

The  
**Switching**  
HOUR

A Halloween Reverse Harem Romance

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AMAZON AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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*The Switching Hour*

*A Halloween*

*Reverse Harem Romance*

Krista Wolf

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# One

## SILVANA

They say that every second you dwell on the past is a second you're stealing from your future. Slick, right? I don't know how true that is, or even who "they" are. But it was this questionably deep quote — scrawled across the front of a dirty garbage can at the end of a Miami Beach street — that finally broke the camel's back for me.

That stupid little quote sent me home to pack my things. It flung me two full days and sixteen-hundred miles northward, in a tired old car that was already protesting to begin with.

And now here I was, driving to a house I'd never seen, built by a great-grandfather I'd never met. Rolling past midnight through a state so far north I'd never even dreamt of visiting, toward a town so small that zooming into it from Google maps had me laughing my ass off.

I turned the wheel again, growling as the streets grew even darker. Shaking my head with the outrageousness of it all.

I could've stayed. I could've tried to make it work in my shitty little apartment at the ass end of Overtown. On a whim though, I'd made a command decision: that I'd rather try

making it in some *other* shitty place, in some *other* shitty town.

Why? Because to hell with the past. My past sucked so much I'd rather drag the future out to the nearest bar and start doing shots with it. Even if in the end, all it wanted to do was fuck me.

*Not that I couldn't use a good—*

The road — if you could still call it that — suddenly opened left, and there it was: a tiny overgrown trail that could be construed as a driveway. Two strips of dirty gravel overgrown with weeds in the middle.

“No way.”

It looked like it hadn't been used in decades. Maybe more.

“No fucking way.”

I rolled to a stop. My phone still blinked with the same alert: ARRIVED AT YOUR DESTINATION. The cold rain had finally let up enough to see without windshield wipers, which was good because I only had half a wiper-blade left on the driver's side, and none on the passenger's.

*You should just turn around.*

I laughed, and my laughter quickly turned hysterical. Imagine that? Coming all this way and just turning around? I could chalk it up to one of the craziest things I'd ever done, and that list wasn't exactly insubstantial.

But for once, I wasn't here for crazy.

“Alright gramps,” I grumbled. “Let's see what you got.”

I clicked on my turn signal — an action that made me laugh even harder — and rolled slowly up the shadowy driveway. The crunch of gravel beneath my tires was accompanied by the scraping of overhanging branches, from trees that hadn't been pruned since Elvis was alive. The twin path stretched on and on, and for much longer than I expected. When you lived your whole life in a big city as I had, you had no true conception of what owning property was even like.

The letter from the lawyer had arrived half a year ago. It shocked me enough that I even *had* a great-grandfather, but to learn he'd actually known about me in the end was even more of a surprise. Apparently he'd used the last of his money to search for heirs, and in his final days had willed everything he owned to me.

Since the man died penniless in his Oregon rental trailer, that really didn't amount to much. But it turns out he *did* own a big old house in New Hampshire. A house he'd supposedly built with his own two hands, nearly eighty years ago.

I'd signed my name to the deed last spring, sight unseen. The only image I had of the house came from a single black-and-white photo, found at the bottom of the old cigar box the lawyer shipped down to me. In it, my great-grandfather was grinning from ear to ear. He stood proudly in front of the beautiful Victorian, hugging a pretty young woman that could only be my great-grandmother.

My thoughts were mixed at the time. I was thrilled to know I had another relative, yet somewhat angry I'd never known about him until it was too late. Maybe my great-grandfather even felt the same about me. I'd never know.

But the house...

In my spinning, conflicting mind, the house eventually became my savior. My Hail Mary pass. My ticket out of the ruins and rubble of Miami, because after what I'd gone through, there certainly were ruins.

Something large and dark finally faded into view, and I guided the headlights straight onto it. I killed the engine, cracked the door, and swung my cramped legs onto the gravel. By the time I'd pulled myself into a standing position, my jaw was already on its way to the ground.

The house was a complete and total *wreck*. A broken, ruined shell of its former self, it jutted three stories into the air and loomed high over me like some ugly, angry demon.

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

It was well past midnight now, on a moonless, cloudless night. Only the spectral glow of my car's headlamps illuminated the hulking, ghostly form of the old Victorian, just enough that I could see my way up the decrepit steps and to the front door.

Any other person would've run screaming, possibly even in terror. But I didn't have time for screaming. I was a woman down to zero fucks, zero choices, and her last eighth of a tank of gas.

Setting my hands on my hips, I let out an exhausted sigh.

"Home sweet home."

# Two

## SILVANA

Six straight hours. That's how long I scrubbed the place. That's how long it took to put even the slightest dent in the stench of mold and mildew, and give the first few rooms a nice, lemony, bleach-tinged scent... over the smell of *more* mold and mildew.

But I didn't care. I'd never owned anything substantial before, and this was my place now. The idea of being a homeowner felt outright bizarre — stranger than anything I'd felt before — but it also came with a certain pride of ownership that I was really enjoying.

I did the important rooms first: the kitchen, the living room, the *other* living room... plus whatever that round, turret room was that contained that amazing, curved wooden staircase. I had no idea about the place, really. Everything was incredibly old, and the doorways unusually narrow. But the house was huge on the inside, even cavernous. The once beautifully-paneled rooms gave way to each other with multiple entrances and exits, like some sort of weird, messed-up maze.

Bit by bit, the dirt and grime was stripped away beneath my furious onslaught. Growing up as a foster kid, the one thing I learned was how to clean. I'd always been meticulous

about whatever little spaces I'd been lent or given, and that was paying off in spades now. And while some things were so old they disintegrated the moment I touched them, the more basic parts of the old Victorian were still proud and strong.

In short, the house had good bones. Maybe the porch was a rotting mess and the railings were failing away, but the front door was as solid as the day my great-grandfather hung it. The plaster and lath walls remained strong and unbent. The planked oaken floors creaked beneath my feet, but there were no holes, and no soft spots.

I'd opened the windows just after getting started, and now the light of dawn was filtering in. I stuck my head out from time to time, reveling in the fresh, sweet pine scent of the forest that surrounded this place on all sides.

Where I was from, the waning days of September were no different than the rest of the summer. They were an extension of light and heat and warmth.

Not up here, though.

In this place it was already cold. There was a snap to the air; a sharp chill that numbed your skin and bit at your lungs whenever you breathed in too quickly. The air had a taste to it, too. The flavor of something crisp and strange and autumn-tasting.

I kinda liked it.

I heard the vehicle before I actually saw it. The low thrum of its engine seemed like an interloper after all my solitude. I continued cleaning through the sound of a car door swinging open and shut, and the heavy sound of boots thumping up the outside steps and across the porch.

*My porch.*

The front door was open. I didn't even turn around as the footfalls indicated my visitor had stepped inside.

"I figured it wouldn't be long until you showed up."

The man was stout, short, and overweight, with large brown boots and a belt that disappeared beneath the overhang

of his belly. His beige-colored uniform seemed stretched tight in several uncomfortable-looking places as he shifted from one leg to the other.

“Did you catch me on the way in?” I asked him. “Because there’s no way you saw my car from the street.”

The sheriff shook his head and grunted.

“A deputy saw you drive through town last night. He followed you through to the other side, then said you disappeared down this road.”

I nodded, dropping my sponge into the latest bucket of my shit-brown bleach mixture. Then I wiped my hands on my ‘clean’ rag.

“Didn’t take long to drive through town,” I replied glibly. “I could throw a rock from one side to the other.”

The man grunted again. “Maybe see that you don’t.”

I watched as he reached behind himself and pulled out a large, oldschool clipboard. On top of the clipboard was something else: an iPad, or some other sort of generic electronic tablet.

*Ah, crap.*

My face contorted bitterly as I leaned back against the counter and crossed my arms. The man’s eyes were cold and unfeeling as they shifted to meet mine. Immediately I noticed that one of them was clouded over with a milky white cataract.

“Alright, Ms. Carter,” he barked. “Let’s see it.”

I paused for an extra-long moment, just because I could. Just because it would piss him off, and I enjoyed pissing people off. Especially people like this.

Then, begrudgingly, I put one foot on the opposite counter and reached down to roll up the hem of my jeans.

# Three

## SILVANA

The electronic ankle monitor was sleek and black, with a green LED that blinked every eight seconds. It was fixed tightly to my ankle by a thin nylon band, just as it had been for the better part of the past eight months.

“Hmm,” the Sheriff said, examining it visually. “Alright, now don’t move.”

He tapped his tablet a few times, punching all different things with his pudgy fingers. The LED on my anklet began blinking furiously, several times per second. After about half a minute, it finally stopped.

“Good. You’re all synced up.”

The man seemed satisfied as I slowly lowered my leg. He punched a few more buttons, then turned to face me again.

“By the terms of your house arrest, you’re not permitted to go beyond fifty yards from this very spot,” the sheriff said. “Except under the unique set of circumstances the Miami-Dade probation department has already laid out.”

I crossed my arms again, letting my lips go tight. “Fifty yards?” I sneered. “C’mon sheriff, you know that’s bullshit.”



“Fifty yards is all you need,” he said mechanically. “With that radius you can go outside, walk the grounds a little.” He sniffed at the moldy, bleach-soaked air, wrinkling his nose. “Get some fresh air...”

“I have a few dozen *acres!*” I protested. “And lots of landscaping that needs to be done.”

“So?”

“So fifty yards is nothing,” I shot back. “Especially with all the spare time I have.”

My guest stared back at me for a moment with his blue-and-white eyes. Eventually his lip curled, and he began punching buttons on the tablet again.

“Fine. I just gave you a little more breathing room.”

“Thank you.”

“If you reach the edge of the arrest zone,” he pointed downward, “that light turns red and your ankle monitor will beep loudly. That’s your warning to turn back. If it beeps for more than a minute it shoots me a message, and then you’re screwed.”

I nodded obediently, though I’d been wearing this thing for almost a year now. It took every ounce of my willpower not to make my best ‘no-duh’ face.

“If you leave the property,” he continued, “or try tampering with that device? I get immediate notification on my smartphone. We’ll come straight away. You’ll be handcuffed in minutes.”

My folded-arm silence didn’t seem to be the answer he was looking for. His scowl deepened.

“I *mean* it, Ms. Carter. I won’t even ask any questions, you’ll just be arrested.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I waved him off. “Let’s get on with the good stuff. Let’s talk about exceptions.”

Now it was his turn to pause, as he reached up to scratch at the side of his head. The sheriff had very thin, straw-like

hair, probably the result of going so totally grey. But he had a lot of it for a man well into his 60's.

“Once a week you're permitted to go into town for groceries, and groceries *only*. You can also bring any trash you have to the landfill. You can also see a doctor, but you'd damned well better have an appointment first. And believe me, I'm going to check.”

He reached out and handed me a business card embossed with the sheriff's office logo and a trio of phone numbers on it. I took it reflexively.

“You'll call that first number *before* you leave to go anywhere,” said the Sheriff. “And I'll tell you whether or not it's okay to go.”

“I have to *call* you first?” I snarled.

“Every single time.”

“What if you don't answer?”

“I always answer,” he shot back. “That's my personal line. It goes directly to me.”

“And what if—”

“What if *nothing*, Ms. Carter!” the man snapped back. Clearly he was already fed up with me.

“But just look at this place!” I protested, waving an arm around. “Give me a free pass to the hardware store, at the very least. If I'm going to fix this place up, I'm practically going to be living there.”

“Too bad. *Hire* someone.”

I put on my saddest face. “I can't afford to—”

“You're under house arrest, remember?” the sheriff snarled. “This is supposed to be a punishment, not a renovation project.”

My expression turned sour again quickly. He wasn't buying it. Smart man.

“I still don’t know why you’re here, Ms. Carter,” he said suspiciously, “or how long you plan to stay in town. Just make sure you abide by my rules. I’ll be stopping by to check on you often.”

“Awww,” I purred, giving him my most saccharine smile. “Sheriff, now that’s just sweet as honey!”

“Stuff it, Ms. Carter.”

He turned to leave, and I watched him go. Two steps beyond the kitchen’s side doorway, his foot cracked one of the porch boards straight through. His ankle gave way and he almost rolled sideways, but caught himself just in time. Before he’d regained his balance though, I think he used every curse-word he ever knew.

“This is bullshit,” he finally sneered, flexing his knee to make sure it was okay. “You shouldn’t even *be* here!”

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’s unsafe! This house ought to be condemned!” He sighed angrily. “Hell, I think it was condemned at one point.”

“So?”

“So you don’t even have a CO for this place.”

“A CO?” I bit. “What’s that?”

“Certificate of Occupancy.” He glanced upward, probably at the sagging roof that overhung the porch some thirty feet up. “The inspector would have a field day here. You should probably just rent a room in town, while you wait.”

I approached the doorway, then leaned out a little ways. I pretended to look at the same thing he was.

“You want me to live in one of those creepy motels I saw on the way in, until I can get this place fixed up?” I laughed heartily. “By then I’ll be fifty!”

“Not my problem.”

Our eyes locked, in a test of wills. I tried my best not to stare too hard at the white milky one.

“Sheriff, are you saying I can’t live in the house that my beloved great-grandfather built with his own two hands?”

He shook his head slowly. “Not until it passes inspection, no.”

I laughed again, just before slamming the door in his face.

“*Watch me.*”

# Four

## SILVANA

It probably wasn't the best idea, slamming the door in the Sheriff's face. Especially since his rolled ankle was likely to swell to the size of a softball over the next few days, and that meant I'd be constantly on his mind.

No, that was just one more wrong move in a long series of bad choices I'd been making lately. Only this was the first one I'd actually made here, at the site of my all new beginnings. And that part sucked.

Instead I spent the rest of the day knocking a half-century of dust off the bottom floor of the house, and scrubbing it clean. It was daunting work. Tackling the tiny bathroom off the entry hall had almost made me physically ill, but being the only toilet I'd found so far, it had to be done.

By noon I'd cleared enough space to make the first floor livable, or at least half of it. Even so, I already had much more square footage than my largest apartment. I took an impromptu lunch in the front seat of my car; half a gas-station sandwich I'd picked up somewhere in New Jersey, washed down with warm soda and a stale bag of chips. Then I closed my eyes, just to rest them for a moment...

... and woke up cold and shivering, in pitch darkness.

*Fuck.*

I had one task left to do today, and it was probably the most important of all. I'd planned on doing it while it was still light outside, but now that option was shot to hell.

*Gotta get it done, though.*

After stretching some of the stiffness out of my tired body, I popped the hatch and rummaged through the dense pile of everything I owned in the world. My car was so full of miscellaneous crap it looked like I'd been living in it, which really wasn't that far off.

Near the bottom of the pile of clothes, boxes, and laundry baskets full of personal belongings, I found what I was looking for. So much for planning ahead.

Heaving the mother of all sighs, I gathered up everything I needed and headed upstairs.

I went slowly, despite the burden of the big canvas sack slung over my shoulder. I hadn't even been upstairs yet, but I needed to get as high as possible for what I needed to do. The ornate wooden staircase creaked beneath my weight, but it didn't shift or budge an inch. My great-grandfather was apparently one hell of a carpenter. For that I was grateful.

I passed the second floor landing where the staircase continued onward, shining the five-dollar headlamp strapped to my forehead everywhere I looked. The hallway broke off in two directions up here, both of them lined with doorways. Some of them were even open. But the floor itself...

*Oh SHIT!*

I stopped dead in my tracks. In both directions, the dust on the floor was broken by footprints. *Booted* footprints.

“HELLO?”

My own voice broke the stillness so abruptly it actually startled me. I panned left and right, up and down, half-afraid of what I might see. Dust swirled through the beam of my headlamp.

“Anybody up here?”

It wouldn't surprise me at all to find squatters in the house. Back in Overtown, squatting had become almost a legitimate form of residence. Rents were ridiculous in some places. People simply couldn't keep up.

The weight of my burden was dragging me down. I could explore later on maybe, but right now I had to continue.

"I'll be upstairs if anyone needs me!" I called out loudly. "Make yourself at home, there's beer in the fridge!"

There was no beer and there was no fridge. Hell, I didn't even have a bed or a bedroom picked out yet to set up in. But when you were alone and lonely, it always was fun to play around.

Upward I went, climbing into the vaulted attic on the third floor. The space was massive, spanning the entirety of the house. The dust was so thick it limited visibility to just a few feet in front of me.

"Anyone wanna help me with this?" I grumbled, shifting the weight from one shoulder to another. "It's heavy."

No answer. No footprints up here either, and that was good. I made my way south, in the direction of one of the reverse gables I'd seen from the driveway. This particular one opened out to a tiny, railed balcony with a pair of broken spindles. The door granting access had long ago been twisted backward on its hinges.

*There we go.*

I stepped through the opening, testing the balcony's rotten boards with one foot first, then the other. Satisfied, I climbed over the railing and onto the precariously sloped roof just outside. Being careful the whole time not to look down.

It was pitch black and moonless again, but now the wind had picked up. I could hear the sound of leaves rustling as the trees swayed. The canopy was a mass of shifting shadows, just above me.

"This is nuts."

Saying it out loud didn't make it any less crazier, but I continued unpacking the bag anyway. The metal bars of the tripod went together easily enough. In no time I had them positioned against the roof's moss-covered tiles, as best I could considering the angle I was working with.

Bracing my feet for maximum leverage, I grabbed the .22 caliber Ramset tool and loaded it with a half-dozen drive pins. Then I started blasting.

“OOOHH!”

The first pin I fired into the anchor hole on the tripod blew me backward a couple of inches, but a couple of inches was all it took. I was slipping. *Sliding*. Pain flared on my hands and forearms as I scratched for a handhold on something, anything, but it was just too late. Gravity already had me. It pulled me downward, faster and faster, moving me inexorably closer to the edge of the roof.

Tiles slid free. Rotten pieces of ancient plywood disintegrated beneath my scrabbling fingers, as I flipped backward and hurtled helplessly over the edge.

“HANG ON!”

And then I was falling... falling through the crisp, night air. The beam of my headlamp swept wildly across the trees as I winced hard, waiting for the excruciating pain of my inevitable impact.



# Five

## CYRUS

“HANG ON!”

By the time I got the words out, it was already way too late. Thank God she flipped backward before going over though, because it gave me that one extra second. Just enough time for that one last step, which positioned my body more or less perfectly beneath hers.

“UNNNFFF!”

The air was forced from her lungs all at once, in such a violent way I knew it would hurt like hell. My elbows bowed painfully, my locked arms giving way beneath the weight of her acceleration. I caught her across the back and just behind the knees, as the force of her momentum eventually knocked us both to the ground.

But I caught her. And that was all that mattered.

“Gotcha!”

I held her for an extra few moments, while her face went tight with alarm and panic. My God, she was beautiful! Even as she clutched me, gasping for air.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” I said quickly. “You’re gonna be alright. Your wind might take a minute to come back though,

so just try to relax.”

Her hands were still death-locked on my arms, her fingernails digging in like claws as she clutched onto me for dear life. Eventually her blue-grey eyes shifted to mine. I saw the fear slowly draining.

“Don’t say anything. Just *breathe*.”

We were on the ground now, at the foot of the vast, wraparound porch. She’d missed the railing by inches. She’d missed even worse than that, only by the grace of good timing.

“I saw you climbing around up there,” I said slowly, “so I made my way over. At first I thought you were trying to break in, but—”

“Why... why would I break in...”

She was talking, even though I told her not to. The pretty ones were always the most stubborn.

“... to my own *house*.”

I glanced down at her strangely, then smirked. “This isn’t your house,” I said. “This isn’t *anyone’s* house.”

The woman I’d just saved from certain death pushed off me, then scrambled to her feet. Her chest was still heaving, as she worked to force air into her deflated lungs.

“W—Who are you?” she demanded.

“Me? I’m Cyrus.”

Her head cocked curiously. “And why are you here?”

“I’m here for the house.”

For the first time I noticed that the lights in the lower level were on. There weren’t many of them, but they were definitely running.

“You got the *lights* on?” I gasped incredulously.

The woman swallowed hard, regarding me coldly. Eventually she nodded.

“How?”

“I called the electric company,” she said. “I had the power turned back on a few days before I got here.”

“But—”

“I told you already, this is my house.”

Though her words were registering in my ears, I still shook my head. I’d been here a hundred times, inside and out.

“No one would buy this house,” I disagreed with a laugh. “It’s too—”

“I inherited it,” she cut me off coldly. “From my great-grandfather.”

*Inherited!* Now I was interested! I couldn’t help my eyes from going wide.

“You’re a relative of old man Carter?”

The woman glanced up at the spot she fell from, a good two-and-half stories directly above us. I saw her shiver involuntarily.

“I guess so, yeah,” she replied. “That’s my last name.”

“Got a first name?”

She looked at my arms, fixating on the torn right sleeve of my leather jacket. A good portion of my bicep and tricep was exposed. The skin there was bleeding from three distinct puncture wounds.

“Silvana,” she said, her eyes softening. “My name’s Silvana.”

“Silvana?” I whistled. “Damn that’s beautiful.”

She went to roll her eyes, then somehow stopped herself before she did. She pointed to my arm.

“Did I do that?”

I looked at it and shrugged. “Better than you hitting the ground, no?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“What the hell were you doing up there?” I pointed.  
“That roof’s like a hundred years old!”

“Eighty,” she corrected me.

“Still—”

“And I was installing something,” she went on. “Trying to, anyway.”

“Installing *what?*”

Her eyes shifted away from me for a second, as if trying to determine how much she should tell me. Eventually I guess she relented.

“A satellite dish.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “A satellite dish! On *that* roof?” I let out another chuckle. “You must take your television routine very seriously.”

Silvana Carter folded her slender forearms across her chest. “No, I take my *work* very seriously.”

I noticed that she was bleeding also. And shivering. Hell, she ought to be shivering, she was only wearing a T-shirt.

“What did you mean when you said you came for the *house?*” she asked me skeptically.

“You’re bleeding too,” I pointed out.

“Answer the question.”

I bit my lip. She was a tough one. I had the urge to pull off my jacket and drape it around her, but I knew for certain she’d refuse.

“I... sort of work here,” I said awkwardly. “Have been for the past five years.”

Her face remained impassive, unchanged. Cold and beautiful.

“So that’s your footprints I’ve been seeing around?” she asked.

I flicked a finger in the direction of the newly-lighted windows, and therefore the front door.

“Let’s get out of the wind and I’ll tell you.”

# Six

## SILVANA

“And you bring people here? To my *house*?”

It probably came out a lot snottier than I actually meant it. Accepting the clean wad of paper towels I’d just given him, Cyrus nodded.

“Small teams of people, yes.”

“For... what did you call it? Ghost hunting?”

“We prefer the term paranormal investigation,” he smirked. “But yeah, that’s the gist of it. We set up cameras, recorders, EMF meters—”

“In *this* house,” I said again, pointing to the floor.

“Sure. What’s so hard to believe about that?”

Cyrus peeled off his leather jacket and draped it over the counter. Almost immediately, all thoughts of everything else went straight out the window.

*Holy shit.*

My guest’s body was utterly *ridiculous*. Two broad, dream-like shoulders flowed into a pair of long, powerful arms that dabbed at the scratches I’d given him. I was all but hypnotized watching them flex into tight, striated muscles.

But his chest...

Cyrus's enormous pectorals stretched his T-shirt tightly over his V-shaped body. I could see the curve of his muscles straight through it. All the way down to the taut, rippled expanse of what *had* to be the best rack of abdominals I'd ever seen on a man's body.

"You still haven't thanked me, by the way."

"For what?"

"For saving your life."

My eyes crawled back to those incredible arms. If they hadn't been so big... so strong...

"You're right," I admitted. "I definitely owe you one."

Cyrus chuckled and turned on the faucet. "Big time."

A disgusting stream of air and water sputtered from the faucet, vibrating the very walls the pipes were housed in. As it spit out into the sink basin, I sighed and shook my head.

"If you give it a minute it'll go from sludge-black to shit-brown," I said. "And then if you're really lucky, you'll get yellow."

"Yeah, you've definitely got well problems," Cyrus agreed. "Water down there's stagnant from sitting so long."

I felt a flash of panic. "So I need a new well?"

He shook his head. "Nah, probably not. You just need to run it hard, for maybe a day straight. Get all new water in there."

"Run my water for a day straight?" I scoffed. "I could only imagine the water bill."

"You don't have a water bill," Cyrus pointed out with a smile. "It's a well, remember?"

God, even his smile was beautiful! Cyrus had thick, flowing dark hair, offset by a pair of intense, ice-blue eyes. His face was clean of stubble, his angular jaw covered in stubble so perfect it would make George Michael jealous.

“I still can’t believe the work you’ve done in this place,” my guest said, glancing around the kitchen. “And you’re saying you just got here?”

“Yesterday.”

“Man,” he whistled low. “Have you started on upstairs yet?”

I paused for a moment, then shook my head.

“That’s gonna be an uphill climb,” he lamented, finally wetting his paper towel. He switched the sink off. “You should probably get help.”

“I’m not in a rush,” I countered. “I’ve got plenty of time.”

As I watched, Cyrus began dabbing at his wounds. He had thick wrists. Big hands. The kind of hands you could imagine all over you.

*Stop it.*

“Is that a *Datsun 280z*?” he asked incredulously, peering out the window.

“So what if it is?”

“It’s pure awesome.”

Something occurred to me as I shrugged off the compliment. “Hey, where’s *your* ride? I don’t see one, and I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I left it parked out by the road,” he said. “There’s a path that runs along the other side of the house and comes up from behind. I usually take it, to check the trail cams.”

I blinked in astonishment. “There are *trail cams*?”

“Yeah. Motion sensor deer cams, actually.”

“I want them gone.”

I’d spat the words quickly, defensively. Without giving it much thought.

“They’re not aimed at the house or anything,” Cyrus explained. “Not directly, anyway. They’re more focused on the



yard, and the old—”

“Still,” I cut in, trying to remain diplomatic with the man who saved my life. “I’d feel better if they weren’t there.”

He finished cleaning the scratches on his arm, which were starting to look sort of deep. Eventually he nodded.

“Alright, they’re history,” he agreed. “I’ll come by in the daylight to make sure I get them all.”

Guilt crept in. It was mixed with a few other emotions I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Okay. Umm.. thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” said Cyrus. He unrolled a new wad of clean paper towel and wet it all over again before taking a step in my direction. “Now you.”

“What about me?”

“Look at your forearms, Silvana. Your hands...”

The stinging was something I’d filed away almost immediately after regaining my breath. Now I looked down, and for the first time I saw the abrasions on my arms and hands. There were trails of dried blood running down to my elbows, where they stopped abruptly. Sliding down the roof had done a number on me, my palms especially.

“You got any peroxide?” he asked. “If not, there’s a twenty-four hour place in town that we could—”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

He took another step toward me. “At least let me help wash off the—”

“I said I’m *fine*.”

Cyrus stopped, shrugged, and dropped the paper towel in the sink. By the time he’d slung his jacket back on, I felt like an asshole.

“Look... I’m sorry,” I fumbled awkwardly. “I really don’t mean to be an asshole.”

“So it just comes naturally?” he joked.

“Something like that,” I finally smiled. “I’m just really tired and strung out.”

“Not to mention cold,” he said, pointing to my shaking hands.

“Yeah. When the sun goes down, it’s freezing in here.”

Cyrus nodded. “There was a pot-bellied stove in the common hall — a real beast of one, too. It used to heat most of the house, but someone broke in and scrapped it a few years back.”

“Great,” I grumbled.

“The fireplaces in the library and some of the bedrooms still work though. And there’s a wood-pile out back. It’s old but there’s a lot of it. Should burn hot and fast.”

My shoulders slumped, and very slowly I felt my body start to relax. This guy wasn’t a problem, he was a bunch of solutions. Plus he’d just saved me from a serious trip to the hospital... or worse.

On top of all that, he was straight up yummy as fuck.

“Think you could help me mount that satellite dish?” I asked, picking up the paper towels again. “I’ll let you keep the trail cams.”

Lifting one arm, I began washing the dried blood away. I intentionally avoided his gaze while awaiting an answer.

“On another part of the roof, sure. Maybe a part that’s not rotten.”

I shook my head. “Can’t be on another part of the roof. I need south-facing exposure for the satellites.”

Cyrus paused, scratching at his stubbled chin. For the first time I noticed a long scar trailing across one of his cheeks.

“I could pull it all up and put down new plywood. We’d need tar paper. A couple squares of asphalt shingles...”

“Would that cost a lot?”

“Wouldn’t cost anything if you don’t mind hunter green shingles,” he shot back. “I’ve still got some left over from the last roofing job I did.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You do construction?”

“I do a lot of things,” he winked. “But off and on, yes. I do carpentry.”

My mind raced with conflicting thoughts, weighing merits and drawbacks. I hated relying on people. I hated not doing things myself. But considering the circumstances...

“O—Okay, sure,” I relented. “That would be great.”

I punched up my contact list and handed him my phone. Cyrus put his number in, and headed for the door.

“Where are you staying, anyway?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“In town. Obviously you’re not staying *here*, at least not until you get all set up.”

“I... don’t know the name of it,” I lied. “One of those little strip motels.”

He regarded me curiously for a moment, then nodded.

“Call me early enough, and I’ll show you the best place to get breakfast.”

# Seven

## SILVANA

*Knock Knock KNOCK.*

I groaned, pushing myself to a standing position from where I knelt on the bedroom floor. By now it was half-clean, half covered in what I was calling ‘the grime of ages’, which I was becoming extremely familiar with.

“Coming!”

I called out loudly, casting my voice ahead of myself as I jogged down the gleaming staircase. I took pride in how beautiful it was now. I’d spent a good two solid hours on it, first with hot mops, then with a multi-surface degreaser, and finally with good old Murphy’s oil soap.

“Just leave that in the upstairs hallway,” I pointed to the man carrying my mattress. “Next to the box-spring.”

It was delivery day, and the whole property had been a flurry of activity. I’d received two amazon deliveries already, which included everything from all new cleaning supplies to pots and pans, glassware, linens, toiletries, and even a few standing lamps to light the darker corners of the house at night. I’d ordered space heaters too, but unfortunately they weren’t showing up for another two or three days.

Outside, I had two different landscapers cutting back the jungle of weeds infringing upon the house. I'd promised each of them weekly maintenance if they did a good job, so in the end one of them would be cataclysmically disappointed.

The cleanup crew I'd called had driven all the way up from Keene, and they'd arrived with a thirty-yard dumpster. Already it was almost full. From one of the turret windows I could see it stuffed with the miscellaneous piles of junk situated around the property, plus several dozen yards of broken railings, rotten boards, broken siding, and the moldy, god-awful rugs that had been pulled from the first and second floors. The house was a storm of dust that I knew would settle over everything later on, and I'd have to re-clean most surfaces all over again.

But hey, where the hell else was I going?

Finally there was Cyrus, hammering away above me at the end of a thirty-foot extension ladder. Fixing my roof and hopefully mounting the tripod I'd use to hook up the high-speed broadband internet I needed to finally get back to work.

I'd intentionally waited until after ten o'clock to call him. The last thing I wanted was to explain why I was still sleeping in my car, and couldn't possibly go to breakfast with him.

*KNOCK KNOCK!*

"Alright, alright already!" I cried, hurrying my way through the foyer. "The door's open anyway, for the love of \_\_\_"

The man standing in the doorway was in uniform. And not a cleaning crew or landscaping uniform, either.

"Ms. Carter?"

He wore the same colors as the sheriff. The same boots, the same belt, the same shiny badge, too. Only this man was much younger, and this man was *huge*.

"Uhhh... hi?"

The guy in front of me was in his late twenties, and built like a Sherman tank. Big, broad, and muscular, he outweighed even Cyrus by a good twenty pounds.

“I’m officer Miller, Ms. Carter,” the man smiled. “Pleased to meet you.”

A lettered nameplate fixed just above one buttoned pocket confirmed the man’s last name. His hand was already extended. Mechanically, I shook it.

“What can I help you with, sheriff Miller?”

“*Deputy* Sheriff,” he corrected me.

He removed his mirrored glasses, and a lovely pair of caramel-colored eyes settled on mine.

“Fine, then call me Silvana,” I shot back. “Enough of this Ms. Carter crap.”

Our handshake went on a bit longer than usual. Not that I minded. Deputy Miller’s palm was smooth and strong, and felt comfortingly warm as it enveloped mine.

“Silvana, huh?”

“Yes.”

“That’s very pretty.”

I smiled and accepted the complement, while my eyes flitted strategically over the tighter spots on his uniform. Between him and Cyrus, it got me wondering what they put in the water up here.

“Sheriff sent me over to make sure you didn’t need anything,” he said.

“You mean the sheriff sent you out here to check up on me.”

The man laughed gruffly. “That too.”

“Well you can tell him I’m being a good little girl, and I’m playing nice.”

The deputy poked his head inside and took a good look around. Then he shook his head in disbelief.

“Damn. The sheriff wasn’t kidding.”

“About what?”

“You fixing the place up.”

“Yeah, well I’m pretty determined.”

He looked me up and down slowly. His smile widened.  
“I can see that.”

“And driven.”

“Uh huh.”

“And as you probably already know, a bit of a captive audience.”

At that deputy Miller smirked a bit knowingly, if not apologetically. It brought his already-handsome features into sharper focus.

“I’ll tell the sheriff you’re kicking ass here and taking names, alright?”

“Much appreciated,” I smiled.

“You know he’s scared shitless of you, right?” His smirk turned into a grin.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And uhhh, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to give me a call.” His face grew more solemn. “I had a sister who went through this,” he added, his voice going low. “So I’m sympathetic to your cause.”

I didn’t have to look down to know he was already holding out a business card. It was almost identical to the sheriff’s.

“Thanks, deputy Miller.”

“Nolan.”

*Nolan.* I tasted the name. It wasn’t half bad.

“Thanks Nolan,” I reiterated. “And I—”

Someone dropped abruptly beside the deputy, clapping a hand on his shoulder. It turned out to be Cyrus. He’d climbed

down the ladder and hopped over the railing.

“What’d I tell you?” he called cheerfully. “Was I right?”

Nolan looked me over again, his gaze stopping here and there. Eventually he nodded.

“Yes. You were spot on.”

“Told you.”

My brows knit together as I crossed my arms. “Told him what?”

“That you were an absolute badass,” Cyrus confirmed. “And nothing like the rest of the women in this town.”

*That’s probably not saying much*, I thought but didn’t say.

“The two of you are friends, then?” I asked.

They looked at each other. “You grow up in this town and you pretty much know everyone else,” Nolan admitted. “Can’t be helped.”

Cyrus nodded. “We also share some work, here and there. Plus the two of us train together at the gym.”

“You mean I train *him*,” the big deputy chided his friend.

“Bullshit.”

They went back and forth for half a minute, while I sat there enjoying the show. Their camaraderie was evident for two people who were very much the same, yet also different.

“The gym, huh? Well that explains a lot,” I said, not even caring about the implications.

Off in the distance a lawnmower stopped running. Everything got that much more quiet.

“So your dish is up,” Cyrus went on. “You can set the angle yourself, but it’s all installed on your new forest green section of roof.”

“Oh my God!” My face lit up. “Thank you so much!”

“No biggie.”



I twisted in the doorway. “What umm... do I owe you for \_\_\_”

“You really don’t owe me anything,” he cut me off. “But I wouldn’t say no to a couple of burgers from Freddie’s right about now.” He thumped Nolan playfully in the chest. “You in?”

Nolan and I exchanged a knowing glance. It happened quickly, before Cyrus even noticed.

“I’m sure Ms. Carter’s going to be stuck here pretty late,” he said, matter of factly. “Especially with all this work going on.”

“The sheriff’s right,” I jumped in. “I’ve still got tons of stuff to do before this all gets wrapped up.”

*Deputy sheriff*, Nolan mouthed silently.

*Silvana*, I mouthed right back.

“I really do appreciate the help though,” I added, shifting my attention back to Cyrus. “Raincheck maybe?”

My impromptu savior regarded me skeptically as we squinted against the dying sun.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

# Eight

## SILVANA

“And that’s it?” I asked forlornly, punching in the last few keys. “Really?”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but yes,” Edgar replied, over my headset. “That’s the best you’ll get for now. Your signal’s just not strong enough for the better VPN’s. Not the ones exclusive enough to require speedier connectivity, anyway.”

I sighed wistfully, staring into the screen of my laptop. At least my living situation had improved. I was lying on my stomach, stretched out over my soft new bed. The heat of the nearby fireplace was enough to drive the chill from the air, and brought the room to a respectable sixty-eight degrees.

“Can’t you get a clearer shot at the satellites?” Edgar asked.

“No. I mean, not from where I have the dish.” I scratched my nose. “Too many trees.”

“Then cut them down. You own the land, don’t you?”

I tried to envision what that would entail. Already I’d made a huge dent in my savings, just getting the house in semi-livable shape. He did have a point, though.

“Or put it somewhere else, then.”

“I would,” I lamented, “but my choices are limited.”

On the other side of the country, Edgar laughed. “You? Limited? C’mon sweetie, we’ve known each other way too long for me to buy *that* one.”

I was only half-listening now. I was too busy cycling through my inbox, mentally assigning various priorities to all the work I’d put on hold during my trip north. I had three SQL injection routines still running that I needed to check, and a corrupt database one client was whining about. I’d also cracked a popular bank’s new security AI with a simple brute force program, which was something they weren’t going to be too happy about.

“So how’s the weather up there?” Edgar was asking.

“Chilly.”

He laughed again. “Better you than me.”

“It’s not bad though,” I offered. “No humidity at least. And it’s kinda growing on me.”

“Yeah, well Suzanne’s not going to like the cold,” he countered. “Let’s hope her gaskets don’t split up the middle on you. She was born down here. She’s never seen snow.”

“Suzanne’s just fine,” I smiled, thinking of the faded orange Datsun down in my driveway. “She sends her love.”

I tapped the keyboard again, and my screen filled with a whole bunch of cookies I’d swiped from another client. They claimed to be running some cutting-edge forecasting software for the NYSE, and wanted their system to be airtight against their competitors.

“That parsing program I gave you work out?” Edgar asked.

“Haven’t checked yet.”

“Let me know. I can tweak it if you need me to.”

“You the man.”

One of my latest projects had been breaking into a state records database — a little too close to the government work I always tried to avoid. I'd phished a key-logging program onto one of their Unix servers three weeks ago, with the intention of running Edgar's software to pluck out a few passwords. I just hadn't harvested the raw data yet.

A scream rang out, sounding a little like a wounded animal. For a moment I couldn't tell if it was over the phone or inside the house.

"I gotta run," said Edgar. "Someone's crying downstairs."

I chuckled. "Skinned knee?"

"God only fucking knows," he grumbled.

"How many you got there now?"

"At the moment? Three. All of them under ten."

Closing the laptop, I rolled onto my back and sighed. "You're a saint, Edgar," I smiled. "A goddamn saint."

"Yeah, yeah," he brushed me off. "Haven't hosted a teenager since you, though. You ruined us for good, I think."

"Happy to oblige."

Another scream, louder this time, came over the headset. It was followed by the crash of something breaking, and more crying.

"Go," I instructed. "Run. And hey Edgar... thanks."

"That's what I'm here for," he replied. "Oh, and Silvana?"

"Yes?"

"You're still my favorite."

I felt a happy warmth, somewhere deep in my chest. "Oh, believe me I know."

The latest and greatest of my six foster fathers hung up, leaving me in relative silence. The only sound in the room was the reassuring crackle of the fire.

Rolling off the bed, I threw another two logs into the firebox and held my hands out to warm them. Most of the second floor remained untackled, but I'd picked the first bedroom that had a fireplace and claimed it for my own. It was a nice size too, with windows overlooking the north and west sides of the house. Off in the distance, I could see the faintest glimmer of what was probably the lake.

My mind drifted back to my previous life, and my relationship with my foster father. Edgar had been my parent, my mentor, my friend. He'd been the only person to truly connect with me, and had a knack for pulling me away from the listlessness of my teenage angst.

Part of it was because I became quickly fascinated with his work. As a white hat hacker hired to break into various computer systems to test for vulnerabilities, I'd watched him make a kickass living right from his desk. And then I was more than just watching, because I was learning too. Edgar was a patient, methodical instructor. I was a voracious student, eager to learn.

That was a long time ago, and by now the student had become the master. Edgar and his wife Janice were still fostering children, which was something they were honestly born to do. But his time in front of the keyboard was limited these days. And mine was not.

“Ah, Edgar...”

Janice loved me in that watered-down, blanket way she loved all the others she fostered, but Edgar had treated me like his own biological daughter. He would always listen to my problems, before and even after I left the house. He wouldn't judge, either. Hell, he'd even sent me off with Suzanne, the beloved 1970 Datsun 280z he'd grown up driving. I'd tried giving it back three times already, but he told me it wasn't practical for him anymore.

“Suzanne wasn't built to live in a garage,” he'd said. “She needs young blood. She needs *you*.”

I hoped he was wrong about the gaskets, and what he'd said about the colder weather. I loved that car, just as I loved

him. It had style and character. It had taken me on lots of different adventures, including this one.

Twisting my body, I put my backside up against the fire. On a whim, I inched my sweat shorts down so that the flames flickered warmly against the bare skin of my naked ass.

*Mmmmm...*

God, it felt *good!* Too good. So good it ought to be bad for me or something.

Yet as great as it felt, nothing was going to beat the feeling of sleeping in a real bed tonight, instead of a car.

# Nine

## SILVANA

*Beep-beep-beep!*

The warning light on my ankle monitor finally blinked red again, just before the end of my driveway. I'd already tested it on the sides of the house. I'd walked far into the woods with a set of painted wooden stakes, to mark out the perimeter of my closed little world.

To his credit, the sheriff had made good on his word. He'd given me much more than the original fifty-yard radius. Maybe there was a kind heart after all, inside that massive, barrel-shaped chest. More likely though, he figured if I were out here working on cleaning up my property I couldn't really be getting into trouble somewhere else.

This time instead of backtracking I pulled out my phone. I punched in the number from his business card, and fired off a text-message.

Heading into town, sheriff. Food shopping. As per our agreement.

The seconds ticked by, and there still wasn't an answer. My anklet kept beeping, its alarm annoying and shrill. It seemed like the volume was getting louder and louder.

*I wonder what happens next?*

I was tempted to find out. Instead, I got ready to put the car in reverse when the alarm stopped and the light on the device abruptly went from red to amber. I'd never seen amber. Then my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Carter, I told you to *call* me before you went anywhere!" the sheriff barked.

"I *did* call you," I protested. "And I haven't actually gone anywhere."

"No, you sent me some damned message that flashed on my screen before I could even read it!" he grumbled.

Was he for real? Apparently he was.

"Sheriff, with all respect it's the twenty-first century. A text-message is an easy thing to—"

"I don't go for messages!" he seethed. "I want *phone* calls. The old-fashioned kind, where I can hear you and you can hear me."

Damn, was he always like this? Maybe he still hated me because of the rolled ankle thing. Or maybe someone *else* pissed in his Cheerios this morning.

"Did you hear what I said, Ms. Carter?"

"Yes sir."

"Alright then." He took a deep breath before continuing. "I've disabled the alarm temporarily. You've got two hours."

I felt strangely light and exhilarated. Like I'd dropped fifty pounds in the last five seconds.

"Two hours," I repeated.

"Understand the *alarm* is disabled, but the tracking device is not," the sheriff continued. "I can still see you



wherever you go. And trust me, I *will* be watching. For the next two hours my eyes will be glued on the Ms. Carter show. Got it?”

“Awww, sheriff! You’re making me blush.”

“One hour fifty-nine minutes now,” he replied coldly. “And counting.”

He gave me one more warning, something about being back inside the perimeter before the device turned on again. By then I was already turning onto the road. It felt incredibly liberating, just to be moving again. I even took liberty with the speed limit, as I wound my way into town.

My new fridge had been installed earlier in the day, and right now that fucker was empty. I was determined to remedy that situation immediately, even if it meant expending my weekly trip on something I could’ve probably had delivered straight to the house. Maybe the sheriff even knew about things like Peapod, Instacart, and Uber Eats. Or maybe he was still stuck in the dark ages, talking on smart phones instead of utilizing them to their fullest potential.

Right now though, I was slow-rolling and enjoying my freedom. I cruised what looked to be ‘main street’ of the little New Hampshire hamlet; a criss-cross of boarded-up storefronts intermixed with mom and pop shops. Here and there I saw something familiar, like a 7-11 or a Mobil station with a built-in Dunkin’ Donuts. But there were no strip malls, no bodegas, no major grocery chains. Not even a Starbucks.

It was outright barbaric.

I even passed “Freddie’s,” which was either modeled to look like an old 50’s burger joint or it actually was one. In a town like this it was difficult to tell. New Hampshire was still 90% forested, or so I’d read. Driving through it now, during the daytime, that figure seemed accurate.

Eventually I settled upon a medium-sized building painted with the words Jayne’s Market. I parked, made my way inside, and began pushing a half-sized shopping cart up and down the quaint little aisles.

*Do people actually live like this?*

Apparently they did. I'd gotten a taste of small-town life through movies and television, but I never dreamed it would be my life someday. I began plucking things I needed from the crowded little shelves, both perishable and non-perishable. There weren't many choices. Where I was used to sifting through ten different types of dish detergent, there was only one. Everywhere I looked there were one or two brands of everything, and not many duplicates either.

I grabbed milk, eggs, and two cases of drinking water because I didn't trust anything that came out of that tap. Then I visited the deli section, stocked up on cold cuts, and was laughed off when I asked about buying chicken cutlets or steak.

"You'll need to see the butcher," the young girl at the counter snickered openly at me. "We don't carry that here."

"No, of course not," I shot back. "That would be way too convenient."

Her eyes blinked in confusion. "What?"

"Where's the butcher?" I asked, ignoring her. "Or rather, *who's* the butcher?"

The blonde behind the deli counter blew a big pink bubble. She popped it with her tongue, while looking me over.

"Clear across town, just off the overpass. Look for Dietrich's."

"Thanks."

I checked my phone as I pushed back through the middle aisle, in the direction of the lone cash register. The overpass was about two miles away, but I should have time. I wanted to return before the two hours was up, to get back in the sheriff's good graces. Maybe after a few successful trips he'd give me a little more leeway. But for now—

*"Unnnfff!"*

My whole body bent around the hand-grip of my shopping cart, as I ran straight into a brick wall! Only when I

looked up, it wasn't a wall. It was a man.

“Sorry!”

I'd spat out the apology quickly, before our eyes even met. Because after that, I didn't have words at all.

*Oh, wow.*

The man standing at the end of my shopping cart was tall and lean and beautiful, but also strikingly familiar. He had jet-black hair that crawled down the sides of his handsome face into a super-trimmed goatee.

“No need to be sorry,” the man smiled. “I got my boot out just in time.”

I looked down reflexively to a pair of large, black leather boots, then up over his wonderfully-tight jeans trimmed by a sleek black belt. The man's shirt hugged his lithe, elongated body, which I could see was tight all over and taut with muscle.

“You alright?”

I swallowed hard before finally meeting his gaze again. The man's face was as chiseled as his body, but his expression was soft and pleasant. But most of all, I noticed his eyes. He had the most beautiful, glimmering dark eyes. Eyes that pierced right through me, even as I stared into them.

“Y—Yes,” I stammered. “I'm fine.”

And then all of a sudden I knew it: where I'd seen him before. He looked like the personification of Lestat, the protagonist from the Anne Rice books I'd read so many times over.

The man looked like a sexy vampire.

# Ten

## HUDSON

She looked young! Way younger and more beautiful than I'd expected. Her silky brown hair had gold highlights that shimmered and changed color whenever she moved. It was also pin-straight, as it hung down to the small of her back.

"You're the one fixing up the old Carter house!" I snapped my fingers.

The woman behind the shopping cart blinked a pair of beautiful blue eyes. Her adorable, upturned nose twitched as she spoke.

"Let me guess," she purred. "Small town, where nothing's a secret? Everyone's got eyes on the new girl?"

"Nah, nothing that exotic," I chuckled. "Cyrus and Nolan told me."

"Ah."

Her eyes were still shifting over me, trying to determine who I was. Even better, she wasn't trying to hide it.

"I'm Hudson," I said, extending my hand. "Hudson Cross."

She paused for a moment, then reached out and shook it over the shopping cart. Her skin was smooth, soft, and

beautifully tan.

“I’m Silvana.”

“Silvana...” I smiled. “Wow, that’s—”

“Beautiful?”

I looked back at her and shrugged. “I was going to say sexy.”

Her mouth twisted into something playful and skeptical at the same time. “Sexy, huh?”

Now it was my turn to let my eyes wander. “Very.”

God, she had *great* curves. And lots of them.

“To be honest there’s nothing sexy about it,” she said. “My parents named me after the town in which they met. Turns out it’s just a dot on a map, an hour north of Seattle.”

“Silvana Washington, huh?”

“Yup,” she confirmed. “Population 90, last I checked. A whole mile and a half of total nothingness, in the middle of absolute nowhere.”

Her voice was pretty great also. Soft and feminine, but confident too.

“Hey, it spawned you, didn’t it?” I winked. “Can’t be all bad.”

She shifted from one hip to another as I checked out her cart. It looked to me like she was buying one of everything.

“I still can’t believe someone’s fixing up that old house,” I told her. “Land’s cheap up here. It’s easier to build from scratch.”

“Maybe I’m just a sucker for history,” she countered.

My eyes flared hopefully. “Seriously?”

“Hey, I know a gem when I see it,” she replied. “Or maybe I just enjoy carrying on my great-grandfather’s legacy.”

I still couldn’t believe she was related to old man Carter! At first I thought Cyrus was bullshitting, but then Nolan

backed him up.

“You really loved the old guy, didn’t ya?”

“Oh yeah,” Silvana nodded. “He was the shining star of our family. A beacon of positivity. The pillar upon which—”

“You never even met him, did you?”

She let out a chuckle. “No.”

“That’s alright, not many people in town have. He left in the 60’s, from what I’m told. Pretty sure your father was born there, though.”

Abruptly she seemed much more interested. “Really?”

“Yeah. Didn’t he tell you?”

For a moment she didn’t answer, but her eyes told the tale. Silvana looked down to where her hands still gripped the shopping cart.

“I never met my father,” she said solemnly.

Fuck. I hadn’t meant to pry, especially not in ways like this. I couldn’t help but notice she looked heartbreakingly beautiful though, even while sad. I needed to change the subject fast.

“Hey, I heard you’re going to let us leave the trail cams,” I said. “We appreciate that.”

“*We?*”

“Yeah, Cyrus and I. Nolan too, I guess. He’s been known to download the SIM cards for us every once in a while, while he’s out on patrol.”

“And all three of you do this?” She looked curious now, not angry. “In and around the house?”

“Are you kidding? Do you have any idea of the history of that property?”

Silvana shrugged. “Can’t be too detailed. I was told my great-grandfather built the place right after he returned from the war.”

“The *property*, not just the house,” I countered. “And he built it around the existing structure which was much, much older.”

She still didn’t get it. To be honest, not many people did.

“Aren’t you a little too old for all this supernatural crap?” she teased.

“Never too old,” I countered quickly. “And it’s not crap. You should hear some of the EVP’s we’ve isolated on that property. Not to mention the stuff we’ve caught on camera—”

“Show me.”

She crossed her arms. My smile widened.

“Okay. When?”

“Friday night,” she said. “Come by with some proof.”

I held out my hand. “Done.”

She shook it. “Good. Now one more thing.”

“What?”

“Where the hell do I buy booze in this town? I cruised your little main street up and down, and didn’t see a single liquor store.”

I tried biting back a laugh, only because she’d think I was laughing at her. It slipped out anyway.

“Sorry,” I said apologetically, “but you’re in New Hampshire. All the liquor stores here are state-run.”

Her pretty eyes narrowed. “You gotta be shitting me.”

“Oh, I don’t shit,” I told her. “Not about liquor anyway. The nearest place isn’t that far, though. It’s just off the interstate. Right over by—”

“Dietrich’s.”

I grinned, giving her another once over. Each time was better than the last.

“Shit, will you look at you?” I teased. “You’re a regular local now.”

“Friday evening,” Silvana reiterated, ignoring me. “Eight O’clock. I’m pretty sure you already know the address.”

“I can find it blindfolded, in the dark.”

“And you’d better bring something *good* with you,” she warned. “Something definitive.”

Glancing down at her phone, she looked suddenly alarmed. Silvana guided the cart quickly around me before zipping away.

“Might want to bring whatever you’re drinking, too,” she called back.



# Eleven

## SILVANA

The distant rumble grew even louder until it was a dull roar, rolling up my driveway. The single headlamp of a sleek, dark-colored motorcycle flickered off. The crunch of boots on gravel gave way to the hollow thud of my half-dismantled porch.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I breathed, sighing in relief. “Thanks for coming.”

“A damsel in distress?” Cyrus smiled. “Couldn’t keep me away.”

I stepped aside, ushering him into the house quickly so I could close the door. Down here in the lower level, it was only slightly less cold than being outside.

“I know this is stupid,” I began, “and I know I must sound like a little girl having a nightmare—”

“Nonsense,” Cyrus interjected. “If you heard something you heard something.” His leather jacket creaked as he walked. “Now show me where.”

I shivered, despite the blanket still wrapped around my shoulders. I led him through the house and up the staircase,

into the hallway on the second floor. My bedroom door was open. So was the one opposite mine.

“I heard it on that side of the house,” I pointed into the other bedroom. “A tapping at first. Then a scraping sound.”

“You sure it wasn’t the wind?” asked Cyrus. “Could’ve been a tree branch scratching back and forth against the house.”

“There *are* no trees up against that side of the house. I had the landscapers cut everything back.”

Cyrus squinted down at me for a moment, then stomped into the opposite bedroom. His footfalls were heavy and reassuring against the worn wooden planks.

My midnight savior peered out through the window, then wrestled it open and looked down. A chill wind swept through the empty room.

“I didn’t know you rode a motorcycle.”

“You never asked. Got a flashlight?”

I returned to my bedroom and retrieved the big 14-inch Mag-lite I’d brought all the way up from Florida with me. The heavy black cylinder functioned as both a kickass flashlight as well as a makeshift club.

Cyrus stuck one arm blindly behind him and I laid the thing in his palm. He clicked it on and leaned precariously out the window, sweeping the beam back and forth.

“You sure this was the source of the noise?” he asked.

“Somewhere over here, yes.”

The room dropped another three or four degrees before he was finally satisfied. He thumbed the light off, stood it up on the floor, and went through the difficult process of closing the eighty-year old window.

“Well there are definitely some slats of siding missing,” he said. “A few others are broken, too.”

“I guess they could’ve been missing for a long time, no?”

His lips went tight as he shook his head. “I can see them on the ground, right near the base of the house. The backs are clean, too. Unweathered. They just came off.”

My heart had been racing since being woken up by strange but distinct noises. Now it pounded that much faster. “So what does that mean?”

“It means I’m going out there.”

My body shivered at the very thought. “Alright, give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll—”

“Not a chance. You’re staying here.”

Normally I would’ve protested, maybe even been a bit pissed off at being told what to do. But his order came off as protective rather than authoritarian.

Besides, he was gone before there was even time to argue.

I followed him down and into the kitchen, where he exited through the side door and disappeared quickly into the darkness. The only sound I could hear was the rustling of the trees.

A minute went by. Three minutes. As it turned to five, I began wondering what I’d do if he didn’t come back.

*You’d follow him out there, just like in any bad horror movie, I thought to myself comically. And eventually you’d find him in some sort of—*

“Hey.”

The voice behind me startled me so badly I nearly leapt out of my skin! I spun around, both fists raised, and found myself staring at Nolan.

“You!”

It took me a second to recognize the deputy sheriff out of uniform. He looked even broader and more powerful in civilian clothes.

“Yeah, sorry,” he apologized. “Cyrus called me on the way here, told me there might be trouble.” His eyes narrowed.

“Where is he?”

“Other side of the house.”

Nolan disappeared too, leaving me all alone once again. After a few more minutes, I put my back to the doorway. I was shivering uncontrollably. Inside and out.

*Get a grip, Silvana.*

The anger started to come back, eating away most of the fear. Just as I was about to go look for them, both men returned. Cyrus nodded at my hands, which were still balled into tightly-clenched fists.

“You wanna spar with us?” he asked, his expression amused. “Or should we go back inside?”

With my heart hammering away in my chest, we made our way back through the house. It wasn't until the front door was locked and I was back in the comfort of my bedroom that I started to calm down a little.

“Wow,” Nolan said appreciatively, glancing around. “You really made it nice in here.”

The room was warm and cozy, not just because I'd decorated but also because I'd thrown some wood on the fire right after bolting awake. The firebox was blazing now, filling the room with a soothing, flickering heat.

“Thanks,” I told him.

The sheriff's deputy nodded then turned to face his friend. They both had a grim look.

“What'd you see outside?” I asked. “Anything?”

Cyrus had removed his jacket, and was holding his hands out to the fire. Nolan wasn't wearing a jacket at all. Both men were dressed in tight white T-shirts: probably the ones they'd been sleeping in when I first called Cyrus. His flowing hair looked adorably soft and touchable without any product in it.

“The siding is bowed and broken on that side of the house,” Cyrus said, pointing. “At least fifteen feet up. Multiple

places, too. At first I thought a tree might've fallen against the house, but like you said, it's all clear."

"It couldn't have been that anyway," I murmured. "The noise happened over the span of a few minutes."

Nolan glanced at Cyrus, then back at me. His face went abruptly serious. "Really?"

"Yes," I swallowed. "Why?"

"Because it looks like someone was *climbing*."

Something coalesced in my stomach, creating a tight ball of dread. I moved closer to the fire. Closer to them.

"W—who would be out there climbing?" I asked trepidatiously.

"Dunno."

Cyrus crossed the room, sat on my bed, and began unlacing his boots. As I watched, Nolan did the same. Their simple gestures sent a flood of relief washing through me.

"But we're sure as hell not leaving you alone tonight."

# Twelve

## SILVANA

The kissing was inevitable; the end result of warmth, and closeness, and skin on skin. Both men had slid into my bed without a word, and I was grateful for their presence. I'd accepted them with equal amounts of unspoken silence, just happy to not be alone.

It began with Cyrus, brushing one strong hand gently along the side of my face. His eyes were awake and alive as I cuddled into him. We stared at each other for a long while, enjoying the intimacy, trying to read one another's thoughts. Soon he had both arms wrapped tightly around me, and I was scissoring one naked thigh between his equally naked legs.

*Thank God.*

It felt so incredibly safe and wonderful, being held like this again. Especially here, in this place that could get dark and lonely. And especially tonight, when I was genuinely afraid.

Our faces drifted inexorably closer, and then we were kissing softly, slowly, our lips barely grazing one another's as our soulful gaze went several layers deeper. And then my eyelids fluttered closed, and I reveled in the feeling of his tongue against mine. My lips parted and my jaw rotated and I

whimpered softly as this beautiful man began exploring my mouth.

*Mmmm...*

The combined heat of our bodies created a warm, wonderful world beneath my thick down comforter. Cyrus had stripped off his shirt and jeans, and was wearing only his boxers. Nolan had just about done the same. I was still in the same threadbare pair of sleep shorts I'd stolen from an old college roommate, and a T-shirt that I instantly wished wasn't there. And of course, thick white socks that came up over my ankles. For obvious reasons.

I was nestled between them. Ensconced in warmth and flesh. I was kissing one man while spooning backward against another. Making out dreamily in a warm cocoon of heat and arousal, while another guest slumbered peacefully behind me.

And that's when I felt the hand on my ass.

*What the—*

Cyrus's two calloused palms still cradled my face, so they were present and accounted for. That meant Nolan was not only awake... but also aware.

"I..."

One of the palms turned into a finger pressed gently against my lips, shushing me. Then Cyrus was kissing me some more. A pair of hands slid to my hips from behind, pulling me backward, spooning me perfectly against Nolan's hard body. And I could feel something *else* too. A growing knot, way down near the curve of my ass.

Cyrus's tongue swirled through my mouth, kissing me passionately once more before breaking away. His ice blue eyes were locked on mine again. Very gently and not-so-subtly, he nodded in the other direction.

And then my breath was taken away... as Nolan rolled me over and began making out with me from the other side.

*OH MY GOD...*

I was on my back now, my head lolled left as the sheriff's deputy took over. Like Cyrus, his hands found my face. They sifted behind and into my hair, sliding ever so gently against my scalp as he pulled me closer, to drink even deeper from my lips. His kisses were even softer, even slower. Just as confident, though. Just as full of passion and electricity as his friend on the other side.

Back and forth they went, kissing and caressing me, letting their tongues dance with mine. Soon their hands began exploring my body beneath the sheets. Warm, probing fingers lifted my shirt from either side, setting my eager breasts free. Two sets of fingertips dragged themselves over my areolae with tantalizing slowness, as I gasped into first one hot mouth, then the other.

*You're crazy, Silvana.*

A big palm slid gently downward, over the flat of my belly. Butterflies exploded as it pierced my waistband and kept going.

*Out of your fucking mind—*

I gasped sharply as three warm fingers curled over my mound, then continued downward along my glistening folds. By now I was utterly drenched. There were no panties to contain my wetness. Nothing else to hide or contain my excitement...

Then a thick finger slipped deep inside me, and I practically melted into the bed.

*Fuck.*

I was making out with Cyrus at the time. I grabbed the back of his head now and began *really* going at him, kissing him with such ferocity my lips hurt.

He eventually pulled back a little, and his eyes found mine. A question was asked. Consent was enthusiastically given. It all happened silently, wordlessly. All within the understanding of our shared, soulful gaze.

A moment later his fingers joined Nolan's, and I sighed in pure, unfettered ecstasy.



*Yesssss.*

The comforter was pulled down to my navel, and two hot mouths dropped over my breasts. The contrast between their swirling tongues and the cooler air was sheer heaven. I rolled my knuckles into two thick heads of hair and egged them on, as they continued nursing me hungrily while still fingering me beneath the blankets.

It occurred to me that I might be dreaming. That maybe I hadn't heard a noise at all, and that I was still tucked beneath my blankets, slumbering away while blissfully alone. I'd wake up happy and refreshed yet horny and sad the whole thing hadn't actually happened.

Only no, it *was* happening. My sighs and cries said so.

And if it was happening, I intended upon enjoying every last second of it.

I let go of their heads and reached out on either side of me, intent in giving back just a fraction of the pleasure they were giving me. My palms found two bulging pairs of underwear. Each was equally warm and wonderfully thick beneath my questing, hungry palms...

Someone pushed my right hand away. Then my left.

"No, honey," a voice murmured. "This is about you..."

It was Cyrus, looking up at me from where his tongue still traced lazy circles around one rosy-tipped nipple. Nolan was doing the same from the other side. His caramel brown eyes met mine as he winked at me and whispered.

*"Just you."*

I was touched, flattered, confused... maybe even semi-pissed at having been denied something I wanted so badly to explore more of. But I was also in *heat*. My two saviors continued loving my body inch by inch with their hands and mouths. Touching it so commandingly yet tenderly I felt hotter than I ever had in my life.

In the end I could only sigh as I slipped back into oblivion.

*MMMMmmmm...*

My legs were spread achingly wide, as the men took turns alternating rubbing my tender button and plunging their thick fingers in and out of me. Eventually my breathing changed. At the penultimate moment I arched my back and bit my bottom lip so hard I thought I might scream.

Then I came so hard I literally *did* scream.

My cry echoed through the firelit bedroom, reverberating off the plastered walls. It was a cry of triumph, a cry of relief. A cry of such intensity and pent-up release, it drove me to the brink of something beautiful as I thrashed and writhed and clawed at the bed beneath me.

When it was over I remember more kissing, more passing my lips back and forth between them. It was slow and dreamlike and fueled by the endorphins swimming through my climax-addled brain, but it was no less hotter than it was before.

I found myself murmuring something — I don't even know what it was. A thank you, maybe. Words of disbelief, or deep appreciation, or even delirium-induced love.

Then I collapsed back into the cocoon of safety and warmth provided by the two hard male bodies cuddled up on either side of me.

And I slept like the dead.

# Thirteen

## SILVANA

The next day was the coldest yet. The autumn breeze carried an all-new crispness to it as I walked my property line, along with an underlying smell of smoke or fire. Someone was burning wood, maybe leaves. These weren't problems we had in Miami, so they were as new to me as the chill in my bones.

It didn't help that I'd woken up alone, but I guess that was to be expected. It was probably better anyway. There would be no awkward breakfast, no avoiding anyone's direct gaze. No small talk over coffee while trying to ignore the fact we'd let ourselves get carried away last night, or that I'd screamed my way through the mother of all orgasms.

No, last night was likely a one-shot deal. A coming together of various circumstances that put the three of us together in a random yet perfect way. Amusingly, I was glad I'd sprung for the king-sized bed. I'd always been a flip-flopper, and since the bedroom was big enough to handle it I'd ended up upgrading my usual queen to something I knew I'd never fall out of.

Right now I was admiring the beauty of an autumn morning deep in the woods. It seemed the surrounding leaves had turned even more yellow, and orange in spots too. The property surrounding my great-grandfather's house was truly

beautiful. All the photos and footage in the world could never do it justice.

*Not your great-grandfather's house, the voice in my head reminded me. YOUR house.*

That part still hadn't sunk in yet. I'd been cynical at first, declaring myself nothing more than owner of a termite-ridden pile of future kindling. But the more I saw of the house, inside and out, the more I realized what I really had. I was starting to like this historic old place, even love it. And there were entire rooms — floors even — that I hadn't even begun to explore yet.

On the far side of the house I found the broken slats of siding, and the ominous chill of last night came back. Whatever had made the noise that woke me up had done the damage here. Several pieces had broken off halfway up the side, which as Nolan pointed out, could've easily been due to someone climbing.

“Whoever you were, I hope you fell and broke your legs,” I spat.

I picked up the pieces and carried them back to the porch. Some of them I could nail back up. Maybe I could sweet-talk one of the landscapers into doing it, the way I got two of them to carry firewood up to my bedroom.

*Or maybe as a new homeowner you could bite the bullet and buy yourself a ladder.*

There were so many things to be done it was almost overwhelming. But if I took them bit by bit, one step at a time —

My thoughts were interrupted by the slow-roll of a car making its way up my driveway. I recognized the shape of the sedan before I even saw the light-bar on top. The familiar logo of the sheriff's office had me bracing for my next encounter with the grumpy lawman.

*Great. Here we go...*

Then the door clicked open, and Nolan stepped out instead.

“Oh,” I smiled, as relief broke over me. “It’s just you.”

“Just me, huh?”

Images flashed through my mind, unbidden. His handsome face, lying alongside me in bed. Kissing me. Touching me...

“Well I was hoping it was the sheriff coming to take me out to lunch,” I lied. “You know how close we are.”

“Like Harry Potter and Voldemort.”

I chuckled. “Exactly.”

Nolan looked damned good in his uniform, and now I didn’t mind checking him out directly. As I let my eyes crawl appreciatively over his body, he pulled something from behind his back and threw it to me. I caught it without even looking.

“What’s this?”

“Something I’m pretty sure you don’t have,” he said. “Something we usually wear up here, right around this time.”

My gift was soft, like a piece of clothing, so I grabbed the two shoulders and let it fall all the way open. The words SULLIVAN COUNTY appeared on the top right corner, just above the sheriff’s logo.

“Congratulations,” Nolan quipped. “You’re the proud owner of a sweatshirt.”

I laughed. “You’re right. I don’t have one of these.”

“Few girls from Miami do.”

“Oh we wear them at night sometimes,” I said. “You know, when it drops down into the 60’s.”

“Must be brutal.”

“It dipped into the low 50’s once,” I said jokingly. “We huddled in groups for warmth.”

Popping my head through the neck-hole, I pulled the big sweatshirt down around me. Instantly I felt ten times more comfy and cozy.

“Thanks,” I said genuinely, admiring him again. “Seriously, that was sweet.”

Nolan smiled and folded his arms across his giant chest. “Would it be even sweeter if I told you we were going on a field trip?” he asked. “Because there’s something *else* you need, and we’re going to get it.”

I repeated his folded-armed gesture and sighed. “You know I can’t go anywhere.”

The deputy sheriff nodded solemnly. “Normally that would be true. But I got permission from the big guy. After last night’s events, he’s given his blessing.”

My eyebrows knitted together. I had no clue what he meant.

“Go on,” he said, nodding at my ankle. “Check for yourself.”

Slowly I followed his gaze, then peeled back the cuff of my jeans. The ankle monitor’s light wasn’t green, it was amber again!

“No way!”

“Yes way.”

Without thinking I flung myself into his arms and began kissing him on both cheeks. Nolan turned about three shades redder.

“Alright, alright,” he laughed, pulling back. “Now get in. If we hurry, there might be time to take you to lunch too.”

# Fourteen

## SILVANA

My heart was breaking, and I couldn't stop it. It was filled to overflowing with such love, such instant affection for the occupant of the seat beside me, I couldn't help but reach over and hug him again and again.

And every single time, the dog nuzzled me back.

“Oh my God I *love* him!”

The shelter had been two towns over, and more than an hour away. It had been filled with all different breeds of dogs and cats, all of which were sadly looking for a home.

But this particular dog had called out to me.

It was caged all the way in the back, where it lay shivering in the far corner of its metal pen. It didn't come when called, like the others. At least not at first. But then it *saw* me... and something in its big brown eyes made it rise to its feet and start wagging its tail.

The dog wasn't pure-breed, or any particular breed at all. It was your run of the mill, sixty-pound mutt: too old to be a puppy, too big to be cute. It was also too dirty and mangy to be attractive, but I was thinking I could fix that problem with a warm bath, some good shampoo, and a whole bunch of TLC.

Nolan and I took the dog for a walk in one of those little fenced-in areas, where it warmed up to me big time. Every minute that went by brought it a little further out of its shell. By the time I was signing the papers, the dog was nuzzling happily against my leg. After a small adoption fee and a few more signatures, I was given its bowl, its leash, and a few banged-up chew-toys that had been in the cage with it.

“You can keep those,” I’d said politely, trying to wave them away. “Throw them out, or maybe give them to another —”

“Oh no,” the adoption agent had smiled. “Whatever comes in with the dog goes out with the dog. That’s a hard and fast rule.”

I learned that my dog had been found in an abandoned car, by someone who’d apparently moved away. At least they’d left the windows cracked and a dish of water on the back seat, which was empty by the time he’d been found.

“What’s his name?” I’d asked, before leading him away.

The agent had shrugged. “We don’t know. He came in nameless and we never gave him one.”

And now here I was, hugging my new pet on the way back to my imminent house arrest. Nolan had taken us both to lunch; drive-through hamburgers complete with fries and vanilla shakes. I’d ordered two for my shaggy new friend, and he’d wolfed them down happily.

Shit. I could’ve sworn the dog even *smiled*.

“You know this isn’t my first time in the back of a police car, or even my second.” I laughed out loud, then hugged my newfound friend. “But it’s definitely the best.”

Nolan laughed, guiding us along with one strong hand that rested casually atop the steering wheel. I had another flash of heat, remembering where that hand was last night. We hadn’t even spoken about it. He’d acted like nothing had happened at all.

I wasn’t sure if he were just trying to be a gentleman, or —



“You needed this old boy,” he said, reaching back to plunge his fingers through the fur on the top of the dog’s head. “For times like last night, when no one else is there.”

It was a comforting idea, when he first brought it up. A very sweet one too.

“*You* were there for me,” I pointed out. “Cyrus too.”

“And I’m glad we were,” he replied. “But I’ll feel better knowing you have a big shaggy hero at the foot of your bed, ready to rip any future intruders apart.”

I glanced down, to where the dog was licking my palm happily. His tongue was starting to tickle.

“More like kiss them to pieces,” I grinned, pulling my hand back when I couldn’t take another second.

“We tried that last night,” Nolan countered, flashing me an over-the-shoulder grin. “Didn’t work. You’re still in one piece.”

The butterflies came back as I leaned in close, putting my lips right up against his ear.

“Maybe you didn’t try hard enough,” I whispered.

For a few seconds he nearly swerved off the road. I settled back with a smile as he got control again, rolling us out of town and into the wooded outskirts where my property lay.

The radio crackled with static, and I heard the sheriff’s voice break through the old speaker. Nolan said something along the lines of being finished, and a few seconds after we rolled up the driveway I heard my ankle monitor chime once, loudly.

“That’s it,” he sighed, putting the car into park. “You’re back on the funny farm.”

I checked the light, which of course was green again. But I couldn’t be mad. The sheriff had done me a hell of a good deed at his deputy’s suggestion. And my new dog was already sniffing around, eager to be outside again.

I opened the door and the dog ran free, bounding its way toward the back of the house. I let him go while I unloaded the rest of his things, including the dirtied-up toys.

“Aren’t you uh...”

“A little worried he might run off?” I smiled.

“Yeah.”

“Nah. He’ll come around.” I set the dog-stuff down on the porch and sauntered my way back to the car. “Besides, it’s not like I’m gonna keep him prisoner. There’s too much of that going on around here already.”

I leaned into the open window, where Nolan was still sitting with his hands on the wheel. As our faces drifted closer together, his smooth brown eyes searched for mine.

“Thanks for today,” I murmured. “Seriously.”

“You’re very welcome,” he smiled. “I figured you’d do just about anything to get out of the house for a while.”

“Give me another week or two in here?” I laughed wickedly. “Who the hell *knows* what I might do...”

I kissed him before he could do anything else, planting my lips softly against his. Nolan kissed me back slowly, the way he had last night. Our tongues rolled while the sedan’s engine hummed, until we were broken apart by the crackle of more radio static.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Gotta run.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I countered. “I’m sure not.”

Somewhere in the distance the dog barked. We maintained eye contact though.

“I’ll be by tomorrow night, with the others. If there’s anything you need, be sure to text me.”

My brow furrowed. “The *others*?”

“Yeah. Hudson said you wanted to see the tapes Friday night. He’s the got the master copies, but Cyrus and I have—”

*Hudson!* I'd forgotten all about him! Not that someone so exotically good-looking was even remotely forgettable. I'd just been... well... preoccupied.

"You *all* do this?" I asked, genuinely curious. "The ghost-thing I mean?"

"Well, it's mostly Hudson and Cyrus's gig," he admitted, "but I help out. Besides, it's decent money sometimes."

My mouth dropped open. "There's actual *money* in this?"

"Sure is. And when you live in a small town, any outside income you can bring in helps with—"

"But *how?*" I asked, exasperated.

The radio barked again, and this time Nolan picked it up. He put the car in reverse, shot me a wink, then mouthed two words before rolling away:

*You'll see.*

# Fifteen

## SILVANA

I spent the remainder of the afternoon in the yard, cleaning things up and letting my new dog run back and forth between the house and woods. Every time he came back I gave him a treat from one of the bags the shelter had provided me, and I filled his bowl with ice-cold hose water that he lapped up greedily.

“Good boy!” I told him, scratching him all over. He turned round and round in a tight circle, giving me his flank. Using his snout he showed me exactly where he liked to be petted, which was apparently everywhere at once.

I was bagging a few piles of leaves left behind by the landscapers when he disappeared for the fifth or sixth time. This time I heard barking. I figured he’d found a squirrel or rabbit to keep him busy, but the barking eventually stopped and he didn’t come back, so I went off to look for him.

“Ummm... boy?”

I had a decent search radius thanks to the sheriff, but there were still limits to how far I could go. If my new companion ventured beyond the reach of my ankle monitor I’d have to call Nolan again, which I decided wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing.

The woods behind my house were deep, blanketed by thick, decades-old layers of pine needles and decayed leaves. I'd placed limit markers down on the east and west sides of the property, but I hadn't gone too far behind the house just yet. I knew the lake was back there, but I didn't know how far. Hell, there were a lot of things I still didn't know.

“Dog?”

I felt incredibly stupid, calling him like this. I hadn't even given him a name!

“Here boy! Come to—”

Suddenly the woods opened into a clearing, and I could see the shaggy brown tail of my new companion. It was wagging back and forth very rapidly, as if he'd found something good. A few steps later, I saw what it was.

“Oh.”

Three young kids sat on sport-style bicycles, forming a small circle around my dog. Two of them were petting him simultaneously. All three of them froze upon seeing me.

“Umm... hi,” the one in the black wool cap said awkwardly.

Damn, they were young! The oldest couldn't be more than fifteen. My eyes scanned left to right, where a huge, five-foot deep hole had been scooped out of the clearing. Piles of dirt and sand — excavated from the hole — were scattered everywhere. Next to that were a pair of shovels.

“What's this?” I demanded.

The blond kid in the middle averted his eyes downward, while the tallest of the three focused nervously on still petting my dog. It was the one in the wool cap that spoke up again.

“We uh... we come here to ride sometimes.”

I looked again and saw organization to the chaos. The excavation had created tracks and trails, ramps and jumps, leading in and out of the hole. Everything was hard packed, and well-ridden on. In short, they'd been doing this for quite a while.

“You made a whole BMX track back here,” I said.

The others eventually nodded. “Yes.”

I returned their nod with an even more appreciative one. “Holy shit, it’s cool as hell.”

All three whipped their heads up to look at me. Their expressions were suddenly hopeful.

“How long have you been working on this?”

“A couple of years now,” the tall kid said. He continued petting my dog beneath his chin. He must’ve been doing a great job too, because the animal’s eyes were screwed shut with pleasure. “We started with a small track and a few bumps. But then James had the idea to bring in shovels, and—”

The blond kid shot his friend a staying glance. He stopped mid-sentence.

“This is your property, isn’t it?” the kid in the wool cap asked.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Only recently, though. I sort of inherited it.”

There was a long, awkward pause, as the three of them looked at each other. Eventually the wool-capped kid nodded glumly.

“Alright then, we’ll take off. Sorry about the hole.”

I glanced again at everything they’d built, including the track itself. It looked like a tremendous amount of work.

“If you want us to come back over the weekend and fill some of it in,” the tall kid offered, “we could probably—”

“Nah, leave it,” I told them. “In fact, I want you to use it. You have my permission.”

Their three sets of eyes went so wide, I actually laughed.

“What? Is that so hard to believe?” I snickered. “I was young too, once.”

“You’re young *still*,” the blond kid offered.

“Ah, flattery,” I smiled. “It’ll get you everywhere.” I pointed at him while addressing the others. “Pay attention. You two could learn something from this one.”

The blond kid’s cheeks, already flush from the cold, went a few shades pinker. It was kind of adorable.

“And you’re not mad?” the kid in the cap asked. “We can really use the track?”

“Yeah sure, why not? As long as you don’t get hurt, because I’m pretty sure I don’t have homeowner’s insurance.” I pondered for a moment. “And if you *do* get hurt, we never had this conversation. Right?”

“What conversation?” the tall kid asked.

“Exactly.”

I patted my leg, and my dog bounced over. He began licking my hand as I scratched behind his ears.

“Just steer clear of the house and we’re cool,” I added.

“That house?” the blond kid pointed. He shook his head. “You couldn’t *pay* me to go near that house.”

I squinted back at the others, and it was immediately obvious they felt the same way. I wanted to ask them why, but I was pretty sure I’d get three different versions of the same urban legend. Besides, I wanted to see what Hudson and the others had first, before making any judgments.

“Say, you haven’t noticed anyone poking around the house lately, have you?” I asked suddenly. “You know, walking the grounds, climbing the walls...” I eyed them shrewdly. “Anything like that?”

“No, not really,” the tall kid shrugged. “No one out here but us.”

“Well, the deputy *does* come by sometimes to check the deer cams,” said wool-cap. “Other than that—”

*Deer cams!* Holy shit, I’d forgotten about the cams!

“We can barely see the house from back here anyway,” he went on. “So it’s not like we’d even know if—”

“Gotta run,” I said, backing away quickly. “Nice meeting you boys. Enjoy the track. Don’t get hurt. And if you happen to see something...”

“We’ll let you know,” wool-cap promised, waving as I turned away.



# Sixteen

## SILVANA

The dog beat me back to the house, where I expected to find him sniffing around the bag of treats. Instead I found him wagging his tail on the side of the house, where I got another surprise:

There was a strange car in my driveway.

“Hello?”

It was an older Chevy, maybe a Caprice Classic from the 80’s. The ignition was off, and the car was empty. I could hear a ticking sound coming from beneath the massive hood, as the engine block cooled down in the chill air.

I walked quickly to the front and back of the house, and found no one at any of the other doors. The door to my kitchen however, was open a foot or two.

“Oh you’ve gotta be *kidding*.”

I stormed inside, with my dog following dutifully. I hadn’t taken three steps into the kitchen when my nose — grown accustomed to all the cleaning products by now — wrinkled at a pungent new smell.

*What in the—*

Smoke! Something was burning!

“HEY!”

I flew through the downstairs rooms, following the scent. It was practically everywhere. I could detect a faint white haze still trailing up the staircase, so I took the steps two at a time and ran full tilt into something small, thin, and bony.

“*Oooff!*”

The woman and I bounced off one another and went flying to opposite ends of the upstairs landing. The impact was hard, jarring. It took each of us a few moments to scramble back to our feet.

“Hey,” she coughed, picking something up from the floor. “What’s your problem?”

She was thin and pale, with ink-black hair and somewhat familiar eyes. Those eyes were unreasonably angry now, as the weird-looking object she held in her hand continued emanating a thick, white smoke.

“*My* problem?” I growled. “This is my *house!*”

“I know,” the woman said calmly. “That’s why I’m here.”

I blinked in total confusion. “What? You’re not making any sens—”

She extended her arm and began waving the object in her hand again, while fanning the smoke out with the palm of her other hand. I was absolutely livid.

“What the hell *is* that?”

“It’s sage.”

She continued like I wasn’t even there. I had the urge to grab it from her hand and toss it straight out the window.

“But why are you burning it here,” I seethed. “In my *house?*”

“To dispel any negative energy,” she said, as placatingly as if explaining something simple to a small child. “And establish a positive environment.”

“But—”

“Got any allergies?”

I squinted, still mystified. “Everyone does.”

“This neutralizes positive ions,” the girl went on. “It helps with pet dander, pollution, dust, mold...”

“Wait, I thought you were trying to establish positive ions?”

“A positive environment, yes. But positive ions?” She shook her head. “Those are bad.”

For the first time I noticed how the woman was dressed. She wore strange but exotic layers of multi-colored clothing, which hung down around her slender waist in an array of flowing skirts. Her dark hair was tied up with strings of beads that matched her many necklaces. Two delicate chain hand-flowers wrapped each wrist, extending to multiple silver and gold rings on each thumb and every finger.

The air was growing thicker now with burning sage. While the smell wasn't exactly pleasant, it wasn't terrible either. Sort of like smoldering grass, or maybe even weed.

“Do you have any specific objects you want smudged?”

“Smudged?”

She waved the sage again, this time in a small circle. “Yes. You know, with this.”

I shook my head to clear it, almost like I'd fallen under a spell. “Who exactly *are* you?”

“I'm Maeve.”

She spun on her heel and walked straight into my open bedroom. Sighing mightily, I followed after her.

“I mean what are you doing here, Maeve?”

“Cleansing your house,” she repeated. “Hudson said you're living here now, right?”

Hudson. *Hudson...*

I looked at the woman again, and realization finally dawned.

“Oh shit,” I snapped my fingers. “You’re his sister!”

“Yes.” She finally turned to face me, her almond-shaped eyes rising to meet mine. “And you are?”

“Silvana.”

Maeve’s face, expressionless until now, lit up with delight.

“Silvana?” she repeated. “That’s breathtaking!”

“Err... thanks.”

“You should swing by my shop one day,” she said, with total seriousness. “Your aura is amazing. I’d love to do a reading.”

“Yeah,” I said mechanically. “Sure, maybe.”

Very gracefully, she laid one delicate hand on my arm. “I’m so glad you’ve calmed down,” she said. “I was getting a weird vibe from you.”

My mouth dropped open, as the woman walked slowly away. I decided to take a different approach.

“You wouldn’t happen to have your brother’s number, would you?”

Still fanning the sage, Maeve reached into one of a thousand hidden pockets and produced a small silver smartphone. It was so tiny I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Is this the original Iphone?” I quipped.

She didn’t answer, and the phone was unlocked. I punched up the contacts, found Hudson easily enough, and dialed him.

“What’s up sis?” he answered cheerfully.

“I’m not your sis,” I replied glibly. “I can’t put her on the phone either, because she’s too busy obliterating all the negative energy in my house.”

“Silvana?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause, followed by a groan. “She’s burning sage, isn’t she?”

“Like a witch in a gypsy camp.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Sorry.”

Images came flashing back, of him standing there in the supermarket. Hudson had a serious presence to him; a charisma that was hard to describe. Even over the phone it carried weight with it.

“How’d she get in here, by the way?”

“She has a key,” said Hudson, as if it were common knowledge. “We all have a key.”

I laughed at the absurdity of it all. There were so many things about the house I still didn’t know. The dog, who I’d completely forgotten about, wandered up from downstairs and began wagging its tail.

“Best thing to do is let her finish,” Hudson instructed me. “I know it’s a bit of a pain in the ass, but once she gets started it’s like arguing with the Terminator. It’s just impossible to turn her off.”

My dark-haired intruder was moving back into the hallway now. I smiled and shifted out of her way.

“It’s alright,” I relented. “I guess she’s harmless.”

“Most of the time, yes,” he agreed. “Other times though...”

Hudson’s voice ended in a low, attractive chuckle. Even though the man was virtually a stranger, I found myself looking forward to seeing him again.

“I sent Maeve with a big bag of dog food,” he said, “but she’ll forget to unload it. So before she leaves, make sure she does. It’s in the trunk.”

I was touched and confused at the same time. “How the hell’d you know I got a dog?”

“My inane psychic abilities.”

I laughed. “This is more small town bullshit, isn’t it? The kind where everyone knows everyone else’s business?”

“Something like that,” he said slyly. “Or maybe the three of us are just closer than you realize.”

The way he said the last part was strange and open-ended. It left me wondering the true extent of their friendship, which by now I realized went well beyond their common interest in the house itself.

“Well, thanks then,” I told him. “I hadn’t even thought of dog food yet.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“So you’re all coming tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I felt the knot in my stomach tighten a little more. It was a good knot, though.

“We’ll order a couple of pizzas then,” I thought out loud. “I guess I could open a few bags of chips too.”

“Sounds extravagant.”

“I’m just saying, don’t be expecting appetizers or anything.”

Hudson laughed, and even his laugh was attractive.

“Silvana?”

“Yes?”

“Dog food. Trunk of Maeve’s car.”

I chuckled. “Got it.”

“Don’t let her drive off with it, because she will.”

# Seventeen

## SILVANA

“Sorry but I still don’t hear it,” I shrugged apologetically. “It sounds like... I don’t know, like it could be a bird or something.”

The three of us were huddled around my kitchen table, waiting for the pizza to arrive. Hudson had his laptop open, and was playing his fifth or sixth recording so far.

“Hang on, I’ll find the cleaned-up version.”

“Cleaned up?”

“Distortion removed. Ambient sound too.” He began opening and closing folders, furiously. “You can hear it a lot better once the white noise is removed.”

Nolan, still wearing his deputy’s uniform, smiled at me from across the table. He’d straddled one of my chairs backwards and was resting his chin on top of his hands.

“You believe in this stuff?” I asked him.

He shrugged noncommittally. “I’ve heard a few things.”

“Well then show me *those* things,” I smirked back.

“In due time.”

Just beside me, Hudson had only one foot on the floor and was leaning back in his chair. It looked unnervingly like he could lose his balance, but somehow he seemed totally comfortable.

“Apparently you don’t know Hudson,” Nolan explained. “He likes to build up to things.”

He lifted the bottle of merlot he’d brought with him and held it out to me. I tipped my glass his way and let him refill it, nodding in appreciation.

“Buildup can be nice,” I said, holding the deputy sheriff’s gaze for two or three seconds.

“Very,” he agreed.

“Of course, you always run the risk of losing your audience. If this is the kind of stuff you’re showing people—”

“Ah, here it is!” Hudson cried excitedly, his chair dropping back to the floor. “Listen to *this*.”

He put one finger over his lips while double-clicking with the other. Absently I realized he was left-handed. The mouse was curved backwards, with the pad on the other side.

Once again the “ghostly” EVP played over his expensive portable speakers. Once more I heard something that sounded like a bird squawking, or maybe a little kid mumbling through a paper towel tube.

“That’s the cleaned *up* version?” I teased, tipping my glass back. I took a long sip of the deep red liquid, letting the warmth settle over my belly. “I don’t mean to be such a relentless skeptic, but—”

“What do you know about the story of this place?” Hudson asked, switching gears.

I shrugged. “Only that my great-grandfather built it.”

“He built the part of the house we’re sitting in right now, yes,” he said. “But there are places within that are much, much older.”



*Places within.* My eyes narrowed. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Hudson’s pretty mouth curled into a smile, and I nearly melted on the spot.

“Let me show you.”

God, he was so damned *good-looking!* His eyes glowed with excitement as he spoke, lighting up every feature of his gorgeous, goateed face. He stood up, but just then Cyrus entered the kitchen from the back of the house and nodded to the others.

“We’re ready.”

All three of them had taken turns keeping me busy, while carrying things inside for the past half-hour. Presumably to the library, because they’d strangely demanded I clean that room out before they came over.

It was exciting and mysterious at the same time.

“Ready for what?” I asked.

Cyrus rubbed his hands against his thick, delectable thighs. “Come and see.”

I’d spent yesterday evening scrubbing the library clean of dust and dirt, and most of this morning polishing the wooden surfaces to bring out their beauty. Somewhere in the middle, I slept. My new pet hopped up onto the bed without being invited, curling his warm, comforting body into the cozy nest created behind my legs.

Immediately I knew I’d sleep better with him guarding me.

Right now I was following the guys through the foyer, past the formal dining parlor and into the bookshelf-lined room they’d called the library. At one time there were probably hundreds of interesting books here, in all shapes, sizes and colors. At the moment the room was empty and lonely. Totally devoid of life.

Or at least it was...

“Oh my God!”

What I saw made me clap both hands right over my mouth.

# Eighteen

## SILVANA

The first thing I noticed was the rug. A huge red Persian had been unrolled in the center of the hardwood floor, and on top of it various pieces of mismatched furniture had been placed. There was a full-sized couch! Three different chairs. A tufted bench rested against one wall, and a couple of antique-looking end tables had been nestled perfectly between the seating areas.

Cyrus arched one dark, masculine eyebrow. “You like?”

“Are you kidding?” I cried, somehow prying my hands away. “It’s *gorgeous!*”

Best of all the fireplace was lit! It was bigger than the one in my bedroom, it roared brightly at the far end of the long chamber. I made a beeline straight for it and put my hands out to absorb the welcome warmth.

“You guys are crazy!” I exclaimed. “Where’d you get all this stuff? *How’d* you get all this stuff?”

“None of it is new,” Cyrus explained quickly, “not even by a longshot. So don’t get too excited.”

“Don’t get excited?” I countered. “To hell with that, this is amazing!”

I tore myself free of the fireplace and plopped down into the center of the couch. It was so soft it nearly swallowed me whole, but I knew right away it would be comfy as hell.

“We picked most of it up at a thrift warehouse up near Bristol,” said Nolan. “A couple of other pieces from estate sales.”

“That table there belonged to my grandmother,” Hudson pointed out. “That chair came from my garage. And the rug... well, we found that in the attic.”

I reached down to run my hand over the beautiful Persian. It was so soft and rich, it felt almost like new.

“Someone wrapped it well so it was fairly protected,” said Cyrus. “Of course we had it cleaned anyway.”

I looked around, and noticed a few other decorations as well. There were tchotchkes on some of the shelves now, even a few picture frames. Many of them looked so perfectly suited for where they were, I wondered if maybe they came from the attic too.

“The Himalayan salt lamp is a gift from my sister,” said Hudson. He pointed to a rosy, salmon-colored glow in the center of another shelf. “She said you shouldn’t turn it off though, so it never stops ionizing the air.”

The fire crackled, driving the usual nighttime chill from the room. Just a day ago this place had been a complete mess, but it was so warm now, so cozy. One by one the guys sank into different chairs, each with a fresh beer in his hand.

“We figured you needed a place to relax and unwind other than your bedroom,” said Nolan. “A place you could easily warm up, until you get the heat fixed.”

Sighing his way into the cushions, Cyrus nodded. “It gets *cold* up here, Silvana. Colder than you realize.”

“Colder than my Miami skin can handle?” I smiled.

“Yes.”

The dog had followed us in, wagging its tail the whole way. He spun in a circle three or four times, then curled up in

the corner of the rug nearest the fireplace.

“I can’t thank you boys enough,” I said, shifting my eyes to all three of them. I wasn’t used to stuff like this. I was honestly getting a little choked up.

I was about to say something else when the dog’s ears perked up. A second later, three quick knocks came from the other side of the house.

“Ah,” said Hudson, smacking his lips. “Johnny’s here.”

“Johnny?”

“The pizza delivery guy. From Andiamo’s.”

I squinted back at him skeptically. “Wait, how do you know his *name*?” I mused. “And how do you even know we picked Andiamo’s? You weren’t even here when we ordered!”

Hudson looked at me and laughed. “Well, there are three pizza places in town,” he explained patiently, “but only one will deliver out this far. That’s Andiamo’s.”

“And they have four drivers,” Nolan added with a grin. “But only one that works on weekends.”

“Johnny.”

They nodded together, as I shook my head in disbelief.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this small town backwards logic.”

# Nineteen

## SILVANA

Two hours later the pizza was nothing but crumbs, the wine long gone and the bottle drained. Each man had a small stack of empties next to his chair. The fire had a thick base of pulsing orange embers, which threw a warm, wonderful heat into even the furthest corners of the room.

“And so you book ghost tours,” I repeated again. “Here. In this house.”

“Yes,” Hudson answered. “Those are okay, but they don’t pay nearly as well as the full-scale paranormal investigations. We host those for ghost-hunting groups, from all over.”

Nolan had left a while ago, to pick up more to drink. It was one of those fun nights where the conversation was good, the company was better, and nobody wanted it to end. Especially not me. I hadn’t had one of these nights in *way* too long.

“And people pay for *this* place?” I asked again.

“Of course,” said Hudson. “This is one of the most haunted houses in northeast America.”

“Now tell her why,” Cyrus smirked from the opposite chair.

“Oh, that part.” Hudson shifted his lithe, beautiful body and broadened his perma-smile. His shining white teeth only made him more attractive. “It’s because we’ve promoted it that way for years.”

“Promoted it?”

“Through articles,” he said dismissively. “Interviews, ads, radio announcements. A whole series of different YouTube clips...”

“And an entire thriving *website*,” Cyrus chimed in, “complete with dark graphics, creepy music, and eerie sound effects. A website with thousands of hits each month, dedicated to all the different stories about this place.”

Slowly I was starting to get it. “Stories you made up, I’m assuming?”

“The term ‘made up’ has such a negative connotation,” sighed Hudson. “A better term would be ‘embellished’.”

“So you’re bullshitting!” I laughed.

“No, not even close,” Hudson protested. “There’s actual paranormal activity here.” He paused to look at Cyrus. “Sometimes. On occasion.”

“But this place isn’t very creepy,” I protested. “It’s actually pretty plain.”

“Try turning all the lights off, then setting up some night-vision cameras and EMF meters,” Cyrus chimed in. “It gets there pretty fast.”

I still couldn’t believe it. “And people really come out here?”

“In droves,” said Cyrus. “Especially around this time of year. Remember, it’s in their nature to want to be scared. They eat this stuff up. Plus, have you looked at your house from the outside? Before you started cleaning it up, it really did look hauntingly magnificent.”

I had to agree with him there. I’d probably screwed up their whole business model with every dollar I spent.

“So I’m the monkey wrench, huh?” I asked. “By moving in here I ruined everything?”

The guys looked at each other and shrugged. “Hey, we had a good run. Nothing lasts forever.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I still feel bad, though.”

“Well you shouldn’t,” said Cyrus. His stark blue eyes captured mine. “You coming here was actually a really good thing.”

The room went silent for a moment, and I felt my heart swell. These men had gone out of their way to help me, and to make me comfortable. They’d fixed things. Provided things. Shown up in the middle of the night to comfort me when I was terrified, and needed them most.

Throughout my life, I was used to being bullshitted. I’d grown accustomed to people tearing down my walls.

The way they were treating me now didn’t seem like either.

“And what about you?” Hudson asked curiously.

I stiffened a little. “What about me?”

“We’ve talked about ourselves, the town, this place. Even our little side hustle here...” he pointed down at the floor. “But none of us know anything about *you*.”

Cyrus moved closer, shifting to the edge of his chair. I noticed their chairs were very near the couch now, too.

“There’s really nothing much to tell,” I said, trying to sound bored. “Know how people brag about eating ramen in college? Well I’ve eaten it my whole life. Hell, I’m *still* eating it. And it’s goddamn delicious.”

“So you come from humble beginnings,” Hudson theorized.

“Something like that,” I shrugged. “It’s all very boring, really. Let’s just say I left Miami and ended up here.”

I stretched backward on the couch, extending my legs and letting my toes point forward. Even though I hadn’t meant



it, the guys took this as a hint. They left the chairs and slid to the floor on either side of me, each taking a foot in their strong hands.

“Well if you were bored with a city like Miami,” Hudson pointed out, “this place will damn near put you to sleep.”

I glanced at Cyrus, who was already smiling. “Getting put to sleep can be fun sometimes,” I purred, without looking away from him.

By now they were rubbing me through my socks, rolling their thumbs through the tired arches of my feet. The sheer intensity of the pleasure was eye-rolling. It almost drove me to tears.

“Go on,” I finally relented. “Ask me something. It has to be specific though. Maybe a yes or no question.”

Hudson cracked one of my big toes. It felt amazing.

“You came up here totally alone, and you’re doing this all by yourself,” he said. “So are you running from something?”

“No, not really,” I said contemplatively. “My past, maybe. But my past is in the past.”

I turned to Cyrus, expectantly. The muscles of his two big arms flexed as he touched and rubbed me, sending me into a temporary hypnosis.

“Ever get in trouble?” he asked.

“Trouble?” I let out a nervous chuckle. “Sure.”

His hand slipped higher up my ankle, and closed over something beneath my sock. Then I felt it. Then I *knew*.

*Oh shit!*

One look in his eyes and he knew also.

“We all get in trouble,” he shrugged with one giant shoulder. “Doesn’t mean shit.”

His hands slipped further upward, past my sock and over my ankle monitor without so much as a word. He began

massaging my calf muscle, which felt wonderful.

“Ever been so overwhelmingly attracted to someone you can’t help but want to touch them?” asked Hudson.

His hands were working my other calf, his magical fingers climbing ever higher. My stomach rolled.

“Even if you have to use the pretense of rubbing their feet?” I challenged.

“Yes.”

“Then probably,” I admitted. I tried looking down, but my eyes only ended up crawling his incredible abs. Between those and his model good-looks, I didn’t know which seemed worse. “Can’t blame someone for overwhelming attraction though, can you?”

His hands moved even higher. “Nope.”

They were closer now, so close I could smell them. Cyrus’s scent was leather, and oil, and steel — all things manly. Hudson’s was much more exotic. He smelled not exactly like cologne, but of a blend of things that resembled clove, and spices, and sweet, delicious musk.

Their hands kept going, gliding their way up my legs as they slid onto either side of the couch. They were rubbing my thighs now. I wanted to close my eyes for a moment and enjoy the feel of their touch, but my heart was pounding too fast.

“Ever kiss a complete stranger?” Hudson breathed into one ear.

I nodded my head slowly up and down. “Hasn’t everyone?”

A moment later his lips were on mine, kissing me so expertly and magnificently I couldn’t help but moan into his full, beautiful mouth. They were on either side of me now, their bodies touching mine. This wasn’t heaven, it was *double* heaven.

“You ever do two guys at once?” Cyrus asked.

My stomach fell instantly away, like the initial drop of a very steep roller-coaster. Somehow I held on tight and regained control.

“Ah,” I finally croaked. “Now that’s a good question.”

Hudson’s eyes flared, all dark and dangerous. “We thought so too.”

I swallowed once, hard, but it wouldn’t go down. The knot in my throat was too big.

“That would have to be a no,” I murmured softly. I swung my head to the right, to look at Cyrus. “Well, sort of. Almost.”

“Almost?” Hudson pressed. “So you’ve never had a threesome?”

His lips still hovered near mine, tantalizingly close. I had the urge to grab him and kiss him again, while looking past Cyrus’s playful grin. I wanted to see if there was even an ounce of jealousy in his all-knowing eyes.

“It’s not that I never *thought* about it,” I said truthfully. “I’ve just never had the opportunity...”

“And what if the opportunity were right in front of you?”

I closed one hand over each of theirs, then helped slide them further upward. The guys took over from there, slipping their warm palms into the valley *between* my thighs. I gasped softly and spread wider for them as they squeezed, possessively.

“No more questions,” I breathed, reaching out to kiss whoever was closest.

# Twenty

## SILVANA

A cold, dreary rain had begun falling outside, but inside the library was firelit and cozy. I was stretched out on the couch, my skin flush. The wine all warm in my belly...

*Holy fuck.*

Hudson was busy kissing my neck, and the gentle way he was doing it was driving me absolutely crazy. I kept staring at Cyrus, who was looking back at me with growing arousal. We'd been making out off and on for several minutes now. The guys passing my lips back and forth between them, while their hands explored every one of my curves.

Somehow my top came off, as did their shirts. And then suddenly they were nuzzling my breasts. Grazing their rough, manly faces against my tender skin, as two hot mouths closed over my stiffening areolae.

“SSSSsss...”

I made a hissing sound, like a snake. It was one-hundred percent gratification. My fingers slid into the thick hair at the backs of their heads to pull their mouths more tightly against me, as their hungry, questing tongues rolled in slow circles that had me dripping, soaking wet.

*Are you really going to do this?*

Seriously? The little voice in my head was asking this *now?*

I rolled my head back, enjoying their hot mouths as they fed on me. Their hands roamed northward, finally reaching the goal. One of them unbuttoned me, as the other lowered my zipper. Working in tandem, they shimmied my jeans down and helped me kick them off...

*Ohhhhh...*

My tiny thong didn't stand a chance.

"*Fuck,*" one of them whispered. "Look at how wet she is."

I sighed as two big hands pulled my thighs apart, and their fingers began to explore. I was moaning, groaning. Bucking my hips against the thick fingers that were slipping inside, while wincing in pleasure every time a thumb roamed over my swollen, sensitive clit.

I pushed the craziness of the situation to the back of my mind, to make room for my brain to enjoy it. I had two of the hottest guys I'd ever known, right here, right now, working on my body together. I was about to do things I'd only fantasized about, in a place I felt warm, safe, and finally at home.

"I need you."

I spoke the words while sliding my hands into their laps, feeling the full-blown arousal of both very *gifted* men. This time I wouldn't be denied. This time I was hellbent on taking command.

Twisting my body, I looked Cyrus dead in the eyes and tugged on his waistband. "Get these off."

In seconds he was fully naked, resting back against one arm of the couch as I lowered my head and went down on him. He felt enormous in my mouth: both long *and* thick, with a perfectly-formed head that felt silk-like against the back of my throat.

*Ohhhh fuck yes.*

I gripped him with both hands, pumping him from beneath as I licked and sucked up and down. Just behind me, Hudson seemed content to just watch. I felt his hands rubbing my back, his fingertips trailing down to caress the curve of my ass. He cradled my body with his, showering gentle kisses along my shoulders that trailed all the way down along my spine until I broke out in goosebumps.

In the meantime, I was sucking the soul out of his friend. Cyrus was moaning softly, sifting his fingers through my hair as I worked him top to bottom. Once in a while I made eye contact, just to see how close he was. Each time I glanced up he'd part my hair with his fingers, making sure we connected eye-to-eye on that most primal, intimate level.

An arm slid beneath my ribs and pulled me backward, arching me away from Cyrus and in the direction of his friend. I craned my neck and Hudson began making out with me wildly, his tongue plunging deep into my desperate mouth.

*Holy SHIT.*

He was the most incredible kisser I'd ever experienced. Every glorious rotation of his lips against mine made me hotter and wetter, until the hand I was still pumping Cyrus with began slowing down.

I was lost in lust. High on the ecstasy of four big hands gliding expertly over my most carnal, sensitive parts.

Hudson had stripped down so I reversed positions and began blowing him too, giving him the same treatment I'd just given his friend. He was pleasantly long with an upward curve — the kind of dick I couldn't *wait* to get inside me because I knew how amazing it would feel.

By now my thong was so drenched you could wring it out. Cyrus worked it down over my thighs and pulled it free, then went back to running his hands over me from behind. I felt his hands slide into place on my hips and lock themselves there, as he positioned himself directly behind me. And then I knew.

*YES.*

I sighed around Hudson's manhood as Cyrus slid right into me, burying himself so deep I wanted to cry with joy. I began cursing, moaning, begging him to keep going. He pumped me harder and faster as I did my best to keep my mouth on his friend, but having him inside me felt so insanely good I couldn't help but raise my face toward the ceiling and scream.

God, it was so fucking *good!* So unlike anything I'd remotely experienced before. The sensation of feeling everything at once was overwhelming at first, but it was so fucking sexy. Writhing between them, surging back and forth as they took me from both ends... my body was so hot it felt like it was on fire.

*This is unreal.*

My heart was hammering away in my chest, but the butterflies in my stomach had been replaced by an all-consuming fire. It had started deep down, somewhere below my navel. Right now it was spreading outward, smoothing over my goosebumps. It had a calming effect too, giving me the confidence and courage to take what I wanted, and to even ask for it out loud.

“Harder.”

I was still blowing Hudson. He sighed in gratification as I stroked the base with one fist while weighing his warm, heavy balls in the palm of my other hand. They had me over the arm of the couch now. Hudson had moved to a standing position on the other side, while Cyrus knelt behind me, pounding happily away.

*Ohhhhh FUCK.*

I was moaning. Groaning. Enjoying life! Rolling Hudson around, while Cyrus picked up even more speed...

“What the fu—”

None of us noticed Nolan until he was standing in the doorway. His jacket and hat were wet with rain. In his arms, he carried a brown bag with more than a few bottles poking out of it.

“I dip into town for a few minutes and *this* happens?”

Cyrus had slowed down a little, but he was still surging into me. And while I’d taken my mouth off Hudson temporarily, my hand was still pumping him hotly against the side of my face.

“This freaking you out?” Cyrus asked, giving my hips a squeeze.

Nolan put down the bag and chuckled. “No. Not even a little.”

The deputy sheriff looked down at me hopefully. Giving him a tiny shrug, I smiled and winked.

“Oh I’m *all in*,” he grinned, peeling off his coat.



# Twenty-One

## SILVANA

Nolan stripped down easily, as Cyrus and Hudson fell back into the warm, familiar rhythm of using my body. I watched his clothes come off while I bounced between them. Admired his thick chest and impossibly broad shoulders, as the firelight glinted off his handsome, rain-soaked face.

The deputy sheriff was all but gone now, because the man who bent before me had the look of a true warrior. I shivered with new arousal as he put his hands on my body. He looked at me with those piercing brown eyes. Traced my curves with the pads of his fingers. A thousand words passed between us, without either of us saying a thing...

*Wow.*

I kissed him hungrily as he finally took my face in his hand, pulling me away from Hudson. His tongue slipped past my teeth, twisting and rolling its way against mine as if searching for my very soul.

It was incredibly hot, how easily he'd gotten involved — especially how he'd gotten so hard, so fast. Maybe it was the watching. Maybe it was the anticipation of what I was about to do to him. Or him to me.

*Oh wow...*

Nolan swung his erection my way, thick and heavy. Then he guided my head sternly in his direction, and I started blowing him too.

*Damn.*

His assertiveness was making me even more wet. It was like taking off the uniform turned him into a whole different animal. It was one that I knew nothing about, but wanted very badly to learn.

“She’s incredible.”

He muttered the words so low and deep it vibrated all the way down through his body, humming against the sides of my wet, swollen throat. I started going to town on him. Rolling his balls in my hand. I was giving him the same treatment I’d just given his friend, when I felt Cyrus abruptly leave me to be replaced by someone else.

*Yes...*

Hudson took hold of my hips now, dogging me from behind as his beautifully-curved cock touched all new places inside me. I bucked back to meet him, slamming my ass against that incredible rack of abdominals I just couldn’t get enough of.

“Holy shit,” I heard him mumble. “Holy *fucking* shit...”

Cyrus sat back to watch, his eyes pregnant with arousal as his two friends spitroasted me back and forth between them. I just couldn’t believe it. I was in the middle of *doing* it for fuck’s sake, and even then I still couldn’t believe it.

Part of me wanted to beg to be taken into my bedroom. To be spread out across the cool surface of my new silk sheets and be plundered over and over as I spread my legs and took them one right after the other. But I also didn’t want to leave the softness of the couch. The coziness of the firelit library contrasted wonderfully against the cold rain outside, and there was just too much warm skin here to want to go *anywhere* else.

My moans grew louder, my breathing more rapid as they screwed me closer and closer to orgasm. Finally unable to hold

off another second, I reached back to grab Hudson's ass with one clawed hand. My fingers dug into hard, pumping muscle. My fingernails were like talons.

"Don't stop!" I gasped, pushing back on the arm of the couch. Somehow, I was still pumping Cyrus with one hand. "Don't you dare fucking st—"

I had a full body orgasm that was more like an out-of-body experience. One minute I was there in the library, pinned between two hot-bodied men, and then next I was floating on clouds of euphoria. Swimming in a sea of warm gratification, as wave after wave of sweet dopamine washed over my brain.

It felt like forever, but when I came down I was no longer on the couch. One of the guys had stripped the blankets and pillows from my bedroom and had laid them out across the carpeted floor.

My legs were pinned back, and suddenly I was being entered again. Nolan thrust into me from above, allowing the weight of his body to drive himself far, far inside me. He plunged so achingly, beautifully deep that the pillow beneath my head was soon wet with the tears of joy that ran down both my cheeks.

*Unbelievable.*

I clawed at the blankets, reaching out for the others. Cyrus was kneeling by my head, cradling my face in his hands. His swollen manhood was just inches from my face. I looked him in the eyes as I licked him once, up and down.

*Three guys, Silvana.*

I still couldn't believe it. I hadn't had sex in so long, and now this? It felt like it *had* to be my birthday. I felt like a princess, being totally worshiped...

It was fantastic.

Two different hands grabbed my ankles, pulling them further back. Giving Nolan an even better shot at what he was doing. And then I saw his face, which was already dripping sweat. The deputy's eyes found mine, only this time they

captured my attention and drew it over and upward, toward the base of one ankle...

*Oh SHIT.*

All three of the guys were looking at my ankle monitor now. Hell, Hudson's hand was just about wrapped around it.

Staring up at them, still in the middle of the action, I just smiled and shrugged.

"I *told* you I was a trouble-maker."

Hudson laughed. Cyrus shook his head with a grin.

"I'm pretty sure this just makes you even *hotter*."

# Twenty-Two

## NOLAN

It felt warm and wonderful plunging inside her, burying myself in her heated essence again and again. But above all else Silvana was beautiful, from the inside out. She was smart, funny, sarcastic. Strong almost to the point of being fearless, in her approach to life.

I'd wanted her from the moment I saw her, but I knew the others did too. Cyrus had been stricken with her as I was, from the beginning. And Hudson had latched onto her indomitable spirit, as I knew he would.

Right now though...

Right now we'd somehow come together in a rush of bodies, heat, and sex. Instead of competing for her affections we were taking her *together*, in a way that was raw. Visceral. Primal.

But somehow, no less important.

I was still pumping away, drilling her deep as the others held her legs back in a way that was sexy as hell. But I wanted her differently. I wanted to feel the full weight of her incredible body, pinning me deep inside her.

“Ooh!”

Silvana gasped as I rolled onto my back and took her with me, pulling her to a full mounted position. In just seconds she knew exactly what I wanted. She tucked her feet beneath her and rested her thighs against mine, bouncing gently up and down on my raging spike of an erection. Her eyes glazed over. She bit down on her lower lip...

“Oh my *God*...”

I couldn't even get deeper if I tried — that's how buried to the hilt I was. And Silvana kept rocking forward and back, dragging me along the heat of her insides. Squeezing me tightly within her innermost places, as I struggled to maintain some semblance of control.

It was difficult, because she felt so fucking *good!* So perfect and tight and amazing, with her tan Florida skin and her smooth, unblemished thighs...

I leaned forward to bury my face in her breasts, nuzzling them as her hips gyrated in slow, deep circles for maximum penetration. And then we were kissing. Kissing like *lovers*, with depth and feeling and incredible emotion. Silvana's arms slid past my shoulders as we kissed with a connectivity that transcended our bodies being locked tightly around each other, but more of a twisting together of our very thoughts, our dreams, our souls.

And then I felt it — the warm rush of inevitability. The three-second warning that came with the knowledge that if I didn't stop now, I'd never be able to.

“I— I'm not going to be able to stop from—”

Silvana hushed me with an outstretched finger, pressed between our trembling lips. The smile on her face was nothing short of wicked.

“Then don't.”

I didn't just explode, I fucking *erupted*. My body stiffened, my muscles went tight, and within seconds I was shooting jet after warm, sticky jet of hot come. Blasting it right through my body and into hers, where I pumped it way up deep into her warm, willing womb.

“YESSSS...”

She hissed the word, clutching her beautiful face tightly against mine. Silvana kissed my neck, my shoulder, my lips. Her eyes sought my own, witnessing and taking part of the sheer euphoria of what had to be the greatest, most intense climax of my entire fucking life.

Only once I'd finished filling her did she collapse sideways, spent. Silvana let out a gratified sigh, her triangular face all flushed a beautiful pink. A moment later she dipped a slender finger into her mouth and giggled.

“Who's up next?”

My stomach felt queasy watching Cyrus push forward, nudging her thighs apart so he could plunge back into her. He lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her hotly as her body began rocking back and forth beneath his.

*Holy fuck.*

A mixture of feelings swept over me; part jealousy, part excitement. And then I realized even the *jealousy* was exciting. Probably most of all.

*This is so fucking hot.*

I'd never seen anyone have sex, except on film. Watching two people go at it in person was way sexier than I realized. Because by not being involved, I could more fully appreciate the pure, undiluted wantonness of the act itself.

And then it wasn't just two people going at it, it was three. Hudson joined in, lying alongside Silvana so he could kiss and touch and caress her. He chewed her shoulder and kissed her neck, then gently pushed her hair aside and began whispering things into her ear. Whatever they were, they did the trick. I saw her eyes go glassy and her toes curl, as shivers ran up and down her naked, writhing body.

*Is this okay?* I thought to myself. *Are we crossing some kind of line?*

On Silvana's end, I'd have to say no. She was smiling and sighing and giving it back every bit as good as she was

getting it. Her level of greed and arousal might've even been greater than ours, as she cried out in joy and screwed back against us.

As far as the three of us, however, I really didn't know. We'd never even dated each other's exes before, and in a town this small that was a pretty big feat. The three of us had become close over the years, and had talked about doing a lot of things, some tame, some wild.

But sharing some beautiful, sensual stranger on the floor of a 'haunted' library definitely wasn't one of them.

Someone gasped, and I saw Silvana's body go stiff again. She shuddered and came around Cyrus, clawing his back as he dumped himself into her.

*FUCK.*

My friend threw his head back and made a noise I'd never heard before — something like the howl of a wolf crossed with the roar of a lion. His ass pumped into her again and again, draining the rest of whatever was inside him straight into the same warm, wet place that I had.

*Is this even happening?*

My answer came as Silvana rolled onto her hands and knees, waving her ass in Hudson's direction. She began swaying it back and forth until he mounted her from behind, and that's when she looked up and settled her gaze back upon mine.

*More, she mouthed silently, adding a devious smile. I want more.*

Our eyes were hopelessly locked now. They stayed that way as her body began rocking beneath Hudson's long, perfectly executed thrusts. I watched them fuck, reveling in the naughtiness of being a silent witness until Silvana began crooking a finger, beckoning me over.

There was nothing else I could do. Nothing but obey.



# Twenty-Three

## SILVANA

“Damn,” the voice called as I entered my kitchen. “Baby I gotta tell you, this is some real gourmet-type shit.”

I was still rubbing my tired eyes. Squinting against the daylight streaming in, as the scent of bacon and eggs and — thank God — coffee drifted into my nostrils.

Hudson sat casually at my kitchen table, with both feet resting on the next available chair. He took a sip from his mug and pointed.

“That has to be a five-hundred dollar coffee maker,” he said. “Easily.”

“Try a thousand.”

His bewilderment was as pure as a child’s. “You’re lying!”

“What’s there to lie about?” I yawned, reaching for a mug of my own. “I may not have a lot of money or a lot of things, but I’m a girl who takes her coffee *very* seriously.”

I pushed the button that would grind a fresh cup and extract it perfectly into the mug I slid beneath it. Hudson watched as I sugared it up and slid into the chair across from him.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“You mean the rest of the merry band of pirates who plundered you last night?”

I laughed, despite trying not to. “Yeah. Them.”

“Cyrus is at a construction gig. And Nolan’s had some appointments before he had to clock in for work.”

“Appointments?”

Hudson wrinkled his goatee as he took another sip of coffee. “He trains people at the local gym,” he explained. “It’s a decent side job, especially since he goes there every morning to work out anyway. Might as well get paid for a few training sessions.”

I stretched my back, and then my legs. The insides of my thighs — among other things — were definitely sore. I didn’t have to ask why.

“And what about you?” I asked.

Hudson leaned forward and delivered his standard, panty-melting smile. “What *about* me?”

“What do you do for work?”

“A bunch of things,” he shrugged. “I’ve got some AdSense running on our ghost-hunting website, plus the YouTube channel is starting to pay out a little. I make most of my money with Cyrus, though. The two of us have been doing odd construction jobs here and there.”

“I see.”

“Of course we also help my sister out with Breathe from time to time,” he said dismissively.

“Breathe,” I repeated, trying to think. “That’s her shop?”

“Yes, but we don’t get paid for that. If anything the three of us drop a few bills *into* her cash drawer, whenever one or more of us are nearby.”

I could only imagine the type of shop Maeve was running. It was probably filled with incense, crystals, and

everything spiritual. It warmed my heart however, to think about her brother and his friends secretly helping keep it afloat.

“What about you?”

I took another sip of my coffee, sizing him up. Hudson looked showered, refreshed, and ready for the day. Somehow he even had a new shirt.

*I'm a network consultant*, I almost lied. It was the easy answer, and my standard go-to. But for some reason, this time I didn't. Maybe because his piercing dark eyes had already shifted down to my ankle monitor.

“I'm a white hat hacker,” I said. “People pay me to break into systems and report vulnerabilities.”

He nodded, somewhat knowingly. “White hat, huh?”

“Yes.”

Using his coffee mug, he toasted my ankle. “Then how'd you get that?”

Again, an easy lie floated to mind. This time, something in his complete lack of judgment pushed it away.

“I may or may not have logged into a few old clients,” I shrugged, “and added myself as the payee for some fictional service contracts.”

“Ah,” he smiled. “And they don't notice?”

“Not if you add code masking those contracts from all financial database inquiries.”

He paused for a moment. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah. I imagine I've driven some CFO's pretty crazy trying to figure out where missing monies went.”

“But checks still go out.” He shook his head. “They don't see that?”

“I created a few dummy corporations,” I explained. “Plumb-Tech Heating and Air. Platinum Pest Control. Outside

stuff, mostly. Nobody questions that their building might have an HVAC service contract, or a bi-weekly exterminator.”

“Even if they don’t see them,” Hudson nodded. “They figure that stuff happens after hours, when they’re not there.”

“Bingo.”

“That’s pretty ingenious.”

I raised my ankle and tapped the monitor. “Not ingenious enough, I’m afraid.”

Hudson shifted forward, his body language becoming a little more familiar. He lifted the cover from a delicious-looking plate of eggs, bacon, and french toast.

“Whoa,” I sniffed. “I have cinnamon and powdered sugar in the pantry?”

“You do now.”

My stomach rumbled excitedly. “What’d you go into *town* already?”

“I get up early. Always.”

His eyes followed as I bit into a strip of bacon, which was miraculously cooked exactly the way I liked it. When I raised it his way in appreciation, his smile widened.

“Nolan knew, didn’t he?” Hudson asked.

I nodded and reached for the syrup. “Of course. The sheriff’s got him keeping an eye on me.”

“Keeping an eye on you?” he laughed. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

“You can call it whatever you want,” I said, tearing into breakfast. “I’m chalking last night up to the fire, the wine, and checking something big off my bucket list.”

Fond memories swirled, sweltering recollections of everything we’d done last night. I’d used these three men to break my dry spell in spectacular fashion, and they’d used me as well. They’d taken me over and over throughout the night, spreading my legs and pinning me into the blankets whenever

one or more of them had recovered. I couldn't count the number of times I'd been woken from happy delirium, willing to go again. Or the number of times each man had emptied themselves inside me.

*Holy shit...*

The whole thing seemed like a dream now, almost beyond belief. I'd been wanton. Greedy. Utterly shameless...

"Damn," I declared, wiping my forearm abruptly across my brow. "What the hell'd you put in these eggs?"

Hudson crossed his arms and grinned. "Love."

"Well it shows."

I shook my head and kept eating, while my belly thanked me. Somewhere in the middle of my meal the dog bounded in from outside, little bits of leaves dangling from both ears. He looked up at me, wagging his tail merrily.

"Here you go, boy."

I shared a single strip of bacon with him. That's all he was getting, though.

"So quick question," I said, changing the subject. "Those trail cams out there. The ones you use to capture ghosts..."

Hudson's smile widened crookedly on one side. He set his coffee down and steepled his long fingers together. "You want to know if one was pointed at the east side of the house?"

I bolted upright so fast my coffee almost sloshed over one side of the mug. "Yes!" I answered, my pulse quickening. "I was going to ask last night, but then we got... umm..."

"Sidetracked?"

I nodded slowly. "So can you pull the footage from the other night?" I asked. "The one where someone tried breaking in?"

My lover-turned-breakfast-cook reached out for his own laptop, which was still on the kitchen table from last night. He opened the screen and swung it my way.

“I already have.”

# Twenty-Four

## SILVANA

My script was still running, sending and receiving hundreds of data packets back and forth between my top-of-the-line laptop and the relay satellite hovering in the cold New Hampshire sky. I waited for it to finish, stirring the hot and sour soup I'd had delivered half an hour ago which was somehow still flesh-scaldingly hot.

I was just about to risk my first bite when the dog barked downstairs.

Sighing, I set the bowl carefully on the corner of my bed and headed down. But not before throwing another two logs on the fire.

“COMING!”

He wanted to come in again, and I decided this would be the last time for the night. The good news was that he'd been coming back regularly, and I was no longer worried about losing him. I actually felt better with him roaming the grounds, too. Especially after having seen the trail cam footage.

The camera near the east side of the house had been positioned perfectly, but unfortunately it hadn't picked up much. Hudson sat huddled with me in front of his laptop for a solid hour, adjusting brightness and contrast and all those other

graphics-type things I was never truly any good at. He seemed to know his way around a computer, too. Not only was he very comfortable with the editing software, but he dropped hints and used terminology that made me think he knew a lot about programming language and operating systems, too.

Frame by frame, we watched the intruder creep along the property line and make its way toward the house. Three times the shadow-figure tried climbing to the second floor window. Three times the ancient siding gave way, sending it hurtling back to the ground.

The third fall was a big one, and for several moments the dark lump at the base of the house remained unmoving. Then a light went on upstairs — me, entering the opposite bedroom — and the figure dragged itself to its feet and limped hurriedly into the forest.

“I’m pretty sure he hurt himself,” said Hudson, after rewinding the footage for the sixth time. “We should be looking for a guy with a limp.”

“A guy, huh?”

“Well it’s way too tall to be a woman,” he’d shrugged.

That was hours ago, when the light of day lent me a sense of security and courage that darkness always stole back. Hudson had left sometime before lunch, urging me to call if I needed him. He’d given me a comforting hug and a lingering, open-mouthed goodbye kiss that stole my breath away. It was the kind of kiss that left me floating on my toes in the gravel driveway. I was still tingling all over as he turned onto the distant street and disappeared.

Right now however I was cold and alone and making my way through the darkened corridors of the first floor. It was at least fifteen degrees cooler down here at night. Until I got the heat situation squared away I might have to rig up a doggie door, or maybe limit the number of times I indulged my pet’s wanderlust.

The dog’s tail wagged hard as I let him in, slamming back and forth against the door-jamb as it bounded through.



“Good boy.”

I’d already poured his food earlier. He made a beeline straight for it, and for the next minute or two the kitchen was filled with smacking, crunching noises of an animal enjoying its dinner. While he ate, I removed the battered leather collar he’d been adopted with and swapped it out for the new and improved collar Cyrus and Nolan had dropped onto the kitchen table when they showed up last night. They’d even brought a few new toys, too.

“You let me know if you like that earthy, crunch stuff,” I told him as he finished up. “If not, I could always pick up a few cans of wet food to mix in.”

I was in the middle of tossing the old collar into the garbage, when I suddenly noticed something. On the inside of the battered brown leather was some faded black lettering.

“Whoa.”

My hand froze, mid-drop. There were four distinct handwritten letters. Each was different, and each one more faded than the last:

L—I—A... and something that looked like an N or an M.

“Liam?”

The dog’s head whipped around so fast I thought it might spin right off! His normally-fast tail-wag tripled in speed, bouncing loudly against the cabinet near his food bowl.

“Your name is *Liam*!?”

He bounded over to me, and I held out my hand to him. I was rewarded with tremendously enthusiastic licks by the biggest, wettest tongue in the world.

“Thank God!” I laughed, roughhousing my palms against the sides of his shaggy face. “I didn’t know *what* to call you!”

I bear-hugged him and I swear to God the dog hugged me back. It was one of those emotionally rousing human-canine moments you might see only in a dog food commercial, only this commercial was my real life.

“C’mon Liam! Let’s go upstairs!”

Liam raced me to the staircase and beat me handily. He loped upward with his clumsy, oversized stride, and I heard him leap happily onto the bed...

*Oh no!*

I got there five or six seconds too late. By the time I turned the corner he was still wagging his tail, tongue out, panting like crazy... only now the floor next to my bed was covered in spicy, pungent soup.

“Glad *one* of us got to eat,” I lamented with a sigh.

# Twenty-Five

## SILVANA

If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that the car was *fucked*.

Hot steam poured out from under the hood as I clicked it open, revealing wetness everywhere. The hoses were a shredded mess. The radiator was crumpled like tin foil, leaking a sickly orange sap from dozens of punctures.

I sighed angrily and looked left and right, where the road stretched in both directions. In both directions it disappeared into the fog.

*Go.*

The fog extended into my brain, because for some reason I couldn't remember which direction I'd been coming or going. Not even looking at the orientation of the car helped.

*You have to go NOW.*

I had no idea where I was. Even worse, I had no clue where I was supposed to be.

Panic set in, rising from my stomach in a ball of acid bile. Somehow I fought it down. I looked again and now the engine was gone. Not damaged or destroyed either, but totally missing!

*Pick a direction, Silvana.*

Wires and hoses dangled everywhere, like some dark octopus reaching for nothing. And the fog had grown thicker. It had closed in from both directions, making the road look half as long as it did before.

In the back of my mind, time was running out. I knew it even before I heard the telltale beeping of the ankle monitor. The sound was so loud and shrill against the absolute silence, it seemed to shatter the night.

*You have to choose!*

I turned left, tried to take a step, and still found myself completely motionless. It was the strangest feeling: the disconnect between my brain and my body. I was willing my feet to move, but getting zero in the way of results.

*Other way?*

I turned to the right now, and once more I willed my leg to take a step. Again my body refused even the simplest order from my brain.

*Beep-beep-beep!*

The light on the monitor was blinking red. I could see it through my sock! By now I was completely frozen, standing in the spectral glow of the Datsun's headlamps. The front of the car looked like two perfectly round eyes piercing the gathering fog of night...

When the engine roared to life I nearly jumped out of my skin! It began humming, thrumming, even though in the back of my head I knew it was no longer there...

*GRRRRRRR...*

Gasping for air I bolted upright, throwing off my blankets and sheets. The cool air hit my sweat-soaked body like an arctic blast.

*“OOOHH!”*

My hand scrambled at the foot of the bed, where Liam had fallen asleep comfortably against my legs. Only he

wasn't there. In the dim glow of the fireplace's dying embers, I quickly located him at the other side of the room.

The dog was on his hind legs, staring out the bedroom window.

And he was growling.

“*GRRRRRRR....*”

“Liam!” I whispered.

He stopped growling but refused to turn around. The way he was still looking through that window sent an even greater chill right through me.

“What is it, boy?”

I was still whispering as I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and planted my feet on the floor. Apprehensively I made my way over to stand next to my dog. I was afraid to look. But I needed to see...

*Shit.*

There was a man standing at the edge of my driveway.

The fog-like fear and uncertainty of my dream was still heavy in my mind. But now it was being replaced by something else. Something I was a lot more familiar with:

Anger.

“Fuck this.”

I backed away, going immediately to the shelf in my closet. When I returned I was clutching the Taurus .38 special revolver my foster father had given me as a twenty-first birthday present, along with a trip to the range where he taught me how to use it.

Edgar was always good for shit like that.

I shivered against the cold as I stared down again into the darkness. The man was still there. He was tall — far too tall to be one of the BMX boys who'd wandered up from the trails. He also seemed to be staring up at *me*.

My phone was on the nighttable, next to my bed. I retrieved it quickly and returned to the window, holding it up as I turned the flashlight on. Without pausing I tapped the glass three times with the tempered blue steel of the revolver's barrel, as hard as I dared.

"Hey asshole!" I shouted down. "I'm calling the police!"

Liam barked in tandem with my threat, which I hoped the man had heard through the thick panes of glass. Instead of dialing 911 however, I called Nolan instead.

He picked up quickly, on the second ring. Even so, in just that short amount of time the intruder was gone.

"Silvana," I heard Nolan say groggily. "Everything alright over—"

"No," I cut him off quickly. A second shiver ran through me as I scanned the shadows of the now-empty driveway. "No, it's not."

# Twenty-Six

## SILVANA

“And that’s it? He was just *standing* here?”

Cyrus kicked the gravel around the driveway some more, searching for clues as Hudson emerged from the nearby treeline. All four of us had searched the area multiple times already. So far we’d found nothing.

“He probably heard Liam barking,” I theorized, “and froze where he was. “If he hadn’t woken me up—”

“Liam?” Nolan smiled. “You finally named the dog?”

“The dog named itself really,” I explained. “But the important part is that he heard this guy from upstairs and through the window. Whatever he was about to do, he got stopped.”

Nolan had shown up within minutes, the others just before dawn. After making sure nothing had been broken into or tampered with on the lower level of the house, we’d sat around drinking coffee until it was light enough outside to search the grounds.

“Well that settles it then,” Cyrus declared. “If you have to be stuck here, you’re not sleeping alone.”

Hudson nodded his immediate agreement. “We rotate then. All three of us take turns staying over.”

The image formed in my mind — all three men clocking in and out of my bedroom on a daily basis. My stomach churned.

“Agreed,” said Nolan. “Who wants to take—”

“Wait a minute,” I broke in. The way they’d left me out of the equation made me chuckle. “Do *I* have a say in this?”

The guys looked at each other for a moment. All three of them shook their heads.

“No, you really don’t,” said Nolan. He shifted uncomfortably. “Also, that gun you never told me about? The one you’re not even permitted to own?” His voice dropped even lower. “I never saw it. In fact, none of us did.”

“But—”

“I’ll park the squad car in the driveway if I have to,” he said sternly. “If it means protecting you, I’ll sleep there.”

Hudson laughed and jerked a thumb at his friend. “Look, he can do what he wants, but I prefer the bed.”

I was totally relieved of course, and even touched by their concern. Because as comforting as it was with Liam there, having one or more of the boys spend the night in the house with me was ten times better.

*Spend the night in the house with you?* The voice in my head was mocking me. *Is that it?*

Looking from man to man, I fought to untie the knot in my stomach. It was a half-hearted battle, though. Because as much as I’d kept telling myself the other night was a one-shot deal, the warmth in my belly told a different story.

“I’ll be on the job all day,” said Cyrus, “but I’ll be back here before dark. So I’ll take tonight.”

“Fine,” I relented. “I’ll make dinner.”

Hudson’s eyes lit up. “Wait, you’re making *dinner*? I’m coming too, then.”



Cyrus grunted. “This isn’t a sleepover, man.”

“No, definitely not. Which is why you’ll want me there in case someone *does* show up. In fact—”

Nolan put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Tomorrow, bro. You take tomorrow.” He pointed at me. “She’s got a life to lead. Work to get done. We’re not here to disrupt her, only to protect her from whoever the hell is stalking the grounds.”

Hudson’s mouth twisted into a half-frown, but eventually he relented. The sheriff’s deputy turned to Cyrus next.

“Know what to do if someone *does* show up?”

“Beat them to within an inch of their life?” growled Cyrus.

“No, you call us and sit tight. Don’t turn any lights on, and don’t let on that you’ve seen them.”

Cyrus scowled. “Why?”

“Because we want to *catch* them next time,” explained Hudson. “Not scare them off.”

“Yeah,” Cyrus finally agreed. “Alright.”

“I can have a car here in eight minutes tops,” said Nolan. “Even less, if someone happens to be patrolling outside of town.”

“Why don’t you just park a car out front?” I asked. “Tell the sheriff I’m in danger?”

“We *could* do that,” Nolan reasoned. “But again, that’ll just scare your visitor off temporarily. And once the sheriff gets involved, he’ll be all over this place. All the time.”

“Ugh.” I said.

“Exactly. Plus, it’ll be a little hard to explain why the three of us are taking turns staying.”

We milled around a little more until there was nothing left to do or say. Eventually I offered the guys breakfast. Cyrus and Hudson politely refused, telling me they were already going to be late to the job they were working on.

Nolan declined as well, but the sheriff's deputy hung around until his friends had peeled off from the end of the driveway. Together we watched as Hudson went right, while Cyrus and his noisy Harley Davidson peeled left.

"Let me ask you something," he said when the noise disappeared into the distance. "And trust me, this can be just between us."

"You want to know if I have any enemies?"

Nolan took a half step back and crossed his arms over his powerful chest. He eyed me shrewdly for a moment, before bobbing his head.

"The answer is no," I told him. "No obvious ones, anyway. When I packed up and left Miami I made a pretty clean break."

"You didn't piss anyone off? Owe anyone money?"

"Oh I pissed people off all the time," I admitted. "But I never had any debts."

The deputy scratched at his jaw. The next question was slightly less comfortable for him.

"Got any crazy ex-boyfriends?"

"Of course. Doesn't every girl?"

"Any who might've followed you up here?"

I thought for a moment. "Honestly no. None that would be hunting me down."

"Hmmm," said Nolan.

"The way I left, I honestly don't think anyone would be able to find me," I told him. "I didn't announce my departure, and I didn't leave a forwarding address."

Some unknown animal made a noise out in the forest, and Liam took off after it. We watched him go, disappearing into the woods.

"I guess that leaves just one other motive," I shrugged. "Robbery."

“Well... yeah,” Nolan admitted. He looked me up and down awkwardly. “Maybe not the *only* motive, though.”

He’d come here in the dead of night, obviously without his uniform. He looked rough around the edges now, unshaven and maybe even a little bit messy. It was kind of a turn on.

“You’d better head to the gym,” I urged, before my mind wandered down other less-savory avenues. “I’m sure you’ve got training sessions.”

“So the guys told you, huh?”

“Yup.”

He pulled out his keys and made his way toward the car. I just happened to be standing in the way. I made no effort to move, either.

“You promise to call if anything happens?” he asked. “I mean, whoever this was might not wait until nightfall to come back.”

He went to take another step, and his body melded with mine. His hands hovered awkwardly below my hips, right around the level of my ass.

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

His palms brushed the sides of my jeans. For a second I thought he might chicken out, but just before moving away he planted his hands on my hips and pulled me close.

“You’d *better*.”

The kiss was fast, hot, and fantastic. Nolan’s tongue swirled through my mouth with a strength and possessiveness that left me weak in the knees.

*Fuck...*

Five seconds more and I would’ve grabbed him by that magnificent beast between his legs and dragged him back into the house. Instead he broke off just before that point, leaving me totally breathless and wanting more.

“Not now,” he murmured gruffly, “but the next I’m here?”

Nolan locked eyes with me. He pointed up at my bedroom window before getting back in the car.

“You’re *mine*.”

# Twenty-Seven

## CYRUS

“Well you can cook,” I sighed, pushing my plate forward in gratification. “I’ll give you that.”

Silvana took the complement without changing her expression. I could tell she was pleased, though. It was in her body language.

“Well I sort of cheated,” she admitted.

“Oh?”

“You’re a man, Cyrus. I grilled steaks served with cold beer. Right there I was ahead of the game.”

I laughed as she used the edge of the counter and her clenched fist to pound the cap off two fresh bottles. That part was sexy as fuck. I made sure my fingers lingered on hers as she passed me one.

“We really need to get you a bottle opener,” I said.

Her eyes followed mine as she took a long, deep pull. “I’ll add it to the list.”

It was a quiet night, broken only by more cold rain. It had been raining a lot lately, even for October. The sound of the droplets hitting the roof was a steady white noise above us.

“So you think our friend will be coming out tonight?” I asked.

Silvana swallowed, then shook her head. “Probably not.”

“Because I’m here?”

“Could be you, could be the rain. Could be the gun I waved at him last night, from the window.”

“He’s been here twice,” I pointed out. “Think he’s the kind of person who’s deterred by something like that?”

She stared at me for several moments, saying nothing. I studied her eyes, her face, her perfect, pouty lips. She wasn’t just pretty, she was heartbreakingly gorgeous. So beautiful she had to know it.

“Silvana...” I breathed softly into the neck of my beer bottle.

“Yes?”

“Who’s after you?”

The question was followed by even more silence. Eventually she got up, took our plates, and dumped the scraps into the garbage before placing them in the sink.

“Is he an ex-friend?” I probed gently. “Family?”

“He’s neither,” she answered.

I squinted back at her curiously. “If you don’t know who he is, how do you know?”

“Because I was never big on friends,” she shrugged. “And I never had any family. No real family, anyway.”

I let her stand there leaning back on the counter, staring at the floor. As the noise of the raindrops became absolute, Silvana took another pull from her beer and shook her head.

“I was a foster kid,” she said. “Bounced in and out of the system due to a drug-addicted mother. We severed ties for good when I turned seventeen, and my foster father at the time helped me with the emancipation papers.”

“That sucks,” I declared.

“Sure does.”

“And what about your father?”

She shrugged her pretty shoulders again. “Never knew him. Never wanted to. What else do you want to know about me?”

The last part could’ve been sarcasm, but it also could’ve been genuine. I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

“Everything.”

I held my hand out to her. Silvana looked at it for a long time before finally placing her palm in mine. I pulled her into my lap, where she slid one leg over my thighs and rested her beautifully-rounded ass on me.

“I know all about shitty fathers,” I told her softly. “Mine wasn’t always shitty, though.”

Her expression turned to one of interest. Maybe even compassion.

“Dad was a drill sergeant in the Marines,” I explained. “He gave his whole to the corps, wholly and without question. Even if it meant we didn’t see him much.”

I thought back, trying to find the exact point where the good memories ended and the bad ones began. It wasn’t a distinct line, though. The whole thing was more of a blur.

“When he got too old to be useful and the military finally spat him out, he sort of fell apart. Now he’s a shell of what he used to be, physically and emotionally.” I looked away for the next part. “In fact, he’s the town drunk.”

A gentle hand touched my face, pulling me back in her direction. I took her finger with my other hand and used it to trace the line on my cheek.

“See this scar right here?” I asked. “Got that in a bar fight, while trying to back him up. My father picked a brawl with three guys, all bigger than him. After decking two of them, the third guy drew a knife.”

Silvana took over, feeling the scar herself now beneath the pads of her fingers. Her eyes held understanding. Commiseration.

“That sucks,” was all she said.

“Sure does,” I smiled.

She batted a pair of long, feathery lashes, as our faces drifted closer together. Her nipples were stiff now, beneath her shirt. It could’ve been arousal. It could’ve also been that every time the sun went down, the house grew colder every hour.

“Family can be overrated sometimes,” she murmured.

“You can say that again.”

Her pretty lips parted in a smile.

“Family can be overrated someti—”

I kissed her hard, sliding my hands along the small of her back and pulling her body against mine. She was just too warm, too beautiful. Too incredibly soft and fragrant and perfect in every way, for me to even think of holding back.

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!*

We both jumped at the sound of the kitchen door, not ten feet away. Silvana’s arms slid around me, squeezing me even tighter. It was adorable.

“What the—”

“It’s me!” came a voice through the door. “Open up!”

*“Hudson?”*

I’d spent the whole day with him, running a framing crew for some new commercial building on the other end of town. We’d parted ways hours ago, all sweaty and desperate for showers.

“You gonna let me in, or—”

Silvana had hopped out of my lap by now. To tell the truth, my lap wasn’t all that happy about it. She unlatched the door and my friend stepped inside, dripping wet from the rain.



“This isn’t your night,” I pointed out. “You have tomorrow, remember?”

“Who said that, Nolan?” he laughed. He slicked back his hair. “I don’t remember ever putting him in charge of the schedule, do you?”

He looked from Silvana to me, then back to her again. Our expressions must’ve been pretty telling.

“Besides,” he said. “Why should the two of you have all the fun tonight?”

My friend sniffed the air, rubbing his hands together. I shook my head.

“Too late,” I told him. “You already missed dinner.”

“That’s alright,” he waved me off. “The three of us have much more important stuff to do tonight.”

Silvana opened a fresh bottle of beer and handed it to him. “Like what?”

“Come outside and I’ll show you.”

She and I looked at each other, then up at the roof. The steady drumming of the rain hadn’t let up one bit.

Hudson sensed our hesitation and frowned.

“Hey, you wanna heat this place again, don’t you?”

# Twenty-Eight

## SILVANA

The cast-iron stove wasn't big, it was absolutely *huge*. It had taken all three of us to wrestle it from the back of Hudson's truck and drag it through the front door on dollies and hand-trucks. Dripping wet, it took another several minutes of pushing and shoving to get its four sturdy legs in exactly the correct place.

"Hudson!" I gasped in amazement. "How in the world did you get it back?"

"Well it's not the same one," he lamented. "But it's damned close. Best of all it was free."

"What?" I cried. "*How?*"

"I cashed in a favor," he shrugged.

I was skeptical. "No one has favors *that* big," I countered.

"Oh you might think so," declared Cyrus. "But trust me," he pointed at his friend. "*He* does."

He'd left his leather jacket in the kitchen and gone outside in only a shirt. Right now it was soaking wet and clinging to his body, showing off every glorious ridge and ripple.

For the next half hour the two of them hooked it up to the exhaust system that was already there. Hudson loaded the hopper and got it burning. A formidable orange heat spread throughout the first floor, taking it room by room.

“How the hell is it so hot already?” I asked.

The chill had gone out of the air startlingly quickly. It was replaced by a soothing, penetrating warmth.

“Because it’s coal, not wood,” Hudson replied. He tapped on a half-empty bucket of what looked like broken black charcoal. “You’ll need to build a coal bin outside, of course. The old one rotted away decades ago.”

“Coal bin?”

“Sure,” said Hudson. “You’ll have to set up monthly deliveries.”

I looked to Cyrus for help, but he only smiled at me and winked. “She’ll add it to the list.”

Damn. There sure was a lot to owning a house! And here I thought it would be simple enough to just move in.

“Old man Carter — sorry, your great-grandfather — built the rest of the house around this one room,” said Hudson. “The parts not built around the old house, anyway.”

“*Old* house?” I tilted my head. “You said something about this before. Something about ‘places within’.”

“That’s right.” Hudson’s dark eyes glimmered with new excitement. “I haven’t showed you yet, have I?” He slipped his hand into mine. “Come.”

He led me along, over creaky wooden floors and through narrow doorways into parts of the house I’d given only a cursory glance. Cyrus followed along, rolling his eyes playfully as I looked back to mouth the words *what the fuck?*

“Here we are,” said Hudson at last. “Take a look at this room. What do you see?”

We were in a tiny chamber at the back of the house, with three doorways and no windows. I could tell from faint

outlines that a few shelves had been put up at one time. Right now they were missing.

“I see a pantry,” I guessed. “Maybe a storeroom.”

“Yes, but *look*.”

A single overhead bulb hung from the ceiling, but not the dead center of the ceiling. It made the whole room just feel... off.

“That wall’s different,” I pointed out. “It’s newer.”

Hudson’s smile was one of satisfaction. He reached down and pulled at something, and the entire wall came off in his hands.

“Whoa.”

Behind the wall was a dusty chamber lined in mortar and stone. A set of crumbling steps led downward, into the earth. The walls down there weren’t even solid, they seemed to be made of dirt.

“That right there is the original foundation of the house,” said Cyrus. “Seventeenth century. The stairs go down to what used to be a root cellar, but now it’s mostly filled in.”

“But I thought my great-grandfather built this house from scratch?”

“He did,” Hudson explained. “From what I understand, he got back from kicking Nazi ass in the European theater, then built this place with his own two hands.”

“People sure as hell rocked back then,” Cyrus whistled.

“Greatest generation ever.”

I felt a surge of unwarranted pride at my recently-discovered heritage. Once again it made me wish I’d known this man while he was alive, rather than learn about him after his passing.

“So what’s all this then?” I asked.

“Apparently there was another home here first,” said Hudson, “and your great-grandfather appended the house onto

it. If you look carefully, you can see some things that just don't fit. There are other places at the back of the house where you can still see remnants of the old structure."

"Some of the best EVP's we've picked up have been in places like this," said Cyrus. "Nooks. Closets. Little secret rooms."

I wanted to listen to some of those recordings again. But not now. Not tonight. Instead I turned back to face them.

"What we did the other night," I said, riding an abrupt wave of courage. "Have you boys ever done that before?"

They were both taken aback by the sudden change in topic. Cyrus raised a curious eyebrow. Hudson stroked his goatee thoughtfully.

"No," they both said in unison. "Never."

"Because you seemed strangely comfortable sharing me," I went on. "I know it seemed abrupt, maybe spur of the moment. But I wondered if maybe..."

"We'd shared a woman before?"

"Yes."

The idea excited me, thrilled me, made me gut-churningly jealous — all at once. I'd been thinking about it constantly, ever since the morning after they'd shared *me*.

"No," said Cyrus, finally. He ran four big fingers through his thick, damp hair. "It was spur of the moment, like you said. Entirely organic."

"He's right," agreed Hudson. "I know maybe it felt like we *could've* planned it, but we didn't."

"Okay then," I shivered against the cold. The dampness here was penetrating down to the bone. "Could we go someplace warm again?"

Wordlessly we moved back through the house, into the room where the coal stove was glowing. It was wonderfully warm in here now. Almost even to the point of being uncomfortably hot.

“Are you upset about it?” asked Cyrus. “We’re sorry if you are. It’s not like we—”

“No,” I interrupted quickly. “I’m not upset at all.”

Hudson looked confused. He scratched at his head. “Because we can always—”

“I want to do it *again*.”

The words had spilled out abruptly, organically — just as before. But it was what I wanted. I’d known all along.

Cyrus stepped into me, reaching out with one big arm. He cradled me comfortingly into his body... as I reached out and pulled Hudson in, securing him on my other side.

“I want to be warm and safe and pinned between you,” I breathed hotly. “I want to feel you both on me, behind me, *inside* me...”

I swallowed hard, then let out a little dry laugh. “Oh, and I also want it in a *bed* this time.”

In response I felt a hand slide over one globe of my ass, then the other. I knew the hands belonged to two different men. Somehow, that felt wholly natural.

“The only way this is going to work though, is if we keep it casual,” I warned. “So no strings. No attachments. Okay?”

I felt so incredibly safe and protected sandwiched between them. But I also felt strong. Damn-near all-powerful, actually.

“Trust me,” I finished, “I like you guys a lot. But for none of us to get hurt, this has to be purely sexual. Strictly for fun.”

My hands wandered their big, broad backs, my fingertips gliding over muscle upon solid muscle. Already I was tingling all over. Every nerve ending in my body knew what was coming.

“Fun?” Cyrus chuckled gruffly. “Is that it?”

I planted a slow kiss upon one chest first, then the other. They were both so tall, it was all I could reach.

“Keep it casual,” I said again, “and you boys can have *all* the fun you want.”

# Twenty-Nine

## SILVANA

I rode them in the softness of my bed, straddling them side by side. Their hands roamed my body as I clawed their chests, bending first to kiss one man, then the other.

*YES...*

It was a dream, riding them like this. Spreading my fingers and bearing the full weight of my body downward. Driving whoever I was fucking even deeper inside me, as I rolled my hips in slow circles and screwed them into oblivion.

I switched yet again, throwing my leg over Cyrus this time. I lowered myself onto his thickness with a strangled gasp, locking eyes with his friend as his hands continued roaming my body.

“She looks happy,” Hudson chuckled, slowly stroking himself as he watched us fuck. “Are you a happy girl?”

I bit my lip in answer, but never looked away. Cyrus leaned upward, his hands clamped tightly on my naked thighs. His hot mouth closed over one breast as I continued riding him, throwing my head back and feeling my long hair cascade down my naked back.

I had the warmth of the flickering bedroom fire. The softness of the sheets and comforter beneath me.



Plus I had *them*.

*Mmmmmm...*

Yes, I *was* a happy girl right now. Maybe the happiest girl on the whole fucking planet. I held a hand out to Hudson in gratitude, and he interlaced his fingers with mine. Even as I took his friend, it maintained our most intimate connection. He held me steady as Cyrus's powerful arms guided my body forward and back against his thick, rigid shaft.

*Oh FUCK yes.*

The movement was shocking and incredible. It rubbed my tender button perfectly against the top of his shaft, while the remainder of his length stayed buried deep in my throbbing pussy. I found myself shifting with the momentum, moving faster and faster in a rhythm that rocked the bed.

My gaze slid down Hudson's body, pausing over his ocean of tight, flawless abs before moving even lower. It made me so fucking hot, watching him touch himself. My heart was pounding away as he stroked himself with one big hand, gliding it up and down until we were staring into each other's eyes again.

*It's okay*, he mouthed silently. His lips spread over his perfectly white teeth in a smile. *Come*.

I gasped hard, squeezing his hand. My other hand was still on Cyrus's beautiful chest, my nails digging even deeper into the warm, unblemished flesh.

*Come for me.*

Hudson's mouth formed the words, once again without saying them. And then it was all over, my resolve totally gone. My eyebrows arched upward in a look of blissful confusion as my mouth opened in pure ecstasy.

*Yesssssssss...*

Cyrus's swirling tongue combined with the rhythmic friction against my clit sent me flying over the edge. I came hard while he was deep inside me, contracting around him, squeezing him from within. I could tell by his moans he was

feeling it. He stopped feeding on my breast and started kissing me again, making out with me wildly through the tail end of my climax.

“C’mere, beautiful.”

Hudson took control, pulling me over. I threw my leg over his torso and straddled him again, taking him all the way to the root with a shuddering sigh.

*I could do this forever.*

We’d started so long ago, stripping our clothes off and crawling into the center of my king-sized bed. My muscle-bound lovers had taken turns at either end of me, stretching my G-string to one side and plunging into me doggie-style while I went down on whoever happened to be in front.

Over and over they switched, holding my hair back so the other one could see. And then they were pulling my hair, too. Leaning over my shoulder and passing my mouth back and forth so they could practically both kiss me at once, while one pounded me hard from behind.

More than once I’d come close to crying, that’s how good it felt — literal tears of joy. Instead I’d pushed them onto their backs and forced each of them to watch as I went down on the other. I’d done it slowly, sensuously, with tons of touching and kissing and really hot eye contact. I’d brought them to the brink several times. To the point where each man actually begged me to come.

That’s when I broke away cruelly, switching straight from one lover to the other. Or even better, to strut naked across the bedroom — their eyes still crawling my body — while I bent to toss another log on the fire.

But now...

Now we were just too far into it. I’d teased them too much, edged them too many times. I expected (and hoped!) at any moment for them to hold me down, pin me straight to the bed, and fuck my everliving brains out until they were draining themselves inside me.

Turns out it wasn’t like that at all.

“Get up.”

I was riding slowly up and down on Hudson. Teasing his chest with my fingernails, when he bucked abruptly beneath me.

“Get up, and get on your *knees*.”

Both men were saying it now. And both were rising. Apparently some kind of dam had burst, and I was powerless to stop what was coming.

“O—Okay.”

They stood over me on the bed, stroking themselves top to bottom. Hovering over me as I knelt before them, looking up along their incredible bodies.

*Oh my God.*

I reached and placed one trembling hand on each of their powerful thighs. I closed my eyes as they rubbed themselves against my face. The incredible image of their closed fists pumping up and down was burned into my brain, hopefully forever.

*OH my GOD...*

I was so hot, so impossibly turned on. And they were coming, one right after the other. Grunting and releasing themselves near-simultaneously, as they finished over my face and chest with two warm loads.

# Thirty

## SILVANA

You'd think it would be crazy being trapped in a house, surrounded by construction, staring at a computer screen all the time. Keeping up with various work projects and meeting overly-ambitious deadlines, as the weeks of October ticked by.

But then it was and it wasn't.

There were moments of frustration, of course. Repair costs were mounting, and new problems were constantly being found. Just a month after moving in I was already scraping the bottom of my bank account. It didn't help that the way I worked, most of my more promising contracts paid the bulk of my fee only *after* delivery.

Then again I had pleasant distractions. For one, the crisp fall weather was turning even colder and I was actually enjoying it. The house was warm and cozy now, constantly glowing with so many fires it kept me walking around in the same shorts and T-shirts I normally wore in Florida. On the outside, the grounds were looking better and better, too. Any time I got antsy and couldn't sit in the computer chair a minute longer, I was out there raking leaves, burning deadfall, and generally enjoying the one thing I never really had before: a backyard.

Finally of course, I was lucky enough to be juggling not one but three incredibly sexy friends. Friends who also happened to be my *ridiculously* hot lovers.

Nolan showed up one day to the sound of rip-roaring chainsaws. Apparently he'd cashed in a favor of his own — something about an overweight lumber truck he'd let off without a citation — and before I knew it a full tree-cutting crew was clearing the taller pines just south of the house. They gave me a full-strength internet connection in a matter of hours, and I gave them such a grateful round of hugs Nolan was soon ushering me back into the house and shooing the men away.

Hudson was constantly bringing decorations and tchotchkes into the house whether I wanted them or not, but every time he showed up I couldn't refuse that crooked, charismatic grin. He and Cyrus were eternally fixing anything they saw that might be broken, even if sometimes their impromptu repairs seemed more of a sweet excuse just to stop by and check in on me.

By day the boys kept me company; laughing, joking, helping with anything and everything. They broke the monotony of my house arrest — as well as the tedium of my work — in ways that always made me smile.

But by night...

By night these men slipped interchangeably in and out of my bed, sometimes two, even three at a time. They took me to all new heights of physical fulfillment. Expanded my sexual horizons in radical new directions, some of which I'd never even dreamed possible. There was hardly a night I wasn't sliding my arms over a pair of thick shoulders, then spreading my legs in wanton abandon. I loved it. Fuck that, I *craved* it. No matter how often they took me I just couldn't get enough of them.

And judging by the guys' voracious, near-insatiable appetites, that hot little street *definitely* ran both ways.

The sex was beyond incredible of course, but the camaraderie the four of us experienced as a group was even

more surprising. I hadn't counted on growing so emotionally attached to these men, so quickly. And I certainly hadn't taken into account how close the three of them were — almost like brothers — having grown up in such a small town setting.

On top of everything else the boys kept me safe and protected. I fell asleep each night in a cocoon of warm flesh, usually with strong arms or giant legs wrapped securely around me. With one or more of them always parked in the driveway, there were no more nighttime visits. I was sleeping better than I ever had in my life, and woke each morning happy and refreshed.

I was getting to know the town too, even limited by my once-a-week trips. The sheriff kept me to the same strict schedule, with my ankle monitor blinking off the moment I called him and then back on after exactly two hours. I'd tried getting extensions, if for no other reason than to cruise around and enjoy my freedom for a few minutes longer. Each time I'd asked, the sheriff had laughed at me and hung up.

Under any other circumstances I might've complained. In truth though, I had everything I really needed. Repairs were getting done, the town was actually growing on me, and the house was actually starting to feel like home. I was getting tons of work done, and for once in my life all of it was white hat. I hadn't performed a single edgy or illegal operation, other than to defy the terms of my release stating I couldn't work 'in an internet-based capacity' at all.

And of course, there was Cyrus, Nolan, and Hudson. Always there, always making my life a hundred times more interesting.

And all three of them, totally *mine*.

What else could a girl really ask for?

# Thirty-One

## SILVANA

Living in and around Miami had never been dull, probably because you could go from the richest, most affluent areas to the shadier side of the city in two miles flat. It made for a far more eclectic experience, and it gave you a much wider range of things to do. But even up here in New Hampshire, where everything seemed idyllic and picture perfect, dicier sections of every hamlet always existed... no matter how big or small.

I was in one such part of town now, picking up from a little cinder-block shack about to collapse in on itself called Spicy's. The place was half convenience store, half restaurant, but it turned out the most amazing home-cooked food I'd tasted so far.

On the way in I'd noticed a gray-haired man leaning or sleeping against the side of the building, clutching a pile of ragged belongings against his chest. On the way out, I stopped by him intentionally.

"Hey old timer."

It took a few seconds, but eventually he looked up at me. His leathery face was crossed with a thousand lines, and I

didn't doubt that every one of them had a different story behind it.

"I picked up two meals by accident. Want one?"

I pulled a foil-wrapped box from my brown paper bag and offered it down to him. Almost immediately he accepted it, while cracking a surprisingly beautiful smile.

"Thanks little lady."

My return smile felt better than anything all day. "You're very welcome."

The sun warmed my face as I returned to my car, wondering if I had enough time to reach the liquor store and still make it home. If I didn't, I knew my phone would ring almost instantly. It begged the question as to how much leeway the sheriff might give me in such a situation, and whether or not I was ready to test those limits.

"Hello Ms. Carter."

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the sheriff's car suddenly materialized before me. He was sitting in the driver's seat of the sedan, which was parked right next to mine.

"Why hello sheriff," I smiled sweetly. "I was just thinking about you."

"I'll bet," the man scoffed. "Wanna tell me what you're doing here?"

"At *Spicy's*?" I shrugged innocently. "They make the *best* sandwiches. And they also—"

"You're supposed to be shopping for essentials, remember? Not sandwiches."

His eyebrows were fixed at forty-five degree angles, crossed in anger. Or maybe they were frozen like that, I didn't know which.

"Well it is a *convenience* store," I said defensively. "And I picked up some essentials too."

I held the brown bag out to him, so he could look inside. He glanced for only a second, trying to look disinterested.



“Batteries?” he spat. “Why do you need—”

“Why sheriff,” I cooed, interrupting him with my most sugary-sweet smile. “It’s *never* polite to ask a girl about her batteries...”

They were for my mag-lite, but he didn’t have to know that. With three boyfriends, the last thing I needed were *those* types of batteries.

It sure was fun though, watching the sheriff turn six different shades of red. He stumbled through a few words and even started a few sentences, but eventually gave up as my smile widened.

“Well it’s nice seeing you sheriff,” I said, letting him off the hook. “But if you don’t mind—”

“Ms. Carter, could you take a quick ride with me? There’s something I want to show you.”

His demeanor had changed now. There was no irritability or anger, or even embarrassment. Suddenly he was all business.

I glanced at my phone and held it out to him. The stopwatch feature I was using only showed forty-eight minutes left.

“This is all I have left before—”

“Never mind that,” he said, tapping the tablet on the seat beside him. “You’re with me now. Consider yourself off the clock.”

Shrugging, I dropped my ‘essentials’ off in the front seat of my car and hopped in with him. The sheriff waited until I clicked my seat-belt then took off immediately, rolling us smoothly down avenues that would take us back to the main part of town.

“You getting along okay?” he asked. “In general?”

“Sure.”

“Construction going well?”

He was making small talk as he looked ahead, his eyes focused on the road.

“As well as can be expected,” I answered. “I have termites, though.”

The man nodded disinterestedly. “Every house that old has termites.”

“Yes, but—”

“You fix that porch yet?” he grunted.

“The one you broke when you put your foot through it?”

“The one that’s rotten!” he shot back. “Probably from your termites!”

Tempted to glance down at his ankle, I choked back a smile. “Well if you must know, the answer to your question is yes.”

The sheriff sniffed and grunted again, seeming entirely unsatisfied. “How close are you to getting your certificate of occupancy?”

I shrugged.

“Have you even had an inspector come out yet?”

I shrugged again.

The man shook his head and sighed heavily. “You’re going to need an extension,” he said. “I suppose I could put in a word or two at the inspector’s office, and probably get you one.”

“That would be nice,” I agreed. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he growled. “I haven’t done anything.”

The car turned, then turned again. Eventually we pulled into a long, L-shaped building with both a front and back parking lot. The sheriff guided us around back and into one of the empty spots on the fenced-in side. Then he killed the engine.

“We’re here.”

He opened his door and got out with a groan. By the time he slammed it shut, I still hadn't moved.

"You coming, Ms. Carter?" he asked simply.

My stomach lurched. I looked up grimly at the sign peeking out from the other side of the building, just over the low-slung roof. It was emblazoned with a single word:

MOTEL.

# Thirty-Two

## SILVANA

“Umm... sheriff?”

He straightened his shirt while adjusting his belt, looking around surreptitiously. When I still hadn't moved from the car, he scowled impatiently.

“I'm not exactly sure what you wanted to *show* me,” I went on, “but I'm really not—”

“Come on, Ms. Carter,” he said, lowering his voice to just above a whisper. “While he's still here.”

*He.* My eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“Who are you talking about?”

His voice grew more frustrated. “Just get out, please.”

I emerged slowly, noticing the sheriff's eyes weren't on me at all. Instead they were glued on the line of doors behind this side of the strip motel.

Or rather, one door in particular.

“Sheriff what exactly are we doing here?”

“If you'd stop dawdling,” he sighed, “we might actually be solving a mystery.”

I blinked. “Dawdling? Did you really just say—”

“Follow my lead.”

He strode confidently up to the building without looking back, and for some reason I followed. The number on the door read 37. The sheriff extended a thick arm and ushered me to one side, well out of the way of trouble. Then he knocked three times, hard.

“SHERIFF’S OFFICE.”

For several seconds nothing happened. He knocked a second time, then a third.

“I’ll call the manager if I have to!” the sheriff threatened through the steel-lined door. “But one way or another, we’re coming in.”

Now the door did open, revealing the dingy, poorly-lit space beyond. It was your run of the mill cheap motel room. The kind you usually only needed for three hours at a clip, but that you could also rent by the week if it came down to it.

The man who answered the door looked even *more* rough around the edges.

“I’m sheriff Andrew Dodson,” the sheriff began. “We’re investigating a potential break-in in the area, and just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

He stepped aside, so I could get a good look at the person in the doorway. But also, it seemed, so the person could get a look at *me*.

“Could you tell me your name, sir?”

The man in the doorway said nothing. He was too busy staring at me with a mixture of pure shock and mild horror. He wasn’t looking at the sheriff at all.

“M—My name?”

He was tall, lanky, and somewhat unkempt — maybe even borderline malnourished. Behind him the sound of a television droned on.

“Yes, let’s start with your name.”

Through the crack in the door, I could see his motel room was a total disaster. The stale, sour smell wafting from it matched what I was seeing, too.

“Do you have a name?” the sheriff asked casually. “Or maybe some ID?”

The lawman’s voice was calm and collected, but he was clearly operating on a heightened sense of awareness. He’d done this a thousand times. He was a professional.

He’d also cleverly angled his body to cover up the fact that he had one hand on his gun holster.

“I don’t... I mean I *do*,” the man stammered. “Have ID that is.”

“Great!” replied the sheriff. He said the word in conjunction with a nimble twist of his fingers, uttering it just loud enough to cover the sound of his holster being unsnapped.

“It’s just that—”

All of a sudden, everything happened at once.

The guy flung himself forward mid-sentence, reaching for the sheriff’s arm with his left hand. At the same time, he threw a right-cross that connected with the sheriff’s jaw.

“*Oooff!*”

It was a hard hit, I’d give him that. To the sheriff’s credit he took the punch and stayed upright, spinning completely around as the man twisted his arm behind him. He yanked it upward and there was a loud ‘pop’, followed by the clatter of something heavy and metallic: the gun hitting the cement walkway.

“Sheriff!”

I reached for him, but the man was already shoving with both of his long, ape-like arms. The sheriff went sprawling backwards, pinwheeling wildly, trying his best to stay on his feet. Unfortunately he lost the battle. He stepped off the curb and fell sideways, bouncing violently against the pavement.

The sound of the air leaving his lungs all at once was oddly frightening. The man from the motel and I locked eyes for a moment, then our gazes both dropped instantly to the gun. It was a lot closer to me than it was to him, but he reached for it anyway.

“FUCK!”

My kick connected with his wrist, flinging his arm upward. The gun went sailing through the air, so high and so far it ended up landing on the low-slung roof of the motel, some five or six rooms down. I held my breath, praying it wouldn't roll off...

Thankfully it didn't.

*You bitch!*

He didn't say the words except with his eyes, which were terrifyingly scornful and full of abject hatred. But they were tired eyes, too. Eyes that betrayed an exhaustion not just of the body, but of the will as well.

I raised my arms defensively, but the man from the hotel room was already running away. He wasn't sprinting fast enough that I couldn't catch him, had I actually wanted to. But there was something else I noticed also. Something that became obvious as he crossed the parking lot and quickly disappeared around the corner and onto the busier streets.

The man was *limping*.

“Sheriff!”

He was still on the ground, clutching his ribs with one hand and his radio in the other. The look on his face was venomous. He was still catching his breath, trying to force air into his lungs.

“Let me do it,” I said quickly, closing my hand over his. “I'll call for backup. I'll order an ambulance—”

“Ms. Carter!”

Red-faced and angry, the sheriff snatched the radio back and growled at me.

“You’ll do no such thing...”



# Thirty-Three

## SILVANA

We returned to Spicy's a half-hour later, after everything had mostly calmed down. The manager of the motel used a stepladder to retrieve the gun from the roof. Two other squad cars and a team of EMT's showed up, but the sheriff stubbornly refused medical treatment and quickly shooed all but one car away.

I was hoping to see Nolan, but the sheriff whisked me away before any of that. The last thing I saw was the motel room being roped off with yellow tape.

"How'd you know it was him?" I'd asked on the way back.

"The guy who tried breaking into your house?"

"Yes."

"I didn't," the sheriff paused, clearing his throat. "Not until he saw you, anyway. Then it was in his eyes."

"Yes, but how'd you *find* him?"

"This isn't that big of a town, Ms. Carter," he'd answered. "That man was a newcomer like you, and he arrived about the same time you did. He stayed in that same motel room the whole time, and never left during the day. He didn't

have friends, he didn't have a job... he was suspicious right from the beginning."

I'd sat there staring out the window, impressed with the level of the man's deductive skills. By the time we rolled to a stop next to my own vehicle, the sheriff had turned to me coldly.

"He was here for *you*."

The way he said it wasn't accusatory, it was more of a dire warning. The tone of his voice gave me the chills.

"That man followed you to this town for a reason," he said evenly. "Do you happen to know what that reason was?"

It was a question I'd asked myself a hundred times already, maybe more. The boys had asked me too.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I really don't."

He examined me in the same way I expected he scrutinized everyone who answered a direct question from him. Eventually he nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

"That was a smart move, kicking the gun out of his hand."

I shrugged. "Not so smart, really. I was just acting on instinct."

"Doesn't matter," he said dismissively. "Your instincts are good, and that was some quick thinking."

For the first time since I'd met him the man was eyeing me differently. His guard was down now, and his gruff exterior had softened. I could almost see the actual person behind the armor.

"You probably saved the both of us from getting hurt."

Silence reigned, as the man shifted in his seat awkwardly. This was probably as close to a 'thank you' as I was going to get.

"You're welcome," I told him.

“You get that move from watching Miami Vice?” he asked.

I let my face go abruptly blank. “What’s Miami Vice?”

I was teasing him, of course. Down where I was from, the show was loved and revered. It was before my time, but I’d still watched a good handful of episodes.

*He* didn’t need to know that though.

Turning away from me, the sheriff swore scathingly and grumbled something under his breath.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“I’m pretty sure I’m getting too old for this shit.”

It was all I could do not to break out laughing. Instead, I pointed to where he was still clutching his side.

“You promised the EMT’s you’d go to the hospital and get that checked out.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“You’d better do it,” I told him sternly. “Those ribs could be broken. I might even call, just to make sure you—”

*BEEEEEP!*

The monitor on my ankle began emitting out a loud, shrill, continuous cry. I didn’t have to look to know it was blinking red.

“Sheriff—”

He had the tablet in his lap already. I watched as he punched a whole bunch of buttons in rapid succession, and the alarm abruptly stopped.

Our ears were still ringing as he swiveled the tablet my way. When I looked I could see the deactivation countdown had been reset to another two full hours.

“Is that alright with you?” he asked.

“I guess it’s not *too* bad,” I smiled sweetly. “Could I maybe have four instead?”

The sheriff actually laughed, and his laughter wasn't unpleasant. Still wincing in pain, he threw the tablet into the backseat and pointed to the passenger seat door handle.

“Get the hell out of my car, Ms. Carter.”

# Thirty-Four

## SILVANA

“And that was it?” Cyrus said disbelievingly. “They couldn’t tell you anything else about this guy?”

We were walking the overgrown path behind the house, the one I’d been told led to my lake. It felt strange to me, owning an entire *lake*. Especially one I’d never even seen.

“I guess I’ll find out more later on,” I replied. “The sheriff mentioned something about coming by to take my statement, or maybe he’ll just send Nolan to do it. Either way, I don’t really know anything. I’d never seen the guy in my life.”

It was obvious the path hadn’t been used in a long, long time. Right now it was more of a rabbit trail, really. There was a lot of work to be done if I wanted to reclaim it from mother nature.

“Maybe not,” Cyrus replied. “But it sounds like he knew *you*.”

I stumbled for just a second, sliding my foot over an errant twig. Cyrus caught and steadied me by the shoulders.

“Watch it,” he smiled. “Go slow. We’ve got plenty of daylight left.”

He slipped his hand into mine. As always it felt big and reassuring and absolutely perfect.

“They’ll catch him if he hasn’t left town,” he went on. “But he’d be stupid to stay. There’s nowhere he can go that someone won’t report back to the sheriff. Especially now that there was gunplay involved.”

I chuckled. “It wasn’t *gunplay*, really. More of a drop and a pickup and—”

Cyrus abruptly stopped walking. Squeezing my fingers he pulled me backward and into his arms.

“That guy went to pick up the sheriff’s *gun*,” he said icily. “If you hadn’t stopped him, who knows what would’ve happened?”

The wind picked up a little, blowing his hair across his handsome face. His steel-blue eyes looked over my head for a moment, perhaps scanning for danger before they dropped back onto mine.

“Silvana, if anything happened to you...”

I shivered, and he pulled me even closer against the warmth of his body. His arms were wrapped around me so tightly I never wanted him to let go.

“I know,” I said. “I get it.”

“What the sheriff did was dangerous,” said Cyrus.

I shook my head. “He didn’t know.”

“Believe me, I understand what he was trying to do. But in doing so, he put you in harm’s way.”

The sheriff had called twice so far, just to make sure I was okay. And that was only in the last few hours. The second time he’d asked if I’d remembered anything about the man who’d been seen on my property that I hadn’t thought of before. Again, I could only shrug.

We began walking again, with Cyrus in front and me trailing close behind. Our hands were still touching, our

fingers interlaced. I wanted to stay like that all night, even if it meant never letting go of him.

“He’s not a bad guy, the sheriff.”

“No,” Cyrus admitted. “He’s not.”

“We got off on the wrong foot maybe, but now—”

The path grew suddenly wider, then dumped us out onto the banks of a beautiful, shimmering lake. It could’ve been a pond, really. A big one, anyway. Absently I wondered what the requirements were, size-wise, that differentiated the two of them.

“You’re wondering why this is a lake instead of a pond,” Cyrus said matter-of-factly. “Aren’t you?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “How’d you do that!?” I demanded. “That’s the third time this week!”

His ensuing grin eclipsed his entire face. “It’s easy,” he said. “I look into your eyes and I can just...” he paused and shrugged. “Well, I can just *read* you.”

“Read me.” It came out flatly and not as a question.

“Yes, read you,” he said. “You’re a pretty open person, Silvana. You like to think you’re some complex, hard-to-solve riddle, but in reality you’re the most straightforward woman I’ve ever met.”

I wasn’t sure if he was actually giving me a compliment or calling me simple. Either way, I had the urge to kiss him.

“Come on,” Cyrus said, pointing. “Looks like you’re the proud owner of a decrepit old dock.”

He walked past me, and I followed him down to the shore. The dock that stretched out into the water was ancient and broken. Every third slat was gone, and the ones still there were so ravaged by dry-rot they made every step precarious.

The boards creaked under our weight, but eventually we reached the end. I stood there for a moment with my hands on my hips, gazing out over the calm, placid waters. I was grateful my ankle monitor hadn’t gone off.

“There’s just so much to *do*,” I sighed, feeling the weight of it all. “So many things here that need to be fixed.”

As if the gods of good timing were punctuating my statement, Cyrus’s right foot went straight through one of the boards. Somehow he caught himself before it swallowed him all the way to the hip, but only barely.

“Quit breaking my dock.”

Cyrus rubbed at his bruised knee. “Fuck that. Tell your dock to quit breaking *me*.”

I chuckled. The sun would be going down soon, and I wondered what the place would look like by moonlight. Probably spectacular.

“You know we’re going to help you, right?” Cyrus murmured. “No matter what it is, you know we’re always here for you.”

I felt the heaviness of his leather coat being draped around my shoulders. The lingering warmth from his body felt like putting on a towel, straight from the dryer.

“I know,” I whispered back. “You boys mean the world to me.”

He slid his arms around my waist, pulling me against him from behind. I could feel everything now. Especially the thick, reassuring knot of his manhood pressed into the small of my back.

“It’s all about depth, by the way,” he said nonchalantly.

My pulse quickened. “Depth, huh?”

“Yes,” he answered. “If sunlight penetrates to the bottom, it’s considered a pond.”

I sighed as his hands slid down my belly, his fingers dipping into my waistband. “That’s not exactly what I—”

“But if there’s anywhere in this body of water where it’s still dark down there, it technically becomes a lake...”

He delved even further, until I felt the tips of two fingers brush the very top of my slit. Involuntarily I shivered.



“Come on,” said Cyrus. “The others should be just about done with your surprise now.”

I whirled happily, even if it meant putting his fingers on hold. “Surprise?”

My handsome lover smiled and nodded.

“What is it?”

“Something you’ve done without for *far* too long,” he chuckled.

# Thirty-Five

## SILVANA

“Alright, hit it!”

Hudson pressed the button, and the screen blinked to life for the very first time. The television’s logo appeared, followed by the setup screen and the date/time selection.

“How big is this thing?”

“Seventy-two inches,” Nolan said proudly.

“Holy shit!

There was a loud POP as someone pulled the cork from a bottle of wine. Between that and the warm fire crackling behind us, it was all music to my ears.

“That’s not even all that big these days,” Hudson waved me off. “That’s just as big as we could go on this particular wall.”

Cyrus returned to the room, carrying two big bowls of popcorn. The salty, delicious smell of it had reached the library long before he did.

“You guys really didn’t have to buy me a television,” I said again. “Much less one this big and expensive.”

“Isn’t it the bigger the better?” Hudson smiled.

“Well... yeah,” I smirked back. “Of course it is. But I’m not a size-queen when it comes to watching TV.”

“You didn’t even *have* a TV,” Nolan pointed out, “which is pretty fucking barbaric to begin with. Besides, have you seen television prices these days? They’re lower than a snail’s ass.”

It made me feel all warm and fuzzy, knowing the guys had pitched in to do this for me. Though I also suspected, being around here as much as they were, that they did it for themselves, too.

“Here. This is all you.”

The connection screen came up, and the remote was dropped into my lap. I selected my wireless router — which comically was the only one for miles around — and put in the password.

“Your wi-fi is called ‘Byte Me’?” laughed Hudson.

“Mmm-hmm,” I said, gratefully accepting a glass of wine from Nolan. “It used to be Wham Bam Thank You LAN.”

Hudson and Nolan laughed. Cyrus only sank onto the cushion beside me and shook his head.

“You’re a weird girl, Silvana.”

“Amen to that,” I agreed, popping a piece of popcorn into my mouth.

What followed next was a series of logins, preferences, and endless menu scrolling, as the guys argued about what we should watch first. I’d left it entirely to them, just content to squirm back into the softness of my second-hand couch and sip my favorite merlot, Dreaming Tree, which all three of them had finally learned.

Liam bounded over and I scratched him behind the ears for a long while. I knew he’d stand there forever if I didn’t dismiss him. Eventually I set my wine down and hid my hands under my thighs — a little trick I’d learned from Cyrus, who

was always petting him. He curled up at my feet and began snoring within seconds, not minutes.

“Alright, it’s down to Palm Springs,” said Nolan, “or The Map of Tiny Perfect Things. Both movies are sci-fi, both are romance, both involve time-loops.”

“Gotta have time-loops,” Hudson affirmed.

It was cute, watching them go back and forth. All three of them were so different in so many ways, and every day I learned more about what they liked.

“So the decision’s mine?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Flip a coin then,” I smiled, stretching out contentedly. “I’m just happy to be here with you boys.”

After hearing about my day they’d banded together and all agreed to come over tonight. They claimed it was because they were worried the man from the motel might show up, maybe to take one last crack at me before leaving town. Whatever the actual reason, I was more than grateful to have them.

“Doesn’t the sheriff get a little suspicious that you’re always here?” Cyrus asked Nolan.

The deputy sheriff shrugged. “Whenever he asks, I tell him I’m checking up on the new girl.”

“Checking up on me, huh?” I smiled.

“Well sometimes I have to check you more thoroughly than others,” he grinned back. “You know, strip you down. Examine you closely. Make sure you’re not hiding any weapons...”

He reached out for me, guiding my lips against his while planting a strategic hand on the inside of my thigh. We kissed softly, tenderly, our tongues rolling through each other’s mouths as the others sat watching in the firelit warmth of the library-turned-TV-room.

*Mmmm...*

It was like that a lot: the *watching*. Because as much as they enjoyed taking me together whenever they could, all three of them loved seeing me be taken, too. Almost as much as doing it themselves.

For me that was often the sexiest part — all the long, lingering eye contact with whomever happened to not be involved. It was a way of bringing that person into the mix, even if they were off to one side stroking themselves as they watched.

Plus it was just unspeakably hot, staring into one man's eyes as another man fucked me. Blowing one lover while reaching for another, or just gazing deeply into the eyes of his friend.

“Here.”

Cyrus growled the word as he took possession of my mouth, tilting my head to the other side of the couch. One calloused hand smoothed the side of my face as he drank from my lips, kissing the breath from my lungs as another hand slid up my *other* thigh.

*Nobody has it this good.*

I sank into the couch as my shirt was lifted, and my breasts were set free. Nolan went to work on them hungrily, using his hands and mouth. Cyrus was still kissing me into another world, as Hudson slipped from the chair beside me to the floor between my now outstretched legs.

*Nobody on the whole fucking planet...*

I gasped as thick fingers brushed my warm, swollen mound, and suddenly I was lifting my hips, helping the boys roll my panties over my ass and down past my knees. They were still dangling somewhere around my ankles — the lace material caught on my ankle monitor, in fact — when Hudson shoved my legs apart and buried his face in the warm, wet valley between my thighs.

“Holy *fuck*...”

I breathed the word between kisses, as Cyrus and Nolan were still passing my lips back and forth and taking turns on

my breasts. Down below, Hudson spread my flower with his thumbs and dove right in. I practically screamed as he devoured me from the inside out with his talented, loving tongue.

“You boys... spoil me... so much...”

I sighed in delirium through half-lidded eyes, my hands reaching, grasping. One closed over an already-hard shaft, all warm and thick and ready to go. The other sifted through Hudson’s midnight hair, squeezing his face even tighter into my wetness as the first hint of a lightning-quick orgasm began building deep in my stomach.

“Maybe you deserve it,” was all I heard, as my eyes fluttered closed and the rush of oblivion took me.

# Thirty-Six

## SILVANA

“All the way back *here*?” I asked again. “Keep going?”

“We’re almost there,” said Hudson. “Trust me.”

It felt a little bizarre, being led at dusk into the thick woods of New Hampshire. By a man who a month ago, I didn’t even know.

“Hudson it’s getting *really* dark.”

“Good.”

“And I’m getting a little cold.”

“Then I’ll warm you up.”

The days of October were winding down, and the trees were getting stripped of their beautiful leaves. Halloween was coming. My weekly shopping trip was filled with reminders of this, as the shops and windows of the quaint little town had been decorated with all sorts of Halloween-themed decor.

Hudson had come with me on this late afternoon trip, to help me with errands and to keep me company. We’d even stopped off at his sister’s shop. *Breathe* was exactly as I’d pictured it: an explosion of everything to do with astrology, meditation, the occult, and the healing powers of self-reflection. It looked like a gypsy wagon threw up all over the

racks and shelves of the little store, accented by glimmering crystal pendants, clusters, and silver jewelry tied to black nylon strings.

Maeve had greeted me with a hug that went on about five seconds too long to be comfortable, then slipped a carved runestone into my pocket. “That one grants protection, love, and joy,” she’d told me gravely. “After everything my brother told me, I thought you could use it.”

I wondered exactly *what* Hudson had told her, and how far he’d gone. But I thanked her anyway, adding a warm smile and kiss on the cheek.

The rest of our trip was the standard race against time. Hudson had me back in the driveway well before my ankle monitor’s LED was due to turn green again. Or as I referred to it, before my carriage turned into a pumpkin.

We hadn’t gone into the house this time, though. Instead he’d taken my hand and led me behind it, this time along a different path that led into a different part of the woods. It seemed the more I walked the grounds, the more I realized I had more property than I knew what to do with.

“Ah, here we are.”

The narrow path eventually spat us into a large, rounded clearing dominated by a huge weeping willow tree. Darkness had fallen around us quickly, but even in the shadows I could see the edges of the field.

“What is this?” I asked.

“I’m not really sure, to be honest,” said Hudson. “But at one time, long ago, this place was cleared for a reason.”

It was impressive really, this much open space in the middle of such a dense forest. I wondered if my great-grandfather had anything to do with it. By the age of the ancient tree in the center of the field, I figured he’d found this place exactly the same as I had.

We walked out for a good thirty yards, until we were halfway to the tree. At that point my lover abruptly stopped walking.



“Now what?” I asked.

Hudson smiled and pointed. “Look up.”

I did, and what I saw made me gasp. Millions of twinkling, shimmering stars lay spread out above us, looking like tiny silver jewels scattered across a vast, darkened bowl.

“Whoa!”

I’d never seen the sky look like this. Not ever. The intensity of it was almost frightening.

“H—How could this be?”

“Zero light pollution,” he explained quietly. “Out this far, you’re not even picking up the lights from the house.”

I stared upward for a long while, just taking it all in. The vastness of the sky made me feel small. Humble. But also strangely detached from everything.

Hudson squeezed my hand again, then pulled me close to him. The warmth of his body felt reassuring as a cold breeze kissed my exposed skin.

“You get enough of the stars?” he asked.

“For now, sure.”

“Good. Because there’s also this.”

He clicked something with his other hand, and suddenly the base of the willow tree erupted in beautiful blue light. Hundreds of battery-powered LED’s had been spiral-wrapped around the base of the trunk, then strung through the lowest branches to create an umbrella-like canopy of shimmering, cyan-colored light.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me...” I breathed.

My lover laughed. “What? Too cheesy?”

“Are you serious?” I balked. “Hudson, this is some grade-A, next-level romantic shit!”

He laughed. “Better than holding you by the waist at the bow of the Titanic?”

“Way better,” I countered.

“What about holding up a boombox outside your bedroom window?”

I turned, letting my body slip into his. “Pretty close to that, yeah.”

He pressed another button, and music began playing from unseen speakers. It was soft, slow, melodic. A slow, haunting ballad from the 80’s that I somehow knew but didn’t know.

Whatever it was, it was absolutely *perfect*.

*Holy—*

Our bodies were face to face, hip to hip. Hudson slid a strong arm around my waist, and before I knew it we were slow dancing.

“Oh you’re scoring *big-boy* points now,” I breathed.

He chuckled. “It’s not Peter Gabriel, but it’s pretty damned close.”

The lump forming in my throat prevented a big, funny retort on my end. Instead I placed my head against his chest and let my eyes close in contentment.

“Close enough.”

We swayed gently in the field, dancing beneath the blue lights and the silver stars. The hand on the small of my back felt warm and powerful. Even in the middle of the darkened woods, just being in this man’s arms made me feel safer than I ever had in my entire life.

“I can’t believe you did all this,” I murmured, holding him tight. “All this hard work. Wrapping all these lights into this poor tree...”

“This tree’s so old it’s dying,” Hudson said gently. “I like to think it appreciates us. It doesn’t have many days left.”

He pulled back to stare at me, and his dark, beautiful eyes revealed everything. They looked like twin mirrors, reflecting both shadow and light.

“Think of all the things this tree’s seen,” he breathed. “All the generations of people who’ve stood beneath it. Maybe we’re the last ones. Maybe this whole field gets forgotten, once we’re gone.”

It was one of the single deepest things I’d ever heard. For a moment it made me profoundly sad, but also appreciative of where we were. What we were doing.

“Are you okay?”

Reflexively I nodded. My skin was numb from the cold by now, but on the inside I still felt warm. Hudson took my chin in his fingers, then tilted his head to kiss me. His lips were full, sweet, perfect.

“How’d you get this spiritual?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I guess I’ve always been this way.”

“Well it’s sexy,” I told him. “*Really* sexy.”

Hudson’s feet kept leading us through slow, shifting steps. Our eyes were still locked, our lips brushing lightly as we never looked away.

“It’s easy to do stuff like this for you,” he whispered softly. “Do you know why?”

My heart shifted in fifth gear, thundering away as I stared at his perfect, porcelain face.

“Because I—”

I shushed him by covering his mouth with mine, kissing away everything else.

# Thirty-Seven

## HUDSON

I hadn't planned on making love to her, but somehow that's exactly what happened. I'd provided the pillows for comfort, the sleeping bags for warmth. I'd zipped them together so we could hold each other quietly and stare up at the sky, listening to music as we watched the stars make their way across the dome-shaped opening in the forest.

Instead Silvana had stripped us both until we were naked, then kissed me all over until I was rock-hard. My lips, my neck, my chest... she'd kissed and nibbled and even bit me playfully at times, all while using ten wicked fingers to explore my body beneath the thick layers of nylon, polyester and taffeta.

Then she proceeded to spread her legs and screw my balls off.

She's been insatiable in our little cocoon of heat and warmth, with only our heads exposed to the cool night air. We moaned and screamed through a thunderous, simultaneous climax, ending only once I'd finished emptying myself between her sweaty, sex-soaked thighs.

After that we *did* stare up at the sky, with her angelic face nestled wonderfully in the crook of my arm. For what

seemed like a blissful eternity, neither of us said a thing. But even eternity doesn't last forever.

"You know what I was going to say, don't you?"

I felt her shift uncomfortably for a moment. Eventually she nodded.

"I love you, Silvana."

One song faded away. Another began. For the few seconds between them, the silence was deafening.

"Did you hear what—"

"You *can't* love me," she interjected softly. "We talked about this."

"We talked about not getting attached," I agreed. "About keeping things casual."

"Yes, and why?"

High above in the cold black sky, the big dipper stared down impassively. It didn't have any more in the way of answers than I did.

"I don't honestly know," I told her. "I mean, we're far beyond friends. We obviously have feelings for each other."

"I can't have feelings for you," she sniffed. "It's not possible."

"And why not?"

"Because I might not be around here forever," she pointed out. "Once I'm done fixing up the house, who knows if—"

I turned to face her. "Is that it?" I demanded. "You can't have feelings for me because you might eventually be moving away?"

She sighed into the nighttime breeze. "No. Of course that's not *all* of it."

"Then what?"

I felt her shift inside the sleeping bags, perhaps trying to extricate herself from our lover's embrace. There just wasn't

enough room.

“Silvana, tell me.”

I’d seen her angry, frightened, happy, and caught up in the throes of staggering ecstasy. But for the first time I could remember, she actually looked sad.

“I can’t have feelings for you,” she explained, “because then I’d have to admit feelings for Cyrus and Nolan, too.”

I blinked. Was that all?

“Silvana—”

“And don’t tell me it’s okay,” she cut me off, “or that I can love your friends too. Because although you could fit everything I know about love on the head of a pin, there’s one thing I *do* know.”

She paused to look up at me fiercely.

“Love doesn’t work that way.”

My arms were still around her, holding her against me. I squeezed her as gently as possible and waited until she was looking me in the eyes again.

“I can’t speak for the others,” I said softly. “I can only tell you how I feel. But they *do* love you, Silvana. I know them well enough to say that.”

She shook her head, and the skeptical look was back again. “You can’t *all* love me.”

“I’m willing to bet you’re wrong about that.” I told her. “You can’t help who you love.”

Just above the surface of the sleeping bag, Silvana shrugged a naked, goose-pimpled shoulder. “You can all *like* me,” she said. “Obviously you can all sleep with me, too. The multiple friends with benefits thing? That part’s easy.”

“Easy and fun,” I pointed out.

“Very.”

“So... why not the rest of it?” I challenged.

She thought for a moment, and in that moment I fell deeper in love with her. Everything about this girl had rocked my world, since the moment I'd laid eyes on her. The idea that I could lose her was terrifying.

"It's just that it wouldn't be fair," she eventually said. "Not long term, anyway. There would never be enough of me to go around."

"With all due respect," I said carefully, "you seem to be going around just fine."

Her pretty dark eyebrows knitted together. It only made her more attractive.

"You know what I mean."

*Let it go*, a voice in my head warned sternly. *You're going to end up pushing her away.*

I held her quietly, enjoying the warm feel of her lithe, feminine body. Between the music, the silence, and the beauty of the night, the last thing I wanted was to shatter the spell.

"I want you to enjoy this for what it is," she murmured softly. "Okay?"

*What is it then?* I wanted to ask. Because I didn't know. Not really.

But I nodded anyway.

# Thirty-Eight

## SILVANA

“I’m sending you another access fob, for a system I can’t crack. Take a look at it when you get a chance?”

On the other end of our Zoom call, my foster father’s eyes scanned four different screens. His fingers hammered away at some unseen keyboard before he added a short laugh.

“If you still haven’t lost your touch, that is.”

I lifted my foot into view, then pulled down my sock. Edgar rolled his eyes as I tapped my ankle monitor.

“Anything that’ll get me a matching set of these?” I asked.

“No,” he smirked. “Nothing illegal.”

I tilted my head until he finally sighed.

“Alright, nothing *that* illegal.”

“So... ‘borderline’ illegal.”

He scratched at the grey stubbled around his jaw. “Let’s just call it skirting trouble.”

I opened the top drawer of my new desk and pulled out my key-fob ring. On it were at least ten different USB thumb drives, plus a good dozen or so plastic authentication fobs for



various systems I'd worked on. Some of them had gone dark long ago, but a few were still blinking randomly-generated codes every fifteen or twenty seconds.

"That's what I'll tell the judge," I said. "Your honor, I wasn't breaking into that banking system I swear. I was only skirting trouble."

"There you go."

I held up the key-fob ring and shook it at the screen. The plastic and metal components rattled together as Edgar smiled.

"You look like a janitor carrying that thing," he joked.

"I'm showing you this because I already have enough on my plate," I told him. "I have more work than I know what to do with."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yes, but—"

"Besides," he said, leaning in. "Last I checked you weren't really going anywhere. At least not for a while..."

I raised my fist and threatened to punch the screen. Only Edgar could joke with me about something like that. Anyone else...

"It'll show up in the next few days," he said. "If you get anything, let me know. I'll cut you off a slice of the pie."

"I don't need any pie."

"It's a damn juicy pie, Silvana. There's plenty for both of us."

We went on a little longer after that, but it was mostly small talk. I asked how Janice was treating him, and Edgar pressed me on how I was treating Suzanne. Eventually we bid our farewells and signed off to immerse ourselves in our work. It was an understanding we had. The one passion we shared.

Once again though, all I could find myself thinking about was Cyrus, Nolan, and Hudson.

The guys had been treating me so incredibly well, through all different aspects of my time here. They'd been my friends, my helpers, my sanity. They'd been my saviors, too, on more than one occasion.

And of course they'd been my lovers, as well.

It bothered me that they were taking such good care of me, yet I hadn't given much thought to their own feelings. In the interests of keeping things casual, I'd merely ordered there be no feelings at all.

*Not cool, Silvana.*

I sighed and threw my headset onto my new desk, which was really an old desk — some forgotten treasure we'd found while exploring the attic together. Cyrus and Hudson had dragged it down for me and dusted it off, setting it up close enough so I could enjoy the bedroom fireplace while getting work done.

I'd thanked them as profusely as I always had, but suddenly this didn't seem like enough. Lingering kisses and mind-blowing sex didn't seem like enough, either. Not when I was enjoying those things as much as they were.

*Shit.*

No. Apparently I was a taker, and I hated being a taker. It happened when I wasn't looking or paying attention, and of course that was my fault too.

“God, I'm a totally shit friend!” I cried out loud.

Liam looked up at me from his corner of the bed. Still curled in a tight ball, he yawned and closed his eyes again.

“I'm even a shitty friend with benefits.”

I sat down and stared at the fire, resolved to fix things one way or another. Being trapped in the house my options were limited. But I was a resourceful girl, and even limited options could be made very, very interesting...

Picking up my phone, I punched up the messenger app and selected our group conversation. So far it was filled with

fun, flirty plans, sexual innuendo, and maybe even a few R-rated pics we'd exchanged back and forth.

Halloween's coming, so nobody make any plans.

It was just a few short days from now. But still plenty of time to plan something for *them* for a change.

That whole night... the three of you are *mine*.

# Thirty-Nine

## SILVANA

I imagined a lot of holidays might be different up here in New Hampshire, especially when compared to a big city like Miami. There would be a lot less people, and therefore less fuss. Everything would be smaller, quieter. A lot more like in all those Lifetime movies I'd watched.

But the biggest difference of all was something I never really considered:

Halloween in New Hampshire was fucking *cold*.

It seemed like fall had disappeared when I wasn't looking and winter had finally kicked in the door. The air was sharp and biting now. It tasted at times like it could cut off my tongue.

Luckily I'd made all the preparations I needed, and everything else could run on autopilot. The house was warm and cozy and clean. I had the lights dimmed, the music set, and there were three different varieties of cold beer in the fridge. A trio of ridiculously thick porterhouse steaks lay marinating in a covered bowl, right alongside them.

On the kitchen table were three handwritten notes, tucked into three separate cards. In each one I'd poured my

heart out, individually telling these men all the different things I appreciated most about them.

And all this was just for starters.

Cyrus arrived first. I greeted him with a sweltering open-mouthed kiss and a squeeze of his manly, magnificent arms. He smiled and kissed me back, then went straight to the coal stove and began screwing around with the back of it.

“Hey...” I called to him. “Forget working on stuff, you’re supposed to be—”

“You know that shitty electric hot water heater that rattles the house whenever it kicks on?” he asked.

I nodded numbly. “You mean the one that gives me lukewarm showers?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about it?”

He squatted down and pointed. “Well with a little work I could route the pipes along the back surface of this thing. Whenever it’s on, it would give you all the hot water you’d ever want.”

*Now* he had my interest. “How hot are we talking?”

“As hot as you’d want to go.”

My mouth dropped open. “So I could finally take scalding showers?”

“Sure,” he smiled. “Maybe I’d even start taking some with you.”

I slid behind him, running my hands slowly over his shoulders. They felt like two granite mountains as I gave them a squeeze.

“Are you saying you wanna fuck me in the shower?” I whispered, my lips inches from his ear.

Cyrus’s neck broke out in goosebumps. “I’m sure not saying I wouldn’t.”

“You give me hot water and I’m *yours* in that shower,” I murmured sultrily. “I’ll do anything you want in there.”

“Anything?”

“Yes. Now stop worrying about fixing things. Get your ass in the library, take your boots off, and put your feet up. You’re getting pampered tonight, whether you like it or not.”

He did, and I handed him a beer on the way in. Hudson showed up to join him and received an equally hot kiss, a tray of Buffalo wings, and a cold beer of his own.

“So are we getting dressed up?” he joked, on his way through the kitchen. “Maybe do a little trick or treating later?”

“Oh there’s going to be tricks *and* treats,” I teased, licking my finger. “And someone’s *definitely* dressing up...”

I saw his Adam’s apple bob sexily as he swallowed. The look in his eyes told me he was already excited.

“Before tonight’s up,” I winked, “Halloween might be your new favorite holiday.”

Within minutes the two of them were enjoying a football game and relaxing on the couch in the library. The fire there was already going nicely. I’d contemplated many things I could do in there to make the boys happy — and of course went over a few in my mind we’d already tried. But to *really* pamper them, I had to have each of them alone. I needed them stripped down and spread naked across the surface of my bed, one by one by one.

Knowing them, the anticipation alone would drive them crazy.

I fired up the little charcoal grill I’d bought, and was waiting for the coals to get to temperature. In the meantime I carried a fresh round of beers into the library, being sure to bend over right in front of the boys as I picked up the empties.

“That type of behavior is going to get you thrown over a shoulder and carried right upstairs,” Cyrus remarked casually.

“Well I’m a girl that’s been known to take chances,” I shot back.

He reached for me quickly, but I was faster. Teasingly I pulled away.

“Not yet though,” I told him, as the backs of his knuckles grazed the curve of my ass. “You’ve got a long way to go before—”

My sentence died as Nolan rushed into the room, looking all flush and excited. He was still wearing his uniform, his cheeks still red with the cold outside.

“What’d you have planned for tonight?” he demanded quickly.

I stared back at him in confusion. “Lots of things. Why?”

“Anything we could move to another night?”

The others shifted uncomfortably, as they turned to see my reaction. Cyrus was scowling. Hudson didn’t look too pleased either.

“Well I didn’t put the steaks on yet,” I admitted. “But I planned hot-oil massages for each of you upstairs, one by one. With *very* happy endings, mind you. Plus—”

“As awesome as that sounds,” he interrupted, “we should take a raincheck. I have an impromptu counter-proposal.”

His words hit me like a truck, full speed and from out of nowhere. My heart sank.

“Bro,” Cyrus growled. “How about we take a raincheck on your raincheck? Our girl here went through a hell of a lot of trouble tonight. It just wouldn’t be—”

“You’re gonna freak out,” said Nolan, still clearly excited. He turned to face me. “Ready to freak out?”

I shrugged, trying not to be angry. “Um... sure.”

“No, seriously.”

“Okay, okay,” I relented. “Freak me out, then. I can’t wait to see what—”

Without fanfare or theatrics, he pulled something from behind his back and held it up. It took me a moment or two to

recognize what it was:

A very familiar-looking electronic tablet.

“The sheriff’s out of town for the night,” Nolan explained. “He’s up in Laconia, testifying tomorrow on some joint task-force or something.”

I started to get it. My body began to tingle with excitement.

“Are you saying—”

Nolan beamed. “Look for yourself.”

I put my foot on the nearest chair and ripped down my sock. The light on my ankle monitor wasn’t green... it was amber.

“NO WAY!”

“Yes way,” Nolan grinned. “Put the steaks away, because we’re getting you out of here tonight. I booked us a giant suite down in Keene, plus a table at the best Italian place I could find.”

The other guys shot up, their expressions filled with the same happiness and excitement reflected in mine.

“We can stay there overnight?” I breathed. “Sleep at a hotel? Wake up in a different place, a different city...”

“If we hurry back before lunch, sure,” Nolan shrugged. “The sheriff will never know.”

I threw my arms around him so hard I nearly knocked him over, screaming with happiness as I covered his face with kisses. Which of course, only proved him right all along.

I freaked out.



# Forty

## SILVANA

I'd often wondered what it would be like to be free again — to just take off without limits in any direction I wanted. I imagined it would feel a lot like the last day of school used to. That sense of total and complete liberation, as you threw your notebooks over your shoulder and took off running full speed into summer.

I was wrong though, it didn't feel like that at all.

It felt ten times better.

The ride to Keene was an hour of complete wonderment that seemed like it took an entire day. I spent the time cozied up in the back seat with Hudson, staring out into the cold Halloween night. The heat blasted over us in the warm darkness as the first snow of the season began falling from the sky. At the speed we were going, it was like flying through hyperspace. The slow, lazy flakes shot past all around us, lending a surreal but awesome feeling to the whole trip.

“Italian still good?” Nolan asked from the driver's seat. “Because we can always—”

“Italian is perfect,” I beamed back at him in the rear-view mirror. “This whole thing is perfect.”

I reached up to trace my fingernails gently over the two thick, beautiful necks in the front seat. Nolan and Cyrus responded by tilting their heads appreciatively in my direction.

“You boys could take me to McDonald’s and it would *still* be perfect,” I added.

A hastily-packed overnight bag rested to one side of me, as Hudson’s hand slid an inch or two higher on my stockinged thigh. In the spirit of Halloween I was dressed as a witch, and being that I never expected to leave the house it was a slutty witch, too. This was one surprise for the boys I’d decided to take with me. Or rather *they* had, once I’d told them about it.

With a few modifications I’d made the costume PG again, at least while we were out in public. I wore a series of black and orange skirts, a black coat over my corset top, and I didn’t put on nearly as much makeup as I’d planned. I’d also ditched the stiletto heels for something more practical and less ‘working girl’, but of course that didn’t mean I didn’t bring them with me. I’d left the broom — with a detachable handle that doubled as a paddle — at home, though.

“Sorry we don’t have costumes too,” Nolan had apologized. “If we’d known...”

“No apologies necessary,” I’d told them, eyeing them lustily. I tapped a finger against my blood-red painted lips. “My favorite costumes of yours are *under* your clothes.”

It wasn’t long before we were stepping out into the crisp night air as the snowstorm swirled around us. The flakes were bigger now. I took off my witch’s hat and stuck my tongue out to catch a few. Every one of them tasted like freedom.

“Feed me,” I laughed, as they ushered me along the sidewalks of the beautiful New Hampshire hamlet. “I’m starving.”

Again, they could’ve taken me anywhere and I would’ve been just as happy. That’s how good it felt to be out of the house, out of the car, out of our little town. I was a full-blown part of civilization again, and I’d been given back the most amazing gift in the whole world: *choices*.

I'd vowed to go straight a few different times in my life, and I'd broken promises to more than one judge. But right now, right here, I made a conscious, irrevocable decision. One that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt I would stick to for the rest of my life:

I was done doing *anything* that might jeopardize my future freedom.

We could smell the place well before we saw it. The scent of garlic and bread and savory meat floated tantalizingly along the wind, making my stomach growl and my mouth water. It took five minutes to get our table, and another five to get drinks. We ended up in the dimly-lit back room, away from the chattering crowds. I wondered if Nolan had requested it because it was quieter, not realizing that for once I was enjoying the noise of being around other people.

“So what exactly do witches eat?” Hudson teased, tipping back his first beer.

I answered while ripping one of the warm rolls from the bread basket in half. “Locals.”

It had always been our inside joke: how I was the big city girl and they were the good old boys from a quaint, small town. There was even a role-play in there somewhere, if we ever got around to it.

“How's it feel to get out?” Cyrus asked.

I sighed headily. “Like I won the lottery.”

“You *did* win the lottery,” Hudson pointed out, nodding to himself and his friends.

“Yeah,” I smiled sweetly. “About that...”

I opened my shoulder bag and passed out the three cards I'd slipped inside. Each was a different color. Each had a different name.

“You boys read those while I freshen up,” I said, rising. “This witch needs to make room for more wine.”

That part wasn't true quite yet, but the things I'd written in those cards were too sweet to sit there uncomfortably while

they read them. Yes, I meant every word. I'd tailored the individual notes inside each card to make each man feel as special and unique as possible.

But for some odd reason, I couldn't look them in the eyes while they read them.

*Maybe because you're getting attached.*

In the cute little restroom, I brushed the idea aside. I couldn't get attached. Even if there were only one of them — and an actual relationship were possible — getting attached was downright stupid.

Sort of.

I painted my lips again and fixed my eyeliner, then took a couple of deep breaths while staring into the mirror. I decided the sweet little notes I'd just handed out were as serious as I was willing to let tonight get. After all, I was finally free! Free to live, to move around. Free to feel the wind on my face and run in any direction I wanted.

For the rest of the evening, I just wanted to have *fun*.

I returned to laughter, another round of drinks, and fuck yes — appetizers. The boys pulled my chair out and welcomed me back, while Nolan poured more wine. Eating commenced, and as the food hit my empty stomach I became happier and more sated than I'd been in a long, long time.

Dinner turned out amazing. Dessert, too. My eyes eventually settled over the bottle of red that sat empty in the center of the table, and I realized I'd finished the whole thing myself. I wasn't dizzy though, just buzzed and elated and relaxed. If anything, I was drunk on freedom.

Cyrus squeezed one knee under the table, and Hudson the other. One leaned in to kiss my neck, while the other whispered in my ear.

“Those notes you gave us...” Hudson murmured softly. “They're more special than you can ever realize.”

My skin flushed as red as my burgundy lips, as a prickly heat stole over me. Enduring gratitude was never something I

was good at. Probably because most of the people in my life had been ungrateful.

“We know we’ve been a little overwhelming,” he went on. “Sort of like a package deal to you. But the fact you tailored these notes to each of us makes them that much more important.”

My whole body felt like it was on fire now, made worse by all the wine. Cyrus’s kisses weren’t helping, that was sure.

“I’ve never seen three friends so close,” I told them truthfully, “and as a team you’re amazing. Not just in bed either, but in the way you help each other through life.”

I placed my hands over theirs and squeezed, while looking directly across the table at Nolan.

“I know the three of you so ridiculously well,” I smiled. “But as similar as you are, I can always tell each of you apart. You come through my front door and immediately I know who’s in the house. I know you by your mannerisms, your movements. The very scent of you...”

Nolan’s eyes lit up in a very strange way. Crossing his massive arms over the table, he leaned forward and bit down on his sexy bottom lip.

“So you’re saying you can tell us apart, hmm?” he asked. “Always?”

I nodded slowly. The hands gliding over my stockings moved higher.

“Well then...” he smiled devilishly. “Wouldn’t it be fun if you *couldn’t*?”

# Forty-One

## SILVANA

*“Ohhhhhh...”*

The air left my lungs as he sank into me slowly, filling me inch by inch. His entire body was intentionally held away from mine, so that the only part of him touching me was the full length of his manhood as it pierced me to the very core.

*He’s thick.*

I struggled casually, testing the limits of my bonds. My wrists were bound to the upper corners of the bed with something soft yet strong. The knots were tight. There was no hope of slipping free.

Not that I wanted to. I was having *way* too much fun.

*“Fuck me...”*

I whispered the words desperately, hoping my latest lover would oblige. He only left himself embedded inside me, screwing in deep, rhythmic circles. The pressure of his pelvis grinding into mine was an almost exquisite pain when compared to how good he felt inside me. But it was a pain of denial. A pain of wanting something so very badly, but only getting teased instead.

They'd taken me back to the hotel, each of them taking turns whispering their full intentions once we got there. I'd practically skipped along the snow-powdered sidewalk. I was ready to strip down during the elevator ride, as six hands were finally free to start roaming places I'd been dreaming about all evening.

And then we were in our suite, where they took turns kissing me until I was dripping wet. The guys made a round of cocktails for themselves at the room's beautiful bar, then led me into the living area stripped off just about everything except my stockings and corset.

I was turned to face the window, overlooking the cute little town. This late, only the streetlights were lit. The snow was still swirling down, heavy and thick. It blanketed cars and roads and sidewalks alike, turning the branches of the ancient oak trees into something white-frosted and beautiful.

Strong hands slipped down to my hips from behind, and I'd prepared to be bent over. I'd never been more sure this is what would happen, probably because it had happened so many times over the past month. All three of my lovers had enjoyed using me in this deliciously dominant way, and had done so in just about every room of the house.

Instead my sight had been taken as a silken blindfold was slipped over my eyes. The last thing I saw was the beautiful snow-capped gazebo in the town's center square, before a knot was tied firmly yet comfortably behind my head and darkness enveloped me.

What followed was a fun game of 'guess who', with me as the only contestant. I was turned in a tight circle multiple times, like in a birthday party game of pin the tail on the donkey. It left me dizzy as well as blind, but also completely unsure as to who was where. All talking had abruptly stopped. The only sounds had been low, masculine chuckles all around me, plus the deep, rhythmic breathing of three men about to have a *lot* of fun.

A strong hand had led me a few steps in an unknown direction, and two palms pressed gently on my shoulders. I

ended up on my knees, with my hands resting on what I knew to be the leather couch. I could hear the creaking of leather as all three of them sat down one by one. It was amazing how much more you could discern just by using your ears, once you've had the distraction of your eyesight taken away.

Calloused fingers had caressed my cheek, leading me forward and downward. And then something warm and familiar was pressed against my face, and I knew exactly what they wanted me to do.

“You think I can't tell you apart like this?” I'd chuckled, licking the underside of the thick shaft in front of me. I'd reached out to the left and right, where I found the others already working themselves up and down. They'd done a good job, apparently. Already they were fully hard.

“Alright,” I'd grinned up at them blindly. “Let's do it.”

From there I began blowing them one by one, taking each man all the way down my throat and swirling my tongue. It was surprisingly sexy, not being able to see who was who. Each time I switched I made mental notes as to where I thought they were sitting, judging only by what I could feel with my hands and mouth.

At one point I'd reached out for a set of hard abs, and got a pretty good feel in before my hand was pushed away. Apparently that was breaking the rules. I wasn't allowed to touch their bodies, only the parts that really mattered.

Even so, I made good on my promise to identify each of them. Nolan's thighs were so big and powerful I knew them immediately upon setting my hands on them. Likewise, Hudson was identifiable by his wonderfully-curved member. I didn't even need to rake my fingers along his rippled stomach to know when he was buried deep in my throat.

Man by man, I brought them to the brink of exploding in my hot mouth. Each time a hand guided me gently away. When I couldn't take it another minute — when I just *had* to have them inside me — I popped the latest of them from between my swollen lips and sat up straight.



“Nolan, Cyrus, Hudson,” I said with a proud grin. I pointed with my outstretched finger. “That’s left, center, and right.”

I heard grumblings, followed by gruff laughter. Eventually Cyrus broke the silence.

“That was way too easy,” he complained. “But yes, you got it right. So far, anyway.”

*So far...*

I’d expected the game to be over, and to be declared the winner. Instead I was carried into the suite’s master bedroom and tied to the corners of the mattress. My blindfold was still firmly in place. I was blind, spread-eagle, practically naked. Dressed like a sexy, fishnet-stockinged witch about to be ravaged... who also happened to be horny as hell.

And now...

Now I was being teased mercilessly, as each of them took me all the way to the hilt. The three of them had been doing the same thing for what felt like a good half-hour now, switching off on me every five minutes or so with someone new. I would hear the door open, and someone new would come in. Whoever was there would leave, and the door would close. It was sexy as all fuck. The anonymity of whoever I was spreading my legs for was like some feverish, addictive drug.

The man inside me now was buried deep between my outstretched thighs, slow-grinding against my clit until I was moaning and begging for more. But no matter what, that’s all I got.

“Fuck me,” I said again. “Go to town on me! Please...”

I was rewarded with a faint chuckle. It was so low and quick, it was almost like I imagined it.

“This isn’t fair,” I whimpered. “I guessed already! I thought I won.”

As torturous as it was, I had to admit the whole thing was hotter than hell. I *loved* not knowing who was fucking me,

and the mystery of which man might be using my body just added to the whole sensory experience.

I squeezed hard from the inside, clamping down on whoever was inside me. My efforts elicited a tightly-controlled grunt.

“Come on,” I purred sultrily. “Make me come! I promise to make *you* come. I’ll bring you off so hard, so fucking deep inside me, you’ll be screaming my name for ten minutes.”

I bucked my hips upward a few times in rapid succession, simulating the kind of penetration I wanted. The hands holding my ankles screwed a bit tighter. With control maybe, yes. But also with an inner frustration and turmoil that was palpable.

“That’s it,” I growled. “Just *fuck* me. Don’t wait any longer. Don’t make it any worse for either of—”

Whoever it was abruptly withdrew... then slammed right back into me. They did it again and again, over and over, sending me straight to cloud nine.

*Yes!*

It was like a dam had broken, or the rules of the game had changed on the fly. Whatever it was, I didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was the pure joy of this swollen thickness, filling me from within. Slamming gloriously into me again and again, as I was flung over the teetering edge of a cataclysmic orgasm.

“*YESSSS!*”

I cried openly and happily, tears of absolute joy flowing down my cheeks. I spent a minute or three in the clouds before floating back to earth, my entire body shaking all over, my legs trembling so violently that whoever was responsible for delivering this gift had to hold them steady in his two big hands.

And then *he* came too, filling me with a savage roar.

*Ohhhhhhhh...*

My swollen channel felt every pulse, every beautiful contraction as my lover spent himself inside me. I hooked him in with my legs. Dug my heels into his tightly-clenched ass and held him against me until he was totally finished, and I'd drained him of every last drop.

“Fuck...”

I knew the voice before he even lifted the blindfold. Once he did, I saw a very happy, extremely spent Hudson.

“You just made me lose!” he grinned, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Oh yeah?” I teased, adding a giggle.

I squeezed him hard from within, flaring my eyes in victory. Hudson's half-lidded smile was all the reward I needed.

“Go send the others in then,” I murmured. “And I'll make them lose too.”

# Forty-Two

## NOLAN

Of all the things that seemed more lonely at night, the streets were especially empty. No people. No light. Nothing to differentiate between shadow and darkness, without even a hint of the coming dawn.

For some odd reason I enjoyed this time. Maybe because it was pure. Easy to understand. There was a certain tranquility to all that nothingness, especially now, with all of downtown Keene blanketed by new-fallen snow.

“Hey...”

I turned and there she was, all lithe and bed-headed and beautiful. Her skin was flushed as she stood in the doorway. Her eyes were one quarter exhaustion, three-quarters contentment.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked her.

She shrugged. Even her shrug was cute.

“Come outside with me for a minute,” I said, sliding the door to the balcony open. “Check out the snow.”

Silvana leapt ahead barefoot and without hesitation. She swept powder from the railing with a delicate hand, then

wrapped her fingers around the cold, wrought-iron surface as I came up behind her.

I was wearing an entire down comforter from one of the secondary bedrooms, pulled over my shoulders, sheets and all. It was an easy thing to wrap all of this around her too. My arms criss-crossed in front of her, and together our bodies shared the heat inside.

“You’ve seen snow before, haven’t you?”

She snuggled into me with a sigh, then nodded her head. “Yes. Never this much at once, though.”

The falling snow had finally stopped. There was at least half a foot of accumulation, though.

“This is nothing,” I smiled. “You’re in New Hampshire now. Stay here long enough and the first *real* storm will make this look like a dusting.”

She nodded again, this time more slowly. I felt a shift in momentum, though. It was attached to my last comment.

“You’re leaving aren’t you?” I asked softly. “Once you’re done with the renovations?”

Her body slumped a little, then slowly stiffened. She stayed locked in my arms, though.

“I... I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“It’s okay if you are,” I said gently. “Of the three of us, I’m probably the one who most understands.”

Silvana turned into me, and her eyes were curious now. “And why’s that?”

“Because I left once,” I explained. “Went all the way to the west coast. At least for a little while.”

“You wanted to be an actor?”

“Shit no,” I laughed. “Not even close.”

Silvana eyed me skeptically. Somewhere within the heat of our blanket burrito, I squeezed her body even tighter.

“When I was a little younger, I trained in mixed martial-arts,” I explained. “I got really good, really fast. Enough that I won a few tournaments, and eventually got noticed. Before long I was given a shot at something bigger.”

Old memories came together, and for once I didn’t shoot them down. I recalled the thrill of winning, the excitement of the recruitment process. The pride I felt being taken under the wing of one of the biggest fight academies in Los Angeles.

“It was incredible living out there,” I explained. “The sun, the surf, the lifestyle... everything was so different from up here! Yet the whole thing was like a dream to me. Sometimes it still seems that way.”

“So what happened?” she asked. “Why didn’t you stay?”

“I did,” I told her. “For a good long time, too. I was actually rising through the ranks out near Hollywood when I got the call that my father had fallen ill.”

She stiffened again, but this time only until her reassuring hands found mine. “Shit, Nolan. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be,” I told her. “I came back to help him, but it was already too late. In the end he went quickly, at least. No pain. Passed away a little over a year ago, but it was a long enough illness that I missed my window.”

I lowered my gaze, letting it spiral down into the darkness below. The little town looked frozen over. It sparkled icily beneath the moonlight.

“Anyway, I should’ve known it would happen,” I tried forcing a laugh. “Everything was going a little too well.”

“Bullshit,” Silvana barked.

“What?”

“That’s a bunch of defeatist bullshit,” she affirmed. “If anything you’ve got good karma coming your way for helping your father, not bad. It’s not every son that gives up on his dreams.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “But as much as I liked Hollywood, it still wasn’t my place. It felt good at the time, but this...” I

waved an arm at the snow-covered shadows. “This is more like *home*.”

She shivered, and I realized she was standing there barefoot. Still wrapped in the blankets I led her back inside, closing the door behind us.

“Look, I want you to know I understand,” I said simply. “Being from Miami, maybe this place isn’t for you. And yeah, we’ve been pretty intense so far. I know we probably confused you too, with all this time and affection and constantly being around. So if you need us to back off...”

“No,” she choked. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

I gazed back at her and shrugged. “Maybe not, but if this whole thing isn’t serious then maybe it’s for the best?”

The wounded look in her eye was a dagger to my heart, but I had to say these things. Cyrus wouldn’t. Hudson outright couldn’t. But if I was going to protect myself as well as the others, they still needed to be said.

“Silvana we *love* you,” I sighed finally. “Isn’t it obvious? Hudson — although we’ve warned him not to — is already calling you our girlfriend. And Cyrus...” I shook my head. “Shit, I’ve never seen Cyrus act this way. His whole face lights up when he talks about you. And he talks about you like you’re always going to be in our lives.”

“He—he *does*?”

“Yes!” I smiled, as if the answer were obvious. “He and Hudson have all these unspoken plans in their head. Big plans. The kind of plans you don’t make if you know someone might take off at any moment.”

She tried to swallow, but I could see it wasn’t quite working out. I’d never seen her this nervous.

“But again, this is their *place*,” I reiterated. “Their families are here. Cyrus takes care of a father who doesn’t deserve him, and Hudson’s as close to his mother and sister as any good kid has a right to be.”

I could tell right away she understood. Which was good, because some people didn't.

"It's about jobs and opportunities too," I continued. "Cyrus and I have a good thing going on right now, but it wasn't always this way. There used to be a big shop in town. It employed two-hundred people who did welding and fabrication, manufacturing parts for assembly robots in big factories." I glanced down and laughed, bitterly. "Now those same robots we built are assembling themselves, somewhere else. Funny, right? The whole town worked themselves right out of a job without even knowing it."

Silvana's eyes were locked on me. She was listening to everything I was saying, but she was also lost deep in her own thoughts.

"And what about you?" she blurted.

"What about me?"

"How do *you* feel?"

We were still holding each other's hands, only now we'd slipped to the couch. Face to face, eye to eye, all but the most base of emotions were stripped away.

"I love you with all my heart," I admitted, giving her the unvarnished truth. "But if you can't love us back — if this whole thing has to be nothing more than casual, as you said — wouldn't it be better this way?"

She didn't speak, or move, or anything else. On some level though, I picked up a deep sense of sorrow.

"If it were up to us we'd *all* have you," I told her. "We'd all take care of you, the way we are now."

I took her face in a gentle hand. Her skin was impossibly soft as I smoothed my thumb over one tearful cheek.

"But it's not up to us," I murmured softly. Laying back on the couch, I pulled her into my arms until her entire body was lying across mine.

"That ball's in your court."





# Forty-Three

## SILVANA

I shivered my way back up the stairs, stepping past more puddles and dirt and grime. Paperwork had been strewn all the way out into the hallway. Some of the clothes from my closet, too.

“Ms Carter?”

The sheriff was in my bedroom, stepping carefully around a bundle of stripped linens. The mattress had been separated from the box spring. My antique desk, completely turned on its side.

“And you’re sure there’s nothing else missing?” the sheriff grumbled.

“No.”

“Just your laptop?”

“*Two* laptops,” I corrected him. “And yes.”

What started as a pleasant morning had turned into an afternoon nightmare. The boys had taken me out for the most delicious breakfast in Keene, then snuck me home before anyone knew the wiser. After dropping me in the driveway before taking off for their respective homes, Nolan had

apologetically turned my ankle monitor back on. A trio of goodbye kisses later, I was back in my house...

... where the whole place was a cold, wet mess.

“LIAM?”

At first I’d suspected the dog. Liam bounded in from the back of the house when I’d called him, his fur all matted with snow. Though I’d been gone less than twenty-four hours I’d left him plenty of food and water, and of course he had the doggie-door. We’d filled the coal stove to the brim, and Nolan had adjusted the flue for a long, slow burn that would keep the dog warm the whole time we were gone.

The problem however, wasn’t the dog at all. It was the inwardly-broken window on the east side of the house, and the two sets of strange bootprints leading in and out of it.

Not to mention the entire place being ransacked, top to bottom.

“Do you think it was *him*?” I asked the sheriff anxiously.

“What, the guy from the motel?” He shook his head.  
“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because that guy had tiny feet. He wore a men’s size seven, maybe an eight, tops. The bootprints in the snow outside your window were both made by elevens or twelves.”

I pondered the whole thing for a moment. The sheriff certainly had an eagle eye: if he said the man’s feet were small, I totally believed him. Besides, there were two intruders this time, not one.

“And the doors were locked, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Because you were... out for a walk in the *woods*?”

If he was skeptical before, the man was downright suspicious now. Luckily I’d had the whole thing worked out ahead of time. Before calling the police to report the break-in,

I knew I had to come up with *some* kind of reason for not being there.

“We were walking together, Liam and I. There’s a huge field with a big weeping willow tree. And he likes to fetch sticks, so—”

“How long were the two of you gone?”

“An hour and a half,” I shrugged. “Maybe two hours.”

The sheriff scanned me again, and this time his eyes squinted. “You traipsed around the snow-covered woods for *two hours*?”

“Hey, I’m from Miami. This was my first snowfall, okay?”

“Yeah... okay.”

*One down, I thought to myself. One to go.*

“And the tire-tracks in your driveway,” the sheriff said. “Think they were made by the perpetrator?”

He was trying to catch me. I was ready for him.

“No.”

“Then whose are they?”

“The deputy sheriff came by to check on me earlier this morning,” I explained. “He does that sometimes.”

“Nolan?”

*Is that his name?* I wanted to ask sweetly.

“Yes.”

“And obviously he got here before the break-in.”

“Obviously,” I said. “The only footprints on the driveway side of the house belong to me.”

“From when you went out to greet him.”

“Yes.”

The sheriff paused to write something down on his clipboard. I hadn’t told a lie, so it was all easy to believe. If it

came down to it, the tire tracks would match Nolan's car, too.

“So you and your dog walked in and found the place like this?”

I nodded, numbly. It had been hard at first, not calling the police right away. Not calling the guys had been even tougher. Still, I couldn't keep relying on them for everything. As Nolan had indirectly pointed out last night, it really wasn't fair.

It was worth waiting for the sheriff to be back, though. The man was thorough and fair, and for some reason I trusted him. Right now he had two men downstairs, working the scene at the window and taking photos of the bootprints in the snow. There was another skirting the house, probably trying to track the footprints through the woods or wherever they came from.

“Alright Ms. Carter,” he finally sighed. “You going to need any help cleaning up here, or—”

“No,” I replied. “Not at all.”

His expression softened, and he looked sympathetic. After checking the hallway, he took two steps closer and lowered his voice a little.

“Be honest with me,” he said. “Do you know who this is?”

I shook my head slowly. The look on my face told him I wasn't lying.

“Do you have any idea what they want?”

“I honestly don't know,” I shrugged. “I don't have anything of value. Those laptops were older models I'd just dragged up with me that were sitting in the closet. One's actually wiped, and the other one doesn't even connect to the internet.”

He'd known enough not to ask me too much about what I did for a living, probably because he knew the terms of my house arrest. I appreciated that part. He was giving me the benefit of the doubt.

“The way they turned everything upside down,” he went on, “makes me think they were looking for something... specific.”

“Something in the house, maybe?” I offered.

The sheriff scratched at the back of his neck. “This house has been abandoned for decades. If someone wanted anything that was still in here, they could’ve taken it long ago.”

“Yeah. Guess so.”

He foraged into a pocket and produced a slip of paper with a phone number on it.

“Call this and ask for Ronnie. He’ll come fix that window for you. He’ll do it fast too, and at the best price.”

“O—Okay. Thanks.”

The sheriff scanned the mess in my bedroom one last time and let out a disgruntled sigh. “At least there’s some good news in all of this, though.”

I arched a hopeful eyebrow. “Oh?”

The man nodded. “Looks like whoever’s stalking your property isn’t after *you* at all. They’re after something... else.”

# Forty-Four

## SILVANA

With the coal stove blazing and fully-stoked, the house was warmer than it had ever been. I had every light in the place on. The television too. I was on the couch, covered in a blanket, with Liam resting happily in my lap.

And *still* I didn't feel safe.

There were only two windows in the library, and they were too high to be accessible. They were also too high to provide any useful angle, which meant I couldn't really look outside.

"Who was here, boy?" I asked, scratching the dog's shaggy belly. "Tell me."

Liam's eyes tracked me curiously, but as usual he provided no answers. I was grateful that whoever it was, my dog hadn't been hurt. Either he'd been roaming around outside — which knowing him was probably the case — or he hadn't even been enough of a threat for the intruders to lock him in the nearest room. Hell, if one of them put out a hand he'd probably lick it to death.

I scratched him some more, squeezing him tighter against me. The pressure of his body against mine gave me an added sense of warmth and security.

*Nothing like the guys, though.*

I sighed wistfully. They'd text-messed a little while ago to check up on me, but true to Nolan's word they'd given me my space. It should've relieved me, but instead it made me sad. And on a night like tonight...

Well, on a night like tonight I could've used all the companionship I could get.

The fact they hadn't showed up yet meant one thing for sure: the sheriff hadn't told Nolan. It seemed a bit odd to me, but maybe he was catching on to the idea that his deputy and I were a lot closer than he was probably comfortable with.

Before leaving, the sheriff had offered to station a car out in the street for the next few nights. I'd flat out refused. I suspected he might do it anyway, but the three times I'd walked to the end of the driveway I hadn't seen anything at all.

Now, this late at night, I was regretting not taking him up on the offer. Even if it meant that particular officer might get an eyeful, if all three of the boys happened to show up.

But now that wasn't happening too.

*You wanted space? You got space.*

I flipped through the channels restlessly. Either there was nothing I wanted to watch, or I just couldn't focus.

*No strings, remember? Just friends.*

My stomach sank. I was starting to realize my words had been a lot stronger than my convictions. Despite what I said there *had* been strings attached. And not just strings on their side... but on my side, too.

A smile crossed my face as I called up recollections of last night. The joy of being freed had been totally intoxicating, but the sex even more so. It seemed every time we fell into bed the three of us found amazing new things to try. There was no limit to the fun we could have. No end to the—

*No limits but the ones you set.*



I stopped, realizing the gravity of my own statement. I'd set emotional limits but not physical ones. Imaginary lines I didn't want crossed, drawn in my own head and heart.

The guys had respected these boundaries so far, at least outwardly. But if I were being honest, I'd broken my own rules. I'd developed feelings for each of them whether I liked it or not, and these feelings were far beyond the scope of friendship. Even worse, they were feelings I couldn't possibly expect them not to sense or reciprocate.

I *loved* them. All of them. Cyrus for his leather-clad bad-boy drama, and Nolan for the sweet demeanor beneath his stoic, panty-melting authoritarianism. I loved the tightrope Hudson walked between his sizzling hot body and the giving, beautiful person he was beneath.

These men weren't my friends. Not even close! But they weren't purely my lovers, either. They took damned good care of me in that department to be sure, and I more than reciprocated. But at the same time there were already strings and attachments we'd developed between us that I couldn't even begin to admit.

*And to think they did all this while sharing you between them.*

Sharing me. Just the idea of it gave me the warm shivers. But that's exactly what we'd been doing all these weeks. The men had shared my love, my attention, my affection, and my body. They'd done it without hesitation, without complaint, and somehow — and this was the kicker — without even a shred of jealousy.

*Holy SHIT.*

And here I was, pushing them away? I wasn't just living the one perfect relationship I'd always sought after and wanted, I was living three of them at the same time! Three distinctly-wonderful yet individual relationships, plus a fourth one that encapsulated all of us together.

It was the perfect storm of sex, companionship, friendship, love. The be all end all romance to top all

romances, carried out by four semi-mature adults working toward a common goal.

And for some reason I couldn't even remember, I was standing in the way of that goal.

“Fuck this.”

I loved these men! I loved them just as much as they loved me, and possibly more. I'd been pushing the idea away as unorthodox and unstable. Yet my whole life had been unorthodox. Every decision I'd made had led to a more unstable future.

Until *now*.

The realization crashed over me, wave after wave. Everything I'd done since arriving here had been positive. Every piece of my heart I'd managed to give out had been given back to me tenfold, and for some reason I'd kept convincing myself I didn't deserve it.

*Or want it.*

But I *did* want it! I wanted it very badly. Maybe I was too frightened to take it, or too scared I might lose it sometime down the road. But *not* doing it... that was so much worse. The idea of not taking a chance when I'd been given something so incredibly precious was suddenly the most terrifying thing of all.

Liam's eyes followed my hand as I picked up the phone and called up my messages. I punched the words without reservation. I spelled it out for all three of them at once, so that there wasn't any doubt at all.

Cyrus. Nolan. Hudson...

My heart pounded as I typed their names. But it also soared.

I LOVE you.

# Forty-Five

## SILVANA

“I still can’t believe you didn’t call us!” Cyrus cried. “After all you’ve been through here? And now there’s *two* of them?”

He ran his hand over the frame of the broken window, which for the time being was covered in plywood. Ronnie had promised to come first thing in the morning. Ronnie rocked.

“I can’t believe Dodson didn’t *tell* me,” Nolan growled. “He knows I’ve been checking up on you. He knows I’m invested!”

“Yeah, and he probably thinks you’re fucking me too,” I added.

“Well I am.”

“You sure are,” I agreed. “But the sheriff is probably nervous about his deputy getting involved with the new girl. Especially since the new girl hasn’t done anything but start trouble since she came to town.”

They’d shown up almost immediately, without even answering my text. And they must’ve talked amongst themselves, because they arranged it so that they all got here at once, too.

I'd ushered them quickly inside, in case the sheriff *did* have someone watching the house. Then I'd kissed them slowly, one by one. Holding each man tightly and silently against me... before finally telling them about the break-in.

They'd all gone ballistic, of course. Especially Nolan. Hudson and Cyrus did a quick sweep of the yard, partly to look for intruders but also to pluck the SIM cards from the trail cams. The problem with that however, was that they came back empty-handed.

"What do you mean the cameras are *gone*?"

That part in particular had spooked me. From the looks on their faces, it must've spooked them too.

"Whoever it was took every last one of them," Hudson had explained. "Somehow they knew where they were."

"Some of them were ten feet up, strapped to a tree!" growled Cyrus.

"Yeah," Hudson nodded. "They got those too."

I went over everything, including what the sheriff had said about posting someone to keep an eye on the street. I thought they'd be worried about the optics of all showing up here. Especially Nolan.

But I was dead wrong.

"I don't care who knows I'm here," the sheriff's deputy had said. "Or for how long."

"Yeah," said Cyrus. "Me neither."

They put their arms around me again, and nothing in the world felt better or safer. I went along willingly as they guided me back into the firelit library.

"So they came on the *one* night when you weren't home," said Cyrus. "That can't be a coincidence."

"No," Nolan agreed. "It means they've been watching. Waiting for the house to be empty."

I thought about the woods surrounding the house, all dark and deep. It creeped me out to think that men were out

there. Watching. Waiting...

“When’s the last time you checked the trail cams?” asked Nolan.

Hudson shrugged. “Had to be over a week ago.”

“They were watching even back then,” Cyrus spat. “It’s the only way they knew to get them all.”

“So they only took two computers?” asked Nolan.

“Old laptops, yeah.”

“But not your television,” Hudson pointed out. “Or your million-dollar coffee maker.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. He was right.

“But they didn’t get *that* laptop,” Cyrus pointed to the machine on the couch. “The one you brought with you yesterday.”

I stifled a gasp. I’d slipped the machine into my overnight bag without even thinking, just in case I needed to run a script or check on a routine. In all our merriment I hadn’t even thought about doing any work. But I had it with me just the same.

“Is there anything on that computer someone might want?” asked Nolan.

All three men were looking at me now. Somewhere behind me, the fire crackled.

“I... I don’t *think* so,” I said. “I mean, I have all kinds of logins and passwords to databases and such. But it’s boring stuff. Even on the banking systems, it’s not like I could run transactions or—”

“You have banking information on there?” asked Hudson.

I thought for a moment. Eventually I shook my head. “Not currently.”

“If they were after that laptop that would make sense,” said Nolan. “Except that they ransacked the whole house.

Every drawer and cabinet, even the little ones.”

“Maybe they were looking for something else too,” Hudson theorized.

The room fell silent for a moment, as the three of them made themselves comfortable. It was obvious I was getting all three of them tonight. They’d all come so quickly, and without question or hesitation. It was something they would’ve done even if I hadn’t added that last line of my text-message.

But I had.

“Look, I’m safe for tonight,” I said a little nervously. “But we have to talk about something else...”

Their eyes were on me now, as they so often were. Being with the guys was always casual, always fun. Never uncomfortable, even in the slightest.

But this was different. I was about to go down all new avenues, into uncharted territory. I’d said something I couldn’t take back — not that I wanted to — and was about to say more.

“It’s always been hard for me to imagine myself with someone, much less three someones,” I began. “I’m an independent kind of girl. A real pain in the ass girlfriend, if any of my exes are to be believed.”

They said nothing. Cyrus cradled the glass of whiskey he’d poured earlier, which was just about gone. Hudson and Nolan rested their hands on their knees.

“I said I love you just now, and I meant it. Not just one of you, but all three. I love you for all the help you’ve given me, and for the friends you’ve become. But it’s much more than that. It goes... way beyond.”

I faltered, and a hand closed over mine. Hudson looked up at me with his dark, glimmering eyes.

“You don’t have to tell us,” he smiled gently. “We *know*.”

I nodded, sniffing as I looked up from the floor. My gaze went to each of them and the discomfort was gone. The nervousness too.

“But I also *love* you love you,” I said, laughing inwardly at how stupid it sounded. “In the way a woman loves a man. Only times three, which sounds utterly ridiculous—”

“No it doesn’t,” Cyrus cut me off sternly. He shook his gorgeous head. “Not at all.”

I swallowed hard, nodding back at him. Somewhere deep, I was drawing upon an all-new inner strength.

“As unorthodox as it sounds, I can’t *not* love all three of you,” I went on. “I can’t imagine myself without you! I look at you and see everything I ever wanted in a relationship, but also so many other things I never *knew* I wanted. Things I never knew I could have.”

“But you *can* have them,” said Nolan. “We want you to have them.”

I nodded again. “I know that now,” I agreed gently. “And I can’t fight it. Hell, I don’t even *want* to fight it. Never really did.”

My last sentence was the stark, honest truth I’d finally come around to. It was a realization that could never be told, it had to be learned.

“So what does this mean?” Cyrus asked.

“It means I want to be your girlfriend,” I said definitively. “I want to belong to all three of you. I want you to love me the way you already do, and take care of me the way you have been, and laugh and smile and joke and make fun of each other, and do every single thing exactly as we *have* been doing... only without me pulling away. Without me trying to convince myself — or any of you — that the whole thing is casual, or temporary, or no strings attached.”

“So you want strings,” Nolan smiled hopefully.

“All the strings in the world,” I smiled back.

I saw the elation in their faces. It was laced with relief. Hope. Love...

“I want lots of things,” I went on. “Incredible, amazing things.” My eyes were glazed with happiness. “*Future*



things...”

I stood, calling them in with my extended arms. And as always, they came. Encircling me, the way they always did.

“But we can discuss those things later on,” I whispered in the darkness. “After you boys take me upstairs and *truly* make me your girlfriend...”

They shifted excitedly, closing in from all sides. As they ensconced me in fire-warmed flesh, I reveled in the feel of their skin against mine.

Tonight I wanted a night of hugs and kisses and intimate closeness. A night that began with hot tongues and roaming fingers...

... and ended with a pussy full of come from all three of them.

# Forty-Six

## CYRUS

*YES...*

Her hot mouth swirled over the head and down the shaft, bringing joy to every last inch of me as she gripped me by the base. I had two hands on the back of her beautiful head. One held her firmly but gently as she guided me down her throat again. The other sifted through her hair with open fingers, relishing in the cool, silken feel of her gorgeous brunette locks as they went slipping by.

*Oh FUCK yes.*

The whole time, Silvana bounced gently up and down on the bed. And that's because Hudson was buried all the way to the hilt inside her. Buried so deep in fact, that she couldn't help but whimper and moan around me as she rode him slowly, sensuously, in the reverse cowgirl position.

Nolan was there too, his hands and mouth working even more magic on her two swaying breasts. We'd quickly learned this was her favorite part; taking on all three of us. Feeling those six roaming hands against her incredibly soft skin. Being pleased while *giving* pleasure, as she so succinctly put it.

It was her favorite so far at least, because there were still so many things we hadn't tried. There were so many fantasies

still left unfulfilled, spoken in the heat of passion by four very twisted and exciting minds.

In the past we'd rushed through things, to accomplish certain positions and goals. We'd wanted to drink our fill of this woman. To take her every which way we possibly could, while tattooing each successive memory into our sex-addled brains.

In the past it had been a little bit edgy and frantic, because we never knew when this might end. We were getting close, and she wasn't ready for that. We were prepared to make her ours, even though it was something she'd told us could only be casual, only be temporary...

And sadly, never be real.

But now things were wholly different. Not only had she finally come around to the idea of something more concrete, she'd opened her arms and professed her love to us. She'd admitted to holding back, to keeping her feelings in check the same way we had.

Now though, she was finally our *girlfriend*. She was ours and we were hers and there was nothing to keep those feelings in check any longer. They came out in a flood and all at once, gushing forth in a display of heat and passion and love. We'd *never* kissed her like this! We'd never plundered her body so possessively or thoroughly, as the way we had for the past few beautiful, toe-curling hours...

"Fuck..."

Hudson's face contorted as he let go again, erupting inside her for the second or third time tonight. Silvana's body stiffened with excitement. Her blue-grey eyes rolled upward to capture mine, still half-lidded with her own arousal and contorted by raw, unchecked lust.

I pulled myself from her mouth and bent to kiss her, as my friend continued painting her insides with his warm, wet seed. The jealous feeling rose up again, creating a ball in my throat.

*Holy shit...*

Jealousy like this was supposed to be bad: the feeling of watching someone you love making love to someone *else*. But God, it turned me on so fucking much!

I loved watching her facial expressions as she experienced that pure, rapturous pleasure. I loved watching her lose the last of her inhibitions, as her hips rolled and her lips parted and the cute little noises of climax erupted from her tender throat.

“He’s coming in you...”

I whispered the words into her ear, while sliding my cheek against hers. Her flesh felt so hot. So feverish...

“How does it feel?” I murmured hotly. “To have all three of us *inside* you?”

She gulped. She gasped. Her eyes told the tale.

“All of us taking turns filling you up,” I said savagely, “again and again. Spreading your legs. Piercing you to the core and fucking you over and over, all night long...”

Her next breath was deep and shuddering, and I saw her eyes roll back into her head. Then she was coming hard, screwing herself down against Hudson’s deeply-embedded manhood. Practically crying with joy as her body let go in another epic, endorphin-fueled release, while I grabbed her by the cheeks and kissed her so hard and passionately she nearly passed out in my arms.

“You’re our *girl* now,” I whispered, holding her face in my hands. “Always.”

She kissed me back fervently, smiling and nodding. The intensity of the love in her eyes only added to the moment.

“Yes.”

When I couldn’t take it another minute I pulled her to her feet, then spun her around and bent her deep over the bed. Silvana was ass-up, face-down, her legs slightly spread. Her beautiful entrance was all glistening and swollen, filled to overflowing with a thick button of my best friend’s pearlescent seed...

... which was now threatening to roll down the insides of her luscious thighs.

*FUCK!*

All night long I couldn't help but want to be inside her. I was enjoying her warmth and her wetness so much, the other guys were constantly having to pull me away to get their own turns.

“MMMmmm...”

I sank into her again now, feeling that beautiful wet heat engulfing me from all sides. Silvana whimpered softly as I began fucking her, grabbing her hips and picking up speed. She flipped her shimmering hair over her naked back as we fell into our familiar rhythm, and I knew two things for absolute certain:

One, that I loved this woman like I'd never loved anyone else in my life.

And two... it would take a whole army of friends to pull me off her this time.

# Forty-Seven

## SILVANA

The next week was a hell of a lot of things, but it was far from lonely. And that's because one or more of the guys was always there, day or night, to make sure I was never alone.

It was sweet and awesome of course, but in other ways it wasn't. For one, I felt hopelessly guilty. Hudson and Nolan alternated spending days with me, and Cyrus was there every night. And although they downplayed the whole thing and told me everything was 'fine', I knew they were missing out on both work and workouts. And therefore paychecks, too.

On top of that, I myself had plenty of work to do. Normally this would be a great problem to have, except for the distraction of knowing one or more of my boyfriends were sitting downstairs, probably watching daytime television. It made it hard to get any kind of consistent work done. Especially if I went downstairs and one or more of us happened to have an itch we needed to scratch.

And scratching itches was something that happened often.

"Go," I ushered them just about every day. "Please. I'll be okay!"

Each time, they always shook their heads. “It’s too dangerous,” they’d tell me. “Not while these guys are still out there.”

I tried convincing them that whoever it was had gone. That they’d either found what they were looking for or realized it was never here in the first place. But then our eyes would inevitably fall on my laptop, and we all knew I was lying. Or at the very least, wishful thinking.

And though I’d scoured every ounce of data on the hard drive front to back, I still didn’t know what someone might be looking for, or especially why.

Back in town, the sheriff had run into a similar series of dead ends. There were no clues, no sightings, no fingerprint matches that might magically provide suspects. There were no suspicious new strangers staying at any of the local motels either, at least not from what he and Nolan could ascertain anyway.

So I stayed home, and tried to get some work done. Ronnie fixed my window for pennies on the dollar, and I focused on putting the rest of the place back to normal. If someone wanted something *else* I had in the house — outside the scope of my laptop — I really couldn’t imagine what it was.

It was one such afternoon when I was particularly stumped, and nothing I did seemed to work. My DNS spoofs weren’t spoofing. My SQL injection routines weren’t injecting. I looked at Liam and he looked back, and the two of us had the same thought at the same time:

“Wanna go outside, boy?”

The word ‘outside’, to a dog anyway, is like crack cocaine. His ears had no sooner perked up than he was jumping off my bed, wagging his tail.

“Let’s see if Nolan wants to go.”

By way of his doggie-door Liam could go outside any time he wanted to really, but he loved following people around. He’d developed a special kinship for Hudson in

particular, probably because Hudson talked to the dog *constantly*, every time he was over.

When I got downstairs however, Nolan already had his shoes on and his radio in hand. He was scrambling for his keys, too.

“Liam and I were about to—”

“The bank’s being broken into,” he said quickly. “Gotta run!”

“What?” I exclaimed. “What bank?”

“I’ll tell you later,” my lover said curtly. On the way through the kitchen he squeezed my shoulders, then gave me the quickest kiss of my life. “Sorry!”

We watched him go, practically leaping over the hood of his car like Bo Duke to get into the driver’s seat just *that* much faster. A moment later the deputy sheriff was gone in a cloud of exhaust and a shower of gravel and spinning tires.

“Huh,” I said to Liam, reaching down to scratch him. “Who’d be dumb enough to rob the bank in *this* town?”

We set off for the back of the house, and the overgrown trail that led down to the lake. The dock was old and decrepit and falling in on itself, but sitting at the edge with my feet dangling over the water always cleared my head a little.

Plus it was *my* dock. And that made it all the more special.



# Forty-Eight

## NOLAN

The windows were broken inward, shattered into thousands of glimmering shards by ugly chunks of cinder-block. One of the bank's employees was already sweeping it up. The branch manager came running over, frantically waving her arms to stop him.

"Don't you need to take photos first?" she cried out to us. "Isn't this a crime scene?"

The sheriff was still busy writing on his clipboard. Even I knew not to interrupt him until he was finished.

"Let's just give it a minute," I said. "We're not sure if this is an attempted robbery, or—"

"Should we close the doors?" the manager was asking. "We could leave the drive-through open, of course. But the inside should probably be off-limits. Don't you think?"

"Did anyone come in through the broken windows?" I asked.

"No."

"They just shattered them? For no reason?"

The branch manager looked at me like my head was screwed on backwards. "*Obviously* they had a reason," she

theorized.

“Not necessarily,” I shrugged. “Could’ve been kids. Could’ve been vandalism.”

“Except that the footage shows two large men committing the crime,” the sheriff finally spoke. “They ran to opposite ends of the building and broke both windows. Then they tried the front doors...”

“Which was tough shit on them,” one of the tellers — a tall girl with a name tag that read Kaitlyn — chuckled. “Breaking the windows triggered the alarm. And the second the alarms were triggered—”

“The doors electromagnetically locked,” I finished for her.

The footage was already playing in a loop not far away, behind the main desk area and just inside one of the offices. Even from here I could see the blurry figures leap out of the same white truck. They delivered their cement projectiles almost simultaneously, then ran around to the front of the bank.

“There’s no way they could get in with the doors locked,” the branch manager went on. “Until the alarm gets shut off, those doors only open from the inside.”

The incident had happened while both tellers were on lunch break. Which made zero sense, considering it would be difficult to get to the cash drawers without anyone at either of the service windows.

“What do you think they wanted?” I asked Dodson.

The sheriff grunted. “Difficult to tell.”

“This is a bank and they tried to break through the *doors*,” the branch manager interjected. “What do you *think* they wanted?”

“They barely even tried the doors,” the sheriff shot back, “almost like they knew they wouldn’t open. Then they took off.”

“Good thing for us.”

“Maybe,” said Dodson. “Unless they didn’t want you at all.”

The sheriff gave the manager a dirty look, then took a few steps in the direction of the back office. He dragged me with him by the elbow.

“What took you so long to get here, anyway?” he asked, lowering his voice.

I paused before answering. “I... wasn’t in town.”

“You were at the old Carter place,” the sheriff grunted. “That’s where you were.”

“So?”

“So nothing!” he growled. “I need you *close*, Nolan. After all, you’re the sheriff’s deputy. Even when you’re not on duty, I’d like to think that—”

“Look, after what happened at that house — twice, mind you — I can’t just let it go. If you’re not willing to post a permanent watch—”

“I can’t afford the manpower,” Dodson cut me off. “You know that.”

“Then you can’t begrudge me spending my off-duty time there.”

The sheriff’s mouth curled downward as he shifted from one hip to the other. “Look,” he said hesitantly. “I know you’re sweet on that girl...”

“Sheriff—”

“Don’t bother trying to deny it. And believe me I get it. She’s pretty and she’s new, but she’s also—”

“Trouble?”

“I was going to say flighty, but yeah, trouble too.” The sheriff paused to clear his throat. “Although that last part isn’t entirely her fault. From what I can gather, she seems to have her head screwed on straight. And believe me, it’s not that I don’t think...”

His voice trailed off in the back of my mind, and that's because I was suddenly distracted. My eyes had wandered back to the camera footage, where the two men kept jumping out of the truck, smashing the windows, then leaping back inside.

*Two men.*

The way they shouldered the doors was half-hearted, almost an afterthought. Like they weren't trying to get in. Like they were only trying to...

*Set off the alarm.*

A grim realization stole over me. My whole body stiffened.

"It's a distraction..."

Somehow the sheriff was still talking. He paused in the middle of his sentence. "A *what?*"

"It was a distraction!" I cried, prying my eyes away from the footage. "They weren't robbing the bank at all! They were —"

The sheriff still had my elbow, but I pulled away. His eyes narrowed.

"Nolan, what—"

"Shit! I have to go!"

"You're not going *anywhere*," Dodson swore. "Not until —"

I spun away, heedless of even more orders the old man was barking at me from behind. I sprinted through the lobby and toward the exit, practically shoving the bank manager aside on my way back to the car.

*I'm such an idiot!*

The cool air blasted me in the face as the doors flung open. Putting my head down, I raced through the tiny parking lot.

*I should've known...*



# Forty-Nine

## SILVANA

I felt the dock shift to one side before I even heard the creak of the ancient timbers. It broke me from my trance. Startled me to the real world from my lake-induced daydream, as I rose slowly to my feet.

“Hey,” I said casually. “You’re back earl—”

The rest of the sentence died in my throat. And that’s because two strangers stood at the foot of the dock, cutting off any chance of escape on my part.

“Oh. It’s just you two assholes.”

The man on the left snarled like a wolf, with his shoulders going up as well. He was bald and red-cheeked, his face and chin covered with some kind of scraggly-looking, salt-and-pepper beard. But it was the man on the right — the one who hadn’t even reacted at all — that scared me even more.

“About fucking time you showed your faces,” I said, summoning more courage than I actually felt. “Don’t you think?”

The bald one’s eyes shifted to his buddy for a moment, then back to me. So he wasn’t the leader, then. Not by a longshot.

“Let’s get this over with,” I spat. Making my stance as defiant as possible, I crossed my arms. “What the hell do you want from me?”

The man on the right took a step forward. He was shorter and stouter, his long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. But it was his eyes that scared me the most. They were strange and frightening, with tiny pupils that looked almost like pinpricks against big, sky-blue irises.

He had my laptop tucked beneath one arm. The one I’d brought with me on Halloween night.

“That’s it, huh?” I laughed. “That’s all you wanted? Shit, you should’ve just asked. I’ve been meaning to get a new one anyway.”

Both men took another step forward. They didn’t seem the least bit amused.

“Where is it?” the shorter one snarled.

I scanned the shoreline, stalling for time. Unfortunately there was no sign of Nolan. Liam was less of a long-shot, but there was no sign of him either. My dog had wandered off quickly, having grown tired of watching me watch the lake.

“Don’t make us ask you again,” the other man spoke. His voice was low and gravelly, like he’d been breathing coal dust his entire life. “Give it over.”

As the distance between us grew shorter, my confidence was waning. I couldn’t let them know that, though.

“Why don’t you tell me what you—”

“The *files!*” the first man barked angrily. “We know you’ve got a portable drive or a USB thumb or—”

My body shivered with the sudden revelation. So *that’s* it! They wanted the files on my key-fob ring!

I shifted back a half-step, giving up all the room I had. The ring of thumb-drives and authentication fobs was on me right now. I’d slipped it into my pocket early without even thinking, after loading some of the files Edgar had sent me.

*Were they after Edgar?*

No, I realized. They couldn't be after his files. These assholes had been stalking the house for a while now, way before Edgar sent the flash drive over.

"We tried doing it the nice way," the shorter man stated flatly. "We tried waiting until you weren't there. But you're *always* there!" He jerked a thumb back angrily toward the house. "You never leave!"

"That's because I *can't* leave." Bending slowly so they didn't think I was going for a weapon, I rolled my jeans up over my ankle monitor. "See?"

The bald stranger's eyebrows knit together for a moment, not really registering what he was seeing. But the smaller guy knew. I could see it in his beady blue eyes.

"What'd you do?" he asked offhandedly.

"Killed some trespassers."

He scoffed. "What'd you *really* do?"

"Does it matter?"

The man looked over my shoulder and sighed. He looked tired. "No. Not at all."

"Good, then let's cut through the bullshit," I told him. "You've got all three of my machines now. Whatever files you're looking for are bound to be on them."

"They're not," the scruffy-looking intruder snapped. "We checked."

I pursed my lips. Whatever they wanted, it had to be specific. Especially if they'd already scanned my machine.

"What files are you looking for?" I asked, still stalling. "Maybe I could help."

"The ones that are probably in your pocket."

I risked a glance downward, to where the distinct outline of the key-fob ring rose up in sharp relief against the front pocket of my jeans.



*Fuck.* Why did I have to wear such tight jeans?

*Because the boys like it, that's why.*

Oh yeah. Right.

*You like it too, by the way.*

I shook myself back to the present, where the two men had stepped even closer. The dock was groaning and creaking beneath their weight. Things were about to get real.

“So what happened to your friend?” I asked, realizing neither of these men were the one the sheriff and I had chased from the motel.

“Friend?”

“The guy who shattered his leg trying to climb through my second floor window,” I answered. “Weird, right? I have first floor windows, you know.”

“Yeah,” the shorter guy answered. “He wasn’t the brightest bulb in the bunch.”

“No, definitely not.”

“Last chance to give up what’s in your pocket,” he shot back quickly. “Or else we take it.”

“Pockets and all,” the other man added.

They had me trapped, dead to rights. They could charge me right now and take what they wanted, and I’d be virtually powerless to stop them.

But for some reason they hadn’t.

*Oh.*

I pulled the ring from my pocket. A dozen tiny plastic fobs jiggled beside a handful of various-sized thumb drives. I supposed I could just give it to them. Maybe they’d even walk away.

*Yeah...*

*FUCK that.*

“Take another step closer and I toss this in the lake,” I told them coldly. “And trust me. I can throw pretty far.”

Both men halted immediately in their advance. The dock rocked gently backward at their sudden stop.

“The water ruins these things pretty instantly,” I added, matter-of-factly. “Within seconds.”

That part was bullshit of course. The truth was, I had no idea whether I was right or wrong. I extended the arm that held the ring over the water anyway.

“Oh yeah?” the taller man challenged. “You really think so?”

My heart skipped a beat as their feet began moving again. A half-second later they were running down either side of the broken dock, sprinting full-tilt in my direction. The leader’s beady blue eyes were full of contempt as he sneered angrily.

“Let’s find out.”

# Fifty

## SILVANA

It was one of those freakish moments where time froze, and everything happened at once.

The men were running directly at me, moving so fast I doubted they'd even be able to stop. For a moment I considered baiting them. Side-stepping at the very last second, and letting them go sailing off the end of the little pier and into the lake.

If there were just one of them hurtling at me, that idea might actually have worked. Unfortunately there were two.

*Shit.*

In a split-second decision I told my left hand to drop the key-fob ring. Then I dove right, headfirst, into the lake. Instantly I realized there were two problems with that plan. First, the water was absolutely fucking *freezing*. Nothing like Florida! And second...

The hand that was supposed to drop the fob-ring never actually obeyed.

I was left swimming through the icy, murky water, clutching something that might ultimately get me killed. I didn't know why they wanted it, or what was so important that someone was willing to follow me up the entire eastern

seaboard and stalk me for it. But whatever it was, I'd made the recklessly stubborn decision not to give it to them.

“Stop her!”

There are a few advantages to living in a place like Florida, and one of them of course is the ocean. I grew up on Miami beaches, swimming in Atlantic currents. These were the same currents that wrecked the 1715 treasure fleet. The churning, swirling waters that made up one corner of the Bermuda Triangle.

As a result, I could *swim*. I could swim fast and far, and the still waters of the currentless lake behind my great-grandfather's house, which was now actually *my* house, were little match for me.

*But damn, it's so COLD!*

I could feel my muscles constricting in the near-freezing water, threatening to cramp up on me as I made a beeline for shore. But if it was affecting me, it was affecting them too. I could hear the splashes of someone swimming behind me, and they didn't seem to be gaining. Even more concerning were the shouts of the guy with the beady blue eyes. In my peripheral vision I spied him running parallel to me along the shore, his greasy ponytail trailing behind him as he pumped his arms for every last ounce of speed.

*MOVE!*

My feet caught on something squishy that gave way beneath me, and the next thing I knew I was pulling myself from the water. My clothes were soaked. I felt fifty pounds heavier, and my legs were so cold they were on the verge of refusing my brain's commands.

I ran anyway.

“STOP!”

Somewhere behind me a voice rang out. It was further. More distant. Familiar...

*Nolan?*

Hope rushed through me, fighting off the icy wind that threatened to freeze me to the bone. I saw my lover come flying out of the woods, his legs moving so fast he could barely keep from falling.

“SILVANA!”

The man with the ponytail turned, backtracked, and flung himself at the deputy sheriff. He tackled him from the side, before he even knew he was there.

“Nooo!”

My own cry had stopped me, leaving me dripping on the slippery, leaf-strewn bank of the lake. I whirled in Nolan’s direction, willing my legs to carry me to him as fast as they possibly could.

I couldn’t move a step though.

Someone had me by the wrist.

“Give it to me!”

My bald, scraggly pursuer had finally dragged himself from the water. Teeth bared, huffing with exertion, he squeezed my wrist until I screamed.

“I’ll break your arm if you don’t—”

I bit him. It wasn’t something I planned or even thought about until the warm, coppery taste of blood filled my mouth...

“NNNNGHHH!”

The next thing I knew I was sprawled on the ground, holding my head. I had no feeling in the whole left side of my face. The ringing in my ear was so loud it drowned out just about everything else.

“You BITCH!”

The man standing over me was *beyond* pissed. Blood flowed from his ruined forearm, where a chunk of flesh hung obscenely down.

*Oh shit...*

When I looked up I saw murder in his eyes. Scrambling to my feet, I knew in an instant he no longer cared about the key-fob ring at all.

He reached out for me, and for one terrifying second my feet were frozen. Then something inside me broke free...

And I ran.

“You’re DEAD!”

There was no time to think, no time to plan. I flung myself headlong into the forest, sidestepping trees and saplings as my legs took me away as fast as my feet would carry me. I could only pray it would be enough.

“I’m going to KILL YOU!”

I could hear him crashing through the woods, heedless of sticks or thorns of low-hanging branches. His steps were heavy, his clothes still flinging water with every movement. And he was right behind me. Closing. Gaining...

*FUCK!*

I’d glimpsed Nolan briefly before fleeing; both he and the other man were grappling in the mud, rolling around on the shore of the lake. It made my heart hurt that I couldn’t help him! But I also knew if I gave up a single step of my headstart, I was totally done for.

I made myself as small as possible, darting through the heavier growth that I knew the taller man might have problems with. He stayed with me though. As the grunting behind me grew even louder, I began anticipating the feel of his hand on my shoulder. Or even worse, his fingers rolling themselves into my hair...

I was moving further and further from the house now, or so I thought. The way I was running it was hard to gauge any sense of direction, but eventually I’d break free of the perimeter. My ankle monitor would go off and the sheriff would come, and I’d never be happier to see his grumpy face.

The tips of two fingers brushed me for a moment, and in that split-second I screamed. It was loud and crazy. The

scream of someone being chased through the woods. The kind of scream—

*THHHHWAP!*

It was a distinctly foreign sound, but violent nonetheless. There was the low ring of metal, followed instantly by a loud, sickening crunch. I took another few strides, then suddenly realized I was in a small clearing surrounded by trails. I fell to my knees and rolled forward, spinning my body around...

My pursuer was laid out flat on his back, totally unconscious and bleeding from his face. Standing above him was the kid in the wool cap. Clenched tightly in his two outstretched hands, he held the blade end of a large spade shovel.

“Got him.”

His two BMX buddies were behind him, sitting on their bikes and looking incredulous. But not nearly as incredulous as me.

“Are you okay?”

My young rescuer offered me his hand. I reached out for it, and he helped me up. The others came over immediately, flanking me protectively on either side.

“Who the hell is this guy?”

I gulped air for a few long seconds, just grateful for the oxygen. Staring down at the unconscious form of my would-be pursuer, I put my hands on my knees and shrugged.

“No one important.”

# Fifty-One

## SILVANA

“So that’s it? They were looking for a *database*?”

Edgar’s voice, as always, was reassuring. I could hear the eternal clacking of his keyboard in the background, and that was reassuring too.

“Not just any database, but a specific one I worked on last year,” I said. “I didn’t get all the details, but it was something financial. Something that could implicate some very high level people, and it seems I was holding the last copy.”

“No other details, huh?” my foster father chuckled.

“I didn’t want them. It’s better that way, you know?”

“Usually is,” Edgar agreed. “The older I get, the less I *want* to know about things.” He laughed his deep, velvety laugh. “You’ll learn that lesson one day, too. At a certain point in your life, ignorance is what keeps you happy.”

I could picture him nested perfectly in his home office, surrounded by basketball trophies from his glory days. God, I really missed him. Hell, even Janice too.

“You really should come visit one of these days,” Edgar offered, reading my mind. “I’ve got some cool new stuff to



show you.”

“Computer stuff?”

“Some, yeah. But also other stuff too.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “You got some new guns, didn’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“You’ve only got two trigger fingers, you know.”

“Yeah well guns jam sometimes,” he pointed out, “and you can never be too well-protected.”

Protection wouldn’t be a problem for me, now that the two assholes who’d come after me were arrested and singing. Nolan had beaten the dangerous-looking one to a bloody pulp, right on the shore of the lake. And the guy who’d been smashed in the face with the shovel was in even worse shape.

“Did you dig that fallout shelter you’ve always been talking about yet?” I asked Edgar.

“Nah,” he sniffed. “Waiting on you.”

“Yeah right,” I shot back. “I’ve got enough projects here to last a lifetime.”

“Welcome to home ownership.”

The door opened somewhere behind me, and the fireplace flickered. A few seconds later a pair of strong, masculine hands slid over my shoulders. They began rubbing and massaging as I sat in the computer chair.

“Maybe you should come up here,” I told my foster father over the phone’s speaker. “There’s someone you should probably meet.”

A pair of lips kissed my neck, sending electric shivers rocketing down my body.

“You *met* someone?” Edgar asked dubiously.

“*Someones...*” the lips at my neck whispered directly into my ear.

“What was that?”

“Sorry, nothing,” I jumped in quickly. “But yeah, maybe I did meet someone. Why, would that be so hard to believe?”

“For you, yes,” Edgar laughed.

“Fuck off,” I shot back playfully. “Maybe I met *two* someones. You never know. Or maybe I met three.”

I was playing with fire, of course. With the exception of the guys, Edgar probably knew me better than anyone else on the planet. Dangling the truth in his face disguised as a lie would be something he might easily pick up on.

“I’ve got some vacation coming to me after the holidays,” Edgar eventually answered. “If you’re serious, I’ll see what Janice and I could swing.”

“I *am* serious,” I declared. “And you do that.”

“I’m not doing sixteen different house projects when I get there,” he warned. “Telling you that right now.”

“Twelve then?”

“Two,” he grunted. “Three tops.”

“I’ll settle for eight,” I smirked back. “Final offer.”

By now my shoulders were getting so expertly massaged it was almost impossible not to moan. I sat there with my eyes half-closed, all but drunk on the feel of strong hands rubbing a magical warmth into my tired muscles.

“We’ll figure that part out if I get there,” said Edgar.

“*When* you get here,” I corrected him.

“Fine, then. When.”

It was about as much of a commitment as I’d get from my former foster father. But it filled me with pride just *thinking* of showing this place to him.

“Silvana?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re safe.”

His voice was so genuine it choked me up. I was almost teary-eyed.

“Thanks, dad.”

The word wasn't normally in my vocabulary, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd called him that. It was always when things felt the most special. Like now.

“And I'm glad you met someone too,” he answered. He cleared his throat. “Or someones.”

I couldn't tell if he were playing along with me or maybe digging for a kernel of truth. Either way, he wasn't getting much.

“Goodbye Edgar,” I said before hanging up. “Talk soon.”

“Roger that.”

I sighed happily as the call ended and my phone screen went dark. Then I turned and saw Hudson... but also Nolan, and Cyrus too. The three men stood staggered in my bedroom, looking exceptionally gorgeous in tight, sleeveless T-shirts. Their arms were *pumped*. Their shoulders as well.

“Just worked out, huh?”

“Could be,” Cyrus flexed.

They'd converted the sitting room into a home gym earlier in the week, complete with workout bench, barbell rack, and a full set of heavy iron plates. Although the danger from the unknown intruders had passed, the guys were no less eager to stay at the house with me. Day by day, room by room, we'd taken the place back from the brink of ruin and turned it into a living, breathing home again.

Right now the muted glow of the firelight cast strategic shadows that accentuated every ridge and muscle of their hulking bodies. It was their eyes though, that held me captive. Each man had a familiar expression I'd seen before. It was a hungry, even ravenous look that always made my stomach explode with butterflies.

“We're not exactly done working out yet,” said Nolan. Still looking me straight in the eye, he stretched two long,

powerful arms overhead.

“No?”

“No,” Hudson agreed. “We’ve still got... muscle groups that need to be pumped.”

Even beneath his T-shirt, Hudson’s stomach was an explosion of ridged, rippled abdominals that made me instantly wet. My mind called up images of laying on that stomach. Of tracing the lines of that six-pack, or eight-pack, or however many there were with the fingertips of one hand. All while slowly stroking him up and down with the other.

*My God.*

The image overwhelmed me, flooding me with heat. I suddenly very much wanted to do that again.

“So am I involved in this workout as well?” I asked.

They took a step closer. My pulse quickened.

“Oh yeah.”

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I hooked one finger into the corner of my mouth in mock innocence. “And you boys will show me what to do?”

Hudson’s hand slid past my hip and over my ass. His palm was large enough to practically cup the whole thing in one hand.

“We could give you some pointers, yeah.”

He leaned in to kiss my neck again, and I melted into his arms. Nolan and Cyrus came up on either side of me and I surrendered happily. Their hands and mouths on my body completed our familiar little circle.

“You’ll need to have proper *form*, of course,” Nolan whispered into my ear. In conjunction with his sexy, husky voice, a hand slid up the outside of my thigh.

“It’s not going to be an easy workout either,” hinted Cyrus. “You’ll need to keep up with us.”

“I— I can keep up.”

He shook his head slowly, as if disagreeing. “I hope so,” he countered. “Because tonight we’re going to *really* put you through the paces.”

His hot breath in my other ear sent waves of chills straight through me. Another hand slid up my other thigh. But on the *inside* this time.

*Fuck yes.*

The butterflies in my stomach were fluttering wildly. I was so turned on I was almost nauseous.

“What do you think?” asked Hudson. “We take you down to the weight room? Right in front of the mirrors?”

I envisioned being bent over the weight bench, staring at myself as they took me one by one from behind. It would be so hot, watching them switch off on me. Seeing their faces for once as they took turns tagging me from behind.

“Could you work me out right here, instead?” I purred. Extending an arm, I pointed to my bed and its fire-kissed blankets. “It’s so warm in here. So soft and cozy and perfect...”

One by one I kissed them deeply, starting with Nolan and moving on to Cyrus. By the time I hooked Hudson’s head and brought my lips to his they’d already stripped off my shorts and shirt.

“We could... do the weight room... another time...”

I murmured the words between kisses, losing all track of what we were even talking about. Four arms lifted me onto the bed. Another two rolled my thong all the way down, past my feet and into Cyrus’s strong, meaty hand.

“I could even write a raincheck if you—”

I never finished my sentence, as a *very* damp pair of panties was stuffed into my mouth. It turned me on *way* more than I ever thought it could.

*Holy SHIT...*

Cyrus smiled as he placed a big finger against my lips to shush me. Then he kissed me on the forehead, as two hot mouths closed over my breasts from either side.

“Remember,” he whispered into my ear. “The *real* workout starts when you want to stop...”

# Epilogue

## SILVANA

“Now hold perfectly still. If you move around, this might hurt.”

I tried not to tense up, but the anticipation was killing me. I’d waited for this moment for a long time. My whole body was vibrating...

“Ready?”

I winced and clenched my teeth together. “Just do it.”

There was a sharp pinch as everything went tight, followed by a flash of pain. Then, with a magical ‘pop’, all the tension was released at once...

... and the ankle monitor dropped to the floor.

“There, Ms. Carter,” the sheriff barked in satisfaction. “You’re free.”

“About damn time.”

He smiled and slipped the removal tool back into his belt. Everyone around me let out a small cheer, as Cyrus picked up the discarded anklet and handed it to him.

*Holy shit.*

I glanced down at my two ankles, which for the first time in what seemed like forever finally looked the same. The idea

of being free still didn't seem real. Nor did the implications that went with it.

"How's it look?" asked Hudson, nodding downward.

"Naked," I said. "Weird."

"It's going to be even weirder when you go wherever you want and do whatever you want," said Nolan. "We can take you places. Far away, out of town..."

The sheriff shot him a quick look and Nolan put his hands up.

"Not *too* far," he relented. "But I do have some vacation still, so—"

"Ms. Carter, feel free to get as far away from this town as your little heart desires," the sheriff said.

"Why sheriff," I cooed. "You trying to get rid of me?"

His expression finally broke into a smirk. One that was almost a smile.

I put on my best mock-wounded look. "I thought we were friends."

"Hmmm," the man pondered. "We'll have to see how much trouble you stay out of now that you can wander around." He shook his head. "Let's not forget all the trouble you've been when you couldn't even leave your own property!"

"I'm pretty sure the trouble wasn't of my own doing," I explained needlessly.

"Still..."

The sheriff's smile faded, but he winked at me before turning away. Or at least I thought he did. I'd suspected for a while he was all bark and no bite. That beneath his tough-guy, all-business, lawman exterior, the man was probably the biggest sweetheart.

He'd never let me know that, though. And that was more than fine by me.



“If you wanted to take her away for the weekend,” sheriff Dodson grumbled to Nolan, “you know, to celebrate? I guess I could get your patrols covered.”

“Well that’s mighty nice of you sheriff,” I chuckled.

“Just be ready Monday for...” he paused awkwardly, glancing at the others. “Well, you know.”

Nolan nodded appreciatively. I knew as well. Just a few days prior, the sheriff had announced something important that’d been a long time in coming: he was finally retiring.

And with Nolan next in line for sheriff, he’d spend his remaining time grooming him for the job.

It wasn’t happening for another year of course, or thereabouts. But Nolan would be stepping into some mighty big shoes. His responsibilities would keep him tied to the town he’d grown up in, though. The same town I’d moved to on a whim, without any clue as to what I was getting myself into.

And that was just fine with me also.

For the past several months I’d spent a bitterly cold winter in some *very* hot ways, surrounded by a trio of warrior-like boyfriends who treated me as their queen. Stuck on my throne, I’d been worshiped and attended to. Treated to all kinds of amazing things by these three men I’d grown to love, and who’d gone out of their way to make me a welcome part of their lives.

Somehow, even without leaving the house it never got boring. We cooked, we renovated, we opened up the rest of the house. Room by room we turned the old place into something entirely ours, working tirelessly on creating a space that was warm, cozy, and beautiful, no matter which room we might be in.

And believe me, we were everywhere. Christening *every* single room. Each night I wasn’t curled up on the couch watching movies and trading massages I was being led into a different part of the house and taken in ways I could never even have fantasized about, because they were so incredible, so crazy, they required a relationship like ours to fulfill them.

I couldn't count the number of times we'd role-played, or which of the molten hot scenarios were my favorite. No matter how they began or how much exquisite build-up they required, they always ended the same: with me, sandwiched happily between them. Spreading my legs and curling my fingers into some hot, pistoning ass... while getting so thoroughly, wonderfully fucked from every direction that the days and nights seemed to blend right into one another.

"We'll be back before Monday," Nolan smiled, sliding an arm around me. "Whatever we decide to do."

The sheriff eyed his deputy sideways again, the way he had several times before when Nolan was flanked by Cyrus and Hudson. Maybe the old man knew. Maybe he didn't. Knowing him it wouldn't be that far-fetched to say he figured it out: that Nolan wasn't my *only* boyfriend, and that while his friends were both screwing the hell out of his girl, he not only knew about it but enthusiastically gave his blessing.

When he wasn't joining in, of course.

"Thanks sheriff," I smiled, as the man stomped through the doorway. "Maybe I'll stop by sometime. We'll have lunch."

"You do that, Ms. Carter. And maybe I'll—"

"Silvana."

He blinked for a moment, then nodded appreciatively. "Alright. *Silvana*."

"There you go."

A minute later I was smiling from the porch, waving as the old man took off down my driveway. He'd only barely disappeared from view, when two different arms slid around me.

"What now?" asked Cyrus.

"Now... you boys take me someplace far, far away from here," I chuckled. "Or at least distant enough that I can't even remember this place."

They looked at each other for a moment. “Is the town that bad?” ventured Nolan.

“No,” I admitted. “It’s actually quite charming. And having a snow-filled winter was fun, even if we couldn’t run off sledding or skiing or taking part in any of the other cool things about a snow-filled winter.”

I inhaled the fragrant late spring air. Summer was coming. It promised all new freedoms, all new life.

“So let me tell you what comes next,” I went on. “First, I want you boys to put those trail cams back up and start up your ghost tours again. I know you shut everything down since I moved in, and you’ve been turning business away.”

“But what about—”

“We can work the scheduling part out,” I said. “Any night you need the house can be a night I spend at one of your places, right?”

Cyrus smiled. Nolan too. “That works.”

“I’m actually looking very forward to staying somewhere other than here,” I said. “And as much as I love this place, I don’t mind sharing it. Once we get the dock fixed up we could start renting it like an Airbnb. Not just to your ghost-hunting buddies, but to anyone else who wants a lakehouse, too.”

“You’d hardly sleep here then,” said Hudson. “You have no clue how much we could get for overnights in this house.”

“Good,” I nodded. “As far as I’m concerned we could rent it out *every* night.” I took a long, nervous breath. “And then use the money to build a new place together.”

My gaze flitted between all three of them, gauging their reactions. All three of them wore expressions of excitement mixed with incredulity.

“You mean that?” asked Cyrus.

“More than anything,” I affirmed. “As much as I admire my great-grandfather’s legacy, I’d rather create my own. I was

thinking we could design a place for the four of us. We could even build some of it with our two hands—”

“Eight hands,” Hudson interjected.

I beamed back at him. “That’s what I’m saying. This house will always be special to me but it’s not mine, except on paper. Ever more, it’s not *ours*.” I looked at each of them in turn. “You guys wanted to do this, right? You wanted to go all in?”

“Of course!” Nolan smiled.

“Well there’s nothing more all in than building a place together.”

They held me in their circle now, surrounding me with love. I could feel their excitement building. Only Cyrus remained somewhat skeptical.

“And you’re sure you want to do this *here*?” he asked. “And not somewhere...”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m a small-town girl now,” I declared. “Maybe you’ve converted me.”

He eyed me skeptically. “Maybe.”

“Besides, I don’t want to live in town anyway,” I said. “Let’s get ourselves a big plot of land outside of town, like this one. Then we create our own place from scratch.”

He tilted his head. “So no more Miami?”

“We can always visit there if you want,” I grinned. “But I’ve done Miami already, and there are a lot of *other* places I’d rather see. Big, beautiful cities, some of them even across the ocean.”

Cyrus seemed almost satisfied. To seal the deal, I slid my arms over his shoulders and kissed him.

“Having a place that was ours? One that we built together?” I let out a wistful sigh. “Well, then we could *always*

come home.”

He began kissing me back, and we all knew where that led. Soon I was being passed around in a kissing circle, which was my favorite fucking place in the entire universe.

“I can’t wait to go places with you,” Hudson breathed. “Anywhere and everywhere.”

Nolan nodded eagerly. “And we’re going to show you off every place we go.”

“Oh yeah?” I teased. “Talk is cheap.”

Cyrus’s hands found my hips. As he enveloped me from behind, I could feel everything about his hard body pressing into mine.

And I do mean *everything*.

“Speaking of talk,” he murmured, “maybe we should get inside and figure out where we’re taking you tonight.”

I melted into him, feeling his presence. Letting him know he could take me anywhere, as long as his hands remained on my body.

“Three boyfriends,” I sighed happily. “That means you’ll need to take me to three times as many places, of course.”

Hudson pressed into me from the other side. “Of course.”

“And shower me with three times the love, three times the attention.”

Nolan stepped in, his hot mouth dropping slowly to my neck. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Three times *this* too,” I purred, grabbing him firmly between the legs. Nolan’s crotch felt like a hot knot slowly untying itself in my open palm. “Know what I mean?”

Rather than answer he kissed all new goosebumps along my skin. “We know what you mean,” Cyrus growled. “But know what else?”

“What?”

His hands slid between my legs, squeezing gently along the insides of my thighs. Which were on fire now, by the way.

“That street goes both ways,” said Cyrus.

“Three ways actually,” Hudson chimed in. “As long as we’re counting.”

I thought about their hands, their mouths, their bodies pressing against me. Stretching me out on some strange new bed. Stripping me down and pushing my legs apart...

“Yeah,” I sighed as I was picked up and carried inside. My face came to rest against a warm, thick chest. “I’m pretty sure I can live with that.”



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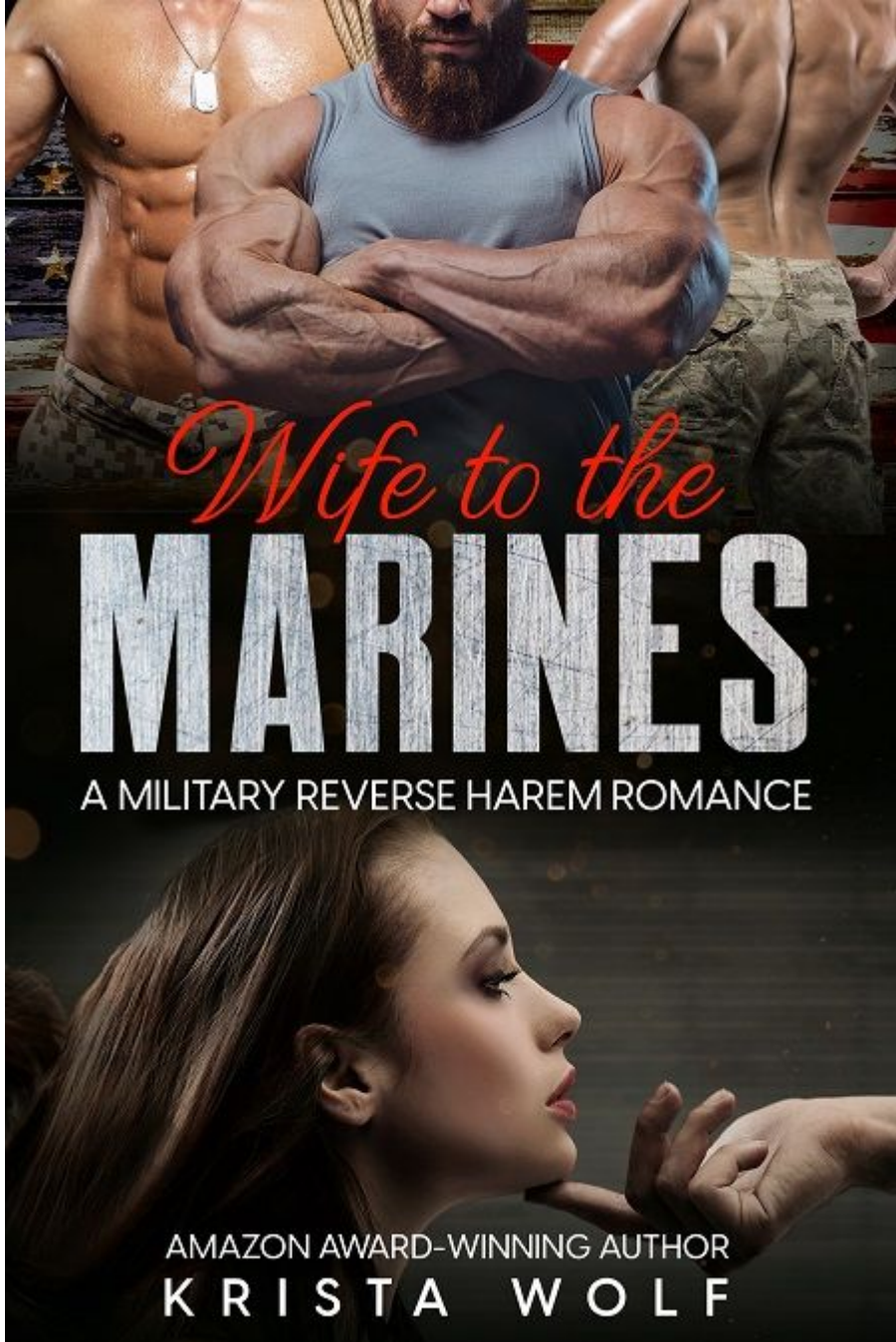
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Thanks for checking out *The Switching Hour*. Here's hoping it rocked your socks off!

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*Wife to the*

# MARINES

A MILITARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

AMAZON AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
KRISTA WOLF



# Chapter One

## SKYLAR

I picked up the pace by lengthening my stride and pumping my arms. My feet barely touched the smooth, rounded pavement before I was lifting them again, propelling myself forward and around the next curve.

*Six-Twelve!*

I couldn't believe it! I'd slept past six o'clock for the first time in *ages!* Almost even to six-fifteen.

It was totally unheard of. Wholly unlike me. Especially since—

*C'mon, focus!* I scolded myself angrily. *You can make up some time here.*

Pumping harder, I pushed past the halfway point and slipped to the other side of the path. At this hour, the trees threw more than enough shade to cool me off. Staying out of the hot morning sun would only improve my time.

*It was your birthday,* the other voice in my head argued. *There's nothing wrong with taking some time out for yourself.*

That much was true, I guessed. Only I *had* taken time for myself. I'd spent all of last night partying with my friends, who took me out to celebrate the rather random occasion of twenty-six years of existence on this planet.

I'd had fun last night, that was for sure. Dinner, dancing — it just felt damn good to unwind. I always packed so much into every single day, it sometimes felt like my life was one big pressure-cooker. If I didn't blow off a little steam here and there I would eventually explode.

*Yes, but six-twelve, Skylar?*

Alright fine, it was almost two hours after I usually woke up. Which meant I'd have to cancel something, or be late to something, or maybe even both. And I hated missing deadlines with a passion.

My legs were a blur beneath me, as they attempted to make up some time of their own. Town Point Park was exceptionally beautiful this time of year. With the hint of a cool breeze rolling off the Elizabeth River, I almost wasn't even breaking a sweat.

I finished my morning run ahead of schedule, and saved elevator time by jogging my way up the six flights of stairs. Once in my apartment I peeled my clothes off on the way to the bathroom, dropping my shorts and tank-top into the hamper before finally stepping beneath the cool blue lights of my programmable rain shower.

*YES...*

The water was cold at first, but I didn't mind. I let it wash the sweat away as I soaped and shampooed and lathered myself into a big sudsy mess. By the time I'd rinsed it all away, the digital display read 111 degrees Fahrenheit. Normally I'd turn my face to the lights and enjoy letting the heat soak into my body for a few wonderful minutes, but definitely not today.

No, today I had a client at eight, another at nine, and a Zoom call with a potential publisher at precisely ten-thirty. I had three hours of work time slated for the early afternoon,

half of which would be research and note-taking, while the other half would be actual writing.

Beyond that I'd bike down to the fitness center and teach the Saturday afternoon water aerobics class that entitled me to my free membership. I'd swim laps in the Olympic-sized pool until I'd satisfied today's quota, then shoot home to start running errands.

All things considered, a pretty light day for a Saturday.

It took only a minute to shake my hair out, tie it back in a ponytail, and dress for the gym. Keys in hand, I was sliding into my computer chair to check my email when my phone went off.

*Shit.*

My nine o'clock appointment just canceled.

I sighed, scowling at how carelessly some people blew off their obligations last minute. I mean sure, sometimes things came up. But a little notice would've been—

My thought process stopped dead in its tracks. And that's because my email inbox was full.

“What the...”

Well not *literally* full. But full of enough new messages that they scrolled off the screen. The darker font marked them as unread, but each one was unique and with a different subject line:

Hey baby! It's me!

Congratulations — Today's your lucky day

Are you for real? 'Cause I sure am.

Nice profile! Color me intrigued...

My brow furrowed as I continued scrolling through. All the messages came from the same sender, a popular dating website I'd seen advertised a million times before.

*Oh SHIT.*

Quickly I clicked on my browsing history, and there it was: two dozen links from the same dating site's url. I'd apparently created a membership sometime last night. Hell, I even had a profile...

*Alyssa! Josie! Maria!*

My lips curled back in a controlled snarl. I could see my friends laughing and clinking their wine glasses together, drunkenly signing me up for this bullshit while I slept soundly in the next room. They'd invited themselves back for a drink last night, and for once I hadn't said no. My only caveat was they needed to keep the music down after I went to bed, and they needed to clean up after themselves before they left.

As far as I knew they'd kept at least one of those promises, because I'd woken up to a clean house. But this...

This was taking things a little too far.

"Assholes," I sighed aloud, shaking my head. The girls had been trying to coax me into joining a dating site for months now, and I'd always laughed them off. Reaching out, I shift-clicked and deleted the first full page of responses without reading them. The next few responses floated to the top of the screen:

You sound totally insatiable! I like that.

Message me message me message me  
message me

You + me + ? = fun

You're sooooo beautiful! Hit me back

The latest response made my blood boil. *Beautiful?* How would anyone know what I even looked like, unless...

Punching a few quick keys, I pulled up the website and found I was already logged in. My message center was bright red, with a blinking flag icon and 87 new messages. But it wasn't my message center I was interested in.

Instead, I clicked on my profile...

And both hands moved instantly over my mouth.

# Two

## SKYLAR

It wasn't the photo that bothered me. Actually, the photo they'd chosen was a pretty good one. It was what my friends had written on the bio *below* my photo that made me gasp out loud:

### SUPERGIRL SEEKS MULTIPLE BOYFRIENDS TO SATISFY INSANELY BUSY LIFESTYLE

Are you hot, smart, sweet *and* athletic? Cool and confident, with a voracious sexual appetite and a drive to accomplish all of life's most beautiful goals?

Even better, do you have a couple of *friends* just like you? Great! Go get them!

I'm too physically fit for any one guy, too busy for any one schedule, too smart for any one mind, and too accomplished for any single guy to handle.

So why waste my time and yours? Unless there are *three* of you, I'm really not interested. And every last one of you had better measure up!

Sorry for the brutal honesty, but hey, I'm looking to make this work. So if you've gotten this far and there's *any* doubt in your mind right now? You're already disqualified for a total lack of confidence.

Serious offers only!

~ Love, Skylar ~

*Holy fucking shit!*

They used my photograph *and* my name? These girls had balls! And yet I could totally see them doing it, too. Josie was probably giggling her ass off, as Alyssa and Maria thought most of this shit up. And poor me, snoring away blissfully in the next room. Totally oblivious to the fun they were having at my expense.

And there were other profile pics too. I scrolled through all five of them, each one depicting me in various physical activities such as climbing, skiing, and surfing. In the last photo I was stretching some yoga pose on the beach, reaching back behind me to hold one leg high over my head.

“You guys are in for it,” I swore, pressing the keys that would delete the next page of messages. “I don't know how I'm going to return the favor yet, but I'll get you back for—”

*BZZZZT!*

My phone buzzed again, and this time it was my *other* client. She wouldn't be able to make it down by eight o'clock, and would I be interested in working her out at eleven o'clock instead?

*No... I thought to myself angrily. No I wouldn't.*

I texted her back, telling her I was busy later and that we'd reschedule for sometime next week. Being a physical trainer at four different gyms was great when it came to the

flexibility of making my own schedule. But then it also sucked sometimes, for reasons exactly like this.

I took a moment to calm down, now that my morning wasn't nearly as packed as it was a few minutes ago. Page by page I deleted the responses to 'my' singles ad. When I was finished I'd delete the profile and that would be that.

Towards the end though, I saw one response that made me take pause:

You can delete all other messages, Skylar. We're the *\*only\** ones who can keep up with you.

*Yeah, right, I laughed. Nice try.*

My finger still hovered over the delete button. Whoever this was had obviously pulled it from the profile itself, but I had to admit the use of my name was a clever distraction.

Again I went to delete it. Again I took pause. Finally I deleted everything else — just as I'd been instructed — until this message was the only one left.

*Screw it.*

I double clicked, then sat back as my browser took me to the sender's profile. A series of hot, hard-bodied photos splashed across the top of my screen. Men so ridiculously cut and muscular they almost looked like bodybuilders, yet from the lean, trim way those muscles rested naturally on their frames, I knew they were not.

There were no faces in the photos, only bodies from the neck down. Broad, beautiful shoulders tapered to wide chests and sculpted pectorals. The big arms that sprouted from either side were strong and striated and very powerful.

“Yeah...” I laughed. “Okay.”



My eyes hung there for a little bit, enjoying themselves exactly where they were. Eventually I forced them downward, to read a profile very similar in scope to mine:

THREE (3) US MARINES  
SEEKING ONE WIFE  
TO SATISFY INSANELY BUSY  
LIFESTYLE

Are you beautiful, intelligent, kind *and* open-minded? Boldly successful and self-reliant, with an insatiable sexual appetite and boundless energy?

Even better, do you find yourself bored dating only one guy? Great! We've got the perfect solution!

We're too physically fit for the average girl, too busy for an average relationship, too smart to think inside the box, and bold enough to ask for *exactly* what we want.

So why waste any more of our time? We happen to be just what you're looking for, and you're precisely what we need. As far as we're concerned we should already be together, all four of us. Kicking ass and taking names.

Unless your ad wasn't serious, of course. Or unless you're just talking shit.

There, all the cards are out on the table now.

The ball's in your court, Skylar.

~ USMC(x3) ~

*Ummm... wow.*

I scanned the photos again, then read the ad two more times. It was funny. Ridiculous. Maybe even mocking.

*Fuck this.*

Back in my email inbox, I pressed delete and the message went away. I was staring at some other, more boring message in its place. Something about seasonal hourly changes at one of the training facilities I used.

*Were they really mocking me?*

Somehow, without realizing why, one of my fingers moved to the CTRL button. I held it down and pressed 'Z'... and the message hopped back into my inbox.

A few moments later, my phone was in my hand. I punched up Josie's contact from my call list and listened as it rang three times on her end.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I jumped in. "You lunatics still having breakfast at that place four blocks from my apartment?"

On the other end of the phone my friend paused. "It's more like six blocks from your place, but yeah," she replied. "We just sat down, actually. They haven't even handed us menus yet."

"Good," I said, snatching my running shoes up again. "I'll be there in five."

# Three

## SKYLAR

Although my birthday breakfast was planned months ago, I'd canceled only last week. It turned out the girls were having it anyway, somewhat defiantly, after our night on the town. They needed it to nurse their hangovers, but mostly to gossip about last night's events.

"I thought you had clients this morning?" asked Naomi, as I slid into the seat beside her.

"I did."

My shyest, most reserved friend blinked her pretty green eyes. "You worked them out *already*?"

"Nah. They canceled."

"Oh."

"Everyone's unreliable these days," I explained, scanning one of the diner's laminated menus. "Everyone's a thoughtless, self-centered asshole who thinks the whole world revol—"

"Skylar?" Josie chuckled.

"Yeah?"

"Ease the throttle back a little."

My best friend sipped at her coffee, smiling at me from the other side of the oversized booth. Josie's blonde hair was still wet from the shower. Last night I'd watched as she danced it into a big tangle, flailing across the dance floor with a handful of willing — and even unwilling — partners.

“So I'm too throttled up, huh?” I asked. “Is that it?”

“Seems that way, yeah.”

The waiter finally came and poured me my own coffee, which probably saved a few lives. One by one we ordered breakfast. As usual, Renee took three times as long as anyone else. After her second attempt at getting the short stack pancakes appended to her order at the kids' meal prices, I took the menu from her hand and bonked her over the head with it.

“You didn't need all those carbs anyway.”

She frowned, I laughed, and the conversation moved on. Naomi asked about the parts of the night she'd missed out on after going home early. Renee, who'd bailed after the club, wanted to know how late the party had continued back at my apartment.

“A couple of hours I guess,” Alyssa shrugged, glancing at Naomi. “We had another round of cocktails and bullshitted for a while. Skylar went to bed almost immediately, so...”

“Skylar had work the next day,” I said, addressing myself in the third person.

“We still had fun though,” Maria agreed, lowering her head slightly. I watched as the dusky-skinned Arizona transplant shot Josie a sideways glance. “Lots of fun.”

“If you mean lots of fun at my expense,” I sneered, “then sure. I agree.”

One by one the girls grew quiet, each waiting for the other to speak. The silence drew out. It became more awkward with every passing second.

“I saw the profile you made me,” I finally sighed. “Multiple boyfriends? Really?”

“Skylar—”

“I mean shit, I know it irks you that I haven’t had a boyfriend in a while,” I went on. “But to just throw me to the wolves like that? And while I’m *sleeping*, no less...”

“Skylar, listen—” Alyssa interjected.

“What would make my friends do something like that?” I kept on, settling back with my coffee. “Something *this* rough. *This* mean-spirited.”

“It was never meant to be mean-spirited,” Renee jumped in.

“Something this insulting and callous and—”

“Okay, want the truth?” Josie demanded.

“Yes. Of course I want—”

“Skylar, we hate you.”

The words seemed to stop everything, including time. I sat there dumbstruck, utterly motionless. Even the noisy background chatter of the diner was gone.

“You... *hate* me,” I croaked softly.

Worst of all, the words had come from my best friend.

“Well, yes and no,” Josie confirmed. “I mean Skylar, we *love* you. You’re our coolest friend! You’ve always been there for us, and you’ve always had our backs.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“*But...?*”

“But... well... we also hate you,” Alyssa confirmed. “You have the best job, the best figure, the best work ethic. Plus you’ve got more drive and ambition than all of us combined.”

Around the table, the others were nodding their slow agreement. They looked overwhelmingly relieved they hadn’t been the ones to broach the subject.

“You get up early every day,” pointed out Maria. “You run five fucking miles before you even have coffee.”

“Six,” I pointed out.

“See?” said Alyssa. “You’re always correcting us on everything, too. All throughout our text-messages, you’re always fixing our spelling and grammar.”

“So?” I shrugged. “Don’t you want to know when you’re wrong abo—”

“No!” laughed Josie. “We don’t!”

“You have the best hair,” said Alyssa. “The best apartment...”

“Definitely the best apartment,” Maria lamented.

“You somehow get drunk without getting hung over,” Naomi pointed out. “Every single time, too. You really are like Supergirl!”

“But—”

“And on top of all that you date all these *really* hot guys, Skylar! All these really cute, really nice guys willing to give the whole world to you, and instead of loving them back you end up dumping them anyway.”

Alyssa pointed around the table in a circle. “Most of us would *kill* to have guys like the ones you throw away,” she exclaimed. “It’s outright disturbing. It’s criminal!”

They were right, of course. I hadn’t been able to keep a relationship in quite some time. Either I’d gotten bored too quickly, or I’d pushed the guys away for other reasons. Reasons I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Maybe even reasons like this.

“Know what you are?” asked Renee.

I was too stunned to answer. I only shook my head.

“You’re a fence jumper,” my friend went on. “For you, the grass is always greener on the other side. So you jump on over and roll around in it. You don’t even care whose lawn it is! You do it anyway, and just as *they* get used to having you in their life, you look over the next fence and decide you’d rather be *there* instead.”

*Fuck.* The observation was so accurate I couldn't even argue.

"I'm really that big of an asshole?" I croaked.

"No, not really an asshole," Alyssa countered. "More like... well..."

"Look, you've been here about ten whole minutes," said Josie. "So far you've vetoed Renee's pancakes, smacked her with the menu, and you made the waiter change my white toast to whole wheat."

"Holy shit," I swore dramatically. "I *am* an asshole!"

"Oh stop it," Maria cut in. "You're not an asshole at all. You're obnoxiously intelligent and unreasonably successful. And though you're not conceited about it, you're also not really humble about it either. You're just blindly ambivalent to what everyone around you is thinking and feeling. You're just... just... SKYLAR."

I stared down into the mirrored surface of my black coffee. The reflection staring back at me had nothing to say.

"Sorry if I do these things," I said at last. "I really am."

"And we're sorry for putting up that profile yesterday," said Josie. "That was mean."

"Nah," I smiled. "It was kinda funny, actually."

Alyssa glanced at Maria cautiously. "We thought so too at the time, but—"

"Believe it or not, someone answered."

Josie snorted. "Yeah. I'll bet *lots* of someones answered."

"Well they did," I said, "but one of them was serious. One of the responses actually had three guys."

"It *did*?"

"Hot guys?" Maria inquired, excitedly leaning in. "Athletic guys?"

I nodded slowly. "Even better."

I paused, finally enjoying the moment. All five of them were hanging on my every word.

“Military guys.”



# Four

## SKYLAR

If the weekend was long — and it sure as hell felt like it — the week was ten-times harder.

For one, I was absolutely *swamped* with clients. There were new clients. Old clients. Clients who'd given up and suddenly come back into the rotation, and clients who'd somehow all wanted to reschedule missed workouts at the exact same time.

I made housecalls too, and those paid best of all. For some people money was less of an object, especially when it came to their health. In the beginning I'd taken on people content to train in the backyards with nothing but medicine balls and resistance bands, but now I walked into full-blown home gyms. Many of these were decked out with the best commercial equipment available, some of them even better than the gyms I normally worked at.

But as much as I loved training people, my passion had changed. The more I got involved in the nutritional aspect of staying healthy, the more I realized I loved something else even more: cooking.

Right now I had a nutritional guide being shopped around at different publishers, plus I was working on two

different cookbooks. My kitchen itself was a work in progress. I was in the process of obtaining everything I needed to make my photos really pop, while researching the right cameras I'd need to start putting out videos, as well.

But through it all, my training came first.

By the end of the week I was unusually exhausted, and I didn't take that lightly. My body demanded rest, and I always listened to what my body told me.

Maybe that's why I was sitting at my desk, sifting through old emails while trying to relax. I saw the one from the three Marines — the only response from the dating site I hadn't deleted — and clicked through to their profile again.

Okay, fine. Maybe I'd clicked through two or three *other* times during the week, too.

“You have to go out with them!” Josie and the others had pleaded with me. “For science!”

Science. Yeah, okay.

Resting my chin in my hand, I let my eyes dance over those hard, beautiful bodies. There were definitely three of them. I could make out the three distinct body types, including one chest that had a lettered tattoo high on one massive pectoral.

As someone who trained I could admire their strength! Their raw, sheer power. But there was a casualness in the way they carried themselves as well. A cool confidence that told me they weren't posing or trying to look blown-up or puffed out.

As a woman though...

*God.*

As a woman I was lost in the fantasy of being wrapped in those arms. Of being crushed tightly against one of those hard, well-developed chests, while tracing my fingers slowly along every peak and valley of those washboard abs.

The profile was brand new. It had the same creation date as mine, which meant they'd created it for the sole purpose of

contacting me. They'd even left the 'Skylar' part of their profile up.

*They want you, apparently.*

I had nothing to do. No one to see. I'd intentionally left my schedule blank this weekend, in case I wanted to rest and recharge.

"I'll bet none of this is even real," I told my empty apartment. "These could be stock photos for all I know."

On a whim I hit the MESSAGE button at the top of the guys' profile. Before I could even think, my fingers were typing away:

Alright fine. One of you big beautiful  
Marines  
can take me out this Saturday.  
I don't care which.

In one fluid motion I pressed the SEND button. Then I laughed at myself for being so silly.

"Look at you," I chuckled aloud. "Are you really this desperate?"

Immediately I wondered why I'd even bothered. Maybe it was because I was challenging myself to be wrong. Or maybe I was hoping not to be right.

*You don't actually have to be desperate, you know...*

In truth I didn't. I had a slew of ex-boyfriends I could call upon for certain things, many of whom were still hung up on me. I could eliminate those because of the messy aftermath that would be involved, and I was still left with a handful of numbers I could dial. It would only take one contact. One suggestively-worded text-message, and I could soon be fulfilling the one need I'd neglected for far too long...

BZZZZT! BZZZZT!

My phone went off, startling me out of my almost-daydream. It wasn't a text-message, it was actually ringing.

*What the—*

It was a number I didn't recognize. In my past world I'd always ignored those, but sometimes clients called from their partner's phones and such.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end of the phone was deep and resonant, and totally unlike any I'd ever heard.

"Sorry Skylar," it said simply. "It doesn't work like that."

My mind raced, trying to put the voice with a face. There wasn't a chance in hell, though.

"Who is this?"

"One of your big beautiful Marines," the voice shot back.

# Five

## SKYLAR

*Holy SHIT!* My breath caught in my throat.

“H—How’d you get this number?”

“It’s part of your profile.”

My eyebrows knitted together. That part didn’t make sense.

“If that were the case, I’d have been fighting off hundreds of calls all week.”

“Hundreds, huh?” said the voice, mildly amused. “Except the second part of your profile isn’t revealed until you message somebody back.”

*Second part of my...*

I rolled my eyes. I could only imagine what the girls had put down in the *second* part of my profile.

“Wow,” I said. “I guess that makes sense, then. You could’ve messaged me back, though.”

“Yeah, well...” the voice purred deeply. “We’re not exactly the messaging type.”

*We’re not. As in ‘we.’*

The plurality smacked me back to the reality of the situation.

“So I take it you’re looking to go out with us tomorrow night?” the man asked.

“One of you, maybe,” I shrugged.

“As I said, it doesn’t work like that. We come as a package.”

“You’re Marines,” I teased. “Fight it out.”

I got up and poured a quick glass of wine. Then I settled back into my computer chair, letting it swivel left and right as I stared at the photos.

“Besides, how do I even know these photos are legit? You haven’t shown your faces.”

*BZZZZT!*

My phone screen changed to an image of myself. In big, bold letters the word FACETIME... appeared.

“Whoa.”

There was a red button to decline, and a green button to accept. I was suddenly torn.

*You’re the one who called his bluff, I reminded myself sharply. Now you’re not gonna let him show his hand?*

I glanced back at the image of myself, resting casually in my chair. I looked presentable enough. Reaching back to fluff my ponytail for no particular reason, I pressed ACCEPT.

The screen filled immediately with a gorgeous, stubbled face.

“This work a little better for you?” the man smiled.

“Yeah,” I replied, nonchalantly sipping my wine. “Guess so.”

The man on my screen had dirty blond hair, cut relatively short, and a smooth, masculine jawline. Even over the phone I could tell his eyes were an amazing shade of light blue.

“Good. I’m Troy.”

I tipped my glass his way. “Skylar.”

“Pleased to meet you Skylar.”

I laughed. “This is a little weird, isn’t it?”

“Only if you want it to be.”

Troy sat at a table in a bright-looking room, with what looked to be a kitchen behind him. He wore a plain white T-shirt and a camouflage cap. Though I could only see him from the waist up, he definitely looked like a Marine. As far as I was concerned that was a good thing.

“So those photos were all legit, huh?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Prove it. Take off your shirt.”

I’d said the words only half-expecting him to comply. After a quick smirk the man reached down and rolled his T-shirt up over his V-shaped body. Inch by glorious inch he revealed his gorgeous chest, arms, shoulders. Quickly I compared them to the photos still splashed across on my computer screen.

“Ah, so you’re the tattooed one.” I tapped at the same spot on my own chest. “What’s it say?”

“0331.”

I pursed my lips. “Is it a date or something? March thirty-first?”

“No.”

“What’s it mean then?”

Troy scratched playfully at a patch of sexy blond stubble. “Maybe I’ll tell you on our date.”

He leaned into the camera, looking back at me with those crystal blue eyes. I felt a flutter of excitement. Almost like he might come through the screen and inspect me in person.

“Alright,” I said, finally satisfied. “I guess you’re real then.”

“Good,” Troy smirked. “Now take off *your* shirt.”

I laughed. “Sorry. It doesn’t work like that.”

He shrugged innocently.

“Nice try, though.”

“Got any tattoos of your own?” he asked.

I hesitated, watching as he pulled his cap back on. He was still distractingly shirtless, though. And intentionally so.

“C’mon Skylar,” he grinned. “Your profile talked all about confidence. Or was that just talk?”

I swallowed sourly, half-wanting to tell him the profile wasn’t mine to begin with. Then again, the man had a point.

Reaching down, I rolled up the sleeve on my left arm. My forearm tattoo came into view: Mom and Dad’s names scrawled over a beautiful black-and-grey clock face, along with a pair of very significant dates.

“Hmm. You lost your parents, didn’t you?”

For a moment I said nothing. Eventually I nodded.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Troy. His voice was somber as he squinted even further into the screen on his end. “And the clock’s to remind you that we’re all on borrowed time?”

“It’s a reminder that I need to get my ass in gear,” I replied. “That we don’t have nearly as much time as we think we do.”

“Amen to that.”

Troy held up his forearm. There was a dagger tattoo there that I hadn’t noticed before, along with a flowing banner that wrapped the hilt. There was a name on the banner, and a date beneath it.

“I lost my older brother Amos a couple years back,” he said. “Baddest motherfucker you ever ran across. Three combat tours in Iraq, two in Afghanistan.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, we all are. But know what? He *lived*. Every moment, every day, he lived life to its fullest.” A smile crossed



Troy's face, his expression peaceful even in remembrance. "Everybody dies. It's how you live that matters."

Our eyes met, and a moment passed between us. There was a silent understanding; a shared kinship in loss. Though I'd been talking to him for less than five minutes, I felt inexplicably drawn to this man.

"So you're taking me out tomorrow?" I pressed.

He shook his head. "Not just me. Forrest and Everett, too."

"Forrest," I repeated, tasting the name. "Everett."

"Yup. It's all or nothing."

A triple date. My stomach did a flip-flop.

"Where are they, then?" I asked. "Let me talk to them."

"They're out right now."

"Hmmm..." I paused, taking another sip of my wine. "Seems like this would be easier if it were just you and me."

"That's not what your profile said."

*It wasn't my profile, I wanted to say. I didn't ask for any of this.*

"Skylar..."

I looked up, and Troy was pulling his shirt back on. His biceps curled into two perfect boulders as he pulled it down over his shoulders.

"Your profile says you live down near the river, by the railroad yards."

I nodded mechanically. "Westover avenue. Yes."

"Shoot me your address, and we'll come get you tomorrow. Let's say seven."

My mind searched for an excuse, a reason to bail. Any reason whatsoever.

It came up with nothing.

"O—Okay."

“Good,” Troy smiled, his handsome face jutting forward. He was bent over now, very close to the camera as he laced up his boots. “The guys are gonna be pumped.”

*The guys.* No matter how many times I repeated the phrase, for some reason it still didn’t feel strange.

“See you then.”

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# About the Author

Krista Wolf is a lover of action, fantasy and all good horror movies... as well as a hopeless romantic with an insatiably steamy side.

She writes suspenseful, mystery-infused stories filled with blistering hot twists and turns. Tales in which headstrong, impetuous heroines are the irresistible force thrown against the immovable object of ripped, powerful heroes.

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