



# 1001 DARK NIGHTS

JONAH BENNETT

*A Bennett Mafia Novella*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# TIJAN

**Jonah Bennett**

A Bennett Mafia Novella

By Tijan



1001 DARK NIGHTS  
PRESS

Jonah Bennett

A Bennett Mafia Novella

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## Book Description

Jonah Bennett

A Bennett Mafia Novella

By Tijan

From *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Tijan comes a new story in her Bennett Mafia universe...

Jonah Bennett wasn't like his family. The mafia business was firmly what his brothers did, not him.

That changed the day a rival family killed his fiancée.

\*\*Every 1001 Dark Nights novella is a standalone story. For new readers, it's an introduction to an author's world. And for fans, it's a bonus book in the author's series. We hope you'll enjoy each one as much as we do.\*\*

## About Tijan

Tijan is a *New York Times* bestselling author that writes suspenseful and unpredictable novels. Her characters are strong, intense, and gut-wrenchingly real with a little bit of sass on the side. Tijan began writing later in life and once she started, she was hooked. She's written multi-bestsellers including the Fallen Crest series, Ryan's Bed, Enemies and others.

She is currently writing many new books and series with an English Cocker she adores.

You can find out more about Tijan at <http://www.tijansbooks.com>.

## [Also From Tijan](#)

### **More mafia:**

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Micaela's Big Bad

More books to come!

## Acknowledgments from the Author

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Thank you to everyone.



## **Dedication**

To all those who love my mafia books! Thank you for your support.

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## One Thousand and One Dark Nights

*Once upon a time, in the future...*

*I was a student fascinated with stories and learning. I studied philosophy, poetry, history, the occult, and the art and science of love and magic. I had a vast library at my father's home and collected thousands of volumes of fantastic tales.*

*I learned all about ancient races and bygone times. About myths and legends and dreams of all people through the millennium. And the more I read the stronger my imagination grew until I discovered that I was able to travel into the stories... to actually become part of them.*

*I wish I could say that I listened to my teacher and respected my gift, as I ought to have. If I had, I would not be telling you this tale now.*

*But I was foolhardy and confused, showing off with bravery.*

*One afternoon, curious about the myth of the Arabian Nights, I traveled back to ancient Persia to see for myself if it was true that every day Shahryar (Persian: شهریار, "king") married a new virgin, and then*



*sent yesterday's wife to be beheaded. It was written  
and I had read that by the time he met Scheherazade,  
the vizier's daughter, he'd killed one thousand  
women.*

*Something went wrong with my efforts. I arrived  
in the midst of the story and somehow exchanged  
places with Scheherazade – a phenomena that had  
never occurred before and that still to this day, I  
cannot explain.*

*Now I am trapped in that ancient past. I have  
taken on Scheherazade's life and the only way I can  
protect myself and stay alive is to do what she did to  
protect herself and stay alive.*

*Every night the King calls for me and listens as I spin tales.  
And when the evening ends and dawn breaks, I stop at a  
point that leaves him breathless and yearning for more.  
And so the King spares my life for one more day, so that  
he might hear the rest of my dark tale.*

*As soon as I finish a story... I begin a new  
one... like the one that you, dear reader, have before  
you now.*

# Chapter One

## JONAH

A screech of brakes.

A horn blaring.

That was the only warning we got.

Melissa and I were traveling. We'd taken time off from our residencies, mine in surgery and hers in family practice. We were in different locations. The driving distance wasn't that far, but this time together was special to me.

I had decided. I didn't want to wait anymore.

That was my last thought as we came to a quick stop in our rental car. The traffic had frozen, bumper to bumper.

"What the hell is going on?" Melissa asked.

I looked over at her and smiled. She was beautiful, like always. Big doe eyes. Long brown hair that had a slight curl. We'd been together for the last year. When I switched to go to medical school in the States, she was in the same year as me. We dated on and off for that year and the year after, but it was on and off for a reason.

Then school happened.

We graduated.

We went into our specialties, but we decided to try again.

I was happy that we had. I was happy with her.

I was just happy.

She was gorgeous. She was kind. Smart. She liked to tease me with this little sparkle in her eyes. She was also competitive, always pushing to get the best marks on each test and exam. She pushed *me* to do better, and that was a novel

experience for me. I was used to pushing myself. No one in my family was in the medical field. It wasn't what they did, but me... That was not me. I was the first to venture outside our family business.

It wasn't that I didn't have their support. I did. They wanted me to go, to do better, to be better, but that's all they had to offer. So I was left in the role of pushing forward, forging a new path. Though not with Melissa. She motivated me, and that was one of the many reasons I'd fallen in love with her.

Right now, however, I was mostly focused on the fact that we had six days left to celebrate before going back to our normal, hectic lives. I reached over and threaded my fingers with hers, staring at the sparkling ring on her finger.

"We should call our families tonight," I suggested. "Tell them about the engagement."

She'd been glaring out the window at the traffic, but when I dropped a kiss on our fingers, she relaxed.

She turned to me, that sparkle in her eyes. "Oh, you mean I'll actually get to meet your family? Your very reclusive family that you've always said isn't in the States and out of phone reach?" She was teasing, but sort of not.

She hadn't met my family for a reason, but they knew about her.

Kai had her investigated. And if Kai had any files on her, then I knew Tanner got them as well. He probably had done a couple passes, too. Meaning, that he saw her in physical proximity, he knew her, but she wouldn't have known who he was. Brooke wasn't one to be left out. She insisted to overhear a phone call I had with Melissa one time. It was her way of "meeting" her.

That was my family.

*But* it was time. If she was going to marry me, she needed to know what she was marrying into. It was only fair, but once she knew, I'd have to be prepared that she might decide not to

be with me—or worse, that she'd say something to someone else.

I leaned back and shot her a grin. “When you meet them, you'll know why.”

The traffic still wasn't moving forward, and more horns had started to blare.

I frowned. “You think it's an accident up there? That's why we're stalled?”

“Oh.” Her smile melted away.

If someone was hurt, we were supposed to go help.

Melissa reached for her seatbelt at the same time I did.

“Open the trunk,” I called as we rounded to the rear of the car.

She found the button to pop it open, and I saw a first aid kit pushed back in the corner. I grabbed it, shutting the trunk.

As I did, a guy came walking toward us, past the truck in front of us. Tall. Broad shoulders. White. He was in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, decked out like a stereotypical cowboy—probably Wrangler jeans and a shirt stolen from the set of an old Clint Eastwood movie. I catalogued all that out of habit.

He saw me and stopped.

He looked at Melissa.

He turned back to me. “You're Jonah Bennett?”

I frowned. “Who's asking?”

“Do we know you?” Melissa stepped toward him, looking him over. The doctor in her came first, always. “Are you hurt? Is there a car accident back there where you came from—”

She was concerned about him, concerned about others.

That's what she did, who she was, and why I loved her.

He pulled a gun out and pointed it at her.

She didn't seem to register that.

She was looking for blood on *him* when he pulled the trigger.

## Chapter Two

JONAH

“No!”

The world exploded in screams.

Then blood.

More blood.

More gunfire.

People were running.

I was running. I caught Melissa’s body, but the guy—I looked.

The guy was gone.

\* \* \* \*

“We need you to come down to the station,” said a voice from somewhere above me.

We were at the hospital—or I was. But I wasn’t working. I was... I didn’t know what I was doing.

That guy—Melissa was already dead when I caught her body, but the ambulance still brought her here. They were trying to save her, but I knew. I knew as I felt for her pulse, she was gone.

Two detectives stood before me, and I looked around.

*Where am I?*

One of the cops looked around, too. He answered slowly, eyeing me. “We’re at San Antonio Medical Center.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “My fiancée, she—” I looked behind them. A doctor stood there, frowning at me, two nurses with him. Why were they looking at me like that?

I stood to go around the cops, to the doctor. “She’s gone, isn’t she?”

The doctor looked back at the nurses. One gave him a nod, and he came toward me, his hands in his pockets. “Yes, Mr. Bennett. Your fiancée, Melissa Rainsley, didn’t make it. We were unable to resuscitate her.”

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

God.

God.

I went over it all in my head, remembering the guy, what he’d said.

He’d asked my name, and then shot her.

“What was that?” One of the cops leaned forward.

I looked over, squinting at him. At them both. “The guy. I can give you a description.”

“Yes.” The second cop came forward, showing her badge. “I’m Detective Munoz. We’d like to bring you to the station for questioning.”

*Right.*

Because Melissa was dead.

The doctor glanced between the cops and me. “Uh... We found a medical card in her belongings. We’re notifying her family since you weren’t married yet.”

*Right.* They’d take it from here. That’s what he was telling me, and he was right to do that. She was theirs now. They’d take care of her. I had other problems to handle.

I’d witnessed a murder.

But fuck. I had to think.

These were cops.

I couldn't be stupid here.

I nodded, my mind scrambling.

I had to be smart. I needed time to get organized.

"I need to go to the bathroom first."

The male detective bristled, starting to walk with me.

The female held him back. I saw the hand she put on his arm.

They thought—No. I couldn't go there. I didn't know what they thought.

One of the nurses showed me a back bathroom, and I went inside.

*Jesus.*

I stopped just inside the door.

Melissa was dead.

She'd been shot.

He'd asked my name, and then shot her.

*My name, and shot her.*

He never turned the gun on me.

My hand shook, blood still coating it.

Damn. *Damn!*

None of this was his blood. Just Melissa's. Not mine.

I went to the sink and washed it off, but *gah*—I froze midway through and held one of my hands up.

This was her. And she was gone. I washed this away. I was washing her away.

My phone was ringing.

Cursing, I grabbed for a paper towel, a bunch of them, and reached for my phone.

*Kai.*



He already knew.

I swallowed over a knot and hit accept, putting it on speaker.

“Kai,” I choked out, the sobs right there, just at the back of my throat. I was going to lose it.

He was quiet a beat before, “Where are you?”

“Hospital.”

“Where specifically?”

“A bathroom.” I looked around. Two stalls. Both doors were open. And I was losing it. My knees were shaking, my legs unsteady. I was going down.

“I’m alone,” I rasped out.

“I got a call. Your name came over a police scanner with a GSW.”

*Gunshot wound.*

He was quiet again, and I could hear him taking a breath. “Jonah, are you hurt?”

Tears rolled down my face—big, fat tears—but an eerie calm came with them. I put the phone on the floor and hung my head over it. “Not me. Melissa. They killed my fiancée, Kai.”

He knew about Melissa. He didn’t know about the fiancée part.

He was quiet another moment. “What’d he look like?”

I gave him the cowboy description I had stored away, because in this life, with my family, you needed to know that shit. “Melissa wanted to go to the Valley, but I said no. I steered clear. I know there’s cartel there.”

“You got police where you are?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I looked over. They were probably on the other side of the door. “Two detectives came to the hospital. They want to question me at the station.”

“How are they treating you?”

“Like I’m the one who shot her.”

“You think they know who you are?”

A hard laugh ripped up from my throat, an ugly laugh. “Who the fuck knows. Could be my skin color. Could be because I was the significant other.” *But fuck. Melissa.*

She was dead.

Angry grief rose. I felt my chest tightening.

“Tanner’s in Kansas,” Kai continued. “He’s on his way to the jet now, and I have lawyers heading your way.”

I frowned. “You want me to hold them off here or go to the station?”

“I’d never *want* you to go to a police station, but I don’t think they’ll hold off. Go. Don’t say anything to them. If they haven’t figured out who you are, they will, and it’ll be like Christmas to them. I don’t care what they say to you. They can lie.”

“I know. I know all this.”

God.

*Melissa.*

Grief clawed through me, eating up one cell at a time, one organ at a time. I let out a deep sob, a noise that didn’t sound human.

Kai’s voice dropped low. “I’m sorry, Jonah. I know you loved her.”

“If this was about me...” I couldn’t keep going because I knew. I fucking knew. It was. “He asked my name, and then he shot her. She was looking him over, thinking he needed medical assistance. She had no clue. No clue, Kai!”

“I know. I’m sorry, brother. I’m so sorry.”

There was murmuring on his end. I heard a female voice, and Kai came back. “I’m on my way. Tanner will get there first, but I won’t be far behind. Riley wants to know if you want her to come?”

I loved my brother, both my brothers, and I loved my sister-in-law, but I was already shaking my head as he asked the question. “No. No. I—you and Tan. I’m not... She needs to stay with the kids.”

“Okay. I love you. I’m coming.”

I put the phone back in my pocket. Kai was coming.

Good.

Tanner was coming.

Good.

I needed my brothers.

But I couldn’t move. Not yet.

Melissa.

*I’m sorry, Melissa. I’m so sorry.*

## Chapter Three

### JONAH

They didn't know who I was, or who my family was. Not yet.

I was in a back interrogation room at the police station when I figured that much out.

I'd been here a few hours now.

I was tired, and time had started to bleed together. They kept asking me the same shit. Over and over again.

The lawyers never appeared, but maybe they were here and waiting for Tanner. Maybe? I didn't know anymore. I didn't know anything.

Except that they didn't know who I was.

"Mr. Bennett, why aren't you speaking?" Detective Munoz asked. "We want to find this guy as soon as possible, and you're not cooperating with us. You realize how this makes you look, right?"

I sat in a chair in a corner of the small room, and they had pulled up two chairs across from me. They were suspicious of me because I was Melissa's significant other. That suddenly clicked, and a wave of relief crashed through me, followed shortly by a surge of anger because *fuck that*.

I mean, I got it.

They were doing their jobs, but that sucked.

I'd offered to give a physical description at the hospital, but they didn't take me up on that. Maybe there was video footage from a phone camera? That would make sense, but why were they just sitting with me?

"Are you guys at least looking for her shooter?" I asked.

Their eyes jerked back to me, and their demeanor sharpened.

The male leaned forward. “You want to cooperate with us now?”

Munoz added, “We do, actually, have video footage. We have a BOLO out, and we have units canvassing the area. We’re looking. We’re doing our jobs. We also have audio of the incident from another phone, but we couldn’t quite make out what the man said. It looked like he asked you a question. What did he ask you?”

I closed my eyes. This was going to start a whole different search once they knew, but they needed to know. I wanted them to find this guy. I’m not like the rest of my family. Maybe I was idealistic—or unrealistic, as Tanner might say—but due process and all.

*No.*

Fuck that.

Fuck the justice system.

Fuck everything.

I weighed it in my head... If they actually found this guy? I didn’t want that justice.

I wanted different justice, my family’s way of justice.

So I shook my head. “I couldn’t make out what he asked me.”

The two shared a look. “The video clearly shows that he asked you a question. You answered. Then he turned and shot your fiancée. What did you say, if you didn’t hear his question?”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

Footsteps sounded from the hallway, along with loud voices.

It was distinct enough, stopping right outside the door, and both detectives stopped talking to me. The male detective was rising out of his chair when the door opened.

An officer leaned in, his hand on the handle, and motioned to the detectives. “Out here. A word.”

They shared a look, gave me a look, and as one, left the room.

I heard more voices, the sounds of arguing, and suddenly the door opened again.

A woman in a business suit came in briskly, holding a briefcase. Another guy followed, and behind them, I saw my brother Tanner in the hallway. A police officer had stopped him there.

So the lawyers *had* waited for him.

He looked over their heads, meeting my gaze, and his eyebrows went up.

He was asking if I was okay, but just like that, a wave of grief lodged in my throat. I could barely shake my head because now that he was here, I was crumbling. I could feel it rising.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I couldn't lose it. Not yet.

Fuck being masculine. Fuck anyone, society, everyone.

She was gone.

Because of me.

Tanner saw all this in one look, and his eyes burned. The storm was coming, in the way only Tanner could make shit happen.

I closed my eyes, my head folding down as I heard him start.

“Let me see my brother. Right. Fucking. Now!”

“Who are you? Who is this guy? How'd they get back here?” another voice demanded.

“I'm Tanner Bennett, and that's my brother.”

There was a moment of silence, but then I felt his presence. He must've shoved his way into the room. The business suit lady stood on my other side.

“Mr. Bennett, it's best if your brother does cooperate in some way with the detectives,” she said, her voice low.

Tanner touched my shoulder. “No.” His voice was gruff. “It's not. This can be scheduled for tomorrow. Right now, my brother needs his family. He's grieving.”

“Mr. Bennett?” It was Detective Munoz. “You're his family?”

“Yeah.” Tanner's tone was sarcastic, and he tugged on my chair.

I opened my eyes, not seeing anyone, but I stood.

I knew why they were confused, but Jesus. We were past that shit.

Tanner was white. I wasn't totally white.

Tanner's voice was clipped as he explained, “If you need a whole family tree, suffice it to say that a few of us kids have different dads, and the guy who raised us was a piece of shit and didn't let us talk about who our real daddies were growing up. And that's all you're getting from us because the only other thing you need to know is that our lawyers are here. You can talk to them, or you can wait, because the big kahuna isn't far behind me.”

Tanner guided me out the door, where he had a coat for me.

I didn't understand why I needed a coat, but I took it.

Tanner turned back as we started down the hallway. “And if you need more clarification, the big kahuna is Kai Bennett. Our other brother.”

Everything swirled around me. Faces blended with each other. Voices, too, but then a distinct quiet came over everyone.

Tanner heard it, too. “Nice to know that even all the way down here, you guys have heard about him. All communication will be handled through our lawyers.”

He was right. Even down here in Texas, they knew who Kai was.

They knew he was the head of our family’s business, the Bennett Mafia.



## Chapter Four

### JONAH

“If there’s cameras out there—and I’m guessing there won’t be, but just in case—put the coat on,” Tanner said softly as we walked toward the front of the police station.

I looked down and there was dried blood all over me. I didn’t realize.

I’d forgotten that I hadn’t wanted to wash her blood off.

Gone was the sarcasm, but I could hear his anger. He was keeping it banked. And cameras? Jesus.

I frowned. “What cameras?”

“At this point, we have no idea. Cover your head, too.”

But there were no reporters, if that’s what he’d been referring to, as we left the station and went to the waiting Escalade. Yet I saw Tanner still looking around. He was worried about long-zoom kind of cameras. Like PI cameras or... I had no clue.

I didn’t do this world.

I was in the civilian world.

I had no clue what it took to be a criminal, but Tanner did. He ran a good portion of the business for Kai in the United States. That much I did know.

We settled into the back of the vehicle, which had a driver and a guard in the front seat. As we left the station parking lot, Tanner turned to look behind us, and I followed. The car trailing us was full of Tanner’s security team.

I didn’t travel with one because I lived a normal life, so there was no need—or that’s what I’d insisted.

Kai had argued with me when I left for medical school, wanting to send a team. I didn't want that. I wanted to be normal, but he made me try it for a while. I couldn't be normal with bodyguards trailing me, and I was good at spotting them, even when they tried to be hidden. So after a year of me ditching them, Kai finally conceded and pulled everyone.

I didn't even have a gun.

If I'd had a guard on me, *she* would still be alive, though.

God.

"She's dead because of me."

I felt Tanner look my way, but he didn't respond. He did say, "Sorry for taking so long to get to you. I know our family is flying nowadays, but I couldn't get to you fast enough. The lawyers couldn't find where you'd been taken. You didn't go to the usual station for this jurisdiction."

I frowned, looking at him. "Where'd they take me?"

"It was another station, but just not the one where you should've been. We think they were trying to hide you."

*Wait.* "But not from you guys."

His eyes were heavy, waiting for me to put two and two together.

I did. "They thought the shooter was going to come back and finish me?"

He shrugged. "At this point, we don't know. I just feel bad that it took so long. They questioned you the whole time?"

I nodded, then shook my head. "Yeah, but they gave me a lot of breaks. So no. I don't even care. I—" Melissa was gone. Another wave of anguish was coming, going to hit me hard. "I want to see her."

"Melissa?"

I nodded. "I asked her to marry me two days ago."

He pulled in a breath.

"We were going to call the families." I looked away.

“You were going to tell her about us?” He eyed me a moment.

I nodded, my head feeling so fucking heavy. “Yeah.” That’s all I could get out.

*“You’re Jonah Bennett?”*

*“Who’s asking?”*

*Bang!*

I jerked. I’d never get that out of my head. Ever.

“Kai will be here in a few more hours,” Tanner offered.

“He asked my name.”

“I know.”

“He shot her. I never told him who I was.”

“What?”

I mused to myself, going over it. “He didn’t want to kill me. He wanted to kill her because she was with me. He wanted to hurt me.” Which meant... I looked at Tanner. “He either wanted to hurt me because of me or he wanted to hurt me because I’m a Bennett.”

My grief was morphing into something else. I pushed it back, along with the anger.

No, the anger remained, but I was moving it. Controlling it. Channeling it.

I wanted vengeance. I needed it. But first, I wanted to figure out *why me*.

*“It was another station, but just not the one where you should’ve been. We think they were trying to hide you.”*

What murderer would go to a police station to finish the job?

Not a normal one.

But a mafia one, yes. A hitman.

“Do you know why this happened?” I asked.

The inside of the Escalade was quiet. We were on the interstate, heading out of town.

Tanner didn't look at me. He didn't answer either.

"Tanner."

His eyes were clouded over, but he could never hide, not from me. Others, yes, but I knew my brother. I'd worshipped my brothers, all of them.

Cord was the oldest. Then Kai. Tanner. Brooke followed him, and then me.

For a while, growing up, I hadn't been living with them, and neither had Brooke. But then Cord died, our dad died, and Brooke came home from boarding school.

Kai took over and brought us all together.

Our mom was gone long before any of that. I could barely remember her.

Tanner still hadn't answered me.

What the fuck?

I slammed my fist into the back of the driver's seat. It was abrupt, jarring, and violent.

The driver and the guard both jerked, but Tanner barely flinched.

"We were not at war with anyone, so I don't know who did this or why." A feral look entered his gaze. "But we will, because whoever did this is now at war with us."

Good.

Just, fucking *good*.

## Chapter Five

### JONAH

We drove to a house somewhere outside the city limits. When we arrived, it was large, and we had to go through a gate to get to it. That was almost standard for us.

I had a new understanding for the reason.

I was now pacing in a back library room because I didn't know what to do with myself.

What do you do in situations like this?

Should I call Melissa's parents? I'd only met them once.

Melissa wasn't super close to her family, but I knew she loved them. She was close to her brother.

*Her brother.* Oliver. They talked daily, and he wouldn't be getting her call today. She usually reached out to him.

I had to call.

I searched for my phone, but I didn't have it.

*Where is my phone?*

I started for the door, going to find Tanner.

I noticed a few more guards at the front door when I passed by, but didn't think much of it. "Where's Tanner?"

Two of the guys looked at me but didn't respond.

Then I heard from behind me, "He's in the office."

I turned to see Kai's main guard, or his current main guard. "I'm sorry, Jonah," he said. "For your loss."

Pain I didn't want to feel, like I never knew existed, rose up and filled my chest. "Yeah," I clipped out. This had just

started, and already I was sick of hearing those words. “Where are they?”

He motioned back through the living room. “I’ll take you.”

I followed him through the living room and kitchen to a door in the back. It was closed, but I could hear their voices.

He was about to reach forward, to announce our presence, when I heard my name.

My hand went to his arm, stopping him.

I could hear Kai through the door. “How is he?”

“Shitty,” Tanner replied. “How’d you feel if someone gunned down Riley?”

“I’d be devastated.”

Tanner grunted. “Then you can imagine. He asked her to marry him. You know that?”

“He told me on the phone.”

“*Fuck, Kai! Fuuuuck!* He’s our little brother. We’re supposed to protect him from this shit. You and me. We signed up for this. We took over, but Jesus. Not him. He—” Tanner’s voice cracked. “He’s the good one.”

“I know.”

“Do you?!” Tanner snarled.

“Watch your shit with me.”

“Sorry. I just—why didn’t he have a detail on him? She’d be alive. The guy would be dead. Jonah wouldn’t be fucking destroyed. He won’t wash her blood off of him. We tried—tried to get him to shower, tried to get him to change clothes. He won’t do it. He slips in and out of these spells, like he’s not even present. He fought me when I tried to get him to change shirts. *Fought me*. My guards had to wade in, and he fought them, but there was a look in his eye—I don’t think he knows he even did it. And they interrogated him for hours. Why didn’t he have a guard on him?!”

“He did.”

*What?*

“How do you think I knew what happened to him?” Kai barked.

“You had a guy?” Tanner asked.

“Yes, but he was too far back. They have to be or Jonah spots them, and he keeps slipping them. You know that. He wanted to be normal.”

“Well, he’s *not!*”

“I KNOW THAT!”

The guard pushed forward, but again I held him in place.

I wanted to hear everything. I had to.

“So what’d your guy say?”

“It was a professional hit,” Kai continued. “He’s a ghost. My guy watched the bus, the airport, train station. If he’s not in town, he drove out.”

“No way he’d go north. This isn’t our area. Why was Jonah here?”

“Because—”

With that, I shoved open the door with a growl. “Because I was an idiot and wanted to *not* live a mafia lifestyle!” I surged past Kai, going right for Tanner. My fist was up, but I barely registered that. “I wanted to go on a trip with my girlfriend when I asked her to marry me. How fucking stupid of me, right?! I wanted to be normal, Tanner! Can’t you understand that? But you’re right. If I wasn’t, she’d be alive. It’s my fault. I’m hearing you loud and fucking clear—”

I swung, and I heard shuffling behind me, but Tanner had a sad look on his face. He stared at me as everything unfolded in slow motion. He looked at me, at my fist, and decided not to duck.

I pulled my punch, skimming his chin instead.

He stumbled back, still looking at me with that same sadness. He was haunted.

He didn't hit me. He didn't do anything. "That's not what I was saying," he told me.

"Fuck what you're saying. It's the truth."

He reached for me, but I shoved away.

I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to have Tanner look at me that way. He was always angry, always. He covered it up with funny and crude comments, but he was angry underneath. And Kai—I couldn't look at him.

Kai was ice. Always controlled. Always thinking, planning. Kai ran our empire.

Kai kept us safe, and he'd tried with me.

It was my fault.

"I have to call her brother," I announced.

"Jonah." Tanner started for me, but I moved away, shaking my head. He stopped, but then Kai moved forward.

"Let us call him," Kai said. "This is Oliver?"

Of course, Kai knew his name. Kai probably knew more about my fiancée than I did. Ex-fiancée? Was she an ex when the relationship ended because of death?

So much fucking pain.

What was the threshold? When would I start going numb? I thought that's what happened. You feel too much until finally you stop feeling? It was a coping mechanism, or that's what I'd studied. The shock should've settled in long ago.

I remembered what Tanner said before, about the fighting. I didn't remember that.

Shock must ebb and flow. I hadn't realized. That was good to know.

"He'd be expecting a call from her, if—wait." *The hospital.* "The doctor said they were going to notify her family. They would've called him." Melissa wasn't tight with their parents, but Oliver was. He was the *youngest and most adored*, as Melissa put it.



She hadn't known I was also the youngest. Brooke teased me about being the most adored in my family.

I never told her.

She would've liked knowing that.

*Brooke.*

"I don't want Brooke to know."

Tanner and Kai shared a look.

"She'll freak out, and I can't handle it. I..." I had no clue what I was doing. Melissa's family would handle what they could. Kai would take care of anything else. I had work. But... there'd be a funeral. Was I supposed to... No. Her family would do that.

Her body.

Then I remembered why I'd left the library in the first place. "I don't know where my phone is."

Kai glanced to Tanner, who was already shaking his head. "I don't have it." He frowned at me. "The cops ask to see it?"

They had.

I'd forgotten.

"They still have it."

Kai pulled his phone out, already dialing a number. "They asked for it for evidence. I'll see if the lawyers can get it back."

See? He took care of everything.

"What do you need, Jonah?" Tanner had moved closer.

I shook my head. "I have no idea. I want to murder whoever killed her. I want to see her body, say goodbye. Her family won't want me at the funeral. I'm sure the cops will tell them the connection. And even if it wasn't about who we are, it won't matter. They'll still go there, be angry she was involved with me in the first place."

What did I have if I wasn't with Melissa? Being a surgeon?

“I want to see her body,” I repeated. I looked over at Kai, who was finishing his call. “I need to say goodbye.”

He gave me a small nod and was on the phone again.

He’d make it happen. That’s what he did.

## Chapter Six

CARSON

Sometimes being a forensic technician was cool, sometimes it wasn't.

And I wasn't even the lab director. That was Milo. I was the technician, so I was more their assistant—doing the tests, taking the samples, stuff like that. But currently, I was exhausted, and I wasn't loving my job, because I'd already worked a sixteen-hour shift. And even though I'd clocked out, I had more left to do. We'd had more bodies than normal come through. The other tech, Benjamin, had the weekend off for a wedding he was going to up in Oklahoma.

This wasn't a normal situation, but that didn't matter. It was all me.

Milo had called, said she needed a rush on some new tests on the most recent body, and since I was the closest to the lab, it was on me to get it done. Police had called in late, putting an urgent rush on the tests. I agreed, because what choice did I have?

I remembered when the body came in. Even though she was dead, she was beautiful.

Her family had come through, asking to see her.

I also noticed her ring. I mean, Milo had noticed, too. It was swabbed before it was taken in for evidence, but it was a serious rock. Whoever loved this girl *really* loved her. The dude had money, but he hadn't been with the family when they came in.

A pair of parents. The mom was stiff. The dad, too. They'd just stood there, looking at her. The little brother broke my heart. He was maybe in high school? He'd fallen apart, and then they'd left.

No one else had showed up since, so the lab was dark and closed when I went back.

I scanned my badge, went in, and went to the back room to put my stuff down. I was coming back out with my lab coat on and my hair pulled back when I heard the voices.

“—no one to know.”

Oh. *Fuck.*

I had already come through the first door by the time I realized what I was walking into. Through the doors, through the window, I could see Benjamin. His head was down, and he was very much *not* at a wedding. He wore street clothes, and there were three others with him.

“Hey!”

I turned, seeing who had spoken.

A big guy stood just inside the front door with a gun. *A gun?! What the what?* And he was seriously large. As I watched, another guy stepped around him, and he was like the dude, 2.0. They were both goliaths, and both with guns.

*Holy exclamation point! What is going on here?*

“Car.” Benjamin came toward me from the other room, looking me up and down. “What are you doing here? You’re clocked out for the night.”

My mouth was on the floor. I mean, my eyebrows and my heart were on the ceiling, but everything else had bottomed out. “Those guys have guns,” I whispered.

“I know.”

There was no shock on his face. He totally knew, which he’d just said. *Right.* I needed to catch up here. Then the door opened behind him, and holy mother of all Toledo, the most gorgeous guy came in. Tall. Dark hair. Some seriously luscious facial features. He was pretty and hot and dangerous, and he had guys with him who had guns. *OMG!*

He stepped around Benjamin, assessing me.

I could tell this dude was the shit. He was smart. Obviously had money if he had guys with guns at the ready, and well, I guess that meant he was dangerous, too. Why were they here? This wasn't a Jason Bourne movie.

“Carson? Carson Dayley?” he asked.

I flushed. “Yes, and please don't make a joke. It's not my fault that dude got famous and I didn't.”

His eyebrows moved together, but that was his only reaction. Maybe he didn't know pop culture. Score for me, if he didn't.

“My brother's fiancée came in earlier,” he said. “She was murdered, and he was there. We've not had contact with her family as to whether they wanted him to see her with them. He wanted to say his goodbyes. That's all.”

*Right.* But it was shady. No one who wasn't shady had two guards with him, and these guys were the real deal. I could tell fake guns from real guns. My cousin Toby once had our other two cousins carry fake guns so he could get into a poker game. I'd never asked for details. I didn't want to know. The fake guns alone gave me the heebie-jeebies.

“Ms. Dayley?”

*Right. Focus.* The hot dude seemed like he was waiting for me to give him the go-ahead.

Also, I needed to stop thinking the word ‘right.’

Then I remembered that Benjamin didn't have the new set of keys. The locks had literally been installed today.

I shot him a look. “You dumbass. You faked the new tests so Milo would get me in here, didn't you?”

“What? No. But I mean, it is karmic that you came in.” He pulled his keys out. “They don't work.”

I huffed, already knowing what I was going to do. Who was I to stand in the way of a grieving fiancé?

I moved forward, and the hottie stepped aside. He hadn't given his name. Pretty sure that was on purpose, but then I was

into the next room and *holy*... I was having a full déjà vu moment because I was wrong. The hottie behind me wasn't God's gift to women. I mean, he was up there. Along with the blond, tousled hair and scowling face, and he had some dark energy around him. But he was just *handsome*. The other one, though?

The other one made me literally forget how to walk as he looked my way, but he wasn't even looking at me. His eyes were empty.

He was—this was the fiancé.

I sucked in my breath. My stomach clenched, and it was as if I'd been bombarded by his agony, because I could see that's what he was in. Pure torture. He was twisted up on the inside, but my God, he still took my breath away.

Tall. He had a young look to him. He looked like someone who would row crew.

The other two were tan. The blond was a little paler, but this one had either a warm tan or his skin was a lighter shade of brown. There was a darker undertone than the others', and he had full lips with dark hair cut super short, a fade on the side. He was in a dark sweatshirt, the hood pulled up. For a moment his eyes flashed, flickering on and *seeing* me, but then he receded into memories and pain, and his gaze clouded over again.

My hands shook because I swear, I could feel his pain, and it was unbearable. "Excuse me," I said softly, stepping forward and going around to her door.

I put the key in and unlocked the chamber, but I didn't pull her out.

I turned, now standing so close to this guy. He hadn't moved back, but he needed to know. They all did.

"When I—"

He rasped out, "I know. She'll be uncovered so no evidence was tainted."

Okay. The guy knew police protocol.

“We haven’t finished her autopsy,” I explained. “We were waiting for her—”

He looked at me, his eyes finding mine, and I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even swallow.

“I know,” he said softly.

I nodded and stepped aside.

He was the one who rolled his shoulders back, reached forward, and pulled her out.

I couldn’t be here. This was his time to say goodbye.

“Take your time,” I murmured for only him to hear. “The ring was bagged. I’m sorry. The cops took it.”

I left, not wanting to see the extra dose of sadness I’d just poured over him. I took Benjamin with me. I kept a firm hold on him, not stopping until we were back in the staff quarters. Once the door was shut, he twisted his arm free.

I let him go.

“What the hell, Car?”

“You leave them alone.”

He smirked. “Look at you, all being down with—”

“Shut up. Not one fucking word.” I pointed out the door. “That’s family saying goodbye to family. You won’t take one dime from them, you hear me?”

Anger tightened his face. “What? You can’t—”

“You take one dime, and I’m reporting you to Milo. I don’t give a fuck what that’ll do to me, too.”

He looked at me like I was a stranger to him. “Shit. Where’d this new Carson come from? You usually only whine if you get the wrong coffee.”

“Stop,” I snarled. “Talking.”

“You’re no longer Car to me anymore. It’s only Carson from now on. And I’m no longer Ben to you.”

I gave him a scathing look. “You never were, *Benjamin*.”

He shut up after that, thank God. If he hadn't, I'd have had to involve the police in his murder, by me.

I wasn't kidding.

I'd never had a reaction to a guy like that, ever. But that man was *in* me.

He was still in me when they left, when I booted Benjamin out, and when I performed the last set of tests on her.

I wasn't sure he was ever going to leave.



## Chapter Seven

### JONAH

Melissa had a lovely funeral. Her family was there. Her friends from high school and college. A couple medical students from our year.

Not me.

Her family didn't want me there.

But I was still present. I was in an SUV, parked across the street. My brothers were with me. They couldn't keep me all the way away.

And I was wrong. She had a *beautiful* funeral.

\* \* \* \*

“What are you going to do?” Kai asked me.

Sometime later—weeks? A month? I wasn't sure—I was with Kai at the house in Vancouver.

Riley and Kai's two children were here, playing. They'd kept me distracted. There were lots of tea parties with Brooklyn, but not with Blake. His nickname was Blade, after one of Riley's friends. He was a hellion, and had no time for tea with his younger sister. He'd wanted hide-and-go-seek on the hundred-acre woods we owned. He did it up right, too. Camouflage. He came out wearing a parka with leaves and sticks glued on the back.

Riley had choked up. She was so proud.

Kai cleared his throat, an expectant look on his face. He was asking me this question because my time was up. I had to

go back to being a doctor or decide on a different path.

“I’m going to go back.” I decided as I said this, and it felt right.

“You sure?” he asked. “You don’t have to do medicine. Or you don’t have to do it now. You can take time off.”

I shook my head, feeling it in my gut. “Melissa would be pissed if I did that. I need work, to be honest. I’ll be a better surgeon, for her.”

He nodded. That was done.

\* \* \* \*

“Brooke called, asked why you aren’t returning her calls,” Tanner informed me over the phone. I’d been back at work for two months now. And I’d been avoiding Brooke’s calls. She’d just had a high-risk pregnancy. Millie was still in the NICU.

“I don’t want her to know,” I told him. “The stress for her? I don’t want to be a part of that.”

Tanner sighed. “You sure?”

“I’m sure. Tell her I’m busy. Tell her I love her, but I can’t talk to her about this. I will, just not yet. She needs to focus on her family, on her new little girl.”

“Okay.”

I heard the sarcasm in his voice, and I almost smiled. Almost.

Brooke probably wouldn’t believe him. “You need to sell it, Tanner. I mean it. If anyone can, it’s you.”

“Riley wants to tell her.”

Kai’s wife. I loved her to death, but I shook my head as I held the phone up. “She can’t. I can’t handle Brooke falling apart over me. Put it that way to her.”

“I will.” He paused. “I’ll sell it, Jonah. Don’t worry. We love you. Just know that.”

I was loved. I felt it every day from my siblings. I'd never thought otherwise.

It was a blessing.

My throat swelled. "I love you, too."

## Chapter Eight

JONAH

*Six months later*

I was finishing dictating my notes when my phone lit up.

**Crowler: Hey! We're heading your way. You don't get a say. We know people, know you're not on call this weekend. We need group time together. Badly.**

I'd had the phone on silent while I was working, and now that I saw this text, I could see more behind it, including one from my brother.

**Tanner: In town. Want to meet up.**

I thumbed a response.

**Me: Finishing my notes. Where are you?**

*Crowler calling.*

I picked up, leaning back. "Hey, man."

"Bennett! You texted back."

I just laughed, because this was Crowler. He was nicknamed Crowler for a reason. It was a long story, but it had to do with a night of howling and crawling.

There might've been drinking involved, too.

And Hawaiian shirts.

He and some others had been in my core unit from the first year of med school. It was rare, but sometimes we got an overlapping weekend off.

Seemed like this was one of them.

*Beep beep.*

I put the phone on speaker, but checked the incoming text.

**Tanner: Not an option. Tell me where you are.**

Fuck's sakes. My family probably had an app on my phone to show when I was using it.

“What are you guys thinking for tonight? Who's all in town?”

“Well, Bubs. Carlster. Babs. Yours truly, and uh, oh, Samsonite.”

Those nicknames were used *only* by our group, and only when we were together.

Bubs and Babs were a couple, like Melissa and I had been. Unlike Missy, Babs was still breathing. Pain sliced through me, but I swallowed, pushing it down.

After Melissa died, her family wanted nothing to do with me. I tried calling her parents a few times, and Oliver more than a few times, but her dad told me to leave them alone.

I did. I left everyone else alone, too, my family included.

They still hadn't found Melissa's killer, and until they did, I wanted nothing to do with any of them. Might not make sense, but it was the only thing that pushed the burn down inside of me. Maybe I was punishing my family—I was punishing myself for sure—but the need to hurt had only grown in the last nine months. Doing medicine was the only thing keeping me going.

But I could stop, *would* stop, when Kai brought me Melissa's killer.

After that, well... I didn't care. I just wanted her killer.

Kai had said he'd do it, but it'd been nine fucking months.

Tanner reaching out was for Tanner. If they had the guy, Kai would be in touch. That's how Kai was.

“Hey,” Crowler broke into my thoughts. “Samsonite wants me to ask if you're up for a trip this weekend.”

I frowned, coming back to our phone conversation. “I thought you said you're coming to town?”

“We are, but Samsonite just got off the phone with someone, and she got tickets for a Mustangs game in Kansas City. Want to go?”

“How many tickets?”

I heard him echoing the question to her, and heard her response, “Eight.”

He came back. “Eight, so all of us and if we wanted to bring a couple friends.”

“How’d she get eight tickets to a professional hockey game?”

“Not sure...”

She said something to him on his end, and he came back. “Her sister is banging one of the players. I guess he hooked her up. You in?”

My phone buzzed again.

**Tanner: Time’s up.**

I growled internally as I stood, grabbing my things. “I’m coming, but we gotta leave now.”

“Sure thing, but—”

“Text me the details. I’m on the move now.”

“Okay, Budderoni. Bring on the puck bunnies.”

I snorted because he had no idea what that actually meant.

I left the clinic, went to the apartment I was using, and packed a bag. When I’d finished, I checked outside. Kai had a guard on me, as he had all year. Ezekiel. I’d let him stay, trying to do things the safe way, until today. He was parked in the back corner of the lot, and I could see him on the phone. Maybe he was talking to Tanner, maybe not, but this weekend, I didn’t want anyone tailing me.

When I was working, he stayed a reasonable distance away. That had been my only stipulation. Maybe I should give up medicine, but I hadn’t gotten to that yet. And until I did, I

didn't want my coworkers, colleagues, classmates, and patients to know who I was.

The reason Melissa was dead.

## Chapter Nine

### JONAH

I ditched Ezekiel in the parking lot outside my building and met my friends at the airport. They'd been heading my way when Samsonite got the tickets, and because the Minneapolis airport was the biggest one in the area, I met them there. By the time I checked in and got through security, the plane was starting to board as I got to the gate.

"Bennett!" Crowler was the first to greet me, his hand up as he stood in line.

I met it, fitting my palm into his, and we clasped each other across the back.

Behind him, Bubs and Babs gave me a hug. Neither knew that this killed me, because they were supposed to be Melissa and me.

I gave each of them a smile and a hug back.

Carlster was next, sporting a full beard.

Then came Samsonite, famous for quoting *Dumb and Dumber* for an entire evening once, and the only one who didn't give me a warm greeting. Instead, she gave me an uneasy smile, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. "Jonah."

I nodded. "Yo, Sams."

It'd been like this since Melissa died. She and Sams had been roommates.

I shared a look with Carlster, who only raised his eyebrows with a small shake of his head. He and Sams had some type of relationship, but I didn't know what it was. He moved forward in line, along with the others, and Sams moved behind me.



I glanced back over my shoulder. “So your sister scored these tickets?”

She nodded, looking away. “You know hockey?”

“I know a bit. Which player?”

“Franklin?”

I nodded. He was good. He wasn’t the team’s star, but he was one of their best. “I think I read he was recently divorced.”

“They aren’t serious, but my sister...” She looked past me, hugging herself. “She knows how hard our stuff is and offered it up as a getaway. I’m glad you came.” Her gaze found mine on that last statement.

Right. *Melissa*.

I stiffened. “It’s been a hard...year.”

“I’m glad you stayed in medicine.”

I frowned at her.

She saw my look. “I mean, you could’ve taken time off, but then sometimes you don’t come back.”

I nodded. “It’s the only thing keeping me going.”

“I get that.”

\* \* \* \*

Because life is like that, Sams had the seat next to mine on the plane. Halfway through the flight, she turned to me. “She talked to me about you, you know.”

My eyebrows furrowed. “About what?”

“That you never talked about your family.”

“Oh.”

“I have friends at your clinic, and I asked them,” she blurted. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to pry into your life, but

they told me they never see you with anyone. Like, around town. Your clinic is in a small town. They'd know. Are you..." She stopped, staring ahead at the seat before her. "Are you alone going through this? You shouldn't be. I... I loved Missy, but I have Carl, and I have my family. You shouldn't be alone, Jonah."

I gave her a smile, knowing she was trying to read me, and I didn't let anything show. Everything was locked up inside. Like a jail cell. I'd spent my whole life perfecting this skill.

"I'm doing okay, Sams."

That was all I said. I'd been lying since I started medical school, but that didn't mean I enjoyed adding extra lies on top of the necessary ones.

She searched me, studying, but after a bit, she let out a breath of air. Her smile seemed more genuine, more relaxed. She slouched back in her chair. "Good. I didn't... I mean, I just wanted to do what Melissa would want. She'd worry about you. She'd want you to be with people who love you."

*Fuck me.*

I gave her another one of my easygoing grins. "Can you believe we actually have a full weekend away? How about getting some drinks and starting it off the right way?"

She hit the button for the flight attendant. "I am down for that."

\* \* \* \*

When we landed, everyone turned their phones on.

I didn't.

I bought a prepaid one on the way out of the airport. I'd be using it for the weekend.

"What happened to your other phone?" Crowler asked when I gave him the number.

“Stopped working. I’ll take it in when we get back, get it fixed.”

His head bobbed up and down. “Cool. We got an Airbnb for the weekend, but there’s a pub not far from it. Want to grab a beer while the chicks get ready?”

“I will get a drink wherever you want this weekend.”

“Right on, my medicinal brother. Right. Fucking. On.”

## Chapter Ten

### JONAH

Turns out I was the only one who understood hockey.

When we got to the game, I tried to explain the rules and penalties, but by the time we got through the first period, the girls told me to save my breath.

Even so, watching hockey was a rush. I'd forgotten how much I used to love this sport. In Canada, hockey was a way of life, a religion to some.

I'd never played. No way would they let a Bennett play. The other players wouldn't have touched the ice if I got on it. So I watched and cheered, got drunk with Tanner a few times.

I missed those times.

A pang filled my chest.

I missed my family. I missed Brooke, Tanner, Kai.

*Melissa.*

The arena melted away for a second.

*"Jonah, Jonah, Jonah."*

She'd liked to say that and then laugh as I tackled her in bed, rolling her underneath me.

A wave of emotion passed through me.

My chest felt tight. Pain radiated through me, like someone was cutting me open, one slice at a time. I missed her so much.

*"Bennett."*

I glanced around. Crowler needed to stop using my last name. Tanner spent time in Kansas. We had business here, but I didn't know what or how, so coming here had been a risk, but it was a calculated risk. What were the chances I'd run into

any of his guys? But still. Crowler yelling my name was an *unnecessary* risk.

He waved from the aisle. “I’m going for beer. Want some?”

I looked over the stands again. They were starting the third period soon, and my chest was still tight. I could feel Melissa everywhere, so I stood to follow him. “I’ll come with.”

“Right on.”

I waited till the top of the stairs before I grabbed him. “Do me a favor?”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Stop calling me by my last name, yeah? JoBro is fine.”

“Nice! I love it. JoBro it is.”

*Crowler.* So easy.

We went to get beer for everyone, and I was JoBro from there on out. Crowler made sure to announce to everyone the name I now preferred. Bubs and Babs laughed. We were all about the nicknames in this group, but I didn’t miss the look Carlster and Sams gave each other.

\* \* \* \*

“Cutler Ryder could have my babies,” Babs sighed in our Uber after the game.

We’d gone to a nearby bar, and now two hours later, we were driving somewhere else. I wasn’t really paying attention.

It was bliss.

Cutler Ryder was the star player for the Mustangs. He’d scored three of their four goals tonight in their win over Vegas. Far as I could tell, since his picture was plastered everywhere, he was the face of the team, too.

“Me, too.” Samsonite sighed. Both girls were drunk in the backseat.

“I’d bang him, if I was a female.”

Crowler was also drunk.

The only one sober was Carlster.

I had a steady buzz going, which I was enjoying. Melissa was still here, but not as haunting. Everything else had been pushed back, too.

“Pretty sure the dude is married and has lots of babies, if the Dirty Rag is true,” announced the Uber driver.

Everyone stopped talking for a moment.

Crowler, face scrunched up. “The fuck you say? A Dirty Rag?”

The driver laughed, hitting a signal and turning out of town. “It’s the local gossip site. You guys said Bresko’s, right?”

Samsonite leaned forward. “I think. That’s the club my sister said they’d be at.”

“You know people there?” the driver asked. “Your name is on the immediate-entry list?”

Sams frowned. “Why?”

“Cause they don’t do lines,” the driver explained. “If you’re on the list, I can drop you right at the front. If you’re not, you have to wait in your car. It’s a process they have.”

“We can’t just get dropped off and wait in line like normal clubs?”

“Not here. There’s a line, but you gotta wait in your vehicle to get to the line. I don’t mind either way, but if you don’t have immediate access, I gotta charge you an extra waiting fee.”

Samsonite got on her phone, and ten minutes later, she said, “My sister is there. We can be dropped off. She put my name on a list, I guess.”

“All of us?” I asked.

She went back to typing.

Her phone lit up a second later. She read the text out loud, “Franklin gave your name and however many guests you have. Ask for the Mustangs’ private box. They’ll bring you to us.”

The driver whistled, making another turn onto a dark road. We’d gotten off the interstate. “Didn’t know I had hockey royalty in here. You know Franklin?”

“He’s dating my sister,” Sams explained.

He whistled again. “He’s one of the best we got. Heard his contract is up for negotiation again soon. I hope he doesn’t leave. Finally got our team to jibe a while back—wouldn’t want to lose that. We love the Mustangs here in Kansas City.”

“Uh. Yeah,” Sams said. “I’ll share that with her.”

\* \* \* \*

Samsonite gave our names at the door, and they waved us through.

I hadn’t been expecting a pitch-black nightclub. After a moment, I could see there were lights on the floor. A second later, a staffer came over, and then we were moving.

I glanced back to see one of the bouncers studying me.

I frowned. A frisson of alarm tried to penetrate my buzz, but I shrugged it off.

No way anyone could know who I was, right?

I just wanted a weekend, one weekend away.

We weren’t in Texas. I wasn’t anywhere outside my family’s territory. We were firmly inside it. Everything would be fine.

I didn’t need to worry about anything.

I was JoBro tonight.

\* \* \* \*

## CARSON

I found myself in the middle of the dance floor, but I had no idea how I got here.

I mean, I sort of did.

I knew my sister had called, telling me there was a big Mustangs hockey game tonight. She'd coaxed me into using my vacation time to get the week off before her wedding. So here I was. We'd gone to the game—her fiancé was a big fan—and now we were at a nightclub, dancing in the middle of a techno wave. Neon lights flashed in the ceiling and on the floor, and lights outlined the exits, but the rest of the space was almost pure darkness.

My sister leaned in, her hand on my hip. "Isn't this great?" She had to yell for me to hear.

I didn't bother responding. She'd stopped being sober enough to hear me two hours ago, so I moved her hand to my face and nodded. I tried to be enthusiastic about it. That tended to translate better in the drunk language, and it did. My sister squealed—I could still hear—and wrapped her arms around my neck.

She yelled again, "I'm so happy you got time off."

*Time off.* Yeah. That's what it is.

I kept dancing, but my mind wandered.

I couldn't stop it.

I enjoyed my work. Being a forensic technician was the *bomb* in my mind, but I was different lately.

I had changed.

I couldn't describe it.

Just, there was an ache inside of me. It was weird, and frankly, pissing me off.



I shouldn't still be thinking about some guy I saw one night, one time. But I was. He was in me for the month after I saw him, and the month after that, and after that—until I couldn't handle it anymore.

I tried to stop myself from thinking back on that night, but it took such work to numb my brain. I couldn't change that I had been there, coming in to do those late-night tests on a body. I knew she was Melissa Rainsley now, because I'd done my research. And I knew her fiancé's name, Jonah Bennett.

I'd found some pictures of the two of them online, and they'd been adorable. If I'd seen them in real life, happy and together, I would've hated them on sight for being so perfect. So *right*.

I knew he'd been in medical school. He had no search history, no social media, but his classmates did. It was scary what you could find in the social media world.

Once again, I shook off my thoughts of him and the fact that he lived two states north of where I grew up, but I couldn't escape it.

I'd never been the same since that night.

I couldn't get his face out of my mind, and I had no clue why.

The DJ hit a new beat, cranking up the volume, and I put everything I had into turning my mind off.

One night. *Please*.

## Chapter Eleven

### JONAH

I was in a booth. Some chick was grinding on top of me, and I was gone.

I wasn't here. I wasn't touching her.

I was with Melissa, feeling her curves, her ass, her pussy.

I didn't care who this was. In my head, she was the love of my life.

Groaning, I grabbed the back of her head and tugged her close. My mouth dropped on to hers, hungry.

*Fuck.* I needed this. I needed one more night of her.

*Melissa.*

*Please.*

She groaned, winding her arms around my neck, and shifted, pressing down on my dick.

I didn't care.

I was ready to fuck her right here, right now, but something in the back of my head held me off. It was irritating. Like a bug, pestering me.

She moved her body over mine, and my hand swept down.

A taste.

I'd get her off, then handle shit somewhere else. I'd take her with me. *Melissa.* That's who I'd take with me. But as my fingers tunneled up into her, I knew it wasn't right. That wasn't her pussy. It wasn't her moans. She didn't move the way Melissa did when I was working her over.

I moved my forehead down, pressing into her shoulder, and forced my eyes open.

Flashing neon lights blinded me.

Blonde hair came into focus.

That's right.

I had no clue who this girl was, but we were in a club.

I looked over. Crowler was next to me, a girl on top of him.

Carlster and Samsonite were in the corner of the private box, talking to a big guy and a girl that looked like Samsonite. *Ah...* That's how we got here. That was Sams' sister and Franklin, a hockey player. I kept looking, watching the crowd in the box. It was a large area. No, wait. There were two boxes attached. People flowed from one to the other and back.

I scanned again. Bubs and Babs were gone. Knowing them, they probably went back to the Airbnb for private time.

I couldn't blame them. I would've done the same myself.

The girl moved over me, now reaching for my dick. I looked down, feeling detached from my body. She was riding my fingers. I had two in her, and she was going to town. I blinked a few times, my gaze swinging to the other side of the box. There were people there, Tanner and—*what?!*

I froze.

Tanner was *here*.

He stood at the edge of the box, looking down at the dancers below. Two other guys were with him—I knew those guys, too. They were hockey players. Cutler Ryder and Hendrix... I couldn't remember his name, but what the fuck?

As if sensing my gaze, Tanner glanced back, saw me watching him, and flashed me a smirk. He said something to the hockey players, who glanced at me, and then he began to move my way.

I was about to throw the girl off me, but Tanner was already here.

He pushed me back down in the booth. "Stay, brother."

The girl sat back, a hazy look in her eyes as she blinked at Tanner beside me. Then, she smiled, slow and sultry, and leaned forward to kiss him. She thought this was going to be a threesome. *No way in hell*, but I did nothing, knowing Tanner would.

He scoffed, touching her forehead as he shoved her off of me. “You’re not my type, sweetie. You’re not my brother’s either.”

I groaned, closing my eyes and letting my head fall back. “Fuck me.”

Crowler lifted his head from deep-throating his girl and sent Tanner a frown. “Who’s this, dude?”

Tanner looked at him, his eyes sharpening.

*Fuuuck.*

Tanner knew I kept our family a secret. He knew the deal, but he was here, and they were here and... Chaos was about to ensue.

Tanner raised an eyebrow, mocking me as his smirk deepened. “Should I do the introductions, or would you like to, *JoBro?*”

I stifled a groan. I had no clue how he knew about that, but I wasn’t surprised.

Adjusting myself, I leaned forward, raking—shit. I used *one* hand to rake through my hair.

I needed to sober up fast. This club was making me drowsy, or maybe that was just the liquor.

“Jonah.”

I ignored Tanner, because fuck him.

Shoving to my feet, I looked around.

There were four guards in the box, and all were watching me, well, Tanner, too, but mostly me. I was the wildcard here.

I shook my head. “What are they authorized to do?” I sent a mocking look to Tanner. “Tackle me? Restrain me?”

He stood, scowling right back at me. “They’ll do whatever I tell them.”

“They work for me, too.”

Crowler’s eyebrows shot up. Guess he could hear us. He edged the girl off him and stood.

“No. They don’t,” Tanner countered. “These are my guys. You didn’t want yours, *remember?*”

*Melissa.*

My stomach sank. I felt ice inside of me, saturated in torture. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck you.” Tanner moved into my face.

He didn’t get it.

I could see the wildness in him, wanting to unleash. That’s how he always was.

That wasn’t me, but I had wildness inside of me, too—the need to hurt someone, hurt anyone because *I* was hurting. I hated it.

Hated. It.

Actually, I hated everything.

Myself.

My life.

My family.

The world.

That she wasn’t here.

I could keep it away, keep it manageable if I was working, if I was around friends—because they didn’t know me. They weren’t my shelter. Tanner was. Kai was. Brooke was. My family was, and because Tanner was here, I was feeling goddamn everything.

I wanted to hurt him for that.

But Tanner knew me, too. He was reading me, and like a switch had been flipped, his anger dissipated.

“Jonah...” He said it low, but I caught it.

I shook my head, shoving him. “Get *away* from me.”

“Tanner?”

A new guy had approached—no, I knew him. That hockey star guy, and he was frowning at Tanner.

They’d been talking before Tanner came over.

“You know him?” I asked Tanner.

“We do business together,” the guy said. “I’m a silent investor here.”

*Business?* I swung my gaze to Tanner. “He’s a hockey player.”

Tanner’s smile was tight, but he shrugged. “We can talk about that later, if you actually want to know.”

“When I heard Tanner was in town, I wanted to come out and see him,” the guy added. “He doesn’t stick around that often.”

*No shit.*

“JoBro?” Crowler was looking around.

I glanced over. Samsonite and Carlster were headed our way. They’d noticed something was happening.

I needed to get out of here.

I was about to lose my shit.

Tanner moved closer. “You gotta chill right now.”

I knocked him back, shaking my head.

Everyone was too close, too in my business.

My head was swimming.

*Her.* I missed her.

Why wasn’t she here?

Why did she have to die?

The guards moved in. They didn't seem to like how I handled Tanner.

That was fine.

If Tanner owned this club, that meant I owned this club. Family business was family business whether we were a part of managing it or not. That was how Kai handled things, so I could destroy what I wanted.

When the first guard touched my arm, I swung. My mind went blank.

But then it registered—these weren't our normal guards. One raised a taser, but as he was about to light me up, Tanner grabbed him. “No!”

The guards backed off.

“No!” I went after them, needing this. I needed to feel on the outside what I felt on the inside.

Tanner grabbed me, wrapping me in his arms, putting me in a hold.

We'd learned this when we were kids, but I was beyond any clear thinking. I was still trying to swing, needing an out.

Crowler stood slack-jawed. Samsonite was crying, pale. And Carlster just frowned. Not much fazed that guy. The rest of the guards had pushed back the hockey players and the crowd in the box.

“He's my brother,” I heard Tanner shouting over my head. “Hurt him and you're dead.”

He got a better hold on me and applied pressure.

He was putting me out.

I wanted it.

I wanted to be with her.

\* \* \* \*

I came to and immediately knew we were still at the club. I could hear the bass from the music through the floorboards, but we were in an office. I lifted my head to look around. *A big office.* Couches lined the entire side of it, and forty people could've sat where I was.

It was more of a small event room.

Sitting up, I looked behind me. A tinted-glass window overlooked the dance club below. At the far end of the office was a bar, and I could see several people gathered there in the semi-darkness. A door in the corner opened, showing a bathroom inside, and Samsonite came out, drying her hands.

I swung my legs down, and a door at the other end of the room opened. Tanner and the hockey guy emerged. They shook hands, and the hockey star headed back out to the club.

Tanner glanced my way, realized I was awake, and motioned for me.

*Right.* Time to deal with real-life shit.

I stood, my head pounding.

“Jonah.” Samsonite moved toward me.

“No,” Tanner barked. “He deserves to have that headache for a little while longer.” He nodded sharply toward me, and I made my feet move.

The headache pounded into me, keeping rhythm with the music. He was right. I did deserve it. I made my way toward him.

Crowler came over, but not super close since Tanner seemed territorial for some reason. He looked at him and turned to me. “You okay?”

I nodded, grabbing the back of my neck, feeling a knot there. “I’m fine.” I scanned the room, all my friends were here. And all were eyeing me with concern.

I shook my head. “You guys can take off if you want. Family drama aside, I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?” Samsonite moved forward.



Tanner made a growling sound behind me. He didn't like that outsiders were concerned about me when he was around. That made me smile.

I had missed him.

He shook his head and moved through the door again. "Get rid of your friends. We have business to deal with."

I frowned, but once he closed the door behind him, I reassured them I'd be fine. "For real. I've been avoiding my family for a while," I explained. "He's due some answers from me."

Carlster nodded, moving for the exit.

Samsonite hugged me. "Your brother is hot, but scary. If you need us, just shoot me a text. Okay?"

I stepped back from her. "I'm good. I promise."

She nodded, squeezing my hand before going to where her sister and the hockey boyfriend waited by the door.

Crowler grabbed me in a fierce hug, adding one hard pound on my back. "Care about you, man." He stepped back, dipping his chin as he moved to follow them back out into the club.

"Jonah!" Tanner called from inside the room he'd gone into.

Right.

It was family time.

## Chapter Twelve

### JONAH

“Samsonite?” Tanner sat behind a desk, leaning back. “Crowler? Carlster? They told me about Bubs and Babs. What kind of friends do you have?”

“We’re big on nicknames.” I shrugged, scanning the room for where he might keep some painkillers. Or alcohol. Either would help.

He rolled his chair back, pulled open a drawer, and set something on the desk. “There.”

He had put two Advil on the desk for me.

I snagged a bottle of whiskey, popped the pills in my mouth, and took a drink. I swallowed them with a nice burn afterwards.

Tanner frowned as I retreated to a couch in the corner, easing myself down. This office had the same setup as the connected other room I’d come to in. One wall was tinted glass, and I was able to look down, watch the people on the dance floor below.

“How’s your head?”

*Pounding.* “It’s fine.”

He snorted. “You’re such a liar. Why don’t you tell me the truth? Remember what that’s like? Been so long since you told us the truth. Maybe you don’t remember anymore.”

I elaborated on the nicknames, ignoring the other bite from him. “Crowler’s name is Gabe. Samsonite’s real name is Hailey. Carlster is actually Ayush. Bubs is Mitch. Babs is Catherine. We don’t like real names because when we’re all together, we like to get away from the pressure of being doctors. Nicknames help with that, for some reason.”

“That guy called you JoBro.”

I laughed. “That’s not a special nickname or anything. I told him today to call me that instead of yelling out *Bennett* every other minute. Until this weekend, I’d been avoiding them as well. And like you all, they’re fed up with it.”

Tanner wore a slight smile now. “Good. Because if anyone nicknames you, it should be me.”

I grunted, taking another sip of whiskey. “Noted for future reference.”

He laughed. “Good.”

I turned to watch the dancers. Tanner kept watching me.

After a bit, he said, “You going to lose your shit again? Or is that drama done for the night?”

A sour taste filled my throat—the memory of her. I couldn’t get her out of my head. I took another swallow of whiskey, but the burn didn’t help. “I don’t know.”

I was a mess.

It’d been nine months since Melissa died. When was grief finished? Was it ever? I hated this, all of it.

“I just miss her.”

“I know.”

I hung my head, holding on to that whiskey. It was a lifeline right now. “She died because of me. I can never make that right. Ever.”

“You can kill him...”

“You haven’t found him!” I snapped, looking up.

Tanner eyed me evenly. “We haven’t found *him*, but we know his name. He’s a contract killer, and he only comes out to do work once every two years. He disappears right after a hit. Whoever paid him, paid him *a lot* to hit your girl. The guy won’t accept another job for a year, at least, and wherever he hides, he does it extremely well. Kai is handling negotiations

to get a location for him in a week. I didn't come to check on you. I came to ask if you want to be there when we get him."

His words hung between us for a moment. I needed to process what he was telling me.

"Why *the fuck* didn't you lead with *that*?"

Tanner chuckled. "What? And miss not being bored and getting to chase my little brother to Kansas City, eight hours from where he was supposed to be, and finding him in one of our businesses?"

I had to smile at that. "Since when do we own nightclubs?"

"For a while, actually. When Kai sent me down here, he wanted to be half legit. This is a legitimate one."

"You're partners with that hockey guy?"

Tanner laughed. "Kai's the one who vetted him first."

"Right," I mocked. *Man*. It felt good to be with family again, felt right. "When I'm with you guys, there's no holding back. I..." This was hard to explain.

Tanner got quiet, but I couldn't look at him—not when I explained this.

A part of me was ashamed.

I looked out at the dancing crowd, not really seeing them. "I feel secure with family, but when you guys aren't around, I have to handle life. Everything in my head gets pushed back. You know?" I looked to see if he understood me. "I can push her back."

He shuddered before he nodded. "Jo, we get it, but we love you. We're always going to worry about you and want to check on you. That's our job. You'd do the same for us, and you know it."

He was right. If the situation was reversed, I'd be so far up his ass it'd almost be incestuous.

I went back to watching the dancers. "I love you, brother."

"Love you, too."

Then I saw her, smack in the middle of the dancers, the light flashing over her every third second.

Not Melissa—never her again—but the other one from that night.

*Carson.* Her name was Carson, and she was here.

I cursed, shoving up and heading for the door.

“What’s going on?” Tanner called after me.

“The lab chick is down there.”

In an instant he was up and following me, and I knew he’d call in the guards, because he was like me.

In our world, there were no coincidences.

## Chapter Thirteen

CARSON

I moved toward the bathroom—more like stumbled to the bathroom—sweating, with this lacy, long-sleeve top plastered to me. I had no idea how my sister, Melody, had talked me into wearing this. At least I hadn't listened to her when she said to go without my bra.

Inside the bathroom, the music was still pounding, and I was pretty sure there were two girls having sex in a stall behind me, but I could see my bra. And it was a cute bra. A black, slinky bra.

It was the one thing on me that I'd actually picked.

Melody had chosen the leather pants, and they were sticking to me, too.

And the heels.

I growled, staring at myself.

I needed to change this. I needed to muster up my inner Tim Gunn and work some magic, because I was going to sweat myself to death out there. Thank goodness I hadn't been drinking.

Okay.

This shirt...

I hadn't picked it out, but it was mine. I couldn't remember when I bought it, where I bought it, or if I'd ever worn it. *Done.* I heaved it off, tried not to take a whiff of it, and I yanked on the sleeve. I pulled, tore, hacked, decimating what had once been a beautiful creation, I supposed. I wasn't very fashion forward. I wasn't even entirely sure what that phrase meant. What I was, though, was logical and functional, and I couldn't cut my pants off, so the shirt would have to do.

I removed the sleeves and shortened the hem, and when I put it back on, it was a lacy, cropped tank top. Thank goodness for my early-morning late runs, which was me running because I was late for work, early in the morning. Hoof it all the way to the lab enough times at a dead sprint, and anyone could develop some stomach definition.

But anyway, *score*. I could breathe.

With that thought, and the fact that I'd just emptied my bladder, maybe I would have a drink?

I was thinking about that when I stepped out of the bathroom, and not at all focused on my surroundings. I knew better than that, except right now, it seemed I didn't.

Either way, two guys blocked me.

I couldn't see past them. It was just massive chests, and one grabbed my arm and pushed me back into the bathroom.

"Hey!" I tried to pull my arm clear, but dammit, I couldn't. He had an iron grip.

The other one went to the stalls and banged on the doors. "Party's over. Club's closing. Get out."

I heard grumbling, and then the door opened and two girls came out. Both shot us (myself included) nasty looks as they went past. One reached back to tug her skirt down, and they swept right out.

I should've asked them for help. What was I doing? "Hey \_\_\_"

"Too late." The guy holding me pushed me away, blocking the door.

That's when I got a good look at him, and my knees gave out.

Recognition jolted me, and I was on my ass.

These freaking heels. *Last time I listen to my sister.*

When I looked back up, my hand on the sink behind me, I saw a ghost. Well, not a ghost, but whoa.

My eyes bulged, and my heart dropped. “You’re...”

*Jonah Bennett.*

My brain clicked, and I clamped my mouth shut, two seconds from spilling and showing how much of a stalker I was.

His hotness had not dimmed at all. *Jesus*. This guy just got better. It was such a shitty thing for me to think, but grief made him sizzle. He had a five o’clock shadow going, and the whole angry/stricken vibe just emanated from him.

I was speechless, and I was never speechless. I always had something to say.

Might’ve been why my brain was working overtime.

*God.*

I wanted to have this guy’s children.

I was hungry for him.

So embarrassing.

But my stomach did growl, and my vagina pounded.

He raised an eyebrow, watching me. He stood over me, perfect position for, you know... Here I was on my knees—and there went another staccato drumline in my lady parts. My clit was getting in on the action.

I needed a life. That was my problem.

First time leaving the state, taking time off, and here I was: about wetting myself because I was hot for a grieving guy who looked like he wanted to murder me.

The other guy came to stand next to him, and both looked down at me.

I recognized him, too. He was the blond hottie from that night in the morgue.

I sank down, letting my ass rest on the backs of my heels. “I know you two.”

“You’re smart.” The blond leaned down, took hold of my arm, and heaved me up. He gave me a smile that was *not* a



smile. It was a warning. “And you’re coming with us.”

“What?”

The blond steered me out of the bathroom, and I now wondered why he’d even taken me in there if we were going to leave right away. But as we walked, I was *very aware* of Jonah behind us. Was he checking out my ass? Logic pointed toward no, but a girl could wonder.

Then a door opened, and voices spilled out, along with footsteps descending on stairs. The first guy hit the hallway in front of us, and I froze. Whoa. I’d just watched that guy play hockey. He was a Mustang.

I opened my mouth when the blond muttered, “Shit.”

“I got it.”

A hand from behind touched my elbow. I knew whose hand that was. My body knew whose hand that was. A full-body shiver, the good kind, ran through me.

I had just a second to register all of that before the guy let me go, and Jonah turned me around and threw me over his shoulder. I yelped, but he had me anchored to him, hanging upside down.

A woman laughed as she passed us.

“Nice,” someone murmured.

“Hope you had a great evening,” the blond responded, so professional.

He sounded like a greeter at a store. Seriously.

Then they were gone, and I realized I’d missed my second chance to yell for help. These guys were kidnapping me.

Kidnapping. Me.

These guys.

What universe had flipped itself around and swallowed me up? This didn’t happen, *ever*, to someone like me.

It was my red hair. That’s why I was being taken.

That made no sense, but I was going with it.

My brain grasped for something to rationalize what was happening—fuck it. “Hey! What are you guys doing?” I finally asked.

Jonah chuckled, and I could feel it in my vagina, which was pressed against his shoulder. “How much have you had to drink?” he asked. “You’re way too slow on the uptake.”

I scowled at his ass. “You don’t have to be insulting.”

“She’s probably here with someone. You got her? I’ll head to security and find who she was with, make her excuses.”

“What?!” I tried to twist around to see him.

I couldn’t.

I went back to watching the ass below me.

Jonah ignored me, turning to go up the same set of stairs those people had come down from. “Not a problem. Your office?”

“My office. See you in a bit.”

I started to struggle. “Honestly. Put me down. I remember you, and this is—I don’t know what this is, but it’s outrageous. That’s what it is.”

The blond was gone now, and Jonah took me down a hallway.

Upside down, I could see a bunch of guys, looking like guards, standing outside a door.

“Hey! Help! He’s kidnapped me.”

Jonah ignored me, going right up to those guys, so I tried again.

“Hello?!”

One moved, but just to open a door. That was it.

We went inside.

The door closed behind us, and I twisted up in time to see that neither of those guards gave me a second look.

I growled. “What the hell?”

Jonah tossed me on a couch, and just as I started to look up, snarling at him, he followed me down.

I lay on the couch, spread eagle.

He wedged a knee right up between my legs, settled against my crotch. His hand found my throat, pinning me down, and he glared at me.

“Now that we’re alone. What. *The. Fuck.* Are you doing here?”

His hand tightened.

There was nothing sexy about this position. *At all.*

I had a strong feeling the actual truth wasn’t going to work here.

## Chapter Fourteen

JONAH

“Can’t we talk first before we start playing rough?” Lab Girl asked me.

*Who the hell is this chick?*

I mean, I knew who she was. I remembered her from that night. I remembered everything from that night.

Kai had bought our way into the morgue since Melissa’s family hadn’t been interested in me seeing her body. Then this woman had come in with the keys, and I’d given no fucks as to what Kai and his guys were going to do with her if she protested. Fortunately, she didn’t, instead, showing me kindness when I never expected it.

Because of that, I found myself easing up on her, just a bit. I stepped back, released her, and stood.

She sat up, adjusting her top—whatever kind of top that was—and brushed her hair out of her face.

I looked her over. *Jesus*. I felt myself getting hard, just looking at her.

She was medium height, with pale skin and pink lips made just for kissing. A smattering of freckles dusted her cheeks. Dark eyes. A great rack—both were a good handful. Her hair was blond with a reddish tint to it... *No*. She was a redhead with blond highlights.

She was knockout gorgeous, and I was definitely hard.

She had a healthy body. She was toned, like she ran, but lifted weights on the regular, too. She looked made for rough fucking. Nothing skinny about her.

She gave me a wary look and seemed to consider standing, but decided against it. Instead, she sat back, crossing her arms over her stomach. “You regularly greet people that way? A good manhandling?”

“You know me.” It wasn’t a question, because she did.

I remembered her recognition when she saw me in the bathroom, and sexual interest had come immediately after. She wanted me, and even now she was squirming on the couch.

If I touched her, I bet she was already wet. I moved closer, my mind already there, already wanting to bend down and dip in.

The door slammed shut behind us, and I whirled. I hadn’t heard Tanner come in, but he strode toward us, his eyes frosted. “Sorry, babykins, but your very wasted sister and her man accepted a ride home on the club. I passed along your message that you ran into an old friend and are heading back by yourself, since apparently you have your own hotel room.”

Her eyes bulged out, and her mouth dropped open. “Are you kidding?” she sputtered. “No way my sister would believe a stranger.”

He chuckled and tossed a phone to her. “She didn’t. She believed you.”

“What? How’d you get my phone?” She grabbed it, swiping her screen, and froze before lifting heated eyes my brother’s way. “How did you unlock it?”

“Funny how this nightclub has security cameras and can see when a person unlocks her own phone. Going through your texts to find the one labeled SIS was easy work after that.”

A full, red flush bloomed under her skin, traveling up as she glared at Tanner. “You asshole.”

Tanner glanced my way as he went over and sat next to her on the couch, resting his arm across the back. She scooted away, putting ten feet between them. There wasn’t much couch left behind her. She tried to watch both of us at once, her eyes darting back and forth between us.

A calculating look had formed in Tanner's gaze. She was a mouse to him, and he wanted to play.

"Give me that phone," I demanded.

Her head jerked my way, and Tanner was across the couch in a flash. He swiped it, unlocking it, and tossed it to me before she could do anything.

"Hey!"

I grabbed it, going across the room to the bar. Putting the phone on the counter, I moved behind, grabbing a glass of ice. "Either of you want a drink?"

"Are you high?" she asked,

Tanner laughed, strolling over to me. "I'll make the drinks. You do your research."

My brother knew me so well.

He picked up a glass and pointed at Carson with it. "You stay, but also, do you want a drink?"

She was still sputtering. "You two are nuts. You can't just kidnap—"

"Girl, stop talking," Tanner said, shaking his head. "We can and we did, and if you think you can do anything about this, maybe think back to the first night you met us. Remember the two big guys with us?"

Her mouth closed.

He shook his glass with the ice in it. "Remember the guns that they had?"

I was swiping through her phone, going over her texts, her phone calls, her contacts, the outgoing calls. I lingered on her text thread with SIS, seeing that she was originally from Kansas City. She was up early for her sister's wedding next weekend.

I went through a text thread she had with someone named Milo—a colleague, I was guessing. Milo told her to enjoy her time off, that she needed to take more time for herself.

What was I doing? Kai had an entire computer team to go through stuff like this.

I pulled my phone out and dialed him, showing Tanner who I was calling. His demeanor changed; some of the fun faded. He gave me a nod, his eyes darting toward Carson. He'd watch her.

With that, I went into Tanner's actual office room. Kai answered as I was shutting the door.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "It's almost two in the morning where you are."

I started to correct him, but he was right. Kansas City was in the same time zone as Minnesota. "I'm with Tanner."

"Yes. He said he was going to see you."

"We're in Kansas."

Kai was quiet. "Okay. What's going on, Jonah?"

"Remember that girl who helped us see Melissa's body?"

"The forensic technician, yes."

"She's here."

"In Kansas?"

"At the club Tanner owns."

"She was there when you guys were there?"

"Are. We're still here—"

"Leave."

"What?"

"Leave now. If she's working for a rival family, they might be on their way. Take her somewhere else. Check her body for a tracker."

*Oh fuck.* He was right. Why hadn't I thought of all of that?

I moved back to the other room, motioning for Tanner's attention. "We have her phone," I told Kai. "Could you—"

“I’m dispatching orders right now. Tanner knows the guy I’m sending to get the phone. He’s local. He’ll do an analysis there, where you guys are.”

“Okay...”

“You’re in Tanner’s area. Let him do the legwork. The girl is with you?”

I stopped and stared at Carson.

She hadn’t moved, but her flush had waned, along with her fight. She had folded in, hugging herself. She looked like she wanted to disappear.

“I’m looking at her.”

“Your job is her. She was taken with you at the morgue. She didn’t care about me or Tanner, but she liked you. Use that. Study her. Get to know her. You’re a genius, Jonah. Use some of that intellect and learn everything about her.”

My dick shouldn’t have been twitching at the thought of doing that, but it was. Which was uncomfortable.

“Got it.”

“Love you,” he said. “It’s nice to hear from you.”

He ended the call, and I put my phone in my pocket.

Then Tanner’s phone lit up, and he read the screen as he set the bourbon aside.

I went to Carson, motioning. “Get up.”

“What?”

“Get. Up.”

“Why?”

I didn’t wait, but I didn’t go for her arm. I took her hand, threading our fingers together, and I didn’t miss the way her body reacted. She shivered. I felt it through her fingers, but she cursed under her breath, gritting her teeth.

If she didn’t actually know why we were kidnapping her, she was great at acting.



I kept a firm hold on her hand, and I stepped in so I was looking down at her, in her space. Her breasts grazed my chest, and I ignored how that made me feel.

Her eyes darkened, holding mine, and she bit down on her bottom lip.

“Melissa was killed by a ghost,” I told her. “He approached me, asked my name, and then shot her. We weren’t in my family’s territory—a mistake I will never make again—but in our world, coincidences don’t happen. We’re close to finding this guy who was contracted to kill my fiancée. So you being here is not a coincidence. The timing, too. We need to find out who your real employer is.” I leaned down. She was shaking, but her eyes kept going to my mouth. I moved even closer. My breath washed over her, and I pulled her flush against me.

I could feel everything now. Her heat. Her pulse.

“You’re either going to help us or we’ll get the information another way. Either way, my brother and I will find out who you work for.”

I could feel the *thump thump thump* of her heart.

I moved my head back, studying every detail, every hair strand. “You shouldn’t have fucked with my family,” I said softly.

“I don’t even know who your family is.”

My gaze lingered on her mouth, wanting a taste. “If that’s the truth, you’ll soon find out. And you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

“Let’s move,” Tanner announced.

I stepped back, catching her as her knees sagged.

I turned to see Tanner at the door.

Still holding her hand, I pulled her forward, and we stepped out into the hallway.

An entire wall of guards waited there. As one, we moved to the exit.

\* \* \* \*

## CARSON

My social media research skills were lacking, *severely*.

I never would've found any of this about him, whoever he really was. Was his whole doctor charade just that? A farce?

He had my hand in his, and as we stepped into the hallway, twenty bodyguards surrounded us. Six on one side. Six on the other side. We had men in front of us and men behind us, and while we were walking, the blond asshole scrolled through his phone and acted like we were going on a casual stroll through some park.

It pissed me off.

I had no clue who these guys were, but they thought I worked for the guy who'd killed Jonah's fiancée? I guess? That didn't bode well. They were wrong about me, but my God... How to convince them? I needed to get out of this alive.

*Just stay alive.*

I started trembling again, because I shouldn't ever have had to think something like that.

Jonah tightened his hold on my hand.

I'd thought he was nice. I'd been wrong.

So fucking wrong.

## Chapter Fifteen

CARSON

We drove north out of the city, eventually turning in at a well-hidden driveway.

There was a gate. And woods. Lots of woods.

The driveway wound up to the front of a huge, sprawling one-story house.

I watched Jonah and his brother. Neither seemed worried about me studying our location.

Jonah took my hand again and led me inside. My heart sank. There were armed guards all over, a huge and expansive lawn, and trees.

There were so many trees everywhere. Inside, the house had more trees in a center atrium, and even sort of a yard. If I hadn't been brought here against my will, I would've thought that was super cool.

The front entryway was glass, and with glass doors opening to that atrium area, I could see all over the house. The kitchen was to the right, a living room across, and the room on the left looked like a library. There were a couple bedrooms. This was my dream house.

Fuck these guys. Just fuck them and their obvious extreme wealth.

Tanner's phone buzzed, and he halted.

Jonah turned back, waiting.

"I gotta go," Tanner said.

Jonah's hand flexed against mine, holding tight for a second. "What do you mean?"

Tanner was still focused on his phone. “I need to go meet the guy for the phone.” He looked up, grinning as his gaze found our entwined hands. “I’ll be gone the night. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

Jonah snorted, taking me down the hallway to the left. “That’s literally nothing.”

“Not true, little brother.”

Jonah tugged me forward through a myriad of hallways and took a left that seemed to go into an entirely different building. He pulled me into a back bedroom, and then through to the bathroom, which included the biggest shower I’d ever seen. It took up the entire side of the bathroom, and except for the tile against the wall, everything was clear glass. Not the smoky glass to help with privacy—this was totally clear. There was no privacy at all in this bathroom.

Jonah dropped my hand, stepped into the shower, and turned it on, ducking past the waterfall showerhead.

He tested the water, waiting until a bit of steam began to rise, then came back out.

“Strip,” he said.

I closed my eyes, because no way was this happening to me. Not me. This was a scene from a movie or something. But when I opened my eyes, he was still there, still waiting, and the look in his eyes was set. He was not messing around.

“No,” I croaked, stepping backward.

“Take your clothes off. Now.”

I shook my head again. “No. This is not happening.”

“I’m a doctor. I don’t give a fuck about nudity. Strip now, or I will strip you. I have to see if you have a tracker or not.”

*A what?* I frowned, but he wasn’t wasting any more time.

He came forward, taking my hand and spinning me. He trapped me against his body, and in the next second, my shirt was up and off. One snip, and my bra was gone. He ran his

hands over me. He was moving fast and efficiently, but thoroughly.

A tracker.

He thought I would have a tracker on my body?

What kind of world did he live in?

I broke away, holding my hands out toward him. “Please stop.”

This was so humiliating. I was burning up.

A flash of sympathy flared in his eyes. “If you have a tracker, I will find it. You have no option here.”

He didn’t care. My integrity was nothing to him.

Gah. I stepped back, some of my fight starting to fade, but *dammit*.

I undid my heels, tempted to throw them at him. But I didn’t, because I was half naked. I didn’t want any body parts rubbing against me right now.

The pants were next.

I unbuckled, wiggling them down, and stepped out of them. My thong was next. I tried to hide myself with my hair, but that was greasy from the nightclub. “Are you going to check my vagina?” I meant that as snark, but when he was quiet, I looked up. “I was joking.”

He wasn’t listening. He circled me, looking over my body.

He bent forward, looking at certain angles, and I realized he was looking for any bumps on my skin. He thought the tracker might be *in* me, but he was checking without touching me. I swallowed a sour taste in my mouth, refusing to be grateful for that small kindness.

After a moment, he stepped back and nodded toward the shower. “Go.”

I stepped inside, and *mannnnnn*, the water felt *nice*.

I turned towards the spray, giving him my backside.

When I turned back around, he was gone. My clothes were gone, too.

Fucking fucker fuck.

Grabbing the shampoo, I studied it. No clue what brand it was, but I was sure it cost \$500 a bottle. I was tempted to empty the entire thing on the floor, but something told me he wouldn't care.

Or notice.

Once I'd finished showering, I sat on the bed, a huge towel wrapped around me.

Jonah returned, carrying a pile of folded clothes, and placed them next to me. "Put those on."

He went to a dresser and pulled out a pair of socks.

I frowned but reached for the clothes. He had found me underwear, leggings, a bra, and a yoga top. There was a sweatshirt on the bottom, and damn—I would've loved to buy that sweatshirt if I found it in a store. It was the softest material I'd ever felt, and it was off-white. Cream.

I dressed, pulling everything on.

That's when I realized the socks weren't socks. They were a yoga type of shoe that looked like socks. They were comfortable. *Holy crap*. Rich people always got the best stuff.

"When does the interrogation start?" I asked.

He watched me with hooded eyes from across the room. "Tell me why you're here, why you were at Bresko's."

I frowned. "I thought you went through my phone."

"I want to hear it from you, in your words."

There was a look to him, like he was analyzing me. Maybe he was.

I sighed, so tired of all of this. I shrugged, sitting on the bed. "I'm from here. Grew up here all my life, and my sister is getting married next weekend. I'm a bridesmaid, or supposed to be one, and she called my boss and told her she'd gotten

tickets to the Mustangs game tonight. She got me a couple extra days off so I could come up early. After the game, she wanted to go to Bresko's. Said she got a VIP package from there."

"Who do you work for?"

I frowned. "The lab. I don't work for anyone else."

"I'm not too familiar with Bresko's, but with the exclusivity of it, I have a hard time believing a VIP package exists. So I'm asking again, who do you work for?"

I had nothing. No words. He knew who I worked for. "The *morgue*, in *Texas*."

His eyes flashed. "Either your story checks out or we find out who you're working for."

"I don't work for anyone else, just the lab. I'm not lying to you."

Jonah's eyes sparked, but it was dim. He was on low simmer.

And still gorgeous.

That wasn't fair. The universe shouldn't make men like him look like that.

"You're doing this—"

His phone buzzed. Text after text began coming through.

He stepped back, swiping open his screen. "Crowler..." He cursed, leaving the room.

This was my time. I had to try. I had to take it.

I had no idea when he'd come back, so I went to the window.

I opened it, holding my breath, but when no alarm sounded, I cranked it farther open and hauled myself through it. Thank goodness they didn't have screens here.

Hitting the ground, I landed on a sidewalk, and I crouched down. I imagined myself as an amazing kick-ass female spy. I didn't see anyone around.

*Holy shit.* I couldn't believe this luck, but I was going with it.

The yoga socks/shoes/whatever the hell they were, helped as I took off, running down a hill. There was minimal sound. A few leaves crunched, but that was it.

No guards ahead, they were all off to the side. One was back behind me. I just moved where those guards weren't, because I could see them. It was dark, but I could see their lights. They were walking. Probably a perimeter check? But so far, they didn't know I was here.

I kept going, and thank *God* for the running I could do. Anyone tells you to show up early for work, ignore them. Be late. You never know when or how it'll save your life.

I kept going and ran smack-dab into a few trees, their branches cutting my skin.

I kept my head down, running with an arm over my head to protect my face. It sort of worked. I was bleeding in a few spots, but I needed to get to the road.

*Keep going.*

*Keep going.*

I started to chant that phrase in my head.

Moving forward, stumbling, hitting a tree, and moving around it. Over and over.

I'd be black and blue by the end of this trek, but it'd be worth it.

Lord be with me today! Today, Lord! Right now! Today. Or tonight. I didn't think he cared. Sorry, He cared.

Still, I prayed under my breath as I chanted in my head, and then I stumbled down a hill and—*ALARM! ALARM!*

Lights flooded the woods.

They switched on, one section at a time, and now I saw them coming.



*WHO PUT LIGHTS IN A FOREST?! A freaking forest. My GOD!*

The lights turned on behind me.

*Switch.*

Ninety yards away.

I took off, not caring what I was going to hit.

*Switch.*

Sixty yards away.

I sprinted, blood gushing down my face.

*Switch.*

Thirty yards.

I couldn't see the road, but it had to be in front of me. Somewhere. It couldn't be that far, could it?

*BAM!*

*Switch.*

The lights over me came on, and I heard a siren start.

They'd spotted me.

They probably had cameras installed along with those lights, but fuck them if I was going to stop and wait.

I kept going, and since I could see now, I could go faster.

But the yoga shoes/socks weren't good for running long distance. They were letting me down.

I went another thirty yards before I heard the engines.

My heart sank, but dammit, I kept going. I hadn't fought when they took me. This might be my last chance.

A four-wheeler appeared and parked on a ridge to my right. All four guards hopped off, spreading out in front of it.

I waited, but they didn't do anything. They didn't come for me. They just waited.

That wasn't good.

Still, I kept running.

A second ATV appeared on the other side, and again, four guards got out, taking point in front of it.

Still waiting.

I heard another vehicle pull in behind me.

Another to the front.

And another, and another.

They were forming a circle, closing me in.

Those fuckers.

Seriously.

Goddamn fucking fuckers.

I kept on, tripping down another hill, and nearly ran into an ATV stopped in front of me.

A figure jumped down from it, pausing, but then making his way to me.

“Carson.”

*No, no, no.*

I kept going.

I tried for the left side, but the guards began moving towards me. Their guns pointed right at me.

“Carson.” He dropped his voice—trying to what? Be soothing?

Too late for that.

I tried right, and it was the same greeting. Guns pointing at me.

I stopped. I didn't have superhuman strength or the ability to climb trees.

Game over.

Jonah came closer as I stood still, my head held high.

Not down. Never down. Fuck down.

I wanted to see what was above me and around me. I wanted to make note of what was out here, because this wasn't the end. I'd try again, and I'd get free.

I would.

I wasn't done.

I wasn't out.

Jonah stopped next to me. "Are you done?"

I closed my eyes, my head tipped back. "Fuck you."

He didn't respond, but he took my arm, and his guards swarmed.

## Chapter Sixteen

CARSON

I put up no fight. I'd decided to store it for when I really needed it. Or that's what I was telling myself.

Jonah took me to the kitchen of this magnificent dream house and got out a first aid kit. I did nothing to pull my arm away when he started to tend to me.

I sat on the table, and Jonah poked and prodded me all over. He found every scrape and cut a tree or branch had made, and he cleaned the wounds. A couple needed stitches, and he did that, too. He was very proficient.

“This is actually what you do for a living?”

He'd been placing butterfly bandages over a cut on the back of my shoulder, but he paused and stepped back. He circled around in front of me, frowning. “What'd you say?”

It took a second before I realized my mistake.

Oh...

No. I wasn't supposed to know anything about this guy. Why would I?

He lowered his hands, standing very still.

I gulped, because fuck—this was not good.

I lowered my head. “I mean...”

“No, I heard you.” He set down the tweezers he'd been holding. “You know I'm a doctor?”

I looked straight ahead. I didn't know what to do here. I was caught, kind of, or at least it seemed that way.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Jonah hadn't said anything when he and the guards caught me in the woods. Nothing at all. He just caught me, and they brought me back, and he'd been cleaning me up. He'd had hardly any reaction at all until I went and said those words.

"You know what I do for a living?" he asked again.

"I know you do that, not your family stuff," I choked out, keeping my head down.

I tensed, waiting for his reaction.

Nothing.

It was silent.

"Explain," he said.

*Jesus.* I didn't want to.

I forced my eyes up at him.

He gave me a heavy look, and I couldn't decipher what he was thinking.

I shivered.

"Carson," he said quietly.

A second shiver passed through me.

I could feel blood trickling down my back. I reached behind me with some gauze.

"Keep going."

"No." I glared at him. "You still haven't said shit about who you are, who your family is, who you think I am. Nothing. You've kidnapped me. That's it. You made me strip and checked to see if I had a tracker? And what? Were you looking to see if it was under my skin? Like we're in a Jason Bourne movie or some crap like that? Are you insane?"

"I changed my mind. Stop talking."

I did. Gladly. I meshed my lips together, and when he stood and nudged my hand aside, I brought the gauze back to my lap. There was a good dot of blood there. I stared at it, not knowing why, but unable to look away from it.

Fuck it.

Just fuck it.

What did I have to lose?

Nothing.

“I remembered you after that night,” I said softly.

He had started to bandage that cut, but he paused a moment.

“It was her, now that I’m thinking about it. She—when she came in, I just thought how beautiful she must’ve been. You could tell. Sometimes we can’t, when they’re...you know, but with her, I *could* tell. I could tell right away. There’s always a feeling about them.”

Should I tell him about the other side of it all?

I looked back and found him staring at me.

Oh boy.

Okay.

Here we go.

I hoped he was open-minded. “I can *feel* them.”

His eyes sharpened, finding mine.

“When they’ve died, I can feel them.”

“Shut up.”

I didn’t. “If it’s their soul or—”

“Stop.”

“If it’s their, I don’t know—”

“Stop talking.”

“—their spirit. It’s *them*. I can feel them.”

“Shut up!” he roared, reaching for me.

His hand found my throat, but there was no pinch, no squeeze. It was all for show.

“I knew she was loved when she was wheeled in. I can’t tell you how I knew it, but I did.” I swallowed, feeling his hand tighten over my throat. “Her family came, and I knew it wasn’t by them. I’d never felt that before. Ever. But I knew. I *knew*, and then you showed up, and I swear, I could feel her. I could hear her say, *finally* to me, like she’d been waiting for you.”

“Shut,” he growled. His hand twitched, tightening on my throat. “Up.”

I wanted to. I just couldn’t.

Not about this. Never about this.

My voice dropped low, almost to a whisper. “She left.”

His hand tightened, painfully.

“After you were there, she was gone.”

He closed his hand, sucking a breath in, and pinned me to the table. His eyes were feral.

I closed my eyes, feeling his hand on my throat, but my God, I had to tell it all now. “You can kill me. That’s fine, but she *was* there. I have to tell you that. She was there, and she was waiting for you, and when you showed up, she was happy.” My eyes were still closed, but I felt a tear trickle out, down the side of my face. I left it. It didn’t matter. “She was happy you were there. It was you she was waiting for, not her family. You. And I can feel all of that because I’ve taken care of so many dead people.” I took a deep breath, noting that I was still able to do so. “And since we’re talking about spirit stuff, the rest seems silly to keep from you...” *Oh boy. Really?* Yes. “I was attracted to you—not your brothers, you. I don’t know why—maybe it was her. But the doctor stuff I know about you? It’s because I googled you. I know your name. I know your medical school friends, or some of them. You were tagged in a picture someone uploaded—you and your nurses. And there’s another of you and your patients. They tagged you.”

His patients loved him. I’d seen that.

His nurses respected him. I saw that, too.

“If it’s all a farce, you being a doctor, it’s a really good one.”

He stood, releasing my neck and scattering bandages across the floor. He tossed his scissors in the sink and stormed out.

He left me alone, with his memories.



## Chapter Seventeen

JONAH

*Jesus.* She had no idea.

That shit she said to me?

I couldn't.

I just...

I couldn't.

*Fuck.*

I'd left her alone again.

## Chapter Eighteen

CARSON

A little while later, he found me in what I assumed was the library.

One wall was the floor-to-ceiling glass, facing the atrium, but two of the other walls were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. And books lined every inch of those shelves. The other wall was painted black with a leather couch against it that looked hella comfortable. Two afghans were folded on one end. The place should've been in a design magazine. I hadn't a clue how to describe the rug, except that it was fuzzy and white, and I could've taken a nap on it. For twenty-four hours.

Jonah stood in the open doorway.

I glanced over at him as I perused the shelves. He looked ragged, and cautious. He tipped his head back, a soft sigh leaving him as he put his hands in his pockets. "I'm tired."

"Sorry for going all *Sixth Sense* on you." But I wasn't, actually. Not at all. It was my truth, whether he took it or not.

"You believe what you said to me?"

I paused, but then nodded. "I do. It's—I've never felt something that strongly. It was... I couldn't forget it."

He narrowed his eyes, tilting his head to the side. "Can you—I mean... Do you feel her now?"

"I'm not psychic, so no. Whatever that was, it was a one-and-done thing."

"You said you've felt them before?"

"Yes. Sometimes it's a presence, like if you're sitting somewhere and someone comes up behind you. I feel 'em once and then not again after." Goose bumps lined my arms as

I remembered some of those times. “I’ve never told anyone about that stuff. It makes me sound like a freak.”

He snorted. “We have a situation, or I have a situation. I’m dead on my feet, and knowing my brother, when he gets back here, he’ll be raring to go. So while I’ve adapted not to need a ton of sleep, I’d still like to get some.” He raised an eyebrow.

I shifted my feet. “What?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“I’m not a fan of tying you up, or using handcuffs, or even locking you in a room. So yeah. You’re the situation.”

“I’m not going to run.” I motioned toward the glass wall. “Run where? And who buys a place in the middle of a forest, but has cameras and lights installed? That’s insane.” I thought about it, and a shiver went through my body. “Don’t answer that. I won’t run.”

“I’m hoping you won’t kill me either.”

“Huh?”

He moved across the room and grabbed my wrist, then switched his hold. He dropped his hand into mine and led me from the room. We went down a hallway and back to the other building. Then we went down some stairs, and he tugged me into a back corner room.

It was large, dark, and the bed was enormous.

Releasing my hand, he waited till I stepped all the way inside before shutting the door. There was a code set next to it. He pressed and held the bottom button. Two green lights flashed, and there was a locking sound in the door.

“If you put in the wrong code even once, the room will light up, and an alarm will sound. We’ll have guards at the door within ten seconds.”

Okay, then. No trying to hack a coded breaker.

He went to the far end of the room and opened another door. A light switched on. “Here’s the bathroom if you need

it.”

He disappeared into a walk-in closet and came back with clothes. “Here. For sleeping.”

He had everything I would need: a soft tank top, pajama bottoms.

He went back into the closet, leaving me alone in the room.

Guess it was bedtime?

But I felt dirty from my forest jog, so I went to the bathroom. I cleaned up as much as I could, rifling through the drawers and finding a toothbrush still in its wrapping. I brushed my teeth, and after I couldn’t stall anymore, I opened the door. But I wasn’t ready.

Who could be?

I should’ve been, because I’m a forensic technician. Bodies weren’t new to me. They were my job on the daily. But no. No one could’ve been prepared because *holy fuck me*, Jonah Bennett’s body was glorious. *Glor-i-ous*. Emphasis on all of that.

He was standing, his head cocked to the side, in a pair of sweats. They dipped low, resting on his hips. My mouth went dry. It wasn’t that he was ripped, because he wasn’t. I didn’t like that look, but he was lean, and there was definite muscle definition. He took care of his body. That was evident.

He had the penis landing strip, the two muscles (I knew the scientific names, but they weren’t coming to me right now) that if you kept following them down...there you go. As a colleague would giggle sometimes, you’ve landed on home base. I’d never been infatuated with those muscles (on live people, of course), but on Jonah, they made my knees a bit weak.

And his arms.

I was a puddle of a gooey virgin, acting like I’d never been around a guy before.

I hadn’t moved from the bathroom doorway.

“I’m not doing the floor,” he announced. “So you can, if you want, or suck it up and share a bed with me.”

“What?”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not lying. I’m exhausted. It’s almost six in the morning. I need some sleep before Tanner comes and ruins the weekend.”

Oh. He thought... I shuffled to the side. Yeah. I wasn’t flustered because we were sharing a bed, but now looking at it, those were satin sheets. *Satin*. Now I had a whole different kind of fluster going. Down south. In my vagina.

I cursed under my breath as he went into the bathroom.

*What am I doing?*

I’d run for my life forty minutes ago. Jonah came after, brought me back, and cleaned up my wounds. But had I forgotten the whole *kidnapping* part before that?

I went to the far side of the bed and got under the covers, and *oh my God! This was pure heaven!*

I should’ve been freaking out—again. I should’ve been planning my escape.

I should’ve been...I didn’t even know. But as I touched those sheets, my eyes closed and that was all...

\* \* \* \*

## JONAH

Soft, light, feminine snores floated through the room when I opened the door.

I had to stop a second to appreciate them because it’d been a long time since I’d heard sounds like that. I’d been with women since Melissa’s death, but never at my place and never overnight. It was usually a hookup in a bar, or outside in the

car, or a hotel room. I never went to their place, and I never let them come to mine. Nothing personal. Nothing humane.

Just sexual need, and then I'd go back to my place.

My phone lit up on the nightstand.

**Tanner: Her phone is legit. As far as the hacker can tell, she's legit, too.**

My gut shifted. I felt a certain way about that.

**Me: You serious? A coincidence?**

**Tanner: Seems like. The guy went through everything. Kai sent someone to her apartment. It was clean. We can't find anything on her. Finances are good. Her home life is normal. Nothing's getting flagged.**

I looked down at her. She was turned toward me, on her side. The cover was tucked over her chin, and damn... *Damn*. We were assholes.

**Tanner: What are you going to do with her?**

**Me: Not a clue. I have surgeries lined up starting Monday. When is this thing with the hitman?**

**Tanner: Kai is still in negotiations for the details. Stay put. Can you cancel your surgeries?**

He had no clue how that worked.

**Me: No.**

**Tanner: What about your med school friends? You were supposed to be with them this weekend. Will they be a problem?**

**Me: No. They reached out, but I handled it.**

**Tanner: I'll be back later today. Have you slept? Where's the girl now?**

I snapped a picture of her and sent it to him.

**Me: We're in the lock room.**

**Tanner: Make sure to hide the guns. You're crazy.**

Yeah. Yeah, maybe I was.

**Me: I need sleep. Don't wake me up when you get here.**

**Tanner: Nighty night. Keep your balls.**

I rolled my eyes and fought another yawn as I blacked my screen and put the phone on the charger in the drawer beside me.

I went to sleep listening to Carson's snores.

## Chapter Nineteen

CARSON

I woke, stretched, and froze.

My hand hit a body next to me. Then I felt the satin, and reality sank in.

I wasn't home. Where was... *Jonah. Kidnapping.*

I was tired, really tired, but also alarmed. I opened my eyes, knowing I needed to deal with reality, but not wanting to in any way, shape, or form.

Still.

I looked over and found Jonah watching me. He was sitting up, his back against the backboard, the sheet pooling at his waistline. Those delicious washboard abs looked even more defined than last night.

Was that a thing? Could muscles get more defined from sleep?

And I was stalling. Again.

“Morning.”

My own morning breath hit me, and I wrinkled my nose, pulling the sheet over my face. “Sorry. Bad breath.”

“Your breath is fine, but go wash up. We have things to talk about when you're done.”

I froze. “Talk about what?”

He motioned to the bathroom. “Do that first.”

Slipping out of bed, I passed him to the bathroom. I felt his gaze, but when I snuck a look, he wasn't watching me. His eyes were deadlocked on the bed, his jaw clenched.

What was that about?



He was standing when I came back out with my teeth freshly cleaned, which was exciting. He'd pulled on a white T-shirt with his sweats. Bummer. Yeah...something was wrong with me.

“Maybe sit for this?” he said.

Dread spiked my pulse, but I did as he said. I crawled back to my spot on the bed, sat back, and pulled a pillow over my lap. “What’s going on?”

His eyes flared before they grew hooded. “Good news: you’re in the clear. Everything checks out, so it looks like you being at Bresko’s actually was a coincidence. For that, I apologize.”

My gut shriveled. If that was the good news... I gulped. “What’s the bad news?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You don’t know who my family is—”

I jumped up, shaking my head. Panic spread over my entire body.

I wasn’t scared with Jonah. That was the truth—that’s why I had different reactions, kept feeling attracted to him. But his brother, the other guy from the morgue? I was terrified of those guys.

I held my hands up. “I don’t want to know.”

Jonah took a breath, looking down. “We kidnapped you. That’s a felony, and if you go to the polic—”

I shook my head, because no, no, no. That was not happening. “I remember the guns,” I said, my voice a whisper.

Jonah started around the end of the bed toward me, his head still down.

I took a breath, flattening my hand against my stomach. It was rumbling all over the place. “I don’t know what your family does, but I’m not dumb.” I tipped my head up.

He moved even closer.

“Jonah.” My voice was wobbly. He had to know I wouldn’t say anything, do anything. “It was very obvious that your family is wealthy—like, the type I didn’t even know existed. All the guards? That’s scary. Whatever your family does, I don’t want to know. I don’t need to know. I won’t say anything.”

He was in my space, but his eyes were soft. “It’s not that simple.”

It *had* to be. Panic was branding me from the inside out. I had to convince him of this.

Would they kill me?

*No, this is Jonah.*

My God. Why did I have blinders with this guy?

Jonah closed in, but he didn’t touch me. He stayed just out of touching distance, but he watched me, and I was flipping the fuck out.

I blinked away tears. “What are you going to do to me?”

He stared long and hard, as if looking inside of me. Then he reached up, his hand cupping the side of my face. “I remembered you, too, after that night. You showed me kindness when no one should’ve been doing that. You did. That meant something to me.”

I closed my eyes, wanting him to close the distance and wanting him to step away at the same time. Fear and desire pumped through my blood, heating me up. “Are you going to kill me?”

His hand flexed against my cheek.

I opened my eyes, finding his gaze on my lips.

*Oh man.* What was he thinking?

“Jonah,” I whispered.

His eyes flickered, coming back into focus.

“What are yo—”

“No.” That’s all he said before he lowered his head, and his mouth touched mine.

I gasped, grasping his wrist.

He pulled back. Lust had darkened his eyes, but he was holding, waiting.

He was waiting for me.

My heart thumped against my chest. I knew what I wanted.

Need flooded me. The ache inside me spread outward.

I started without fully admitting to myself what I was going to do. I moved closer, my lips searching for his, and after another second’s hesitation, I let go of his wrist. I grabbed his shirt and raised up on my toes.

I found him this time, and *all* the hesitation was over.

## Chapter Twenty

CARSON

This was different.

The way he touched me—tender, soft, like I was fragile. I didn't want that.

“No.” I pulled back and shook my head, my arms tightening around him. “No.”

He studied me a moment, and then his eyes flashed. Determined. Hard. His jaw tightened, and then his mouth was on mine.

He wanted everything.

His tongue dipped inside.

I could only gasp, responding in kind.

God. I was melting.

I remembered that night, and how I'd wanted him even then. I'd felt guilty about wanting him. Not now. Not anymore.

He grabbed my ass and hoisted me up.

I went with him willingly. Anywhere. My legs wrapped around his waist, and he turned toward the bathroom.

I heard the shower start, and then the steam hit us, and I gasped again. The water drenched us as he moved me against the wall—pinned in place, grinding into me.

Pleasure and lust swept through me.

I wanted him inside of me, but as I pushed against him, my back still to the wall, he grabbed one of my hands. He pinned that to the wall as well, his mouth moving down my throat.

I felt the sensation of water on skin as he ripped away my shirt.

I grabbed for his collar and yanked, just needing it gone. I twisted my other hand free, dragging it from his hold, and went for his pants, but his hands were there, too.

He tunneled into my pants, and I felt his finger at my clit.

My eyes opened.

He watched me, waiting, and as my gaze met his, his finger slid inside.

The feeling almost too much. It'd been so long since I'd done this—and to do it with him...

He thrust again and again. His thumb rubbed over my clit as he kept pumping into me. A second finger joined, and I felt so full.

He kept going, grinding into me, pushing up and rotating around.

His mouth found mine again, and after that, I couldn't do anything. This feeling...

Then just as I was about to explode, he pulled back.

"No!" I gasped.

I felt him grin against my lips, and he nipped at me. "Yes," he breathed, his mouth fusing once more with mine.

He adjusted his hold on my waist and moved a hand behind me. He rubbed there as two fingers slid back inside. His tongue moved in the same rhythm as his fingers, and I shuddered. I had no ability to move except to answer him back. Whatever he wanted.

Round and round. In and out.

The ache pulsated through me, mingling with pleasure and need.

Then my entire body spasmed in his hold, and I cried out, my mouth ripping from his.

He held me in place, moving to nuzzle my throat as he kept moving in me, caressing as I rode out the waves. As they started to ebb, as I started to think again, he released me

enough to face him fully. He removed his hands, but he was still there, grinding against me.

He still had his pants on.

Not fucking fair.

Growling, I reached for them.

He caught my hands, holding them out to the side, and he evaded my mouth.

“What?” I snapped.

He grinned, lust swimming in his eyes. “I need to know you’re sure about this.”

“Do you not know what you just did to me?”

His grin widened, and he dropped one of my hands, pressing his hips back up into me.

I groaned, my head resting against the tile, and a shiver wracked my body.

His hand went to my hip, flexing there. “Are you sure?”

I ground down on him and gave him my own grin. “That answer your question?”

His eyes flashed full black, and I had a second to wonder if I’d just teased when I shouldn’t have before he plucked me from the wall. He carried me back to the bedroom and dumped me on the bed, soaked. He went to the nightstand for a condom and stood over me as he opened it.

I sat up, a languid sensation filling my bones, but there was excitement, desperation, a spike of adrenaline and power all rolled up with it. I’d never experienced this before.

I was almost drunk from it.

I reached for his pants, and without giving him a second to question me, I pulled them down. His dick was right there, large, resting against his stomach. My mouth watered.

I took the condom from him but bent forward before putting it on.

I wanted to taste him.

I eased down, sealing my mouth over him, and I felt his intake of breath. He stilled for me, but that's exactly what I wanted.

I worked him, opening my throat, taking more, sucking him in and in and in.

He began moving with me, and after a few more times in and out, I relaxed more fully. He touched the sides of my head and began moving in me.

He began fucking me again.

I loved this.

I'd never done this—let a guy ride my mouth—but I was elated, and I couldn't explain why. That same almost-drunk feeling shuddered through me as he paused. He started to withdraw, but I held on, sucking him one last time, and he unloaded into my mouth.

After, I pulled my mouth back.

After, I swallowed.

After, he watched me with heavy-lidded eyes.

After, he pushed me down, took the condom, pulled it on, and slid inside of me.

And then he made me scream all over again.

## Chapter Twenty-One

JONAH

“Why the shower?” Carson asked.

I laughed, surprised at that question. We’d just paused to rest after our second round. I had no idea the time, nor did I want to know. We’d been in the room all day. It could’ve been nighttime again by now. And if it was, I *really* didn’t want to know.

That meant I’d have to make some decisions, and I wasn’t ready.

Carson turned my way in bed, pulling the sheet over her.

I shrugged. “Better maneuverability for what I did in there.”

“Are you serious?”

I grinned. “Yeah.” I paused. “Wait, you enjoyed that, right?”

A slow smile was her response. Her cheeks pinked. “Oh yeah. I liked that a lot.”

“You’re shy.”

She nodded, not looking at me, and those cheeks remained pink. “I’d never done a few of those things. I mean, the sex, yes. The other stuff, no.”

I rolled closer. “You’ve never given a blow job?”

“Not like that.” Her cheeks went from pink to red. “I’ve never enjoyed it either.”

Warmth churned through me, and *fuck*, I liked hearing that—a whole ton. More than I thought possible.

I rolled to my back, resting my hand behind my head.



“Are you okay?” she asked.

My throat got full, but I nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”

I heard her moving, and she settled over me, sliding her hips over mine.

I was already hardening at the first movement, but as we came in contact, I was ready to go. My hands went to her hips and held her there, not pushing her away, but not letting her start to grind over me.

I closed my eyes, pain slicing through me. “It was like this with Melissa.”

She froze. A gargling sound ripped from her before she started to lift off of me.

I stopped her, holding her in place and moving her to my lap. Right in front of me. Her face to mine. Her eyes to mine. Her lips to mine.

She was trembling, and I didn’t think it was a good tremble this time.

Something new and deep moved through me. Pain intermixed with it. I felt a sudden, new tenderness right along with whatever was going on inside of me. I tucked a strand of hair behind Carson’s ear.

She jerked at the gentle touch, her eyes big and dark. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“That she was the last.”

I shook my head. “She wasn’t the last.”

She went rigid again.

I smoothed my hand down her arm, going to her hip, and I urged her into a slow and sensual roll. She began moving with me.

“With you, it’s you,” I assured her. “It’s not her.”

She paused, her hands falling to my chest. “Oh.”

I reached over to the nightstand and pulled another condom out.

Her eyes held mine, not moving, and she took it from me. Opening it, she lifted herself up, and neither of us looked away as she rolled the condom over me and moved down on me.

She started—moving, rolling, riding—and as she did, neither of us looked away.

Not once.

This time felt different.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

CARSON

Holy moly Christmas. I couldn't believe what had happened.

Jonah kidnapped me, and then was like, "Oopsies, we shouldn't have kidnapped you," and my response was to fall on his dick. Multiple times.

I was nuts! My sister would—my sister! I'd been gone for a full night. She might've believed the first lie, but not a full night and day. I'd never been gone that long on a one-night stand, and I assumed that's what Jonah's brother had texted to her.

Jonah reappeared from the bathroom.

We'd been in the room all day, literally, and my stomach was growling. His had growled earlier during I'd forgotten which round, but he hadn't cared.

Now he was dressed, and he took one look at my face and must've seen my alarm.

"What?"

"If you're not going to kill me, I need my phone back. My sister will be raising holy hell looking for me in Kansas City."

He grimaced and looked toward the ceiling.

"What?"

He looked back at me, his jaw set. "Why don't you dress, and I'll see if my brother is back. He'll have your phone."

"Will he have destroyed it?" I stood as he went to the door.

He put in the unlock code, and yeah, you bet your ass I was watching.

He turned back. “He waited to see what I wanted to do with you.”

A huge knot formed in the bottom of my throat.

He opened the door and started to go through it.

I called his name. I had to know.

He glanced back. “Yeah?”

“What *are* you going to do with me?”

A cloud came over his features, but he just shook his head. “Not what you’re worried about. Don’t worry.”

Then he was gone. The door closed behind him.

It locked again.

*Fuck’s sakes.* That pissed me off, but I hurried toward the bathroom. *Wait...* I backtracked and went to the closet. I had no clothes, so I perused the shelves, surprised to find some women’s clothes in here. I grabbed leggings and a large shirt—black to match my mood—and headed for the bathroom.

I wasn’t sure where to find shoes, hoping I wouldn’t need to make another run for it. Jonah seemed to have moved past that, so maybe we *all* had—his two brothers as well.

I showered and dressed, then went to the code box and put in the code Jonah had used.

The door flashed green. I opened it.

I realized why he hadn’t seemed to care if I saw the code. I had no idea where to go. However, the room was in the back corner. I only had one direction to go, forward.

I started exploring, remembering we’d gone down some stairs, so I went up some stairs. After that...I got lost. At one point, I was pretty sure I was near where I’d been found in the forest. Which, if you thought about it, that was ingenious on their part. At another point, I found myself in a hallway with a wall broken up by large rocks. It was camouflaged to blend in with that forest I’d been in yesterday.

*Whoa.* If I kept going, would I make it to a road?

Also, a follow-up thought: *Do I want to go that route now? Escape?*

After Jonah and I did what we did, he seemed like he'd feel guilty if I were to die. He was a doctor... Those people took oaths of morality and saving lives, not killing people—and caring. That meant he had to care...right?

Then again, maybe I'd enjoyed a whole day in bed with someone I'd given too much credit to? Who knew where Jonah was in the hierarchy of his family? It might not matter what he said, what he wanted. The blond brother seemed higher up, or at least more ruthless.

I could possibly be screwed here. That seemed a high probability.

At this point, I was giving it up to the universe where I should go. So I kept going.

I went through another batch of hallways and turned left. After a bit, I came to a bedroom.

Another bedroom.

I got a glimpse of the middle atrium.

I kept on going.

I was going past rooms I didn't remember seeing before, but I was on the other side of the middle green area, so that made sense.

A gym.

An indoor pool.

Another courtyard, but this one was inside. It looked like it was outside, but it wasn't.

I kept on, coming to another set of doors.

I opened them and heard voices, and I froze because one of them was female.

*"You never told me about Melissa!"*

I careened to a halt as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Whoever she was, she was furious.

“I learned this morning that she died *nine months ago!* My little brother’s fiancée was murdered in front of him,” she rasped out in a screech. “Kai and Tanner were there. They fucking swooped in to save you, and you asked them *not to tell me!* It’s me, Jonah! Me! *What were you thin—*”

“I was thinking I didn’t want you to worry about me!”

I nearly fell over, hearing that. My mind returned to that day. I’d seen the torment, but hearing it again, it tore through me, leaving scars in its path.

“Jonah.” A deep sob sounded from her.

I didn’t want to hear this, but I couldn’t make myself leave. I had to hear, but it was going to make me bleed on the inside.

“Brooke,” he said quietly, and I recognized that voice. He’d used it with me just a few hours ago.

Pain laced through me, spreading out, inching and weaving around all of my veins.

“You’d just had Millie,” he continued. “I didn’t want you to deal with—”

“Deal?” Another choke from her. “Do you not know how much I love you? How much I *adore* you? You’re my little brother. You’re mine to watch over. *Mine.* Kai takes care of all of us. Tanner, he does what he does, but you—I got *you* growing up. You and I were both shipped off. You and I are both different, but you and I—it was us. I never felt more part of the family than when I was with you. I’m the only girl. You’re nice. You should understand me.”

I blinked away tears.

“You’d just had Millie,” he said again. “I know what you would’ve done. You would’ve packed up your newborn and flown straight to me. You would’ve tried to take care of me, your husband, and your newborn. I didn’t want you to be at risk, or her to be at risk.”

“Jonah.”

“You had an at-risk pregnancy *and* birth. Yes, I wanted my sister with me, but I’m a doctor in my heart. You needed to be

taken care of, and not knowing about me was what you needed. I'd do it again."

I could hear her sobbing.

"Brooke."

A hand covered my mouth, and I felt myself yanked backwards—back through the door I'd just gone through, past the inside courtyard, past the pool, and into the gym.

The door shut behind us, and we were encased in four walls of mirrors—or mirrored glass, at least. I was able to see through them to the outside. The blond brother shoved me farther into the room and released me, blocking my way out with a smirk on his face.

"Aren't you the sneaky little eavesdropper?" he said. "You're supposed to be secured nice and tight in the lock room."

I opened my mouth, ready to deliver some explanation, when I comprehended his words.

*The lock room.*

That's what we'd been in?

Not all the bedrooms were the same?

I felt hot all over, and I knew my face was red, because that's how I rolled, being a redhead. "Lock room?" I asked.

But of course. That made sense. The coded lock. I closed my eyes, bracing myself. "Is that where you put all your captives?"

He snorted. "No. Most of us use trusty guards to keep ours in. Consider yourself insulted that Jonah didn't want to use guards for you, but then again, maybe he'd been thinking it through. We have security footage for that room."

I rocked backward. My voice dropped to a whisper. "What?"

*Security footage?!*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### JONAH

I hadn't seen any guards in the house. That should've been my first clue, but I'd taken two steps into the kitchen when my sister pounced. She hadn't explained anything, just started in. I'd been quiet for a while, letting her get this out of her system. I owed her this, at least, but after a few minutes, I'd started pushing back.

We were now in our third round of Brooke being angry that I'd kept Melissa's death from her, and I couldn't handle hearing about it again. When she stepped forward, waving her glass of wine in the air, I caught her wrist before she flung it on the floor.

"I got it," I told her, trying to keep my voice level. "You're hurt. I'm sorry. But can we not rehash how I lost the love of my life for a fourth fucking time?" My hand tightened around her wrist before she blanched, realizing what she'd been making me endure.

"Oh, God. Jonah." Her face crumpled.

She was going to lose it. Again. In a different way.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." I let her go, taking her wine glass with me and setting it clear across the room. My head down, I braced myself against the counter. I needed a moment, just one moment. I took a breath, rolled my shoulders up and back, and I turned to face her.

*Right. Let's keep moving forward.* I cleared my throat.  
"Who'd you come with?"

"Tanner." She was eyeing me, worried and biting her lip.  
"Are you..." She started toward me, but I held a hand up. She



paused, holding in place as she bunched the end of her sleeve. “I wanted to be there for you, and you took that away from me.”

“I know.” I sighed. “But please be here for me now, and please stop talking about Melissa.”

I didn’t want Brooke to talk about her—or Tanner or Kai. I didn’t want anyone to mention her name.

*Except Carson. She can.*

A little voice whispered that in my head. I didn’t mind when Carson talked about her.

I didn’t know why that was.

“Where is Tanner?” I asked. “I need to ask him something.”

She glanced around and shrugged. “Who knows. I made him wait until my jet landed before we drove here. I’m sure he’s pissed, though who knows why. I think he was with someone before he had to pick me up. He seemed testier than normal.”

I smiled and shook my head. No matter the crisis, Brooke was Brooke.

She and Tanner were always either bickering with each other or he was making her laugh hysterically. With Brooke, you never knew the reception you’d get. Well, except for me. What Brooke had said was true. I was the one she loved the most, but I hadn’t known the reason until now.

I eyed her. “You feel different because you’re the only girl?”

Her face shuttered closed, and she shrugged. “It is whatever. I guess we all have our things.”

Yeah. Maybe.

But something was nagging at me. I couldn’t get rid of it, and I looked around again. “You’d think Tanner would’ve come in here by now.”

She shrugged, moving across the kitchen to claim her wine glass again. “Yeah, but it’s Tanner. He’s either getting orders from Kai or—I don’t know. Got anyone in the lock room? He likes to check that stuff out right away.”

Dread hit my gut *hard*.

The lock room.

Carson.

She’d watched me put the code in. I hadn’t cared because she wasn’t a captive anymore, but this was a big house, and if Tanner wasn’t in here... *Fuck*.

I took off.

Brooke yelped. “Where are you going?”

“The security room!” I yelled back, tearing through the south end of the house. There was a shortcut this way, past the pool and into the back hallways, but then I saw them.

He had her in the gym, and he was barring the door.

I loved my brother. Loved him.

I loved all of my siblings, almost idolized them, but right now, watching Tanner keep Carson in a room it was obvious she did not want to be in, I saw red with someone I never thought I’d see red with.

I was there in two steps, hauling the door open.

Tanner jerked, starting to turn around, but I shoved him aside as I met Carson’s gaze.

Relief flooded her face, right before the tears came, and she bit her lip.

“Come here.”

If there’d been an argument, there wasn’t anymore. I heard even Brooke’s startled gasp behind me at my tone. It wasn’t hard or angry. It was gentle, almost tender, and Carson blinked more tears away before she met me. Her hand took the one I held out. I gave Tanner a warning look before I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her to my chest, as we left the room.

“Jonah,” he called after me.

I raised my voice, holding her firmly next to me. “Do not follow me, Tanner.”

“Jonah—”

“*Don't!*”

I was taking her to the garage. If I couldn't trust my family to wait and get my input before handling Carson, I was taking matters into my own hands. I glanced down, cursing because she only had socks on. *Fine*. I veered down a different hallway, going to the wing Kai liked to use when he and Riley were here.

Riley would have clothes and shoes that Carson could use. Riley wouldn't care.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Lacing our fingers, I pulled her inside their bedroom. “We're getting out of here.”

Kai's room was the grand room. Brooke always went on about how Kai kept all the biggest rooms/suites/wings/floors/houses for himself, so I wasn't surprised when Carson took two steps inside and gaped.

I let her go, moving to the closet where I knew Riley had her things.

I pulled out shoes and a sweatshirt. I tossed both toward Carson before going to Kai's desk. “Put the shoes on. Keep the sweatshirt just in case.”

“Right.” I heard her awed tone.

I had my things on me, but cash and a burner phone sometimes weren't a bad idea. I found some money in the stash Kai kept on hand and nabbed a phone, passing it to Carson as I took her hand again, leading her back out of the room.

“What's this for?”

“Call your sister. Let her know you're okay, and then we're going to get you to safety. I'll come back for your phone when

I know you're fine."

"Uh...what?"

But I wasn't explaining any more.

Tanner and Brooke wouldn't fight us leaving, but there was a sense of urgency in my gut.

If we were going, we had to go now. Otherwise Carson would get thrown into the wolves' den, and I didn't want that to happen. At least, not any more than it already had.

We reached the garage, and I heard the sounds before I registered what they might've meant. I kept going anyway, pulling open the door and *then* stopping. The vehicle lights came first, then I could make out the SUV that eased inside. I had only a second to squeeze Carson's hand in warning before the engine shut off.

She was screwed.

A door opened. My brother got out, strolling around the back of his SUV.

The guards weren't in the house because Kai was coming. That's why I hadn't seen them earlier. There'd been an incident one time with his woman. He liked having that privacy, but not Tanner. Tanner never minded which guards were around, and neither did Brooke.

I should've remembered.

Now Kai was here. He eyed me, his gaze dropping to my fingers laced with Carson's, but he didn't show a thing.

He looked back up. "Brother."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

CARSON

I recognized this guy as he rounded the corner of the SUV. He was the first hottie from the morgue, and he was in charge. That much was obvious. Jonah had squeezed my hand. That could mean a few things, but all of them were bad in this scenario.

I gulped.

Tanner was terrifying, but in a whole different way. This guy could order my death, and eyeing him, I knew he would do it. He'd do it coldly and without a second thought, if he thought he needed to. For now, after giving me a curious perusal, he seemed more fixated on Jonah.

"I'm taking her to her place," Jonah said as if heading off an argument. He said it with authority, and this guy gave me a whole different look, as if I were a new species to him. I held my breath until he turned back to Jonah.

"You might want to have her stay, considering we're fairly certain her being at Bresko's wasn't an accident after all."

"What?" My voice hitched high, and I flinched. *What?!* I stepped around Jonah. "What are you talking about? My sister \_\_\_"

This brother of Jonah's focused back on me, and there was a shift in his demeanor—a subtle one, but it was ominous, a warning. I almost stepped back, feeling it, but I couldn't see it. I'd started wondering if I was imagining it when he responded, again so casually...

"Your sister received free tickets and a free VIP pass to the nightclub. It wasn't a coincidence you were at both places."

“But...” I shook my head. “My sister said it was a friend who worked there. She said she won the hockey tickets.”

“There was no friend. There was no contest. Those tickets were sent to her.”

I wished the floor would open up and swallow me, because *what?!*

I couldn't comprehend any of that. My sister wasn't a liar.

What were they saying?

The door opened behind us, and Tanner's voice filled the garage. “Took you long enough.”

I tensed. I *really* didn't like this brother of Jonah's. He moved past me to the back of the SUV. He opened it and grabbed a bag before closing it. Pausing as he turned to us, his gaze swept over everyone, lingering on Jonah and me.

Tanner spoke again. “Pretty sure there's been a new development, Kai.”

*Kai.* That was the first brother's name. Jonah had mentioned him.

Kai. Tanner. Brooke. Jonah. Four of them.

“I'm seeing that,” he responded.

“Also, Brooke's making dinner.” There was a slight laugh in Tanner's voice. “So if we don't want to die, we might want to get someone else in there. Normally she's the one we want in there, but considering she's a little unhinged tonight...”

Jonah groaned. “I got it.” He took my hand again, turning to me. “You need answers. Stay. We'll get some for you, and then I'll get your phone. I can take you back wherever you want to go.”

My throat felt scratchy. “Promise?”

My head whirled. Maybe I shouldn't have asked that, but I needed some reassurance I'd be taken home.

I wanted Jonah, but I also wanted nothing more than to curl up in my bed at my parents' house, where I'd grown up.

His eyes darkened. “Promise.”

I nodded, feeling a little steadier, but not much.

Jonah led me back inside, and I glanced over my shoulder as we went.

The older brother hadn't moved, and his eyes hadn't left us either. As I looked, our gazes caught and held. I felt it deep inside—a warning—and I gripped Jonah's hand more firmly before steeling myself and forcing myself to turn back around.

I didn't like giving him my backside, but in this moment, there was no way around it.

I also felt like he was aware of every emotion and thought running through my head, and he found them amusing.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### JONAH

I didn't like the way any of them were watching Carson.

She was a new enigma to Kai. She was a new toy for Tanner. And Brooke... I spared a look up from the counter. I had no idea.

I'd expected some reaction from her when I came in holding hands with Carson, when I informed Brooke I'd be making the dinner.

There was none. Normal Brooke would've been throwing attitude. She tended to come off as spoiled, though she wasn't. It was mostly a wall to manage strangers. Instead, she barely gave Carson a look, stepping to the side and refilling her wine glass.

She and Tanner were at the kitchen island now, working on their second bottle. Both were quiet. Kai leaned against the counter, on his phone. He'd been on it since I'd started cooking. I'd taken whatever Brooke had been making off the stovetop—I had no clue what it was—drained the water and tossed it in the garbage.

Carson stood next to me, helping. Head down. Quiet. She stuck close to my side.

She was smart.

“So...” Tanner refilled his wine as he broke the silence in the room. “Carson.”

I felt her tense, straightening next to me where she'd been cutting vegetables for the sub sandwiches. She glanced at me, still staying close.

He finished pouring and put the glass back down, with a little extra thump.



I flicked the burner to simmer, covered the dish, and turned to face him as well.

Brooke looked away, her eyes glazed and her fingers clenched tight around the glass.

Kai's gaze was firmly on Brooke.

Tanner smiled at Carson, looking a bit predatory. "When I left, you and Jonah weren't getting along." He picked his glass up, motioning between us. "Now I'm noticing a closeness that wasn't there before. Care to elaborate?"

Carson stiffened and took a breath.

"I'm sorry, but I hated Melissa," Brooke cut in.

My heart dipped, and I whirled to look at her.

Carson gripped my arm, and I frowned at her, but she looked only at Brooke.

Tanner snorted. "Tell us how you really feel."

"I don't mean to talk bad about her, since she's dead, but \_\_\_"

"No," Tanner said. "Please do. I didn't care for her either. I'm riveted."

I gave him a look. "I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "You were banging. I didn't think it'd be serious. Then you broke up how many times? The engaged part—that threw me—but you were mourning. You still are, so I was quiet. But since Brooke is letting it out..." He gave another shrug.

Kai frowned, but he didn't say anything.

Brooke's eyes didn't seem entirely focused. The alcohol was taking its toll. A tear slipped down her cheek. "You loved her, Jonah, but I didn't like her. And I feel shitty saying that. I'm just...relieved, and how awful of a person does that make me? She would've been terrible for you. A girl knows. You and she were on and off, then back on, and I just had this dread about it. I know you, Jonah. You were feeling restless,

looking for your place to fit in—but you fit in with us. You’re one of us. We—”

She broke off, turning to look out the window. Another tear trickled down her cheek. “She didn’t like not knowing your family, and I get that. That’s normal, but when I overheard your call with her, I had this horrible, *horrible* feeling, and now she’s dead, and I’m grateful and that makes me the worst. And if anyone felt that way about my little girl, I’d want to murder them. Melissa has a mom, and I’m trying to think of her, but...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “All I can feel is that my little brother won’t be lost to us anymore.”

“Brooke.” I started to go to her, but again, Carson held me back, still watching Brooke.

“I’m sorry she’s gone,” Brooke continued. “I really am, and I know it’s because of our family, but I’m still so relieved. I had a feeling she was going to take you away from us, maybe turn you against us, and I didn’t know how I was going to handle that.” She began to cry in earnest.

Tanner was right next to her. My eyes urged him to hug her, comfort her, do something.

He just grinned and took a drink of his wine.

Then, after a moment, Brooke seemed more focused. She looked at me, her eyes softening, and turned to Carson next to me. I expected her to harden. She didn’t. The two of them watched each other, sizing each other up, but there was no hostility.

I was confused.

“He never fought for her,” Brooke said after a moment.

I felt that, a direct hit to my chest. But she was right. I hadn’t.

“He kept her separate, but he shoved his brother out of the way for you.”

Kai shook his head. “It’s not the same situation.”

Brooke turned to him, raising her chin, a little unsteady. “You’re right. Maybe. I have no idea the situation with this

one, but he never brought Melissa around. Whatever the situation, I know she wouldn't have been in the same room with all of us. He'd have kept her somewhere else, locked away. But this one, she's here. She's at his side. That says something."

Tanner finished his wine and stood, picking up the now-empty bottle. "Why are we cooking dinner? It's ten at night." He looked around. "I ate. Brooke ate on the plane. Kai, you probably ate on your flight down, too."

Brooke finished her wine. "I needed to do something."

As if on cue, Carson's stomach grumbled.

Everyone heard, turning to us.

"Sorry." Carson's hand went to her stomach. "Didn't eat all day."

"See!" Brooke snapped her fingers, surging to her feet. "There. I knew there was a reason I started cooking. Someone always needs to eat, no matter what time of day."

Tanner snorted. "Saved by the hostage."

Brooke's face went flat. "What? She's a hostage?"

Tanner cringed.

Kai shot him a look. "No, Brooke. She's not, but on that note, the rest of us are going to my office. It's business. You've stated you don't want to know."

Brooke's eyebrows went up, and she looked ready to fight, but her shoulders soon deflated. She nodded, wrapping her sweater tighter around herself. "You're right. I don't want to know until the day I have to know. On that note, I should call my husband."

She crossed to the door and stopped to look at me. "I'm sorry for your loss, Jonah. I'm sorry you have to go through this."

My throat swelled up, but I nodded. "It's getting better. Every day."

She probably didn't believe me, but it was the truth. And I felt sort of wrong about it, because that shouldn't have been the case. I should've still been devastated, and a part of me was, but...a part of me wasn't.

I didn't know how to wrap my head around that.

"Office," Kai said. "Now."

Carson gave me a look.

Right. She needed answers.

So did I.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

CARSON

These people were terrifying, but also fascinating.

The sister? I had no idea what I thought of her now. Emotional at first. Hurt. In pain. Then there was a glimmer of depth, but she was in shock. That much was obvious. As for Tanner, I felt like he'd love to string me up and gut me one organ at a time, telling me jokes as he did. There was no way to read him. He had a firm wall up to everyone, even his family...or so I thought.

As for the oldest, my first impressions were the same: cold, ruthless, cunning. But he loved his family—and they all loved Jonah.

As we went to yet another part of the house (not a shock at this point), I pushed aside the fear and started observing them. The two brothers kept glancing at Jonah, measuring him.

It was almost as if he had surprised them?

Jonah had a good heart. I couldn't explain how I knew, but I did. I'd known it the first moment I saw him, almost like something clicked for me. It was new.

Yet as we went inside this massive, dark office, I knew Jonah would try to get answers for me. I lo—liked. *Liked*. I liked him even more for that.

“You said Carson's sister got free tickets and a VIP pass from a contest?” Jonah asked.

Kai had moved to his desk and was going through some papers. He looked up and gave his brother another one of those measuring looks before he gave Tanner a nod.

Tanner moved forward, taking out his phone. He also pulled out my phone and tossed it to Jonah, then pushed a

button on his phone.

He placed it in the middle of the desk on speaker. “Go ahead,” he barked.

“We looked through Carson’s phone and found nothing there,” came a voice from the phone. “She’s legit, but researching her story, we found some items. The older sister, the one getting married, received an email about a contest for Mustangs tickets. She responded to the email, but it was a fake. It looks like she entered the contest, but that data doesn’t exist. It was a dummy database. We found the email congratulating her, and a number for her to call to claim the tickets. That number is also a dummy number. It no longer exists, but we think when she got the tickets, she was also given the VIP pass for Bresko’s.”

“You’re unable to trace where the email originated from?” Kai frowned.

“We’re working on it, but we’re jumping from Russia and hitting walls. She was set up. That much is true.”

My sister.

They—whoever they were—had targeted her.

My knees buckled.

They’d said it before, but I hadn’t let it sink in. I hadn’t believed them. But this... I remembered when she’d called me.

*“Can you believe this?! It’s like it’s meant to be, you know?”* she’d squealed over the phone.

“She was so excited,” I said, feeling their gazes on me. But I didn’t look up. “She’s getting married next weekend, and she thought it was perfect timing—that she’d won the tickets.”

“And Bresko’s?” Kai asked.

I looked at him. “She told me ...” I trailed off, trying to remember the exact wording.

*“Bresko’s? Seriously? That weird club?”* I’d asked her.

*“It’s not weird,” she’d countered. “It’s exclusive, and yes. From time to time some of the players go there. I got it on good authority that a bunch will be there. Bram wants to go. You know how much he loves hockey.” She’d laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I have that VIP package, remember? Gotta use it while I have it. Don’t know when that’ll come around again.”*

I told them what she’d said.

“Who’s Bram?” Tanner asked.

“That’s her fiancé. That’s his name.” I began feeling a different sort of dread slither through me. “Please don’t do anything to my sister. I couldn’t...” I felt an ice pick being shoved through my chest. I turned to Jonah. “Not my sister. Not her.”

She couldn’t go through what I had.

Jonah reached out his hand.

“She’s supposed to get married next weekend,” I whispered. *“Please.”*

The voice from the phone spoke up, “They don’t need to do anything. We can hack her phone. The correspondence will be there, most likely.”

Jonah gave me a nod, and I closed my eyes. I couldn’t handle it if they took her.

“When will you know?” Kai asked, moving closer to the phone.

“Give us an hour to be thorough.”

“Okay.”

Tanner ended the call on speaker, and Kai pulled out his own phone and put it to his ear. “You were listening?” he said. “I want a team dispatched to observe the sister.”

“No!” I started for him, but Jonah caught my hand. He pulled me back.

Kai ignored me. “Just observe her for now.” He ended the call, and those cold eyes turned my way. “We have no plans to

harm your sister, but she was used to get you here. We need to find out who orchestrated that.”

My heart beat so hard.

Jonah wrapped his arm around me, pulling me to his chest. “If someone made sure Carson was there, how could they have known I’d be there? I was the one who recognized her.”

Tanner and Kai both noted the way Jonah held me close, but I didn’t care. I sagged against him, feeling safe.

They shared a look before Kai responded. “We don’t think they did. We think whoever did this was assuming Tanner would be there and would recognize her.”

Jonah’s arm pressed a little harder around me, but it felt good. Secure.

“But he wouldn’t have,” Kai added. “She’d already been identified by security. It wouldn’t have mattered if you or Tanner were there. She was green-lit the second she entered the building.”

My chest felt tight. What did that mean?

“We were watching her, waiting to see what she would do. You and Tanner just got to her before we made a decision.”

“So you already knew?” Jonah said.

“I was notified that an employee from the morgue was spotted in one of our nightclubs. It’s not the first time. We own a lot of clubs, but it wasn’t until your call that I realized you were involved. I wasn’t lying to you, Jonah.”

Jonah’s arm grew even tighter. “You could’ve shared that,” he said harshly. “You could’ve—”

“For what reason?” Kai shot back. “We have no idea why she was there. We still don’t. We’re getting the information, and when we do, we’ll figure it out. It’s been a goddamn day. You’re not in this family business, or are you forgetting? We had a conversation. You chose to stay out. I’m respecting your wishes.”



His eyes traveled over me, over us, and lingered on Jonah's arm. "Twenty-four hours ago, you were barely restraining yourself from wanting her dead. Now look at you. How was I supposed to know your feelings would change so quickly?"

Jonah's entire body locked up tight behind me. "You told me she was interested in me. You said to use that, to study her —"

Now I froze.

*What?*

He knew?

A ball of fire ignited inside of me, low, and it was growing fast.

He was using me?

Kai was still watching me, waiting to see how Jonah's words affected me. "Your feelings have changed. You're invested."

I felt a growl working up through Jonah's chest, but it didn't matter. Jonah didn't like hearing that, and that told me everything.

I stepped away from him, ignoring the sudden quiet that came over the room.

There was a window, and though it was dark outside, I went to look through it.

I could see the lights in the trees. The guards. After that, it was just darkness.

I'd never had a hope of getting free. I saw it now. It was all hopeless.

"Cars—"

I spoke over Jonah, still turned toward the window, my back to them. "Who are you people?" I hadn't wanted to think about it before, but I had to know. Jonah wasn't an ally.

It was just me, me alone. I needed to know who I was dealing with.

“I’m a forensic technician,” I continued. “I’m a lab person. I do the tests, run the samples. I do the grunt work sometimes. I enjoy it. I like the science. I hate the death part, but I like everything else. It gives me purpose, but I was only one of the techies that worked on her.”

I’d been enamored with Jonah from the beginning. They saw how I reacted to him.

“For me to be here, they had to have seen the security feeds. It only makes sense. That’s the only indication of...” It was a bitter lump to swallow. “...how I was attracted to Jonah from the start. I told him about the ring, and the only people in the room were me, him, and Tanner.” I shook my head. “Tanner couldn’t have heard what I said. But the security camera would’ve. It was directly above us.”

They would’ve needed that footage. They’d used it to identify me, identify my sister, get me here. But why?

I turned, looking at Kai. “Why? Why this weekend?”

He didn’t speak.

“They know we’re close to him,” Tanner said.

Kai’s eyes flashed, and I almost stepped back, into the window, because of what I saw there.

Death. Anger.

I didn’t want to look at Jonah, see whatever he was thinking or feeling.

I’d heard enough.

He’d used me. Everything had been a lie. That’s all I needed to know.

“Carson.”

I turned back to the window, ignoring Jonah.

“Give her her phone,” Kai said. “You can take her home.”

I heard rustling behind me, and then Kai called my name from the door.

“You and your sister will be under observation for the week. It’s for your safety now, but do not alert her to their presence. You do, and I’ll have you and her brought back in.”

As warnings went, it was almost friendly, but as I nodded, I still felt the ominous threat there. They’d bring us in and then what?

I didn’t want to find out.

“Jonah, take her home.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

CARSON

The ride was quiet.

Jonah and I sat in the back of an Escalade. There were two guards in the front, and another vehicle following us. That was for Jonah's safety.

Once I started recognizing the landmarks, seeing that they were taking me to my parents' house, I asked, "Are you mafia?"

Jonah didn't answer, not right away. We traveled a little farther before he turned to me.

"I'm a surgeon."

"But that's not what your family does."

He didn't answer me, and I saw that he wasn't going to.

My parents lived out of town on a farm. The Escalade paused at the end of their driveway. It was a long one, half a mile, but if they'd turned in, the dogs would have woken everyone. Instead, all the vehicles pulled to the side of the road, and the headlights went off as they waited.

"Do you want us to drive you up to the house?" Jonah asked.

"No." The house was dark. "They're probably asleep."

"Your parents are farmers?"

"My dad used to be, but he retired a while back. He rents the land now to other farmers." I frowned. "Why are we here? I was staying in a hotel."

"Tanner informed me that accommodations had been made for you, so your sister wouldn't be alarmed."

A chill went down my spine. That did not sound good.  
“What do you mean *accommodations*?”

“Your sister got a call, which she thought was from you, from your phone, telling her you’d be home later. You’ve been checked out of the hotel, and your sister said she’d be here this evening. Kai wants you near your sister, since he has one team dispatched to watch you both.”

I hadn’t a clue how to react to that. I ground my teeth together. “And if for some reason my sister goes to town and I’m not with her?”

“Then the team will be split in half. They’ll be thinned out, so that wouldn’t be smart.”

He sounded like his brother right now, cold to me.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. “Right.”

I was starting to hate that her body had ever come to the morgue. She died and brought him into my life. If she hadn’t, none of this would’ve happened.

I wouldn’t have met him.

I was going down a dark path, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“Where’s my phone?” I asked. Tanner had handed it to him, but I hadn’t gotten it yet.

He reached into his pocket, pulled it out. He held it, not handing it over. “Carson...”

He was going to apologize or something. I heard the softening in his tone, and my heart broke.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

Fuck!

I’d fallen for him.

I knew it then.

I hadn’t wanted to admit it, because it was the worst possible outcome of this, and now I didn’t want to hear whatever he had to say.

I couldn't handle it.

*Dammit.*

I cut him off, grinding out, "Give me my phone and get the fuck out of my life."

I could feel his gaze, but no. No way. I was *not* looking at him. I'd been avoiding that since hearing how he'd used me in the office. He still didn't hand it over, so I grabbed it, and I got out before anyone could make a move.

I half expected someone to come after me—a guard or someone, but no one moved.

The vehicles didn't move either.

They were going to watch me walk inside.

*God.* What was the point? To keep me safe? That was a joke.

Head down, I started up the driveway.

It was chilly out, so I zipped up the sweater Jonah had given me, the one that belonged to Kai's woman, and I turned my phone on. I was halfway to the house when the notifications started flooding in.

**SIS: OMG, where are you?**

**SIS: Seriously. Where are you?**

There were more, all from that night. More came through, marked unread, but those had been viewed, and I had responded.

Well, Tanner had texted her back. But seeing the messages, knowing they weren't from me and how easily she'd believed them, gave me a shiver.

The new messages were still coming through.

I clicked out and saw some from my boss.

**Milo: How's the weekend?!**

**Milo: I need to live vicariously through you. Tell me how things are going.**

**Milo: You never got back to me. Was the night crazy? Lots of dancing? Lol!**

There were other texts, too—from my mom, my dad, a couple of my cousins.

*Wait.*

Dancing?

I stopped walking and went back to Milo's text.

I felt like I was detached from myself as I texted her back. Never mind how late it was.

**Me: How'd you know about the dancing?**

I waited, holding the phone tight in my hand.

*Please remind me how I mentioned it before leaving for Kansas.* I must've forgotten. I must've bitched about going to Bresko's... But I knew, *I knew* I hadn't. I just told her I was going back for my sister's wedding a week early.

She was the one who'd pushed me to take the time and go back early.

My phone buzzed.

**Milo: Download this app.**

My phone buzzed again, and a link came through.

I reached for it, about to click it, but paused.

I... I was fully detached from myself.

*What is going on?*

I looked back, and the vehicles were still there.

I had no idea what this app was, so I went to all of my social media accounts. Everything. My email. I went in and unlinked every single one. I needed to be smart. I uninstalled each and every one, until my phone was bare.

One of the vehicles turned on its headlights. They inched forward behind me, turning down the driveway. I turned my back to it, but I didn't move from where I stood. I could hear the tires going over the gravel, and I clicked on the app.

The first Escalade sped to me, and I heard a door open.

Boots hit the ground, then I heard Jonah's voice, "What's wrong?"

I started to answer him, but my phone flashed, then went black. "I—"

He was at my side, taking my phone. "What is it?"

The screen flashed again, and two sets of letters and numbers appeared.

Another door opened, a guy hollered, "Toss the phone."

Jonah looked back. "What is it?"

"Tanner's on the line. He said her phone was just hacked. Those are coordinates." The guard was at our side now, and he reached for the phone. He started to toss it.

"No!" I lunged for it, but Jonah got it first.

"It'll lead to her parents," the guard explained. "We need to destroy this phone."

Other guards came running.

"Toss it on the ground," one of them yelled.

Jonah did.

One guard dumped gasoline on it, and another lit it on fire. The other guards built a wall around it so the fire wouldn't spread, and Jonah grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

Someone said, "The last coordinates will still show up. We have to go."

"My parents," I breathed.

Jonah shook his head. "They're looking for you, maybe hoping you'd lead them to me, to my family. They already know who you are, and that means they know where your parents live. You not being here will keep them safe." He tried to take me back to the Escalade.

I dug my heels in. "How do you know?"

"We have a team here."



I looked around, but I saw no one else.

“They’re here, Carson. Trust me.”

That was the problem. I didn’t.

Seeing my look, he threw me over his shoulder and ran.

He threw me in the Escalade and barked at the driver, “Get her out of here.”

Then he was out, slamming the door before I could comprehend what he was doing.

“Wait! What?” I was at the door, trying to open it, but it was locked.

The driver hit the accelerator, reversed, and we were heading right back out where we’d come from.

As we sped off, I looked back at Jonah, who had joined the other guards.

“They’ll make sure the fire is out and the phone is toast before heading back.” The driver glanced up in the rearview mirror at me. “He’ll be in the next vehicle. Don’t worry.”

As we sped down the road, we passed another black Escalade, waiting at a dirt road. It flashed its lights before falling in line behind us.

“Who’s that?”

“The other team sent to watch you. They’ll escort us back.”

What Jonah had said was true. They had men everywhere.

Which made everything so much scarier.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### JONAH

I refused to leave until the fire was out, the phone was destroyed, and I confirmed that Carson's family hadn't been disturbed. After that, I got in the next Escalade and sped back to the house. Five miles in, my phone rang, and I noted the driver was getting some incoming orders.

*Kai calling.*

“What's going on?” I asked.

“Change of plans. I want you out of here.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Her phone wasn't hacked for coordinates,” he said. “They already knew where she was. It was hacked for a backdoor into *our* operations. As soon as she downloaded that app, they were in and looking for our software. They knew we had her phone. They knew we would put our own program on there to try to catch them. They were prepared.”

I swore. “What's happening now?”

“We're waging an online battle. They're trying to get into some of our business operations, and our people are trying to get a lock on where they are.”

“What's the change of plans, then?”

“Drivers are instructed to take you and Carson to the airport. Tanner is escorting Brooke there. I want the three of you gone.”

“Tanner?”

“He's staying. This is his territory. He knows it better than me.”

“Carson’s family is here.”

“But *she’s* in danger, and I’m assuming you want her to be safe.”

“Of course.” There was no other option. She wouldn’t be another Melissa—and that thought brought me up short.  
*Another Melissa?*

“I have surgery on Monday.”

“I’m not going to be our father. You have the choice of what to do, but you have to be safe. Right now, we’re under attack. If you go to work, you will have two teams on you. That’s not an option, and there could still be collateral. I won’t take that on my conscience. Any of your patients or colleagues who get in the crossfire, that’s on you. But it’s your decision.”

A hollow laugh ripped through me. “Right. What a choice.”

“You have genius-level intelligence. You know I’m right.”

I did, but this was the problem. There was always a fight, always a battle, always a war. There were always enemies going after us.

*“You’re Jonah Bennett?”*

*“Who’s asking?”*

*“Do we know you?”* Melissa had asked. *“Are you hurt? Is there a car accident back there where you came from—”*

*BANG!*

I couldn’t go through that again. Not with Carson.

“You want us in Canada?”

“Brooke’s going back to her family. You can go with her and take Carson, or you can stay with Riley.”

Right. Canada or Canada. No Minnesota.

“I should spend time with Brooke. She was upset tonight.”

“I’ll let the pilots know.”

We ended our call, but I had other calls to make.

I dialed my old life, wondering when I'd be able to get back to it.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

CARSON

We weren't going back to their gated and very, *very* secure estate. I figured that out when we turned toward the city lights, and the city lights never went away.

“Where are we going?”

The driver looked in the rearview mirror. “Change of plans, ma'am. I'm supposed to take you to the airport.”

“What? Why?”

“I wasn't told, but I'm sure others will come who can explain.”

I wished I'd kept that burner phone Jonah gave me. I'd put it down on a counter in the kitchen and never picked it back up. There'd been no reason to have it. I knew I was getting my phone back. So much for that.

The driver took me to the airport, but not the part of the airport I knew.

These were the private hangars, on the far end of the public airport.

Inside was an airplane with some workers around it. We pulled in, and a giant-sized guard approached the vehicle. At least he seemed like a guard. He wasn't wearing an airport uniform, and had a handgun strapped to his side. The driver got out, they talked, and then the guard came to the back and opened my door.

“Ma'am.”

I got out. He gave me a polite nod. “If you'll follow me?” He pointed to a room. “I'm told you can wait in there for the rest of the passengers.”

“Who are the rest?”

His face shuttered closed. “They’ll be along shortly.”

*Um... Okay?*

I stepped inside a cozy waiting room with couches and chairs. There was a table in the corner and a whole bar/coffee setup on the other end. I was too wired to sit, so I moved to the window and watched.

That’s when my bladder reminded me I hadn’t gone to the bathroom before leaving Jonah’s family’s very, *very* secure estate, and who knew how long ago that was.

There were two doors in the back.

I opened one, and it was a bathroom.

I went in, peed, and for a moment—a brief moment—I wanted to stay there.

I wanted to hide.

I wanted to wake up, come out of this nightmare, and find I hadn’t been kidnapped, hadn’t had sex with a guy who was using me, and hadn’t started to fall for him. I wanted a world where my sister hadn’t been set up by someone who also sent *me* an app.

Milo.

I hadn’t even considered her after everything happened.

They had her phone. I didn’t think *she* would send me a virus to download. That meant it hadn’t been her texting me at all. But I hadn’t put two and two together. I hadn’t shared that with Jonah. My phone went wonky, and they lit it on fire, and then I was in the vehicle, being driven away for my safety.

Panic collapsed my lungs. My chest felt like it was caving in on itself. I wanted to claw at it, open it up so I could breathe—but that was anxiety.

Fear.

I was having a panic attack.

I knew this.

I hadn't had one of these since I was a child. I felt the world trying to collapse on me, and I couldn't do anything except let it. I tried to use reason to remove myself from the panic. Sometimes that helped.

*This will pass.*

*Eventually.*

*Reason and logic will come back. The world isn't actually ending.*

*I'll be just fine.*

*I'm here, in a private airport waiting room bathroom, and everything is fine.*

*Everyone will be fine.*

Jonah's family weren't pushovers. They could fight—Jonah! He'd shoved me into the vehicle, but where was he? Was he safe?

*Wait.*

I needed to think logically about this. He had to be fine. There was a whole other vehicle there, other guards there. He was part of their family. There was no way he wouldn't be safe. His family loved him. They would do anything to keep him safe.

Nonetheless, the rational sentiments weren't working.

The panic continued to rise.

I washed my hands and went back outside. I sank down into the nearest chair, put my head between my knees, and took a breath. I counted down from five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

*Breathe out.*

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

*Breathe in.*

I kept going.

Holding for five.

Releasing for five.

I lost count, but I was still doing the breathing exercises when there was a commotion.

*Bang, bang.*

*That sounded like fireworks.*

That was weird, but breathe in.

And five, four, three—fireworks.

*This is an airport.*

*There wouldn't be fireworks here.*

I lifted my head, stood, and turned toward the window.

I saw the backside of someone running out of the hangar.

*What?* I ran for the door and started across the hangar toward the opening.

Someone else came around the corner from the opposite side.

I faltered, thinking he was a guard. He'd come back to check on me.

But wait...

He was tall, with broad shoulders and a thick gut—not overweight, just muscle. He was built like a box.

He was moving with purpose.

He wore a business suit.

He saw me...



He kept coming.  
There was no emotion on his face.  
No remorse.  
No shock.  
No sadness.  
Nothing.  
He was nothing.  
He reached into his suit jacket...  
I started to move backward.  
My gut was slow on the uptake, but my feet weren't.  
I began running...  
I looked back over my shoulder.  
He pulled out a gun.  
Still, there was nothing on his face.  
Just knowing. Recognition.  
He knew who I was.  
I had no idea who he was.  
I ran faster.  
I couldn't get there fast enough. I knew that much.  
Still, I tried.  
I had to try.  
"Stop!" he yelled.  
I did.  
I stopped.  
Why?  
*I should keep going.*  
Fear pulsed through me.

My blood was pumping. The sound became deafening, drowning out everything else.

That was shock. Shock and fear.

But I turned to look at him. I didn't know why. Maybe I needed to see who was about to kill me? Was that it?

I turned, my chest heaving, and I felt something trickling down my leg.

I looked down. I'd just gone to the bathroom...

When I looked up, he was coming closer.

There was nowhere to run.

There was no escape.

This was it.

I held my hands up, as if that could do something.

A bullet would go through my hands, ripping my skin.

I knew the trajectory it would take.

I knew the damage it would make.

I was the one who cleaned that up on others. Other bodies.

That was my job.

Someone else would clean me, some other forensic technician.

This wasn't supposed to be how it ended.

I loved Jonah.

I could admit that now. I knew it, fully and completely, with the same ferocity as the breaths I pulled in.

I'd fallen for him.

I'd miss my sister.

My family.

My future nieces and nephews.

I wouldn't be there to hold my parents' hands when they needed me.

They'd attend my funeral, rather than me attending theirs.

My sister would get married without me at her side.

Her wedding—she'd be mourning me instead of getting married.

That wasn't right.

That was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, and now this—this guy!

Rage sparked in me, warming my belly, growing, spiraling.

I started for the guy, and that seemed to shock him.

His eyes widened.

He hadn't been expecting that, but screw him.

“Who the fuck are you?!” I snarled, dropping my hands.  
“Why are you doing this?”

He backed up, his eyes still big.

I just kept coming.

He moved back again, but then logic kicked in, and he stopped. A hard look came over him, and his arm firmed, holding that gun steady at me.

“It's nothing personal,” he said. He took off the safety.  
“You're a loose end.”

Did I really want him to be the last thing I saw before I died?

No.

I closed my eyes.

I thought of my sister.

My parents.

My grandparents.

Jonah.

I thought of Jonah.

And I waited.

*BANG!*

I braced myself, expecting pain, but nothing.

I opened my eyes. The guy was turned away from me, blood everywhere.

His gun was on the ground.

He held his arm, and I rushed to grab the gun at the same time he dove for it.

I kicked it out of the way, but his hand closed around my ankle, and he yanked.

I went down.

“Stop!”

*Jonah.*

He came toward us with a gun in his hand. He was advancing, fast.

“No,” I tried to say, but the guy moved fast. He whirled behind me, his arm whipping around my neck. He had it bent at an angle, and he dragged me with him.

“Get back!” he yelled. “Get back or I’ll snap her neck.”

Jonah kept coming, kicking the gun on the ground behind him.

I couldn’t look away.

He was here. I knew he’d keep me safe.

But that look on his face? He was cold. Ruthless. He was like his brothers.

But there was goodness, too. He was a doctor. He wanted to heal people.

We’d never talked about it, but I saw it in him. I understood that side of him. The good, the bad. I saw it all. I understood it all.

I still loved him.

I *loved* him.

It had happened so quickly. One look in the morgue, and that was it for me.

Love at first sight? Did I believe in that?

I think a part of me did. A part of me must've, because a part of me knew.

That part loved him.

That part had recognized him in the Bresko's bathroom.

That part had kept me from being scared of him.

That part knew he'd take care of me.

That part knew I'd found home.

I shuddered, all of those emotions spreading through me while a guy was threatening to snap my neck.

“Let her go!”

The arm tightened around me. “No! You leave. I'll let her go once I'm clear.”

He was trying to walk me to the other end of the hangar.

I saw people moving in behind Jonah, but I was almost transfixed. I didn't want to look away from him.

*BANG!*

The body behind me went rigid, and then the arm slacked from around my neck.

I stepped away, feeling disjointed. The body slumped to the floor behind me, and I turned, staring down at him. I couldn't comprehend what I was looking at.

He was a stranger, but he'd been holding me, threatening my life, and now he was on the ground.

His eyes were like glass, frozen in time, a hole in his forehead.

Almost black-looking blood gushed from it, flooding his body, and he was bent at a weird angle.

His leg went one way as his body had landed on it.

One arm was flung out, the other arm still bleeding.

There was a presence beside me. I felt someone's breath on my face.

An arm wrapped around my waist, and pulled, carried me away. "Don't look." A hand cupped the back of my head and turned me away from the stranger bleeding out on the cement.

I knew whose arms I was in.

Safe. Home. Jonah.

I could come back to my body.

"Jonah..." A sob worked its way up my throat. My whole body started shaking.

Bits of reality started to piece together, what had actually happened.

"It's okay." He smoothed a hand down the back of my head. He stopped and held me tight. "It's okay. You're okay. He's dead. He can't hurt you. You're okay."

There were others here now. I heard them. I felt them.

They stopped and talked to Jonah, but he didn't move. Not once. He held me.

He conversed with them over my head, but he never let me go.

That's all I cared about.

He never let me go.

He never let me go.

## Chapter Thirty

JONAH

Carson was out.

It had taken an hour of holding her, hearing her crying in my arms, *feeling* her crying in my arms, and she'd needed a sedative. But she was asleep now.

I was watching her when Kai came into the security room. We were back at the house. She was in the lock room, as she'd said she felt safe there, but I could see her on camera.

Kai joined me in looking at the monitors. I expected him to say something.

He didn't.

I was almost thankful, but then...

"We got his phone."

I didn't move my eyes from her, but I asked him, "What'd you find?"

"He had two incoming calls from a number that was traced back to a Guaranno family member."

Guaranno.

They'd been a mafia family until Kai and Tanner disbanded them, by force.

This was payback.

That one name made everything make sense, and fuck, but I almost wished it hadn't. That was this life. Payback. Revenge. Or the opposite, moving up.

I hated this world.

"He was hired by the Guaranno family, then?"

“It looks like. We looked into her boss’ bank accounts, and she was given two large sums of money—one the night your fiancée died and the other two days ago.”

I frowned, but I still didn’t take my eyes off Carson. “Two days ago?”

“It seems there was a phone call from Carson’s boss to Carson’s sister. The call was recorded on her boss’ end, probably used as evidence for the payout. She knew about the Mustang tickets, about the VIP pass to Bresko’s. She was pushing the sister to invite Carson to come up a week early, promising Carson would get time off. It’s safe to say she was either behind the tickets and VIP pass or she knew about them.”

Right. That made sense, now.

“And the night Melissa died?” I asked.

“Probably a payout for the security feeds from that night, or for information about what happened when we arrived to visit Melissa’s body.” He hesitated. “I got a call from one of the detectives who interviewed you. They found Carson’s boss’ body. She was killed, but it was made to look like a suicide.”

*Fuck’s sakes.* “That cop is on the payroll for us now?”

“There’s more.”

He didn’t answer me because I already knew.

I readied myself for what else was coming.

“The male technician we initially paid off to see Melissa’s body—he was killed, too. It seems they were cleaning up all loose ends.”

I couldn’t—how does someone process that? “If he had killed her today...” I couldn’t finish. “He killed Melissa. If he had killed Carson...”

“The working theory is that the Guaranno family hired him, paid him to hurt you because we love you. Tanner loves you. I love you. We think they wanted to hurt you and have us watch you hurt for the rest of your life.”



Jesus.

Christ.

Every word he said inflicted pain I never knew was possible.

More pain.

Insufferable pain.

But what I'd thought was true. They had killed Melissa. I was already suffering that pain, but if they had gotten to Carson...

She was the future.

"I think I love her," I told Kai.

I was lying. I knew I loved her.

I knew when I walked around that hangar door and saw a stranger pointing a gun at her head. I would never have that image out of my head. It was permanently burned there.

But I loved Carson. I knew it now.

It was shocking, because it was something that shouldn't exist. Against all odds, in this life, I wasn't supposed to get two of them. Two chances.

I was looking at her right now, sleeping in my bed.

"I know," Kai said.

I wanted to look at him, but I didn't. I didn't dare take my gaze from her, from the screen. "I put her in the vehicle for her safety. I thought..."

"I know."

I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"You stood against Tanner for her. You had her at your side when we were in the kitchen, with family. Jonah, all of us are aware of your feelings. Brooke was right. You brought Carson around us, and you didn't need to do that. She could've been away in a room, in another building. She never needed to come to the house. You did that. You chose to do that."

“I *love* her.”

“I know.”

“How can I love her so quickly after Melissa? How is that... How is that even realistic?”

*How did I get this lucky?*

Why did I get this lucky? *Me*. I didn't deserve that.

I chose to love my family. I chose not to leave my family. That should mean... That meant I didn't deserve love. In a way, it made sense to me, what had happened to Melissa. But getting Carson? So soon? That didn't make sense.

I wasn't supposed to get her.

“I'm going to be honest,” Kai said, removing his hand. “I've learned that love is love. For what it's worth—and I'm saying that knowing what I have to say is probably *not* worth a lot, but I'm going to say it anyway. *For what it's worth*, you loved Melissa, but maybe you didn't love Melissa as much as you think you did. Maybe this one is the real one?”

*Did that make sense?*

Yes. And no.

But I loved Carson, and I couldn't lose her. That's all I knew right now.

“Is it done? The Guaranno revenge?”

He took a long breath. “I will make sure it is.”

That was code for Kai taking it from here. I was out. Carson was out. And really, right now, that's all I cared about. I didn't ask more questions. Maybe I should've. Maybe a normal person would've, but I didn't. I knew the deal. I knew what family I'd been part of when I was growing up. Kai said the revenge was against him and Tanner, but this was family business.

I was out, I wasn't in that business, but my last name *was* Bennett.

I was a Bennett.

I hadn't left the family completely. I couldn't.

I loved Kai. I loved Tanner. I loved Brooke. They were my family, so there was a gray area I would always have to navigate. Because of that, because of what they did, I would continue to do what I did. I was a doctor. I saved lives. I'd started down that road to make up for what my family did. It had been a conscious decision then, and it was even more so now.

"I love you, brother." Kai put a hand on my shoulder again.

I nodded, my throat constricting. "I love you, too."

That was the problem. I loved them too much to leave.

It would be my burden to carry.

But watching Carson, I knew I couldn't put her through it as well.

That was the problem.

## Chapter Thirty-One

CARSON

When I woke, it took a minute before everything came back to me.

Once it did, it came in a rush.

The club.

Jonah.

Being kidnapped.

Running in the woods.

Jonah.

Sex with Jonah.

Tanner.

Threats.

Jonah.

His family.

Almost getting to my family.

And then—*BANG!*

He'd brought me back to their house, to the lock room.

He'd asked if I wanted to go to a different room, but this was the one I was familiar with. There was a lock. Security feeds. I felt safe here, and how the tides had changed.

It was dark in here, but I heard a rustling, and a second later, a weight settled on the bed next to me. I felt hands smoothing my hair back, touching my face, running down my arms.

I knew whose hands those were.

He moved in closer, and I leaned forward, my forehead resting on his shoulder.

He held me, like he'd held me in the vehicle, all the way back here again.

I felt him tense.

The peaceful moment was gone. Whatever he was going to say was going to ruin it. I felt him preparing.

I couldn't get that guy out of my head, his gun pointed at me.

"I didn't fight him," I said.

"What?" Jonah dipped his head down, his breath warming my shoulder.

"He came to kill me, and I didn't fight him. I stopped as soon as he said to."

"If you hadn't, he might've tried to kill you sooner. He was a professional. His job is literally to kill. You waited, and that gave him some time. It helped. You standing there made him stand there, and that helped. It did."

"I could've kept running."

"He would've shot you. I saw his face. He wasn't going to chase you in the waiting lounge. If you had reached for the door, he would've killed you then and there. You stopped and faced him, and he took his time. Trust me." His lips grazed over my skin. "It helped. It did."

I guessed that was something then.

"I didn't want to see him when he killed me. I was thinking of my family." I turned my head. Mere inches separated our mouths. "I thought of you."

His eyes darkened, softening. He cupped the side of my face, and his thumb rubbed my cheek. Tenderly. My heart was breaking because I knew he couldn't feel the same as I did.

I was going to say it anyway.

“I fell in love with you.” The words rushed out of me in one breath.

I didn’t register his reaction. I almost didn’t even want to see it. I just wanted him to know because that’s the kind of person I was. I left no stone unturned, no regrets. I didn’t hold back.

“I think I fell in love with you when you looked at me in that morgue,” I said. “You were standing over her, but when you looked at me, I just felt it. And I’ve continued to feel it. It’s made me go a little mad, because I didn’t want to admit it. I didn’t want to feel what I feel when I’m around you, but I do.” I took a breath. This was the hardest part. “You never would’ve come into my life if she hadn’t died. But she did, and it’s like she brought you to me. I feel so horrible admitting that because a part of me thinks that’s beautiful. I’m grateful. But a part of me is so sad, because it was her death. She should’ve had a full life, and she isn’t going to. You loved her, and you have to feel that loss. But I love you. I do. And now you know.”

I waited, my heart not beating.

I’d been focused on his mouth, but it didn’t move.

I lifted my gaze.

His eyes were closed. He held himself rigid next to me.

My heart sank.

That was the opposite of what I had hoped for.

My hand covered his against my cheek.

He opened his eyes, and I saw torment there.

*God.* I’d done that to him. I made him feel like that.

My heart split all over again.

“It’s okay if you don’t love me back. I mean, how could you? You still love her—”

“I don’t.”

“What?”

“It’s... I did love her. A part of me still does, but...”

I waited.

I kept waiting.

This was torture.

He lifted his head and gave me a sad smile.

Not good. So not good.

He reached for my leg and pulled it over his lap. The other went behind him, and he tugged me even closer, one of his arms going around behind me. I rested my head on his shoulder again.

A small sigh left him, and he settled his head on top of mine. “My family is very powerful,” he began. “And you’re right. I never answered you before, but we are mafia. We run almost all of Canada, and most of the Midwest. Kai is the head of our family. Tanner’s next in line. Brooke isn’t a part of it, and neither am I, but we *are* in a way. We’re still Bennetts. It’s complicated. There are others who want to take over, but we maintain the peace. Because of that, I’ll never be normal. And I think for the first time, I’m starting to accept that. I will never be normal. I *can* never be normal. I’m not just talking about being a Bennett, being in this family. I’m talking about how I look, and how I’m different from my siblings. It’s not a big deal to them, but it is to me. It’s been a part of me, this looking different from them, but it was never something we talked about. That’s because of how our father was—or how *their* father was. My mom died when I was young, and I remember so little about my time with her. But nothing was ever talked about, including the fact that my mom had an affair with another guy. It’s obvious. Whoever he is, whatever ethnicity I am, my dad treated me differently because he knew I wasn’t his. And I’m not the only one different. It’s Tanner, too. It might not make sense, but with my dad gone, it’s like we’ve all finally started to get to know each other. We’re slowly starting to talk to each other about real shit in our lives.”

He fell silent. “For a long time there was a fear that if we talked about real things, he might kill us—Tanner being gay, what ethnicity I am. He shipped Brooke and me off for a while, like he didn’t want us in the house. Now it’s different, but I’m realizing how strong his hold was on me. It kept me quiet, and I’m learning that I had mixed my fear of him with my ability to understand what our family does, what Kai and Tanner do. That’s not fair to them. I’m just now starting to sort through that.”

He swallowed, a flash of pain tightening his face. “My solution was to run away. I went to med school because I wanted to be nothing like my family. I wanted to do good and make up for the bad they do, the bad our dad did. Kai runs the business differently. I know he does, and I know there’s a whole power structure in place, and if we stepped out of our role in it, it would be chaos after. A lot of people would die. But my brother is a good guy deep down. Like I am, too, but if something happened to him, happened to Tanner, if Brooke didn’t step up...” He looked right at me. “I would take over, and I would do it for them. They’re my family. They’re a part of me.” His eyes grew clouded. “I’m telling you this so you know from the start who I actually am. This is the real me. Melissa didn’t know me.” His hands jerked, a reflex tightening for a moment. “Brooke was right. I couldn’t trust Melissa, and I hate that now because I should’ve been honest with myself from the beginning. I did love her, and I’m still grieving her, but a part of me felt what you felt that night, too.”

*Ooooooh.*

Oh!

My heart started pounding, faster and faster. I leaned closer. “What did you just say?”

A slow grin spread over his face. “I don’t know when I fell in love with you, but I did. I am. I knew it when I saw that gun pointed at you, and I can’t *not* know it now, if that makes sense. What I’m saying is that I wish I didn’t love you.”

*Oh.*



“I wish I could walk away from you, not worry about you. Not love you. Not want to be around you, hold you, hear you laugh. Not want to see you in that ridiculous shirt you wore at Bresko’s. Because if I could, that would be the best thing for you. I can never not be a Bennett, and that’s what I’d been trying to do before. I got Melissa killed because I wasn’t accepting myself. But you’re different. It has to be different with you. I cannot lose you—not when I just got you, and...” He shuddered. “Me telling you I love you makes me feel like I’m giving you a death sentence. I should walk away from you, but I can’t. But if you walk away from me, if you decide you don’t want me, I will let you go. That’s the only gift I can give you.”

He told me he loved me by telling me he wished he didn’t love me.

It would be funny except for how true it was, and how haunted he’d looked as he said it.

I knew he’d spoken the truth.

“Did they find out who the guy was?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah,” he rasped. “It was a rival family. Kai told me they wanted payback for something he did, but I can’t tell you anything more. With this family, the less you know, the better. Trust me. That’s where I’m coming from. You want that?” He shook his head, his eyes searching mine. “You can’t want that. You can still walk away from me, from this life. You should do that. You should want to do that.”

I started to shake my head.

“No, Carson. Think of your family. Your parents. Your sister,” he said. “You love me, and if we try this, I will come with you. You’re bringing that to them. I—you cannot do that.”

He was right.

He was *right*.

God.

I didn’t want him to be right.

He pulled away, feeling my thoughts.

I didn't stop him.

I should've stopped him. Right?

He stood, then spoke so softly. "I do love you. It's new, and I didn't expect it, but it's there. I love you enough to know you *can't* want this life I would be giving you. We're new, though. That's the good thing. It's easier to walk now than later."

I was ripped apart.

He was yanking me in half, right down the middle.

He bent, his hands so gentle as he smoothed my hair. He pressed a kiss to my forehead, and that made everything so much worse. He was so loving.

"Everything is done. You'll be safe from now on. When you're ready, we'll drive you to your parents' house."

He started to leave, but I grabbed his hand.

I tugged him to the bed. "Tonight."

His eyes found mine, searching, but he nodded.

He moved back with me, both of us lying down.

Bittersweet.

That's how the night was, being with him, his mouth on mine, moving inside of me, but knowing this was the last night. I had found my love, my person, but I couldn't be with him.

Bitter-fucking-sweet.

I hated it.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

CARSON

My sister got married.

I was there.

I didn't remember it.

I've been told I gave a great speech.

I've been told I laughed. I smiled.

I danced.

I remembered none of it.

I wasn't there.

I was back at that night, that bittersweet night.

I was *always* back at that night.

\* \* \* \*

They never knew what had happened to me the weekend before they got married. No one did. Not my parents. None of my relatives. None of my old high school friends I reunited with after the bittersweet night.

My sister went on her honeymoon.

I went back to Texas, but Tanner had told me about Milo and explained the connection. It was the nicest he'd ever been to me.

I learned Benjamin had also been killed.

The local detectives questioned me, considered it odd that I was out of town when they both died.

I didn't know what to tell them. I *had* been out of town.

I turned in my resignation after I was done talking to the detectives.

Considering the circumstances, it was effective immediately.

What was next, I didn't know.

I was always back there, with him, that same bittersweet night.

I didn't think I would ever leave.

\* \* \* \*

I went to where she was buried.

I visited her grave.

I laid flowers there.

I told her I was sorry about what happened to her.

I told her I'd fallen in love with him, too.

I told her he was trying to do what was right for me, because he hadn't with her.

And I asked her if she would've wanted that, if she had a choice.

She didn't answer.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

JONAH

*Six months later*

I rode the elevator up to the restaurant where Kai was waiting.

He'd called to check in after I got out of my last surgery for the day. He was in Duluth, wanting to meet. And because it wasn't that far for me to drive, I was joining him at his newest restaurant. It overlooked Lake Superior, and everyone was talking about this place. It was the new *it* place to be.

As the doors opened for me, I realized no one else would be here tonight. The place had been locked down specifically for Kai and me—no one else except a chef and our guards.

Kai was behind the bar when I arrived, and he held up a drink, giving me a smile.

I almost faltered because it was rare for me to see that side of him. Some of the tension in me eased up a little, but not completely.

Since he and Riley had their second little girl, Kai had been smiling more and more. I should've been used to it, but considering the way we'd grown up, it'd take a while.

I met him at the table he'd selected for us. It was near the window, and Lake Superior spread out beneath us.

"I always forget how pretty it is up here," he said.

I grunted. "Hilly, though."

"That, too."

Kai had been cautious moving into the state. He was less cautious with the legitimate businesses, though, and this was only one of his many restaurants around the state. I didn't know the reason for his caution, but I didn't ask. I wouldn't until something happened and I needed to be more directly involved. Until then, I was still a surgeon—except I had guards disguised as extra hospital staff around me. So far it was working, and there hadn't been an incident, not since Melissa and Carson.

*Carson.*

The thought of her sliced through me.

I'd turned that side of me off. The caring side. The feeling side. It'd been *only* work for the last six months.

Work.

Family.

The basics like eating, resting, exercising.

But back to work.

Always work.

That was my routine.

No women.

Everyone had been Melissa after Melissa. Then Carson came, and I couldn't.

If I couldn't have her, I'd have no one. I was fine with that.

“How are you?” Kai asked.

I knew the question was genuine, but I wanted to snarl. How did he think I was?

I looked at him, knowing he could see my pain. “Fucking great.”

His eyes grew speculative, but he nodded and reached for the seat next to him. He pulled out a file, tossing it in front of me.

“What's this?”

“You asked me to find your father.”

I jolted. I had asked, but it'd been months ago. “You found him?”

He nodded, taking a sip of his drink before his eyes fell back to the file. “He’s alive.”

“I thought you were here to give me an update on Carson. I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to see you.” I focused on the file as I said that.

I’d reached for it, was about to open it, when he said, “I’m here for her, too.”

I froze. The pain tore through me, gutting me.

*He was here for her, too?*

I forced myself to open the file, and ice ran through my veins.

He had round cheeks. Blue eyes. Golden umber skin. There were laugh lines around his eyes, around his mouth. He looked like me, but he didn’t at the same time. I moved to the next picture of him. He had a little stomach, but not much. He looked under six feet. I knew Kai would have all the facts, but I wanted to see it for myself.

His name was Gabriel Alfonso.

5’11”.

He was an engineer.

There was a picture of him with two elderly people, my grandparents. I could see the resemblance.

My grandmother was Black. My grandfather was white.

My dad was biracial.

There was a picture of him with a young woman. She was Black, too.

A picture of him, her, and a younger girl.

“You have a sister,” Kai noted.

She looked like me, with the round cheeks, though mine weren't so round anymore. I'd grown out of that a few years ago, but I couldn't stop smiling. She had straight, dark hair.

"They live in Boston."

I looked up at Kai, who spoke as he was looking at the file. "She goes to Boston University. Fluent in German and Spanish. She's studying to work as a translator. I know that's all in the file. She's doing college and works part-time as an EMT."

"An EMT?"

He nodded, a faint smile showing. "You get the medicine from your dad."

I looked over the other things in the file, reading up on my grandparents. They were both alive, both in a nursing home together.

Gabriel's wife was a music teacher. Her name was Cierra.

"What's my sister's name?"

"Angela. They call her Angel."

*Angel.* "Brooke will flip out. She's not my only sister now."

Kai chuckled before taking another sip. "I asked Tanner if he wanted me to find his dad."

"He said no?"

He snorted, which sounded so odd coming from Kai. "He told me to fuck off."

I put the file down, leaning back in my chair. "You? Brooke?"

None of us was certain who our real father was.

"Brooke and I are both from Anthony." Anthony Bennett, the father who raised us.

I nodded. "So it's me and Tanner who have different dads."

"And Cord."



I frowned. “But you know who Cord’s father was, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he have siblings?”

“No.”

“So I have a sister, and we don’t know about Tanner.”

Kai nodded. “Right.”

Right.

I had a family—another family.

*Fuck.*

But then everything closed in on me.

I closed the file and pushed it away. “I can never meet them.”

“I know.”

It was the same deal as Carson.

“If someone else found them? Found him, found her?” My other sister. I looked at Kai, who was nodding.

“I’ll set up a team to watch them,” he said. “They’ll watch from afar. They’ll never know they’re there.”

God. *Fuck.*

More people to love, more people to worry about. More people who could get hurt.

“You said you were here about Carson, too.” My voice dipped low. I always thought about her. She was always there, always in the back of my mind, so there was always some pain. But when I let myself bring her to the forefront, really think about her, my insides tore out of me.

It’d been six months since I knew I loved her, and that pain never left me. It never diminished. I would live with it. I’d have to.

“She’s not doing well,” Kai said.

My mind went blank, and I surged to my feet. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

He stood, too, but more slowly. The old Kai was back, cautious and withdrawn.

*Fuck that.* “What’s wrong with her?”

He didn’t answer right away.

That wasn’t fast enough for me.

*“What happened to her?!”*

## Chapter Thirty-Four

CARSON

I woke to a beeping sound, and the smell.

I knew that smell, more than I wanted to.

I was in a hospital, *again*.

This was the third time in six months, and I looked over to find myself handcuffed to the bed railing.

*What did I do?*

“The first time was a car accident.”

I knew the voice. I didn't know the person, but I knew that voice. It was judgment, and it was a social worker. I'd gotten to know those people after the last two trips to the hospital. They'd been called in because the medical staff was concerned. They'd started to see a pattern, and that pattern was me self-destructing.

This time, the social worker, or maybe it was a nurse—I didn't know yet—was male. He came forward, sliding over to my handcuff, and he pulled out a key, opening it. “We didn't know what state of mind you'd be in when you woke up this time. You woke up screaming the last time, they said.”

I flinched, remembering that. I'd been screaming and yes, pretty hysterical. The nightmares never left me. I'd woken up in the middle of one.

“I'm fine.”

“No.” He laughed, rolling back a few feet on his stool. He stretched his feet out in front of him and crossed his arms over his chest, his employee lanyard tucked beneath. “You are most *definitely* not okay. You're not eating. You've lost thirty pounds, and you did not have thirty pounds to lose. You refuse

to give a work history, so I don't know how you're living right now, how you're making money. You have an unhealthy pallor. You're anemic. The first time you fell asleep at the wheel. The second time you collapsed in the grocery store. Do you remember what you were doing that caused you to end up here this time?"

I could feel serious judgment from this one.

"You fell from a ten-story patio," he informed me. "You got caught on a patio two floors down, and someone was there. They pulled you to safety, but you almost died this time. I've read through the notes your nurses have taken, and all have stated that you refuse help. You were healthy up until four months ago, the time of your first collapse. What happened just before that?" He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I have a strong case to have you committed for a seventy-two-hour hold if this isn't physiological."

I grimaced. "No."

"Were you trying to commit suicide?"

"No!" I blanched at the thought. "I'm not sleeping. That's it. That's all this is. It's nothing—the nightmares..." I couldn't stop the shudder. My entire body jerked.

I hated the nightmares.

"Nightmares?" he parroted, sounding unconvinced. "This is all because you're having nightmares?"

He didn't know what kind they were: people dying—my family, my sister, Jonah... That guy always came back, every night. Someone died every night.

I was waiting for my turn.

I didn't want to sleep, so I tried to avoid it.

You couldn't avoid sleep permanently, I'd learned.

"Yeah." My voice came out hoarse. "Sounds stupid when you say it like that, but yeah." I cringed. "I fell off a patio?"

He nodded. "You should be dead."

*Right.* Then it would've been my turn after all. I sighed, because damn. *Damn.*

“I probably shouldn't tell you this, but there's a nurse here who knows a relative of yours. She's concerned, says this isn't like you. She said you've always been healthy. There's no similar family history. *What* happened? This sounds like something very specific brought this all on. Is this trauma? Were you attacked? What happened? I'm only asking because I am very, very concerned. You might not get caught by another patio next time. There might not be someone there to grab you.”

The floor under my bed had opened up, and I felt everything being sucked down into it—a whole vortex, pulling me down.

I knew that wasn't what I wanted. How had I gotten to this point?

He was right. I hadn't been taking care of myself. It wasn't just the nightmares, but those were the worst part. I could never escape them.

I would die if I didn't change something.

“I know the cause of it...” I hesitated. “But I have to talk it out with a therapist. I need confidentiality, because what I have to say could get people killed. I can't tell you what it is, but I wasn't trying to kill myself.”

He swallowed. I could see his Adam's apple move up and down. “Were you attacked?”

I didn't answer that. “I do not have a death wish,” I said instead. “But I haven't been taking care of myself. I *will* change that. I promise.”

“You need to sleep. I can get a prescription for you. It'll make you go to sleep.”

I almost cried out at the thought. I was able to wake up from the nightmares. I wouldn't be able to wake up from that. “No. Not that, but I'll go somewhere I'll be safe. I promise.”

He stared at me long and hard before he gave a slow nod.  
“Okay.”

I nodded back. “Okay.”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

CARSON

I was packing when I heard the door beep.

I stopped, my heart racing, but no... That wasn't possible. That was the sound of when I turned off my security system, and I hadn't. It was a malfunction. Had to be. Or I was hearing things.

“You moved.”

I screamed, my bag and clothes went into the air, and I gaped—not believing who I was seeing.

Jonah stood in my doorway, watching me.

Jonah.

Here.

In my apartment.

My new apartment that I'd moved into after I quit my job in Texas, because I didn't know why I was living in Texas when my family was in Kansas.

And he was here.

*Here.*

“What the fuck are you doing here?!”

Okay. I had no chill button in this situation.

He didn't answer, and that's when I clued in to how clenched his jaw was.

He was ticked off.

Well, that made two of us.

“You left me!”

“I did not leave you,” he bit out.

“You told me to go!”

See? No chill. He was here. I was here. I was pissed. He was pissed. We were having this out.

“You had your brother take me home.”

“I told you if you left, I wouldn’t stop you.” He started forward. “Because I loved you! I did that for you!”

“I didn’t ask you to do it for me.”

He stopped, his face twisting up. “What are you talking about? Look at you!” he roared, pointing at me. “You’re a walking skeleton. What the fuck have you been doing to yourself?! You’re anemic. I can see that by just looking at you, and FYI, that’s not a good sign. I just got off a plane, which I rushed to after my brother told me you were in the hospital for a third  *fucking*  time in six months.”

He was really angry.

And damn.

He was hot.

Something was so wrong with me.

But he was here. Here. In my apartment. Where I was.

He came for me.

I hadn’t realized I’d been waiting, but I was. I had been. This was what I’d wanted all along. I just didn’t know it.

A tear fell down my cheek. “I wanted you to come after me.”

His eyes grew stricken. “What?”

“I wanted you to come after me.” I shook my head, flicking away that tear. It was stupid to cry over this. “I mean, I didn’t know until you just showed up. But wait—are you  *here*  here? Or are you here to yell at me and leave again?” I shot my hand out. “Because I’m not doing that. Not again. I’m not the one leaving this time. You can’t make me go, like literally. I’m not getting a ride to my parents’ house with your



brother, who was nice to me and that freaked me out. Neither of your brothers are nice. When they are, it's not right."

He cracked a grin. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." Oh, man. I was. I really was.

Not about his brothers—I was half joking about them, but I wanted him here.

And he was here.

I wasn't letting him go this time.

I wasn't letting myself be taken away.

What did that mean?

I didn't know.

His eyes gentled, and so did his tone. "Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath in, getting control of my emotions. "I will be."

He moved in, cupping the back of my head and tilting my face up to his. His thumbs smoothed over my cheeks. "You're not well. Kai told me about your hospitalizations, and I almost attacked him. He should've told me after the first one. What's going on? They started after you left us?"

Oh boy. This was going to be painful.

I reached up, my hands covering his, and held on. "I'll be fine. I will be. It's—it's just... I haven't been motivated to take care of myself. I've been depressed, because, you know. You. Leaving you shattered me, and I don't know, I think a part of me just didn't care what came next. But what came next were the nightmares."

He stepped close, his body touching mine. "Nightmares? You're having nightmares?"

I nodded, my neck stiffening up, and I could feel the fear moving through me, just talking about them. My body was conditioned by now. "It's always the same. The hangar. That guy coming in, but it's not me he kills. It's my family. My parents. My sister. You."

“Baby.”

A wave of emotion crashed through me, but this time, it was good.

Healing.

Hope.

I could feel it creeping in, one inch at a time.

“It’s been a really long few months.” I choked out a sob, and Jonah crushed me to him.

He wrapped his arms around me, tucking his head down. “I’m so sorry. I would’ve come after the first one, and that’s on me—”

I pulled back, tipping my head up. “Shut up.”

“What?” He laughed, frowning at the same time.

“Shut up. You blamed yourself for Melissa. You convinced me to walk away from you. You stayed away, and you were doing that for me. But enough. Stop blaming yourself for not being perfect. I could’ve reached out, too, Jonah. I knew you would love me. I know you do love me. I stayed away because...” I didn’t know anymore. “I’ll tell my family who you are, and it’s their choice. If they don’t want to risk it, I’ll stay away. But I can’t stay away from you, not anymore. I almost died this last time. I fell—”

“I know what happened.” His voice was low. “I know the timeline. You need to go to counseling to stop the nightmares.”

“I know.” I motioned to my bag. “I was packing to go to a treatment facility. This last accident woke me up, in a way.” I tightened my hold on him. “But I don’t want to do this without you. I love you. It never went away. It’s never gone away. You’re my one. I want to be with my one.”

His mouth was on mine after that.

He groaned, picking me up. “I love you. You and me. We’ll figure it out.”

The love, the sensations, the pleasure, all of it swept through me.

It pushed away the pain, the fear, the longing.

I was in his arms.

I would always be in his arms.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### JONAH

#### *Boston*

They had a big house. Big and bricked.

Carson had offered to come with me. So had Tanner. Kai, too. But I didn't want any of them, not for this. I didn't know why. I loved them, every single one of them, but this was the other side of me. It felt right to be here by myself, to do this alone. 'Cause that's how I felt at times—alone. But I wasn't. I knew it logically. It was hard to explain, but here I was.

Even Ezekiel was parked in a vehicle behind me. There were other guards around me.

But I was here.

I just wanted to see him, see her.

I didn't plan on talking to either of them. What I'd said to Kai was the truth. It was dangerous to know me, to be loved by me. This was the right thing to do for them. It was my way of protecting them, but they were part of me nonetheless.

A car moved past mine, slowing, and turned in to their driveway. Two guys got out, carrying food. They were laughing. The front door opened before they got there, and my sister appeared.

I leaned forward to get a better look.

She was beautiful. Dark eyes. Yellow dress. Ebony skin. Her hair was pulled up today, in some sort of updo. She smiled at the guys. Both hugged her before stepping in. She paused, looking outside, scanning the street, before following them in.

I knew they were having a party today. They were celebrating that my dad's wife had gotten a promotion at work. She was the elementary school's new principal. Kai's PI had called with the information, telling me if I wanted to see my dad, he could make it happen. He'd made contact with a guy going and could get me an invite to go with him.

I passed. Didn't feel right meeting them that way.

Seeing them this way was creepy, but at least I could see them. It was on my terms.

I watched for a while as they welcomed more guests, and my dad hadn't come to the door, not once. It had been my sister or her mom welcoming their guests every time.

My phone buzzed.

**Ezekiel: That's everyone on the guest list.**

**Me: He never came to the door.**

**Ezekiel: He might not be there.**

*Yeah.* He was right.

I looked in the rearview mirror, seeing him and the other guards watching me.

I should go. We should go. Carson was at the hotel waiting for me. I knew Kai and Tanner wanted to hear how it went. But it was a thirty-minute drive to the hotel, and I'd been in the vehicle this whole afternoon.

I got out, wanting to stretch my legs.

Ezekiel frowned, but I waved him off. I headed his way. We could figure it out in person—I wanted to move. I was restless.

As I walked to his car, a vehicle approached, a silver Lexus. Ezekiel got out to join me on the sidewalk, and behind me I heard, "Hey!"

I turned and looked.

Ezekiel moved in front of me, reaching for his gun.

A man was hurrying across the road, the Lexus behind him. He'd left it in their driveway, half pulled in. The door was open. "Stop!" he yelled.

Ezekiel stepped forward, but I caught his arm. He hadn't gotten a good look at the guy.

I had.

It was my father.

He got to the sidewalk, dressed as if he'd come from a business meeting or church—a buttoned-up black shirt. Silver tie. Black slacks.

I moved back, but I didn't want Ezekiel to guard me.

"Put it away." I motioned to his gun.

He did but moved to stand beside me. He wasn't blocking me anymore, but he was at my side, between my father and me.

Gabriel looked at me hard, still a distance away, and nodded to himself. "I know you," he called.

Thirty yards was between us, but I heard him loud and clear.

"I know who you are," he repeated

I shook my head. "Nah, man. I'm just talking to a friend here." I motioned to Ezekiel.

"She told me about you." His eyes were burning now. "Told me I had a son. I knew it. I knew all this time. Told my wife. My daughter. They know about you, too."

I moved forward, standing to face him square.

"You're my son," he said, his voice strong. "*My son*. I would've known you anywhere. You look like me. Got her color, but you're me. I wanted you. Do you know that? I tried to get you, but he wouldn't let me."

I stepped back and nearly *staggered*.

"What?"

“I tried. Over and over again. I wanted my son, but he’s big. He’s powerful. He’s dangerous. And he threatened me. Anthony. Her husband. Don’t know why he didn’t just kill me. I expected it. I knew who he was, what he did. He killed her instead. He told me he’d kill someone I loved, and she was dead a month later.”

I’d been so little. I remembered her funeral, remembered not holding her hand anymore.

He raised his chin, defiant. “I got word from your aunt, who told me what he did. She told me you were loved, that he wasn’t hurting you. She also told me to stop trying to get you, said he’d likely kill you before he let you go.” He shook his head, lowering it. “I never knew if I did the right thing by backing off or not. I met Cierra around then, but I never stopped wondering.” He looked back up, lifting his chin again. “But you’re here. You came to me. Is he dead?”

I nodded. *Damn.*

I’d been raw when Kai told me about Carson. I was shattered when Melissa died, but this was different. This was a whole other emotion, and I had no idea what it was.

“He’s dead.”

“Good. *Good.* He deserves to be dead. That’s good.” His eyes were fierce. “You are my son. I love you, always did. I wanted you then. I want you now.”

I started to shake my head, but stopped. I had no idea how to process this shit. None of it.

“I wasn’t going to talk to you,” I told him. “I wasn’t—I wanted to see you. That’s all.”

He took a step forward.

I backed up.

Ezekiel started to move between us, reaching for his gun.

I grabbed his arm. “No.”

But Gabriel stopped, eyeing Ezekiel.

I stepped in front of Ezekiel. “He’s my guard.” I looked back, and a few of the other guards had stepped out of their vehicles. There were a few others on the sidewalk behind us, some on the other side of the street.

Gabriel was looking, too. “I see that.”

“We still do what he did. *We* do it. My brother runs the family now.”

He nodded. “Kai. I saw the news, saw years back they were looking for your sister. I hoped everything was okay.”

He did?

I nodded, my head swimming—all the facts, everything he knew. I hadn’t known. I hadn’t been prepared. “Brooke is fine. We’re all fine.”

“I have alerts set up for all of you. I know your names. It was just a blip of news, and then it went away. I figured that’s ’cause of what your family does.” He cracked a grin. “Seeing them now makes me feel a way... They answer to you, right? It’s not the other way—you being captive or anything? They’re protecting you, not, you know...”

I nodded, letting go of Ezekiel’s arm. I’d forgotten I was holding it, keeping him from pulling a gun on my father.

*My father.*

I’d thought of him that way, but seeing him in front of me, hearing him call me his son...

It was a lot. It was all just a lot.

“They’re protecting me,” I told him.

“Good. That’s good.” His eyes softened again, and he raised that chin up. “But I know you. I wanted you to know that.”

“Yeah,” I managed. “Listen—”

He shook his head. “Nope. You don’t got to say what you’re going to say.” He held a hand up. “I know what you’re going to say. What you do, what your family does, it’s dangerous. Am I right? That’s the only reason why I can think



my son would seek me out, be across the street from my home, but not plan to talk to me. Because it's dangerous to know you? Is that what you were going to say?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I don't care—not about that. I'm a Black man in this society. There are things I'm scared about, but knowing my son? That's not it. That'll never be it. I love you. I want you. You hearing me on that?"

I moved my head up and down again.

I couldn't speak.

My chest was full.

My stomach was full.

My head was full.

I had no idea what to do.

"I really want you to come in and meet your sister. Meet your cousins. Meet my wife. She's a good woman. I want you to meet your aunt and your uncles. And be prepared, some of your uncles might scare you, but they'll love you. They don't know about you, just my wife and your sister, but they will all welcome you. You're family. My son. I'm *proud* to finally meet you." His face was wet with tears now. "If you don't want to walk to the house, come inside, and meet people who already love you, that's fine. But know this, we do love you. We do want you. You are always welcome. Always."

A door opened in the distance.

"Dad?"

I stepped back, knowing who that could be.

Gabriel rolled his shoulders back. He shot me a look.

"Right."

He went up the driveway. He said something, making it sound like a joke. I didn't know. I heard her laugh, heard the relief, and then he was back in his car and parking it in a better spot.

I stepped back, feeling like the world had just exploded.

My sister was at the door, waiting for her dad.

Gabriel parked, got out, locked his car, and went to her. He held the door as she went inside, and looked one last time at me.

He stood there a moment, staring at me.

I stood there, staring back.

“Dad?” Even from outside, I heard her call for him.

Still he stood there, staring at me.

He wasn’t going to go back inside, not until I moved.

I had to make the decision. He was waiting on me.

*Goddamn.*

Tears fell down my face. I knew it. I couldn’t stop them. I didn’t want to stop them.

I’d grown up with a man I knew was never my father. I grew up feeling different from my family—a part of them, but apart from them. Now my father was waiting for me, letting me decide. I blinked so many times, trying to stop the tears.

There was no way to prepare for this.

I hadn’t told him I was a doctor.

I wanted to tell him I was a doctor.

“Go, man.” Ezekiel nodded toward the house.

“Go.”

I started, but then stopped.

My sister came back to the door. She stepped in front of him, looking where he was looking. She frowned, paused, and then recognition hit her. Her eyes bulged, and her mouth dropped open. She gasped, a slight scream. She pressed her hand to her mouth, but it was done. It was over.

I started moving toward them as she ran down the stairs to me.

## Epilogue

CARSON

I'd be lying if I told you everything was happily ever after. It wasn't. I went to counseling and opened up about what happened. The whole almost-being-killed thing had given me some trauma.

I was dealing now.

Eventually things got better.

I could sleep. The nightmares lessened, and when they did come, Jonah was there. That helped *tremendously*.

There was a lot of running. I excelled at the half marathon—but nothing longer than that. No thank you. I wasn't nuts. I was good. Good to go!

Also, Jonah and I worked *hard* at our relationship.

It wasn't easy to come together, but we loved each other.

He was getting to know himself more fully, meeting a whole different part of his family. Eventually his other family met that family, and I was there.

I was at Jonah's side the entire way, like he had been for me.

I also laid everything out for my parents and sister. I told my family about Jonah and his family's business. That wasn't smooth sailing. My sister was happy that I was happy, but she was understandably hesitant about the mafia world.

My parents were *not* happy because of the mafia world.

There was no hesitancy on their end.

If I chose Jonah, I wouldn't be choosing them. They were clear on that, but I had already tried not being with Jonah. I

knew that didn't work.

So I chose Jonah. I choose to be happy.

My parents decided to disengage from me.

My sister was angry with them, but I understood. They were worried about her, too, that Jonah's family would be a danger to her. I really did get it.

It hurt, but it made sense. Either way, I couldn't go forward without Jonah. I knew by now that wherever I went in the future, he'd be there. That was the best option for me.

I loved him.

I couldn't stop, no matter the hardships.

\* \* \* \*

We got married in the woods, with a woodland-fairytale theme.

I. *Loved*. It.

We had butterflies in the trees. Fireflies at night. I used moss for decoration. The trees had tiny, tiny doors on them to make it look like gnomes lived there. It was everything and more—my dream wedding.

I wore a wildflower crown on my head.

My bridesmaids were my sister, Brooke, and Angel.

Jonah had Tanner, Kai, and Ezekiel as his groomsmen.

The flower girls were all of Jonah's nieces, because he had a lot by now.

Riley, Kai's wife, was in the front bench. She was amazing. There were a whole bunch of people next to her, but I didn't know who they were. Jonah told me they were hush-hush because of what they did. I didn't know what that meant, given that the Bennett family was also hush-hush, but by this point, I just went with it.

His father walked both of us down the aisle, and Jonah's stepmom cried the whole time.

Tanner made an awkward speech, which I was expecting. He talked about a lock room, about kidnapping people. One of Jonah's uncles on his dad's side, who Jonah didn't know that well, made the second speech. It was way better than Tanner's, but I'd never admit that to Tanner—who was, by the way, an awkward friend to me.

Yeah. I had no idea how that happened either.

Jonah was still a surgeon, and I had gone back to being a forensic technician. Though I knew I probably wouldn't be content with that. I'd been considering going to school for the whole shebang next fall: a forensic scientist.

Oh yeah. I'd be calling the shots. I knew I could do it.

But I hadn't done it yet. Because that took balls. All my balls had been taken up by marrying Jonah. Bad metaphor, but I loved him. I was almost obsessed with him. I worshipped him.

Just kidding.

I'm making it weird. It's not actually like that.

I love my guy. He loves me.

We'll figure it out, and we have time.

All I know is I'm hella fucking happy, and so is he.

\* \* \* \*

*Much later*

“Babe!”

From upstairs I heard Jonah's yell, and then the doorbell rang right after. That likely meant Angel was here.

I finished wrapping our precious little Gabriella Brooke in a blanket. When she was snug as a bug—and yes, I chanted this in my head as I did it—I lifted her to my shoulder. She was tired, already nuzzling into me. I could've laid her back down in the crib, turned on the sound machine and the monitor, and she'd go right to sleep. She was perfect like that. I assumed those were Jonah's genes, because no way did she get that from me.

But I didn't. I couldn't resist. I took her with me.

Because Jonah's surgery had gone late, I'd thought we might not do our date, but he was firm. When he'd arrived, I was in sweats, with a pizza on the way and my show picked out on Netflix.

He'd taken one look at me and said, "*Nope.*"

I should have expected it. He'd promised a date, and he wanted them more than I did. He'd read a manual during our premarital counseling that said *always keep it fresh, always keep it new, always keep it fun.*

Regular dates were his solution.

Planning for regular sex wasn't needed. We were just *fiiiine* in that department. I was a little sore from the position he'd put me in last night. Jonah got fucking experimental at times, emphasis on the *fucking* part.

Moving down the stairs, cradling Gabby in my arms, I could hear Jonah and his sister talking.

Angel had moved to Minnesota. She got a job here, but I suspected she'd come at least partially because this was where her big brother was. Lord knows, I didn't blame her. She idolized Jonah, and a weird sort of relationship had developed between her and Tanner.

I guess that was Tanner. I had a weird friendship with him too.

We'd grown to the point that I was his sister, but when the two parts of Jonah's family started to merge more, Tanner and Angel had become each other's shadows. I thought it was sweet, in a fierce sort of way—the fierceness coming from

Tanner. I knew Jonah's dad had his concerns, but Angel didn't listen. Well, she did, and then did what she wanted anyway.

She and Jonah were similar in that way.

They also both adored Gabby.

And as soon as I came into the living room, Angel headed for us, her hands out.

She gave me a brief smile in greeting but zoomed in on Gabby and soon had her cradled in her arms. She stepped back, giving me a softer smile before cooing at her little goddaughter who was just as obsessed with her aunt.

"Heya, Carson," she said once the baby was situated.

"Hi, Angel." I moved in to kiss her cheek.

Another soft smile was my reward. Jonah's younger sister was a little shy at times too, at least with me.

"Babe!"

Jonah stood at the door, waving his phone around. "I gave her the update. It's all good. We gotta go or we're going to be late."

I frowned. "Late for what? You made reservations or something?"

He flashed me a grin. "Or something."

I sighed. That grin was the perfect mix of cocky and happy. My man was happy. And my heart did a little pitter patter in my chest because that made me happy too.

I know the saying is that you get a honeymoon phase—two years. Not me. Not us. I was *in love* with my man as much as the first day I met him, and it only grew deeper as the days went by.

Jonah was out the door now, moving toward where he'd parked in the driveway.

Angel gave me a gentle nudge. "Go on. He's excited."

I eyed her, smiling. "You know what it is, don't you?"

Her eyes twinkled. “I know enough to know my brother cannot *wait* for this date tonight. Go. Have fun. I got this.”

I took a moment to really look at Angel. She’d grown up since I first met her, and she was a stunningly beautiful woman. All of Jonah’s family members on her side were great—his father, his stepmother, who would be so pissed I was adding the *step-* part. As far as she was concerned, she was Jonah’s mother, and in a way, she’d adopted Tanner and Brooke as well. Not Kai, but the rest most certainly. Jonah was lucky to have all facets of his family, but there was something special about Angel.

My throat filled with emotion suddenly. “I know Jonah loves you, and Tanner does, but so do I.” I wanted her to know that. It was important to me, and when I felt it extra, I shared it extra. Angel knew this already, and she moved in, giving me a hug.

I looked down. Gabby was watching us, a smile pushing up those cheeks of hers.

I was pretty sure she was filling her diaper.

“I love you, too,” Angel said. “Now...” She turned, her hip checking mine. “Get going. My brother’s going to lay on the horn in a second, and none of us wants that.”

*Oh God.* He would. “I have to go.”

Angel laughed as I hurried outside, grabbing my purse and phone on the way.

Jonah was antsy, his fingers drumming a beat on the steering wheel when I got in. “You good?” he asked with a nod.

I frowned as I shut the door and grabbed for my seatbelt. “I was good with Netflix and chilling tonight. Think I should be asking you that question.”

He froze, and then consciously relaxed himself. His head gave a little shake, and his shoulders loosened up. He dropped his hand from the top of the steering wheel and gave me a soft smile, similar to the one I’d gotten from his sister inside. “Hi.”



*Gah.* The melting. It was happening again.

I smiled back. “Hi.”

“I love you.” His eyes were shining with extra emotion.

I leaned over, cupping the side of his face. “I love you, too.” My thumb ran over his cheek. “You okay, though? For real?”

He nodded. “I am. Promise.”

“Good.”

As I let my hand fall, he leaned over, his lips finding mine. It was a soft graze at first, then a second, but my belly lit up by the third. That one was hot.

He cradled the side of my face as his mouth commanded entry.

I was happy to give it. I’d give him anything in that moment.

A second child? Here you go. I birthed it just now.

His hand slid to the back of my neck, and he angled his head for better access.

*God, yes.*

*God, please.*

Just, *God.* All day, God.

I could’ve kissed him for the rest of the night.

\* \* \* \*

Jonah pulled back a few minutes later.

However, *goals.* I knew what I was aiming for after this date—that and more, but definitely kissing. So much kissing.

I liked all the kissing.

Jonah pulled out of the drive and drove to the local botanical garden, which was empty when we arrived. As we

got out, there were no other vehicles in the lot. I was choosing to ignore the one that followed us with Jonah's security guards.

But I *wasn't* ignoring how Jonah held my hand, taking me down the sidewalk, lights above us and on the path lighting the way, to a table by the water fountain.

I realized he'd rented the whole place. This was all for us.

I was stunned, and melting, and my stomach was doing this flutter-flip thing.

"Jonah," I whispered.

He squeezed my hand, because he was still holding my hand.

Seriously loved my husband.

We had our own chef, and no other staff. He dished up the plates for us and left us alone.

The stars above. The lights. The sound of the running water.

It was one of the most romantic dates I could've imagined, and it was just Jonah.

He did this for me.

I could say that I'd remember this night for the rest of my life, but that wasn't true. I'd remember what *he* did.

The food was delicious.

The garden was a sanctuary.

But I wouldn't remember those details.

I'd remember the look in his eyes when he'd pulled into the parking lot, how ecstatic he was to see my reaction.

I'd remember the way he held my hand the entire night.

I would remember how he looked up at the stars, his thumb rubbing over the inside of my hand.

I would remember falling even more in love with him that night.

I sat across from him, listening to him tell me a story about one of the hospital volunteers, and I soaked everything up.

I would never stop soaking in this man—these moments, every laugh, every look, every caress, every story. They were locked in my head, in a vault, and I'd never give anyone the code. They were mine.

Except, well, one day Gabby could learn all about how her mommy and daddy met, then fell in love.

But until then... I leaned over, stopping Jonah mid-story, and kissed him.

I would remember kissing him, too.

I would never stop kissing him.

\* \* \* \*

## JONAH

“I love you.” Carson sighed softly as I slid inside of her that night.

I was declaring this date a success. She never stopped smiling all evening.

I bent down, grazing a soft kiss over her shoulder, and decided I'd tell her in the morning that I wanted to start trying for a second baby.

THE END

If you enjoyed Jonah's novella, please leave a review! They truly help so much.

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There were always whispers about my roommate at Hillcrest Academy.

The wealthiest of the wealthy sent their kids to our boarding school, and Brooke Bennett had been at the top, though I never quite knew why. She was fun and outgoing, but she kept quiet about her family. The only things she showed me were photographs of her brothers.

I became fascinated with her second-oldest brother. Kai Bennett.

He was the most of them all. Smoldering. Hypnotic. Alluring.

Kai had eyes that pulled me in and a face that haunted my dreams.

Then I met him.

He came to our school with their father, and that's when I learned what kind of family Brooke came from. They were mafia, and Brooke's oldest brother was dead. Her father said accident, but Brooke said murder.

Three months later, her father died, and Kai became the head of the Bennett Family. Brooke left Hillcrest for good, and that was the last time I saw her.

Fourteen years later, I'm staring at her face on the television. Brooke is missing.

Two days later, Kai Bennett kidnaps me.

\*\* This is a 120k complete standalone.

\*\* There is a bonus chapter from another book at the end.

\* \* \* \*

Two of my guards stood to the side of the door, and the other two positioned themselves outside.

I didn't ask questions, and none of them said anything.

I felt it in my bones: I was waiting for Kai Bennett.

I knew I wouldn't be able to find an escape route from the apartment. But I still looked around to get my bearings.

Inside the bedroom was a king-sized bed, and a wrap-around deck beyond two sliding glass doors. As I stepped out onto it, my heart sank.

There was nothing for me to climb onto if I wanted to make my way down. The fall could've fit a thirty-eight-floor hotel, and I could see rocky terrain at the bottom. It was a rock-climber's dream, or challenge, but not mine.

"Gonna jump?"

I jerked, my hands clenching the railing as his smooth voice slid down my spine. It awakened all my nerve endings, and I gritted my teeth, hating how I reacted to him. Those were the first two words he'd spoken to me in fourteen years, making four in total now.

Why did I react to him this way?

Turning around, I found Kai standing just inside the bedroom doorway, his head cocked to the side as if he found me a puzzle.

I'd seen it before, but his presence was like a punch to my sternum. He'd been devastatingly handsome at sixteen and he was even more so now, and that set my teeth on edge.

Dressed in a business suit, the shirt unbuttoned and the ends pulled loose from his pants, he had bare feet. He looked as if this trip to see me was the last thing he had to do before relaxing completely, as if I were an afterthought.

Then he shrugged off his suit jacket and shirt, catching the collars of both and tossing them on the bed. He turned to the closet behind him, which opened to showcase an array of men's clothes.

My mouth dried.

This was his bedroom.

Was it?

I glanced to a second closet, wondering if I'd find women's clothes in there or more of his.

He brought out a T-shirt and pulled it on. It molded to him, revealing broad shoulders and a lean waist that had been trimmed down to a core of solid muscle.

His hands dropped to his belt buckle, and I pulled my gaze away and turned around.

“So are you?”

I turned again to find him fully clothed, wearing a pair of dark gray sweatpants that molded to his bottom half the way his shirt did to the top.

He motioned to me. “Come on. I'm tired, and I don't want to have this talk worrying my little sister's dear friend might jump to her death.” He snorted to himself. “She'd really be furious with me then.”

There was a twinge in his voice. Exhaustion? I heard it now. I followed him, at a reluctant pace, as he went to the bedroom's far wall and pushed a button.

Two doors slid open, revealing an entire bar built into the wall. As he poured a glass of bourbon, I saw the slope in his shoulders. There were bags under his eyes, and a tired softness around the corners of his mouth.

“Are you going to speak, or do I need to test your vocal chords a different way?” he asked, swinging his heated eyes my way. His nostrils flared as his hand tightened on his glass.

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Kasi Alexander

Jessica Johns

Dylan Stockton

Richard Blake

and Simon Lipskar