

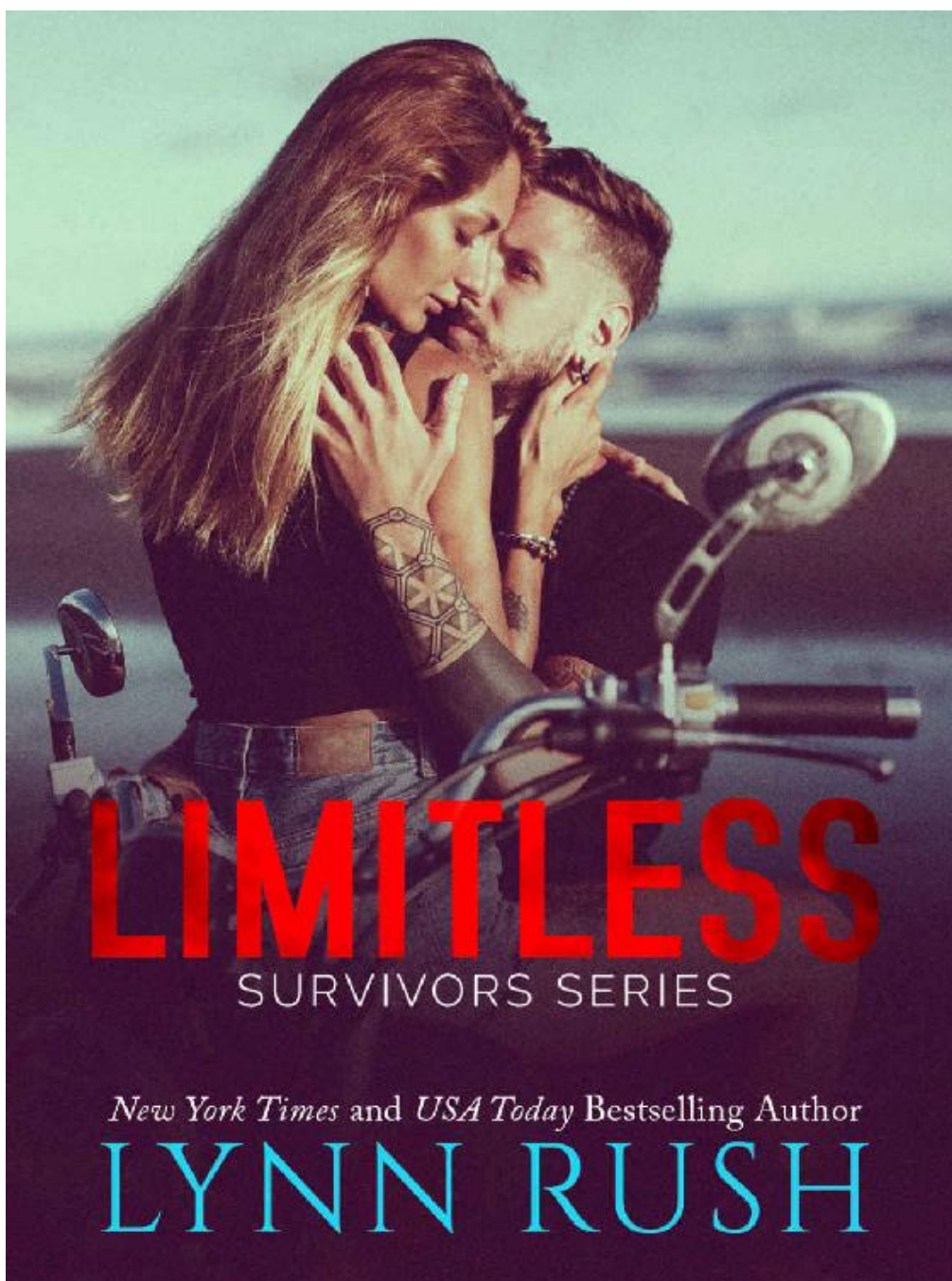


LIMITLESS

SURVIVORS SERIES

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

LYNN RUSH



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Chapter One

Angelina

Taking this one step through the doorway of my apartment wouldn't kill me. Logically I knew that, but somehow my body considered the mere thought of walking out of my apartment a step that could possibly end the world.

At least my world.

I drew in a deep breath, but it didn't change the drum solo pounding away at my ribcage.

"I can," I whispered. "I've been practicing. I'm strong."

"Yes, you are, Angelina." Jenna's soft voice whispered in my ear.

She was an amazing therapist. Heck, it was two in the morning, and she was on the phone with me, helping me take this first step.

I glanced at my phone and her wide, green eyes filled the small screen. She nodded, encouraging me. Like she had for the past two years.

Two freaking years it's taken me to get through the doorway of my apartment and into the elevator. Tonight's goal: The Lobby.

The first few steps were always the toughest. Like when I was running on my treadmill, it was difficult to get started, but once I was running, I fell into a groove, and it was awesome.

It was the same with this damn doorway. It tried to trip me up every time.

But not tonight. I was going to get to that lobby if it was the last thing I did.

A wave of anxiety stormed through my stomach, clenching the muscles. Heat steamed my cheeks, but a chill puckered the skin along my arms beneath my long sleeved thermal.

I can do this. I will not let them control me.

“Breathe, Angelina,” Jenna reminded me.

How did I do that again? Oh, yeah. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

“Name your songs if you need to,” Jenna said.

I nodded and eased my hand down, still holding the electronic lifeline, but I didn’t want to see Jenna’s face. I needed to be strong. I could do this.

Sober. Family Portrait. Try. As I rolled through the list of songs from my favorite, kick-ass, tougher than nails artist, P!nk, I felt my confidence rising. It was a silly safeguard, but it worked.

I lifted my foot toward the threshold of the doorway—that thin silver frame on the floor separating my plush burgundy carpet from the hallway outside. I swallowed hard, squashing the tears threatening to choke me.

Let’s Get The Party Started, Who Knew.

I squeezed my phone as my foot planted on the worn carpet outside my door. *Yes!*

God, I was sick. For this one little step to give me so much pleasure was...insane. But I had to do this. Had to. I was graduating this year, and I was bound and determined to make it to graduation.

Or at least a graduation party.

Something to celebrate the monumental occurrence of me getting my degree. Because I'd been in this apartment three years and twelve days, and I'd never left.

As in ever.

And I was more than ready to leave.

"Okay! I can do this. Focus," I said out loud.

The first step turned into another, and I was standing outside my door. I glanced to my right, toward the elevator, and the walls suddenly slanted. The elevator door seemed to stretch until it was a mile away from me.

"No. I'm okay. Breathe." I closed my eyes and ordered my heart to calm down. I'd use up my allotted heartbeats for my lifetime in the next ten minutes if it didn't slow down.

I squared my shoulders and turned to fully face the hallway, the obstacle keeping me from my goal. I needed to kick its ass right now. The air was still, and there wasn't a sound to be heard. The twenty floors of hotel excitement below me would be quiet this time of night.

This was my dad's hotel and it catered to business people, and they were focused, hardworking, and mostly quiet this time of the night.

I should know, I'd watched from afar for years.

"Angelina?" Jenna's voice streamed over my earbud.

"I'm good," I said. "I'm good." I'm safe. No men are hiding in the shadows.

I took another step, staying focused on the elevator door. Another turned into five more. Only seven feet left. I passed the neighbor's closed door. I'd heard some moving around beside me this past week as new people had moved in, but it'd been quiet for a while now.

On my phone I tapped home and then the video app. I scrolled through the screens confirming all was quiet on each floor of the hotel. The elevators weren't moving, and people would need a VIP pass to get to this top floor.

This was my chance. I was going to make it all the way to the lobby. If I made it, I could tap that bag of candy corn Mom had sent me. I'd been holding onto it for two weeks as I prepped for this adventure.

Slowly, I made it to the elevator. The down arrow on the panel between the elevator door and the wall called me like a beacon. *Just press the button.*

One step at a time, right?

I punched the arrow with a shaky finger. Nothing caved in on me. I didn't get electrocuted. The walls stayed where they were—they didn't even slant. I checked my breathing, and it was fine—a little breathless, but nothing close to hyperventilating.

Sweet. Empowerment stormed through me. Electrified my veins, giving me power, energy.

“I’m so proud of you,” Jenna said.

The crank of the elevator grinding its way up here sent a round of nerves through my chest and nearly sent me running back to my apartment. Instead, I fisted my hands.

Timebomb, Trouble, Stupid Girls.

The doors silently rolled open. Nothing creaked at this five-star hotel. Nothing but the best here. Well, except me. I was broken and creaky.

I shook my head, tossing those negative thoughts to the carpet. I leaned forward, looking inside the box. Dang, it was small.

But not as small as the last time I’d stepped into it. See, things were getting better. I totally could do this.

The mirrored walls mocked me, showing my tattered reflection. Yoga pants, long sleeved shirt and running shoes. Yeah, my hair was flying in all directions like Medusa’s snakes, but heck, I didn’t have anyone to impress.

At this rate, I probably never would, considering I was having so much trouble leaving my place.

One more step.

The checkered carpet matched what I was standing on. Only one little gap separated the two surfaces.

My heart started hammering. The world started tilting. I—

No! It was time to make agoraphobia my bitch!

I jumped into the cab. It swayed a little, and I closed my eyes. *Sober. Try. Just Give Me A Reason.*

I put my arms out to balance, not that it was swaying so much, but it helped stabilize me. Knees bent, I glanced around the dim elevator box. Soft music piped in, but it was the dreaded jazz. I hated jazz. It was sooo...depressing.

“Great job, Angelina. How are you feeling?”

“Scared. Freaked out. Empowered. Angry. Happy.”

“That’s quite a mix. Good job. Focus on the one emotion that will get you to the next step.”

“Empowered. Empowered. I’m strong,” I whispered as I turned to face the hallway. The walls didn’t slant this time. “Yes!” I pumped my fist in the air. “I’m the shit!”

The doors started rolling shut, and a vise around my neck squeezed. *It’s okay, I’ve done this before. It’s fine. I’m making it to the lobby.*

“Doing great, Angelina. Press the L for Lobby.”

I drew in a long, slow breath as I stepped toward the side, hand raised.

Suddenly, the cab jostled, and the floor fell out from beneath me. My gut clenched as I widened my stance.

“Whoa.”

“It’s okay. Someone just activated the elevator elsewhere. Press the button, Angelina. You’ve done this before. You’ve got this.”

I have done it before. A few times. I’d never made it all the way down, but I’d gone several floors before. Even stepped out on floor three, once. It was part of working my way to the lobby.

But right now, I could barely breathe.

I stared at the button. *Push it. Push it!* If I didn't, I'd be forced down to meet whoever activated the elevator. I reached out, but I was too far. It felt miles away. Miles and miles.

Heat raced up my neck and to my cheeks.

"Angelina. Press the button right now," Jenna ordered me. She knew I was losing it.

I stepped forward. Almost there. Almost—

The elevator started plummeting even faster. The whir of the machine continued as if laughing at me as we fell floor after floor after floor.

I cupped my cheeks, almost dropping my phone, as I watched the numbers zoom down the count toward the massively bright G. *Garage*.

"Oh God. Not the garage."

"Press L, Angelina, right now, press L. It will stop before you hit the garage. Do it now! Angelina. Right now!"

My legs turned into cooked noodles, and I started sagging to the floor. My finger managed to hit L before the darkness crept in. Such a familiar darkness. It felt like my lungs were two sizes too small. There wasn't enough air.

The mirrored walls started slanting toward me. I heard Jenna's distant voice shouting at me to breathe. To name songs.

What songs? I couldn't even think of one single song right now. Only static filled my ears. Deafening static.

Help! I couldn't find my voice.

The elevator stopped with a jolt, and I palmed the cool wall trying to stay upright. *Wait, what happened to the lit-up L? I need the lobby. Not—*

The doors rolled open, and a shadowy figure filled the doorway. A gigantic man with arms bigger than my thighs stomped over the threshold. The whole thing shook and groaned like a monster about to swallow me whole. *No. No. No!*

The static magnified until I thought my ears would surely bleed. A vise cinched my chest so hard I coughed, searching for air. Just one breath. *Help!* My phone slid from my slick hands.

The giant reached for me, and his eyes were wide. His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear over the blood raging through my head. Those eyes, though, they were a blue like I've never seen before. On the sunniest day, right after sunrise, the sky sometimes took on a violet blue color. It was one of my favorite things, and his eyes captured that color exactly. Such a calming, beautiful, blue-sky sunrise.

And it was the last thing I saw.

Chapter Two

Hunter

“Whoa. Hold on!” I raced toward the girl sagging to the floor. Her wide, brown eyes flashed a fear I’d seen before. All too often. “I’m not going to hurt you,” I said. “Not going to hurt you.”

Her tiny body slumped back and would have fallen to the floor had I not grabbed her shoulders. *What the hell?*

“Hey. You okay? Hey!” I gently shook her, but she was out.

I didn’t catch the scent of alcohol or anything, so she didn’t pass out from that. As a bouncer, I’d seen that more times than I could count.

But the fear I’d seen in her eyes. What was that about? I was scary looking, yeah, but not *that* scary looking. Then again it was two in the morning, and I probably reeked of grease, sweat and beer from a long night at the bar.

“Hello?” a tiny voice called out. “Hey, you. Hello?”

I glanced around and saw only the empty hallway behind me. “Hello?” I called out.

“Here. Here.”

The voice sound like it was coming from the unconscious girl—wait, she had an earbud wedged in her ear. I scanned the floor and found her phone off to the side. There was a woman on the screen waving her hands. *Holy shit.* I snatched the thing up, and on the screen, there was a woman pointing to her ear.

“Oh. Yeah.”

I swiped the phone and turned off the Bluetooth. The woman’s image cut out a second, but then her voice cut in.

“—you so much. Thank God you came by. Please. You have to help her,” the woman on the screen of the phone said.

“What the hell is going on?” Maybe I was being punked or something. Maybe there was a hidden camera around. Hopefully not, considering I needed to stay off the grid as much as possible.

“What’s your name?”

“Hunter. You?”

“Jenna. Can you please press the 21st floor? Oh wait, you need the pass. Hers is—”

“I got one. That’s my floor.” I leaned to the side and swiped my key fob then clicked twenty-one.

This girl lived next to me? I hadn’t met the neighbors yet, but I’d only moved in last week, and I made it a point to not mingle much. *No personal attachments allowed.*

“Thank you. Wait, you’re Angelina’s neighbor?”

“Angelina?” I shifted the stranger around and hoisted her into my arms. Light little thing. Fit, too. Those yoga pants suited her. “Is that your name?” I asked, looking into her relaxed face. She looked more like a Lina....

No. No nicknames. No connections.

But there was something about this girl that poked at my rigid no dating rule. Maybe because it'd been so long since I'd been with a woman. I was primed and ready—

“Yes. Oh, thank goodness.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, totally confused how I’d ended up holding a total stranger in my arms after a long night of plucking drunks off the floor of the club. None were as pretty as Lina, though. Such a fragile-looking thing. Her head lulled against my chest, and a strange sensation of electricity and tingling ignited where she touched me. It wasn’t even skin-on-skin, but I felt it.

Even through the stench of greasy food and sweat clinging to my shirt, her fresh scent sifted through. What was that? Cucumbers?

“...was that what your name was?”

The voice from the phone yanked me out of my staring. “Yeah. Hunter...Amos.” Holy crap, I almost gave her my real last name. “So, what’s her deal? Should I be calling an ambulance or something?”

“No. If you’re okay with it, can you get her to her apartment?”

“As in...like bring her in there?”

“I’ll stay on the phone with you the entire way. It’ll be fine.”

There was nothing fine about me, a total stranger, bringing another total stranger into her apartment. I took care of drunks at the bar, but the furthest I’d ever gone was to get them to their cab or their car if they had a sober driver.

“I know this might seem strange, and I can’t tell you much other than she’ll be fine. We were trying something out and...well, you were a little unexpected.”

“You her shrink or something?” I glanced up at the numbers as they edged toward our floor. I was a little sad at the thought of letting this warm woman go. It’d been so long. So very long since I’d just held someone.

I couldn’t chance getting close to anyone. I wasn’t safe. I ground my molars, the all too familiar anger rising up. It was my dad’s fault I couldn’t get close to a woman. Damn violent prick ruined not only my mom but me, too.

But at least Mom was safe from that monster now.

“Hunter? Is everything okay?”

“Um yeah.” I cleared my throat, focusing my thoughts on the girl in my arms. She needed me to keep my shit together. Even though she didn’t know me, she was depending on me to protect her. I could do that. Hell, it was my mission in life to keep people safe. I had a lot to make up for. “Are you her shrink?”

“You seem distracted.”

“Nice deflection, Doc.” So she was a shrink. *Great.* What did I walk in on? “Am I holding a crazy chick? Or—”

“No. If you could just...help her, we’d be greatly indebted to you.”

Shrinks cracked me up, but I did have to give props to this one. To be on video chat at two in the morning, and she’d not yet admitted to being Angelina’s shrink—this lady was good. “Your name is Jenna?”

“Yes.”

“It’s fine. I’ll take care of her. What do you need me to do? We’re at floor 18.”

“Her key fob is in her—wait, she’d been holding it. No, she hadn’t. Those pants have a zip pocket on the lower back. It should be in there. Can you try and find it?”

“Okay, but if she wakes up and freaks out thinking I’m trying to cop a feel, you gotta back me up on this.”

“Let’s pray to God she doesn’t wake up, for her sake.”

“Sounds bad, Doc.”

“You’re a big guy, you can handle her. Hurry, in case she is nearing consciousness.”

“She’s not. Trust me, she’s totally out.”

“Lots of experience with unconscious girls? Maybe we should call an ambulance.” She laughed.

“Funny. I’m a bouncer.”

“Say no more.”

“Okay, here goes.” I eased her feet to the floor while I held her up in a one-armed hug.

I couldn’t help but notice how nicely her body formed to mine, soft and warm. *Stay focused.* A wave of her fresh scent wrapped around me again. Dang, I could get used to that smell. Her head shifted, and her forehead rested against my neck, nice and smooth. I slid my hand down her lower back until I felt a little bulge as her tight ass started to curve.

No. She did not have a nice ass! *No. No. No.*

“Find it?” Jenna’s voice distracted me from my totally inappropriate train of thought.

“Yeah.” I fumbled with the zipper, but finally got it open and plucked out the key fob as the elevator came to a gliding halt.

Her lifeless body shifted as I eased her back into my arms. Her head hung back, exposing her long, swanlike neck. Hair the color of champagne spilled over my arms.

The doors rolled open, and I carried my charge past my door. It was strange thinking this girl had lived next to me this past week, and I’d not heard a peep from her or seen her. Judging by her unconscious state right now, I could see why.

I swiped the key fob in front of the door handle, and I heard more than one lock sliding, which was weird as there was only one key fob pad above the handle.

“Okay. I’m in,” I said to Jenna as I pushed open the door.

A wave of fresh scent washed over me. I couldn’t place it, maybe because the grease clinging to my clothing was tainting it, but it might have been cucumber body spray. Or melon. Yes, something like melon. I was around chicks enough at the bar and at school to catch the scent.

I let the door swing shut, and I took in the space.

Immediately to the right there was a small sitting room with a couch, a chair, and a massive TV mounted to the wall. *Nice.*

Further back lay the kitchen that resembled mine with a huge center island, stainless steel appliances and tile

flooring. There was a hallway off the right of the kitchen that probably led to some bedrooms like my apartment.

To my left, there was an open office with three monitors on a massive desk. On the wall above the monitors, there were two more TVs, but they scrolled some screen saver pictures of the ocean, surfing, and baseball. Wait, baseball?

“Her bedroom is off to the left, past the office,” Jenna said.

“Um...” I glanced back to the sitting room. “I’ll put her on the couch.”

“Very noble of you, Hunter.”

“Enough with the positive affirmations, Doc.” I chuckled. Shrinks really did crack me up. I should know; I’d seen my share. “She’ll be fine on the couch. Anything I need to get her? Or...you know, like meds or something?”

“Her iPad should be on her desk, grab that and set it near her? Her friend will call her in a couple of hours.”

I glanced over my shoulder and located the iPad. “Okay, I see it.” I turned around and carried Lina to the couch. I knelt and settled her onto the soft, leather cushions. I grabbed the blanket that was bundled up at the other end and shifted it over her.

Her head tilted to the side and created a gap along the neck of her shirt. A jagged purple line curved over her shoulder. It was thick, too.

Shit, that was a mean looking scar.

I diverted my focus to the task at hand, covering her up with the blanket, but I couldn't take back what I'd seen. Hell, it looked like the one on the side of my mother's face thanks to my abusive prick of a father.

Standing up, I took in a deep breath to douse the angry fire in my gut. I despised seeing women abused or hurt. I'd seen enough of that to last a lifetime. Hell, I lived it daily, not knowing if Dad was going to show up or tear through some town, hurting anyone in his way, searching for us.

I snatched the iPad off the desk and hurried back to Lina. "Okay, Jenna, the iPad's on the little table here." I positioned the phone so the shrink could see everything. "She's safe. I'm heading out."

"Thank you, Hunter. You're a Godsend. Take care."

I tapped the call to an end and set Angelina's phone next to her iPad. *Godsend?* Not even close.

Chapter Three

Angelina

“Oh my gosh, Lizzie, I’m so mortified.” I scrubbed my face with my hands as I settled into my office chair, fighting the tears once again. “I passed out in the freaking elevator!”

“Hey, it’s been three days, would you quit obsessing?” Lizzie shook her head. “Remember what you accomplished instead.”

“True.” Yeah, I’d gone further than I ever had on my quest to make it out of this damned hotel, but then I had to go and faint in front of a stranger, and he freaking carried me into my apartment. *My home!*

My heart ramped up again at the thought of a stranger—a man no less—being inside my home. I’d woken up to Lizzie ringing me on FaceTime. Talk about humiliating.

“You know he’s totally sexy, right? I mean, those pics you captured from the video of him at your door. Delish!” Lizzie grinned into the camera. “And that’s just on camera. In person he must be double delish.”

“As if I’ll ever find out. I’m never leaving this apartment again.”

“Don’t say that Angelina. Please.” Lizzie’s expression turned dark. “We have to...we have to get out of here.”

Tears pricked the backs of my eyelids. Lizzie hadn’t left her apartment in a handful of years either. As far as I’d gone in my adventures out, she’d fallen even more into her agoraphobia.

I couldn't let her down. My needing to get out of this place wasn't only for her. No, it was for me. I needed it as badly as she did.

"When you say, 'we', Lizzie, that means you, too, you know." I brought my feet up onto my computer chair and sat cross-legged as I leaned my elbows onto the desk. The sun spilled in behind me from the big, open windows. The cool breeze felt good and fresh.

"I know." Her voice got small. "You think I should take the meds? You think it'll help?"

"Maybe for a while. Short term, though, to help you over the hump. What's Jenna say?"

"Pretty much what you just said. You sure you two don't talk about me?"

"Nope. She's the bomb, remember? Best chick out there for helping freaks like us."

Lizzie slumped into her computer desk chair. "What's it like out there in Minnesota?"

"Windows are open," I said, tilting the camera to the side a little and easing out of the way. "If you were here with me, you could feel this nice breeze."

"It's effing cold here in New York." She let out a big sigh. "So, that guy, *Hunter*, he really came to your door?"

"Twice." I glanced at my front door, remembering the thrill of hearing his voice on the other side, asking if I was there.

Where else would I be? Then again, he didn't know exactly what was going on, either. And if I had my way, he wouldn't, because I didn't plan on seeing him any time soon.

“What if he stops by again?”

“I'm quiet as a mouse in here. So that's not a problem. He won't even know I'm here.” I crossed my eyes at the screen. “Next topic.”

“Don't you miss people? I mean, at all?”

“I have my peeps right here.” I tapped the screen. “You're it, babe. Well, you and a few thousand on social media.” I laughed.

“I mean real peeps.” She held up her hand to her face. “Like touching them. Warm, soft skin.”

“You mean guys.”

She blushed.

That was easy for her to say. Her agoraphobia hadn't been triggered by three days of captivity, rape, and torture by five guys. I wasn't sure I'd ever miss guys again.

Oh, who was I kidding? I remembered the kind, gentle touches of a guy before the shit storm that shattered my world. And heck yeah, I missed that, especially the rush of anxiety swirling around my stomach right before that first kiss. The tenderness of it...

“We don't need guys, Lizzie. We're strong, capable women.”

“Yeah, strong. Capable.” She rolled her eyes. “And shut-ins. That doesn't scream strong and capable. At least

you're a little strong. You made it to the garage level. The freaking garage level, Angelina. I am so proud of you."

But I totally face-planted when the adventure went south. "I was only supposed to go down to the lobby, you know. I panicked. Totally lost it."

"At least you did something."

And luckily landed in the arms of a trustworthy guy. He could have done any number of things to me. Stolen stuff from my place. Killed me. An invisible noose slid around my throat.

The pressure was enough to make me cough. I touched my neck, knowing nothing was there, but I sure could feel the pressure anyway. Slowly tightening.

"Angelina?" Lizzie said. "Hey, look at me."

I stared at the screen, and her blue eyes widened.

"Hey, girl. You're okay." Her fingers touched her screen, and I raised my hand. "There you go. Touch my fingers. Focus."

I pressed my fingertips to my computer screen and nodded, swallowing through the thickness. With my free hand, I brushed along my shoulder. The deepest of the scars was there. A flash of a blade reflecting the light ignited behind my eyes. *No*. No flashbacks. Please—

A video box in the lower left corner of my screen popped up, and in the next breath, my doorbell sounded.

Lizzie sat up straight. "Oh...is it him?"

I closed my eyes, took in one deep breath, then checked the surveillance video. Yep. There he was with his long, blond hair. His bangs were long enough to fit behind his ear, while the rest of his hair grazed the neck of his shirt.

He wore a tight red thermal shirt today. His pecs seriously tested the limits of said shirt, too.

“Hello?” he said, eyeing the camera.

“Answer it, Angelina,” Lizzie said. “You’ve got to be curious how he looks in person.”

Sure I was, but to open the door to him, the one who scooped me off the floor after I passed out with fear? No way. I’d dissolve into a puddle of embarrassment.

“Oh, see, I knew you wanted to. Look at you primping your hair.”

What? Then I realized my hands were up in my hair, fluffing it. I’d gotten out of the shower a couple of hours ago and hadn’t done anything with it. Then again, I never did do anything with it. Why bother since I never went anywhere?

“You can open the door. You don’t have to go out or let him in. Just open it.”

“No. I—”

“You can!” Lizzie pointed to the screen. “Try it. I’ll stay online. You can do this, Angelina. You *have* to do this.”

“Angelina? I know you’re in there,” Hunter’s voice trickled through my thick door.

God, I wanted to go to him—I mean—to the door. And it was true, I wanted to see him in person. The video feed

I had was good, but not great. He looked so big, though. So scary with the long hair and tattoos I'd seen on his bare arms yesterday when he'd knocked on my door.

I pushed my chair away from the desk.

“Yes!” Lizzie said. “Go. Go. Go. Do this for us.”

I gulped through the nerves. *For us*. Okay. I could do this. I could...no, I couldn't. I stopped in the middle of my office area. The door tilted slightly, and I put my hands out to stay balanced. I shook my head and patted my warm cheeks. I was already starting to sweat.

I'm a complete and total freak!

“I'm just checking to make sure you're okay. You've got me a little worried.”

Worried? For me?

A soft thump sounded, and I glanced back at my computer. The video feed showed him sitting, back against my door.

How strange.

“Today's the first time I've heard anything from your apartment since that night. You—are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to say yes, but I shut it again. Instead, I took the final five steps to the door and sat down, facing the door. Pressing my hand where I knew his back was, I could have sworn the wood felt warmer than normal. I knew it was my mind playing tricks on me, but I went with it. I'd not felt the warmth of a man's touch in years. Hell, I'd not even

seen anyone in person since my mother last visited more than nine months ago.

Other than Mom and Dad, no one came into my apartment. The mail was left at the door, and I waited until it was clear to get it. Same with the groceries. I'd had this carefully laid out plan for years to avoid seeing anyone ever again.

But now, I sat on the floor, touching my door because I knew another human being leaned against it. I really was sick.

Lonely.

Horny.

Alone.

Broken.

The joys of being in therapy for so long, I could identify my feelings easily. Too bad these particular ones slapped me in the face until it stung.

“I can tell you have your windows open. It's nice out, isn't it? I was out today and thought of you. I hope you don't mind, I picked something up for you.”

I sat straight and pulled my phone out of my back pocket. I clicked on my video system so I could see him from here and smiled. He held something in his right hand. Looked like a bag. Yes, one that was filled with little yellow and orange pieces of goodness.

Candy corn!

How did he know those were my favorite candies of all time? There was no way he could. Talk about a master guesser. My mouth started drooling as if I was one of Pavlov's Dogs.

"Will you open up so I can give them to you?"

I closed my eyes, summoning the strength, the will—

"Do it!" Lizzie's voice traveled through the open room, and I cringed. Hopefully he didn't hear that.

"How 'bout this? I'll leave them here then I'll step away. I know you don't know me, don't trust me. That's okay. I need to know you're okay. You've got me worried after the other night, but I don't know anyone I can call to check on you."

"How'd you know?" I asked. I wasn't sure I'd asked it loud enough, but then he spoke up.

"Know what?" he asked, as if it wasn't totally weird that we were talking through a closed door.

"That I loved candy corn?"

He laughed. "I didn't. There was a cool Halloween display at the market down the street and I went for it. But I'm glad you do. Will you open up so I can give them to you?"

I glanced at my phone. He'd made no move to get up or anything. He probably knew I wouldn't but wanted to give me a chance. He had to think I was a total freak. Well, I was, but still. It must be glaringly obvious now.

"Um. I'm okay. And...thank you for helping me."

“Glad I was there for you. So, your name is Angelina? That’s pretty.”

“It was my grandmother’s name.” Why was I telling him that? Holy cow.

“It’s nice. How long have you lived here?”

Three years, sixteen days... I glanced at my phone again and saw that he’d stretched out his legs and crossed them at his ankles. He really wasn’t going anywhere, was he?

“I moved in last week. Hope we weren’t too noisy for you. Minnesota’s new to me, and I’m not sure I’ll be okay with the cold, but the change in leaves is starting. That’s pretty cool.”

We?

“I’ve been here three years,” I said as I turned and relaxed against the door. Only an inch separated me from a real, living human being. I closed my eyes and pictured his violet-blue eyes staring at me with a loving look. Tender and gentle, but protective and fierce too, since he was so huge.

“Three years, huh? That’s a while. You must like it here.”

“It’s nice.”

We sat there in silence for a while, but it wasn’t weird. It was...calming.

“Where did you come from?” I meant geographically but also in the figurative sense, too. He was my knight in shining armor the other night, and now he sat in a hallway

talking to me through the door as if it wasn't the most asinine thing in the world. So yeah, I needed to know.

"Nowhere special, but I've never lived in Minnesota before. What are the winters like?"

"Cold. Lots of snow. Hope you drive an SUV."

"I do, actually. Good to know, though. Will I need chains for the tires?"

I laughed. "No. You'll be fine."

"I've never driven in snow before."

He was from a warm climate. "Let me guess. You're from Arizona."

"Around there."

"It's just you?"

"My mom lives with me." I heard him move and checked my screen to see he was standing. I did the same, but I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like he could see me. And it wasn't like I was going to open my door. "I should go. I'm glad you finally answered and that you're okay."

I rested my hand on the door, wanting so much to open it.

"I'll leave these here for you. Enjoy." He stood at the door, staring at it, for a few seconds, then he stepped out of range of my video. I pressed my ear to the wood, listening for any movement. Any sign he was there.

"Bye," I whispered as the tears welled.

Would I ever be normal again?

Chapter Four

Hunter

“I tell ya, Mom, I would swear no one lives next to us. It’s so quiet...all the time,” I said, looking out the window. Talk about an amazing view.

“I can relate.”

“You can’t leave much because that right was taken from you. She...I think she’s agoraphobic.”

“Sounds like it. But what you did for her, that was sweet. You took care of her, tried to talk to her. But you can’t make her, you know.” Mom looked up from her computer and smiled.

She had a beautiful smile, even with the seven-inch scar running down the side of her face. So many people couldn’t see past that, though. I could finally look at it without going into a rage, but it took some time. Even after three years, I still get twinges of it—flashes of my father slicing her open in a fit of rage.

Shaking my head free of those thoughts, I focused on the few pillowy clouds dancing around the darkening sky. It was a rare treat I had the night off from the bar, and I’d pounded out my paper due Monday, so I was set to relax... only I couldn’t.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t push Lina from my mind. Her face kept popping up, almost knocking me off my feet. At least she’d talked to me. For how quiet she was, she

could be dead or something. It'd been over a week since I'd left her the candy corn.

It hadn't been on her doorstep the next morning, so I knew she'd gotten it. But why couldn't I get her out of my mind? I'd left my card on the candy gift, hoping she'd reach out by emailing me. That was safe, wasn't it? I'd read up on agoraphobics and learned that many were very active online. Hell, my mom wasn't technically a shut-in, and she was online like crazy.

Under a pseudonym of course.

A movie. Distraction would help me get Lina out of my mind. Maybe I'd check out the latest—

My phone chimed. I slid it out of my back pocket and checked the screen. An email message from...Angelina. *Holy shit.*

I clicked it open and read the subject: Neighborhood Watch. *What the heck?*

Dear Neighborhood Watch Super Star,

Thank you for leaving a candy treat on my doorstep while out on your nightly patrol. I feel very safe with you walking the halls, guarding the elevators, and hanging around the garage for damsels in distress who may need your assistance.

Your time and devotion to the safety of others has not gone unnoticed, and I wanted to drop you a note to say thank you!

Angelina.

I re-read the strange message six times. This must be her sense of humor. Or she truly was crazy. I hustled to my bedroom and sat at the desk in front of my laptop to see the full message. I fired up the email and clicked reply to her message.

Ding!

I got a message alert. The avatar was a picture of Lara Croft punching someone in the face.

Even more strange.

Three dots lined the bottom indicated she was typing so I settled in my seat, my heart hammering in my chest as if I'd just ran six miles at race pace. It was so strange talking to the next-door neighbor like this; even more strange was the dry humored email and that avatar. There had to be a meaning behind it, and my curiosity made me want to talk with her even more despite my No Girls rule.

Talking online or through a door didn't count. Did it?

The chime sounded with her message.

Hey, Neighbor. Boy, she sounded chipper.

I typed, *Hey back at ya.. I got your email.*

Was wondering. I sent it over three minutes ago... I was warming up to her humor.

LOL. What are you doing?

Nothing. You?

The same. Thank you for the candy.

You're welcome. Need more?

I do, actually.

I'm on it. Gladly. This time I might get her even less, then she'd run out and need me to get more for her faster.

Thanks for talking through the door like it wasn't completely weird.

Was fun. Maybe you'll open the door sometime soon.
No. I did not just type that.

Wouldn't count on it. But thanks. I should go.

Don't go. Unless you want to meet at your door.

No reply. No dots. *Shit.* I'd scared her off. What the hell was wrong with me? I did *not* pine after chicks. I could *not* have a girlfriend. I shouldn't have friends, either, but I'd already broken that rule with Drey at the bar. Though, he was wicked tough and could fend off anything if Dad found him.

Angelina?

I'm here.

Sorry if I spooked you about the door comment.

You talk to chicks through doors often?

That was close to the "You come here often?" pick up line. I wondered if she was lonely like I was. Had to be if she was a shut-in.

Only those I find in elevators.

So, often? LOL. I'm so embarrassed.

Don't be. It's fine. There's not much I haven't seen, so there's not much that'll shock me.

Wish I could say the same.

Those six words grated along my chest cavity like a dull blade. She must have been through something bad to be a shut-in. Or something bad happened to her. *So, what's your plan for tonight?*

I'm going to watch a movie with my friend Lizzie.

She's coming over?

No, we watch them online together and video chat during the show.

Sounds fun. Never done that before.

Lizzie and I do this all the time. You can come if you want.

As in come over? Count me in. I'll bring the candy corn.

I meant I can video you in. You can watch it with us.

Crap. For a second there, I thought I'd get to see her again. *What movie?*

Brainless action flick, but the hero is hot. LOL.

I'm in—not for the hot hero, though! What time?

Really?

Sure! Like I said, I've never watched a movie this way.

You're strange.

You're calling me strange?

Kettle, I get it. I'll dial you in twenty minutes.

Sweet. Just enough time to get some more candy corn.

* * *

Angelina

“I can’t believe you invited him. That’s freaking awesome, girl.” Lizzie jumped up and down and let out a squeal.

I shook my head in disbelief myself. There was something about him that lured me in, calmed me. I couldn’t help but email him after more than seven days of thinking about doing it. And several pushes from Lizzie.

“I can’t wait to meet him. This is like a date, you know. Like, a double date without a fourth.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. She was like my long-lost sister or something. This was her dating Hunter as much as me.

Not that dating was an option. Not that I could date... anyone. Not after what those monsters had done to me. They’d ruined me for—

Knock. Knock.

I shot out of my computer chair at the sound echoing through my quiet space. My safe, quiet space.

“Who’s there?” Lizzie asked.

I tapped my video feed to the screen and saw Hunter squatting down in front of my door. “It’s him.” Eyeing the closed door, I confirmed all three locks were engaged as were the three chains.

An email popped up on my phone, and I smiled when I read the words.

Candy corn for the movie.

“Oh my gosh, he brought candy corn, didn’t he?” Lizzie squealed again. “He is so sweet. Absolutely, positively sweet. I could seriously swoon. And he’s such a big, tatted-up guy. Doesn’t look the part of a romantic.”

Exactly what scared the crap out of me. Not his sheer size or wicked-strong look, but the idea of him. I must really be sick of being alone if I was considering things with him. I’d freaking invited him to a movie knowing full-on that nothing could ever become of us other than email buddies and video chats. Unless...

Unless I really could make it past this agoraphobia. Get outside and back into the real world. Maybe—

“I’m heading back into my place now,” Hunter said through the door. “You can come out and get them.”

I heard Lizzie let out a loud sigh in the background, but it was barely audible above the blood rushing through my mind. If I opened the door right now, I might catch a glimpse of him. What would he think? Would I pass out?

I couldn’t move. I stared down at my phone and watched him walk away. He glanced back twice, and unless it was a wonky glare, I thought I saw a wave of sadness wash over his eyes.

“Go get it, girl,” Lizzie said.

I inched toward the door and started unlatching the chains as quietly as I could. Drawing in a deep breath, I pulled open the door, and there sat the candy in a bright pink bag. I almost melted into a puddle right then and there.

I snatched the treasure, quietly shut the door, then hustled to the computer desk. “I wish you were here, Lizzie, so I could give you some.”

“Enjoy them for me. I can’t believe that guy of yours.”

“He’s not my—”

“Oh yes, he is. What kind of guy would talk to you through the door like that, then agree to a video movie date, with a third wheel no less, and then, run and get you candy corn for the movie?”

A totally and completely amazing guy.

“Ready to start the movie?”

I nodded as I tapped my iPad to life and linked up with Lizzie, then hustled over to the TV area. A few clicks later, I had the movie cued up on the screen. The only thing left was to add Hunter to the chat.

“You got your movie ready?” I asked.

“Yep. I’m at the start. Does Hunter have Netflix?”

“We’ll find out.” I added his email to the chat, and my fingers went sweaty. “Here we go.”

A few seconds later, the video chat added another window, and it started ringing. My heart stalled, but then the click of Hunter answering the call kicked it into starting again.

“Hey,” he said as his face came into focus. “Did you get the candy?” His focus shifted slightly. “Hi.”

“Hey, Hunter,” Lizzie said as she waved. Her cheeks turned bright red. “Where’s my candy?”

“Um...

“Kidding. It’s quite a ways to New York.”

He laughed. “Okay, so, now what do I do?”

Over the next couple minutes, I talked him through how we’d count down and start the movie at the same time, and we were a go.

“This is pretty cool,” he said. “I think they have a watch party function, you know?”

“Yeah, but video is more fun,” Lizzie said.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Bedroom, on the bed. You?”

“Couch.”

“Ah, I remember that room.”

Lizzie giggled.

“Show me your room,” I said.

He grinned, and his camera shifted. He tapped the screen, then disappeared. The picture shifted to his room. There were pale blue walls, but they were bare. No pictures or anything. As the screen panned right another door came into sight. “Okay, excuse the bare walls, but I am a guy. There’s the bathroom, and no, I won’t show you that.” The camera panned more. “Closet, then the door out into the living room.”

More blue walls came into view again and then the corner of the bed and his bare feet.

“Nice room!” Lizzie said. “Even the feet.”

The camera blanked out again, but in a flash, his face came into view again, and he was smiling. “So, you guys like action movies?”

“Hell yeah,” Lizzie said. “I want to kick ass like some of these guys.”

“But no one is as kick ass as Lara Croft,” I said as I popped three pieces of candy corn in my mouth.

“Oh, now it makes sense,” Hunter grinned.

“What?”

“Your avatar. She’s got a mean left hook.”

“Like I said...kick ass chick right there.” I pumped my fist. If only I was a fraction as brave as her. If only I’d had some of her skill, I wouldn’t have—*no. Not going there.*

“I can teach you some of those moves,” Hunter said.

I nestled into my couch, relaxing into the soft cushions. “You know martial arts?”

He nodded, sinking into his pillow as well. “I teach it down at Arrowhead Fitness Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Cool. Are you a black belt?” Lizzie asked.

“Not officially. Never tested.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Moved around a lot, couldn’t commit to formal training.” He shifted and cleared his throat. “But I think I’d pass if I did.”

“Hell yeah. You’re strong,” Lizzie said. “Oh, did you see that?” She pointed to her TV. “That shit is sweet!”

Hunter and I both laughed at that one. No one liked violence more than Lizzie. At least in the movies. I mostly liked the ones who used their power to protect people. Like I wished I could.

“So, you teach self-defense?”

He nodded.

“It figures with the way you took care of me, but you weren’t coming back from a class when you found me.”

“Work.”

“Hmmm, that late? Let me guess...” I tapped my finger to my lip. Could be something medical coming off a late shift. Or... “You’re a bouncer.”

“How in the *hell* did you know that?”

“Lucky guess.”

“I tend bar a little, too. When I’m not in school.”

“College?”

“Yeah. By the end of the year, I should have enough credits to graduate. You?”

“Same.”

“You at the State campus? I’ve never seen you there.”

“Technically, yes, I take classes there. But I remote in and attend the classes via video feed.” I didn’t want to go into how I’d gotten those favors with him right now, so I changed the focus back to him. “What’s your degree?”

“Criminal psychology.”

That sent a shiver down my spine at the thought of the creeps he'd be dealing with. "How'd you get into that?"

"Wanted to understand the demented mind better. Maybe to help it, or at least profile them so the police can find the criminals out there and get them off the street."

A darkness clouded his eyes as he said the last few words. His jaw tightened, and he glanced to the side. Oh yeah, he had personal experience with criminals.

"That's cool," I said.

"What's your degree?" he asked.

"Business. I'm going to help my dad run his company...hopefully."

"What's he do?"

"You don't know?" Lizzie asked.

"Know what?"

"Nothing," I said. "He has a few companies, and I'll help him with them." No need to let it out so early that I was the daughter of his landlord or heir to all of Dad's hotels around the world. That made things awkward when people found out I was a billionaire's daughter. Never could tell if they were my friends because of that or if they really wanted to be around me.

"I pegged you for a brainiac."

"Hardly. I—"

"Don't believe her, Hunter. She's wicked-smart," Lizzie said.

“I can read a person pretty good.” Hunter winked.

“I bet. Do you see a lot of fake IDs?” I asked.

“Quite a few, but I meant I can read a person pretty well to know if they’re lying.”

“Even on camera like we are?” Lizzie said.

“Even on camera.” His eyes pierced through my defenses with one look. “And you, Lina, are a brainiac. I can tell.”

Lina. I was used to Angel or Angie...Lina was so much better! I switched my focus from his devastating eyes to the TV screen in time to see a building blow up. I heard Lizzie yelling in the background, but it didn’t register much more than white noise. No, the overwhelming presence that was Hunter sucked all the oxygen from the room. Sure, he wasn’t literally here, but even through the video link, it felt like he was here. He was less than one hundred feet from me, lying on his bed, but I swore I could feel his warmth radiating through my body like a salve for my aching soul.

So long ago, it’d been ripped to shreds. Sure, the docs sewed my body up, but some things they couldn’t fix, and Hunter...even though I didn’t know anything more than some superficial information about him, he soothed the ache.

God, I wanted to feel better. To be brave. To be...free. Somewhere deep down I knew he was a piece of that puzzle to put me back together.

Chapter Five

Hunter

“Ready for a study break, yet?” I asked Lina.

She looked up and into the camera, so I got a good view of her face. Despite the mild distortion of the video feed, she was breathtaking. Those dark brown eyes reminded me of a pool of chocolate. And those heart shaped lips and her strong nose... This close to the camera, I got a clear picture of her pale skin.

A cool breeze trickled in from the open window in my bedroom. I glanced outside, and the bright sun shone down, but it was chilly out.

“Study break, huh?” Lina smiled.

She could seriously part the thickest fog with that bright smile. What I wouldn't do to see it in person and feel the full effect of her presence.

“I'm thinking a trip to the patio might be in order,” I said, standing up. We'd been studying for over two hours, and it was strange having a study date with her via video chat.

Turned out that she did everything via video chat. The movie the other night with her and Lizzie was weird at first, but then I fell into the swing of her video schedule quickly.

It was like being with her...only not. I wanted to run my fingers through that champagne hair streaming over her shoulders. I wanted to touch that smooth skin that was so pale it was obvious it rarely saw a ray of sun—if ever. It was quite possible she didn't even go out onto the patio.

She looked over her shoulder, and I could tell her windows were open, too. “Meet you out there?”

Sweet. She went for it. I hustled over and slid the sliding glass window open and stepped out. Mid-October in Minnesota was proving to be cold. I much preferred the warm desert climate, but Dad knew that Mom and I both did, so this was as good a place as any to hide. Well, besides Alaska.

I gripped the railing atop the fence hemming in our concrete patio. The cement flooring chilled my feet. I heard the door roll open next door and headed to the far end of my patio. “Lina?”

She coughed then said, “I’m here. Um...”

“It’s okay. One step at a time. You can do it.” She’d opened the door.

And hearing her voice without the door between us, or the distortion from the phone and video feed was such an improvement. Her voice was quiet, but smooth, and slid over me like my thousand count bedsheets.

Not that I should be getting closer to her, but something about her demanded it. I couldn’t *not* be around her. I couldn’t *not* help her. Even Mom had commented on it.

It had probably looked weird sitting outside her front door talking to her. At first, it felt weird, but I blasted through that as soon as I started learning more about her.

“You okay?” I asked.

“No,” she said, then laughed. “You?”

“I’m good.” I leaned over the railing to check out the small people scurrying around below. I glanced to my right and saw the tail end of her railing. A thick, brick wall separated us, so I couldn’t see much more than a few feet of her railing at the far end of the patio.

But if she were to lean forward...not that that would happen, at least not today. It was just cool she was willing to try stepping outside. Had to give her props for that.

“Talk to me about something,” she said. Her voice was raspy, and I could tell she was breathing heavy.

“Did you know that Ritalin is actually a stimulant? We’re actually giving hyperactive kids a stimulant.”

“That sounds *bass ackwards*.”

I laughed. “I know, right? But it’s got something to do with ADHD’s wiring. The stimulant calms them down. You know like to us, it hypes us up, but to them...it’s fascinating.”

“You going to work with young criminals or something?” she asked.

Dang, her voice sounded good...and closer. I glanced to my right, wishing I’d get to see her. “No. I hope to focus on the adults, but there are some developmental classes I have to take as part of the degree.”

“You like kids?”

“Sure. Unless they’re screaming their heads off. You?”

“Yeah, I guess, not that I can have any. They freak me out...then again, not much doesn’t.”

Hmmm, she can't have kids. A question for another time. "Speaking of freaking out, how are you doing? You sound like you're really outside your door."

"I am, and the world isn't tilting so much."

"Good. How's it feel?"

"Boy, you are going to be a shrink, aren't you?"

"No way. That's medical school, girl."

"Are you going to get your master's degree or anything?"

"Eventually. As much online stuff as I've been doing lately, I might opt for an online degree of some sort."

She laughed. "I'd like to make it to a classroom."

"You will."

"You sound so sure."

"I am. Look how far you've come in the few weeks I've known you."

She hummed, not really answering.

"What?"

"It's true. I've...well, I've never made such strides like this."

"You've never had a goal of graduation to spur you on until now."

"And I didn't have you."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. It totally rocked my world thinking I might be empowering her, giving her the

strength to get out of that damned apartment. But what scared the shit out of me more was how much it made me want to be with her, as in touch her, smell her, kiss her. A streak of fire-hot blood pounded down my spine at the thought.

The totally inappropriate thought. It was that excitement, that energy, that caused trouble. People I cared about tended to get...hurt around me. Or dead.

“You don’t know how to take a compliment, do you?” she said.

I stepped to the brick wall and pressed my hand against it like I’d often done to the wooden door into her apartment. I didn’t trust compliments. They built me up, but Dad had always crushed me back down, even further. Often with his fist.

“Thanks, by the way, for the bag of candy corn I found on my doorstep yesterday.”

“Sure. There was a box there, too.”

“Yeah. They know to leave it on the floor.”

“Anything fun?”

“My monthly package from Mom and Dad. More candy corn,” she said with a laugh. “And...well...they send me stuff each month.”

“Care packages are fun.”

“Yeah. They’re in Germany right now working on opening...another business.”

“What kind of business? You said they have several companies to manage.”

“Nothing important. So, what do you do that you can afford the second half of the top floor of a five-star hotel?”

“That’s Mom’s department. I’m mooching off her.”

“You could never mooch. You’re way too sweet for that.”

Her voice sounded lower and more relaxed. “Are you sitting on the floor?”

“Yeah. I’m almost to the railing. Needed a break.”

“Says the runner who managed fifteen miles yesterday on the treadmill. I’d shoot myself from boredom.” I sat on the cold floor and propped myself against the railing. “My mom makes the dough, takes care of almost everything. I work and...take care of her.”

“Take care of her?”

I hated this part. I wasn’t sure how much I should tell her, but strangely, I wanted to confess everything. “She’s not agoraphobic, but she doesn’t leave the apartment much because...well...she works from home and just doesn’t like to be around people much.”

“What happened?”

“She was involved with someone, and he hurt her really bad—physically. She’s pretty shy and...unsure.” More like she’s not safe. Mom wasn’t shy at all, but Dad always seemed to track us down and make a play for her. Sick bastard was obsessed with her—with hurting her. Damn police couldn’t grab the slippery slime ball. Not even our relocation handler could track him.

I no longer had any faith in the legal system at this point.

Of course, Dad was former military—special forces no less—but even they couldn't catch that son of a bitch. They'd taught him the skills he was using to make our lives hell, but even they couldn't stop him.

My heart pumped up another notch, and heat steamed through my face as the anger began to simmer. Visions of him hurting Mom flashed, and I clenched my fists, desperately needing to pound something.

I hammered my thigh, and the impact shook me back into reality. *Calm down.*

“You okay?” Angelina asked.

“Good.”

“You know how you can read people? Well, there's something you should know. I can too, but it's more like I can *hear* people.” She took a breath. “And I know you're lying.”

* * *

Angelina

I settled against the little wall that the railing was affixed to and let out a long sigh. The tension in Hunter's voice, the pain—he was lying to me about what happened to his mom. Problem was, should I ask about it? He might ask about me and why I was a shut-in.

And that was *not* okay.

“What makes you think I'm lying?”

“I heard it in your voice. And if I had to guess, you're sitting on the floor, hands fisted, and you just punched...your thigh maybe? It wasn't your other hand because that didn't sound like a slap. Am I right?”

Silence.

Yep. I'd totally nailed it. There was some serious rage jading his voice, too, but I kept that to myself. I knew rage with the best of them, but he was massive. His rage might look a lot more...violent than mine.

“That's okay. You don't have to tell me. I have my share of secrets, and you've never pressed me. Just know that you can tell me if you want.”

I didn't think he was going to say anything since it was quiet for so long, but I finally heard a small voice say, “Thanks.”

“We're a pair, aren't we?”

“Yes, we are.” He let out a long breath that sounded almost like a tired sigh. He must have a little baggage he was

carrying around, too. “How are you doing over there?”

“Great, actually. I’m leaning against the railing!” I couldn’t believe it myself.

These past few weeks with him were nothing short of miraculous. I got energized just talking to him. Even during our study dates, when we weren’t even talking, I felt a connection through the airwaves. Heck, even through the brick walls separating my house from his.

“Great job, Lina. You’re doing great.”

It was because of him. I was sure of it. “Thanks. Hey, I have a question.” Since I was feeling so bold. “Why are you doing this with me?”

“Sitting on the patio?”

“That and...well, everything. The candy, video chat movie nights, talking through my door...all of it.”

“Do I need a reason?”

“Everyone has a reason.” And sometimes, it was wicked and dark. Psychotic and sadistic.

“Maybe it’s not a bad reason, though.”

“I’m not sold on that.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“No. I meant—not that you’ve got bad reasons—ugh.” Sometimes my mouth said the words wrong. “You...how come you’re with me on your nights off work? You could be out with a normal woman. You’ve got to have them lined up at the door.”

“Don’t try and flatter your way out of the bad reasons comment, Lina,” he chuckled.

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, but he didn’t answer my question or deny there was a line of women after him. This guy was funny, gorgeous, and completely selfless. Why on earth was he here with...me? “Seriously. What gives?”

“Nothing gives. I like hanging out with you. Even if it is outside your door or on a video chat. But I like this the most so far because I can hear your true voice. No crackles of the cell phone or muffled because of the door.” He paused for a few seconds. “I like your voice.”

I gulped. His was like music, too. Felt nice. It was almost like I was meditating when I listened to him talk.

“No girlfriends?” I couldn’t believe my boldness. Then again, I’d made it to the lobby a couple more times since I’d met him. Sure, it’d been two in the morning again and I didn’t step off the elevator, but I’d looked out. Stuck my head out and looked around.

So yeah, I was badass and bold right now.

“No,” he said, with an edge to his voice.

“As in ever?”

“I didn’t say *that*.” He chuckled. “Just not right now.”

“When was your last one?”

There was a long pause, and I wished I could see his face. I wanted to know what he looked like when he thought hard, at least I guessed that was what he was doing right now. “We’re really going to talk about that?”

“Why not?”

“That’s...we’re taking things to another level if we go down that road.”

“Another level? I don’t...get it.” My heart started up a familiar drum solo deep in my chest. *No*. I would not let my anxiety get the better of me. Not with Hunter. No. We were only talking, learning about each other. Then again, what business did I have doing that, even? What could I, a scared, wimpy agoraphobic freak ever offer him? Hell, what could I offer anyone?

“It’s okay, Lina.”

God, I loved it when he called me Lina.

“I’m just saying, things are gonna get deeper if we dive into that.”

I wanted to go deeper with him, more than I wanted to admit to myself, even. Heck, the dreams I’d had since meeting him were *plenty* deep. “I...want to.”

“You do?”

“But if you don’t. I...I understand.” I chomped on my lip and closed my eyes as I scanned over a mental list of songs to fend off the anxiety dancing around in my stomach. I’d totally understand if he didn’t want to, but I sure did. I wanted to know everything about him. His life. Even his past girlfriends. Well, maybe not that so much, but a little. What shaped him into this strong, thoughtful man?

“Lina, I want to, but...well, I’m not sure I—”

I pushed up to my feet as the tears burned my eyes. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I asked. Just forget it. I didn’t mean to ruin things. I was just curious.”

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

The world tilted slightly, and I palmed the brick wall between us. I’d had boyfriends in high school, sure. I could stick to talking about that part, and maybe if I started with being more open, he would, too?

At least that was the theory.

“I’ve had a couple.”

“Ever been in love?”

I wasn’t sure I knew what love was but evidently, he was ready to take things deeper. This guy was so confusing sometimes. “No.”

“As for girlfriends...I’ve had a couple. Well, one serious girlfriend.”

I stopped at the opening of my sliding glass door. “Serious?”

He coughed, and I noticed his position had changed. He might be standing in his doorway as well. “Yeah. But it was a couple of years ago.”

“What happened?”

He let out a frustrated groan. “I—well—it didn’t work out.”

“Love?”

“I think so. Um. I better get back to studying. Talk to you later?”

Guess that was as deep as he wanted to go.

Chapter Six

Hunter

“Are you going to try again?” I asked Lina through the door.

I heard a thump on the other side of the door and couldn't help the smile. I envisioned Lina's lips thin with frustration as she bonked her head on the door.

“I...maybe.”

It'd been nearly five weeks since I'd first met the strange beauty, and I'd yet to see her in person other than that one night I'd found her in the elevator. And it'd been nearly two weeks since we'd had the former boyfriend/girlfriend discussion.

Things had been a little strained between us. We'd been talking through her door at least two days a week and online nearly every day, but we conveniently ignored the pink elephant in the room. That was okay with me, though. I shouldn't have told her as much as I had about Isabelle.

But here I was, standing in front of Lina's door hoping to hell I'd get to see her in person. I *ached* to see her, to hold her. I was dumber than a box of rocks, but my body worked on its own when it came to her. As much as my mind fought me on it, I kept pushing things forward with the visits to Lina's door.

Lina. She'd not said anything about my nickname for her, but I sure as shit loved how it felt rolling off my tongue.

“Hunter?” Even though her voice was muffled, I still loved the sound of it.

“Yeah?”

“I think I am ready...to try again.”

She'd told me about three more elevator adventures over the past few weeks, and I hated that she'd waited until I was gone to work. The thought of her facing those challenges while I was away hit me harder than I thought it would. What if what'd happened before happened again, and I wasn't there to catch her? I hated not being there.

In such a short time, through all the texting, emailing, and talking, she'd weaseled her way into my heart more than I liked. Scared the shit out of me...yet didn't.

“I'm glad to hear that, Lina. You're strong. You're ready. I know it.”

“Did you *read* that from me on our last video chat?”

I laughed. “Yes. And...I hear it in your voice.” I remembered that determination in my mom when she'd finally decided to leave my dad.

He'd nearly killed her, and she lay in the hospital talking about how she couldn't leave him, how weak and stupid she'd been. But when the doctors told her exactly how close she'd come to dying and how insane that monster was... her motherly instinct had ignited. Sure, what I heard from Lina wasn't motherly instinct, but it was determination, nonetheless.

“I can help you if you want,” I said, hoping she'd let me be part of this. “What's your goal for today?”

She let out a long sigh and believe it or not, I did, too. God, we were so in sync it was scary. “I want to walk through

the lobby.”

“Sweet.”

“You know my graduation goal?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, there’s a new, smaller goal.” She paused.
“Halloween is this Friday...I’d like to help hand out candy.”

I’d read up on the small event. It was something the hotel did every year for some kids from a local church down the street.

“That’s a great goal, Lina.” We had three days to make it happen. Three whole days. Shit, I had class this week and an exam this Friday. Didn’t matter. I’d work it in if she’d let me help.

“But first...”

I sat up when she didn’t continue. “Lina?”

“I love it when you call me that.” Her voice was so quiet, I wasn’t sure I’d heard correctly.

The sound of a deadbolt sliding had me to my feet, staring at her door. A second lock slid and then a third. My hands went sweaty, and I took another step back. The last thing she needed, if she was really going to open the door this time, was my massive body filling in the doorway.

I wanted to say something to encourage her, but I didn’t dare. I didn’t want to break the zone she might be in.

The doorknob turned, but nothing happened. *Come on. You’re so close. Come on, Lina.* I stepped away more, until my

back met the wall across from her door. “Lina,” I whispered.
“You can do it.”

The door cracked open, and I saw a sliver of dim light and a portion of the couch I’d set her on all those weeks ago. “Hunter?” her voice was like a song. No muffling from the video feed or the door between us.

I almost didn’t answer so I could hear it again, but I didn’t want her to think I’d bolted. “I’m here.”

The door opened another two inches. Slender fingers curled around the wood panel, slightly above the handle. The fingernails were nearly white for how hard the fingers were gripping the door.

It took every ounce of my strength to not rush the door and grab her hands to let her know I was here. To give her some of my strength.

“Talk about something.”

“I’m not really sure what to say. The thought of seeing you, in real life, has kind of scrambled my brain. But I will say you have nice fingers.” *Nice fingers? Nice one, dumbass.*

“You’re doing okay right now, actually. I’m...kind of excited to see you, too.”

Had I known she was going to do this, I would have dressed in more than my jogging pants and jacket. I probably looked like a thug.

“Is Lizzie on the phone with you?”

“No.”

“Jenna?”

“No. Just me and you. Can you handle it?”

“Hell yeah.” I stepped closer. “I really want to touch your hand.”

“Um...” It slid from my view.

“Wait. I won’t. I’m sorry.” *Son of a bitch*. I should keep my mouth shut.

I heard her drag in a deep breath. “It’s okay.” The fingers reappeared, then the back of her hand and...the door opened wider.

A set of dark brown eyes hidden beneath long lashes peeked around the corner. She eased out as she urged the door more open. Standing straight, she was taller than I’d expected. The one night I’d seen her, I’d held her in my arms, so I didn’t get a great view.

A tight blue Under Armour shirt gloved her runner-slim body. The V-neck came together at her chest, showing a subtle hint of her curves. And it sent my body humming.

She wore black jeans that hugged her narrow hips and skinny legs, and were tucked into black, ankle-high boots.

“Lina,” I said as the air streamed from my chest. She was beautiful. Her light hair draped over her shoulders, resting on her chest, and like I’d seen her do tons of times on video chats, she bit her bottom lip.

The action was even more devastating in person and cranked my body a notch tighter. Good thing my long shirt covered the embarrassing evidence that I was saluting at her beauty.

“Um...” She glanced to the side. “Hi.”

“You okay?”

She nodded and pushed the door all the way open. Her chocolate eyes swept over me, starting at my face and shifting down so slowly I nearly felt the heat from the intensity of her stare.

It may have well been her hands touching me for how my body responded to her inspection. I needed to calm the hell down. Right now.

“You’re doing great.” I stepped forward, wanting to reach for her so badly.

She eased back, but then came forward, halving the distance. The hesitation and fear in her eyes triggered my protective nature. Instantly, I was pissed at whatever had caused this beautiful woman to doubt her strength. Her worth. Her...life.

She tugged her long sleeve over her left hand and poked her thumb through the crafted hole. There wasn’t much of her skin exposed at all, but that didn’t take away from how stunning she was.

“How far are we going into the lobby tonight?” I asked. I needed to stay focused on the task. No distractions. I’d survived plenty of cage fights by my sheer will not to be distracted, staying focused. I could here, too.

She smiled, and the full effect nearly flattened me. No distorted video to douse this bright grin anymore. I’d have to see it live and in person from now on. Video chat would no longer work for this guy.

“I want...to walk through it.” Her eyes held so much hope, I couldn’t help but nod. I saw the strength bubbling in again. She was determined. Sure, there was fear in her eyes, and it tensed her full lips into thin lines, but she could do this. She *would* do this, and I was going to help her. “Tell me what you need.”

“Walk...with me?”

“Of course. Tell me how close. You’re in control.” I motioned toward the elevator at the end of the hall. She’d told me it was exactly eleven steps for her to get to the elevator. “One step at a time.”

She nodded again and stepped out far enough for her door to shut behind her. I noticed in her right hand, she held her phone, and with her left hand, she patted behind her. Probably had the key fob in her back pocket like she’d had when I’d found her.

She came beside me, keeping a foot between us, and looked up at me. “I think I remember seeing your eyes that night...just a glimpse, but I wasn’t sure. And since then, I’d always wondered what they’d look like in person.”

“And?”

“Just like I remember: On the sunniest day, right after sunrise, the sky takes on a violet blue color. A calming, beautiful blue-sky sunrise.”

I was about as calm as a tsunami. Not once in my life had I been referred to as calm. Words like violent, destructive, angry, and uncontrolled were usually associated with me. But with her...none of that surfaced.

She smiled. “I like your eyes.”

“Yours aren’t too bad, either. Though I’m not good enough with words to describe them other than stunning.” I glanced at her fisted hand at her side. “You okay?”

“Almost.” She grinned. “I can’t help but worry you must think I’m such a loser.”

“I only see strength.” I glanced at the elevator. Only a few more steps to go. “Am I pressing the button or you?”

She stopped, put her palm against the wall, and her eyes closed. “*Sober. Let’s Get The Party Started. Try.*”

I watched her as she named more songs and smiled. She was fighting through the fear. I saw it in her flexed jaw and her furrowed brows. “I’ve always liked Sober. That might be my favorite of hers.”

“Recovering addict, are you?” She grinned and her eyes were still closed.

“Maybe.”

“And you work in a bar? That’s not promising, Hunter.”

My name coming from her lips clicked something into place, deep in my dense noggin. It was perfect. Like it felt now that I was beside her, helping her overcome her fear. I was going to be here for her like I hadn’t been for my mom. Like I hadn’t been for Isabelle. For every woman I hadn’t been able to protect from Dad’s wrath.

I’d dedicated my life to protecting people—women—from asshole men who threw their weight around like bullies,

but when it came to Lina, she took the prize.

I would help her if it was the last thing I did.

“I’ll push the button.” She stepped away from the wall and opened her eyes again. “I’m good.” Two long strides ate up the final feet to the elevator door, and she stabbed the button with her forefinger. “I checked the camera before coming out here, it’s pretty calm down there, but not totally empty.”

“Well, it’s not two in the morning.”

“True. And for the Halloween thing...I’ve been practicing with Jenna. I mean...well...looking at masks and costumes and stuff for a few weeks.”

“That’s awesome.”

“It also helps that it’s little kids and we’re in a spacious room I’m familiar with. Near the exits should I need to leave. Things like that.”

“All good things.”

The elevator doors rolled open, and she stepped back.

“So, you like it when I call you Lina, huh?” I asked, hoping to distract her. “I can’t be the only one, though, right?”

She nodded and stepped into the elevator. A quick turn and her eyes fixed on me, wide and filled with...fear? No, it must be something else, but I couldn’t place it.

Her chest heaved as she held her phone with both hands and bit that bottom lip of hers again. Boy, that tiny gesture was about to bring me to my knees.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared to get in here with me.”

She smiled.

And that smile totally and completely rocked my world.

Chapter Seven

Hunter

I stepped into the elevator cab with her, and she inched to the side. I knew she'd have trouble with my looming size. She was barely five and a half feet tall, and I was a tower at six foot four, not to mention how big I was. Standing next to her only magnified my size.

I'd always told myself I'd never be weak again, that I'd be able to defend myself if anyone threatened me or anyone I cared about. Specifically, my mom. But now, I wished I were a little smaller so I wouldn't scare Lina.

"How...how'd you come up with Lina?" she asked.

"Just felt right. With some people, nicknames just come to me." Especially beautiful people like her, but I left that out.

"So, what could I nickname you?"

"The idea is to come up with one on your own, *Lina*." I couldn't help but smile. "I'm surprised no one has called you that before."

"The ones I hear mostly are Angel. Or Angie." She shifted her weight and glanced at the top above the doors. Each floor pinged quietly as we made our way down.

"Doing okay?"

She hummed her yes, not taking her eyes off the floors blinking. But then the box slowed near floor three.

“Crap,” she whispered. Her chest started heaving again.

“I’m here,” I said, stepping closer to her. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She glanced at me then to her feet. “I hate how weak I feel.”

The doors rolled open, and an older guy with salt and pepper hair strode in. He wore a tux, and his hair on the left side of his head shot up in all directions. “Hey,” he said as he pressed the 1st floor button. “Great party, huh?”

“Party?” I asked widening my stance so Lina could stay hidden behind me.

“Oh, sorry, thought I’d seen you in the room on the second floor.” The guy shook his head. “Pretty hot!”

The scent of hard liquor emanated from him—it felt like I was at the bar it was so thick.

“You should head down, there are some sweet ass chicks there. You’d do well.” He punched my shoulder as if we were old buddies.

The way he talked about women and how he smacked me made me want to hit him that much more. Right in the jaw so he couldn’t offer that sly grin to anyone else tonight. Behind me, I felt a pull on the back of my shirt and fingernails scrape along my skin. *Shit*. She was holding on for dear life. Could this elevator move any slower?

I reached behind me, positioning my hand on my lower back, palm up, offering it to her. I knew she wouldn’t

take it, but I wanted her to know she was on my mind right now, that I was here for her and would protect her from this ass with the red lipstick along his shirt collar.

Oh yeah, he'd gotten lucky alright.

And he was right, I probably could too, judging by all the advances I shoved off each night at the bar. But I didn't want anyone. No, that wasn't quite right. I wanted someone, but I *couldn't* have anyone. Not romantically, anyway. It was too risky with everything going on in my life.

The elevator slowed, and the guy regarded me with glazed over eyes then tilted to the side as if to see what was behind me. I shifted, keeping my gaze locked on him, daring him to move a fraction more to see the treasure behind me.

I kind of wanted him to make a move. It'd feel nice to knock that arrogance swaggering off him like a black, suffocating ooze. I could always peg those assholes when they first stepped into the bar. The ones who wanted one thing from a chick and probably wouldn't have any issue doing anything to get it.

His eyes widened as he stepped to the doors rolling open and he stumbled out. Too bad the stench of alcohol lingered.

"Okay to keep going?" I asked Lina.

Warm fingers slid along my palm so lightly I wasn't positive it had happened, but it had to have. Gentle touches worked up to my wrist then clammy fingers clamped around, holding tight. I felt her wrist in my palm, so I latched onto her.

“I got you,” I said, feeling privileged that I was the one allowed to hold this dainty wrist.

She trusted me.

The elevator started moving again toward our destination: the Lobby.

“Want to check the video feed on your phone?” I asked.

“I’m...okay. Got to...keep...going,” she said, breathless. Her grip tightened, and I stood where I was, unsure of exactly what to do. But for now, I was going to relish the contact with her. I felt her pulse hammering into my palm, and her skin was clammy, but she’d reached out. She’d touched me all on her own. Sure, it was in response to nervousness, but the idea of her reaching to me empowered me even more. I would be her buoy in these murky waters...yes. I’d protect her.

“You handled that well, you know.”

She huffed. “Sorry about the nail scraping.”

“I don’t mind losing a little skin if it allows you to meet your goal.”

“I think I’m okay now.” Her hold on me loosened. “Thanks.”

I started releasing my grip on her wrist when the elevator came to a halt. She squeezed her hand on me briefly, but then let go. “I’d like to keep holding your hand, Lina,” I said over my shoulder.

She stepped back and looked up at me, her eyes wide. I noticed they were a little bloodshot, and some black smudged

below her eyes. Damn it, she'd been crying?

“You want to...hold my hand?”

I turned toward her as the door rolled open. “Only if you want.”

She eyeballed my offered hand, then me. Voices streamed in through the open door, and I glanced over my shoulder to assess the situation.

No one stood waiting to board the elevator, so I stepped into the doorway to prevent it from closing, all the while keeping my hand up for her to take if she wanted. It would be her choice. She was in control. But damn, I wanted those slender fingers to thread through mine.

Such a complete and total contrast. She was so small and fragile. I was so big and tough.

She reached for me then hesitated and fisted her hand. “I want...to, but...I want to be able to do this on my own. I...but...I want to hold your hand, too.” Pink dusted her cheeks as she glanced past me. “Once I'm out...to the lobby.” She smiled and nailed me with a look. “You'll...be my...your hand will be my reward.”

Me? A reward? Hardly, but if that's what it took to get her out there, then hell yeah, I'd do that for her.

* * *

Angelina

Four steps to freedom...well, not exactly freedom, but close. Further than I'd ever gone without Jenna or Lizzie talking me

through it. Instead, I had a massive bodyguard with a heart of gold.

Anyone who saw him would probably see a thug with all the tattoos, long hair, and huge muscles, but not me, not anymore. I knew him, the real him, and he was all kinds of caring. I should be feeling mortified by the near panic attack in the elevator and the fact that I was having so much trouble just standing outside the elevator in the lobby.

But I didn't. There wasn't a hint of embarrassment or frustration in his violet-blue eyes.

It was nice having him here, but I needed to be able to do it on my own, so I didn't take his hand. Once I was to the fountain, then and only then.

I loved how his eyes lit up when I'd called him my reward. I wasn't sure where that'd come from, but it sure felt right. When I'd touched his hand in the elevator, I knew I'd want more. Heck, I'd known since we first started talking on the computer, texting...and the patio. I—

“Lina?”

My heart warmed hearing him say the nickname only he had. It was his and his alone. The fact that he wanted to call me by a nickname made me smile. So yeah, holding his hand again would be my reward once I made it to the fountain in the center of the lobby.

“You okay?”

I looked up at him then around me. Holy cow, we were already beside the fountain. People loitered outside the gift shop and near the seating area outside the restaurant.

I'd done it. I'd made it to my fountain. My—and I didn't even remember getting here. "Oh my gosh," I said. My heart wasn't even hammering. My palms were no longer sweaty. And most importantly, I was conscious.

"Hunter. We're here." I spun a circle, bathing in the excitement of making it through the lobby.

It felt as if a weight was off my shoulders. I could breathe, take a deep breath and have my lungs be fully filled with oxygen. Not the tentative breathing I'd lived with for so long from the oppressive weight of confinement.

I was free. I was—in my lobby. Energy burst through me. "Hunter. Let's go to the door. I can do it. I—"

"I know you can." He smiled, and by God and all things holy, his smile was magical.

The skin around his eyes creased ever so slightly and his eyes flashed as if aglow. He was happy for me, too. Excited. He didn't sneer at me like I was a freak or anything. No. He looked at me like I was an actual human being. Not some broken little china doll.

He was why I was here. His courage, his encouragement...*him*.

"You lead," he said. "I'm right behind you." He glanced around. "You're safe."

I knew I was. With him by my side, I felt like I could conquer Mount Everest. I turned and faced the revolving glass doors. I took a step. Then another. And another. Heck, I didn't even bother counting them. I just went with it.

One foot in front of the other. I wasn't sure how many times Jenna had told me that while trying to coax me out of my apartment. But something was different about today. Sure, it could have been Hunter, but it was inside of me, too. A strength that had once been at the forefront was back. At least some of it, anyway. It'd finally broken through the bonds of what those guys had done to me.

I couldn't wait to call Lizzie. And Jenna. They'd—

A team of guys barged through the push-doors beside the revolving doors, and I skidded to a stop. Hunter grunted behind me, but then was right beside me. The laughter from the guys coming in echoed off the cathedral ceiling of the lobby.

I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm strong.

I watched as the guys passed by without giving me another look. They were talking about the girls they'd hoped to meet and how it'd been so long since they'd partied. I even heard some talk about how college was getting the best of them, and they needed time to blow off steam before mid-terms kicked their asses.

I could relate. I narrowed my sights on the doors again and fisted my hands. The windows reflected the lights outside the hotel. I could barely make out what was going on out there, but I imagined tons of people walking, looking up at the beautiful stars, walking down the sidewalks and holding hands with their loved ones. Breathing in the fresh, crisp fall air.

Maybe even bustling around to find costumes for Halloween. I checked my phone. No. It was too late for shopping.

I glanced at my partner in crime and smiled. He looked forward, then over his shoulder. He really was watching out for me, wasn't he?

Training my focus back to the door, I realized I was about three steps away. The bellhop smiled and went to usher me toward the door. I put my hands up and said, "I'm good."

He dipped his head and stepped toward the concierge table. I pressed my hands on the glass and pushed.

"Alone or with me?" Hunter asked. I glanced at the space I was walking into and realized it'd be quite a tight fit if we shared the same section of the revolving door.

"The one right behind me," I said, stepping into my own space.

"You got this, girl."

I pushed onward, and the sounds muffled as I was sealed inside. My chest tightened, and my palms went sweaty, but I could see outside better now. Only a few more feet, and I'd be out into the cold. I pushed one more time and two steps later I was outside.

Holy crap, I was outside the hotel.

Chapter Eight

Angelina

The doors kept turning, and I moved farther out to give Hunter room to step out. I stood there, hands fisted at my side, breathing in the cool air, and I felt Hunter beside me.

“Beautiful out, isn’t it?”

I looked up at him and smiled. He was the one who was beautiful. Strong. And I’d never felt more powerful because of it. What I appreciated the most was how he treated me like I was normal even though I wasn’t in the same stratosphere as normal.

But right now, as I stood outside, I did feel a bit closer to normal. Well, closer than I had in the past three years, one month and seven days.

“How’s it feel?”

“Totally and completely indescribable. I mean, I’ve been out on the patio lots of times now, but this...standing out here? It’s freaking fantastic.” I lifted my face skyward and put my arms out as I took in a deep breath. The refreshing cool invigorated my body. My muscles. My soul.

“You kicked your goal’s ass. You know that right?”

“I made it my *beeotch*.”

He laughed, a from-the-gut-laugh that echoed off the building across the street, laugh. I couldn’t help but join him, his joy was so contagious. I leaned forward and grabbed my stomach as I fell into the laughter. Tears welled as I gasped for air.

This whole getting-out-of-the-house-thing might be possible after all. I mean, I was already out of the house yeah, but even more. Maybe someday soon I'd make agoraphobia my *beeotch*, too.

Tears streamed over my cheek as I laughed. There might have been a few in there for Lizzie. I wish she could be here with me, too.

Hunter finally stood straight and looked down at me. Dang, he had to be about a foot taller than me, but he didn't scare me in the least. I glanced down at his hand and remembered what I'd said earlier. "Can I have my reward?"

He stopped, his face suddenly serious, then looked around before planting his focus directly on me. "I'm thinking this momentous occasion calls for a serious candy corn binge."

"I don't want candy. Not with this." I stepped toward him, focusing on my strength. My success. "I told you what I wanted. Is it okay?"

"I'd like that. If you're okay with it."

I nodded. Dang, he was so respectful. He offered his hand, palm up, to me. It was so big, and part of his tattoo sleeve wrapped around his wrist low enough that his jacket didn't cover it. He wore three rings, the thickest one was around his thumb, and it was silver with something etched into it that I couldn't quite make out.

The style fit him, though.

I touched the center of his palm with my fingertips, then slid my fingers over and threaded them through his. We

both curled our fingers, sealing the connection, and a wave of warmth flooded up my wrist.

Oh yeah, that was the best reward for meeting my goal. Kicked candy corn's butt by a mile. Other than when I'd grabbed his wrist in the elevator, I'd not had physical contact with a man in over three years.

Slowly, he brought our connected hands up toward his face. Never breaking eye contact with me, he gently pressed his lips to the back of my knuckles. "I'm proud of you, Lina."

The gentle touch of his lips to my skin sent a shiver along my spine. Yeah, it was cold out here and I only wore a thermal long-sleeved shirt, but I hadn't shivered because of that.

Yes. I was going to beat this thing. Finally, I saw hope at the end of the tunnel. It happened to be in the form of Hunter, but still. I saw hope. I would beat this so I could be with him. I wanted him more than I'd thought now that I'd seen him in person. So caring, strong—

Headlights flashed in my peripheral vision, and I looked up the street. An SUV with their lights on bright zoomed toward us.

No. No. No. Instantly my chest tightened. My vision tilted. *Inside. Need to get...inside.*

"What's next? Want to walk a little?"

"Inside. Inside. Inside." I stumbled back toward the revolving door, loosening my hold on him. "Hunter..." My voice cracked. The corners of my vision faded into black.

Breathe, Angelina. Breathe. "Sober. So What. Fucking Perfect. Stupid Girls."

"Okay. We're going. Look at me, Lina. Look at me."
Hunter tightened his grip on my hand. "No one will hurt you. Not while I'm around."

His smile alleviated the anxiety vise gripping my chest, but not all the way. I pushed through the revolving doors and burst into the lobby. Once a place that freaked me out now calmed me. Anything was better than seeing those headlights.

The black SUV. The five guys spilling out and grabbing me. The pain. The fear—I shook my head. No. I would not fold. I would not give them power. I was strong.

I stopped at the fountain, my chest heaving, the hairs along my neck prickling.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Hunter asked.

"*So What. Trouble. Who Knew.*" I answered with songs instead as my heart calmed down.

Hunter glanced back to the door, his eyes narrowing then stepped toward me. "Trigger, huh? I get that. But hey, you didn't pass out. I'm not carrying you. So that's progress noted."

Dang it! Why'd that freaking SUV have to come barreling down the road when I'd been doing so well? I stared into the water, watching the flashes of pennies flicker as the water splashed down from the fountain.

I wasn't going to win this battle, was I?

* * *

Hunter

A fist hammered my cheek, my eye nearly exploding. I ducked, punched my attacker's groin, then spun away. I hopped to my feet, grabbed the back of the guy's neck, and smashed his face into the wooden, two-person table near the dance floor.

No, he hadn't been dancing. This asshole had been practically raping the chick he was with near the back wall of the dance floor.

A scream sliced through my focus. The raven-haired beauty looked at me with wide, green eyes. Fear laced the sea-colored irises like a cancer. I hated that look. I'd seen it too many times.

"Whoa, Hunter," Drey said as he grabbed my elbow. "Outside."

I half-dragged the asshole toward the door while the bartender, Gabriella, headed over to the girl this guy had assaulted. I burst through the back doors by the restrooms and tossed this jerk out like I did the trash.

The guy whirled around, and I caught the flicker of a blade off the light above the door. He was too quick for me to move out of the way, and the doorway confined my ability to move much. Those two things combined spelled one slicing burn across my side, between two ribs.

I kicked his wrist, and the knife blasted against the brick wall across the alley.

He stumbled, and I leapt at him, foot first. My heel connected with his jaw. He spun, and I landed in a push up

then kicked out his knee. I thrust myself up and pummeled his cheek. Bones caved, and the guy screamed like a baby.

Good.

Where did he get off hurting that girl? This bastard needed a lesson. He—

“Hunter!” Drey yelled. “Shit.”

My friend jumped in front of me, his hands up. “Back off, Hunter. Back off.”

I grabbed my side. “That dumbass sliced me. He—”

He pointed at the guy rolling on the ground. “Stay down or you’re dead.” The guy gasped a response, showing no motion to get up. Good, because Drey was right, I might kill that guy.

Heart hammering, my lungs burned, and I realized I hadn’t even taken a breath for who knew how long. I let the cold air in, and the red tainting my vision receded.

I’d lost my cool again. When the red showed up, bad things happened.

I squeezed my fists, the pain of swollen knuckles dragging me back to the reality of this dank alley behind the bar.

“Calm down, Hunter. You’ve got about two seconds before Bill comes out here. You’re—”

“I know.” I was screwed. This was my third altercation this month. It was like I was a magnet for asshats looking for trouble or something.

First mistake: I didn't take the fight outside. Second mistake: kicking the hell out of this guy. I couldn't stop, though. The guy had slapped the girl, then started shoving his tongue down her throat despite her pushing him away. By the time I'd gotten to him, he'd already ripped the front of her shirt open.

He'd inhaled three shots within about ten minutes after he'd strutted into the bar, so I'd been watching him. It was like I could see the ones about to snap. Maybe it was because I rode the edge so closely myself. At least here I did. When I was with Lina, nothing violence-related triggered. Only the need to be close to her, to kiss her, and in my wildest fantasies to strip her down and make love to her.

That I could control—for the most part—by working off the pressure in the gym and taking arctic showers. But when I came here, I had a tough time controlling the rage. Mom had told me several times to ditch this job, but despite the triggers for my violence, I was good at it. And this was a prime place to help people who needed it.

After what I'd done two years ago while drunk and at a bar, I had a lot of sins to make up for, so I was going to stay, no matter what.

“Oh, Hunter.” Sarah, one of the waitresses, came running out. “Your eye.”

I already felt the pulse and pressure. It was going to be a good shiner. The prick got a cheap shot on me. He was lucky Drey came before I unpacked the right hook that'd taken down one of the top Ultimate Fighters I'd faced a couple of years ago.

I was lucky. That monster could never come out again.
Never.

The tall, skinny waitress stopped in front of me and reached for my face. I backed out of range, and she frowned. “Let me look at it.”

“Nothing to see. I’m fine.”

“Sarah, can you go get him some ice?” Drey asked.

She slouched and tossed Drey a glare. I’d known for a while Sarah had a thing for me, but the skinny flirt wasn’t for me. I’d seen her go through more guys than I could count. Working here she’d seen me at my worst and still chased after me, but I knew it was for other reasons. Ones I didn’t dare jump into with her—or any woman.

The back door burst open, and all three hundred and fifty pounds of Bill leapt through as if ready to pound on someone. Probably me.

“Hunter. Office. Now.” He glanced at the now unconscious guy on the ground. “Shit.”

I pushed off Drey and stormed around Sarah. “I’ll get my own ice.”

“Hunter, you need a doctor,” Drey said.

“I’m fine.” I yanked the door open with my left hand as my right hand cupped my side. The blood was starting to gather in my palm. Dang, it was deeper than I thought.

I hurried to the bar and got a towel of ice, then headed toward Bill’s office while he handled the guy I’d hammered.

The red filtered back into my sight. I needed to get this beast in check and fast.

My phone vibrated, indicating a text, and I pulled it out of my front pocket. *Lina.*

Instantly my focus shifted, drawn directly to her and what she might need. Breathing became infinitely easier, and the weight on my chest that much lighter. I wasn't sure how she did that to me, by merely texting me, but I needed it—her—like a drug.

This was not good. No way could I become dependent on her. It'd end badly. But damn if I didn't get all giddy like a horny teenager at the thought of seeing her later. Even if it was only on a video screen.

“Nice going, buddy. That guy was a prick,” someone yelled out.

Another slapped my shoulder and said, “Nice job taking out the trash.”

I hated how that pumped me up, but it did—big time. Yeah, the guy was a douche, but I'd really hammered him, and that wasn't right. My switch flipped when I saw him hurting that girl, and I was right back in that damn cage ready to tear heads off.

I checked my phone and read the text from Lina.

How's work going?

I swiped the message and entered my code, then typed. *Fine. How was your exam?*

*Aced it. *happy dance**

More reason to celebrate tomorrow night. You still up for coming over?

Not sure it's a celebration, I choked last night.

But you went farther than you thought you would. You deserve it.

So, anything fun going on at work?

Nice deflection, Lina. I laughed. She was a feisty little thing. 7:00. Be there.

Still on for tonight?

I pushed the door open to Bill's office and flopped into the leather seat in front of his massive cherry wood desk. *You sure? I'm off at one, not too late?*

Insomnia, remember? Unless you're tired.

No, I'm good. What movie is on tap?

Nightmare on Elm Street. Only two more days until the Halloween movie marathon.

LOL. I pressed the ice to my face. Okay, see you in an hour.

Be safe.

Always.

It was surprising, and a little startling, how easily I'd slipped into comfortable talk with her. And she always said be safe at the end of our texting. It had to come from her inherent sense of not feeling safe. She'd not yet told me the details of what led to her agoraphobia, but from what I learned and have studied about it since meeting her, it more than likely stemmed

from a violent event. Not always, but many were related to that.

I was dying to know, yet I didn't want to. I wasn't sure I could handle it if it was as bad as I'd imagined it. With the deep scar on her shoulder that I'd seen a glimpse of a few times, it had to have been bad.

Thunderous footfalls neared the door, and I knew I was in for it with Bill.

I glanced at my phone and at Lina's picture on the background. I had to stay calm and take my punishment like a man. I leaned to the side and shoved the phone into my pocket and put the ice back to my eye. A twinge of pain sliced up my side.

I needed to have that looked at after the shout fest from Bill.

The door swung open and bounced off the back wall. Oh yeah, this was going to be bad.

"Damn it, Hunter." He slammed the door and lumbered toward his desk, huffing. I'd never seen his face so red. And I swore I heard thunder rumbling from his chest. "If I have to guess, he's got a broken jaw, possibly broken wrist, broken nose, and a concussion. What the hell were you thinking?"

"He was attacking that girl."

"Yes. I asked her to stay back to make a statement. But damn it, Hunter, you put this bar at risk every time you do shit like this. Man, how many times do I have to tell you?" He hammered the top of his desk with his fist as he fell into his

chair. “That’s the third time this month alone. I don’t know what to expect from you, Hunter.”

“Sir, I—”

“I know an anger problem when I see one. Been there, done that, kid, but you got to get a handle on it...and now.” His voice cracked he was yelling so loud. “So far we’ve been lucky you haven’t seriously hurt—or killed someone.”

I opened my mouth, but he put his hand up.

“I know. They were scum-bag assholes who’d needed lessons in manners. But Hunter, it’s not your place to offer that. You’re my best bouncer, you can tend bar, and you can pick out a troublemaker a mile away. Most of the time you handle them by the book. But...” He shook his head. “You get a little scary when you go off.”

“He pulled a knife. I was fine until he did that.” Well, mostly fine. Actually, nowhere near fine.

“What happened?”

“I was taking him out the back way. I know I screwed up starting things in house, but I was taking him out back and he pulled the knife. Got a good swipe in.” I lifted my hand to show him the cut.

My world tilted when I saw the amount of blood that’d gathered in my hand. It spilled over onto his leather seat by mistake. I gritted my teeth through the pain. I might have lost a little more blood that I’d thought.

“Hunter!” Bill pushed up from his chair with an unlikely agility. “Shit.”

“I’m okay. But like I said, he pulled a knife and it turned into self-defense.” I set my ice towel down and gripped the arm of the chair. Even though I was sitting, the room starting spinning.

“Hunter.” Bill reached for me as he rounded the corner of his desk. “Hunter. Shit.”

My mouth went dry, and everything went hazy. I remembered this feeling all too well from when my dad had hammered into me good one night, and I had nearly bled out.

This wasn’t as bad, but it wasn’t a superficial cut like I’d thought.

Chapter Nine

Hunter

“Drey!” Bill yelled.

Like Drey would be able to hear over the noise of the club. He—

Drey barged into the office. What the hell? Was he standing guard?

“Damn it, Hunter. I knew you needed a doctor.” He rushed to Bill’s desk. “I’m calling 9-1-1.”

“No,” I said. “Just...Can you take me to the ER? It’s only a few blocks.” I’d know, too. I’d been there a few times.

“Drey, go see if the ambulance is still here.”

Drey flew out of the room, leaving me with Bill and the heavy air in the small office. He ripped the first aid kit off the wall beside the door and yanked it open. “Okay, this is how it’s going to go.” He tossed the kit on the desk but held a pack of gauze in his hand. “You’re done here.”

“What?” I yelled.

“For a month.” He knelt beside me and pressed the gauze to my side, none too gentle, either. “You’ve got that long to get your shit together, Hunter. I mean it.”

“But you need me. You’re down a bouncer, and it’s Ted’s last week next weekend tending bar. I—”

“You are welcome back once I get a clear from a doctor for your stitches and documentation from a shrink

confirming you're seeing someone about this anger shit you got going on."

"Therapy?" I shook my head, which made my eye throb. I almost opened my mouth to tell him that shrinks didn't do shit for me, but then I'd be admitting to my past with therapy for my anger.

"Yes, therapy. Even a big ass like you needs to get his shit together. I want you back, man, in a big way. Like I said, you're the best bouncer I've had, but I won't run the risk with you as a loose cannon here."

"Loose cannon? I'm not—"

"Maybe not yet, but you're headed in that direction, Hunter. Some would argue you're there, but I have tolerance to your way of handling things." He let out a long breath. "I been there, kid. I—you have potential, Hunter. You're a good kid, and I can't let you go through what I went through because you didn't have a leash on your rage."

My heart slowed a few paces, and I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. His jaw twitched, and I knew he was grinding his molars. "What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing good. Trust me, man. Get this shit dealt with or you'll lose eighteen to twenty like I did for taking a life you had no intention of taking."

Holy shit. He'd killed someone? "Bill, when—"

Drey burst through the doorway followed by a medic. "Got one. I—" He looked at me, then Bill. "What happened?"

Bill stood, making room for the medic. "Nothing. Get this kid looked at." He pointed at me then finally looked my

direction.

That's when I saw the truth of his words. He'd killed someone. Taken a life—like I had. And tonight, that monster had surfaced again. I'd wanted to end that asshole I'd been pounding.

I gulped through the nerves choking me, and it hit me in the windpipe like a steel knife: I was truly my father's son. His psychotic DNA ran through my veins. There was no escaping it or the killer it'd turned me into.

* * *

Angelina

I held my hand up to Hunter's door about to knock, but I stopped before my knuckles met the wood. Damn my insecurity. He'd told me twice he'd gotten held up at work and that was why he'd not been able to make our movie date last night. And then, today, he'd only texted me a few times, but no video chats at all.

Believe it or not, I was jonesing to see his face. I'd missed it—which was totally pathetic on my part. When had I become so dependent on him?

I shook off the negative thoughts starting to overwhelm my mind and knocked on the door as I adjusted the bottle of sparkling cider in my other hand. I was so curious to see what his place was like. His room. Heat rose to my cheeks. Me, in a guy's room. I couldn't believe it.

"Coming," he said, and I stepped back, smoothing my hand down the front of my long-sleeved shirt. I tugged the

arms down out of habit to confirm they covered my wrists.
Damn scars.

The door flew open, and Hunter filled the doorway.
Dang, he was big.

“Hey, beautiful,” Hunter said as a smile brightened his face.

His eyes flickered with light as he—wait—his left eye was puffy and—*almost black!* “Hunter!” I clutched my throat. “What...happened?”

The eye was so swollen I wasn’t even sure how he was smiling. It had to be putting pressure on the injury.

He waved me off. “Just another day at the job.”

“You got this at work? Last night?”

Holding the door open wide, he stepped back. “Come in. And yes, work last night.”

I stood there, staring at him. Images of my cut, bloody, swollen face flashed in my mind. I’d seen pictures once I’d recovered from the attack, and they had been vicious. Both of my eyes had swollen shut, leaving me almost unrecognizable. Almost dead.

All to get back at my father.

A pounding started in my temples. Blood was rushing through my ears in a tempo that matched my rapid pulse as more images flashed through my mind on fast forward.

“Hey. Oh. Wait. It’s okay.” Hunter stepped toward me hand outstretched.

I backed away. “Just...need a sec.” *Blow Me (One Last Kiss), Funhouse, True love.* “Are you...okay?”

“Sure am. Really. What happened there?” He stepped out a little further and closed the door almost all the way behind him. “You went about six shades paler than you already are.”

I gulped as Hunter’s strong, concerned voice chased the images from my mind. “Nothing...the thought of you getting hurt.” I cleared my throat. By not telling him about my experiences with black eyes and...well, lots of things, I wasn’t lying, was I? It was early in our friendship to be spilling all my guts, right?

He touched the purple skin beneath his eye, and I flinched. Didn’t that hurt? “It happens once in a while on the job. Drunk guy got a little frisky.”

“Is that why you cancelled on me?”

“Sorry about that. I—well—shit, I was in the hospital.”

“What?” The cider slid right through my slick hands.

He lurched forward and gripped the glass bottle a foot before it would have crashed to the floor. Talk about quick reflexes. “Whoa, calm down, Lina. It’s okay.”

“But...hospital.” I took in a deep breath to slow myself down. “For a black eye?”

“The bastard cut me, too. Had to get stitched up. I lost enough blood that they kept me overnight.” He held up the cider. “This for dinner?”

I nodded, unable to make a sound or utter a word. He'd spoken about a night in the hospital like it'd been a trip to the marketplace or something.

"Sorry I look like this. For Halloween tomorrow, I'll go as a boxer." He laughed. "It'll be pretty authentic, won't it?"

It'd been my goal to participate in tomorrow's Kiddy Halloween, and I'd had three more successful trips around the lobby without Hunter with me, or Lizzie and Jenna on the phone. Even some of the masks and costumes that Jenna had me working through didn't affect me as much anymore.

I hadn't made it outside again since that night with Hunter but roaming around the lobby was a monumental feat. I'd been excited to tell Hunter last night.

"Are you still up for going?"

"Of course. But first thing first," he said, stepping back into his apartment. "I'm hungry. You ready to come in? Mom's got everything ready." He held up the bottle of cider I'd almost dropped. "And you don't have anything breakable in your hands anymore, so we're good, right?"

I couldn't help but smile. I inspected the silver threshold I'd have to step over, and it reminded me of the elevator line I'd conquered three times today. *No problem.*

"So, you had to get stabbed and beat up to get out of our movie date, huh?" I said, stepping forward.

He grunted. "She's a comedian." He backed away, giving me ample room.

I stepped onto plush carpet and let out a breath.

“And I didn’t get beat up.” He eased the door shut and leaned toward me. “I kicked *his* ass.”

“Then he must have been doing something bad.” I looked up and got snagged in his bright gaze.

Less than five inches separated his face from mine, and a wave of clean fresh cologne wrapped around me, warming me from the inside out. A flutter in my abdomen bloomed, and I found myself leaning forward.

His nostrils flared, and he froze, eyes fixed on me. My heart jumped into a record pace, and a warm, tingling feeling spread from my chest to the tips of my toes.

This hulking guy standing over me with his well-toned muscles, his tattooed arms, and his kind eyes was a bundle of contradictions. His tough looks and massive size demonstrated a scary intensity and strength that screamed *do not screw with me*. Yet his eyes...those tender pools of violet-blue gave off a feeling of compassion and tenderness that completely contradicted his outward appearance.

Those eyes gave me strength as they silently encouraged me to take the next step. To bust through the chains securing me to my fears.

His smooth skin and square jaw drew me in even more. I raised my hand to his face, and he didn’t so much as breathe. Gently brushing the skin beneath where it started bleeding into purple, I let out a breath.

It was as soft as I’d dreamt it would be. Yet another contradiction in his rough appearance. And this strapping guy was standing here, letting me touch him. No wait, *I* was

touching him. And it was incredible. The warmth beneath my fingertips surprised me. I wouldn't have guessed he'd let off this much heat, but it made me want to crawl up into him and purr.

I stepped even closer, my body about to make contact with his. *Finally*. Maybe just a hug or something—anything—to get closer to him. His strength might seep into me more if I touched him...kissed him.

“That eye does look a little nasty, doesn't it?” A soft female voice sifted through the haze that'd settled over me.

I jerked my hand away from Hunter's face, but he held my gaze. His eyes had morphed into a darker version of intensity. Desire maybe? Or...fear? That surprised me. I wouldn't think he'd be scared of anything, let alone me.

“It's just my mom,” he whispered, his voice softer yet deeper than normal. “You okay?”

I nodded and stepped to the side more, escaping his intoxicating heat, and mentally whacked myself back to the moment.

A skinny woman with a blonde pixie haircut came into focus. She stood about five-foot-two if I had to guess. I only had her by a couple of inches, tops. She wore a floor-length skirt that hugged a slim figure and an oversized white sweater that hung off her left shoulder.

Her smile, though, was what drew me in, and I instantly knew where Hunter had gotten his from. She was beautiful. Her smile brightened her face, and the same eyes

stared back at me. Hunter had gotten his eyes from his mother, too.

She stepped into the entryway even more, still smiling, and the overhead light spilled over her, so I got a better view. A purple scar followed the contour of the right side of her face. It traveled each and every curve of her temple, high cheekbone, all the way over the curve of her jaw.

I flicked my focus back to her smile and offered her one of my own. “Hello, Mrs. Amos.”

“Please. Call me Lisa.” She stepped forward and reached for me.

“Um, Mom. I told you she—”

I immediately fell into her inviting embrace. It both surprised me and scared me that I’d done that, but as her arms secured around me and she gave a gentle squeeze, I was glad it’d happened.

It almost felt like a hug from my own mother, and I’d not had that in over nine months. They had all but given up on me and had said as much with their last goodbye.

Yes. I could get used to this very quickly.

Chapter Ten

Hunter

Seeing Lina in Mom's arms nearly brought me to my knees. I'd told Mom of Lina's condition, and how she didn't like to be touched. What on earth possessed her to go for a hug within the first two minutes of meeting her?

Evidently it was exactly what Lina had needed. Relief washed over her as she fell into Mom's arms, and my heart nearly burst.

I wanted to be the one who held Lina. A ping of jealousy spiked, but I shook it out of my head. First, I couldn't get close to Lina like that, and second...ah hell, there wasn't another reason. I just couldn't let myself fall for her. It was too dangerous, especially after the shit that went down last night. I'd almost cancelled this dinner, but Mom looked like she'd mop the floor with me if I had dared to do that.

Mom stepped back and petted Lina's hair as she smiled. "Hungry?"

Lina nodded then glanced at me. I swore I saw tears building in her eyes. I eased away and guided her toward the kitchen.

"Same layout," she said, walking beside me, but keeping a half a foot between us. "I like the dark walls."

"I've been busy painting," Mom said. "Hopefully the fumes haven't bothered you."

"No. Not at all. So, you did all this?" She looked around the main living area. It was the mirror image of her

layout.

I glanced at the bottle and saw it was apple cider. I couldn't keep the grin inside at the thoughtfulness. She'd remembered I didn't drink, and I'd only mentioned it on a chat one night...more than a week ago.

"Hope you like grape." She smiled.

"Perfect." I glanced at the dining room table. It was all set for dinner. "I'll get the wine glasses. Have a seat."

Mom and Lina chatted quietly as I searched through the cabinets for glasses. God, this almost felt normal. Like there wasn't a care in the world, just me having dinner with my...*friend* and my mom.

Like I hadn't just gotten let go from my job for a month and forced into therapy. Like I didn't have a lunatic father out there somewhere searching for us. Like I wasn't... alone.

I gathered up the glasses and hurried back to the table in time for Mom to be dishing up the food. We ate as we settled into comfortable chatter about surface topics. Lina never pushed things. I knew she had a batch of her own secrets, so she respected my privacy as I did hers.

It was nice, even though it pained me to think I could never tell her about being in witness protection. *Ever.*

"Why don't you go give her a tour while I pick up here?" Mom said as she stood. "I'll get the dessert ready."

"I'll help you with the dishes." Lina reached for my plate. "Besides, it's the same layout as mine, right? I could probably find my way around here better than you guys."

“I bet.” Mom placed her hand on Lina’s forearm. “But let me do this. Hunter can show you around. I want you to be comfortable here.”

Lina held Mom’s gaze for a several seconds as if they spoke silently between one another.

It was then that I realized why. Mom had been brutally attacked, victimized, and she’d always said she could pick out a survivor with a look, that there was an innate connection that could never be shared with another.

That was it. Like Mom, Lina had been brutally attacked. Hurt so deeply she’d retreated to her home and hadn’t ever left.

No wonder she’d reacted to my black eye and my size...probably everything about me scared the shit out of her. Or at least used to.

But now Mom wanted Lina to get comfortable here? That probably wasn’t smart—

“Okay. I’d like to see the place,” she said to me.

Those eyes. When I’d first seen them in the elevator that night we’d met, they were dull, filled with fear. But now...there was a spark in them. I might have helped that along too, and the thought filled me with pride. Not the ego pride I’d gotten last night when those guys were congratulating me on kicking that douche bag’s ass. No, this was more of the contentment-type pride. I wanted to help people like Lina. Like my mom.

I offered my hand to Lina and nodded.

She took the two steps around the table separating us and slid her hand into mine as a smile filled her face. “Dinner was great, Lisa. Thank you.”

“Sure, honey.”

I led Lina to the left, down the hallway to Mom’s master suite and office.

“No pictures on the walls yet?”

“We’re not known for decorating much.” Probably because we’d never been able to stay anywhere very long before Dad found us. “Mostly just painting the walls. And we always have to have a view.”

“Always?”

“Well, we...move around a lot.”

She looked up at me. “Why’s that?”

“Haven’t found the right place yet, I guess. Mom’s job, too. That takes us places.” I almost choked around the lie. Dad was the reason. It made me hate him that much more that Mom and I had never been able to put down roots anywhere.

“But she works from home you said.”

“Mostly. Still has a headquarters to report to once in a while.”

“She could fly if it’s not that often.”

I smiled at the thought that maybe Lina *wanted* me to stick around. “True. Like I said, maybe we just haven’t found the right spot yet.” I pushed open Mom’s door. It was laid out like a small apartment with a small study area, a couch with a TV, and a tiny wet bar. “We made some modifications.”

“I can see that.” She smiled and eased into the room.
“Nice office area.”

It was like Lina’s with three monitors on a big desk, only we didn’t have several more affixed to the wall.

“What’s she do again?”

“Works for a SEO company, managing companies’ social media and networking strategies.”

“Cool.”

To the left was Mom’s bedroom area and master bath.

“Now this is pretty cool. You combined two bedrooms, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I remember hearing some light construction, but I wasn’t sure what it was.”

I ushered her back down the hall and past a closed door. “Here’s the other spare. We’ve not done anything with it yet.”

She nodded, and we headed back out to the main living area. I pointed out the obvious kitchen, TV area and then along the wall to my left were the windows that overlooked the city like in Lina’s apartment.

“So, your bedroom is connected to mine, then.” She smiled nodding ahead of her.

“Yep.” I’d thought of that more than once, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. Especially since some of my thoughts about that weren’t quite so innocent.

I urged her onward with a gentle tug through our connected hands, and she smiled.

I pushed open the French doors. To the left was a continuation of the windows and another entrance to the patio, and the wall that'd been between us that night we talked.

The thought of sleeping next to Lina each night made me smile. And if her bed backed up to the wall where mine did...dang, we'd been sleeping within feet of one another.

I shouldn't have enjoyed that thought as much as I did. She squeezed my hand then let it go. "This is where you sleep." She smiled as she turned a circle, eyes shifting as she took everything in. Not that there was much. No pictures on the walls, just a king-sized bed against the far wall, a walk-in closet on the opposite wall, and the master bathroom.

She walked to the desk propped against the wall between my bed and the windows, and she ran her finger along the length of it. "This is where you study." She picked up my Abnormal Psych book and shook her head. "Lots of dysfunction discussed in here, huh?"

I sat on the bed, watching her.

"Am I...in here?" She held up the book. "I mean, my disorder?"

"Yeah."

"You read up on it?"

"Yep."

"And..."

"And what?"

“And what do you think?”

“That you’re strong and courageous. That you’re working through whatever shoved you into the disorder.”

“Nice answer, Doc.”

I huffed.

She turned toward the windows. The sun had set long ago, so it was nothing but a wall of black that reflected our images back to us. She crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes.

In the reflection, I saw myself sitting on the bed, elbows on my knees and my hands clasped before me. I wasn’t sure what to do or say, so I just sat there, watching her. It was a nice view, so I didn’t mind.

“If I were stronger, I wouldn’t be the way I am, though, right?”

“Not necessarily.”

“That’s conveniently vague, isn’t it?”

I laughed. “Aren’t all shrinks like that?”

Now she laughed. “Not Jenna. She’s in my face.”

“Well, she’s good at what she does. I’m just a wannabe.” And a thought jumped into my mind. I could have Jenna write me a note. Or counsel me...*shit*, did I really want to go the counseling route again?

“I wouldn’t say that. You’ve gotten me further in four weeks than she has in over two years.”

“I’m thinking that was all you.”

She faced me, those devastating eyes plowing over me. “It’s been you.”

“I can’t let you give me all the credit. I may have nudged you along some, but it’s you, Lina. You have to believe that.” I needed her to believe that.

If I could help her overcome this agoraphobia and get back into the real world, the noose of guilt around my throat over Issie’s death might loosen a notch. Not that I deserved that, but every time I helped someone the pressure lessened a little.

She smiled. “See what I mean? You’re...always like that. Always encouraging me. Not pushing me. What’s that about?” She stepped toward the bed. “How are you like this?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant. It wasn’t like I did any of this for her. She had to take those steps on her own. I hadn’t pushed her. I’d only offered to go with her. To help.

“It’s like you’re this beacon of strength or something. And your mom, holy cow.” She shook her head. “I...I haven’t hugged anyone in months.”

“Where are your folks?”

“England and Germany. They’re not around anymore.”

“They don’t visit you? Or come home sometimes?”

“Starting a new company overseas. It’s a long process.” She sagged onto the bed beside me and let out a sigh. “And...I think they’ve given up hope on me. That I’ll ever kick this...issue.”

“Yeah, well, when they do come back, they’re going to have a surprise, aren’t they?”

“Graduation.”

“That’s when they’re coming back?”

“I’m hoping.” She gazed out the windows again. “If I can get out of this building and go to the campus, yes, I’ll invite them home.”

“We’ll get you there.”

She turned, bringing up one of her legs to face me better. She rested her arm on that bent knee. “What happened to your mom?”

The question hit me in the gut with the weight of six barbells. I’d not told anyone the story. Then again none of my friends had ever met Mom, so I’d never had this come up. I hadn’t planned for it, either. *Shit.*

“She was attacked,” I said as the image of my father filleting her face with a serrated blade from our kitchen. Her screams echoed in my mind.

“Did they catch the guy?”

I wish. It was like my dad was above the law somehow. The cops could never get their hands on him for some reason. Yet he always found us. “No.”

Chapter Eleven

Hunter

She sat with me in silence for a long time. I fought with the memories threatening to spike my temper even more than it was already registering. I hated how that triggered my rage, but even more, I hated how hard it was to control it once it started simmering. Damn psychopath blood running through me, that's what it was. It was like a monster waiting to get its grip and shred through me.

“That’s why you teach self-defense. Why you’re a bouncer. Isn’t it?”

She totally and completely got me, didn’t she? And it scared the shit out of me. All these days of talking to her on chat, texting, or talking through the door with her...she understood me. And we hadn’t even had any super deep conversations. As a matter of fact, this was the closest we’d come to talking deep since the almost past relationships conversation.

Lina didn’t need the burden of knowing my baggage, though. Not when she had tons of her own to deal with.

A warm hand slid over mine, and I realized my hands were fisted on top of my thigh. “And it’s why you keep moving.”

“When did you become the shrink?”

She smiled. “Been working with them enough, probably picked up a few habits. When did it happen?”

“Three years ago.” I stared at our joined hands, loving how her dainty fingers twined with my bigger, rougher fingers. Such a contrast—like us. She was a tiny little thing, so fragile, and here I was like a bull in a china shop.

“And your dad?”

“Not in the picture.” And I hoped to keep it that way. New names, a new place to live that was so out of our comfort zone...

“You’ve been with her since you were twenty-one, moving around. And school?”

“Mostly online.” I shifted on the bed a little and looked out the window. This conversation was getting a little too deep for me, but I couldn’t help myself from answering, “Got a couple years at a community college in before we had to leave.” More like before Dad cracked even more than he’d cracked when he’d returned from war. “I transferred here the beginning of this year, hoping to finish out the year at a physical campus and actually graduate.”

She held my hand tight, then ran her other fingers over our joined fingers. “I hope you stay, too,” she whispered. “We could...walk through ceremonies together.”

Each day I found myself wanting to stay more and more as well. For Lina yes, but also for Bill. Last night that big guy showed me an unexpected part of him. I wanted to learn more about him and his life. I’d taken to him right away when I took this job in August, right before classes started, and now I understood a little more why.

A comfortable silence fell over us for a long time as we stared out the window. It would have been nice to get some blankets and park out on the patio on the big chair together, but I'd settle for the handholding.

Wait, no. I probably shouldn't even be doing that.

"How are you doing, Lina, being here at my place?"

"I love being here. It's so relaxing." She captured my gaze. "What's it like having me here?"

The question caught me by surprise, and I wasn't sure what to say other than, "I like it." I couldn't say *too much*, but that's what I was thinking. I could see myself getting used to this..

"I like it, too."

Her head rested on my shoulder, and a wave of citrus-laced melon circled around me, teasing my body. It'd been so long since I'd been with someone...It'd be so easy to lay back, taking her with me, and get lost in her.

Slow down, buddy.

I pressed my cheek to the top of her head and absorbed the heat radiating from her. Her thumb brushed along the top of my thumb where our hands joined.

"This is probably the best moment I've had in three years, one month and eight days, Hunter, and I don't want it to ever end. Can we just sit here forever?"

"Might get sore asses, but I'll give it a try."

She laughed. "I can't even tell you how happy I am that you're in my life. And how you tolerate all my...quirks

without making me feel like a total loser.”

“You’re not a loser.”

She sighed.

“You’re not a loser. Say it.”

“You’re not a loser.”

“Lina, you know what I mean.”

Her eyes were dark with unshed tears lining her bottom lids. “I wish I weren’t, but I am, Hunter. I want so much to be...normal. To be with you in so many ways I’m not able to. To not worry all the time. To not fear everything so deeply.” She closed her eyes and twin tears fell. “You make me want to try, though. To try and be a better person, a stronger person, so maybe you’d consider me.”

She made me want to be a better man, too.

“Lina,” I said as I brought my thumb her to face and wiped the tears from her left eye. Her skin was so soft beneath my touch I needed to feel it more, so I cupped my hand to her cheek as I swirled my thumb along the smooth skin.

“Would you give me a chance to be more than your friend if...I kick this thing?”

“If I could, I’d have you right now, Lina. Right this very minute.” I rested my forehead to hers, and her body tensed. “Shhh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Shit, what was I doing?

“You...want me?” She leaned back. “Even...like this?” She wiped her tears away as my hand fell from her face.

“I want you, Lina, but...I’m...” Shit, how could I say this? Oh, because I have anger and Daddy issues.

“But I’m a mess. I understand.”

“It’s not you it’s—” Oh, I did not start the most cliché statement on the planet, did I?

She chuckled and sat up straight as she dragged the back of her hand beneath her eye.

“I didn’t finish that sentence because I knew how you’d take it.” I snatched up her hand. “I’m not sure how to tell you without freaking you out.”

“Too late.”

“I mentioned we don’t stay in places very long, right? Well...how fair is it to start something with you when, in all likelihood, I’ll be leaving.” Telling a partial truth tasted like ash in my mouth. It was more like I’d get her hurt...or killed.

She bit her bottom lip as she narrowed her eyes, studying me, like she was trying to read my mind. The truth in those brown gems slashed through the guards I was putting up—or trying to when it came to her.

I had no business bringing her into my life as a friend, let alone anything more. I was fucked up and was from an even more fucked up family—Mom excluded. Lina didn’t deserve that. She’d obviously seen enough violence in her life.

“You’re lying.”

“No, Lina. I’m—”

“It’s okay.” She stood. “I get it. I’m fine. This is good. I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s going to be all weird now,

isn't it? Shit.”

“Whoa. I've never heard you swear.” I snagged her hand again so she couldn't walk any farther from me.

She studied the floor as she threaded her fingers through mine. Everything in the world blurred away when our palms met. If I so badly needed to stay away from her, what was I doing constantly groping her hand, sitting next to her?

“I wasn't lying. I'm trying to protect you.” From me *and* my family. “I want more with you, but it's safer for you if we—if I don't go down that road.”

“Okay, well, I better go.” Her grip on my hand loosened. “Thanks for tonight...I like being here.”

She turned and walked toward the open door. It took every ounce of strength in my body to stay where I was and watch her walk out and possibly lose her.

It was better for her, though, that I stayed where I was.

* * *

Angelina

“I'm not even sure why I said what I said. I think I was possessed or something.” I shook out my hair as I stood in front of my bathroom mirror, trying to decide how to do my hair for my Lara Croft Tomb Raider costume. The darn braid wasn't working.

“He really blew you off? Are you sure? Every time we've watched a movie, you two have been talking and giggling like two little lovebirds,” Lizzie said. “Oh, try the

braid again, you almost had it. Dang, you look exactly like her.”

“Only way smaller and no type of chest.” I laughed. “And yes. He was lying. I’ve wrecked things, haven’t I? I mean, I’m not ready to jump into a relationship. I don’t even know if I *can* kiss a guy without spiraling into a PTSD flashback. I mean, the dreams are still coming, almost every night.”

“Almost? As in, they’re not every night now? When did that happen?”

“They’re not every night anymore. Um...a few weeks ago, maybe. I still get them, but you know what? They’re not as vivid as they usually are.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I actually forgot.” I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten. My dreams and my...disorder have ruled my life for so long. They’d been at the base of every thought, deed, and action for three years one month and ten days. “I can’t believe it, Lizzie. I forgot!”

She smiled and started laughing. “God. That must feel so...freeing.”

I worked the braid and decided it’d have to be good enough as is.

“And you know what, Angelina?” Lizzie asked. “Maybe he pulled away for reasons you don’t know about. You said it yourself, you haven’t told him everything about you yet.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to anymore.” I carried the iPad into my bedroom and set it down to lace up my black, kick-ass boots. “He doesn’t need to know that crap.”

“Why not? Because he shot you down for trying to up your relationship status to more than friends?”

“Yeah. Not just anyone gets to know that kind of stuff about me.”

“That’s bullshit, Chica, and you know it.” Lizzie pointed at the screen. “You’re scared. And you know what? He sounds scared, too. That’s it. I know it. You’re both just freaking out.”

“You’ve seen Hunter, right? He doesn’t scare too easily. I mean, that black eye, he brushed it off like it was a paper cut or something.”

“Well, nothing physical scares him, but you, you’re more than that. Come on, girl, you’ve had enough counseling to notice this, haven’t you? I mean, I wasn’t even in the room while you two were talking it out and I can see it.” She shook her head. “And he didn’t tell you why—I mean the real reason—they moved around a lot?”

“Nope. But his eyes gave him away. And by lying, I mean lying by omission, there’s something he’s not telling me.”

“See. He’s scared you’ll find out and hate him. Yes. That’s it!” She fist-pumped the air as she nodded. “I’m going to be a damn shrink, you know that?”

“That’s not too original, Lizzie. We’ve watched about sixteen thousand movies about that very theme.”

“And as your pseudo-shrink, I have an assignment for you,” she said, totally ignoring me.

“Oh great.” I stood up and snatched the iPad then walked to the full-sized mirror beside my door for one final inspection.

Despite the big gap I’d created between Hunter and me last night, I was proud of myself for trying. I’d taken a risk, something I was getting better and better at lately.

We’d not talked at all today, but as far as I knew, we were still going down to the Kiddie Halloween event together. It was a small event in a safe environment I was familiar with and only little kids with a few parents and church staff would be there.

But still. I was doing it!

My first social event in over three years.

Three. Freaking. Years!

A wave of nausea swarmed my stomach like a kick to the gut.

“Whoa...breathe, girl. Breathe,” Lizzie said. “Think of some P!nk songs or something.”

I closed my eyes as I pressed my palm to my abdomen. *In. Out.* I repeated that for a few seconds, then opened my eyes again. I wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants, which were a little tighter than I’d normally wear, and I had the fake guns holstered to my thighs like Lara Croft.

Sure, she’d worn a tight tank top, but that wasn’t going to happen here. Not with all the scars I had on my

shoulder. Not to mention my wrists. But the rest of my costume was exactly like hers when she kicked ass in the caves.

I'd picked Lara Croft because of her strength. That chick pummeled anything she faced, and I wanted to be her tonight.

"There, the color's back to your cheeks...well, what little color you have." Lizzie laughed. "Okay, let me see."

I angled the iPad so she could see as if she were beside me, looking in the mirror with me.

"Perfect. You're so kicking ass tonight in those boots. And here is your assignment..."

"I kinda hoped you'd forgotten."

"I figured. But Angelina—hey, totally appropriate that your name is Angelina!"

"You just figured that out?" I shook my head. "I thought you had a 130 IQ?"

"Jerk. Just for that, your assignment changed." She grinned. "You will tell Hunter about the attack."

Chapter Twelve

Angelina

“Lizzie, no. First—no. And second—it’s a party. Why on God’s green earth would I talk to him about that at a party? Third—why would I open up to him like that when he thoroughly shut the door on my face last night?”

“My first assignment was to try and kiss him. Would you rather have that one?” Her grin filled her cute face. She was so sweet, thoughtful, and so young looking.

Sure, she was nineteen and I was only twenty-three, but still. Her blonde, bob-cut hair flopped forward, and she pushed it behind her ear as she focused in on the screen with her midnight-blue eyes.

She might be in New York and looking at me via Facetime, but I felt every bit of her stare.

“I say there aren’t any assignments.” The doorbell rang, and I hopped to my feet. “He’s here.” I hated that I was so excited for this. He’d told me we couldn’t be together other than friends, but...I was pathetic.

“Take me with you,” Lizzie said as I snatched the iPad. “I want to see him.”

I hustled to the door and whipped it open.

His bottom jaw dropped, and I think mine did, too. He wore boxing shorts and no shirt, instead, it was a little coat thing that matched his shorts. He had a pair of gloves slung over his left shoulder.

But man, that little jacket thing was open enough for me to get a great view of the middle of his chest. The coat covered his pecs, but I could see the faint smattering of hair in the deep valley between them clear as crystal. I'd known he had nice pecs, but to see a little more... *Whew*.

And the abs. I needed to stop gawking, so I shifted my focus to his eyes. They were wide and in the middle of a head-to-toe appraisal of me. And I felt every second of it.

Lizzie snickered, and I lifted the iPad so she could see Hunter more clearly. "Hey," I said. "Lizzie wanted to see your costume."

She squealed and said, "Damn, that's a sweet costume. And that eye...yeah, that's a wicked shiner all right. Hey Hunter."

"Hey Lizzie," he said, still looking at me.

Heat flooded my cheeks, but I stood a little taller under the scrutiny of his stare. Sure, I didn't have much of a body, but I still had a few curves. And for the first time in a *very* long time, I wanted someone to see them. I never thought I'd ever want that again after the attack, but that was another thing Hunter did for me.

He made me feel beautiful.

"You look great, Lina." He smiled then looked beyond my shoulder. "Is tonight the night I get to come in?"

Lizzie gasped. I turned the iPad so I could see her. "Okay, Lizzie. Thanks for helping me get ready. Talk to you later?"

She grinned that evil grin again. “Assignment number one. I want a report on it tomorrow morning.”

I shook my head and clicked *end*.

“Assignment?” Hunter asked.

“Nothing.” I stepped to the side and set the iPad on the wall table beside the door. “You ready?”

“So, it’s a no go on coming in then?”

“Maybe...after?”

“When you’re ready.” He stepped back and waved me out. “So, what’s the plan?”

I let out a long breath as the door shut behind me, and I glimpsed the elevators. “The cameras show things are about set up down there in the conference room. Kids should be coming through soon.”

“You good?”

I nodded, working hard to keep from hyperventilating. I’d been working so hard with Jenna and on my own to look at various Halloween masks, costumes and even some movie clips to help fight off the anxiety I knew would come with tonight’s adventure.

I wasn’t stupid enough to think I could get through this evening without any anxiety. But I was ready. I was strong. I could do this.

“You don’t look like you’re doing good.” He grinned as we slowly made our way down the hallway. “I mean your face. The rest of you, your costume, it’s fantastic. You look... hot.”

I smiled, understanding my face was probably reflecting some of the anxiety I felt fluttering around my stomach.

“Whew. I wasn’t sure you’d be okay with me saying that. I mean, about you looking so hot.”

“Why not?” I had to tease him a little. He was stumbling around with his words, and it was cute.

“Well...just wasn’t sure. But you do. Seriously.”

“So do you. Your costume is perfect with that black eye.”

“I’ll tell everyone Lara Croft kicked my ass.”

“Like they’d believe that. You’re huge. And...you look like a boxer. Have you ever?”

He shook his head and faced the elevator door. His jaw ticked, and his hand fisted at his side. “Ready?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. So, what’s the plan once we’re down there? I mean, if it gets bad for you, what’s our signal for me to get you out of there?”

“How’d you know about that?”

He glanced at me. “Makes sense to have an out, right?”

His eyes darkened, the spark dimming, nearly fading out. Once again, he was keeping something from me, and it had to be something big for his mood to shift so suddenly. I shouldn’t be upset he was holding stuff from me, considering I was doing the same thing, but I was.

Maybe I should tell him a little something...to pave the way for him to open up more. My gut cramped at the thought. He'd think horribly of me. Think me...dirty. Used.

"It's okay, Lina. I just know a little bit about the idea of jumping into something that potentially might have some triggers."

"Oh, criminal psychology...I get it." I pressed the down button. "What should our sign be?"

"Tug on your left ear?"

"What if I have an itch?"

He laughed. "Okay, something more dramatic. Wave your keys?"

"Lame." I held up my key fob. "Not much to wave."

"Well, what'd you have in mind?"

"How 'bout you never leave my side, and I'll say, 'Let's go.'" The elevator doors rolled open, and we stepped in. "Oh, but that's mean. What if you see someone there you want to talk to?"

"I won't."

"How do you know that?" I pressed the lobby button and rolled my shoulders free of the tension starting to build. I didn't want him to find someone else to talk to or hang around with, I wanted him all to myself, but that wasn't right, either. He'd said we couldn't be more than friends. What if he found a girl he might want to talk to?

"I just do." He looked at me sideways. "When I said last night that I wanted you, but it wasn't a good idea, it wasn't

because it was you...that's my rule with all women."

"As in...you wouldn't be with *any* woman, period?"

He dipped his head, then focused on the numbers lighting up as we passed each floor. Five floors went by, and he'd not even breathed.

"So...this no women rule, how long have you been following it?"

"A while."

"You're so vague it drives me nuts sometimes."

"Adds to my intrigue."

It sure did, but that wasn't a good thing. Made me like him even more. "Why do you have that rule?"

The elevator slowed as we reached the third floor. He stepped to the side as I ducked back, instantly becoming my shield. I moved right with him as if I'd done so for years, and he moved as if he knew exactly what I'd need. No, he *did* know.

The doors rolled back, and Dracula stepped into the elevator followed by a baseball player and...*oh shit*...a guy with a skull cap on.

Black.

And he had a goatee.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs as if that baseball player had used his bat on my back. Dang it! I hadn't even made it to the ground floor before hitting a roadblock. Jenna and I had talked about how this party would be filled with obstacles. I could handle this.

I'd even looked at some pictures that resembled my attackers for this very reason.

Take it one at a time. Slow. Remember your skills. You can do this. Jenna's words flowed through my mind as it started down the spiral into a full-on flashback.

Shit.

Sweat popped on my forehead and above my lip. I brushed my finger over my damp flesh and bit my lip. Just a little pain to distract. *Sober. Let's Get This Party Started. Try.* The elevator dinged, and we were on our way down again.

The three who'd walked into the small box with us laughed, and a wave of alcohol-scented air washed over me.

That was all it took to send me free-falling into a flashback.

"Hold her down!" The guy yelled.

The sound of his belt loosening and a zipper shifting hit me like a slap to the face. I screamed so loud my throat burned, but a hand went over my mouth. I kicked and scratched. Please don't do this. Please don't—

A hand to my face sent my cheek exploding. Warmth paired with a pain I'd never experienced sliced along my face as I heard cloth ripping, tearing. Another set of hands held my wrists out to the sides of my body. So exposed. So vulnerable.

I closed my eyes. The cold cement beneath my body scraped my skin as the guys held me down and went to work on my clothes with the knife.

Just escape. Float away to a safe spot. Maybe I'll be lucky and die tonight. Then I won't feel anything. The cold air bit at my skin—

“Lina?” Hunter’s voice dragged me from the gruesome memory.

I fisted my hands, and surprisingly, they gripped something warm and soft. Wait, I felt a heartbeat beneath my right hand.

I opened my eyes, and Hunter peered down on me with concerned eyes. “You’re safe. I got you.”

Glancing around, I realized we were off the elevator and stood to the side near the wall. The other three elevators were letting people off.

Thankfully, they didn’t pay us any attention.

“We heading back up?” Hunter asked, his chest rumbling at the deepness of his voice.

“No,” I whispered. “I’m...okay.”

Heat radiated from him, and my hands, greedy for contact, soaked it up like sponges. Instantly I felt calm. I could do this. I would do this!

I should probably let go, but I didn’t want to. Instead, I stepped closer, holding onto my pillar, my hero, my guardian. Each point of contact my body made with his sent a shot of electricity streaking down my stomach. I was pressed against him—as in *very* close to him. Only three inches separated my mouth from his chest, I could—

“What was the trigger?”

I eased away from him, leaving my hands on his chest for as long as I possibly could. “Skull cap and goatee. That was bad.”

“But you made it.” He nodded. “I’m thinking your idea of me never leaving your side was the right one.”

“Might be.” I pressed my finger over the top of my lip to wipe the perspiration away. “Whew, first one down, and I didn’t die. That’s good.”

“Lara Croft is kicking ass.” Hunter glanced to his right, toward the open lobby area. “Ready?”

Yes. I’d be Lara Croft tonight. I knew her better than anyone for how many times I’d seen the movies. She was strong, kick ass, and totally sexy. I could be those, too, at least the strong and kick ass...and maybe a little of the sexy. That was okay, right?

The panic attack was big, and my hands were still shaking, but I’d made it.

I rubbed my hands on my pants and checked that my fake guns were in place then stepped beside my partner in crime. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Thirteen

Hunter

I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the sexiest person in the room—hands down. She'd faced down a wicked panic attack only thirty minutes ago, and she was here, smiling, and handing out candy to these kids.

Sure, her hands only stopped shaking a few minutes ago, but that wasn't unexpected. The amount of adrenaline that'd rushed her body would take its toll for a while. Even with the help of some calories to help ease the crash.

Lina reached into the bowl of candy as a young kid dressed as a pumpkin came our direction.

“Trick or treat!” the boy yelled.

“Hi!” Lina said. “And what are you supposed to be?”

“Punkin'. Candy?”

“You're pumpkin candy?” She smiled and placed a handful of candy into the kid's bag.

“No! Punkin'.” He grinned, and that's when I saw he was missing his front teeth.

He looked up at me and stepped back toward the adult I assumed was his father.

“Yeah, he's a little scary, isn't he?” Lina backhanded my bicep and shook her head. “Don't worry, he's harmless.”

I squatted down as I grabbed another piece of candy from Lina's bowl. Now the kid and I were eye-to-eye. “Havin' fun?”

He nodded.

I held out the candy, and he teetered his eyes from me to it then back to me. I smiled and nodded. The kid grinned and snatched the candy from my hand.

“See, I don’t bite.” I held my hand up. “High five.”

He jumped up and slapped my hand.

Beside me, Lina laughed, and we watched the kid scurry away to the next station across the lobby. They had about fifteen stations throughout the conference and each of the kids were hurrying from one to the other, then they were ushered down the hall into another room that had a small, haunted house in it.

I loved the glow emanating from Lina’s face. And that smile of hers could melt even the coldest of hearts. My heart was far from cold, hell, it was smoldering it was so on fire for her, but she was working through my defenses like ice cold water from a fireman’s hose.

This ‘keeping things as friends’ wasn’t going to be easy. Especially with her wearing that tight outfit. The long sleeve shirt covered her completely, yet it was still one of the sexiest things I’d seen her wear with the way it hugged her curves.

Hell, she might even have a set of six-pack abs under there if I saw it right. And I’d been looking in that direction *way* too much tonight.

She really was fit, but how often she ran on that treadmill, it didn’t surprise me. What did surprise me were my reactions to her. How protective I felt...and then some. These

past couple of years I'd been able to shut myself down to any woman who'd shown an interest, but Lina was different.

Sure, I'd told her we couldn't be anything more than friends, and I'd done that tons of times over the years. This time, though, my body wasn't getting the message.

A group of four guys dressed up in matching costumes strode through the doorway into our conference room. We were only a couple of tables from the door because we wanted to have clear access to bolt back to her place if needed, so they were only about ten feet from us.

Lina stood straight as she watched them with narrowed eyes. Deep lines creased her forehead as she studied the group, and her breathing shallowed.

It'd been a group that'd hurt her, hadn't it?

One of the leaders of the event made his way toward the guys who'd congregated right inside the door, checking out the surroundings. He'd probably ask them to leave since this was a private function.

Lina glanced to the side, and her eyes widened as another kid came walking toward our table. This one was a little girl dressed up as a princess. She couldn't have been more than six or seven.

"Trick or treat," she said with a high-pitched voice that was so cute I couldn't help but smile.

"Oh my gosh, you're so precious," Lina said as she reached into her bowl for candy.

Damn it, her hands were shaking again, and my stomach clenched. I glanced at the group, and it looked like

the guy was talking with them. They'd be gone soon.

The guy escorting the little girl grinned as he stared at Lina. I recognized the longing in his eyes because it'd been staring at me from my mirror since I'd first seen her. I swallowed hard and steered my attention to the tiny girl before us.

“What are you?” the girl asked Lina.

She smiled and said, “Can you guess?”

The girl grinned and shook her head.

“Lara Croft, right?” the guy said. “Your costume is perfect.” His eyes slid down Lina's body, and he smiled again. “First one, right? When she's about to go into the forest. Only with long sleeves instead of a tank top.”

Prick was perceptive.

Lina nodded as she stepped back. A light flush colored her normally pale cheeks.

A gentle tug on my robe had me looking down. This tiny girl only went to about my thigh. “Hey. What are you?” She hollered.

“I'm a boxer.”

“Boxer? What's a boxer? What are those on your shoulder? Why do you have black make-up on your face? How come you're so tall? What—”

I squatted down in front of her. “Is this better?”

“You get to see so much way up there.” She pressed her forefinger on the tip of my nose. “So big. I'm big, too. One day, I'll be tall as you.”

“Want to see what that’s like now?” I glanced up at who I assumed was her father, though he seemed a little young. The guy nodded.

I offered both of my hands to the girl, and she gasped as she nodded. I picked her up and hoisted her on my right shoulder while I held her steady by her legs. She let out a squeal that had half the room looking in our direction.

“I’m so tall. I’m so tall.” Her giggle was contagious.

Lina’s hands covered her mouth as she watched the girl on my shoulder waving her arms.

After a few seconds I set her back to her ballerina tipped feet and squatted before her. “So you’ll have to work hard and eat well to be big like me, okay?”

She reached up for me. “Again. Again.”

“Come on, Baily, let’s keep moving,” the guy said, looking at me. “Thank you. She’s...usually so shy.”

I stood to my full height and nodded.

He focused back on Lina and smiled, then guided the little girl toward the next station. I was glad he was gone. I didn’t like how he was ogling Lina. Not that I had any rights to her, but it still pissed me off.

“You were good with her,” Lina said watching after the kid. I was just thankful she wasn’t noticing the guys were still in the room. She was doing so well, and I didn’t want anything to change that.

“Yeah, well, little girls dressed as princesses get to me every time.” I shook my head and turned toward Lina.

“Yes. I knew it!” The guys that’d come in were hustling toward us with their arms raised in the air and yelled out, “It is you!”

The nearly bald leader that had been talking to them followed behind, an apologetic smile curving his thin lips. “They said they knew you and wanted to say hi.”

Lina flinched and swung her focus toward them. I stepped toward her, thinking she’d freak, but I didn’t see any major signs of panic yet. She did analyze them closely, but other than that, she seemed fine. Maybe a little tension in the jaw there, and her hands were fisted.

Progress noted.

“It *is* you. I saw you online. Dude, you’re the shit.” The scrawny kid’s voice cracked. He couldn’t be more than thirteen years old and barely a buck twenty soaking wet. “The way you pounded Hethrow in that ring? That was fucking art, you know?”

The boys fanned out, so they formed a half-circle around me as I stepped in front of Lina more. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Even though I did. I just wanted them to leave. I’d left that part of my life back in Arizona. How the hell did they find me here?

“Thor’s Hammer! Holy shit! I can’t believe it. I almost didn’t recognize you with hair.”

Great. That stupid nickname rears its ugly head again. Yeah, I had a right hook that’d knock just about anyone down, but *Thor’s Hammer?* *Lame.*

“Yeah!” the second kid shouted. “You got a fight here?”

“Dude,” I said a little louder than I’d hoped, but the fact that they recognized me when I’d been bald for a lot of my fights back in Arizona was not a good thing. “It’s private Halloween party and this is a costume.”

“Yeah. Yeah. We’re leaving. But we had to come and see you.”

“You got me mixed up with someone else. You should bolt.”

“Is this your girl?” The third one leaned to the side. “Lara Croft. Excellent.” He stepped forward. “You can kick my ass any time.”

I grabbed the kid’s arm and pushed him back. “That’s enough.”

“All right, boys. It’s time to leave,” the leader said.

“Watch out, Erik, he might break out Thor’s Hammer and pound on your scrawny ass.” He laughed as he dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I’m so going to get a picture of you. When’s your next fight?”

His hat had been on backwards, but now that he turned it around, I saw the symbol for Ultimate Fighting. And here I thought growing out my normal-colored hair and staying off the underground circuit would change things.

Hell, I’d never fought with my natural-colored hair. I’d either shaved my head or spiked it a different color for each fight. And I had about six fewer tattoos, back then, too.

“Dude, can you sign this?” The main guy held out a marker and his cap.

Shit. Shit. I did not need this. I’d kicked one guy’s ass in the ring and then *bam*, I was all over the internet. I was just letting some anger out. I hadn’t known the guy I’d knocked out was some phenom on his way up the ranks.

“There’s a mistake. Keep on moving, guys, we’ve got candy to hand out.” I glanced at Lina to see how she was doing, but she was staring at me. Damn her inquisitive eyes. She could read right through my bullshit, couldn’t she?

That part of my life was gone. Dead. No need to share that dark, violent part of my past.

“No way, dude. Two years ago, man, you kicked Cain’s ass! You’re—”

“Two years ago?” Lina asked as she stepped toward me. “We were on a mission’s trip in Guatemala building homes, so I’m thinking you guys are mistaken.”

The guys ogled her with wide eyes and their bottom jaws hanging open. Mine almost dropped as well at her quick thinking, but I went with it.

“All year,” I said and shrugged.

“But—”

“Come on, Derik, let’s jet.” One of the guys dragged him away toward another station. “Dumbass.”

I watched them walk away, then turned to find Lina staring at me with her arms crossed over her chest. “Ultimate Fighting, huh?”

“Nice save.”

“Can I have your autograph?”

“Funny. You doing okay?” I glanced around to see if any little kids were coming our way, hoping they were. I didn’t want to go into this with Lina. Not when I was working hard *not* to bond with her any more than I already had. If I told her about the fighting, she’d ask why I’d stopped. And that would lead to more lies on my part because I couldn’t tell her the real reason.

She’d never forgive me. Hell, I hadn’t forgiven me, how could I expect anyone else to?

“No, what’s funny is Thor’s Hammer?” she snickered. “Care to share?”

I glanced around some more, but I was shit out of luck with a distraction. “No.”

“So this here *friendship*, is a one-way street?” She nailed me with a stare.

It was strange how those eyes could both heat my body to nuclear levels *and* slice through it with the sting of an acid-laced dagger. I preferred the melting looks than the glacial one fixed on my face now.

What had happened after that fight changed my life. And stole a beautiful light from this world too early. *Issie*. No. I couldn’t talk about it. Never. “It was a...dark time in my life. I’d rather not discuss it.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I get it.”

And just like that, she let it go.

She actually let it go. Now, one thing I knew about chicks was that they pressed. And pressed. Hell, Sarah from work was relentless in her pursuit of me, constantly asking me questions and touching me. But Lina was going to let this secret...go?

I guess not wanting to talk about dark times was one thing she understood more than anyone. Probably because she was so versed in it. I'd yet to find out what had happened to her so I guess she could respect my not wanting to talk about my junk.

Funny how I found myself *wanting* to tell her.

"Can I ask a favor?" Lina smiled.

"Sure."

"Will you teach me?"

"Teach you..."

"How to fight."

"And why would you need to know how to do that?"

The last thing I wanted was her in the line of danger, having to fight anyone.

She glanced to the floor then around her. "When those guys came up to you...I was scared. I immediately thought about what I would do if they...well, I...hate being scared, Hunter. I'm sick of it."

"You're getting stronger, Lina. You're doing great."

"I know. But...I think learning how to fight would help. I want to get *out* of this place, Hunter. As in outside."

"And you think knowing how to fight will help."

“Knowing how to *protect* myself. Yes.” She nodded.
“And, you said you teach at your club. That’s only a mile from here, right?”

I nodded, and a spark of hope lit up her eyes.

“I could...I’m going to get myself to where you teach and take a class. But...can you start teaching me here? And I’ll work to getting there? Will you help me?”

“Of course I will.”

She jumped up and down and let out a little squeal.
“Tomorrow. After your class?”

“There should be room in my place. Or, in yours?”

“We’ll use a conference room here on this main level.”

“We can do that?”

“Sure. I’ll get it worked out.” She clapped. “Yes!”

I watched her as she faced the next child coming for his sugar fix. Already the confidence was showing on her face as she stood taller, her back a little straighter and her shoulders broad. I’d help her beat this thing.

And it hit me right then and there: I was going to stay here. With Lina.

To hell with my past, and to hell with my dad. I’d beat them both if it meant staying here with Lina.

Chapter Fourteen

Angelina

“It’s good to see you out and about again, Miss Angelina,” Doug said to me as Hunter, and I walked past the concierge toward our reserved conference room.

“Thanks, Doug.” I smiled and noticed my steps were a little bit lighter.

I’d been practicing with Hunter for three weeks, nearly every night, whether it was before or after classes.

“You make friends quickly,” Hunter said as he held open the door to the conference room.

The wall of windows offered a nice view of the setting sun. It was nearing Thanksgiving, so the sun set early nowadays, but it wasn’t any less fantastic to see, especially with the clouds roaming around the sky today.

“Yeah, well, Doug’s been around forever.” I threw my towel in the corner of the room and went to the center.

“Doesn’t look much older than you.” Hunter faced me in the center of the cleared-out room. He was wearing a tank top this time. It was both awesome and distracting at the same time. His arms really were as big as my thighs. Maybe even both of them together.

I’d always thought that was gross when I’d seen it on TV, but his muscles weren’t all shiny with oils and veins popping out. His size was intimidating, I’d even seen it on Doug’s face at first, but Hunter’s eyes were what drew me in.

They were kind, loving, and that negated the fear factor over his size. For me anyway.

“Lina?” he asked.

“Oh. Sorry.” *Don't mind me, I was totally spacing on your body.* “He’s only a couple of years older than me. He’s poised to step into leadership here once he’s done with grad school.”

“And you know all this how?” He bent his knees and motioned for me to do the same to start warmups.

“Dad told me.”

“Your dad knows him?”

I nodded and worked on my deep breathing. It’d probably be safe to tell him my dad owned the hotel, but still I said nothing. With my luck things would get all weird between us again, and we’d just gotten back to normal...well *our* normal. He already knew Dad took care of me by sending money every month. What would he think if he found out his landlord was my dad?

Then again, Hunter had kept to his rule of not dating and held me at arm’s length, even while training me, so, why did I care if he looked at me differently? He was my...*friend*.

That word was beginning to piss me off. I wanted to be more than just a friend more than I’d ever wanted anything before.

Him and his damn rules. And his stubbornness.

“So, what are we working on tonight?” I said, needing to shift my focus elsewhere before I popped a blood vessel in

my temple.

“I only have an hour, then I’ve got to get cleaned up and ready for class.”

“No work? You’ve not been going for a while.”

“Yeah, well...they gave me a month off.”

“What?” I stood straight.

He lunged.

I blocked his hands, which were aimed at my throat, with my forearm, but he was so big and held his ground so well, I pretty much knocked myself to the side.

I was pathetic.

“You need to square up more. Remember, you need your core ready for anything at any time. Strong and solid.” He gripped my waist and kicked out my legs, so I stood with a widened stance.

A wave of his fresh scent hit me. He always reminded me of the crisp autumn air after a thorough rain shower. *Focus, Angelina!*

“A month off? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Nothing to tell. Now, get ready, I’m going to attack again. This time from behind.”

“What happened?”

“With what?” He asked as he stepped behind me.

“You’re job, silly. It seems weird they give you a month off. You love that job.”

“Do you want your lesson or not, Lina?”

I whirled around and planted my palm to his chest and pushed with all my weight. Pushing a brick wall would have produced more results. “You don’t have to be a jerk, you know. I was worried. I mean, you like your job, then you’re off for a month and helping me. You didn’t take time off to teach me, did you? Please tell me that’s not what happened.”

“And if it was?” He quirked his eyebrow up and tilted his head toward me.

“Hunter! No. I didn’t mean for you—”

“Relax. It’s not because of you. Though you’re not a bad reason to take time off, you know.” He smiled.

“Then why?”

“It doesn’t matter. Why do you want to know?”

“Because we’re...friends.” I hated that word with a passion hotter than the fire in Hades right now.

He grimaced as well then stepped away.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“I thought we were having a lesson here,” he said.

“Fine. Be a jerk. I tell you all about my stuff...” I spun around preparing for him to attack me from behind. Maybe I’d throw in an extra kick or something this time around. I suppose I couldn’t blame him much for not opening up with me when I’d stayed pretty superficial as well.

He came at me and grabbed my neck from behind. I jabbed my elbow to his gut, stepped on his foot, then rushed my fist toward his face. He ducked and jumped out of my move to punch his groin...like he’d taught me.

He rubbed his gut and said, “I should piss you off more often. Nice job!”

I stuck out my tongue at him, but he was right. I’d executed what he’d taught me better than I had so far. Maybe he *should* piss me off more often. It seemed to empower me. What I really wanted, though, was for him to tell me about why he wasn’t working. He never talked about himself or his past, and even though he insisted on remaining only friends, I wanted to be closer to him. Learn more about him and what made this walking contradiction tick.

He jammed his fingers through his hair. “I got... well...you remember the black eye a few weeks ago?”

I nodded, hopeful he’d finally tell me something.

“It was a fight at work. I got...a little rough with the ass—er—the guy, and my boss said I needed some time off.” His jaw ticked and his hands fisted. A deep breath expanded his already massively broad chest.

I’d just buried my elbow in his gut, and probably bruised my skin as a result, but he didn’t appear the least bit phased.

“A little rough?” I stepped back from him. He suddenly felt twice as big as he was.

“He was harassing a girl, and I went a little...off on him.”

“What happened?”

“He had a few broken bones.”

“Hunter! You broke his bones?”

“Hell yeah I did. Felt them cracking, heard them, too. That asshole deserved it—but it got—he was hurting that girl, Lina.” He shook his head and with a grunt he turned toward the windows. “Lina, I...I can’t stand it when guys throw their strength around like that. He was hurting that girl.” His shoulders slumped forward. “And I...”

“Snapped,” I whispered.

He stared out the window, but I felt the anger radiating from him. He didn’t need to say anything, the air around him vibrated with emotion. Pent up emotion.

“I pictured you, Lina. Getting taken advantage of. I couldn’t let that happen. Won’t let some stupid prick rob a woman of her life.”

“Like I’ve been robbed.” I stepped toward him, my frustration with him pushing me away melted with every inch I moved. He had such a rough exterior and put up a jagged front, but he was nothing other than a kind, selfless, caring man.

“And Mom.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

He stepped out of my reach, shaking his head, and I saw his jaw was tense. His hands were still fisted, his chest heaving.

I finally got it at that moment. He was a walking time bomb; one little trigger away from exploding. He wasn’t much different than me only my bomb wasn’t violence. No, I passed out.

Talk about contrasting reactions.

Maybe that was why I was so comfortable around him. He'd never hurt me, but he'd sure as heck would hurt someone to protect me, and I'd never had that before. I'd not been able to protect myself—nobody had been.

Until now. This guy would, and he would teach me to protect myself, too, so I'd never be vulnerable again. And those women at the gym, he was helping them. It all made sense now.

“Thank you, Hunter, for teaching me self-defense, so I'll never be robbed again.” His posture relaxed. “You might have anger issues, but you're dealing. You're teaching me to defend myself. And those people you teach in your classes. That's awesome.”

He grunted, and I stepped in front of him.

“Grunt all you want. I think you're wonderful.” I put my hands on his chest. “You've brought me out of my shell. I'm moving around the hotel. I've made it down to the end of the block. You've been instrumental in that, Hunter. And this...teaching me self-defense. How can I thank you for that?”

“Coming to my class next week would be thanks enough.”

I let out a calm, centering breath, as I contemplated the idea. I'd gotten down to the end of the block this week. Sure, Jenna had to virtually hold my hand during the event, but still. It'd been a big step.

But to go a full mile...

“Think about it.” He smiled.

He really wanted to see me succeed. I'd never had someone so entirely in my court like this. Jenna and Lizzie, sure, but Hunter was live and in person...this was so much better.

I gently gripped his chest, and his eyes widened. Beneath my palm, his heart started racing. Had mine not been pounding equally as hard, I probably could have heard his. Instead, I focused on the feeling of his chest palpitating against my palm. His heat filtered through the thin fabric separating me from him and warmed me right down to the tips of my toes.

"Lina," he whispered. "We should get back to the lesson."

"Yeah, probably," I said, not moving an inch. I was too close to his warmth. I loved the feel of his heart beating beneath my hand. I loved the strength flowing from him to me. I loved his stormy scent. It empowered me as it fused into my pores.

He didn't move either, though, so that was a good sign. Lizzie had given me my *assignment* weeks ago at the Kiddie Halloween event, but now, more than any other time, I wanted to complete it. To kiss Hunter. Once such a scary thing to even consider, but now, my body warmed at the idea.

No, it heated at the idea of Hunter. He was this big, imperfect, totally sweet guy who chose to spend his free time with me. *With me!*

The black pupil ate up his violet-blue iris. His chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, and he looked out the window.

Why was he fighting this? Couldn't he feel it between us?
That no dating rule was stupid. He knew it. I knew it.

And for once, I thought maybe I might have something to give him. I was still broken, but much better than the wimpy mess he'd found in an elevator all those weeks ago.

He looked down at me, and I gripped his pecs even more as I rose to my tip toes. "Lina," he whispered.

"Let me try this," I said. "I want to try this with you, Hunter."

"No. I—"

"I trust you."

"That's from lack of options, Lina. There are better men for you. Now that you're out and about you can meet one."

"I want you." More than anything I'd ever wanted.

He closed his eyes, and his jaw clenched. "No, you don't. You want the idea of me. I'm not who you think I am. You shouldn't trust me."

"I do trust you." I slid my hands up the deep valley between his pecs to his neck. Oh, God his skin was so smooth...and warm. I could melt into him and get lost for an eternity.

"I'm...not...safe." His jaw was tight, and his eyes flared with a hint of danger mixed in with the desire.

I knew he wanted me, too. Why was he fighting it?

"You would never hurt me."

He grabbed my wrists, and I thought he was going to pull away from beneath my touch. Instead, he smoothed his big hands up my arms until they rested on my shoulders. He leaned forward, and I pushed up even more.

Inches separated us, and I knew this was it. My first kiss in three years eight weeks and one day. And it would be with a man who'd totally and unexpectedly rocked my world. A man who made me feel safe, treasured, and...normal.

I didn't care what his past was like or what he'd done as an Ultimate Fighter. He was who I wanted. He was mine.

Our breath mingled, flirted as he hesitated an inch before contact. He was so close I could almost feel his lips touching mine, and they tingled in anticipation. Just one push up, and I could taste him. No fear. No regrets. Only strength. He was my hope.

“Angelina, I—”

A man's voice sliced through our moment, and Hunter whirled around, keeping me behind him.

Doug froze in the doorway, his eyes wide and his mouth open. He stepped back, but who wouldn't with a massive guy like Hunter staring you down? Sure, Doug was over fifteen feet from us, but Hunter was so big it didn't matter.

I gripped his bicep as I stepped out from behind him. “Hey, Doug.”

“Sorry...I—there's something I need your help with.”

Hunter quirked an eyebrow up.

“Yeah, sure. What’s up?” I asked.

“Computer’s hitching at the receipt printing screen. I know you’re a wizard with it, so I thought I’d check with you before calling IT.”

Confusion clouded Hunter’s eyes. Guess it was time to tell him about my connection to this hotel, huh?

“I’ll be right there,” I said. It felt good to say that instead of having to remote log in from upstairs to figure it out. I was on my way out of this agoraphobia pit, wasn’t I?

Doug closed the door, looking more than happy to leave the room. I even noticed the tension filling it up.

Hunter loomed down at me. “Why would he think you know anything about the computers here?”

“Because I do.” I stepped to the side to get my backpack. “I’ve helped them out quite a few times, only it was remotely from my apartment.”

“Looks like you’ve been keeping some secrets from me.”

“No more than you have.”

He grunted and walked toward the door his hands clenched at his sides. “I better go.”

“Hunter,” I said. He froze at the door, with his hand on the knob. “You can’t be mad.”

“I’m not.”

“There you go lying to me again.” I dug into my bag and pulled out a sweatshirt. “You can shut me out all you want, but I know there’s something between us. I felt it, and I

know you felt it. It might scare the crap out of you, and that's fine, because it scares me, too. So we're perfect."

"No. We're not." He whipped around. "There's so much shit you don't know about me, Lina. Shit that'd make your head spin. I will *not* subject you to that. I *won't* have you involved in that. Involved with me."

"Too late." I stomped toward him. "The night you picked me up off that elevator floor it started. You saw something then or you never would have come back. You never would have talked to me so much."

"I'm trying to be your friend."

"That was fine at first. But there's more." I pressed my forefinger to his impressive pec, which was totally flexed. Man, he *was* pissed, wasn't he? "We're more than friends."

"We can't be," he whispered.

"Say that all you want, Hunter. And all that *shit* I don't know about you...please, after the *shit* I've been through, nothing you could say or do could scare me away." I slung my bag over my arm.

"Lina. I can't—"

"If I have to be the one to start spilling secrets, fine." I cleared my throat, preparing for the *holy shit* look, and spit it out. "My dad owns this hotel and about twenty-five other ones throughout the country. I work for him, but that's just a front. He's embarrassed by the mere sight of me because of my disorder and doesn't have a clue how to be around me after what happened to me. I'm a disgrace to him, and he shells out

the money to keep me up in this place and will give me a nice, quiet job behind the scenes once I graduate.”

“Your dad’s not embarrassed—”

I put my hand up as I walked past him. “Ball is in your court.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hunter

“You’re an idiot, you know that, right?” Mom said as I sat at the table for dinner.

“My day was great, thanks for asking. How was yours?” I reached for the spoon in the mashed potatoes.

Mom glared at me for a long time as I piled food on my plate. I’d had a day filled with exams and studying for the upcoming ones before the holiday break. I missed my study partner, though.

“He’s not going to find us here,” she said.

Not this again. “He always does.”

“Even if he does, we’ll get him this time. Marshal is ready. We’re ready. This place is safe, and we’re guarded.”

“We’ve felt safe before. This is no time to let our defenses down.” Couldn’t ever relax, even though our handler, Marshal, said he was ready. Not until that bastard was behind bars...or dead.

“I haven’t heard you talking with Angelina much these past few weeks.”

“Stay out of it, Mom.”

She let out an exasperated sigh and set her fork down with a clank. “Hunter. You need to have some form of a life. You’ve been taking care of me for too long. It’s time you had a life of your own.”

Easy for her to say. Well, not easy, but she could say that and not have to worry if her anger was going to burst out of her like a green monster and hurt people around her.

“Did you know she was our landlord’s daughter?” I asked.

“What? Really?”

I nodded, shoveling in some food. I’d been chewing on that little bombshell for a few weeks now, and it still didn’t sit right. She was a billionaire’s daughter and had been hiding that from me. Why would she hold something so trivial from me?

“Is that why you’re all grumpy? She told you? Or did you find out some other way?”

“She told me, and I haven’t been grumpy.”

“Yes, you have. And Bill won’t let you back yet, huh? Why don’t you just get into counseling, then you can work. You’re a pain in the butt when you’re not working.”

“You’re full of the compliments tonight, aren’t you?”

“Well, the ball’s in your court, and I see you holding it—no—squeezing it, and I wouldn’t be a good mom if I didn’t say something.”

“You’ve been talking to Lina.”

She nodded. “I may have dropped some cookies by the other day.”

“She let you in her house?”

“Well, I’m not the one being a total jerk.” She grinned.

I hung my head. I was being a jerk, but it was a strategic choice. I'd been way too close to kissing Lina, and if I had, then I'd fall for her even harder than I already had. I couldn't afford to. Unlike my disillusioned mother, I knew this would come to an end. Dad would find us, and we'd have to move.

I'd told myself, several times, that I was going to stay here with her, no matter what, but then I'd talked myself out of it each and every time.

My psychopath father might hurt Lina if he found out about her and how close she was to us. He'd done it before.

And Mom didn't have any right to be meddling in Lina's life, either.

"You need to stop talking with her and stop going over there. What if Dad finds out about her and she gets hurt? Don't you think she's been through enough?"

"Stop it, Hunter. You're getting out of control. You know that? How long have we been running? Three years, now? We've given up *everything* because of him." She touched the jagged scar along her face. "He's ruined enough of my life for me to continue letting him control me when I'm not even married to him anymore. I refuse to keep giving him that power, Hunter! I'm done with it. I'm going to have friends and a life. It's cold here, but I like it. I like this house. The people here are nice, and I will *not* shy away from them. I will not hide. I'm sick of it!"

Mom had these meltdowns occasionally, but this one, this felt different. The aggression rolling off her surprised me. That'd always been *my* thing, not hers.

“And you. How you’re treating Angelina is unacceptable. She’s a terrific woman, and since you’ve met her, you’ve been so calm. So sweet with her.”

“Mom. You know I can’t—I’m not having this discussion again.” I pushed away from the table as I grabbed my plate and stood. Mom knew damn straight why I couldn’t be with Lina—or any woman for that matter. “Thank you for cooking tonight. It’s great.”

“Don’t, Hunter. Sit and listen to me.” She hurried toward me. “I need this. You need this.”

“What I need is for you to stop pushing me—I need —”

“Stability!” She pounded her fist on the top of the table, her eyes flaring with anger. “No more moving, no more running. If he finds us, then we end this. I’ve given him too much power, and I’ve let you down in the process, Hunter. You deserve a normal life. Angelina is a great girl, and you deserve some happiness after everything that’s happened.”

Happiness. I wasn’t sure I remembered what that was anymore. Well I did. Lina had shown me some since I’d met her. But it wouldn’t last. I’d ruin it, or Dad would. “It’s not that easy.”

“It can be.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her back pocket and offered it to me. “Jenna will help.”

I stared at her outstretched hand, my gut churning. The ever-familiar heat of anger simmering turned over in my stomach. “You did *not* tell Lina what happened. Mom, you—”

“I didn’t, but I got Jenna’s information for you to use to get back to work. Bill’s not going to bend on this, and you love your job, so either call Jenna or call someone. Get that anger under control so you can be with Angelina.” A tear popped from the far corner of her eye and trekked down her cheek. “I can’t lose you, Hunter. Not to that poisonous anger. Not after what happened with Isabelle.”

I gulped. And that’s when it hit me. “Dad resurfaced, didn’t he?” My heart hammered my ribs, and blood pounded through my head like a raging river. “He hurt someone.”

More tears fell. I hated it when Mom cried; when women cried in general. It broke me. Shattered my barriers.

“Mom?”

She nodded. “He caught our trail in Flake, it seems. My old...boss, Terry—” She swiped her finger beneath her eye, but it didn’t clear the now streaming tears. “He...didn’t make it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I tossed my plate onto the table. Flake was the last town we’d been in nearly a year ago. If he tracked us there...

“He’s not coming this direction. Marshal’s on it.”

“*Please*. He hasn’t gotten anywhere with capturing Dad in all these years, Mom. How the hell is this any different than the other times?”

“It’s different because we’ve found a home! You’re going to finish college and walk-through ceremonies. We have a home. You found Angelina.”

I shook my head. “She deserves better than me, Mom.”

“Then *be* better. Look at all that she’s accomplished these past months. You’ve helped her achieve that. You know what to do.”

“Easier to do that for someone else than yourself. I refuse to drag her into this. No matter how badly I want to be with her.” I jammed my hands through my hair. “Dad’s left a trail of bodies. Anyone he views as in his way to get to you ends up dead, or missing or...Shit, Mom. I have to stay away from Lina. If Dad hurts her—”

“She’s strong. She might not look it, but she is.”

“The strongest...besides you.” I sat back down at the table. Mom had a point. If I wanted Lina more than anything I’ve ever wanted, why the hell wasn’t I trying to be better for her? Why wasn’t I doing everything in my power to protect her and be with her?

Because every time I’d tried to do something for me or Mom, Dad had ruined it somehow. Or I had.

I wasn’t even sure if I knew how to function without Dad on my mind or the worry of him jumping out of nowhere.

“What brought this on, Mom?”

“Angelina.” She smiled as she brushed the tears off her face and hitched her hip against the table. “After what she’s been through and how she’s doing now...it inspired me. We can get through this thing with your father. It ends here.”

“She told you, didn’t she?”

Mom nodded. “It’s a precious thing to have her trust me with her secret. You can have it, too, Hunter. If you want it.”

“I’ll ruin it.” *I’ll ruin her.*

“You will if you think like that.” Mom rubbed my hand. “But I know you, boy. You have a heart bigger than your biceps and thighs put together. That’ll win.”

I wasn’t so sure. After what I’d done to Issie...that’d ruined me forever. And when Lina found out, she’d walk away from me, I knew it. Mom didn’t, but I did. There was no way Lina, after having suffered at the hands of men, would stay with me once she found out that the very hands she’d held so tightly had killed a woman.

“You know when I say it’s a precious thing to trust someone with a secret that’s so deep...it goes both ways.” Mom smiled and sat back down in her chair to finish her meal.

Both of my hands shook like I was a nervous wreck. I wasn’t sure I could handle Lina’s rejection, though.

But if I didn’t tell her, I would lose her...and possibly my sanity.

Chapter Sixteen

Angelina

“You can do this, Angelina,” Lizzie said as I stared at the iPhone. “He’s going to love it.”

“I hope so,” I said as I glanced out the backseat window. I’d been practicing for weeks, coming down to the gym where Hunter taught self-defense. Despite the awkwardness of the almost kiss that Doug had interrupted over three weeks ago, Hunter continued training me.

He’d stayed distant and superficial during our time together, but I was just glad to be hanging with him again. I’d thought for sure I’d pushed him so hard with my *Ball’s in your court* comment, but I was learning he had to come to things on his own sometimes.

Well, maybe Lizzie had figured that out and told me. It’d been a long three weeks.

“So, his last final before the break was yesterday, and this is the last self-defense class before break, so you’re home free. This is an early Christmas present for him and one huge step on your part. I’m so proud of you.”

“Even though I didn’t pass that assignment you gave me way back on Halloween.”

“Good thing I allow retakes. Tonight, you’ll pass with flying colors.”

“I hope so.” I had to be either the stupidest chick alive for doing this when he’d clearly shot me down with the non-kiss, or I was a glutton for punishment.

Probably both.

“Okay. I’m going to hang up now. I’m really going to leave this car and go into that gym. There are tons of people in there.”

“After work crowds are big, I know, but you can do this. For both of us.”

“No pressure there, girl.”

“Sorry. For you...and him. You both need this.” Lizzie grinned. “Call me later. I’m waiting for deets.”

I nodded and ended the call, then slid the phone into the zipper pocket of my workout shirt and closed my eyes. I imagined walking up to the door, opening it and going straight to his teaching studio. My heart hammered, but I beat it down with a deep breath.

“Eight-thirty pick up?” the driver asked.

I threaded my arms through my light jacket and said, “I’ll call it in. Can you be on standby or are you pretty booked out?”

“No. I’m on call for you, Miss Angelina.” He smiled. “You’re going to do great.”

“Thanks.” Ever since I’d been down in the lobby more, I’d gotten to know the staff better. I’d known them all through email and video chats, but in person was even better. It was a tight little family down there, and they’d welcomed me into it with open arms.

I pushed open the door and put my feet on the concrete sidewalk. *I can do this.* Once out of the car, I shut the

door and faced the two-story building. The top floor was nothing but windows, and I saw a small crowd beginning to form in the training studio.

Even from here, I could make out Hunter's form. He was about a foot taller than everyone in the class, so he was easy to pick out for sure. He walked with such a confidence. I'd seen it wane during our almost kiss training session, but he'd tucked that incident way down and hadn't mentioned anything about it again. Not to mention, he'd kept his distance on chat sessions, movie time, and texting.

I checked the street, then crossed as I repeated my *I am strong* mantra. I stormed in the front door and showed the temporary pass I printed from the Internet and kept on going. I'd memorized the schematics of the facility I'd downloaded, so I knew exactly where to go.

Even calculated the steps to each spot I needed to go.

Weights clanking rang out like a bells choir, and the scent of body odor and disinfectant hit me like a tidal wave. A guy wearing a weight belt walked toward me, and I slowed, veering to the side to give him lots of room to pass by. But I didn't panic. No hammering heart. No vomiting. No fear.

I was going to be okay.

I trudged to the back of the room toward the stairwell that led up to the second floor. With each step, my excitement rose. The thought of seeing Hunter in his element made me smile. Alone with me in the conference rooms he was gentle, but firm. He pushed me, challenging me enough to keep me going, keep me focused.

Finally to the top of the stairs, I faced a row of treadmills to get to the entrance to the room. I smoothed my track jacket down, hoping I'd not pitted out too much. Not only had I ventured out, but I'd worn a shirt that exposed the scar on my shoulder. Talk about a double whammy for sure. The dark thing was such a contrast to my pale skin, but I was bound and determined to take the next step with him. Show him I could be strong enough for the both of us until he came to his senses and let me in.

Of course, I still wore long sleeves to cover my wrist scars...I wasn't quite ready to show them off to the world yet.

Hunter had to have seen some of this ugly shoulder scar during our training sessions, I wasn't totally oblivious to the times when my shirt gaped, but he never asked about it. I knew he wanted to know, but I had to respect the guy from refraining.

His mom, on the other hand...I'd told her that first time she came over. Her bribe had been delicious chocolate chip cookies, though. She'd whispered some nice advice when it came to her son, which helped me understand him better and why he was being such a jerk after our near kiss. But, like I'd said, the ball was in his court now. Hopefully I could get him to do something with it tonight.

I made it to the end of the treadmills and stood a step outside the entrance to the studio. There had to be nearly twenty women in there, and they all crowded around Hunter. He was kind of a beacon, wasn't he?

I drew in one last breath to give me a boost of energy and stepped through the threshold. And once again, nothing

caved in on me. I didn't pass out. And even better, my heart wasn't pick-axing my chest.

The wall of windows on the far side of the room overlooked the city...at least as much as we could see only two stories up. It was black, but the lights beyond were beautiful. And there was Foreman Lake in the background.

It'd been ages since I'd walked around that.

"Lina?" Hunter's voice cut above the murmur of all the women chatting.

His eyes were wide as he stepped around the crowd. I heard whisperings of *Who's that girl? What's going on? Is that his girlfriend?* I liked that last one. Girlfriend had a nice ring to it.

"You're here?" he said as he approached me.

I nodded and smiled. "Remember the thank you I mentioned before."

"This is..." He turned around toward the other women, and I realized they were all staring at us. "Looks like we have another member tonight. Everyone, this is Li—Angelina."

The women crept toward me, mostly wearing smiles, but I saw the wonderment on their faces, too.

I heard a few hellos and nodded as I worked the zipper down on my jacket. Hunter winked at me, then started waving his massive arms to get everyone into lines.

"Ready to get started?" he said, his voice deep enough that it echoed off the glass wall behind him. "Let's show

Angelina the warmup.”

I fell in the last line as I tossed my jacket on the floor by the mirrors behind us. I caught a glimpse of my scar in the mirror, but before I could think about it further and get anxious, I whirled around and faced the front. Since I was so short, I could barely see Hunter, but I caught glimpses of him doing some small movements to get warmed up.

“Hi. I’m Janey. Glad you’re here,” a short girl with spiked red hair said to me.

“Thanks. Nice to meet you.”

“How do you know Hunter?”

“He lives next door to me.”

“He dragged you out, huh?”

“More or less.” I smiled. “How long have you been in his class?”

“A few months. When he started it in August. Damn near got myself killed before I met him.” She shook her head. “Boyfriend went postal on me.”

“Oh my,” I said as I followed along with her as she did some light stretching.

“Yeah. Well, Hunter taught me a few things and not just defense. He’s a great guy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The best.”

“I can tell how much you surprised him.” She nodded. “What’s up?”

“He’s been...giving me private lessons at home, and so I thought I would try coming to his class once to surprise him.”

“At home? As in *private*?” She waggled her eyebrows.

“Nothing like that...I’m-er-I *was* homebound.” I gulped past the nerves of that admission. “He helped me.”

“Homebound? Like you didn’t ever leave your house. How long?”

She asked the question like I’d told her I liked waffles or something. Like it was completely normal. “Um, just over three years.” More like three years, two months, and twenty-nine days.

“Holy cow.” She changed her stretching stance as she faced forward. “And this is your first time out?”

“Been working up to this. But yeah, for the most part.”

“And you came here.” She grinned. “Yeah, I knew I saw some sparks between you guys. I’m glad you’re here, girl.”

“Thanks.”

We fell into a comfortable silence as Hunter led the class. He was confident, encouraging, yet demanding and expectant. Such a sexy combination.

It was then that I decided it might be time to let him in. And not only my heart, but my apartment.

Chapter Seventeen

Hunter

“I can’t believe you came here,” I said as I picked up the towels around the room. My shoes squeaked, and the scent of sweat hung heavy, but I was right at home with it. Having spent all that time in the boxing ring, I’d been around it forever.

“Surprised?” She smiled, and it was one of her biggest smiles yet. It filled her face and lit up her brown eyes like they were fireworks.

“Very. How did you do this?”

“Like everything else. Small steps.” She grabbed her jacket from the floor then faced me, holding it in her hands.

I brushed my fingers along her shoulder, right above the purple scar exposed by her V-neck workout shirt. It wasn’t quite as wide as Mom’s, but it was jagged.

I could tell she was working hard not to step away. She always had if I’d touched her shoulder while training, and now I knew the full extent as to why. The mark coiled over her shoulder and disappeared beneath the neck of her shirt, but in front, it flared out like a purple vine then ducked back under the fabric right above the swell of her breast.

That had to have been a deep cut, or maybe she’d had surgery. And just like that, my heart rate kicked up and red cornered my vision, tainting the perfect view I had of Lina.

Back off. No! The thought of her in pain, being abused...I couldn’t fucking stand it. I slid my fingers along her

shoulder and down her arm as I stepped back, focusing on my control. *Damn anger.*

“You are gorgeous,” I said. Yes, focus on her. I was with her now, and I’d protect her. No one would ever hurt her again. Not even me.

“Thanks. You did great with us. All these women have a story, don’t they?”

“Most.” I nodded. Some were horrific, but for the most part, yeah, they had their own stories on varying levels.

“Any homebound?”

“Not that I know of.” I waved her to follow me to the far corner of the room to grab the last stray towel. “How’d you get here?”

“Driver.” She blushed. “Hotel driver...limo.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her obvious embarrassment. “Is he...picking you up?”

She nodded.

“Call him and tell him not to bother. If you’re okay with it, I want to take you.”

She grinned and pulled out her phone from a zipped pouch on the back of her workout shirt. “How’d your final go?” she asked as she typed a text.

“Good. Didn’t ace it but did okay. You done for the break now, too?”

“Yep. Well, one more final tomorrow, but I’m ready.” She held up her phone and said, “Okay, you’re stuck with me.”

Then she bent down and picked up the towel. “What happens now?”

“I have to clock out, then we can bolt.”

She followed me down the stairs to the main floor in silence. Every time I glanced over my shoulder, she was looking around, taking everything in. It had to be strange for her since she’d been locked up in her house for so long. She looked like a kid in a candy store.

But what I liked most: No anxiety or panic attacks.

We reached the last step, and I grabbed her hand. She smiled and hustled toward me, holding her jacket together. She’d not yet zipped it—probably so distracted with everything to absorb.

I ducked into the office and found Razor hunched over the computer. “Hey Raz. Rooms’ all cleaned out. See you in a couple of weeks.”

“Sure, dude,” he said as he turned around. “You—oh, hi.” He looked at Lina.

She smiled. “Hi.”

“This is my...friend, Angelina.” I tightened my hold on her hand. I was so damned proud of her. I reached over the desk for a knuckle bump with Razor. “See you in a couple weeks, man.”

“Merry Christmas,” he said and winked at my girl.

My girl. Yeah, that stopped me cold, but for once, it didn’t completely freak me out. After what she’d shown me by

coming here, how strong she was; I felt like a wuss. A huge, pain in the ass, stubborn wuss.

We made it to the front doors, and I stopped her.
“Want to wait here? I’ll get the car.”

“I’ll go with you,” she said, reaching for her zipper.

I gently batted her hand out of the way and snatched up the zipper. She smiled. I dragged it up to the top notch, then brushed my knuckles along her cheek.

“You did great tonight,” I said as we walked outside.

“Thanks.” She smiled as a snowflake landed on the end of her cute, button nose.

She lifted her face skyward and giggled. Snow started falling over us like a little blanket of quiet. “Maybe it’ll be a white Christmas?”

I reached behind her and pulled the hood over her head. “Let’s run.”

I was parked at the back of the lot, and as we ran the damn lamp beside my car flickered out. Lina gasped, and I looked down at her. Even in the dark, I saw how pale she’d gone. I half expected to hear some P!nk songs, but I didn’t.

How had she gotten so strong without me realizing? Then again, we’d been working out in the conference room a lot, and it was true that confidence and fitness went well together.

I beeped the car unlocked and pulled open her door. A wave of frigid air blasted through the lot and right through my thin layer of clothing.

I slammed the door and hustled in from my side. I revved the engine, so we could get things warmed to turn on the heat. “Where’d this cold come from?”

“Well, it *is* December in Minnesota, ya know?”

“First one, remember?”

“Get ready for some fun, desert rat. The high is supposed to be *six* tomorrow.” She laughed as she pulled her seatbelt on.

“Thank you for coming.” I grabbed her hand again. I couldn’t get enough of her.

“It was a thanks for all you’ve done, teaching me self-defense. Remember?”

I sure did. That was the night I’d totally blown it with her. But right now, her smile and her excitement made that night seem like years ago. “Will you forgive me?”

Her eyebrow lifted.

“I’ve been a jackass.”

She grinned.

I turned toward her more. “You coming here tonight. You...you showed me something.”

“What’s that?” She leaned closer.

“There’s nothing you can’t conquer.”

She bit her lip, and her gaze shifted down a brief second. “I can think of one thing—er—person,” her voice was quiet. “You’re like an impenetrable force of nature, Hunter.”

“True.” My turn to grin. “For the most part. But you’re blasting right through it, though.”

“I forgive you, so do you forgive me for not telling you about who my dad is?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Didn’t want you to treat me weird.”

“Why would I?”

“Billionaire’s messed up daughter? Spoiled rich kid getting everything handed to her?”

“So not what I was thinking.”

“Good.” She smiled again and leaned even closer. “I think I’m ready to share one more thing.”

“Three adventures in one night?” I brushed some hair from her forehead, so I got a clearer view of her smooth skin. “What is it?”

“A part of me.” She closed the distance between us, and our lips met.

Hers were cold, but soft, and as quickly as they’d touched mine, she leaned back, her eyes searching mine. I wasn’t sure what to say, it’d happened so fast. I barely got a sense of the kiss. It was so light and quick.

She bit her bottom lip and focused on mine again. I nudged my forefinger under her chin and got a good look at her eyes. They were curious and wide but filled with desire. I slid my finger along her jaw then placed my palm on her cheek.

She leaned into it and smiled. With her free hand, she grazed her chilly finger along my bottom lip. I eased forward and brushed my mouth to hers. She drew in a deep breath, and her eyes shot wide just before they closed.

I drew her closer and tilted her head as I suckled her bottom lip. She must have recently put on some lip balm because I tasted a subtle hint of strawberry. Her mouth opened slightly, and I meshed our lips together even more, drawing on her warmth.

Her cold fingers curled around my neck as she leaned back. I skimmed my thumb along her cheek, absorbing the heat from her skin.

“That was as amazing as I’d thought it would be,” she whispered.

“Ditto.”

“Had you thought of it?”

“Pretty much since day one,” I said.

“Why the change of heart?”

“You.”

“Me?” She grinned.

“You inspired me to be strong. Stronger than the shitty hand I was dealt. Stronger than my fear.” I kissed her cheek, wanting so badly to tackle her mouth and get a deeper taste. But like she said, small steps. I had to earn her trust. And most of all, I had to be worthy enough to take care of this precious woman.

And I would be strong for her because I was going to
make her mine.

Chapter Eighteen

Angelina

“It’s called ice, and it’s very slippery,” I said, teasing Hunter.

He regarded the glossy, frozen water with wide, curious eyes. “I know what it is, *smart ass*. But me and ice skating...it’s not a good fit.”

I glanced over the rink as the handful of people skirting around the ice went along their business. The sun was high in the sky, lighting everything, and I was with Hunter, so I was safe.

“If you’re scared, we can go back to—”

“I’m not scared.”

I laughed as I tugged him toward the warming house to get our skates. After a few tries we got the right sizes and were hobbling on the padded floor to the ice.

“You’ve never done this before, huh?”

“That’d be a hells-to-the-no. You?”

“Long time ago. Should be interesting...” I toed off and gave a couple pushes, testing out my legs.

Everything came back to me in a rush, and my mind whirled as the comfortable memories flittered in. Dad used to take me skating, even on the coldest days when Mom wouldn’t come out. It was our thing.

Back when our relationship was easy, and not tainted by what had happened to me. I longed for those carefree days again.

I spun a slow circle as I got more comfortable on the skates, and a surge of excitement zipped through me. Talk about a rush, and it didn't accompany a panic attack in three years and.... I couldn't remember the day count.

Holy crap, I couldn't remember.

Toeing the ice, I stopped myself, racking my brain to remember how many days. When I couldn't, I laughed. I could have figured it out if I thought about it, but I didn't want to give it that much energy. It'd already owned me for all those years.

"Wow," Hunter said as he wobbled toward me. "I think I see steam coming out of your ears."

I looked up, and found him staring down at me, his nose already red. He wore a black skull cap that hid most of his blond hair. The cap didn't faze me, never had, probably because it was attached to him. Despite his intimidating size, he equated calm in my broken mind.

Sure, he had a hint of fury flickering behind those eyes once in a while, but that was fine. I was fine with it.

With him.

"Everything okay?" He finally reached me.

I laughed at the sight of him ankle-beating those skates so badly.

"Okay, laughing-totally-not-cool, girl." He winked. "Let's see how you do in the boxing ring."

Deal." I spun and pushed off a few times, then crossed over, doing a circle as I built momentum. His eyes widened

again, and a smile curved his full lips.

I'd kissed those lips last night. Technically twice, but I didn't count that lame first kiss of mine. But hey, at least I'd tried, and it led to the most delicious kiss I'd ever had.

I pushed off one more time, put my arms out for balance, and toed off. One little jump got me a couple of inches into the air as I turned, then landed on my skate.

"Holy shit, Lina." Hunter smiled as he kept his arms out to the side to stay balanced even though he wasn't moving.

I skated toward him, never taking my eyes from his. People around me blurred from my vision as I focused on him. Only him.

He reached for me, and I pushed even harder, anxious to touch him. We both had thick gloves on, but I didn't care. He was the first man I *wanted* to touch in three years and some odd days. He'd helped me break out of my prison. He was the one person I trusted more than I'd ever trusted anyone in my life. Even my folks.

For how quickly they abandoned me when my disorder got bad...No. I wouldn't think of those things right now. I had a real chance with Hunter now that he had relaxed and was open to giving us a try. Fear had prevented me from taking any chances for so long; this time was mine.

No, ours.

"It's coming back to you, no problem," Hunter said as my hand fell into his.

"This feels so awesome!" I leaped into his arms and hugged him tight.

“Whoa!” His skates flew out from beneath him, and we went down.

The air rushed out of his mouth, and he let out a grunt as his butt met the ground, but he held me tight, so I didn't hit the hard ice.

“Oh my gosh, Hunter!”

“You okay?”

I held his gaze. Worry streamed through his bright eyes as he scanned my face. Lying on his big body, I didn't feel the cold air or the hard ice. Heck, the people buzzing around us barely registered. Instead, the flushed cheeks and red lips of this solid guy beneath me were all that held my attention.

“Lina,” he whispered as he pulled me toward him, closer to those delicious lips.

Yes, I had to kiss them, or I might burn up. I closed my eyes and leaned toward him anticipating his rainstorm scent.

Soft lips met mine. They were cold, but once they touched me, they warmed, steaming me up pretty good, too. Suddenly my thick winter jacket was too much.

“You sure you're okay?” Hunter asked, his nose touching mine.

“Good.” I could hardly talk. “Sorry I jumped on you.”

“Hey, I enjoyed it. Next time you might want to do it without the skates on, though. I'll be better able to hold onto

you.” He glanced at my mouth. “And I really want to hold you right now.”

And I really wanted to be held. But this wasn't the place.

I rolled off him and sat on the ice for a few seconds as I got my bearings. We both eventually made it to our feet, and with Hunter slipping and sliding, we skated the loop a couple of times before we pulled off to sit by the snack bar.

“You doing okay with crowd?” he asked.

I nodded, smiling as I watched everyone. “It's been so long since I've been able to people-watch. I forgot how fun they are.”

“Some not-so-fun people ruined that for you for a long time.”

I captured his gaze and held it for a long time, wanting so much to tell him everything. My chest ached because my heart was pounding so hard with desire to tell him, to share that part of me with him. That was a big step, though.

The progress I'd made these past few months...it was huge. Jenna had mentioned that the years of therapy and going through the grief process and basically all the healing I was doing was finally clicking into place. It wouldn't be overnight, I knew that, but each step I was taking forward was bigger and bigger.

I knew things could go south again, I wasn't naïve enough to think I'd never struggle again, but this freedom I felt was amazing.

I was close to being ready to tell Hunter more about what'd happened to me...But maybe not right now.

"You're doing great, and you look beautiful." He reached over and tugged one of my braids that hung from my beanie.

"I feel so...normal."

He wrapped his big arm around me. "Good. Because you are. I, on the other hand, am not feeling so normal around all these skaters. It's much harder than it looks."

I laughed. I kind of figured he'd be able to master anything. He was so big and strong. Kind of like my superman, but he was normal, too. *Normal*.

With my head propped comfortably on his big bicep, I tilted toward him, and he smiled. "I think I'll pick what our next adventure will be, deal?"

"Ultimate fighting event?"

His body stiffened around me. "No."

"You used to fight, but you don't like to watch anymore?"

"No. That's...my past."

"I'd like to hear about it."

"Some other time." He went to move his arm from around me. "Ready to go?"

"No. I'm sorry I pushed." Dang it, I'd gone and ruined the moment. "I call a take back."

"A what?"

“A take back. You get to take back something you said or did; pretend it was never said or done.” I’d dreamed of a take back in relation to what’d happened to me, but that was something I’d never get. This one...hopefully I would.

His face softened, and he closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. That was a bad time for me.”

I nuzzled more under his arm and rested my gloved hand on his chest. I wanted to know about it so badly, but I kept my mouth shut. I knew all too well about not being able to talk about bad parts of life. He knew the basics of what’d happened to me, but not all the details.

I wanted to tell him, to share that part of me, but he might really flip out.

Logically, I knew he wouldn’t. He’d never made me feel badly even with all my quirks. Maybe if I started with a short snippet, he’d take my lead.

“It was five guys. All wearing black skull caps.” I swallowed hard. “I was walking home from a party. Freshman year.”

His arm tightened around me. I felt so safe in his arms.

“They knocked me out and I woke up inside a room, tied to a hard bed...pretty much naked.” I closed my eyes, digging deep for some of Hunter’s strength. “I could tell I’d already been raped, but they...the leader...he didn’t have any plans of stopping with that.”

“Lina,” Hunter whispered.

Tears welled, and I sat up a little straighter, working to get through the emotion clogging my throat. Other than Jenna and Lizzie, I hadn't told anyone any part of it, not even my parents. I'd tried, but the pity-stares stopped me. They couldn't handle it. Couldn't handle the shame I'd brought on the family. Especially when I fell deeper into my illness.

"I was there for three days. No food. No water." I cleared through the thickness in my throat. "All five...they kept coming back. Mostly the first two days. Then it was just the leader." I shook the image of his face trying to dominate this moment I was sharing with Hunter. I wanted to open up to him more, wanted him to with me as well. "I wanted to die so the pain would end. So that the...assault...would stop."

"Why'd they...I mean...was it a random—"

I shook my head, gulping through the tightness growing in my chest and throat. "Billionaire Dad. They were...looking for money. Payback for something."

We sat there in silence for a long time. I didn't have it in me to go on about the morbid details behind the abduction. This was a first step, and hopefully when I gathered enough strength to look at Hunter, he wouldn't have the dreaded, *Holy shit, what do I say now?* look on his face.

But I had to, we couldn't stay on this bench for much longer considering how cold my butt was.

"So where are you going to take me for our next adventure." I propped my head up so I could see his eyes.

For a long time, maybe more than thirty seconds or so, he stared down at me. His eyebrows furrowed a few times, and

his eyes widened while his grip around me tightened. He pressed his lips to my forehead, then rested his cheek against it. “You’re inspiring, you know that?”

I couldn’t have dreamed up a better response from him, really. At that moment, every wall around my heart shattered. The strength in his muscles was nothing compared to the power he held in his eyes. He didn’t pity me. He didn’t think me disgusting. No, he thought I was inspiring.

Waiting for him to speak, I watched the people skate. Hopefully, his silence meant he would tell me something about his life now. He knew so much about my junk. I’d love to know his.

“You never push me on stuff, other than when you left the ball in my court statement, which was a nice move by the way.”

I chuckled. I’d hated waiting for him, though. It was much harder than I thought it would be. “Yeah, well, I know first-hand how the past can impact the present. I hope you know how much I want to know about you, your past and everything. I care about what happened to you. And it won’t affect my opinion of you now, Hunter. Nothing could.”

“I’m not so sure about that, Lina.” His grip on my shoulder tightened. “I want to know so badly what you suffered, but I know I need to earn your trust.”

Tears burned beneath my eyes.

“But I will.”

“And me? Will I be able to earn yours? You know so much about my *stuff* already, but I hardly know you. And I

want to, Hunter. You know that, right?”

He nodded. “And I do trust you, more than I’d expected to. You surprised me.”

“Surprised?” I sat up more, facing him. “What do you mean?”

“I never get attached. I mean, I teach classes and stuff wherever I end up, but this one-on-one stuff...it’s not me.”

“Why?” I was almost scared to ask for fear he’d shut down again.

“I’m just not...safe.”

“How can you say that? I’ve never felt safer around anyone in my entire life. Even my parents.”

He let out a long, slow breath. “I have...an anger problem.”

I held his gaze, searching it for his true meaning. I’d seen his temper flare a couple times, but everyone got annoyed sometimes.

“Fighting...that world, well, it didn’t help things.” He looked out over the skaters. “I’ve hurt people.”

“Comes with the territory of Ultimate Fighting, I would think.”

“It sure does.” He cleared his throat. “Are you getting cold? Should we head out?”

“Sure, we can go.” I pushed up and touched my lips to his. They were tight, but instantly softened beneath mine. He brought his hand to my face and pulled me closer. Tilting my head slightly, he brushed his tongue along my bottom lip.

A thrill of electricity zipped through my chest, but he pulled away. “You’re making it so difficult for me to resist you.”

“Then don’t.”

“I’m scared for you if I don’t.” A flash of darkness dulled his bright eyes. “But, I’m also scared at the thought of life without you.”

It was then I decided he needed me as much as I needed him. I could save him as much as he’d saved me.

Chapter Nineteen

Hunter

“Are you taking me to your club?” Lina asked, her eyes wide, as I steered my truck onto the highway.

“For your first major outing more than five miles from your house, you think I’d take you to that wild place?”

She laughed. “True. That might be one for a later adventure.”

I loved how relaxed she was. To think when I’d met her a couple of months ago, she was a bundle of anxiety not able to take more than a few floors down from her house. And now she was on her way, not even knowing the destination... She was my inspiration.

Or she just made me into a big mushy wuss who’d lost his Man Card. Every moment I thought of her, it always calmed me down. Even at work now that I was allowed back since I started working with Jenna.

The anger didn’t rise as easily after only two weeks of sessions. They were every other day sessions, but still. Christmas Eve was tomorrow, and I wanted to do something special for Lina. Maybe even tell her about my past life some more.

She should know about what was going on with my dad since she was so involved now. Not to mention how attached to her I’d gotten. There was no way I’d be able to up and leave like Mom and I usually did if Dad showed his face

in town. I'd only recently admitted it to myself, but Lina was my anchor. If I had my way, I'd never leave her.

Hell, I was even toying with telling her about the witness protection even though Marshal, our handler, would have my ass when he found out. But how could I not tell her? Was I supposed to stay Hunter Amos forever? Even though that wasn't my given name?

Then again, this name, I felt most comfortable with it. Like it was more me than any other name.

That mostly had to do with Lina, though, I was sure of it.

"What's got you so quiet over there?" Lina skimmed her gloved hand over the leather seat and poked my ribs.

"Nothing." I smiled and snatched up her hand. "Ready for the Christmas Eve dance tomorrow?"

She nodded. "My dress was delivered today. Lizzie was gushing over it. I can't wait for you to see it."

"Maybe I might get to come into your house to see it?"

She grinned. "Maybe."

God, I'd hoped for that for so long. She'd opened up, only once, about her attack that day we'd gone ice skating, and I already felt like I was exponentially closer to her. But to see her house, inside...that'd seal the deal.

I was just thankful she could give me some time tonight. She'd been so busy recently, helping with this dance tomorrow night.

“How did you celebrate Christmas growing up? Open gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day?” she asked.

“Day. Stockings, too. You?”

“All gifts on Christmas Eve up at Grandma’s. She lived near the Canadian border, so it was always wicked cold and there was always tons of snow. It rocked.”

“That sounds cool, literally. I think I like warm Christmas weather better.” Christmas lights on the cactus in Arizona was awesome.

“Did you stay awake to try and see Santa?”

“No.” Dad wouldn’t tolerate anyone defying the rules, otherwise belts came off and that meant serious pain.

She quirked up her eyebrow but didn’t push it. Damn, I always got so short when it came to talking about my life. I gripped the steering wheel, gathering the courage to trust her a little more. “Dad was a mean son of a bitch, so if he laid down a rule, I followed it, or Mom would pay the price.”

“Pay the price?”

“For *her* son acting out.” I bit back a slew of curse words wanting to stream out, like it did when I started getting worked up about Dad and how much he’d hurt Mom...and me. “When I did something well, I was Dad’s good kid. But if something wasn’t quite up to par with him...he got rough.”

“I assume when you say *rough* you mean he dished out some serious punishment.”

I nodded. She already knew me so well.

“I get it.” She squeezed my hand. “And your mom’s scar...was that for something *you* supposedly did wrong?”

I glanced at her. She knew Dad was responsible for that?

“She told me. Not the details, only that your dad had done it and you two were on the run from him.”

“Wow, she told you a lot.”

“Not really. Mostly that was it, she said it was your story to tell.” Lina smiled. “She’s pretty awesome you know?”

I nodded. “She likes you a lot, too.”

“Well, survivors kind of latch onto one another. It’s hard to describe, but there’s this innate connection. It’s like you feel so alone, like you’re the only one who has ever suffered so greatly. When you find another living soul who’s experienced something so big you can sense it, there’s this invisible cord or something holding you together.”

“That’s a pretty good way to describe it.” I couldn’t help but smile. “Mom has said the same thing before. And about you.”

We sat in silence for the last five minutes of the drive. I’d called in a big favor for this surprise, hopefully it’d be all ready.

“Planetarium?” Lina whispered as she checked her phone. “It’s so late, though.”

It was almost eight o’clock, but the facility closed to the public at five, and the cleaning people didn’t come for two hours. Thanks to Janey, we’d have it to ourselves until then.

I steered the truck around to the back entrance. Janey's car was there, right where she said it would be. This might work out fine.

I parked the car and looked over at Lina. She grinned back at me. "What's going on?"

"Surprise." I pushed open my door, then rushed around to hers and helped her out.

She took in her surroundings, then landed that power-packed gaze on me. "You're surprising."

Good. I was aiming for that, so that made me smile. I grabbed her hand and brought her to the door and knocked three times.

The door creaked open a few seconds later and Janey peeked out. "Hey guys."

"Janey!" Lina said.

"Hey, girl." She grinned and pushed the door wider. "Come on in."

I led Lina in, and we followed Janey down a dark hall. I hated how the dark might affect Lina, but she seemed to be taking it all in stride. "You okay?"

She nodded and tightened her hold on my hand. That alone told me she was probably reciting P!nk songs in her mind right now.

"Just a little farther," I said. "I got you."

Janey stopped at a door, shoved her key in then pushed it open. "It's all yours."

I peeked in then led Lina through the threshold and into a world of stars. The room was pitch black, but the ceiling was a rendition of the Milky Way.

“Hunter, this is fantastic,” Lina said as she turned a circle, focused on the ceiling. “How’d you do this?”

The door clicked shut, and I realized Janey had gone. I’d told her a little about the situation, and since she’d had some struggles with violence, she totally understood the baby steps needed to get Lina out of the house.

“Come here,” I said, reaching for her hand. “There’s a spot up front for us.”

I guided her down the aisle, the thick carpet muting our steps. As we made it over the last batch of stairs, the front row of the theatre seats came into view. A small table, covered in white linen with a bottle of sparkling cider and two glasses on top, came into view.

I heard Lina take in a sharp breath, and her fingers went to her mouth. Soft music piped into the room, and the screen up front blinked on with a picture of the desert landscape.

Taking her hand, I led her to the seat in front of the table then reached for her jacket. “Here, let me take this.” I peeled the thick coat off and tugged at the long-sleeved sweater. “This, too.”

“Okay.” She stood before me in a long-sleeved red thermal that went well into her hands, and her thumb poked through the fabric. She always wore those types of shirts, never exposing much of her skin.

I slung off my jacket, then sat beside her as a deep voice came over the speakers.

“The desert. A beautiful and harsh environment...”
More pictures bled into the massive screen.

“Hunter, this is so great,” Lina said again and smiled.
“It feels warmer in here, too. Hot almost.”

“It’s an experiential tour of Arizona.” I leaned forward and grabbed the cider as the voice took over again describing the heat of the desert in the heart of July.

I poured two glasses and handed her one as I sat back. I lifted the armrest between us and draped my arm around her more. She snuggled close. I loved it when she did that. It was like I could protect her from anything and everything.

Even me.

We sat in silence watching the desert climate unfold before us. And when the room got chilly, I held her so close we kept each other warm. When the show came to an end, neither of us moved. The stars came back over the ceiling, and we sat there in silence admiring the sparkling beauty. It was almost as if we were outside.

“I definitely want to go to Arizona with you some time.”

It didn’t escape my attention she’d said she wanted to go with me. I couldn’t go back there, not until Dad was caught, but yeah, I’d go there in a heartbeat with her any time after that.

“I think I’d miss the snow, though, if I lived there. The four seasons.”

“The leaves changing colors was pretty cool,” I whispered as I rubbed my hand up and down her arm. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” She looked up at me.

“You always wear these types of shirts.” I toyed with the hand portion where her thumb protruded through the fabric. “Is it to cover another scar like the one on your shoulder?”

Her body stiffened within my grasp, and I knew I’d scared her a little.

“I covered my scars with tattoos,” I said. “The biggest one is along my neck.” I leaned to the side to expose the side of my neck. “You can’t see it, but you can feel it.” I grabbed her hand and brushed her forefinger along the three-inch scar.

“What’s it from?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“A knife wound.” My heart started pounding as I neared the ledge I was about to jump off by telling her. I owed her, though; she’d opened up about her abuse... “From my dad.”

She gasped.

“He didn’t always take it out on my mom.” She went to move, but I tucked her forehead back to my neck.

“Sometimes, if I screwed up and he was going for her, I’d get in the way. I hated seeing her pay the price for my mistakes.”

“What was the screw up?”

“Got a B in geometry.”

She huffed. “A *B*? As in almost an A?”

“Dad demanded perfection in everything. He came from...chaos, so I think it stemmed from there.”

“Chaos?”

“His mother left when he was a baby, and his dad... was pretty absent. Alcoholic...mentally ill. And, well, Dad had to fend for himself since he was young.”

“When you say mentally ill...”

“Probably untreated or undiagnosed schizophrenia or any other smattering of mental illnesses. Had they been treated he might have had a chance...well, he eventually ended up institutionalized. Died shortly after.”

“How?”

“Killed himself.” My heart started hammering at the memory of Mom telling me about Dad’s life. “Dad’s reaction was control...perfection. No room or tolerance for errors. Anyway, when I got bigger, I tried to get in between them more. Save her from the injury.”

“Why didn’t you guys leave?”

“We tried. He...always found us. And that punishment for him finding us was always the worst.” I closed my eyes at the images trying to flash before my mind. The blood. The violence. “That’s why I stayed close, going to community college so I could be near Mom, but with me out of the house, I thought things would get better. Nothing there to egg him on.”

“Didn’t matter, did it?” She shook her head like she knew what I was talking about. Hell, maybe she did.

Hopefully not. She’d seen enough violence with her attack. I’d hate to find out her parents were abusive. And I certainly hoped it was nothing like Dad’s abuse.

“It was when Mom called his Sergeant, looking to get some help for Dad, that he went nuts. Almost killed her. Right in front of me.” I combed my fingers through Lina’s silky hair, and the contact settled me, making it easier to talk about somehow. “He bolted, leaving Mom to die on the kitchen floor. But during Mom’s time in the hospital and recovery, that’s when we found out what really happened overseas. Why he’d come back so broken.”

“What?”

“They won’t tell us all the details, but something happened on a mission, and he lost his entire team. A mission gone bad evidently. But as a result, he cracked. He’d come back more violent and unrealistically paranoid. It was bad. I remember the nights I’d slept outside the house in my truck, worried for Mom. Even though I was out of the house, she didn’t leave him, and I’d always wondered why. I understand the cycle so much better now, but... I couldn’t do anything.” I’d hated that feeling of powerlessness, too. I was so big, could fight, but couldn’t face off with my dad because I knew it’d hurt Mom in the end.

“Oh my gosh, Hunter.” She coiled her arm around my stomach and hugged me closer. It was almost as if she knew I needed to say this without looking into her eyes. “How is he not in jail?”

“That’s the kicker. He was in special forces, so he has mad skills to stay invisible. Add that to the psychopath genes and it spells disaster.” The authorities had come close a few times, even pegged him with a few bullets. But when faced with a man trained to survive in the harshest conditions and had oodles of money at his disposal, it got complicated in a hurry. “But he has to slip up sooner or later.”

I wanted to tell her everything; about my handler, about witness protection, but I couldn’t. One, that would be a lot for her to hear. It could really overwhelm her, scare her away. I didn’t want her to have any setbacks. Two, I needed to check with my handler to see what my options were, if I had any. I’d never wanted to tell anyone this badly before.

Lina shifted within my grasp, and I could tell she was going to look up, so I steeled myself for the emotions her eyes would evoke. They always made my insides churn with hope. With...love.

Instead, she moved enough that she kissed my neck, right where my scar was. The numbness associated with the damaged nerve endings muted her soft lips, but the notion made up for that. She kissed a trail behind my ear as she shifted even more until she could pull me in a full-on hug.

“Thank you, Hunter,” she whispered, “Thank you for telling me.”

God, I loved this girl, no, this *woman*. This fragile, broken, yet infinitely strong woman had totally and completely rocked my world. She’d only seen violence when it came to men, and I vowed right then to show her love could be something filled with happiness and tenderness.

It was funny to think I could show her that, considering I was filled with so much violence and anger. But when I was with her, none of that surfaced.

Then again, it was usually just the two of us. It might be a different story if she was ever threatened or in danger. Hell, who was I kidding? There was no *might* about it. I attracted trouble like a magnet, so it was only a matter of time, especially now that she was making her way out of her house.

That'd be the real test.

Chapter Twenty

Angelina

Tonight, was the night. I was going to let Hunter into my house. The one sacred place that no one, besides Lisa and my parents had entered ...but it'd been almost a year since Mom and Dad had been in here.

I stood in front of the full mirror and brushed my hand down the front of my gown. The light blue fabric felt like silk and clung to my body like a glove. The curve of the neck dipped lower than I'd expected, but it was nice. I had a nice body under all the clothing I usually covered it up with.

The lace over my shoulder and down my arms covered most of the scar on my shoulder, and it was long enough to cover my self-inflicted scars on my wrist. The cuff was thicker, so no evidence of the old wounds showed.

The light flare at the hips made it look like I had hips. Running helped me with my anxiety, but it didn't leave much extra on the hips and boobs, that was for sure. I loved how the fabric flowed behind me but was a little shorter in front to show my rockin' shoes. I'd been practicing in them for nearly a week so I wouldn't look so uncoordinated.

They were nothing like my kick-ass boots, which was what I really wanted to wear, but we were only going to the main floor of the hotel, so I could leave them behind.

I couldn't wait to see Hunter. As if on cue, a gentle rap on the door caught my attention. I grabbed the clutch from my dresser and hustled out of my bedroom. "Coming." My heart raced as if I was doing sprints on the treadmill.

After planning the last three Christmas Eve Fundraiser Balls via email and watching it via the conference room video feeds, I was finally going to personally experience the excitement.

I stopped at the door and took a deep breath, then turned the knob. Hunter stood tall in a black tux. The neck of his white shirt didn't quite cover up his neck tattoo, but that added to his intrigue. His biceps bulged, pulling the fabric tight, and much like his against-the-grain attitude, he didn't wear a tie. Instead, he left the two buttons unbuttoned, giving a peek at his neck and more black ink.

I couldn't wait to touch those and find out what other kinds of markings he had...and *where* else.

"Hey, beautiful," he said. "Wow."

I stepped through the doorway, the heat creeping up my neck. "Wow right back at you."

"Will I mess something up if I give you a kiss? I can't not give you a kiss when you look this sexy—beautiful."

More heat flushed from my chest. Me sexy? *As if.*

With my high heels, there wasn't so much distance between us. It was nice. He nudged my chin with his forefinger, and I closed my eyes, waiting for his yummy lips. When they didn't come, I opened my eyes.

He was staring at me, wonder filling his gaze—and a little fear. As quickly as I saw it, it vanished, and he pressed his mouth to mine.

His soft tongue brushed along my upper lip, and I drew in a sharp breath at the brief contact. It was nothing but

tender, and it gave me an even more intense sense of him. His fresh, rain scent always wrapped around me when he was near, but it was incredible how one gentle touch of his tongue ignited a tidal wave of the essence.

He went to ease away, but I curled my fingers around the back of his neck, holding him in place. I tilted his head a fraction, needing to taste more of him. His hand gripped my waist as he opened for me.

Warmth filled my mouth. His minty breath mingled with mine until his was indistinguishable from mine. Heat wrapped around me, starting at my stomach, and flowing through me until my heart was pounding so hard I was sure he could hear it...or feel it since he held me so close.

Opening more to him, he came in for another taste, a little further this time as if testing the waters. God, he felt like home. His breath was mine and mine his.

There was a hint of coffee with that mint and...sugar. My new favorite mixture. I pushed up on my toes, tightening my hold around his neck, and my body went flush to his. That triggered all sorts of tingling electricity pulsing through my body.

I'd kissed guys before the attack, but never like this. His fingers burrowed into my hair, and he pulled me impossibly closer to him, almost as if he needed to feel me near him as much as I did.

His hand inched down along my spine, pressing more of my body to his, and the kiss morphed into one laced with possession, a fierceness so raw and powerful I felt his body shiver.

And I readily absorbed it, needing that power, wanting it. For so long I'd been weak. Scared. Yes, I was ready for him to step into my world. After the party. Yes!

His grip around me loosened, and he drew his warmth from my mouth but gave one last tease as he suckled my bottom lip. Tilting forward, his forehead met mine, and he brushed his thumb along my lower lip. "I might have smudged your lipstick."

"Lipstick's overrated," I said, my voice shaky.

"You okay?" He drew in a deep breath as if taking in the scent of me.

"Better than okay. That was...awesome."

"I'm up for more of that any time you are." He grinned.

"Maybe after." I kissed his cheek, then whispered. "In my house?"

His smile widened. "*In* your house?"

I nodded. I did have a present for him and having him *literally* step into my house was part of it.

"I'd be honored." He pressed a gentle kiss to my lips then eased back. "Ready to dance, princess?"

"Princess, huh?" Then he was my warrior. No doubt about it.

"*My* princess," he said, offering me his arm to take. I slid my arm through his, and we walked to his door just as it opened.

There stood his mom, dressed in a long black dress with a cover around her shoulders. “Angelina, you look beautiful.”

“You do, too.”

“I’ll have the prettiest women at the ball on my arms.” He grinned and offered his free arm to his mom. “Ready to go raise some money for a great cause?”

Yes. By attending tonight’s ball, maybe I could show someone, even if it was only one woman, that they, too, could find their strength. I’d been a victim long enough.

* * *

Hunter

“She really is amazing,” Mom said as we watched Lina talking to the woman who emceed the ball. “I didn’t realize she’d always sponsored it.”

“She never said anything other than she helped out a little—behind the scenes, of course—from her apartment. I didn’t realize how involved she’d been.” I shook my head, absolutely amazed by this woman.

“Poor thing, all those years locked upstairs.” Mom beamed at me. “You’re good for her.”

I huffed. “Trying to be.”

“You are. I’m glad you’re finally taking time for you and your life, Hunter.”

“Me, too, Mom.” I grabbed her hand. “I hope it can last.”

“I talked to Marshal yesterday. There’s been no further sign of him. We’re fine.”

“I’m not sure if I’m happy about that or not.” No telling where he might show up next. “I still have doubts about bringing Lina into this world of ours.”

Mom tugged at my hand. “You can’t choose who you love. When it happens, you have to go with it.”

“And hope they don’t turn into a monster?” Lina didn’t know what she was truly getting involved with when it came to me. Not just the psycho father hunting us, but the DNA running through my veins could—

“Hunter.” She shook her head. “Your father...no one knew how sick he was—”

“Until it was too late.” I shook my head. What if that sickness lays in wait inside me? What if I hurt Lina? What if I turn into the very monster my father was?

“Don’t go there, Hunter.” She grabbed my arm with an impressive force. “You are nothing like him. *Nothing*, you hear me?”

“I’m not like him.” A mantra I’d repeated since I was able to comprehend how much of a prick he was. “I’m not like him.” And I’d done plenty to prevent it with martial arts teaching me control, helping women by training them, and protecting them at the bar. But I knew the monster was in there.

“She doesn’t even know my real name.”

“It’s okay.” Mom framed my face with her hands. “You are Hunter Amos. You’ve finally found your place in this

world. So...it doesn't matter who you were before."

I gulped. Would Lina feel the same if she found out?

Mom eased away from me, still holding my gaze.

"Take your girl out to the dance floor."

"But you—"

"I'm fine." She glanced around the huge ballroom.

"We're surrounded by people, even tons of security, so I'm safe."

"I was surprised by all the guards." I eyed two people with earpieces beside each entry door and another two near the emcee. Not to mention the horde of them scattered throughout the lobby. Considering this was a charity ball to raise money for the local domestic violence shelters, it made sense. "Not to mention the lack of TV cameras and publicity."

"Lina said they don't allow them inside. I saw a few outside the hotel, reporting. Can't have pictures and cameras everywhere considering the private nature of shelters and women needing anonymity."

"Perfect for us," I said.

"They worked hard to get private donors. And a lot of word-of-mouth marketing." She nodded in Lina's direction. "I'm safe. Go. I want to watch you two have a nice time dancing."

I kissed her cheek and moved toward Lina. She straightened, and a smile filled her face as I approached. That alone empowered my resolve to protect her forever and never hurt her. I wasn't like that monster who fathered me. Nothing like him.

“Care to dance?” I reached out for her hand.

“Absolutely. Patty, this is Hunter, my...boyfriend.”

The older woman’s eyes widened, and her mouth opened as if surprised. I had to say I was a little surprised by the label as well, but it felt right. Like it felt right to hold Lina’s hand in mine. To take care of her.

“Nice to meet you, Hunter. Take care of our girl, here.”

“Always,” I said leading Lina away. “Boyfriend...I —”

“I’m sorry if I was out of line. I should have asked you first.”

“It’s perfect,” I said, kissing the back of her hand as I faced her. “Now, come dance with your boyfriend.”

Her cheeks reddened as she stepped into my arms. “I really like how that sounds.”

She rested her cheek on my chest and formed to me as we swayed to the slow music. There were several couples on the floor, dressed in varying ranges of flashy gowns to conservative dresses. I’d heard earlier that this event was over six hundred dollars per plate and that it raised well into the tens of thousands of dollars for the charity.

And it had been founded by my Lina. Something she’d never told me. As broken as she’d appeared to the world these past years, unable to leave her home, working to get through college, and working to overcome her tragedy, she’d done some impressive things during her seclusion.

I couldn't have been more in awe of her than I was at this moment. "Why didn't you tell me you were behind this event?"

"You heard, huh?"

I nodded, waiting for her to continue.

"Patty wanted to present me with an award tonight when she found out I was attending, but I told her no. I don't need everyone to know anything about my involvement. Some do, just from word of mouth, but for the most part, I like to remain anonymous."

"I understand that. I'm proud of you, Lina." I hugged her close and kissed the top of her head. "My little princess. You're helping so many people. I've been through a DV shelter once or twice in my time, and without them a lot of women and children would be in danger."

"And homebound." She let out a sigh. "I wanted to do something after.... You know—to help women. What happened to me...if something good—no matter how small or big—could come out of my situation, then I had to do it. Owed it to myself and to the women who need these services." She hugged me tight. "Had to do something."

I swayed with her in my arms for another two songs, the minutes passing like seconds until a shout ripped me out of my fog. And then a scream that was entirely too close to my Lina shattered the peaceful bubble around us.

"Where is she?" A man's deep voice ripped through the music and chatter surrounding me. "You're hiding her, you bitch."

I shot straight and held Lina's face to my chest as I surveyed the crowd. One perk of being six foot five was I could see over everyone.

Four security guards, tasers at the ready, wove through the people in our direction. To my left I saw the guy they were bearing down on. Tall, skinny, and dressed in a tux, he held Patty by the throat, pushing her through the crowd.

Shit, he was pushing her toward the back corner. There was an exit there.

"She's mine. Mine!" the guy yelled.

Patty's husband tackled the guy, but he kicked out his knee and smacked him across the face with his free hand.

The security team was too far away, and with the people backing away, they were working up stream to get to Patty.

Red flooded my vision as I grabbed Lina's shoulders. "Stay back, we don't know if he's armed."

"Help her," she whispered.

I hustled toward the guy, the people darting out of my way. They probably saw the fury starting to build deep within me. The man was only about fifteen feet from me and hadn't seemed to notice me, which was strange in its own rite considering my size. Then again, he was stuck in his rage, focusing on Patty.

She clawed at the man's hands, but he pressed onward. No hint of any bulge in the back of his coat indicating he was packing, but I couldn't be sure. How he'd handled Patty's husband, he had some skills, but he was small, at least

by my standards. And he wasn't watching his surroundings as much as he should.

I could take him.

I would not let Lina's friend get hurt like this. And at a ball raising money to prevent this kind of shit.

Calm down. The rage's volcanic heat was nearing epic proportions each step I took, and it felt like the blood in my veins was boiling.

The guy turned around when I was only five feet from him, so I lunged, snatching his wrist. I squeezed, compressing the ulnar nerve, hopefully sending a jolt of pain through his arm as his grip around Patty's neck weakened.

With my free hand, I grabbed the back of his neck. He let go of Patty, and she sagged to the floor. I took the final few steps toward the darkened corner of the room and slammed his face into the wall.

He spun, swinging, but I ducked, then popped up and slammed my fist into his face. His cheek caved beneath my knuckles, the feel of crackling bones vibrating through my hand. But that was fine with me. This asshole needed more.

More pain. Floodgates of red overtook my vision as my hands fisted so tight my knuckles burned.

I jack hammered punches to his gut, then backhanded his face near the eye. I spun and pounded his jaw. The guy bellowed as blood spurted from his mouth, and he clawed at my arm.

Disgusting pig.

Did he think he could treat women like shit and get away with it?

No, he had another thing coming. This prick wasn't any better than shit on the bottom of my shoe. And to come into this party, one raising money to fight this type of asshole... Oh, he needed to be taught a lesson.

The guy fell to his knees, but I caught him, cuffing his throat with my hand. Squeezing, I lifted the puny excuse for a guy up until his feet no longer touched the floor. His face instantly morphed into a dark shade of red.

“Hunter!” Lina yelled.

I hoisted him up even higher to get more momentum, then slammed him to the floor. Blood roared through my head, adrenaline rushing through my veins as I squeezed his throat. I couldn't allow him to hurt anyone else. Ever.

He needed to be stopped.

He needed to pay.

It was my Lina's first time ever attending this ball, and he'd ruined it for her. For everyone. This would set her back in her recovery. *No!*

A black shoe came into view off to the right, and I lashed out, swinging. He might have come with someone else. I hadn't been looking. Shit. Was Lina okay?

“Stand down!” someone yelled. “Stand down, now!”

Someone close jammed his foot on the asshole's wrist, securing it to the floor. One of the guards loomed over me, his foot on the guy's wrist and a taser pointed at me.

Me? What the hell?

At least it wasn't someone with the asshole lying on the floor, covered in blood.

"Hunter."

Above the commotion, I heard Lina's voice. I peered over my shoulder to see her. I had to see her. Was she okay? Did she get hurt?

Her eyes were wide, and she was reaching for me. "Don't hurt him. Don't—"

One of the guards intercepted Lina around the waist and spun her away from me.

I roared to my feet. "You've got about four seconds to get your fucking hands off her!"

Lina stumbled to the side, her hands to her throat and her eyes wide.

The guy bent his knees, taser pointed at me but let go of her. He kept his arm out to the side, boxing her behind him. The two other guards aimed their weapons at me as well.

"No!" Lina screamed. "He's with me. He's with me. Don't hurt him." She reached for me, and a wave of energy stormed through my muscles again—they tightened, ready to fight to get to her.

"Get on your knees, man," the guard yelled at me. "Let me sort this through. Jack, get a medical team in here." He looked back at me. "Sir, stay there. Don't move."

Lina looked at me and nodded. "It's okay, Hunter. Please, just do it."

Of course those asshole cop wannabes were worried about me. I was all tatted up and bigger than two of them put together, but all I wanted was to get to Lina. To make sure she was okay.

“Please...Hunter,” she begged. Fear laced her eyes, darkening them until they were almost black. It was fear for me...and of me, though.

Shit.

I eased to my knees, my hands up as I watched her. She didn't appear to be hurt. I didn't see any blood, and she was moving fine.

“I'm okay. I'm okay.” She pushed at the arm keeping her from me, but the guy wouldn't budge. “Let me go. Hunter. Let me get to him.”

“Stay calm, Miss Raine. Let me—”

I went to push myself up so I could break that arm holding her prisoner in half, but she elbowed the guy's side and pushed his arm down. Two steps brought her to me, and she leapt into my arms. “Hunter.”

Now that I held her tight, and her scent wrapped around me, my senses pushed through the red haze tainting my vision. I hugged her close with one arm while I kept my other one up. “I'm not going to hurt her.”

“Yeah, rent-a-cop, he hammered that asshole,” a voice shouted out.

“Way to go.”

“He saved us.”

“Who is that?”

Lina buried her face in my neck and hugged me tight.
“Oh my gosh, Hunter.”

“Are you okay?”

Her little body shook as she tumbled into sobs that resonated through me like a dozen knives slicing my gut.

“Lina, answer me. Are you okay?” So help me, if she was hurt—

“I’m okay.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“I’m okay, Hunter,” she said from behind me, a guard at her side. “It’s fine.”

Her eyes were wide with the same fear I’d seen in Lina’s. A fear that ripped a hole in my reality.

I glanced over my other shoulder and found the guy lying limp on the floor. His nose was facing the wrong direction, and both of his eyes were nearly swollen shut already.

Shit.

Mom was on her phone, more than likely calling Marshal. We might need his help on this one.

Damn it! I’d lost control again.

Thankfully, Lina hadn’t been hurt. Even if my actions tonight forced Mom and I to move again, her safety was worth it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Angelina

My key fob dropped to the floor my hands were shaking so badly. I couldn't even hold the dumb thing in front of the sensor. How ridiculous was I?

“Let me,” Hunter whispered as he bent down to get it.

When he'd punched that guy so hard, I heard the bones cracking, I'd almost lost it. But he'd stayed focused to the point that it was almost scary. But now, he was quiet, and the light in his eyes was gone.

Hunter waved the key fob in front of the sensor pad, then stepped back. “You sure you're okay?”

“I'm fine, Hunter.” I reached out and touched his warm forearm. He'd taken his jacket off and rolled up his shirtsleeves while talking with the security guards. “Are *you* okay?”

“Not even close.” He shook his head. “But you and Mom are safe, so that helps. I can't believe—”

“Don't.” I grabbed his hand and twined my fingers with his. “That guy was insane. You stopped him. You saved Patty. And everyone in that lunatic's path.”

“But I—” He stepped away from me. “Lost it. Lost control.”

“Yeah. You did. Only for a second. You were trying to stop that guy. To protect Patty. Protect that guy's wife.”

He looked to the floor with his shoulders slumped. He looked absolutely broken.

“Hunter?”

Fists tight at his side, he backed away, and looked everywhere but at me. I stepped toward him, and he put his hand out. “Don’t.”

“No. You don’t. Don’t do this.”

In a move so fast, he rammed his fist into the drywall. It crackled beneath the pressure, and he leaned forward, his forehead thumping against the wall.

The anger radiating from him nearly plowed me over it was so thick. My heel caught the hem of my dress, and I stepped back with my other foot to right myself but hit the hem with that heel, too.

And down I went.

My butt hit first, sending a zinger of pain up my back.

“Lina!” Hunter lunged toward me.

I let out a yelp as my elbow crashed with the carpeted floor.

Hunter stopped just before making contact with me, his eyes were wide and dark.

“It’s okay, I tripped. I—you—”

“I scared you.” He closed his eyes briefly, and the muscles along his jaw fired. “Are you okay? Let me help you up.”

He guided me to my feet as I untangled my heels from the back of my dress. I'd shredded it good.

"I'm sorry, Lina." He shook his head. "I better go. You get inside. I'll see you...later."

"No," I said as I grabbed his hand. "Don't push me away."

"Lina, you fell down because of me. Because I—" He glared at the wall. "Shit. Lina, I fucked up your wall."

"It's fixable," I said, inching forward, like I was approaching a wild animal. The feral look in his eyes was a little disconcerting, but I knew he'd never hurt me. "Come inside with me."

"No." He backed up some more. "I need to go. Go inside, please. I want to make sure you're tucked in safe and sound."

"Then you're going to have to wait. I'm not going inside without you."

"Lina."

"Hunter." I crossed my eyes at him, hoping to break through that brick wall he was erecting again. I'd just gotten through it and didn't want to hammer through another one. I would, of course, but I didn't want to.

"I'm out of control."

"No, you're not. You're fine." I nodded. "You'd never hurt me. Hunter, you're—"

"Dangerous." He slammed his back into the wall and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. "I would never

intentionally hurt you. Never. You're—I—care about you so much."

"I know." I knelt before him. "I care about you, too. Hunter, I'm safe with you. Safest I've ever been in my life."

Rubbing his face with his hands, he leaned forward. "I didn't mean to hurt Isabelle either. But I did. I hurt her, Lina."

"Isabelle?" I gripped his shoulder. "Hunter, who's Isabelle?"

"She was my girlfriend...she—I'd won a fight. We were celebrating. I was drunk and...kicking the hell out of some cocky son of a bitch who was hitting on her. His gang jumped us in the alley. Six against one." He banged his head against the wall, his eyes closed tight. "I fell into a rage. Only saw red. So much red..."

I combed my fingers through his hair. His pulse was visible along his neck, and his veins bulged.

"I didn't mean to. She...she must have gotten in my path or something." He leaned away from my touch.

Oh, God, had he hurt her?

"I'd beaten four of the guys so badly the other two ran. When I came out of the fog, Isabelle was on the ground..."

"The guys—"

"No!" Tears lined the bottom of his eyes. "She was... They said the guy driving the car...he didn't see her."

"Hunter."

“It hit her, but it was her head hitting the concrete exactly right that did it. That ki—” He pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes. “I lost control, didn’t even know what was happening. I accidentally hit her—pushed her or something.”

Oh, crap. She’d died, hadn’t she?

A tear finally traced over his cheek. Seeing this big man break down in tears nearly tore me in half. I hated how much he was hurting.

He blamed himself for Isabelle’s death.

“Shhh,” I said combing my fingers through his hair again. “It’s okay. I’m fine. We’re fine.”

“That rage came back tonight when I saw that guy grab Patty. I wanted to kill him.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Because of you,” he whispered as he leaned into my hand. “Above everything raging in my mind and in my ears, I heard you, Lina.”

I pressed my lips to his forehead. “I’ll always call out for you.”

“I’m not like him,” he whispered. “I’m not like him.”

“You’re nothing like him,” I said, guessing he meant he wasn’t like the man he’d fought—or like his father.

I wove my arm around his neck and pulled his head to my chest. “You’re nothing like him,” I whispered. “You’re my Hunter. My rock.”

God, I loved this complicated guy. Yeah, he scared me sometimes, and tonight, well, I got to see a side he’d kept so

well hidden, but it was fine. I wasn't scared of him, more scared *for* him. He was so hard on himself. Wanted so badly to not be like his father, like the assholes out there preying on women.

But Isabelle...that was the worst of his guilt. I could feel it oozing from him.

Didn't matter. Hunter was mine and no matter what, I loved him.

* * *

Hunter

We were standing side-by-side at the threshold of her door, staring into her apartment. My mind was still whirling over what had happened at the ball, but even that couldn't take away from this very important moment: Entering Lina's home.

After knowing her for a few months now, I was finally invited in. And after a crazy night. She'd seen me at my worst—well not quite my worst, but close enough—and she still wanted me by her side.

“Are you sure?” I asked, standing in front of Lina's open door. “Even after...everything tonight?”

“I'm positive.” She slid her hand into mine and threaded her fingers with mine. “You're fine. It's over, you were defending Patty and everyone around us. Even the security guards saw it.”

Not to mention Marshal making a call to them, and the authorities, according to Mom. I was sure I'd get an earful from Marshal about this.

“Ready?”

I nodded, and we stepped over the threshold. She smiled. “I know you were in here that first night we met, but I was out cold and don’t remember it. But I’m glad I’m awake for this one.”

“Me, too.”

We took a few more steps past the initial entryway and into the open area of her apartment. It was nearly an exact replica of my place, but a mirror image of my layout. And much homier as she’d been sequestered here for years, and it had her personality everywhere. The wall colors were bright, and the window dressings were varying shades of dark and light. From the entryway, I was able to see into the kitchen, and judging by the gadgets lining the back wall, it was used quite a bit.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Good. I’ve wanted to bring you in here for a while now.” She grinned up at me. “Let me show you around.”

We buzzed through the spare rooms, the kitchen, and on our way toward her room, we passed her office area with all the screens. They had sayings floating on the screens, inspirational quotes in bright colors, and pictures of sunsets and beaches.

“I’ve got pictures of everywhere I want to travel to once I get out of here. Cayman, Hawaii, France, Alaska...lots of places.”

“Sounds good,” I said, hopeful I’d get to take her on a few of those trips someday. “And this is where you work.”

Consulting.”

“And take my classes. See, I log in and there’s a video in the classroom I can feed into, so it’s like I’m there, only on a screen. I get to see the people, the teacher, even ask questions. It’s pretty cool. I had to call in a few favors for that—and make some donations to the computer science department.”

“Of course.” I looked toward her bedroom. “Do I get to see your room, too?”

She nodded, her cheeks reddening. I followed her, admiring the nice view. That dress clung to her body like a second skin, and it made my fingers itch to touch her. I’d gotten a taste of her earlier, before the dance, and I wanted more. But after what’d happened tonight, it might not be a good idea.

I was calmed down, yeah, but after my breakdown out in the hallway, I wasn’t so sure where everything stood with us. All I knew was that my outburst didn’t push her away like I thought it’d had. When she fell backwards because I scared her by punching the wall, I thought for sure she’d bolt.

But she hadn’t. *Yet*. Why did I have to always add that *yet* on things? Mom assured me that Marshal was on things with the local authorities, and I wasn’t going to get hauled in. That meant we wouldn’t have to leave, so I should enjoy this night with Lina. Mom was right when she said I needed to have a life, and I wanted Lina in it. I wanted her.

She pushed open the French doors to her room, and a wave of her melon scent swarmed me. I took in a deep breath of it and smiled. Damn, that scent was addicting.

Under her intense stare, I stepped further in. “I like it.”

The walls were a light pink color, but the accents were dark—blue, red, and some white. Strange combination of colors, but it worked for her. The bed was a king-sized spectacle in the middle of the room beneath a canopy of sheets, and it was raised up on blocks. The windows overlooking the city were dark, but I saw my reflection in them along with Lina’s beside me.

The bathroom and closet were in the same spot as mine, but her room had a nice sitting area at the far end with another TV that had a screen saver of pictures scrolling.

I stepped toward it, watching them float around, and then I saw one of us. It was a selfie from when we’d gone ice-skating.

“I love that picture,” she said. “It’s my favorite.”

Hopefully, she hadn’t posted it to her social media. I didn’t think to check. But why wouldn’t she have posted it? She was always online. I’d ask her tomorrow. I didn’t want to ruin this night by telling her about witness protection.

Just the thought of it tampered my rising lust. That and what happened at the ball. But, she seemed okay with it. The light in her eyes, her bringing me into her home, and her encouragement...she really wasn’t scared of me, was she?

I needed to let what happened tonight go and enjoy this moment. Enjoy her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hunter

“I got you something,” Lina said, hurrying to her closet. “For Christmas.”

“I should go get my present for you. I—”

“No. In my family, we opened on Christmas Eve. Yours was Christmas Day, so that’s how we’ll do it.” She grinned, handing me a gift bag. “It’s nothing fancy, just...well, something special.”

I took the bag she offered me and nodded. “Thanks.”

“Come here.” She went to the couch and sat down. “Open it here. I want to watch.”

Her eyes were so wide and her face so aglow, I couldn’t help but be excited. She took in everything with such wonder and intrigue, it was like she was learning everything all over now that she was in the world of the living again.

I sat next to her on the couch in her bedroom sitting area and pulled the bag open. There was so much tissue paper in there I couldn’t see, so I dug around and touched something cold. I glanced at her, and she had her hands clasped in front of her chest as she watched me. The light in her eyes erased all the shit that’d happened tonight.

There was no fight. I hadn’t lost control. We were in our own little world. It was at that moment I understood how she got trapped here. It was comfortable. Safe.

She nodded, so I turned my focus back to the gift. I peeled away the tissue and found a picture frame. Inside it was

the selfie I'd seen on her screen saver.

Our heads were tipped together, touching, and we both had ridiculously big smiles on our faces. The flash had lit up Lina's brown eyes until they nearly glowed.

"I know, I look like a demon, but I muted out the color best I could. I love our smiles." She smiled the very same one in the picture. "We're so happy."

"You make me that way."

She nodded. "You, too. Do you like it?"

"I love it," I said, taking in the beautiful picture again. "The frame, is that candy corn?"

"Yeah." She laughed. "I knew you'd appreciate that. Speaking of...I'm about out, when will I get my next bundle of candy on my doorstep?"

"I might have a secret stash at my place, but I'll be bringing them *inside* next time." I reached for her. "Come here."

She leaned toward me, and I pressed a kiss to her lips. "Thank you. This is great."

"Merry Christmas, Hunter." She brushed her fingers along my lips and smiled. "You're the best present I've had in my entire life."

I claimed her lips a little harsher than I'd planned, but her smile, her scent, her...acceptance of me broke my resolve. Delicate hands framed my face, holding me still as her tender tongue caressed my lips, begging entrance. Breathing her in

chipped away at my restraint, and I went a little deeper. Surprisingly, she tilted her head and let me in even further.

I had to remember to keep things slow and controlled with her, not only because of her past with men, but to keep myself in check. It wasn't rage I felt, but the rush of being close to her, wanting her so damn badly, that urged me to let loose and devour her. No way would I expose her to that. I wanted to be different, better—for her.

Her hand slid down my neck as far as the two open buttons on my shirt would allow, and she grabbed the deltoid as if she were holding on for dear life.

I broke off the kiss, hoping to God I wouldn't see the fear in her eyes I had earlier. That'd kill me. I'd seen enough of that in my lifetime. *Please not with her.*

Dilated eyes stared back at me. Her lips were shiny, and her breaths were coming short and fast.

"This okay?" I asked, curling some stray strands of hair behind her ear. "It's been a...crazy night. I don't want to push you."

"I'm good to go, Hunter. I promise." She bit her bottom lip. "Can I try something else?"

Yes! "Only what you want. You're in control." If she knew how badly I wanted her right now it'd scare her. *Control. Slow down.*

Shaky fingers reached for the buttons on my shirt. "I've always wanted to see more of your tattoos." She undid the first button.

“There are quite a few,” I said, setting her present on the table beside the couch. “Some aren’t so great.”

She undid the next button. “Do they all have stories?”

“Most of them.” I propped my arm on the back of the couch and ran my free hand up her thigh as she undid the third button. “Some I got just because they were cool.”

“Why tattoos?” There went the fourth button, and I had to shift to make room in my pants to sit comfortably. She was so sexy in that dress, and how her tongue jetted out as she worked a button down was nearly the death of me.

“At first, it started out as rebellion against my dad. But then they became symbols of strength, reminders of how I was going to be different, stronger than him.”

The fifth button went, and she’d made her way to where the shirt was tucked into my pants. I couldn’t let her go further or she’d really be in for a surprise. Pretty sure she wasn’t quite ready for that, I stayed her hand and pulled out the rest of my shirt.

She undid that last two buttons and pushed the fabric back, exposing more of my chest. Wonder filled her face as she scanned the expanse of my exposed skin.

“They’re beautiful.” Her forefinger trailed the biggest one that covered most of my chest. “Why an eagle?”

“Symbolizes victory, and that’s all I’ve wanted when it comes to my dad. For me and for my mom.” I brushed my knuckles down the side of her face. “And now for you, too. Victory over this prison of yours.”

“It’s working,” she whispered, her voice husky. “I’ve never felt so free in my life. Even before...”

“I’ll never hurt you. Never,” I said, vowing it to her *and* myself. “Never.”

“I know.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss between my pecs, where the eagle’s head was. She moved the shirt back some more to see my shoulder. “Tiger?” she said, then kissed it.

“Means willpower, personal strength and courage.” And I’d fought for that since my asshole dad—no, I would not let him in this moment.

Lina was finally opening up to me, letting me into her safe, controlled...lonely world. No way would I let my father in this moment. This was mine. Mine and Lina’s. I might be physically strong, but I’d been weak all these years, hiding from life like she’d been hiding from the world.

“Smooth.” Her breath was warm against my skin as she dusted kisses along the start of the tiger’s head on my neck. It coiled around my shoulder and eventually bled into a skull with black roses, which rightfully represented love and death.

There’d been plenty of both in my twenty-four years of life.

She made her way to my chest again, and it took everything in me to remain still. I wanted to dive into her, make her feel so good she’d be screaming out my name as I made love to her.

Instead, I bit my cheek working to calm my body down.

“Your heart is pounding.” She kissed me right where I knew it was hammering away.

“You do that to me.”

Desire dominated her wide, wonder-filled eyes. “I do?”

“I want nothing more than to make love to you, Lina. All night.” A wave of fear hardened her face and flared her nostrils. “But don’t worry, I can wait. I just wanted you to know what you do to me, how much I want you right now.”

She gripped my pecs and eased forward. Her fear completely gone. And that turned me on even more.

“Is it possible to love someone you’ve only known for a few months?” She asked, her lips brushing mine as she spoke. “Because I do, Hunter. I love you. So much.”

“It’s possible.” I kissed her lips. I loved her so much it scared me.

I sat up and pulled her as flush against me as I could, considering we were sitting on the couch, and took the kiss deeper. She shoved my shirt down, and I shook the fabric free of my body without ever disconnecting from her mouth.

I needed more.

Warm hands slid down my chest as she pulled away. She was breathing heavy as she took the sight of me in. “I can’t believe you’re here, with me. And I’m kissing you, touching you. This is...perfect.”

I combed her hair back to fully see her face, and she closed her eyes as if drinking in the contact. For so long she'd been without, and I intended to worship her like she deserved. Kissing every surface on her face, her scent fused inside of me, tightening my body until I thought I'd snap in half.

Curling my fingers along the nape of her neck, I tunneled into her hair seeking out the piece that held her flowing locks hostage. I needed to feel it between my fingers, to grip it, to—

Nails dug into my skin, and I leaned back.

“Give me...a second,” she said, her eyes were closed tight.

“Lina?”

“I...can't...” She groped her throat. “Hunter? Where...are...you?”

Tears welled in her now wide-open eyes, but I knew she couldn't see me. Even though I was right there, she couldn't see me. A flashback had taken over.

Shit.

“You're okay. I'm right here. Shhh...” I wasn't sure if I should touch her. “Just breathe, baby, breathe. In. Out. Do it with me. In. Out.”

“I...can't...bag...I—”

“Okay. Okay.” I tore out of the bedroom and ran into the kitchen. I opened every drawer in the center island and found some brown paper bags. As I ran back to her, I blew into it, getting it ready.

“Here, baby, hold on.” I knelt before her heaving, shaking body, and held it to her mouth. She batted my hand away and put her hands up as if defending her face from something—no, someone. “It’s a bag, Lina. Breathe into it. You’re safe. They’re not here. Only me. You’re safe.”

She sagged forward, and I covered her mouth with the bag. “In. Out. Slowly. In. Out.”

The bag puffed out then collapsed, then puffed out again. Her frantic body calmed a little as her breathing regulated.

“That’s my girl. In. Out.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and tears spilled out the corners. Fear and embarrassment dimmed her eyes. Damn it, I’d pushed her too hard. Kissing and touching her, I’d lost control, taken things too far.

She gripped my shoulders as she took two more breaths, but these were shallow, weak.

Sagging onto the couch, her eyes rolled back, and her grip on me loosened. Her arms flopped down, the one hanging off the couch. “Lina?”

I pressed my finger to her neck to find her pulse hammering. As I held it there it started to even out with unconsciousness.

Damn those assholes who hurt her. I had to find out what happened. Keeping my hand on her shoulder to let her know, even in her unconsciousness, that I was still there, I grabbed my phone. Better get Mom over here to get Lina settled and stay with her. I refused to have her wake up alone

but didn't dare be here in case it scared her. After a flashback like that, she might wake up confused, and I'd already put her through enough tonight.

Plus, I had a little research to do.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Angelina

Distant humming lulled me out of the darkness, and I turned to my side, snuggling my soft blankets to me. Wait, was that the smell of cinnamon rolls?

I bolted up. Sun shone through my window, and I was tucked tight in bed, wearing my PJs. But how was that possible? I was with Hunter. Kissing him.

A flash of the vacant, brown eyes of the man raping me ran through my mind. The other guys. The knife. The blood. I coughed through the emotions ransacking my very being. I'd been kissing Hunter, wanting to touch him more, to get lost in him, but the images had taken over and I'd been instantly back in that stinky, smelly house.

I leapt off the bed and ran to the bathroom. I'd not eaten any food for so long there wasn't anything to vomit, but my body didn't care. It had to get the memories out somehow...

"Oh, honey." Lisa's voice came in from behind me. "It's okay, honey, you're safe. Shhh."

Gentle hands tugged my hair back as my body tried to expel my spleen.

"Help me," I gasped. "Oh, God."

Lisa's hand rubbed up my back. "Breathe, honey. Focus on my voice. You can do it, Angelina."

I listened to her speaking the words as they coaxed my body into obeying. Slowly, I calmed down.

“There you go. Come on.” Lisa helped me to my feet and drew me into a warm hug. “You’re okay, sweetie.”

“Where’s Hunter?” I sobbed into her shoulder.
“Hunter...”

“He’s fine. Just wanted to give you some space. Shhh, now. It’s fine.”

She held me there for I don’t know how long before she leaned back and looked at me with the very same eyes as Hunter’s. Piercing, intense, and gentle all rolled up into sincere. She was so incredible.

“Come out to the kitchen.” She led me by the hand, and as I passed through my bedroom I glanced at the couch. I’d been close to Hunter there. Kissed him. Wanted him to touch me, and those bastards ruined it for me.

I choked back a sob and focused on Lisa. “How are you here?”

“Hunt came and got me. He didn’t want you to wake up and be scared with a man in your safe space.”

I covered my face with my hand, the embarrassment burning through my fingertips. “I’m mortified.”

“Don’t be. He’s seen much worse, trust me on that one.”

“He has?”

“He’s told you a little about his father and our situation, but not all.” Lisa smiled as she guided me to a kitchen barstool. “You should try and eat something.” She pushed a plate of cinnamon rolls and orange juice in front of

me. “And like I said, it’s his story to tell, but I can share some of mine that he just happened to be a part of. And it includes panic attacks of all levels. But let’s start with you telling me what happened last night. Or would you like me to get Jenna on the phone?”

“No. I’m okay.” I peeled off a piece of warm bread and put it in my mouth. “I love cinnamon rolls.”

“I figured you would. Everyone does, secretly anyway.” She smiled over her cup of coffee. “Go on.”

“I feel weird telling you.”

“Don’t be shy.” She winked. “There’s not much that can surprise this old bird.”

“You’re not old.” I swallowed some orange juice, already feeling the energy return. “I asked if I could try touching him. We were...kissing.” I closed my eyes, fighting the tears. “And the...flashbacks.” I squeezed my eyes shut as they tried to work their way into my thoughts even now. “Hit hard. My guard was down. I—felt so comfortable.”

“Damn PTSD. It’s like you’re right back in the event.”

“I could smell their sweat. Hear them breathing.” I fisted my hand and pounded the counter. “They ruined it. I was doing so well.”

“They didn’t ruin it, sweetie, don’t give them that power.” She patted my hand. “Do. Not. Give them that. They are scum-sucking bastards who don’t deserve such power over you.”

I looked at Lisa, stunned. She’d never talked so forcefully before.

“Sorry. My son tends to wear off on me.”

“Hunter doesn’t...talk like that.”

“Well, he cleans up nicely for you, but sometimes he lets his tongue loose.” She shook her head in true *Mom* fashion.

I rested my head on the countertop. “He was so perfect. So tender. How could I let those bastards in on that moment?”

“It takes time. This is your first taste of love since what happened to you. It’s trying to taint what’s good, what’s pure.”

“I love him, Lisa.” Tears stung my eyes. “So much, and I’ve been ruined for him.”

“I know it feels that way, honey.” She hugged me over the shoulder. “It feels that way, but it’s not true. It’s the furthest thing from the truth. You are such a pure soul. Look what you organized last night. You raised over four hundred thousand dollars. Did you know that?”

“What?” I sat up. “What did you say?”

“People heard about what happened on the news, and the gifts are pouring in. They’re turning what was an amazing event marred by violence into an epic event. The lives Patty and her team are going to help with that event, you’ll never know. And even if that jerk hadn’t stormed the party, you were well on your way to over sixty thousand dollars. I spoke with Patty.”

I couldn’t believe it.

“See how a bad thing can turn into something beautiful? It’s not how we’d have preferred it, but you have to go with it. You’re so strong, honey. So strong.”

“Didn’t feel like it.”

“We’re not perfect. Look at Hunter and what happened with him last night. Not everyone would be able to see past his violence, his anger. But you did. You welcomed him into your private home. Accepted him, faults and all. Including his cloudy past.”

“Isabelle.”

“He told you, then?” Lisa asked, combing her fingers through my hair.

“Some.” I pulled my long sleeve shirt down, making sure my scars were covered.

“Did you tell him about those?” She pointed to my wrists.

“Not yet. I’ve told him some of my story, too, but not all.”

“There’s time. Apart, you guys are so cracked, but together, you fill in the gaps. You’ll get there.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” I wrapped my arm around her waist. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“You’re family, honey. Whether you like it or not, you’re part of this imperfect, on the run family.”

“I don’t want you to be on the run anymore.” Heck, I didn’t want to be on the run anymore, either.

“We won’t be. We’ll get it figured out.” She nodded.
“But don’t you worry about anything.”

“I can help. Tell me how I can help.”

“That’s for Hunter to share, not me, honey.”

My stomach twisted into a knot. From the darkness in her eyes, it was a big story. One that already scared me, and I didn’t even know it yet.

Hunter needed me to be strong, and I would be. I refused to let our pasts ruin our future.

“Are you okay now?” Mom asked.

“Yeah. I think...I’m going to shower, then it’s Christmas at your house, right?”

“There’s my girl.” She kissed the top of my head and headed toward the door. “Come lock up behind me then get cleaned up. Brunch is in two hours.”

I hopped up and followed her to the door. I clicked the deadbolts shut and leaned against the door. Score one for the assholes, but I plan on making them my bitch on the next go ‘round with Hunter.

* * *

Hunter

“Merry Christmas, Hunter,” Marshal said. “I’m sure that’s why you’re calling me on Christmas Day, right? Please tell me that’s why you’re calling me on Christmas Day—especially *this* early.”

Not. “Sort of. But hey, Merry Christmas.” I flopped onto the couch in our living room that faced the wall of

windows overlooking the city. The sun was up, and it was bright, but the warmth didn't reach us because it was frigid out there.

“Spill it.” His voice went curt, immediately turning into the witness protection handler I'd known for years.

“Okay, first, there might be a picture of me on Lina's social media. Yeah, I know I look super different with hair and about six more tattoos, but still. Just a heads up.”

“Damn it, Hunter. You've got to let her know not to post anything about you. Not that she needs to know about witness protection, because that's against the rules, be vague, like I've told you.”

“About that...I'm done with it. I'm telling her everything, and Mom and I are not leaving town again.”

“Hunter. Shit,” Marshal said. “That's not an option.”

“Look, Marshal. Mom and I are not the typical witness protection people, hiding out from the mob and shit like that. And really, the whole witness protection thing...it's a joke. Dad keeps finding us. You're not protecting us from anything.”

“But staying in witness protection keeps *me* and my team in your life. And yes, we are protecting you. We're able to use our manpower to track your dad and, don't forget, it allows us to take extra measures to keep you safe rather than leaving you out there for the local police to help you.”

“Marshal—”

“And, like the Christmas Ball. What you did there, Hunter...I was able to pull some strings to keep you out of it

because I'm in your life. And I'm in your life because of this witness protection detail. Are you following me on this Hunter?"

My gut hollowed out. He really had saved the day. No mention of what I'd done made the morning news and then there was the whole not getting locked up for my excessive violence thing.

Shit.

"You're putting her in more danger by telling her. You should just lay low with her, Hunter. At least until we get your dad behind bars."

"No. Don't put any more of that shit on me, Marshal. If Dad shows up again, there are two options. One, you get him or two, I kill him. I'm sorry, but I'm—no *Mom* and I are—done running. He's taken too much of our lives, and we're sick of it."

"You've seen what he can do, Hunter. Firsthand. Not to mention the trail of bodies he's left searching for you."

"Then find him. Quit pussyfooting around and find that prick. You're the government, aren't you? Don't you have some task force or black ops unit? I won't have my girl or my mom in danger anymore."

"Don't you think we've been doing everything we can?"

"No, because he's still out there, Marshal. How can one man be so slippery that you—or the army—can't get him?"

I heard him cuss, but he didn't say anything. I had no right going off on Marshal like this. He wanted Dad caught as much as we did.

“Look, Hunter, I know last night at the ball was difficult for you and your mom. I get that. But let's not go and make rash decisions about anything.”

Rash. “Whatever, Marshal. We agreed to go into witness protection to testify when you caught him after he almost killed mom. But that was *three* years ago, Marshal. Three!”

“No one could have ever expected this from Christopher. He's a psychopath. A very intelligent, powerful, and resourceful psychopath. He'll slip up. He's got to.”

“And in the meantime, we're stuck here, while you guys *wait* for him to slip up. That's not good enough anymore, Marshal. *Make* something happen.”

“Hunt—”

“What happened to Angelina three years ago with her attack?” I sat up and planted my elbows on my knees while I leaned forward. I'd said what I'd needed to say about the dad situation. Time to move on. “I've been digging around online, but there's not much out there. It's like it's been pulled or compromised somehow.”

“I can't just give out all this information because you're in witness protection, and I'm not your research buddy either.”

“Marshal, please. Tell me if the guys got jail time for whatever they did to her.”

“Yes. Two of the five got serious time—as is, they shouldn’t see the light of day until they’re old and gray.”

Holy shit. “What...were they convicted of?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“First-degree attempted murder, premeditation, kidnapping, rape, torture—”

“What?”

“She flat-lined three times in surgery and once on the way. The leader had some history with her dad.”

“The others?”

“Lesser sentences. They’ll get out in a handful of years.”

“How is everything so hidden?”

“Because of whom she is. Her father has some serious pull...everywhere. When you amass that kind of influence and power, you make enemies.” Marshal paused, and I heard computer keys clicking. “Look, I’m kind of bending some lines here by telling you, but you need to know what you’re getting into.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Somehow I knew you’d say that. Anyway, Dom, the guy who orchestrated the abduction as a ransom-gig. Case file indicates Dom’s father was let go from one of the hotels Lina’s Dad owns. Something to do with theft. Evidently, that led to financial hardship for the family.”

“What do you mean?”

“Father lost the house, fell into crime, got his ass thrown in jail then died there. Dom didn’t confess much, but the others did, to lessen their sentence. Dom had payback in mind when he took Angelina. Ransom, but then...Hunter, it got bad for Angelina. *Really* bad. Her dad paid the ransom, authorities tracked the money down to where she’d been held.”

“Holy shit, Marshal.” Fury started boiling again, deep in my gut, at the thought of how much abuse she’d suffered. “I didn’t find much of anything for Angelina Raine other than her social media stuff, schooling, and general things like that.”

“That’s because her parents changed her last name to protect her. Supposedly to keep her out of the limelight, but honestly, I think it was more not to mar their image that they have a shut-in for a daughter instead of the socialite she was raised to be.”

“Shit. Mother Fu—”

“Hey, watch it. Don’t make my ears bleed on Christmas Day.”

Maybe Marshal was right, maybe I shouldn’t tell her about witness protection, the full extent of what Dad’s done these past three years. She didn’t need to carry that weight. She had enough nightmares to deal with. But I didn’t like keeping it a secret.

Then again, as Mom had said, Hunter Amos was who I was now. It didn’t matter about my previous names. Nothing mattered except my Lina...and getting Dad locked up forever.

“Listen, Hunter. I’ll check in with the military team assigned to apprehending your dad again, see what I can dig up. They can’t enjoy having a rogue walking time bomb out there.”

“It’s been three years, Marshal, they would have found him by now.”

“Yeah, well...you can blame *them* for your dad’s expertise in evading everyone.” He cleared his throat. “I know it’s tough. But your mom...she’s right you know.”

“What?” Okay, that surprised me.

“She told me about how much you want to tell Angelina everything and how you’re struggling with keeping this secret from her.”

I gulped.

“I respect that. And you. You’re a stand-up guy and you want to do right by Angelina.”

“But...”

“Do not tell her about the witness protection part. You need us. And while we have enough to convict your father on so many things, you and your mother still need to testify on what he did to her. To you.”

He made a little sense. They’d not caught Dad yet, but they were an added layer of protection when Dad did pop up... *Shit.*

“Thanks, Marshal. And oh, Merry Christmas.”

“You, too. Keep out of the limelight.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try harder. And no more fights at the club where you’re breaking noses and jaws.”

“What?”

“I’m serious. Clean it up!”

“I hear ya.” I clicked end and tossed the phone on the cushion beside me.

Marshal was right. So was Bill. I needed to get my shit together if I wanted to stay here and stay with Lina. If she’d even have me after she learned the truth.

But should I tell her *everything*?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Angelina

I looked at the ocean of shredded wrapping paper over Hunter's living room floor, surrounding the eight-foot Christmas tree and smiled. This had been the best Christmas ever—minus the panic attack last night, oh, and the attack on Patty at the ball.

Okay, maybe this shouldn't have gone down as the best Christmas ever with all that bad happening, but the fact that this was the first one out of my house in over three years...it was the best.

"What are you thinking about over here?" Hunter asked, the couch sagging beside me as he sat down.

I let gravity pull me to him, and he opened his arm to receive me. He was so warm and cuddly with all that muscle to grab onto.

"Lina?"

"Just thinking about how happy I am." I closed my eyes. My tummy was full of delicious eggs, bacon, and more cinnamon rolls, and I was sitting with the most patient, understanding man on the planet.

I was sure it was going to be weird coming over here after last night's epically embarrassing panic attack, but it was like it'd never even happened. And there wasn't the whole pink elephant in the room thing going on, either. He took me as I was, didn't he?

He had since day one.

“Merry Christmas, Hunter,” I said into his chest as I snuggled closer to him.

“You too, Lina.” He kissed the top of my head. “I got you something else.”

I sat up. “No, Hunter, you’ve given me so much already.”

“I did overdo it a little, didn’t I?” He grinned. “But it was so much fun buying things for you. I...never had that before.”

“You spoil me.”

“I want to.” He leaned to the side and pulled something from behind him.

My heart froze at the sight of a jewelry box. *Jewelry* box? No. It couldn’t be. We weren’t to the point of jewelry, were we?

“No more panic attacks, Lina.” He tapped my nose. “It’s not that...yet.”

Yet? Did he say *yet?* I swallowed down the nerves.

“So, it’s corny, but...there was this cartoon ages ago. It’s a classic comic I stumbled onto as a kid—I used to collect comic books—and I found the old cartoon...and well, it’s cool.” He handed me the box. “They had these rings, and this corny saying to activate their superpowers.” He nodded for me to open the box as he finished saying, “Thought we could have that.”

I creaked the lid open and found two silver rings inside, one was huge, obviously for him, and the other a mini

version for me. There was a solitary symbol engraved in the band where a gem would have normally been.

“It’s beautiful. What is that?” I brushed my finger over the smooth surface.

“It’s a Celtic symbol associated with power and strength.” He reached into the box and grabbed the small ring. “It’s for your forefinger here.” I held out my right hand, and he slid it over my knuckle.

“You’re going to wear a ring on your forefinger?”

“Hell yeah.” He slid the ring on his finger. “Matches my thumb ring on this hand.”

“And the one on your ring finger.” I grabbed his hand. “What are these, do they have stories?”

He nodded.

“But first, I want to tell you thanks.” I kissed his cheek. “This is perfect!” I held my hand up to see the treasure around my finger. It was like I could already feel its strength. And knowing he wore one, too...that made it even more effective. “You said it was from a cartoon?”

“The ring was, not the symbol. And don’t freak—the two who wore these were brother and sister, but that’s okay, we’re so not that, and that’s fine. But they would always say, ‘Wonder Twin powers activate.’ And then they could do all sorts of crazy things.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, it’s a little bass ackwards, but hey, we are too, so it fits. But I want to emphasize how the brother sister

thing...so *not* an issue here.”

I slapped at his chest, then pushed up and pressed my lips to his. He didn't move other than to open his mouth slightly and let me in. He was probably scared to even touch me after last night, but this was good, too. Hopefully going further would be easier next time we tried...

Lord knew my body wanted him now, despite just *thinking* of having sex with him brought up some anxiety.

Just kissing. I'm just kissing. I leaned into him more and gave a final suck to his bottom lip, then eased back.

“Rings. Stories.”

He touched a kiss to my nose and smiled. “You like your stories.”

“You have so many. I don't have any kind of life, so I'm living vicariously through you.”

“For now. We'll make our own stories together, too, okay?”

“Deal. Now talk.”

“This one.” He held up his thumb. “Was my grandfather's. It was his wedding ring if you can believe that.”

“Wow!”

“You think I'm big, he was a giant. Toughest man alive as far as I was concerned. Used to box, was an amateur heavyweight champ looking to go pro way back.”

“Wow. That's where you get it.”

He grunted. “Grams died when I was eight and that's when he gave this ring to me. He said when I was old enough,

I needed to wear that ring and always remember two things. One: Family is everything. Two: Never go down without a fight.”

“He sounds awesome.”

“Gramps died when I was twelve.” He glanced at the Christmas tree and didn’t speak for a while. “And I hid the ring from Dad. He would have taken it.”

“What’d your gramps think of your dad?”

“Hated him. Even kicked his ass once, too. Badly!” Hunter shook his head. “But Dad’s retaliation was too much so he didn’t do it again.”

“Retaliation?”

“It was two-fold: he beat Mom to a pulp and didn’t let us travel to see Gramps for almost a year. Prick knew how to stay off the grid back then like he is now.”

“It’s crazy your mom stayed with him so long.”

He let out a sigh, then said, “My first memory of the abuse was when I was seven or so. I’m sure it was going on a lot longer than that, Mom doesn’t talk much about it.”

“She feels bad.”

Nodding, he went on. “But I started noticing the bruises. Dad hadn’t come at me yet, not until I was about nine. Dad got us both pretty good around then, and that’s when Gramps pounded the hell out of him.”

“And it got worse.” I ran my finger along the thick scar along his neck.

“Yeah. Dad did a couple tours, and each one changed him.” He swallowed hard and shifted in the seat. “Made him more paranoid, focused, intolerant of imperfection. I told you what happened already on his final mission.”

“I’ve read up on what it takes to leave an abusive home. Your mom’s so strong to have gotten away from him.”

“She is strong.” He pulled me closer. “Like you are.”

“Even more so with my power ring.”

He sagged into the couch more, and we sat in silence for a long time watching the tree sparkle. I was sad Hunter had it so rough growing up. No wonder he struggled with his anger.

“I want to try again,” I said, working up the courage to spit it out for the last ten minutes.

“What’s that?” He brushed his thumb over my shoulder.

“Being close with you.”

“As in...sex?”

“Um, not...no.” I sat up. “I meant—”

“I didn’t think you meant that, but...I wasn’t sure for a second there.” He grinned. “Caught me by surprise.”

Heat flamed my cheeks. “Have you...had sex before?”

He nodded. “Before your attack, had you?”

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, Lina. What happened to you was brutal enough as it was, but for it to be your first experience with

sex...that's shitty." I swore I heard him growl.

Shitty was the best way to describe it, yes. I wasn't even sure I'd ever be able to have sex, or if I wanted to even try.

"Pretending that never happened to you, would you have had sex before marriage?"

I folded my legs up onto the couch and wrapped my arms around them, bringing my knees to my chest. "I was still figuring things out about that. Maybe...I was pretty much the only freshman in college who hadn't." I laughed, remembering my roommate's surprise when I'd told her that. It'd been her goal those first few weeks of school to 'hook' me up.

I wasn't a prude or anything...I just hadn't found the right person to consider it.

"Boyfriends?"

"A few in high school. Hadn't found one in college yet, then again, it was early in the semester when...well, there wasn't much time. And since then,...online dating only works until they want to meet you."

"You online dated?" He sat up. "Don't tell me you were sexting guys..."

"Hunter!" I slapped his chest. "I can't believe you just said that."

"Sorry, that was an asshole thing to say. I mean—crappy thing to say. The idea of you being with anyone else...well, it got me a little riled up."

"How many girls...women have you been with?"

“Three. And no one for two years.”

“Since Isabelle? Oh yeah, the no dating rule...”

“Right.” He shook his head. “It was...I was too dangerous.”

Flashes of anger and hurt slanted through his eyes, but I more saw it as a tortured soul.

“When you say you’re too dangerous, tell me exactly what that means. Like, do you get...aggressive when you’re... with someone?”

He let out a long breath. “I’m a big guy, Lina. I have great control, but...yeah, sometimes I get a little worked up when things get intense.”

“Have you...hurt someone—a girl—when you’ve been...*with* her?”

“No, not like that, more it’s...well, my temper. I—if I fly off the handle, like I did on that guy last night, people close to me, as in vicinity close, tend to get hurt. Even those I care about.”

“What happens when you fall into a rage like that?” I gripped his bicep, and he flexed beneath my touch.

“Everything...turns red. I can only see the guy I’m attacking. All of the bad things he’s done, or that I imagine he’s done, flashes before my eyes, and I just go crazy.”

“And when you’re worked up while you’re with a girl? It’s the same thing?”

“No.” He turned toward me. “Not even. I...my world is a little screwy with my dad, and...my anger issues...I just

don't want anything to happen to you. Ever.”

“Oh.”

“I'm scaring you.”

“No.” *Yes.* “A little.”

“That's why...well, that's why I've not been with anyone for so long. Well, one of the reasons. I've focused on my martial arts and my control.” He glanced to the side then back to me. “And why I've been seeing Jenna.”

“What?” I sat up straight. “Jenna? How long? What —”

He placed his finger on my lips. “Remember that month off from the bar? Well...it was forced. I had a meltdown at work and...Bill, that's my boss, he told me to get my shit straight, so I did—er—I am.”

“Hunter,” I whispered.

“For you, Lina.” He grabbed my hand and kissed my new ring. “For us.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Like I said, I wasn't with anyone since Issie. I vowed it for two reasons: Getting my shit together and until I was done running from Dad.”

“You were great with me last night.”

“It's easy to be with you, Lina.” He curled some hair behind my ear. “For some reason it's always been easy to be around you. You make me want to be a better man.”

Tears stung as he looked at me with his piercing violet-blue eyes. His face was so calm, so peaceful right now all I could do was stare.

“Because someday, Lina, soon, I’ll get to have you.”
He nudged his finger beneath my chin. “All of you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hunter

“It’s so weird you work in a bar, look like you do, and you don’t touch a drop of alcohol.” Drey shook his head as he downed the rest of his third bottle of beer.

“Yeah, well me and drinking don’t go well together at all.” I finished off my second Pepsi. “It’s good to be back.”

“Good to have you, man.” Drey smacked my shoulder then leaned on the bar beside me while Sam worked at getting us another round. “No one can pick out a dumbass looking for trouble like you.”

It felt good to relax with him after my first day back. Drey didn’t work for another hour, but he’d been here for my entire four-hour shift.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I asked.

“Yeah, right. New Year’s Eve, and I’m working, thanks to you...and your date.” He rolled his eyes. “Plus, I love New Year’s Eve shifts...They’re epic. So, what are you going to do with your girl?”

“Watch the ball drop at her place, I guess.”

“You should bring her here, man.” He backhanded my chest. “It’s going to be rocking. We have Wounded Shadow playing. Can you believe that? They’re playing at our puny little bar on New Year’s Eve, man. It’s going to be legendary. I can’t believe Bill let you off.”

I was surprised, too, but then again, Bill was still leery of me being back at work after only a few weeks of

counseling. He probably thought New Year's Eve might be too much for me to handle.

I'd worked a few of them, though, and Drey was right, it was fun. As much as I loved hanging out at home or at Lina's, heading out for a night of dancing sounded pretty good.

Wonder what she'd feel like dancing close to a slow, sexy song?

"Wow. You got it bad, dude." Drey took a draw from his bottleneck. "You pussy whipped?"

"Hey." I frowned at him. "Don't say shit like that about my girl. And yeah, I got it bad, so shut it."

"Whatever." He turned and faced me, resting his elbow on the bar, and his other hand on my shoulder. "She's calmed you out, that's for sure."

"I can still kick your ass."

"No doubting that." He chuckled. "For realz, man, it's cool. You don't look like you're going to pop your cork at the slightest movement. And I don't have to worry about you hauling off and killing someone."

He wasn't wrong. Lina was the best thing for me. Taking Marshal's advice, I'd decided not to tell her about Witness Protection. After we got Dad locked up, I'd be able to tell her everything. But for now, we needed Marshal and his team in our lives, watching over us, keeping an eye out for Dad and giving us that extra layer of protection.

"You know about Bill's past?" I asked Drey.

“A little.” He turned back around to the bar as he watched Sam leaning over, giving some girl some loving.

It would be nice to do a little of that with Lina; show the world she was mine. I twisted the ring on my forefinger and smiled. Wouldn't mind showing that off a little either.

It surprised me how much I would have enjoyed putting an engagement ring on her finger. It was too soon for that, though.

“Did Bill really kill someone?”

Drey nodded, the spikes in his dark hair barely moving an inch they were so gelled into position. He'd been working at The Rage for about five years, so I wasn't surprised he knew the story. He'd always been protective of the bar...and Bill, now that I thought about it.

“Can you tell me?” I asked.

“He must have let onto something for you to ask me what he did.”

“A little, that night I kicked the hell out of that guy.”

“The night he kicked your ass off the job.” Drey nodded. “I thought he was going to kill you. That's why I was so close to the door, man.”

“Really?”

“Hey, they don't call this bar The Rage for nothing.” He grinned. “No, but seriously, I haven't seen him that pissed since...well, since I was a smartass punk who needed an ass kicking.”

“You?”

Drey nodded. “Bill kicked my ass sideways, but I needed it.” He chuckled. “For as big as he is you wouldn’t think he was very fast, but he is, man. He is.”

“Why’d he pound on you?” I leaned against the bar, totally curious. This Bill guy, he was legit.

“I was running with a stupid gang. Doing dumb shit.” Drey sipped his beer. “He set me straight...as the ER set my arm.”

“No way.”

Drey nodded. “But you’re much bigger than me. I didn’t think he’d rough you up, but you never know about that guy.”

“He looked like he was going to pop a blood vessel, that’s for sure, but really? He killed a guy?”

“Voluntary manslaughter. He was mixed in with some pretty bad people, things went way too far with some jackass at a bar.” He shook his head. “I’m starting to see a pattern with bars and fights, you know. People like you and him shouldn’t work here.”

“Or it’s *exactly* where we need to be.” I nodded to the dance floor. “Watching over things.”

“Yeah, you’re trouble, so you know trouble when it walks through the door. Got to admire the guy, though. Tough as a rabid Rottweiler but he gives a shit about ya, you know?”

“Enough to throw my ass in counseling.”

“Ha! He got you, too.” Drey slapped my shoulder, laughing. I joined in, and we finished off our drinks in relative

silence as the rest of highlights on ESPN played out.

Hanging here with Drey and hearing Bill's story only solidified my choice to stay, and even nudged me closer to entertaining the thought of marrying Lina someday soon. First, we needed to get Dad's ass in prison, and we needed to get Lina to the college so she could make it through graduation ceremonies, and then...

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I leaned to the side.

"Your girl calling to check on you?" Drey laughed.
"You are whipped."

"Douche bag."

I flipped the phone to see the screen and saw Lina's face. How could I not smile at those beautiful eyes? I tapped the text message open.

I need candy corn!

I laughed out loud and Drey leaned close. "Candy corn?"

"It's our joke...kind of how we met." I typed back *I'll stop on my way home.*

Come get me. I feel brave!

You are brave. Okay. Meet me in the lobby in eleven minutes.

"Brave?" Drey asked.

"Snoop."

"Curious."

I glanced at him, not sure I should be sharing Lina's issues, but if I really was going to hang around here, then having a buddy to throw things at might be nice. "She's a shut-in. Well, she was when we first met."

"Shut-in. As in doesn't leave her place?"

I nodded. "Until a few months ago. I've been... helping her venture out."

"For real?" He tipped the beer bottle to his mouth. "I hear that shit's nasty. Agoraphobia, right?"

"Yeah. She's kicking its ass, though."

"How long?"

"Three and a half years."

"Holy fu—hell. That's—*dude*." He shook his head. "No wonder she's never been here. I was wondering if you even really had a chick. But man, that's gotta suck not ever going out."

"We're getting there. Maybe soon enough she'll be able to come here." Though it might be a while.

"You're a saint, man. I couldn't hack that."

She was worth it. I hopped off my seat and one lean arm slid over my shoulder, while the other curled around my waist and hugged me tight.

I reached for the arm around my waist, thinking for a split-second Lina was here, surprising me. For a while now, I'd wanted to bring her out somewhere, if not here, then out to a dinner or something more public.

I instantly realized it wasn't her body against my back. No, this one was way too hard, as in fake boobs hard, and the perfume was too thick.

"Oh, hey, wait," I said as I worked to unsecure the clasped hands around my chest and peel Sarah off me.

Lips brushed my neck, and a giggle made its way to my ears.

"Sarah?" I twisted out of her grasp as gently as I could. The girl was small, so I held her hand to make sure she stayed up right, keeping my annoyance in check.

"Hunter. *Isss* great to *see* you." *Hiccup*. "So sexy," she whispered, her lids hanging low over her green eyes.

"Starting the party early?" Drey slid off the stool, his eyebrows pulled together. "I thought you were working tonight."

She shook her head, and a silly-wide grin filled her face. If she didn't try so much, she could be beautiful. Plastic surgery was not her friend. And she couldn't have been more than thirty-years-old if I had to guess.

Really sad.

"*Lesss* dance." She reached for my hand, but I dodged out of range, and she frowned.

"Sorry, Sarah, heading out to get my girl."

She lurched forward. "Your girl's *sss* right here."

The stench of hard liquor, mint and perfume nearly suffocated me it was so thick.

“Oh man.” Drey stepped up and grabbed her hand.
“It’s not even eight o’clock. At this rate, you’re never going to make it to the ball drop.”

She went to pull out of Drey’s grip, but he held tight and said, “Head out, man. I got her.”

I ducked out and hustled to the door hearing her call after me. She’d made me late.

Our big trip for New Year’s Eve would be a trip to the candy shop. That’d be fun, too, and no drunks breathing nasty breath on me or groping me. Yeah, a quiet night in with Lina would be great, especially if she wanted to try being close again like she’d said on Christmas.

I wouldn’t mind starting the New Year in her bed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Angelina

“Wow, girl, you are *hot!*” Beth high-fived me as I walked by the front counter.

I was nowhere near hot, but I appreciated her compliment. I felt good—strong—and I had my black, kick ass boots on with a red dress that was tight up top with a little flare starting at the hips. The hem angled from my knee to the floor. Not to mention my leather jacket...

I owned this outfit tonight. For once I didn't worry about how it was shorter in the arms than my other clothing. The kick ass black, leather wristbands I'd ordered last week had come in today, so I was feeling brave.

It was way overdue that I show Hunter my self-inflicted scars, anyway, and since I was feeling so invincible tonight, I may show him later.

Dang I loved this empowerment, and I knew exactly what it was.

Love.

I'd never been in love before, and it totally rocked.

“What's the plan?” Beth asked. “Dancing?”

“Not sure I'm ready for that, even in my kick ass boots.” I laughed as I checked my phone. Hunter must be running late. “A trip to the candy store, though, I'm ready for that.”

“Candy store?”

“It’s our thing.” I checked the front door, but the bellhop wasn’t jumping up to get the door for anyone. *Strange.* He always told me, nearly to the minute when he’d be home, and he was rarely off by more than a couple of minutes...and usually on the early side.

“I have to tell you, he’s so sweet. And strong. I was at the Christmas Eve Ball...he was incredible.”

I nodded. “Sure was.”

Dale jumped up and hustled to the door.

“Oh, I think he’s here. Happy New Year!” I hollered out as I nearly sprinted to the revolving doors.

A blast of frigid air hit my face, and my chest tightened. I coughed through the cold and hustled to Hunter’s SUV. The door pushed open from the inside, and a wave of warmth met me along with a mix of scents.

Sweat, Hunter’s shower fresh scent...and perfume?

“Sorry, Lina. Got held up at work.” He shook his head.

“No fights on the first day back, I hope.” I leaned toward him, and he pressed a kiss to my lips.

“No fights tonight.” His eyes slid down my body, and I hugged the short leather jacket close, hoping he liked it. “You look great!”

“I know we’re just going to the candy store, but I wanted to dress up. It’s silly, I know, but...it makes me feel strong, too.”

“First New Year’s Eve out and about. I get it. And trust me, I don’t mind one bit.”

“I wish I could try coming to your bar...to dance.”

He faced me with wide eyes. “Yeah?”

Oh man, he wanted that, didn’t he? He couldn’t hide the excitement in his bright eyes.

“It would be fun to show you off.” He grinned as he checked the mirrors and pulled away from the hotel. “And do a little dancing...”

He slid his hand over the leather to my thigh and gave it light squeeze.

“I...ah...I’ll try it soon.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything.

The ride to the candy store was quiet, and he seemed...distant. His answers to my questions weren’t too wordy, not that he ever was a fountain of words, but still.

He parked the car, got out and came to my door. “Ready for a sugar rush?”

There were only two cars in the parking lot, and a quick glance to the storefront showed only one customer inside. He was searching down the gummy bear aisle while the worker up front at the register was hunched over her phone. “Quiet night.”

He helped me out by holding my hand, then shut my door. “I don’t suspect many come to a candy store New Year’s Eve. I’m not even sure why they’re open.”

“Waiting for the drunk or stoned people to get their cravings on, I guess.”

He laughed as he threaded his fingers through mine. I hadn't bothered with gloves, so I welcomed the warmth. Even the chill of his many rings felt good. I put my free hand in my leather coat pocket and glanced up at him. He scanned the lot.

“You always do that, don't you?” I said.

“What's that?”

“Look around as if you're expecting someone to jump out at you.”

“Doesn't hurt to be aware. You see a threat before it's too late that way.”

“You know what?” I swung our clasped hands. “We're not that different, you and me.”

He stopped before the door and nudged me to face him. White plumes floated from his mouth as he let out a breath. It was only about six degrees out, so it didn't take much, but from the length of the white plumes, he'd let out a long breath.

“Scared,” I said.

“Scared, huh?” He reached for the door and pulled it open. “Come on, let's get you inside. You're cold.”

Dang, he knew me so well. It hadn't even registered with me that I was getting cold. He guided me in and to the right, down the jellybean aisle.

“Hi!” the girl from the counter shouted.

He nodded to her and guided me back three steps to the small two-person table. “Let’s hear your theory.”

“What happened to me, it’s...well, you know. It ruined me enough that I didn’t step out of my house for three years three months and ten days.”

“Back to knowing how many days? Is everything okay?”

“Fine. I was curious earlier while I was talking to Jenna.”

He dipped his head. “Go on.”

“Well, I’m always looking around, scared of everything so I could run away, avoid it. You, you look around so you can head it off and kick the crap out of whatever dares confront you.” I sat down and grabbed his hand. “I love that. Wish I had more of that in me, but what I meant is that you assume something bad is going to happen, so you live like it is. Only you didn’t hide, you got big and super-strong. Anger was your prison, like my house was mine.”

He gulped.

“I so didn’t plan on saying all that.” I shook my head, what the heck was wrong with me? “Talk about a way to ruin New Year’s Eve bringing up all heavy and dark stuff.”

“You’re right.” He brought my fingers to his mouth. “And you didn’t ruin anything. But...The shit from our pasts haunts us in different ways. Lends to different types of prisons.”

“I’m walking out of mine, are you?”

He held my gaze for so long I didn't think he was going to answer me for a minute, and I glanced around, uncomfortable with the silence.

"I am, actually, walking out of my prison." He glanced out of the window. "*Because* of you."

I held my breath. It wasn't very often he opened up about his past, but it sounded like he might right this very minute, and I sat at the edge of my seat in anticipation. I wanted to know more about him almost as much as I wanted a fifty-pound bag of candy corn.

It was more than the knowing, though, it was about him. I wanted more of him. I'd already decided tonight was the night I wanted to try to be close with him again, but if he opened up a little, gave me another peek into his life, that would be icing on the cake.

He unzipped his jacket a little and let out a long breath. Wait...was that lipstick on his shirt? A wave of perfume swirled around me like a noose around my neck as he shifted closer. What the—

"Because of you, Lina, I've broken the one rule I've lived by since Isabelle. There was no stopping it. No matter how hard I tried, and trust me, I tried. Even hurt you in the process, which was the last thing I wanted to do."

I focused on his eyes, trying to not look at the smudge that was now a blinding light working to lure my focus. It had to be a mistake. Maybe it was blood?

No fights today.

But then what could it be?

“Lina?” He jiggled my hand. “You okay?”

“Fine.” I shook my head. “You broke your rules for me.”

“Never get involved. Never let anyone in.”

“Because of Isabelle. I get it.” I wasn’t sure I wanted that pressure, but I had it.

“And Dad. He’s dangerous. It would kill me if you got hurt by getting mixed up with me.” His grip on my hand tightened, and his nostrils flared. “New year. New life.”

“Together.”

“You and me.” He clanked his ring to mine.

My gaze drifted down to the lipstick on his shirt, near the neckline and my doubt flared up like a flame doused in lighter fluid. “Do you wish I could go to your club?”

“If not my club, maybe somewhere...like out to dinner?” He nodded. “That’d be cool. A quiet bar with a small dance floor maybe?”

“It’s important to you.”

“You are. Only what you’re ready for. You know that, right?”

It was always what I was ready for. He was so getting gypped by dating me. Wasn’t he? He’d broken his rule for a broken person, and he deserved more. Someone who could go dancing, go out and have fun without passing out from a panic attack.

“You ready for that sugar rush?” His thumb passed over my knuckle. “You really look beautiful you know that,

right?”

“Thanks. And yes, I’m ready.” For more than just sugar, too. I was ready to be closer to him, to take the next step toward getting to his club.

I’d made it to his gym, his club was my next goal. Seeing that lipstick on his shirt was a motivator that I needed to jump on. He was close to girls all the time at that club, helped a lot of them, so it must have been something like that. Maybe one got close to him, and it brushed off. I trusted him, he’d never do anything like that to hurt me, but if I was going to hold onto him, I needed to be stronger, more capable.

And not only for him, for me, too.

His club was only a mile from the ultimate goal I’d started this whole adventure for: getting to the college campus. On my way to getting there, I’d get to his club.

But tonight, I would get him in my bed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hunter

I stood to the side watching Lina interact with the front desk girl...I couldn't remember her name. But Lina had insisted on buying her a pound of candy since she was stuck manning the front desk on New Year's Eve, and I had to admit that was thoughtful.

Then again, my thoughts were a mess with how sexy Lina was. Her kick ass boots, that crazy sexy dress, and that leather jacket. I hadn't been so distracted not to notice how tall she stood, though. Her shoulders were back, her head was high, and the confidence streaming from her made my chest swell.

I'd helped with that confidence, which empowered me even more. I had something to offer her, to people like her who needed help.

Boy, she'd hit the nail on the head earlier, though, about how my anger issues were my agoraphobia. I'd only met her a handful of months ago, but she already pegged me right on. Not only had I broken my no women rule, but she'd also obliterated it into a billion pieces to the point I'd wondered why I'd had that stupid rule.

Isabelle's face flashed before my eyes, and I remembered. But Lina was right, so was Jenna, that I'd used it to keep me prisoner. It'd tainted my entire life and had probably made my anger even worse.

But if I didn't get attached to people, I wouldn't snap, I wouldn't break apart if they were hurt or injured somehow.

Like Isabelle.

Lina and I really were similar now that I thought about it.

“Ready?” Lina asked as she stepped toward me.

I grabbed her hand. “Ready. What’s on the movie docket tonight?”

“No movie...” She winked and tugged me away from the elevators.

“Wait, what—”

“Trust me.”

I glanced around when I heard the distant sound of music and chatter. And laughing. It came from up ahead and off to the right. Her hand went sweaty in mine, but she pressed on. “Lina—”

“You up for a little experiment?”

“Sure, but a bar? This is a big one.”

“It’s dead. Our big event is Christmas. There won’t be tons of people in here since we didn’t have an event. Just a few business peeps stuck here for the holiday.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I...heard how you said *dancing* earlier, and how you’d like to dance with me.”

“I didn’t mean to put pressure on you.”

“You didn’t. But you wish we could go out more, don’t you? You can’t deny that, Hunter.”

“It’d be nice, but I—”

“I think it’d be nice, too. What better place to try it than here? In my hotel where I’m familiar.”

She had a point there. But bars...they were my specialty, but also my trigger. What if someone got out of hand in there? Scared her? I might not be able to talk myself out of hammering anyone who harmed her.

“You did say you were feeling brave.” I took in the sight of her in that dress and kick ass boots. “And you look so sexy, I wouldn’t mind showing you off.”

“And I’m with you.”

We stopped directly outside the entryway to the bar, and I faced her. “You are with me, Lina. I’ll keep you safe. No matter what. You say the word and we’ll get out of there.”

“What’s the word?”

“What do you mean what’s the word?”

“You said say the word and we’ll leave, so what’s the word?”

I laughed, and she followed suit.

“Candy Corn.” She smiled as she nodded. “I think that’s a good word.”

“I’d say that’s perfect. Ready?” I faced the bar, and she sidled up next to me.

At first glance it appeared to be active with about twenty or so people dispersed throughout the small establishment. Mostly men, probably the business guys the girl at the front desk had alluded to. A few couples sat at the six booths along the far wall, eating.

Around the mahogany bar that was the centerpiece to the room off to the left, a handful of guys sat on barstools, hunched over their pints. In the back, there were three couples dancing to a slow song beneath the flashing lights of a disco ball.

“Wow. They redid the dance floor. I remember hearing about that.” She clutched my hand as we walked in.

The bartender nodded her greeting, and I held my hand up, “Two Cokes, please.” And I pointed to the two-person table closest to the dance floor. “Doing okay?”

“Great. It’s so pretty in here. Oh! Check it out.” She pointed to the wall. “That’s me and Sylvester Stallone.” She laughed. “Oh my gosh. I remember that.”

We walked toward the wall filled with various framed pictures of famous hotel visitors. “Sly Stallone, huh?”

“Dad was a huge fan of his, so he absolutely had to get a picture of him with his little girl.”

I leaned in and that’s when I saw her true smile. I’d seen plenty of them over the past months, but this one, this was bright, untainted by the events of her life. Genuine, carefree, and totally trusting.

Stallone had her propped on his shoulder, and she had her hands up like he’d done in Rocky. I’d seen her do that a few times when she’d mastered a self-defense move during our training. Or when she’d first gotten three blocks away from the hotel without a panic attack.

This girl was a survivor. And here she was experimenting on New Year’s Eve by walking into a bar to

make me happy, because I'd mentioned how it'd be nice to go out with her and do a little dancing someday.

Pride for her swelled thick in my chest—along with my desire for her. Inching in front of me, she pointed to another picture. “There. That’s Dad with Tom Hanks. Cool. I didn’t realize these were here.”

“He’s proud of you.”

“Even if I was a total flop for a daughter.”

“Lina!”

“Sorry. Negative Nellie strikes again. But it’s hard, you know?” She turned around and looked up at me, standing so close I felt the heat radiating off her body. “He—they—have no association with me. Other than a monthly package.” Her jaw clenched. “Did you know...well, you couldn’t, but he even...changed my last name.”

I did know, but she didn’t need to know that, and from the sad look in her eyes, she didn’t know it was done to protect her. “Go on.”

“It’s nothing.” She inched closer to me and wove her arms around my waist. “No more Negative Nellie tonight.” Soft lips touched my neck. It was as high as she could reach without getting up on her tiptoes or wearing heels.

I held still while she peppered kisses along my neckline and pulled herself flush against me. While we might have some similarities in our past prisons, we were quite the contrast in body type. Hers was soft, mine hard. She had no tattoos, and I was covered in them. She was dainty where I was a big thug.

As her warmth seeped into me, my body tightened, wanting no barriers between us, wanting only to feel her bare skin. My hands itched to touch every part of her, to make her feel good.

To make her mine.

“Your drinks are up,” the bartender said, and Lina flinched within my grasp.

We swung by and snagged them, then I led her to the table, and we sat, facing the dance floor. The song had morphed into something fast and techno-filled so it'd all but cleared the floor. Seemed everyone was more into the slow, touchy songs.

I knew I was. Normally I liked the fast stuff while bouncing at the bar, it kept my pace up. The slow ones where everyone was groping someone reminded me of what I once had and couldn't have again.

Until now.

“You're thinking pretty hard over there,” Lina said then sipped her soda.

“Just wondering how you're doing.” I shifted in my seat, needing to relieve the pressure her little kissing session had caused in my jeans. Her body was made to fit mine. I knew it.

“Fine. Next slow song is ours.”

“Well, let me go tell them what song we want.” I stood, and her eyes widened.

“You’re going?” Her knuckles whitened as she gripped her glass.

“I can stay. Sorry.” I shook my head. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“What song would you tell them?” she asked as I sat down again. God, I was an idiot. It was so strange not being able to leave her.

“An old one.” I took a drink. “But it’s cool. A classic.”

“Now I’m intrigued.” She glanced across the floor. “Just over there, right?” She pointed to the DJ.

“Yeah. But I can do it next time. I’m not leaving you.”

“I could come with, but I’d rather be surprised. I’ll stay. You go.”

“Sure?”

“Hurry fast.” She smiled. It wasn’t the one in the picture I’d seen earlier, and it was now my mission to get that smile back.

I studied her for a few seconds, weighing the risks. I’d be gone less than two minutes. She’d be within eyesight the whole time. Out of it maybe ten seconds while I talked to the DJ.

“I’ll be fine.” She patted my hand. “I want to dance with you.”

I hopped out of my seat, tossed my coat onto the chair, then hustled across the floor. I wanted to dance with her, too, but mostly I wanted to hold her. Close. Wanted to feel her

against me again and enjoy New Year's Eve with her in my arms.

I threw a glance over my shoulder, and she was watching me, her focus never straying. Talk about pressure.

“What's up, man?” The DJ pulled an earphone away from his left ear and leaned toward me. I told him my song, and he grinned. “Kicking it old school. Nice.”

I turned around and found Lina right away. She still stared at me, staying focused, but what I saw behind her was more of an issue than anything. A tall, skinny guy, holding two glasses of wine walked toward her.

Only thing, there wasn't anyone with him to merit holding two glasses. Did he think that wine was for *my girl*?

* * *

Angelina

Hunter picked up his pace toward me, his focus shifting over my left shoulder. A tall, skinny guy with a buzz cut and a shadowed jaw walked in my direction, his glacial gaze fixed on me. He held two glasses of red wine in his hands and nodded at me.

That wasn't the bartender. We hadn't ordered any wine, either. I hopped out of my seat and was to Hunter in four long strides.

The guy smiled and set the drinks on my table. “Compliments of the house. Sparkling Cider.”

Hunter nodded toward the entrance of the bar. There stood Beth. She waved, then turned on her heel and hurried

away.

“She’s so sweet, but that guy scared the crap out of me.” I pressed my hands to my hot cheeks.

“Me, too.”

“Nothing scares you,” I said as we sat at the table.

“You couldn’t be more wrong about that.” Hunter gave another glance around. “I was wondering what he was up to, that’s for sure.”

“Looks like you need to recite some P!nk songs.”

He leaned back in his seat and let out a laugh.

“Almost.”

We clanked our glasses together and said, “Cheers.”

Wow. I almost felt normal sitting at a table in a bar with Hunter, drinking sparkling cider. And I liked it. The bubbles slid down my throat, and I smiled.

The techno song ended, and the DJ said, “For the special couple up front here...Until The End Of Time.”

Hunter smiled. “Ready?”

I set my glass down as I drew in a deep breath, summoning my strength. I touched my ring with my thumb as I always did when I needed a courage boost and slid my hand into his. “Until The End Of Time?”

“It’s an old Foreigner song, but it’s pretty sweet.” He tugged me onto the dance floor and spun me around before drawing him close to me. “Like you.”

“I’m old?”

He laughed. “Hey, that’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

Another couple joined us on the dance floor followed by another. The women fell into their guys’ arms with an ease I was jealous of. Sure, I felt comfortable with Hunter, even wanted to be in his arms, but there was that tension across my shoulders I couldn’t get rid of. Like the memories of what happened to me were simmering below the surface ready to burst my bubble.

“Relax,” Hunter whispered, his breath warm along my ear. “It’s just you and me here, no one else. Let them fade from your awareness. Be here with me.”

I eased my hands over his chest and to his neck. Warm skin met my fingertips and absorbed all my worries. Well, maybe not all of them, but most of them. It was like a weight slid over my shoulders and crashed against the wooden floor.

Resting my cheek on his chest, I fell into his slow rhythm and listened to the words of the song and his heart drumming. The combination lulled me into a calm state I’d not been in for a while. One I’d been searching for, for more than three years.

He was like my own personal sedative.

Gentle fingers curled around the back of my neck, massaging, luring all the tension from my muscles. Another set of fingers slid around my waist and pulled me even closer to him.

The contact pushed the air right from my lungs, and I expected the normal images to start flying behind my closed

eyes, but they didn't.

"It's okay," he whispered. "You feel so good in my arms. You're safe."

I held on tighter, bringing me even closer to him that I straddled one of his legs as to not step on his feet.

He drew in a quick breath and pressed his mouth to the top of my head as I got lost in the words of the song.

They spoke of opening a door, finding your way, and reaching inside to get where you want to go. Where you want to be.

"Lina," he said, his hand tracing up my spine.

I shifted, turning my face so I could kiss his neck, one of my new favorite things to do now. And hopefully just the beginning for tonight.

"Doing okay?" His throat vibrated against my lips.

I pushed up to my tiptoes and kissed him a little harder as my silent answer. The perfume from before was gone, and I only caught the hint of his cologne mixed with a little salt. Such an intoxicating combination, I couldn't help but lick his skin.

He flinched within my grasp, and I hoped that was a good reaction, because my body flared to life at the contact with his.

And no flashbacks.

I leaned back and looked into his eyes. His nostrils flared, and the black pupils expanded, eating up the violet blue. "Like that?"

His hand slid to my lower back and pressed me to him, so I knew exactly what I'd done to him. "I'd say," he said as he grinned. "You drive me crazy."

"Crazy, huh?"

"It's a good crazy, trust me." He rested his forehead against mine. "Thanks for doing this. You like dancing?"

"More the part where you're holding me. But I like the song you chose, too." I stepped more into him. "And how it makes me feel. How *you* make me feel."

"How's that?" He touched a kiss to my cheek.

I pushed up even more and claimed his lips. He responded in kind, opening for me as if he'd been waiting for my kiss all day. And I let him have it. All of it.

His hand slid further down until it nearly cupped my butt, and that set off a whole new round of fireworks beneath my skin.

"Did you know... They say that what you're doing at midnight on New Year's Eve is what you'll be doing all year?"

"That's why everyone kisses?" I said, my lips mingling with his. "Because they want to be doing more of that in the coming year?"

"Maybe. But I know what I want to be doing right now with you." He kissed me again, holding me so close that I wasn't sure if it was his heart I felt pounding or mine. "But maybe in a more private place?"

I glanced around suddenly realizing our song had bled into another, one I wasn't familiar with. Two other couples

were still swaying to the music around us, but the others had gone back to their tables.

“This is so awesome.” I didn’t feel a hint of anxiety around these people or about the fact that I was out of my apartment. I’d made agoraphobia my *beeotch!* “I can’t get over how good I feel.”

“You do.” He hugged me tighter.

“I...Do you want to come to my place?” I smiled.
“That sounded like a total pick up line.”

“You can use that line on me any time.” He kissed my lips. “And yes. I want to go to your place.”

Heat steamed up my neck. “Good. Because I want to do more of this...with less clothing on.”

“That is definitely something I can help you with.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hunter

Lina pushed open her door and stood on the welcome mat. Two deep breaths later we stepped through the threshold. She sure had something with stepping over that line, didn't she? Or it was the fact that I was with her.

This was technically the third time I'd been inside her home if I counted the first one after I'd found her in the elevator. It sure felt like an honor to be here, though, considering she let no one in. As in ever.

Last time it'd led to a panic attack, and I sure hoped it didn't again tonight. After dancing with her so close, my body was on edge, tight with need to be with her. To touch her.

She tossed her bundle of candy corn on the coffee table and turned to face me. Her hands were fisted at her side, and her chest heaved way more than I'd like, well, unless my touching her and kissing her were the reason.

But they weren't. She was nervous, and I couldn't have that. "We could dance some more."

She grinned. "Music sounds good. Drink?"

I nodded as I stepped into her living room area and stood before her massive TV. "We could put a movie in instead if you want." That might relax her, too. Something familiar. "Hey, I'd even watch Tomb Raider if you wanted."

"You would?" she asked from the kitchen.

"Well, only if you dressed up in that Halloween outfit again," I said, teasing.

“You’re funny,” she said, sounding closer, so I turned around. “Here.”

Standing there, in her now bare feet, holding a glass of fake wine, I smiled. She looked so comfortable and confident, and it made me want her even more ferociously. “It’s only eleven fifteen, still have forty-five minutes until the New Year.”

She sipped her drink. “We’ll toast then, too,” she said, smiling. “Right now, we’re...toasting my first step into a bar. Next up...we’ll see.”

I wove my free arm around her waist. “College campus. We’ve got five months to get you there for graduation.”

“I was thinking next was...being close with you.”

“Oh. I’ll take that.” I pulled her flush with me. “You’re the driver, Lina. We can stop any time you want.”

She pressed her body against me. I ducked down and got in her line of sight to see how she was doing. She smiled, and I couldn’t help but claim her mouth. Still holding my wineglass, I pulled her closer with my free hand as I begged entrance to her mouth.

She was so soft and timid with the kiss it reminded me of her fragility, and I slowed things down. Our tongues caressed, teased as the seconds turned into minutes and could have tumbled into hours for all I cared. I could kiss her all night.

And I would if she’d let me.

“Couch,” she whispered into my mouth.

I disconnected with her, and she nodded to the side and held up her glass. “I want both hands free.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I grabbed her glass and set them on the coffee table, then guided her to sitting on the couch. Her wonder-filled eyes scanned over my body, and she drew in a sharp breath and glanced to the side.

“It’s okay, Lina. Only as far as you want. I just can’t shut my body down. You’re so sexy. Don’t be scared.”

“Can I...see more of you?”

“As much as you want.” I sat on the coffee table before her and nudged her chin up so I could see her clearly. “I’m yours, Lina, and I want you. I want this. But only what you’re comfortable with.”

“Sex?”

“Someday, yes. Tonight...let’s enjoy each other. No pressure. I want to learn you, Lina.” I leaned forward and pressed a promising kiss to her mouth. She reached out and grabbed my face, holding me steady as she took it deeper.

“I love you. You’re so patient.” She kissed my eyelids and leaned back. “And I think I’m ready to show you something. Before...well, you’re going to see it anyway.”

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath as she reached for her other hand. Slowly unsnapping the leather band around her wrist.

Even in the dim light I saw the mark right away, and I bit back the urge to flinch at the raised scars. She reached for the other wrist and did the same thing, yielding the same results.

“I...didn’t want you to be surprised.” She laid out her hands, wrists exposed, on my thighs.

“Lina,” I whispered. Unable to think of anything to say I grabbed her right hand and brought her wrist to my mouth. Slowly I brushed my lips along the scar, never taking my eyes from her. I kissed the inside of her palm then set her hand down so I could do the same thing to her other one.

She watched me with a close eye, and I knew she was waiting for my reaction. Maybe watching to see if I was repulsed, disgusted or if I would turn her away.

I knew all too well about momentary weakness. She’d tried to take her own life in hers, and I ended a life in mine. I wouldn’t judge her. Never.

She’d tried to kill herself, even did it the right direction by running up her vein rather than across her wrist.

“When?” I said now holding both her hands in mine.

“Couple of years ago. Stupid moment. Totally wasted on sedatives and depressed.”

She’d been a shut-in by then, alone with no one checking on her. “How’d you survive?”

“Lizzie called Jenna because I wasn’t answering at our scheduled time. She knew I was in a bad place. Jenna alerted hotel security and a medical team. They busted down my door.” She shook her head. “Enough about that. I just...didn’t want to surprise you.”

“Thank you, Lina, for trusting me with this.” I pulled her close. “I love you.”

She paused, her mouth open, as if my words scared her. No, it wasn't fear I saw, it was surprise. "You...said the words."

"I love you," I whispered again, leaning forward. "You're my girl."

"Oh my gosh that sounds so perfect. I love you, Hunter." She reached for the hem of my shirt. "Can I see more?"

Easing it over my head, she removed my shirt and tossed it to the floor near the door. "The art is so beautiful. You are, too." Her fingers traced the eagle in the middle of my chest, her palms resting on my pecs. She gave them a light squeeze and smiled.

I reached for her jacket and pushed it over her shoulders as I watched for her reaction. She shimmied out of it and let it fall to the floor.

"Does getting a tattoo hurt really bad?"

"Some more than others. Depends on where and how much ink." I traced the curve of her collarbone to her sternum. "You've never had one?"

She shook her head now skimming her fingers along my ribs. "Not an ounce of fat. Nothing but muscle."

I'd worked hard to build up for fights, but mostly to be able to fend Dad off when he tried anything or caught up to Mom and me. I never wanted to be weak again.

I fell to my knees before her, and she parted hers to let me in. Easing forward, keeping my eyes on hers, I saw a myriad of reactions. Desire, fear, heat, wonder....

Her skirt kept me from moving very close to her, so I placed my hands on her thighs easing the thin fabric up slightly. Exposing her pale skin as I moved her dress sent my body into another tailspin of excitement. If I knew it wouldn't scare her, I'd pull her forward so I could feel her against me. I needed some pressure to alleviate this need boiling through my body.

“Can you take me to the bedroom?” she whispered.

I brushed her hair back to see her face more clearly, watching for doubt or any kind of discomfort on her part, but I didn't see any. Only desire. One almost as intense as mine felt.

I scooted back, then scooped her into my arms. Hurrying through the small hallway to her side of her world I walked through the doorway into her sacred place.

Standing before her bed, holding her in my arms she gave me a knee-weakening kiss as if to say she wanted me to place her on the bed.

The thought of seeing her naked, making love to her flashed before my mind's eye.

Stay in control.

“What happened there?” she asked as I set her to her feet. “Am I doing something wrong?”

“No. You're perfect. Just working to calm myself down a little.”

“So, you're freaking out a little, too?”

“Not at the idea of being with you...but my body is giving me trouble.” I grinned. “Trying to take it slow with

you.”

She leaned forward and kissed my pec. Forging a trail across my chest to the other one had me looking at the ceiling while I absorbed her touch. Her closeness.

Combing my fingers through her hair, I eased her back. With my free hand I pushed her dress off her shoulder and kissed the now exposed skin as the fabric fell away. “How do I get this little number off so I can see more of you?”

She giggled as she turned around. “Zipper.”

I slid my hands down her waist to the front of her and pulled her back to me. She rested her hand over mine fixed on her abdomen as my free hand worked up her body.

At the contact, she tensed for a second then relaxed, tilting her head back so I had a good view of her smooth neck. The skin called out for my attention, so I leaned forward and gave it a good lick as I massaged her. Learning her body and how it felt. How it responded to my touch, urged me toward the cliff.

“Okay?” I asked, then licked the curve of her neck as I went on to her shoulder.

She hummed her response, and I looked at her face to confirm that was a good sound. Judging by the smile it was.

I stepped back and slid the zipper of her dress down, but her body tensing stopped me. “Too fast?”

“I’m okay, but... There’s another scar back there.”

I slowly finished unzipping, then urged the fabric apart, and the evidence of her attack revealed itself. Long,

jagged, and raised along her shoulder blade. It disappeared around her shoulder, but that part I'd seen before, at least a hint of it.

Rage bubbled to life deep in my gut working to douse the lust building, but I pushed it back. Anger had no place in her bedroom while I held her so closely. She trusted me, and I would not blow that.

Slowly, I turned her around so I could see her eyes. "You're beautiful."

I pulled the fabric down as she eased her arms out. She held the dress up, covering her bra. I caressed her shoulders, then trailed around to her back as I drew her close. "It's okay. Take it slow."

"Your patience is rivaling the saints right now."

"But my thoughts are far from saint-like," I said, grinning.

"Mine, too," she whispered. "Scares me a little. What if I freak out again, Hunter? I don't want to. I want this. I want you."

I grabbed her hand. "We've got our power rings on. There will be no freak outs tonight."

She released her hold on her dress, and it pooled around her bare feet. I swept my gaze over her stunning body. Strange to not see tan lines or anything, but she'd not been outside much over the years. The pale skin suited her, though, adding to her angelic look. She wore a red bra and panties... matching set.

My thoughts were so not angelic and prompted a few more non-saintly thoughts. But one thing was for certain; she was all that mattered and all that would ever matter from this minute forward.

* * *

Angelina

“I’ve never done anything like this with a guy.” I combed Hunter’s hair back as he lay atop me.

I was sure I’d freak out as the cloud of lust dissipated, considering I was in my undies and bra with a guy lying on me.

But I didn’t. Nothing felt more right than having him here like this. He was a decent man. An honorable man. Nothing like what those animals had done.

Hunter shifted, finally looking up. His eyes were glazed over, but a smile filled his face. He rolled onto his side, taking me with him. “You okay?”

“Better than okay. You?”

“Ditto.” He rolled back and then onto his feet and stepped toward my bathroom. “I’ll be right back.”

He was so amazing I couldn’t even think of another word to describe him. And I’d made it. Totally hadn’t freaked out or passed out. Sure, it wasn’t even close to having sex or anything, well, sort of close, but still. Before we’d been only on the couch messing around a little and I freaked. This was a whole lot more and not once did those nasty images flash.

I felt only him. Only his body. Only his love.

A few minutes later, he came out of the bathroom wearing a pair of sweats. “Why is my bag in your bathroom and filled with extra clothes?”

“I went over to your mom’s and got it.”

“Please tell me you did *not* tell my mom what we were doing tonight.”

“Hunter. Of course not.”

He flopped onto the bed and crawled toward me. “Thank God.”

“I told her we were going to have a movie marathon and you might want some comfortable clothing since you were coming right from work.”

“You’re so smart.” He turned toward me, gathering me to his chest so my back was against him. “You okay?”

“Perfect. Hunter, that was beyond words.”

“I’d say. And to think, it gets even better.” His hand glided over my abdomen, securing me to his body behind me. “You’ve never done this, huh?”

“Nope. It was all kinds of awesome, though.”

“Don’t worry, there’s more where that came from... later.” He nuzzled my neck, peppering it with kisses.

I sat up. “Wait, what time is it?”

“Twelve fourteen. I checked the clock in your bathroom. Happy New Year, Lina.”

“And look what we were doing when the clock struck twelve.” I wiggled around to face him. “Guess what we’ll be

doing this year?”

“What we’ll be doing forever if I have my way,” he said, his eyelids hanging heavy over his eyes. “Forever, Lina.”

Those words settled over me, seeped into my skin and filtered into my bones. Yeah, we were destined. Just had to get over the last few hurdles.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Hunter

“Hey, Bill, what’d you need?” I asked, sitting in the leather chair facing his massive desk. It wasn’t my night to work, but he’d called me in for a chat, which was strange considering it was Valentine’s Day.

“How’s it going with Jenna?” he asked dragging his thick fingers through his graying brown hair. His light blue eyes were always a little dim, but today, they had a spark...an energy.

“Fine. I figured you’d be getting her progress reports. Is there something going on?”

“I am, but I thought I’d check with you. You seem to be straightening up around here nicely.”

I nodded. No major fights inside the club in a couple of months. Things had been going well with Lina, hell, she was almost to the campus. With only a few more months until graduation, we’d make it there in time.

And Dad was last seen more than seven hundred miles away from here, hopefully following a dead-end trail into a military-sized trap. Damn psycho wouldn’t relent. But Marshal seemed confident they’d get him this time and was working closely with Dad’s former sergeant.

“So, what’s up?” I asked. “Everything okay, Bill?”

He glanced around as he stood. “Just wanted to check in. You good?”

“Yeah,” I stood, thoroughly confused. “You sure you are?”

He huffed and lumbered around his desk. “Look, kid. I wanted to let you know... You’re doing good. Keep it up.” He patted me on my back, and none too gently either. “I know you’re going to college to get your fancy degree in that criminal psycho stuff.” He grinned and wheezed out a coughing laugh. “But you do good work here.”

“Thanks. I—”

“Still need to work on that interrupting, though. Let an old man finish a thought, would ya? They don’t stick around in our old mucky brains for very long. You do good around here. And...well, I need a new Cooler here. You’re a great bouncer, man, but you got the skills to be more.”

I knew the two Coolers we had here pretty well. They were bad asses and could knock you to your knees with a glare, but they didn’t. They headed trouble off before us Bouncers needed to come in and clean some clocks.

Most of the time, anyway. If they got involved, something big was going down.

“I thought Drey would be up next for Cooler?”

“He’s like a son to me, you too, boy, but some people aren’t meant to be anything more than a bouncer. Drey’s got that covered, you’re meant to be more.”

“Wow. Not sure what to say.”

“Think about it. It’s quite a bit more pay, higher percentage of tips, but you’ve never really been interested in the money, have you?”

I shrugged. It'd always been more than the money. It was about keeping people safe, making up for what I'd done, all the pain I'd caused Issie's family. Hell, pretty much every penny I brought in doing this gig went to their family.

Anonymously, of course.

"That's why you're going to be a great Cooler." He grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward the door. "Just had to get that anger bit under control."

"Bill...what happened—you said something before about accidentally taking a life."

He stopped, his hand on the doorknob. "Did me a fifteen-year stint for it, too."

"You killed someone."

"Doesn't matter if you didn't mean to or not, you take a life, you got to pay for it."

My gut hollowed out. I'd not paid for it, other than nightmares and guilt, because Marshal stepped in and cleaned up my mess. *Shit.*

"Seems to me you might know a little what I'm talking about already." Bill drilled me with a stare. "Don't you?"

"Does it ever...get easier?"

"Some, but not much, and that's okay. The minute you forget what you did, it'll be too easy to slip back into that way of life. You hear me, boy? You don't ever forget what's happened. You forgive yourself, but never forget. That way you'll never make the mistake again."

I wasn't so sure I'd ever forgive myself, either. Mom and now Jenna had both harped on me to forgive myself, but I couldn't. I didn't deserve that kind of mercy. No, it was better that I stay focused and keep making up for my past.

“Any plans with your little one for Valentine's Day?”

“*Little one?* You know, you're not *that* old, Bill.”

He laughed, his big belly shaking. “Maybe not chronologically, but that's not all that ages a man. I'd never peg you for a twenty-four-year-old.”

That wasn't the first time I'd heard that. “Well, when shit happens, you can either grow up or...well, you just grow up fast.”

Bill eyeballed me a long time, opening his mouth as if to speak a couple times then finally grinned and said, “I know you got someone. You never brought her around here yet. Scared old Bill might run her off?”

“Funny.” I offered my hand for him to shake.

“Thanks, Bill. For everything.”

He grinned as he took it. “Anything you need, boy, you come to me. I got your back. No matter what, you hear me?”

I nodded taking note of the intensity of how he said it. Almost as if he knew more about me than he should. There was no way he could, but still, I couldn't shake the feeling he did somehow.

“Now, let's go get a drink before you run out and sweep your Valentine off her feet.”

I pulled open the door and waved Bill through, totally seeing him in a different light. The old guy never ceased to surprise me, that's for sure. I bet he would have made a great dad to some kid.

He'd killed someone, accidentally, and paid his price. He was a better man for it, stronger, and was helping other idiots like me and Drey. Maybe there was hope for me yet. I'd never done time for what I'd done to Issie, but my brain sure had locked me up as punishment.

And now, for some reason, Fate had given Lina to me. I didn't deserve her or her love, but I had it.

I pulled Bill's door shut and confirmed it was locked, then turned around and rammed shoulders with Sarah.

She spun around, her drink spilling onto the floor, and flopped into my arms.

"Hey, you." She looked at me with glazed over eyes. Her breath reeked of alcohol.

I glanced down the hall where she'd come from. "You okay?"

"Hmmm." She leaned into me more as I worked to step away from her. So trashed, she swayed like a leaf in a windstorm. "Why don't you like me?"

"Sarah." I took another step toward the open space, totally uncomfortable being alone back here with her.

She waivered as she misstepped toward me and reached for my arm.

“Easy there.” I held her forearm and glanced toward the end of the hallway. “Hey, Drey!” Hopefully he could hear me, but the music was at a high point, vibrating the walls around me, no way would he hear me back here.

“Wanna be...” *hiccup*. “My Valentine?”

She lunged forward, dropped her glass, and wove her arms around my neck.

“I got a spot for us in the back room. Come on. I’ll make you feel so good.”

I grabbed her at the waist to push her away. “Sarah, stop. You’re drunk.”

“Just once. I need to have you just once, then I can get you out of my mind.” She licked her lips. “Always...on my mind.” She palmed my zipper and let out a moan.

“Hey!” Grabbing her wrist, I backed up the last two steps. “Drey! Give me a hand here?”

“Ah, shit!” I heard him yell, and I turned around, only he wasn’t alone.

Lina stood there between Bill and Drey with wide eyes.

Ah shit was right.

* * *

Angelina

I was such an idiot. Such a stupid, clueless girl to think I would ever be enough for Hunter. Tears bit at the backs of my eyes, and a swirl of anxiety tightened my chest. I’d worked so

hard to get here. To be in this bar with all these people for Hunter.

At least I knew whose lipstick I'd seen on his shirt on New Year's Eve. There he was holding a tall, skinny, and completely sexy woman in his arms. His hands were on her waist, and they were almost dancing. They couldn't even wait to get to the dance floor.

"Whoa, hold on, Angelina." Drey showed me his palms. "It's not what you think. Just hold on."

"Breathe, girl," Bill said.

He was bigger in person than on Skype, that's for sure. He'd been so sweet working with me to set up this Valentine's Day surprise for Hunter. I'd expected him to be this cuddly teddy bear, instead, he was a tall, ferocious wall of muscle, but his smile was as genuine in person as it was online.

"That's Sarah, and she's had a thing for Hunter since day one."

"Obviously." I glanced back to the door. "I think...I should...go." Dang it, I was losing my breath. *No panic attacks*. This wasn't only a panic attack edging toward the surface—it was my heart shattering in my chest.

I couldn't give Hunter what he needed, and I may never be able to. Was I being selfish even trying to? He was an incredible man and of course other women were going to throw themselves at him. Probably did every night he was on shift. He couldn't resist them forever. He deserved more.

"Lina!" Hunter called out from across the room as Drey peeled that woman off him.

I stepped back, suddenly not feeling so brave in my kick ass boots, black leggings and form-fitting long sleeved shirt. Having stood in front of the mirror and changing five times to find my power outfit, with Lizzie's help of course, I suddenly felt naked and very unprotected.

Shit.

There You Go, Sober, Let's Get The Party Started.

"You're doing great," Bill whispered. "Stay here. It's not what you think. He's never been into Sarah."

Maybe not, but he was stuck with half a woman. A broken half of a woman at that. A sick-o who'd taken an entire month to get to his club. I was ridiculous.

Chapter Thirty

Angelina

“Lina,” Hunter said again now only two feet separating us. “You’re here?” he glanced at the big guy beside me. “Bill?”

He grinned and stepped away. “She’s all yours.”

“You son of a bitch,” Hunter said with a smile.

Bill chuckled and nodded in my direction. “Take care of her.”

“How’d you do this?” Hunter asked me, his eyes wide with surprise and...pride? “Are you okay?”

I nodded, not sure I could speak yet without sounding like a total idiot. I shifted my focus down and sure enough there was that damn lipstick again. The girl that’d been pawing him wore enough that it was no wonder it’d bled on Hunter’s light blue t-shirt.

I pulled my sleeves down out of habit, fully knowing my scars didn’t show, but still. It was like they flared up at the stupidest times.

“Hey, you sure you’re okay?”

“Happy...Valentine’s Day.” I finally squeaked out. This hadn’t gone as I’d planned, that’s for sure.

“You, too.” He glanced around. “You...did this for me?”

I nodded and glanced around him at Drey and the woman. He was walking with her toward the bar, but the

woman wouldn't stop staring at Hunter...and me. "Who is that?"

He waved his hand at them. "Sarah. She's wasted and very gropey when drunk. Sorry you had to see that."

"She's beautiful." I bit my bottom lip a little harder to try and snap my brain out of this Negative Nellie spiral it started sliding down.

"She's not even in the same stratosphere as you." He stepped forward. "Can I kiss you? You look beautiful."

I looked up at him and smiled. He pressed his mouth to mine, and I positioned my palms on his chest—one of my favorite things to do.

"You're wearing your kick ass boots." He smiled.

"Am I going to have to kick that girl's ass?"

"She's so wasted you could sneeze hard, and she'd fall over. Sorry you had to see that. She's a little out of control."

"I'd say." I squeeze his pecs, and he flexed, which was another thing I loved. "She's into you."

"Yeah." He kissed my forehead. "But I'm into you."

I claimed his lips with a little more force than I'd planned, but he went with it, instantly opening for me. Hunter was mine. I was worthy of him. Sarah was nothing. Seeing them together had been nothing but bad timing.

Hunter was mine. He'd never hurt me.

"I'm tasting candy corn," he whispered.

“Ate the last of it today, but I’m not sure we’re going to find anymore during Valentine’s Day season.” I laughed.

“I can’t believe you’re here. This is *sweet*.” His face glowed. “Let me introduce you around?”

I nodded. It seemed so strange that such a big, macho guy was fawning over a girl like this in front of everyone. I’d always pictured guys as stoic, holding a tight rein on their emotions like my dad and the few guys I’d known before the attack. Not Hunter. He freely held me and kissed me as if he didn’t care who saw. As if he were proud to.

Hunter truly did treasure me.

“Hey, Sam, this is my Lina.” Hunter knuckle bumped the guy. He was tall, had a pierced nose and shaved head and was sporting some serious ink along the neck.

“Good on ya, mate,” he winked at me as he spoke to Hunter. “She’s a corker.”

Hunter nodded and tugged me along the bar to the other end where a girl was mixing drinks. She had long, stick-straight black hair so dark it held a hue of blue, but there was a streak of hot pink through her bangs. “Hey, Gabriella. This is Angelina.”

“What’s up, *chica*??”

I smiled at her and said, “*Nada mucho*.”

She smiled and said, “*Buenas noches*.”

“Wait, you know Spanish?” Hunter turned me toward him.

“You just heard the extent of it.”

I couldn't help but smile at his smile. He was so happy his face nearly glowed. He'd really wanted me to come down here, hadn't he?

Drey came strutting toward us. "Dude, sorry I missed it. You surprised?" He punched Hunter in the shoulder.

"You were in on this?"

"Hell yeah. Me and your girl, we're tight." He nodded toward me.

Hunter quirked an eyebrow up, still smiling of course.

"I called in, talked to him and Bill to work it out." I smiled big and said, "Surprise!"

"This is the best ever."

"Dang, you really do have him whipped. He's like a giddy little girl."

Hunter punched Drey in the gut, then pushed him in the chest. "Zip it, douche bag."

I laughed as I stepped closer to Hunter. It sure was getting full in here. I hadn't thought a bar would be a choice place to bring a Valentine for a date or romantic evening. Clearly, I was wrong. The room sort of closed in about three notches tighter over the past ten minutes.

The DJ cut in and said, "For all you love birds out there...enjoy."

The familiar song, *Until The End Of Time*, poured out the speakers, and I heard a few squeals as couples jumped up.

"Is this your doing, too?" Hunter asked.

I nodded and said, “Wanna dance?”

“Always.”

“Drey, grab us some Cokes and block off a VIP section?”

“Already done, dude,” he said, pointing to the second-floor loft area overlooking the dance floor. “Just don’t make me give up my Man Card for setting all this up. On second thought, I should take yours!”

“Ass,” he said guiding me toward the floor.

“Wow. He’s hilarious,” I said.

“Good guy.” He spun me around then drew me into his big arms. “Lina, this is mind-blowing. How’d you do all this? I’m...shocked.”

“Over the last month I’ve been working at it.”

“I was wondering what was going on with you. I knew something was up but couldn’t quite put my finger on it.”

“And here I thought I was hiding it so well.”

He pulled me so close I had to straddle his leg. He held me tight for the entire song and well into the next one before he loosened his hold a fraction. It was like he was holding on for dear life. I loved it, but something about it felt off. Like maybe he was afraid I’d have a meltdown or something.

I hated he always had to worry about me.

“I thought the guy was the one who was supposed to go all romantic for the girl on Valentine’s Day?”

“I kind of make that difficult with all my...quirks, you know?”

He smiled.

“You must get sick of that.”

“Not in the least.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I love being here with you. Showing you off to my friends.”

“You’re pretty well liked around here.”

“It’s like a second family, almost. I’ve never had anything like this.”

“Because of your dad. Was it a rule like the no women?”

“Not that I follow my rules.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “But yeah. I...Lina, I never let myself get close to anyone for two reasons. First, yeah, was my dad. Second, if I don’t care about anyone, I won’t snap if they get hurt.”

“Snap. As in your temper.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s really that bad.”

“Isabella is proof of that.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

He grunted.

“You’re a different man, now.” I pressed my forehead to his neck. “You’re the most gentle, kindest, and selfless person I know.”

“Because of you.”

“I might help bring that out a little, but it’s still you.” I tapped his chest as the slow song bled into another.

He hugged me tight and touched feather-light kisses along my neck. It ignited a subtle hum in my abdomen that swirled with sparks of electricity tingling below the surface. I lost myself in the gentle sway he settled into and hugged him tighter, needing to be closer to him.

Everything else disappeared. There wasn’t anyone around us, no sounds, no nothing. In our own little cocoon, nothing could touch me but him. No memories. No pain. No history.

Just us and our future.

We could have one. I was bound and determined to have one. My doubt tried to leak in earlier when I saw him with Sarah and steal this moment, but no more.

“If you keep that up, I’m going to have trouble keeping my hands off you much longer,” Hunter whispered into my ear as he drew the lobe into his mouth.

It was then that I realized my hands were in his back pockets, and I was practically grinding against him. “Oh my gosh.” I went to step back, but he kept me close, locking me to him.

“Don’t. I like you exactly where you are.” He slid his hand to my lower back and pressed me closer. “You’re so sexy. And I’m so proud of you. If we were at your place, I’d show you just how proud.”

A thrill shot through my chest. “Is there...someplace here we can go?”

He leaned back, and his eyes were wide as if questioning what I'd said. Heck, I was too, but I wouldn't mind being a little closer to him right now either. My heart jumped to race pace as he looked at me with a heated stare.

"Are you sure, Lina? It's—that's a big step." His voice was deeper, raspy. I'd recognized that sound before. He really did want me, didn't he? It was weird how much that empowered me. Gave me strength.

"I'm feeling brave...and a little turned on," I whispered.

"Lina..." He grabbed my hand and hurried me off the dance floor. I glanced over my shoulder and was stunned by how many people had been dancing. I'd not even noticed, and even now, I didn't care how many people were around me. It was so freeing not having the weight of anxiety or panic attacks on my chest. I felt like I could face the world right now and beat back every demon with my bare hands.

My heart picked up, and my face warmed at the thought of being close with Hunter again. I'd never pictured myself as someone who'd escape to a dark corner of a bar, but —

Hunter stopped in front of a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY and pushed it open. It was a small room that had a toilet on the far end and a row of lockers on the joining wall with a bench in front of them. Further back was a small shower stall.

He closed the door, clicked the lock, then turned to face me. "Lina—"

I pushed up and silenced him with a kiss as I threaded my arms around his neck. A guttural moan vibrated through his body and filtered into my chest. That only hitched up my excitement even more.

He spun me around, and I felt a wall against my back. “Okay?” His breath was hot against my neck. “Don’t...want to...scare you.”

“I’m good.”

“I want you so bad right now.”

A jolt of panic zipped through me, but as quickly as it came, it fled, chased away by Hunter’s kisses.

“No sex...just...Need to touch you more.” He shoved his hand up my shirt, and I offered my arms. He whipped my shirt off and stared at me with wide eyes. “Black lace.”

“Was hoping you’d see...” My chest heaved with excitement. “More of me tonight.”

“Shouldn’t be here, though.”

Heat coiled up my core and tightened around my chest, making my lungs feel two sizes too small. This time it wasn’t from fear...it was from excitement. Hunter treasured me. Respected me. There was no dominance involved, only a sense of tenderness, wanting to be closer.

“I love you, Lina,” he said as he kissed a trail down my neck and pulled me flush against him. “Thank you...for this.”

“Show me what to do, Hunter. I trust you.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Hunter

“You’re not staying for the green beer?” Drey asked me.

“Please. I don’t even drink beer when it’s normal color, let alone green. Besides, you’re not Irish.”

“Who the hell cares? It’s an occasion to drink!” Drey smacked my shoulder. “Your girl coming down here or what?”

“No. I’m heading to her,” I said, then finished the last of my Coke.

“Cool man.” Drey drained his fourth beer. “I’ll down a few for ya.”

“You do that. I’ve got some green drinks lined up for Lina.”

“You got the ring?” Bill leaned back to see me around Drey.

I patted my front pocket. I’d taken it out of the box because *hello bulge* would give it away.

“I can’t believe you’re popping the question on St. Patrick’s Day.” Drey shook his head.

“I’m not popping the question tonight. Just picked up the ring.” But for how nervous I felt, I would have thought I was proposing tonight. “You know. Taking the next step *toward* proposing.”

Drey scoffed. “That makes no sense.”

Might not to him, but it did to me. It wasn’t like I could propose to Lina when I still hadn’t told her about the

witness protection program. I mean, come on.

But tonight was the night I was going to tell her.

She'd come so far in her treatment and I knew she could handle it. I knew I could trust her with it. She was so strong. I'd wanted to tell her for so long, but Marshal always shot me down.

But no more. I had Mom's blessing, too.

So, this ring would soon be on Lina's finger. But first, I was going to tell her everything. Tonight.

"You're lucky as shit you know that?" Drey said, staring at his now empty mug.

"Of course he does!" Bill stood while Drey swiveled on his bar stool, so we all faced each other. "Don't you, boy?"

"Oh yeah. I do." I patted his shoulder. "And no, Drey, I'm not giving you my Man Card."

"Don't worry. It's safe and sound with you, man."

Maybe Drey was finally getting it. Finding the perfect woman you want to spend the rest of your life with doesn't mean giving up your Man Card, it actually makes it even stronger. The romance, doing dumb stuff for love, sacrificing things for your woman...none of that makes a man weak. It makes him stronger.

"She's lucky, too." He glanced around, then waved to Sam for another drink. "You're a good guy, man."

"Don't go all hug-happy on me."

He coughed, then let out a loud laugh. "Don't worry. So not going there. Bill might, though. He's touchy feely like

that.”

He smacked the back of Drey’s head. Those two cracked me up.

“No, it’s true, man. You’re the shit. You’re real and that’s cool,” Drey said.

For a guy who joked about everything and was rarely serious, I felt the sincerity in his words. Bill stared at him as well but had a slight grin on his face.

My phone vibrated in my front pocket, and I dug it out while flicking Drey’s shoulder. “Thanks, man. There’s a Lina out there for you.”

“Hey, before you go running out,” Bill said as he led me a couple of steps away from Drey. “I was working on the Cooler paperwork, and something came up on your social security number. I must have misread the number or something. Can you—”

Another text vibrated, and I glanced down.

911 Happy Man

“Shit,” I yelled as I turned and ran toward the front door.

My blood went to an instant rage and stormed through my head as my heart exploded within my chest.

“Hunter. What’s up?” Drey chased after me, and I heard Bill’s lumbering footsteps close behind as well. “Hold up, man.”

I pushed through the crowd zeroing on the door, needing to get there faster. To get home. To get to Lina. *Shit.*

Finally to the door, I tore through it and bolted to my SUV as I tapped Siri to life, and ordered, “Call Marshal.”

“Hunt!” Drey yelled. “What’s up?”

“Stay here, man. I gotta go.” I waved him off without looking.

“Hunter. Kid, what’s—”

I hopped into my car and squealed out of the lot just as Marshal picked up the call. “He’s here.”

“What the hell, Marshal? Where? Is Mom—”

“Where are you? I’m coming to your place with a team of guns.”

Like that’d matter. They’d failed when they’d tried to get him last time. There was no stopping this asshole.

“Shit!” I hammered the steering wheel as I swerved around the corner, narrowly missing a parked car. “Where. Is. He?”

“Popped up about six miles south of town four minutes before I texted you. Heading north.”

“How’d you find him?”

“Asshole looked right at some cameras at a gas station. Looked *right* at them, Hunter.”

“Mother fu—” I needed to calm the hell down or I wasn’t going to be any good to anyone. “Where?”

“Head home. What’s your ETA?”

“Seven minutes if I don’t get pulled over for speeding.”

“I’m clearing the way for you. We’ll get there about the same time.”

“Does she know?”

“I’ve alerted hotel security. They’ve locked down the elevators and swept the stairwells. All is clear. I’ve got two on your floor. It’s only your two apartments up there. Elevator and stairwell are covered.”

“By pansy-assed rent-a-cops.” Everything in my life was about to explode, wasn’t it?

“Only for another six minutes. Even if your dad breaks every speed limit, he won’t beat us there. Focus, Hunter. I need you coherent. Your Mom and Angelina need that, too.”

Shit. “You think he knows about Lina?”

“We have to assume he does. Son of a bitch seems to know everything.”

“What’d the army guys say?” I jerked the steering wheel so hard the tires squealed turning the corner off the highway.

“Same bullshit.”

“Nobody has any idea how to contain this fucker, do they? What’s the plan?”

“Relocation.”

“Not an option, Marshal, I’ve already told you that.” No way would I leave Lina. Ever.

“Then it’s lockdown or move to a safe house.”

“If anything happens to Mom or Lina—”

“It won’t.”

“I’m going to make sure it doesn’t, Marshal. You hear me?” I would kill my dad if he even came close to either of them.

“Won’t come to that. You’re in a tactically advantageous situation on that top floor. I have twelve agents on their way. We’ll figure this out.”

“See you in three minutes.” I ended the call no more hopeful Dad wouldn’t get through those guys than Marshal sounded.

That son of a bitch had evaded them, and the military team assigned to apprehending him for three years. He’d found us in every new location we’d moved to and still hadn’t gotten caught.

The definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over expecting different results, and so far, we’d proven that theory true. But I was done moving. We were staying and, one way or another, my dad was going down.

Whether it was by Marshal’s hand or mine. I would keep my family safe.

* * *

Angelina

I stood behind the front desk working on a computer meltdown when a swarm of men dressed in black suits came through the doors. Three stopped after entering and remained near the doors.

One turned as he scanned the area, and I saw an earpiece. He was huge, and I recognized a familiar bulge at his side—he was packing. I glanced at Doug and asked, “What’s up?”

“Nothing’s on the docket. No high-profile peeps coming until tomorrow morning.” He walked around the counter and toward the remaining seven storming toward the front desk. “May I help you?”

The tall guy with ginger hair in a buzz cut started talking, but I couldn’t make out what he said, only saw that his red eyebrows were furrowed as he spoke.

“Marshal!” A familiar voice echoed through the lobby. It was Hunter’s. I knew it immediately, only it was pressured, forceful.

The red head whipped around, and the team moved as a unit toward him as he darted through the lobby toward the stairwell.

Gasps sounded as the hotel patrons watched the organized commotion. Everyone in black moved as if they knew this dance, but how could Hunter? He knew these people?

My gut tightened, and I darted around the corner of the table. “Hunter!”

The door shut as I shouted, but the red head and two of the guys turned around to face me. “Step away, miss. This —” The red head reached for me. I jumped back, nearly tripping on my clogs. “Angelina Raine?”

“Who—”

“She’s clear,” he said to the guy beside him. “Stay on her. Top priority. Let’s go.”

“Wait. What’s—where’s Hunter?”

“Elevator.” He pointed.

“I am not getting on that with you.”

The guy pressed the up button and tapped his ear. “Marshal here. On elevator six, three plus one civ.”

“Listen—”

He whipped around and said, “If you want to see Hunter, you’ll get in this elevator right now.”

“What the hell is going on?”

He nodded to one of the guys in fatigues, and he reached for me. I swiped my forearm in time to deflect and slammed my heel on his foot then palmed his chin.

I spun around and darted toward the counter, “Doug! Call security—”

A firm hand curled around my bicep. “Don’t,” the man said. “I won’t hurt you, Angelina, but your actions may cause Hunter and Lisa harm. Be still. I’ll take you to him.”

Eyes the shade of green that fills the air right before a tornado stared down at me. It felt like that right now. He knew Hunter and Lisa, he was packing heat and was with an organized group of men, which meant he was law enforcement of some sort.

Hunter’s dad was here.

“You can trust me.”

“Who are you?”

“Marshal Smith.”

“That’s supposed to mean something?”

“So, he didn’t tell you after all.”

“Tell me what? What the hell is going on?”

“I’m his handler.” He glanced around as he spun me toward the elevators. “Simon. Jones. Deal with security and front desk. Minimal disruption.” They nodded and darted off toward Doug. “Angelina. I’m Marshal Smith with the witness protection program.”

“The witness...”

“Hunter’s dad is in town and less than a minute away from this hotel if my calculations are right. Please get in this elevator so I can get you to Hunter before he goes off the handle when he doesn’t find you at home.”

“Hunter,” I gasped and took off toward the elevator. The door opened and Marshal, along with two more guys filed in. Holy cow, how many were there?

I stabbed the 21st floor button as I swiped my VIP card. “Hurry. Please.” I dug into my back pocket, then swiped my phone alive and entered my code. I pulled up a text to Hunter. *I’m safe. With Marshal. Coming to you.*

“You know him pretty well, don’t you?”

“Thought so.” I glanced at the numbers flashing their way toward the one I so desperately needed to see. He was in witness protection? How could—he never told me! Damn it. He lied—

“He said he was going to tell you everything on Christmas Day. I told him he couldn’t, but...I thought he would anyway.” Marshal shook his head. “He actually listened to me.”

I huffed, wavering between anger and fear and rage. Christmas Day? That was almost four freaking months ago. I’d shared everything with him. Had even told him more about my attack. And my body...we’d not had sex, but the things I let him do to me. Things I’d done with him.

Heat steamed up my cheeks, and a heavy pressure weighed down my chest. *Shit!*

Chapter Thirty-Two

Angelina

“Get behind me.” Marshal stepped in front of me, gun drawn.

Immediately I was yanked back to the day I was rescued from that horrible house. That prison. Teams of police barged in with guns. Shots fired. Screams.

My world tilted, and I grabbed onto the railing behind me. Stay focused. *Sober. Try. Long Way To Happy.*

The vacant eyes of the monster who’d abused me the most flashed in my mind. His last attempt to end me as the SWAT team came down on him. His crazy, wild screams.

The elevator slowed and Marshal stiffened, his arms rising. “Get to the side,” he said as he moved. I followed, ducking, and working to not puke up the blueberry muffin I’d just eaten. The small box shrunk, pressing down on my chest, stealing the oxygen I needed. No. No. I had to stay strong.

Breathe. Focus.

The elevator stopped, and the world slowed as the doors started rolling open. Four guys, with their guns raised greeted us. They kept their weapons aimed toward the elevator as Marshal stepped toward the door, me close behind.

“Angelina!” Hunter yelled as he barged out from his house. “Shit.”

He shoved the guys out of the way, the last one being Marshal and yanked me into his arms. Crushing me with a hug, he buried his face in my hair. “Lina. Lina. Are you

okay?” He pulled his face from my neck. “Get the fuck out of here. Give us room.”

Marshal backed away, ushering his men with him.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Hunter said over and over as he held me. “God, Lina.”

“Lisa?”

“Mom’s fine.” He leaned back analyzing me with an intense stare. “Are you? Are you okay? I thought you’d be up here. And when you didn’t answer. You weren’t in your apartment. I—I’m sorry. I—where were you?”

“Helping the front desk.” I loosened my grip. “What the hell is going on?”

“I’m sorry, Lina.” He glanced over his shoulder into the hallway then grabbed my hand and led me out of the elevator. “Dad’s in town. I thought—” He shook his head. “He got to you. You were gone.”

I looked down the hall. My door hung from its hinges and splinters of wood were scattered around the carpet. My stomach soured, bile rising. *Bad Influence, Stupid Girls, Sober.* Hunter reached for me, and that’s when I noticed his bloody knuckles, the crazed look in his eyes.

“I want every guest checked out. Picture IDs at the front desk. Change all the door codes so everyone must come get a new key. And the VIP code. Everything.” Marshal turned toward Hunter and me. “Pack up. We’re leaving in sixty minutes.”

“No!” I shook my head. “No. No. No.” I pushed away from Hunter and ran into his apartment. “Lisa!”

She rushed off the couch and wrapped me into a warm hug. “Shhh.” She petted my hair. “It’s okay. We’re fine.”

“We’re not fine, Lisa. Not fine!” A vise tightened around my chest, instant and intense pressure.

The walls slanted toward me.

“Lina,” Hunter said from behind me as two guys followed him into the apartment. Marshal shut the door, boxing me in. So many people. So close. Too close.

“Look at me, Lina,” Hunter said. “You’re fine.”

He took a deep breath, and I went to do the same, but I coughed.

“Try again.” He knelt before me while Lisa stayed beside me, her arm around my shoulder. “In.” He reached for my hand, and a flash of silver caught my attention. I grabbed his hand with mine, so I saw both of our rings.

Our rings. What a bunch of bullshit. He’d lied to me. How could I gather strength from lies? Deception?

“There you go,” Hunter said. “In. Out. Nice and slow.”

Shuffling beside me drew my attention.

“No. Face me, Lina. Focus. Doesn’t matter what they’re doing. They’re nothing. Nobody.”

I focused on my right hand so close to his. The silver. The emblem. The strength it meant. I was strong. “Wonder twin...” deep breath. “Powers...” deep exhale. “Activate.”

Hunter smiled. “So, it’s not P!nk songs anymore?”

“This works...better.” I blew out another long breath. But now it also hurt more. Because he’d lied.

“Nicely done,” Mom said. “That was a whopper.” She scowled at Marshal. “You and your grunts didn’t help things by barging in and boxing her into that elevator.”

I saw a flare of rage swarm over his mom’s normally bright, calm eyes. Yeah, Hunter didn’t get his temper from only his dad. His mom was a tough little thing, too.

“The floor is secure, sir,” a guy said from behind Hunter, but I couldn’t see him. Didn’t want to, either. Damn black clothing. Some wore fatigues, others wore suits. What the hell was going on?

“Forty-two minutes to exit.” Marshal nailed Hunter with a stare so sharp it would have sliced through leather like butter. “We need to leave.”

“Hunter. I...can’t. I—”

“Shhh,” he said standing up and taking my hand. “I told you Marshal, we’re not going. You said yourself this place was secure.”

I couldn’t leave. Hell, I’d made it to only a block before the campus. Tomorrow was going to be the day I made it all the way. Maybe even a step inside the library. I couldn’t go somewhere with these...strangers.

Even Hunter was a stranger to me right now. I thought he’d told me everything about his life. I knew about his dad and how dangerous he was and how he’d chased Lisa and Hunter from town-to-town over the years. But to never tell me they were in witness protection.

Wait...was Hunter even his real name? My stomach clenched at the thought. *Oh, God.* I needed to get home. Into my house. My space. I—shit!

Marshal's eyes ping-ponged between Lisa and Hunter. "Mom, you agree?"

"Hunter stays. I go."

"That's not going to happen." Hunter reached for her as he held me, but I pulled my hand out from his. "We're together."

"It's not up for discussion." She nodded to Marshal. "I'm packed. One bag on the bed."

Marshal waved a soldier to go get it, then stepped back to the door as if he knew Mom and Hunter were going to have words.

She looked from me to Hunter, then back to me. "It's me Christopher wants. If I'm apart from you, then you two are safe."

"No," Hunter said.

"It's only until they catch him. One person in a safe house, that's better. Easier to guard." She glanced at Marshal. "We've already discussed it."

"What?" Hunter said. "No!"

"I knew you'd object so Marshal and I worked it out ahead of time. It's already done. Even you won't know the location. He'll find it and come after me. We'll be ready." She glanced at me.

“I will not have you as bait.” Hunter’s voice rattled, almost sounding like he was growling.

She grabbed Hunter’s hand and mine. “It won’t be long. Marshal will stay in touch.”

“But—” Hunter shook his head. “Mom. I...don’t know what to do.”

“Nothing. You’ll live your life...with a few guards for a while, but you’ll keep moving. We’re going to grab your dad before graduation, and I’ll be back in time to see your walk-through ceremonies. I promise.”

“You can’t make promises like that,” he said.

“Then I’ll make it,” Marshal said, stepping beside Mom. He put his arm around her shoulder and nodded. “I’ll make it, so she doesn’t have to worry about Christopher again.”

I wasn’t sure if Hunter saw it, but I did, Marshal cared for Lisa...and more than as a client.

Mind whirling, I stepped away from Hunter and Lisa. Pressure bloomed along my chest and around my heart. It’d broken a little finding out Hunter had lied. He’d dragged me into something so much bigger than he’d alluded to.

“I...need to...go,” I said between shallow breaths.

Hunter reached for me, but I flinched out of range. “Lina, please—”

“I’ll take her,” Lisa said, nodding me to the door. She didn’t try to touch me, so she must have seen my confusion. My anger. I hated that feeling. It was dark and depressing. For

so long I'd been angry with my attackers—with *everything*. I'd been locked in depression and darkness, and believe it or not, I felt it creeping back into my chest like a fifteen-pound weight.

“Lina, wait. I—”

“Back off, Hunter.” His mom waved him back and gave him a stern glare. He stopped, his eyebrows furrowed and watched me.

I turned around and ran toward the door. The gun-toting guys dodged out of my way, and I blasted around the corner toward my apartment. My sanctuary. Just a few more steps, and I'd be able to breathe again. To see straight.

Hopefully. Hunter had shattered my door. What if this place wasn't safe for me anymore? Hunter's mom followed me through the broken door but paused. “Jonsey. Get a door up here now. Three locks and three chains. Make it happen five minutes ago.”

My heart calmed a notch as I stood in my familiar space. I took in a deep breath and caught Hunter's scent. He'd been here last night as I taught him how to cook lasagna. There was still a fresh scent of food, his cologne and candy corn sugar. He rarely came over without bringing a bag of candy.

“Honey?” Lisa's voice was quiet, but close.

I whirled around, fighting the sting in my eyes. She didn't need to deal with my psychosis when her psychotic ex-husband was after her. “I'm okay.”

“No, you’re not.” She reached for me, but I stepped back. “He was going to tell you tonight. Tell you everything.”

My stomach soured, and it felt like I had a weight on my chest.

“I’m sorry, Angelina. I know Hunter hates that you’re dragged into this danger now. Feels responsible.”

“He is,” I whispered. “He should have told me.” Not that the knowledge could have shut off my feelings for him, but still. Starting a relationship with lies?

He’d doomed us from the minute he chose not to be honest.

“We’ve kept our secret for so long, and this was the first time he’d ever *wanted* to tell someone, to break our cover.” She grinned. “For you.”

“He lied. He—is his real name even Hunter?”

Her face went pale, and she looked to the side.

“Oh my God. I don’t even know his real name.” I backed away. “Or yours, do I?”

“Angelina, wait.” She stepped toward me. “You have to understand. He couldn’t—”

“Please leave.” I stepped toward my desk and grabbed my iPad. I needed to talk to Lizzie. Maybe even Jenna after the crap that’d just gone down. My room would be safe. I had locks on that door. “Please, Lisa. This is...my space. My haven. Don’t ruin that for me more than Hunter already has.”

She stopped. “Angelina.”

I shook my head as I started for my bedroom. “Just go. Go!”

Silence hung heavy for a few minutes before I heard shuffling. “I’ll have a door here for you in less than an hour. Four guards are here for you, backs to your door, until that happens. They won’t take a step inside. You’ll be safe.”

The tenderness in her voice wasn’t lost on me despite my anger and my fear. She really did care and want me safe. I had no doubt Hunter did, too, but how was I going to get past the lies?

How was I ever going to feel safe again?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Hunter

I sat in class staring at my phone more than listening to the psychology of deviant sex offenders. If only Lina would call, text, anything. It could be a totally cursing, yelling, whatever interaction, I didn't care, as long as I heard something from her.

It'd been two weeks since Marshal and his team of gun-toting morons had ruined things for me and Lina. Two weeks that her engagement ring had been burning a hole in my pocket. I kept it with me 24/7. It made me feel closer to her somehow.

I couldn't blame Marshal and his team, though. This was my fault. First, it was my fault for letting her in, second, by not telling her way back during Christmas when I'd decided to.

Shit.

"Dude. You're going to break the desk," Jose said as he smacked my shoulder.

My free hand was gripping the armrest so hard I heard metal groaning. I checked my phone one more time, then set it face down on the desktop. Tanking this class wasn't an option so I needed to get focused.

I glanced to the door and saw one of my permanent escorts standing there, hands clasped in front of him at the main door. Marshal promised I'd only have a guard for a week

...two weeks ago. Not to mention Lina's guard. He never moved from her door. Probably because she'd not left.

Not once.

I'd set her back so badly. *Damn it.* What could I do to get her out of her house? She only had a couple of months until graduation to get on campus here and the walk-through ceremonies. I couldn't let her miss that goal because I fucked up.

My phone vibrated, and I whipped it over.

Just a text from Marshal.

We're fine.

I'd sworn him to three texts a day telling me they were okay. He'd been religious about it and that both reassured me and pissed me off. He was with Mom. Knew where she was, and I didn't. It was the first time since we'd run from dad that I wasn't in control.

And it sucked monkey balls!

"Let me guess. A chick dumped you." Jose snickered as he faced the professor.

Only ten more minutes until class was over, then I was headed straight to Lina's to sit outside her door again. I hated that she was stuck in her house, even more because I was the cause of it.

My phone vibrated again, and it was a text from Drey.

Stansey called in sick. You up for a shift?

Dang it. I should take this shift, but instead I typed, *Can't, got plans.*

Say Hi to Angelina, he replied.

He and Bill didn't know about our breakup, and I sure as shit wasn't going to tell them. I'd been scarce at work these past two weeks because I didn't need Dad showing up there. Then again, maybe that'd be good. Bill, Drey and I would take him out.

Yeah, I could tell Bill. That guy had been through some rough shit with his murder case and time in prison. He might have some advice. Maybe I should go in today after all.

I tapped a new message open to George, the guy guarding Lina's door. *Okay?*

A few seconds later I got a reply, *Good*.

So, everyone was safe at the moment. Yeah, I should go into work. I opened a message to Drey. *Dude. I can do it.*

Sweet. See you soon.

I glanced at the time. I'd have just enough to get home, changed and to the club. While it sucked Lina was homebound again, I was glad she wasn't out and about. If I was watching every shadow, checking every alley, I couldn't imagine how she'd be.

I breezed through class without hearing another word, and as I was packing up my back to leave Jose asked, "Seriously, man. You cool?"

"Yeah. Shit going on at home. Thanks." I hoisted my bag over my shoulder and hiked it up the rest of the stairs to the top exit. A few stairs down, and I was on the main floor headed toward the building entrance.

It would be dark soon, so I'd like to get in the car and home quick. I rounded the corner into the tunnel that led to the main entrance when I rammed shoulders with someone. A quick turn, and I swiped the legs out from whomever I rammed into. He grunted but cuffed my ankle and pulled. I was too heavy to topple with that move, but it was a good reaction on his part. He was trained.

I knelt, pinning him to the ground with my knee and grabbed his throat. "George?"

I rolled off him and yanked him to his feet. He coughed. "Marshal said you were good, but shit, man."

"What's wrong? Lina okay?" I shook him.

"Come on." He yanked me back to where I'd come from.

Around the corner he put his back to the wall and pushed me with him. "She's coming."

"What the hell is going on? You just texted me telling me she was fine."

"She is, stupid. She's just not at home."

"Start talking right this second or I'm going to bust a gasket." I gulped through the rage thrumming my veins. Slow down. Slow. Slow.

"She's been practicing this past week. Made it to campus today."

"What?"

George peeked around the corner. "Shut it. She doesn't know I'm here. I tailed her along with Rick and James.

We got her covered, man.”

“But she doesn’t know.”

“You kidding me. She almost used her kick ass boots to kick me in the balls when I’d mentioned I would be watching over her as she did this.”

I laughed. So, she was wearing her kick ass boots, huh? I wondered what else she was wearing, and I absolutely hated the fact that George knew about her kick ass boots in the first place. Hated the fact that he’d had more contact with her than I had.

“Okay. She’s coming.” He backed us up.

“What’s her plan?”

“Attending her first class.”

“What? At night? How the hell are you even considering letting her do that?”

“There’s no stopping her, man. She’s like a force to be reckoned with.” He shook his head. “There. Around the corner of the little post office. Her room is 212.”

We bolted up ahead, and I held my breath. Lina walked around the corner, her head held high and her back straight. She looked like Lara Croft right off the Tomb Raider movie with her black pants, black kick ass boots, a white shirt under her black leather jacket. Her confidence held an angry edge, though, and her brown eyes a little colder.

Her lips drew my attention as she nibbled her bottom lip, the only sign of her insecurity. I checked her hand, wondering if she’d worn the ring I’d given her.

She had. Her thumb rubbed the silver band constantly, and that gave me a sense of pride thinking she might be rubbing that for courage. Even after hurting her so badly and her refusing to talk to me, she still used our rings for strength.

What I wouldn't do to put this other ring on her finger...but that seemed a distant dream right now considering I'd been reduced to hiding to catch a glimpse of her.

"You said she's been practicing all week?"

"Swore me to silence."

"Shit, George. Are you kidding me?"

"No, man. But don't worry. I've had men on her every step." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Marshal's calling."

"Take it. I'll watch."

"George here," he said and stepped back, keeping an eye on Lina.

He was a good soldier. Lina glanced around for a brief second, then forward again. I saw the determination in her eyes. She was going to bust through this last obstacle. Going to class? I wanted to rush her and give her a big hug. I was so proud of her.

She turned down the next hallway toward the stairwell that would lead to her room. I should know, I'd just come from that area. Her class was in a big auditorium. I might be able to watch over her in there without her knowing.

And I would, too. Missing her wasn't even close to the correct word to describe the void in my life these past two

weeks. I'd been a pathetic excuse for a human without her.

But I deserved it. I'd screwed up beyond measure.

I glanced at George and waived him back. We'd have to go on the parallel hallway to beat her to the stairwell.

George's eyes went wide, and my gut dropped.

"What?"

"Shit." George took off down the hallway. Gone was the stealth and at the front was worry. Wide-eyed and full-on worry.

I took off after him. "What's happening?"

I glanced around searching for Lina. She was nearly to the first set of stairs on the stairwell leading to the second floor. She shot a look over her shoulder, then flinched. Three tall guys who looked like they should be on a division one basketball team stormed toward her.

She stopped, wither hands fisted at her side. She looked around, but then landed her focus on the guys. Always alert, aware, proactive, like I'd taught her.

I watched the guys advance on her as George and I stormed along the hallway. They wouldn't do anything in broad daylight with all these students around, would they?

The guys were closer to her than us, and I opened my mouth to yell for her to run, but she took off up the stairs. She hoofed it two at a time, grabbing the railing. Yes, the top floor, that would be even more busy. Good thinking, Lina. Get to more people.

The three guys charged after her. “Hey!” I yelled. The last one glanced in my direction, but then turned and followed the rest of his goons up the stairs.

“Rick. James. Coming toward you. Three of them. Six eight, two hundred pounds. Armed at the left hips. Hunter and I are tailing them up.”

Armed? I hadn't noticed that. *Shit*. I turned on the speed and reached the last thug before he got a good start up the stairs. I fisted my hand in the shoulder of his jacket and yanked him back. George went up the stairs for the next one.

I spun and kicked my guy in the gut. His back rammed into the showcase of art awards, and glass shattered everywhere. Screams erupted and people started running in every direction. My guy rolled and hopped to his feet.

He must have been about six foot four and tipping the scales at over two hundred pounds, and he was sporting a snake tattoo up his left arm.

I lunged and grabbed for his throat, red tinting my vision. Rage pounded through my veins so loud it sounded like a raging river in my skull.

Snake Boy deflected my advance and punched my chin. I spun but slammed my hand to his throat as I did. He leaned forward, and I hiked my knee to his nose, shattering it with one hit.

Chopping the back of his neck, I helped his fall forward accelerate. He planted his hand on the slick floor and pushed himself to the side as he kicked up. His foot hit my side, but I grabbed his leg and punched his groin.

I collared his neck, then hoisted him up and pinned him to the brick wall. “Who are you?”

He went to punch me, but I slapped his fist and head butted him. More screams followed, and I knew this wasn't the place to do this, but I had to get some answers. Was he connected to my dad or was he some random dude wanting to hurt my Lina? This didn't make sense.

“Screw you.”

I rammed his head against the wall, and he melted to the ground, unconscious. I took off up the stairs. I had to get to Lina. There'd been two more guys. What if—

I rounded the corner to find Lina facing off with one guy. Her legs were bent and her fists tight at her side. George was lying on the floor on his back, totally motionless, but the other guy was right there with him in unconsciousness.

The bald guy advanced on Lina, but she ducked to the side as she punched his stomach. It didn't stop him, and he wrapped his hands around the back of her neck and pushed her forward.

“Let's go!” he yelled.

Red claimed my vision quicker and faster than it ever had. My heart exploded as I burst toward them. No one touched my Lina. This asshole wouldn't be taking her anywhere. No way. No how.

I tackled the jerk around the legs. Lina, the guy, and I were on the floor in the next breath. Lina yelped and kicked out, her heel colliding with Baldy's cheek. I grabbed his pants at the belt and yanked him away from Lina.

Palming the back of his head, I hammered his face into the concrete floor. Blood spurted from his nose, and I heard a sickening crunch. I rolled the guy on his back and pounded his stomach. He swung at me, but I ducked and hopped up to my feet.

Grabbing his shirt, I yanked him up and tossed his ass at the wall ten feet away. I was on him in the next instant with my forearm across his throat.

“Hunter!” Lina yelled.

“Who are you?” I pushed harder. This guy had about three seconds to talk before he’d permanently lose the privilege to say another word. “You in with Christopher?”

The guy’s eyes flashed with confusion for a second before anger darkened them. He grinned and let out a laugh. “You’re so fucked, man.”

“Screw you. Now talk.” I cuffed his neck and squeezed. “Or so help me I’ll kill you for touching her. You hear me? I will kill you.”

His eyes widened, probably seeing the truth in my words, and he stilled. “Hired. Don’t know by who. Swear.”

I tightened my grip. “You’re lying.”

“No. Man. Did transaction over email. Swear.”

“Hunter!” Lina yelled her voice closer.

“Let him go.” Another voice joined the conversation. “Now.”

I glanced over my shoulder to find two campus security officers pointing their tasers at me.

“Wait.” Lina held up her hand and stepped in the line of the tasers. “That guy was attacking me. Hunter helped me.”

I squeezed Baldy’s neck harder. “Talk.”

He coughed. “Told...you.”

“Hunter.” Lina touched my shoulder. “Let...him...go.”

“He...touched you.”

“Please.” She drew in a breath. “Hunter.”

“Was...going to take you.” I tried to focus through the rage storming my vision. The thought of Lina getting hurt again. Being taken.

“I...need...to go.” Lina’s voice was faint, airy.

I turned around and saw her chest heaving. Tears rimmed her eyes, and her jaw was tight.

“Hunter...” Her knees bent, and she tumbled toward me.

I tossed the guy to the side and dove for Lina as she melted to the floor. Cradling her head so it wouldn’t hit the hard floor, I slid beneath her so she landed on me instead.

“Lina!”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Hunter

The guards hustled toward the guy I'd been holding and aimed their weapons at him.

"Hunter!" George rolled to his side. "Angelina."

Another round of rent-a-cops came hustling in, weapons pulled along with the other two guys from Marshal's team. Where the hell had they been?

Lina lay limp in my arms, unconsciousness slowing her breathing and calming her face. Damn those guys for scaring her so badly.

"She hurt?" George stumbled toward me. Blood dribbled from the side of his mouth.

"No." I waved him off. "Get back. Everyone get back." I held her close, rocking her. "I'm so sorry, Lina," I whispered, pressing my lips to her forehead. "So fucking sorry."

I'd missed how smooth her skin is, her melon scent. No way did I want to reunite with her as a result of some asshole thugs trying to hurt her.

George stood up and started barking orders to security. I zeroed in on Lina, brushing her hair back, kissing her temple, her closed eyes. "You're safe. I got you. I'm never going to let go again."

* * *

Angelina

Sweaty bodies, foul breath, and the stench of week-old tuna saturated my senses. They'd finally left me alone. So tired, I was so tired.

The metallic taste of blood coated my tongue, and I turned to spit. My sore cheek met something soft. The pain lessened for a while as I closed my eyes and disappeared into my mind. I'd lost track of how long I'd been stuck in this stinky basement and the last time I'd eaten. The chill seeped into my bones making me feel brittle and...broken.

Tears stung the back of my eyes, but it hurt too much to let them out because of the cuts on my face. I shifted slightly to ease the pain on my right side, but my hands fastened to the bedpost above my head restricted my movement. A wave of nausea swarmed over me.

A door creaked, and my stomach clenched. They were back. No. No—

“No!” My voice and burning throat yanked me out of the nightmare.

My shirt clung to my chest like a second skin. I pulled the sheets up as I looked around. Familiar pink walls with pictures I'd seen day in and day out for years sent a sense of peace over me.

The blood raging through my brain and my heart hammering drowned out every other noise around me.

My door burst open, and Hunter thundered through, fingers folded into a fist, and his eyes dancing every direction. “Lina?”

I scooted back in my bed, stunned at his presence. And that's when reality hit me spot on the head. I'd been heading to class. Three guys ran after me, chasing me up the stairs. I'd kicked one, but the other, he grabbed me, tried to drag me away.

That was when I saw Hunter. He tackled the guy. Saved me.

"You screamed." He hurried to me and skidded to his knees.

I stared at him, but I couldn't speak as my tongue was thick with dry mouth. He'd come to the campus, he'd found me. After all this time, he was here, by my side. He'd chased my nightmare away, too. I'd not had that dream for a while.

I grabbed the pillow and hugged it to my body.

"You're safe." He glanced around. "Nightmare?"

I nodded. "How are you here?"

He sat back on his heels. "You scared me."

"What time is it?"

"Don't worry about that. You—"

"How long was I out?" Damn it, I'd passed out. I'd made it so far, too. I was on the campus, heading to class! And then all hell broke loose.

"It's morning. You slept all night."

"What happened? Who were those guys?" I shook my head, clearing the sleep and the remnants of the nightmare from my mind.

“Marshal’s team is on it. Not sure.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.” He shook his head. “I swear it.”

I didn’t trust him. He’d lied so perfectly about everything to me, he could be lying now.

“Marshal hasn’t found a connection to my dad. Or anyone. But they targeted you, you know that, right?”

I nodded.

“Recognize any of them?”

I shook my head. Right now, nothing made sense other than this raging thirst drying out my mouth and throat. Still hugging the pillow to my chest, I rolled out of bed.

“Lina?”

I cringed at the sound of my nickname coming from his mouth. Not that it sounded bad, it didn’t, it sounded like heaven, but that’s why it hurt so badly. “Thirsty,” I said as I stomped out of the bedroom.

Being away from him these past weeks had been good because my heart didn’t hurt so badly at the sight of him. It stung, still, thinking about him, missing him, but now it was even worse with him here in my space. His stormy-fresh scent wrapped around me, and my body went into overdrive, remembering how he felt against me. His touch. His kiss.

I shook my head as I rounded the corner of the center island to the sink. I snatched a glass from the drying rack and filled it up. Maybe cold water would snuff out this fire trying to flame.

“I could have gotten you something to drink.”
Hunter’s voice was close.

I closed my eyes as I finished off the refreshing liquid. “I can get my own water,” I said, setting the glass back down in the sink. I faced the window, taking in the sun shining through.

I heard the bar stool skid across the tile, and I ordered myself not to move despite how much I wanted to. Hell, I wanted to jump into his arms and have him touch me like he had back in the locker room at the bar.

Heat steamed up my neck and gathered at my cheeks at the memory. But also, the embarrassment. We’d gone further than we’d ever had, than I ever had, and then I find out he lied to me about...everything.

And now, when I’d met my goal of getting to the college campus all hell broke loose. That didn’t douse the fire flickering to life in my abdomen. I closed my eyes, taking in a deep breath as I worked to focus on something else.

Anything but Hunter. His lips, his— *Stop it.*

“I’m sorry, Li—”

“Don’t,” I whispered. “Please. Don’t.”

“I have to. Lina, I love you. I can’t—”

“You would have told me if you truly loved me, Hunter.” I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing the stinging tears starting to surface back. “You would have told me.”

I’d shared everything with him. Tried so hard to get better both for myself, and for him. I wanted a normal life, one

with him, but now...I wasn't sure of anything.

“What’s your real name?” I asked. Yes, I needed to stay focused on the lies, the betrayal, so I wouldn’t give into the desire to be with him. To touch him. To kiss him.

“Brett Nelson.”

Brett Nelson. It didn’t sound nearly as nice as Hunter. Or it was just unfamiliar, like Hunter was now.

“But Brett died the day Mom almost died.”

I stayed focused on the clear blue sky, willing its energy into my tired bones.

“I became someone without a name, without a home. All I had were the clothes on my back, my mom, and Marshal. He wiped our history and created a new life for us. At least for a while. But four names, five states, and three years later, here I am, finally ready to stake a claim on a name, a life...on the love of my life, and I screwed it all up.”

Tears started spilling. *Love of his life.*

“Lina. I didn’t plan to meet a woman like you, someone I could see myself spending the rest of my life with. I fought it. Knew it would never work out. Not with what I was, not with the blood of a crazy, violent man running through my veins.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“But I did. I fell so hard, so fast, it scared the shit out of me. I’ve never wanted to stay in a town so badly before. Never had hope for a future or excitement for a ... wife and a family.”

I covered my face with my hands and gave into the sobs fighting to burst out of my throat.

“Please...tell me I can fix this.” The bar stool skidded across the floor again, and I shifted so I could see him along the edges of my vision. “Tell me you can forgive me.”

I wasn't sure I could, though. I wanted to, more than anything. But trust...it meant everything to me. I'd never trusted anyone in three years six months and eight days. And yes, I was back to counting each and every damn minute. I hated that. Hated this situation.

He'd broken my trust—possibly irreparably. I had to stand firm, be strong. For so long I'd been a victim. Weak.

No more. I could stand on my own. Hell, I got to the college campus without Hunter—er—Brett.

But I loved Hunter. That was probably why his lie hurt so badly. Lies, plural. I didn't know his real name, or his mom's. He'd had tons of chances to tell me.

He'd said he shouldn't get involved with me in the beginning, that he wasn't...safe. I truly thought he'd meant because of his temper. His violence.

That I could handle. I'd seen it rear its ugly head a couple of times, and I was able to see past it. Even more than Hunter was. But the lies?

Lies I couldn't get past.

“Lina? Say something.”

My throat closed as I nearly blurted out that I forgave him and jumped into his arms. But logic beat down my heart's

desire. “I think you should leave.”

“But—”

“Now...” I wasn’t sure what to call him. “*Brett.*”

* * *

Hunter

“Careful, Hunter. You’re a Cooler now,” Andy said as he grabbed my elbow. “You identified the threat, Drey’s on it.”

But I needed to pound something. And hard.

I nodded and settled back next to my trainer and surveyed the mob of people crowding the place. It was the end of April, and I could feel the tension of upcoming finals like a pressure cooker ready to blow.

And I was right there with them. Not so much because of school, mostly it was because of Lina. For over three weeks since the attack, she’d ignored every call, text, and never answered the door when I stopped by.

Didn’t stop me, though, I left her candy corn every chance I could get. But soon, I was going to need to accept the fact she was done with me.

I’d crushed the one thing she needed most in her life since the original attack: Trust.

Obliterated it and there was no putting it back together again.

“She’s still not responding, huh?”

I huffed. Whole damn bar knew what was going on with Lina because of Drey’s big mouth. None of them knew

the true reason, my being in witness protection, but they knew that we'd broken up.

I still carried that ring in my pocket though. Every damn day. It's what kept me sane—mostly sane—while I was separated from Mom and Lina, I was out there looking for my dad.

He was in town. His face had shown up a few times according to Marshal. Why those idiots couldn't get him made my blood pressure go up even more. So, I was out there, open to him, hoping he'd come find me. This time, I'd take him down.

I wasn't the young boy he once knew and could push around because he held Mom's fate in his wicked hands. No, I was one pissed off man, ready to end things and win Lina back so I could put this ring on her finger.

That made all the difference—and much more lethal.

"Hunter, why don't you take a break and go cool off. You're giving me a rash." Andy backhanded me in the chest and nodded toward the door. "Fresh air'll do you good."

I glanced at him, and he nodded.

"Crowd will get worse here within the hour, so I need you ready. And less—volatile."

"Thanks," I said as I stepped away.

Fresh air would do me good. I needed to check in with Marshal and George, who was stationed on Lina's door again. Drey knuckle bumped me on my way out. He didn't say anything, but I saw the sadness in his eyes. He liked Lina, too, and felt bad for me.

It was my own fault. I should have told her back in December, but I let Marshal talk me out of it. I stomped past the line of people waiting to get in and turned into the alley. It was well lit, part of the club and its safety measures, but it would work. I closed my eyes and sagged against the building, listening to the thumping music filtering through the brick.

The cool air sifted through my thin, long-sleeved shirt and sent a chill through me. I slid out my phone and voice activated Marshal's phone number so I wouldn't have to open my eyes.

"Marshal, here."

"We good?"

"Yes, for the fourth time tonight."

"How's Mom?"

"Fine."

"Anything more on Dad?"

"I wish. That prick is like Casper." Marshal grunted into the phone. "I've even taken your mother out to dinner a few times to see if anything happens."

"You did not just tell me you're using Mom for bait." My eyes snapped open, and a wave of raged stormed through me.

"You know your mom better than anyone. Once she gets an idea into her head..."

"Shit, Marshal. You can't be—"

"Don't worry, son. I won't hurt Lisa."

I spun around to find my father standing across from me, leaning against the other building, and I almost crushed my phone.

“Don’t say a word.” He clicked the top of his mouth with his tongue.

“Yeah...I know.” I shifted the phone to my left hand, leaving my strongest one free. “Marshal...I have to get back to studying. Finals and all...”

“Studying. You’re at work right now, aren’t—”

“Got that Abnormal Psych test Monday, need to study up on how to subdue the psychotic patient.”

“Shit!” Marshal yelled into the phone. “Fucker’s there. Keep him there. Timms. Jonsey. Ricks. Happy Man 911 at Hunter’s club.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hunter

“Thanks. I’m pretty certain I’ll ace this test,” I said into the phone, thankful Marshal got my message about Dad being here in at the club. Now to keep him here until the guns arrived.

I tapped end and slid my phone in my front pocket as I watched my psychopath father eyeing me as if he could read my mind. Maybe he could for how he was always one step ahead of everyone.

Hopefully Marshal’s guys were close. Or, I hoped they weren’t, because I was ready to kick Dad’s ass into the afterlife.

“Promoted to Cooler. That’s impressive considering your...temperament.”

“Wonder where I got that from?”

He grunted as he pushed off the wall to stand straight. I bent my knees and readied for a fight. He was almost an inch taller than me, but I had about a hundred pounds of muscle on his scrawny ass. I’d been waiting for this moment. Training for it.

“So, you won’t hurt Mom? Why do I find that hard to believe?”

He offered me a crooked grin, and his dead eyes sized me up. “She’s mine and always will be.”

“Sick fuck.”

He shrugged and looked up the alley to the sidewalk. “Carved out a nice little life here. Heading north into the cold, that was a nice twist. Then that little trap in Nevada. Almost got me.”

Almost being the operative word. And a word I wanted obliterated from the dictionary when it came to him. And in about fifteen seconds it would be.

“Took me a while to find you.”

“Now that you have...”

“I’ve found *you* and your Angelina. But you know who I really want.”

“Never.”

He slowly shook his head. “Careful, son. It’s interesting how quickly things can change. One minute you’re feeling safe and confident, then the next three guys up and attack you. Set your therapy back. Set the fear of God back in you.”

Shit, he’d hired those thugs at the college to attack Lina.

“She complied so nicely by isolating herself right back where I needed her.”

“Needed her?”

He grinned. “And those guards. Where did your handler find them? At the Barney Fife wannabe training camp?”

My gut hardened. If he knew the guards...right where he needed Lina—*Shit!* He had Lina.

“I see the light of realization flickering on. You never were very bright. You should have picked up things much sooner. Didn’t I teach you to stay ahead of the game?” He tsked me. “But, like I said, you were a little slow.”

“What have you done with her?”

He picked at his fingernails like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Nothing yet. But I need my Lisa like you need your Angelina, so we’ll do a little exchange.”

How the hell had he gotten to her?

Shit.

“You have twenty-four hours to get it arranged. I’ll contact you.”

“And if I refuse?”

He turned toward the alley. “Then you’ll have the blood of yet *another* woman on your hands.”

I lunged at him, red flooding my vision and grabbed the back of his neck. I spun and rammed his forehead into the brick. Hammering his stomach allowed for no relief of the fear storming through me. Fear for Lina. God, who had her, and what were they doing to her? Where was she?

Faster than I could track, Dad spun and punched my chin so hard my eyes watered from the sting of it, distorting my vision. He ducked and kicked my shin. He’d probably meant to go for the knee, the one thing that could bring me down, but he’d misjudged my size.

I fisted my hand in his hair and slammed his head down as I raised my knee. His nose caved.

“Tell me where she is.”

Dad gurgled, then coughed.

I cuffed his neck and smashed him against the wall.
“Tell me! Or I’ll kill you.” But I knew I’d kill him anyway.

“Never...find...her.”

“Oh. I will. You know I will.” With Dad gone,
whoever was helping him or working with him would fall
apart. “So, really, I don’t need you alive.”

I squeezed harder, falling more into the red. The rage.

Dad was going to die tonight.

* * *

Angelina

“Bill, I don’t understand what’s going on?” I opened the door
to his SUV near panicked after he almost broke my door
down. “Is Hunter okay?”

“It’s a long story. Get in, I’ll tell you on the way.
Hunter’s fine...I think.”

I hopped in and Bill revved the car to life. “That’s not
very reassuring.”

“Why do you have a guard?” he asked, glancing in the
rearview mirror.

Looking over my shoulder, George’s SUV came into
view. “After the attack on campus, I...asked for more
protection.”

Bill eyed me, his eyebrow up. Obviously, he didn’t
believe me, but I wasn’t going to spill Hunter and Lisa’s

secret. No way. The fact that Bill showed up at the hotel for me had me a little concerned, though.

“So, what’s going on?” I asked settled back into my seat.

“Something weird came up on Hunter’s background check when I promoted him to Cooler. Something didn’t add up about social security numbers or something. My HR lady flagged it and called me.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure what to think of this, but... the SSN he’s using was just issued or something.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t add up.”

“What’s that got to do with me? I mean, Hunter and I...we’re not together anymore.”

He let out a huff, and his knuckles blanched as his grip tightened on the wheel. “That’s not right. You two... That boy, he was better with you. But...I thought—” He pounded the wheel.

“Bill. What?” The nervousness radiating off this big guy made *me* nervous. He was like a dad to Hunter, but for him to step forward, especially about Hunter and me... something was up, and my gut wasn’t liking the feeling.

“You don’t know much about me, but...well, earlier today, some tall, skinny guy showed up at the club. Now, that’s normally not a big deal, but I’ve seen a lot of shit, and this guy, his eyes were dead. Vacant. He came around sniffing after Hunter.”

“Who was he?” *Oh no!* It might have been Hunter’s dad!

He shook his head. “Don’t know. He danced around my questions pretty well—like a pro.”

“And that got you to my house why?”

“He asked about you, Angelina. About you *and* Hunter.”

I gasped at how fast my chest tensed.

“I know you two aren’t together, but when Dead Eyes asked about you, my gut went nuts. And if I’ve learned anything throughout my fifty-two years of life, it’s how to survive, and I’ve done that by trusting my gut.” He steered the vehicle onto the exit ramp.

Those must have been a rough fifty-two years, because I’d always pegged him for being in his early sixties. And here he was talking about how his gut had helped him survive. More than likely, it was the prison time Hunter had told me about before.

Only a few more minutes, and I’d see Hunter. I needed to see him. “Your gut told you to come to my house, and then what?”

“Hunter’s at work, I...if I got the two of you together, maybe work things out...I’ve been wanting to do this for a while now, and then today...” He slouched. “I’m not really sure, Angelina. But Hunter’s like a son to me, and he’s been miserable without you...”

“I’ve...been miserable without him, too.” I let out the breath that felt like I’d been holding since I’d last told Hunter

to get out of my apartment. And it was the truth, I'd been miserable. But now I was a little scared. "Bill?"

"Yeah?" He glanced at me.

"Hunter told me a little about what happened to you. And, well, if you felt like you needed to get me, then I'm glad you did. I want Hunter to be okay, too."

"You know what's going on, don't you?"

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. "I think...that guy might have been his dad."

"No way *that* was his dad. I can't explain it, Angelina, but that guy who came looking for Hunter reminded me of the psychopaths I'd met up with in prison. No life in those eyes. Only...evil."

"Look. It isn't my story to tell but trust me, that guy very possibly could have been his dad. Can you drive faster?"

The car lurched forward as Bill cursed, and a need to get to Hunter tumbled through my stomach. I needed to get word to Marshal. I leaned to the side and dug out my phone to call George. He was following behind us in his own car, but he could reach Hunter's handler.

"Shit!" Bill hammered the steering wheel, and I looked up.

People scampered through the street, screaming from what I could hear through the closed windows. There was a small crowd near the alley of the club, including Drey. I recognized his spiked, black hair right away.

"Bill?"

“Okay, here’s how it’s going to play out. You stay right by me. I’m going to hold your hand, and you need to be okay with that.”

“I am.”

“And you will not leave my side. I know you’re not comfortable in crowds or with people touching you, but you have to trust me. I won’t hurt you.”

I gulped as I nodded. “George...he’s here, too.”

“Climb over the center console and come out my door.” He pushed his door open and scanned the area as I propped myself on my seat to get ready to climb over.

He reached back with his meaty hand and showed me his palm. “Take it, and don’t you dare let go. No matter what.”

I shifted to his seat and grabbed his hand. He guided me to my feet, eyes scanning everywhere, and pulled me close to his back as he stepped forward.

“Angelina,” George said from behind me. “I’m going to put my hand on your shoulder.”

I nodded. “George, this is Bill. Bill, George.” They both grunted their greetings.

“EMTs and Marshal are three minutes away. Angelina, get yourself ready.”

Bill slowed his movement and asked, “Ready for what?”

“It’s Hunter. He’s down.”

“No!” I went to let go of Bill’s hand, but he held on tighter. “Bill. Hurry.” Tears pricked at my eyes like acid-laced

needles.

Breathe, Angelina. Just breathe.

The commotion buzzing around the bar was overwhelming, storming through my mind and tightening my chest.

I peeked around Bill's side as we stepped off the curb.

"Bill!" Drey yelled as he took off toward us.

"Angelina."

"What's going on?" Bill asked.

"It's Hunter. He's...he's been stabbed."

"Oh my gosh!" I yelled and darted out from behind Bill, but he didn't let me go.

George's grip tightened as well. "Hold on, Angelina. Drey. Take her side. We're moving slow."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Shut up. Follow his lead, Drey," Bill said.

Without another word he nodded and came to my side. "Hunter was rambling about Lina. Lina's gone. Lina's in danger." Drey shook his head and ran blood-stained fingers through his dark hair. "What the *fuck* is going on?"

"Is that...Hunter's blood on your hands?" I yelled.

"Bill. Let me go! Please!"

Oh, God. Hunter was hurt. Dead maybe.

Bill plowed through the crowd both with his body and powerful voice while Drey and George surrounded me. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear the crowd.

Other than seeing Hunter on the video feed on his daily visit to my door, I'd not seen him in person in more than three weeks.

Just yesterday, I'd almost opened the door, needing to see him in person so badly. Wanting him. Each day we'd been apart, I'd been thinking things through, talking to Lizzie and Jenna about the whole situation. And each day, I'd come closer and closer to understanding Hunter and what he'd done. Slowly piecing back together the trust that'd crumbled.

“Get back!” Bill yelled.

The people parted like the Red Sea and what I saw could have been exactly that...a sea of red blood.

Hunter lay on his back on the cold asphalt holding his side. Sirens echoed in the distance, and I flinched, knowing at the sight of Hunter's motionless chest that they were too late.

I pushed off of Bill, and he finally let me go. “Hunter! Hunter!”

Bill stepped to the side, clearing the way for me with his big arms, while George followed me closer than my shadow.

I skidded to my knees, the asphalt slicing through my yoga pants, and I grabbed Hunter's hand. “Hunter! Hunter!”

George touched his neck. “Got a pulse!”

Bruises and cuts littered Hunter's smooth flesh. His eye was swollen shut and his lips busted and bleeding.

“Hunter! Please, Hunter, it's me, Lina. Your Lina.”

Hunter turned his head toward me and blood trickled from his mouth.

“Got...him...” he whispered. “Safe...you’re safe.”

I cradled his head to my chest and looked up at Drey. He nodded farther in the alley, and I saw another body, lying motionless on the ground, but no one was near it.

“Is he dead?”

“No.” Drey shook his head. “But he’s close.”

I grabbed Hunter’s hand, and the eye he could open looked straight at me. “Had to...he was...going to...hurt you.”

“Shhh,” I combed his hair back. “Lay still.”

“You...safe. All that...matters to me.”

“Hold on. Help’s here. Just hold on.”

“Love...you...brought my soul...back.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks. “I love you, Hunter Amos. I’m so sorry...for everything. I love you.”

The ambulance pulled up along with three police cars. Right behind them Marshal came running with three guys flanking him.

I looked back down at Hunter, and his eye was closed again. “Hunter!” I shook him, but he didn’t move.

“Shit.” George took his fingers to Hunter’s throat. “No pulse!”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hunter

Lina looked down at me with shining brown eyes. Her smile chased away the darkness threatening to dominate my vision. It was so cold wherever I was, but her eyes, and her smile let in a brief reprieve.

I reached for her, but my hand went right through her face as if she were a ghost.

“Lina?” I called out to her, but my voice was nothing but a whisper. My throat ached and my chest was heavy.

I glanced around, but there was only darkness, so I zeroed in on her face again. The smooth curve of her pale skin over high cheekbones. How her champagne hair dusted along her forehead and long, silky locks coiled her neck and rested on her chest.

She leaned forward as if knowing I needed her close, to feel her body. This time her subtle curves formed to my hard body. Raising my heavy arms, I welcomed her onto me. She nuzzled her face in my neck, peppering kissing along my cold skin.

“I love you, Lina. So much.”

She was safe now. So was Mom. I’d finally beaten that prick and my girls were safe. That was all that mattered. Even if I died, which it felt like I might considering how heavy I felt, I could die happy knowing I’d saved them.

Maybe Heaven would welcome me even though I was guilty of killing Issie. Maybe taking care of people and helping

them would atone for that. But I really wanted to be with Lina.

The ring. Yes. I had to give her the engagement ring I'd been holding onto for so long. When I'd seen her come in that alley, flanked by Drey, Bill and George—wait, where was Marshal? How'd Bill get involved?

“Lina!” I tried to call out, but my voice was now gone.

“Hunter!” Her voice penetrated the blanket of black void sucking me in. “He’s waking up. Hunter. It’s me, Lina. Hunter!”

Soft fingers touched my face, brushing from my temple to my jaw. Then tender lips. I turned toward them, searching out more of the melon taste.

“Oh yeah, he’s having a good dream.” That voice sounded like Drey’s. “He’s going to be just fine and ready for some action.”

“Come on, kid.” That was Bill’s voice.

Where was I? What was happening?

“Clear the room, I need to check—”

“No. I’m not leaving,” Lina said.

“Miss, you need to—”

“I said I am *not* leaving. Work around me if you need to. Hunter, come on. Wake up. I’ve been activating our wonder twin powers all day, it’s about freaking time you listened.” Fingers dragged through my hair. “I’ve got your ring right here. They won’t let me put it on you, but I’ve got it on my thumb. Come on, Hunter.”

Tugs to my left side sent jolts of pain across my gut, and I went to bat whatever was causing it away from me.

“Calm down. Just checking things out.”

“Hunter. Open your eyes,” Lina said, then kissed them. “Please?”

As if I couldn't disobey her, I opened them. She was less than three inches from me. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she had dark rings beneath me. Tears welled as she smiled.

“There you are.”

“Lina,” I said, my voice finally working. Maybe not all together working, but it sounded more like a voice that time.

She closed her eyes and tears streamed over, a couple dropping on my face. “Oh, sorry.” She wiped my cheek. “Thank God.”

“Hunter, can you look at me please?” A foreign voice entered the conversation, and I glanced to my side. A woman with black hair pulled back in a braid stared down at me. She flashed a light in my eyes. The grip of a blood pressure cuff tightened around my bicep. “Can you tell me your full name?”

“Hunter Amos.”

“What day is it?”

“Depends, how long have I been here?”

Lina laughed, but the nurse huffed.

“Last I checked, it was Friday, and I was at the club.” I turned to face Lina. “Is Dad...dead?”

“No.” Fear flashed over her eyes.

I went to sit up, but Lina and the nurse held me down. Dad wasn't dead? But I'd killed him. I felt his heart stop while I choked that son of a bitch.

"Marshal's got him. He's chained to a hospital bed."

"No! He'll—he could escape."

"Shhh. He's drugged. Limp as an overcooked noodle." Lina pushed my hair back. "Lay back. It's fine. We're safe."

"I lost it...couldn't stop. He said he took you. I—"

"Calm down, Hunter," the nurse said. "You'll tear out the stitches."

I glanced down my body, finally taking inventory of my situation. I was lying in a hospital bed with a flimsy sheet over my lower half. The nurse poked at my left side, and I remembered what'd happened.

Dad had pulled a knife from his boot and stabbed me. Like the trained killer he was, he went for my femoral artery when he'd tackled me at my waist. I'd deflected him enough and got a blade to my thigh instead. The slice was big, and I felt the loss of blood almost immediately, but it'd triggered my beast even more.

Only snippets of what happened next filtered through the red haze. But one part I remembered for sure was sitting on top of him, choking him. He'd gotten two more jabs with his damn knife, but I knew I couldn't let go until he was dead. Look how easily he'd stab his own son, his flesh and blood, I couldn't imagine what he'd do to Lina or Mom.

Even Bill or Drey for that matter.

The nurse scurried out of the room, promising she'd return soon with some pain medication. I was just glad she was gone.

I turned toward Lina. "Where's Bill? Dad said—"

"He's fine." Lina glanced around then leaned in. "Lisa's fine, too. She went to get a soda."

"You're safe. I'm sorry. I—"

"Shh." She kissed my cheek. "I'm sorry, Hunter. So sorry. I—was scared. When I found everything out—I was so hurt."

"I'd broken your trust." I nudged her chin with my finger. "So sorry I lied. I love you, Lina. Love you so much."

"I love you, too, Hunter—er—should I call you Brett?"

"No. Like I said before, Brett's dead." I pulled her in for a kiss.

Her soft mouth molded to mine, and she gently placed her hands on my chest. "Ready for your ring back?" She leaned to the side then held up my ring of strength that matched hers. I offered her my forefinger, and she smiled as she slid it on.

She reached to the side again, and a red hue settled over her pale cheeks. "Um...they gave me all the belongings they found on you..." She smiled. "There was another ring."

Oh no!

She held up the engagement ring I'd bought for her. "Lina. I—"

“I hope this is for me?”

I laughed, but my stomach objected to that wholeheartedly. “No. It’s for my other soul mate. I hate that you found it like this.”

“Only fitting, right? The first time you met me I was unconscious.” She held up the ring. “Makes sense I find this while you’re unconscious.”

“Don’t make jokes, it hurts.”

Her face went grim. “I’m sorry.”

“Give that to me.” She placed the gem in my hand and smiled. I pushed up as much as I could and held it up, the two-carat diamond flickering beneath the sodium lights. “Angelina Raine, will you marry me?”

She nodded and said, “Yes.” Tears cascaded down her cheeks. “Yes!”

I slid the ring over her finger, and I knew things were finally as they should be. I’d found my home, my soul mate, and my mom was finally safe from Dad. Hell, everyone was safe from him now.

“Let’s get the hospital chaplain in here.” Lina grinned, looking at her ring. “I don’t want to wait another minute.”

If I’d felt a little better than I did, I would have agreed. But no, I wanted to enjoy her once she was officially mine. “Not into big weddings?”

“No. I’m into you and being with you.” She grinned. “No more delays. No more surprises. I love you, Hunter, and as soon as you’re healthy, we’re doing this.”

I brought her hand to my mouth, and I kissed the ring on her finger. "I'm already feeling better."

* * *

Angelina

"I'm sorry I can't be there in person to fix your hair," Lizzie said.

The iPad was propped up on my beauty stand in my bathroom as I stared blankly ahead at Lisa's finished product.

"You're stunning," Lizzie said.

I touched the pile of dark blonde locks on top of my head, strategically placed with random white flower pins stuck in. Lisa had done a great job. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her in the bedroom, packing up some of the beauty supplies strewn all over my bed.

"I wish you could be here, Lizzie." I looked at her computer face. "But you will be, someday soon, I can feel it."

"I'm not so sure, girl, but keep the hope. I need all the help I can get."

"If I can do it, you can."

She nodded. "Drey's agreed to hold the iPad during the ceremony, so I'll be there, girl. I'll see it all. I just wish your folks could make it."

"This is a tiny ceremony. The Justice of the Peace, Lisa and Marshal. The real party will be in the summer after graduation."

"Why the quickie wedding then? Graduation is next month, what kind of honeymoon can you have?"

“Oh, we’ll have a honeymoon. A couple of them. One this weekend and then another this summer.” I laughed. “Girl, I would have married him right there in that hospital room of his if I’d had my way. Because if there’s one thing I learned through all of this crap with Hunter’s dad, it’s how quickly things can change. How quickly people can be taken from you.”

Seeing Hunter in that hospital bed, so close to death, no way was I going to wait another minute to be with him. I’d almost thrown his love away with the bathwater. I was not going to ever take anything for granted again.

“Yeah, well, I’ve always believed in the love at first sight thing, and the minute I saw him on that video feed that first night we watched movies together, I knew he was a goner for you.”

I laughed. I’d been a goner for him, too. “Thanks, girl.”

Lisa stepped through the doorway of the bathroom. “Ready, honey?”

I turned around, my heart leaping into my throat. “I am.”

“Everything’s all set downstairs.”

Soon I’d be Mrs. Hunter Amos. We’d only have a few days to celebrate the new name officially, but after graduation, which Mom and Dad promised to get back for and stay for a while, we could plan a wedding party that would rival the Royal Family’s.

But for now, I was happy to be getting married to the strongest, most amazing guy I'd ever met.

Lisa reached for my hand, and I gave her the iPad to give to Drey. I had to have my Lizzie there, even if it wasn't in person.

Within five minutes we were standing before the small ballroom in the hotel, Lisa holding my hand tight. "Okay, I'm going to pass you off to Bill, okay?"

I nodded and as if on cue, Bill lumbered toward me from the other side. "Hey there, Angel."

He'd taken to calling me that over the last few weeks as Hunter recovered from his injuries. Bill had stepped in like he'd known me for years. Kind of like a surrogate father.

Lisa hurried ahead of me, into the ballroom as I pulled in a deep breath so I wouldn't fall over from nerves. I wasn't scared or worried; more excited and anxious, but my body reacted the same way with the fluttering stomach and weak legs.

"Hold on tight," Bill said.

And I did as he led me through the threshold of the door. Hunter looked unbelievable standing at the end of the short aisle, but what surprised me was how many people were in the room.

Patty and her husband, all the girls from Hunter's self-defense class, and most of the hotel staff. They all stood, clapping as I walked forward. Tears stung my eyes, and I looked up at Bill.

"Surprise," he said.

I was speechless, and almost out of breath from surprise. Drey held up the iPad, and I saw Lizzie's face, tears streamed down, and she was waving. I waved back, then focused on Hunter.

He stood there in jeans and a button up short sleeve shirt. His blond hair rested on his shoulders in that sexy messy way I'd grown to love.

He smiled, and my world tilted, but it wasn't in a panic attack sense. No, my world tilted on its axis because I knew nothing would ever be the same after today.

And for once, I was okay with that. He loved me. I loved him. We would be together forever now. Nobody would ever take him away from me.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Hunter

Lina was breathtaking in her kick ass boots, black leggings and flowing button up white shirt. It was long sleeved, but sheer enough for me to see through to the form fitting black shirt she wore beneath.

I loved how she wanted a casual, quickie wedding, wearing what was most comfortable to both of us. She'd said it was more about us being ourselves than getting all dressed up and doing what everyone else thought we should do.

Hell, I'd had to convince her to at least wait until I was out of the hospital.

And that made me love her even more if that was possible.

Bill stopped a few feet from me and glanced to the side. I watched for Lina's expression as she followed his gaze. We'd planned that Bill would bring her directly to me and we'd start the vows, but I had a little surprise cooked up.

Lina's mom and dad stepped out from the crowd, clapping. Lina gasped and locked gazes with me. I nodded and couldn't help but smile. The planning and scheduling had been worth it. While I lay on my bed, healing from all the wounds my father had caused, I had tons of time to make it happen.

Though there was an edge to Lina's mom's voice during the planning, when we'd met last night that seemed to melt away. It was a short two-night trip since they were in the

midst of opening a hotel in Germany, but the thankfulness in her dad's voice made it all worthwhile.

No parent should miss their daughter's wedding.

Lina hurried to her dad and gave him a big hug.

"I'm so proud of you, honey."

"You're here? How—what—"

"Hunter contacted us, and I'm so glad he did," her dad said. "No way would we miss our little girl's wedding."

Her mom nodded, then gave Lina a big hug. "We love you, honey."

Lina faced me, then smiled as she hurried toward me. She wrapped her arms around my neck and planted a kiss on me that nearly knocked me over. Not so much because I was still a little on the weak side, but from the intensity. But I welcomed her weight. Her body.

"Hey, we haven't gotten to that part yet!" Drey said.

Screw them. I was going to kiss my girl whenever I wanted. I hugged her so tight I lifted her off the floor. She was all mine. I loved her more than I could put into words. I'd almost lost her because of my lies, and then because of my father.

Never again. I intended to bind myself to her in every way humanly possible. Never again would I be without her.

The crowd closed in, circling us as the Justice of the Peace cleared his throat. I let Lina slide down the front of me, but I kept her close as the Justice went into his speech.

I heard most everything as I stared at my bride, but what resonated with me the most was the death do us part. I'd give my last breath for her, almost did in that alley a few weeks ago.

There wasn't anything we couldn't face now.

I couldn't wait to be with my Lina. To have *all* of her.

"Okay, *now*, you can kiss the bride," the Justice of the Peace said as he winked.

And boy, did I ever.

* * *

Epilogue

Angelina

“Look at us, back where we first met.” I threaded my fingers with Hunter’s as we stood in front of the elevator. “Only we’re on campus!”

“And you’re not unconscious.” He waggled our connected hands.

“Not yet, anyway,” I giggled as we stepped into the tiny box, and I tightened my grip even more. Good thing he was a tough guy, he could take it. “I made it, Hunter. Graduation day!”

“You sure did.” He brought the back of my hand to his mouth and pressed a tender kiss to it. “I’m so proud of you.”

I could see it in his eyes, too. He meant it. “I’m proud of you, too.”

He quirked up his eyebrow, something I’d learned about him over these past few weeks as husband and wife. It was his silent way of showing me he didn’t understand something or was working to figure it out.

“For taking care of me and Lisa. Your family.”

With his father finally in military prison, possibly awaiting a death penalty, and his mom happy with Marshal, Hunter was finally free. Like I was. I’d never seen him so relaxed and... content. He deserved it.

And here we were graduating. It was our goal, both of ours, and we’d made it. Together. Lies and his father tried to

interfere, but we'd busted through them. We'd found our way back to each other.

We were freaking married. I still couldn't believe it. I'd come so far this year. I'd found my strength. I'd found my soul mate.

"I'll always take care of you, Lina." Promise laced each word and helped blast through the nerves threatening to weaken my resolve of walking through graduation.

I still wasn't quite to the point of sitting in the crowds and walking down that long, long aisle to the front of the auditorium, so we arranged a back way in, the one used by the professors, and Hunter was going to walk with me.

Small steps.

"Got you something." Hunter pulled out a little red cloth sack from his pocket and smiled as he handed it to me. "You know, for sentimental reasons."

I grabbed the present and pulled it open. There was a handful of candy corn inside. I dug in and grabbed a few and popped them in my mouth. "You're going to make me fat, you know."

"You could stand to have a little more meat on you." He patted my butt. "Doing okay?"

"Great." I leaned into him and realized I really was doing great. Minimal anxiety, normal breathing, and best of all: no passing out.

Progress noted!

The elevator stopped, and the lazy doors slid open. A small group of people gathered before the elevator, smiling.

I stood straight, a rush of anxiety clenching my stomach, but as quickly as it came, it vanished. Especially when I saw Drey. He was holding an iPad up, and Lizzie was smiling at me, clapping.

“What’s...going on?” I looked up at Hunter as he guided me out of the elevator into the hallway leading to the stage entrance.

“Brought a few people along for moral support.”

Jenna stepped out from behind Bill. “Jenna!”

I hurried to her and fell into her arms. She’d been my virtual counselor for more than two years, and I’d always wondered what it’d feel like to give her a hug.

“Hey, sweetie,” she said as she hugged me back.

She was taller than I’d thought she would be, but then I thought about it, and realized I’d always seen her sitting down. But her vibrant amber eyes were the same. The video didn’t dull those out at all.

And she smelled like roses. I totally pictured her as a rose girl.

“You look so beautiful, and you’re doing great.” She smiled as she stepped to the side. “Your mom and dad are on the other side of the stage to greet you two after you get your diplomas.”

I hugged her again. “I can’t believe you’re here. This is so awesome!”

Hunter rested his hand on the nape of my neck, something I totally and completely loved. “Ready, Mrs. Amos?”

Looking up at him, I smiled as he guided me to the entrance. Marshal and Lisa pulled the side doors open, and Lisa winked. “You look beautiful, honey.”

I brushed my hand against hers as Hunter and I stepped onto left wing of the stage.

Hunter gently pulled the curtain back and squeezed my hand. “What song are you going to be thinking about as you walk across the stage?”

“No song.”

He looked down at me.

“Don’t need one. You’re with me.”

“I’ll always be with you.” He kissed my forehead.

“Angelina and Hunter Amos.” Our names echoed through the auditorium, and my heart skittered.

I’d done it. Made my goal of going to graduation—and then some.

I drew in a deep breath, stood up tall, and stepped onto the stage.

And for once, I knew everything would be all right from now on.

About the Author

New York Times & *USA Today* bestselling author Lynn Rush is a full-time writer, wife, and trail runner, living in the Sonoran Desert, despite her fear of rattlesnakes. Known as #TheRunningWriter, she can't resist posting epic sunrise pictures while running in the desert with her trail sisters, even if she has to occasionally hop over a scorpion. When she's not running, writing, or reading, she and her Ironman husband are watching movies that fuel her undying love of superheroes, vampires, and all things supernatural.

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