

A romantic couple embracing at sunset by a river. The man is shirtless and has a tattoo on his shoulder. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a black top. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The river reflects the light of the setting sun.

RIVER OF

*Regrets*

LEANNE  
DAVIS

RIVER'S END, BOOK 18

# RIVER OF REGRETS

RIVER'S END SERIES, BOOK EIGHTEEN



LEANNE DAVIS

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# CONTENT WARNING

Do not read this if you are concerned with spoilers—but please be aware that this story deals with serious content matter.



**This title deals with strong language, sexual situations, and mature content matter, including: themes of trauma, PTSD, gun violence, child kidnapping, and references to rape.**

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# PROLOGUE



~ *T*wo Years Before~

FRANCINE RYDELL KNOCKED DESPERATELY on the grand, twelve-foot tall, wood and beveled glass door as she sobbed, “Please, Mom. Please. Just open the door. Give me five minutes. That’s all. Russell is out here with me. It’s cold and he’s crying and... please, just a few minutes?”

She waited, more tears rolling down her cheeks. No answer. No footsteps. No clicking of the three deadbolts she knew secured the door of her mom and stepfather’s majestic Bellevue home. She could hear someone breathing, however, on the opposite side of the door. She stepped closer and leaned her forehead against it.

Speaking softly, less shrill and not as desperate this time, she begged, “Please, Mama. I know I’ve messed up over and over. I ruined our reputation and our family name. I put the stores at risk too. But I swear to you, I’m trying to change. No, I *am* different now. The minute they put Russell Wilson into my arms, I fell in love with him. I’ve never loved anyone so much. I love him, Mom. But I need your help. I don’t know what to do. Stanley left. Hunter doesn’t know he has a son. There’s no one helping me. I just need you. I promise, I’ll change. I’ll learn. I promise... please... Mom? Mom? Please.

MOM.” Francine grew more frantic as she continued her monologue to the shut door. She heard the softest scuffling of feet and knew her mother was retreating from the entry.

Her mom refused to answer the door. Not for her traitorous daughter. It was real now. Her mom was not opening the door for any excuse. Francine needed money and guidance but...

She peeked down to check on Russell, who cried in his car seat. He was just a few weeks old. The sweetest, most precious bundle of love in the world. The most beautiful baby too. He had a shock of bright red hair and striking blue eyes.

Anyone who saw him and met his biological father, had no doubt that he was indeed, Hunter Rydell’s son.

Hunter was Francine’s ex-husband. He detested her. Even more than most divorcés hated their exes. He wished she went to hell. Her cheating on him went far past “socially acceptable.” That was the same reason her parents disowned her.

She was having sex with her stepbrother Stanley for years. Their tryst predated her five-year marriage to Hunter and continued unabated. Hunter eventually caught her in bed with Stanley and that was the end of Hunter’s involvement with her.

He never believed she was sorry or could conceive of the horror that she subjected him to. She changed him forever. She knew that.

Francine, fortunately, underwent a transformation. All the deficiencies she ignored in her personality suddenly became blatantly apparent to her. She recognized them but had no clue what to do about them.

When she realized she was pregnant, she was unsure if the baby were her lover-stepbrother’s or her husband’s. Hunter

severed their relationship and abandoned her as soon as he discovered her in the act of cheating.

She moved in with Stanley and expected to have a committed relationship with him, one that she'd longed for since her teenage years. Stanley was the only boy, and later, man, that she loved. It wasn't as gross as most people seemed to find it. At least, not from her perspective. He was her true love and her young heart never faltered.

They knew their relationship was wrong, but Stanley honestly seemed to like always having to sneak around. They did so for years. Stanley was the one who suggested she marry Hunter. Hunter worked for Stanley's dad at the same location as Stanley. Hunter was a hard-working, high-ranking manager who painstakingly earned his position while Stanley was an idler. He had an office merely because his last name was Stanton.

Stanley was also terribly flawed. Even Francine knew that. Over the years, he cheated on her, and even left the country at times without any warning. He flitted in and out of her life. But somehow, Stanley always managed to squeeze back into it.

With an abundance of shame, Francine caved every single time.

This time, however, was the last. Stanley abandoned her with a newborn baby after promising to raise Russell with her. They bought a townhouse with the money she got from her divorce after she was immediately cut off from Hunter's earning power. She also had to sell her jewelry. She suspected Stanley took much more money from her account than the required down payment on the condo.

When her monthly mortgage bill appeared, she had no means to pay it. Before the first payment was due, Stanley skipped out on her twice; and the last time? She never heard from him. She waited for days until she mustered up the courage to beg her mother for financial help.

Russell cried all the time, and he was crying now so she bit her lip, leaned down and pulled him out of the infant seat. She hugged him tightly to her chest. He was wrapped up snugly, and his hat was on. She was a pro at keeping him warm and freshly changed.

But the baby formula was running low, and she was on her last pack of diapers. Lacking the means to buy more, and with no idea how to earn the money for her needs, she realized she had to do something she never did before. She had to find a new source of money. Francine was pampered and indulged all her life by her parents. Stanley's dad was her stepfather, but she considered him her father since he raised her from the age of seven onwards.

How odd to fall in love with her stepbrother.

But now she had a baby with all the basic needs in life: food, shelter and clothing. They were suddenly luxuries that she could not afford. She was lost and didn't know what to do. She hugged the baby tighter and leaned over to kiss his squealing, tear-filled face. His distress cut her heart in two. "Oh, baby... Shh... Shh... I'm here. Mommy's here. Mommy loves you, Russell. I promise it'll get better. We'll be okay. We'll be okay..."

She muttered the empty words as she started walking towards the car. Filling the gas tank was another frill she had to budget. All her credit cards were maxed out. She couldn't get any new ones.

She strapped Russell in his seat as carefully as the hospital staff showed her.

Behind the steering wheel, she cried almost as loudly as her son howled.

“Oh, Russ, you deserve a much better mommy... so much better than me. I love you. I love you with all my heart. I just wonder... what if you'd be better off without me?”

The words she whispered were followed by sobs from both of them. She was parked in her parents' driveway, but she might as well have been floating on a raft in the middle of the ocean. The circular drive graced the fourteen-thousand-square-foot, stone monstrosity of a house. A center fountain sprayed jets of water from a cherub's mouth.

Useless. Her parents were both utterly useless. They were also assholes. Francine seethed as she stared at their excessive opulence while she struggled to think of a way to feed her son.

But with sinking despair, she knew she was the useless one and now, most definitely, the asshole.

There was only one person who could help her. The most decent person she ever knew. That was why she married him.

Hunter Rydell. The father of her son. He just didn't know he was a father yet. Or that Francine even had a baby.

He also didn't know what a terrible mother Francine was. She might have loved her son more than life itself, but she also knew, deep down in her guts, that Russell would be so much better off without her.

## CHAPTER 1



*R*OMAN BARRETT LIT UP the flashing light on his patrol car after the luxury car sped past. Sighing to himself, and grateful that the day was nearly over, he groaned at the stupid sedan. It reached a speed that was far too dangerous. One sharp turn on the single-lane, unpaved road could send the car careening off the embankment into the river below. It was ridiculous to drive so fast. Anyone could see that an unpaved country road demanded that drivers take it nice and easy.

*Must be another entitled city dweller, a rich-prick tourist on his way to the Rydell River Resort,* Roman thought. He didn't always pull the tourists over who were headed there, given his family connection to the place. His adopted dads both worked for the Rydell corporation. His Aunt Kailynn married into the Rydell family, and his cousins were Hunter and Landon Rydell.

Approaching the car from behind, Roman noticed her long, dark hair before a woman's face turned his way. Big eyes and perfectly sculpted features with pouty lips and delicate eyebrows made Roman do a double-take. She was gorgeous, model-worthy even. Her window was rolled fully down.

As soon as she heard his footsteps, she started talking. "Hi, Officer. Sorry for speeding. I'm fresh back in town after being

gone for quite a while. I'm so excited to return that I got carried away. My son and I are here to visit his father." The woman chatted easily, her gloss-slickened lips sliding into a huge, sexy smile. Easy and breezy. She effortlessly managed to take full control of this stop.

Glancing into the backseat, Roman saw the baby securely strapped in.

"You were going twenty miles per hour over the speed limit."

"Really? Crap. I'm so sorry. I won't do it again."

Oh, spare him the regrets and promises not to do it again while fluttering her eyelids. She would speed again, and she probably did it more often than not; he'd bet his badge on it.

"Right."

"I'm Francine Rydell. Part of the Rydell River Ranch family, in fact, that's exactly where I'm headed."

He looked at her curiously, waiting for the aha! moment or some kind of punchline. But it never came. His next thought was, *so?* Who the fuck cares where she was headed? Fuck, another Rydell? Who the hell was this one?

She mistook his silence for encouragement and thought he respected her answer, so she went on. "Hunter Rydell is my son's father. That's Russell Wilson Rydell." She pointed to her baby in the back seat.

Oh, fuck. Hunter's ex? The stepbrother-fucker? The all-time asshole who cheated on his cousin with *her own* stepbrother? Roman shuddered to think of it. How gross. Then he took a good look at her, and wow, was she stunning. He often wondered how Hunter could have failed to see that coming, but maybe her exquisite face clouded the facts and

prevented them from ever becoming clear. She was red hot. Beautiful as all fuck. She seemed tall, even while seated in the car, and her elegance fairly oozed from her. No wonder he felt the city vibe from her and assumed she was just another tourist in the valley.

“Really?” he finally acknowledged after a flicker of a glance at her toddler in the back.

She blinked and smiled a huge grin. Her brilliantly white, ridiculously perfect teeth reminded him of a toothpaste commercial. “Yes. Really. Russ and I are visiting for the rest of August and some of September. Hunter took an extended vacation as he’s attending his cousin Daisy’s wedding, then wanting to visit with his family. He asked me to come stay so they didn’t have to be away from Russell.”

Did she really think he fucking cared about any of that? Roman’s disdain for her began to grow. This entitled bitch who had sex with her stepbrother for years while cheating on her husband. His cousin. Not much he could find to like in that. No pretty face was worth it.

Not even hers.

He smiled politely, with a cool, but formal ease. “May I see your license and registration, Mrs. Rydell, please?”

Her outrageously beautiful smile instantly dimmed. “Oh. Okay.” She gave it to him without another word. He went back to his unit and took his sweet time about it. He checked her background and registration. There were no warrants on record. Damn. But he did manage to write up a hefty damn violation. Smiling to himself, but keeping his face neutral, he stepped back to the open window. He returned her license with the citation after she signed it. She took it begrudgingly, and blinked dramatically, before adding a groan.



“But...”

He set his fingers on his forehead as if doing a formal salute, then he smiled wide and said, “Hope the rest of your day is pleasant, Mrs. Rydell.”

Roman sauntered away without another word to the entitled asshole who famously screwed over his cousin.

Fuck, it was fun to see karma in action. She was getting screwed over this time.



THE RIVER’S End Tavern was popular in the small town of River’s End, and Roman scanned the after-work crowd until he found just the face he sought, his brother Rodrigo. He saw him tipping back the hard ale he preferred to drink after working all day.

“You won’t believe who I just ticketed only about an hour ago,” Roman said as he pulled out the chair to flop down on it.

“Who?” Rodrigo grunted, no doubt exhausted from his day working in the barns of the ranch spread. He always appreciated the ice-cold drinks to wash down some of the dust.

Waving at the bartender, an old timer who had long known Roman’s preferences, Roman was assured he’d soon have a drink, so he turned back to his brother.

“Francine the-stepbrother-fucker Rydell. Hunter’s ex.”

“Really? I never knew her.”

“She’s absolutely stunning. Truly. Might be the most stupid, gorgeous face I’ve ever laid eyes on. But what a piece of crap she turned out to be. I mean, doing the stepbrother the

whole five years she cuckolded poor Hunter. He must have been way too into her beauty.”

“What was she doing to warrant pulling her over?”

“Going way too fast down River Road. She tried dropping her last name of Rydell and thought that would make me simply let her off. She fluttered her lashes and did the femme fatale thing along with the name-dropping. Well, I can’t stand that shit. So hence, Rydell River Valley’s stepbrother-fucker now has a speeding ticket.”

Rodrigo laughed and lifted his drink in a mock toast. Without words, they perfectly understood each other. Always. Roman felt sure Rodrigo would be his only life partner. He had no need or desire for a girlfriend, let alone, a wife. Ever. Long term relationships were never part of his plan.

His life was great just as it was.

Sex, whenever he wanted it, was easy to find. Being attractive, as he’d often been told, he was not shy. In fact, some might have called him a player, a man-whore, or a complete scoundrel. But hell, even if he were, the women he slept with knew the deal and how he was.

Rodrigo, on the other hand, was quiet, timid, and fearfully unwilling to pursue women.

Nothing like Roman.

All the conversation and companionship Roman needed was fully provided by his little brother. It never mattered that they weren’t blood related. After being raised together in a group home when they were five and seven years old, that was it. Brothers for life.

Brothers who had decided to stay in River’s End.

Roman and his younger brother, Rodrigo, were formally adopted by Pedro and Jordan Hayes-Ruiz when they were twenty and eighteen. But they had lived with the couple since they were fourteen and sixteen years old, when the Ruiz-Hayes's had been their guardians under a legal guardianship. They were taken off the beaten path of the city and transported to a town called River's End. Their house sat opposite a fancy horse ranch-turned-resort that included other enterprises with the Rydell name on them. Rydell River Ranch and Resort. Rydell River. Rydell River Valley. All Rydell or Rydell-related.

His new adopted parents turned out to be decent people who embraced him and his brother despite their troubled past. Their history was a sad collection of successive group homes and foster care. Roman never even called them homes, but "places he stayed."

No one wanted them around and they both knew it. They clung to each other with unbreakable fidelity that even true brothers by blood couldn't imagine. They were all each other had. And their bond was ceaseless and strong.

Now twenty-seven years old, Roman was entering his fourth year as an officer with the Pattinson Police Department, and very proud of his twist of fate.

Being taken in by Jordan and Pedro was a surprise to both boys, especially after a pretty terrible introduction. Roman considered it a miracle, and still pinched himself over it sometimes. He and Rodrigo were just passing through the area in the middle of summer when they were in their teens. Having just escaped from a terrible foster home, they were guilty of more petty crimes than they could count or remember. While vandalizing one of the outbuildings of the

Rydell River Ranch, they were apprehended by none other than Jordan Hayes-Ruiz. Roman feared his skinny ass would be summarily beaten up by one of the many ranch hands and tossed into the river or sent off to prison for many years.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Jordan offered to let them stay in an empty ranch hand cabin on the Rydell River Ranch. He offered them some food and gave them decent clothing to wear. He said they could sleep there overnight, but clearly understood if they chose not to stay. After all, they were still strangers.

Jordan invited them over for dinner.

Roman was startled to realize that the other man living in the house was Jordan's spouse. The small house above the river they lived in was nicer than any other home the boys inhabited before, and Jordan and Pedro were like no couple they ever knew. Each man worked across the river on the Rydell River Ranch. That was a decade ago. Now, they were in their early fifties, but still in the same physical shape as some men in their thirties. The unceasing, hard, demanding chores kept them both strong and healthy. They always seemed to have plenty of money and friends, and an entire social network of support. They were also funny and nice.

However, Roman refused to submit to anyone's control. To no one's surprise, Rodrigo and he didn't stay there long in the cabin, and soon ran off.

Inevitably, they got caught again, but this time, they were doing something much worse, which landed them in serious trouble. They unwittingly stole a car that belonged to the local mayor.

Facing some real jail time, in desperation, Roman called Jordan and Pedro to beg for some legitimacy and help. They

were subsequently released to the two men's custody. That was because the sheriff already knew and trusted Pedro and Jordan.

The sheriff was only one of many in the River's End community that gave them a break and in doing so, started to teach them what was right and wrong, and eventually, how to become decent people. They saw examples of who and what they wanted to be in the world.

Or rather, *to* the world. Roman realized he hated to hurt others or their property and preferred to be an integral part of the community. He also wanted to push it forward, offering at-risk kids and youth, like himself and his brother, a real chance to improve and thrive. Changing the entire trajectory of someone's life was an incredible process to witness.

Young Roman would have scoffed and ridiculed the idea that adult Roman would choose a career in law enforcement, of all things.

The steady influence and mentoring, provided by Jordan and Pedro, enriched Roman's life, beliefs and attitude. Roman took an oath to enforce the laws and he honestly hoped to dispense it in fairness, perhaps even with kindness. He saw his own reflection in the troubled youths like himself and he knew not all were criminals or dangerous. Some of them had untapped potential and just needed to find a new path with the right understanding and direction. Some only needed a small nudge to embrace the better things in life.

Some nudges came in the form of tough love, while others were a kinder, gentler approach. He employed both in his career. He cultivated useful resources and social services, including youth centers, churches, and nonprofits that gave at-risk youth the kinds of help they might need. He even

recruited Aunt Josefina, who was a translator, to assist him with communication issues. It was amazing how often something as simple as proper communication could clear things up.

He truly believed he influenced the lives of a few kids and prevented them from becoming sad statistics. He and Rodrigo could have ended up that way, without the help of those very same kinds of people and services. Roman volunteered for a local mentoring program for youth.

He was first assigned to a kid named Bruce. Trying to form a bond with the youth for several months, he had yet to make a breakthrough. But he still hoped he could someday, being buoyed by his own history. If Jordan and Pedro had given up on him and Rodrigo, where would they be today? Who knew? But not in as good a place as he was now, and that was the point.

Roman didn't often articulate that information to others. Or what he saw as his role as an officer.

He looked tough, fierce and almost scary. He was big guy in his toned muscles and breadth. He liked tattoos and had what others called a "fierce" look in his facial expression. He knew how to use intimidation when dealing with people who were rotten to the core.

Roman handled plenty of those too. He was extra soft and kind to those who deserved it, and extra ruthless to those who didn't.

Tough but fair. That was his motto on the job, and in life.

Except for lying, cheating, pieces-of-crap humans... like Hunter's ex.

Because Hunter's ex was that universally disdainful. The kind no one should desire in a spouse. Hunter's ex was notorious for her unforgivable sins in the family, in River's End. Hell, in the entire Rydell River Valley. Hunter holed up in the valley two years ago, after catching his wife in bed, red-handed, doing the nasty, full-on naked, humping her stepbrother, with whom she'd been raised since she was seven years old.

The basic deviance of it made Roman shudder with repulsion. Ugh. Worse still, it wasn't a rare event, but something that happened continuously during Hunter and stepbrother-fucker's entire five-year marriage. She was doing the deed behind Hunter's back all that time.

She had all the money because her stepfather owned the chain of Stanton Department Stores. It managed to survive the internet revolution and still thrived today. Hunter worked for them. That was how Francine met him. But she pursued him, not vice versa. If she wanted her stepbrother (so gross) so much, why did she marry Hunter? Puzzling.

"Hunter know?" Rodrigo finally asked.

"I'd assume so." He snagged the beer bottle the server left on the table and guzzled it. Yeah, that hit the spot. "I see maybe now, why Hunter got so bamboozled. She did have his kid in the back seat."

"You really gave her a speeding ticket?"

Roman had a smug look and then a grin. "Sure. She was legally speeding. Thought to tell me she was a Rydell, no doubt to get out of it. She all but tried to bribe an officer of the law. She sure as shit did. Hunter can thank me later."

Rodrigo shook his head with a small smile. “I doubt an unhappy ex-wife with her temperament does anything for him.”

He grinned. “But it was satisfying. I can’t stand people brimming with entitlement. And she reeked of it.”

“Well, good thing that you cost her some money.”

He raised his drink in another feigned toast to Rodrigo’s dry tone and comment. “Damn right. Someone’s got to hold her accountable.”

His phone rang, and glancing down, he grinned at Rodrigo. “Well, that didn’t take long. Guess who?”



## CHAPTER 2



**E**LICKING HIS PHONE, ROMAN grinned and winked at Rodrigo as he said, “Yo, Hunter. What’s happening?”

“You realized who she was,” Hunter didn’t even bother to say hello.

“Hard to miss that shock of red hair on Russell’s head. Yeah, I believed her. Stepbrother-fucker, correct?”

Hunter sighed into his ear. “We don’t call her that anymore. Now, Francine can only be referred to as the mother of my child.”

“Dude, she was speeding and that, my cuz, is illegal and so is bribery. She tried to get me to ignore it because we’re related.”

“You didn’t cite her because of the stepbrother-fucker shit?”

“No. She was really speeding. She pronounced her name *Rydell* as if she were royalty and it made her exempt from the usual rules of the road and state laws. Smiling happily at me, like that was enough to forgive and forget her past transgressions. She hasn’t learned anything. You’re welcome. But let me guess... she’s crying on your shoulder and that’s why you’re calling me?”

Hunter groaned. “No. She’s not crying. Perhaps you’re right though, she does need to learn. She speeds all the time and gets so many tickets that she has sky-high insurance rates. I hoped you were overreacting and did it for personal reasons, after she tried to use my name.”

“It’s her name too, bud, ever since you married her and made her a Rydell.”

Rodrigo shook his head as Roman tried to rub in Hunter’s mistake. It was impossible not to find some humor in it all.

Hunter sighed even louder. “You’re having too much fun with this.”

“I am.” Roman leaned back in his chair. “Make her pay up, bud, and tell her to slow the hell down. She’s a menace to all the obedient drivers on the road. As well as most decent people, from the sounds of it.”

Hunter grumbled and added, “I get it. I just wanted to bitch about it.”

“Dude, try to make better choices.”

Hunter let out a weird groan-moan. “I have. Kyomi Wade. But she became Francine’s bosom buddy and Francine is still my baby mama, along with some other factors that make her my responsibility. It’s something I can’t live down or avoid. Goes to show you, one decision...”

Roman shuddered. He’d never fall for a drama queen, or someone who was too pretty, or just plain useless like ol’ Hunter Rydell did. Idiot. Always thinking with his pants instead of his head. You fuck people who act like Francine, but you don’t marry them.

Then again, Hunter didn’t know he impregnated her until after Russell was born. Weird-assed bitch kept that a secret.

From the baby's father. Since she wasn't sure if Russell's father was Hunter or her lover/stepbrother's, she had to keep it from him. But when the kid came out with bright red, Hunter-hair, how hard could it be to know which one was his father? Then she dumped the poor kid on Hunter's doorstep when he was barely a few weeks old.

A real piece of work. The more Roman remembered, the better he felt about serving his community and doing his job to make her accountable to something.

But stupid Hunter shouldn't have to pay for any of that shit.

"Why's she in town anyway? Way I recall it, she never came here in the five years you were married to her." Now curious, Roman sucked down another beer as he waited for the latest gossip from his cousin.

"She didn't. But now, she came here as a favor to us. To me and Kyomi. At our request she's brought Russell here for an entire month. I told you, it's not like the old days or even when our relationship was new. Oddly enough, she's fine now. And she's also my son's mother. So lay off it with the nickname."

"You're the one who started it."

"I was angry at the time. Time passes, and things change, Roman."

Fine. Fine. Pussy-whipped. But he knew Hunter was right, raising the kid had to change things.

"Russell's a cutie," Roman said to pacify his cousin.

Hunter's entire voice brightened. "He is, huh? Amazing kid. Bright and funny and so sharp you wouldn't believe all the stuff he gets the very first time." And there it was. Parent-

pride. The joy of fatherhood. Roman honestly couldn't relate to it. Never seeing it for much of his early life, Roman didn't know many dads who were good to young kids. He liked hearing it from Hunter.

Roman was very familiar with the harsh side of parenting, which was often displayed to him and Rodrigo, as well as other foster kids he met. Childcare Services was a broken institution, and the foster care system was in dire need of an overhaul.

The critical factor for him and Rodrigo was, of course, their adoption by Pedro and Jordan.

"All right. I hoped you did it for my sake. But I know she has a lead foot and she no doubt thought the Rydell name meant something special here. I doubt she tried to bribe you even if that's how it came across."

"Is she also clueless?" Roman wanted the truth. The way Hunter tried to explain her made it hard not to read between the lines.

"No. Not like that. She's just naïve in many ways because she never learned how the real world works. She was always isolated and spoiled by her parents who insisted on treating her like a child. That's what's so stupid. Her lack of experience shows sometimes."

"So... she's just a spoiled brat with no real-world knowledge?"

"Kind of like that. Kyomi is teaching her now. She genuinely wants to change and not be how she used to be. But it's a slow process... and she often reverts to her past behavior. The problem is, sometimes, it still works for her."

"Dude, you really tied yourself up with a diva."

Hunter chuckled. “You’re not the first to point that out to me.”

“Won’t be the last either, buddy. All right. Just remember this, you can’t bribe an officer of the law. Will I see you at Daisy and Asher’s wedding?”

“Yeah, yeah. And I wasn’t trying to bribe you...”

“Sure, bud. Yes, you were. But we’ll forget it.”

“Fine. See you at the wedding.”

Daisy Rydell was Hunter’s first cousin. Hunter’s dad Ian was the brother of Daisy’s dad Shane. Roman considered Daisy his honorary cousin. Why the hell not? Having no blood relatives in his life, to his knowledge, the idea of belonging to other people became really unimportant to him. What was important? The people who showed up. Loyalty. Caring. He made his family based on that, not blood or DNA or because he should have. Everyone liked Daisy and Asher, including him, so of course, he planned to attend their wedding.

The wedding was scheduled to happen the next night and Roman looked forward to it. It would be a huge Rydells/Reeds/Hayes/Ruiz-Hayes reunion.

Okay, Francine-fucking-Rydell thought she became some kind of royalty with her married name, and it was kinda true. But she was never *really* a Rydell and had no right to the title of it. So he put her in her place. Happy to do so. Hunter’s call only cemented his choice.

Turning back to Rodrigo, Roman informed him, “So Hunter has to pay her fine. What a shit show he created. Reminds me why I don’t have kids, or a wife, or anything close to a girlfriend. Why would I risk setting myself up to wind up with an ex like that, and having to fork out child

support, visitation dates and all that crap. Yuck. Never. Women, for me, are the sources of shit and trouble. Sometimes, I wish I were gay like our dads. Swear to God, it would be so much easier.”

Rodrigo released a half grunt, half laugh. “You say the most incorrect and shocking things, and you’re wrong about this. Our dads don’t have it any easier for other reasons. And no one, be it man or woman, wants your shitty attitude toward commitment and your lack of belief in others.”

“You dare to argue with me? How much good have you seen in any relationships of the intimate kind?” He gave Rodrigo a long, serious look. He wasn’t always serious. But sometimes, it was hard to deny the shithole they came from.

“No. But we saw it here. With our dads for sure.”

Yeah. Pedro and Jordan were good parents to them, and good spouses to each other. Their relationship clashed with Roman’s belief that intimacy inevitably resulted in chaos and abuse. They usually called them Pedro and Jordan to their faces, but whenever they discussed them privately, they referred to them as *their dads*. And they really were their dads. The labels were unnecessary. They both detested using labels with anyone but each other. Brothers always to the end. Before everything they were brothers. But even calling them dads, evoked associations with other disastrous origins.

“Well, hell. At least the wedding is something to do this weekend. And I always enjoy our family reunions.”

Rodrigo nodded. “Maybe this time, you won’t sleep with any members of the bridal party? Don’t need a repeat of last time...”

Roman ducked his head with chagrin. Yeah, that became a legitimate shit show when he got caught banging a bridesmaid in an empty room of the church. The bride didn't appreciate the distraction from her, and even Pedro, who usually didn't do such things, told him off.

Tipping the beer in a mock toast to his brother, he couldn't wait for tomorrow tonight, if only to get laid. Women at weddings—were often, but not always, (can't be too fast to group people together)—overly sentimental and emotional at nuptial events. Consequently, they could be very receptive to him. Yep, it could turn out to be a great weekend.



SHE WISHED she were better behaved. Always. In everything. Francine watched the family around her laughing, hugging their hellos, and several vigorously gregarious displays of excitement at seeing each other. They all seemed engaged in loud, friendly conversations.

This could have been her family. Her people. If only she'd given them a chance. Wincing, she remembered her only visit here, when she was officially the bride of Hunter. She was rude to everyone, literally lifting her nose with disgust toward them all. The pristine and very successful horse ranch they created might as well have been the dregs of the earth to Francine. She never allowed the people there to get close to her, although she was supposed to be madly in love with Hunter.

That was her first sin. She never loved Hunter as much as Stanley, and yet they stayed married for five years. She relied on and needed Hunter for emotional and financial support, far

more than undying love. Even now, she remained overly reliant on him.

And Kyomi.

Kyomi was Hunter's fiancée. She truly loved Hunter and tried to give him everything he deserved. At first, Francine turned up her nose at the cowgirl who replaced her. But soon, she succumbed to Kyomi, and became her very best friend. Kyomi had that kind of magnetic personality. She was admired by all and kind to everyone. Even Francine.

Francine who did so many offensive things to Hunter, it was hard to remember all of them.

Contrary to popular belief, Francine regretted how much she hurt Hunter. He was always a decent, wonderful person to her no matter what happened.

She liked Hunter immensely when she met him. His bright, unusually red hair and young-Robert Redford appearance attracted her to him initially. But love and marriage? They were a bit harder to sell. She cried the first time they slept together simply because Hunter wasn't Stanley and she'd never slept with anyone else.

Sex with Hunter wasn't so awful, but the dynamic between them was unlike that with Stanley.

The only thing that caused Francine to change, grow and decide to improve her entire life was becoming Russell's mother. She hoped her hard work would eventually pay off. She spent many hours in therapy. Apparently, she had some unhealthy attachment issues that she persisted in recreating with Stanley. She also learned she had almost no self-esteem, despite her ceaseless act to prove the opposite. Her past



behavior patterns and relationships only reinforced all the negativity she believed she deserved.

Despite learning all of that, and recognizing it, she couldn't erase what happened in the past nor the consequences of being known for that transgression. She hated her stepbrother now and the horribly shameful nickname that she had in the Rydell River Valley. She could only pray her son would never learn about it.

Everyone who lived in River's End, and most of the Rydell clan, knew what she did and the terrible nickname she received. Only Hunter and Kyomi came to her defense, bless them, and tried to convince others to stop calling her that.

None of the Rydells seemed to like her anymore or sought her out for conversation. Her former mother-in-law could only give her a stiff nod as she passed her. Her former father-in-law, Ian, grimaced before turning away. But everyone adored Russell and wanted him to share their special events or just hang out with them for days at a time.

In the end, thank God, Francine was glad he wasn't Stanley's baby. Being a Rydell, Russell had Hunter, Kyomi and the rest of the Rydell family to compensate for Francine's deficiencies.

Francine loved being a mother and she loved her baby. He was her son, the light of her life, and she knew she would always protect him fiercely from cruel gossip and snide remarks.

That's all she could do for now.

By simply coming into town, she already screwed up. Hunter was sighing with obvious distress that she'd instantly caused more hard feelings.

“Did you have to tell Roman you’re a Rydell? He assumed you were trying to use our name to get out of that speeding ticket.”

She was. Cringing at his admonishment, she watched Hunter hang up the phone after speaking to Roman. He was the big cop who seemed so handsome but was actually very rude. His huge, hulking figure and intimidating uniform were as frightening as the big gun he strapped to his body.

She felt very proud to be asked to come to River’s End, with Russell.

Until she ruined her own introduction into town with another speeding ticket, which could only increase her insurance premiums, and Hunter was rightfully annoyed. Kyomi just laughed at her and said, “Welcome back to town, Franny.”

Kyomi was the only one who could call her that. Francine hated that nickname almost as much as the other one she earned. She liked her birth name, *Francine*. It sounded elegant and beautiful to her ears. But Kyomi immediately shortened it to Franny and merely smirked whenever Francine begged her to stop using it. Kyomi always replied, “Sorry, but I can’t. You’ll always be Franny to me.”

The grin and casual ease that Kyomi used when she spoke and interacted with her were the only reasons Francine accepted the nickname of Franny. Besides it was much less reprehensible than the other one.

“I had no intention of trying to bribe the officer. I did it out of habit. Everyone here cares so much about the Rydell name in River’s End.”

“And it’s a name that provides you with some respect and decency. Is that why?”

She sighed. “Fine. Old habits die hard. I’m still trying to improve myself.”

Kyomi slung an arm around her. “Ah, hell, it’s just Roman. Forget it.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s a great cop. And actually, a pretty upstanding guy. But he’s also a complete man-whore. Don’t get bent out of whack from anything he says; he’s no saint, either.”

Francine appreciated Kyomi’s opinion.

“Why are you always so nice to me? I’m always surprised that you don’t detest me.”

Francine failed to understand why Kyomi was so tolerant and forgiving toward her. Francine didn’t deserve it. But Kyomi just shrugged and shook her head.

“You’re a nice person too, Franny. Other people are starting to see how much you’ve changed. You just need to learn new ways to show it.”

“You know what everyone here thinks the moment they spot me.”

Kyomi snorted. “That’s just around here. Nowhere else. You can’t blame a small town in which Hunter is so popular.”

“Which means his son will be that popular.” Setting her shoulders back as if to prepare for war, Francine asked, “Okay, where should I stay?”

Kyomi slapped her on the back. “That’s the spirit. Fight, stepbrother-fucker. Fight on.”

Francine glared hard at her friend, until Kyomi laughed so hard, she doubled over. Francine shook her head and mumbled, “I take back every nice thing I ever said about you...” Then she ended up grinning with Kyomi. Only Kyomi could say that to her, and Francine always knew she was teasing. Maybe a little macabre, but never mean-spirited. Kyomi liked to tease her playfully. Their relationship was in a place where they could talk that way to each other and know it was only in jest.

“Just show me where to go,” Francine growled as they started walking together with Russell between them. Now two years old, he held the hands of the two adults as they half-swung, half-walked his little legs.

Kyomi didn’t realize the extent of Francine’s endless battle. She was trying to right all the wrongs of her past with the kind of people who held onto grudges, sometimes for generations, and did not forgive the mistakes of others so easily.

Thank goodness for her ex-husband’s wonderful fiancée. Kyomi was fast becoming her very best friend, sister, and mentor. Kyomi didn’t need to reciprocate, but she remained the most important woman in Francine’s life.

## CHAPTER 3



*F*RANCINE AND RUSSELL STAYED in the same cabin she previously used when visiting the Rydell River Ranch. It was small but well-kept and she appreciated being allowed to stay there at no cost. However, in her married days, she refused the accommodation, claiming it “wasn’t suitable to her requirements.”

When she remembered how ridiculous she used to be, she was not surprised no one liked her.

Daisy and Asher’s wedding ceremony ended, and Hunter came over for Russell. They wanted to keep him overnight. There was no one she trusted more with Russell than Hunter and Kyomi. And she was glad Russell spent time with them so they could teach him all the things that she screwed up. She felt excruciatingly lonely, however, when Russell left her arms.

Unable to retire for the night, as it was only eight o’clock, Francine wandered across the lighted paths of the Rydell River Resort. The romantic boardwalks traversed the landscaped grounds, going past an elaborate playground area, a swimming pool and plenty of intimate picnic sites. When she reached the river, she slid onto a bench. Some people were milling about the area, and she noticed a bonfire near the Rydells’ private

beach. She had no doubt the wedding guests and family were all together, enjoying the evening with each other.

Was it appropriate for her to wander into that? Having concluded that she was a terrible judge regarding what was appropriate or not, she had no clue what to do. The old, entitled Francine would have assumed so, and felt sure she was wanted. Spoiled rotten by her parents, when they discovered whom she was having sex with, they summarily rejected and disowned her. They unknowingly contributed to create the situation she found herself in.

Her gaze roamed around until she stopped when she saw his face.

Oh. Oh, dear. That big, huge, burly cop, Roman.

She owed him an apology.

Her ploy to use the Rydell name and Hunter to avoid another speeding ticket and a spike in her insurance rates, tarnished her return to town, and it was definitely not her finest moment. In the old days, it might have pleased her, but now, it only embarrassed her. How the hell did she keep getting things wrong all the time?

Walking toward the bonfire, Francine recognized Landon, Hunter's younger brother. He was the same age as she was and had been working out of state for several years. She never really interacted or spoke to him. Or any of the Rydells really. She noticed another cousin, Iris, the girl-mechanic and her husband, Quinn. Then she saw another uncle; Joey, was it? She believed he was married to an older woman.

Roman was drinking a beer and not in uniform this time. He wore black slacks and a tawny-brown shirt that was neatly pressed and tucked in. Now it hung loose, however, and a few

buttons were undone while the sleeves were haphazardly rolled up.

She saw the tattoos all over his arms. He looked more like someone to arrest than an officer with the power to do so. Talking animatedly, Roman waved his hand around with the can of beer in it. Francine detested the taste of beer and rarely drank anything but infrequent glasses of fine wine.

All the upper crust snobbery of her childhood kept her from acting and being normal or typical.

She longed to be like everyone else.

She was sincere in her efforts but often, the harder she tried, the faster she stuck her foot in her mouth without any clue she was doing so.

Francine could feel the heat from the fire, but she was not part of the group. Seems Mr. Cop had the spotlight now.

His words were audible to her despite her position at the rim of the group. “Pat asked for the little blue pills. Old Glasgow always keeps his ADHD meds around and shares them with his friends on occasion. When Pat asked Glasgow for the pills, he gave him what he thought Pat was asking him for... but he gave him the other little blue pills. The worst part was, they were on their way to visit his fiancée’s parents.”

Gut-wrenching laughter erupted from the group and Francine tilted her head. What was the joke? Then another guy said, “How do you hide a four-hour boner like that from the in-laws-to-be?”

“Glasgow was blushing when he realized Pat only wanted his ADHD meds and knew he gave him his boner pills. His fiancée was freaking out because she took them too. Seems the couple were up all night and only wanted a pick-me-up before

dinner with her parents... Well, they got a pick-me-up, all right..."

How horrifying to imagine. A smile slipped over Francine's face while listening to the cop's story and the reactions from his cousins and the townspeople. She studied Roman as he spoke and laughed. He used vigorous hand motions to punctuate whatever he said, and there seemed to be nothing subtle or subdued about him. His entire body got involved while telling the story and he had everyone's eyes fastened on him. He only seemed to grow more interesting to Francine as he spoke. He was loud but not obnoxious. At least, not to this crowd. But he commanded all eyes to watch him. Leadership fairly oozed from his pores.

She stood outside the ring of people around the fire. No one noticed her yet, but most wouldn't have approached her even if they did. She could feel the deep heat of a blush. It was embarrassing to realize how much of a pariah she had become in River's End. She wished sometimes, she could revert to the old Francine. Stepbrother-fucker-Francine never cared what anyone here thought about her. That version of Francine would have held her head high and visibly snubbed these people. That Francine could not be abased or humiliated because she honestly believed she was simply better than all these podunk, country people. She would have reveled in *not* being one of them.

However, the newer, clued-in Francine suffered the mortification right down to her toes every time she noticed somebody glancing at and instantly dismissing her without a word.

She lived nearly twenty-six years without any understanding, and worse, without ever caring about the



consequences. She only cared about herself and little else affected her.

The last two years? She'd done everything she could to change herself.

She left a bad taste in almost everyone's mouth after her atrocious behavior became public.

She didn't dare approach this crowd, especially the most popular one holding court right now, Roman.

Sighing, she turned her back on the indifferent audience who didn't want her there anyway. Drifting from the bright warmth of fire, laughter, camaraderie, and fun, she walked towards the bench in the dark where she first was sitting.

Loneliness gripped her heart like a vise that slowly cut off her circulation. The part of her life that made her saddest was, her only friends were her ex-husband and his fiancée, with whom she talked regularly, hung out with and seemed to like her. Hunter and Kyomi. How pathetic. Being Hunter's baby-mama was a role she took for granted once and totally abused. Now they lived in the same building, one floor below her, and until just a few months ago, Kyomi was Francine's roommate. She wanted to live close to Hunter but wasn't quite ready to move in with him yet. It turned out wonderfully. Especially for Francine.

When Kyomi finally moved in with Hunter, they were engaged. Francine wandered around her place, feeling bereft and lonely without Kyomi there any longer. Although they lived only one floor below her, she knew Hunter moved there for Russell, not her.

They lived there solely because of Russell. But it didn't stop her from enjoying the privileges and convenience that

came with it.

Besides, Kyomi had become Francine's favorite person in the world. The no-holds-barred woman, Kyomi was the most honest, most direct person Francine ever knew. Kyomi refused to sugarcoat anything she said, yet she treated Francine with sincere respect and shared her sense of humor. Francine's ridiculous behavior in the past didn't matter to Kyomi, and she explained why without making Francine feel worse. Her undying respect and kindness endeared Kyomi to Francine and earned her eternal loyalty.

Although very few people ever saw that. After what she did to Hunter, no one bothered to delve any deeper. The thing they didn't know? Her loyalty belonged to someone else once. Stanley Stanton.

Being young, naïve, and very stupid, Francine allowed her heart to listen and believe in her stepbrother. Stanley was a slimy asshole from the beginning. The part of her history and eternal regrets that made her the saddest was that no one knew how stupid and humiliated she felt for loving a man who didn't deserve her, Stanley Stanton.

Neither of her parents would speak to her after the discovery. The incestuous affair between their stepchildren appalled both of them and they abruptly denied her everything. They eventually met Russell, but only a few times. They feared her sins would fall on her son, and that was when she clearly awoke to the values of her so-called *close* family. She was wrong for doing the things she did. But Russell was innocent. He was bigger than the moon and stars in his innocence and beauty. Every part as good as any exemplary child. Avoiding Russell because of her sins and suggesting her

son might inherit her wanton disregard for social mores, she disowned her parents in return.

Now, she had no parents. No lover. No Stanley. No friends. The ones who filled her vapid, shallow life in Seattle abandoned her after the scandal that ruined her and Stanley. All her so-called friends just disappeared. People she previously entertained and allowed to stay at her house? All gone. Expensive booze and even drugs that she once supplied to those fickle fair-weather friends? All forgotten with the scandal. Along with her money.

No one stood beside her but Hunter and Kyomi.

They were practically her surrogate parents now.

Poor Hunter. Her remorse persisted for what she did to him. And now she still had to rely on him. He was smart, calm, logical and always knew the right steps for her take. Kyomi was the best thing for him. The irony was that Kyomi was also the best thing for Francine.

On nights like this, of course, they deserved their time together, alone with Russell and each other. Francine wasn't totally clueless. She understood that they needed times to themselves and never infringed on that. She shared her custody hours with them, but didn't expect them to share their custody hours with her.

Francine's faults could have filled a whole book. But she would never deny Hunter the chance to see Russell. Not a chance. Never. She generously agreed to anything Hunter requested. They shared joint custody of Russell, and their proximity to each other meant Hunter got to have more time with his son.

Hunter was just as generous to Francine. Oddly enough, they were far better in their roles as co-parents than they ever were married. Most of that was owing to Kyomi's suggestions and guidance. She had the ability to cut through bullshit like a laser and focus on the best possible outlook for Russ. Screw everything else.

Hunter followed Kyomi's lead, along with Francine.

"Well, if it isn't Princess Rydell. Lurking around here? Still hoping you can talk me out of a speeding ticket?"

That voice. The deep, commanding voice of the big, strapping cop.

Glancing toward the shadows, she watched him materialize like an apparition from nowhere. The darkness seemed to spit out a dark, beautiful demon in the form of a man.

*Roman.* Even his name sounded ominous. She wasn't sure of his last name.

His tone was harsh to her ears. She failed to get his meaning for a few moments, before it finally clicked. She replied, "What? I never 'lurk' anywhere and certainly not around you. Why did you call me Princess Rydell?"

His big arms crossed over his massive chest. "You presumed that dropping the Rydell name makes breaking the law acceptable. Like you're royalty or something just as ridiculous."

Yeah, sometimes her sense of entitlement snuck up before she realized it and spewed from her mouth. Trying to reverse the decades of privilege, as it turned out, took a lot more effort and time than she realized.

The old Francine was unliked by most people. Unlikeable was the nicest description she heard. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned the Rydell name. It’s just—” Sighing, she quit talking. She was beginning to filter her responses, although she never did that before. The Rydell name was so well known and popular around there. Until she married Hunter, she used her maiden name, Stanton, to get whatever she needed or wanted. So ridiculous that a simple name could hold so much clout. From gifts of free jewelry to entry into exclusive restaurants and clubs.

“My maiden name had plenty of advantages and some habits can be hard to break.” She glanced away from looking at his face. Even in the shadows, he was handsome. Soulful, big, dark eyes, and a nicely shaped, prominent nose that seemed well-sculpted with his chiseled face and wide mouth. His dark hair complemented his olive-tinted white skin. He kept his hair short at the sides and longer on top, sort of swirled around like he ran his fingers through it. “Even when I should.”

“Your ex called me to let you off.”

“But you didn’t listen to him.” She glanced back at him. “Being the good officer that you are.”

He stepped closer. “Hunter shouldn’t have to discuss law enforcement with me on your behalf. You’re making him act like a different person than he really is.”

“And rules are rules?” she said flippantly before realizing her mistake. That was the wrong thing to say to a big, hulking officer who was inexplicably angry at her. The filter she counted on did not always do its job.

“Yes. Rules *are* fucking rules, Princess.”

Stiffening her spine at his tone, she replied while raising one of her eyebrows, “Don’t call me that.”

“Princess is a more polite nickname than the one I really could have used.”

*Stepbrother-fucker.* That’s the nickname he wanted to use. She nearly bit her tongue. No. She refused to blush in response. Or let this hulking, rude jerk observe her physical disdain and embarrassment from that moniker.

“You knew exactly who I was.”

“No, I didn’t. Not at first. The red-headed kid in the back seat was what clued me in.”

Right. And he obviously abhorred her to the extreme, based on all the local rumors. “You’re one of Hunter’s adopted cousins, right?”

“Yeah.” His face didn’t twitch. Great. No relief from his judgmental opinions.

“I’ll pay the ticket. I swear I will.”

His jaw ticked. “You don’t even know my name, do you?”

Dropping her gaze to her lap, she shook her head and said, “Your name is Roman.”

“And Hunter will pay your ticket. You can’t. He already told me.”

“I plan to pay him back.” Owing Hunter for her rent, food, gas, insurance, and so on, the list of things he bought for her over the last two years was extensive. Ever since she introduced Russell to him. Another speeding ticket with all the others... and another insurance hike to follow. Kyomi carefully explained to Francine how insurance worked and showed her what a big hack it was. The people who needed

insurance the most, along with the ones who had accidents on their records, got their yearly rates jacked up to the point of unaffordability. Punishment. All of Francine's life had become one big stint of penance and retribution.

Kyomi told her one thing that encouraged her: her relationship with the Rydells was no one's damn business anymore. If the three of them could work their shit out amicably, then everyone else could go to hell. "And that's none of your concern."

"It is when my cousin all but bribes an officer of the law. Shit-assed move, Mrs. Rydell. Leave him alone. He's a stand-up guy." His gaze scoured her. What was he really saying? That she was not a stand-up woman?

She rose to her feet and Roman dwarfed her. That rarely happened, being six feet tall on her bare feet, but Roman was six-foot-four or five.

"Why do you have such a problem with me?"

"Oh... I don't know, stepbrother..." he smiled, and she saw the mean glint in his eyes. His reference had its intended effect on her. Shame and humiliation. "For what you did to my cousin and his reputation."

She gritted her teeth. "Hunter's forgiven me. So why don't you mind your own damn business?"

"No." He stepped back, and his mocking grin remained. "True that. By the way, my name is Roman Barrett. Hunter's uncles, Pedro and Jordan adopted me. I suppose you just happened to forget that... well, you're not very interested in other people anyway, are you, Princess Franny?"

Wow, how could he be so offensive? Francine guessed his physicality, looming presence and badge made him think he

had certain advantages in life.

Coming from a family of old wealth and a famous name, she recognized it.

Breathing deeply, she nodded. “I didn’t forget, and I knew both Pedro and Jordan. I just didn’t know you were their adopted son.”

“Well, Princess Franny, it’s been a blast catchin’ up with you.” He flipped on his heel and vanished into the shadows as fast as he appeared.

Asshole.

Thankfully, she was not an asshole anymore or she might have struck him with something heavy or reported him to his superior by making up something offensive enough to give her a decent case. Lucky for him, she was no longer like that.

Most of the time.



## CHAPTER 4



“*K*YOMI? WHAT’S GOING ON?” Francine tilted her head as she spoke to her friend. It was the next morning and Kyomi came over to drop Russell off for a few hours. She had a meeting with someone. “I could tell something was up last night, but you seemed too tired to talk about it.”

“So you let me stew all night with it?”

“I hoped Russell would perk you up.”

“He always does.” Kyomi grinned and Francine knew she earned a few brownie points in how she handled Kyomi’s upset last night. “You’re really changing, you know.”

Thinking of her conversation with the rude cop last night, Francine shook her head. “Seems I take one step forward and three steps back.”

“Did something happen?”

*Something like pissing off a big, brute of a cop? No.* Kyomi still seemed upset, and Francine had to quit trying to trump that. How easily she could describe last night in detail to Kyomi’s inquiry. Pity parties were something she formerly excelled at.

Hunter and others often accused Francine of whining. She had a shrill voice but only when she whined. When she wasn’t

whining, it wasn't shrill. It became a top priority for Francine to avoid using that tone. "Nothing new. So tell me, what's going on?"

Kyomi's smile was half its usual size and it failed to light up her bright, intelligent eyes. "I just discovered my long-lost brother is dating Jack Rydell's daughter, Melanie. No one knew it until now. We were getting introduced when Hunter figured it out. Just as I was ready to say something, he lost it. Then my brother Kyle lost it and left. Now Melanie's confused and heartbroken since she seems to really like him. I have to rethink everything I ever knew about my family. But other than that, it's all good."

Kyomi never shared or expressed any drama to people. Francine wanted to be a good friend, like Kyomi was to her. Setting a hand on Kyomi's arm, she couldn't think of any words at first. She learned about Kyomi's family history only after Kyomi got drunk one night and told her. It was almost a mistake. Kyomi's brother Kyle murdered her other brother Kodi and then vanished from her life. She hadn't seen him in about eight years. "And Melanie didn't know anything about it? She must be devastated."

"Freaked out. Unsure. Unclear. I feel the same. There seems to be more to the story than what I've heard, and Melanie claims he's perfectly great to her. In fact, that's who we're meeting with this morning. To exchange notes, sort of."

"Well, of course. Wow, what a damn development."

"Yeah." Kyomi leaned her shoulder on the doorjamb.

"What is it?" Francine pressed when Kyomi stared off into space.

“What if I was wrong, or even kinda wrong all this time? What if Kyle wasn’t the monster Dad said he was, and it was all some kind of a misunderstanding?”

“Well? What if? You’re not to blame. You were just a kid who believed the adults in her life.”

“But all this time that we wasted.”

“It’s never too late. That’s my only hope. Life’s regrets can’t determine how the rest of your life goes. Look at me, Kyomi. I could fill a river with all my regrets, no, an ocean with them. If people don’t forgive me, or realize all the regrets I have and move forward, then what’s the point in it for me? All I have left are my regrets, Russell, the lessons I’ve learned, and my intention to improve myself. So couldn’t Kyle and you reconcile? Unless you don’t want to, of course.”

Kyomi’s gaze narrowed on her. Then a huge smile appeared on her face. “God damn, Franny. You just gave me some grown-up and much-needed advice. A pep talk. And you did that because you could see I needed it. You’re living proof that people can change, huh? I guess you’re right. I have to see for myself about Kyle. If things aren’t what I was taught, then I still have to see them through, huh?”

“Yes. I really think you do.”

Kyomi suddenly launched herself forward and hugged Francine. “Thank you, Franny. I needed a pep talk and I didn’t expect it to come from you. I’m so glad I offered to drop Russell off today. You were exactly what I needed and more. You’re growing in bounds by the day.”

Francine was never offended when her ex-husband’s fiancée spoke to her that way. Kyomi was always supportive and encouraged Francine to forge on. Her methods might have

been blunt, but they showed how much she cared. Francine harbored an undying love for the girl in return.

She hugged Kyomi back tightly and finally let her go with a long sigh. “I wish sometimes, you weren’t the fiancée of my ex.”

“Why? Aren’t you glad he’s not bringing a horrible shrew into your son’s life?”

“Of course, I am, but I’m more than grateful it’s you. Hell, you’ve taught me so many things about how to take care of my own son. But as the ex, and considering my former relationships with Hunter and Stanley, as well as what I did, I can’t really call you my best friend.” She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry, it came out wrong. I can’t call you my best friend without other people thinking it’s weird or peculiar.”

Kyomi simply laughed. “Yes, you can. If I’m your best friend, Franny, you and I can admit that to anyone. Nobody but us can decide the rules that govern the family we are. Right? You, me, Hunter and Russell? We make the rules, and we agree on them. Screw Stanley Stanton and the past. What you just said? It’s brilliant. I love you, regrets and all. You can move forward with us to embrace a new and different and better life than you ever had before.”

“Do you really consider me your friend? Or just tolerate me as Hunter does, because of Russell? To keep the peace. Because you’re a better person than me and it’s the right thing to do?”

Kyomi’s laugh pealed out again. “Those were the reasons at first. That pretty well sums up my motivation for befriending you. I was so pissed when I found out Hunter fathered a child with you. I wanted him and only him. No way was I ready to become a stepmother to his child. But when I

met Russ? He was so easy to love, and I instantly wanted to take care of him. Then I met you. Not so easy. You know that. Your regrets and all. But I loved the same two boys that you did, so it was something we both shared, and I had to do more than just tolerate you. I saw how mixed up you were. Your version of reality clashed with the real thing. I wondered if you just needed a little, damn, normal guidance, and maybe you'd respond to it in a positive way. Now... look at you, Franny." She beamed with pride like a loving mother toward her mixed-up teen.

"You know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. But I mean, could you ever think of me as a friend whose help *you need*, instead of someone you have to guide and constantly try to improve?"

"Francine?" Kyomi so rarely called her by her full name. The horrid nickname Kyomi gave her was Franny. Why did she change it now? Even Francine was becoming fond of it because Kyomi chose to call her that.

"What?"

"You just provided the help I needed. I think we crossed a line."

Tears blurred Francine's eyes. They were real tears that flowed from the emotions flooding her heart. "I was just thinking last night..."

"What?"

"You and Hunter are the only friends I have in the world. I don't know who else I trust or want to be around. I have no one but Russell and you two. It's pathetic. Sometimes, it scares me."

Kyomi tugged her into a hug again. “It takes time to create a new network of friends since you fully flushed all the shit from your life; I mean Stanley Stanton and your own parents. But I promise you, the new Francine will have no trouble rebuilding it. All the new people that come into your life could become your friends, it’s up to you to choose which ones you want.”

She snorted. “But you didn’t choose me, Kyomi. I was forced upon you.”

“That’s true. And it turned out to be the oddest, greatest ordeal that ever worked out for me besides Hunter Rydell.”

“I’m so glad you feel that way.”

“Well, it’s the truth. Now, I’d better see if I have another brother.”

“Good luck. Call me if you want me to bring Russell by later if only for the purpose of cheering you up.”

Kyomi gave her another squeeze and retreated. Francine turned towards her son who was busily scribbling on a coloring book. He tilted his head, talking away to himself as he often did. His vocabulary was rather extensive for his age.

Francine’s heart swelled with love in her chest. It happened every time. Her love for the small, red-haired boy literally stole her breath away sometimes. She hated the panicking, helpless sensation she had sometimes when she was left alone with him. Not because she didn’t want to have him. She did. Every moment of the day. She ached inside when he stayed with Hunter and Kyomi, leaving her alone. The gut-twisting fear in the back of her mind always flashed to the front of it. *What if she did something wrong?*

What could go wrong? Everything. Every. Single. Thing. Her daily encounters with Russell often scared her. She lacked confidence and doubted all that she did and said in every interaction. The ability to determine how much was enough or too little seemed to elude her.

Should she let him have his binky so often? The clashing opinions on that subject were just one issue. But he cried so long when she took it away. Should she allow him to cry for long periods? Was that the right way to teach him boundaries? Or was she making him feel abandoned and afraid that no one cared if he cried? Was she helping him learn how to comfort himself, or ruining his self-esteem because no one responded to him?

During these moments, Francine could only consult Hunter or Kyomi or both, and trust their opinions, even though they didn't technically know any better than she did. She never trusted herself, and her past history supported the evidence that her best judgment was everyone else's worst. She did it all wrong, every time. She could not fail with Russell.

Her previously obnoxious confidence was gone. Now? She was so unsure of herself that she needed constant reassurance.

Russell Wilson Rydell was named after Francine's favorite Seahawks quarterback. In her opinion, he was the best, the most fantastic quarterback of all time, on any team. She was a die-hard Seahawks fan. Something she never faked, and it often came as a surprise to others.

She named her son after the man whose fine traits she admired and hoped her own son might have. Leadership. Endurance against all odds. Unflinching morals. Generosity toward others. Inner strength. Kindness. And luck. Just a little

bit of damn luck. Why? Because her son deserved the world, and she was his mother, which seemed most unlucky for him.

That much was against Russell.

She hugged him and snuggled her nose between the crease of his neck and shoulder and he squealed in delight. She often did that. Acting like she wanted to eat him up. His sweetness, softness and every physical part of him were perfect. She hugged, kissed, played and simply held him as often as she could. He always responded to her, knowing she was his mother. That still blew her mind. Deserved or not, he seemed to want her all the time.

His mother. She never understood how important a mother was to a baby until she had Russ. Her role as his mother was the only thing that had any lasting value or meaning to her anymore.

Francine Rydell, mother of Russell Wilson Rydell.

Damn right she eagerly claimed the Rydell name now. She revealed her joy, pride and strength whenever she said it out loud. *Francine Rydell*. She felt like she still had to earn the title as the mother of the most wonderful child, and the best edition (in her estimation) to the Rydell family.

Stupid Roman failed to see she wasn't using the Rydell name to take advantage or gain privilege, but because she was so filled with pride that she could include herself as one. Better a Rydell than a Stanton, and all the harm she previously inflicted on that name. Her sense of entitlement and selfish gain were relegated to history now. As Francine Rydell, she barely stood a chance of changing and improving her life. Living up to the Rydell name became a goal worthy of all her effort, work and energy. Not only for Russell but also for herself and their future.





HER BIGGEST PROBLEM in changing was not being able to erase her old life; it refused to just disappear. She didn't live in a vacuum and her current role as a new mom who loved her son more than life itself was a real challenge. She was learning the consequences of her previous mistakes firsthand and ceaselessly honing new skills in order to make new friends. Her life choices and decisions before Russell still haunted her. Literally.

Including Stanley Stanton.

Lately, he was becoming more aggressive too.

*Lately* meaning in the last three months. Almost a year had passed since she and Kyomi evicted him from her apartment. That was when the first-round of Stanley's lame attempts to recapture her affection started. She stayed strong and deflected them. She always felt more sure and exacting when Kyomi was right beside her and Hunter was nearby. But she managed to resist Stanley then and he thankfully disappeared for three months. Then he showed up again.

And again, she resisted his overtures.

He disappeared again for three months.

Francine never questioned his three-month pattern, although she was curious about the timeline. She simply accepted it and continued to move on.

Her actions in the past were always dictated by Stanley's moods and whims. It began when she was seven and they were inseparable. In their early teens, they were best friends and at eighteen, they became lovers. She endured years of him

always taking from her, pushing her and pulling her whenever he wanted her. Then he was gone. He rarely warned her and could disappear for a week or a month or longer.

Francine unfortunately was addicted to his love. She craved his attention like a junkie craves heroin. She lived for his attention and praise. But Stanley knew that and took advantage of it. He could be so mercurial about it. Complimenting her and then scolding her mercilessly with the flip of a dime. She never knew when to expect it or why it always happened.

But it did.

Then he told her he wanted her to marry Hunter. He insisted she had to. Weak, submissive, stupid and ridiculous, the young Francine obeyed his order.

Over the years, Stanley came and went at his own leisure. He might leave her on a whim, only to return unexpectedly and pursue her doggedly. She was quite stunned at times to see how intense his mission to win her back became. She mistook his obsession and possession for love. She was flattered, thinking he needed her, when it was really no more than a sinister game of catch and release. Stanley got off on his cruel games. He had no trouble luring her back to him, no matter how good her life with Hunter might be. Stanley knew he owned her whenever he bothered to reappear in her life.

Occasionally, she could resist him for months at a time. Once, she lasted an entire year. But in the end, her weak and needy personality always succumbed to his relentless pursuit. That was how she cheated on Hunter for five years during her marriage to him, although it wasn't continuously. As for Stanley, he only wanted the fruit that was out of reach. Soon as he got it, the clock was ticking, and it wouldn't be long before

he'd turn around and leave her again. His last affair was with an older woman, who had lots of money.

He hooked up with her a month after Russell was born.

Then he returned a year later, but thank God, Kyomi was there. By then, she and Kyomi were roommates and Francine finally showed some gumption by standing up to him. Her strength and presence helped Francine finally be strong against Stanley. For the first time, she mustered the strength and courage to tell him to leave.

Everyone hoped and some believed that was the last of Stanley Stanton in her life.

But it wasn't.

Stanley continued to intrude on her life at his will. She did her best to avoid him.

But he'd always managed to boss her around in the past, so he refused to stop doing it, even when she didn't want him anymore.

Stanley never believed her.

He insisted Hunter was poisoning her mind and brainwashing her. He liked to grab her and place his head on hers, pressing his forehead against hers in a familiar way. Holding her face with his hands, he spoke in a tone that always made her insides quake. "No one else understands us. You know that. I told you people would try to destroy us if they knew. That's why we have to hide what we do. Always. I'm the only one who gets you, Francine. I'm the only one who loves you no matter what."

That old line worked for years on her. She swallowed it hook, line and sinker in the past.

But after Kyomi became her friend, she wondered if someone else actually cared as much about her as she did about them.

Growing up, Francine never earned her mother's approval. She found Francine insipid and uninteresting. Her stepfather exploited her to make him look like the doting father, but did he ever love the person inside her? No. It was evident at an early age, there wasn't much to love in Francine.

She was never cuddled, hugged, and pampered like Russell was, not only by her, but also Hunter, Kyomi and all the members of the Rydell and Hayes families.

Francine's parents saw Russell a few times in limited, formal settings. They treated him like an abstract entity instead of a child. The same way they raised Francine.

No excuses now, though. Francine knew better and was working on it. She had to accept all the deprivation of her childhood without using it as an excuse for what she did to Hunter. She could never pretend she hadn't sullied his life with her own depravity.

Guilt was something she had to live with now.

She didn't dare tell anyone that Stanley still showed up at her door.

However, after a huge blow-out with Kyomi, Stanley never visited her unless she was all alone. He'd bump into Francine as she walked on the beach, or after Kyomi, Hunter and Russell left the townhouse building for a few hours.

Francine feared if she told anyone of his clandestine visits, they'd repeat that horrible nickname again, just as stupid Officer Roman did. Her salacious story deserved the horrid

nickname. She doubted the day would ever come when it was finally forgotten.

People would assume she wanted to get Stanley back. Never mind that she didn't. She dared not tell Hunter and Kyomi, her best friends, after how she humiliated Hunter. They were on decent terms now, not just because of Kyomi's influence and Hunter's desire to be a good father, but because Hunter's opinion changed. He now had respect for Francine and that was her most sought-after goal. She hoped to never mention Stanley's name to Hunter again as all it did was stir up old shit.

How could she tell Hunter that Stanley still showed up, although he acted very strange? Completely different than he did before.

He became aggressive whenever she denied him anything.

She refused to sleep with him. She ignored his requests for money. He began increasing his demands of both.

That was partly why she decided to stay in River's End for a whole month. She longed to get away from his advances. Here, at least she felt free. If she stayed at the townhouse, Stanley would just wait until Hunter and Kyomi weren't around to take advantage of her.

She tried to banish his memory. Stanley was a blight on her, a stain on her past that still held her back from the person she wanted to become.

But she couldn't wash him out.

Later, getting back to the cabin where she stayed, she glanced around furtively before ducking inside. She was safe. There were lights and guests milling about the grounds.

Being alone now, without Hunter and Kyomi right below her, she felt like a newborn fawn left unattended by its mother in the woods at night. Stupid and ridiculous, the new Francine fought the urge to bunk down with her ex and his fiancée, even though it was exactly what she wanted to do.

Ahh, hell. Ever the drama queen, she once again let her imagination get the best of her. Everyone told her that. Literally, everyone. It was time to tamp down her paranoia and get better. Her mantra nowadays was, “No more drama.” Yawning, she ignored her lonely feelings and slipped into bed.



KYOMI TOLD her later that her meeting with Melanie revealed things about her brother that she never knew. After shunning him for so many years, and believing her parents without question, she felt despondent and confused. She hoped to build a new relationship with Kyle but felt unsure how to even begin. She was also angry at her parents.

“Do you mind if we take Russell with us today?” Kyomi asked Francine. “We’re going to visit my dad. We want to talk to him about Kyle and something AJ Reed told us. He offered to buy my dad and me out of the ranch. I’m actually considering it. Having Russell along always cheers me up.”

“Of course. Are you actually thinking of selling your family ranch?”

“I’d be more than fine with selling it. My family disintegrated there. I no longer work on it and have no plans to.”

“What if you moved here again?”

“Cowgirl Kyomi? No. I don’t want to work there again. Since I’ve been free of it, I’m substantially happier. It dragged me down and kept me stuck in a rut. I’m much freer and better by not working there.”

“I hope your dad agrees with you and things go well with Kyle.”

“What are you planning to do? I hate to leave you alone.”

“I’m fine. I need to get better at being alone. I’ve improved a little since you moved in with Hunter. I thought I might go into town. I honestly haven’t looked around here much and maybe I should.”

“If you wait, I’ll go with you tomorrow.”

“I’ll go again with you. Both trips could be good for me.”

“No one thinks about it anymore, you know,” Kyomi said, her tone serious. “What happened with Stanley? I know how self-conscious you get in public because you assume that’s all people know and what they’re thinking, but it’s overblown in your own mind.”

It wasn’t. Considering Officer Roman’s reaction to seeing her. But Francine bit her tongue. “You’re probably right. Anyway, I hope your visit with your dad goes well.”

She sighed. “It won’t. But thank you anyway.”

They parted after Francine gave Russell a series of peppered kisses. Closing the door, she glanced around. Now what?

Anytime she was without Russell, Francine felt like a small rowboat suddenly freed of its moorings, drifting aimlessly down a rushing river. No paddles or direction. No lifejacket for safety. No motor to switch on. She just twirled

and swirled aimlessly, like a lost, little boat with no sense of direction.

But now she was a grown-assed woman. An adult. She had to fill her life without centering it exclusively on her son. It wasn't fair to do that to him. All her enjoyment, satisfaction and reason for living came from Russell. It wasn't healthy especially since her son spent half his life with his dad. Her son had not one household, but two.

That left her alone often. Far more often than she preferred. She had to figure out how to be alone without self-destructing, or making rash, pointless decisions. She had to learn how to stop being old Francine.



## CHAPTER 5



*N*O SHOPPING. FRANCINE DIDN'T browse either, lest it lead to impulse buying. She was still paying off the maxed-out credit cards that came after doing too much of that. New Francine was frugal, and she hunted for bargains on anything she now purchased. She became surprisingly adept at that. With the same zeal she had in frittering a thousand dollars on absolutely nothing, she now proudly stretched a mere ten dollars in surprising ways. Even Hunter was impressed when she told him all the things she found for Russell and how little they cost.

The new Francine held her head high as she walked around downtown River's End in the evening twilight. It was the end of another hot, blistering, blinding, sunny day. She didn't dare use the Rydell swimming beach to cool off though. That was because, like the bonfire the other night, people would instantly avoid her. Even if they had the good manners to approach her, any conversation would be stilted and awkward.

She preferred not to ruin their time while stressing herself out too. She remained hidden in the air-conditioned cabin until she took a swim in the early afternoon at the resort pool. She preferred to get in before all the guests took over. She also relaxed and worked on her tan, taking one last swim before

hurrying back to her cabin to shower and clean up for the evening.

Driving across the river, she left the car in a city lot next to the park. Ducking out of her car, the oppressive heat of the evening still waffled over her. It was really intense, but nothing like Edmonds or Seattle, where barely a few days a year could be called “sizzling.” Especially at eight o’clock at night.

Daylight lingered in the white and peach sky overhead. The park sprinklers came on, creating rainbows of arcing water that reflected the sunlight in prisms of soft colors and shining white spray. Large cottonwood tree leaves fluttered in the soft breeze and the tranquil serenity made the twittering of birds sound like a symphony. No one else was parked in the lot.

Francine was very grateful for the peaceful spot along with the valley, the river, the ranch and the small town of River’s End. Tilting her head, she gazed at the view. The change in her perspective physically seemed to grip her. Years ago, when Hunter first brought her there, she detested the small hamlet. She thought it was ugly, filled with rubes and hicks, and totally beneath her. She called it “dusty and hot and stupid.”

How vapid she was then.

Staring at the long shadows, they reminded her of hot summers and days filled with light. Golden rays from the sun to the earth and sky and river. How she wished that people would stop hating her or feel the urge to call her cruel names that were both rude and insulting.

Kyomi was right, she *was* working very hard to improve her societal standing. It wasn’t fair to call her that vicious moniker anymore. She did sleep with her stepbrother, but it

was a youthful, forbidden love that she never orchestrated. If only she hadn't dragged Hunter into it and betrayed him.

But without Hunter, where would Russell Wilson Rydell be? His life and well-being were worth anything she now had to endure. Even name calling.

Couldn't this town become just a little more friendly? Seeing how Hunter and Kyomi accepted her and her son, couldn't the rest of the townspeople do the same?

Straightening her shoulders, she nodded as if she were having a conversation with someone. If she put herself out there as a different person, one who was filled with kindness and confidence, not insipid and shallow, would others perceive it? Would they respond to her being different? For goodness' sake, Kyomi, of all people, did. Why not others too?

That idea stuck in her mind as she started down the sidewalk. From the park, she turned onto the main street that featured several thriving businesses. The café, a small store and gas station, a few second-hand stores that were closed, and a candy shop that also sold souvenirs, including key chains and postcards of the area.

The one thing open right then, however, was the gas station, which only accepted credit cards. The rest of the town was closed. Quiet and still. She found nothing intimidating or scary about it. Still well within the confines of her comfort zone, she headed for another business she realized was still open, The River's End Tavern.

At the entrance, she sucked in a deep breath. She'd never been inside a small, roadside tavern such as this. No doubt, like the café, it was full of locals. She expected it to be the kind of place where the residents knew if you were a stranger in town simply because they all knew each other so well.

Names, birthdates, family histories, generational squabbles, addictions, vices, and accomplishments—all the usual factors in life—were public knowledge to these people.

Francine was no exception. Everyone knew her as Hunter's baby-mama, Russell's mother and stepbrother-fucker.

That was her claim to fame. Successfully perpetuated by her own rudeness, which many witnessed the first time she visited the area. People didn't forget things like that.

She hoped to have a casual drink and be allowed to enjoy it without any fuss or controversy.

Entering the establishment, she tried to keep her insecurity at bay. She was in a public place and had every right to enter it. To her surprise, the entire room did not stop their conversations, or turn and stare at her. In fact, no one even glanced up at her.

Maybe Kyomi was right, and she *was* making too much out of it.

Some old men were sitting at the bar. A few younger couples occupied the tables. It seemed pretty busy for River's End, but then again, nothing else was open.

Nothing except the gas station.

She started to slide into the seat at the closest table when a voice stopped her. "Did you take a wrong turn, Princess Franny?"

*Roman.* Ugh. She whipped around when his voice came from right behind her. Sure enough, he sat at one of the circular tables. They were too small to accommodate four to six chairs but apparently that amount were expected to share it. He sat sprawled in the small chair, his legs splayed, and his arms folded over his massive chest. Dressed in casual clothes,

he wore no uniform. He wasn't Officer Roman now. Just plain, old, boorish, rude Roman. He wore black jeans with a red t-shirt. Raising an eyebrow up at her, he examined her closely with only his eyes.

Francine always wore sedate, conservative clothing when she came to River's End. She was trying to appear respectably maternal more than anything else. The way Roman's eyes studied her made her feel as exposed as if she were wearing skimpy lingerie.

She quietly assessed his tablemates. Two women. Two of the bridesmaids from Daisy's wedding the other night. Francine recognized them immediately.

He... couldn't be... with both of them. Could he?

"I thought this was a public place of business, Officer. Am I not allowed here?"

He furrowed his brow at her when she sneered over the word, *Officer* as if subtly reminding him he should uphold some standards when addressing others. But he popped back with a grin. "Point taken. Of course, you're allowed here. I'd never guess this was your kinda scene."

It wasn't. Francine was used to pulsating strobe-lights, heavy-metal bands, multi-level nightclubs featuring progressive music, and expensive drinks. That was when she was a VIP member. She partied in her youth and would have never spent a single second in a dive like this. She disliked country music as well as cowboys who twanged songs about drinking away their sorrows.

"I wanted to walk around town but nothing's open."

Why did she feel the need to defend herself to him?

"Sit down." He smiled. Must be a dare.

She evil-eyed him. “I wouldn’t think of interrupting,” she replied with a swift glance at the two women.

They didn’t smile at her, but neither did they glare. Their glassy eyes revealed their state of inebriation and neither seemed to register that Francine was even there, much less, why. “I’m fine at the bar.” She all but turned and ran to get there. When the bartender finally took her order, she asked for a glass of Chablis. Then she carefully concealed her grimace after tasting the tepid, flat, cheap, horrendous white wine that The River’s End Tavern regularly served. Princess or not. Snobby or not. It was disgusting and nasty.

With every long, miserable sip, Francine nearly keeled over and heaved, but she felt the probing eyes of that jerk of a cop on her. Watching. Judging. Waiting for her to spit out the terrible beverage and demand her money back. She chose to restrain her initial reaction and exhibit her ability to remain poised in the face of adversity.

Instead, she quietly sipped the glass of kerosene and all but gulped it down finally just to end the torture. “May I have a glass of water please?” she requested when she could no longer stomach the foul aftertaste. The bartender frowned but returned with a glass of lukewarm water, that almost killed some of the bitter aftertaste.

“John, I’m ready to square up now.”

Startled to hear his voice so close beside her, she turned sharply and found Roman at the bar, standing next to her. His attention was fastened on the bartender who leaned over to speak to someone. John waved his hand to indicate he heard Roman. Of all the places at the bar to choose to pay his tab, why did he pick the spot right beside her? What crap. He

purposely intended to bother her. John was much closer to his table than she was.

“You have to yell right next to my ear? Are you trying to seek my attention, Officer?” she asked with a cloying tone and a fake smile. She was sure he expected that from her.

“Sure. I’ll take your attention, Franny. Come and join us.” He gave her a wolfish half-grin, wagging his eyebrows and tilting his head toward the two bridesmaids. They were already standing together by the front door, waiting for him. Both of them.

Her mouth dropped open. “Are you... seeing both girls?”

He grinned fully now. “Sure, but I’m up for a foursome. First time for me, but I’m sure it can be done.” He put his hands together in front of his body and cracked his knuckles as if he were preparing to do some heavy work.

“You are so gross.”

“I’m fun, not gross. Big difference. How ‘bout it, Franny? Wanna have some fun?”

Not with him. But she dared not admit it. She was slightly relieved he dropped the *Princess* and was calling her just *Franny*. But she still gnashed her teeth when she saw his gleeful smile at watching what his comment did to her.

Staring forward, she muttered, “And the people in this town call me rude names.”

He let out a laugh before leaning closer. “I don’t lie or cheat or betray anyone. Big difference.”

“You’ve made it very clear that you don’t approve of me.” She gave him a side-glance. “I’d like to let it be known, I don’t approve of you, either. *Officer Barrett.*”

“Ah, so the claws come out. Seems fair. Neither of us approves of the other. But Franny, when I’m on duty, I always behave. Right now? I’m just a young, single guy drinking at a bar. Two bridesmaids wanted some fun, and they sought me out... why refuse them?”

Ick. Straightening her shoulders, she gave him a look of clear disdain. She had a regal, snobbish expression she liked to use in such situations. She rarely chose to do so these days, but she did it now.

“Why would you advertise that kind of behavior?” She shrugged.

He had a lopsided grin. She hated it when her stomach tightened in response, as if his boyish smile worked for her. His handsome face, cockiness, and arrogant smile affected her just as easily as it did the two drunken bridesmaids. “Behavior is dictated by one’s status. If I’m single, I can do whatever I want with consenting adults. Married? I’d never stray. I take my profession very seriously, but I never allow it to influence my personal life. So, although it’s been riveting, Franny, my night of adventure awaits me.” He gave her a fake salute and then turned to go.

“Don’t contract any diseases.” She flashed the regal, saccharine smile again.

He let out a booming laugh. “You got some bite in you, Franny. I appreciate your concern for me. But there’s no need for it.” Then he freaking winked at her, and leaned so close, his mouth was near her ear and his breath felt warm when he said, “I always ardently enjoy having sex, as well as *all* of my partners... but I only participate when I’m fully protected and safe.”



His words caressed her, and her gut tightened. Damn him. He was deliberately trying to be an asshole to make her uncomfortable. She was furious that all his innuendo was succeeding.

As worldly as Francine's taste was, and despite all the places she used to go clubbing, dining, and traveling when she could spend her parents' money, she was never worldly with men. She rarely bothered with flirting since she was always with Stanley. She falsely believed she already had her soulmate so there was no reason to learn how to flirt.

She realized now how wrong her views were on relationships.

She jerked her head away from his hot breath and seethed inside. But Roman just laughed and squeezed her arm as he left the establishment. She hated herself for looking back over her shoulder to watch him leave.

The asshole put an arm around each girl's waist as he walked them out.

This is how the guy spends a weekday evening?

Three days later, Francine was casually hanging out with Hunter, Kyomi and Russell. She was having dinner at her former in-laws' house when Hunter told the latest story streaming down the family gossip line.

Roman got into trouble when a neighbor made a disturbance call, and the cops came to check it out. Roman was outside his apartment alongside two women who were fist-fighting each other. He kept trying to break it up but only got scratched and bitten for his efforts.

No one was arrested, although Roman was warned about making any future disturbances late at night. But Francine was

over the moon to hear that was how his night ended.

What could be better than that? The smug prick. She hummed and smiled the rest of the evening, feeling totally content now. Safe sex, her ass.



FRANCINE STARED at the large gathering in the park. She was surprised to see a small stage being setup and various crowds milling around. They were rather loud and excited. A local band was performing a free concert tonight in the park. Many summer Saturdays featured free entertainment at this park. The town was several miles away from River's End and far larger than anything in the Rydell River Valley. Situated on the Colombia River, the setting sun turned the river orange, then gold and finally black.

Hordes of people came for the concert. Hunter and Kyomi were there, as well as several of his cousins, aunts and uncles. Francine and Russell came too. She was spreading out a blanket for them when her gut tightened. Watching the crowd, she homed in on the one person who kept popping up everywhere she went. She never noticed him before, yet he seemed to be all around her now, even in the family grapevine.

Roman. He stood out in the crowd. Uniformed, he seemed much more visible and present. He reminded Francine of a burning candle in the dark.

He was on duty, patrolling the crowd tonight.

It thrilled her when he noticed her staring at him and nodded her way. She expected to receive the heated glare from last weekend, or the cocky, sure, obnoxious sneer at the bar. It wasn't snarky for once. She expected he thought only of her as

*stepbrother-fucker*. But he lifted a hand and gave her a small hello.

*Hello?*

It was far better than his other reactions she'd gotten thus far.

She was glad to take it. She waved back, beaming.

Maybe she was too excited, showing too much teeth at her obvious pleasure over his response to her.

Maybe it was due to the story from Hunter that he seemed a bit...subdued. Maybe it was good to take him down a peg or two.

The concert started. Francine was surprised but grateful the music was fairly good. She loved any live music, and she swayed, smiled, and clapped with the crowd. Russell ran around the family circle, going from her, to Hunter, to his grandparents. He loved alternating between so many of them. They all treated Russell like a child king that they loved, and he was well-aware of it.

Finally, intermission was announced, and Francine went to one of several food trucks that provided refreshments. Paying for two lemonades for her and Russell, she grabbed them and started weaving back through the crowd, when she noticed Roman. He was smiling politely and pointing out something for the middle-aged couple before him. She grinned. He was showing them where to find the restroom.

“Hard at work, Officer? Helping the seniors reach the bathroom in time? Glad to see you’re keeping us all *fully protected and safe*.” Her eyes sparkled as she muttered the same words he spoke to her the other night.

He whipped around when he heard her behind him. She was glad to finally take him by surprise and seize the upper hand this time. Instead of admiring him or feeling self-conscious about what he called her, she finally relaxed, glad to be on a par and equal to him.

He acknowledged her change in stature with a small nod as he flashed a grin. “My job is to protect and serve. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep others... *safe*.” He mimicked her tone, and she was glad he saw her humor.

She put a hand on her heart. “Even when you have to protect two fighting females? You get serious points for your courage.” She knew her eyes sparked with mischief. And for once, it felt fun. Flirty. Even wonderful. They were bantering. Back and forth. She never knew it could be so much fun and so harmless. She wasn’t hurting him and neither did he hurt her. He still annoyed her and pissed her off, but it was much less aggressive. She liked being sarcastic without offending him or his position.

His shoulders slumped and his mouth twisted to the side. “So you heard. I was hoping you hadn’t.”

“Why? Why do you care if I heard Hunter’s story about you?”

“Because I figured you’d gloat but I... deserve it.”

A grin appeared on her face. “Did they really bite you when you tried to break them up?”

He sighed and flushed. She almost choked on her own saliva at knowing she could embarrass him. He flipped his arm over, unbuttoning the sleeve and rolling it up a few inches. Damn her weak stomach. Her heart was fluttering, as if his actions were intentionally slow and sexy. Revealing his strong

forearms, he rolled the sleeve up inch by inch. Then she saw the bite mark right below his elbow. Purple bruising surrounded it.

She gaped and exclaimed, “Holy crap. You really did get bitten.”

“Hurts like a mother too.”

“Why? I mean... what led to the confrontation?” She chewed on her lip, picturing one of the snarling females attacking him like a rabid dog as he tried to intervene. “Was it due to jealousy? Did you deserve it?”

“I wish it were that, if only to soothe my ego. Turned out they were a couple who sometimes like to include men in their sex. But the fight was over something entirely unrelated to me. I don’t know what set it off.”

Francine wanted to hear so many details about it now. Hunter said they were in various stages of undress so someone must have initiated sex...and then...

“Needless to say, they’re very passionate about each other. And I apparently interrupted that.”

She had to hold her side to keep from erupting into peals of laughter. He noticed and finally released a chuckle. “I bet you think I got what I deserved.”

She replied, “After what you called me, maybe there is such a thing as divine justice and retribution.” Then her laugh faded. “Did you get in trouble at work? I mean, because the neighbor called it in...”

“You really know all about it, huh?”

“It was the latest news for the entire ranch. Hard to miss even if I didn’t know you.”

“Great. No real harm. The bridesmaids left together, and there was more slapping each other than an outright slugfest. There were no physical marks on either of them, so they didn’t file any report.”

“What about your bite mark?”

“I didn’t share that with either of them. Nothing official happened. But I did get a... a stiff talking to.”

“Hence, you offered for crowd control tonight?” she asked, unsure of the usual protocol.

“No. I was scheduled to work tonight. This is just a small part of what we cover. A big gathering like this? People get drunk and disorderly—” He held up a hand. “Don’t comment. I know. The other night was a shit show. Usually, I don’t get detained by the same police force I work for.”

It was impossible to restrain her laughter. When she glanced at him again, he was watching her with an odd expression.

“What?”

“You have a nice laugh. I guess I never heard you laugh before.”

“I’ve laughed at you before.”

“No, you mocked me and snickered. I never heard you laugh from enjoyment.”

She smiled, happier with their exchange than she could remember with anyone. “I’m not a man-eating monster even if you insist on pretending I am.”

He tilted his head to indicate a slight acknowledgment. “Fair enough. Maybe I was a bit harsh.”

“Judgmental. Cruel. Rude. Yeah, considering you might not be the first one to cast such stones...” She waved at his arm, and he rolled his eyes.

“Admittedly.”

She tilted her head. “What else might you see on a night like tonight?”

“Occasional fights between youths or couples. Domestic violence. Petty theft and malicious mischief. People feel free and start acting up. They can get weird. Sometimes it’s just controlling stuff like that.”

“Any examples?”

“Um, once I had to chase down a man dressed like a chicken.”

“A chicken? Why?”

“Ya got me. But he wore a chicken head, tail and feet... and nothing else to cover the rest of him. He not only scared the kids but hell, he scared all of us. He never explained why. Just did it.”

“I can’t imagine the kind of stuff you deal with.”

“Nothing like big-city cops do. But sometimes it’s exciting. Most of my shifts are like this. Directing nice, old ladies and men to the facilities.” He shrugged. “I just try to do my job despite whatever comes.”

Sounded like a good motto for life. His tone went deeper when he said that. There was no more joking. “Do you like doing it? Do you wish you patrolled a more populated area?”

“Never. I like working here. I like the people and most of them like me. It’s nice to feel connected to people you want to help. But it’s also hard when I have to make arrests on people I

know or slightly know. Like everything else, it has good and bad aspects of it. I can't imagine doing anything different. I grew up everywhere and nowhere, so this is my somewhere. A place where I belong. I like law and order, accountability and maintaining that. Most of the time, it's a good fit for me."

"When isn't it?"

"When I see my screwed-up self in a teenage kid who's making really bad choices and mistakes. Without discipline and accountability, I'd never have changed. It works both ways. If it's done right, like Jordan and Pedro did for us, we learned to respect them, and later, we didn't want to disappoint them. We strove to meet their expectations. And luckily, we knew what those were. We knew what they wanted from us. What was acceptable for society. How to be accountable. We felt ignored all our lives, except for each other. Suddenly, two adults—two decent adults—with humor and kindness actually cared about us and wanted us to care about ourselves and them."

"I didn't know you were so thoughtful."

"I didn't know you were either," he countered with a wink and a grin. "Gotta make tracks, there's an argument brewing over there, I'd better go check it out."

Then off he went with authority and command, parting the crowd to let him through. It wasn't just his physical height and presence, nor his demeanor and the commanding way he moved, but something else about him drew respect. His uniform emphasized the same message that his body conveyed: law and order.

Except for the bite mark.



Shaking her head, she wondered about the different sides of Roman. Upstanding, fiercely proud of his job and also a man-whore, according to Kyomi. Interesting.

He was becoming much more interesting than he used to be. And he was funny too. Great to verbally spar with. That was a completely new experience. Stanley lacked any sense of humor and was hypersensitive to the extreme, everything offended him. Hunter and Francine had more formal interactions because she intended from the beginning to keep him at arm's length.

But Roman? Hell. She revealed a version of herself that even she didn't know about with him. More importantly, she liked being that version.

Within moments, he interrupted the dispute between the teenagers. How did he spot it? She thought he was fully engaged with her, yet his Spidey senses were tuned into the crowd around him. He got right into the face of a kid about eighteen, who was fuming while flailing his hands, and obviously angry. The other kid stopped when Roman held his hand out, giving him the unspoken command to freeze.

Francine shuddered. She'd totally suck at his job. Conflict, never failed to startle and intimidate her. Her first instinct was to cower, try to hide and stay silent to avoid fanning the fire. She could never in her wildest imagination interrupt a screaming fight between two big guys.

Finally, the angrier kid visibly started to defuse and eventually, they both walked in opposite directions. Roman walked past the edge of the crowd with the quieter kid and Francine watched until she lost sight of them. It was time to get back to the concert anyway.

She eagerly joined her family and was pleasantly surprised at how nice the evening ambiance was. She actually had fun, something she hadn't enjoyed very often in her life.

She wondered, if she could learn to take life far less seriously and seek out people who were entertaining, funny, and sarcastic so she could also be that way.

Fun suddenly became a new word to her.

The new concept fascinated her.

Saying goodnight to Russell with a peppering of kisses, she meandered back to her own cabin, thinking her life could be on a new, exciting trajectory. She had to admit she was beginning to like River's End. Even the Rydell family, who used to detest her, seemed to be thawing slowly. Maybe in time, they would all totally melt and become friends.

Maybe.

Maybe after she was able to start supporting herself with her new career choice they would see she had truly and fully changed from the Francine they first met.

For at the end of September, she was scheduled to go back to school, which would open up an entirely new adventure. She was attending beauty school, for which she was just as thrilled as she was scared. But at least she was eager to try something new. Something different. And that's all that mattered.

She couldn't wait to embrace the new Francine.

Edmonds offered a two-year course in Cosmetology through the local community college. After working several kinds of jobs that ranged from food services, office administration, and a receptionist in a beauty salon, she finally found an occupation that piqued her interest.

Graduating high school with a low GPA was the extent of her ambition. She moved from her stepfather's mansion to share a home with Hunter Rydell. Both households were taken for granted and expected to support her however she saw fit. There was never any thought that Francine might overspend or live beyond her husband's means.

Naturally, she abused her position until Kyomi explained what a budget was and how to follow one. She informed Francine of the price each item cost. The extras that Francine used to indulge in soon became luxuries she could no longer afford. Eventually, with the tutoring of Kyomi, Francine realized what a waste of resources she was. As well as time and space.

Francine was a terrible employee at first. When she learned how hard jobs were she was appalled by what she didn't know about real life stress.

She earned so little money for enduring long hours, and tasks.

She worked at five jobs before she found the one she liked: receptionist in the local beauty salon.

She had only recently quit as she was starting beauty school in the fall.

It was a higher-end salon right down the street from her townhouse. She could walk to work. She quickly made friends with the owner and the other people who worked there: three hair stylists, two estheticians, two makeup artists, and a massage therapist.

The environment was warm, friendly and very welcoming to her. No one knew anything about her past. She never offered any information and the ladies who met her actually

liked her. That was a new experience for Francine. Previous women she met often considered her their competition and bristled at her for no reason. Why? What prize were they competing for? She had no clue. There wasn't any benefit in that as far as she could see. But that was how she *used* to be. Jealous. Rude. Entitled. Shallow. Vain. Useless. Mean.

Francine liked being the receptionist and they were wonderful to her in return. Perhaps it was because she was so cheerful and found all of them so fascinating. They were independent women working and providing for themselves in successful ways. The services they provided were genuinely loved by Francine. Not just for the beauty treatments, but the processes involved. They could make *anyone* feel better, more confident, and good about themselves. How wonderful to be the source of so much happiness for so many people. They quickly included her in their events outside the salon, barhopping, cozy dinners and parties. While attending one of these, the owner suggested to Francine that she should go to beauty school. Francine never concealed her fascination and respect for the industry, so why wouldn't she become more involved in it?

She dismissed the idea at first.

But it hung around in her head and refused to disappear. She started watching the stylists working and found their skills utterly intriguing. She could see herself welcoming young women and asking how they wanted their hair cut? She could easily see herself spinning the chair around and chatting with the patron before collaborating on the latest look she wanted to try.

Two years ago, the idea of having an entire shop of women and customers surrounding her every day was impossible for

Francine to even consider. As soon as it actually happened, she was delighted.

Her job wasn't taxing and something new always kept her engaged. She also liked to chat with all the patrons.

She eventually approached Deanna, the owner, and asked her more about it.

Deanna told her which school she preferred that Francine attend for her training, one which she deemed acceptable to her standards.

The concept sat like a rock in Francine's gut for a good two months before she finally broached the subject to Hunter and Kyomi.

One evening, she sat them down and told them all about her work, the customers' positive feedback that she got, her fabulous co-workers, and most importantly, Deanna's latest suggestion that she become a cosmetologist.

"That sounds fantastic. Why would you hesitate?" Kyomi asked, all but clapping her approval.

Francine blushed and replied, "Because I'll have to use your support money to pay for it. It's not cheap. I was so stupid and clueless all my life, never knowing how much anything cost, let alone, training for a career like this..."

Hunter nodded, his face solemn. "I agree with Kyomi. I think it's a great fit for you and you should definitely do it."

She sighed. "Someday, I might actually earn my keep."

Hunter indicated the notepad where she scribbled her intentions down. "With that plan, it will happen far sooner than I ever assumed." Then he turned his head to the side and inquired, "But why are you asking us? Why not just tell us

what you intend to do? You're the master of yourself now, Francine. You don't need our blessing or approval anymore, especially if it doesn't involve Russell."

"Well, it does, and I do. First of all, it'll take a lot of my time away from him, which brings up the problem of childcare."

Kyomi swept a hand around. "Between the three of us, I'm sure we'll manage."

"That's why this option right here might be the most feasible." She pointed to the community college catalogue that offered Cosmetology classes two evenings a week and one practicum during the day.

"Good choice. See? The three of us *can* cover for you."

"And second? Because it's your money. I was a fool to fritter it away for too many years to count, and I never want to do that again. But I can't make any promises, since I'm not the best judge."

"I appreciate that. But this is a good plan and you thought it out very well."

She sighed as she added, "And there's one more reason. I like getting your blessing because I value it so highly."

Kyomi got up and hugged her. "Leaps and bounds, Franny. You're growing into an amazing person. This idea is awesome, and we need to celebrate."

They did and Francine committed herself wholeheartedly. She started the application process and was scheduled to begin classes in late September for the fall quarter.

This was her last summer off, which was why she went to River's End. She extended her trip through all of September so

Russell could spend more time with Hunter and Kyomi, and his extended Rydell relatives.

## CHAPTER 6



*I*T WAS A FEW days after the concert that something woke Francine up in middle of the night. Startled, everything stilled inside her. It was a strange scraping... right near her head. Outside the window above the bed. Terror flooded her. The scraping was not her imagination. It was real. She turned her head and stared at the closed shades.

She saw an outline in the shadows. It was faint but definitely there. A person's form.

It moved. The tapping and scraping started against the window again. A tree branch? Not on such a hot, breezeless night.

Someone was right there. Next to her head. While she slept. Until he woke her. She was sure the figure was big. But who could it be? Who?

Was she overreacting? Being hysterically dramatic as she so often was in the past? Hunter's criticism echoed in her head. But... there it was again. Right freaking there.

Panicking, she reached for her phone and dialed 911. Without deciding if it was right or wrong, she just called to hear someone's voice.



An efficacious female voice answered, “911, what’s your emergency?”

“Someone is right outside my bedroom window. I’m frightened,” she whispered, fearing the strange figure could hear her speaking on the phone.

“Are you in danger now?”

“I don’t know.” Her whisper started to rise in volume. Someone was definitely there.

“Okay, hold on and stay with me. I’ll contact an officer in the area. We have someone close by.” The woman’s soothing voice kept Francine calm and alert. Several minutes passed and then she said, “Okay, an officer is pulling into your driveway now.”

Sure enough, the lights blinked red and right in the front of the cabin. Thank God. Whoever was creeping around took off after the blare of bold sirens and glare of flashing lights streaming over the yard. Right? She finally mustered the guts to look out again. But there were no scraping sounds and no large shadow now. How could she prove it? There *was* a shape and now there wasn’t.

“I see the patrol car.”

“Do you want me to stay on the line?”

“No. I’ll go out and meet them.” She hung up after thanking the woman and hurried forward. The knock at her door made her scurry over, barefoot, wearing only the t-shirt and shorts she put on before tucking herself into bed. Flinging the door open, her relief finally in sight, but the words from her mouth vanished as she stopped and stared.

Roman was standing there.

His muscled mass towered over her and she felt completely intimidated. Realizing her call for help summoned him to her, she cried out, “What are you doing here?”

His face blossomed into a small grin of what? Amusement? Annoyance? “I was on duty. You called the police. I’m the police for this area tonight.”

“Did you know it was me who called?” She disliked his grumpy tone and the sullen look on his face. He still wore his uniform. Her gaze fell to the gigantic, black gun he had strapped to him. She fought the urge to shut the door to avoid his sneering, suspicious stare.

But there was something going on right outside her window. She called him there for a valid reason. He was *supposed* to serve and protect her. But right now, he was nothing but disconcerting, intimidating and huge.

He acted like she was full of shit. Why would she fake something like that? She knew that it was somehow punishable, even if she wasn’t clear what that punishment was. But the obvious implication from his tone and cool gaze that scoured her made her feel weak and vulnerable.

“So the report says, you heard someone trying to get in?”

“Well...” Now, with this looming apparition glaring at her, the words she tried to say were stuck in her throat. What if it were just a tree branch? Was she being ridiculous? There were a dozen men or more around her that she could have called, but she chose to dial 911? She must have been panicking and failed to consider her options.

Why didn’t she call Hunter?

That would have been the more prudent solution to squelch her fear and insecurity.

Then she could have avoided seeing this rude man at her door.

No... It didn't change the fact that she definitely knew someone was out there. Right outside her window. Making a scraping noise. Standing in the dark. It was *not* normal behavior. Whoever it was deliberately tried to appear aggressive and intimidating. Normal people don't do that.

“Well, then what? Precious resources here. You called it in. Let's hear it.”

At his clipped words, her tongue felt like it grew much thicker in her mouth. “I—I awoke to a noise. When I rolled over, I saw the outline of a large figure from my bedroom window. There was a scraping noise by the window that sounded like fingernails scratching and tapping. Both. When I called 911, I swear the figure must've heard me, because it stiffened and then it was gone. But... I know it was there.”

His expression was grim but at least he didn't sneer at her description. “Okay, why don't you show me where your bedroom is?”

She didn't like hearing that, but she had to show him why she called. He didn't fully dismiss her claims. Or say it was nothing. Not yet.

Leading him into her bedroom, she became acutely aware of him striding behind her. He stayed a few paces back. There was a difference in running into Roman randomly at the Rydell River Ranch and having him show up on duty. He kept his distance and didn't mock her. So that was an improvement.

Her rumpled bed showed where she flung the covers back. She pointed at it. “I was asleep there and as you can see, that

window is right here. I wasn't mistaken. Someone was just outside it."

He nodded, looking grimmer than ever, but giving away nothing. "That is close."

"I could see the man's outline through the shades."

"They were drawn then, I assume?"

"Yes, but there was illumination from all the lights out there. I clearly saw a figure, with a head and shoulders, that was big and square like a man."

Roman didn't comment. Swinging around, he said, "I'm going to check outside. You can come with me or stay here."

She shivered and stayed inside. Sliding onto one of the wood stools under the small breakfast bar, she waited. Her nerves were as tightly strung as a tennis racket. Thank God, Russell wasn't there. The thought of someone outside his little bedroom left her cold. Maybe Russell should spend the rest of their visit with Hunter and Kyomi.

Finally, hulking, big Roman knocked on the door and she replied, "Come in."

He entered. "I saw footprints directly below the window. Odd spot for anyone to be standing, not even the groundskeeper. That big, old bush right there could easily hide someone behind it. It looks like they crawled under it to pop up literally from beneath your window."

Her mouth dropped open in shock that he actually found something, and her stomach knotted. "Then you believe me?"

"I believe what I found, yes."

"What do you think they wanted?"

He shrugged. “We’ve had a few incidents over the years at the resort. Usually just teens doing pranks and harmless antics. There was only one real crime, that happened years ago now, at the main part of the ranch, not at the resort.”

“What happened?”

He hesitated, crossing his arms and leaning a massive shoulder against the doorjamb beside him. “Hunter never told you?”

She shut her eyes and a sinking sense of disappointment washed over her. But there he stood. Judging her response. Blinking open her eyes, she shook her head. “He may have but I don’t remember. I was too self-involved to take any notice of it. Why? What happened?”

“Again, it was a long time ago. It has nothing to do with this.”

“Well?”

Roman paused and seemed reluctant to continue. Something weird rippled through her.

“What?”

“Hunter’s cousin, Iris Rydell, was brutally raped in the mechanic shop when she was working all by herself late at night.”

No. Oh, no. She’d definitely remember if Hunter told her *that*. While dating Hunter, she was known for being vapid, shallow, snobby and rude, but she would have no doubt, remembered and cared about something like that. She knew Iris. Iris married a billionaire and was pregnant, but she still looked like a freaking car mechanic. Because she was.

“Did they... did the cops ever find out who did it?”

“No. They figured he was someone her dad knew in his travels from years ago. Some old dried-up biker who looked up Shane Rydell and found Iris. It was a crime of opportunity rather than anything planned. Not like this. Peeping Tom incidents have never been reported here. It’s most likely a teenaged boy on vacation with his family. You’re an attractive woman. Perhaps he saw you by the pool and decided to check you out closer.”

She shuddered. “Are you saying it’s my fault for being here?”

Sexist. Chauvinist. What? She was to blame because she tempted him with her very existence?

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean that at all. He’s a sick, freak that went to some effort to sneak under a window and try to check you out. Or maybe he wanted to get your attention? Going on a hunch here, you know, I don’t know the answer. But I’m certainly not blaming you.”

Well, thank goodness for that. She wouldn’t have to hate him on sight now, even though she came damn close to doing that.

“I guess he’s gone. Should I just go back to bed?”

His gaze held hers. “I assume he won’t try anything again tonight. Police presence is often enough to deter some amateurs.”

“What happens now?”

“I’ll tell Shondra to be on the lookout. She’s the head of security for the resort. She’s also excellent at her job and in general, but I can specifically ask her to keep an eye on you. I’ll also file a report and let the Rydells know they might have a Peeping Tom on their hands.”

“You don’t think it’s worse than that?”

She really didn’t want to know. This was worse than anything she could have imagined. She was so creeped out, she had goosebumps and couldn’t stop reliving the moment she awoke to someone *right outside her window*.

Roman’s arrival filled her with dread because she thought he’d blow her off. She feared he would think she overreacted because nothing actually happened. But he didn’t. Instead, he found evidence. Physical proof that a presence was right where she said it would be.

She hated knowing he had proof.

But she appreciated that he didn’t blow her off.

And he wasn’t as rude as he’d been in previous encounters, which helped soothe her freaked-out ego.

“No, I don’t believe it’s anything serious. I expect it’s just some dumb kid who’ll most likely go home with the creepy family that created him. That’s the bad part about opening your home up to strangers like the Rydells did.” He lifted his big shoulder off the doorframe. “I suggest staying at Hunter’s tonight. I’m assuming you won’t get any more sleep now if you stay here.”

“Yes. I was thinking of going to Kyomi’s.” She emphasized her best friend’s name. “She’s my best friend now.”

“And Hunter is your ex. Pretty complicated shit that.” She started to open her mouth to say something snippy in return, but he held up a hand. “Go put on some clothes and I’ll walk you over there. Unless you’d prefer to go alone?”

She slid her bare feet to the floor and Roman’s eyes followed her, but he remained impassive. “I’ll go put some

clothes on.”

Quickly exiting the room, she grabbed some pants and a hoodie before ducking into the windowless bathroom where she could avoid his staring eyes on her. She emerged in black yoga pants and a purple hoodie, more than glad to cover her lady-parts. Somehow, she blamed herself for the peeper, even though she knew it wasn't her fault. Even if she ran naked all around the resort, no one deserves to have a creepy pervert watching her. Or scaring her for no reason but to get her attention. Grabbing her purse, Francine nodded at Roman and said, “Ready.”

“Russell's not here?”

“No. Blessedly, he's with his dad and Kyomi.”

“Yeah.” Roman stepped through the door and held it for her until she passed him. She hated how her shoulder contacted his perfect, uniformed chest.

He had way too much clout with her.

It was midnight, which wasn't considered late at the resort. A group of thirty-somethings were gathered around a fire. Their little kids were asleep, and they were relaxing, imbibing in alcohol and sharing some adult time. It sounded so nice. Imagine if she could find a nice person, get married and enjoy a network of actual friends...

“Keys?” Roman reminded her. She snapped out of her trance of wishing for a normal life and friends.

Grabbing the set of keys the resort receptionist gave her, she found the key to the front door and quickly locked up. Roman's cruiser sat in the driveway with the lights off.

“Ready?” he asked, and she followed him. They stepped onto the graveled pathway that had plenty of lighting all along



it. There wasn't anything creepy out there now that she was outside. She liked hearing the laughter of the vacationers as they sat around their fire. "It's darkest by my cabin than anywhere else," she noted.

"Yeah... It does appear that way. I'll talk to Joey Rydell and see if they can't add some more lights."

The quiet descended between them. Although she was freaked out by the strange events of the night, Roman was impossible to ignore. Her entire body zapped with excess energy caused by his presence beside her. Damn. What was wrong with her that attracted her exclusively to assholes? First Stanley and now Roman?

Maybe Roman was a better person than Stanley. Good lord, she could only hope so.

They reached the front of Ian and Kailynn's home. It was the same neighborhood where several of Hunter's uncles lived. Hunter and Kyomi stayed there more often than before, now that they had Russell, mainly to allow the grandparents as much time with little Russell as possible. He was adored by every generation of the Rydell family, unlike Francine's people. It made her feel sick to realize how little she got from her own family emotionally or financially.

"Are Hunter and Kyomi at his parents' house?" Roman asked.

"Yes. When they're in town, they like to stay there with Russell just so Kailynn and Ian can see him more."

"Right." He didn't comment further but something unspoken hung in the air.

"But Kailynn hates me." Hunter's mother Kailynn disliked Francine all along. She had only herself to blame for that, and

her actions, and decadent past, but she was also very rude and snobby to Kailynn Rydell. Ian preferred to ignore Francine and simply never interacted with her. Kailynn was cordial but that was the extent of her contact.

“You’ll have to disturb them. Unless you want to go back to your cabin?”

“No.” That was the only thing she knew she didn’t want.

He swept his arm towards the house. “Then figure out a way to get inside. Try texting one of them.”

She gave him a glare and texted Kyomi. She waited. Nothing. Then Hunter. Nothing. They were, no doubt, fast asleep.

Calling Kyomi, she answered on the second ring.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. But I’m outside. Could you come down?”

“Yep.”

Moments later, the door flung open, and Kyomi stood there with Hunter close behind. Of course. They feared something drastic must’ve happened. Francine did weird things like that in the beginning but hadn’t for a very long time.

Kyomi’s gaze landed on her, and she scanned for injury, but finding none, her eyes drifted to the big figure behind her. “Roman? Why are you here?”

“I woke up to someone outside scraping my window. I called 911, and they sent Roman. No one is there now and it’s probably just a Peeping Tom or a prank from a teen staying at the resort. But—”

“But you rightfully don’t want to stay there. Come in. I don’t care if some awful teen woke you up or Bozo the Clown. It’s not a Goddamned joke and it can’t be taken lightly. There’s no fun in someone purposely trying to scare you or spy on you. I hope that’s understood.” She glared at Roman.

He threw up his hands with a chuckle. “Yes, ma’am, it is. Which is why I walked Mrs. Rydell over to this safe house.”

Hunter added, “My son could have been in that cabin. What should be done?”

“I’ll let the resort security know, and they’ll get extra people to watch the cabin. I’ll be around more often, of course, and I’ll warn your dad and mine that a Peeping Tom or a petty criminal is looking for any opportunity to break in.”

She shuddered. He seemed to be trying to diminish the threat. But he had no idea what it felt like to be woken up, alone and helpless, and see a dark figure with only a thin pane of glass for separation. She imagined how easy it was to open the window and grab her.

But at least now, she was being taken seriously. She just wished it wasn’t Roman.

Turning to Roman, she said with no inflection, “Thank you, Officer, for responding to my call and seeing that I got here safely.”

He touched two fingers on his forehead in a mock-salute and inclined his head. But when she turned to leave, he lifted his head just a few inches, and she saw the sardonic twist to his mouth. The gleam in his eyes seemed almost predatory. Was he mocking her? Maybe he wasn’t so ordinary and decent.

She quickly ran inside the sanctuary that Kyomi and Hunter symbolized to her.

## CHAPTER 7



*R*ESPONDING TO A CALL from Francine Rydell wasn't Roman's first priority on his late-night to-do list. She opened the door after he knocked, wearing lounge clothes that were designed for comfort and sleeping, but on her? Roman found them stunning. The luscious yards of tanned legs and curves, sliding up to a shapely butt that her shorts allowed him a peek-a-boo glimpse of. Her collarbone seemed so delicate and seductive that he fought the urge to lean forward and kiss the hollow there.

That concept startled him. Roman didn't even *like* Francine Rydell on the few unflattering occasions when he encountered her. He didn't have to like her, he supposed, to fantasize fucking her. Her face was flawless, in his opinion. It was easy to forget about her personality, however deranged that might be. Despite everything that marred Francine Rydell's personality, Roman had one cardinal rule, which he lived by: never look at women sexually while on duty. Never. It was an irrevocable sin. Mixing business with pleasure was a no-go for him. He represented authority with the badge, the uniform, and the gun at his side, so he could not fail in his training. Certain protocols were instilled in him even before he took the job. Pretty women tried to seduce him all the time—many coming on to him—but they invariably failed, getting no

more than the usual “yes” or “no, ma’am,” as well as “please” and “thank you,” but never anything more suggestive than “how can I help you?”

Sometimes he came to arrest them.

But flirting or even looking at them too long with any trace of sexual interest was a line he adamantly refused to cross and wouldn’t even consider.

Damn Francine Rydell. He only came there because she left a distress call and dispatch believed her.

He wondered if it were a ploy to draw him to her.

Ironically, the same night of Daisy and Asher’s wedding, she showed up *after* the nuptials when most of the guests and family were down at the private beach. He noticed her on the fringes of the campfire while telling the group a funny story. Oh, he saw her, all right. She appeared to be lurking and moving awkwardly through the shadows. But he knew how disliked she was by the crowd at the beach.

She was genuinely shaken tonight, and he saw the footprints where she claimed someone was when she awakened. The prints were much bigger than her shoe size, which he guessed was a nine or ten. He guessed she was six feet tall in her stockings. And extremely exquisite, physically speaking.

As for her personality, morals, taste in men, and humiliating abuse to someone he cared about, that was a whole different ball game.

He was surprised how quickly Kyomi attacked him for sounding skeptical about Francine’s story. Kyomi was obviously friends with Francine now, which seemed impossible once. But her immediate concern was unmistakable

along with her belief that what Francine claimed was true. He wondered how hard it was for Kyomi, as Hunter's fiancée, to forgive his ex-wife for cheating on him with her stepbrother? Hunter had to make his peace with Francine since she was the baby-mama and all that.

But why did Kyomi get involved?

She should have detested Francine and the burden Princess Franny inflicted on them. Imagine the life they could have shared if she didn't exist. Worse still, Franny still had the Rydell last name, not Kyomi.

Then he wondered if Francine was secretly using it as a ploy to get into their house. Roman felt guilty for escorting her there. Who could deny her entry after he showed up with her? *If* that was her plan, wow. It was an epic success.

Of course, he had no proof, so he had to treat her claim as legitimate and real. But the chance that this could be a scheme to wedge her way between them, or reconcile with Hunter, obviously never occurred to Kyomi. Francine must have wormed her way into Kyomi's good graces and managed to make Kyomi her true friend.

Roman suspected she must have had a fabulous ability to con people. Using her charm, her beauty, and flawless face, all she had to do was blink her expressive big eyes and pout with that solemn, little mouth.

How she could fuck her own stepbrother evoked an ugly image in his mind.

Well, no matter. He still had a report to write, and a follow-up visit to make. He did his job regardless of personal bias and without discrimination. He gave her a speeding ticket because

she fully deserved it and he'd have given it to anybody else that he caught.



“HOW’S IT GOING, Roman? I haven’t seen you in far too long.” Jordan grinned when Roman walked up to him. Jordan was working inside one of the Rydell River Ranch machine shops, fiddling with the engine of a tractor. Setting his wrench down, he came over and gave Roman a warm hug. “How’s Bruce doing?”

Bruce was a kid Roman mentored through a police-sponsored, Big Brother program for the area called Officer Friendly. He immediately identified with the boy, who reminded him so much of himself and Rodrigo, that they instantly had a rapport. Bruce couldn’t trust adults, especially one in uniform. So Roman ditched the uniform and showed up in regular clothes to shoot hoops for weeks on end with the kid. That was it. They played basketball. They only talked when Bruce felt like it or wanted to. Mostly, they limited their discussions to each other’s sportsmanship and abilities. Eventually, the kid grew more comfortable with him and Roman responded and reciprocated, which created more trust.

One day, Bruce mentioned his dad used to shoot baskets with him. It was the first personal fact Roman knew about him. Roman described Rodrigo and him when they were growing up in foster care. From that day forward, their bond began to grow.

Jordan and Pedro saved him and Rodrigo from a vicious cycle and they naturally celebrated his connection with Bruce. They kept pushing him to see about fostering the boy and following their lead.



It seemed a long shot. Roman was a swinging single. And that's how he lived. He slept around *regularly*. His favorite hobbies included going to the bar on his nights off, hanging out with noisy crowds, dancing, throwing darts, rolling dice and drinking. He was always responsible and only engaged in the festivities when he was off duty, but he couldn't imagine inviting a freaking fourteen-year-old kid to be part of it. Rodrigo was a better fit as a foster father than he was. Rodrigo liked to stay home. When he drank, he preferred intimate gatherings, rather than crowds like Roman. Rodrigo was an introvert by anyone's observation.

Roman and Rodrigo shared a two-bedroom apartment across the river in River's End. It wasn't a place for foster kids to thrive.

"Made a minor breakthrough. He talked to me about his dad."

"What's the story there?"

"I only got a few snippets. The usual. Alcohol, drug addiction, and petty crimes landed him in and out of jail until he murdered someone, and now he's in for life. The kid doesn't have a soul in the world to love him. He's been a victim of the foster care prison for a few years now."

"Don't give up. You and Rodrigo were no more than tight-lipped, little assholes when we met you, but our patience was exponentially rewarded."

He laughed. "We were not assholes. We were uneducated, unnurtured, unloved, uncared for, unmonitored teenagers at risk."

Jordan's eyes sparkled with admiration. "I know. That's exactly why we took you both in and never lost hope. Each

day, we could see the trust building until you told me about your dad one day...”

“What little I remembered. Very little.”

“The fact that you shared it with us was huge.”

“I can see that. So I’m not giving up yet with Bruce. But I’m actually here on an official visit. Remember Hunter’s ex? That model named Francine? She called 911 last night to report a possible Peeping Tom woke her up. Right outside her bedroom window. Says she heard tapping and scratching, which woke her. She also saw a figure there. I can’t prove it but there were footprints. I just thought you should know so you can put the word out. I contacted security and Shondra is already on it.”

“She’s the best. Yeah... That’s pretty spooky. Especially if it’s true. Any chance it’s not? I mean, it *is* Francine.”

“Stepbrother-fucker. Yeah, I know, and I had my doubts. She seemed legit though, visibly shaken and the footprints were behind the bush in front. A guy would have to crawl around it and then under to pop up between it and the cabin window. The footprints were too large to belong to her. She asked me to take her to Hunter and Kyomi, and they both believed her.”

“Those two are Goddamned saints when it comes to that woman.”

“True that.” He grinned. Being adopted late in life, Roman was grateful he had two people that he could call his parents, and especially appreciated having a father-figure. Or two. The male role models in his life up until that time amounted to zero, nada, nothing. And now he had two dads? Fuck yeah. That was an epic win. From being homeless, orphaned, and

scared, with his only friend another homeless, orphaned, scared teen, to having two dads that sincerely loved both of them who were nice, caring, funny and took excellent care of them? They hit the fucking jackpot.

“Well, we take things like that very seriously. I’ll beef up security and keep a close eye out. I’ll tell Ian and Kailynn too, but I think we should broadcast the word to the guests and see if anyone has another incident to report. You can’t have too many eyes on alert.”

“Agreed. Makes my life easier.”

They chatted about the local updates before he finally left. After a full shift that started late, Roman was exhausted. All he wanted to do was heat something up from the freezer and fall onto his bed.

Only thing nicer would have been a soft, plump pair of tits to cushion his fall. But after the bridesmaid drama, he thought it better to lay low for a week or two. Maybe a few days. Yeah, a few days should do it.



“YOU’RE IN DEMAND AGAIN, Roman. Same woman, same type of call. Different cabin. Go to number eighteen.” The dispatch order came several nights later. Roman sat in his patrol car, officially on duty but little was happening tonight in the valley. It got like that a lot around here. Roman grew up watching the TV cop shows with complicated drug busts, mysterious murders and the like. Maybe the city experienced that but patrolling the Rydell River Valley was more of a snooze fest.

There were a steady flow of deaths, sure. But most of them were natural causes or accident related. People occasionally

fell out of the rafts on the river and drowned or hit their heads on a rock and died. Tourists racing motorbikes down the road had head-on collisions. Hunting accidents and lost hikers were always reported. Even wildlife disturbances. Most of those involved scared tourists who never saw a bear or cougar randomly wander through a campsite, or anywhere but on television. Rural life carried its own risks. Most of Roman's job entailed traffic accidents, domestic disputes, and assisting tourists.

"Thanks, Mary. I'm on it," Roman responded, heading out to the Rydell River Ranch with his lights on... again.

Well, hell, he expected Princess Franny to stay with Hunter and his kin. Why did she return to a cabin to be all alone if the odd presence were real? But Mary's report was the same address, different cabin. No doubt the bright, blaring lights would have scared off anyone, if they were there still. He doubted they were. Then he wondered if they'd ever been there?

He stomped up onto the porch and tapped the door of cabin 18 while calling out, "Officer Barrett, Mrs. Rydell."

Francine answered and this time, she was dressed in long pants and a t-shirt. Casually, yes, but at least she wasn't wearing sleepwear like last time. Damn. He remembered the image of her long legs. He stared at her discreetly, because he wasn't a creep. Not to mention, he was on duty.

"Same thing?" he asked as soon as her face appeared in the opening door.

"No. Someone came in here this time." Her eyes reminded him of an owl. Lord. No wonder Hunter became so bamboozled by her. The doe-eyed innocence she displayed made his heart swell and he wanted to comfort her, like he

would a hurt puppy. He resisted the urge to puff up his chest, and swoop in, like Tarzan, to sweep her off to safety in his arms.

“Can you explain it in more detail?” He indicated his intention to come in and she opened the door wider. “I thought you were staying with the Rydells.”

“I was. But Kailynn and Ian seemed uncomfortable having me around and there wasn’t enough space. Everyone’s edgy about a creepy peeper and we’re all taking it seriously. Security is also watching me. They told me to switch cabins, as you can see. We all hoped that would be the end of it.” Her slim shoulders jerked in a gimpy shrug. “Until I noticed the shower curtain was closed.”

“You didn’t close it?” He kept his tone serious and pretended to be listening while mentally rolling his eyes in disbelief. She called 911 because she forgot she closed the shower curtain? Did she expect him to open it for her? Lord. Roman was a master in keeping his face neutral when something appalled him. He really hated to waste his time on imaginary phantoms that only came out when no one else was around. She wasn’t the first, God knows.

“Of course, I didn’t close it. I never do. As a habit, I always leave it open.”

“Why?” he ventured cautiously. Did he want to know the reason? But her voice was so passionate.

“Ever hear of *Psycho*? Norman Bates? Come on. You don’t freaking close your shower curtain when you’re not using it. Living Alone 101, Rule 7.”

Yeah, right. He was called out to comfort a freaked-out woman alone in the dark whose vivid images came straight

from Hollywood and the goriest horror films. Roman's expression and tone remained neutral. She wasn't the first to call 911 because she freaked herself out, so he wasn't mad because of that, per se. But he also wasn't a babysitter.

"That's not uncommon," he replied, acknowledging her fear without adding to it.

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "I'm not afraid of a closed shower curtain. When I jerked it back, I called 911 instead of Hunter or the resort security because of what's in it."

*In it?* Now she had his attention.

"Come," she said, and he obeyed.

He followed behind her, dwarfing the little hallway where she led him. All he noticed was the sleekness of her shiny, long, black hair. The confined space made her seem even closer to him. He still didn't like her. She was ridiculous and repugnant in her daily behavior and the condescending way she treated others. Particularly her spouse. But Roman's inner horny-man could not deny how much he wanted her. He scrutinized everything about her. And found everything about her desirable.

So much for stupid, small spaces.

She stopped and set a delicate hand on the bathroom door before opening it halfway.

He shook the images from his head. *Job*. He was there to do his damn *job*. And she called it in. He had to perform his duty. No matter how bizarre or weird, duty came first.

He was prepared for anything from dead fish to snakes when he stared in puzzlement at the bathtub. It was filled to the brim with tulip heads. Someone cut the stems off dozens of

them and placed the many blossoms into the tub that was half filled with water.

Roman was startled by the sheer *prettiness* of the scene and didn't know how to react. It looked like a damn love poem. Yes, it was an odd place to find it, being in the bathroom and all, but the cost of the off-season flowers had to be exorbitant.

The mere logistics instantly stumped him. How could anyone get so many blossoms inside the cabin without being seen by someone? It had to be a few buckets at a time. But it took a hell of a lot of bucketfuls to fill the tub. He glanced back at her.

She shook her head. "I know. It's so weird. So freaking weird. That's why I called it in."

"How long did you have possession of this particular cabin?"

"Today. I opened it this very afternoon."

"Who knew you were here?"

"Ian, Kailynn, and everyone at their house. Anyone who works here too, most likely. It wasn't any secret, but nobody needed to know except the immediate family."

He turned around and took several pictures of the scene.

Feeling her gaze on him, he knew she was watching and waiting.

He said, "Why don't we go back into the other room?" The open main room served as the entry, living area, kitchen and half of the hallway. But it was far better than being crowded in the damn tiny bathroom filled with tulips.

She flopped on the couch and tucked her feet up under her.

He cleared his throat. “Tell me all about your day. All your comings and goings. Were there any time gaps when you left this place unattended?”

She described opening the empty cabin during the afternoon and bringing her luggage over. Correction, Hunter did that for her. The bathroom was empty, and the shower curtain was wide open.

“You’re positive of that? Memories can be inaccurate sometimes.”

“I’m someone who notices every single detail about any room I’m in. I notice any doors being shut or not. Same with the drawers and cabinets. I can spot if a damn vase has been moved or a candle turned around. I know for a fact the shower curtain was pulled back. I also made a note of the bland white tile that didn’t have creepy scum in the tile grout lines. I don’t miss anything like that.”

Picky. Particular. Yeah, she probably did memorize everything around her.

“I played with Russ until I left to eat dinner at the River’s End Café. I ordered a chef salad. You can check with Jacob and Luna. They both saw me there. That was the only time I left the place unattended.”

He nodded. Perhaps that was when the mysterious stranger... did what? Started hauling in bucketfuls of tulips?

“Do tulips mean anything special to you?”

She sighed and her gaze landed past his shoulder. “It’s my favorite flower. People who know me are aware of that. I used to have tulips delivered every week to put them in the entry way, living room and even my bedroom.”



He restrained the urge to whistle. That would have amounted to a hefty bill. Yeah, she would be a girl who insisted on weekly deliveries of fresh flowers. So typical and predictable. He was almost disappointed she wasn't more original.

“Expensive. Elegant. Was that your draw to them?”

Her gaze flipped back to him, but she was glaring. “My family has a large estate in Bellevue. Exactly like what you'd expect. But our gardener always grew prize tulips in all kinds of varieties and colors. The tulip bed was below my window so when I was a little girl, I thought of it as my own secret garden. I liked pretending I was the girl in that.”

“In what?” He tilted his head.

She rolled her eyes. “*The Secret Garden?*” She tilted her head and waited impatiently... for what? He wasn't sure.

“Sorry?” He shrugged.

“It's a book by Frances Hodgson Burnet. It's only a classic. Most little girls read it.”

“Ah. So that was your fantasy? To be like the girl in the book?”

“Yeah. The little girl was lonely, and the garden was her favorite place to find solace and joy. She heals herself and her cousin by her frequent visits to the garden.” Her gaze dropped to her fingers, now twisting in her lap.

“You saw yourself as the little girl?”

She shrugged. “Larry, Stanley's dad, had such a grand house, with incredible grounds. A full-time gardener kept it all very pristine. I wasn't allowed to play in it. The garden was filled with flowers, and all I could do was look at them. No

one could stop me from doing that. So I did. I imagined they talked to me, and I pretended to be a princess trapped in an evil castle, waiting for my prince to rescue me.”

“Instead, you got your stepbrother, the toad, didn’t you?” He instantly regretted adding the snarkiness. Her version of herself as a little girl was nothing like what he pegged on her. He imagined her as a horrid, entitled brat who had everything she could want and insisted on more.

Being lonely and sad? Imagining herself in a formal garden she was forbidden to touch or play in?

Huh. Who knew?

All that information flowed from the mere mention of her favorite flower.

She frowned at him. “Yes. Then Stanley became my playmate and then friend. The only one I had for many years. He listened to me and refused to obey all the rules of where we couldn’t play or what we couldn’t do. He did whatever he felt like. That thrilled me to no end. He was fearless, demanding our parents spend more time with us when he wanted it, and scattered away when he didn’t. He never cared if he was in trouble or getting praised for his good deeds, because none of that mattered to him. I admired his independence. He was all I couldn’t be.”

That wasn’t Roman’s take on her and her stepbrother. Not a story he could ever conjure up. Imagining her and Stanley as kids, why did she think she needed his friendship so much?

From kids and friends, they decided to start fucking. And didn’t stop even after she got married.

Roman had to focus harder on his duty. Back to the weird flowers floating in the tub. “Do you have a boyfriend now?”

Anyone who might know the story you just told me and how you feel about tulips? Could this be some kind of... misguided token of romance? I agree, breaking into a woman's place to leave something romantic is downright lunatic, but is there any chance the intention was actually to make you feel special or cared about? Or maybe a creepy way to seduce you?"

Her eyebrows furrowed and he instantly knew she didn't like his insinuation or question. He threw up his hands. "I'm only asking to know where I need to investigate. It's not to judge you or because I *want* to know."

She shook her head. "No one. There's been no one since my divorce."

"Not even Stanley?" Natural follow-up question, right? Yes. But her glacial expression conveyed she didn't think so.

"He hasn't been in the picture either."

"Not at all?"

She sighed and turned away. "Not like that. No."

"Then how?"

"He's shown up a few times to start things over. Kyomi and Hunter walked in on one of his attempts."

"And you denied him?" He kept his tone easy with no inflection in his voice.

"I told him to leave. We aren't lovers anymore," she snapped.

"Have you ever seen any other signs of him lurking around River's End?"

"No. Never. He's never been here. That I'm sure of. Besides he's far smaller in all ways than the figure I saw."

He nodded. “Okay. No lovers. No Stanley. Any admirers? Anyone trying to put unwanted advances towards you? Even subtle, innocuous things that might not seem important to you but would to the person doing them? Think hard on this one.”

“Why should I think hard on this one?” Her head popped up and she looked puzzled.

“People notice other attractive people.”

“No. Not that I can think of.”

He sighed. She gave him a big, fat nothing to go on. *Fun.* “So getting the flowers into the cabin must have happened when you ate dinner. Pretty gutsy, seeing how it was daylight. No reason for it except to grab your attention, as far as I can see. I’ll talk to the resort guests and see if anyone saw anything. They might not have realized what they were witnessing. Who’d ask a guy why he was entering a cabin with a bucket? Probably thought he worked for maintenance.”

She rubbed her hands together. “Great. So I have nothing to satisfy my suspicions. Except we know some weirdo is trying to... what? Impress me? Scare me? I don’t get their motive for doing this.”

“Me neither. I’ve heard of some weird shit though. So who knows?”

“Yeah. Who knows? Great.” Her defeated tone conveyed her feelings on the matter.

“You want to go back to the Rydells?”

She sighed. “No. I don’t like crowding them. Would you just do a quick search? I’m sure no one’s here, and I’ll lock up after you leave. I’m sure it’s... fine. I’ll dump the flowers tomorrow.”

Braver than he ever imagined. He rose to his feet. The open layout of the guest cabin left him with little to search. He inspected all the closets, rifling through a few of her things hanging there. He also glanced under the beds and in the pantry closet.

“Nothing here, Mrs. Rydell.”

“Okay. Thank you.” She still sat on the couch, her hands fidgeting. “You’ll follow through and talk to the guests nearby?”

“Right after I leave. I’ll file another report and check in with security again. Why don’t you see about moving to another cabin?”

“Because after one cabin change, apparently it doesn’t work.” Her body shuddered at the thought.

Whoever was behind the odd, little pranks had to be someone who liked her. Roman was sure of it. It was a misguided, rude, stalker-ish approach, but most likely, harmless.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call Hunter?”

“I’m sure. As you said, no one’s in here. There’s only the one door. I’ll lock and bar it. I have my phone charged and I’ll call Hunter if I hear anything suspicious or unusual.”

He sighed. “Or call me. I’m right across the way, and I have a big gun.” He smiled to ease his statement and let her know he meant it with some levity.

Her gaze traveled to his hip, and she swallowed. “Never wanted someone with a big gun before.”

Lord. If he wasn’t on duty, he’d be all over her innuendo. But her sad eyes and weary demeanor indicated she didn’t

mean it the way his juvenile ears wanted to hear it.

“I’ll let you know if anything pops.” She rose as gracefully as a gazelle to her feet and followed him to the door.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

He was surprised at her polite tone. “Night then.”

He waited outside her door until the locks stopped moving. “Okay then?” he called through the closed, barricaded door.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Shaking his head, he hoped this was a real call and not some weird ploy to get Hunter back. He refused to facilitate that. Back to his job, Roman questioned the resort guests that were her closest neighbors. Most of them were startled to find him on their doorstep, clad in full regalia, large and intimidating with his holstered gun and badge. His questions all resulted in the same replies so far: no one saw anything. He could tell no one was lying because they weren’t squirming or looking uncomfortable. Nothing peculiar or remarkable to disbelieve anyone.

He spoke to the security team again and reminded them to take extra precautions. Shondra said she’d stake out Francine’s cabin herself. “I’ll call and let her know I’m there.”

“I’m sure it’s just a terrible wanna-be Romeo. But it’s a rotten thing to do to her,” Shondra said out loud, and Roman said he believed that too.

“But we’ll keep on high alert and get the word out to all the guests. So far, no one has anything to report.”

Did that improve the situation? The crime was officially known as minor harassment. So probably not.



LATER, Francine counted *ten* bucketfuls that were required to remove the tulip heads from her tub. Resort maintenance did it after Hunter ordered them to. He came down there to see why Roman's patrol car was back. Witnessing the tulips, which he knew were her favorite flower, Hunter also interviewed the guests, asking the same questions Roman did.

Was she seeing anyone? Any Stanley sightings? Anyone giving her unwanted or unusual attention, even frequent glances?

No. To all questions.

Except the one about Stanley.

She did hear from him on occasion. But not for a few weeks and never when she visited or stayed in River's End. She told the truth. Plus, spooky games were not Stanley's style. He liked to interact with her and witness her reaction. He wouldn't do that unless he could watch her response.

It wouldn't work for him.

"Do you want to go back home?" Hunter asked.

"No. It's just a pranking teenager, I'm sure," she assured Hunter. She wasn't ready to be alone in Edmonds without Russell.

"Most likely. I mean, what's the point except as a prank?"

None, she supposed.

"That being said, you're not staying here."

"I can't stay with your family."

He grinned. "I know. Luckily, my family has lots of little cabins. What about the cabin closest to the check-in office? The road surrounds it, plenty of lights are on it, and of course, security is right there too. I'll inform Shondra and the other resort staff. Be sure to let Roman know where you're staying now."

"Okay, thanks, Hunter. I will." She sighed at all the moving around but started grabbing her stuff. With Hunter's help, she discreetly moved into the third cabin. Glancing around, she felt a little foolish for hiding from something that would most likely prove to be nothing.

She maintained it was nothing but pranks and everything was fine, consoling herself for two hours. Eventually, she put in her earbuds and played music until she fell asleep.

The next morning, she almost wilted from joy. Nothing happened last night. She slept the whole night through without anything creepy happening. Maybe it was all over. No more pranks.

Her temporary relief lasted an entire week.



## CHAPTER 8



*T*HUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

That sound. What was it? Her brain awakened just as her eyes snapped open. The odd sound was very loud and harsh. Like a tree falling on the ground. It was that pronounced.

Shit. It was still nighttime. Panic flooded her at the realization. It wasn't someone knocking on the door. No. Or even a fist pounding on the door to wake her up. It was much louder. Louder than the music in the earbuds. Frozen in terror, she waited for it again, holding her breath, but hearing nothing. Should she call Hunter? Or Roman? Or anyone? No, she should take a look. See if it was just a branch. Or a cat. Or a dog. Something innocuous to explain it.

Thump.

There it went again.

She yanked out the earbuds and grappled for her phone. Rising from her bed, and sliding to the floor, everything was dark but the night light she left on. She crawled below the window, and stealthily entered the living room on all fours, her eyes glued to the only door.

There was someone out there. A man. She could see the distinct outline of wide shoulders, a bulky body and sizable

height.

One thing she could confirm: it wasn't Stanley. This wasn't his MO, but the tulips in the tub made her pause. However, Stanley had a slim profile and physique. Of that, she was sure.

So who could he be? What did he come for? Why was he there?

She restrained the urge to scream and frantically crawled backwards. Fearful tears already started to fall, and she broke into a cold sweat all over her body. Holding a hand to her mouth, she covered it to avoid screaming.

The man's figure was right there at her door. This time, it was no elusive shadow. This time, the noise didn't sound like a tree branch scratching, but an entire platoon of soldiers trying to smash her door in.

Clear as day, he stood there peering in. He was actually looking inside her cabin? He had to be looking for her, right? This wasn't a case of her insane ego kicking up. This was—a total stranger sneaking around in the dark.

Gasping for air while sobbing tears, she crawled into the closet and closed the door so the phone light wouldn't be visible.

At least, not to the man prowling outside.

Her heart hammered inside her chest until it was painful. She held her breath without trying to. The cold, stinking sweat of raw fear emerged from her pores. Clumsily, she pried her fingers open to tap out a message. Shaking with terror, she pressed *send* several times before she succeeded.

*Help me. Someone is trying to break down my door. No question about it this time.*

She went straight to Roman for help as he had the big, scary gun on his hip, which he jokingly showed her. This time, there was no joke. If she called Hunter, she could be pitting him against someone with harmful intent. And possibly a gun of his own.

No decent, normal, rational person would stand outside a stranger's door and peer inside the window in the middle of the night. While making a loud racket. Why would they do that? No ordinary, good, decent person, with good intentions, would think of doing anything like that.

She couldn't fathom the reason why and stayed in the closet, shaking nervously on edge. Tears streamed down her face. What if Roman was asleep and didn't hear her text? Should she call him? But then she'd have to speak to him and risk drawing the perp's attention. He'd know that she was indeed awake and out of her bed. She wanted to see if he were still there. Maybe he left. Maybe—

Another thump. It sounded like something hard crashed into the door. Were they trying to break through it. Dear God, why? If someone wanted in, why not simply smash the door lock? Or bust off the knob? That would have been far quieter and more efficient.

A text came through. Her heart swelled in hope and anxious need. Roman.

He said, *Stay put. On my way.*

She texted back. *Hurry. It sounds like he's ripping the door off the frame.*

She was sure of it when the thump sounded again.

She covered her head in case something fell on her. Then she covered her mouth with the back of her hand to stifle her

screams. Whoever it was intended to awaken and frighten her. There was no other reason but for his cruel amusement. She had nowhere to hide in the stupid cabins and no real weapon.

Why would he make so much noise?

Then she heard nothing. It all stopped. Dead silence.

The disorienting stillness seemed to last for hours.

Another text: *I'm here. Coming through door.*

The door swung open. She saw it rebound off the door stopper. Then she heard his voice. It was loud and booming. He was calling her name. *Roman*. “Francine? It’s me, Roman.”

Exhaustion completely drained her, and she had almost nothing left inside her but relief and gratitude. Roman came. She was safe now. The crazy, loud stalker was no longer a threat. Tears streamed down her face again. She nearly collapsed from exhaustion and huddled into a ball while hugging herself. Bright lights flooded the room and angled into the closet.

“Francine?”

Her throat felt like she swallowed a frog. Shaking hard, she croaked, “I’m here.”

The closet door slid open, and she blinked at Roman’s giant form silhouetted by the room light. He was staring down on her, his hands on his hips. “Francine? What happened?” His voice softened in a way she never heard before, and he squatted down in front of her.

“Someone tried to break through the door. I saw him standing there. Did you see anything? How did you get in?”

“No one, yet. I came to check on you first. I grabbed a master key to the resort cabins last time this happened from

the security office.”

She glanced around cautiously, looking bewildered. Her hands trembled as she cowered in the closet. Yeah, it wasn't her finest hour. “I'm really getting scared now. I crawled on all fours before hiding like a frightened child in the closet.” She bit her lip and wiped the tears off her cheeks. She hoped he didn't think they were being shed for his attention or the dramatic effect they might have had on him. Moments before, she was running strictly on adrenaline and the tears suddenly emerged at Roman's arrival without her even realizing it.

“You were very resourceful. Using what you had and reaching out to me for help. You did just fine.”

That was nice and it made something inside her glow. His approval was unexpected but surprisingly valuable. His validation made her feel better than she had for a long time. Seeking her own self-worth was always a challenge and one that she often fell behind on. He made her feel more worthy and fulfilled than anyone else. She was more than thrilled to receive this big, rugged, brawny cop's unsolicited praise.

Roman blatantly scorned her for her past actions. Making it glaringly obvious. Feeling like she earned his approval when she was hiding in the closet filled her with unconcealed pride.

So she wanted the big cop to think more highly of her.

That was new ground too.

“Will you take a look around?”

“Okay, I'm on it. But you can come out now.”

She pressed herself deeper into the oddly comforting small space. “I'd rather wait here.”

He sighed. “Okay. I’ll take a look around, if you’ll come out when I give you the all-clear?”

“Okay, I will then.”

He rose up to his generous height, then disappeared. He was only gone for minutes, but they dragged on like weeks. The emptiness and quiet were almost as intimidating as the loud noises.

Finally, he came back in.

“Okay, Princess, all clear; you can come out now.”

She peeked at him before crawling under the clothes hanging there. “I thought you didn’t call me that anymore?”

“Princess Franny?”

“Yes. Most recently you called me Mrs. Rydell.”

“Right. Because I was called out here officially. This time? You personally texted me and here I am, just plain old Roman, your neighbor right now. And a private citizen.” He proffered his hand out to her. “Now will you please come out?” His tone was quieter, almost coaxing.

Sighing, she put her hand in his and almost yanked it back. The touch from his hand was like a sharp zing. It surprised her but it was definitely there. Stupid her. Chemically reacting to a man who didn’t even like her. With a quick tug on her arm, he brought her out of her safe cubby hole.

She saw he wasn’t wearing his uniform and frowned. “Did you bring your gun?”

He smiled. “I have it. Shoulder-holster, concealed carry permit.”

“Oh. I prefer that you call me Mrs. Rydell or Francine.”

“I’ll take note of that.” He started to grin.

She ignored it and asked, “Did you find something outside? More footprints?”

“Nothing. No signs of anything.”

Damn. Not that she wanted to confirm her suspicions were true, but strictly because she wanted to be believed. “He *was* there. Ramming something against the door that was loud enough to vibrate the whole cabin frame and windows.” Her hands shook as she remembered seeing the hulking form and hearing the terrifying noise. “I find it hard to believe that no one else could hear it.”

“Well, I haven’t asked anyone yet, but the river tends to muffle a lot of noises, being so close and all.”

“You believe me, don’t you?”

“Ah... heck, Franny, why don’t you come clean? You love the spotlight and are well acquainted with playing the role of helpless damsel in distress. Really, if you wanted me to come around more often, all you had to do was ask.”

“I’m not lying or faking it. Everything I told you really happened. You believed me. You saw the footprints, and the tulips, so why not the guy that was here tonight?” Frustrated and weary, she pounded her hand into her other one. “Why don’t you believe me now?”

“Well... Princess, because it occurred to me that all of these events could be easy enough to recreate and make them appear real even if they really weren’t.”

“I didn’t go outside and peep at myself. Or lug in buckets of stemless flowers. Someone would have seen me for sure.”

“No one saw anyone unfortunately,” he reminded her. “And ever since the first call I responded to, you won’t stop calling me now.” Roman stepped closer. “Should I be flattered? If you wanted a date, Princess Franny, all you had to do was ask. I might dig a dramatic chick. Fuck... it might even be fun.”

She stomped her foot and rudely turned away from him. “I’m not a dramatic chick. And it’s not my fault that when the perp shows up, you’re the nearest cop on duty. You’re so sexist and wrong to say that. This isn’t a joke. It hasn’t been...”

His laugh sounded soft behind her. A steady chuckle. “Okay, let’s say it isn’t. Nothing’s happened for a while. Maybe you’re just a little jumpy. The pranking kid probably went home. It could be the teenaged Peeping Tom we imagined earlier.”

“I didn’t imagine anything tonight and I don’t run into the closet simply because I’m afraid of the dark. *Someone was here.*”

Sighing, Roman rested his butt against the back of the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Ah, Franny... I’ve done some investigating into you since last we spoke.”

She turned dejectedly and flopped onto the opposite couch. Leaning her elbows on her knees, she rested her head in her hands, letting her hair cascade around her. Long and thick, it concealed most of her face as she blinked away her tears.

She was far beyond the days of manipulating others to get what she wanted. The tears she cried now were heartfelt and genuine. She changed her whole outlook in a very short time. She earned a credit rating and almost paid off all her bills. Kyomi helped her draw up a strict budget and they reviewed it each month to keep her accountable. Yes, Hunter’s child



support payments were her main income, but she legitimately intended to get a real job and support herself and Russell. Soon. And she could not wait.

Why did all this stupid stuff have to happen in the few weeks she was here? Her history dogged her, tainting her reputation and credibility.

“What did you learn about me?” Her tone hollow. She knew the stuff Roman would find if he probed into her history.

“Your family supported you for your entire life. You wasted as much of their money as you did Hunter’s. You cheated on your husband for the whole five years you were married with a disgusting, incestuous relationship that outraged every decent person. He was your stepbrother, with whom you were raised like a sister. Am I correct?”

“Yes, all of which you could have confirmed just by asking Hunter.”

“I did ask Hunter. He’s always more than decent when he talks about you. Kudos for fixing that, although I have no clue how you managed to.”

She licked her lips and another silence descended between them. “So because of that, I can’t be considered credible? I’m not good enough a person to be a victim?”

“Not sure. Just stating the facts.”

“If I were raped, would I become a credible victim?” she finally asked after a long silence.

Peeking through her eyelashes, she saw him jerk upright. Then his head started to bob. “No, no one is saying you’re not a credible victim. My job is to find the truth no matter how often people try to withhold it from me. But point taken. So, do you think someone is stalking you? Is that your theory?”

“Someone trailed me to three different locations to do weird, creepy things. It always happens when my son is not inside the residence with me. I have no idea what’s going on. But something *is* definitely unusual.” Biting her lip, she tried not to yell. None of this was normal. And she hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

“I’m afraid you have a track record of exhibiting questionable behavior while trying to manipulate those around you for your own benefit.”

Exhausted by having his tedious argument slammed in her face again, she tilted her head and asked, “And what benefit, *Officer Roman*, is there in stalking myself?” She sneered over his name with her tone.

He nodded. “Hunter’s attention? Driving a wedge between him and Kyomi? Those already occurred to me.”

Her jaw dropped. “I don’t want Hunter back. My best friend is Kyomi. Ask both of them.”

“I have. They told me that too. But given your level of manipulation in the past, it occurred to me it’s possibly something that could be orchestrated by you.”

She dropped her face into her hands. “Is that Officer Roman speaking or Cousin Roman?” She nearly collapsed with her frustration.

“Cousin Roman stated it, but Officer Roman wondered about it.”

“I don’t do that anymore. I’m working hard to learn acceptable methods to win my way.”

He stood up, brushing his fingers through his hair. “So all this is really happening? You have no idea whom it could be or why they would do it?”

“Yes,” she whispered, too weary to argue with his conclusion. “I truly don’t know who it could be, and I don’t know why.”

“You’re sure it’s not your stepbrother?”

She cringed at the thought. “I’m certain. He would come see me, not stalk me.”

A long, ridiculous silence ensued. He didn’t move and she knew he was staring hard at her. She couldn’t muster the energy to try to win him over. He already decided she was responsible in some way, and she was a fool to think he’d deal fairly with the likes of her.

She almost applauded him for the wonderful performance he gave so far. As the neutral professional commonly known as Officer Roman, she swallowed his performance, hook, line and sinker. That was the only reason she called him tonight, officially or not. She reached out because she was fully convinced he believed her. She actually thought he could help her.

Now, to hear he was probing into her past as if she were the guilty party was a kick in the gut.

His voice interrupted her thoughts. “Look, you just made a good point and I feel like a jerk now. Why don’t you stay with me tonight? We can do some more interviews and investigating tomorrow. But it’s late now and I doubt you can sleep here tonight.”

“Stay with you? Are you insane? Why would I stay with someone who hates me.” She could not express the amount of shock she felt in her tone. Didn’t he know she was not very experienced with men except for Stanley and Hunter? They defined the full range of her sexual partners. Stanley was her

first and Hunter was more of a friend than anything romantic. Men didn't invite her out to their pads and even if they did, she wouldn't go.

“I believe you, Franny. I know this shit is going on. What happened tonight and everything else you already told me. So don't fuck with me over this. Tonight is different because the perp has escalated. He really wants you to know he was there. He's trying very hard to scare you. He wants you to beg for his mercy. You responded exactly as he hoped you would. So it doesn't seem so harmless anymore.”

She stared at him. “You really do believe me?”

He nodded, his facial expression neutral. “Are Hunter's parents a better option than me to stay with tonight?”

“I don't relish watching their dismay for hours on end.” She slipped her hair behind her ear. “I'll grab my things.”

Jumping to her feet, she almost ran down the hallway. She was stressed and slightly worried he'd reconsider his offer and withdraw it. Stopping at the bedroom door, she glanced back and said with true gratitude, “Thank you, Roman.” Then she disappeared in her small room to pack an overnight bag. She sighed, glancing around. This was turning out to be nothing like the vacation she planned.

## CHAPTER 9



*W*HAT THE HELL WAS Roman thinking? Inviting the subject of an investigation to his private domain to spend the night?

Was it just because Francine claimed to be a damn victim?

No. Tonight she was simply Hunter's ex, his cousin's baby-mama who got scared. For God's sake, the cool, sophisticated, occasionally hysterical woman hid inside her own closet.

She was too afraid to come out even after he got there.

Yeah, he was starting to believe her complaints.

He still suspected a bashful teen who must have seen her from afar and decided she was too beautiful to bother with him. Pranking her was his juvenile way of coping and dealing with his anger that he couldn't have her, probably because she was clearly out of his caliber.

Roman got rattled when Francine so eerily zeroed in on what he kept hinting about, that maybe she wasn't a victim after all. When she asked what "qualified" her to be a victim, he felt guilty for daring to challenge her. He was accustomed to taking statements from victims and would never dismiss a claim of rape. Or fail to show his respect by treating the victim

with extra care and kid gloves. The idea he was deliberately ignoring her harassment because of her past was well-deserved and appropriate.

Was that what inspired him to ask her to stay at his fucking house? His guilt? He remembered the pathetic image of her dropping her shoulders and head in defeat. Seeing her cowering in a small closet was rather emotional; but was that why he said, *Come to my house tonight and stay with me*. He never meant to do that. His original thought was to take her to one of the Rydell homes or to Hunter and Kyomi. She was their problem, not his. But for whatever reason, Roman invited her to spend the night at his house.

She emerged from the bedroom with an overnight bag and his stomach churned. His cousin's ex was not the ideal woman to bring home. A modern Helen of Troy in her beauty. And she nearly ate Hunter alive. Things were better now, but not enough time had passed for Roman to forgive and forget what she was capable of. The idea that she could betray anyone, let alone, someone she vowed to cherish and love, made his brain hurt. Roman could never understand how any person could do that.

Francine did it though. Hunter was the victim then. Maybe she was a victim now.

Nodding his resolve now that he committed himself, Roman opened the front door and swept his hand in a gentlemanly manner to her.

They walked to his SUV and Francine set her bag inside before belting herself in the passenger seat.

Thankfully, it was a short drive because no one spoke during the few minutes down River Road, across the bridge and onto the highway to River's End. He turned off the

boulevard to his street. Roman's apartment was above a garage that was formerly occupied by Hunter's cousins who were older than him, Iris and Rose. Iris was the one who got raped years ago.

Those thoughts occupied Roman's brain as they drove.

He glanced at Francine and thought *bad things really do happen*. Anyone could become a victim. He saw it firsthand all the time. He never blamed the victims he interviewed. Anyone could be caught off guard and targeted. There were no benchmarks for persecution. His regret suddenly overcame him for doing that to her.

After he shut his car off, he turned to Francine and said, "Rodrigo and I have the two bedrooms. I can sleep on the couch tonight and you can take my bed."

They entered his apartment, which was small and cozy. The rent was minimal because his dad's owned it. They rented it to them for almost nothing.

Rodrigo's door was shut. "That's my brother's bedroom, he's not here tonight. My bedroom is over there."

She glanced around and nodded, transferring her weight from one foot to the other. Nervous much? He wondered if he were the cause of her anxiety. Then he remembered how frightened she was to think a stalker followed her home.

He didn't mean to appear so incredulous at her most recent complaint, but a dude pounding on the door? Why? All he had to do was pop the cheesy lock off or smash the doorknob. After examining it thoroughly, Roman planned to recommend a safety upgrade to his Uncle Ian. The hardware was ancient and represented a security risk for the guests.

How could Francine's door remain unscathed and unmarked if someone beat on it? What did they use? She insisted it was too loud to be a fist or a knuckle or a palm and guessed it was something like a tree stump or the like.

Very odd.

It was already past two-thirty in the morning. Francine's text woke Roman up from a deep sleep. He was annoyed at first when he grabbed his gun and headed over. Why did she call him directly and not the PD or Hunter? Some things could only make him question how much she could have been responsible for what was happening to her.

He even wondered if the pretty, little Franny were attracted to him and this was her MO, albeit annoying and dishonest, to draw his attention.

But why did he find her hiding in the closet? His internal debate about her veracity continued to stump him. She looked extra convincing and kinda cute when he found her, to be honest, huddled behind her clothes in the corner with her phone clasped between her hands as if she were praying. Was it a calculated move to make her appear more shaken and desperate?

The sinister images of her past couldn't compete with seeing her crouched so small and scared inside a closet. Hunter not only tolerated her now but had become genuinely concerned about her safety.

The harmless assumption was being tested. A prankster wanted to scare her, there was no doubt about that. Roman thought about Kyomi becoming friends with Francine. How was that possible?



The stepbrother-fucker. It was hard for Roman not to think of that name every time he saw her. Cheating on a spouse for five years was an epic offense to him. It was so low and horrible that anyone who did it must be deficient of all morals or decency. He considered it a real disorder that indicated Francine had no conscience and psychopathic tendencies.

With all that in mind, Roman could not justify why he brought her home tonight. Was it her gorgeous face? Is that why he temporarily forgot everything he knew about her? He used to tease Hunter for what happened to him in the big city when Hunter left to seek a better life than he had in the valley.

Glancing at Francine Rydell, he guessed how Hunter could let that happen.

Then he reminded himself why it would not happen to him. He had a strong personality, and unnegotiable convictions that forbade him from sleeping with a cousin's ex or any woman who would cheat for five years. She seemed to lack any standards. Roman's sex life was *active*, as he liked to call it, but he still had a code of ethics and principles.

Single women were his only partners. Not too young or even close to jailbait. He insisted on women who were adults. Honesty was a virtue he held in high esteem, and it had to be respected at all times. His partners knew that sexual intimacy with Roman was a dead end. Period. There was no rainbow wedding or long engagement. When the act ended, so did Roman's interest.

No promises. No lies. Just great sex, lots of fun, and a friendly goodbye. For the most part, he had no problems and could easily manage that.

"Bathroom is in there," Roman pointed as he spoke. It was getting very late, and he was eager to end his impromptu

slumber party. So stupid to bring a woman like her home.

She turned and followed his finger, carrying her case of small toiletries with her. Not another word was spoken. Roman pulled out a sleeping bag and a pillow from his bedroom closet. Sighing, he regretted giving up his bed. Maybe it would better benefit Princess Franny to sleep on the couch tonight.

He was just leaving his bedroom when the bathroom door flew open, and she stepped out. They nearly collided and both stepped back. He found himself staring down at her in the shorts and t-shirt she wore. At least, she wasn't wearing lingerie. This was better. He swallowed hard and ignored his nasty side.

No. Nah. He wasn't into her.

She smelled good, all flowery. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

“Oh, um...” Feeling awkward again?

He held up the sleeping bag and pillow. “Just grabbing my stuff. Take the bed. It's a mess in there because I wasn't expecting—anyone.” He shrugged and grinned.

“Beggars can't be choosers.” She looked around him. “Do you usually clean up before women come over?”

“Not generally, because they don't come here often. But I would if I planned it.”

“Where do you guys go then?” Her expression was curious as her head tilted and she glanced up at him. Why the hell were they discussing the places he might hook up?

“Other places,” he replied. A blush covered her face. Was she getting bashful for talking about sex? He liked the unexpected blush on her face and the way she kept fidgeting.

She was kinda cute again, so he leaned on the doorjamb. “How about you?”

“How about me? What?”

He waved a hand and said, “Well, you asked me where I hook up, so I’m reversing the question and asking you. Seems fair.”

“I don’t.” She shrugged and a perplexed look appeared on her face before she looked away. “Most of the time I have Russell with me.”

Now, Roman’s expression showed surprise. He almost forgot she was a mom. Tilting his head, he shook the cobwebs out. She didn’t appear very motherly to his eye. Not as Hunter’s ex, or all scrubbed free of her cosmetics with her hair pulled back like a college girl in her dorm. Clicking his tongue in his mouth, he nodded, “Right. Russell.”

“The only time I don’t have him is when he visits Hunter and Kyomi. I prefer to have him with me all the time, but we share joint custody.”

He squinted at her. Was she justifying her ability to take care of him? She seemed unreasonably defensive. “Sure. Why not just go back home then? Wouldn’t that stop all this stalking shit?”

She shoved past him and strode into his kitchen. He followed her, throwing his pillow and sleeping bag on the couch. His words seemed to trigger her, and he wondered why.

“Because there’s nothing at home without Russell.” She stopped at the counter, gripping it and leaning on it. Her shoulders hunched up, and she dropped her head down. Roman was puzzled by her dramatic response.

“Uh... okay.”

“Hunter and Kyomi are the only alternatives to me. There’s no one else. They generously allow me to still see Russell during the week when they have him. I just...”

Now we’re getting down to the nitty-gritty. True confessions? Seemed so. Even stranger, Roman found himself eager to know more. He walked closer and waited. “Just what?”

“I have no one else.”

No other lover? Why would she share that with him? Then he took it further. Did she really mean she had no one else in her life?

“No friends? No relatives? You grew up there, right? In Seattle?”

She flipped up her head, and her ponytail bounced. “I did. I was a spoiled, rotten, mean human being. I trashed all my childhood friends when I became a teenager. I exploited my looks and excessive wealth to try to create some self-confidence.”

Startled at her vehement tone and the brutally unappealing admission about herself, Roman tilted his head. “Why?” he asked when she was quiet.

She side-eyed him and looked away. “I honestly don’t know. I was very unhappy as a kid. Always seeking attention anywhere I could find it. I thought I was better than everyone else and being a mean girl was expected from me. A better way to explain it is, I felt better knowing that someone else felt worse than me.”

“Do you still think like that? Is that why you cheated on Hunter?” He kept his tone mild, seriously curious why she did that.

“No.” She shoved off the counter and crossed her hands over her stomach. Then she hunched over and replied, “No, that’s not true. I don’t really know. I hope that wasn’t the reason. My, you know, stepbrother...” Sucking in a breath of air, she watched Roman flinch when she referred to Stanley. “Please, don’t respond to that. Not tonight. You asked me something and I’m answering the question. Not my choice to bring him up.”

Roman held up his hands as if he were under arrest. “Hey, it’s fine. It’s your confession, not mine.”

She tilted her head and nodded. “I know you distrust me and think I’m faking all of this. I understand why. I wanted to explain... me.”

“Okay. Explain away. Your stepbrother did what?”

“He gave me attention. He made me feel like I was the most important person in the world. He can be charming. He’s actually very good at that. But in the next moment, he can be as cold as an iceberg. In a nanosecond. I mean, if I said the wrong thing or laughed too loud at a joke, he would accuse me of not laughing at the joke but mocking him.”

“Sensitive asswipe?”

She smiled. “Yes. Moody. Very hard to please. But I just tried harder to seek his approval.”

“And Hunter?”

“I should have never done what I did to him. After we married, he became the only solid presence in my life. He was always my friend and main source of support, in all ways, like he is now. Stanley insisted I marry him for the perfect cover. I never argued with him... He pressed me into marrying Hunter. So I did. I never disobeyed Stanley.”

Stiffening his spine, Roman held his hand out. “Nope.”

Startled, she looked at him. “What do you mean, nope?”

“No. You can’t blame your stepbrother for *your* actions. You dated Hunter Rydell while you were with another man in all ways. And then you married him. You can’t blame what you did on that manipulative jerk-off stepbrother, because you chose to do what you did. There are consequences to any action. That’s something you need to learn apparently.”

He expected her to stomp out in a fit for calling her out on her lame excuses. But she didn’t. Instead, she stepped back and nodded. “You’re right. I chose to marry Hunter. I think I knew deep inside that he could take care of me. I sure couldn’t, and Stanley couldn’t, and even later on, my parents disowned me.”

“The same parents you shared with Stanley?” He shuddered.

She shuddered too. “I take all the blame for what I did to Hunter. And the nasty nickname people gave me. I deserved that. But when I was younger, I had no one except him to talk to. It started out like us against the world and led to other things. I never intended for us to have sex.”

*Sex.* The word lit both of them up like a neon sign. “I merely asked why you decided to stay in town?”

She shut her eyes and seemed to wilt, leaning against the wall behind her. “I guess because I have no one else in my life. No one who stuck with me. I don’t deserve anyone. Not even my own mother. When I had Russell, I didn’t tell Hunter I was pregnant. I ran off with Stanley because he claimed my pregnancy was a game changer. He promised it would all be different. Being the co-dependent sap I was, I believed him.

He bought the townhouse without a job, using the money I got in the settlement. Then he left me and Russell, and I was all alone. I had no money and no way to provide for myself. Russell needed diapers and clothes and formula, so I begged our parents for some help on their doorstep. Russell was crying in his car seat beside me, and I begged my mother to let me in. Just to give me a hand. I'd have done anything for Russell. You don't understand what having a baby does to a parent..."

Beyond all reason, Roman was thoroughly invested in her story and wanted to know more. What does having a baby do to a new parent? So he asked, "What? What does it do?"

"The nurse laid him on my chest, and he was all squirmy, red, wrinkled, slippery and crying. That moment was something I feared happening all my life. But instead of fear, I got this tidal wave of love that completely overcame me. I can't describe the magnitude of it. It was like... my life suddenly had no importance, and Russell was all that mattered to me from that moment forward. This tiny person instantly became my entire purpose in life."

She nodded. "He was the first reason I had to start changing myself. I wanted to try my best to become a good mother for him. I realized then that the actions of my past still haunted me. The selfish, useless, shallow, abusive, bratty, spoiled, bitchy, nasty girl I was had to expire so the new Francine could live. Russell was the only reason I existed from then on."

He tilted his head and studied her. Okay, imagining her as a mother wasn't sexy and didn't seem real before, but after hearing her talk about it? Her face was glowing, her eyes

shone with what had to be true emotion, or else she was a really amazing actress.

Roman didn't fully rule that out yet.

“And what about Stanley?”

“Gone. He left me and Russell twice in the span of a few weeks. It was obvious from the sheen of red fuzz on Russell's head, that he was Hunter's baby. But Stanley promised me...” She shrugged and stiffened her spine. “You're right, I have no one to blame but me, and shifting accountability is irrelevant. I chose Stanley instead of Hunter and anyone could have predicted exactly what happened. He left me without a second thought and easily forgot all he promised me. Hunter was a hero in the end. Despite all the grief and woe I caused him, and forcing myself into his life for decades to come, Hunter never complained.”

“So Stanley left. You felt useless. Your parents disowned you. All true?”

“All true.”

“And then?”

“I dumped my baby on Kyomi. I literally went to their house, shoved Russell at her and ran off.”

“You ditched your newborn baby?”

“For several hours, I abandoned him.” She whispered the words, and her face was stricken with horror. That one admission seemed to conflict with her conscience. Francine seemed genuine and sincere when Russell was the topic of conversation.

“After two hours, you came back?”



“Yes,” she stated. “You know all there is to know about me now.”

“I knew a version of it once, but it wasn’t your version, right?”

Her head ducked down. “I’m surprised that you’d even be willing to listen to my version.”

“Honestly? I am too. When you got to town, you were a pariah.”

“And now what am I?” She lifted her eyes just enough to glance at him before she looked down. Something glinted in her eyes. Was it hope? Did she care what he thought of her? The tone in her voice seemed like she was holding her breath.

“Your version makes you more... human,” he replied. Shrugging, he added, “Everyone has a story, some are tragedies, but they don’t excuse a person’s subsequent behavior in my opinion. Learn from the shit of your past and don’t spew it around you now. No one’s allowed to be an asshole just because others were assholes to them.”

Her chest rose and fell while breathing heavily.

“I was an asshole because someone treated me like an asshole?”

He cracked up laughing at her serious, shameful tone and blushing face. “We’re all assholes sometimes, hell, Franny. We can’t avoid it; it’s human nature. I was an asshole before you called me out on the victim shaming.” He shrugged. “There’s a difference between acting like an asshole and actually being one, Princess. Don’t you know what that is?”

She hung her head. “No.”

“Why’d you tell me that story?” He tilted his head, seemingly truly curious.

Her innocent eyes looked him over. “Because you’re a cop.”

“And?” He was unclear how that justified a woman’s entire life story.

“You’re someone who always does the right thing. I wanted to... explain who I was and clarify that I don’t intend to be that person anymore.”

He rubbed his neck. “I appreciate that. But being a cop doesn’t mean I can separate my morals from my job. I can be an asshole too. Some might think I’ve handled myself and other things the wrong way at times, but the consequences can be much worse than the mistakes, which makes any transgression forgivable.”

Her gaze lifted to his and she pushed her hands against the wall seeking... What? Strength? Her eyes stayed riveted on him, so big, and sweet, and pleading. “I know what you think of me and why. Yet you’re still willing to help me. I owed you some kind of an explanation.”

He shrugged. “Eh. You don’t owe me anything. You were right when you said nobody has to earn the title of victim. You could be a damned burglar or some other criminal, and you would still not deserve having any violence inflicted upon you. Who and what you might be makes no difference in my job and it certainly doesn’t determine the people that I help. You could have been working the cabins as a full-time prostitute and I would have still made sure you were safe and not scared.”

She laughed out loud. “I’ve been called that a few times but in a much more derogative way.”

He shrugged. “There’s nothing wrong with prostitutes. Business transactions should never be illegal. A woman should be able to do whatever she wants with herself.”

“Except with her stepbrother?” she challenged.

His mouth twitched back and forth. “Wow. Point taken. When you put it that way... yes. Yeah, because the prostitute is honest, earning a living, not cheating on her husband for five years.”

“Honesty trumps all else.”

He nodded. “Damn right it does.”

She closed her eyes for a long, pronounced moment. Weird. What’s she doing that for? Then her eyelids flickered open, and her stare held his. Something weird seemed to energize and vibrate between them. Much more electric than two people sharing stories. Roman felt hot and the feeling tugged on him all the way down to his stomach and lower... fine. Sure. She was hot. His heart started racing.

“What?” he finally asked, hearing the emotion in his voice, and the husky timbre to it. Her gaze clung to his and he couldn’t even blink.

She gulped. “Nothing.”

Now she’s quiet? Confession was over so she had nothing more to say? The weird look they shared continued between them. What the hell? How could he be attracted to someone who could fuck her own stepbrother?

To Francine?

To Princess Fucking Franny?

To Franny?

It was so much harder to dismiss her when he thought of her as anything but stepbrother-fucker. He could easily ignore Francine, the diva who was once married to Hunter. Calling her Princess Franny gave him some distance, and it amused him to think of her as being harmless and useless. Per her own admission.

Until she had a son.

A baby boy.

She now had a job as the mother of Russell.

Roman couldn't remember his mother but he couldn't deny the compassion he felt when she described how Russell filled her with love and gave her new purpose in life. Pretty hard to dismiss that.

He almost cried out, "I know. That's what a mother should be." He never understood why his biological parents abandoned him so carelessly and without any regard to his well-being. His own mother tossed her child away like garbage.

He almost envied the passion he glimpsed in Francine Rydell's journey into motherhood and how much Russell meant to her.

So what was going on now? The energy between them was blazing. He stepped closer, testing the odd tug he felt coming from her. Her eyes stayed glued to his.

"Franny?" His tone was husky when he stepped closer and pushed her into the wall. Then he surrounded her. Her breath hitched but her gaze remained on his.

"I hate that name."

“I like it.” He smiled.

Her expression suddenly clouded. “But you don’t like me.”

He chuckled and slid his hand up her arm. Her entire body jolted as though a live wire pumped 1200 volts through it. Without considering the consequences or the ramifications, Roman leaned down, sliding his tongue into her ear before licking it. She shivered and pressed herself closer to him. He whispered, “Oh, honey, I don’t have to like you to want to fuck you.”

Then his mouth landed on hers and the fireworks exploded.

## CHAPTER 10



*H*IS MOUTH SIZZLED ON hers and his words reverberated in her brain. Warning her. Did she heed his caveat?

He said he didn't like her.

He just wanted to fuck her.

The two were at odds, weren't they? At least, in her brain, they were. When Hunter hated her, he avoided her. When Stanley got mad at her, he punished her by not speaking to her for days at a time. Never mind, touching her affectionately or having sex.

This big, burly man was pressing himself into her, hard. Pushing her against the wall and kissing her. And she was kissing him back.

He didn't even like her.

But now, he knew everything.

The ick factor of her history. She just told him her side of the story. He knew the details before, but she told him her version and he still wanted to kiss her? Seeing that he hadn't fled in disgust made her slightly optimistic.

She'd never been with a man who knew all about her. She was so rarely honest with herself. Stanley only received the

toned-down version of what she believed he wanted her to be. With Hunter? She had to lie all the time to cover up her affair with Stanley.

And Roman? She told him every disgusting detail.

For some reason, she had a strong desire to admit her past to him. To claim it. Did she intend to turn him against her? She believed she could. The urge to bare it all and be honest recklessly overwhelmed her. Just rip off the bandage and be done with it. Ditch the image and stop trying to explain how much she wanted to change. He'd leave eventually. Her wretched past was doomed to haunt her. Her future could not proceed as she wished until it was no longer at the mercy of her past.

Kyomi and Hunter's involvement with her was all based on their mutual love for Russell.

This giant, brute of a man was not connected to Russell in any way.

He was always blunt, and often rude. He didn't bother with the usual niceties. He only brought her there to let her get a good night's sleep in a safe place.

Not so safe anymore.

He still thought the perp was a pranking teenager.

She wasn't safe. Her fear was as real as her love for her child.

Roman held her against the wall and used his mouth to coax her tongue into a tango with his, which seemed to incinerate her entire body.

No one wanted Francine anymore. Maybe no one ever did.

Hunter loved her once, but he was more of a friend now. Shamefully, Francine was never sexually attracted to him. Sex was merely a weapon she used to coerce him. A chore assigned by Stanley that she had to perform.

She only had sex with Stanley to keep him. Addicted to his attention, acceptance, and love, she'd have done anything to keep him coming back. His mercurial personality made it hard to know if he even wanted her. Sometimes, he did. She often felt like it was a game with him, and he just wanted to see if she'd do it.

Roman was still kissing her.

“Franny?” His mouth lifted from hers long enough to whisper, “Say yes.”

*Say yes to what?* Fine. As long as these feelings kept building. “Yes.” She nodded and her stomach almost growled at being asked to do... what? She didn't know what.

Her nerves were instantly replaced by guilt.

Sex was always a chore and a responsibility. It was never something she particularly enjoyed. Not at all. The cheating seemed funny to her since she never cared if she ever had sex again. She exploited it as a means to achieve her many goals. Evil is the worst reason to have sex with anyone. That was how she experienced it. When Stanley insisted she submit to him, she was desperate to keep him. She couldn't bear to lose him. She thought how blessed she was that Stanley even wanted her. Pathetic and desperate to keep him, she never desired him sexually.

With Stanley, it was always that way.

But as Roman so bluntly articulated, she made the choice to do it. She knew she had to start fully embracing that before



she could grow and be the woman she wanted to be.

Getting kissed by Roman felt so right and uncomplicated. She didn't have to think about it. It just happened.

He dwarfed her own generous stature. Most men were eye level with her or close to it. Not Roman. She had to tilt her head back to see his eyes and that was... hot.

Her. Hot. It seemed magical for her to feel that way.

Roman was a handsome man, and in uniform, he took her breath away. She couldn't deny that. His lavish height, wavy, dark hair and commanding presence were clear evidence of his hotness to her. Francine never knew how much that turned her on.

Showing up in her time of distress and being so calm and decent about it, even helpful, Francine probably overreacted in her affectionate feelings for him. She made him a hero because that's what she usually did. First with Stanley, then with Hunter, and when her parents disowned her, she did it with Kyomi.

She was used to being told what to do.

This guy pointed out her faults and held her responsible for them, but in the end, he brought her to his home.

And now she was rammed up against a wall, being supported by his arms and legs while his mouth devoured hers.

There was nothing subtle about this man. He was all in. Whether it be with his words, deeds, actions, or opinions. He didn't apologize or deny anything. He was almost like an aphrodisiac to her. She, who hid her secret lifestyle for a decade. Hiding from her parents, then her friends, and finally Hunter was damaging to her, but it also proved she still had some decency inside her.

She was never comfortable in her own skin. But this man fully embraced every feature that defined himself. He answered questions directly and it didn't matter what she asked. His innate ability to cut through any BS was something she sorely lacked.

Even his kiss was direct and as potent as his conversation. Perhaps that was why she revealed so much to him.

Sliding his hands suddenly into the backside of her shorts, she felt his fingers on her butt cheeks and it felt amazing. She groaned at the warmth of his hands, and the way he knew how to massage her, not to mention his audacity. She felt his hardness against her softness and gasped into his mouth.

He was again, direct and obvious. There. To her surprise, it felt good. Maybe even right. Sex for no reason was a new angle for her. The most unbelievable aspect was that she had no ulterior motive, which never happened before.

He rubbed her body without removing her clothing, which puzzled her. Releasing her briefly, he stepped back. "I've got some rubbers in my pants pocket."

He dug out his wallet and located the condoms. Looking down, he was distracted for the moment. She had to bite her lip to stifle her amusement at the audible relief in his tone. She was glad to discover he was prepared for anything.

He held the condom as he gazed back at her, pulling her close to him and freeing his hands to resume their groping. He grabbed her ass and planted his hungry mouth on hers again.

She felt his fingertips traveling up her bare legs before they dipped under the hemline of her shorts. He ignored her panties and slipped his finger inside them as he groaned, sliding his finger back and forth a few times.

Releasing her, he dropped his jeans to the ground, stepping out of them before he turned back to her. He pushed her pants down and she fumbled out of them while he was sliding the condom on with one hand.

He stepped closer to her, taking her in his arms. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Her tone sounded breathy and strange to her own ears.

Then he simply slipped his erection inside her. He thrust himself deep inside her, hammering her over and over again. Her body took his, shifting against the wall as he thrust. It went on with her own soft cries and his grunts. On and on it went until his body suddenly stiffened and ceased before he thrust himself one last time inside her.

Done?

Oh yes, done, by the sheer pleasure reflected on his face.

Wow. His ferocity was pretty powerful stuff. She knew how much he wanted her, and it was much more demanding than Hunter or Stanley.

It felt nice to be so desirable. Right?

Sure.

Men often complimented her pretty face. Her body was long and lithe, something the trendiest magazines said was sexy.

Roman pulled out after the orgasmic aftershocks ended and his eyelids finally shut. When his head shifted, she knew he was looking down at her.

She avoided his gaze.

What had she done? She chose to do it, but why? Why would she?

She blinked as hot tears pricked her eyes. She always made the wrong decision. *Always*. Bad judgment plagued her and all the work she did over the past two years was a total waste. She repeated the same mistake. She chose the wrong man. Again. Sex with Roman was a huge error. Although the actual sex was... fine.

That was a first, since it usually wasn't.

She turned and squatted down to gather the bottom half of her clothing. She stayed there way too long, hoping Roman would leave. But he didn't; he watched her with his hands on his hips. His naked lower half would have been in her face if she'd lifted her gaze even an inch.

Roman squatted beside her and she felt his hand on her face. "Why are you crying?" The puzzlement seemed genuine in his tone.

She almost flinched. Should she be honest with him? Yeah, that had to continue. Sensitivity was beyond the scope of this brute. After coming inside her, he couldn't even *pretend* to imagine her state of mind?

She blinked. "Nothing."

"Tell me. I asked you why."

She shrugged, clutching her shorts before replying, "I always make the wrong decision when it comes to men."

He snorted. "Obviously. But that was in the past. This was nothing but sex, Franny. Why does that make you cry?"

"Maybe because I wasn't with Stanley," she snapped with a snide glare. Of course, it wasn't true, but she hoped he'd

ignore her after that sucker punch.

Quiet followed her statement. Damn. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? The sex was over, so it was time to give her some space and leave.

“How many men have you had sex with?”

“Two. Duh.”

“Not, duh, I assumed there were many more. Am I the third?”

She wouldn't look at him.

“Really? No one else?”

“No. Rest assured, it's not your fault, I just don't really enjoy sex and I... I forgot that for a moment.”

“You don't like sex?”

“No, not really.”

“How the hell do you not receive any enjoyment? Why do you do it then?”

She twisted her head so he couldn't see her eyes. “It was a desperate attempt to keep a boy interested in me. I'm certainly not the first girl to do so.”

“You only did it to keep Stanley, your stepbrother, interested in you?” The incredulity of his discovery was audible in his tone.

“Yes.”

“And... with H—” He stopped mid-sentence.

Rolling her eyes, she supplied, “Hunter? That was much harder for me. He was probably very good at it, but I had no business being with him. Guilt tarnished the experience most

of the time, because he was my friend, and that was about it for me.”

Roman was quiet.

For several long minutes. Francine wanted to slip on her shorts and go to sleep... She was ready to die of shame. She imagined rolling herself up into a ball to hide her embarrassment. Yep. Those were the only options. Never seeing this man again was the best idea of all.

Then he said, “Ah. Sounds to me like you just need a lover with more *finesse* and skill. I can do that. Do you mind?”

She was glad he didn’t ridicule or lecture her again, so she turned to him. He waved his hand toward her body.

“Do I mind what?”

“I’ll teach you how to enjoy it. Nothing feels better than a good orgasm. Hell, Franny don’t you think you deserve that?”

“Do I?”

He flinched. “Well, since we *are* naked.”

“Guess you got hit with some false advertising, huh?” She almost bit her tongue.

His gaze traveled over her, and he tilted his head curiously, asking, “How so?”

“You knew me as an adulteress of many years, so you might have assumed I knew some good tricks. And I actually do know some. I just don’t like any of them. Or sex in general.”

His gaze studied her from the crown of her head downwards, and he seemed to examine all the exposed areas

of her body parts. In a solemn tone, he said, “Damn, Franny. You’re the hottest piece of ass I ever nailed.”

Startled at his crude words, she jerked back. Roman set a hand on his heart. “Swear to God, you are.”

She snorted. That didn’t help. Men were so physical instead of expanding their brains. Yawn. Another guy who liked her body. But Roman insisted on telling her, so she simply nodded in acknowledgment.

Then he suddenly grabbed her and brought her close to him. He put his face right in hers. “The thing is, Franny, you could add fifty pounds on that body, or lose another twenty... or whatever you wanted to do to yourself, and honestly? I’d still say the same thing. The chemistry is what determines how hot a woman is. I mean, it’s here... between us. Pheromones are just chemicals. We succumbed to them because it exists. I never knew you didn’t really like fucking, that’s all. But I know now, and I want to help you with that.”

Habit made her reply, “I liked it just fine with you.”

He rolled his eyes and snorted. “Did your stepbrother and Hunter believe that when you lied about their performances?”

She smiled, then glanced away. “Yes.”

“You never replied to my first suggestion. Can I?”

“I don’t know what you’re asking.” She smiled at him, his tone reminding her of an eager little boy instead of a huge man.

“I’m asking if I can fuck you using some *finesse*.”

“That could be countless things. I prefer to know exactly what I’m agreeing to.” She shivered. Stanley liked kinky sex,

which Francine never remotely found sexy. She detested that part of their sex lives.

“There’s no fun in that. Okay, just the usual stuff.”

“I’ve done the usual stuff too...”

“Not with my techniques.”

His grim expression was like a warrior going to battle. Who was the enemy? Her lackluster sex life and lame body language? She had to giggle.

He smiled too. “It’s pretty adorable to hear you giggle. You don’t do it often. Now fess up, why are you giggling?”

She surprised herself and almost snapped her hand back as if she got stung when she placed her thumb on his lower lip. “You seemed to be preparing for battle. It struck me funny. You’re the first one to notice that I don’t really enjoy sex. I guess I giggled because I was happy you at least noticed.”

“Franny, I’m gonna do far more than just notice. May I? I need your permission, Princess.”

“Fine. Permission granted...” She bit her lip in anticipation. “For... sex with *finesse*.”

“My choice of methods?”

“If they’re acceptable and not weird.”

“Okay, acceptable and my choice. Deal?” He stuck his hand out. Oddly, she buzzed with excitement right down to her toes. It was strangely sweet of him to offer. And to her surprise, she really trusted him. Maybe it was the cop factor. Or his rescue of her even if he didn’t see it like that. Maybe she liked his sense of humor and the way he proudly insisted he could teach her to enjoy sex. She couldn’t deny him something he seemed to think was his strength and forte.



She felt clumsy. Giving him permission to do what? Play with her body? Doing things that might start out interesting but eventually fizzle into a bland—meh. But Roman wasn't like Stanley or Hunter. This guy was entirely new. She didn't have a history or a future with him, which she found almost liberating. She didn't really know him. Maybe that's why this could be different? Possibly. She wanted to believe it could be.

She stared at him. "Should we—"

"Stand up," he ordered, his eyes gleaming.

She shrugged. Okay, she knew how to be submissive, having done that often. She could be dominant too, if Stanley told her to be. She rose upright, yawning already. She didn't expect much because it always ended the same. Seemed like nothing but extra work: being compliant or bossy and authoritative. Why not just do it and get it over with? To Francine, sex was something she tolerated in order to move on. Rising to her feet, she waited. Roman got up too.

"Take your clothes off."

With a quick glance, she saw him stripping off his clothes. Suddenly, he was standing before her, like a six-foot-something wall. Rigid muscles, ropey thighs and calves, and a six-pack that she admired. His penis was large, but that didn't impress her. She knew most women found such things sexy. His sprang out toward her from a bed of black hair. Great. Big penis, big deal. She planned to pretend that he filled her all up with it before uttering rude noises to convince him of his mightiness.

Roman wasn't shy, and she knew that for sure.

She sighed while stripping her shirt off and dropped her bra before standing in front of him.

His eyes studied her face, then descended to her neck, breasts, and stomach, where he spent lots of time focused on her mid-section. Then his gaze went lower.

“Franny, you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she politely replied as she avoided looking at him. Or herself.

Silence. Then, she asked, “What do you want me to do?”

“You could start by changing your grim expression. You look as if I’m marching you in front of a firing squad.” He put his arm around her and pulled her closer. To her surprise, he flipped her around in his arms, touching her back with his chest, and keeping one arm around her. Then he smacked her ass. “Walk down that hallway.”

She rolled her eyes. This was something new. She obeyed him. When he stopped her dead, she suddenly recoiled. *Lord. No. Ick.*

She saw the mirror.

Right there, hanging on the back of the door, she caught her reflection and saw her naked front. Her reflection blocked Roman’s, who had no such modesty. He stepped to the side, turning her, and they both observed their genitalia in the mirror. His was now quite prominent and he pushed it into her back.

“Look.”

She refused. “I don’t make videos. No desire or need to watch myself.”

“I think you do.”

She didn’t like where this was going. “I don’t like your idea of *finesse*.”

He wrapped his arm around her tighter, dropping the other one onto her stomach. Slowly sliding his palm above her shaved pubic hair, he brought it back up. Then he rubbed her opening once, going up and down very slowly. Shocked to feel his fingers exploring right between her legs, she recoiled... at first.

No foreplay. Her butt responded by wiggling backwards and simply ramming herself into his hard, muscular thighs and he pressed back. Using his hand as a vise, he clamped her from the front and back.

“Watch yourself in the mirror. Look how glorious you are. Maybe if you realized your own beauty, you’d also feel it.” His hand descended, and he gently opened the lips of her vagina before flattening his palm and cupping her with his huge hand. There was nothing discreet or subtle about this man. His bold touch almost horrified her, and she shut her eyes.

“Look...” He encouraged her again, his tone much softer and gentler. She responded by fluttering her eyelids and minding him.

She looked at their reflection and found it oddly sensual. His hand was lost in the gap between her legs. His wrist and forearm seemed bold and stark against her front.

Then, he started moving his hand, wiggling his fingers inside her. Swirling just two fingers first, he moved them around, and up and down, creating wetness. She was responding to him physically. She almost gasped when the strange sensation filled her, welcoming Roman to explore her further.

He gripped harder, rubbing her to increase her wetness. Grunting with approval, he muttered, “That’s my wet girl.”

His mouth was right above her head.

Roman was watching them in the mirror too.

The jerk was actually enjoying this. She was no more than a porn show for him.

Like all men. Sex catered to *their* needs and wants, despite what really turned a woman on. That's why she found no joy or relief in it.

He pushed his fingers much deeper inside her. She reacted to the fierce pressure. She expected hours of futile attempts at foreplay. Nipple-sucking, tongues tangoing, and all the touching were honest attempts, but they'd been used on her before.

Roman wasn't the first one to try to satisfy her.

She never expected this though... being so rough. No soft, timid gestures, but his large hands gripping, groping, swirling and pushing inside her. He shoved his fingers deeper but instead of feeling bored or annoyed—as she usually did—her body jolted at the sensations. They were eagerly welcomed by her body. All that wetness made it so much better. He could slide on her slickness and fill up her body with his.

He grabbed her and she bolted upright so he did it again and whispered, “Found the right spot, huh?”

“You didn't find anything, you big brute,” she muttered breathlessly, but her traitorous hips undulated with his dexterity. His fingers swirled and pushed errantly. There was no pattern or rhythm to it. He kept groping her everywhere and it worked.

“You enjoying this?”

She groaned. “Yes... yes, I think maybe I am.”

“That’s my own technique, I’m getting it patented.”

She blinked at the truth of what he said. Seeing the mirror, she gazed at his reflection and hers. The big, hard, turned-on man surrounded her, his beefy arm covered her front, contrasting with the flawlessness of her body. His tattooed, hairy forearms turned her on. She loved to see his harshness next to her softness and found him much more attractive than she did before. She blinked when his fingers emerged from her and then disappeared again inside, and the satisfying way he filled her up.

“Oh,” she gasped, blinking as she watched and felt him working on her. It was even more exciting to see it *and* feel it at the same time.

Oh, Francine felt it, all right. She started to smolder, and her blood boiled. Weird, little pinpricks appeared behind her eyes and her freaking toes curled up.

Oh. Oh, yes. *Yes.*

Pumping her hips in response to his ministrations, she started to tense.

She forgot to moan for him to pretend she liked it. Ugh.

“Franny. Quit thinking.”

He sensed her sudden tension. “Can I just close my eyes and not speak?” She never experienced anything like this before.

“Is that how you want it?” His finger still wiggled inside her.

“Yes. Yes. I really just want to get the full effect and I need to do that in quiet.”

He released her and she almost cried out NO. She was almost there. Then he flipped her around and lifted her up, heading toward his bedroom. He gently carried her to his bed and opened her legs. “Close your eyes. Don’t make a sound. It’s all for you, Franny. I’m doing this only for you.” Grabbing a pillow, he lifted her hips and placed the pillow beneath her, as though he were setting up camp between her legs.

She became self-conscious instantly. NO. Then she thought, *Who cared?* He wasn’t someone she’d have to continue seeing. Just tonight. Now. They had no past and no future. And he was offering her a gift. His personal technique for achieving female orgasms. He volunteered.

She flopped her head back, closed her eyes, and spread her arms over her head. Then she relaxed and lay there. She didn’t moan or groan or yell his name or whisper, “Oh, my God.”

She didn’t twist her hips while writhing around to pretend it was pleasurable. No...

Francine just shut her eyes and let her entire body float. She was totally still. Drifting in and out of awareness... then he started up again. There was no shame in his touch, or his hands and mouth being right there, right freaking *there*. And he was relentless.

Francine never relaxed during sex before. It was exquisite. She closed her eyes and let the sensations travel through her body. For the first time, she had them. She almost felt selfish. Complete submission was a luxury. She had no idea it was what she always wanted.

She felt like a limp fish. Who knew that could turn her on. Her fear of being bad at sex no longer loomed foremost in her mind. She formerly moved and writhed, moaning on cue, reacting and pretending to come because that was how it

should happen. She watched porn with Stanley. She mimicked the actors. But never experienced it.

Now? Oh, how decadent she felt, but so good too.

It began building and she stretched her arms over her head, straightening her legs and pointing her toes... until... yes. *Oh, yes. Yes. Yes.*

Fireworks went off in her head. Screams and yells and blinding colors and hallelujahs.

Externally, she was silent.

Behind her eyelids, the firework show continued and her entire body seemed to stretch as it savored the magical, wonderful elixir that previously escaped her.

Until Roman used his *finesse*.

The *finesse* he promised her was no joke.

It wasn't really *finesse* at all; he was too bold, fierce, hard and rough. He knew what he wanted, and he went for it.

It all ended with a blinding orgasm that Francine fully experienced in every cell and pore in her body. All the good stuff she only heard about was finally part of her experience.

She never felt more liberated while being fully engaged with her body. Orgasms mostly eluded her in the past.

Tears of relief and gratitude flowed from her eyes. She was a normal woman.

But reality slowly weaved its way back through her sensual nirvana.

Now? Everything became quiet. She blinked her eyes and realized she was lying on his bed. Her arms and legs were not

tied to bed posts (as Stanley preferred). She appeared like a giant X on his bed.

Quiet sex.

It was a moment of pure excellence.

She doubted a man would like it as much as she did.

As if on cue, Roman suddenly put his face right over hers. Supporting himself with his massive arms, he stared down at her face long and hard. Studying it for several minutes, he came to a private conclusion that he did not share with her.

He leaned down and kissed her before flashing a blinding grin of amusement.

She stiffened.

“What’s wrong?”

Surprised he managed to read the subtle tension of her body, she shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Quit it. Tell me what you didn’t like. Kissing me?”

“No. I like kissing. I just don’t like it after...”

“After what? Speak to me, Franny. The only way to make sure it’s good is to know what you don’t like.”

She groaned. “You’re way too honest.”

“And you’re not. Now tell me what?”

“I don’t like to... you know, taste... it.”

There. Another truth came out. Some partners found it sexy to taste themselves on their partner’s mouth after the intimate act of oral sex. Francine? She found it distasteful.

She closed her eyes, knowing he wanted the truth, but maybe he didn’t. He would eventually find her prudish and



boring. Her hot body could not rescue her and make her someone desirable he wanted to pursue.

As if to confirm her unspoken conclusion, he suddenly rolled over to the side and wiped his mouth several times on the pillow. Back and forth. Then he took the pillowcase with his hand and pushed it back and forth even more times across his lips.

Dropping the white pillowcase, he smiled and said, “There. I’m all clean.”

*All clean?* She turned her head and stared at him wide-eyed. Did he actually wipe her taste off his mouth? Just because she said she didn’t like it? Of course, wiping his mouth off didn’t quite do the job, but knowing that he listened to her and then did something about it was pretty epic. She felt flattered.

It was kind of awesome.

“I hope you didn’t mind?”

He gazed at her. “Nope. I don’t mind. And if pussy juice isn’t palatable for you, that’s not a problem. I’m the one going south. I want you to enjoy everything about it. I think you might know what you do like. But you need to grow a pair of balls before you can voice it. There are countless ways to have sex, Franny. We can do it any way you like. I’m up for whatever as long as it gets the job done.”

Her brain almost exploded. A blast of heat singed her face. Although he was crude and blunt about it, he respected her wishes and seemed completely at ease with her.

“You don’t mind if I’m a cold fish?” She tilted her head, now completely puzzled.

He chuckled. “Not if it works for you.”

Was he suggesting it might happen again, not just tonight? She blinked. That was in the future. Not the present. The pressure returned and it started to twist up her guts. Her nerves were on edge. Performing again.

He laughed and grabbed her face in his hands. “I have a hard-on that could turn granite into gravel. Mind if slip it inside that wet, pretty spot I worked so hard to prepare?”

The outrageous things he said. She blushed and recoiled as something weird knotted inside her lower stomach. The brute didn’t seem to know how to engage in anything that was romantic, soft, or sensual. But he did know how to give her the first orgasm she had with a guy.

She nodded as she obediently opened her legs.

He smiled, and said, “I appreciate your lack of enthusiasm, considering your recent history. But right now, I need a solid yes or no. Gotta say what you want with me, Princess. No misunderstandings, right?”

Right. She appreciated his insistence on her consent. “Yes. You can have sex with me.”

“Again, I appreciate that. But take note, it’ll be a big, orgasmic moment of *us* having sex. Now, give me a second to slide the rubber on.” He opened a drawer and ripped the condom package open with his teeth. Then he turned back and rolled it on, and she was amazed that he never showed any modesty.

“Done.”

She smiled at his excitement and enthusiasm when he all but bounced across the bed towards her. Maybe sex could be wonderful with Roman. He came closer and grinned in her face. “Franny?”

“What?”

“You should grab something to hold on tight.”

Startled at his advice, she started to say, “What do you mean—” when he shoved his erection into her. She was already wet and slippery, so he thrust deeply inside her until he hit a dead end and bounced back. So hard and rough, he continued to pound her and... oh, did she hold on tight. She clasped her hands around the rails on the headboard. She needed something firm to anchor her. Then she lifted her hips up to give him even better access. Over and over.

And over.

She wasn't bored or sore... and she started to writhe like a snake under him.

For real.

And then... all the good things started to happen again.

Shutting her eyes, she bit her lip and clung to the headboard rails as she lifted her hips to meet his.

He swore, then screamed her name and she pushed back with her hips and held onto him. Emitting a soft sigh, he suddenly collapsed with a huge huff on top of her.

His huge body engulfed hers.

No supporting his weight off or rolling halfway to the side for Roman. No. He just flopped down like a worn-out chew toy on top of her.

His weight felt like a concrete block. Crushing her. Trapping her. But...

She had to laugh.

Hard and uncontrollably.

That never happened to her either, not during or right after sex.

He buried his face in her shoulder and said, “Are you laughing because I just came inside you?”

“No, I’m sorry. It was...”

“Don’t say funny.”

“No. You’re so big and intimidating and after you claimed a little of your *finesse* could allow me to enjoy sex, that word was one I’d never, ever use to describe you. Especially regarding anything sexual. Just now, when you flopped over and nearly crushed me is the first time I’ve ever actually liked sex.”

He lifted his head, and cupped her face, planting his mouth on hers and kissing her. Then he smiled. “Well, then it’s okay, so long as you’re enjoying it.”

“I was and I am.”

She longed to say more. She knew how to gush and fuss over him because she thought it was required. It was, according to Stanley. Inflate the guy’s ego by saying he did a good job.

She was glad she accepted Roman’s offer to have sex with her using his *finesse*.

Might have been one of her *best* decisions. It was certainly the most shocking. Then he got up and left the room, coming back moments later with a warm, wet cloth. Like a registered nurse, *he freaking washed between her legs* while saying, “Bet you don’t like anything from sex left on you.”

She had no answer for that.

Hell no, she didn't. And now that she was all cleaned up, she felt especially nice. In the past, she hurried into the bathroom to wash herself off as soon as Stanley or Hunter finished.

Roman crawled behind her, wrapping her up in his giant arms before he yawned. "Great fuck, Franny."

It was. But who talks like that? Certainly not she. Never.

## CHAPTER 11



*F*RANCINE WOKE UP ALONE. Stretching out, she winced when her crotch began to sting. Not the usual sensation after sex. But she never experienced sex so rough and hard.

She enjoyed the sunlight that filled the room as she glanced around herself. The bright, blinding sunshine accompanied a cloudless, blue sky. She reached over before she realized her phone wasn't even in the bedroom. What time was it?

Did she really do that?

With Roman?

He told her he didn't have to like her to fuck her. His crude words trickled through her memory. Did she really have sex with that lewd, crude, brute of a man?

With the light of day, her modesty returned, along with her senses. She recalled her original disdain of Roman and groaned out loud as she put a hand over her eyes. What did this mean? He was Hunter's cousin, another man she knew intimately who lived in River's End. She told him all her secrets and some private things she never voiced to anyone. Not even Stanley. What was she thinking?

The worst part though was knowing that no woman, especially a sexual partner, could amount to anything more than a fuck to the self-confessed man-whore, Roman Barrett. She freaking witnessed it weeks ago, and now, here *she* was.

Holding the pillow over her head, she wanted to bury herself for a week.

Then she remembered when Roman wiped his mouth on that pillow, and she immediately threw it on the floor. How often did he wash his sheets? What if there were... emissions from those bridesmaids he slept with?

Furious with herself, and him, she sprang from the bed and again, flinched.

God damn. She hurt down there. So sore. It felt like someone pummeled her between her legs.

Roman was a freaking animal.

How could she face him now?



ROMAN WATCHED HER SLEEP.

While Francine Rydell slept beside him in his bed, after banging the daylights out of her, Roman woke up early. The morning light filled the room and he looked at the woman beside him.

She was still in his arms.

Somehow, they remained touching even in their sleep.

It was odd, because the women Roman banged never spent the night.

He didn't wake up to them.

He didn't cuddle with them or sleep next to them.

Rules one, two and three were all broken.

Instead of avoiding her or feeling annoyed and disgusted that he had to face a woman in his bed so early in the morning, he could only stare at her.

He studied her flawless face.

The morning sun illuminated half of it. Her forehead had no bangs, and her long hair was all tangled around her and the pillow. Part of it had a real knot and he examined the natty kinks with his eyes. He thought it was funny, but he didn't laugh. It made her look cute. Seeing Franny with messed-up hair, *sex hair*, was a first. Knowing he caused it made it even more special. Her dark eyebrows arched perfectly, and he liked how thick her eyelashes looked above her cheeks.

Sighing, he found it hard to stop watching her sleep and a feeling of tenderness swelled in his chest.

He watched her during foreplay and while they were having sex. He orchestrated the satisfying ascent that eventually resulted in her climax. He studied the different expressions on her face. Even her eyebrows moved, and he doubted she was aware of the fascinating tale he read on her face.

She kept her eyes shut most of the time, refusing to speak or moan or even sigh. Like a cold fish lying in missionary position under him. She made him work harder than any woman he could remember. Much harder than the two bridesmaids just a few weeks ago.

She didn't like kissing after the act or even talking about it. She didn't like anything that most of his sexual partners enjoyed.



She liked his *finesse* though.

She just preferred to be quiet. Like she was now.

He hated knowing so much about her. Yet he facilitated that. He should have stopped after the first fuck. He got off. Damn. That should have been the end of it. What made him decide to go all out and magically give her multiple orgasms? Since when did he take up the challenge to seduce frigid women?

But Francine wasn't frigid. Not at all. She just needed to accept and validate her actual feelings and thoughts.

Was he the only guy who could do that for her?

No. Nah. Any guy could.

Fisting his hand, he rejected the thought. After all the work he did with her, he deserved to reap the benefits. But seeing a woman for more than one night was something he strictly avoided.

Always.

He felt strange watching her sleep.

In his bed.

He'd become a fucking wuss. He hated it. And it was her fault.

Realizing his mistake and the strange feelings that accompanied it, he leapt from the bed, and dashed into the shower to clean up before donning his uniform. Listening carefully he heard movement in the next room. Rodrigo up already, preparing coffee. He must have come in sometime in the night.

Maybe he could leave before she awoke.

“Busy night?” Rodrigo inquired.

Roman scowled as he turned to grab a coffee mug. Rodrigo was used to Roman’s loud nights. Rodrigo referred to Roman’s sex life as a “busy night.” Last night wasn’t like any of those other nights and he didn’t want his brother to know about Francine or see her here.

“Just another broad.”

“Aren’t they all?” Rodrigo replied absent-mindedly.

Suddenly, Roman’s bedroom door burst open, and Francine appeared, all six glorious feet of her, wearing only Roman’s t-shirt as she dashed towards the living room without making eye contact to either of them. Roman only realized then that her clothing from last night was still lying on the living room floor, along with her bag and her belongings. Francine collected as much as she could carry and ran back to his room, slamming the door.

Roman sipped his coffee as Rodrigo turned towards him, saying, “Just another broad?”

“Yes.” He turned away and poured some more coffee into his cup, spending way too long doing it.

Damn... Francine looked great in his t-shirt, and he felt his lower parts tightening. Her long, curvy body was very appealing first thing in the morning.

Rodrigo sat at the coffee bar and spooned his cereal into his mouth. “So... does Hunter know?”

“No.” Roman cringed. “She called me last night to report someone harassing her and I was off duty. So... whatever.”

“You’ll explain it to him,” Rodrigo stated.

Roman's stomach knotted with stress. "Yes." But he sure didn't want to. He violated the universal bro-code. No banging the exes. Never mind, the worst of the exes. Roman could not believe how reckless he was.

"Just once?"

*Twice. But who's counting?*

"Bro, you know me."

Rodrigo nodded. "I thought so. But..." he waved his hand and finished, "never expected that."

"Well, neither did I." It sounded wrong and sad, which was not what he wanted. "Besides Hunter is—"

Roman stopped talking when the bedroom door opened again. This time, a properly dressed Francine walked out. Wearing black leggings with a beige top that clung to her shoulders and ended below her hips, her hair was brushed, and the cute, little snarl above her forehead was gone.

She looked classy, model-worthy, and more like the usual Francine. She appeared so worldly. Like she knew all the secrets and tricks to satisfy a man a hundred ways. Her mouth could articulate the sexy words and promises. She was a walking fantasy.

But in reality, Francine was prissy, modest, and prudish, someone who *enjoyed* her sex in missionary position. She loved most it seemed? Closing her eyes and laying still for the entire thing.

Yet, Roman never enjoyed sex with a woman more than her.

Now Rodrigo knew about it. The night they shared. He had to tell Hunter and he grimaced when he thought how wrong it

was.

Swearing internally, Roman glared over his coffee cup. He hated women crowding his space the morning after. It was easy for him to be cold and callous to any woman who dared to fall asleep or begged to stay. He always warned them not to do that.

But in all fairness, he didn't tell Francine that. He invited her to spend the night.

But he didn't sleep on the couch.

In one honest moment, he banged her against the wall.

He glanced at the wall and relived the image.

No one spoke when Francine entered the kitchen. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Rodrigo stared at them and said nothing.

Her gaze flittered away, and she gulped and said, "Hello, Rodrigo. It's so nice to see you again."

Roman lifted his eyebrows in surprise. Was it nice? Did she expect to see Rodrigo first thing in the morning? He doubted it. But her measured tone was polite, and almost sounded sweet without being syrupy. Despite her embarrassment in coming out of Roman's bedroom half dressed, she covered well. Roman appreciated her greeting his brother. Rodrigo was the most important person in Roman's life now, as always. He gave her mental props for leading with that.

"Francine."

Rodrigo failed to say it was nice to see her. "Francine said the peeper guy was at it again last night."

“Uh-huh. You weren’t on duty.” Rodrigo reasonably pointed out.

“I gave her my cell number. This time, it was more dangerous because he attempted to break in.” An attempted break-in? Did he have some kind of unusual need to justify his actions? In the past, Roman never tried to explain the reasons for anything he did to Rodrigo.

She nodded. “Yes, he was trying to break through the front door. I freaked out and hid in my closet to call him.” Referring to Roman as “him,” she used her hand to indicate Roman but refused to make eye contact with *him*.

Rodrigo’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. He waited for Roman to state the obvious. *That was why Francine lost her panties in the living room.* But thankfully, Rodrigo wasn’t as mouthy and brash as Roman was. Roman’s reaction, if the situation were turned around, would definitely not be as polite.

Damn. Why him?

“I need to go now and check on Russell. I’ll... finish getting ready.” Her voice wavered with nerves as she spun around and retreated.

Rodrigo lifted his chastising gaze to Roman. “Stepbrother-fucker? Really, man? Right here in our living room?” He shook his head. “What about the rules we agreed on?”

No one could bang girls in the shared living spaces. The exception was the shower/tub because they could wash it. Roman had to scrub it with a strong cleaner, per Rodrigo, if such things ever happened. Which they rarely did.

But the living room was strictly off limits. Rodrigo deserved a clean space to relax without stressing over the concept that bodily fluids could be present on the furniture or

the floor. Fair enough. They shook on the agreement years ago.

Roman never broke it until Francine came over.

Damn it.

“It happened in the heat of a moment and will never happen again.”

“Sure. Right. I saw how nervous she was. But stranger still, she’s here. This morning.” Rodrigo proclaimed it like an announcer at a sports event.

“You’re being a bit dramatic.”

“I’m not. She’s here. This morning. None of your women turn up in the morning. Let alone, sleep in your bed. Or even sleep. Did you sleep with her?”

“I fucked her. Long and hard. Twice.” He wanted to regain his sense of control.

“I heard you, but not her. Whatever. I’m used to that shit. But did you really sleep? Did you shut your eyes and sleep in the same bed together? Did you?”

Roman felt cornered. He hated to be accused of anything by Rodrigo. How could he answer that? Why should he reply at all? He was being attacked, and Rodrigo was being a jerk.

“Don’t lie to me.”

Finally, he confessed everything. “Fine. Yeah. I was tired. She woke me up about the stalker shit. That was true. All of it. We came back here, and the emotions were high. One hit wonder.”

“Two hits. You said you did it twice.”

Crap. He admitted that. “So? What of it?” Taking the offense, Roman slammed his coffee cup down, sloshing some coffee on the counter. “She’s red hot. Such a great fuck. Get over it, Rodrigo. Are you jealous?”

Rodrigo snorted. “Hardly. Hunter’s ex? Need I remind you, you have to tell him? You have to be the one. You can’t let him find out from her. Or anyone else.”

“I’ll tell him, don’t worry. It’s fine anyway. I’m sure it is.”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you? Sure? How can you be when you’re already acting unlike your usual self? Since when did you start bringing victims home? The reason for an investigation? Never mind, having sex with your cousin’s ex? And sleeping all night in the same bed with her?”

“Okay. I get it. I’ll tell Hunter first thing.”

Rodrigo shrugged and shook his head, muttering, “Stepbrother-fucker...”

Roman poured the rest of his coffee into the sink. Suddenly, his stomach felt sour. What was he being accused of? Betraying his family? Himself? Rodrigo was laying it on a bit thick. Of course, he planned to tell Hunter. So what if she slept over? She was in physical danger and scared about what was going on. It only made sense. He did his job by *protecting and serving* her.

Provoked, Roman stomped across the living room to his bedroom door. He spun around, warning, “Don’t call her stepbrother-fucker anymore.” Then he nodded. “No. Now she’s Roman-fucker.”

Then he opened his door, slammed it and faced the woman in question, who was glaring at him.

## CHAPTER 12



*F*RANCINE STOOD ON THE other side of the bed. Holding a brush in her hand, her long hair was neatly braided, and she flipped it in front of her left shoulder. Then her gaze landed on him.

“Roman-fucker?” she hissed.

Roman almost smiled. He never heard Francine swear except when she was repeating others, now that he thought of it. It sounded funny coming out of her mouth. But her expression told him she was not amused.

“Better than stepbrother-fucker.”

“How about just calling me by my name? Francine.” Her hiss rose a decibel higher. Glancing at the door, he assumed she was trying to keep it private. Then her entire face looked defeated. “Even Rodrigo calls me that? And he was so respectful around me. I didn’t think he’d... do that.”

Everyone else in the Rydell River Valley called her the stepbrother nickname too. Roman felt a little bit bad. Seeing how upset she was and the disappointment at learning Rodrigo wasn’t as kind as she believed made him feel guilty for bursting her bubble. Still, he was honest. Always. Right? Even if it hurt people’s feelings. “I think he got mad because we did it in the living room. That room is strictly off limits.”



She shut her eyes. “Of course, it is. As it should be. Oh, my God. I can’t believe I—”

“Well, to be fair, *I* is the wrong pronoun. Should’ve used *we*, honey. You didn’t fuck yourself.” He shrugged.

Her distress was real, and she flopped on the bed, turning away from him and burying her face in her hands. “He must think I’m a slut.”

“Oh, no, he doesn’t,” Roman replied immediately. Confident. He was being truthful, so he corrected her. “He thinks *I’m* a slut.”

She stopped moving and just sat there. Then she looked over her shoulder at him. “Really?”

“Really. He’s never approved of my dating practices.”

“Random sex with multiple partners?”

“Yes.”

He hoped to convey the idea that no one would judge her for having sex there. They only condemned her when her stepbrother was involved, and she was married. Instantly, he realized his mistake.

Her voice became softer. “And now I’m another random sex partner and he knows about it. It might hurt Hunter. I can’t believe... I keep doing the wrong things...”

Burying her face again, she seemed horrified.

Well, shit. She had to bring up Hunter again. Sex wasn’t taboo between her and him. No married partners cheating here. No other relationships either. Two single, beautiful people who found themselves unable to resist each other.

Francine was crying on his bed in the morning. Things like that were an anomaly. What should he do? Hug her? He feared he might encourage it. Or make her think he hoped to comfort her, which he most emphatically did not want to do.

“Rodrigo won’t tell anyone.”

“We still have to tell Hunter.”

Roman crossed his arms over his chest and a sense of pride filled him. “Yes. Glad to see there’re no more secrets. I agree.”

She flipped him an evil look. “I know the difference between right and wrong. I knew I was wrong all those years. I knew that. Not knowing wrong from right isn’t the reason I keep making bad choices.” She flopped her arms around and eventually, rested them on her stomach.

Wow. This was beginning to sound tragic.

“I’m not a man-whore and I’m not a tragic hero. I’m just a guy who wanted to have sex with you. You responded to me, which means we’re two adults who physically desired each other. No harm, no foul. We’ll tell Hunter together if you like. There. Not quite the drama of Stanley the stepbrother. So please don’t compare us to that.”

She peeked at him. “You say that, but when I saw you and Rodrigo, you glared at me, seemed awkward, had a judgmental expression and you acted weird. You claim to be honest with your sex partners, not brutally honest with me though.” Rising up, she dramatically spun around. “Well? Why are you so awkward and strange to me? I don’t deserve that. Pitted against two men, I’m the vulnerable one. And you’re the man-slut. You’re used to this. Why aren’t you better at it?”

He fingered his hair. Damn. She had him there. He nodded. “Okay. I admit I got weird. Having Rodrigo there made it...”

“I know.” She flung her arms in the air and all but screeched. Then she ducked her head and lowered her voice. “I know. I expected you to handle it with a little more grace and care. After all, he’s your brother, not mine.”

“True. But my partners rarely stay after sex, Franny. You’re not listening. I don’t allow many women here. I wasn’t lying about that.”

“I saw you with two women.”

“Well... I didn’t say *never*. I said rarely. Besides, at weddings, women get...”

“Vulnerable?”

“No, they get horny and unreasonable. Those bridesmaids were just horny.”

“You had them come here.”

“If you recall, they left in the middle of the damn night. You stayed over, not them.”

“Why?” she yelled when he yelled. Damn. He assumed Rodrigo could hear them. Then she marched towards him, pointing her finger into his chest. “Because you believed I was in real danger?”

“No. Because you were scared, and I felt sorry for you.”

“I would have slept on the couch.”

“Next time, you will,” he thundered back.

She was breathing hard and so was he.

Damn it. They both lunged towards each other and apparently, had no more words to say. Her arms clasped his

neck and his wrapped around her waist. Their mouths were open wide, and they angled their heads various ways for better access. Tongues thrusting and licking, he groaned, and she sucked on his tongue and lower lip. He dropped his hand under her shirt hemline and pushed it up with her bra in one quick movement. Holding her large, perky breast, he used his thumb to twirl and twist her sensitive nipple, making it harder. She heaved towards him with a squeak.

He did it again and released her mouth, spinning her around until both of his hands were supporting her big, round, pillowy mounds, while he rubbed and plucked her nipples. She wondered how he managed to skip over this technique last night.

Writhing, she wiggled her butt against him. Silently.

He slid one hand down her stomach. Feeling the skin and muscles of her quivering abdomen, he explored her wet panties. Holding her closer to him, he pushed her butt against his front. When he entered her with two fingers, she whimpered.

Whimpered.

Franny responded with a noise.

He released her immediately. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh.” Her voice was breathy. Lost. She was enjoying it, right? But the whimper...

“I’m just a little sore. From last night.”

Oh. Shit. She was sore from last night. Did that happen before? Probably, but no one told him because all the other women he fucked never stayed overnight.

He jerked his hand away from her pants.

“You need to tell a guy that before he hurts you. Sex shouldn’t hurt if it’s done right.” Would she ever tell him what the hell was the matter? What she liked and didn’t like? When it fucking hurt? Christ. The woman buried her feelings like a pirate buries treasure.

“It—doesn’t hurt. I’m just sore. A little stinging. I can’t be the first woman that experienced it. I’m sure it’s happened before.”

“Well, I don’t know because I usually don’t wake up to anyone the next morning. I expect it to sting from too much banging, but not with a whole night to recover.”

“No reason to stop, even if I only had a couple of hours recovery, not a whole night.”

“Of course, I’m stopping. If it hurts, we wait. There are other times and plenty of other ways. Christ, Franny. Take better care of yourself. Speak up. Defend yourself first and foremost.”

He pictured her silently suffering through the pain with Stanley and Hunter. He had no face on Stanley just a measly, wimpy, little, slimy dude... Such a geek couldn’t notice her whimpering from pain. Sore and achy were irrelevant words to that creep.

She looked up at him, biting her lip. “I was angry at you. Now you’re angry at me?”

“I’m angry now because you don’t take basic care of yourself and you’re not being honest.”

She shut her eyes. “I’m well aware of your insistence on honesty but can’t you ever just be... nice?”

She was very upset.

While anger seemed to energize him. He enjoyed sparring, but especially with her. Francine couldn't take it anymore, he guessed. Guilty and feeling cruel, he said, "I can be nice." His tone was softer.

He took her hand. "Lie down on the bed."

"But—"

"Let me show you other ways of enjoying each other..."

She pursed her lips. "I was referring to how you spoke to me. And refused to comfort me."

"I know what you meant. I'm no good at that. I'm pretty good at this. Let me."

She lay on the bed, and he planted himself between her hips. She became totally submissive. He grabbed her pants and slid them downwards. Slowly. Easily. Delicately, using his fingertips to caress her bare skin. He slowly moved down her thighs, over her knees and calves, coming back up, and starting over.

The tension in her body released, and her legs loosened.

Sliding up her body, he grabbed her torso and flipped her over on top of him. Startled, she stared down as he said, "Grab the headboard and sit on my face."

Bug-eyed, she shook her head. "Certainly not."

"You get to control it. You decide how much pressure. Trust me, it'll surprise you."

She didn't move. He tugged on her waist and eventually slid down, pulling her crotch above his mouth. She gasped as he straddled her over his face, and eventually grabbed the headboard per his instructions to brace herself. Using her hips to bring her closer to him, his lips came into contact with her

sore, inflamed crotch and he kissed her. Slowly. Using his tongue gently.

She fought her initial response. She never liked it before. But it actually felt so good and soothing, that she lowered her hips and welcomed his tongue sliding into her. Clutching the headboard, her body rocked naturally, and waves of pleasure ensued. Yeah... Roman could actually be really nice.

The morning after.

She guessed there's a first for everything.

Now all wet and slippery, her body rocked frantically, awaiting the final release. With a shudder, her whole body convulsed and Roman found it epic. She looked gorgeous.

But she remained quiet.

Her silence amazed him. It wasn't a ploy. That's how Francine Rydell came. Her orgasms were silent screams.

She slid down on top of him and started kissing him. This time, she didn't ask him to clean out his mouth. Thrusting her tongue deep inside his mouth, she smashed her lips on his and never let go. He enjoyed how she so deftly aroused his nether region. He was even hoping she'd drop to her knees and give him the same favor, but he guessed that was probably stretching it. He wondered if she'd stay silent after seeing his dick up so close and personal. She wasn't talkative and didn't bother to comment on it. Most of Roman's women claimed to be surprised by how big it was.

Back to Franny.

Exhaustedly, she dropped her head in the crook of his neck, keeping her arms around him, and her long body lay over his. Roman was still completely clothed in his uniform. He'd have to change... Naked and wet, Francine straddled his

leg, and her feet grazed the tops of his. She still had her arms wrapped tightly around him. She was holding on. That was comforting.

Were they cuddling?

*Crap. Shit. Damn.*

He undid her bra gently, soothingly.

Crap.

They lay together for a long time.

Her skin cooled and he glanced at the bedside clock.

“I have to get to work,” he softly announced in almost a whisper. He rarely spoke like that. Fucking pillow talk? No way. Well, maybe. Damn it.

Her body twitched. “Oh, God. Of course, you do... and I need to pick Russell up. I was...” She flipped her head toward his clock. “Oh, no. I told Kyomi I’d be there half an hour ago. I can’t believe it. I’m never late. Oh, my God.”

And just like that, the cuddling session ended. Francine launched herself off him like a rocket. Grabbing her clothing, she scurried into the bathroom.

Roman lay on his bed, blinking.

She had to pick up her child. She was a mother. He just tongued a mother until she was senseless only minutes before she headed off to get her baby.

She wasn’t so sexy now.

Roman cringed at the thought he still had to tell the baby-daddy he diddled the mommy. *Fuck.*

Getting up, he shuffled to his closet to get another clean uniform. After he changed and lifted his sidearm from a



locked safe, Franny emerged.

She stopped dead when she noticed what he held in his hand. Shuddering, she said, “Oh, it’s so big.”

Anyone who knew Roman would have known what his reply would have been to that. But he nodded, fully aware she was only referring to his gun.

“It certainly is.”

“I’m terrified of them. Except when someone is trying to get into my house. That’s the only reason I reached out to you.”

He slung it back in the holster. Her gaze followed his movement, and he caught her eye.

“What?” She blushed and turned away.

“What?” he repeated.

“The first time you walked up to my car, I thought you were huge and intimidating... but also handsome. I was never attracted to a man in uniform, but you took my breath away that day.”

He pressed his lips together tightly. He never expected her to be so honest but now that she was, he didn’t know how to answer it. Saying something crude about his big gun, or how she could reciprocate if they had more time seemed so juvenile. Her sincerity stopped him from resorting to the usual banter and he nodded, saying solemnly, “Thank you, Franny.”

She nodded and quickly looked away. There was something about her that Roman found sweet and it endeared Francine increasingly to him. Fuck his tender feelings. They made him do stupid things. “I—I have to go now. I told Kyomi

someone tried to get into my cabin, and I slept on your couch so I'm not fully lying. But..."

"Right. Mothering comes first."

Fuck. Roman never diddled a single mother before. Ever. None that he knew of anyway. He was in an odd position, having sexed her up a few moments ago and then saying their goodbyes so she could attend to her maternal duties.

"Okay. Well..."

Most of the time, Roman bid his sexual partners goodbye, saying, *it's been fun*. Or *I had a great time*. *See you*. Basically, those three phrases. But with Franny?

She fidgeted again and tried to pass by him, muttering...  
"Okay. Well..."

Roman knew he disappointed her. Immensely.

## CHAPTER 13



*W*ITH A LUMP IN his throat, Roman flagged down Hunter, who was coming out of his parents' house. "Hunter," he called, striding forward with as much confidence as he could muster, trying hard to ignore the nerves tickling his stomach and making it churn.

"Roman, hey. Anything new happening? Is Francine okay? She has Russell now."

"Oh. Right. No. She's fine. But, there's something..." He drifted off and his tongue seemed to swell in his throat. Crap. This was harder than he expected. His guilt over violating his own code of ethics was even more magnified when it applied to family. You don't diddle your brother's ex, which sure as hell included your cousins too. They were first cousins. Adoption wasn't an issue; this family was Roman's family, and he betrayed the family code.

Why? One moment he was comforting Francine Rydell and the next, he was pinning her against the wall to engage in hot, uncomplicated fucking. That's what happened. He was surprised when she started to cry after having sex with him. None of his former partners ever cried afterwards. That's where the honesty came in; it kept things like that from happening. He was always clear and gave his partners "the

talk” before any fucking started. Not with Franny Rydell. He couldn’t take his eyes off her face, so he blamed his absent-mindedness on that. Her face could make any guy forget his name, ethics, and everything he formerly valued.

Sighing, he knew that was crap. Francine was no more to blame than he was. Their damn chemistry was.

Hunter’s ex. He broke the code with Hunter’s ex.

“What is it? Something new in the case?”

“Yeah. She, uh, she called me late last night and said someone was trying to get inside the cabin. She texted my private number because she wanted someone with a gun to show up.”

“Shit. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine now. It really freaked her out. I found her in the closet, hiding. She seemed pretty wiggled out. I told her she could stay at my place after she refused to ask you and Kyomi, and since I was off duty...”

“That’s good. She shouldn’t be left alone. Not when this shit keeps happening. I guess we’ll have to get a larger cabin where we can all stay together.” Hunter flinched. “Nothing like having an ex and your fiancée under the same roof.”

“Right. Yeah. Good idea.” Roman rubbed his neck. He wasn’t listening. He doubted it was a good idea. Being alone with Francine Rydell was never a good idea.

“Hunter, the thing is...”

“Of course, Kyomi will enjoy it. Those two are sisters from another mother and it’s very strange, but at least, I get to hang out with Russell more, which is great. Seems like my ex is more often in my life now than—”

Too much info. Roman rubbed his toe in the dirt and smiled as Hunter chatted about his ex and friendship and other good things. Really good things.

Roman dreaded telling Hunter what she did because it would ruin everything—again. Learning that she could betray him again would only prove how untrustworthy she was. Crap. Damn. Roman didn't want to cause him so much distress. He couldn't come out and say it. He wished he could hide.

That was the coward's way out. The easy way. The wrong thing to do. Having broken the code, lying by omission would just make it worse.

If only he could find the right words. *Finesse* and delicacy were required in this situation. A different kind of *finesse* than he had with Franny.

"I fucked her last night." The words spewed out without any planning or consideration or screening. Instantly, his stomach knotted. "I'm sorry, Hunter. I was wrong and you have every right to hate me. She's your ex and I'm your cousin. Or I *was* your cousin, if you can't see past this. It wasn't planned, by either of us. Not trying to make any excuses, but things just went..."

Hunter raised a hand and said, "Stop talking."

Roman stopped mid-sentence.

He looked up at Hunter and then down at his feet in the dust. Shit. Hunter could disown him. Never mind the decade they shared as cousins. Roman deserved whatever he got, but he hoped Hunter would understand, considering he also fell for her beauty in the worst way and went so far as to marry her.

Roman was, at least, aware of Francine's duplicitous nature. Poor Hunter wasn't.

"I don't ever want to know the details of Francine's sex life. I spent too much time already getting over it. I don't want to know anything more about it, Roman."

Roman's shoulders dropped. Hunter was still hurting and seemed bitter about Francine. He assumed it was because she was so stunning and there were so few like her.

"I understand." Roman started to step back, his stomach churning with knots. He lost a family member, for what? A few moments of pleasure, well a little more than a few, but no more than a handful compared to family, which lasted for life.

Hunter grabbed him. "You understand what?"

"I know I crossed a line. I'm beyond redemption. I get it."

"No. What makes you think I care that much? I just don't want to hear about it. See? I don't care in the least who Francine chooses to sleep with. She's my baby's mom and my fiancée's best friend. At most, she's *almost* my friend. But as far as my interest on that subject and her go, it's nowhere. Considering..."

Roman nodded. "Well, yes... considering. I figured she was off limits for the same reason."

"But you changed your mind?"

"She's not as bad as I thought she was," he grumbled, unsure how much he should explain about the situation.

"She's got a bad rap now for doing what she's best known for. But there was more than that between her and me. I'm glad it's over now and I don't care if it's just you or the whole soccer team. I prefer not to know any details."

Roman's stomach stopped churning and he felt like he could breathe again. "I thought I did the wrong thing."

"No. I appreciate you telling me. But there's nothing to discuss. If you don't mind."

He nodded his head vigorously. "Right, no more about that."

"What's the latest on the creeper?"

"Nothing. Gotta be a teen or someone staying at the resort. Must be watching her movements, even though she already relocated to three different cabins."

"I'd completely laugh it off if he hadn't followed her to all three cabins."

"It's definitely some sick shit. But it seems the only intent is to scare her."

"Mission accomplished," Hunter commented. "Is she staying with you now?"

"Oh, crap, no. Nothing like that," Roman immediately exclaimed.

"It's not the worst idea. Staying with us gets complicated for obvious reasons I don't have to explain. But you're a cop that she now trusts."

"You want me to ask her to move in with me because she's scared?"

"Didn't you take her there last night for that reason?"

"Yes. But now it has another connotation."

Hunter's eyebrows ascended. "Right. The connotation given by you. It seems fair, given the situation. She doesn't participate in casual sex, despite what her nickname suggests."

He bit his tongue to restrain his remark. Really? She kept her eyes closed and didn't make a sound.

Hunter, at least, knew her. And he cared about more than just her pretty packaging.

Crap. More tender thoughts.

Such weird shit with a woman he barely knew, his cousin's ex. She was someone he never planned to seduce; it just spontaneously occurred. Probably owing to the circumstances and so forth. That's what he had to blame. As a cop responding to her calls, there was never a thought to other stuff. Well, not really. Maybe a tiny bit. Hard to ignore her female parts. He found some of them particularly attractive, like her breasts, her long legs, and thick, shiny hair. So what if he noticed? But he had zero, *nada* interest in acting on it. The idea never crossed his mind. And now that he had, was he somehow obligated to let her stay with him? No. His casual sex, one-night stands, and quickies prohibited any opportunity for a second night and (God forbid) staying with him for any length of time.

"Hunter... I came to tell you what happened and come clean. I didn't start a relationship with your ex. No way. Hence, my responsibility ended as soon as I was out of uniform."

He nodded. "Your business, Roman. I share the same ethical code with you, so I thought maybe she meant more than you realized at the time."

*More than he realized?* No. He wasn't deep. Not like that. He was shallow. Easy to read and understand, honest with his expectations and needs. No need to consider his emotional side. He loved his job, his brother, his two dads and the extended family he was adopted into. He was also very



grateful for his luck in finding this location and establishing his own place in life. Even as a teenager, his family didn't come too late. He liked to think of all of them as his family.

Damn. Francine was harassed in three different cabins.

What Hunter suggested made perfect sense.

"I'll consider it."

"Okay. Thanks for the update. Let me know what you decide and where she stays. I'm sure she'll tell me or Kyomi though."

Hunter started to walk away, when Roman asked, "That shit between Francine and Kyomi as best friends is kinda weird, right? I'm not the only one who thinks that?"

"What's weird about it? My ex and my fiancée could carry on a relationship without me around, and I think that's weird. Good too, I guess, but weird."

"Francine never left your life really."

Hunter shrugged. "She gave birth to my child. I guess I failed to foresee that or her and Kyomi. But it's easier this way since everyone gets along."

"Even you and she get along now?"

He hesitated. "Francine is Russell's mother. I like to watch her with him, but I have absolutely no interest in rehashing the past. It's nice to get along without any drama."

"She's not as bad as I had her pegged."

"No. She's not. She's done some colossally bad things. But I have to give her credit for trying to change and improve herself. Having Russell was the catalyst she needed to do the

right thing and I have to admit she's succeeding. Plus, she's a good mom, which makes up for the bad."

Roman flinched. *Mom*. Ouch. That term again. That status again. It was all anyone talked about most of the time. And the reason why he left single moms alone. Too many complications. Too much risk if they decided to pin their hopes on him. Nope. A kid could never be his responsibility. He grew up without a family. No blood links to anyone. The family he had now contained no blood link. He didn't want to raise kids or procreate. But if he did, they would have to be from his semen, not another man's. Blood link would be important then. No compromising on that.

His interactions with Francine were mostly when she was without Russell. In the heat of the moment, Roman temporarily forgot about the kid and her duties as his mother. That element was excluded from his sex life for good reason.

The kid.

"Dude. I'll never have any authority with her kid. And yours."

"Well, that's an entirely different conversation."

"Good. Then, let's not have it." Roman shuddered. Another reason not to sleep with family exes. He had to ingrain that permanently so he would never forget it again.

He sensed that Hunter expected more from him with regard to Francine than he did yesterday. Crap.

"Okay. I'll let you know what happens." Roman made his escape and decided work was definitely a real blessing today.



ROMAN GLANCED up and was surprised to find Shane Rydell standing before him. He almost groaned out loud. Oh, for fuck's sake, not today. Too much Rydell family drama already, and he certainly didn't need any more of it. But here was Shane. So Roman had to deal with him.

“Hey, Roman.”

“Hi, Shane. How's it going?” Roman already knew why Shane was there. He gestured for Shane to follow him to a quiet place in the precinct.

“Any progress?” Shane asked once they were alone. No small talk, right down to business.

“No identification yet. Our only progress is eliminating the suspects with alibis who could *not* have done it. Then we'll see who's left.”

Shane nodded. Disappointment was on his face, but he shrugged. “Well, that's something. A long process. Better than I ever got.”

Roman nodded. “You know the deal. I'll do this for you, and use my internal resources, but if something pops, Shane, it goes legit. I'll handle it. I'll decide who to pass it along to. But I will not be your vehicle for vigilante revenge.”

Shane tugged on his long, graying hair. “If you had a daughter, and something like that happened to her, you'd understand. But I know. I agreed and I'll keep my word.” His jaw tightened.

Shane asked Roman to identify the man who raped his daughter, but he first had to promise Roman he wouldn't kill him. It was Roman's insurance to avoid becoming involved in a murder and condemning Shane to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Roman nodded. He pursued the cold case because he believed Shane would keep his word. No matter what. He hoped he didn't overestimate Shane's self-control.

Several years ago, Shane asked Roman to help him find the man who raped his daughter Iris. There were no leads still. Roman told Francine the truth. That case hung in the back of his mind when he showed up at Francine's door. All three times. Maybe that was why he felt compelled to invite her to his home.

He witnessed Shane's frustration and disappointment in seeking a man who hurt his daughter for no reason.

Shane had a list of suspects to investigate. A long, comprehensive list.

He wrote down every biker friend, acquaintance, customer or other male he met in his youth and travels. All the men he could remember ever dealing with. Shane was popular in his youth. He traveled all over the country on his motorcycle. He also toured Mexico and some of the most remote areas of Canada. He met all kinds of people and many unsavory characters. Guys from biker gangs, drug runners, illegal arms and explosives dealers, and so on. Roman was surprised as well as impressed to hear about Shane Rydell's connections from years ago. Men he knew long before he got married and settled down with four daughters. His daughters were all grown now, married, and having their own kids.

But Iris got raped by an anonymous guy who knew Shane. That was the only connection and clue to his identity. It was based on Iris's description: older, possibly Shane's age, with gray hair. And Iris thought he was a biker. They consulted many sketch artists, but Shane never recognized him.

It gnawed at him continuously over the years.

He tried to find the guy on his own and failed.

Everyone else moved on. Even Iris. She grieved and healed, got married and was expecting her first child.

But Shane could not let it go so easily. He believed he was responsible for the violence inflicted on his daughter, and until he found out *who* the fiend was, he could not have resolution, closure or most importantly, justice.

Roman scanned the list of names and promised to help. How could he refuse the man? Shane wasn't an actual uncle but Ian's brother who was Roman's adopted uncle. So they were all family. Iris was a Rydell, which was enough to motivate him. Anyone who suffered the brutal assault that she endured deserved to have her case solved. However, the statistics of success were lower than low, especially after so much time had passed.

"Even if we figure out his identity, Shane, he might be long dead. And we might not be able to prove anything," he warned him again.

"Iris deserves to know what happened to him. If he's dead, good. If not? We have to find him."

Roman nodded. "Then I'll keep at it."

"I appreciate your discretion as well. My family would be angry. They moved on and healed. Iris is doing so well now too. But I can't get past it, not until I turn over every stone I find for the answer. If this list fails to provide any leads, I'll have to give up and admit I couldn't find the monster. But I'm not there yet."

Roman put his hand out. "I'll track down every name. If anything turns up, you'll be the first I call."

Shane shook his hand. “Thank you, Roman. I heard someone was being bothered by another guest at the resort. Is it anything serious?”

“Just a Peeping Tom, we believe. The victim is Francine, Hunter’s ex.”

Shane flinched. “Really? Stepbrother-fucker, huh?”

Roman flinched. *Even the old-timers referred to her as that?*

Shane shrugged. “That creepy shit doesn’t belong on Rydell land. Fuckin’ A. If you find out who it is...”

Roman grinned. “I will *not* call you, Shane Rydell. I’ll handle it, as I would any other situation.”

Shane shrugged. “Sometimes, you gotta do what you gotta do.” Roman heard Shane destroyed his own mechanic shop when he realized Iris was raped inside it. He tore it apart, using his bare hands before rebuilding a new one. Shane got shit done. He intimidated people and had to be treated with caution and respect. Roman was tight-lipped about Iris’s rapist, if he were ever found. Not to protect the rapist, but Shane. He didn’t want Shane to end up in jail for torture and murder.

Roman feared that possibility so he handled Shane with the utmost care. Despite how much Shane promised he would never violate the law, no matter what they found.

He lied to Shane about the progress though.

Two names did pop. The age was right. The description fit. Both could have been in the valley around the same time Iris was attacked. Roman was still analyzing the clues he found.

He considered finding out for himself before trying to prove anything. One of the two suspects was dead. One was still alive. Roman secretly wished it were the dead guy. Then the Rydell family would have their answer, and no one, not Shane or Quinn (Iris's husband) or even Iris herself would wind up in prison for trying to attain their own justice.

He sighed heavily. The day was only half over.

Roman still had Francine to deal with.

During his lunch hour, he left work with Shane still fresh in his mind. Iris was brutally attacked on the same land where Francine was getting creeped out now. Well, he couldn't just leave her on her own.

Exhaling a breath, he said out loud, "Fine. She can stay with me. Separately. For safety's sake and *her comfort*, given the crap that's going on. Nothing more." He nodded for emphasis, but no one answered.

Driving back from town, he pulled into the Rydell River Ranch and sighed when the text came through.

He forgot he was having dinner with his two dads.

He glanced across the river. Hell.

Francine would just have to come along. No big deal.

But it kind of *was* a big deal. He never brought anyone home with him before.

He exited his vehicle and jogged up to her front door before tapping on it. "It's Roman," he announced.

She opened the door a minute later and his eyes ravished her. How could he forget what a stunning woman she was? How vibrant her eye color, and how ridiculously pretty she was. That's all.

Beauty didn't last forever. Just as they wouldn't.

"Hello." She smiled brightly but her gaze bounced off him and she looked away. Lord. She was so bashful. Shy? Like they were in a red-hot tryst after dealing with a dump truck of emotional shit. It was just fucking. And now he was being a cop again. And safety was his MO.

"Iris Rydell was once raped in the mechanic shop at this location. I don't believe that kind of situation is a threat to you, but I also can't guarantee it. Hunter prefers that you don't stay with them. So if you like, you can stay with me. But only as a guest. Not officially, mind you. But it can't be personal. Get me?"

She gave him an odd look. "I—you want me to stay at your place?"

"Yes. I told Hunter what happened. He said it was a viable solution. And again, Iris..."

She nodded. "Yes. You don't have to convince me how creepy strange men can be to women, Roman. I'm one who already experienced it. You might call it a prank, but when it happens, it feels as real and threatening as someone trying to attack you. Like walking down a street and having someone come up behind me with a knife; that's how threatened I feel each time."

He tilted his head, considering her statement. Being a large figure, he didn't inherently have the same fears and concerns. Dark places and strangers walking up to him when he was alone didn't intimidate him. Sure, random violence could happen to any gender, but a specific kind was often targeted at females. Roman knew, having investigated many of them. Why he took her concerns less serious than someone he didn't know was a puzzle. He realized his own bias toward her being



“stepbrother fucker,” made him less sympathetic to Francine Rydell’s fears and concerns.

What if in the end, wasn’t just a pranking teenager?

“I should have realized that.”

Her gaze remained fastened on his. “What do you mean? I thought you already realized that.”

Damn. He was good at faking it if she didn’t see how casually he handled her concerns. He assumed she wasn’t in any “real” danger but simply got spooked.

“I’m aware of it now.” He left it at that.

“And you’re only doing this because Hunter decided you should take care of me.”

“He suggested it. And it’s a good idea. We don’t know who the stalker is, and he’s found you in three different cabins, after three different moves. That’s unnatural. Perhaps I failed to take it seriously enough.”

“So now you think I’m in danger? Just because of what Hunter said?”

“People need to view things from new perspectives sometimes to arrive at different conclusions.”

She rolled her eyes. “So that’s a yes?”

Honesty was the best policy. He guessed she thought he was a patriarchal jerk since the situation only became serious in Hunter’s opinion, not hers. “Yes.”

“And this is just because of the creeper stuff.”

“Yes. We’re not dating. I’m on duty right now.”

“*Officer Roman.*”

“Yes. If you’re interested in my offer, pack some stuff and I’ll return when I’m off duty.”

“I’m definitely interested.”

“I forgot my dads are expecting me for dinner. I remembered on the way over. That okay with you?”

She nodded. “Jordan and Pedro? I met them once, but I never spoke to them very long.” She flashed a smile, which quickly dimmed. “They’ll know me, of course.”

“Yes. But it’ll be fine. They’re totally cool.” He carefully omitted Jordan’s referral to Francine by her nasty nickname.

“And Francine?”

“What?”

“I was wrong. Hunter made me more aware of your concerns, issues and legitimate fears. I see them now as the threat they are. I’ll do better from now on. It doesn’t help the situation, but I’m sorry if I appeared patronizing in my actions.”

She tilted her head curiously. “I thought you were listening to me.”

He smiled. “I’m a better cop than a bed buddy.”

“I feel safe with the cop version of you even when you’re not on duty.”

He turned to go but flipped his head around with one last smirk, “Franny, don’t you like the bed buddy version too? Be honest.”

Then he sauntered off.

Going to work made everything better. He was still grinning from the interaction with the woman he planned to

pick up later and take to dinner at his dads' house before taking her home with him.

Fuckin A. What a day.

## CHAPTER 14



*R*OMAN PULLED IN THE driveway exactly at six o'clock just as he said he would. Francine was packed and ready. Russell was staying overnight with Hunter and Kyomi after spending the whole day with her. Francine's stomach knotted and she twisted her fingers together with raw nerves. Thoughts of this morning hung around in her head, creating more chaos than she already had to endure. What was happening with Roman?

The first time they had sex, it was without any strings. No expectations that might suggest a new relationship could be beginning.

After witnessing Rodrigo's reaction to her, and Roman's failure to defend her, they were arguing before she passionately kissed him instead of winning the argument. More sex. She was becoming a horny mess.

Her list of flaws was growing longer.

Of course, it was easy for Hunter to saddle her with Roman. No. Damn it. She worked so long and hard to improve herself, and now, after only a few hours with Roman, she was back at square one. Knowing that two men were negotiating where to put her for the night also offended her. She felt stupid

and annoying. Her low self-esteem automatically returned and she hated letting others take care of her.

She legitimately wanted to take care of herself and Russell.

Now, she waited for the rude guy she slept with who still refused to call her a friend.

He had his own horrible name for her. *Franny*.

Roman bounded up the short walkway to her third cabin. The last few weeks were some of the strangest she ever experienced, and she wondered if she'd ever feel normal again. She hoped she would when she went back home. She loved her wonderful townhouse and having Kyomi and Hunter live beneath her in close proximity to Russell. It gave her a safe feeling.

She watched the other resort guests walking about, their voices audible in the general vicinity, and wondered if anyone were paying extra attention to her.

Roman knocked on the door and she answered it. "Ready?"

"Yes." He moved fast and didn't bother with idle chitchat; that was something she noticed about him.

Maybe she liked that. After years of Stanley's games and lying to Hunter, it felt good not to pretend. Or appear to be polite. Honesty hurt sometimes, but at least it was real.

She carried her duffel bag to the squad car. He didn't open her door but simply slid in the driver's seat and she did the same. No pampering. No chivalry. Princess Franny didn't deserve it.

Did he consider them equals?

“Anything weird happen today?” he inquired as he started the car.

“No. Nothing I noticed.”

“No more tips on the line. I don’t get it. How can this asshole be so obvious at times and still remain undetected?”

“I was sure someone could have heard the racket he made the last time.”

Roman side-eyed her. “I agree. But when people are on vacation, they hear all kinds of things they don’t hear at home, so maybe they tune out the odd noises or ignore them. A loud thumping could turn out to be a drunken idiot cutting firewood. Or nothing out of the ordinary. Partying it up.”

“You still believe me then? Despite having no witnesses to substantiate it?” Francine asked.

He nodded. “I believe you.”

Roman was not one to gush. She appreciated knowing he still believed her. He wouldn’t say it just to make her feel better. “Thank you.”

“You thought I was a chauvinistic ass and didn’t believe you before?”

She smiled, glad he called himself out. “Yes. But to be fair, I didn’t know you didn’t believe me. You kept it professional.”

He snorted. “Until last night.”

She stared out the passenger window. They pulled into the driveway of Roman’s two dads. The house they owned in River’s End butted up to the river and overlooked the Rydell River Ranch.

She loved it when the giant cop called the small house his *home*.

“How old were you and Rodrigo when Jordan and Pedro took you in?”

“Fourteen and sixteen. We thought we were too old to need anyone. We were on our own way too long. We made it all formal with adoption and all when we were twenty and eighteen.” He opened the car door and jumped out. Francine followed him, suddenly feeling hungry. She was also curious to hear more details about him. What made him tick? He knew her history in a capsule, but she only knew snippets of his. Why did she want to know more? Sighing internally, she cursed herself for taking any interest in him.

At last, she got a glimpse of his family life. Following him up the walkway, her nerves started to percolate. She wanted Roman’s family to like her. But how could they since they all knew her as that terrible woman with that disgusting nickname? Her entire personality was compressed into that one fact. How could they ever warm up to her?

She suddenly stopped and grabbed his sleeve. “Roman?”

His surprise shone on his face. “What?” His eyebrows rose and he seemed very patient as he waited for her to say what she meant.

“They only think of me as... that nasty moniker, right?”

“Well... yes.”

“How do you plan to introduce me?”

“Well...” His eyebrows lowered and he seemed perplexed. “Hell, I don’t know. I’ll say you’re my friend? They know about the trouble at the ranch since they both still work there.”

“I just don’t want them to hate me on sight.”

“Well, don’t worry about that. We all thought the worst of you but that was in the past.” He dropped his hand on hers and squeezed it. “They’ll roll with it. I already asked them to.”

“You discussed me with them?”

“I did, yes. I asked them not to use that nickname anymore.”

“What else did you tell them?”

“That we’re friends and I’m doing my best to keep you safe. I don’t exactly discuss my sex life with them. Being dads and all that.”

“So how do you think they feel about me?”

“Uncle Caleb and his wife and kids will be there too. No one will call you that name or mention anything about what you did in the past. I swear. Just be nice, Franny, and they’ll be nice too.”

*Just be nice and they’ll be nice too?* She snorted. She wished her damn parents taught her that, instead of learning it at the ripe old age of twenty-eight.

Wait. Caleb and his wife and kids? “I wasn’t expecting that.”

The door began to open and he gave her a quick smile. “I forgot.”

A dark-haired woman in her late fifties came out and hugged Roman. Francine should have known who it was, but she couldn’t remember.

“Roman. How wonderful to see you again. It’s been a while.”



He hugged her back and said a few words to the woman. Francine was wilting and her nerves made her more anxious. Hanging back, she waited and hoped Roman would acknowledge her. “Aunt Josie, you remember Francine?” *Josefina*. Yes, she was Caleb’s wife.

Caleb was the brother of Jordan and Kailynn. All were Hayes family members.

Francine’s smile was big and warm, and she hoped to dispel whatever they might remember about her.

“Hello,” Francine said as she smiled.

Josefina smiled and greeted her, saying, “Come in, we have quite a crew here.”

Josefina took Francine’s arm and gently walked her forward. “That’s my husband, Caleb. Those two over there are our kids, Eliana and Dominic.”

Their *kids* were the same age as her. Not kids at all. They were young adults who must have been moral, decent people, unlike her.

Everyone was polite and said hello to her. Some asked her where she was living and generally harmless questions like that. Everyone wanted to hear about Russell and she eagerly shared her anecdotes with them. That’s what broke the ice and soon, Pedro and Jordan were interacting with her as well.

She was ushered into the circle they formed in the open living area near the kitchen. There was a four-person table so everyone just balanced their plates on their laps, sitting on the sofa, the floor or any available chairs. Whatever worked. The meal was delicious. Taco salad with spicy dip and nachos. It was an evening filled with laughter, personal stories, and all kinds of random topics of conversation. The jokes and

bantering were casual and natural and Francine could see how well Roman fit into this family. So did Rodrigo, although he was more subdued and quiet. Occasionally, he'd interject a dry comment with a straight face, and it was hard to know if he were joking. But it was obvious Rodrigo was as well-loved as Roman.

Pedro came over and sat beside Francine. She was caught off guard when he sought her out and warily munched on her nachos. She didn't know what to say. She instantly felt awkward and unsure amongst these people who were so much fun, easy-going, and enjoyable. Totally non-threatening. She never saw a warmer family than this one.

But in all honesty, her upbringing would not have allowed her to appreciate their family bonding and comfort with each other in the past. She would have no more eaten on the floor with her plate balanced on her thighs and a Corona beside her than fly to Mars. She'd have turned up her nose at their laughing, joking and ease with each other. Their informality. Not to mention, the small house with its old furniture and dated décor.

She would have missed this shining moment altogether.

How loving, kind and accepting of each other they all were. They laughed at Pedro's penchant for perfection, and Jordan's habit of always being late, and Caleb, who was retired now but still spent most of his time at the Rydell River Ranch with his brother and best friend, Pedro. Watching them together, she smiled at the clear bromance between Caleb and Pedro.

Pedro noticed her watching them when he and Caleb were ribbing each other. The good-natured ease and frankness they shared after thirty-five years must have been a true gift. "He's

a pain in the ass sometimes, but he has a good heart,” Pedro said, indicating Caleb.

Caleb bristled. “Says Mr. Perfectionist who thinks he’s always right. You know who I’m talking about, Pedro. I’m not a type A, or a control freak like you. Jordan is a saint for staying married to your picky ass for so long.”

Jordan flopped down beside Pedro, casually draping his arm over Pedro’s shoulders. “Sainthood is reserved for me.” Winking with a smile at Pedro, he doubled over when Pedro pretended to jab his elbow into his stomach. There was no anger involved, just good fun. Jordan was grinning and Pedro leaned in for Jordan to brush a kiss on the top of his head. Roman was sitting away from Francine, and they were separated by two people.

She felt a twinge of envy as she watched the easy way Jordan and Pedro displayed their affection. Roman wouldn’t even sit next to her. He acted very distant from her now. She remembered a day in middle school after she kissed her crush at the spring dance. In the dark gym, while swaying to an 80’s slow song, they kissed with their tongues. Francine was one of the first girls in her class to French kiss a guy. The other girls gawked and asked her all about it.

The next day, while in math class, he fully ignored her. He avoided even looking at her. He slouched in his chair and pretended not to hear when she tried to talk to him. He continued to dodge her at every opportunity for the rest of the year. She told Stanley about how heartbroken she was, and Stanley promised to beat up the kid.

That thrilled her twelve-year-old heart.

Roman was treating her the same way now.

But his family members were gracious, welcoming, and delighted to have her on her own merits, without treating her as Roman's guest. No one mentioned Hunter or her gross stepbrother. So it didn't take long for Francine to relax and really enjoy them.

"So Roman, how's Bruce doing? Any new breakthroughs?" asked Jordan.

"Nothing epic. Still meeting twice a week. Whenever he shows up, I count it a win." Francine listened to their conversation, studying each participant.

"Well, that says plenty. Showing up means you're important enough for him to make the effort. That's a hell of a lot more than anything he could tell you. Keep at it, Roman."

Francine longed to know whom they were talking about. Roman nodded, and his expression seemed despondent. "Were we this hard?" he asked Jordan before including Pedro with his eyes. Francine knew enough of their history to assume "we" meant Roman and Rodrigo. Hard to what? Teach? Discipline? Love? Connect with?

"You were both hard to reach at first. Your life experiences always seemed to include a nasty ulterior motive. Bruce probably endured the same kind of abuse and that's why he's so distrustful. He can't believe you're genuinely interested in his welfare."

Was Bruce a youth that Roman was mentoring?

"I hope you're right. Sometimes he seems eager to trust me. Smiling and laughing with me. He fist-bumped me the other day after a miracle shot he made. And the next time I saw him, he wouldn't say two words to me. He's angry, sullen and freakin' awful sometimes. But he shows up. He plays ball

pretty hard on those days. Great way to release anger and stress.”

“That says a lot. Those days must be amounting to something. You know the feeling, Roman. He’s angry at the entire world. Nothing in his life ever improves or goes right. He wastes his time hating all the entitled assholes who have it easy. He has to claw and scrape for the scraps he gets. That rage is hard to ignore sometimes,” Jordan said.

“I was like that?”

“You and Rodrigo were both that way. You practically snarled like a wild animal, and Rodrigo was more like Bruce. Always sullen and hard to read.”

“But we never stopped showing up. Until we finally made you believe us. Not our words,” Pedro added.

Roman nodded but his thoughtful consideration of both his parents was obvious. He appeared very moved by what they were telling him and looked like he believed every word of it.

“I had no idea how exhausting it could be.”

“Well, there’s that but it’s so worth it. Anything that’s hard earns more value,” Jordan said with a caring smile.

Francine kept quiet and looked at Roman who contemplated the last few bites of his taco salad. He chewed silently and seemed to be considering something. Francine thought of her parents’ ridiculous house and all their money. Her unlimited access to clothes and food and any other material thing went way beyond excessive. But at the time, she never thought it was enough. She whined and demanded more, often getting very angry for the *things* she lacked.

What she truly lacked were love, attention and affection.

Her life looked very different from what Bruce or Roman or Rodrigo experienced. But despite all the trappings in Francine's early life, she had no connection or relevance to the real world and it did nothing to benefit her.

Roman's dads asked Caleb and Josefina about their plans when the winter snows came.

Francine leaned towards Roman and asked, "Who's Bruce?"

"A kid I mentor. It's through a program in the department," he muttered.

She liked that, although it surprised her. "I didn't know you guys did stuff like that."

He shrugged. "It's not going very well. This kid has issues with anger and impulsive behavior. I can't get past this wall of steel he keeps around him. Every so often, I catch a snippet of honesty and a real glimpse of his life, and then weeks go by and we just play basketball..."

"Your dads are right. Just showing up is huge. Every time you show up it's huge too. Give him more time." She moved closer. "My mom was constantly thoughtless and absent from me. I didn't believe her most of the time because she never did what she said she would. When Hunter first came back to his job after we divorced, he found out my parents disowned me and Russell, so he urged my mom and stepdad to help me out. They both promised him they would. But in my gut, I knew they were just empty words. Nothing came of it. Maybe showing up on my doorstep to meet Russell could have convinced me. But they never bothered. So I have no reason to believe them now."

He stared at her. “So your advice is to keep trying? Keep showing up until eventually, he magically decides to believe me?”

She flushed. How dare she compare her silly problems with this kid’s? Turning away, she muttered, “Sorry. Bad habit in my effort to relate.”

He touched her arm. She looked down at Roman’s giant hand before meeting his serious gaze. “I wasn’t mocking you. I was curious to know your opinion. He’s so damn hard to read. I was just asking.”

Her heart blipped like a radar screen. Crap. She loved being needed. And being asked her opinion. Being taken seriously. “Yes, his actions speak much louder than any words could convey.”

“How many actions until I can compensate for all the wrong inactions he had to endure?”

She beamed. “Exactly what I tried to articulate.”

He tilted his head. “You did. You made it easier to understand.”

She met his gaze and they held a long stare before she finally grinned. That was the only way to ease the moment. The tension was building in her stomach and moving into her arms. He was so profound. He smiled back at her and she blinked at seeing how genuine it was.

Turning forward, she found Rodrigo looking at her. Then Roman frowned.

Pedro was grinning at her.

She wondered, *Was he happy to see Roman engaging with her?*

It didn't matter because she was eternally grateful for the kindness she received from the entire family that night.



## CHAPTER 15



*F*RANCINE ALL BUT GULPED out loud. Exhausted from the family get-together that meant more than any she attended with her own family, she suddenly felt strange. Mostly about Roman and herself. Specifically, the two of them together. Rodrigo stayed longer than they did and she was grateful for the reprieve. Enough judging for one night.

But now they were back at Roman's place again. Not hers. His.

Roman made it more than clear it was strictly because of the creeper threat and not to have sex with her.

But that didn't change being alone together after the fact. How did she register that? How did she act?

Her exhaustion weighed down on her. The past few days were long, and she obviously didn't sleep more than a few hours last night.

Wilting, she set her stuff down.

The silence between them was real. Uncomfortable. Downright awkward. She cleared her throat. "I'll use the restroom."

Escaping, she all but collapsed on the closed toilet lid. Tears fell from her eyes but they were just tired tears. She still

suffered from the stress of meeting so many people who thought so little of her. Changing their minds after the fact was much harder than when she didn't care how horrible she was. The disgusting moniker, *stepbrother-fucker* was never said out loud, but she still assumed they all thought that as their calculating eyes followed her.

And Roman.

Were they wondering what kind of sexual spell she cast on the smart, strong, honest Roman Barrett? They probably thought she did the same thing to Hunter.

Scrubbing her face, she sighed and ran the water. After taking off her makeup and brushing her hair out, she purposely put on her unsexiest pajamas. The warm flannel bottoms and t-shirt were topped with a zip-up hoodie when she emerged from the small room.

Whatever was in Roman's mind, she was too tired to have sex.

Set on her decision, she found Roman sitting on the long, sectional sofa. The TV was on. The lights illuminated his handsome face.

"I'll take the couch." His legs were resting on the bare coffee table. She noticed a sleeping bag thrown beside him.

He didn't even glance up at her.

Without objections, she sped into his bedroom, slipping beneath the covers she recently had sex in. The idea that these sheets still had evidence of sex on them concerned her, so she decided it was only from her and Roman, not the bridesmaids. The urge to sleep tugged hard on her and she succumbed, drifting into a sound slumber.

Waking up, she forgot where she was. Panic filled her. Was she with the creeper? Inside another cabin?

Shaking her head, she was relieved to say no. No. She was sleeping in Roman Barrett's bed.

And... he was slipping in behind her.

His arms surrounded her. She tilted her head up and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"Fucking you."

"Now?"

He paused behind her. "If that's okay."

"It's okay." She let out a sigh as she felt him. He quickly discarded her panties.

Oh? But oh, yes, he was. His condom-covered penis nudged her from behind and that fast she was wet. She lifted her leg over his and he filled her up from behind. He was gentle at first and moved slowly into her. She didn't know he could be so tender about it. She shut her eyes as he thrust inside her and her hips followed the natural, easy rhythm. He worked on her like that until a wonderful, long, orgasm rewarded her. It seemed to convulse her entire body like sunshine rising over the earth.

After he grunted, he held her and she knew he was finished. He reached down and took the condom off. She shuddered, thinking of the dirty thing being tossed away so recklessly, but when his arms once more wrapped around her, pulling her back to him, she liked the way he was holding her.

Instantly, she slipped back into sleep. She didn't care what he was doing anymore. He said one thing, and subsequently did another. So much for Mr. Honesty.

When she awoke. Roman was gone.

He left a note saying he had an early shift and would see her later.

*Later.*

*See her.*

She held it and wondered, *What the hell were they doing?*

Stretching, she got up and showered before leaving his place to see Russell. Her confusion and exhaustion were forgotten as soon as Russell squeezed her with childish delight. The little angel threw his arms around her neck and Francine sighed with joy. She lifted his little, bitty body and hugged him until he started to squirm. Laughing together, they spent the next four hours playing on the floor. When he started to drift off for a nap, she let him fall asleep against her. She never tired of holding him and studying the soft curves of his golden-tipped eyelashes and his rosy, little cheeks.

Suddenly, Kyomi entered.

“Roman?” she said without any preamble. Francine tilted her head toward her sleeping toddler. She gently lifted the sublime, little body and lay him in his crib before following Kyomi down the hall to another, private room.

There, Francine nodded and confirmed she was right, saying, “Roman.”

A long silence fell.

“Did Hunter tell you?”

“Yeah. Roman told him. In a confession. He was worried he broke the universal bro-code.”

“I feared my behavior was out of my control again, like with Stanley.”

Kyomi waved her hand around. “This isn’t about Stanley. Not anymore.”

Dear Lord, how nice that would be. “Did everyone get the memo? So far, all I hear are the reminders of my past. So the ghost of Stanley appears to still be haunting me.”

Kyomi set a hand on hers. “It’s not about Stanley. It’s Roman. Are you sure about him? I meant it when I told you he isn’t exactly a saint.”

“The man-whore stuff? I know. He was brutally honest about it. But society applauds a man-whore, not what I was.”

Her lips twitched back and forth. “Franny, it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“To forget Stanley forever. Look, when I met you, you were a whining, sniffing, annoying bitchy-brat. You even agreed with that description. You worked so hard to change, and you have. You’ve done a full one-eighty. But Roman? That’s going a bit too far. You’ll get trampled by stuff that’s no one’s business. Stanley and your marriage to Hunter are old news now and Hunter prefers to never mention the fucker again. So there. Done. No one else’s business. Maybe we went too far.”

“What do you mean, *too far*?”

“Your natural joy and enthusiasm towards life in general shouldn’t be squashed.”

“My life used to be shallow and the only time I got excited was while spending money and wearing shiny jewelry,” she scoffed.

“You got more excited when Russell smiled or walked or moved his dimply arm a cute way. You celebrated Hunter’s accomplishments and even mine. Franny, you have so much to offer. Trust your new self. Let her out. Let her shine. No more tragedy or sorrow. No more stepbrother-fucker shame. That negativity is harmful.”

“And how does this relate to Roman? You think this is about him? How? Are you saying he’s not good enough for me?” She almost laughed outright.

“I didn’t mean that. I just don’t want you to allow others to influence your opinion of yourself. You’re a good person. You can judge yourself now. You have all the good stuff inside you to live proudly as Francine Stanton Rydell.”

“A lot of people still say I have no good inside me.”

“Then they’re wrong. They never met the funny, sweet, loyal friend that I know, the best friend a girl could ever want. Someone who is always selfless and complimentary and never hesitates to say endless amazing things about me, but never about herself. It’s time to start.”

Francine had a half smile. “I like what you’re saying but I don’t know if I believe it yet. Let me think about it some more. Maybe. But as for Roman? No problem. I swear.”

“Did he seduce you?”

“No. No. Not at all.”

“You’ll have to explain it.”

Francine turned her back to Kyomi. “I can’t explain sex to you. Considering...”

Kyomi laughed. “Considering I sleep every night with your ex? I slept with Asher Reed in the not-so-distant past,

right? And yet I was front and center at his wedding, being one of his good friends. It's okay, Franny."

She turned back with a small smile on her mouth. "He calls me that too."

"Calls you what? Franny?" Kyomi crossed her chest. "That's *my* pet name."

"Roman used it to insult me."

"Ugh. So did I." Kyomi's smile wavered. "I worry that you still think you don't deserve good things in life. You allow yourself to be treated as something less than deserving. *That's over now*. You can't let it inside your brain anymore. Hunter doesn't remind you of the past and if anyone had the right to do it, he does. So don't let others dis or insult you."

She shrugged. "Roman doesn't use it as an insult now. It's his nickname between us."

"What else is between you?"

"Sex."

"And?" Kyomi's eyebrows rose.

Francine crossed her arms over her chest. "And I don't know."

"Tell me something I can understand."

"Sex with my partners in the past, Stanley and Hunter, was always for a reason. It began as a desperate, clingy action to keep Stanley interested in me. Then with Hunter, well, you know the reason for that. But I never had sex *without* a reason. For my..."

"Enjoyment? To feel good?"

“Yes.” Francine blew out a long breath. “Why does my only friend have to be in love with my ex-husband?”

“Because that’s how we roll.” Kyomi waved a hand around dismissively. “And with Roman, you enjoy sex? Is that because it’s uncomplicated?”

Francine bit her lip. Maybe. It sounded something like that. But it seemed much more. “I enjoy it. I—”

“What?”

“I prefer to stay silent and don’t make any sounds. I never knew that before. Roman doesn’t care. I was always performing with Hunter and Stanley.” Heat filled her face and neck and she darted her eyes away.

“And now you can enjoy sex because you no longer feel the obligation to perform? Well, of course. No wonder it’s better.”

“I don’t know why I wasted so much time performing instead of enjoying.”

Kyomi laughed. “Honey, Hunter’s and my sex life is on fire. Nothing can change that. He didn’t notice it was all an act, did he?”

She shook her head. “No one did. Not even me.”

“Then it must be fucking amazing to experience the real thing.”

“Yes.” She exhaled with a sense of relief. “Yes. It is.”

“And with such a man-whore as Roman, hell. Why not?”

Francine bit her lip. “That’s the thing...”

“What?” Kyomi groaned.



“It’s much more complicated than what I initially thought was good sex.”

“With Roman? How so?” Kyomi tilted her head curiously.

“He says the crudest phrases. And he’s brutally honest most of the time. He’s also a complete blockhead and insensitive to me. He’s fantastic at sex. Loud, rough and kind of all in.”

“But?”

“But he can be so nice. He knows how to listen and listen well. He admits his mistakes and even explains ways to change them. He can also be dismissive and then turn around and make me feel like...”

“A princess?”

“Like an equal.” Francine shrugged. “I’ve never felt that way with a man before. I was desperate and pathetic with Stanley. And Hunter was much smarter and better than I was. I was so stupid. But with Roman? I don’t feel insecure. I want to be friends with him. And so much more.” She threw her hands up. “I honestly don’t know what’s happening. He took me to a family dinner at his dad’s house and his uncle and cousins were there too. It felt weird and awful at first, but it turned out to be wonderful. He went silent and seemed rude when we left and went back to his place. He acted annoyed I was there. Then, in the middle of the night, he slipped into bed with me and I instantly felt safe. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Kyomi let out a long breath. “Maybe it’s more than sex. Maybe you’re saying I need to shut up about Roman because you deserve this.”

“Do I?”

Kyomi stepped forward and suddenly hugged her. “He’s lucky that you feel anything nice about him. Yes. You deserve whatever you choose to pursue. Dig up that old Francine ego and let it shine with your new and improved judgment.”

Francine shut her eyes and clung to her friend. “What would I do without your wisdom?”

“You don’t have to find out.”

“I feel like I’m always anticipating the day when you’ll both decide you’re done with me.”

“I know. We all felt like that. Once. No more. You did the necessary work. Now? You’re my friend. You’re Russell’s mom. You’re part of our family, as we are yours.”

She let Kyomi’s words inflate her. Family. They were part of a family. Just a statement of fact.

She had no affection for her own family, so her stepbrother became the recipient of what she perceived as love. Stanley made her feel and act miserable. This new family was healthy. She was having sex with a guy whom she could laugh and joke with. She could stand up for herself now and voice anything on her mind. That was new. The days of whining to Hunter and causing issues for attention were over. With Roman, she just said whatever she thought. And the man encouraged it. In fact, he expected it.

Kyomi became the sister and mother figure she never had. As well as her very best friend. The world might raise an eyebrow, but to Kyomi and Francine, their relationship was clearly working.

They were all her family.

Russell. Hunter. Kyomi. Her. If some of the Rydells accepted her, maybe Roman could also be her friend.

## CHAPTER 16



**F**EELING EMBOLDENED BY HER new position in Roman's life, and after telling Hunter and Kyomi the truth, Francine felt totally free now to explore the oddly surprising development in her dealings with Roman Barrett.

The next evening, she went to his place, unannounced. She imagined herself a young girl preparing to see her first boyfriend. The butterflies of anticipation were new, real, and kind of fun.

How did she manage to skip all the fun things and go straight to unhealthy sexual relations with the most inappropriate partner?

Not Roman. He was NOT inappropriate.

She knocked but got no answer. Strange. Both of his vehicles were parked below.

Finally, she spotted him.

He was hunched over the picnic table beneath an ancient apple tree. The sun was oven-hot, roasting the land of River's End. The small two-bedroom above the garage that Roman and Rodrigo shared didn't have a deck, but they did have an old picnic table set under an apple tree. The grass grew longer underneath it and she was careful to stay on the lookout for

snakes in the area. Not the kind of worry she relished. She was new to the country lifestyle, and the extreme weather, as well as many other hazards she never encountered in the city. But she always bit her tongue when the urge to whine about anything arose. Her will to reform did not include irritating sounds like that. However, snakes remained a challenge for her.

Roman sat with his eyes fastened on the river. It was no more than a small blue line beyond the grassy field that was once an orchard. The few scattered buildings blocked a clear view of the beach. The mountains loomed over everything. On this side of the river, the view was mainly of the Rydell River Ranch. There were completely different views and ambiance from other sites. But damn. Not a single bad angle to this Rydell River Valley.

He lifted a bottle and downed it before slamming it on the table. He was still dressed in his uniform. How big and commanding he seemed. Francine doubted she would ever cease to find him particularly appealing. Big, buff guys with bulging muscles weren't Francine's type. Hunter was a princely male. Gifted with perfect fashion sense, he was definitely her type. Stanley was slimmer, more discreet, but always well-dressed. Giant, brawny, burly men rarely appealed to her. But not so with Roman. She approached him, almost giddy with excitement to see him. Why? She had no clue. She didn't bother to analyze what she felt.

*Franny.* He called her Franny even though he knew she hated that. He called their sexual sessions *fucking*. *Nailing*. *Banging*. Any crudely descriptive word to define it. In the past, she would never tolerate such uncultured talk. But Roman always did it with a boyish grin and a shrug that floored her. She easily fell for his goofy grin. He, who didn't

want anyone to know they were seeing each other. Yet, here she was, just as giddy as any girl with her first crush.

Stupid, huge man.

She sat down beside him. "Hello."

He gave her a side glance but didn't turn toward her or even grin. Instead, he scowled. "Not now, Francine. I've had a really bad day."

*Francine?* He never called her that. She was startled. She tried to stare into his eyes, observing his locked jaw, and the grim line of his mouth. *Bad day?* Of course, that was part of the job. Solving crimes was at the top of the list. She assumed it wasn't from someone breaking a minor law, like speeding. Probably something more serious involving violence or street drugs or domestic abuse.

Not like she was someone he yet confided in when something bothered him.

But why couldn't he? They already engaged in the most intimate physical act. They were already more personally involved than she was with her previous two lovers. Why was Roman being so evasive?

Why couldn't he share his bad days with her? Why couldn't they be friends? *And* lovers? Francine never had both in one person. Friend, lover, and confidant all rolled up into one person. One relationship. Roman wasn't ready to label it as anything yet, but Francine knew it was something more than his casual references to it.

She set her hand on his. His right hand was clutching a bottle of cheap bourbon. He downed most of it in the short time she was near him. She slipped her hand inside his. Her long fingers, so slim, pale and elegant seemed fragile in his

huge, hairy-knuckled, beefy hand. His hands reminded her of oven mitts.

“Will you tell me what happened?”

He didn't look at her, taking a gulp and making a face before sneering at her. “No. I'm not discussing it with you. You aren't my girlfriend so don't start pretending now.” He jerked his hand from hers rather forcibly.

“Why can't I be your friend?”

“We fuck, Francine, we're bed buddies. That's it. No connection beyond that. No girlfriend. No friend. Just fucking. Now I already told you, I had a bad day and I wanna be alone.”

She was far too sensitive according to her stepfather, her mother, classmates, Stanley and even Hunter. Yep, she took things personally, making mountains out of mole hills. She always made it a reflection of her in some way, the worst way, instead of trying to be objective.

She flinched after hearing his entire sentence. He deliberately wanted to hurt her.

Fucking partners couldn't be friends? Since when?

His intent, no doubt, was to make her leave. She closed her eyes and steadied her anger. The desire to lash out and deny what he said occurred to her. But instead, she mumbled, “I know that. But I like to listen. Maybe I can help.”

His laugh soured her stomach with its mocking severity. “There isn't one thing you could say or do to help me with any of my problems.”

She winced. His foul mood made him particularly harsh and unfair. She decided to give it one more try.

“I can listen.”

He tilted his head towards her. And a cruel sneer appeared on his face. “I lied. You could help me by fucking my brains out. Sucking me off. Bending over this table and—”

She abruptly rose and the heat filled her cheeks. His derisive laugh insulted her. “See? You can’t help me.”

“You’re just being mean.”

“I’m just being honest.”

“You’re not. You’re drunk and in a pissy mood. You’re also trying to pick a fight.”

“And yet, here you are. I told you to leave me alone.”

He did. She replied, “Why are you so insistent that I leave? Why can’t I stay here?”

“Because I had to do a shitty thing today. I feel terrible and I can’t be nice. So leave. Go. We’ll resume our fucking another day.”

She stared at him. “I don’t want to.”

“*Fuck*, Franny. Say you don’t want to fuck. I dare you.” At least he called her Franny.

“No.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “What shitty thing happened?”

He looked up at her. His jaw clenched again. “I had to arrest someone.”

“Someone innocent?”

“No. Someone guilty.”

And what? What did that mean? He faced forward. “Like I said, just a shit day.”

Why was he behaving so horribly? What happened? He stared forward again. “Let me fuck you, Franny, or leave. That’s all I’ve got to offer.”

She studied his profile. Did he mean, leave forever? She wasn’t sure. His crude language was getting old.

“No.”

“Then.” He waved his hand without looking at her.

She stepped back. “I have to go now.”

“Well, gee, duh. I told you to.”

She didn’t say she’d be right back. Leaving him, she drove back to the ranch and found Russell with Kyomi. “Do you mind if I take him tonight?”

Kyomi glanced up. “No. Any particular reason?”

“I have a friend I’d like him to meet.”

“Roman?” She tilted her head, her eyes flashing.

Francine nodded. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“He’s a womanizer,” Kyomi replied bluntly. “You appear worldly, but you’re not. Don’t think he’s more invested than he really is. Involving Russell seems too risky, in my opinion.”

“Believe me, he has all kinds of flaws, but he’s ridiculously blunt and honest. I know where I stand with him. I was never in doubt.”

“So what’s the plan, Franny?”

“I plan to make him smile.” She shrugged. “Long story. Can you trust me for once?”

Kyomi handed Russell to her. “Franny, I don’t have to trust you *for once*. I always trust you. You’re his mother, so you



always trump me. But if *you* need anything..."

"I don't." At least, she didn't think so. She wanted to believe she was acting like an adult, with her eyes-wide-open and all that. She could handle this.

Buckling Russell into his car seat, she kissed his dimply cheeks and rubbed his silky, red hair. "Oh, my, how I missed you."

He grinned with delight as he grabbed a fistful of her dark hair. She laughed and gently untwined her strands from his sticky, sweaty, little grip. "Okay. Maybe it's a mistake. But I don't think so." Stepping back, she contemplated her intentions. She wasn't being the old, needy, clingy Francine again, was she? Using her own child as a prop? She didn't feel needy, clingy, or out of control like in years past. She simply saw that Roman needed a friend.

But he rejected her.

Yes, she was right to bring Russell. She threw her shoulders back. Yes, damn it. She was worthy and deserving of a friend. Having slept with him was irrelevant now. Damn it, she was good and ready to get beyond her past. To stop rehashing all her bad judgments and poor decisions. She deserved some credit and respect.

She didn't stomp her foot to emphasize her mental debate, but in her head, she did.

Minutes later, she pulled into the same spot she vacated twenty minutes before. Roman hadn't budged, still facing forward, and this time, a bottle of beer was on the table. He didn't turn when her car pulled in.

She grabbed a babbling Russell and squeezed him while hanging him on her hip before carefully carrying him over the

grass in need of a mow.

Sucking in a breath, her courage quickly depleting, she said, “Roman?”

He straightened upright. Clearly, he wasn’t paying any attention to her and failed to notice her approach. “I told you to go away.” He started to twist around. “Unless you came to take me up on my offer to fuck—”

His eyes landed on her and he instantly stopped swearing. “No. I did not come back to take you up on your offer.”

Roman looked at Russell and then at her. “That’s a low trick. Take your baby home. I’m not your boyfriend. I don’t want to play with your kid. *Hunter’s* kid. I’ll never be his... whatever kinda daddy.”

Francine ignored his rude rambling. “This is Russell Wilson. He’s just over two years old. Say hi to Roman, Russell.” Burying her nose in Russell’s sun-warmed hair, she pretended to whisper. Then she said, “He’s being fussy and grouchy right now.”

Russell clapped as he grabbed her hair again. She tried to yank her head back but holding him prevented her. Laughing helplessly, she said, “Okay, Russ, you got Mommy, didn’t you?”

“Good way to remove any hot passion related to your presence. I can’t think of you like that. Get a clue, Francine. Seriously. I can’t believe Hunter didn’t teach you anything. Why don’t you get a tighter clamp on him?” Roman waved towards Russell. *Him?*

“I’ve been a mom since you met me.”

“You mean, since I started fucking you?”

She scowled at his foul language. He laughed but it was mirthless. “I don’t watch my language because little kids have big ears. I’m not fit to be around a little kid. Obviously. You should have better judgment than that. You should have known that. Better to keep your offspring outta my sight.”

“I had no idea you were such a jerk.”

“Yes, you did. Unless you *chose* not to know.”

She drew in a breath of air for patience. Steeling her resolve, she sat down on the picnic bench, facing out, away from Roman, who was facing in. She set Russell on her lap, and he squealed, swinging his hand with her long hair and making her flinch.

Roman noticed what he was doing and a small laugh escaped from him. Then he scowled. She was sure he didn’t intend to show her any amusement. That violated the asshole code he seemed to live by.

“You can say hello to my child. You owe me that much.”

Pursing his lips, he glanced at her. Then he looked at her child. Russell was oblivious to the tension and simply played with her hair happily. She ignored the tugging on her scalp. “Hello,” he said in a low voice lacking any inflection.

“Haven’t you ever seen a baby before?”

“Of course, I have.”

“You don’t know how to talk to them, do you?”

“No. I already told you. I don’t do single moms for that reason.”

“So *I* was the exception.”

“No, you were the mistake.”

He ignored his stupid code with her, so perhaps there was more going on between them than he dared acknowledge. He looked at her and then at Russell before frowning once more. “Damn,” he muttered. “It’s all because of your face. You’re too damn beautiful; that’s what started all of this.”

This? What did he mean by *this*? She wanted to scream at him. But instead, she calmly tilted her head. She was becoming appalled at Roman’s atrocious sense of charm.

Standing up abruptly, she startled him. “Don’t you dare do that to me. Nobody patronizes me and tries to blame it on my face. What happened between us was no accident. You were attracted to *me*. The person inside of this shell is who you want and who you were drawn too.” She flushed with anger, and it ripped through her. Being side-lined and ignored most of her life, she could only attribute her insecurity to her own mother. “Pretty but useless” was a lesson she knew so well, she internalized it. That was the sniveling, whiny, horrible person who mistook Stanley Stanton’s abuse for love. She got exactly what she deserved.

Roman looked at her. “Okay, that was a crappy thing to say. I’m sorry.”

“And?” She tapped her foot, making Russell babble happily. Her take-no-prisoners attitude and stance were unspoken. And damn it. She deserved better. Who taught her that? It wasn’t her parents, or Stanley, or Hunter. It was Kyomi Wade. She believed in Francine while nobody else would. Nobody.

But that was then.

“And what?”

“What made you feel bad about arresting someone? So bad that you projected it onto me? I only brought Russell here to cheer you up. You’re a monster though, if he didn’t. So?”

His mouth twitched. “I’m not a monster.” His gaze landed on Russell. “He has that shock-of-red-hair gene that most of the Rydell men carry.”

She beamed. “It’s adorable, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he finally replied. His big paw landed on Russell’s silky head and he gently rubbed it. “You’re actually a cute kid.”

“And?” She nearly tapped her foot.

His lips twitched into a half smile. “And I guess that comes from you.”

“Stop changing the subject. And?”

“And? I’m sorry?”

“Is that the right answer? Are you really sorry?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

She nodded, still unsmiling and sat down. “What happened today?”

“Bruce. I had to arrest him.”

Her breath hitched. Oh. Bruce was the kid he mentored. “You had to arrest *him*?” She stared in disbelief.

He nodded, and she saw the surprise in his eyes. Was it because she listened and remembered and cared? He could be downright insulting to her sometimes.

She wanted to know the details. Why was he arrested? When? What happens next? But instead, she lay her hand on top of his and squeezed it. “I’m sorry.”

He didn't throw her hand off this time. Eventually, he flipped his hand over and held hers. They sat in awkward silence.

Then Russell started fidgeting from where he was propped between her legs.

“Want to go down to the river with me? Russell likes to play in the sand.”

Roman glanced down and shrugged. “Nah. Go ahead.”

At least, he didn't scowl or insult her this time. He was half as terrible as before. She wished he'd come with them. Her disappointment made her wonder if she were becoming overly attached to him. The power imbalance with Stanley came to her mind. God. Was she doing it again? The same bad habit? Always feeling needy and clingy? Wanting more than the man was willing to give her emotionally and otherwise? Would she never learn?

Perhaps not. She needed more time to improve herself. She thought she was making progress but not unless she was irretrievably drawn to emotionally unavailable men who kept her at arms' distance.

Sighing and disappointed, she pulled Russell closer and kissed his silky hair as she tromped down to the beach. Following a trail through the grasses, she finally wove through some trees to a rocky outcrop. It wasn't nearly as nice as the Rydell side of the river. But the water was shallow and it had a little current. She found a spot with a dry isthmus into the river. It was a small area but large enough for Russell to explore. She set him down and sat beside him. He'd need fresh clothes after they got back. But, oh well. She remembered her childhood and how careful her mother insisted she be. Damn, if her child would suffer the same fate.

He squealed in delight as he grabbed fists of sand, which he flung everywhere. Then he flipped over and started toddling around. They flopped down on a spot of wet sand near shallow water that allowed Russell to frolic without worry. It barely reached his tummy and he splashed and laughed, grabbing fistfuls of wet sand and throwing it. He let it slide through his fingers and patted it on the ground. Prattling happily, he appeared to be in a magical world of his own making. She sat on her knees and covered her bare legs with the warm grains. Watching Russell play so innocently, it was easy to ignore Roman for the time being.

## CHAPTER 17



S HE TRIED HER BEST.

Roman drank the whole bottle of cheap bourbon, which made him surly, depressed, and feeling worse than ever. By the time Franny approached him, he'd worked himself into a frothy anger. Mean and rude.

Yet Franny returned with her kid to... what? Cheer him up?

It was sweet of her.

And also stupid.

Rumblings of her past were beginning to show. At least, she wasn't a man-eater, which is what Roman assumed after he heard why Hunter divorced her.

Instead she seemed to be easily manipulated and too passive about bad behavior directed at her.

Roman was crystal clear with her and honest. He rejected her, but she came back. He was glad she didn't obey him.

Sighing, he put the beer bottle on the table. It wasn't helping. The sun was setting but the temperature was still hot. Sweat beaded on his skin. He got up and wandered towards the river down toward the bluff. He took in the view until he spotted them.



Francine was right beside Russell in the sand. Russell sat in a few inches of water splashing everywhere and playing blissfully. His hair looked like fire in the sunlight. Hers retained the midnight black that he admired.

She was right. Being pretty isn't what made his stupid heart react so intensely to her. What was he responding to? His heart thumped harder and seemed to expand in her presence. It was too weird to label or try to analyze.

He followed the trail she took and started walking towards her, stopping when the sun's descent shadowed her. She noticed him at once.

He imagined himself fucking her against the wall. That was the only thing that could make him feel better. Maybe relieve the guilt and shame for a few moments. Or possibly wear him physically out. But instead, he sat down beside her and her baby, watching Russell play between them.

She didn't speak. Neither did he.

They watched Russell together for a long while. He snatched at the water when it lapped up, only to splash himself and look surprised. Russ loved getting wet, and tried it again as if he expected to have new results. It was almost hypnotic to watch him. Observing the learning process taking place right in front of them. Interacting with his environment, trying to figure out how it all worked, and maybe trying something different. When he got completely wet on his front side from all the splashing, Roman laughed out loud.

Startled at the happy sound from his throat, so did Francine. She glanced at him and stared. He shrugged. "His persistence in trying to catch the waves is admirable."

Francine took a long, cool at him before she began to grin.  
“It is.”

His laugh broke their silent standoff.

“Why’d you come down here?”

He lifted his gaze to the rippling river. Sunlight danced over it, weaving through the swishing current with golden streaks. “I’m drunk. The alcohol didn’t help. And I thought maybe this could brighten my mood.”

She stared at his profile. “Is it?”

He didn’t know. His chest still ached, and his stomach was churning in knots but his mind had something amusing to occupy it now. “Yeah. A little.”

“You aren’t a very nice drunk,” she stated.

He shrugged. “I’m not usually like this. But you shouldn’t let anyone talk to you the way I did. You gotta learn to stick up for yourself, Francine, especially with those who might mean something to you.”

“Like you? Do you mean something to me?”

He flinched, realizing he stepped right into that one. “You think I do. That’s all that counts and you’re the only one who can determine the answer. You could do a better job of taking care of yourself.”

“Odd.”

“What?”

“I was just thinking that same concept during our interaction.”

“Habits are hard to break. But you need to destroy the bad ones. Your value doesn’t come from a man. Or from your

looks. Or from what your mother taught you. It comes from here.” He touched his chest. “From you. What’s inside you. And when you learn to accept that and believe it, you need to teach him,” he nodded at Russell. “Teach him how to have healthy relationships.”

“Do you have healthy relationships? Does being honest excuse all your bad behavior?”

Ouch. He didn’t consider that. “I guess so. I express my expectations to allow people to decide if they want to be part of it or not. Are you saying that’s *not* right?”

She sighed. “No. It doesn’t seem like enough though. Do you ever care how the other person feels after you’re honest with them?” She looked at him and then away as she shrugged. With a snort, she added, “I don’t know what makes relationships healthy or sick. Mine were all skewed and screwed up. I still don’t trust myself, so how can anyone else?”

“You called me on it back there. I was a mean jerk. I’m sorry for that.”

“What do you want to do now? Still want me to leave? Or do you want to talk to me? If not, I’ll leave.”

He tapped a finger on his bicep; then he nodded. “I’d like to talk about it.”

“With me?” she clarified as if she feared he was joking.

“With you.” Something tightened in his guts. She was having an effect on him, and it was different than fucking. Or lust. Or even the amusement she provided. She might actually matter to him just a little bit.

Her words were soft and caring as she inquired, “What happened with Bruce?”

Glaring into the sun, he began. “He held up a convenience store. I was on duty so I responded to the call. I had to arrest him. The whole thing. Handcuffs. Reading his Miranda rights. Putting him into the squad car and booking him. We didn’t speak. Not a word. He acted like he never met me. All those hours of basketball meant nothing. Like I didn’t know anything about his dad or the things that were done to him. Bruce became just another little, shitty, petty criminal I had to put away.”

His stomach twisted again and he worried he might be sick.

Her hand touched his bare forearm but she just rested it there without saying anything. The quiet Francine surprised him. So he continued talking.

“I wasted all that time for nothing.”

She squeezed his arm and said softly, “It wasn’t a waste of your time at all. It’s deep inside him now. Somewhere, he knows the truth. He just can’t access it yet. Someday, all those hours you spent playing basketball will be the only thing that pulls him off the brink of disaster. You mentored him. You can’t stop now. He needs you more than he ever did before.”

“He’s in custody for armed robbery. That translates to years of juvenile detention for him. Of course, he deserves it, but still. From there, he’ll join a gang and start doing drugs if he isn’t already. The dark side will just pull him harder, and he won’t be able to resist.”

“That’s exactly the reason you can’t abandon him now. Try to be more consistent in your time with him. Show up for him. Wherever he has to be, you go there too. Fight for him as much as you can. He’ll probably ignore you, or curse you, or whatever. But don’t stop showing up. Fight for his soul. He’ll

have no reason to join a gang if he feels like he belongs somewhere else. If you fight for him, you might convince him he's worth fighting for. Show your support to him and be different than everyone else. He needs you to mentor him now more than he ever did before. This is an opportunity; not the end of his life."

Roman turned halfway through her speech to stare at her. He was shocked. Her advice was spot on, clear-cut and profound. She was correct.

It would take hard work. More days of being rejected for who knew how long? But if he continued to show up for Bruce, someday, his influence might dawn on the kid. It was a crushing blow to realize he had to do time in juvie. His future was tainted now. His delinquent past could not be expunged because it involved a felony.

How could Francine believe it wasn't the end for Bruce? Or for him as Bruce's mentor? Roman honestly wrote it off.

"I didn't think there was any point in seeing him again. I thought I failed."

"It's more complicated than that. A sociologist could probably explain it better than me. But the only failure I see in this situation, is if you desert him. You should visit him in juvenile hall every chance you get. Just show up. Keep at it. You're mentally and emotionally stronger than him and he needs to know that, even if it's hard. Maybe that's the whole point? He'll be ungrateful at first, expecting you to leave like everyone else in his life."

He couldn't undo the kid's life or the factors that created it. But someone had to care enough to start. Why not him?

Francine added, “I was a spoiled brat until my mid-twenties. If Kyomi hadn’t shown up for me, I would have never tried to change. My problems and mistakes were different and not as heartbreaking as this youth and what he’s been through, but I was still a loser. And I would have made a lousy mother. Kyomi was the one person who saw something good in me, and she changed my whole course, showing me the person I *could* be. You can still do that for Bruce. If you care enough to sacrifice some things for him.”

Did he? Feeling exhausted about the situation and his time being wasted for nothing, an hour ago, he would have rebuffed her suggestion. He had nothing left to give. But Francine’s words made total sense. His interest started to percolate.

“You think it’s worth me bothering?”

“I think someone has to show up for him.”

“What if the end results are still the same?”

She dipped a toe in the sand and flung the grains in the air. “Then you can cry in your beer. But until you’re sure, you have to give him whatever you can. Show up. Walk him through the system. Explain things to him. You know the ropes. Help him see how awful his life will be unless he chooses another path. But give him hope and the confidence to see he can change his story. If he makes new and different choices, it can happen. Don’t let him despair over his years in juvie; tell him it’s not a death sentence. When he gets out, he can start over... but why would he care if no one shows him that’s possible?”

“Francine?” He stared at her with his mouth open, and the alcohol haze slowly wore off. “That’s pretty strong advice.”

“It’s also the right advice.”

His gaze stayed riveted on her face. She didn't smile or look away. He finally nodded his agreement. "Yes, it is. I'm sorry I didn't give you a chance. I'm sorry for using honesty as a weapon against you."

"Why did you do that?"

*To keep her at a distance?* The thought popped into his head. He tried to push her away because it was too easy to get used to her being around. He didn't want that in the long term. He chickened out and muttered, "I thought honesty was a positive trait."

She tilted her head. "It is. You're right. Being sneaky and manipulative and lying are not only unconscionable but they're wrong. Detrimental. Life-depleting. That's what I did. But now I'm more cognizant of my language. The words you use matter, sometimes drastically. You can be honest without being offensive or brutal. There are so many ways to convey your meaning and not necessarily just with your tone."

Russell grabbed a fistful of sand, jumping on his pudgy legs before suddenly springing towards Roman. "Want some?" The wet, dribbly sand escaped through his fingers. Why did the toddler suddenly go to Roman? He'd been playing in the sand for a long time, off in his own world and ignoring them. But that fast, he suddenly turned to Roman for attention; why?

Kids were weird.

Roman nodded as he put his hand out. "Could I? Is it special sand?"

"Yep." Russell grinned up at him. "It's magic sand. How'd you know?"

Russ was a talker. He often sounded like a tiny college professor. Francine said, "Hunter's mom noticed his

vocabulary was astonishing for his age. He just started talking in full sentences one day. Wow. The conversations he carried on. Those words led to more words.” Capturing the rapt attention of a new person, Russell took full advantage of it.

Roman had no reply for that. Until this moment, he avoided conversations with little people. But it was obvious this child would not be satisfied if he ignored him.

“Well, this sand is boring, old, and common. Right? You only wanna play with the best sand.” He leaned forward and whispered softly, “What kind of magic does this sand have?”

Russell beamed and giggled as he squeezed Roman’s hand, dripping the magic sand down his wrist and arm. Unconcerned by the mess on him, Russ replied, “It makes stuff see through.”

He glanced at Francine. “Invisible?” he inquired.

She smiled and nodded. “That’d be my guess.”

“So, is there a lion behind me that I can’t see?” he asked Russell.

Of course, the kid didn’t think of that, but Russell nodded, big-eyed, saying, “Yep. You hafta be careful. He’s right there.” He pointed his empty hand toward Roman’s left.

“Right. I can feel his breath.” And thus, Roman’s code of conduct was shattered. He was lying to a child. And in response to his lie? Russell clapped his hands with joy.

“I can feel it too.”

The hot breath was no more than the evening air rushing past them. But Russell’s reaction was far cooler than anything.

“So what else is here?” Roman scooted closer to Russ, fascinated at what he would say.



Twilight fell and the day grew more tolerable but it was still freakishly warm. Russell left the water and covered himself with the fine white sand before he began an entirely new conversation. The sun-warmed sand felt like a blanket to him. He rolled back and forth, giggling and claiming to be a mummy covered in sand from head to toe. Francine groaned as she grabbed him and tucked him into her lap. He chortled peals of laughter. “We’ll be brushing the sand off you until next week.”

He laughed harder as she leaned down and blew kisses on his tummy.

Roman watched them and realized he’d stopped obsessing about Bruce and the terrible day he had. In the last hour with them, he was lighter and more cheerful.

Francine managed to bring him out of a dark place by simply being there. Giving him access to her son. Being together. She and Russ did more for him than all the alcohol.

Maybe she was right. But he wasn’t ready to analyze her advice immediately.

“We should take him inside and start hosing him down. It’ll be past his bedtime.”

Those words snapped Roman back to reality. Where was she suggesting that take place? Where did she and her son plan to stay? With him? Too strange. Too odd. Too intimate. But they were already there and the shadows were lengthening. Never mind, the sick individual who was still bothering her.

God damn it.

“I guess you should stay with me.”

Her back stiffened as she rolled her eyes at him. “You could say that another way, yet you seem to always pick the

worst way.”

Getting on their feet now, Francine wiped her sandy baby down as best she could and lodged him on her hip. “It’s late and I don’t want to give you the wrong impression.”

“Impression? Roman, when have you ever given anyone an ‘impression’? You say glaring, vivid, vibrant, blunt pictures of exactly what you think and feel. There are no impressions conveyed by you. Of course, I’m staying at your place because of the situation with the Peeping Tom, not because you suddenly desire my company.”

She walked in front of him and her annoyed tone filled his ears. He sighed at her back. She had a nasty temper too and was not particularly guarded with her own language. Did she realize that?

He stomped up until he was beside her. “You do realize you’re no less subtle than me and your vague, polite impressions are more like rude jabs. I hope you see yourself as clearly as you see me.”

She stopped dead. Russell was bobbing with her stride and he stopped too. He simply looked around, joyfully uncaring. “I—I, uh. Damn it.”

Roman suddenly started to laugh. They were at the base of the stairs to his front door. He stepped closer and his gaze embraced her. “You think I’d be standing here with a shy, shrinking violet? Someone who cowers from my words and temper? Or kowtows to me in perpetual agreement? Snooze. What the hell fun is that?” He slid his hand up to cup her face. “Why would I want anyone who can’t give as good as I can?”

She blinked and swallowed, obviously aware of the sudden crackle of attraction zapping between them, just as he was.

Russell lowered his head to her shoulder and his eyes hung at half mast, ready to close. How could anybody go from exerting so much energy to becoming nearly catatonic with sleep so fast? They made a beautiful picture: the snuggling baby with his mama.

“If you weren’t holding your baby right now, I’d fuck you against that door behind you,” he whispered softly, only for her ears. She blinked and groaned as she shook her head. He grinned, reading her reaction. The blink? Her shock that he would use those words. The groan? That he said it out loud with her child in her arms. The shaking head? Because she liked it all. And kind of wanted to take him up on his suggestion.

“Roman Barrett. You’re incorrigible. Stupid. Disgusting. And uncultured.”

He grinned. “And yet I still tempt you.”

She gritted her teeth. “You do not.”

He leaned closer and her breath caught as his lips touched hers. “Liar. Chicken. You know how tempted you are.”

“Stupid brute. Open the door. This child is getting heavy.”

He reached around her to open the door and she all but fell inside. He followed behind her... still grinning. This terrible day, when he seriously considered ending his career in law enforcement, was finally ending. Now? He was smiling at a woman holding her sleeping toddler in her arms.

He stepped forward and said, “Here, let me take him.”

“Where?”

Good question. “My bed, I guess.”

“Where will you sleep?”

He sighed as she gently transferred Russell's sleeping form to his arms. Sand piled beneath them and against him. "On the couch."

"I should bathe him first or your bed will be a sand box."

Sighing, now that his bed had become a nursery, he shrugged. "I guess there're worse things." Carrying the sandy, sleeping toddler to his bed, Roman gently set him down and tugged the covers over him.

When he straightened up, he found Francine in his doorway. She was staring at him with a bemused expression on her face. "What?" he growled, recognizing the look in her eyes.

But feeling too scared to address it.

"You. You were sweet and tender and kind and attentive to him. I didn't think you had those virtues in you."

He passed her. "He's two. I'm not a monster. Of course, I'm all those things."

"You hide them sometimes."

"I don't hide them. I just don't share them very often."

"You should as often as you can. It's exactly what Bruce needs and you damn well know that's why he responds to you."

Maybe.

"I'm sleeping on the couch now," he grumbled in response.

She stopped him as he started to pass and put her arms around him. Rising on her tiptoes, she said, "Thank you for playing with Russell and giving him your bed."

He started to stick his tongue in her mouth but she scooted back, putting herself out of reach. He groaned. “You’re welcome. And thanks for coming back.”

She touched his mouth with her fingertip. “See? It’s not hard to be decent and caring. I like seeing that side of you. Even without your tongue in my mouth.”

She might have gotten his number. Intimacy made him uncomfortable. The way they were talking made him itchy. Having her child in his bed while they kissed and exchanged tender thoughts? Surreal for him. Roman almost freaked out to think he was acting so strange. And worse? He found himself enjoying the new feelings. Her eyebrows rose to challenge him.

“Fine. I don’t do tender very often. It helps if I add sex to it.”

“Not every time. Because of the child and me.”

“I know.” He released her, his shoulders slumping. “I know all those things, Franny. I’ve never wanted things that way.”

“Is it so terrible to try a little of both? With me?”

He really hated to answer her but she asked, so he did. “With you? No, not quite as terrible.”

She grinned. Kissing his cheek, she started to pass him and added, “Soon you’ll start liking it. Seeing me. Kissing me. Talking to me. And being tender to me and my child.”

She sauntered away, her gorgeous, round ass swaying as she ducked into his bathroom.

He headed to the couch. She might be right.

The bad day became tolerable only after their encounter.

Opening his eyes the next morning, Roman nearly jumped out of his skin.

Russell was staring at him. Lying on the couch, Russell's gaze was aimed directly at his. The child didn't blink but stared right at him.

"Morning, Russell," Roman said while yawning and rubbing his crusty eyes.

"Hello, Roman. Do you have any toys for me to play with?"

"Where's your mom?"

"In bed sleeping."

Lucky woman. Grumbling to himself, he sat up and replied, "Sorry, but I have zero toys."

"What can we do then?"

The big eyes blinked up at him. Indeed. What could they do? Make some strong coffee with a shot of alcohol in it?

Roman said, "Do you like to watch cartoons?"

Russell beamed as he jumped on the couch beside him. Roman put some cartoons on his TV streaming service. Who knew they were there?



FRANCINE WALKED out at nine o'clock, surprised to find Roman cuddling on the couch with Russell. Russ didn't look up from the TV. Roman glanced at her when she entered. "He asked me if I had any toys. I don't."

She was glad to see he solved the problem without depending on her. "You could have woken me."

“Why? Then we’d both be awake. He’s happy with the toons. Unless I violated your strict rules about the screen time? I didn’t know about them though.”

“I have none. But even if I did, I’m grateful you took care of him. I can’t believe I slept through him getting out of bed.” She glanced back. “But he left a trail of sand. Sorry, Roman, I’ll clean it up. It’s awful.”

He saw it too. “It’s just sand. A vacuum is all we need.”

She smiled. He was far more genial and easy-going than she’d ever witnessed before. The way he spoke to her child made something swell in her chest. Did she like it? Why? Why did Roman’s interaction with Russell mean so much to her? It was weird. No. She had no plans to stay in River’s End. And Roman didn’t want a girlfriend.

Why bother indulging in fantasies of either possibility?

He was very sweet all the same. “Come on, Russ. Bath time.” She glanced at Roman. “I should have asked first, sorry. Do you mind if I wash him off now?”

“Well, of course not. Don’t ask stupid questions. It’s insulting.” He swiped a hand as if to dismiss her. Then he gently scooted Russell. “Now listen to your mama. She’s always right.”

He acted gruff and rude but telling her not to ask stupid questions seemed more friendly than before. Could she do as she pleased now? Strange. Astonishing. And not as formal.

Glancing back. She smiled at Roman. He scowled at first, but finally grinned back.

## CHAPTER 18



“*A*RE YOU COMING?”

“Why would I come?” Roman grumbled and Francine glared at him.

“Because it’ll be fun.”

“It’s a family outing. We’re not family,” he reminded her.

“We’re friends who care about each other,” she countered, her eyebrows rising.

“What will people think?”

“You care what others think? Since when?”

He flinched. He wasn’t that heartless or gauche, was he? He cared about what she thought. Somewhat. But going to the fair with her and her kid? It was so dad-like. Roman started itching and his skin felt too tight at the very thought of it.

But her eyes were pleading for him to say yes.

“It’s just a carnival. Not a wedding. You’ll be fine, I swear.”

Now she was simply challenging him. She did that a lot. He knew that. He read her every time she did it. And her goading worked because he couldn’t resist it. He rose once more to the damn silent challenge. For an entire week, she



stayed every night with him. And Rodrigo. But Rodrigo avoided being there sometimes.

Russell was there about half the time. Roman never asked where Francine went in the day-time. But she always returned to his place when it got dark. Sometimes she was alone. On those nights, they fucked in his bed for hours. Sometimes she came with Russell. On those nights, Roman slept alone on the couch.

Today was a first. She asked him to join her and Russell in the daytime. That was new.

“And Hunter and Kyomi plan to be there?”

“Yes. They’re family and they invited both of us. We all want to go together. You should come too.”

“It’s weird. Hunter’s my cousin.”

“Hunter doesn’t care what we do,” she reminded him.

What *were* they doing? Was he simply protecting her like a secret service guy? Sure. That was it. But it was much more involved than that. How did he manage to let it come to this?

Russell was cute; there was no denying that. He was also freaky smart. Roman became increasingly convinced that he could be a savant. Hunter was above average in everything and Roman believed Russell inherited the same gene. But again, Russell was his cousin’s son. Roman didn’t want to be anything but a friend to the child.

“If this is as casual as you say, why make it such a big deal? You’re also Hunter’s cousin and friend, so why not? It shouldn’t mean anything. You attach way too much meaning to innocent things and overreact.”

Considering her point, Roman tilted his head. He did enjoy seeing Hunter and Kyomi and he was invited, along with Francine.

She jutted her hip out. “Is it the carnival food and having too much fun? Do you get sick on the rides? Or are you so boring that you avoid anything fun like a carnival, Mr. Grinch?”

“I’m amazed to hear you like that stuff, Francine Stanton Rydell. Mrs. Thing of Seattle. Queen of the Hoity-Toity.”

“I used to be boring. I’m not anymore. Hunter and Kyomi invited us; don’t you have fun with them?”

He slowly rose to his feet and set the pop can in his hand down. “Are we going to double date with your ex and his fiancée, who coincidentally has become your best friend?”

She shrugged. “Essentially, we are. But who said we’re dating? All we do is fuck so it can’t be a double date, right?” Her eyebrows lifted. Yeah, she didn’t hesitate to call him out.

“Right. So we’re going as two friends joining your ex and his fiancée?”

She gave him a dirty look. “They’re so much more than that. And if you weren’t such a pansy-ass you’d say the same about us.”

That’s exactly why he didn’t want to go. He wasn’t ready to embrace that reality.

She sighed and flipped around. “Never mind. Russell can be my date and we’ll have an excellent time.”

Roman almost lunged after her as he grumbled. “Okay, I’ll go.”

He didn't elaborate on his reasons because he wasn't prepared to explain. He brushed her off by saying he liked carnival rides and deep-fried Snickers.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she rolled her eyes. "Why didn't you say that to begin with?"

His main point was that she understood it was *not* a date. They were not double dating and he was not there as a surrogate father to her child. Just a family friend. *Family*.

It disturbed him when he tried to analyze it. He still had a hard time seeing Francine as the stepbrother-fucker he heard about. She was so cool. Her personality was funny with an edge to it. He enjoyed her company even with all her clothes on.

Tying his shoes, he got up and followed her out. "Do you want me to drive?"

"Sure."

She slid into the passenger seat of his vehicle. While pulling into the Rydell River Ranch, Roman felt strange. Hunter was busy getting Russell into his car seat when they drove up. Ugh. The car seat. Everything associated with Russell required four times the equipment and took twice as long as any adult.

When they got out of the car, Kyomi came bounding out of the house. "Hey, Franny. Hi, Roman," she said as they all met up. Hunter stood upright from the backseat of the car.

"Done," he announced proudly.

Francine ducked her head inside the car and told Russell something that made him laugh. Roman was beside Hunter, and he shuffled his feet, saying, "Hey."

“Hey,” said Hunter. Then they fell silent. Roman was instantly out of his comfort zone and realized his instinct to stay home was correct.

“Okay. Ready then. Let’s go,” Kyomi called as she scooped some personal stuff into a purse.

Francine ran around the car and scooted next to Russell. They were riding together? He didn’t expect that. Hunter got into the driver’s seat. Sitting in the back, Roman felt like a freaking toddler.

This was getting too weird for words. Seeing Hunter every time he glanced in the rear-view mirror and trying hard not to make eye contact was a challenge for Roman. He shifted around, but was wedged tightly next to the door.

“I heard there’s an entire race track set up just for toddlers,” Kyomi exclaimed.

“Jack hitched up some horses for a hay ride and said they brought in a roller coaster. I mean, it’s not Disneyland but for this area, it’s not bad,” Hunter added.

That prompted a family discussion and Roman didn’t know what to say or add. He knew nothing about the ranch, and he wasn’t part of their immediate family. He belonged to the extended family.

When they arrived at the site, everyone trooped out of the vehicle. Hunter and Francine worked together to get Russell out as Roman waited off to the side. Kyomi was in charge of the stroller and other items in the car.

They strapped Russell into the stroller and each took a bag of his stuff. The day’s heat was on the climb as they strolled towards the ticket entry. Hunter paid for Kyomi and Russell. Roman paid for himself and Francine, ignoring his feelings

about it. Being part of Francine and Russell's life as a *friend*, what did he do in situations like this? Should he defer to Hunter? He had to. Hunter was Russell's dad and Roman would never be.

Roman never wanted to be a dad.

But he also didn't want to be a stepdad to Russell.

Or anyone else.

The carnival was set up on the lush, irrigated grounds of the town park. Green grass stretched out towards the Columbia River into a cove that the river meandered through. The sandy beach there was already filled to the brim with people.

Mature landscaping and leafy trees created spider-web shadows that helped cool the temperature. A series of booths featured all kinds of money-gobbling games and specialty foods. Long lines denoted the location of the roller coaster and a few smaller rides. Spinning chairs that rose up into the air and orbited the area were popular, as well as teacups that rotated as fast as the riders chose to spin them. A small train that ran on wheels for the younger kids traveled the perimeter of the carnival.

Trailing behind the group, Roman nodded to the people who recognized him with warm greetings. Some barely made eye contact before looking away with anger, shame, or regret on their faces. He got to know most of the people in the area he served. Not all of them appreciated his presence. He'd met some people on their worst days, being drunk and disorderly or taken into custody for beating their kids or spouse. Some arrests were laughable compared to others, but a few preferred to avoid him for now.

Today, Roman didn't care about any other people's bad days.

His own feelings occupied his mind and he felt surly and out of place. Jamming his hands into his pockets, he observed the ready-made family that consisted of three people. Kyomi seamlessly filled the roles of Hunter's fiancée and Russell's stepmother. She already shared a unique bond with the child. She knew better than to trespass on Francine's position as his mother, and Kyomi defined her own function.

Well, fuck. Roman sure as shit wouldn't do that.

He found himself in a place he didn't want to belong at all. For crap's sake. His overtures with Francine only happened because she stayed at his place and she was gorgeous. So what if they had sex? It wasn't any lead-in for anything remotely connected to a trio of people raising a little human. He liked little humans too. Who didn't? But raising one?

No.

Trailing behind, Roman watched when they suddenly stopped and lifted Russell out of the stroller. Of course, Russell wanted to see the ponies. The petite Shetland ponies were harnessed on a merry-go-round to allow small kids to sit in their saddles and walk around in a circle. *What a miserable existence for the ponies*, Roman thought to himself. But all the kids beamed and squealed with unbridled joy and delight. They stood in line until Hunter and Francine got their turn to walk around the small circle with Russell.

"Coming from a horse farm, how can he be satisfied with this boring exercise?" he muttered to Kyomi who waited beside him. They were the two outsiders, with no blood relation to the family.

She glanced up at him. “Yes. But this is different. Stop acting like a grumpy jerk, Roman. Look how happy Russ is.”

Russell grinned as he scooted his butt up and down, pretending to be on a bucking bronco instead of a sedate pony plodding along the same rut. “Do you find it hard standing here with all the baby accessories?”

“No,” Kyomi snapped, obviously unhappy he was there. That’s okay, so was he. Then she gave him a sharp look and added, “I’ve been here from the first day Hunter met him.”

“Because Francine tried to hide him,” he muttered with telltale bitterness in his tone. He occasionally found it hard to relate to the Francine he knew now. Was he betraying Hunter by taking up with the very woman who destroyed him?

“She did in the beginning. But she isn’t that person anymore. You know it, too, so stop it. Judging her is just crap.”

“Am I judging or simply speaking the truth?”

“The truth isn’t almighty. Context matters and so does history.”

“I just find it hard to understand how you became part of their family.”

“Because we love each other. We have clear boundaries and communicate our feelings between us. It’s not the usual custody situation but we manage.”

He tilted his head. “It seems to work.”

“That’s because it does.”

When Russell was lifted off his pony, he ran towards Kyomi with a huge grin while clapping his hands. “Did ya see me, Kyomi? Did ya? I rode the pony.”

Kyomi grabbed him in a hug and spun him around, squealing with him over his accomplishment. They all managed to make it work together. Roman begrudgingly admitted it.

How many parents could one little dude have?

Russell noticed Roman and he waved his hand. “Roman. Did ya see me on the pony?”

Apparently, Russell was proud to broadcast his accomplishment to everyone and Roman was no exception. He could only grin back at the happy child. “I saw the whole thing, Russ. And you were awesome.” He held out his fist and Russell instantly fist-bumped him.

“Hey... what’s that over there?” Russell inquired as he stared over Roman’s shoulder. Turning around, they all looked at the beanbag toss game behind them.

“It’s a game,” Roman answered.

“Can we play it?” Roman was amazed when Russell asked him instead of one of the parents standing nearby. Roman glanced up at three sets of eyes and nodding heads urging him to say yes. They became no more than a blur, but he agreed and they all trooped over there. Roman paid the attendant before handing the little guy a beanbag. As he lifted him up to throw, he said, “Let it fly like your namesake.”

Francine named Russell after her favorite quarterback. Calling him Russell Wilson was like paying homage to her hero. Russell did his best to toss the little bag but it fell just short of the first ring.

“Holy firefly, Batman. That was a great shot,” Roman exclaimed and it was the truth. For his tiny height and age, the little guy had game.



Francine came up beside them as Russell wound up his arm again. “*Holy firefly, Batman?*”

Roman shrugged, his eyes riveted on her son and his next throw. “Well, I’m sure you prefer that to my favorite f-word.”

She touched his wrist. “I’ve just never heard *firefly* as a replacement for it.”

Her hand was so cool and soft. Each time she touched him, something churned around in his guts. “Course, not. I pride myself on being original.” Then he smiled at her. The chemistry that connected them started to return, along with his friendly banter.

Her smile was huge. “Well, then holy firefly, Batman. I appreciate your restraint.”

They cheered for Russell Wilson as he flung but missed again, although his valiant effort was rewarded by Roman who passed the attendant a fifty-dollar bill for the top prize: a stuffed animal that probably cost three bucks, but the kid deserved it.

The attendant handed Russell the stuffed lion and instantly, he was over the moon. He grabbed it, hugged it and ran around his three parents, eagerly sharing it.

Francine looked at Roman skeptically. “Is that an award for his participation? I wouldn’t have guessed you were the type.”

“He’s two years old. He earned it,” Roman grumbled. Only an hour ago, he would have agreed with her.

She took his hand in hers. “I’m glad you did that. But fifty bucks? Really?”

“You saw that?”

She nodded.

Tucking her head on his shoulder while holding his hand, Roman sighed. He didn't pull away or resist her overtures but walked around with her until they reached the next ride and the next game. After gobbling down cotton candy and funnel cake, Russell began to grow cranky. Throwing down his drink because Hunter asked him to share it, Francine released Roman to gently scold her son. Lifting him in her arms, his head fell on her shoulder and he promptly fell fast asleep.



EVENTUALLY, Roman relaxed. Earlier, he was tight as a rope and much surlier than usual. She blamed it on Hunter and all the reminders of her past. Francine hoped Roman could forgive her as Hunter did. But she understood how bad the entire thing was now. Roman had a hard time reconciling his attraction to her with her ugly past.

She was sure that's why he struggled to accept her. Never calling anything involving a woman and himself a date, now he had to endure a face-off with his own cousin. It was easy enough to see the confusion and emotional chaos on his face. His awkwardness in interacting with Russell while Hunter was there fascinated her. It was like watching a science experiment.

Thank God, he really wasn't the monster she imagined. She was flattered that he spent a fortune on a stupid stuffed animal, which Russell clutched tightly even while sleeping on her shoulder.

Francine said, "Could we sit by the water and cool off? It's getting so hot."

They found a nice spot beside the water with a shade tree to cool it. Kyomi spread the blanket out and Francine gently laid Russell on top of it, who curled up.

“I wish I could sleep like that,” Hunter remarked. Francine remembered Hunter’s insomnia. He was always thinking of his stressful job. Maybe that never changed.

“Me too. No worries as long as Mom’s shoulder is available, the answer to everything.” Kyomi smiled at Francine, who returned it. She was glad they adored the same child who loved them both.

Francine was proud to be Russell’s mother and thank God, no one doubted that, including her son.

They sat with Russell in the center, and the conversation flowed easily. They discussed the carnival, the people they saw there, and Hunter’s and Kyomi’s jobs in Edmonds.

After a lull in conversation, Francine rose to her feet. “I’m going to grab a cold drink. Anyone else interested?”

She got two requests for sodas and one for water. “Want me to come with you?” Roman asked. He was lying down, looking totally relaxed. How often did he just chill? Relaxing on the soft grass? Never as far as she knew.

“No. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

Her heart warmed with joy to see everyone sitting and relaxing around her sleeping child. She tingled with anticipation. She worried how Hunter and Roman would behave together with Russell between them. She didn’t want a pissing match and hoped it wouldn’t come to that. The reality that they all shared would always be. Could Roman manage it?

At first, Francine’s heart sank because of Roman’s silence and clear awkwardness. He didn’t know how to fit in with

them. The three of them had successfully streamlined their custody agreement over the last two years.

When Roman finally relaxed, however, and stopped being such a standoffish jerk, he pleased her. She had glimmers of hope.

Her heart was thrilled, although she couldn't define what she wanted from him yet. No reason or desire to analyze anything. The potential was more than enough.

The crowds were thick and the lines were long. Weaving her way through the throngs, Francine faltered.

She blinked when the awful image caught her eye.

Just to the left of the booth stood a man she recognized.

*Stanley?*

She blinked again. The man was in a shadow and kind of hidden. But he was looking right at her.

The same build. Same hair. He took half a step forward and she gasped.

Stanley.

Why was he there?

Her brain seemed to short-circuit and she fearfully glanced back towards the grassy area where her son slept.

Everyone was still there, chatting and all smiles. Perfectly at ease.

No one noticed him.

The stepbrother. *Her* stepbrother.

Her heart hammered and her throat constricted. *Stepbrother-fucker*. The name and its stigma echoed in her

brain. As soon as they saw him, it would start all over again.

She couldn't allow that to happen. Panicked to nearly freaking out, she rushed from the line and raced towards him. The motherfucker.

She pushed him out of their line of view. Those were the people she respected and cared about now.

Today.

In the shadow of the booth, behind all the noise and crowds, she finally was prepared to face Stanley Stanton.

She stared at him, feeling truly stunned. It had been so long.

He was cold but handsome, with blond hair and good looks. Many women found him desirable, not only Francine.

“Playing house doesn't suit you, Francine.” His tone was as cool, smooth, and slick as marble. Just like his personality. And his looks. Staring at him, she blinked several times.

How did she miss it before? That slick frostiness. The cold glint in his eyes. What she formerly assumed was his intensity and interest, turned out to be calculated hostility.

Her entire moral system was based on *this*?

She shuddered at her own behavior, stupidity, and the hateful feelings he stirred up inside her. But she threw her shoulders back and fixed her gaze on his. No more sad, little Francine, desperate for love. Eager for approval. Which he never gave to her. He just manipulated her, playing on her weakness and leading her on. Like a bored cat playing with a stunned mouse.

All at once, the puzzle pieces fell into place. “You. You've been stalking me.”

He looked her over, sneering at her casual appearance with condescension. What a prick and a snob. “What are you babbling about now?”

“Reality.” Her breath caught. “How else would you know I was here? You’ve been stalking me.”

“I noticed you in the crowd. I came here to see you, and I didn’t hide. No. I let you see me. I don’t know what you’re bitching about but stop it please. When did you become so slovenly? You look so common. It doesn’t work for you.”

“No, *you* don’t work for me,” she hissed. “What do you want? Why are you here? Why have you been stalking me?”

“I came here to see you. You weren’t at your home. I heard about the carnival and guessed you’d go to it with the kid. Not so hard to locate you in a crowd of town hicks, Francine. You stand out like a royal queen. Did you forget all that?”

His words, singling her out, always appealed to her vanity before. He knew how to speak in a way that both flattered and made her beholden to him.

She hated the old Francine now more than ever.

Weak. Sniveling. Shallow. Vain. She cursed her basic insecurity that invited his manipulation and evil actions, which she encouraged. Roman was right all along, she asked for it and no excuses could ameliorate her transgression.

All she had now was regret.

A whole river of regrets.

Her wasted youth. Her lack of morality and decency. Her penchant for hurting others without caring. Her absence of self-confidence. Those were gone now. She hoped.

“You’re a weak, sniveling conman. That’s all you are, Stanley. Get out of here. Never approach me or my son again or I’ll slap you with a restraining order.”

His surprise at her newfound attitude was replaced by a cool, even gaze. “So now you’ve become the domestic Goddess you always claimed to detest, haven’t you? Living in this hick town with nothing but jerks around you? Like Hunter. He’ll never amount to anything but a small-town boy from a horse farm.”

“Hunter is twice the man you are. He’s good, kind, thoughtful, and intelligent. He’s also an excellent father. I knew even back then you were nothing compared to him. So fuck off, Stanley. I don’t want you anywhere near me. Ever again. I don’t even care why you came here. Was it for money? You pathetic wretch. Never learned how to make any on your own? Forget it. I don’t fucking care.”

“You don’t, but everyone else does, *stepbrother-fucker*.” He snickered the nickname with a mean smile and an evil glint in his eyes. “You’ll never be accepted here because no one will ever forget that. Not in this small-minded, one-horse town.”

She shut her eyes. Was that true? No. How could it be? She knew they accepted her because she saw how far Roman had come around. And his family. And some members of Hunter’s immediate family. But that didn’t matter anymore. It was ancient history. She changed her image.

Stepbrother-fucker and all that the name entailed was dead.

For good. Forever.

“Just leave me the fuck alone.”

“Can’t I make a spectacle of you? I mean, *us*. Of course, I can. How do you think your cop-fucker over there will deal

with that?” He gave her a malicious sneer. All the veneer and polish of his feigned aristocracy melted. He was no more than an empty, vapid mannequin. She shuddered and got a chill. He had no soul inside him. Just a vacant hole of cruelty and negative emotions.

Stanley began molding her and grooming her from the age of seven onward. She saw it all so clearly now.

She was only a little girl when her sociopathic stepbrother entered their home. She had her mother to thank for that. If Stanley were a few years older, people would have sympathized and tried to help her. They would have realized her stepbrother was a predator all along, grooming a little girl. Despite being the same age, Stanley was still a predator.

And now she saw the sinister gleam in his eyes. Cold chills covered her arms even with the high temperature of the summer day. She felt vindicated for finally seeing him clearly. He manipulated her. She was a victim of a domestic abuse. It went on for decades.

And no one reported it.

Not even her.

Everything was suddenly revealed as if the sun finally broke through the storm clouds. She was a victim who perpetrated his crime in her adulthood when she cheated on Hunter.

But Stanley was the source.

No more. Never again.

She fisted her hands, getting mad that he knew about Roman. There was no doubt in her mind anymore. Stanley was the stalker. He was playing another cruel game with her and scaring her as usual. It was just a more extreme version of



what he did before. He was the cat and she was his mouse. He never drew blood or came close to killing her; he just batted her around and made her do his bidding under threat of what he *might* do.

The flowers that came? Who else knew about them but him?

“How did you manage to look so big outside the cabins?”

He sneered and a cocky gleam appeared in his eyes. “Wasn’t me.”

The little grin he failed to conceal told her he was behind it, even if he physically didn’t do it. He paid someone obviously. How did she miss that?

She originally hoped it wasn’t Stanley. He never did things that way before. His former manipulation was very familiar and he often practiced it on her.

She was always his victim. The little mouse he liked to bat around and control.

Now she was rebelling and refusing to lie still and take it.

That thought made her smile and she stiffened her spine. “You’re right, he’s it for me. He’s also fearless and big. Get out of town. I know what you’re doing. Keep it up and I’ll tell Roman to stop you. He’d gladly end it because he’s sick of the shit too. You’re nothing but a weak, petty, little man who can’t satisfy any woman. None. Crawl back under your rock and live your sad life in isolation. This is your only chance. Stay away from me and my child or face the consequences. I will repay you, *stepbrother*,” she whispered. Getting right into his face, she added, “For all your depraved indecency and malice.”

Stanley stepped back in shock and stared at her incredulously. Her blood was boiling and she felt potent, visceral, and vital. She knew how powerful and strong she appeared to him. He could never control her again. The little mouse had grown into a lioness. No more. She gave him her most evil and mean grin to remember her by.

For the first time in two decades, she stood up to Stanley. Her pride and the spontaneous surge of joy that filled her made her physically gasp. Her speech was inspiring. She was pleased with her command and authority. Free from Stanley. Free from all the nasty concepts that Stanley planted inside her. Her life was suddenly authentic and true now. She didn't need anything from him anymore. The ventriloquist lost his dummy.

No better analogy to describe how he played and exploited her; she was a thoughtless dummy.

But never again.

Her liberation made her feel exceptional and lucky.

Getting back into the long beverage line, she waited, ordered the drinks, and finally wandered back to her friends. She was so grateful to have them. Friends. Wonderful, caring, loving friends who knew her so well. They saw what was inside her. And they still liked her and smiled and joked with her. The sense of belonging she'd been searching for as a little girl was finally satisfied by those near her.

Seeing Stanley in the flesh again was what fully cut the cords between them.

Francine was reeling. Tired. Exhausted. But not ready to tell any of them yet.

She would. She wanted to tell Roman that her stalker was no longer a threat. She was eager to explain her own revelation and how she finally banished the perp. She wanted Hunter and Kyomi to know too so they could quit worrying about her safety.

But right then, Francine wanted to enjoy her date with Roman, despite his denial that it was a date; she knew it was. Her day with him shone like gold. Stanley stole years from her, but not today.

Flopping beside Roman, she gave him the soda, and he drank it quickly. “What took you so long?”

“The lines were endless. Someone bitched about them to the attendant so I had to wait for them to finish their little confrontation.” She drank her water. Mentally, she applauded her rebirth and newfound freedom.

Roman’s gaze stayed on her as the conversation continued. He asked softly, “Everything okay?”

“Everything is wonderful.” She beamed and he smiled, a little confused by her blatant joy. But he pulled her closer to his side.

Like a boyfriend might do. She was more than willing to wait until Roman came to his own conclusion that he wanted her. When he was ready to say it, she would be too. She generously gave him all the time and space he required without feeling insecure or needy like she was with Stanley.

*Finally*, Stanley had become a fixture of her past. She was so eager to tell everyone. But not now. A day in the park, attending the carnival, lying in the sun, with all the people she most loved, was a gift and she wanted to enjoy every second of it.

## CHAPTER 19



“*I* HAVE TO LEAVE town overnight.”

Francine blinked in surprise at Roman’s words. He shrugged. “It’s business. I can’t talk about it yet. But it’s pretty important.”

“Of course, it is.” She nodded. “Where’re you going to?”

“Southern Idaho.”

He offered no explanation as to why he’d have to go there. “You’ll need to make some arrangements to stay with Hunter.”

She bit her lip in response. “Oh, right, because of the stalker threat.”

“Yes.” He gave her a look when her tone sounded odd. “Did you forget?”

She shook her head. “No, I was just having so much fun these last few days, I didn’t want to think about the reason I was actually staying here.”

Here. Roman’s place. His domain. She practically lived there now. Sometimes with her baby, sometimes alone.

The worst part for Roman was, she was right. He was also having fun during the last few days. And he kind of forgot about the stalker as well.

He finally located the top suspects on Shane's list, and the time had come to find out if Iris's rapist was the guy who was still alive or the one who died. Roman had no doubt he had to be one of the two.

He owed it to his family. Especially Iris. She deserved justice and anyone with a conscience would agree.

Iris waited years for this. How could he make her wait a moment longer than necessary? Iris might never know he made her wait for justice to prevail, but he'd know, and Roman couldn't live with that.

Meanwhile, he was having fun playing house with Francine and fucking her.

She became strangely chipper, flirty and agreeable after the carnival. Was it because he enjoyed being with Hunter, Kyomi and Russell? He was fitting in so easily that it was no longer impossible to exclude a long-term relationship from happening. That concept had already occurred to him, seeing her so full of joy and happiness. And full of sex. So much sex. Holy crap. He was getting used to feeling sore and exhausted from her.

He tried to keep up with her after unleashing her inner beast. She couldn't wait to have another orgasm, compensating for the decades without them, in a matter of weeks.

A task Roman loved to work at for her.

But now? Reality and his job interrupted everything.

"I wouldn't go if it weren't so important, but it can't wait."

"Of course, you should go. I'm sure Hunter and Kyomi will let me stay with them." She twisted her lips and seemed pensive.

“What?”

“When you get back, we need to talk. Fall is just around the corner. We have to go back to Edmonds and...”

“That has to wait ‘til I get back. Maybe overnight.”

He almost groaned. *The talk*. What subject was *the talk* about? What do we label ourselves now? Are we a couple? Friends with benefits? In a relationship? All the buzz words gave him a headache.

He usually dumped his girls long before they had *the talk*.

Actually, he *always* dumped them before the need to talk arose.

But Roman just nodded and said, “Okay, we’ll talk when I get back.”

And say what? When he left the next morning for Idaho, his thoughts were preoccupied with *the talk*.



ROMAN DROVE to the small town listed as Jarvis Redholt’s last known address. His nerves were ramped up, but he ignored them and kept his face stony. He knocked on the door and waited.

Who the fuck would answer?

No one? Jarvis himself? Who?

Twelve years had passed since the night an evil monster entered the Rydell River Ranch and found a young woman alone in her mechanic shop, *their* mechanic shop. He proceeded to throw her against the equipment, stunning and

disorienting her, then forced her to submit to him on the cement floor and violently raped her.

Roman read the police report several times. He was quite familiar with Shane's version also.

But Roman never heard the story from Iris's mouth. Shane asked him to spare Iris from recounting her version, so she didn't have to relive it.

Until now, he had no reason to ask Iris to relive it.

This man, Jarvis Redholt seemed to be the fiend who raped her.

Roman didn't have any proof.

But he had the facts.

Jarvis met Shane Rydell about thirty years ago when Shane came through this Idaho town. Shane's bike needed work and Jarvis's shop fixed motorcycles. Jarvis allowed Shane to do his own fix, using his shop and tools. The two became loose acquaintances after that. A few years after their first meet, Jarvis had ordered a motorcycle from Rydell Rides. Shane might have contacted him once or twice in the thirty years that passed, but they remained no more than acquaintances.

The night before, a popular swap meet that took place in the valley the weekend when Iris was raped. He was able to prove through credit records that Jarvis was there.

Jarvis knew his old acquaintance Shane Rydell lived in River's End.

But did he know Shane had a daughter?

The door burst open, startling Roman. A woman stood there with a toddler on her hip. "Hello?" She smiled but

seemed reserved and he detected a cautious tone in her voice. “Can I help you?”

Roman wondered how best to handle this and decided to introduce himself as a cop to put her more at ease. “My name is Roman Barrett. I’m an officer in a small town in Eastern Washington. I ran across this address during an investigation. May I ask, do you own this house?”

Her eyes dimmed and her mouth twisted. “What kind of an investigation?”

How should he answer that? What could he say to encourage her to trust him? She seemed immediately wary. What was she thinking? “Please, do you own this house?”

“I don’t. My worthless father owns it. But I live here. It’s the least he could give me. Us.”

Ah. Unresolved anger. Okay.

“Is your father Jarvis Redholt, by any chance?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Would you like to come in?”

Roman was glad he brought his concealed weapon with him. He touched it to reassure himself it was still there. Just in case. He couldn’t take any chances. This man brutally raped a young woman so Roman didn’t trust anyone or anything connected to him. Nor would he run from him. “Thank you.”

He entered the small, ordinary house. Cluttered in kid toys, Roman noticed a pile of fresh laundry folded on the love seat, and the TV playing cartoons. She smiled. “Can I get you anything?”

“No. I’m sorry for intruding.”

She flopped down on a chair and set her baby on the floor. He immediately crawled to a nearby toy. “But you want to



know about my father.”

He found it hard to think of Jarvis as a *father*.

She cringed. “I rarely call him that. Jarvis Redholt was no more to me than a sperm donor. I saw him maybe, five times in my whole life. He refused to pay my mother any child support or even send a damn birthday card. My mother had to support me on a minimum wage waitressing job. She worked lots of minimum-wage jobs while I was growing up. She had her own set of problems. Drugs and alcohol were her favorite amenities, but she loved me, and she tried to take care of me.”

He winced and understood. “And now you live in his house?”

She snorted. “He got an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer that seemed to signal his need for redemption. He scraped up the money from his illegally gotten gains and bought this house, claiming it was all for me. My husband and I don’t have a lot of money, but we’re both hard workers. I almost told my dad to keep his stupid house until my husband said some good could be sifted from all the harm he inflicted.”

Roman’s heart dropped. *Pancreatic cancer?* Very few survived that diagnosis.

“I never saw a death certificate for Jarvis Redholt.”

“He disappeared. I don’t know when or how he died. But I’m sure he did. He gave us this house along with a bullshit apology for leaving me a lifetime of nothing. He wanted to die in his own way. No bullshit chemo treatments, or radiation, or wasting away in a hospital bed. He got on his favorite motorcycle and rode down the highway in a dramatic departure. He told us to see him off. We waved goodbye as he disappeared down the highway. Said he had to die as he lived,

or some kind of crap. Just more bullshit. That was two years ago. I'm sorry, Mr. Barrett. I don't know where he ended up or died. I don't care either. But I saw the test results from the hospital and his cancer was a guaranteed death sentence without any treatment. He's dead now somewhere, but I don't have a clue where it could be."

"Wow." Roman was torn. He felt bad for the daughter and worse for Shane and Iris... The fucker died unhappy and alone, at least.

"No other family or friends?"

"None that I know of. He couldn't sustain a single relationship in his life. No one got close to him. He seemed awesome until he exposed you to his toxicity, which killed everything around him."

"Could he hurt someone?"

She nodded. "Yes." She said it without hesitation or emotions. Shutting her eyes, she shuddered. "Who? Who did he hurt?"

Telling this woman her father raped a young woman twelve years ago was irrelevant now. Roman had no desire to darken the memories of her dad more than they already were. He was about ninety-five percent sure her father raped Iris Rydell. But no good could come from telling his daughter, who was already well aware that her father was violent and cruel. His history and heritage were despicable to all who knew him.

Better to leave her in peace with the fucking house. The asshole literally rode off into the sunset. Strange sense of closure, but closure nevertheless.

Roman came up with a plausible lie. “I was tracking stolen bike parts. His old shop name came up during the investigation. But if he’s no longer around, then obviously, this is just another dead end.”

She waved a hand around. “Par for the course. Stealing shit and fencing stolen goods. Those were his specialties. I’m sorry. I got rid of everything I found in the garage before we even moved to this house. I refused to keep anything that belonged to him. I didn’t want the plunder from his past to taint us. We started over clean and innocent. I have a child to protect and raise.”

Roman rose to his feet and sincerely said, “I’m sorry to bring up any memories you prefer to forget. I wish you and your husband all the best and hope good things await you in the future.”

“I’m sorry you came so far for a dead end. Literally.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s just one more lead I had to check off. More often than not, they go nowhere. Thank you for your time. I’m sorry if I dredged up anything too unpleasant for you.”

Her smile was both sad and wise. “Nothing surprises me about him, but I have to consider my husband and child... For those reasons, I had to move on.”

He nodded. “I understand. Another lead... closed.” Not quite. If Iris could identify Jarvis, they would know for sure it was closed. Roman planned to show Iris a picture of him. At least, he’d have the perp’s name, his former location, and of course, where he was now, expired in some unknown venue.

He had to be sure about the name and the last known details before approaching Iris. It wasn’t justice, by any call.

But it was the truth. And knowing the truth might relieve them. If they could call it closure.

Ironically, the only suspect Roman thought was still alive turned out to be as dead as the other one. He hated asking Iris to look at their pictures to identify the perp.



ROMAN FELT HAMMERED AND EXHAUSTED. He was thrilled to know the truth and depressed that there could be no justice for Iris. Her ordeal weighed heavily on him that night. The need to open old, evil scars because he had to filled him with dread. But no one deserved to know the answers more than Shane and Iris.

Her pain was something Roman hated to see resurface.

Was the price of closure worth it?

He had no choice, so he could only hope it was.

He decided to eat a meal with a stiff drink before doing a face-plant in the motel bed.

And maybe placing a call to Francine.

The thought of curling up next to Francine was an antidote to everything else. He had a hard day. A meeting that went nowhere and the anticipation of inflicting more pain upon telling Shane and Iris. But he had to take it one day at a time.

He glanced down when his phone chimed. *Hunter*. He ignored it, feeling too tired to deal with anything else.

Then a text came through with 911 on it.

Hunter? Hunter was coding him with an emergency?

*Francine*. The damn stalker. God damn it.

He immediately called Hunter back and his heart was in his throat. “What happened?” He snapped when Hunter answered after a single ring.

“It’s Russell. He’s missing.”

The words were slow to fully register. Roman felt like someone was talking to him under water. A terrible black, muddy hole of water that filled him with anger.

Francine was not being threatened.

But... Russell?

Russell. A little baby? The little, sweet, red-haired baby? Francine’s baby? Hunter’s baby?

He shut his eyes as the terrible images shattered his calm. Gripping the phone, he feared he’d break it. He nodded nervously, although no one could see him. “What do you know?”

Hunter’s tone was ragged. Frightened. His voice was cracking and hollow all at once. “Francine put him down for a nap. She did a workout video, and when she finished, she went to check on him... but his room was empty. The bed was empty. Russell was gone.”

*Gone. Empty.* The worst words raged through his head.

Terrible things filtered in that almost made his knees buckle. “Are the police there?”

“Yeah. The entire ranch is searching for him. Come back now.” Hunter hung up and Roman understood. There were some things that couldn’t be discussed, and this was one.

A lost or kidnapped baby.

Gone.

Fucking A. *Francine*. Franny. His heart hurt in his chest. He imagined her pain and terror. Immobilized for a moment, he felt like his feet were glued to the floor. Not now. He had to shake off his personal emotions and the ache in his chest became more pronounced. If he went home at once, he could possibly help. Do something. He had to fix this for Francine. And Hunter.

But mostly, Roman wanted to be there for Russell. He had to find him. This was his wheelhouse and it no longer mattered that he was Francine's boyfriend or fuck partner or friend. None of the things that defined them mattered anymore.

He needed to be *her cop*. He needed to find *her son*. By compartmentalizing it, Roman took the first step.



INCONSOLABLE COULD NOT DESCRIBE Francine's state of mind. There was no word in the English vocabulary to capture her distress and anguish.

Cooling down after an intense session of Hatha Yoga, Francine wandered into Russell's room at Ian and Kailynn's house. She didn't expect him to be awake so soon, so she sipped on her water bottle and did her usual check-in on him.

Lowering the bottle, and peering into his bed, she blinked in disbelief as she tried to make sense of what she saw.

*Nothing.*

The ruffled bed had no baby in it.

Startled, she rushed forward and started pulling off the covers, but the bed was empty. Empty.

No baby. No Russell.

What the hell?

Her heart leapt into her throat as she frantically searched everywhere. Diving towards the closet, checking under the bed, she spent the next few minutes tearing apart the room, looking for any signs of him.

But nothing. Nowhere.

There was no sign of her baby.

He must have woken up early from his nap and started exploring. It was unlike him but kids could be unpredictable. That was their nature. Right? Right.

She reassured herself of that. Totally right.

She rushed as fast as she could out the door, hurrying down the hallway, looking right and left as she reached the main, open living area. But there was no sign of Russell. Just Kailynn.

“Russell?” she gasped. Her voice lost all volume as a series of horrible images bounced into her head and made her stomach churn. Something bad was going on. She had no facts, no basis, and no reason to say that, but her guts told her something wasn’t right.

“What?”

“I put him down for a nap and he isn’t here. Oh, my God. Kailynn, he must have gotten out of bed and gone exploring.” She shrieked, “Oh, my God, the river.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Kailynn answered without pause. She rushed around the counter and started moving towards the door. Francine followed her.

They both started screaming his name, moving away from each other without speaking but working in unison to find him.

Outside, they spread out, looking everywhere. Finally, Francine crawled under a large bush that a toddler could fit behind. She was screaming his name and calling him. “Russell. Russ. Baby... come on. Where are you?”

Two hands grabbed her and spun her around. Hunter was shaking her. Not hard, but with enough force to make her look up at him. “Where’s our son?”

“*I don’t know.*” Sobbing, she shook her head and nearly collapsed. Hunter’s hands were all that kept her upright.

“The doors were shut tight. He couldn’t have gotten out of the house. He’s not wandering the ranch or anywhere near the river.” Hunter’s voice was tight, low, and filled with panic. The same reason her voice went higher and her nerves were ragged.

“He was sleeping in his bed. I just did an hour of yoga... I swear to you... he was there...” Sobbing, her entire body shook.

“I know. But he’s not there now. Where could he go? Why isn’t he in the house?” Hunter’s usual calm escaped him. He let go of Francine and started pacing. She fell on her knees, holding her hands to her face as her tears streamed and her stomach cramped with sickening knots.

“I don’t know.” She screamed to his pleas. “I don’t fucking know. He was there. He was here. I don’t know where he is.” The words burst out and shattered her entire being. She didn’t know where her son was.

How could she live with another minute of that?

Two arms encircled her and gently tugged her upwards. Female arms. She tried to see through the blurry vision of streaming tears. *Kyomi*. Kyomi was the one who held her. She



didn't say anything or try to make it better, she just rocked Francine and the tears free flowed down both of their faces.

She and Kyomi couldn't stop crying while Hunter paced, panicking and mumbling. The truth entered her thoughts. But it was so horrible, so deeply phobic and terrorizing, that she all but rejected it.

"Hunter?" she pleaded. She needed his reassurance that her son, *their son*, her heart and life, hadn't been snatched from them. "Hunter..." she cried again.

"I don't know," Hunter finally screamed in answer to her anguished cries.

"He's... gone, isn't he?" She choked up while trying to whisper the awful words.

Her son. Their son. *No. No. No.* How could she bear to know the truth?

"Where could he go? Who was he with? How could he not be here?" Francine crumpled into a heap and all but sank into the ground. Kyomi struggled to hold her up.

Kyomi soothed her until she finally met her friend's steady gaze. "Kyomi?"

Kyomi shrugged and cried as she answered, "I don't know, Franny. No one knows where Russell is."

She merely put him down for a nap and now she didn't know where her own son could be. Or how he was.

"Call the police," Francine shrieked as she twisted her hands in Kyomi's shirt. The magnitude of her frantic words and Hunter's devastated her. The meaning and the horror were intolerable.

Kyomi tightened her grip on her. “He did, honey. He already did. The entire ranch is looking for him.”

How could this happen in such a small amount of time? She felt dizzy from her ragged nerves and shock. How much time had passed since they last saw him? Sobbing, she cringed at the terrible visions clouding her brain. Russell drowning in the river. Falling down and getting hurt somewhere. Maybe he was trapped and unable to answer their calls? Or... much worse. So terrible, she couldn't stand to consider the possibility.

How could Russell manage to get out of the locked house on his own? The doors were all shut. Everyone was aware of his presence and no one would have left any of the doors open.

Did someone kidnap him?

Someone. Stole. Her. Son? But how? Why? How could anyone do that? It was broad daylight. She, Kailynn, and Ian were inside the house. Who could have entered the Goddamned fucking house? How could anything like that happen?

Her brain rejected the conclusion. She started shaking her head. Over and over. Vigorously.

When her stomach cramped, she suddenly bolted for the bathroom. She vomited in the toilet repeatedly.

Curling up into a ball, she couldn't process what was happening during the last few minutes. She ached everywhere. She physically burned for her baby. Her sweet, innocent, wonderful, sweet-smelling toddler. Her arms ached to hold him. She loved his smiling face and giggle as he pulled on her hair or chatted away. All the familiar images of what Russell would be doing and should be doing right now, if he were safe

with her, and Hunter, and Kyomi and the rest of his family, flashed through her mind. But the people who should have known, *his people* didn't have any idea where he was.

Kyomi came after her. "The police are here," she announced gently before her own voice wavered.

"Did I do this?" she whispered to Kyomi. Staring down at her feet, her terror jolted through her veins.

"No. We don't even know what *this* is."

Her words were strong but their effect failed to calm Francine. "What's happening?" She grabbed her knees and hugged herself before slowly blowing out a breath and rising up. The police were here.

They came to find out about her missing son. Russell. A very young child was missing. The worst visions filled her mind's eye and she moaned with agony at what it might mean. Oh, God, never mind what it might mean to her, and them, she was worried for Russell.

"I don't know," Kyomi answered absent-mindedly.

"Come out. The cops want to speak to all of us."

Cops. Law enforcement.

Francine's heart ached for her son. And her mind scolded her. She needed Roman now. He'd know what to do. He would use every resource available to find the baby. His fierce attachment to his job and always doing the right thing emboldened her. "Roman. Could you please call him? He'll know what to do. Please. He's in Idaho working on a case. Call him for me, Kyomi," she pleaded in a heartbreaking tone.

Kyomi nodded. "We will." She helped Francine to her feet. "Just have a word with the officers first."

She shuddered. The officers. Asking about her son.

What had she done?



THE LONG HOURS passed by so slowly. Francine's agony never abated. She vacillated between uncontrolled tears and violent retching. Her moans of sheer physical agony collided with bouts of self-recrimination.

The cops fully questioned everyone: Francine, Hunter, Kyomi, Kailynn, Ian and all the family members and workers on the elaborate ranch.

While they examined the room for evidence, Francine felt distraught and useless in the house. She sat in the baby's room, his grandma's guest room, and sniffed the sheets that still smelled of his sweet scent. She couldn't go home to their house, or his bedroom yet. She could only hug her knees to her chest, and rock on the couch of her former in-laws' house. Her brain failed to accept the reality happening around her.

She could not survive this. No way. Russell was too important to her. Who was responsible? What were they thinking? Why did they do it? How could this happen? The day began as just another ordinary day. She shuddered. Nothing marked it as special or different until the moment she missed her son because he wasn't where he belonged.

She answered the endless questions. Over and over. Eventually, by rote. There was no need to censor what she said. She was desperate to help them in any way. They had to find him. If she could provide any clues, she would in a heartbeat.

If she had to go to prison for the rest of her life, but they found her son, she would have gladly made the exchange. Anything for Russell. She'd give anything to know her child was safe.

But nobody had any answers. Even the experts couldn't find a trace to lead them where her son was. No one had a clue what happened. There was nothing to go on and no witnesses. No trail of evidence. Russell vanished like vapor into the air.

One minute, Russell was there and then, poof. He was gone.

Each time the thought crossed her mind, Francine rushed to the toilet and vomited.

The words they used haunted her, like a terrifying horror film. Kidnapped. Taken. Gone. Traceless.

Darkness began to fall, and Francine whimpered at the realization that Russell, her little boy wasn't safe. By then, she was puking bile over and over, having nothing left in her stomach.

She ignored the movement around her. And whispers. And discussions. People came and went. Most reported to Ian and Hunter and Kyomi. She could not listen or comprehend their words. She ignored them, grieving in confusion and feeling forsaken by the world.

Where was her son?

As the sun went down and darkness fell, people were still out looking for Russell everywhere. When she glanced out the window once, she saw the steady sweep of countless flashlights. It was so eerie, she backed away and began whimpering softly. Kyomi grabbed her and quickly shut the blinds. Nothing could block it out. Reality.

She gripped Kyomi's hand. "Kyomi... where... what if..." but words failed her. Nothing could describe the fear gripping her heart. The flashing colors behind her eyelids.

"No, Francine. Don't say anything, damn it, *NO*." Kyomi grabbed Francine's arms and forcibly shook her. "No words like that. Russell's coming home to us. And very soon. There is no other way this can end."

Hours later. She was drifting mentally. Incessantly aching. Sniveling occasionally. Feeling totally useless.

But her tears never stopped.

Finally, the door burst open. It was dark out and dozens of flashlights still scoured the area. She heard voices from the many volunteers searching for her son. Hunter's son. One of the Rydells was missing so most of the population of River's End was helping to look for him.

Everyone except Francine. She was curled up on the bathroom floor, crying and retching alternately.

## CHAPTER 20



*H*OURS. IT HAD BEEN hours since Francine's son disappeared. Russell was gone. *Gone*.

Wringing her hands and pulling her hair, Francine tugged too hard and cried from the pain of her scalp. She feared she would go insane. She had to control her reeling panic. Her tears and desire to die right now were helping no one. The rational part of her understood that much. But the strength she sought to hold up was beyond her.

So far beyond her.

She couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't face the truth. She couldn't hold her shit together. All the puking and crying. Being useless and meaningless. Her thoughts were scattered and spacy as her panic reigned supreme.

Why Hunter didn't banish her from the ranch amazed her after what happened. She deserved whatever hostility he harbored towards her.

She lost their child. Their son. Their sweet, little baby.

So helpless and tiny. Still totally dependent on them. The thoughts of what could be happening to him right now made her clutch herself before racing to the toilet once more. Even

the bile choked her, and she had the dry heaves from an empty stomach.

She couldn't stand not knowing where Russell was or what he was enduring right now.

Where could he be?

She whimpered and closed the toilet seat.

Hunter came in and pulled her upright. He held her against him and didn't try to recite any platitudes as she clung to him. She was grateful for the support.

"Roman's pulling in now."

Francine nodded and came out with him.

Roman burst through the door and all his brute force and thundering presence instantly reassured Francine. His height and bulk totally juiced up the energy in the room. His entire body seemed to radiate strength and direction. Something they all needed.

Relief. The deep, undeniable tug of relief washed over Francine. Roman could fix it. Roman could find her son. He'd...

No. As always, her first instinct was to depend on a man. How could Roman fix this? She didn't know.

But he was a cop. He had experience, connections, resources, and a knowledge that none of the rest of them had. Maybe something was shifting, finally moving forward. Hope sprang in her heart. Francine felt renewed hope with Roman's arrival.





THE ENTIRE ROOM went quiet when Roman burst inside. Hunter stood next to Francine who, in a word, was utterly destroyed. Tears ravaged her face and her long hair was extra snarled and forgotten. Nothing mattered to her anymore. Seeing her in such a state of panic struck him like an arrow in the heart. It fucking mattered now. She mattered very much to him. No labels. He just cared about her.

Everyone was waiting. There could be no waiting at a time like this.

“What the fuck is being done right now?”

Hunter spoke to him in a low, dull, crackling tone that hinted of his unshed tears and unreleased anger.

There was more to this. And everyone knew it. Why wasn't it being addressed front and center? Roman paced back and forth. “What do they know about Stanley?”

“Stanley?” Hunter turned his head and his eyes shifted around the room.

Francine stiffened. She stared at him with limp, dead eyes.

“Yeah. The freak who manipulated and ruined Francine for years. How is he not at the top of everyone's suspect list?”

Silence. Then Hunter said, “Because she hasn't heard from him for almost a year.”

“Stanley?” Francine uttered. “He couldn't... what? What makes him a suspect? What did he do?”

“He kidnapped your son, Francine. Russell's been abducted. Sean sent me the statements. No way did he wander out of this house on his own.” The blunt words felt like bullets being shot at her. Sean was Roman's superior, of that she was certain.

She gasped and doubled over, grabbing her stomach.

Shaking her head frantically, she said, “But why? Why would he kidnap Russell? He has nothing to gain. And he hasn’t contacted us.”

“*You*. He has *you* to gain. All those pranks he did to scare you. I underestimated him. I didn’t realize how lethal they could be. I have to share the blame. Now where would Stanley be?”

Francine moaned loudly and her entire body folded over as she started choking on her own sobs. Kyomi rushed over and held her tightly. Looking at him, stricken, Kyomi’s own sobs made her hard to understand.

“He... he... one time, he came looking for Francine. When we first moved to Edmonds. He was really rude and vicious. But he left. After a mild, short confrontation. It was the first time Francine ever stood up to him. She found her voice and I—that is, *we* were so proud of her. For a moment, that was so brief I didn’t think about it until now, he seemed ready to attack me. I had a—a fleeting ripple of fear when I came between him and what he wanted, which was Francine. But he left and didn’t do anything more about it,” Kyomi told Roman.

“Because I was on my way into the house and he’s a fucking coward,” Hunter muttered.

As they spoke, Francine’s entire body jerked and bolted upright. Her face was aghast. Shocked with an unexpected epiphany, it contrasted with her previous expression of agony.

Roman read her guilt, confusion and surprise immediately. “What? What is it, Franny?”

“Stanley—do you really think he took Russell?” she whispered and the horror she felt was audible in her tone.

“Why was that not everyone’s first thought?” Roman grumbled.

“There’s no motive. Why would he do that? His whole MO was never like this.”

“Refusing to respond to him wasn’t your MO until it was, right?” Roman countered. His head was aching over the loss of time. The first lead had to be Stanley. “He’s doing this to scare you again. And it seems to be working, huh? Tell me how that isn’t his usual MO?”

She gasped and jerked back as if he struck her. “No. Oh... no.” she moaned before doubling over again. Her head shaking, she started chanting manically. “*I did this. I did this. I did this.*”

Roman rushed forward, and took her arm. He shook her as if she needed an intervention to stop her short-circuiting thoughts. “What? What did you do?”

“Stanley—he was at the—the carn—the carnival.” Her words were faintly whispered. And her tone was heartbreaking.

Roman saw red as he asked, “What do you mean, he was at the *fucking* carnival?” He roared the words, making Hunter flinch. “The one we went to?”

“Yes,” she sobbed and her tears made her hiccup as they streamed over her face.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell any of us?”

“I saw him when I went—to—to get the drinks.” She stuttered over the words. The useless fucking tears were hindering the timeline. Roman fought the urge to grab her arms and shake her until she fucking spilled it. Talk. Tell him what happened... now.

Francine cowered as if she expected him to start beating it out of her. He sputtered when he saw her cowering. It was insulting and ridiculous. Pulling himself away from her, he started pacing. The entire room went silent after his avalanche of fury. “What the fuck are you talking about, Francine? You saw Stanley *in* River’s End? And spoke to him? But you didn’t tell anyone or even consider why he came here? After being scared and stalked, it never occurred to you that it was this fuck?”

Tremors awakened her body. Her teeth chattered as she sputtered once more, bending over and clutching her stomach. “It did occur to me, but I didn’t think it was him until he confronted me...” Her voice trailed off.

“And then you knew it was him?”

“He didn’t confess to it, but yes, I knew it was him. He paid someone else to scare me but he’s the perpetrator.”

“Why didn’t you come right back and tell me? Hunter? Kyomi? Anyone? Why didn’t you fucking tell someone? What the fuck is wrong with your brain?” His rage unnerved her and she winced in fear.

“I was going to. Remember when I said I had to talk to you when you came back? I planned to tell you then. Among other things...” She tried hard to defend herself.

Roman stopped for a moment, his fists clenched. “Tell me what? That you saw Stanley? That he was the guy stalking you and trying to scare you?”

“No. Yes. All of it. But when it happened, I realized I could finally resist him. Even being alone, I stood up to him. It seemed *so* important at the time.” She sobbed, clutching her chest as if her heart was stopping. “Believe me, I know it’s

nothing now. Just stupid, pointless shit. I saw it as a milestone in my independence. An improvement for the better. And I... I..."

"You what?" Roman screamed at her, needing all the information he could get from her now. There was no time for her to have a melt-down or wax eloquent about her feelings. "We're wasting time. We need to know everything that happened, *now*."

"I thought about it for a few days. I was proud that I stopped being... *her*."

"Her? Who's her?"

"*Her*... stepbrother-fucker. I stopped being her for good. And I just wanted to enjoy how wonderful I felt. It was true and it was mine. I improved myself. I told Stanley off and said I regretted ever knowing him. It was epic. Amazing. I was so glad to finally move on. I never dreamed my silence on the matter would... lead to..." Her sobs ended her words.

Roman's anger was like a living, breathing organism ready to explode from his chest. He started stomping instead of pacing to relieve some of it. His fists were clenched and his mouth was compressed. "You didn't tell anyone because you were *feeling it*?"

"Yes." She hiccupped again. "You were the first one I planned to tell. I just wanted to tell you in my own way and time. I didn't consider Stanley a threat any longer."

"*You* told me you hadn't seen him in a long time. Is that true?"

"I used to see him now and then. He'd pop up like he did at the carnival, just to taunt me. Then he'd go away. That

behavior didn't alarm me because he'd always done it. For ten years he came and went."

Roman's ears could have ruptured with the pressure in his head. Exploding with fury, he shouted, "You were fucking a cop and you didn't think to mention, *hey, my ex still bothers me?* I was under the impression that you no longer had *any* contact with him. You're a fucking liar. You can't stop lying and cheating and doing what's best for you, for Francine *Stanton*." He spat out her last name with disgust. "Look what that fucking got you. Just look, Francine. Where the fuck is Russell?"

The entire room went eerily silent after his infuriated scream. Francine recoiled in obvious embarrassment and shock at his harsh words and the vehement tone he used to admonish her.

She hung her head, whimpering in sobs.

"Well?" Roman's hands were on his hips. "How could you keep something like that from me? How many times have I asked if anyone bothered you? Hunter asked you too, and hell, all of us did. Of course, we needed to know if he still bothered you." His anger mounted as he spoke and the pressure increased. "And again... while fucking a cop. Why did you keep the truth from me? You did the same thing to Hunter. You lied to him about Stanley. You told all of us he was no longer a threat. No precautions were taken because you chose not to tell us about him. *Motherfucker!*" Roman turned and kicked the couch. His foot bounced off, but his toe ached from the act of violence.

"Fucking A, Roman!" Hunter suddenly snapped, striding up to Roman and pushing his finger into his chest. Startled that Hunter would defend her, Roman took a step back. Hunter

yelled in his face, “Back the fuck off her. She’s his *mother*. She would never do anything to jeopardize Russell’s well-being on purpose.”

Roman ignored them all.

“Yeah, well, until she did.”

Hunter stuck his finger in Roman’s chest again. “Fuck off, Roman. We’re missing *our child*. Stop yelling at her. She didn’t kidnap her own child. She didn’t know how dangerous Stanley was.”

“But I’d know. I would have known and taken precautions to protect her and Russell!” Roman shouted. His gaze landed on her. “You valued your own vanity above his safety.”

Roman all but lunged at Hunter. Why didn’t Hunter care about what Francine did to him? And now Russell? All because of Stanley Stanton? Her sick obsession with him affected Hunter’s life and her own *for years*. Now their son was involved, and he still couldn’t see it?

“Don’t you get it, Hunter? She gave Stanley access by staying quiet about him. Her continued dependence on the man who did everything he could to ruin her and her life. And now he has your fucking son, Hunter. Yet you defend her actions?”

“I—I know Francine would never do anything to hurt Russell.”

“And yet... the end result is, she did contribute to his abduction.”

Francine moaned with pain at his cruel words.

“She didn’t.” Kyomi suddenly stood up and held Francine whose tears were streaming down her face. She hugged

Francine as the poor girl started choking on her own tears again. Roman's words painted a lurid picture. "Nothing has happened to Russell. How dare you say otherwise. Stanley obviously wants money. Russell is the means to getting it. There's no reason to hurt him."

"Oh, really? Is that because anyone who kidnaps a baby from a house in the middle of the day is sane and trustworthy and always acts decently? Listen to yourself. I've seen what people do." Roman was consumed by his anger. And his emotions and fears. No one knew how bad it could get. No one but Roman knew.

"Stop it." Francine suddenly jerked herself free of Kyomi's hold. She rushed forward and screamed right into Roman's face. "Stop it. Stop saying that about my baby." Then she turned and ran off, holding her hand to her mouth. Moments later, everyone heard her retching her guts out again.

The entire room fell into stunned silence. Roman eventually broke it. "Yeah. Well, truth is hard to accept. I'm not afraid of it. We've been fucking, I'm a cop, and she lied to me and everyone else about Stanley. Her baby's gone and she needs to comprehend that by telling everybody the whole truth so we can find him." He left the room and followed the heaving sounds to the bathroom.

His heart hurt. Francine held the knot of her hair back, leaning over the toilet rim and hacking up gobs of spittle and bile.

Sighing, he went inside. He closed and locked the door behind him.

He sat on the rim of the tub near her and waited until she finished barfing the bile. Finally, she sank back on her heels and he flushed the toilet. Grabbing a washcloth, he dampened



it and handed it to her without a word. She wiped her face. He knelt down beside her, taking the washcloth from her and wiping the tears off her face. All the snot and throw-up were gently removed by him. Her eyes filled with tears again and she simply looked down as his hand held her chin firmly.

“I disgust you,” she finally whispered.

He knew what she meant. But he shrugged and pretended not to understand, saying in a lighter voice, “I live with Rodrigo. He can’t hold his liquor any better than a child. I’m used to chunks flying everywhere.”

She shook her head. “What you said out there—” Biting her tongue, she stopped. Her gaze slid up to his.

Was she waiting for an apology? “I meant every word.”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “Why did you come in here then?”

“Because I meant it. The truth must be told and I always tell the truth. Whether anyone wants to hear it or not. You already know that about me. The truth must come out. It’s the only way to start, with the truth. So I won’t apologize for it. You’re fucking a cop, are you not? Me. Officer Roman Barrett. Is that a true fact?”

She bit her lip and nodded her head.

“And I asked you about Stanley Stanton on several occasions. Another true fact?”

She glanced down and finally nodded but her hands trembled.

“You should have told me.”

“I thought I did. I thought I told you—”

He opened his mouth to argue and she flipped her head back. Her eyes flashed with some feeling for the first time, in spite of the tears. “*Enough!* I thought I told you enough. None of that pranking shit was anything like Stanley’s past actions with me or anyone else. Plus, the man he hired to do them was so much bigger than Stanley that I assumed it couldn’t be him. I didn’t suspect him at all. Not in the least. I never dreamed...” She shut her eyes. When she opened them, her eyes were awash in tears. “I never dreamed he’d go after Russell.”

Roman squeezed her chin. “No. Be honest, Franny. You knew you didn’t tell me all of it. You withheld some of it because you thought it made you look bad. When I said the starting point for me is the truth, I meant *all of it*. Even the bad stuff nobody wants to share. It has to be brought out in the open to clear the air. I can move forward from that point, but I demand nothing less.”

“I’ve disgusted so many people. Hunter. Kyomi. My parents. The general public. But I’ve never disgusted my son. He—he loves me. And I would never do anything to hurt him. What am I going to do?”

She wilted and fell against him. Shocked to find her all but flopping into his arms, he caught her. She looked up and sniffed. “I know you’re mad at me. I get that. But for just this moment, can you be something more than just the cop I’m fucking? Could you be my friend? My son is gone and I’m sick with fear. Seeking the truth is right. Okay? But don’t forget humanity. Emotion. Not everything is black or white or easy, at least, for some of us it isn’t, Roman. Being harsh and judgmental in this moment might not be as helpful as being there for me. Or anyone who suffers a loss so horrible, terrifying, and sickening.”

He remained impassive but didn't stop looking down at her. No one ever called him out like that. Maybe she had a point. The truth was precious, but maybe he didn't have say it so bluntly all the time.

She added, "Unless you're really just fucking me? Sorry to disappoint you then because gee, I don't feel like it. Maybe you care as a cop, someone in the field of law—"

He angled his head and put his mouth on hers. Startled, she let out a little squeak. He made her swallow her last words and kissed her. Taking her face in his hands, he swept his thumb over her lower lip and sighed, "I'm not just fucking you."

"Could you possibly refer to it as something less... callous?"

Her request surprised him. "Fucking is what bothers you?"

"Intensely."

"But it's the raw truth."

She set two fingers on his mouth. "The truth can be expressed in a more refined way." She almost smiled before she wept fresh tears. "I'm sure you could find other ways to say the same thing."

His eyebrows juttred upwards. "You prefer that I say we're what? Making love?" He shook his head. "I never talk like that, Franny."

"I usually don't talk about fucking either."

He smiled and planted another kiss on her mouth. "We'll discuss it in depth later. For now, tell me everything you know. Wrack your brain to remember everything. And hold yourself together, for Russell. I need to know the timeline. Everything that you said to Stanley. I need some leads, where he would go

and what he might do. I need you to give me every tiny detail you recall, even if you think it's unimportant. Let me be the judge of that, okay? Russell is counting on you.”

She shut her eyes tightly before more tears fell and she swallowed hard. Then she stood, fisting her hands and saying, “I’ll do anything for Russell.” She rubbed her nose and something exploded in Roman’s chest. Was it seeing her display courage and motherly love? “No matter what happens between us, please, find my son.” She walked in front of him, her shoulders back, her head held up. No more tears.

Francine was in warrior mode. Roman respected that. They sat down in Ian and Kailynn’s living room as she began her rendition of her complicated history with Stanley Stanton. Hunter, Kyomi, Ian, Kailynn and he listened quietly without interrupting. Roman asked a few questions if he was unclear about something or thought it might lead somewhere.

She told a long story that spanned just over twenty years.

Some of it was familiar to Roman. She was a young child seeking acceptance and attention. When her stepbrother showed up in her life, she found it.

Her description of Stanley revealed he was never typical. She didn’t mince the details and told them everything. The first kiss in the media room of their parents’ large home to the first time they had sex. She believed they were bonded together for life. It was almost tragic to imagine teenaged Francine calling him her boyfriend and soul mate when Stanley was just a lewd manipulator.

“That’s not unusual with sociopaths,” Roman remarked. “He groomed you to welcome his advances and isolated you from everyone your own age, even your parents. He made you think he was the only one who understood and cared about

you. He made the bond you shared the only thing that mattered to you. He convinced you that everyone else was out to get you. Spreading paranoia. Being a control freak and a predator, he was adept at manipulation. You were young and innocent, the perfect target. If he hadn't been the same age as you, he'd be a pedophile."

She sniffed and lifted her eyes off the floor to his calmer, quieter words.

Then Hunter added, "I never allowed you to explain what it was like with him. I never realized how depraved—"

"We were? I was? You weren't wrong, Hunter, I was. I'm so embarrassed for taking any part in it. Roman was right that I played down the truth of who I used to be and what I used to do. I didn't want any of you to know the details, and the worst of what I did."

"Stop." Hunter suddenly shot upright. "We're not reliving the past. What was has no influence on what is now. You're the mother of my son and that's all that matters." He paced a few steps and said, "Now you're my friend and Kyomi's. No need for more apologies. You're different *today*, and that's all that matters now. Except finding our son. Did you get any leads from her story?" Hunter's gaze pierced Roman.

"Other than my conclusion that Stanley's the culprit? Yes. I'm tossing around a few ideas. He shows up every few months, a regular interval pattern. Until she rejected him. He blamed you and Kyomi, and when she didn't change, he snapped. She came here and he saw an opportunity to reach her." Roman's gaze landed on Francine. "He was the cat and you were his mouse. From the very start. This is another instance of that; except he upped the stakes and the consequences."

Open-mouthed, Francine stared at Roman after his summation. “I never saw any of that.”

“You couldn’t. You were too busy being scared. He thinks of you as his possession. You were trained to react to him and him alone. And you did that for years. But when Russell came into the picture, you stopped playing along. He decided he could force you to play.”

Letting out a small cry, Francine pressed her lips together to stop her tears.

“What would his next move be?” Kyomi inquired.

“He’ll try to get her to come to him. Alone,” Roman answered. “I don’t think this is about Russell, but rather, making Francine come back to him.”

“He must know we called the cops. He knows about you,” said Francine.

Roman shut his eyes. That tidbit was new. But he held his tongue. She obviously just remembered the connection. “And what makes you think he knows about me?”

“The day of the carnival he called me—”

“What?”

“Cop-fucker.”

Right. From stepbrother-fucker, which Stanley no doubt adored, he twisted it around to make her feel worse. “You are. No shame in that,” Roman said with a shrug.

Kyomi let out a small laugh. She flopped beside Francine and took her hand. “He’s right. There’s no shame in any of it. Stanley’s the only shameful one.”

“Try to remember his facial expressions. How did he take the news? How did he deliver it?”

She shut her eyes and spoke after a long moment. “His expression was always hard to read. That’s why I always tried to please him. His strength over me was mostly based on his lack of reaction. He ignored me to punish me. He sneered and threatened to announce his presence to you. He knew we were together. And it bothered him. But he was probably madder that I wasn’t following his orders anymore.”

“I think you’re right. Control is power to him. He controls you now, doesn’t he? How will he contact you? A way that no one else could know about? Not the cops. Not Hunter. Not me.”

Startled, she stared up at him.

“How... how did you know?”

“I’ve been at this stuff quite a while. Human nature isn’t too hard to predict.”

“You can’t work on this case, Roman. They won’t let you,” Hunter interjected suddenly.

“Of course not. I’m merely here to support my girlfriend, right?” He glanced around. They all agreed with head nods.

Kyomi let out a deep breath. “Thank God. Just quit yelling at her.”

“Fair enough,” he said to Kyomi. “So?” He raised an eyebrow at Francine.

A furious blush covered her face. “As with everything, I should have thought of it hours ago. Wait.” She pulled her phone out, opened a social media app and typed some stuff in before giving it to him. “Fake accounts, we used the names of

famous actors we had crushes on. We created them before anything sexual happened, when we were about thirteen.”

Roman was discouraged by how long and deep her connection to this controlling, manipulating maniac was. Stanley invaded all her stages of growth. He was a blood-sucking leech that all but destroyed young Francine.

And now he'd stolen her son.

But Roman was going to get him back.

There were no new messages as the accounts were decades old. Roman held the phone out to her and she leaned forward to grab it. Setting it into her hand, he wrapped her fingers around it but held on still. “You’ll let me know as soon as he contacts you?” he asked, gentling his tone for the first time. She blinked at the politeness of his request.

Francine nodded. “Yes. Of course. You think he will?”

“Yes. Within hours. He’s just baiting the mouse he loves to bat around.” He shook his head. “Know this: I’m not okay with it. If I can catch the motherfucker, he’ll get as much jail time as we can possibly sentence him to.”

Francine lowered her head and said softly, “Thank you.”

Hunter started pacing. “What’s next? Do we just wait?”

“Well, the ranch and resort area are still being searched. The cops on the case have your entire history to sift through, if we’re wrong. But for now? I don’t think so. What’s next? We wait for him to reach out. Francine is the prize.”

“Russell is his pawn,” Hunter stated and a shudder passed through his body. Dread. Fear. Worry. Everyone was consumed by the idea of what could go wrong.



“Yes. And Stanley needs Russell,” said Roman, trying to establish some positivity. They all needed hope now. “He needs Russell for negotiations, so he’ll keep him safe.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you didn’t believe it yourself,” Francine said between them.

He glanced at her. “You know I wouldn’t.”

Her shoulders slumped, but for once, Roman was glad to be honest and blunt. His unvarnished truth theory convinced Francine to believe him. Her relief was tangible.

Stanley was as dangerous as a loose cannon. With no sense of morality or common decency to guide his decision-making, no one knew what he was capable of. Roman walked over to Francine. He leaned down and gently took her in his arms, hugging her for a long time. She fully responded to him. Quiet. Clinging. Hoping. Believing.

The truth would have to suffice for the time being.

That’s all Roman could give her right now.

He secretly hoped he didn’t end up being a liar.

## CHAPTER 21



*H* EY, MY LITTLE MOUSE. Miss me now?

The message came through just half an hour later. Francine was incessantly checking her phone since the last conversation. Roman made some calls and examined her computer, tracing all her social media, emails, and everything she'd ever exchanged with Stanley. Even her text messages showed up in the cloud of her laptop.

Her heart froze. Then it cracked and splintered. *Mouse?* Holy shit. That's what Roman called her with him. How could Stanley know?

She looked around.

Shit. Fuck.

He could only know that if he were listening. But how?

She resisted the urge to whimper. *How?* Was all she typed back.

*I've been listening to your conversations the entire time. Not hard to bug a common location where everyone gathers. What could be more ideal than the grandparents' house? You'd be surprised at the technical equipment you can find on ordinary websites nowadays.*

She shut her eyes for a moment and the impact of his words made her think. He must have been listening to know the three moves she made this summer. Three cabins that he knew about before she moved her meager belongings into them. So easy. And stupid. His game of cat and mouse never ended.

She really was no more than a mouse to him.

*Bring back Russell. I'll do anything you want.* She was more than eager to get right to it.

Instead of answering her direct plea, he rambled, something she was used to. *Your cop-fucker isn't as stupid as I first thought. Big and dumb. He knows more about me than you do, and you've known me since we were seven. But you won't tell him, will you? You haven't yet. Let's keep it that way, hmm? For Russell's sake? What do you say, Franny?*

She glanced up and looked around. Roman was scouring her laptop. Hunter was beside him. Kyomi was in the kitchen. Her ex-in-laws were speaking quietly to each other. She saw the concern etched on their pale, tear-stained faces. No one was watching Francine at the moment.

Stanley had her with one sentence.

*For Russell's sake.*

Stanley never called her Franny. Not until he heard Kyomi and Roman call her that; his simmering anger at the nickname kept her silent.

*What do I do?*

*Get up. Go to the bathroom so no one wonders why you're typing on your phone. One look at your face and your cop-fucker, or your clueless ex-husband might guess.*

Stanley knew Francine too well. As unsettled as she was, she rose to her feet and hurried to the bathroom. No one noticed or tried to stop her. She'd hurled so many times in there, they were becoming used to it.

*Show Russell to me. Please. Please. Please.*

A photo appeared. Russell was sleeping on the floor. Uncovered on a hard floor, but at least, he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Her heart clenched. *Tell me what you want. I'll do it.*

*Come to me.*

*I'll gladly come to you. In exchange, release Russell and let him go. He's nothing to us.*

*Us.* The word glared at her. Half her life, *us* was comprised of her and a monster. The man who controlled and ruined her. The fiend who kidnapped her son.

*You'll have to be alone.*

*Well, obviously. Like I'd bring the cops with me. I know what you want. I know you, Stanley. So agree to release Russell and I'll give you what you want.* She all but snorted out loud.

*What do you think I want?*

*Us. You want us together again.* The answer was clear. She knew she was right. Her strength and power grew exponentially. Russell would be okay because he was just the pawn, the bait to draw her out. And she'd gladly sacrifice herself to the monster to free Russell and keep him safe.

*Don't you want me back?* No. Never again, she thought.

But she wrote. *Yes. It's easier with you. I can be myself with you.*

*I got tired just listening to their sanctimonious demands of you.*

*Tell me where to find Russell so I know he's safe. If he's safe, I'm yours.*

*Meet me at the last cabin you rented. No one can suspect we're right fucking there. We'll leave him in the playpen, and someone can pick him up when we're far away. Deal?*

Her heart sank. No. Never. But she had no choice; she had to agree to his terms.

She'd slip a note to Roman and let him know. He could decide how to follow her. He must realize he could not stop her. This was her only chance to save Russell.

*That shade of peach brings out your skin tone. You should wear it more often.*

Freezing, she glanced down.

He must have had a camera in the house as well. Her heart hammered and raced. She couldn't risk leaving Roman a note. They were all gathered in the main living room. No doubt, that was where he hid the camera. Her heart was lodged in her throat, but she carefully typed, *Thank you. I wish I didn't have throw-up and streaks of tears all over it. Not appreciated, Stanley.*

Stanley texted a laughing emoji.

Fucker. There was no humor in her for this shit.

*When?*

*How can you leave there by yourself?*

*I'll blame it on the vomit. I'll say I need to take a quick shower and change. Anyone would believe that.*

*True. They would. Okay. Come alone or I'll know.*

*Of course, you will. I don't doubt anything you say now.*

*Excellent. Then we're on the same page.*

*Now?*

*Now.*

She clicked her phone off. Then she stepped out of the bathroom after flushing the toilet. She brushed off her peach shirt and announced, "I need to shower and change. I have some stuff at the last cabin I stayed in still. I shouldn't take more than a few minutes." Her voice cracked as she spoke. It was real. She *did* need a few minutes.

Kailynn nodded and rose to her feet. She took Francine's hand. "That might make you feel better. And drink something too, honey, being sick won't help Russell."

Francine squeezed Kailynn's hand, pleading with her eyes, but Kailynn merely saw her grief and fear. "I know we've had our differences, but after hearing what you went through, I understand some things better now."

Francine almost wilted against the competent, capable woman. She wished she could let someone else fix this. But that's how she ended up here.

"I blame myself."

"But not for this," Kailynn said softly with kindness.

Tears stung her swollen, aching eyes. "But not for this," she repeated.

She brushed her hands together and said, “I shouldn’t be longer than fifteen minutes.” Francine hoped they’d come looking for her when she didn’t return after fifteen minutes.

Roman and Hunter still studied the laptop, scanning years of texts.

“Take all the time you need. We’ll come and get you if they find anything.”

She knew they wouldn’t find anything, but she kept her mouth shut. Stanley could see and hear everything.

She had to play the role of the grieving mother without acting like she was going to her own funeral. She had to save her son. That’s all that mattered. Whatever price Stanley demanded, she would pay. But her hands were shaking and Kailynn noticed. “Oh, honey, you’re still in shock. Why not just shower here?”

“No,” Francine snapped, sounding way too sharp and loud. Roman lifted his head and slowly turned towards her. He searched and scoured her face while she did her best to withstand his scrutiny. *He knew.* Without anything from her, he knew. She shrugged. “I’m sorry. I’m just exhausted. I need a few moments to clean up and change my clothes.”

“Of course. No one can blame you for wanting that.” Kailynn released her hand and stepped aside.

Roman’s gaze was still pinned on her. Then he voiced, “You can’t go alone. Considering...”

Ian stood up. “I’ll walk with you, Francine.”

She nodded. “Thank you.” Moments later they exited the house together. Walking in sync for moments, quiet between them. She appreciated Hunter’s dad was never one to mince words or voice useless platitudes. She didn’t have the mental

wherewithal to even pretend conversation just then, considering the stress eating at her.

It was so fucking dark. No doubt, Stanley planned to disappear with her under the cloak of darkness. Clean, neat and simple.

She glanced at the resort cabins. Was he hiding there the entire time? Her gut indicated yes. He simply took her son half a mile away and hid him in the very place they already searched.

Stanley was also there. Waiting them out.

Waiting for him to tell her what he wanted her to do next. Roman was spot on about their relationship. Cat and mouse.

Once to the cabin door, she paused to say to Ian, "I'll be fine now. Thank you."

"There is no being fine, Francine. We'll find Russell, there is no other outcome of this. But you are not fine. Don't waste time pretending to be."

She blinked back the threatening tears. His tone was so calm, assertive, fatherly. But his eyes were red-rimmed and glistening. Showing his stress that his words didn't express. She licked her lips and admitted, "I'm so scared."

She was trembling right then. Terrified to enter the cabin behind her. Scared what it might mean for her. She wanted to lean into Ian and let him hug her, and shore up her resolve. But no. NO! Stanley was on the other side of this door, and no doubt was both watching and listening. She had to be strong and assertive, all to keep her son safe.

Ian set his hand to her forearm. "We all are. Don't underestimate it. But believe that we all are here for you." He



let out a grunt of disgust. “Even as those words do nothing for you.”

She gulped. “They do mean something to me. We’ve never had a relationship of any type. I know why. But I know how you feel about Russell. So it does mean a lot.”

“I didn’t know,” Ian said simply. “I didn’t know what you went through.”

She smiled softly. “You couldn’t have. I didn’t fully know. But it also isn’t all an excuse. I still was who you first met.”

“But we, my wife and I, never let you change. You have, and we know that now, and won’t mistake it again.”

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much that would mean to me.”

“You deserve it, and we should have realized it without all this trauma. But things will change from now forward. Go take your shower and regroup. Text when you’re done, and me or someone will come back for you.”

“Okay. See you soon.” She wouldn’t, but she believed her smile genuine enough. He had to believe her. Or she might put his life and her son’s at risk.

But with a squeeze of her arm, Ian nodded, turned and started to walk away. Waiting for a moment for him to get lost in the shadows, she then turned towards her destiny.

Throwing her head back, without knocking, she entered her little cabin. The place Stanley knew she hadn’t stayed in for weeks while she alternately slept at Roman’s and Hunter’s parents’ houses. Stanley might have been hiding there for several days. Waiting. Planning. Baiting her. The carnival was just his first appearance.

“Stanley?” she called out. Her nerves were calm now. Her voice sounded strong and normal. She was ashamed to call his name. Lifetime habits were hard to break.

“Francine.” He appeared in the arch of the hallway.

“Where’s Russell?” she demanded.

He gave her a congenial smile, but his eyes revealed his glee, a weird sense of control upon seeing her. She was his again. His favorite toy to play with was back. She tried to take it away.

She’d pay for that now.

“This way.”

She sprang to follow him down the hallway. Caution be damned. In a panic, she couldn’t wait to see Russell. She squeezed past Stanley’s fit, toned body and he laughed at her eagerness but allowed her to pass.

Her heart was beating so fast, she feared it might explode until... fuck. There he was.

Russell lay on the floor of the spare room. Francine started to snatch him up when Stanley warned her, “Don’t. Don’t wake him up. We’ll leave now.”

Her heart fell into her shoes. He refused to let her touch him. She feasted her eyes on Russell’s sleeping body. Memorizing him. Drinking him in. She couldn’t stand being right there without touching and cuddling him, letting him know she was there and she cared. So much. Her grief in leaving him on the floor unattended nearly choked her.

“We can’t leave him there. I’ll tuck him into the playpen. You said...”

He grunted. “If you can do that without waking him, okay. But if you wake him up, I’ll have to drug him again.”

*Again?* Her heart lurched with fear. “*What did you do?*” she cried out.

He waved a hand around. “Nothing serious. A little Benadryl did the trick. Calm down. That’s why he’s out cold.”

The fucking bastard. Stepbrother-asshole-fucker. He was more despicable and loathsome than she ever imagined. But she ignored that thought for the moment to take care of her son. Falling on her knees, she scooped up his insentient, prone, little body. Russell flopped around and didn’t wake up. Drugging a baby was not a harmless prank. No matter what Stanley used to do it. She carefully lay Russell in the playpen where he was safely contained. Until help could arrive. His father would find him. She touched his cheek, his forehead and his little hands. Leaning down, she kissed him three times and whispered, “Daddy will be here. Soon. I love you so much.”

*Whatever it takes.*

“Francine.” His voice was as heavy as concrete. She stood upright.

Stanley suddenly snarled, “What the fuck? What did you *do?*”

Startled, Francine’s stomach knotted and she frantically looked around to see what he was reacting to. She followed his gaze. Through the front door relite, she could make out the image of Roman walking swiftly to the door.

“Nothing. You saw and heard everything I said and did. I said nothing.”

“No secret code?”

“None. I wouldn’t dare risk it.”

Roman was freaky good at reading her. His frank approach always trumped her pretense.

She was thrilled he knew something was amiss with her, but also horrified.

Stanley produced a gun and waved it at her, then at the door. “Tell him to leave. Don’t say I’m here. Or I’ll shoot Russell straight through his precious, little, red-haired head.” Then he gave her the most chilling, cold grin she ever saw. What kind of a monster threatens to shoot a two-year-old in the head?

She gulped down a wad of bile and blinked. Tears were fine. Roman would assume she left the others to cry alone.

Quickly, she hurried to the door to catch him. “You didn’t need to follow me,” she said in a rush. Her voice sounded hoarse.

“You were strange.”

“My son was kidnapped. How do you act when that happens?” She sniffled and rubbed her eyes. Trying to hide her panic, she explained, “I just need to have a long cry in private. For a few moments anyway. And then I wanted to clean up. Hard to believe?” She raised an eyebrow.

“No. Of course not. I thought...”

“What?” She was petrified and frustrated to make him leave so she snapped at him.

“You might need me.”

*I do right now.*

Her heart was bursting to say the words. Along with her head and soul. But she stuck her tongue in her cheek and said, “I need a shower. I’ll come back. Might take half an hour though. I’m just so worn out. I need to rejuvenate myself. Please. Do you understand me?”

He nodded, but his gaze didn’t stop searching her face. When he finally seemed satisfied, he replied, “Okay. Half an hour. But stay here. I’ll come back for you. No reason to take any risks.”

“Of course not.”

She’d be long gone by then. But at least, he’d find Russell. Thank God for that. It was the only thing to ease her chaotic, traumatized brain.

She waited until he left and stepped away, shutting the door firmly. She even locked it, as Roman often reminded her, before wilting like a delicate flower in a hot wind.

“Fucking A, the dude never gives up, does he?” Stanley muttered from the hallway. He was watching, judging, and listening while holding his gun on her. Cold sweat covered her entire body.

Roman refused to give up. His raw power and persistence were precious to her now.

“Let’s leave. You heard him.”

Stanley smiled. Another grin that chilled her to the bone. Then he disappeared and came back, holding her drugged son.

Francine shot upright. “What are you doing with him?”

“Insurance. He’s gotta come with us. At least, until we’re outta here.”

*And where would they leave him?* She nearly collapsed with fear. “That wasn’t the deal.”

His vampire grin infuriated her. “Oh, Francine, there *was* no deal. I have a gun so you’d better get going out the door. Now move.”

She whimpered as he lifted the gun next to Russell’s fragile temple.

“Move.” She did. She went straight to the door and looked at him.

“Follow that tree-lined hedge right here down to the river. I have a car stashed by the river.”

“Obviously,” she snarled with rage, adding, “take that thing off him now.”

“I will. As soon as we’re moving.”

She headed out the door into the shadows. The trees of the hedge hid them from the ranch and the guests at the resort would probably not notice them. What’s odd about a couple and their sleeping baby taking a stroll by the river? No alarms there.

Some flashlights were still visible, bobbing in the hills surrounding them. The search started at the Rydell River Ranch, and spread out further. The volunteers were above and beyond them, no longer searching the immediate area.

“If we see anyone, say you needed some fresh air. If they realize I’m here...”

“I get it,” she snapped.

He chuckled, “Oooh, so bitchy.”

Francine did exactly as he said.

She hoped with all her heart that her baby lived to see the sunrise.

## CHAPTER 22



SOMETHING WAS DEFINITELY OFF with Francine. Any idiot could see she was beside herself with her kidnapped baby in the custody of her sicko ex who wanted her back at any cost. But going to the empty cabin to cry alone? And shower? It was feasible. But it also seemed off somehow. Roman sensed it but he couldn't pinpoint what was odd about it. She was under so much stress, he couldn't push her any further. His gut instinct insisted something wasn't right.

Her child was missing but it was more than that.

Roman left her cabin and walked to Ian and Kailynn's but he didn't enter it. He circled around and went back to her cabin. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but his gut-feelings were on high alert. Something wasn't okay. Francine was acting strange. The sudden need to be alone. Returning to the cabin where she hadn't stayed in weeks.

Her demeanor also seemed different. She wasn't as frantic. Fearful but not hysterical. It was so real, he could almost smell it on her, and he wondered why her confusion dissipated.

What changed?

*She knew where Russell was.*



But she wasn't sharing it. Stanley must have gotten to her somehow.

*He was there.*

The realization stopped Roman dead. Quickly, he called Sean Astor, his most trusted friend on the force and his superior. He rapidly explained his fears, saying he believed his girlfriend's ex was keeping her under his control with a weapon. The weapon in question? Russell. He was Stanley's weapon.

Of course, she couldn't tell him what was happening. He wouldn't have either.

His heart raced with the thumping of his hurried steps as he sprinted towards the cabin. He didn't have his service piece with him, just his own Glock. Pulling it out, he slowed his steps. Stealth was necessary as he crept around the cabin. All the window shades were pulled. It was silent as death.

He shuddered, feeling sure now the place was empty. Kicking in the front door, he sprang inside, his gun at the ready, but he entered only silence. He rushed through all the rooms and of course, found nothing. No sign of Francine. No more lingering doubt. His suspicion was correct.

She'd been abducted by Stanley, just like Russell.

He glanced at the gravel path hidden by the mature trees and darkness. The perfect getaway. He knew it led towards the river. The exact route Roman would have taken if he were on the run.

Fleeing through the front door, he followed the path but remained at a distance. His eyes scoured the area constantly in case they were right there, avoiding the main path.

Stillness and silence.

If Russell were with them, how could they keep the two-year-old quiet? He doubted they could.

Eradicating the nasty images he saw in his mind's eye along with his fear, Roman forced himself to forget the victims were Francine and baby Russell. He had to remain calm and cool to solve the case. Where would Stanley go? He planned this. It was too well-coordinated to be hasty. Somehow, he managed to steal Russell from an occupied house. He took him to the third cabin Francine stayed in. The trees provided him with enough cover to sneak over there, given enough time.

But how could he do that with a small baby? Babies are loud.

Unless he drugged him.

Fuck. Yeah, he must've drugged the little baby. Roman hoped it was something relatively harmless. Then Stanley probably hid in the cabin while everyone searched the ranch, believing Russell wandered out of the house alone. Fears that the toddler wound up in the river were paramount on everyone's mind. No one imagined the man they were looking for was right there on the premises.

The chance that it was a kidnapping by a nameless faceless monster only widened the search, directing it further from the ranch.

Stanley waited them out. No doubt he contacted Francine through their long-standing, secret communication.

Roman was busy unraveling their history and behavior patterns. Stanley's usual indicators that preceded his fear tactics over the years were revealed in an extensive messaging history of texts, emails, and private social media messages.

Always manipulative. Cold. Soothing. Complimentary. Sucking up. Then cruel. So heartless and brusque, it made Roman furious that Francine mistook it for love. Stanley's treatment was the antithesis of a caring person. Roman zeroed in on that and missed what was right in front of him. Why did she suddenly decide to take a shower?

His insides liquefied as he fully realized what happened. She left all alone to meet the man who stole her youth, innocence, soul, and now, her baby.

Into the shadows of the night.

The spurned lover's deranged plan to get his girl back wasn't an antic or prank. This wasn't any jilted, jealous lover.

This was a felony: kidnapping.

Whatever Stanley planned, it was carefully calculated. Roman knew that from the history of Stanley's psychological profile. Controlling, manipulative, and abusive. He could only succeed if he controlled every aspect of the crime. Like he did with Francine.

She finally rejected him, and bruised his inflated ego.

Her subsequent insecurity was driven by Stanley's sick games and her own belief she was who *Stanley* said she was. He truly believed he owned her. After being groomed so long and always hearing that, Francine thought he owned her too.

Until Russell was born. He, alone, was the catalyst that allowed her to muster the strength and the will to abolish the control Stanley had over her. Suddenly, she no longer let him pull her strings. Then she cut all the cords.

Stanley couldn't allow that.

So he stole her baby. But Russell was only the bait. She was the prize.

What would he do to her now?

Roman's fear clutched him and he grimaced.

Stanley wasn't a spurned lover, but a psychopath seeking revenge.

He stopped on the route to the river when he saw the shoreline before him. It was partly riverbank and partly flat beach. The brush and trees made it harder to traipse around in. Much easier on the sandy beach.

Closing his eyes, he tried to remember the terrain from the edge of the Rydell River Resort that went upriver. Some of it paralleled the road, but not all of it. The river went two miles up to a bridge that supported the highway into River's End.

Downriver were acres of Rydell land and their beach. It went up to a high rock, then down a long, steep bank. It was almost impossible to walk over quickly, especially at night. Anyone caught there was a sitting duck. Each end of the long bank could be easily covered and shut off.

Upriver towards the bridge. That was the only choice they had.

Roman started upriver, his eyes scanning the area and taking each step with caution. The rocks, dried brush, old leaves, detritus and twigs snapped and rustled under his boots. Damn it. Trying to move with speed and stealth was nigh impossible. But he kept on. His senses were fully heightened. He stopped and listened, his eyes scanning the shadows, seeking any sign of movement in the night. The faintest sound of a bush or branches being broken. The crackle or crunch of his own feet. His desire to find them was indestructible.

Stealthy, smart choices and careful concentration were crucial now. Roman had to rely on every bit of training and experience he had. He could not allow his fears and emotions to swamp his judgment. His choices had to be the best for the situation and not based on how he felt.

He could delve into his own feelings and thoughts later. They didn't matter now.

Saving Francine and Russell. That was all that mattered. The urge to do that as fast as possible was his hardest instinct to ignore. No. He had to slow down. Think. Listen. Plan.

Which way would a man go with an unwilling adult and a drugged-out two-year-old in his arms? Was he holding a gun on Francine? Roman felt sure he was. There had to be some kind of weapon. How else to keep her docile and quiet, thoroughly under his command? Stanley was used to the old Francine though. The new Francine was nowhere near as compliant.

He found a path that was wider with less brush to scrape against and make noises. Those were the pathways he followed. Most of them hugged the river beside the beach houses and campsites.

He prayed he was on the right path and that Stanley would stay close to the river. Using it as a map, the river was his trail. His guide. Roman expected Stanley to follow it if only because he didn't know the area. Not like Roman did. Roman could close his eyes and find his way smoothly despite the darkness.

But Stanley wasn't familiar with the terrain or the housing. He'd have to stick to the river.

A dirt road descended from the main highway and stopped under the bridge. From all the roads around it, a parked car would have been almost invisible. That made the most sense to Roman. Stanley must have parked a car there so he could access it from the river.

Without road blocks in place, Stanley could easily escape with his captives in a car.

Sean stayed in contact. Area cops of all branches were gearing up.

Roman told them to be as discreet as possible. No flashing lights or sirens. Not until Roman gave the word.

Well, Sean had to give the word. Roman wasn't assigned to the case. He couldn't call any shots officially. Sean trusted Roman's judgment, however, even now.

The police presence was being set up as he walked on. River Road was now blocked off and being patrolled near the highway. The net was slowly tightening. For now, there were no signs, but soon the area would be teeming with sirens and bright lights.

But would it be soon enough?

What if this were part of the plan? Roman figured out Stanley's moves but was he too Goddamned late?

What if he were?

The possibility filled him with despair and nearly made him fall to his knees. No. NO. He could not think of that. Focus on the next move. Where to?

To the right was a swath through the pines and grasses that could muffle his steps. Off he went.

Listening.

No unusual sounds. Chirping crickets. A breeze rustling leaves. The river rushing.

He kept his pace for the two miles up the river when finally, he spotted the bridge.

Spurts of adrenaline surged and a sense of relief swept through him. Maybe he got there in time. He saw no lights on the bridge which meant, no cars were there yet.

But he didn't want Francine and Russell stuck in a car with a cornered Stanley. Trapped like a feral coyote with cops in front of and behind him. What would Stanley do? Terrible thoughts and images rushed to his brain. No. That was why he had to get to them first, before they reached a getaway car.

If he could just locate them and sneak up to disable and disarm Stanley.

Roman hoped with all his might for that.

Finally, the bridge was fully visible. He stopped and did his usual routine: listening, ears primed to the faintest sound, vision scanning the darkness.

His heart dipped when the noise of the police barricades, although distant, became audible, even to his ears.

Stanley would realize at once that he'd been made.

But would he know Roman was there?

No. Stanley could not possibly know that. Roman was the surprise Stanley couldn't expect.

Then Roman found them. All three of them. His heart jackhammered in his chest. Thumping so hard and loud, it hurt his ears.

Stanley and Francine were standing before him, facing each other. Russell was in Stanley's arms. A gun barrel was visible as he spoke. His movements seemed upset and jerky. He didn't point the gun at her and almost forgot it in the rant he was on, using it mainly to emphasize whatever he said.

To avoid being detected, Roman started creeping from pine tree to pine tree. The massive trunks hid him. Each step was cautiously taken and his breathing was silent. Any surprise could kill her or Russell.

It was a dire situation. Stanley pressed the baby against his chest with one arm and held his gun in the other. There could be *no* standoff.

Stomach churning with cramps, Roman kept his silent, creeping pace. He fought the urge to rush, tackle, swing and murder the motherfucker.

Oh, how he wanted to murder Stanley.

He gripped his gun tighter. Murder was too good for what Stanley did to Francine over the last two decades. Never mind what he did to Russell.

The risk was huge. And terrifying.

Quiet steps. Hide. Glance.

When he finally came within hearing distance, he was parallel with them. Crouched on the bank to the right of Stanley, Roman crept halfway under the bridge and hid behind one of the concrete supports. Deep in the shadows. He listened to the conversation between them.

"Who did you tell?" Stanley demanded.

"No one. I swear. They must be on assignment. We'll just hide here. They already searched it." Francine hedged and



begged, her tone nearly frantic.

Scared. She was so fucking scared.

Roman's heart ached for her. What to do? What could he do?

"No. They weren't there earlier and they're acting too cautious. Too quiet. No lights or noise. Your cop must've warned them. Where is he?"

"How would I know? I'm right here, Stanley, with you."

"You must've tipped him off."

The gun hand waved furiously between them.

"He walked away. He didn't rush off. You saw that. He had no idea. They don't know we're here." Her voice was close to pleading.

"Fucking great," Stanley hissed. Then he turned. "Doesn't matter. They were wrong. Come on."

The car was below Roman, but Stanley marched Francine right past it. "Stay there," he said before putting Russell down. She started to lunge for her child, but Stanley pointed the gun at her. Then at Russell.

"Stay. There," he repeated. She released a small cry of frustration and pain but stopped dead, staring at the sleeping boy on the sand before her.

Stanley came dangerously close to Roman when he ducked around the concrete pilings at the far side of the bridge. Rustling and movement followed before Stanley appeared with a fucking raft. He wiggled it out from behind a large, green bush.

It was a small, two-man inflatable affair with oars in the center. They could float silently down the dark river, past the resort and ranch beach before disappearing into the ether. Like silent apparitions.

It was more than Roman expected from Stanley. The little prick gave himself more than one option. The getaway car may have been no more than a decoy.

Roman tensed. He had to do something *now* or they could vanish. Stanley planned this thoroughly, so he no doubt stashed another vehicle down river where he planned to land the raft.

Roman could not lose Francine and Russell or he might never find them again.

Lifting his phone, he texted a message to Sean. *Below bridge. He has a gun. Raft. What do we do?*

Fuck. Sean must have instantly decided. Moments later, came the stomping of feet and an explosion of lights.

Huge, high-powered lights swept over the entire bridge. No longer in hiding, the cacophony of heavy feet, loud voices, and car doors slamming rent the silence.

That quick, the lights caught Stanley as he dropped the raft in the water. Raising his gun, he waved it around. He was finally caught off guard.

“Hands up, Stanley. You’re surrounded.”

*Surprise, motherfucker.*

What followed was a loud, chaotic, rapid influx of uniforms, lights and sounds.

That fast, Stanley grabbed her.

He pushed Francine in front of him and set the gun barrel to her temple. His head pivoted back and forth.

He was smiling, no, more like smirking.

His expression chilled Roman to his bones.

Stanley must realize that a dozen law enforcement officers from varying agencies had their rifles and personal side arms all pointed at him. He was a sitting duck.

And yet? He was smiling. Grinning. Pleased.

Because he had Francine.

Roman instantly realized Stanley's third escape route now.

Stanley never cared if he got caught.

Killing Francine and death by cop were poetic justice for the disgusting behavior that Stanley orchestrated for decades.

Russell meant nothing to Stanley. He was never part of the picture. He and Francine were the only two in the picture.

But they were too late.

He would kill her. All the cops believed Stanley was using Francine as a shield. His escape vehicle. Not the murdered victim of a demented psychopath who had no conscience or honor. Stanley was driven by something deeper and darker than anyone conceived of tapping into. Including Francine.

She cried out when he grabbed her, pulling his arm that was around her neck. Tears streamed down her face. She stared up at the bridge and the number of people trying desperately to save her.

None of them knew they were just participants in another game to Stanley. They simply became an opposing weapon.

Roman was standing to the side of Stanley, his gun pointed right at Stanley's head. A clean, direct shot.

But Stanley held Francine in front of him, and the top of her head was right beneath Stanley's lips. He even kissed her scalp more than once.

If Roman missed... he'd kill Francine.

His heart lurched.

If he misread Stanley's intentions, he might be committing murder.

If he missed his target, he'd murder Francine.

His arms wobbled. Sweat slid down his forehead, stinging his eyes.

Suddenly, Stanley's finger twitched. It was poised on the trigger of the gun aimed at Francine's head. If Stanley knew Roman had him in the crosshairs, he'd have already pulled the trigger.

Roman had no doubt Stanley would kill Francine.

An unholy, strange event was about to occur and his thoughts emptied. Cold fear sliced through him as he studied his target. His only connection to Stanley. Aimed right at his temple. Roman had to kill him in one shot or he'd kill Francine.

*He was right.*

That was the only thought he clung to.

Francine would die if he didn't pull the trigger.

Now. Right fucking now.

And he did.

## CHAPTER 23



**F**RANCINE'S ARMS AND LEGS stung from the brambles and pine needles that ruthlessly scraped her bare flesh as she followed Stanley's orders. Russell was in his arms so she obeyed his instructions cautiously.

Upriver. It seemed like forever but was probably no more than a few miles before Stanley stopped under a bridge.

Her terror came full circle when she spotted the car.

She feared Stanley would drive her and Russell far into the horizon where no one could ever find them again. But Stanley didn't want Russell. Russell was no more to him than bait. A nuisance. Not worth the hassle. He said so.

Francine feared he'd either hurt Russell or leave him there. Right next to the river. What would happen when the drugs wore off and her precious, innocent baby woke up, all alone, on the river bank, cold, lost and *abandoned* in the dark? She stared at the swirling, inky depths of the rushing river. A whimper from her mouth made Stanley laugh.

"Scared? Don't be afraid, Francine. We're finally together. You're with me again, where you belong. It's always just us in the end, remember?"

His words petrified her. She didn't think she could handle anymore fear but she had to when he flung the gun around with careless disregard as he spoke. It was as if he found the gun no more dangerous than a pencil. Cold sweat drenched Francine each time the gun was near Russell. What if his carelessness accidentally triggered it?

*In the end.*

The words were so silky and cool from his mouth. His smile was extra sinister too.

*In the end.*

The words seemed specifically chosen. The secret smile suggested a joyous thought to Stanley that he wanted to share with her. Yet he seemed to also enjoy gloating over it and keeping his delightful secret.

*In the end.*

Stanley went on another rant. But Francine quit listening. His words were so disjointed, garbled, and chilling, she blocked him out.

*In the end.*

He finally set Russell down and Francine's heart leapt in her chest as she bent down toward his prone, little body lying on the cold sand. He was still so out of it. How much Benadryl did he give Russell? Her fears of an overdose gripped her heart. What if Stanley gave him too much? What if her baby never woke up? What if there were long-lasting effects?

*What if?* There were so many of them. But her worry was impossible to alleviate.

“Don't go near him.”

She stopped dead. The gun was aimed at her. Stanley swung it at Russell and then back to her. She nodded.

He was in control.

*In the end.*

*Us.*

There was no *us*. Stanley was just terrifying her as he always did. This time, by kidnapping her and her son and holding them hostage.

How could he think this would end with *us*?

And why did he keep talking about *the end*?

The chilling words made Francine eager to calculate his next move.

This couldn't go much longer and had to end soon. Whenever Stanley decided.

When she saw what Stanley dragged out from under the bridge, she uttered a groan of dismay. A raft. He brought a fucking raft to float them silently down the dark river.

Walking towards her, he grinned. "Let's go."

"Russell." Her heart lurched and she froze. If they left him there all alone and he woke up, the river would entice him into it, and he'd surely drown. She had no intention of allowing that to happen. Stanley had advanced into murder. Death didn't scare him anymore. The gun proved that.

*In the end.*

She could not leave her child lying alone on a riverbank.

"Leave him."

Before she could respond, the entire night exploded into lights and sounds as chaos erupted all around them. The night sky suddenly burst with activity.

Of course, it was the bridge above them with the thick line of cops stationed along it. The flashlights were pointed down on them and they could no longer avoid being seen.

Francine blinked with confusion and her brain failed to register all that was happening. Stanley used the opportunity to his advantage, grabbing her and placing her in front of him. The cold, merciless steel of the gun barrel pressed into her temple but she dared not move, and could only wilt in fear. It paralyzed her.

His arm held her neck and his lips were above her head.

Stanley remained calm, and she was sure he was smiling.

“This is it. See that? We have an audience. And witnesses. A bridge full of spectators to watch our final, beautiful act of love.” His voice seemed to have a slick, oily sheen. Francine shuddered with repulsion. She wanted to deny what was happening but her gut-sickening fear told her otherwise. She knew exactly what Stanley planned to do. He obviously had no qualms about it either. He’d shoot her and the line of cops watching would kill him. Death by firing squad. A murder-suicide. They could die together. *In the end*. And almost at the exact same second.

Her heart hammered and seemed to swell, cutting off her breathing. She gripped his elbow and forearm around her neck and he squeezed harder. She tugged on it in desperate panic. “No. No. Please... No.” She knew it was too late. Once Stanley decided on something, nobody could stop him from acting on it.



*At least, Russell would be okay.* The cops were right there. When she dropped in a pool of her own blood and they killed Stanley, they would rush down and find her baby lying in the cold sand, but alive. They would realize he was drugged and take him to the hospital at once. Then they would reunite him with his father, Hunter. Francine knew in her heart that Hunter and Kyomi would always love him and take good care of him. He'd be safe, loved, and *cherished*. Her heart recovered with the peaceful thought.

Russell would be okay.

She trusted Hunter to do the right thing. Her whole life was wrapped up in that little form on the beach.

She quit resisting Stanley and relaxed her body all at once. A weird sense of calm seemed to tranquilize her. Tears filled her eyes.

She'd only just started to know her true self.

She even began to like herself.

But she loved Russell more.

She loved her friends. And knew they would mourn her.

And they would take good care of her baby. They would do everything for him to compensate for losing his murdered mother.

She hoped Russell would know how desperately she wanted to save him when he got older. And that it wouldn't mess him up too badly. She wished she could subliminally tell her child not to grieve for her. No guilt. She loved him with all her heart and he saved her long before she did her best to save him.

She hadn't failed Russell. Not tonight.

As long as he would be okay.

Hunter was a miracle to her now. Thank God Stanley chose such a good man for her to marry. As a father, Hunter was unparalleled.

She was sorry she could not become the mother she wanted to be, but grateful that she saw the light before she left the earth.

And Roman.

She wondered if he'd feel guilty. She expected he would grieve for her. They all would, if only because of Russell. That didn't bring her joy, only comfort. She had good, decent people who truly cared for her. Hunter, Kyomi and Roman. They were by far the best friends she could wish for.

“Ah... so you feel it too. The calm before the rapture. The joy. The inevitable ending. We belong together, Francine. Those people will be our witnesses. They're part of the whole beautiful moment, aren't they?”

It seemed oddly surreal. The spotlights shone everywhere like beacons. The line of guns and the dark sentinel above them were in position. Ready to protect her. Little did they know that Stanley planned to use their weapons for his own strategy.

She wanted to scream and freak out. But the little, sleeping body on the beach kept her quiet, compliant and obedient.

She hated Stanley for that.

He seemed to forget about Russell. He was only thinking of them. Their final, grand moment, their mutual exodus from this life.

“We’ll be like Romeo and Juliet. We’ll die in each other’s arms. Entangled romantically as we always were. It’s so perfect. Epic. Those—”

Zip. Zing.

Hell. Chaos. Blood.

The sound confused her until she realized Stanley’s head had just exploded above her.

She screamed loud enough to pierce an eardrum. Sticky, hot blood was spurting and it spilled and splattered all over her.

Stanley tried to speak and his warm breath filled her ear. She was mere inches from the side of his face.

Until Stanley was no more than brain matter.

What used to be him was now all over her.

Stunned, she searched around for some clarity. How did that happen? Who shot him?

Roman.

He wasn’t on the bridge, but below it and to her side. That’s where the zip sound came from. His gun was holstered at his side.

Roman.

Roman.

Roman.

Her heart beat out his name. Her insides were liquified. Wet brain matter and pieces of Stanley’s skull slipped off her and fell down her leg.

Nothing seemed real.

Silence descended but the energy between them remained. Roman stared at her and she stared back. Numbness. Shock. Grief.

She glanced down, but he was gone. Stanley was gone. Obliterated. His head was literally off his shoulders and all over *her*.

She started to scream as she dropped to her knees and crawled towards Russell. Fear made her shake and shiver. It could have been Russell. She saw what the bullet did. She saw it, heard it, and witnessed the harm it inflicted. Ragged, cranial chunks and wads of gray matter and blood were all that remained of Stanley's head.

She was only inches from being shot.

Her shaking made her teeth rattle. She lifted the still slumbering baby and held him tightly against her. Crying, chattering, and moaning, she was almost relieved despite her exhaustion, fear, and confusion. She rocked Russell in her arms, bursting with love to have her baby safe again, and warm. She looked away from the remains of Stanley Stanton.

Roman found her and stood beside her. His hands were on his waist, and his elbows were out. She stared up at him and asked, "What did you do?"

More chaos ensued before he could answer her. Loud voices broke the silence and everyone converged on them at once. The cops were everywhere around them.

Closing her eyes, Francine turned to her side and threw up.

## CHAPTER 24



*R*OMAN'S HAND SHOOK AS he slowly lowered his firearm after sending the bullet directly into Stanley's skull. It entered below his left eye and fully detonated before what remained of his head splattered all over Francine. She was literally *inches* from the target.

Roman felt empty and hollow when she screamed. She sounded like a wounded animal. Then she fell on her knees and crawled over to her son and grabbed him. Rocking and chanting in her baby's ear, Roman wondered if she were losing her mind. Did he clip her?

He rushed forward with new concern and fear.

He never shot a man before.

He never even fired his gun at someone.

Never had to pull it out or threaten anyone with it either.

The images in his head overwhelmed him.

The scene evoked all kinds of feelings inside him.

The moment he pulled the trigger, he stressed that he could clip Francine. Thankfully, he didn't miss.

Roman saved Francine.

He was the hero of the day.

Francine was still alive and Stanley was dead.

She reeked of urine and couldn't stop crying. Her heartfelt moans were unsettling to his ears. She looked up at him with fuzzy eyes and said, "What did you do?"

She knew what he'd done. Why would she ask him that? Her lost, frightened expression tore him to shreds.

More pandemonium. Noisy officers, bright lights, loud footsteps, and cussing. He blinked. Adjusting from the darkness and intense quiet to the current situation was a sensory overload.

Roman started shaking and dry heaving. He didn't turn around to look at the mutilated remains. The remnants of cranium and organs were all that remained of where Stanley once stood. Detached from his body. Gooney, sticky, skin and tissue that once were part of Stanley's face, eyes, mouth and perverted brain. At last, Stanley was dead.

She was safe.

Francine was finally safe and alive; the end product of his efforts.

*What did you do?*

Her question while rocking her little boy in her arms would haunt him forever.

What he did would also haunt him.

"Roman?"

Sean approached his side and immediately, Roman said, "He was ready to pull the trigger on her."

"No one could see that but you. We didn't know you were right there."

“He was about to kill her,” Roman stated. He was sure and confident when he replied to Sean. Inside however, he was soft and broken. Everything that happened was hazy and seemed far away. His continuous tremors and shaking were caused by the rush of adrenaline, that his body now had to absorb, when he pulled the trigger.

“Roman, hand me your gun,” Sean said calmly.

Glancing down, Roman lifted his hand and saw the weapon still in it. Gulping, he nodded and handed the Glock to Sean. “We’ll sort everything out, Roman, I swear,” Sean vowed.

Roman shrugged. Turning his head to the night sky, he cleared his throat and asked, “Am I under arrest?”

“No. Of course not. She had a gun to her head. That shot you took was a miracle. The risk to her life was imminent. No doubt in anyone’s mind who saw it, she was in mortal danger. And you weren’t on duty. You acted as a civilian who saw a crime and did your best to stop it. You saved her life.”

He knew that. But he didn’t feel like a champion now. The sour taste in his mouth certainly wasn’t worthy of a hero. Didn’t the good guy deserve something better than that?

“Get an ambulance down here. She’s in shock.” Sean nodded towards Francine. Crying and kissing her son’s sleeping head, she kept whispering things softly to him.

Squatting beside her, Roman gently touched her shoulder. She turned to him with glassy, strange eyes. “Stanley drugged him with Benadryl. He’s been like this the whole time. What if it doesn’t... I mean, what if—”

What if nothing. After such an ordeal, Russell Wilson Rydell would recover and be fine. In a matter of hours. As

soon as the allergy medicine wore off.

He had to be fine.

“The ambulance is turning around right now.” He nodded gently towards the vehicle with lights spinning, although it didn’t make a sound. After completing a U-turn in the dirt-strewn, rocky road near the bridge, the EMTs jumped out with their gear and rushed towards Francine and Roman.

Francine refused to let Russell go. Roman understood as he tugged gently on her arm. “They’re here to save him,” he coaxed her. Eventually, she released her son’s unconscious body from her vise-like grip. Roman wasn’t surprised, considering what she just suffered. Only his words convinced her to trust him.

Another EMT crew started to address her condition. She was still shaking and tears streamed down her cheeks. Shock and trauma.

More cars arrived, parking off to the side of the ambulances. Hunter and Kyomi were running toward them. Their frantic gazes searched the crowd and Roman waved them over. Sean allowed them to pass through.

Francine saw Hunter and launched herself into him, crying hysterically. Hunter’s presence actually soothed her like no one else could.

“Russell. He’s... I don’t know. They’re taking him to the hospital. Stanley drugged our baby son. I hate him so much. I hope Russell won’t remember any of this...” Her voice was tinged with hysteria, and her gaze darted around before she jerked away.

From Roman.



Hunter took in the scene. The headless body behind them. Myriad police trying to figure out the facts while documenting and sealing off the scene. The crime scene. The homicide.

“What the—” Hunter stared the longest at what used to be Stanley Stanton.

“I shot him in the head,” Roman said simply when Hunter’s gaze landed on his.

Hunter gulped with revulsion at the sight. Then he solemnly nodded and said in a strong voice to Roman, “Thank you.”

*Thank you. Not, What did you do?*

Roman shrugged. He didn’t enjoy anything about tonight. Not how it started, and especially not how it ended.

Kyomi made a strangled sound and diverted her eyes quickly from the gruesomeness behind them. Hunter, however, studied it with keen interest. His nostrils flared and Roman glimpsed some satisfaction on Hunter’s face. Was he happy to see how Stanley ended up?

Roman felt no gratitude or satisfaction for his deed.

An empty, hollow feeling of nothingness swept over him.

At least Francine could find comfort with her friends. Kyomi took Francine’s other arm, and she and Hunter assisted Francine to the ambulance where the medics were.

Good. She’d get all the medical attention she needed, along with Russell. Their love and support would, no doubt, get her through the next few moments and hours after the shock finally wore off.

He glanced around.

There was nothing left for him to do. He wasn't on duty. He was a killer now. Lost and unsure, he wondered, *who the hell would help get him through it?*

Then... Another car appeared.

Rodrigo, Jordan and Pedro got out of it. Sean sighed and said, "Is the entire Rydell River Ranch expected to show up?" His wry voice was tinged with humor to ease some of the darkness Roman felt.

"Maybe."

For Roman, they came there.

He walked towards them and Rodrigo simply hugged him. He was a few inches shorter and more slender as he embraced Roman wholeheartedly. Not as a show of affection between two men, but as his brother, supporting him and physically holding him upright. They hugged long and hard, easing the suffocating mood.

Roman started shaking even harder now.

"What did you hear?"

"That you shot Stanley and saved Francine and Russell."

"Just Francine. Russell was asleep in the sand on the beach. Stanley held the gun to her temple and his finger was twitching; I saw it. He planned to kill her and then dramatically exit in a glorious hail of police fire from the line of cops on top of the bridge."

"You stopped it."

"I could have shot Francine in the face." The words cracked his voice as he said them. But the calm and certainty that he previously felt was replaced by anxiety that nearly knocked him on his knees.

Rodrigo didn't let go of him.

“Fuck that. You didn't even graze her. You did what had to be done. You had no other choice. It was war. Francine was about to die. That piece of shit would've died too, either by your hand or his own.”

The surety of his brother's words slowly sank in. They also began to take root. That was a reality that didn't hurt as much. Roman nodded and walked over to his two dads to receive a tight hug from each of them.

“Of course, you saved Russell and Francine. You rescued a baby and his mother. Of course, you're the grand hero. Stanley was goading the entire police department to end his miserable life. And they would have. Gladly. You did it before she was killed too. But no one could have found Russell if you hadn't figured out where they were. And reported it. If Russell had been left alone on the beach, he might have wandered into the river... you definitely saved both of them,” Jordan said, and his voice was full of emotion.

*You saved them.*

*Thank you.*

*What did you do?*

All the reactions Roman received filled him with joy and hurt. His sense of confusion was the biggest surprise he had. He was trained to use a weapon, and make split-second decisions. He was aware of the gravity of any decision along with the aftermath and consequences. But no one prepared him for his subsequent feelings. Excruciating doubts, unreasonable fears, and nausea. No matter how justified he was in taking Stanley's life, it was still a life he snuffed out in one pivotal second.

And the risk he took of possibly injuring or maiming Francine. If he flinched or his aim was off by mere centimeters, her beautiful face could have been disfigured.

Roman's body shuddered as the images filled his brain.

He didn't expect his split-second decision to cause so much grief and trauma.

"Roman?" Sean said. Roman released his dad's embraces and turned to him.

"What?"

"Can you come down to the precinct with us now? Make an official statement?"

"Can't he go home and process this at least?" Pedro protested.

Roman shook his head. He was not new to this. He was usually the one making the unpopular request. "No. It's better if I do it now. Fresh and uncensored. I get it. Let's go."

He started towards Sean. "We'll come down there too and wait for you," Rodrigo called out.

Hunter noticed Roman leaving and rushed over. "Why are you getting into the squad car? What the hell? He just saved my son and Francine?"

Roman waved a hand. "It's fine, Hunter. Standard operating procedure. I'll ride in the front, not the back." He tried to summon a casual smile, but his effort was a miserable failure.

Sean spoke to the others. "No one thinks Roman was anything but heroic. However, many eyes will be looking at this: an officer-involved shooting. The boyfriend shooting his girlfriend's ex. A dozen of us were there to witness it.

Everyone has to make a statement. It has to be by the book and Roman knows that.”

“I do.” He hadn’t considered himself the boyfriend shooting his girlfriend’s ex. Never that angle. Was he really her boyfriend? How did Sean know? Even Roman couldn’t say for sure.

*The talk.* Her request to do that slipped his mind. He wondered then, when she said it, if he *were* her boyfriend. Maybe.

He looked at the mess he created. One glance at the body being moved and the gory residue being brushed away, he imagined some poor, unsuspecting rafter dragging his raft towards the water only to find brain matter on his water shoes.

Shuddering at the visceral, but quite possible chance it could happen, Roman looked away.

The bright lights made it seem like eerie, ethereal daylight. The regular noise of cleanup and officiality used to comfort Roman. They signaled the end of the violence and chaos. But now? He had another horror to contend with. The aftermath of his action.

It felt very different now. The lonely sense of hollowness returned.

While riding into town, it suddenly occurred to Roman that he knew who raped Iris Rydell Larkin, but he didn’t have a chance to tell anyone. The stab of guilt in forgetting that overcame him. He remained quiet, knowing it might be a while before he could name the perp to those who deserved to know the most. Staring out the passenger window, he asked, “Do you foresee any official problems?”

He was sure Sean's gaze stayed on him for an extended moment. But he didn't look to verify his hunch. "No. All of us witnessed it. He held that gun to her fucking temple. He was baiting us. Taunting us. None of us had a clear shot. He kept her right in front of his head. He knew that. He wanted us to watch, helplessly, until he was good and ready. He had to control that. He never suspected your angle at his side where her face wasn't blocking his."

Roman shuddered. "It came close enough."

"You took an epic risk... and a damn good shot. The distance. The pressure. The adrenaline alone was coursing through me and *I* was shaking. Damn, Roman. Just damn. You were heroic. As sharp as a sniper."

He felt like a murderer. But Roman didn't voice that. "It doesn't feel that way."

"It was a tough situation, but you did the right thing. The evidence will bear that out." Sean slowed the car as they neared the station. "You did everything exactly right. You called us before you gave chase. And you only gave chase to prevent their escape. There was no other choice. How could you delay any action? You warned us how to approach and where to go. You were correct about all of it. What you did was colossal. You saved two deserving lives and took one that wasn't."

They stepped out of the car and Roman said, "Okay, then let's get the official shit over with."

Roman sat down to tell the horrific story and make an official statement and report before he was released. His brother and two dads were waiting to take him home. Soon as he saw his bed, he collapsed on it. His exhaustion rapidly launched him into oblivion.

## CHAPTER 25



“*P*ERHAPS YOU SHOULD TRY talking about it. Honestly.”

“I’ve told you everything.”

“Yes, Roman you have. You’ve been very cooperative. You’ve told me the exact details you reported the night it happened. But this isn’t to write a report. I’m simply here to help you.”

Roman almost barked with laughter. “No offense, but talking about it isn’t helping.”

“Being honest might change that.”

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. A fucking joke was what this was. He was seeing the mandated counselor, as required, before he could go back to active duty. The idea was to discuss any lingering trauma and grief he might have from the shooting. It was a good shooting—and fully justified. But Roman did it off duty and had to go through more bullshit. Seeing a counselor was originally a suggestion that really wasn’t.

The counselor was a decent man and Roman acknowledged that. He sincerely tried his best to study Roman and talked to him in a way that made sense to him. Roman

liked being blunt and demanded full honesty. He had no confidence or expectations from the therapy, and he definitely detested talking about his Goddamned fucking feelings.

What bothered him the most was his fear upon seeing a gun next to Francine's head. Roman couldn't accept how helpless he felt and worthless.

He couldn't stand the moment he decided to pull the trigger, knowing Francine's head was right there. Right fucking there. Centimeters from his target. Not feet or inches. *Centimeters.*

A cold sweat swept over him every single time he remembered that moment and he winced in response.

Fucking eagle-eyed, perceptive counselor Bob Robin didn't miss his reaction. Stupid, decent Dr. Robin. Boring name, bald head, and button-up shirt. His appearance reminded Roman of a math teacher, calculating and uncaring, showing no sentiment to others. But Dr. Bob was pretty decent at his job.

"What? What made you wince? The chance you could've shot Francine? Your girlfriend? Or because you killed Stanley Stanton?"

"Francine is not my girlfriend," Roman snapped, automatically. It was spontaneous. "We were just fucking."

Dr. Bob leaned back and sighed. "I see. You were just fucking her. Still, you could have missed. That must be a bit alarming to recall."

He almost roared with laughter when formal Dr. Bob said *fucking*. "*Alarming?* Stanley's gun was pressing into her temple. I had to hit Stanley's fucking head. It was more than *alarming!*" he snarled.



Damn it. Anger and rage. Roman carefully locked them up inside himself and tried to keep them concealed.

Anger and rage.

He vacillated between blaming Stanley for making him do it and Francine. All he could blame her for was being there.

Yeah. Sometimes, he did blame her for being there.

Fucking Stanley Stanton. If she'd told him sooner, Roman might have prevented it.

But stupid Francine never told him.

*What did you do?* Her first words to him still haunted him.

“Right. What word would you use?”

Roman's eye twitched. He knew what Dr. Bob was doing. Trying to make him relive it. Talk about it. Cut out the gangrene in his body that was starting to rot. Therapy was supposed to replace the surgery to excise all the rot.

But Roman wasn't convinced that words were as good as surgery.

“I could have murdered an innocent woman. Whether I was fucking her or not, that was really fucked up.”

He answered honestly. The past four appointments were finally leading to fruition. Roman thought he saw Dr. Bob lean forward with relief and satisfaction. Or was it joy? Roman finally gave him something to work with.

But... *alarming*? What a weak, inefficient, lame-ass word.

When does *alarming* describe a shooting? Blood and gore. Death. Murder.

Francine had pieces of Stanley's brain on her.

It was far worse than *alarming*.

Franny.

Poor fucking Franny.

“Okay, we agreed it was fucked up,” Dr. Bob agreed. “But you didn’t do it. You didn’t cause it.”

“She kind of did,” he muttered carelessly. He was even rude.

“How so?”

“I know what you’re doing,” he mumbled, leaning back and stretching his legs out.

Dr. Bob grinned. “Oh? What am I doing?”

“Drawing me out through casual conversation and blowing it up into something more than it is. She and I were fucking. That’s all. I knew her by her nickname, stepbrother-fucker, but that was where it ended. I got to know her better when I responded to a mysterious case of a creepy stalker that was bothering her. We thought they were harmless pranks at first. Not once did she tell me about Stanley. Nothing relevant. That’s why he had the audacity to freaking kidnap her son in his twisted way to get access to her.”

“The stepbrother-fucker nickname was very offensive to her. Especially if she wanted you to like her. You took personal umbrage at her affair with Stanley, as I recall? You once told me you couldn’t believe you were ever attracted to her after what she did with Stanley. That might have provided her with strong enough motivation not to mention Stanley to you.”

He regretted telling Dr. Bob all of that because now it was being flung back into his face. “What? I wasn’t understanding

enough for her to confide in me? She ruined my cousin's life for five years, fucking her stepbrother. I didn't know..."

"What didn't you know?" Dr. Bob pressed.

Raw emotion surged through Roman. He felt the weight of Dr. Bob's words. They were working the magic he sought. Roman didn't stop. "I didn't know how deep of a victim Francine was of Stanley Stanton. It started when she was just a little girl. He got his claws into her and then abused her for two decades. He convinced her to believe she was less than nothing and only he could love her. She was a domestic abuse victim, and I didn't see it. I never even asked her what her relationship with Stanley was like from her viewpoint. Not really. Not in a way she could be honest and tell me about it. About him."

"Until when? The moment Stanley held the gun to her temple?"

"No. When I was examining her private emails and texts. Looking for clues. It was all right there. Then she said she was going to her cabin to shower and I stupidly let her go. Alone. I was so focused on what I was reading that I failed to read her distress signals and what was really going on at that moment."

"And if you did? What could have changed?"

"Everything," Roman replied.

"Or," Dr. Bob said calmly, "or Stanley may have harmed or even killed Russell. He was capable of it. He was the killer, Roman. Neither of you two had that instinct. There was nothing you could do but simply survive the ordeal. And you both did."

"Barely," Roman huffed. "Just barely."

“Maybe you’re blaming yourself for not seeing her clearly.”

“Maybe.” He turned his head away.

“When did you last speak to Francine?”

“Three months ago. That night was the last time. You know that,” he hissed.

“Maybe it’s time to see her again.”

*What did you do?*

Her last words to him while holding Russell still interrupted his sleep. Or lack of sleep. It couldn’t be called restful sleep when it was so full of nightmares.

Endlessly repeating nightmares. Francine’s head was blown up instead of Stanley’s. Francine’s body lay lifeless on the shore instead of Russell’s.

“What about work? What do you avoid there?”

“I don’t avoid anything,” he automatically replied.

Dr. Bob gave him a long look over his glasses. “Don’t con me. You have no idea the shit I have to cut through with criminals. Psychopaths who spend their entire lives lying and hiding their true intents. People can’t fool me, and your pathetic attempts are no exception. You’re a blunt, honest, good man, Roman Barrett. You can’t hide that for a single moment. Whom or what are you avoiding most? Francine? Work? Using a gun? Doing your job? Living with nightmares that you think you deserve? What affects you the most now?”

He stared open-jawed and stunned at Dr. Bob. They were fastened in a long eye-lock. “How—how did you know?” Any of that?

“You’re an excellent shot and a magnificent cop. But I’m an excellent therapist.”

“It all affects me still.” He turned and stared at his feet. “I picture Francine crumpling over, dead from my bullet. My gun. My choice. My arrogance to take the shot. I dream it over and over and over again. I wake up in a full-body sweat. I can’t shake it. I could have killed her. Just as easily as Stanley could.”

“All true, Roman. It was a very close shot. Even the most skilled sniper could have missed it. Not to mention your stress, intensity, and the speed in which you had to take the shot. Any one of those factors could have skewed it and caused you to miss your target and hit her.”

“Arrogance was my flaw.”

“No, necessity,” Dr. Bob countered. “And there was no flaw. You had no other choice. She was dead if you failed to act. You read her statement. Stanley fully intended to shoot her. You could have also missed him, and he’d have pulled the trigger on Francine anyway.”

That made Roman jerk his gaze back to the middle-aged counselor. “I—I never once considered that. Thanks for giving me a new angle to stress over.”

He shook his head. “That’s my point. You don’t have to stress over it. It happened. It’s over. You succeeded and prevailed.”

“I’m a real fucking hero,” he muttered.

“You are. Even more so because you have remorse. You aren’t glad a human life is gone because of your actions. Necessary and justified though they may be, they were your

actions nevertheless. I admire the responsibility you bear. But I don't envy it. Don't carry Stanley's water."

"Don't carry Stanley's water? How am I doing that?" Five sessions with the therapist was all Roman agreed to. It was a suggestion that he voluntarily undertook as part of the investigation.

The headlines ran for a couple of weeks. *Cop shoots girlfriend's ex in multi-officer standoff. Sheriff allows off-duty officer to take down his girlfriend's ex...* and so on. All the reports were skewed to sensationalize it. Some made it seem sordid and dirty. Others called it a fair fight over a woman between worthy opponents.

The fact that Stanley abused Francine from the time she was a child, got no mention. The off-duty cop and the standoff were severely underplayed. It didn't look good for cops. Another cop-involved shooting. Another claim that aggressive use of force was to blame.

Roman had no desire to continue with anymore sessions.

Dr. Bob gave him a sharp look. "You're still not processing this or ready to end our discussions. Let's tap into that brutal honesty you're so well known for. Use it on yourself. The things that most daunt you now. You're afraid to go back to work. And hold a gun. Or be in a position of authority and power, as you now know the consequences of those things."

"I always knew the consequences."

"Not as well as you do now. The first-hand, breathtaking, eyewitness, brutal knowledge of what bullets can do. A momentary choice, a single action, and a life ends in blood and gore. You're afraid to wield that kind of power again and make those kinds of decisions."

“I didn’t know it was so... hard to live with. The implications.”

“It is hard. You’re not the first cop to express that, no matter how justified it officially is.”

He sighed. “Do I have PTSD?”

“Yes. Your mind is still injured. It’s no reflection on your manhood.”

“I know that,” he snapped. He was offended to be so thoroughly reduced to a stereotype.

“You do in your head, but your heart resists believing it. You thought a justified shooting would not bother you and you’d just go back to work again as if you weren’t altered. But you are. It’s something you can’t undo. You’ll never be the Roman you were before you pulled that trigger. And whatever happened between Francine and you—that’s changed too.”

“Into what?”

“No one knows but you and she, and perhaps that’s what scares you most to find out.”

He hated the tremor that jolted through him at hearing Dr. Bob’s words. “I rushed to her right after I pulled the trigger. After Stanley fell, she dropped to her knees and crawled over to her son. She held and rocked him and cried out a shrill, death cry. It was bone-chilling. I was so relieved she was alive, and I hadn’t killed her. Stanley hadn’t killed her either. Then she said—”

“What? What did she say to you?”

His stomach hurt as he softly replied, “She said, *What did you do?* She asked me that. As if I just broke her heart by killing Stanley. Or maybe she saw how close I came to killing

her and wondered what kind of monster I was to take the shot. All the doubts swirling in my head had to be in hers too.”

Dr. Bob nodded. Then a long pause passed before he said, “Perhaps her state of shock prevented her from knowing what she said? I read the report on her. She wet herself, Roman. She was truly suffering from shock and hysteria. All the stress nearly broke her in that moment. And I believe the same thing happened to you. You both suffered extreme distress. Those were just words. Not some inner truth from an oracle she uttered. My suggestion? Ask her why she said that. Ask her the truth when she’s not taking care of her unconscious son after having a gun pressed to her temple.”

He nodded. “I believed it was truth.”

“And what if it is? Are you afraid to know? If it isn’t, can you forgive yourself?”

“Forgive myself?” His spine snapped him upright. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Knowing that and believing it aren’t the same thing.”

“I hate your explanations,” Roman grumbled. “So ambiguous and easy to dole out. Actions speak much better.”

“You’ve exchanged neither with her. Perhaps it’s time. For your own mental well-being.”

“The need for closure and all that shit?”

Dr. Bob nodded. “Yes, closure and all that shit.”

Roman’s mouth twisted. “And... what about next week? Are we still on? I’ll make no guarantees, and I’m still not sold on the idea—but maybe... could you see me again?”

“Yes, for as many weeks as you need.”



It was the first time Roman didn't sneer at the wise, kind, brutally blunt, and honest man who was also pretty nice. Roman jumped to his feet despite the extra five minutes he had left. At the door, he muttered, "Fine, Dr. Bob. See you next week. I've got nothing better to do."

## CHAPTER 26



“*F*RANNY, IT’S OKAY, LET me take him.”

Kyomi’s voice was gentle and so tender and soft, she could’ve been speaking to a baby.

Then again, that was her behavior since the night Stanley was killed. Her arms tightened around Russell. He squirmed and giggled with sweet laughter, believing it a game. It was fun. Mommy held onto him while Kyomi tried to take him.

Kyomi wanted to take him outside. To the fucking park. How dare she?

Francine tightened her grip.

“He needs sunshine and air. A chance to play. I won’t pretend to know what you’re going through, but Franny, he isn’t damaged or traumatized. He doesn’t remember any of it. He’s fine now, okay? All he needs is to run and play and be free as much as you cuddle and hold him. He needs to be around *all of us*.”

Francine knew that. She wasn’t stupid.

Francine was just... scared. The outside world terrified her. So many strangers. So many unknown threats. So many Goddamned people living in Edmonds, Washington.

Three months had already passed but Francine couldn't forget the sensation of a cold, steel gun barrel being pressed against her temple.

In her mind, she was still there. But unlike the old days, she dared not voice it. She couldn't whine about it. She couldn't cry either. She simply endured it.

She found it hard to know what to do with herself now. Russell could not be out of her sight. She slept beside him every night and when he napped, she stayed in his room. She could not stand to be away from him at all.

The last time she left him alone, he was kidnapped. The innocent nap turned out to be the perfect opportunity for a demon to rip Russell away from Francine, and the rest of his family. The fiend drugged her baby and left him on the river's edge. He could've drowned. Or gotten shot.

All the scenarios churned in her stomach and she desperately clutched her son with an unhealthy need. She insisted on always keeping him right there with her.

Of course, she was overreacting, and it wasn't okay. Francine understood that. But she could never leave him again. She didn't trust the world anymore.

Everyone was kind and patient with her. Hunter. Kyomi. Ian. Kailynn. All were soft spoken. Concerned. Tolerant. They regularly took turns in making sure Francine was never alone. They'd heard her whimper in terror before and no one wished for that to happen again.

She'd endured so much terror.

"How can you ever forgive me?" she whispered to Hunter in the hospital. They were waiting for their son's physical exam to end after he was rescued. Russell had to suffer

because of her poor choices. From decades ago, to today. Never telling anyone Stanley was in River's End until it was too late and failing to suspect the man "stalking her" was actually him. Those were unforgivable sins in Francine's mind.

"You were willing to die for Russell. I don't need to forgive you because you're not to blame," Hunter said softly. His gaze was kind when he looked at her.

"What about everything else I did?"

Hunter walked around the bed rail and stopped beside her. She was sitting on a stool because she couldn't stand any longer. He kneeled down and set a hand on her knee, looking at her directly in the eyes. "I tolerated you in the beginning and learned to appreciate you as a mother. You're a great mother to my son. I'm very appreciative of that. I'm also grateful for Russ and being able to co-parent with you instead of fighting or not getting along. But now? After seeing how abusive Stanley was to you all those years? I love you, Francine. You're my friend and the mother of our child. I can't get over what you did and were willing to do for him. You're tough as steel and I never imagined you had so much strength. You were ready to die for him. I don't regret a single thing that happened with you and me. The past is easy to forgive. You were Stanley's victim. You need to realize that. Okay? And Kyomi and I love you very much and we'll be here for you whenever you need us. What he did to you, and Russ, and all of us is over now. He did it. He gets all the blame, not you." He brushed away her tears. "Believe that, Francine. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. You should know that by now."

Francine nodded and tears of gratitude and appreciation rolled down her cheeks.

That helped, but the lingering guilt still hung on. Choking. Cloying. Never releasing her.

She couldn't eat because her stomach was constantly roiling in knots of anxiety and nausea. The images never left either. She remembered the gun in great detail. Seeing Russ lying on the sand, passed out cold. Wanting to go to him and being prevented by Stanley. The rush of anxiety and emotional angst seemed to be her only companions now.

Despite having been given too much Benadryl, Russell suffered no lasting effects. Francine was thankful for that but thought she deserved to suffer, not her sweet, innocent wonderful boy.

The bullet zipping past her. She recalled how the moving air and energy alerted her at the exact moment it penetrated Stanley's skull. The way his body jolted before he fell. Lifeless. Dead. Behind her. All *over* her.

She was saved by centimeters. That's all that separated her fate from Stanley's.

Roman killed him. And he almost killed her.

Roman never visited her or sought her out after the ordeal.

Francine refused to go back to the ranch or her ex-in-laws' house after the hospital released her and Russell. Hunter and Kyomi drove them directly home to Edmonds.

Home.

A place she no longer felt safe in. The wonderful home of a few weeks ago was gone.

Nothing was the same after that day. Everything good and safe and sure was suddenly not. Francine checked behind

every door and inside every closet, searching for anything out of place. That became her new routine.

She could not manage her grief, anxiety, and fears. Everything terrified her. She hadn't left the townhouse since their return. And neither would she allow Russell to leave.

When she looked up at Kyomi, the tears were streaming down Kyomi's face as she told her, "You must get some help, Franny. Stanley can't ruin you, unless you let him. The decades he stole from you are over. They're in the past *now*. We all know what you went through. But you're a decent person. You needed our help to flee an abuser. A psychopath who ruled and controlled and hurt you. And we failed you. You shouldn't suffer anymore now because he's dead and gone. The threat is gone forever, Franny. Please... let us find you some help..."

Kyomi sniffled. She rarely cried over anything. Most of her problems were met with strength, humor and honesty.

She knew how to be a good person.

Franny wondered *what that was like?*

Francine never stopped being grateful that Kyomi embraced her instead of hating her. She was still amazed that they became best friends. Russell suddenly squirmed from her grasp and toddled to Kyomi with a gleeful laugh.

He was so happy.

He was laughing, eating, and being himself, as usual. Wonderful Russell.

"I lost him," Francine mumbled.

Kyomi shook her head. "Oh, no. NO. He was kidnapped by a psychopath. You were also a victim. What can we do now

to make you believe that?”

“Do? Nothing. It’s my problem, right?”

“No, it’s actually PTSD. That’s the correct term for it.”

“I already saw a counselor. Remember? After Hunter and I divorced. She told me I had unhealthy attachment issues. She didn’t blame it on being a domestic abuse victim like you’re suggesting. She said—”

“Then she fucking missed it too. Not all therapists are competent. She ignored your decades of abuse and found it easier to blame you.”

“I don’t know how she could have missed something so obvious.”

Francine could only smile after she observed Russell’s joy when Kyomi took him in her arms.

“I have some names of a few good therapists.” Kyomi picked up Russell and kissed his forehead before sitting next to Francine. “Franny, we all need help. At some time or another. You experienced a traumatizing event. And it’s stunting your progress as an individual and as Russell’s mother. Please consider talking to someone.”

Francine shook her head and Kyomi set Russell back into her arms. She kissed Francine’s forehead and quietly slipped out the door. She didn’t take Russell to the park because she respected Francine and would do nothing to alarm or distress her.

Francine was still afraid. All the time.

Constant cold chills and the panicky need to see, touch, hear and feel Russell were overwhelming her. All reason and logic were helpless when pitted against her emotions.

The cold steel of the gun barrel. The goodbyes she mentally said, and the odd, but horrible need to accept and prepare for her own death and mortality. Fearing the zipping sound of the bullet entering Stanley's brain was aimed at her.

She woke up every night drenched in a cold sweat. Once awake, she could do nothing else but remember and obsess over it.

Francine also felt guilty for not allowing Russ to go to the park. She was depriving him of fresh air and sunshine, as well as opportunities for play and socialization.

But Francine could not force herself to handle that yet.

Kyomi was right. Maybe the counselor she saw missed a few important red flags. Stanley turned out to be far more abusive and psychotic than she ever imagined.



“HAVE YOU HEARD FROM ROMAN?” Francine asked Hunter one night. He was in her living room, playing with Russell after bringing dinner for them. Kyomi had to work late. The change in Hunter towards Francine was significant. He was much kinder and gentler. In the past, he seemed to be tolerating her rather than enjoying her company. But now he treated her like a sister that he had to be careful around sometimes.

“Yes, actually.”

“How come you never mentioned it?”

“I didn't think you wanted to discuss him. You're the guide when it comes to what you're willing to talk about. But we're here for you to support you in any way we can.” Hunter shook his head. “We're your family, Francine, and you're ours. That



piece of shit mother and Larry were terrible role models, so don't even consider them your family anymore."

Hunter's boss, Larry, was her stepfather and Stanley's biological father. Francine slowly let Hunter's words simmer through her brain and gradually register. "That helps a lot." She exhaled with a whoosh of air. "I wasn't ready to address my life yet. But now, maybe I am. How—how's Roman getting along?"

"Not doing well either. Struggling and traumatized."

"Has he returned to work?"

"Not yet."

She hesitated. He wasn't back on the force? Why not? What was he doing with his time now?

"How does he feel about seeing me?"

"He's convinced you don't want to see him. You've never asked about him until now," Hunter replied gently. "No one is pushing you to do anything. If you're not ready, we'll just wait until you are."

"How long can you keep this up?"

"Keep what up?"

She sighed and scooted forward as she stared at her bare feet. "Postponing your life. Never taking our son to stay at your place because I have separation anxiety. It's not normal or healthy. For him or any of us. I know that. I just..."

"Francine, few people survive being taken at gunpoint. How you managed to keep your wits and remain calm and cool is a miracle. You kept our son alive. If you need a few weeks or a few months to move past it, I'm happy to work with you. You saved the day every bit as much as Roman did."

If you can't see that or feel it, then believe me, it's true. Whatever makes you feel safe is everyone's goal now."

"The old me would milk this. Make you give me anything I want."

"The old you is no more than a memory," Hunter said simply.

She shut her eyes. His words were so reassuring, yet so simple. "I think I'd like to see Roman now. Maybe that would help... both of us."

"Okay. I'll call him and make the arrangements."

Her smile was involuntary and it felt genuine. It even made her eyes twinkle with warmth, something that hadn't occurred in a long time. "I would have definitely milked that a long time ago."

"You were acting under Stanley's influence. Always scheming and scamming for him."

"I hold some blame in this. I wasn't innocent. I willingly became his pawn."

"I studied your history and now I know what happened to you."

She shuddered, so glad it was over. Pinching her arm, she proved it was really over this time.

She knew Hunter was watching her. "What? Be honest. We're all family now, so you have to stop handling me with kid gloves. I'm an equal member of the Rydell family and someone you can rely on. I promise to get better. Now tell me what's on your mind."

Hunter got up and started pacing. His expression flickered and Francine glimpsed a problem that was deep and dark.

Looking toward Russell, Hunter said, “I can’t work for him anymore.”

*Who? Larry Stanton? Stanley’s dad?*

“Did he even grieve for Stanley? Did he know what his son did? What a psychopath Stanley really was? Is he sad that he’s dead?”

“Stanley was no more than a blip on his radar, it seemed. He accepts no blame for the kind of person Stanley became. It wasn’t his fault. He showed his concern and grief by ordering the most expensive wreath for Stanley’s funeral and then? Back to business, as usual. My son was almost murdered at the hands of his son and the greedy bastard asks me for next month’s sales projections. I could have murdered him with my bare hands.”

Startled, Francine’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. She’d never seen Hunter so enraged. He was always so mild, rational and calm. Most of the time. Until it involved people he cared about and loved.

“He never warmed up to me. Of course, I understand why you need to quit.”

“Money will be tight.”

“Money be damned. Do it. Tell him to stuff himself and then quit. We’ll make it work.” She shook her head. “I’ll call the therapists that Kyomi collected. I’ll make an appointment to see someone. I need to get my head straight so I can get a job. You and Kyomi can’t keep supporting me. There’re four of us now.”

He gave her a wry grin. “Kyomi supports herself.”

“I will too. One day, soon, I will. I promise.”

He leaned over and squeezed her shoulder. “That’s not why I told you. Since it affects you, I need to prepare you and Russ for leaner days. I thought I could tough it out and ignore him, but I just can’t stomach the bastard another second. It’s not dislike. I *hate* the sight of his face.”

“That’s because he resembles Stanley so much. I’ll bet you hate the sight of him.”

“What about the townhouse? Is your heart set on staying here?”

Glancing around, she looked startled. “You mean, the townhouse? Or Edmonds in general?”

He nodded and said, “Don’t answer that. No hurry yet. Consider it a possibility. If we sell, we’ll get way more than what we bought it for. Housing prices have skyrocketed in the short time since we became the owners. Makes a substantial nest egg for all of us. We could start over... just about anywhere.”

“What kind of work would you like to do?”

He waved his hand around. “I’m thinking about starting my own business. I’m sick to death of working for heartless bastards.”

“What kind of business?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I haven’t fully decided yet. But, Francine? If I did, making it fly is the least of my worries. I can do business in my sleep. But you, Russell and Kyomi are the only people I’m worried about. We’ll stay together no matter what happens. So... just think about it. All of it or just the parts you like. We can do some or none. Just tossing out some possibilities and thoughts.”

*We'll stay together.* The magic words she longed for her entire, lonely life filled her up with joy and security.

“I believe in you, Hunter. Kyomi could go back to ranching.”

“She and her brother sold the family ranch to AJ Reed.” He shrugged. “It’s a little too late after the epiphany I had.”

“We could find another ranch.”

“And you? Ranches are rare in the city or suburbs like Edmonds.”

She shrugged. “I don’t care about that anymore. I need to find something I like to do that earns a paycheck.”

“First of all, however... you have to heal. Do that and we’ll talk about the rest later.”

Later. Sometime in the future.

She felt so exhausted sometimes to make it through one day, it was hard to imagine the pain and anxiety becoming long term. She shut her addled brain down. She had to focus on right now. This moment. The next hour. This day. That’s all that mattered for now.

She still found very little she could do. She was annoyed with herself. She needed something to aspire to. Staring at her son with the constant fear of what *might happen* wasn’t normal or healthy. She told herself it was an isolated incident. She knew the threat to Russell was dead and gone. But she couldn’t stop looking over her shoulder in anticipation of something terrible happening.

*There was no threat.* She insisted there wasn’t by chanting that over and over in her brain.

She had to believe it sometime.

“Maybe a nice walk in the fresh air would clear my mind. Could you stay with Russell?”

Hunter’s head snapped up and he stared at her in disbelief. “Alone?”

She smiled and almost laughed. “I know I can trust you with Russell.”

Hunter nodded. “You feel safer knowing where he is and who’s around him.”

“I fully trust you, Hunter. With his and my life.”

“I appreciate that. Ditto to you.”

Her heart swelled at hearing his confident, warm tone.

Francine left her townhouse for the first time since returning home from the hospital. She exhaled her breath as she stepped out of the building, looking right and left. There were so many people walking around. Some were window-browsing. Lots to do on Saturday. Shopping. Beach walks. The ferry emptied and the traffic increased temporarily, the daily cargo of cars and pedestrians eager to reach their destinations. She usually loved to people-watch, fantasizing about all the places they might be going to and the reasons why they came here. Were they touring Edmonds? Enjoying the beauty of Puget Sound? Going to work? Visiting family?

All different.

All the same.

But Francine felt removed from everyone. Disconnected. She walked towards the beach, but she knew she’d changed. She was darker. Gloomier. She kept walking to the water’s edge and followed it to the rocks of the seawall. She climbed up on the jetty and started hopping over it. Mindlessly.

Escaping life. For the first time in three months, she took a break from stressing over her son.

She was acting normal, right? Taking a small break for her own sanity?

As she hopped from rock to rock, her brain was cataloguing all the images of that night, along with some snippets from the last few weeks and years.

She ruminated over the older version of herself compared to the new one.

The selfish, whiny, sad, lonely, bitter Francine was dead. Franny, the new version, was loved and respected. She had friends and family now. They showed her she was worthy to be friends with and loved and cherished. They began to undo all the damage that Stanley Stanton inflicted.

Stanley was gone forever.

Obliterated and soon to be forgotten.

Not Franny.

She stopped and flopped down on a rock. The sun was setting now. Orange, gold and platinum skies shimmered as the sun dropped like a shiny coin below the horizon.

A new and different sensation dawned on her.

She was... *free*.

The thought was so simple, yet so clear.

Stanley's torment and torture were relics of the past.

She was free.

The cost was steep. But not hers to pay. The one who paid this time was Stanley.

Not her. Franny didn't have to hide the person she deserved to be from anyone.

Stanley and his control of her were gone. Poof. Into the ozone.

The concept bounced around and around in her brain. He was gone. Stanley was no longer here. He would not pop up again demanding money, time, or sex.

Stanley was truly dead.

She was still alive and FREE. That meant everything.

Staring out for a long, long time at the water view before her it truly started to sink in. Finally, she rose to her feet and wandered back towards the townhouse.

When she returned home, hours after leaving it, Hunter's face showed his relief. "I was getting worried."

"I had a lot to think about."

"Any grand conclusions?"

"No. Just that... I might be okay... *eventually*."

Hunter's body relaxed and he smiled and nodded. "Russell went to sleep."

He expected her to run into Russell's bedroom just to see him. The urge previously was overwhelming. She was as much a slave to it as an addict. Just one peep to make sure his little, red head was safe and sound.

Right where he should be. She could never forget the way her gut squeezed when she saw Russell's empty bed. It never left her.

"Go ahead. Check on him," Hunter said gently, respecting her phobia.



She had to start living again.

Sitting down, she inhaled a deep, long breath and said, “No need to. I believe you.”

Hunter stared at her for a solemn moment. Then he smiled.

## CHAPTER 27



**S**WINGING THE DOOR OPEN, a voice started talking before it was half cracked.

Francine.

Shocked, Roman pushed the door out of the way and stared at her.

Francine. She was standing right before him.

Her long, dark hair trailed over her elbows. Her face was flawless in her expert application of makeup. Her clothing was stylish and attractive as always. She looked fresh and healthy.

She was smiling at him. “You saved our lives.”

Her words made him sag against the doorjamb. She believed he saved her? News to him. Stunning news to him. Something filled his bloodstream... relief.

“I wasn’t sure you saw it that way.”

“Why didn’t you speak to us? You stayed so quiet. Not like you to act so wussy.”

His lips twitched. “Wussy?”

“Yeah.” She straightened her back. Her gaze was riveted on him, and the top of her head reached his chin. “You saved both of us. Russell and me. Didn’t you wonder how we were?”

“Everyone told me how you were.”

Catatonic. Crying. Unable to leave her townhouse. Glued at the hip to Russell. Unable to let him out of her sight. Constantly checking on him obsessively. Hunter, Kyomi, Kailynn and Ian had to take turns living with her. She couldn't stand being alone.

“Everyone? Not me.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay, how are you, Francine?”

“I'm... traumatized and heartsick. A bit neurotic and anxious as well.” She shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. Then she smiled softly and said casually, “How about you?”

He shook his head. “I'm fucking great.” His tone was brimming with sarcasm.

“Can I come in?” she asked as she tilted her head, waiting.

Startled at her request, he nodded. “Sorry. Sure.”

She entered and glanced around his unspectacular, little home. He took refuge there just like she did at the townhouse. His place was a mess. Rodrigo was the only one cleaning up, but he wasn't always around. Take-out containers, pizza boxes and empty bottles were littered everywhere. The closed in, stifling, musty air suddenly made it hard to breathe. He winced. “Perhaps I let things go a bit too long.”

She shrugged and sat down, uncaring. “Open the shades. That'll help.”

He did before turning towards her. Waiting. Unsure. Guarded. Tired. His residual energy was zapping away quickly.

“I took a walk.”

He examined her and seemed surprised by her words. “Oh? How was it? Good?”

“Yes. First time I left my home since returning from the hospital.”

He knew that and nodded. “I know.”

“Hunter told you?”

“Of course. I check in pretty regularly. You were...”

“Almost murdered by my former lover. And almost shot accidentally by you.”

He stepped back as if her words slapped him. Sure. Yeah. He knew that. But hearing it from her, with such a crisp tone, jolted him. Stricken, he splayed his hands. Dr. Bob encouraged him to let go of the fear and guilt about what happened. He couldn't quite convince Roman that he *had to* take the shot and did so only as the very last resort.

Crushed by her accusatory words, he stared down at his hands.

Silence descended for a good minute.

“Fight me, Roman. Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me that you saved my life. And my son's life. You found us. You read the situation that no one else could. Tell me I'm wrong and you were the one who saved me. Tell me that. Where are you, Roman? Where's your honesty? Explain to me what Roman did for us.”

His gaze flickered up at her words spoken in a powerful tone of voice. No longer the mixed-up, scared, broken woman Hunter described. Roman swallowed. “This walk you took. It seems to have done you some good,” he remarked pleasantly.

She grinned. “It did. I was so stuck in my anxiety and fear. That’s all I’ve thought about since that day. The feeling that Russell was not where I left him. That moment traumatized me. For real. Maybe for always. I wake up remembering the hollow feeling. The helplessness of it. The gut-sickening fear of it. I was so stuck on all those feelings that it totally escaped me that there was something else that happened that day too.”

“What?” He was breathless to hear the words. Her answer. Would her answer make sense of all this?

“Stanley died. He’s gone. Forever. And your actions set me and Russell free. He can’t hurt us anymore.”

Of course, Stanley deserved it. But Roman’s actions in the moment and the consequences of his actions still haunted him.

He sniffed and flopped down on the chair beside him. Resting his elbows on his knees, he shrugged. “Obviously, Stanley caused it all. But things still happened.”

All at once, Francine was right there. She dropped down and kneeled between his knees, her head directly before him. He stared open-mouthed at her.

She gripped his hands. “The things that happened were caused by Stanley. We just reacted and dealt with them. We just tried to survive and we did. We did.” Taking a hold of his hand, her slender fingers contrasted with his giant, mitt-like paws.

Francine kissed the back of one mitt.

“I could have missed.” His tone was hollow, helpless and empty.

She flipped his hand over, opening it flat, and kissed his palm. He didn’t know what to make of her. “These are the hands that saved me. They literally saved my life. I love these

hands.” She looked up at him, and her gaze was genuine and clear. “I think someday I could fall in love with you.” She looked away. “But there’s time for that. So much time that I don’t need to be clingy anymore. I’m being honest and truthful now. Brutally honest and if it’s hard to hear or it hurts...”

His words to her came back to him from her lips. And a simpler time. Roman was different then.

She licked her lips and went on, “But we never had *the talk* because we were just fucking.”

Roman suddenly grabbed her, fiercely pulling her next to him. His mouth landed on hers and he pressed hard, as if he were demanding something. Then he released her with a harsh tone, saying, “We were never *just fucking*.”

She smiled and lifted her hand through his hair, moving over his scalp. He moaned at the soft, intimate caressing. He didn’t realize how much he needed to be touched. By her. By Francine. Soothing and peaceful, he calmed instantly and the dark, relentless monster that hounded him seemed to vanish. Gripping her closer to him, he muttered into her neck, “I could have shot you. I can’t get that part out of my head.”

“You stopped him from shooting me is what’s stuck in my head,” she whispered in his ear, kissing him below it, on his neck. He shuddered in response.

She eased back into his arms, cupping his face and studying him. “What happened to you? What are you going through? Why aren’t you at work? Tell me. And I’ll tell you. And together, we’ll figure this horror-show out. Being apart doesn’t work for either of us. I don’t know why, but you and I... well, we just make better sense together.”

Make better sense.

He set her back and drew in a deep breath. “Tell me what you went through first.”

She nodded and sat back on her heels. Then she sat cross-legged on the floor. Picking at the carpet threads, she started, “I’m sure you already read my statement, but after Stanley contacted me through our old message thread, all I could think of was rescuing Russell. I would have told you and Hunter and everyone else if Russell hadn’t been in his custody.”

“I’d have done the same thing. For Russell, I mean.”

She nodded. “He was holding a gun on Russell when you came to the cabin. I couldn’t dare risk a glance or try to secretly get a message to you. Stanley had it pointed at Russell’s temple.”

He listened intently. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

She threw her shoulders back. “I’m here. I left town and my townhouse *and Russell*. I’m all kinds of things, but not okay, however I’ll cope with it because I want to talk to you.”

He reached out and touched her. “Okay.”

She nodded. “That’s right. Believe what I say I can do.” Taking his hand, she asked, “How did you know Stanley was with me in the cabin?”

“I didn’t. Not for sure. I can’t say how. Something felt off with you. When you ran to shower, to clean up, it struck me that you weren’t the woman I knew. Taking a break to shower in that crucial moment? Nah. So I circled back. I called Sean and kept him updated. It was supposed to be an unofficial tip. He told me to stand down. Of course, I couldn’t.”

“Is that why you’re not at work? Because you saved us?”

“No. I’m not at work because I fired a gun and killed a man. I made a decision in a split second that I don’t think I can make again. I don’t want to find myself in a situation where I’d have to make such a choice again. So I can’t work if I can’t do that.”

Her expression hinted of grief. “Oh, Roman. It took so much from you.”

“No. *He* did,” Roman sneered. “Not it. Stanley took so much from *us*.”

After a quiet, long pause and a searching look, she asked, “Did he doom us?”

His heart clenched at her soft words and the stark look in her eyes. He searched his mind for a reason to smile and establish some levity. “We haven’t had *the talk* yet.”

“Roman?” she replied softly, but seriously. “We had the talk already. We just didn’t know it. Did Stanley doom us?”

He glanced at her, his throat tightening. Shaking his head, he answered, “Not from my perspective. How about yours?”

“Not from mine either.” She clenched her fists and said, “Stanley can never take anything from me again. You freed me from Stanley.”

“You said...”

“What did I say?”

“That night after I shot him. You were rocking Russell and kind of hysterical and you said...”

“I don’t remember what I said.” Her expression was clear and honest. She didn’t remember.

“You said, *What did you do?*”



She stared open-mouthed at him and shook her head furiously. “I swear to you, I don’t remember saying that. Most of it is still pretty clear actually. The moments right before, I remember like they were yesterday. In vivid Technicolor. But I don’t remember the moments right after. They’re disjointed. I know you avoided me. You didn’t visit me. We survived the war together and never so much as spoke again after it was over.”

“When you asked me that, I thought you were...”

“What?” She laughed and guessed, “Mad? Angry? Upset that Stanley got shot and not me? He kidnapped my son. He put the gun to my temple. It was cold, but not. It pressed hard but didn’t hurt. He was ranting that we were like Romeo and Juliet and our death together was perfect and beautiful. His fingers moved. I felt them. Sensed his thoughts. He planned to shoot me in the head before the line of cops on the bridge took him out. I’m sorry. I don’t remember what I said but it wasn’t meant to hurt you.”

He shuddered. “So he was really ready to kill you?”

Her head tilted and she studied him long and hard. Then she physically launched herself at him. He caught her in his lap before she started kissing his face. All over it. Holding and kissing him. When she pulled away, she nodded. “He couldn’t wait to kill me. You really did save my life.”

He was flattered by her confidence in him. Her caring. Her claim of his heroic action. He gripped both of her hands and made her look at him. He wanted her to look and listen to what he had to say. “The cops were only there because I called them in. And I could have easily missed. It was a long shot. Your head was a breath away from his. It wasn’t all magic and talent. I had no idea if it would work. I waited because I didn’t

know what to do. You were so close. Right there. I was so glad you didn't go down. I thought you'd been shot. I'd have murdered you. Killed Russell's mother. It was pure luck I got Stanley when it could have so easily been you."

She nodded and watched as she listened solemnly. "You had the guts to try, Roman... He was itching to pull the trigger on me. The cops facing me couldn't take a shot. They would have hit me, not him. You knew that. Yet you had the guts to try. If you hadn't, I'd be dead."

She smiled again and seemed angelic. "You knew he was in that cabin. You stayed and watched. Then you followed us without being detected. Stanley had no idea you were there. That's what saved my son. If he suspected you were following us, he would have shot Russell and left him dead. He wanted us to disappear that night. No one would have found me. I wasn't expected to survive the night with him. He planned it. A grisly, disgusting murder and suicide by cops. You rescued us. In the most desperate moment, you saved us."

He still had the sickening doubt. She gripped his hands and jerked them for him to listen. "I knew Stanley. I was a dead duck. He wanted to murder me. You had to take the shot."

He shut his eyes. "All I can think about when I shut my eyes is what would have happened to you if I missed?"

"We both still have nightmares. I wake up with cold chills. All the time. I worry about Russell. I don't know how to stop myself. But we're both alive for a reason so we have to try. We can't let Stanley, a dead man, interrupt our lives anymore."

"Where do we go from here?" Roman asked.

She leaned into him and simply hugged him, saying softly, "It's time for *the talk*. We can start there."

## CHAPTER 28



**S**EATED AT THE SMALL coffee bar, the only uncluttered eating spot in Roman's small apartment, Francine waited. He insisted on making coffee and a quick bite. She wanted neither. But he seemed to need the normalcy of doing it.

He was different. Shaken. Changed.

She glanced at herself. Was she as changed as he was?

Roman's former swaggering confidence and arrogance and honesty seemed damaged. She hated Stanley for doing that to him.

She was glad he was dead. But she detested witnessing it. It was easy to curse your evil enemies. But watching them die and being splattered by their brain matter wasn't nearly as satisfying as people might think.

"I've been seeing someone," Roman suddenly admitted. He jarred her from her reverie and she all but shrank in horror.

"Y—you have? Already?"

She never considered that. Of course, it was easy to be with a woman you didn't have to save. His confession stabbed her like an arrow in her heart.

He looked up at her and for the first time in three months, his cocky smile brightened his handsome face. “Not a woman, Franny, a therapist.”

She sagged and got embarrassed as well as amused. “Oh,” she replied, letting his words fully register. “Oh. Wow, I didn’t expect that.”

“It was in response to a mandated suggestion from the department. Since I was a cop and you were my... my—”

“Fucking A, Roman. When will you refer to me as your girlfriend? I was, I am, and I will continue to be *your girlfriend*. Now admit it and grow up.”

She stood and fisted her hands while shouting.

It was pretty amazing.

He cleared his throat and gave her a blinding grin. “So... is this *the talk?*”

“Yes,” she all but shrieked. Then she explained, “I was never someone you were just fucking as you so happily announced to anyone that would listen. I was your friend. You were my friend. Then you saved my son. And me. You became my hero. And then... well, then... you more or less vanished into thin air.”

Her righteous indignation wilted at the end of her speech. She shut her eyes, growing tired already. “Tell me I wasn’t wrong?”

Silence. When she looked up at him. His gaze on her was fierce. “Your hero?”

“My heroic boyfriend. Was I wrong?”

He smiled slowly. “Your heroic boyfriend. I could probably get used to that as long as you say the other a lot.

While being naked.”

He was teasing her and smiling. Then he walked around the counter and sat beside her. They faced forward and the gravity of the situation returned.

Her shoulders sagged and her smile remained small. “Why did you avoid me for so long?”

“I blamed myself for letting it go as far as it went. To the point I had to take that shot. I don’t see myself as a hero at all. I blame myself for letting my own biases blind me to what was right there in front of me. I was so preoccupied, I never really saw or listened to you.”

“I was going to tell you...”

“But don’t you see? You couldn’t tell me about Stanley. I didn’t provide you with the care or understanding you needed to feel safe enough to talk to me. The honesty I insisted on also kept you from being able to be fully honest with me.”

“Roman... we... have to stop this.”

His body tightened and he whipped his gaze back to her. “I thought you just said...”

“We have to stop blaming ourselves for things we didn’t do and couldn’t know. We were and still are newly together. Learning about each other. Communicating our thoughts and feelings in order to figure it out. Nobody could know all the answers so soon. It’s simply ridiculous to conjecture. We were still in the experimental stages of being together.”

“Dr. Bob says things like that.”

She twisted around to stare at him. “Is Dr. Bob your therapist?”

“Yes.”

“What else does he say?”

“That I did nothing wrong. The circumstances determined my actions, not me. The choices I had to make were not normal or average. He admired how I kept my wits and did the right thing. Everyone agrees with that. But I don’t feel right yet. When I realized Stanley had Russell *and you*, I wanted to kill him. I really did, Francine. I thought by taking his life, all the problems he caused for you would end and I would feel...”

“I know. It wasn’t as satisfying as you hoped.”

His gaze shone with relief. “You understand me then?”

“I do. I’ve thought the same thing. No one wanted him dead more than I did. I watched him threaten my son with a gun. Then he threatened me with it. I hated and reviled him with every breath I took. I wished him a painful, agonizing death. But when it happened, I wondered why it had to go that way. Stanley deserved it. He wanted it too. He even asked for it.”

She gripped Roman’s forearm on the counter. “I wish now that I’d fallen into your arms crying and thanked you. I wish I responded to his killing with relief and joy. You deserved nothing but accolades for what you did. I was still alive. I survived only because of your action. And my son survived too. I should have showed you how much I appreciated you in that moment. Instead, I felt numb and cold. All I could think about was Russell. I failed to give you the credit and appreciation you deserved.”

“I deserved nothing.”

“No, Roman. We didn’t deserve what Stanley did to us.”

He looked at her long and hard. “It wasn’t a moment to celebrate or sigh with relief. It was horrifying. Stanley’s head

was splattered all over the ground and on you because of my action. I did that. My only reason to celebrate was because you weren't the one who ended up that way."

"I think... it's time we talk now."

He let out a small chuckle. "Okay. Francine, I thought we already were?"

"Call me Franny."

He paused and a slow smile appeared on his lips. "Okay, Franny. Glad to see you're finally coming around."

Her eyes twinkled in response. "I think I am too. Now, let's start with you. Where were you when it all started?"

"Idaho." His shoulders fell again. "I was investigating a lead to find the man who raped Iris Rydell and I did."

Her mouth jerked open. "Iris? You found Iris Rydell's rapist? After all these years?"

He nodded. "Shane gave me every contact he'd ever had in his life. It took a long time, more than I expected, to zero in on him. I had to go through the process of elimination, determining everybody's whereabouts and proximity to the ranch. I narrowed it down to two suspects. I think I got the right one now. I just need to show Iris his picture." He shrugged. "Then Russell got kidnapped and I didn't do anything about it. Another fail."

She grabbed his hand. "It's not a fail. And if you found the demon who did that to Iris, she'll be better for knowing."

"I hate to open this up all over again for Iris. She moved on and has a full life now. How could this possibly help her now?"

“Don’t worry,” Francine replied with a crisp, sure voice. “I’m sure it still matters to her, and it can only benefit her. She needs a name and an identity. Yes.”

“I don’t have the energy to tell her. She’ll cry or look haunted or... do something emotional. I wish I could muster up the strength and fortitude.”

“No one will judge you.”

“I will.”

“Then you’re too harsh. We’ll tell her together. I’ll be there with you.”

“I haven’t seen Bruce either. Not once. And then I avoided you and just sat here...”

“You were traumatized. We were both traumatized. But I’m here now to break the ice.”

“Exactly. You had to come to me.”

She bristled. “Because you’re the big man who’s supposed to take care of little, ol’ me? Fuck that. I can take care of you, Roman Barrett, and do a damn good job of it.”

He turned on his stool and his gaze scoured her. “You’re different. You’re much stronger and clearer than you used to be.”

“I know I am. For once, I feel unleashed. I never realized how much Stanley tied me up in emotional knots.”

“He mentally and physically abused you for two decades.”

“Kyomi thought my other counselor missed that whole side of me. I’m seeing a new one soon. I have a lot of work to do. Both of us do.”

“So where does that leave us?”



She gripped his hand, intertwining her fingers with his and replied, “Two broken souls who like fucking?” He glanced at her sharply and she snickered. “See how stupid that sounds? We have a connection and it’s much more than our friendship. We were always together, Roman, despite how much you tried to ignore that.”

“Aren’t you scared anymore? After what we went through?”

“I’m more scared of the person I used to be when Stanley was alive. I can’t fucking wait to be thoroughly free of him. Fully myself. You haven’t met her yet. She’s fucking big and epic and more than worthy to challenge your brutal honesty.”

He smiled slowly and looked sad. “What if I can’t continue my career as a cop? I get the cold sweats just thinking about holding my gun again. Any gun. What if I can’t do my job?”

She leaned forward, pulling him close to her until their foreheads touched. “Then we’ll find something that you can do. I think Hunter is ready to quit his job too. He detests Stanley’s father now. Kyomi could go back to ranching and Hunter might start his own business. After beauty school, I’ll find a job somewhere around here too. But for now? We’ll have to be four adults without any jobs and a two-and-a-half-year-old baby to raise.”

He smiled and replied, “I’ve never wanted to be anything but a cop. It’s the only occupation I ever aspired to become.”

She squeezed his hand. “Then we’ll get you back there. Dr. Bob and I. But if you can’t? There’s no regret or shame. You saved my life and I intend to spend every day I have left on this earth being grateful for that. I’d like to spend it living with you. I don’t give a fuck how it looks. This isn’t about jobs or good looks or money or status or careers or where we choose

to live... it's about who *we are*. And how we connect. And oh, my God, do we fucking connect.”

“I stared at you for what seemed like hours when I had Stanley in my gunsight, and my heart was being ripped to shreds. I knew then that I loved you. And I had to try to save you. When I squeezed the trigger, gut twisting, thinking *did I just kill the woman I love?*”

She held his hands and shook her head. “But you didn't, Roman. You saved my life and Russell's life and now we have another chance to see the sun rise and set, and go to the beach, and play in the river. And we owe it all to you, Roman.”

“When did you get so strong?”

“The better question is why was I so weak before?”

“You were a victim,” Roman argued.

“If you believe that, then you were a victim too.”

He sucked in a shuddering breath. “I never considered that.”

“Well, we both were.”

“And now, what have we become?”

She let out a long, shuddering breath. “Now we're just survivors.”

He tested the word on his tongue. “Survivors. Both of us.”

She gave him a look and added, “And doing more than just fucking.”

Solemnly, he said, “Considerably more.” He shuddered and sighed. “I don't even know why I was worried. It seems stupid now. The three of us are alive and well and here, so I'm sure we can figure it out.”

“I start Cosmetology classes in January, in Edmonds. I was supposed to start in late September but didn’t for obvious reasons.”

“I don’t have a job anymore,” Roman reminded her.

“More to figure out.”

“Can we do that maybe... tomorrow? And just be survivors today? Because, I have to tell you, I’m not really feeling like a survivor today. More like a victim.”

Her shoulders slumped and she leaned her head on his shoulder. He kissed her beautiful temple and was so glad it was unmarred and perfect. “I’ll admit, I do too. But maybe someday, with enough therapy and time, we’ll reach that goal.”

“I’m sure it will all fall into place.”

Roman nodded his head. After a long while, he said, “I dread telling Iris what I know. I never used to hesitate about stuff like that. I just blurted out the truth. Now all I do is stress over what the truth will do to her.”

“Don’t forget, there’s more than one way to speak the truth. But you need to tell Iris who the fucker was.”

“I understand that but I’m different now. Hesitant. I can’t get comfortable because of my anxiety over the choices I’m making. Even my choice of words. I never hesitated or wavered in the past. I picked a course of action and followed it. I made my decisions and acted on them. I never held back if I wanted to say something, anything at all. But now I’m unable to choose. I worry about making the wrong choice or saying the wrong thing. I’m incapable of making the smallest damn decisions.”

“After your last decision, which you made under extreme duress and stress, a man lost his life. You were worried that my head was blocking your target. That would make anyone suffer doubts. That authority and power are such huge responsibilities and they’re not for the faint of heart. I think time will heal that too.” She all but sat on his lap as she cupped his face with her hands. “You’ll be the old Roman again. Maybe a smidgeon less harsh but still the truthful, fun, humorous, moral, decent, confident person you’ve always been.” She kissed his lips and he gripped her tightly against him.

“I never needed a pep talk to set me straight.”

She smiled softly, staring at his face. “It seems to agree with you though.”

He squirmed around and clarified, “I didn’t mean it as a good thing.”

“Well, I did. And I do. Roman, get ready to hear the truth from now on with the most brutal honesty you ever imagined. Believe me.” He laughed as he hugged her tighter.

## CHAPTER 29



“*I*’M SORRY I TOOK so long to tell you this. But after the shooting...”

Shane Rydell put his hand up and used the other to grip his wife’s hand. Allison must have known what their conversation would be about because she didn’t look surprised to see Roman there. “We understand. What did you uncover?” He glanced at his daughter and son-in-law who sat there grim-faced, pale and listening. Intently. Roman eyed Francine who sat close to him, supporting him mentally and morally. Roman nodded and began, “I investigated every name on your list, every acquaintance, friend, co-worker and enemy. Everyone that I could find. Two of the names belonged to men who were in the area around that time. I saw the records to prove it so I could be sure.”

Iris gasped. Quinn all but jumped from his seat. “How long have you been investigating this?”

“Years,” Shane answered and Roman nodded. “Far longer than I was involved.”

Tears rolled from Iris’s eyes as she stared at her father with visible love and compassion in her gaze. “Dad?” Her voice cracked.

“I couldn’t let it go. You’re my heart. My baby.”

Roman had a frog in his throat and he looked at Francine. The emotions. The guilt. The dread.

“You must have found something. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here,” said Shane.

Iris squared her shoulders. “Who was it?”

Roman lifted out a picture. “I need you to confirm his identity. I believe it was this person. But I leave it up to you.”

Her eyelids twitched and she gripped her husband’s hand. Iris neither sought anyone’s advice nor support. She replied, “Absolutely. I’d know his face anywhere. In my nightmares. In broad daylight.”

*Nightmares.* Francine and Roman shared a long look. They both knew about those. Especially recently.

Roman handed Iris the 8” x 10” photograph of Jarvis Redholt.

Iris studied it closely. Quiet descended and absolute stillness. She eventually lifted her head and stared at Roman. “Yes. Roman. That’s the man who raped me. What’s his name?”

Her voice cracked but she appeared as strong as steel. Courageous and unflappable. A true warrior.

“Jarvis Redholt.”

Shane shook his head and swore, then his tone went guttural with emotion as he said, “Idaho guy, right? My bike broke down there thirty-odd years ago. I used his shop and dealer to get the parts. He let me fix it myself for a nominal fee. I used to see him every decade or so and say *hey*. Have a drink and split. He was a brittle, hard dude. I knew that. But

hell, he was always nice to me.” He stared down and inhaled a deep breath. “And because of that, I brought him to Iris.”

Iris snorted. “No. Dad. Damn it. *You* wanted to know who did it. Fuck your guilt. I spent years working through it. Don’t make me start all over again with your guilt. You couldn’t have known. Obviously. Look how long it took Roman to find him. But he did. Roman found him. We have a name for the phantom pervert. An answer. After all this time, that’s what I needed to hear the most. Unless this isn’t about me?”

Roman’s gaze jerked up to her face along with everyone else’s. Iris was pale, but calm. Her words were pretty amazing. Roman felt better about telling Iris who the rapist was. It was the right thing to do no matter how many years it took.

She looked right at Roman. “What do you know about him now?”

“It’s not the closure I hoped to give you. You know his name and Shane knows how he ended up here. He was a creep all his life. I met his daughter, who never knew him. She received a few birthday cards and visits during her entire childhood. Then he got pancreatic cancer, so he bought her a house and gave it to her. He told her to see him off when he took his last ride, his death ride, on his motorcycle. She said he literally rode off into the sunset. He had stage four cancer and no chance to survive. She was the last to see him. I’m sorry, Iris. It’s not enough, I know.”

“Well, even if he went to jail, it wouldn’t hurt him as much as what he did to me. Our system sucks. But Roman, you found the answers. You couldn’t control the outcome. You did exactly what my dad asked you to do.”

“That’s all there is to him?” Quinn asked, his jaw locked and firm.

“That’s all. You’re welcome to inspect everything I dug up.”

“No, we don’t need that. I’m done,” Iris spoke sharply with firm confidence. “I just wanted to know who he was. Dad needed to know his identity more than me. I believe his daughter. What did you tell her? Why did you say you were there?”

“I made up a story about some stolen bike parts that led me to his old shop name. His daughter hated him, and suffered greatly with her mother from his neglect. He wasn’t a decent person ever in his life. I couldn’t see any good reason to tell her my real mission.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you made that judgment call.”

Francine squeezed Roman’s hand at Iris’s compliment. Roman did indeed have good judgment. His wisdom was once considered one of his stellar skills.

“I used to think the truth was so valuable, there was no reason to blunt or soften it. But it doesn’t change the truth to use some tact and care with it.”

Francine beamed at him. “I agree.”

Roman glanced at Francine and then at Iris. “And what about you? Did any good come to you? Does the truth set you free?”

“It really does.” She glanced at her dad. She leaned forward to take his hand and squeeze it. “Dad knew I needed the closure just as much as he did. And that’s what we got. Closure. Not a rehashing of the incident. I feel a difference now. An important difference.”

“I do too,” Shane nodded. “I wanted you to have justice though. I wish his karma was more suited to his crimes but it



was beyond my control, no matter what. And I worried more that I couldn't keep my word not to kill him." His gaze landed on Roman.

Iris snorted. "Oh, what? You convinced Roman to help you under the condition that you wouldn't do anything if the guy were still alive and accessible?"

"He did promise me." Roman smiled.

Iris snorted again. "Bullshit and lies. He'd have done something drastic that we'd all regret. He would have given us a river of regrets."

Shane shrugged. "Perhaps. But I'd never regret getting the chance to pummel him."

Francine said, "Iris, can I ask something?"

Iris looked at her. "Of course. You're a survivor too." Everyone knew what happened from the mouths of the family to the media coverage, both online and traditional.

"Did you ever forgive him? The man who raped you? Even without knowing his name? Did you? They say you have to forgive in order to find peace within yourself or something like that, but I just—"

"That," Iris snorted, interrupting her, "is a bullshit platitude from a ridiculous self-help book probably written by an author who never experienced violence directed *at* them."

"Soooo... is that a no?" Francine's tone was full of irony.

"That's a *fuck no*. I can't forgive the asshole who randomly came in, smashed my head with my own tools and violated me in the most brutal, torturous way possible. No way. He knew exactly what he was doing and he did it for pure sport. To

satisfy his perversion. I refuse to forgive him because I can't. I won't."

Francine's breath caught, and Iris noticed. "Am I too graphic? Sorry. I don't sugarcoat the ugly details."

Francine shook her head and gave Iris a smile. "Fuck no. I was relieved. I'm so messed up about it and so is Roman. That's why it took so long to tell you. I don't know how to forgive. How do I live with it?"

Iris nodded. "Time is your friend. Crying. Talking ad nauseum. Support from your peers who get it and know what you need. Ignore the bullshit-brained, well-meaning people. They try to minimize it, or sweep it under the carpet, reducing it to platitudes, and stressing forgiveness as a remedy. No matter how bad it was. Violence inflicted on purpose is unforgivable. There are truly evil people in the world who do evil things. Not all things are equal and should be forgiven. Unless it works for you. I learned to compartmentalize my emotions. You can feel the anger and rage but don't let them consume you. Being proactive helped me too. I started a support group in this area for sexual abuse survivors. There weren't any support groups before. I was amazed to see how many joined it. But as to forgiving those who trespass against us? Fuck to the no, forever." She glanced at her dad and then at Quinn. "I learned to forgive *myself*. For my bad days, I let them be bad and forgave myself for allowing that. Time passed and I had fewer bad days and more frequent good days. Knowing his name? That can't buy my forgiveness. I'm glad to have the answers that unsettled me. To see the clear face of the phantom monster. I know he existed. I can evict him now from taking up any more space in my brain."

"So it really does help?" Francine exclaimed.

“Yes, it really does. And don’t be discouraged at first. It gets easier, I promise. If you need to talk to someone or reach out, if you’re having a bad day, feel free to call me. I’ve been there.”

“I worried about re-opening a healed wound when I told you this,” Roman said to Iris. “Shane needed to know. I understand why, a father wants to protect his child forever.”

“Right now, you both have raw, gaping, open wounds. You can’t seal them up too soon. Covering an injury up too fast without proper care can only create infection and possibly gangrene. It needs to be left open, to drain the hurt, and how bad it feels. You will slowly begin to recover, and start to heal. It will all get better. You must let it heal slowly, from the inside out. And the end won’t be a flawless patch of skin like before. I’m sorry, but you’ll never be the same. You’ll always have a scar. It’s part of you now. What you do with it is totally on you. You can’t ‘re-open’ issues like trauma, abuse, violence, and rape. *It’s always there.* Don’t be afraid to speak about it openly, especially to us. Just be real,” Iris explained.

“That makes the most sense I’ve heard so far. I couldn’t get a grip on how to *feel.*”

“Changed. Altered. A before and after in the highest extreme.”

“Yes,” Francine agreed and her gaze clung to Iris’s.

Iris smiled gently. “We both endured undeserved violence. I encourage you to talk to me if you think I can help. But be forewarned, I don’t recite platitudes and I’m terribly honest.”

Francine glanced at Roman and then back at her, smiling wide. “I need sincerity now. I need to discuss...”

“Nasty things that no one likes saying? Then I’m your girl.”

Roman squeezed Francine’s hand and she knew—deep in her heart—*he was her guy*.

“I doubt that forgiving Stanley can help me.”

“My opinion? Find a balance. Don’t get so stuck in all the brutality and evil you endured, that you become that yourself. Don’t become nasty and bitter or you’ll ruin your own life more than the violence you endured. For now, just remember that part. Okay? At the toughest moments, and the worse days; and remember one more thing. It’s not forever.”

Iris *knew*. Iris had the voice of experience and she spoke directly to Francine’s soul.

A short time later, after the proper goodbyes and hugs and promises to talk later, she and Roman left. They were walking along a wide trail at the Rydell River Ranch. They met at Shane’s house and parked at Ian and Kailynn’s. Now, she was back at the very place it all started. But there were no triggers to evoke the horrible images now. Odd.

“It must have been so hard for Iris to live and work here where her rape happened.”

He nodded. “I thought I’d find it hard to come back here but it’s still the sunny, pretty, horse ranch I’ve always known and loved.”

“Me too.”

“I guess the darkness lies in the episode itself, not where it started.”

After a moment, she said, “You gave Shane and Iris the answers they sought and peace of mind. It’s just as heroic as

how you saved me.”

“I’m nothing but a messed-up, anxiety-ridden, former cop. No hero here.”

“Yes, you are,” she insisted. “And what she said, is right, go back to being a cop.”

“I’m not ready yet.”

“Then just think about it. No timelines. Remember? On any of it.” Then she fell silent and leaned her head on his arm as they walked quietly along the road. Holding hands in the same place that started a nightmare made them both feel better.

Near the car, Roman finally said, “Maybe.”

## CHAPTER 30



“*R*OMAN. I’M SO GLAD to see you.” Sean stood up when Roman walked in. Sliding into a chair across from him, Sean sighed. “Should I dare to hope this means you’re coming back?”

“Believe me, I want to. But I’ve been having some commitment issues.”

“What does that mean?”

“It involves my gun. Any gun. I can’t force myself to hold...” His gaze skittered off. Was he ready to share his problem with Sean? Admitting it could be the end of his career. The only career he enjoyed and wanted to keep, right?

“What is it, Roman? What’s going on with you?”

“It was much harder than I expected when I had to fire it. Making the decision to shoot, I mean. It happened so fast and I keep reliving it. And doubting myself. I keep wondering what if I have to make that choice again?”

Sean leaned back in his chair and nodded, giving Roman his space. Then he said, “May I speak freely?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ve never fired my weapon once in twenty-eight years of service. Not once. I can’t advise you about how it feels

because I don't know. All I know is, you're one of the finest cops I've ever worked with. You're moral, upright, and you make sound decisions. You're the best marksman too, of any person I've worked with in all that time. I know this department and this neighborhood will suffer greatly without you."

"But what if I've lost my edge?"

"What if you've gained a deeper understanding and respect for the position of authority we hold? What if you've realized the inherent power in the gun, and why we have to respect them? What if you could teach others what you learned? In this day and age, a good cop like you can teach and mentor others to know the difference between being a good cop and a bad one. What you now have to offer is so much more than what you think you lost."

Roman was startled by the words of his superior but pleasantly. He didn't react at first. Swallowing, he nodded and replied, "I've never considered anything like that."

"No hurry to give me an answer, just think about it and don't shut down the idea of coming back. No one deserves more recognition and honor than you do. We would sorely miss you. Take all the time you need to make the right decision."

Roman rose to his feet and shook hands with Sean before he left. He walked outside and called Francine who was back at home in Edmonds. He told her their conversation. She listened quietly and said, "That's a lot to consider. Can you handle the responsibility again? It might be exciting to teach the incoming cadets about the real-life problems and issues involved."

Roman listened to her words. Along with Dr. Bob's take, and the responses from Hunter and Kyomi. He also discussed it with both of his dads, separately and together.

Rodrigo was the one who finally came up to him and said, "It's not like you to quit and walk away from something you love. Let's go to the shooting range. We'll sit there for as long as it takes. *As long as it fucking takes.*"

The suggestion surprised Roman and he imagined himself doing that. He didn't go to the shooting range that day, but his mind was obsessed with it. A few days later, Roman told Rodrigo, "You have to carry it."

He meant the gun, of course. It wasn't the gun that shot and killed Stanley. He had more than one inside his gun safe. One less gun now. He never wanted to see or use the Glock again.

Rodrigo drove the short distance to the gun range and they paid the entrance fee and went inside.

For a full hour, Roman did nothing but stare at the gun that Rodrigo placed on the small shelf in the shooting booth. He stepped back but stayed close. Both of them wore earphones. Rodrigo's presence kept Roman grounded. Roman reached for the gun several times, but a collage of images and feelings in his head stopped him. He let them fully play out inside his mind. What if he missed? What if he aimed too far to the right? Dead Francine. What if he aimed too far to the left? Dead Francine because Stanley would have shot her. What if? What if? What if? They never stopped.

They repeated in his nightmares. The same thing always happened. Over and over again. He closed his eyes and felt the cool breeze after the heat of the day. The rushing river. The shouts of the police overhead. The searchlights illuminating



the area. The shadows bouncing over Stanley and Francine. Holding the gun. Steady. Without shaking. In the mode, on edge, in the zone. Could he ever get there again?

When Roman finally lifted the shooting range gun, Rodrigo exhaled a breath as if he'd been holding it for the entire hour.

Roman felt the weight of the weapon, and its familiarity in his hand. Roman was always a good shot from the day he started training. It came naturally to him and he practiced more often than anyone he knew. The gun was an appendage to his arm, an extension. He became very comfortable with it.

Until that night.

But he succeeded all the same.

He let that thought fully germinate in his mind. All his practice culminated in the perfect moment when he needed it the most.

His muscle memory and the zone he was in were real. Maybe that would be valuable to others. Maybe he could help others.

He didn't want to hurt anyone.

But the world wasn't filled with fucking unicorns and rainbows. Evil was everywhere, even River's End. Look at what happened to Iris and Francine.

Roman felt called upon to drive it back to oblivion.

That was his calling in the past. Everything was black or white and right or wrong then.

Francine and Stanley made him rethink his core beliefs. So many shades of gray.

Except knowing when and how to use a gun. Roman waited until the very last split second, hoping and praying he wouldn't have to.

A feeling of peace settled over him as he stared at the gun now in his hand. Cold, hard steel that could shatter a man's head like a light bulb.

Roman wasn't trigger happy. He didn't make the wrong decision. He acted correctly in the exact moment he needed to.

All at once, Roman took a shot.

Rodrigo flinched.

Roman didn't hesitate. That fast, he hit the bullseye, dead center. Slipping off the earphones he said, "I need about a thousand more shots before I can trust myself to know the moment when it becomes necessary again." Roman lowered his arm. He was glad Rodrigo was there. "I did it right when I most needed to get it right."

Rodrigo shuffled his feet and glanced at his brother. He touched Roman's shoulder and said, "You got it right."

"I wish I could feel sure. I need—"

"Time and counseling. You only shot and killed because you had to. There was no other choice. You're a cop because you want to serve and protect. The citizens of River's End, like me and everyone who lives here, couldn't bear to lose you."

He shut his eyes and let Rodrigo's words sink in. Then he nodded. "Okay. I'll try a few more."

He shot the whole round and needed to reload. After he finished, Roman unloaded the gun and stowed it safely. "I need to see Bruce."

When he turned, Rodrigo's eyes twinkled. "And Francine?"

He smiled. "And Franny." He passed his brother, carrying his own weapon.

"She grew on you, didn't she?" he asked Rodrigo with a grin and eyebrow wag.

He laughed. "She did. Eventually."

"Yeah... me too."

His heart was hammering and Roman was good and ready to see Sean about getting back to work.

Back in service.

Trying to make the world a little better than he and his brother found it when they were alone and young.

He liked tracking down the people who hurt innocent victims and giving them what they deserved. His mission to uphold the law ran through his veins. He could never turn his back on it.

Now, he was ready to return to normal life.

Slightly altered. Different. "Scarred," as Iris explained.

"What will you say to Franny?"

He shrugged. "I guess we'll have to find a way to date across the state, juggling her kid and co-parenting with her counseling schedule and mine. I don't care as long as it's formally decided."

Rodrigo shook his head. "I'm still surprised you even have a damn girlfriend."



TWO DAYS LATER, Roman walked into the juvenile detention center where Bruce was sentenced for the next three years. He waited at the visiting table, but Bruce didn't come.

After Roman's sixth visit, Bruce finally came to the visiting table and saw him.

"Want to know a story?" Roman said to him as soon as Bruce sat down. He offered no concern about where Bruce was living or how long it had been since he last saw him. Roman started talking like before, as if they were playing basketball as usual.

"I guess."

"I shot a guy and his head exploded."

Bruce's mouth twisted. "I heard something about that."

"Want to hear the details?"

Pretty gory way to entice someone. But he got a connection. A line. A hand. A link. Someday, Roman hoped his visits would culminate in a friendly relationship. But for now? He was content to simply tell Bruce what happened.

## EPILOGUE



**T**IME PASSED. IRIS WAS right in her assessment of what it took to overcome grief and trauma. Lots of time.

Francine started beauty school, which reduced her anxiety of leaving her son alone significantly. She became happier and more confident, knowing her nightmare with Stanley was finally over and done.

Roman returned to work and stayed in River's End. Francine did not.

One whole year had passed since the shooting when Francine showed up at the apartment Roman shared with his brother. They both commuted the long distance through the winter snows and spring's reawakening. For a two-week stretch, the heavy snow prevented the mountain passes from opening or being safely navigable, so they couldn't see each other at all.

She knocked with exuberance, showing up without any warning and without Russell.

Roman opened the door, wearing his uniform with surprise on his face. "Franny. I didn't realize you were coming."

She shook her head and eagerly replied, "Guess what?"

"What?"

“We’re moving to River’s End.”

Roman tilted his head. “We? Who’s we?”

“Everyone. Me, Russell, Hunter and Kyomi.”

He leaned into the doorjamb. “How the fuck did you manage that?”

“I told you Hunter wanted to quit his job. It took this long for him to extricate himself from the company and keep some money coming in. By selling the townhouses, we’ll make a killing. Enough to set everyone up here. Kyomi wants to start a hobby ranch. And Hunter plans to start a new business from here. I have to commute to Edmonds to finish my last three quarters of school but it’s only nine months. We can handle that. They agreed to come back here. All of us. Hunter wants to be closer for his family, and Kyomi loves the area. We’re still figuring it all out. But it’s going to be here.”

His gaze lingered on her. “And us?”

“We can be much closer here.”

“Co-parenting with the Rydells?” Hunter and Kyomi got married last spring.

“Yes.” Francine didn’t waver in her excitement. Roman hugged her tall, long body to his.

“I’d fuck you against this door if Rodrigo weren’t right there,” he whispered into her ear after a long, lingering tongue kiss.

She giggled. She was happy, youthful, and healed. The joy shone from her eyes.

After conspiring all winter on how to keep herself and Russell in River’s End for good, they finally made a plan. The posse of parents were more a unit now than ever. Her news

was the best fucking news Roman ever heard. He was glad to be back on the force here and didn't want to leave it. Francine could work in a beauty salon nearby. She planned to work and show off her talents so she'd eventually be swamped with clients.

Roman beamed at her cockiness. The new confident, honest, and kind version of Franny Rydell was a lovely sight to behold.

"I'd let you do it too," she replied as her breath hitched in anticipation. They separated and stared at each other. *Later* was left unsaid.

Once inside the door, Francine rushed to Rodrigo and said, "Guess what?"

He glanced at her from the back of the couch, merely observing her excitement. "What?"

"We're all moving back here."

Sighing, Rodrigo gave her and Roman a long look. "You'd better find a new place. I'm not listening to you two doing it out here anymore."

Francine blushed and Roman roared with laughter. They didn't always make it to his bedroom during her visits.

She tilted her head towards Roman. He pulled her closer and said, "First thing."

Her gaze twinkled as he ignored his brother and kissed her mouth.

After surviving through hell and back, life was moving on. Ever forward.

Except now, it was here. In River's End.

Francine was exactly where she wanted to be. She could raise her son in a safe environment. And work. She never lost sight of her goals and was more than willing to do the work and make the sacrifices. She was so delighted to live in a safe place with her son.

“Maybe the four of you can buy a compound and live with Hunter and Kyomi,” Rodrigo added, interrupting their kiss and her excitement. He thought the foursome parenting was a little creepy.

She beamed. “We will not do that. We all need boundaries. We’ll be close but not too close; we’re still discussing it. They’re partial to the north valley near Kyomi’s old ranch, but not too close. And I was thinking of the south end, as Roman patrols that area.”

“Thank God. I was afraid you’d start a cult on the compound which would get really weird.” Rodrigo’s eyes twinkled as he added, “I’m just feeding you shit, Franny.”

She loved hearing Rodrigo call her that too. He gave her shit. They often kidded each other and the way he spoke to her was warm and amiable. “It’s a healthy arrangement with plenty of boundaries so we can all get along and raise Russell.”

Rodrigo held up his hands. “Fucking amazing and you have my congrats. Glad to hear it.” He sighed dramatically. “I’m going now. Leaving you guys alone. Please. Please. Please. Just stay in his bedroom.” Flashing a huge grin, Rodrigo left.

Roman stared after him and then at her. He shrugged before they launched themselves at each other. “Fuck that,” Roman growled while lowering her to the edge of the sofa. He kissed and devoured her mouth and neck.



She laughed and later moaned loudly with desire.

Finally.

They were home.

Home was new and brilliant for everyone now. For herself. For Russell. For her friends. And for her boyfriend.

Roman said, “I love you,” and she knew deep in her heart, soul, guts, and her very being, that he meant forever. The rest of her life. She felt so free. She could be with Roman without losing sight of the path to finding herself. Fully. Being his girlfriend was exactly what she wanted. For now.

Someday later? Maybe she’d finally want to get married, but for real this time.



#### **AUTHOR’S NOTE:**

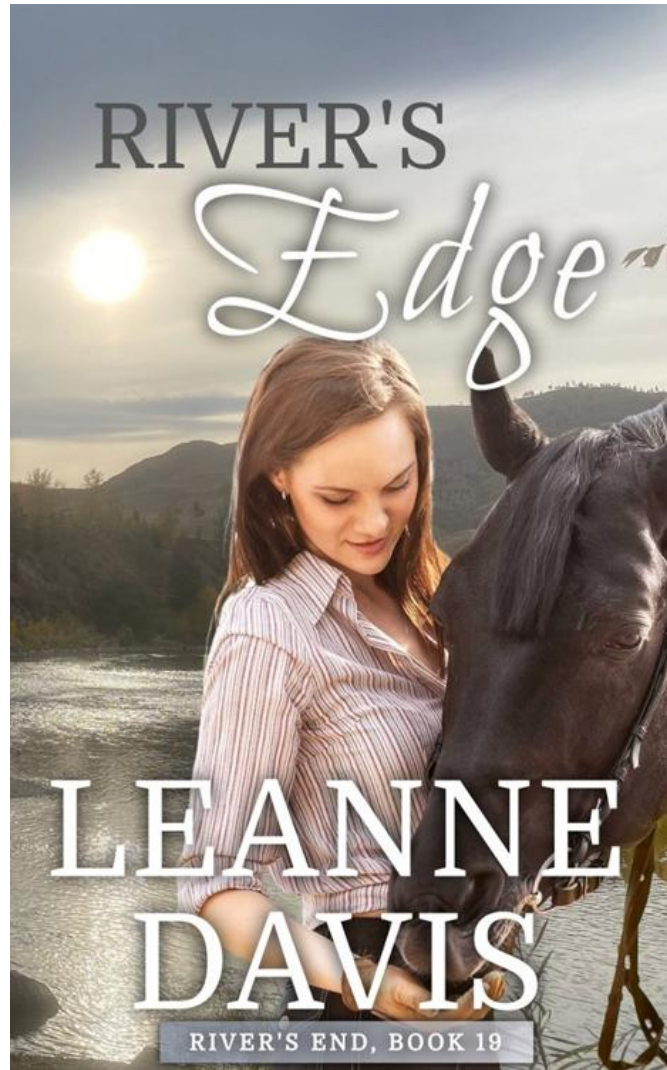
Thank you for reading the latest adventures in the River’s End Series, with Roman and Francine. Introduced in River at the Ranch, and again in River from the City, there were many reasons to dislike Francine Rydell. She was an exciting challenge to bring around as a heroine worthy of her own story. I hope you enjoyed her transformation as much as I did creating it!

Read on for more about River’s Edge, Book #19.

Jade Rydell will soon be taking over the Rydell River Ranch, and that transition is going just fine until she realizes just exactly who one of her new ranch workers turns out to be. He is far more than the usual worker they hire.

What he means to her, to her father, and most of all to her grandparents, is going to be ride worth reading about!

I hope you will stick around to see what could possibly next happen along River's Edge...[Click here for River's Edge!](#)  
OR [River's Edge Website.](#)



*Click here for [River's Edge](#).*

**Thank you** for reading RIVER OF REGRETS!

I hope you found Francine's character arc entertaining, compelling, and satisfying, as you followed her from a woman purposely hurting others, to becoming self-aware, and finally capable of caring how her actions affect those around her.

Read on to learn who Jade Rydell is as she will soon be taking over the Rydell River Ranch, and what happens when she realizes just exactly who one of her new ranch workers turns out to be. He is *far* more than the usual worker they hire. What he means to her, to her father, and most of all to her grandparents, is going to be ride worth reading about!

Click here for [River's Edge!](#)

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I would be so grateful if you took a few moments to leave a review of [RIVER OF REGRETS](#). It really helps expand an author's audience and we really do appreciate the effort.

Keep reading for an excerpt of RIVER'S EDGE...

## EXCERPT

### **Excerpt:**

The dark, dusty barn was filled with the horses' neighs and sighs, but it didn't mask the sound of their collective boots sliding over the concrete floor, as they stopped behind him. He didn't have to turn around to know exactly who it was.

Jade. Ben. And most likely Jack. He was glad she was smart enough to grab help and not confront him alone. As far as Jade knew, he was violent and dangerous.

Because she finally recognized she'd met him before.

What did it take? Almost three full months of constant, daily contact and yet, until today, she'd never paused when glancing over him. He'd believed her recognition would happen when he'd first showed up on their ranch, and been introduced to her. In that exact moment, he'd placed exactly who Jade Rydell was, and why they had targeted her in the first place.

But Jade? Never so much as blinked in any kind of recognition that she'd ever laid eyes on him before. He'd thought when he spoke, she'd recognize the sound of his voice. But not once did she flinch with the realization of who he was.

Not once.

Not until today.

Today when he'd had a bandanna over his mouth, covering the lower half of his face from the choking dust billowing up from the horse round up they were on. When he'd looked up, he'd found Jade's gaze on him. Evaluating.

Her head tilted; her eyebrows lowered. She'd been reasoning it out. Trying to figure out what was different about him. He happened to be looking at her when her brain hit the jackpot and realized who he was.

But horses ran between them. Dangerous and loose. She couldn't stop and let her personal discovery fully germinate.

Jade had finally placed him in her memories, and now she was here to see him punished.

He expected she'd go get her dad, grandfather, the cops.

"You were there that night." Ice dripped off her tone. There was no need to define when or where or what, *that night* meant.

He nodded as he fully swung around to face them. "Yes. I was always sorry. I didn't know it was going to go like that."

"So you don't deny it?"

He dropped his hands to his sides and let his shoulders fall in defeat. "No. I saw the moment you recognized me."

"We could just kill you. No one would know."

He nodded, lifting his gaze to the soft statement spoken by Jack Rydell. He didn't like his granddaughter being hurt. "You could. No one would likely figure it out. There isn't many who would miss me." His heart twisted. Just Penny. She deserved

so much better. Always had. Always would. “But I’d prefer you call the police. They’ll just arrest me.”

“No one’s going to harm you.” Jade’s voice interrupted all the posturing. Arms crossed over her chest. “You’re not going to try to stop us from turning you in? I thought you’d try to run.”

He shook his head. “I can’t stop you. There’s nowhere left to run.”

“Why did you come here? What do you want? What kind of game is this?” Ben Rydell spoke then. Behind the two men and Jade, stood her mom, Jocelyn and her grandmother, Erin.

*Erin.* The entire reason he was here. She was his last hope. Maybe... she’d take some pity on him. Or tell her husband to do as he threatened. He understood that would be fair punishment for what he’d done, and who he was to her.

“No game. I needed a job. You guys had a job. I didn’t know who Jade was or that she’d be here until the moment we were introduced.”

“Why did you stay?”

“She didn’t recognize me. And I did need the job.” But really? It was mostly Erin he stayed for. He just hadn’t figured out how to proceed.

“Fuck that. There’s more to this. No way you ended up here by accident.” Ben snarled.

He sighed. “No. No accident.”

“Jack! Ben! Just call Roman. Before you two do something stupid.” Roman Barrett, he was a family member cop. Jocelyn’s voice called out behind them. Reasonable.

Correct. They should do that. But he didn't blame Ben or Jack, for threatening him, but mostly he didn't blame Jade.

He licked his lips. "You should call Roman. I'll tell him everything. I can tell you who I was with that night, and likely where to find them. I will do all that."

By then Ben was getting closer to him.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jack snarled. "At least tell us that."

He nodded. "I can tell you that."

He finally had to reveal what felt like his least line of defense, and also his last chance. He stared at Erin. Erin had been behind them all, quiet. Not realizing this entire debacle revolved around her. Why he was here. Why he stayed even after he knew who Jade was. Even how Jade ended up being the target of *that night*. The most horrific night of his life. And hers.

He regretted this. But there was no other choice. "Cole. My name is Cole... Poletti."

He watched the words ripple through Erin.

Her head jerked upright, her eyes grew bright, her mouth dropped open, as a jolt shuddered through her. Then she shot forward. Jack grabbed at her as she moved right in front of him.

"No. No. Don't say it. That name. That fucking name."

Erin's eyes shut. Her face crumbled.

"I'm sorry." He offered. He truly was. He was never okay with who his father was.

She shuddered. "You know Chance Poletti?"



“Yes. He’s my father.”

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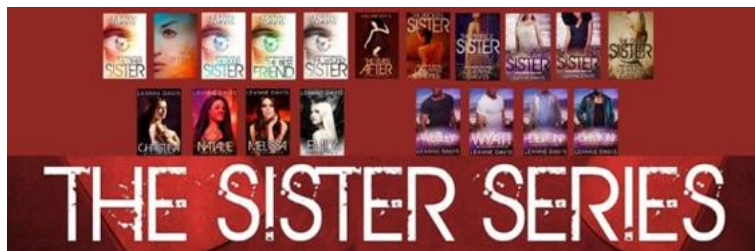
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Leanne Davis has earned a business degree from Western Washington University. She worked for several years in the construction management field before turning full time to writing. She lives in the Seattle area with her husband and two children. When she isn't writing, she and her family enjoy camping trips to destinations all across Washington State, many of which become the settings for her novels.

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River of Regrets

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