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USA Today Bestselling Author



Relentless Charm

Barrington Billionaire Series

Book Fifteen



RELENTLESS CHARM

DANIELLE STEWART



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RELENTLESS CHARM

King traded away his old life to protect the people he cared about. Now, with a new assignment and a deep mystery to unravel, there might be hope for redemption.

Bailey Raine was out. She'd broken free of her dangerous family and found refuge with Gloria Kinross. All she had to do was stay free of them. Easier said than done.

When King is tasked with finding Bailey and convincing her to break away from her past, tension boils over. As they battle endless threats, it becomes clear that passion comes easy, peace is much more elusive.

Will King be able to save her from the danger of her family?
Will Bailey trust him enough to finally let go of her past?

CHAPTER ONE

King

Orders were a language King spoke fluently. It's what he preferred. To be given a direction and then execute. That's how he was programmed. The reason why was becoming clearer these days. A brush with death was providing a new found clarity that had been obscured for too long.

When the Rossi family took him in and put him to work as a young man, they also changed him on a cellular level. It was all under the guise of their altruism. Taking this helpless kid off the street and giving him a better life. But the cost of that life had proven to be like selling his soul to the devil. He'd finally worked out a way to buy it back.

There were times he'd wondered who he would have become if not for their influence. Maybe now was his chance to see what life, free of them, might be like. Redemption was in sight. But only if he could pull this off.

The GPS indicated there were nineteen miles left on his trip and his gas tank was perfectly aligned. Just as he'd planned it. While he would have preferred more time to prepare for this job, he understood the urgency when Carmen hired him. The alternative for him was a no brainer. Nothing was left for him back home. He'd burned every bridge. Hell, he'd blown them up. The target on his back would have burned bright, every enemy he'd ever made ready to strike. Not to mention the cops would have been pretty damn

interested in what he had to say if he'd stuck around. Leaving was the best option and at least he had a purpose to run toward.

Out here there were no burned bridges. No people chasing him down. The peaks of mountains in the distance were a stark contrast to the skyscrapers of the city he'd just flown from. The airport was hours in the rearview mirror, and signs of all civilization were dwindling like a dying campfire. It had been ages since he'd passed another car. The winding road was closing in around him with thicker brush and looming trees, however it was the furthest thing from claustrophobic.

Cruising with the windows open, the mountain air had a distinct scent of pine trees and rain, though it wasn't raining now. The closest thing he could compare it to was the way it smelled in the city when the asphalt was blazing hot and summer rains fell, though out here it was much more refreshing.

Exhaustion and unease weighed down his every move, but the distance he'd put between him and his former life was a gift. One he wouldn't squander.

His ringing phone broke his gaze on the distant skyline. Carmen had been calling frequently with nervous requests for updates, even when next to nothing had changed.

"Hello?" King masked the annoyance in his voice. This was still better than being in prison and having to face his former life of crime. He'd put Lou Rossi in jail, and there would be hell to pay for that if he wasn't cruising on this desolate road right now, and Carmen was the one to thank for that.

"Are you there yet?" Carmen's voice rattled with nerves. "You should have been there by now, right?"

"I'm getting there. Should be another half hour or so. I got slowed down by a bunch of wild turkeys that wouldn't get out of the road. I'm pretty sure one gave me the finger. Is that possible?"

"A gang?"

“What? No not a gang, turkeys.”

“That’s what a group of wild turkeys is called. A gang.”

“Oh,” he chuckled. “Then maybe they did give me the finger. They definitely looked edgy.”

“King, please be serious.” Carmen’s voice broke and she sounded as exhausted as King felt. “You do know you can’t just roll up and join a commune, right? Did you read all the material I sent you? Cults are not all that welcoming to strangers they think might disrupt their system of control. You definitely look like a disrupter.”

“I read everything you sent.” He’d answered these questions already, but he understood why Carmen was asking them again. He was an unknown commodity. A wild card. She was trusting him with something vitally important to her, not because King was her most reliable option. But because she was trying to do this clandestinely. Everyone else she worked with would have talked her out of it. Or downright shut it down. It didn’t fit the mission of the work they did. It fell outside the purview of what was safe and right. That was where King did his best work.

He respected what Carmen and her team did for a living. They swept in and continued the work of Gloria Kinross. When someone was experiencing abuse that was on track to be fatal and couldn’t get help from the normal channels, they’d step in. With funds and a network of safe houses they would help people get out of situations that seemed impossible to escape. They’d done it for King’s former boss’s wife and child. Saved them from Lou when King hadn’t been able to do so on his own. For that, he felt a deep sense of gratitude to them. And so he’d let Carmen ask as many times as she needed to until she had the answers she wanted.

“And you have a plan?”

“I have the framework of a plan. *Plan light* if you will. It may involve those turkeys now that I know they’re part of a gang.”

“King,” she sighed. Levity was no help. He took note of that.

“I’ve got it under control. I need to get the lay of the land and the people. It’s going to require some observation. Time. I know you’re anxious.”

“Don’t call me anxious.” Carmen punctuated the words with a sigh. “I just hate when people call me that. I’m focused. Driven. Determined. This isn’t anxiety.”

“Got it. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m on this. I know I haven’t done anything yet to prove myself to you. Trust is earned. I get that. When I have an update, you’ll be the first to know.”

“I don’t want to fail Bailey. That’s going to make me a pain in your ass. Can you deal with that?”

“I can deal with anything.” He didn’t let an ounce of humor weave into his words. She needed to know he meant it.

“I hope you’re right about that. Bailey is a wonderful person who has been through a lot. I’ve seen her at her worst but I’ve also seen her pull herself out of that. I want her to be safe and happy. She deserves it.”

“I got that impression from the information you sent over. I’ve done some reading on communes and cults. I know about her father. His arrest. The charges.”

“Gloria had a hand in that arrest, working with a dogged detective in the area. Bailey’s father, Dale, was a slippery guy. Charming in the most toxic way possible. He had a lot of people under his spell. It took serious work to finally get him arrested. Even more work to undo what he’d done to Bailey. She was so conflicted when I knew her. He turned her all around. Messed with her mind.”

“Maybe things are different there.” King was hopeful that this could possibly be a misunderstanding. Some overreaction that could easily be resolved. But he also understood men like Dale did more than just control the people he was around. He could poison a well and have an impact long after he was gone.

“I can feel it in my bones.” Carmen cleared her throat. “I know these kinds of things. That goosebump feeling every time I called her. The little edge in her voice. A defensiveness just a beat after we said hello. There is something there.”

“If there is, I’ll find it.”

There was a voice in the background on her end of the call suddenly and he knew what that meant.

“I appreciate the updates,” she called out in a singsong voice. “Talk to you soon.”

And just like that the line went dead. He’d wondered since she first made contact how serious she was about keeping this quiet from her team. The people who she claimed were her family. The more she randomly hung up on him the clearer that became.

The gas light popped on the dash again, this time flashing more urgently.

“Perfect,” he whispered to himself as he tossed his phone onto the passenger seat. Now all he had to do was drive and let the rest fall into place.

CHAPTER TWO

King

The car sputtered to a stop a half mile from the spot he'd programmed into his GPS. It was going to be the entry point into the community Bailey lived in, according to the research Carmen had sent over. It would be dark within the hour. There was spotty cell service and if Carmen was wrong about this location, King knew he was screwed.

Walking the rest of the way gave him a chance to clear his head and power down his phone. This only worked if he seemed truly stranded.

Approaching the small shack-like building just as the sun was creeping lower in the sky, he knew his timing couldn't have been better. Rustling his hands through his hair as though he was all worked up, King made his way to the front door of the little store. The sign above the door was crooked, one chain holding it up was longer than the other and it was made of a piece of scrap wood.

It read D's. No other indication of what might be in the small building. But perhaps that was intentional. Anyone passing it on the road would have driven right by. There clearly wasn't gas for sale. And the building looked mostly uninhabited. From everything Carmen told him, this was the gateway that would get him into Cinderhill.

The door was barely on its hinges as he knocked gently. "Hello?" King called and the door creaked open on its own.

“Yes?” a timid voice called back, and he hesitated to step in. He was always aware of how his build and height could instill fear in people, even when that wasn’t his intention. He moved cautiously, not wanting to spook anyone inside.

Instead, he stood in the doorway and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim room lit only by some small oil lamps. “Sorry to bother you. I ran out of gas.”

“Oh.” The woman stepped forward from behind a dust-covered glass counter. “Way out here?”

“I was just passing through and didn’t realize how far it would be to the next gas station. I’ve lived in a city my whole life, there’s gas on every corner.” He chuckled trying to put her at ease. He tucked his hands into his pockets, attempting to show her he meant no harm.

The curls in her hair bounced, the rusty brown color catching the light that came in through the doorway he was standing in. She was petite with lush lips and the kind of eyes that seemed forever in awe of what they were looking at.

The dress she wore was pale lace, simple in its cut, but intricate in its pattern. He took her in for too long, forgetting to look around the room.

She raised a brow curiously at him. “There are signs. Warning signs for miles. They indicate how far it is to the next station.”

“I’m notorious for ignoring the warning signs.” He reached up and pushed the hair off his forehead. He hadn’t worn it this long in ages, but his time recovering in the hospital had made him less worried about keeping his head nearly shaved. No suits to wear. No bodyguard duties to have to look intimidating for. Longer hair was the kind of rebellion he felt he needed right now.

“That makes two of us.” She moved toward him, seemingly unbothered by the fact that he was a hundred pounds heavier and a foot taller. Or that they were alone in this isolated area. It made him certain she had some sort of weapon or protection he couldn’t see. No one was this blindly trusting.

“My name is Bailey Raine. Let me see if I can find a way to help you out.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “I’m King.”

“King, that’s a cool name.”

“Don’t ask if it’s my real name. I’m not sure. It’s the stuff of family lore.”

“You don’t have a birth certificate?” She glanced up at me peculiarly.

“I probably do, but I’ve never seen it. My family was . . .”

“I don’t know if I have one either.” She shrugged, still trying to put him at ease.

“We seem to have a lot in common.”

“Families can be complicated.” She cooed and smiled gently at him. “I’m sorry to say I think it’s too late to have a tow truck come out. They don’t like to be out this way after dark. The roads are treacherous with no lights and big cliffs to drive off. It’s probably better that you’re getting off the road now.”

“Is there a gas station I can walk to? I really need to keep moving.” King had to look as flustered and put out as possible to not raise an alarm. Desperation was always the death of a mission in his experience.

“Why?” She asked the question so directly that he was shocked into silence for a moment. Most people dust over these kinds of questions, but he liked her style.

“Staying in one place for too long doesn’t work for me.” He shrugged coolly.

“Are you being chased? On the run?” Her look of intrigue made him grin.

“Not really.”

“But a little?” She smiled wide and fluttered her lashes as though him being some kind of outlaw would spice things up.

“I’m reinventing myself.” He knew that wasn’t completely a lie. The old King was gone. He couldn’t go back home or try to pick up where he’d left off. That’s what happens when you turn on the mob boss you’ve worked for since you were a kid.

There were still moments he questioned how he ended up being the right-hand man for such a monster, but he couldn’t let his mind go there. He’d done his best to keep Rossi in line over the years. And now he’d been the one to put him in jail and make sure his wife and daughter were free of him. It was time for a clean slate.

What he hadn’t considered when he decided to do those things was just how much of his identity was wrapped up in that life. It was like ripping off a bandage and realizing it was pulling a chunk of you away too. “I just haven’t decided where that will happen.”

“And you’re going to keep moving until you decide?” She leaned against the glass counter full of trinkets and propped her chin in her hand.

“I feel like maybe I’ll know it when I get there.” He posed this more as a question than an answer. “But none of that is your problem. I’m sorry to roll up on you like this. Spilling my guts and asking for help.”

“I don’t mind at all. We have lots of people who run out of gas on these roads. Or they get lost. Don’t have phone service. It’s why we’re here.”

“You keep saying we.”

“My family. Some friends. We own this little store and a plot of land around here.” She waved around the room and beamed with pride. “This way if people need to stop and use the restroom and get a snack or something for a headache, we have it.”

“That’s nice. I didn’t see many cars on the road though. You must not get too many people through here. That’s a lot of sitting around waiting for something to happen.”

“It’s about quality, not quantity. The things we sell give us just enough money for the things we need, and we feel good

knowing we are an oasis for someone who might be in a tight spot. Now, let's make a plan for you."

"I've given up on plans." He looked around the space and eyed a bucket of berries that were as red as he'd ever seen. His stomach growled.

"It doesn't have to be too complicated. You need a place to sleep tonight, a decent meal, and some fuel in the morning. We can manage that."

"I don't want to put you out. I can sleep in my car. I'll buy some of that fruit. That'll do."

"The temperatures drop dangerously low around here at night. And a man cannot live on fruit alone. I was just about to head back home. I'll give you a ride and we'll find you a good spot to lay your head. If Mrs. Tully has a pot of something on the stove, you'll be very glad you said yes."

"I don't like needing help." This admission would be impossible to choke out normally. Working under the guise of some mission made it easier to say such things. A calculated choice to show vulnerability. If this was some cult he was walking into, his normal tendencies to be in control and dominate wouldn't work here.

"We all need help at some point in our lives. You look like you've had a hard time."

"I've had worse." King smiled

"Have you had better?"

"I'm looking for better, if that counts?" He tucked his hands into his pockets again and glanced around the little store once more. "You live out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Yes. It's great."

"It seems so isolating and . . . sorry . . . boring. No offense."

"None taken. I've lived other places, but something always draws me back here. Do you really love the city that much? Did you find peace there?"

“I didn’t. I’m not sure I was really looking for it though,” King admits.

“But now you are?” Her mouth curled into a smile.

“You ask a lot of questions.” Keeping his voice playful, he was trying not to persuade her to stop.

“We like to get to know people here. In a real way. That requires questions. But if you’re not comfortable —”

“I don’t mind. Honestly, no one has asked me much about myself for a while. It was more my job to be seen, not heard.”

“Intriguing. I look forward to hearing more about what you did for work. Follow me out back; we’ll take the four-wheeler and see if we can get you a nice meal.”

“Aren’t you going to lock up?” King asked, gesturing at the door.

“There’s no lock on it. If someone needs something when we’re not here they are welcome to it. They leave a little cash. Whatever they can.”

“I was born with a heavy dose of skepticism. Doors are made for locking. Protect what’s yours. No one else will do it for you.”

“I was born to trust. And it’s always worked out for me.” She picked up the hem of her dress as she led him to the four-wheeler parked behind the small building. “I’ll go slow, but the path can be a little rough. You’ll have to hold on.”

“I’ve never—”

“You’ve never been on a four-wheeler?” She glanced over her shoulder at him as she patted the seat for King to join her.

“I’ve never been the passenger. Everywhere I go, everything I do, I usually drive. I always know where I’m going.”

“Maybe it’s time you let someone else lead you for a little while.” She patted the seat again.

It was sweet, but knowing the context of a cult, there was also an ominous cloud around the words. Is this how they got

people? Save them. Get them food. Convince them to stay and then gain control over their free will? He wasn't sure if she was being nice or manipulative, either way, he'd keep his guard up. There was nothing new there. He'd lived that way most of his life.

CHAPTER THREE

Bailey

There are always people coming and going on the edges of Cinderhill. Travelers who had gotten turned around or needed a quick stop on a longer journey. Not many came into the heart of the village. The term village was generous. It conjured up images of brick buildings and little store fronts. This was not that.

“What is this place?” King asked over the sound of the engine as Bailey parked by the pavilion in the center of the community. Parking the four-wheeler there was the rule. It was for anyone to use any time. Just like everything in Cinderhill. Nothing belongs to anyone; it all belongs to everyone.

“Cinderhill is an organic sustainable community that listens to the land and fosters a positive, fruitful, and conscious relationship with the people and the environment.”

“Okaaay.” King drew out the word as he glanced around the open courtyard that was surrounded by raised box gardens and small cinderblock homes. She always loved to see this place through the eyes of an outsider. Especially one who was a self-proclaimed city dweller.

“It’s probably a lot to take in for a city guy like you, but Cinderhill is a really special place. I grew up here. We have everything we need and nothing we don’t.”

“How many people live here?” He got off the four-wheeler and extended his hand to Bailey. Reluctantly she took it, noticing it seemed like a reflex action for him. He was generous in his movements. Thoughtful. But it came across more like a dutiful reaction. A muscle memory of having to be obedient rather than just making kind gestures.

“Thirty-eight right now. It goes up and down. People come and go.”

“If it’s so great why does anyone leave?” He arched a brow at her and seemed to be holding his breath. This man was flesh and blood but seemed to be held together with skepticism and anger. It wasn’t that he was walking around brooding or mad. His stare was piercing and slightly unsettling in its intensity. He was shadowy in a mysterious way she felt the need to guard against. Men like this, charming and domineering in size, were dangerous in her experience. Not that they would strike out like a coiled snake, but they expected something. Their charismatic smile made them somehow entitled to respect and power. She hadn’t decided if that was King yet, but she knew by the look of him, it could be so. He was pleasant enough, but it took obvious effort to hold his smile and relax his shoulders.

“People get what they need from here and then they move on. Or they hate it here and realize they miss the creature comforts they grew up with and leave. This place is perfect to me, but it doesn’t mean it’s perfect for everyone.”

“And you live off the land?” He ran his hand over the leaves spilling out of one of the gardens. “That must be a ton of work?”

“It is, but when you all work together, it’s amazing what you can get done. Everyone pitches in. And most importantly, people need far less than they think. Food. Water. Friendship.”

“Entertainment? Technology? Medicine? Thai food?” He chuckled. “I can think of a million things I’d miss if I was living off the grid.”

“Can you think of some things you’d be glad to be free of?”

He opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. He tucked his hands in his pockets and waited for Bailey to tell him what to do next. This was clearly not how things normally worked for King. It was intriguing to her why he was fighting so hard against his natural instincts.

Boredom was something she'd learned to manage over the years, but every now and then the loneliness crept in. She wasn't going to admit that to King, but his presence here felt pre-ordained. As though he'd arrived just in time, and something about that opened her to the idea of letting him unfold before her, rather than trying to understand him completely in this moment.

There wasn't anyone her age in Cinderhill right now. There were some children, some young parents, but everyone else was over fifty. The people her age would usually come in with all the zest of creating a new life then leave a month or so later. She'd met some amazing people, but they were always just stopping temporarily. For young people who'd grown up with everything available at their fingertips and on demand, this transition was too hard. So Cinderhill was full of older people who'd grown up in simpler times and children who'd been born here and didn't know better.

"Let's get you a meal and a place to sleep tonight," Bailey sang through a smile. "You can get back to the city and some Thai food by this time tomorrow."

"Are you sure I'm allowed here?" He moved tentatively as a gaggle of children bounced by, playing a loud game of tag.

"What do you mean?" Bailey laughed and turned to face him. "What exactly do you think Cinderhill is?"

"Aren't there rules? I feel like I'm intruding on something."

"You're a guest. Guests are always welcomed. There are some expectations of people who come to live here, but you're not subject to those. You don't need to muck the stalls or churn butter. Just enjoy the peace and quiet."

He nodded, still looking uneasy. “Did you build these houses?” He eyed the small cinderblock homes that were all just a single room in a perfect square with a metal roof. Before she could answer they were interrupted.

“Who’s this, Bailey?” a voice called from one of the windows of the closest tiny house. Edna Barry peeked her head out and waved her hand wildly. “Bring him over here.”

“Edna, he ran out of gas. Don’t scare him into walking the thirty-two miles to the next gas station.”

“I don’t bite,” Edna teased.

“She literally bites,” Bailey cut back with a playful smile. Nothing was funnier in this moment than watching King try to decide what was true and what was a joke.

“Am I sleeping in there?” he whispered nervously.

“No, you’ll crash at Moe’s.”

“Does he bite?” King asked.

“Not on Tuesdays.”

“It’s Friday,” King corrected.

“Oh. Hmm, that’s right. Then maybe you’ll stay with Chad.” Throwing him a playful glance, she waited for his expression to soften.

“You’re screwing with me?”

“You asked what we do for entertainment? We mess with outsiders.”

“Outsiders?” King challenged.

“I’m kidding. We don’t talk about people like that. Cinderhill is welcoming.”

“But you wouldn’t want everyone coming here, right? The whole point is to keep it small and simple? Too many people like me would ruin it.”

“The good news is, very few people can commit to living this way. It’s not for everyone. You wouldn’t last a week.”

“Excuse me?” King stopped in his tracks. Just as Bailey suspected, he responded to a challenge. “I’ve lived in some pretty rough situations. A week here would be nothing.”

“You want to bet?” She extended her hand for a shake.

“Bet?” He looked down at her hand with his skeptically raised brow.

“We’re in need of some new roofing materials. Judging by the cost of those jeans you have on, you could certainly afford to help us with that if you lose.”

“And when I win?” King chose his words precisely, feeling confident beyond measure. “What will I get?”

“A date with me.” She brushed her hair off her shoulder like a movie star walking the red carpet.

“A what?” He chuckled but she could see his cheeks flush for just a second. “What makes you think that would be a win for me?”

“Trust me, it would.” Bailey sticks her hand out an inch farther, daring him to shake on it.

“How do you know how much my jeans cost? I don’t exactly see any high-end retail stores out here in Cinderhill. Something seems fishy.”

“They’re European. I lived in Italy for a time.” She cut the words short, feeling suddenly like she’d shared too much. “I might not look like I know much about fashion, but I do.” Bailey lifted the hem of her simple dress and did a tiny curtsy.

Looking around Cinderhill, King finally took her hand. “Deal. If I can stay here a week, we go on the date of my choice. If I can’t, I’ll pay for whatever roofing supplies you need. But you can’t intentionally make me miserable. No concerted effort to get me running for the hills.”

“Deal.” Their hands lingered for a long moment after the agreement was sealed with a handshake. “Now come eat some possum stew we cooked up from roadkill down yonder.”

“Roadkill?” His look of unease had returned

“I’m kidding. It’s beef stew and you’ll love it. We trade a butcher in the next town over some of our eggs for his beef. Don’t look so scared. Try to view Cinderhill as a refuge. A break from your life that wasn’t going so great. If you frame it that way, I think you’ll be able to really appreciate what we have here.”

“Unfortunately, none of that matters now.”

“Why?”

“I can’t lose a bet. It’s not in my DNA. You’re stuck with me for the week now.”

Bailey waved off Edna’s prying eyes and looked up at King. “We’ll see about that.” Part of her felt guilty for locking him into this agreement. It was self-serving no matter how it turned out. The roof repairs they needed were vitally important, but her love life as of late had been just as ignored as the metal planks they used to keep the rain out of their tiny houses. Not to mention, it was good timing having a man like King around.

He seemed capable in that unmistakable way a man looked when he could handle himself. That could come in handy.

CHAPTER FOUR

King

It felt like it had been ages since something had gone so smoothly. It had turned out to be easy and had worked the first time. Instead of feeling relief, King was focused on what might go wrong next. He'd expected to have to work his way into Cinderhill—that he'd be met with some resistance and cynicism about arriving out of nowhere.

Instead, he had a week of unfettered access to the place and Bailey. King would be able to see for himself if there was something bad going on here. Something Bailey needed to be rescued from. It was early, he'd only been around her for an hour, but so far there didn't seem to be any red flags. Surely someone in danger or fear for their life would not welcome him in so quickly. Or maybe that was exactly what someone in that position would do.

He demanded patience of himself. He'd honed the skill perfectly over the years. Waiting to be ordered around. Holding his breath for the next threat. This would be no different. He wouldn't jump to a conclusion one way or another. The truth would come out if he waited for it.

“Mrs. Tully, this is King. He ran out of gas and found his way to us. Do you think you could fix him up a bowl?”

The woman pattering around the kitchen looked weathered and hunched, yet the lines on her face were clearly from

laughing, not frowning. Her apron was frilly and her hair, all wild gray coils, sprang up in every direction.

“Only if it’s not too much trouble,” he cut in, wanting to be an amicable guest. He’d needed to duck to make his way into her tiny cinderblock house. The floors were crooked and the furniture mismatched, but it still had the essence of a grandma vibe.

“Good gravy, you’re huge,” Mrs. Tully announced, waving her ladle around like a wand. Drips of stew hit the floor and were quickly lapped up by a tiny dog with patches of missing fur and an eye that wandered away from the other. “Scram, Fuzzington,” she scolded the puppy and pushed him away with her slipper.

“Fuzzington?” King asked with a chuckle.

Bailey lowered her voice to explain. “It’s short for Sir Fuzzington the Great, Earl of Puppy Chow.”

“Of course.” King nodded.

“Did you hit your head on the door frame on the way in?” Mrs. Tully pressed, eying him from head to toe.

“I’m not that big,” King replied with a smile. “Only six foot three.”

“Your shoulders,” Mrs. Tully sang in amazement. “They are wide as my house. How did you even get in here? Are you part Sasquatch?”

“Mrs. Tully,” Bailey scolded. “You can’t go around calling people Bigfoot just because they happen to be tall.”

“And broad,” Mrs. Tully added, “as a barn.”

King couldn’t fight the laugh. He did look rather large in this tiny house, next to these two small women. “You two are brutal. I thought a place like this was supposed to be all peace and love.”

“A place like this?” Mrs. Tully asked, looking suddenly serious. “What exactly do you think Cinderhill is?”

“I don’t know,” King shrugged. “It’s a commune, right? That’s the vibe I’m getting.”

Mrs. Tully turned her back to him under the guise of stirring the stew in her pot. “I know in the city everyone thinks everything needs a label. But I’ve been living here for twenty-eight years and I’ve never felt the need to call it anything other than home.”

“I didn’t mean to presume. I think this place is cool. And for a week, I’ll be calling it home too.”

“A week?” Mrs. Tully asked, her dark brown but very aged eyes turning back to appraise King. “You think this is a vacation destination? You just pop in and kick your feet up for a week?”

“No,” Bailey cut in. “He just needed a place for the night. Now we’ve got a bet going. If he can’t stay here for the week, he’s going to buy us those roofing supplies we need.”

Mrs. Tully’s eyes were filled with mischief again. “Oh, you brilliant girl. He won’t be able to make it here. I bet he’s used to fluffy beds and air conditioners.”

“There’s no air conditioning?” King asked, looking around the tiny space. “It’s pretty hot here during the day, right?”

“Sweltering,” Mrs. Tully reported cheerfully. “And cool at night. And there are rules here. You look like you hate rules.”

“Love them, actually.” King winked at her.

“Up with the sun. Everyone has a job. And new people tend to get the toughest ones. How are you at scrubbing bathrooms?”

“Very skilled,” King retorted. “You won’t scare me off. I don’t intend to lose this bet.”

“It’s good timing,” Mrs. Tully said, her words veiled in some subtext King couldn’t decipher. But Bailey seemed to. It was his first indication that maybe something else was going on.

“What’s so good about the timing?” he pressed, trying to be chill about it.

“I’ll take a bowl to go if you don’t mind, Mrs. Tully. Mama’s barely up for eating these days, but she’ll find it hard to turn your food away.”

King didn’t press for an answer to his question. She clearly didn’t want to answer. And he was more interested in hearing about her mother. Carmen had sent over all the information she had on Bailey and her family. He knew her father had been arrested and convicted of racketeering, kidnapping, and trafficking. There was still another twenty years on his sentence. But there hadn’t been much on her mother.

Many of the records were sealed, but what he had seen was enough to know Cinderhill the way it was four years ago was a toxic and dangerous place. The women were like property. The people working were like unpaid laborers, day and night, prisoners, unable to leave. And her father, Dale Raine, was mastermind of it all. Profiting off of other people’s pain. His daughter, Bailey, bore the brunt of his violence.

By all accounts Dale’s specialty was twisting religion into a weapon to keep the people in line. There were notes about cruel beatings and harsh punishments for those who didn’t comply. It had taken Bailey’s astounding bravery to finally have her father arrested and she’d gone, with Gloria’s help, to Italy while the other people in her father’s network had mostly fled. Bailey was offered a new life. A fresh start, and yet, she ended up back at Cinderhill.

“Of course you can take a bowl, you sweet thing. I don’t know what your mother would do without you. You’re what keeps her going.”

The questions bubbled up in King’s mind, but he knew he hadn’t earned the right to ask yet. Instead he took the bowl of stew from Mrs. Tully, prayed it really wasn’t roadkill, and sat on the small chair she gestured toward.

“Sit down gently. That’s my best chair but it’s not built for a giant.”

He sank down slowly, knowing if he broke this chair, it would only fuel more jokes.

Mrs. Tully went on to explain other points about Cinderhill. “All that food is grown right here. You’ve never had such a fresh potato in your life.”

She was right. The stew was the best he’d had in ages. The life of a bodyguard had left him grabbing dinner on the go. Hanging out in dark parking lots. Watching. Waiting. Skipping meals altogether.

“This is amazing.” King watched as Mrs. Tully filled a glass bowl with stew for Bailey to take with her.

“Tell your mother we’re all thinking about her. Let me know what else she might need. I can whip up anything she has an appetite for.”

“You’re a doll, Mrs. Tully. I’ll get this to her and come back for Bigfoot here. Try not to scare him off too quickly. We can put him to work before we run him out of here.”

Bailey leaned in and kissed her cheek. Their love for each other was apparent, and again King tried to find the cracks, the fissures that would allow him to see what was broken in Cinderhill. But he could see nothing yet.

“Fair enough,” Mrs. Tully sang as she sliced off a piece of freshly baked bread and brought it to King. “You can’t live on stew alone. Not a boy your size.”

“These giant jokes aren’t going anywhere, are they?”

“They won’t,” Bailey teased as she stepped outside. Over her shoulder she called back to him, “But you will.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Bailey

Gravity was hitting her mother harder these days. Pulling the skin on her cheeks down. Making her slump in her bed. Everything seemed heavy to her mother. That's what illness did. It added weight to your life even as the pounds melted off.

"I brought some of Mrs. Tully's stew. Do you want it in bed or at the table?"

"In bed," her mother croaked. "But I'm not very hungry."

"You know you have to eat to keep your strength up. Dr. Murray wants you to go to the hospital. Have you thought more about that?"

"I'm staying here. It'll all work out." Her mother was an expert at placating someone. She'd done it all her life. From what Bailey knew of her mother's parents, they were dominating people. First generation immigrants, fleeing some horrible atrocities in Romania. It made them hard and inflexible people, which in turn made being malleable her mother's best coping mechanism. She had needed to be clay in their hands as to not be crushed by their tight grip.

Bailey's father was like a replacement for them, filling in the gaping hole when she finally moved away from her parents. Bailey assumed he could sense her proclivity for people-pleasing and matched it perfectly with his need to dominate. Now, with none of those controlling voices in the

room, Bailey tried to take a kinder approach, but it had dangerous consequences. Her mother's health was deteriorating fast, and though the doctor had warned it could be life-threatening if untreated, she couldn't get her mother to budge on going to the hospital or even agreeing to have any medicine at home.

"Let's try for at least half a bowl." Bailey grabbed a spoon and carried it over to her mother. She was brainstorming different ways she could try to get her to agree to the medical interventions.

"Did they come?" she asked, moaning in pain as she tried to sit up.

"Don't worry about that, Mama. I've got everything under control."

"They are going to come. It's part of the prophecies," she sputtered between bites of stew. "My time is short here. They must sense that."

There was nothing more difficult in Bailey's experience than pretending to believe what her mother was saying. Or at least not openly challenging it. She had to walk the tightrope of allowing her mother to still live half in the past while trying to pull her into the truth and the future.

Her mother was like a scuba diver down so deep that if she surfaced too fast, she'd suffer grave consequences. Bailey had learned this in Italy. Through intensive therapy she'd been able to conquer her own demons and realize fully that the propaganda and lies her father were telling could not be true. He'd turned Cinderhill into a cult. One she was fully faithful to. But in time, and with help, she'd been able to unravel the many threads of lies that had been carefully wrapped around her brain.

Her mother was much deeper in the dark sea, and getting her to surface was taking time. But there was no time left. Without treatment she'd fall into sepsis and death would follow. Bailey wrestled with the notion that her mother would die still in the grip of her father's mind control. Actually because of that mind control.

“We talked about this, Mama. I’m handling it. You’ve done a great job over the years. Now you just need to take care of yourself and I’ll take care of Cinderhill. It’s why you need to listen to Dr. Murray.”

“I’ve kept your father’s dream alive. Kept this place going for the day he comes back. He knew there had to be a period of cleansing to keep the eyes of the outsiders off of us. But my illness will be the catalyst for the new phase of Cinderhill. Your father will be back. A miracle is coming.”

Bailey couldn’t bite her tongue. “He’s not going to come back. You know that. He’s in prison for many more years. I can’t imagine he’d want you to die when medicine could treat you.”

“He’ll be back. You don’t know your father like I do. He’ll think of something. They’ve had him in there for all this time, but he’ll find a way out. A way back to me. Back to Cinderhill.”

Bailey hoped with everything in her soul that her mother was wrong. There was no world in which Cinderhill was better off with her father there. He’d been the one to bastardize and destroy it in the first place.

Her childhood had been idyllic. Truly perfect. It was filled with a sense of belonging, community, and freedom. They lived in a close-knit group where everyone looked out for one another and shared resources. Children were free to explore and learn in a natural setting, surrounded by nature and the simplicity of rural life. She had friends and was surrounded by love. Every good memory she had was tied to this place. But sadly, it was corrupted and destroyed. She’d been fighting now since her return to recreate the place she remembered.

But this kind of conversation always went nowhere, so she knew better than to try to debate too hard. What would it matter soon? Her mother was deteriorating so quickly. The most important thing was to get her to agree to medicine.

“You’ve got get your strength up.” Bailey gestured at the stew and smiled.

“Just a few more days,” she sighed, closing her eyes. “The cleansing is over. It’s time for a return.”

“Don’t worry about that. You just get focused on when Dr. Murray comes back so we can decide—”

“There’s nothing to decide. I’m not going to the hospital. The land has always sustained me. It will now. Dr. Murray is going to bring me more of the tea.”

“You can’t cure this infection with tea, Mama. I’m not saying you can’t find things to make you feel better and help your body, but the hospital is still the place where you can get the best care for what you are going through. You do want to live, right?”

“If these were the old days, you know what would happen if you said something like that. You’d be a non-believer.” Her eyes were still closed and her words rose and fell in volume like the tides.

“We stopped all of that, and for good reason. You remember that, right, Mama? People need to have their own thoughts and feelings without fear of punishment for expressing them. We’ve worked hard to undo all of that. I know at times it felt like you were betraying Dad, but really you were putting things right.”

“The stew is good, dear.” Her mother sighed.

Damn her.

No one could change the subject more skillfully than her mother. She was an expert at deflecting and ignoring.

“I’ve got to go back to Mrs. Tully’s,” Bailey announced, bringing over a napkin and small glass of water. Dehydration had been a problem for her mother lately and it was getting harder to convince her to drink anything. She didn’t have an appetite and some days hardly had the energy to bring a glass to her lips. The infection was taking hold.

“Why? Is she all right? Tell her the stew was just what I needed.”

Bailey wanted to shout back that carrots and beef weren't going to cure her. Nothing from the land could do that. Instead, she allowed her mother to guide the conversation toward what was most comfortable.

"We have a guest," Bailey explained. "He ran out of gas and Mrs. Tully is getting him dinner."

"Who?" Her mother seemed to get enough energy back to look worried. "What do you know about him?"

"Trust me, Mama, him being here is a blessing. His name is King. He's going to help us repair every roof that's leaking."

"We shouldn't let strangers in here. You know how your father feels about that. It's too dangerous. That's how he got in trouble in the first place."

It felt wrong not to call people out on altered reality and lies. But it's similar, Bailey imagined, to a dementia patient. It was always worse to challenge their reality and make them feel like strangers in their own body.

However, the truth was her father got in trouble because he broke the law. He turned Cinderhill into a hellscape of archaic rules and twisted ideology. But to her mother, it was the prying eyes of outsiders that caused all the problems. In reality, those outsiders saved lives. Yet, there would never be a way to convince her mother of that. Dale Raine was her husband, her hero, and an all-around saint as far as she was concerned.

"King's not staying long. Just passing through. We'll help him and he'll help us. That's what Cinderhill is about, right?"

"Right." Her mother sighed and closed her heavy sagging eyelids. There was no room for doubt that her mother was simply parroting back what she thought Bailey wanted to hear, but for now that had to be enough. "You're so right, dear."

CHAPTER SIX

King

“You finished dinner?” Bailey asked, as she strolled up to King. He’d found an overturned log and was perched there, staring up at the last few clouds that were turning cotton candy pink by the setting sun.

“And I did the dishes.” He beamed with pride.

“Not that easy without running water, was it?”

“I’ll admit,” King began, “this is a tough lifestyle. Certainly missing many of the creature comforts I’m used to, but I’ll survive. You’ve got a good system for well water. It wasn’t too bad.”

“I checked with Moe. He said you’re welcome to stay with him; he just needs a bit to get a bed ready for you. I warned him it’ll have to be a big bed.”

“Don’t blame me for being so tall. I wasn’t raised in a place like Cinderhill. My diet was all meat filled with growth hormones and junk food. I’m just a product of my environment.”

“Aren’t we all?” Bailey whispered, frowning for a moment.

“That’s a positive in your eyes, right? You love it here? What a great place to be raised.”

“Environment is more than just the place you live. It’s the people who raise you. There are some days I’d like to be a product of someone else. But we don’t get to choose such things, do we?”

“I heard you say your mother wasn’t well.” King stood and moved closer to Bailey. There was no time to be attracted to her. No scenario where it made sense to give in to his desire to kiss her plump pink lips. This was a job. He’d have to remember that. But she could help that situation by not looking so damn cute every second. The heavy topics would keep him in check.

“She’s sick but refuses treatment from the hospital. Without the treatment she’s going to keep declining and could die. But part of being committed to living off the grid is the rejection of conventional medicine. It’s a complicated topic for some.”

“She’d rather die than go to the hospital and get care?” King fought off the instinct to judge. This was a completely different lifestyle here in Cinderhill. One he couldn’t possibly understand yet. Which meant he had no place to judge it either.

“There are a lot of people who are skeptical of the medical industry and how it’s been turned into a business. My mother is, unfortunately, easily swayed toward those theories and can be convinced of just about anything being evil or bad. Convincing her of any other things that require discerning logic is another story, even if her life depends on it.”

“That’s got to be hard to sit by and watch.”

Bailey dropped her head. “It’s difficult to be the only voice of sanity in the room sometimes. Especially when I’m not that effective at it.”

“Does your father live here in Cinderhill too? He must have an opinion.”

“My father never lacks for strong opinions. But he doesn’t live here anymore.” Bailey plucked a long piece of grass and ran her fingers over it like it was a strip of silk. “We should

walk the gardens while we wait for Moe to have your bed set up. Want to?"

"Sure." King gestured for Bailey to lead the way. He understood he couldn't dive headfirst into every question he wanted to ask. A stroll and a change of subject would likely be the better option right now.

They walked around the gardens as night began to settle in around them. The scent of fresh herbs and flowers filled his nose. He couldn't help but admire the beauty of it, even if it was far different from what he was accustomed to.

King glanced over at Bailey, sensing she wanted to tell him something. Maybe Carmen had been right. Was there more to Cinderhill than just some peaceful community? Secrets? Danger? He wasn't sure but something peculiar was written all over Bailey's face.

"My father was arrested. He's in prison." She blurted the words frantically and then snapped her mouth shut.

"That's ironic. My dad is in prison too," King retorted with a look of empathy. "And so is the guy I thought of as a brother for most of my life. I put him in prison actually, and frankly, it keeps me up at night."

"Wait what?" Bailey stopped walking and turned to face him. "Your father is locked up too? And how did you put the other guy in prison? You'd better not be kidding, because I was standing here contemplating what you would think when you heard what I had to say."

King nodded, indicating he was telling the truth. "Life is messy. I don't care if you live in a skyscraper or a tiny house in the middle of nowhere. Parents fail their children. People are neglected. Overprotected. Unloved. Loved too much. It seems like a lose/lose situation to be a parent most days. But my family was a disaster, and the people I picked to be like family to me were just as bad. So, your father being in prison doesn't register as some terrible thing to me. It's not a reflection on you."

“Hmm,” she hummed. “I was only telling you because if you spend any amount of time here, someone will share stories with you, and I wanted you to hear a bit of it from me first.”

“Spill the tea,” King teased, nudging her shoulder as they began walking again. “What skeletons are haunting this place?”

“You plan to tell me all your deep dark secrets?” She raised a brow and waited for him to break eye contact but he didn’t.

“No. I can’t. But I’ll tell you some stuff if you really care to hear it.”

“Then I’ll tell you some stuff too. But for now all you need to know is Cinderhill hit a rough patch for a while because of my father. He broke some laws and twisted some stuff around to make people here think they couldn’t live the way they wanted anymore. He’s gone. I’m here now and things are safe and thriving again. We have our issues. Challenges. But I make sure they don’t threaten the way of life here in Cinderhill.”

“That’s a nice speech,” King agreed with a nod. “I feel like some of it is aspirational. Maybe not exactly where you want it to be, but I like the effort.”

“Aspirational? You think I’m lying about how great Cinderhill is?”

“I think it’s probably a lot of work and for all the peace and tranquility that this place offers, there must be a ton of stress and expectation for you.”

“I can handle anything.” Her back went rigid with pride. “Cinderhill is a lot of work, but it’s also beautiful. Just look around.”

They strolled while Bailey animatedly described her experience of living off the grid, without any of the modern amenities. She beamed as she explained the freedom that comes with being completely self-sufficient. How she learned to thrive without the distractions and stresses of city life. As he listened to Bailey’s persuasive arguments, he found himself

drawn to her in a way he never expected. A dangerous inconvenient attraction that would not help him do what needed to be done here.

While fantasizing briefly about what they could do on the tree swing they just passed, King nodded and shook off the desire. Instead, he went back to searching her face for the tells. Some little sign that she didn't believe everything she was saying. And there were some. He could spot the doubt, but it was not time to push yet. He would tread lightly.

"What did your dad do that got him arrested?" King asked, trying not to look too eager for the answer.

"The details don't matter. It's not really something you'd understand. The important thing is he's not coming back here any time soon, and Cinderhill will never go back to the way it was while he was here. You don't need to know more than that. Plus you'll only be here another day or two, so what does it matter?"

"A week," King corrected.

"You're just caught up in the beauty of Cinderhill so you're feeling overly confident. Wait until you realize there are no hot showers or video games. You'll be checking in to the closest hotel in the city before you know it."

King groaned. "I do love a hot shower."

"You'll enjoy our gravity fed outdoor solar showers that lack water pressure but make up for it by being a wonderful place to see a friendly bug skitter by."

"A bug going by? It's nice to have company in the shower," King retorted, sure to catch her eye and watch her mind roll that around for a moment with the inuendo.

"Moe is a great friend and he loves a shower." She winked playfully at him and kept walking.

"Noted." The energy between them was becoming charged. Bailey was clever. Quick with a sharp reply. Her cascading hair and the hem of her lace dress kept getting swept up in the breeze, making her look like she was ready to be photographed for a magazine cover.

“We should head over to Moe’s place now. I’m sure he’s ready for you.”

“Anything I need to know about Moe? Convicted felon? Serial killer hiding from the law? Vegetarian?” King pretended to gasp.

“I’m a little concerned about the order you put those questions in.”

“I don’t really understand someone who doesn’t eat a cheeseburger.”

“Moe is a wonderful man who lost his wife in a car accident. He came out here to grieve and find some peace. He’s one of the good men. Quiet. Humble. Doesn’t make waves. He turned seventy last month.”

“Was he friends with your dad?”

“Moe stays out of things. That’s the best way I can explain it. He keeps to himself and works hard but never got very involved with my father and his nonsense. You’ll like him.”

King let his expression fall serious. “I know we’ve been joking around, but there is something I want you to know.”

Anticipation was written all over her face. It was obvious Bailey did not like suspense or surprises. He nearly told her to take a breath and unclench her jaw.

“What is it?”

“Just that I appreciate you helping me out. Everyone here. I don’t know too many places left on the planet that would see a guy like me in a bind and decide to help. A bowl of stew. A place to sleep. Some kindness. I don’t think I realized how much I needed it.”

“The stew?”

“The kindness. I was on a road to nowhere and now I’m here.”

She furrowed her brows curiously. “Do you think that’s fate? You don’t strike me as a guy who gives all the credit in his life to destiny. For you, I bet it’s all about drive and

purpose, and anyone who isn't where they are supposed to be just doesn't want it bad enough."

"Is that my vibe? I hope not. People don't always get to dictate their circumstances and you can't simply drag yourself out of rock bottom. So yeah, I think there's some fate involved here. Something that helps us get where we're supposed to be. People there to lend us a hand."

"You're a romantic. I didn't expect that. You were running from something and ended up here. I like it."

"I'd like to think I'm running toward something, even if I don't know what it is yet. Behind me is a lot of regret. I put all my loyalty in a guy who never deserved it just because I felt like I owed him my life. He crossed a line I couldn't stomach anymore and I made sure he paid for it."

"That's intense. You went to the police to turn your friend in?" Bailey nibbled her thumb nail and gazed at him intently as though she was watching the season finale of a dramatic television show. He was the *Who shot J. R.?* of her life at the moment. Apparently, off the grid, any story you haven't heard before was captivating.

"It was a little less conventional than that. I made him stab me." King knew this would elicit a dramatic reaction and Bailey did not disappoint.

"No you didn't," she argued, shoving his shoulder back. He relished the touch of her hand. "What do you mean? You can't make someone stab you."

He pulled the neck of his shirt over his shoulder and showed her the mostly healed wound. Bailey's hand raised as though she planned to touch him again, but she brought it back to her side a moment later, thinking better of it.

King tried to explain, though he hardly understood it himself. "This man was like a brother to me, but for all the wrong reasons. Allegiance and love are not the same thing. It took him hurting someone I actually did love for me to realize how wrong I'd been. I helped her and her daughter leave and then I fought with him, knowing he'd try to kill me."

“That seems extreme.” Her gorgeous eyes were wide with hunger for more information.

“My life was extreme. It was high stakes. So he stabbed me, and I shot him.”

“Did you really shoot him?” she asked, her expression a mix of horror and slight admiration.

“I had to. It was him or me at that point. But it wasn’t easy. You can hate someone and love them at the same time. That’s the shit they never tell you when you’re growing up. The nuances of life are where all the problems start.”

Bailey’s expression softened as she processed his words. “You and I might have more in common than I thought.”

“You shot a man you cared about?” he teased her, knowing she likely hadn’t.

“I’ve had to make tough choices about people I love. I’m still doing it every day.”

“There are ways out. Look at me.” He lifted his arms as though he were the shining example of a well-lived life all of a sudden. It was laughable, but he wanted to offer her the levity.

“Oh yes, you’ve clearly got it all figured out.” She nudged him with her elbow as they walked by the fragrant wildflowers at the edge of the dirt path. There were tiny houses splattered throughout the area, all similar in their simplicity. Just cinderblock with a metal roof.

“Is everyone already sleeping? It’s so quiet.” King craned his neck to search for anyone chatting or roaming around.

“We’re up before the sun. This time of the evening, people have eaten. They’ve finished their jobs. Mostly they are settled in with a good book by their fire and resting. Some meditate. Others sing. They sew or make crafts. Some pray. The children learn or are told stories. It’s my favorite time of the night. I loved it when I was very small. We call it the stillness.”

“You’ve really lived here your whole life?”

“I was born here. Literally. Like over there.” She pointed to a small, square, one-room house.

“Did your parents build Cinderhill or something?”

“No, it was here when my parents arrived. It was smaller, just about ten people living off the land. Only four of the cinderblock houses existed.”

“What drew them here? Or how did they even find it? It would have been before you could just search communes on the internet, right?”

“Someone my father knew had passed through the area on a hunting trip and came back with stories of the way of life. My parents were not adjusting well to adult life and the expectations of a ‘normal’ existence in a capitalist society.”

“Meaning?”

“My father couldn’t find a job he wanted to do and hated going to work. They weren’t very skilled at anything that could earn them a decent living and both of their parents had put them out after short stints of returning home. I think my father was out of options, and when he heard about Cinderhill he was convinced it would be some kind of heaven.”

“Heaven? So it’s a religious thing? I didn’t see a church.” King scratched at his head, attempting to sell himself as confused when in fact he’d read all the notes Carmen had sent about Cinderhill.

“There’s no building we call a church. Not anymore. There was a temple my father created but it’s gone. Now, I make sure people here can believe what they like and have the ability to listen to their hearts and bodies. Cinderhill is not supposed to change people; it’s meant to give them more space and freedom to discover who they are.”

“What if they are assholes?” King asked, partly serious. “Shouldn’t some people change?”

“Then they don’t belong here.” Bailey shrugged, but he could sense some unease.

“How do you make them leave? If everything is so peaceful, how do you defend Cinderhill when things go wrong?”

“They rarely do. But those things work themselves out in the end. This type of living isn’t for everyone and the assholes usually go back to the city.” Her lips curled into a devilish smile.

He understood her joke instantly. “I’m rethinking calling you kind.”

“You’ll be rethinking everything when the sun comes up tomorrow morning and you realize how much work you have to do.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bailey

King stood in the communal outdoor kitchen; his eyes fixed on the pile of peaches Bailey had brought in. There was already an unsettled bewildered look on his face that she found a little funny. That's what a pullout cot for a bed and a cold shower can do.

"Did you sleep well?" Bailey asked, able to guess his response based solely on his expression.

"I slept," King said, his voice gravelly. "I think. Can you sleep while you're tossing and turning?"

"The cot wasn't great?"

"I guess I've gotten used to high thread count sheets and a pillowtop mattress. Also I don't think I've slept on a bed that my feet hung over in a while. I'm not complaining, but my body is."

"We have a wonderful muscle balm made of natural ingredients found right here on the land that you can use. And after standing up all day in the kitchen, you'll need it."

"Mrs. Tully was threatening me with bathroom cleaning responsibilities, so I'll take any job in the kitchen I can get." He slapped his hands together as though he were pumped for the task. He didn't realize just how long and tedious this kind of work could be once the excitement wore off.

She was feeling her own kind of excitement. The air between them was charged with tension. It had been far too long since she'd been in the presence of a man like King. It reminded her of Italy. Of the freedom she had when she'd first escaped Cinderhill. He was like a glass of red wine in a bustling café. A ride through the busy street. King, with his mischievous grin and large capable hands, was a compelling reason to miss the outside world.

“You'll be glad to know we reached out to the tow company and they'll be putting gas in your car, so if you want to leave today—”

“A week.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“Okay,” she said with a shrug, enjoying this banter more than she planned.

Bailey came up to him with a knife in her hand and a funny grin on her face. “Is this triggering for you? I know you were stabbed.” She eyed the spot on his shoulder where he'd shown her the injury.

“Nothing scares me. You'll have to find another way to win the bet.”

“Okay, are you ready to learn how to preserve peaches?” she asked. “This is an essential skill for living off the land. What will you eat when the gardens aren't growing? You have to have a stockpile of food for everyone in the community and plan for things to go wrong.”

“That seems pretty easy.” King grabbed a peach from the counter and brought it to his nose. She watched his eyes widen as he smelled the sweet freshness.

“It can get very monotonous and it's hard on your hands. The key to this kind of work is making it fun. It's best to make a game out of it. For every batch we make, you have to tell me something about yourself.”

King raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “That game sounds a little disproportionate. Every other batch, you have to tell me something.”

“Fine,” she shrugged, knowing full well there were plenty of things she’d never be courageous enough to speak out loud to him.

“And what do I get when I finish all the peaches?” He was strutting around as though this would be easy. He didn’t realize there were seven more bushels waiting for them when this one was done.

Bailey stepped closer to him. She could practically feel the heat radiating off his body. “I’ll think of some kind of reward,” she whispered, taking the peach from his hand. This sultry flirtation had not been part of the plan, but King’s pull was strong and she continued being drawn in closer.

“I don’t know what else you’ll want to hear from me. I’ve told you plenty already. More than I have told anyone in a long time.”

“Why do you think that is?” She curled a loop of her hair around her finger and eyed him closely.

“Who would you tell?” he chuckled. “It’s not like you’re posting stuff on social media. I guess you could whisper all my secrets to a bird or something.”

“Good point. But you are going to go back out into the world and maybe you will tell them all about me and my secrets. I’m the one who should be worried.”

“I won’t tell anyone anything.” He plucked three peaches from the counter and began juggling them. “I think I’m joining the circus after this, so the clowns won’t care about your secrets.”

“I can see you in the circus.” She winked at him and loved the way he smiled back.

Peeling and slicing the peaches with effortless precision, Bailey laughed at the image of King running off with the circus. Did people still do things like that? She was envious of how open the road in front of him would be once he left Cinderhill. Clearly he was fleeing something difficult, but he was going to just travel around until he found some place he liked. Anywhere. It seemed like a liberating kind of strategy

she wished she could adopt. “You’re obviously deflecting. I think there is a lot more you can tell me. Who exactly are you, King?”

“I’m a kid who had a messed-up family, and got taken in by people who might have been even more screwed up. They were involved in organized crime. They did what they needed to in order to get what they wanted. I felt like I’d finally found somewhere I belonged, and so I was willing to do their dirty work. Turns out I was good at doing what other people didn’t have the stomach for.”

“And then one day you decided it wasn’t right?”

“The guy I worked for did a lot of terrible stuff, but the worst of it was how he treated his wife. He humiliated her. Hurt her. Scared her. They had a little girl and she saw way too much of it. I was worried he’d soon move on to hurting his daughter too.”

“That’s terrible.” Bailey felt her cheeks rise with heat as she thought of her own father and how he tormented people. How being his daughter didn’t give her some blanket of protection. In fact it seemed to do the opposite.

“The problem was his wife wasn’t ready to leave. She didn’t think she could safely get out so I had to just wait. I did everything I could to minimize the violence and shield their daughter from it. But until I was confident she was going to leave and stay gone, I couldn’t step in.”

“That must have been hard to watch.”

“It was the worst thing I’ve had to do. But if I’d have tried to help her before she was ready, he’d have killed me, and then she would have had no one there when she was strong enough to leave. I had to walk a tightrope.”

“But you did it. You saved her and her daughter.”

“Not alone. There were other people who helped when the time came. But yes, they are safe now.”

“And then you just left?”

“I had to heal first.” He pointed to his shoulder. “Once I was out of the hospital, I packed up and started driving. Lou and the men still loyal to him would have killed me if I stayed around. Even worse, they could have used me to try to get to his wife and daughter. I couldn’t risk that.”

“Now you’re here in Cinderhill, peeling peaches and learning how to live off the land.” Reaching for the bowl next to him, Bailey brushed against the tense muscle of his bicep. She’d lived such a solitary life for so long, it was strange to be this close to a gorgeous man again. Brooding and charming, with a past that had clearly shaped him into the resilient but untrusting man he was today. She was growing more enamored with him by the minute.

Bailey leaned in closer and drew in the musk of his strong body.

“How am I doing?” King asked, proud that he’d made it through his pile of peaches.

“I think you’ve earned a little reward,” she whispered, before taking a juicy slice of peach and popping it into his mouth. Her fingers lingered near his lips for a long beat.

King seemed to savor the sweetness of the fruit, his eyes never leaving Bailey’s. She understood this was a dangerous game. A surefire way to end up with a pile of regret when he pulled away from Cinderhill. Judging by his lust-filled eyes, he knew the same, but didn’t care.

“This doesn’t seem all that bad,” King replied licking his lips and breaking the tension. “I could work like this. Living off the land isn’t nearly as difficult as you said.”

“There are seven more bushels of peaches to get through. You’ll be hunched over this bowl all morning. Plus, I’m starting you off easy. We’re chopping wood next. Everyone needs to be restocked. You think your back hurts now, just wait.”

King grinned, and there was a lightness in his step that hadn’t been there before. He knew she was flirting with him

and he clearly liked it. “Working up a sweat is one of my favorite hobbies.”

They worked in comfortable quiet as they stocked the shelves with peaches. This was the part of Cinderhill that always energized her. Creating something that would sustain everyone. Something they could share and enjoy. Doing it with King only heightened her enjoyment.

After hours of peeling and preserving, Bailey took his hand and led him out of the kitchen. “You did better than I expected.”

“That’s me,” King replied, pretending to be beaming with pride. “Exceeding expectations. But don’t think I didn’t notice you’ve gotten out of telling me anything. There’s definitely more to the story about your dad.”

“There is,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Tell him the whole thing,” Mrs. Tully said as she shuffled by with a small basket of tomatoes. “Tell him how the hunger for power corrupts men. How the charisma of a man like him can be more dangerous than a gun. How he ruled with an iron fist and poisoned the well that is Cinderhill.”

“Damn,” King said, raising his brows in surprise. “That’s pretty heavy.”

“It was a dark time here,” Bailey agrees, but found it hard to explain further. “Things are different now.”

“On a razor’s edge,” Mrs. Tully replied as King took the basket from her hands to lighten her load.

“What does that mean?” he asked, a grave look of concern painted on his face. “Your father isn’t coming back, is he? You said he’s locked up for a long time.”

“No. He’s not coming back,” Bailey retorted, giving Mrs. Tully a look of warning. King wouldn’t be around here long and it didn’t serve them to air all Cinderhill’s dirty laundry. “He’s never coming back. Things are peaceful again. People can make up their own minds. Live the lives they want. I’ve made sure of that, haven’t I?”

Mrs. Tully sighed and looked reluctant to stop the conversation. “You have, but at what cost?”

“We’re heading to the woodpile,” Bailey deflected tactfully. “I’ll make sure you’ve got plenty to keep you going for a while. We need to take advantage of this guy before he goes running out of here.”

“Put him to work,” Mrs. Tully teased, squeezing his bicep and seeming resigned not to push the topic of Cinderhill’s problems any further.

King still had a look of unease as she led him out of the kitchen and down the property toward a pile of fallen trees and large logs.

“Most of our power is solar. That runs our communal kitchen, as you just saw. It’s enough for the fridge and freezer, the electric stove, and a few other appliances. But in the housing units people only have wood stoves to cook on, like Mrs. Tully was doing yesterday with the stew.”

“And they don’t have bathrooms in their houses. I learned that the hard way last night at Moe’s.”

“It’s a short walk to the bathrooms.”

“A dark walk. I was unprepared. The wildlife was especially wild last night.”

“I don’t think the people who built Cinderhill minded the walk. They designed these little cinderblock square houses. Just big enough to keep the weather out. When my parents got here in the eighties, they were a big part of making improvements to them. My father poured the cement floors and then put down the hardwoods. He was no expert, but it helped. He insulated them the best he could. He helped build the furniture. He made sure each unit was as comfortable for people as possible while remaining true to the mission of Cinderhill.”

“Until he went nuts?”

She felt a jolt in her stomach. No one around here spoke so candidly about her father besides Mrs. Tully. Everyone else had resigned themselves to trying to forget it had ever

happened. “It’s wasn’t a quick snap. He didn’t just lose it. Changes came slowly. I know now that’s how you manipulate people. It’s not all at once, it’s a chipping away of what is normal right under their noses, until they look up one day and realize how unrecognizable everything is.”

“How bad was it?”

“Bad.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been very difficult. At least he went to prison and the people here have their lives back. It sounds like that is thanks to you.”

“I abandoned them actually. I was focused on self-preservation and left them in the lurch. I wonder sometimes if I came back too late. I still lose sleep over that.”

“If it was really that bad, it sounds like you didn’t have a choice. They don’t seem to blame you for saving yourself.”

“It’s an ongoing process. Some things are still in the works.”

“Is that what Mrs. Tully was alluding to? She looked like she wanted to say more.”

“Mrs. Tully never backed down to my father. When the rest of us followed him blindly and got lost in the manipulation and lies, she quietly resisted. Whispered in the night about how wrong he was. In fact, it was her counsel that got me to finally snap out of it and do something.”

“But the work’s not done?”

“Not yet.” She wanted to burst open with the truth. Tell King why this place was not free of the grip of her father yet. Instead, she bit down on her lip until pain radiated through her body. This was not his problem. She didn’t know King. It would be wrong to pull him into it. The best thing that could happen was he’d laughably lose the bet and help fund some roof repairs. He’d be gone and she’d continue her fight, missing the sight of him. The smell of him. But moving forward.

“You’re very cryptic.” His eyes narrowed as he appraised her closely.

“Old habits die hard.”

“You’re telling me.” He chuckled as they reached the wood pile and he seemed to assess just how much work there was to be done. King appeared thrilled rather than intimidated. “Swinging the axe around for a while might help me work out some of my own problems.”

“It’s worth a shot.” She grinned and pointed to where the axes lay.

“Well, it sounds like you’ve done a lot to fix this place. And I’m happy to help out in any way I can. I have a unique set of skills, maybe they can be of use for more than just canning peaches and chopping wood.” There was something written between his words, a message he was trying to send, but she couldn’t be certain what it was.

Did King sense the looming danger? Were all these questions a result of his skilled radar for bad things that might happen?

It made her anxious to think King might have been able to figure her out so easily. To read her and this place like a book even though she’d been trying to keep it all from him.

“I appreciate that. I know how dysfunctional it looks from the outside. But even with everything that’s happened, this place is still home.”

He lifted the axe, positioned a log, and swung effortlessly. It split in a way Bailey hadn’t seen in so long. The men living in Cinderhill now were aging. This chore was always a slow and grueling task that they put off as long as they could.

King kept talking as he set up another log. “Home is such a weird concept. I’ve never really nailed down how it’s supposed to feel.”

Bailey looked at him, really looked at him for the first time. His eyes were bright and sparkling, and his face was unguarded. There was something about him that made her feel like he was genuine, like he was someone she could trust.

Though she'd learned the hard way the worst men are the best at giving that impression.

“You'll know it when you find it. Someone like you will end up right where you belong. Just keep looking.” She took on the job of gathering the pieces and stacking them in the wagon to be delivered around to each little house.

“You don't have to do that.” He waved her off.

“I'm the one who usually has to split it all too. Trust me, this I can manage.”

They fell into a comfortable rhythm. They worked in silence, the only sounds the *thunk* of the axe hitting the logs and the sexy grunt King made as he swung it.

As they chopped and stacked wood, Bailey tried to push the nagging feeling of guilt out of her mind. She didn't know what the future held, but for now, she was happy to have a break from her problems and a man like King to be with.

The sweat was beading on his forehead. His muscles pulsed with every swing. He was a capable man and she had the sudden desire to find out what else he might be good at.

CHAPTER EIGHT

King

He sat in the driver's seat of his now running car and watched his cell phone come back to life. Whoever had filled up the gas tank hadn't left a bill or seemed to expect to be paid. He certainly wasn't in the city anymore. That never would have happened where he was from.

When his phone powered up, he saw all the missed calls and messages from Carmen. That was to be expected. He'd gone radio silent and she'd be pissed.

"Hello, Carmen? It's King. Is now a good time?" He was asking if anyone from her team was around because he knew she wouldn't want them to hear the latest update.

"I've been blowing up your phone. Where the hell have you been?" Carmen's voice was raised and strained and he got the impression from the volume, no one was around to hear her.

"I've been working. Doing exactly what you sent me here to do." Guilt plucked at his throat, making his voice sound less than convincing. In truth, while he was observing Cinderhill and what might be going on, he was captivated by Bailey. His thoughts wandered to her in every quiet moment, and out in the woods there were lots of those. He continued to explain, trying to sound more confident.

“I’m staying in Cinderhill and they don’t have technology on site. I had to wait for my gas tank to get refilled so I could charge my phone in the car. But trust me, things are going fine here.”

“You’ve seen Bailey?” Her clipped phrases and irritated tone let him know his explanations hadn’t reassured her yet.

“Yes, she’s the one who helped me out when I ran out of gas and took me in to Cinderhill for food and a place to sleep.”

“And things are fine? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I’ve spent time with Bailey and I have to say, things seem different here. I’ve heard bits and pieces of how bad it used to be, but Bailey seems happy. And there’s no indication she’s being held against her will. This place is her home and the people are her family. No sign that she’s in any kind of danger.”

“King,” Carmen replied flatly, “it’s a cult. At first blush it’s supposed to seem all rosy and peaceful. You have to look deeper. I sent you all the paperwork on cults, right? You do understand how they work?”

He wasn’t taking this personally. He’d been in enough dire situations to understand the first thing that disappeared was the niceties. People lashed out when they were scared and he could take it.

“I don’t think it’s fair to call it a cult anymore. It seems like the people who are here are more like a simple off-grid community. They’re self-sufficient, friendly, and living off nature. It’s not a lifestyle I’d subscribe to, but it seems harmless.”

“You haven’t seen a single indication of a problem?” Carmen asked with deep skepticism. King could appreciate that. That was a language he spoke fluently.

Deciding from the beginning he had no intention of keeping anything from Carmen, King told her everything he knew and even some things he was speculating. “I’ve heard some talk about lingering problems, but nothing that seems too serious. I’m digging into that further. It’s great here. Everyone

is kind and welcoming. They do their own thing. No distractions. No drama. The land and how they live on it is beautiful. Like a little piece of heaven.”

Carmen was silent for a moment. King could hear the frustration in her voice when she spoke again.

“King, I appreciate that you’re trying to help, but it sounds like you’ve fallen under the same spell Bailey did. This place is dangerous. It ruined her life. She was nearly killed there. Did she tell you that? You need to try harder to get to the truth. It’s there. Under the façade, it’s there.”

“Carmen, I understand your concern, but I’m telling you that things are different here. This isn’t the same place Bailey left years ago. It’s older men and women. Young kids playing around. It’s not perfect, but it seems like they’re making an effort to move beyond their past. No one is skittering around, being untrusting of me, this guy who just showed up. They’ve slung the doors wide open and welcomed me in. If they had something to hide, do you think I’d be able to walk through there so freely?”

“I don’t want you to get sucked into this. You need to get Bailey out of there before it’s too late.” Her voice shook with emotion. “It’s clear she hasn’t told you the stories of what really happened there. If she had, you’d never look at that place the same.”

“Carmen, there is no indication she wants to leave or needs to be rescued. By your company’s rules—”

“We aren’t playing by those rules. That’s why you’re there instead of someone else. I know how that place destroyed Bailey. She would never choose to stay in Cinderhill. They’ve brainwashed her again.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m just trying to be transparent with you about how I see things at the moment. I’ll keep an eye on Bailey here and let you know if anything changes. But right now, I think we need to trust that Bailey knows what’s best for herself.”

Carmen sighed heavily. “Just don’t screw this up. If you start drinking the Kool-Aid too, we’re finished.”

“No chance of that. I’m rock solid. I’ve got this.”

When he hung up the phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat, he drew in a deep breath. The realization that he may never be able to convince Carmen of Bailey’s safety hit him hard. This could be a mission he could never really complete, and that didn’t sit right. What kind of proof would Carmen accept and how would he get it without tipping Bailey off to his motive for being there?

His gut sank. He felt slimy now, walking around Cinderhill, joking around and doing work as if he’d really run out of gas and ended up there because of serendipity. Hopefully there would be some way to get out of all this without anyone getting hurt. Not that he was in a rush to get out of anything at the moment. The idea of leaving Bailey was enough to make his palms sweat.

CHAPTER NINE

Bailey

The veil of sleep was overtaking her. It had been a long day filled with hard physical labor, all meant to keep King on his toes. But it had worn her out too.

As her eyes shut, a familiar and terrifying scene closed in around her. She was backed into a corner of the communal kitchen. Her father had returned and was maniacally looming over her, his face twisted in anger. Words poured from his mouth like water from a fire hose.

“You don’t let a stranger in. You know that!” His face was red and flames seemed to dance across his eyes. “This is our sanctuary and you’ve opened the door to the devil.”

“Dad, I was just—” His hand flew up to her mouth and slammed down on her with the force of a hammer to a nail. Her head smashed to the wall and air was hard to take in as he covered her mouth and nose.

“You want the devil here? You want to let in the evil of the world to destroy what we have? I have known since you were a child that you would betray my teachings.”

She tried to pull away from him, but he grabbed her arm and twisted it, causing her to cry out in pain. His grip was tight, and she could feel his fingers digging into her skin.

He spoke in a voice that was almost demonic, and it seemed to come from all around her, filling her ears and her

mind. He talked about salvation, about his special connection to the earth, and how he was the only one who could lead Cinderhill. He told her she needed to fall in line or be eliminated.

That was always the word he used. *Eliminated*. And she knew how easily he could snuff her out. Make it as though she never existed. Fear enveloped her every cell.

Bailey tried to pull free, but vines sprung up from the ground and crept their way around her feet and rose to ensnare her ankles. The earth was his to control and it would rise up against anyone he wanted to punish. That's what he believed and preached and it was happening.

The ground beneath her feet crumbled suddenly as her father's face blazed with anger. The vines loosened and she found herself falling. The pit was dark and bottomless and her father's voice turned to a distant scream.

A scream that she realized a moment later, was her own.

Bailey sat up in bed, drenched in sweat. It took her a moment to realize it had been a dream, but the terror of it lingered. She got out of bed and walked to the window, looking out at the moonlit landscape, needing air.

"Bailey?" a voice called quietly from outside. "Are you okay?"

King stood lit by the moon just outside her open window.

"I heard a scream," he continued in a hushed but worried voice.

She watched his posture. The readiness in his stance. If she was not okay, he would fight whatever monster was threatening her. She'd known so many people ready to fight her, but it had been too long since she had someone ready to fight for her.

"A dream," she sputtered out. "I was having a bad dream. I'm okay."

"Are you sure? Do you need anything? That scream was ___"

“Sorry if I woke you,” she gulped, and leaned against the window frame.

“I was already up. Walking around. My back is in rough shape. I was trying to tough it out, but damn.” He stretched and groaned.

“I can give you something for the muscle pain if you want to come in.” Bailey pulled her cotton robe closed and moved to the front door. Her house was the smallest of all the cinderblock squares in the community. She’d wanted it that way. Maybe it was a form of penance for abandoning them, but when she returned, she insisted this was where she would stay.

It was little more than a bedroom with a small walk-in closet size space that held a woodburning stove and tiny table. She’d done nothing to decorate it or make it feel like more than just a place she slept at night.

Her mother had mused that perhaps it was because she planned to leave again soon, but that wasn’t the case. Bailey was here to stay. She just didn’t feel worthy of cozy décor.

“You sure you’re all right?” King asked again as he stood in her doorway, reaching up to move her bangs away from her damp forehead. “That had to be one hell of a dream. What was it about?”

“A monster,” she uttered quietly. “I can’t ever seem to get away from him.”

King nodded as though he understood perfectly. “Yeah, I know that kind of monster. The ones that are real. But you’re safe now.”

“I wish it were that easy. The hold my father had over me was more than just a controlling parent. He was in my head. I was convinced of things that now I know couldn’t be true. It took a lot of work, practically deprogramming my brain to be able to tell truth from fiction. Sometimes I can’t keep it all straight. I don’t think I’m doing it right. I don’t know if I’m helping people here or—”

His eyes bore through her. She could feel the heat of his body as he moved in closer to hold her. “Everyone I’ve met adores you. They have nothing but good things to say about Cinderhill and what you’ve done to help them. Moe could be the president of your fan club. Mrs. Tully obviously loves you.”

When his arms folded around her, she lost her breath. She’d been comforting people for so long. Making things right. Solving problems. Trying to hold this place together. No one had thought to see if she was falling apart.

“Do you want to be here?” he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear. “You don’t have to stay in Cinderhill if you’re not happy here.”

“I do have to stay,” Bailey sniffled, knowing that didn’t really answer his question regarding her happiness. But that had never been a priority before and she didn’t plan to start prioritizing it now.

“I’m the lynchpin. If I go, all of this crumbles.” She thought of the earth crumbling beneath her feet like it had in her nightmare.

“You can’t carry all of that on your shoulders. Trust me, when you make yourself personally responsible for everyone around you, it’s impossible to be everyone’s keeper. Life happens. It’s necessary to put yourself first sometimes.”

“I did that once already.”

“And it sounds like you had to. Maybe it’s time to consider that again. If not, you’ll lose yourself completely.”

“Too late,” she sighed, pressing her cheek to his chest. “I’m long gone already.”

King leaned back and looked down at her with a confident smile. “You’re not gone. I can see you perfectly.” His lips touched hers gently and the shock of it made her back go stiff. It took just a second of his tongue exploring her mouth for Bailey to melt like butter into his arms.

A sound rattled in the night outside. Likely just an animal scurrying away. But it was enough to halt the moment. She

pulled away from him, her better judgment clamoring to the front of her brain.

“I should go check on my mom. She’s been having tough nights.” Her lips were just centimeters from his and part of her hoped he would ignore the attempt to sidetrack what they were doing.

Instead, he loosened his grip and reluctantly leaned back. “Of course. Just holler if you need me. And I’ll take a little of that muscle balm if you have it.”

“Right,” Bailey replied, feeling a sudden chill as she left his arms. “Turn around and tell me where it hurts.”

Grabbing the bottle off the small table in the corner of her room she watched as he pulled up his shirt and exposed his toned back.

“It’ll be cold,” she warned, her eyes locked on his muscled body.

“I could use a cool down.” He chuckled and she could feel the rumble of his laughter against her hand.

“I’m sorry if I’m sending mixed messages. I have a lot on my mind.” She felt suddenly self-conscious of the kiss and asking King in tonight. Surely a man like him could be anywhere with anyone if that’s what he wanted.

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” he replied as she slid his shirt back into place. “You’ve helped me more than you know. You don’t owe me anything. Don’t let me be one more thing you feel bad about. I can tell it’s already a long enough list. When you think about me, I want you to feel . . .” he trailed off as he seemed to search for the words.

“What?” she asked, licking her lips and tasting him there still.

“Everything.”

CHAPTER TEN

King

Mrs. Tully heaped a pile of scrambled eggs onto his plate and then wobbled uneasily back to the stove in her tiny kitchen. She now had a pile of wood in a small basket by it and King felt good to know he'd provided her with what she needed. Looking around at everyone he'd met at Cinderhill so far, he couldn't imagine anyone else finding the task of chopping wood very easy.

"Ask what you've got to ask," she said, flipping the bacon skillfully. The splattering noise against the skillet was loud but Mrs. Tully was louder.

"Ask what?" King questioned, pretending he hadn't been dying to pick her brain since the last time they'd spoken.

"About her father. You want to know about Bailey's father. It's written all over your face."

"I would like to know how things went down. It's so foreign to me. I've never really understood the idea of some dude getting people to do crazy stuff just because he tells them. It sounds like he was a powerful man, but still. How does that happen?"

"You've never been a man to take orders from anyone?" She turned and looked at him skeptically. It stopped him in his tracks, the fork hovering in midair before it could reach his mouth. Mrs. Tully must have a damn good read on him.

“I guess I worked for someone before. But I didn’t think of him as a—”

“Did this boss of yours ever ask you to do something you knew was wrong?”

King thought of the hundreds of things he’d done for Lou that broke the law or landed in some moral gray area. “He did.”

“Why did you do those things for him?”

King thought on it for a moment. He’d been so closely inspecting everyone here at Cinderhill he’d been avoiding a look at himself. “I felt a sense of loyalty to him. Some obligation. He’d done a lot for me over the years. Saved my ass plenty of times. I thought the least I could do was work hard for him.”

Mrs. Tully’s face darkened. “That’s how many around here felt about Dale. He put his blood, sweat, and tears into Cinderhill. I lived here before he arrived and things were dire at times. We were barely holding on. He helped improve the homes, built the gardens up, and had amazing growing techniques. The solar panels were his doing. The list of ways he improved our home was long.”

“And so people felt obligated to listen to his crazy talk?”

“For years, it wasn’t all that crazy. It was rooted in faith. Very similar to what many of us had grown up with. He felt like a healthy addition to Cinderhill. We’d never really had a leader, and Dale showed us the benefit of having that kind of structure.”

“Bailey said there are very few of you still here from that time. Was there a mass exodus at some point?”

“When Dale began being rigid and inflexible, some people moved on. It was more a trickle. Rumbings around the garden about how he was losing his marbles. I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Cinderhill was my home. I thought maybe Dale would see everyone leaving and take that as a signal to settle down.”

“He doesn’t sound like a man who’s easily deterred.”

“It emboldened him and made him more frantic. Things escalated. I didn’t know what was happening to Bailey. She was very faithful to her father and though he was hurting her terribly, she never spoke up about it.”

“Hurting her how?” King felt his hand ball into a fist and relaxed it quickly, remembering there was no one here to fight about Bailey’s old pain.

“That’s her story to tell if she wants to. I know it’s hard to believe, but Dale truly started out as a good man, but once he got a taste of power, it went straight to his head.”

“But Bailey had it bad?” King understood it wouldn’t be easy for Bailey to share these details with him, but he wanted to know. The paperwork Carmen sent had alluded to plenty of abuse but didn’t explain more.

The idea of Bailey, so kind and welcoming, being harmed made him furious. But her father was sitting in prison. Was that justice? It didn’t feel like enough.

Mrs. Tully took a deep breath. “I’ll just say it got bad. Real bad. He started holding insane ceremonies, trying to make the crops grow. Trying to make it rain. He talked about sacrificing animals, about how it was necessary to appease the gods. Every time something unlucky happened around here, he’d blame it on the residents of Cinderhill, saying that we didn’t have enough faith in him, that we weren’t being obedient enough. That’s why the lettuce was wilting or the chickens weren’t laying enough eggs. It was madness.”

King shook his head in disbelief. “Why didn’t anyone stop him?”

Mrs. Tully looked at him with a sad expression. “We tried. But he was our friend, you see. It was clearly some kind of mental breakdown. We thought, at first, being gentle with him was the right thing to do. Appeasing his delusions as to not make it worse. But then some people started listening intently. Believing. That’s when I knew the tides were turning. A mad man is nothing until he has followers and then he is unstoppable.

“Bailey seems so strong. Why did she tolerate all of that? Was she really a believer?”

Mrs. Tully’s face turned even more somber. “It’s not about strength or being a true believer. Bailey spent her whole life in this bubble here on Cinderhill. Everything she knew about the world came from what the people around her told her. It was easy for her to be swept up in it all. I should have been paying more attention. Dale wanted to perform marriages between people who didn’t want to get married to each other, just to assert his dominance. He planned to have Bailey marry someone twice her age. It was sick.”

King was starting to feel sick himself, hearing about the horrors Bailey had endured. He couldn’t imagine going through something like that and coming out the other side with such a happy and peaceful disposition. It reinforced the idea that Bailey was stronger than she appeared.

“But things are different now, right?” he asked. “Cinderhill is not like that anymore?”

Mrs. Tully smiled sadly. “No, it’s not. But the scars are still here, and they run deep.”

“Can I ask you why—”

“Why I stayed?”

“Yes.”

“The same reason I came here to begin with. I feel connected to this place. I’d left my entire life behind and there was nothing to go back to. Before long Cinderhill became a part of me. And even though times were dark, I knew there would be light again. I knew Bailey would be the one to bring it back. If I’d have left or tried to strike down everything Dale was doing, I wouldn’t be here now to help her.”

“You were playing the long game.” King smiled, lighting with recognition. “I’ve been there before. It’s hard as hell.”

“Bailey is doing her best to move on, to create a new life for herself. But it’s not easy. And sometimes, the past comes back to haunt her.”

King sipped his orange juice and tried to read between the lines. “I feel like there is more you aren’t saying. There is still some danger here isn’t there? Some threat? I can feel it.”

“If you stick around, you’ll see for yourself.”

“So you want me to stay?” He took a bite of the perfectly cooked eggs and savored their freshness. He’d only ever had store bought before. These tasted completely different.

“I thought everyone around here preferred I lose the bet so the roof repair supplies would be on me.”

“I think there’s more you can do to help Bailey than patch a roof or two. It’s not my place to say any more. But the roots Dale planted here run deep and they are strangling at times. Bailey’s mother is a fragile piece of the ecosystem here and she’s dying. If she does, a small level of protection we’ve come to expect will evaporate. That’s what keeps me up some nights.”

“You’re not the only one losing sleep. I heard Bailey screaming last night as she woke from a nightmare. It was awful.”

“If a bad dream is all that lingers from what that girl went through, it’d be a miracle.”

“Bailey is still in danger?” King pressed, desperate for the answer. Not so he could call Carmen and confirm her fears but because he wanted to lash out at anything that might harm Bailey.

“Talk to her. Work by her. Listen to her fears. Wake her from those nightmares. You’ll figure out all you need to that way. I’m going to water the plants out front. Eat up. You’re going to need your energy. Last I heard you’re slinging boulders around today.”

“Boulders?”

“Well, rocks. The dam collapsed and we need to build it back up. It’s back-breaking work. That sound fun?”

“I think my back is already broken.” He winced and reached around to his sore muscles. “But I’m ready to help

anyway I can.”

“Heal up,” she said, shuffling out the door. “We need you strong. A soldier for the battle.”

Mrs. Tully was out the door, humming some little tune before he could press for more answers. The hair on the back of his neck stood up the way it used to when Lou would fly off the handle. King didn't have flight built in. Only fight. And he knew he had to be prepared to start swinging if the time came.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bailey

Dr. Murray looked as though he'd seen a ghost when he stepped away from her mother's bed. He drew in a deep breath and placed his stethoscope back around his neck.

"I know you weren't scheduled to come back around this way for a week, but she wasn't acting like herself this morning," Bailey apologized. "She seemed like she was getting worse."

"It's no trouble," Dr. Murray replied, pushing his wire-rim glasses up a little higher on his nose. "She's incredibly dehydrated and the pain she's experiencing, I believe is from the infection spreading. Without more testing done at the hospital, I can't do much to help. I think it's time we bring her in. She's at a very high risk to go into sepsis."

"No," her mother snapped, the most lucid she'd been all morning. "I'm not going to the hospital. I'm not going anywhere."

"Mama, please, can we just—"

Her mother winced in terrible pain as she tried to sit up. "Get out," she hissed at Dr. Murray. "You're a heathen. I don't want you and your poisons. Go."

To his credit Dr. Murray never flinched. He just nodded politely. "I'll let you two talk. Get in touch with me today if

she's willing to go in. Otherwise, I'm afraid the pain and the fleeting lucidity will just get worse."

"Thank you, doctor." Bailey folded her arms across her chest as he stepped out of the door. "Mama, I need to you understand what the doctor is saying."

"I know what he's saying and I know why he's saying it. He's testing my faith and my allegiance to this place and your father."

"No, he's saying you're dehydrated, your infection is taking over your body and your pain will get much worse if you don't go to the hospital. It has nothing to do with Dad or faith. It's science. It's facts."

"You're foolish if you don't see it," her mother spat out angrily. "Why did you always have to challenge him and make him so angry. He was never angry until you made him that way."

The self-doubt spread from her toes to the tingle in her scalp. She and her mother had miraculously avoided these conversations over the years. Bailey had been the one to put her father in jail, and yet they'd hardly ever addressed it. Her mother was an expert at that type of compartmentalizing. When Bailey returned to Cinderhill she was welcomed with open arms. Mostly because her mother's health was beginning to fail slightly and she didn't want to be alone. Alone was worse than the betrayal Bailey had caused.

"He doesn't matter anymore, Mama. Your health is all we're talking about."

"Blasphemy. The crops won't grow if you talk like that. The earth will be barren and dry. How could you turn your back on your father? After all he did for the people here. He knew there would be trials. That his people would be tested and some would fail. But for it to be you . . ."

"Mama, we're talking about infections. Medicine. Comfort care. You shouldn't be suffering. There is no need to be in pain when Dr. Murray is able to help you."

“I failed him.” There was only a single tear that trailed down her mother’s cheek before her eyes snapped shut. “They will be back. You know they are coming. It’s they who we must submit to.”

“Never,” Bailey whispered. “Never again.” She balled her hands into fists. The anger was not directed at her mother, but there was no one else here to lash out at.

“He designed a life for you. It was pre-ordained. All you had to do was submit and obey. That was never something you would even consider.” Her mother kept her eyes closed as if wishing she could transport herself to sometime in the past. A time when her husband was still in power and his promises, the grandiose plans, felt attainable.

“You should want more for your daughter than what he had sentenced me to. According to him, I was supposed to be married to a man twice my age. I was supposed to be an obedient servant of the land for the rest of my life. That’s what he wanted for me. He was unwell and he was dangerous. I deserved more than that and you deserve more than this.” Bailey gestured around the room at the herbs and spices that were meant to heal her mother but so far had been unsuccessful.

“I have lost your father, but I have not lost my faith in him. This land can heal me, and his love can sustain me. And if it doesn’t, it is because I have failed, not because he has. I pity you for not believing in anything as much as I believe in him.”

Her mother had not talked like this in years. She’d been meek and somber. Now as life drained from her body she was somehow emboldened. Bailey prayed exhaustion might take over suddenly and end this climbing tension. The last thing she wanted to do was argue with her mother when she was this ill.

“I just want you to be comfortable,” Bailey said, rushing to her mother’s side and taking her hand. “You can have faith in whatever you want, and think my father is some sort of Messiah. You can hate me for what I did. But please don’t suffer when you don’t have to.”

“That was always your problem, Bailey.” She edged out the words as she seemed to get paler by the moment. She looked more like an over-exposed photograph than a woman as she continued to scold Bailey.

“You were never willing to suffer for what you believed. You were born selfish and I was not a good enough mother to free you of that sin. It’s my fault. But the best I can do is model what it looks like to be a martyr for your faith and hope someday you’ll be willing to do the same.”

Something broke in Bailey as she shouted back her frustration. “I have already lost enough for this faith. I came back when I was free of it, just to try to help anyone who was left. Anyone who could be saved from the poison Dad was leeching into this place. I’ve given up my entire life for what I believe. Because I believe Cinderhill and the people who live here can be better than he was. That’s what I have faith in.”

“Maybe I’ll be gone next time they come,” her mother whispered ominously. “Then all will return to the way it was meant to be.”

Her mother’s breath was rapid and then slowed suddenly as sleep or some version of it took over. Bailey, still there, released her mother’s hand and stared down in disbelief. She had fought so hard to convince her mother all these years that there was a better way. A safer way. There were times she thought she had persuaded her mother that everything her father had done was harmful and insane. But now she understood when it mattered most, her mother was still loyal to her father. Even on the edge of death, she couldn’t seem to see it clearly.

Bailey needed air. The walls were closing in around her. Bursting from the room as though shot from a rocket, she spilled out where the sun was blindingly bright. Stumbling forward she felt the familiar grip of King’s arms around her. The tears were coming furiously fast and she gulped for air like a dying animal.

“What happened?” King asked as he leaned down to look into her eyes.

“My mother,” Bailey stammered frantically. “The doctor came. He wants her to go to the hospital, but she’s refusing. She’ll die a very painful death here, and she doesn’t care. She doesn’t want medicine or anything. That’s the power my father still has over her. She believes it’s her penance for her lack of faith that has her dying this way.”

“That’s madness. She shouldn’t have to suffer. You can talk to her again and try to explain the options. She needs to go to the hospital or at least get some sort of medication to ease her pain.”

“No one understands how powerful my father is. Even when he’s locked away. He has a hold on Cinderhill and my mother. There is nothing I can say that would change her mind. I thought I had swayed her a little to see my father for who he was. But I failed. And worse, the rest of Cinderhill is vulnerable once she dies. We’ll lose all our leverage.”

“Leverage?”

Bailey covered her face, wishing she hadn’t said anything. She pulled away from him and shook her head. “It’s complicated, King. People don’t just stop being brainwashed. They don’t get over the type of control my father had over them. I had to have intensive care to get his voice out of my head. There are people who don’t live here anymore but still hold the same loyalty to the ideology my father preached. My mother’s death will be a catalyst to set them all off again.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” He breathed his promise into her silky hair and squeezed her tighter.

“It’s never just been about me. Never. If it was, I would have stayed gone. I have a responsibility here. He is my father and I went along with him for years. Harming many people. I am going to make that right.”

“It can’t be all up to you. Don’t do this alone. Let me help you.”

Staring up into his face, she wanted to believe he could save her. Save Cinderhill. Maybe he was the one thing that could finally break this place of the hold her father had. But in

her heart, she knew it would take more than his good intentions and a desire to protect her. A war was coming. And they were not prepared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

King

Wiping sweat off his forehead, King stared at the massive dam that had collapsed. The sound of rushing water was deafening, and Moe had explained if they didn't fix it soon, Cinderhill would face a severe water shortage.

The situation was dire, and King was starting to realize how fragile this lifestyle was. There was no running to the grocery store. No calling in for help when you needed it. For all the peaceful benefits of living in a place like Cinderhill there were constant threats to their survival. Now he was aware of an external threat. People who might want to do them harm. Moe had to have the answers King needed, and he wouldn't stop asking until he learned the truth.

The challenge was, Moe was a man of few words. He liked to work quickly and quietly. Read silently by the fire. Even eat without saying much. King could sense the sorrow and regret that weighed heavily on him. Moe had obviously seen bad things in his life. It was written all over his face.

"Do things like this happen a lot?" King asked, gesturing to the broken dam. "An awful lot of work has to be done to live this far outside of civilization."

"This dam has held up for the last twenty years. So not too often. But the work is worth it. Cinderhill is a slice of heaven."

King nodded. “What happened to finally make it collapse then? Do you think it could be sabotage?”

Moe didn’t flinch, seeming unbothered by King’s concern. He just kicked at a few loose rocks by the base of the river and assessed the situation. He didn’t answer and didn’t seem to feel obligated to. In any other situation, King would appreciate that about Moe. But under these circumstances, he wanted answers.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, King shoveling dirt into the hole while Moe added some wooden planks to stabilize the structure. King couldn’t help but notice the scars on Moe’s arm and wonder if they’d been there before Cinderhill. He knew Moe’s wife was killed in an accident and maybe he’d been in the car too.

If he couldn’t get his basic questions answered, he was sure Moe would not break into a long diatribe about all his deep dark pain. Instead King started with something he hoped would seem innocuous.

“You ever regret living all the way out here?” King pressed, hoping for some kind of conversation to spring up like a weed reaching for the sun.

“You know,” Moe said, his voice hoarse and breathless as they worked. “Cinderhill used to be a peaceful place before Dale ruined everything. I guess that’s what you’re asking about. That’s the juicy stuff you want to hear about, isn’t it?”

King stopped what he was doing, looking up at Moe. “I’m not trying to exploit Cinderhill. Get to all the deep dark secrets for fun. I’m worried about Bailey. Her safety. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I don’t gossip. I don’t get involved.”

“I know that. But you care about Bailey?”

“Of course I do. She’s a solid person. I’m a private person and she respects that. Cares for this place. For all the people.”

“Then help me. Tell me what you know and how I can help.”

“Why hasn’t she told you?” Moe huffed loudly as he rolled a few more rocks over to the half-repaired dam.

“She’s not ready.”

“Then that should tell you something.”

“It tells me she’s scared. Overwhelmed. And if you can look me in the eye and tell me she’s safe, that Cinderhill has no looming threat, I’ll let it go.”

“No you won’t,” Moe chuckled. “Don’t bullshit me. I know the look you have in your eyes. I’ve seen it many times before.”

“Oh yeah? On who?”

“Dale used to look like that when he was stuck on something, a dog with a bone, he’d have that same look in his eyes.”

“You think I’m like Dale?”

“Two men may appear similar on the surface but their intentions can reveal their true character. Good intentions stem from a desire to help and make a positive difference, while bad intentions stem from a desire for personal gain or control over others. But their intensity can be the same. You can be the same and opposite all at once.”

“I’m nothing like Dale. I don’t want to control Bailey or Cinderhill. I want her to be free. Safe. Is she?”

Moe looked down for a long beat and then back at King.

“Not once her mother dies.”

“I keep hearing that. And Bailey seems to be in a dark place about it all. Her mother is very ill and refusing any kind of comfort or care. She’s got some weird allegiance to her husband. But what does her mother’s death have to do with Dale?”

Moe let out a deep sigh, leaning against his shovel. “Dale was a good man when I met him. He cared about the community and wanted to make it a better place. But then something changed. He became obsessed with power and

started twisting his beliefs into a controlling kind of leadership.”

“Everyone keeps telling me that, but I can’t grasp how it all went down. How did he convince people—”

“He didn’t convince all of us. But you have to understand who I was when I arrived at Cinderhill. I was a shell of a man. Broken. My wife of twenty-three years died in a car accident. The same accident that left me all mangled like this.” Moe turned his arms so King could get a better look at his scars. “I wasn’t interested in what Dale was doing or trying to do. I was surviving. Barely holding on. I did one little task at a time to keep myself from jumping off the nearest cliff. I knew things were changing gradually, but I was drowning in my own pain.”

“And how did you finally realize how bad it was?”

“People started leaving. People who loved Cinderhill and had been here longer than I had. Not these fly-by-night folks who tried it out and decided they missed the city. No offense.”

“None taken,” King chuckled.

“Well, once longtime residents started leaving, I started paying attention. Those who stayed were being forced to submit to Dale’s will. He mostly left me out of it. I kept to myself and did the work asked of me. I think he could tell I was pretty off balance myself.”

“But some people did fight back?”

“It was useless. It would never work. Trying to make him see how absurd he was being was futile,” Moe said, waving his hand dismissively. “Now, I’m in a better place and obviously I regret that I didn’t do more. I stayed quiet and out of the way, but I should have stood up to him. I had no idea the violence that was happening behind closed doors.”

King nodded, feeling a sense of empathy for the old man. “I need you to level with me. Is Bailey in danger now that her mother is so sick?” There was no point in dancing around the questions. If King was going to help, he needed all the information he could get.

Moe's expression became more forlorn before he looked away. "There are still people loyal to Dale who will come back when she dies. The ten men who left in the wake of Dale's arrest are still a threat. They moved into the mountains and were living a meager existence, coming down once every few months to get supplies from Cinderhill."

"There are men living up in the mountains who follow Dale's nonsense?"

"Yes."

"And everyone here just gives them supplies?"

"They still have some contact with Dale. He's prophesied all these things are going to happen and they believe him. Bailey's mother brokered a deal with them, telling them to keep their distance until it was safe again. There was a chance they all could be arrested too."

"Why weren't they?" King asked, a heat of anger rolling up his back.

"Like I said, they moved out into the woods. Laid low. The police seemed satisfied with cutting the head off the snake. As if that would solve all the problems. What they didn't realize was just how many snakes were out living in the woods around us."

"So they are waiting for Bailey's mother to die and then what?"

"They plan to come back. That's what Dale has foretold or whatever. He writes them letters from prison. They have been struggling more, demanding more supplies. Something is going to blow soon."

"And what recourse do you really have to keep them out? If Dale is telling them to come back, and they are desperate, how do you keep them from doing that?"

"We have no recourse. When they see a chance to come back in, they will. They are desperate men who were completely loyal to Dale and, by extension, to his wife. With her so ill, it's just a matter of time."

“Will they listen to Bailey? Can she make some sort of deal with them?”

“No. They blame her for Dale’s arrest and the collapse of the Cinderhill he was creating. They hate Bailey, and the moment they get a chance, I believe they will come back, reclaim Cinderhill, and push her out.”

“By force?” King felt a sense of unease wash over him. He had heard about the dangers of cults and their leaders, but now he was seeing just how deep this control ran.

Moe nodded, his eyes filled with a mixture of fear and determination. “I’ve been trying to keep an eye on them each time they come for supplies. I’m a different man than I was back then. I don’t intend to let anyone come and take this place or hurt Bailey. I might be an old man, but I’ll be ready for them this time.”

King placed a reassuring hand on Moe’s shoulder. “You’re not alone this time. We’ll do whatever it takes to protect Bailey and keep those men from coming back to Cinderhill.”

They continued working until the dam seemed secure. Moe pushed his shovel into the ground and wiped sweat from his forehead. “You asked if I thought this was sabotage. I do. And there will be more to come.”

Walking back toward Bailey’s house, King couldn’t help but notice the tension in the air. The normally quiet paths were filled with people, their eyes darting around nervously. It was as if everyone was collectively waiting for something terrible to happen. Clearly they knew Bailey’s mother’s health was worsening and that something may come of that.

“King,” Bailey called, waving him over to the gardens. “Were you able to shore up the dam?”

“It’s all fixed,” he assured her, dusting his hands off. “I’ll fix whatever you need around here. You just have to let me.”

Bailey drew in her lip and nibbled on it nervously. “Moe told you about the men still loyal to my father?”

“They’re coming Bailey. I know losing your mother is scary, watching her suffer is terrible. But while you are in that

pain, trying to convince her to get care, I'm worried these men will see an opportunity to strike. Moe thinks the dam breaking was a message from them."

"There are whispers," Bailey agreed. "Everyone here is on edge. I need to find a way to reassure them that no matter what we'll be safe here."

"Are you safe here?" King pressed. "Maybe fighting for Cinderhill isn't feasible. What recourse do you have against these men if they come muscling their way back in?"

"None really." Her eyes dropped down to her shoes. "But we can't run away."

"Then we need a better plan."

"We?" Bailey asked, the word catching in her throat.

He reached out and took her hand in his, waiting for her to look up at his face. "I have a unique skillset. Let me use it."

Nodding, she sniffled back the emotion. "I'm sorry you've gotten mixed up in this. All you wanted was a tank of gas."

"I think I'll end up with a hell of a lot more than that. And I'm good with that."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bailey

“I can’t imagine what you think of all this,” Bailey sighed. She lay back on the soft grass, staring up at the stars overhead. The night was cool, and a soft breeze blew through the field, rustling the leaves on the trees around them. King lay beside her, his arm around her shoulder, holding her close. It was so tempting to lean in to the feeling of security he was offering. Unfortunately she knew better.

“Trust me, I’m in no position to judge. The only thing I worry about is how this is affecting you. The weight of the world is on your shoulders.”

“Just the weight of Cinderhill,” she corrected, looking up at him with a half-smile. “Do you think I should have stayed away? Left this place in the dust and never looked back?” Bailey shuddered at the thought, a sense of despair washing over her.

“Returning to your roots is human nature. Your mother is here. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t homesick right now. I left in such a hurry. Abandoned my entire life. I know that pull to go back.”

“But it’s dangerous there for you?”

“I’m not worried about my safety. Going back would open a whole slew of problems for people I’m trying to protect. You came back to keep everyone safe. It’s different.”

“Either way, it hasn’t worked out very well, has it?”

“You said people helped you get out last time. Maybe they could help in some way again. Or the police, wouldn’t they be interested in capturing these men for their past crimes?”

“The statute of limitation has expired on anything they did. And the people who helped me the first time didn’t want me coming back here. I burned that bridge. These men haven’t done anything legally wrong recently to get them arrested, and by the time they do, it’ll be too late for anyone around here to report it. They’ll close ranks around this place. Shut down any communication with the outside world. Close their hands around our throats and do what they’ve been waiting for this whole time.”

“There are ten of them?” King asked. “And are they armed?”

“There are more now,” Bailey reported somberly. “They’ve been recruiting. Cinderhill might not seem like much, but between our use of the river, our solar power, and our houses, this place is an off-grid mecca. It’s a coveted location with just the right balance of comfort and privacy. That’s why they are so fixated on it and well—”

“What?” King asked, squeezing her a little tighter to prompt anything she might want to say.

“My father deemed this place a holy land. There were ceremonies. Sacrifices. Really barbaric stuff. Those men believe, unequivocally, that my father is the chosen one and this land is sacred. My father has been communicating with them all along. He’s kept them at bay to make sure the police don’t come back and take more extreme actions. I give him credit for that, he can be a patient man when he needs to be. He knows damn well if they’d returned too soon the police might have come and rounded them up. And he was right; for a while the cops and other services often checked in on Cinderhill. Then it became less frequent. Now it’s been ages since they’ve come around. And apparently my father’s latest prophecy is that the time is almost right. My mother’s illness is some kind of proof that Cinderhill is failing. That it needs to

be made right again. For him it's not sickness killing my mother, it's a failure of faith."

"So you have no way to convince them otherwise?"

"I'm afraid the difficult life they've endured in the time they've been banished from here has made them more desperate. They're wearing thin and have been waiting for this moment. We're on their holy land and living against all their laws and rules. They see this as a holy war. I'll be the only thing keeping them from Cinderhill."

"Not the only thing," he assured her. "I'm here."

"Two people are not enough."

"How can you be so sure the people who helped you last time wouldn't do it again? Do you keep in touch with any of them?"

"Have you ever failed someone?" Bailey asked, squirming and looking away. "I had every chance in the world to start over and be safe and I marched myself right back in here. There are so many people who need help and they're more worthy of it than I am. I had my chance and I wasted it. Trust me, that door is closed."

"What if it isn't?" King's expression was peculiar and it sent a shiver up her spine. Everything felt so out of control and she couldn't understand what he was getting at.

"It is." Her voice was firm and her back rigid. "Just drop it. That's not an option. I need to try to come up with a deal that will work. If I can get them the supplies they want and help them build something—"

"You can't try to negotiate with them. It's about action."

"When I was young Mrs. Tully used to tell stories to me by the fire. There was one that always stood out to me."

King was not hearing a decent solution. "Bailey—"

"In this fable, there is a small village located near a bridge. The bridge is guarded by a troll, who demands a toll from anyone who wants to cross it. The toll is usually a portion of

the traveler's supplies or goods, such as food, clothing, or tools.

“At first, the people of the village resent having to pay the troll. They feel that it's unfair and that the troll is taking advantage of them. However, they soon realize that the toll is actually protecting them. The troll prevents dangerous animals and robbers from crossing the bridge and entering the village.

“Over time, the villagers come to accept the toll as a necessary cost of living in safety. They begin to see the troll as a guardian rather than a burden. They even start to bring gifts to the troll, such as food and clothing, as a way of showing their appreciation.

“In the end, the troll and the village form a symbiotic relationship. The troll protects the village, and the villagers provide for the troll. Both sides benefit from the arrangement, and peace is maintained.

“Maybe I need to do the same. Something to appease and sustain them. We can spare more food. We're struggling with supplies, but if we could round up what they need to get some solar power of their own, it could help. Maybe some better shelter would be good.”

“Screw them,” King bit back. “This isn't a fairy tale and they are the source of the danger, not the potential protectors you're hoping they could become. They are blind followers of your father's toxic bullshit. I know you haven't shared a lot, but it sounds like his reign was violent and cruel, especially toward you. You aren't going to take things from the hard-working people here and try to tame these wild animals. It's not symbiotic. It's a deal with the devil.”

“But it might work.”

“Maybe for a little while. It's not sustainable. Believe me. I know men like this. My entire life I've been surrounded by people who pretend to have a code. As though they live by some honorable set of rules when, in fact, they are fueled by their base instincts. They take what they want. Hurt who they please. And because it's a pack mentality where they're all doing it, it's somehow excused away. Deemed necessary for

survival. No matter what you give these men, it will never be enough. You don't appease these men, you crush them."

"How? Our group is made up of older men and women. Young children. These are peace-loving people with a simple life. We're not built to go to war with religious zealots who are on the verge of starvation."

"You're right. Which is why you need an army. Some kind of backup. Are there any cops you can trust? The people who arrested your father must still have some kind of vested interest here."

"Detective Arnaldo is retired. Originally Arnaldo was determined to take my father down but it didn't prove easy. People here were either loyal or terrified. Either way, they weren't talking. It made his job very difficult. But once he was no longer on the force, no one was paying attention to Cinderhill. They saw how I'd changed things and seemed to just move on."

"How did he find out what was going on here in the first place?"

"We're still governed by the same laws as you and everyone else, even though we live out here. We had to show records of schooling the children. That wasn't being done effectively because of all the chaos my father was creating. In turn, the police came to investigate. My father, charming as he was, smoothed it all over and promised to do better. But Detective Arnaldo was not as convinced as the other three officers who came up. He kept popping in. Chatting with any of us he could get alone. My father warned us of the punishment if we let the corrupt law of the country have a hand in our community. No one talked."

"Until someone did?"

"Me," she admitted gloomily. "I was out at the shop where you and I met. It was raining and I was dreading the walk back. My arms were sore from the bruises my father had left and we were so low on food and supplies I wasn't sure how we'd make it another month. My father was on this kick about how our lack of faith was causing us to be punished with poor

crops. It was really just a lack of work. No one was tending the crops. They were too busy praying and squeezing the life out of everything here. But he was adamant it was our fault. I sat there alone in the shop, sobbing. Detective Arnoldo came in and told me again he could help.”

“And you trusted him?” King squeezed her a little tighter, kissing the top of her head. His arms felt like a protective cage in shark-infested waters.

“No I didn’t trust him. Not even a little. I argued. Explained. Defended. He listened, and now I realize he could hear all the hallmarks of someone who’d been brainwashed. I was so far in; I couldn’t see a way out. He understood we wouldn’t be able to agree on anything that day, but he kept coming. Kept trying to help. And he did. For more than two months, when I was alone working in the shop, he would visit. Bring things that might help us survive. I would tell my father I’d traded a traveler for them. He was so blinded by his own ego he hardly pressed for details.”

“Did you eventually tell Arnoldo about the abuse?”

She sniffled and leaned in tighter to King. “I didn’t have to say it explicitly at first. He could see it. He knew I was taking the brunt of it in the community and he offered a way out. I told him there would be no safe place for me. I couldn’t believe I’d ever be able to get far enough to be free of my father’s reach. I was so indoctrinated into our belief system that, even though my father had no resources and likely couldn’t find me if I left, his teachings told me otherwise. He convinced me he had the ability to see into the past and the future. That he could teleport himself to any day in time. I sound like a nut when I say those things now.”

“You were young and he was your father. Of course you believed him. I did some pretty terrible things in the name of blind loyalty. Looking back, I can’t imagine I was ever that person. But you did get out. That’s what matters.”

“Arnoldo had been right. There were people willing to help. Connected and kind people who were willing to pay for me to be taken somewhere safe. To be cared for. Somewhere I

could relearn right from wrong. Up from down. I just had to give a statement about what was happening in Cinderhill, who was to blame, and what I'd seen and endured."

"It's hard to turn your back on the only thing you've ever known, even when you realize how wrong it is."

When she'd first met King, she never imagined how much they'd have in common. He seemed like a formidable man. The kind who knew who he was and was completely sure of himself. But the more they talked the more she realized just how much he'd been through and how hard it had been to leave. There were moments she was glad for the kindred feelings and other times she wished neither of them had to deal with the pain and regret.

"It was a whirlwind from that point. I was taken to safety. My father was arrested and the other men who might have been considered culpable fled. The police and lawyers took what they could get by prosecuting my father and tried to offer as much support as possible to those left at Cinderhill, but people were shell-shocked. Questioning everything. It isn't as though you just snap out of it when someone like my father is pulled out of a cult. There is this vacuum left behind. A lack of air. I was gone for some time. Just a safe place, it's not important where. But I knew I needed to come back. Someone had to help other people heal and keep those men who'd fled from returning."

"I'm sure you were worried about your mother."

"I was worried my mother would be a puppet my father would find a way to control from prison. That the men who'd fled would wait until the coast was clear and weasel their way back in. So, against all the advice of everyone who'd helped me escape, I wrote a letter to Mrs. Tully. I wanted to know what was happening. How things were. If they needed me."

"And she told you to come back?" King looked down at Bailey curiously.

"God no. She wrote back and said to stay as far away from this place as I could. She was happy I was free of it and she understood, now that all the secrets were out, how much

trauma I'd endured. Mrs. Tully reminded me I was worthy of a good life and I'd never be able to get one in Cinderhill. Not after all that had happened. She said the police were still popping in often enough to keep the other men away and she thought that would keep up for a little while."

"Why didn't you listen to her?"

"Guilt. The shame was so suffocating. I needed to do everything I could to make it right and that couldn't happen with me hiding out somewhere worrying only about myself. I walked away from the place that was helping me and returned."

"What was it like when you came back?"

"Awful. Everything needed to be reorganized. Planted. Planned. People looked lost. My mother was frail. She was in need of someone to follow. I knew if I didn't step up someone else would and their intentions would be evil. I could do it better than my father had. And I was right. It worked in a lot of ways. Not only did some good people return who were scared off by my father, but for first time in years we welcomed new people. We had open doors again. Freedom for people to choose what was right for them. And we've done it. My presence had kept the men away. My mother's vague agreement that it was better for them to stay away for now was enough. All that is going to change now."

"What you did was miraculous," King replied. "Completely brave and selfless. But at what cost? You can't stand in the gap forever, trying to keep the danger at bay."

"I feel so lost," Bailey admitted, turning her head so she could hear his heart beat, wishing it could lead her to a better answer. Some clear path forward.

Tipping her chin up, he kissed her, rolling so her body was on top of his. There were no answers. No easy solutions that would solve the unsolvable. But what seemed right and easy was this kiss. The way Bailey's hands roamed over his body as she straddled him. The earth below them was soft and smelled of moss and leaves, and the stars above winked and peeked out from behind the clouds in varying patterns.

There was a primal dance happening. Something Bailey didn't realize she was so thirsty for until his body began to quench every dry part of her. His hands moved down her quivering chest as she adeptly pulled open the buttons of her dress. She was desperate for the night air to cool her hot skin. Desperate for his hands to be on her.

He pulled open the tiny buttons on her dress and exposed her skin. The gasp that left her body felt otherworldly.

“King,” she breathed, his tongue following the same path as his hands, nibbling the peaked buds of her breasts until she lost her breath with pleasure.

This was a reclaiming of the earth. The land. This ground. She was not a prisoner here anymore. For this moment she was not alone. She knew King was making sure of that in every way possible.

She'd nearly forgotten how powerful pleasure could make you feel. How the skilled hands of a lover could elicit the most visceral reactions of sheer ecstasy. King never skipped a beat. He found her every point of desire and licked, pinched, or sucked his way around it, responding to her cries of pleasure with even more.

Their clothes peeled away like layers of wispy mountain fog being burned away by the heat. When the moon lit King's naked body she pushed back from him for a moment, hungry for the view. The beauty of his statuesque frame made her urgency for his touch even greater.

“I don't want you to feel—” he began, misreading her body language as hesitation rather than need for a better view.

“Take me,” she demanded, sweeping her hair off her shoulder. “Don't make me wait another second.”

A look of relief and desire painted his face as he repositioned himself to take control. Bailey was deliberate in her expression, making sure he could see just how badly she wanted this, how impatient she was growing for him to fill her.

With a thrust, King parted her legs and his full length plunged inside her. The arch of her back was involuntary, a

response of pleasure she could not control. Her nails came to his back and clawed their way down, begging with each scrape for more of him.

With hypnotic rhythm King moved within her, teasing every inch of her naked body to the same beat. And as her breath quickened, so did his thrusting, until she burst open with a flurry of ecstasy. Tightening every bit of herself around him, they rode the wave of pleasure together.

It was their moment. Their space. And for a brief window of time, nothing could harm her. Not while King was holding her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

King

King and Bailey had driven for hours to reach Arnoldo's small mountainside condo, the only address they could find for the retired detective. Bailey had not seen him in years, but it was becoming clear, in Bailey's eyes, they had nowhere else to turn for help.

As they drove, their fingers laced together comfortably with the affection of a new couple, although they'd hardly had time to consider what they really meant to each other. This was fast and selfish. King recognized that. He'd spent so many years at the beck and call of Lou, that he'd always sidelined his own life. Now when he finally felt something real, it was again tainted by the threat of violence.

King knew one call to Carmen and they'd have resources to help Bailey and others leave. But he couldn't let on that he knew about Gloria. Or worse, tell Bailey he'd come here under false pretenses to spy on her and get to the bottom of what was going on in Cinderhill. The best he could do was stay by her side and make sure nothing bad happened on his watch. Seeing Arnoldo made sense for now.

"Do you think we should have called him first?" Bailey asked, her free hand spinning a lock of her hair in that nervous way she did. He now recognized the ways she manifested her fear in panicky motions.

“It’s better if we don’t give him a chance to think better about helping us. The element of surprise will be in our favor.” King squeezed her hand a little tighter.

As they approached the small condo, they saw a man sitting outside, smoking a cigarette. He looked up as they advanced toward the building and gave them a small nod of greeting, though it didn’t look as though he recognized Bailey.

“That’s him,” Bailey whispered into King’s shoulder as she clung to his arm. “He doesn’t look well though.”

As they walked closer, King saw that he looked much older than someone who had retired a few years ago, with deep wrinkles etched into his face and tired eyes. This was not a formidable man who might be eager to jump into a fight again. He seemed a bit frail and maybe ill. Disappointment washed over King.

He’d wrongly conjured up the image of a hard-boiled, grizzled cop with the fire for justice still raging in his eyes and an underlying, relentless ruggedness that was still enduring even though he’d turned in his badge. That was not the case.

“Detective Arnoldo?” King asked tentatively as they approached. “My name is King Kendrick. I was hoping I could talk to you for a bit about Cinderhill.”

Arnoldo nodded but didn’t say anything. He stood up and gestured for them to follow him inside.

The condo was small and sparsely furnished, with only a few pieces of basic furniture and a TV in the corner. There were no pictures or decorations on the walls, and it felt like someone had just moved in or was moving out. Not at all like this was the place he lived all the time.

“Are you doing a podcast or something?” His voice was gruff and strained, as though it pained him to speak. “That’s who shows up on my doorstep these days. People wanting to ask me about old cases. Make their fortune on the misfortune of others. Cinderhill certainly had that in spades.”

“It’s my misfortune,” Bailey said, just above a whisper. “Do you remember me?”

Arnoldo turned slowly, steadying himself on the closest chair. He blinked his gray watery eyes at her for a long beat. “Bailey?”

“Yes sir,” she said, an air of apology on her lips. King couldn’t tell exactly what she felt sorry about but it was written all over her face. This was hard. Facing him again was complicated and she looked bowled over by the shame.

Arnoldo gestured for them to sit on the couch and took a seat in a chair across from them. “I don’t remember you.” He points a crooked finger at King.

“I’m a friend. I’m trying to help if I can.”

He nodded as though the answer satisfies him and turned his attention back to Bailey. “I didn’t expect to ever see you again. You were whisked away pretty quickly after your father was charged. What brings you back here?”

Bailey took a deep breath before speaking. “I’ve been back. Cinderhill was my home and staying away wasn’t an option,” she said. ” And . . . it’s different now. It’s not how it was when my father was in charge. The people there are just trying to live their lives and raise their families. There’s freewill and peace.”

Arnoldo raised an eyebrow. “I find that hard to believe,” he groaned. “You know what your father did to those people, Bailey. You know the kind of things he was capable of. And now you’re telling me that they’ve all moved on and healed?”

“No, no, that’s not it,” Bailey replied quickly. “A lot of the people living there now are new. They never met my father. Any residents from before have openly rejected everything my father stood for. They were his victims, not his accomplices.”

Arnoldo shook his head, unconvinced. “Cults don’t change. Not without a lot of real intervention. They can bury it, hide it. But that thread always runs through them. Your mother certainly wasn’t someone who would have been able to just stop believing. If she’s still in Cinderhill then some of your father is there too.”

“She’s still there,” King admitted, reluctantly agreeing with Arnoldo. He’d been worried about the same things. That Cinderhill might not be salvageable. That the cost would be too high and the loss too great.

“I have faith in the people of Cinderhill now. It’s just . . . there are other men out there. Men who were part of the cult when my father was the leader. Do you remember James? He’s been keeping things together out there. They fled into the woods when the police came, and they’ve been surviving out there ever since. Out of respect for my mother’s wishes, and at my behest, they stayed away from Cinderhill, convinced when the time was right, they’d be welcomed back in. We gave them food and supplies when we could, just to keep them at bay. But now my mother is on the verge of dying and they’re threatening to come back and take over again. They’ve been communicating with my father, who has bolstered the idea of returning, as if my mother’s illness and pending death is some kind of sign that the time is right.”

Arnoldo leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “What do you want me to do about it?” he asked, clearly frustrated with Bailey’s choices over the years. “You were out of there. Free. I busted my ass to find people who could help you without a single paper trail. You’re the one who decided to come back.”

Bailey didn’t drop her head in shame. Instead she doubled down. “I shouldn’t have had to run away from my home. My father was the problem. His ideology and cruel punishments were the issue. I deserve to live where I want, free of fear. You know those men, Arnoldo. You know their names and their faces. We need your help to track them down and stop them before they can do any harm.”

Arnoldo shook his head. “I’m sorry, Bailey, but I can’t help you,” he apologized. “I’ve been put out to pasture and I’m retired now. I don’t have any jurisdiction. I can’t go around chasing after every criminal who might be a threat to someone. And even if I could, what would I do? If things are how you say, then Cinderhill is compliant with their home schooling, free from any abuse or crimes. There’s no reason for the police or child services to go in there now. Have the

men you're talking about done anything illegal recently? Anything you can prove?"

"No," Bailey reported, now looking defeated. "They haven't."

"We think they sabotaged the dam. But there is no proof of that." King sighed and leaned back against the couch, frustration etched into his features. "It's not right," he groaned. "Protection shouldn't only come into play when something bad has already happened. We need to prevent this from happening, Arnaldo. We can't just sit around and wait for them to make a move."

Arnaldo folded his arms across his chest, his face clouded with thought. "I understand what you're saying, King," he replied slowly. "That was always the hardest part of my job to face. There were plenty of victims failed by the system. But we can't preemptively go around arresting people we think might do something bad."

Bailey shifted nervously in her chair as Arnaldo continued.

"And I do feel for you, Bailey. But you have to understand, there's only so much I can do. I'm not a cop anymore. The force I worked on has changed dramatically. They pushed me out and I didn't leave on good terms. They were making changes I couldn't bring myself to agree with. I took a lot of heat for what happened in Cinderhill."

"Heat?" she asked, looking perplexed. "You were a hero."

"That's not how everyone saw it. I invested a lot of time and resources on a community up in the woods that didn't matter to anyone back in town. Putting your father away was great, but they weren't interested in tracking down and punishing all those other men. Not to mention those men had ties to people on the force. Brothers-in-law. High school friends. It was messy. Getting you out was my first priority. Then putting your father away. Outside of that, no one cared to do anything for the people of Cinderhill. The overall feeling was, if you want protection, live a more normal life closer to town. They saw your isolation as a trade-off. You were giving up your right to protection for your right to autonomy."

“I didn’t know any of that.” Bailey looked down at her lap, her face a mask of disappointment. “You were so determined when I finally told you what was going on,” she said softly.

Arnoldo sighed heavily, his face softening. “Politics are involved everywhere and, unfortunately, that is worse now than ever. Under the current chief and with those men having connections to people on the force, you’ll have a hard time getting help. Especially if you can’t prove anything has happened yet. I’m sorry, Bailey. I really am. I wish there was something I could do to help you. But I don’t have the power I used to have. All I can do is offer you some advice. And my advice to you is the same as it was back then, leave. If these men are hellbent on taking back Cinderhill, let them. Do you remember what I told you that last day we spoke?”

“You said no plot of land was worth dying over. That I should leave and never look back.” Bailey nodded slowly; her eyes downcast.

King couldn’t bear it; he looked up sharply, a fire in his eyes. “They don’t deserve to win this. To run good people off and use their twisted beliefs and desire for power to get what they want. I can’t sit by—”

“Then do something,” Arnoldo said with a shrug. “You keep fighting if you want to. The advice I’m giving is to protect you, I certainly agree they don’t deserve to be there. If I were a younger man, in better health I would—”

“What?” King asked. “What would your play be if things were different for you?”

“The best defense is a good offense,” Arnoldo said, sitting up a little straighter. “The police can’t do anything until there is a documented crime. But you aren’t a police officer.”

King nodded slowly, his face still tense, but he felt a seed of hope growing in him. “Thank you,” King said, jutting his hand out to shake as he made his way back toward the door.

Bailey stood up, lagging a bit behind as she looked around the room again. “Thank you, Arnoldo,” she said softly. “Thank you for all the help you gave me. You made it so I could get

stronger and come back to do the right thing by the people at Cinderhill.” She paused. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure,” he shrugged. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Are you happy here?”

His face twisted with confusion. “Happy?”

“It seems like a lonely kind of place. Not much like a home.”

Arnoldo chuckled nervously. “After my wife died and they made me retire, it made sense to sell the house and move into something smaller. I didn’t really bother unpacking any of our stuff. It was all hers really. I was never one for knickknacks or fancy things.”

“There is always a place for you at Cinderhill,” Bailey announced through a smile. “Anytime you want to make a change, you’ll be welcomed with open arms.”

Arnoldo scratched his balding head with his shaking arm. “I never really thought of—”

“That’s all you have to do,” Bailey offered. “Just think about it.”

“Hopefully there is a Cinderhill left . . .” King trailed off as they stepped back outside.

Without another word, they got into their car and drove away, the mountains looming in the distance. They were quiet for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, King spoke up. “I don’t want to just wait around for something bad to happen. We need to strike before they can.” He pounded his fist into his palm.

The way Bailey jumped broke his heart. King’s fervor to demolish these guys was obviously terrifying to Bailey. This wasn’t just some job to her. Some assignment to tackle. This was the life she’d been drowning in for years. Escaping and returning. These men were not faceless creatures in the woods to her like they were to him. Many of them were men she once knew. Once lived with at Cinderhill. Men who were corrupted by her father and have now become the enemy. He draped his

arm over her shoulder and knew, for her sake, he'd have to tread lightly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bailey

Fleeing Cinderhill the first time.

“My name is Gloria,” the woman said as she settled in next to her on the private jet. Bailey had never flown before. Had never seen a plane, let alone a private jet. The cushion of the chair was plush. The leather soft. But she could hardly feel anything at all. Numbness had set in.

“My friend, Detective Arnoldo, said you did a really great job telling him what was happening. That took a lot of courage.”

“You’re his friend? Arnoldo doesn’t seem like a guy who has many of those.”

Gloria laughed a hearty chuckle that made Bailey feel flutters of excitement. There had been no laughter in her life for so long. She certainly didn’t say things that made people smile or chuckle. She swelled with pride as Gloria composed herself.

“You got me there. Arnoldo is a tough nut, but we know some of the same people. He reached out to someone in my network. That’s what we have, a network of people. I guess saying we’re friends was a little out of context.”

“A network of people who do what?” Bailey asked, wishing she didn’t sound so defensive and pious. It was the only tone she knew in the presence of strangers. Outsiders. The enemy. She scolded herself, tormented by the constant back and forth happening in her mind.

Bailey could no longer trust her own instincts. They’d proven to be wrong again and again.

“In the simplest terms, we help people who can’t find another way out of the tough situation they’re in. When normal channels fail, we step in.”

“And how do you decide who to help?” She bit the words out like an accusation and then regretted it instantly.

“That’s a good question. We have a process. Certain things have to fall into place in order for us to be able to step in and help.”

“What about my father?” Bailey asked, folding her arms over her chest and grimacing. “Why doesn’t he get help? He has to go to prison and I’m on this jet going who knows where.”

Another woman stepped out from behind a door and made her way toward Bailey, taking the seat across from her.

“Great timing,” Gloria sang. “This is Carmen. She’s been in a tough situation too and we were able to get her out of it safely. Now she helps other people. I thought you might want to talk to someone closer to your own age and life experience rather than some stuffy old lady who’s out of touch.”

Carmen shook her head. “Don’t let Gloria fool you. She’s the furthest thing from out of touch. She’s cooler than all of us. But it’s nice to meet you. I know this first plane ride can be really jarring.”

“It is,” Bailey admitted. “I just want to go back home.”

“And you can,” Carmen shot back quickly. “You’re never a prisoner here. Any time you choose to leave that will be arranged. But for safety—”

“You can’t keep me safe,” Bailey said, her voice betraying her, cracking with emotion. “Maybe for other people this has worked, but my father is different. You don’t understand the things he can do.”

“Explain them to us,” Gloria suggested. “We want to see the full picture.”

“He can bend time. My father has a relationship with the earth that you could never understand. Moving from one place to another without any effort at all. He can hear my thoughts. He knows the future. That prison cell won’t hold him.”

“Did he foresee any of this?” Carmen asked, waving around the plane. “Was he shocked to be arrested and find out you were the one who helped make that happen?”

Bailey’s brow creased deeply as she thought this over. “He did seem surprised.”

“And he’s been in jail for more than a week now?” Gloria pressed.

“Yes.”

Carmen nodded. “And he’s not been able to leave prison with any of his powers? Perhaps they don’t work there. That means he won’t be able to track you down wherever you are. So maybe we can keep you safe. I know this is heavy shit—”

“Careful,” Bailey winced. “You swore.”

Gloria drew in a deep breath. “What do you think happens when you swear?”

“It’s a sin. A dangerous—”

“What did they tell you happens if you swear?” Gloria asked again, this time more gently.

“Fire,” Bailey whispered. “Your skin will burn. The flesh will—”

Gloria held out her arm. “My skin is fine. I’m a little cold actually.”

Tears welled in Bailey’s eyes as she reached out and touched Gloria’s cool arm. “My father said . . .”

“That will become a familiar refrain,” Gloria replied, putting her hand over Bailey’s. “And the only thing you can do is prove some things right or wrong. When nothing happens, you’ll know what the truth is. We aren’t here to tell you everything you believe is a lie. That won’t help. Where we’re going, you’ll have professional people who can help you navigate all of this. But mostly it’ll be what you can sort out in your own heart.”

“I don’t want to find out things he told me were untrue.” Bailey whimpered. “What does that mean for me? For everything I believe?”

“Nope,” Gloria said, reaching into the bag by her and handing over a piece of rich chocolate, “you don’t have to do that. We’re not here to implode everything you know. It’s not one day at a time. It’s one moment at a time. And this moment is for chocolate.”

Carmen smiled. “It’s okay to be scared. You can do hard things even when you’re afraid. I already can see that in you. The only thing you’ve got to do is breathe. Eat. Drink. Keep existing. The rest doesn’t have to happen all at once.”

Bailey nodded, nibbled on the luscious chocolate, and closed her eyes as the plane continued to cut a path through the clouds. Everything below looked so small. Her eyes scanned the endless sky beyond the window. She was still in shock, her heart racing as she tried to process what had just happened.

The land below was a patchwork of green and brown, dotted with clusters of buildings and roads that snaked through the landscape. She’d always known the world was bigger than just Cinderhill and the little towns around it she had visited, but this perspective was almost overwhelming as the clouds cast long shadows on the ground below.

As the jet continued its ascent and she savored the chocolate melting in her mouth, Bailey closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt the rush of adrenaline and the weight of her past slowly falling away. She knew her journey was far from over, and there would be many more challenges

and obstacles to overcome. But for now, she was content to simply be in the moment, to savor the feeling of being alive and free.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

King

The conflict raging in him was like the push and pull of the tides. One minute he was a wave crashing to the shore, certain he should call Carmen and alert her to the pending danger here in Cinderhill. Then, just as quickly, those waves were sucked back out to sea and he knew he'd be betraying Bailey and her trust in him if he did that. There was no right answer here.

"I really thought he'd help us," Bailey said somberly as they walked toward the gardens of Cinderhill. "He was so instrumental in getting me safe and my father charged."

"It looks like the last few years have been hard on him," King replied, trying to sound connected to Bailey's words and not show how distracted he was by the turmoil he was feeling.

"You're back," Mrs. Tully cried out breathlessly as she crossed the courtyard, waving her arms. King's stomach twisted instantly into knots. This was not going to be good.

"They were here," she exclaimed. "Three of them. All wild and angry. They were asking where you were and then went in to talk to your mother. When they came out, they started raiding the winter supplies. All the stockpiled food is gone. They said the only way we'd get any of it back was when they moved back in, making Cinderhill holy again." She covered her mouth in horror and couldn't continue for a moment.

“Did they hurt anyone?” King asked, his heart jumping wildly.

“Moe,” Mrs. Tully answered with a gasp. “He tried to stop them and they punched him. He fought back the best he could but they got him good. Bertha has him now. She’s cleaning him up. Everyone is scared out of their minds and holed up in their houses. We didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s all right,” Bailey said, pulling Mrs. Tully in for a hug. “I need to speak with my mother. You go inside and take a rest. I’ll come find you in a little while.”

“People are talking about leaving,” Mrs. Tully said, letting Bailey go. “Anyone here from before doesn’t want to go through that again. And all the new residents are afraid of what will happen if James and those men take over. What are we going to do?”

When Bailey didn’t answer, King decided to. “It won’t happen again. I’m going to deal with them.”

“We’ll talk in a bit, Mrs. Tully,” Bailey finally added.

King could tell by her body language that Bailey was on guard, not just because of the situation but because of him too.

“I need to talk to my mother.”

“No, we need to act. Now we can call the police. Report the fact that they were here, stole things, and assaulted Moe,” King insisted.

“You heard Arnoldo, right? No one in town, including the police, want to get involved in this place after we brought so much bad press to the area. Some of the cops are related to the men who just robbed us. Even if we call them, it’ll take ages for them to send someone up, and when they do it’ll go nowhere. I have to talk to my mother and make some sort of plan. A peace offering. Maybe I can spin things to make them think this is a new kind of foretelling, from my mother now, that they should follow.”

“That won’t work.” King ran his hand over his head and groaned. “You’re going to walk into their space and try to negotiate? After they were here and violent? It’s an eye for an

eye. We have to look strong here or they'll exploit the weakness even further."

"We aren't strong," she bit back. "This is not some underdog war movie where we are going to be able to outwit them. We're not going to set a bunch of traps so they realize this is too much trouble. They are under a spell we will never be able to break. But maybe we can keep them at bay a little longer."

King pounded his fist into his palm. "Let me go after them. Let me send them a message they can't ignore. I told you I'm capable of that."

"They're probably armed." Bailey shook her head.

"So am I," King replied, feeling suddenly as though he'd said too much.

"You have a weapon?" She looked him up and down as if she might spot it on him.

"It's in my vehicle. Locked up and out of sight. I know you said Cinderhill doesn't allow technology or weapons. I wanted to respect that."

"You were just driving around with a gun? You had no clue where you were headed or what you were going to do, but you were armed?"

"The life I came from required it."

"And you think you're going to go into the mountains and shoot all our enemies? You'll be outnumbered and out-gunned. It's going to cost you your life and merely enrage them."

"They beat up Moe. Stole from you. And all you want to do is make a deal with them? That's madness."

"Let me talk to my mother," Bailey said, setting her jaw in anger. "Give me some space. You can't possibly understand how things work here. Don't do anything."

"You can't ask me to do nothing now that the danger is at your doorstep. You invited me here, let me into your life, and now I'm supposed to sit by and watch people get hurt?"

“King, this is a world you’d never understand. Just back off.”

King took a step back, the wild look in Bailey’s eyes enough to make him worry. “Bailey, I can’t just—”

She stormed off toward her mother’s and left him standing with his heart in his hands. There was no way in hell he could walk away now. He knew what he needed to do. The phone call he had to make. They were out of options and she wouldn’t listen to reason. Maybe she would listen to Carmen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bailey

Bailey's heart ached as she looked at her mother. She saw the woman who had caused her pain and trauma, but also the woman who had given birth to her and raised her to the best of her ability. She felt a mix of emotions: anger, sadness, grief, and guilt.

Taking a step closer to her mother's bedside she took her hand, feeling the fragile skin and bones. Her mother's time was running out. She closed her eyes and tried to hold back the tears that threatened to spill over.

"Mama," she whispered as her mother howled in pain and then stopped suddenly, slipping back into sleep.

In the silence Bailey recounted the moments that defined her relationship with her mother. The times she'd made her feel small and worthless. Punished her ruthlessly for some perceived slight against her father. But she also thought of the times when her mother had held her close, kissed her forehead, and told her she loved her. The memories were jumbled, chaotic, and bittersweet.

"Mama," she said louder this time. "Mama, wake up."

Bailey's mother stirred, her eyelids fluttering open.

"Mama," Bailey said softly, "I need to talk to you, can you wake up?"

Her mother's eyes met Bailey's, and there was a moment of recognition. "Bailey," she said weakly. "You were gone, but you came back."

Bailey couldn't be sure if her mother was talking about today or the larger issue of her abandonment in previous years. Either way it didn't matter. The time to hash those things out had passed.

"I'm here, Mama. Do you know what happened today?"

"They came," she announced with a confused smile. "Did you see them? The men have returned."

"The men," Bailey grumbled. "Robert? Dean? James? Which men were here?"

"James," she reported. "One of your father's most faithful disciples. I haven't seen him in so very long. How sweet of him to come."

"You haven't seen him because he's a criminal and he worried about coming back here and getting arrested."

"Hush," her mother replied. "Don't talk that way."

"I know you're confused right now. You're in pain. But please remember how good things have been. There is peace. There is prosperity here. Cinderhill is a safe place to live now. Or it was without Dad's men coming back and causing problems. I need to know what you said to them."

"James is tired," she whispered. "He has shown his faith and is ready to come home. They all are. It's time for Cinderhill to become the place your father was creating. Enough time has been wasted. If not, the end will be near. Your father wrote them a letter. If they return and restore his land to the holy ways, I will be healed. My suffering will not be in vain."

"You have a serious infection, Mama. The return of crazy men with dangerous ideas will not heal you. Dr. Murray has been clear about your prognosis without early intervention. Now if you want to ease your pain and try to get some care—"

“I will be healed. Upon their return; with the return of discipline and dutiful faith we will all be healed.”

“You told them they could come back? You and I have always agreed it was not time.”

“It’s time now,” she sighed. “Your father has prophesized it. He wants me free of this pain and suffering. He wants you to reform your ways or . . .”

“Or what, Mama? What will they do if I and other people here don’t submit to their will?”

“It will not be like last time,” her mother said, grinding her teeth. “Your father will return too. There will be no way to escape. No one arrested. Your father said he was too forgiving last time. He underestimated your fall from grace and all that would tumble with you. It won’t be tolerated this time.”

“And you’d have them kill me rather than face the truth that Dad is a fraud. You’d rather die in this bed than get the care you need? And all the joy and peace in Cinderhill that exists now means nothing to you?”

“Peace at what cost? Living like sinners might bring some temporary joy, but it will not bring salvation. Nothing you have done will save your soul. Only obedience and submission to your father’s will can do that. You’ve made mistakes, Bailey, but there is still time to fix them. Still time to save me.” Her eyes danced wildly. Desperately.

It hit Bailey in a new way. Her mother was afraid. Not loyal or devoted. Terrified. Her life was fading and only one thing could deliver her from death. Bailey was standing in the way of that.

“I know you’re scared, Mama. This is all very confusing and you’re hearing all this information and thinking it could save you. But your husband is not coming back. Your illness is not going away without medicine. And I will not allow those men to return and hurt anyone.”

“And what can you do?” Her mother bit out the words like the snapping of a venomous snake.

“Whatever I need to. I protected this place once, I’ll do it again.”

“You want me to die? That’s what you’ll be doing. Sentencing me to death. Throwing away salvation for your soul.”

“Mama, I love you. I know right now that will be hard for you to believe. But I spent a very long time trying to figure out what is true in this world. There are some days I question things. I need you to know I don’t question my love for you. You were not given a fair shot at life. Right from the beginning, it was all stacked against you. I think you did the best you could with what you had.”

“But you’ll let me die.”

Bailey had learned so much from Gloria and Carmen but nothing seemed to prepare her for this. The deep cutting words of her mother from her death bed. There was a very good chance her mother would die with hate in her heart for Bailey. Blame. Anger. No matter what words passed between them right now, unless Bailey completely acquiesced to the madness of her father, there would be no way to gain her mother’s love back.

It was amazing that even though her body was failing, there was still deep conviction in her mother’s eyes.

But as her mother’s breathing grew weaker and more labored, Bailey understood time was running out. She closed her eyes and tried to summon the strength to face what was coming, to find a way to say goodbye to her mother without making amends.

One thing she learned from Gloria was, sometimes forgiveness is not always about receiving an apology, but about taking off the noose of hurt and pain that leaves you gasping for air. There is power in laying it down and walking away, even if someone is still hanging on to the other end of the rope. Let them grip it as tight as they want for as long as they want. It can’t hurt you anymore.

“I love you, Mama,” she whispered as she stepped out of the room. “But I’ve got to do what’s right even if it’s impossible. I have to try. We might not be fighting for the same thing, but I hope you can appreciate that, like you taught me, I’m fighting for what I believe is right.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

King

Sitting in his car with his loaded gun in his lap, he knew things were at a tipping point. The little store was empty, his car parked beside it. What would come of the charming little place for weary travelers to stop once Dale's men took hold of Cinderhill again. If it were up to King, they'd never find out.

"Carmen," he said, too breathless to try to come across as calm.

"What's the matter?" Carmen asked, her voice hushed, indicating someone must be around her. Someone she didn't want to know about this clandestine arrangement.

"Can you not talk right now?"

"Talk," she said, her clipped word rushing him along.

"Shit is going down here. There were men, a faction of people who fled after Dale's arrest, that are threatening to come back. I've tried a few different channels to get some solutions but they've escalated. Today they came in and stole supplies and assaulted a resident while Bailey and I were trying to get some help from a retired cop who worked the case the first time."

"Arnoldo?"

"Yes. He couldn't do anything for us other than informing us that the local politicians and police force will not be much help. Dale's men have recruited others from town, some

connected to the police. There is still some bad blood from the surrounding towns about the negative press Dale's arrest brought them. It's a mess."

"What's your plan?" Carmen asked, and a lightning bolt shot through his chest.

"I was hoping you had one. I'm armed. I can try to protect Cinderhill but there is no one else here. I'd be on my own. I have no idea how many men are out there and they're highly motivated by their religious delusions. They know the terrain far better than I do. I need some kind of backup. Can you send ___"

"That's not what we do," Carmen corrected. "We're not an army or law enforcement. We extract people and then use channels available to try to make sure those responsible are prosecuted. We're a network of safe houses and therapeutic healing centers, not soldiers."

"I understand," King said, hanging his head.

"I can get people out of there. People who want to leave. If they understand how dire the situation is and don't have other options, I can assist with that."

"There would be some," King sighed. "But not Bailey. She's not going to abandon this place or the people who stay. Her mother might pass soon and has turned down all medical care from the doctor; she won't go to the hospital. Bailey won't leave her either."

"I knew something was wrong. I could feel it in my gut. She wouldn't ask for help, told me everything was different there. But it's all the same. Dammit."

"I can put the word out to people that there are options to leave if they'd like. I'll coordinate with you on that."

"And what about Bailey?"

"She gets the protection of every bullet in my gun. That's all I can offer if she doesn't want to leave. I promise no one gets to her unless they go through me first."

“That’s not a fair ask of this job. I didn’t mean for you to have to die to protect her. I’m not paying you nearly enough for that.”

“It’s not about the money. Bailey is . . .” He trailed off.

“I know she is. That’s why I sent you there to begin with. She’s remarkable, isn’t she?”

“Yes, and that resolve and stubbornness will probably get us killed.”

“I’m going to work some back channels I have to see if there is anyone outside of local law enforcement who might be able to help. It’ll be a political nightmare, but I have a few favors I could call in. Unfortunately, they’ll need more to go on than just some stolen food and a fight between a couple people. I need proof of an imminent threat. Some photos from their camp or some illegal behavior. Something.”

“I’ll work on that. I had plans to stake it out tonight anyway.”

“Be careful. No one here knows I sent you out there. If you get killed doing what I hired you to do, it’ll be very complicated for me. So stay alive.”

King chuckled. “I guess that’s as good a reason as any to not get killed. It would be very inconvenient for you.”

“Totally.”

They disconnected the call and King sat for a long moment staring at the shack where he’d first seen Bailey. The way the light hit her. The way she’d warmly welcomed him in. No hesitation. It still warmed his heart.

Holstering his weapon and tucking his phone in his pocket, he knew he’d be breaking two important rules of Cinderhill by bringing both in. That was the least of their problems now. Everything was going to come to a head, and it was time for him to face Bailey with the truth, even if it demolished what they were building together. He couldn’t keep her safe and lie at the same time. And if he had to choose, the choice was easy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bailey

With a look of determination, Bailey stepped forward to address the gathered residents of Cinderhill. They were standing in the garden, looking tired and afraid. The children clung to their mothers. The older men and women leaned against the trees and blinked slowly, trying to process what had happened and more importantly what was to come.

Bailey went right into trying to give clarity. “I know today’s events have left us all feeling scared and uncertain,” she began. “But we cannot let fear rule us. We must stay strong and stand together.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd, and Bailey continued. “The men who attacked us today are dangerous. They are loyal followers of my father’s teachings, and they want this land back. But we cannot let them win. We cannot let them turn this place into a cult again. To ruin everything that is good about Cinderhill.”

King spoke up, his voice low and serious. “Bailey is right. These men are dangerous and likely armed. More than that they have connections to the police that will make getting any outside help up here to protect everyone very difficult. We need to consider the safety of everyone here. If anyone wants to leave, I have people who can help you do it safely.”

Bailey was taken aback by King’s offer, but she quickly regained her composure. “I understand if some of you want to

leave,” she agreed. “But personally, I’ll be staying here. I know that many of you weren’t here when my father was leading this place. But I’m determined to make sure it never happens again. I won’t be run out of here, and anyone who stays can count on me to do everything I can to protect us.”

King looked at Bailey skeptically. “And what exactly will you do?” he asked. “Do you have a plan?”

Bailey could see his thinly veiled attempt to call her out. He knew damn well there was no master plan, but she refused to back down. “I’ll figure it out,” she replied firmly. “I won’t let these men take over our home. And I won’t let them intimidate us into leaving.”

King sighed and shook his head. “I think people should leave,” he asserted. “I think you should leave, Bailey. I understand how much Cinderhill means to you, but it’s not worth dying for. Not for any of you.”

Bailey felt heat roll up her back. “Do you know what this place means to us? I doubt that, considering you don’t have a home at all. You’ve never been connected to people or a place the way we are to each other here. You’ve said it yourself. So how could you possibly understand why I’d stay?”

King’s eyes went wide with disbelief. Perhaps he expected some resistance from her, but clearly nothing so personal. It wasn’t her normal tactic and guilt crept in instantly, but she had to hold firm.

He turned his attention back to the group. “I don’t know how much time we have before those men come back and plan to stay. If you want to leave, let me know.”

Bailey was taken aback by King’s plan to help everyone leave Cinderhill safely. “Who exactly do you have that can help all of these people get out?” she asked skeptically. “We’re in a remote area with limited resources. How do you plan to handle all of that logistically?”

King met her gaze evenly. The anger over her words had subsided and was now replaced with some kind of guilt,

though she couldn't tell for what. Soon his words made that perfectly clear.

"The same people who helped you leave the first time will help everyone now," he replied, his eyes darting away. "I spoke to Carmen, and she's ready to do whatever she can to get people out safely. Unfortunately, there isn't a solution for how to stop the men who want to take over Cinderhill. This is the best they can do."

Bailey's mind spun, trying to understand what he was saying. "How do you know Carmen?" she asked, stuttering the words out. "How did you call Carmen?"

King walked closer to her and begged her with his eyes to please hear him out. "I know this is not what you want to hear, but I've got to tell you the truth. Carmen asked me to come to Cinderhill to check on you," he answered quietly. "She was worried that you weren't safe. And she was right."

Bailey's anger flared like an open flame doused with gasoline. "You lied to me," she cried, her voice rising. "You didn't really care about me. You were just doing a job you were being paid for. You're here to spy on us?" Her hands flew up to her hair and she grabbed at it to try to get herself to understand. "You didn't really run out of gas. It was all a trick to get a job done? You and I were just—"

"No," King corrected, cutting his hand through the air. "Once I was here, everything I did and said was real."

"Real," she laughed humorlessly.

There was a deep sadness in King's eyes, but she couldn't muster the energy to care about his feelings. He betrayed her. Tricked her. All for a job he was hired for.

"I did care about you, Bailey," he said softly. "I still do. But my job is to keep people safe. And right now, the safest thing for everyone here is to leave."

Bailey shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe you did this," she gasped, her voice breaking. "I trusted you."

King's hand reached out for her but she left no doubt by her body language that he shouldn't.

“I understand if you’re angry with me,” he replied frantically. “But please understand I’m only trying to do what’s best for everyone here.”

Bailey didn’t respond. She backed away from him and glanced around at all the frightened faces, who were trying to decide what to do next. They needed someone strong to tell them what to do. Someone wise to advise them. Suddenly, as she realized how duped she’d been by King, she knew she was not that person.

“Everyone needs to do what they think is best for them. If King has a safe way for you to leave and you want that, you should go.”

“Bailey, wait,” King called as she turned and walked off. Time was closing in around her. Her mother would not last much longer. The danger would not be far off. And now, the one person she thought she could put her faith in had betrayed her. All she could do was walk away.

CHAPTER TWENTY

King

Mrs. Tully's eyes were blazing with anger as she confronted King. "How could you do that to her? After all she's been through?" she asked, her voice shaking with emotion.

He knew there would be hell to pay for hurting Bailey. She was so beloved here, and he'd embarrassed and betrayed her in front of everyone.

King held up his hands in a gesture of apology. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn't want her to question my motives or think I was using her," he explained. "So I kept the reason I arrived here a secret. But that didn't change how I felt once I got here. It was never a job to me, not once I met her. I was trying to help her."

"You failed miserably at that, didn't you?" Mrs. Tully retorted sarcastically. "You're a fool; you should understand how hard it is for Bailey to trust someone."

King hung his head. "I know. I messed up. I want to make things right now. We don't have much time, and I know Bailey is not going to leave here."

Mrs. Tully's expression softened slightly. "Of course she isn't. So tell me what you think you're going to do now?"

"I need to do some surveillance on these men and their camp," King said. "I need to find out how many there are, what weapons they have, and what they're capable of."

Mrs. Tully frowned. “We know what they’re capable of, sadly. So why bother? You’re leaving with all the others who are fleeing from Cinderhill, aren’t you?”

King shook his head. “I’m not leaving unless Bailey does too.”

Mrs. Tully’s eyes widened in surprise. “Bailey’s not leaving. You know that.”

“I do,” King acknowledged. “But I can’t abandon her. I don’t care how upset she is with me. And I can’t let these men take over Cinderhill. I think some part of their twisted ideology and messages from her father will involve harming Bailey. Her life is in danger.”

Mrs. Tully nodded slowly. “I understand. I’m not leaving either. This time I won’t sit by quietly and let them take over. Now that I know what happened to Bailey and how badly she was abused, I won’t let it happen again. They kept it from us last time, but now we know.”

At that moment, Moe walked over to join their conversation. Hunched in posture and holding his side with his hands, he groaned. “I’m not leaving either,” he announced. “Whatever happens, I’ll fight for Cinderhill.”

Their resolve was endearing but misplaced. This was well beyond a few people banding together and standing their ground. Their convictions would not be enough. “I need to find these men and figure out a plan,” he said. “Moe, you know where their camp is, right? Make me a map so I can go scope everything out.”

Moe nodded. “I’ll get on it right away, but if they catch you out there—”

“They won’t.”

Mrs. Tully spoke up. “I’ll get some supplies to take with you and start helping the families that want to leave to get ready.”

King sighed. “I understand. But I still think you should consider leaving, both of you.”

Moe shook his head. "I wasted too much of my life standing for nothing. That ends today. Let me go out there with you to see their camp."

"You're in no shape for that. You stay here and help Mrs. Tully. Keep an eye on Bailey."

"I'll try to talk to her," Moe said, flashing a knowing smile. "I'm not much of a talker, but when I do finally figure out what to say, people tend to listen."

"She's never going to forgive me." King hung his head in defeat. "The best I can do is try to help any way I can."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bailey

“About half are staying,” Mrs. Tully reported as she shuffled into the common kitchen and handed Bailey a plate of food. “They’re packing up and they’ll be ready to go in the morning. It’s the mothers and their children mostly. Probably a smart move.”

“What time will you leave?” Bailey asked, staring down at the plate of chicken and wishing she had any appetite at all.

“I’m not leaving,” Mrs. Tully asserted, tipping her head back in pride. “Last time I had nowhere else to go, this time there is nowhere else I’d rather be. They don’t scare me.”

“They’re scaring the hell out of me,” Bailey replied. “And King . . .” she trailed off, still unsure how to process what he’d done.

Moe cleared his throat as he walked up on them. “He just left.”

“King left?” Bailey asked, shocked at her own reaction. He’d betrayed her. Lied. Was just pretending all this time so he could get a job done. Why should she care that he was gone? But obviously, she did.

“I drew him a map to the last camp I knew about out in the mountains. I don’t know if they’re still there but he’s going out to get an idea of what we’re really up against.” Moe stuck his

hands in his pockets and looked like was bracing for something.

“Is he crazy?” Bailey shouted. “Why would you make him that map? He can’t just walk in there and think they won’t spot him. They’re mad men. You know James. He’s probably got the entire place set up with boobytraps and trip wires.”

“I warned him about that. King is a capable man and he wasn’t about to be talked out of his plan. I figured the best thing I could do was give him as much information as possible.”

“Well he’s—”

“He shouldn’t have lied to you,” Moe agreed with the thought she couldn’t seem to speak out loud. “I can tell he was conflicted as hell about it.”

Mrs. Tully rested a hand on Bailey’s shoulder. “I think he was trying to help the best way he knew how. And Carmen . . . she’s the one who helped get you out of here last time. They made sure your father was arrested. I think their intentions for sending King here were probably good.”

“Why are you two taking up for him?” Bailey asked, silently relieved they were doing so. She was still seething with anger, but a small part of her knew they all needed King right now.

Mrs. Tully looked to Moe before answering. “Someone can do something wrong and still be right in the long run. I think that’s the case with King. He obviously cares about you.”

“Enough to go put himself in danger out there,” Moe reminded her. “Enough to out himself as a liar to try to keep people you care about safe.”

Bailey hung her head in her hands. “Are we crazy to stay here?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Tully laughed. “And maybe my faith in King is misplaced and I’ll regret it, but right now I think there is still time for him to make this work.”

“Bailey,” a voice called from over her shoulder.

“Arnoldo?” she asked, turning to see him standing there, fidgeting with the straps of the bag in his hand. “What are you doing here?”

“You invited me, remember?” He looked suddenly self-conscious.

“Of course,” she shot back quickly. “But this is not a great time for a visit. Something has happened and the threat from James and his men is imminent.” She knew she looked wild with worry, but she needed Arnoldo to know how serious this was.

“What happened?” Arnoldo’s bushy unkempt brows furrowed, deepening the line in his forehead.

Mrs. Tully moved in and sighed as she looked him over. “You’ve changed quite a bit.”

“I’m old,” he chuckled, smiling warmly at her. Bailey didn’t know how much the two had interacted in the wake of her father’s arrest by Arnoldo, but their familiarity made her think they’d obviously gotten to know each other.

“Aren’t we all,” Moe said, wincing at the pain in his ribs.

“The heart attack took a lot out of me,” Arnoldo reported to Mrs. Tully, his eyes fixed on her as though Moe and Bailey had ceased to exist. “But I’ve still got some fight left in me.”

“Fight is the operative word at the moment,” Mrs. Tully replied nervously. “They’re coming back. Any time now they’re coming back and taking what they think is theirs. They stole our winter stockpile to show us they mean business and they beat on Moe pretty good.”

“I gave them a run for their money,” Moe reported, trying to straighten up and wincing again.

“Damn,” Arnoldo grumbled. “Something has to be done.”

“Isn’t there anyone you can call now?” Bailey asked, breathless from the anxiety coursing through her. “You said once they did something we could report it.”

“Report it,” Arnoldo muttered, shaking his head. “You can call. They’ll drag their feet and screw around. No one wants to touch this place with a ten-foot pole.”

“What if you call?” Bailey asked, wanting to fall down on her knees and beg, but trying to retain some dignity.

Arnoldo rolled his weight back on his heels and looked away. “I should have been more transparent with you when you came to my house. I’m a pariah down there. You were gone, and not long after, your father was taken into custody. It got ugly. I couldn’t seem to get everything done that I needed to. I didn’t realize there were ties to this place on the force. I made a big stink, tried to pull back the curtain on everything, and I used some unconventional tactics that ended up sinking me.”

“Unconventional?” Mrs. Tully asked, looking worried.

“I tend to punch my way through barriers. Some of those barriers were people. My superiors. I pissed a lot of people off. If I made a call down there now, it would make things worse.”

“Men have that effect on situations,” Mrs. Tully said with annoyance. “Now how about we stop talking about what we can’t do and start talking about what we can do. I’ve helped many of the people who want to leave with their children get packed up. King is in contact with Carmen, you remember her?” She eyed Arnoldo, waiting until he nodded. “Well, she’s going to help with that.”

“What can I do?” Arnoldo asked, waiting for an order as if there were some list somewhere to be checked off.

“Good question,” Bailey said, rubbing her tired eyes. “My mother needs urgent medical care but is refusing it. She’ll die soon without it but feels like it’s my father’s will. She thinks when James and his men return, she’ll be miraculously healed. I think there is a chance their disdain for me is at a boiling point. They’re encouraged by letters from my father and they might come in with guns blazing. If you’re looking for what to do, we’re not really at that stage yet.”

Arnoldo searched all their faces, hoping one would break into laughter and tell them this was a joke. When he realized how dire things were, he ran his hand over his balding head. “If you had more time, you could get your mother deemed unable to make her own medical decisions and then—”

“There is no more time,” Bailey reported somberly.

“Where is King?” Arnoldo asked, scanning over their shoulders.

“He went to find their camp,” Moe explained. “He figured if we could get some intel on exactly what they have going on, at least we could be more prepared.”

“Prepared for a fight?” Arnoldo asked, looking around the area as if magical soldiers would pop out suddenly. “That doesn’t seem feasible.”

“I’ve got a mean right hook,” Mrs. Tully teased, holding her fists up.

Arnoldo smiled slightly then fell serious. “I think leaving is the best option. You can regroup and try to formalize some kind of action, legal or otherwise.”

“King is going to come up with something,” Moe said, nodding his head. “Just give him a shot and if by morning we’re still in the same position, we’ll consider leaving.”

“We will?” Bailey asked, cocking up a curious brow.

“Everything’s on the table,” Arnoldo said, seeming like he was itching to take control again. “Have you called Carmen?”

“No,” Bailey said, her cheeks blazing red for a moment. There was so much there. So many parts of that story that made her stomach twist into knots. It was made even worse by the idea that Carmen and King had been working in cahoots to try to trick Bailey. The idea of calling Carmen after all this time felt impossible to do. And yet, just as impossible to avoid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

King

Darkness had closed in fully around him as clouds rolled in front of the moon. He moved slowly through the woods, his senses heightened as he tried to remain undetected. He had spent most of his life in the city, but he had been in dangerous situations before and knew how to move silently and with purpose.

As he got closer to the spot indicated on Moe's map, he could see he was on the right track. There were well worn paths through the brush and trash discarded in odd places.

Ducking behind a large fallen tree, King saw a sorry sight. The camp was a mess. The men living there were clearly in dire straits. The shelters were in disrepair, and the camp was overgrown with weeds and brush, trash and debris strewn about.

Taking a quick stock of the place he saw two men sitting by a fire, playing cards and laughing loudly. They were obviously supposed to be on lookout duty but were clearly not taking their responsibilities seriously. King made a mental note of their positions and moved on.

As he continued to survey the camp, he tried to get a headcount of how many men might be living there. He saw a few sleeping in makeshift, lean-to shelters with one open side. There were a couple more men wandering around aimlessly,

looking tired and despondent. A fire had been burning in a stone pit but it was mostly unattended embers now.

King tried to ascertain if the men were armed, but it was difficult to tell in the darkness. He needed to get closer to the camp to get a better look. If they were bringing guns to the fight, it changed everything.

Slowly and methodically, King inched his way closer to the camp. He knew any sudden movement or noise could alert the men, and he didn't want to take any chances.

From his new vantage point he saw it, his gut dropping down to his boots. Leaned against another fallen tree were at least a half a dozen rifles. They looked in varying conditions, some so old he wasn't sure if they were even in working condition. But if even half of them were, he understood the implication for Cinderhill.

The rations they'd stolen earlier that day were stacked up close to the fire and picked over. Jars opened and smashed. The leaves of root vegetables strewn around. And worst of all some of the peaches he'd canned himself were eaten.

"Wake up," someone shouted and King froze, certain he'd been discovered. His instinct was to run but he knew if there was even a chance this wasn't about him, he'd have a better shot by holding his ground.

"What is it, James?" A man with a long beard and a ripped flannel shirt sat up by the dwindling fire and wiped at his eyes.

"Who the hell is supposed to be in the trailer right now? It's empty."

King scanned around. There was no trailer in sight. This had to be off in some other location. But the fact that it was currently unmanned was certainly pissing James off. That had to mean something.

"Buck's out there," a voice in the darkness answered, sounding timid. King was picking up on the fact that in the absence of Bailey's father, James was the leader. And his anger rose with every word.

“Buck? You all let Buck go out there on his own? What is wrong with you? He’s probably running through the woods naked right now. Tom and Bill, you go find Buck. Jones, you go to the trailer before the thing burns down.”

“Yes sir,” they all called back as they jumped into action.

“Everyone else get up. There is penance to pay for this mistake. Get the coals.”

The flutter of movement was like a super nova, bursting to life. Flashlights kicked on. Men jumped from the places they were sleeping. One man grabbed a small shovel and started stirring the coals around in the fire to bring them back to life.

King clutched the tree he was crouched behind and tried to make sense of what was happening. The men circled the fire. He counted fourteen. Knowing three had been ordered away and Buck was apparently streaking through the woods, that made eighteen men in the camp.

One by one, King watched as they fell to their knees, their words all meshing together like out-of-tune instruments all playing different songs. Instinctively, his hand moved to his holstered weapon. Something about what he was watching felt inherently dangerous. Not just to him but to all those men around the fire.

They chanted wildly and howled as James took hot coals at the end of the shovel and pressed them against the men’s backs. No one ran. No one spoke out. They seemed to revel in the pain and punishment. For all King thought he understood about these people and this place, he was suddenly overwhelmed with sadness.

Never in his life did he realize something invisible like faith could have such a throttling grip around so many necks all at one time, squeezing out their existence and leaving them a shell.

For a brief moment an image crossed before his eyes. He was the one around the fire, Lou the person laying hot coals against his body. Demanding something of him. Something that his gut knew was wrong. And the demons that remained

inside King were suddenly staring back at him. So obvious. Omnipresent.

The thought resided in his chest. A whisper. One he tried not to hear but it reverberated against his ribs and rattled its ghostly chains through his body.

I am not so different from these men.

He lost his breath at the thought and took a reckless step backward, a twig cracking beneath his feet. Some of the chanting ceased suddenly. He steadied himself, but his gut told him he was too late. He'd given away his location.

They knew he was there. He was outnumbered and outgunned. It was time to move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bailey sat by the bedside, her mother's shallow breathing the only sound in the room. The air was heavy with the stale smell of illness. Bailey couldn't help but feel a sense of sadness wash over her. She knew her mother's time was running out, and despite everything that had happened, she couldn't help but feel a sense of loss.

In the silence, lost in thought, her eyes wandered to the small bedside table. It was strange to think of how many happy memories her mother had here. She would die loving her husband, loving Cinderhill. Never realizing how dangerous both were for so long.

Bailey had always believed there would come a time when her mother would come around and realize just how poisonous the cult had been. How many lies were told and how disproportionate the punishments were to the perceived crimes. Bailey's heart had held on to the hope that she and her mother would one day balance teacups on their laps and smile at each other as they finally saw things clearly together. It was now sinking in . . . that would never happen.

Wiping a tear from her cheek, she focused on the small drawer in the bedside table. Something drew her to it, and without realizing she was doing it, she opened it and peered inside.

At first, all she saw was a few pieces of jewelry and some old photographs. But then, she saw a stack of letters, tied together with a piece of string. She recognized her father's handwriting immediately.

Bailey's heart began to race as she picked up the letters and began to read. The first few were mundane, filled with talk of everyday life for him since he'd been arrested. But as she read on, the letters grew darker, more sinister.

What Bailey never knew were the details of what her father called the Master Plan. He'd mentioned it often and she'd heard talk of it in hushed whispers around Cinderhill but the particulars were never shared with her.

Now she saw it in black and white. A takeover. Spreading out Cinderhill into nearby towns and sharing their ideology far and wide. The goal was to expand their reach and influence throughout the state and beyond. He had even talked about violence, about hurting those who stood in their way.

It was madness. They had absolutely no realistic ability to grow beyond what they were. They had no resources, and even though some people of Cinderhill were hungry for the toxic message her father was spreading, the masses all over the world would not be swayed to believe him. It was laughable, but at the same time his grandiose beliefs were scary.

Bailey felt sick to her stomach as she read on, realizing just how far her father had gone down the path of madness and how her mother had followed him blindly.

The further she read into the stack of letters the worse it was. Clearly her mother had told him she was not well and he in turn twisted that news into some sort of prophecy. James and his men were likely told the same. Her mother's illness could only be cured by what he called the rebirth of the holy land and deep penance. That until they returned and reclaimed Cinderhill, there would be no peace for any of them. Even from behind bars he was pulling the strings.

Finally, she saw it. A letter from six months ago. Obviously providing the answer to the difficult question of how. How they would be able to regain their footing in Cinderhill. How they could come back and get people to submit and follow. Of course her father had a plan for that. Step one, eliminate Bailey. She was the cog in the wheel. The one who would again try to stop them.

That wasn't a surprise. Or it shouldn't have been. Yet still she was shocked to see it in writing. Her father saw her as nothing more than a barrier to his master plan and therefore expendable.

Pushing that feeling aside, she focused on the next part of the plan. Something she was reading but could not make sense of. It was a list of supplies. Things that would be needed, things her mother would have to provide for James and his men. She read it again and again, trying to make sense of why they would need these things.

She scanned the last few letters, still confused. Her eyes were heavy with exhaustion but she knew she couldn't sleep until she figured this out. And not until King was back. He'd been gone for hours, and she wondered how well he'd be able to manage this mission he'd taken on. Moving through unfamiliar woods at night. Trying to clandestinely spy on a group of men who were unnaturally adept at knowing their surroundings and sensing any change.

It wasn't until Moe burst through the door and breathlessly announced it, that she could breathe right again.

"He's back," he said, frantically waving for her to come out.

It was a rush of relief she wasn't expecting. Nothing had really changed. He'd still lied. The danger still loomed. There was no solution on the horizon, but just knowing he'd come back was enough to calm her. At least for a minute. She would take what she could get.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

King

Arriving back at Cinderhill, exhausted and dirty from his trek in the woods, King stumbled toward Bailey, drawn to her and the light spilling out from her mother's open door.

"Are you all right?" she asked, looking conflicted about caring how he was.

"I'm not sure if they spotted me, but I think they might have. I got the hell out of there in a hurry. Took a few spills on the way back."

"I'll get the first aid kit for those scrapes."

"No," he said, waving her off. "I'm fine. I have to tell you what I found out."

Arnoldo walked up with his arms folded across his chest as he appraised King. He must have looked worse than he thought. Bailey reached up and pulled some leaves out of his hair.

"Arnoldo?" King asked, trying to figure out why he'd come. "You're here."

"I'm accepting Bailey's invitation. Sounds like I've come at an eventful time." Arnoldo smirked. "You look like you've been busy. What did you find out?"

King took a deep breath before answering. "There are about eighteen men in the camp, and I saw at least half a

dozen rifles.”

“And how did the men seem? On edge?”

“Yes,” King answered worriedly. “They’re agitated. Nervous. Everyone was jumpy. The energy there was intense and the camp was a mess. They’ve already picked over a lot of the supplies they stole from Cinderhill. It feels like they’re spiraling. They were doing some kind of ritual around the fire where James was burning them with coals as punishment.”

Bailey shuddered at the mention of the ritual. “My father called that back to ashes. At first it was used to test someone’s faith. But it eventually morphed into a form of punishment.”

Arnoldo’s face darkened. “They’re escalating. That’s not a good sign,” he muttered nervously.

King nodded in agreement. “It feels imminent. Whatever they plan to do, they’ll be doing it soon.”

King paused, considering his options. “Are you armed?” he asked Arnoldo.

“Always,” Arnoldo answered. “I brought what weapons I had. I know there are bears out here sometimes. Wanted to be prepared.” It was obvious Arnoldo knew exactly what he was doing when he decided to show up. He was being coy, but it was clear he came to help in any way he could.

“Do you know anything about a trailer?” King asked, dusting some of the mud off his knees.

“Trailer?” Bailey asked, narrowing her eyes as she tried to understand. “I didn’t know they had a mobile home there.”

“They do,” Moe said, sidling up to them. “They bought it off Lyle Johnson in town a couple of months ago. I was picking up supplies from his gas station and saw James towing it away. It’s a beat up hunk of junk. Barely livable and Lyle was glad to get it off his property.”

“And what are they doing with it?” Bailey asked as though King might have some answers.

“I didn’t see it,” King explained. “But James was pissed that some guy named Buck was out at the trailer by himself.

That's why he was burning the other guys with coals. Like they were all being sloppy."

"Buck Sanveesa," Moe sighed. "He's a mess."

"Well, whatever was happening in the trailer, James was worried about Buck screwing it up. He sent a couple other guys out there to help him. We need to find out what they're doing in that trailer."

Bailey reached into her sweatshirt pocket and pulled out the letters. "I found these in my mother's drawer. They're from my father. He was instructing her to do things. Pulling all sorts of strings. I have to imagine James was receiving similar letters. It's definitely at a tipping point."

"What was he telling them to do?" King asked, taking the stack of letters from her.

"Get rid of me. Sabotage some of our systems so we begin to see them as necessary to our survival. He suggested knocking the dam down because it would be too difficult for us to build it up again. Then to rob us of our supplies to make us scared and desperate. He was stressing the importance of a stockpile of money and building up wealth so they could use it for control."

Moe furrowed his brows. "I thought they were pretty desperate out there. Starving."

Bailey shrugged. "Maybe they are. I don't see how they could be making money with the supplies my father told them to gather."

Arnoldo reached his hand out to see the letters. "What kind of supplies?" He took a deep breath, looking at the list of supplies Bailey showed him. "This is bad, really bad," he said. "These are all common ingredients for cooking meth. They're definitely cooking it in that trailer, and if they're selling it in town, we have a serious problem on our hands."

King nodded grimly. "I think some of them were tweaking. I thought they were jumpy from the circumstances, but now that I see that list, some of them are definitely using."

Moe looked at Arnoldo expectantly. “This is a good thing, isn’t it? They’re doing something illegal. Something that’s negatively affecting the town. That’ll get the cops up there, right?”

Arnoldo shook his head. “I don’t know. I mean, even if we could convince the police to take action, we don’t know who we can trust. There’s too much corruption in this town, and James and his men have connections there. We’d need proof and then some kind of outside agency that might care about it.”

“We need to call Carmen,” Bailey edged out, the pain written all over her face. Just uttering Carmen’s name clearly reminded her of how King had lied. How he’d arrived under false pretenses and tricked her into thinking it was fate that brought him. Pride had her quickly changing her expression and straightening her back. “You should call her, King. Give her an update about the possible drug connection and see if that’s something she can work with. Maybe she has a contact who would be interested in busting James and the rest of them. I doubt the weapons they have were obtained legally.”

“She’d probably rather hear from you,” King said, speaking cautiously, feeling like he’d just stepped onto crackling thin ice.

Bailey only shook her head, seeming unable to form the words. She took a half step back and hugged her arms around herself. “I’m going to go sit with my mother. Let me know if you hear anything. It’ll be chaos here in the morning, trying to get everyone out who wants to go. I’m sure you two have a lot to talk about . . . logistics and all.”

She slinked away, trying but failing to keep it from turning awkward.

“What was that about?” Arnoldo asked, looking to Moe for some explanation and he obliged.

“King pretended he was here by coincidence, saying he ran out of gas and needed a place to sleep for the night. In reality, Carmen sent him here to spy on Bailey. When shit hit the fan,

he had to tell her, and it's been a little tense around here since."

"I wasn't here to spy," King corrected. "It wasn't like that."

"Yikes." Arnoldo tossed his hands up as if he wanted no part of this. "You dug a deep hole with that. Good luck climbing out."

"Carmen was right to worry," King tried to remind them, but he knew exactly how he looked in all of this.

"Call her," Arnoldo sighed. "It might be messy, but Bailey is right. Carmen is likely your best shot at getting something done."

King's heart ached as he watched Bailey walk away. He longed to chase after her, to wrap her in his arms and beg for her forgiveness. But he knew she needed space, knew she wasn't ready to talk to him yet. He glanced down at his phone, wanting to call Carmen and set things in motion to bring James and his men to justice, but his mind kept wandering back to Bailey. He wished he could go back in time and change things, make it so he'd never betrayed her trust. His chest felt heavy with the weight of his regret as he watched her disappear around a corner.

Fishing his phone out of his pocket he dialed Carmen. If he couldn't make things right with Bailey, he could at least try to make them safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Bailey

This was the rally Dr. Murray had warned about. The phenomenon before death where the person experiences a temporary improvement in their physical condition. He explained that this could include a return of energy, clarity of thought, or improvement in vital signs such as breathing. This can give the impression that the person may be improving, but it is often a temporary situation that occurs before the final decline.

Even knowing this was true, watching her mother experience it was agonizing. It was like a cruel joke, a cosmic tease. Just when she had begun to accept that her mother was leaving her, that she would soon be gone, she was given a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, her mother would recover and they would have more time together. Time to finally see eye to eye.

But deep down, Bailey knew that wasn't true. She knew the rally was only a temporary reprieve, a last gasp before her mother's body gave out for good. The thought of that was almost too much to bear. It was a rollercoaster ride of emotions, and all Bailey could do was hold on tight and ride it out until the end.

"They must be coming," her mother said, shifting her body more upright than it had been in a week. "I can feel it."

Bailey didn't bother clarifying that this surge of energy could be medically explained and didn't mean her mother was on the mend. There would be no convincing her this was anything other than her husband's prophecy being proven true.

"Do you know why Dad had you get all those supplies for James and the other men?" Bailey asked, trying not to sound accusatory. "I read your letters."

There was an urgency to have answers because the window to ask these questions was closing. She felt owed this by her mother.

"I don't question your father. That is where you and I have always been different."

Her mother spoke as though critical thinking was some sort of crime; Bailey knew that was half the problem. Questioning things allowed people to gain a deeper understanding of the world around them, to challenge assumptions, and to learn new information. Life has to be filled with the choice to explore different perspectives and open up to new possibilities. More than any of that, questioning things creates a path to identify and address problems, and to make informed decisions based on evidence. The absence of those things is exactly how a cult can thrive.

"They're for meth," Bailey replied flatly. "Dad was a strict prohibitionist. A purist ideology could never tolerate the use of any mind-altering substance or something used for escapism. Don't you think it's strange that in the pursuit of money he changed that stance?"

Her mother showed her proverbial hand accidentally. "No one was doing the drugs. Creating them for the sake of his plan is not in conflict with prohibition or purity. If we are to exist and conquer in the capitalist world, we may occasionally have to participate in its evil ways."

Bailey had read that line verbatim in a letter from her father to her mother. It turned her stomach.

"They are using," Bailey explained, wishing she was a big enough person to leave her argumentative tone at the door.

Unfortunately there was no way for her to divorce emotion from this.

“Who?”

“Some of the men. King saw for himself. They’re tweaking. Out there cooking meth and using it too. That’s not part of Dad’s plan, is it?”

“They will be dealt with upon your father’s return.”

“He will never be back. And you will be dead. Why can’t you see that? There might still be time to save your life. I can get you to the hospital tonight. But it has to be your choice.”

“I will never choose anything that goes against your father’s will. For he is—”

“Please, Mama,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion. “You don’t have to listen to his prophecies anymore. You don’t have to die. I’m here. I’m your daughter. Choose me, for once. Let your maternal instincts kick in and fight for your life. Let me be enough for you.”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed in confusion. There was no scorn or anger there. It was genuine perplexity over the words spilling from Bailey’s mouth.

“How could you ever be enough? You’re competing with God. With your father, a true prophet of the land and the Lord. It makes no sense to think just because you are my daughter, that would be enough. I’d be a fool to forsake everything I believe for just one earthly being. Don’t ask that of me.” A well of tears began building in her eyes and for the first time, Bailey saw her mother was conflicted with the idea.

Perhaps it was fear of death. Or some tiny strand of lingering doubt. But as quickly as it began, it was gone. Her mother righted herself and shook her head. “You’re tempting me with evil. I won’t be led astray.”

Bailey swelled with guilt. She remembered why she’d never asked her mother to choose her before. It wasn’t fair. The spell was too strong. Her father’s hold too strangling. It was a drug. And like any addict, it was not simply a matter of willpower or choice. An addiction this strong would require

professional help, and without it, begging to be loved more than the drug would never work.

“Any time,” Bailey began, “I don’t care when it is or what is going on, if you change your mind and want to live and be treated at the hospital, I will get you there. We don’t have to agree on why you’re going. We don’t have to talk about what happens after. But just say the word, and I’ll get you help.”

“My help will come from reclaiming our land under the guidance of your father. I will be healed.”

All Bailey could do was nod and offer a small defeated smile. “I’ll let you rest,” she whispered, backing out of the room with tears streaking down her face.

It was after midnight and the cloudless sky was bright with stars and a nearly full moon.

All the familiar sounds of Cinderhill in the late night hours were echoing through the trees and filling the air with a soothing yet eerie melody. There was something comforting in knowing this symphony of nature had existed long before her and would be here well after.

The rustling of leaves underfoot, the distant hoot of an owl, the chirping of crickets, and the croaking of frogs could all be heard in the silence.

The gentle rush of wind through the leaves and the occasional rustling of a creature passing by unsettled her now. Was there something more sinister in the darkness? Something deadly?

The distant howl of a coyote and the snap of a twig heightened the sense of danger that lurked in the dark.

But it was the new and unfamiliar sound that worried her the most. King’s whispering voice on the phone. He was calling Carmen. Telling her that Bailey had screwed it all up again. Danger was at their doorstep and she needed to be rescued one more time. A reality that slapped her across the face and left a sting that wouldn’t let up. She knew, however, the pain was just starting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“I’m sorry to reach out so late. I know these are tough calls for you to answer.” King kept his voice low, though he wasn’t sure why. It was Carmen who needed to be clandestine about this call, not him.

“I want the updates. I stayed in the office tonight. I’m working on mobilizing what I can from here to make sure you’ve got transportation and safe housing for everyone who needs to flee in the morning.”

“Did you tell your people?” King asked, curious if now this real danger and the willingness of some to leave legitimized the mission enough for her to be transparent.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat nervously. “It was difficult, but I couldn’t keep it from them any longer. How is Bailey?”

“Pissed.”

“I’m sure. I hate that she thinks I was having her spied on. I was so worried. I knew her mother was still mixed up in things and that her father had to have some control even from prison. That doesn’t likely change how she’s feeling about my tactics.”

“Or mine.” King gulped.

“You were there to do a job,” Carmen replied kindly.

“Well, while I was here doing that job, we . . .”

“Oh King. Seriously? Part of the reason I picked you was because your whole vibe was all business. Did she fall for you?”

“There was some mutual falling. But once she found out why I was here, it hurt her. She assumed since it was a lie, everything else I said must have been too.”

“I’m trying to remind myself that we had no other choice. Without this intervention someone could have been hurt or killed.”

“Getting people out is one thing,” King began. “But one of those people won’t be Bailey. She’s not going to leave. That’s why I’m calling. The local police won’t be likely to act. Or if they do, not with the urgency we need. This is a powder keg, lit matches everywhere. We need some other agency to step in.”

“I’ve made a lot of calls,” Carmen reported, sounding pessimistic. “There is nothing federal to call in at this point. I need more.”

“I might have it. I went down to their camp today and they were talking about some trailer they have. Bailey found a list of supplies her father instructed them to get. Pseudoephedrine, lithium batteries, hydrochloric acid, red phosphorus, iodine crystals, anhydrous and ammonia to start.”

“They’re cooking meth?” Carmen asked skeptically. “That can’t be right. Dale was a pious and strict leader who banned any kind of substance or distraction. He worried any amount of mind-altering substance would be a threat to his control over their thoughts. This would be in direct conflict with that ideology.”

“Dale knows they need cash to get back on their feet. They have enough privacy up at that camp to pull it off and we think they’re selling to all the surrounding towns and using their sale of firewood as a cover.”

“Do you have proof?”

“Not yet. Just the list of supplies and some talk I overheard about the trailer. Arnaldo said there has been chatter in town about an increase of problems with drugs, but it didn’t sound like anyone had tied it back to James and his men. I can get

proof though. I'll have to figure out where the trailer is, but if I send you photographs of their operation, will that be enough."

Carmen paused. "I honestly don't know. It's not a substantial drug ring. We don't know that they've crossed state lines with it. The men don't have warrants out for their arrest as far as we know. It would be hard for me to make a case for anyone who might have jurisdiction there. The safest thing to do would be to convince everyone to leave. Everyone. If we clear out Cinderhill and regroup, we might be able to get them on something that puts them away for good."

"She's not going to leave."

"I need to talk to her. Do you think you could convince her to call me?" Carmen sounded desperate.

"I'll try. I don't really know what she's feeling right now; the only thing I'm certain of is she's dug in about staying here. So are some others."

"See if you can get her on the phone with me. I'll do what I can to convince her."

King disconnected the call and stood in the darkness, the sound of his own exhausted breath filling his ears. He thought about the trailer. How he would find it. What evidence he could gather. He thought about Bailey and how he'd convince her to call Carmen. More importantly, whether that would work.

"King," he heard Bailey whisper in the darkness, "Carmen wants to talk to me, doesn't she?"

He moved toward the sound of her voice and stretched out his cell phone hoping she would take it. "She just wants to make sure you're all right."

The delicate touch of her fingers against his was a dagger to his heart. Those were hands he wanted to hold but knew he'd lost his chance. She took the phone, at least a step in the right direction.

"You should get some sleep," she instructed, her voice flat and cool. "It'll be busy here in the morning getting everyone on their way."

“You’ll call Carmen?” He knew he sounded anxious and he didn’t care.

“I’m going to stare at the phone for a while and wrestle with the idea.”

Her honesty was refreshing. At least she still trusted him enough for that.

“And I’m going to look through your camera roll for your most embarrassing picture.”

“Fair enough,” he smiled, stepping away from her. “Good night, Bailey. Shout if you need anything.”

“Night,” she called back, and he wondered if her voice seemed lighter, more forgiving, or if that was just what he wanted to hear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Leaving Italy

“It’s all in that packet,” Carmen said as she placed the crisp white envelope bearing her name in bold letters into Bailey’s hands.

Staring down at it, a knot formed in her throat. This was a moment she’d been both waiting for and dreading. Time to say goodbye to the people who had become mentors and friends. Leaving the place that had wrapped her in protection, yet made her feel bare and afraid.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t know if I’m ready to leave.”

Carmen placed a reassuring hand on Bailey’s shoulder. “You’re stronger than you realize,” she promised. “You’ve come so far since you arrived here, and I have no doubt you’ll be able to make a new life for yourself in Maine.”

Bailey nodded, but she felt the doubt gnawing at her. Looking down at the packet, she began to flip through the pages.

“Can’t I do what you’re doing? I could work for Gloria and help other people get out of their abusive situations. Specifically people dealing with cults. I could bring a unique perspective.”

“You definitely could. Your empathy and passion are so special. But this is only meant to be a stopover, not a place to

stay. The good news is you can help people wherever you go. We need a network of survivors willing to help other people as they need it. That doesn't just happen here in Italy. It happens all over the world, including where you are going. There might be a time where Gloria calls you and asks you for help."

"What am I going to do with myself in Maine?"

"You're young and your life is waiting for you out there. You're ready for friends, maybe even new love. It's time."

"What about you?" Bailey asked, furrowing her brows. "Shouldn't this just be a stopover for you too?"

"Everyone's situation is different. Gloria will boot me out of here eventually, when the time is right." Carmen smiled and softened her expression. "You're ready, Bailey."

She thumbed through the maps of the area she was going to, a list of emergency contacts, and even a few photos of the cottage where she'd be living. Everything was so meticulously planned, so perfect. She felt a wash of gratitude come over her.

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me," Bailey said as she looked around the room, taking in all the familiar sights one last time. "I'm really going to miss Italy. I'm going to miss all of you."

"I know," Carmen replied, "but you're going to love Maine. It's a beautiful place, and you'll have a fresh start. You'll have a job and a new community of people who will support you."

Carmen's kindness was making the guilt in Bailey's stomach sour even more. Hidden in her bag was a letter. A letter home that she'd written weeks ago. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness and nostalgia as she thought back to Cinderhill, her childhood home. Despite all that had transpired with the cult and her father's abuse, there was still a part of her that longed for the sense of community and belonging she had felt there before things had gone so terribly wrong.

Now as the time to leave the safety of Italy grew ever closer, the letter called out to her like Edgar Allen Poe's raven.

The unsent letter begged to be mailed because she needed news of her mother. Of her friends. Of the place she'd left behind so very abruptly.

“You all right?” Carmen asked, her words shaking Bailey from the thoughts of the letter she was hiding.

“Just imagining a life in Maine,” she sang, trying to sound upbeat. “You think I’ll fit in there?”

“I think anywhere would be lucky to have you.” Carmen picked up one of Bailey’s bags and pulled it over her shoulder. “You finish up in here and come have dinner with us before you go.”

When she was alone in the room again, Bailey reached for the letter, needing to see it again. She looked at it in her hand like it was a crime. It had taken her weeks to muster up the courage to write it. But now that she was leaving Italy and preparing to start a new life, the pull to know what was happening back home was stronger than ever.

Bailey took a deep breath and placed the letter into an envelope, sealing it shut before adding the address of Mrs. Tully’s house in Cinderhill. She knew that once she sent it, there was no going back. She would have to face whatever news came her way, whether good or bad.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bailey

Bailey's fingers shook as she pressed Carmen's name. She waited anxiously as the phone rang, each passing second feeling like an eternity. Finally, Carmen answered.

"Bailey, is that you?" Carmen asked, her voice full of concern.

Bailey struggled to find the words. She was embarrassed and ashamed of how she had failed. She had promised Carmen she would never go back to Cinderhill, and now here she was, right back where she started. They'd talked a few times before this, but Bailey had always tried to paint a rosy picture of how Cinderhill had reformed. That things were safe and stable. Now that Carmen knew the truth, Bailey was mortified.

"I . . . I don't know," Bailey stammered. "I guess there are no secrets now. King told you everything. You know it's bad again and you know I put myself in this position. After all you did for me—"

"This would be happening whether you were back in Cinderhill or not. It sounds like you're the one who's kept it at bay this long. The people there have you to thank for the period of safety they've experienced."

"But I came back here after all you and Gloria did for me."

"I let parts of my old life back in too," Carmen admitted tentatively. "My sisters. I never thought I'd see them again. I

didn't think I could maintain the mental health I'd fought so hard for and look backward at the same time. But it's not backward. My sisters aren't little kids anymore, left in the dark about my abuse and how my parents took his side. They're grown women with full lives and wonderful hearts. I was afraid, but now I'm so glad I have them again."

"Really?" Bailey asked, sniffing back the emotion. She'd worried about this conversation since the moment she realized the danger around Cinderhill was still looming and Carmen might be the only one able to help her.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line before Carmen spoke again.

"Are you safe?" she asked, her voice calm and measured. "Is there anything happening right now?"

Bailey nodded even though Carmen couldn't see her. "It's quiet right now, but I don't know how long that will last."

"And your mother?"

"What has King told you about her?"

"Just that she's ill and he's worried her death could act as a catalyst for more danger."

"It's curable," Bailey gulped out. "That's what's so crazy. My mother could go to the hospital and get a regiment of intravenous antibiotics and medical intervention and survive. She's refusing because my father has told her she'll be healed when his men have returned and are welcomed into Cinderhill."

"Shit."

"Yeah, it's really screwed up. My mother was a big reason I came back here. I hoped with some physical distance from my father she would wake from his spell. But it never happened. No matter what I tried, I couldn't get her free from his grip, and now it's too late. She's willing to die for him."

"I'm so sorry, Bailey," Carmen said, her voice choked with emotion. "I haven't had the courage to face my mother again after she and my father sided with my abuser. My mother is

mentally unwell. She burned down my childhood home recently and had been tormenting my sisters. I thought I was the only one she hurt. You're very strong for trying to help her."

Bailey took a deep breath, feeling a glimmer of hope. "Thank you, Carmen," she said softly. "I should have told you sooner what was going on. Obviously, you knew something was wrong, because you sent King."

"King," Carmen said with a sigh. "My intentions were good, I promise. He was in a unique position and seemed like the only option. I wasn't trying to spy on you."

Bailey took a deep breath, attempting to process Carmen's words. "I understand," she accepted. "I know you had to send someone to check on me, and I'm grateful that you did. It's just hard to face the fact that he was only doing his job." She looked down at her hands and picked at a loose string on her sweatshirt. "It felt like we had a connection, and now I don't know what to think."

"I know it's difficult, but please don't blame King for any of this. He was following orders." Carmen was trying to smooth this over, but it didn't hit right.

"That makes it worse. Following orders to pretend to like me and get me to like him back? It's disingenuous."

"I didn't tell him to get close to you," Carmen explains quickly. "That was never part of the plan. If he cares for you, it's because he truly does. I would never put either of you in that position."

"I don't want to be angry with him or you. It's just hard to trust anyone after what happened."

"I might have bungled this whole thing. I'm not Gloria. She always knew how to handle these things. But you can trust me, Bailey. I'm here for you, no matter what. And if King cares for you, I'm sure he'll prove it to you in time."

"Or die trying." Bailey cringed. "I'm worried he's feeling so guilty he's going to take too many risks."

“He talked to me about going back to the camp and getting some evidence. I’m assuming that would be dangerous?”

“Very. Isn’t there anything else we can do?”

“Yes.” Carmen answered just a bit too fast to seem calm. “There is something we can do. Get everyone, including yourself, out of there. Let us help you with that. I can fly you here, in Boston, and we’d have time to properly catch up. I miss you. I miss our talks. Our jokes.”

The nostalgia was a deep pull in her chest but Bailey knew if she left now, Cinderhill would be gone forever. There would be no coming back from what James and his men would do.

“I’m going to stay here and see it through this time. I know it’s dangerous, but I’m a different person now than the last time you helped me leave. A lot of that strength is thanks to you. Now it’s time for me to use it.”

“I understand,” Carmen whispered, clearly disappointed. “I’m working as hard as I can from here to come up with a solution.”

“We are too,” she assured her. “Remember what Gloria always said.” She smiled at the thought and then saddened at the idea that the world had lost such a great woman.

Carmen answered without skipping a beat, “Equal parts persistence and patience always wins.”

“Let’s hope she was right.” Bailey gripped the phone tightly, wishing she was hugging Carmen instead.

“You’ve got this, kid,” Carmen replied through a familiar breathy laugh. It was an old rallying cry she’d always hit Bailey with in her darkest moment. It made sense now, everything was pitch black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

LOU'S CONTROL

King

Standing before Lou, his hands tucked into the pockets of his suit, King listened intently. This was a day like any other. They were in the lounge of the empty restaurant, hours before it opened. The owner, for a little cash on the side, let Lou and his men meet there as often as they liked. It was quiet and Lou felt confident the place wasn't bugged.

"It's got to be today," Lou barked, banging his hand on the already set table and sending the silverware into the air. "You know what happens when a rival family gets a foothold around here. It can be over like that." He snapped his fingers.

"They're hardly rivals," King replied flatly. "They don't have a fraction of our capital and no loyalty within their organization."

"Do you want my mother shot in her sleep?" Lou asked, narrowing his angry eyes. "You've sat at her table every Sunday for years, eating the food she's made you. But you don't care if she's gunned down by these monsters?"

"Of course I care." King sighed. "I thought we were lying low. Arson is a serious charge if we're popped for it. And retaliation. The Carter boys will know it was us who torched their warehouse."

"They'll have nothing to retaliate with. They keep their cash, their guns, and their drugs all in one place like idiots.

They've made it too easy. We need to strike now and take them out before they smarten up."

King had done many jobs for Lou in the past, but something in him had shifted lately. A small voice in the back of his mind, reminding him how screwed up this was. "I don't know, Lou," he said, shaking his head. "It seems reckless."

"What do you care?" Lou asked, eyeing him closely. "You love this shit."

"I do?" King cocked up a brow. For as much as he thought of Lou as family, it was becoming apparent that he didn't really know him at all. Lou was ruthless, but King had excused it away as part of the job. But now he'd seen things get more terrible by the minute.

Lou sneered at King, his eyes glinting with anger. "It's your job. These are the things you do. Don't start turning into a chickenshit on me. You're a hammer, if you turn into something else, I'll have no use for you."

King nodded, knowing Lou meant what he said. If he was no longer of use around here, Lou would have no reason to keep him around.

Lou tossed King the car keys and gestured with his chin for him to leave. He was being dismissed. Because he was nothing more than an employee around here. Even if he wanted to believe otherwise, it had proven true again and again.

Lou sighed, his expression growing less patient. "We have to strike first. We have to protect the people we care about."

"You're the boss," King replied with a sarcastic salute. "I'll call you when it's done."

As King drove to the warehouse, the voice in his head told him that life could be different. Should be different. But he silenced it. There was no path out of this for him, no better place for him to be. Nothing was waiting for him around the bend.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Bailey

The sun rose as it always did, not caring about the darkness that was closing in around Cinderhill. That morning Bailey had slowly opened her eyes and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the fresh air that always made her grateful to be alive. The early morning light filtered through the trees, casting a golden glow on everything around her. She felt the softness of the grass beneath her feet as she walked the field and the coolness of the earth against her skin. This was her home, her sanctuary, the place where she felt most authentic.

But as she gazed around, she could feel the tension in the air. People were moving quickly, packing their humble belongings into bags and crates, grabbing whatever they could carry. She could see the worry etched on their faces, the fear that they might not be able to leave in time. James and his men were coming, and nothing would be the same once they arrived.

Bailey knew that King and Carmen had coordinated with her people to get two buses up there to load everyone up to bring them to a safe location. She'd been on the same journey years ago. The rescue that had plucked her from the place she loved. Now, with this new perspective, as the person who was staying behind, she felt a sense of pride. This time she would fight.

It was infuriating to see people flee. They were right to do so. This was dangerous. The anger rose in her when she considered how unfair it was. The people of Cinderhill couldn't live the way they wanted to in this peaceful spot because the thirst for power always destroyed everything. It was invasive like a weed that choked out the happiness of others. It wasn't fair.

They had worked hard to create this utopia, this perfect little world where everyone had a place and everyone was valued. They had lived in harmony with nature, taking only what they needed and giving back what they could. And yet, here they were, being driven out by a group of men who wanted nothing more than to rule like kings.

Bailey got up and started helping people pack, not wanting to waste any time. She knew that every second counted, that they had to get as many people out as possible before James and his men arrived. She tried to ignore the fear that was gnawing at the pit of her stomach, the fear that they might not make it out in time. She had to stay focused, had to keep moving.

As they finally loaded the buses, Bailey could see the relief on people's faces, the sense of safety that came with knowing they were getting out. She could see the determination in King's eyes, the way he was organizing everything, making sure everyone had a seat, making sure no one was left behind. It was hard to stay mad at him. It was more her embarrassment that kept her from smiling in his direction when they locked eyes. It felt terrible to know everyone was in on something she was left in the dark about. Even if their motives were good, she still felt foolish.

"The buses are loaded," King reported, tossing the last of the bugs into the cargo area under the bus. "Last call."

There were ten people standing by the busses. Some were waving their goodbyes. A couple looked as if they were considering leaving too. They were trying to decide if they'd made the right choice.

“You’re not giving up if you decide to leave.” Bailey encouraged them. “There really isn’t much we can do to fend off James and the others. I don’t want you to think we have some kind of master plan. I want to be transparent.”

Arnoldo chuckled. “Way to rally the troops.”

“It’s more like I’m sanctioning a retreat.” Bailey took a step back and pulled her hair into a ponytail. “I’ve got one last thing to try. Arnoldo, I know you don’t feel like you have many favors to call in, but do you know anyone at the prison who could help me out. It won’t solve all our problems, but it’s something.”

“I’ve got someone there,” Arnoldo said, snapping his fingers.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Bailey asked, turning to King, as close to him as she’d been all morning.

King fished it out of his pocket anxiously, looking happy to be able to do anything that might make Bailey happy.

“What else can I do?” King asked.

“You can hope this works.”

She stepped away from the busses, looking over her shoulder as they began to pull away. It made this last ditch effort seem even more important. She had to see her mother. This was all she had left.

Her mother was shifting uncomfortably as Mrs. Tully helped her sit up a bit. “How is she?” Bailey asked, already knowing the answer. It wasn’t going to be good news.

“The pain seems worse,” Mrs. Tully reported somberly. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

Bailey had the cell phone in her hand and the plan in her head. “Mama, I need you to listen to me for a few minutes.”

“We’ve said it all,” she mumbled.

“There is one person you haven’t heard from. I’m calling him.”

“He can’t have calls,” her mother said, narrowing her eyes. “You can’t call him.”

The line was ringing before she could ask any more questions. The glazed look in her mother’s eyes was replaced by a laser focus.

“Don’t say anything,” Bailey said firmly. She had no idea if her mother would comply but it would be crucial if this was going to happen.

“Hello? I’ve almost forgotten how to use the phone.” Her father’s voice as mostly unchanged. Still a mix of smooth and commanding.

She’d struggled to think of how to address him. It seemed impossible to call him Dad now. “I had to call in favors to arrange this call. You’re not supposed to have contact with the outside world. Yet you must have bribed someone there to get your letters out.”

“I don’t know anything about letters.” He cleared his throat.

“Sure,” Bailey sighed. “No one can deny reality like you.”

“You pulled strings just so you could call and insult me?” There was a bite to his voice that always came before his lashing out. But this time he couldn’t reach her. He couldn’t affect her at all.

“The truth shouldn’t be insulting if you’re living your life right. But this call has a purpose. I wanted to tell you that Mama died. You got what you wanted. She succumbed to the infection that could have been cured with medicine at the hospital.” Bailey raised her hand to silence her mother and shockingly she stays quiet. Maybe she’s curious what Dale will say once she really is dead. She wants a preview of a future she won’t be alive to see.

“If it is the will of the world, then it must happen.” His voice is unemotional and stoic. “She is a martyr.”

“She was a victim,” Bailey corrected. Her father was aware that she had been the one to put him in prison. What he hadn’t ever heard was her openly and deliberately defy him.

To call him out and demean him. “What kind of man lets his wife die just so he can get what he wants. Is there anything weaker than a man who sacrifices his wife for his own gain? Pathetic.”

The silence was a good sign. It wasn't often her father was rendered speechless. That usually meant he was trying to gather a good argument, which meant he saw her as a fair opponent.

“You know nothing of these things,” he finally bit out angrily. “You don't know what it means to be faithful to something larger than yourself.”

“Apparently, it's larger than your love for your wife. And you're such a man of conviction yet you think it's fine to be ordering people around in the woods telling them to cook up drugs. That's suddenly fine? How easy it is to change what you believe when it serves you.”

“Sometimes you can only battle evil with evil.”

“You've got a one liner for every occasion. How clever of you. I'm starting to think allowing Mama to die was all a convenient part of your plan. She was never as committed as you were. Not as strong. She welcomed me back in here after you were gone.”

“She never should have let you back in. It was her weakness.”

“And now she's dead. Another one of your plans that worked out perfectly. Maybe you're smarter than I give you credit for. You really convinced her she would be healed when James came back. Mama was never the smartest, but I thought she'd at least be able to see through that.”

“She shouldn't have let you back in. There is a price to pay for every choice.”

Bailey laughed, making sure the volume was up high enough on speaker phone for her mother to hear. “But she seriously believed it would be some magic cure for them to come back here. What were you going to do when they got here and she didn't get better?”

“It would have resolved itself in time.”

“What does that mean? Do you really need to speak in code. Can’t you ever just say it directly or are you that much of a coward?”

“She would have realized soon enough that her death was unavoidable. By that point, there would have been no fight left in her anyway. You confuse my strategy with cowardice.”

“Strategy. My mother’s death was a moving of a chess piece in your grand plan? What was it about her being alive that was such a threat to you? Were you afraid she’d always hold some bit of loyalty to me.”

“It was only natural. She was your mother. The bond could only be broken one way. Now it is.” The cool indifference with which he delivered these words were like a stake to the heart. Through the entire conversation Bailey had not looked over at her mother for a reaction. She genuinely didn’t know if there would be one. Sometimes even something so obviously terrible could not shake her mother’s loyalty.

As her father continued, she tried to steal a glance at her mother. “You’re out numbered. I’m sure by now your people are fleeing just like you once did. James and his men will be there soon enough to reclaim our holy land. They’ll use your mother’s death as inspiration.”

“Win/win.” Bailey finally turned to her mother and looked at her full on. There would be no turning back now. She would either see it, or find some insane way to spin what she was hearing into something she could still understand.

It was sadly a rush of relief in Bailey’s body as she took in her mother’s expression. Her face was contorted with misery and a realization of the obvious betrayal. Her shaking hand came up to cover her mouth.

“And next they’ll get me out of here,” her father continued, now more bitter in his tone.

“Ha!” Bailey wouldn’t hide her disbelief. “You think they’re going to break you out of prison? They’re hopped up and using that meth you convinced them to make. They robbed

the supplies we had here in Cinderhill and picked over and devoured most of the reserves that a smart man would have rationed. If you've put your faith in those fools, it'll be your downfall."

"They don't matter," he hissed out. "None of them really matter. I don't care what happens to them once I'm out of here. They're weak. A means to an end."

"I've got to go," Bailey said, tuning out whatever her father was threatening next. "I've got to something important to do." She disconnected the call while her father was midsentence. There was a power in silencing him again.

"Don't say it," her mother began, the tears rolling down her cheeks. "You've made your point."

"I'm not saying anything, I'm asking something. Please, let me take you to the hospital. Let them try to save your life."

"What's the point?" Her mother closed her eyes and turned her head. "You need to be here anyway. If you leave now to bring me to the hospital, it will give them the opportunity they are waiting for."

"There is nothing more important to me than you getting to the hospital. Nothing." Bailey had learned a lot from Carmen and Gloria while she was away from this place healing. But by far the most impactful was how you could model the best kind of love even when someone was able or didn't know how to love you back. "I don't care what else is going on right now. You're all that matters."

"He said—"

"I know. I'm sorry you had to hear someone you love and care about say such terrible things about you and your worth. They aren't true. Very little of what he has ever said is true. Your life matters and I want you to live."

"Why?" Her cracked and dry lips barely parted as she spoke. "What have I ever done for you?"

"You let me come back here. I know you could have done more to keep me out. More to hurt me once I was back. You quietly accepted me and let me do what I could for Cinderhill.

Now let me do something for you.” Bailey crossed the small room and took her mother’s hand. “Let me call Dr. Murray. Let me bring you to the hospital.”

She offered back only a barely perceivable nod. It was far from a ringing endorsement of the plan but to Bailey it was a gift that made her tired heart sing. Thinking of the advice Gloria gave her when everything felt lost, Bailey smiled at the thought. “Choosing yourself is the first step toward happiness. You’re on your way.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

King

There was a skip in Bailey's step as she raced over to him and it made his heart skip a beat. Tears clung to her lashes but she looked as though she was relieved.

"My mother is going to the hospital. She's going to get care." She handed King back his phone and sighed with great relief.

"That's incredible." His eyes went wide with disbelief. "How did you pull that off. She was so adamant."

"I called my father and let her hear how terrible he is for herself. He doesn't care about her or what happens. This is all about him. I could have told her that until I was blue in the face, but she needed to hear him say it."

King pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. "I'm so happy for you. How can I help? What do you need?"

"I have to—" She looked down at her shoes. "I'm worried if I don't go with her, she'll change her mind or panic."

"Of course. Go. I'll call Carmen and see if she can arrange the fastest transportation possible. Helicopter maybe."

"What about you?" She asked, drawing in her lower lip and looking up at her. "The people who decided to stay. I can't leave them here. James could be coming any time."

“You’re going.” He planted her hands on her shoulders. “I’ve got things handled here.” It was a lie but one he was determined to make sound convincing. They weren’t out of time yet, but her mother nearly was. That had to take priority. “Can you do me one favor though?”

“Of course,” she answered, without hesitation. The ice was thawing between them. The frost bite damage already done. But it felt as though there was hope.

“Can you convince Mrs. Tully you need her to go with you?” He shot Bailey a knowing look of his underlying meaning. “It’s not that I don’t think she could hold her own here. I’m sure she could.”

“I’m on it,” Bailey said, squeezing his arm as though their secret pact was safe with her. “She’ll be a good comfort to my mother too. But are you sure—”

“Go,” King ordered firmly. “You’re doing the right thing.”

As if he’d personally lifted a boulder off her back she met his gaze, looking lighter and free. She lifted to her tip toes and kissed his cheek. “We should talk when I get back.”

“I’ll be here.” He gripped her hand for another beat and reluctantly let her go. “Good luck.”

“Luck might not be enough. Let’s try for a miracle.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

King

Arnoldo lingered by Mrs. Tully long enough to be conspicuous. King smirked catching Bailey's eye as they both made a mental note of this brewing connection.

When Bailey and her mother were safely away in the ambulance with Mrs. Tully in the front passenger seat Arnoldo walked back over toward King.

"I've got good news," he began but King cut him off.

"Mrs. Tully accepted your wedding proposal?" King couldn't help himself.

"Don't start that," Arnoldo barked, furrowing his thick overgrown brows. "You want to hear what I've got to say or you want to get knocked on your ass?"

"I'll take any good news I can get at this point." King folded his arms across his chest and held his breath for something that might help. Moe walked up looking anxious but staying silent.

"That guy you mentioned, he's going to be the key to all this."

"Who?" Moe asked, his breath catching in his throat. "What guy?"

"Buck Sandveesa," Arnoldo explained. "The guy you said they were all worried about screwing things up. That got me

thinking.”

Moe shook his head. I can assure you Buck Sandveesa is not the key to anything. The only thing you can rely on him for is to blow something up or wreck a car. He’s was a nightmare when he lived here in Cinderhill and if he’s put there using the drugs, they’re making it’ll be ten times worse.”

Arnoldo nodded his agreement. “That’s what I was banking on. A guy like that has a paper trail even when he’s trying to live off the grid. I had someone check him out for me.”

“I thought you didn’t have any more favors to call in,” King challenged, for some reason getting some enjoyment out of messing with Arnoldo. It was hardly the time or place but in a moment like this, what was left to do but have some laughs.

“It wasn’t so much of a favor as it was more an ultimatum based on extortion. I helped a guy out who works in the records department when his daughter was getting mixed up with the wrong people. I bailed her out a couple of times and never said anything. I don’t like squeezing people like that, but desperate times call for desperate measures.”

King could see the conflict on Arnoldo’s face. These situations were delicate and he’d clearly had a lot of emotions tied to the past. It was obviously messy.

Arnoldo went on explaining. “The good news for us, but not for him, is our buddy Buck has two warrants out on him. That in itself isn’t enough to get the cops to give a damn about coming up here. But when I dug deeper, I realized one is for punching an off duty police officer about six months ago.”

Moe still looked unconvinced. “You think the brotherhood of cops will be swayed enough by that? If they were concerned about him, why didn’t they just come up and get him?”

“Buck, for being an idiot, made a point of spreading the word that he left town to move back home with his mom. Obviously, we know better. And it’s not so much the fact that he punched a cop, its which cop. Lenny Smith. He’s the sheriff’s son. If we call the right people, they’ll be up here in a

hurry to get him. If we can get them to stumble upon that trailer it might be enough.” Arnolito slapped his hands together. “We’ve got to move the right levers at just the right time but we can make it happen.”

King chuckled. “Nothing like a common enemy to solve a problem. So all we have to do is sell Buck down the river to the cops.”

Arnolito paced a bit, running his hand over his balding head. “I want to make sure they don’t walk into an ambush. We need to let them know about the cache of weapons they have and how they’re likely tweaking and trigger happy. I might not be very popular with my old department, but I don’t want to see anyone get shot up either.”

“What if I call?” King asked, his mind racing with the possibilities. “I can be a concerned citizen. Let’s take you out of it completely. Unless you think you’ve got some more extortion magic up your sleeve.”

“I don’t know what they’ll think of an outsider but it’s probably better than me trying to strong arm them by threatening to dig up all their skeletons. It’s worth a shot.”

King took his phone out and handed it to Arnolito who punched in a number. When it started ringing, they all fell silent.

“Sherriff’s office.” The voice was distracted and indifferent.

“Uh—yeah hi I need to report something.”

“Who’s speaking?”

“My name is King. I ran out of gas up here by some place called Cinderhill and stumbled on some crazy shit I thought you should know about.”

The silence on the line dragged on.

“Do you know where that is?” King pressed. “It feels like the middle of nowhere. Maybe you haven’t heard of it. “

“Sir, can you tell me more about what’s going on there?” The annoyance remained but he could tell he had their

attention.

“I don’t even know where to start. I stumbled on this weird place and they were nice and all but there is something going on in the woods. I think there are people cooking drugs in some trailer out there. A bunch of guys with guns. They’re kind of a mess.”

Another long pause. “I can take down your concern but we won’t have an officer out that way for a while.”

“There is some guy here bragging about beating up a cop. He said he popped a kid named Lenny Smith and took him down pretty good. His name is Buck, I think. He’s telling anyone who’ll listen how he got the best of the Sherriff’s son. Someone needs to get up here and check these dudes out.”

“Buck Sanveesa?”

Now he had their attention.

“Yeah, I think that’s what they said his name is. He’s up here in a trailer cooking meth and shooting guns off. If you come up here, I’d be ready for a shoot-out. They’re nuts.”

“Do you have a location?”

“I can send you my current location if that helps. These guys were talking crazy. I heard Buck say he was going to finish that Lenny guy up for good next time he saw him. It seemed like he really meant it.”

“I—uh, hang on for me. I’m going to get some more information. We can get someone up there today.”

“I don’t know if I’d send just one or two people. I think these guys plan to go out in a blaze of glory. They are definitely a cult or something. You don’t want to mess with them.”

“Trust me, we are aware of them and what they’re capable of. You’re sure Buck is up there?”

“Positive,” King asserted. “He’s a nut. Totally destructive and obviously he’s got a hand in the drugs their making. There’s more than a dozen guys up here. I think they might be

planning some kind of take over. A hostile one. Are you going to do anything about it?"

"We will," the man asserted. "Buck is a wanted man here. If you're certain he's up there—"

"Positive. But how long before you think you could send some people up? I'm stranded here. As a reporter I'm really ___"

"Reporter?" The man sounded highly concerned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not doing a story or anything," King said, shooting Moe a funny look. "I was just heading through but these guys are clearly from some kind of cult or—"

"We'll have someone up there right away." The man was rushed and whispering things to someone on his end of the line with some urgency. "Just get me the coordinates of their camp and then steer clear of there. Trust me, we're on it. There is no story there. It's a police matter."

"As long as you're going to handle it, I don't see any reason for me to stick around. I've got gas in my car now, I'll just be moving on."

"It'll be handled."

The end to the call was abrupt. Just the exchanging of some map coordinates and some basic information that might help the police. King wanted to believe it had been enough but he looked to Arnoldo for some kind of reassurance.

"They'll all be talking," he said with a nod. "Every cop on duty will want to be the one to bring Buck in. I think this will do it."

"And what do we do?" Moe asked, looking around at the now abandoned Cinderhill. "Do we just wait around and see what happens?"

Arnoldo sighed. "I guess we settle in and wait. We have to have faith that the timing works out. The cops need to roll up on them, before they roll up on us."

“I don’t have that kind of patience,” King explained. “I don’t want to sit here with the last few people in Cinderhill like sitting ducks. We need to be on the defensive here. Just in case,”

“I like it.” Moe grinned. “Some war games?”

“Something like that.” King looked around and realized just how vulnerable Cinderhill really was. James and his men could do a lot of damage before the police came. He thought back to the strategy that had gotten them this far. “We need to go on the offense. We can’t let them come here and tear up the place or have a shoot-out with the cops. Whatever happens needs to be at their camp.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” Arnaldo groaned. “How exactly do you expect to make that happen?”

“Mrs. Tully is a pretty good judge of things and she called me a fool. I say, I can make that work. I’ll go to their camp and pretend to try to make some deal. Stall them until the police get up there.”

“And how exactly do you intended to get out of there when shit goes down?” Arnaldo clearly didn’t like this plan. “They aren’t going to discriminate when they roll in there and I doubt you’ll get time to explain.”

“I can handle that. You two stay here and keep an eye out.”

Surprisingly it was Moe who spoke up first. “Like hell. We’ll have your back there. They won’t see us but we’ll keep an eye on you. I know these guys. I’ll be able to tell if they’re about to lose it.”

Arnaldo agreed. “And if the cops do come in there, we can see them coming and give you some kind of signal to get the hell out of there.”

“Fine, but I want to be sure Bailey has something to come back to. That’s my priority.”

Moe chuckled. “Trying to win her back by any means necessary. Impressive.”

“I blew it before I ever really had her, so I’m not sure I can call it winning her back.”

“Oh please,” Moe said with a wave. “I’ve known that girl a lot of her life. She was all in on you. Still is. Just don’t get yourself killed out there and you’ll get her back.”

“They might shoot you on sight,” Arnaldo said grimly. “You understand that right? You’re crazy to just walk in there.”

“Sometimes the only way to deal with crazy people is to act like them. This is the right move, I’m sure of it. I’ve got to call Carmen first, but then we head out.”

“Can you shoot?” Arnaldo asked Moe gesturing for him to follow toward where he had his weapons.

“Hunted all my life,” Moe answered with pride. “I could hit a running squirrel from a good clip away. I’m a little rusty but let me see what you’ve got over there.”

When King was alone, he drew in a deep breath and called Carmen. He never imagined when he first arrived that this would be how things might turn out.

“King, tell you me you have a good update.” Carmen was breathless as if she’d been staring at her phone waiting for it to ring. “Did the busses work out? I haven’t gotten confirmation that they’ve arrived at the location I’d set up for them.”

“They were perfect this morning. We couldn’t have gotten that many people out without your help. Other updates are positive too. Bailey was able to convince her mother to go to the hospital for what we hope will be lifesaving care. Arnaldo found out one of the men with James has warrants for assaulting a police officer and I called in a tip about it that should hopefully get the cops up here.”

“Really? That’s all amazing. How did you pull that off?”

“It wasn’t really me at all. Everyone else was able to get things done. Now I’m just heading into the camp in the woods to stall and distract them so whatever goes down with the cops happens there and not here in Cinderhill.”

“Wait, that seems...” she trailed off. “If Bailey is safe, maybe you should just leave too. Let everything else go down however it will. You’ve done more than enough. The job is over.”

“I know it is, but I need to make sure Bailey has a place to come home to that’s not marred by another terrible thing. I’ll be fine.”

“This is outside what we discussed originally. I don’t feel comfortable with you taking on the additional risk.”

“It’s not on you. This is something I need to do. Whatever happens, just please make sure Bailey knows that I’m sorry I lied to her. Promise me that.”

“King, I know Bailey well. She won’t need you to die for her in order to make amends. Maybe your past has you twisted up in the idea that the only way to be loyal to someone is to have your life on the line, but that’s not the case.”

“This place, unfortunately, has had me looking damn hard at my past. I didn’t think I had anything in common with people in a cult. But then I started to realize we weren’t so different. I was under the impression everything I’d done in my life for Lou was some act of loyalty and the paying off of a debt. But really I was just a pawn in his game. I’ve learned some things about myself out here.”

“Then take the lessons and find the peace. You don’t have to do this.”

“Thank you for trusting me with Bailey. I know that was a risk. I was an unknown, with lots of baggage, but coming here changed me for the better.”

“King—”

He disconnected the call, knowing they wouldn’t agree on his next move. Carmen was probably right. It was foolish but important. Those two things could be true. He looked back at Arnaldo and Moe, chuckling that this would be his back up. These two old men with shaky hands and their prime well behind them. And yet he couldn’t think of two better people he’d want watching his back right now.

“Let’s roll out,” he called waving for them to gear up.
“We’ve got to go be fools for a while.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

King

The camp looked even worse in the light of day. There is trash strewn everywhere that the men just step over as if they don't see it. The structures they use as shelters are barely standing up. Men hustle around packing up bags and grumbling angrily at each other.

"Hey," King calls as he steps out from the woods with his hands disarmingly high in the air. "I'm looking for James."

"Who the hell are you?" Multiple unkempt angry looking men ask in unison.

"My name is King. I'm here to talk with James about Cinderhill. I'm obviously outnumbered here. I'm not looking for a fight. I'm looking to make a deal."

James stepped forward and eyed him nervously. He wore a ragged fur trimmed coat and worn out leather boots that had both seen better days. His beard, like most the other men was unkempt and as wild as his tangled hair. He moved with unease, as if he were in some kind of pain. There was no doubt this was a difficult life and surely, they were tired of living it.

"What do you want?" James had a voice that sounded like gravel crunching under foot.

"I'm here to negotiate. Make a deal. No one in Cinderhill is looking for a fight. They want peace. I'm here to broker it."

“Peace,” James scoffed. “We were driven from our holy land. Forced to live like dogs out here. Waiting. Waiting. Just hanging on for a sign and it’s finally come. You can’t stop us from reclaiming our destiny.”

“Living out here must be hell,” King began, slowly lowering his hands. “And I talked to Dale. I have to admit, he’s sending a lot of mixed messages.”

“You talked to him?” James lunged forward, narrowing his eyes in disbelief. “We can’t talk to him. It’s just letters. And those hardly come anymore.”

“I had a way to make a phone call to him. There were questions I wanted answered. I know all about what he teaches and what you believe. But then why would he have you creating that poison out in the trailer. You’re risking everything to make drugs when he himself has preached so much about how much of a danger they are. Look at what it’s done to some of your best men. They’re using aren’t they James.”

“I, uh—”

“It’s made them weak and sloppy. But they can get help before it’s too late. Dale wasn’t even making sense when I talked to him.” King was trying to keep his best poker face. He hadn’t talked to Dale but the call Bailey had with him was obviously profound. “Even his wife has found too many holes in what he’s saying. She went to the hospital this morning. Against his directive, she’s getting care for herself. I know it’s hard to believe but sometimes power can corrupt even righteous men. Dale is not immune to that.”

“He’s a savior,” James shouted back. “He is immune.”

“No one should live like you have out here. And Cinderhill isn’t some place to just move the mess you have created here. You have to know it will be a poison that destroys the land you think is holy. I’m asking you, if anyone here has doubts about Dale please come with me. You’ve given your time, your lives, you’re risking your freedom for him. He doesn’t care what happens to you. If you are ready to stop this madness, then come with me.”

“Where?” A curious voice shouted from the back of the camp. “What is there for us if we leave here?”

“Help,” King called back loudly. “You’re in something very deep but there is a way out. I know people who can help you get your lives back. Break free of the garbage Dale has been making you do all these years. There is a better life than this.”

James boomed. “Our better life is at Cinderhill, waiting for us.”

“It’s all going to follow you.” King shook his head. “Do you think Dale is going to stop asking you to risk your lives and your freedom? No. He’s going to want you to use Cinderhill to do more things that put you at risk. It’s not over until he’s free from jail and wealthy with drug money. All of that is going to come at the cost of your lives, and he doesn’t care.”

“We can’t get him out of prison,” someone said, sounding confused.

“It’s part of his master plan,” King explained. “At some point, he’ll call on all of you to risk your lives to get him out. There will be no peace for any of you until that happens.”

“Where will we go?” A muscular man with tired looking eyes dropped the pack from his shoulder and shuffled forward. “If we leave here, where can we go?”

“I can work all that out for you, but you have to be ready to leave this behind. You have to be open to breaking the spell. Bailey did. She grew up under Dale’s control. Many of you likely saw what he did to her over the years. She survived that, stood up to him, and broke the spell. Her life is better for it and yours can be too.”

James spat at King’s feet. “She’s a non-believer.”

“She’s a survivor,” King corrected, knowing he was risking a lot to make this distinction. “And everyone here has the chance at living a better life if they want to.”

“I want to,” a voice called. Then another in agreement until there were five or six men coming forward.

“Stay where you are,” James said, pulling his holstered gun out and pointing it at the men. “You cowards. You’re not leaving.”

“James,” King said gently. “If they don’t truly believe then you don’t want them here anyway, right? Let them go.”

James hit the butt of the gun to his head as if he were struggling to make sense of it all. “We are faithful,” he grunted through clenched teeth.

“Then stay here, but these men are leaving with me.” King gestured for the men to head up the hill where Arnoldo and Moe were perched. “Anyone else who is ready to put this chaos and pain behind them can come.”

“No,” James said turning toward the rest of the men and waving the gun around. “No one else wants to go. We are faithful.”

Shifting eyes and worried looks passed between the remaining men as the five deserters fled cautiously yet quickly up the hill.

“There’s nothing waiting for you but more trouble. It won’t come from Cinderhill. You know they aren’t strong enough to keep you out. But it is coming. Now is your last chance to pick a better life and get help.”

Three more men skittered wildly by James and up the hill. The rest looked either resigned to stay or as committed as James was. One of those men was Buck. He looked just as hapless and dumb as his reputation indicated.

“You’re not leaving,” James said, pointing the gun at King. “You’re staying until we go to Cinderhill. You’re their hero, right? Then we’ll march you in there and shoot you down right in front of them.”

“James, I’m telling you, this is all going to end terribly.”

“For you,” James bit back.

“For all of us,” King agreed. “And it doesn’t have to.”

King felt his phone vibrate in his pocket twice. That was the sign. Arnoldo was alerting him that the cops were coming.

Shit was about to go down.

“I’m walking out of here,” King said firmly.

“No,” James screamed, his hand shaking with adrenaline and fear. “You’re not going anywhere.”

The next ten seconds were a blur. A swarm of police with guns drawn descended wildly on the camp. They barked orders and demanded the men put their hands up and lay on the ground. All complied except James who still had the gun raised and pointed directly at King.

“Drop the weapon,” an officer shouted but James had a look of revolution on his face. As though this were going to be his big moment. Judging by the look in his eyes, shooting King would be worth the bullet he’d catch from the cop’s gun.

“Don’t do this James,” King demanded. “Dale is not worth dying for.”

“You don’t understand,” James said, a tear born from anger streaming down his dirt covered cheek. “I don’t die. I am faithful. I live forever.”

“What if he’s wrong, that’s a big gamble.” King kept his hands raised.

“Drop the weapon,” the officer shouted again.

King could see himself in James in a way he hated to admit. This blind loyalty was so toxic and consuming. He watched James lift the gun higher, pointing it at King’s head and everything flashed before his eyes. The people he loved. The things he’d done in the name of loyalty. All of it. Lou stabbing him. Bailey kissing him. It was all there before his eyes.

When the pop rang out, he dove to the side and waited for the pain, but all he felt was his recently healed shoulder hitting the ground. Opening his eyes and trying to focus, he saw James go down. A bullet from the officer had taken him out.

There was commotion. Hand cuffs. Some men resisting arrest, then dejectedly giving up. Arnaldo came down from the hill and King sat on the ground watching him explain. Pointing

toward the trailer deeper in the woods. Then gesturing up to the men at the top of the hill who'd walked away peacefully and needed to be talked to.

It was Moe who came to King first, extending a hand to lift him up to his feet, though he didn't really have the strength for that.

"This could have been worse," Moe sighed, slapping King's back.

"Damn," King groaned. "I dislocated my shoulder hitting the ground."

"Better than a bullet between the eyes."

"Can you believe this all came down to some idiot named Buck who just pissed off the wrong cop?" King chuckled as he shifted his shoulder, trying unsuccessfully to get it into a comfortable position.

"You need to call Bailey," Arnoldo said as he came over to check on King. "She'll be out of her mind with worry."

"She'll see me soon enough," King said, pointing to his shoulder. "We can have a date at the hospital while I get my shoulder popped back into place."

"Romantic," Arnoldo teased. "I'll drive you. If you're looking for an update, these guys still hate me and I need to get off the scene."

Moe laughed. "You sure know how to make enemies. Hopefully you make some friends in Cinderhill. I know one person who's glad to make you a pot of soup anytime you want it."

"I can't live out here," Arnoldo answered. "I was only coming out here to make sure everyone was all right. You wouldn't want me living in Cinderhill."

King shook his head. "I don't think Mrs. Tully is going to let you leave without a fight. And if I had to put my money on either of you in some hand to hand combat, I'm betting on her."

EPILOGUE

Bailey

He could only wrap one arm around her while wearing the sling for his shoulder but it was still good to be back in his grip. King had risked his life well beyond any job he'd been given and she couldn't thank him enough for that.

"I can't believe we have a shot at a fresh start in Cinderhill," Bailey said, talking only of the people who lived there and not King specifically. She wanted to see if he included himself in that.

"Think of all the ways you can build on what you already have when you don't need to worry about your father or any looming threat out in the darkness. It's going to be amazing."

"Where is Carmen sending you next?" Bailey asked, stepping out from under his arm and trying to look busy as she filled her basket with fresh tomatoes. Her mother would be coming home next week if all went well and she wanted to make her favorite sauce for when she was back and ready to build her strength back up.

"She called this morning. I need to call her back. She didn't leave a message." There was a worried look on his face as though he was unsure what his future held. This dilemma seemed insurmountable. Bailey finally had Cinderhill on the path to what it once was. King was likely ready to return to city life or back to some job Carmen would put him on next.

They had no feasible shot at a future together. It was better to bite the bullet now than to drag this out.

“Can you call her now? I’d love to let her know the latest here and tell her all the things I have planned.”

King smiled warmly and dialed Carmen.

“There’s the idiot,” Carmen sighed.

“I’m not loving this nickname,” King shot back. “I was being brave, not stupid.”

“There is such a fine line,” Bailey interrupted. “Hey Carmen. Thank you again for all you did to help everyone here. If there is ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“I’m so glad it worked out and you’re safe. I have really high hopes for the future of Cinderhill. It feels early to call in a favor already but I have something urgent that I need help with.”

Bailey touched King’s arm gently. “I figured King would be in high demand after such a successful job. Where are you sending him next?”

“Nowhere,” Carmen replied somberly. “I was hoping he could stay there. We have a client who is being relentlessly stalked. She’s high profile. An actress. You’ll know her work. She’s tried everything to break free of this stalker or even figure out who they are. This is an incredibly volatile situation and she’s in grave danger if she doesn’t leave immediately.”

Bailey looked up at King. “Wait you want to send a famous actress to Cinderhill? She’ll hate it here.”

“I need her as far off the grid as possible. This is not some creepy stalker who’s just obsessed with her on screen persona. It’s something much larger than that. I need to find out who is behind the threats to her and while that work is being done, she needs to disappear.”

King nodded and smiled down at Bailey. “I’m happy to stay here and help any way I can. Is she going to travel with your team and when would she arrive?”

“I’m very worried there is some deep conspiracy involved here. She’s spoken out about a church she used to be a part of and this could potentially be tied in. I’ve got to send her with someone I can fully trust. Thank goodness there are so many O’Malley brothers.” She laughed quietly. “I’ll send you both the information I can and any details that might help. But expect two new guests soon. She’s shell shocked and while Cinderhill will be a big culture shock for her, I think it’s the best option.”

“We’re on it,” King said, beaming with relief. “We’ll wait to hear more from you soon.”

When the call ended, they stood staring at each other for a long moment.

“You’re staying,” she whispered, tears forming in her eyes. “I’m really happy that—”

He didn’t wait another second, his lips crushing down on hers, his uninjured arm tugging her body close. The kiss lasted an eternity, all the pent up fear and anticipation flowing through their lips.

“I’m so sorry I lied,” King finally whispered breathlessly as they parted. “I will never lie to you again.”

“I hope not, because I can’t live with someone I love lying to me. It’s too painful.”

The word love didn’t stick to her lips or come out clunky. Her cheeks didn’t pink with embarrassment. She meant it. Every syllable.

“I love you too,” he said, his lips parting into a wide smile as he pulled off the sling on his shoulder and lifted her off the ground.

“You’re arm,” she said with concern. “You’re hurt. Don’t take that off.”

“You make me feel super human. There’s no pain when I’m with you.”

“Where are we going?” She giggled as he tickled her side and kissed at her neck.

“We’re going to bed,” he teased.

“It’s the middle of the morning.” She smiled and looked into his hungry eyes.

“Good. That means I have all day with you.”

“There is so much work to be done. We have to—”

“We’ll be working up a sweat don’t worry.”

“King, what about all the work to be done here?” She gestured around but prayed he’d ignore her protests.

“It’ll all be here. The work isn’t going anywhere and neither am I. Remember, I won the bet. I’m cashing in on my date right now.”

“I guess it’s only fair,” she whispered into his ear as he held her tighter. “A bet is a bet.”

“I say we need a new one. This time I think I can stay here forever.”

“Ok,” she replied with a nod. “And I’m betting on us this time.”

“Oh, but some things need to change. We’re getting hot showers and I need a radio to listen to some baseball games on. And pizza. I can’t live without pizza. Have you even had sushi?”

“King, I’m not a prisoner here. We can go places. Do things. Now that Cinderhill is safe, I don’t feel like my every waking minute needs to be spent protecting it. We can be here sometimes and travel other times. We can make this work.”

“And the hot showers?”

“Consider it done.” She sealed it with a kiss and could see a future in his eyes that hadn’t existed before now.

He bit his lip and looked mischievously at her. “If I ever let you out of bed, we’re going out for pizza tonight.”

“Celebratory pizza. Done.”

They laughed and kissed as they moved as one down the paths of Cinderhill. He would have his pizza. She would have

the place she loved with the man she loved. And maybe they'd even be able to help Carmen. Even the scales. Pay the debt.

There was hope in the air at Cinderhill and she breathed it in deeply. For the first time in a long time, tomorrow could be better than today. And the company wasn't too bad either.

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