



Sophie's

SONG

NIGHTHAWK



SEARCH & RESCUE

AMANDA ZOOK

Sophie's Song

Nighthawk Search and Rescue Book 6

Amanda Look

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First paperback edition March 2023

Cover design by Kari March Designs

Edited by Beth Lawton, VB Edits

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To Music



Thank you for always clearing my head, healing my heart, and
lifting my spirits.

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for
education, because rhythm and harmony find their way into
the inward places of the soul.”

Plato

Content Warning

Warning: This book contains scenes of domestic violence.

Intimate partner violence affects on average 20 people per minute in the United States (NCADV). “More than 1 in 3 of women and 1 in 4 of men will experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime” (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2021).

If you or someone you know are dealing with issues stemming from toxic or abusive relationships, talking to a therapist can make a big difference in how you feel. Abuse in any form should not be tolerated, but therapy and reaching out to your support network can help you recognize this and develop an exit plan.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

TTY 1-800-787-3224

Text “START” to 88788

Domestic Violence Support | The National Domestic
Violence Hotline ([thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org))

Chapter One



Five Years Ago

Lights flashed in their psychedelic dance. Sirens wailed. Evan Cole didn't notice any of it.

What the hell happened?

Racing through the streets in his Chicago PD issued Ford Interceptor, he focused on the road in front of him, blocking out all the shit that he'd missed. There was still time. There was still a chance to fix this. There had to be.

Evan slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision with a Tesla whose driver didn't heed the lights and sirens. Pounding his fist on the steering wheel, he let out a slew of curses.

“Come on. Come on. Move out of the way, asshole.” He willed the shiny luxury vehicle to move faster. Nothing angered him more than a driver who ignored his civic duty to get the hell out of the way for emergency vehicles.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. There was one thing he hated more: missing the clues that were right in front of his face. He tore a hand through his hair just as the Tesla pulled to the side. Evan shot out, pressing the gas pedal to the floor.

Finally, he pulled onto the street that was crowded with a massive police response. This felt all wrong. The quiet neighborhood in the northwest corner of Chicago rarely saw the outrageous display that had packed onto the treelined

street. Plenty of Chicago police officers called Edison Park home and lived the peaceful, idyllic lifestyle.

But on this day, one of their own, Don Rockwell, a decorated detective, had lost his goddamn mind.

His partner, his *brother*, had gone off the deep end, and Evan had missed all the warning signs.

Evan threw the SUV into park haphazardly next to the other emergency vehicles and raced up to his captain. He eyed the brick bungalow, hoping to see movement inside. How many times had he pulled up to this house to see the family living a pleasant life through the large front window?

There had been so many occasions celebrated at this house. Beers shared with his best friend while standing over the grill on the brick patio out back as Tara put the finishing touches on their dinner. Playing with their daughter, Katie, who'd always watched for him from the window before rushing out the front door and leaping into his arms as she told him her latest news.

He'd spent hours with the little family. They were his family. Don had married Evan's sister and welcomed their beautiful little girl, his niece, into the world a year later. They had the perfect life. Happiness. Love. And music.

Tara had followed in their mother's footsteps as a high school music teacher. And little Katie, she was a wonder at the piano. By age five, she had mastered the masters. The girl awed Evan with a natural talent that was unlike any he'd ever encountered. She far surpassed his own skills but still begged

him to join her at the family's piano. They would play nonsense together, laughing at their made-up songs.

A happy family full of love and life. But now Evan wondered if it had all been a mirage. Where had they hidden the secrets all this time? How had things gone so wrong? And how was he going to save the family he loved from disaster?

"Has he talked?" Evan asked Captain Errol Breckenridge.

"Not yet. He's closed all the curtains, and he cuts off any attempt at communication."

"Katie?" As soon as he'd heard what Don had done, he'd rushed to get to the house without learning all the facts. All he knew was that Don had lost his fucking mind and was holding Tara hostage.

"Still at school. A unit is waiting there." Evan blew out a breath of relief. While the situation was tenuous, it would have been ten times worse if Katie had been home. Knowing his niece was safe, he could focus on saving his baby sister.

"I'm calling him," Evan said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Not sure he'll answer," his captain replied.

"Gotta try." He stabbed his partner's contact and waited. It rang. Once. Twice. Evan's hand tightened around his phone as he listened to the incessant ringing. Each trill shot through his clenched jaw like a dentist's drill. And they were just as painful.

Finally, just as he thought the call would go to voicemail, the ringing stopped. “Evan?”

“Tara,” he gasped. His heart broke as she sobbed, muttering incoherently. “I’m here. I’m outside. Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“Katie?” she cried. “Keep her away. Please.” The desperation in her voice tore at Evan.

“She’s still at school. She’s safe. A unit will pick her up and take her to Mrs. Breckenridge.” The captain and his wife were like surrogate grandparents. They lived a couple of blocks away and spent just as much time at the bungalow as Evan did.

“Promise me.”

“What?”

“Promise me you’ll take care of her. She won’t understand. Promise me you’ll help her through it.”

His gut clenched. “I won’t need to. You’re gonna be fine. We’ll—”

“Promise me,” she cried, interrupting his assurances.

It was a promise he didn’t know if he could keep. How could he explain to a ten-year-old what was going on with her dad? He wasn’t even sure *he* understood what was happening.

“Evan?”

“I promise,” he breathed out, knowing his sister just needed the words.

“Tell her I love her.”

“She knows.”

“And Mom and Dad.”

“They know too.”

“Love you more than cheese, big brother.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. She always pulled out that phrase from their childhood when she was feeling especially sentimental. It tore through his chest. She sounded like she was giving up. “Stop, Tara. You’re not going anywhere. Understand? You’re gonna be fine. You’ll be bingeing on that disgusting Hawaiian pizza together soon.”

She snorted a laugh that turned into a sob. “I’m sorry, Evan. I’m sorry I never told you.”

“You can explain it later, okay? There’s nothing to be sorry for. Understand?”

“Yeah.” He could tell in just that one word that she didn’t believe him.

“What’s he doing?”

“Pacing.”

“In the living room? Just answer yes or no.”

“No.”

“Dining room.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Are you in the same room?” He needed as much as he could get from her in order to make the best plan to get her

out.

“Yes.”

“He’s armed?”

“Yes.” Her voice quivered with that answer. She’d always accepted that the job required they be armed, but she didn’t like it. Evan had offered to teach her how to use a gun several times. She always refused. She’d been too afraid.

And now her husband was holding her hostage at gunpoint. Her worst nightmare brought to life. And knowing the man he’d called brother was causing her terror was too inconceivable to wrap his brain around.

“Okay. You’re doing good, Tara. We’ll get through this. Will he talk to me?”

“I-I think so.”

“It’s gonna be fine. Take a deep breath. I’ll get you out, okay? Give him the phone.”

“If I could pick the best brother—” The rest of her statement was cut off with a sob.

“I know. If I could pick the best sister, it would be you.” A heavy weight settled in his chest. He had to give the words to her. A foreboding mass twisted in his gut. An uneasy feeling that those would be his last words to her. She said nothing more, but he heard her sniffles.

“Stop that crying.” Evan flinched at the tone of voice he’d never heard come from Don before. Not even when dealing

with their worst subjects had he ever sounded like that. The whimper from Tara caused Evan to see red. He wanted to tear into his partner for causing her terror.

“What do you want?” Don snarled.

“Hey, partner. What are you doing?”

Don snorted. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m having a chat with my wife. I can’t let them turn her against me.” Evan had no idea who Don was referring to. He sounded out of his mind and that alarmed Evan. But for now, he needed to focus on getting Don to put the weapon down and let Tara go.

“Okay. But you don’t need a gun to talk to her.”

“It’s the only way she’ll listen. The only way to save us.”

“She can’t listen well if she’s scared. Why don’t you put the gun down?”

“Not gonna happen. They are already in her head. She needs to understand. You all need to understand.” *Fuck*. He sounded more cracked by the second. What was going on with his partner?

“Understand what? Come out and talk to me. I’ll listen.”

“No way. They probably got to you too. You’ll take her side. She’s your sister.”

“And you’re my partner. My *brother*.”

“Can’t do it anymore.”

“Can’t do what?”

“They messed everything up. She wants to leave.”

“She’s scared. You’re scaring her. Of course she wants to leave. How ’bout you let her out of the house, and I’ll come in? We’ll talk.”

“No!” he shouted. “You don’t get it.”

“I’m sorry,” Evan said, trying to portray a calmness he didn’t feel. Every muscle clenched tight, keeping him from rushing through that door and throttling his partner whom he didn’t recognize anymore. “Explain it to me.”

Silence met his request. It lasted for so long he had to glance at his screen to see if the call had disconnected. He listened closely, hoping Don would give him something. A rasping noise sounded in his ear, a rustle of clothes, confirming Don was still there.

“Don. Help me understand,” he asked softly. “What’s going on?”

“She’s leaving me, man,” Don groused. It was a shocking revelation. He’d thought they were the perfect couple. Clearly, he’d been wrong. How could he have been blind to what was happening to his own family?

“I’m sorry.”

“I can’t lose her.”

“Okay. Put the gun down so we can talk about this. There are plenty of things we can do to fix this, okay? But holding a gun on her is not one of them. Let her go, and we can talk. I’m with you, man. I’m not going anywhere. Let’s talk. Just you and me. We can figure this out together.”

“Can’t lose her,” Don repeated.

“You won’t if you put the gun down and let her go.”

“She’s gonna leave.”

“No, Don. Not if you let her go right now. You can try therapy or something. There is still a chance to fix this.”

“No. Can’t fix it. It’s over.”

“Don—”

“If I can’t have her, no one—” The shot that rang out startled him so badly he nearly dropped the phone. The second shot was just as shocking as the first and froze Evan in place.

What the fuck just happened?

Chapter Two



Present Day

THE LOUD, EXPLOSIVE POP startled her so badly she jerked the wheel violently as her heart pounded in her throat. Panic left her gasping for breath. *He'd found her and was shooting at her.*

She was dead for sure.

But the lopsided bumps the car made as it drifted down the dark country road told a different story. The repetitive thumps slowed as she pulled to the shoulder. Putting the car in park, she clutched the steering wheel as she willed her heart back into its proper place and rhythm.

Unable to fully control her trembling, she climbed out of the old Hyundai, gripping the door until her legs were steady. She spotted the flat tire on the front driver's side instantly.

“Fuck.” She could not catch a break. A chill gust of wind answered her curse, and she shivered.

She must have lost her mind when she decided to run in December. It was freaking cold. And she wasn't just talking about the type of cold that one could combat with a pair of warm socks and mittens.

No.

This was the type of cold that seeped into your soul. The kind of cold that no amount of cozy fabric could tackle.

And Sophie Alvaro was beyond feeling the cold, since her veins had long since iced over.

No. Not Sophie Alvaro.

Sophie Alvarez.

She had to remember to use Alvarez. Even during her inner dialogue. She needed to get used to that name. Sophie Alvaro was gone. It was crucial to keep that in mind. Especially if she wanted to live.

Popping the trunk, she hoped the shyster who'd sold the car hadn't lied and there was indeed a spare. Shuffling her meager belongings to the back seat, she lifted the floorboard, breathing a sigh of relief when she spotted the spare. Her relief was short-lived since the required tools had not been included.

Shoulders hunched in defeat, she glanced around. It was dark, with nothing but farmland surrounding her.

The area was quiet. Too quiet. She was used to the city sounds. This type of quiet seemed to roar in her ears. The wind screamed through the bare trees, and the branches creaked as they bowed to the wind's pressure. It was strange how different the wind sounded without the buffer of skyscrapers.

A dog barked in the distance, making Sophie jump. A train whistle reached her ears. She could hear the rumble of the train's movement over the tracks, so different from the sounds of the L she was used to hearing.

The sounds bombarded her from all sides. Defeated, she climbed back into her car, knowing it wouldn't be wise to

search for help this late at night.

Sophie kicked herself for not listening to Mrs. Tilley. If she had followed the older woman's instructions to the letter, she wouldn't be in this predicament. As it was, she was nearly out of gas and money. Not to mention options.

Her instincts had been to get as far away as fast as possible. She had thought Mrs. Tilley's plans would keep her too close. Just being on the opposite side of the lake from her hell hadn't seemed safe enough. Granted, it was Lake Michigan, but it still felt too close. Especially for someone with resources like Victor Silvo.

Figuring a large city in Indiana would cloak her, she had driven south instead of east like Mrs. Tilley had ordered. She'd be just one of eight hundred thousand people. It'd be easy to disappear. She had realized her mistake quickly after arriving in Indianapolis.

As she had walked down the sidewalk, hoping to find a job, she'd seen the symbol that haunted her dreams. The three-point crown graffitied on the side of the building had effectively frozen her in place more than the cold was doing to her at the moment.

The Latin Lords were everywhere. She had been mistaken to think their territory was only in Chicago. A stupid mistake that had cost her way too much.

Back on target to follow Mrs. Tilley's directions, Sophie had hoped the meager amount of gas left in the tank would last.

Finally, she'd pulled into the little lakeside town of Lake Haven with fifty dollars left to her name. And yet she'd breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Tilley had assured Sophie her friend could help her.

Pulling up to a quaint cottage a few blocks back from the shoreline of the lake, she'd hoped Mrs. Tilley's friend was home. It was early, but the dark windows suggested no one was there.

Sophie had parked on the street and taken a deep breath. *You can do this. You made it this far. Now all you have to do is knock on the door.*

Yes, she could do this. The hardest part had been getting away from Victor. Knocking on a stranger's door should have been easy.

Sophie had climbed out of her car, gasping as the icy wind stole her breath. Huddling into her coat, she walked up the path to the cottage's front door. Taking another deep breath, stunted because of the cold, she raised her fist and knocked.

Then waited.

When no one answered, Sophie had gotten back in the car and pulled away from the curb, unsure of what her next step would be. She drove aimlessly, which was dangerous considering her current fuel and money status. Eventually, she'd ended up bumping along the cobblestone street at the center of town.

Lake Haven was a quaint town nestled next to Lake Michigan. It would be the quintessential vacation spot on warmer days, when the frigid wind wasn't trying to peel the skin off one's cheeks.

Still, curiosity had gotten the better of her as the cute store names caught her eye, prompting her to spend a few hours perusing the shops.

She'd stepped into Torch of Haven, a candle store, and nearly moaned as the warmth of the shop enveloped her. The scents that assaulted her senses were heavenly, and if she'd had the money, she would have made quite a few purchases. Even the make-your-own-candle station appeared intriguing.

With a sigh, she'd left the store and ducked into the others. Innovation Haven, the educational toy store, made her smile as she watched the kids flit from item to item. A young boy drooled over the robotics section. Another seemed obsessed with the model car kits.

The store had a piano mat stretched across an open area. A girl with the most beautiful blond hair Sophie had ever seen was dancing around on it. Sophie couldn't resist joining her, and together, they'd made up a nonsensical song that only made sense to them until the girl's mother pulled her away.

The encounter had been fun, but it had left her feeling sad. At thirty-two, Sophie had imagined she'd have her own beautiful little girl by now. But life had other plans for her, and there had been no way she'd bring a child into her nightmare.

Back on the sidewalk, the scents emanating from the coffee shop, Brew-tiful Haven, had invited her in, but she'd kept her distance. She had a weakness for a caramel cappuccino but knew her wallet could not support her fondness for the drink.

Finally, as the sun had settled behind the lake's horizon, Sophie found herself at the entrance to a bar. Through the window, Jolene's appeared to be a popular spot. Figuring it couldn't hurt to sit at the bar and nurse a drink for a while, she had stepped through the door. The cacophony of conversations among friends and family bombarded her as soon as the door closed behind her.

The bar had been packed. Patrons of all ages filled the space. A large group took up the middle of the restaurant, having pushed a bunch of tables together. They were boisterous and loud. The men were handsome and could put Victor's perceived formidable physique to shame. The women were beautiful and appeared to be close. Sophie had felt a pang for the closeness she saw among the group. She'd been isolated by Victor for so long that all the friends she'd once made years ago had flitted away. And now she was alone.

Shaking herself out of her melancholy, Sophie had headed for the bathroom before settling on a stool at the bar. She'd ordered a soda from the brawny bartender, who'd eyed her with interest. Feeling uneasy, she pulled her baseball hat lower over her brow, hoping to remain inconspicuous.

She'd sipped from her drink for a while until a plate appeared in front of her.

“I didn’t order this,” she’d told the bartender.

“I know, but I figured you could use it.”

“No, thank you,” she’d said, pushing the plate away.

The bartender pushed it back. “Eat it. It’s on the house. It was made by mistake and will only go to waste if someone doesn’t eat it.”

Her empty stomach had grumbled, desperate for the food. Sophie had eyed the man, who seemed sincere, before accepting his offering.

The bartender was a big guy with muscles bulging under tattoos that covered both arms. He ran a hand over his bald head and smiled. That smile had put her immediately at ease. It was so boyish and incongruous with his outer appearance. “Name’s Ox, if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” She’d picked up the giant burger and moaned with her first bite. The flavors that erupted on her tongue were so good. Sophie noticed Ox staring at her with an odd expression. She covered her mouth as she chewed, then offered an apology for the noise she’d made. “It’s good.”

Ox laughed. “That’s a burger by Jolene for you. They are virtually orgasmic.”

A burst of laughter had erupted from her as Ox walked away with a wink. It’d been a long time since she’d had anything to laugh about, and the sound startled her. Setting her burger down, she reached across the bar for the ketchup for her fries. After she’d dumped a blob onto her plate, she’d returned

the bottle and noticed her sleeve had moved, exposing the scars and lingering bruises from her last encounter with Victor. She'd yanked the sleeve down and glanced around, hoping no one else had noticed.

The man standing at the end of the bar had caught her attention. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a muscled chest that filled out his T-shirt nicely. Short, dark brown hair lay in waves on top, and the five o'clock shadow that covered his square jaw made him look more handsome than Victor's precisely groomed façade.

His lips had been tilted up at the corners as he watched the large group in the center of the room. But it was his blue eyes that caught her attention the most. They were a blue that reminded her of a summer sky. The kind of warm blue that could wrap you up in happiness and comfort.

Their gazes had met and locked briefly before she'd lost her nerve and ducked her head, pulling on the bill of her hat. Her heart had pounded, and she didn't know why. But for the brief moment they'd stared at each other, she'd felt something she hadn't had in years. It was a warmth she'd only felt with two other people before they were ripped from her life.

Sophie thought of that moment in the bar as she sat shivering in her disabled car. What was it about that man that had affected her so much? Why did a simple set of blue eyes remind her of better times?

The bright glare of approaching headlights pulled her from those thoughts. She'd thought the truck would keep driving

past and was surprised when it pulled up behind her. A man climbed out and walked toward her. She was wise enough to stay locked inside as she watched him approach.

He stopped next to her window but several feet out onto the road, as if knowing she'd be nervous and wanting to give her space. Even only illuminated by the headlights of his truck, she recognized him instantly.

She imagined she'd never be able to forget those blue eyes and the feelings they provoked.

Chapter Three



IT WAS ANOTHER RESTLESS night for Evan Cole. Which was why he was driving down the old country road instead of resting in his warm bed. It had been a grueling day of training, topped off with another celebratory gathering at Jolene's.

Jude's woman, Hollynn, was on the mend from major back surgery, which was the reason for the celebration. Evan shook his head, remembering the surprise they'd all gotten when Jude's parentage was revealed. How was it they had never known the big guy's parents were famous?

It had been a shock to learn that bit of history from his friend, to say the least. But it was even more surprising how quickly the massive grump had fallen for his girl. Evan thought Jude would be the last one to get caught up in that type of thing.

That made five of them now. Five Nighthawks that had fallen in love. Two of them were soon headed toward the *'till death do us part* bullshit. While the whole idea of marriage and forever wasn't for him, he couldn't deny that his friends

were happy. They'd found some pretty remarkable women to share their lives with. But he'd seen how forever could quickly turn destructive. There had been no coming back from that sorrow for his family, and he wouldn't wish that on his Nighthawk brothers for anything.

Evan forced his thoughts away from his remorse as he sped past the dormant farmlands. He loved driving his new Ford F-150, but this road and its haphazard pothole repair patches were giving his shiny new shocks a workout. The ringing of his phone echoed in the cab, distracting him from the bone-jarring bumps in the road. Seeing his dad's name on the dashboard display, he answered using the Bluetooth setup.

"Hey, Pop. What's up?"

"Sorry to call so late, but I promised your mother I'd call and ... well ..."

Evan laughed. "You forgot."

Brandon Cole chuckled. "As usual."

"No worries, Pop. I'll let Mom know you fulfilled her directive."

"Knew I could count on you, kid."

"As usual," Evan replied, parroting his dad's words. "So, what do you need? Or should I say, what does Mom need?"

"Nothing really. Mom just wanted to make sure you knew about Katie's performance with the symphony."

"Wait. Katie's performing with the symphony?"

“Shit. Didn’t we tell you?”

“That was probably another of Mom’s directives you forgot about.”

“Yeah, probably. Sorry about that.”

“No worries. Tell me about Katie’s performance.” Evan’s niece was only fifteen but could play the piano as well as any grown professional, all thanks to his mom and his sister, Tara.

Faith Cole had been teaching piano lessons for nearly forty years and had made sure every child under her roof could play Beethoven and Chopin from memory. But his niece, Katie, had a unique talent for the instrument. She was a virtuoso with so much talent in just her little finger; she put Mozart and Rachmaninoff to shame.

“She’s debuting with the Chicago Symphony for their holiday concert. Your mother is beside herself with pride.”

“I bet. Has the search for the perfect gown started yet?”

Brandon chuckled. “You know it. She’s sparing no expense for this one.”

“Send me the bill,” Evan said, knowing his parents lived on a fixed income and struggled to raise their teenage granddaughter. Evan helped as much as he could ... well, as much as they would allow. Brandon was a psychology professor at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. He should have retired years ago, but with the death of Evan’s sister, Katie went to live with her grandparents. Brandon

continued to work, and Faith taught private lessons, but they still struggled in today's economy.

“Evan,” Brandon chided.

“Pop, let me do this. I want to support Katie. Let me buy her a damn dress.” His parents could be stubborn about taking his money. Nighthawk Search and Rescue paid well—much better than his job with the Chicago Police department had, anyway. There was no reason he couldn't help his parents. He had no family of his own and had invested well. He could afford to do more if they'd let him. It was their own bullheadedness that blocked him.

Buying a dress for his niece wouldn't even put a dent in his account. It was the least he could do, but no amount of money would assuage his guilt over his sister's death.

A pair of flashing hazard lights caught Evan's attention ahead in the road, distracting him from his spiraling thoughts about his sister. “Send me the bill, Pop.”

Brandon sighed. “Fine. But don't tell your mother.”

“As usual.” It was the same old song and dance they played all the time. Brandon pretended Evan had nothing to do with the necessary purchases, and Faith pretended not to know exactly where the money had come from. It frustrated Evan, but it worked for his parents and their pride, so he kept their secrets.

“Listen, Pop. I gotta go. There's a disabled car ahead. I'm gonna stop and see if I can help.”

“Okay, kid. Stay safe.”

“Will do. And don’t forget to send me that bill.”

Brandon’s gruff chuckle traveled over the speakers in the truck’s cab. “Yeah, yeah. Talk later.”

“Later.”

Evan hit the button to hang up and slowed to a stop behind the stranded car, an older model Hyundai from the looks of it.

He approached the driver’s side warily; the caution was instilled in him from years of traffic stops with the CPD. One never knew what you’d encounter when pulling a car over. He stopped in the road a few yards away from the disabled car. He’d seen a silhouette of the driver as he’d approached after spotting the flat tire while stepping out of his truck.

Shaking his head, he lamented the disappearing practical skills such as changing a tire. Most people just called someone to take care of it for them. It didn’t surprise him to see another driver unwilling to do the dirty work themselves.

The car was old and looked like it was on its last legs. Rust was slowly eating away at the back driver’s side wheel well. Through the window, he noticed a few bags filled with food and a suitcase.

He held his hands open and hanging at his sides in an effort to look nonthreatening after identifying the driver was a woman. He didn’t want to frighten her. As she lowered her window, he smiled and widened his eyes in recognition. It was the woman

from Jolene's. The one he'd bought the burger for since she looked like she hadn't eaten in days.

She eyed him warily, as she should. Deserted at this time of the night, the road would be as dark as a tomb without his headlights illuminating the area.

"Hi," he said. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"Can I be of any help?"

She paused, as if weighing her options. The nearest house was ten miles away. It was after midnight. He didn't think she had very many options unless she'd already called for help. He could clearly read a myriad of thoughts on her features.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his Nighthawk ID and showed it to her. "I know you don't know me. My name's Evan Cole. I work for Nighthawk Search and Rescue. Take a picture of my ID and text it to someone you trust if it will make you feel safer. But I promise you're safe with me."

There were dark circles under her eyes, but they did nothing to detract from her deep amber irises. She had beautiful lips, full on the bottom and a tad thin on the top. As he watched, she pulled one corner between her teeth while she weighed her options.

Her eyes darted to the side, and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. "A picture is unnecessary. I just need the tools."

She'd stopped nibbling on her lip to speak, and the glossy wetness on that abused bottom lip momentarily distracted him. "What?"

"The tools. The guy I bought the car from guaranteed there was a spare, and there is, but he neglected to include the tools. If I could borrow yours, I can change it quickly and be on my way."

Evan's brows rose. "You know how to change a tire?"

"Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"Not in my experience, no."

"Well, my dad made sure I learned before ..." She broke off and sucked that lip between her teeth again, as if angry for saying too much. Evan wondered where she was going with that sentence but didn't push.

"Okay, then. Let me get the tools, then we can get to work."

"Thanks."

As she climbed out of the car, Evan strode to the toolbox in the bed of his truck and grabbed the tools. The woman had the trunk open and the floorboard up and was struggling with the wing nut that held the spare in place by the time he returned to her side. She gritted her teeth as she strained to twist the screw, which remained stubbornly stuck.

Bent over as she was, her coat had ridden up exposing the curves of her ass encased in denim. An image of him gripping that ass momentarily distracted him and he had to shake

himself out of it. Stunned by his reaction, he'd never had such a visceral fantasy about a woman before.

But as he moved closer, it was her profile that made his mouth go dry. Even scrunched up in her effort to remove the bolt, she was stunning. High cheekbones, plush, rosy lips that looked entirely too kissable.

She'd tied her long brown hair up in a messy knot, exposing the elongated expanse of her neck. The smooth almond tone of her skin had Evan fantasizing about taking a bite, and suddenly he was starving.

Clearing his throat, Evan offered, "Can I try?"

"No. I got it," she grunted. Her hand slipped, causing her knuckles to scrape against the metal. "Shit," she muttered, shaking her hand out.

Evan glimpsed the torn skin and the blood that seeped out. He caught her hand in his before she could reach for the screw to try again. An unusual sensation rushed up his arm at the contact. He stared down at her hand, her fingers gripped in his fist, allowing him to examine the injury. "Here, let me see."

"It's fine."

"I'm sure it is, but I'd feel better if I could see for myself." Using the hem of his shirt, he blotted the blood away for a clearer picture of the injury. The gashes weren't too deep but would need to be cleaned out to avoid infection.

"Doesn't look too bad," he stated. "Let me get my first aid kit so we can clean it."

She snatched her hand back just as her cuff slipped, exposing a strip of the bruises he'd seen back in Jolene's. This close, he could see some unusual ridges under the bruises. Scars of some sort. His cop's brain raced with scenarios. Bruises, scars, suitcase, and the exhaustion that was clear on her face. Combined, they all led to a conclusion he was not happy with.

Was she in trouble?

He was a stranger to her, so her twitchiness was expected. But he sensed there was more beneath the surface. Even though he'd just met her, he was curious about what she was hiding.

He hated seeing the marring and pretended not to notice, just as he sought to dismiss the twinge of regret he felt at the loss of her slender hand in his own. "No, it's fine. Let's just get the tire changed."

Evan reluctantly relented but stopped her when she reached for the screw again. She huffed and stepped back, allowing him room to strong-arm the stubborn screw. After needing to use more strength than he'd expected, the thing finally turned but resisted. The rust buildup made the task unnecessarily difficult.

Finally, he removed the screw and lifted the spare out of the trunk. The tire was surprisingly in good shape, considering the state of the wing nut. Evan turned to find the woman kneeling beside the flat, tire iron already on a lug nut. She was twisting with all her might until her face turned red and a vein stood

out on her temple, but nothing happened. She tried the next one with the same result. And the next. None of the lug nuts were budging.

With a groan, she tried once more. “What is with these things? Why is everything on this car being so difficult?”

Evan chuckled. “Maybe it just needs a little more love.”

She glared at him over her shoulder, her irritation making that vein pulse. With a grin, he held his hands up. “Just saying.”

“Whatever. I’ve never had so much trouble changing a tire before.”

“Someone probably attached them with an air gun.”

“Right. Because my life isn’t difficult enough,” she muttered. Evan wanted to ask why her life was difficult, but figured she’d refuse to tell him. He didn’t know what it was about the woman that had piqued his curiosity so much, but he wanted to know more.

“Need a hand?” Evan asked, unable to keep the smirk from his face.

She huffed out a breath, blowing a wisp of hair off her forehead, only for it to fall back into the exact same spot. He’d never seen anyone glare at their own hair before, but this woman managed to express her frustration with the wayward strands in the most endearing way. He rolled his lips inward to contain the laugh that wanted to burst free at her cross-eyed scowl.

Crouching beside her, he said, “Come on. You pull, I’ll push.” He wrapped his fingers around the left side of the tire iron while she did the same with the right in a reverse grip to his own. “On the count of three, pull up as hard as you can.” She nodded, and he began the count. Reaching three, he put all his weight into pushing down on the tool.

The growl that slipped from her lips surprised him, as did the sudden give of the lug nut. They both went flying, her fist slamming into his eye in a startlingly painful punch. Evan landed on his back on the road, with her sprawled half on top of him.

She hovered over him, a stricken expression on her face. One hand covered her mouth, which hung open in shock. “Oh my God. I am so sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” She cupped the side of his face, her expression morphing to one of concern as she studied his eye. He fought the sudden desire to lean into her touch. “Does it hurt?”

“It’s not too bad,” he answered honestly because with her soft hand touching him, he felt no pain. At least until she prodded his slowly swelling eye. He grabbed her hand, pulling it away from his face. “Come on, Slugger. Let’s get that tire changed.”

She seemed to suddenly realize that she still lay half on top of him and scrambled to get up. Once on her feet, she held out her hand to help him up. “I really am sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said with a gentle squeeze to her hand. “I’m fine.”

She nodded with wide eyes, still obviously appalled at what she'd done. "Seriously. It was an accident. I've had worse."

"O-okay."

Evan bent to pick up the tire iron, placing it over the loosened lug nut and turning a few times before moving on to the next. The rest of them didn't give him as much trouble as that first. Before removing them completely, he jacked the car up.

He turned to finish twisting the lug nuts off but found she had beaten him to it. He waited, ignoring the throbbing behind his eye. She'd really walloped him, but he couldn't fault her for it. It was truly an accident. And like he said, he'd had worse.

Leaning against her car, he crossed his arms in front of his chest and watched her work. "So, do I get to know the name of the opponent who knocked me off my feet?"

She fumbled the last lug nut, dropping it to the ground. It started to roll under the car, but she snatched it up. Evan's brow furrowed at the tremor in her hands. He hoped she wasn't scared of him. He'd tried to reassure her that he only wanted to help.

"It-it's Sophie," she uttered.

"Sophie," he said, trying the name out. He liked it. It suited her. "Nice to meet you."



DEALING WITH THOSE STUPID lug nuts while her hands were trembling uncontrollably was a pain. It wasn't the man's fault, either. He'd been nothing but gracious and helpful. Her nervousness came from her own mind. Her awkwardness upon meeting new people. Her desire to remain unnoticed. Her fear of being discovered.

The man had done nothing more than ask her name, a normal request. But it weighed heavily on her. That simple request was not so simple for someone escaping hell. She wanted to hide away, keep herself isolated, safe. It was unrealistic. She'd run out of money in no time—possibly even tomorrow. She'd need a job. A job meant people. She'd need to deal with the fear and nervousness of sharing innocuous information about herself.

And it started with this man and his request to know her name.

The tremors turned internal as soon as he repeated her name in that smooth voice, warm like honey as it dripped over her. *What the hell was that?*

Warm honey? The lack of food must be making her delirious. That was a weird thought to have about someone's voice. The burger she'd eaten earlier had been filling, but after going a few days with very little, it hadn't been enough.

She remembered seeing the man at the bar, which was probably why she trusted him to help her. That and his job. How bad could a person who rescued other people for a living be? She'd been exposed to the worst in humanity and had gotten pretty good at reading people's true intentions. She could interpret the evil in a person. It was like reading someone's aura. A black soul was not something that could be hidden from her ... not anymore.

She may have been a naïve little girl once. Not anymore. That naiveté had been beaten out of her long ago. In one night, her idyllic life had come crashing down in the most horrific way. She'd lost her parents, her home, and her freedom. At fifteen, she had been an orphan and had been sent to live with her uncle, a wolf in sheep's clothing. That was her first glimpse of evil. It was a lesson that would remain with her for as long as she lived.

There was none of that blackness in this man who crouched beside her, helping her lift the spare into place. She could detect some shades of gray, as if something in this man's life had changed him, but mostly, he was full of warm colors.

And boy, was he handsome. Victor had been handsome too, but in an arrogant way. He worked hard to maintain his handsomeness using whatever medical science could help him with. His outward appearance was always impeccable. Fine Italian suits. Weekly manicures. Expensive cars. Priceless art. Whatever elevated his status, he used to his advantage. But it was all a cover. The outer trappings hid his true persona. One that was devoid of all color. As black as black could get.

Sophie shook herself out of those thoughts and watched the man screw the lug nuts into place. She handed him the next one and observed him from under her lashes. His wavy brown hair swooped down over his forehead. Dark brows furrowed in concentration over those blue eyes she'd noticed back in the bar. The color was hard to distinguish in the lack of light on the side of the road, but she remembered what they'd made her feel. Comfort. Something she hadn't felt since that last day with her parents.

How was that possible? Sure, she read things in the colors people put off. But could the color of a man's eyes really bring her that much solace? It was too crazy to think about.

"Can you lower the jack?" he asked, his voice breaking into her thoughts, startling her. His brows knitted together as a frown pulled at his lips. Sophie lowered the jack and watched as his jaw that was covered in a heavy five o'clock shadow ticked. It was obvious her skittishness bothered him, but he was too kind to call her out on it. For which she was thankful.

"That should do it," he said after tightening each lug nut a final time. He packed away his tools, then wheeled the flat to her trunk and hefted it inside. "The spare should hold for a while, but I wouldn't recommend driving long distance on it. There's a good auto shop in Lake Haven that could look at your tire. Maybe they could patch it. If not, they'll give you a decent deal on a new one."

"Thank you," she said as he closed the trunk and wiped his hands off on his jeans.

“You’re welcome.” He hesitated, as if he had more to say but was unsure of whether he should. He pushed the hair that hung over his forehead back as he looked at her. “Will you be okay now?”

Sophie’s gaze darted around, uncomfortable under his concern. “Y-yes. I’m good.”

“I hope you don’t have too far to go tonight. I haven’t seen you around here before. Do you have someplace to stay, or are you just passing through?”

“I’m staying with a friend,” she lied. She would be staying with a friend of a friend if that person was home. As it was, she’d probably spend another night in her car, freezing her ass off. But she couldn’t tell him that.

He watched her quietly. She had the uncanny sense he knew she was lying. “Okay. Good. I hope you’ll like it here. It’s a great place to visit.”

“What about a place to live? Is it just as great? I’m looking for a place to resettle. Are there opportunities for work here?”

Sophie had no idea why she asked him any of that. It seemed like too much personal information to share with a stranger. The words just tumbled out before she could cut them off.

“Sure. It’s great here. Nice people. Great views. And if you’re looking for work, Jolene is always looking for help, if you don’t mind waitressing.”

“Is that the bar in town?”

“Yes. I noticed you in there earlier. It’s a regular hangout for my friends and me. Her burgers are excellent.”

“I can agree with you on that. I had one of those masterpieces. So delicious and juicy.”

He gave her a weird look she couldn’t interpret. Then he smirked. “Exactly. If you go to Jolene’s for a job, tell her Evan sent you. She’s a good friend and will treat you right.” *Evan*. That was his name. She’d felt bad she’d forgotten it and committed it to memory now. She didn’t think she’d ever forget the kind man who was full of comforting colors that wrapped around her like a warm hug. *Ugh*. What was she thinking?

She needed sleep and food. In that order.

“Thank you for your help.”

He grinned down at her, causing her breath to catch. Men had smiled at her all the time, but theirs had seemed so predatory. Evan’s was genuine. Kindness effused from it. While the other smiles had made her feel uncomfortable and dirty, his made her feel buoyed. She wanted to be a recipient of more of them but knew that would be a bad idea. If he ever learned of her past, she was sure those smiles would turn to grimaces of disgust.

She absentmindedly scratched at the scars on her wrist, hating that she was left with the physical reminders of her past.

“Let me give you my number in case you run into any more trouble. Do you have your phone?”

Shit. A phone. Most normal people had one of those. She’d left the one Victor had given her behind, knowing he tracked her every move with it. It had been her own personal ball and chain, locking her to that man every minute of every day.

“Um ... it broke, and I haven’t had a chance to replace it yet.” The lies were just flying out of her mouth now. She felt bad about lying to him, but she had no choice. Nobody could ever know where she’d come from. It wasn’t safe—for her or them.

He reached behind him and pulled out his wallet, removing a card. “Okay. Take my card. It’s got my cell number on it as well as the organization I work for. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me. If you can’t reach me, any of my friends at Nighthawk will help.”

She looked down at the rectangular piece of card stock in her hand. There was a bird with its wings outstretched in the lefthand corner, followed by Nighthawk Search and Rescue in big bold letters. His name, Evan Cole, was printed underneath, along with phone numbers and an email address.

“Okay. Thanks,” she said, sliding the card into her pocket.

“I mean it. If you ever need *anything*, call.” She had no idea why he was pushing this. Her heartrate accelerated as she had a sudden thought. Did he know she was running? Did he know who she was? She had to get away from him. He saw too much.

“Sure. Okay,” she said, backing up toward her car. “Thanks again.”

“Hope I’ll see you around, Sophie.”

“Yeah, you too,” she forced out past the lump that had lodged in her throat. Climbing into her car, she slammed the door closed, then started the engine. Evan bent to pick up the tools, and she watched as he walked back to his truck. After putting the tools in the back, he paused in the open door, one foot on the running board and an arm slung over the top of the door. It was as if he could see her.

She pulled out onto the dark road and watched as his form diminished in her rear-view mirror.

Chapter Four



SOPHIE TOOK A DEEP breath before opening the door. As she stepped inside, the warmth she'd experienced the previous night instantly surrounded her, and she sighed in relief. Spending the night in her car again had not been a picnic. It had been another chilly night.

The shower she'd taken at the truck stop off the highway had been lukewarm at best. Plus, she hadn't wanted to hang around naked for too long in that place. Every horror story imaginable had entered her mind as she'd washed. Thankfully, the experience had been trauma free.

She snorted at that thought. If only the rest of her life had been just as free of torment as that moment. But there were things that would forever remind her of the abuse, especially when she showered and couldn't hide from the marks. Fully clothed, she could pretend like they didn't exist. But when showering and rubbing soap over her body, she could feel every ridge and valley of the brands. Victor had made sure she would never be able to escape him. He would remain in her head forever every time she looked at her body.

She hated it.

She hated him.

But she was free of further abuse by him and had just stepped through the door of her new life ... hopefully. She needed to get the job first.

The same bartender from the night before stood with his back to her as he restocked the bar. He glanced up and smiled as she approached.

“Wasn’t sure if I’d see your gorgeous face back here. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Ox, right?” she asked, remembering the name of the beefy bartender.

“That’s right. And you are ...?”

“Sophie.”

He held a hand out over the bar for her. She placed hers in his and he grasped it firmly for a shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sophie,” he said with a wink. Sophie blushed. She was accustomed to men looking at her with lust, but no one dared flirt with her. Most knew she belonged to Victor and didn’t want to incur his wrath. Therefore, she was too out of practice to deal with Ox’s blatant attempt.

The man was handsome, if a little too old for her. She put him in his midforties. He was the complete opposite of Victor. Ox’s bald head shone under the lights over the bar. Victor’s hair had always been perfectly styled. Never a hair out of place. Ox appeared as if he’d just stepped out of the pages of

every motorcycle club romance she'd ever read. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders and exposed the sleeves of tattoos that adorned both arms. Victor wouldn't be caught dead marring his body in such a way. But Sophie thought Ox's tattoos were a work of art and didn't fault him for showing them off.

But the biggest difference was the smile. Every muscle and line on Ox's face was engaged. A genuine smile she hadn't seen since her parents died. All she could see when he grinned was fun colors.

Victor smiled, but it was never a true one. It was often laced with nuances. She'd learned to identify his smiles to know what to expect. And they never effused fun colors.

There was the smugly satisfied one when something had gone his way. Which, to be truthful, things always went his way. He made sure of that.

Then there was the shrewd smile he'd give his business associates. He was a savvy businessman, worth millions, and everybody knew it. Men clamored to do business with him. And he was cunning enough to work them against each other to his gain.

There was the prideful smile when people would compliment his acquisitions, which mostly meant they were admiring her. She was an acquisition that pleased him greatly. Mostly because others desired her. He fed off of the other men's longings, knowing that he controlled the thing they most yearned for.

But it was the smile that was accompanied by ire in his eyes she feared the most. When she observed that smile, she knew she was in for a world of hurt. She had displeased him in some way and would be disciplined, and he looked forward to doling out the punishment.

She shivered and could almost feel the marks on her body burn with the memory of those punishments. Pulling herself out of those awful thoughts, she focused once more on Ox's open smile and returned it with one of her own before removing her hand.

Nervously, she pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and dropped her eyes, as Victor had taught her to do when in the presence of another man. If she had made eye contact with someone else, Victor assumed she was flirting and would chastise her for it.

As her eyes studied the grain of the bar top, she remembered Victor wasn't here. She was free and didn't have to follow his edicts anymore. She forced her eyes up to meet the nice bartender's once more.

His smile widened, which bolstered her courage. "What can I get for you?"

"A job?" she asked with a shrug and a shy grin.

"Well, let's see what we can do about that. Let me get the boss. I'll be right back."

She nodded and bit her lip as Ox went through the door to the kitchen. Soon, he returned with the redhead she'd seen

setting things up on the stage last night. The woman appeared to be close to Sophie's age, with striking green eyes and a lovely smile. Another kind smile that reached those green orbs, filled with bright, happy colors. Yellows, reds, and oranges.

"Your timing couldn't be more perfect," the woman said by way of greeting.

"I'm sorry?"

"One of my waitresses quit last night. I'm in desperate need of a replacement. Got any experience?"

"I've worked in a nightclub for years." It was true, but not exactly what the bar owner was asking. Sirens had been one of the most exclusive nightclubs in Chicago. And owned by Victor, of course. But she hadn't been a waitress there. Her skills were used in another capacity.

"Excellent. When can you start?"

Sophie's eyes widened. She hadn't expected to be hired on the spot. "Um ... today?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. Follow me."

"Welcome aboard Sophie-love." She threw a smile over her shoulder at Ox as she followed the woman to the back office.

Sitting behind her desk, the redhead gestured to a chair on the other side, saying, "I'm Jolene Pritchett, the owner of this little slice of heaven."

"Sophie Alvarez. It's nice to meet you."

“You too. So, here’s what we are going to do. I’ll give you a trial run here, then reevaluate after two weeks.” Jolene listed a salary and what it would increase to if she passed the two-week trial. And of course, she’d keep any tips she earned. “How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” And it was. Sophie felt like she was finally on her way to experiencing true freedom. With a steady paycheck, she could build up her savings, which would allow her to live an independent life.

Jolene spent the next half hour going through the paperwork for an official hire. Sophie was once again grateful to Mrs. Tilley and the uncanny contacts she had that afforded her to obtain a new identity for Sophie. Complete with ID and social security number. She had no idea how Mrs. Tilley did it, but she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

With the paperwork chore completed, Jolene turned her over to her best waitress. Nan Ryan was a single mother of two who had the patience of a saint as she taught Sophie everything from the computer system to what shoes were best for someone who spent all day on their feet. The woman was friendly and welcomed Sophie like a long-lost sister. She was full of energy and life and surrounded by bright shades of blue. But as Sophie got to know her, she sensed an underlying current of exhaustion and grief. She didn’t know the woman’s story and wasn’t about to ask. That would only court questions about her own past that she couldn’t share with anyone.

By the end of her shift, Sophie was exhausted but thrilled to have a little pocket change from the tips Nan had shared with her while she trained. With that, she could put gas in her car and still have some left over to put toward her apartment fund.

All the people at Jolene's, from the employees to the patrons, had greeted her with smiles and well wishes. It was a pleasant family atmosphere, and it made Sophie nostalgic for her own family. They'd been gone for fifteen years, yet she still missed them every day. She yearned for them and the love they'd showered her with.

Sophie had waited on a young family that evening, and the obvious love they shared made her heart clench. The precocious little girl reminded her of herself at that age. The girl had chatted non-stop while drawing in a little notebook. Sophie had caught a glimpse of the drawing and had been amazed at the young girl's talent.

During a bit of a lull, Sophie leaned against the bar and watched the little family. Mom and dad, brother and sister. They laughed. They chatted. They greeted neighbors with enthusiasm. The perfect family.

"You okay, Sophie-love?" Ox asked, pulling her out of her musings.

"Hmm? Oh yeah. I'm good."

Ox looked in the direction of the family Sophie had been watching and smiled. "That's the O'Donnell family. Quite the story they have."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup. Few years ago, the kids went missing.”

Sophie gasped. “Oh no. That’s awful. How were they found?”

“You may have noticed young Lucy’s talent.” Sophie nodded, remembering the amazing details the girl had put into her drawing. “The art teacher at her school was close to Lucy and turns out she had grown up with the owner of the Nighthawks.”

“That’s that search and rescue group, right?” she asked, an image of Evan popping into her head. She could just imagine that group charging to the rescue, just as Evan had come to her aid the night before.

“Yup. The Nighthawks showed up en masse, and they found the kids within hours.”

“God, what a story.”

“Gets better.” Sophie arched a brow at Ox, wondering how that story could possibly get better than two kids being reunited with their parents. “The art teacher and the Nighthawks owner are now engaged. The wedding is in a few months.”

Sophie nearly swooned. A story like that was like something right out of a book. Despite her experiences with a horrifying relationship, she still believed in love. At least for other people, she did. For herself, she didn’t think she could

ever trust anyone enough to let her guard down. She was too damaged. Too scarred.

“You’re right. That is quite a story.”

“You’ll probably meet them soon.”

“Who?”

“The Nighthawk family. They’re in here all the time. Natalie, the art teacher, is one of Jolene’s best friends.”

“Oh, that was the group I saw last night, right? The ones who took up all those tables in the middle?”

“That’s them. A great group of people. Close like family but not blood related. And they keep adding to their ranks. Those Nighthawk men fall hard and fast for their women. And we often get a front-row seat to the courtship here at Jolene’s.” Ox winked at her, and Sophie laughed.

“You’re an old softie, aren’t you, Ox? A true romantic.”

Ox scoffed, pretending to be affronted by her statement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. An old Army man like me? What a ridiculous notion.”

Sophie snickered. “I’m on to you. You can’t fool me.”

Ox flicked a bar towel at her as if to shoo her away, then went to check on his patrons. Sophie’s gaze went back to the young family, and she observed them under a new light. That must have been a scary couple of days for all of them, but they appeared no worse for wear. She wondered what her life

would be like if her parents had survived. How different would it be? How different would she be?

One thing she knew for sure: they never would have sold her to Victor like her uncle had.

Shaking herself out of those thoughts—it wouldn't do to dwell on things she couldn't change—she went back to work, checking on her tables under Nan's watchful tutelage.

Climbing into her car after her shift, she began to think that things were finally looking up for her. She was going to make it. As she curled up under the blankets in the front seat of her car, the reality of where she spent the cold nights seeping into her bones, she nearly laughed out loud at that thought. It was going to be another frigid night, but at least she was free.

Chapter Five



A WEEK AFTER HE helped a stranded Sophie, Evan and the rest of his team were working their asses off setting up the new training area. It was a tricky setup, and it took all their strength and concentration to pull it off.

Graham had acquired six decommissioned train cars, most of which had been damaged, making them perfect for the Nighthawk's needs. They rented a large crane to help with placing the cars, stacking them on top of each other, some lying on their sides. Anything to make it appear as if a terrible accident had occurred. It would be an excellent training setting for urban search and rescue.

While derailments didn't occur often, there was still an average of seventeen hundred derailments per year in the US, with over one hundred seventy fatalities. Not overly large numbers when considering the population of the country. Any training they could offer to reduce those numbers was the ultimate goal. There was a reason why the SAR motto was "So others may live."

Evan took a break and cracked open a bottle of water. After sucking down half, he glanced around at the place he'd found his second chance at five years ago. From his vantage point, he could see The Pile, a massive heap of mangled steel, concrete, rebar, wood, and anything else that might have been from a collapsed building. A great teaching tool full of pockets where a "victim" could be trapped.

Near The Pile was Calamity Village. A strip mall, a two-story home, and a couple of trailers they'd added the previous year compiled the village. All the buildings appeared to have gone through a large-scale disaster. The Nighthawks used them to train their groups of emergency response professionals on urban search and rescue after tornados, hurricanes, floods, and even terrorist attacks.

The Nighthawk facility was a place where tragedy and training met. They used these tools to expose emergency responders to the chaos and disorganization of a disaster scene, making it as realistic as possible for the trainees.

And now they were adding to their arsenal of tools with the train cars.

The Nighthawks were growing, and Evan was thankful for the opportunity to work for the group. It was a second chance to prove himself, as stupid as that seemed. For most of his life, all he'd wanted to do was help people. It was part of what had driven him to become a police officer. He'd loved his job. While it wasn't always a picnic, the rewards far outweighed the downsides.

Until they didn't.

Losing Tara had thrown him off his path. How could he be an effectual detective when he hadn't noticed the changes in his own partner? He'd wallowed in grief and guilt until there was nothing left in him. The job he loved—the job he'd lived for—was lost to him.

In the midst of a dark time, a chance meeting with Graham Whitaker had changed the gloomy direction his life had spiraled into. The Nighthawk's owner had offered him a place among the team, yet he doubted his worthiness.

It was his niece, wise beyond her ten years, who had truly changed the trajectory of his life.

Evan observed his parents as they sat around the table. It had been six months since they'd buried Tara. Both of his parents grieved hard for their daughter, yet they had stepped up for their granddaughter. Katie's life had been completely turned upside down. Not only had she lost her parents, but she'd been uprooted from the only home she'd ever known and had to start a new school in Muncie.

His parents had watched helplessly while she struggled to make friends. She'd become even more quiet since that day. Retreating into her music. While she created the most beautiful music, Evan knew his parents were worried about her. It was written in the creases on their faces. Worry lines that hadn't been there six months ago.

He wished he could do more to ease their burden, but knew he was too messed up to take over guardianship of his niece.

But just how messed up was he? Could he take this new job offer? Would he be able to overcome his failures to be effective in the job?

These were the questions that plagued him as he explained the job—and his doubts—to his parents. They'd never failed to support him in the past. He knew his parents loved him. Knew they still loved him despite his failure to save Tara. They would not be happy to know he blamed himself for her death. It was the only secret he'd ever kept from his family.

People called him a hero because of his job. What a crock of shit. He was no hero, and he told his mother as much when she'd stated the Nighthawks would be lucky to have a hero like him among their ranks. He'd scoffed at her words.

Katie, whom they all thought had gone to bed, had rushed into the room and stood in front of him with her hands fisted on her hips, glaring up at him. She looked so much like her mother it made his chest ache.

She hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to them at dinner, but she had a mouthful for him now. "I've learned a lot about heroism over the last few months," she'd started. "Want to know what I've learned?"

"Katie," he groaned, pushing his hair off his forehead. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she had to say. He'd let her down in the worst way possible. How could she ever look at him and not see his failure?

She pursed her lips, and her eyes narrowed as her glare intensified. He snapped his mouth closed and tipped his head,

indicating for her to go on. “The word hero gets thrown around a lot and I’m not sure anyone uses it the right way. Are heroes only in the movies or comic books? Are they real? Are they the latest rap artist? Or a soldier who fought for his country? I’ve had many heroes, and they change as I grow. My first hero was Ducky.”

Evan smiled, thinking of the floppy yellow stuffed duck he’d gotten for her on the day she was born. That well-loved duck had gone everywhere with her.

“Ducky and I shared some pretty big things. Whenever I was scared, Ducky was there. Ducky was my safety net. My protector. He healed my hurts and kept me from feeling lonely when the kids at school were being mean to me.”

That hurt his heart. No kid should have to experience barbs like that. Bullies sucked. He wanted to go back to her school and find those kids. They deserved a lecture, or better yet, a warning about how to treat people. He wanted to hug Katie, but she wasn’t done with her speech.

“Then my heroes were in the movies. Moana and Elsa were my role models. Brave girls I looked up to and wanted to be like. Beethoven was my first musical hero. When I got better at playing, Rachmaninoff and Liszt were like gods to me. Heroes in my musical world that gave me confidence and made me feel good about myself.

“As people grow up, it’s harder to find your heroes. That’s why the world needs people like you. I’m lucky. I will always

have my favorite. The one hero I will always look up to is you, Uncle Evan.”

His brows shot into his hairline, shocked by her words. “I may only be ten, but I’ve seen you. You help people. I remember how you were with Tony.”

Evan smiled, thinking of the teen he’d worked so hard to save from ending up in a gang. Tony and his mom lived a few houses down from Katie’s house. Evan had run into the boy one day after observing him trying to steal some kid’s bike. He’d stopped him, and instead of turning him in for the crime, he talked with him. He was an angry kid with all the baggage that came along with being abandoned by an abusive father. Tony had pushed Evan away that first day and each day after that. But he’d been determined. Evan wasn’t going to be another adult to fail in Tony’s life.

The kid slowly grew to trust him. His grades improved. He got a part-time job. And soon, he’d graduated from high school with honors. He was now in the police academy with the goal of becoming a Chicago police officer.

“You were his hero. He knocked you down over and over again, but you kept at him. Heroes are willing to stand up after being knocked down. They won’t be beaten by anything life throws at them. Tony didn’t defeat you. And neither should what happened to us. You are my hero, and that group would be lucky to have you.”

As he sat staring at his niece, stunned by her wise words, his mother covered his hand with hers. He pulled his eyes from

Katie, who, at that moment, seemed much older than ten, and looked down at his mother's wrinkled hand. The hands that once taught him and dozens of other kids how to play the piano showed their age.

"Look at these broken hands of mine," his mother said, holding them up in front of him. Ravaged by rheumatoid arthritis, her crooked and swollen fingers could no longer reach a full octave on the instrument she'd played her entire life. He knew it was painful for her to still be playing, but she was determined to continue the practice for the sake of her granddaughter. "They look about as broken as I imagine you feel. You feel like you can no longer do the job you love."

He opened his mouth to protest—to tell her he was fine—but she cut him off with a slash of one hand. "Deny it all you want, but I see your struggle, and my heart aches for you. I know you've seen my own struggle as I try to play the piano with these broken hands, but no matter how hard it gets, no matter how painful it might be, as long as I can play one note, I'm happy. Here's what you should remember, no matter what you're feeling inside: broken crayons still color."

The words the women in his life had imparted to him gave him the push he'd needed to accept Graham's offer. He'd found a place with the Nighthawks. While his failure with Tara would always haunt him, he'd found a new purpose. His broken crayon could still color.

After finishing his bottle of water, he got back to work building their new disaster. He lost himself in the work until

Graham called for them all to take a break. It was lunchtime, and since their chef, Layla, had gone out of town for a family emergency, Jolene had offered to cater the food for them. When he turned to join the group headed for lunch, a pair of warm amber eyes greeted him.



SOPHIE'S JAW DROPPED AS she took in the disaster in front of her. The massive train cars were clumped in a tangle of iron and steel. They'd already walked past the ghost town that looked like every picture she'd ever seen of a town in the aftereffects of a tornado. And the immense pile of junk nearby had her scratching her head.

When she pictured a search and rescue group, she saw men walking in wooded areas to search for lost kids. Or she pictured those guys who climbed mountains to get to stranded tourists. She had no idea the complexities of what a search and rescue group entailed. She'd never imagined something like this.

Sophie worked quietly beside Jolene as they set up the catered lunch for the Nighthawks. The group was working on a massive project for their training facility, and she was happy to help even as her nerves threatened to get the better of her.

Everybody at Jolene's, including the owner herself, had been patient with her. Their kindness kept her coming back even as frustration at her ineptitude made her want to hide in a

hole. There probably weren't many thirty somethings in this town who didn't know the basics in a kitchen, let alone behind a bar. She'd worked in a bar for over a decade but couldn't tell anyone the first thing about mixing a drink. Ox had patiently shown her how to work the soda dispenser. She'd only mixed up the choices a few times, much to her chagrin.

Waitressing hadn't been as easy to learn as she'd hoped. Her social skills were sorely lacking since Victor had kept her isolated for so many years. Her hands shook and sweat trickled down her back each time she had to greet a new table. If it hadn't been for Nan's persistent guidance, Sophie would have been a mess.

Her introduction to the kitchen had been overwhelming, to say the least. The fast paced atmosphere, the machinery, and the massive amounts of ingredients that the chefs expertly used with ease awed her. She'd watched in fascination as the employees worked. They seemed to each know the intricate dance steps that were required to serve the patrons. She hadn't known how she'd learn to match their skill.

Nan had been her lifeline that first day. Sophie had struggled with every part of the job. She could tell Nan had quickly figured out she'd lied about her experience, but was too kind to call her out on it. Instead, she'd walked her slowly through each step. Under Nan's tutelage, she'd slowly improved, leaving her exhausted at the end of each shift.

Despite the exhaustion, Sophie found herself enjoying the work. She could now greet her tables without feeling like she

was going to puke. She liked talking to the patrons. It made her remember the easier times in her life when her parents were still alive. She'd made friends easily and had never been at a loss in conversations with them. Those skills were slowly starting to come back to her.

And yet, being here at the Nighthawk facilities, knowing that she would soon see Evan again, she felt her nerves building once more. She silently berated herself for her edginess. She needed to think of him as just another customer. Not as a man who made her heart skip a beat every time he smiled at her.

She wasn't free to think of him in any other capacity. She had to remember that. She couldn't open herself up to anyone. It would be too dangerous. She'd never know if she'd have to run again. Falling for someone was out of the question. Aside from the risk, she was too broken—too scarred—to allow anyone to get close. She'd do well to remember that.

As they made their way across the campus, Jolene had pointed out the different areas the Nighthawks used for their training courses. There was a classroom building. A full gym, complete with climbing walls. The barracks where the kitchen they'd been working in was located. And then there were the hands-on training areas, including the one they were currently constructing.

She couldn't comprehend the use of some of the mess. What could a pile of debris teach anyone? It was something she imagined only made sense to those who worked with it. She'd

been ignorant about what the group did. Upon her arrival at the facility, her eyes had been opened.

Sophie had followed Jolene as they went to gather the guys for lunch. The frozen ground crunched under her feet, and she shivered as the arctic breeze washed over her. After being in the overheated kitchen, the chilly air was a shock to her system. But nothing could have prepared her for the sight before her.

Temperatures may have only been in the midforties, but that hadn't stopped half the men from stripping off their shirts as they labored with their task. One of which was the man who'd stopped to help her change her tire. The man she couldn't get out of her head.

Evan.

She gaped at him, stunned at the display. Sophie had felt the hardness of his chest when she'd fallen on him, but to see it presented before her was something else completely. He was a specimen to behold. All hard ridges and valleys. And the way his muscles flexed with his movements ... Sophie shivered, and not because of the cold this time.

“Girl, I know that's a lot of eye candy, but you really need to close your mouth before you drool and embarrass yourself,” Jolene hissed near her ear before laughing.

Sophie blushed and snapped her mouth closed. She hadn't realized it had been hanging open. “That's just a lot of ...” She broke off, unable to find the right words.

“Yum,” Jolene finished for her. Sophie had to agree with her assessment. It was a whole lot of yum. So different from what she was used to.

Victor had prided himself on being in shape. He was fit, but he couldn't hold a candle to the level of fitness Evan and the rest of the group exemplified. Sophie squeezed her eyes closed, hating that Victor still lived in her head. There was no comparison between that monster and these men. She knew that.

These men were building something designed to help save lives. Victor only destroyed lives. Horribly. That last night had been proof of his temperament. He'd annihilated so much in that one action and had left her with no choice. If she hadn't escaped, she knew it would have been a matter of time before she was next.

Sophie took a deep breath, hoping to purge the bitter memory, and opened her eyes to meet the bright blue ones of Evan. He was staring at her as he talked with one of his coworkers. One side of his mouth quirked up into a half smile, and he winked. The big man he was talking to turned to follow the direction of Evan's gaze and scowled at her. She quickly lowered her gaze and dropped back behind Jolene as her boss approached a blond man.

“Hey, Graham. You guys at a point where you can stop for lunch?” Jolene asked.

“Sure. You know they'll always drop everything for your food.”

Jolene laughed. “You’re probably right. Graham, this is Sophie, my new waitress. Sophie, this is Graham Whitaker. He owns Nighthawk along with his brother David.”

Graham smiled and held out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

She shook his hand and startled as she met a pair of ice-blue eyes. She’d never seen eyes that bright before. Blinking several times, she lowered her eyes to their clasped hands. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

As soon as she dropped his hand, she jolted as a loud whistle pierced the chilly air. “All right, you heathens. Time for lunch,” Jolene called out and was met with cheers. The men dropped what they were doing and rushed to the barracks where she and Jolene had set up for lunch.

“Damn, Jolene. Didn’t know you had that in you,” Graham remarked.

“I only bring it out when needed.”

They turned to follow the group to the barracks, and Sophie trailed along behind. Feeling a presence nearby, she glanced over her shoulder to see Evan walking to catch up. He’d put his shirt back on, and Sophie felt a twinge of disappointment, which was so unlike her. When he reached her, he gave her another wink.

“Nice to see you again, Sophie.”

“Hi,” she replied, nerves making her throat feel tight.

“I see you took my advice.” Sophie tilted her head, unsure of his meaning. “The job,” he explained.

Sophie nodded. “Oh yeah. Jolene was kind enough to give me a shot.”

“She’s a good person. Told you she’d hire you.”

“Thanks for sending me her way.”

“Are you enjoying it?”

“I am. Everybody there has been really nice.” His blue eyes shone as he smiled. For a moment, she was lost in them. The comforting color felt like a cocoon, insulating her from harm. It seemed like that smile was just for her. That only she could bring out that glow in his eyes.

“Jolene’s the best, isn’t she?” His gaze drifted over to the woman herself. That smile still in place. She deflated, feeling like an idiot. It wasn’t a cocoon. It was a bubble, and it had just popped.

How could she be so stupid to think he’d be interested in someone like her? With the way he was looking at Jolene—a soft expression, as if she mattered more to him than just a friend—they must have had a close relationship.

She could never compete with someone like her.

Jolene was a successful business owner. An accomplished chef. She had the type of personality that attracted people to her. It was no wonder Evan was interested. Who wouldn’t be?

As for her? She was too broken. Homeless, since Mrs. Tilley's friend still hadn't returned. No education beyond high school. Her only friend was an old lady, and even her she couldn't have contact with anymore. It would be too dangerous if Victor ever found out about her.

She was a husk of her former self before her parents died. Before her life imploded. No man would want her. At least, not a good man. Victor professed his love for her, but it was a warped and twisted love. An obsessive love. It was not what her parents had taught her about the emotion.

Despite everything she'd been through, she still yearned for the type of love her parents had. The kind where you could tell just by looking at the couple how deeply they cared for each other. A loving partnership full of special love notes, dancing in the kitchen, and laughter.

Sophie mentally slapped herself. Didn't she just get done telling herself she couldn't get involved with anyone?

Unconsciously, she scratched at the scars on her wrist. It was a good reminder that no man would want her anyway. She was tainted. Marred. Nobody would look at her like she was their whole world. Especially not when they learned everything—saw everything—that was her.

The reminder was like a slap in the face. She dropped her gaze, mumbling about needing to retrieve something from the kitchen. Then she turned and nearly ran away from the man with those dangerous blue eyes.

Chapter Six



IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the night, and Evan couldn't sleep. The anniversary he dreaded each year was fast approaching. His parents always wanted to have a big family meal, and every year, he bailed out, blaming work. When in reality, he couldn't face his parents or his niece with the depths of his failure.

So every year, he tortured himself going over those days leading up to the end, hoping something would stick out in his memory that would help him understand. Pointless? Probably. But he couldn't help himself.

This year, he'd started his mental torment early. Unable to sleep, he threw off the covers and dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a Nighthawks T-shirt. Shoving his feet into his boots, he grabbed a fleece by the door and headed out of his apartment. Maybe the fresh air would help clear his mind.

He jogged down the steps and out the door to the sidewalk. The crisp air stole his breath. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he hunched his shoulders against the wind and set off. He had no destination in mind. Anywhere was preferable to

being trapped inside his tortured brain. It was unrealistic to think he could outrun his thoughts, but he tried anyway.

The night was quiet, the rustle of old leaves as they rolled down the street the only sound to meet his ears. He looked up at the inky blackness above him. The pinprick points of light scattered across the dark sky brought back memories he'd tried to shove aside for years.

"How many stars do you think are up there?" Tara asked. Evan lay with his little sister in their backyard, staring up at the night sky. It was summer; there was no school the next day. Therefore, they could stay up late. He'd spent the day riding bikes with his friends. Tara had wanted to ride with them, but they'd ditched her as soon as they could.

The guilt always caught up to him, though. Which was why he was spending a warm summer's night lying in the grass with his sister.

"Billions," he answered.

"Nuh-uh. There's no way. It doesn't look like billions."

"Pretty sure there are stars up there that are too far away for us to see."

"Then how do they know how many there are?" His six-year-old sister was a curious person. Even though only sixteen months separated them in age, he always felt much older and wiser than her.

"They use telescopes to study the sky. Then there are the spaceships and other things they send up there to explore."

Tara gasped. "Spaceships? Like Star Wars?"

"No, silly. They can't travel to other galaxies. They just go up, then come back down. Sometimes they send probes out deeper, and it sends pictures back."

"That sounds cool. Can we see those pictures?"

"Probably. There's gotta be books with them in it. Or maybe the internet."

"Could you imagine going up there?"

"Would you go if you could?" he asked. He wasn't sure if he'd be willing to do it, but he was curious about what Tara would say.

"Maybe. It could be fun."

"You'd get homesick in a day," he teased.

"Would not."

"You'd miss me too much."

"That's why you gotta come with me."

"You and me on a spaceship together? We can barely stand a trip in the car."

"I know. But we'd be older then. Maybe we'll like each other more."

"Are you saying you don't like me now?" he asked, putting a little extra hurt into his voice to annoy her.

"Yup," she answered, popping the P. For a moment, he was stunned by her answer, but then the giggle slipped out of her.

“Why you little ...” he started, then rolled over to tickle torment her. She kicked and laughed, wiggling around to get away from his tickling fingers.

“Okay. Okay,” she cried. “I give up. Stop!”

He paused with his hands hovering over her, his fingers curled as if ready to resume tickling her. “Admit you lied.”

“No.” She wasn’t going to give up easily. She never did. He tickled her more, hitting all the spots he knew drove her nuts.

“Stop! I’m gonna pee my pants.”

Evan laughed. “Tell me the truth and I’ll stop.”

“Fine,” she gasped with a laugh. “I lied. I like you more than cheese.”

“Cheese? Ugh,” he groaned.

“What? You know how much I like cheese. I’m saying I like you more than my most favoritest thing in the world.”

He stopped tickling and fell onto his back with a laugh. “I’m better than cheese? Well, that’s something.”

Tara started giggling again. Her giggles never failed to make him smile. He hoped she’d never lose those giggles.

Once they’d quieted down, they went back to staring at the stars. Tara reached over and buried her hand under his. He grabbed it and squeezed.

“If I could pick the best brother, it would be you.”

“If I could pick the best sister, it would be you.”

Evan rubbed a fist over his chest. The bittersweet memories caused an incessant ache that wouldn't ease.

He'd been right. Those were the last words he ever said to his sister. The man he'd once called brother had made sure of that.

He walked, wandering the streets of Lake Haven. The town was decorated for the holidays. Twinkling lights were wrapped around each lamppost. Snowflake banners hung from the top. Painted scenes from different Christmas cartoons festooned the store windows. Charlie Brown, Rudolf, and Frosty smiled out at him from their holiday scenes.

Everything was festive and happy. He couldn't fault the town for enjoying the spirit of the holiday. Not everybody had experienced loss during this time of the year. He was used to trying to put on a happy face for the holidays. But this year, he struggled.

Five years seemed like a tiny number. It wasn't. So much could happen in those years. New jobs. New schools. New friends. How much *new* had Tara missed? How many moments?

Too many to count, just like the stars she'd once asked him about.

Every year, he wished things had turned out differently. Every year, he wished it had been him, not her.

Every year, he wished.

Useless wishes. He knew that.

Didn't stop the wishes from seeping from his heart.

And every year, he sucked it up and tried to move on. What else could he do?

As he walked, he kicked at a rock, watching it roll away before catching up to it and kicking it again. Turning a corner, he saw Jolene's in front of him. A pair of stunning amber eyes flashed in his mind.

Sophie was an enigma. Beautiful and kind, if a little quiet. He'd tried to talk to her several times at lunch, but she made some excuse about work each time and walked away. He didn't know why he was so intrigued by Sophie. No other woman had piqued his interest like she did in a long time. But if he couldn't get her to talk to him, he'd never be able to get to know her.

And he wanted to know her.

He wanted to know what made her tick. He wanted to know what thoughts were going through her brain each time she chewed on her lower lip. He wanted to know why she suddenly shut down and appeared to be beaten when they'd been talking about her new job at Jolene's. What had he said that put that wounded look in her eyes?

He'd said something about Jolene being one of the best.

He paused, raking a hand through his hair. Was it possible she'd taken his comment as an admission that he had a romantic interest in Jolene? He was an idiot. Nothing could be further from the truth. He thought of her like a sister, just like

he did all the Nighthawk women. He shook his head at himself, wondering how he could fix this.

He started walking again, moving past Jolene's to the parking lot. From his position, he could see the front bumper of a car parked behind the restaurant. An old, dilapidated car he recognized.

What was Sophie doing at the bar this late at night? Jolene's had been closed for hours. There was no reason for her to still be there. He jogged across the lot and headed to the back of the building, noticing she'd parked in an area that was out of view of the cameras Jolene had installed. He approached the car cautiously. A foggy residue partially steamed up the windows, and a figure was slumped in the front seat.

Evan peered into the windows from a distance. The back seat was full of luggage, and clothes were spilled out onto the floor. A couple of grocery bags were on the front passenger seat. Bread and peanut butter sat on top.

Sophie lay with her seat reclined under a mound of blankets and coats. A blue knit hat covered her chestnut hair. Her mouth was open slightly in her sleep, which he would probably find adorable in any other situation than a woman living in her car.

He pushed the hair off his forehead. *Shit.*

What was she thinking? Did she not understand how dangerous this could be? There was no way he could leave her here.

He moved closer to her window and crouched down, not wanting her to wake and see a large figure looming outside. He tapped on her window. She jolted, her eyes flying open. As soon as she spotted him, the color drained from her face, and she screamed.

“Sophie,” he called. “It’s me. It’s Evan. Calm down.” He tried to make his voice as soothing as possible, even as his frustration over the situation roared through him.

She swallowed her next scream as his words must have registered. He tried the door handle, which was locked. “Open the door, Sophie.” He knew his voice sounded too terse but couldn’t help himself. This situation was wrong in so many ways.

He heard the click of the lock being released and stood before pulling the door open. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He winced at the harshness in his voice when he saw her flinch. He took a deep breath and attempted to gentle his voice. “Sophie. What’s going on? Are you living here?”

“I’m ... uh ...” She pushed the hair out of her face, and it didn’t go unnoticed to him that her hands shook. He felt a twinge of guilt for scaring her so badly.

“Sophie.”

“I-I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. It’s freezing out here. You’re living in your car.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she muttered.

“Sophie.” Fuck. Why was she living in her car? She’d told him she was staying with a friend. Why did she lie? Again, his cop’s brain was working overtime. He got the feeling she was running from something but didn’t know her well enough to confront her.

“What? Are you just going to stand there and say my name over and over again?” She raised the seat back into an upright position and folded her hands together in her lap.

He crouched down again to see her better. The interior dome light was dull, but he could still make out the red in her cheeks. He didn’t know whether it was from the cold or embarrassment.

Her shoulders slumped, and her gaze dropped to her hands in her lap. He gently laid his hand over hers. The tremor in them shot straight into his heart. He could feel the chill in them through the material of her gloves. The dark circles under her eyes spoke volumes of her suffering. His protective instincts ignited. “Why?”

“Why what?” she asked obtusely. He arched a brow and glared at her. She knew exactly what he was asking. She huffed out a breath. “I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I didn’t have a lot of money left and didn’t want to waste it on a motel room. As soon as I can save some up from Jolene’s, I’ll get an apartment.”

She'd dropped her gaze to her lap during her explanation. "What happened to the friend you were staying with?"

She pulled her lip between her teeth, and he fought the inappropriately timed desire to nibble on the abused lip with his own teeth. She stared at her hands in her lap as she answered. "Um ... that didn't work out."

He tilted his head. "Why do I get the feeling you're lying?"

Her brows rose, and her head shot up, her gaze now even with his. He narrowed his eyes, daring her to lie to him again. She huffed out a breath. "Fine. The friend went out of town unexpectedly. She didn't know I was coming. I'd hoped she'd be home by now, but she's not. I didn't have any other place to go."

The hunch in her shoulders told him she hated that he'd found her out. He had the sudden urge to gather her in his arms and just hug her. Instead, he had a better idea.

"Get your things."

Her head shot up, surprise in her eyes. "What?"

"Never mind. Just get what you need for tonight. We'll get the rest tomorrow."

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. "I'm not moving in with you. I barely know you."

He barked out a laugh. "I know. I'm not asking you to move in with me. I've got something better in mind."

"I don't understand."

“Just get your things, Sophie. I’ll explain on the way.”



SOPHIE GRABBED HER PURSE and the reusable grocery bag she’d shoved a change of clothes and some toiletries into. Evan took the bag from her as soon as she stepped out of the car. He placed a hand lightly on her back as they started walking away from Jolene’s.

“My building is right there,” he said, pointing to a square brick building.

Sophie’s feet faltered. “I told you I’m not moving in with you, Evan.” She turned to head back to her car, but Evan grabbed her elbow and steered her back around.

“I know that, slugger.” She rolled her eyes at the nickname, which made him smile. “My teammate Emma has the apartment across the hall from mine.”

“Evan! It’s the middle of the night. It would be rude to drop in on her now.”

“Relax. She’s not there. She moved in with her boyfriend. The apartment is empty but furnished. And best of all, the rent is paid until the end of February.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You can live there for the next few months while you save up.”

“I told you. I can’t afford to rent an apartment right now,” she balked.

Evan stopped walking and put his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. “Sophie. The apartment is already paid for. And so are the utilities. Emma’s kept the apartment for emergencies, which came in handy a few months ago. Our friend’s uncle stayed there while recovering from surgery. He needed a safe place to recuperate.”

Sophie tilted her head. “But why?”

“It’s what we do,” he stated simply, as if that explained it all. Sophie had no clue what that meant. The people she’d been exposed to had never done anything for someone else without an ulterior motive. *You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. Then I’ll most likely turn around and stab you in the back.* Those were the types of people she was accustomed to.

This *it’s what we do* stuff made no sense to her. She was having trouble wrapping her brain around it. Even if it wasn’t after two in the morning, she’d probably still have trouble grasping the concept.

“Listen, Emma’s boyfriend is ridiculously wealthy. He keeps the apartment for her, just in case. She’s Jolene’s best friend. I’m positive she’d want one of Jolene’s employees to use it.”

This still felt entirely too weird. Who just lends out an apartment rent-free to a complete stranger? “I don’t know,” she hedged.

“How ’bout you sleep on it? It’s cold. It’s late. At least use the place tonight. You can think about it more in the morning.”

That sounded reasonable, so she nodded. Evan let go of her shoulders and took her hand. Just that one simple gesture, a man’s hand surrounding her own, had an unfamiliar feeling stirring in her gut. The last man to hold her hand so gently had been her father. After he died, there was no more tenderness. No comfort. No sense of safety.

Evan led her to the brick building and pulled out a set of keys. He used one key to open the outer door, and the heat rushed out to greet her. She sighed, delighting in the warmth. The few weeks she’d spent in her car had been miserably cold. Her body had never relaxed in sleep. The cold had every muscle in her body tensing to control the shivers.

She’d wondered if she had made a huge mistake in running. She had everything money could buy with Victor. A spacious place to live. Plenty of food. Warm bed. But all the comforts came at a price. One she wasn’t willing to make anymore.

All it took was one glimpse of her scars to remind her that she’d done what was necessary.

And the memory of what happened that last night.

After climbing a set of stairs, Evan paused in front of a door. “Let me get the spare set of keys for the apartment. It’ll just take a minute, but you’re welcome to come in.” He looked uncertain, which she found kind of endearing. She didn’t say anything while he opened his door. She hesitated a moment

before stepping over the threshold behind him into the entryway.

It was a typical apartment. Living space with a kitchen on the other side. The couch was a soft gray color and looked like it had seen better days. The large flatscreen on the wall didn't surprise her. But what did surprise her was the electronic piano that sat against the wall. She wondered if he played but was afraid to ask. She didn't know him well enough to pry into his personal life.

Before she could contemplate more about the piano, Evan was back with a set of keys. "Okay. Here we go."

She followed him back into the hall and to the other apartment door on this level. When he opened the door, he held it and gestured for her to precede him. It was nearly the same layout as his, just flipped. It was furnished, as he'd said, and the furnishings looked comfortable. An L-shaped couch faced a large window with a coffee table in front.

A bistro table with two chairs was in the corner next to the kitchen, which was separated from the living area by a peninsula. The cabinets and appliances all appeared functional, if a little dated. The butcher-block counters were clean but limited. It was a small space, but to Sophie, it was perfect.

"Okay, well," Evan began, setting the keys on the counter, "there may be some food left over from when our friend stayed here, but the fridge is probably empty. As far as I know, the bathroom is stocked with towels and stuff. The bed should have sheets. If not, I can lend you some of mine. Like I said,

the place is paid for until the end of February. And all the utilities are included, except for cable and internet. The wi-fi signal isn't too bad here, so you probably won't have trouble with your phone."

"I don't have a phone." The words slipped out before Sophie could stop them. The surprised look on his face told her she should have kept that fact to herself. She'd smashed the one Victor gave her to smithereens before leaving, feeling a modicum of freedom in the act. It may have been childish, but it had felt incredibly gratifying.

"You haven't replaced it yet?"

She cocked her head, then remembered she'd told him hers was broken when he was helping her with her tire. She bit her lip, hating that the lies were piling up.

"Sorry. It's none of my business. If you ever get a new one, you shouldn't have a problem." She could see the questions in his eyes, but he didn't prod. She liked that. She knew someday people would have questions about her past, but she wasn't ready to answer them yet. She wanted time to discover who she was away from the monsters. The fear was still with her, but she was determined to take it one day at a time. With small steps, she would eventually shake off the chains of her past.

"Okay," she replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Okay. Well, I'll let you get settled. I hope you can get some rest. I'm right across the hall if you need anything." He turned and headed back to the door.

“Thank you,” she called out before he could leave. She wanted to say more, but the words lodged in her throat.

He must have seen what she was trying to say in her eyes as he studied her. He nodded, then murmured, “Get some sleep.” Then he was gone, leaving her alone in a warm and cozy apartment. An apartment that was hers and hers alone ... at least for a few months.

She may have made a mistake in not following Mrs. Tilley’s instructions to meet up with her friend, but she’d lucked into an incredible situation. And someday, as she grew stronger, she would be able to either pay back those who’d helped her or pay it forward. She was well on her way toward changing her story.

Chapter Seven



*“**I**DERIVE NO PLEASURE from this. I hope you know.”*
His words said one thing, but the tone said something completely different. Sophie knew enough not to call him out on the lie. Victor would love nothing more than to punish her further for her insolence. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

“When you let them close to you, it drives me crazy. How many times do we have to go over this? Perhaps this time, the lesson will stick.” Sophie wanted to scream. She had been talking to her coworker about the music for the club. Something she had to do for her job. It wasn't her fault that her coworker was male. But every time Victor saw her talking to a man, innocent though it was, he'd punished her. She'd had enough punishments to last her a lifetime, and she had the scars to prove it.

Victor was methodical in his punishments. The beatings were hard enough to tolerate. But it was the mental game he played that caused her the most pain. And he loved the game.

He got off on it. She was completely under his control, and he fed off her fear of him.

Sophie lay on the desk in his office inside the penthouse he'd imprisoned her in. Her arms were spread wide and tied to the legs of the desk. She was still fully clothed in the gown she'd worn to the club, but she didn't feel any less vulnerable. He knew how to break her down.

Victor circled her, his lecture about her whorish ways ongoing. Sophie stared at the ceiling, losing herself in the popcorn pattern. She'd reached one hundred thirty-three in her count of the bumps when the slam of the wooden box lid startled her. Her blood pounded in her ears. It was going to be one of those nights.

The sharp clink. The snick. The puffs. The acrid aroma. The clank. Like Pavlov's dog, her body responded. Every time.

Victor puffed on the cigar he'd just lit as he continued to circle her, playing his warped game. He toyed with the lighter in his hand. Flicking open the lid, the clink automatically making her body tremble. Then the clank as he flipped it closed. Over and over again. The repetitive strike causing her to lose any control she'd found in her count of the ceiling's bumps.

Victor saw her reaction and laughed. She clenched her hands that tingled from the constraints, trying in vain to alleviate the tremors. Her blood felt cold as it rushed through her body. Her heart pounded roughly, forcing the icy chill in her veins to rush to the ends.

She knew what came next. They'd been through this routine before. Like a macabre dance, the steps were followed succinctly. The cigar was lit, the caustic smoke hovering over her prone body. He held the thick shaft in her face, and the tip glowed as he smoked.

Slowly, he slipped the dagger out of his pocket. After placing the still lit cigar in an ashtray, he prepared his favorite torture device. Another clink of the lighter, and the icy chill in her veins froze in place. A snick as the flame ignited, and everything inside her tightened.

She couldn't look away. She couldn't close her eyes. He forced her to watch. Every time.

He held the flame to the pommel of the dagger he'd had specially designed. The etched scales glowed as it heated. The siren's tail appeared alive as the flame set it ablaze.

Victor smiled, satisfied with the lighter's progress. Sophie hated that smile. She focused all her energy on that hate. It was better than focusing on her fear.

The fear would kill her.

The hate kept her alive.

He pushed her gown off her leg, exposing her thigh. The hand not clenched around the dagger held her leg steady, his fingers digging into the tender skin of her inner thigh.

"I derive no pleasure from this, Sophie." Victor attested as he held the heated end of the dagger over the sensitive skin of

her inner thigh. The heat blistered. The sizzle as her skin burned mixed with the scream she couldn't hold in.

Sophie woke with the scream still on her lips. She swiped at her legs as phantom pains erupted over her skin. Closing her eyes, she breathed through the fear and agony the nightmare brought back. She counted her breaths, in for three, out for five.

The tremors eased. The essence of pain lessened. Her skin burning and the sound of it faded. But the smell ... that was fused to her senses forever.

Someday, she hoped the nightmares would fade. Just as she hoped the scars would. She knew they would never go away completely. They were too deep and too numerous. She'd hoped that with her freedom, the things that haunted her would dwindle. It was stupid of her to wish it would be instantaneous. Nightmares the likes of Victor would remain rent free in the brain for a long time to come. It would take more than futile wishes to exorcise that demon.

With a sigh, Sophie got out of bed just as the sun peaked through the curtains. Knowing there was no way she'd get back to sleep, she began her day. Stepping into the shower, she washed off the remnants of the dream as the water scalded her skin.

She took her time, relishing in the freedom to do so. Taking quick showers at truck stops over the last couple of weeks had been a perilous experience. Every horror story imaginable had entered her mind each time she'd stepped into the truck stop

bathroom. She'd rushed through her routine, in and out as quickly as possible, not wanting to risk being exposed longer than necessary.

But here, in the beautifully warm apartment Evan had offered to her, she basked in the shower. With a washcloth, she scrubbed her body, needing the barrier between her scars and her hands. Despite her habit of scratching the ones on her wrist, she never touched the others, and she never looked at her body anymore.

The burns were telling. The first couple of times had been on her wrist. Four marks making a square shape. But he'd wanted her in revealing gowns at the club. Marring her body where people could see was unacceptable. That was when he started on her inner thighs. Sixteen burns total from that custom-made dagger. He thought it was some sort of perverse judgment to brand her with the siren symbol on his dagger while berating her for using her seductive siren powers on men. It didn't matter that he'd kept her working in the club. Her talent brought the patrons in, but it came at a price. One that she had to pay ... painfully.

Never again. She escaped and would never go back to that life.



“I’LL TELL YOU, I’M getting ready to throw in the towel and just elope.” Sophie was waiting on Jolene’s

friends. A group of women who seemed as close as sisters. The pang of irrational jealousy she felt every time she interacted with them was perplexing. She didn't begrudge them their friendship, but it made her sad her life had killed any chances of developing similar relationships.

Seventeen years was a long time to go without a single friend. No gaggle of girls to dish on the hottest guys in school. No girls' nights at the bar. She never realized how much she'd missed in her caged life until she observed this group of women.

The kindness they showed each other cut at her heart. These women were there for each other no matter what. They had someone in their corner.

Her last true friend had been Sam. Seventeen years ago, they'd still been close despite their high school activities taking them in different directions. Sophie always knew that no matter how far apart they drifted, Sam would be there for her if she needed. That relationship was ripped away from her when her world crumbled around her.

She'd seen Sam once in seventeen years. An encounter that had ended in the most horrific way. It had been the catalyst for her escape. If only she had done it sooner. Things might not have ended they way they did for her friend.

"What do you think, Sophie?" Jolene asked, pulling her out of her dark thoughts and into the group's conversation.

"I'm sorry. What?" she asked after setting down a glass of water for the woman with the smoothest, blackest hair she'd

ever seen.

“We were just wondering which was better: the big wedding ceremony or doing something small, like eloping. Which would you do?” Jolene asked.

Sophie knew her jaw must be hanging open, stunned that they would include her in their discussion. It took her a moment to formulate a reply. “I guess I’ve never thought about it before.” It wasn’t a complete lie. In the early days with Victor, she’d thought about it all the time. Imagined a huge, expensive wedding with the who’s who of Chicago in attendance. That dream crashed and burned just as surely as any of her other hopes and dreams.

“Why don’t you sit down and join us for a bit,” a blond woman asked.

So surprised by the invitation, she was sure her eyes were now bugging out. She looked over at Jolene, her boss, who gestured to the empty chair at their table.

“My name’s Annika,” the blond said. Then went around introducing the rest of the women.

“Natalie and Annika are getting married soon, hence the wedding talk,” said the woman with the darker blond hair that reminded her of the wheat fields outside of her home town. Sophie recalled her name was Sutton. There was a large camera bag hanging off the back of her chair.

“Yes, and my mother is driving me nuts, which is making me rethink the big ceremony thing,” Natalie, the woman with

the black hair groused.

“I thought you’d cut your mom out of your life?” Hollynn asked. She was a tiny thing, around the same height as Natalie, but instead of black hair, she had long honey brown hair that hung in a braid over her shoulder.

“I did. She’s trying to weasel her way back in. Thinks that now that I’m getting married I’ll forget about all the bullshit she put us through.”

“I’m sorry, Natalie. I can’t imagine that. My mom has been wonderful through this process. I don’t know what I’d do without her. I’m lucky she already loved Logan like a son when we were kids,” Annika said.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll ever forgive my mother for the way she treated Graham when she first met him. I’d never been so ashamed. Luckily, Graham’s parents are awesome. His mom is the best.”

“So, ignore your mom and keep planning the wedding for yourselves and the family and friends that matter to you,” Sutton advised.

“I agree. Screw mom. I wouldn’t even bother to invite her,” Maddie, who Sophie discovered was Natalie’s sister, said with a bit of a bite to her voice.

Sophie wondered what this woman had done to alienate both her daughters so badly. What she wouldn’t give for one more day with her mom. To feel one of her hugs. She felt the

sting of sudden tears burn at the backs of her eyes and lowered her head to hide her effort to fight them off.

“Do you get along with your parents, Sophie?” Natalie asked.

She lifted her head, not knowing how to answer. She couldn't remember if she'd mentioned her parents to anyone in this town before now. She didn't want to go against what she'd already shared. Deciding honesty was the best course, she said, “My parents died when I was fifteen. Car accident.”

The group erupted in expressions of sympathy. “I'm so sorry. I lost my dad too when I was a teenager. My mom was distant after that so it was kind of like I lost them both. You never quite recover from losing a parent so suddenly,” Hollynn said laying a comforting hand over Sophie's. It was a simple gesture, one of comfort and care. It made her throat grow tight and her eyes burned with unshed tears.

“No, you don't,” Sophie agreed blinking rapidly to stave off the tears.

“Okay. So, I've decided,” began Natalie. “I'll keep planning the ceremony. I want everyone I love there to celebrate with us.”

“Yay,” Hollynn cheered. “I love weddings.”

“I wonder what Emma's wedding will be like if they ever decide to get married,” Jolene mused.

The women explained to Sophie that Emma was another of their friends and the woman whose apartment she was staying

in. She was a Nighthawk who was put in charge of training Marcus Rayne, the famous actor who wanted to make a movie about the group. They'd fallen in love and were currently in Vancouver filming the movie.

"I'm sure it will be a circus," Natalie conjectured. "Remember the mess after the paparazzi discovered Marcus with Emma?"

"Yeah, I don't envy them," Annika said.

"If they want the big wedding thing, we'll do everything we can to keep it as normal as possible," Sutton assured.

Jolene nodded and clapped her hands once. "Right. We've got their backs." The others agreed. Sophie was once again stunned by the support these women showed for one another. And furthermore, they seemed to be enveloping her into their fold. Before the restaurant became busy with the dinner rush and she had to get back to work, they had continued to include her in their conversation. Asking her opinion about flowers, music, and other such wedding things.

It was one of the nicest afternoons she'd had since her parents died. But in the back of her mind, she told herself not to get too comfortable. She never knew if she'd have to pick up and run again. She'd have to find the fine line of not getting too close to them while still remaining friendly. Victor wouldn't hesitate to go through them to get to her if he ever discovered where she was hiding. If she could help it, she wouldn't endanger these women.

Chapter Eight



“**W**HO ARE YOU?” THE squeaky voice shouted to her from under the stairs as Sophie descended. Two days after her encounter with Jolene’s friends, she was shaking off the aftereffects of yet another nightmare when the voice startled her. She stumbled, missing a step. Thankfully, she’d been holding on to the handrail and caught herself before she fell.

“Christ,” she mumbled, gaining her equilibrium again.

“Geez, sorry, lady. I dinna mean to scare you.”

“That’s all right. I’m fine.”

Sophie stepped into the hall at the bottom. The door that led outside was in front of the stairs. A hallway ran along beside the staircase, leading to more apartments and, she assumed, a back door, if the light she could see at the end of the hall was any indication.

A towheaded boy with bright blue eyes stared at her from the back end of the hallway. He held a remote control for some

sort of device in his hand. “Who are you?” he asked again before fiddling with the remote.

The whir of a tiny machine sounded from behind her. Sophie turned just in time to hop out of the way of the miniature truck that was barreling toward her. The front door flew open, bringing in a gust of wind that pushed her hair into her eyes, so she missed the truck’s rebound. It crashed into her ankle with a remarkable amount of power for something so little.

“Mikey,” Evan shouted. The kid jumped. So did Sophie. Christ, when would sharp tones of voices stop affecting her so much?

“Sorry, Mr. E,” the boy said, bending over to grab his truck.

“Not me you owe an apology to,” Evan stated.

The boy looked over at Sophie with wide eyes. “Sorry, lady. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“That’s okay. Accidents happen.”

The boy’s eyes brightened at her words. He juggled the truck and the remote, trying to free a hand before giving up and putting both down on the floor. He then thrust a hand out to her. “Hi. I’m Michael Ryan. I live in that one,” he said, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder. There were two doors in that direction, so it was a guess which one he meant.

Sophie took his hand in hers, and he shook it with enthusiasm, as if it excited him to do something so grown-up-like. “I’m Sophie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Mikey is one of Nan’s kids.”

“Oh. She lives here too?”

“Yeah, she lives in number two. Mrs. Briggs lives in number one. I’m sure you’ll meet her soon. She likes to act as everyone’s grandmother.”

“She makes the best cookies,” Mikey added.

“Well, then, I definitely want to meet her.”

“What’s your mom up to today, Mikey?” Evan asked.

“She’s getting the Christmas decorations out of storage in the basement. I was helping, but she wanted me to take a break. She said I could play outside as long as I watched Avery.”

Evan placed his hands on his hips and smirked at the boy.
“And where is Avery?”

Mikey tilted his head, as if he was trying to comprehend Evan’s words, before his eyes popped wide open. “Oh shit,” he mumbled. Sophie fought back a laugh at the curse that came from the little boy. Then he whipped around and dashed out the back door, leaving his truck behind.

“Watch your language, Mikey,” Evan called after him.

“Sorry,” he yelled as the door slammed behind him.

Evan shook his head. “He’s a good kid, but he gets distracted easily.”

“I imagine that’s normal.” Sophie didn’t actually know if it was normal for a kid. She’d been isolated for so long, she’d

never had an association with children. The nightclub clientele was most definitely part of a different demographic.

She hated working at Sirens, but at least she got to do what she loved there. It was the only times she had a modicum of freedom. She could lose herself in the job and let all her worries and stresses fade away. But even the pleasure she derived from her work waned. Victor's obsession had intruded into her life there more than ever, and she had known she'd never be free unless she did something. She'd also figured it would only be a matter of time before she outlived her usefulness to him.

He had no problem taking out perceived obstacles in his obsession. That's how deep his sickness ran. She knew that sickness would soon kill her. If he ever found her, her life would be forfeited.

Sophie shivered. She had to make sure he never found her.

"Sophie?" Evan asked, breaking into her panicked thoughts. It was obvious from the deep furrow in his brow that she'd missed his question. She'd heard nothing.

"I'm sorry. I was lost in thought. What did you say?"

"I asked how you were doing. Did you get any sleep?"

"Oh yes. Thank you. I slept well. It was nice to be warm."

Evan's expression softened. "I'm glad."

Before he could say more, the back door burst open, and Mikey ran back in. "Mr. E. Come quick!" The boy gestured vigorously for Evan to follow him.

“What’s wrong? Is it Avery?” Evan asked, hurrying to follow the boy. Sophie trailed them, not knowing what else to do.

“It’s ... just come on,” Mikey prompted and ran to the alley between the apartment building and the adjacent structure.

“Mikey, tell me what’s wrong,” Evan insisted. He went around the corner, and Sophie nearly ran into his back when he came to an abrupt stop. Mikey was crouched in the alleyway next to a little girl who sat on her knees.

“Avery,” Evan asked. “Are you okay?” The little girl looked up at him with a watery gaze, bit her lip, then pointed.

Evan crouched on the other side of her. “We gotta help it,” Mikey said. Avery nodded exuberantly.

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got here.” Evan reached down, and Sophie moved closer to see what they were all staring at. A little orange kitten lay on its side, with one leg juttied out at an unnatural angle. Sophie’s heart clenched. The poor thing looked like it had been through hell. It was skinny, and Sophie could see its little lungs working overtime as it struggled to breathe. She wasn’t sure if something was wrong internally or if it was just in pain from the obvious injury to its leg.

“Can you help it, Mr. E.?” Mikey asked. Avery’s watery gaze pleaded with Evan to do something. The little girl didn’t utter a word, but her expression said it all for her. She didn’t want the little kitten to hurt anymore. She appeared almost desperate to help take away its pain.

“We can try,” he replied. The little girl’s shoulders dropped like she’d just heard what she’d needed to hear and could relax. “Why don’t you two run inside and get an old towel for us to wrap the kitten in?”

“Should we take it to the vet?”

Evan hesitated. Sophie could see the war going on in his head by his expression. The kitten looked too far gone, even to her. She wouldn’t want to get their hopes up, only for the little thing to succumb to its injuries. “Go get me the towel, and we’ll see what we can do for it.”



SOPHIE SAT IN THE passenger seat of his truck, the kitten wrapped in a towel on her lap. She stared down at it as if her will alone could encourage it to keep fighting for life. The kids had put up a fight to accompany them, but Nan needed them at home. Evan promised he’d keep them updated on the kitten’s condition.

Sophie was kind enough to go with him, and he was glad to have her company, even if she didn’t talk much. That was fine with him. He didn’t like to talk a lot, either. Especially on this day. At least taking the kitten to the vet would distract him from the anniversary of Tara’s death.

“How’s it doing?” Evan asked.

“Not worse,” Sophie replied with a shrug. “I hope the vet can help it. I’m pretty sure those kids would be devastated if it died.”

“Yeah, they’ve had enough death in their young lives. They don’t need any more.”

Sophie’s amber eyes went round before she asked, “What do you mean?”

Evan sighed. “They lost their dad and their grandparents—their dad’s parents—in a car crash a few years ago.”

Sophie gasped, and her eyes welled up before she shuttered them. “That’s awful. Those poor kids. I lost both my parents in a crash as well.” Her voice wobbled, and her bottom lip trembled. Her grief was still fresh and palpable. “At least they still have Nan.”

“Nan’s a great mom.” She nodded. “I’m sorry you lost your parents. How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

“Too young,” he said, knowing his words were trivial compared to the loss. He knew loss. He felt a similar grief every day. But a boatload of guilt accompanied his sorrow. It was hard to grieve properly through the heavy guilt that consumed him.

“Yes. Too young,” she repeated stroking a hand over the dirty, matted fur of the kitten in her lap.

“Did you have anyone to help you through it?”

Sophie scratched at her wrist through her shirt, the cuff of which was clutched in her fist. He recalled the bruises he'd seen that night in Jolene's and wondered again what she'd been through. She had that haunted appearance he'd seen too many times as a cop in Chicago.

"My uncle took me in, but he wasn't exactly a warm guy."

Evan placed a hand over hers, stopping her from scratching. She jolted but didn't pull away. He squeezed. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "Everybody loses somebody eventually."

"That's true. Doesn't make it any easier."

"Nan's kids seem to handle it okay."

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"Mikey, I think is okay. But Avery ..."

"What?"

"I don't think she's said a word since it happened," he replied sadly. He'd never heard the little girl talk, but she communicated a ton through her expressions. And Mikey seemed to have an innate ability to understand her. Evan knew Nan worried about both of her kids, but her daughter not speaking was the hardest on her.

"Oh, that so ... Nan must be beside herself with worry."

"I'm sure she is. But they're all strong. They'll get through it together."

"I'm glad they have each other."

“You must have been glad to have your uncle, even if he wasn’t exactly warm and cuddly.”

“Sure.” There was something in her tone that suggested life with her uncle had not been ideal. His curiosity piqued further.

“What were your parents like?”

Her head shot up and turned to look at him. He’d kept his tone light, hoping to lift the mood she’d slumped into at the mention of her uncle. He hadn’t expected the smile or the way it lit up her mesmerizing amber eyes.

“They were the best.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“They were always there for me, supporting everything I did. They had the biggest hearts.” She glanced down at the kitten and scratched its neck, a wistful smile tipped the corners of her mouth. “It’s the love they had for each other I remember the most. Music was a big thing in my house. I can’t tell you how many times I caught them dancing in the kitchen.”

“My mom is a music teacher, so I can understand the sentiment. Although I never caught my parents dancing.”

Sophie laughed. “I’m not even sure you could call what they did dancing. They kind of sucked at it. But they didn’t care. I think they just did it to be close to each other.”

“I can see that. I hate to dance, but I might be inclined to participate if it got me closer to the woman I loved.” Her gaze darted to his. “If I ever found her, that is.” He wasn’t sure, but

he could have sworn he'd glimpsed relief in her eyes at the last bit. For some reason, that had him feeling extremely pleased.

There was no doubt he was attracted to Sophie. Had been since he'd first spotted her in Jolene's. But she was standoffish. There were secrets she kept close to herself. He wasn't sure if he could wade into that. He'd had enough secrets being kept from him to last a lifetime.

"My parents used to leave notes to each other. But not the normal type of notes. Song lyrics. They'd find the words in some song that expressed how they felt. They got the biggest kick out of trying to stump each other."

"Love notes through song lyrics. I love that."

"I know, right? They were ridiculously sweet in that."

"I can tell you really loved them." A pang of sympathy beat against his chest. He'd had a good childhood with two loving parents who were still alive. He may have experienced a devastating loss, but he'd had them to lean on. Who did Sophie have? It didn't sound like her uncle was that great.

"I did. The day I lost them was the worst day of my life. At least until—"

She cut herself off and turned to peer out the side window. He found himself wanting to know what she was going to say. What had replaced her parents' deaths as the worst day of her life? "Until what?"

She scratched at her wrist, a nervous habit he was beginning to recognize. She did it anytime she was confronted with

something she didn't want to talk about. More secrets.

“Until their funeral,” she answered, her voice devoid of emotion, and he recognized it for the lie it was.

Chapter Nine



S HE'D LIED. WAS THIS who she would have to become to keep herself safe? A liar?

She hated liars. Being lied to since she was fifteen had made her loathe the habit. But now she found the lies slipping out far easier than they should.

The day her parents died had been among the worst days of her life. As was their funeral. But it was the day she'd lost all semblance of security that preceded even that. She'd had to leave the only home she'd ever known to move into her uncle's place. A cold and sterile condo in the heart of Chicago. A modern monstrosity she'd hated on sight. It was all chrome and sharp angles. Dark colors that matched the darkness in its inhabitant.

One week was all it took for Tito to show his true colors.

She'd just buried her parents and was missing them fiercely. Still in her drab funeral clothes, she'd placed a framed photo of them on the mantle as unchecked tears fell. There had been no harm in the act, but Tito had thought differently. The moment he'd spotted it, he'd thrown it across the room.

Sophie'd had to duck to miss being hit by it. If only she had seen the fist coming like she'd seen that frame. She'd never been punched before, and the physical pain that erupted in her face was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. The mental pain had been crueler. A savage shock to say the least. Unfortunately for her, it wouldn't be the last time she suffered that type of pain ... and worse.

Her uncle not being warm and cuddly had been an understatement. But that had not been the biggest issue when it came to him. It was his control, his anger, and, to some extent, his lust. He'd never crossed that line with her, but she could tell he'd thought about it. Her father's brother was nothing like the man who'd raised her. He was the exact opposite. He kept her completely reliant on him while using her for her talent. And then when she'd reached the legal age, he'd sold her in a business transaction to Victor Silvo.

It had taken years for Sophie to learn what her Uncle Tito had received in the deal. If the rumors she'd heard about him since leaving his home were true, his business had thrived through Victor's clubs.

She'd learned through years of abuse, first under her uncle and then with Victor, to keep her mouth shut but her eyes open. And what she'd learned about both men had been terrifying.

Tomás "Tito" Alvaro was a top-tier member of the Latin Lords, a deadly gang that had a stranglehold on Chicago. He was evil and smart, a lethal combination to an innocent person

like herself, but he was quite useful to the Latin Lords. His negotiations with Victor had opened doors for the gang and cemented Tito's role among them. It didn't matter to their leader that he'd used his young niece as a bargaining chip. All that mattered was being able to use Victor's clubs to move more product.

At first, it had thrilled Sophie to be out of Tito's house. Victor had praised her talent and wanted her on stage every night. It wasn't just her voice that he'd wanted, and Sophie had been too naïve to understand what being Victor's girl truly meant. She'd gone from one controlling, possessive man to another.

With Victor, she'd done it willingly. He'd flattered her. Given her the loving attention she'd been so desperate for since her parents' deaths. She didn't notice until it was too late that he was molding her into the perfect subservient girlfriend. He'd successfully groomed her. And she'd relished in the attention.

Until the first time he'd beaten her.

Then he was no better than her abusive uncle. She sought an out every chance she got from that moment on. She kept her eyes and ears open to the dealings and activities going on around her, learning what true evil was. And that last night before she'd escaped, she'd witnessed it firsthand.

She prayed every day that Victor hadn't discovered she'd seen what he'd done. She vowed that someday she'd see

justice served. Murdering Sam Chasin would be his downfall. She'd make sure of it.

“So change of subject,” Evan said suddenly, breaking into her thoughts. “Favorite animal?”

“What?”

“What’s your favorite animal?”

Sophie smiled and glanced down at the kitten in her lap. “Right now I’d say kittens. Yours?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty partial to cats too. Favorite color?”

“Blue. You?”

“I’m suddenly fond of amber.” Sophie felt her cheeks heat as he glanced over at her before returning his attention to the road. “Ice cream flavor?”

“Vanilla.” Evan’s face scrunched up, making Sophie laugh. “What? It’s good. It’s one of those flavors that you can add any topping to, and it will still be good.”

He cocked his head and raised his brows, as if conceding to her logic. “Okay. That makes sense, but it doesn’t beat deer traxx.”

“Deer traxx? That’s not a flavor.”

“Au contraire. I beg to differ. It is the finest of ice cream flavors. But it can’t be just any deer traxx. It has to be the caramel deer traxx. Little chocolate cups full of gooey caramel goodness.”

“You’ve certainly put a lot of thought into this,” she teased.

“I take my ice cream very seriously.”

“As everybody should.” She pursed her lips to hold in the laugh that wanted to burst free at his silliness.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re making fun of me?”

“I would never,” she responded, placing a hand over her heart, putting on her best affronted act.

He arched a brow at her. “Mm-hmm. Okay, new question. What’s something you wish you could learn?”

“Oh, we’re delving deep, are we?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Mm, I guess I always wanted to learn to play in instrument.”

He shot a quick look over in her direction. One brow arched. “Really? Any instrument in particular?”

“I remember learning the recorder in elementary school.”

“I think everybody did that in elementary school.”

“Much to our parents’ displeasure.”

“I seem to remember my dad filling his ears with cotton balls when my sister and I learned.”

“Oh, mine probably would have done the same if he thought of it.” She laughed as memories of better times with her parents came back to her. They loved watching her perform, but the recorder year was rough for them. “What about you? What’s something you want to learn?”

“Oh, my turn in the hot seat, huh?” He paused a moment as he took a left-hand turn when the traffic cleared. “I think I’d like to learn how to make small talk better.”

Surprised, she turned to face him. “You seem to be doing a pretty good job right now.”

“Asking silly questions is not small talk.”

“Sure it is. That’s what small talk is all about. Learning about the other person. How else can you learn about someone unless you ask questions? For instance, I now know you have a strange taste in ice cream.”

A laugh burst out of Evan. “And you have simple tastes.”

A smile pulled at her lips. “See, it worked. We already know each other better.”

“That we do. Okay, one final question. This is the make-it-or-break-it question of our budding friendship.”

“Uh-oh. Should I be scared?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe. What is your favorite song?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. “Come Rain or Come Shine.”

“Ooh, old school. Why that one?”

She bit her lip. “It’s the last one I remember my parents dancing to in the kitchen before they died. It’s what I imagine love is supposed to be like,” she answered wistfully.

Evan pulled his truck into a parking space at the vet's office and cut the engine. "I like that. Now I'm gonna have to listen to the song again."

"It's a good song." Sophie dropped her gaze to the kitten on her lap, suddenly feeling embarrassed. The conversation had turned awkward thanks to her answer. *What love is supposed to be like?* What kind of answer was that?

"Come on," Evan said, breaking into her self-flagellation. "Let's see what the vet can do with this little guy."

Sophie nodded and carefully climbed out of the truck, trying not to jostle the injured kitten around too much. Evan put a hand on her lower back as they walked up to the door together. A tingle went up her spine. She had never felt such a comforting gesture from a man before.



THE KITTEN NEEDED SURGERY. Its little leg was mangled beyond repair and would need to be amputated. Evan and Sophie left him in the capable hands of the vet, who promised to keep Evan informed of the cat's recovery.

Evan had a feeling he was soon going to be a cat owner. Nan was allergic, which was why the kids had asked him to take it to the vet. He liked cats well enough. He just didn't know if he wanted to live with one. There was no use jumping the gun and buying the litter box yet. The kitten may not

survive the surgery or have worse injuries than they thought. Anything could happen.

“I hope this didn’t take you away from any grand plans for your day,” Evan asked Sophie as they drove back to the apartment.

“Indeed. I was intending on participating in the most glamorous event: grocery shopping.”

Evan snorted. “I’m sorry to take you away from such an elaborate affair.”

“Quite,” she replied, effecting a snooty British accent.

He chuckled, her silliness affecting him unexpectedly. When she smiled, when she laughed, it made her look so young and carefree. She was a beautiful woman, and the quick moments of joy he’d seen only a few times now made her even more ... just more.

“I could use a few things from the store as well. How ’bout we go together?”

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that. I can manage on my own.”

“I know you can. But since we both need to go, it makes sense to go together.”

“O-Okay,” she replied. Her fingers twitched in her lap, and within seconds of answering him, she was scratching at her wrist again. He wondered what was causing her nervousness. Was she afraid to be alone with him? If that were true, why did she volunteer to go with him to the vet?

“What’s wrong?” The question was out before he could clamp it down. Her hand froze, her tension was palpable.

“N-nothing.” He knew that lie. Tara had used it all the time. Especially when she didn’t want to talk about something. He should have tried harder to get to her secrets, especially in those last days. Perhaps if he had, he could have prevented her death.

He shook those thoughts off to focus on the woman beside him. Sophie didn’t appear to be afraid of him. No, it had to be something else. Something he knew she wouldn’t tell him about. Another one of her secrets. He felt irate that she was keeping those secrets from him, even though she was under no obligation to tell him anything about herself. They’d only just met a few weeks ago. The rapid-fire question session as small talk had been one of the longest conversations they’d shared.

It was also one of the more straightforward conversations he’d had with her. She could easily talk about her parents and simple likes and dislikes, but anything else in her life was off limits. Even if they were building a nice friendship, it didn’t entitle him to her secrets. He needed to get over himself.

“Listen, I can go some other time if you’re uncomfortable,” he offered.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that ... I’m embarrassed to say.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed by anything around me.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I’ve only worked a couple of shifts at Jolene’s. I didn’t want you to see how little I could afford.”

“Sophie, you never have to be embarrassed about working hard and surviving the best way you can. We’ve all been there at one time. Believe me, starting out as a beat cop in Chicago, I lived on a shoestring budget. I can’t tell you how much Ramen I ate.” He thought she’d laugh at that, but when he glanced over at her, all the color had drained from her face.

“Are you okay?”

“I-I thought you were a Nighthawk.”

“I am now. I left the Chicago Police force about five years ago. I was on the force for twelve years, ten of those years as a detective.”

“O-oh.”

She was scratching at her wrist again. “Is that a problem?” He hated to even ask, but he’d experienced so much hate thrown in his direction because of his chosen profession. He’d hate to think that Sophie would be among those types of people.

“No, of course not. It just took me by surprise. It’s a noble job.” She whispered the last part so quietly that he had to crane his ears to hear her.

Evan turned into the parking lot of the grocery store and parked but didn’t get out. Instead, he turned to face Sophie. “Listen, if my former job makes you uncomfortable or something, we don’t have to do this together. I can take you back to your car.”

“No,” she said forcefully. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make it seem like I was prejudiced. I just hadn’t had a lot of interactions with a cop before. You’re not what I expected a cop to be like.”

His lips twitched at her confession. “Really? What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Someone meaner? More standoffish? Harsher?”

“I can be all those things if I need to be. Or if I’m in a bad mood.”

She laid a hand on his arm that was propped on the console between their seats and offered a rare smile. “You’ve been nothing but nice to me.”

He covered her hand with his own. “You’re easy to be nice to.”

She huffed out a sound of disbelief. “If only that were true.”

Chapter Ten



SHIT. SHIT. SHIT. Evan was a police officer. And not just any police officer, but one from Chicago. He had been nice to her, but if he ever found out who she was, that would most definitely change.

She'd lied—again—when she'd said her interactions with cops were few. She'd met several at the club. All of them were corrupt.

In her former world, there were two types of law enforcement. Those that were either in Tito's or Victor's pockets. Or those that were true warriors for good but would batter themselves against the impenetrable wall that protected Tito and Victor. The former wouldn't hesitate to turn her in to Victor. They would kill the latter for not handing her over.

The question was, which camp did Evan stand with?

And if he discovered who she was, then what?

If he was corrupt and gave her up to Victor, her life was over. Victor would truly kill her for her insolence.

But if he was honorable, Victor would probably kill him for keeping her secret. He'd done it before, and that last night she'd watched it happen. Sam had tried to protect her. He'd been her friend, and Victor had killed him because of her. She couldn't go through that again. She'd need to keep her distance from Evan no matter what camp he sided with.

But, Jesus, when he looked at her like that—with those sky-blue eyes that softened with concern—she was drawn in closer. She couldn't let that happen. Closer was deadlier.

Then she wondered what it would be like to have a friend. Someone on her side. Someone to talk to. Laugh with. Share her secrets with. Evan seemed like he'd be the type of person that would give his all to a friendship. Especially for someone he cared about.

What would it be like to have someone in her corner? She'd been too young to truly appreciate it from her parents. She'd hoped to find it with Victor. To escape her uncle's abuse and find comfort in a man who wanted her.

The memory of that day remained strong in her mind. She and Uncle Tito rode the elevator to the penthouse. His voice in her ear was still as clear as day. *You're going to make me a shit ton of money. At least you're good for something. You and that voice of yours.*

The elevator doors opened to a smiling older man. She'd been struck by how handsome he was. Tito pushed her out of the elevator without a goodbye and left her there. She remembered trembling, realizing she was alone with a strange

man. He'd smiled at her and made her feel at ease, welcoming her to his home. He'd given her a splendid room with a bathroom that was to die for. He'd outfitted her in the finest clothes. And he left her alone for two years.

Two years while she got to know him. The first time he'd come to her room at night, she'd been thrilled. This distinguished older man wanted her. With his money and power, he could have anyone, but he wanted her. Little did she know he was just programming her to be his perfect little woman.

The first time she'd spoken out of hand, the result had been shocking. And the revelations she'd learned from that moment on had destroyed her. Again. It was a repeat of Uncle Tito's abuse.

The backhand from Victor had been shocking. Her teeth had cut into the inside of her cheek, and her mouth filled with blood. She stared at him, clutching her flaming cheek. The man had been so gentle with her for nearly two years.

And to make matters worse, she had no idea what she'd said to anger him.

They'd been talking about her needing to rehearse with a new accompanist. The last guy who played for her had quit suddenly. One minute he was there, and the next, he was gone. She told Victor she needed to practice with the new guy to see if they'd mesh well together. She'd asked for time alone with the accompanist to rehearse.

And been callously struck. Then given some excuse about there being no time for a rehearsal. It was bullshit. She did nothing all day. She wasn't allowed to leave the penthouse. Therefore, she had plenty of time. She had nothing *but* time. Most days, she was so bored she felt like she'd go crazy. But then, she'd get to the club and step on stage. The music helped her. Calmed her. She could lose herself in the music and forget her loneliness. And the fact that she lived in a virtual prison. One that she hadn't seen being erected around her until it was too late.

She'd broken out of that prison. She had to remember that. She was making a new life. New friends. And yes, that included the blue-eyed dream guy in front of her. She swallowed down her trepidation and followed him into the store.

“Need some plain old vanilla ice cream?” he teased.

“Very funny.”

“Well, I'm gonna get some deer traxx. Maybe if you're nice, I'll invite you over sometime to try it.”

Sophie smile, liking the fact that she had the freedom to accept his potential invitation. “I'd like that. Maybe you can help me broaden my frozen dessert palate.”

“Stick with me, grasshopper. There is much to learn.”

She laughed, loving his zaniness. She was worried she'd messed things up with her reaction to the news of his former job. That he could brush it off so quickly and go back to the

fun-loving guy she was growing to seriously like was amazing.

Victor hadn't talked to her for two weeks after that day he'd first struck her. He could hold a grudge like nobody else. As time went on, it had gotten worse. Sometimes it would be months before he'd speak to her again.

It suddenly hit her. She was in a grocery store, shopping for food that she herself would cook. Something so normal, most people took it for granted. She'd never shopped for herself. Someone had bought all her clothes. Someone had cooked all her meals. Victor had everything done for her. She'd been completely reliant on him.

But now she was free. Shopping for her own food. And with a new friend to boot. She was on her way toward living the good life.



E VAN'S FINGERS MOVED OVER the keys. Black and white. They bowed to his bidding, creating poetry. They obeyed his every command, crafting an aural sensation. It was as second nature to him as breathing. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the motion, besieged by the sonorous vibrations. The slick coolness of the keys under the pads of his fingers was as familiar as home.

He let the music take over, bathing him in melodic nuances. His thoughts dictated the tempo. Haunted amber eyes lingered at the forefront of those thoughts. During their impromptu trip to the store, she had smiled more than he'd ever seen her do before. Her laugh had a musical quality to it he wanted to recreate as he played the piano.

She'd done such a good job of distracting him from the day, he hadn't even realized she was doing it. It was the first time in five years that he hadn't spent this day wallowing in his guilt and grief. In fact, the events from five years ago hadn't even entered his mind.

Sophie did that for him. Something his own family members couldn't do.

The woman had adhered to his brain in a way no one had before. It had happened quickly. In a handful of encounters, she was ensconced in his thoughts as much as the music he currently played by memory was. He wanted to get to know her better. Hear more of her melodious laughter. And nothing would please him more than to know that he'd been the one to draw that laughter out of her.

His hands froze over the keys. Christ, what was that? Nothing would please him more?

No, he couldn't go there. He didn't emote joy in his interactions with others. It may have been five years, but he was still as lost in those contemptuous thoughts as he had been immediately after. The fact that he'd even made Sophie laugh at all had been unexpected. The unfamiliar jolt behind his

chest had caught him by surprise. For just a short time, he'd forgotten about everything else.

The blackness he'd lived in for five years had shimmered, and amber tones encroached at the corners. The lyrical laugh acted as a balm on his singed heart. For the first time, he'd felt something more than the scorched scars on the organ.

Guilt followed the optimistic feeling.

Tara would never again experience that lighthearted sensation. His little sister would never feel joy. Laughter. Love. Her little girl would grow up without her mother's love. And he felt partially responsible.

The old jazzy classics were his go-to comfort as his thoughts ran the gauntlet. "Dream a Little Dream of Me" soothed his tattered soul. He took the tempo slowly, letting the notes flow around him.

Then a new sound reached his ears. He thought it had been in his head. He knew the words to the song and assumed he'd been singing them internally. But the voice was not the deep tones he was used to with his own voice. The pitch was different. The inflections were unfamiliar. And yet it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

His eyes flew open, and he stared at the wall in front of him, as if he could see her through it. Sophie was singing along as he played. The wall between them muffled her angelic voice. But he could still make out every word. Every note. It made the hair on his arms stand up.

His eyes drifted closed as he let the melody seep into his soul. Inches of drywall separated them, but it felt like the most intimate moment of his life. He almost hated to play the last notes of the song, knowing it would end the exceptional moment they were sharing.

But as he closed out the song, his fingers immediately shifted to the next piece that sprang into his head. After the opening strains of “Someone to Watch Over Me,” he held his breath, hoping to hear the lovely voice once more.

She didn’t disappoint.

Song after song. He played until his fingers ached. And she traversed the musical journey with a skill that was unmatched. It was a memory that would live with him for a long time to come.

Finally, his body was too exhausted to continue. He sat on the bench, his hands rested on the keyboard. He stared at the wall again, wishing he could see her. Would she be smiling like he was, having shared something so special? Did she even know he could hear her?

He strained his ears for any sign that she was still there. But there was nothing. Exhaustion swamped him. He gave up and crawled into bed with her mellifluous voice following him into his dreams.

Chapter Eleven



SOPHIE WOKE FEELING MORE rested than she had in years. It was amazing what a good night's sleep could do for a person. The nightmares, thankfully, stayed away. She felt great.

Could her euphoric feeling be a result of her indulgence the previous night? When she heard the music coming through the wall, she couldn't keep herself from singing. The songs that had played were some of her favorites. Classic jazzy pieces that artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra crooned with style.

She'd always loved to sing. Her parents had encouraged her talent. Supported it with lessons and attendance at every event she'd participated in. When they died, the music died with them. It was cliché, but that's how it felt. Especially once she'd moved into Uncle Tito's place. She still performed, mostly in school and paid gigs her uncle arranged, but it wasn't the same. The smiling faces of her parents were no longer beaming at her from the audience.

The pleasure she'd once reaped from singing was dampened. Yet she felt she owed it to her parents to keep singing. They got so much joy from her voice. She sometimes felt closer to them when lost in song.

Uncle Tito had encouraged her talent, but it was different. For him, it was about making money. She never saw one cent of that money. He said it was the cost of taking her in.

When Tito had dropped her off at Victor's condo, and he'd smiled at her, she felt like the luckiest girl in the world. *This handsome gentleman was attracted to her.* What young girl wouldn't fall for a tempting seduction like that?

She had been so young and naïve.

He hadn't touched her sexually during the first couple of years she'd lived with him, but he seduced her all the same. Soft touches. Little kisses. She was putty in his hands and incredibly willing the first time he came to her bed. It hadn't quite been what she'd expected, but she could tell she'd pleased him. And that was all that had mattered to her, keeping Victor happy.

When he'd asked her to sing at his club, she was ecstatic. Performing in a club like Sirens was a dream. It was classy, sophisticated. Styled after an old speakeasy, it was understated in its refinement. Men in suits and women in their finest dresses went to Sirens to see and be seen. They'd drink at the little tables scattered throughout and make deals over libations. And Sophie would watch it all from her stage that was just big enough for her and a piano.

Victor provided her with the most gorgeous gowns, and she'd dressed to please him. Then she'd get on the stage and sing. Eventually, word got around about her talent, and people would flock to Sirens. It should have been a dream come true.

But it turned into a nightmare.

She knew the effect she had on the men, and some women, in the audience. She saw the lecherous looks. At least once a week, someone had to be escorted out of the club for daring to touch her, even if it was to just shake her hand to congratulate her on her performance.

Victor became possessive. He hated the men ogling her, but he wouldn't let her quit. She was bringing in good business. He'd force her into the tight, sexy gowns and tout her out on stage.

Then he'd later punish her for attracting attention.

The first time a man had dared touch her, he'd lost it as soon as they'd gotten home. He'd backed her into her room, and she thought he'd wanted to have sex. Instead, he'd turned her until her back was to him, unzipped her dress, exposing her back. She trembled, anticipating a romantic night of sex. She heard the clink of his belt buckle, then the swish as he pulled the leather from the loops and bit her lip in excitement.

The stinging pain stunned her. It wasn't until the third lash that she understood what was happening. Victor was whipping her with his belt, berating her for luring the men in. It was her fault the men couldn't control themselves. It was her fault she needed to be punished.

She'd cried and pleaded with him for mercy. She'd gotten used to the occasional backhand, but this was so much worse. How could this be happening to her? She'd thought he loved her. But this? This was cruel. This wasn't love. She'd seen true love in her parents, and this was something they'd never dream of doing to one another.

After six lashes, she had lost count. She couldn't remember slumping to the floor but knew the whipping didn't stop even as she curled into herself. She lay there for what seemed like hours, even after he was done and had left. His final words to her rang through her head: *You are mine, and you'd do well to remember that.*

When she'd finally found the strength to get up, she'd gone to the bathroom and glimpsed the damage in the mirror. She'd stared at the marks on her back, unable to grasp what had just happened. There were a few welts, and her skin felt like it was on fire. Little did she know she'd find out what that truly felt like later.

Through tears, she attempted to wash her back. She'd experienced abuse from Uncle Tito, but this felt different. She was under no delusion that Tito had loved her. But Victor ... she thought there was love there.

She'd cried herself to sleep, and the next day, Victor acted as if nothing had happened. She'd tried to beg off from performing that night, but he wouldn't hear of it. He'd forced her into another gown, one that covered her back, and had sent her onto that stage once more.

She sang, but the joy she'd once found in the music was gone.

Until last night.

Pushing the memories away, she got ready to head into work. A slip of paper on the floor in front of her door caught her attention as she grabbed her purse and keys. She scooped it up and unfolded it to read.

A song title was written in slanted cursive, the words shooting straight to her heart. "Thank You for the Music" by ABBA. She remembered her parents dancing to it in the kitchen and smiled. A tear slid down to her lip, and she licked it away.

There was no signature on the note, but she had a hunch she knew who had left it. Feeling just as good as she did when she woke up before all the bad memories intruded, she headed off to work, the note tucked safely into her purse.



IT WAS LATE. MOST everyone had gone home. But Evan had stuck around. He knew Sophie was closing. He'd seen her from his apartment window the other night walking home alone ... in the dark. He hadn't liked seeing that. So, he'd waited for her to walk her home.

What were friends for, right?

He tried to convince himself they were just friends, but his heart didn't twist itself into knots when he thought of his other female friends. Only Sophie. She had snuck under his skin, and darned if he didn't like her there.

"Hey, Evan. What are you still doing here?" Jolene asked as she stacked chairs on the tables.

Grabbing the nearest chair, he helped her with the task. "I thought I'd wait to walk Sophie home."

Jolene let out a breath that sounded like relief. "Oh good. I didn't like the idea of her being here by herself. Or walking home alone, either."

"Just here to help a friend out."

Jolene smirked. "Right. *Friend*. If that's what you want to call it. But I've seen the way you look at her."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Jolene rolled her eyes so hard he thought they'd get stuck. "What is with you men and your refusal to see what's right in front of you? God, save me from another hard-headed man who's too stupid to see a good thing. That girl could use something good in her life, bless her heart. So don't fuck it up."

"Jolene? Where do you want this?" Sophie asked, saving Evan from having to reply.

Jolene left him to finish stacking the chairs to assist Sophie as they restocked the bar. "You look tired, Jolene. Are you okay?" Sophie asked.

Evan took in his friend and had to admit he'd missed how exhausted she appeared. It looked like she'd lost weight as well. The only word he could use to describe her lately was sad. She smiled as always, but he noticed tonight it didn't reach her eyes.

They all wondered what had happened between her and Finch, but that had been over a year ago. Both his friends had been hurting, but neither was talking about it.

"I'm fine," Jolene replied tersely. "I am a little tired, though. Do you mind finishing up?"

Sophie gaped at her. "You want me to close up? By myself?"

"Yeah. Is there a problem with that? You've seen me do it plenty of times. Just lock up tight."

"But I've never done it by myself. I-I ... what if I forget to do something?"

"Don't worry. I trust you and have complete confidence in you. And Evan's still here, so you're not alone."

"I ... okay," Sophie said, the furrow between her brows deepening. She chewed on her thumbnail as she watched Jolene gather her things. The sleeve on her shirt slipped, revealing part of her arm. Her bruises were gone, but he noticed something else on her wrist. A scar, or several, in a square pattern. What could have possibly made a scar like that?

He'd seen wounds that were similar. Mostly from burns caused by cigarettes. He'd come across a few people in his former job who had been abused in such a manner. Sophie had her secrets. Was this one of them? Had someone done that to Sophie? Had someone purposefully burned her?

Just the idea of it made him see red.

Sophie. Quiet, beautiful Sophie. It was unthinkable that someone would hurt her. And if it were true, he wanted to hunt down the culprit and give him a taste of his own medicine. He'd show the guy what it felt like to be helpless and at someone else's mercy.

Jolene waved goodbye and dashed out the door. Evan glanced over at Sophie, who was scrubbing the bar as if her life depended on it. "Anything I can do?"

She jolted, as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Um ... no, I don't think so. I've got it." Then she tilted her head while she studied him. "Why are you still here, by the way?"

"Thought I'd wait and walk you home."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. Okay." She went back to work, and Evan glanced around, hoping something to do would pop out at him. The upright piano on the stage caught his eye. Jolene had been gifted the piano a few months ago, and they'd gotten a lot of use out of it during their karaoke nights.

Sitting on the bench, he settled his fingers on the keys. He felt the difference immediately. His electric piano was sufficient for his small apartment and appeased his need to

play. But there was something about the ivory on a well-crafted instrument he appreciated. “Moonlight Sonata” poured out of him from memory. It had been one of the first pieces his mother had taught him and always made him smile when he played it.

He’d been so lost in the music he hadn’t noticed Sophie had stopped working and was staring at him in awe. When he lifted his head, he glanced at her. She was looking at him, slack-jawed, arms folded, and one eyebrow arched.

He shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry. Hope you don’t mind if I play.”

Her mouth snapped closed. “That was you playing the other night?” she asked, the shock evident in her voice.

“Yeah.”

“God, Evan. You’re really good. I had no idea. I just thought you were listening to the radio or something.”

“My mom was a music teacher. She taught us to play.”

“Us?”

“My sister and me.”

“Oh. Does she still play as well?”

He dropped his head and rubbed his fingers over the white keys. “Um ... no. She died five years ago.”

He heard her gasp but kept his eyes on the keys. He didn’t want to see the pity. He’d always hated the pity. Especially

with the amount of guilt he carried about it. He felt the pity was misplaced.

“I’m so sorry, Evan. Were you close?”

He sighed. “Yeah. We were.” Just not as close as he’d thought, since she didn’t feel comfortable enough to tell him what was going on in her marriage.

“Well, you play beautifully.”

“Your voice. It’s amazing.”

“Oh God. You heard me?”

“Yeah. I enjoyed playing for you.” The blush that colored her cheeks enamored him. But it was the smile that took his breath away. His heart pounded, and he tore his gaze from hers to focus back on the piano. The song popped into his head, and his fingers moved over the keys. Her story about her parents dancing and how it made her think it was what love was like had stuck with him. “Come Rain or Come Shine” was another one of the old jazzy standards that he’d kept in his repertoire. It had always been one of his favorites. But it wasn’t until he heard Sophie sing along that he truly appreciated the piece.

As he played, she moved closer; the lyrics flowing from her tongue were as natural as if she’d been singing it for years. She sat next to him on the bench. He moved over to give her more room, not breaking from the song.

Her voice wrapped itself around his heart and entered his bloodstream. He felt alive. He felt peace. He felt desire.

It was the most intimate moment of his life. And he never wanted it to end.

Chapter Twelve



SOPHIE COULDN'T KEEP HERSELF from singing. As soon as he played the opening strains of her favorite song, she couldn't hold back. She also couldn't resist the pull she'd felt toward him. As she sang, she made her way across the room until she was sitting beside him on the bench. He'd moved over to give her more room and had never once faltered in the song.

She'd sung the piece plenty of times at Sirens, but this was the first time she'd felt the song fill her soul. She couldn't make out what made this time different, unless it was the man beside her.

The man she couldn't stop thinking about. He'd drawn her in since their very first meeting, and it scared the shit out of her. She'd been drawn to Victor as well, and her time with him had quickly turned bad. The control he had over her had done a number on her. She wasn't sure if she could trust another man. She could barely trust herself.

Her intuition about people was obviously flawed since she'd been so duped by Victor. And the years under his thumb hadn't

done her any favors in the confidence department. She was just starting to find her feet. Could she trust another man not to destroy her as Victor had?

She wanted to say yes. Everything inside her screamed that Evan was a good man. The type to build a woman up, not tear her down. But what if she was wrong?

Scratching at the brand on her wrist, she listened to Evan play the last few notes of the song. When the resonance faded, they sat in silence.

He reached over and laid his hand on top of hers. She held her breath. “Sophie,” he rasped. It was obvious he felt the energy zipping in the surrounding air. It arced between them, pulling them closer until their shoulders touched.

His hand stopped her fingers from scratching, and she released a breath she didn’t know she was holding. His thumb swept across her palm, drifting to her wrist. It slipped under her sleeve, and she froze. She knew the instant he felt the scars. His breath hitched, and hers stopped.

She tried to pull her hands away, but he wouldn’t release them. He pushed her sleeve up, revealing the set of scars. Four of them, creating a square of circles. The scales of the siren’s tail were highly visible.

Evan stared at her arm without speaking until Sophie felt like squirming. She chanced a peek at him from beneath her lashes and could clearly see his clenched jaw. He appeared angry, which frightened her at first. She’d seen the anger men carried far too often.

But Evan's anger was different. It *felt* different. She couldn't explain it, but she knew it wasn't directed at her.

He held her wrist loosely with one hand while the other hovered over the scars, as if afraid to hurt her if he touched her. "Jesus, Sophie," he breathed.

"It's okay."

He shook his head. She could see the battle he fought with himself for control. "Who did this to you?"

There was no way she could tell him. Victor Silvo was too well known in Chicago. And Evan, being a former cop, probably knew of him. She couldn't trust anyone enough to give them that secret. She couldn't risk her location getting back to him. She'd die before she was forced to go back to him.

"It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't. Someone hurt you, Sophie. It matters."

"It's over. I escaped. I feel safe here. Safe for the first time since my parents died."

"You said you lived with your uncle, right? Is he the one who did this to you?"

Sophie shook her head sadly. "No, he had other methods."

"Sophie ..." A clamp tightened on her heart at the tortured tone of his voice. "Please, talk to me."

"I can't, Evan. Please don't make me." The tremble began in her hands and traveled up her arms until her whole body

was shaking. She knew he could feel it.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, and cupping her cheek with his other hand, he turned her to face him. “Okay, Sophie. I’ll let it go for now. But I’m here for you whenever you’re ready.”

She gazed into his eyes, letting the sky-blue irises soothe her. He looked at her with compassion. With care. And, dare she say, affection. Everything she read in his eyes comforted her.

He studied her, his eyes bouncing between hers, as if looking for the answer in them. Then he sighed, leaned in, and kissed her on the forehead. Her eyes drifted shut as his lips lingered there. “I don’t know what you’re doing to me, Sophie, but I hope someday you’ll trust me with all your secrets.”

Her breath caught in her throat as she swallowed back the sob. She’d never felt such tenderness from any man before. It was almost too much for her to handle. She wanted to bask in it, but at the same time, she wanted to run from it. So many conflicted feelings overwhelmed her.



THAT MOMENT A WEEK ago still lived front and center in her brain. It had been a long time since she’d experienced tenderness like that. Something had stirred deep inside her. Something she’d long since buried. She’d interred it

deep in the ground the day she'd buried her parents, the day Uncle Tito struck her for the first time.

There had been no remorse in his eyes. Instead, she'd glimpsed a sick appreciation for the pleasure he got out of seeing her cower. She knew then, her life would never be the same.

But that moment with Evan had stirred feelings she'd thought she'd never experience again. A liquid warmth had spread through her body, emanating from his lips on her forehead. The sweet gesture had her craving more. And that was dangerous. She knew how quickly something could be snatched away. Especially something she desired.

Evan had continued to walk her home when she worked late. There had been no other intimate moments, but every morning, she found a note under her door. He'd stumped her with his second note. A song title she'd never heard before.

After a quick Google search on the computer at the library, she listened to recordings of "Look for the Silver Lining" by Jerome Kern. It was a lovely old-fashioned tune about finding the sunny side of life.

A lovely sentiment meant to cheer her up. It worked, but not because of the lyrics. It was the note itself and the man who'd written it that soothed her. He took the time to do something thoughtful, and it touched her. She'd mentioned the notes her parents had passed to each other once, and that had been weeks ago. That he remembered that conversation and was

carrying on the tradition was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her.

With a smile, she made her way back to the apartment from the library. She'd taken to checking the internet on the library's computers for news about Victor. If he was still making news about his business practices, then she felt safer. There had been nothing written about her. Apparently, a popular nightclub singer's disappearance wasn't big news for Chicagoans.

If she thought too hard about that, it might depress her. But she was too happy to be free of that world to let it bother her.

And singing while Evan played for her over the last couple of nights had brought her more joy than the years of singing for a packed house at Sirens. It was freeing and made her happy. Evan's repertoire was as diverse as hers. They matched each other perfectly.

So far, they'd been able to keep their sessions just between the two of them. It was an intimacy she'd never experienced before, and she wasn't ready to share it with anyone else.

Lost in her thoughts, she nearly walked into a man who was heading toward her on the sidewalk with an unlit cigarette between his lips. Distracted momentarily, she bumped into his shoulder and muttered an apology.

It was the snick sound that stopped her in her tracks.

The clink. The snick. The hiss. The clank.

The pattern repeated as the man passed, but she didn't see his receding form. She was back in Victor's office. His voice was so clear in her mind. *I derive no pleasure from this.* She'd heard it so many times, accompanied by the clink, snick, hiss, and clank of his lighter. He'd play with that device over and over again.

Clink. Snick. Hiss. Clank.

The shaking started of its own volition. As she stood, frozen, just steps from the door to her apartment building, a woman walked by, sending her a concerned glance. Sophie barely noticed her. There was a darkness in her periphery that was clogging her vision.

I derive no pleasure from this.

Sophie trembled and gasped for air.

The stench of burning skin was cloying, sticking to her lungs, impeding her breathing.

Struggling for breath, she wheezed as she attempted to get a hold of herself. Jerking her arms, she anticipated the pain from the burn. Something was different. She wasn't restrained. Victor usually tied her arms down or had someone hold her down. He messed up this time. She could run.

That thought jolted through her system like a shot of electricity. A whimper slipped past her lips. The door next to her opened. She took her chance. She grabbed the handle before it could close and pulled her body over the threshold.

Her legs felt heavy, like she was wading through mud. She forced them to move, praying she could escape.

Hide.

She had to hide.

She stumbled past the staircase that seemed familiar, yet wasn't. Spotting a dark space under the stairs, she dropped to her knees and crawled as far back as she could. She then sat with her back against the wall, pulled her knees into her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. Dropping her head between her arms, she attempted to make herself as small as possible.

She could no longer hear the sounds of Victor's lighter, but that meant nothing. She had to stay hidden. His anger would hopefully fade if she could stay hidden long enough.

Something touched her arm, and she whimpered.

Don't look. Keep your head down. Stay still. Stay hidden.

The touch occurred again. This time she couldn't hold in the shriek.



Chapter Thirteen



E VAN WAS DISTRACTING HIMSELF from thoughts of his neighbor by flicking a stick with a string at one end at the little ball of orange fluff that awkwardly pounced on it when there was a knock at his door. He assumed it was his downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Briggs, who came to him at least once a week requesting his help with something in her apartment.

He'd helped her change lightbulbs, plunge toilets, and even change the clock on her microwave twice a year. She was a sweet old lady who was obviously lonely, as her only family lived in Florida. He'd heard so much about her daughter and grandkids, he felt like he knew them. The last few times he'd visited her, she'd hinted at moving south to be closer to her family. He'd hate to lose the friendship he'd found in her, but he couldn't fault her for needing her family.

His family lived much closer than Florida, and he tried to go see them as often as he could, even though it killed him each time he saw them. Especially Katie. She'd grown so much in the five years Tara had been gone. Her mother had missed so

much; it broke his heart every time he looked at her. Katie was remarkably resilient. Not only was he often in awe of her talent, but her buoyancy floored him.

She missed her mother just as much as Evan did, if not more. But she didn't let her grief hold her back. It was as if she was living to honor Tara more than anything else. Tara had been Katie's biggest cheerleader. Evan's parents tried to fill that void, but he knew it wasn't quite the same.

Still, she didn't let it get her down. Bethany, Tin Man's sister, reminded him a lot of Katie. If those two girls ever met, look out world. He shuddered at the thought.

As expected, he was now a cat owner. The vet had amputated the injured leg and brought her back to health. He scooped the kitten into his hand as he reached for the doorhandle.

Expecting to see Mrs. Briggs, he was surprised no one was there, and it took him a moment to realize his visitor was much shorter than his older neighbor.

“Avery?” he asked the young girl. “What’s the matter?”

Without answering, she stared at him with her big blue eyes that were filled with worry. She had the string of her hoodie in her mouth and was nibbling away at it.

“Is something wrong?”

She nodded.

“Is it your mom?” Her blond curls swung over her shoulder as she shook her head. “Your brother?” Again, more swinging

curls as she denied her family needed something.

“Then what’s the matter, sweetheart?” She dropped the soaked string and opened her mouth, but no sound came out. The accident had taken more than just half her family. It’d also taken her voice.

She glanced over her shoulders at the stairs. Then back to him. She did it again, her frightened eyes darting down the stairs before cutting left, then right. A sigh slipped past her lips, as if frustrated that she couldn’t tell him what was wrong. His heart went out to her, even as his worry built. Grabbing his hand, she pulled him into the hall.

He didn’t hesitate to go with her as he dropped the cat inside his apartment and shut his door. Something clearly had to be wrong for her to come to him. She dragged him down the stairs and down the hall toward the back door. But instead of leading him outside, she stopped near the back of the staircase and pointed.

Evan ducked to look in the direction she’d pointed. In the dark space underneath the stairs, a figure sat hunched into a tight ball. He fell to his knees and crawled closer, raking his gaze over her form. He couldn’t see any obvious injuries.

“Sophie?” he asked, touching her arm. She jolted at the touch, and the whimper that she released shot straight into his heart. Huddled in on herself, she tightened her hold on her knees. With her head buried between her arms, her long, dark brown hair covered her like a curtain. His stomach knotted

with apprehension at the violent trembling he could feel under his palm.

He snatched his hand back, shaken by her reaction. He didn't touch her again. Instead, he spoke to her in as calming a voice as he could. When she still didn't respond, he peered over his shoulder at Avery. The little girl stood behind him, the string back in her mouth.

“Do you know if she's hurt?”

Avery shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

“Do you know what happened?” Another head shake as she watched him unblinkingly. Avery squatted down and duck walked closer to Sophie under the stairs. She reached out, laying her hand on Sophie's foot. There was no reaction to the touch.

“Okay, Avery. Let's see if we can't figure out what happened.” Avery nodded and chewed on the string, the suction noise echoing in the confined space.

Evan turned back to Sophie. He wanted to touch her more than anything. To comfort her. But it was obvious she was too lost in whatever had frightened her to realize he meant her no harm.

“Sophie. It's Evan. Can you look at me, babe?” No response. “Come on, little songbird. Let me see those beautiful eyes. It's just Avery and me here. No one is going to hurt you.” He inched as close as he could without touching her. Her

curtain of hair fluttered with her trembling, causing the knot in his stomach to tighten.

“Babe. I need you to look at me.” He took a chance and deftly moved a section of hair away from her face. A slight whimper was her only reaction. “It’s just me, babe. Just Evan. The floor is cold. How ’bout we get up and go upstairs?” She shivered but remained in her tight ball.

A door in the hall slammed, causing Sophie to jump so badly she nearly hit her head on the wall behind her.

“Avery!” Mikey shouted. “Mom said it’s time to come home and do your homework.”

The young girl looked at him with wide blue eyes, then glanced at Sophie. She appeared reluctant to leave.

“Avery, where are you?” Mikey yelled. Avery glanced over her shoulder, then back to Sophie. Indecision clouded her features.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ve got her. You did great taking care of Sophie and coming to get me.” The sweet smile, sans hoodie string, warmed his heart. “Go on home and get that homework done.”

Avery nodded, then patted Sophie’s foot before rising and heading back to her apartment. Evan could hear Mikey questioning Avery about what she’d been up to when the door slammed shut. Sophie’s jolt wasn’t as violent this time.

Evan turned his attention back to the terrified woman. He suddenly felt ill-equipped to help the situation. He didn’t know

enough about Sophie and her past to help her through this. His ceaseless, internal questions hammered away at him. Someone had hurt her ... badly. That was obvious. The question was, how did he help her without triggering more panic from her?

“Think you can look up at me now, Sophie?”

There was a slight jerk of her head that he took to mean no. “Sure, you can. Just lift your head a little.” She didn’t move, but he noticed her trembling wasn’t as pronounced.

“Can you tell me if you’re hurt?” She gave a stilted jerk of her head back and forth. “Okay. That’s good. Do you mind if I sit here next to you?” Again, she made the same jerky motion with her head.

He plopped his butt down next to her and leaned against the wall. He tilted his head back on the wall and stared up at the underside of the stairs, his mind full of dark thoughts. The scars on her arm, the bruises on her wrist, it all led to abuse. What had she suffered through?

“‘Heart and Soul’ was my sister’s favorite song to play when she was four.” He talked, keeping his voice low and soothing. “She made me play it so many times I had dreams about it. We’d play through it a bunch of times, then switch parts. Every day for nearly a year.” He snorted. “Or at least that’s what it felt like. But it made her happy. I think she just liked spending time with me. I’d started kindergarten and was away at school all day. She missed me.”

As he talked, her tremors lessened, and he could sense her body relaxing by slow increments. When she tilted closer to

him with her shoulder against his, he let out a breath. “Can I put my arm around you?” he asked, needing to touch her. He wanted to do more. He wanted to look her over and assure himself she wasn’t injured. He wanted to pull her into his lap and wrap his arms around her, protecting her from whatever frightened her. But at her hesitant nod, he settled for wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

By increments, her tremors ceased, the tenseness in her body easing as he sat beside her. Eventually, she relaxed in his hold, tilting her body closer to his. He squeezed her shoulder. “Wanna tell me what happened now?” he asked.

Sophie lifted her head and met his gaze. The torment in her amber eyes had his abdomen tightening into a big knot. Her anguish gutted him. He wished he could ease her mind of whatever haunted her.

A chilly draft swept through the hall, and Sophie shivered. “This floor is cold. Why don’t we go home now and get warmed up?”

Evan rose as far as the low ceiling would allow. Once clear of the dark space under the steps, he uncurled to his full height, stretching his back. He held in the moan as muscles that had cramped while sitting on the hard floor relaxed. But he couldn’t hold back the grunt when his back cracked loudly in the empty hall as he stretched. He may not have considered himself to be old yet at only thirty-eight, but he’d put his body through a lot over the years, and now it was making its displeasure known.

Ignoring his aches and pains, he turned back to Sophie, who still sat huddled on the floor. “I’m gonna pick you up and take you to a safe place, okay? One arm will be under your knees and the other will be around your back. I’ll carry you upstairs to my apartment. You’ll be safe there. And warmer. Is that okay, Little Bird?”

He saw her hesitation. He even understood it. But he still held his breath as he waited for her permission. He wanted to get her some place safe and warm. There was a residual fear still dulling her vibrant eyes. He’d do anything to eradicate that fear.

With the tentative nod of Sophie’s head, he leaned over and placed his hands exactly where he said he would and swept her up into his arms. Backing out of the alcove, he asked, “Still okay?”

She caught her quivering bottom lip between her teeth, then nodded. As he moved down the hallway toward the stairs, she rested her head against his shoulder with a sigh. The puff of air slashed across his throat, making his skin burn with heat he fought against feeling. A pleasant hum that warmed his blood and spread across his chest.

He was hard pressed to ignore how good she felt in his arms. How right. The trust she was putting in him made his heart skip. The thing hopped around behind his rib cage as if it couldn’t believe its luck. That this beautiful little songbird trusted him while in the throes of a frightful panic attack was a miracle. He’d do whatever it took to protect that trust.

Tara's face flashed in his mind. She'd trusted him too, and look how that had ended. Old fears and doubts crowded his thoughts as he climbed the steps. He shoved them down. Now was not the time to analyze his failures. He needed to focus on Sophie. He could feel residual tremors rack her body as he carried her. Whether from the cold or her fear, he was unsure, but figured it was both.

At his door, he bent his knees to reach the doorknob and shoved it open with his shoulder. The warmth of his apartment chased the chill from his bones almost immediately. Kicking the door closed behind him before the kitten could escape, he threw the deadbolt into place, figuring if Sophie realized she was safe behind a locked door, her panic would ease.

Evan sat on his couch with her in his lap. Her head still rested on his shoulder. Every so often, her body shuddered. He reached behind him, grabbing the blanket his mother had made for him when he'd first moved into his own place. The crochet throw was thick enough to provide some much-needed warmth for the woman in his arms.

Draping the blanket over her, he held her in silence, letting the comfort he hoped his presence provided set in. "Did I ever tell you about my niece? Katie is fifteen and has more talent in her little finger than I could ever hope to have. She started playing the piano at three. My sister taught her the basics that our mother had taught us, but it soon became clear that Katie had a gift."

He talked to Sophie in a smooth, calm tone, telling her all about his niece. Her first recital. The argument she had with Tara about the dress she wanted to wear to that first recital. Tara had purchased a nice, simple dress, but Katie wanted to wear her Belle costume. Complete with the billowing hoop skirt and yellow plastic dress-up play shoes. Tara ended up compromising and running out to buy a yellow dress minus the poofy material.

“As she’s gotten older, her repertoire has grown in difficulty. Now she can play pieces by Schumann and Ravel like they’re ‘Chopsticks.’ I’m in awe every time I hear her. I just wish Tara could hear her play. She’d be so proud.”

His nose burned, and he blinked back the tears that had surfaced at thoughts of Tara. He didn’t talk about his sister much, so his reaction took him by surprise. With his family, whenever her name was brought up, he walked away. He could never face the tremendous guilt he felt at her death. He knew his family hated when he did it, but it always felt too soon to face it.

His parents tried to counsel him through it, letting him know it wasn’t his fault and that they didn’t blame him. But he ignored their well-meaning words. It was still too raw. And talking about Katie growing up without her mother just about killed him.

Katie was a young woman now, having spent the past five years without her mother. She should have had more time with

her. It was cruel that Evan had had more time with Tara than her own daughter.

He was glad his parents hadn't balked at taking her in, even at their age. He hadn't been sure he could do it. There was too much darkness swirling inside him. Too much shame. Too much anger. And he was a pretty poor substitute for Katie's mother.

"I'm sorry you lost her," Sophie rasped. Hearing her voice, even the hoarse roughness of it, eased his musings. Unable to help himself, he lowered his head and brushed his lips against her temple, breathing in her scent. It was a familiar scent. Like a spice his mother had used in her cooking.

"Thank you." He didn't know what else to say. He didn't want her pity. He wasn't worthy of anyone's pity. Every day, he went over what happened in his head. Always wondering where he went wrong. What he could have done differently. There were never any answers.

But now was not the time to dwell on his failures. He had a beautiful woman in his arms who had been terrified. She needed him to focus on her right now. His lips played at her temple. Apple pie. That was what her fragrance reminded him of. Warm apple pie with cinnamon. His mouth salivated. He wanted a taste. Would her skin taste just as sweet?

He closed his eyes and let everything that was *her* seep into his senses. The pieces of hair that had escaped her ponytail tickled his nose. The weight of her head on his shoulder. Her

warm breaths blowing across his neck. And that heavenly smell.

“Now I’m hungry for apple pie,” he muttered.

“What?”

Shit. He hadn’t realized he’d said that out loud. “Your perfume or whatever. It reminds me of apple pie.”

“Oh, that’s my body wash. I wanted to try something new.”

“I like it.”

“I ... uh ... I needed something different, after ...” He wasn’t quite sure what she was trying to convey. After what? She took a deep breath, as if steeling herself for what she needed to do. He gave her the silence she needed to gather her thoughts.

Chapter Fourteen



SHE'D HATED THE PERFUME that Victor made her wear. While Tom Ford's Tubéreuse Nue was highly popular, the floral intensity mixed with the musky spices was nauseating. As was the luxurious price.

She wasn't sure if the perfume made her sick because of how it smelled or because of who insisted she wear it. Maybe someday she'd be brave enough to take another sniff if she ever ran across it in a store. She'd just have to hope she wasn't bombarded with horrible memories if that day ever came.

For now, she liked her drug store apple scented body wash. It reminded her of more pleasant times in the kitchen with her mother as they made apple sauce after spending the day in a local orchard.

Evan's scent surrounded her as she sat with her nose practically pressed into his throat. Peppermint with something woody. It was the peppermint that made her smile. It reminded her of her dad, who loved the red and white striped candy. He always smelled like Christmas, no matter what time

of year it was. And now she was being held by a man who smelled so similar.

She closed her eyes and let the scent fill her with comfort. When she felt something walk across her lap, her eyes popped open. There sat the little orange kitten, staring at her with big golden-green eyes. She gasped and scooped up the little ball of fluff. After burying her nose in the cat's fur, she noticed it was missing a leg. Her heart twisted for the wounded creature.

"The vet said she'll be fine. Animals adapt quicker than humans to a missing limb. This little gal is already gallivanting all around the apartment. If I'm not careful, she'll dash out the door one of these times."

"She's yours now?"

Evan gave a sheepish grin. "Looks that way. I picked her up from the vet yesterday. She's already claimed her spot on my bed."

That made Sophie smile. Knowing this big, strong man was a softie and let a tiny kitten sleep in his bed warmed her heart. "What did you name her?"

Evan pursed his lips. "I haven't yet. I was hoping you'd help."

Sophie brought the cat up and held her in front of her face, eye to eye. "Ginger? No, that's not right. Pumpkin?"

Evan scrunched up his face.

"Marmalade? Apricot? Nacho Cheese?"

He burst out laughing at the latter. “Nacho Cheese?”

Sophie shrugged. “It just came to me.” She continued to stare into the kitten’s eyes. One paw darted out and swiped at a piece of Sophie’s hair. “Wait. I know. She’s orange. How about Ginny Weasley?”

“From *Harry Potter*?”

“Yeah.”

Evan smile. “I like it.”

Sophie brought the kitten closer and nuzzled her nose with the kitten’s. “Hello, Ginny. It’s nice to meet you.” Ginny meowed, as if to return the greeting.

“I think she likes you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” She placed the kitten back down on her lap. Ginny turned around in a circle before settling and rolling up into a ball.

“I like seeing your smile. You scared me downstairs. Are you feeling better now?”

She nodded and melted further into his embrace, knowing she should explain her panic attack but needing just a few minutes more of the peace and comfort his arms provided. After Victor, she never thought she’d be so comfortable around another man ... ever.

There was something about this man that put her at ease. Perhaps it was the music. Or maybe the quiet comfort he exuded. His voice soothed her. His touch gave her a sense of

safety. Somehow, she knew her well-being was important to him. He'd never touch her in anger. A jealous rage would never assail her while she was with him. She'd be protected.

And maybe even loved.

But first, she needed to let go and let him in. And the only way to do that was to tell her truth.

Or at least as much as she was comfortable sharing.

“It was ... It was a lighter.”

“A lighter?” His brows pulled together, trying to fathom what she meant.

“A man on the street. I bumped into him. At first, I didn't notice him. I saw a brief flash of a cigarette hanging from his mouth but didn't really register it. Then I heard it. The lighter. It was one of those that has a lid that needs to be flicked open before you can light it. The same kind Victor used.”



E VAN'S HEART PICKED UP speed. The dread he felt building was like a heavy weight in his gut as he imagined where this conversation was heading. “Victor? That's the guy's name?”

She dropped her gaze back to her lap and nodded. He wasn't having that. He didn't want her to hide from him. “Tell me.

Please, baby,” he urged, cupping her jaw. With slight pressure, he had her eyes once more.

“He smoked cigars and carried that lighter everywhere. When he was angry or frustrated, he’d take it out and flip it open constantly. The sound was usually followed by—” She cut herself off, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth.

“By what? What did he do?”

“He just wasn’t a nice man. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Sophie.”

She shook her head. “I-I can’t.”

“Please tell me. I need to know,” he rasped.

She dropped her chin, staring at Ginny in her lap, and gnawed on her lip. She was shutting down. Shutting him out. He could understand her reluctance to talk about it. He was the same. He never talked about what happened with his sister, so how could he fault her for keeping her mouth shut about her own trauma?

The look in her eyes devastated him. He needed to backtrack his words to ease her nervousness. “I know you don’t know me very well. You probably don’t know if you can trust me yet. But I feel like there’s something between us. It feels special. I don’t know what it is, but it feels like I’m closer to you than anybody. I understand if you don’t feel comfortable.”

“I-I’ve never told anybody. Well, except for Mrs. Tilley, and that was an accident.”

“Who’s Mrs. Tilley?”

A small smile touched her lips. “She’s the woman who helped me escape.”

The warm smile told him everything he needed to know about Mrs. Tilley. She was obviously someone special to Sophie. “How’d she help you?”

“There weren’t very many places I was allowed to visit. At least, not on my own. The one place I could visit was the salon. Once a month, I could sit in my hairdresser’s chair and just *be*. Mrs. Tilley was a regular. A feisty old lady. There were whispers that she was once a spy, but I don’t know how true they are. I could almost believe it with the amount of attitude she had.”

“She sounds like someone I’d like to meet. How did she come to help you?”

“Mrs. Tilley came in the bathroom while I was washing my hands—I hadn’t realized how far I’d pushed my sleeves up. She took one look at my arm and started hatching a plan. At first, I was too afraid to listen to her. Over months, she wore me down. She had a plan all worked out. She’d even had a new identity created for me—” She broke off on a gasp and clapped a hand over her mouth.

Evan chuckled at her evident faux pas. He took hold of her hand and pulled it away from her face, lacing his fingers through hers. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone your secret.”

“God. She’d kill me if she ever learned I blurted that out.”
Sophie bowed her head, a red tinge coloring her cheeks.

“I think if she worked so hard to get you safe, she wouldn’t waste all that effort by killing you now.”

A bark of laughter burst out of Sophie, startling Ginny awake. She let out an aggravated meow before putting her head back down and dropping off to sleep again.

Sophie gave him a smile that sent his pulse racing. She was unaware of how captivating she was when she smiled. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“How’d you get away?”

“It was during my monthly hair appointment. Mrs. Tilley had it all set up. The crappy car was waiting for me a few blocks away. She gave me clothes to change into, and they dyed my hair.”

“Really? It looks so natural. What color was it before?”

“It was blond.” Evan scrunched his nose, unable to picture her as a blonde. The shade her hair was now was perfect.

Seeing his expression, she giggled. “Exactly. Victor wanted me blond. I hated it. This is closer to my original color.”

“It’s beautiful. And it suits you.”

Despite her almond skin tone, he couldn’t miss the rosy blush. “Thank you,” she mumbled, ducking her head once more while swiping a strand of hair behind her ear.

“What happened next?”

“Mrs. Tilley had filled the salon with a group of her friends. They distracted my guards enough that I could slip out the back.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Wait, guards?” *Just who was this Victor guy?* And why did he have people guarding Sophie? Something wasn’t right. He wished she trusted him enough to give him the full name.

“Jesus, Sophie. Who is this guy?” She pressed her lips together in a firm line. He dropped her hand and pushed his hair off his forehead but froze amid the move when Sophie flinched. His brows drew together as he agonized over her actions. Shit. He’d have to remember not to make any sudden moves around her. She was still skittish, and rightfully so.

Slowly, he lowered his arm. Hers were wrapped around her waist again as she stared at a spot on the floor. He gently clasped her hands in his. “I’m sorry, Little Bird. I didn’t mean to startle you. I just don’t like hearing what he did to you.”

Sophie peered at him through her lashes. Biting her lip, she replied, “I should stop. I-I’ve already said too much.” She moved the cat off her lap and stood on trembling legs, still unsteady from her panic attack.

His stomach tightened. He didn’t want her to shut him out. He felt too much for her. He wanted to learn everything there was to know about her. When she was ready, she would tell him. In the meantime, he’d work on his patience.

He rose to his feet, following her to the door. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he turned her to face him.

“Don’t stop yet. Tell me more about your escape,” he asked, rubbing his hands down her arms, hoping the gesture soothed her. “What did you do after you left the salon?”

Sophie hesitated. He could see the indecision in her eyes. She searched his eyes, for what, he didn’t know. But then she sighed and continued her story. “I-I walked down the sidewalk to the car. Mrs. Tilley told me to walk normally. That was the hardest part.” His arm now wrapped around her waist, he squeezed, giving her support even though it was a fraction of the type of encouragement he wanted to give her. “My heart was racing so badly, I just wanted to run. But I didn’t want to draw attention to myself, so I strolled down the street like I was any other tourist.”

“I can see how nerve-racking that must have been.” Yet, she still did it. That took a level of courage he couldn’t even imagine. This beauty with the mesmerizing amber eyes was continuing to surprise him everyday with her indomitable strength.

“Very. I-I thought I w-was gonna hyperventilate. By the time I reached the car, I was a mess. Mrs. Tilley had thought of everything. There were suitcases filled with clothes. Some money. A new ID. And directions to a friend of hers. I was to drive directly to her friend’s house, and she’d take care of me.”

He tilted his head with a brow furrowed in confusion. “You were living in your car, Sophie. How come you weren’t with the friend?”

Her face scrunched up in disgust. “Because I messed up. I was supposed to go to the friend, but I thought it was still too close to Chicago. So I drove south. I ended up in Indianapolis. I thought I could disappear in a big city. But I-I—” She broke off, biting her lip. She was holding something back. He could see it in her eyes.

“But what?”

“I couldn’t stay there. I got back in the car and booked it out of there.”

Something had spooked her in Indianapolis. There was still more she wasn’t telling him. But this seemed like something else. Why would a city nearly two hundred miles away from where she’d been living cause her to run again? He wanted to push, to pull the information out of her any way he could, but he understood that was not an option. What she had told him already would have to suffice ... for now.

“Where did you go next?” His hands were still rubbing her arms, and as long as she didn’t pull away, he was going to keep doing it.

She wouldn’t look at him, choosing to stare instead at his chin. That was confirmation to him that she was still keeping something back. “I decided it was time to follow Mrs. Tilley’s directions. I drove directly to her friend’s house. She lives here in Lake Haven. Only when I got there, no one was home. I waited and kept checking back, but she never came home. I didn’t know what to do then. Layla was going to give me a place to stay and help me find a job.”

“Layla?”

“Um ... I think that was her name. Layla Hendrix.”

Evan threw his head back and roared with laughter. It never ceased to surprise him how small the world truly was.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Layla Hendrix is the chef at Nighthawk. She cooks in the cafeteria for the training groups.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped. “No ... really?”

“Yeah. But she got called out of state to care for a sick relative or something.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. My luck sucks.”

“I don’t know ... you were pretty lucky that night you got the flat tire.”

Her eyes shot to his, a brow arched in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? That was just more bad luck. I was on my last few dollars. I couldn’t afford a new tire. And I was stranded on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. This city girl was so far out of her element, it wasn’t funny.”

He slid one hand down her arm and captured her hand. Bringing it to his lips, he placed a kiss on her knuckles before enveloping it between his hands. Her fingers still felt far too cold. He held her hand loosely, hoping the heat in his would leech into hers.

“Yeah, but then you met me.”

She snorted, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “And you think you’re some sort of good luck charm or something?”

“I felt pretty damn lucky meeting you.”

The pink on her cheeks was endearing. He loved the reaction she had to his words. She ducked her head again, which he hated, but then she peered up at him through her lashes. “You’re pretty good with the words, aren’t you?”

It was his turn to scoff. He’d never been particularly good at the flirting game. Not like Finch had been before Jolene knocked him down. “Never used to be any good at the whole talking thing. Guess it just took the right girl to bring me out of my shell.”

Chapter Fifteen



HOLY CHRIST. The way he was looking at her made little wings flutter in her stomach. His hands were still holding hers, and he stepped closer. She raised her free hand and placed it on his chest. His breathing increased. She could feel his heart race under her palm.

Evan let go of her and moved his hands up over her shoulders and across her collarbones until he was bracketing her throat. With his thumbs, he tilted her chin back. “Tell me you feel it too,” he rasped.

Sophie’s own heart rate increased as his words wrapped around her. The heat of his palms on her throat was intoxicating. She’d had a hand on her throat. It had never felt like this. Before, it was all about anger and control. He did it to prove his power over her.

This ... this was sexy. This turned her blood molten. Heat flooded her body, and it wasn’t the only thing that was flooded. She squeezed her thighs together to ease the need she suddenly felt.

“I feel it.”

The blue in his eyes darkened, and he leaned closer. His lips were a hairsbreadth away when he asked, “Can I kiss you?”

The air from his breath drifted over her lips. Suddenly dry, she moistened them with her tongue. He watched the movement. She couldn't look away from the obvious hunger that burned in his expression.

“Yes,” she whispered, finally finding her voice.

He didn't make her wait. He closed the distance, his mouth descending on her with haste. Every square inch of her body dissolved into his. He deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue inside her mouth. Gentle yet insistent and like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

His hands moved, drawing her body even closer. One on the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair. The other went to the small of her back, his fingers splayed wide.

Her hands slid up the hard planes of his chest, over his shoulders and into his hair, gripping the strands. A gruff sound rumbled up out of his chest. She swallowed it with her own moan.

A kiss from Evan was more than just a kiss. It was an intimacy she'd never known. A closeness that was unfamiliar. The taste, the smell. The scruff tickling her cheeks. The warmth that radiated from his body, heating her up from the outside in. She melted into him, letting him take some of her weight as he pulled her in closer. The sensations overwhelmed her, but the one that stood out the most was trust.

She didn't know how it had happened. Perhaps in the little things he did. The music they shared. The nights he'd waited around to walk her home from work. The sweet conversations. The comfort he gave her while in the midst of a panic attack. It all melded into one element.

One truth.

She trusted this man, who was managing to do devastating things to her with a simple kiss. She fell deeper into the kiss until she feared she'd drown. A dizzying current that raced through her. Everything tingled, like electricity had zapped through her system. Her breasts felt heavy, their tips hard, little points that rubbed against his chest. A sharp ache between her legs begged for the attention like a starved creature.

Evan eased the kiss with short, soft pecks. When he drew back, she wavered. If he hadn't been holding her, she feared her legs wouldn't hold her. He stared down at her, a liquefied heat smoldering in his gaze.

"Wow," she whispered dreamily.

His mouth curved into a smile. "Yeah. Wow. You're not anything I was prepared for." Dropping his brow to hers, he looked deep into her eyes. Her heart gave a little tug. That look ... it was everything. Everything she'd ever dreamed of. Everything she never knew she was missing. Everything she never knew she needed.

Now, if she could trust herself to let him in.

Louis Armstrong's "What A Wonderful World" pealed through the room. She suddenly wondered what time it was as Evan pulled his phone out of his pocket. "It's my dad. Sorry, I need to take it."

A brief glance at the time on the microwave told her she had half an hour until her shift started. "That's okay. I gotta get ready for work."

Evan swiped to answer. "Hold on a second, Pops." He took the phone away from his ear, and his eyes swept over her. "Are you gonna be okay?"

A smile pulled at her lips. "I'm fine. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime, Little Bird." He pulled her into a quick one-arm hug and kissed her brow. "See you later?" He phrased it like a question, as if he was eager to see her again.

"Later," she promised.



“HEY, POPS. WHAT’S UP?”

The deep baritone from his dad's laugh blasted his ear. "Don't *hey, Pops* me. You just called some woman *Little Bird*. Who is she? Do you have a girlfriend? Your mom's gonna shit a brick if she finds out."

"Pops," Evan murmured, pinching the bridge of his nose as he squeezed his eyes shut. "She's a friend."

“Why do I feel like you’re letting off the ‘for now’ part of that sentence?”

“She’s new to town.”

“So?”

“So I don’t know her that well.”

“Yet,” his dad chuckled. Evan could practically see the teasing glint in his dad’s eye, even though they were hundreds of miles apart. The deep grooves at the corners of his eyes would be crinkled in mirth. His parents loved to tease him about the girls he dated ever since the first girl he took to the movies in high school.

“Pops.” The exasperation rasped in his tone.

“You don’t often have pet names for your friends.”

“Sure I do. Remember Finch?”

“That’s different. Finch is not a term of endearment. And I bet you don’t speak his name with that special tone a man saves for the woman he’s interested in.”

“Fuck, Pops. Really?” He threw the hand not holding the phone up in the air. “Okay, fine. She’s nice.”

“And pretty?”

“Gorgeous. I’m attracted to her, but it’s new, so lay off. She’s had a tough life.”

“All the more reason you’d be good for her.”

“Is there a reason for this call, or did you just want to bust my chops?”

Brandon's deep chuckle burst through the phone. "You know how much I enjoy busting your chops, but there is a reason for this call. Your mother wanted me to remind you to pick up Katie from the train station. She didn't want you to forget."

Evan rolled his eyes. His mother still treated him like he was a little kid. Like everybody and their brother didn't have their calendar on their phones. There was no way he was going to forget to pick up his niece. "You can tell her not to worry. The reminder is in my phone."

"Hmph. Someday I'm gonna have to learn how to do that."

"Ask Katie."

"Right. She is the expert in our house."

"Most teens are."

"She's looking forward to her visit. Make sure she relaxes a bit. She's been stressed about her performance with the symphony coming up. She needs a little downtime. Got any fun things planned?"

"She's gonna help us with a training simulation."

"What does that mean?" Even after five years, his parents didn't understand what his job entailed. They still thought the only thing he did was find lost kids. The Nighthawk training center was quickly becoming one of the best in the nation for SAR instruction and certification. Search and rescue was more than just finding lost kids. And many communities direly needed proper training. He loved his job and was grateful

Graham had given him the chance to have a meaningful second career.

“We constructed a new area at our facilities. Katie’s gonna help us stage a major train derailment.”

“Wha ... how?”

Evan chuckled. His father was not one to stutter. Explaining the complexities of the train accident scenario to his father took more time than he thought it would. As a professor of psychology, the older man’s knowledge of the SAR world was limited.

“You do understand that she has to take the train home, right?” Brandon pointed out. “Don’t you think she might be nervous to ride after participating in your event?”

“If she is, I’ll drive her home.”

“Of course you will. I would expect nothing less. You’re a good man.”

It bothered him more than it should that his parents still considered him a good man. Somewhere deep inside, he knew the truth behind that, despite being trapped in his self-doubt. His dad would have a heyday getting inside his head. Which was why he kept his mouth shut instead of voicing his opposition to Brandon’s statement.

“Anything else I need to know about Katie’s visit?” he asked his dad instead.

After confirming the time for Katie’s arrival once more, they said their goodbyes. And, of course, Brandon had to get

one more jab in. “I can’t wait to get Katie’s account about your lady *friend*.”

Evan hung up on his dad while the man was still roaring with laughter, his mind immediately turning to the lady friend in question.

And that kiss.

He could still taste her on his tongue. She’d surprised him by how quickly she’d melted for him. He wasn’t lying when he said he hadn’t been prepared to meet someone like her. His attraction to her was growing, burning him up from the inside. He’d never gotten so hard from a simple kiss before. One touch from her, and he would have gone off like he was sixteen again.

Just one kiss, and he was undone. And wanted more. He couldn’t wait to see her again. Glancing at the clock on the microwave, he figured, why wait? It was lunchtime after all. He could go for a Jolene burger. Getting to see the prettiest waitress Jolene employed was just a bonus.

But as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, another idea came to him. Changing directions, he had a few errands to complete before he’d go to Jolene’s. It had been five long years since he felt like doing what he was planning. He owed his change of heart to the bravest woman he’d ever met.

Chapter Sixteen



JOLENE'S USUALLY SLOWED DOWN between the lunch rush and the dinner crowd, but it was never this slow. The only patron was Evan. Her heart did a little tap dance when she spotted him walking through the door.

He wore a light blue button-down dress shirt, as if he'd just come from the office. She'd never thought of herself as an ass girl, but seeing Evan in his dark jeans, which cupped everything just right, she had to reassess. The man was hot and utterly unaware of his effect on women. She'd witnessed many women stare longingly at him while he'd waited for her shift to end. The ones brave enough to approach him were turned away. Sophie couldn't understand why he hadn't once taken advantage of what they were offering.

But after that kiss ... she had an inkling now.

As soon as he walked through the door, his eyes immediately searched her out. The smile he sent her made a flood of warmth envelop her body. His clear blue eyes raked over her from head to toe. Volts of electricity rocketed through

her body from every spot his gaze alighted. If she hadn't been at work, she may have been tempted to throw herself at him.

Wiping down yet another table in an effort to make herself look busy, she saw Evan move to the piano out of the corner of her eye. She paused in her work, ready for the magic he could create with eighty-eight keys. And she wasn't disappointed. The music enthralled her. She didn't recognize the pieces, but that didn't make her appreciate them any less.

Sophie stood still, listening to him until she remembered she was at work and should probably do something to earn her paycheck. But there were only so many times she could wash the tables before it became ridiculous.

No sooner had the last chords of one piece ended than he'd transition into the next one. A smile tugged at her lips as she recognized it. Evan glanced over at her, one brow arched, as if challenging her to join him. She couldn't resist. Making her way over to him, she sat beside him on the bench like always as the opening notes from Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" rang out in the bar. By the time they were halfway through, she'd lost herself in the song. Her voice took on an ethereal edge, building in intensity to the bridge before bringing it gently back down to the end.

They sat, breathless, their gazes locked. A heady current zipped between them, making the air feel thick with desire. Evan's eyes dropped to her lips, and she tilted her head up, drawn to him like a magnet. He leaned into her, their mouths a hairsbreadth away, when applause behind them erupted.

They jerked apart. Sophie's head whipped around to see a handful of Evan's Nighthawk friends standing just inside the door, watching them raptly. They had equal expressions of shock and awe on their faces. It was a teenage girl who was the first to gush as she swiped on her phone.

“Oh my God! That was incredible. Who are you? You're amazing. I thought Martina Abbott was good. She's got nothing on you.”

The girl bounced off chairs and tables as she made her way across the room to them, her nose still buried in her phone. When she reached them, she finally dropped her phone and beamed at them.

“Seriously, that was amazing. I wish I could sing like that. And you,” she said, pointing at Evan with her phone. “What the hell? You can play the piano? Why did we not know this? What else are you hiding? What is wrong with all you Nighthawk guys? What's with all the secrets? Shit. If I had a smidgen of your talent, I'd be shouting it from the rooftops ... or singing from the rooftops ... or playing ... you know what I mean.”

“Okay, Bethany, take it down a notch.” Tin Man draped an arm around the girl's shoulders.

“Did you know about this?”

“No. I didn't know Evan could play. Let alone that Jolene's new waitress had a voice like an angel.”

“It's better than an angel,” the girl stated.

“And just how many angels have you heard sing, Little Bee?” Jude asked.

“Oh, shut up. You can’t deny how good she is.”

“Nobody’s denying that,” Jude assured.

Bethany was punching away on her phone again. “My reel is going to get so many views,” she muttered, dropping into a seat behind her.

Sophie’s blood iced over in her veins. The girl had a video of her. Panic seized her. If her image got splashed across social media, it was only a matter of time before Victor saw it. He’d come for her, then her life would be over.

Evan must have sensed her alarm. Especially since her body was as stiff as a board beside him. He took her hand, squeezing it hard. The pinch of pain grounded her slightly.

“Can I see the video?” Evan asked.

“Sure.” Bethany popped up and handed over her phone with the video cued up. Sophie breathed a sigh of relief. She’d filmed it from the side, and with Sophie angled toward Evan throughout the song, her face was never shown directly.

Evan played it again, then looked up at her, his brow arched in question. He was asking her if she was okay with Bethany posting it on social media. Her heart thumped behind her rib cage. That Evan cared enough to check the video out for her sake was incredible. “I-I don’t know.”

She couldn’t shake the trepidation the video caused. The recording wasn’t the best with all the ambient sounds, and the

piano drowned out most of her voice. Still, it made her nervous.

Evan squeezed her hand. “Let’s not risk it.” She blew out a breath and nodded, relieved he was looking out for her. “Don’t post that on social media, Bethany.”

Sophie didn’t have to look at the girl to see her confusion. She could hear it in her voice. “Why not? It’s an incredible video. You should be proud. Why do you look like I just told you a ghost was standing beside you?”

“Please, Little Bee, don’t post it.”

Sophie could feel the girl’s eyes on her and she felt like crawling into a hole as more people stared at her. Finally, she huffed out a breath. “Yeah, okay. I get it. But can I at least show it to Lia?”

“That’s your friend, right?”

“Yeah.”

Evan glanced at her with one eyebrow arched. She nodded at his unspoken question. “That should be fine,” he told the girl. “As long as Lia understands to keep it private too.”

“Great. She’s gonna love it. She loves to sing. Hey, maybe you could give her some lessons or something?” Sophie didn’t know what to say to that. She’d never thought about teaching singing lessons before. That would never have been a remote possibility in her former life. But now? It was something she’d have to think about.

With an arm around Hollynn, Jude snorted. “Do you ever shut up?”

“I think you know the answer to that, Giant J.”

“I do. Quick, someone get her some food. That usually shuts her up.”

“Fuck off,” Bethany spat.

“Bethany,” scolded Sutton, who walked up and wrapped her hand around Tin Man’s arm. “Language.”

“Geez, *Mom*. Lighten up.”

Tin Man pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why am I suddenly feeling tired?”

“Because your sister is half your age, which means she has double your energy,” Jude teased.

“Feels more like triple most days,” he grumbled, lowering his forehead to his girlfriend’s shoulder.

“Poor you,” Sutton cooed, patting him on the head.

“Okay, let’s eat. Then I want to hear more music from you two.” Bethany started pushing tables together. The others helped her, creating a long grouping of tables in their usual spot.

While Evan’s friends’ attention was elsewhere, Evan cupped her cheek, turning her to face him. “Are you sure you’re okay with the video? I can ask her to delete it if you want.”

She thought about it again. With her new ID, she didn't have a social media footprint under her new name. Nobody here knew about her former life. Her face wasn't showing. It should be all right. She felt a bit of trepidation about it but swallowed it down.

“I think it will be all right.”

“If you're sure?” He studied her expression, as if looking for something that would contradict her words.

She placed her hand over his on her cheek. “I am.”

He nodded before dipping down and brushing his lips over hers in a gentle kiss that had her toes curling.

“By the way, Bethany was right. That was incredible. I could listen to you sing all day long.”



E VAN FLIPPED THE COLLAR of his wool coat up to block the chilly wind blowing in from the lake as he walked Sophie home from Jolene's. It had been another good night among friends, even though they teased him mercilessly about his hidden talent. He didn't know why he hadn't shown any of them before. He'd always been private about his piano playing ability. But if Sophie had taught him anything, it was that music should be shared. It wasn't something to be ashamed of, not that he ever was. He enjoyed playing in peace and quiet. That way, he could lose himself in the music.

But tonight had been fun. His friends had talked him into playing for impromptu karaoke. He liked playing as they cut loose and entertained the crowd. He especially enjoyed playing for Sophie. She had a charisma and stage presence that was unmatched. And her voice ... even now, he got chills just thinking about it.

They walked in silence, the wind gusting around them. Occasionally, their shoulders would bump into each other. Evan reached over and grasped her icy cold hand in his, entwining their fingers. “No gloves?”

“I forgot them.”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out his left glove. “Here, put this on.”

“No. I’m okay. You keep it.”

“Put it on Sophie,” he gently ordered. She took the glove and slipped it on with a chuckle at how big it was on her. “Want the other one?”

“No, I’m good. Your hand is warm enough.”

“Good.” He lifted her hand to his mouth, placing a kiss on the knuckles. It was still cold, but not like before he’d started holding it. Then he slipped their clasped hands in his coat pocket.

“That was fun tonight. Do you guys do that often?”

“I wouldn’t say often, but we occasionally like to let loose a little. Especially when things have been rough.”

“What do you mean?”

“It started a few years ago. A guy was harassing Logan. He’d blamed him for his wife’s death. She’d crashed her car into the river and got swept away before we could reach her. Logan had been in the water. He was so close to grabbing her when she slipped under and disappeared.”

Sophie gasped. “That’s awful.”

He told her about the night Annika suggested they do karaoke after dealing with the drunk and belligerent man. The guy had spouted off all sorts of hateful things in front of his young daughter. The women had distracted the daughter and called for her grandparents while the rest of them dealt with the father. After, they sat quietly, stunned at the events and the hatred. Their job was saving lives. Losing his wife had hit them all hard, as it always did when they lost someone. It had been Annika’s suggestion to ask the band to play for them as they let loose with their version of karaoke.

“It did the trick. Everyone had a blast.”

“It does wonders for forgetting your troubles. Everybody’s laughing and having a good time. Music can help get the bad things out of your mind for a while.”

“Is that why you started singing?” he wondered.

She glanced down, her lips turned down in a frown. “No. Music was a special thing my mom and I shared. After she died and things got rough, I used music to escape.”

They'd reached their building. Evan pulled out his keys to unlock the front door, excitement building as he thought about the surprise he'd set up for her. But he paused as her words registered. "Rough how?"

Sophie's shoulders rose as she took a big breath, as if steeling herself for something. "Let's go inside. Then we can talk."

He followed Sophie through the door and up the stairs, where she paused in the hall, unsure of which apartment to go into. He took her hand and unlocked his own door, pulling her inside.

Ginny met them at the door, mewling her heart out. Sophie bent and picked her up, laughing when the kitten started chewing on a strand of her hair. She pulled it out of the cat's mouth, then bopped her on the nose. "Hair is not food."

"I think she'd eat anything if I let her."

"She's so darn cute. How can you refuse her anything?" Sophie nuzzled her nose into the cat's neck, and he never wished to be a cat so much.

"It's not easy," he said. Sophie froze as she walked deeper into the apartment. A gasp escaped her lips as she stared at his surprise. The lights on the Christmas tree were the only illumination in the apartment, turning his place into a sparkly wonderland.

"It's beautiful," she uttered, her eyes glued to the tree. Evan smiled at her reaction until he saw the first tear fall.

“Sophie?”

She took a deep breath and wiped a tear off her cheek. “I’m okay. It just reminded me of my parents.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

Her smile was bittersweet as she stepped closer to the tree. “Not bad memories. Good ones. Christmas was always a special time in my house. I haven’t had that in a really long time. I’d forgotten the feeling.”

“Okay. Good. I’m glad you feel that way since I set up another tree in your apartment.” He’d done it with a bit of trepidation, yet hoping she’d love it. He wasn’t sure of her reaction but couldn’t help himself from attempting to make things special for her.

Since Tara had died so close to Christmas, the season had lost all of its joy for him. He went through the motions with his family, but that was about the extent of it. He had never been able to find it in himself to truly celebrate—until her.

At his confession, Sophie turned to him, fresh tears slipping down her cheeks. “You did this for me?”

Evan shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged, his shoulders staying raised by his ears as he ducked his head. “I hope I didn’t overstep.”

“No. Not at all.” He lifted his gaze to hers and saw something resembling awe in their amber depths. “I’m stunned, is all. No one has ever done anything like that for me before. I just can’t ... I can’t believe ...”

He understood what she was trying to say even though she couldn't find the words herself. He stepped toward her and bracketed her face with his hands. The rust-colored striations that surrounded her pupils drew him in. "You deserve to have these special moments, Sophie. I've never known anyone as strong or courageous as you. I'd like nothing more than to give you a holiday like the ones you remember with your parents."

With a soft sob, she fell into him, her lips landing on his. He quickly deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue across hers. They dueled. She moaned. He growled and pulled her in tighter. As he drank from her, he was startled to realize he was a goner. His heart was never going to recover.

The squirming kitten brought them both back down to earth and broke their kiss. Sophie giggled and he couldn't resist tasting that happy sound. With more effort than he expected, he forced himself to step back. She fisted his shirt, halting his movements. He met her glistening gaze, and his heart thudded hard against his chest as he stared in wonder at the adoration in her eyes. His heart skipped a beat as, for a moment, he felt unworthy of such a look. But he pushed it aside when she whispered, "Thank you."

A slow smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Anytime."

Turning toward the kitchen, he adjusted himself. His blood was spending far too much time in one particular place as of late and he needed a breather before he took things farther than she was ready for. "Want something to drink?"

“Just some water, please,” she answered, placing Ginny on the armchair. The kitten circled around twice before lying down and closing her eyes.

He filled two glasses with water, then sat beside Sophie on the couch. She was watching the kitten sleep, her lip trapped between her teeth once more. A myriad of emotions flitted across her face as he observed her.

He'd gotten so distracted by her kiss, he'd forgotten she'd wanted to talk to him. He waited silently, watching the battle behind her eyes as she thought about what she wanted to say.

Unable to stand the abuse her lip was receiving, he reached over and pulled it out from between her teeth. “We don't have to talk about anything tonight. We could watch a movie or something, and I could just hold you.”

Her expression softened as her lips pulled into a half smile. “No, I should probably tell you the truth before this,” she gestured between them, “goes any further. And if it goes where I think it's going to go, you'll see—” Again with the lip biting.

“What am I going to see, baby?”

“Everything.”

Chapter Seventeen



“**I** WAS WITH VICTOR for twelve years.” She sucked in a shaky breath. “Things were good at first. I was out of my uncle’s house, and Victor was good to me. Showering me with adoration. And I reveled in it. It had been so long since I’d felt loved. I was starving for it. He knew that. And he took advantage of it without me even realizing that was what he was doing. Over the first two years, he was grooming me so that when we were finally together, I was the complacent woman he’d molded me to be.

“Victor hired me to sing in his club. I sang there most every night once I turned eighteen. Night after night, I dressed in the gowns he bought for me and sang to a room full of patrons. Unfortunately, the audience was mostly made up of men. I hated it, dreaded it. After four years there, Victor’s affection warped into jealousy. He saw me talking to my accompanist. A nice guy who’d been playing for me for years. I don’t know why a simple conversation about the music had set Victor off. He ... he dragged me into his office. Then he—”

Evan watched her throat work as she tried to swallow. Whatever words she was going to say were stuck there. “It’s okay, baby. Take your time.” He pulled her into his arms, his hand on the back of her head. She burrowed her nose in his throat, just as she had the kitten, and let out a deep, shuddering breath. A current of electricity pulsed through him. It took everything he had to keep the blood from rushing to his cock.

He focused instead on Sophie’s words. There was a pain in her voice that he hated. Hated even more that he dreaded what she’d say next. He knew enough about her now to know her story wouldn’t be a happy one. The scars on her wrist were proof of what he figured was just a smidgen of the abuse she’d suffered.

“It was crazy. It was like he’d been possessed. The loving, attentive man was gone. Replaced with a monster. H-he tied me to his desk. I screamed and cried, but the music in the club was too loud for anyone to hear.”

Her voice dropped an octave as her eyes turned glassy. “*“I derive no pleasure from this.”* I hear those words in my nightmares, followed by the sounds of the lighter. He’d say them every time. Stupid words that were nothing but a lie. That first time, I didn’t know what he was going to do. He lectured me about attracting the attention of other men. That I was no better than a whore. Then he lit up his cigar.”

Evan forced himself to remember that he was holding Sophie in his arms as the rage fired his blood. His hands itched

to clench into fists. Fists he wanted to pummel into Victor's face.

Sophie was precious. To be handled gently. She would never feel his anger directed at her. Instead, he'd use his hands to protect her, comfort her. He stroked a hand down her hair as she continued her story.

“He liked daggers. He collected them. Ceremonial daggers from all around the world. His favorite one he kept in the breast pocket of his suit. Some well-known Japanese artist specially made it. On the end of the handle was a carving of a siren's tail.”

Evan glanced down at the scars on her wrist. He could just make out the individual scales. “Motherfucker. He burned you with it?”

Her hair caught in his scruff as she nodded.

“Son of a bitch.” He whispered the words, but he wanted to roar. Victor had brutalized her. It was so much worse than anything he could have imagined. Something rose up inside him. A kind of panic. Were there more than just the four on her wrist?

He suddenly needed to see them. All of them. He needed to catalogue each and every burn scar. Commit them to memory. Then hunt the bastard down and give him a taste of his own brutality.

“Are there more?”

Sophie pursed her lips. It was obvious she was reluctant to tell him, but he already knew the answer.

“How many more? Let me see them.” She tensed in his arms. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew they were a mistake. She pulled away from him and wrapped her arms around her waist as she stood. A ball of worry and foreboding twisted inside his stomach. *How bad were they?*

With her arms wrapped around herself, her shoulders hunched. A lone tear slid down her cheek. His chest ached. He wished he could wipe every painful, bitter memory from her mind and fill it with only good things and love. She deserved nothing more.

He stood; Ginny watched them warily. Crossing over to Sophie, he clasped her hands. “I’m sorry, baby. You don’t have to tell me any more. Not if you don’t want to. I’ll listen, you know I will. But if you want to be done for tonight, we can do what I suggested earlier. I’ll hold you while we watch a movie.”

One corner of her mouth tipped up in a smile. “No. It’s okay. I should finish it.” She shook her head. “No, I *need* to finish it. If I want us to go any further, I have to get this out.”

“Baby, you know I’m happy just spending time with you. I never need anything more than to see you happy. These past few weeks, getting to know you, it’s been ...” He paused, struggling to find the right words. “It’s been really nice. I’ve struggled ever since my sister died. Being with you, it’s better. I’m no longer consumed by my guilt.”

Sophie tilted her head as she considered him. “What do you feel guilty about?”

He closed his eyes, searching for the strength to confess his faults. She squeezed his hands, infusing him with encouragement. If she could share what was done to her, surely he could tell her what had happened. “My sister, Tara, was killed in a murder-suicide. Her husband killed her.”

Sophie gasped. “No.”

He nodded. “It gets worse. Her husband was my partner. My best friend. I considered him a brother before he was officially a brother-in-law.”

“Oh my God. Evan ...”

“I never knew they were having problems. She was going to leave him. Turns out he’d gotten addicted to drugs in that last year after he’d had surgery on his shoulder. I didn’t know. There was no evidence that I saw. I failed him just as much as I failed her.”

“No. That’s not true.”

He wanted to pace, but she tightened her hold on his hands. “I let my baby sister down,” he admitted, his voice harsh with a gritty rasp. “I was there, and I let her down.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Don had barricaded himself in their house, holding Tara hostage. I was called out to the scene. My captain thought maybe I could get through to him. He wouldn’t talk to anyone else. I called him. Tara answered. She knew.” He sucked in a

shuddering breath. “She knew what was going to happen. She begged me to take care of Katie. Tell her she loved her. And our parents. I told her she could tell them herself when she was safe. I didn’t know.”

His vision wavered. His eyes burned. He blinked rapidly to ease the sting. “What happened next?” Sophie asked gently.

“Don took the phone. I tried to talk to him just like always. Like a brother. I asked him to put the gun down. Let Tara go. I told him I’d come in, and we could talk things out, but only if he let Tara go. He was out of his mind. Kept muttering ‘they’ were turning her against him. I didn’t know what he was talking about. He told me she was gonna leave him, and he couldn’t let that happen. I was right there and couldn’t stop it. I was right there. His last words still haunt me. ‘If I can’t have her—’ I’ll never be able to unhear them. Or the shots that ended their lives. I couldn’t stop it.”

Sophie dropped his hands and cupped his cheeks, tilting his head up until their eyes met. He stared into their amber depths. From this distance, he could catalogue the rust brown specs that dotted the amber. There was a fire in her eyes. “Evan, stop. It sounds like you did everything you could.”

He shook his head. “She was my baby sister. I let her down.”

She tightened her hold on his face, preventing him from shaking his head. “No, you didn’t. You did exactly what she asked of you. From what you’ve told me of your niece, she

sounds like she's happy and loved. That's all Tara wanted for her little girl, right?"

Evan shrugged, unwilling to concede his fault. "I don't know. Every time I look at Katie, I'm swamped with guilt. I let her down too. She has to grow up without a mother because of me."

Her brows furrowed as she narrowed her eyes. "No, not because of you. Because of Don. Or better yet, because of the person who first sold him the drugs."

"I don't know, Sophie. How could I not see what was happening with them?"

"Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us. How did I not see the type of man Victor was?"

Evan lifted his hands to bracket her face, matching her hold. "I guess we're both blind."

"I'm sorry for what you went through," she said, her voice soft.

"I'm sorry for what you went through." He feathered a kiss over her lips. "Thank you, Sophie. I've never talked about what happened before. Maybe someday I'll accept that it wasn't my fault."

Sophie sucked in a large breath, then hit him with more horror. "There are sixteen burns, including the four on my wrist."



“SIXTEEN. SIXTEEN?” SHE NODDED.
“Motherfucker,” came his strangled reply.

He stepped back and raked his hair off his forehead. His bright blue eyes flashed with something dark. She held her breath. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she waited for him to work through his thoughts.

The fabric of his blue shirt pulled across the flat muscles of his chest as he took a deep breath. “What club?” he asked, his lips pursed in a thin, tight line.

Unsurprised by his question, Sophie closed her eyes, knowing it would be easier to talk if she didn’t have to look at him. “Before I answer that, there’s more you need to know.”

“What do you mean?”

The blood pounded in her temples, and her stomach churned. The fear of telling him everything made the muscles in her throat tighten. With a deep breath, she started at the beginning. “I think I told you my uncle was not a warm man. That was not exactly true.”

“Okay,” Evan said, drawing the word out.

“He was mean.” She shivered, remembering the first time he’d hit her. Evan tightened his arms around her. “I never knew how much a punch hurt.”

Evan's body jolted, and his muscles stiffened underneath her. "He hit you?" A muscle ticked in his jaw. She assumed he was holding on to his fury. She instinctively knew the fury was not directed at her like the men who'd come before him. Just like her father, he did not like to hear about a woman being abused.

She told him of the first time Tito hit her and how much it had hurt. "I'd never been so blindsided in my life. He was my father's brother, but the men couldn't be more opposite. Dad was warm and loving. His brother ... he was a monster."

"He kept me home that week from school since the bruise was noticeable. After that, he learned to keep his hits to other places."

"Shit. He didn't want anyone to see what he was doing to you." Evan ran a hand down his face, then squeezed his chin between his fingers.

"I've had bruised, cracked, and broken ribs more times than I can count. He even broke my wrist once."

"The one thing I had going for me was my singing. He liked 'renting' me out to perform. Not sexually," she added, and the tension in his jaw eased a bit. "It was just singing for parties, clubs, wherever he could make money. When I was eighteen, he made a deal that would change my life again. He sold me to a man who wanted me to sing in his club."

She thought he'd been furious before, but it was nothing like the rage she could feel rising inside him now. "What the fuck?" he growled.

She forced herself to go on, despite the fear that swept through her. What would he think of her after he heard the whole story? Would he be disgusted and want nothing to do with her?

A cold sweat permeated her body. She wiped her palms on her jeans. “It took a few years, but I pieced together bits of information and learned who my uncle really was.”

“What did you learn?” he prompted.

Her throat had closed up, making speech difficult. Evan was a former cop. Surely he would know the name once she said it. She swallowed past the lump, clearing her throat of the imaginary blockage. “My uncle is Tomás Alvaro. I knew him as Uncle Tito.”

Evan’s body jerked like he’d been shot. “Shit. Tito Alvaro is your uncle?”

Sophie nodded, then slumped down to the couch as Evan moved around the room. He shoved his hands through his hair and paced. Sophie watched him, remaining quiet as he worked out the bomb she’d just dropped on him.

“Tito Alvaro. The enforcer for the Latin Lords?” He looked at her for confirmation. She bit her lip and nodded again. “Fuck, Sophie. The CPD has been after him for years. He’s been a suspect in numerous murders, but nothing ever stuck. There was never any tangible evidence.”

She had been ignorant of his dealings in the Latin Lords when she’d lived with him. He would often go out to meet

with his friends. She just assumed it was exactly what he'd said it was. A type of boys' night out. Drinks at a bar. Whatever it was guys did when they got together. Little did she know, he'd been meeting with his gang leaders and carrying out whatever "job" they ordered of him.

She'd picked up rumors working in Sirens. The underbelly of Chicago knew the name Tito Alvaro and feared it. No one ever crossed him or the Latin Lords and lived to talk about it.

"And you lived with him for three years?"

"Yes."

"You never knew?"

"No. He kept that life well hidden from me. I went to school. I performed where he ordered me to. That was about it. I was sheltered. No friends. No contact outside. I was alone and scared. I never knew what would set him off, so I tried to hide in my room as much as possible whenever he was home."

"Shit, Sophie. I'm sorry. That sounds—"

"Horrendous? Yeah, but it was nothing compared to what Victor did," she mumbled.

"Years after I was moved into Victor's penthouse, I learned the truth. They'd made a deal. Me for exclusivity in Victor's clubs to push their product."

"Motherfucker," Evan spat and resumed his pacing. "He traded you like cattle for ... what?"

"It was a very lucrative deal for the Latin Lords."

“Despicable,” he sputtered. “Son of a bitch. I’m going to kill him for what he put you through.”

Sophie shot to her feet. She moved to him, placing herself directly in front of him. Her palms landed on his chest, stopping his pacing. “No. He’s not worth it. I’m free from him. I’m free from both of them. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Evan’s expression softened as he glanced down at her. He ran a thumb tenderly down her cheek. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you that way too. You can count on me.”

She smiled, losing herself in his tender gaze. “I know.”

His hand cupped her cheek, caressing the sensitive skin under her jaw with his thumb. “You’re so beautiful.”

They stared at each other. His eyes were hooded. She could see her reflection in the darkness of his dilated pupils. The energy in the air was so thick she could taste it. Warm blood rushed to her skin, making her tingle in places that had never felt anything like it before.

Sophie reached up to touch his face, the roughness of a day’s growth of beard abrading her fingers. He dropped his head until he pressed his brow to hers. All she could hear was the harsh rhythm of his breathing and her pulse pounding in her ears.

He trailed his fingers down her neck, stopping over the spot where her pulse drummed like he wanted to take a measure of her excitement. With the way it was drowning out all other sounds, she’d say her excitement level was feverish.

The corners of his lips pulled up into a smile just before his mouth descended on hers. She ached for more of the maddening brush of his lips against hers. Moving one hand up his chest, she grasped the back of his neck and pulled him in closer, deepening the kiss. She opened to him with a moan.

His tongue slid against hers, making another part of her body pulse. She writhed in his arms, grinding that needy part of her against him. It was his turn to moan.

“Please tell me you’re okay with this,” he rasped, running his lips down her throat, nipping her collarbone. The little sting shot straight between her legs. She was hot and needy and wanted him like nothing before.

With his face buried in her neck, she nodded. She wanted this. She wanted him. But a sudden bout of trepidation hit her. He’d see her. All of her. All her scars. She didn’t know if she could handle it. What if he rejected her because of them?

“Babe, maybe we should stop. We’ve talked a lot tonight. I’m sure you’re exhausted, especially after working a full shift. It’s okay if we stop here.”

Biting her lip, she shook her head. “No. I want this. It’s just —” Her throat closed off, choking off the words. She scratched at the scars on her wrist as she fought to get the words out.

Chapter Eighteen



E VAN CUPPED HER JAW with his warm hand and lowered his head until his eyes were level with hers. His other hand covered hers, stopping her from scraping the brands. “I don’t care about them. No scars will ever be able to detract from your beauty. All I see is you. The true you. Your scars only prove how strong you are. You survived. You escaped. They didn’t defeat you. Your strength is awe-inspiring.”

“Evan,” she breathed.

“I want you, Sophie. I can’t deny that. But I also just want to be with you, in whatever way I can. Whether it’s holding your hand or having you naked in my bed, I don’t care. I just want *you*.” He gently bumped his nose against hers, making a smile pull at her lips.

“I want to give you everything. But I’m nervous.”

“I know, baby. We can take it slow. One step at a time, okay?” She nodded, then yawned, her eyes widening comically as she tried to cover the unexpected action. Evan grinned. “In the meantime, it’s been a long day. We’ve talked

about a lot of emotional stuff. I can tell how exhausted you are. Stay with me tonight. Just to sleep,” he rushed to add.

The smile she gifted him made his heart sing. “I’d like that.”

Taking her by the hand, he pulled her down the hall into his bedroom. She stood awkwardly next to the king-sized mattress while he rooted around in his drawers. Pulling out an old CPD T-shirt, he handed it to her. “Here. You can sleep in this. Why don’t you use the bathroom first?” he suggested.

She grasped the shirt to her chest, then did as he proposed. While she was occupied in the bathroom, he changed into a pair of sweatpants but left his torso bare as he usually only slept in his boxer briefs.

When she returned, her steps faltered. Her gaze swept over him, and her eyes grew dark with longing. He was having trouble getting his own feet to function as the sight of her in his T-shirt did wicked things to his system. She licked her lips, and he groaned as his body responded. The intense physical awareness they had for each other arced between them like a bolt of electricity. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

When she tried to stifle another yawn, he shook himself out of his trance. Crossing the room toward the bathroom, he paused beside her and ran a finger down her bare arm, delighting in the shudder he felt go through her.

“Climb into bed, little bird. I’ll be right out.” He kissed her head, her intoxicating scent filling his senses. The apples and cinnamon imbued him with comfort even as his blood heated in his veins.

Shutting himself in the bathroom, he willed his body to settle. He didn't want to rush this with her. It had been a long, emotionally taxing day, first with her panic attack, then with her sharing her story with him. He could give them both the night to let everything they talked about permeate.

After finishing in the bathroom, he double checked everything was locked up and turned off lights. The sight that greeted him when he returned to the bedroom had a smile pulling at his lips. Sophie was curled up near the middle of the bed, Ginny finding the perfect spot behind her knees.

Turning off the light, he climbed in beside her. She immediately snuggled into his side. Wrapping an arm around her, he pulled her in closer. She lay her head on his chest, an arm thrown over his abdomen.

Kissing the top of her head, he whispered, "Goodnight, little bird."

Her sigh of contentment made him smile into her hair. He couldn't have said it better himself.



THE NEXT DAY WASN'T nearly as long and emotionally draining as the previous one. That was probably a result of the incredible feeling of waking up in Evan's arms. She couldn't remember a time when she'd woken up with such a profound sense of contentment.

She'd watched him sleep for a while before unable to resist placing her mouth on the enticing spot below his jaw. The scruff of his beard tickled her lips. He stirred, his arm tightening around her. When he opened his eyes and smiled at her, a warm glow flowed through her.

“Good morning,” he greeted, stroking the skin on her hip where the T-shirt had risen.

“Hi.” Tingles raced across her skin at his light touch. The feeling pushed all coherent thought out of her head. She could only focus on those fingers and the delicious torment they were providing.

“Sleep okay?”

“Hmm ... oh yeah. Best sleep I've ever had.”

That made him smile. “Me too,” he replied, kissing her forehead. “Hungry?” Just then, her stomach rumbled, making them both laugh. “Okay. I'll see what I can rustle up for breakfast.

She watched him climb out of bed, enjoying the way his sweatpants left nothing to the imagination. She fought to hide her pout of disappointment when he threw a shirt on, covering all those delicious muscles. She must not have been successful if the smirk on his face was any indication.

They ate waffles together and laughed as they talked. It had surprised her he owned a waffle iron, and he admitted he didn't use it as often as he should. It had been his sister's, which made it hard for him to use. Too many negative

emotions pummeled him each time he tried to take it out of the cabinet. But because of their talk the previous day, because of her bravery and strength sharing the hell she'd survived, he said he was determined to put the past behind him. He'd wallowed in grief and shame for long enough.

Her heart swelled at the fact that she could do that for him. That she inspired him to heal himself. It made her feel good. As did the stories he shared of him and his sister growing up. It was obvious the affection they had for one another. There was a pang of jealousy for what it must have been like to have a sibling. She wondered how different her life would have been had she had a brother or sister.

After breakfast, Evan headed off to work and she let herself into her apartment. The Christmas tree that greeted her made her smile. It was such a simple thing, yet the most thoughtful gift she'd ever received.

She was falling so hard for the man who made her heart sing. Was it no wonder she was ready to give herself wholly to him the moment he came home from work? As soon as she heard him enter his apartment later that night, she was across the hall and knocking on his door.

"Hi, little songbird," he crooned as soon as he opened the door. "Did you miss me?"

"Maybe."

He pulled her into his arms. "I missed you." Then he was kissing her like he needed her to live. She lost herself in his

intoxicating kisses. “I take it you don’t have to work tonight?” he asked, cupping her face with his warm hands.

“No.”

“Whatever shall we do with our evening?”

Pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, she gnawed on it as she considered his words. His thumb swept up from her jaw and freed her lip, then brushed over it in a soothing gesture that was utterly seductive.

Unable to help herself, she stuck her tongue out, licking his thumb as it passed. His eyes darkened and flared with something heavy. Emboldened, she pulled his thumb between her lips and sucked. His harsh breath reached her ears as she looked up at him through her lashes.

“Sophie.” He said her name breathlessly.

He pulled his thumb out with a pop and descended on her, thrusting his tongue inside her mouth. He devoured her as if worried she’d disappear. His arms banded around her, hugging her body tightly to his. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushing her fingers through the strands of his hair.

He surrounded her in every way. His peppermint and sandalwood scent filled her nostrils. His taste, something sweet and dark, filled her mouth. His touch as his hands worked their way beneath her sweater made her skin tingle in the most delicious way.

“Please, Evan,” she gasped. “Take me to bed.”

With his lips on hers once again, he slid his hands down her ass, then hitched her up until her face was even with his. She wrapped her legs around his waist, a need for friction making her rub against him as a heat grew between her legs.

He moaned as he worked his way around the furniture to the hall. Ginny's tiny meow barely broke through her senses. They both ignored the plaintive sounds as Evan pushed through his bedroom door.

She dropped her feet to the floor to stand before him, meeting his hooded gaze. With his eyes fixed on hers, he grasped her arm and pushed up her sleeve, exposing the scars. Bringing her wrist up to his mouth, he covered the burns with soft kisses.

“Are they all like this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

She lowered her eyes, feeling embarrassment sweep over her. “Nuh-uh.” He tilted her chin up with one finger underneath. “You don't hide from me. This won't work if you hide.” He cupped her cheek. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. I promise I won't see anything but you.”

“They're ugly,” she admitted.

“No. They're part of you. That makes them beautiful.”

She could almost believe him, especially with the burning sincerity in his eyes. But a niggler of doubt still tugged at her.

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Any on your shoulders?”

“N-no.”

He pulled on the neck of her sweater, exposing one shoulder. The warmth of his breath rushed across her skin, raising goose bumps a moment before she felt his lips. He dotted kisses over her shoulder before moving to the other side to repeat the process.

He dropped to his knees in front of her. “Any on your stomach?”

“No,” she answered, biting her lip.

He pushed the hem of her sweater up, exposing her belly button. More kisses feathered her skin, sending a rush of tingles through her veins. “What about your hips?”

“No.” His fingers ghosted across her hips, his lips following.

“What about your lower back?”

“No.” He turned her around until her back was to him. He kissed the dip in her spine, then licked the dimples at the top of her ass. She trembled, and his grip on her hips tightened.

“What about your upper back?”

She shook her head, unable to speak, overwhelmed by the feeling.

He pushed her sweater higher. It caught underneath her breasts but revealed her utilitarian bra strap. Goose bumps erupted as he ghosted his lips up her spine. One hand slid from

her hips and splayed across her stomach. Her skin absorbed the heat from his palm, raising the temperature in her blood to boil.

“How about your breasts?” His thumb hovered dangerously close to the underside of her breasts. He’d just have to move it a tiny bit, and it would slide beneath the underwire of her bra.

“No.” Feeling suddenly emboldened, she grabbed the hand on her stomach and pushed it up under her sweater and over her breast. More heat suffused her sensitive skin. He rubbed his palm over her nipple, making it harden even more than it was already.

She whimpered when he removed his hand, missing his touch. He pushed her sweater higher, and she helped by ripping it off over her head. Then he opened the clasp of her bra and pushed the straps down her arms. She let the garment fall to the floor at her feet.

He placed a soft kiss on her back where the bra had left its mark. Then, grasping her hips, he turned her to face him. Her first instinct was to cover herself, but the desire she saw in his eyes stopped her. She’d never seen a man look at her like that before. Sure, she’d received lots of lustful glances from men at the club, but this was different.

There was lust, of course. But also something much deeper. Need. Awe. Dare she say ... love? She couldn’t define it with just one word. And none of the words she could think of were right.

He rose to his feet, the material of his shirt brushing against her breasts. The tight buds tingled, begging for more.

“Beautiful,” Evan whispered, then kissed her with hungry lips. His kisses made her feel so wanted. It almost hurt.

Her toes curled as his tongue swept across hers. She arched her back, pressing her body into his.

Breaking the kiss, he raked his gaze down her body, taking in her curves.

Her chest hitched. He curved his hand around her waist, his fingers feathering the bare skin there. The heat of his touch made her feel like she was burning from the inside out.

The need to touch him flooded her body as her heart hammered. She reached for the buttons on his shirt. The task was maddeningly slow, pushing each disc through the hole as she worked her way down his chest. He helped by pulling the tail out of the waistband of his pants.

Once the last button slipped loose, she dipped her hands between the two halves of the material, running her fingers over his abs, marveling at the definition. His muscles twitched. That drew a smile from her lips, knowing her touch affected him just as much as his did to her.

Slowly, feeling each dip and curve under her fingertips, she moved her hands higher, reaching his shoulders. She pushed the parted shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, where the cuffs caught on his wrists. Too impatient to wait, she placed her mouth on his chest.

Evan sucked in a breath, and she dragged her lips up to his neck. She bit down on the curve where his shoulder met his neck. Then she soothed the bite with her tongue.

“Fuck, Sophie,” he hissed.

“Hmm?”

He was holding her to him at her hips, his fingertips digging into her skin as she licked her way across his throat. Then his hands were sliding up her sides. He went slowly, as if committing each dip and curve of her body to memory. She’d never felt so sexy.

Sophie arched her back with a moan when his hands reached her breasts. His thumbs slid over the nipples. Her body shook against his. Pleasure unlike anything she’d experienced swamped her.

But then he lowered his mouth to her tight bud, drawing it between his lips. The pleasure she felt then made her dizzy. Her breath was stilted. She panted as her heart hammered in her chest.

Everything felt flushed with heat. The space between her legs throbbed with need. She didn’t even notice she was holding his head to her breast until he moved to the other one. When he nipped down on her tight bud, then flicked it with his tongue, her fingers tightened in his hair. A growl rumbled up from his stomach.

He let go of her nipple and feathered light kisses up the curve of her breast to her throat and across her jaw, making a

beeline for her mouth. He once again devoured her. His tongue swamped her, drowning her in sensations that made her toes curl.

“Baby,” he murmured after breaking the kiss. Their faces were so close she noticed the fleck of green in his blue eyes. The emerald specks created a halo around his darkening pupils. “Where are they? Show me where your scars are hidden.”

Chapter Nineteen



E VAN IGNORED THE FLUTTERS of apprehension as the words left his lips. He didn't want to pull her out of her passion fueled haze, but he didn't want to mess this up by inadvertently exposing them before she was ready.

She'd responded so ardently to his touch, it was like she lit up inside. And when she touched him in return? Fuck, it felt good. But if they were to go any further, as he fervently hoped they would, it needed to be on her terms. If she wasn't ready, he'd be content to hold her in his arms all night long, if she'd let him.

"We can stop here," he assured her as anxiety leeches into her. Her face paled under the blush from their passionate kisses. "You can show me as much or as little as you want. The rest is in your hands. You have the power here."

Her eyes flared, the amber sparkling as she absorbed his words. "I have the power?" Her voice was no more than a whisper, but he still heard her.

"Absolutely, baby."

A smile pulled at her lips. "I like that."

"Me too." And he meant that with all his heart. Empowering the woman in his arms turned him on more than anything else.

"I want you so much. I can do this."

He lowered his head until their brows were touching. "I know you can. You're the strongest person I know."

"Okay." Her hands shook as she reached for her waistband. He covered them with his own to steady her.

"Tell me about them first."

Nodding, she described them to him. "They're on my inner thighs. He wanted them hidden after screwing up with the first ones on my wrist. He wanted to put me in strapless dresses to perform. I had to wear a big gold cuff when my arms were exposed."

He tried to keep his expression impassive, but it was difficult. She talked about it as if being branded was an everyday occurrence. He hated that for her. Torture like that should never be normalized.

Evan struggled not to let the emotions in. The rage. The worry. The sadness. They all threatened to swamp him. But he couldn't block how proud he was of her. It took a bravery beyond compare to expose herself to him. He knew that and would not take it for granted. He'd honor the gift she was presenting to him.

"There are twelve of them. Six on each leg. In a line starting at my knees."

He took her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. “I know this is hard for you, but I’m so proud of you, baby.”

“Pfft. There’s not much to be proud of. I should have left after the first time.”

“It doesn’t matter when you left. It only matters that you did. And you worked hard to do it. It took a great deal of courage to do what you did.”

“I wish I felt as brave as you make me sound.”

“I’ll remind you every day until you believe it.”

She tilted her head, nuzzling her cheek into his palm. A tightening in his chest took his breath away. He could very easily fall for this woman, if he hadn’t already.

“Okay. I’m ready.” She pushed her leggings down so quickly it was like she was ripping off a Band-Aid. He kept his eyes on hers. She’d let go and bared her scars. That was enough for him. He didn’t need to see them. And he didn’t want to make the rest of the night about her burns.

He took her lips again, sweeping his tongue inside and swallowing her gasp. He grasped her hips and pulled her in until her body was flush with his. Skin to skin. So close he could feel the tight buds of her nipples poking his chest.

Every drop of blood in his veins was rushing to his cock. He was so hard it took everything in him not to come in his pants. Evan slid his hands to her back. She molded against his body like she was made for him.

He took a step, backing her toward the bed. Once the back of her knees hit, he kept going until she sat. He hovered over her, continuing to push her down until she was flat on her back with her legs dangling over the edge.

He released her lips to slide his mouth along her jaw to her ear. "So beautiful. So brave," he whispered. She shuddered and sucked in a gasp.

A smile teased at his lips while he trailed them down her delicious body. Achingly beautiful, yet with a core of steel. She was soft where he was hard. Velvety smooth where he was abrasive.

He dipped his head to capture a nipple in his mouth, slicking his tongue across it, drawing a moan from her sweet lips. Crossing to the other, he gave it equal attention before continuing his erotic path lower.

He kissed her stomach, feeling the muscles contract under his lips. Then he traced the jut of her hip with his tongue. She arched under him, as if her body alone could will him to move where she was most needy.

He looked up at her body as he settled himself between her legs. He wanted to sear her beauty into his mind before getting his first glimpse of her scars. Tanned skin. Dark nipples. Mouth lush and swollen from his kisses. Long, dark brown hair strewn across his pillow.

She was perfection.

He felt them before he saw them as he slid his hands up her legs. Little imperfections in her otherwise smooth skin.

Finally, he looked.

Twelve circles dotted her inner thighs. A pattern that resembled mermaid scales registered in his mind. She'd said the carving on the knife was a siren. Something niggled at the back of his head but wouldn't coalesce.

He pushed it aside to focus on her. She'd tensed beneath his touch, and it was his job to make her forget. Her scars did not define who she was. Not to him. Even though he was filled with burning rage at the pain she endured ... no, not pain ... torture. He shoved his own feelings out of the way for her.

He dipped and placed a kiss on one. Sophie shivered and tried to close her legs. "Too much? Do you need me to stop?"

"N-no. Keep going."

"Good. No hiding. Remember?"

With a slight touch, he prompted her to spread them wider. He could do it himself, but he needed her to do it willingly. He didn't want her to be ashamed of any part of her body.

He could feel her trembling. He calmed her with light touches and warm kisses. Sophie propped herself up on her elbows, glancing down her body at him between her legs. With each kiss, she relaxed, moving her legs wider.

Evan worked his way up her thighs, kissing each mark but not giving them any more attention than any other part of her

body. It was just skin. Damaged skin, but skin, nonetheless. And he loved every inch of her soft skin.

She was glistening as he worked his way to the apex. Her hips arched off the bed with his kiss on her core. He dipped his tongue out, then swallowed his first taste of her. Her elbows fell out from underneath her, and she collapsed back on the bed.

He lapped at her, her flavor so intoxicating he was getting drunk on the taste of her. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed she'd fisted the bedsheets in her grasp. Pleased she had let go of her trepidation in favor of the pleasure he could give her, he slipped a finger inside her. Then two. She was impossibly tight, and he groaned.

She arched her back, and he reached up with one hand to cover her breast, teasing her nipple with his thumb, making her gasp his name. She was close. He could feel her tighten on his fingers, and his cock throbbed with an ache to be buried deep inside her. Every cell in his body ached with desire.

Sophie rocked her hips, pushing herself into his face. He pumped his fingers in and out of her, picking up speed. When his mouth settled on her clit and he sucked on the sensitive bundle of nerves, that was it.

Her sweet body held his fingers in a vise grip as she went over the edge, panting his name.

After one last taste with a swipe of his tongue, he moved over her. Her eyes were glassy. Her lips swollen. The long strands of her hair were mussed.

She'd never been more gorgeous.



SOPHIE FOUGHT FOR BREATH. Evan had effortlessly made her soar. Now he was staring down at her, his chin wet with her pleasure. A crooked smile tipped his lips. Sighing, she returned his smile and felt a shiver rush through her body.

He chuckled. “You okay?”

She grinned. “Stupid question. Is anyone ever not okay after the best orgasm of their life?”

His smile widened. “Best of your life, huh?”

She kept her mouth shut, unwilling to stroke the cocky man’s ego further. Instead, she brought her hands to his chest, sliding them down one scant inch at a time. His muscles ticked under her hands.

When she reached his belt, he stopped her. “We don’t have to go any further.”

“I know. I want to. You made me feel ... everything. I want to do the same for you.”

He dipped his head until their brows met. Something passed between them. Something that was too fathomless to name.

She went back to work on his belt, then the button. Carefully, she slid the zipper down over his erection. With

their gazes still connected, she wrapped her hand around him. Evan groaned, and his eyes shuttered. He unconsciously pumped his hips, thrusting himself into her fist.

He was large. Much bigger than Victor. She swallowed back the giggle at that thought. Victor's ego did not match the size of his dick.

She stared at him with wide eyes as he grew impossibly larger and harder while she stroked him, worried about the fit. As if he could read her mind, he kissed her before saying, "It will fit."

She nodded. He rolled off her to remove his pants and boxers. Reaching in a bedside drawer, he took a condom out of a box and tore it open. She watched as he rolled it on, her lip trapped between her teeth again.

He turned back to her and pulled her lip out from between her teeth. Then, leaning over her, he soothed the abused lip with his tongue. She wanted more. No, she needed more. She clasped the back of his neck and pulled him closer, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He let her have control of the kiss, groaning as she sucked his lower lip between her teeth.

He positioned himself between her legs. She raised her knees, then wrapped her legs around his waist. She knew her scars were rubbing against his hips, but with his tip at the entrance to her core, she forgot all about them.

Evan pushed inside her. She could feel her walls widening to accommodate him. Once fully in, he whispered. "See. Made

for each other.” Then he kissed her with a fervor that took her momentarily by surprise.

“God, Evan,” she moaned. “Please move. I need—”

“I know what you need. I’m gonna love you like nobody’s ever loved you.”

She smiled, hearing the line from her favorite song they’d once performed together. The smile morphed into a gasp when he pulled nearly all the way out before thrusting back in with a twitch of his hips. He continued to torture her this way until she was begging for more. Leaning down, he wrapped his lips around her nipple. She cried out when he dragged it between his lips, his tongue drawing circles around the tip.

Arching against him, she met him thrust for thrust.

“Sophie. So good,” he murmured against her lips. She lost her mind when he reached between them and found the center of her pleasure. He circled it with his thumb as he moved deeper. When he pressed down on her clit, she exploded.

He kissed her again. It was a slow, sumptuous kiss that made her body pulse and contract. A moan slipped into her mouth as her walls squeezed him tighter. He continued the kiss, her body shaking against his.

His thrusts picked up speed as he lost himself in her body. With one last lurch of his hips, he plunged deep and held there as he emptied himself inside her. His orgasm triggered another mini one from her. She cried out as vibrant colors appeared behind her tightly closed eyelids.

Evan dropped his head, his nose nuzzling the side of her neck. There he stayed, breathing heavily, each puff of air like a caress across her sensitized skin.

“Made for each other,” he muttered.

Chapter Twenty



E VAN WATCHED AS HIS niece was moulaged by Sophie. Makeup applied to her face and arms created the mock injuries that would be used in today's simulation. Nighthawk had dozens of groups attending today's wild practice in effective search and rescue during a train disaster. The drill would prepare their attendees in a rapid and effective response to a large-scale wreckage. They'd focus on breaching the train, shoring up sections to prevent collapse, and triage.

Hence the makeup. Katie and Sophie were both taking part in the simulation as "victims." They needed to make it look as real as possible to give the rescue workers the feel of an actual situation where lives were in danger. They'd learned that if a trainee saw a card merely listing the injuries, they wouldn't take it seriously. Adding makeup and fake blood made the situation more realistic.

They rarely did it this way, especially since the Nighthawks usually played the victims during smaller training sessions. But since they were staging the drill using their new train disaster section, they wanted it to look as real as possible.

It had been a few days since the first night he and Sophie had spent together. She'd slept each subsequent night in his bed until the previous one. She hadn't wanted to make Katie feel uncomfortable, so after sharing a meal together, she went across the hall to her own apartment. He rode out the night, aching to have her by his side.

It was amazing how, in such a short time, he'd gotten used to her being in his arms at night. He could still smell her on his sheets. The night had been long and *hard*.

By the second morning they'd woken up together, it dawned on him that she'd never answered him about who her ex was. There was something about the siren pattern from her burns that bothered him. Like his brain was trying to make him remember something. He just didn't know what it was.

"This looks disgustingly awesome!" Katie said, pulling him out of his thoughts. She held out her arm to view her "injury." A long gash ran up the length of her arm, dripping with blood through the rip in the old coat they'd found for her costume.

Evan had met Katie at the station the previous night at the appointed time, as his mother had ordered. She'd talked his ear off, excited about her trip and the next day's simulation. She and Sophie had bonded during dinner and the drive out to the Nighthawk complex, chatting about music, school, and Katie's upcoming performance with the symphony.

"If awesome means being covered in fake blood like you're Carrie, then yay for you," Evan teased with two thumbs up.

“Who’s Carrie?” Katie asked. Sophie burst out laughing and continued to laugh as Evan stood slack-jawed, staring in disbelief at his niece.

“Wow. We really need to work on your horror movie repertoire.”

Katie rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Oh, there’s Bethany. I’m gonna go show her what Sophie did.” Evan had been right about the two teenage girls. They’d bonded instantly as soon as they’d met a few hours ago.

He watched as they giggled together. His heart gave a little tug. Seeing her so happy was bittersweet. While he never wanted his niece to wallow in grief and sadness, it killed him that Tara couldn’t see the wonderful young lady Katie was turning out to be.

“She’s a really sweet girl,” Sophie remarked.

“Yeah, she is,” he replied, watching the girls cross over to the catering table. Jolene had once again provided a smorgasbord of enough food to feed an army.

“I can’t believe she’s going to perform with the Chicago Symphony in a few weeks. That’s amazing.”

“Her talent is amazing.”

“I would love to see her on that big stage. It’s gonna be an incredible experience for her.”

“Why don’t you come?” he asked, knowing he’d like nothing more than to have her accompany him to the symphony.

“What?”

“Come with me. We’ll make a weekend out of it.”

“Aren’t tickets already sold out?”

Evan raked his hair back from his brow with his fingers, dropping his chin before tilting his head to look at her. “I may have bought a few hoping to talk my friends into attending with me.”

A smile flitted across her face. “How many is a few?”

“A dozen,” he replied, a half smile pulling at his lips. Sophie’s laugh burst out of her again.

“Is that all?” Her eyes caught his, her broad smile sending a pulse of warmth through his chest.

“Yeah, that’s all. So what do you say?” His voice was low. He reached out and trailed a finger down her jaw to her neck, unable to keep himself from touching her. His eyes soaked in every inch of her face, committing it to memory. The uplift of her nose. The full bottom lip. The way her eyes darkened when he touched her.

She tipped her head, exposing her graceful neck, allowing his fingers to drift across her sensitive skin over her pulse point. His heart hammered against his chest. He dipped his head, his lips hovering over hers. The puffs of air from her increased inhalations wafted over him.

“Say yes,” he whispered. Her body went taut. The hesitant motion might have gone unnoticed if he hadn’t been so in tuned with her.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Evan.” He pulled back far enough to see her eyes. Their amber depths glowed with unspoken anxiety and fear. He’d give anything to annihilate that fear.

“I’m gonna be by your side every minute. You’ve changed your appearance. No one will recognize you. I know you’re scared, but you’re not alone anymore.” The tension left her body at his words and she relaxed in his arms. He pulled her closer. “Say yes.”

“Yes,” she hissed, closing the distance. Her lips swept across his, igniting a fire in his veins, just like every time she kissed him. He gripped her hips, pulling her against him. His lips played with hers, savoring her taste. He reveled in her soft moans. Gloried in drawing the breath from her body, leaving her weak.

Ignoring the surrounding chaos, he lost himself in the sweetness of Sophie. He didn’t care that he had a job to do. Didn’t care that everybody could see him ravage her. His niece was nearby and would probably tell his wedding obsessed mother all about the woman he couldn’t keep his hands off of, but he didn’t care. Nothing mattered except his need for Sophie.

“When you’re done sucking face, we could really use your help,” Finch shouted as he passed.

Evan waved his friend off, nipping Sophie’s lip one more time. Pulling away, he nudged her nose with his and grinned.

“I guess I should get back to work. Although I’d much rather be kissing you.”

A blush stained her cheeks. He kissed the tip of her nose, then stepped back. As discreetly as possible, he adjusted himself in his pants. It wouldn’t appear very professional if he showed up to the drill with a hard-on.

“What do you need to get gory-ed up?”

“Gory-ed up? Is that a word?”

“It is now.”

She chuckled, her smile lighting up her eyes. “I’ve got the gory-ing handled.” Her smile dropped. She tilted her head. “It’s funny. I usually used this much makeup to hide the bad stuff. Now I’m using it to create the bad.”

His mouth dipped into a frown as a cold fury flashed through him. Just the thought of her being bruised—burned—was infuriating.

He ran a thumb across her jaw. “You’ll never have to hide another bruise, baby,” he said, his voice full of grit.

She reached out and touched his face, her eyes shining. A sad smile flitted across her lips. “I know.” Then she blinked away the wetness building in her eyes and gave him a gentle push. “Go get to work.”



SOPHIE HAD NEVER HAD so much fun playing a wounded train crash victim. Of course, she'd never done it before, so this was a novel experience for her. One she'd never forget.

Watching Evan do what he did was eye-opening. She'd never put much thought into the people who showed up to help at a disaster. The skill and concentration were impressive.

It ran like a well-oiled machine.

The EMTs came first. Their job was to evaluate the injuries, drawn to the ones leaking the most blood. The medics got right to work, taking pulses and carrying off the worst of the injured. They attached cards to the rest to catalog the survivors. Each victim's card was ascribed one of four levels. Level three were the lucky ones, the ones who walked away. Level two meant the wounds were noncritical. Level one indicated the need to rush to help the victim. And Level zero, the most ominous, meant the victim had died.

Sophie was a level three, while Katie was level two. Both of their supposed injuries were insignificant.

After the EMTs' evaluation, the rescue workers got to work. Following the reports from the EMTs, they started with pulling victims out of impossible places.

The rescuers had to make decisions that would be agonizing to most people. They would decide who to help first to maximize the lifesaving. Sophie couldn't imagine having to make a choice like that. Not being able to help people right away must have been tormenting.

She never knew how many rules and protocols there were to follow in saving lives. Four rescue workers lifted Katie and carried her out of the train, even though she figured one man could lift the girl alone. Apparently, that was a rule. Four men per victim. One at the head, two at the hips, and one at the feet. They had to stick to the process, making it become almost routine. She heard Evan tell one trainee who'd questioned the four-man rule that history shows if you follow the rules, you save more lives.

It was all about muscle memory for these guys. They practiced so it became ingrained in them. Therefore, when they pulled up to an actual emergency, they knew exactly what protocols to follow to maximize the number of lives saved. She hated to say it, but she could see how practice would also keep the panic down for the rescuers. Practicing with the fake wounds would help with that as well. The gore would desensitize them to the real thing. It was a sad reality, but a necessary one.

It was an amazing thing to watch. The care and dedication were something else. She hadn't seen such kindness and compassion in a long time. It nearly brought her to tears several times.

Once training was complete, the feast began. Everybody communed in the large dining hall. Laughter and camaraderie echoed throughout the room as everybody enjoyed Jolene's food, since Chef Layla was still out of town. Moods were high as they celebrated their hard work. The trainees would return to their towns having learned skills that would help save lives.

Sophie couldn't believe there were people like that. Men, and women, who gave their all to help perfect strangers.

Feeling suddenly emotional, Sophie excused herself and headed to the bathroom. Pushing her way through the door, she swiped at a tear and slammed her purse down on the counter. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were glassy as she fought back more tears.

Why was she so emotional?

Resting her hands flat on the counter, she dropped her chin to her chest, her shoulders hunched until they were nearly touching her ears. Her chest felt tight, and she rubbed the ache with a fist. It felt like she was having another panic attack, but different.

She'd lived in darkness for so long. It was so deep, she never thought she'd see a way out. But here she was, in a little town on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, surrounded by the very best of humanity. People who'd brought her into their fold without question. That type of kind-heartedness was overwhelming to someone who'd seen nothing but the worst of humanity for so long.

How was she to deal with the abrupt change? She'd been so busy since arriving in town. First with just surviving. Then with her job, earning her own money to continue to ensure her freedom. Then she got to know Evan. He'd been the balm her heart had been aching for.

She'd been going fast forward in her new life, and she'd never taken a moment to stop and breathe. To appreciate all

she'd found here. And now it was hitting her all at once.

Sucking in a ragged breath, she let a few more tears slip. She thought of her parents and the love they had for her and each other. She thought of the friends she'd made in the short time she'd been here. And she thought of Evan.

She closed her eyes and sent up a word of thanks. In her darkest days, she'd never imagined she'd be living such a life. A good life. Laughter and love. And music. Evan and the extended Nighthawk family had given her voice back to her. Her song. And she promised herself that she'd soak up every good thing she could.

Squaring her shoulders, she dried her tears, splashed water on her face, and smiled at her reflection. Life was good.

Grabbing her bag, she walked out of the restroom and straight into a hard chest. Her purse slipped from her arm to the floor, spilling its contents.

"You okay, baby?" Evan asked, gripping her shoulders to keep her from falling down.

"I'm good." His eyes narrowed as if he didn't believe her. She laughed. "Seriously, I'm good. Really good. It's been a great day. I may look tired, but I'm too jazzed to feel it."

A smile broke out on his face. "Good to know." He bent and placed a kiss on her brow before letting her go and crouching down to pick up her stuff. "What's this?" he asked.

Sophie had been grabbing her wallet and looked up to see what Evan was holding. Instantly, her throat tightened. She

couldn't answer him, even if she tried. Her heart pounded and the world around her blurred as she looked at the disposable camera in his hand.

Her salvation.

Chapter Twenty-One



ALL COLOR LEECHED FROM Sophie's face. He'd never seen something like that happen so fast. Her mouth opened and closed several times, as if she was trying to answer him but something prevented her.

Evan glanced down at the box in his hand. The thing looked like it had come straight from the nineties. A disposable camera. Did they still make these things?

But if Sophie's reaction was anything to go by, this was more than just a camera to her.

"Sophie? What is it? What's the matter?" Her eyes were wide and fixed on the box in his hand. Her mouth opened again, but no sound came out.

Evan put the camera down next to his knee on the floor. Her eyes followed it. He cupped her jaw and forced her to look at him. "Sophie, baby? You're scaring me. You look like you've seen a ghost. Is it the camera?"

He could feel her trembling through his hand. He hated that his question about a simple item from her purse would so

abruptly change her mood. But it was curious that she'd have such an item. With cell phones, disposable cameras had become defunct. Everybody now had a camera in their pocket.

So why did Sophie have something so old-fashioned? And what was on it?

“Sophie, I’m gonna need you to say something. Can you do that?”

Sophie nodded, then shook her head. Then nodded again. Her throat worked as she swallowed several times. “I-I found th-that. Lost and found. At the club.”

Her sentences were disjointed and stilted. He followed along as best he could. “Okay. Are there pictures on it?”

Sophie nodded, her eyes so wide he wondered if she'd blinked yet. He couldn't recall if she had.

“Did you take the pictures?”

Another nod.

“Do you want to get them developed? I bet Sutton could do it in her studio.” Sutton was Tin Man's girlfriend and a world-renowned photographer. She'd left the jet-setting life to open her own private studio in town.

Evan hadn't known it could happen, but Sophie paled even more. Her usually glowing tanned skin was washed out and white as a sheet. The pink he always loved seeing in her cheeks was nonexistent.

“I ... It's ...”

“Sophie, what is it?” His worry was growing exponentially. She still struggled with getting the words out, and he didn’t know how else to help her.

“It’s nothing good.”

He breathed out a sigh of relief. She’d finally been able to force the words out. They were shaky, but it was progress.

“What do you mean?”

“I-I grew up living next door to Sam Chasin.”

Evan blinked at the abrupt change of subject. “The senator’s son who went missing?”

She nodded, pulling her lip between her teeth. He hated to see her abuse her lip again but let it go for now.

“He was my friend.” Her eyes filled with tears. “And that got him killed.”

“What are you talking about?”

Sophie glanced around, but the hall was empty. “Is there someplace private we can go? This is not something I want everybody to know.”

“Okay. Sure. We can go to one of the empty dorm rooms. Just let me check on Katie first.”

He rose to his feet, then helped Sophie up. She swayed, but he pulled her close, wrapping her up in his arms. With his lips against her brow, he assured her. “Whatever this is, it’s going to be okay.”

He walked her down the hall toward the stairs. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Entering the dining hall, he made a beeline for Graham and Natalie. His expression must have told them something was up. Graham stood when he reached them.

“Can you make sure Katie’s okay for a little while?”

“Sure. Is Sophie okay?” Natalie asked. It figured she’d ask about her friend. Sophie had grown close with all the ladies associated with the Nighthawks.

“I’m not sure. There’s something she needs to talk about right now. I’m gonna take her upstairs to an empty room to get to the bottom of it.”

“Room four is open,” Graham said.

“Go take care of Sophie. We’ve got Katie.”

Murmuring his thanks, he crossed over to Katie, who was chatting with Bethany. “I’ve got to take care of something. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take. Stay here, okay?”

“Sure, is everything okay?”

He could see the worry in her eyes, but he forced a smile to reassure his niece. “Yeah. Everything’s good. Just some stuff I need to handle.”

“Okay.” He bent and kissed her head before turning and leaving the dining hall. Sophie was where he’d left her, propped up against the wall. She was still pale, but color was slowly making its way back into her face.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand and leading her up to the second floor. Reaching room four, he opened the door for Sophie and flipped the light switch. She stepped into the room with her arms wrapped around herself. He followed, then closed and locked the door.

With his hands on her shoulders, he maneuvered her to sit on the edge of the bed. He grabbed a desk chair and pulled it over to where she sat. “Tell me what that camera has to do with Sam Chasin.”

With a deep breath, Sophie began her story.

He’d never considered himself a violent man. He’d never relished that part of his former job. But the longer he listened to Sophie—the more he learned about Victor Silvo—he could very well see violence in his future.



SOPHIE FOUND IT AMUSING that there was an old disposable camera at the bottom of the lost and found box behind the bar. Who even used them anymore? She grabbed it and flipped it over to view the little number through the window. Only five pictures had been taken.

Then a plan took place in her head. Glancing around to see if anyone had noticed her taking it, she placed the camera in her clutch. Purses were too gaudy, according to Victor. Especially while she wore designer evening wear. But she’d

needed something to carry her lipstick and other girly things while working in the club. Victor had acquiesced and bought her several clutches to match any outfit.

Making her way around the end of the bar, she gasped, spotting her old friend.

“Sophie? Is that you?”

“Sam? Oh my God. How are you? What are you doing here?”

He gave her a warm, friendly hug. She stiffened, knowing eyes were everywhere. She feared how Victor would react to a simple hug.

She’d grown up with Sam Chasin. He’d moved in next door when she was five. He was two years older but had never treated her like there was an age difference. They played together every day after school. When middle school rolled around, their time together lessened, but they still rode their bikes together often. She was a sophomore when her parents died. He’d been there for her at the funeral. That was the last time she’d seen him.

Sam’s father had quickly risen up the political ranks and was a senator now. There was talk that Sam would follow in his father’s footsteps. Knowing the type of kid he’d been while they were growing up, she suspected he’d do something great.

“I’m good. It’s so great to see you. I’ve missed you. The neighborhood was never the same after you left.”

“I’m so sure,” she teased even though her chest felt tight. If he only knew what had happened to her since she’d left the place she’d grown up in.

“Yup. There was nobody left to fight off my bullies for me.”

Sophie laughed. To her ears, it sounded stilted and fake, but Sam didn’t seem to notice. “You never needed help with that. Nobody would dare pick on Sam Chasin.”

He chuckled. “You may be right about that. Now I take on the bullies for a living.”

Sophie tilted her head. “Oh? What do you do?”

“I’m a lawyer. But I’m planning to run for political office in a few years, just like my dad.”

“Got your eyes on the Oval Office, huh?”

He smiled, his eyes shining. “Maybe.”

“I bet you’ll make it.”

His smile deepened, the corners of his eyes creasing. “That’s nice of you to say. Can I assume I have your vote?”

From out of the corner of her eye, she saw Joseph walking toward her. Joseph was one of Victor’s men who often served as a guard for Sophie. He had no allegiance to her. It was all for Victor. She needed to end this conversation before Joseph snitched on her to Victor.

“Well, it was really good to see you, but I need to get back to work,” she rushed out. She spoke far too quickly, making it sound like all one word, but she needed to get away fast.

Without waiting for his reply, she turned on her heel and practically ran from the room.

Once in the hallway that led to a storage area, she leaned against the wall, wheezing. She wasn't sure whether Joseph had seen her talking to Sam. She couldn't make that mistake again.

Unfortunately, Sam came back the next night. Then the next. She needed to put a stop to this, or he'd never get that bright, shiny future the news talked about.

They shared a few words each time he visited, and she could see he was growing increasingly frustrated at not being able to really sit down and talk with her.

That last night, he'd let his frustration get the best of him. As she turned to rush off, he grabbed her wrist, knocking the gold cuff off. His brow furrowed as he felt the scars under his fingers. He turned her wrist and gaped at the marks.

"Sophie, what is this?"

"It's nothing." She brushed it off and tried to pull her arm from his grip.

"This is not nothing. Who did this to you?"

"Seriously. It's fine. I'm fine."

"Sophie. Are you safe?"

She was still trying to tug on her arm to escape without drawing attention. He stubbornly refused to let her go. "I'm fine," she insisted.

Then she spotted Joseph making his way toward her once more. His eyes were narrowed on Sam. "Please, you have to let me go." She could hear the panic in her own voice but didn't know how else to make him understand.

"I don't understand."

"Please. Let me go and get out of here. Don't come back. Please." She was begging. She didn't want to see her old friend get hurt because of her. Other men had disappeared after talking to her. The accompanist she'd talked to that had gotten her first punishment had never returned. When Sophie asked about him, she'd been told he'd moved on. But she suspected there was more to it than that. She was sure Victor wouldn't stop at murder to get what he wanted.

She couldn't let that happen to Sam.

He must have heard the desperation in her voice. She glanced over at Joseph again, judging the distance between them. Sam followed her gaze, and his eyes widened. "I can help you, Sophie. Please let me help."

"No. No one can help me. But you have to go before they catch you talking to me."

"Sophie."

"Please, Sam. I can't lose you too," she begged, blinking back the burn of tears.

"Okay. I'll go for now. But I'm coming back for you, Sophie. We'll find a way to get you out."

He dropped her arm, and Sophie turned and dashed off to her dressing room. She still had a set to do. Splashing water on her face, she touched up her makeup and tried to calm her racing heart.

She was halfway through her set when she saw Sam being led away by Joseph. Panic unlike any she'd ever felt before rose inside her. Her pulse hammered in her ears, blocking out all other sounds. She knew she was still singing but couldn't hear herself or her accompanist. Somehow, she finished the song. She knew what she needed to do, but first she had to make a graceful exit off the stage.

The man sitting at the piano gave her a surprised look when she dashed off the stage. He knew they still had a few songs left to do, but she couldn't wait.

Charging into her dressing room, she grabbed her clutch and headed down the hall to where Joseph had disappeared with Sam.

She crept closer to Victor's office on the tip of her toes, hoping her shoes didn't make a sound on the cement floor. The door was ajar, and from her position in the hall, she could see the area in front of Victor's desk.

With her heart in her throat, she carefully removed the disposable camera from her clutch.

"You made a mistake coming back here," Victor said, his voice low. The menace in it made Sophie's hair stand up on her arms.

“I’m just another patron. Seems counterproductive to your business to turn away customers,” Sam replied. He stood in front of Victor’s desk. Joseph was behind his right shoulder, and another guard, Sal, was behind his left. Victor stood and rounded his desk, where he leaned against the edge in a nonthreatening way.

Sophie knew it was all a show. She could see the tic in his jaw. Victor was angry. She’d been a recipient of that rage more times than she could count. She knew the signs. This would not end well, even as she prayed for Sam to find a way out.

“You’ve been talking with my star quite a lot.”

Sam shrugged. “She’s nice. Very talented.”

“And mine,” snarled Victor.

“Okay,” Sam replied, drawing the word out. Her old friend stood there, hands held loosely at his sides. He had no idea the danger he was in, and Sophie had no way of warning him. Her only tool to help him was clasped in her hand.

“Like I said, you made a mistake.” Victor picked up the ceremonial dagger that was displayed on his desk. He held it loosely in his hand, the sharp tip against one finger while he twisted it back and forth with the other. A tiny dot of blood appeared on his finger. Victor ignored it.

“Your mistake was in coming back more than once. Talking to her more than once. I cannot tolerate that.”

“Again, seems bad for business.”

Victor chuckled, and Sophie's blood turned to ice. He always laughed like that when he was about to dole out his punishment. "I do quite fine for myself. One less patron won't hurt my business."

"Yes, you have pompous asshole written all over you." Victor's hand tightened around the grip of the dagger. There weren't many people in the world who dared to talk to him that way. Sophie willed Sam to keep his mouth shut. He shouldn't be baiting Victor. *"I'm thinking you don't know who I am. Otherwise, you wouldn't want to attract the negative publicity I can bring down on this place. If I leave now, no harm, no foul."*

"I know exactly who you are, Mr. Chasin. Daddy can't save you this time."

"Listen, Silvo, back away now. Otherwise—"

Victor moved fast, but so did Sophie. She kept pressing the button on the camera even as her mind screamed in horror. The dagger was sticking out of Sam's chest, blood spreading like spilled wine down the front of his shirt. Her friend's gaze was on the weapon, a look of disbelief in his eyes. Then he slumped to the floor and didn't move.

"Pompous asshole," Victor sneered, kicking the downed man in the ribs. Casually, as if he hadn't just murdered someone in cold blood, he yanked the dagger out of Sam's chest, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped off the blood. Then, holding the dagger as if it were a precious antique, he placed it gently on its stand.

Sophie's finger still continued to push on the button, unable to stop even though she'd finished the roll of film. When the two guards moved into action, Sophie turned and ran down the hall, back to her dressing room. She went straight to her bathroom, where she emptied her stomach of the little bit she'd eaten that day.

Once regaining a semblance of her equilibrium, she forced everything out of her mind except for her next move. She had the proof to take down a villain. She needed to focus on escaping and getting the camera to someone trustworthy.

The grief could come later.

Chapter Twenty-Two



THE NEXT MORNING, SOPHIE paced, nibbling on her thumbnail as she waited for Sutton to do her thing with the film. She had no concept of how long a process like developing real film took but couldn't concentrate on much else while she waited.

Evan had reluctantly left to pick up some food for all of them. And he'd only left because Wyatt was there to watch over her.

Evan had become protective of her, but it wasn't a strangling type of protection like Victor's had been. She was free to be whomever she wanted to be in front of Evan. He just wanted her to be safe.

She liked that.

She liked that someone cared enough to worry about her safety. Hence him waiting to walk her home after working late at Jolene's. And his reluctance to leave her now to get the food.

It was sweet. And she loved him for it.

She wasn't sure exactly when it had happened. She didn't think it had been all at once. It had been in the little things. The music they shared. Their walks after work. The way he always checked in with her, even if just by a glance. And the way he'd taken care of her the previous night when she'd finally grieved for Sam. He held her, understanding the loss she was feeling. He didn't begrudge her a friendship with another man. In fact, he encouraged it. And she'd made friends with most of the Nighthawks.

Evan wasn't threatened by other men. He was secure in his trust of her. Secure in the relationship they were building. What more could she ask for?

He wasn't perfect. Who was? But he was perfect in the way he cared for her. Perfect in the way he protected her. Perfect in the way he only wanted the best for her. And perfect in the way he loved her.

She was pretty sure that was what he felt. How could he not? She had so much love for him and could feel the love oozing out of him. He made her happy. She hoped she could make him half as happy as he'd made her.

But at the moment, all she could think about were those pictures. Was she doing the right thing? What if the pictures were crap, and they had nothing? Would she always live in fear of Victor Silvo?

This was her last hope.

She nearly bolted to the ceiling when the door slammed behind her. She'd been so lost in her thoughts, she hadn't

heard Evan return. Her hand flew to her throat, attempting to calm her racing heart.

Evan placed the bag down on the coffee table. “Sorry, babe. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

She waved off his apology. “No. It’s okay. I should have been paying more attention.”

He crossed the room to her, a crooked smile pulling at one side of his mouth. Gently gripping her shoulders, he rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “You doin’ okay?”

She nodded, bit her lip, then shook her head. His smile widened. “I’m a mess.”

“No, babe. You just have a lot on your mind. It’s okay to be anxious about everything. But remember, no matter what the pictures tell us, we still have the smoking gun, so to speak.”

Tilting her head, she considered his words. “What do you mean?”

“The dagger. They can get a search warrant and test it for Sam’s DNA.”

She furrowed her brow. “That thing’s probably been cleaned by now.”

“Perhaps. But I bet he didn’t clean under the grip. Blood has a way of creeping into all sorts of cracks and crevices.”

“But how will they be able to get the search warrant if the pictures are crap?”

Evan was still rubbing her arms, the heat from his palms seeping beneath her skin, calming her. “One thing at a time, okay? If the pictures don’t turn out, we’ll figure something else out.”

“No need,” Sutton said as she walked into the room with a stack of photos. “You got him dead to rights, Sophie.”

Evan took the pictures from Sutton. Sophie watched the range of emotions pass across his face. First was hope and curiosity. Then came anger and a cat that got the cream expression. They must have gotten the proof they needed in her pictures.

But it was the last emotion that made Sophie tremble. His hands tightened, gripping the photos so tightly they crinkled. His face paled before he forcibly blanked his expression.

“Fuck,” he muttered, swiping the hair off his brow.

“Wh-what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Sophie. Fuck. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She felt sick to her stomach. Was this when he finally realized she was too damaged to be with? That she wasn’t worth the effort? That because of the man in those pictures, she’d never be worthy of love.

“That’s Victor Silvo,” he uttered through gritted teeth.

Sutton gasped. “I’ve heard of him. He’s that billionaire from Chicago, right?”

“Everybody in Chicago has heard of him. He owns half a dozen nightclubs across the city. Not to mention the dozens of investment properties he owns. He’s been on the Forbes 500 list many times. A self-made billionaire.” Evan paused in his speech, his angry eyes landing on her. “And dirty as fuck.”

Sophie nodded, not bothering to deny the truth. Everybody knew how dirty Victor Silvo was. Yet he remained untouchable. The mayor, police chiefs, cops, gangs. They were all in his pocket, covering him in Teflon.

“There were rumors of his brutality, but nothing substantial.” He glanced at the scar on Sophie’s wrist.

Nothing substantial until now. She could practically hear his unspoken words.

She grabbed the photos from Evan’s hand and glanced through them. She paused on the ones showing the dagger in Sam’s chest, tears burning in her eyes. “I should have tried to stop it,” she murmured.

“No, baby. If you had intervened, he would have killed you too. This is the best way to get justice for Sam. Silvo’s going down for Sam’s murder.”

She heard Evan’s words but couldn’t absorb them as she flipped to the next picture, showing the man in question. The utterly detached expression on Victor’s face filled her with dread. The man had just brutally stabbed someone and was treating it like any other business transaction.

The tremors came upon her suddenly. She couldn't stop them. She couldn't control them. She'd experienced his brutality so many times, it shouldn't still affect her so violently. But this? The total disregard for human life captured forever in film ... it's shocking.

Fear consumed her. Sutton took the pictures from her hands as Evan wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his warm chest. She shivered. It felt as if ice had replaced the blood flowing through her veins.

"He's gonna kill me," she whispered.

"That's not gonna happen, baby. You're safe. He's never gonna touch you again."

"You can't promise that. Sam tried to help too, and look at what happened to him."

"I know. But remember, you escaped. You're safe. Surrounded by people who love you."

She pulled back, her fear suddenly multiplied. Evan. All her new friends. Victor was capable of killing them all. The proof was in those pictures. She should run from here while she still could. It would be the only way to keep everyone she cared about safe. "All the more reason for me to leave here. I can't risk everybody."

There was the faintest click of a door closing as Sutton left them alone. "No. You can't think like that. And if you leave now, you'll be running for the rest of your life. We have the proof to end this for you. Silvo's guilty as hell. He will burn.

Have a little faith in the system. Have a little faith in me. I won't let anything happen to you."

"I'm scared, Evan. This feels different from all the fear I experienced before. I'm so scared. Why does it feel so much worse?"

"Because you have more to lose this time. You've made a life for yourself. You have a good job. Great friends. And a man who loves you very much."

Her head shot up to see the truth of his words in his eyes. He was looking down at her, and the tenderness in his eyes took her breath away. "You love me?"

Evan cupped her cheeks. "Yeah, Sophie. I love you. You brought me back to life. After Tara died, I didn't think I deserved anything this good. You made me see differently. I love you not only because of what you've made of yourself, but because of what you're making of me. You've brought out the best in me. A me I thought was dead and buried. We'll get through these next steps together. Hopefully by next week, this will all be over. You'll be truly free."

"Free," she whispered, blinking against the prickling sensation in the corners of her eyes. "I never thought I'd ever be free. Let alone find someone like you. Thank you for showing me what true love looks like. I-I love you too."

Evan's mouth crashed down on hers, and as their kiss deepened, the ice leached from her veins, replaced with molten lava. She was burning up for the man who'd taught her what

genuine love looked like. She now knew what love was, and it was because of him.

Her parents had started her education when she was born, but her learning had been stunted when they died. The type of love she'd been subjected to since their deaths was the killing type. It suffocated you until there was nothing left of the person you were meant to be.

Evan's love gave her wings. He loved to watch her soar. And when she faltered, he was right there to give her some extra lift.

Because of Evan's love, she wanted to fly to the highest peak and sing. The lyrics would say everything she wanted him to hear, everything that was in her heart. The music would hide a thousand words of love. In listening, the passages would be free.

He was the song her heart wanted to sing.



SOPHIE WAS EXHAUSTED WHEN they returned to his apartment after getting the photos developed. He tucked her and Ginny in his bed where they both promptly fell asleep. He held her while she slept, and his heart ached each time she whimpered in her sleep. He hated that her dreams tormented her. She deserved a break from all the pain. More than that, she deserved an end to all her torment.

His mind ran through everything that had happened since he'd found that camera.

After listening to Sophie's story the night before, there was no way he could let her go home alone to her apartment. Instead, he took her to his, despite Katie being in the next room. His niece was so tired from all the excitement, she went directly to bed.

Sophie had slept in his arms when she finally did sleep. She said she'd never let herself grieve for her friend, and it hit her all at once as soon as she lay down. Evan had held her through the worst of it. His heart had twisted in agony for her and all that she'd lost.

First her parents. Then her home and being forced to live with an abusive guardian. She'd lost her sense of safety. There hadn't been an adult she could trust to help her. Then, with her ex, she'd thought she'd had something good, only for that to be brutally yanked away from her. And finally, a friend who only wanted to help was murdered right in front of her eyes.

She'd lived through far too much heartache. He couldn't promise that she'd never experience heartache again, but he could certainly love her, protect her, do everything in his power to make her happy. He could promise her he'd never let her down.

Katie had been spending the day with Bethany and her friend Lia. He expected her home soon, so he reluctantly left Sophie asleep in his bed to make dinner for his niece.

They talked about her upcoming performance and how nervous she was. He tried to assure her as best he could, but felt inadequate. It was just one more instance when he felt like he'd failed her. She needed assurances from her mother, not her uncle. The guilt still twisted him up inside, but he attempted to let it go and just listen to Katie voice her fears.

After watching a movie together, Katie went to bed and Evan crawled back under the covers with a still sleeping Sophie. He pulled her close and fell asleep with her apples and cinnamon scent surrounding him.

In the early hours of the morning, Sophie woke, and they made plans even though exhaustion still weighed her down from the stress of what they found in those pictures. Evan wanted to call his former captain. Sophie balked, and he didn't blame her. He knew dirty cops existed. He was aware that several were in Silvo's pocket.

But he assured her Captain Breckenridge was honorable. He was the only cop Evan trusted with this.

Evan would need to convince the captain to keep Sophie's name out of it. It was the only way to keep her safe. Otherwise, he would find another way to take Silvo down. He would not subject her to more than she'd already experienced. She relaxed somewhat when he promised to keep her anonymity.

That morning, as Sophie showered, he called his old boss. Breckenridge greeted him warmly. They, along with Don, had always been close. But as time passed, Evan had let the

relationship whither. His angst over what happened kept him from reaching out to his friend.

Yet Breckenridge still talked to him as if no time had passed since their last conversation.

“Captain—”

“Fuck, kid. How many times do I have to tell you to call me Errol?”

“Probably one more, sir. Just like always,” he answered, his mouth quirking into a smile.

“Things never change,” the captain replied, and Evan could practically see the old man shaking his head in exasperation. “So, what can I do for you?”

“It’s more about what I can do for you,” Evan answered.

“Call me intrigued. Whatcha got?”

“Victor Silvo.”

“Nasty son of a bitch.”

“Too true. Hypothetically, what would you say if I told you I had something that could take him down for good?”

“Hypothetically, I’d be skeptical. The man is untouchable. He’s got so many politicians and high-ranking cops in his pocket. Nothing ever sticks.”

“I know, but I believe there is no way that what I have won’t stick this time ... hypothetically,” he added at the end. He wouldn’t give Breckenridge details until they could meet in

person. He wanted to be assured that this information wouldn't get into the wrong hands, hence the hypothetical talk.

“Okay then. Hypothetically, if you have something foolproof, I'm all ears.”

“Not over the phone. I'll be in the city next weekend for Katie's performance. We can meet then.”

“Perfect. The wife and I are looking forward to seeing her performance. We snapped up tickets as soon as they went on sale. It will be good to see her again. And you, kid. It's been too long.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. Text me where and when you want to meet. I'll see you then.”

They said their goodbyes just as Sophie came out of the bedroom. She looked tired, her eyes still a little red rimmed. When she smiled, though, it lit up her whole face. He held his arms open, and she walked right into them, snuggling into his chest. He inhaled her fresh, clean scent. The hint of apples drew his own smile.

“Ugh, get a room,” Katie moaned as she walked in on them.

“Good morning to you too, Katie,” Evan drawled. Sophie snickered, still wrapped up in his arms. He never wanted to let her go, but they had important things to do today. The first was to feed his girls, then drop one of them off at the train station.

Sophie and Katie hugged goodbye at the station two hours later, as if they wouldn't see each other in five days for the

symphony performance. It made his heart happy to see the two most important people in his life bond.

Together, he and Sophie stood on the train platform, his arm around her waist as they waved goodbye to Katie. He could've sworn he heard a sniffle from her as the train disappeared from sight.

“Love you, little bird,” he murmured as he buried his nose in her hair.

“Love you too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three



AFTER DROPPING KATIE OFF, they rushed back to Evan's apartment. They were barely through the door when clothes started flying. Mouths fused, he lifted her up, and she automatically wrapped her legs around his waist. Blindly, he made his way down the hall, only bouncing off the wall once.

He dropped her to the bed and followed her down, pushing her into the mattress as he kissed a trail down her throat. Reaching her breasts, he covered her flesh with teasing kisses. She arched into him, her body begging him for more. He covered her nipple with the heat of his mouth, licking the tight bud before withdrawing and blowing a cool draft of air across the wetness. He felt her shiver from head to toe against his own body and smiled.

She lay under him like a goddess, the light of the sunset over the lake shining through the window and the rays bathing her in radiance. Breathing fast, she stared up at him, the amber color under her heavy-lidded eyes popping in the sunset's glow. He couldn't keep from touching her.

Tracing her fluttering pulse, he followed a zig-zag line all the way to where her heart thumped a steady beat. It lulled him into a near hypnotic trance. He could stay and listen to the music her body made forever if his whole body wasn't crying out to be buried deep inside her.

He tore himself from the trance and continued bathing her with kisses as he worked his way down her body. Her legs tipped open a bit wider, and lust roared through him. He was lost to her. To her flushed skin. The wetness between her thighs. The heady aroma of her desire.

He dipped his head, needing to taste her. With one swipe from his tongue, she was crying out and arching into him. He teased the swollen knot of her clit. Gliding his tongue over it. Circling. Giving it tiny flicks of pleasure. Sophie squirmed on his face, pushing against him for more.

Which he gave her, plunging his tongue inside her slick heat.

She moaned.

He groaned.

He could already feel the waves of release running through her. The tensing of her thighs, the contractions of her stomach. Her broken breaths. All told him she was close.

And then she erupted. He watched her body spasm and arch in the throes of ecstasy. It was a beautiful sight.

Before she could come down, he'd sheathed himself with a condom and was pushing inside her in one breath. She cried

out. His name on her lips sounded like the greatest love song ever.

He moved faster; she met his fervor, thrust for thrust. Their hips moved in harmony until they lost the rhythm to the passion.

They fell together. His whole body tensed as he held himself deep inside her. Pleasure coiled in his stomach, and he grunted her name as he emptied himself inside her.

He rolled off her, pulling her with him until her head lay on his chest. Her apple scent filled his head as he held her to him. He kissed her head, leaving his lips there while he closed his eyes and savored everything that was Sophie.

His love for her sang through his mind. She was like the greatest music ever written. His fingers danced over her spine, playing the music only they could hear. It was quickly becoming his favorite song. One he wanted to listen to over and over again.

What she survived—who she survived—made her the strongest woman he'd ever met. She hadn't let Silvo destroy her. She was full of life. She could laugh and tease and live life to the fullest. More than that, she could love. The fact that she still believed in love spoke volumes about her.

Sophie. His sweet Sophie had been under Silvo's thumb. She'd been horribly brutalized by him. What had her life been like beyond the brandings? Everything inside him burned to hear every detail. And if it was as bad as he imagined, he would stop at nothing to bring that evil bastard down.



SOPHIE LOST HERSELF IN his steady breaths, basking in the afterglow. He'd just rocked her world, and she was ready to go again. She'd never experienced such passion, such love.

All she'd ever wanted was to be loved. Like her father had loved her mother. The so-called love that Victor professed to have come with nothing but pain and fear.

There was no pain in Evan's love. And the only fear was the fear of someday losing his love. She felt free of all the weight and pain that life had dealt her because of his love.

He gave her the type of feeling people wrote songs about. She'd sung most of those songs, having never understood the sentiment behind them. She had a feeling the next time she performed one, she'd finally get it.

There were pieces of him in every song she sang, she just never knew it. But he was her favorite song. One that would play on repeat in her head for the rest of her life.

If they made it through the mess with Victor and Tito, she knew that music would be their love language. There was no pain in their music. No fear. No danger. No sadness.

Sure, songs were filled with those emotions. But not theirs. He would play the music that spoke to her soul, and she'd sing every note for him. It wouldn't matter if the notes they played

individually were different, because when blended together, it would be the most beautiful song ever heard.

As she lay on his chest listening to the soothing music of his heartbeat, she knew one truth: he was her favorite love song.

“You seem to be thinking pretty hard over there,” Evan murmured, his lips moving in her hair.

“Just loving this moment.”

She felt his lips tip in a smile. “Me too, baby.”

“Tell me a story.”

“What do you want to hear?”

She thought about it for a moment. She wondered about his family. She’d met Katie and loved her. She’d meet his parents this weekend. But what she really wanted to know about was Tara.

“What was it like having a sister?”

He snorted. “A pain in the butt.”

She tipped her head back to look up at him. “Really?”

“Yes,” he answered, then continued, “and no.”

Sophie tilted her head. As an only child, she had no concept of what things were like between siblings. “What do you mean?”

“We annoyed each other just as any siblings do. But in the end, we were always there for each other. When she fell and scraped her knees, she ran to me for hugs. When I first noticed girls and had questions, she listened without teasing me too

badly. When a boy broke her heart, she cried in my arms. Then I went and gave the guy a stern talking to.” Evan winked, and she had a feeling that “talking to” involved fists more than words.

“What was it like for you when she started dating your partner?” she asked cautiously, not wanting to bring up memories that would hurt him. She just wanted to get to know his sister through him.

“They kept it hidden for a while at first. But Tara felt bad about sneaking around. She invited me out for lunch and told me she was in love with Don, but if I wasn’t comfortable with them being together, she’d end it. What kind of brother would that make me if I got in the way of their love? I admit, it was weird seeing them together at first. But anyone who looked at them could see the depth of their feelings for each other.”

“That sounds beautiful.”

“It was.” He grew quiet for a moment, lost in thought. “I just wish one of them would have talked to me about what was going on. Maybe I could have helped them.”

“You can’t live in the what-ifs. It’s in the past. We can’t change what happened in the past. I can’t change the fact that my parents died, leaving me in hell. But I can close that chapter and start a new one. Sure, I’ll probably end up reading those old chapters over again, analyzing every word. Sweat over them. Regret how they were written. But those chapters are in the past. There may be twinges of pain from time to time, but it can’t truly hurt me. I choose to live in the now.”

“How can you move on so easily after everything that happened to you?”

“It’s not easy. It takes resilience. Courage. There will be times I falter; I know that.”

“No, you won’t. You’re the strongest person I know.”

She smiled. “And that’s why I’ll thrive. Because of the people I’ll surround myself with now that I get a choice. You have been there for me every time I’ve stumbled. Let me do the same for you.”

She remained quiet for a moment as she let him absorb her words. Then she remembered something Mrs. Tilley told her. She’d been crying in the woman’s arms, lamenting the loss of her parents, her freedom, and everything else she was living through. Mrs. Tilley held her through the worst of it. Then she said, *“When your new life begins, you must let go of the past to find your future. Just remember, falling into the water doesn’t kill you. You drown by staying there, doing nothing. Let go of what hurts you and find what heals you.”*

“You’re right. We can help each other. I want to live in the present with you. Will you help me?” he asked, and the sincerity in his voice made her heart soar.

Sophie kissed the underside of his jaw. “I’d love nothing more.”

“I love you.”

She grinned and buried her face in his neck. “I love you too. But I do have one request.”

“What’s that, my little songbird?”

A smile teased at her lips at the endearment. It made her heart happy. “Could you teach me to fight?”

His brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“J-Just in case. I want to know how to defend myself. I’ll be better equipped to face going back to the city if I know I can defend myself.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” he assured.

“I know. But it never hurts for a girl to know those things. I’ll feel stronger.”

“You’re already strong, babe.”

“I know you think I’m strong. But inside, I’m still shaking in fear. Please, help me with this.”

He seemed to consider her words before running his fingers through her hair. “Okay, baby. I’ll teach you some basic moves. You’re right. Every woman should know how to defend herself.”

She threw a leg over him, straddling his hips. His hands went to her waist, gripping her hard. She could feel him growing hard beneath her. Leaning forward, she kissed him and soon lost herself in sensations.

When she finally lowered herself over him, she was so close to flying it only took a few thrusts before she took flight. She fell asleep, secure in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Four



“**W**HAT ARE WE DOING here again?” Finch asked, peering around him at the throng of people. The Christkindlemarket at Daley Plaza was crowded this close to Christmas, but the shoppers gave the group of large men a wide berth. He crossed his arms over his chest as he took in the busy market booths.

Evan rolled his eyes as Graham sighed. “For the last time. The girls wanted to do some shopping and the potential investor agreed to meet with us here.”

“So, who is this guy?”

“Grant Silverton. He’s a successful real estate developer who’s looking to make an investment in a ‘worthwhile project.’ His words,” Graham explained.

“Tax write-off,” Evan muttered.

“Right. So why are we here?”

“Finch,” Graham groaned.

“No, I mean, why are the guys and I here? Couldn’t you have met this guy without us? Or better yet, couldn’t you have

met him with David, your business partner?”

“He requested to meet some of the Nighthawks. I figured since we were going to be in the city for Katie’s thing, we might as well kill two birds with one stone.”

Finch snorted, a lopsided grin tipping his lips. “You really want to talk about killing birds to a bunch of Nighthawks?”

It was Evan’s turn to groan. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Are you ever serious about anything?”

“Um, let me think ...” Finch flicked a finger against his chin, his eyes fixed on the low clouds.

“Never mind,” Evan grouched, tapping his fingers on his leg. He felt jittery. Sophie and the rest of the woman were huddled in a circle, looking over the map of the market. The whole group was together. Sophie would be fine.

She’d been nervous to be back in the city. He could understand her trepidation. They’d taken precautions to protect her identity. Between her hair color change and her clothes, he understood she looked nothing like she had as a singer in Sirens. The chances of her being recognized were nil. Still, he would feel better once they were in the car heading back to Lake Haven.

His uneasy feeling was probably the anticipation of waiting for a phone call from Breckenridge. He’d met with his former captain yesterday and handed over the pictures. His boss had

stared at the photos in shock, as if he couldn't believe what his eyes were telling him.

Victor Silvo had murdered Sam Chasin. And it was all there in graphic detail. The two-dimensional images were vivid in their ghastly, unquestionable authenticity.

Breckenridge was reaching out to a judge he hoped wasn't in Silvo's pocket for the warrants. Evan hoped to hear that they'd come through any time now. Things needed to move quickly after that. Too many things could go wrong. Silvo and Tito had eyes and ears everywhere in the CPD. Breckenridge needed to gather men he could trust to keep things quiet as they organized the execution of the warrants.

So Evan waited for his phone to ring while he helped his boss fundraise, and shopped with Sophie and Katie, while trying to ignore the feeling of trepidation that had the hairs on the back of his neck itching.

"The others should be here soon. We've got an hour until the investor arrives. Maybe we should use that time to strategize."

"Strategize what? You've done this a million times before. You don't need us."

Graham took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. They'd stopped on the way to the market for their morning caffeine fix. Evan's had gone cold quickly in the chilly mid-west December air and he'd chucked it into the garbage as soon as they'd entered the Christkindlemarket. "Maybe I would

appreciate some backup. Wouldn't hurt you to learn how to schmooze."

Logan, Tin Man, and Jude approached their group. "Yeah, Finch," Logan teased. "Maybe if you learned the fine art of sucking up, you could get Jolene to talk to you again."

Finch's shoulders drooped, and his smirk slipped into a frown. "Fuck off," he said without any heat.

"Come on, Finch. When are you gonna tell us all what happened? Maybe we could help you two work it out."

Finch pushed a hand through his hair, mussing up his curls even more than the wind had, but remained tight-lipped.

"Logan's right," Evan said. "We just want to see both of you happy again. Let us help."

"There's nothing any of you can do," Finch replied. "She found out I'm not who she thought I was, and that was it."

Frowns graced the faces of all the guys. "What's that mean?" Jude asked, voicing Evan's own confusion.

Evan could see the pain his friend fought so hard to hide behind his humor. But he knew how that pain could eat away at a person. He'd wallowed in his own pain for so long he couldn't see a way past it. At least, not until Sophie had entered his life. She didn't know it, but she'd repeatedly knocked against that wall he'd built up around that pain until cracks formed. The cracks spread, and the foundation crumbled. The collapse happened gradually, allowing the

subtle sound of life's serene music to penetrate. It was a music he had blocked out the moment his sister died.

Over the years, he'd tried to find that calm again. He'd continued to play, remembering the fun he and Tara used to have as they fooled around on the piano together. But it wasn't the same.

Not until Sophie.

She'd breathed new life into him. New music. She brought the enjoyment back for him.

Even though his heart broke for his friend, he couldn't help but feel a buoyancy he hadn't felt in years. His anxiousness grew, and he couldn't wait to get Sophie home again. After completing this meeting with the investor, they'd finish up their shopping at the Christkindlmarket then head back to Lake Haven. He wanted to wrap his arms around her just to experience the thrill of feeling her relax against him.

She'd had her own walls, and he knew what a gift she'd given him as she slowly lowered them. He'd do anything to protect that trust she'd placed in him. He knew how badly she'd been hurt in her past. He vowed her future would be filled with nothing but love and music.



“CAN WE GO TO the Sweet Castle?” Katie asked with a little hop to her step. Sophie smiled at the

excitement the teenager was portraying as if she was still a toddler. The girl was still flying high from her impressive performance the night before. Sophie had watched in wonder as Katie's hands flew over the piano keys creating such splendid music it had settled deep inside her soul. She had every right to bask in her euphoria. Katie was a genius when it came to her chosen instrument.

Sophie wished she had half as much energy. But with the worry she had about the photographs and the fallout once they were made public, she hadn't been sleeping well. That combined with Evan's heavy sessions teaching her how to defend herself, followed by different, more carnal types of sessions, her body was feeling the burn and exhaustion. Muscles she didn't even know she had ached. But she didn't mind the twinges. It meant she was learning something useful and growing stronger. What more could she ask for?

"I'd love to get one of those gigantic pretzels," Bethany enthused. "Or some schnitzel."

"And we definitely have to go to the cheese haus. Cheese makes everything better," Annika said, adding to the growing list of booths the ladies wanted to visit at Chicago's Christkindlmarket while the men hovered nearby waiting for them to make their plans.

"What is that quote from?" Natalie asked. Annika, a literary professor, loved to quote from the great literary works of the world. Apparently, she had a quote for every occasion.

"Not a quote. Just the truth," Annika answered with a grin.

It was Sunday, two weeks before Christmas, and the place was crowded. But the mass of people didn't deter the women.

"Hot chocolate is just as important as cheese. We'll definitely need some hot chocolate," Natalie suggested. "Especially since this wind is freezing my eyelashes. I'll need the hot beverage to melt them."

"We could always go to the alpaca booth and stock up on gloves and scarves," said Sutton, rubbing her already mittened hands over her red cheeks. Natalie was right. Temperatures were dropping radically as the wind picked up. But what did they expect? They didn't call it the Windy City for nothing.

Natalie wrestled the paper map as the wind attempted to rip it from her hands. "We may have to split up to get everything we want."

"We'll take Katie to the Sweet Castle." Sophie glanced at the map over Natalie's shoulder. "How 'bout we meet at the hot chocolate stand in an hour? Will that give everybody enough time?"

"Perfect," Annika replied. "Who's coming to the cheese haus with me?"

The ladies broke off with their men to head to their respective booths, and Sophie smiled at their giddiness. As she watched them walk away, her eyes burned, which she was going to blame on the wind and not the fact that she felt near to bursting with tears thinking about her new friends.

She couldn't remember a time she'd been happier despite being back in the city she'd escaped from only a few months ago. Her happiness was in the most part due to the man who'd brought her into his circle of friends, making them hers so effortlessly she'd hardly noticed him doing it. Now she had a whole host of friends. People who cared about her. Supported her just by being a friend. She hoped she gave back to them as much as they had given her.

As if sensing her emotional state, Evan wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to his warm body. He kissed her temple, then asked, "You doin' okay, babe?"

Sophie inhaled deeply, letting the crisp air fill her lungs. "Never better," she replied. She'd been nervous about returning to the city where she'd experienced so much pain. She tried to take solace in the fact that she no longer resembled the woman she'd once been while performing at Sirens. Her hair was a different color, and she'd let the natural wave come out while styling it. Victor had liked her hair blond and sleek. This way suited her much better.

Her clothes changed her appearance as well. The simple jeans, cheap sweater, and puffy winter coat were a far cry from the designer threads Victor had forced her to wear. It had amazed her how wearing the comfortable clothes—clothes she chose herself—could be so freeing.

With the changes to her appearance, she felt confident her return to the city would go unnoticed. It didn't hurt she had Evan and the other Nighthawks as virtual bodyguards.

Katie grabbed her hand, drawing her out of her musings. “Come on, Sophie. Let’s go.”

“I’m coming.” With Evan’s hand clasped in hers, she followed the teenager down the path towards the Sweet Castle.

Unable to keep the grin off her face, she glanced at the man beside her. Evan had given her something else she had sorely missed. A family. His parents had welcomed her in like a daughter. And she was already loving the talented girl pulling her down the aisle.

Many had remarked on Sophie’s talent when she was little. Her parents had fostered her love of singing but didn’t push her farther than she was willing to push herself. She would forever be grateful for the solid foundation they’d given her, allowing her to keep her love of music alive and not get burned out too quickly. Her time with Tito and Victor had dulled it, but now, especially with Evan, her muse was inspiring her once again.

And Jolene had been another help in finding her way back to her music. She’d given Sophie the encouragement to perform again. Jolene’s bar was the perfect venue for Sophie. Small and intimate. A family atmosphere. She could perform when she wanted, what she wanted, and how she wanted. There was a freedom to her performances she hadn’t felt in years. Jolene had had a hand in granting her that freedom.

Thinking of Jolene, she was disappointed her friend hadn’t joined them for their Chicago excursion. She’d told everyone she didn’t have enough coverage at the bar, but Sophie didn’t

believe her. It was because of Finch. From the bits of information she'd learned from the other women, Jolene and Finch had been close until recently. But nobody knew what happened between them. A rift had appeared, and apparently, it had grown until the two could hardly stand to be in the same room together. They weren't fighting. In fact, they hardly spoke to each other.

But Sophie had seen the wounded expression on Finch's face more than once. He still had feelings for Jolene. And it broke her heart to see his longing so prevalent in his expression.

Sophie had caught Jolene gazing at the Nighthawk pilot a few times as well. But in her, there was an undercurrent of anger. She didn't want to pry, but she wished there was something she could do to help her new friends.

Something caught her eye in one of the shops as they passed, and Sophie pulled Katie to a stop. "Wait. Let's go in there for a sec."

"The glass shop?"

"Yeah. I wanna get Jolene something for Christmas."

Katie smiled as they entered the shop while Evan waited just outside. "That's a good idea. I love Jolene. Her restaurant is so cool. I was visiting once when they were doing a karaoke night, and it was so much fun. I wasn't brave enough to get up there, though."

"What? But you're so musically inclined."

“Yeah, on the piano. But singing?” Katie cringed. “No thanks. I think I’d rather have all my fingernails pulled off than sing in front of people.”

“Well, that’s dramatic.”

“It’s the truth. I’d freeze up before the first note left my mouth.”

“I bet you could do it if you put your mind to it.” Sophie picked up a beautiful handcrafted blown-glass ornament. It was clear with specks of red and orange that reminded her of her redheaded friend. She picked up a pair of them and went to the register to pay.

“You sound like my mom.”

“What do you mean?” Sophie asked as she pulled out her bank card, still amazed that she had something that people usually took for granted. Having the ability to purchase whatever she wanted whenever she wanted with her own money had been more freeing than anything else she’d experienced since leaving Chicago.

While they watched the woman wrap the ornaments up to bag them, Katie explained. “My mom always told me I could do anything if I truly wanted it and worked hard. She taught me to play the piano, and it was all downhill from there.”

Sophie took the bag from the saleswoman and followed Katie out of the shop. “Your mom and my mom probably would have been friends. They sound so much alike. My mom taught me music as well.”

“Too bad they never met.” Sophie hated the grief in Katie’s tone. It was similar to the sound she’d heard in her own voice more times than she could count over the years.

“Who knows? Maybe they’re watching over us together right now.”

Katie’s smile loosened the knot in Sophie’s stomach as they discussed their moms. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“It would.”

After passing a few more booths, the Sugar Castle came into view ahead, but Katie slowed her steps before they could get any closer having spotted a booth that sold a drink she wanted to try.

Sophie had heard about the kinderpunch, a German non-alcoholic holiday drink, but had never tried it. The line was long but Evan agreed to stand in line for them since there wasn’t a lot of room for multiple people to wait.

She and Katie stood out of the way of the shoppers. As they waited, Katie’s good mood waned. “I miss her. My mom. Every day. My dad too, even though ...”

“I miss my parents too. And it’s been over fifteen years. I think about them all the time. I wonder what my life would be like had they not died.”

“Me too. If my dad hadn’t—” Katie cut herself off before she could finish her thought. Sophie turned to face her. Katie ducked her head, avoiding meeting Sophie’s eyes, and chewed on her bottom lip.

“Katie? What do you know?” She thought she remembered Evan telling her that they’d kept the truth about what happened that day from Katie. They didn’t want to taint her good memories of her father. According to Evan, Don had been the perfect family man. Doting on his wife and daughter. That’s why the tragedy had blindsided them all.

“Nothing,” Katie answered a little too quickly.

“Katie.”

Her gaze darted over to the kinderpunsch line. “Don’t tell Uncle Evan.” The desperation in the girl’s voice gave her pause.

Glancing around quickly, Sophie spotted an empty bench and pulled Katie over to it. She caught Evan’s eye indicating where they would be. Understanding her intentions, he gave her a chin lift. Katie tucked her hands between her knees after they sat down, her shoulders hunched as she stared down at her feet.

“I can’t promise not to tell your uncle if I think it’s necessary. But I can promise that I will listen. I’m here for you, Katie.”

“Has Uncle Evan talked about what happened?”

She cast a glance at the man in question. He was watching them with a furrowed brow. She smiled, hoping to reassure him that everything was fine while questioning her decision to leave him out of this discussion for the time being. She knew how much pain he still felt over what happened to his sister. If

she could spare him more of that grief, she would and hope she wouldn't say the wrong thing to Katie. "Some. He talks about your mother a lot, but he clams up when your father is brought into the conversation."

Katie sat quietly, rubbing her hands together between her knees. Sophie studied her, remaining just as quiet, giving her time to gather her thoughts. She hated to see the girl struggling but understood her need to talk about it. After her parents died, she would have given anything to have someone to talk to.

"I know what happened that day," Katie finally admitted. "I know what my dad did."

Sophie sucked in a breath of air, unsure of how to handle this. There had been a reason the Coles had kept the truth from Katie. Sophie may not have understood it, but she wanted to honor their decision. This was a minefield she wasn't sure she was equipped to deal with.

"What exactly do you know?" Sophie asked, easing into it while debating whether to grab Evan's attention.

"My friends sent me the articles. My dad held my mom hostage. He lost control and shot her, then turned the gun on himself. They also said he was high on drugs which is crazy. But I guess there's no other explanation for what he did."

Sophie knew her jaw was hanging open in shock that Katie knew as much as she did. She snapped it shut, then took a deep breath before replying. "Okay. So you know everything. Are you okay?"

“Not really. I’m kinda angry.”

“That’s understandable. I was angry too when I lost my parents. It was so unfair.”

“No, that’s not what I’m angry about. I’m mad that Grams and Pops didn’t tell me the truth. Why would they keep that from me?”

Sophie took a moment to collect her thoughts. She was treading into uncharted territory here and didn’t want to disparage her grandparents’ decision. So she tried to answer Katie’s question in the only way she knew how. “Tell me about your parents.”

Katie’s head shot up, the confusion evident in her wide eyes. “What?”

“Your parents. What do you remember about them?”

“They ... they were the best parents. Supportive. Loving. Everything a kid needs her parents to be.”

“Sounds a lot like mine. Now tell me about your mom.”

Katie smiled. “She was pretty. Talented. Patient. Stubborn. She could sit with me for hours, helping me learn a new piano piece. She pushed me to be my very best, which sometimes made me mad. But when she pushed, it worked.” A smile tipped the corners of her mouth. “I guess I’m a lot like her.”

“I bet you are. Your uncle talks about your tenacity while learning a new piece. Your mom gave you that.”

“Yeah, I guess she did.”

“Okay, what about your dad? Tell me about him.”

“Dad was larger than life. Protective. Strong. He didn’t always understand my mom’s and my need for music, but he supported me. He didn’t know the first thing about Chopin or Beethoven, but he’d be in the front row at every performance cheering me on.” She looked out at the people passing by as they shopped, a wistful expression on her face. Then suddenly, she frowned. “He changed. That last year. He wasn’t ... he didn’t ... he was just ...” She struggled to find the words, then pursed her lips.

“I’m guessing he acted differently. Like he wasn’t the dad you knew anymore.”

Katie nodded and squeezed her eyes shut, pushing a tear past her lid to slide down her cheek. “H-he was so angry. All the time.”

As another tear fell, Sophie feared asking the next question. “Did he ... did he hit—”

Katie sat ramrod straight as she cut off Sophie’s words. “No. Nothing like that. He never hit me.” Her expression dropped. “But I’m not sure if it was the same for my mom.”

A family of four tramped past, the kids skipping as they sang “Frosty the Snowman.” The scene made her smile sadly. She remembered that kind of idyllic life as a little kid. Surrounded by the love of her parents. Not a care in the world. It amazed her how quickly it could all be taken away.

She caught Evan's eye again, glad that her body blocked his view of Katie's tears. She still felt the need to shield him from his niece's pain knowing he'd blame himself even more than he already did. He smiled and her heart gave a little flutter. She was doing the right thing.

Life was fragile. Something she and Katie knew far too well. They were alike. Both had tragedy strike their innocent lives, changing them forever. It was a nightmare no child should have to suffer.

Losing her parents in a car accident, while sudden and tragic, was not something anyone could predict happening. But to lose the ones you love at the hands of someone who was supposed to love you ... Sophie couldn't imagine.

"He killed her. Just shot her dead. Why? Why would he do that? He stole her from me. For what? Didn't he think of me at all?" Her tone increased in distress as her confusion spewed forth. People began to notice the distraught young girl, and Sophie wanted to guard her from their scrutiny. She got up from the bench and crouched in front of Katie, taking her hands in her own.

"I don't think it was like that. He wasn't thinking of anything other than his own agony. He wasn't in his right mind."

"Because of the drugs?"

Katie's knowledge of *everything* that had happened stunned her. How could her grandparents and Evan not have noticed how much information the teenager had gathered? In this

internet age, she could collect information with a few clicks.
“Wow, you *do* know a lot.”

“No thanks to my family,” she grumbled.

Sophie peered over her shoulder, hoping Evan wasn't too close to joining them yet. She could just see the top of his head over the others in line. He still had several customers in front of him. Sighing, she turned her attention back to Katie. “They were just trying to protect you.”

“From what? The truth? The fact that my dad was a murderer?”

“Exactly.” Some of Katie's anger evaporated as she blinked with bafflement. “Remember how you just described your dad? Don't you think your grandparents would want you to keep the memories of your dad as a good man intact? It's probably agony for them to know what happened to him. Especially for your uncle.”

Katie scoffed, her eyes flashed with anger as she glared at the back of Evan's head. “He was there. He let it happen.”

The anger in the girl's voice shocked her. She gaped at her, wondering how she could ever think her uncle just *let it happen*. “Oh, sweetie, you know that's not fair. You're old enough now that I think you understand about putting yourself in someone else's shoes. Imagine what it was like for him. His best friend and his sister. Two people he loved more than anything. He was blindsided. They'd kept the problems from him. But he did everything he could to stop it.”

“It didn’t work,” Katie groused.

“No, it didn’t. And it kills him every day. Especially when he looks at you.”

Katie refocused on her with a tilt to her head, her brow wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Sophie sighed, unsure whether she should say any more. She didn’t want Katie to hate her uncle for his part in that day’s events, and it would devastate Evan to know his niece felt even a modicum of anger toward him.

She needed to get Katie to understand, to empathize with what Evan felt. “Pretty sure your uncle would have given anything to have saved your mom that day, including his own life. And because he couldn’t? For a man like him, he sees it as his biggest mistake. His biggest failure. He feels like he let you—and your mom—down. It kills him that he couldn’t save her ... for you.”

“For me? I don’t get it.”

“Yes, for you. She was your mother—”

“And his sister.”

“Yeah, but the relationship is different. A girl needs her mother. When he sees you growing up without her, it’s hard for him to accept that he did all he could. I don’t know if he’ll ever be able to forgive himself.”

“Oh, I-I never thought of it that way. I miss her. And my dad. And yeah, I hate that they’re gone. But I’m gonna be

okay. Now that I understand Uncle Evan's part, it's not his fault, and I'm sorry he feels bad about it."

"You should probably have this talk with him and your grandparents sometime. Clear the air. It might help your uncle to hear what you just said to me."

Katie bit her thumbnail, contemplating her words. "Yeah. I'll do that."

"Your uncle will probably be looking for us. Shall we move closer to the kinderpunsch stand?"

"Yup," Katie said, popping the *P* and bouncing back to the happy-go-lucky teenager Sophie was growing to adore.

"I'm lucky to have my family, aren't I?" Katie asked after they'd taken a few steps.

"Absolutely."

"Who took you in after your parents died?"

"My uncle."

Katie gave an excited little hop. "Really? That must have been great. I always have fun when I stay with Uncle Evan."

"Um ..." Sophie hesitated, not wanting to expose the life she'd lived to such a young, impressionable mind. Katie had enough hardship in her own life. She didn't need to hear about Sophie's. But she'd remained quiet for too long and drew Katie's suspicions.

Katie grabbed Sophie's hand. "What is it? What did I say?"

"Nothing, sweetie. I don't like to talk about him much."

“Oh God. I’m sorry. Why?”

“Let’s just say he wasn’t a very good guy. Not like your uncle.”

“Aw, why you gotta say such things?” Sophie froze at the sound of the voice that came from behind them, her blood going cold with fear.

Chapter Twenty-Five



SLOWLY, SHE TURNED ON her heel to face Joseph and Sal, the two guards who worked for Victor. She'd hoped to never see them again. They were the two assigned to guard her every time she went to the salon. Frankly, it surprised her they were still alive, considering she'd disappeared under their noses.

“Yeah. Don't think Tito's gonna be so happy to hear that after everything he did for you,” Sal sneered.

“S-Sophie?” Katie asked, and Sophie's heart shattered at the tremor she heard in the young girl's voice.

“It's okay. Katie,” she assured, moving to stand slightly in front of Evan's niece. Joseph's eyes narrowed as he caught her maneuver. Every atom inside her quaked in fear, but she was proud it didn't show in her voice. Evan's words flashed through her mind. She was the strongest person he knew.

Her gaze darted in his direction, willing him to look over. If she could somehow attract his attention ...

“Don’t even think about it,” Joseph said. “Your boyfriend will be dead before he could make it two steps over to you.” It was then she noticed the other men loitering nearby. One was directly in line behind Evan. She could just make out the three points of the crown tattoo on the back of his neck sticking out of his collar. She’d become very familiar with that symbol. It was a staple among the Latin Lords gang members.

Another stood to the left of the drink stand. He raised a cup to his lips and Sophie saw another crown tattoo on the back of his hand. The points of the crown were inked on three of his fingers. And even though she couldn’t spot them, she figured there were more waiting for an order to cause mayhem.

With her heart pounding, she swallowed the scream that wanted to claw its way out of her throat. They had her trapped. They knew she would never risk the dozens of innocent lives that were enjoying the market.

She eyed the two men who’d had a hand in making her life miserable for over a decade. As always, they were dressed in tailored suits. Joseph’s was black with a black button-down shirt and tie. Sal’s was charcoal with a light blue shirt and no tie. She could just make out the requisite bulge under their coats that told her they were armed. She expected nothing less.

“You want him to live? You’ll do exactly as we say.”

Katie gasped, and Sophie could feel her tremble behind her. “S-sophie?”

“Shh. It’s gonna be okay,” she said, trying to inject a confidence she didn’t exactly feel into her tone.

“Yeah, Katie. We’re just havin’ a conversation here.”

“No need to be nervous.”

Sophie reached behind her and grasped Katie’s hand, clinging to it. If they had to move fast, she wanted to ensure that Katie stuck with her. “What do you want?” she asked, trying to infuse more bravado into her voice than she felt. It worked, mostly, even though she felt like her knees were knocking together.

“You come home and don’t bother to drop in on your uncle? What kind of niece are you?” Joseph mocked.

“Victor will be thrilled to have you home too.”

“This isn’t my home anymore.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. This will always be home.” Joseph gave her a little push, forcing her to walk. Unsure her legs would function, she slid one foot forward, moving slowly while her gaze darted to her surroundings, hoping to spot a way out of this, but not wanting to draw Evan’s attention. They wouldn’t hesitate to kill him. That she could say without a doubt. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she got him killed.

A quick glance in his direction showed her that Graham and Logan had joined him, drawing Evan’s attention away from her.

They’d reached the entrance to the Sweet Castle, and Sophie wished they could hide inside, but Joseph grabbed her

arm, his fingers biting into her muscle. “Your uncle would like to see you.”

Sophie thought about ripping her arm out of his grasp, grabbing Katie, and making a run for it until Katie’s gasp caught her ear. “Hey!”

Sal had a hand wrapped around Katie’s arm as well. Sophie had no choice but to cooperate for the time being. Even as everything inside her screamed at her to run, she knew that would be a huge mistake. The presence of the other Nighthawks with Evan meant their women were nearby. She couldn’t put her new friends’ lives at risk.

If she grabbed Katie and ran, the assholes who’d grabbed them wouldn’t hesitate to use those concealed guns. And neither would the gang members surrounding Evan.

She continued to look for an opening to escape, unwilling to admit defeat. Right now, she had to protect Katie. “Let go of her.”

“Nah. She can come meet Tito too.”

“No. She doesn’t have anything to do with this. Let her go.”

“Not gonna happen, angel. Might as well shut up and just go with it. Nothin’ will hurt you as long as you’re good. Stay quiet and everybody lives.”

Sophie caught one last fleeting glimpse of Evan who had finally made it to the front of the line before the men propelled the women out of the market area and onto Clark Street, heading north. Everything moved in a blur, too fast for her to

focus on any place or passerby. Desperate, she willed the kaleidoscope of images to slow down to allow her to look for a way out of this predicament.

She knew what would happen as soon as they brought her to her uncle. Once he got his hands on her, it wouldn't be pretty. It would be just as bad, if not worse, if they took her to Victor. She'd betrayed him. She'd slipped from his control. He wasn't the type of man who would take disloyalty lying down. Her punishment would be harsh. He'd lock her up, and she'd never see the light of day again. He wouldn't allow her to sing in the club like she had in the past. He'd take everything away from her until she was nothing.

Sophie glanced at the innocent young woman that had unwittingly been pulled into this hell. Catching the fear on Katie's face, her stomach filled with a weight of powerlessness. Her heart pounded against ribs that felt too tight to contain the hammering. She had to get Katie out of this. If Tito got his hands on her, he'd ruin her, then sell her off to the highest bidder. Just like he did with her.

Holiday shoppers crowded the streets, the euphoric atmosphere at odds with what was happening right in the midst of the revelers. If Sophie could catch the eye of just one of them and could communicate their dilemma ...

It was a ridiculous idea. What could any innocent do against two of Victor's enforcers? And who knows how many others were nearby?

Before she could come up with an adequate plan, they turned down an alley. The darkness cast by the two buildings was unnerving. They stopped by the back of a Lincoln town car, and Sophie watched as the trunk yawned open. She stared down into the dark space as all the little hairs on her arms stood straight out. Her mind went blank, unable to think of a way to save them.

“Phones,” Joseph said, making Sophie jump. Unable to fathom what he was saying, she blinked blindly up at him. “Give me your phones.” His bark caused a small whimper to slip from Katie. The sound twisted itself around Sophie’s heart. She’d give anything for Katie to not be involved in this.

“Please. It’s me Tito wants. Let her go. She’s no use to him.”

“Shut the fuck up and give me your phone.”

Katie handed her phone over while Sophie reached for hers. She couldn’t help but feel she was relinquishing her last thread of hope. Evan had given her the phone, saying he’d feel better if she had a way to call for help if needed. He had been thinking of the time she had a flat tire and was stuck alone on a dark road. Not the possibility of her being kidnapped by the guys who worked for evil.

Her heart dropped into her stomach as soon as the device slipped from her fingers.

Joseph dropped both to the ground and stomped on them with his abnormally large Oxfords. Distracted by the smashed and twisted pile of technology, she didn’t notice that Sal had

grabbed Katie again until the girl whimpered. She was struggling against the hold the man had on her wrists as he forced them behind her back and placed them inside the loop of a zip tie. The clicks as he tightened them sounded overly loud in the dark space.

“Oh, please don’t,” Sophie begged when Katie cried out in pain as the plastic dug into the delicate skin of her wrists. “Please don’t hurt her.”

She shoved Joseph out of her way to reach for Katie but was grabbed and pulled back. “No. Ugh.” She struggled. “Let her go. Please, let her go. I’ll do whatever you ask. Just let her go.”

He wrenched her arms behind her back and restrained her with her own set of zip ties. “Oh, you’ll do whatever we want, no matter what.” Joseph pulled her back against him, his lips near her ear. She leaned away from the awful feeling of his acidic breath against her neck. “I’m looking forward to making you do whatever I want.”

Sophie shivered at the suggestive threat. The man cackled and thrust himself against her bound hands. He rubbed his hardness into her palms. Sophie couldn’t help herself. She fisted his dick, squeezed hard, and twisted. Joseph howled, and Sophie tightened her grip, digging her nails in as hard as she could.

The punch to her kidney took her down to her knees, her grip slipping. “You bitch. You want it so bad, I’ll give it to you right now,” he sneered and reached for his belt.

“Joseph, stop fucking around. Get them in the trunk before someone sees.”

Joseph growled, obviously disgruntled to be interrupted. He fisted a handful of Sophie’s hair and lifted her to her feet. His rancid breath assaulted her senses when he leaned down in her face. “I’ll give you the fucking you deserve, cunt. Just wait.”

Before Sophie could reply, the man released her hair, then punched her jaw. The force of the blow sent her reeling, and she fell over the bumper of the car and into the trunk.

“Sophie,” Katie called out. She could hear the girl struggling against their captors but couldn’t shake off the stupor the hit had put her in. Dizziness swamped her as a darkness seeped in from the edges of her vision. She felt a weight land on top of her, then nothing but blackness.



BY THE TIME EVAN had reached the front of the line, Graham and Logan had joined him. Ignoring the grumbles of the customers behind them as they cut the line, they chatted about the upcoming meeting with Mr. Silverton. His boss had done his due diligence and researched the investor. There wasn’t much written about the man himself, just his companies.

He was a successful developer, responsible for revitalizing parts of Chicago. But he was reclusive. Graham couldn’t find

any photos of the man, so they had no idea who to look for in the crowd of people. It was a little strange Mr. Silverton wanted to meet in such a public place, but they'd been told this was just an opportunity to be introduced to them. The money talk would come later.

Evan glanced over at the bench where he knew his girls sat. Not spotting them right away, his heart jolted. Raking the crowd with his eyes, he searched for them until a man standing by the drink stand caught his attention. As he watched, the man rubbed at his scruff on his chin and Evan's heart stopped. The Latin Lords crown was tattooed on the back of his hand.

Panic seized him, and he searched the crowd again. More questionable men jumped out at him. *Fuck*. The horrendous notion that he'd fucked up big time threatened to swamp him.

Graham's trilling cell phone sounded as he was about to step away from the booth in search of Sophie. "Hey, Chickadee. You a little impatient?"

Graham's spine went ramrod straight, his gaze shooting over to Evan. "Say that again. I'm gonna put you on speaker." He lowered the phone from his ear and hit the speaker button. "Go ahead, Chickadee."

"We just saw Sophie and Katie leave the market. Since Evan's with you, I thought it was a little strange."

Evan's heart stopped before turning over and thumping painfully against his sternum. His hands tightened on the flimsy cups he hadn't even realized he had grabbed, prepared

to dump them and rush out of the market after Sophie and his niece.

“We tried to keep them in sight, but lost them in the crowd. Last we saw, they were out near the street. And it looked like two guys were with them.”

“Sophie’s not answering her phone, either,” Annika said.

Evan dumped the cups and pulled out his phone. He listened to the rings, counting them as they went unanswered. Disconnecting, he immediately redialed, hoping that she just hadn’t heard it ring with the noise from the crowd. This time it rang once before clicking off. He tried again and was directed to her voice mail right away.

His gut churned with worry. There was no way Sophie wouldn’t answer his calls. Especially since Katie was with her. Not unless something—or someone—prevented her from answering.

Fuck. He never should have let Sophie come back to the city. She had escaped. She’d been safe. He’d been confident in his ability to shield her and selfishly wanted her with him for Katie’s performance. And now, he feared she was potentially going to pay for his mistakes.

He looked around for the Latin Lord he’d spotted earlier, hoping to grab the guy for questioning. He was gone. Scanning the crowd, his heart dropped. They had all disappeared from sight, but he could feel their eyes on him. He’d be delusional to think they would just walk away and leave him alone.

“We’re gonna keep looking,” Natalie said. *Shit*. The other women. He needed them to be as far away from this as possible. Another mistake that would haunt him. He should have told them about Sophie’s past.

Graham launched his cups into the trash bin. “Wait for us. We’ll meet you by the Sweet Castle.”

“Hurry.”

Evan rushed toward the Sweet Castle, nearly colliding with a young family just exiting the candy store. He could barely hear his boss calling the rest of the Nighthawks. His pulse pounded so hard it muffled the surrounding sounds.

He raced past the women to Clark Street and skidded to a stop. He frantically searched both directions, hoping for a glimpse of Sophie’s wavy brown hair or her light blue coat. If the wary looks the crowd was giving him were any indication, he must have looked like a crazed man as his head swung back and forth.

But there was no sign of them. They were gone, and he had no idea which direction to even try to go. Helplessness swamped him. Once again, he could only stand uselessly on the street as people he cared about were in potential danger.

Shit. He let her down.

Because the only conclusion he could come to was that either her uncle or Victor had found her. Neither of which was acceptable.

And he hadn't been there to protect her from her worst nightmare.

He may have let her down, but to find the woman he loved, he'd burn this city to ash.

He still had contacts in this city. He'd start with them. He'd leave no stone unturned until both his girls were safe.

Chapter Twenty-Six



SOPHIE JOLTED AWAKE, AND the pain was instant. Surrounded by darkness, she took stock. A persistent throb emanated from her jaw. She worked it from side to side, wincing at the pain. There was an ache in her lower back that twinged with every miniscule movement. Her shoulders burned, and her wrists felt like they were on fire. She tried to ease the discomfort, only to find her hands bound behind her back.

Everything came back to her with an urgency that brought clarity. Something shifted behind her.

“Katie?”

A gasp reached her ears in the confined space. “Sophie! Thank God. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. What about you? Did they hurt you?”

“No. No, I’m okay.”

“Where are we?”

“Still in the trunk. I don’t know where they’re taking us.”

“Okay. Good.” As long as they were moving, there was still a chance to come up with a plan of escape. “Let’s see if we can’t figure a way out of here.”

“I’ve tried to feel around, see if I could put my hands on any tools. I think they removed everything.”

“That’s okay. We’ll think of something else. Can you reach my front pocket?”

Sophie heard shuffling. Something hard bumped into her lower back and she sucked back a gasp as pain jolted up her spine.

“Sorry,” Katie mumbled. Sophie felt hands on her hip. “What am I looking for?”

“See if my pocketknife is still there?”

Fingers dug into her pocket. Sophie rolled to her back and attempted to straighten her legs in the tight space. She ignored the agony in her body as she waited.

“I feel something.” Fingers pushed deeper into her pocket. “Almost got it. There.” The hands pulled out, and Sophie rolled to her side.

“Give it to me.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“Katie. I don’t want you to cut yourself.”

“It’ll be easier for me to cut your ties. I’ll be careful.”

Sophie huffed out a breath of frustration but resigned herself to letting Katie help. The clack of the knife hitting the plastic

of the zip ties sounded loud in their tomb. They were quiet as Katie worked on sawing awkwardly through the plastic.

The car jolted, jostling them both. Sophie felt a sting as the knife slipped and sliced her skin before a tiny thud caught her ear. “Shit. I’m sorry. I dropped it.”

Katie wiggled around behind her as she tried to grasp the knife once more. “Don’t worry about it. I think you’ve cut it enough I can break it apart.” She rolled onto her stomach, the pain in her back protesting the movement. Sophie worried the punch to her kidney had done more damage than she initially thought.

She lifted her arms away from her body as far as her aching shoulders would allow, then brought them down in one swift motion, yanking her wrists apart as they collided with her body. The plastic snapped, and Sophie breathed a sigh of relief as the tension on her shoulders eased.

Stiffly, she rolled to face Katie. “I’m free. Now you.” She patted around as far as she could reach until her fingers brushed against the knife. She held in the wince as the sharp blade cut her thumb. Grasping the tool in her hand, she got to work on Katie’s bindings.

Once free, Katie rolled to face her. Nose to nose, they hugged. “What’s happening, Sophie? Who are these guys, and where are they taking us?”

Sophie drew back but kept a hand on Katie’s upper arm. “I’m gonna get you out of this. Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll do what I can too. But Sophie, it would help if I knew what we’re dealing with here.”

Sophie blew out a breath. “Remember me saying my uncle wasn’t a good guy?” Sophie felt more than saw Katie nod. “He took me in when I was fifteen and the abuse started almost immediately. He’s an evil man. The things I know he’s involved in are too horrible to believe.”

Katie gasped. “Oh my God, Sophie. That’s terrible.”

Sophie explained how she’d eventually been sent to live with Victor. How safe she’d felt for the first few years. How much she enjoyed performing at Sirens and how it all changed. She held back the worst of the abuse, unwilling to subject the girl to those images.

“With the help of a friend, I finally escaped. That’s when I met your uncle and the others.”

“God, Sophie. I’m so sorry that happened. But I’m so glad you met Uncle Evan. He’s a good man, and I can see he loves you a lot.”

“I know. He *is* a good guy, and I love him too. I’m just so sorry my past has hurt you. I never wanted to put you in danger. I’m gonna figure out a way to get you out of here.”

“How? What are we going to do to escape?”

Sophie looked over her shoulder at the place where the glow from the emergency release handle for the trunk should be. Her uncle’s men might have been stupid enough to neglect to

search her pockets, but they had been smart enough to remove the release handle.

There went that plan. The only thing she could think of would be risky, but she'd do anything to free Katie. "I think I have a plan, but I need you to do everything I say. It's the only way, okay?"

"O-okay. Tell me what to do." Sophie laid out her plan, and together, they tweaked it until they each had their roles. It had to work. Despite the doubt clouding her hope, she was determined. She would not let the man she loved lose another family member. Especially not because of her. Katie would escape. She'd survive. That was all Sophie could hope for.



E VAN MADE HIS PHONE calls as the others called the rest of the Nighthawks. Soon, they all stood around him waiting for direction. The problem was, Evan had no idea where to begin.

"You guys need to take the women out of here," Evan insisted. Grumbles of dissent rang out, the loudest from the women. His gaze shifted to the surrounding crowd, constantly searching for the threat of the Latin Lords. A target was on his back, and he itched to eradicate it. But more importantly, he needed his friends out of the line of fire. "Seriously, go back to the hotel."

“Wanna fill us in on what’s truly going on?” Jude asked after joining them near the Sweet Castle.

With a sigh, his gaze dropped. He hated he had to spill Sophie’s secrets to them. He knew that she’d never want them to look at her differently. But by the expressions on their faces, that would never happen. There was anger on her behalf and awe at her strength. The same awe he felt every time he looked at her.

The story once again broke his heart, his pain for what Sophie had survived evident in the rasp of his voice.

The convoluted tale was twisted and appalling and featured villains that were the worst of humanity. The shock of learning of the horrific life Sophie had escaped from coalesced into rage for each one of the Nighthawks. These men were first and foremost protectors by nature. Learning that one of their own had been so horribly abused lit a fuse. And God help Tito Alvaro and Victor Silvo if they laid one finger on Sophie or Katie. They had no idea the hell that would rain down on them if anything happened to either woman.

“You should have told us,” Jude said, his massive arms crossed over his chest.

“It wasn’t his story to tell,” Hollynn said, resting a hand on Jude’s arm.

“Still should have given us something. A warning,” Jude muttered.

“He’s telling us now,” Graham reasoned. “That’s all that matters.”

Annika caught his eye, her gaze assessing. “You think we’re in danger?” she stated. “That’s why you want us to leave.”

“Yes,” he replied simply.

“Okay. So what are we going to do to find them?” Annika asked.

Evan stared at her incredulously. “Didn’t you hear what I just said? The Latin Lords are ruthless. Please, go back to the hotel where I know you’ll all be safe.”

“No,” Annika returned.

“Not gonna happen,” contributed Sutton, crossing her arms.

“We’re staying to help.” Hollynn stepped closer to him and dared him with her eyes to argue.

Natalie was the last to speak and did so in no uncertain terms. “We’re in this together. You might as well just accept it.”

Evan glanced at their men, imploring them for help.

Graham took pity on him at last. “You can try to argue with them, but it would be a waste of time. Let’s focus on a plan to find Sophie and Katie, then we’ll circle back to this matter.”

“We just want to help in any way we can,” Annika said in a gentle voice. Logan wrapped an arm around her, pulling her in close.

He regarded his friends. He knew without a doubt they would help in any way they could. There was a fierce determination on their faces. They'd each been in his shoes. They understood the fear he felt and wrapped their arms a little tighter around their own women.

Evan's felt tremendously empty without Sophie.

He gave in to the women's insistence for the moment, pushed his feelings aside and focused on what they'd learned up to this point, which was very little.

After hearing that several people had seen Sophie crouched in front of a crying Katie, he fleetingly wondered if Sophie had taken her some place private to talk. When he saw them at the bench, he assumed everything was okay when she smiled at him. But if they had gone some place quiet, that wouldn't account for the unanswered calls and texts.

He didn't know why he was trying to come up with other possibilities. He knew what had happened. The anxiety in his gut had been warning him all morning. He'd fucked up and Sophie's past found her. Just what they intended to do with her—and Katie—remained to be seen.

It couldn't be anything good.

A cold knot formed in his stomach with the possibilities, the most devastating being that they'd be killed or even trafficked. The two men from Sophie's past were ruthless bastards. They wouldn't take Sophie's betrayal well. They'd want retribution. And now his niece was caught up in the mess.

The invisible band around his chest tightened as images flashed through his mind. He'd seen enough crime scenes in his days on the force to know the worst that humanity was capable of. Hell, Sophie's own pictures were proof of the lengths Silvo was willing to go.

But he'd want to make Sophie suffer first. And that was the best thing they had going for them at the moment. He wouldn't kill Sophie right away. He'd want to punish her. Her burn scars flashed in his mind's eye. Silvo's punishments were brutal. Those scars were proof of that.

But Sophie was strong. She'd survive whatever Silvo doled out. And Evan would be there for her every step of the way.

He just needed to find her first.

And hope they didn't kill Katie outright.

While Breckenridge worked on the warrants, Evan's other contacts within the Chicago Police Department were working on finding Tito's and Victor's current whereabouts. Neither man was in their homes or at the many clubs Silvo owned. They had to turn up eventually. And when they did, Evan would be there.

Evan had also gotten in touch with an old informant of his. Surprisingly, the man was still alive. Gus Mann was a strung-out low man on the totem pole within the Latin Lords' gang. His motivation was cold hard cash, and Evan promised him the mother lode if he came through for him with information leading to Sophie's and Katie's safe return.

There was no other outcome that he would accept. They would return to him, safe and sound. Anything else was unthinkable.

“Have you talked to your parents?” Natalie asked him, a deep furrow between her brows conveying her worry.

“No, not yet. Not until we know more,” he bit out, his voice thick and unsteady. He couldn’t make that phone call. Not again.

The first phone call, nearly five years ago to the day, had been the hardest thing he’d ever had to do. Nothing had prepared him for that moment. Telling his parents their little girl—his sister—was gone had broken him. He’d never forget the anguished cry from his mother.

That was when the guilt set in. It should have been him. He had the dangerous job. He put his life on the line every time he pinned on his badge. Especially in the years leading up to his resignation with the animosity felt toward cops in his city. It was a cruel twist of fate that he lived while his sister was gone.

He couldn’t make that phone call. Not yet. How could he? How could he tell his parents that their little girl’s little girl was missing?

No. He’d hold off for as long as he could. Why worry them unnecessarily? He didn’t know for sure yet what happened to Katie and Sophie. Until he did, he’d guard his parents against the heartbreaking distress he currently felt.

Natalie laid a soft hand on his arm, drawing his gaze to her. Her green eyes spoke of the worry they all felt. “Okay. If you need me to talk to them, I will.”

His mouth curved with tenderness for the woman before him. The concern marring her features was a testament to the size of her heart. He knew she’d do anything for not only him, but for Sophie and Katie as well.

He looked around at the men and women who surrounded him. Each one of them was invested in a positive outcome. Nothing else was acceptable to them. They’d proven their strength and resilience over the years, starting with Natalie and her fight for survival. Graham hadn’t given up in his search for her, and neither had the rest of the Nighthawks.

And now that another one of their family members was missing, Evan knew with a certainty he felt bone deep that not a single man or woman standing with him would give up until they were home safe.

Katie, of course, was his family, which automatically made her a member of the extended Nighthawk family. Sophie had only recently joined their ranks but was no less family, mostly because she was important to Evan. His heart tried to swell at the overwhelming emotions his friends filled him with, but the band of worry and fear restricted the expansion.

Evan patted Natalie’s hand, which still rested on his arm. “Thanks, Natalie. I’ll let you know if it’s necessary,” he said just as her phone rang.

Natalie pulled the device out of her coat pocket and answered, putting it on speaker for all of them to hear. “I’ve got a location,” Emma succinctly informed, forgoing pleasantries. Evan’s heart leaped at the news, thankful that someone had thought to call their resident computer expert. “At least it’s the last place their phones were. The good news—they were together. The bad news—the signal was lost. I’m sorry, guys. That’s all I got. I’ll text you all the location and keep digging.”

“Thanks Emma. You’re the best,” Natalie said.

“Emma, wait,” Evan called out before Natalie could hang up. “Tito Alvaro and Victor Silvo. I need you to do a deep dive if you can.”

“Sure. Anything in particular I should look for?”

“Focus on properties for now. I want to know what they own.”

“Got it. I’ll call back if I find anything.”

“Thanks.” Natalie hung up, and the Nighthawks’ phones chimed with the incoming text.

Evan looked at the address and realized it was only a few blocks from their current location. He took off, dodging holiday shoppers in his haste as best he could. Reaching Clark Street, he turned north. He ran, not stopping to make sure the guys followed. He knew they were there. Just as he knew they wouldn’t stop until the girls were found.

Skidding to turn down the alley, he collided with the brick as he took the corner without slowing. He ignored the burst of pain in his shoulder while using all his senses in his search. His feet came to an abrupt halt when he reached the end of the alleyway. There was nothing here. A few sturdy doors that led into the surrounding buildings, dumpsters, and trash.

His girls weren't here.

"There." Evan turned to find Logan pointing to the ground. He stumbled closer, then crouched by the mangled pile of what had once been two cell phones. He recognized Katie's case instantly. He was the one who'd gotten it for her last Christmas. The music notes covering the plastic mocked him.

This was the confirmation they needed, but it didn't make him feel any better.

As he stared at the shattered phones, he couldn't move, couldn't breathe. He remembered Jude doing the same recently when Hollynn had been taken and they'd found her bracelet in the woods. Jude had stared at that piece of string like it could magically tell him where to go next. He needed the crushed lump by his feet to give him a bit of magical direction, even knowing the wish was ridiculous.

"Now we know for sure they aren't just off getting a coffee somewhere," Logan said.

"Where do we go from here?" Tin Man asked.

"We let Emma work her magic," Graham instructed. "Anybody besides Evan have any contacts in the city that

could help?”

Silence met Graham’s inquiry until Jude spoke. “What about your friend Wade, Tin Man? Think his group could help us out?”

“I don’t know. They’re based out of New York. I’ll call him.” Tin Man stepped away to place that call, but Evan still couldn’t move away from the twisted remains of their phones. He couldn’t help but feel it represented his fragile connection to Sophie. Smashed to smithereens, just like his heart felt.

Graham’s voice pulled him back from his spiraling thoughts. “I’m sorry, Mr. Silverton. We’ll have to reschedule.” Evan looked over his shoulder to see his boss on his phone. “We’ve had a family emergency that pulled us away last minute.” Evan shot to his feet when Graham’s tone changed to anger. “Who the hell are you?”

The call now on speaker, they listened to the voice on the other end, Evan’s own rage building. “Sorry for the subterfuge. I’m sure your organization does wonderful things. Unfortunately, it’s not really anything that benefits my business interests. But I wanted to express my thanks to you and your team, Mr. Whitaker. You Nighthawks have been useful in one regard. Because of our scheduled meeting, I saw a successful return on a previous investment. And the best part is that it comes with a bonus that I’ve been assured will be quite profitable.”

Evan’s hands shook as he clenched his fists. His pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out the ambient city sounds.

Every man in this alley knew what the guy was alluding to when mentioning the lucrative bonus. He was talking about Katie. It was obvious what his plans were for her. It sickened him to hear the asshole talk about Sophie and Katie like they were nothing more than business assets.

Nausea churned in Evan's gut. He turned toward the dumpster beside him and emptied his stomach of the breakfast he'd shared with the people he loved just a few short hours ago. Now two of them were in harm's way. In the hands of a monster. Evan felt a helplessness he hadn't suffered since the day Tara died.

Straightening, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, determined the outcome to this current situation would be different.

"I hope my triumph hasn't upset you too much," the asshole on Graham's phone mocked. "But now you understand that nobody takes what is mine without consequences. You'd do well to remember that. That's twice now, Mr. Cole. You've missed what's right under your nose twice. First with your murdering partner and now. Some cop you are."

The blood drained from Evan's head before what remained froze in his veins as Silvo's cackle rang in his ears. Dizziness assailed him, and he felt the acid in his stomach roil again. He swallowed it down, jaw clenched to contain it.

"What do you know about my partner?" Evan asked through gritted teeth.

"My associate knows more. I read the papers, Mr. Cole. I know your partner lost it. It was your sister he killed that day,

wasn't it? I heard she was a beautiful woman. I'm hoping the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"You son of a bitch," Evan roared. "You touch one hair on her head—"

"And you'll what, Mr. Cole? What could you do to me? I'm untouchable. This is *my* city. I own it and everyone in it. Including you. There is not a single thing you can do to me."

"Keep deluding yourself, Silvo."

"Ah, I see you've heard of me."

"Yeah, I know who you are. I know what you've done."

Silvo's laugh had the opposite effect Evan was sure the man meant it to convey. Instead of feeling belittled or defeated, Evan was more determined than ever to take him down. He'd been a scourge on the city for long enough. He'd pay for his crimes. But more importantly, he'd pay for the hell he'd subjected Sophie to for years.

"Should I be nervous?" Silvo taunted.

"Absolutely."

Silvo chuckled again, convinced of his power. "Don't be daft. You have nothing. You're just a washed-up cop who couldn't cut it in the big city. You couldn't even stop your own partner, your brother-in-law. What makes you think you can even aspire to stopping me?"

It was Evan's turn to laugh. "Watch me." He knew exactly how Victor Silvo was going down, and he would relish it. "I'm

coming for you, Silvo. Watch your back.”

“You don’t scare me, Mr. Cole. I’ve already won. My property will soon be returned to me. I’ll make it so she disappears, and you’ll never see her again. But I’m nothing if not magnanimous. Perhaps I’ll let you say your goodbyes. I’ll be in touch.”

The Nighthawks stood in silent shock in the shadowy alley. Nobody knew what to say. The man’s words had been ominous. But Evan was not about to give up. Hearing the man who’d tortured Sophie speak of her as if she was nothing more than a piece of property lit a fire inside him.

He’d find her ... and Katie. And Victor Silvo would pay.

“Holy shit, that man is fucking evil,” Hollynn muttered. All eyes turned toward her. The woman who usually used Disney character names as curse words surprised all of them. “What?” She shrugged. “He is.”

Jude wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “You’re right, princess,” he agreed, placing a kiss on her temple. “He’s fucking evil.”

Hollynn’s outburst was enough to break his team out of their shocked stupors. But it was the determination among the women that had a small smile tipping the corners of his lips.

“Okay, we know who has them. What do we do next?” Annika asked.

“Can I have that bag?” Evan asked, indicating the plastic shopping bag Annika had grasped in her hand.

“Sure, what for?” she asked.

“Evidence collection.”

“Oh, right.” She pulled the ornament out of the bag and handed it over to him. Evan squatted next to the cell phone remains and covered his hand with the bag before scooping up the pieces. He turned the bag inside out around the shattered parts. Perhaps his lab contacts could get some prints off the phones. It would be nice to have more concrete proof. He knew it would be too much to hope that they’d find Silvo’s prints on the phones. That man would never sully his hands with dirty work. He’d send his employees for that type of work. If there was any trace evidence and they could prove a link to Silvo, that would just be one more nail in his coffin.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“REMEMBER, AS SOON AS I make my move, you run. And you don’t look back. No matter what you hear, okay?”

“I know, Sophie.”

“This is important, Katie. You have to get away. Your uncle needs you to survive.”

“He needs you too,” Katie insisted.

“You successfully escaping will help with that.”

Katie squeezed her hand. “You’ll be careful, right? You have to survive too, Sophie.”

The tremor in Katie’s voice tore at her heart. She wasn’t sure of what the outcome would be. The actions she’d have to take to ensure Katie could make her escape would be risky, but she couldn’t think of any other way.

As she lay in the dark, jostled by every pothole and bump in the road, she went over each lesson Evan had taught her. She could do this. She had to. Evan taught her well. She was stronger than ever.

She only floundered in her resolve a few times, remembering the size of the men who'd captured them. It was no question they outweighed her. But Evan had taught her how to use their size against them. She was scrappy and tough. She just needed to distract them long enough for Katie to get away. After that, she didn't care what happened to her.

A flash of grief swept through her as her thoughts turned to Evan. She was sorry he'd lose her. She'd never wanted to cause him that type of pain. But at least he'd have his niece back. As long as she died knowing Katie was safe, she'd be good.

A prickling burn stung her eyes that she blinked rapidly against. She wished things could be different. For the first time since her parents had died, she had been happy. She'd found a love she never imagined she'd have.

And that man loved her back just as fiercely. She was thankful to have experienced his love for as long as she had. Evan's love would give her strength. She'd use that strength to survive. But if the worst happened, at least she'd had something special with him, even if it had been too short.

Every time she felt the car slow, her breath halted in her lungs, and this time was no different. The car stopped, and Sophie tensed. Something tugged on her boot, distracting her from her concentration on the car's vibrations.

"What was that?" she whispered.

"Sorry, my bracelet got caught in the zipper of your boot," Katie explained.

“Oh.” She couldn’t say anything more, for at that moment, the engine cut. The car jostled as the men moved. She assumed they were climbing out of the car. A door slammed. Then another.

“Ready?” Sophie asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Y-yes.” The tremor in Katie’s voice killed her, but they didn’t have a choice. This had to work. For Katie’s sake, this had to work.

Footsteps crunched and drew near the trunk. “Get them out. He wants them inside quickly,” Joseph said.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re not gonna help?”

“You telling me you can’t handle two tied up and scared girls?” Joseph laughed.

“Whatever,” Sal muttered.

The chirp of the trunk release echoed in the confined space. Sophie braced herself. As soon as she saw a sliver of daylight, she burst into action. She pushed the trunk lid open as quickly as she could and heard a thunk followed by a groan.

With one leg out of the trunk, she blinked against the sudden brightness to assess her surroundings. Sal stood nearby, clutching his face, blood dripping from his mouth.

“Son of a bitch,” he moaned.

Sophie didn’t hesitate. She climbed the rest of the way out and punched the man in his groin. The squeal that erupted

from him made her smile as she watched him drop to his knees, his hands now cupping himself.

“Run, Katie. Go. Get out of here.”

Katie didn't hesitate as she rushed past her. Sophie was glad Katie did as she asked and prayed the girl would get away.

“What's going on?” Joseph asked, coming out of a nearby building.

Sophie turned to face off with him. “She attacked me, man,” Sal complained.

Joseph charged Sophie, but she was ready. She shot out a hand, fingers extended, and jabbed him in his throat. He gagged, and she followed up with a palm to the nose. “Motherfucker,” he yelled.

The resounding crunch sickened her, but she couldn't stop. She went to knee him in the groin, but he blocked her. “You'll pay for that, bitch.”

He swiped out at her with a meaty fist, and she ducked just in time. She danced to the side, her confidence growing. That was her first mistake. Her second was assuming the first guy she'd hit was down for good. He pulled her legs out from under her before she even knew he was close. She crashed to the ground, the air leaving her lungs in a whoosh.

Winded, she was too slow to stop the fist that came toward her face. Pain erupted in her eye. Before she could truly grasp what happened, a hand seized her hair and pulled her to her feet.

“Go find the girl,” Joseph ordered.

Sal grumbled but went to do as ordered while Joseph dragged her into the building.

Sophie cringed when the door slammed shut behind her. She tried to ignore the omen that the sound resembled the finality of her death.

“Was that really necessary, Sophie?”

Yup, and there was death himself.

Sophie peered through the dim vastness of the warehouse until the silhouette of a man she’d hoped to never see again came into focus. Tito Alvaro was no stranger to death. The Latin Lords enforcer had worked his way up the ladder. Now he gave the orders. She knew her death would just be one more command from him to his men. Or perhaps he’d feel the need to carry out the dirty deed himself.

“Just as stubborn as your father,” he tsked. “It’s that stubbornness that’s going to get you killed. Just like it did him.”

She didn’t think she could feel any worse than the pain that throbbed through her skull, but she was wrong. What was he saying? Could it be that Tito had killed her parents? “No,” she gasped.

Tito laughed. “You finally see the truth.”

“Y-you killed them?”

His smile sickened her. “Not exactly.”

She knew what that meant. He may not have done the deed himself, but he gave the order. That didn't erase the fact that he was a murderer in her book. She didn't think she could hate the man any more than she already did.

Suffering Tito's abuse for years had hardened her heart. The cruelty had long-lasting consequences for her. She had feared opening herself up to someone. But one man had broken through her defenses. Had reminded her what love looked like—similar to what her parents had with each other. Had given her the courage to face the bad stuff. Made her feel strong and brave. Enough that she could let him in. And he hadn't disappointed. He loved her as her father had loved her mother. And she'd be forever grateful for the short time they had together.

Evan had given her the greatest gift this holiday season. He'd made her see herself as a strong and fierce woman. She drew on that strength now. Never again would she cower for these small men. No matter what her uncle had in store for her, she would remember what Evan taught her. She'd cloak herself in the love and safety he'd so effortlessly given her. And she'd survive.

But first, she had to know.

“Why?”

Tito laughed. “He tried to defy me.”

“That's it? He dared to ... what ... stand up for himself? Is your ego so delicate you can't stand it when someone challenges you?”

His eyes burned with a fanatic rage. The old Sophie would have withered under such a glare. The new Sophie, the one with Evan holding her up in her mind, met his unrelenting stare. “He met that woman and forgot who he was. When I reminded him, he spit in the face of our family honor in favor of his whore and the brat they were raising. He left me no choice. And when I first saw what a beauty you’d grown up to be, I set my plan into action.”

His laugh flung hot coals into the pit of her stomach. “It’s ironic, really. He gave up everything for love, only to watch that love die right before his eyes. And when he went to meet his maker, he did so knowing that I would take the thing he loved most in this world. He died knowing what the future held for his daughter. He didn’t even fight for you; did you know that? He resigned himself to death. He was a weak man. My men came for him, and he crumpled. It was a good thing I had him killed. He’d given up so easily. He never would have made it in my organization. Sad.

“The only good thing he ever did was give me you.” He arched a brow with a sardonic smirk. “Even if it wasn’t by choice. You have been very lucrative. Especially once Victor took an interest in you. Making that deal with Victor was extremely beneficial.” The smirk died, and his eyes hardened, boring into her. “Then you had to fuck it up. What made you think you could ever escape? Are you that fucking stupid?”

Sophie kept her mouth shut. There was no use arguing with him. He’d never seen her as a person. He saw nothing but dollar signs. She’d always been a talented piece of property to

him. Her gift—her voice—had made him a lot of money. It had opened doors into the clubs scattered around the city. She'd sing in those clubs, and he'd get his guys to sell his product to the patrons. It was a win-win for him.

The deal he'd brokered with Victor for her had cemented his place as the head of the Latin Lords in Chicago.

She pursed her lips tightly to hide the satisfied smile that wanted to break free. Her escape must have put a serious dent in his bottom line. That thought pleased her more than was probably safe.

The door behind her opened, letting in a burst of light that was quickly snuffed when it slammed closed. Sal panted for breath as he drew closer.

“Where’s the girl?” Tito roared.

He shrugged. “Dunno. She’s gone.”

Tito turned an unnatural shade of red, and if she cared, Sophie might be worried about his heart. Surely that type of stressful ire wasn't good for a man his age. He picked up a piece of wood that had broken off of a pallet and hurled it across the room, narrowly missing Sal.

It thrilled Sophie to hear Katie had gotten away. Now she could face whatever Tito had in store for her. She could endure any punishment as long as Evan's niece was safe. Despite that, her stomach still dropped when her uncle turned his attention back to her. His eyes flashed a moment before he lashed out. It wasn't the first time a man had backhanded her, but that didn't

diminish the pain. Her face erupted like fire, the burn spreading, causing tears to build up behind her lids.

He pinched her chin, forcing her to look at him. He angled close until he was in her face. Sophie tried to lean away from the rage she could feel boiling up inside him. Joseph's hand on her back prevented her retreat. She swallowed as a chill ran down her spine. There was a foul taste in her mouth as she attempted to swallow past the ache in her throat. It was her own blood. Her teeth must have sliced into her tongue when Tito struck her. She looked away from his fury. His fingers tightened on her chin, squeezing until she cried out in pain.

“This is all your fault, and you will pay. You will not escape as easily as your father did. When I'm done with you, you will wish for death.”

“Lock her up,” Tito ordered, shoving her toward Joseph, who pushed her toward the back of the warehouse. “Then get out there and find that girl. Victor will be here soon. Everything has to go according to plan. We can't let that little brat get away. Don't come back empty-handed again.”

Even Sophie understood the threat behind Tito's words. If they couldn't find Katie, they were as good as dead. Joseph shoved her into a chair, nearly knocking her and the chair over in his haste. She glanced at her surroundings. It was an office that obviously hadn't been used in a while. Dust covered every surface. Her nose inadvertently tickled, and she fought back the sneeze. Before she could even think about fighting, her right arm was zip-tied to one arm of the chair. In no time, she

was bound, hands and legs. She pulled against the bindings to no avail.

“You’re gonna pay for that little stunt you pulled outside,” Joseph sneered while tightening the zip tie until it bit into the skin on her wrist. “I look forward to the show.”

He laughed, straightening to his full height. As he eyed her, his expression changed to one of outright lust. He bent over her and pressed his lips to hers, forcing his tongue into her mouth. Before she thought better of it, she bit down ... hard. The metallic taste of blood flooded her tongue as Joseph roared. “You bitch.”

He pulled back, then slapped her so hard her head whipped to the side. More fire erupted across her face. This time, the tears broke free from their confinement.

“Let’s go, Joseph,” Tito bellowed from the other room.

“We’re not done here,” he threatened, before spitting blood out onto the floor at her feet.

The door slammed behind him, and she was left alone. The click of the lock prompted her back to slump. Her chin dropped to her chest, and she let the tears run unimpeded.

Katie was free. She kept that truth front and center in her mind. As long as Katie was free, nothing else mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



STILL IN THE ALLEYWAY, Evan paced as he waited for word from his contacts. He'd handed off the bag of evidence to a detective he'd once worked a case with years ago. Evan knew it was a longshot and would take weeks for the results from the lab, but it was all he had at the moment. Detective Hill wanted more. Evan saw the ambition in the man's eyes. A case like this could make his career. He didn't blame Hill for that aspiration. At one time, he would have felt the same.

Now, he didn't care about any of it. His only concern was getting Sophie and Katie back safely.

As he paced, he counted. One. Two. Three. Four. His fingers tapped against his leg, playing out a melody he was unaware of. One. Two. Three. Four. Whatever piece his fingers danced to was in the 4/4 time signature. The beat counted out in his feet. The rhythm as natural to him as breathing.

In his mind, he heard Sophie's voice. A siren's call unlike any he'd ever heard before. But that wasn't what drew him to

her. She was as beautiful as a siren, there was no doubt. But what really attracted him to her was her strength. She'd been through hell, the likes of which he'd never experienced. He may have suffered a tragic loss, but at least he'd been able to live his life. To thrive. Change careers. Laugh with friends. He'd still had the love of his remaining family members.

Sophie had no one.

Once he got her back, that would change. If she'd let him, he vowed she would never be alone again.

"Something is nagging at me," Sutton said as he reached the end of the alley and turned back.

"What is it?" Tin Man asked.

"Something that guy said. Silvo?"

"What did he say?"

"It was something about his property would *soon* be returned to him."

"Okay, so? We know he meant Sophie. So what's bugging you about that?"

Sutton chewed on her thumb as she thought. "He said '*soon* be returned.'"

Hollynn gasped. "Jiminy Cricket. He doesn't have her yet."

Annika grabbed Logan's arm. "He also said he *hoped* the apple didn't fall far from the tree when he was talking about Katie. He hasn't seen her yet."

“Right,” Sutton agreed. “He was bluffing. He doesn’t have his hands on them yet.”

“Okay, but how does that help us?” Natalie asked.

The girls deflated as silence descended around their group. No one had an answer.

“It helps to let us know we’ve got time,” Evan surmised. “He’ll want to see Sophie with his own eyes. He’ll want to assert his control over her once more. She escaped, defying him. He won’t be able to let that stand unpunished. So the fact that he doesn’t have them yet helps, Sutton. It lets us know that for the moment, they’re unharmed.”

“At least by him,” Logan muttered.

“Logan,” Annika chided.

“Sorry.”

“No. You’re right, Logan. We can’t assume they haven’t been hurt by whoever Silvo has working for him. But knowing Silvo himself hasn’t touched them yet is a good thing.”

“Good catch, shutterbug,” Tin Man said, placing a kiss on the little mole at her temple.

Evan resumed his pacing. More counting out the beat. His fingers resumed their reflexive sequence. The tempo pulsed in his mind like a ticking clock. How much time had passed since they were taken? How long would it take Silvo to get to where they were being held?

Tick. Tick. One. Two. Three. Four.

If he kept up the 4/4 time, he could ignore that it felt like a countdown clock and time was dwindling. He'd never hit zero. Sophie's and Katie's time would never be up.

One. Two. Three. Four.

The trill of his phone broke into his thoughts and interrupted his count. He pulled out his phone, hoping the call was from one of his contacts with news. It read as Unknown Caller in the ID window. He answered anyway.

“Cole.”

“Hello. Is this Evan?”

“Speaking.”

“Um ... hi. My name is Valerie. I work at Funks Restaurant in Franklin Park. A young woman came in and asked that I call you.”

His heart leaped into his throat. Could he hope that Sophie and Katie had gotten away? “Who?”

“She said she's your niece, Katie. Hold on, she's asking to talk to you.”

“Uncle Evan?” His knees nearly gave out hearing that voice on the other end of the call.

“Katie,” he breathed. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. I'm good. But Sophie ...” She broke off with a cry.

“What is it, sweetheart? Are you hurt?”

“No.” She sniffled. “I’m not hurt. Sophie. She got me out.” There were tears in her voice that twisted around his heart. He couldn’t stand to hear Katie upset. “She hit them and told me to run. She told me to run and don’t look back. Not for anything. I ran. I ran, Uncle Evan. I ran and left her there. Sh-she didn’t follow.”

The wobble in her voice made it difficult for him to understand what she was saying, but he got the gist. Sophie had confronted the men who’d kidnapped them to give his niece the chance to get away.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Everything is going to be okay. We’ll find her. Where are you? I’ll come get you.”

Katie sniffed. He’d never been more proud of how she was pulling herself together. “The lady said she’d text you the address.”

“Are you safe there?”

“Yeah. She’s hiding me in the office at the restaurant.”

“Okay. Good. Stay there. Don’t go outside. Not for anything, all right?”

An incoming text chimed, and Evan glanced at it, noting the address. Shit, it was going to take an hour to get to her. He wouldn’t let that deter him. He’d get to her no matter what it took.

“Jude’s got the truck,” Graham said in his ear and pointed to the mouth of the alley. Evan forwarded the address to the rest of the team’s phones.

“Katie, I’m on my way. Stay put. Let me talk to the woman again, please.”

There was a rustling of fabric as the phone was passed. “You don’t need to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of Katie. She’s such a brave girl.”

“That she is. I just wanted to ask that you not call the police yet. The men she escaped from have several cops on their payroll. They’ll take Katie right back to the men who took her.”

“Katie tells me you used to be CPD.”

“Yeah. I’ll call my former captain. He’s the only one I trust.”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll trust you to handle that side of this. Do you want to talk to her again?”

“Please.” He could hear the woman murmuring something to Katie before his niece greeted him again. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?” he asked as he hopped into the idling truck, needing the assurance again.

“I’m okay. One of them hit Sophie. They put zip ties on our wrists and stuffed us in the trunk. Sophie was unconscious. I was so scared she wasn’t going to wake up.”

“Shit, Katie. I’m sorry.” He listened to her talk even as his heart shattered at what she’d gone through. What they’d both gone through and what Sophie was still experiencing. “What can you tell me about where they took you?”

“I-I’m not sure. We drove for a while from the Christkindlmarket. Sophie was out for most of it. I didn’t know where we were. I didn’t bother to stop and look around. I just ran.”

As he listened to his niece, he texted with Breckenridge, letting him know Katie was safe. In return, Breckenridge informed him they had the signed warrant and teams were on their way to Tito’s home and Sirens. The men were at neither place, but at least they could execute the search warrants. They’d get that dagger. The DNA test on the weapon would be the nail in Silvo’s coffin.

“That’s okay, sweetheart. You did the right thing. Were there buildings around you?”

“Yeah, but not like skyscrapers or anything tall like that. More ... what’s the word? Industrial? Boxy buildings with not a lot of windows.”

“Like a warehouse?”

“Yeah, I guess. I ran past a bunch of buildings like that. Long buildings that looked abandoned. I was hoping to see workers, but it was deserted. After I ran across the train tracks, that’s when I saw more cars and some businesses.”

“How long were you running before you crossed the train tracks?”

“I don’t know. One guy tried to follow me. I hid behind a dumpster, and he ran right by me. When he was gone, I ran

maybe five minutes more to the tracks. After that, I saw the restaurant.”

Evan had Katie on speaker and was scrolling through the map on his phone. He traced a path from the restaurant and found the train tracks she mentioned. There was an industrial area just past those tracks. About a dozen buildings, too many to search individually. He hoped either his contacts or Emma could narrow it down further for them.

“Did you have to cross or go under any major highways?”

“No, but I could hear the cars. The area was quiet, except for the traffic sounds. Oh, and the planes. They were flying low, so I think the airport was nearby.”

“Big jets or small commuter planes?”

“The big ones.”

“Good. Do you remember seeing any signs?”

Silence met his question, interspersed with more snuffles. Shit, he knew this was a lot, but the more they could figure out about where she was taken, the quicker he could get to Sophie.

“I’m sorry, I can’t remember. I was so scared. I should have paid more attention. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, Katie, you did good. I’m sorry to push you to remember.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Evan. I want to help. I-I was ... I was afraid they were going to kill us. And when Sophie wouldn’t wake up ... it was ...”

“I know, Katie. I’m sorry you had to go through that. You’re safe now. We’ll be there soon, okay?”

“She did wake up. Sophie, I mean,” Katie continued, as if she hadn’t heard his assurances. “I was glad because I wouldn’t be alone anymore. Does that make me a horrible person?”

“No, sweetheart.”

“She wasn’t feeling any pain while passed out.” She gasped, making Evan’s heart fly into his throat again, wondering if they’d found her. “Oh, they punched her in the back too. Low down. Isn’t that where the kidneys are? I could tell it really hurt her. If she’d stayed asleep, she wouldn’t have been in pain, but I was so glad she was awake and talking.”

“It’s okay, Katie. Sophie’s tough. She’s handled worse pain.”

“I know. She told me about some of it as we were cutting the zip ties.”

“You cut the ties? How?”

“She had a pocketknife on her. Those guys only asked for our phones. They didn’t even think about what we had in our pockets.” She giggled, and Evan felt lighter than he had since Natalie’s call about them going missing. It was a beautiful sound, and he closed his eyes to savor it.

“It was so d-dark. Th-they’d removed that handle thing too. You know, that one that’s supposed to open the trunk from the inside?”

“I know what you’re talking about.”

“That pissed off Sophie, but then she said she had a plan. I wasn’t sure it would work. I didn’t know Sophie was such a badass.”

Evan chuckled. “I taught her a few ways to defend herself.” He felt his heart swell with pride even while a knot tightened in his gut at the thought of her needing to use those moves.

“It worked, from what I saw. She rammed that trunk lid into the first guy’s face. There was blood everywhere. She was yelling at me to run as she punched him in his junk. I’ve never heard a man make that type of noise before. She really walloped him.”

“Good for her,” Evan said. He glanced out the window. The buildings passed in a blur. Jude was driving like a bat out of hell. At this rate, they’d be there in minutes.

Katie went quiet then, worrying him. “Katie? You okay?”

“Yeah. I-I don’t know what happened after that. I did what she said. I just kept running.”

“You did good, sweetheart.”

“I wish I could have helped Sophie.”

“You did. By getting yourself out of there, you helped her.”

“I did?”

“Absolutely. She’s strong, but if she was worried about what they would do to you, she would have given them anything to save you.” He was sure of that. It was exactly what he would

have done in her place. It was exactly what he would do to save Sophie. He'd take on whatever pain he could if it kept her safe.

“Do you mean they would have used me to hurt her? Like something out of the movies?”

“Yeah. I mean exactly that. I know I probably shouldn't tell you that, but you need to understand how much you helped her. Knowing that you got away, she can now focus on saving herself.”

Katie's sniffles reached through the phone to wrap around his throat. “I-I didn't think of it that way. D-do you think they'll kill her?”

“No, I don't.” At least not yet. Not until Silvo could get his hands on her. “The man she escaped from when she came to Lake Haven wants her back.”

“We can't let that happen, Uncle Evan. That guy did awful things to her.”

“I know. I won't let him get to her.” If it was the last thing he did, Silvo would never touch her again.

“I think I heard them mention her uncle. He was not a good man. How can someone be so mean like that?”

“I don't know, sweetheart.”

“I never realized how lucky I've been. I had Grams and Pops. And you.”

“I'm a poor substitute for your mom,” Evan confessed.

“That’s not true. Sophie helped me realize that.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were talking about our parents ... before. Back at the Christkindlmarket. I was so mad.”

“Why were you angry?” What could have happened that morning to make Katie mad? People at the market had seen her crying. Was this what they were talking about? If they were talking about her parents, why would that make her mad?

“Because ... because I know you—and Grams and Pops—lied to me.”

“What do you mean?” *Shit*. He knew it had been a mistake to keep the truth from her. But his parents had been insistent. He figured it would only be a matter of time before Katie learned what really happened. He wished he could go back and change that decision. She’d been old enough to understand. At least understand as much as any of them could.

“I know what really happened when they died,” she whispered.

“Katie, I’m sorry—”

“No,” she said, cutting him off. “I understand now why you did it. Sophie helped me.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked me to describe them. Both Mom and Dad. When I talked about the things my dad and I did together, how much he loved and supported me, she said you probably wanted me

to remember my dad for the good parts. Not for what happened in the end. Is that right?”

Evan sighed. If only he could do the same. If only he could remember who Don was before. The best partner he'd ever had. The best friend. He was a good man—a good cop—until, Evan could only assume, desperation consumed him. “Yeah. Your dad was an amazing man. Honorable. The perfect cop.”

“The best dad,” Katie said softly.

“That too. He loved you a lot. I'll never forget the smile that stayed glued to his face for days after you were born. It was embarrassing, actually. Imagine trying to arrest a suspect and your partner is grinning like a fool.”

It was a bittersweet memory. Don had been nothing short of besotted with his baby girl. Nothing could bring him down. Even while arresting a man wanted for shooting at some kid's birthday party, Don was giddy. Made it hard to come across as a tough cop, but he didn't care. He shrugged off Evan's eye rolls. He wouldn't apologize for loving his baby.

“You never told me that.”

“I'm sorry. I should do more of that, shouldn't I? We should talk about him too.”

“Yeah, I guess. But ...”

“But what?”

“He killed Mom. How can we talk about him as a good man if he did something that horrible?”

“I don’t know, Katie. I have a hard time reconciling the man he was with the man he became at the end. I just tell myself it wasn’t him.”

“It was the drugs, wasn’t it?”

“You know about that too?”

“It was in an article I read.”

“Yeah, it was the drugs. He hid it well. I didn’t know he was struggling. He became an addict. And addicts sometimes become desperate. He always had a temper. But I guess it got worse with the drugs.”

“He yelled at Mom a lot.”

“I wish I had known.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

“No, Katie. Don’t put that on yourself. Your dad should have told me. Hell, even your mom should have reached out. But they didn’t.”

They were both quiet for a time after that. Evan knew the guys were listening in to the conversation. They were learning more about his family than he’d ever shared with them before. By shutting out the pain and guilt he’d felt over Tara’s death, he’d shut out his remaining family members and his friends.

Seemed to be a habit among the Nighthawks.

They were a group of idiots who kept their inner demons close to the vest. Strange how they could be so close to one another yet not know each other’s deepest heartaches.

That should change.

Evan spotted Finch over his shoulder. That man was going through his own heartache. They all saw it. The question was, how did they get him to open up about it?

That was a crisis for another day. Right now, he needed to focus on Katie and Sophie.

“There’s the restaurant,” Jude pointed out.

Evan let out a long breath and let his head fall back against the headrest. “We’re here,” he said into the phone as Jude pulled into the parking lot. He hopped out before the truck even came to a complete stop. Barreling through the door, he didn’t see the other patrons as he rushed toward the back of the restaurant where he assumed the office was. As soon as he got to the hall, there she was. A little disheveled, pieces of hair having long fallen out of her braid. Dirt covered her ruffled pink sweater. A tiny tear near her shoulder. But he’d never seen anything better.

“Uncle Evan,” she called and rushed into his arms with a sob.

“It’s okay, Katie. I’ve got you.” He lifted her off the ground and walked back to the room she’d come out of. Standing in the office, he held her as she cried, her tears soaking through his shirt.

He caught the eye of an older woman behind her. Assuming she was Valerie, he tipped his head to her in thanks. She nodded with a smile, then left them alone in the room.

Lowering Katie back to her feet, he held her away from him to look her over better. “You’re okay?” he asked, cradling her face in his hands. A smudge of dirt marred her cheek. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. Other than that, she appeared unharmed.

“I’m okay. But we gotta get Sophie. Now.”

“We will. Let’s make sure you’re taken care of first.” He took his phone out again. “I’m gonna call Grams and Pops to come get you. Once you’re safe, I can focus on getting Sophie back.”

He still dreaded the call, but it was time. His parents were understandably upset. And a little angry he hadn’t called them earlier. Handing the phone to Katie, he watched as his niece slowly calmed. His mom always had a knack for soothing their anxiety.

“I know, Grams. But Sophie ...”

The call was on speaker. His mom was indicating to Katie they were coming for her. But his niece was arguing that she wanted to stay and help find Sophie.

“The guys and I are working on trying to figure out where you were taken,” Evan assured. “We’ve got this handled. It would ease our minds to know you’re somewhere safe.”

“But—”

“You did a good job describing what you saw when you ran. From that, we’ve narrowed down the general area.”

“Uncle Evan—”

“Let your uncle handle this, Katie,” his mom gently ordered.

“I know. I want to go after Sophie right now too. But we gotta be smart about this. If we start knocking on doors, we risk alerting them, and they’ll get away.”

“Why would you knock on doors?”

“It’s just a figure of speech. We don’t want to knock on doors like I said. But we need to give my contacts time to see if our suspects own any of the properties nearby. That’s the only safe way to find Sophie.”

“Why not use the AirTag?”

Everything inside him stilled as he struggled to understand what Katie had just said. Her eyes popped wide, and she slapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God!” she muttered through her fingers. “I didn’t tell you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My AirTag. Grams got tired of me losing my keys. She got me an AirTag on a keychain to help me keep track of them. Like I said, those guys took our phones but didn’t search our pockets. I had my keys in my pocket. I slipped the AirTag out and put it in Sophie’s boot.”

“That was very smart of you, Katie,” Pops said, and Evan could hear the emotional rasp that his father tried to contain. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Are you telling me we can see exactly where Sophie is using this AirTag?”

“Well ... yeah.”

“Jude!” Evan shouted, not realizing the rest of the guys were right behind him.

“On it,” he said, his phone already to his ear. “Emma’s getting the info.”

“I’m sorry. I forgot to mention it earlier.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m pretty sure you just saved Sophie’s life.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine



SOPHIE'S FACE THROBBED. SHE'D forgotten what it felt like to be hit. *It had been nice while it lasted.* It was strange to regret her complacency in being pain free, because now that she'd been hurt again, it felt ten times worse.

She shivered. The room they were holding her in was cold. By the looks of the place, she figured no one had paid the heating bill in years. December in Chicago was not for the faint of heart. She was glad they'd left her with her coat on, but her fingers were going numb from not only the tightness of her bindings, but from the cold as well.

It was as if the chill was seeping in through her fingertips, entering her bloodstream, and coating her body in liquid ice. At least it took her mind off her predicament. She had no idea what her uncle had planned for her, but she couldn't imagine it was anything good. How long did she have until Victor arrived? And what would happen when he did?

A pressure built in her chest, and she wished her hands were free to rub it out. Now that she knew Katie had gotten away, the energy had been zapped from her. She slumped in her

chair, an intermittent tear occasionally slipping down her cheek. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

Evan was there. In the darkness behind her shuttered eyes, she could see him, clear as day. His bright blue eyes with the crinkled corners shining brightly as he smiled at her. He sat at the piano, watching her as she sang. She'd never felt so in tune with another person before. It was like the music tethered them together. He could read her as easily as she could read the notes on the page. He followed her effortlessly. It was as if they were made for each other.

She felt the truth of that down to her bones. From the first note to the last, he was hers and she was his. It became even more real when they finally fell into bed together. He played her body as well as any instrument. His fingers danced across her skin, making her tremble with need.

If she kept her eyes closed, she could live in those moments forever. Evan's smile. Evan's touch. Evan's love. She could hear him playing for her. Blocking out every other sound, she focused on the music in her mind. Her body rocked as the rhythm infused her.

She felt the vibrations of her hum against her lips before she registered that she had let the music take over. The notes from "Come Rain or Come Shine" swept over her. Her body rocked as the words formed. Soon, she was lost in the song, the words settling deep inside. *I'm gonna love you like nobody's loved you.* Evan said those words to her just days ago.

She had lain naked in his bed on her stomach. He'd lounged on his side next to her, his head propped up on his fist. His warm palm stroked her back from neck to ass, causing goose bumps to erupt. Her eyes were closed then too. She could feel the smile that tipped the corners of her mouth. Never had she felt such contentment.

The cold, dark room disappeared as she lost herself in the warmth of the memory. A secret smile curved her lips as the final words of the song slipped out.

"I'm with you always. I'm with you come rain or shine." The last note faded too quickly, as did the man of her dreams.

Her eyes shot open, and standing before her was the man of her nightmares.

"That was lovely, Sophie."

She sucked in a gasp, her fingers curling around the edge of the chair's arms. Her entire body tensed; the warm, happy glow she'd felt in the memory had vanished. It felt like she'd been dipped in liquid nitrogen. Everything in her told her to flee, but if she moved even the slightest bit, she'd shatter.

The man whose smile was pure evil stood over her, impeccable as always in a three-piece charcoal suit. He lifted a hand to straighten his blue silk Hermès tie, his fingernails perfectly buffed. Everything about his outward appearance spoke of refinement and grace. It was the inside that was rotten and horrid. She'd seen his true nature too many times to count.

He frowned at her. “I hope the sentiments in that song were for me, Sophie dear.”

Sophie kept her mouth shut. She knew any words she dared utter would only make things worse for her.

“I was considering forgiving you for your little rebellion, but now, knowing what you’ve been up to on your ... vacation? Let’s just say your punishment will be severe. After, I will reevaluate your penance.”

Sophie closed her eyes and prayed for an inner peace she’d never once felt in this man’s presence. She prayed but wasn’t feeling it. All the old fears—the terror—came rushing back.

Katie was safe. Warrants would be served. She’d captured the proof. He’d go down for murder. Evan wouldn’t stop until he found her.

She repeated these truths over and over again in her head.

Finally, she opened her eyes. The rattling beat of her heart still pounded in her chest, but she ignored it.

Victor flicked a strand of her hair off her cheek, a look of derision on his face. “This hair color. Unsuitable. It will be added to your list of punishments after this appalling color is removed.”

Sophie fought the urge to roll her eyes. Figured her hair would be the first thing he’d noticed about her. It was all about appearances with him. And for some reason, Sophie’s natural hair color did not fit the refined image he’d hoped to mold her into.

“How did you find me?” she asked, ignoring the queasiness in her stomach his words about punishments triggered.

Victor chuckled. “Silly Sophie. Poor, naïve Sophie. Did you really think I wouldn’t recognize your voice? I’ve been listening to you for over a decade. I’d know your voice anywhere. The song in that video was nice, but nowhere near your usual caliber.”

Sophie’s eyes slid shut again. *Shit*. Someone else must have taken a video without her knowledge, or someone Bethany shared her recording with must have posted it somewhere. She’d thought she’d been so careful. What a fool she’d been.

“A common bar, Sophie? Really?” he continued. “And you lowered yourself to a waitress. Despicable.”

Of course he’d think working hard for a paycheck was beneath her. He had everything handed to him. What he didn’t have, he took ... ruthlessly.

“Finding out about that man took a little more digging. A former cop turned do-gooder. Interesting choice. And such a tragic past he has. Pity what happened to his sister. You’ll have to ask your uncle about his role in that bit of drama.”

Sophie swallowed past the lump that had lodged itself in her throat. “What do you mean?”

“I understand drugs were involved.” Victor tsked while shaking his head. “Another cop swayed by narcotics. Shame, really. Such a disgusting habit. I understand your uncle took a loss when the guy offed himself.”

Sophie blinked, trying to grasp what he was telling her. The pain in her head was making everything fuzzy. “Are you telling me Tito supplied the drugs to Evan’s partner?”

“How else do you think Tito gets the law to turn a blind eye to our business dealings?”

“Oh God.” Sophie felt sick. This was going to kill Evan. But at least he’d finally know the truth.

“Anyway. As I was saying. Your *friend’s* new profession gave me an idea. I understand the organization he works for runs on donations. It was easy enough to lure them all here.”

No. The meeting with the investor the Nighthawks had scheduled. Coincidentally, at the same time she and Katie had been snatched. “You were the potential investor.”

“I had to separate you from those brutes. Their desperation for money made it easy. And once I give the order, your uncle’s men will take care of them.”

Her head dropped, defeated. She’d made so many mistakes. And now her friends would pay. Her mind raced with escape scenarios. They flew through her mind, each more unfeasible than the last. The helplessness choked her until she struggled for each breath.

The rustle of fabric caught her attention. Victor reached into his inside breast pocket, and Sophie tensed. Every molecule in her body recoiled at the movement, knowing what came next. Fresh tears slipped out. Everything in her was frozen in dread. She hadn’t even felt the burn behind her eyes.

The light flashed off the monogrammed silver case. The click of the latch opening made her flinch. She stared at the perfect knot in his tie at his throat, refusing to watch him prepare his favorite torture device. The case closed with a snap, the sound hitting her like a whip. Then came the sounds she still heard in her nightmares.

Snick.

Click.

Hiss.

Clank.

The horrid, acrid stench of the cigar smoke traveled up her nostrils, suffocating her. The smoke intertwined with the icy fear, coating every inch of her body. It was automatic. Like Pavlov's dog. Her limbs shook. Everything tremored, and the liquid nitrogen feeling that coated her veins shattered.

She'd escaped this. For a brief time, she'd been free.

Free from dread.

Free from fear.

Free from torture.

Free from pain.

She'd been free from the nightmare that had become her life after her parents had died. And she had *lived*. For all too briefly, she had truly lived.

And loved.

Little moments flitted through her mind. Jolene's smile when she'd hired her. Nan's kind guidance. Little Avery sitting with her during her panic attack. Katie's magical performance just the previous night.

And Evan.

So many moments. Every one worth the pain she was now going to be subjected to. She wouldn't give her time with Evan up for anything. Even if she died, she would die knowing what it felt like to have a man's love. And to love him in return. What more could she ask for?

"You know I derive no pleasure from this, Sophie."

Those words. How many times had he said that to her? She knew it was a crock of shit. He got off on torturing her. It was just ironic that he couldn't "get off" after the torturing. He'd never been able to get it up after the sessions. And it pissed him off. Of course, she only suffered more because of it. He'd take out his sexual frustrations on her. Often beating her until he'd exhausted himself. She'd get a reprieve then. He'd leave her alone for weeks until something new set him off.

She didn't think there would be any sort of reprieve this time.

Sophie jumped at the feel of metal on her arm. Victor sliced through her coat and shirt sleeve with the dagger, narrowly avoiding nicking her skin.

That dagger.

The device of his favorite act of torture. A gift from some Japanese businessman. The siren etching on the tip of the handle mocked her, as always. She resigned herself to the inevitable. She'd left Victor. She'd embarrassed him. Now she would pay.

“You brought this on yourself.”

Snick. Click. Hiss.

Victor held the cigar between his teeth, puffing on it every few breaths. The dagger in one hand as he held it over the tiny flame of his lighter. Sophie looked away, hating the sight of the metal heating. She tried to think of another song. One that she'd shared with Evan. Lyrics ran through her mind. Disjointed notes. Rhythms out of sync.

Nothing coalesced. Her mind had shut down. It was empty. Blank. Frozen in dreadful anticipation.

Clank.

The lighter flipping closed was the only warning she received before the piercing pain on her arm. She screamed. The sizzle of her skin burning was an all too familiar tune. The scent of burning flesh mixed with the cigar smoke made bile rise into her throat.

It was all an established sensation, yet it felt like it was the first time all over again.

“Fuck, Victor,” Tito yelled from the doorway. “What the fuck? You want every cop in the city rushing in here?”

Victor removed the cigar from his lips to hold it between his thumb and two fingers. “This place is well hidden. No one knows she’s here.”

“The fuck they don’t. That girl got away.”

“And I assume you have every Latin Lord in the city is looking for her.” He rolled the cigar, his focus on the stubby Cuban, as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Doesn’t mean they’ll find her before her cop boyfriend does.”

The line of Victor’s mouth tightened as his eyes flashed with something dark. Slowly, he turned his head to face Tito. “He is not her boyfriend,” he snarled.

Tito threw his head back and roared with laughter. “You keep deluding yourself, Silvo. Especially if you think that boy won’t risk everything to get her back.”

“He’ll be taken care of,” Victor replied through tight lips. Despair knotted her guts. If something happened to Evan because of her, she’d never be able to live with herself.

“I warned you that this was a bad idea. Your obsession with the whore is going to destroy everything.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw as he glared at Tito with icy eyes. “You take care of your business. I’ll take care of mine.”

Tito clenched his fists, his stony scowl set on Victor. “And you make sure this madness doesn’t mess with my business.”

Threat shone from wild, dark eyes. Victor Silvo would tolerate no one talking to him in such an insolent manner. For Tito to allude to his unstable psychosis ... it was madness itself.

He radiated a menace that compelled her to shrink away as much as her bonds would allow. “You would do well to remember where you would be without me,” Victor sneered with contempt.

“Yeah, and you’re about to fuck it all up. No pussy is worth it, no matter how ... talented she may be,” Tito replied, raking her body with derision.

“I would suggest you watch your tone.” Icy shards wrapped around her heart at the nerve-racking menace lacing his voice.

“Fuck you, Silvo. Mark my words—you will regret this asinine obsession. And I will celebrate your downfall.”

Victor straightened, bringing himself to his full height, which had nearly half a foot on Tito. Not one to be intimidated, Tito squared his shoulders, facing off with the terrible and obvious threat. The unsettling, sinister aura dominating the room made the hairs on the back of Sophie’s neck stand up.

Victor placed the cigar between his teeth, closing his lips around it. The end flared as he pulled in a draft. Savoring the smoke filling his lungs, he slowly removed the cigar before releasing the nauseatingly pungent smoke in Tito’s direction. “You forget—I am untouchable.”

Tito scoffed, ignoring the ominous tenor. “No one is untouchable. Especially when they’re pulled around by their dick because of their crazed obsession with a whore.”

Sophie never saw it coming. The ringing in her ears afterward drowned out all other sounds. She shook her head, trying to clear the muffled and discordant reverberations. She struggled to understand what she was seeing. The man lying on the floor shouldn’t be there. And neither should the crimson puddle of viscous fluid spreading across the grimy floor.

The blood and the warmth it could provide left her face and plummeted to her feet, replaced with ice water that froze her veins. Icy panic crept up her numb extremities to her chest. She sat, unable to comprehend what she was looking at.

Bile bubbled up from her stomach. Even though it was not the first time she’d seen someone murdered right before her eyes, the shock still stunned her. Was that ever something someone got used to?

“Now where were we?” The clink of the lighter pulled her eyes from the man bleeding out on the floor. Victor stood as if he hadn’t just shot someone in cold blood. Apparently, murder didn’t affect some people like it did her, a fact that had the bile rushing up from her stomach. Sophie leaned over the arm of the chair and let loose, emptying everything inside her until there was nothing left but her bruised and battered soul.

“When you’re done, we shall continue,” Victor said nonchalantly. She’d witnessed his ruthlessness before, but this was next-level shit. Her uncle’s blood hadn’t even coagulated

yet. She'd just puked her guts out. And Victor was eager to continue his torture.

Sophie's mouth hung wide open as she gaped at the monster in the Armani suit. All the outer trappings no longer hid the hideous soul inside. She vowed then and there to see this to the end. He would not defeat her.

She tore her eyes away from him as he heated up the dagger's pommel once more. Her gaze settled on a clear patch of glass in the window, a direct view to the bright blue sky. A blue like Evan's eyes.

No, she would not be defeated. Evan often praised her strength. She'd cloak herself in that strength and survive.

"Oh, I forgot. I promised your cop *friend* I'd call and let him say goodbye. How about we do that now?"

Sophie's jaw went slack. She couldn't have heard him right. Squinting at that slice of blue, she tried to play his words back in her mind, still not making sense of them. Until he was speaking into his phone.

"Mr. Cole. I'm keeping my promise. Sophie wants to say goodbye. Oh, but wait, I have to do something first. Hold on for just a moment."

Victor put the phone on the desk beside her. She stared at the device, the numbers she'd memorized swimming in front of her eyes. Evan's phone numbers.

The searing pain had a scream tearing past her lips. In her defenseless stupor, she hadn't been prepared for the burn.

Victor pushed the red-hot butt of the dagger down on the exposed skin on her arm. He drove it deep until muscle hindered his momentum.

“Sophie!” She slapped her lips closed around the scream, turning it into a whimper at the sound of Evan’s voice calling her name through the phone. The tears she thought had been drained out of her fell once more.

Victor ruthlessly tore the ring from her skin, and Sophie couldn’t hold back the pitiful sob. With the number of burn scars that dotted her body, you’d think she’d be numb to the pain by now. That was not reality. Evan, hearing every agonized sound she made, exacerbated the torment.

The phone wavered before her eyes, blurred by her tears as Victor held it in front of her. “Now, my dear, say goodbye to the boy.”

Chapter Thirty



THANKS TO KATIE'S AIRTAG, Evan, Jude, Logan, and Tin Man had wasted no time in sprinting to the warehouse where they believed Sophie was being held. Finch stayed back with Katie to wait for his parents. Graham and the ladies were also on their way to the restaurant. They wanted to be nearby for when they finally got Sophie back.

Just like his niece, he hardly took in his surroundings as he ran until the train tracks appeared in front of him. Evan leaped over the tracks, silently cursing the loose gravel that nearly made him stumble. They were closing in on the location, and adrenaline blasted through his bloodstream.

Breckenridge, his old captain, would meet them there with the cavalry, but he'd be damned if he was going to wait for them. Not at Sophie's expense.

Jude caught his eye, gesturing with a tilt of his head in the warehouse's direction where they were holding Sophie. He glanced around at the men with him, seeing their determined expressions. They were headed into an unknown situation, but each man was ready to run into the fire for him. They were

unarmed, about to face off with who knows how many of Silvo's and Alvaro's men. But each of the Nighthawks with him now was a deadly force all among themselves.

They'd just reached the line of warehouses when his phone rang. He knew this was Silvo's promised phone call. He shouldn't have been surprised Silvo even bothered keeping his word. It was one more method of evil he could utilize to torture Sophie. With the added bonus of tormenting Evan as well.

Evan growled into the phone. Hearing that scream from Sophie stopped his heart. It was still struggling to find its rhythm as he listened to her whimpers. Tearing a hand through his hair, he spun around, wishing he was in the room with Silvo. He'd tear the man apart limb by limb.

His gaze met his friend's angry, wide-eyed expressions. Shit. He knew there was no way they hadn't heard that scream. And he hated it for Sophie that they'd heard her pain. But all he saw in them was the same rage coursing through him. The same determination.

If his senses were focused anywhere other than the woman on the other end of the phone, the smell wafting from the dumpsters he passed might have been overwhelming.

"Now, my dear, say goodbye to your boy." The smarmy refinement in Silvo's voice grated on his nerves.

Another faint whimper from her made his heart feel like it was going to explode through his chest. He closed his eyes

against the sting of tears at the confirmation of her suffering.
“Sophie?” He whispered her name.

“I-I’m here.” Her voice sounded so weak. The hoarseness was more evidence of her torment.

“Hang on, baby, okay?”

“Katie?”

“She’s safe.”

He heard her release a heavy breath. “You saved her,” he continued. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I’m sorry she got caught in the middle of this.”

“Not your fault.”

“I’m sorry,” she cried. It tore at his heart to hear the defeated tone in her voice.

“You’re so strong, baby. Remember that. You took on two men to give Katie time to escape. You’re amazing. So strong.”

He kept mumbling words of encouragement to her as he used his notes app to type out instructions to his team. Jude was on top of it and was soon conversing with Breckenridge. His captain was still thirty minutes away.

“Remember that promise I made you?”

“W-what?” Fuck, he hated that tremor in her voice.

“Come rain or come shine. I’m always with you.”

“Come rain or shine.”

“It’s coming. It’s almost over, baby. Just hang on a little longer. Can you do that for me?” He wanted to warn her that their plans were already in motion so that she would continue to fight. Silvo was listening. He couldn’t outright confess what he’d set into action.

Jude forced them to slow as they neared the warehouse the AirTag signal was pinging from. They couldn’t rush in, not without knowing what they were running into. Reconnaissance was the key. Evan crouched behind a dumpster while his three friends split off to learn what they could. He watched as they virtually disappeared, thankful his teammates had the training he lacked. Silvo and Alvaro didn’t stand a chance against the three deadly former special forces members.

A smile tipped his lips, ready to bring down hell on the man who dared to lay a hand on his woman. “We’re coming. Understand, baby?”

“I understand. Hurry.”

“When this is over, I’m gonna love you like nobody’s loved you.”

Sophie’s little laugh boosted his resolve. “High as a mountain, deep as a river?”

“Absolutely.”

“You shouldn’t fill her head with lies, Mr. Cole. It will only be more painful for you both. Just say your goodbyes and move on with your life. The sooner you accept Sophie is mine, the better off you’ll be.”

Silvo's speech did nothing but bolster his determination. He'd see the end to the man if it was the last thing he did. "You fucked up, Silvo."

Silvo's laugh burst across the phone line. "I assure you, Mr. Cole, I have never in my life 'fucked up,' as you so crudely put it."

"That's where you're wrong." Evan tried to keep his voice steady as anger raged through him. "You fucked up. And there are pictures to prove it."

"What are you talking about?" Silvo growled.

"They tell a gruesome story. One that people have been speculating about for months. Allow me to tell the story."

"Your attempt at histrionics is tiring."

"That may be, but I'm betting you're gonna want to hear the tale."

Silvo sighed. "Fine. Proceed."

"Many months ago, a well-known senator released the heartbreaking announcement of the death of his son. Do you remember that? It made national news."

"Yes, Mr. Cole. Everybody knows about that tragedy."

"Right. But what everybody doesn't know is that the last place Sam Chasin was seen alive was in your club."

"That's too bad. I wasn't aware he frequented my establishment."

Yeah right. I'm sure you know about every single person who crosses the doorstep into your club.

“Let me back up. You need more background for this story to truly make sense.”

“You try my patience, Mr. Cole.” As long as the man was focused on their conversation and not hurting Sophie, Evan didn't care what the man said to him.

“Anyway. When Sam was a little boy, he moved with his family to a close-knit community in the suburbs of Chicago. The little girl next door immediately befriended him. They were tight until the girl's parents died and she was taken away. Sam missed his friend. Fast forward a couple of decades. Sam's attending a bachelor party for a friend at a club in Chicago, and who should he run across? That's right, his old friend.”

“I fail to see what this story has to do with me.”

“I'm getting to that,” he spat out the words contemptuously.

There was an awful pressure that swelled and pushed up into his throat. That same helplessness he'd felt outside Tara's house was back. Magnified tenfold. He pushed it aside to continue his story. He would not fail the woman he loved. “You see, this club had something unique that drew the patrons in, much like the mythological characters the club was named after. Sam was shocked to see his friend singing up on the stage. Anxious to reconnect, he waited for her to take a break and approached. The reunited friends shared a drink while reminiscing about the good ole days. She was just as

nice as he remembered, but he sensed a sadness in her. I'm embellishing a bit here, but I'm sure you can see where this is going. You were there, after all."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

Evan rolled his eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to rein in his anger. Pulling on an iron control he'd once mastered as a cop, he kept all expression from his voice. "I figured you'd say that. Nevertheless, Sam was right to sense that sadness in his old friend. Only, for her, it was much worse than just being a little blue. She'd existed in a type of hell nobody should endure. Her only bright spots were the music she could lose herself in and her reunion with her childhood friend. But someone was watching her every move, and that someone was not happy to see the budding friendship."

A warning voice whispered in his head, making his heart rate pick up speed. He glanced over his shoulder, relieved there had been no unpleasant surprises patrolling the area. Still, his misgivings increased by the minute. He wondered how much longer Silvo was going to put up with the disruption to his plans.

Evan continued the story. "This asshole who watched her every move thought he owned her and was jealous of any man who attempted to talk to her. Sam had to disappear. I'm pretty sure our doomed hero was not the first man to vanish."

"Your theatrics are impressive. Very entertaining. But you're wasting my time." Sophie's whimper hit him like a

missile to the chest. For a moment, panic caught in his throat. Did he push too far?

“Wait. I’m almost done. This is where it gets good. You’re gonna wanna hear this last bit.” Determination was like a rock inside of him. His entire body vibrated with resolve. One way or another, the end was near.

Silvo huffed out a breath. “Fine. Finish your story.”

“Sam gets called into the club owner’s office. He goes, thinking the owner just wants to get in good with a senator’s son. Little did he know he was walking into his own death. But what our villain doesn’t know—and here’s where it really gets good—is that there was a witness. A witness with an old disposable camera from the lost and found box.”

“What are you talking about?” Silvo asked, his voice low and devoid of emotion. He’d lost his pompous, high-brow inflection in the flat tone.

“Here’s the bottom line, Silvo. You stabbed Sam Chasin with the ceremonial Japanese dagger you keep displayed on your desk. From what I’ve learned about the weapon, it’s called a tanto. It is believed that the samurai used such a dagger in ritual suicide, allowing them to have an honorable death—something you did not afford Sam Chasin. Here’s the part about the tanto’s history I find amusing. Today, the tanto is considered a protective charm. They give it to newborn babies and blushing brides.” Evan chuckled. “Too bad it didn’t work for you. As we speak, search warrants are being served.

I'm betting, knowing the type of man you are, that dagger is still sitting in a place of honor on your desk."

Silvo roared, and Evan heard a crash. His heart stopped, thinking he'd taken out his aggression on Sophie until he heard her laugh. "A protective charm." He could just make out her words as she giggled in the background. "How ironic."

"Shut the fuck up, Sophie."

"Silvo," Evan called, hoping to pull the man's attention away from Sophie again. "Listen closely, Silvo. You still have time. Run now, and you have a chance. You can disappear. I'm sure you have an escape plan. A man doesn't reach your level without one. Take whatever money you've squirreled away and disappear."

Evan stood from his crouch as Jude and the others joined him again. Using hand signals, they each indicated what they'd witnessed inside the warehouse. Two men lounged in the open part of the building. Sophie and Silvo were in the office on the north side. Tito lay dead on the floor. He pushed that news aside to focus on the remaining threat.

"Don't worry, Mr. Cole. Of course I have a plan. I am untouchable." The arrogant tone was back in his voice. "Just one last loose end to tie up."

"Leave it. The cops know where you are. They're on their way. If you have any hope of escaping, you should run now. Leave Sophie and go."

“Now, I have a problem with that, Mr. Cole. I can’t leave Sophie behind.”

“Yes, you can,” Evan said through gritted teeth. “She’ll only slow you down.”

“I’m aware.”

An unnerving silence passed between them until he heard Sophie gasp. “No, Victor. Please.”

He was running before he even registered his feet were moving.

“If I can’t have you, no one can.” Evan stumbled. Silvo’s words, so like the ones Don had shouted that day, had his heart sinking into his gut. The shot hit him in his chest. He dropped to his knees, unable to breathe.

He stared blindly at the building, the memory of the day his sister died blurring with the current situation. It was a nightmare. It had to be. Any moment now, he’d wake up. Sophie’s warm body would be cuddled up next to him. Ginny curled in a tiny ball of fluff at their feet.

But somewhere deep inside, he knew that was a lie. His heart screaming in agony was entirely too candid.

As he kneeled, frozen in the weeds, three men ran out of the building he was staring at. “Evan! Get up,” Jude yelled. “Go get Sophie. We got this.”

Tin Man and Logan were already on the two men who flanked Silvo. Seeing the man who’d tormented Sophie for so many years in the flesh jump-started his system. He surged to

his feet and ran for the man. Silvo saw him coming. His eyes widened before he changed direction, now running away from Evan.

With a burst of speed, Evan closed the distance, ignoring the shots Silvo attempted to fire at him over his shoulder. Shots that went so wide it was laughable. With a soaring leap, Evan took Silvo to the ground. He flipped the man over and sent his fist flying into his face. He did it again. Then once more, the scars on Sophie's body front and center in his mind. This man needed to suffer, just as she had.

The sirens wailing in the distance barely registered. Evan's entire focus was on the man he wanted to destroy with his bare hands.

Jude's beefy hand landed on his shoulder, halting his next hit. "I've got this. Go to Sophie."

Her name made Evan hesitate just as he was about to shrug off Jude's hold and continue to beat Silvo to a bloody pulp. Surging to his feet, he ran to the building. His only thought now was Sophie. He prayed as he never prayed before that he wouldn't find his nightmare again.

Racing to the office, he slid to a stop just inside the door. Tito lay in a bloody puddle, a hole in his chest. But it was the chair lying on its side next to the desk that drew all his attention. He could only see her feet, still strapped to the chair legs.

He moved cautiously closer, dreading what he'd find when he rounded the desk. He held his breath. Her legs came into

view. Then her hands, the zip ties so tight they cut into her wrists, causing her to bleed. Next was her chest, which he stared at hard, willing it to move with her breaths. When he didn't see the telltale movement, he closed his eyes, which burned with unshed tears.

“No.” The word left him on a breathless wail. This couldn't be happening. Not his Sophie. She couldn't be gone. The agony he felt in his chest was almost too much. He wanted to drop to his knees and scream.

A soft moan broke through his misery, and his eyes shot open. He fell to his knees, his hands cupping her face. Her bruised and battered face with her beautiful amber eyes blinking up at him.

“Sophie,” he breathed, letting go of the air he'd been holding in his lungs since he entered the room.

She was alive. His prayers had been answered.

He knew he should check her over for gunshot wounds, but he couldn't drag his gaze away from hers.

She was alive.

Chapter Thirty-One



SOPHIE BLINKED, HER VISION wavering. A man hovered over her, but with her one eye almost swollen shut and the other burning from the tears she'd cried, she couldn't make out his features.

The last thing she remembered was Evan's voice on the phone, reminding her of how strong he thought she was and that he was gonna love her, *come rain or shine*.

No ... wait ... there was more.

Sam.

Evan had spoken to Victor about Sam. The pictures. A warrant. Victor's anger had been palpable. He'd been livid, his features an unhealthy shade of red. He'd completely lost his cool, throwing a chair across the room. She'd never seen him so unhinged. There was the crazy she saw for years when he wanted to punish her, but this was so much worse. She'd never feared for her life, despite the pain he inflicted.

There was always something in the back of her mind that told her he would never kill her. He needed her too much. His

obsession with her was an all-consuming thing for him. To say she was shocked when he aimed that gun at her was an understatement. His words before pulling the trigger—“If I can’t have you, no one can”—had terror racing through her system. Her heart beat so fast she thought it would burst right out of her chest.

His hand quavered, the gun twitching imperceptibly. She saw the moment in slow motion. He inhaled. His shoulders tensed. His eyes narrowed as he focused on her. Then his index finger compressed.

In the seconds between squeezing the trigger and when the deafening shot rang out, she threw herself sideways, chair and all. A slice of pain across her shoulder. That was the last thing she remembered. She must have knocked herself out when she landed.

But what had happened to Victor?

When she opened her eyes, everything was fuzzy. The shadow that crouched over her was an indiscernible shape. She feared it was Victor, still intent on torturing her, until she felt warm hands gently cup her face.

Then he spoke, his soft voice like a balm to her pain. “Sophie. Baby, are you okay?”

She closed her eyes, letting the comfort of his touch soothe her. With a deep inhale, his reassuring scent entered her senses. Peppermint and sandalwood. Distinctively Evan. She smiled, letting it wash over her. With her exhale, she relaxed

into his hold, her body comprehending that she was safe before her brain did.

“Evan,” she whispered.

“I’m here, baby. You’re safe now.”

She nodded, keeping her eyes closed even as more tears slipped out. She felt tugging on her wrists and whimpered.

“I know it hurts, baby. We need to free you, then we’ll take care of the hurt.”

Limbs finally free of their binding, she was pulled from the chair into Evan’s lap. He wrapped as much of himself around her as possible. She slumped into his embrace, exhaustion overtaking her.

“Rest, baby. I’ll take care of you.” It was as if his words gave her permission to let go. She let the warm darkness overtake her, assured she was in good, loving hands.



FINCH BROUGHT KATIE AND his parents to the warehouse while Sophie’s wounds were treated. The reunion between his girls was both agonizing and wonderful. Evan was pretty sure even his stoic friends were teary-eyed.

Sophie and Katie hugged, laughed, and cried. They’d shared a special friendship before, but now their bond was solidified.

Evan was glad Katie would have another strong female role model in her life.

And Sophie was the strongest person he knew. He rode with her to the hospital and held her hand as a doctor stitched up the bullet graze and treated her new burns. Two more. Bringing the total to eighteen. He almost wished he'd killed Victor.

Released from the hospital nearly two days later, he held her again in the backseat of Graham's truck as he drove them back to Lake Haven. His parents with Katie followed behind, unwilling to leave Sophie. He was happy his family was getting to know her, but he wished it were under better circumstances.

Once settled in his apartment, Sophie sat with him and his family and told them what she'd learned about Don. He'd been shocked to learn his partner had been on the take with the Latin Lords. And for what? Fucking drugs.

His anger got the better of him, and he flew into a rage. A dirty cop. His best friend—his brother—was dirty. He couldn't wrap his head around it. He now knew the truth, yet more questions remained.

Don had been a good cop. He'd worked tirelessly for his city. He'd even been injured on the job, needing surgery on a torn rotator cuff. That must have been the impetus of the drug usage. Had he been in so much pain he became addicted to his pills? It pissed him off that he'd never know for sure. He'd never once thought his partner would sink so low.

And it killed him he hadn't known.

It was Sophie who calmed him down. She stood in front of him, her face battered, and reminded him about the conversation they'd had about leaving the past where it belonged.

“You can't change what happened,” she said. “Let go and settle your mind. You can create a better future.”

Her words settled deep inside him. He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight as he did what she said ... let go and settled his mind. They swayed in their embrace together to music only they could hear.

Until his mother had to add her two cents.

To say his parents had been miffed about being kept in the dark was an understatement.

“When will you learn that we're in this together?” his mom chided. “We know how much you've struggled with what happened. Keeping it all bottled up and hidden from us ends now.”

He'd attempted to argue that he was only trying to protect them, but that had backfired.

“If you had told us that Katie and Sophie had been taken from the very beginning, we could have told you about the AirTag sooner. This could have ended in minutes instead of hours, you stupid, stubborn boy.”

Evan stared at his mother, slack-jawed. She was right. They could have traced their location right away. It could have

saved Sophie so much pain. Guilt tried to settle in his gut until the sweetest sound he'd ever heard met his ears.

Sophie burst out laughing. She was still in his arms, and her body shook against his as she laughed. Katie was soon giggling right along with her. Then his dad's booming laugh joined them. His mom glared at him, hands on her hips as the rest of her family lost their minds. It was as if she was daring him to laugh, which he knew instinctively would not be a good idea. He pursed his lips to hold in the desire.

"I guess she told you," Sophie wheezed, wiping the tears from under her eyes.

Once again, Faith Cole was right, and he was an idiot. If he'd learned anything from his Nighthawk friends over the past few years, it was that keeping things bottled up never worked. He vowed then and there to try to be more open with his family.

That moment of levity had gone a long way toward starting the healing process for all of them. But especially Sophie. Hearing her laugh like that, he knew she was going to be okay. There would be dark moments. How could there not be? But he was determined to make sure the lighter moments would far outweigh the dark.

After his parents and Katie went across the hall to the other apartment, Evan drew a bath for Sophie. She insisted he join her in the large tub. He crawled in behind her, pulling her into his arms, her back to his front.

He was hard and aching for her, but he gritted his teeth against the need. It was enough that she was here in his arms.

Conscious of keeping her bandaged arm dry, he carefully washed her body, running the soapy cloth over her curves. He could feel her relax against him the longer they spent in the soothing water.

Eventually, he sensed she could no longer keep her eyes open. After climbing out of the tub and drying off, he helped her out, wrapping her in a warm towel. He threw on a pair of sweats and gave her one of his T-shirts to sleep in. Then he put her to bed, climbing in with her and pulling her into his arms. Ginny took her place behind Sophie's knees after he covered them both with the blankets. He listened as her breathing evened out.

The whiff of apple teased his nose as he breathed in her fresh scent. His body slowly began to relax, even as the revelations from the day swam through his mind.

With Tito dead and Silvo in jail, she was free to live her life. His heart twisted with trepidation. Sophie was free, but what if she decided to stretch her wings somewhere else? What if he wasn't enough for her anymore? He'd have to let her go. He'd never chain her to him. It would kill him to do it, but if she asked, he'd set her free. But she'd take a piece of him with her.

A few days later, he lay awake again, watching her sleep. He still worried if he was worthy enough for her to stay with him now that she was free. His gaze swept over her nearly healed bruises, each one still twisting a knot in his gut. But it

was the stark white bandages on her arm that stabbed the deepest.

If he'd taken his head out of his ass sooner, he could have saved her from experiencing that hell again. He'd missed so many signs. Just as he had with Tara and Don. He put her in danger and he'd never forgive himself for that. How could he possibly expect her clemency?

"You're thinking pretty loudly back there," her sweet voice rang out in the darkness. She turned around to face him.

Evan kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

He studied her features, noting the pinched brows. "Are you in pain?"

Sophie pursed her lips. "Just a little."

"Let me get you some pain pills."

He made to roll out of bed, but she stopped him. "Not yet. I just want to lie here in your arms a little longer."

A smile tugged at his lips. "I'm not going anywhere, little songbird."

"Good." She snuggled closer to him, burying her nose in his throat. "What were you thinking about?"

"You're free. Tito's dead. Silvo's in jail. You're truly free. You could go anywhere. Be anything."

She tilted her head back to look at him. “And you’re worried I won’t want to stay with you.”

It should surprise him that she could read him so well, but it didn’t. She was always tuned into his thoughts and feelings. “I would never hold you back.”

“I know. Which is why I’m not going anywhere either. I love you, Evan. I’m the person I always wanted to be because of you. If you’re thinking I could find something better out there, you’re wrong. There is nothing better than right here. There is no one better for me than you. Sorry to say, but you’re stuck with me.”

The smile that pulled at his lips grew as she spoke. As did his heart. He felt full. Full of Sophie. Full of love. Full of life.

He dropped his head until his lips hovered a breath from hers. “Thank God,” he huffed, before taking her mouth in a fiery kiss. She met him with a hunger of her own.

They moved quickly, shedding clothes until they were skin to skin. He held her so tightly to him he felt a shiver rock through her. He kissed her harder. Deeper. Needing her closer as she reached to run her fingers through his hair.

After rolling on a condom, he held himself at her entrance. His breath caught when she looked up at him. Despite the bruises, she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. If he could spend his life gazing into her intoxicating amber eyes, he’d consider himself lucky.

“I love you, Little Bird,” he whispered against her lips and slid inside her. He swallowed her gasp and pushed deeper. Treasuring the feeling of her walls pulsing around him, he held himself there.

“Evan, please,” she moaned.

“What do you need, baby?”

“I need ... I need you to—” She broke off with a groan as he pulled out, then thrust back in.

“That what you need, baby?” he asked with another thrust.

“Oh God, yes! More. Please.”

“You never have to beg.”

“Evan.” His name falling from her lips was something he’d never take for granted. It had been too close. He’d almost lost her. The bullet had just barely grazed her arm. If she hadn’t thrown herself over ... He blocked that thought from his mind and thrust harder.

She was here. He was buried deep inside the woman he loved, and she was shattering in his arms. He held her together but soon fell apart himself.

They stayed wrapped up in each other, their hearts beating the powerful rhythm of their love. He was going to love loving her. Touching his brow to hers, he smiled as her soft snores reached his ears.

Life was precious, and he was going to stop existing and just *live*.

Sophie. She was the one who made him forget about yesterday and the mistakes of his past. With her by his side, he'd dream about tomorrow. And what splendid dreams they would be.

Epilogue



Finch

ANOTHER EVENING OF TORTURE. Finch didn't know why he kept doing it to himself. She'd never look at him as she once had. Most days, she wanted nothing to do with him. It tore a little more from his heart every time he put himself in this position.

But it was important to be here for his friends tonight. This was a night to celebrate. Not only was it Christmas Eve, but two of the couples in their group were getting married in a few short months. Marcus had finally finished his movie about the Nighthawks and was already receiving critical acclaim from early viewings. Soon, they'd all head to the premiere in LA. Another night of torture being so close to her but unable to work his way past the heavily fortified walls she'd erected when she'd learned the truth about him.

But tonight wasn't about any of that. Tonight was for Evan and Sophie. Together, they'd taken down two of the biggest gangsters in Chicago. The men had been the biggest evil the city had ever known. It still amazed him that despite the years that law enforcement had tried to take down Alvaro and Silvo, all it really took was a little songbird and an old-fashioned disposable camera. Hell, even their resident Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, Sutton, had been impressed, and she'd help take down a trafficking organization.

He was surrounded by impressive women, but only had eyes for one.

She flitted around the tables in her restaurant, greeting friends who were more like family to her. She'd given Sophie the biggest hug. Finch could see she was close to tears as she hugged her new waitress-turned-friend. His brows puckered as he watched her. The glassiness in her eyes was unusual. She wasn't one to show an emotion that vulnerable.

She wasn't a crier. She took charge and blasted through. Despite everything their friends had been through over the years, he'd never once seen her cry. To see her so close to tears now concerned him. Something wasn't right.

He looked closer. She was doing her mother hen routine, taking care of everybody else. There were dark circles under her eyes that hadn't been there a few weeks ago. He'd seen them get worse over the last few days, but he'd passed it off to stress over Sophie's kidnapping. Now, he wasn't so sure that was the reason.

At one point, he saw her go behind the bar and grab a glass of water. She swayed slightly as she drank. Her bartender shot her a concerned glance, which she ignored.

As he watched, she pushed a strand of hair off her forehead with a shaky hand. She quickly lowered it and glanced around, as if hoping no one had seen. He'd gotten pretty good at watching her without her knowing. It had taken nearly a year, but he'd refined the skill. After the glares she'd given him the first handful of times she'd caught him, he'd had to get better at it.

Now, he was glad for the skill. Something was not right with her. He glanced around at their friends to see if anyone else had noticed her strange behavior, but everyone seemed to be enjoying the celebration.

He turned his gaze back on her in time to catch her jump nearly out of her skin. A frown pulled at his mouth as she slipped her phone from her pocket. She answered it. Whatever the person on the other end told her, it was nothing good.

As a redhead, she had beautiful alabaster skin. Skin so smooth he'd had more than one fantasy about running his lips all over it. He dreamed about kissing the smattering of freckles across her shoulders. But as she listened to the person on her phone, she grew deathly pale.

She swayed again before pulling herself together. With the phone still to her ear, she walked away from the bar, heading toward the hall that led to her office. Finch couldn't take it anymore. Something was not right.

He got up to follow.

He reached the door to her office just as she hung up. With her back to him, he watched as her shoulders dipped. She had one arm wrapped around her waist. The hand still holding the phone was covering her mouth. The sob that tore from her mouth broke him.

"Jolie," he whispered. She whipped around, her eyes narrowing as she met his. Now that she'd learned the truth, she hated it when he called her that.

“Get out,” she hissed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Finch stepped into the room. “What’s wrong?” he repeated.

“None of your business.” Her hands were on her hips. He recognized the false bravado for what it was: her defense against him. He wasn’t going to let it faze him. He knew something was wrong with her. He still cared about her immensely and would do anything to help her, even if she hated him.

“Jolie—”

“Don’t call me that.”

He ignored her outburst. “I can tell something is wrong. Maybe I can help.”

She sighed. “There is nothing anyone can do. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make flight reservations.”

With a brow arched, he tilted his head. “Flight reservations. Where are you going?”

“Home.”

He wasn’t expecting that answer. She was from Georgia, but as far as he knew, she hadn’t been home for years.

“Why?”

She had her phone up and was swiping through it. “Why what?”

“Why are you going home?”

Without looking up from her phone, she said, “My father had a heart attack.”

He sucked in a breath. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

She shrugged but still didn’t look at him. “Put your phone away. Go home and pack a bag,” he ordered. “I’ll pick you up in an hour. I can get you there faster than any commercial flight can.” He knew his boss would have no issue if he took the helicopter. Especially in this case.

“That’s okay. I don’t want to bother you.”

He took a risk and stepped closer to her. Carefully, he placed his hands on her shoulders until she looked up at him. “I’m doing this. Go home. Pack a bag.”

“Finch—”

He cut off her argument with a finger over her lips. “Don’t argue with me. Let me do this for you. Let me save you the added stress. I’ll get you to your daddy in no time. Okay?”

He stared into her wide green eyes, willing her not to argue with him. This close, her exhaustion was even more evident. He wondered if she’d been worried about her father’s health for a while now. Had that added to her fatigue, or was something more going on with her?

Finally, she nodded. He dipped his head and briefly kissed her forehead. He didn’t linger, even though everything inside him screamed to sweep her into his arms. He stepped back and repeated, “One hour.”

With that reminder, he turned and left her office. She may hate him, but he was determined to do whatever he could for her. Maybe someday she'd give him the opportunity to explain.



EVAN HELD BACK THE laugh that wanted to burst forth at Sophie's less-than-impressed expression. Her face was scrunched up as if she'd gotten a whiff of something rotten. Which was a real possibility, judging by the looks of the place.

He stood beside her on the curb outside the building in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago. It was an up-and-coming area, great for investors. But this was not an investment property. This building was going to offer something much more important.

Even though right now it looked like the worst building in Chicago, Evan could see its future. He couldn't wait to see it to fruition.

"Evan, what are we doing here?"

Before he could answer, he heard voices from inside the property. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he said, "Come on. I'll let a friend explain."

He steered her through the wide front doors, one of which was barely holding its position. The smell hit him as soon as

they stepped over the threshold. Sophie covered her nose as her face scrunched up even further. He couldn't blame her; the stench was nasty. They'd have to take care of that as soon as possible.

“Oh, good. You're here.” A loud voice greeted them as they walked into the large lobby. A man in a fitted charcoal three-piece suit stepped forward. He held himself with an air of authority despite the deep lines on his face and the sprinkling of gray hair at his temples. His smile was kind as he strode toward them.

“Senator Chasin?” Sophie asked, surprise clear on her face.

“Sophie,” the senator called out, holding his hands out for her. She stepped forward nervously and placed her hands in his. “It's so good to see you.”

“It is? I mean ... It's good to see you too.” Evan smiled. She was too cute.

“Sophie. Such a lovely young lady you've grown into.” A woman roughly the same age as the senator stepped out from behind her husband. She looked more like a PTA mom than the senate majority leader's wife. She swept by her husband and enveloped Sophie in her embrace.

“Mr. Cole.” Senator Chasin held his hand out to him.

“Evan, please,” he said, taking the man's hand.

“Glad you could come.”

“Wouldn't miss this for the world.”

Mrs. Chasin held Sophie at arm's length, her gaze sweeping over her. "Look at you. You're so beautiful. It's no wonder Sam was so taken with you," she said with glassy eyes. He thought for a minute that the woman was going to start crying, but she collected herself with a sniff.

Sophie, though, was not feeling as strong. "Mrs. Chasin. I'm so sorry. Sam ... he was only trying to help me. I should have done something. I-I should have stopped them." Evan's gut tightened. It didn't happen often, but even months later, she still experienced nightmares about what she'd witnessed the night Silvo murdered Sam. And it still killed her that she couldn't have prevented it.

"Nonsense," both Mrs. Chasin and Senator Chasin said at the same time.

"Sweetheart," Mrs. Chasin continued gently. "We know there was nothing you could have done. Not without being killed yourself."

"You did the right thing," Senator Chasin said. "Because of you, our son will get justice. Sam was always a champion for the underdog. He hated it when people in power took advantage of others. I like to think of his death as his contribution to taking down one of the most evil men in this city."

Mrs. Chasin wiped Sophie's tears away. "You offered Sam friendship all those years ago. You helped him through a difficult move. He missed you fiercely when you had to move away. I know he always wished he'd tried to look you up. I'm

so glad he got to renew his friendship with you before he died.”

Evan saw Sophie wince. He knew she carried a tremendous amount of guilt, and she wished Sam had never found her again. He wanted to wrap her up in his arms and protect her from the Chasins’ words. He knew no matter what they said, she’d always feel responsible for his death. Just like he would always feel responsible for Tara’s.

Senator Chasin stepped forward. “I can tell you think we’re full of shit.” Sophie’s eyes widened at the man’s crude words. “But hear this: we are grateful to you, Miss Sophie Alvaro. We have not, and we will never, blame you for what happened to our son. That blame lies solely with Silvo. So, you take that weight off your shoulders. It’s not worth carrying around.”

Sophie sucked in a deep breath, swiped at her tears, then nodded. The Chasins smiled widely at her. Evan’s heart swelled at her resolve. She was so strong it took his breath away.

“You’re probably wondering what we’re all doing here, aren’t you?” Sophie nodded again, moving to his side. She wrapped her arm through his. He could feel her tremble slightly. Her emotions were still all over the place.

“Let’s make this quick. It stinks in here. Did you not think to clean out the dead bodies before you bought the place, Chasin?” A new voice joined them, startling Sophie. She gasped, then pulled away from him to run to the woman who’d just entered the front doors behind them.

The woman returned Sophie's exuberant hug. Evan could tell Sophie had lost her battle with tears as her shoulders shook. Mrs. Tilley let her cry it out, murmuring words of comfort the rest of them couldn't hear.

Mrs. Tilley met his eyes over Sophie's head. The tough former CIA officer looked on the verge of tears as well. Evan himself felt a suspicious burn at the backs of his eyes as he watched the reunion. He was glad he asked the senator to look for the old woman who'd helped Sophie escape. Mrs. Tilley's meddling had most definitely saved Sophie's life.

Sophie pulled herself together and gestured for him to come closer. "Evan, this is Mrs. Tilley."

Evan thrust out his hand. "It is an honor to meet you, ma'am. Thank you for what you did for Sophie."

She batted his hand away and swept him up into a boisterous hug. He swore his feet left the ground in her exuberance.

"None of that ma'am shit," she said after letting him go. "My, my. You're a handsome one, aren't you? If I was twenty years younger, I might be prone to give you a run for your money, young lady."

Sophie giggled. The sound wrapped itself around his heart. He'd never tire of hearing her joy. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his side, placing a kiss on her temple as she laughed.

“Well, shit. It looks like I don’t stand a chance in hell,” Mrs. Tilley complained, eyeing where he held Sophie.

“Sorry, Mrs. Tilley. I’m in too deep with the songbird.”

Mrs. Tilley threw her head back and let out a gruff laugh. “This one’s a keeper.”

Sophie gazed up at him, her eyes full of love. “I know.”

“Okay, Tilley. Wrap it up. We’ve got important things to get to,” Senator Chasin said.

“Oh, put a sock in it, Chasin. Can’t you see I’m having a moment with my girl?”

Chasin snorted. “If I didn’t know what you once did for a living, I probably wouldn’t let you talk to me like that. I’m a very important man, you know?” Evan heard the teasing tone in the senator’s voice yet couldn’t quite believe that the man who was third in line for the presidency was mocking himself.

“Still nothing but a pompous windbag,” Mrs. Tilley muttered. Mrs. Chasin burst out laughing. “All right. Enough funny business. Have you told her yet?”

“No,” Senator Chasin replied. “We were waiting for you.”

“What’s going on?” Sophie asked.

“We brought you here today to make a very important announcement.”

“Enough grandstanding. Just tell her already,” Mrs. Tilley groused.

“I’m getting to it. Keep your pants on, woman.” Evan could feel Sophie attempting to stifle her laughter. It appeared Mrs. Tilley and the senator had a very interesting relationship.

“As I was saying. You’re standing in the future home of the Songbird House, a domestic abuse shelter. Mrs. Tilley has graciously agreed to run it. We’d like you, Sophie, to sit on the board.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped open. She stared at the senator, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. “I-I don’t understand.”

Mrs. Tilley rolled her eyes. “Way to fuck it up, Chasin. What he’s trying to say is that in honor of what you did to survive and to bring Sam’s murderer to justice, he’s sponsoring the development of this new shelter. Victims of domestic abuse, no matter what age, social status, whatever, will find sanctuary at the Songbird House.”

“They decided to name it for you, baby,” Evan filled in.

“For me?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“But why me?”

“Jesus, Chasin. Did you not even thank her for what she did yet?”

“I did. She just doesn’t think she did anything special.”

“Nothing special,” Mrs. Tilley uttered. “Sweetie. You took down Victor Silvo. He was virtually untouchable. Because of your bravery, that man is rotting in a jail cell, where he’ll

remain for the rest of his life. However short that is,” she added, as if she knew the man’s days were numbered. Evan wouldn’t be surprised to hear that Silvo had been killed in jail.

“Strongest person I know,” Evan murmured before kissing her temple again.

“Oh, and one more thing before we all head over to City Hall for the press conference,” Senator Chasin added. “I’m also starting a new organization dedicated to helping first responders with substance abuse. My wife came up with the name.”

Mrs. Chasin smiled. “We’re calling it True Addiction Recovery for All. Or TARA.”

Now it was Evan’s turn to stare slack-jawed at the three of them. “What?”

“Hearing about what happened to your sister got us thinking. Substance abuse among law enforcement and other first responders is growing, unfortunately. And there are not enough avenues for help.”

“We’re hoping the TARA organization will be the start of a wider response to the problem,” Mrs. Chasin finished.

“I-I don’t know what to say,” Evan stammered.

“Now you know how I feel,” Sophie muttered under her breath.

Mrs. Tilley clapped her hands. “Okay, now that that’s over with, let’s get over to the press conference. Your friends and family are waiting.”

This time, both he and Sophie were in shock. “What?” they said at the same time.

“You two are responsible for some huge projects taking place in this city. We felt it was only right that you share this moment with your family and friends.”

Before he knew it, they had made it across town in record time and were now seated among the press while listening to the senator thank Sophie publicly for her role in bringing Sam’s killer to justice.

The two charity announcements were well received by the press. Evan’s mom cried at the honor to her daughter.

He looked over at his family. His parents held hands as they listened while the senator laid out the plans for TARA. Katie looked like she was going to burst with pride. All three were smiling. It was then he knew they were all going to be okay.

Then the senator announced that both the Songbird House and TARA would use music in the healing efforts. Nothing could have brought more joy to his family. It was quite literally music to their ears.

Music had always found its way into the deepest places of his soul. Since losing his sister, it was his way out. A way to disappear where no one but him knew the path. It soothed his mind, giving it and the unsettled thoughts that battered him rest. It healed his heart, yet he still didn’t feel whole.

Not until her.

Sophie.

He'd found someone who made him feel as good, if not better, than music did. Sophie's song touched his soul, and his heart would always beat to the rhythm of hers.

Afterword

Hollynn's Horizon

Chapter 1

The echo of gunshots ringing through the hangar and the horror that followed played on a loop in her brain. Jonah grabbing his chest. A scream caught in her throat as she watches the red spot spread on his shirt. The man who'd been like a father to her sinking to the floor.

She could do nothing but watch. Frozen in place. His lips had moved as he'd fixed his gaze on her.

“Run.”

The desperation in his eyes had her system rebooting. Her gaze shot to Travis, who was lifting the gun in her direction. Hollynn spun around and ran out of the hangar. Once on the tarmac, she spotted her yellow Air Tractor. Saying a silent prayer that they'd fueled it up. She climbed into the cockpit as the first shots pinged against the fuselage.

Forgoing safety checks for the first time in her life, she started the plane and shot down the runway, not daring to

breathe until she was in the air. *What just happened?*

She should have listened to Uncle Jonah. He'd told her to stay home, but she didn't. She'd arrived at the small private airfield just as Travis strode into the hangar. Sensing something wasn't right with the scene unfolding in front of her, she'd hidden while Jonah confronted him.

When the shots started pinging through the hangar and Jonah lay bleeding on the concrete floor, he'd told her to run. Wanting to help the man who'd been like a father to her, she'd hesitated, and it had almost gotten her killed.

"No. No. No," Hollynn Rowe exclaimed as the engine of her Air Tractor 502 sputtered.

This could not be happening. The situation she found herself in now was just the crown on top of an evil witch horror filled day.

It should have been a nice, normal day. Take the plane up. Spray the crops. Land and reload. Wash, rinse, and repeat. Easy peasy. And Hollynn had appreciated the easy after leaving her former job six months ago. Having seen too much grief during her missions with Sokaris Air flying fallen military members to their homes for burial, she needed the normalcy of the stress-free, tranquil days.

Hollynn had been a captain for Sokaris Air for eight years. Named after the Egyptian god of the dead, Sokaris Air's mission was to respectfully ferry the fallen from the Port Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to their loved ones anywhere in the United States. Hollynn had considered it

an honor to perform the duty. She lost a bit more of herself after each mission, witnessing many forms of grief.

They had told her not to get emotionally involved, but how could she not? Observing the anguish in each family member's face as they waited for the honor guard to carry their loved one across the tarmac to them, her heart had ached.

The nightmares didn't help. But those disturbing dreams were not the only issue that had prompted her to move on from the job, but she refused to chew on that pickle in her present situation.

The comfortable existence she had hoped to find in her current job had been shot to hell. Hollynn suppressed a snort as the ironic thought penetrated her mind.

Glancing at her instruments in the cockpit to see the fuel gauge needle on the E, she wished she *had* listened. She may have made it out of the hangar but with no fuel, her death may be imminent, anyway.

Hollynn flicked the gauge with her fingers, realizing somewhere in the back of her head the futility of the movement, but she couldn't stop herself.

But alas, no luck. The stupid needle remained on E.

A gun-toting Travis must have hit the fuel tank as she made her escape from the small airfield that had been her second home for decades.

Jonah Krause had raised her at that airfield. Instilling in her a love for all things flying. Uncle Jonah and her father had

been buddies in the Air Force. After Hollynn's father passed, and her mother became distant in her grief, Uncle Jonah had taken her under his wing. He'd taught her to fly and had been so proud the day she told him she'd joined Sokaris Air.

But now her surrogate parent was gone, and she could very well join him if she didn't get her wits about her.

Hollynn reached for the radio to transmit her mayday but hesitated. Travis would be listening for her. She'd witnessed Travis kill Jonah. He'd murdered him in cold blood, and she was the only one who could identify him. She knew, instinctively, she would be next if Travis found her. Using the radio was definitely out.

Hollynn rooted around in her backpack for her cell. She could call someone. She *should* call someone. Someone she trusted.

But who?

Sadly, Jonah had been one of her only friends. Since she'd been home, her days had been solitary. She worked alone. And she went home alone. She'd locked herself into the pathetic life.

But recently, Jonah had been giving her more operational control of Haven's Dust. She'd been working closely with Madison Ghannon, a local freelance bookkeeper. They'd met several times at a local bar to go over the finances, and Hollynn had enjoyed her time with the woman. Her sister, Natalie, had joined them occasionally with an innate ability to make Hollynn feel welcomed.

The Ghannon sisters were close to the Nighthawks, a group of men and women who worked in search and rescue. Maybe if Hollynn called Maddie, one of her friends could help.

Decision made, she unlocked her phone, pulled up Maddie's contact information, and hit the icon to make the call. Putting it on speaker, she waited for her to answer.

"Hey, Hollynn," Maddie answered. "I was just about to call you. I've finished your quarterly review if you'd like to meet sometime to go over it."

"Jonah's dead," Hollynn gasped, still in disbelief. Saying it out loud caused a painful knot to form at the base of her throat.

"What?"

"Travis," she croaked again. "He killed Jonah."

"What are you talking about? How do you know?"

"I ... I saw it," she panted. She needed to slow her breathing before the panic attack she could feel coming hit. Now was not the time for her system to shut down. Her engine was doing enough shutting down for the both of them.

"Oh God, Hollynn. Are you okay?"

"No," she stated simply. "Listen ... I'm in the plane, heading north. He must have shot the fuel tank as I escaped. I'm going to find a place to land safely."

"Where are you?" The worry in Maddie's voice made her cringe. "What can I do to help?"

“Call the police. Tell them you heard shots near Haven’s Dust. Don’t tell anyone about me.”

“Hollynn—” Maddie argued, but Hollynn cut her off.

“I don’t want Travis to find me. I’m sure he’ll kill me, too.” The plane sputtered again, the engine trying fitfully to stay engaged. There was no way Maddie could miss the booming rattle.

“Hollynn!” she yelled. “Tell me where you are. I have friends who can help you.”

“It’s not safe,” Hollynn insisted reevaluating her earlier thought.

“Please, Hollynn. The Nighthawks can protect you. Many of them are former special forces.”

The engine sputtered again, the deafening clatter sending her back to another time. Another crash. She shook her head. *Stay focused, Hollynn. Do not get lost in the past.*

“Flick!” Hollynn wheezed under her breath as the plane shuddered. The engine’s power fluctuated.

“What happened?”

“I don’t think I have much time left. I’m gonna have to put her down somewhere.”

“Hollynn!”

“I’m in the Upper Peninsula. There’s an old Air Force base. Gonna try to land there. If I can’t make it, I’m hoping I can

glide to an open area, but I might have to set it down somewhere in the forest.”

There were a lot of trees between her current location and any open space big enough for her to land. It would take all the training and skill she had to get out of this alive. Crashing in an area full of trees was not ideal. Her little plane would crumple like a tin can.

Hollynn kept her eyes focused on the ground below, hoping to find any gap in the canopy. The colorful display of leaves was a beautiful sight that she would have enjoyed if she weren't fighting a dying plane. If she had to crash through the woods, she might not survive. What she wouldn't give to be in a high-powered jet with an ejector seat right now.

The plane hit a pocket of air, the turbulence causing the aircraft to shudder. Hollynn held her breath, hoping she wouldn't lose too much altitude. Her breathing became more erratic, and she struggled to pull in huge gasps of air.

Those memories threatened to swamp her again, and her vision narrowed. The world tilted as image after image of that fiery crash flitted through her mind. She could still see her father's hands on the controls as he fought to bring them down safely.

No! Not now!

She couldn't lose focus. To survive this, she needed to shove the past out of her head. Hollynn closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deeply. After a few inhalations, the voices on her phone caught her attention. She'd forgotten she

was still on with Maddie, who was talking to someone in the room with her.

“Call Graham!” Maddie shouted. “Hollynn needs help!”

Hollynn gasped as another pocket of air pushed her down a few hundred feet. No way she’d make it to a safe landing point now. She was too low.

“Hollynn?” Maddie asked, concern filling her voice.

“I’m sorry, Maddie,” Hollynn rasped.

“I’ll stay on with you until you land,” Maddie insisted. That was the last thing Hollynn wanted her new friend to do. She wouldn’t subject her to listening to what might be her death.

“Can’t. Gotta concentrate. Thank you, Maddie. Goodbye.”

“Holl—” Maddie yelled just before Hollynn ended the call. She also turned off her phone, knowing Maddie would try to call her back. Strangely, she thought about the phone calls from Flight 93 on 9/11. How the loved ones listened in agony as their family members attempted to take back the plane ... then silence. It must have been pure torture for those people. And even though she and Maddie weren’t extremely close, there was no way she’d subject her to listening to her end.

Alone again. She could do this. She’d been alone most of her life. She’d be alone for her end, too. Nothing different. Taking another deep breath to calm nerves that threatened to splinter, Hollynn spotted her opening. A gap in the trees. Hopefully, the clearing would be large enough to land.

“Here goes nothing,” she murmured with more confidence than her shaking hands portrayed as she turned the plane toward the gap. She worked to keep the craft level as it lost altitude. Before she knew it, the landing gear skimmed the tops of the trees. The plane lurched as the wheels were ripped from the body.

Hollynn saw the opening just beyond the trees in front of her. Could she make it through the last of the vegetation, or would it shred her to pieces as she tore through the foliage? Thread the needle, she thought as she barreled closer to the clearing. If she aimed just right, she had a chance.

Her plane shot through the remaining trees, the left wing nearly tearing off. She met the ground in a head bouncing body shaking slam, the warm metallic liquid flooded her mouth as her teeth pressed hard cutting the flesh of her tongue. She skidded across the clearing, straight for the tree line at the other end. Her teeth rattled in her head from the jarring journey on the belly of the plane. She prayed her skid across the ground would slow her enough that the collision with the massive trees ahead wouldn't be fatal.

Closer and closer she hurtled toward the trees. Hollynn held her breath, bracing for the brutal impact. She hit with an explosion of sound that sent the inhabitants of the forest scattering. The force of the sudden stop threw Hollynn forward. She lay draped over the throttle, momentarily stunned. *At least I'm on the ground*, she thought, before darkness descended over her mind.

Acknowledgments

Dear Reader, Thank you so much for taking this wild ride with me and allowing me to tell this story that means so much to me. I appreciate you taking the time out of your life and offering a piece of yourself to these words and these pages. Your enthusiasm and love for my characters makes this job a joy to do and your support means the world to me.

Did you enjoy Evan and Sophie's story?

People are often hesitant to try new books or new authors. Honest reviews of my books help bring them to the attention of other readers and encourage them to make that leap and give it a try. If you've enjoyed this book, I'd be eternally grateful if you could spend just a few minutes leaving a review on any or all of the following sites to help this story find the readers who would enjoy it. Goodreads, Bookbub, Amazon. Even the short reviews really make an impact.

I would also like to acknowledge the following without who this book would not be possible.

Laetitia Treseng of Little Tweaks and the OG of beta readers, whose advice and prodding have gone a long way to fluff up this story.

Jenni Bara and AJ Ranney, the best beta readers who never hesitate to tell me the truth. I look forward to reading your future books as well.

Beth Lawton, my editor who tirelessly works to clean up my manuscripts. I always thought I was good with the commas. Who knew I was so wrong?

My family, who more often than not, leave me alone long enough so that I can commune with the voices in my head.

Also By

Books In This Series

Nighthawks Search and Rescue

Nadia's Nemesis (Prequel)

Natalie's Nighthawk

Annika's Aurora

Emma's Element

Sutton's Shadow

Hollynn's Horizon

Sophie's Song

Jolene's Justice (Coming Soon)

Marnee's Mission (Coming Soon)

About Author

Amanda Zook has been an avid romance reader since middle school when she delved into *Gone with the Wind* and has finally decided to liberate the stories that live in her head. After growing up in the Sweetest Place on Earth (Hershey, Pennsylvania) she attended college at a small liberal arts school majoring in English (what can you do with an English degree?). She met the love of her life there and followed him to the Jersey Shore (no, not the MTV reality show) where they lived for the first 20 years of their marriage, before moving halfway across the country. Amanda now lives in the Southwest corner of the mitten state on the shores of Lake Michigan (no sharks, no salt, no problem).

She is a wife, a mother of teenage twin girls (even though she is aghast that her children dislike reading and pizza) and can now add published author to her list of achievements.

You can find her on Facebook, join her Facebook reader's group, Amanda Zook Books, Instagram, and TikTok.

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