my tears flow. My eyes are going to be the size of grapefruits if I keep crying like this. I might just shut down my store for the day.

“I don’t want to share my story,” I tell him.

He reaches over and pats my hand that’s resting on my leg. He gives me a smile. “I just wanted to let you know I’m here if

you ever do want to share. It's not often a survivor escapes so it warms my heart that you made it out, and now my granddaughter is okay because of you. You've officially become one of us now. This town is full of mostly good people. We help each other. There's nothing any of us won't do for you now. If you need any of us, it takes only one call," he says.

"Thank you, Mr. Ray, I really appreciate it," I tell him, my heart feeling fuller and warmer than it ever has.

He smiles as he stands then walks out as quietly as he entered, leaving me with a lot to think about. I know one thing for sure. I feel like maybe, just maybe, I have a family for the first time in my life. Coming to this town was the smartest and luckiest thing I've ever done.

I'm heartbroken for Lisha, but I think she's going to be okay now, truly okay. I might be as well. I finally rise and go to the back bathroom to clean my face. I'm not going to close down. This business is my salvation and being here is the best thing I can do when I feel so raw. It brings me happiness, just as this town does. I'm home. I'm home for the first time in my life.

Chapter Eighteen

I know I should open the store, but I just can't find the will to do it today. I left after the visit with Lisha's grandfather. I was tired and drained. It might be weakness that made me put the closed sign on the doorway due to illness, but I can't beat myself up for it. I've worked hard every day since I walked out of juvie as a free woman. I can take a day to feel sorry for myself.

I'm sitting on the couch eating ice cream when a knock sounds on my door. The spoon freezes halfway to my mouth as I look toward the closed door. A full minute passes and there's another knock, this time louder.

I set my bowl down and stand, looking at my pajamas with disgust. Who could possibly be knocking at my door? It hasn't happened once since I moved to this town. I'm friendly with the neighbors but I'm not home too often so I see everyone at the store or at other businesses in town ... never at my home.

"Come on, Cass, I know you're in there."

I frown, then smile, then frown again. I move forward and undo my lock, then slowly open the door to find Mattie standing on my porch with a bag hanging from her arm and a big smile on her lips.

"Mattie, what are you doing here?"

“I had a feeling you were having a bad day especially after what happened with Lisha, then seeing the closed sign on the bookstore door.”

“I guess it scared me more than I realized,” I admit.

“It’s okay for that to affect you,” Mattie assures me. “But you have to remember you saved Lisha. If it hadn’t been for you, something bad could’ve happened to her. Not only did you save her, but you saved other girls in this town, maybe even me. Did Sheriff Spangler talk to you?”

“I talked to him and Cheryl this morning,” I tell her, confused now.

“The deputies went to that party and busted them last night after you called it in. The guy who was talking to Lisha has a rap sheet a mile long. His real name’s Pedro Alexander, and he’s wanted in three states for robbery and rape, *and* he’s a murder suspect. He was in our town using a different name and ID. If it hadn’t been for you, he might not have been caught. He could have done horrible things here to people I care about. He could have killed Lisha, or taken her away, never to be found again. Her parents would’ve been ruined for life. *You* stopped that. You’re the entire town’s hero.”

Mattie looks at me with hero-worship and tears fill my eyes. “I’m not a hero, Mattie. I’m so flawed I don’t even know where to begin to explain how messed up I am.”

She laughs. “Nope, not accepting that, Cass. I adore you. I love working at the shop, and I love what a great person you are. It sucked yesterday, but Lisha is fine, or she will be soon. She’s a bit upset right now, but also grateful to be alive. You have nothing to be upset about. Take today off and eat that

melting ice cream, but don't hide too long. We all need you. I need you. I can't imagine not working at the bookstore. It's important to me."

A tear escapes, no matter how hard I try to hold it in. I quickly swipe my cheek and smile at this little girl who it seems impossible is only a teenager.

"How did you become so wise?" I ask.

She laughs. "I was raised by great parents. My dad died five years ago and Mom and I didn't think we'd survive it, but we have each other. Both of my parents taught me everything I know, but I'm really close to my mom. She's always been my best friend. I know kids say that all of the time, but it's true in my case. She taught me how to love and how to be a decent person. I screw it up sometimes, but I'm always trying to fix myself when I make mistakes."

"Most adults don't even learn this lesson in their lifetime. It's pretty impressive you already have such great wisdom," I say.

"I brought junk food," she says as she holds up the bag. "I also *really* like ice cream," she adds with a huge smile.

"Is that a hint?" I ask, feeling better. I'm still not back to myself, but this visit is certainly helping.

"It's *definitely* a hint."

"I have Oreo and Rocky Road," I say.

"Oreo of course," she says.

The two of us move to the kitchen and I pull out another bowl and the ice cream. Once it's dished up, Mattie happily

takes it, and we move back into the living room and both sit.

“Have any good movies?” Mattie asks.

“I don’t really watch movies,” I admit.

“That’s just plain tragic,” she says. “Don’t you get bored?”

“No, when I find myself with some free time I read books,” I tell her.

She laughs. “Duh. I guess you do own a bookstore.”

The two of us spend the next couple of hours eating ice cream, popcorn, chips, and other junk food as she tells me her favorite gossip about the people in town. I relax. I’m still a little stressed at how close Lisha came to being taken by a horrible man, but Mattie has definitely made me feel better.

By the time she leaves, I don’t feel the need to cry ... though I’m sure the feeling will come back for the next week or two. I think she’s been the perfect first visitor to my home. The longer I live in this town, the more I love it, the more I pray I’ll get to stay forever.

Chapter Nineteen

It's been a day and a half since that middle of the night call with Lisha. Her parents have kept me well-informed, and I'm looking at the huge bouquet of flowers they sent yesterday with a beautiful thank-you note that sent me over the edge again with tears.

My eyes are swollen and no amount of makeup is covering up the constant tears. I think they are under control now. Just when I think I've left my past life behind, something like this happens and not only rips off the bandage, but takes a piece of my flesh along with it. I'd do it again and again if it saves other girls from the fate I was born into. I know how to deal with my pain ... I'll take it to save a young woman from a life of servitude to horrific people.

The door jingles and a subdued Lisha walks inside, a bag in her hand. She's moving a little slow as she crosses the room toward me, and I fight the stinging sensation in my damn eyes.

"Hi, Ms. Cass," she softly says.

"Hi, darling. How are you feeling?" I ask as I stand and meet her in the middle of the room.

She bursts into tears and drops the bag as she throws her arms around me. That's it, my eyes spill over again as I hold her. We stand this way for several moments, and it's a double whammy for me. I care about this little girl and I'm glad she's

okay, but it also makes me think of all the moments with my daughter I've missed ... ones I might never get. To hold my child and comfort her would be the greatest gift of my life. I can't imagine the joy I'd feel to have as much love from her as Lisha is showing me.

She finally pulls away and wipes her eyes. "Thank you for coming for me. I don't remember much, but I know I was in serious trouble."

"I told you I'd come. I keep my promises. It still stands. If you ever get into trouble you call me."

She nods. "I'm not going to be getting into trouble. That was a wake-up call. Seeing the pain on Mom and Dad's faces broke my heart. I realize how much they love me, how important I am. I also realize that one foolish decision can ruin my life. My mom sat down with me while I was recovering and watched hours and hours of videos of survivors ... and stories from parents who lost their children. It broke my heart. There are so many children who are never seen again. I should've listened to you when you first talked to me, but I thought I was so much smarter. I know you and my parents aren't trying to hold me back, you're trying to help me fly."

"That's very true," I tell her. We walk to the coffee counter and I move behind it to make her favorite drink.

"I'm going to start paying for drinks now. You don't owe me free ones, you never did," she says with determination. This child is one of the lucky ones, and it's beautiful that she sees it.

"I can use a few hours a week of help here. Employees get free drinks," I tell her. I feel connected to her, and I don't want

her to run through my life and be gone. I want her to be a part of it. I think I need her as much as she needs me.

Her lips turn up and she gives me a smile that warms my heart. “I’ll talk to my mom, but I bet she’d like it. I’d love to work here. I’ve been a little jealous of Mattie having such a cool job.”

“You have great parents. It’s good to hear you’re going to talk to them before making any big decisions,” I say as I finish her drink. I hand it over and start making one for me. She takes a sip and sighs.

“So good.” She eats up the whipped cream and I hand her the can so she can reapply it. She smiles even bigger as she puts a huge dollop on top. “Thanks.”

“We talked a lot. They didn’t ground me, or yell at me, or punish me at all. They said they’d honor the promise you made me. I told them they could punish me because I lied and was really stupid. Dad said everyone deserves a second chance. He did tell me if he ever catches me drinking or doing drugs again though that he’d lock me in jail.”

I chuckle. “He might just do that.”

“I’d deserve it. But, I went to church with Shay last night. Pastor Chad has a really cool youth program. They have a band and several of the kids from school play instruments and sing. We had a delicious dinner and played games. It’s the best time I’ve had in a while. Next week we’re taking a trip to Springfield to do twilight bowling. Our group, which I was excitedly brought into, does the coolest stuff like rafting, skiing, bowling, game nights, volunteer work, and so much more. Shay’s been trying to get me to go with her for a while

but I thought I was too cool to do a lame thing like youth group. I was wrong. I like the kids there and Pastor Chad's amazing."

"I'm so glad to hear it," I tell her.

"I know I'll still screw up at times, but I won't ever do anything as foolish as I did the other night," she assures me.

"I learned long ago to not keep blaming myself for mistakes I make. I'm human and I'm going to screw up. That doesn't define who I am. I hope you can do the same. Thomas Edison had one thousand fails at creating the light bulb. He didn't look at it as failure, he looked at it as getting closer with every try. We might be able to do some things perfectly on the first try, or it may take us a thousand attempts. Either way, we get where we need to be in the end."

"You're my hero, Ms. Cass," she says.

"I'm nobody's hero, but I am someone who cares about you."

"You can't stop someone from looking at you as their hero," she says. She jumps up and goes over to where her bag dropped when she first came in. She brings it to me. "This is for you."

"You didn't need to get me something," I say. I haven't received many gifts in my life, and it still makes me uncomfortable on these rare occasions I get them. I don't know why.

"I wanted to. Now, open it," she says before picking up her coffee again.

I open the bag and inside is a Barbie. I pull it out and look at her. She claps her hands.

“Okay, this might seem cheesy to you, but this is my most cherished possession. I know it’s a little strange, but I’ve been obsessed with Wonder Woman since I can remember. My mom got this for me for my fifth birthday. It’s proudly stayed in the box on my shelf since then. I’d look at her every night and think I want to be as strong as Wonder Woman. You *are* a superhero to me, and I have a feeling you’re going to be to other girls in this community as well. I want you to have this as a thank-you from me, and as a reminder of how special you are.” She’s now beaming at me and my damn eyes are watering again.

“Oh, Lisha,” I say with a little sob. I rush around the counter and throw my arms around her again. “You are so special. You’re the superhero.”

“We’ll agree to disagree,” she tells me, making me chuckle.

“I’ll always cherish this.”

“Good. Now, I have to run. Mom’s at the grocery store. We’re having another movie day. This time she wants me to watch all of her favorite nineties movies. I won’t admit to her how much I like them because I have to maintain my coolness factor,” she tells me with a laugh.

“It will be our little secret.”

She squeezes me one more time then rushes out, leaving me alone in my shop, staring at a Wonder Woman Barbie. It’s the greatest gift I’ve ever received. I set it on the shelf above the coffee machines where I’ll see it the most.

I have to turn away before the waterworks start again. The door rings as a group of ladies walk inside. I'm thankful for customers. I don't need to be inside my own head anymore. I've had too much time for that these last few days.

The next few hours go by in a flash as Mattie comes in and the shop fills with customers. I finally gain control over my emotions and start laughing instead of crying. Lisha is okay, and I'm in my place with people I call friends. I refuse to think I'm missing anything ... or anyone.

With a couple of dozen people in the shop, drinking coffee, eating pastries, shopping, and visiting, I haven't noticed the bell on the door for a while. My back's turned toward it when a chill runs through me. I freeze, not understanding what's happening. I can't stop myself from turning around ... and that's when I meet *his* gaze.

A mixture of emotion fills me as Greyson's eyes meet mine. His lips turn up in a smile. I'm sure all color has washed from my face. I try to process what I'm thinking and feeling, but the only emotion I can focus on is ... desire. One look at the man I thought I'd never see again sends my body into a whirlwind of feelings. I have a desire to be with him, to be held, to be comforted, to have him take away the pain I've been feeling.

He walks with confidence, not stopping a safe distance away. He moves up to me, wraps his arms behind me, leans me backward, and kisses me to within an inch of my life. I'm wobbly as he brings me back up.

"Finally," he says.

"How?" I breathily reply.

Before he can say a word, Mattie skids to a stop next to us, her eyes wide and a bright smile on her lips. “Who are you?”

“Greyson,” he replies. “Nice to meet you.” He holds out his hand and she takes it with a giggle.

“I’m Mattie.” She pauses then jumps up and down on her feet. “Oh, oh, oh, you’re the one who put that dreamy look on her face for the past couple of months. She’s gone from dreamy, to pouty, to introspective, to nonchalant. She thinks she hides her emotions well, but I have a feeling you rocked her world so hard you messed with her programming. She’s totally glitched out.”

I look at Mattie in horror as my cheeks flame. “She’s overexaggerating,” I say.

“Nope. I’m not. I figure she won’t say this to you, so as her friend and best employee it’s my responsibility to say it all.”

“I think you and I will have to sit down and chat,” Greyson says, his own smile growing the more my traitorous employee speaks.

“No, you shouldn’t be speaking to anyone. You shouldn’t even be here,” I tell him. I can’t question him on how he found me with so many ears listening. The bustling shop has gone oddly silent as all eyes are on our little scene. Great, just great. Within the hour every single person in town will be well aware a hot stranger came into the shop and kissed me breathless.

“Oh, we definitely need to talk,” Mattie says. “Are you here to claim Ms. Cass?”

“That I am,” he says.

“No, he’s not,” I counter.

“How will you win her?” They’re talking as if I’m not standing right here.

“I have some good moves,” he says with confidence.

“They’d better be more than good. I haven’t seen her on a single date since she moved here nearly a year ago, and believe me, we have a lot of single men who’ve tried getting her attention,” Mattie tells him. I’m too horrified to interrupt. I want to stop this, but it’s like being tied to a track with a train heading straight for you. I want to stop it, but I don’t seem to have the power to.

“Do you have any suggestion?” Greyson asks.

She puts her hand on her hip and taps her foot as she thinks. “Well, she loves chocolate covered strawberries and old books. She likes hiking, but it’s still pretty cold out. She does get all warm and gooey for chocolate covered nuts. But I don’t think any of that will win her over. I’ll have to think on this some more.”

“I might be able to come up with some good stuff,” he says.

“I’m right here, you two,” I finally gasp.

“Oh, we’re well aware,” Mattie tells me as if I’m the child and she’s the adult. Our world has turned upside down. “You know, it’s only gossip if someone talks behind your back. I take pride in telling everything to a person’s face. Of course, this man is hot and you’ve obviously been lusting for him, so even if you stomp off, I’ll still talk to him and help plan how to catch you.” She gives a shrug as if this is just a normal situation and out of her control. She’s only doing what must be done. I’m again speechless.

“I like the way you think, Mattie,” Greyson says.

“You’re both terrible,” I say. “Why do I like this nosy town?”

“Because we’re all wonderful.”

“I’m not thinking anyone is wonderful in this moment,” I counter.

“You know what they say about liars?” Mattie says. I raise my brows. “They shall be thrust down to hell, not gently placed, but thrust.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re crazy. Everyone here is crazy,” I say as I throw my hands in the air and turn around.

“Where are you going?” Mattie asks.

“I have customers to attend to,” I tell her, not turning back.

“I’ll take care of this one, and you can tend to the ugly ones,” Mattie replies before she starts giggling.

I turn back and look at her in horror. Several chuckles escape from my customers. “Everyone here is terrible, just terrible,” I repeat. This causes more laughter.

Instead of helping anyone, I decide to go to the back to have a few minutes alone. How in the world did he find me? I thought I was being so careful with how I registered my business. I keep offline as much as humanly possible. I pay cash for most things, and I keep far away from social media.

At my desk, I lay my head in my hands. How do I feel about him being here? I can’t decide. I’ve had a few very emotional days and there’s no way I’m going to process something this big. Who is Greyson River? Is he dangerous? I

have no idea what he wants. For that matter I don't know what I want. Hell, I don't even know how I feel about this turn of events.

I close my eyes and focus on breathing in and out. It's all I can do in this everchanging world. Maybe I'll begin to figure it all out soon. For now, I'm going to go to my happy place and pretend nothing significant is happening in my life. I can almost smile as I slowly breathe in and out. It will be okay, it will all be okay ... it always is.

My journey tends to take me down many different paths, some bad, some good. No matter which path I take though, I'm always still standing when the adventure is over.

Chapter Twenty

Greyson

I find a flat rock and send it flying across the water, feeling no satisfaction as it skips five times before sinking into the beautiful McKenzie River. I knew Cass would be shocked at my arrival, and maybe a little horrified, but it's clear we have a connection and I thought she'd at least speak to me.

Nope. I was wrong.

She ran from that coffee shop and I didn't see her for the rest of the day. It's early morning now and I'm determined to get her alone. We have to talk. My phone rings and I look down, guilt tingling along my spine.

"Hello."

"Any updates?" the man asks.

"Not yet. I'm still looking," I say.

There's a long pause, letting me know the man on the other end isn't happy. I wait. I know how the power game goes.

"Speed it up." He says the words harshly before hanging up.

"Dammit!" I holler before pitching another stone in the water.

"Having a bad day?"

I whip around to see two men approaching, one in a cop uniform, the other dressed casually. I hadn't expected the sheriff to seek me out, even with this being a small town. I shouldn't be shocked though. I did make quite a splash with my entrance yesterday.

"It could be better." I force my shoulders to relax. If I look suspicious they might try to run me out of town. Then again, they could try to run me out, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm here for a reason and I'm not leaving until my mission is finished.

"It certainly can. You can't be at the river without a fishing pole," the man next to the sheriff says. "It's against the law."

"I've never fished before," I admit.

"It's easy," the man says before holding out his hand. "I'm Micah Clark. I own the fishing shop in town." I shake his hand. He hands me a fishing pole. I look at it like an alien object.

"I'm Sheriff Dan Spangler," the sheriff says as he holds out his hand, squeezing my fingers tight. I fight to hide my smile. Nothing like a handshake to prove manhood.

"Greyson River," I tell them.

"Fitting name," Micah says as he looks at the river and laughs.

"I guess so, as this river is a little grey."

"You'll have to see it in the summer, it's more beautiful and as blue as it gets," Micah says.

“Not sure I’ll be around for that long,” I tell them. I’m well aware they’re fishing for information more than anything in the river. I can give them a little. I know what I can and can’t say. I’ve done my job for a long time.

“How long will you be here?” the sheriff asks.

“I’m not sure yet,” I say. This is the truth. I don’t add I’ll be here as long as it takes.

“That’s vague,” Micah says. It’s almost like they’re a team, each knowing what to say and what expressions to use to intimidate a person. I smile.

“Don’t get too many strangers in town?”

“Nope, not in the winter. In the summer we get a lot of outdoorsmen,” Micah says.

“We don’t have a lot of trust for people who come into town, walk into one of our businesses, kiss the heck out of one of our favorite people, then make her run away,” Dan says.

I smile. “I guess I did make a unique first impression.”

“You sure did. How do you know Cass?” Micah asks.

“We met several months ago,” I say.

“Where?” Dan asks.

“That’s our story. I don’t share personal information,” I tell both of them.

“You’re not making it any easier to trust you,” Dan points out.

“You trust Cass,” I say.

“She’s earned our trust,” Dan says. “You haven’t.”

I chuckle. “Cass has a story, just as I have my own. Most humans don’t share their stories with strangers.”

“We’re well aware Cass has a story. In a small town we’re able to know our neighbors a lot easier as we all shop, eat, and play at the same places. Cass will share more with us when she’s ready,” Micah says. The way he says her name makes me want to send a fist into his perfect nose.

This thought stops me. What in the living hell? Is that jealousy I’m feeling? I’m not quite sure as I’ve never before felt that emotion. I don’t like it too much. I crack another forced smile.

“What if her story is that she’s a serial killer?” I ask.

Both the sheriff and Micah laugh. “Well, I guess that would sure give the gossips something fun to talk about. Sometimes we don’t have enough drama here to entertain our citizens,” Dan says.

“Yeah, and that would make great stories at the bar,” Micah adds.

“So, she could be a serial killer and she’s okay, but *I’m* the real danger?” I ask with a laugh.

Micah reaches to the bottom of my shirt, and it takes all I have not to block him. I know he isn’t making an aggressive move, but everything in my training tells me to defend myself when someone is coming toward me. He rips off a price tag I missed.

“A person who tries too hard to fit in usually has something to hide. You don’t look like a polo shirt and jeans type of man with your expensive haircut and thousand-dollar shoes,”

Micah says. I'm sort of shocked he knows the price tag of my shoes. It's a good thing I'm not wearing my expensive Italian leathers.

"Everyone has secrets. If I were an open book, it would probably terrify others, but I'm a law-abiding citizen, that I can assure you. Some secrets are meant to be kept and some are meant to come out. Normally, they come out at the worst possible time for someone," I tell them.

"That's true. That's why it's always good to rip off the bandage and air your dirty laundry right from the beginning," Dan explains.

"I think I'll leave some things a mystery," I assure them.

"Come on, Greyson, we're good guys. You can trust us," Micah says with an award-winning smile. That jealousy rushes through me again. Does he want Cass? So what if he does? She's not mine. Even if we have a fling, it won't last forever. He looks like the type of man who wants to settle down with two-point-five kids and a dog and kitten. If I were a better man I wouldn't try to pursue any further romance with Cass.

Newsflash, I'm not a good guy.

"I guess time will tell how good the people of this town are," I say.

This makes the men laugh. They aren't even a little offended at my words. That's a good sign. People who are easily offended are normally the ones trying to hide the most. Those secure and happy in their lives don't need to defend themselves or shout at others.

"Are we going to find out you're a serial killer?" Dan asks.

I give him a big smile. “Never say never.”

“Okay, okay, enough of the interrogation. Let’s do some fishing,” Micah says.

“Are you trying to make me look like a fool?” I ask as I reluctantly look at the pole.

“Nope, there’s nothing that brings me more pleasure than to create a new fisherman,” Micah says.

“It’s good for his bottom line,” Dan says as he takes his own pole, holds it back, then makes a perfect cast into the flowing river.

Micah gives me a lesson on how to hold my line on the reel as I cast, and after a few failed attempts I pick it up pretty fast. I find myself smiling as I get the hang of it. When I get a bite and my pole shakes, I have a real smile.

“Reel!” Dan and Micah shout.

I battle the fish, and shockingly pull it from the water. It’s huge. I have no idea what it is.

“Damn, nice trout,” Micah says as he shows me how to take the hook out. “I’ll show you how to clean it when we’re done. You’re going to have the best dinner of your life tonight.

The last of my stress fades away as I cast my line again. This is much more fun than it looks on television. I’ve never had an interest in doing it before.

“Who knew playing with a rod would be so calming,” I tell the men. We all burst into laughter.

“Men know what feels good,” Micah says with a wink.

“What’s your plan for getting Cass to talk to you?” Dan asks.

I shrug. “Not sure yet, that’s why I’m down here,” I admit.

“Well, she sure does love chocolate covered strawberries,” Micah says. I feel foolish over my jealousy. The man wouldn’t be helping me if he was crushing on her. That’s two people now who’ve mentioned strawberries. I remember how well she enjoyed them on our last night together. Did her love of strawberries start then or before that night?

“Where do I find them?” I ask.

“You’ll have to drive into Springfield,” Dan says.

“I might have to take a drive after fishing,” I say.

They both nod and then we go silent as we stand on the edge of the river and continue fishing. It looks like Micah just got himself a new customer, because I have a feeling I’m going to be here for a while. I also have a feeling I’m going to need to fish because nothing about Cass is ever easy or stress free ... and shockingly I like it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Twelve Years Ago

I've been in juvie for two years. Each day melds into the next. One isn't better or worse than the last. People do what they want with me, but I stopped caring what happens to my body long ago. It doesn't mean I don't fight, it just means I go somewhere else in my mind while it's happening. It doesn't happen nearly as much as when I lived with my so-called parents, but it never seems to end. There's only two years to go and I'll be free, then no one will hurt me again ... I'll make sure of it.

I'm in the library drawing an image of what I think my daughter might look like now. She's a year and a half old, walking for sure, and most likely speaking several words. She's calling someone else Mama. That thought breaks my heart more than any other I have while thinking of her. I picture her with light hair like mine and I draw a few wispy curls on the paper in front of me. I'm not the best artist but with nothing else to do in here, I'm improving.

I'm completing a curl when the image is ripped from the table, my pencil making a jagged line on the paper as it whisks away. Two of the older girls stand before me, one with a sneer, the other with an almost apologetic expression on her face. She's a victim too, but has learned that to survive in here you have to join with the bullies. I refuse to stoop to that level.

“What is this?” Lacey, the snottiest girl in the jail, asks.

“That’s clearly her daughter,” Julie, the subservient girl, says.

Lacey tosses the picture on the ground as she leans over the table. “Do you *really* think you’ll get her back?”

“It might happen,” I say with determination.

“You’re a *murderer*. The only thing you’re going to get back is a lot of insecurity and a whole lot of hell,” Lacey says with an evil laugh.

“I’ve been through hell enough times to know every street in it,” I tell her, feeling defiant even though it will most likely cause more pain.

She laughs again, the sound filled with zero humor. “We’ve all been through hell, honey; that’s why we’re here. Do you really think anyone gives a shit about you or what you’ve been through? Let me answer for you, nobody cares and there are no heroes in the world to save you. You’re all alone at the whim of me and anyone else who wants to do whatever we want with you.”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks of me. And nobody can do anything that hasn’t already been done. I’ll do my time, then I’ll be gone from here forever, and I will find my daughter,” I tell her.

She pulls me out of my chair and backs me up against the wall. I look past her at one of the male guards who’s gazing at us with curiosity. He doesn’t move closer. The guards rarely do. It seems they like to see us fight. They love when it gets

bloody or sexual. Maybe they think it's just punishment for whatever brought us into this place.

“Prison breaks all of us. You'll leave here a shell of yourself like all of the girls who came before you have,” Lacey says, her spit flying in my face.

“I think all of us can rise from the ashes,” Julie says, her tone subdued.

Lacey is still holding my shirt, keeping me pressed against the wall as she turns and glares at Julie. “You go on thinking the world is full of rainbows and puppies. I *know* the truth. It's all about survival of the fittest.”

“This place won't break me. *You* won't break me,” I tell Lacey.

“We all say that when we come in. Then we grow up. What do you actually think you're going to do when you're out?”

“I'll get a job and prove I'm a good mother,” I tell her.

She laughs again. “You have a GED that no one gives a damn about. All you do is read books and draw stupid pictures. You work in the kitchen so maybe you can be a fry cook, making minimum wage. You know nothing about being a parent. You'll never get your daughter back and she's better off for it.” She seems utterly gleeful, spitting these hateful words at me.

“Maybe I'll have a bookstore that serves coffee since those seem to be my only talents,” I say, my spine stiffening.

“With what money, chica?”

“I'll figure it out,” I tell her.

“Well, you do love to dance in your cell at night. I like watching the show from across the hall. Maybe you should start using this body for something useful,” she says as she tears my shirt open and puts her hand against my skin.

I don't struggle against her. She's done this before. She does it to a lot of the girls. I'm not sure if she's actually into women or if she's into dominance, but I know she loves a fight and the more I resist the worse this will get.

Her hand goes up my stomach and lands on my breast. She squeezes as she lets out a sigh. “Oh yes, with this body you could make a lot of money stripping. You could slowly unveil these beauties and make all of the men cream their pants as they reach into their deep pockets to get more and more out of you.”

She squeezes me hard enough to make me wince, which brings more pleasure to her eyes. She then leans in and licks my neck. I'm stiff in her arms but I don't push her away. I also don't glance over at the sicko guard who's probably getting off on this.

“Stripping isn't a bad idea. You could make a lot of money and maybe eventually own that bookstore,” Julie says as she stands back. She knows she can't help me, but she's a caring person and wants us all to have hope. Maybe this place won't break her. I doubt it, but I can hope for the best.

“Yeah, I'd pay top dollar to have these nice tits in my face.” Lacey licks her way down my throat to my breasts and back up again as I stiffly stand against the wall. If this goes much farther I'm not going to have a choice but to fight. I'm done

being a doormat for girls like her. I might not be able to fight the guards, but I'm sure I can kick this girl's ass.

"You've made your point, Lacey," I say between gritted teeth as she sucks hard enough on my neck to leave a mark.

"Oh, I'm not finished yet," she tells me before she squeezes my breast again with one hand while tangling the other in my hair and pulling it hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. She then smashes her mouth against mine in a punishing kiss as she grinds against me.

"Come on, Lacey, let's get out of here," Julie says as she pats Lacey's arm.

Lacey rips her mouth from mine to growl at Julie. "Shut up, bitch. I'll get to you in a few minutes," she snarls. She then leans away from me and rips my shirt up all of the way, exposing my plain white cotton bra.

"Oh, you are pretty. The longer you're here, the hotter you get," she says. I see lust and dominance in her expression. I keep my arms at my sides and the guard still does absolutely nothing as she pulls down my bra, making my breast fall out. She leans forward and licks me before biting my nipple. I clench my fingers together so hard my nails bite into my skin.

Lacey leans back. "You taste just as good as you look," she says. I don't give her the reaction she wants, which seems to infuriate her. Instead, I go to my dark place in my mind and feel somewhat at peace as she continues to lick, suck, and bite me. I clench my fists as I fight with myself on what to do, about how far I'll let this go. I know a reaction will make it worse. I might win today, but she'll just get her minions and attack me so much worse if she feels humiliated.

Am I making up excuses? Or perhaps there's a place deep down inside me that actually likes this. Maybe it's the familiar evil I know. Do I want human touch even if it's harsh and cruel? Or is it that this is all I've known my entire life? Is there a part of me that likes the guard watching it all? Am I sick and twisted just like the other girls, and living in denial about it?

Part of me wants to fight back, to punch and kick and scream, but my subdued part is what I know best. It's ensured my survival through the years. Lacey kisses me again, this time not as harsh. She's growing tired of her game. She wants me to fight. That's where she gets the most pleasure and power.

She finally steps back. I push my bra into place and slowly pull down my shirt while she smirks in front of me. "I like this game we play. You might be my next girlfriend," she says. Julie looks relieved at this. She's been Lacey's girlfriend for three months now. No one gets to tell her no and whoever she chooses is her toy until she moves on to the next person.

"You're going to do whatever you want, Lacey," I say.

She scoffs. "Maybe not. I do like more of a fighter. It's why I'm growing bored with Julie here," she says as she gives Julie a disgusted glance. Julie just looks to the ground. Lacey takes her hand and the two walk away. I look at the guard who smirks at me. He's a disgusting pig who I hope falls off the top of a tall building.

I go back to my cell and lie in bed. My roommate returns a couple of hours later.

"I heard about the library," Paige tells me.

This roommate has been my favorite. She's in here because she stole her neighbor's car and crashed it into a police station at the age of thirteen, sending a cop to the ICU. She was being abused at home and knew she had to do something extreme to get away since no one believed her when she tried to tell others what was happening. Her parents are elite Washington society like mine, who think of us as nothing more than troublemakers.

"It's nothing new," I say.

"I'm sorry, Tina," she tells me. I cringe. I hate my name. "Sorry," she murmurs, knowing I hate it.

"It's just a name," I say with a sigh. "I need to accept I'm never going to quit getting assaulted. There's even a part of me that craves it," I admit.

"All of us do because it's all we've ever known," she says, sitting up and staring at me. "I heard they were talking about you making money stripping. You really do dance well. It's something to do to get your power back."

"How does stripping give *me* power?"

"Well, they *are* looking at you anyway. They're stripping you in their sick minds. Stripping might bring you some dignity because it's on your own terms and you're good enough that you can make a crapload of money doing it."

"I've never thought of it like that," I admit.

"You have a couple of more years in here. You could practice and learn routines, then make a ton of money for a few years and save enough to have your own business if you

want. The possibilities are endless,” she says, growing more excited.

I don’t say anything as I lie in my bed looking at the bunk above me. Is this my path in life? I can dance, no question about it. I was forced to do it from a young age and was severely punished if I didn’t please the creepy men coming over to objectify me. I was good at it. I like to dance. I can go someplace else in my mind when I’m dancing, to a safe place where I feel good about myself and the world around me. I love how I move and how the music takes me to another world.

“What are you thinking?” Paige asks.

“Maybe I can do that,” I say after another long moment.

“Maybe we’ll do it together. When we get out of here, we’ll make our own path in life and never see any of these people again.”

“That’s a great thought,” I tell her.

“It *can* happen. This place doesn’t have to define us. Our past doesn’t have to dictate who we’re going to be for the rest of our lives. We can take the lessons we’ve learned from before and during our time behind bars and turn them into something good,” she says, still filled with optimism.

“Maybe we can,” I tell her, feeling hopeful for the first time in a while. Is this my way out of here? Is this what it will take to find my daughter? Is all of this really nothing more than a game where the winner is the strongest and smartest? I know what people want from me, so can I turn that want into something I can twist and take?

“We have to make it through here first. No matter how bad it is though, it’s not close to as bad as it was at home,” she softly says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“I agree,” I tell her.

How sad that being molested in here doesn’t compare to the horrors we’ve been through on the outside. We can either focus on our past, though, or we can look toward our future. I’d rather dream than wallow in self-pity. I’m going to make it out of here. I’m going to see my daughter again and prove all of these people who’ve held me down wrong. I’m more determined than ever to make this happen. I’m going to take my life into my own hands and take power away from the monsters. I smile. Thank you, Paige.

Chapter Twenty-Two

What is up with strangers coming into this town? A few customers are milling about the shop and Cheryl is sitting at a table, pretending to read a book while she sips coffee. She's really here because she's so proud of Lisha, who's working her first shift today. She's doing a fantastic job. She's a natural with the customers, a quick learner, and eager to do anything I ask. She's a great hire, just as Mattie is.

The man who just entered though makes me nervous. There's no reason he should. I'm going to get strangers in the shop, especially as summer is quickly approaching. Heck, for that matter, I haven't met every person who lives in town yet. It might be small, but there are a lot of my neighbors who don't come out as much, and not everyone wants to go to the local bookstore on a regular basis.

The man who just entered is wearing an expensive suit, immediately making him look out of place. He stands at about five-foot-seven, skinny, and a little nerdy. I have a soft spot for nerds, somehow feeling they're not violent, so that's not what set me on edge. It's the knowing, assessing look in his eyes. He seems to be on a mission ... and he looks as if he's trying to hide that fact.

Maybe I'm jumpy from the other men in suits who appeared in town a couple of months ago. Then there's Greyson, who I still don't trust, and now this man. Some say

there's no such thing as coincidence. Maybe I should pay attention to my gut.

The man briefly looks at me, then heads to the thriller section of the store. His glance was so fleeting, it should ease my nerves, but it made me feel worse. He seems to have all of the right moves as he tries to look like a casual shopper. Then again, maybe I'm starting to see ghosts around every corner. No one has come after me in the past ten years. Why would they now?

On the other hand, I've been completely in the wind for nine years. I've moved around, never bought a property or business until now, and have flitted from job to job in many different cities. This is the longest I've been in one place since my release from juvie. Would anyone still want to find me after ten years? What kind of threat do they see in me?

Sure, when I first got out of juvie I wanted revenge. I wanted to take all of the powerful men and women in DC down.

After a couple of years of seeking revenge, I realized it was only hurting me. If I ever want a relationship with my daughter I can't be a vengeful person. I have to be good, have to be someone she'll want to know. I can't be filled with hate and be a friend to my daughter. It just won't work. My best form of revenge is to forget all about them, to live a happy life, and not let what they did break me.

But the people in DC don't know any of this. They don't know me. Maybe they're afraid the skeletons in their closets will come out at the worst possible moment. Maybe they want the threat of me gone, making a shiver rush down my spine.

Glasses man comes to the coffee counter where I'm standing. It's my favorite place to work in the shop. I took out the front register as most people who come in want coffee with their books anyway. It's easier to do all of the transactions here.

"Hello. Did you find what you're looking for?" I ask with a fake smile.

He gives me a look that tells me nothing. "I believe so," he says. The smirk on his lips doesn't reassure me.

"Is this everything?" I ask as I take the John Grisham thriller from him.

"I'll take a black coffee as well."

"Perfect," I tell him, my voice a bit too bright to be believable. I turn and pour him a cup of black coffee, then hand it over as I ring him up. He pays with cash ... of course he does.

He gives me one more assessing look, then turns and walks from the store. I follow his retreat, holding my breath until the door shuts behind him. A shudder runs through me.

"Who was that?" Mattie asks as she appears beside me.

"I'm not sure, but I didn't like him," I admit.

"Me neither. For some reason he gave me the creeps," Mattie says.

"That's because you have good instincts about people."

"He doesn't fit in our town. I know that sounds snobbish, but it's the reverse. He seemed far too uppity for Ravish," she says. This makes me smile.

“We are a little redneck here,” I tell her.

“I know and I love it. I’ve never been a makeup and dresses kind of girl. I’ll put one on for dances, but I’d rather play in the mud than dance in stilettos,” she says.

“I agree with you there.”

“So, what do you think he wants in our town?”

“I have no idea; maybe he’s just passing through,” I say.

I don’t want to admit I’m afraid. I don’t want to say I have a feeling he was here checking on me. I don’t look the same as I did at fourteen. My hair is darker, my skin bronzed, my features matured. But a person who has my fourteen-year-old picture could reasonably say I’m the same woman as that girl.

They’d be wrong. That girl has been dead for a very long time. That girl was a victim, abused and abandoned by those who should’ve loved her the most. That girl is long gone. I’m a new woman, and I’ll never be Tina Moore again.

Maybe I need to call the woman I called mother for fourteen years. I’ve had no desire to speak to her from the moment I was taken from her home in handcuffs, but if they’re after me, she’ll know about it.

She’s not innocent in all of this. She’s as big a part of the trafficking as the rest of them. She might not participate in abusing children, but she’s complicit in it, and she sure enjoys the money. She had no problem selling out her own daughter.

Someone calls Mattie and she rushes off to help them.
“Lisha, take over the register,” I tell my newest girl.

“For real?” she says as she rushes to me.

“You did great earlier. I have total confidence in you,” I tell her.

“I’ll do amazing,” she promises.

I nod, then walk through the back door into my office. I sit and gaze at my phone. I have the number blocked so if I dial, the person on the other end can’t track my call. Then again, my mother isn’t an ordinary woman. If she wants to trace me, she has the connections to do it.

Why would she want to, though? I’d think she’d like to pretend I’m dead. There’s no way she’d have any interest in my life. She certainly wouldn’t seek me out. Then again, it might not be her leading this if someone is after me. It might go even higher than her.

I sit at my desk for the next twenty minutes wrestling with whether to call or not. I finally decide I’m not going to rest properly unless I do it. It’s been fourteen years since I’ve thought about calling her, but I always know how to get ahold of her. It would be foolish not to know what she’s up to. Besides that, it would be very difficult not to know where she is now with how famous she is.

I pick up the phone and dial. It’s answered on the second ring.

“Isabella Branson please,” I say in a professional voice.

“One moment,” the woman on the other end of the line says. The phone is put on hold, and I sit at my desk with my heart thundering. I’m about to hear my mother’s voice for the first time in fourteen years. How will it make me feel? I’m about to find out.

I'm kept waiting for five minutes. This isn't unusual. My mother liked to feel important when I was a child. I'm sure it's worse now. She never was a person to run from power, and she now has more power than she had before. She'd done quite well for herself. Was it all planned?

"Isabella Branson here," she says, her voice poised and professional.

"Hello, Mother," I say, my own tone void of emotion.

There's a long pause. "Why are you calling?" she asks with pure ice dripping. She wasn't expecting this call. I'm only calling her mother because I have a feeling it's annoying her. She doesn't ask how I am, just wants to know what makes me think I have the right to call her. My heart's still thundering and sweat beads on my skin, but I keep my voice void. I won't grant her the gift of knowing how traumatic this call is for me.

"Have you sent people after me?" I ask.

There's another long pause. "Why would I bother?" She gives a fake laugh. She's perfected her fake smile and laugh.

"That's good because your daughter is gone. She's been dead for a very long time. If you were sending goons after me it would be a mistake. You would do well to remember I know things that can destroy your entire world. I'm happy with my life now, but if anyone comes after me, I promise I will burn it all down." I say all of this in a flat voice.

She's quiet for so long I'm beginning to think she's hung up. I listen carefully and hear the slight sound of breathing. She's composing herself. She's also playing chicken. I wait.

I've said what needed to be said, now I need to wait so she realizes how serious I am.

“What makes you think you'll live long enough to burn anything down?” she finally asks, her tone only showing the slightest edge of stress.

“I'm not a broken little girl anymore. I'll never be anyone's victim again. If you come after me, you'll regret it. You might want to tell your group of thugs this. None of you have power over me any longer. I've made sure of it.”

My mother coldly laughs. “There's more power here than you can comprehend. You might think you can do whatever you want, that you can hide, but there's no hiding from us. If we want you found, you'll be found. If we want you gone, you'll be gone.”

“I guess you can in your new position,” I say.

“Been checking up on me, daughter dearest,” she says.

“I know to keep my enemies in my sight,” I tell her.

“At least you're smart enough to know who to watch out for,” she says. She's so cold. How could this woman have given birth to me? How can she hate me so much? I've never been able to understand.

I have a daughter I only spent two days with, and I love her more than anyone else in the world. I'd give both of my legs to have another two days holding her. I'd give my life for her. What went wrong with my own mother? I'll probably never know.

“You should tell my step-father if something happens to me, the video evidence of all of your deeds will go viral within

minutes,” I warn.

This makes her pause for a long time. Her breathing has deepened. I’ve hit center mass with this shot.

“You’re bluffing,” she finally says. It’s a good thing we aren’t standing face to face because her voice is so icy I’d freeze on the spot.

“I guess you can have me killed and find out,” I say. I immediately hang up. I’m about to have a panic attack and I don’t want her to hear the fear in my voice. If she knows how scared I am, I lose. I try to catch my breath as I hear a noise.

I look up and find Greyson standing in my doorway, an odd expression on his face. How much did he hear? Oh my gosh, what if he’s a part of all of this? What if he’s my worst enemy? My panic increases, and I think I really might pass out.

“What’s going on, Cass?” he asks as he moves toward me.

“No. No. No.” I say this over and over again as I melt down.

He drops to his knees in front of me, pulls me from my chair, and curls me up on his lap. I shake as tears explode from my eyes. I push against him, but he doesn’t let me go. I finally wither, dropping my head to his shoulder, and let it all go, crying harder than I’ve cried before.

“It’s okay, let it out,” he says as he rubs up and down my back.

I’m not sure how long we sit while I have a complete meltdown, but eventually I’m able to push off the panic and fear. Eventually I realize I’m cradled in Greyson’s arms. I

don't trust this man, yet he's the one comforting me. What does it mean?

I'm too broken to try to figure it out. I'm also too weak to pull away from him. He might be my enemy, but I can't share this with anyone else and he's here, and for some strange reason, I find comfort in his arms.

"What's going on, Cass?" Greyson asks again.

"I can't," I say on a hiccup. The tears finally start to dry up. I'm calming. I don't pull away from Greyson, though. His arms are comforting. I won't berate myself for this.

"I want to know your story, Cass," he says, his hands still comforting me. He's not trying to turn this into something; he's simply holding me. I almost wish he would put a move on me so I can see him as a horrible pig. He's not though. He seems to honestly care.

No. No. No. No. I can't go to this place in my mind. I can't think of this man as my savior. No man ever wanted to save me. They all wanted something from me, and nothing stopped them from taking exactly what they wanted. Why does the smallest part of me think Greyson is any different? Because I'm a fool.

"I'm here," he says.

I shake my head. He keeps rubbing my back. What am I going to do? I need to trust someone ... it might be a matter of life or death. How can I give my trust though, when it's always been broken? I've done well on my own, better than I ever have. But I'm confused. I can't focus on only one emotion.

I compromise. I'll keep my walls in place, but I'll talk to Greyson. I won't share my story with him, but maybe I can listen to why he's here. Maybe he simply wants to see me again. Maybe ... maybe he's not the bad guy. Maybe I can explore these feelings I have when I'm around him. Maybe ... maybe it can be something.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Greyson

I'm not sure how long Cass and I sit in her office on the floor, long enough for my leg to go to sleep. It hurts, but I don't say a word. It's very clear she needs to be held. I witnessed a panic attack when Mattie led me to her office. Mattie's a little matchmaker, which works for me. It got me to Cass.

I caught the end of Cass's conversation. I'm not sure who she was speaking to, but it was clear it wasn't a good call. She was melting down. Who is this woman? What's her full story? I want to demand she tell me.

I'm frustrated. This was supposed to be cut and dry. This was supposed to be easy. It isn't. I should know better. Nothing is ever black and white, and one person can tell a story one way while another will tell it completely different. I've only had a few conversations with Cass, yet she's special and I want to help her; I want to take some of her pain away.

I'm beginning to figure out she's a good person. She might not be perfect, but who of us are? She's pretty damn close to perfection, that's been clear from the beginning. I want to help her. I want her to lean on me. This is blowing up my life ... and I don't seem to give a damn.

“Let me take you home, Cass,” I say after a little while longer. She shakes her head.

“Come on, you can’t go back out on the floor. Your face is puffy and you’re shaking. Let me tell Mattie to call in another employee. We’ll slip out the back door,” I say as my hand continues to rub her back. She doesn’t shake her head this time, but she doesn’t agree.

I sit with her another couple of minutes then shift. She scrambles out of my lap and gets up on shaky legs. I hate to admit it, but my own legs are a bit unstable as I stand. I shake my foot, waiting for feeling to return to it. Damn, I hate the sleep tingles. They hurt far more than they should.

“Sit down, I’ll be right back,” I tell her. I’m stunned when she plops down in her chair. I’m taking a risk to walk to the front. She might be gone when I return. It’s worth the risk though. She needs to go home. I don’t want anything from her, I simply want to be her friend. I have a feeling she doesn’t allow herself to have many friends. Maybe I can change that.

I find Mattie right away and pull her aside. “Cass isn’t feeling well, so I’m going to take her home. Can you call someone in?” I ask.

“Oh no, can I do anything?” Mattie immediately asks.

“She had a bad phone call and I think she just needs some alone time,” I admit. If I don’t share some truth, this child will knock down walls to get to her.

“Oh, that makes sense,” she says. “Dana will be here in thirty minutes and I’ll just stay on. Please let me know if she needs anything.”

“I promise I will.” I try not to rush as I walk back to Cass’s office, relieved when I see her still sitting in her chair. My heart breaks for her when she looks up at me, hopeless.

“You’re all set. Let me get you home,” I say in a gentle tone.

She nods as she stands and grabs her purse. We walk side by side out of her office, then exit the building through the back door.

“Did you bring a car?” I ask.

“No, I walk when it’s not raining,” she tells me.

“How far away do you live?”

“About a mile,” she replies.

“Okay, we’ll take my car.” She shakes her head. “If we walk, the chances of running into neighbors who want to talk will be greater.”

Her eyes widen. “Okay, you can drive me,” she says.

We move a block down the street where my SUV is parked. I open her door and she climbs in. She leads me to her place. It’s cute. It’s small, up the road from the river, and looks perfect for her.

“Can I come in with you?” I ask, hoping she’ll say yes.

She stays in her seat for a long moment and I hold my breath. I’m not pushing her; it’s clear she’s been through enough for the day. One more thing might send her completely over the edge, and I’m not willing to be the one who pushes her.

“Yes,” she finally says. She grabs her door handle and jumps down before I can get out and open it for her. I don’t say a word. The show is hers. She can pretty much have or do anything she wants right now.

She opens her door and it takes all I have not to make a comment about it being unlocked. I know this is a quaint town, but there are bad people everywhere. She’s a single woman living alone and should be more careful. When she’s feeling better I’ll say something. For now, I’m here as her friend ... not her guardian.

Her small living room holds a loveseat, small television, and a large vase in the corner with fake flowers in it. The small kitchen is visible with no decorations. She doesn’t have a table. Two doors are off the kitchen and living room. The place is smaller than most apartments I’ve seen. I’d go crazy in a house this small, but some people prefer less space because it means less maintenance.

“I’ll make some coffee,” she says as she moves into the kitchen.

“Sounds perfect,” I tell her.

I sit on the loveseat and wait while she moves around the kitchen. She’s starting to have more energy and the deep sadness is fading on her face from what it was just a little bit ago. Maybe she’s pulling out of the funk that call placed her in, or maybe it was just good to get out of the bookstore for a while, to change her environment.

She finishes the coffee and comes to the living room and looks at me. She hands me a cup, then sits down next to me,

her body pressed against mine. I automatically wrap an arm around her back, pleased when she snuggles against my side.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No.”

I rub her shoulder with one hand as I sip my coffee with the other. We’re both quiet as we stay pressed together for the next ten minutes. Sometimes silence can say a lot more than words ever will.

“Are you a bad guy, Greyson?” she asks.

“Sometimes,” I admit.

A slight smile flits across her lips. It’s much better than her look of defeat.

“I guess all of us are at some point,” she says.

“I think anyone who thinks they never do anything wrong is a liar,” I say. “Then again, I’m as close to perfect as it gets.”

She actually chuckles and I feel like I’ve just won the gold.

“Want to watch a movie?” I really don’t know what to do to cheer someone up. I’ve never had to before. I don’t do relationships. I’m never emotionally involved with women ... until Cassandra.

“No,” she says. She takes a deep breath as if trying to say something. I wait. She finally sets her cup down, lifts her hand, and runs her nails over my cheek. I can’t help it, my body immediately reacts to her. I tell myself to calm down.

“Greyson,” she whispers.

“Yes?” My voice is a little too throaty for me to cover what her touch does to me.

“Do you really want to know what I want?” she asks, her eyes dilating and her breathing growing a little heavier. I hope she’s going to ask for what I think she’s going to ask for. I hate that I want it. I’m supposed to be nothing more than her friend right now.

“What do you want?” I ask. I’m pretty impressed with myself for my restraint.

“I want you to make me forget this day. I want you to light my body on fire and make everything else go away for a little while,” she whispers.

My body responds and I’m instantly hard. This woman does things to me with nothing more than a few words, unlike what anyone has ever done to me before.

I hate myself for it but I have to confirm. “Are you sure?”

She smiles. “I’m *very* sure,” she says before she leans forward and kisses me. She pulls back, seeming unsure of what to do next. That’s incredible, considering the job she had until a couple of months ago. There’s so much to this woman and I want to discover it all.

I don’t need to be asked twice. I set my cup aside and capture her mouth with mine, not hesitating as I slip past her lips and caress the contours of her mouth. If she wants me, I’m hers.

The instant flames inside my body wipe away every other thought in my brain. I want to take her to a whole new world and make her scream my name. Fire rips through me with

nothing more than my mouth on hers and her fingers tangling in my hair. I'll never get enough of this beautiful woman.

Cass shifts on the couch as a whimper escapes her. She kisses me back with as much hunger as I'm feeling. The pressure inside me is building to volcanic levels. I try to gain control, but it's a lost cause. There's no more control when it comes to Cassandra.

I stand, holding her in my arms, and move to the first of the two doors. Bingo, it's her bedroom. There's only a double bed in the tiny room, but we don't need a lot of space because I'm going to be all over her. I don't want even an inch to separate us.

I place her down and pull off her clothes. It doesn't matter how many times I view her beautiful body, it will never be enough. She's perfection standing before me naked. My fingers shake as I strip away my own clothes. I'm shocked how gentle I am as I lift her and lay her on the bed.

I follow her, then kiss her again before I slowly skim my lips across her jaw and down her slender neck. She tastes perfect as I kiss and lick her skin before gently nipping her shoulder, making a shudder run through her.

She moans as I suck the place I've just nipped, and her hips arch off the bed toward me. I keep moving lower and take a moment to enjoy the view of her perfect breasts moving up and down, her pink nipples hard. I bend and take one perfect bud in my mouth, sucking it hard, making her cry out as she tangles her hands in my hair and tugs.

As I move from one nipple to the other, I slide my hand down her quivering body and she opens her thighs for me. I

slip my fingers over her heat, feeling how wet she is. Now, I'm groaning as I lick her taut nipple while sliding two fingers inside her.

Cass pushes up against me, demanding more without a single word. Her body is on fire and we might both be burned alive. It's the only way I want to go.

I need to taste her. With reluctance I release her sweet nipple, then move down the curve of her stomach, making her cry out again as my fingers and tongue caress her. I pump my hand and her hips arch up again as she squirms against me. I can barely breathe I'm so turned on.

I settle between her thighs and lick my way across her heat as she moans. I don't make her wait long before I swipe my tongue over her bundle, continuing to pump my fingers in and out of her. I suck her bud, then lick, then suck and she screams as her walls convulse against my fingers. I pump slower, drawing out her orgasm as I circle my tongue slowly over her bud.

I could taste her like this for hours. I can touch her and make love to her over and over again. I've never wanted another person like I want her. If I think about that too long, I'll be the one running scared. It's all so intense, it's almost too much.

My tongue swipes against her trembling bud one more time, making her shake before I crawl my way up her body, tasting more of her skin. When I reach her nipples I gently bite down and she wiggles beneath me as she lifts her hips, forcing me to press into her. I'm about to lose control.

I need her lips again so I wrap a hand behind her head and devour her mouth, this time harder, faster. Our tongues tangle as I deepen the kiss, my body throbbing, my skin hot and vibrating. She pushes her hips up again and I need to take her.

With my control about to shatter, I reach for the condom I set on the table and rip open the packet. I'm shaking as I slip it over my pulsing arousal. I'll never be caught without a condom, even if I'm not looking for sex.

I push my knees against her thighs, spreading them farther apart before pressing myself against her slick opening. I can't wait. I slowly push forward, then rip my mouth from hers as I clench my teeth together. She's so wet, so hot, and so tight. One little move is going to send me over the edge.

She tenses as she adjusts to me. I press on while looking at her face. Her eyes fly open and I see a flinch of pain in them. I'm all the way inside. Her walls tighten against me, and I rest inside her, giving her time to adjust. I have a feeling it's been a while since she's been properly loved.

"Oh," she finally says as a smile flitters across her lips. I pull back a little and then press back inside and that flash of pain in her eyes is long gone. "More."

I immediately start moving, pulling nearly out before sliding back in. Sweat breaks out all over me as I look into her face while pumping into her body. She's panting and I'm losing control. I pump faster, pressure building. Our eyes lock as I move inside her tight body, faster and faster, feeling every inch of her walls closing in on me.

Suddenly her head is thrown back as another powerful orgasm rips through her, making her so tight around me I can't

move for a few seconds. I'm barely holding on to control as I see pure ecstasy on her face. She's groaning as wave after wave of pleasure washes through her.

When her pulses lessen, I move again, not taking it slow this time. I pump hard and fast as she squeezes her thighs around me. Now I'm throwing my head back and crying out as I explode deep inside her.

My entire body rips open as wave after wave of pleasure washes through me. We're both shaking as the last of my pleasure empties inside her. I barely stop myself from collapsing on top of her. Instead I turn us and fall to my back with her still connected to me, but not lying on top. I'm not ready for us to part.

We don't say a word as our deep breaths and thundering hearts fill the room. I close my eyes and hold Cass. I fall asleep, completely spent.

When my eyes open again, I look out the small window in Cass's room, shocked to see it's dark out. I'm not sure how long the two of us have slept, but she's half on top of me, half off. The condom is still hanging on and I'm sure we're both a mess.

I smile. Cass wiggles against me as if she's trying to get even closer. I'm instantly turned on again, ready to plunge deep inside her. I never get enough of her ... not ever. Instead of acting on my desire, I dislodge myself from her arms, not because I don't want her, but because we need to talk. Yes, that was the greatest sex of my life, but we need to talk. There's so much weighing on my mind, and I know there's a lot on hers.

She frowns as I stand over the bed, but she doesn't wake up. I leave the room, and skeptically look at the tiny shower in her bathroom. I hope I don't break it. It takes a little while to heat, and I barely fit, but I manage to take a quick shower. I wrap a towel around my body then walk out to my vehicle to grab my bag. I don't want to put jeans back on.

I come inside, throw a pair of sweats on and head to her kitchen. I'm suddenly starving. I'm not the best cook, but I'm not horrible. I look through her few cupboards, the fridge, and the freezer. There isn't a lot to work with, but I can come up with a decent meal.

It takes about thirty minutes for Cass to step from her room, an oversized shirt covering her. She looks so young and innocent as she gazes at me from the doorway of her bedroom. It almost makes me feel guilty for my dirty, dirty thoughts about her.

"That smells good," she tells me.

"It's chicken spaghetti." I walk from the stove and head straight for her, pulling her against me and giving her a proper wake-up kiss. She sways on her feet as I pull away, her lips turning up in a beautiful way.

"I feel better," she says and I'm surprised at how much I love these words.

"Good. Let's sate one hunger so we can sate another," I tell her with a wink.

She smiles full on at these words. "Okay. Do I have time for a shower?" She blushes. "I'm a little ... sticky."

I throw back my head and laugh. “I already almost lost my life in your tiny shower. It tried to strangle me.”

“It’s not small, you’re just ... large ... everywhere.” She turns to walk into the bathroom and I reach out and smack her butt. She laughs before she enters the room and firmly closes the door.

I go back to the stove. Right here, right now, this day is perfect. I refuse to think about this bubble popping. The rest of the world can go away for the rest of tonight. I have no illusions it will come back with a loud bang, but for now we’re both in good moods and getting our needs met. Tomorrow we can deal with the problems.

I start whistling as I finish up our dinner. It’s done as I hear the shower turn off. My arousal twitches. “Down boy,” I murmur. “We need fuel.”

The bathroom door opens, and the scent of peaches follows Cass out. I almost forget about the food with the desire shining in Cass’s eyes. But then I see she’s looking at my spaghetti with lust ... not me. I’ll feed her, then I’ll build a whole new hunger inside her for dessert.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I'm not sure where I hurt more. Seriously, my entire body is sore. I don't need to go to the gym anymore, I just need to spend two straight days in bed with Greyson River. It's the best workout I've ever had.

From the moment his hands were on me, my problems faded away, my mother not entering my mind until this moment. I smile. Even having her flit through my thoughts doesn't bother me. I feel *that* good. I'm sure I'll worry again later, but for now, I'll savor this cutout in time with Greyson.

I shift, causing me to moan. "Ouch," I say, my butt wiggling against Greyson.

"Don't do that or I won't be able to control myself," Greyson says as he moves his hand from my stomach to my breast and squeezes. I feel him twitch behind me, which makes me wiggle my butt again.

As sore as I am, I can't sate the new hunger this man was able to bring out in me. I like it.

"Woman, you seriously have to stop. If we don't leave this house, we'll starve. There's nothing left to eat." As if on cue, my stomach complains loudly, which makes me giggle.

"See, I told you," he says as he pulls his hand from my breast and I frown. Then I feel a sting as he smacks my butt.

Before I can do a thing about it, he hops from the bed, instantly making my room shrink as he stands.

I flop to my back and gaze at the masterpiece before me. I'm used to being ogled. I much prefer to look at him.

"Nope, don't get that look in your eyes. I'm going to take a shower," he tells me, turning. I think the back view is even more delicious than the front.

"Need me to scrub your back?" I call.

He laughs but doesn't reply. The bathroom door firmly shuts behind him. There isn't room in my shower for both of us. Heck, it barely has room for him. I heard him yelp more than once as he bumped his knees or elbows. That's good for him. With the way he spends money, I'd pretty much bet he's never stayed in a place as small as mine before.

What are we going to do when the real world butts in on us? I'm far too relaxed to allow worries to seep into my sated body. I don't move from the bed as he showers. When he steps into the bedroom doorway wearing nothing but a towel, my mouth waters.

"Where's a good place to eat?" he asks. I look at the clock. It's almost eight in the evening.

"I think Eye of the Storm is all that's open now besides the grocery store," I tell him.

"That's the bar, right?" he says as he runs a hand through his wet hair, making his abs and arms flex. It doesn't matter what this man does, it's sexy.

"Yes, I've been there a few times, and it's fun."

“It’s Saturday so the place will be hopping,” he says.

“Well as hopping as this town ever gets.” I reluctantly sit up, holding the sheet over my naked body. I love how his eyes trail over the material as he tries to take another peek.

“Quit looking at me like that unless you want to crawl back into bed,” I warn.

He looks torn, but then turns on his heel and marches to the living room for his bag of clothes. He has a briefcase and several bags with clothes and toiletries in his vehicle. I haven’t been brave enough to ask him why. Who is this man? Part of me wants to know. The rest of me doesn’t want to know anything. I don’t want our perfect bubble to pop.

I finally gain the strength to climb from my comfy bed. I slip on a robe then move to the bathroom. The hot water is heaven over my aching muscles. I stay in the shower until the water runs cold. I climb out, dry off, then go through my beauty routine ... which isn’t much. But if we’re going out, I want some perfume, lipstick, and mascara. I don’t need blush. My cheeks are still flushed from all of our lovemaking.

When I come out with a towel wrapped around me, Greyson looks up from the couch, hunger in his eyes. “Nope, it’s too late. Now I’m starving and ready to go out and eat,” I tell him with a laugh as I slip into my bedroom and firmly shut the door. I hear him groan from the other side.

I might be teasing, but it’s hard to resist the man. I want him as much as he wants me. I love that I want him. I love that he brings me pleasure. I love the world he’s opened to me. I have a feeling I need to enjoy every single moment of it,

because it hasn't happened before, and it might never happen again.

I come out in jeans and a long-sleeved blouse. Winter is turning into spring and the air isn't too cold. Plus, it gets hot quickly in the bar, especially if we do any dancing. I can't hear music without wanting to move, and on a Saturday night there should be a live band.

For a small town, the owner, Dillan Scott, seems to get some big names to perform. The artists like coming to Eye of the Storm because the locals enjoy the show and buy the band drinks like they're old friends instead of superstars. Pictures of Luke Bryan, Jason Aldean, Brantley Gilbert, Tyler Farr, and Tim McGraw, who's family live close to us, along with so many more artists decorate the walls. I hope someone good is playing tonight.

We arrive at the bar and the parking lot is crowded. A lot of noise spills outside and the cheers are loud. "Oh, this means someone good is playing."

"The owner doesn't advertise?" Greyson asks.

"Nope, it's always a surprise. Artists know they can make last minute plans with him. If no one comes to play, we have karaoke, which is also fun. I've only been a few times because it's a little overwhelming, but I have to admit when I show up, it's a blast."

"I've never been to a live concert," he tells me.

"I've never been to a real concert either. They're too spendy for me, but I've seen a lot of local artists at bars. I like

new artists because they have so much passion. It's also fun to see someone at the beginning of their career.”

Just as Greyson opens the door to me, Walker Hays launches into the chorus of his AA song, making the crowd go wild as they hold their drinks in the air, making me laugh.

“Fitting song,” Greyson shouts.

I laugh as I drag him forward and jump to the back of the dancing crowd, immediately joining the line dance with perfect steps. Greyson shocks me when I turn to see him beside me, stepping right along with me.

Tryna steer my daughters off the pole,

And my sons out of jail,

Tryna get to church so I don't go to hell

The crowd chants, *I don't wanna go.*

I'm just tryna keep my wife from figuring out,

That I married up, and she married way, way down,

In Alabama where they love Nick Sabatan.

The crowd again roars, *Roll Tide.*

Tryna write a song the local country station'll play,

Hey, I'm just tryna stay out of AA.

Greyson and I dance until the end of the song, then we scoot our way through the crowd until we reach the bar. Luckily, with so many people dancing, there's an open stool, just one, but I jump up on it while Greyson scoots in beside me.

“We can share,” I tell him.

“I don’t mind leaning right where I am. That makes it easier for me to touch you,” he says with a wink as he slides his hand up my thigh, sending a shiver through me.

“Hey, girl, long time,” Emmy, my favorite bartender, says. She lived in Ravish when she was a kid, then moved away. She came back to town around the same time I did. Even though she’s from here, she moved away for a lot of years so I feel more of a bond with her as the newbies. “What are you two drinking?”

“I’ll take a Hop Valley IPA,” Greyson says.

“I’ll have a lemon drop,” I tell her.

“Coming right up,” Emmy says as she does a little dance away from us and pours his drink while grabbing the vodka for mine. She’s a damn good bartender, making the men all want her, and keeping the crowd happy with her little shows. I bet her tips are as good as mine from stripping ... and she gets to keep her clothes on.

She hands us our drinks as the crowd goes quiet. Walker holds his hand up, making everyone hush as they wait to hear what he wants to say.

“Are you all feeling fancy?” he yells.

The short hush instantly evaporates as the crowd screams. The drums start and the song begins. Emmy does a little spin as she grabs a couple of cans of whipped cream. The owner, Dillan, grabs a bucket and goes to the end of the bar. Emmy jumps on the bar and the patrons scoot back as they tilt their heads.

I've heard about this, but haven't seen it before. Of course, this is the first time the song's been played live, and the crowded bar is going extra crazy.

As soon as Walker launches into the chorus Emmy begins dancing down the bar as she squirts whipped cream into the patrons' mouths. I gladly throw my own head back and take a nice swallow of cream. Dillan comes up behind Emmy tossing Jell-O shots. The patrons gladly take the free boozy treat.

*Yeah, we fancy like Applebee's on a date night,
Got that Bourbon Street steak with the Oreo shake,
Get some whipped cream on the top too,
Two straws, one check, girl, I got you.
Bougie like Natty in the Styrofoam,
Squeak-squeakin' in the truck bed all the way home.
Some Alabama-jamma, she my Dixieland delight,
That's how we do, how we do, fancy like, oh.*

Walker plays for another hour, then jumps from the stage and heads straight to the bar as the crowd parts for him. His band moves among the crowd, some of them sitting at tables, others dancing on the floor as the juke box takes over the entertainment.

A stool next to me opens, and Walker sits next to me. "Howdy," he says with a stunning smile.

"Hi," I reply, somewhat shy. What in the actual heck? I don't get starstruck. As a matter of fact, I've seen more than a few famous people in the club I worked at. Most stars no longer impress me. Walker has a drool-worthy smile though,

and he seems like a good man. I'm well aware that people put only the best of themselves on social media, but he does silly dances with his kids and seems to be in a true-life love story with his wife. That gives him bonus points in my mind. Well that, and the fact that he's never been to my old club.

"Enjoying the night?" he asks.

"Yes. We were starving, drawing us out. It was a perfect night to come."

He leans closer, speaking so only I can hear him. "I don't think the man next to you likes me smiling at you. Maybe he doesn't realize I'm head over heels in love with my wife." He chuckles as he winks.

I laugh, now completely at ease. "Nah, we're just having a fling. There's no jealousy," I reply. I've said bold things before, but this time the words make me blush. Maybe I don't like to think of what Greyson and I are doing as a fling. I'm not sure.

"Oh, darlin, that look he's sending my way is how I make my money. I'm producing a song in my head right now. Many songs have been written from a look like that. I don't think it's a fling. Send me an invite to the wedding." He hands me a card and I laugh while horrified at the same time.

"Not going to happen," I gasp.

"We'll see," he says with another laugh. Then he jumps up. "Hey, Emmy, I'm dying of thirst," he calls.

"Keep your pants on, Walker, I'm getting to you. We wouldn't be so crowded if you hadn't just been up on the stage shaking that fine ass for the last couple of hours."

Walker laughs hard, then is sucked up by the crowd.

“I spot a table, come on,” Greyson says, his eyes intense. I can’t read his thoughts.

I take his hand, barely grabbing my drink in time as he marches us through the crowd to a small table in the corner of the room. It’s a perfect place for us to look out at everyone.

On each table is a tablet to order food and drinks. This might be a small-town bar, but this bar is large and fancy so the tablets are fitting.

Greyson orders enough food for ten people to eat and I don’t complain. I’ve always wanted to try one of each of the appetizers. I have enough neighbors around me that the food we don’t eat won’t go to waste.

About twenty minutes later, Emmy comes out with the first of the appetizers. “You two are keeping our kitchen staff busy,” she says with a laugh. She brought extra ranch. She knows me already, even though I’ve only been in a few times.

“We’re hungry,” I tell her.

“I bet. He looks like he gives a great workout,” she tells me with a wink before turning and running back behind the bar before I can reply.

“Do I give you a good workout?” Greyson asks. I’ve forgotten all about Walker Hayes as I gaze into his eyes.

“Oh, you give the best workout ever,” I assure him.

“Then let’s eat and go home and burn off all of these calories,” he suggests.

“That sounds like a plan.”

We spend the next two hours listening to music, eating, dancing, drinking, and laughing. By the time we're ready to leave I'm more than ready to do some bedroom aerobics again. My only worry is how I'm going to say goodbye to this man. It will happen ... I just hope it takes a little while, and we get to stay in paradise a while longer.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I'm late. Work was swamped today, and it took me forever to get out of the store. I can't miss this class and disappoint Lisha. I'm the one who told her this is a great thing to do. I rush down the street to the high school. The lights are blazing bright in the gym and the door is open. I head straight for it, hearing a lot of women's voices.

I'm a little out of breath as I rush through the door and smile with relief when I see everyone milling around, visiting. There has to be a hundred women standing on the wrestling mats covering the floor. A few men are here, but it's mostly females in the gym.

"Cass," a voice calls.

Lisha and Mattie are standing together on the edge of the mats. I rush over to them. "You almost missed the start," Lisha says.

"I know. I'm sorry. Work was crazy," I say as I take off my jacket and place it next to hers on the floor.

"I'm sorry. We should've helped you," Lisha says.

"No, you girls have school to focus on. Minimum hours only."

"We're nerds. We do well in school," Mattie says with a big smile.

“Yes, you’re both kicking butt,” I say. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Now we get to learn how to kick butt for real,” Lisha says, a fire in her eyes that I’m grateful to see. She’ll never be a victim again.

We’re at a self-defense class. I’ve taken these classes many times when choosing not to be a victim after walking out of the juvenile detention center. But it’s always good to have a refresher course. And I’ll go through it again and again if it helps these girls learn how to protect themselves.

The gym owner, Derek, a police officer for thirteen years before moving here, teaches the class. He’s pulled in a few town members who know a bit about self-defense as well. This community likes to raise each other up and help everyone protect themselves. It’s a beautiful thing to witness.

“Are you ladies ready to begin?” Derek asks as the chatter in the room dies down.

“Yes,” a few of the ladies call back.

“Please have a seat,” he says.

We all sit on the mats in a big circle with Derek in the middle. He turns and looks out at us and smiles. He has the warmest smile; it’s a look that tells people you can trust him.

“I know a lot of you, but for those I don’t, I’ll tell you a little about myself. I was a police officer in Eugene for thirteen years. I taught defense tactics at the Police Academy for years. I learned a lot and I never shy away from learning from others who know more than I do. I hope I can share some of my knowledge with you.”

“How come you quit being a police officer?” one of the ladies asks.

As I watch Derek, I see a flinch in the normally smiling man. He has a story, that’s for dang sure. He covers the reaction instantly and I have a feeling he’s like me and doesn’t have any desire to share. Maybe someday he’ll find the right person he can confide in.

“There are some incredible things that come with being an officer. You get to know the people in your community. But you also see the worst mankind has to offer. Some can handle that for an entire career. I decided it was changing me into someone I didn’t recognize when I looked in the mirror. I’ve always loved fitness and decided that was what I wanted to focus on. I still love law enforcement, but I feel fitness is a better fit in my life,” Derek says.

“Yeah, it’s probably nice to come to work without having to wear a bullet-proof vest,” Mattie says.

“Yes, that’s very nice,” Derek tells her. “Does anyone here have any self-defense training?”

I raise my hand before thinking about it. I realize quickly I’m the only one in the room with my hand in the air. I pull it right back down, but it’s too late; Derek spotted me.

“How many classes have you taken?” he asks.

“Um, a few,” I tell him. I’ve actually probably taken a hundred, but there’s no way I’m saying that. If he has a story to tell, the fact I’ve taken so many defense classes will tell him and the rest of the room I certainly have my own story.

“That’s great. You can be my helper today,” he tells me. My cheeks flush.

“Oh, it’s been a while since I took my last one, I don’t know how much help I’d be,” I say. My last class was about two months ago, but that could be considered a while.

He laughs. “Come on, don’t be shy, we’re helping to protect these lovely women in our town,” he tells me as he walks over and holds out his hand. There’s no way I can get out of this. I reluctantly give him my hand and he helps me stand.

“Let’s start out with a demonstration. It will let me see what Cass knows, and show you some dos and don’ts of self-defense,” Derek says.

I nod at him. Do I do this right or not? I don’t think I can’t not react. If a man touches me when I don’t want him to, I respond with force.

“We’re going to do a basic move for what you do if a person grabs you from behind,” Derek says as he places himself behind me. I immediately tense. I don’t like men behind me. I don’t like to feel vulnerable.

I’m tense as I stand in front of him, but I look at Mattie and Lisha who are beaming at me as they cover up their giggles. I’m so happy to see them enjoying it that it helps to calm me. Still, when I feel Derek’s hot breath on the back of my neck, my entire body tenses all over again. I’m ready.

Derek wraps his arm around my middle and I relax even more. I’m suddenly pulled out of the situation and thinking about this good-looking man’s arms around me and I’m feeling ... absolutely nothing.

When Greyson touches me, I feel fire and tingles. But this hulk of a man touching me is like a brother giving a hug. My fear is gone, my tenseness gone, and my head fills with confusion. Maybe Greyson is truly a one-of-a-kind man. Am I meant to be alone when he's gone? That's what I always wanted, or thought I wanted, but suddenly that makes my heart ache a little.

“When a man grabs you, you don't want him to lock his hands,” Derek says. His words pull me back into the current situation. Before he can wrap his other arm around me and connect his hands, I twist so quickly, he looks surprised ... and pleased.

I take my right foot and slip it behind him, sweeping his feet out from beneath him. He immediately falls to the mat, and I jump on him, pinning his arms to the mat with my legs.

Derek looks at me and starts laughing. There are shocked gasps from the women watching us. No one moves for several seconds.

“Did I get that right?” I ask as I bat my eyes at him.

He laughs harder. “A *few* classes?” he says with a raised brow.

“Okay, maybe more than a few,” I admit. “Did I do it right?”

“Not exactly,” he says with a smirk. I realize I'm about to be schooled a half-second too late.

Before I can scramble away from this large man, he takes control again and flips me over, his massive leg pinning me to the mat, his hand a few inches above my neck. He doesn't

touch me, which I'm grateful for. Even if he put a light touch against my neck, it might start a panic. This man is an excellent teacher.

Derek looks at the crowd. "Cass did a great job. She took me down perfectly. The mistake she made was confidence. She took me down then thought she could keep me there. She should've knocked me on my ass and then run away. You're not weak for escaping. That makes you strong. You eliminated your threat, now you need to get as far away as possible. The reality is more often than not the person attacking you will be larger than you. You might be able to surprise them like Cass surprised me, but if you hang around their brute strength will eventually win out. Get them off of you and stun them into immobilization long enough for you to escape."

Several of the women nod, eating up his words. They're fascinated that I took him down. They want to know if they can do the same.

"I do have to say I haven't been taken down in a long time, especially by a person weighing half as much as I do," Derek says as he releases me, stands, then holds out his hand to help me to my feet.

"It's always good to be humbled," I tell him as I take a step back.

"Yes, it is," he says. "You and I will have to do some more difficult moves. I'll start an advanced class for those who master the basics."

Now *this* excites me. "I'd love that."

"Good. Now, back to work."

Within an hour I'm a sweaty mess and also laughing and smiling a whole bunch. I'm teamed up with several different women as Derek teaches us good moves to get someone off of us, and watching Mattie and Lisha partner is the cutest thing I've seen in a while. They're giggling a whole lot, but they're also taking it seriously and doing a good job.

We spend two hours in the gym then I walk the girls out where their mothers are waiting for them. Cheryl immediately walks up to us.

"How did my girl do?" she asks as she wraps an arm around Lisha. Cheryl really wanted to come to the class, but she wants Lisha to have some things of her own and knows she'd be more self-conscious with her mother standing there.

"I don't think anyone will ever hurt this girl again."

"Dang straight. Derek said me and Mattie were naturals," Lisha says.

"That's wonderful," Cheryl replies.

Another older woman walks up wearing a smile. "Hello, I'm Bethany, Mattie's mom," she says as she smiles. We haven't met yet, but I've been looking forward to it."

"Hello, Bethany, it's a pleasure to meet you. I adore your daughter."

"Well, she adores you as well. She told me about those classes you're thinking of doing. I'd love to talk to you about it," Bethany says.

"Yes, come in anytime you're free this week and we can put something on the calendar. It would be fun to teach some

canning classes. I'll need to order more books because I'm sure they'll sell out."

"I love seeing old arts come back in fashion," Bethany says. "We better get home now, though. I bet everyone is hungry after that workout."

"Yes," both girls say in unison, making all of us laugh.

Everyone goes their separate ways and I'm alone. For the first time, I don't like it. How wonderful would it be to go home to a family, to have a nice dinner together? I never really wanted this ... or at least I told myself I didn't want it. Why do I want it now? Maybe it's this town. Seeing all of these happy people makes me want a happy little bubble of my own.

"Hey, beautiful, need a ride?"

Greyson is standing a few feet from me just as the last of the vehicles pull from the parking lot.

"I thought you were going to be gone for a few more days," I say, my heart immediately beginning to thump at the sight of him. It's been less than a week since he left and I've missed him. I won't admit how much, and I hate that it's true, but I missed him. My feet are itching with the desire to run straight to him when he gets that crooked smile on his lips that does strange things to my belly.

"I finished early," he tells me. "Have you eaten? I'm hungry after driving for hours."

"No, I haven't," I say. I'm not even self-conscious about the sweat covering me, or the mess my hair's in. After a night of lovemaking with this man I look worse.

“Well then, you’re in luck because I have a surprise for you.”

“I like surprises,” I say before thinking. I *don’t* like surprises, I never have, but apparently I like all sorts of new things when it comes to this particular man.

“Well then, give me a kiss and come with me,” he says, not moving from where he’s standing. He wants me to approach him. Almost without my telling them to move, my feet walk forward.

He finally takes a step and meets me, his arms coming around my back, mine around his neck, and then he kisses me ... and I’m home. I fall into his kiss and get lost in his arms. If I’m not careful I’ll get used to this. I’ll stop being suspicious and stop asking questions. I can’t afford to do that, but it’s happening whether I like it or not. I might even be falling for this man. It should fill me with terror, but right now all I feel is happiness.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eleven Years Ago

Sexy music plays from the phone of one of the two guards sitting in front of me, both leaning back with grins on their faces as they watch. It's midnight and nearly everyone in juvie is sleeping ... not me, and not these two guards who like the show I'm putting on for them.

We're in the bathroom ... no cameras anywhere. They're sitting in chairs in the middle of the room as I do a dance for them to the tune of Buttons by the Pussycat Dolls. The chorus comes up and I walk to them, then turn and sit on Paul's lap, flinging myself backward over Ryan while arching my chest upward.

I reach up and grab Ryan's hand and slide it from my throat to my thigh. His eyes widen in arousal as I circle my hips over Paul, the music adding to the allure.

I'm telling you loosen up my buttons, baby,

But you keep fronting,

Saying what you going to do to me,

But I ain't seen nothing.

I roll my back and rise as I move in front of them, turning so they see my back as I lift my shirt and fling it over my head. I turn, wearing the lacy black bra Ryan brought in

earlier. I shimmy out of my pants, leaving me before them in nothing but my black thong, a garter, and stockings.

They're panting as I continue dancing, moving behind their chairs and then doing a handstand over the top, landing in Ryan's lap. I reach behind me and wrap my arms around his neck. He leans forward and licks my neck while wrapping his hands over my stomach and pushing his hips up, pressing his arousal against me.

I'm not afraid. We've done this dance before. I turn them on, they pay me a lot of money, and then they go whack off in the bathroom. They want the show but aren't willing to rape for it. They beg and plead but won't demand I have sex with them. I'm good at dancing, at turning them on and then leaving them wanting more.

I have the power now. I control these men. They'll do anything I want. My confidence has grown. Where once I was nothing but a sex doll to be abused, now I'm the one in control, I'm making these men pant. They pay me a lot to do it. It's not the case with all of the guards or the other girls, but I'm learning how to use my power to set me free. I'm learning that many will take from me, so I'll take when I'm able. I'll do just about anything to have freedom when I'm out of this place.

"Baby, I'll buy you a house if you just let me fuck you," Ryan says with a groan.

I smile as I turn, letting his lips glance across mine before I rise and straddle Paul.

"What will you give me?" I ask as I circle my hips over his bulging arousal. He wraps his hands behind my back and pulls

me closer as he kisses me. I allow it for the briefest of moments before pulling back and circling my hips again.

“I’ll break you out of here,” he says with a gasp.

Tempting ... oh so tempting ... but my time is almost up. If I leave here before I’m officially freed, I’ll be on the run. If I wait a little longer, I’ll walk away with a clean record.

“Nope,” I say. I kiss him once more before leaning over and kissing Ryan, then I rise again. I slowly take my body to the ground, do a few sexy curls and twists that have both men gasping. I unclip my bra and toss it before lying on my back and arching upward.

Ryan reaches down and squeezes his massive arousal, trying to find an ounce of relief for himself. Paul shifts in his chair.

“Anything, we’ll do anything,” Ryan says on a guttural groan.

I rise as the music ends. This is the fourth song I’ve danced to tonight. I go over and straddle one leg of each man as I wrap my arms around both of them.

“You two can please each other,” I say before kissing one then the other as they both reach up, one of each of their hands on my naked breasts. I have to admit their gentle touch isn’t entirely unpleasant. I’m not used to being touched in a way that’s meant to please me, and it confuses me whenever I do feel an ounce of pleasure.

I know I’m broken. I shouldn’t feel anything other than spite for any of the people here, but taking even a little bit of control over my life has allowed me to have real feelings, to

think not all touching is bad. I won't act on any of these feelings. I won't willingly have sex with anyone ever again. I *will* use my body to make money though, but just the sight of my body, not the use of it.

I kiss each of the guards again before rising. They don't try to stop me, though the hunger in their eyes tells me how much they want to. I've been violated by multiple men at the same time. Many have fantasies of threesomes and orgies, but let me tell you, it's not great. Maybe for those in the mix willingly, it's a turn on for them, but it's always been horrific for me.

When a person wants nothing more than to take pleasure from another at any cost, it breaks a person. They're unable to feel anything good in all aspects of their lives. I move away and pull off my garter and panties, standing before them completely bare as I put my juvie clothes back on, leaving the lace on the floor.

I can't have those clothes in my cell. Questions would be asked and I'd most likely be moved to a new place. That can't happen. I know the evil here ... and I can control some of it. I'd have to start all over at another facility. I have ten more months until I'm free. I can make it.

I don't look back as I exit the bathroom. I make my way back to my cell where the door is cracked. I slip inside and lie down.

"How did it go?" Paige asks.

"Perfect." I reach up and Paige takes the hundred-dollar bill from my hand. I share my money with her. She's going to need her own fresh start when she gets out of here.

“How much are you up to?” she asks with a smile in her voice.

“Eight thousand.” It’s tucked away behind a perfectly loosened brick.

“And I have three thousand. You’ve done all of this in a single year,” she says.

“I know. Sex sales,” I tell her.

“You aren’t even having sex with them,” she points out. She goes silent. I’m not getting paid for sex, but that doesn’t mean I’m not being forced into it.

“Not willingly,” I say. Not all of the guards and girls in this place are as self-contained as Paul and Ryan. Some want more for their money. I deal with it. As the assaults happen, I tell myself it’s happened before; I survived then, and I’ll survive now. I’ll make it out of here and then a man won’t ever touch me again.

“Do you think we’ll ever be *willing* to have sex?” Paige asks.

“I can’t imagine a time that will happen, but I have to admit, I feel twinges of something once in a while,” I say with guilt.

“It’s okay, Sass,” she says. She’s given me that nickname since I hate Tina so much.

“It’s not, but the way we grew up, it’s hard not to have mixed feelings. I try to forgive myself. Maybe someday I’ll find my worth. For now, I’m figuring out how to survive,” I tell her.

“We have worth. It might be hard to find, but we do have worth,” she says as if she’s trying to convince us both.

“We’ll see. My only objective in life is to find my daughter. I figure I’m damaged goods, but I don’t care about that. I just want to find her and have a relationship,” I tell her.

“What if you can’t? Will you try to have another baby?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I refuse to believe I might not find her.”

“We have to focus on whatever gives us hope,” she says. This is pure truth.

“I agree. I take life one day at a time. If I think too much about the past or the future, I can’t get out of bed. When I think of time as a day by day thing, I can make it through. I tell myself one day it won’t be like this, one day I’ll be able to plan further than one day out.”

“It won’t,” Paige insists.

“I sure hope not.”

We both go silent as we think about the choices we’ve made and are currently making in our lives. Maybe some would agree with them, and some wouldn’t, but each day I do figure out more about who I am, so I’m okay with the choices. Slowly putting pieces of me back together, might eventually make me whole. It’s unlikely, but knowing it’s a possibility helps me get up each morning.

I look at the latest picture I drew of my daughter, and it gives me enough peace to close my eyes and fall into dreamland. I’m getting closer, I silently promise. I’m getting closer.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Greyson

Cass's sweet perfume fills the space in my SUV and I realize how much I missed her the last few days. I hate that I'm lying to her. I can tell myself all day long I'm not exactly lying, I'm just not sharing my reasons for being here. No matter what, though, it feels like I'm lying to the woman I'm starting to care for.

Everything in me wants to tell her the truth, wants to explain to her she might be in real danger. I've come to a few conclusions: one, I like this woman ... and not just for sex ... and two, I don't think she's a bad person. The people out for her don't have good intentions. These people don't put this much time and energy into hunting a person down because they want to send them flowers.

What does all of this mean? Do I quit my job? I can walk away from it without feeling an ounce of remorse. If I do though, I won't be in the loop. I won't know what's happening. They're already growing impatient with me.

What do I tell them? Do I lie and say Cass isn't who we're looking for? That won't do her any good because someone else will come along. So, what do I do? Everything in me needs to protect her, but I'm utterly helpless at doing just that.

Right now I'm living in denial, pretending we're simply two normal people heading home together. I pull up to the house I rented for a few days. There are some stunning rentals in this area. It's March, which means there aren't many tourists yet, giving me lots of options. When I was looking for the rental, I had one thing in mind.

"Where are we?" Cass asks as I stop the vehicle in front of the large entryway.

"I rented this for a few days," I tell her.

"Oh," she says as she looks up at the house. It's a stunner for sure, sitting right beside the McKenzie River on ten acres with all of the amenities a person could ever want, a swimming pool, jacuzzi, play area, fishing dock, and most importantly, a huge master bathroom with a tub big enough for two.

"Come on," I say. I jump from the vehicle and rush around to open her door. I barely make it in time. She's definitely not used to having a man treat her right. This shouldn't bother me so much as I found her at a strip club, but I'm angry at myself as soon as I have this thought. Where she worked before or where she works now doesn't define who she is. It's petty and stupid of me to even think such a thought.

I help her from the vehicle, then rush around the back where I pull out two bags, one of which is hers.

"How?" she asks. She doesn't look upset, just confused.

"Well, you're the one who leaves your door unlocked. I packed you a bag. You don't have a ton of clothes so it wasn't all that hard."

“I swear I locked it this time,” she says, then chuckles. “I guess I forgot. I haven’t locked it in a long time so it’s a hard habit to get back into.”

She had locked the door, but I was hoping she wouldn’t remember. I don’t want her to know how good I am at breaking into buildings. Her lock was a piece of cake.

We move inside the house and she smiles as she looks at the large space. The entryway is furnished in beautiful rustic charm with vases of flowers strategically placed. The entrance opens to a large living area that has couches in an L around a sizable fireplace with a television above it.

Off to the right is an enormous open kitchen with top-of-the-line appliances, grey granite countertops, and every gadget any cook would drool over. Patio doors lead from the kitchen to a monstrous deck equipped with an outdoor kitchen, patio furniture, and a huge gas fireplace. She walks to the rail of the deck and looks below at the river idling by.

“This is stunning,” she breathes. “I can’t believe the owners want to rent it out. I’d never leave.”

“A lot of people buy vacation homes they stay in for a few weeks a year, then rent it out the rest of the time to help cover the costs,” I tell her as I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. She snuggles back against me. We’re a perfect fit.

“I want to see the rest,” she says. I’m instantly cold as she walks from me back inside the house. There are two sets of stairs, one leading up and one leading down. She goes down first and sees a full game room with a pool table and beautiful bar. A door leads into a theater room with reclining chairs

perfectly positioned. There's even a popcorn machine and fridge stocked with sodas. She grins.

“We have to watch a movie.”

“Of course.”

She rushes up the stairs and takes the other staircase to the top floor where several doors are closed. She looks in each room, then finds the master bedroom and stops as she looks around. The bedroom is bigger than her entire house with a huge king in the middle of it. There's a fireplace with seating around it and another door that leads into the bathroom ... the entire reason I rented the place.

She walks in the room, her feet barely touching the floor as she moves straight to the huge tub. “I'm *definitely* using this,” she says, looking up with a genuine smile. I don't understand the innocence I see in her eyes. This woman has lived a traumatic life, yet she still finds such joy in a new experience. It's humbling to me. It also makes me want to give her the world.

“We'll use it together,” I tell her. Before I picked her up from the class I made sure the house was stocked with what we'd need for a couple of days. There's plenty of food, drinks, and bath products. I don't know everything she likes yet, but I think I've done pretty well, especially with the peach scented bubble bath.

She claps as she stands. “Thank you, Greyson, this is even better than Idaho.”

“There's no spa here,” I say.

“Who needs a spa when there's a bathtub like this?”

The two of us descend the stairs into the kitchen. I pull out the steaks I have marinating, then grab a bottle of wine. I pour two glasses then take her out to the patio and light the fireplace. Instant heat warms the small area. She curls up on a chair and stares at the dancing flames while I go back in for the steaks and bring them to the grill. I set them on the side as I warm the grill, then put them on when it's the right temperature. I don't get to barbecue too often, and the sound and smell of sizzling meat makes my mouth water.

"Sit back and relax while I get the other things ready," I tell her as I lean down and give her a gentle kiss.

"I can help," she says, but she looks so cute and dreamy where she's sitting I don't want her to move.

"Nope, this is my night for you," I insist. She doesn't fight me. I come back out and refill her wine before I mix the salad and warm the already prepared potatoes and green bean dish.

I flip the steaks a few times in between so it's all done about the same time. I bring it all to the table next to the fireplace and we sit beneath the stars as the fire blazes next to us. This might be my idea of heaven.

"I want to take you on a real date."

She laughs after she finishes the food in her mouth.

"This is a pretty spectacular date."

"This is your town. I love it, but I want to take you on a *real* date. We've already had a weekend away, and the best two days of my life in your house, and now we have this, but I want a real date where we talk and get to know each other more."

She looks a little confused. Then she shrugs. “I honestly don’t know what a real date looks like.”

I’m floored. “What do you mean?”

“What is a real date?” she asks. She then takes another bite of steak and sighs. I am a great griller if I do say so myself.

“I don’t understand what you want me to explain,” I say. I lift my glass and take a sip.

“What makes something a date?” she asks. At first I think she’s teasing, but she’s looking serious. She’s really asking me to define what a date is.

“You’ve been on dates before.” I say this, not ask, because there’s no way this woman has never been on a date. For one, she’s absolutely the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and for two, she’s charming and fun. There’s no way men haven’t begged to date her.

“No, I haven’t been on a date. Well, I guess our weekend was a date,” she says with a shrug. She doesn’t see this as a big deal.

“How?” It’s all the sound I seem to get through my stunned throat.

“I’ve never been interested in dating.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like men much. I don’t trust them. I’ve seen the worst the world has to offer. Sure, I’ve had men proposition me, but I’ve never gone out with any.” She’s talking like this is no big deal. It seems huge to me.

“You’ve gone out with me,” I remind her.

She laughs. “Yes, and what’s strange is I seem to like it.” She looks confused as she says it.

“Hey, I’m a heck of a guy,” I tell her. “I cook, I dance, and I come up with great ideas.”

“Everyone seems amazing in the beginning. Just because I haven’t actually dated, doesn’t mean I don’t read a lot about relationships. I like finding information about things I don’t know, and I have an entire bookstore for research.”

“It’s true most people show their best side in the beginning, but there isn’t normally this connection so quickly. Trust me, I’ve dated a lot, and I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want you.”

She takes in a deep breath as her cheeks pinken. I love when they go this shade. It makes me want to carry her off to bed. I force myself not to do that ... not yet. I want to learn more about her. I know her body well, it’s her heart and mind I’m trying to discover now.

“Most people want sex, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” she tells me.

“It’s not just sex I want with you, Cass, though I do enjoy that very much. I want to know everything there is to know about you.”

A shudder passes through her, and I desperately wish I could read her mind. I want to know her story, want to know why she always has an edge of suspicion in her eyes. She doesn’t trust well, and I want to know why. Maybe I need to start digging. For some reason I don’t want to do that ... I want her to trust me enough to tell me. I can get any

information I want, but it's not the same as her trusting me enough to share her story with me.

"I don't talk about my past. This is me now and that's who I am. I'm a bookstore owner who loves to read and hike in the mountains. I like being prepared for emergencies, and I love to dance. I normally like to be alone, though lately I'm discovering that I like my neighbors. I've never had any interest in sex, but with you, that was shattered. The old me no longer exists and I want her to stay hidden in the past." She says this with no apology.

"We all have secrets and we all need someone to share them with."

"I don't know you well enough to share. Every time I've tried to open up to someone it's come back to haunt me."

"Well then I'll just have to convince you I'm worthy of your trust." I'm not sure how I can say this to her with a straight face. Maybe because I truly mean it. I need to quit my job. I still can't tell her, though, can I? No, she'll despise me. She might even run. If there are people out there who want to find her, and she's managed to stay hidden for this many years, I don't think she'll want to be found now. There's time. We still have time. I'm going to push it from my mind for now and think about it later.

"Are you full?" I ask, giving her my most seductive grin.

She laughs. "Very full. Now I want that bathtub."

The two of us clear the dishes. We stand side by side in the kitchen and clean up our meal. I realize how ordinary and domestic this is. I'm shocked at how much I like it. What's

happening to me? Is this what my friends have been telling me would one day happen? No! Absolutely not. This is just for now. It's great for now, but it will have a beginning and an end.

This is one more thing I push from my thoughts. We finish in the kitchen and I make her giggle as I lift her from her feet and put her over my shoulder.

“What in the world are you doing?” she asks as laughter rings out behind me while I rush up the stairs.

“Carting you off to the master bedroom.”

Her laughter stops as I place her on her feet in the bathroom and finally give her the kiss I've needed to give her for nearly a week now. It's full of heat and promise and the start of a very hot night. I pull away before her bath is forgotten.

I take my time stripping her while the tub fills. By the time we get into the hot water we're both ready to explode. Tonight will be a night we make love for hours. I'm perfectly okay with that. I'm *more* than okay with it. I just might be okay doing it for the rest of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Special delivery,” Mattie says as she lays a package on the counter.

“From who?” I ask as I take the beautiful box tied with a big red bow.

Mattie raises her eyebrows as if to call me a moron. I look behind her but there’s no sign of Greyson anywhere.

“Will you hurry and open the box? All of us are dying to see what’s inside,” she says as she stands in front of me, tapping her foot. I notice several of my customers are watching with rapt attention. My cheeks flush. I was on center stage for a very long time. I don’t want to be there anymore.

“Okay,” I say as I carefully undo the bow. I’m obviously taking too much time because Mattie lets out a lot of sighs.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that patience is a virtue?” I ask.

“I know, I know.” She’s clenching her fingers together. I have a feeling it’s to keep her from ripping the box open herself. I finally take off the lid and a note is on top of pink tissue paper. I lift it.

Be ready at five for our date.

“That’s all it says?” Mattie asks as she takes the note from me and flips it over. There’s no signature and nothing else to

tell me what we're doing.

"That's it," I say. I pull back the tissue and find a sparkling black dress. As I pull it out, all the ladies sigh in approval. I have to admit, I agree. It's stunning, a simple black floor-length dress with a high slit up the side. I have no doubt it will fit me to perfection.

Mattie reaches inside the box and pulls out a pair of heels that make me drool. I've worn a lot of heels in my career, but none so delicate and pretty.

"Oh my gosh, these are Jimmy Choo's," Mattie gasps as if what she's holding is the best thing in the universe.

"Marry that man," Janet, one of my customers, demands.

"I'd marry him just for the shoes," Julie, another customer, says.

"I've married for less," Judy pipes in. All of the women cackle. I can't help but laugh with them.

"Okay, these *are* stunning shoes," I admit.

"It's two already. You'd better head home and get ready," Mattie says, still holding the shoes. I'm not sure they'll still be here if I turn around. She *really* likes them. Maybe I'll give them to her after I wear them tonight. It's not like I have anywhere in this town to wear such delicate and expensive shoes.

"I have plenty of time to get ready. I don't take as long as teenagers," I tell her.

"Oh, for a date in these shoes there's lots of preparation that must be done. You have to shave in all of the right places,

make sure you're scented just right, and do your makeup and hair. He's obviously taking you somewhere extravagant to have you dressing up all fancy," Judy says.

"I want my husband to take me to a fancy place. I'll complain when I get home," Janet says with a scowl.

"Those men get too dang comfortable. Maybe if we stop cooking for them, they'll take us out once in a while," Judy points out.

"Oh yes, let's go on a food-and-sex strike," Janet says.

"Done," Judy says as the women join hands. I almost feel sorry for their husbands. The men are sure to come after Greyson with torches and pitchforks if they see him again. I giggle at that thought.

The ladies finally talk me into leaving to get ready so I head home with my beautiful new dress and shoes. I don't like admitting they're right, but it does take a couple of hours to get ready. I take my time shaving and beautifying myself. I put the finishing touches on with twenty minutes to spare.

While waiting, I run my fingers over the silky material of my dress that fits me like a glove. I feel like Cinderella waiting for her very own Prince Charming to pick her up. Ten minutes before five, there's a knock on my door. He doesn't walk inside, which confuses me. I get up and glide across my small living room. These shoes are heaven on my feet.

I open the door and gasp. Greyson's a stunning man on a daily basis. Right now, though, he's the most handsome creature I've ever seen in my life. He's wearing a tux that fits to perfection, hugging his wide shoulders, and tapering down

to his trim waist. The pants are perfectly cut, showing off his incredible thighs and butt, and the jacket rests exactly where it's supposed to.

“Wow,” I breathe, unable to take my eyes from his body.

“There aren't words to describe how stunning you are,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. I meet his gaze, and the desire in it makes my heart skip a few beats. It also makes me feel beautiful and wanted.

“We need to go quickly before I rush you back to the bedroom,” he says. That's when I notice one of his hands is behind his back. He pulls it forward and presents me with a huge bouquet filled with roses, carnations, and wildflowers in a multitude of colors.

“Oh, Greyson, these are beautiful.”

I take them from his hand then turn and walk to the kitchen. I don't have a vase. I've received flowers at the club, but have never taken them home. I haven't wanted any romantic gestures from those men. These flowers will make me sad when they die. I want them desperately. I find a lemonade pitcher and put them in it. Even in the ugly pitcher the flowers are stunning. He frowns.

“You don't have a vase?”

“They still look beautiful in the pitcher,” I tell him. He still frowns. “It's a country town so a pitcher is perfect.”

“I should've gotten a vase. I'll remember next time,” he tells me. He takes my hand and kisses my palm, sending shivers through me. “You deserve to get flowers every day.”

“Okay, we’d better leave or it’s going to be me dragging you to the bedroom, and now I’m curious where we’re going all dressed up.”

A smile returns to his lips and he takes my hand and leads me outside where a stretch limo waits, halting my steps.

“You must’ve made a splash coming through town,” I say in awe. As much as I’ve done in life, I’ve never ridden in a limo before. I bet I’m going to enjoy it a lot.

“I’d have red carpet rolled out for you if it would make you smile,” he tells me.

“That’s not necessary,” I say. I place my arm in his as he leads me to the limo. The driver has the door held open and I climb inside. Sultry music is playing and a bottle of champagne is on ice with two champagne flutes next to it. On the seat is a box of chocolate-covered strawberries.

Greyson climbs in next to me and I cup his cheek. I fight back tears as I look at him. “It’s taking all of my self-control not to climb on your lap and thank you properly for the start of the best date ever.”

His eyes sparkle and he takes my hand and places it on the large bulge of his pants then winks at me.

“There’s a privacy window so I’m perfectly okay with you climbing on me.” He pulls me close for a scorching kiss. When he releases me, I’m utterly breathless.

“How long of a drive do we have?” I ask.

“A little less than an hour,” he says, his eyes lighting up even more. I’m about to climb on him when I spot a pamphlet on the seat near him. I reach out and pick it up.

Inspired by the beloved films, the romantic and adventure-filled new musical Anastasia is now at the Hult Center. From the Tony award winning creators of the Broadway classic Ragtime, this dazzling show transports us from the twilight of the Russian Empire to the euphoria of Paris in the 1920's, as a brave young woman sets out to discover the mystery of her past. Pursued by a ruthless Soviet officer determined to silence her, Anya enlists the aid of a dashing conman and a loveable ex-aristocrat. Together they embark on an epic adventure to help her find home, love, and family.

“Is this where we’re going?”

He smiles. “Yes, to the Hult Center in Eugene. It’s a small theater compared to the grandeur of Broadway, but it’s beautifully built with stunning architectural and acoustical features, a towering glass lobby, and excellent concert hall.”

“We’re going to a real Broadway show?” I gasp.

“Yes.”

I throw my arms around him and squeeze, no longer thinking about sex. I kiss his cheek then sit back in my seat with my smile so wide my cheeks hurt.

“I’ve always wanted to do this, and I absolutely love the cartoon, Anastasia. I’ve watched it a dozen times. I love the music and how this poor girl rises above it all to become royalty. It’s so romantic. That’s really saying something for me because I’m not a romantic.”

He chuckles as he pours us each a flute of champagne and hands one over. “I think you’re far more romantic than you

realize. You just haven't had the right man in your life to bring it out."

I frown as I look at him, then take a sip. I want to crawl back into myself. I'm getting too attached. "Please don't make this more than it is, Greyson. This is fun and exciting, but we both know it will end. You'll move on and I'll focus on my store and the things I have to do. This isn't a fairytale where everything has a nice tidy ending."

I don't want to put a damper on our mood, but I tell him this as much for me as for him. I'm the one worried about getting attached. Anytime I get too attached to something, it gets ripped away from me. I don't know how I'd handle that with Greyson if I get much closer to him.

"Sometimes we have to live in the moment and not worry about tomorrow. We don't know what will happen," he tells me.

"I love *this* moment," I say.

He hands me a strawberry. "What's your job, Greyson?"

The humor falls from his eyes. This look he's wearing now is what makes me afraid to trust him.

"I would tell you, but it's boring, and tonight is about magic and fairytales," he says, pasting a fake smile on his lips.

A part of me wants to push him. I have a feeling if I push a little more he'll spill all. A bigger part of me is afraid though. If I pop our magic bubble, my night will be a nightmare instead of one I always want to remember.

"Okay, tell me your most memorable moment instead," I say.

A bit of sparkle returns to his eyes. “I was at a fundraiser and they asked me to fill in for the host halfway through because he got sick. I’d never done that sort of thing before, but the man who’d been up there was funny as hell. I thought, okay, I have a sense of humor, I can do this. I was about twenty at the time. I got up and it was all going well. People were buying auction stuff and money was coming in for a women’s shelter in the area. It was all good. I see this really pretty blonde in the front row who’s smiling so I look at her and the man she’s sitting next to and make a joke about her not sneaking into her father’s liquor. The audience goes silent. There was no more laughter as I finished for the next fifteen minutes. When I left, my mom pulled me aside, utterly horrified. She told me the man was the mayor of the city and the woman was his new twenty-year-old bride. There was a twenty-five-year age difference between the two of them. I was horrified and disgusted at the same time. I never went to one of those functions again.”

“Unfortunately, I saw a lot of that in my line of work,” I tell him. “There were lots of pervy old men sometimes with women young enough to be their granddaughters. Nothing surprises me anymore.” I don’t tell him that I personally experienced the depravity of men when I was a child. I push it from my mind. I have to fight not to sink back into that dark place. It’s good he doesn’t approve of old men with young girls. Another reason I can somewhat trust him.

“What caused that look in your eyes?” he asks as he cups my chin.

“I really don’t like pervs,” I tell him.

“I’ll get you to talk to me someday,” he says, confidence in his expression.

“I don’t think so, but you never stop trying,” I tell him.

Before long, we arrive and I’m relieved when the limo stops and the back door opens. Greyson gives me one more serious look before he steps out, then helps me out from the luxurious ride. The Hult Center is smaller than I pictured it, but it’s quite beautiful. We walk inside amid a crowd of well-dressed patrons, some looking excited, others bored. I wonder how many of these people are so used to this lifestyle that it’s nothing special to them. How sad for them.

The lobby is stunning, and Greyson buys us drinks before leading me to our VIP seats with a great view of the theater. The show soon starts and I’m drawn in, completely in love with it from the moment it begins. Greyson holds my hand and squeezes as I laugh and cry and become immersed in the magic of it all.

When the curtain goes down for intermission I look at the man who’s pulled out all of the stops and I smile. I lean over and give him a kiss. “Thank you for the best first and only date of my life.”

He cups my cheek and smiles back. “I’ll give you plenty more,” he tells me. Something in his eyes makes me stop short of what I want to say. He’s hiding something, and I think it’s big enough to make me eventually hate him. Right now I don’t want to know what it is. I don’t want a single thing to mar this perfect night.

I rise and excuse myself to use the restroom. I need a few minutes to calm my racing heart. I don’t know what’s going to

happen tonight or tomorrow. I need to stay focused on the now. I've done this for my entire life. I'm good at it. I fix my lipstick, paste a smile on my face, and exit the bathroom.

I go in search of Greyson.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Greyson

My phone rings as Cass walks away from me. One look at the caller ID tells me I don't want to take this call. I'm also very aware I can't keep putting it off. I let out a sigh. I'm not supposed to have my phone on in the theater. I send the call to voicemail as I make my way outside.

When I'm alone, I dial the number and it's answered on the first ring.

"What in the hell is going on, Grey?"

"I'm working," I reply.

"Bullshit. You're in Eugene at the damn Hult Center." A chill rushes down my spine. Of course they know where I am. Me, more than anyone else, knows that no one is ever truly alone. If eyes want to be on us, they're on us.

"Yes, working," I say, my voice calm, professional.

"I'm sending someone else in. I think you're compromised," the voice says.

"No, I'm not, Sir. I'll have a full report to you in one week. I've never failed before," I say, feeling a surge of panic.

"That's not good enough. You have three days to get this done." The call ends.

I put my phone away, feeling like garbage. How in the world am I going to go back inside and face her? Our time is running out. I'm going to break her heart. She might think she's not falling in love, but I see it. Hell, I'm not in love, but I'm obsessed. I've never felt for a woman what I feel for her.

I want to give Cass the world. I want to make her smile and laugh. I want to give all sorts of firsts to her. How in the hell does a woman like her reach the age of twenty-eight without ever having a date? It's incomprehensible to me. I don't get it. I don't understand a lot of things when it comes to Cass.

As much as I don't want to look into the full file of her past, it's time to do just that. The problem with seeking information on her, is *they* will know if I do. Will I make things worse for her if I do that? Hell, I don't know anymore.

The intermission isn't long, so I head back inside, hoping the fake smile on my face is good enough. I move to the bar and am there less than a minute when I feel her hand on my arm. "I've been looking for you," Cass says, smiling, unaware of my turmoil.

"I'm always looking for you," I tell her, immediately placing my hand at her back.

"This show is amazing."

"I agree. I did see Cats a few years ago and that was quite good too."

"Oh, I bet it was."

We reach the bar and each get a drink before we return to our seats. I keep my smile in place, and she's so mesmerized

by all of the things going on, she doesn't notice my mood shift ... or I don't think she notices.

The second act begins and once more she takes my hand. I have plenty of time to pull myself together as the show continues. I feel a little better by the time it ends. It takes a while to make our way through the crowd to where our limo is waiting. The driver has a fresh glass of champagne poured for each of us as we approach, just as I asked. She takes it with a smile and a thank-you before climbing back inside our private space.

Sitting next to her, she practically glows. "Thank you, Grey," she says, her eyes sparkling. "I know I keep saying it but this is the best date ever."

"It's not over yet."

"What can top this?" she asks with a giggle before picking up a strawberry and savoring it.

"We're having dinner, then I'm taking you to a suite where I'm going to make you come so many times you'll be begging for mercy," I say with a wink.

Her eyes widen in delight, and she reaches over and runs her fingers up and down my thigh, brushing against my arousal.

"How about we skip dinner and go straight to the orgasms?" she says as her finger traces me through my pants that are growing tighter by the second.

"This is your first date. I want it perfect," I tell her.

"Room service?" she asks.

“That’s a nice compromise,” I admit.

“Exactly,” she says. She then cups me in my pants. The last of my stress falls away as I push a button and tell the driver we have a change of plans. I cancel our dinner reservation at King Estates Vineyard. She continues rubbing me through my pants and starts undoing my zipper when I stop her.

“We don’t have far to go,” I tell her. She frowns as she rubs along my pants again, making me squirm.

We arrive at our hotel in ten minutes and I practically fly us to our suite. She gives me a wink before disappearing into the bathroom. I order food while kicking off my shoes and socks, then take off my jacket and untie the bow tie. My shirt is off, leaving me in an undershirt and my tuxedo pants when the bathroom door opens.

A wave of peach drifts out before Cass immerges, dressed in a tiny, black lacy teddy that has me drooling. She leans against the door. “How long until dinner arrives?”

“Thirty minutes,” I gasp.

“Good, I have something I need to do,” she tells me as she sexily struts over, then pushes me backward. I nearly fall as we reach the couch. I plop down, reaching for her. She shakes her head and takes a step back. She then gives me a dance that has me so hard I might not survive.

She drops to her knees then crawls to me, spreading my legs open before leaning down and breathing heavily over my pulsing arousal. I groan.

She undoes my pants and struggles to pull me free. I’m so hard it’s not easy getting me out of my pants and underwear.

She's determined though and soon sets me free, my arousal springing up. Her fingers wrap around me, my hips arching off the couch. I'm so sensitive at this point a light wind might cause me to blow.

"Mmm," she purrs as she reaches out and runs her tongue in a circle around my throbbing head. I groan as her fingers tighten around my shaft.

Before I have time to breathe, she takes me in her mouth and sucks hard. Her hot mouth closes over me as she takes me deep before pulling back. Her tongue is magic, tasting every ounce of desire I'm dripping. She sucks, licks, nips, and groans around my hardness.

"Stop. I want to be inside you," I say.

She shakes her head, not releasing me from her lips. I don't have the strength to fight her as she sucks harder while squeezing her fingers. I cry out as I let go, my orgasm ripping me wide open as she continues to suck every drop from me.

I lean back for a few seconds and catch my breath. This woman does things to me I never imagined possible. I want more. She's kneeling before me, perfectly satisfied, her eyes sparkling, her lips red and swollen.

I swiftly drop to the floor and push her onto her back, loving the sight of her surprise. I rip away the miniscule black thong barely covering her heat from me. She gasps when I push her thighs apart and bury my face in her sweet core.

I'm still hungry and only she can satisfy me. I don't want anything to interrupt her first orgasm of the night. There will be plenty more, but we both need this first one. I lick her from

the bottom to the top, then suck on her throbbing bundle. Her hips arch off the floor. We've had foreplay all night, touching, kissing, gazing at one another. Now, we both need release. I had mine, she *will* have hers.

I spread her wider and lift her ass in the air. My tongue strokes her from the back to the front and she gasps as she wiggles beneath me. I plunge my tongue inside her, tasting her heat, her pleasure, her beautiful desire. Then I suck on that sensitive bundle as I flick my tongue over it again and again until she screams, her flesh shaking as pleasure rips through her.

I slow my tongue and draw out every ounce of her pleasure until her back hits the floor again, then I fall next to her, our breathing coming out in pants.

"Wow," she says on a sigh. "Wasn't expecting that." She turns as she curls up against me.

"Expect a lot more," I tell her.

We're on the floor for ten minutes when a knock sounds. I told them to leave it at the door, that I'd bring it in. I wait a full minute before I get up. I redo my pants as I grab a blanket from the closet and throw it to her. The waiter should be gone, but I'm not taking any chances.

As long as I have my way, Cass will never be eyed by men again ... just me. I move to the door as she rises, wrapped in a blanket, and takes a seat at the table, her hair a mess, her lips swollen, and her cheeks my favorite shade of pink. Our cart's in the hallway on its own.

I bring it in and set our food on the table. We smile at each other, knowing we're both going to need energy for the rest of the night, and we consume all of the food. We finish quickly and I carry her to bed.

This time, I don't hesitate as I lay her down and slide into her, stopping when we're as close as we can possibly be. I look deep in her eyes, nothing between us, both of us raw and bare for the other. I want this moment to last an eternity.

I might not get everything I want, but I'll make this night special. I'll make myself unforgettable. If I can't, she'll never forgive me ... because no matter what I do next, I'm sure to break her heart. I'm hoping I can be the one to mend it. I have a feeling I won't be able to let her go. What I feel for her is too intense.

I didn't want this, wasn't expecting it, but it's here and nothing in me wants to run from it. Is this what love is? I have nothing to compare it to. I only know the thought of losing her rips me in half.

I shut off those thoughts as I move inside her hot body, making the two of us one. I never fully comprehended what that meant until joining my body with hers. Mine. She's mine ... and I'm one hundred percent hers.

Chapter Thirty

I haven't stopped smiling for two days. It's actually quite disturbing. I'm now one of those women who have always disgusted me. Seriously, I don't believe in love and I don't believe it when people say how much they cherish another person. I always believed it was all lies in order to get something you wanted from somebody else.

Sure, there are good marriages. I see them in this perfect town. But they aren't built out of *love*. Those relationships were built out of *need*. One person asks another person what can you do for me? What can you give me that will make my life better? If that person can't make the other person's life better, they move on to greener pastures. Sometimes, more often than people think, they keep that spouse of theirs and still seek out greener pastures.

How can love be real when people use each other so much? How can it be real when respect seems to be a thing of the past? I don't believe in love. I believe in need. Even knowing all of this about myself, I'm still smiling. It's driving me crazy and I can't seem to stop. No matter how much I try to push the smile away, it keeps appearing on my traitorous lips.

“What are you thinking about?” Mattie asks with a sly smile.

“Profits are good. I think we need another employee,” I tell her. That seems believable to me. The store is doing well. From everything I read before starting my own business, I was warned it would take a lot of time to make a profit. Since I have no loans, everything I make comes straight back to me.

It’s sort of funny actually. I’m doing so dang well I don’t think I would have needed my fifty-thousand-dollar weekend with Greyson. I have no regrets about it though. I wouldn’t take it back for anything ... because without that weekend we wouldn’t have all of the rest of what we have, and now that it’s happened, I can’t imagine it not happening. I’m not making sense in my own head.

“Nope, that’s not a smile about business. That’s a *love* smile,” Mattie says.

“How in the world would you know about love? You’re still a kid.”

“Hey, I’m a young adult,” she corrects. “Besides, kids fall in love all of the time. It might be puppy love, but we aren’t as jaded as adults so it’s easier for us to give our hearts. Heck, I fell in love with Ms. Judy’s new puppy just this morning. Like seriously, I’d die for that puppy, and it only took me fifteen minutes to be smitten. People who say teenagers don’t know real love are dumb. We love openly and freely. It’s adults who become so jaded they don’t trust their own feelings,” she points out.

I’m in awe of this child. That’s not anything I thought about before, but it makes a lot of sense. So much wisdom comes out of her mouth that I laugh and ponder at the same time. I’m so grateful I landed in Ravish.

“I have to agree, Cass; that’s totally a love smile,” Lisha says as she joins us.

“If you two have time to sit and gossip about me, you have time to work,” I say with a laugh.

Lisha’s grin grows. “We’re fully caught up,” she says. The two girls look at me with far too much knowledge in their young eyes. It freaks me out.

“Back to the love topic. When are you going to admit how much you care about him?” Mattie asks.

“I’m not in love,” I say. I hold up my hand before they can argue. “I understand love a little more now. I’ve always avoided romcom movies because they ticked me off with the fake falling in love in totally unrealistic plots. I can see why people like them though, because there is *some* cheesiness to life and Greyson does make me feel kind of giggly and stuff when I let my guard down.”

Mattie and Lisha look at me in horror. “You don’t like romcoms? Like none?” Lisha gasps.

“No, I’ve avoided all of them. I prefer horror. It’s much more realistic.”

“No way, not even a single romcom?” Mattie asks.

“Nope. As soon as one comes on, I change the channel.”

“That won’t do. We’re having a romcom marathon after work today. We’re going to put on our jammies, make a lot of popcorn, and have a ton of chocolate and ice-cream while we watch a minimum of three romcoms,” Lisha says.

“Brilliant. We close early today and there’s no school tomorrow. We can stay up until three in the morning if we like,” Mattie says.

“No way am I being forced to watch romantic movies all night,” I say in horror.

“Yes, you are. We get to introduce you to the best movies of all time,” Mattie says, her eyes wide with excitement. I look between her and Lisha and my shoulders sag. There’s no way I can deny these girls anything when they seem so happy with the idea.

“I guess we could watch maybe one,” I say with reluctance.

Both Lisha and Mattie scream with delight, making a few heads turn our way.

“Okay, I know this isn’t a library, but it is a bookstore. The employees should be a little more subdued,” I tell them.

They cover their mouths as they giggle. “Okay, we’re going to bust our butts getting everything done so the second we’re closed we can start movie time,” Mattie says.

“I’ll run to the market and grab a bunch of junk food. I have so much money now from my paychecks and tips that I’m dying to spend some,” Lisha says.

“I’ll chip in too. Make sure you get Hershey’s and Baby Ruth’s.”

“I’ll chip in as well. Might as well grab KitKats and Oreo ice cream,” I say as I pull out a fifty-dollar bill.

“Best night ever,” Mattie says. She then gives me a skeptical look. “You do have a smart TV, don’t you?”

I laugh. “Yes, I have a smart TV,” I tell her.

“Good, and Amazon Prime?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Cause we’re watching nineties romance. The only way to get them is on Amazon.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Wait, I have an idea,” Lisha says. “Let me make a phone call. This might get even better.”

She runs off and I have no idea what she’s doing. Twenty minutes later, she’s grinning from ear to ear. “I’m clocking out, but I’ll be back in one hour to help you guys get everything finished so we can leave on time.” She doesn’t give us a chance to argue before she clocks out then rushes from the store.

“What’s she up to?” I ask Mattie.

“I have no idea,” Mattie says. She then lifts her phone from her pocket and smiles. “Oh, *now* I know,” she adds after reading a text message. “You don’t get to know; it’s a surprise.” She then dances away.

I shake my head, unable to keep up with the teenagers. We have three hours to go before we’re done for the day, so I get busy. The girls are going to want to leave as soon as the doors close. One hour before normal shutdown, the store is completely empty, strange for a Saturday.

“Let’s close up and go,” Mattie tells me.

“We can’t close early,” I say.

“Trust me, no one else is coming in, they’re somewhere else.” She goes to the back and flips off the lights. I’m laughing as I go along with it. I guess she’s the boss now.

We walk together from the front of the store, then quickly move down the sidewalk to the other end of town. There’s a crowd, and that’s when I realize where we’re going. I stop. “What’s going on?”

“Lisha’s friend’s dad owns the theater. She called and talked him into playing nineties romcoms tonight and then a grapevine went out to all of our favorite girls. We’re having a girls-only night at the theater watching *Clueless*, *Drive me Crazy*, and *Fools Rush In*. You’re going to love it.”

The theater is old, a one room theatre with a basic popcorn machine and candy stand. The owner lets people bring their own treats in because he doesn’t have a lot to offer. In turn he has loyal customers who come back again and again. The nice thing, too, is the people who wanted to watch the movie they were going to play don’t mind at all having their night changed. There’s something fun about having a girls-only night of old romcoms. The men don’t even mind as they say goodbye and head over to *Eye of the Storm* to wait for their partners to finish.

I’m dragged inside and soon holding a bucket of popcorn with a lap full of candy. And then, miracle of miracles, I’m laughing and crying as I watch old romcoms with my two favorite girls in the world on either side of me.

By the end of the third movie, I’ve been officially brainwashed. I was rooting for the couples and feeling stress that they might not get their happily ever afters. What has

happened to me? Am I even savable at this point? I know with absolute clarity I'm in trouble, deep, deep trouble ... and all of my woes have a name ... Greyson River.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ten Years Ago

I lean against the wall, my face blank as Dave thrusts into me over and over, one fist tangled in my hair with my face pressed against the wall, his teeth biting my shoulder. He grunts behind me as he slaps my ass and pushes harder and harder until he finally lets out a groan as he shakes violently.

I don't say a word as he pulls out his disgusting dick and steps back. My head hurts and my ass is bruised from his constant hits, but I don't focus on the pain. I wait while he takes off his condom, ties it, then stuffs it in his pocket. I finally lean down and grab my pants, my legs only slightly shaking as I put them back on.

"I'm going to miss this," he says with a satisfied sneer in place as I turn and look at him. I feel absolutely nothing. I'll feel it later just as I always do, but in this moment, I feel nothing. I went to another place and I won't give him the satisfaction of how much he hurts me, how much he breaks me.

"You'll get it from someone else in here ... until you're finally caught. Then it will be *you* with *your* face pressed against the wall as some dick tears *your* ass apart," I tell him. I keep my face blank as I say this. I don't need more bruises, but

I can't help but throw some words his way. Today is my last day in this hellhole. I'm getting released in the morning.

"Don't you need some money, Tina? Just because you're leaving here, doesn't mean we have to part. I have a nice apartment a few miles from here. I'll give you a ride to it tomorrow morning." There's actually hope in his eyes.

"Do you honestly think I'm so desperate I'd shack up with you?" I ask. I'm more curious than disgusted.

"What else are you going to do? You have nowhere to go and no one who gives a shit about you," he says as he looks me up and down.

"I'll get as far from here as humanly possible. I don't need anyone to help me. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"The real world is going to knock some sense into you. Don't tell me you haven't liked our time together. I know you want me," he says with a laugh. He thinks he's a gift to all women. He must not have a mirror or hear himself speak.

"All predators think the same. You think we want it, that we need you. We *tolerate* you because you're in control ... for the moment. It won't always be that way. You can no longer cuff me to a bed and screw me. You can no longer push me into the wall and have your way with me. One day *you'll* be the one in cuffs getting screwed."

I barely finish my sentence before his fist comes out and slugs me in the stomach hard enough to take my breath away. He learned two years ago not to hit me in the face. It leads to too many questions. He, like a few others here, has only

inflicted wounds that clothes cover. None of us complain because those at the top of the chain are just as corrupt as some of the guards. A few of us have been left in the warden's office for him to abuse. Fighting only leads to more pain. It will change, I assure myself. I don't care if it takes twenty years, it will change.

"I can pay you nicely to be my little slave," he says.

"There's no dollar amount that would make me come home with you," I snarl.

"I might not give you a choice," he says, his eyes almost wild.

"What are you going to do, Dave? Are you going to wait outside and kidnap me as soon as I step from these prison walls?"

"Maybe," he says as if the idea is appealing.

"Good luck with that," I tell him. "This will be your last day of touching me, then you can fuck yourself, and this place can burn in hell."

He grabs my arm and pulls me to him, his hand once again tangling in my hair. I can't stop a whimper from escaping as he wrenches my head back to the point of my neck snapping.

"I can take whatever I want from you. Even after four years you haven't learned that lesson," he snaps. He slams his mouth against mine, making my teeth cut the inside of my lip as he pushes his tongue inside my mouth while pulling my hair harder.

He slams me back against the wall as he grinds against me, his punishing kiss going on and on until I'm about to pass out

from lack of oxygen. Finally he breaks away. He looks at me with victory as he sees the paleness in my face.

“You might think you’re special, but you’re nobody. You might be leaving here but you’ll end up in big-girl prison next. I have friends there who are looking forward to alone time with you.”

He grows more excited as he says this and his hand snakes up my shirt. He squeezes my breast painfully and I don’t satisfy him by letting out a scream. I keep telling myself this is the last time he’ll ever touch me, this is the last time *any* man will ever touch me without my consent.

He’s growing hard again and I feel like crying. I won’t allow the tears to fall, but I thought that was the last time he’d ever get to screw me. I might be wrong. He grinds into me, then rips my pants away as he throws me to the ground on my hands and knees. He doesn’t like looking in my face while he rapes me. He wants to pretend I’m getting off on it. He thinks he’s that good.

I go to my happy place in my mind while he adds more bruises to my body and takes me again. This is it. I’ll get through this, keep my mouth shut, then I’ll be free of this man forever. I’d kill him, but he’s not worth it. He’ll pay. I’ll make sure he pays ... no matter how long it takes me to get there.

He finishes, tossing me aside after he grunts his release. This time I keep my mouth shut as he laughs, standing above me. He kicks my leg before he walks out the door. I lie right where I am for a while before I get up and dress again, then I go to the showers and strip once more, standing beneath the warm water.

The first thing I'll do when I'm out of this place is take a scalding hot shower for hours. I'll find a place with one of those endless water heaters and shower and shower. I never feel clean here. I scrub myself as well as I can before I dry off and dress once more in fresh clothes.

I leave the bathroom and limp my way back to my cell. Paige is sitting on the bed, looking sad.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to miss you," she tells me, a tear falling.

I immediately go to her and pull her into my arms. I wince at the pain of the new bruises covering my body.

"I'll write to you and before you know it, you'll be free," I promise.

"I don't know. It's been halfway survivable with you here, but when you're gone, I don't know if I'll make it," she says, crying harder now.

"You *will* make it, Paige, and when you're out, you'll be with me," I tell her. I hope I can make this happen. It's going to be hard because I'm going far away from this place. For Paige though, I *will* come back.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself. I should be celebrating with you. You're going to make it, Sass, I have no doubt about it," she tells me as she pulls back.

"We're *both* going to make it," I insist. "Tomorrow, I walk out of here with my head held high. I'm going to walk away from here, get on a bus, and leave this place. Then I'm going to let you know in code where I'm at just like in *Shawshank Redemption*. You'll come and join me."

“I have two years to go,” she says.

“I made it through four years. You can do this, Paige. Promise me you won’t give up.” She looks at me as if she’s struggling. “Please, promise me,” I insist.

“I *will* make it,” she tells me.

We move to my bed and lie down together, taking comfort in a gentle human connection. She’s like a little sister to me. There’s nothing I won’t do for her. She’ll make it out just like I’m making it out. I hold her close, needing her touch as much as she needs mine. We rely on each other.

I know my plans, but I’m afraid to tell her. I’m getting a one-way ticket to the West Coast. I want to be as far away from here as possible. I’m going to find a place to leave her my contact information, but I’m not putting it on anything that will come into this building. I don’t want any of these assholes to ever find me again.

We talk long into the night, neither of us wanting to go to sleep. This is the last night we’ll spend together for at least two years. I won’t come back to visit. This place is evil and once I step away, I’ll never darken its doors again. I can’t. If I come back, someone will somehow find a way to make me go inside. I won’t let that happen.

When I’m gone from here, no one will ever rape me again. If I ever choose to have sex, it will be on my terms only. I will make it, I’ll prove them wrong, those who have told me I can’t.

Somewhere in the early hours of dawn Paige and I fall asleep next to one another. I tell myself she’ll be okay, and

we'll find each other again. I have to hope this with all of my heart. If I don't, I can't make it through the next day, or the next years of my life.

“One day at a time,” I whisper before I fall asleep.

Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of my free life. It will get better from here.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I feel like a teenager as I lie on a blanket by the river and Greyson's hand trails down my torso as his lips caress mine. Heaven, I'm in absolute heaven. I can't get enough of his hands and mouth all over me. I sigh as his fingers slip beneath my shirt and move upward, my skin tingling everywhere he touches.

His lips leave mine and trail down my jaw as his fingers slip beneath my bra and slide over my nipple, making me arch upward as I moan. Yes, I need our clothes gone, need his mouth all over me.

He moves down my neck and opens my shirt. He kisses that tender place between my breasts and I lift my hands into his hair and hold him close to me. He slides over and sucks my nipple into his hot mouth. More. I need more.

My head turns and I crack my eyes open ... then freeze. There's a flash in the trees. I'm pulled from the moment as I look over at the tree line. We're a mile down the river in a place away from everyone. I'm sure the flash is a fluke. I try to focus on Greyson's mouth doing delicious things to my nipple, but as he moves to the other breast, another flash appears. I freeze. He feels the tenseness in my body and looks up in concern. I lower my hands and cover my breasts, feeling exposed.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asks.

“I see something out there,” I whisper, staring at the area I saw the flash. As Greyson turns to gaze in the direction I’m focused on, there’s another flash. His gaze narrows.

“I’m sure it’s a wrapper or something the sun’s glinting off of,” he says, but he now sounds as tense as I feel. He pulls my bra and shirt back into place, protecting me, and sits up. I join him as we gaze into the woods.

“That’s not a camera, is it?” I ask.

“I hope not,” he says, but there’s anger in his tone.

“You think it is, don’t you?” I gasp, trying not to cry. Is some pervert out there taking pictures of us? All that’s been exposed are my breasts but the thought of someone having pictures of my naked form horrifies me.

I was so careful in all of my years of using my body to make money. There were never cameras allowed in the clubs I worked at, no hidden cameras, and no cell phones allowed inside. The places were incredibly strict on this. Sure, I stripped for rooms full of men, but there were no pictures of me anywhere ... until possibly now.

“I’m sure it’s a damn teenager out exploring, thinking he got lucky coming up on some people having sex in the woods,” Greyson says. “I’m going to kill him if that’s what it is.”

A shiver runs through me. “Who would do that?”

“In this world of social media, everyone wants to share. Catching someone having sex would be like gold for these nuts.”

“I like social media to grow my business and change the lives of people who would’ve never had these opportunities before, but I despise the dark side,” I tell him. I know a few of the kids who were in juvie who are now influencers making hundreds of thousands of dollars. I’m very happy for them. Taking videos of someone like this is disgusting, though.

“I’m going to check it out,” he tells me as he rises.

“No, what if it’s dangerous?” I say as I grab for him.

He briefly smiles at me. “Trust me, I can take care of myself.” A shiver runs through me at the confidence in his voice. It makes me wonder once again what he does for a living. He’s not even a little scared at the thought someone might be out there.

Without arguing more, he rushes off. I stay where I’m at, not sure what to do. I can’t help but wonder if this is some pervy kid ... or if it’s something more. I can’t shake my call with my mom a month ago and the feeling that eyes have been on me for some time.

I don’t cry, but there’s tightness in my throat. Is my world crashing down around me? Have those monsters in DC found me? Why would they want to? I haven’t been a threat to them in a long time. I didn’t turn them in when I could’ve done that. Why would they come after me now?

Even as I’m asking myself these questions, I know the answer. The last man, the person who impregnated me, is a *very* powerful man ... and I have a secret about him he’ll never want to come into the light of day. I should’ve turned him in fourteen years ago. Maybe something would’ve been done. It’s too late now.

No, I made the right decision. Had I turned him in, he would've come after my daughter ... not *our* daughter, but *my* daughter. He'd want her dead. Is that what he wants now? If I know where she is, then he knows. This terrifies me more than anything else.

I sit and wait for Greyson, but thirty minutes pass without a sign of him. I can't sit in the open any longer. We hiked here. I can't stand feeling hunted, so I gather our stuff and start the walk back to my house. He'll figure out what I'm doing.

Making my way through the overgrown trail, I jump at every sound. I hate feeling this way. It's been a long time since I was spooked by shadows and sounds. I hear rustling in the bushes and my body freezes before I alter my stance. If someone is coming for me, I won't go down easily.

As the noise grows closer, I force my heart to calm and take a deep breath. I slowly turn in a circle, not sure where the sound's coming from. Another sound makes me take a deep breath. I have to stay calm if I have even a slight chance of being safe.

"Cass, it's me," Greyson calls from some distance away.

I nearly sob in relief. I remain where I am with my arms raised. He might be coming back, but that doesn't mean someone else isn't here. I wait, slowly scanning the area around me. I'm surrounded by bushes and trees where anything or anyone could be hiding.

Another three minutes pass before Greyson appears twenty feet from me. I don't relax my stance as he approaches.

"It's just me, you're okay," he says as he slowly gets closer.

“Stay quiet. I want to make sure the noises I heard were you and no one else,” I whisper.

He goes perfectly still as he stands back to back with me and we look around, straining to hear everything. There are birds in the trees, and the sound of small critters rustling about, but nothing indicating footsteps.

“Let’s get out of here,” he tells me as he puts an arm around me and turns me in the direction of my house. We don’t speak as we race along the rugged trail we were so excited to find a few hours ago.

I don’t take a full breath until we break out of the woods and into the clearing near my house. We quickly head inside, relieved. I move to my sink and get each of us a large glass of water. My throat is dry.

“Did you see anything?” I ask.

“Yes, I saw cigarette butts and a couple of wrappers. I couldn’t find a person though.”

My heart thumps. “Someone was taking pictures then.” It’s not a question. I know what that flash was.

“I think so. We didn’t get naked though,” he says, trying to comfort me.

“My chest was exposed,” I point out.

“Not for long. My mouth was covering it,” he says.

The look I give him isn’t one of praise. “Oh, that makes it *so* much better.”

He gives me a smile, but he’s clearly as tense as I am. “Well, I think the cat’s out of the bag that we’re a couple,” he

tells me.

His words cause another skip in my heart, which I try to ignore. “We’re a couple?” I ask instead, trying to calm my fear and put a note of teasing in my tone. I’m not sure I’m pulling it off.

Greyson pulls me close. “We’re *certainly* a couple, Cass. This isn’t a fling for me,” he says before gently kissing me.

We’ve been pretty much inseparable for a month now, and we’ve never talked about what that means. I don’t know if now is the time to have the discussion.

“I don’t like labeling stuff,” I tell him.

He holds me close. “We don’t need to have a label. I know how I feel about you, and that’s all that matters.” Part of me wants to ask him how he feels. The other part of me doesn’t want to go there. I think it’s better to leave it alone.

“I like being with you,” I tell him.

“I’ll take that for now. We don’t know what happened out there so let’s not get too worked up over it. I’ll speak to Sheriff Spangler and we can go from there,” he tells me.

“You’re right. I’m not going to let some idiot ruin my day.”

“Good. Now, let’s finish what we started,” he says with a crooked smile. There’s still tenseness in his shoulders and voice, but he’s valiantly trying to cover it up. I appreciate him more for this than just about anything else.

“Greyson, take me to bed,” I tell him.

He immediately picks me up and carries me to the bedroom. Within a few minutes all thoughts of strangers in the

woods are forgotten. When I'm in Greyson's arms the rest of the world fades away. I hope it stays this way for a very, very, *very* long time ... maybe even forever.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Greyson

I pace the home I'm renting about a mile outside of Ravish. I chose this place for its privacy and lack of cameras. I made sure there weren't any. There are things I have to do in my work that require absolute privacy.

A car comes down my drive and I tense. I'm expecting a visitor today after I received a text a couple of hours ago, but it's not a visit I'm looking forward to. I haven't brought Cass to my place, not because I don't want her here, but because I can't take the chance she'll surprise me when someone's here I don't want to see her.

The plain vehicle shows up as I stand on my porch, my gun secure at my side, ready to be drawn. Kevin steps from the vehicle and pauses. He knows I'm on edge so he gives me a second to adjust to the fact that he's standing there. We've worked this job together for a long time. We know the rules.

He finally begins moving, striding onto my porch.

"Kevin," I say, no emotion in my tone.

"Greyson," he replies, then holds out his hand. "It's good to see you."

"I'm not sure I can say the same," I tell him. He shakes his head as if this upsets him.

“Well, let’s sit and chat,” he tells me.

We walk inside my house. I go to the fridge and grab a couple of bottles of beer and an opener, then lead him to my back deck and the chairs facing the river. Both of us know to only take sealed containers from anyone ... even a friend.

“You’re seriously upsetting people,” Kevin says as we face the river. Sometimes it’s easier to talk to someone while focusing on something else.

I sigh. “I know. This isn’t a black and white case, though,” I tell him.

“It’s just as black and white as every other job we’ve done. This time though you’ve been honey-trapped,” he tells me, which raises my blood pressure. I have to fight the urge to punch a man I consider a friend.

“It’s not that at all. I’ve done jobs I haven’t liked before, but this one is wrong. We’ve been friends for a long time, and we’ve both had concerns before, so I hope you’ll trust me when I say we’re going too far. People aren’t our personal pawns to use as we please.”

“I trust you with my life. We’ve been in situations where those aren’t just words, but absolute truth. I’m telling you, man, this isn’t different. The only thing is how *you’re* reacting to it. You’ve made this personal, you got involved, and all of your careful training’s been thrown out the window,” Kevin says.

I shake my head. “I’m not being hoodwinked. She doesn’t know why I’m here. She doesn’t know who I am. There’s nothing in this for her to need to seduce me.”

“You don’t know that,” he says.

“I do know it. I know her. I need to tell her who I am and what’s going on.”

Kevin’s the one sighing now. “You can’t blow this mission, Greyson. Your entire career’s on the line.”

“I don’t give a crap about my career. I care about this woman.” I haven’t said these words to myself, but they’re true. If I believed in love, I might think I love her, but I don’t believe in love. I do believe in respect, in lust, in friendship. I care about Cass, and I can’t let anything happen to her. Mistakes can be made and she’ll pay for it with her life.

“This is so much bigger than you and me, or you and her. How can you not see that? You aren’t green,” he says with frustration.

“Not everything we do is about the next big promotion. I can care about her, care about you, care about this country, and care about my job at the same time. I’m telling you there’s something seriously wrong about this,” I say. I don’t know how to make him see it.

We sit back for a minute with neither of us speaking. He’s angry, I can see it in the set of his shoulders, but he sees the same in me.

“Like I said, I trust you, Greyson, but I don’t trust her.”

“That’s because you don’t know her. I guarantee you if you spent a day with her, your opinion would change. I don’t like this one bit.”

“So, now you want to protect her?” Kevin asks, looking at me with shock.

“I’ll protect her if that’s what needs to be done,” I tell my long-time friend.

He again shakes his head. “This isn’t good, Greyson. I see this ending very badly.”

“I hope it doesn’t,” I tell him. “What will you do?”

He gives me an incredulous look. “I hate that you’re putting me in this position.” That’s not an answer to what I’m asking.

“I know. I’d hate it if you were putting me in the same,” I admit.

Now he gives me the slightest smile. “I don’t know, Greyson. Nothing like this has happened before. I don’t like it one bit.”

“I get that,” I say. I don’t push him. I laid it on the table. I hope it doesn’t come down to us on opposite sides of a line. I’m not sure what I’ll do if that happens. I’m afraid that’s what it’s coming down to though.

“I can’t stay long. This isn’t on the books. I wanted to talk to you face to face though.”

“What are they saying?” I ask.

He again shakes his head. “You know I can’t go there,” he tells me.

“I know. I shouldn’t have asked.” I’m putting him in a very bad place right now.

“Be ready,” he warns, giving me a gift.

“Thanks,” I say.

Neither of us say more as he stands, leaving his beer half full. He turns and walks away. I don't move as I sit in my chair sipping beer and looking at the river. I have to talk to Cassandra. It's time to talk to her. The second I do, I'm giving up my job, the life I've not only lived, but thrived in.

It doesn't matter though. There's no other choice now. I won't sell her out, and I won't give her up, so that leaves no other option but to tell her everything. She might hate me. I might lose her anyway. I'd rather lose her this way than the other. And there's a chance, a small chance, that she won't be mad ... that she'll understand.

I don't move for a long time. The conversation I'm about to have with her is going to be the hardest of my life. I need a little more time preparing for it. The bubble we've been in for months is about to pop.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I bring more wine to the ladies sitting in a circle with books in their hands. It's book club time at the store with my favorite group, *Reading Between the Wine*. They come in once a week and talk about the books they're currently reading while having wine, eating snacks, and chatting about their lives.

I've learned more about this town from these ladies gathering together than through any other conversations. No one gossips quite as well as a group of ladies discussing books. They see and know everything about everyone around them.

They're super excited for this meeting as a New York Times best-selling author is coming in to visit with them. I have to admit I'm a little excited too. I own a bookstore, so I'm obviously a lover of reading. The door opens and Author Ruth Cardello walks into the room alongside Karen, who organizes the book club.

"Hello, ladies," Ruth calls out, her cheery attitude immediately infectious.

The women stand and grin as Karen and Ruth approach.

"We're so happy you've come all the way from the East Coast," Anita says, the first one to step forward.

"I was here visiting my friend, Melody, and couldn't miss out on this great book club," Ruth says.

“We have so many questions about your newest book *Out of Love*,” Kathy says.

“It’s such a great story and I laughed through it,” Lorene says.

“Well, I do love having a farmer switching places with his business savvy twin brother,” Ruth tells them.

“I love that each of them didn’t know they had a twin out there,” Karen says. “That’s always a lot of fun.”

The ladies all sit together and dive into the book with Ruth, excitedly talking about how she came up with the story and her process while writing it. I listen for a while as I thought once or twice about writing my own book.

The chance of finishing a novel is slim to none for me, but it’s a thought that flits through my mind. I was told by a few people that my life is a story of its own, but I think it would be too painful to relive it. Putting it on paper would make it more real, and most days I want to forget about everything that happened to me during those traumatic years.

The doorbell chimes and Greyson strides inside. I forget all about the book club as I move to greet him. My heart still skips a beat every time he walks into a room. Is this a fluke or is it something that will always happen? It’s never happened to me before with any other person.

My smile fades when I notice he isn’t smiling. Not only isn’t he wearing the grin I’m used to seeing, but he appears worried about something.

“What’s wrong?”

His lips turn up the slightest bit as he gazes at me. He immediately cups my cheek the way I love so much. It's almost like he can't stand to be near me without touching me. I had many men wanting their hands on me, but he's the first man I *want* to touch me. I love his touch. It not only comforts me, which is odd on its own, but I crave it.

"I need to talk to you about something important," he tells me.

"Will it take a while?" I ask as I glance at the book club.

"Yes, and it can wait until you close. I just needed to see you," he tells me. His pinkie brushes my neck and sends shivers down my spine.

"I want to talk to you about something as well," I admit.

I'm terrified to have this conversation, but I've thought about it a lot. I care about this man and I want to make sure he knows it. I don't ever show people I care about them because I was hurt so much and rejected far too often. I have a feeling that I can tell this man without scaring him away. It does frighten me, if I'm being honest, but I need to open myself to ever have a chance of living a normal life.

"I hope it's good," he tells me.

"I guess we'll see if you think it's good or not," I say as I smile.

He leans down and briefly kisses me. Even his slightest kiss sets my body on fire. I can't seem to get enough of him. I kiss him back, very aware of the ladies behind us.

"That's how I get inspired to write romance stories," Ruth says with a laugh.

Greyson and I turn and smile at the group before giving a little bow which makes all of the ladies in the book club laugh.

“Glad to inspire such a lovely group of women,” Greyson says.

“Oh, honey, you inspire by just being in a room,” Anita says with a wink that actually makes Greyson blush, considering she’s about seventy, old enough to be his grandma. He does wink back at her.

“If I were a few years younger I’d be sending you flowers and chocolates,” he tells her, making her giggle.

“Hey, Anita, quit trying to steal my man. I can’t compete with a world-class ballerina,” I say.

“Oh, in my day I could mesmerize the crowds,” Anita says as she stands and does a little twirl that’s utterly beautiful. “These days I can’t get on my toes though.” She doesn’t look sad about this. She’s lived a picturesque life and it’s obvious. “Now I enjoy watching my grandchildren perform on stage.”

“We’ll have to bring in a projector and watch some of your videos,” I tell her. Her eyes sparkle as she waves a hand.

“Oh, no one wants to see that,” she says with a blush.

“I do,” I tell her. The rest of her group all agrees with me. She smiles with pure delight.

They go back to discussing books and I focus on Greyson again. “Meet me here at closing and we can go for a walk,” I tell him.

“What time are you closing?” he asks. My hours vary depending on what events I have going on.

“I have a feeling this group will be here for a few hours. Ruth hasn’t been here long, but she’s sitting back with wine, and they all have a lot to say,” I tell him with a laugh.

“Okay, send me a message when you’re closing. I’ll be nearby and will come right away,” he says. He leans over and kisses me again, making me a little wobbly as he pulls away.

I enjoy the view of his nice butt as he walks away from me. I love both views of him: coming *and* going. My heart races as I think about what I want to say to him tonight. Will it change our relationship? And what does he want to talk to me about? It’s only a few hours until I find out. I can be patient.

I remain busy over the next few hours, keeping snacks and wine flowing for the book club, and making coffee and tea for other customers at the store. I don’t have time to do anything other than ring up purchases and make drinks.

It’s another three hours before I text Greyson that I’ll be ready in one hour. I set my phone down, get to my closing duties, and don’t go back to my phone. When the last person is out of the store and I finish checking out of my till, I go back to my phone ... and frown.

Greyson didn’t reply to my message. I send another text, letting him know I’ll be ready in five minutes. I wait. There’s no reply. I pace a little, then turn out the lights and walk to my front door. I lock it and stand outside as I hold my phone. No message comes in and no sign of Greyson.

I stand outside for about ten minutes, worry causing a frown in my forehead. I try to shake off the feeling of abandonment. Obviously he got caught up in something and

isn't able to text me. I decide to walk home. He'll know where to find me. He's never not shown up when he says he will.

It takes about twenty minutes to get home and still nothing from Greyson. I'm worrying more and more, but try to push away my concerns. I'm sure he's fine. Another hour passes before I decide to call him. I hate that I'm doing it. I lift my phone and dial his number ... and it immediately goes to voicemail. His phone's off.

Now I don't know whether to be hurt or worried. He's the one who came to my shop and said he wanted to talk. It wasn't like I sought him out and said I want to have a relationship discussion. It can't be that he was scared away ... or can it? Did he panic about us having a talk?

Filled with dread, I curl up on my couch. This is why a relationship is a bad idea. It gives another person power over you, over your emotions, over your time, over your very happiness. Dammit, I knew all of this, and yet I still became emotionally invested. I fight tears as I wait to hear anything from Greyson. He won't just leave, will he? I don't know if he's capable of that or not. How much do I really know the man?

I recall all of our time together. We've shared a lot about what we like to do, but how deep did our conversations go? He knows nothing of my past and I know nothing of his. I'm not even sure what his job is.

I sigh with regret. I don't think I really know him at all. I might've given my heart to a man for the first time, and I don't even know who he is. What am I going to do about it? I can't answer this question. I can't answer anything right now. I'm

barely holding on. No. No. No. I've been through so much worse ... I won't let this break me. Even as I consider this, a tear slips, and then another. Damn you, Greyson, damn you.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Greyson

Fury fills me as I sit across from my boss in a building who in the hell knows where. My phone is gone, my hands are cuffed behind my back, and my head is throbbing. The bastards were waiting for me when I walked into my house, and I was so consumed with thoughts over Cassandra I didn't realize they were there until it was too late. They knocked me out before I could blink.

Cass has to be worried, has to be wondering where I am. If I know her, and I think I do, she thinks I abandoned her. I wasn't sure if she'd forgive me for not telling her who I really am. That's nothing compared to abandoning her ... and that's exactly what she'll think happened. She'll believe I left her without a word, something she's more than used to. It's something I never should do to her ... even if it's completely out of my hands.

“What in the hell is going on?” I shout.

“We had to pull you out,” Larry says.

“You can't do that. What is this?” I'm filled with rage and it's probably a good thing I'm restrained because I wouldn't mind wringing a lot of necks right now.

Larry pulls out pictures and tosses them on the table. “Your job wasn't to sleep with her,” he says as images of Cassandra

and me cover the table. There are several of us kissing in different places ... including messing around at the river.

“It was you. I should’ve known,” I snap, utterly betrayed and violated. I feel worse for Cassandra.

“You know this case is too damn important to leave it up to you,” he tells me. “I’m disappointed. You were hand-picked for this, and you nearly blew it.”

“I did my job more than well. Maybe *you’re* not doing *your* job,” I snap.

He narrows his eyes and I know I’m pushing it too far. I don’t care. Larry fought his way to the top of the chain. He fought prejudices and politics to get where he is. He’s the first Black man in his position and he doesn’t take nonsense from anyone.

“Watch what you say right now. I know you’re pissed, but I’ll only let you push this so far,” he warns.

I’d be smart to heed his warning. Right now I only want to get back to Cassandra. She’s in danger and can’t be alone. I take a deep breath and try to control my temper.

“I didn’t screw up,” I say.

“You slept with her,” Larry points out.

“Nothing said that was out of bounds. I didn’t do it for the job where others have done just that,” I say.

Larry gives a sardonic smile. “Yeah, our jobs really suck sometimes,” he tells me.

“I didn’t get close to her because of the damn job. I care about her,” I tell him.

He looks at me with so much intensity I squirm. This man has a way of doing that to anyone he talks to. It's why he's where he is.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't send you back to DC right now," Larry demands.

"She won't trust anyone else. All of this will be for nothing if you pull me. It might be too late now. She doesn't trust easily," I say. "I sure as hell didn't need to be spied on."

"This is the biggest case of your life, hell, it's the biggest case we've ever been a part of, and that's saying something. Of course I'm going to keep an eye on you. There's no way in hell this is getting ruined because you can't keep your damn dick in your pants."

"I've never once failed," I tell him, deciding not to talk about my pants or body parts.

"You're failing right now," he says.

"That's bullshit. Get me back in there," I demand.

Larry's phone dings and he looks down. I see the frown on his face that sets my heart to thundering. It takes a lot to upset Larry and right now he looks upset. He lifts his phone and hits a button.

"Is this verified?" There's a pause. "Are there eyes on it?" More silence. "Dammit, fix this now. If you don't get eyes on her immediately heads will roll and I'm not talking figuratively. I will personally pick out the sword." He hangs up and looks down for a moment before he meets my gaze.

"What's happening?" I ask. I panic and don't know why. I should remain calm. Nothing good comes from losing our

minds. The calmer we remain in situations, the faster we find solutions.

“She’s gone,” Larry says.

He doesn’t have to tell me who’s gone, but I’m still shocked.

“What in the hell do you mean, she’s gone?”

“Our man went to check on her. He was doing a perimeter check and was gone for fifteen minutes. When he got back she was gone.”

All color leaves my face as chills go down my spine. I’m fighting panic.

“They figured it out,” I gasp.

“We don’t know that,” he says, but he’s come to the same conclusion. There’s no other explanation with that short of a window. Someone spotted the person watching her and slipped in the second his back was turned. I could’ve stopped this. I would’ve been with her.

“That’s not all,” he says as he rubs his forehead, something he only does when he’s out of answers.

“What else could be this screwed up?” I shout.

“The other one’s been taken too.” He’s scared, and his fear sends my emotions over the edge I was balancing on since I woke up in this building ... hell, since I first laid eyes on Cass for the first time and felt the intense spark between us.

“Undo me now,” I say so quietly and fiercely, it would scare anyone ... other than Larry. He rises and moves behind

me, undoing the cuffs. Cold fury runs through me. I don't move from my chair, afraid of what I'm capable of right now.

"Don't do something you'll regret, Grey," Larry tells me.

"I'm going to burn them all down," I say.

"We have to find them first," he replies.

"We'll find them. I don't know if it will be too late. For the sake of the men who grabbed me, they better pray it's not too late."

I've never been this afraid. My world's quickly unraveling and I'm helpless, something I'm not at all used to feeling. I don't know where to begin. I can't do this on my own. If I could I'd be rushing out the door right now. But if there ever was a time to remain calm, this is it.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Eugene," he says.

"Let's go."

I walk out of the room knowing Larry will follow. He might be the boss, but I know more than anyone else about this case. I need to gather the rest of my team. If she's not found immediately, she has no chance. She might not have one now. I hope the man's arrogance will give her some time. That hope is all that keeps me going.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Eight Years Ago

The sun shines on my face and I smile. I've had two years of freedom. It hasn't been an easy two years, but it's paradise compared to what I already went through. My smile fades as tears come to my eyes. I haven't found my daughter. I haven't given up, but those guards were right, it's not as easy as I thought it would be on the outside.

I'm making something of myself though. I dance six nights a week. I was working seven nights, but I need one day to refresh, to run errands, and to search for my little girl. The other days and nights I dance. I smile how I'm supposed to smile, and I turn men on ... then drain them of every dollar I can get out of them.

It's been two years and I have \$300,000 saved. What other profession could a former prisoner have and make this much money? Nothing I can think of. The longer I dance, the more I make. That doesn't mean I'll do it forever, it just means I'll do it for as long as I need to in order to make a new path in my life. I'm only twenty. I have a lot of years left to live.

I changed my name. I'm no longer Tina ... now I'm Cassandra. I like the name. Paige will be with me soon. She gets released in a week. I'm in DC right now. Instead of leaving a note, I came for her. I'm not getting near the juvie,

but I left her instructions to go to the group home many of the young women go to when they get out of the hellhole that housed me for four years.

I hate being back in DC, but it's only for a week. I didn't want to not be here in case she was released a few days early, which sometimes happens. I've been wearing a short dark brown wig. It's winter; otherwise I'd probably be sweating. I'm also a lot darker than I was two years ago now that I can be in the sunshine. I don't think I look anything like I did when I walked from juvie two years ago, giving me a sense of security as I walk near the place where so many violated me. I don't think any of them would recognize me now that I'm a woman. I can fight back as I've taken many self-defense classes. I won't ever be violated again.

I love how easy it was to change my identity. I walk back to the nice hotel I'm staying in, five miles from where Paige is. It's not a Super 8, and it's not a Hilton, but a middle-of-the-road hotel. I get free breakfast and don't have to worry about bed bugs, but I'll not run into any DC socialites either ... especially my mother, who hasn't even tried to get ahold of me since my release. I'm okay with that. I want nothing to do with her.

I order pizza then flip on the television. I'm not a fan of the news since it seems to glorify evil and tells us every five minutes we're going to die if we don't do what the brainwashers tell us to do, but I need to at least watch local news so I know what's happening in my neck of the woods.

If an escaped lunatic is running around, it's best for me to know rather than to live in ignorant bliss. As long as it's not

happening close to me, I'd rather not know. It's not like I can do anything about the rest of the world. That takes people with power to make a difference ... and it seems few people in power care more about being of service than they do about being served by the minions who put them into office.

A breaking news alert flashes across the screen, catching my attention. Is there a killer on the loose? I wouldn't be surprised; this city full of corruption and crime. I focus on the story, and my face drains of color as I see cameras pan in ... on the juvie prison I lived in for four years.

I turn up the volume.

"It appears the allegedly accused detention officer Dave Pimlot is being escorted from the premises now. He's being charged with multiple counts of rape and molestation along with the murder of a girl who was housed inside."

He's been caught. He's *finally* been caught. I want to feel joy at this, but all I feel is horror.

"Yes, those are the charges," another reporter says. "As this story continues to break, we're learning several more guards have been questioned with more arrested, including the warden, Jim Phillips. An account of his has been discovered with five million dollars in it, looking like payoffs."

"That's correct," the first reporter says. "Hold on, we have more incoming information."

I stare at the flashing lights of cop cars as girls are escorted from the detention center and placed in vans. More officers I recognize are brought out in handcuffs, and the warden comes out screaming before he's placed in the back of a car.

The reporter on site looks up, her face pale. “It looks like the murdered girl is Paige Hanson, daughter of Senator Hanson. She was found behind the trash dumpsters last Friday, and the warden said he didn’t know how it happened, another girl must’ve stabbed her. Apparently, the center was already under surveillance, and today they raided the facility to take in all of the suspects.”

“Have we gotten comments from Senator Hanson yet?” the reporter at the studio asks.

“There’s been no comment from the senator. He’s gone into isolation as he mourns the loss of his daughter.”

I scream. I can’t remember the last time I’ve cried, screamed, or felt this much rage. How? Why? This can’t be real.

“Yes, it’s been confirmed by the coroner’s office that the body of the girl found is Paige Hanson, who would’ve turned eighteen in two days and was scheduled to be released.”

“That’s a true tragedy.”

I no longer hear any of the words spoken as the reporters continue talking about this scandalous event. I’m numb. Paige is dead. My only friend in the world was murdered. Dave got what I wanted him to get, yet I feel no joy. The girls will be moved to alternate facilities so the monsters here can never touch another soul, yet I feel no joy.

I’d hoped my best and only friend would come out and we could make good on our plans together, but that’s gone now. She left me alone. It takes a while longer before I realize tears are streaming down my cheeks.

Even if Dave and the others will pay for their crimes, they still won. They ruined the lives of so many young women, and they ended Paige's life. They'll now be behind bars, but they have dirt on so many high-up officials, they'll most likely get light sentences. What kind of world do I live in?

I can't move from the bed for hours. The pizza comes and remains untouched. I have no appetite. I don't know what I'm going to do next. It's been a long time, but right now I feel no hope at all. What will come of me? Why didn't I report this place? Why didn't I fight for Paige? I knew the abuse that was going on, but I was too scared to try to stop it. Now, Paige has paid the ultimate price. My heart is heavy.

I have no will to function for the next two days as I restlessly sleep on and off while watching the news nonstop, trying to find out what will be done with Paige's body. In the end, I don't get to know. The senator wants it all to disappear. He's safe with nobody asking questions about the sex and lies he was a part of.

Once I realize I won't get to tell Paige goodbye, I check out of the hotel, go to the train station, and buy a one-way ticket in a private car. I'm heading back to the West Coast where I'll once again disappear.

With Paige gone, nobody knows me as Tina besides my mother, and she doesn't care. Tina is officially dead forever ... not a bad thing. Paige's death is horrifically tragic. There are so few good people in the world, and it seems the good ones die first.

I don't know what I'll do now. For the first time in a long while I feel utterly hopeless. Can I pick myself up one more

time? By the time I arrive back in the west, the last of my tears have fallen. If it weren't for my daughter being in this world, I might entirely give up, but she is out there, and I'm determined to find her, no matter what it takes. I will choose to live for her. I *will* see her again someday. That's my only hope anymore. Everything else has been taken away.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

It feels like someone is standing over me pounding my head with a hammer. It's throbbing so hard I don't want to open my eyes. What in the heck happened? One second I'm on my couch bemoaning my relationship, or lack of a relationship, with Greyson, and the next I'm dizzy and everything goes black.

I take a calming breath and try to figure out what happened. I'm sitting on something hard and I can't move my arms or legs. I'm tied up. I fight the panic wanting to consume me. No good will come from it. I have to figure out where I am and what's happening. If someone has taken me, the chances are it's already over, but I'm not built to give up that easily.

I try not to move as I listen for noise. It takes a moment before I hear what sounds like quiet sobs. Is there another victim here? Am I not the only one who was taken? This fills me with dread. The panic waiting to overtake me wants to surface again, but I push it down. I don't have time for panic. It won't get me anywhere.

I open my eyes to a large room, a warehouse of some kind. Several dusty windows surround it, and it's dark outside. Only a bit of light filters through the room. I look everywhere, but it's a lot of empty space. I hear whimpering again and I try to turn, but I can't see behind me.

I tug on my binds, but they aren't loosening. Whoever tied me up knows what they're doing. I can work on them for hours and do nothing more than injure myself. That doesn't mean I won't try. I see my legs are bound to the chair I'm sitting on. There's a rope around my middle, tying me to the chair as well as my hands being tied together. I hurt all over. I can't move. If I shake myself hard enough I might be able to knock the chair over, but that's not going to do me much good.

The crying grows a little louder. I can't stand it. "Who's there?" I quietly ask.

There's a hiccup.

"Cass?" the confused voice asks, sending the first real shiver of fear through me. Now, it's not a guess, it's a fact.

"It's me, Mattie," I say, choking on the words.

"Why are we here?" she asks, her voice so scared my heart feels like it's being ripped open all over again.

"I have a feeling a very bad man has found me ... and you," I tell her.

"Why would anyone want us?" she asks. Part of me rejoices in the fact that she cares about me, that she's not just scared for herself, but for both of us. The other part of me, the majority, wishes with all of my heart she doesn't have to see this, to know this. I barely got time with her. I'm still building a relationship. And in one moment that's being destroyed. We've never actually had a chance.

"Because ..." I choke up and have to stop. "Because you're my daughter," I tell her.

She gasps behind me, and it kills me that I can't see her face, I can't offer comfort.

"But how?" she asks. I can't tell what she's thinking. I push on my chair as I try to turn it. It moves a little and I use my bound feet to twist and turn. It takes several tries and I'm dripping sweat, but it's worth it. I finally see her, tied to a chair about ten feet from me. I don't have the strength to try to hop my chair all of the way over to her.

"I didn't want to tell you like this. I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you at all. You have a wonderful mother and a perfect life. I just wanted to know you. I needed to see how you've grown," I tell her, tears streaming down my face.

"But if this is true, you gave me up," she says, looking at me as if I've completely betrayed her.

"It wasn't my choice," I say.

"Everyone has a choice. I'm glad you gave me up because I love my mom and my dad even if he's been dead for five years. He was as incredible as my mom. You aren't my mother, you're just an incubator," she tells me with pain and rage.

I bow my head. Maybe it's better for her to think I'm a monster. Maybe she'll be able to deal with this so much easier if I'm the monster. I don't care what happens to me, but nothing can happen to her. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure she lives a beautiful life. I have to get her out of here first, though, or that can't happen. I tug on my hands. The rope scrapes against my flesh, but I ignore the pain. I have to save my daughter.

There's a loud noise to the side of us and we both turn as a door opens. Three men walk inside, holding guns, looking around the room. One of them speaks into a mic near his cheek. They stand near the door as another man walks inside. My face drains of all color. I wasn't expecting him to personally come.

True terror fills me as the men walk back out the door, leaving Mattie and me inside with *him*. He looks over and meets my gaze, a predator's gleam in his eyes, a smirk on his lips. No. No. No. If he's allowing Mattie to see his face, it only means one thing ... we're both about to die.

"Hello, Tina," he says with the perfect politician smile firmly in place.

"My name's Cassandra," I tell him coolly. I'm filled with fear and panic, but I can't let him know that. The only chance my daughter has is for him to believe I can hurt him.

"Vice President Branson," Mattie gasps, shock in her tone as if she can't believe what she's seeing. I'm sure she thinks this is nothing but a dream, that's all it can be.

"Hello, Mattie," he says, an evil glint in his eyes while the smile remains on his disgusting lips.

"How do you know me? Why are we here?" she asks. There's a little hope in her voice, as if she believes this means we're being rescued. She's *very* wrong. But she doesn't know what a true monster this man is.

"I know all about you, Mattie, about you *and* Tina. It took me a long time and a lot of resources, but it was always just a matter of time before I found you."

“I don’t understand,” Mattie says. Fear comes through her voice again as she realizes he’s standing there, not moving to help her. She looks toward the door he came through as if searching for men to come rushing in, but no one comes. She’s starting to realize no one’s coming to rescue us.

“Your mother here did a really good job of trying to hide you, but I’m too powerful to leave any loose ends behind. She was locked away and I tried to have her taken care of then, but people can’t do their jobs like they used to. Normally, when you want someone gone, they’re gone without a trace left behind. Then your mother got out and disappeared quite well. It’s taken me a long time to hunt both of you down,” VP Branson says, clearly gloating at how smart he thinks he is.

“Why do we matter?” Mattie asks.

“Because loose ends have to be killed,” he conversationally says.

“And you’re risking everything to do it yourself?” I ask. I know what a depraved monster he is, but this still shocks me.

“I wanted to make sure with my own eyes that it was done. Everyone else has already been taken care of. The best has been saved for last,” he says, focusing on me again.

“How can you want to kill your own flesh and blood?” I ask.

Mattie gasps in horror. She looks from him to me and back to him. She’s confused and looks so broken, it takes my breath away. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. I never should’ve come to Oregon. If I’d have known it would put Mattie in

danger I wouldn't have. I just wanted to know my daughter. I had no idea it would lead this monster straight to her.

“She means nothing to me, Tina, as you don't. You were a great time, and I was sorry to see you go, but all good things eventually come to an end.”

He then moves over to Mattie and runs his hand across her face, nearly making me throw up.

“Don't touch her, you disgusting pig,” I shout as I shake my chair, trying to get free.

“I get to do whatever I want, whenever I want to do it,” he says with a smirk before running Mattie's hair between his fingers.

“She's *your* daughter,” I remind him. He has no rights to her, all he did was force the sperm inside me that created her, but for him to creepily touch his own flesh and blood is going too far for a monster like him.

“She's not my daughter. I have my required children that look good for photo ops. She's just a mistake. It doesn't mean she's not a pretty mistake,” he says, keeping his hands on her, making me scream. Mattie's gone quiet and incredibly pale as she looks at the vice president of the United States in utter terror.

“Where's my mother?” I demand of him.

He laughs, looking as if he's enjoying himself. “Your mother wouldn't dare come here. The wife of the vice president has far more important things to do than visit ghosts.”

“She can’t be okay with you killing me and her granddaughter.” I know it’s foolish, but I’m hoping my mother has one ounce of motherly love inside her.

He laughs again. “She wants you both gone even more than I do as you’re a stain on her otherwise perfect life. Don’t you know the story of how you were conceived?” he asks.

I give him a blank look. “What are you talking about?”

He laughs harder as he touches Mattie again, standing way too close to her. “Oh, the things you don’t know, Tina, that involve you and Mattie. I guess you’ll go to your grave never knowing.” He bends and looks as if he’s sniffing Mattie’s hair, and I forget all about my mother.

“Please don’t touch her,” I say, not above begging. I’ll degrade myself for my daughter. I’ll do anything it takes to try and protect her.

“I don’t have a lot of time, so we’re going to have to get down to business right away,” he says as he shifts to the side of Mattie. “Where’s the evidence you’ve threatened me with?”

“I’m not giving it to you,” I tell him. “When I die it will come out and even you won’t be able to deny the truth.”

He doesn’t look at all fazed. “I have men who are very good at extracting information. They like doing it. You’ll be missing chunks of flesh, but you’ll eventually talk. Everyone does,” he tells me while rubbing Mattie’s shoulders. I can’t keep the bile in anymore, and turn as I empty my stomach. He gives me a disgusted glance.

He grabs Mattie’s chair and pulls them both back from me a few more feet. I shake as I look at the two of them.

“No,” I say. He only knows me as a fourteen-year-old scared child he tortured, raped, and did horrific things to that no human should want to do to another individual. He doesn’t know the woman I am now.

“Come on, Tina, you know this is over,” he says.

“You can do what you want to me. I’ve already been tortured to the brink of death, it’s nothing new. There’s nothing new you can do,” I say in a defeated voice.

He seems thoughtful for a moment, then smiles as he moves in front of Mattie, his back to me. He reaches down and Mattie screams as a snapping sound echoes in the room. The bastard turns her chair and smiles as he shows me her broken wrist.

“I might not be able to torture you, but can you handle watching as I torture her?” he asks. Mattie is weeping in pain and fear, and I struggle more to get free of the chair. He’s right, I can’t handle this.

He lifts his hand, his eyes on me the entire time before he slaps Mattie, his smile growing wider as he turns to gaze at my daughter.

“No!” I scream. “Fine, you win. I’ll give you everything.” I’m sobbing so hard I can barely get the words from my throat. I know he’s not bluffing. He’s a monster unlike any that have come before him. The twisted things he did to me still haunt me. He’d have no problem doing the same to Mattie. He doesn’t care that she’s his daughter.

“Don’t give it to him, Cass, he’ll still hurt us,” Mattie cries.

“No, let her go and it’s all yours,” I tell him. I know Mattie’s right. I know he’ll kill us both after putting us through unimaginable torture if I don’t get her out of here, but maybe he’ll make it fast if he gets what he wants.

“This isn’t a negotiation, Tina, this is you giving me what I want,” he says, not at all fazed by the pain he’s causing.

“Just let her go, and you can do what you want with me. Please let her go,” I beg.

He throws his head back and laughs. “I always get what I want. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

“He won’t pay if you give him what he wants,” Mattie says. I look into her eyes and see pain and fear, but strength as well. She knows the danger she’s in, knows she’s most likely going to die, and she’s being so damn brave in her final moments. I hurt that I missed out on her life, and that we’ll never have a chance to know each other, but I hurt even more that she’s having her innocence destroyed in her last moments.

“Mattie, if it saves you pain, I’ll give him whatever he wants.”

“Don’t you get it, Cass? It doesn’t matter. We’re gone. He’s going to kill us. If you give him what he wants, he gets away with it. He can do what he wants now, but at least he’ll pay later,” she says. She’s so damn brave in the face of all of this. I can’t believe I’ll never get to truly know her. No one realizes the true depravity of some people until it’s too late.

He grabs Mattie’s hair and pulls it so hard it makes her yelp again.

“You’re a smart little girl. It’s too bad you have to die. Maybe I’ll keep you stored away for a while first. I don’t get fighters too often.” He slaps her again, this time so hard the sound echoes through the room. Mattie groans as her eyes flutter. The hit nearly knocked her out.

“Will you swear to stop touching her?” I ask, unable to stop tears from flowing down my cheeks.

“I’ll promise to make it a quick death. I can’t leave witnesses,” he says as he looks at Mattie again with wicked hunger in his gaze.

“Fine,” I say.

He leaves Mattie with what looks like reluctance and walks back to me.

“Don’t do it, Cass,” she begs. I want to give her what she wants, but I can’t sit here and watch her get tortured. He has no honor, but maybe he’ll simply kill us if he has what he wants. We’re too much work to keep around. The thought of locking her up for years, abusing her over and over again, is too much for me to handle.

“You won’t touch her again?”

“I won’t touch her again,” he says.

“Please let her go. She won’t say anything,” I try one more time. He laughs.

“That’s a no-go,” he says. “I’m out of patience. Give it to me now, or I don’t stop this time.” He takes a step away from me like he’s going to go back to my daughter.

“Untie me at least.” He laughs at this and utter defeat fills me.

“Okay,” I say. I take a breath. I give him the name of the attorney who’s to send the letters and videos out to every news outlet in the country if I don’t check in with him at six every Wednesday night. When I’m finished, I hang my head in shame. I might’ve just killed the wonderful man who agreed to help me. I can’t help it though. I have to try to save my daughter above everyone else.

“You do realize if I check on this and it’s fake it will be so much worse for her?” He smiles as if this is just another task on his to do list.

“It’s the truth,” I tell him. He’s defeated me. He wasn’t able to do it fourteen years ago while he tortured me again and again, but he’s finally done it by having my daughter in the room.

He smiles as he kneels down, coming close to my face, victory in his eyes.

“You should’ve listened to our daughter,” he whispers. “I don’t care about lying. Hell, I’m very good at it, good enough to make it to be the vice president of the United States ... and soon president as soon as the current one has a little accident. I was just a lowly senator when I had my fun with you. Now I have all of the law enforcement agencies under my thumb. I can do whatever I want whenever I want. Right now what I want is to have fun with Mattie. It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to play with such a scrumptious young thing. With so many eyes on me at all times, I have to be more careful now.

It's not impossible to get my needs met, but it's certainly harder now."

He stands up and starts moving over to Mattie again. He immediately kicks her chair over and her body slams against the ground, her head hitting hard, and knocking her out. He starts untying her from the chair as I scream so hard and loud I'm sure I'm waking the dead.

I knock my chair over as I try to struggle free. He's really going to do this, he's going to rape his own daughter. It's so beyond comprehension for me I can't even fathom it ... even after all I've seen and been through. There really isn't a place too far for these monsters to go.

I try scooting my way to them, not knowing what I can do, but not willing to sit back and watch this happen. Before I can move even a few inches, the doors burst open ...

Chapter Thirty-Eight

I wonder if I passed out and am now dreaming. I'm still in the same warehouse, but I see Greyson, all in black, carrying a gun, with a dozen armed men behind him, rushing into the room. I shake my head, trying to figure out if this is a vision of what I want to see, or if it's reality.

VP Branson looks up, annoyance on his face. "I said there are to be no interruptions under no circumstances," he thunders as he rises to his feet.

More and more men enter the room. There have to be fifty of them, all armed, all staring at Branson with varying looks of disgust, sadness, and horror. Some even look pleased. I don't understand what's happening.

"Mr. Branson, you're under arrest," Greyson says. I'm shocked as I watch him flash a CIA badge. What in the world is happening?

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Branson thunders. He turns to another of the men. "Arrest this agent right now," he demands.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's not going to happen. This room is under surveillance. Everything you've just said was recorded. You *are* under arrest," another man says as the men move closer to Branson.

For the first time, I see fear on Branson's face. He takes a step back. He seems to realize he's done for, but he still stands his ground.

"You can't arrest me. I'm the vice president of the United States," he roars.

"Sir, you've been under investigation for a while now," Greyson says, murder in his eyes.

"This is bullshit, *you* work for *me*. You're the one assigned to track Tina," he shouts.

"Those *were* the orders. I received other orders after yours were given. This entire operation has been about investigating you. We've had Cassandra, who you call Tina, watched for two years now, trying to figure out if she was the one. We weren't sure. We only knew if she was the one you were looking for, you'd come, and we'd have you." He looks at me apologetically as he says this, then turns back to the other men. "Take him," he finishes.

I watch in shock as the men surround Branson. He's now the one in handcuffs. Another man rushes to Mattie while Greyson comes to me. Branson is taken from the room, screaming that they're all going to pay for this treason.

Greyson begins undoing my binds. I look at Mattie, who's now being placed on a stretcher that was rushed into the room. My daughter's going to be fine. She'll hate me for the rest of her life, but she's going to be fine. I sob as Greyson undoes my hands. They ache as blood rushes back into my fingers.

He isn't saying a word as he removes the bindings on my legs. When he's finished, I sit on the floor in shock as he

kneels in front of me.

“I’m so sorry, Cass,” he tells me. I see pain in his eyes. I can’t process all that’s happened in this last few hours.

“I was bait?” I say.

He’s ashamed as he nods. “We had to make sure it was you, but that was the plan,” he admits. I think about this for several moments. It makes sense. If they’re going after someone as powerful as the vice president, they’d need to do all they could to take him down. I’d have done the same in their position. It still hurts that Greyson was involved in all of this. My heart’s breaking.

“I don’t know who you are,” I say. There are no more tears. I’m very aware I’m in shock, but I still can’t compute all of this. Is it over? Will I no longer have to live in fear?

“I know. I couldn’t tell you what was happening,” he says, his voice filled with regret.

“Were you supposed to sleep with me to get close to me?” That hurts more than anything else.

“No!” he says with vehemence. “They wanted to pull me from the case because I got too close to you. Everything that happened between us was real ... it’s still real. I was going to tell you. That’s why I came to the store today. I couldn’t stand the lie between us any longer.”

“I don’t believe you. I was nothing more than a great screw along the way to you getting your man.” I manage to take all emotion from my voice.

I’m very aware that Mattie has been taken from the room. It kills me I can’t go with her, and I can’t talk to her. What is she

thinking of me right now? Pain unlike any before engulfs me.

“Agent River, we need to transport her to the hospital,” a man says.

Greyson nods, looking defeated. They place me on a stretcher. It’s not necessary but if it gets me out of here, I’ll allow them to do it. Besides, it will put me closer to Mattie. Before they take me out I look at Greyson for a final time.

“You got your man. I’m glad. I’ll forever be thankful to you for that. But it’s over between us, I don’t ever want to see you again.”

He looks like I slapped him as I’m wheeled away. I turn my head, unable to keep looking at the man I was desperately falling for. How can things go so very wrong on the same day I had hoped for something more? How can I go from wanting to profess my feelings to a man to never wanting to see him again? Maybe because my life has never been my own.

I was controlled by my parents and the monsters they sold me to for my early years and the juvie system for four years. I was on the run for the past ten years. I’ve never been free. I’m not sure what I will do now that I am ... or soon will be.

I don’t say a word as they place me in an ambulance and check for injuries. Bandages are put on my wrists and ankles, and I’m numb as we near the hospital. Once inside, I give yes and no answers as the medical staff ask me questions. I sigh with relief when I’m finally alone.

Noises surround me in the busy ER, only curtains separate me from other patients. I can tell Mattie’s in the space next to me. Evidently she’s alone as well. I slowly rise, the gown they

placed me in not much protection. But I don't care. I step to the curtain door and look out where several agents stand guard. I wonder if Branson's here too. I doubt it.

The man closest to my area looks at me and nods. I nod back then move to the partially open curtain and see Mattie. She's lying in bed facing the wall. I step in with her. She turns and gazes at me but I can't read her expression.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," I tell her.

Tears appear in her eyes, but she blinks them away. She doesn't demand I leave so I take a chair next to her.

"My parents abused me from the time I was little. They did horrific things to me and then passed me along to their friends. One of those friends was a senator at the time, Senator Branson, who's now the vice president. I killed my father when I couldn't take it anymore and I was taken to juvie. At juvie they discovered I was a pregnant fourteen-year-old. As soon as I knew I was pregnant, everything in me shifted to protecting you. I wanted to die before I found out I was pregnant, and then I knew I had to keep you safe, I had to make sure you'd never be abused like I'd been." I stop and wipe away tears. Mattie isn't looking at me, but she seems to be listening to what I say. It's all I can ask for.

"I refused to tell them who'd been abusing me because I knew how powerful these men were. I knew they'd make me, and you, disappear, so I made a plea deal and asked that they didn't let anyone know I was pregnant. I was foolish to think I could keep it from Branson. He'd claimed me for that last year so he'd know you were his. He also wouldn't want anyone to find out. I had you while I was still in detention, but I got to

spend two precious days with you in the hospital. I vowed I'd find you again. It took me a long time. I just wanted to know you were okay. That's why I moved to Ravish. I didn't want to upset your life or take you from your mom. I only wanted to know you. Wanting that nearly got you killed, and I'll never forgive myself." I stop again, sobbing as I sit next to my daughter, desperately wanting to touch her. I clench my fingers to keep from doing that. I don't think she wants my touch right now.

"What do you want from me?" Mattie asks. It's a start. She finally looks me in the eyes.

"I want to be your friend. I want to know you," I say.

She looks broken, which breaks me even more. She turns away and stares at the wall for several heart-stopping moments. I wait. I can't pressure her. I don't have the right. So much time passes that I wonder if she's going to say another word. She has every right to send me away. I've done nothing but cause her pain.

"I need time," she finally says.

I want to crumple on the floor in relief. It's not a yes, but it's not a closed door. There's a chance she'll talk to me. Maybe, just maybe, I'll get to know my daughter. Even if we don't have a normal relationship, maybe we can have *something*. That's more than I hoped and prayed to have.

"Take all the time you want." I lift my hand to touch hers, but she pulls farther away. I try not to let it hurt me. She's only fourteen and has been through too much already. She's the same age as I was when I brought her into this world.

“I want to be alone,” she tells me.

“I understand,” I say. I look at her one more time before I move back to my area. I sit down on the bed, then curl up and let silent tears fall. She didn’t say no, she simply said she needs time. She deserves all of the time she wants.

An hour passes before I hear commotion in the hallway. I tense, though I’m pretty sure I’m safe now. I’ll probably tense in unfamiliar situations for the rest of my life. I don’t know if I’ll ever truly feel safe. It’s so much worse right now with Mattie so close yet so far away.

“Mattie,” a voice cries.

“Mama,” Mattie replies, then there’s loud sobbing as mother and daughter reunite. More tears fall. Mattie has a mother who loves her as much as I do. The difference is her mother has protected her for her entire life. I wasn’t able to do the same for her ... I almost got her killed.

I can’t stand being here anymore. I find the bag with my clothes and get dressed, ignoring the smell of puke on them. I walk out of the room and see the agents.

“Am I allowed to leave?”

“You’re not under arrest, we’re here for your protection,” the man says in a kind voice.

“Thank you,” I say, and turn to walk away with no one stopping me.

It takes a little while to find a car service willing to take me all of the way back to Ravish, but eventually an Uber accepts. It costs two hundred dollars, but I don’t care. All I want is my tiny home. I need to curl up and sleep for about a month. I

hold my emotions in for the entire ride, grateful not to get a chatty driver.

I'm so exhausted by the time I hit my bed, I barely make it to my pillow before falling into blissful darkness.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

A week has passed since my life came to an ultimate crescendo. So much changed that I still can't process it all. Three different agents have interviewed me. I've told my story over and over again. With a case this prominent they need to make sure the facts are all in order. I have to give them credit for keeping things under wraps.

The entire world was shocked when it was announced Vice President Branson was arrested. It's been non-stop coverage for seven days in a row. Nothing like this has happened in the history of the United States and people aren't sure how to deal with it. A part of me is still afraid he's going to get out of this. He's managed to keep himself out of trouble for a long time. No one even knows where he's being held.

I go to work each day and fake a smile. Mattie's no longer working at the bookstore and I ache to see her. I also know she asked for time, and I'll give her all she wants. I didn't get to watch her grow up, but I've had a few months to work with her and see her laugh. We were getting close.

I know how she must be feeling right now, knowing she's been lied to, knowing that the person who gave her up is now in her life. She can't comprehend how much I didn't want to let her go. She can't come close to understanding what all happened to me. I don't want her to. If she knows, her innocence is forever shattered.

As it is, she'll be traumatized for life, knowing what her biological father was willing to do to her. It's hard to imagine how monstrous some humans can be. For the most part people are inherently good. It's those few bad ones who give us nightmares.

Though no one in the town knows what happened to me or knows my past, they can see that Greyson's gone and Mattie isn't working for me anymore. I have lots of offers of help and many pitying looks. They most likely think it's over a breakup. I'd rather they think that. I don't want them to know I have a connection with the news cycle about Vice President Branson.

I keep promising my friends and customers I'm okay. They nod but don't look convinced. Will I have to leave this place I love? I will if Mattie needs me to. Her happiness means much more to me than my own. I realize it's selfish but I don't want to go. I love Ravish. I feel safe here. I have friends. None of that matters more than my daughter's happiness though.

Yes, I was taken from Ravish, but it wouldn't have mattered where I was. He was the vice president. There was nowhere I could truly hide from him when he wanted me found.

For now, I'll let more time pass and keep pasting a smile on my face that I don't feel. I've done this before. I've spent a lot of time faking it until I make it. I can do it again. Unless Mattie tells me to go away, I have a glimmer of hope that we'll have some sort of relationship.

I refuse to think about Greyson, though he creeps in as soon as I let down my defenses. I miss him and that frustrates me. He isn't who I thought he was. Then again, who did I think *he* was? I never really knew the man. I knew the chemistry

between us, and I knew he wanted me, but I didn't know *him*. He was sent to keep an eye on me. Was any of it real on his side?

That's a road I can't afford to go down. I have far more important matters to deal with. He's just a man in a long line of men who took what they wanted from me. He's not special, he's nobody important. I'll forget about him just as I've forgotten about all of the rest of them who have come and gone.

My heart calls me a liar on this. What good does my heart do me? It's caused me nothing but pain in my life so far. I didn't think I'd ever be capable of falling for a man, but somehow Greyson snuck beneath my defenses. Somehow he found a place in my heart that allowed him to slip in.

I can push him out much easier than I allowed him in. I won't make that mistake again. I'll never be hurt by someone again. I'll live the best life I can, taking each day as it comes, just as I've always done.

Fortunately a group of customers come into the store, forcing me to get out of my head. If I keep thinking about this, all it does is hurt me more. I paste my fake smile on my face, then gladly take coffee orders as my customers excitedly talk about the newest and greatest books they want.

Today is a new day. Tomorrow will be another. Every person has to learn to crawl before they walk, and everyone deals with difficult times in their lives in different ways. Who's to say my life is any more difficult than someone else's? I experienced life differently than the majority of the

population. It doesn't make me unique or special. It just makes me ... well, it makes me, me.

Chapter Forty

Greyson

Mattie is skipping rocks at the river. She looks so young and innocent. Who would ever guess she was attacked, nearly killed, and worse by her biological father, the vice president of the United States, only a month earlier? Of all of the monsters in this world, I still have a hard time believing it. Those who have no idea of the amount of power some people have, can't imagine what happens right in front of them.

Most people believe others are inherently good. I hate knowing how wrong that is. When humans go to the dark side, they go all the way. It sucks to watch it for so long. It's made me a little too cynical.

I move down the path and stop next to Mattie. She tenses before realizing it's me. I hate that she'll fear strangers for the rest of her life. I hate that her innocence was stolen from her a month ago. Once it's taken, a child never gets it back. There's only a short window for children to be carefree and innocent before the real world comes crashing in on them. It's supposed to be adults' job to ensure it lasts as long as possible. We failed Mattie.

“What are you doing here?” she asks as she throws another rock.

“I wanted to check on you.”

“Why? Several men came and talked to me. I’ve told my story dozens of times now. My mom told the last guy to take a hike.”

“You have a very good mom,” I tell her, meaning it.

“I do,” she says defensively.

I give her a smile. “No one will take you from the only home you’ve ever known,” I promise.

She sighs, her defenses coming back down as soon as they went up.

“I’m confused,” she admits.

“I’m sure you are. You’re young, Mattie, and a lot has been thrown at you in a very short time.” I bend and pick up a few rocks and start sliding them across the water with her. I’ve done it many times before as it’s oddly soothing.

“I haven’t talked to Cass since everything happened. I want to, but I don’t understand all of this,” she admits.

“No one can expect you to understand,” I tell her. She obviously needs to talk. Maybe this was the perfect time to show up.

“I feel bad that I quit my job and left her alone,” she says.

“You seemed to really love that job,” I say.

“I loved every minute of it,” she tells me with a little excitement in her voice. “But it would be weird going there now.”

“How much do you know about your ... um ... Cass?” I ask.

She gives me a bit of a glare as I almost slip and call Cass her mother. “She told me that horrible man was the one who got her pregnant, that she killed her dad, and she had me while in juvie, and I was taken away,” she says, tears appearing in her eyes.

“All mothers want to protect their children. It’s built into them. Some can’t because they aren’t physically able to, and some aren’t mentally able. Some get into bad situations, and others have their own reasons, but I believe it’s burned into our DNA to take care of our children ... unless there’s something broken in a person like there is in Branson. He’s just plain and simply a monster. I don’t think it’s a mental illness. He doesn’t get off that easily. He’s scum and he’s going to pay for his crimes. It doesn’t take back what he did, but at least victims like you and Cass will get some peace knowing he’s gone forever.”

“Do you think she wanted to keep me?” she quietly asks.

“I believe she wanted you with every fiber of her being. She has one image of you. It’s from an ultrasound they gave her. It’s framed in her house. I knew immediately what it was, but I never brought it up to her. The second time I went to her place it was hidden behind a book, so I believe she thinks she kept it hidden from me. She doesn’t talk to anyone about her past. That’s not good for her, because she can never truly heal if she doesn’t have someone she can talk to about what was done to her. She spent every available minute she had devoted to finding you. And I believe she loved you enough to find you and try not to upset your world. She told me more than once what a great kid you are, and how she’s so happy you have a

loving mother. You might be the only person in this world Cassandra loves.”

There are tears falling down Mattie’s cheeks now. I want to comfort her, but I keep my hands to myself. After the attack from Branson, she’s probably going to be jumpy for a while with men coming too close to her.

“I don’t know what to do,” she says again with more tears falling.

“You don’t have to decide immediately. I do think you’d feel much better if you talked to her though. I think both of you need it. You’re too young to hear all of the details of the pure hell she suffered, but trust me, it’s beyond any of our imaginations to think so many horrible men can do such violent acts to a child. She was your age when she snapped, when she had enough. It had been happening to her from at least the age of five. I’m sure there was abuse before that as well.”

Mattie continues to cry next to me, but we both keep on skipping rocks. I let her process my words as I stand two feet from her and enjoy the sound of rocks splashing on the water. I feel sorry for those people who never get to enjoy something as simple as sitting or standing by a fresh body of water. There’s nothing as pure as being in nature.

“Are you hungry?” she asks after another few minutes pass.

“I could eat something,” I say. She gives me a semblance of a smile as she turns and walks over to where her backpack is. She pulls out a sandwich and a bag of chips. She tears the sandwich in half and hands it to me. I hate taking food from a

kid but I also understand this is a peace offering so I accept my half and take a bite. It's delicious.

"I haven't had peanut butter and jelly in a long time," I tell her. "This is terrific."

"My mom and I pick the berries and make jam. I hate the store stuff now."

"Your mom has real talent," I tell her. We finish our sandwich then she holds the chip bag out to me and I pull out a handful. The crunching of the chips seems extra loud in this peaceful setting.

She starts talking about school and her classes and I listen. We talk nonsense for about an hour. If she's not asking me to leave, I'm not willing to go anywhere. She needs this as much, if not more, than I do. Maybe it's the connection we both have to Cass. Maybe since we can't see Cassandra, we need to spend a little time together. I'm sure she misses her as much as I do. It's hard to comprehend how either of us is feeling.

"Have you talked to Cass?" she asks.

I don't know why, but I haven't been expecting this.

"No, I haven't, why?"

She gives me a look that only a teenager can perfect, one that calls me an idiot and more. It almost makes me laugh. I haven't received a look like that in a very long time.

"Because you love her," she says.

"No, I respect her, and I like her, but it's not love," I tell her, feeling my heartrate pick up. I don't believe in love, but

I'm not going to say that to this vulnerable child. She rolls her eyes at me.

“Yes, you do,” she argues. “It was clear to see every time you came to the store. You looked at her like she was the only person in the room.”

“Do you learn this stuff from those romance books in the store?” I ask, trying to make a joke. She's too smart for me to sidetrack her though.

“Yes, I learn it from books, from when I could watch my mom and dad, from watching other couples. I learn it from movies. Just because I'm a teenager doesn't mean I don't know about love. Everyone says teens don't comprehend love, but that's idiotic. We understand it more than adults as we aren't so skewed, just like I've said a thousand times to lots of people,” she informs me.

“Well, Cass and I were in a high-stress environment from the moment we met. I had a job I was doing that I was hiding from her, and she had secrets she didn't know I was aware of. It's really difficult to know what feelings are real when people are placed in these situations,” I explain.

Mattie thinks about my words for a few minutes then smirks. “You can tell yourself that all day long, but if it was only a job for you, you wouldn't be here now trying to make me understand her, trying to have me see her. You wouldn't want me to know my mother.” Her eyes widen as she says this. It was a slip. She must be thinking of her as a mother, which probably also fills her with guilt since she's been raised by a woman worthy of being called Mom. I don't know what it's like for her, but I can still understand confusion and pain.

“You know, it’s okay to have two moms. You can even love them both the same. Or you can love one more than the other. No one can tell you how to feel about someone. We also can’t control how we feel about others. If we love them, we love them,” I tell her.

“Are you the pot or the kettle? You say you don’t love her, but I think you do. How can you give me advice on what I’m feeling when you don’t understand what you’re feeling?” she wisely asks.

I sigh. I’m a CIA agent getting bested by a teenager. Maybe it really is time I turn in the badge. I’ve been thinking of doing that for a long time now.

“You might have a point there,” I admit. “It’s never a bad thing to do some serious self-reflection.”

“I want to see the vice president,” she says, totally knocking me for a loop. I wasn’t expecting this at all.

“Why?”

“He said there was more information he had. I’m not sure I need to hear it as much as Cass does, but he’s still the man who was supposed to be my father and I want to look in his smug face and punch him back like he did to me. I owe it to him.”

“I don’t think I can make that happen,” I say, treading carefully. I’d love to help her get some revenge on the monster who hurt her.

“You can make it happen. I have faith in you. I think maybe Cass and I both need to see him, to look him in the face. With him chained up and unable to hurt either of us anymore,

maybe the nightmares will stop. I think I need to see him looking weak and maybe give him a black eye or two.”

“How are you only fourteen?”

“I’ve always been told I’m much wiser than my age,” she says with a shrug. This makes me laugh.

“Whoever tells you that isn’t lying,” I tell her.

“Will you make it happen?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I tell her. She gives me a smile, then shocks me again as she bumps her shoulder against me. It’s not a hug but it’s contact and I know that’s a huge step for her.

We sit together for another half hour before she says she needs to get home. We walk up the path together then go our separate ways. I look in the direction of the bookstore and everything within me wants to go there. I can’t though. I know I can’t. I hang my head as I move in the opposite direction toward my vehicle. Once again, I’ll drive away from the woman I want nothing more than to run straight to.

I don’t think there are enough therapists in the world to tell me what’s wrong with me. Maybe the truth is we’re all screwed up humans and some of us just handle our insanity better than others.

Chapter Forty-One

My stomach turns as I sit back in a chair. It's early and I feel terrible. I should push opening time back since I don't have too many early morning customers. But these are my hours and I've been too consumed with everything else in my life to change the times.

The bell on the door rings and I groan. I don't want to be perky yet. This cinches it, I'm changing the hours to open at ten instead of eight. I'm always much happier by ten in the morning.

"Hi, Cass." It's amazing how two little words can accelerate a heartbeat and nearly make a person faint. I try to remain calm as I turn and see Mattie standing in front of me. She looks nervous but determined.

"Hi, Mattie," I quietly reply.

"Can I sit?"

"Of course," I say. She walks to the chair across from me, takes a seat, and looks at the floor. I devour her with my gaze, looking her all over to make sure she's fine. Lisha has been a doll and talks about all of her friends, including Mattie, saying she's doing good and her wrist is healing fast, but that she misses having her at the store. At least with Lisha here I've been able to know how Mattie is. It still isn't the same as getting to see her myself.

“I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to come see you,” she tells me, finally looking up and meeting my gaze.

“You haven’t taken too long. You have every right to take all of the time you need.” I’m just grateful to have her here with me now, but I’m also terrified she’s going to tell me she’s made a decision and never wants to see me again. I don’t think my fragile heart can handle that. I also don’t have the right to beg her not to shun me.

“You look scared so let me start with saying I want to get to know you,” she says, tears shining in her eyes.

With that one sentence I lose it and tears not only fill my eyes but slip down my face before I have even a small chance of stopping them. This makes her eyes spill over too. She quickly wipes them away.

“I’d love to get to know you too. You’re remarkable and talented and beautiful. You’re everything a parent could ever dream of having in a child. I’m not trying to say I’m your parent. You have a wonderful mother, I’m just saying you’re a dream child. I want to know anything you’re willing to tell me.” I’m blabbering and talking too fast, but I’m excited and scared and I can’t seem to stop myself.

“It’s okay, a very good person told me I can have two mothers. It feels weird to call you Mom, so I’d rather call you Cass, but I’m coming to accept that you *are* my mother. I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t given birth to me. I’m glad you chose to give me life, and I’m glad my mom adopted me and loved me and raised me. I think I can have you both.”

“I should’ve tried so much harder to keep you but they wouldn’t let me.”

“I can’t imagine how sad and scared you must’ve been. I tried picturing myself pregnant right now, and it doesn’t even compute. I still sleep with stuffed animals in my bed. I’m very sorry people hurt you and took away your youth, took away your baby. I can’t pretend to try to understand how much your life must’ve hurt.”

“None of that matters because you’re here and you’re amazing. I tried for a long time to forget about my past, but coming here actually made that happen for the first time. It feels like home, like my past doesn’t affect me so much. I feel like I have friends and family. This is an amazing community,” I tell her.

“I have to admit I’ve complained a few times about there not being much to do here, but after all of that drama with you know who, I’m a little more grateful to live here. Sure, they took me from here, but if I lived in a big city, I’d be scared to walk around alone. I don’t like people getting too close to me at the moment,” she admits.

“I’m so sorry about that,” I say, desperately wanting to reach out and comfort her. I clasp my hands together to keep from doing just that.

“Do you want to work here again?” I ask when a bit of silence goes between us.

“I love working here,” she says with some hesitation in her voice. I smile at this beautiful child I created. It boggles my mind that this perfection can come from such an evil act.

“There’s no pressure at all, Mattie, none. You can work here and keep to yourself. You can set the pace on how much we talk. I want it to be easy for you. Just knowing you’re okay

and getting to see you fills me with so much peace, I don't need much else in life."

She gives me a slightly bigger grin. "You do know I'm a teenager and teens are good at getting our way. You don't want to give me too much power," she says with a laugh that's the most beautiful sound in the world.

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind, but remember I'm fragile right now, and you can pretty much get anything you want out of me."

We're finally getting to talk about real things after fourteen years. Even though my heart's been heavy for a very long time and there's still a lot of things I can't control in my life, this is one of the best moments I've ever had.

"I think we're both going to be fragile for a while," she admits. She then stands and moves into the chair next to me and reaches out.

My hand's shaking as I lift it and clasp her fingers. I start crying all over again. She looks up at the Super Woman Barbie on the shelf then back at me again.

"You've been a hero a lot in your life. Amazingly, you have a kind, loving heart with all that's happened to you. I'd be a fool to not want to know you more."

"Oh, Mattie," I say, crying even harder now. "I'm so sorry. It's just that I thought I might never get to see you again, that you'd ask me to leave. I'd do anything you asked of me, but it would've killed me. This is so much more than I dared to dream."

She stands up, her hand still in mine, and tugs. I rise to my feet and she wraps her arms around me. I shake as I hold her close to me, hugging my daughter. I don't ever want to let her go. When she finally pulls away her face is as big a mess as mine.

"I really do want to get to know your mother if she'll let me. She's done a fine job of raising you, and I appreciate her more than words can say. I prayed you'd go to a good home where nobody would hurt you, and it's clear that's exactly what happened."

"She wants to know you too. She encouraged me to talk to you. She said it breaks her heart all you've gone through and she thinks it's amazing how hard you fought to find me. She said it's because of you she was blessed to finally get her miracle child."

"This is so much more than I could ever hope for. You really did win the jackpot on parents. I'm grateful you have her."

"Me too," Mattie says. She then wipes her eyes again. "I'm going to use the bathroom and clean myself up." I nod as she walks away.

I go behind the coffee counter and grab some towels and try to clean my own face. About five minutes pass before Mattie comes out looking shocked. I'm immediately concerned.

"What's wrong?" I ask. I'm not sure I can handle another attack right now. I look around for monsters with guns coming for us. Nobody is here.

She holds up the pregnancy test I forgot about. My face washes of color. Will she hate me now? Will she run away? Why didn't I throw that thing out? Probably because I'm still in shock from the results I just got this morning.

"Are you pregnant?" she asks quietly.

I swallow. "I haven't felt good for a while so I took the test. It came out positive, but I have to go to the doctor to confirm." There's no way I'm going to lie to her. We're so fragile, I'm afraid the smallest incident can rip her right back out of my life.

"How do you feel about it?" she asks. She moves to the coffee counter and sits, placing the test between us like a flashing beacon.

"I'm not sure yet. I guess scared is the top emotion," I admit.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

Now I'm confused. "What do you mean?"

"Do you want the baby?"

My hand automatically goes to my stomach. "I wasn't trying to have another baby. Losing you still hurts fourteen years later, but if I'm pregnant, I'll make sure no one comes in this time and takes my child from my sobbing arms."

She looks at me with sadness. "Is that what happened with me? Did they rip me away from you?"

I nod. "The doctor and nurse made up some stuff that allowed me to be with you for two full days in the hospital. When they couldn't keep us in the hospital any longer, social

services came in with officers and pulled you out of my arms. I wanted to fight them, but I wasn't taking a chance of something happening to you in the struggle. I've never cried so hard or for so long."

She looks down for a moment before her gaze comes back to mine. "That's saying something with all you went through."

"That's not at all what I meant," I tell her. "It's impossible to describe what I felt. You were mine for nine months in my belly. I felt you grow with each passing day. I felt you kick me and turn in my body. You were mine and mine alone ... and then you were gone. It was like losing an essential part of me I couldn't survive without."

"Well, you might have a chance to have a redo," she says as she looks at the test.

I reach across the counter and put my hand over hers. "Even if I am pregnant and have another child, that doesn't take away even a smidgeon of the love I feel for you, Mattie. No one and nothing can replace you. You might have another mother, but I have one daughter right now, one beautiful child I adore. I could have ten more children, but you'll always be my first. You'll always be the reason I survived when I didn't want to live anymore."

She gives me a wobbly smile. "It's kind of strange, but I'm a little jealous," she says.

"Oh, sweetie, I promise you have nothing to be jealous about."

"I am a teenager and we do have weird emotions," she points out, making me laugh through my tears.

“That’s for sure.”

“Are you going to call Greyson?” My heart skips a few beats at this question. I shake my head.

“No, this isn’t his baby.”

She narrows her eyes. “Then who’s is it?”

I smile. “It’s mine,” I tell her.

“You aren’t the Virgin Mary,” she points out.

This makes me laugh. It’s amazing that I can laugh and cry at the same time, that I can feel so much joy, sadness, and fear in the same minute.

“What I mean is no one will ever take a child from me again. I’m the one growing this baby if I am pregnant. Greyson’s gone, and I’m not willing to share custody.” I grow fiercer as I speak.

“He *is* CIA. I think he’ll figure it out if you’re pregnant,” she tells me.

“Well then, I better be careful.”

“I think you should tell him, but I understand why you’re scared. Do you want me to go to the doctor with you?”

And just like that I’m sobbing again. “I’d love for you to come to the doctor with me.”

Mattie stays with me for couple of hours and even though I’m an absolute hormonal mess, it’s pure heaven visiting with my daughter. This road we’re taking together will work out. We’re going to be just fine. We might hit some obstacles along the road, but I think we’ve gotten through the worst of it. I might just have all I’ve ever wanted ... and so much more. I

try not to be filled with too much hope, but I can't help it, I *am* hopeful.

My daughter wants to build a relationship and maybe, just maybe, I'm going to have another child in my life. I'm in no way prepared for that, but it doesn't matter, I'll make it work. This is simply the next chapter in my life.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mattie and I sit in my house wondering what in the world is going on. Two months have passed since that day I took the pregnancy test and Mattie came to me saying she wants to try. That was the best day of my life. From that moment on, Mattie and I have built a real relationship. Not only have we begun bonding in a way that assures me we're going to be okay, but I've visited with her mother, who's an incredible woman. We talked about our lives and how we can be friends.

I'm thankful to the DA who told me he'd personally make sure Mattie went to a good home. He did good — he did *really* good. My daughter's lucky enough to have two mothers who love her more than life itself. I'm very aware she and I are going to have much more of a friendship versus a parent-child relationship. I'm okay with this. I don't want to flip her world upside down, I just want to be a part of her life.

“What do you think this is about?” Mattie asks as she sits back on the couch, sipping a hot chocolate.

“I'm not sure. Maybe we're simply making it easier to round us up this time,” I tell her.

“That's so not funny,” she says, but she smiles anyway. It's really not funny. Being taken was terrifying, but we're both safe now. I have to remind myself frequently of that. I received a call yesterday from the head of the CIA for Mattie and me to

wait at my home at ten the next morning. He said it was for something we wanted. He wouldn't give any further information ... so here we are. If this is a trick, we're sitting ducks.

A knock on my door sets my heart to hammering as I rise. I look at Mattie who's trying to act casual, but I can see she's a bit tense as well. I'm not sure if we're ever going to stop jumping at sounds or unexpected sights ... or something as simple as a person knocking.

I open the door ... and pause. Mattie's gaze is on my back, but I'm frozen. I wasn't so foolish as to think this might never happen, but I thought I'd have more time.

"Who is it?" Mattie asks, rising to her feet. My voice catches in my throat. I try to answer but I can't.

"Hi, Cass," Greyson says, his gaze intense as he looks at me like he's never seen me before.

"Greyson," Mattie says excitedly as she jumps to her feet. She pushes past me and flings herself at Greyson, giving him a hug. Seeing how happy my daughter is finally gets me to move my feet. I take a step back. I don't know what to say to him. My daughter sure seems to love and trust him, which thaws a bit of my heart.

His arm's in a sling, and I want to question him on what happened, but I still can't find my voice. After three months of not seeing him, I'm shocked at how hard my heart's hammering. It seems distance hasn't dimmed how I feel about him. I don't think it has anything to do with the baby I'm carrying. I carried Mattie as well and there were certainly no warm and fuzzy thoughts about the man who impregnated me.

I have to admit, it's different when it comes to Greyson though. I wasn't forced to be with him, I did it because I *needed* to be with him. Seeing him again is hard. He smiles as he hugs Mattie and gazes at me.

"Why are you here?" I ask, my voice quiet.

He flinches at my words, but keeps his gentle smile in place. "My director called you," he says.

"Yes, but *why* are you here?" I repeat.

"It took some major connections, but we've approved your request to see Branson," he tells me. My heart stops for a solid three seconds. I feel faint at these words. I didn't think this could happen. Mattie and I talked about it, and I'd love the closure, but I didn't think it would be possible. I notice he's not calling him VP. The man officially lost that title, but the public doesn't know all of the details. They've covered it up better than many of the other political cover-ups they've done through the years. Washington will always protect its own.

"Right now?" Mattie asks when I can't seem to form words.

"Right now, we have a jet on standby. It's VIP treatment for the women who brought down a very corrupt man," Greyson says. "There are many people who think of you two as heroes even if the public will never know."

"I don't want people to know. I don't want to be linked with that man," Mattie says with a shiver.

"I couldn't agree more," I add.

"Do you want to see him?" Greyson asks, looking concerned.

“I don’t want to see him, but this closure will be good for both Mattie and me,” I tell him. I turn and grab my purse. If I think about this for too long there’s no way I’ll make it out the door.

I let Mattie sit up front with Greyson. It’s difficult being with him again. I might want to deny my feelings toward him, but he’s the only person I’ve ever been with that I *wanted* to be with. He made me feel things I didn’t know existed until him. I’m still confused and I really don’t know what to do about it. It’s certainly not helping to be in the back seat looking at him with his unique scent surrounding me.

The drive to the private runway takes thirty minutes. A fairly large jet is waiting for us with several men in suits guarding the area. Greyson parks the vehicle and we climb out. Several heads nod as we make our way to the jet. Greyson doesn’t even pause as he holds out a hand and has Mattie and me walk ahead of him.

I’m getting another first here. I’ve never flown before, let alone taken a private jet. There’s something unnatural about being thirty thousand feet in the sky in a giant piece of metal. Right now I can’t think about that. I want to give this gift to Mattie more than I’m afraid to fly.

Once we’re seated, things happen quickly. The door shuts and soon the captain tells us to buckle up because we’re hitting the runway. Before I have time to fully process what’s happening, we’re in the sky. I’m tense for about five minutes, but soon realize how comfortable the jet is. If I don’t look out the windows, it’s no different than sitting on a train.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Greyson gives me a smile. “You know I can’t tell you that,” he says.

“I figured as much. How far are we flying?” I try.

He chuckles. “I can’t answer that,” he says.

“It’s pretty easy for us to figure out how far we’re flying,” I point out.

“I know. You can figure out a lot on your own. I just can’t be the one to *tell* you anything,” he says with a wink.

“Is it way cool to be CIA?” Mattie asks.

“It has its moments, but it’s coming to an end,” he tells her, shocking me.

“Why?” Mattie asks. I’m secretly glad she’s asking him this stuff. I want the answers too, but I don’t want to be the one to ask. I know that’s passive aggressive, but I don’t care.

“Because I have different priorities in life now,” he says.

“What priorities?” she pushes.

He looks at me with a gaze so intense I feel scorched. “Well, I learned work isn’t everything. Family is far more important.”

“Family? Like kids?” Mattie slyly asks. I feel the color drain from my cheeks as I look down. I’m four months along and I have a little bump now that’s easily hidden with clothes. My breasts have gotten a size bigger as well. I can simply say I’ve gained weight at this point. There’s no way he knows I’m pregnant.

A little corner of my mind points out what Mattie said. He is CIA. If there’s information he wants, he certainly can get it.

He's not acting like he knows I'm pregnant though. It's taking all I have to keep from rubbing my belly.

"I love kids," he tells her.

"You treat me good so that's a few points in your favor," she tells him. "What do you think about babies?" I'm going to have to spank my daughter. She's walking a fine line, and I can't look at Greyson, afraid he'll read it in my eyes.

"I haven't thought much about babies," he tells her.

"Well, you're thinking about them now, so what do you think about babies?" she pushes.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye as I pretend to look out the window. It's light out, but we're above the clouds so I can't see a single thing below.

"What's your interest in babies?" he asks. I see his gaze caress me from my head to my toes. Did his eyes just pause for a long moment on my stomach? I want to twist in my seat and tug on my shirt, afraid my baby bump is showing. I don't move. I have to act cool here.

"I think babies are great. I'm just getting to know you, and want to know what you think about the tiny things," she tells him.

He laughs, but he seems a little tenser than he did when he showed up at my house. I don't know what it means.

"Well, I wouldn't be opposed to having a few babies of my own," he tells Mattie.

"That's good. There's a lot of people these days who don't want kids. It's something a person has to ask before getting

serious with someone,” Mattie says, sounding so much older than her fourteen, nearly fifteen years.

“I can say this isn’t a conversation I ever thought I’d have with a teenager,” he tells her with a chuckle. He seems to be relaxing again. I’m finally able to take a full breath.

“You know I talk above my age. So, if you’re quitting the CIA, what will you do next?” she asks.

“I’m glad you asked. I just bought a house,” he casually says.

“Oh, that’s great. Where?”

His gaze zooms in on me but I refuse to look him in the eyes. “Ravish. It’s the great vacation house I stayed in for the weekend and I fell in love. I made the owners an offer they couldn’t refuse.” My heart skips as he says the words *fell in love*. What did he fall in love with? The house ... or something more?

I turn and stare at him, confused. He smiles at me. I’ve let Mattie lead this conversation, but this part of the conversation impacts *me*.

“Are you kidding?” I ask, my heart thumping erratically.

“Nope, not kidding. I was gone for three months. I’ve given you time to process everything. Heck, I had to do a lot of my own soul-searching before I came back to you. I didn’t want to come back without knowing what I wanted to say. I never believed in love, and a part of me still balks at the word love. However, it’s the only word that fits how I feel about you. I understand it might take you time to come to the same

conclusion I came to, but I'm confident we'll be on the same page sooner rather than later."

I gape at him as Mattie grins like a loon. She loves every second of this. She's also very much team Greyson. She brings his name up so much I don't have a chance to put him on the backburner of my mind.

"I don't think uprooting your life is a good idea," I tell him.

He shrugs. "Look, we can have many conversations on feelings and choices and what's been said or done wrong, but none of that will help. I love you, Cass, which is something I've never said to another woman. I know I didn't tell you the truth about my job, and I know you feel deceived, but you'll never know the real me, or about how much I care for you unless I'm with you. This is my last mission with the CIA and then I'm a free man."

"We haven't had enough time to know if we're in love. I don't believe in it either. I think people use each other. Love is just a word," I tell him.

"I think about you every day and every night. I miss talking to you, touching you, making love to you. I miss your spark and your passion for life. I respect how brave you are and how you've always managed to rise from the scariest of places. That's all I need to know in order to love you. I look forward to learning every little fact about you, and I hope that takes years. I have a feeling being with you will be like living in the middle of a tornado. We'll never get bored. And from here on out, this love I feel now will grow and build the longer we're together. We're both learning how to trust. We might as well do it together."

I don't know what to say. I'm in shock. This isn't what I was expecting. I try to think of a valid reason why this is wrong.

"Look, we met under very tense conditions. I don't think either of us know what we're truly feeling," I tell him.

He shakes his head. "We can at least say we've been through the worst anyone can go through and survived it. It's gravy from here on out." He pauses as he holds my gaze, refusing to set me free. "Just answer me this: do you think about me at least once a day every day?"

I want to tell him I don't think about him on a daily basis. If I say that, he'll know it's a lie. I might be able to deceive some people but not Greyson, not when my emotions around him are so raw and ripped open.

"Just because I think about you, doesn't mean the thoughts are good," I point out. He chuckles.

"I assure you my thoughts of you are good ... *very* good," he says with a wink.

"Gross, don't forget a child's here with you," Mattie says with a grin. She loves every second of this. I'm sure she wishes she had a big tub of popcorn to enjoy the show.

"You'd get bored in Ravish in two seconds," I warn. "There's no chance I'm leaving it. I found my home and it's where I'll live for the rest of my life."

"I really got into fishing while I was there, so I'll be just fine."

"What will you do for work?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. It's a new chapter in my life. I'll figure it out soon enough. I'll run my own business, or maybe I'll spend more time fishing. I work because it gives me a purpose not because I need the money. Maybe you'll be my new purpose to focus on."

I gape at him. "That's putting a lot on my shoulders," I warn.

"Good. I want to be with you, and I'm going to make it happen."

"Is this plane ride a smokescreen so you can talk and I can't get away?"

He chuckles, his mood quite light. "Nope, we're going to see the monster who can't harass anyone ever again. But we do have a long flight so I figure we can get some talking done too."

"I like your way of thinking," Mattie says.

"Did someone from town talk to you?" I carefully ask. Does he know about the baby? Is this all a way for him to get to his baby? The thought terrifies me.

"I've talked to several people from town," he tells me.

"Did they tell you anything specific?" I push.

His smile falters. "What would they need to tell me?"

I flush as he stares at me before his eyes travel my body again. His gaze rests on my breasts a bit too long. They're certainly bigger. Is he figuring this out now if he didn't already know? I don't say anything as my heart thunders.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" he asks.

“Nope. Nothing I want to tell you,” I say as I swallow my fear.

“I think there is,” he says.

“Someone *did* tell you about the baby,” I snap. I finally touch my stomach, holding myself protectively. His eyes widen in shock and I realize he didn’t know. I’m the one who just told him. Dang it, I’m completely rattled and there’s nowhere for me to run.

“Thank goodness. It was killing me not to tell him,” Mattie says as she sits back grinning. “Wish I had some popcorn.” Oh my gosh, I knew it!

We’re on the way to see the monster who nearly killed us both and we aren’t even thinking about him. How weird is it that all of our lives are so filled with drama that visiting a murderer/child rapist is at the bottom of our priorities?

“You’re pregnant,” he says as a statement. It takes a minute, but his eyes start to sparkle and his lips turn up. “I wasn’t expecting this, but I’m quite happy about it. How far along are you?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t know how my birth control failed,” I say.

He shakes his head. “I’m not accusing you of anything. I just want to know how my child’s doing,” he gently says.

“It’s *my* baby,” I tell him, a bit of fear coming through in my voice. He rises from his seat and moves to me, kneeling on the floor at my feet. He reaches up and takes my hand. My fingers shake as he squeezes them.

“Cass, listen to me right now. I’m not taking this baby from you. *No one* will take this baby from you. That will never happen again. I want to be a part of my child’s life, I want this because I love you and I want to be a part of *your* life. I want us to be a family.”

My eyes tear up, but I refuse to cry. I’ve done more crying in the last few months than I’ve done in my entire life. I won’t keep doing it. At this point it’s absolutely ridiculous.

“I don’t know what to think about all of this. It scares me,” I admit.

He squeezes my fingers. “Hell, I’m scared too. Look at the lives we’ve both had. How in the heck will I be a good father? I’m going to screw up because I’m human, but I guarantee you there won’t be a day that passes that both you and my baby won’t know how much I love you.”

“I don’t know, Grey,” I say, the tears coming ever closer.

He smiles. “I’m going to marry you, Cass.”

I swallow as my eyes widen to the point I most likely look like an owl. Mattie cheers beside us. I stare at Grey. Who in the heck says that?

“You can’t just tell me what’s going to happen,” I inform him in the prissiest voice I can manage.

He smiles, not seeming at all fazed. “I’ll say it every day until I wear you down. Not much scares me, Cass, not much at all. The thought of living my life without you terrifies me though. That fills me with real fear.”

I want to reach out to him so badly my fingers ache. I don’t do it, though. I’m too confused.

“Can you give me some breathing room? I have to think about all of this,” I say.

He leans forward and kisses our joined fingers, then stands and goes back to his seat. I take a calming breath. I don't know what else to say so I focus on the window, at the clouds beneath us. This is a lot to take in. I don't know what to do. He's not forcing me to decide right now, and I appreciate that.

He stands after a few minutes and goes to the back of the jet. When he comes back out he has a box full of goodies. Mattie immediately dives in, grabbing several things. Greyson sets the box close to me and after a few minutes I take a bag of chips and start eating them. It helps when I'm nauseous.

After a while I fall asleep. When I wake up, it's dark outside and the pressure in my ears tells me we're descending. “Are we here?”

“It appears so,” he says.

“He must be in the US then,” I say. He shrugs. He's not going to tell me anything. I get it. He's not allowed to tell me. We're lucky to be here if luck is the word I'd use.

The jet lands and soon the door opens. We exit the jet, looking around. I see nothing. It's dark out and several unmarked vehicles and men dressed in full gear surround us, but other than that it looks like miles of nothingness. I have no idea where we are. I don't know what direction we flew. I assume we didn't go west into the ocean, but for all I know there's some secret island off the West Coast somewhere. I'm sure there are many hidden places only top government officials know about.

We're herded into the backseat of a vehicle with the windows so tinted there's no chance of seeing out. Even the front panel is darkened, but the driver is wearing some special kind of glasses. I hope they're allowing him to see because I can't see anything. We could be driving off of a cliff for all I know.

After about ten minutes, it grows even darker, making me think we've gone underground. A shiver rushes through me. Greyson, Mattie, and I keep silent. I'm too nervous to speak. I'm sure Mattie is too. Greyson is most likely used to this. I reach over and grab Mattie's hand. She squeezes my fingers. It's reassuring to have each other right now.

The vehicle finally stops and the door is immediately opened. I step out and wait. Mattie and Greyson join me, then we're led down a long hallway. It looks like we're in a cave. I don't bother asking where we are. They aren't going to tell us. If I tick them off too much, they might scrap this whole thing. We're too close to turn back now.

A door opens to a dimly lit room. "Wait here," the man says. Greyson, Mattie, and I step into the room and sit. A large square table is in front of us. There are mirrors on two of the walls and doors on the other two.

After about ten minutes, the door across from us opens and there he is ... Branson. He's handcuffed and wearing leg shackles as he's slowly led forward. He's forcefully placed in a chair that seems to be bolted to the floor. The men guarding him, lock him in place so there's no chance of him rising, then they turn and exit the room. The air feels heavy.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you,” Branson says. The man looks broken with shadows beneath his eyes, and sunken cheeks. He’s lost at least thirty pounds and his hair’s gone completely grey. He no longer looks presidential, but he’s not totally defeated. There’s still a gleam in his eyes that tells me he wants revenge.

“We wanted to make sure you’re locked up,” I tell him, making sure I give him a mocking smirk I know will infuriate him. This same look made him hit me more than once when I was only fourteen years old.

“I’m certainly locked away in one of our secret places. I bet you have no clue about how many of these places exist. If the public truly knew the power the government holds over them, they’d be horrified. We control *everything*. That’s why they can keep me here without a trial. We do it to those we deem a threat . . . and we can deem anyone we want a threat. Who’s going to stop us?” he asks, that gleam in his eyes growing brighter and more sinister.

“You aren’t a part of *we* anymore,” I say.

“All it takes is one person loyal to me, and I’ll get out of here. I can disappear forever and you’ll never know. I’d always sleep with one eye open if I were you,” he sneers.

You’d think these words would send a shiver of fear through me. This man was the most powerful person in the world a few months ago, and now he’s a prisoner at a place that doesn’t exist on paper. That’s how fast someone can disappear . . . even the vice president of the United States.

“I chose a long time ago not to live in fear. Sure, there’s a chance of you getting out, but I think there’s a bigger chance

of you taking a bullet to the brain. You know too much for them to ever let you out. You hurt thousands of people and destroyed countless lives. I wanted to look you in the eyes to personally tell you that you didn't break me, I'm going to be just fine. My daughter and I will both be fine. We'll walk out of this dungeon and you won't cross our minds again. You'll be forgotten, nothing more than a dusty name in a history book no one will pay any attention to. Your name and your memory will be wiped away forever."

His eyes narrow as I finish. Spit flies from his mouth.

"You're nothing more than a piece of ass, you little bitch," he yells.

"I took down my dad, and I took you down. It seems I'm a lot smarter than you," I say.

"And I helped. You wanted me dead, but you couldn't find me," Mattie says. I'm shocked and amazed at how brave this child of mine is.

"Give it time," Branson yells.

"We don't have to. We wanted to come here for closure, but seeing you makes me realize we didn't need to come. You're pathetic."

"I agree; you're a waste of space on this planet," Mattie says.

"You said you took down your dad?" He has a sly look in his eyes.

I want to leave but there's something in his tone that makes me also want to listen. I wanted answers, so I'd be foolish not to hear what he wants to say.

“I spent time in jail for doing it so you’re well aware I took him down.”

He smiles as if he’s the ultimate winner in all of this. “That wasn’t your dad, you foolish, foolish girl. That was the bastard who had to claim you as his daughter. He knew from the beginning he wasn’t your father, and he relished all of the times he got to punish you for it.”

He could be lying to me, but I don’t understand the point of this. “What are you talking about?”

“Your mother despised your father. She married him because she wanted to get to the White House. It was too late when she figured out he was too weak to get there. She and I had an affair for many years, but we never thought of sex as sacred so we both had our flings. Obviously you know I had younger tastes, but so did she. Of course she liked them a little older, but she much preferred young pool boys. Nobody knows who your actual father was. He doesn’t matter. The man you killed was just one more man in a long line of men that used you. You should be grateful to me because at least when I took an interest in you, it was down to one man instead of multiples on a daily basis.”

I gape at him. He actually thinks I should thank him for what he did to me? “I honestly don’t think any person is as evil as you,” I tell him in a quiet tone. “I don’t care what you, my mother, or the man who pretended to be my father, say or do. I don’t care about any of you. I’m going to walk away and wipe all of you from my mind. You’ll all burn in hell.” I’m not yelling, just making a simple statement, one I needed to make long ago.

“You’ll never know everything if you walk out of here,” he says in desperation.

“I don’t care,” I tell him. And I mean it. I truly don’t care anymore. This is a past life that won’t haunt me anymore. I turn and begin to walk away when Mattie goes around me. I hold out a hand to stop her as she nears him. He’s a monster, and I don’t trust my daughter being within touching distance of him, even if he does appear to be completely locked down.

Greyson grabs my hand and I look up to yell at him, but there’s a look in his eyes that asks me to trust him. I hold his hand as I stare at my daughter, who’s standing in front of Branson.

“Do you want to play, little girl?” he disgustingly asks.

“Yes, I do,” Mattie says in the sweetest voice possible. I jerk against Greyson not understanding what’s happening.

Then, before I can move, she lifts her fists and punches him three times in the face, shattering his nose, and snapping his head backward. He gazes at her in shock. She then spits on him before smiling.

“I told you I’d punch you in the face. I’ve been taking classes and learning not only how to defend myself but how to take down bullies like you. No one will do to me what you’ve done to so many. Have a miserable life . . . not that you have many days left . . . but I hope each one is horrible.”

She turns and beams at me and Greyson before marching to the back door and waiting. I’m stunned motionless for another few seconds as Branson stares after Mattie. I think about giving the bastard a few punches of my own, but realize I

don't need to. He's not worth even that much of my effort. I turn and join my daughter.

Greyson sends Branson a wink, then the three of us walk to the door and press the buzzer to let us out.

“Don't you dare turn your backs on me. I'm the vice president of the United States!” he roars, his shock evaporating.

The door opens and we walk through it. As soon as the door shuts, his raging voice is completely silenced. We don't hear even a tiny bit of sound. That's a scary room, a place torture can happen, and no one will hear. A shiver now runs down my spine.

“I want to leave,” I tell the guard. He nods.

The three of us are led back to the SUV and loaded inside. That's it. We came, we saw, we conquered. Branson will never harm another soul again. I'm sure there will be others who come along and do terrible things, but if more and more people fight back, they'll be silenced as well ... until there are more good than bad public servants in our country.

“Will my mother pay for her sins?” I ask.

Greyson gives me a sympathetic look. “I don't know if there's anything with her name on it. She might get away with it,” he says with a sigh of frustration.

I think about this for a minute, then give him the barest hint of a smile. “She lost all the power she fought so hard for, and her husband has left in a sea of scandal making her a piranha. Even if she doesn't legally pay, she's socially paying, and in her eyes that's worse.”

“That’s true,” he tells me.

Greyson, Mattie, and I don’t speak any further as we’re driven back to the jet. I’m sitting in the middle of the seat, and both Mattie and Greyson reach for my hands. I allow them each to hold me, needing their comfort. It helps knowing we’re united ... at least in this. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow, but I survived today. That’s worth smiling over.

Epilogue

Five Months Later

I scream as pain rips my stomach in half. I'm only six centimeters dilated, and I can't take much more. I don't remember it hurting this much when I delivered Mattie. Probably because I was more afraid of losing her than I was afraid of labor pain. This is hell, though, this is absolute hell.

"Drugs, I need drugs," I cry.

"Doctor!" Greyson shouts.

Someone comes in and puts something in the IV hooked to my arm and there's immediate relief. It's not much, but even a little right now is gladly accepted. I take a calming breath for the first time in what seems like hours.

"This child's torturing me," I complain as I rub my stomach.

"Well, he's definitely making his entrance into this world with a bang," Greyson says. He's trying to stay positive for me, but I can see how much my pain's hurting him. I appreciate him so much for this. He's excited for the birth of our son, but he's hurting that I'm in so much pain.

The man won't go away. He's still here no matter how much I've tried chasing him away. He loves me. I can't deny it's true. He's been amazing to me, at my side through this

pregnancy no matter how many times I tell him this is a phase. Every day he tells me he's going to marry me, and every day he tells me he loves me.

He's a part of our community, and all of our neighbors love him. I have to admit, I've been to his house more than once to soak in his dang bathtub, using my pregnancy as an excuse. He's more than patient with me and hasn't pushed for sex, though I see constant desire in his eyes. Who in the world is this patient, this willing to wait so long for a woman he's regularly professing his love to? Apparently, Greyson Rivers.

My defenses are down and I don't want to resist him anymore. He's always at my side when I need him the most. I look up at him, tears in my eyes.

"Oh, sweetie, the bad part will be over soon and then our perfect son will be in your arms," he says before bending down and giving me a gentle kiss. My tears overflow.

"I know. I'm just hormonal."

"You'll feel much better if you say yes, you'll marry me," he points out. I give him a glare.

"Really?" My voice is just slightly snarky.

He grins. "You're going to marry me," he says just as he's said every day for the past five months. He hasn't once forgotten to say it. I sometimes say something, and sometimes I walk away. I haven't once said I'll marry him, but he hasn't given up. He doesn't have any desire to leave my life ... to leave *our* lives.

"Fine. Yes." He's rubbing my hand and it takes about three seconds for him to realize what I just said. His eyes widen as

he looks at me in awe.

“Yes?” he asks, his lips turning up.

“Yes, I can’t take it anymore. I’ll marry you,” I tell him.
“Then at least I’ll have the tub every day,” I mutter, still holding on to some of my snarkiness. I’m in labor, I should be able to get away with anything coming out of my mouth right now.

He grins as if he’s just won a gold medal, not even responding to my tub comment. He shocks me and grabs his phone. He hits a button, then says our hospital name and room number. He hangs up and I look at him in confusion.

“What in the world are you doing?” I ask.

We’re interrupted when another contraction hits. This one is bad, but not as bad as the last with the meds now flowing through my blood. He helps me breathe through it, then wipes a cool cloth over my forehead when it’s over. I flop back on my pillow.

“That was the preacher I’ve had on standby for five months. He’ll be here in about ten minutes,” he tells me, coming right back to our conversation.

“What?” I gasp as I stare at him in horror.

“I’ve been waiting for you to say yes for five months. I want you to be my wife when this baby enters the world,” he says, still grinning.

“I can’t get married in this bed. I look terrible, and we don’t have licenses and stuff,” I point out.

“We’ll have a real wedding later. I want you to be my wife right now. I might not be CIA anymore, but I still have connections. He’s bringing the paperwork,” he says, solving all of the problems I’ve stated.

“You really want to do this now?” I gasp.

“Now,” he says. “Please.”

I can’t deny him. I’ve done it for too long when I’ve known how I feel for a while and simply fought it. I can’t fight anymore. I nod at him, and amazingly, his smile grows wider.

The next twenty minutes are a blur of tears, screams, and cheers from the hospital staff as the preacher comes in, having Greyson and me both sign papers and say vows between contractions. He pronounces us man and wife just as another one hits me so hard I scream again.

“It’s time to push,” the doctor says.

“About time,” I sob. The preacher congratulates us, then slips from the room as the staff moves to get me into delivery position.

It takes ten more minutes to bring our son into the world. All of my pain is forgotten as they place him on my belly. This time I don’t fear him being ripped from my arms. This time, he’s mine to keep forever. And this time, his father is a good man and at my side, one hand on the back of our child, the other on my head. He’s gazing at our son with tears in his eyes.

“You’re incredible, my love,” he says in awe.

I look at him as he gazes at our son, and my heart is so full it feels like it’s going to burst. “I love you, Greyson,” I say for

the first time. This isn't only the first time I'm saying it to him, it's also the first time I've told another person I love them. I've wanted to say it to Mattie, but I'm waiting for her. I can wait no matter how long it takes.

Greyson's gaze shifts to me, his eyes shining, his mouth suspiciously wobbly. He snuffles as he rubs his fingers gently through my hair.

"Oh, Cass, I love you so much my heart's about to burst. I'll prove to you every day for the rest of our lives that my love will never fade. You and this baby are my universe now," he whispers.

"I believe you," I say so in awe. I feel like I'm floating.

"We have one more person in our family," he says with a smile as he takes out his phone and sends a message, making me love him even more.

Within five minutes Mattie comes skidding into the room, worry on her face. "My brother's here?" she gasps, panting. We offered to let her be in the room with us, but she vehemently said she couldn't watch him be born because she'd surely pass out.

She slowly walks up to the bed, her breath coming out in pants from running down the hallway. She's mesmerized as she gazes at the baby.

"Yes, your baby brother, Austin Matt Rivers, is here," I tell her, more tears falling.

"Matt like Mattie," she says, beaming even bigger now as she gazes with love at her brother.

“Yep, after his sister,” I say, sniffing. I’m going to just cry every day for the rest of my life it seems.

This beautiful child who had her world completely uprooted less than a year ago has adjusted so well to everything. She’s been a part of this pregnancy and has been more than excited to meet this baby. She still lives with her other mother, but we’ve all become a family. It might not be a typical family, but it’s uniquely ours and we’re making it work just right.

“He’s so small,” Mattie says.

“He’s bigger than you were,” I tell her.

“Do I get to hold him?” she asks.

“Yes, as soon as they clean him,” I tell her.

The nurse takes that as her cue and takes our baby to weigh him, measure him, and get him cleaned up. She comes back and I nod at Greyson so she hands him to his father. I got to hold him immediately, now it’s Greyson and Mattie’s turn.

Greyson cradles him close, looking into his son’s eyes with utter awe. I want to freeze this moment and look at it again and again for the rest of my life. He directs Mattie to the couch and she sits. He sets the baby in her arms and she grins down at him.

“As soon as you’re big enough I’ll teach you how to drive our parents crazy,” she whispers, making both Greyson and me laugh. I hope she does teach him everything she can. I hope they’re best friends even with the age difference.

Greyson comes right back to my side and holds my hand as he leans down and gently kisses my lips. “It might’ve been

quite the journey to get here, but we've made it," he tells me.

"We sure did," I reply, more tears falling. "These tears will eventually stop coming so easily."

"I hope you always feel everything this much. It's much better to let our emotions out than to repress them. I'll always be here for you, Cass, for the rest of our lives," he promises.

"I know," I say, feeling his love wash over me.

"How long do we wait until baby number two?" he asks.

"Three," Mattie says with a laugh.

"Sorry. When do we start trying for baby number three?"

I look at him in horror, then realize he's teasing me. "You're a brave, brave man. If you were smart, you'd be running right now after those words," I tell him.

"Amen," the nurse says with a chuckle.

He kisses me again, then wisely moves away to sit beside Mattie. He puts an arm around her back and it makes me smile again. I see his phone sitting on the table next to me and pick it up to snap a picture.

We might not be a traditional family, but I think that makes us all that much better. We're unique, and we've built this family on love and trust. Nothing will ever tear us down. No one will ever come for us again. I'm safe. My bookstore isn't the only thing that's a safe haven now, my entire life with Greyson, Mattie, our son Austin, and the town of Ravish, is one big bubble of a safe haven.

Did you love this book? Reviews are appreciated. You can do
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