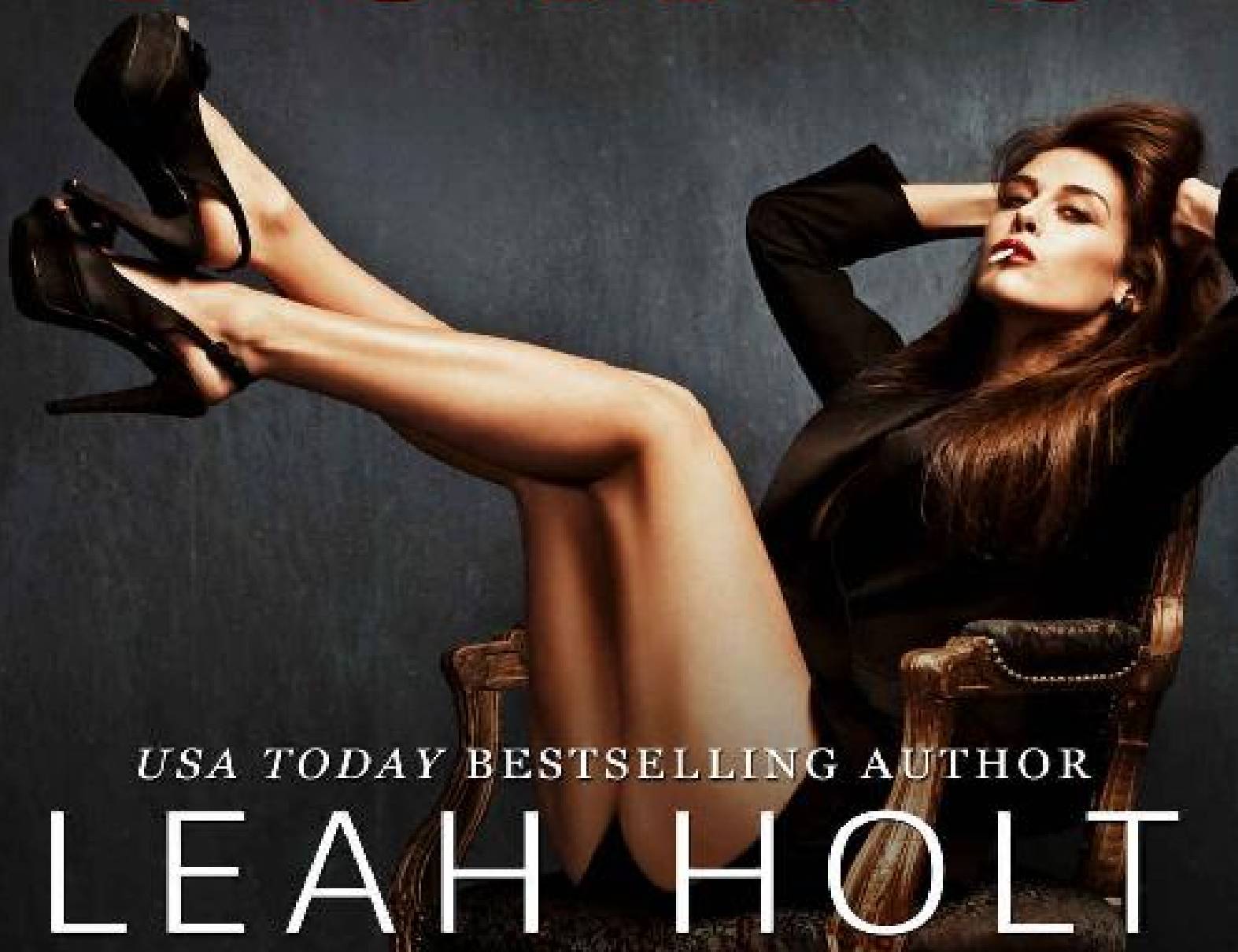


REVENGE

IS BEST SERVED
IN A PAIR OF

BLACK PUMPS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEAH HOLT

**REVENGE IS
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IN A PAIR OF BLACK
PUMPS**

Leah Holt

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MAN SEEKING WOMAN

BOUND

KING

Chapter One

Dove

Cool air swirled around my calves, rounding my thighs and crawling across my belly. It was a taunting breeze, like thin nails in the darkness teasing you with fear. Or when it felt like someone was watching you, and the hair on the back of your neck stood up. Most of the time, that feeling meant nothing. No monsters coming for you. No eyes were spying from a distance. It was just your imagination.

But what happened when it was real? When it wasn't just your mind playing tricks on you? When it *was* the monster that haunted you?

I shivered instantly, causing the man to laugh. His laugh, throaty and low, was far too genuine. It turned my stomach, forcing vomit to bubble up in the back of my throat and my stomach to clench tight. Every piece of my body was trembling. Like I was standing on a block of ice in the middle of the Arctic ocean. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop my muscles from quivering. They kept coming, each wave stronger and more intense than the last.

I was trying so damn hard to pretend like I was someplace else. A deserted island, a quiet park in the countryside, in the woods, standing between a million trees, listening to the leaves as they rustled and the birds flutter among thin branches.

But you are here.

He ran his finger up the outside of my arm, moving it over my shoulder and across my neck. He was feeling, exploring, searching for the thick vein under the skin that could prove to him I was alive. The pads of his first two fingers pressed against me so forcefully I could feel his heart beating through his fingertips. It was fierce. It was powerful. It was the starving heart of a predator ready to clamp giant fangs into my warm flesh.

“Are you afraid?” he asked with his lips against my ear. The prickly hairs of his mustache scraped the shell of my ear,

sending another wave of shivers that sliced me open from head to toe.

I turned my face away and closed my eyes. I didn't answer. I couldn't, even though my tongue swelled with words, and the muscles in my throat strangled tight, ready and eager to scream at him to get away from me. Yet, I was silent as a mouse. My voice was lost to the sick, disgusting feeling flowing through me.

"No," he said, his voice a hiss in my ear. "That's not fear. You can't fear what you asked for. Can you?" His fingers pressed deeper against the vein in my neck as his thumb stroked the curve of my jaw back and forth.

I pinched my eyes shut tighter, demanding my brain alter my reality and save me. Sadly, it didn't. It didn't transform my reality into something better, something wholesome, something beautiful. Leon's acrid cologne still held me hostage. His firm grip and hot breathing kept me from escaping. His body was placed between me and the exit.

I'm going to throw up.

I floated my eyes up to the ceiling, trying my best to not let them drift to his face. My lip shook as he kept touching me with the prowess of beastly need. *Just get it over with.*

The sooner he was done, the sooner I could call us even and get the hell out of there. I'd be able to run away and pretend like it never happened at all. I'd finally be able to move on with my life and call my debt paid.

I was stupid to take him up on his offer from the beginning. Then again, I was also desperate. Desperation led to poor choices. I let desperation push me into his hands. My options were limited, and time was running out. He opened a new door that seemed answer all my problems.

Usually, something too good to be true is just that. It was a mirage. A palm meadow in a desert with glistening water and cool shade. It never existed, but I saw what I wanted to see.

He scraped the rough pad of his thumb across my bottom lip as he exhaled against the side of my face. His breath reeked of whiskey, curdling my stomach like sour milk. I fucked up big time, and this was how I thought I could fix it. I wasn't there by choice. The only other option was death. Sex was better than being buried six feet under. At least, that's what I was trying to convince myself of.

It was crazy how life issues could help excuse your actions. I didn't see any other way out of my debt to him. I didn't know how to handle the situation I had gotten myself into. That wasn't how I pictured repaying Leon what I owed him. Not once did I think taking his money would turn me into his prostitute for the evening. The torment he had been putting me through needed to end. The death threats, the constant

surprises from his men showing up wherever I was, the people following me, the phone calls, the little notes; it had to stop.

This is how I stop it. It ends here and now.

The tips of his fingers drifted down between my breasts. He popped one button open at a time on my blouse. He was moving painstakingly slowly and was enjoying it far too much. I could feel the paltry smile on his face and the boreal coolness of his eyes as he watched me recoil from his touch.

“You’re trembling, Dove. Stop it.” His voice was husky, and for the first time, I felt the full force of the devil in his hands. He grabbed the outside of my cheeks, burrowing the small edges of his dirty fingernails into my skin. He forced my eyes to his. “You did this to yourself. Don’t act like you’re the victim here. We both know you came to me first. I didn’t put this on you. *You did.*”

His fingers pierced my skin, digging in so hard he pushed the meaty flesh of my cheeks into the bones beneath. I darted my eyes between his and saw nothing. They were empty and hollow, just two giant glass orbs. He didn’t care that he was taking something from me that I didn’t want to give. He didn’t care if tears were streaming down my face and my mascara was seeping black blood.

My body shook more violently as he brought his lips closer to mine. My heart started pounding so hard it hurt. Everything hurt, from my brain to the nerves in the tips of my toes. I wanted to run away. My legs itched to take off into a full sprint, but there was no way I would make it to the door before he caught me.

“Tell me, Dove. Do you think I should fuck you hard or soft?” He tilted his head slightly, a sick smirk spreading across his face. “Should I fuck you until your cunt bleeds? Maybe I should fuck you so hard I split that little piece of skin between your ass and your pussy?” He licked my lips and used his free hand to cup my mound. “What do you think?” he asked.

I slammed my legs shut on reflex, refusing to let him go further. “Stop. I’m done. I can’t do this,” I said quietly, my

words all mushed together from his grip on my cheeks. “I’ll find another way to get you your money.”

“It’s a little late for that now, isn’t it? You should have thought about that before you stole from me.” Leon released my face with a hard shove. His hand slid to my throat and squeezed hard, cutting off the air. “A debt is a debt, you fucking whore, and no debt goes unpaid. That’s called stealing. Are you a thief, Dove? A dirty, rotten little thief?”

I shook my head as I inhaled the tiniest trickles of air and gasped for a single breath. I tried to pull his hand away, clawing and tugging at his fingers, but it was no use. Leon stood up, raising me in the air with him.

His free hand tore at the buckle on his pants as he growled, “Fucking bitch. Trying to skip out on me again. You can’t fucking pay me; you never could fucking pay me. I was a fool for helping you to begin with. We’ve been down this road before, and I’m sick of it. I’m getting what you owe me one way or another. And if you won’t give it to me willingly, I’ll just fucking take it. I don’t need your permission. I fucking own you.”

My feet were almost dangling in the air. The very tips of my toes loosely grazed the floor. Leon took a few decisive steps forward and slammed my back against the wall. The room was starting to turn purple as I went in and out of an oxygen-deprived haze. I couldn’t breathe. I could barely feel my lips anymore, and my eyes started to bulging from the sockets.

My lungs burned for air. It was like I was being poked with hot needles as the pain surged through my body. I was barely gasping anymore, it was more of a shallow hiccup, but he still wouldn’t ease his grip.

His pants fell off his thin, wrinkly hips down to his ankles. His belt was dangling, the metal buckle scraping the floor. It scratched like nails against a chalkboard, back and forth and back and forth as it swayed across the wood.

I had never seen true evil before... *until right now.*

Leon was the devil in the form of a man. He had come from hell to torture me. To hang me like meat from his ceiling until I've rotted away and had no strength left to fight anymore. He wanted to kill me. Even if that wasn't his intention, the blackness of his eyes said my death would be a bonus after he violated me for punishment and payment of my debt to him.

I kicked my legs, but he dodged them easily. I clawed at his wrist and swatted at his face. I missed. The more I fought, forced the last bits of oxygen to be used up, and the world started to fade away. My eyes glazed over with tears that burned like acid.

"Please stop." I mouthed the words, but it only seemed to enrage him more.

His fingers tightened, and his lips folded down into a stern scowl. Snarling, he ripped my skirt off and tossed it away as simply as if he was throwing away trash. His eyes glistened like fire, and his fingers singed my skin like hot iron. With his free hand, Leon split my blouse in half and severed my bra in the center as if it was made of paper.

His nostrils flared, and he bared his teeth as he said, "You're mine now."

Leon released my throat. I dropped to the ground, my legs weak and shaky as a panic-fueled inhale filled my lungs. All I could do was just breathe. I didn't run when I should have. I didn't fight when I could have. I just embraced the cool, crisp air that began to spill into my lungs.

Clutching my chest, I coughed and wheezed as everything else around me was on mute. It didn't last long; the single moment of freedom was gone in a split second.

He grabbed me by the hair in one quick swoop, yanked me to my feet, and flipped me around, crushing my face against the wall. He moved me like I was a plastic doll that weighed nothing. His thick, knobby fingers clamped my neck from behind as his other hand held me around the waist. He pushed me down by the neck, skinning my cheek as it scraped the wall.

“Please, I can’t do this. Please, don’t do this. I can pay you another way. Let’s just talk about this. We can figure something out.” I said anything I could to get him to reconsider. “You don’t want to be this man. You’re respected. Doing this will only hurt your reputation.”

Leon let out a hearty laugh. “My reputation. Unfortunately for you, I’m owning up to my reputation right now.” His fingers pinned me in place against the wall. “You had your chance, and you fucked up big time.” He licked his palm, smearing it up between the folds of my mound. “Can’t go in dry, but I’ll work you up soon enough. You’ll love my cock once it’s inside you. All the girls do, even those who don’t want to end up screaming my name.” His mouth made an audible wet sound from the spit on his lips as he smacked them together and smeared a second layer of saliva on my body.

Tears fell from my eyes. I was sobbing, my words no longer words at all. Everything I tried to say came out as gibberish. He thrust forward hard. The pain was so intense as he ripped me open rashly. As he pumped his hips, I felt the warm trickle of blood slipping down my legs.

Another crushing zap of pain exploded as my sex tore at the seams. The blood kept trickling until my ankles were damp, and the floor beneath my feet became slippery and wet. Leon didn’t care that he was hurting me. He didn’t care that there was no pleasure in this for me. As he thrashed against me from behind, he grabbed my throat and squeezed, constricting my breathing again.

That was it. My body reacted the only way it could to try and save me. My brain shut down, forcing everything around me to go black. And I welcomed that blackness in. I gladly accepted the silence of unconsciousness over the knowledge of what he was doing to me. I’d happily take my dreams over my reality. That blackness was worth more than any bit of light. In the darkness of my mind, I wasn’t there with Leon anymore.

“Wake up,” he said, slapping my face. The sting of his palm on my cheek caused my eyes to open. “Wake the fuck up, whore.”

I blinked my eyes open gently as my brain returned to the nightmare my body had been living in. I was aching all over. My throat was tight, and it burned when I swallowed. My chest and lungs felt like I had just been drowning. I couldn't move freely as every slight motion sent an electrical shock to the nerves.

"Get up," he demanded, grabbing me by my hair and lifting me to my feet.

As I stood, my legs wobbled, and my knees kept trying to buckle beneath my weight. There was an intense pain between my thighs as I stepped forward. I was still trying to process what had happened. I was in that weird state of sleep and consciousness where your dreams and reality merged into one. I couldn't remember what was real and what was imaginary.

I was naked with blood smeared on the inside of my legs and dried streaks that went to my feet. There were bruises spotting my body like cheetah spots, and my muscles ached to the bone.

Leon grabbed a t-shirt off his floor and stuffed it against my chest. I grabbed it instinctively, holding it tight. He walked me to a door, and I exhaled a sigh of relief. He was sending me home. My debt was paid.

Thank god. It's over. It's all over.

As he opened the door, all I saw was pitch black inside. Squinting, I tried to see through the darkness. There were no streetlights or stars in the sky. No moon overhead or headlights in the distance. I couldn't hear the sound of cars or crickets.

"In you go," he said, giving me a hard shove forward.

I stumbled, falling to my knees. "Wait, what's going on?" I asked. "My debt is paid. I can go home now. I did what you wanted me to do."

"Did you honestly think that this would make us equal? I'm not done with you yet. This is just the beginning, Dove." He grinned as he held the door in his hand. "You might as well get cozy in there. But don't worry, I'll make sure no one

comes looking for you. The last thing I need is more cops on my back.”

“*Wait, what?* No, this was the deal. I did what you asked. I repaid you. You have to let me go!” I screamed a raspy, cracking scream. My throat was so dry and swollen I could only force my voice out so much.

“I don’t have to do anything.” He let out a thick and gritty laugh as he tipped his head back like I had just told a joke. “Dove, you simple-minded whore. You’re not done yet. Far from it, actually. Did you really think one fuck would be enough? You’re no Marilyn Monroe, sweetheart. You took from me. Now, it’s my turn to take from you. I’ll decide when you’re all paid up.”

I climbed to my feet on trembling legs and attempted to run out, but he shoved me back effortlessly, and I crumbled into a heap on the floor. I had no strength to fight him.

Leon slammed the door shut. The sound of locks being turned on the outside stopped my heart in my chest. “Sleep tight. I’ll see you soon enough,” he said through the thick oak sheath.

I should have never gotten involved with a man like him. I should have listened to the warnings. I should have taken all of it more seriously. I should have known better than to think taking his offer was the answer to my problem.

Now, he had changed the rules, and there was nothing I could do to stop him. Sitting in complete darkness, I hugged my knees and cried.

I’m his captive...

What the fuck did I do?

Chapter Two

Dove

Darkness. It was the darkness you see when you sleep, and there were no dreams. It was all-consuming. There was a faint trickle of light creeping in from under the door, but it wasn't enough to stop the shadows from turning into monsters. I was living in the deepest depths of the ocean. The sheer weight of obscurity was suffocating and killing me slowly.

I had no idea how long Leon planned on keeping me; or if he even planned on letting me go at all. I kept telling myself that he'd set me free. He couldn't keep me forever. My mother would only take my absence for so long before she started asking questions.

Eventually, she'd come looking for me. She'd start to worry because I was never gone longer than a day without at least calling her to check in and see how she was feeling. I doubted she'd go more than two days before calling the police, frantic and wanting to start an all-out search party with the national guard and as many volunteers as she could.

My eyes had adjusted in the twilight; I could see my fingers in front of my face. I wiggled them gently, barely catching the outline between the little glittering stars in my eyes from rubbing them. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

I curled against the back wall, watching the faint light under the door. I was in an empty room. There was a dirt floor beneath me and cement walls around me. He had graced me with a metal bowl for water like an owner provided for their dog.

I mindlessly reached out my hand and traced the rim slowly, dipping my fingers inside and feeling the icy water. *Why would he have a room like this? What purpose did the room serve?* It wasn't a closet or a utility room. It was more of a cell than anything else.

Then it hit me. The room was to keep women like me prisoner. Women who he thought stole from him. Women who he felt betrayed him. Women he just wanted to control and hurt and own.

I'm his now. His fucking property. His fucking whore.

His fucking dog.

I grabbed the bowl and threw it with an angry grunt. It bounced off the walls and splashed me with the cold water. Tears came on hard and strong, and I couldn't stop them. They fell down my cheeks, plopping into the dirt with a dusty splash. The loose ground puffed up against my ankles from the weight of my tears. One after the other plummeted to the earth soundlessly.

The air around me was heavy and damp, like a muggy summer night right after it rained. Only it was not pleasant. It didn't smell like wet grass, blooming flowers, or fresh air that had once been humid and was now thin and cool to inhale.

It was more like a fungus-filled forest with dead, rotting debris. With trees surrounding you so densely that you feel like they're closing in on you, trying to suffocate you. My lungs heaved for fresh oxygen between long sobs. My hands scratched at my neck, begging for just a single molecule. I lay on the ground and rolled to my side, pressing my cheek against the dirt.

Oh god, I can't breathe. I'm going to die in here.

Deep within the blackness around me, more stars began to pop and sparkle. I didn't think it could get any darker than where I was right then. But the stars, the stars quickly fizzled out, and the blackness became a bottomless pit that swallowed me whole.

"Wake up!" he screamed from above as he kicked me hard in the ribs.

I jolted awake, grabbing my side as the burn radiated so deep I could feel it move around my back and into the organs inside. It sizzled in my muscles, curling like hot talons around

the bone. I curled into a ball, holding my ribs and groaning with pain.

He kicked me again in the back, causing my body to straighten like a board. Another sharp stabbing pain stretched deep, splintering me from the inside out.

“You awake now, Dove?” he asked as he squatted down and moved the locks of hair covering my face out of the way. “It’s time to get up.”

The light from the doorway was blinding. I had no idea how long I had been asleep. It could have been seconds or minutes, or it might have been hours. My right leg was numb, my eyes were crusty with sand and tears, and dirt was embedded in the skin on my left cheek.

I blinked a few times, adjusting to the light. “What do you want?” I asked. My brain was still swirling in the oxygen-deprived haze. I felt the tiny grains of sand across my dry, cracked lips as I spoke, so I wiped my mouth with a weak hand, then licked my lips to moisten them. Some dirt stuck to my tongue, so I kept brushing my tongue on my wrist and spitting on the floor.

“You’re a disgusting human being. Ladies shouldn’t spit; ladies swallow,” Leon uttered. “If I weren’t ready to play, I’d turn around and walk out.” His voice bristled my skin, making my stomach twist with a million tornadoes.

“I’m pretty sure there’s only one disgusting human being here, and it isn’t me,” I snarled as I held my crippled body with one hand and pushed my other palm into the dirt to sit up.

“Here, let me help you up.” His fingers curled deep in my hair, grabbing close to my scalp, then he yanked me to my feet.

“Ahhh!” I screamed, grabbing his wrist with both hands and holding onto him as if he’d feel my despair and release me instantly. He didn’t stop; he lifted me like a damn handbag and carried me off.

Lean turned around to walk, dragging me with him. I scrambled to stay on my feet, stumbling behind him as he

pulled me along. My knees buckled, and the joints in my ankles stiffened, causing me to fall.

I could barely keep up, but Leon just kept going, moving as if I was just a bag of luggage he was rolling through the airport. His feet pound against the hardwood floor, taking long, sweeping strides. The floor chafed my skin with sharp splinters, creating raw, latticed bleeding lines on my knees and across the top of my feet every time I dropped to the ground.

I kicked my feet, bucking my body as hard as possible, trying to break free. “Let me go!” I screamed. “Let me go!” My nails dug into the meat of his arm, attempting to force him to release me. But his skin was callous as an elephant. Rough to the touch and thick as leather.

Leon ripped me off the floor, his fingers still tightly wrapped in my hair. He grunted as he spun me around and pushed me down by my shoulders. I caught myself with open palms on the floor and peered up at him with hate in my eyes. I hated him. I wanted to rip his throat out and shove it up his ass.

The floor was no longer wood but icy cold white tiles with red and blue swirling designs connected at each corner. The walls were bright white, with a white toilet and a white porcelain sink. Besides the simple colors in the tile, the room was as sterile-looking as a hospital.

“Why are you doing this? Why? Please, just let me go! Please!” I begged.

“Shut the fuck up.” He stepped forward, forcing me to crawl back until I hit the tub. Leon leaned over me, reaching into the tub to turn on the shower. “Get in. You’re fucking dirty. I won’t fuck a dirty whore.”

“What does it matter?” I asked. “You’re a dirty fucking asshole.”

Leon growled, taking me by the hair to lift me again. He threw me inside the shower. I slipped on the wet basin and fell back against the wall. The water was cold and felt like daggers on my skin.

“Wash your filthy fucking hole, whore.” He chucked a bar of soap at me, then folded his arms over his chest and waited for me to follow his orders.

“It’s ice cold,” I said.

“And? Do you think I give a fuck?”

“Plea—” I started to say, but he stopped me with a slap across the face.

“Clean yourself, whore, or I’ll fucking do it myself.”

I reluctantly washed my body as he watched. I was trembling, my teeth were chattering, and the water was so cold it hurt as much as getting burned by fire. When all the bubbles were gone, and he seemed satisfied, Leon shut off the water and threw a small towel at my face. I dried off, again with him watching me like a hawk.

The second I was dry, he reached into the shower, grabbed another fistful of wet hair, and yanked me out. There was no humanity in his eyes at all. He didn’t look at me like I was a woman. He stared at me as if I were an object. I didn’t have feelings in his eyes and didn’t deserve any sympathy either.

Leon dragged me down the hall to the hell that contained my coffin. He threw me on the bed and stripped his clothes off.

“On your knees,” he barked.

“No,” I snapped through clenched teeth. “I won’t let you do this.”

“You don’t have a choice.” He took a naked step forward, his arms dangling at his sides.

He had a fat pot belly and a tuft of gray hair in the center of his chest. His legs were thinner, offsetting the broader span of his shoulders. A thin layer of gel slicked back hair, making it shine. Thick wrinkles lined his forehead in anger, webbing around his coal-black eyes.

“I said no.” My voice was firm, more potent than it had been.

His hands opened and closed at his sides, and his lips curled into a joker-like smile. “Fine, have it your way.” One of his hands jetted out and grabbed my throat. He pushed his fingertips into the bruises around my neck that were already there. “The more you fight, the more I like it anyway. It lets me know I’m getting everything you owe me.”

He forced me onto my stomach and pressed my face against the thin cotton sheet. It smelled like old sex and rusty metal. I coughed and gagged as he split my legs apart with his. His body felt like fire against my skin as he slipped between my legs and ripped me open again.

He didn’t even bother licking his palm that time. The sensation stung like pouring alcohol on an open wound. I cried out in pain, but all he did was laugh. *He fucking laughed.*

“My poor little whore. Am I hurting you?” he asked as he lowered his lips to my cheek and kissed me softly between sandpaper thrusts and savage hands. Tears came streaming uncontrollably down my face. I didn’t want to cry, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. “Good. Because I certainly don’t plan to make you happy. I’m teaching you a lesson. Sometimes a spoiled little bitch needs to learn.”

His voice echoed through my empty soul. Because right then, that was precisely what I was—*empty*. There was no more Dove. She was long gone. She abandoned that body the second he closed that door. I was an empty shell of the woman I used to be.

Leon shifted his hips, and the pain struck me like lightning hitting a tree. Over and over, he thrust himself inside me, turning my delicate skin into raw hamburger.

“Are you learning anything, little whore?” he asked. “Are you learning that you’re never going to win? That you’re mine until I decide otherwise?” He pulled himself free and licked his palm, smearing his gross saliva over my dry entrance.

I shivered at the feel of his warmth. My entire body tensed up as he slammed himself inside me again. Unwanted. Unasked for. And without permission.

He grunted like a beast as he violated me. His fingers captured me in place, pushing me deeper into the mattress. I tried to go inside my mind to escape the wretched hell he was forcing on me. Except my mind said no. My brain was screaming for me to do something to stop him. To stick up for myself. To make him listen.

I can't do this!

Kicking my heel up, I hit him in the balls. Leon inhaled a sharp breath as he took a long step back. I lifted my face and looked over my shoulder, hoping to see him keeled over on the floor. But it didn't do what I thought it would. It didn't stop him. It fueled him.

His fist lashed out and punched me across the head. He clamped his fingers around the roots of my hair, ripped my head back, then slammed my face against the bed. The sheet filled my nostrils as I inhaled, making it hard to breathe. And maybe that was a good thing. Maybe suffocating to death was better than any life with him.

"You stupid fucking bitch," he snarled through clenched teeth. He slipped his foot between my legs again and kicked them out as wide as they could go, forcing himself inside my body again.

My skin stretched and tore. Warm blood trickled down the inside of my thighs. The pain coursed through my body, rippling like an earthquake. My muscles shook, and my heart was pounding, but there was nothing I could do.

I tried to scream, but instead of inhaling air to fuel my voice, I inhaled a giant mouthful of the sheet. It muffled my cries.

After he finished, he used my hair like a leash and dragged me back to the closet, throwing me inside and slamming the door shut. I curled into a ball on the floor and cried myself to sleep.

* * * *

I picked up a small gray pebble with rough edges off the floor and scratched another line in the dirt beside the crack at the

bottom of the door. As I counted them, a sense of dread and despair consumed me. It had been twenty-one days. *I think*. I wasn't entirely sure. It was hard to keep track when there was no day or night, no singing birds in the morning or crickets in the evening, no lunch break or dinner time music.

Time was dripping by like a slow leak from a broken faucet. Day and night bled together, mixing into a world where everything was mop water gray, the sun didn't rise, and the moon never got a chance to glow.

The lock flipped open, so I scurried back against the far wall. I could see pretty good now in the makeshift cell. My eyes had adjusted to the constant darkness. The smell was no longer rancid but was almost comforting in a way.

While I was in there Leon, wasn't hurting me. While I was in there, I was safe. I was alone, and being alone was far better than being out there with him. The only downside to being alone was the loss of control over my thoughts.

Is my mom looking for me?

When will someone find me?

Do they think I'm dead?

Are the police out there searching for me?

Am I another face on a faded, weathered, worn, and forgotten poster?

I could picture it. My smiling face on a piece of paper hanging in a storefront window or stapled to a telephone pole. My skin cracked, and my smile blotted out from torrential rain and gusty wind. The paper would be crinkled and tattered. The white would no longer be crisp but yellow and stained. An image that no one looked at anymore as they walked by. No one took a second glance. They just kept on going, living their lives as they always did.

The door opened. Leon stood in the entrance, taking up the entire space. He flipped his fingers for me to come to him. I did as I was told, standing up and walking to him. He ran his fingertips through my hair, brushed the knots loose, and then wiped the grime off my shoulder.

I didn't even flinch. I let Leon smear my own filth on my skin. He pulled a blue handkerchief out of his back pocket and finished wiping the dirt from my hair out from under his nails.

"Let's go," he said, taking me by the wrist.

I stopped fighting him. There was no point anymore. I fought him for as long as I could. My body was too weak, and my muscles were too thin. I was withering away to nothing more than a skeleton. Even my ribs were starting to protrude from under the skin like the nails of an alien trying to break through to the surface.

The raggy t-shirt he had given me was now tinted brown, and the fabric was thinning from him tearing it off me like wrapping paper on a present. There used to be a logo in the center of a girl with her leg wrapped around a pole in a seductive dance, but the ink was so dull and spotty that you could only see the red of her lips and the vague outline of the pole. He always forced me to wash my body in icy water but never my hair. I was only allowed to clean my skin. Then when he was finished with me, he would stick me back in the gross shirt.

Leon pulled me down the hall and into the kitchen. He sat me down at the kitchen table by pushing me into a chair using my shoulders. I folded my hands on my lap, remaining quiet. Aromas were swirling all around me. I could smell fresh bread and the tang of tomato sauce. Oregano and garlic drifted in next. My mouth watered instantly, tongue softly licking the back of my lips instinctively.

He walked away for a moment to the counter, then came back with two bowls. He dropped one of them in front of me. The cream-colored bowl wobbled in a cylindrical fashion, spilling spaghetti over the sides. Leon walked to the other side of the table and sat down with his bowl.

He pulled a thick blue cloth napkin off a loaf of fresh Italian bread like he was a magician making it appear out of nowhere. With a steak knife in hand, he forcefully cut through the loaf and speared a stick of butter, half-melted in a glass dish with the tip of the blade.

“Eat,” he said as he spread the butter across the surface of the bread.

I could almost taste the spaghetti in my mouth and the acidic sweetness of sauce as it slid down the back of my throat. It was real food, not scraps and rotten leftovers. It smelled amazing, but I knew that beneath the enticing scent was poison. I knew it was some game he was playing. I wasn't stupid. I knew better than to take the apple from the old lady in the woods.

I watched him as he took a bite of his bread. Small crumbs stuck to his lips and his mustache. He chewed with his mouth partially open as he stared at me under thick and heavy lids. “I said eat,” he demanded, his left cheek packed full of food like a squirrel right before winter. He was holding his piece of bread between two knotty fingers and twisting it around impatiently as he waited for me to follow orders.

“I'm not hungry,” I said softly.

He swallowed the mouthful with a slow gulp. His lips opened and pulled. His throat elongated as the tight muscles of his neck moved up and down like a turtle stretching out from its shell.

Leon kept his eyes on me as he reached for a bottle of wine sitting in a small tin bucket. “You're hungry. Eat the damn food.”

What the hell is he doing? I had no idea why he was doing this. Since I'd been there, he treated me like a fucking dog. Now, I was sitting at his table with a folded napkin at my side and a bowl filled to the top with pasta.

I don't want shit from him.

“No,” I answered proudly. Gritting my teeth, I pushed the bowl away. “I'm not eating this. I said I wasn't hungry.”

He was right though. I was fucking starving. What he had been feeding me was barely enough to stay alive. I knew my body was slowly eating itself. I could feel it. Despite the fact I could feel my ribs, my stomach was concave, my cheeks were starting to hollow, and my hair was beginning to fall out, I still

didn't want his food. I didn't want anything from him. I had already seen what happened when you took anything from that man.

I was living it. I was breathing it. I was engulfed in it. Whatever he wanted to give me, I was going to refuse. The last thing I wanted was to owe him more. More for the money he lent me. More for the food he put in my belly. More for the life he was giving me by allowing me to breathe.

He could fucking keep it all. I'd rather die than take one more thing from him.

Leon sipped the wine in his glass, glaring at me over the rim. "I won't ask you again. You're insulting me in my own home. Eat the damn food before it gets cold."

I steadied my eyes in the sockets and hardened my jaw. "I said no, you fucking prick."

He slammed both fists on the table, causing it to shake as he crushed the piece of bread between his fingers. Crumbs fell, bouncing free from his hand like fleas on a sick dog. "EAT," he barked. Small bits of chewed-up bread flew out of his mouth, sprinkling the table. His eyes grew wide, bulging from his head.

But I didn't flinch. Why should I? He had already beaten me, starved me, and raped me repeatedly. What more could he do? Kill me?

That would be a welcomed ending to the horror he was forcing on me. What gifts had he given me besides purple skin, swelling all over my body, pains so deep inside I couldn't soothe them, and dreams of escape? *He's given me nothing except nightmares.*

"No." My lips curled into a snarl, nostrils flaring wide. "Fuck you." I grabbed the three-pronged fork and held it up. "I'm done. I'm done with you. I'm done with all of this. Let me go." My throat was dry, making my voice scratchy. "Or I'll carve your eyes out of your damn skull."

Leon knocked his bowl off the table with one quick swoop of his arm. It shattered to pieces on the floor as the spaghetti

spilled out like guts from a stomach wound. He jumped from his seat; teeth bared as he let out a loud grunt I could feel in my chest.

Long heavy strides brought him around the table. I attempted to get up and run, but he lashed out and grabbed my hair, yanking my head. His other hand swiftly snatched my wrist and twisted my arm so I couldn't hold on to the fork, and I dropped it instead.

“Don't be a stupid little whore. You're going to eat this fucking food.” He fisted a handful of spaghetti and tried to stuff it inside my mouth.

If it had been the first day, I would have probably cried so hard I wouldn't be able to see. I didn't cry anymore. I had no more tears to shed. He broke me. He took my life and turned it into a hell full of sharp glass and jagged bone.

'No! I'm not taking another thing from you!' My brain screamed as my mouth was sealed shut.

I squeezed my lips closed as tight as I could and attempted to turn my head away, which caused him to smear sauce and spaghetti across my cheek. He didn't like that. The growl he released was like a bear ready to maul someone who had trespassed into their territory. Leon yanked on my head harder, causing my neck to snap back. He held me there like that, my neck curled back over the head of the chair and my throat fully exposed.

He pushed the food up my nose, blocking me from being able to breathe. I opened my mouth on reflex, and he took that opportunity to force his large fingers inside, filling my mouth with spaghetti as I tried to inhale a breath of air.

I sucked in the spaghetti, choking and gagging on it. He reached back and grabbed another handful, and stuffed more inside. My eyes watered, and my chest burned as I tried to swallow and breathe simultaneously.

“There, you ungrateful bitch,” he said sharply. “I hope you fucking enjoy it.”

Leon threw my head away and cleaned his hand off across my breasts. He sighed loudly as he picked up a napkin and wiped the crushed bits of noodles out from between the insides of his fingers. He gathered my utensils, tisking me under his breath. "I do all this for you. I give you money for your mother. I give you a deal I'd never give anyone else. I make you a decent fucking meal, and this is how you treat me? Such a fucking ingrate." He shook his head as if I was a spoiled child, then went to the counter and made himself another bowl of pasta.

My chest ached from coughing and swallowing and trying not to choke. I was breathing heavily, the muscles still constricting violently as they spasmed uncontrollably. My arms rested against the seat of my chair, my jaw throbbing at the jowls from being hyper-extended past its breaking point.

Leon calmly walked back to the table and took his seat. Setting his bowl down with a grunt, he forked a giant scoop into his mouth. The noodles squished between his teeth in the silence. He didn't look at me at all. He simply finished his food, then pushed the bowl away.

His hand reached for the wine glass but instead diverted to the bottle. He grabbed it by the neck and took a giant swig. I wasn't sure what was running through his head. It could have been anything. He could have been thinking about how he would make me pay for all of this. He could be thinking about throwing me in an icy cold shower and fucking me until I bleed to teach me a lesson. Whatever he was thinking, I knew it wasn't good.

His eyes shifted to mine. His mouth razor thin and sharp. The bold webs beside his eyes crept out as he veered his stare. The fuzzy caterpillar brows above his eyes crawled inward to the bridge of his nose as his lips coiled like a dry worm on the pavement.

"You fucked up, Dove." He cocked his head a hair, his pupils turning to pinpricks. "But you know that already, don't you?" His chair squeaked as he pushed it away from the table. He unbuttoned his pants and pulled out his cock. "Let's go. It's time for you to fix your mistake."

I hesitated, grabbing the table's edge instead of getting up like he wanted me to do. He rolled his eyes, annoyed that I was still not following orders.

“Fine,” he said, standing up as he palmed his cock. He walked to my side, curled his fingers into the flesh of my cheeks, and forced my mouth open with one hard squeeze. He started to put his cock in my mouth, then thought better of it and pulled away.

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a large flip blade and clicked it open. The metal lit up under the chandelier overhead, and he thumbed the knife's sharp edge. His eyes twinkled with pleasure and excitement and joy, all of the things no human being should ever feel in a moment like that.

Leon ran the sharp edge of the knife over his tongue. A thin strip of blood began to seep from the small slash. He swallowed it with a groan, then pressed the knife firmly against my throat.

“Bite my cock, and I'll slit your throat. I won't think twice. I don't give two shits about your fucking life. You mean nothing to me. You're just a fucking whore who got in over her head. Understand?” he asked.

I nodded lightly.

He pushed the knife harder, and I felt my skin begin to break. “If I so much as feel your teeth, I'll not only kill you, but I'll kill your fucking mother too. Got it?” I nodded again.

“Good, now suck my fucking cock, bitch.”

Chapter Three

Dove

Hours in the small closet became so much lost time. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. I had no real idea exactly how long I'd been there. The last time I counted and was confident I was right, it had been ten months.

I'd tried to keep track the best I could, but Leon would find my makeshift calendar of slashes in the dirt floor or chalky lines on the back of the door, and he'd scrub them away, and I'd have to start all over again.

I couldn't count anymore. I was done reminding myself of the life I was missing outside those walls. I was done wondering if my mother cried herself to sleep at night and if the world had forgotten me altogether. I was just done.

He was never going to let me go anyway. Not now, not ever. It didn't matter how much he took from me or how much I gave; the apologies, the promises of not telling anyone what he had done, the begging and pleading; it was never enough. He still wanted more.

It's never going to end. He'll never free me.

I made peace with it the best I could. I knew I was never going to see the sun again. I was never going to see my mother. I was never going to smell the scent of the freshly baked banana bread my mother would always make me on my birthday or the sound of music as she cooked in the kitchen.

And that was okay; it had to be okay. I did what I could to help her. I did what I thought was right because she needed more than we had. My mother needed someone to care for her life as much as I did, and that type of care came at a very high price.

The money I borrowed from the devil put me there, but that money gave her a chance she never had. It was over now; even if he didn't think he was done with me, I was going to force him to see it. I needed to be set free.

The lock flipped with that metallic ping that used to send me scurrying into the corner. I didn't recoil from him anymore, and I hadn't in a long time. Leon opened the door and said, "Come, Dove, I'm horny."

"No," I said with as much power as I could muster. My throat was still swollen from yesterday's horror show. Leon had choked me so hard I could still feel where his fingertips hit my esophagus. "Just kill me and get it over with. I can't do this anymore."

"Aw, my poor little whore. Too bad for you, I don't give a fuck what you want. It's your fault you're here. Besides, I'm enjoying this way too much to kill you. Honestly, I never thought I'd have this much fun with you. You turned out to be my best debt yet."

Gritting my teeth, I screamed at him with every bit of strength I could find as I pushed myself to my feet. "Fuck you! I fucking hate you!"

If he wasn't going to kill me willingly, if he couldn't give me just one moment of humanity and end all the suffering, then I would make him. I wanted out. Death was the only way to break the bars he was caging me in.

I took a long step out from the small closet and into the light. My skin, usually ivory, was a multitude of purple and green bruises and translucent from lack of sunlight. New and old wounds, fresh and dry cuts, and raw and scabbing scrapes covered the surface. Dirt coated my feet and was embedded under my nails. My hair was tangled and full of knots and debris. I could feel the grit of sand on my scalp and the itch of wounds healing on my head from him tearing at my hair.

"Kill me," I demanded, holding my arms out wide. "Just fucking take the last debt I owe you. Take my damn life because I don't want this anymore. My life is yours. Just fucking take it. It's what you want, right? You want to kill me. So do it already!"

He stretched his hand out and cupped my brittle jaw with his dry, callous fingers. "Dove, you might be done with me,

but I'm not done with you. I'm far from finished with you. This only ends when I say it does."

I could see in his eyes that he'd never be kind enough to give me death. I was going to have to force him to do it. I wouldn't keep being his fuck toy and punching bag. I wouldn't let him use me as some sick game. He had his time, but it was my time now. It was my life, my choice, and I was more than ready to cross the bridge from hell to heaven.

"Fuck you!" I screamed, launching myself forward and jumping at him. The strength came out of nowhere. Adrenaline I hadn't felt in months hit me hard, flooding my veins with liquid courage. I clawed at his eyes, scratching and digging. My nails ripped at his flesh, peeling away chunks. "Fuck you, asshole! Kill me! Fucking kill me!"

Leon stumbled backward, surprised, and fell to the floor. His arms came up defensively to block his face. This was my last stance. My Alamo. My life. And I had to keep control to get what I wanted.

He grunted with anger as he caught his bearings, his eyes zeroing in on my face. With one quick snap of his wrist, he clamped his hand around my neck and squeezed harder than I had ever felt him squeeze before. But I still didn't stop. The hand that was slowly helping me slip away was what I wanted. The air being refused into my lungs was what I needed. That level of rage was the cure to end all of it. I kept clawing and raking my dirty nails down his face. I was straddled over him, kicking my heels against his ribs and striking him with the intent of keeping him angry.

His skin was slick and warm. Blood was pouring from the wounds I'd inflicted on his forehead and around his eyes. Seeing that blood, seeing the metallic red liquid as it poured down his face, only fueled me more.

Suddenly, there was a burning sensation in my gut. I looked down to see the shiny edge of a blade pierced through my tattered shirt. It didn't hurt. There was pressure and a twinge of something sharp, like when you prick your finger with a needle, but other than that, I felt nothing.

I couldn't help but wonder if that was the numbness people talked about when they were close to death. I had heard stories of people doing extraordinary things when injured to save their lives or someone else they loved. Maybe I was in that same trance? Maybe God was taking away the pain so I could drift off to sleep?

Leon pushed the blade in deeper and twisted it as he growled, "You stupid, dirty fucking whore." Spit flew out of his mouth, splattering against my face as he pushed the blade in as deep as he could.

The thin fabric of my shirt turned bright red as blood began to seep, pouring down the knife's handle and over Leon's hand. I fell off his chest and onto the cold floor. My head began to feel light as the world started to spin.

There was so much anger in his eyes. Leon hated what I had done. He hated that he didn't get to keep control of the situation. He hated that he couldn't control *me*.

He pushed himself off the floor and wiped his forearm around his face. His eyes were bloodshot. The wounds from my nails kept bleeding no matter how much he wiped. He was frowning, his expression stern as he rocked his jaw back and forth. His teeth ground down as loud as stone against stone as he breathed heavily through his nose.

Storming across the room to the nightstand beside the bed, he opened the drawer and pulled out a gun. The metal glinted as if it was winking at me with compassion. *This will all be over in a second. Don't worry; I'll help you break free,* it whispered.

He pointed the barrel in my direction, his finger firmly wrapping the trigger. I held my stomach and curled up into a ball as a sense of calmness fell over me.

Pow! Pow!

Blackness swept in, stealing me away. I think I was smiling as it happened, although I wasn't sure. All I knew was I was free. And that was what I wanted most of all.

Chapter Four

Dove

“Dove.” She shook my shoulder lightly. “Dove, honey.” Her voice was in my ear, jostling me awake.

“Hm? What? What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay? Do you need me to call the doctor?” The questions came rolling out in a groggy, sleep-filled tone. I pushed myself up in bed and rubbed my eyes. “Are you feeling sick?”

My mother smiled as a mother does. She knew I cared for her, but she also thought it wasn’t my responsibility to take care of her and worry as much as I did. “No, Dove, I’m alright.” Her eyes were sparkling. Bright and lively for someone who was battling cancer. “I’m just fine, Honey. Stop worrying about me so much. You have your own life to think about too.” She smiled again as she gave me a playful shove to the shoulder.

The scarf on her head had a sunflower and polka-dot pattern. She had started drawing her eyebrows on with light brown liner, even feathering the lines to give them a more natural look. They looked good, much better than the first time she tried. When she first tried it, she drew just a thin, curved line that looked more like an unfinished tattoo than eyebrows.

I told her she didn’t need to do that and that as soon her treatment was over, all her hair would grow back, and she’d look the same as before. She insisted that it made her feel better when she looked in the mirror. It made her feel normal. So, I didn’t mention it again. As long as she felt good about herself, positive, and in good spirits, I wasn’t going to poke at little things like hand-drawn eyebrows.

I did tell her that her eyebrows reminded me of her mother, my grandmother. Right up until the day my grandmother took her last breath, she would draw these thick, marker-style eyebrows. My mom just laughed it off and nodded in agreement. Although, she claimed her way of doing it was better.

“What time is it?” I asked as I looked over at the clock on my dresser. “It’s ten in the morning already? Your appointment is in an hour.” I threw the blankets off and swung my legs over the side of the bed. “I need to get up and get dressed.”

“That’s why I let you sleep. Maybe this time can you stay home? What do you think of that? You don’t need to come to every appointment, you know.”

“Uh, yes, I do.” Rolling my eyes, I shook my head in disbelief. “You’re not doing this alone, Mom. I told you that.”

“I’m not alone, Dove. You’re always with me. Like I’m always with you.” She smiled as she turned to sit down next to me. “But, you’re a young girl. You deserve to live your life too. You can’t spend all your time worrying about me.”

“You’re my mother. We’re a team. Deal with it.” I stood up and turned to face her, placing my hands on my hips. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get dressed. We have an appointment to get to.”

“You know you remind me so much of your father. You even get that same look in your eyes when you’ve set your mind to something.” She slapped open palms on the top of her thighs and stood up to leave. “You got his stubbornness.”

“Mom?” I asked.

She stopped in the doorway, grabbed the frame, and leaned back to look at me. “Yeah?”

“Do you think dad is watching over us?”

“Always, honey. He’s always watching over us.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I can still feel him. I can’t see him, but I know he’s here. I don’t think I’d have this much strength if he wasn’t.”

“Yeah, he was a pretty strong guy.”

“And he gave me a strong daughter.” She smiled one last time, then disappeared out the door. “We need to leave in thirty minutes!” she called out as she headed down the hall.

“Yeah, I know!” I called back.

* * * *

“Ms. Harloway?”

“Yes?” my mother asked as she lifted her head from the magazine she was aimlessly flipping through.

“The doctor is ready for you now.”

We both stood up, and my heart was racing already. I didn't know how my mother could be so calm. My hands were sweating, and my stomach was in knots. These appointments were the hardest.

And yet, my mother walked gracefully behind the nurse like she didn't have a care in the world. Her back was straight, and her chin was high. Even though I knew she was tired and weak, her body was failing around her like an old car that had been left outside next to the ocean. My mother still held herself with poise. I'd seen her appetite vanish and the pounds melt away, leaving her brittle as dried branches. I had watched people stare at her as she walked through the store with a mask on her face because her immune system was shit from the chemo and radiation.

As we walked down the bleached white corridor that smelled like cleaning solution and hot plastic, my nerves were on edge. I wanted to know how things were going, but I also wasn't sure if knowing was a good idea. When you were given a timeline to life, and you knew how many grains of sand were left in your hourglass, maybe not knowing was better. At least then, you weren't counting down the minutes.

The nurse guided us into the room, and we both sat down. My mother sat at the patient's table—the paper crinkled beneath her like a bag of chips being opened as she adjusted. I took a seat in the leather chair by the door. My hands were in my lap, and I nervously picked at my fingers.

“Stop that,” my mother scolded. “You're too old to still be doing that.”

“I'm sorry, I can't. I'm so nervous.”

“I know, and that’s alright. It’s normal to be nervous, Dove, *but* let’s see what he says first. No need to get all worked up. I mean, my appetite has been getting better. I feel stronger and haven’t had as much nausea as before. I feel like we’re going to get good news today.”

“And if we don’t?”

“If we—”

A knock at the door caused us to simultaneously jerk our eyes as Dr. Mazi came in. “Hello,” he said with his professional smile. “How are you guys doing today?”

“I’m feeling pretty good,” my mother answered proudly. “But my daughter is a nervous wreck.”

The doctor smiled at me and nodded. “I can understand that.” He pulled the computer out from the wall and swiveled the screen. Tapping the keys, the screen glowed against his face, turning it a dusty blue. “So, we sent you for a CT scan and an MRI.”

“Mm hm,” my mother agreed. Her fingers curled over the table’s edge, pinching the paper as she tried to lean over to see what was on the screen.

Dr. Mazi pulled his glasses off and looked over at my mother. I could tell already that the news wasn’t good. His eyes said it all, even though he hadn’t said a word. The doctor stepped forward and softly pressed the pads of his fingers around my mother’s neck.

“I noticed you gained a couple of pounds, which means you’re eating. So, that’s good.”

“I really do feel good. Honestly, I feel better than I have in a long time. Other than occasional nausea once in a while and my lack of hair, I almost feel normal.”

Dr. Mazi unwrapped the stethoscope around his neck and plugged it into his ears. “Deep breath for me.” He listened. “Again,” he said, moving the bulb around her chest and back. “Good. No pain at all?”

“Sometimes, but nothing crazy.”

“Dr. Mazi,” I said, holding out a hand. “What did the tests show? Is the tumor getting smaller? Is it going away?”

“Dove,” my mom said, her voice holding that cautionary tone.

“I’m sorry, Mom, I just hate having to wait. I want to know.”

“Dove, your mother has done a great job doing everything we recommend she do.” The doctor turned and smiled, replacing his medical necklace. He held the metal emblem, his eyes soft as he looked down at me. “And you’ve done an incredible job taking care of her. I know how hard this has been on both of you.”

“It has.” My eyes started to fill with tears, and my bottom lip began to tremble. “It’s been awful.”

“That being said, I’m not going to lie to you. The news isn’t good...”

I didn’t hear much after that. A rambling of words tumbled out of the doctor’s mouth, sending me deeper and deeper into hopelessness. My mother listened carefully, nodding as the doctor told her that her tumor had grown and they had found another one.

The cancer was spreading. I had to do something to help her.

* * * *

“Over here! Hey! Hey! Over here!”

A man’s voice screamed from somewhere in the distance, like a whisper floating through the darkness, riding the shadows. His voice ebbed and flowed with deep drops and high notes.

I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed, half awake and half asleep, and listening to an unknown voice in my dream. I didn’t recognize the man’s voice. He wasn’t someone I knew. He was a dream actor, playing whatever role my mind had given him.

“She’s still alive! Help me get her out! Easy now, easy!” he yelled.

Who is that? Where is he?

I tried to search within the pitch-black void of my dream for his face. There was a pin-sized spec of light in the distance and the outline of a figure. I scrunched my eyes and tried to step forward, but I couldn’t move.

Then I felt the weight of hands as they scooped under my arms and another set as they grabbed my ankles. I could feel them, but I couldn’t see them. They were strong as a vice, but the center of my body buckled and bent like a loose rope. It was as if my entire body was asleep, but my mind was alert and wide awake.

Water sloshed around me, splashing on my face and muffling my ears. The voices around me became dull, like they were behind a well-insulated wall. The hands placed me down gently on the ground. One of the men put his ear against my mouth and listened to me breathe. His face over mine was heavy.

‘I’m fine,’ I attempted to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. Instead, my chest rattled, and the back of my throat felt swollen shut.

What the hell is going on? I thought to myself as the world around me began to move so fast I couldn’t keep up.

Sirens blared in the distance. They grew closer and closer until they were on top of me. There was a man above me pounding on my chest and yelling at someone else. All the noises and voices swirled around in my brain, but I didn’t feel anything—no pain, ache, soreness, or crushing anxiety. I was numb.

‘My mom... Where is my mom?’ I tried to say, but again nothing came out.

Then there was nothing. No sounds. No feelings. No voices or touch. No dream.

The light had been turned on, then off, and suddenly back on again. The outside world came rushing back in. It happened

in flashes. A man was pumping my chest. The plastic cap around my mouth forced oxygen into my lungs. There was beeping, ripping, and pressure—so much pressure around my chest.

There were images of arms and blurred faces; hands and shiny metal tools; screens with lines that spiked and then went flat, steady, and then dropped like a bad stock crashing. So many different faces slipped in and out of my consciousness. A man with a big bushy mustache and a woman with blond hair and blue tips. An older woman with tight curls and big, friendly blue eyes.

I could see her face the best. She was there the most and constantly spoke to someone else in the room. I just didn't know who. I moaned, but not on purpose. She looked down at me, lowering her face so close I could see the fine lines beside her eyes.

“Shh,” she hushed softly. “You're okay now. Can you tell me your name?” she asked.

“Mom?” I asked, my voice barely audible. I could hardly move my lips to talk. Even my tongue felt so damn heavy.

“Your name? What's your name?” she asked again, but I still couldn't answer her.

A red hue coming through my lids, and my arms and legs were moving around without my help. A pinch in the top of my wrist made my hand twitch. My eyes started to flutter open, but only briefly. A plastic mask came down and covered my nose and mouth. Then it was all gone. Every single face and voice became a dream that was escaping me.

Little did I know that dream was absolute.

Chapter Five

Dove

I opened my eyes and was instantly struck by the bright white of a room that smelled like bleach and burned plastic. The lights were so intense they reminded me of driving at dusk. When the sky, still brightly lit by the sun setting on the horizon, cast shadows that slowly formed like ghouls crawling out of the ground, and as you took a turn in the road, it blinded you with such force you couldn't see anything at all.

I blinked a few times, forcing the room into focus. A warm white blanket wrapped around my body and tucked in place. My head was elevated slightly by a couple of pillows. The machine beside me was beeping steadily as an icy sensation seeped under the skin on the top of my left hand.

Lifting my arm, I noticed there was an IV secured to my wrist by a piece of clear tape. I lowered my hand and tried to swallow, but my throat hurt. It was dry and scratchy, like I had been sucking on sandpaper and drinking concrete. I dug my palms into the mattress and attempted to push myself up, but an intense pain sliced and burned across my stomach, wrapping all the way around to my back.

"Mm," I huffed under my breath in pain as I dropped back down and took a few deep breaths.

"Careful, don't move too much," a woman said as she stepped into my line of sight and smiled. She checked the fluid in the bag hanging on the IV stand, then pressed a few buttons on the machine that was still beeping like an alarm clock. Her eyes glanced over me as she wrote a few notes on a small piece of paper, then cupped her hands on her hips. "My name's Cindy. I'm your nurse."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, there's no way for me to put this lightly, so I'm just going to be honest with you. You, my dear, have been through hell." She said it with a smile. A fake smile, but sympathetic and honest all the same.

“It feels like it. Where am I?” I asked.

“Mount Lake Hospital.”

“Mount Lake, but why? How?”

“There are a few people who want to ask you the same thing.”

“People? What people?”

“A couple of detectives. But we can worry about that later. Unless you’re in the mood to talk?”

I shook my head no and waved a limp hand. “I’d rather not.” My body was starting to wake up, making me realize just how serious the nurse was about what I’d been through. I hurt everywhere. From my ribs to my tailbone, my head to my toes, even my skin ached. It all just hurt. “Ahh,” I hissed as the pain stabbed like small knives all over my body. My lids shut tight, and I clenched my jaw with agonizing discomfort. “Jesus,” I said with a pained breath.

“What’s your pain on a scale of one to ten?” she asked.

“What’s the pain level if it feels like all your bones are broken and smashed to bits?”

“I’d call that a morphine shot.” She chuckled and injected some liquid directly into my IV. My skin warmed as the medicine flooded my veins, causing the pain to subside and my body to go slightly numb. “Better?” she asked.

“Better.”

“Good. So, you have a name?” Nurse Cindy asked as she checked my blood pressure and took my temperature.

“A name? You mean you don’t know who I am already?”

“No, sweetheart. Around here, you’re known as Jane Doe, but a real name for you would be nice. You’ve been out for almost a month now. ”

“A month? I’ve been out for a month?” I asked in shock.

“We didn’t have a choice with all your injuries. Dr. Tibido put you in a medically induced coma to help you heal. I’m

going to go get him now; just sit tight for a second.” She left the room, and I sat in a sleepy haze, still trying to wrap my head around what had happened.

She returned a few moments later, her shoes squeaking against the tiles with the doctor behind her. He was a stout little man, balding on top, with thin black hair around the base and sides like a cake that had been half covered.

“Well, looks who’s up,” he said. “Let me take a look at you.” He shined a light in my eyes and listened to my heart and lungs. He used the pads of his fingers, which were extremely cold, to press around my neck and under my chin gently.

He grunted a few times as he looked over my chart and then back at me. “You’re healing well, but you still have a long way to go. Your insides were bruised just as badly as your skin on the outside. You should make a full recovery, but...”

“But what?”

“But, you were hurt pretty badly. There was damage to your stomach, your intestines, and your lungs. You had broken ribs and a broken clavicle. The amount of trauma that your body has been through has left you with severe scarring. Whoever did this to you never wanted you to wake up again. I know you might not want to talk about this, but we know there was sexual assault as well. That assault will most likely affect your ability to get pregnant later in life. I’m so sorry I have to tell you this, but you probably won’t be able to have children in the future.”

I heard every word he said. Each letter struck me like individual razors. Leon had effectively taken away my past, present, and future from me in one giant swoop. I would never be the same again. I would never be the girl I remembered.

How was I ever going to explain this to my mother? How could I tell her that she’d never have grandchildren?

“Honey, this is all a lot for you to take in, but we *really* need to know your name. I’m sure someone is waiting for a

phone call from you.” Cindy touched my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. “Can you remember your name?”

“You honestly don’t know who I am? You mean no one’s been looking for me?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but no. The police have been here almost every day waiting for you to wake up so they could find out who you are and what happened to you. I heard they checked every surrounding district and then some, going as far as across the country, looking for any missing person report that fit your description. They came up empty-handed.”

I dropped my head back and looked away from her. It didn’t make sense. My mother would have searched for me. She would have plastered my face all over the freaking state trying to find me.

As if she could sense my confusion, Cindy said, “If you tell us your name, we can call your family. I’m sure they’re looking, Hun. You know, you’re really lucky to be alive.” I looked over at her, and she gave me a motherly smile. “The fact you survived is a miracle.”

I didn’t smile back. I wasn’t lucky. None of that was luck. She had no idea what I had been through. I might have been unconscious for a month, but I remembered every damn second. Every bruise. Every cigarette burn. Every stolen minute and forced encounter. I could even remember the look in his eyes as he stuffed the knife in my gut and pulled the trigger.

You don’t forget that kind of evil. The memories don’t just disappear from taking a long nap. Leon tried to kill me. I thought he *had* killed me. I even wanted him to kill me. The fact that I was lying there, despite how amazing it was to the doctors I survived, didn’t change what put me in that bed.

The devil put me there. He gave me these wounds. He gifted me all of the pain.

There was a knock on the door. The nurse softly touched my arm as she said, “I’ll see who that is. You just rest.”

She cracked the door open, and I heard her whispering to someone in the hall. Cindy's voice raised and lowered with frustration. Closing the door, she walked back to my bed with a look of annoyance on her face.

Resting her hand on my arm, she gave me a sympathetic smile. "The police are here and want to talk to you. I—"

"Let them in," I said, cutting her off.

"Are you sure?" she asked, surprised. "Because you don't have to. I can tell them you're not ready and are still asleep."

Dr. Tibido pushed the computer back against the wall and said, "Really, don't do more than you're ready for. I think you should rest more before talking to anyone. I'll tell them to come back another time."

"No, it's fine. Let them in."

The doctor exhaled hard. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Let them in."

Cindy pursed her lips, obviously not agreeing with my choice. She opened the door, saying something under her breath, and then stepped out of the way.

Two men walked in. One man was wearing a suit, while the other was in just a dress shirt with no tie and a pair of tan slacks. The suit-less man's sleeves were rolled up his forearms, and the top button of his shirt was open. The fancy-dressed man looked older. He had a slight pot belly and a lot of gray hair up his sideburns that seemed to suit the thick lines creasing his forehead and the balding area on the back of his head.

The younger man pulled a small notebook out of his pocket, then grabbed one of the chairs against the wall and pulled it across the floor to the side of my bed. The feet screeched like nails on a chalkboard across the tiles. He sat down and stared at me as the other man started speaking.

"We're so glad to see you're awake." The older detective loosened his tie and walked around to the other side of my bed. "I'm Detective Johnson, and this is Detective Colt."

Detective Colt nodded his head and gave me a casual wave. “First things first,” said Detective Johnson. “The doctors told us they had no way to know if there was any damage to your brain or memory until you were healed enough to wake up. The most important thing I need to know right now is who you are. Can you tell us your name? Do you remember?”

“Detective,” Dr. Tibido said. Both men glanced up at the same time. “Don’t push her too hard. I haven’t had any time to test her brain function. She seems alert and well-focused just from speaking with her now, but I can’t give you my assurance that there hasn’t been any brain damage.”

“Understood,” Detective Johnson said. He looked back at me and asked me again. “Do you know your name?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Great, actually.” He sat silently for a moment, and when I didn’t say anything, he cocked a brow and asked, “Well, what’s your name?”

“Dove,” I said. “Dove Harloway.”

“Harloway...” Detective Johnson looked over at his partner. Their eyes connected, sending secret police code back and forth, then he turned back to me. “Dove Harloway?”

“That’s right.”

He squinted his eyes, causing his brows to fold in. “Dove Harloway... Are you related to Monica Harloway?”

“Yes, that’s my mother. Is she here? Can I see her? I’m sure she’s going crazy right now. I thought you said no one reported me missing?” I asked as I looked over at Cindy.

“Dove,” the detective said.

“Where is she? Where’s my mom?”

Detective Johnson’s eyes closed as he ran his hand across his balding head. He ruffled the thin layer of hair on the front of his scalp and sighed. “Dove—”

“I want to see my mother,” I said, cutting him off. I was not answering anything else. Not one more question until I

talked to her and let her know I was alive. “Go call her, tell her where I am. Tell her I’m alive, so she isn’t worried anymore.”

His eyes softened as his mouth crinkled. “Dove, there’s something you need to know about your mother.”

“My mother’s sick; I know that already. She’s probably worried about me and going nuts right now.” I tried pushing myself higher in the bed, but it hurt too much, so I relaxed back.

“Dove,” the detective said as he rested his hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry I have to tell you this, but your mother is deceased.”

Deceased... Dead? She’s dead?

“No, no, that’s not right. She can’t be dead. They said she had more time; they said the new treatments looked like they were working.”

“It wasn’t her cancer, Dove. I’m sorry you have to hear this right now. I am.”

My eyes filled instantly with tears. “Oh my god, she couldn’t make it. She couldn’t live without me. Oh my god, oh my god...” I wept instantly, tears pouring down my cheeks as my breathing became heavier and hard to control.

“No, Dove,” Detective Colt said, his voice gentle and soft. “Your mother didn’t die from a broken heart either. I don’t know how to put this lightly, so I’m just going to be honest with you. Your mother was murdered.”

“Murdered?” No. No, that can’t be right. She was sick. She had cancer. No one would want to hurt her. You must be mistaking my mother for someone else. She was sick, and then she didn’t know where I was. She was not murdered.”

“Someone murdered her, Dove. Someone killed your mom, and we want to find out who. There might be a connection between whoever killed your mother and who did this to you. Do you know who did this to you? Can you tell us anything about the person who hurt you?”

My lips thinned as rage and anger filled my body. I knew exactly who did it, and there was no doubt in my mind that the same person also killed my mother. I could feel it. I could feel it in my gut and my muscles. I could feel it in every vein, nerve, and cell, all the way down to my bones. Leon killed my mother.

I'm going to fucking kill him. He's going to fucking die for this.

He had no right to take her life. I was the one who took his money. I was the one who had agreed to pay him back. It was my debt, not hers.

I closed my eyes as I cried, turning my head away from the detectives. My lip trembled as I tried to calm myself down, but I was so damn angry. So angry and sad that it hurt more than the pain in my body.

My mother is gone. She's gone forever.

And it's all my fault.

The thought that she was murdered because of me sent a different wave of pain through my body. I brought his wrath down on her. If I hadn't gone to Leon for help, she'd still be alive, even if it was only for a little while longer.

I knew cancer would take her in the end, but the fact that someone else took her before her time killed me inside. She didn't deserve that. It was my burden that killed her in the end.

“Dove, please, can you remember anything at all? Even the smallest detail might help us figure this out.”

“No, I can't,” I answered, my face turned away.

“Can you tell us what your last memory is? The last memory you have before waking up here?”

“Making my mother breakfast. I cooked her eggs and toast with half a grapefruit. She wasn't hungry and barely touched it, but it was her favorite. I knew she wouldn't eat it, but I made it anyway. I poured her a cup of coffee and set her meds on the table with a glass of water next to her plate.” Turning

my head to look at the detectives, I asked, “How? How did she die?”

“Dove, you don’t need to worry yourself with those details right now. We just need—”

“How?” I demanded. “I don’t need you to coddle me like a child. Tell me how she died.”

Detective Johnson sighed softly as his eyes steadied on mine. “She was shot.”

“Where?”

“Dove—”

“Where was she shot?!” I yelled, my hands gripping the bed bar and my knuckles turning white. “Did she suffer?! Tell me she didn’t suffer!”

“It was a single shot to the back of her head,” Detective Colt said as he looked up at Detective Johnson, then back to me. “She didn’t suffer; it was quick and painless.”

“Did she know it was coming?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she know it was coming? Was she murdered in her sleep? Was she at the store? Did she know she was about to die?”

He nodded slightly. “From what we can tell, yes. A hiker discovered her body deep in the woods at Green Falls a few days before you were found in a dumpster behind an abandoned restaurant. It appears she had been there for a while.” He leaned forward, scooting the chair closer. “Please, Dove, try and remember what you can so we can get the bastard that did this.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” I said, flat and emotionless.

The urge to spit his name out briefly skated through my mind, but only briefly. I didn’t say it. A feeling of hatred and rage that was all-consuming prevented me from speaking.

I know the bastard you want, but he’s not yours to get. He’s mine.

Leon destroyed my life. He ruined me. He killed someone innocent; he killed my mother. There was no justice in letting the police capture him. I didn't want a lengthy, drawn-out court hearing. I wouldn't risk a situation where there was even the slightest chance he could spend the rest of his natural life living in a ten-by-ten cell.

He's going to die, and I'm the one who's going to kill him.

I was not going to put his fate in someone else's hands. I was going to kill him myself. I deserved that much for what he put me through.

"Alright, detectives, that's enough for today. She needs to rest. Give her some time. I'm sure it will come back to her." Cindy waved her arms, ushering the detectives up and out of the room.

Detective Colt pulled a card out of his back pocket and placed it on the small table beside my bed as he stood up. "If you think of anything, anything at all, you call me. It doesn't matter what time of day it is, okay? I'm always available."

I nodded. Cindy closed the door as they walked out into the hall. As she returned to my side, she smiled, that same gentle, apologetic smile. "You alright?" she asked.

"No, I'm not alright, but I will be."

"We have a grief counselor available so that you can talk to someone. Want me to go set up a time for you?"

"No. I just need some time to myself."

"Alright, I'll let you rest for now, but I'm only a click away. If you need anything, press the red button, and I'll come running."

"Don't run; you might hurt yourself, and then what?"

"You'll have a roommate," she said with a wink. Cindy gave me another dose of morphine before heading out the door to make her rounds.

The second the door closed behind her, I lost it. The tears came hard and fast, and I was struggling to breathe. My lungs hurt, and my stomach clenched tight, sending shock waves of

pain through my body. But I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop the tears from coming.

My body was shaking and trembling violently. Every muscle was flexing and moving, tensing and contracting. I inhaled and exhaled, desperately trying to calm myself down. In through my nose, out through my mouth. Repeat.

After what seemed like forever, I finally felt like I was breathing normally again. I rubbed my eyes, and when I opened them, they landed on the phone on the table beside my bed. The detective's card was lying flat in front of it, so I reached out and picked it up.

I know who did this. I can end this all right now. One phone call, and it's done. Leon will be arrested. And I... I—I still won't have my life back.

I tapped the sharp corner of the card, flicking it back and forth over the pad of my finger. The card stock started to crease as I peered down at the numbers. I sighed heavily and picked up the receiver.

There was a small set of directions taped to the phone. I dialed number two for outgoing calls and typed in the numbers. My heart was racing, and my stomach was in my throat.

“Hi, there! You've reached Monica and Dove. We're not home, so leave a message, and maybe we'll call you back.”
Beep.

“Mom,” I said softly. “Mom, are you home? Hello?” No one picked up. There was silence on the other end. “This is crazy. You're gone. You're really gone...” The phone dangled in my hand for a long second before I dropped it back in place.

My heart ached with a pain I had never felt before, and I wanted it gone. I didn't want to feel that way. There was only one way to make it all go away; one way to truly fix my broken heart.

He's going to pay for this. I'm going to make sure of it.

Chapter Six

Dove

“Want to give it a try?” Cindy asked as she stood at the side of my bed. “I know you still hurt, but we really should get you moving. The sooner you start, the better.”

“Yeah, I think I’m ready. I’m tired of being trapped in this bed all damn day.”

“Good, but remember, you need to take it slow. *You* might feel ready, but your body might not want to cooperate. Don’t be surprised if you can’t hold yourself up or fall the first few times. Your muscles have weakened from lack of movement.”

“That’s why I have you. You’ll catch me before I hit the ground.” I gave her a fun smile and wiggled my brows.

“Don’t let these biceps fool you.” Cindy pursed her lips, reached behind, and pulled the walker around between us. “I know it might be hard to tell, but I’m older than dirt. I’m like a sandcastle. You fall on me, and I’m going to crumble beneath you. Then we’ll both be screwed.”

I laughed hard, grabbing my stomach as it cramped with pain. “Ow, don’t make me laugh; it hurts.”

She chuckled as she looked up at the clock. “Well, it’s too early for more medicine, so you’ll have to grit your teeth for the time being.” Cindy tapped the arms of the walker and said, “Come on, let’s try to get you on your feet.”

“What happens if I do better than expected? Does that mean no physical therapy, and I can go home early?”

“I highly doubt it. You’re going to need physical therapy. I know that for a fact. But let’s see how you do, and we can talk going home another day.”

“Alright, fine.”

Cindy helped me lift my legs, twisting them over the edge and placing my feet on the floor. The tiles were cold, sending icy spikes through my heels. I could feel the weakness in my

muscles already. They were slightly shaking as I pressed my hands into the mattress and shifted the weight of my body downward. Blood rushed to my head, making me dizzy, causing my knees to tremble, and my eyes to cross.

“Oh man, I feel dizzy.”

“That’s normal. You haven’t gotten up or walked in a couple of months.” Cindy’s eyes steadied on mine as she gave me a confident nod. “You got this. I know you got this.”

As my fingers curled around the walker’s handles, I exhaled slowly. Cindy pushed it in closer, positioning her feet against the front wheels, so it didn’t slide out from underneath me. My eyes stayed on the floor, staring at my feet and wishing them to work as I remembered.

My toes curled against the tiles. I was feeling the floor beneath me, getting reacquainted with the surface. I had been in bed with tight socks that went up to my knees and would tighten and release at set intervals to increase the blood flow. I used the bar over my head as much as possible to lift myself while Cindy would bend and stretch my feet.

But I hadn’t walked on my own. I felt like a small child who needed to be bathed and changed. My food had to be diced into small pieces to keep me from choking on them. I couldn’t hold a spoon or a cup or even lift my arms to tie my hair back for a long time.

“Let me put these slip-free socks on you,” Cindy said, grabbing a pair off the table. “It’ll help.”

“No, don’t. I want to feel the floor.”

“But—”

“Please? Let me feel it with my feet.”

“Alright, but if you wobble even just a little, they’re going on. I like my job, and I’d like to keep it.”

“Fair enough,” I answered.

My hands tightened around the handle as I exhaled hard and pulled myself up. It took everything I had, and I mean everything I had. We often take little things for granted—the

ability to do mundane tasks daily without a second thought. But imagine not being strong enough to button your pants, brush your hair, or feed yourself.

My knees buckled slightly, but I held on and locked my knees in place. I was leaning forward, putting all my weight on the walker. I was already winded, and all I had done was stand up.

“You alright?” Her eyes were reading my every move. They traced each leg and watched both feet. She didn’t even blink out of fear that she’d miss a sign and I’d go down.

“So far, so good, I think.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. Just stay where you are for now and feel it out. You can always sit right back down; the bed is right behind you. Remember, just because you want to doesn’t mean you can yet. Feel your limits, Dove.”

“I’m alright. I want to do this. I might have been brought close to death, but I’m not dead yet. These legs still have a lot of life in them.”

Cindy’s eyes twinkled as she grinned wide. “You got that right. You’re one hell of a fighter, that’s for sure.”

“I’m ready to go home. I want to visit my mother’s grave and show her I’m still alive. For me to do that, I have to walk.”

“I’m sure she’s waiting for you, but trust me, she knows you’re alive. Mothers know everything.” Cindy took a small step back. “Let’s see what you got, kid.”

The walker rolled forward slightly the second her feet were gone, but she was there to catch me if I needed her. I steadied myself, securing my hands tightly around the handles. Giving the walker a little push, I took a small step. I barely moved an inch. My ankle bent awkwardly to the side, but I stayed upright.

One step turned into two, then three, then four, until I was at the bathroom and turning around to return to the bed. It took me five times as many steps as it would normally, but I did it. I did it because I was determined.

I dropped onto the bed feeling happy, yet winded and struggling to breathe from the injuries to my ribs and chest. “That felt good,” I said between breaths.

“Good, that’s really good. Maybe you can do that again later, but only when someone else is in the room. I don’t want you trying this by yourself. The last—” a knock at the door cut Cindy off. She held up a finger to me and went to open it up. “Look’s like you have a visitor.”

Detective Colt step inside. He gave me his professional yet secretly trivial smile. A smile that said, *‘Hey, look who is up and moving; maybe you have answers now.’* “You’re looking good. A lot better than when we first met.”

“Was I that hard to look at the first time?” I asked.

“I mean, I can tell you’re getting better, is all. You know, I thought I would have heard from you by now.” He walked further into the room and pulled out a small bouquet from behind his back. “I thought you could use some color in here. I always hated how dull hospitals were. You’d think they’d realize that a little color can help people feel better. Hope you like lilies.”

“I’m allergic.”

“Oh, crap, sorry. I—”

“I’m kidding,” I said with a chuckle. “They’re pretty. Thank you.”

“I think there’s a vase in the break room. Let me see. I’ll be right back,” Cindy said, leaving the room.

Detective Colt set the flowers on the table, then pulled up a chair. He took out his small notebook and opened it up. “So, last time we spoke, you had some memory problems. Has anything come back? I was hoping you’d have something for me today.”

The memories never left, but you can’t have them.

“Nothing yet. I’m sorry. The doctor said it could be days, weeks, months, maybe even years before my memory returns. If it comes back at all.”

He closed the notebook and relaxed back in the chair.
“Well, that’s not the news I was hoping to hear. You really can’t remember anything?”

“Not a thing.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” He cocked a brow, his head tilting slightly.

“What reason do I have to lie to you?”

“Well, you remember your name and your mother. You remember how to eat, drink, read, and everything else.”

“None of this has been easy. Just because I remember *how* to do things doesn’t mean I *can* do them on my own. How would you feel if you had to have someone else wipe your ass?”

“I’m not saying things aren’t hard for you right now. I know none of this is easy. I’m just trying to understand how you don’t remember anything about what happened to you. It seems to me that it would be hard to forget.”

I shrugged my shoulder and looked off. “I don’t know. The brain is a funny thing, I guess.”

“Look, I get it. The trauma you went through is horrific. I’m just looking for one single memory to give this case a boost. Anything might help, even if you don’t think it means much.”

“You don’t have anything at all?”

“No. Nothing. Your mom was found, then you were found, and that’s all we have. There’s no evidence. We have a few shell casings, and unless we have a weapon to match them to, they mean nothing. We’re going at this blind.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

“Why won’t you look at me?” he asked, leaning in closer.

My eyes moved to his, and my mouth tightened. “Do I have to? What difference does it make?”

“Most people want justice after something like this. They look at me because they want answers. They look at me

because they want me to catch the asshole who hurt them. They look at me because they have nothing to hide. Do you have something to hide? Do you even care?"

"Look, Detective," I said, my voice short. "We both want answers—me probably more than you. My mother was killed, and it's me lying in this bed. Don't doubt me when I say I want whoever did this to pay." My voice was seething as I snapped through clenched teeth. "But don't you dare accuse me of not caring."

Detective Colt just stared at me in silence. I didn't like it. I didn't like how quiet he was. It was like he was trying to peel back the layers and see inside my head. As if he could see behind the iron curtain.

But I wasn't the one on trial. I wasn't the murderer or the sadist. In all forms of the word, I was a victim of a monster, and so was my mother. I wasn't going to let him forget that, even if I was hiding information from him.

"What?" I asked.

He pouted his lips and shook his head. "Nothing, it's just that's the first time I've heard any real emotion in your voice."

"Maybe I'm trying not to let it get to me too much. Did you ever think of that? I need to get better so I can get the hell out of here. If all I do is sit around and cry, how the hell can I expect to heal? I need to focus on other things."

"And go where?"

"Home. To my mother's grave. To my life again. You think I want to stay here forever?"

"No, but aren't you afraid of what might be waiting for you outside these doors?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"What I mean is, you don't know who did this, I don't know who did this, but you want to go running home? What if whoever is responsible comes looking for you? What if this isn't enough, and they want you dead?"

“I’m pretty sure I was supposed to die. And I’m pretty sure they think they succeeded.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. If you think that the fact you were found didn’t make it into the paper or on the news, you’re wrong. A girl found in a dumpster and a woman shot in a field don’t go unnoticed by the media. That’s a front-page headline and a top-of-the-hour news report.”

“Then let him come for me. I’m no safer here than I am at home. Am I?”

“That’s where you’re wrong. We’ve had an officer outside your door twenty-four hours a day. No one is coming through that doesn’t have clearance. I can’t promise you that same safety once you leave.” He rested his elbows on his knees and placed his chin on the back of his knuckles. “So, let me ask you again. What do you remember?”

I stared at him, my pupils bubbling with anger. My nostrils flared, jaw jetting out. “I told you already, but if it makes you feel better, I’ll tell you again. I don’t remember anything. Maybe you should jot that down in your little notebook, so you don’t forget it this time.”

No matter how many times the detective asked me the same damn question, I was not going to crack. Leon was going to pay for what he had done. He was going to feel it like I felt it. The pain, the hurt, the agony of my heart breaking in my chest. I was saving it all for him. I wasn’t going to let him get jail time; that would be too nice for his breed.

He wouldn’t live a comfortable life behind bars, getting three meals daily and pristine care. He wasn’t going to keep breathing the same air as me and not pay for every scar he put on my body. Even if, by chance, Leon got the death penalty in the end, it could take years before he died. I didn’t want that. I loathed the idea of waiting until I was in my forties to see him take his last breath or until some freak cancer took his life before justice was paid.

Justice for me looked nothing like that. My justice was that man dying a slow and agonizing death. I wanted to look into his eyes and watch the lights go out. I wanted to see the fear

on his face as he realized that I was the one taking it. There was no other way. Then and only then would I be able to have peace.

“Look, Dove, I know this is hard for you. I do. I get it. I ___”

“You don’t get it,” I said, silencing him instantly. “You have no idea what I’ve been through or what I’m still going through. You don’t know shit about what’s going through my head. Don’t sit there and pretend like you do.”

He let out a slow breath and pushed his arms straight, locking his elbows. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I don’t know. But I do know that whoever the sick son of a bitch is that did this to you is still out there. He needs to be taken off the streets before he can do this again to someone else.”

“At least we agree on that.” I snuggled deep into the blanket and let the pillow cradle my head. “Now, I need to get some rest if we’re all done here.”

Detective Colt stood up, then pushed the chair back against the wall. “Well, I can’t rest. And I won’t until the person is behind bars where they belong.”

“Ha,” I chuckled under my breath as I pulled the blanket up higher. “Yeah, because that will fix what he’s done. Prison is a goddamn vacation. I’d rather see him dead,” I said quietly as I rolled to my side.

The detective hovered there in silence. I could feel him looking down at me, but he didn’t say anything. After a few seconds, the door creaked open and then clicked shut. I looked back over my shoulder to see he was gone.

Sighing to myself, I closed my eyes and drifted into an uncomfortable sleep. The images in my head were worse than just nightmares. They were what I lived through.

I woke up every morning knowing that the dreams weren’t just some figment of my fucked up imagination. They were real. They happened.

And they wouldn’t go away until Leon was dead.

* * * *

After five long months of rehabilitation, wound care, physical therapy, and shrinks, who wanted to make sure my mind was as stable as the rest of me seemed to be, I was finally able to go home. I wasn't one hundred percent healed on the outside, and my mind, well, I balanced it the best I could so they would leave me alone. I could take the poking and prodding of my body, but I only allowed so much digging at my brain.

I could walk around without getting winded as easily. My ribs ached less, but I could still feel them if I moved in specific ways. My muscles were regaining more and more strength each day. It didn't look like my legs were made of spaghetti anymore, and I was grateful for that. I was eager for my bed. I was tired of people coming and going at all hours of the day: different doctors, different nurses, different therapists, and so many different faces and names. I was even excited about the silence home would grant me. I needed time to myself to just think.

“Are you sure there's no one I can call for you? Not even a friend that can come pick you up and take you home? I'd feel better if I knew someone was with you.”

“No, there's no one. Besides, if the doctor didn't think I'd be alright on my own, he wouldn't be letting me go, right?”

Cindy pursed her lips just like my mother used to when I was a smart-ass to her. My heart splintered with pain in a million different directions. I could see my mother's face in my mind. Her snarky smile as her lips pulled tight, and her lids thinned like a sheet of tissue paper. The tone of her voice when she'd give me a smart-ass remark back shut me up instantly. Because she always knew the right thing to say.

“You just make sure you keep up with your physical therapy appointments,” Cindy said as she wheeled me to the exit. “I don't want to see you back here again because you fell and hit your head.”

“I will, don't worry,” I said.

“You better. I’m going to check in with Dr. Roberts and make sure.” She pushed the chair close to the taxi, then locked the brakes. “I’m going to have the driver put your walker in the trunk for you.”

“I don’t need it anymore, Cindy; I’m good.”

“Yeah, I know you are. You’re an Olympic gymnast now, but I also know I saw you almost trip over your feet the other day, and your knees give out, bringing you to the floor. Don’t push yourself harder than you can handle. Listen to your body, Dove. I loved having you here, but I mean it when I say I don’t want to see you again.” She gave me a wink as she lifted the folder walker off the arm of the wheelchair and started to bring it to the car.

“Here, let me get that,” a man said as he stepped beside me. I looked up to see Detective Colt as he took the walker from Cindy.

“Detective Colt, I didn’t expect to see you again so soon,” I said. “I thought this was a don’t call me; I’ll call you, type of deal?”

“Please, call me Ty. And I just came to see Cindy.” He smiled, and she rolled her eyes with a little smirk.

“You say that now until I need to draw your blood. When I was drawing Dove’s, I saw your face, and you turned white as a ghost.”

“I think it was just the lighting,” he grinned at me, flashing his perfect white teeth behind a foolish smile. He placed the walker in the trunk and walked back to my side. “Here, take my hand.” He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers.

“Thanks, but I can do it on my own,” I answered as I pushed myself up. My arms shook slightly, and my legs wobbled. I teetered on my heels, causing Cindy to grab the wheelchair and the detective to brace his arms for my fall.

“Whoa,” he said, taking a step closer. “I think you should let me help you.”

Reluctantly, I sat back down in the wheelchair and sighed loudly. “And I think I need to do this myself. I can’t depend on

anyone else once I'm home. You won't be there to catch me."

"I could be if you're willing to talk to me. I have some more questions that might help jog your memory."

"I doubt it."

"Detective Colt, don't push her. It'll come back to her when she's ready to remember. She has your card, right?" Cindy asked with an air of annoyance.

He nodded, pulling another one from his pocket. "But, just in case," he said, holding it out to me.

"I have it; I don't need another. It's all I'm leaving here with anyway. Well, that and my pain meds. Otherwise, I have nothing else."

"Except this," Ty said, digging in his pocket and pulling out a thin necklace. They found it in the dumpster next to you. I'm assuming it's yours." He dropped it in my hand.

The cool metal puddled in my palm. I pinched the charm and flipped it over. "This is mine. My mother gave it to me for my birthday." The pendant was silver, with my birthstone in the center. It was an amber gemstone, and across the top, in french, it said, *Pour Toujours Ma Fille*.

"We weren't sure it was yours. What does it say?"

"Forever my daughter." My voice softened. There was a lump in the back of my throat and tears in my eyes. "My mother came here from France with her parents when she was a little girl. She always spoke in french when we were home, especially if she was pissed about something."

"Here." Ty gently pulled the chain from my hand and wrapped it around my neck, clasping the back. "You can speak fluent french?"

"Almost. Not as well as she could, but yeah, pretty fluently." My fingers danced over the pendant, touching it softly. It was back where it belonged, and had been since the day she gave it to me. Until Leon took it, I never thought I'd see it again.

“That’s pretty cool. The only thing my parents spoke at home was the language of grounding me.” Ty laughed and held out his hand again for me to take.

I didn’t laugh with him, and neither did Cindy. I also didn’t take his hand. Detective Colt let his laugh die out as he ran his hand over his head and cleared his throat. “Yeah, this is why I became a detective and not a comedian,” he said.

“Obviously,” Cindy answered. That got me to laugh. “See, she still has a sense of humor.”

“Can we try this again? Will you let me help you?” He tilted his head, pushing his hand back in my direction.

“Nope,” I said sternly. “I don’t need your help.” I pushed myself up, my legs strong enough to hold me steady that time. My stubbornness might be holding me up; either way, I didn’t care. I was on my feet without his help or anyone else’s.

I took an awkward step forward, leaning forward and grabbing the roof of the taxi. One more unstable step, and I was inside. “See, all on my own.”

I closed the door and gave Cindy a wave and a smile, then a half smile at Ty. The taxi pulled away, and I let myself zone out. My house was about forty minutes from the hospital. I watched the trees as they rolled by and looked up at the sky to see the clouds.

Seeing the sky with its rolling white clouds and the sun should have made me happy after not having it for so long. But there was a pit in my stomach that was making me feel sick.

As the taxi pulled up to my house, that feeling exploded like a bomb in my gut. My entire body went heavy as I saw the small brick house with black shutters and a pitched roof. Gravel kicked up against the undercarriage of the car as he slowed to a stop. The driver got out, pulled my walker from the trunk, and opened my door.

He set the walker next to me and asked, “Do you want some help inside?”

“No, thank you, though. I can do it.” I bundled up the bag of medication under my arm and touched the pendant on the necklace around my neck for good luck.

“Alright. I’ll stand here in case you need me.”

“Thanks,” I said as I took the walker. “But I’ll be alright. Besides, I might not go in right away.”

“Sure, no problem.” He nodded gently, walking back to the driver’s side and getting in.

I waited for him to back out of the driveway and watched until I couldn’t see the taxi anymore. Turning back around to face the house, I took it all in. The pit in my stomach was now a hurricane. My chest hurt as I tried to breathe.

With painful slowness, I pushed the walker up the driveway. Drag marks were left in the gravel behind me as the wheels resisted moving through it. I had to give the walker an extra shove, which almost sent me tumbling forward.

Luckily, I caught myself before I face-planted on the ground. I spaced my feet more and gripped the walker tighter. As I approached the front door, I noticed that all the flowerbeds under the windows were overgrown. The flowers were wilted, and the petals were falling off.

Tears pricked my eyes. My mother always kept her gardens up. She would water them and feed them every day. She tended to them almost as much as she did to me as a child. They were her babies.

They had slowly died because she wasn’t there anymore. They looked exactly how I felt inside. I was wilting. My petals were dropping to the ground as the realization that my mother was gone settled over me. Sometimes you don’t want to believe something. Sometimes you have to see your world change to know it is real. That was the first time it truly hit me.

The dead flowers; dry, brittle, and bleeding back into the earth that gave them life; the overgrown grass that was almost knee high; the mail piled up in the mailbox, and the garbage

cans still full against the garage door, it all was cementing a visual of the truth.

Tears fell down my cheeks, plopping onto the cracked and broken leaves of my mother's rose bush. I watched in slow motion as the drops splatted and rolled off, then disappeared into the dirt. Tear after tear fell like that. A single splat, and then it was gone. I rubbed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath as I forced myself to keep moving.

The two low steps were tough to navigate, but I got to the door. I ripped off the police tape that still crisscrossed over the front door and let it flutter to the ground soundlessly. The doorknob was cold against my palm as I tried to open the door, but it was locked.

Shit.

I ran my fingers across the top of the window frame until I felt the spare key still tucked safely inside the trim. *Good, it's still here.*

My fingers trembled as I lined up the key with the lock. It took a second, but I finally got it in and was able to push the door open. As the door swung inward, I froze in place. My mind was hit with a barrage of memories as I stared into the darkness. Only my memories didn't match what I was seeing.

In my mind, the lights were on, and music was playing. I could smell the food my mother would be cooking, the pot roast, the fresh fish, the lasagna with freshly baked bread, and all kinds of pies. Decorations from different holidays skipped through my brain—the tree at Christmas, colored eggs at Easter, and pumpkins and skeletons at Halloween. I could picture the lights dangling around the windows, strung up around the room as bold and bright as the stars in the sky.

But the second I blinked, it was all gone.

The dark silence of the house consumed me. It was the silence I thought I craved. Except right then, it was louder than thunder. I had just walked into the center of a storm.

Chapter Seven

Dove

I closed the door behind me. Even though it was a gentle push, it slammed loudly, echoing through the silence like a scream in an open cavern. I stood motionless in the thick quiescence. It wrapped me like a cold wind, making me shiver from head to toe.

I locked the door behind me as I took a cautious step forward with the walker. The wheels whined as they rolled across the floor, creating a new echo that was eerie and unfamiliar.

My cheeks were damp from crying, and fresh tears kept building on the edge of my lids. My mother was the soul of our house. It was her home long before it was mine. The house felt cold and lifeless now. As if her death had somehow destroyed the beating heart inside the walls.

I flipped the lights on in the living room. The place had been flipped upside down by the police searching for clues. Drawers were left open; their insides spilled out like a gutted fish. Black powder was dusted all over the handles and doorknobs, around the edges of the trim, and across surfaces.

Behind all the disarray, I could see the home I remembered in my mind. The floral couch still had the quilt my grandmother had made folded across the top. The fridge buzzed from the kitchen, giving off that metallic vibration sound that used to scare me as a child, but I had grown to find comfort in it as an adult.

There was a picture of my mother and me on the wall from years ago when I was just a little girl. I was about five, and we were both dressed up for Halloween. I was wearing a big, blue, sparkling Cinderella dress, and my mother was dressed like the fairy godmother.

She was holding a pumpkin we had carved to resemble a carriage. It didn't look anything like the carriage in the story,

but she did her best to make me happy. The smiles on our faces were big and broad.

I could remember the way I felt that day; the excitement; the anxiousness to go out and get candy; the way my mother played the role of the fairy godmother all night long with her wand and impromptu songs she would sing on the spot, using her own lyrics to fit what was happening.

My heart shattered. *God, I miss you. How can this be real?*

I plucked the picture off the wall, brushed the dust off the glass, and then pushed my walker to the couch. Dropping down, I put the bag of medication on the table and stared at the picture.

Her eyes were so full of life. They were always so full of life, even when she discovered she had cancer. Not once did she let anyone feel bad for her. Not once did she get angry and scream about life not being fair. Not once did she expect to be treated differently. She still got up every day to cook, clean, and run errands. Nothing was going to stop her from living.

The tears fell hard and fast, blurring my vision. *This isn't right. This isn't how it was supposed to be.*

“This isn't fair,” I said out loud, my voice incensed. The tips of my fingers traced my mother's face. I wished I could go back in time. I wished I could change what I had done. Then I would have had more time with her. None of this would have happened. But wishing didn't change what was done.

“It's my fault, Mom. This is all my fault. You died because of me.” My voice trembled as I spoke to her through the picture. “I did this to you. I took what little life you had left.”

Knowing my actions and choices led to her death, knowing that my selfishness was the only reason she wasn't there, cut me deep. I stole it from her. I greedily put her in the hands of a monster. If I never went to Leon and hadn't borrowed from the devil, she'd still be alive.

“Why did I do that?” I asked. I was staring at her face, wishing for her to answer me. I wanted to hear her voice call out from down the hall. I wanted to lift my head and see her

poke her face out from behind the doorway as she told me I was ridiculous. I wanted all of it to be a horrible dream. But it wasn't.

Exhaling a heavy breath, I set the frame down on the coffee table and wiped my eyes. I looked out into the empty house, and it didn't feel right without my mother. Even the house was grieving. It creaked and groaned as the wind picked up outside. The windows rattled, and the walls trembled as if the house was crying too.

This was the home my mother and father bought while she was pregnant with me. It held us both through the good and the bad times. When my father died in a car accident when I was ten, that home helped her find her smile again.

She could look around and see the memories; the floor my father installed; the tree he planted in the front yard; the walls he painted her favorite color green; the cracked oven door because he dropped it while trying to fix it, and the crooked ceiling fan in the living room he put up. All of that brought her back. I watched my mother lose herself after his death and then find her place again. I wasn't so sure I'd be able to do the same.

Anger and sadness were the only feelings I felt. They burned through my soul like fire burned through wood. I had no idea if I'd be able to make it to the other side and find some form of happiness again.

I've lost too much. There's no coming back from this.

I leaned my head back against the couch and placed my hands on my forehead. I reached forward and pulled out the different medication bottles from the hospital, lining them up on the table.

Finding the pain medication, I popped two and swallowed them without water. I didn't want to deal with the pain anymore right then. My muscles, my chest, my bones, my fucking heart; they all hurt. All I wanted to do was sleep and forget it all.

You can't escape it.

I closed my eyes as they filled with more tears. *I can't take this.* Tears trickled down my cheeks as I grabbed the bottle of pain medication again and poured all of it into my hand. *I can end this right here.*

No more pain. No more embittered memories. No more tears. It would all be over. I could go to sleep and drift into an endless slumber, never waking up again. The pills rolled around in my palm like white candy.

I can do it. I can erase everything right now... Right down to my very own existence.

I thumbed the pile of pills, ready to take them all when a little voice screamed in my ear to stop. I jolted, turning to look around me. The spot on the couch was empty, but the voice sounded alive. It sounded like my mother was yelling my name from across the street while all the windows were closed.

“Mom?” I asked out loud. “Mom, is that you?”

There was no response, but I felt her. I felt her there with me. My heart was racing fast, and a light sweat broke across my forehead. As I stared at the medication in my hand, my thoughts started to change.

No, this isn't what I need to do.

Pouring the pills back into the bottle, I relaxed on the couch. I knew how the story was going to end. I knew exactly how the villain was going to die. I was still alive because I was the one who was going to make things right.

Chapter Eight

Dove

A warmth moved down my face, like when you open the oven door, and hot air spills out, baking you with whatever is inside. I opened my eyes. The sun was shining through the window. The beam of light spread out through the room, lighting up small bits of dust as they twisted and twirled in the opaque yellow stream.

My mind flashed back to being in that small room at Leon's house. I thought of the soft glow of light that would spill in from under the door and how I would lay with my cheek against the dirty, dank floor, trying to feel the heat from the light. I remember how thirsty I was as I lay there, but every breath was just another inhale of the dusty air. I would drag my index finger back and forth over the dirt, causing it to billow up like a dust storm. The tiny particles would dance in the light. They swirled around each other in a symphony of silent movements, all of them beautiful and dying at the same time. They would only float for so long before falling back to the earth from which they came.

That dust dance signified my death. I never thought I would get out of there. That same dust also embodied the beauty of everything I took for granted. The flowers I never smelled. The smiles of the people around me. The feel of the sun on my skin. I never took the time to notice the fresh air of a spring day and so many more things because life was too busy to stop and admire those little things.

I pushed myself up slowly, still highly aware of all the healing I still needed to do. "Ugh," I groaned. My muscles were stiff like cardboard. Sharp pains cut through me like lightning bolts, zipping down my legs and back up over my shoulders. Rubbing my arms and legs, I slowly twisted and placed my feet on the floor.

The wood was cool under my feet. I wiggled my toes, curling them up tightly, then stretching them open. The therapist in the hospital told me I needed to move as much as

possible. She said the more I moved, the easier it would get each day.

I need a shower.

I peeled myself off the couch using the walker and went down the hall to my room. I sifted through my clothes spread all over the bed and floor, eventually grabbing a pair of yoga pants and a long t-shirt. As I headed to the bathroom, the hallway seemed much longer than I remembered.

Each step made my feet feel heavier and heavier, like I was wearing cement shoes. The floor was hard as marble when my heels came down, unlike the wood planks it was made of.

After turning the water on, I carefully took my clothes off and stared in the mirror. I couldn't recognize the face looking back. My eyes were dull and dead, lacking every emotion except anger and hate. It wasn't just the scars from Leon's knife, or the burn marks, or the bullet wounds that had changed me. It was the scars that couldn't be reached. The ones that couldn't be seen on the outside but felt by me on the inside.

The scars inside would never heal; they would never be mended with stitches or band-aids. My heart will always bear the weight of what I went through.

The steam fogged the mirror, erasing me just like I wanted to be erased. There was an outline of a person. A figure that once held something unique but not anymore. I was a hollow shell, forever lost to a trauma that no words or doctors could take away.

I carefully stepped inside the shower, letting the water wash over my head and roll down my shoulders. The droplets smashed against my body, each one like a thin needle that pricked my skin. Nothing seemed normal anymore.

The simplest tasks were like climbing a mountain without hiking boots. It was more difficult than I expected to get dressed after the shower. I struggled to pull the yoga pants up my legs and wrestled the shirt over my head, but I did it.

I breathed a sigh of relief once it was over and sat on the toilet until I caught my breath. I used the side of the sink to stand up because I didn't want to use the walker. I hated it. The walker made me feel old, like I was an elderly lady. It was hard to let go of certain things. I know I used to do these things without a problem, and then one day, I woke up and couldn't anymore. It was frustrating.

Give it time. You need time.

My knees were slightly bent as I ditched the walker and used the wall to walk down the hall. As I stepped inside the kitchen, the counter became my crutch as I rested my hip against it.

There was so much discomfort throbbing in my lower back and upper thighs. My stomach kept getting struck with sharp slices of pain as I twisted and moved. I cringed and grabbed my belly as I pulled a mug out of the cupboard.

Shuffling my feet across the floor, I brewed a cup of coffee. I held the mug in one hand, then used my free hand to guide myself carefully back to the living room. My legs were growing weaker and weaker with each step. My knees were starting to give out, and my muscles were trembling.

The strength I wanted to have and the strength I had weren't lining up. In my mind, I could get up on my own and move around freely. I could make a cup of coffee in my sleep and dance across the room if I felt like it. But in reality, I was broken.

With the cup in my hand, I leaned against the wall and looked over at the couch. There were no more walls to get there. Inhaling a deep breath through my nose, I let it out through my mouth. "You can do this," I said out loud to myself. "It's just a few steps."

I tightened my grip around the mug and pulled myself off the wall. I didn't try to walk right away. I looked down at my feet, ensuring I had my balance before taking a step. When I felt secure enough, I went for it.

The coffee in the mug sloshed around as I took my first step. I rocked a little from side to side, but I stayed upright. I took a second step, causing the coffee to splash over the rim. It was hot, making me hiss, but I ignored the burn and kept going.

One slow step after another, I was almost close enough to the coffee table to reach out for support. My eyes locked on the table, and I stretched my hand out, ready to grab the edge, when my knees suddenly buckled, and my legs crumbled beneath me like brittle porcelain.

The world moved in slow motion. The coffee flew out of the cup in long tan streams that seemed to stay floating in the air. My body fell forward, then everything went black.

“Dove. Dove, wake up.” My shoulders shook as a voice whispered in my ear. “Come on, Dove, wake up for me.”

“What? What happened?” I asked as I opened my eyes and saw Detective Colt standing over me.

“It looks like you fell and hit your head on the coffee table.” His hands moved around my neck, feeling and examining. “Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?” I attempted to sit up, but he stopped me from moving.

“Don’t move yet. I want to make sure you didn’t seriously hurt yourself.”

“I hurt all over. What difference does it make at this point?” He glared at me with arched brows. “My neck is fine,” I said. “See? I can move it.” I rocked my head from side to side. “But my head hurts like a son of a bitch, so it matches the rest of my body now.”

“Well, you got a pretty big egg on your forehead.” He slipped a hand under my neck and the other under my legs. Ty lifted me off the floor and carried me to the couch, placing me down gently. “I’m going to call for an ambulance. You should get checked out to make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

“No,” I demanded, holding up my hand. “Do not call an ambulance. I’m fine. I spent enough time at the hospital

already.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I made a coffee and was walking to the couch when I fell.”

“You must have knocked your head good on the table.” He attempted to reach out and touch my forehead, but I swiped his hand away.

“I’m fine.”

“Alright,” he said, holding up open palms. “The coffee you made is all over the floor. I’ll get something to clean it up.”

“No, you don’t have to do that,” I said as I rubbed my head.

“So who is going to clean it then? You?” His voice was sarcastic as his eyes looked me up and down.

I sighed heavily and gave in. “Fine. There are paper towels right on the counter in the kitchen.”

“Stay right there, and don’t move a muscle.” He disappeared into the kitchen.

I could hear him rummaging around. “What the hell are you doing in there?”

“Getting something to clean it up.” Ty returned with the paper towels, the spray cleaner, and a dish rag bundled up in his hand. “Here,” he said, holding out the dish towel. “Put this on your head; it’ll help the swelling go down.”

The towel was packed with ice. I took it and placed it on the area that was throbbing. Ty dropped to his knees and started spraying the floor. He wiped up the spilled coffee and picked up the broken pieces of the ceramic mug that were scattered across the floor. He went back into the kitchen and started to rummage around again.

“What are you doing now?” I asked.

“Where are the mugs?”

“Why?”

“Never mind, I found them.” He came out a few minutes later with two mugs filled with coffee. Placing one down on the table in front of me, he smiled. “I hope you don’t mind; I helped myself to some coffee too.” He lifted his mug in his hand and took a sip.

“No, it’s fine.” I reached out for the cup. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He sat in the recliner against the front window and asked, “Feel any better?”

“I will in a second.” Picking up the bottle of pain medication, I took a couple. “This will do the job.”

“I know it’s not my business, but maybe you left the hospital too soon?”

“You’re right; it’s not any of your business. Maybe I was there longer than I wanted to be.”

“Maybe. But is it safe for you to be here alone like this?”

Glaring at him from the corner of my eyes, I frowned. “Did you come here just to scold me? How did you get inside my house anyway?”

“The back door was open. When you didn’t answer the door, I started to worry.”

“What if I was just in the shower or something? What if I just didn’t want to answer the door? Did you ever think of that?”

He shrugged his shoulder casually as he took another sip of his coffee. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? You were unconscious on the floor. You’re lucky I showed up. Lord knows what would have happened to you if I didn’t show up.”

“I would have woken up eventually.”

“And if you didn’t?”

“Maybe that wouldn’t have been so bad,” I said quietly under my breath.

Ty’s eyes stilled on mine. He leaned in closer and said, “Dove, I know all of this is tough on you, but that’s not what you want. You don’t want to die.”

“You don’t know what I want.”

“I know if you wanted to die, you wouldn’t be here right now. It’s that simple. People don’t make it through what you did without wanting it.”

I stared at him for a second, then closed my eyes, and moved the ice bag around my forehead. “Maybe the simplest answer is there’s no reason at all as to why some people live, and some people die. Maybe I just got lucky.”

“I’m not a man who believes in luck.”

I opened one eye and peered at him. “You don’t believe in luck?”

“Nope,” he said, stiffening his torso and relaxing again. “You either want something, or you don’t. I look at it like this...” Ty paused, tapping his fingers against the mug for a moment. “We’re all capable of great things, and sometimes it takes something devastating in our lives to help us see clearly. But, once your eyes are open, they’ll never close again.”

“What about the people that never have anything bad happen? Are you saying those people can’t see clearly?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying at all. Some people just know that life is worth living no matter what.”

“Look,” I said, closing my eyes again and laying my head flat. “My head hurts too much to process this shit. How about you tell me why you’re here in the first place?”

“Because I was assigned to your case, and I promised you the night you were brought to the hospital that I’d capture the person who did this. My guess is the same person who did this to you also took your mother.”

My muscles stiffened as Leon’s face popped into my head. I pushed myself up quickly, sitting up straight against the arm of the couch. The towel of ice started melting, causing the fabric to drip. Cold water trickled down my temples as I pulled the towel off and set it on the coffee table. Picking up the mug of coffee he made me, I drank a big gulp. It was still hot, prickling the back of my throat and making me cough.

“You think so too, don’t you?” he asked. His tone was accusatory, as if he was sensing my thoughts.

“I have no idea.” I shrugged a shoulder and looked out the window behind his head. “I can’t remember shit, so I’m not going to be able to help you. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you this.”

“I think you can help me. Tell me about you. What you like, where you like to go, the people you hang out with.”

“What the hell does any of that matter? I wasn’t really living an active lifestyle before all of this. I was a girl whose mother had cancer. I was a girl who took a few classes at the community college and spent her free time doing what she could to help her mom.”

“Come on, I’m sure there’s more to you than that. Any social media? Boyfriends? Guys you met online?”

“No, none. I hate social media, and didn’t have any time for dating.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you? You’re what, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three—and I don’t care if you believe me or not. It’s the truth.” I grabbed the bottle of pills on the table and poured another two into my palm.

“You know you took some a few minutes ago.”

My brows knitted together as my lips folded into a heavy scowl. Tossing the pills into my mouth, I washed them down with another sip of coffee and gave Ty an annoyed smile. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

“You sure? Because I don’t mind keeping you company.”

“I don’t need company. You found your way in; you can find your way out.” I slid back down on the cushions and rolled away from him. “I still have your card; no need to try and leave me a third.”

My eyes were open, staring at the back of the couch. I listened as he got up from the chair, walked into the kitchen, placed his mug in the sink, and came back out. He was

standing on the other side of the table. I knew exactly where he was because there was a board on the floor that creaked with weight on it. I stayed silent and didn't look over at him.

“I'm not going away, Dove; I hope you know that. I won't give up. I know you're healing, but I also know that you and your mother deserve to be free from this. That can't happen if you don't help me. I need your help with this, and so does your mom.”

I felt his fingers on my shoulder. His thumb swept up the curve of my neck and back down over my shoulder. His touch was soft and tender. “I know you feel alone, Dove, but you're not.” He squeezed my shoulder, sending a rush of warmth over me. The tips of his fingers dug in deep, and I wondered if he could feel the slight tremble that rippled through my body. “I know you're angry. I know you're so very, very angry, and I get it, I really do. If anyone can understand that anger, it's me.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. It was as if this man could read my thoughts and sense what I felt inside. I *do* feel alone. I *do* feel angry. But it didn't matter what he said. He would never understand what I had been through.

Keeping silent, I pinched my eyes shut tight. Ty's fingers slipped free of my shoulder, and I felt the weight of his shadow lift as he stepped back. The front door opened and closed. I glanced over my shoulder at where he was just standing. I knew the detective wanted to do his job. He was determined but I wasn't willing to give up my secrets. The detective had his plan, and I had mine.

Chapter Nine

Dove

I scooted the chair in closer to my computer and turned it on. It took a few moments to boot up. I was feeling a little better, less sore, and more mobile. I had the impression when I left the hospital that I was doing incredible. I hadn't realized how much help they gave me until I had to do everything alone. It was a rude awakening. But there was a sense of comfort at home that I didn't get in the hospital.

The screen popped on, flickering for a second before exploding with bright light. I blinked a couple of times as my eyes adjusted. A slight headache was brewing behind my eyes, but I ignored it. I had gotten really good at ignoring all the pain. It was the one thing about all of this I was proud of. It was something I could finally control.

Before everything, the computer had been my lifeline. I didn't lie to the detective about not having a social media account or friends. I was honest about all of that. What I had left out was that I was fucking good with computers.

I had hacked into my high school computer system my senior year. It was so easy. I could have changed all my grades, and no one would have noticed. I didn't do it, but knowing I had the skill was a thrilling.

That led me to hack into other systems. The local mall's security system, the town's data bank. Even the files for all the patients at the hospital weren't safe from me. I knew what was going on with my mother before she did. I just never let her know it.

After five minutes of a swirling icon and multiple percentage rates to completion, my computer was alive. I rested my hands on the keys, the serotonin flowing instantly. It was like a drug touching the keyboard. My veins would open, allowing the blood to rush in like waves as they stormed the beach. My body became warm as the pads of my fingers

stroked the keys as smoothly as a ballet dancer skimmed over the stage like she was floating.

I opened the browser, unsure if the detective had wired my house or not. I wasn't taking any chances. I had to assume he had. Why wouldn't he?

My goal was different than his, and I didn't want him to interfere with my purpose. I secured my computer, ensuring no one could track what I was doing. I began my search the second I knew I was safe from prying eyes.

It didn't take long before I had access to every little detail about Leon I could find. He owned a few nightclubs in the city. He had been arrested for money laundering, stolen goods, and tax fraud.

Then there was the information I already knew about him that I wouldn't find online. His side business of sex trafficking and drugs. The guy was a piece of fucking shit, and the world would be better off without him.

With a few more clicks, I controlled all his security systems and could see all of his bank accounts, contacts, and phone numbers. I could even see his next damn doctor appointment. The next hour I browsed, learning every little bit I could. I wanted to know him inside and out.

He moved up north from Miami when he was ten. His mother was a seamstress, and his father was a crook. His dad had been arrested for car thefts, robberies, and domestic assault. When Leon was thirteen, he became a ward of the state because he kept running away from home, and his mother couldn't control him after his father went to prison. It looked to me like he followed in his father's footsteps.

He was an only child. Both of his parents had died years ago. He had no other family that I could find. No children. No wife. No relatives. I shut my computer off and pushed back from the desk. After digitally jumping into his world and seeing just how easy it was, I knew I could keep an eye on him without him ever knowing I was there.

He'll never see me coming.

I stretched my legs and rubbed my hands up and down my thighs. As I glanced to my right, I saw a small picture on the shelf of my mother and father before I was born. Exhaling deep, I carefully stood up from the chair and walked over to it.

Their smiles brought a tear to my eye. They didn't have a care in the world back then. They had an entire lifetime ahead of them. I just wished it had been longer. I ran my finger around the edge of the frame, my heart swelling with sadness.

There was something else I had to do. I had been putting it off until I felt strong enough. I was ready.

Chapter Ten

Ty

Where the hell is she going?

I watched Dove climb into the back of a taxi and drive away. As I started my car and pulled onto the road, the engine roared to life. I followed a little behind so I didn't draw any attention. I'd been watching her home since she left the hospital, hoping I'd see something, *or someone*, that might help with the investigation.

I knew deep down that she was the key to unlocking everything. I wasn't sure what her role was or why the shadow of death followed her so close, but it did. I could see in her big green eyes there was something there, hiding in the depths, screaming with a voice so loud I could hear it from a mile away.

My hands tightened around the wheel as I quietly chased the taxi. It took a few turns, and I mimicked them. Dove was brilliant, but I had been doing this job for a long time. I had a sixth sense. I could see things that most would miss. I could feel something that most couldn't. And my gut was never wrong.

The girl knew something. Even if her memory was shot right then, the truth was there, just waiting to spring back to life. My biggest fear was that whoever did this would come finish her off. I tried so hard to keep the story out of the news and the papers, but I could only do that for so long.

A mother shot execution style and then her daughter found beaten, stabbed, shot, and left for dead, was precisely the kind of clickbait these journalists lived for. Dove's safety didn't concern them, but it sure as hell concerned me.

The taxi rolled to a stop, so I slowed my car down and pulled over out of view. Dove got out of the car, said something to the driver, and handed him some cash. She didn't check her surroundings before tucking her head into her jacket and walking off.

Where the hell is she going? There's nothing even around here.

She was on the sidewalk, heading up Arnold road. It was a small through-way connected to downtown Coventry's business section if you went back about five or six miles in the opposite direction. Tiogue lake was on my left. It was a man-made lake where all the locals went fishing. There wasn't much to catch in the lake except carp and catfish. An old, rundown mechanic shop was across the street from where she got out. Otherwise, there were only trees for miles.

It was cold out, so no one was out fishing. I could see a few swans and Canadian geese bobbing up and down on the low waves rolling over the choppy surface. The sky was mop water gray, and it looked like the clouds were going to open up any second.

I let her walk a little before climbing out of my car to follow her. She was effectively unaware that I was even there. She didn't look nervous about being alone, which felt off to me.

What piqued my interest the most was that she looked so comfortable alone. Most victims are terrified if their abuser isn't locked up, but not Dove. The guy who did that to her could be anywhere, and she didn't look worried about it. She wasn't looking around with shifty eyes or walking with an uneasy gate. She looked determined.

She cut through the parking lot of the old shop, then ducked into the trees behind the building. Her imperceptible limp was much better than the last time I saw her. She wasn't holding herself with an arm over her stomach like she was in pain. Her hair was pulled back into a clip with loose curls that bounced up and down with every step.

As the trees thickened, I lost her for a second, but as I pushed through the overgrown path in the woods, the trees opened back up to the back side of a small cemetery.

I stayed hidden in the shadows of the woods and watched her cross the field of headstones. St. Mary's cemetery had been there for decades. There was a mix of old and new

monuments. Some were broken, and you couldn't read the text anymore, while others were decorated with fresh flowers.

Dove disappeared over a small ridge, allowing me to sneak out of my hiding spot. I spotted Dove kneeling on the ground next to a headstone that looked like it had been there for some time. It showed plenty of age, with green moss climbing up the side and over the top and shriveled flowers in a vase attached to the granite base.

Dove plucked the dead flowers out and tossed most of them off to the side except for one. She stared at the wilted flower as she spun it between her fingers. She was talking, but I wasn't close enough to hear her.

There was a voice inside my head telling me to leave her alone. That this wasn't something I should see or be a part of, but I was too damn stubborn to do that. Sometimes the only way to get the answers you wanted was to catch someone at their weakest.

"Hey," I said as I walked up behind her.

She didn't jump at the sound of my voice or even lift her head. She kept her head down and just stared at the dead flower.

"I hope I didn't scare you."

"You didn't. I wondered how long it would take until you finally came over."

"You knew I was here?"

"You weren't exactly slick about it. I spotted you the second I left my house."

She's paying more attention than I thought.

"Sharp woman," I said, taking a few steps closer. "Was it the town cruiser that gave me away?"

"You could say that. I know every car that's normally on my street. You stick out like a sore thumb."

"Let me get this straight, you can remember every car on your street, but you can't remember anything about what

happened to you?”

“I’m not sure how much you know about the brain, but the doctor called it long-term memory. My long-term memory is fine; it’s my short-term memory that’s fucked up right now.”

I dropped down next to her and read the name on the grave. “Thomas Harloway.”

“My father.”

“I’m sorry. He died in a car accident, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I read about it in your file.”

“My file?” Her eyes flicked to mine. The decrepit rose between her fingers began to spin faster. The petals looked like they were going to fly off and crumble to dust.

“Yeah, your file. Does it surprise you that you have a file?”

“No, I’m just not sure why my father’s death is relevant to your case.”

“It’s not, but it gives me details about you and your past. Is your mother buried here too?”

“Look at the other side of the headstone.”

I walked around to see her mother’s name etched across the back.

“I don’t have the guts to go to her yet. Figured I’d sit here with my father first since I’ve been here so many times before. It feels weird to know she’s here with him now. It doesn’t seem real.”

“I’m sorry, Dove.” I rested my hand on her shoulder gently. “You shouldn’t have to go through this. It isn’t fair.”

She looked up at me briefly, her lids shutting slightly as she shifted her eyes back to the dry flower in her hand. “The first time my mother brought me here after my father died and the stone was put up, I saw her name on the other side, and I screamed. I screamed so loud I fell to my knees. And you know what she did? She fell right with me. She took me in her

arms, brushed my hair with her hand, and told me everything was alright. She said she's right here, and she'll always be here; that she wasn't going to be put in the ground until she was old and gray. Now she's gone."

"She's still with you, Dove. She's a part of you, just like your dad is a part of you too. It doesn't matter where you go; they will always be with you."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't feel that way. I don't feel them with me. I can't feel them around me. Trust me, I've tried. I've tried so hard to feel them. But they're gone, Detective, and they're never coming back."

Tears dripped off her cheeks, falling to the ground with soundless splashes. The earth absorbed her sadness as if her parents were trying to take her pain away. It hurt me to see her that way. To see her with so much suffering inside.

There was nothing I could do to change the past, but I could still help her heal. I could fix some of it for her. For me to do that, she needed to talk to me. She needed to tell me everything she knew so I could end some of the suffering.

Her shoulders shook as she wept. Her hands were trembling, and her breathing was broken up with strained gasps for air. She was slowly breaking from the inside out. Her entire world was being ripped to shreds like a tornado cutting through a house, and she was stuck in the center of the storm.

"Dove, please, I need you to just tell me what you know. I know you remember something. I can see it in your eyes."

"You don't see anything. My eyes are empty, just like the rest of me."

She was wrong. Her eyes weren't empty. They were full of pain, regret, anger, and loss. All of it was right there, floating on the surface. I could see every emotion clearly; it didn't matter how much she tried to convince me that she was hollow.

"No, you're not. You're not empty. You're lost. You're wandering around with no idea what to do or how to get

through it. But if you let me, if you give me a chance, I can help you heal.”

Dove whipped her head over her shoulder and snarled, “You can’t help me. No one can help me.”

“I can. I’m not lying when I tell you that. I need you to trust me, Dove.”

She stood up in one quick burst. Her lips crinkled with anger and pain as she glared at me. “You keep saying that! You keep telling me you can help! But you can’t help! So just stop already!” Dove threw the dead flower to the ground and spun away from me, whispering under her breath. “I already know how this ends.” She pulled her phone from her pocket as she stormed away. Looking back at me, she said, “Oh, and one more thing, stop fucking following me.”

I straightened my back and tucked my hands in my pockets to show her I wasn’t the threat she needed to ward off. “How are you getting home? Want me to give you a ride?” I asked.

“You’re the last person I want a ride from.”

I watched her walk down the narrow path of the cemetery until she was out of sight. She was hiding something. There was no denying it. She said the quiet part out loud. *‘She knows how this ends.’*

As I climbed back inside my car and shut the door, I decided to do some more digging. I had been trying to figure her out for months now. Even before she woke up in the hospital, I tried to learn about her.

I knew something in her past was chasing her. Now, I needed to find out what that was—*no, not what but who*. The *who* was what I was searching for. Someone she knew did this, and I couldn’t shake the idea that was why she wasn’t trying to help me. Because why, after everything she had been through, would she push me away?

After leaving the cemetery, I went to the hospital to talk to her mother’s doctor.

“I already told you, Detective Colt, Mrs. Harloway, and her daughter never came to see me with anyone else. It was

always just the two of them.”

“Did Dove ever mention anyone else to you while they were here? A boyfriend, a neighbor, another family member?”

“No, our conversations were always about her mother’s treatment. Just like—”

“You already told me before,” I said before he could finish. I tapped the pen against my chin as I looked at my notebook. “Alright, let me ask you this, how many treatments did her mother have?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant at all. And to be honest, I think that question toes the line of doctor-patient privilege.”

“I’m not trying to make you break your oath. It’s just that I want to solve this case. Some things might seem unrelated, but then again, you never know what information can get this entire thing moving. We all want to put this person behind bars. I’m sure you do too.”

He looked at me for a moment. I could see the wheels turning in his mind about what he could and couldn’t share. “Well,” he finally said. “Monica went through three rounds of chemo and two treatments of radiation. It wasn’t working as well as we had hoped, so I told her about an experimental drug being tested. Dove was interested in that, and her mother agreed. We had started the new treatment, and it was looking really promising, but then...” He paused and stroked his hand across his jaw. “You know.”

“Did she have private or state insurance?”

“Why does that matter?”

“I’m curious how she paid for the treatments. I mean, they’re not cheap, I’m sure. The money had to come from someplace.”

“Well, Mrs. Harloway was on the fence about what to do, but Dove wanted the best for her mom.”

“Huh,” I grunted. “How much was it going to cost them?”

“Detective Colt, I’ve already given you more than enough. My patient might be gone, but I still have my ethics about

what I tell you. I know you're trying to do your job, but I'm sorry, there isn't much more I can say."

"I understand. I'm just," I said as I exhaled heavily and leaned toward his desk. "I'm trying to put the pieces together, and right now, none of it fits."

I couldn't say what I was thinking out loud. I knew Dove's mother's cancer was a changing point in both their lives. How much of a role it played in the choices Dove made, I didn't know. The trauma that was inflicted on Dove was personal. It went far beyond just overkill. Her injuries were to make a point.

What happened to her mother seemed to be straight-up murder. It was clean and straightforward. A single bullet to get it done. If there was no link between the two, if they weren't connected at all, the odds of something like this happening were a billion to one.

"I'm sorry; I wish there was more I could tell you," Dr. Miza said.

"Sure, I understand. I just have one last question. If, for some reason, Dove reaches out to you, will you let me know?"

"It will depend on what she comes to me for, Detective."

I nodded my head and stood up. Holding out my hand, I said, "Thank you again. I hope I didn't take up too much of your time."

"No, it's fine." He gave me a firm handshake and walked me to the door. "If I think of anything else, I'll certainly let you know."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. You have my card."

I was frustrated that the investigation was stalled. Dove didn't have any red flags in her life. Nothing stood out in her past that would lead to someone trying to kill her.

This can't be random. It just can't be. None of this makes any sense.

What was done to her was pure rage.

Chapter Eleven

Dove

I slightly pushed the blue floral curtain out of the way and peeked outside. I could see Ty parked about a few houses up. There was a thin outline of his silhouette behind the glass. He had been there all morning, even after I told him to stop following me. I couldn't understand why he was so insistent on watching me.

Maybe he's not watching me but watching over me...

The thought flickered through my head, but I pushed it away. I only wanted to finish what I set out to do. If Ty got to Leon first, I'd never be able to mend my broken heart with the bitter-sweet pill of revenge.

Stepping away from the window, I tied my sneakers and pulled my hair back into a ponytail. I wanted to get out of the house and do something I used to do. I was going to go for a run. I wasn't sure how it would go. Maybe I'd take that first leap and fall flat on my face. Maybe my knees would lock up, my ankles would roll, and I'd end up a twisted pile of road rash. But I wanted to try.

It could possibly bring back a little piece of who I was before. I was hopeful that the girl I remembered was still inside somewhere. Optimistic that she was just hiding under a cloak for protection and would come out once she knew she was safe.

Except, you're not safe. Not yet.

As I stood in the driveway to stretch a little, I looked at Detective Colt's car from the corner of my eye. He was tucked behind Mr. Thompson's black truck. I acted like I didn't know he was watching. It was probably better if I made him think he was outsmarting me so I could keep an eye on him too.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, that was the saying, wasn't it? The detective wasn't aware, but he was

one of my enemies. He stood in the way of everything. He was the mountain I needed to scale.

I took a right out of my driveway, jogging away from him. I didn't need to look back to know he was tailing me. His tires rolled slowly in the distance, popping loose rocks against his fender walls. The faint sound of the engine hummed like static in the background.

The sky was a little gray, with the sun making a cameo every so often between plumes of big dark clouds. There was a slight chill in the air. Cold to the lungs with every deep breath. It was the weather I loved to run in.

Starting slowly, I let my feet feel the pavement and tried to focus on my muscles and breathing. My lungs burned with icy needles, but I ignored the discomfort in my chest. The pain in my ribs and the way the muscles in my legs tightened unexpectedly almost made me stop. Except, I kept pushing forward. Sharp pins and a stinging sensation clawed through every nerve as if my body was trying to tell my brain it wasn't ready, but again, I kept running.

Nothing compared to the pain I'd been through. No amount of discomfort would ever equate to what Leon did to me or what it felt like to learn my mother had been murdered.

I ran around the block and out onto the main road. I ran to make myself stronger. I ran to build the muscles I lost. I ran to escape the dreams and thoughts and hurt inside. I ran to escape the world I hated and the one I wished I could run back to.

The sound of my feet hitting the pavement and my heavy breathing, drowned out the world around me. My blood was pumping hard and fast, feeding my legs as I picked up the pace. Sweat beaded up on my forehead and trickled down the back of my neck.

As the wind blew through my hair and the air filled my lungs, I didn't feel all the iron bars caging me in. I was free.

I finished my run, slowing to a stop in my driveway. Ty's car rolled up beside me. "Get in," he said.

I cupped my hips with my hands and tilted my head.
“Why?”

“Just get in. There’s something I want to show you.”

“Nah, I think I’m good. I need a shower. You’ll have to show me—”

“Just get in, please.” His voice was commanding, not asking. He leaned over and popped the door open.

Reluctantly, grabbed the door and climbed inside. I twisted to look at him, asking, “What? What is so important that you need to show me right this second?”

He pulled a green folder out from his seat and handed it to me. “Here.”

“What is this?” I asked, opening the folder.

There were three rows of six faces, all of them men. There were thin faces, fat faces, faces with hair, and others that were bald and had wrinkles. There were guys with tattoos on their necks or next to their eyes. One guy was even smiling with a toothless grin.

“What is this?”

“Do you recognize any of these people?” he asked as he pointed down at the paper.

I glanced over the faces again. “No.”

I lied. Leon’s face was dead center, but I refused to let my body react to him. His face haunted me every night. Seeing him staring up at me from a thin sheet of paper meant nothing. The paper wasn’t real. He wasn’t speaking to me or calling me a whore. He wasn’t smiling that devilish grin or putting new wounds on my body. He was simply stagnant in the image like a bacteria-filled puddle.

“Are you sure?” Ty observed me carefully, searching for the slightest hint of recognition.

“I’m sure. Is that it? Can I go now?”

His cologne swirled up around my face, igniting senses that had been dormant. I hated it. I hated that this man was

suddenly making my heart pound and my stomach turn into knots. I hated that the musky odor of mint and the essence of copra sparked a small flame inside me. It was foreign and unwelcome.

“I was hoping someone would jump out at you, but if not, I’ll just keep searching.”

“You don’t need to,” I said. “I—” Cutting myself off, I turned my attention out the window and looked at my house. “Never mind.”

“No, what is it? You what?” he asked.

“It’s nothing; just forget it.” My hands began to intertwine, balling up nervously.

“No, go on.” He slid his finger under my chin and turned my face back to his. “Tell me what you were going to say. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I let my eyes still on his and said, “I hate the person who did this. Whoever it is, I hate them. But the more I think about everything, the more rage I end up feeling. If I’m a victim, like you say, then why the hell do I only feel anger? Why don’t I feel fear? Why don’t I feel anxious?”

“Everyone deals with trauma differently, Dove.” His thumb softly moved back and forth over my chin as his eyes shifted between mine. “There’s no right or wrong way to feel.”

My eyes flicked away as I kept fumbling with my hands in my lap. The detective didn’t know that it was all my fault. *I’m the reason for all of this.* It was the truth. None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me.

I looked back up. Our eyes connected. Ty wasn’t looking at me like he did in the hospital. There was no pity or poignant regret for me. This was different. There was a glimmer of silver in his deep blue eyes that I hadn’t noticed before. The metal flecks sparkled like tiny stars as his eyes darted between mine. They drifted around my face until they finally settled on my lips. I licked them naturally, and he inhaled a quick breath.

Ty jerked his hand back and ripped his eyes away. “Alright, I need to get back to the office. You can go.”

“Are you sure you’re just going to go back to the office?” I asked. “You mean I won’t find you parked outside my house in an hour?”

He glanced at me briefly, his tone changing completely. “I’ll be around. It’s still my job to keep an eye on you.” He started his car, and I climbed out.

Ty hit the gas, and the tires skidded on the pavement as he took a hard left. I knew he’d be back at some point, but this little break gave me a chance to do some more research of my own. I didn’t go back inside my house; instead, I jogged into town.

“What can I help you with?” the man asked as the door swung shut behind me.

“I need a gun,” I said.

“Alright.” He opened the case in front of him as I stepped to the counter and pulled out a small twenty-two. “This is the gun most ladies purchase when they come in. It fits in your purse, is easy to handle, and comes in pink.”

“Well, I’m not that kind of lady. I don’t care what colors it comes in. I need something that won’t miss and can get the job done.”

His eyes grew wide as he gave me a smirk. “Sounds like you mean business.”

“I do.”

“Can I ask what you’re hunting?”

“You can ask, but it doesn’t mean I’m going to tell you.”

“And I don’t have to sell you a gun if I think it’s for something nefarious.”

I placed my hands on the counter and glared at him. “Do you see these scars?” He quickly looked over my face and the visible skin on my arms and nodded. “I need something to protect myself. I don’t want to be a victim anymore.”

His demeanor changed. His brows lowered, and his lips smoothed out. “Alright, what did you have in mind?” he asked

as he put the small pistol back into its stand.

I tapped my finger against my chin and looked over the guns in the glass case. “This one,” I said, pointing to a large, black gun. “What about this one?”

“That’s a Glock.”

“Is it accurate?”

“It is with a little practice.”

“That’s perfect.”

“Okay. Well, first things first. I need you to fill out this paperwork for a background check.” He picked up a clipboard and handed it to me.

“Sure. How long until I can come to get it?”

“A few days, a week at the most.” He rang me up as I filled the paperwork out. “You ever shot a gun before?” he asked.

“Once, when I was a kid with my dad, but it was a rifle.”

“This one is a little different. There’s a range over on North Main street. Go there and ask for Steve; tell him Victor sent you.”

I slid the paperwork back across the counter. “Thanks, I will.”

“I’ll give you a call when your background check comes in. If everything looks good, you can come pick up your gun then.”

“Thanks again, Victor.” Giving him a wave, I left the store.

When I got home, I didn’t see Ty parked anywhere on the street, which made my chest hurt a little. I had gotten used to him being there. I almost missed him. Maybe it was because I was all alone, and there was a sliver of fear someplace inside me that I refused to let myself feel.

I was sitting on my couch when the doorbell rang. As I stood, I felt the soreness in my muscles from the run for the first time. It was a good kind of hurt. One that I welcomed

with open arms. I peeked through the window and let out a sigh.

Pulling the door open, I placed my hand on my hip and tilted my head against my shoulder. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Ty smiled a friendly smile. I hadn’t noticed how handsome his smile was until right then. A single dimple creased at the corner of his lip and right cheek. That dimple made him look younger. There was a touch of gray in his hair, and light lines were beginning to form at the corners of his eyes. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, not the usual casual business suit I had gotten used to seeing him in.

“I thought you might be hungry,” he said, pulling a plastic bag out from behind his back and holding it up. “I hope you like Chinese.”

I folded my arms over my chest and just stared at him.

“Come on, it’s just dinner. I promise I won’t bombard you with a million questions about everything else.”

“Is this a serious promise?”

“Yes, it’s a serious promise,” he said sternly. “This isn’t an interrogation. It’s just dinner.”

“Alright, come on in.” I stepped to the side and let him pass by me.

“Where can I put this?” he asked.

“The coffee table is fine. I’ll go grab a couple of plates and stuff.”

“No, you don’t need to do that. I got chopsticks, and we can eat from the containers. No need to dirty dishes if we don’t have to.”

“That almost sounds better than free food,” I said with a chuckle as I sat down on the couch.

Ty sat next to me and started pulling stuff out of the bag. “Okay, so I got vegetable chow mein, chicken lo mein, sweet and sour chicken, crab rangoons, pork fried rice, and beef with

black mushrooms and pea pods. I grabbed a bunch of stuff because I wasn't sure what you liked."

"I'm not super picky. This smells amazing," I said. "Which one can I..." I asked as I pointed between the small boxes.

"Whichever you want. There are egg rolls in this bag if you want one." Ty picked up one of the boxes after I took mine. "So, you do look like you feel a lot better."

"I do feel better."

"Good. When I first saw you in the hospital, I could never have imagined this is where you'd be today."

I took a big bite of food as I looked over at him. "I thought we weren't going to talk about this stuff?"

"We're not; it's just conversation. I wanted you to know how happy I am to see you like you are now. That's all. We can change the subject."

"Good. Let's talk about you then. I know you're a detective, but tell me something else about you. Are you from around here?"

He shook his head no. "I grew up in California."

"*California?* Why the hell would you trade in the palm trees and sun for pine trees and snow?"

Ty wiped his mouth with a napkin as he laughed. "Honestly, I don't know. After finishing school, I got an offer to work in New York, and then I bounced around some between other districts, and here I am."

"Did you meet your wife here too?"

"Wife?" he asked, his voice a little taken back. I glanced down at the ring on his finger, then back up. "Oh no, this isn't a wedding ring. This was my father's ring. It's his class ring. See?" He held up his hand so I could read the small type on the band. It was a pretty ring with a big red gem in the center, and fancy, silver, and black swirled designs. It said George Colt on one side and class of nineteen seventy-three on the other.

“After my father died, my mother gave it to me. I wear it on this hand because I’m left-handed, and so was my father.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright. It was a long time ago.” He was quiet for a second, then said, “He was murdered.”

I choked down my food with a cough. “Oh my god.”

Ty’s eyes steadied on mine. “I told you I knew your pain. I wasn’t lying about that.”

I was wrong that he didn’t understand me or what I was going through. It was different, but in a way, it was the same. Losing a parent at someone else’s hands leaves you with a film you can’t wash off. It’s like a knife being stabbed repeatedly into every piece of exposed flesh. A pain that goes so deep it doesn’t go away.

“Did they ever catch who did it?”

“No.”

“What happened?”

“My father was a cop too. One night, he was working the graveyard shift when a call came over the radio about a robbery. My dad was the closest patrol to the house. When he got there, the guy ran, and my father chased him. He shot my dad in an alley and got away. They never caught the person.”

“That must be so hard for you. So, why are you here? Why not be at home so you can try to solve your father’s murder one day?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a shoulder shrug. “I guess I ran away from it because being there was too painful for me. But here, here, I can make a difference. Back home, I have a personal connection to the case. I’ll never be able to see it through a clear lens.”

I could see the pain he still harbored in his eyes while he talking. I could feel the hurt in his words. I understood why he was so determined now. He had always been trying to solve his father’s murder, even if it was a different case. He said he

ran from it, but in reality, I think he had been chasing it the entire time.

He scooped a big bite of food into his mouth and tried to smile. His lips folded and crinkled in a weird upside-down, half grin. “Anyway, we don’t need to talk about all this now. What a way to turn a conversation dark, huh?”

“No, it’s alright. I really am sorry you had to go through that. But you’re doing something good with your life and helping other people. People like me.”

“That’s an ironic statement. How can I help people like you when you don’t want my help?”

“You’re right, I don’t. Except, it’s not because I don’t want it; it’s because I don’t need it.”

He peered at me from the corner of his eyes as he finished chewing. “So, you do know more than you’re telling me.”

“That’s not what I said at all.”

“No, but most people who have gone through what you did, don’t push away my help. They embrace it. They call, they give leads, and they tell me everything they know. You’re not telling me anything.”

Jabbing my chopsticks in the box, I pushed the food away. I stood up from my seat, giving him a stark glare as I picked up the empty containers and carried them into the kitchen.

Ty got up and followed me. “I know I promised I wouldn’t talk about it, but I couldn’t help it.”

“You’re right. You did promise.” Facing the sink, I dumped the small amount of food remaining inside the garbage disposal. “And then you broke that promise.”

“We both broke it. You were just as much a part of the conversation as I was. But, Dove, I want to fix this for you and your mother. Think about her; think about getting her the justice she deserves.”

“I have,” I said sternly, twisting back around. “And I know what I need to do.”

He eyed me with curiosity. “You don’t need to do anything. That’s my job. Don’t do something stupid, Dove.”

“Stupid! Stupid! You know what’s stupid?” I asked, taking a firm step closer. “Stupid is you thinking you have any idea what I’ve been through! Stupid is thinking you can fix me by arresting the asshole that did this!” I slammed my finger against his chest, my lips curling into an angry scowl. “Stupid is not listening to what I’m telling you!”

“No, stupid is you thinking you have control over something you don’t.”

Anger and sadness consumed me at once, and I slapped him. Ty just stood there and took it. His head jerked slightly, but he didn’t get upset or angry. Instead, he stayed right where he was and let me unload on him.

“You have no idea what I’ve been through!” I screamed, pounding my fists against his chest. Over and over, I struck him as hard as I could. “No one understands what happened to me! No one! He deserves to die! He needs to die!” Tears streamed down my face as my voice crackled and spit like hot coals having a fresh log thrown on top.

Ty quickly gathered me up in his arms and hugged me close. My angry fists turned into limp smacks as he held the back of my head and pressed my face against his chest. I had fucking lost it.

I was sobbing so hard my body was shaking. Ty squeezed me tighter, brushing his hand down over my head to soothe me. “Shh,” he said hushedly, stroking my head. “Everything is going to be fine. You’re strong, and in the end, you’ll come out of this on the other side even stronger.”

I let myself fall against him, allowing him to embrace me. His arms were so solid and thick that I felt safe in them. Like no one could ever hurt me again if I stayed right where I was, wrapped up in him, protected from the world.

“Shh,” he said again, running his hand down my back. “We’re going to fix this, Dove. Let me help you fix this.”

I looked up at him with tears still falling down my cheeks. Ty's ocean-blue eyes were dark and deep. I wanted to jump inside them to escape the world. His eyes flicked between mine, holding me still and making me feel things I hadn't ever felt before.

My heart was beat quick like a caged bird trying to escape as he licked his lips. My stomach clenched tight as he sucked in a slow breath and pulled his bottom lip into his mouth. His massive hands slipped up my arms to cup my cheeks. His eyes shifted over mine as he lowered his face.

I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. I wanted a moment that wasn't about the pain or the sadness. A moment where my mind could be untethered for just a little while.

His lips touched mine. They were soft and delicate as he kissed me. An excited warmth blushed my skin. I closed my eyes, allowing him to give me a glimmer of light in the darkness of my life. And as quickly as he was there, he was gone, like a hummingbird full of nectar.

Ty pulled his face away, releasing me as he took a long step back. "I'm sorry," he said, running his hand through his hair. "I shouldn't have done that."

"No, it's fine. I didn't mind."

His eyes were wide. He was stunned by what had just happened. "No, I really shouldn't have done that. It's not fine, I... I..." he stuttered out. "I have to go."

Ty whipped around and stormed into the living room. The front door opened and slammed shut, shaking the windows. And I was left alone in my kitchen with warm tingles in my belly and my lungs frozen, unable to breathe.

I touched my lips with the pads of my fingers. They were still hot with the weight of his kiss, like the way you could still feel the sun on your skin after a long day at the beach.

Exhaling a slow breath, I shook the burning feelings inside away.

I didn't have time for that. There were bigger things I needed to worry about.

I couldn't let Ty distract me from what I was willing to die for.

Revenge.

Chapter Twelve

Ty

What the fuck was I thinking?

I clutched my skull and dropped my head to my chest. I shouldn't have kissed her. It was a reckless mistake. She was a victim, and I was the guy who was supposed to save her. I fucked up. I lost control and let my primitive emotions take over.

Her milky skin and the soft freckles running over the bridge of her nose made it hard for me to keep my hands off her. Dove's copper red hair and bright green eyes were striking. Even through the tears, her eyes glistened like pure jade hidden inside the raw stone. Her rosy cheeks and pink lips were so damn kissable I had to taste her. She was so strikingly gorgeous I gave in, tossing everything else to the wind.

It was her eyes that drew me in the most. I could still see the relic of life inside. Small and enervated, smothered by the pain and rage she couldn't sort through. Despite all she was holding inside, they sparkled like stars, like giant beacons of light in the darkness.

Still, none of that mattered. I shouldn't have kissed Dove, and I should apologize for it. I overstepped my boundaries, and I wouldn't let it happen again. I just wished she could see what I could. That her future could be so much better if she let me help. Without closure, she would be trapped in the echo of the past.

She's too broken to see beyond the cracked surface of her heart.

I hadn't spoken to her in days, but I still watched her. So far, I hadn't seen anything that looked suspicious. She ran every morning and spent the rest of her day inside her house.

Today was different. Dove made a trip to a place that took me by surprise.

The gray building had a sapless exterior made of cinder blocks with florescent yellow doors. The windows were all blacked out as if there was something secret inside. It was discrete, tucked back into the trees off the road with a huge dirt lot. The only thing giving it away was a large sign piercing the treetops like a tower to the sky. The words Northern Rod and Gun were lit up in red.

After a few more minutes, I went inside. Dove didn't see me as I stood in the doorway. Or maybe she did and was ignoring me as she'd done before. I watched her for a second before approaching. She adjusted her feet in a wide stance as she tried to position the gun comfortably. She was obviously out of her element because of how heavy and awkward the gun looked in her hands.

I carefully walked up beside her. "You're holding it all wrong." I was almost yelling so she could hear me over the loud gunshots around us.

The air was dense with the scent of metal and gunpowder. It was so thick it tingled the back of my throat as I swallowed. A faint cloud of white hovered over the entire range, unruffled and tranquil, until a bullet cut through it, sending it rolling out of the way.

Dove glanced at me briefly. "Thanks, but I don't remember asking for your advice," she said. Turning her attention back to her lane, she aimed the gun. "You can take your ego and go elsewhere. I'm busy right now."

"You're right. I probably should just shut my mouth. But what good would that do you? Especially because this is one thing I'm good at. Here," I said, reaching out and flipping my fingers for her to give me the gun. "Let me show you."

She eyed me, then passed me the weapon. "Be my guest." She fanned her arm out toward the shooting lane, exaggerating the motion with an extra swirl of her slender fingers.

My eyes were on hers as I paused and gave her an apologetic half-smile. I wanted to tell her I was sorry I kissed her, but it didn't feel like the right time. She was standoffish. Her arms crossed over her chest, lips knitted up.

“Are you going to show me, or are you just going to stand there with that stupid look on your face? Let’s see how good of a shot you are.” She tilted her head and hugged herself tightly.

The primal beast that lived inside roared to life. I knew it was wrong. I knew I should have fought the animal and stuffed it back into its cage. Except, her defiant and bullish attitude turned me on. I enjoyed having to puncture through her steel veneer. She was a challenge, and I loved a good challenge.

“I’ve got an idea. Let’s make this more interesting. Are you a betting kind of girl?”

Her eyes danced around mine, trying to read my thoughts. “I don’t bet.”

“You sure? We can at least make some fun out of this.”

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms as she crossed one leg over the other. “Show me already. This might be a game to you, but it’s not to me.”

My eyes traced her mouth, following her tongue as she licked her bottom lip gently. How she was nibbling on her bottom lip and pulling it into her mouth was sexy. Fuck I could kiss her again.

My cock jerked, and my stomach tightened. A buzzing feeling began to race through my body as Dove forced her breasts to puff up with her arms. She sucked in a breath and held on to it as she noticed my eyes moving around her body. Fuck, she was a desire I couldn’t shake off. I wanted to peel her clothes off layer by layer until she was naked and trembling with wanton need.

I watched her swallow hard, following the lump in her throat until it disappeared. The thick vein in her neck began to pulse wildly. I could almost feel how hard her heart was pounding. My blood began to run hot, and my cock thickened.

Stop! What the hell are you doing?

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I said. “First, you want the back of the gun handle to rest tightly against the joint of your thumb

and pointer finger. Just like this, see?” She leaned in slightly to look and nodded her head. “Then you want the palm of your other hand to sit against the base and your fingers wrapping your hand. Like this,” I said, ensuring she could see what I was doing. She nodded again. “Good. Then you take your shot.” I lined up and fired a few shots, landing them all in the center of the target. “Easy. Now you try.”

Dove took the gun back and tried to imitate my hand positions. She shot, but the gun recoiled, forcing her to hit the target in the low bottom corner. “Fuck, I’m so bad at this.”

“The problem is your tensing up for the kickback. You’re anticipating the recoil, so your hand jerks in response. That’s what’s causing your shots to go low.”

She gave me a look. One that said, *‘I don’t need a damn story; just help me fix it.’* I knew why she was there. She didn’t wander into a gun range because it was some hobby of hers. She was scared and wanted to protect herself. But I wasn’t going to let anything happen to her.

What if you’re wrong? What if she’s not here to protect herself?

Maybe she wasn’t there because she wanted to protect herself. She had said she didn’t need my help. People who were afraid and wanted protection didn’t turn away a cop who was offering it.

Maybe she’s planning something else. The thought stuck a nerve with me. The idea that she might put herself in danger was unsettling. She had already been through so much; would she really risk getting hurt again?

I forced my head to clear and focused back on her. “Try again. Only this time, let it happen. Don’t brace for it. Just let the gun do what it’s made to do.”

Her eyes turned to slits as she turned her attention back to the target and lined up her shot. The gun went off, and that time the bullet hit just outside the center circle of the bullseye.

“I did it,” she said excitedly. She smiled at me, her eyes wide as saucers.

“See, there you go. That one was much better. Nice job.”

“So, why are you here exactly? Don’t you have bad guys to catch?” Dove asked as she reloaded her clip and jammed it back inside the gun.

“I don’t suppose you want to tell me why you’re here with a brand new gun and a box full of bullets?”

“I’m not the one that needs to explain anything. I have a right to protect myself, don’t I? Or do I need your permission first?”

I held out my hands, hoping she could see I didn’t come here to piss her off. “By all means, you have every right to protect yourself. But, I hope that’s all this is.”

“You should learn to mind your own business.”

“Right now, your business is my business.” She veered her stare, ready to lash out at me, but I took a surrendering step back. “Look, I’m not here to bother you. The real reason I’m here is that I wanted to talk to you about the other night—”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she said, breaking in quickly. “What’s done is done.”

“I just—”

“I said there’s nothing to talk about,” she said fervently.

“Alright, there’s nothing to talk about.” I agreed with her because she was right. It was just a kiss. One single, stupid kiss that didn’t mean shit. There was no reason to get all caught up on something so trivial.

Dove fired off a few more rounds. The determination to get better was written all over her face. I tried like hell to watch her and not let my body yearn for her. But watching her with a gun in her hands was sexy as fuck. Her eyes glinted like the gunmetal she was holding. Her expression was serious and determined. That was when it hit me. I knew what she was doing. Dove was preparing for war.

She missed the next few shots, grunting with frustration. “God damn it.”

“Here, let me help.” I stepped up behind her, and she winced. Her shoulders rolled forward as her body tensed up. It almost looked like she was about to drop to the ground and ball herself up like an armadillo. “Relax. If you’re going to use a gun, it’s important to do it right.”

Dove looked up at me over her shoulder, then relaxed her body. “Fine, teach me,” she said.

With my arms around her body, I held her hands and molded them around the gun correctly. I could smell the scent of aloe and coconut in her hair as it mixed with the metal spice of gunpowder and hot lead.

My cock twitched, but I ignored it. I was doing this for Dove. She needed to feel like she could defend herself, and I wanted to give her that. I wanted her to feel like she was in charge of everything around her because I knew she felt like her life was out of control.

Even if she had other plans and was ready to charge into the belly of the beast with her gun blazing, her life wasn’t hers anymore, and it hadn’t been in a long time. Who was I to judge what choices she might make?

It didn’t matter how much I wanted to protect her and keep her safe. She’d never willingly let me take the lead unless she trusted me. Whatever plan she was formulating in her head, however, she saw her story ending; I was going to be there to make sure she came out the other side alive.

I needed her to let go of her anger and permit me to do my job. Dove might be planning a war, but I was going to be her front line. I would be the armor that stopped any bullets coming her way.

Placing her finger securely around the trigger, I set my mouth close to her ear and whispered. “Don’t think so hard about it. Take a breath, and hold it right when you’re about to pull the trigger.”

I didn't let her go; I stayed there, wrapped around her like a shield. I felt her muscles as they moved. I felt her body as her arms tightened and her back pushed against my chest. She adjusted her feet slightly, spreading her legs a little more. Dove inhaled a deep breath, and I felt her hold it in. Then she pulled the trigger.

"See, now that's a kill shot. Dead center."

She smiled at me proudly, only to quickly dart her eyes away. "You're not a bad teacher, I guess."

"Thanks. At least I'm doing something right with you." I attempted to take a step back, but she quickly reached down and grabbed my leg.

"Stay where you are. I feel better with you close."

"Dove," I started to say, but she didn't let me finish.

"I just mean, it feels better when I shoot. Don't get a big head, Detective. The kiss was good, but not that good." She gave me a flirty grin, then turned back to the target.

We spent the next two hours at the gun range. I showed her how to take the gun apart to clean it and how to know if she had a bullet that didn't fire off the way it was supposed to. The last thing she needed was for the gun to jam and explode in her hand.

Her shots became more on-point and more consistent with each pull of the trigger. Plus, I got to see her smile. *A real smile.* A smile I didn't think she had used since before everything happened. Her smile was beautiful, and all I wanted was to give that back to her.

I wanted to give her a life where she could smile and not feel bad about it.

I wanted to give her a life where there was no more darkness and she could shine bright as the sun.

I wanted to help her feel normal again.

Chapter Thirteen

Dove

Black water swirled down the drain as I rinsed my hair out. After it was dry, I clipped in some extensions, so it was longer than usual. I added a nice, thick curl with the iron and spritzed it with hairspray to keep it all in place.

With the tip of my finger, I carefully put contacts over my pupils to make them brown instead of green. The look was completed by a solid glaze of red lipstick with some jet-black eyeliner and mascara.

I was barely recognizable anymore, even to myself. A new reflection was staring back at me from the mirror. No one would know who I was.

Glancing at the computer screen as I slipped my feet into my heels and buckled the strap, I watched Leon as he strolled through his club. It was sad how easy it was to get into his security system.

Leon was keeping his eyes on everything around him like a hawk. He wasn't keeping tabs on just the customers; he was watching his girls too, as if they were all out to screw him over. *'Can't be too careful,'* he used to say back when we were cordial. *'Thieves come in all shapes and sizes.'*

Just seeing him made me feel sick to my stomach. My insides were twisting, and vomit rose to the back of my throat. The muscles in my eyes twitched, and my hands balled into fists. My jaw was grinding back and forth with so much friction my teeth hurt. I wanted to jump through the screen and strangle him.

He moved through the room, laughing and talking to people like a lord tending to his kingdom. He wasn't royalty. He was a fucking monster.

Leon walked out of the frame. I skipped between the different cameras until I found him again. He was standing on the side of the stage with his finger in some girl's face. His

mouth was really close, coiling and thinning as he spoke. I could see the fear in her eyes as he whispered threats from his vile mouth. She looked terrified of him, and she absolutely should be.

Not me. I'm not scared of you anymore.

I moved from camera to camera, noting where the bouncers were, how they paced the room, and who they seemed to be paying attention to. Tonight was a test run. I wanted to get in and get out unnoticed. If I could do that, then Leon didn't stand a chance.

I wanted to get so close I could touch him, and he wouldn't have a fucking clue that his assassin was right there, breathing the same air, sharing the same space, slinking in the same dark shadows. He was going to die. Because I was going to fucking kill him.

"This is going to work," I said to myself as I looked in the mirror one last time. Grabbing a small clutch, I tucked it under my arm and left my house.

The cab was parked outside, the engine idling loudly on the quiet street. I wasn't surprised to see Ty parked up the road again, but tonight I wasn't letting him follow me. He'd ruin my plan. He'd come storming in like a knight in shining armor and steal any chance I had at killing Leon. I couldn't let that happen.

I climbed into the cab and told the driver to take me down to Main street. The sidewalk was busy with people. There were women with shopping bags hanging off their forearms and teenagers crowded around the music store, laughing and smoking cigarettes.

You could tell by how they held the cigarettes that it was a new habit, and they thought it was cool. The girls held them daintily between their fingers, taking little puffs with tight lips. While the boys expelled giant clouds of white smoke, blowing it directly into the air above their heads.

I got out at the coffee shop and went inside. Ty pulled up slowly out front, trying to see me inside. I slipped out of view,

heading to the back where the restrooms were. Looking around, I spotted the exit that led out to the back. It was off to the side, almost right behind the counter. I waited for the barrister to be occupied, then quickly made my way out the back door.

Keeping my body close to the brick building, I peeked around the corner and saw Ty still parked outside. He kept looking down at his lap, then back to the big window. I chuckled to myself as I walked unnoticed in the opposite direction. He didn't have a clue I was gone. He would figure out eventually that I wasn't inside anymore, and I would be long gone before that happened.

Leon's club was about a fifteen-minute walk from the coffee shop. My shoes weren't comfortable, but I ignored the throbbing in my heels and the cramping in my toes. I could hear the music in the distance as I got closer. As I rounded the corner, I spotted the front door and paused.

My chest tightened as my heart started to beat a mile a minute. I nervously ran my hands up and down the outside of my thighs. I couldn't move. It was as if the ground was trying to swallow me whole. My feet became heavier and heavier. The sharp edges of my heels were growing like roots, driving deep down into the earth. For a single breath, it felt like an invisible force was trying to stop me.

You need to do this.

I exhaled a long, slow breath and pushed myself forward. I wouldn't let anxiety and doubt control me. The doorman looked at me warily as I approached. I gave him an overly flirty smile, biting my lip slightly as we made eye contact. I wanted him to just let me in without a second thought.

"You all alone?" he asked as he looked around behind me like he was expecting more people to pop out of thin air.

"Yeah, I heard this place makes a good martini."

"You know what this place is, right? I don't usually see just a single girl. If anything, she's with her boyfriend or

something.” His voice fluttered between curiosity and suspicion.

“Well, I’m not your typical girl.” I smiled again and winked.

He hesitated for a second, so I licked my lips and pushed my breasts up by squeezing them with my arms. The guy melted instantly, just like most men did when they were tempted by sexual prowess.

“Enjoy yourself,” he said as he pulled back the velvet rope.

I smiled back. “Don’t worry, I plan on it.”

I was hit with the scent of cigars and cologne as I walked inside. The heavy bass of the music immediately weighed on me. The beat pounded so hard it made my entire body vibrate. There were men everywhere. Some were drinking and hanging out with friends. Others were getting lap dances or sitting at the edge of the stage, tossing money at the girls as if it meant nothing to them.

Pussy was pussy, even if you were technically paying to see it. That was how these types of men thought. They’d rather shell out an entire week’s pay to see the vagina of a girl they didn’t know than go home to their wife. It was sad, like watching an addict inject drugs right into their veins.

I didn’t feel bad for the men. I didn’t give a shit if they lost everything. I pitied the girls because they didn’t know their own self-worth. Most of those girls were runaways who had been swept into the arms of a dark force. Captured by a man who only cared about himself.

These were the unwanted girls, the unloved, the abandoned, and the abused. I bet most of the girls would probably have preferred being aborted than birthed if they knew they would end up there.

I found a dark corner in the back and sat at a small, round table. A girl in a slinky skirt, lace bra with fishnet stockings, and six-inch pumps clicked her way over and asked me what I wanted to drink. I ordered a whiskey on the rocks.

She walked away, and I took the opportunity to scan the room. I spotted a man at the bar that I knew with a big, bushy beard and a shaved head. *Dean*. He was sipping a beer and chatting with the bartender while his eyes moved all around the room. His gaze was coming closer to where I was sitting. Luckily, they skipped right over me and kept on going.

So far, so good.

Several girls were walking the floor, on the prowl for deep pockets and easy targets. I could smell the saltiness of cum in the air. I was trying to breathe through my nose because I could taste it on my tongue.

The waitress brought me my drink, carrying it over on a black platter. I handed her a ten and told her to keep the change. She stuffed the cash in her bra and was gone.

I sipped my drink casually, searching for Leon. When I finally spotted him, my breathing hitched. My body went cold, my pulse slowed to almost nothing, and the sweat forming against my brow turned to ice.

Everything around me disappeared as a black tunnel formed between us. It was as if I was watching Leon through a looking glass. He seemed to move in slow motion as he laughed without a care in the world. He was enjoying himself, and I hated him for it.

When I exhaled my next breath, the music began to play again, and the voices around me began to filter back in as if someone had suddenly just pressed the play button.

Leon wrapped his hands over Dean's shoulders and whispered something. I wished I could hear him so badly. I tried to read his lips, but it was too dark to see any subtle details. He glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes moving in my direction. I turned my head away instinctively, covering the side of my face with my hand, and stared at the girl on the stage.

Leon began to walk around to the other side of Dean. He gave him a slap on the back, then began to make his rounds. I knew his ritual. I had been watching him for weeks through

the security cameras. He would float around the club as weightlessly as the shadow of a ghost.

He moved between tables, stopping to make small talk with customers. He was coming closer and closer to where I was. I could smell him all over again, even though he wasn't right beside me, and feel the weight of his hands around my throat as the heat of his breath burned my skin. He was too close.

Shit. I need to get out of here.

I looked around, trying to find the quickest exit. I didn't want Leon to see me, not yet. I was going to unravel his world before his eyes and watch the lights go out, but that day wasn't today.

My nerves started to go crazy as my mind spun with fear. *What if he recognizes me? What if he's been waiting for me?*

His eyes landed on mine, and he started to walk between the tables, coming in my direction. He was still stopping and talking to people, but his eyes kept backsliding my way. My heart raced in my chest as the hair on my arms bristled.

His eyes lingered on me for a moment as he spoke with an older gentleman. Through the dimly lit room, his pupils glistened like black flames. He seemed to be making a straight line right for me when a larger man stood up, blocking his way.

This is my chance to get the hell out of here.

I sprang from my seat and made a quick dash for the exit. The doorman asked, "Hey, where you off to so quickly?" He reached out to grab my arm, but I slipped through his fingers, leaving him to catch nothing but air.

"Home," I shot back quickly. My heels pounded against the pavement as I walked fast with my head down away from the club.

I took the first right I could, ducking into an alley. I pressed myself flat against the building, trying to catch my breath. I waited a few seconds, then peeked out. Leon was

talking to the doorman. He looked in my direction, squinting his eyes as he searched before going back inside.

Fuck, that was close.

Did he recognize me? Or was he just going to try and recruit me as another dancer?

I knew I couldn't take another risk like that again. Not if I was going to do what I needed to do and make it out alive. I touched Heaven once already and was able to walk away. I wouldn't be lucky enough to do it a second time.

I followed the alley to the end and cut across Banes street through a small breezeway between two buildings. I called for a taxi once I was away from the club and waited outside Warwick National Bank for it to come. The second I was in the back seat, I pulled the extensions out of my hair and plucked the lenses out of my eyes.

As the taxi pulled up to my house, Ty was parked out front. *Great. I don't need this right now.* I paid the taxi driver and kept my head down, ignoring Ty as I headed to my front door.

"Dove!" he called out to me as he jumped out of his car. "Dove!" he yelled again.

"What?" I asked, not looking at him as he stormed up my driveway. I fumbled with my keys at the door, trying to hurry and open it.

"I know what you're doing," he said indignantly.

The lock opened, so I stepped inside. Holding the trim of the door, I turned around to face him. "You don't know shit," I snapped.

"Yes, I do. I know exactly what you're doing." He pointed at me with a stiff finger.

"I don't have time for this, Detective Colt. I'm tired, and I just want to go to bed." I attempted to close the door on him, but he stopped me.

Ty threw his hand out, forcing it to stay open. "You're going to get yourself killed. You know that? What you're

doing is dangerous.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You’re just mad because I ditched you tonight.”

“No, I’m mad because you’re playing with fire, and you will get burned.”

“*Burned? Burned?*” I held out my arm so he could see the scars from the cigarettes Leon put out on my skin. “You mean like this? You mean like what he did to me?” My eyes turned to slits as I glared at him. Frowning, I shook my arm in his face. “Do you have any idea what I went through? *Do you?*”

“I would if you talked to me about it, but you won’t.” Ty stared back at me, his lips thin as paper. “Who’s *he*?” he asked.

“Forget it. I’m not doing this right now. You wouldn’t understand.” I gripped the door firmly and attempted to slam it shut.

But he refused to let me, stopping me with a solid straight arm and a heavy palm. “I don’t know who you’re talking about, but I know I won’t let you do this. You’re not thinking clearly. I know what you’re after, and I won’t let you put your life in danger because you think this is the right thing to do.”

“You don’t need to worry about me. I can take care of myself.” Pursing my lips, I snarled, “You don’t even know what the hell you’re talking about. You don’t know what I want. You don’t know what I’m thinking. You don’t know anything.”

“I know you want revenge—”

“Then let me get what I deserve! Leave me alone, and just let me be! I’m not the bad guy here!”

“Tell me who the bad guy is then. Let me do my job.”

“No.”

“Dove, whatever it is you’re planning, I can guarantee it won’t give you what you want. Let the law do what it’s meant to do.”

“The law isn’t enough. I deserve real justice. My mother deserves real justice. An eye for an eye, that’s the only way I’ll ever be at peace.”

“If you do this,” he said, tone low, almost cautionary. “I can’t save you.”

“I’m not asking you to save me.” I was seething, packed to the brim with anger. Couldn’t he just let me do what I needed to do? Couldn’t he see how important this was to me? “The last thing I need is for you to save me.”

“Please,” Ty said, reaching out and taking my hand. “Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

“I’m not going to regret anything. If you knew what he did —”

“Then tell me!” he yelled. “Tell me what you know so I can fix it! Tell me who it is so I can arrest him!”

My pupils turned to pinpricks as my mouth pulled tautly. “You can’t fix it, no matter what you do—and you can’t fix me.”

“I can try.” Ty swirled his thumb over the nub on my wrist. “I want to try,” he said. “You just have to let me in.”

“Why? Why do you care? My life is over. Who I was doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t recognize my own face in the mirror. I don’t recognize my own thoughts. I’m living in a fucking nightmare I can’t wake up from.”

His eyes shifted back and forth between mine. Ty threw his hands around my face in one quick swoop and took a firm step inside my house. His lips crushed against mine, stealing my breath with a kiss.

His mouth was soft but demanding. I parted my lips, giving him permission to enter. The tip of his tongue slipped inside and circled mine. He tasted so good, like sweet vanilla bourbon. I fell into him, my hand resting on his chest as he glided one of his hands down to the small of my back.

It felt so good in his arms. Safe, warm, and secure, all the things I was missing in my life right then. I needed him at that

exact moment. I needed him to help me feel human again. I needed him to help me feel alive again. I needed him to show me that not everything was blackened and charred in this world.

Ty kicked the door shut with his foot and walked me backward until my back hit the wall. My breathing went ragged as our lips came apart. He was looking down at me, his eyes delirious with need. Running his knuckles down the side of my face, he whispered. “We both know this is wrong.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Not if we both want it.”

He kissed me again with brute force, then pulled away. “We can’t.”

“Why not?” I asked, my breathing rapid with desire.

“Because we can’t.” He held my shoulders as if to keep me an arm’s length away. But I could see the tempered warmth in his eyes.

“But what if I want to?”

“You don’t want this. This is the last thing you want.”

“I already told you. You don’t know what I want.” I let my head fall against the wall, my eyes securely pinned on his. “What if this is something I need? You said you wanted to help me. What if this can give me relief? Would you give it to me then? Would you give me something that isn’t riddled with hurt and anguish?”

“Is this what you really want?” he asked, his eyes flicking between mine. “Because you might not feel the same way when you wake up tomorrow.”

“I don’t need you to try and convince me of anything. I *need* this.” I wasn’t begging him; I was pleading with him to hear me. To not focus on what he thought I needed but on what I was telling him I needed.

His knuckles swept up and down my cheek. I grabbed his hand and rested my face in it. “I need to feel something that’s not hurt, Ty. I need to feel something good, something real. I haven’t asked you for anything, but I’m asking you for this.”

“I don’t want you to hurt, Dove, but I also don’t want to hurt you either.”

“You won’t hurt me.” I twisted my face in his hand, dragging my lips across his palm. “Please, give me something to think about that isn’t full of pain. You have no idea what’s inside my head. The thoughts, the memories, the fire that reduced my veins to ashes. I’m begging you, give me this one thing.”

Ty grunted a ravenous vocalization that came out from deep within his chest. He captured my face with his mouth, kissing me lasciviously. His other hand gripped my waist, and he pulled me off the wall, ripping me away as if the wall was just about to swallow me whole.

His tongue was swirling and licking across the ridges of my mouth as he guided me to the couch. Each step he took was slow and precise. His eyes were on me, watching me, reading me, making sure he didn’t miss any look on my face that meant I was having second thoughts.

I didn’t want him to be worried. I wanted this. And I wanted him to see how badly I needed it. This was my choice. I threw my hands around his neck and pulled him in. I kissed him back with all the strength I had inside. The little bits of passion that were strewn about and mangled beyond recognition somehow found their way back together.

His arms wrapped me up tightly as he lowered me to the couch. Ty grazed the outside of my breasts, sliding his hands down my ribs and turning my nipples hard. The firm bead drew his eyes to my chest. My back arched upward as he circled one nipple beneath the fabric with the pad of his finger.

I exhaled slowly, my mouth falling open as I tilted my head back and groaned against his lips. Ty’s eyes darkened like the sky when a storm was brewing on the horizon. The blue was now a dusty gray as his hand kept moving down my body. He glided over my belly, tracing a single finger down to my naval. Running the tips of his fingers back and forth over the hem of my skirt, he licked his lips.

His mouth was so close to mine, but it felt like he was miles away. I needed him to kiss me. Lifting my head up, I tried to close the space between us, but he pulled back. “I need you to promise me something,” he said, his words buzzing against my mouth.

“Okay,” I breathed out, raking my fingers through his hair and tangling them deeply.

“Promise me you’ll let me know if you want me to stop.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t want you to stop.”

“But if you do, if you change your mind for any reason at all, promise me you’ll tell me.”

My eyes darted back and forth over his. Ty was dead serious. He knew I had been broken and was afraid to fracture me further. Except, he had no idea that he could never hurt me more than I already was.

I was as broken as a person could be. Shattered into a million tiny pieces that he’d never be able to fit back together, no matter how hard he might try. You can’t wish the pieces back without glue to keep them there.

“I promise,” I said, giving him the assurance he needed.

“Good.” He moved his hand lower, going from my hip to my thigh. Pushing my skirt up, he found the edge of my panties and softly followed the seam. “Don’t break it.”

“I never break a promise.” And with that one answer, his lips crushed mine.

I was wet. The warmth pooled between my thighs, warming my skin. It felt good. For this brief moment in time, I was just a regular girl. A girl being swept away into a land of pleasure. A girl being stripped of every last memory for a glimpse of what my life should have been. No cares. No worries. No pain. I almost felt normal. *Almost.*

Ty started to lift my shirt, but I stopped him. “Leave it.”

He looked at me and smiled. “Anything you want,” he said.

For as much as he was making me forget the world I was living in, there were some things I knew couldn't be ignored. I knew if he saw me fully naked, if he could see what Leon had done to my body, he'd never look at me the same.

He pushed my panties to the side and ran his finger gently up the center and between my folds. He smeared my juice and bit his bottom lip as his cheeks turned red. "You're soaked," he said.

"I told you I wanted this. I wasn't lying when I said that." I pulled my hands free of his hair and reached down to grab his belt. Fumbling with the buckle, I was able to yank it open. "Take me, Ty."

His hard cock was begging to be set free. It pressed against his pants, stretching the fabric thin. I reached inside and grabbed his cock. He was so firm and thick. His cock pulsed in my hand as I stroked him gently.

I popped the button free. The sound of metal teeth echoed around us as I unzipped his pants and pulled his dick out. I wrapped my hand around him, squeezing him firmly. The thick vein throbbed against my palm forcefully as his length jerked with need.

I froze. It lasted half a breath but long enough for me to feel it. Every ounce of pain Leon inflicted on me in that instant fled my body. It scrambled away, leaving deep footsteps in the sand of my mind. There was no place for it there.

Ty pushed his hips up so I could work his pants down his legs. His eyes never left mine. He watched as his finger hit my clit, and I moaned with pleasure. The thick pad of his thumb swirled over my needy button as he pushed his middle finger inside my entrance.

My hand moved up and down his shaft, stroking him as he fingered me. I was alive with his touch. My back arched, and my nipples pebbled. My pussy pulsed and clenched, trying to keep his finger inside.

"Fuck me," I said, guiding his cock to my entrance. "Make me forget, Ty. Make me forget it all. Steal me away, even if it

only lasts a little while.”

Ty pulled his finger free with a wet slurp and placed his arms up by my head as he slowly pushed his engorged tip inside my pussy. He didn't slam inside; he was gentle and delicate, giving my body time to adjust to his thick length.

My eyes rolled back in my head as he hit me so deep I could feel him in my lower belly. My thighs clamped around his waist as he pulled out to the ridge of his crown and pushed back inside. Each thrust was a little harder, a little deeper, a little wilder.

I raked my nails down his back, grabbing the stiff muscles of his broad shoulders. Every muscle was solid and hard as rock. As if God had nothing else left but marble to make this man. There was protection in his touch and safety in the weight of his body pressing against mine. There was comfort in the loss of control that I was allowing myself to have.

Ty growled, dropping his head into the crook of my neck as he pistoned his hips. His fingers twined up in my hair as he ran heavy kisses up my neck. His lips suckled my throat, and his teeth nibbled the exposed skin lightly.

It felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff with the wind blowing through my hair, making my skin ripple with wave after wave of goosebumps. The orgasm was building. It started low in my stomach but quickly bubbled to the top. My toes curled, and my belly tumbled as I finally took that leap over the edge.

Intense pleasure sent shivers down my spine and through all my muscles. My thighs trembled, and my belly clenched tight as the orgasm ripped me in half. I came hard. I came so hard that my body went numb.

Ty's body stilled, his teeth softly gripping my shoulder as his cock twitched inside my pussy. Hot come spilled from his length as his entire body began to pulse. He grunted a deep, throaty growl against my skin.

We were both breathing heavily, our skin slick with sweat, and the scent of sex filled the air around us. Ty rolled off me

with a deep exhale. I turned to my side, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against him.

“I need you to do me a favor,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Keep this a secret between us.”

“Of course.”

“I’m serious. What we just did can get me fired.”

“Who am I going to tell? I’m sure you know by now that I have no friends.” I chuckled softly with a grin. He gave me a serious look. “I know. I’m sorry. I get it; I really do. My lips are sealed.” I pretended to zip my mouth shut and throw away the key.

“Thank you.” He tickled his fingers up and down the side of my arm. “I appreciate it.”

“Are you having regrets now?” I asked.

“*Me? No.* I just don’t want this to interfere with the case or anything else. I want this case, and I want to keep my job. I don’t want to risk losing any of it. It means too much to me.”

“You really like your job, huh?”

“Of course, I like my job.”

“Looks like we both have a job we don’t want anything to happen to,” I said as I pulled his arm off me and stood up to adjust my clothes.

“This is different,” he said sternly. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes, it is. It’s exactly the same thing.”

He eyed me cautiously. “You’re not thinking clearly. I don’t think you realize that.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. I don’t need you to try and tell me otherwise.”

“Come on, I’m not trying to be a jerk.” He pulled me back down to the couch and wrapped me up again. The tips of his fingers moved over the curve of my shoulder and down my

back. “I wish you would just let me help you. If you let me in, I could fix this. I promise I can fix all of it.”

“And I wish you could understand that you can’t.” I snuggled into his arms, letting him hold me. “Only I can fix it. That’s how it has to be.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I need this.”

“You’ve already been through so much. Let someone else take over now.”

“I can’t.”

His eyes flicked between mine. “Why won’t you tell me everything?”

“Just leave it alone, Ty.”

“Are you planning on doing something stupid?” he asked. “Because if you are—”

“Is this Ty the man or Ty the detective talking right now?”

“I’m just Ty, Dove. I’m both of those things. Not one or the other.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you. And even if I wanted to, I don’t know if I could.” Even I didn’t fully understand the hate that flowed through my veins or the determination I had to kill Leon. Revenge was a funny thing. It wasn’t something you thought about; it was something you felt. You couldn’t shut it off or pretend it wasn’t there.

Ty let out a breath, closing his eyes as his fingers ran up and down my back. We were silent, and neither of us said another word. Maybe he was finally seeing what I saw. It was possible, wasn’t it? He had to know how I felt about it on some level. His own father was murdered. He knew the feeling of revenge I was dealing with.

My eyes were growing heavy as his touch soothed me. He squeezed me tighter, pulling me against his ribs. I curled my leg over his, letting him hold me. A sense of security covered

me like a warm blanket as my muscles relaxed. The tension I'd been carrying slowly diminished.

Each blink was longer and heavier until the world was eventually gone.

I was tossed into darkness, a darkness that almost always led to nightmares.

Chapter Fourteen

Dove

“Come,” he growled, pointing at the floor in front of his feet.

I crawled on all fours across the cold ceramic tiles. My bony knees pressed and twisted against the floor like a pestle creating fresh spices in a mortar. Every small pebble and grain of sand easily penetrated the thin skin on my palms. I was slowly dying. Leon was stealing little pieces of my soul and devouring them like the devil’s supper.

When I reached his feet, Leon caressed the top of my head as if I was a loyal pet. He touched my hair softly, gently running his fingers between the fodder strands. He was chewing on something rubbery and dry. Jerky maybe? Either way, he wasn’t going to share any with me anyway.

But I could smell the food in his mouth. It was sweet and earthy and meaty. I could feel the salt as he laughed at something in the newspaper he was reading, and small bits of spit flew out, landing on my face.

“You see this, my whore?” he asked as he took another big bite off the jerky in his hand and shook the paper. “No, no, you haven’t seen this.” His cheeks hollowed and puffed up as he sucked stuck pieces of meat out between his teeth and used his tongue to wriggle them free. “You haven’t seen much of anything.” He had a satisfied grin. Pleased with himself for keeping me removed from the world outside.

I looked up at him, then glanced at the paper and back at him. “Wha—”

Smack!

A heavy backhand cracked against my face, causing me to wobble and fall to my hip. “Do not talk unless I give you permission, and I haven’t told you to do shit yet.” His mouth folded down like one of those ugly fish from the bottom of the ocean. “But, since you’re curious, maybe you can take a peek.”

I didn't let my eyes move off his as I picked myself up off the floor. I had to be careful. Leon liked to play games. This could be one of those games. He might be trying to trick me. He would sometimes tell me I could do something, then punish me for trying to do it. My pain and suffering were his gratifications. He got a kick out of it.

"Here, take a look." He flicked the paper to straighten the edges, then held it up and moved it closer to my face. "What do you think about this?"

My heart began to race, and I suddenly couldn't breathe. My vision was instantly so blurry I couldn't see a damn thing. I opened my mouth to scream and bite Leon on the hand, but he hit me again even harder, sending me flying across the floor.

My body jerked awake. *It was just a nightmare.* I thought to myself as I rubbed my eyes. I was crying. The tears were still wet and warm on my skin. I hated sleeping. I hated the nightmares that came with closing my eyes. I had that same dream several times already, but I had no idea how it ended. I always got to the newspaper, then I would wake up, and I always woke up crying or screaming or punching my bed.

I fell to my back and stretched my arms out over my head. The sun was coming in through the bay window, shining brightly as it heated my face. I blinked a couple of times as I looked around, waiting for the sleepy haze to finally lift. Like lightning flashing through a thundercloud, rapid bursts of images from the night before flooded my mind. Ty's hands on my body, his lips on my skin, his eyes rooted firmly on mine.

Holy shit... What did I do?

My eyes popped open wide as I looked around the living room. *Is he still here?* I listened carefully for Ty, but all I heard was the house waking up around me. I didn't hear any rummaging in the kitchen or his feet coming down the hall. I didn't hear the sound of water from the sink or the robust scent of coffee in the air.

A moment of fear hit me hard. My heart started pounding, and my skin turned cold. *What if he found my computer?* He was a detective. They were nosy little fuckers by nature.

Where the hell is Ty?

Standing quickly, I teetered slightly on my feet but grabbed the arm of the couch to balance myself. The floor was icy beneath me, sending a chill through my body. After a second, my legs steadied enough for me to walk through my house quietly.

I didn't want him to hear me coming. I planned to catch him if he was poking around in something he shouldn't be. I checked the kitchen and the bathroom, then moved to my bedroom, but he was nowhere to be found.

Peeking out the window through the narrow opening of a single blind, I noticed his car was gone. A sense of relief washed over me. I spotted a note on the end table next to the couch from the corner of my eye. There was a mug on top as if he feared it would blow away. It was my mother's favorite mug, one I gave her for Christmas years ago. It was bright yellow and said, *I'm no sunshine until this cup is empty.*

I picked up the mug and stared at it for a long second, just remembering the laugh she let out when she opened it and read the quote. My mother used it just about every day until I would get her a new one, and then she'd use that mug instead. It was a repeated cycle that I didn't appreciate until that moment. She knew every mug I gave her, and which holiday or birthday it was from. But she always treated each one like it was a prized possession. I set the mug down with a sad smile and turned my attention to the note.

Dove,

You looked too comfortable to wake up before I left. I set up your coffee pot for you. Just push start. Figured it would be best for me to go before the rest of the world started waking up. I'll be in touch.

—Ty

P.S. Don't do anything stupid.

I flicked the corner of the note as I reread it. My stomach clenched tight as I was hit with a mix of emotions. Regret,

excitement, anxiety, and nervousness, all tangled like vines into a giant rolling mass in my gut.

I was glad he wasn't here. I didn't know what I would have done if I had woken up with him next to me. Yet, there was a tiny piece of me that wished he hadn't left. I was sure it was only because having him there made the house feel a little less empty. As if two bodies completed the home in some weird way.

I picked up my mother's mug and held it close to my chest. I knew there was no way for him to know that this was her favorite mug or that I had given it to her. *Is this a sign? Is this a sign from her?* My eyes started to fill with tears. *There are no signs. She's gone, and she's never coming back.*

I wiped the tears from my eyes. I couldn't let myself become emotional. Not yet. Not before I took what was mine. *Leon's life.* I looked down to see the note was now crumbled in my hand. Tossing it on the floor, I sucked in a hot breath and forced every emotion trying to hold me hostage deep into the depths of my soul.

There was no room for sadness or grief. I would have plenty of time to grieve, to be sad, and to heal. Right now, I just needed to be strong and stay focused. I tapped my lips as I stood in the living room. It was time to do something. No more of these games.

I headed to my room and flipped on the computer. After a few failed attempts, I finally figured out Leon's password for his email. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, but even the smallest detail might help me.

I already knew the real person he was inside, but that wasn't what mattered. If I wanted to do this and do it right, it was the fine details I needed. I didn't care about making Leon regret what he had done to me.

I wanted him to wish he had never touched my mother. I wanted him to beg for his life. I yearned to see the fear on his face and hear the terror in his voice. I wanted him to plead with apologies and empty promises that he'd never touch another soul. And then I was going to kill him.

The second I felt that his words were more than just distractions, then and only then would I kill him. Leon's life was mine to take, own—and *end*.

Ring Ring Ring

The phone startled me. I stared at it as it rang a couple more times before I lifted the receiver up and placed it to my ear. I was quiet for a long moment, just listening. "Hello?" I finally asked.

"Dove Harloway?"

"Who's this?"

"This is Max Briemster, Local Six News. Am I speaking with Dove Harloway?"

"No, Dove is dead," I said forcefully, then slammed the phone.

The news... They finally reached me.

My eyes were drawn to Detective Colt's business card that was sitting on my desk.

"Hello, this is Detective Colt."

"Ty, it's me. It's Dove."

"Dove? Are you alright? Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine. A news reporter just called here looking for me. How did they get my number? I thought this was being kept quiet. I thought they were going to leave me alone?"

"I have no idea why they would call you. We strictly told them not to, that it would interfere with our case and your safety. What did you tell them?"

"I told them the truth. I told them Dove was dead."

"Are you sure it was a reporter?" he asked.

"That's what he said. Why? Do you know something I don't?"

"Dove, you have to tell me everything you know. Whoever did this might be looking for you. You need to tell me the truth. I need to know everything you remember. *Everything.*"

“I already told you everything you needed to know.”

“You’re lying. I’m coming over right now.”

“No, leave me alone, Ty.” I angrily threw the phone down, my teeth clenching so hard my jaw began to ache.

I didn’t need him. I didn’t need Ty getting in the way and trying to stop me from doing what we both knew needed to be done. He could rattle off every reason in the book why it was dangerous for me to go after Leon, but I didn’t care.

It was happening, and there was nothing he could do to stop me.

Leon destroyed me. He tore my world to shreds, leaving me broken, scarred, and lost. I didn’t know who I was anymore. The innocent girl I once was was gone. She was lost to the nightmares and memories of torture. Leon deserved everything that I was going to rain down on him.

And I was going to give it to him with a smile.

Chapter Fifteen

Ty

I shoved the papers away and leaned back in my chair, resting both arms behind my head. The case was getting to me. A girl who was beaten the way Dove was, and a woman murdered execution style for no reason I could find, was not something you could just push off to the side.

I was beyond frustrated. It felt like I kept going around and around in circles. Every lead hit a wall. Every little piece of information I thought I dug up was just another empty scoop of dirt from the hole I seemed to be standing in.

The images of Dove laying in the hospital bed, battered, bruised, sliced, and swollen, and fighting for her life were spread across my desk. She was all I could think about. Every second of every day was spent thinking about her.

I fingered through the images until I hit the array of suspects I had. The spread of faces on my desk were all staring up at me. I fanned them out, carefully looking each man in the eyes, wishing that something would jump out at me.

All I needed was one thing; a tip, an anonymous phone call, or a single letter in the mail. I didn't care what it was, just something to put the investigation in motion because it was dead in the water. If I didn't get something soon, my captain would shift me to the next fresh case, and Dove's would end up in a cardboard box in the basement.

The bullets from Dove and her mother matched. They came from the same gun, but that was all I had to go on. The connection between the two attacks was absolute, not chance. Pushing my fingers against my temples, I glared at the images of the men I knew could be capable of something like this.

Guy Templeton, charged with kidnapping and rape. He was released from prison on good behavior three months before Dove's mother was murdered. Eight years too early in my eyes.

Tony Reynolds, charged with six counts of rape over a five-year period, was released six months ago after fifteen years in prison.

Benito Carinoso, charged with sex trafficking and the abduction of a fourteen-year-old girl. Released last year after a twenty-year sentence.

And there were more. More men with backgrounds that made my insides burn with hatred. Men that didn't deserve a second chance outside the walls. Men that deserved to be castrated or killed for the things they did. There was no remorse in men like that.

I could see it in their eyes. The empty, cold, dark, and lifeless pits peered back at me from the pages. There was no concern for human life in any of them. Yet, despite how long I stared at all the faces, my gut was telling me the person I was looking for wasn't there.

"Man, don't you look like shit," Detective Steve Cannon said as he leaned against the door frame of my office.

"Yeah, thanks, Asshole." I tried to smile, but I couldn't fake it. "What do you need?"

He stepped inside my office and grabbed a few of the pictures of the felons off my desk. "Any leads yet on the Harloway case?" he asked as he flipped through the images. "You got a few gems in this stack that could be promising."

"No, not fucking one," I grumbled with a sigh as I shoved my chair back away from the desk. "I got nothing."

"Didn't she give a statement? You must have gotten something from that, right?" he asked, cocking a brow.

"Yeah, a bullshit statement. Dove's not telling me everything. I can tell you that right now."

He pulled out the chair in front of my desk and sat down. Studying the pictures in his hand more intently, he pulled them closer and held them out as he squinted his eyes. "You think she's not telling you on purpose?"

“I don’t think it—I know she’s not.” I pulled open the bottom drawer of my desk and took out the small bottle of whiskey I had stashed with two short glasses. Pouring us each a shot, I pushed a glass in his direction. “The girl is hiding something, and I can’t figure out what it is or why she’s hiding it.”

“Fear?” he asked, sipping the liquor. “Maybe she’s afraid of them coming back for her.”

“No, she’s a lot of things, but scared isn’t one of them.”

He looked up at me and asked, “How can you know? People do a lot of things because of fear. The girl’s been through hell, and fearing for her life is possible. Wouldn’t you fear for your own safety after something like that?”

“It’s not that. I can see it in her eyes. She’s on a search of her own. I’m looking in the wrong places. None of these guys did this. This was too clean. Too planned. Too methodical. These guys are opportunistic. They just don’t match what we know already.” I gathered up the mug shots and dropped them into the garbage.

“Well, try to talk to her again.”

“I’ve tried that already, several times too. She’s stubborn as shit.”

“Sounds like you need to try harder. If you think this girl knows something, you need to do whatever you have to to make her open up. Maybe she needs an extra push.”

Does fucking her in her living room count as an extra push?

I bit my tongue. Obviously, sleeping with Dove was a royal fucking mistake. She was vulnerable. Her emotions were so fragile that she probably didn’t even know what she was doing. I should have thought about that. I should have thought more about her, but I did it anyway.

I’m a fucking idiot who let his dick take over.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I’ll reach out to her again,” I said. I downed the rest of my whiskey with a hiss. “I need

more, for sure. Or this case is going to go cold.”

Steve stood up and shook the few pictures in his hand that didn't end up in the trash as if to ask me if I wanted them. I waved them away, causing him to drop them in the garbage with the others. “Alright, well, you know, if you need any help, I'm just down the hall. The chief has me working on some car theft cases, so I have plenty of time if you need an extra set of eyes.”

“Oh boy. You got a raise. Good for you.”

“Ha ha, asshole. I'm being punished. Car theft is for the newbies.”

“What did you do to piss him off?”

Steve rolled his eyes as he ran his hand over his head. “I messed up some stupid forms. It's a technicality, but you know the chief; he wants everything perfect.”

Spinning my chair side to side, I chuckled. “Well, next time, just don't fuck up.”

“Thanks for the advice.” He gave me the middle finger and walked out of my office.

I looked out the window, watching the clouds as they rolled by. Steve was right about one thing; if I wanted to figure this out, solve this case, and give Dove the closure she deserved, I would have to stop treating her with kid gloves and press her harder.

Even if Dove could find a way to live with this dark cloud in a world where the evil that did this went free, I couldn't. I couldn't let it go. This case wasn't just about Dove; it didn't revolve solely around her. That's what she needed to hear and understand and feel. If she couldn't do this for herself, if she couldn't open up for her own peace, she needed to do it for her mother.

I have to make her see the bigger picture. What if this happens to another girl just like Dove? How would she feel then if she knew she could have prevented it?

I snatched my keys off my desk and grabbed my jacket. Sitting in the office wouldn't do shit to solve a thing. Dove was the key. I drove to her house only to find it empty. The windows were dark, and the curtains were drawn. I pressed my face against the glass, but I didn't see anyone moving around inside.

Shit. Where the hell could she be?

The neighbor was out in her yard pruning her rose bushes in front of her home. She was an older woman. Short, round, and with hair as white as snow. Her cheeks were rosy against her dry, alabaster skin. Thick red glasses framed her eyes, and her pleated blue pants were stained with dirt at the knees.

"Excuse me?" I asked, calling out to her as I raised my hand and waved to get her attention. She stopped mid-snip and looked at me over her shoulder with a wary eye. I reached into the front pocket of my jacket and pulled out my badge. "I'm Detective Colt with the Warwick police department."

She relaxed her standoffish stance. "Betty Ogram," she said. "How can I help you, Detective Colt?" She pulled the dirty gloves off her hands, folded them up, and tucked them under her arm.

"Do you know the Harloway family?"

"Do I know them... Of course, I do. I've lived here for thirty-two years, Detective. I know them very well. Well, I did know them. Terrible thing that happened to Monica and her daughter. Did you catch the son of a bitch yet?"

"Not yet, but we're working on it."

She grunted and turned away, going back to pruning her roses. "Well, I hope you catch him soon. That poor girl has lost so much, too much if you ask me. She isn't the same anymore."

"What do you mean she isn't the same?" I asked.

"Well," she said as she kept her attention on the bush. "She used to be so full of light. She was always smiling and happy. She would come over here and help me with my yard or stop by to see if there was anything I needed. Especially after my

husband passed away. Dove would always come over just to keep me company. Now, I don't see her at all, and when I do, she just looks angry. She's out all night, and I see her coming and going at weird hours." Betty stood up straight and looked up to the sky. "It's like her body is here, but she isn't."

"Well, she has been through a lot. I'm not sure how I'd handle any of this if I was in her position."

Betty flicked her eyes to mine and scrunched her brows. "I can sure as hell tell you I'd find the son of a bitch and kill him. That's what I'd do."

"I think a lot of people would feel the same way, but we know that's not how it works. Two wrongs don't make a right."

"So they say." Her tone shifted low as she dropped her face close to a big bloom and inspected it. "Not that I agree completely. Sometimes people need a taste of their own medicine."

"Have you seen her today by chance? I need to speak with her, but I haven't been able to get a hold of her."

She thinned her eyes in thought. "I did see her leave a little while ago, maybe about an hour or so."

"Do you know where she was going?"

"No, she didn't even notice me. I think she was going running."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because she started running," she said casually as her fingers gently glided over the large petal. "Damn Japanese beetles are eating my roses. I can't get rid of the damn things. Do you know how to get rid of these bugs?"

"I don't. I catch bad guys, not bad bugs. Thank you for your time, though. If you think of anything else or see anything at all that doesn't seem right, please, don't hesitate to call me." I handed her my card.

She pursed her lips and tucked the card into her waistband. "Will do, Detective."

I flipped up the collar on my jacket and walked back to my car. There was silence surrounding me. No birds were chirping, and no squirrels were dashing across the lawn or jumping between the tree branches. Even the trees weren't whispering to each other as they swayed in the wind. Just silence.

My eyes landed on Dove's house. The windows mirrored the trees across the street and the sky above them. A gust of wind blew, sending loose leaves tumbling across the front yard. I stopped for a moment, listening, looking, and searching. For what? I couldn't tell you.

I wished all the answers would just jump out at me. I desperately wanted something to point me in the right direction, but we've been all over her home since her mother was found in that field. We fingerprinted, ran phone records, and spent countless hours just watching to see if someone came by that didn't belong. There was nothing.

A car honked as it drove by, causing me to glance over my shoulder. Dove's neighbor waved and smiled, then disappeared behind a tall hedge.

Dove has all the answers; I know she does.

Chapter Sixteen

Dove

My feet hit the pavement hard as I jogged through Painfield park. There were a few other scattered joggers, but overall it was relatively empty. The overcast sky looked like a thick gray blanket. The humidity made the air heavy and damp. The birds were making quick dashes for food before the sky finally opened up.

The weatherman had said there was a chance of a thunderstorm today, but the rain didn't bother me. I actually enjoyed running in the rain. I always felt it was peaceful.

Something about the repetitive sound of water splattering against everything around you was soothing to me. It was like the sky was singing a sad but beautiful song. A song that spoke to you, and said it was alright to cry when you were happy or laugh when you were sad.

In the rain, you couldn't hear anything. You couldn't hear the cars in the distance or the train on the tracks. You couldn't hear the birds whispering quietly in their nests or the planes roaring in the sky. All you could hear was your heart beating with the raindrops.

Darker clouds were starting to roll in. The wind was picking up, making the treetops sway back and forth. The leaves rustled, giving the path an ominous feeling.

As I came around the bend on the path, an unsettled feeling slashed through my body as the solitude settled on me. If Leon had any plans to come for me, this would be the perfect time to finish what he had started.

I had been as careful as possible until right then. I kept an eye on my surroundings and paid close attention to the people around me. But right then, I was just as vulnerable as the day I walked willingly into Leon's hands myself.

Looking back over my shoulder, I spotted another jogger on the path. The guy was wearing sweatpants and a dark blue

hoodie. The hood was pulled up around his head, making it hard to see his face. He was jogging quickly, his pace seeming to increase with every step.

Where the hell did he come from?

A bolt of fear cut through me, making my pulse kick and my blood hot. I ran faster, trying to put some space between us, but he seemed to be getting closer and closer no matter how fast I ran. His legs stretched longer as if he was jumping rivers to close the gap.

What the hell was I thinking? Why did I think I could run again? It's not safe!

Panic was starting to set in rapidly. My chest began to heave as the air around me seemed to get thinner and harder to swallow. I couldn't run any faster than I already was, and it wouldn't be long before he was right on top of me.

Before everything happened, I used to run every single day. I would run for miles. Five, six, sometimes seven miles a day. It helped me to relax and kept my mind clear. It was my only escape from carrying the burden of my mother's cancer.

I tried so hard to hold the weight for her. She didn't need to worry or be afraid. I wanted to do that for her. I wanted my mother to be as weightless as possible. And then Leon shattered me into pieces and stole everything I loved, even running. The serenity of my passion was now stained and tarred by a terrible man.

I was trying so hard to take it back. I wanted to make my life mine again, even if I had to rebuild myself one little piece at a time. But it felt like all those little pieces would never fit together again. As if none of the edges lined up anymore.

I glanced over my shoulder again. The man was even closer, almost in arms reach. *Fuck, something isn't right. This isn't right.* I looked frantically around, hoping to see someone else on the path, but there was no one. It was just me and the man, a man that was making my skin crawl with each giant leap from his powerful legs.

A strong hand grabbed my shoulder. I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Get the fuck away from me!”

“Dove,” the man said, giving me a little shake. “Dove, it’s me.”

But his words hadn’t fully reached my brain. I grabbed his wrist, yanking his arm down and twisting it hard. He let out a painful grunt. “Ah! What the hell!”

In one quick spin, I shoved him face-first into a tree right where the pavement of the path ended, and the natural ground took over.

“Who the fuck are you, and what the fuck do you want?” I growled.

“It’s just me! It’s Ty!”

“Ty?” I released him and took a step back.

“Jesus, you alright?” he asked as he massaged his shoulder.

Ty was in black shorts and a white t-shirt. He definitely was not the man that was running behind me. I twisted around quickly, moving in a circle with my eyes wide as I looked for the other guy. He was gone. He vanished as soon as he appeared.

Am I losing my damn mind? I’m going fucking crazy.

“What are you looking for? You alright?”

“I’m fine. What are you doing here?”

“Me?” Ty rubbed the side of his face as he stared at me. “Oh, nothing really. I just came to get assaulted is all. Were you trying to break my arm?”

“No. Sorry about that. I thought...” I paused, searching through the thick brush to see if anyone was watching us. “I just thought—”

“You thought what? Did something happen?” Ty followed my eyes and looked through the trees. “What’s wrong? What are you looking for?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. Everything is fine. You just took me by surprise, sneaking up on me like that.”

“I was looking for you. I need to talk to you,” he said.

“That’s what phones are for, Detective Colt. You do have one. How did you know I was here? Did you plant a tracker on me?”

“What? No. Don’t be ridiculous. Your neighbor told me you might have gone out for a run, and I wanted to talk to you in person.”

“Well, unfortunately for you, I’m not in the mood for talking.” I shook my head and rolled my eyes in the process. I was not doing that today. Stretching my legs a little, I started to jog away. “Maybe another time. Good to see you, Detective.”

“Dove, wait!” he yelled as I took off up the path. Ty ran beside me. “Look, I know you said you already told me everything, but I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I know when someone is lying to me.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“You’re a liar. You’re even lying to me right now. You think you’re good at this, but trust, me you’re not.”

“Did you come here just to insult me?”

“I’m not insulting you,” he said between heavy breaths.

“You called me a liar.”

“Not to insult you. I’m calling you a liar because you’re keeping secrets and feeding me bullshit. We both know that.” He was trying so hard to keep up with me and talk simultaneously. “I want to know everything, Dove, every last detail so I can solve this case.”

I looked over at him, my eyes turning to pinpricks. “If you’re as good at your job as you say, then you shouldn’t need me. You should have this shit all figured out by now.”

“Come on, Dove. Do you want this to end or not?”

“Want what to end?”

“*This*, ” he said as he looked me up and down and swirled a firm finger. “The paranoia, the pain, the fear—”

I stopped short, my hands balling at my sides. “I am *not* afraid. I’m not afraid of a goddamn thing. I know what you want from me, and I’m not going to give it to you. I have a plan. I’m the one who’s going to fix this. And no one—*not even you*—can stop me.”

“I get it, Dove. You—”

“No,” I snapped. “You don’t get it. You’ll never get it. No one will ever understand. Just leave it alone, and leave me alone.”

“It won’t change anything. Revenge is only a quick fix, like a rush of adrenaline. It’ll fade eventually, and when it does, you’ll regret whatever you’re trying to do.”

I chuckled deviously and veered my stare as I took a step closer. “You just want to rush in here and be the hero. You want to sweep in and save the day like a knight in shining armor, but nothing—” I swiped my hand through the air. “Nothing you can do will ever make this better. You can’t erase what happened to me, and you can’t bring my mother back. Stop pretending like you can fix a goddamn thing.”

“Dove—” he started to say, but I held up my hand to silence him.

I didn’t want to hear anymore. I knew what I had to do, and there was nothing he could say to make me change my mind.

“Goodbye, Ty,” I said as I took off at a full run.

Ty tried to keep up with me, but he quickly gave up once he realized he couldn’t. He slowed to a stop, and I kept going, never looking back. Ty didn’t understand that I wasn’t scared of Leon. I wasn’t frightened of dying, not anymore. I wasn’t afraid of what he might do to me if he captured me again.

What scared me was the thought of not getting the chance to make him hurt. What scared me was the thought of Leon being arrested before I got the chance to make him beg for his own life.

Nothing would make me happier than hearing him plead for mercy and then watching the light go out in his eyes. Did that make me evil? Did that mean I lost all my humanity along the way?

Does it matter after what he put me through?

Fuck him. It's too late for mercy.

I traded humanity for the chance to make him hurt.

Chapter Seventeen

Dove

I turned the music up louder, closing my eyes for a second so I could feel all the notes and emotions as they washed over me. I rocked my head from side to side, dancing a finger in the air until I heard the timer beep. I headed to the kitchen and pulled the lasagna out of the oven.

I used my mother's recipe. Actually, lasagna was the last meal my mother cooked for me before the world went to shit. She was wearing her favorite head scarf, a blue one with little white daisies. It was the one I bought her after she got her first treatment. She swore up and down that she wasn't going to need it. She said her hair was so thick she could afford to lose a few strands. She even laughed and said maybe the bathroom scale wouldn't look so bad anymore.

I smiled as I pictured her pulling the lasagna out of the oven and swearing under her breath because she hit the edge of her wrist against the searing hot oven rack. *'Son of a bitch,'* she huffed out as she dropped the lasagna pan hard onto the counter. *'The damn oven just bit me,'* she said with a chuckle.

For that split second, she was just my mom again. She wasn't my mom with cancer or my mom who was dying. She wasn't my mom that had limited time left. She was my mom that held me when I fell off my bike and busted up my knee. She was my mom that read me stories at bedtime and would make me heart-shaped pancakes every year on my birthday.

So much had already been taken from her before Leon came along. She was living on borrowed time. I had become protective of her. I got mad at her if I found her outside in the garden on a chilly day because I was afraid she could get sicker. I would hover over her in the house like a protective bubble to keep her safe. She hated it, but not once did she get upset with me for it. She understood my fears and worries and let me be there even if she didn't need me.

God, I miss you, Mom.

I took out a plate from the cabinet when the doorbell rang. I would have missed it if it hadn't rung during the silent gap of a song change. Setting the plate down on the counter, I started for the door when it buzzed again. "Alright! I'm coming," I called out. Through the small window in the center of the door, I saw Ty.

Of course, it's him.

Opening the door, I flatly asked, "What do you want now?"

He pulled a bouquet of flowers out from behind his back and held them close to his chest. "To make amends," he said with an apologetic.

"Mm, of course you do." I folded my arms over my chest and tilted my head. "But I don't buy it."

"I'm serious. I've been pushing you too hard." Ty spun the flowers, then held them out to me. "And I'm honestly sorry for that. I shouldn't be trying to force you to do anything. I have no right to push you when you're not ready."

Reluctantly I took the bouquet. "Thank you. I appreciate the apology, even if I still think you're full of shit."

"Fair enough. I know these are just flowers, and flowers don't really fix anything, but my mother used to love getting them when she was upset. I thought you might too."

"I can't say I love them, but they are beautiful."

Ty tucked his hands in his pockets as he started to back away from the door. "Good, I'm glad you like them. Well, I'll let you get back to whatever you're doing. I didn't come to impose myself on you. I just want us to be on the same side, not working against each other."

I glanced inside the house, looking back at the kitchen. "I, uh, I made some lasagna. Are you hungry?"

"No, I don't want to intrude. Thank you, though."

"I have plenty. I can't eat it all on my own. I'll probably end up throwing the rest away once I'm done."

“Well, I don’t want you to waste perfectly good food,” he said.

“Good. Come on in.” I opened the door wider and let him inside. “I’ll put these in some water.” Closing the door behind him, he followed me into the kitchen. “Go take a seat.”

“Smells amazing,” he said as he pulled out a chair at the small kitchen island and sat down.

“I can’t guarantee how good it’s going to taste.”

“I’m sure it’ll taste as good as it smells.”

“I hope so. It’s my mother’s recipe. I’ve never cooked it before on my own.” I filled a vase, put the flowers inside, and then set them in the island’s center. “I figured making it might make it feel like she’s still here with me.” I didn’t look at him as I spoke. I kept my eyes on the flowers, adjusting them and moving them around nervously.

“Does that go for the music, too?” he asked.

“Yes and no. She always cooked while listening to music, but I just hate how quiet this house is without her. I think the music fills the silence more for me.” I grabbed a second plate from the cabinet and placed it next to mine. “How big of a slice do you want?” I asked.

“Good size. I am a growing boy, after all.”

I smiled and cut him a giant piece. “Well then, it looks like I picked a good night for a big meal. Garlic bread?” I asked as I passed him the plate and a fork.

“Absolutely. Can’t have lasagna without that.”

I chuckled lightly. “My mom used to say the same exact thing.”

“I think your mom and I would have gotten along.”

“You know what? I do too. You’re both nosy as hell, and don’t give up.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He cut into the lasagna with the fork and stuffed a big bite into his mouth. He groaned

as he chewed, rolling his eyes back in his head as he said, “Oh my god, this is delicious.”

“Is it really?”

He shook his head yes, barely able to speak with his mouth full. “It is, and I’m not just saying that.”

I took a bite and chewed slowly. “It’s alright. Not as good as my mom’s, but it’s edible.”

Ty was shoveling the food into his mouth and trying to speak at the same time. I couldn’t understand a word he was saying.

“What?” I asked.

He swallowed. I watched his throat elongate and the thick muscles of his neck bulge and flex. He really was handsome. His jaw was sharp as a blade and looked strong as redwood. He had soft lips and a broad nose that fit his face perfectly. His hair was faultlessly messy, tousled in a way that seemed purposeful.

“I said this is the first home-cooked meal I’ve had in years. Usually, I just order out or throw something frozen in the microwave.”

“Yeah, right. You mean to tell me you’re mom never cooks for you when you visit her?”

He shook his head no as his eyes dropped down to his plate. “My mom passed away a few years ago.”

“Oh, I had no idea you lost your mom too. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

“We have that in common, I guess, losing both parents. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened?” He was quiet for a long second, just staring at his plate. “I’m sorry, I’m overstepping. You shared enough when you told me about your dad; you don’t have to tell me about her. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s fine.” He shrugged his shoulder as he grabbed a napkin to wipe his mouth. “She dealt with her own set of

issues after my father died. She just couldn't handle it. They were high school sweethearts. When my dad was murdered, her entire world crumbled. It didn't matter that she had family around her to help her cope; without him, her heart was gone."

"She died of a broken heart."

"No, she killed herself. Ate an entire bottle of pills, then went to sleep and never woke up. My aunt found her when she couldn't reach her."

"So, that's why you got upset when I was taking my medication."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"I'm so sorry, Ty. That's terrible."

"Don't be. It was her choice and what she thought was her answer to fixing her pain. I like to think that they're together now, and I have two amazing guardian angels. I think that's why I don't really fear anything."

"You're not afraid of anything? I find that hard to believe."

"I didn't say that. I said I don't fear anything, but that doesn't mean I'm never afraid."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Life doesn't make sense."

"That I can agree with you on." I got up from my seat and walked to the fridge. I grabbed a bottle of wine and pulled two glasses out of the cabinet. Shaking the glasses, I held up the bottle of wine and opened my eyes wider. Ty nodded yes, so I placed a glass next to him and filled it. I poured myself a drink and sat back down across from him.

He took a long sip of wine, letting it sit in the back of his throat for a few breaths before drinking it. "This is good."

"My dad was a bit of a wine guy. It drove my mom crazy. He would drive to the other side of the country to get a bottle if he wanted to add it to his collection."

"I think I would have liked your dad too."

“Maybe. But I’m not sure he would have liked you. He probably would have thought you were a pain in the ass.”

“That’s what makes me a good detective.” Ty gave me a wink and took another drink of wine. “Being a pain in the ass is how I get answers. You don’t get answers unless you’re persistent.”

“Yeah, well, right now, I’m not getting the detective, right?”

“Right. I’m just a regular guy right now.”

“Good,” I said. “Wait here.”

I got up from my seat and headed into the living room. Sifting through the records on the shelf, I pulled out my father’s favorite one. My father wasn’t just a wine man; he was a music man. He loved all kinds of music but the blues the most.

The music began to crackle through the speakers. I closed my eyes and let it infiltrate my soul. The guitar bled in as the vocals came out deep and throaty. My body started to sway, moving side to side, feeling every word being sung.

“Who is this?” he asked from the kitchen doorway.

“Muddy Waters.”

“I like it.” He held his hand out to me and wiggled his fingers. “Let’s dance.”

My eyes fell to his hand, then popped back up to his eyes. “Dance?”

“Yes, dance. Dance with me, Dove.” He tilted his head forward and arched his brows. “Please.”

“Alright,” I said. I gently placed my hand in Ty’s, and he instantly pulled me in close.

Ty wrapped his arm around my waist and pressed our clamped hands against his chest. He started to move to the beat, rocking side to side on his feet and spinning in a slow circle. I moved with him, letting him lead.

I was stiff at first. My knees were locked straight, and my back was square. Ty gave me a little shake and grinned playfully as he looked down at me. “Relax, dancing is supposed to be fun. Remember, we’re two people right now. Two people just dancing.” I nodded as I exhaled a deep breath. And then we danced.

We moved around the living room, him leading and me allowing him to take me along. We didn’t talk; we simply let the music talk for us.

He brushed his fingers down the center of my spine, sending goosebumps all over my body. I couldn’t contain the shiver that followed. Every muscle in my body convulsed, causing Ty to chuckle.

“Ticklish?” he asked.

“No.”

“So what was that then?”

“That was just a reaction.”

“To my touch?”

“Maybe.”

“Is that a good thing?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Maybe I can help you figure that out.” Ty moved the tips of his fingers up my back, over my shoulder, and then gently caressed the side of my face. “I want to help you any way I can, Dove. If all I can do is help you figure out little things, little emotions, and feelings, then I’ll take it. Because feeling something is better than feeling nothing.”

I looked up at him. His eyes flicked around my face, taking note of every little detail until they finally landed on my mouth. Ty licked his lips, softly tugging his bottom lip into his mouth. He started to lean forward. Closer and closer, but moving ever so slowly.

Instinctively, I licked my lips. My heart was racing, and my lungs started to burn as the air between us grew hot as

fresh ash that had just been spit from the fire. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to touch and hold me and make the rest of the world feel small and insignificant.

I hated the world I was living in. I hated that it felt like my life was like a train going full speed off a cliff, and I couldn't jump off. My life was out of control.

His lips finally touched mine. They were warm and soft and smooth as velvet. Ty cupped my jaw and tilted my head so he could kiss me deeper. The tip of his tongue swept across my lips, and I opened up willingly to let him in. His hand glided from my jaw to the nape of my neck. With utter ease, his fingertips dug in, manipulating me how he wanted.

Ty's tongue drove in deeper as he clutched my roots and tugged my head back harder. It wasn't forceful in a way unpleasant. It was greedy in a way that gave me butterflies. I moaned into our kiss, letting go of everything else for the moment. I didn't need the dark thoughts. I didn't need the sadness. I didn't need anything but him right then.

A throaty growl escaped his mouth as he pulled away for a split second and looked into my eyes. His gaze anchored on mine, and I could see right into his soul for a single breath. I could see how much he wanted to save me. I could see how deep his desire went, like thorny vines that wrapped his body, pricking him with every step, every thought, and every touch. Torturing him with a pain that couldn't be subdued until he got what he wanted.

Except, he wanted more than I could give him. I couldn't give him the answers he craved, but I could let him give me something I desired. I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't reject the opportunity to feel something good in a world that had only been bashing me against sharp rocks like the white caps of waves during a violent storm.

I grabbed his face and kissed him back. We both deserved to let go, even if it was only for a little while. I drove my hands into his hair and pulled him in closer. His tender eyes turned vicious as wanton need surged through his body.

That was it. That was all it took to stop any thoughts of doubt that might have been flowing through Ty's head. He didn't ask me to tell him how I felt or try to convince me that I didn't want it this time.

Ty gripped my ass with both hands and lifted me off the floor, slamming my back against the wall behind me. His tongue swirled, coiling around mine, licking over every ridge, every curve, every dip, and tooth as if he wanted to feel all my mouth had to offer.

I exhaled a deep breath as he ground his hips up, forcing his hard cock to push against my pussy. I was already so wet. My panties were drenched, soaked with arousal. My clit was tender, tingling every time my panties brushed against me. He was hard as stone as he gyrated up and down.

I pulled his shirt over his head with feverish hands and threw it to the floor. Ty matched my intensity, ripping my shirt off and tugging my pants down my legs. With precision, he set me down but held me in place. The tips of my toes touched the cool floor, but I still felt light as air.

I was lost in the moment, getting swept up like a leaf in a swirling winter breeze. My body buzzed with chills as his hands moved down my ribs and his lips found my neck. The sharp edges of his teeth grazed my skin, making my knees buckle.

But Ty didn't let me fall; he clutched me around the waist and held me up. He fluttered kisses from one side of my neck to the other. My head rolled naturally, giving him all the room he needed. He moved his lips higher, kissing up my throat and over my jaw.

I moaned instinctively as he hit the small delicate spot of skin behind my ear. A rush of tingles cascaded down my body, making my toes curl. My fingers slipped higher through his hair, tangling deep and tugging hard.

Ty grabbed me by the ass again, lifting me back off my feet, and walked us to the couch. His touch was ferocious and gentle, rough and tender, hungry and full. He was playing both sides of need. The need to take and the need to give.

My pussy slipped against his lower stomach as he laid on top of me. He boxed my head in with his hands and looked into my eyes. “You’re so damn wet,” he said.

“You make me so damn wet.” I whispered the words as I ran the pads of my fingers down his chest. “Take me, Ty. I’m yours.”

A thunderous moan spilled out under his breath as his eyes moved from my face to my chest. Sucking my nipple into his mouth, he rolled the hardened bead between his teeth as he slipped his cock up my center. My juice coated his length, slicking him from base to tip. His eyes steadied on mine as a look of concern washed over his face.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you,” he said.

“You won’t hurt me.” The words were soft but firm. I meant what I was saying. “No one can hurt me anymore.”

“There’s always room to hurt, Dove.”

“You’re wrong. There’s always room to heal, Ty, but there’s a bottom to pain. I’ve hit that bottom. The only place I can go is up.” I ran the pads of my fingers down his lips and kissed him gently.

That was the answer he needed. He licked my nipple again, then moved to my other breast and sucked it into his mouth. I groaned as I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. Goosebumps billowed down my flesh, causing my hips to rock against his cock.

Every inch of my body was supple. His breath on my skin made me bend readily. His heart pounding in his chest and the blood pumping through his veins created an eagerness for more. I could feel his sweat as it turned his skin hot and the way his body curved fervently toward mine.

Ty shifted his hips, pressing his engorged tip to my entrance. I held my breath as he slowly entered my body, forcing my walls open wide. My lungs expanded, and my nerves went wild as he kept pushing forward inch by inch,

going deeper and deeper. My pussy clutched around him, holding him in place as he stilled above me.

Ty softly brushed his fingers down my cheek and said, "Breathe." I had stopped breathing and didn't even realize it. I was so focused on everything around me that I had forgotten about myself altogether.

As I opened my eyes, they connected with his. He watched me carefully, noting how my body was moving and how my face was twitching. I half expected him to pull out and run away. I could see the fear and worry in his eyes. He was afraid of what I might be thinking or feeling.

I moaned quietly, gently running my fingers down the outside of his shoulders. My delicate touch was all the assurance he needed that I was alright. I wasn't crumbling porcelain beneath him. My body wouldn't suddenly dissolve like a mountainside under torrential rains. I was still there. Still willing. Still ready.

Ty shifted his hips, pulling his cock out to the ridge, then drove back in slow but hard. My legs snapped up to grip his sides as his cock slid further inside my pussy. He pistoned his hips, pulling out and then thrusting back in. Each thrust purged my body with intense pleasure. A pleasure that helped dull the pain. A euphoric sensation that numbed me from the inside out.

My hands traveled down his back, feeling every dip and curve of his firm, lean muscles. I traced his spine back up, slipping my hands into his hair. Grabbing fistfuls of hair, I pulled him in and kissed him.

His warm lips smothered mine as if the chains had come off that were holding him back. Our tongues collided, licking and tasting as his body began to move more freely. It was exactly what I wanted. I didn't want him to think too much about me. I wanted both of us to get lost together.

His cock plunged in. I raked my nails down his scalp and dug them into the meat of his back. My hips began to rock, matching his pace. Sweat pooled at the base of my neck and

beaded across my forehead. His skin was hot and silky as his body began to melt against mine.

My pussy milked his length, gripping him tighter as the orgasm began to build and every muscle in my body contracted. My clit was throbbing, pulsing with a need so fierce I couldn't slow it down. A fleet of tingles ran through me, causing my thighs to tremble and my moan to turn silent.

"There you go, sweet bird, fly away with me," he said against my lips.

His cock thickened inside me, jerking and pulsing violently. With one final thrust, his cock exploded, filling me with warm come.

We were both breathing heavily as he rolled over and tucked himself between me and the couch. Ty gently ran his fingers up the outside of my arm and down my back. The tips of his fingers began to trace the thick scars that riddled my flesh like tree bark.

I had kept them hidden from him until then. I had actually forgotten about them entirely until the pad of his finger moved over the broad line of flesh. He didn't say anything, but I could feel his eyes as they explored each and every scar.

"The world is filled with evil, Ty. An evil I don't even think you could understand."

"Dove—"

"He hurt me," I said, cutting him off. "He hurt me in ways no human should ever be hurt. He stole everything from me. *Everything*. He locked me away. He beat me, tortured me, and destroyed the person I was."

"You're wrong," he said. "He didn't destroy you. He made you stronger."

I let out a cynical laugh. "Stronger... Is that what you call this?" I asked, reaching back and touching one of the scars. "He didn't make me stronger. He showed me what evil looks like. He showed me how dark human nature can be. He showed me the true meaning of hate. I hate him."

“You have every right to hate him, Dove. I wouldn’t ever say you’re wrong for that. But what you do with that hate can either help you or ruin you. You can’t do this on your own.”

“I can, and I will.” My words didn’t falter. There was no doubt in my mind that I was making the right decision.

“Why? After everything you’ve been through, why not let someone else do it?”

“Because it’s my turn.”

“Your turn to do what?” he asked as he wrapped me up in his arms and pulled me close. “What are you trying to do?”

“I can’t explain it; it’s just something I have to do. I need this, Ty. No matter how much you want to help, I need this. And I need you to let me have it.”

“Look, I get it, and I don’t blame you for wanting revenge. But if you do what I think you’re planning to do, I won’t be able to protect you.”

“I don’t want your protection.”

“You’ll be throwing your life away. You’ll get arrested, and then what? Do you want to spend the rest of your life locked up behind bars? You want to lose your freedom all over again?”

“What freedom are you talking about? Do I look free, Ty?” I asked as I rolled over to face him. His eyes flicked between mine as he arched a single brow. “I’m still trapped right now. I’m trapped inside this nightmare for as long as that man is still breathing. I can’t live like this.”

“Then let me help. I can do that for you. I can make sure he never walks free again.”

I shook my head. “You can’t do anything. If he’s breathing air, then I’m still caged. I’m doing this, and there’s nothing you can do or say to stop me.”

“I’m not going to stop you, Dove. I just want you to think about what you’re saying. Really think about what will happen if you go through with it. And what if you fail? What if you go

in there guns blazing, and it doesn't work? What if he captures you again?"

"He won't," I said sternly. "He isn't going to capture me again."

I was not losing the battle a second time. I should be dead. I should have died in that dumpster, but I didn't. That had to mean something. My survival had to be more than just this. More than living in a state of limbo that didn't seem to have an end in sight. It felt like I was alive for no other reason than to make sure he didn't do it again to someone else.

"How can you know that?" Ty asked, his voice begging me to listen to myself. "How can you be so sure that he isn't sitting back just waiting for you?"

"I'm not sure of anything. All I know is what I feel, and I feel like I at least have to try."

"And if he does capture you?"

"If he does capture me, then fate came around full circle."

Maybe my fate was dying after all.

Chapter Eighteen

Ty

Dove was asleep, her lips moving as if she was talking to someone, but there was no sound coming out. Her face twitched in several different directions with agony. Her brows furrowed and her lids scrunched as the muscles in her face tightened and contorted.

I could tell that whatever she was dreaming about wasn't good. Even in her sleep, she was running from the darkness that chased her. I was about to wake her when I got a message from the sergeant that he wanted to see me as soon as possible.

I watched her for a few more seconds. The pain she was living with was large enough to reach out and grab me too. It was so strong and intense that I felt like it was extending long talons from her body, trying to capture me too.

I was already trapped with her in that same darkness. I was living on the outside wall of her pain. Following it around like the shadow of a tree follows the sun. We were both drowning slowly, being teased and toyed with like a game of cat and mouse.

With the lightest touch, I traced the curve of her jaw, softly fluttering my fingertips over the surface. Her face reacted to the feathery tickle against her skin. She pulled away slightly as if my fingers hurt like they were hot as a branding iron.

My phone buzzed again. The sergeant was impatient that I hadn't messaged him back or called him to tell him I was on my way yet. I quickly typed the words heading out now and slipped free from Dove's tangled web of arms and legs around me.

I gathered my clothes off the floor and went into the bathroom to change and clean up a little before heading to the station. When I came out of the bathroom, Dove was lying awake on the couch, covered up to her shoulders by a crocheted blue and yellow blanket.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning.” Her voice was scratchy and dry. “Leaving so soon?” she asked.

“Duty calls,” I answered her as I fixed my holster and tucked my shirt into my jeans. “You sleep okay?”

“Same as usual.”

“It looked like you were having a nightmare.”

“Like I said, same as usual.” She yawned big, her body tucking into itself as she snuggled under the blanket.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I really wish you’d reconsider what you’re thinking about doing.”

“What is it you think I’m going to do?”

“I think it’s something that will get you arrested. Am I wrong?”

Dove held out both her arms, palms up and wrists exposed. “Go on, arrest me then.”

“All I have is what my gut tells me, which means nothing.” I walked towards the door, keeping my eyes on her. “I don’t blame you for your feelings. I hope you know that. But I won’t be able to just sit back and let it happen. I care about you, Dove. I care too much to let you throw your life away on some piece of shit.”

“That piece of shit deserves to suffer one way or another.”

She tossed the blanket off, her body still naked and raw. Her nipples were hard from the chill in the air, and goosebumps were texturing her skin. The sun was just starting to appear, creating an orange glow in the room. Her skin was the prettiest shade of pink as if the sun had personally kissed her body.

Her long legs brought her across the room until she stood less than a foot away. Despite the goosebumps all over her skin, I could feel the heat off her body. I was so fucking tempted to grab her and take her again and again until we were so exhausted that neither of us could stand.

“Well,” she said. “Aren’t you going to arrest me?” She held out her wrists again and tilted her head.

Growling, I took her wrists, pushed her arms above her head, and walked her back to the wall beside the door. I kissed her hard and fast until her body writhed beneath me and her muscles went slack.

I forced myself to break the kiss and said, “I want to stand by your side through this, but I can’t once you cross that line in the sand. I’m begging you, don’t cross that line.” I held her chin, pinching it slightly and lifting her face higher. My phone buzzed a third time prompting me to take a step back and give her a warm smile. “Just think about it.”

And with that, I was gone. I left Dove standing naked against the wall, breathing heavily as her eyes looked wild and confused. It took everything I had to walk away from her like that. My cock was rigid, and my blood was pumping hard through my veins.

It took the whole drive to work for my erection to go down and my heart to stop racing. My cheeks were still flushed as I pulled into the parking lot, and there was a light sweat on my forehead. I sat in my car for a few extra minutes, looking at the six-story brick building. All the windows were tinted black, reflecting the trees and sky like a mirror. A large patch of ivy growth scaled up the side of the building. I watched as several officers came and went, just going about their business. My boss might have tried messaging me a fourth or fifth time, but I turned my phone off.

I had no idea what he needed to see me for. I was assigned several cases already, enough to keep me busy for months. I doubted he’d be calling me in to give me another one. Exhaling a deep breath, I grabbed my briefcase and headed inside.

The elevator was packed with patrol officers and other detectives from different departments. A potent mix of colognes and perfumes smelled as bad as the city dump. I tried to hold my breath, but it didn’t work. Then I tried to breathe in

through my mouth, but all that did was make me taste the chemicals that created the scents.

The second the doors opened, I pushed my way out onto the bustling floor of the homicide unit. Lately, I have been having a hard time being around everyone. All I could think about was Dove's case. It was consuming me just like my father's case had. To the point that there was nothing else on my mind.

I went to my desk first, tucked my briefcase underneath, and checked my messages. Several tips had come in about a few older cases, and there were messages from the crime lab about prints and blood samples that I would need to call them about. None of the messages were related to Dove, which angered me.

"Hey, look who it is." Detective Timothy Johnson said when he spotted me as he was walking by my desk. "I thought I was seeing a ghost."

"Funny. You know where I've been." I gave him a quick glance, then looked at my computer and turned it on.

"You know Dave is looking for you."

"Yeah, I know." My fingers stroked over the keys, opening Dove's file.

"Any new information on the Harloway case? I haven't got shit. No one has come forward about anything. Every tip I've checked out has been a dead end."

I had to pause for a moment. Was there anything new? Not technically. No fingers pointed at any particular person, but now I knew Dove wasn't dealing with amnesia. She was hiding the identity of the person we were looking for, and she had plans to do something terrible.

"No, nothing. This case is one of the hardest I've ever had."

I didn't tell him anything about what I had learned. I kept it to myself, and I wasn't sure why. Deep down, I was trying to convince myself that she wouldn't be able to go through with

anything. She would come to her senses and realize that I was extending her the hand she needed.

“I’ve got a few leads I’m going to check out later today. There’s a couple that said they might have seen something the day Dove was found, but who knows. We haven’t had any luck so far.”

“Yeah, someone will talk eventually. They always do.” I tried to sound confident, but my voice faltered slightly.

“Do they?” he asked. “Because there’s a mountain of boxes in the cold case unit that says otherwise.”

“This one won’t end up down there.”

“Well, I’m glad one of us is optimistic. I’ve been doing this too long to be so sure. Nothing is guaranteed in our line of work. Anyway, go see Dave before he starts breathing down my neck. I’m not your keeper, but for some reason, he thinks I am.”

“Alright, I’ll go in a few minutes.”

Tim slapped the folder he was holding against my shoulder and nodded. “Thank you. I don’t need him blowing up my phone the rest of the day.”

I focused on the computer until Tim was down the hall and out of sight. Leaning over, I rested my elbows on the desk and clutched my skull. My brain hurt already, and the day hadn’t even started.

Alright, might as well get this over with.

I gave fake smiles to people I passed on my walk to Sargent Dave Boland’s office. He called me in when I knocked on his door. “You wanted to see me, Sir,” I said.

“Sit down, Ty.” I took a seat as he kept talking. “I’ve talked with Tim, and he said the Harloway case is going nowhere. I’ve had no updates from you at all, and I need something. Something that says all the other open cases can wait. Do you have that? Do you have the smoking gun so we can make an arrest and close this?”

“No, not yet, but I’m getting close. I can feel it.”

“Feelings aren’t what keeps this place running. We can’t keep pumping time, energy, and resources into this case if it’s going nowhere. It’s been months, Ty. Not hours, not days—*months.*”

“Sir, with all due respect, we can’t just turn our backs on this.”

“We’re not turning our backs, we haven’t turned our backs on any case, but crimes don’t just stop because we’re still working on one. Other victims out there need closure, just like Dove and Monica. They all deserve our time.”

“I get that, I really do, but I’m telling you, something will get dropped at our feet with this one really soon. I can feel it, and my gut has never been wrong.”

“Your gut won’t hold up in court. Your gut hasn’t given us a suspect. Your gut hasn’t done a damn thing. We need evidence and a name. We don’t have either of those things.”

“We have shell casings.”

“But not the gun,” he said as he leaned forward. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear this, but we need to move on for now. There are too many other cases that need our attention. We just got a call; there’s a man who was stabbed behind the Gas and Go up on Nooseneck Hill. No I.D. and no witnesses. I want you to head there now. You’re done following that poor girl twenty-four-seven.”

“Dave, hold on—”

“Ty,” he said, holding up his hand. “It’s not personal, it’s our job, and it’s your job too. That’s why you’re here, to take on whatever case I tell you to.”

I stood up swiftly, and the power of my legs kicked the chair back a foot. He eyed me as he sat back in his chair and folded his hands on the desk like a principal dealing with a behavioral student.

There was nothing else for me to say. I knew the bureaucracy of this place, and you take orders from the top down. I was expected to follow the orders and not think twice

about them. I just couldn't do that. I couldn't just tuck Dove's case into my filing cabinet and leave it to collect dust.

We were well past the forty-eight-hour mark. We all knew that the more time that passed, the harder it would be to solve. Solving this case would require a fucking miracle if Dove wasn't going to tell me shit.

Fuck!

I stormed out of his office, slamming the door behind me. Snatching my keys off my desk, I left and drove to the Gas and Go. I had to put on a professional face, but I wasn't happy about it.

It was clear to me the second I arrived that the guy was killed during a drug transaction. He wasn't some unknown husband, free of debauchery and deceit. One of the other patrol officers recognized him as Gary Risen. He was a dope dealer with a record as thick as a dictionary. Case closed. I could get back to Dove. Or so I thought.

When I returned to the office, the sergeant had another case for me and then another. It felt like he was purposely trying to keep me from going back to Dove. The more he threw at me, the harder it was to keep an eye on her. I couldn't keep her safe like this, not from the evil I knew was lurking in the dark around her or from herself and what I was worried she wanted to do.

My car idled on the quiet street. It was past midnight, and her house was totally dark. I had to try to convince her to talk to me one last time. To not risk her life for her own version of justice. It would be a grave mistake if she took matters into her own hands. I knew that was what she wanted. And I knew she was determined to follow through with it.

I shut off my car and went to her front door. I knocked loud enough that if she was asleep, she should wake up. There was no answer, so I knocked again, banging with my fist and then calling her name.

"Dove?" I said, trying to get her attention without waking up the neighbors. "Dove, it's me." I pressed my face to the

small glass window of her door, but I couldn't see anything inside except the vague outline of furniture.

I walked around to the back door and tried the handle. It was locked. I peeked through the thin opening of the two curtains on the kitchen window and still couldn't see shit.

My heart was starting to race as my gut was telling me that something wasn't right. Dove should be there. She should be sleepily answering the door, rubbing her eyes, and angrily wondering why the hell I was there so late.

"Dove!" I yelled louder as I knocked on the back door and pressed my face against the glass. "Dove, answer the door!"

Why the hell isn't she answering?

I walked around her entire house, checking all the windows. To my surprise, there was one window that wasn't locked up tight. I squeezed through a single basement window and used the washing machine to climb down to the floor.

The fact I was there like that could get me fired, and I didn't care. I was breaking into Dove's home with no grounds that anything was wrong. My sergeant would have my ass if he found out. He'd take my badge, suspend me, and who knows what. It was a chance I was willing to take.

I pulled the small flashlight out of my holster and quietly went upstairs. The door to the basement opened up to the kitchen. "Dove!" I called out but got no answer in return.

She was nowhere to be found. I was standing in her living room, massaging my aching head. *Where could she be?* I was racking my brain and couldn't think of a single place she'd go so late at night.

Grumbling to myself, I paced in a small circle and said softly, "Where did she go? Where the hell did she go?" I kicked something on the floor as I circled past the coffee table. Stopping, I bent down and picked up a small matchbook. The white cardboard had double arrows crossed over each other in black ink on the front, and written down the spine was the word Feathers.

Feathers, I know Feathers. I opened the matches and saw a handwritten name and number on the inside cover. *Leon.* I thought about it for a second, and then it hit me. I knew exactly where she was.

Darting to my car, I stuffed my hand between the seats and pulled out the folder of mug shots I had shown Dove a while back. “Come on, where is he. Where the hell is he?” I asked myself as I scanned the faces.

The pictures were all of guys I knew. Men I had arrested myself or men I knew were capable of terrible things. I threw each page to the floor until I finally saw him. His bulbous black eyes had an empty glare. His wrinkled, leathery skin was cracked and covered in spots. Leon Orlinde, owner of Feathers and a man who had evaded the law for years.

We suspected he was responsible for all kinds of crimes. He had been arrested for plenty, just nothing worthy of a life sentence. Except, I knew better. There was more to him than meets the eye. He had too much money for owning a shit-hole strip club like Feathers.

How does she know him? Why would she be involved with a guy like him?

I stared at the static image as my thumb flicked back and forth over the stumpy edge of the matchbook. Leon couldn't be the guy. It didn't make sense. When I showed her the pictures, she didn't react at all. There was no quiet gasp or gawking eyes. She didn't start to shake, and her breathing never changed. She was calm and still as water without any wind.

He had to be involved. I had nothing to go on except for a book of matches that could be from anywhere, but I couldn't shake the feeling. My phone buzzed. I looked at the screen to see the sergeant had sent a message.

My thumb hovered over the button to open the message to see what he said, but I stopped myself. I didn't have time for whatever it was he wanted. Dove was in danger. I could sense it. It was as bold a feeling as if someone had cut me with a knife across the stomach.

I couldn't stop glaring at Leon's picture. It was like he was taunting me. Teasing me to catch him if I could. He had to be the guy. He had to be the one who did that to her. There was no other reason. None.

Her father had died long ago, and her mother certainly wouldn't step foot in a place like that or look twice at a man like Leon. He was the one. I threw the matches to the ground and started my car. I slammed my foot on the gas, causing the tires to spin on the pavement, creating white smoke that billowed behind me as I drove off.

There was no time to waste. I couldn't just sit back and let Dove kill herself. Because that's precisely what she was doing. She was committing suicide using the hands of someone else.

I refused to let her throw herself to the wolf and lose her second chance at life.

Because she deserved better.

Chapter Nineteen

Dove

I stood outside the strip club, my heart and mind as calm and still as the air around me. I was ready. I thought I might feel nervous or anxious, but I didn't feel anything like that.

A calmness settled over me like the weightless fog that hovers over a valley on a humid summer day. I had gone from being prey to being the hunter. I was a lioness, hidden in the tall grass, quietly stalking my next meal. He wasn't going to see me coming. He wasn't even going to know I was there until I decided to strike.

The music thumped with a techno beat that rattled the car windows parked on the street. The line waiting outside the door moved up slowly. Most were men looking for a lap dance, maybe a blow job, or a decent fuck if the price was right.

When it was my turn, I looked at the bouncer and smiled seductively. It was a different guy than the one that let me in last time. I was thankful for that. It convinced me that this was the right time like everything was falling together in perfect harmony.

Ty hadn't been around in days. He was a ghost. I saw him once or twice drive past my house, but he didn't stop. Ty finally realized he couldn't talk me out of this, so he kept his distance.

I couldn't blame him for not wanting to get involved. Nothing was going to change my mind, and if the police found out he was aware of what I was doing and didn't say something to someone else or stop me himself, he'd lose everything he had worked for.

I had already lost everything; there was nothing left to take.

"I.D.," the bouncer said.

“Sure,” I said. I dug around in my small purse, pretending to be looking for it. I had no plans of showing the bouncer any identification, but I knew a little flirting would work. Men were suckers for tits and a smile. “Shit, I think I forgot it at home.” I pouted my lips and batted my lashes. “I’m old enough, I swear.”

“Sorry, but I’m not getting fired tonight.”

“You won’t get fired if no one knows you let me in. I promise I won’t tell anyone.” Tilting my head, I squeezed my arms together, forcing my breasts to plump like warm bread in the oven. “Pretty please. I just broke up with my boyfriend, and all I want to do is have a good time.”

He rubbed his jaw and stared at my tits. After a few seconds, he pushed open the door. “Alright, but if anyone asks, I never saw you.”

“Of course. It’s our little secret,” I said as I walked past and purposely dragged the tips of my fingers softly across his thigh. I almost touched his cock, but I drifted my hand away just in time, teasing him enough that his mind was on other things and not my face at all.

The floor beneath my feet was sticky. The air had a thick film of smoke that hovered halfway between the ceiling and the floor. A dancer was on the stage, so most of the attention was on her and nothing else.

I found a spot against the back wall to stand. It was dark enough that no one could see me. All the lights focused on the dancer, leaving the rest of the club almost in complete darkness.

It was difficult for me to see anything. I could make out portions of people’s faces as the strobe lights darted from corner to corner and then back to the center of the stage. Men were hooting and hollering. Dollar bills flew through the air and fell around the girl, littering the stage like green snowflakes.

She rolled in the money, taking handfuls of cash and pushing against her skin, smoothing it up her stomach and

over her breasts. She squeezed her tits together, making the guys go crazy. They yelled louder, grunting with more angst like wild animals being taunted with raw meat.

My eyes adjusted in the windowless space, making it a little easier to see. I searched for Leon. I knew he was there. He would make his rounds like usual, and by the end of the night, he'd have a girl or two he'd take upstairs.

I had seen it several times before when I came to discuss our arrangement. When I asked him for a loan for my mother's treatment, he had two girls sitting with him at the bar. He took them by the hands and led us all upstairs.

There were two rooms above the club. One was an office, and the other Leon referred to as his playroom. We went to the office for our first meeting, which was very businesslike. He told me about his conditions. He would lend me the money but expected it to be paid back with interest. I agreed. It seemed simple enough, even though I knew paying him back would be difficult. But all I wanted was for my mother to get the best care.

I had heard all the stories about him and didn't heed any of the warnings. He made me feel comfortable and seemed sympathetic to me. He let me make small payments, a hundred here, seventy-five there.

I would come to the club, and he'd invite me to a drink at the bar. I would always indulge him because I didn't want to be rude. He would ask me about my mother as he watched the people and his girls around us. Then he started asking me strange questions. Questions that made me feel uncomfortable, but I never let him see me squirm. He had asked me how old I was when I first had sex. Or if it turned me on to watch the girls grind against a customer. He even asked me once if I had ever had a threesome. Then he told me I should dance for him.

Leon tried to convince me that I could pay him off quicker if I worked for Feathers. He said it would be the easiest way. I politely declined. He didn't like that. Leon wasn't a man who liked getting turned down.

That was the moment it all changed. He became more demanding, asking for more and more each time I came to make a payment. It started to feel like he was trying to pressure me to become one of his girls. Like he thought if he made it impossible for me to pay him, I'd become his and work for him.

His men would follow me, always making sure I knew they were watching. Once the threats started, I finally had enough. Leon gave me a way out. One night with him, that was it, he had said. One night where he could do whatever he wanted with me. As much as I hated the idea, I thought I could do it and finally be done with that asshole. I was never going to be able to pay him back. Cancer was fucking expensive.

I let him lead me right into his trap. He didn't want to meet me at the club the night he stole me. Instead, he wanted to meet at a park and ride next to the highway. I didn't like the idea, but I wanted it to end. He told me to get in. I was wary but did as he asked. There was no possible way for me to know what he would do. I was naive to the danger.

He was a bad man. I knew he was dangerous and callous, and people feared him. I underestimated our deal. He tricked me. Fool me once; shame on you. Fool me twice; shame on me. But try and fool me again, and you're a fucking dead man.

This was the end of my story with Leon. I would write the final chapter and finish the nightmare he created forever.

From the corner of my eyes, I finally spotted Leon. He was behind the bar, making himself and another woman a drink. He had taken out two glasses and grabbed a bottle off the top shelf. It was probably a high-quality liquor, maybe an old scotch or bourbon, something he knew would make him look classy and rich all at once.

The woman looked young, maybe in her early twenties. She was smiling and giggling as Leon said something. My stomach churned watching him work his magic on that poor unsuspecting girl. He was probably telling her how beautiful she was and how she had no idea how much money she could

make at this place. From the look on her face, she was falling right into it.

But I knew what he was doing. He would pump her full of alcohol and convince the unsuspecting girl to do everything he said. And she would agree to do it. The glint in her eyes and the rosy blush of her cheeks said it was working.

I watched them from my hiding spot, waiting patiently for him to pick up his glass, whisper in her ear, and then take her upstairs. He would feed her more alcohol, probably slip her some drugs, and then he had her for good. She'd be his forever.

No, she won't. He's done terrorizing girls.

Leon tipped his head back and laughed. He swirled his glass of alcohol, took a small sip, then pushed her glass to her lips, forcing her to take another drink. She gladly accepted his suggestion. As if she wanted to impress him, she swallowed the rest of the glass and slammed it on the bar.

He grinned, pleased; she was falling right into his trap. With a satisfied look, he refilled her glass and handed it back. He leaned over the bar, whispered something else in her ear, and then walked off. It was time for him to make his rounds, check on his customers, and make sure his girls were doing exactly what they were required to do.

I countered his every move. If Leon walked to the left, I moved further to the right. If he looked up, I looked down. Wherever he was, I was watching him from the shadows. And the best part was he had no idea I was coming.

He didn't bat an eye at me twice. I kept my back to him and watched him like a hawk. He talked with a few guys in suits and then to one of the strippers working the floor. His hand was clutched so tightly around her upper arm that when he let her go, I could see his fingerprints on her skin.

That really set something off inside me. To see his marks on another girl made my body go up in flames. I was enraged instantly, ready to charge him and stab him in the eyes with the spikes of my black heels. But I held back. I knew that too

many people were around, and I'd never make it to him. Someone would grab me before I reached him, and my entire plan would go up in smoke.

Keep it together. His time is coming; just be patient.

Leon worked the room for about an hour. The girl at the bar had been getting fed drinks by the bartender one after the other. She could barely stand anymore. She rocked side to side like she was standing on the deck of a ship during rough seas. Her eyes would be open, then suddenly, her lids would close, but she'd pop them wide open again. Mascara was smeared like dark circles under her eyes from rubbing them.

Every so often, Leon would look at the bar to see how she was doing. A second girl was there and being handed drinks just like the first. She looked a little younger, definitely too young to be in a place like this.

She had plump cheeks that hadn't lost their baby fat yet, and way too much makeup. It was the classic sign of a teen that wanted to look older. She was wearing six-inch pumps that her ankles were too weak to support. Every time she went to turn in place, one of her feet would fold over, and she'd almost lose her balance. It was probably her first time even wearing heels like that.

These girls had no idea who they were up against. Their minds were too weak to see through his thin skin to the monster beneath. He was making them feel beautiful and valued, giving them the attention they probably weren't getting at home. Or maybe they were both runaways, and he was pretending to be their savior.

That's how he got me. He promised to save my mom.

He made false promises to heal her. He acted like he cared, but in reality, he had no sympathy for her at all. He thought I would fall right into his hands, that he'd be able to mold me like all the girls that came before me.

Except, I wasn't one of those girls. I was different. I came to him for other reasons. I wasn't broken because of abuse

from a parent. I wasn't hurting because I thought no one loved me. And because of that, he never had control of me.

Leon had one arm around each girl's waist and guided them to the door that led upstairs. The girls were stumbling as they walked, giggling with each fumble and grasping him for support.

I followed them from a safe distance. The club was busy enough that no one was paying attention to the straggler only feet away. I stood off to the side, pretending to watch the dancer on the stage.

Leon yanked the door open, guiding the girls through with a push against their asses. The second the door closed, I cautiously walked to it. The bartender was preoccupied with people ordering drinks. The half-naked waitresses were busy taking orders and flirting for bigger tips. The bouncers walking around had their eyes on a guy being obnoxiously loud and seemed to be getting a little too handsy with a girl he hadn't paid for yet.

This is my chance.

I quickly opened the door and slipped inside without a soul noticing me. The hallway was dimly lit with small yellow glowing orbs recessed in the ceiling. The stairs were covered in red velvet fabric as if Leon was trying to make you feel like a Hollywood starlit strolling the red carpet as he led you upstairs.

In reality, he was walking you right into the lion's den. The place where he would slowly and methodically eat away at you until there was nothing left. It was what men like him did. They stalk, they capture, they steal, and then they devour. And when he was done, you'd be nothing more than a doll he could move and manipulate in any way he wanted to.

The music was still loud around me, making the walls thump like I was inside the heart of the building. I took each stair carefully, glancing back to ensure I was still alone. I could hear laughing and the clanking of glasses as I reached the top of the steps. Leon and the girls were in his playroom to

my left, but there was one more thing I needed to do before I took him by surprise.

I went into the office where all the cameras were and sat at his desk. A few key taps later, his security cameras were mine. I stopped the live feed and set them to run on a loop of previously recorded footage. I made sure to wipe it all, so any video I was on tonight or in the past didn't exist anymore.

I wasn't worried about anyone else coming to check the cameras because Leon was the only person who ever watched them, and he wasn't thinking about the cameras right then. Besides, he wouldn't have the chance to catch me in this game of hide and seek. I was a ghost, haunting him quietly from a distance.

My breathing was shallow as I stood outside the door where Leon was about to steal the innocence of two unsuspecting girls. I could feel my lungs rattle with heavy air as I tried to calm my anger. I was enraged. I was so fucking furious that every inch of my body was shaking.

The adrenaline had come in hard and fast like a tsunami cruising towards the shore. My muscles tingled with the urge to charge inside and light him up with a million bullets. But I didn't have a million bullets, and I didn't want to make it quick or easy for him. I wanted him to suffer.

I closed my eyes, opened my lungs up, and breathed. With my hand around the knob, I slowly opened the door. The two girls were lying on the bed, barely awake and unaware of what was happening. Leon was at the end of the bed, taking pictures of their naked bodies.

He flicked his eyes to me in the doorway and said, "Who the fuck are you?"

The second he spoke, all the rage I felt swarmed like a giant hoard of locusts in my gut. I swallowed hard, settling the nerves trying to break me down. I wasn't born a killer. The good person I had once been was trying to push me in the opposite direction I was walking. That innocent girl wanted me to run away. She was pushing against my insides, squeezing my heart and my lungs. I just wasn't going to listen.

“Ben told me you could use one more,” I answered as I pretended to stumble in like I was a little tipsy. My words were linked together like a long note at the end of a song.

He smirked devilishly as he licked his lips. “The more, the merrier, I always say. Please, come join us. The bed is big enough for all of us to play.”

“Good, I like playing,” I said. I buckled my right foot and swayed as I took another step forward to keep my tipsiness authentic. “Where do you want me?”

He stared at me for a moment, eyeing me up and down. My heart stiffened as I waited for the recognition to glow on his face. I waited to see the hatred in his eyes as he realized who was standing in his doorway. I waited to see his eyes spark with fire and brimstone over the thought that he would get to kill me all over again.

Except, he didn't. He smiled, happy and excited to oblige me with an answer. He pushed each of the girls over by the hip. The girls were barely awake. They moaned softly, opening their eyes slightly, then closing them again. They couldn't keep their eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time. Whatever he had put in their drinks was kicking in.

He patted the cramped space between the two girls and said, “I've got a place for you right here.”

Instantly, I knew he didn't realize who was actually standing right in front of him. My own excitement came to life. Everything I had been working for was at my fingertips. It was tangible and tasted like satisfaction. All the fears that made me question myself disappeared. This wasn't his game anymore; it was mine. I was the black widow, and he just crawled into my web.

I shook my head no. “No?” he asked as he gave me a curious look.

“They look pretty out of it. How can we have any fun if only the two of us can move?” My voice was low and sultry as I tilted my head a hair. “Doesn't that take away from the pleasure?”

“Not at all. I like being able to take what I want. And it always pleases the girls I’m with to give me what I want.”

I casually walked closer, shifting my gaze to look around the room. “How can you know that when they’re out cold?”

His demeanor changed slightly, but only slightly. He didn’t want to alarm me just yet. I was still too mobile and alert. As far as he was concerned, I was just a stupid woman spouting my mouth off.

“How about you let me show you? I promise you’ll feel just as good as these girls. Willing to do anything, when I want, how I want, and until I say you can stop. Don’t you want to please me?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” I said, turning to look at him over my shoulder. I gently nibbled on my nail as I picked up a rope he had laid out on a long coffee table. “Let me lead. Let me tie you up, and I’ll do anything you ask me to. I’ll follow your every command. I’ll fuck you as hard or as soft as you want. It could be a lot of fun.” I spun the rope around in a circle, putting on the best act of my life. “Give me that, and I’ll let you do anything you want to me.”

“Anything?” he asked.

“Anything.”

His eyes lit up like a piece of meat being dangled in front of a starving dog. “Are you trying to make a deal with me?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Call it a gift. Give me this, and the rest is for you to just sit back and enjoy.”

“I don’t normally make deals, but you have balls, little girl. I want to see what you got. This could be fun. A little fun for you, and then a lot of fun for me. But,” he said, holding up a single finger as he petted the younger girl beneath like she was a cat. He ran the backs of his knuckles down her arm and over her hip. She wiggled slightly, as if in her dreams, a spider was crawling across his skin. “Don’t disappoint me. I don’t do well when expectations aren’t met. And right now, I have high expectations for you.”

“You don’t even know me,” I said. There was a playful quip to my voice. I was taunting Leon with the power of wonder. He didn’t recognize me, and because of that, he was curious about what my body would feel like.

“Yet,” he said. “I don’t know you yet.” He shoved the two girls over more by squeezing himself between them like a slug. “But we’re going to get to know each other really well, I can promise you that.”

“Me too,” I said as I walked to the head of the bed. “Let me see your hands.”

Leon crossed his wrists and lifted his hands above his head. I grabbed one hand and tied it tight to the headboard. Repeating it with his other wrist, I did the same to his ankles, connecting them to the footboard. He was trapped.

“I’m already fucking hard, and we haven’t even started. Who knew I’d enjoy being tied up so much.” He bit his bottom lip as his eyes fell on my chest and body. “My turn now. I want to see some skin.”

“You want some skin... alright, you can have some skin.” I unbuttoned the first few buttons on my shirt, opening it almost to my breasts. His eyes blazed with that same evil glow I remembered. Only this time, it wasn’t him that was in charge. I used his weakness against him. Sex can make a man do things he never thought he would. Leon’s desire, greed, and ability to control the world around him had left him vulnerable to a girl like me. “But you know what, I think we should play a little first. What do you think? I mean, I can just ride your cock, but what fun is there in that?”

Leon being trapped just wasn’t good enough for me. I needed to know he wasn’t going anywhere. I wanted him to only be able to get out if he cut off one of his hands. I walked to the table and started rifling through the drawers.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just poking around. Don’t worry; I’m working my way back to you. Ah,” I called out happily. “Now we’re talking.” I held up two sets of handcuffs and a ball gag. “Perfect.”

“Whoa, I didn’t agree to all that. The rope is just fine.”

“No, a little extra will just add some icing on the cake.”

“You know what, untie me.” He tried to tug his hands free, almost frantically, as if he had realized his mistake. “Let me go.” He moved his arms, bucking his body as he tried to pull himself free.

I stepped to the bed and locked each hand around the bedposts with a handcuff. “There we go, now we’re in business.”

“Listen, you little fucking bitch, let me go. Let me fucking go right now. You have no idea who you’re fucking with.”

“You sound so angry right now. I thought we were playing a little game?”

His mouth went paper thin as his eyes grew wide with anger. He knew he wasn’t in control, and it was killing him. “I’m going to fucking break you. You’re going to wish you were dead when I get my hands on you.”

“Oh, Leon, you’ve already tried that, and you fucking failed.” I smiled as I looked him in the eyes. I pulled my shirt sleeve down and showed him the scars across my shoulder. “Remember me now?” He stared at me, confused and unsure, but his skin was white as a ghost. I pulled up the hem of my shirt to show him the thick keloid scars from where the blade of his knife had cut open my body and the round bumps from his bullets as they penetrated my skin. “How about now? Do you remember me now?”

“You have some fucking balls coming here like this,” he said. “It was the wrong fucking move, Dove. You won’t go free this time. I’ll make sure you’re fucking dead.”

“I don’t really think you’re in any position to be threatening anyone right now.” I pulled a small switchblade out from a leather strap on my thigh. The blade glinted under the dim lighting. “I think you need some scars of your own to remember me by. What do you think?”

“I think you’re a goddamn crazy fucking bitch.”

“I think you might be right.” I licked the sharp edge of the blade. “But no one will care what happens to an old perverted scumbag like you.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“Yeah, but you tried that already and failed.” I dragged the blade up over his stomach, putting enough pressure to leave a bright red scratch and draw only a small amount of blood. “I hate to tell you this, but you lost, asshole.”

“I didn’t lose shit,” he growled. The corners of his lips filled with white spittle bubbles like a rabid dog. “You just fucking wait. I’m going to make everything from before look like a goddamn fucking massage with a happy ending.”

I tisked him under my breath as I stood over one of the girls and gave her a shake. Her body bobbed and moved, making a few sleepy groans, but she wouldn’t wake up. “What the fuck did you give these girls? Are they even old enough to be here?” I lifted her hair away from her face and looked down at her. “Hey,” I said, trying to rouse her. “Hey!” I yelled, shaking her harder.

The girl moaned and blinked her eyes a few times, but she was so messed up from whatever he had slipped in her drink that I wasn’t sure she even knew what planet she was on. “Mm uhh mm,” she groaned as her eyes rolled back in her head.

“Wow, look at you, a real lady’s man, aren’t you?” I cocked a brow and frowned. “You’re such a piece of shit. You can’t even get a girl to sleep with you willingly unless you drug her. You must be so proud of yourself.”

“I’m going to cut off those pretty little lips of yours the second I get out of these.” The metal clanged against the bed frame as he shook his wrists.

I rolled my eyes as I grabbed the girl by the wrist and pulled her off the bed. I dragged her to the corner of the room, then did the same with the other girl. I covered them with a blanket and decided I’d bring the girls into the hallway when I was done with Leon. I didn’t want them waking up to a dead

man. I'd be long gone by the time they came to. There was no chance they'd be able to identify me to the cops.

“You're not cutting anything off of me, Leon. I think you're having a hard time understanding that you're not the one in charge right now. *I am.*”

He watched me with an evil look on his face. Thick wrinkles creased his forehead, and his already black eyes turned dark as a starless sky. “You just wait, you fucking whore,” he grumbled through clenched teeth. “I'm going to slice your throat from ear to ear, then cut your tits off and feed them to you.”

“Are you now?” I pressed the blade's edge against the thick vein in his neck. As I held it there, I could feel his pulse as it beat against the thin, sharp metal. “Your heart is racing,” I said. “Are you afraid?”

“I want to stuff your fucking tongue down your throat.”

“And I want to cut yours out.” I pulled the blade away and stuffed it in his mouth. “Do you have any idea what you did to me? Do you know what you took from me?”

Leon didn't try to speak. He glared at me with his beady little eyes as thin sweat trickled down his temples. His nostrils flared wide as he took in deep breaths. He wanted to speak, but didn't dare utter a single word.

I pulled the blade against his cheek as I tilted my head and said, “But cutting out your tongue won't do me any good. I won't be able to hear you beg me for your life.” Removing the knife from his mouth, I ran my hand through my hair and took a step back.

He chuckled and smiled lightly. “You know what your problem is? You're weak. You don't have what it takes to be me. You hate me, I can see that, but you'll never be able to kill me.”

“You're wrong about that.”

“Then why not just do it? Why make it such a theatrical event like this?”

“Because I want you to suffer first.” I climbed onto the bed, standing above him like a queen looking down on a peasant. “I won’t kill you until I see true fear in your eyes.”

“Then you’ll never kill me. I’m not afraid to die.”

“You will be the second you see the flames coming up through the floorboards to suck you into hell.” Lifting my foot, I placed the spiked heel of my black pump on his thigh. “I want you to spend all eternity burning. I want you to feel the fire as it melts your skin and know I put you there. Me. The girl you tried to kill but couldn’t.”

“Fuck you,” he snapped as he spat at me.

That single act triggered something inside me. It pushed me over the edge. I lifted my foot and slammed it down on his thigh, creating a pen-sized hole in his leg. Leon let out a scream as he cursed at me.

“Stupid slut! Get the fuck off me!” He bucked his body, trying to twist and rock to throw me off balance.

It didn’t work. I lifted my foot again and then pierced his other thigh with my heel. “Now we’re having fun. Right, Leon? Isn’t this fun?”

I opened the blade again and dropped down, sitting on his waist. Thin streams of blood were trickling out of the fresh wounds and soaking into the white sheet on the mattress.

“You should have made sure I was dead, Leon.” I swiped the blade across his stomach, creating a deep gash. “But don’t worry, I won’t be as neglectful as you. You’ll be dead before I walk out that door.”

I pulled back his boxers, exposing his dick. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked. It was the first time I had heard any fear in his voice.

“You raped me. Or did you forget that part? And you were going to rape these girls too. How many others are there? How many girls are out there that have been raped by you?”

“I gave them all what they asked for. You came to me. Remember? I didn’t come to you.”

“I came to you for help. But you, you took something that wasn’t yours.” I pinched the tip of his dick between two fingers and pulled it up off his body. “You’ll never do that again.” In one clean swipe, I chopped his cock off.

Leon let out a screech like I had never heard before. His body bucked as blood spewed out. His face instantly drained to white, and he started to gag between screams. “Help! Someone fucking help me! This bitch is crazy! Help!”

“No one is coming to save you, Leon.” I tossed his limp, useless dick to the floor. I climbed to my feet and pushed my heel against his neck. “Besides, I’m just getting started.”

“Please,” he said, his face pulling back to reveal a hint of humanity. “Please, you made your point; just let me go.”

“No, I don’t think I did.” I pushed my foot down on his throat harder, closing off most of his air supply. “I don’t think you fully understand what you’ve done to me.”

“I do understand.”

“You killed my mother. Why did you have to kill my mother? Tell me that. Tell me why!” I yelled. My fingers itched to strangle him and feel the life leave his body. But I wanted answers. I wanted him to tell me why.

I deserved to know what she had done to get killed. She was the innocent one. She had done nothing to feel his wrath. I was the only one who owed him anything.

“Because,” he said, his voice low and raspy from the weight of my foot on his neck. “She would have looked for you.”

“That’s it?! That’s why?!” Red was all I could see. I yanked the gun from the holster that was wrapped around my thigh. Pointing the barrel at the center of his forehead, I cocked the hammer, my finger firmly holding the trigger.

He ruined me. And now I was going to destroy him.

Chapter Twenty

Ty

“Detective Colt,” I said, holding up my badge. “I need to speak with Leon.”

“You have a warrant?” the bouncer asked.

“I’m coming in whether you want me to or not.”

“Not without a warrant, you’re not. I know what our rights are.”

I yanked my gun from the holster on my hip and pointed it directly at him. “Fine, we can do this the old-fashioned way then. How about you just get the fuck out of my way. Please.”

The bouncer held up his hands and moved to the side. “Alright, man, no need to get all pissy now. All you had to do was say please.” He fanned his arm out, signaling for me to go right in.

“Nah, I think it’s best if you come with me. Take me to Leon.” I shook the gun for him to walk in first ahead of me.

“I’m not his keeper,” he said.

“And I’m not playing games. Go.”

“You know this is illegal, right? You can’t do this.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll deal with all that shit later. Right now, I just need to talk with your boss.”

“Fine. It’s your fucking ass.” With his hands held up, palms open and facing out, the bouncer walked through the building and down to the bar. “Where’s Leon?” he asked the bartender.

The bartender was a skinny guy with long black hair and pimply olive skin. He had the mustache of a prepubescent teenage boy, with hair spaced too far apart and much too thin to be anything more than a stain on his upper lip.

He looked at the bouncer, then at me standing behind him with my gun. “He’s upstairs,” he said quickly and adamantly.

He didn't want any part of this at all. He wasn't a fall guy for Leon or even someone with big enough balls to take a stand. The guy was just a lackey. A do what you're told kind of guy with no brains of his own.

"Take me upstairs," I demanded.

The bouncer brought me to a door against the back wall and said, "He's right up there." He pointed at the black-painted door with a black knob as if all the paint concealed it like camouflage.

"I said take me upstairs, not show me to the door."

"I don't think Leon would be too happy if we—"

"I don't give two shits what Leon would want or not want; just fucking take me to him." I barked through gritted teeth. "Enough with the bullshit."

"Alright, calm down, man." He yanked the door open to expose a single row of steps that led up and out of view. It looked like they disappeared into the ceiling completely. "Here you go, right up there."

"Don't make me tell you again." I pushed the barrel of the gun into his back and gave him a light shove. "Please, after you."

I followed him through the door. It smelled like mold and stale cigars in the hall. There was hardly any light, so dim I could barely see the stairs. With each step, I anticipated my foot slipping out from underneath me, sending me tumbling backward. I held the railing tightly in one hand, but never took my eyes off the bouncer in front of me.

The man reached the top and pointed at a door to his right. "That's his office."

"Knock on the door." The man started to knock, but then there was a scream from behind a door across the hall.

"No! Don't do it!" a man's voice yelled.

I pivoted on my heels, aiming my gun at the door. "What's in there?"

“That’s the room where Leon does auditions for any potential new hires.”

“Open the office door.” The bouncer went to knock again, but I stopped him. “No, just open it.” He pushed the door open to expose an empty room. “Are there any other rooms up here?” I asked. He shook his head no right as the same unknown man screamed again. “Go, get the hell out of here,” I said.

The guy bolted down the stairs and back into the club. I took out my phone and called the station. “This is Detective Colt; I need backup at one-two-seven Haymes street.”

There was more screaming coming from inside the room. I could hear a mix of two voices going back and forth. I attempted to open the door, but it was locked. I didn’t have time to wait for my backup. Someone needed help inside. I couldn’t just stand there and listen to the cries and not do anything.

With a hard kick, I slammed my foot against the seam of the door where the handle and wall connected. The door burst open in one violent explosion, sending shards of wood into the room like thorny fireworks.

The room was brighter than the hall, blinding me instantly. I blinked several times, forcing the room into focus. A pole was secured to the ceiling with a small, single-person stage in the center of the room. The floor was covered in a red velvet rug, and the walls were covered with naked pictures of women. The women were posing in seductive ways. Some photographs were autographed, while others had girls that didn’t look old enough to be there and weren’t there by choice.

As I glanced around the room, I was shocked by what I saw. Dove was standing over Leon on the bed. Leon was handcuffed to the iron railings by his wrists and tied to the foot-board around the ankles. Her foot was pinned against his throat, trapping him in place with the stem of her heel, and a gun was pointed at his forehead.

Leon was bleeding pretty severely. Blood spilled from several different wounds all over his body. His legs, his chest

and ribs, his face, there was even blood trickling out from inside his ear.

“Help me,” he tried to say, but his voice was barely audible under the weight of her foot.

“Dove,” I said, taking a cautious step forward. My gun was still in my hand, aimed at the one person I knew I could never shoot. “You don’t want to do this.”

“We’ve talked about this already. I need to do this.”

“You’re not a killer. This isn’t the person you want to be.”

Dove let out a laugh like I had never heard before. It was a cackle of sorts, high-pitched and hearty. It wasn’t the laugh of a sane person; it was the laugh of someone who had slowly been losing their mind over time.

“Do you have any idea whose life you’re trying to save right now? This man raped me. He tortured me. He made me suffer for months, and for what? For fucking money! For Christ’s sake, he killed my mother!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, never taking her eyes off Leon as her hands started shaking like she had been outside in the cold for hours. “He ruined my fucking life!”

I lowered my gun and held out a hand to try and calm her down. “Put down the gun, Dove. I know you’re upset, and you have every reason to be, but this won’t fix a damn thing. Killing him won’t erase your scars. Killing him won’t bring your mother back.”

She lifted her eyes to mine. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her lip was trembling just as violently as her hands. “It’s not about my scars. And I know I can never bring her back. This is about making it right. An eye for an eye.”

“This isn’t the right way.” I took another step forward, keeping my arm stretched out toward her.

“Neither is him spending the rest of his life in prison. It won’t be right until I stop sharing the same air as him.”

“Dove—”

“Nothing you can say will change my mind, Ty. There’s nothing you can say that will stop me. I’m doing this.”

“What about your mom? What would she say right now?”

Leon started to laugh, a cold, dry chuckle. “Your mom didn’t have much to say when we dragged her out to that field.”

“Shut up,” she barked at him. Her jaw sharpened, and her lids thinned. “I don’t want to hear you say a fucking word about my mother.”

“I’m just telling you the truth. Don’t you want to know what she said? Don’t you want to know what her last words were? If you kill me, you’ll never get that.”

“Shut the hell up,” I snapped at him. “Just sit there and shut your goddamn mouth. You’ve already done enough, don’t make things worse.”

He laughed again, louder and more intensely. “This bitch isn’t going to fucking shoot me. She can’t fucking pull that trigger. She doesn’t have it in her. She said a lot of shit when she was with me, but her mother was silent as a mouse until the very last second. Aren’t you a little curious, Dove?” His voice was low and coarse.

“Fuck you!” she screamed as she pulled her foot off his neck, steadied the gun in her hands, and aimed it at his face. “Fuck you!”

Leon snarled as he looked up at her, lifting his head as if to dare her to pull the trigger. “She didn’t beg me for her life. She didn’t cry and weep like a frightened child. Not like you cried.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Dove screeched, her arm violently trembling. But she wasn’t crying; she was engorged with rage. A rage that was so intense and full that it swelled to the point she couldn’t feel or hear anything else. “Shut your stupid fucking mouth! I don’t care what she said; it won’t change a damn thing! I’m going to fucking kill you!”

“Dove!” I tried to scream her name over her, but she just kept yelling at him.

“You deserve to spend the rest of your life in hell! You deserve to feel the same pain you put on me! You deserve to fucking die! I hope you rot in hell!”

“Then do it already!” he yelled back.

“No!” I screamed, running towards her.

“Your mom forgave me,” Leon said softly. “She said God was carrying both of us, and it didn’t matter how heavy my burden was on Him. She said He would carry me until I could find my footing.” He chuckled, a callous, almost delirious laugh. His mouth opened wide as his head fell back. “And I still pulled the fucking trigger. What a stupid fucking bitch your mother—”

BANG!

Chapter Twenty-one

Dove

Smoke spiraled out from the end of the gun in thin, wispy trails. I watched as it twisted and twirled higher and higher until it finally disappeared. My palms were sweaty, and my heart was hammering so hard that all I could hear was the intense beat of a drum in my ears.

Behind the drumming was a low-pitched ringing that seemed to be shoving its way forward. Gunpowder created a metallic smell in the air that I could taste on my lips. Everything was still stuck in that limbo of slow motion and real-time as I looked blankly around while I waited for the world to catch up to me.

“What did you do?” I asked as I dropped to my knees on the bed. All the little noises that were usually discrete and ignored were screaming. The springs of the mattress squeaked like the high pitch whir of brakes on a train as it slowed to a stop. The creak of the brackets on the headboard and footboard screamed like a witch being burned at the stake.

“Dove, hang in there. Help is on the way.” Ty came to my side and slowly took the gun out of my hands. He tossed it to the floor and wrapped his arms around my shoulders to help me off the bed.

My whole body shook like I had fallen through a hole in the ice. Ty pulled me against his chest and held me tight. I cried then. I cried like I had never cried before. I cried for everything I lost. For the loss of my mother. For the loss of myself. For the loss of time, I could never get back. For everything, I could never make right.

And I screamed. I screamed so loud as if the earth had just opened up beneath my feet with teeth as sharp as daggers and swallowed me whole, burning me with the flames that fueled the core.

“Why?! Why did you have to come?!” I pounded my fists against his chest, punching and striking with extreme

delusions of hate and rage. “He should be dead! He needs to fucking die!”

A sharp and sensational pain suddenly coursed through my body. I had felt a pain like that before, and I knew what it was instantly. The curse had come back around to finish me off. I reached down and touched my side. As I drew my hand back, it was covered in bright red blood.

“I’m sorry, Dove. I’m so sorry.” Ty cuddled me as I slumped over. It was hard to breathe all of a sudden. It was as if all the air had been sucked right out of my lungs in one grand pull.

“Why?” I asked as I started to feel dizzy, and the room began to shift and sway.

The sound of several sets of feet came charging into the room. Guns were out, and men were in SWAT gear with shields and helmets. They yelled at each other as they swung their weapons from side to side. A few officers tended to the girls in the corner.

“They’ve been drugged,” I said, but my voice too weak to be heard.

“You alright, Ty?” an officer asked.

“I’m fine. But she needs help. She has a gunshot wound to her left side. I’m not sure how bad it is.”

I looked down to see blood covering my shirt and pooling on the floor beside me. The man applied pressure with his hand, which sent another raging storm of pain through my body. I screamed again, my voice so different that I didn’t even recognize it as my own.

There were two gunshots, I was told afterward, but I had only heard one. Ty had shot me. He fucking shot me, causing me to miss Leon entirely, and hit the wall beside his head. Two inches. I had missed by two goddamn inches.

“Someone get me the fuck out of here!” Leon yelled.

“He’s the one we’ve been looking for. Take him into custody.” Ty said to one of the officers. He wasn’t looking at

them as he spoke; he was only looking at me.

I didn't want to see him, not now or ever again. I hated him. I hated the man who was holding me as if I was his to comfort. I hated that he stole from me. I wasn't sure who was worse. Leon, who had killed my mother and brutalized me. Or Ty, for allowing Leon to live another day.

The cops unhooked Leon from the bed, cuffed him again, and dragged him away. I was numb.

Leon looked over at me with a smug grin on his face and blew me a kiss. I grunted, then tried to get up to attack him. "He needs to fucking pay! Kill the bastard! Kill him!"

"I need you to calm down. You're bleeding pretty bad, and the more you move, the worse you'll make it. Where the fuck are the medics?" the man yelled over his shoulder as he looked around the room. His hands were slippery and moving all over the wound on my side. "I need a medic up here now!"

Ty attempted to reach down to take my hand, but I threw him away. "Don't fucking touch me," I snapped as my side began to throb, and my breathing grew shallow. "You lay another finger on me, and I'll fucking bite you."

"Dove—"

"Get the hell away from me." I turned my face away so he couldn't see me crying. I closed my eyes, wishing that this shot was the one. I wanted that pain to be the last I'd have to endure. I couldn't take anymore.

The medics were at my side before Ty could say anything else. They had pushed him back out of the way as they started to work on me. I was lifted onto the gurney and carried downstairs through the club. The lights were on now, the room mulling with little clusters of people that the cops were questioning. A gray layer of smoke floated close to the ceiling like thin clouds blown across the sky.

The voices around me were mumbled pitches of highs and lows. The occasional beep from a walkie-talkie would break the monotone vocals. I could smell the vitriol scent of sex and

sweat hanging in the air. It was so bitter I could taste it on my tongue when I swallowed, and it turned my stomach.

The ambulance was parked out front with its blaring red and blue lights flashing like fireworks on the dark street. They loaded me inside, and I stared at the ceiling as they worked on me. They were asking me questions, but I didn't answer them. I didn't want them to save me. What life did I have left to live? I didn't get revenge. I didn't get to destroy Leon. I didn't get to watch him take his last breath of air.

He was still alive, and because of that, I didn't want to be.

I didn't remember much after that. Blips of time played in my mind like an old-fashioned movie with no sound. Doctors hovered over me, more blinding lights, and my body moved around without my free will.

The next thing I remembered was waking up to the sound of the heart monitor. For a split second, I thought it was all just a dream, and I was waking up again after being found in that dumpster, like a premonition in my sleep that was showing me what was to come. I could make changes with what I knew and do things differently.

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see you again?" Cindy's face came into view as she leaned over me. She smiled and lifted the head of the bed. "This is too soon, Dove."

Fuck, there is no do-over.

"Yeah, good to see you too. So, I wasn't dreaming all of this, was I?"

"If you were, it would be one hell of a dream. But, sadly, no, you're stuck with me again." She laughed as she rested her hands on her hips. "You know the drill. What's your pain level?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing I can't handle."

"Yeah, I know, you're tough as nails. Just make sure you let me know if you need anything. I don't need you trying to brush it off, especially since we have more to worry about than just you this time."

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You and that little bundle you got growing in there need lots of rest.”

“Bundle?”

She looked at me curiously as if she wasn't sure if I was joking or not. “You don't know?”

“Know what?”

“Dove, you're pregnant.”

“*Pregnant?*” I touched my stomach gently. “I don't understand. That can't be right.”

“Well, you are, and you're about eight weeks, according to Dr. Tibido.”

“I thought... I thought he said I couldn't get pregnant? How is this possible?”

“Miracles happen all the time, Dove. Maybe you have an angel or two giving you something to live for.”

“I don't believe in miracles.”

“Well, you and this baby are miracles, I can tell you that.” Cindy rubbed the outside of my arm, then picked up my chart and started to write inside it. “The bullet went in your left side and ricocheted off your hip bone. Then out through the meat of your ribs, nicking your lung. Which is why it might feel painful when you take a deep breath. It would have gone straight through your uterus if you had been standing an inch differently.”

I clutched my belly tighter, trying to feel the baby inside. But I didn't feel anything, not really anyway. Except, I did feel different all of a sudden. I wasn't sure what to think or say, so I sat quietly.

But deep inside, far within the murky gray that had been my soul, I felt something strange. Like the sprout of a new flower from the ground after a torrential rain storm. When the sky had finally cleared, and the sun had crested the horizon, and the ground was full of sweet earthy water. That was when

new life would begin, when the earth would recycle all the dead and rotting pieces to feed the young it was about to bear.

New life had begun inside me, and that helped shed some of the crust around my heart. *I'm having a baby... Ty's baby.* The thought sent a warm shiver down my spine.

“Does anyone else know I’m pregnant?” I asked.

“No, we don’t share private medical information.”

My heart started to beat erratically. It was heavy and fast, skipping and slowing down. I was having a baby. A baby that shouldn’t be. A baby that wasn’t asked for and shouldn’t be able to grow inside. A baby that was not only mine but belonged to a man I now hated. A baby that shouldn’t be alive because of everything I had been through.

A miracle—*my miracle.*

“You alright, Dear?” Cindy asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I’m trying to grasp everything that’s happened.” I paused for a moment, my eyes getting drawn to my bedside. “What’s this?” I asked, pointing to a bouquet of flowers on the nightstand.

“Those are from Detective Colt. He brought them in this morning.”

“You can throw them out then. I don’t want them.”

“You know he hasn’t left once since they brought you in. He’s been here every single day.”

“Good for him, but I don’t really give two shits. He’s an asshole.”

“An asshole who saved your life,” she said.

“Saved my life? He didn’t save my life. He’s the one who shot me.”

“I think that maybe you should talk to him first before you jump to any conclusions.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I don’t want to talk to him. I never want to see him again.”

Ty was the one who shot me. He pointed his gun and pulled the trigger. He saved Leon, not me. He stood by my side and chose the devil. He delivered Leon a life he didn’t deserve. A life that was mine to take.

“Just listen to him is all I’m saying. Give him a chance.”

“He doesn’t deserve a chance.”

Cindy smiled as she closed my chart and walked to the door. “Get some rest; I’ll be back in a little bit to check on you. If you need me, you know how to get me.”

“The red button.”

“You got it.”

Once she was gone, I sat in silence. I thought about putting the television on, but wasn’t in the mood. There was no doubt in my mind that what happened had reached around the globe. I grabbed a magazine off the table, but only flipped through it, then put it back.

I touched my stomach and whispered to the tiny baby inside. “I don’t know how you got here, but I promise you, I’ll do better for the both of us. You deserve that.”

There was a knock at the door. The door creaked open before I could say come in. Ty poked his head inside and smiled. “Hey, you in the mood for some company?”

“No.” I rolled to my side but he didn’t take my rejection, and came in anyway.

“Look, Dove, we need to talk.”

“No, actually, we don’t.”

“Yes, we do. I’m sorry for what happened. I didn’t mean for it to go down like this.”

Jerking my head back in his direction, I snarled, “Yes, you did. You’re the one who did this, not me. I had a plan, I was going to end this fucking nightmare, and you stopped me. You stopped me so you could save that piece of shit.”

“You’re wrong. I did it to save you.”

“Save me?! Save me?!” I yelled as I sat up in bed. “You didn’t save me, Ty! You fucking shot me! I was going to save myself! I was going to get the justice I deserved! And now that’s all gone!”

“Dove,” he said as he stepped towards the bed. “You might not want to believe it, but I saved you. If I hadn’t done that, you’d be dead!” he yelled. Ty’s face contorted with his own anger. “The men that stormed inside that room wouldn’t have been so kind! They would have shot you dead! I shot you, so they didn’t have to. I couldn’t watch you die.”

“I’m already dead, Ty.”

“You’re wrong. You’re not dead, Dove. You have a chance to live now, and I don’t want you to live with the burden of blood on your hands.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make,” I said sternly.

He raked his hand through his hair and dragged it down his face. “Don’t you get it? When you kill someone else, it changes you. You can never go back; you can never erase that from your mind.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know. I was lying when I told you my father’s killer hadn’t been caught. I killed him, Dove. I hunted him down, and I killed him without telling a soul. I was a cop, but I took his life because I wanted to, not because I had to. That’s the difference. Wanting to and having to aren’t the same thing. You might not want to believe me, but I stopped you because you’re not that person.”

“You think we’re the same person? Do you actually think that your story compares to mine? You don’t know shit. That man—”

“That man is going to get what’s coming to him. But you need to think about yourself. Your mother forgave him, and maybe you’ll never be able to do that, and I’m not saying you should, but maybe you need to stop pretending that taking his life would have fixed yours. If you had killed him, you’d be

the one behind bars right now. Then what life would you have?”

“Did you ever think that maybe I don’t have anything to live for?” I could feel the mixture of anger and sadness as it swirled inside me. “Who are you to decide that for me?”

“You’re right; I can’t make choices for you. But don’t think for a second that I would change any of this. I’d do it all over again if I had to. Because...” Ty turned away from me, looked up at the ceiling, then turned back. “Because I love you, Dove. So, you can hate me all you want, but I’d rather spend the rest of my life with you hating my guts than burying you before you had a chance to truly live.” His hands fell to his sides as he turned and walked out of the room.

The tears came, flowing freely as I hugged my belly. Maybe the rage I had been harboring was misplaced. My mother had forgiven him. Even with a gun to her head, she had the courage to let go of her anger. She had the backbone to know he was about to take her life and still had room in her heart to free him of the weight of her death.

I just wasn’t sure I had the same room in my heart. Leon hadn’t earned forgiveness in my eyes. Yet somehow, he had through my mother’s.

That hit me hard. I had thought my soul was already burnt to a crisp. I thought my life was already over. Now, I had a baby to think about. A new life that had been planted by the grace of God.

Could it be possible that your soul was like a phoenix? Could it be set on fire and burned to ashes but still heal and grow into something more beautiful?

My mother wouldn’t want me to shoulder this burden. She would want me to stand tall with my head high and know that in the end, I couldn’t save her memory by ruining my own future.

My mother had done so much for me, and I wished I could thank her for it. She had blessed me with a beautiful life. She had, through her own death, brought Ty to me. She had gifted

me this baby that I shouldn't have been able to conceive. My mother gave me a second chance.

A chance to live and laugh and love again. She gave me a life that I could share with my own child. A life where I could spend my days telling stories about her to a child that would never know her.

Her legacy would live on through me.

And I almost gave that all up for a taste of revenge.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ty

“You completely ignored my orders.” Sargent Boland tapped his pen against his desk. He glared at me, his lips taut, chin cocked to one side.

“With all due respect, Sir, I had a feeling, and I went with it. My gut was telling me something was wrong. It turned out I was right.”

“Your gut isn’t the one giving you orders, Ty. I am. I should take your damn badge and fire your ass here and now.”

I flared my nostrils as I stroked my jaw. I knew my boss expected me to apologize for disobeying his orders, but I didn’t feel bad about my actions. Instead, I felt terrible for not doing more for Dove. I could have prevented all of this if I had paid more attention.

“Do what you need to do, Sir, but I won’t apologize. I saved her.”

“You saved an asshole from becoming a pincushion. From the reports I’ve read, Dove wasn’t the one in trouble.”

I boldly stared him in the eyes as I said, “You’re wrong about that. She’s the victim in all of this shit. I saved her from herself, Sir.”

Sargent Boland grunted as he pushed a small pile of papers across the desk. He lifted his hands to his face and folded them together. He stared at me, his eyebrows pointed in an alert fashion as if he was waiting for me to say more. I didn’t have anything else to tell him.

“How did you know?”

“I told you, Sir, it was a gut feeling.”

“No, I mean, how did you figure out it was Leon Enzo?”

“There was a matchbook in her house with his name on it.”

“A matchbook in her house.” He repeated, his tone full of questions. “You threatened an innocent man at the door. You put your gun to his head and forced your way inside because of a book of matches. That isn’t protocol at all.”

“If I had waited, she would have killed him. If I hadn’t acted when I did, we’d be having a totally different conversation.”

He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers against his mouth. “You know we have to charge her with attempted murder.”

“She’s been through enough already, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you do the same if you were her?” I asked.

Charging her with attempted murder was a grotesque use of authority. It was easy to look at someone else and judge their situation when you were looking in from the outside. It’s like being in the lowest dip of a valley, surrounded by rolling hills and sprawling trees, and expecting to know that there is a vast ocean on the other side.

But, a person flying in a plane over that same valley had a totally different vantage point. They saw the valley and the hills. They saw the treetops and could even see you standing smack dab in the middle of that valley. That same person could also see the ocean you didn’t know existed. It was unfair for my boss to judge her moral compass from his outsider’s perspective. He hadn’t been in her shoes. He hadn’t been brutalized or had his mother murdered by that man. She had. And she had every right to feel the way she did.

I was her conscience when she couldn’t hear her own. I had been there in her shoes, and taking a life out of vengeance didn’t change the pain. I stopped her because it kept her alive.

“The law is the law, Ty. I don’t make the rules. She planned to kill him, that’s premeditated murder. She decided to do this, no one made her.”

“That’s bullshit,” I barked as I slammed a closed fist on his desk. “You and I both know she doesn’t deserve that. He made

her do this. He drove her to this point. The gun in her hands was his fault.”

“It’s out of my hands now.”

“No, you have all the power to make that charge disappear. The girl can’t handle more of this garbage. She’s fragile enough. This will push her over the edge. Have you talked with her? Have you seen what he did to her? Go speak with her yourself. Go see the scars all over her body, and tell me he didn’t twist her arm to bring her to this point.”

“Ty,” he growled as he tipped his head forward, and glared at me heatedly. “You need to go home. Go get some sleep, drink enough vodka that you pass out for the next two days straight; I don’t really give a shit. But, don’t come back until your head is out of your ass and you’re thinking clearly. I know what you’ve been through, I know your father was killed, and I get it, but we don’t encourage vigilante justice. That’s not how the law works.”

“You—”

“We’re done here,” he barked, throwing a finger toward the door. “Get the hell out. Some of us have protocols to follow. I don’t have time for any more of this moral bullshit. The amount of paperwork I have to do now because of your fucking choice is astronomical.”

I popped up from my seat, laid my gun on the table, and pulled my badge out of my wallet. “I don’t think I need these anymore.”

“I’m not firing you. You might get suspended, but that still needs to be determined. I’m waiting to hear from the powers above me. What I do need is for you to start using your damn head.”

“I’m all about respecting the law, Sir, but I can’t sit here and act as if charging this poor girl with murder is the right thing to do. It’s wrong and we both know it.”

I couldn’t wear that badge anymore and call myself a detective or a cop or a civil servant if my boss could willingly charge an innocent girl like Dove. He killed her mother,

brutally and savagely tortured her, then tried to kill her himself. How was putting her in prison justice?

I understood that we had laws for a reason, and maybe I was being unreasonable having lost a parent myself to murder. I just couldn't see how charging her would help anything. What she needed was true justice. Let her see that no one blamed her for her anger or rage. Let her find peace when she already felt like it had been snatched from her. Let her find herself again.

He pushed the gun and badge in my direction. "Take them. You're a cop, Ty. You were made for this job."

"Then why are you trying to make me feel like shit for a judgment call I made?"

"It's not personal. At least sleep on it first before you quit. You're worked up right now, you might feel differently tomorrow. And I don't want to lose a good officer today."

I snatched the gun and badge back hastily. "You're making a mistake charging her. I hope you know that." I shoved my chair out of the way and stormed out of his office.

I drove past the hospital but didn't stop. Dove didn't want to see me, and I didn't blame her for it. I'd hate me too if I was her. I had felt what she was feeling right at that very moment. I had looked evil in the face and put a single bullet right between his eyes.

But after it was done. After the smoke settled and my adrenaline subsided, I realized it had changed nothing. My father was still dead. My mother was still depressed and lost. And I still felt the same pain. Killing that man did nothing fix it.

The hospital went by in a blur as I drove home. By the time I got home, I was so drained that I didn't even get undressed before collapsing on my bed and falling into a deep sleep.

I had a dream that night. I had dreamed of being back at the crack house, staring my father's killer in the face. His eyes weren't brown like I remembered, they were yellow instead. I

could feel other people around us, except I couldn't actually see them. They were like ghosts hiding in the shadows. A presence that weighed on you.

I attempted to pull out my gun, but I couldn't find it. I kept feeling around my waist and digging in my pockets, but coming up empty-handed. I became really anxious and angry because the man started laughing at me. He laughed with a wide open mouth, his teeth sharp and jagged like a shark.

The anxiety kept building and building as I looked for my gun, and his laugh became more unhinged and crazed, like a madman losing his mind. Then my arms were stretched out, and I was choking him. His face turned four shades of red, and his eyes began to pop out of his head. Then his face morphed. I was no longer looking into the eyes of a killer. I was looking into the eyes of my father.

I stumbled backward, falling to the ground in shock. My anger quickly changed to fear because I knew it wasn't the mind of a madman that had been lost but my own mind. I had given in to the weakest part of humanity, and let anger fuel me as efficiently as gas fuels a car.

And when I looked up, thinking I would see my father, I saw Dove instead. I saw her crying and sad because I had hurt her. I watched the tears fall down her cheeks as she rubbed her neck, and felt the swollen dimples from my fingertips. Then she said, "How could you do this to me, Ty? How?"

I woke up in a cold sweat. My shirt was drenched, soaked all the way through. My heart was pounding, and I was breathing heavily like I had just run a marathon. It was already seven in the morning, yet it felt like I hadn't slept at all.

I betrayed her. No one had gotten in my way. No one stood between me and what I wanted. But I was the fortress that erupted out of thin air in front of her. I was the chasm that opened beneath her and sent her falling to her death.

I had become the crux of her hate and the bane of her future.

She was never going to look at me the same again.

Chapter Twenty-three

Dove

It was a Thursday when they arrested me. I was still in the hospital, healing from the gunshot. They cuffed me to the bed even though I had no plans of running away. They sat an officer outside my door, not for my safety, but to ensure I didn't try to escape. As if I had anywhere else to go.

The only people allowed inside the room were the nurses, the doctors, and my lawyer, of which I didn't have one, so they appointed me one. His name was Tom St. Germaine. A weaselly-looking guy with oily, brown hair that he slicked back against his scalp. He was thin, too thin for the girth of his suit. It hung off his body as if he was just a boy wearing his father's clothes.

Maybe that's exactly who he was. He certainly didn't have the essence of high profile attorney or someone with knowledge and skill. He came in the first day carrying his briefcase packed with law books and comparable cases to mine for reference. He would shuffle through them as he mainly talked to himself.

He would come and go with no discernible pattern. Sometimes he would show up in the early morning on a Monday, and then I wouldn't see him for two days until he popped back up in the afternoon Saturday.

If I had any money, I would have hired a better lawyer. Unfortunately for me, I was broke. I was due in court a couple weeks later for a preliminary hearing on October second. The leaves started changing from green to bright reds and bitter oranges. All I could think about was how much my mother loved fall. She always got her sweaters ready and knew the exact date that pumpkin spice coffee would be back at her favorite coffee shop.

My hands were chained to my ankles when I shuffled into the courtroom. My stomach still ached from where Ty had shot me. I could feel my muscles as they tightened and contracted.

Electrical shocks of pain would explode through the fibers. No one seemed to care, though. I was an animal to them, being paraded through a circus for the spectators.

The media was all over. There were flashes from cameras and news anchors with microphones barking questions and pointing their microphones in my face. I couldn't believe I was the one on trial. Me. The victim.

No one would answer me when I asked them about Leon. My lawyer would shrug his shoulder with his face buried in his books. The cops would tell me I needed to worry about myself and that Leon would get his. It was an answer without an answer.

The hearing was quick. I was being charged with first-degree murder. The prosecutor said I had plotted and planned and that civilians weren't allowed to take matters into their own hands. The judge agreed.

They put me on house arrest, with a bracelet on my ankle to keep track of me. I felt like a damn dog, bound to a dog house by a leash. None of it felt real.

Was it worth it? No. I didn't get to murder him. I wanted to kill him. I tried to free the world from his evil. Was it fair? I guess that depended on which side you fell on.

I had people on my side. I saw them outside the courthouse and heard them on the news. They would chant for me, calling me innocent, calling me a victim, calling me righteous and holy. Then there were the people who favored the law. The ones that called me crazy and unhinged said more would die if I was acquitted. As if I had other people I wanted to kill. It was ridiculous if you asked me. I only wanted one person dead, no one else.

My trial date was set for November tenth. My lawyer wanted me to plead guilty, but I said no. I was guilty of nothing but revenge. I wouldn't cave to them because their laws said I was wrong. I wasn't going to bend because the law said I had to lean on it rather than take matters into my hands. An eye for an eye was sometimes deserved. Leon deserved

both of his eyes cut out and stuffed down his throat. I wouldn't apologize for any of it.

I was sitting on the couch, rubbing the slight bump of my belly. It was still subtle enough that it wasn't noticeable to the outside world. I had to keep the baby a secret for now. That would only become another headline in the newspaper if I didn't.

"How you doing in there, little one?" I asked. "You warm and cozy?" I rubbed in slow circles, whispering. "I'm not sure how this will end, but don't you worry, I'm not giving up. I'll never give up. Us Harloways are fighters. You remember that. We don't give up."

The doorbell rang. I looked over but didn't get up. It rang again, then again and again. Whoever it was wasn't taking my silence as a cue to go away. I slowly got up off the couch and quietly walked to the window on the tips of my toes. I pulled the curtain back slightly to see Ty standing on the front step. He smiled at me through the window, then gave me a little wave.

What the hell does he want?

I unlocked the door and opened it. "I thought you were one of the local reporters or something trying to get an interview."

"Yeah, there were a few parked at the end of your driveway when I got here. I sent them on their way."

I looked behind him and spotted the last news van as it drove off. "Thanks."

"No problem."

We both stood quietly, just staring at each other. Ty looked like a mess. I had never seen him so disheveled since I met him. His hair was all messy and sticking up in several places, like he got out of bed and didn't bother brushing it. Dark circles were under his eyes, and his lips were cracked and dry. He had a shadow of hair growing on his face that looked rough as sandpaper. His red t-shirt was wrinkled like crumpled-up paper, and his jeans had little splotches of grease and dirt down the thighs.

“You look like shit,” I said.

“Thanks.” Ty chuckled nervously as he looked himself over. “My Sunday best, I suppose.” He held out his arms limply as he tipped his chin into his chest. “My mother is probably rolling in her grave right now.” He laughed again as he looked into my eyes. “How are you doing?”

“Why are you here?” I asked. I kept my voice as calm as possible; while inside, I was like a shaken bottle of soda, ready to pop.

It was hard to temper my rage and not scream at him, but the doctor said I had to put as little stress as possible on myself because of the baby. I had enough going on already; the last thing I needed was Ty adding to that stress. I was shocked he even had the balls to show his face here.

“I wanted to see how you were doing. I’m worried about you, Dove.”

“Isn’t this a conflict of interest or something? You are the reason I’m in this shit to begin with. I doubt the prosecutor would want you here, considering he’ll probably call you as a witness.”

“Dove, please, you have to see it from my point of view.”

“Your point of view is bullshit.”

“If you had killed him, you wouldn’t even have an opportunity to get out of this mess. Me stopping you gave you a second chance.”

I let out a cynical laugh as I shook my head. “Right, of course. You’re the hero in this story, aren’t you? You saved me! You came rushing in on your white horse and saved the day!” I yelled loudly as I threw my hands up.

At that very moment, a news van rolled up in front of my house. They started climbing out and gathering their equipment. The anchor was holding a microphone and adjusting his tie as he kept glancing over his shoulder at us. Ty looked back, then back at me, and said, “How about we have this conversation inside. What do you think? Will you let me in?”

I held the door tightly, gave him a sarcastic smile, and shut the door in his face. I was not letting him inside. Was he insane? Did he really think he could show up here unannounced, and I'd just let him in like we were old friends?

I peeked through the small window in the door. Ty had already turned around and was walking down to the news crew. He waved his arms, urging them to go and to leave me alone. They tried to ask him something, but he just shook his head no and pointed for them to get out of there.

Ty climbed back in his car, and I expected him to leave. Only he didn't. He sat there, he sat there for hours. I checked every five or ten minutes at first, and an hour later, he was still there.

What the hell is he doing?

Two more news crews showed up like they had been daily since I got out on bail. Ty instantly got out of his car and shoed them away. He didn't even let them get out. Ty threw his arms up and yelled at them that it was private property and they needed to leave. The driver of one of the vans tried to argue, but Ty quickly said something else that I couldn't hear, and they drove off.

It went on like that for hours. A vehicle would come, and he'd send them away. After four hours, I started to feel bad that he was in his car with nothing to eat. I made him a plate of chicken stir fry and brought it out to him.

Ty rolled down his window and asked, "What's this?"

"A little something to say thank you. But don't think this means I forgive you. It's just food." I passed him the plate, gave him a smile, and walked off. I didn't want to admit it, but a little piece of me was happy he was there. I felt safe, just like I had in the beginning when he would be parked up the road.

Once it started getting dark, I thought he would leave. There wouldn't be any news reporters coming out to hang around my house past nine at night. When I got up in the morning and looked out the window, I was surprised to see he was still there.

I pulled on my robe, slid on my slippers, and walked outside into the brisk autumn morning. Ty was passed out in his car with his head back against the headrest, his arms folded over his stomach.

His eyes were closed tight, and his mouth was partially gaping as he snored lightly. His breathing was deep and even, and the muscles of his face would twitch ever so slightly. I couldn't tell if what he dreamed about was good or bad, but he was definitely dreaming.

I knocked on the window. He didn't budge. I hit again louder, and that did the trick. Ty jumped in his seat, grabbing the steering wheel with both hands as if he thought he was still driving and had just dozed off. It took him a moment to realize where he was and what he was doing.

I leaned against the car, crossing my arms as I waited for him to roll down the window. "Sleep well?" I asked.

"Like I was sleeping on a mattress sent from heaven." He rubbed the back of his neck as he squinted his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm sure it was that good. I think your neck might disagree by the look on your face."

He chuckled as he looked down at his steering wheel and tapped it with his thumb. "How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Pretty good, actually."

"You, uh, you doing alright, Dove?"

"I'm fine, Ty."

"You know what I mean. Are you doing alright?"

"What do you want me to say? This is shitty. All of this fucking sucks."

"I know," he said sincerely. "I wish none of this had happened to you."

"Me too."

"I am sorry, you know."

“Me too, Ty. This isn’t how I pictured my life as a little girl.”

“I don’t think any of us really end up getting what we dreamed about.”

He was right. But what good were dreams if they never came true? It was like each dream was a lie. Each wish and happy thought, every exciting adventure, and imaginary game became nothing more than a memory that once was. Every prospect of what or who I could have been vanished the second I reached out for it.

My father, my mother, my education, my life, all of it had gone up in smoke. There was no Dove Harloway. It was like she never existed. I never became a famous ballet dancer for the Paris Opera Ballet. I never explored the Amazon jungle or backpacked across Europe.

Who the hell am I now?

“So,” he said.

“So,” I said back.

We were both stuck in this awkward state of silence. The street was pretty quiet since it was still early in the morning. All you could hear was the nature around us. The birds were chirping loudly, and little animals were scurrying through the leaves, littering the ground.

“You want to come in for coffee?” I finally asked.

“No, I have some shit to get done today but thank you. I’ll have to take you up on that another time.”

“Alright, yeah, that sounds good. I also have stuff to do, so another time is probably better.” I gave him a half smile and took a step away from the car.

Ty started his car and smiled back as he said, “Hey, if more news people show up, tell them this is private property, and you’ll call the police. That should send them on their way.” He let his eyes steady on mine just briefly before he looked over his shoulder and backed down the driveway.

I watched him drive off until his taillights resembled lightning bugs blinking red instead of green. My fingers and toes were cold. The tips had turned a faint shade of blue by the time I went back inside my house. Rubbing my hands together, I sat back on the couch and stared into space.

How had my life gotten so fucked up? Why did it feel like the world had turned against me?

It felt like I had done something evil in my previous life. Maybe I was a criminal who robbed banks or a murderer with no remorse. Either way, it felt like my soul had a black shadow that followed it everywhere.

Chapter Twenty-four

Ty

Dove looked so young up on the stand. She was wearing a white blouse that hung loosely around her frame with a blue skirt and black flats. Her hair was pulled back with a blue headband, and she had no makeup. She was wearing the shiny silver necklace that her mother had given her. Every few seconds Dove would grab the little pendant and rub it with the pads of her index finger and thumb.

She didn't look nervous or scared. Dove looked angry like the entire room was pitted against her, and all she could see were enemies. Her eyes were sullen as she stared at the lawyer asking her questions.

"You knew what you were doing, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said pointedly.

"You went there intending to kill him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You stalked him before that night, isn't that right?"

"I suppose I did."

He kept hitting her with questions that would turn anyone who felt they had done no wrong into a fury of rage. She held herself with poise. Dove answered with weight and clarity. Her voice was bold and strong as she gave simple responses. She didn't care what anyone else thought of her. Not one person in the room had been in her shoes, they could never understand her or the hate she cradled in her heart like a precious stone.

"You wanted him to suffer, didn't you?"

"Objection, your Honor," Dove's attorney said as he stood up quickly. "That's conjecture."

"Sustained, please reword your question, Mr. Daily."

"You knew that what you were doing would cause him pain. Is that right?"

“Yes.”

“You wanted revenge.”

“Yes, I did.”

The prosecutor went on like that for hours. He'd ask her the same question in a million different ways, and Dove would always answer with 'Yes.' But then something changed. Her tone and body language became rigid when the prosecutor started questioning her story. He was trying to put doubt in the jurors' minds, making it seem like Dove had planned the whole thing from the beginning. Maybe she had set up her mother so she could collect her life insurance. Perhaps she didn't want to wait for her mother to die, so she hired Leon to put the whole thing together. Maybe it was all about money and resentment.

He was turning her into a cold-blooded killer, weaving a fantastical tale of childhood anger that carried over into adulthood. Webs of lies were strewn around about how she hated her mother because she thought her father's death was her mother's fault. He would still be here if she hadn't sent him out that night to the store. The resentment grew over time, and when her mother was diagnosed with cancer, it created more anger. Having to care for her, having all the attention shift to her mother, bloomed a bud of hate rooted so deep only her death could cut it free.

None of it was true. Not one ounce of the prosecutor's story held any merit. But it didn't matter what I thought or knew; it only mattered what the jury believed.

“Were you afraid of Leon?”

“Yes, I was.”

“I don't buy that. People who are afraid of other people don't stalk and attempt to kill them. We have documents and transcripts of the interviews you had with the police about how you didn't remember who hurt you. You claimed you didn't know what happened to you, and had no recollection of anything.”

“Yes, that is what I said.”

“So you lied.”

“Yes.”

“Why would you lie about it if you were so afraid of him? That doesn’t sound like something someone would do if they were scared for their life.”

“I was afraid of him, but I also hated him. I hated him for what he had done to my mother. I hated him for what he had done to me. He’s evil.”

“Even if he’s evil, that doesn’t give you the right to kill him. Does it?”

“If I didn’t do it, there would be no justice.”

“You don’t call this justice?” Mr. Daily asked as he looked around the room at the jury and the judge. “You’re saying all of these people are not justice in the eyes of the law, but you are?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that putting him behind bars and letting him live out the rest of his natural life is not justice. Why should he get to breathe another second of air after what he did? Tell me how that’s justice? Tell me how anyone else has the right to decide his fate and not me? Why do you, or any of these people, get to do that, and I have to just accept it? That’s not justice. He already stole enough from me, and I wanted him to pay for all of it.”

Her anger became pliable. Tears were visible in her eyes, and her bottom lip was shaking and trembling as she tried to keep herself together. The prosecutor was using her emotions to draw it out, to try and make the jury see her as a cold, calculated, heartless monster. He was pressing her like clay, spreading her thin, like weak strands when the clay was pulled too far from itself. Then he’d push her back together, balling her up into a solid mass, so rage and hate was the only thing in her eyes.

I hated him for it. I wanted to jump from my seat and charge him like a bull being taunted by a red flag. He was twisting Dove’s entire story into something that it wasn’t. She

wasn't a crazed, money-hungry daughter looking to cash in. She wasn't a soulless creature on the hunt.

Dove had been through something that changed her. It wasn't her fault. She hadn't asked for any of it. She was a victim, and the lawyer used her as a pawn. I watched the jury's eyes grow and shrink. Their mouths would crinkle and fold down. They were getting drawn into his illusion. I couldn't take it. I had to do something to stop the onslaught of trash that was coming out of his mouth.

"You're lying!" I yelled as I jumped up from my seat.

The judge hit the gavel and called out, "Order! Order in my court!"

"But he's lying! Dove didn't want any of this! She's a victim here!"

"Detective Colt, you either sit quietly in my courtroom, or I'll hold you in contempt."

"I'm sorry, Judge Hineault, but I can't just sit here and let him paint Dove as a greedy monster!"

"Detective—"

"No! He can't just stand up there and lie like this! I saw her in the hospital! I saw where she was found after that asshole tried to kill her!"

The room began to buzz with voices. They grew louder and louder like an electrical current that was building. People were turning to stare at me. The press was snapping pictures, and their cameras were pointed in my direction.

"Get him out of here," the judge said to one of the bailiffs. "This is my court, Detective, and I won't have it turned into a circus."

Dove was staring at me from the stand as the bailiff attempted to grab my hands to pull them behind my back. I resisted, leaning forward and trying to yank myself free as I yelled as loudly as possible, "She's innocent! She wasn't thinking straight! You would all do the same if you had been through what she's gone through!"

Another officer came up behind me to help the bailiff. It took three of them to finally control my arms and get them cuffed behind my back. I had to be dragged out of the room. I couldn't control myself. None of that was fair to her.

I looked up right before the doors were closed in my face and saw a single tear trickle down her cheek. She was utterly alone in there now. There was no one on her side, not like me. I was the only one in that room that genuinely cared for her.

No one else felt for her the same way I did. No one else could feel the pain she had been through. No one else knew what she was struggling with inside. They didn't understand that kind of pain or hurt or anguish. No one else loved her.

But I did. I loved Dove, and it would kill me if I never got the chance to tell her.

Chapter Twenty-five

Dove

I couldn't breathe.

I was sitting on the stand with a man that pretended to know who I was as a person. He was acting and talking to me like I was the monster. He kept flipping everything around and putting motives to my actions that weren't true.

I didn't want my mother's life insurance. I didn't hire Leon to kill her and pretend to try and kill me just to make it believable. I didn't try to murder him to keep him quiet, so I could get away with all of it. The entire manipulation of the story was insulting. I wasn't that person.

Mr. Daily pointed at me as he spoke to the jury, but I couldn't hear him. All I could hear was my heart pounding as it beat like a drum inside my chest. All the eyes of the jurors were on the prosecutor. They looked mesmerized as he stitched a whole new story before their very eyes. As if everything I had said, every memory I revealed in that room, and the visible scars were a figment of my imagination. A made up scenario for a game I was playing.

I looked down at my hands. I didn't want to see the juror's reaction or the glaring eyes of the man trying to put me behind bars. I had done nothing wrong. I knew that deep down in my heart, but could they see that too? Could they see the pain in my eyes? Could they feel the hurt in my voice? Could they understand the evil that lived inside me because of Leon?

The judge adjourned the court as the jurors went into deliberation. My lawyer said it could take an hour, a day, or a week; there was no way to know how long it would be before we had an answer to what the rest of my life would look like.

The taxi pulled up to my house, and Ty's car was already parked outside. As I got of the car, I saw him sitting on my front step. His head was down, and his hands were folded together. He looked up slowly as I walked up the driveway.

“What are you—” I started to say, but he reached out quickly and grabbed my hand, cutting me off.

“Dove, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” I asked.

“About everything. You didn’t deserve any of this. I wish none of it happened to you. I wish I hadn’t stopped you. I wish ___”

“What do you want from me, Ty?”

“I don’t want anything from you. I want you to know that I’m here for you. I want you to realize that you’re not walking this road alone. I’ll be with you the entire way because I know who you are, and you’re not what they’re trying to make you out to be.”

“You fucking shot me,” I blurted out in anger. “Don’t sit there and tell me you care!”

Ty stood up, taking both my hands with his. “You’re wrong, Dove. I told you already why I stopped you. Do you honestly think that getting revenge—that killing someone else, will bring you happiness? Because it won’t. It never does. It doesn’t take away what he did. It doesn’t bring back what he stole. The only thing it will do is make you a killer too.”

I stood silently, staring into his eyes. Deep down, I knew he was right; I just wasn’t ready to admit it. I wanted to think that killing Leon would have solved all my problems, but it wouldn’t have. Killing him wouldn’t bring my mother back. It wouldn’t heal the wounds I felt inside. It wouldn’t erase one second of the hurt.

And now I had the baby to think about. A reason to keep going and find happiness and live this life I had been dealt. The baby was a gift. The baby that he didn’t even know existed yet. How was I going to tell him? What would he think?

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said.

“No, you don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“I do. You’re wondering how I would know that.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking at all. It’s not even close.”

“What are you thinking then?”

“I can’t even find the words to say it.”

“So just say it then.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. You’re right about everything. I can see that now.”

“What changed?” he asked as his fingers lightly stroked over my knuckles. His eyes searched mine, flicking back and forth like the bell of a grandfather clock.

I couldn’t tell him the truth. I couldn’t tell him that I was carrying his child. If I got sent to prison for what I tried to do, the baby would just end up in the system. They would take the baby away from me, away from him, away from *us*. I couldn’t do that.

There was a chance that I could spend years behind bars for what I tried to do. In the moment, after everything had happened, I thought going to prison didn’t matter. I didn’t care what happened to me once Leon was dead. But all changed the second I found out I was pregnant. I just couldn’t tell him yet. It didn’t feel like the right time. There were too many unknowns still. The last thing I wanted to do was make it more complicated.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m still really pissed about what you did, but I get it. My mother wouldn’t want me to hold onto all this anger. She’d want me to learn from it, grow from it, and become something after it. My mother would want me to take all this pain and hurt and do something good with it, not take a life because of it.” I exhaled hard, doing my best to keep control of my emotions. “If I get out of this, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“What do you mean *if* you get out of this? You will get out of this, and when you do, I don’t doubt you will do something amazing.”

“Stop, Ty. We both know that I really fucked up. My lawyer says—”

“I don’t care what your lawyer says. You’re not going to spend the rest of your life in prison, Dove. That man is a monster. The world would be a better place without him in it. We both know that. I don’t think anyone faults you for what you did after everything he put you through. The jurors can see that. They know as much as you and I both know that he should get the electric chair.”

“But what if they don’t? What if they believe the prosecutor? What if they believe his lies about me wanting my mother dead for her life insurance?”

Ty swept both his hands down my face and cupped my jaw. “They won’t. They can’t. Your heart is too pure for them to not see the truth, regardless of what some asshole attorney says.”

Tears started to fall down my cheeks as the weight of what I had done to myself finally crushed me. It was like a vice was wrapped around my lungs, and it kept squeezing and squeezing to the point I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t cry, Dove,” he said, his voice a whisper as he dragged his thumbs under my eyes to wipe the tears away. “Everything is going to be alright. I promise you.”

“Why? Why do you care?”

Ty tipped my head up so he could look directly into my eyes. “Because I do,” he said with a little smile. “Because I love you.”

I darted my eyes between his. Tears were still bubbling up and falling down my cheeks, and he was still catching them. His touch was soft and tender and everything I needed, but it was the look in his eyes that drew me in.

“You love me?” I asked.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I do. I wasn’t sure at first why I was so drawn to you and why I couldn’t get you out of my mind. And then I realized it wasn’t a thought pulling me to you; it was a feeling.”

“You don’t love me. That’s not what you’re feeling. You’re just wrapped up in this because of what happened to your

father. Besides, what about your job? Isn't this a conflict of interest or something? You'll get fired."

"No, I won't because I'm not a detective anymore."

"What?" I asked, a little taken aback. "Why not?"

"I resigned. My boss wasn't happy with me, I wasn't happy with me, and I knew there was no way I could stay away from you. I put down the badge and the gun, Dove. I'm done."

"That's crazy, Ty. You love your job."

"I love you more."

"Ty, look, I—" I started to say as I held up my hand when he cut into my words.

"I'm not looking for you to say it back, Dove. You asked why I cared, and I'm giving you the answer. It's because I love you, and I'm willing to spend as long as it takes to make you fall in love with me. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here waiting for you; it doesn't matter to me whether it's a month, a year, or six years. You don't need to love me right now, but you will love me."

"You think you can make me love you even though you shot me?" I asked with a little grin.

"That's even more of a reason." Ty started to laugh, but I stopped him with a kiss.

I kissed him because I might not have been able to say the words, but I thought I loved him too. I wasn't sure if it was true love or just the kind of love you feel when someone is willing to stand by your side through the worst time of your life. But I was willing to find out.

"Take me inside," I said softly against his lips.

He didn't say no or have to think about it. Ty took the key from my hand and opened the door. I went to take a step forward, but he swept me off my feet and carried me inside instead.

His lips were all over me. They were on my mouth, up my neck, across my cheek, and over my chin. Crushing his lips against mine, his tongue slipped inside, tasting and licking with animal hunger. He tasted like honey and whiskey. Sweet and powerful with a hint of spice. He tasted so good all I wanted was more.

I sucked on his tongue as he kicked the door shut behind us and placed me on the couch. Ty crawled between my legs, splitting them wide open with his hips as he pressed his rock hard against my pussy.

He pulled back from my mouth and grunted as he cupped my breast and squeezed. My nipple was pebbled, so he pinched it, rolling it between his fingers. I groaned, arching my back as he raked the sharp edges of his teeth down my neck and across my collarbone.

Goosebumps jumped down my skin like small peaks, covering my body from head to toe. His warm breath scaled my throat as he exhaled and said, “Fuck, I love feeling you shiver when I touch you.” I could feel his lips move even though they weren’t touching my skin, and it felt right.

I didn’t know if it should feel that good or if I should feel so ready, but I did. It had been a long time since something in my life felt right and good and worth the trouble. Ty was all of those things. I spread my legs wider as I raked my fingers through his hair. I grabbed a fistful of dark strands and pulled.

“I love feeling you touch me,” I said back, my words breathy and firm. “I don’t want you to stop.”

“I’ll never stop, Dove.” He lifted himself a little higher, and looked me in the eyes. “Not as long as you’re giving yourself to me.” He leaned in as if he was going to kiss me, but he stopped and asked, “Are you giving yourself to me?”

“Yes,” I said softly as he licked my bottom lip.

“Good.” His tongue glided down my throat as his fingers pulled the edge of my shirt over my head. He dropped my shirt to the floor and looked down at me. His eyes moved down my body and stopped on my belly.

Instinctively, I covered my stomach with both hands. Ty gently gripped my wrists and pulled my hands away. His gaze was set on the small bump that had formed. There was no denying it. A loose-fitting shirt was enough to keep it hidden from those around me, but not while I was naked and exposed.

“Ty, I...” I paused, and swallowed the nervous lump in my throat. “I wanted to tell you. I was going to tell you. I just wasn’t—”

“Shh,” he hushed me as he placed one of his bear-sized hands on my stomach. He didn’t speak. He simply pushed himself back and laid his head on my belly. “How far along are you?”

“Four months.”

“Four months,” he repeated as he gently tickled his fingertips up and down my side as he listened to my stomach. “Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“Not yet.” I played with his hair, twirling pieces around my fingers until they were tight and then letting them go. “I’m not sure I want to know. I think I’d rather be surprised.”

“Me too,” he said as he finally twisted his head to look up at me. His eyes were smiling. Ty sat up so he could lay back on the other end of the couch and pulled me onto his lap. “Come here.”

I straddled his hips as he braided our fingers together and stared at me. “What?” I asked. “Do I look weird?”

He shook his head. “No, you don’t look weird. You look absolutely stunning.” He pulled me down to his chest and kissed me. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and his hand thrust into my hair, taking hold at the roots so he could tilt my head to kiss me deeper. He pulled away to look at me again, his eyes flicking between mine. “And you’ll only look even more beautiful as our baby grows.”

He slid his hand around my head and grabbed the nape of my neck, pulling me back to kiss me again. His lips were dangerous. So fucking dangerous; all I wanted was more. I wanted him to kiss every inch of my body. I wanted him to

taste me and lick me and make me feel like the rest of the world didn't exist.

There was no future without Ty Colt, not in my world. There were not enough words in the dictionary to tell him how grateful I was that he was there or how blessed I felt that he had found his way into my life.

"Ty," I whispered his name with a single breath. He stopped kissing me and peered at me. "I think I love you too."

His eyes moved between mine as a smile formed on his lips. He tugged his bottom lip into his mouth as his grin deepened. "Good, because now that I know you're having my baby, I'm definitely not going anywhere."

I crushed my lips against his, kissing him with everything I had refused to let myself feel. The pleasure, the warm and fuzzy butterflies, the tingles and goosebumps, all exploded at once through my body.

His hands moved freely over my body, grabbing my chest and squeezing my ass. I could feel his hard cock pressed against his jeans, trying to break through the thick fabric to penetrate my pussy. Ty grunted as he worked my pants down my thighs. He ran the tips of his fingers back and forth over the edge of my panties.

"You're so wet already. I can see it from here." He pushed his thumb against the darkened spot of my panties and drew quick, small circles. "Fuck, I want to be in there."

"I want you in there." My voice was a mixture of breath and moan as my hips began to rock against him.

He unbuttoned his pants and pulled down the zipper. The metallic teeth echoed through the room as loudly as a gust of wind slamming against the side of a house. My breathing turned labored as he lifted me by the thighs and lined his cock up with my entrance.

I closed my eyes. "Look at me," Ty said, his tone not demanding but pleading with longing desire. I opened my eyes and looked down at him. "Don't look away. I want to see you when you cum on me."

He pressed down on my thighs and pushed up with his hips. Ty's thick dick filled me to the hilt. My walls stretched wider and wider. I groaned slightly as he pushed the last few inches in with a hard thrust.

There was a slight twinge of pain as he moved my hips, but it was quickly hidden by the pleasure that consumed me whole. I rode his length, up and down, up and down. My pace quickened with each roll of my hips. I could feel him hitting me inside, going so deep I could feel him in my lower belly.

Ty groaned as he fucked me back. Thrust after thrust, he made sure every inch of his cock was inside my body. I was dripping with need. My sweet juice slicked his firm muscle. He pushed my bra up so my tits were exposed and pulled me down so he could suck my beaded nipples.

He moved between each breast, from one nipple to the next, nibbling and rolling them between his teeth. I moaned louder, not even trying to contain it. I couldn't if I wanted to. There was no way for me to stop the sounds that were tumbling out of my mouth.

Ty slid his hands down my back. His touch was gentle and rough all at once. He gripped my hips, forcing them down harder as he rutted between my legs. My skin grew hot, and my stomach clenched as the orgasm built inside.

I was standing on the edge of insanity as tingles bubbled to the surface, and my clit pulsed with greedy hunger, begging to be set free. I was ready to take that leap. I was ready for Ty to shatter me into pieces and put me back together again. I gasped for air as the orgasm exploded, breaking through me like a knife with no jagged blade. It was hard and intense but painless and tender.

I fell forward, attempting to bury my face in his neck, but he wouldn't let me. Ty gripped a handful of my hair and yanked my head back hard as he picked up his pace and fucked my limp body with a ruthless need for a pleasure of his own.

With one final thrust, his cock exploded inside my pussy, filling me with hot cum. His cock throbbed inside my body,

jerking and jolting as all his muscles tensed. There was a slight burn on my scalp where his fingers were twined. My neck was arched back, breathing ragged and uneven.

His eyes never left mine. They were static in place, watching me like I was his goddess. His queen. As if I was what he had been waiting for his entire life. He looked lost in me. His eyes were bright yet distant. I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking about.

Was he thinking about the baby? Was he thinking about how we'd share our story with our child one day and tell them how we met? How the world had been against us from the start. How we both had tattered histories that were better left unspoken. How through all of it, through the thickness of hell and the depths of pain, we came out on the other side together.

And maybe that's exactly what we were. Maybe we were two people brought together by tragedy, only to find happiness in the end.

I could live with that story.

Chapter Twenty-six

Dove

“All rise.”

I stood as the judge entered the room in his long black cloak and cloud of white hair. Thick round glasses framed his bold green eyes, making them three times as large as they actually were.

The call came early in the morning that a verdict had been reached. I almost fell to my knees in the kitchen, but Ty was there to grab me before I dropped. He held me around the waist and helped me into a stool at the counter. It felt like someone had kicked me in the chest.

Today was the day I would learn my fate. It all came down to this moment. All the testimony, the medical reports, the police statements, and the pictures had led up to right now.

I sat next to my lawyer as the judge fixed himself in his chair. He adjusted the microphone at his side and flipped through some papers in front of him. After what seemed like forever, he finally looked up at everyone else in the room.

“Does the jury have its verdict?” he asked.

The juror at the very end closest to the judge stood up and said, “Yes, your Honor.”

“How do you find the defendant?”

“We, the jury, find the defendant...” The juror’s words blurred together, turning muffled and dull as if someone had blocked my ears.

I stared wide-eyed at the woman speaking, knowing what she was saying was determining my future, but I just couldn’t hear her. There was no sound. There was no voice or tone or anything.

My lawyer gripped my shoulder with one hand and squeezed, jostling me back from the depths of silence. “Not

guilty, your Honor.” The room erupted in roars of approval and gasps of disbelief.

I slumped over onto the table and began to cry. I cried so hard my body was shaking and trembling uncontrollably. It was over. It was all over. The jury had listened to me. The twelve people who sat quietly and expressionless, except for an occasional tear or subtle breath, had heard my story. They had seen and felt what I had prayed the world could understand.

I heard that there was an interview with juror number eight a few weeks after my trial. He was a young man, clean-cut with gentle eyes. He explained to the interviewer how he couldn't blame me for what I had tried to do. After seeing all the pictures and hearing my story, he said there was no way he could find me guilty.

After the verdict was read, everything was a blur. Ty helped walk me out of the courthouse, his arms firmly wrapped around my shoulders, protecting me from the reporters and microphones being shoved in my face.

There were bright flashes from cameras and blinding lights from camera crews as he shoved us through the crowd that was thick as thorn bushes. I was bumped and pushed around like a pinball in a machine until we were finally funneled out the double doors into the open.

My attorney was at a podium outside, making a statement on my behalf. I didn't like the attention from all of it. I didn't like how some people viewed me as an evil banshee that had used my powers to seduce the jurors and the judge. While other people were on my side. They had signs with things written on them like, let the bird have its prey, and Leon should be hanged.

Leon's trial wasn't for another six months. He was in prison, held without bail for drugging those girls and killing my mother. My lawyer said that now that my case was over, the prosecutor could add additional charges against Leon for what he had done to me. Attempted murder, sexual assault, physical abuse, and there were more. There was no chance he

would see the light of day again, and if I was fortunate, he would get the death penalty.

My lawyer also told me I didn't have to testify at Leon's trial. He said I had been through enough, and they wouldn't put me through that. But I told him no. I was going to be there. I planned to be there every single day so Leon could see my face. I was the voice of my mother and any other person he had killed in the past. I wasn't afraid of him, and I never would be again.

It might sound strange to some, but I looked forward to his trial. I looked forward to watching him squirm in his chair as his callous acts were brought to light. He couldn't hide from them anymore, and he'd have to repent for his sins. Where the world would see him for the devil, I knew he was.

Ty helped me into the front of his car before he walked around to the driver's side. He reached over and grabbed my hand as he said, "It's all over, Dove."

"No, it's not. I still have to go through Leon's trial. Nothing is over until I hear the judge say guilty."

He smiled and shook his head. "I hope our child gets your strength." He started the car and asked, "So, now what? What do you want to do with your freedom?"

I smiled as I twined my fingers with his and pulled his hand to lay it over my belly. "Let's go home," I said.

Life is a curious thing, isn't it?

It could be wonderful, with laughter and hugs, smiles and kisses. You could find happiness in little things when your life was where you wanted it to be. The scent of the rain on a warm summer day, the way the fireflies flicker on a hot July night. The look you get from someone who loves you. The way a new dress fits perfectly without trying it on.

And in the same breath, it could be challenging and soiled with pain. The pain of losing someone. The hurt of feeling left behind. The darkness of a nightmare and the ache of a scar that had long since healed but still twinged with memory if it was too quiet and your thoughts started to wander.

I had lived a million lives in the short time I had been on this earth.

Now, I was about to start another.

Only this time, it's the life I should have had all along with the man I love and our daughter.

Epilogue

Dove

“I’m getting fat,” I said.

“No, you’re not. You’re beautiful.” Ty came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my body. He cupped my belly and rubbed it softly. “And you get more beautiful every day.”

I leaned my head against his chest as I slipped my arm around his neck. “You really think so?”

“I do. I love watching your belly grow and feeling our baby inside.” He placed a kiss on my cheek and moved his lips down my neck.

I tilted my head to give him more room. His lips were gentle as he kept teasing the skin with more kisses. “Mm,” I moaned. “That feels good.”

“I’m just getting started.”

Ty ran the tips of his fingers up and down the outside of my arms as his lips became more ravenous. He bit me tenderly, letting the sharp edges of his teeth drag across the delicate skin.

I shivered and groaned. Pushing my fingers into his hair, I rubbed Ty’s head and rocked my hips. He was already hard as stone. His cock pushed back against me. We rocked together in the kitchen, moving and swaying like we were dancing.

A gust of sexual fog rolled in with the fierceness of a wave hitting the shore. His hands were a deadly aphrodisiac. They melted me instantly, erasing everything else around me. Lustful hunger made my fullness from breakfast disappear. My body grumbled to be filled with something else. Something firm and hard. Something thick and impressive.

His hands kept caressing my body. They glided over my hips, slipping up my ribs and over my chest. Ty squeezed my breast as he moaned in my ear. “Fuck, Dove, you turn me on.

I'm so fucking hard already." He rubbed his cock up and down against my ass.

"Take me, Ty," I cooed.

He didn't object or guide me to the bedroom. He pulled me off his chest, pressed me forward, and lifted my dress. He quickly slipped my panties down my legs, and they pooled around my feet.

Breakfast over, the was sink full of dishes and bubbling water. The little bubbles popped and fizzled in my face, making my nose tingle. But I ignored them. I needed Ty so desperately; no minor annoyance would drive me away. His cock consumed my brain, leaving me deliriously hungry. My pussy felt so empty, too empty. My sex needed to be fed before she went insane.

I was soaked. My juice slicked my thighs as I rubbed my legs back and forth, trying to ease the ache of my throbbing clit. Ty placed his palm at the base of my spine and grabbed my hip with his free hand to lift me up.

I was on the tips of my toes, my panties tickling my ankles as he slipped his cock inside my pussy. His thick muscle spread my walls wide. Ty pressed himself all the way in and stilled for a moment. His cock pulsed inside me as my pussy tightened around his shaft.

"Fuck, your pussy feels so good. So tight and warm." His lips were at my ear as he spoke. He licked the shell of my ear, tracing the curve up and down and then biting my lobe. "I could fuck you all day long."

"Then fuck me already." My back arched, pushing my ass higher. My lips squeezed his cock, begging him to keep going. "Fuck me, Ty."

He pulled his cock out to the ridge of his engorged tip, then drove himself back inside. My mouth fell open as I groaned a feverish and uncontrolled moan. My clit pounded and buzzed with electric shocks as he began to move rhythmically.

I clutched the edge of the counter with white knuckles as he fucked me. My thighs quaked as the orgasm coiled around each and every muscle. The sensation spread like wildfire, roaring from deep within.

Ty dug the tips of his fingers into my hips as he thrust hard and fast. I lifted myself off the counter and wrapped my arm around his neck. He growled against my cheek as his dick stiffened and jerked. His fingers tightened, and his teeth clamped down on my shoulder as he came.

We stood, our breathing ragged and our hearts racing in tandem. I could feel Ty's heart thumping with mine, matching it beat for beat. His cock slipped free, causing warm cum to drip down my legs.

Ty grabbed a paper towel, handed it to me, and then grabbed one for himself. "Now we can finish the dishes."

I laughed and shook my head. "The water is probably cold now."

The news was on in the background. I had hardly been paying attention to it when the screen flashed with pressing information that had just come in.

"We've just been informed that a suspected murderer has been found dead in his cell. Leon Orlinde was found stabbed to death early this morning. Detectives aren't releasing many details but said they will hold a press conference later today. The victim was currently being held without bond for allegedly murdering a local woman, Monica Harloway, as well as several other charges..."

Her voice faded as my cheeks flushed and a warm heat spread through my chest. *He's dead. Is he really dead?* Could it be that simple?

"Did you hear that?" I asked Ty.

"I heard," Ty answered with no emotion in her voice. There wasn't a hint of surprise in his tone at all.

"Could it be true? Is he really dead?"

I felt numb. The shock seemed to pause all my natural impulses. My heart slowed down. My breathing shallowed. My throat was dry.

Ty spun me around to face him. “It’s true, Dove. Leon is dead.”

My eyes flicked between his. There was a glint of something in the background, a sparkle of satisfaction that sat deep within his pupils. “You knew this already, didn’t you?”

“I’m just hearing it now. Same as you.”

I didn’t believe him. There was a smirk dangling at the corner of his lips. He knew more than he was saying. But I didn’t need to ask to know what it was. Ty made it happen. I could feel it.

“How?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter. You were never meant to carry this burden, Dove. Now, it’s really over.”

There would be no trial for Leon. No testimony or scandalous questions from a lawyer trying to paint me as a jilted lover or some other warped story they might try to create to get Leon off the hook. I wouldn’t sit and listen to them reopen all the details of my mother’s murder.

It was truly over. The last link between my scars and the world I used to know was gone. I could really move on with my life.

Ty

Two months earlier

“Can I trust you to do this?” I asked. My voice was a whisper. The cold phone pressed against my ear as I stared at him through the glass window.

I went directly to the prison after leaving Dove’s house. I had to do something to make a real difference. The news crews were relentless. They wouldn’t leave her alone. Her life had become a circus because of him.

“That depends. Trust goes both ways.” Dylan arched a brow as he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“You have my word.” I nodded with assurance.

“When?”

“Soon, but not yet.” My eyes scanned the guards as they walked around the inmates. “I’ll be in touch.”

“It’s done,” he said with a nod.

“Good.” I hung up the phone and left the prison.

As much as being a cop was a hard job, it was also a network. There were cops and medical personnel who worked hand in hand. Then there were the people on the ground. The informants and the criminals. Most of the people I arrested over the years weren’t good people. But Dylan Brown was different. He wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. He came from a decent family and, unfortunately, had taken the wrong path in life.

He was serving two life sentences for murdering a couple. Dylan had gotten into some heavy drugs. Those types of drugs change you. They make you do things you wouldn’t normally do. He went out one night to rob a few homes so he could buy more heroin and ended up in a house that wasn’t empty.

When the couple confronted him as he rummaged around their living room, he freaked out, panicked, and shot them both. He didn’t deny it. Dylan called the cops himself because what he had done was eating him alive. He took a plea deal and gave details to what happened, which is why he didn’t get the death penalty. He has a four-year-old son, and I knew he wished he had done things differently.

So, I reached out to him and made a deal. I promised him I’d set up a college fund for his son and make sure he had everything he needed in life as long as he took care of something for me. He was already going to die in prison; what was one more life?

Leon was out of my reach; otherwise, I’d kill him myself. But Dove would never have true peace until the day he took his last breath. I wanted to give her that. She deserved it. I just

couldn't let her do it herself. Now, she didn't have to carry the weight of murder on her already burdened shoulders.

This was a burden I'd carry for her.

Because that's what you do for someone you love. You carry what they can't. You bear the weight when they're weak. You give when they have nothing left.

I would always be there for her. I promised her I'd fix this, which was exactly what I did.

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