



WHEN I WAS YOU

A THRILLER

MINKA KENT

WASHINGTON POST AND WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHEN I WAS YOU

OTHER TITLES BY MINKA
KENT

The Stillwater Girls

The Thinnest Air

The Perfect Roommate

The Memory Watcher

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MINKA KENT

 THOMAS & MERCER

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For my parents, my biggest cheerleaders then and now.

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PART 1

BRIENNE

CHAPTER 1

They told me I was lucky.

The doctors, the nurses, the police officer who found me lying bloody, stabbed, and beaten in an alley outside my office under a moonless sky—all of them said the same thing. *“You’re lucky you didn’t die.”*

Didn’t I, though?

I could easily draw a line, and on the other side of that line would be the woman I was before the attack. That woman, that version of me exists no more. Is that not the very definition of death?

But I digress because at the end of the day, I’m still breathing. My heart still beats. My veins fill with the stranger’s blood they pumped into me that night. I suppose in many ways I am lucky—OCD, nightmares, and PTSD be damned.

I sit on the front porch swing and watch the world around me come alive on a Tuesday morning, the chill of late spring in the air. I wave at Enid Davies next door as she waters her pink begonias. I smile at the recently retired Klingenbeards, who walk by with their silky golden retrievers. I watch the schoolchildren bicycle down the sidewalk, their oversized backpacks bouncing as they race one another and ride over cracks and curbs.

Shortly after eight, a snow-white Range Rover pulls up in front of Carly and Brian Marshall’s Queen Anne across the street. It’s been listed eight months now, the asking price ridiculously high. I watch as their real estate agent gives herself a once-over in her visor mirror, smoothing her shiny angled bob and carefully applying two coats of lip balm over her inflated lips before stepping out in her red-bottomed heels and strutting up the front walk. I’m 99 percent sure she’s sleeping with Brian. If she’s not, it’s definitely on her agenda. I’ve never seen an agent make as many midmorning house calls as she does, and I’ve never seen a Queen Anne on this

street take more than a handful of months to sell even in the worst of markets.

A moment later, Brian gets the door, and the agent disappears inside. The curtains remain drawn. Life outside goes on. It never fails to amaze me all the things people do when they think no one's watching, the things they think they can get away with.

Such entitlement, such infuriating audacity.

Like the person who attacked me and left me for dead, running off with my wallet, purse, and watch before disappearing into the night. I still can't fathom how someone can sneak up behind a person in the dead of night, crack their skull against the side of a brick building, jab a knife through their flesh, steal their valuables, and run back to their life, never giving it a second thought.

At least I assume they don't give it a second thought.

Bad people don't sit around thinking about all the ways that make them bad.

If I knew Carly Marshall better, say if we were friends or neighbors who more than waved at one another in passing, I'd mention something to her. Maybe it wouldn't be my place, but a victim deserves the truth.

It's our God-given right.

We are the entitled ones.

I've spent far too much time observing people these past six months, but it hasn't been for naught because I've learned an invaluable lesson. For the first nearly thirty years of my life, I gave people the benefit of the doubt. I saw the good in them. I waltzed through my days without ever thinking I would be the kind of poor sap featured on an episode of *Dateline*, allowing a national network to feed my story to its insatiable armchair detective viewers as entertainment in hopes that maybe, just maybe, someone might know something and come forward.

But we got crickets.

And my case went from lukewarm to ice-cold.

Now I know with absolute certainty that people are selfish. They lie. Cheat. Steal. Hurt. Manipulate. Keep secrets. Wear proverbial masks.

Even kill.

Some of us can't help but be self-serving, letting our egos and ids drive the car as we sit powerless in the passenger seat.

If I dwell too long on these facts, my head begins to throb with the threat of a debilitating headache, and I've ruined far too many perfectly good days to let myself ruin yet another.

The Klingenbeards walk past again with their silky blond dogs, giving another wave, which I return with a nod and a smile. A gentle, tepid breeze rustles the trees around us, and a few seconds later, a pair of ladies in monochrome sweats and ankle weights power walk down the opposite side of the road.

The real estate agent emerges from Brian Marshall's house after a few more minutes, her skirt slightly askew and her hair tucked behind one ear. She climbs into the driver's side of her SUV, and in a flash, she's gone.

From my side of the street, I watch as Brian's curtains pull apart and he lets the daylight in, confirming my suspicions.

Enid's wind chimes tinkle from her porch next door.

Reggie Bernstein sweeps his driveway.

The Halversons' automatic sprinkler system spits and chugs to life.

Just another beautiful day in the neighborhood.

I take one last look around before heading in, at the sunlight trickling through the century oaks, at the pale, heavy-headed peonies dancing in the breeze, at the neighbors meandering past with their leashed purebreds, stopping outside the picket fence to admire my late grandparents' fully restored Queen Anne Victorian. They point at the half-gabled roof and intricate spindle work with pinwheels for eyes, and I imagine they wonder what it might be like to live here—a place so preserved, so untouched by time that it belongs in a museum.

I bet they picture themselves sipping lemonade from the wraparound porch, welcoming guests in the formal entrance at Christmastime, hosting afternoon tea in the rose garden out back with ladies from the Quinnesec Bluff Social Club.

The Queen deserves a family. Truthfully, there are days I feel bad keeping her all to myself.

She's stuck with Brienne Dougray—a thirty-year-old woman with no need for three-fourths of her. All those beautiful rooms with their antique furnishings, polished walnut paneling, and Pickfair wallpapers locked away for safekeeping.

I have no use for a study, a scullery, or the front parlor—which are mostly just for looking—so I leave them to sit pretty, like dolls on a shelf.

I'd sell the place already, but I don't have it in my heart to let go of my familiar surroundings, my safe haven. Not yet.

Grabbing the mail on my way in and double-checking the lock behind me, I sort through the stack of letters before coming across a small package with a local return address and the initials HPG as the sender. When I get to the kitchen, I grab a letter opener and slice open one side of the bubble mailer, retrieving a small blue box from the inside. It's a square-shaped box, glossy blue, and when I remove the lid, I'm presented with a shiny silver key attached to a leather key ring.

I pull the gift out of the box and flip the key ring over, only to find "B.D." has been embossed into one side in some fanciful script font.

B.D.

Brienne Dougray.

A second later, I notice that a small letter, no bigger than a Post-it note, is attached to the inside lid.

Ms. Brienne Dougray,

Welcome to the Harcourt! We look forward to your time with us and hope you enjoy

your stay in the scenic valley of the Loess Hills.

Sincerely,

The Team at Harcourt Property
Group

Quinnesec Bluff, Iowa

The other side of the note features a glossy photo of a mesmerizingly gorgeous Art Deco-style building, something straight out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, as well as a website address in the lower right corner.

This has to be some kind of scam where they give you a fake key to a time-share, but then when you get there, they make you sit through a four-hour presentation and smooth-talk you into signing your life away.

I place the key back inside the box and set it aside for now, opting to sort through the rest of the mail.

I'll check into it later.

I'm sure it's nothing.

CHAPTER 2

It's forty minutes past six Tuesday evening when my tenant, Niall, gets home. I deliberately delayed fixing dinner in hopes that we could eat together.

I do that sometimes. And he always seems grateful. Besides, I see what he eats when I don't cook, and it's usually something along the lines of a turkey sandwich and an apple and strawberry Greek yogurt. Cold things. Quick grabs. Nothing that sticks to the ribs. The man eats like a bird, not a doctor who's on his feet twelve hours a day. He could use a hot meal every now and then.

"Smells amazing—what is it?" he asks, tugging his name badge off his teal scrub shirt when he walks through the back door.

"Shepherd's pie," I say. My grandmother was always big on comfort food. As a result, casseroles comprise three-fourths of the things I know how to make.

He flashes a smile that lights his face, softening his strong features. His deep-set crystalline eyes and square jaw can be harsh on him if his expression veers to the serious side, but when he's in good spirits, I swear he can light an entire room with just one look.

"More than enough," I say, which is my nonchalant invitation to dinner, not that he needs one at this point. He's lived here for several months now, moving in shortly after my attack, when living alone was becoming overwhelming in ways I never knew possible before.

"Let me grab a shower, and I'll be back down." He squeezes past me, his hands resting on my shoulders for a sliver of a second, and then he disappears, footsteps fading until they're swallowed by the second level.

I check the timer on the oven before setting the table.

Despite the fact that our relationship—if you can call it that—is strictly platonic, sometimes it feels like playing house

with him 1950s-style. I'm the stay-at-home wife. He's the husband with an MD. We live on one of the prettiest tree-lined streets in town. We never discuss politics or religion—only the best parts of our days. All that's missing are a couple of kids, some old-fashioned romance, and a border collie named Frisbee.

But whatever this is, I don't mind. It makes me not feel like a freak. He helps me forget. He quells the loneliness if only for an hour or two of my day. Niall is a welcome distraction from the bizarre bubble that has become my life.

I take a seat at the table a few minutes later, a steaming dish of shepherd's pie resting on one of my grandmother's iron trivets. My stomach growls. I haven't eaten a thing since before noon, but I wait for him out of politeness. A quick glance at the front door confirms the lock is engaged. It doesn't matter how many times I check it during the day, I can never help second-guessing myself at the most random of moments.

With my elbows resting on the table and my chin in my hands, I stare out the lace-covered windows of the dining room at a sky that has long turned to dusk.

I'm lost in my own thoughts for I'm not sure how long when the flicker of the aged brass candelabra chandelier above steals my attention.

A sharp pop follows next, then darkness, and for a second I can't breathe, as if the air is trapped in my paralyzed lungs.

My entire house is black, the only source of light filtered through the sheer panels that hang from the windows.

"Niall?" I call up the stairs, palms damp against the tops of my thighs. I don't wait for him to reply before dashing to the kitchen and yanking my keys from the drawer. I'm sure it's just a blown fuse or tripped breaker, but I refuse to lumber around a pitch-black house without taking a couple of safety precautions. One of the first things I did after leaving the hospital was order a handful of portable self-defense tools I could carry on my key chain—pepper spray, a personal alarm, brass knuckles, a miniature stun gun.

Next, I grab a few candles and a lighter from the cupboard beside the sink, placing them in the center of the dining room table before lighting the wicks. It isn't much, but it's better than stumbling around in a dark void.

Turning to carry the lighter back to the kitchen, I stop in my tracks when I nearly bump into Niall standing in the doorway. My heart lurches into my throat with such force it's almost painful.

"Hey," he says, voice soothing like balm. He places his hands over mine, his steady over mine trembling. "I didn't mean to scare you."

The earthy, antiseptic scent of tea tree oil bodywash emanates from his warm skin, and even in the dark, I can see his hair is damp, parted on the side, and combed through.

"I must've tripped a breaker when I was shaving," he says. I exhale. I'm sure that's all it was. This old house needs new electric, but whenever I think of the handful of strangers that'll be working in my home for days, possibly weeks, I immediately change my mind. "You have a flashlight?"

Niall releases my hands and I squeeze past him, fishing around in a kitchen junk drawer until I produce a small black flashlight.

He takes it from me, heading to the basement door, his pace calm and patient.

"When was the last time anyone looked at your electrical panel? Might be time to have it replaced." He clicks on the flashlight before heading downstairs.

I return to the dining room table, taking refuge in the dancing light of the candles until the chandelier above flickers back to life.

This happens sometimes—the tripped breakers—but this is the first time it's happened at night, after the sun's gone down.

Thank God Niall's here. I've always hated that basement. The musty smells. The decades-old canned vegetables sitting on shelves. The iron furnace with its menacing facade. The

way the house creaks and moans when the wind blows hard from the north and all the sounds are amplified down there.

“All good,” Niall says when he returns a couple of minutes later.

My cheeks flush with warmth. I know I overreacted. I know I got worked up for nothing. But once the body’s fight-or-flight response is engaged, there’s no shutting it off until the threat to safety has been removed—something I’ve learned during my recovery.

He takes a seat beside me at the table. “You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“Dig in,” I say with a small smile, ignoring his comment and wishing I could erase my overreaction from a few moments ago from both of our memories. I know our relationship is that of a landlord and tenant, but I’ve always treated him as a guest. A friend, really. I want him to know that I enjoy his company. I want him to feel welcome and at home.

This *is* his home after all.

“Starving,” he says as he heaps a portion onto his plate. “Barely had time to think today, let alone eat a proper lunch.”

I know Tuesdays are his busiest days. He’s said so in the past. They like to perform surgeries earlier in the week; that way if there are any complications or emergencies, they’re normally caught before the weekend rolls around and doctors have to be paged in.

“Sometimes I wonder how I survived before you came along,” he says with a small chuckle as he pushes the serving dish toward me. “What’d you do today?”

I hate when he asks me this. “Same old.”

He doesn’t pry. He knows. Before he moved in, we discussed my circumstances. I thought it would be best to answer any questions he might have before he so much as signed anything. It isn’t normal for a thirty-year-old woman to be living in a massive house all by herself, spending her days doing a whole lot of nothing but staring out windows and

watching the comings and goings of the neighborhood like it's her job.

Fortunately one of Niall's best traits is his compassion, and he wholeheartedly understood my plight, even offering to make referrals and recommendations, as if he instantly wanted to be a part of my care and recovery.

In that regard, I consider myself lucky.

Niall and I exchange friendly glances as we chew. There's an unspoken understanding I have with him that I've never had with anyone else, and while our friendship might be young and born of convenience, in a lot of ways I feel as though I've known him my entire life.

I wish he could have known me before—when I had a robust social life, a phone that never stopped chiming and buzzing morning, noon, and night, an enviable vacation schedule, a whole myriad of interesting things to talk about, and a perpetual smile on my face.

I'm convinced somewhere, deep down, that version of me is still in there. I'm still working on digging her out from beneath the pile of psychological rubble and emotional ash. I haven't given up—it's just taking longer than I expected.

We finish the rest of our dinner in mutual silence. He can't tell me too much about his day due to patient confidentiality, so usually whenever we do talk, there's a lot of generalizing, a lot of inside jokes between him and the other doctors that I politely laugh along at, but tonight we enjoy the close of the day with full bellies, status quo contentment, and quietude.

Niall is finished first, and he carries his plate to the kitchen sink. A second later, I hear the water running, and by the time I join him with my dirty dishes, I see he's filled half of the sink with warm, soapy water. His long arms are covered in rubber gloves, and he dunks a sponge under the bubbled surface before grabbing another plate.

"You don't have to do that," I say.

It's the same old song and dance. Anytime I cook, he insists on cleaning, and I pretend like he doesn't have to

despite the fact that I'm beyond grateful.

"Don't be ridiculous," he says.

I watch the gifted hands that save lives scrub pots and pans and fork tines, the muscles of his strong shoulders flexing as he moves about.

A moment later, I grab a dry rag from a drawer and begin wiping down the clean dishes before putting them away.

We make a good team, Niall and I.

When we're finished, he slips the gloves off and drapes them side by side next to the sink, nice and neat.

"Going to head up now," he says, hands on his narrow hips. I glance at the clock on the microwave. It's still early, but I bury my disappointment behind a pleasant mask. "I'll be in my study if you need me."

A couple of months ago, Niall asked if he could convert one of the spare bedrooms upstairs into a study, and I watched as he filled the room with a cognac leather chesterfield sofa, a bookcase filled with classics and medical textbooks, and a mahogany desk topped with one of those green banker's lamps.

I've told him time and again that he's more than welcome to join me in the back parlor for TV in the evenings, that he's not obligated to remain solely on the second floor when he's home, but he says this is how he unwinds after a long day: he retreats to his study, shuts the door, and does his own thing.

"Good night," I tell him, watching him disappear from view.

Trekking to my room, I change into gray flannel pajama pants and a jersey-soft T-shirt before returning to the kitchen to make my nightly cup of chamomile lavender tea and take my three milligrams of melatonin.

Most nights, I have to chase sleep with a butterfly net. I can't do the strong stuff—I've lost entire days with some of the prescription sleep medications, and the over-the-counter options always leave me groggy the next day. This

combination is the only thing I've found that's equal parts gentle and effective, and the majority of the time it keeps the night terrors at bay.

After carrying my teakettle to the sink, I position the top below the waterspout and twist the hot water knob, losing myself in a little reverie as I wait for it to fill. In my mind's eye, I'm somewhere else. Saint Thomas, to be specific. Two years ago, my girlfriends and I did an eight-day trip filled with sun, sand, and bright little umbrella drinks in oversized cocktail glasses.

It's funny. We were so close then, the four of us. But ever since the assault, they've faded from my life without so much as an explanation.

That seems to be a theme in my life . . . people leaving without explanation.

Before my friends, it was my mother. One day we were at the park, enjoying melting ice-cream cones. The next day she was dropping me off at my grandparents' house with a promise to return.

She never did come back.

I remove my thoughts from the past and bring myself to the present, realizing my kettle is spilling over. I remove it from the stream before glancing up at the window above the faucet. I fully expect to be greeted with my own reflection, only there's a tall figure standing behind me.

Shrieking, I drop the heavy kettle into the sink and jerk back. Two arms wrap around me, followed by a shushing in my ear.

"It's just me," Niall says.

His warmth envelops me for another moment longer before he lets me go.

I press a palm against my fluttering chest. "I didn't hear you coming."

"I'm so sorry." His arms lift at his sides. "Guess I'm used to being a quiet walker at work. You okay?"

Lines spread across his forehead, and he places a hand on my shoulder. He feels awful for scaring me, I can tell.

“Yeah, yeah.” I nod before turning back to the pool of spilled water on my counter.

“Let me get that.” He moves quickly, wiping up the mess and taking the kettle to the stove. The man lives—literally lives—to take care of people. “You have a seat in the back parlor. I’ll bring you your tea in a minute.”

I let him do his thing because I don’t want to be one of those annoying, overly polite people. In the back parlor, I grab the TV remote and tune in to some evening news program, hoping to subtly show off my intellectual side even though I’d very much love to partake in some mindless housewives’ reality show right about now.

I’m all about mental escape these days.

A few minutes later, Niall is standing in the doorway of the back parlor, a rose-print china teacup resting on a saucer in his firm hands.

“And here you are.” He places it on the coffee table before me.

“You’re the best.” I gather my throw blanket and situate it over my legs. “You want to hang out for a bit? I’m just watching this special about climate change. Fascinating stuff.”

I’m lying, which I don’t normally make a habit of, but sometimes I crave his company. Anyone’s company, really. Loneliness has become a residual side effect since my attack. And occasionally desperation is a side effect of that loneliness.

“I’ve got an early morning,” he says, eyes crinkling as if he’s apologizing. And it’s true. Wednesdays he goes in at 6:00 AM, which means he has to be pulling out of here by 5:30 sharp. “Another time?”

I lean forward, retrieving the cup and saucer. “Of course.”

“Good night,” he says, lingering for a second. It’s dark in here, and the flicker of the TV paints shadows on his face, but I swear there’s an air of sadness in his eyes.

Or worse—pity.

He feels sorry for me.

Niall turns to leave, and it occurs to me that perhaps we aren't friends at all. Perhaps he simply feels sorry for me because he's realized over the last several months that he's all I have.

He wouldn't be wrong.

CHAPTER 3

I venture out to the front porch again Wednesday morning, opting to enjoy my coffee from the wooden swing, watching the world wake once more. Earlier this morning, I placed a call to that HPG place that mailed me that key before brewing a fresh pot of blond roast, checking the weather, and grabbing a knit cardigan from my closet.

Robins chirp from the branches of the oaks that surround the property, and a group of schoolchildren blazes down the sidewalk on their bikes—one of them straggling behind and yelling for the rest of the gang to wait up.

School lets out in a few more weeks, and the neighborhood will be more active during the day—safer. It's good to have people around. *Witnesses*. Because you never know. Even if they're children, they have eyes, and eyes are deterrents to those who don't want to be seen.

I think about the person who attacked me—obviously they made off with my wallet so they know where I live. If it wasn't random, if they ever wanted to come back and finish the job, they'd know exactly where to go. But the police insist it was random, that it was a crime of convenience. It was a November Tuesday night, and I was working late in my insurance office on the square, fluorescent lights aglow over my desk. Someone saw that I was alone, watched me lock up the front door as I left, then pulled me into a dark alley. And the rest is history.

I hope to God that it was random, that it was just some lowly opportunist who happened past. I can't think of a single enemy I had before. Then again, the year leading up to the attack is fuzzy at best, thanks in part to my traumatic brain injury.

The faint mew of the neighborhood stray pulls my attention toward the front steps, and up climbs the tortoiseshell feline I've secretly named Beatrice after a stuffed cat I had when I was a little girl.

Beatrice sashays toward me with her crooked tail, mewing and gazing up at me with her sunny yellow eyes, and then she hops up on the swing beside me, rubbing her cheek against my arm.

We've met all of a handful of times, and she acts like we're best friends, which I'm positive has everything to do with the tuna and milk I gave her that *one* time.

"I can't. I'm sorry," I say, as if she could possibly understand me.

She's not skin and bones, and her coat isn't mangy. I call her a stray, but I'm pretty sure she's just someone's free-roaming cat.

Even if she needed a home, I couldn't take her in. Niall mentioned once that he's deathly allergic to pretty much anything with four legs and a tail—which was secretly disappointing because I'd been thinking of getting a guard dog, a Tibetan mastiff or a Thai ridgeback. Something soft, nice to look at, and fiercely loyal.

Beatrice's mews become incessant.

It breaks my heart. It does. But I pet her, hoping a few scratches behind the ear will make up for my coldheartedness.

She moves on a few minutes later, chasing something in the distance and disappearing between two of Enid Davies's peony bushes.

I take a sip of my coffee and peer over the front porch, past the picket fence, where a couple of ladies are walking two dogs—a Yorkie and a miniature schnauzer.

I recognize them. I think they're from the next block over. They always amble down the Avenue of the Queens, always stop to gawk in front of my house.

But today their eyes are averted.

Apparently they only gawk if they think they aren't being seen, which leads me to believe they feel guilty for looking, for staring. Makes me wonder if all those times they weren't

discussing the outside of the house as much as they were what's inside of it.

They feel sorry for me.

I'd tell them to join the club if they'd dare to so much as acknowledge me.

The shrill of my cell phone's ringer pulls me from my haze of thoughts, and I rise from the swing and head inside, locking the door behind me and grabbing my phone off the sideboard in the foyer.

I don't recognize the number on the screen.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hi. Brienne?" a woman asks.

"Yes?"

"This is Harriett at Harcourt Property Group, returning your call."

"Yes," I say. "I received a key in the mail yesterday. I was just wondering . . . why?"

Harriett chuckles, deep and raspy, the way a smoker might. "You're pulling my leg."

My silence should be all the answer she needs.

"You were just here," she continues. "About two weeks ago?"

Frozen, I say nothing.

"Paid six months on a one-bedroom unit," she adds, still chuckling. "Don't tell me you forgot."

I couldn't formulate a response if I tried.

"The key is just something nice we like to do for our residents," she says. "Anyway, your unit will be ready tomorrow, just like you asked."

How many Brienne Dougrays could there be? And two in one town?

Impossible.

“Hello?” she asks, singsong. “You still there, Ms. Dougray?”

There’s a very real chance someone sold my identity on the black market or dark web after my attack—and if the woman pretending to be me purchased it, there’s a chance she holds the key to answering that million-dollar question that plagues my existence and haunts my nightmares.

“Yes. Sorry for the confusion. Thank you for your time.” I hang up, a cold sweat having collected across my brow and a heaviness residing in my middle.

This is big.

In six months, we haven’t had an actual lead.

If I’m going to catch this thief, I can’t have her spooked. She can’t know that I’m onto her, or she’ll run.

My heartbeat pulses in my ears, and the space around me grows ten degrees hotter. The intensity of this revelation stirs the deepest parts of me, and I find myself pacing the hallway. Quick, light steps back and forth, my breath shallow in my chest.

The overwhelming weight of powerlessness blankets me from head to toe, and I rake my fingers through my hair before massaging away the throb at my temples. Without thinking, I make my rounds through the main level of the house, checking doors and locks and windows as though my mind needs to ensure there’s an extra layer of protection between myself and the outside world.

My breathing steadies after a bit, and I finally stop pacing.

I could easily stay here the rest of the day, angrily wallowing in the fact that I’m being victimized all over again, that someone out there has no qualms about stealing my identity after everything I’ve been through. I could easily work myself into another headache spell that knocks me off my feet for the next two days.

If I’m going to find this “other me,” if I’m going to take back what’s rightfully mine, I need to have a clear head. I need to be calm. I need to not overreact.

I was hunted once.

Perhaps now it's my turn.

CHAPTER 4

I spend the greater part of Wednesday strategizing, but not before calling the old detective on my case, who says he'll *do some checking*—which is the same line he used when he was first investigating my attack. I don't know that the man does anything besides check game scores on his phone—at least based on my experience with him—so I try not to get my hopes up. Before we hung up, he told me if this was truly a case of identity theft, I'd need to file a report with the FBI.

It's just like him to pass the buck.

In the meantime, I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands.

But I can't go in, proverbial guns blazing, and demand that this other Brienne Dougray give me back my identity. Odds are I'll look deranged and will more than likely be delivered home in the back of a squad car, the entire neighborhood gawking from behind their curtains at the poor shell of a young woman who finally lost her marbles.

If at all possible, I need to handle this with dignity, grace, and a whole lot of gumption, which means I have no choice but to be strategic. I need to have my facts straight before I make my first move.

According to a website called How Many of Me, there are fewer than seventeen hundred people named “Brienne” in the United States. Roughly 122 residents with the last name “Dougray.” But only one “Brienne Dougray.”

I log in to my credit monitoring account—one I haven't checked since I can't remember when. But the green happy face at the top of the screen boasts that there have been no new inquiries in the past twelve months, no new accounts, no recent activity, and my score is still a healthy 814.

If this woman has stolen my identity, at least she hasn't stolen my credit—yet.

I pull up Whitepages next, followed by PeopleFinder and TruthFinder, then Pipl, FastPeopleSearch, and finally Spokeo.

Tab after tab after tab.

Each result is the same variation of Brienne Laurelin Dougray and some sort of half-observed remnant of my address or phone number, the rest of the information hidden behind a paywall.

Burying my face in my hands, I pull in a full breath and tap my fingers across my temples before massaging the tension from my scalp.

Aside from hiring a private investigator, I'm not sure there's much else I can do. This isn't a case of financial fraud. And it isn't illegal to use an alias in certain situations—celebrities and dignitaries do it all the time. Who knows if this apartment vets their residents? There are plenty of shady landlords who require nothing more than a name, a signature, and a recent bank statement. And if you wave enough cash in their face or prepay your lease, you could claim you're Abraham Lincoln, and it wouldn't matter to them.

Sitting up, I rub my screen-strained eyes and pull myself out of my desk chair. My knees pop and my right shoulder aches as I shuffle to the kitchen. I have no idea how long I've been sitting there, fruitlessly scouring the internet in search of answers. Based on the fact that it's now close to dusk outside, I'm willing to guess it's been hours.

In the kitchen, I grab a bottle of chilled cabernet, followed by a stemless wineglass. I used to do this after work every night, fix myself a glass of red wine—a small treat I'd grown to look forward to. Lately it's been reserved for special occasions—which have been reduced to dinners with Niall when I've gone the extra mile and nothing but wine will do.

Leaning against the counter, I sip my drink, my gaze unfocused as I mentally run through all this for the millionth time, no idea where to even start.

And then it hits me.

Social media.

Of course.

No one uses Google to dig up information on people anymore—they use Pinterest and Snapchat and Twitter and Instagram. I’ve never been particularly fond of the idea of broadcasting every mundane detail of my life to internet friends and strangers, but I’ve always been in the minority.

I start with Facebook. If there are over two billion users, odds are she’s among them. It takes a few minutes, but I manage to set up a dummy account with a throwaway email, and by the time I click through and ignore all the setup prompts, the site finally gives me search privileges.

After taking a sip of my now-room-temperature wine, I place the glass aside and type my name into the search bar. Pressing “Enter,” I hold my breath and scan the results.

- Briane Dougray
- Brianne Dougray
- Brianne Alcott-Dougray, DDS
- Brianna-Dylan Dougray
- Brienne Dougray

No.

Clamping my hand over my mouth, I lean in to examine the tiny square that holds a picture of a woman who looks very much like me—but isn’t.

I don’t have a Facebook account. Never have.

After navigating to her page, I wait as it loads. Then a flood of images of a smiling woman with a sleek brunette bob and a carefully crafted social media profile full of joie de vivre pollutes the screen.

The “About” section is limited, simply stating that she works for the Opal Green PR Agency in Quinnesec Bluff.

There’s a photo of her standing next to the Bean in Chicago. Another one of her by the Eiffel Tower. One of her with a handsome, Burberry-scarf-wearing man with messy blond hair and a runner’s build. Another one shows her holding a muslin-swaddled baby, with a caption about how

much she adores her new nephew. None of these things are anything but ordinary, but I persevere, clicking through each and every one, occasionally pinching and unpinching the trackpad, zooming in to search for microscopic clues.

I'm two seconds from trying another social media outlet when it occurs to me that I've yet to scan her friends list.

I don't expect to find anything. If she purchased my identity off the dark web, she'd have no reason to befriend any of my acquaintances. But given the strangeness of this entire situation, how bizarrely close to home it all is, I'd be remiss if I didn't check.

I run a sweaty palm against my thigh before directing the cursor to her friends list. There's a search option, which might be the easiest place to start.

First, I type in "Dougray," just to see if she's befriended any of my family members.

Three results: Dennis Dougray (my grandfather's brother in Connecticut), Claudia Dougray (my grandfather's sister in California), and Carrie Dougray-Stein (Dennis's granddaughter).

I roll my chair away from my desk and run my hands through my hair.

Okay.

Okay, deep breath.

I can explain this away if I try hard enough.

Dennis and Claudia are in their late and early eighties, respectively. They're not what I would call social media savvy. They probably searched for me one day on a whim, found her, and added her, thinking she was me. I doubt they're on Facebook more than once or twice a year to even notice that *that* Brienne is a stranger.

I toss back what's left of my tepid wine before going for a much-needed refill.

When I come back, I've made a decision.

I'm going to hire a private investigator. There's only so much I can do on my own, and seeing how I'm the victim here and there's a chance this entire thing is a shade deeper than I originally anticipated, certain fact-finding endeavors could be risky.

Waking my computer again, I pull up a search engine and jot down a list of local private investigators, along with their contact info.

A few minutes later, I grab my phone and dial the first name on the list: G. K. Thomasson.

"Yeah." A man's voice answers in the middle of the first ring.

"Hi," I say. My tongue moves like sandpaper in my mouth as I try to speak. I wasn't expecting him to answer so quickly, or to answer at all for that matter. I was fully expecting to leave a voice message. I hope it isn't a bad sign that he's not too busy to answer the phone on the first ring.

"Who is this?" he asks.

"Hi, yes. I'm sorry. My name is Brienne," I say. "And I believe someone has stolen my identity."

"You need to contact the local authorities," he says, "and if it's across state lines, you'll need to open a case with the FBI. You can do that online."

"No," I say, "this person—she hasn't stolen any money or opened any credit cards."

He's quiet on the other end. I can practically hear his thoughts transmitting over the air.

"She's . . . living as me," I say, speaking slowly and carefully.

"And you know this how?"

"A key was mailed to me by mistake." I swallow before continuing. I know how this is going to sound, and I already get the sense that he's far from the type of man to believe much of what he's told. But that's what he does for a living. He looks above and below and finds the truth somewhere in

between. “I called the place that sent it, and they said I had just signed a lease with them two weeks ago.”

He chuckles, amused. Not a good sign for me. “And you don’t think that maybe, just maybe, it’s possible that two people could share the same name?”

My hand shakes, I’m holding the phone so tight. “If it was another person with the same name, why would the key have been sent to *my* address?”

He pushes a raspy breath into the receiver. “Clerical error? I don’t know. Don’t ask me.”

“If you don’t want the case, just say so.” My tone is sharper than usual, and I hate the way it makes me sound. “No need to be rude about it.”

The man stops laughing. “This is a joke, right? Did C.J. put you up to this?”

I force a breath through half-pursed lips before summoning some calmness. “This is not a joke.”

“Then I think maybe you’ve called the wrong guy, lady,” he says, sounding almost in all seriousness. “I can’t help you.”

“Of course you can. I need to find out who this woman really is because she’s sure as hell not who she’s claiming to be.”

“No, no,” he says. “You don’t need a private investigator. You need a doctor. The head kind. Something’s not right about you.”

My cheeks flush; my insides burn.

I can’t remember the last time I’ve felt the physical sensations of embarrassment, and here I am, allowing a complete stranger to make me feel silly and all of two inches tall.

“Screw off.” I hang up on him and shove my phone away before getting up and pacing the room.

I have to untangle this sordid web.

And if no one's going to believe me, if they're all going to think I'm crazy, then I'm going to have to do it alone.

CHAPTER 5

I'm not sure what day it is or how long I've been sleeping, but when I open my eyes and sit up enough to reach the window curtain, I'm met with a storm-darkened sky, the soft patter of rain, and the gentle roll of thunder. I can't be sure if it's early morning or the onset of night.

The emotional strain of this "other me" nonsense worked me into another debilitating state, though I'm not sure how many days or hours I've lost this time.

I've only been sitting a few seconds when the searing throb on the side of my head roars back to life. My stomach churns, and I mentally calculate how long it's going to take me to reach the bathroom.

Ever since the attack, I've suffered stress-induced migraines. Sometimes they last half a day and I can sleep them off; other times they last a solid twenty-four hours or longer.

I need to grab my phone and check the time. Every time I take my migraine prescription, I make a note in my Notes app so I don't accidentally double up, but my vision is so sensitive that the mere thought of checking my phone screen in this dark room makes the pain in my head throb harder in anticipation.

With eyes half-shut, I trudge out of my room, dragging my hands along the floral-patterned walls and feeling my way toward the kitchen, where my pill bottle rests right where I left it, next to the sink.

I fill a glass of water, one eye shut and one half-open, and I choke back another pill before returning to my room and burying myself beneath a mountain of covers.

I just need to sleep this off, and I'll be okay.

My head hurts too much to think, so I lie there in an almost meditative state, waiting for sleep to take hold of me, drifting in and out of consciousness.

It's only when I roll onto my side—in view of my door—that everything begins to fade away . . .

Until a figure appears in my doorway.

A man's figure.

I try to gasp for air, but I somehow end up choking on my spit before I can get a word out.

“It's okay—it's just me,” he whispers. “Just got home. House was dark. Wanted to check on you. Go back to sleep.”

I sink back into my pillow.

It's only Niall.

CHAPTER 6

According to my phone, it's early Saturday morning when I come to again, groggy this time but migraine-free. I'm guessing I doubled up on my meds, which knocked me out for longer than usual.

It's surreal, losing significant chunks of my life, but in a way, it makes me appreciate the clearer moments and the fact that I'm still alive and kicking. And if anything, this last bout has only intensified my desire to get back on track, to take back what's mine.

All I want is some normalcy.

And to feel like *me* again.

I hit the shower and wash over two days' worth of stale sleep smell from my body. When I'm finished freshening up and dressed for the day, I head to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

"Morning," Niall greets me, a full carafe in his hand. Without saying a word, he grabs a mug and pours mine.

"Thanks." I fish the creamer from the fridge and dig a packet of sugar from a canister by the stove. "You have the weekend off?"

I ask a question to which I already know the answer, but he doesn't need to know that. I don't know him well enough to know if he'd be bothered by how much I know about his comings and goings. I could chalk it up to the fact that we live together and we've established a bit of a rhythm in that respect, but deep down I know it goes beyond that, and he's smart enough that he could very easily read between the lines.

The last thing I want is to scare him away, especially when his company, his presence, is so invaluable. He's the only friend I have, and I intend to keep him in my life at any cost. If there's anything I've learned these last six months, it's that friendships—true friendships—are priceless.

“I do.” Niall leans against the counter, sipping from his mug as he studies me. “Any plans today?”

I blow a cool breath across the top of my drink before shrugging. “I need to get caught up on a few things around the house. Maybe do some dusting and vacuuming. Laundry.”

God, I need to shut up.

I’m not doing myself any favors here by showcasing the fact that I’m the world’s most uninteresting woman. I don’t tell him I plan to watch the Marshall house across the street. Carly travels for work on the weekends, and I’m dying to see if the white Range Rover pulls up at any point today.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I don’t know about the rest of the day, but I was planning on taking this outside. Want to join?” He nods toward the locked front door.

I temper my excitement as I offer him a simple, “Sure.” And I stifle a chuckle at the idea of neighbors passing by, hiding their sideways glances and making assumptions about the two of us that couldn’t be more wrong.

“We’re just friends,” I’d tell them. But none of them would have the courage to ask. People get too comfortable living with their own assumptions. I’m convinced most of us prefer to shun the truth for reasons of our own.

A few seconds later, Niall and I are situating ourselves on the swing, trying to keep our coffees from spilling as we get settled, and we sip side by side, among the chirping birds and Saturday midmorning sun, among the passing bicyclists and barking neighborhood dogs.

It’s almost perfect.

If only my mind would stop wandering.

There’s still so much we don’t know about each other despite all the time we’ve spent together these last several months.

I can’t help but think about whether or not Niall has a type, if he’s ever had a girlfriend or been engaged. This sort of

curiosity is only natural, I'm convinced. Besides, friends are allowed to pry into one another's dating and personal lives. It's not unusual. Human beings are built to love and be loved. We're not meant to be alone. And he's such a great catch. I'm dying to know why he's still "on the market."

His chiseled features, deep-set clear blue eyes, auburn hair, and calm intelligence would make him a magnificent partner for the right person.

I know for a fact he isn't dating. When you live with someone, when you see their comings and goings, it's pretty obvious when they're not in any kind of relationship—committed or otherwise.

Unless . . .

Unless he is seeing someone, and he only visits their house out of respect for me, since he knows about my wariness of strangers.

That's so something he would do.

But still, my stubborn inquisitiveness gnaws away at me until I can hardly contain it, questions racing from my mind to my tongue in real time.

Mr. and Mrs. Klingenbeard wander past, both of them craning their necks to take a peek at the two of us sitting here together.

Mrs. K waves. Mr. K smiles.

"They recently retired," I tell him. "Been married over fifty years. Can you imagine spending that much time with someone?"

He takes a sip. "I think it's a beautiful thing. Rare too. At least these days."

"True." I bite my lip before taking a quick breath. "Do you ever think about marriage?"

Niall almost chokes on his coffee, whipping his attention to me. "Why would you ask that?"

Oh, God. Maybe we're not quite *there* yet, and I've jumped the proverbial gun . . .

"I know. It's random. Don't ask me how my mind works. I couldn't even begin to tell you." I play off my question with a quiet laugh before hiding half my face behind my mug.

He switches his coffee to his left hand, resting his right arm around the back of the swing—behind me—as he crosses his legs. I can't be sure, but I think his fingertips just brushed against my shoulders.

"Yeah, I think about it sometimes. Other times I try not to think about it," he says. "Guess the separation's really done a number on me."

My breath catches, and it couldn't be more obvious.

He's separated?

Had he mentioned that once before, and I missed it?

Or did I know, and I'd simply forgotten? I do that lately, forget things.

My heart sinks, and I glance down at the warm mug now nestled between my thighs. I want to know everything about the woman he married, and I want to know why it didn't work out—or if there's still a chance. Of course someone like him would've found love.

Niall deserves happiness.

He deserves love.

I hope for his sake, they're able to work things out.

But secretly—selfishly—I hope for my sake that it doesn't happen too soon. He's only been in my life a short while, and already I can't imagine it without him. Obviously I don't know his wife, but I can't imagine she would be okay with her husband maintaining a close friendship with another woman.

I don't want to think about that, though . . .

Not right now.

"I'm sorry, Niall, I—" I begin to say.

“Don’t be.” He offers me a warm smile that fades fast, replaced by a quick flex of his jaw. “Sometimes things happen in life that are beyond our control. We can only do so much.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking about his separation or reciting some line he feeds his terminally ill patients when all treatment avenues have been exhausted, but his tone is laced in bittersweet, and all I want to do is take his hand.

But I don’t.

It isn’t appropriate, and I wouldn’t want him to think I’m some opportunistic sad sap.

Rising, I rest one hand behind my hip and stretch my lower back.

“Think I’m going to get started on that housework now,” I say.

I take three steps to the front door, and then I glance back toward him. “Oh, hey, thanks for checking on me. Had one of those migraines again.”

“What? When?” he asks, eyes narrowed.

“Last night. Or maybe it was two nights ago . . . ,” I say, starting to wonder if it was actually a dream. “You came into my room? Stood in the doorway? Said you got home and the house was dark so you wanted to check on me?”

His lips press flat, and he squints toward the street, lost in thought almost.

“I got home around five Thursday night,” he says. “Saw your migraine meds were sitting out and your door was closed, so I left you alone . . . didn’t want to wake you. Last night I didn’t come home until ten. Figured you were sleeping.”

I laugh, hoping maybe he’s teasing, but Niall’s too serious to be the joking type and too much of a medical professional to kid about something like this.

“I swear I saw you.” I think I’m going to be sick. I know what I saw. I heard his whispers as they traveled across the dark room. The more I think about it, it was too real to be a dream. “You were in the doorway . . .”

His chin juts forward, his brows meeting. “Nope. Not me.”

My hand fastens around the handle on the screen door. “Huh.”

“Could have been a visual disturbance. Those meds can mess with your REM cycle if you take too much.”

I want to believe him.

I need to believe him.

I *have* to believe him.

CHAPTER 7

I can't shake the feeling that what I saw the other night wasn't a dream or "visual disturbance" as Niall insists, so I spend a good portion of Saturday afternoon inspecting every square inch of the Queen.

Every closet.

Every room.

Every window.

Every door.

Every latch and lock and screen.

When this house was first built nearly a century ago, it was designed with a servants' entrance and servants' quarters.

If you ask me, there are entirely too many points of entry in this place, but boarding any of them up would ruin the historical accuracy this street is known for, not to mention all the guff I'd get for turning this place into an eyesore.

It's half past one when Niall comes out of his office. I have a rag and a can of lemon-scented Pledge in my hand when he passes the dining room. Might as well wipe down the windowsills while I'm making my rounds.

"Hi," he says, stopping and resting his hands on his hips. "Need help with anything?"

"I'm good." I turn my back to him, running the cloth along the dusty wood. "What do you have going on today?"

"Going to meet up with a friend for coffee," he says.

A friend.

I wonder if that's code for his estranged wife. Will they be discussing a reconciliation over coffee? That's something classy Niall would do. He's so sensible, allergic to drama. It's one of the qualities I admire most about him.

Trying to get a rein on my thoughts, I force away any miniature nightmare I have of Niall packing his things and moving out because he's decided to try to make it work again with his wife.

I'm getting ahead of myself, an old childhood habit of always assuming the worst-case scenario. My mother only had custody of me for eight years, but in those eight years, it seemed like anything that could go wrong always did. Evictions. Repo'd cars. Empty cupboards. My mom disappearing for days at a time . . .

My grandparents insisted on placing me in therapy to quell my anxieties, and it took years to undo that early damage. I fear the attack might be bringing those thoughts to the surface again.

"Want me to bring you back anything?" he asks. "We're going to that new café on Carter. I could grab you a scone or something. Blueberry, right?"

I love scones. Blueberry scones to be specific. He remembered because that's what good friends do.

I turn to him, fighting the urge to grin like a schoolgirl. "That would be amazing."

"Consider it done." He fishes in his front pocket, producing his key. "See you in a few."

I offer a casual wave and watch from the dining room windows as he backs out of the driveway a minute later, the flash of his shiny silver Volvo glinting in the sun.

Glancing toward the stairs, I realize I haven't been in his area in months. I generally try to avoid his space, but his bedroom and study are the only rooms with windows I haven't checked today, and I could use this opportunity to run up there and look real quick.

With the rag and cleaner tucked under my arm, I charge the stairs and trek to the end of the hall. He has the last two rooms on the left plus the bathroom that separates them.

My heart undulates in my chest, heavy and in slow motion almost, and my fingertips tingle as I curl them around the

black doorknob of his study.

The door swings open with a faint creak, and the scent of leather and old books fills my nostrils.

Two double-hung windows take up most of the east wall, and I make a beeline in that direction.

I check them twice.

Locked and latched.

Good, good.

Turning, I find myself face-to-face with one of his bookshelves. Tracing my fingers along the spines, I read the titles in my mind: *The Bethesda Handbook of Clinical Oncology*, *AJCC Cancer Staging Manual*, *Cancer Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapy Review*, *Skeel's Handbook of Cancer Therapy* . . .

And then the classics: *The Odyssey*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *David Copperfield*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* . . .

I love how traditional his tastes are. I love how he isn't the type to sit in front of a TV all night, a beer in his hand, passing out to an ESPN highlight reel.

Moving past his bookshelf, I take a seat at his desk, my eye drawn to a vintage La Fendrich cigar box with one of those cardboard lids that flips open with the flick of a finger. And then, without thinking, I open the box.

It's filled—dozens of wrapped Cuban cigars.

Maybe I'm oversimplifying, but if smoking causes cancer, why would an oncologist want anything to do with cigars? I guess if it's a once in a while type of thing, maybe the risk is negligible? I've never once known him to smell like smoke, and there are obviously a few cigars missing. Perhaps he's careful about it? Perhaps he's respecting the fact that I'm not a smoker myself? Or perhaps he's ashamed . . .

I inhale the tobacco scent one last time, shut the lid, and place the box back where I found it.

We all have our vices.

I have every intention of seeing myself out when I spot a small notebook leaning against the lamp on his desk. How I missed it before, I'm not sure. The jacket is covered in tropical flowers, hibiscus and the like, and the spine is turquoise—hardly Niall's style.

With a lump in my throat and guilt flooding my veins, I swipe the notebook from its place. Upon careful inspection, I realize it isn't cheap. It isn't some four dollar back-to-school notebook from a big-box store. The floral cover is leather and embossed with the initials K.E.

Flipping to the inside, my heart comes to a sharp stop when I'm met with the words: PROPERTY OF KATE EMBERLIN.

Fingertips buzzing, I page through what appears to be a handwritten journal.

June 23

Niall worked late again last night. It must have escaped him that it was our anniversary, just like it escaped him last month that we had tickets to Aida and the month before when it escaped him that it was my birthday...

I'd prepared his favorite dinner complete with candles and ambient music. Dinner went cold and uneaten after I'd lost my appetite. I blew the candles out shortly after nine. He didn't come home until eleven and I pretended to be asleep as he kissed my cheek and climbed into bed.

I know his career is everything, but once upon a time I was his everything too. Some days it's as though I'm sharing him with another woman...

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take—the forgetfulness and loneliness. I miss him. I miss my husband. I miss the man I married.

There's a familiarity about the handwriting, though I can't quite place it . . .

It's almost like mine, I suppose, but not quite. One-off, maybe?

“What are you doing in here?”

My stomach plummets when I look to the doorway and find Niall standing before me. The notebook falls from my hands and lands on the floor. To my surprise, he doesn't appear angry in the slightest. There's no flash of rage in his ocean-blue eyes. No pinch to his aquiline nose. No set to his angled jaw.

“I was checking the windows, making sure everything was locked,” I say, speaking so fast my words blur together.

I rise from the chair and move toward the doorway, a gesture to show him I'm done here.

“I'm sorry,” I say as he studies me, his expression unreadable. “Please don't be mad. It's just . . . the other night was so real, I—”

“It was a visual disturbance, I can assure you,” he says, his tone calm and steady and reassuring. “All the doors and windows were locked both nights. It was just me and you here. No one else.”

His words ease my mind, but my body is still tight, wound.

I don't address the journal. The heat of shame is too hot, too fresh. I need to find the right words, though I'm not sure those exist in this situation.

I was in the wrong.

I let curiosity steer the ship.

And now I'm humiliated.

“Here,” he says, wrapping his long fingers around my wrist. He leads me to his bedroom next, and I realize I still haven’t asked why he came back. “Why don’t you check the windows while I’m here? It’ll make you feel better.”

Now I feel silly. But we’re standing in the middle of his room now, so I check the windows.

“All good?” he asks a few seconds later.

I’m grateful he hasn’t mentioned the journal. If he’s as tactful and understanding as he’s proven to be, I could see him letting it go—at least for now.

I nod, wasting no time leaving his room and trying not to gawk at the perfectly tucked corners of his made bed. There’s nothing personal about this space. It could pass for a bed-and-breakfast room. And that tells me he has no plans to make himself at home, at least not for an extended period of time.

We’re in the hall when I watch him return to his study, grab a stack of papers from his middle desk drawer, and tuck them under his arm.

Divorce papers, perhaps?

“I’m sorry, Niall,” I say again.

He places his hand on my left shoulder, his pale-blue gaze softening. “Don’t ever apologize. This is your home. You deserve to feel safe here. Just know that I would *never* do anything that would jeopardize that.”

“No, I mean . . .” My words fade. I’ve never been good at just letting things go. They tend to eat away at me and become unhealthy obsessions until they’re addressed properly. “I shouldn’t have . . .”

He offers a gracious wince, a silent acceptance of a silent apology. His hand leaves me, a cool spot taking its place, and he makes his way to the stairs.

I stay on the second level, checking the windows in the remaining spare rooms—two more bedrooms outfitted for guests who will never use them.

All clear.

I go up the stairs. I pass his study, where the door remains wide open and the colorful journal rests splayed on the floor.

Every part of me wants to pick up where I left off, wants to stick my nose deep in his marital business despite the fact that it has no business being there. I was three paragraphs into the emotional dissolution of their marriage, his wife revealing Niall's human and imperfect side, and now I'm *dying* for more.

But I can't.

It wouldn't be right.

And if I were to get caught again? I can't imagine he'd be so gracious the second time around. He'd have every right to put me in my place, pack up, and leave.

I make my way downstairs and vow to spend the rest of the day distracting myself from the pages all but calling my name from upstairs.

CHAPTER 8

“The destination is on your right,” the GPS plays through my car speakers.

Both of my hands grip the steering wheel, and I’m certain they haven’t moved an inch since I backed out of my driveway fifteen minutes ago. The number of times I’ve left my house in the past six months I could probably count on two hands, and even that number might be generous. But the way I see it, I don’t have a choice in this matter.

I pull into a circle drive outside a ten-story Art Deco giant just south of the square late Monday afternoon, my heart in my teeth and the prick of sweat threatening the nape of my neck. It’s not far from my old office on the square. I’ve passed this place a thousand times before, never giving it a second thought. In fact, I’d heard it had recently gone through renovations, but I had no idea it would be turned into an apartment complex.

I locate a guest parking spot, pull in, and kill the engine before climbing out and preparing my umbrella for the short walk to the front door.

A small sign to the right of the entrance reads THE HARCOURT and then 138 HAYWORTH STREET. An inset plaque reads BUILT IN 1921. A white sign above the door that reads NOW LEASING is a modern if not jarring juxtaposition that almost ruins the otherworldly effect.

There’s no doorman. No other residents in the entry. A small camera is mounted on the ceiling in one corner, but there’s no blinking red light. For all I know, it’s for show—that or it hasn’t been connected yet. The remodeling job is so new on this place that it still has that distinct new-construction smell while simultaneously making me feel like I time traveled. Terrazzo floors with marble inlays, hand-painted murals, and impressive etched glass pendants fill the expansive lobby.

All I need is a flapper dress, a champagne flute in my hand, and a dashing Gatsbyesque gentleman on my arm.

A small door to my left has the words “Manager’s Office” fixed on a plaque along with office hours and an after-hours emergency line. It’s after five now. Any staff has left for the day.

It took me most of the day to work up the courage to come here. For hours I waffled. I hemmed and hawed only to conclude that this was my only option. Without proof of identity theft and financial fraud, I don’t feel like I have a case I can take to the police.

I’m on my own, and if I don’t stop this woman now, who knows what she’ll do next with my information.

I stop at a cluster of mailboxes, scanning the rows upon rows of names corresponding to each shiny door.

Gasping, I almost choke on my own breath.

APARTMENT 2B—B. DOUGRAY

I shouldn’t be surprised, but there’s something about seeing this in person that makes it all too real.

Gathering my wits, I linger in the lobby, head spinning. It could be said that I watch too many true crime shows. Too much *Dateline* and *48 Hours*. Too many of those episodic Netflix crime documentaries that take you deep into the minds of murderers and psychopaths. My thoughts are filled to the brim with possibilities, hundreds of ways this could go.

It could be a trap. A setup. A lure.

But who would draw me here?

And why?

My social circle literally consists of Niall and sometimes Enid Davies next door.

The attack was random (say the police).

And to my so-called friends, I might as well be nonexistent, completely written off.

To my knowledge, I don't have a single enemy.

Fishing inside my purse, I retrieve my self-defense key chain, readying my keys between my knuckles like a makeshift shiv.

My iPhone is freely available in my left pocket, and I read in an article once that if you press the "Power" button five times in a row, it'll send your phone into SOS mode and silently dial 911.

I didn't come all this way just to run away, but preparedness saves lives.

I make my way to the elevator, only to find an OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the front.

Locating the stairs, I take them one by one, then two by two until I realize being breathless is not going to help me in case of an attack.

Slowing down, I round the final turn in the staircase, only to come face-to-face with a shapeless form in an olive-green raincoat.

"Gotta watch where you're going." A tall man with inky-dark hair and a five-o'clock shadow yanks the hood of his slicker down, revealing an icy glare, irises so pale they nearly glow in the dim hallway.

"My mistake," I say, which isn't technically an apology. I don't make a habit out of apologizing to assholes.

He pushes past me, trudging down the stairs with heavy steps that eventually fade, and I find myself standing in front of apartment 2A.

Almost there.

My heart flutters in my chest, all but climbing up the back of my throat. My keys are heavy and warm in my clenched fist, and I trek to the next door.

A gold number "2" and letter "B" are fixed to a painted black door, the finish pristine and almost mirrorlike.

I glance up and down the hall before placing my ear to the door, listening for some sign of life on the other side.

Silence.

I give it another minute, shove my fear into the hidden depths of my soul where it belongs, and retrieve the monogrammed key ring from my front right jacket pocket.

The key slides into the keylock with ease before I feel the pop of the lock.

Maybe I should've knocked first, but given the fact that someone mailed me a key to this exact apartment, I think we're past that formality. If anyone's here, if anyone asks what the hell I'm doing, I can blame it on the key.

Heat creeps up my neck before blooming in my cheeks, and I can't help but feel like a cross between a burglar and a snooping, nosy teenager about to search their parents' bedroom for God knows what. But my curiosity is quashed the second I twist the knob and push the door open.

The place is dark, nothing but drawn curtains and dark forms where furniture should be. Reaching to my right, I glide my palm along the nearest wall until I come across a switch.

A second later, three lights above a short kitchen peninsula illuminate the space, and as my eyes adjust, I scan my surroundings.

Sofa. Chair. Kitchen table.

And cardboard moving boxes stacked in every corner.

I let the door fall shut, and with a firm grip on my keys, I tread from the kitchen to the living room to a bedroom and back. Each space is home to unopened moving boxes and haphazardly placed furniture.

Returning to the kitchen, I check the cabinets—empty. And then I check the refrigerator. Also empty.

No one lives here—yet.

An unsealed manila envelope resting on the counter manages to catch my eye a moment later, and I help myself to

its contents.

It's a lease agreement, with the Harcourt Apartments' logo printed on top.

Six months.

Nine hundred seventy-five dollars a month plus water and gas.

I flip to the next page, eyes landing on the signature line. The agreement was signed over a week ago—and next to the date is none other than my name.

But it isn't my handwriting.

Not even close.

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I begin to call Niall, hands trembling so hard I can hardly manage to hold the damn thing steady.

He'd know what to do, what to say, what to make of all this.

Then again, he knows nothing about this. I haven't so much as mentioned the key to him. He might question my sanity, and I wouldn't blame him.

The line rings once before I hear footsteps and a muffled voice from the hall, growing louder by the second. A rush of heat radiates through me, and my breath shallows. I end the call and silence my phone.

Funny how easily I talked myself into this, and now, at zero hour, when it's too late to duck out of here unnoticed, I'm shaking in my Wellingtons, wishing I was anywhere but here.

The voice is closer now—just on the other side of the door.

Eyeing a small closet by the entry, I sneak inside and shut the door behind me as quietly as I can manage.

And then I hold my breath, squeezing the handle until my knuckles throb.

If someone comes in here, if someone tries to open the door, they'll think it's stuck. That should at least buy me some time.

A crack between the door and the jamb provides me with a sliver-sized view of the kitchen.

It happens so fast—the apartment door opening and slamming.

The hasty trip-trap of heels across the refinished wood floors.

The jangle of keys falling on the quartz peninsula followed by the soft rumple of an overflowing paper grocery bag.

And then a voice.

“That’s so weird,” a woman says. “Yeah, if you could look into it, that’d be great. I wouldn’t want the keys in the wrong hands. When do you think you can change the locks?” She places a handbag on the counter: a Goyard St. Louis in brown and black—just like the one currently resting on the top shelf of my closet. It was an investment piece originally, one I purchased with part of my inheritance after my grandmother passed, but every time I’ve used it, I’ve felt nothing but guilt since I didn’t save for it or earn it. “Perfect.”

My body turns stiff when I watch her shrug out of a classic khaki mackintosh much like the one I’m currently wearing, and I squeeze the life out of the interior knob until she drapes the jacket over a barstool.

That was close.

If I had half a grip on this situation, I’d burst out of the closet like a crazy person and confront this lunatic, but if she’s smart enough to pull this off, she’s smart enough to take basic safety precautions. I can imagine scaring the life out of her, only to be stabbed in the jugular with some knifelike apparatus on her key chain—assuming she shares my affinity for preparedness.

She’s leaning against the counter now, and I can finally get a good look at her.

Same chestnut hair as me, cut into a familiar angled bob like the one I used to wear before I allowed it to grow out.

Same angled chin and stick-straight nose.

Same clear-framed, metropolitan-chic glasses.

Her nails are pale and neutral—classic taupe, I believe—the very same color I once gravitated toward for its versatility and chicness. And when she tucks her hair behind one ear, she reveals a dangling filigree earring in rose gold—the same style I used to wear. In fact, I’d purchased a pair similar to that on vacation in Saint Thomas.

She appears to be tapping out a text message. Then another. And she nibbles at the end of her thumb as she waits for a response.

A minute later, she places her phone on the counter screen-side down and begins to unload the contents of the paper grocery bag.

Two bottles of white wine.

A loaf of bread.

Three frozen dinners.

An assortment of canned goods.

A box of oatmeal.

Feminine hygiene products.

Toothpaste.

Toilet paper.

I think she’s planning to live here . . . as me.

There’s no other explanation for any of this.

With bated breath, I wait for an opportunity to slip out of here unnoticed, watching as “Brienne” heats a frozen dinner, checks her phone every other minute, and carefully unpacks half a box of kitchen gear.

After she’s finished eating what smells like lasagna, she retrieves a white charger cord from her bag and plugs it into an outlet next to the stove. A second later, she fires off another

text before finally charging her phone and sashaying out of the kitchen and down the hall.

She's either in the bedroom or the bathroom, and if I guess incorrectly, things could go very wrong, very fast.

Resting my head against the back wall of the closet, I release my hold on the knob, my hand cramped and almost in a permanent grip-like shape.

And then I hear it: the spray of a shower.

The faint echo of music follows, then the metal-on-metal rack of the shower curtain rings against the shower curtain rod.

This is it.

This is my chance.

I manage to open the closet door with hardly an audible noise, at least not anything she'd be able to hear over and above the shower music and the Fitz and The Tantrums song she's playing on full blast—which happens to be from the very same album I play when I deep clean the Queen on Saturdays.

Four steps and I'm at the door, only when I attempt to make my great escape, I realize she's secured the door using the chain lock.

When she gets out of the shower, she's going to know someone was in here with her. But I don't have time to give it another thought. I get the hell out of there, making the least amount of noise as possible, and in what feels like the blink of an eye, I'm back in the driver's seat of my Audi.

I can't start the engine fast enough, and within seconds I'm zooming through the side streets, heading back to the Queen, with white knuckles and a racing mind.

I need to calm down so I can think, so I can process what I just witnessed.

I know what I saw.

That wasn't a "visual disturbance." That was a woman who looks like me and dresses like me and who signed an apartment lease with my name.

I pull into the driveway a while later, with no recollection of the drive home.

Niall should be home within the hour. Part of me wants to tell him everything. The other part of me can't help but replay the conversation with the PI last week, the way he laughed at me and dismissed me.

I don't know what I'd do if Niall brushed off my concerns like that.

Heading to the back door, I ready my keys for the lock and draw in a hard breath.

I'll tell him.

Just not tonight.

CHAPTER 9

It's strange that Niall still isn't home yet tonight. He's almost always home by five thirty sharp on Mondays and hardly a minute later.

I try not to imagine a scenario where Niall and Kate reconciled or decided to have a romantic dinner or worse: met up at her place for hot makeup sex, though that's exactly where my mind is attempting to steer my thoughts.

I let the PI's reaction from the other day play on a loop in my head. Again. I know I shouldn't. I know he was just some asshole. But it wasn't so much what he said as how he said it.

He straight-up insinuated that I was crazy.

But I know what I saw.

Had he taken the time to actually listen and let me explain

...

Despite the fact that I know what I witnessed this afternoon, I can't help but wish I had some kind of validation. Someone else who could see it, too, and tell me I'm not going insane.

The lock of the back door clicks around 9:00 PM, and a moment later, I hear the soft tread of Niall's footsteps across the kitchen tile. They grow louder by the second, as if he's headed for the back parlor.

A moment later, he stands in the doorway, still dressed in his teal work scrubs. "Hey, sorry. Met up with an old friend for dinner. We got to talking and—"

I glance up from my spot on the sofa. His pale gaze narrows in my direction.

An "old friend."

Kate, I'm sure.

"God, are you okay? You're shaking." He takes the seat next to me, coupling my hands in his. "Did I scare you again?"

I shake my head.

I want so badly to tell him everything. About the apartment. About the woman living as me. But the only thing I keep thinking is, What if he reacts the way that PI did? What if he thinks I'm making this up or imagining things? If Niall's pitying looks made me feel uncomfortable, how would I feel if he looked at me like I'd completely lost my mind?

"I'm fine," I lie.

He eyes the half-empty glass of red wine sitting in front of me. I don't tell him it's my fourth one tonight. I'm not a lush, just a woman dying to quiet the voice in her head and numb the nerves of her frazzled body.

"How was dinner?" I ask. "Where'd you go?"

"Antonella's." His voice is lilted, but his face is still laced with concern. He doesn't like that I've changed the subject. "You sure you're okay? You don't seem like yourself."

"I think I ate some bad takeout or something." I can't tell a good lie to save my life. All he'd have to do is check the trash can in the kitchen, and he'd know I didn't order takeout. Come to think of it, I haven't had dinner yet tonight.

"You want some wine?" I ask. "I don't want the whole bottle to go to waste."

"Yeah. I'll take some," he says, settling into the sofa. I try to quiet the voice that tells me he's only sitting with me because he thinks I'm out of sorts and feels sorry for me.

I head to the kitchen and return with an extra stemless wineglass.

"How was dinner?" I ask as I pour and hand it over.

Shit.

I already asked that.

"You sure you're all right?" he asks for the millionth time, refusing to buy my amateur lies. "What kind of takeout did you order?"

Sometimes I swear he sees clear through me.

I shrug, thankful for the dark of the room because it hides the crimson on my cheeks. “Some new Chinese place.”

I force a smile on my face. I just want to act like everything is normal. I don’t want to think about the other Brienne or the overwhelming rush of powerlessness flooding my veins every time I try to wrap my head around this situation. I’ll deal with everything after I’ve had a couple more nights to sleep on this and to come up with a plan of attack, to go over all my options.

People like that, the clever and conniving types, generally operate one step ahead of everyone else. If I act on anything in haste, if I don’t have all the facts lined up ahead of time, it could spook her. And I want to catch her. I want answers.

I want to know why she wants my life and what she intends to do with it.

“Oh, I got the mail today,” I tell him. “Put your stack by the microwave.”

Getting the mail has always been his thing. Our box was crammed full, mostly junk and catalogs, but it was apparent he hadn’t grabbed it in days.

“Oh, jeez. I bet it was pretty full. Sorry about that.” Niall’s long fingers wrap around his wineglass. “What is it with me lately? I’m never this forgetful.”

My thoughts take a left turn.

If he forgot to get the mail, is it possible he forgot to lock up the other night, too?

There I go. Jumping to conclusions again.

I reach for my glass, burying my anxieties in the last few drops.

We settle into the sofa, zoning out in front of a *Dateline* rerun like an old married couple. He’s seated next to me, so close I can feel his body heat against my arm, and it gives me goose bumps . . .

Until I think about Kate.

The faceless other woman.

It's funny—I don't have romantic feelings toward Niall, and yet I can't deny the hot streak of jealousy that sears through me every time I imagine the two of them together.

He's my friend.

But he's still her husband.

And in the end, it isn't even a competition.

"Niall?" I ask, muting the TV.

He turns toward me. "Yes?"

"Did you . . . did you like being married?"

He stiffens, and the flicker of TV light paints his face in the strangest colors. "Of course."

A pregnant pause settles between us.

"Do you think you'd ever . . . want to reconcile?" I ask, blown away by my sudden audacity.

It's got to be the wine. It's denigrated all sense of self-control, every last verbal filter I had.

"More than anything," he adds, his voice low and broken. "Why would you ask me that?"

I've offended him. I've stuck my nose where it doesn't belong. I've crossed the line between landlord and tenant and pushed the boundaries of our budding friendship . . . again.

"I've just been thinking a lot about marriage lately. In general, I mean," I say, hoping I can retroactively make sense of my prying. "You know me . . . random."

I take the remote and hit the volume, the sound of the *Dateline* host filling the room. Niall uncrosses and recrosses his legs, making himself comfortable again, like he has no plans to go anywhere.

I breathe a sigh of relief at the fact that my nosy line of questioning didn't send him into the next room or, worse, send him packing.

Instead, here we are, playing house again, and I realize now that if he were reconciling with Kate, he probably wouldn't be here, sitting next to me.

He could be with her, but he's not.

He's spending time with me—his friend.

His closest friend for all I know.

No one else.

But I have to be careful. He made it perfectly clear that he still has feelings for Kate, that he loved being married, that he's open to the possibility of reconciling.

I had my head smashed in once.

I don't need my heart shattered, too.

I've already lost all my friends . . . I can't lose him, too.

CHAPTER 10

I spent most of Tuesday morning talking myself out of this, but by the afternoon, that inner voice of reason had become nagging and redundant and ultimately powerless. With each creaky step upstairs, silently scolding myself, I wallow in how wrong this is, reminding myself how mortifying it was to be caught red-handed last weekend.

But now here I am anyway, perched against the edge of Niall's desk, paging through his estranged wife's diary like I have every right.

July 17

I finally asked Niall about marriage counseling tonight and he embraced the idea with open arms. He said he felt it too, that we'd been disconnecting and veering off track. This morning he sent me flowers—two dozen long stem roses in my favorite shade of pastel peach, and the sweetest note informing me he'd made dinner reservations tonight at our favorite place.

I'm three more entries deep when the closing of the back door rattles through the house.

Niall's home.

I close the journal and place it back where it was, leaning against the lamp on his desk. The passages I read today weren't as juicy as I'd hoped. Kate tends to document her days as a bored housewife whose hobbies include various philanthropic efforts. From what I gather, they met in Massachusetts when he was doing his oncology rotation several years ago. She knows no one here, and if I read between the lines, I'm finding Kate to be lonely and a bit unsettled but head over heels in love with her husband.

Their love story is contained in these entries—and for reasons that are all my own, I’m dying to know how it all will end.

With light, nimble feet, I scramble to get out of his study, only in the process, I brush against his dresser and knock a stack of papers to the floor. Falling to my knees, I scoop them up and place them back where I think they were, but it only takes a moment for me to realize what they are.

Divorce papers for Niall and Kate Emberlin.

Oh, my God.

His line is signed.

I get the hell out of there and hide in the spare bathroom across the hall, listening for his footsteps to indicate he’s made it to his room. The sound of his door closing comes next, which tells me it’s safe for me to come out.

The stairs creak with each step, and my sweaty palm glides down the banister with minimal effort. When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I turn to ensure he isn’t standing there, that I haven’t been caught.

Making my way to the kitchen, I begin my nightly fridge and pantry rummaging to figure out what to make for dinner.

Chicken carbonara.

I have everything for chicken carbonara.

And it’s one of Niall’s favorites. Or at least, he wouldn’t stop raving about it last time I made it. Of course, he could have been being polite, but it seemed genuine enough.

I grab a carton of free-range eggs from the fridge and a slab of meat-counter bacon wrapped in brown paper, only when I close the door, I nearly drop them all because Niall’s standing right there, filling the space with his quiet, lanky presence.

“Hey,” he says. There’s something lighter about him today, though I can’t put my finger on it. “I was thinking maybe we could go out for dinner tonight.”

Is this a celebration of sorts?

I mean, he did sign the divorce papers.

“Yeah.” Returning the bacon and eggs to their rightful places, I add, “I’d love to.”



Baru 46 is the newest restaurant to grace Quinnesec Bluff’s trendy Merchant District—it’s where all the hottest shops and eateries are born (and sometimes die). This place has it all: candlelight, a sommelier, dinner-for-two specials, and a man in the corner playing the Spanish guitar, which tells me this isn’t just dinner.

Also, we’re surrounded by couples, though I try not to read into that. The ink on his divorce papers has hardly dried, and he’s never so much as tried to kiss me. I can’t imagine sensible, rational Niall rushing headfirst into a romantic relationship with a woman who clearly isn’t 100 percent yet.

“I can order for us,” he offers. He must sense that I’m overwhelmed by the menu. Or that my nerves have caught my tongue. Or he’s trying to be a gentleman. Regardless, it’s typical thoughtful Niall.

“That would be amazing,” I say, placing my menu flat in front of me and exhaling.

Our server approaches a moment later, and while the two of them are discussing specials and recommendations, I scan the room. It’s dark. Mostly faces illuminated by flickering centerpieces, but my eyes adjust and I discover there’s a familiar face in the corner.

Amber—one of my former close friends.

She’s with a man, one I’ve never seen before. Is she cheating on Jude? Did they divorce?

Niall and the server are discussing the tapas menu in great detail, and I find it hard to sit still. My feet fidget beneath the table, my fingers dancing along the tops of my thighs. I adjust my sleeves and change up my posture and tuck my hair behind one ear, unable to get settled.

The last time I saw Amber, we'd gone straight from pedicures to margaritas, just a typical girls' afternoon. We were discussing her maid-of-honor role in her sister's upcoming wedding in Puerto Vallarta, and then we said our goodbyes, with promises to text later.

A woman appears with a breadbasket, placing it between us. I'm starving, and I reach for a piece, all the while keeping my eyes on Amber.

I nibble and chew and watch, tasting nothing.

It only takes another minute before I'm spotted. Our gazes catch, and her posture shifts, more rigid it seems, and then it appears like she's muttering something, her chin tucked against her chest.

A second later, her male friend digs into his back pocket, retrieving his wallet and throwing some bills on the table.

When they leave, they detour all the way around the restaurant, I'm guessing to avoid me.

"What do you think so far?" Niall asks.

I focus on the handsome man across from me and his gentle blue eyes that instantly put me at ease. I refuse to sully this moment because of Amber's juvenile behavior. This isn't junior high school. Two adults can end a friendship without one of them behaving like a child about it.

Then again, for the life of me, I can't remember why that friendship ended in the first place. Judging by the way Amber acts in my presence, I can only assume that whatever went down wasn't pretty.

"If this bread is any indication of what's to come . . ." I take another bite and give him a wink. "Love the candles. It's so cozy here."

"I thought you'd like it." Niall reaches for his wineglass, and I just now realize that we both have glasses of red wine.

When did he order it? When was it poured? How did I miss that?

A tall man in scrubs is seated in the booth to our right a second later, a beautiful olive-toned woman taking the spot across from him. The doctor visually canvasses the restaurant, stopping when he sees Niall, and then he squints, as if he's trying to place him.

"You know him?" I ask Niall, nodding in the other doctor's direction.

Niall peers in that direction, but the other doctor is too focused on his date to notice now.

"Oh, yeah. That's Pontius," he says. "He's an OB."

"Don't you want to say hi?" I ask, though I imagine their paths don't likely cross all that often.

Niall brings his wineglass to his lips, pausing before placing it back down. "It's fine. I'm here with you, not to network."

My stomach somersaults, and I hide my expression with a glass of wine.

I'm here with you . . .

Our dinner arrives in courses—five altogether.

I haven't eaten like this in I can't remember how long, and when dessert arrives—two spoons—I wonder how on earth I'm going to finish it.

When we're done with dinner, Niall handles the check, and I run off to the ladies' room to ensure there are no specks of parsley in my teeth.

We agree to meet in the front when we're done, near the hostess stand. I get there first and linger by the fish tank while I wait.

"Reservations for Dougray."

I turn when I hear someone say my last name, only to find a woman—or rather, the back of a woman—checking in a mere five feet away.

She's dressed in a chic linen jacket, cornflower blue with a satin bow on the back of the collar. A familiar brown and

black Goyard bag hangs from her shoulder—a sharp and obvious contrast against her feminine getup—and she tucks her dark hair behind one ear.

It's her.

“Right this way, Ms. Dougray.” The hostess grabs four menus, and the other me follows her into the dining room.

They pass Niall, who only has eyes for me in this moment.

“All good?” he asks.

I nod.

He places his hand on the small of my back as we head toward the exit, though I can't help but turn around and try to steal one more quick observation. But it's all for nothing. She's already out of sight.

“You okay?” he asks a few seconds later when we reach his car. He gets the door for me.

“Of course,” I lie.

He studies me, unmoving. “You look like you've just seen a ghost or something.”

Niall shuts the door and strides around the front of the car before climbing in beside me.

“You sure you're all right?” He starts the engine and pulls out onto the main road. The whirl of lights fades into sporadic streetlamps the closer we get to our part of town.

“Yeah. Thought I saw someone I knew,” I say. “But it wasn't them.”

“I do that sometimes,” he says, turning to me as he drives. “I see so many faces during the day, they all start blending together after a while.”

I appreciate that he's trying to make me feel better, but it doesn't keep my thoughts from racing or my pulse from quickening when I replay what I saw in my mind over and over again.

We arrive back at the Queen a few minutes later, and I get out of the car before he has a chance to do the gentleman thing and get my door.

I just want to go inside. Be alone with my thoughts. Figure out who the hell this woman is.

Fumbling with my keys outside the back door, I end up dropping them. When I stand, Niall's behind me. He places his hand on mine, and I realize I'm trembling.

"I've got it." He slides his key into the lock, and the door swings open.

The reassuring, baked-in scent of my home fills my lungs, and I can't get inside fast enough. Sliding off my heels and leaving them crooked and overturned on the rug, I head to my bedroom and close the door.

I should be thinking about the lovely dinner I just had with a man who's been the inadvertent center of my world since said world collapsed.

Instead, I think about the woman in the jacket.

I'm seated at the foot of my bed when there's a soft rap at the door.

"Hey, it's me," Niall says, pushing his voice through.

I rush to the door, combing my hair from my face before opening it.

We stand in silence for a couple of beats, and then he runs his hand through his sandy hair.

"Was it something I said?" He chuckles at his corny line, despite it being a valid question.

"No," I say. "God, no."

"Then why did you . . . ?" He looks over my shoulder, then back at me.

He must think I'm a complete lunatic.

To be honest, I'm beginning to think that myself.

“It’s still early. I was thinking about opening another bottle of wine . . .” he says.

I get the impression that he thinks he upset me, that he thinks a drink will put me at ease. And to be fair, it almost always does.

“Sure. Just give me a second, and I’ll come join you,” I say. I need to make this up to him. We were having such a nice time, and then I started acting erratic. I can’t begin to imagine what must be going through his mind.

We exchange apprehensive smiles, though his leans more toward genuine confusion, and I shut the door so I can change out of my clothes. I can hardly breathe in this dress. The last time I wore it was in the office, but as it turns out, sitting around all day, every day, can do a number on a person’s waistline.

I sweep my hair out of my face and change into leggings and a T-shirt before joining him in the kitchen, where he’s uncorking the bottle.

His expression softens when he sees me. Relief, perhaps? He didn’t want the night to end like that. Then again, neither did I.

I can’t help but wonder if we’d have kissed by now if I hadn’t been so . . . preoccupied.

“I saw someone. It was upsetting, and I overreacted.” I blurt it out so we can be done with it and move on.

He stops twisting the corkscrew. “You want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

He sniffs through his nose. “All right then.”

I love that he doesn’t press on.

I grab two wineglasses. He pours. We cheer.

“Thank you,” I say when the dust feels like it’s settled enough. “For tonight, I mean. I needed that.”

“I know you did,” he says. “And you’re welcome. We should do it again sometime.”

“As long as your wife is okay with it,” I say. There I go again, running my mouth. I’d blame the wine this time, but I only had two glasses at dinner, hardly enough to throw a wrench in my filter.

“Pretty sure she’d be just fine with this.” He chuffs into his wineglass before taking a sip.

And then I remember the divorce papers.

He had them drawn up.

He signed them.

How could I have forgotten?

We stand beside the sink, our reflections in the dark window behind us catching my eye.

We’d look good together, Niall and I. If we were an item, we’d be that annoying couple who seems to be perfectly in sync at every move. The couple that never fights. That finds contentment in the smallest of moments.

It would be so easy to fall for him.

I don’t know how Kate could’ve ever let him go.

They don’t make them like him anymore.

I get the impression from her journal that her expectations were sky-high. Their marriage wasn’t perfect, but what marriage is? And Niall isn’t perfect, but he’s pretty damn close.

Her loss.

I finish my wine and rinse my glass. I could stay here and have another, we could share a little more conversation, let our gazes linger in all the right places, but then we would probably kiss. That’s what you do when your feelings are bottled so tightly they could burst at any moment. The bottleneck breaks, and you lose all sense of self-control. And while I want to kiss Niall more than anything in the world, I also don’t want to rush this.

He might have signed the papers, but Kate hasn't.

I place my palm on his chest, which feels more solid than I expected it to. "Thanks again. For tonight."

Niall's deep-set eyes are glassier than usual. Whether he's tired or disappointed, I can't quite tell.

"Good night," he says.

"Good night, Niall," I say, turning to leave.

On the way back to my room, I think about all the sweet things Niall has said and done for me, all the playing house, all the times it felt like *we* were the married ones.

And I realize now, perhaps I got ahead of myself.

There's a chance he doesn't have feelings for me. There's a chance that I'm nothing more than a cheap substitute for the real thing. A stand-in. A living, breathing cardboard cutout. A cure for loneliness.

I don't know Kate, but I know that I will never be her.

I'll only ever be me.

CHAPTER 11

I decide on a whim Wednesday morning to search for Brienne’s Instagram account. It takes all of two seconds, and the profile is wide open. Perhaps she isn’t as savvy as I initially assumed?

Just a few days ago, she shared a photo of stacked moving boxes and geolocated herself at the Harcourt. Not to mention her entire profile is an open book—practically an invitation for stalkers.

I browse through the rest of her photos, pausing on one of those cliché close-ups of a fresh manicure, her nails painted a familiar-to-me shade of “Barefoot in Paris,” only that isn’t what concerns me about this picture.

She’s in her car, as evidenced by the steering wheel behind her hand. But when I zoom in, I find the distinctive silver four-ring emblem that could only belong to an Audi—like mine.

I place my phone down and give myself a second.

Grabbing a nearby notebook a moment later and a pen from a drawer in the coffee table, I flip to a clean page and start making a list.

1. Same name
2. Same city
3. Same haircut
4. Same rose gold filigree earrings
5. Same Goyard bag
6. Same taste in music
7. Same car

Any of these things on their own would be nothing more than coincidence. But all of them together?

I just don’t understand why she hasn’t stolen my credit or tried to access my bank account.

It doesn't make sense. Nothing about this case of identity theft is typical. Most people steal identities for monetary reasons, and yet she hasn't so much as touched a single penny of mine despite there being literally millions of them.

My grandparents left me everything, and for years, I've hardly touched any of it. They put me through college. Gave me my first business loan so I could open my insurance agency. Left me their house. From the age of eight, I've never wanted for anything, and since they've departed this earth, I haven't had the heart to tap into the generous fortune they placed in my name—not in any notable amounts anyway.

My grandfather always said, "Money talks, wealth whispers," and it's a motto I've always tried to live by.

I rummage through the rest of the other Brienne's pictures, and at some point I stop gasping every time I realize we shop at the same places—or rather, she shops where I used to shop—and that her signature drink also happens to be a Sazerac.

I pore over her photos again, trying to pick up on any other nuances I can find and adding to my list whenever applicable. Almost in a trance, I'm catapulted into her familiar world, and by the time I stop to take a break, I realize it's nearly two in the afternoon.

My battery flashes low, and I place my phone on the charger. I force myself to step away, literally and figuratively, but it's only when I'm making my way outside to grab the mail that I realize her photos, while disturbing and unoriginal, paint her very much as a creature of habit.

Particularly on Thursdays.

When she goes to Italia Fina for happy hour.

From 3:00 to 6:00 PM.

CHAPTER 12

I arrive at Italia Fina at half past three on Thursday and order a Sazerac from an unfamiliar bartender, before claiming an empty booth in the corner of the bar. Once settled, I spread out my laptop and notebook, opening a few random documents and spreadsheets—all props.

And then I wait.

The place isn't nearly as busy as it used to be. Maybe there's some new happy hour hot spot that opened recently that I'm unaware of. But there are enough patrons here that I don't stick out like a sore thumb while simultaneously maintaining a clear view of the main entrance and the entirety of the twenty-six-foot bar.

By the time I finish my drink, it's almost four, and there's still no sign of the other me.

I check her Instagram again.

She hasn't posted anything since yesterday—a close-up of yesterday's cappuccino complete with a foam heart—and then I scroll through her most recent photos. Every Thursday for the past nine weeks, she's been coming here.

There are still two “happy” hours left, so I order another drink from a server who walks past, and then I scan the room before turning back to my laptop screen.

By the time my second drink is almost finished, it's half past five. I milked this one as best I could, but I order a third—this one not for drinking, but as a prop, like my work setup. I needed just enough to take the edge off my anxiety while still keeping a clear head.

Pressure builds in my bladder, and I check the time. Only twenty-five minutes left until the nightly drink specials end, and if she's not here yet, I'm beginning to think she has no intention of showing at all.

I'm seconds from packing up when the front door swings open, spilling a dash of twilight into the dark restaurant for half a second, and then in sashays a confident woman, finger combing her hair as she smiles at the bartender and takes the last spot on the left. Crossing her legs at the knee, she hooks the heel of a pointy-toed black stiletto on the lowest rung of the barstool.

They converse for a second as she drapes her Goyard bag over the back of her seat. A minute later he mixes her drink.

Rye whiskey.

Bitters.

Absinthe.

A sugar cube.

She's having a Sazerac, too, which should come as no surprise to me given what I already know about her from her profile.

The bartender glances in my direction, probably wondering why it is that two women have come in on the same night and ordered the same very specific drink.

Someone once told me a Sazerac is a man's drink. The taste is distinct, acquired. And maybe it's a fair observation, seeing how my grandfather was the one who first introduced me to them. Many of my friends who've sipped off mine coughed and sputtered and shot me looks like I'd just fed them poison, but not this woman.

She sips hers like she's done it a hundred times before.

No puckered face. Not so much as a hint of a wince.

The other me sweeps her hair behind one ear, rests her chin on her hand and her elbow on the bar, and tells the bartender some story. At least that's what I assume she's doing. Her eyes are lit, her face is animated, and she's talking with her hands—an old habit of mine, actually.

He wipes down the bar top in front of her with a blue rag, laughing at everything she says like he's smitten with her. When a couple take the two spots to her right, she scoots over

a little before leaning in and placing her hand on the woman's arm.

She points to the other woman's shoes.

A compliment, I imagine.

I used to be able to do that, to talk to anyone like I knew them. Compliments were my go-to icebreaker. I was quite young and on my fifth elementary school in three years when I learned quickly that kindness was the gateway to friendship.

The other me swirls her drink, once clockwise, once counterclockwise, and then takes a sip. It's like watching a video of myself, each mannerism mimicked down to the last detail.

My stomach churns and rocks, and the burn of bile stings the back of my throat. I should've ordered an appetizer, something to sit in my stomach and soak up all the liquor I've consumed in the past few hours. Come to think of it, I can't recall if I ate lunch today.

Too much excitement.

Too much preparation.

Nourishment was the furthest thing from my mind.

The threat of rising bile intensifies, and I'm left with no choice but to hurry to the ladies' room. Slinging my purse around my shoulder and leaving everything else, I rush to the back of the restaurant and close the stall door.

Hovering over the toilet, I squeeze my eyes tight. The scent of sterilized air and industrial cleaner fills my lungs, making my nausea worsen for a moment.

But it doesn't take long for the sensation to pass, and when it does, it's like it was never there at all.

The strangest thing.

I leave the stall and wash my hands before heading back to my table, keeping my head down so as not to make it obvious. Sliding back into my booth, I sneak a quick glance at the bar.

But it's all for naught.

The woman, her bag, and her drink are gone.

It's as if she was never there at all.

CHAPTER 13

It's not until I'm headed home from Italia Fina that I realize I have five missed calls—all of them from Niall, and all of them over the past hour.

I had my ringer off while I was there, for obvious reasons.

He must have been freaking out, if he's even capable of freaking out, that is. It doesn't seem like his style, but then again, neither is incessant calling.

I texted him from the parking lot before leaving, letting him know I would be home in ten minutes. The message showed as "read" almost immediately, but he didn't respond.

This isn't like him, and of course my mind goes to the worst-case scenario and one of my biggest fears: someone broke into the house.

But my concerns are quelled the instant I arrive at my driveway.

There are no police lights, no investigators, no broken glass.

Just a pacing Niall.

I watch him through the kitchen window, practically wearing a pattern into the kitchen tile, and when I let myself in through the back door, I'm greeted with his lanky arms wrapped around my shoulders.

"What's this about?" I ask, letting him hold me as I breathe in the faint scent of his morning shower mixed with the scent of antibacterial soap that always lingers on his skin.

"I came home, and you were gone. There was no note. I was just worried," he says.

This is about the other night. It has to be.

He has concerns about my mental stability now.

He thinks I'm seeing things.

He thinks I'm behaving abnormally, erratically, and irrationally.

He isn't all wrong.

"I just went out for a couple of drinks," I say.

His gaze falls to the leather messenger bag slung across my body. I wait for him to ask why I brought my laptop, and then I quietly exhale when the moment passes.

"Alone?" he asks, his tone equal parts disbelief and concern.

"It felt good to get out again." I remove the bag and sling it over the back of a kitchen chair. "Baby steps, right?"

When I turn back to him, he cups my face in his hand, eyes searching mine. A shiver runs through me, the good kind. And then I'm blanketed in velvety warmth, the kind that feels like home.

"You have no idea how worried I was." There's a lightness in his voice that wasn't there before. I suppose he's relieved.

"You don't have to worry about me."

"You say that like it's so simple." His thumb brushes across my lower lip, and I'm too paralyzed to move. "You're the *only* thing I worry about."

Oh, my God.

He wants to kiss me.

I see it.

I *feel* it.

But I'm not ready.

I'm not there yet.

Niall is my closest friend. My companion. And my confidant.

I'm not prepared for that to change even if I have fantasized about it more times than I should.

I'm paralyzed. Unable to speak, unable to move. Terrified of scaring him away but also wondering what would happen if I succumbed to this moment with him. All those times I thought he pitied me, perhaps I had it all wrong.

The space between us closes, and an endless moment later, his lips are pressed against mine.

His kiss is soft, lingering. Merciful.

I kiss him back—against my better judgment, lifting my hands to his face and letting my fingertips trace his jaw before trailing down his neck.

And then he turns away, the kiss ending before it had hardly begun.

Molten heat sears my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he says.

I chew the inside of my lip, avoiding his eye contact.

"We shouldn't rush this," he says. "Your recovery. You have no idea how many people I see every day, patients who want things to go back to normal so badly that they hurry their recoveries and find themselves sick all over again," he says.

I take a step back, arms folded. "I'm not one of your patients."

"That's not my point," Niall says. "One thing at a time. If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right."

"You do realize you kissed me first?" I say.

He drags his hand through his neatly combed hair, his lips moving though nothing comes out but a sigh.

"This is about the divorce, isn't it?" I ask before he answers my first question.

Last I knew Kate still hadn't signed.

It's possible he likes me.

And it's possible he's still holding out for her.

And it's also possible that he kissed me and suddenly felt guilty and now he's trying to backtrack, to put it all on me.

Exhaling, he lifts his shoulders and lets them fall. “Yes.”

Niall might be a lot of wonderful things, but he’s also a man with baggage and a past.

“Good night, Niall.” I squeeze past him and leave the kitchen, heading to my room and locking the door behind me. Not that I need to. It feels more like a metaphor than anything else. I need to guard my heart right now.

I need that separation and distance.

I strip down and change into jersey-soft pajamas, pale peach covered in tiny flowers. Girlish. Unsexy. And then I wash up for bed. When I’m finished, I grab my phone and lie in bed, ignoring the fact that it’s hardly seven o’clock.

The glow of my screen stings my eyes, and I dim the brightness until my vision adjusts. Tapping the Instagram icon, I get a wild hair to search for Niall. I’m not looking for anything specific . . . just looking for the sake of looking.

He’s a few years older than me and one of the rare human beings on this earth who aren’t walking around with their noses buried in their phones all day long. I don’t think I’ve ever once actually seen him use any kind of social media app, but it’s worth a shot.

I type in “Niall Emberlin” and hold my breath.

No results.

Out of curiosity’s sake, I type in “Kate Emberlin.”

Five results.

I go through each of them, top to bottom. Three of them are teenage girls. One is a grandmother type. And the other lives in the United Kingdom and wears black lipstick and dyes her hair purple. I’m willing to bet that’s not her.

Half of me is disappointed that I can’t see what Kate looks like; the other half of me is almost relieved. I could spend all night comparing myself to her, digging up dirt and sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong, but it would all be for naught.

At the end of the day, if Niall wants to be with her, he'll be with her. Wasting my time comparing the two of us won't change the fact that he kissed me when he clearly isn't ready to move on from his marriage. The fact that Kate hasn't signed the papers yet is an indication that there's still hope for them, that it isn't necessarily over.

Before closing out of the app for the night, I do a final check on the other me, finding a new picture posted mere minutes ago.

She's at the Clever Canary, some bar I've never heard of in the Merchant District, not too far from where Niall took me for dinner.

A photo of four martini glasses lined up precedes a group selfie of her with three friends, the same friends she was meeting up with at Baru 46.

The final photo in the series is of her, Sazerac in hand and head tilted at a flattering angle.

"Last-minute drinks at #theclevercanary with my girls!" she captions the second photo.

I'm moments from clicking away when something in the photo catches my eye. Pinching the screen with my thumb and middle finger, I zoom in for a closer look at the bracelet on her wrist.

It's a bit grainy, somewhat hard to make out, but it looks almost identical to the rose gold mantra cuff I used to wear to the office all the time, the one that said, NO EXCUSES. I'd originally purchased it after starting a local ninety-day fitness camp with my friends, but I continued to wear it as a general reminder that applied to most things in life.

I darken my phone and place it on my nightstand.

And then I make an executive decision.

I'm confronting this woman.

Face-to-face.

And I'm doing it tomorrow.

CHAPTER 14

“Can I help you with something?” A pleasantly plump woman with fuchsia lipstick on her teeth stands in the doorway of the apartment manager’s office at the Harcourt the next morning. “You’re not Jamie, are you? I’m supposed to meet a Jamie for a tour at eight thirty.”

“No. Not Jamie. Just waiting for a friend,” I say, remaining planted on a tufted bench across from the fountain outside the now-functioning elevator where I’ve been camped out for the past hour and a half.

I’m not sure how much longer I intend to wait. I’d hoped I could catch the other Brienne before she left for work, but so far there’s been no sign of her.

Every few minutes, I feel the manager staring at me from her perch behind her desk, and I don’t blame her. It’s odd that someone would be sitting here for a solid hour and a half, checking their phone and counting ceiling tiles. But I’m determined to confront this other me.

This has gone on long enough.

I’m done with being careful and strategic because it’s gotten me absolutely nowhere.

This ends today.

I’ve practiced my speech a dozen times since I arrived, waffling back and forth between classy and civilized to screaming and confrontational. I’m sure I’ll handle myself with dignity when the time comes, though. While I’d love to give it to this woman, I know I won’t regret taking the high road.

And after I explain who I am and talk to her, I’m going to walk her over to the manager, where she’ll admit that she’s a fraud and that she isn’t who she’s claiming to be, and we’ll settle this matter like adults.

I'd have gone directly to the manager from the beginning, but you never know with people. She might think *I'm* the crazy one, and then she might tip the other Brienne off, and if that happens and she gets the hell out of Dodge, I'll never know who she really is and I'll never be able to find her. That, or the police will be called and I'll be handed a restraining order.

The manager stares in my direction once again, only this time I stare back until her gaze flicks away and she shuffles a stack of papers.

I pull out my phone for the dozenth time and check the other Brienne's Instagram in case she's out and about, but she hasn't updated anything since last night, when she was celebrating her Thursday evening with cocktails at the Clever Canary.

All I want is an answer. An explanation. And for this to end. I don't even need an apology despite the fact that it's beyond reprehensible to inflict mental trauma on someone who's already been victimized.

The whoosh and slide of the main door steals my attention, but when I turn, I find an older gentleman making his way to the elevator, a shiny mahogany cane in hand. He gives me a nod before stepping in and disappearing behind the closing doors.

Scanning the lobby, I glance toward the management office and find the woman with the bright lipstick playing on her phone, only the phone seems to be pointed in my direction, unnaturally upright. Her fingertips are tapping against the screen, but no one texts holding their phone straight up and down.

She's trying to take a picture while pretending she isn't.

Great.

I turn away, chin tucked against my chest.

Taking my time, I gather my things and see myself out. There could be a million reasons why this woman hasn't left her apartment yet this morning. Maybe she doesn't go into the

office until later? Maybe she went home with someone last night after drinks? Maybe she doesn't work on Fridays?

Regardless, the office manager could quickly and easily become a thorn in my side, and the last thing I need is to be banished from the Harcourt when I've yet to have my moment with this imposter.

A minute later, I'm in my car, debating whether I should hang out here for another twenty or thirty minutes on the off chance she *is* home and happens to be heading into the office late today.

I had no idea how long I'd be out today, but I was sure to leave a note for Niall this time. "Running errands," was all it said. I even added a smiley face so he wouldn't worry like before.

I decide to stick around but only for an hour.



It's still midmorning by the time I pull into the driveway. She never showed. The entire morning was a bust. When I get inside, I plan to crumple the note I'd left earlier and toss it in the garbage. I don't want him asking where I went or why. He doesn't need another reason to worry about me or to doubt my frame of mind.

We haven't seen each other since that awkward kiss last night, but I'm hopeful nothing will change between us. We're both mature adults. I'm confident we can move forward.

I climb out of my car, hit the lock button, and head to the back door, keys in hand as I scan my surroundings. It doesn't matter how much time has passed; I'm constantly worried someone's going to jump out from behind a bush or from behind the detached garage and grab me.

As I get closer, I notice a half-bent brown and black tail poking up from behind one of the steps.

Beatrice.

She mews before she makes a full appearance, and I realize she's licking at an empty can of tuna fish someone had

placed next to the back steps.

It wasn't me.

And I know for a fact it wouldn't have been Niall.

He's deathly allergic to cats, and he's the one who cautioned me about not feeding her in the first place—not that I needed to be cautioned. Everyone knows not to feed animals unless you want them coming around on a regular basis, and the last thing I need is for something to become dependent on me in any capacity. I need to be able to take care of myself first before I can take care of another living, breathing life-form.

“Sorry, Bea.” I take the empty can of tuna before sticking my key in the lock.

Once inside, I toss the thing in the trash. It isn't even a brand I buy or keep in the pantry, so no idea where it could've possibly come from.

Maybe she carried it here from somewhere else?

Settling in, I heat a frozen entree for an early lunch and check the other Brienne's Instagram to see if anything has changed.

It hasn't.

The timer on the microwave counts down from twenty seconds, and from the corner of my eye, I spot Enid Davies's silver head of hair passing outside my kitchen window. She's headed for my back door, and I meet her on the steps.

“Hi,” I say.

“Got some of your mail.” She hands me a stack. “Again . . .”

“Thank you.” I tuck the envelopes under my arm.

Beatrice, who hasn't moved on yet, wraps herself around Enid's legs, gazing up at her and mewling as though she's starving.

“There's that darn cat again.” Enid clucks her tongue. “Gorgeous little thing, but she needs to go home instead of

hanging out around here all the time. I've never understood people who just let their animals roam the neighborhood, you know?"

"Do you know where she lives?" I ask.

"Here. There. Everywhere." Enid swats her hand in the air. "If I did, believe me, I'd be over there in a heartbeat. This gal has trampled my begonias eight too many times, and quite frankly, I'm sick of it."

"Try orange and lemon peels," I say. "I heard they're good deterrents. Cayenne pepper works, too, but that just seems mean."

I don't tell her that I secretly enjoy Beatrice's visits. It's almost like having a pet but with none of the worry and responsibility.

"She means well." I wink at Enid before stooping down and scratching Bea under the chin.

She purrs, rubbing her furry face against me, and then struts away.

"I told Niall not to feed her," Enid says with a sigh.

"What?" I must have misheard her.

"Niall," she says. "I've seen him set food out a few times. And last time he swung by here, I told him he shouldn't do that. But you know men. Can't tell them anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure of what?" she asks.

"Niall's allergic. He wouldn't have put food out."

Enid's brows knit, her forehead covered in lines. "I'm pretty sure it was him. I mean, it's always been early when I've seen it. Predawn. Yelled from across the driveway, and he waved. Guess I just assumed it was him every time. Maybe it wasn't. Anyway, I'll let you be. I'm sure you're . . . busy."

She waves before cutting across the driveway and returning to her mauve-and-marigold Queen Anne.

I head in, locking the door behind me and checking it three times before double-checking the front door.

I refuse to believe Niall's been putting food out for the cat.

But if it wasn't him . . .

CHAPTER 15

I've taken refuge in the kitchen most of Friday afternoon. This room with its abundance of windows and light and its generous views of the entire north side of my house—including my driveway and garage—feels the safest for now.

The flash of headlights through one of the windows just past five sends my heart into arrhythmia—until I spot the Volvo emblem.

The lights go out.

Niall exits the driver's side.

I realize I'm clutching at my chest, lungs silently screaming for air.

When he comes in, I don't tell him he startled me—or that I've been waiting hours to ask him one question.

“That cat was hanging out by the back door today,” I say.

“What cat?” He scratches at his temple before shrugging out of his jacket and hanging it on a nearby hook.

“That sweet tortoiseshell one that comes around sometimes,” I say.

The shallow valley between his brows tells me he's racking his brain. If he can't remember the damn cat, he sure as hell isn't the one leaving out cans of tuna.

“The one you told me not to feed because you're allergic,” I add before deciding to cut to the chase. “Enid claims she saw you feeding her.”

Niall laughs.

And Niall never laughs.

“I know,” I add. “I told her it couldn't have been you, but she insisted. Said you waved to her and everything.”

He scrunches his nose. “Did you ask if she was wearing her glasses at the time of this supposed feeding of the cat?”

“She said it was dark. Early morning.”

“There you go.”

“But . . . if it wasn’t you, who was it?” I ask. “I found a can sitting by the back steps. It wasn’t a brand I’ve ever purchased. Someone had to have put it there.”

He slides his shoes off and aligns them at the back door.

“And why would someone do that?” he asks.

He doesn’t have to say it; I hear it in his voice—the doubt and disbelief.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” I say, slapping my arms at my sides and shrugging. “The whole thing is just . . . weird.” Exhaling, I continue, “Anyway, I hope it doesn’t bother your allergies. She was rubbing herself all over the back steps today.”

“Allergies?”

“Yeah,” I say. “When you first moved in, you asked if I had any pets because you’re ‘deathly allergic to anything with four legs and a tail.’”

Niall laughs.

Again.

“I’m sorry. I have no recollection of saying that, nor would I have any reason to,” he says. “I’m not allergic to anything. In fact, growing up we bred Saint Bernards and had a handful of barn cats.”

I have no words.

How could I remember a conversation that never happened so vividly?

“I think we should install that security system,” I say, bringing up a talk we’d had shortly after he moved in. I’d gotten a quote for one not long after my attack, but given the size of the place and the sheer number of windows and doors and areas that would need camera coverage, the quote, with installation, came out to just under twenty grand.

Niall insisted he could find a DIY kit and install everything himself, and I agreed, though I never pushed it. I didn't want to nag at him. And besides, I was feeling safer with him around. And I liked checking all the doors and locks every day as it made me feel in control in what could only be described as a powerless situation.

"If you're still interested in that, then absolutely," he says. "You brought it up once and never mentioned it again. I figured you'd changed your mind. I'll take a look at my schedule and block out some time."

"I know you're busy," I say. "I can hire it out."

At this point, I'm willing to pay whatever it takes for that priceless peace of mind.

And to prove that I'm not paranoid, that I'm not going crazy, that someone truly is lurking in the shadows.

Niall places a firm hand on my shoulder as he studies me. "I hate to see you all worked up like this. It's not good. You should go lie down for a bit. Relax."

I lie down all day some days, and it does nothing to relax me. If anything, it simply gives my mind more time to wander and roam, and I end up working myself up even more.

He lets me go and turns to the medicine cabinet. "You have Xanax, right?"

I nod. My doctors prescribed me Xanax shortly after I'd come home from the hospital and had suffered a few panic attacks when I tried to leave the house in those first weeks. I haven't touched it in months, though, terrified of becoming dependent on it.

My mother had an addictive personality, or that's what my grandparents always cautioned me about. Men. Money. Drugs. If it was addictive, it would find her, or she would find it.

Niall removes one of the orange-brown bottles and unscrews the white safety cap before fishing out a small pill with his index finger. He hands it to me and then grabs a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Here,” he says as I take it from him.

I swallow the pill dry and chase it with a couple of drinks of freezing water. The bottle weighs heavy in my hand, and when I look down, I realize I’m trembling.

Placing the water on the counter, I check the time. It’s far too early for bed, but this is going to knock me out in the next half hour.

Without saying a word and almost as if he read my mind, Niall slips his hand around mine and leads me to my room.

“Just relax,” he says. “And when you wake up, maybe we can go out for a late dinner or something. Get you out of the house for a bit.”

I give him a quick nod. Last time I took one of these, I was down for the count, not waking until the next morning. But it’s kind of him to offer. And it’s nice to know that the awkward kiss we shared last night hasn’t derailed our friendship.

Crawling under the covers and grateful I’m wearing leggings and a T-shirt, not jeans, I turn away from him, my cheek resting against a cool pillow.

And then the strangest thing happens.

The bed dips.

The covers shift.

The warmth of Niall’s body blankets my back, and his soft, clean scent fills my lungs.

“I’m here for you,” he whispers into my ear as he lies down next to me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Almost as if on cue, all the tension in my body seems to dissipate, and my body melts into the mattress in the seconds before I close my eyes.

In this moment, I am safe.

CHAPTER 16

When I wake Saturday morning, Niall is gone, and I try not to wonder if he actually lay with me until I fell asleep last night or if it was another “visual disturbance.”

Pulling myself out of bed, I trek to the bathroom to wash up before following the scented trail of fresh coffee to the kitchen.

“There she is.” Niall rises from one of the kitchen chairs, fishing a mug from the cupboard and pouring me a cup. “Sleep well?”

“Thank you.” I take the drink from him, blowing cool air across the steamy top. He smells like a fresh shower, and he’s dressed in khakis and a kelly-green polo.

“Thought maybe we could head to Sioux City today,” he says. “There’s a Best Buy there. We could shop for security cameras.”

“Oh, you don’t have to waste your Saturday doing—”

He silences me with a lifted palm. “Now’s not the time. I saw how upset you were last night. And if someone’s coming around the house, I want to know about it.”

I take one of the empty seats at the table, cupping my hands around my coffee. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

He beams, but it’s a humble beam if there ever was one.

I think about the journal upstairs, and suddenly I want to sneak a few more pages despite the fact that I’ve been doing so well with that lately. It’s all still so fascinating to me, peeking behind the curtain of his marriage with Kate. A guilty-pleasure distraction, too. Sometimes a little too guilty. There was one entry that I forced myself to skip the last time—a detailed description of a tryst the two of them had in the back row of an empty movie theater during a Tuesday matinee.

My cheeks warm just thinking of the handful of sentences I read.

It is strange to me that her journal would be in his possession, but I'm sure there's a logical explanation. Maybe he packed it by mistake. Or maybe he was wanting to pore over these vignettes, analyzing where things went wrong. Regardless, it's pointless to wonder because I'm never going to ask him.

"I should get cleaned up," I say, sipping my coffee. "What time were you wanting to go?"

He checks his watch. "The sooner the better."

"Big plans later?"

"Meeting with a friend," he says, his expression bathed in seriousness all of a sudden.

I don't ask. I don't pry.

I can only hope today's the day she's finally going to sign.

CHAPTER 17

We return from Sioux City shortly after one. Niall leaves the plastic sacks filled with wireless cameras and control centers on the kitchen table with the promise that he'll install everything before the weekend ends, and then he runs off to meet his "friend," briefcase in hand.

I have no idea if the contents of that briefcase included the divorce paperwork or not.

I couldn't bring myself to ask.

Retiring to the back parlor for some mindless Saturday afternoon TV, I curl up on the sofa with a wool throw and my phone, tapping on the Instagram icon and checking the other Brienne's profile for the tenth time today.

I expect nothing new, just the same old shot of her cocktail lineup from the Clever Canary Thursday night.

Only I'm wrong.

The first image on the top left is brand-new: a selfie of her lying in bed, dark hair piled into a topknot, clear-framed glasses resting on her nose, and a book in one hand—which happens to be the very same book I started but never finished shortly before my attack.

Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier.

Identical to the copy resting untouched on my nightstand.

I sit up, tossing my phone to the other end of the sofa and burying my face in my hands as I steady my breath.

Yesterday got me nowhere, and given the fact that today is Saturday and tomorrow is Sunday, there's no way to determine her schedule with any degree of accuracy. My best bet is to lurk in the parking lot Monday morning.

Or better yet—call and schedule an appointment to see her at work.

But first, I book a cut and color. I need to look like my old self when I meet the other me. The expression on her face is going to be priceless.

CHAPTER 18

I sign the credit card slip at Salon Bella Vida Monday morning, adding a 23 percent tip because I'm in a generous mood today. Hanging my Goyard bag over my shoulder, I run my hand over my sleek bob as the receptionist validates my parking and bids me adieu with her red-lipped smile and shiny blonde waves.

There's an extra bounce in my step that hasn't been there for a long time.

My lips are painted in a luxurious wash of rose-pink YSL gloss.

Givenchy mascara coats and lengthens my lashes.

Creed perfume fills the space around me, radiating off the warmth of my pulse points.

I'm dressed in one of my old color-blocked sheath dresses that still managed to fit with the help of a body shaper.

I haven't looked—or felt—like my old self in ages, but the expression on the other Brienne's face when she sees me is going to be worth all this effort.

I want her to know she's been caught.

And that she won't get away with this.

I *refuse* to be a victim again.

Heading to the parking garage, I check the time.

If I leave now, I'll arrive twenty minutes early for my appointment. It's a little overkill, but it's also now or never.

I'm doing this.

And I'm doing this now.

CHAPTER 19

The uplifting, albeit unexpected, scent of tangerines floods my lungs when I step off the elevator and into the lobby of the Opal Green PR Agency. Modern lounge music wafts from hidden speakers.

I've been here once, years before, when I had just opened my insurance agency on the square and needed some help in the publicity department. The woman they assigned to me suggested a grand opening complete with catering, a live guitarist, and an open wine bar and an extensive social media ad campaign. When I told her my budget was three grand, she almost choked on her Evian.

Maybe had I used her services, my agency would still be around. After the attack, I had to close my office. No one so much as made an offer to buy me out, though one person insultingly offered to buy my client list for a thousand bucks. That's the thing about some people—they're opportunists. They'll take advantage of you if you're not careful.

I maintain a confident stride, keeping my shoulders back and my head high as I head in.

The sweeping glass double doors with the agency's navy-blue logo close softly behind me. The visitors' lobby is chic with its streamlined leather furnishings, neutral color palette, and geometric planters, and this place seems better suited for a Manhattan high-rise than some hidden, sleepy town in the Loess Hills of Western Iowa.

"Hi there. How can I help you today?" the bubbly receptionist asks from behind a glass desk. A headset rests on her ear, and she adjusts the reflective red frames on her face as she devotes her full attention my way. But her perky demeanor fades once she examines me.

Her jaw sets. Her eyes dart. She clears her throat.

It's almost as though I'm making her nervous.

Maybe I look *too much* like my doppelgänger?

“I’m here to see Brienne Dougray,” I say. It’s so strange, saying my name in reference to another person. It feels unnatural. Familiar in my mind but foreign on my tongue.

“You must be Laurelin,” she says, eyes scanning her computer screen.

I nod. I’d given her my middle name when I called this morning.

“Perfect. Let me get you checked in,” she says, clicking her mouse. “Would you like something to drink while you wait?”

“I’m all right, but thank you.”

A second later, the receptionist rises. “Okay, I’m going to take you back to her office. She’s running just a bit late, but she’ll be with you shortly if you want to follow me.”

My grip on my bag tightens, and I swallow the bulge that’s forming in my throat. This place feels like a sauna, and I’m thinking this fitted sheath dress wasn’t the most comfortable choice for this moment, but there’s nothing I can do about it now.

The young woman leads me down a long hallway, past offices that look like carbon copies of one another with frosted glass doors and lacquered white desks and matching potted plants, and when we get to the fifth door on the right, she stops.

“Here we are. Go on ahead and have a seat. Brienne will be with you shortly.” Her gaze is fixed on me for half a second before she returns to her desk, and I take the guest seat in “Brienne Dougray’s” office.

Her desktop is situated much like I used to have mine. Minimalist. Marble and rose quartz accents. Shiny silver-handled scissors. Cup stocked full of matching silver pens. Monitor screen so spotless you could use it as a mirror.

A silver nameplate on her desk all but stares at me, taunting almost. And I’m half-tempted to turn it away, but instead I cross my legs, fold my hands in my lap, and maintain my patience.

The faint scent of Lancôme Miracle—one of my signature scents that I've worn since my sophomore year at college—fills the room, only serving to strengthen my resolve.

This whole thing is absurd.

Beyond disturbing.

My head throbs, and I check the marble and quartz clock on the wall.

It's twenty past two already. How have I been sitting here this long? And where the hell is she? Did the receptionist tip her off?

The room begins to spin, the walls seemingly closing in on me.

Nothing made sense before, but somehow over the course of the past twenty minutes, I've just leveled up to a whole other realm of insanity.

I cross and recross my legs.

I gaze out the window for a moment, to the smattering of passing cars on an otherwise empty afternoon street.

Digging my nails into my thigh, I sit up straight and check the clock once more.

It's only been three more minutes, but it feels like it's been another hour. The knots in my stomach are almost urging me to go. To pack up. To abort this mission because something is obviously amiss.

The receptionist said "Brienne" would be with me shortly. And no professional in their right mind makes a new client wait almost a half hour to be seen.

I clear my throat and reach for my bag, digging out my phone to help keep me occupied while I wait. I'm hopeful that a distraction might quell the nerves and nausea that are digging their claws in me deeper by the second.

I swipe the screen and tap in my passcode, bringing the apps to life. And then I tap my messages—the last one to Niall, specifically, where I told him I'd be out running errands

today and asked if he needed anything. I was trying to show him that I'm okay. That I can function in the world like a normal person. I worry the recent episodes might have him pitying me again, and the last thing I want to do is take two steps back.

Also, he didn't install the security cameras over the weekend like he promised. But it wasn't his fault—he was paged into work Sunday, and when he came home, he seemed exhausted so I didn't press it. I'm hoping if I offer to do him some favors today, he might be reminded of the one he offered to do for me . . .

My message to him shows as read. He read it a minute after I sent it, but he didn't reply. Which is fine because he's busy. He has patients and appointments. He can't always stop what he's doing.

The rest of my messages are ancient. Nonexistent. No one texts me anymore. Just Niall and, on the ultrarare occasion, Enid.

I place my phone back in my bag and plant my feet flat on the floor.

I'm not going anywhere, not until I talk to this audacious lunatic.

Pressing my lips together—an old nervous habit of mine—I stare straight ahead and wait.

And wait . . .

Until a figure in the doorway fills my periphery.

I swear in a fraction of a second, as I turn my gaze in that direction, my heart comes to a full stop.

Because it isn't her.

It isn't her at all.

“Kate? What the hell are you doing here?” Niall's hands press against the doorjamb, though I can't tell if I'm blocked in or blocked from getting out. He's breathless, eyes wild and almost animalistic.

“Kate?” I ask. He stands before me, chest rising and falling as though he sprinted straight from the hospital to the Regency building. He must be so worked up, he doesn’t realize he’s just called me by his wife’s name.

“We have to go,” he says. “*Now.*”

I’m not sure why, but I find myself laughing. Maybe it’s the way he’s acting, like a character from some cut-rate prime-time drama, or the fact that there’s nothing left for me to do at this point but to find humor in what my life has become by this moment.

Niall dives toward me, his slender fingers wrapping around my wrist, and I barely have time to reach for my bag. We’re barreling down the hall of the Opal Green agency, headed toward the lobby, when I realize I’ve yet to see another soul. Not even the receptionist.

Is everyone in hiding?

“What the hell is going on?” I ask him when we burst beyond the glass doors. “And how did you know I was here?”

He doesn’t bother with the elevator, opting to lead me to the stairs instead, and we’re practically running down them.

“Please, Niall, slow down,” I say, my heels clicking against the cement steps. The humor I’d found in this situation a mere instant ago has vanished.

He slows but only slightly, and his grip on my wrist is as firm as ever, like he isn’t letting me go.

By the time we reach the sidewalk beyond the building, I spot his silver Volvo parked in a nonparking zone, the hazard lights flashing.

He gets the passenger door for me, almost shutting it on my feet as I climb in, and before I have a chance to fasten my seat belt, he’s already jumping in beside me.

I’ve never seen him this frantic.

Cool sweat blankets my body as he maneuvers into the traffic and careens between two cars before blowing through a yellow light.

“Will you please just tell me what the hell is going on?” My tone is sharp, startling, and unfamiliar to even myself.

His knuckles are white, hands taut on the wheel, and his jaw sets.

“I don’t know how I missed this.” He shakes his head, eyes focused on the traffic, and it feels like he’s talking to himself. “I don’t know how I missed the signs. They were all there. I should have known. I should have seen this coming.”

“*What* are you talking about?”

Niall’s chest is still rising and falling as though he’s finished a marathon. Or like he’s in the middle of a panic attack. And for the first time in months, I find myself scared.

No.

Terrified.

Only I haven’t the slightest clue what I’m terrified of.

And that might be the most terrifying thing of all.

Niall’s already unbuckling his seat belt by the time we fly into the driveway. He’s so distracted, he almost forgets to shift into park, the car lurching toward the garage door until he slams on the brakes.

I steady my trembling hands in my lap. My eyes sting, wet and hot. My entire world is crumbling beneath me, and I haven’t the slightest clue how or why, just that everything that *was* a few hours ago no longer *is*.

I follow him in through the back door, and he tosses his keys on the counter, careless and unlike him. And then he turns to me with an unfamiliar, almost panicked look in his eyes.

“You’re scaring me.” My small voice breaks.

He forces a breath from his nostrils before dragging his hand through his hair.

“Have a seat in the dining room,” he finally says. His expression is bordering on crestfallen, the way I imagine he looks when he’s about to deliver the worst kind of news to his

patients. “I’ll meet you there in a minute. And I’ll tell you everything.”

CHAPTER 20

There's dust on the dining room table. The grandfather clock chimes from the hallway, three times. Niall's footsteps on the second floor are heavy, hurried. Closet doors and desk drawers open and close. Papers rustle. More footsteps follow. It's almost as if he's ransacking the upstairs.

Finally, he returns, taking the chair beside me, placing a shoebox, a photo album, and a stack of papers between us. Without saying a word, he watches me, studies me like I'm some subject in his laboratory.

"What is all this?" I ask, reaching for the shoebox first.

He places his hand over mine, preventing me from exploring any of this on my own just yet.

"Your name," he says, drawing in a long breath, "is Kate Emberlin."

I squint at him. "No. Kate Emberlin is your *wife*."

The spot beneath his left cheekbone divots. "*You are my wife.*"

I'm at an extraordinary loss for words, racking my brain for any type of memory involving a wedding, vows, a kiss, a consummating night together.

But I get nothing.

The kiss we shared the other night felt as brand-new and unfamiliar as it should have, as my mind recalls no other with him. I know my memory has been shoddy at best lately, but I think I'd remember if I were married, in love, if I took vows with another person.

"I know," he begins to say. "I know this is going to sound impossible. I know this isn't going to make sense. But I have it all here. We're going to sit here together. We're going to go over everything. And we're going to find a way to fix this. Again."

Again?

“Kate, you have what’s called dissociative identity disorder.” He takes a paper from the top of the stack and slides it my way.

Examining the document, I find a marriage license for a Kate Conway and Niall Emberlin. According to this, we’ve been married three years next month.

How can someone erase over three years of their life?

“This doesn’t tell me anything,” I say.

He lifts a finger before removing the lid from the top of the shoebox. A second later, he produces a driver’s license.

The woman in the photo is undeniably me.

The name next to the photo is Kate Emberlin.

Next he digs out a birth certificate. The form states that I was born April 3, that my parents were Mark and Tricia Conway of Pleasant Hill, Iowa.

The date rings no bell.

As far as I’m concerned, Mark and Tricia are complete strangers, and I was born October 2.

“How do I know these aren’t fakes?” I ask. Niall has never given me a reason to distrust him, but given the absurdity of this claim, I have to ask every question, examine this with skepticism.

His shoulders sag as he pinches the bridge of his nose. When he glances across the table at me again, he looks like a man on the verge of losing all hope.

“Here.” He hands me a manila envelope. “All of your medical records are in there. I want you to read everything. Every last page.”

I unwind the cord on the back, opening the envelope and pouring out a thick stack of paperwork. My heart sinks when I read the name along the top of the first form.

Montblanc Psychiatric Hospital.

The name is as foreign to me as everything else in my presence, but I oblige and begin foraging through the documents, all of which are psychiatric inpatient medical records for a Kate Emberlin.

Niall's knee bounces off and on as I read, and his hands form a peak that covers the center of his face.

The clock in the hall ticks.

Tension settles between us, thick and ripe.

I start with the initial evaluation, a five-page typed document signed by a psychiatrist by the name of J. B. Corcoran.

Patient presents today as a twenty-seven-year-old female of Caucasian descent. She was referred by her family physician for an evaluation due to concerns of hallucinations and unstable emotional and cognitive status as reported by her husband, Niall . . .

Patient believes her name to be Brienne Dougray, whom her husband reports is a former personal assistant with whom she developed an intense fixation during a brief period of time in the last year . . .

Patient has no history of previous issues with identity disorders, and patient's husband reports no known drug or alcohol abuse . . .

Patient was arrested for stalking; however, the victim agreed to drop charges in lieu of a voluntary committal to Montblanc Psychiatric Hospital . . .

I cup my hand over my mouth, scanning through the remainder of the documents. But I might as well be reading about a stranger.

I don't know this woman, this Kate Emberlin.

I have no recollection of stalking anyone, of obsessing over an employee, of voluntarily committing myself to an inpatient psychiatric center.

My lower lip trembles, and Niall places his hand on mine.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “I grew up in this house, Niall. As Brienne. My grandparents were the Dougrays. I remember them. I remember my childhood. And my friends. I remember the last time I spoke to each of them. I remember our girls’ trips . . .”

He squeezes my hand to quiet me. “False memories.”

I refuse to believe that something so real could be a false memory.

“It’s all there, in your records,” he adds.

“I remember my grandmother’s perfume,” I say. “And the other night? At Baru 46? I saw one of my old friends, and she was clearly uncomfortable when she saw me. If I remember her and she remembers me . . . how is that a false memory?”

“Which friend?”

“Amber,” I say.

“I’ve never heard of that friend before.” His admission is delivered with tenderness, but it doesn’t make it sting any less. “When you were Brienne the last time, you used to harass her friends. They almost got restraining orders against you until Brienne intervened. You’re really quite lucky in that aspect.”

If what he’s saying is true, it might make sense that none of them will speak to me anymore—I was nothing more to them than a crazy woman trying to infiltrate their group.

I rifle through the medical records, searching for the section on false memories. Sure enough, it’s all outlined in great detail.

“I know you’re scared, Kate.” His voice attempts to soothe, failing. And despite the fact that he’s looking straight at me, it feels like he’s speaking to someone who isn’t here. “I know this is a lot to process. And I know you must have a million questions. But I’m here for you. We’re going to get through this. I’m not going to leave your side. We’ll fix this. Together.”

Looking at him through damp lashes, I try to form some semblance of a sentence, but it’s a near impossible task.

I don't want to believe any of this.

But Niall wouldn't lie. He's only ever had my best interests at heart. He's proven that time and again.

"I love you," he says, leaning in to press a hard if not desperate kiss against my mouth.

I don't kiss him back. I'm too numb. Too shell-shocked. Too baked in unadulterated disbelief that runs so deep it becomes me.

How can I be Kate when I remember every last detail of Brienne's life? Birthday parties. Vacations. Her first kiss with the red-haired boy across the street. An entire lifetime of vivid memories. Eyes closed, I think of my grandparents who raised me, the ones who left me this enormous house and a heart full of memories. I can still smell my grandmother's lilac perfume if I try hard enough. I can still hear my grandfather's voice, warm yet perpetually hoarse from his love affair with cigars.

"I'm not Kate," I manage to say, my voice a bare whisper that floats between us.

Niall leans away. His fist clenches against the tabletop, and he scoots back in his chair, the feet grinding against the wood below. He moves to the window, seemingly lost in thought for a moment, and then he paces the room.

"That's exactly what you said last time," he says.

Perhaps this hits too close to home for him.

He stops wearing tracks into the floor and turns to me, elbows resting on the back of the chair across the table. Hunched over and defeated, he curves a palm against his forehead and exhales.

"When Brienne Dougray called me today and told me you showed up at her office," he says, "a million thoughts ran through my head, Kate. First, I blamed myself for not recognizing that things were headed in this direction, for not seeing the signs. Then I thought about the last time you were charged with stalking. How Brienne was kind enough to drop the charges if you sought treatment. She took pity on you. I don't know a lot of people who would be that kind, do you?"

He winces. “What if she’s not feeling so merciful this time? You scared the hell out of that woman today. I mean, what were you thinking? Going to her work? I’m just grateful she called me first before calling the police. She could’ve had you arrested right there on the spot. And who knows, she might be thinking about filing a report as we speak.”

“I’m sorry you’re so upset . . . I don’t know what you want me to say.”

He buries his face in his hands. A pregnant pause situates between us. Outside, the Klingenbeards parade past, pointing at the house and talking among themselves as one of their silky dogs relieves itself on my lawn.

Looking back, I can’t think of a time they ever called me by any name: Kate or Brienne.

Same with Enid. She’s only ever called me “sweetheart” and “dear,” and I’ve never thought anything of it.

Reaching for the photo album, I tug it closer and flip to the first page.

It’s us.

On what appears to be our wedding day.

I’m dressed in a simple white sheath dress with lace sleeves, a bouquet of calla lilies in my hand. He’s in a black tux, his hand on the small of my back.

“One of the best days of my life right there,” Niall says, looking down from the other side of the table.

I flip to the next page and find a laminated marriage announcement, clipped from the *Quinnesec Daily Herald*.

We were married June 22, three years ago next month. I think of the journal entry of Kate’s when she mentioned the missed anniversary dinner.

“I wish I could remember,” I tell him. I wish I could absorb the pain in his voice, convince him not to blame himself.

I also wish I could believe any of this. Despite the evidence he's laid out before me, I'm still unsure.

"And you will." He makes his way around the table, returning to my side. Pushing the photo album away, he takes my hands in his.

"So . . . what now? I'm just supposed to go through all these records, and everything will magically come back to me?"

Niall shakes his head. "No, Kate. I'm afraid it's going to be a bit more . . . involved than that."

CHAPTER 21

Maybe I should have adjusted my expectations, but when I woke up this morning and I was still “Brienne Dougray,” to say I was disappointed in myself would be an understatement. It turns out the human mind doesn’t work that way.

I’m perched at the foot of my bed, staring at a packed suitcase while Niall showers upstairs.

I spent all last night holed up in my room, going over every last document, every last photograph, fighting like hell to remember something. Anything. I asked Niall to give me some time alone, thinking it might help me to process this, but when he came in to check on me later, he found me in tears, and then he met my tears with tears of his own—a first, at least in recent memory. I might not be able to remember the love we had before, but I can feel it now; I can see it.

And that’s got to count for something.

In twenty minutes, we’re to leave for Old Hundred, South Dakota, where he’s managed to find me an inpatient room at the Crestview Psychiatric Center. It was the closest private-pay facility we could find that had immediate availability, and while the idea of leaving here for an undetermined amount of time isn’t anything I’m looking forward to, it’s the only way to fix this.

To become Kate again.

“You about ready?” Niall stands in my doorway a few minutes later, hair still wet from his shower, the clean scent of soap filling the air. He’s in faded blue jeans and a gray polo today, a color palette that matches the mood of the day.

I rise from my bed and check the zippers on my suitcase. “Yeah.”

He looks at his watch. “It’s about a two-hour drive. We’ve got time to stop for coffee on the way.”

He makes it sound like we're going on a weekend getaway, a miniature road trip.

"I know you like that café on Porter Street," he adds. But it doesn't matter how he spins this; nothing's going to make it easy for either one of us.

"Sure." I let my hands fall to my sides, a gesture that matches the powerlessness of my mood this morning. I just want to get this over with. I just want to be me again. Whoever that is.

Niall takes my bag, wheeling it down the hall, and when we leave, he locks up. His car is already running, which tells me he's anxious.

"Who's seeing your patients today?" I ask.

"Locklear," he says.

I wonder what he's told his colleagues about me or if they know about my disorder.

I wonder if I knew them when I was Kate. Or if I cared what anyone thought. And when I'm Kate again, I wonder if they'll be able to look me in the eye without judging me for my past.

Niall takes us through the coffee drive-through on Porter Street, and within minutes we're merging onto the highway, headed west toward South Dakota, the sun rising behind us.

Niall's fingers are laced between mine as we ride in the loudest silence I've ever known. A steaming Styrofoam cup rests untouched in my right hand.

I think back to a handful of our recent conversations, when I'd asked him specifically about marriage and he'd reacted almost as though I should have known the answers to my questions. For instance, when I asked if he liked being married, he almost scoffed, replying with a quick, "Of course." And when I asked him if he ever thought he'd want to reconcile, he answered with, "More than anything."

All those times, I thought he was referring to Kate.

And all those times, he thought I was referring to us.

My mind overflows with more questions, and each question begets another question.

“Why were we separated?” I ask Niall.

He doesn’t flinch, keeps his eyes on the road. “I don’t know, Kate. We’re like any other couple. We struggled to make time for ourselves. We fought over petty things, and we let them get the best of us.”

“That doesn’t seem like anything worth separating over.”

He offers a pained half smile. “That’s what I always tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t hear it. You’ve always been stubborn that way.”

“Why did you stay around?” I ask. “After we separated?”

He swallows, eyes squinting from behind his mirrored aviators. “I came back after your attack. You needed someone around, someone to help you just in case.”

It’s the strangest thing: I can recall the moment he showed up at my door with such vividness. He was wearing scrubs, his doctor’s badge still attached, and he introduced himself before I gave him a tour.

That, too, must be a false memory.

Niall gives my hand a lasting squeeze.

“Despite our problems at the time, I was still—am still—madly in love with you.” He takes his eyes off the road for a second, turning to me.

“You signed the divorce papers,” I say, remembering the day I stumbled upon them in his room.

“I signed them early on,” he says. “I suppose I thought if I could show you that I was taking you seriously, it might make you think twice. It was a juvenile, desperate move, and for that I’m sorry. But it worked. You asked for more time as long as I promised not to hound you about it. So I didn’t. I didn’t bring it up once. I let you go at your own pace.”

The more he talks about when I was Kate, the more I find my curiosity being piqued.

“My parents,” I say. “Do they know about this?”

His mouth forms a flat line, and he pushes a breath through flared nostrils. “I’m so sorry, Kate.”

My stomach sinks before he says another word.

“Your father passed shortly after our wedding. And you and your mother haven’t been on speaking terms for well over a year.” He pats my knee. “But I’ll make a call to her first chance I get. Fill her in on everything.”

“Why aren’t we on speaking terms?” I ask.

“Your mother . . . how do I say this? She’s a textbook narcissist.” He turns to me, watching for my reaction. “Forgive the bluntness.”

I try to picture her, wondering if we have the same eyes, the same nose. If our laughs are the same.

“She’s a very self-centered person, and she has a tendency to go on these power trips,” he explains. “The woman thrives on drama, and you made the decision to distance yourself from that. Just be prepared: once she knows about this, the rest of your family will know, and somehow she’ll find a way to make it all about her.”

“Do I have any friends?” I ask. “Of my own?”

His lips purse. “You had a few good friends. There was a falling-out. You never went into detail, and it was right about the time we separated.”

“Did they reach out?” I ask. “After the attack?”

He’s quiet for a beat. “Not that I’m aware of. But again, that was such a hectic and difficult time. There’s always a chance . . .”

“You don’t have to sugarcoat any of this,” I say. “If they stopped talking to me, I’m sure they had a good reason. Sounds like maybe I was on a bit of a warpath last year . . .”

“Kate, stop. Don’t blame yourself. People end friendships over trivial things every single day. In the end, it’s not worth dwelling on if you can’t do anything about it.”

I am curious, though.

“Do you have any theories?” I’m not sure why it matters so much at this point, but it does. We’ve got two hours of highway to go, and I’ve got nothing but missing mental pages to fill.

“Honestly, I haven’t the slightest clue.”

“Was I friends with Brienne? Outside of work?” I ask.

Niall swallows. “You hired her on at your insurance agency originally. The two of you hit it off. Became friends outside the office—against my advice, I might add. Mixing business and pleasure is almost always a recipe for disaster. Anyway, you were introduced to her friends, and she was always around after that. Until, you know . . .”

“How long did she work for me?”

“Not long. Less than a year. Things kind of went south between the two of you when you started acting strangely.”

“I became her? Just like that?”

“As strange as it sounds: yes.” He switches lanes, adjusts his mirror. “Everything about you, Kate . . . was her. You became Brienne in every way possible. You started cutting your hair like hers, buying the same clothes and shoes as her. You started wearing the same perfume. Even your mannerisms, your drinks, your music tastes. At first I thought it was a phase, that you were assimilating yourself into your new group of friends, but after a while, I realized you’d taken it further than that.”

I peel my cheek from the window and roll it down.

I need air.

“You doing okay?” He looks toward me, and I don’t have to see the pained expression on his face to know it’s there.

“No,” I say. “I’m not doing okay.”

And it just might be the truest thing I’ve said in a long time.

CHAPTER 22

“We don’t have to go in yet,” Niall tells me, letting the engine idle when we arrive. “I mean, if you want to sit here for a while, we can. I know this must be difficult for you.”

The Crestview Psychiatric Center isn’t at all what I expected. It’s a hundred-year-old Gothic Revival manor in the middle of a half-gentrified residential neighborhood. A weatherworn wooden sign hangs from a post in the front yard, and there’s a small parking lot in the back; otherwise, there would be nothing differentiating it from the other homes on the block, something I assume is intentional given the fact that it’s a private facility.

I study the exterior, noting the fresh-cut grass and its diagonal pattern, the century oaks that line the street and shade the sidewalks, the potted plants and planted perennials that offer a splash of color to an otherwise foreboding brick-and-black frontage.

Sitting in the car, I watch staff enter and exit from a side door. I watch an older woman and her husband disappear inside. I watch a man lead a small mutt across the street, stopping to chat with a neighbor. And then I watch Niall—watching me.

“I hate this,” he says, breaking his silence. “Almost feels like I’m abandoning you.” Niall’s generous hands splay across his thighs, and I’m beginning to wonder if he’s just as nerve-ridden as I am. “Didn’t think I’d be doing this again.” He turns to me. “But everything’s going to be fine. Just like last time. And we’ll be together again before you know it. You’re resilient, Kate. You’ve been through more than anyone else I know, and you always come out on top. We’re going to beat this. We’re going to get our life back.”

Taking his hand, I thread my fingers through his.

“I’m ready,” I say, even if it isn’t true.

I think about the other Brienne—the real Brienne. And how awful it must be for her to have experienced the horror of someone taking her identity.

I can't do that to her again.

And I can't do that to Niall.

He's clearly still in love with Kate—with me.

And he deserves to have her back.

PART 2

NIALL

CHAPTER 23

“Here we are,” the center administrator says, inserting a set of keys into the lock on the door. Her name is Cynthia Braddish, and she walks like a woman on a power trip, but she drives a dented Kia—I saw her climbing out of it when we first arrived. Still, I don’t hold it against her. In fact, I find those kinds of contradictions fascinating. Everything you need to know about people can be found in the things they *don’t* talk about. “We’ve assigned you to room seventeen.”

The room is small, ten by ten if that. She’s got a decent-sized window, fixed of course, with room-darkening curtains, and there’s a bathroom in the hall that she’ll share with three other rooms, much like a college dorm setting.

Crestview is a twenty-eight-bed operation in the middle of some South Dakotan town no one’s ever heard of, and it’s 100 percent private pay. They cater mostly to the well-to-do, those wanting to hide away while they get better, those wanting to fly under the radar—and that’s exactly what we need, or the entirety of Quinnesec Bluff will know our business by the end of the weekend.

I wheel her bag to the corner of her room and park it beside a small dresser that appears to be secured to the wall.

She takes a seat on the side of a twin mattress. There are no headboards. Nothing metal or ornamental or potentially hazardous. A frameless oil painting on simple canvas is mounted to the far wall, but other than that, it’s austerity at its finest—which is exactly what she needs after everything she’s gone through in the last twenty-four hours.

“How long was I away last time?” she asks. There’s a childlike sadness in her eyes as she stares up at me with her deep-set gaze.

“It wasn’t longer than a month,” I say.

“We’ll do our best to make your path to wellness as efficient as possible,” the center administrator says from the

doorway, her posture rigid. “But we do ask that you try your best to take it one day at a time.”

Cynthia’s gaze passes between the two of us, like she’s anxious for me to leave before one of us changes our mind. The sooner I get out of here, the sooner she can bleed us dry. This place isn’t cheap. Six hundred twenty dollars a night, last I checked. I could put her up at a Four Seasons for less than that, but this is what she needs.

It’s the way it has to be.

It’s the only way.

“Mrs. Emberlin, we have you scheduled for your complete physical evaluation in an hour and a half. They’re getting ready to serve lunch in about twenty minutes. I can walk you to the dining hall now if you’re hungry?” Cynthia motions for us to exit the room. “Dr. Emberlin, you said you had some records for me?”

“Right,” I say. “I’ll grab them as soon as we’re finished here.”

“Perfect. I have a few forms for you to sign before you leave as well.” She redirects her attention, pivoting on the ball of her foot. “And Mrs. Emberlin, you do understand that your husband is acting as your agent in accordance with your psychiatric advance directive, and that while your stay technically falls under voluntary committal, you are not permitted to come and go as you please.”

“It’s just a technicality,” I add. I go to her, taking her hands in mine. “And I’ll come see you every weekend. You’ll be home before you know it.”

“Thirty days, Niall,” she says. Her glassy blues squeeze shut, and she bites her lip to stop it from quivering, a far departure from her determined mind-set in the car a short while ago.

“You can do this. You’ve done it before,” I say. I almost add, “Remember?” But then I catch myself.

Of course she doesn’t remember.

She won't.

She can't.

And she'll never.

Because it never happened.

"I love you," I lie, cupping her cheek before depositing an unfeeling kiss on her trembling mouth. She doesn't want to be here, and I don't blame her. I saw the medicated zombies perched on chairs in the "social hall" on our way in here. I heard the wailing screams coming from behind closed doors. I saw the orderlies running down the halls with syringes full of tranquilizers in their hands. I felt the burn of airborne bleach and antiseptic as it filled my lungs.

She doesn't belong here.

But she doesn't know that.

"Mrs. Emberlin," Cynthia says, "I'd hate for you to miss lunch as we don't serve dinner until six PM. Why don't you come with me?"

She throws her arms around me, clinging to me like a child silently begging not to be left at summer camp, and then she lets me go.

I watch her trek down the hall, my chest bursting with pride at the fact that I'm a goddamned genius and I pulled this off—not that I doubted myself for one second.

CHAPTER 24

“If you’ll just sign here.” Cynthia presses a garish red fingernail against a highlighted line at the bottom of a legal-sized sheet filled with fine print.

I have no idea what I’m signing. I haven’t read any of it, only pretended, ensuring it seems as though I’m taking my time. All I know (and all that matters) is that I’m committing her, and they won’t let her leave without my permission. By the time they realize what’s going on, I’ll be long gone. Unreachable and untraceable, my pockets fat with Dougray dollar bills.

“And did you have a preferential method of payment?” Cynthia asks. “We accept all major credit cards as well as personal and bankers’ checks.”

I retrieve the cashier’s check from my wallet that I’d had prepared yesterday afternoon as I was putting the finishing touches on this piece of my plan. It took a bit of finagling, transferring money from one of Brienne’s accounts to another and stopping into her local bank branch armed with Photoshopped documents designating me as Brienne Dougray’s power of attorney, but I managed to move twenty grand around without getting any guff.

It’s amazing how easy it is to get people to trust you when you’re dressed in hospital scrubs and offer a compassionate “good doctor” smile to anyone who so much as looks your way.

Perception is everything.

And at the end of the day, people believe what they want to believe, and no one wants to believe someone who looks so nice could be anything but.

“Perfect.” Cynthia records the check number in her computer and places the check in a nearby leather pouch. “And you’d mentioned medical records?”

I produce the manila folder I'd grabbed from the back of my car when we first came in.

I'm nothing if not prepared.

"Oh." Cynthia nips the inner corner of her lip. "These aren't sealed. Technically they have to be sealed, or they have to come directly from the previous provider to us; otherwise we can't use them."

I'm well aware.

But I need to buy some time.

"Yes, well, everything happened so quickly. All I had on hand were our personal copies," I say. "This should hopefully get you by until I can put in the request with the last hospital."

Cynthia gives me a nod and nothing more. Legally she can't use these records, but she's not about to discharge us and lose out on this easy windfall.

"If there's no further paperwork, I should head back to Iowa." I stand and check my watch. I've got a to-do list a mile long.

"Of course," Cynthia says. She walks me to the front door. "Your wife is in good hands, Dr. Emberlin. We'll take excellent care of her. Dr. Schneider is one of the best; in fact, he's published several papers on dissociative identity disorder."

I clear my throat.

That fact was one I wasn't exactly aware of when I chose this facility.

I reply with a quick and cordial, "Why do you think I chose Crestview?"

"Feel free to call for updates anytime you need, day or night," she says. "Mrs. Emberlin did sign a release and you're listed on her directive, so you're privy to any and all her treatment plan and progress notes."

I manage a polite smile despite the fact that this woman is wasting my time.

I've got quite the to-do list.

"Thank you," I say, reaching for the door, which happens to be locked. A small sign on pink paper instructs me to press the button to my left to be buzzed out.

This might not be Fort Knox, but it'll suffice, and Brienne's so tame and obedient, she's not going to try something crazy—like escaping.

I'm not sure how long this will take or how the hell these people are going to convince her she's someone who never existed in the first place, but by the time anyone gets so much as an inkling that something isn't adding up, it won't be my problem.

A woman from behind a glass window buzzes me out, and I greet the Saturday late-morning sun with a shit-eating grin on my face.

Climbing into my glistening Volvo, which is a far cry from anything I'd ever drive by choice, I start the engine, roll the driver's side window all the way down, and crank the volume on the classic rock station buried behind the NPR channel in my presets.

The wind messes up my perfectly coiffed hair, and for a second it feels good to be a little less than polished.

The rush.

I live for this rush.

And I can breathe again.

God, I can breathe.

I drive two straight hours, high as a kite on a cocktail of adrenaline and self-satisfaction, and I don't think of Brienne.

Not once.

CHAPTER 25

The banks are all closed by the time I get back to Quinnesec Bluff that afternoon, but it doesn't matter. It just gives me more time to get everything in order for next week.

There's a locked file cabinet in Brienne's office, one that I'm positive contains more bank statements and any and all account numbers I've yet to locate.

If only I could find a damn key.

Worst-case scenario, I'll call a locksmith.

But this is exactly why I needed to have her committed—so I could gain full access to every file, every drawer, every record she has. It's impossible to go rifling through someone's private effects when they never leave their home. A handful of times I'd considered doing my dirty work when she was out cold with one of her migraines, but one misstep and all this would be for nothing.

When I get home, I'm famished. I snatch a coupon from a stack of mail and order a pizza. It's too bad they don't deliver beer. If I have to swirl and sniff another glass of cabernet, I'm going to gouge my eyes out with one of those flimsy self-defense weapons Brienne carries around on her key chain.

Grabbing my phone again, I text Samantha the address to Brienne's house and tell her to grab a case of Old Milwaukee on her way. She replies in an instant, ever the accommodating girlfriend, and I settle into the couch in the room Brienne refers to as "the back parlor."

So many times I wanted to scream in her face when she referred to the *parlor* or the *scullery* or mentioned washing the windows in the third-floor *turret*.

Who talks like that?

That's the problem with people like her, people who grew up in these perfect bubbles with their money and their social media-worthy first-world problems—they have no sense of

reality. They're completely out of touch, and they have no idea how they sound to people like me—people who've spent more than a hot minute in the real world.

My stepmom once told me that privilege is an illusion.

And she would know.

She grew up in this very house, with the very same people who raised Brienne.

Now, Sonya wasn't perfect and she sure as hell was no saint, but she was the closest thing to a mother I ever had, and she was the only one who stepped up to the plate for me when I was nine and Dad died from an "accidental overdose." From what I know, she lost custody of Brienne permanently when Brienne was eight or nine. (Drugs or something—which she always refuted.) But when Sonya got clean and tried to make amends with her parents so she could be in her daughter's life, they'd have no part of it.

But it's their loss (may they rot in hell), because Sonya is one hell of a woman.

Or at least she was.

Pancreatic cancer stole her from me a couple of years back. It hit her hard and took her fast. I barely had a chance to say goodbye, and then she was gone. But before she died, she told me stories of her childhood. Of the kind of wealth and privilege trailer trash bottom-feeders like myself could only dream of. It was mostly material in nature, of course. Imported luxury vehicles. Name-brand clothing. Trips to Disneyland on a whim. Dinners at only the best restaurants.

But the thing that stood out to me the most was when she told me her dying wish was that I could someday know what it was like to lay my head on a pillow at night and not have a single care in the world.

It was how she grew up. But it wasn't how she lived. And ultimately it wasn't how she died.

And I decided then and there that I wanted that more than anything.

For me.

For her.

Sonya's parents passed only a few years before that, and Sonya estimated they were worth at least ten million if not more. As Arnaud and Elisabetta Dougray's only child, that money should have been hers. Instead, they disowned their daughter and left it all to Brienne. Sonya always resented the way her parents replaced her with her own daughter.

The entire thing was infuriatingly unjustified, she always said. And I never blamed her.

Where I come from, we might not drink cabernet every night or catch the opera when it's touring through town, but we do take care of our own.

I wasn't Sonya's, at least not by blood, but she never made me feel that way. She fed and clothed me from a young age. Taught me how to drive. Worked two minimum-wage jobs with a revolving door of handsy bosses to make sure I had school supplies every year and a roof over my head that didn't leak.

The way I look at it, I'm righting some wrongs.

Ever since the time I caught one of Sonya's boyfriends stealing from us and slashed his tires, she always called me her "little vigilante."

I think she'd take great pride in knowing nothing's changed.

I'm fifteen minutes into some enlightening crime documentary while simultaneously watching surgery videos on YouTube when Samantha texts to tell me she's at the back door.

"That was fast," I say when I greet her a second later. Hooking my arm around the small of her back, I pull her in before Enid Davies has a chance to notice anything—though Enid would probably think Samantha was Brienne from afar. She's a damn near perfect replica. "You miss me or something?"

I kiss Samantha hard, biting her lip.

“Ouch.” She pulls away, lifting her hand to her mouth and checking for blood.

I’m buzzing. Buzzing with pride. With life. With the anticipation of our wildest dreams coming true. “Sorry. You know how I get when I’m excited.”

“I forgive you.” She fights a smirk and places the beer in my arms.

I drop the case on the counter and pull Sam against me once more, burying my face in her neck and nipping at the soft flesh that smells like the bottle of Brienne’s perfume I found on her dresser the night after I moved in. She was in the shower, and I took the opportunity to snoop through her things, snapping pictures of purses and perfumes and clothing items for reference.

“The perfume. It’s heavy, don’t you think?” I wrinkle my nose.

“But I like it.” Sam lifts her wrist to her nose. “It’s pretty. And you got it for me, remember?”

“Kind of gives me a headache.” I rub my hands along her sides. “You know I like that other one you always wear. The stuff in the pink bottle.”

I have to admit, Sam looks gorgeous like this . . . tailored clothes, full face of department store makeup, expensive haircut, nails done. She even carries herself differently, head held high and all that. A far cry from the girl who grew up in the trailer next to mine in some dog-food-scented town no one’s ever heard of in northeast Nebraska.

But I’d never tell her that.

I’ll take her anyway I can. Dolled up. Dressed down. She’s the love of my life, and I wouldn’t trade her for anything in the world . . . which is why I’m about to give her the world.

The most loyal person I’ve ever known, Sam’s had my back from the moment we met—when Sonya moved us into the Summer Winds Mobile Home Court, and she rode her pink

bike with the missing streamers on the left handle over to say hi and ask if we needed any help.

She came in for some store-brand mac and cheese.

I told her about my dad dying the year before.

She told me about her older brothers and their friends always picking on her, to which I promptly offered to kick their asses (she declined).

I told her about the stuck-up punks at the school I attended in the next town over.

She told me she'd introduce me to some of her friends when school started again in August.

The two of us were inseparable from day one.

The best of friends.

And now? Her loyalty's about to pay off in spades. She's going to reap every last benefit of this entire thing right alongside me, where she's always been.

Besides, at the end of the day, I couldn't have done any of this without her, even if she doesn't know it.

The doorbell rings, and I give Sam a quick smack on the ass before grabbing my wallet.

Pizza. Beer. The girl I love. And an impending windfall.

It doesn't get any better than this.

CHAPTER 26

My phone rings in the back pocket of my scrubs as I'm headed down the fourth floor of the cardiac unit Monday. We've been called for an emergency transfer, and if this sad sack beside me sees me checking my phone while we're en route, he'll report me to our department head.

Brian's been dying to get me canned since the day I started last fall, when the potbellied sloth caught me coming out of one of the physicians' sleep rooms.

Anyone else would've looked like the cat that ate the canary, but I mastered the art of the straight face a lifetime ago, beginning with the bullies who tried to make my life a living hell when I moved to Nebraska, and most recently when I landed this job after having been fired from the last one.

"You're not supposed to be in there," he said—as if I needed to be reminded that I'm a lowly patient transporter and not a doctor.

I yawned and mumbled some half-assed excuse about being up all night with my (nonexistent) sick kid and told him it wouldn't happen again.

Hell, I'd have told him I was abducted by aliens if it meant not telling him the truth—that I was in search of a doctor's badge.

It took a few tries, but I managed to find one lying outside the laundry facility about a week into my employment at the hospital, left behind by a cardiologist by the name of Niall Emberlin. His photo showed him as skinny and pale, hair white as snow, thick folds around his nose and mouth despite looking like he'd never smiled a day in his life.

It was nothing an hour of Photoshop couldn't handle.

All I had to do was make a copy, cover his photo with one of mine, change the department name, and laminate it.

I've always thought it's funny how things work out. My entire life, I've been what my stepmom always called a "manifestor." She was always amazed at how I'd come up with a goal, put my intentions out there, and then sit back and watch it magically come together. I never pretended to agree with her or understand how this manifesting business worked. All I knew was that anytime I wanted something, I did everything in my power to make it happen.

The crazy thing is, I moved to Quinnesec Bluff with an intention to maneuver my way into Brienne's life so I could take what was owed to Sonya and honor her memory, but I had no plan to put that intention in place. And then one day, completely out of the blue, the plan practically fell from the sky and landed right at my feet.

Six months ago, Brienne was attacked outside her office and left for dead. When someone found her lying in the alley outside her office and called 911, where's the first place they took her?

The hospital.

And who transported her?

Me.

She was unconscious in those first weeks. Didn't remember much. Struggled with short-term memory loss. Or at least this is what I was able to glean when I accessed her medical file using Emberlin's badge to log in to the system.

It was an ordinary Tuesday night when I passed her room and overheard two of her friends standing outside chatting about how she needed to get a roommate, how she couldn't live in that big house of hers alone.

I'll never forget making eye contact with one of them (whom I'd later come to know as Marisol) and the look she shot me before she told me to mind my own business.

Pretentious little snot.

It wasn't part of my plan, but I decided then and there that she'd be the first to go once I got my foot in the door.

And she was.

Brienne was barely home but a week or two when I sent a handful of Photoshopped nudes from her spoofed phone number to Marisol's boyfriend's number (which took me all of three seconds to find on the internet).

I don't know how many times I checked Craigslist and various rental websites in the weeks that followed Brienne's discharge from the hospital, but the roommate ad must've been less than two hours old when I responded.

We met the next day, I in my scrubs with my doctor's badge prominently displayed and she in leggings and a cardigan accessorized by dark bags under her eyes from an obvious lack of sleep.

I held my breath as we made small talk, and I breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't ask me to fill out a formal background check (her first mistake).

That's the power of the badge.

And it's a power I'm going to miss when this is all over.

Lying on the spot has become a bit of a specialty of mine over the years. I wasn't quite thirteen when I realized how many doors would open for you if you simply told people what they wanted to hear.

No one's interested in the truth. Most of us just think we are.

Sonya taught me that.

At the end of the day, we just want to believe whatever makes us feel good inside. Whatever makes us feel safe. Whatever lets us sleep at night. It's a fact I've always used to my advantage.

My phone buzzes again by the time we get to the patient's room.

Monitors are going off.

Alarms are beeping.

Nurses are rushing around the room in a blur of patterned scrubs and silent shoes.

“Where the hell have you guys been?” One of the cardiologists spits his words at us, his tone laced in condescension and verbal arsenic. What I wouldn’t give to jack him across his smug red face. “We called for you five minutes ago.”

“We came as fast as we could, sir,” my sackless colleague says, keeping his eyes averted as we disengage the wheel locks on the patient’s bed.

He isn’t lying. We were in the opposite corner of the hospital, messing around by the vending machines when we got the call. I’d have sprinted, but I didn’t want to give Brian a heart attack.

We wheel the patient down the hall, transporting him to the cardiac intensive care unit. The nurses shoo us out of there as soon as the wheels are locked and the bed is in position, and Dr. Red Face gives me a quiet sneer as we pass.

I have to say, not all doctors are like him.

There are some decent ones. Like Dr. Lucas in Peds. That’s who I’ve modeled my Dr. Niall Emberlin persona after. There’s this gentleness and softheartedness about him that doesn’t come organically to me. And on top of that, the guy’s a modern-day George Clooney, who makes all the baby mamas show up to their appointments in lipstick and heels, as if they don’t dress in stretch pants and graphic tees every other day.

He bought me lunch one day, too. He was in a hurry and asked if he could cut in front of me in the cafeteria. By the time I realized he’d paid for my meal, he was already gone.

A man like that is impossible not to like.

Impossible not to trust.

By the time I get back to the transport office, Brian is nowhere to be found. I must have lost him somewhere on the way. Knowing him, he’s hanging out at one of the nurses’ stations, oblivious to the fact that they’re busy as hell and have no desire to shoot the breeze with him. I mean, how can a man

not notice that a woman has disengaged herself from a conversation? That she's only half listening? It's all about the nuances. The little things. If she's playing with her hair or she can't stop smiling, she's into you. If she sighs or acts distracted, get the hell away because she doesn't have time for you.

It's so simple. Honestly. Too simple.

Plopping into one of the rolling chairs, I lean to the side and slide my phone from my pocket before kicking my feet onto the desktop.

One missed call and a voice mail to go along with it.

I recognize the South Dakota area code and hit "Play," and in an instant a woman's voice fills my ear. "Dr. Schneider would like you to come in for Kate's next appointment. Please call us back with your availability . . ."

I'll call them later, stress to them that I can't miss too much work, and then I'll push it off until this weekend. I'll have to talk to Brienne, of course, tell her how much I love and miss her, make sure she isn't beginning to question things too much, but that should buy me more time.

My original supervisor was recently replaced with a man aptly named Dick, who likes to crack his invisible whip and gets pissy anytime Brian asks for time off. I imagine he'd be the same way with me, so I intend to lie low.

The biggest concern I have at this point is how long they're going to let me drag my feet on her medical records. Everything I gave them was falsified, painstakingly copied and pasted and retyped from various documents I found online. I even managed to find a logo on a now-defunct private psychiatric hospital that the state shut down years ago. All their medical records were sent to some central processing place out of Georgia, and requests have to go through some automated system where they state it "may take up to six weeks" to receive your copies.

I can't imagine they'll kick Brienne out of the facility as long as her account is current and she's actively participating

in her treatment. I just have to be careful to keep my excuses straight, to say all the right things when they ask about the status of the records.

I'm not worried.

And honestly, I just need to get through the next couple of weeks.

"Feet off the desk." It's Brian. "This is a hospital, man. Gotta keep it sanitary."

I let my sneakers linger long enough that his nose twitches, and then I drop my feet to the ground. "You're right. Sorry about that."

We sit in silence, as we do most of the time since the two of us have very little to say to each other. The few times we have had remotely in-depth talks, I excused myself from them as soon as he started talking about his live-action role-playing club, his collection of first-edition J. R. R. Tolkien novels, and his addiction to *World of Warcraft*.

My leg bounces when I check the time. I've got another half hour until lunch.

I page through an oncology medical journal I swiped from one of the break rooms the other day. I suppose I don't need to keep reading up on this as I no longer need to play a role for Brienne, but I'm beginning to find this stuff fascinating.

I've got a handful of phone calls to make on my break today, which means I'll need to shove a food court sandwich down my throat and sit in my Volvo in the west parking lot taking care of business.

But we get another page for a transport on the OB floor, and Brian exhales, as if he's annoyed at the fact that he has to do his job.

I'm in a playful mood today.

Think I'll make him run.

CHAPTER 27

I have a cigar on the back steps Tuesday night as the locksmith does his thing, and then I pay him in cash before all but shoving him out the door, appreciating the subtle irony in the fact that I lock up behind him. It doesn't take much to amuse me these days, and there are moments I feel like I'm walking on air, like nothing could possibly bother me. It's got to be that feeling Sonya always talked about—the not-having-a-care-in-the-world feeling.

After heading back to Brienne's office, I take a seat in the creaky wooden chair and pull out the first vertical file.

Taxes.

I shove them aside and move on to the next.

Business licenses, permits, and insurance sales certifications.

Next.

I'm six more file folders deep when I finally come across the golden goose: her retirement portfolio.

The most recent statement is two months old, and I count the zeroes twice to make sure I'm reading this right. I knew Brienne Dougray was loaded, thanks to her grandparents. I just didn't know she was *this* loaded.

\$13,358,000.

Thirteen's never been a lucky number for me, but I find no reason to get upset about this.

I crack the lid of her laptop next, and I'm gifted with a pleasant surprise when it doesn't prompt me for a password.

Smirking, I think of Sonya and how proud she would be that I had the courage to go for this, to right these wrongs in her honor.

I'm the man I am today because of Sonya and no one else.

The good, the bad, and everything in between—it's all her.

I learned the art of negotiation by listening to her phone calls with the power company whenever our electric payment was late. I learned the power of a soft, apologetic tone when she'd fake a less-than-great experience at a roadside diner and earn us a couple of free take-home meals for tomorrow's dinner. I learned how to leverage all the authority in relationships by watching her manipulate her boyfriends with what she sweet-talked them into believing was love.

Pulling up an internet browser, I type in the website listed in the letterhead of Brienne's most recent statement. Once the page loads, I click on "Sign In." Her email address populates automatically as the username, but the password is blank. I hover the cursor over the box, hoping it'll ask if I want to use a saved password, but nothing comes up.

But it's not the end of the world.

I click on "Forgot My Password," and in under thirty seconds, Brienne's in-box dings. Just like that, I've got a link to click on to reset her log-in credentials.

It's so easy it's almost taking all the fun out of this.

I type in a nonsense password, though one I'll be able to remember, and a second later, I'm greeted with a welcome page and a myriad of buttons prompting me to check the latest account activity, download recent statements, or request transfers.

My fingertips are hot to the touch, electric adrenaline making its way through every part of me.

It's a rush like nothing else.

Grabbing a notebook and pen from the corner of her desk, I record every last account number along with their corresponding balances, and I rip the page out and tuck it in my pocket—an added precaution in case I get caught up in all this excitement and forget something.

Next, I click on "Request Transfer."

A pop-up warns me all about the tax repercussions of cashing out certain accounts early, and then it asks if I want to proceed.

I check the box next to “Yes,” and on the following page, I request a paper check be sent to Brienne’s home address.

Please allow 7–10 business days for your request to be processed. If you have not received your check after 10 business days, please call our customer-support line.

That’s going to be cutting it close, but it’s nothing to break a sweat over. Quick on my feet, I can pivot with the best of them. I can turn on a dime. Been doing it my entire life.

Leaning back in the chair, I hook my hands behind my neck and stretch until my shoulders pop and the hint of tension in my upper back releases, and then I head to the kitchen to grab another beer.

By the time I’ve taken a couple of king-sized swigs, my phone rings. A South Dakota area code fills the screen, and I realize I forgot to call them back yesterday.

Summoning my inner Dr. Lucas, I clear my throat, put the beer aside, and take the call.

“Dr. Emberlin speaking,” I answer, my tone neutral and professional.

“Hi, Dr. Emberlin, this is Nancy with Crestview,” a woman says. “I left you a message yesterday about—”

“Yes, I’m so sorry about that. I actually worked a double, covered for a colleague. Gosh, I’ve been sleeping all day.” I add an apologetic chuckle to my gentle tone. “I did check my schedule, and unfortunately, I won’t be able to move things around for the rest of the week, but I could get up there first thing Saturday if that works?”

She’s quiet for a second and then asks me to hold. When she returns, she informs me that Dr. Schneider is off this Saturday, but he’s agreed to come in from eight to nine for this appointment.

I don't like the patronizing undercurrent of her words or the fact that she's insinuating he's doing *me* a favor when I'm shelling out the big bucks that pad his paycheck, but I swallow my pride and let it go.

"I'll be there. You have my word," I say. "By the way, how's she doing?"

"You'll need to speak with one of our nurses," Nancy says. "Let me give you Diane's voice mail. She's with a patient right now."

Before I can thank her, she's transferred me. I leave a message after the tone, identifying myself and asking for an update on the status of my wife. I also ask that she have "Kate" call me when she gets a chance. I'm honestly surprised she hasn't yet—though maybe it isn't allowed. If that's the case, I'll have to step up my game, show more effort in the concerned-husband department.

I grab my beer from the counter as the back door swings open and Sam enters. Her heels click against the hardwood floor, and she's dressed like she just left the office.

Really? She couldn't have changed before coming here?

"You didn't have to stay all dressed up for me, babe," I say, taking her in my arms.

"You're cute." Sam chuckles under her breath and drops her fake designer bag on the kitchen table before sliding off her heels. Until meeting Brienne, I'd never heard of Goyard, and some quick research proved they don't sell their products online. If I wanted the real deal, I was going to have to call Barneys in New York City or the like. Thank God for knockoffs and resale websites. "I'm pretty sure you'll take me any way you can have me."

"You put in your notice yet?" I change the subject.

She frowns. I know how much she liked her job and how much it meant to her to finally feel like she was someone in the world. If a person starts at the bottom, they tend to stay at the bottom. People like Sam and me don't tend to have the brightest of futures given our initial circumstances and less

than privileged upbringings, and it's a crying shame because Sam was born with a heart of gold. It's her best quality—especially when it's directed at me—but it's also her biggest flaw. In fact, it's one of the reasons I couldn't quite tell her every detail about what it is we're doing here in Quinnesec Bluff.

“Yesterday,” she says, collapsing in one of the nearby chairs. “I gave them my notice yesterday.”

“Come on, Sam. Cheer up. Don't be sad. You had a good run there, but it's time to move on.”

“I liked my job.” She chews on her thumbnail, a dirty habit that makes her look nothing like Brienne in this moment.

“For the first time in your life, you don't need to work anymore. And for the first time in my life, I can finally take care of you. Let's enjoy this.”

Initially I told her I had family here that I was looking to reconnect with, that my mom was from here and I wanted to get in touch with her relatives, feel closer to her in that way. Sam thought it was sweet of me and jumped on board with the plan to move here. No questions asked.

I had no problem landing a job at the hospital, making fifteen bucks an hour transporting sick people from room to room, but Sam struggled to land even an interview at the local Burger King.

It wasn't her fault, though.

I got into some trouble back home years ago, took a couple of jobs as a middleman in some stolen car operation this guy I knew was running out of the back of his mechanic shop. Long story short, Sam took the fall for me (all of her own accord, the angel) and did some prison time at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women. As a result, she's a bit less hireable than she once was. Everybody loves Sam the first time they meet her. With her sugary voice and bright-green eyes and infectious smile, she can ace an interview like no one's business. But people don't look at her the same once

they get her background check. They tell her they'll call her back, and then they ghost her.

It took some convincing, but I talked her into applying for jobs under an alias. Once she finally agreed, I whipped up a carefully tailored résumé, applied for a handful of jobs on her behalf, and maxed out a couple of stolen credit cards, surprising her with a new wardrobe and look to go with her career-woman persona.

The apartment at the Harcourt was as much a treat for her as it was a necessity for me.

I told Sam I was working on the side as a live-in caretaker for an elderly woman named Eleanor, which was why I couldn't live with her. And I needed Brienne to think someone else was living as her so she would start doubting her sanity and ultimately believe me when I told her she was Kate Emberlin.

I don't love lying to Sam. She doesn't deserve it. She's the only person on this earth who would take a bullet for me, and that loyalty isn't lost on me. But her moral compass was going to get in the way of this entire plan, and for that reason, I couldn't have her in on it. I'm hopeful someday she'll realize I did this all for her. And for us. So we could have the future we've only ever dreamed of. So we could rest our heads at night without a care in the world.

This week, "Eleanor" is visiting her brother and his family in Minnesota, which is why I've finally allowed Sam to set foot in this house.

I've managed to convince Sam that I'm rolling in the dough working for this fictional elderly lady, that I'm pulling in the equivalent of two generous full-time incomes.

Sam exhales as she stares ahead lost in thought, her shoulders falling. "It was fun being her."

Cold sweat runs down my back. "Her?"

"Brienne," Sam says. "That fake name you gave me. It was like I was living someone else's life for a few months. And it was fun being someone else, you know? When I was

her, people looked at me different. They treated me different. Better, I mean.”

“I’d take you over *her* any day of the week.” I go to Sam, cupping her chin in my hand and angling her mouth to mine. I lower my lips to hers and give her a sweet, moderated kiss this time. No blood, no biting.

A golden heart might be Sam’s weakness, but *she* happens to be mine.

Her mouth smiles against my kiss, and her posture relaxes—as it should. Life’s about to get very sweet very soon for her. The life I’ve always promised her is within arm’s reach, and she doesn’t even know it’s coming.

Over the next week, my elderly charge is going to tragically pass (peacefully and in her sleep, of course), and I’m going to feign shock when I tell Sam the dear old biddy left *everything* to me.

I won’t tell her an amount—just that she’s never going to have to work or want for anything another day in her life.

“Come on,” I say, nodding toward the TV room, or the “back parlor” as Brienne would say.

We cozy up on the couch, and I let her have the remote. My mind’s too busy to focus on TV anyway.

“You’re in a generous mood tonight,” she says as she tosses the clicker aside and climbs into my lap.

She hasn’t seen generous yet.

I’m seconds from moving her hand to the growing bulge in my sweats when the doorbell rings. Sam climbs off me, and I mute the TV.

It’s seven o’clock, and I’m not expecting anyone.

“Stay here,” I tell her, reaching for the remote and turning the volume up. I’m not sure who could possibly be stopping by unannounced, but the TV should drown out any conversation I might not want her to hear.

I step lightly down the hall until I get a clear shot of the front door.

Oh, good God.

It's just Enid.

I'm in sweatpants and a white T-shirt, but she's already seen me through the clear glass window—no time to change into something more befitting a *prestigious doctor*. I do have matching satin pajama sets with accented piping, but those were just for show, something to wear around Brienne. They cost a small fortune, too. Every time I wore them, I felt like a schmuck. A ridiculously comfortable schmuck, but still a schmuck.

"Enid, hi," I say when I get the door. I make a passive-aggressive glance toward my watch, but the oblivious woman doesn't notice. "Everything okay?"

"I was just coming by to ask you that very question," she says, wrinkled lips pursed flat.

I chuckle. If you laugh at someone when they're not trying to be funny, it gnaws away at their confidence just enough to make them doubt themselves—another something I picked up from Sonya years ago.

"I haven't seen Brienne in days," she says.

Leaning against the doorjamb, I rest my forehead against a balled fist. When delivering some news, a bit of melodrama goes a long way with people like this—people who feel entitled to the details of other people's personal tragedy.

"What? What is it?" Enid asks, the impatient old dame. Her narrowed eyes search mine, and I'm pretty sure she's holding her breath as she waits for my response.

"Please keep this between us," I say, voice so low it's almost a whisper. "But she had a bit of a *breakdown* last week."

Enid sucks in a gasp. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. She's getting the help she needs."

“Is she close by?” she asks. “Can I visit? Send flowers at least? Oh, that poor thing. After everything she’s been through. And she seemed to be doing so well! She was coming and going more, chatting . . . I thought . . .”

“We all thought she was getting better,” I say, impressed with how convincing I sound. I’m laughing at myself on the inside. Dying laughing. “I think she might have pushed herself too fast. These things happen. I see it every day with my patients.”

Enid nods, toying with the intricate diamond cross pendant hanging from her neck. It doesn’t matter what you say; if people believe you’re a doctor, most of the time they won’t argue with you when you make sweeping generalizations that sound like they’re rooted in intelligence.

“She’s at a private facility in another state,” I tell Enid, hoping she assumes that Brienne wanted to recover in private. “But I’m going to see her this weekend. I can bring flowers for you if you’d like? I know she’d love that.”

“Would you?” she asks. “I’d appreciate that. I know she doesn’t have a lot of family . . .”

Oh, Enid.

If she only knew.

“Of course,” I say, making a mental note to stop for a five-dollar gas-station bouquet of carnations on the way next time.

“Please keep me posted, will you?” she asks, ever the typical retiree with loose lips and way too much time on her hands. She moved into her house only a month or so before I became Brienne’s tenant, but it didn’t take her long to start asking around and sticking her nose in everyone’s business.

Some people might say that makes her neighborly.

I say that makes her a liability.

CHAPTER 28

“You’re not eating.” I’m seated across from Brienne at a Podunk diner on the south side of Old Hundred Saturday morning. I managed to make her day by requesting a two-hour pass after our session with Schneider. Figured it’s the least I can do, and I need to leave here today on a high note. Can’t have her hope and determination flatlining this early in the game. “Is it the food? You want to order something else?”

She picks at her rubbery yellow scrambled eggs with the thin tines of her water-spotted fork.

“I haven’t had much of an appetite since I’ve been here,” she says. “Everything just tastes . . . different.”

Yep. Mass-produced food usually does.

“Would you like pancakes instead, dear?” I lift my arm, like I’m trying to catch our waitress’s attention.

“No, no. It’s fine.” She sets her fork down and picks up a triangle of buttered wheat toast. The crumbs stick to the sides of her mouth as she chews, but she manages to smile. She’s trying to show me she’s in good spirits.

I reach across the table, slithering my arm between juice glasses and bone-colored plastic plates, and I place my hand over hers.

“I’m worried about you,” I say. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re looking a little gaunt.”

“I’ll be fine.” She dabs her mouth with her paper napkin. Brienne takes a few more bites, and I catch her staring into space a couple of times.

“Penny for your thoughts.” I say the words an endearing, concerned husband would say to his poor wife.

Brienne sits straighter, taking a sip of pallid orange juice that’s more water than anything else. “I just keep thinking about that notebook.”

Ah, yes. Kate Emberlin's diary.

That project was quite the undertaking. First, I had to collect as many handwriting samples from her as I could find, which took me almost an entire week, and even then I'd only collected twenty out of twenty-six alphabetic letters. Then I scanned the documents and sent them to some guy in Indonesia who, for a mere five dollars, turned her handwriting into a downloadable font file, which I installed on my computer. Lastly, I stayed up until 3:00 AM the following night typing up those "notes."

I have to say, I'm not the creative type, but I think I managed to capture the fictional spirit of Kate Emberlin and our imperfect yet loving marital union in those entries quite well.

When I was finished typing them up, I printed them off, then traced over them in the notebook in pencil—a little project that took a handful of days.

It's all about authenticity and detail.

I insisted she bring the journal with her to Crestview for two reasons. One, I wanted to make sure there was ample evidence that Kate existed in case the staff or Schneider began questioning it and the medical records weren't enough to quell their concerns. And two, I wanted Brienne to study those words, to obsess over them, to focus on becoming this fictional person. It's a distraction thing. Something to keep her occupied during her stay.

"How are we doing? Everything good here?" Our waitress has perfect timing.

"Yes, everything was fine," Brienne lies, convincingly so. Impressively so, actually. Props to her.

The waitress takes our check folder from her front apron pocket and places it between us. "Whenever you're ready, you can pay at the register. Thanks for stopping in, and enjoy the rest of your day."

Her voice is monotone, her eyes dead. This is a woman who hates her job.

It makes me think of Sam for a moment, of the kind of life I refuse to let her succumb to.

I reach for my wallet a second later as Brienne slides out from our booth.

“I’m going to use the restroom,” she says before darting off, and I catch her feeling around for her purse before remembering she doesn’t have one anymore. They took that when she was admitted, placing it in a padlocked locker in some back room at the facility. I imagine she feels naked without it, helpless, vulnerable.

And she should.

I’m standing in line at the register when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I glance up to make sure Brienne’s still out of sight before taking it out of my pocket.

Sam: **WHAT TIME ARE YOU OFF TODAY?**

I fire back a quick text composed of a single word: **BUSY**. Sam knows better than to message me while I’m working. (She thinks I’m driving up to Albert Lea, Minnesota, to drop off a few of Eleanor’s things and some extra meds because she’s decided to extend her stay.)

I shove my phone away just as Brienne comes back, and I paste a smile on my face as I hand one of my prepaid VISAs to the cashier.

A few minutes later, when we’re climbing into the Volvo, I lean across the car and cup Brienne’s cheek, pressing my forehead against hers before kissing her mouth.

She tastes like diner eggs and sour orange juice—nothing like Sam’s cherry ChapStick-flavored lips—but I maintain my poker face and pretend it’s a meaningful gesture by taking my time.

“We’ve still got an hour to kill,” I say. “Want to take a drive?”

Brienne sucks in a perky breath, as if my suggestion has delighted her. “As long as you don’t mind.”

“Mind?” I offer a gentle huff through my nose. “Don’t be ridiculous. Every minute with you is precious, Kate. I don’t want to let a single one go to waste.”

I’ve determined the best way to be Niall-husband-of-Kate is to say all the corny things I’d never think about saying to Sam in real life. Sam doesn’t need to hear how much I love and adore her. She doesn’t need constant reassurance and pithy greeting card expressions. She knows it. She feels it. And likewise. What we have is deep, permanent, unspoken, and everlasting, and traditional romantic gestures could never do it justice.

I choose an arbitrary road and keep driving, noting the time to ensure I dump her off at Crestview on time when the world’s longest hour is over.

“You want some music?” I point at the radio.

Brienne messes with the dials, settling on some boring adult contemporary channel that fades and crackles as we dip in and out of highway hills and valleys. We truly are in BFE, and it reminds me of back home in Nebraska.

Miles and miles and miles of depressing nothingness—which is ironic, really, because who the hell would put an inpatient psychiatric facility in a place like this? More than ten minutes out here makes me want to slit my jugular.

We’re halfway into our drive when I spot Brienne glancing at her left hand—her left ring finger, specifically.

“Do you think you can bring my wedding ring next time?” she asks. “I just . . . you don’t have to wear yours. I know we’re still . . . I’m just thinking it might help jog my memory. I don’t even know what it looks like.”

“Kate, of course,” I answer without hesitation.

I make a mental note to stop by a pawnshop this week.

CHAPTER 29

“Dr. Emberlin? Hi, this is Nancy at Crestview,” the woman on the other end of the phone says as I attempt to get gas Tuesday after work. I’m on my third card, the first two declined due to insufficient funds.

I don’t have time for this.

“Nancy, hi,” I say, maintaining my composure. “Is everything okay with my wife?”

“Oh, yes. I’m just following up on those medical records,” she says. “We went ahead and had Kate sign a release so we could request them directly. Sometimes it’s quicker that way, facility to facility. Anyway, that place you gave us in Georgia that houses the medical records for the Montblanc hospital has no record of a Kate Emberlin.”

My jaw sets as I attempt to think of a response.

I had no idea they were going to take it upon themselves to request the records. I’m sure they thought they were doing me a favor but still. This complicates things.

I swipe a new card from my wallet, and it goes through.

I exhale.

“There must be some mistake,” I say. “A clerical error or something.”

“That’s what we were thinking, but they said they triple-checked. They even looked under ‘Katherine’ and ‘Katie’ and Kate with a ‘C’ and all their spelling variations.”

“That’s the problem with paper records,” I say. “They tend to get lost. I know that particular facility was struggling in their final years. I was shocked when I saw they did everything the old-fashioned way, pen to paper. Hard copy files and all that. Now I’m wondering if her file got lost on the way to the processing center.”

I’m rambling now. I should shut up.

“Yes, well,” Nancy says, “we’d really like to get her old records for her file here. Dr. Schneider thinks it would—”

I squeeze the handle on the gas nozzle. “Let me do some calling around. I’ll figure out what’s going on.”

I try to make myself sound annoyed rather than frustrated. It’s always easier to blame a voiceless, absent third party.

Leaning against my car as it fuels, I decide it’d be a great time to switch gears. “Hey, while I have you, would you mind putting me through to Kate’s nurse for a status update? I didn’t have a chance to talk to Dr. Schneider alone on Saturday.”

“Absolutely, Dr. Emberlin. One second, and I’ll page the charge nurse for you.”

Nancy places me on hold, and I grab the two declined cards and toss them in the trash can. They land on a bag of crumpled Ruffles and an empty bottle of Diet Dr Pepper. The gas pump clicks to a stop at forty-two dollars and seventeen cents, and I climb into the driver’s seat, rifling through my wallet as I wait. The thing’s beginning to fall apart at the seams. Cramming a billfold with a soccer team worth of aliases, fake IDs, stolen credit cards, and prepaid VISAs will do that. I’ve even got a handful of traveler’s checks tucked away in one of the slots for emergencies.

Juggling the cards and identities and various accounts is getting old, not to mention far more complicated than it needs to be, which is why the second I get the last of Brienne’s checks and have the cash in hand, I’m putting a significant chunk of it into offshore bank accounts under one name and one name only—my father’s.

Funny thing is, after he died, there was never a funeral, never any fanfare. It was like life just kept going on. It wasn’t until after Sonya passed that I discovered she’d been collecting his SSDI checks still, all those years later.

I never had a chance to ask her what she did with his body, nor did I care.

The way I looked at it, those checks were payment for all those years living with a verbally abusive alcoholic. It took

years for Sonya to tell me that I was the only reason she stayed. She said she couldn't leave me to be raised by him. What she didn't say was that I was her second chance at motherhood, but she didn't have to say that. Some things are felt.

But as far as the IRS and government are concerned, my father's still alive and well, living it up in fabulous Buckner, Nebraska.

"Dr. Emberlin?" A different woman comes on the line. "This is Jackie, one of the nurses here. Nancy said you wanted an update?"

I place the call on Bluetooth, pull away from the gas station, and drive the rest of the way to Brienne's house as the nurse tells me, "Kate is stable" and "in good spirits" and "they're pleased with her willingness to participate in her treatment."

It's nothing new or notable, which is a good thing for me.

I thank her profusely—being the concerned husband that I am—and I pull into Brienne's driveway a minute later, parking behind the A4 (an exact replica of Brienne's car) that I procured for Sam when she landed her job at Opal Green. I had to drive to Michigan to get it, and we got it dirt cheap from some salvage dealer because it once had flood damage, but from the outside it's identical.

The house is dark when I go in, except for the flicker of the TV from the back room.

"Sam?" I call out. My stomach growls, and the house smells like nothing.

"In here," she answers, though it sounds like it's coming from Brienne's room. My jaw tenses, and I head in that direction.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask when I find her rifling through Brienne's closet. I don't normally speak to her this way, but all I see is red and any hint of self-restraint I have goes out the window.

Sam shrugs, giggles. *Giggles.*

“Do you think this is some kind of joke?” I spit my words at her, my fists balled at my sides. The number of times I’ve lost my temper at this woman, I can count on one hand.

Tonight might make it two.

“You want to get me fired?” I rush at her, gripping my hand around her wrist.

“Whose room is this?” she asks. “You can’t tell me Eleanor wears this.”

She pulls a white flower-covered dress off a hanger and drapes it over her body, running her hand down the front to smooth out the creases.

“Her granddaughter stays here between semesters at college,” I lie. “Now put that back before you get me in trouble.”

Sam hangs the dress back up before heading toward the door. I almost see red once again when she takes a detour at Brienne’s dresser, pausing to sniff a pale-blue crystal bottle of perfume.

“I like this one,” she says, reading the label on the front. “Never heard of this brand before. Where do you think she finds this stuff?”

“*Sam.*” I roll my eyes and motion for her to hurry. Odds are her touching stuff in here won’t affect anything, but I’d rather not risk it.

Plus, I don’t want Sam getting a wild hair, thinking she’s free to do whatever she wants in this house just because my nonexistent elderly boss is out of town visiting her nonexistent family. The last thing I need is her coming across some piece of mail with Brienne’s name on it. I did a sweep of the place before Sam came over the first time, but I can’t be too careful.

Sam puts the bottle back and saunters toward me. It’s almost like she’s dragging her feet, literally and figuratively.

“You hungry?” I switch gears. Distraction usually works with her. “Let’s order something. I’m starving.”

She's still dressed from her day job: heels, dress, and jewelry. Her last day is next Friday, and it can't come soon enough. It was dangerous enough having her use Brienne's actual name on the résumé and application, but we lucked out. No one in that firm had ever heard of Brienne Dougray (at least I can only assume so since no one made any comments about there being two of them in one town), and the papers never printed Brienne's name after her attack, nobly opting to let the victim maintain her privacy.

I close Brienne's bedroom door and lead Sam to the kitchen, swiping a takeout menu for Little Taipei off the fridge and handing it over.

"Why don't you order? Anything you want," I say before ducking out to the front porch to check the mailbox.

It hasn't been seven to ten business days yet, but I'm starting to get antsy.

I spent most of last night researching all Brienne's bank accounts and their respective ATM and daily withdrawal limits. One account—a platinum account at Quinnesec National Bank—has unlimited wire transfers up to two hundred and fifty grand per day. That's going to be my baby, right there.

I won't be able to nab the entire thirteen million, but what I can grab will set us up for life. Easily. Especially if we settle in a place where the dollar stretches quite nicely—maybe Indonesia or Thailand or somewhere in Central America.

It took a bit of number crunching and a couple of beers to relax my mind, but I managed to figure it all out, the deposits, the withdrawals, the holds. All of it. In the end, the whole system is something like a perfect row of dominoes. As soon as I knock over the first one, they'll all come tumbling down in proper order.

"You want crab rangoon with yours?" Sam calls from the kitchen when I step back inside.

"No," I call back, continuing to rifle through the mail.

No checks. Yet.

Before I return to the kitchen, I check my phone for a text from my guy. He came through with Brienne's fake Kate Emberlin driver's license for me, but only by the skin of his meth-mouthed teeth.

God, I hate outsourcing.

He's working on getting Sam and me a couple of new identities. I told him he had until Friday. Any earlier, and I'd make sure it was doubly worth his while.

I love watching people scramble for an extra buck, but even more than that, I love that someday in the very near future, I'll never have to scramble for anything ever again.

"I got you sesame chicken," Sam says from the doorway by the dining room.

There's an air of sadness or something in her eyes. I can't quite place it. Or maybe it's in her voice. I swear my mind's been all over the place lately, wheels constantly turning, thoughts coming at me so fast I can hardly keep up with them.

It's possible I've missed something here.

"Thanks, babe." I go to her. I take her hands in mine. I kiss her, long and slow, the way a good boyfriend should. "You're amazing, you know that?"

She stiffens at my touch.

This isn't good.

"You okay?" I ask. I can't read her, and that's a first. "Is this about the job?"

Sam inhales, her glassy gaze finding mine. "Yeah."

"Sam . . ." I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight. I hate that she's upset over the fact that I convinced her to quit a job she very much enjoyed, but she needs to trust me.

I have nothing but her best interests at heart.

"Remember when we were in seventh grade, and those Richardson douchebags were making fun of my shoes because they were all scuffed up? And one of the pricks said my hair smelled funny? And the other one told the whole school I had

lice, and no one would talk to me for a whole year after that?" I bring up a painful memory of mine because I need her to feel this. "And what'd you do? You never left my side. You stood up for me. For an entire school year, we ate lunch at a table by ourselves in the cafeteria, like two outcasts."

Sam blinks, reaching to wipe away a tear. She doesn't like to talk about the past, and I hate to see her cry, but I need to get through to her. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"My whole life, Sam, you've always taken care of me. You've always put me first. You've been better to me than anyone. Better to me than I probably deserved," I say. "But now it's my turn to take care of you."

She doesn't answer.

"Yeah, but you're working two jobs now," she says. "And I never see you. I'd rather live paycheck to paycheck and get to see you every night than only get to see you twice a week."

I wish I could tell her the second job is temporary, but seeing how poor "Eleanor" is going to pass next week, it'll come out soon enough.

"I have a plan for us, Sam," I say. "I'm finally going to marry you. We're going to have that family you always talk about having. Two boys and two girls."

She rolls her eyes. "We can't control that."

I ignore her pessimism. "I want to build you your dream house. Anywhere you want, Sam. I mean that."

"Are you hearing yourself right now?" She tries not to laugh, but it's a good sign that she's eating up my every word.

"I'm saving every penny from this job," I tell her, looking her straight in the eyes. "The life we've always dreamed of is closer than it's ever been."

"You make it sound so easy." She sighs.

"Oh, but it's not. You think I like sleeping in this old house every night? Only seeing you on the weekends? It's hard as hell, Sam. But it's going to be worth it, I promise you."

She kisses me, her hands in my hair, her sweet lips against mine.

Lie. Cheat. Steal. Beg. Borrow. It's the way it's always been for me, the way it has to be for people like us, and we have to be smart about it, or we die with needles in our arms or bars on our windows.

Taking her hand, I lead Sam upstairs to my room, with every intention of making a devil out of my sweet angel—at least for tonight.

And I promise, hand to God, when we finally get out of here, I'm going to spend the rest of my life giving this woman the kind of heavenly existence she deserves.

CHAPTER 30

“Man, I must be doing something wrong.” Brian walks with me to the staff parking lot after work the next day.

“What are you talking about?” I walk a couple of steps ahead of him.

He points to my car, which is parked next to his twenty-year-old Civic with mismatched doors that he drives without a shred of embarrassment. It’s like the man’s got no ego. Amazing, really, but not surprising.

“It’s called money management,” I say, pressing the key fob until the car chirps.

“At fifteen bucks an hour?” He laughs at me, shaking his head. “Right.”

He plops himself into his car, manually cranking down the driver’s window. A second later, the engine coughs to a start, and his FM radio plays over his tinny speakers. Slamming the door, he grabs his white mirrored wraparounds, pops them on his fat face, and peels out of the parking lot.

Tool.

He can speculate and insinuate all he wants, but he’ll never know that I bought the car with someone else’s credit and the bank is thirty days away from repossessing it since the card I used to set up the auto payments was recently reported as fraudulent.

The Volvo’s a bit flashier than I’d have liked, but it was a necessity. I mean, sure, I could’ve played the humble surgeon in the gently used Camry, but I needed to be the stereotype rather than the exception.

I yank my work badge off my shirt and stash it in the visor next to the one I only wore when Brienne was around.

Pulling out of the hospital staff parking lot, I start my ten-minute trek across town to Brienne’s place with the windows down and Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” blaring over the

speakers. I tap my thumbs against the steering wheel to the beat and come to a stop at the next intersection. A pretty blonde in a blue BMW checks me out from behind pristine mirrored aviators. I give her a half smirk before gunning it the second the light turns green.

She wishes . . .

I'm five blocks from home when a call comes over my speakers, replacing Robert Plant's signature wail with obnoxious chimes.

Glancing at the caller ID, I recognize the South Dakota area code and force my annoyance aside so I can get into the right frame of mind.

A second later, I accept the call. "Dr. Emberlin speaking."

"Hi, Dr. Emberlin. This is Jackie, and I'm one of the charge nurses at Crestview," the voice on the other end of the line says. "Do you have a second?"

"Of course. What's going on?" My pulse quickens. It's almost never a good thing when someone asks if you have a second.

"Well, good news." She pauses, drawing in a breath.

Good news?

No. Good news is bad news. At least in this case.

"Kate is making *huge* strides," she says. I can almost hear the pride-laced grin in her voice.

My hands grip the steering wheel so tightly the leather stitching is almost embedded into my flesh.

"We're happy to inform you that as of this morning, Kate's alter is . . . gone," Jackie says. I can hear the smile in her voice. "She woke up this morning as, well, herself."

I have no words.

This is impossible: there is no Kate.

What the hell is she trying to pull? Is she onto me? Does she know?

“Dr. Emberlin? Are you still there?” she asks.

“Yes. Yes, sorry.” I clear my throat. “That’s . . . wow. You have no idea how happy that makes me. The last time, it took a bit longer for her to make progress. I guess you just caught me off guard.” I force a chuckle. “But in a good way, of course. My God. That’s great news. Fantastic. Wow.”

“Dr. Schneider was surprised, too, but he’s extremely pleased with her progress,” she says. “If things continue, she should be able to come home sooner than we originally thought.”

A jarring flash of red and blue illuminates my rearview mirror, and a jolt of cold ricochets through me, my heart hammering in my chest.

I was so distracted, I must have blown through the stop sign behind me.

“Anyway, just wanted to give you that update,” she says. “Kate’s getting ready for dinner right now, but I could probably find her if you wanted to talk to her for a minute? I know she’s been anxious to talk to you now that she has an idea of what’s going on. She was upset this morning when she woke up and didn’t know where she was.”

I pull over, my rims scraping the curb.

She woke up not knowing where she was?

Highly unlikely.

“You know what, Jackie? I’ll let her eat dinner. Tell her I’ll call her tonight before bed,” I say, glancing up as the officer climbs out of his squad car, his hand on his duty belt as he strides to my window.

“Sounds great, Dr. Emberlin,” she says. “Take care.”

I end the call without so much as a goodbye and keep my hands on the wheel. He’s going to ask for my license and registration, but for the life of me, I can’t remember which name I registered this car under. Rookie mistake. Doesn’t help that my mind’s going a million miles an hour trying to wrap

my damn head around whatever the hell it is Brienne's trying to pull.

"Good afternoon, Officer," I say, squinting his way.

His gaze lands on my scrubs, and I relax my shoulders. Any tension is going to be a red flag. These pricks are trained to pick up on the slightest of nuances.

"You rolled through that stop sign back there," he says. "At Cherry and Cardinal."

I give him a humble chortle and slap my hand across my forehead like I'm some well-meaning, nonthreatening doofus.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I was on the phone discussing a patient, and gosh, I must have been distracted. It's no excuse, I know. You just wouldn't believe the day I had . . ."

His lips form a hard, flat line, and his eyes scan the interior of my car, which is neat and clean.

I'm harmless, I bet he's thinking. A waste of his time.

A call comes over his radio. From the sound of it, they need backup for a vehicle search two blocks over.

An endless moment passes before he finally pats the top of my roof and says, "Consider this a verbal warning, Doctor," and returns to his squad car.

I wait for him to speed off before pulling back out into the street and heading home, and I make a mental note to double-check on that registration when I get there.

I don't like how close that was, but at least it's over.

That could've been much worse than a verbal warning.

Much.

Worse.

Enid is watering flowers when I pull into the driveway, and she gives me a wave. Sam's car is parked out front, and I kick myself for forgetting to tell her to park in the garage.

I slam the car door behind me and storm through the back door, immediately regretting the fact that I lost my cool when I

spot Sam stirring a pot of something on the stove.

“Hey, baby,” she says, greeting me with the smile equivalent of a golden retriever’s wagging tail. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be Kraft mac and cheese—the first meal we ever shared—in the pot.

“Can I get you to park your car in the garage from now on? I don’t want any neighbors telling Eleanor I’m having people over all the time,” I say.

“Is it not okay that I’m here?” Worry lines cover her forehead.

“No, no. It’s fine. She knows. But you know how people are in neighborhoods like this. They like to make things up. Start rumors.”

She laughs. “It’s one car in the driveway. Not like you’re throwing parties or anything.”

“Sam. Please.” I remove my shoes and leave them at the door.

“The lady next door came up to me earlier,” Sam says, draining the noodles in a white colander over the sink as I grab a beer from the fridge.

My heart glugs to a hard stop.

“Really?” I pop the tab and take a drink. “What’d she want?”

She turns away, and I realize she’s still dressed from her day at the office.

Still dressed like Brienne.

It’s like she won’t let go of this phony life I’ve given her.

“She said, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize you were back already.’ And I told her no, she’s still out of state,” Sam says.

I exhale and wipe the dampness on my forehead with the back of my hand.

Enid was referring to Brienne.

Sam assumed she was referring to Eleanor.

This is too many close calls for one day.

“Did she ask what you were doing here?” I ask.

Sam stops tending to the pale pasta for a moment and pauses. “No. Actually, she didn’t. Someone walked by and she waved at them, and they started talking about someone down the street. I went inside. I didn’t want to stand there all awkward.”

Thank God.

“They’re throwing me a goodbye party,” she says, her back to me as she stirs in the powdered cheese. “At the office. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Going to grab the mail. When I get back, we’ll sit down, and you can tell me about it, okay?” I say to her before disappearing down the hall toward the front porch. When I come back, I rifle through the small stack until I find a letter with a return address that matches the logo on Brienne’s retirement account statements.

With a careful tear, I retrieve the check and feast my eyes on the \$3,498,997.18 that stares back at me.

For now, they’re just numbers. Ink on paper. But tonight I’ll drive Sam’s Audi to the ATM on Folworth and make the deposit. Using Brienne’s account numbers and Social Security number, I was able to use her bank’s automated phone system to reset her PIN.

Before taking a seat at the kitchen table, I slip the check into my pocket, only to brush my hand against something hard and sharp.

Ah, yes. The ring. Almost forgot.

I ran out to a pawnshop over lunch today to buy Brienne a wedding ring. On my way out the door this morning, I made sure to grab one of her rings from her jewelry box for size purposes. I can’t imagine showing up with an ill-fitting ring. Now’s not the time to get sloppy. I’ve come too far.

I was short on time and the pickings were less than impressive, but I settled on a white gold setting with a one-

carat round stone, though at four hundred bucks, I'm 100 percent sure the diamond's a fake. There were other options—smaller stones that I'm sure were genuine, but the wife of a surgeon needs something a step past modest, especially since our Photoshopped wedding photos give the impression of quite the lavish affair.

Sam dishes our dinner onto plates, giving me twice the amount she gives herself.

Poor girl. I've never so much as given her a twenty-five-cent vending-machine ring.

That'll be changing soon enough, though.

"So tell me about your party," I say.

Sam prattles on, dropping names and mentioning a cake and some card her boss gave her, but I can't help but tune her out, my mind wandering to the fact that Brienne suddenly (and impossibly) woke up as Kate.

Oh, my God.

I've got it.

The diary.

I bet she's been studying it and trying to see if she can pass herself off as "Kate" so she can come home . . . but why?

I thought she wanted to "get better."

Regardless, it's all right. I'm not worried. I've spent my whole life pivoting.

I've got this.

PART 3

CHAPTER 31

BRIENNE

I want to go home.

I need to go home.

This doesn't feel right.

I must have read Kate's diary a hundred times already. I've participated in every therapy session, every group activity, taken on every assignment with vigor . . . and yet I feel no different. In fact, just the other day, I was thinking about my childhood—the memories so vivid and clear, they had to be real and they could only belong to me. The scent of my grandmother's lilac perfume. My grandfather's boisterous laugh. Photo-realistic snapshots in my mind's eye of vacations to the Grand Canyon, Disneyland, the Black Hills, New York City . . .

And yet, according to Niall and the doctors, those memories are fictional.

They belong to someone else and not me.

Niall's here for another Saturday morning session with Dr. Schneider, and I haven't stopped toying with my wedding ring since Niall got here this morning. It's simple and understated. Unremarkable if I'm being completely honest. A plain white gold band and a round diamond. I was hoping it might help jog my memory, but every time I look at it, I feel nothing.

Niall and Dr. Schneider are knee-deep in conversation, and my husband hasn't stopped smiling since he got here this morning. In fact, the first thing he did when he saw me was hug me so tight I almost couldn't breathe, and then there were tears in his eyes as he whispered, "*I can't believe you're back.*"

He looks to the doctor, then me, sometimes nodding, sometimes adding his two cents, sometimes reaching over to pat his hand against my knee.

He keeps saying things like, “*This is great news*” and “*You have no idea how happy this makes me.*” His enthusiasm is contagious. In fact, he’s acting as if he would take me home right now if they’d give him the green light.

I wish they would.

“We’re hopeful that with a couple more weeks of treatment, Kate will be ready to be discharged,” Dr. Schneider says to finish the session.

“You hear that, Kate?” Niall asks, taking my hand again. “Two more weeks.”

“Yes.” I mirror his excitement. “I’m so ready. I just want things to be back to normal.”

Dr. Schneider walks us to the door. “If you’d like another two-hour pass, feel free to stop by the charge nurse on your way out. I’m sure the two of you have quite a bit of catching up to do.”

I wonder if he’s referring to the fact that they’re convinced Kate is back or if that’s a dig at Niall for being so MIA the last couple of weeks. I don’t hold it against him, though. I know how busy he is at the hospital, how demanding his schedule can be.

Part of me imagines he’s burying himself in his work as a way to bide the time until I come home again. Maybe it’s a distraction for him. In one of our group therapy sessions, we talked about all the ways our illnesses can affect our significant others and families.

The first few nights, I was admittedly upset at the fact that Niall wasn’t blowing up the phones wanting to check on me, but after that therapy session, I was able to find compassion in my heart, sympathy for him. I don’t imagine it’s a walk in the park being married to someone with a condition like this. He’s a saint for sticking by me, and he deserves credit for that. Plenty of patients waxed on in great detail about being left by their partners when things got too hard.

But Niall has stood by me.

He takes my hand, and we make our way to the nurses' station, where he signs me out. I realize now that Dr. Schneider never asked Niall why it took him so long to realize I was again living as Brienne and not Kate. Perhaps we'll cover that next weekend? The entire session this morning was so focused on my "strides" and recovery plan that we didn't get a chance to delve into that.

Or maybe I'll just ask him myself.

"I passed a little café just outside town on my way in," he says as we make our way to the car. "Thought we could get breakfast there. I know you didn't love that last place we tried."

I catch myself before responding.

If I'm Kate, then I wouldn't remember the last place he took me.

"Oh, yeah?" I ask. "Where'd we go last time?"

"Ruby's Diner."

"Sounds . . . quaint."

"It wasn't." He unlocks his car, and it chirps twice. "Anyway, I'm excited to sit down and . . . catch up."

Niall drives us just beyond the city limits, to a restaurant fashioned out of what appears to be an old farmhouse. The sign by the road deems it *ARCADIAN FARM + TABLE*, and the parking lot indicates the place is somewhat popular on this Saturday morning.

We manage to get a table with not much more than a ten-minute wait, and Niall wastes no time ordering a carafe of coffee the instant we're seated.

I page through the menu, mostly locally sourced options with symbols next to them stating whether they're organic or vegan or heart healthy.

"So," he says, his clear gaze locked on me as he squares his shoulders, "how are you feeling?"

The waitress returns with our coffee and two mugs. “Are we ready to order, or would we like another minute to look at the menu?”

“I’ll take the blueberry steel-cut oatmeal please,” I say, folding my menu.

Niall wrinkles his nose.

“What?” I ask.

“You *hate* oatmeal,” he says.

I almost ask if he’s sure, and then I catch myself. “I guess I’ve started liking it since I’ve been here. The kind they serve in the dining hall is actually pretty decent.”

He replies with a tight-lipped “Hm,” and I think he buys it.

The waitress’s pen pauses against her notepad, and she studies the two of us.

“Eggs over easy for me,” he says, staring at me while he’s speaking to her. “Wheat toast. Butter not margarine. And a seasonal fruit plate. Thank you.”

Silence settles between us, an awkward pause of sorts. Clinks and clatters from the kitchen and the tinkle of silverware on plastic plates fill the void. I glance out the window beside us and watch a cattle-hauling semi barrel down the road and disappear over the hill.

“So,” he says, “now that we’re alone . . .”

My heart ricochets for a moment. I have no idea where he’s going with this. Maybe he’s onto me. Maybe he’s going to call me out for faking. I wasn’t prepared for this.

“How are you *really* doing?” he asks.

I exhale, blanketed in relief that it’s nothing more than simple concern.

“This whole thing is . . . surreal.” I turn to my right, observing the parking lot, where a young mother attempts to wrangle her toddler boys as they climb out of her minivan and dart off in opposite directions.

“I’m sure it is.” He takes a sip of coffee, his voice gentle and calm. “I’m just glad you’re back, Kate. I just want you to be *you* again.”

I wring my hands in my lap, trying my hardest to fight the nerves that threaten to thwart my determination. I couldn’t have known about the oatmeal. That was pure chance. But if I keep slipping up, he’ll notice. He’ll figure out that I’m faking it.

“How are things back home?” I ask, changing the subject before I get myself caught up in my own lies.

His left brow twitches, and for a second, I wonder if my simple question insulted him. “Fine. Everything’s fine, Kate.”

The woman with the two small boys gets seated behind us, and one of the boys flips around in his booth and pokes Niall on the shoulder. He turns around and gives the boy a smile and a wave, and I realize now there’s only so much I’ll be able to fake around him.

I have no idea if Niall likes kids and wants them or if he simply tolerates them.

I have no idea if we’ve ever discussed starting a family or how I felt about that as Kate.

By the time our food arrives, I’ve managed to keep our small talk generic. Weather, summer plans, his work, that sort of thing. And when we’re back inside his car a half hour later, I watch as he checks the time on his phone. Last week we went on a drive to fill the rest of the two-hour pass, and I’m hopeful he’ll suggest the same today, but I can’t bring it up because I’m not supposed to remember. From what I’ve gathered from all my cognitive behavior sessions and reading a couple of books Dr. Schneider loaned to me, the personalities are generally unaware of one another. They don’t share memories or recollections. If I’m Kate, I wouldn’t recall anything that happened when I was Brienne.

Niall starts the car and pulls back out onto the highway. I’m pretty sure he’s headed back to Crestview. The question lingers on the tip of my tongue, but I manage to overpower it.

“Any plans for the rest of the day?” I ask when we approach the main drag of Old Hundred, passing a quaint flower shop called the Potted Rose.

“Just taking care of a few things around the house,” he says, checking his rearview mirror. His voice is so mellow, so casual, but his fingers are strained around the steering wheel, almost as though he senses something is off. “We got some rain this past week. The lawn’s looking a little shaggy. Thought I’d do something about that today while the sun’s out.”

I glance down at my hands resting on the tops of my thighs and study my ring, still feeling nothing.

“Thanks for bringing this, by the way,” I say, giving it a twist until the stone is centered on my finger.

“Of course.” He slows to a stop as we approach a blinking red light at a four-way intersection.

A moment later, a car pulls up behind us, and Niall eases onto the gas. Streets and houses we pass are becoming familiar, and I know now that he’s taking me back to Crestview.

“What made you choose this ring?” I ask. “I was trying to remember earlier, and it wasn’t coming back to me.”

“Seriously, Kate?” The tiniest ounce of annoyance laces his tone. “You chose the ring. You wanted something classic. It was extremely important to you that it be timeless and heirloom quality. In fact, we went rounds on this very topic. I find it strange that you don’t recall *any* of this”—he glances at me as he drives—“now that you’re . . . back.”

My stomach drops.

He *knows*.

“I know you want to come home. I know you don’t want to be here. But you can’t rush your recovery. You’re only cheating yourself. And honestly, Kate, it isn’t fair to me either.” Niall flicks on a blinker, waits for an oncoming car, and pulls onto the street by the psychiatric center. “I think I should take you back now.”

CHAPTER 32

NIALL

“Dr. Emberlin? You wanted to chat for a second?” Today’s charge nurse, an older lady I’ve never seen before, approaches me by the front office. “I’m Caroline. How can I help you?”

The woman at the front desk said Dr. Schneider had left for the day. Apparently, he only comes in on Saturdays so he can meet with Brienne and me for an hour, and then he gets the hell out of here so he can catch a round of golf before the afternoon sun scorches the top of his bald head.

I’m assuming, anyway.

“Is there an office we can go? Somewhere private?” I ask, scratching at the side of my temple, my other hand resting casually at my hip.

“Of course.” She motions for me to follow her into the main office, and then she takes me to one of the rooms in the back where a desk is covered in files and an older model Dell computer.

She takes a seat.

I take a seat, pausing for dramatic effect.

“I spent the morning with my wife,” I begin. “And I have reason to think she’s faking her recovery.”

Caroline leans back in her chair, unblinking. But just because she isn’t reacting doesn’t mean I don’t have her ear.

“There were some comments she made,” I say. “Things that she wouldn’t have done if she were Kate. This is going to sound preposterous, but I think she’s still her alter, and she’s pretending to be Kate so she can come home.”

The nurse slouches before straightening her shoulders, and then she raps her nails on the desktop.

“That’s . . . wow.” She cocks her head, eyes narrowing at a spot across the room as she thinks.

“She has some of her old diaries,” I continue because I feel like she might be a bit tougher sell than she looks. I’ve familiarized myself with this identity disorder enough to know that one alter generally isn’t capable of pretending to be another—but I also know there are exceptions to every rule and every diagnosis, and strange things happen all the time, unexplainable things. “I think she’s going off the things she read and pretending to be Kate.”

“Are you . . . sure?” Caroline asks. “Dr. Schneider’s been working with her all week, and I’ve been around her and—”

“Are you suggesting I don’t know my own wife?” I make my voice a hair louder than hers.

“No, no, not at all, Dr. Emberlin. It’s just that something like this is . . . I don’t want to say unlikely, but it’s rare for something like that to slip past us. That said, it isn’t implausible.”

Did I call it, or did I call it?

“Psychiatry isn’t my wheelhouse and by no means am I an expert on my wife’s diagnosis, but I’ve been around her long enough to know when she’s Kate and when she’s not Kate, and I’m telling you . . . that woman? The one I spent the morning with? The one who sat in front of Dr. Schneider and pretended she had no idea what she was doing here? That’s not Kate.”

Caroline contemplates my words for a moment, and I steal a peek at my watch and sigh, like I don’t have time for this.

And I don’t.

“I’ve got to head back to Iowa. Why don’t you have Dr. Schneider call me when he gets a chance? I’d like to speak to him *personally*.” I emphasize “personally” because that sort of thing always puts the fear of God into underlings, and then I get up from the chair.

I’m halfway across the office when she scrambles for the phone on her desk.

“If you have a second, I can call him right now,” she says, her fingers punching in the numbers. I wait while she cradles the receiver on her shoulder, and when she taps her nails on the desk, I get twitchy. A few seconds later, she mouths the word “voice mail” and then waits for the tone. “Hi, Dr. Schneider, it’s Caroline at the center. Kate Emberlin’s husband would like to have a word with you when you get a chance. If you could call back at your earliest convenience, that would be great. Thank you.”

She hangs up, looking up at me, shoulders braced as she awaits my response. It’s funny—people fear you when they think you’re someone with influence, someone of importance. I have to say I’m going to miss being able to throw my weight around to get what I want.

“He can reach me on my cell,” I say, and then I leave.

This should buy me some more time.

CHAPTER 33

BRIENNE

“Your husband is on the phone,” one of the orderlies says from my doorway Sunday night.

I haven’t spoken to Niall since yesterday morning, when he dropped me off after breakfast. I don’t know where he went after he walked me to my room, but I happened to glance out the window by the social hall fifteen minutes later and saw his car was still parked outside.

I’m sure he was talking to one of the nurses, sharing his suspicions.

I meet with Dr. Schneider tomorrow morning. I guess I’ll find out then whether or not this is working.

Closing the worn, dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in my hands and peeling myself off the bed, I trek down the hall, following the aide to the room with the phone.

“Line four,” he says.

Taking a seat, I press the flashing button and lift the receiver. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Niall says. He doesn’t call me Kate this time.

“Hi.”

There’s a pause, a hesitation. “How are you?”

His question grates under my skin, but I know he means well. “I’m okay.”

“Look, I feel bad about the way we left things yesterday,” he says.

“You mean the way you accused me of lying and then dumped me off?”

“I just want to make sure you’re getting the most of your treatment,” he counters. “I know you want to come home. And

you will. When the time is *right*.”

“They said it’s possible I won’t remember everything at once,” I lie. “That things will come back to me in pieces. They think it’s possible that the brain trauma—”

“Kate.” He doesn’t believe me. “That’s not how it was last time . . .”

“All I know is that I don’t remember being Brienne, and I don’t remember a lot of what happened over the past six months. I just know that I’m Kate. And I wish you’d believe me.”

Niall exhales into his end of the phone, his silence concerning.

“I want to come home.” My voice breaks. Niall is the only one with the power to make this happen, and I’m not above begging if it comes to that. “Please . . .”

“I’ll talk to Dr. Schneider after your session tomorrow.” He speaks as if he’s doing me a favor, humoring or appeasing me. “And if he says you’re cleared, I’ll come get you the second I leave work. I promise.”

“Thank you,” I say, though I’m not entirely sure I believe him.

“I love you,” he says. “We’ll talk again tomorrow night.”

I end the call and take the long way back to my room to kill some time, even if it’s just an extra couple of minutes. When I pass the nurses’ station, I stop when I see Caroline, the weekend charge nurse. She’s one of the friendlier faces, one of the nurses who treats me with patience and authentic compassion.

“Caroline, hi,” I say, resting my elbows on the tall counter.

She glances up from her clipboard, eyes softening. “Good evening to you.”

“I was wondering if you knew if my medical records ever came?” I ask. Dr. Schneider had brought them up to Niall in our last session together and how he was still needing them for

my file. “I’d like to go over them if I could. I’m just wanting to get an idea of how things were last time. Might be able to give me a better idea of what to expect with everything? I signed that release last week, and I was told someone would request a rush on them, so I thought I’d follow up.”

There’s a hesitation about her, the way her lips dance and her fingers tap. “The records processing facility in Georgia is still having trouble finding you in their database. From what I understand, your husband was going to check into it and get back to us.”

Interesting.

“Keep me updated, will you, please?” I ask before letting her get back to her charting. I’m halfway back to my room when my wedding ring slips off my finger, bounces off the soft tile floor, and rolls a few feet away before settling to a stop against someone’s closed door.

But it’s only when I pick it up that I notice something strange.

The inside of the white gold band has worn to the point that its natural yellow hue is showing through. I distinctly remember my grandmother’s—or Brienne’s grandmother’s—wedding band, which was a simple, stoneless piece, and how it had the strangest color to it, like it was neither gold nor white gold. I remember her telling me that all gold is yellow, and it’s mixed with another metal to make it white and the whiteness tends to fade with time.

Hers took a lifetime to fade.

There’s no way this ring is only three years old.

In a hurry, I carry the ring to the natural light of my window, inspecting the stone as closely as I can. The facets dance and glimmer in the light, flawless and colorless.

Too perfect.

The stone is fake.

CHAPTER 34

BRIENNE

“Hello there. Good morning,” Dr. Schneider says Monday when I step into his office. The orderly shuts the door behind me, and I take my spot on the sofa. Dr. Schneider gathers his yellow pad and pen and his coffee and makes his way to his leather chair, adjusting his glasses and crossing his legs and settling in for the hour-long session that awaits us.

He doesn’t ask me about my week so far. He doesn’t waste time with small talk. His typical jovial casualness is gone, and in its place is a concerning expression and vacant, avoidant eyes.

“You spoke to my husband over the weekend,” I say, hands folded in my lap, knees pressed together to keep my foot from bouncing.

He clears his throat. “I did.”

“He thinks I’m making this up.”

“He does.” Dr. Schneider looks me in the eyes now, though I think he’s trying to gauge how I’m going to react to this news.

“He’s not wrong.” I spent all weekend thinking about this very moment, about what Schneider was going to say to me Monday and whether or not I’d carry on this charade or fess up, and I decided coming clean would be my only chance at being taken seriously.

Dr. Schneider nods. There’s no shock registering on his middle-aged face. No flinch or reaction of any sort.

“I appreciate the honesty,” he says, the way a calm parent would speak to a teenager who’s coming clean about a lie they’ve told.

“But before we get into that, I have a few concerns myself,” I say. “About Niall, actually.”

He flips to a clean sheet in his legal pad and readies his pen. “What kind of concerns?”

“I remember posting a classified ad for a tenant,” I say, “shortly after my assault. My friends insisted. They wouldn’t let it go. I remember not wanting to be alone in that big house. And I remember getting an email from him to set up a meeting. He showed up in scrubs, and I gave him a tour of the house.”

Dr. Schneider’s hand covers half of his mouth, his elbow resting against the arm of his chair as he studies me.

“Why would he pretend to be a stranger if he was my husband? Why would he let me give him a tour of the house? Why would he respond to an ad for a roommate?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer right away, mulling everything over. “It’s possible that in your current state, as Brienne, you made assumptions about him. As Brienne, it’s important that everything makes sense in *Brienne’s* context—not Kate’s. There might be truths that Brienne refuses to see or things that Brienne interpreted differently.”

I shake my head. “He *introduced* himself to me. I remember. I remember shaking hands. I remember him telling me about his job at the hospital, about why he went into oncology—he said his mother had died of cancer. It was like meeting him for the first time . . . or like meeting a complete stranger.”

“Again, your alter has a way of—”

“No.” I cut him off. “Regardless of how I interpreted the meeting . . . what I’m trying to say here is that he *knew* I wasn’t Kate. And he’s known for months. Why would he wait until now to do something about it?”

“I . . . I don’t know.” He places his pen flat on his notebook before his hands form a temple. “That’s a very good question.”

I’ve rendered him speechless. Or maybe he’s embarrassed. Embarrassed that something like this slipped past him.

The clock on the wall fills our silence with steady ticks.

“I have to admit, there are a couple of things about your diagnosis that aren’t exactly textbook,” he says a moment later. “For example, it would be highly unusual for an alter to pretend to be another personality. The personalities don’t like to acknowledge each other. They serve a sole purpose—protection. Not manipulation.”

“I spoke to one of the nurses on Sunday. She said you’ve still not received my medical records,” I say.

“That’s correct.”

“She said the place my husband gave you has no records of a Kate Emberlin.”

“That’s what they’re telling us, yes.”

“I know this is going to sound crazy.” I swallow the lump in my throat and wring my hands before looking up at him. “But what if there is no Kate Emberlin? And what if there never was?”

Dr. Schneider doesn’t write me off, doesn’t dismiss my theory. He doesn’t immediately respond either. I doubt he wants to admit he’s been taken for a fool. But to be fair, neither do I.

“I need to go home,” I say. “How can we make that happen?”

He shifts in his chair. “Because you’re voluntarily committed by your husband, you’ll need to write what we call a three-day letter. I’ll take it to the Crestview board, and we’ll let you know by Thursday whether or not we can release you. I will say, however, that if the board disagrees with discharging you, it then becomes a matter of the court. There will be a court order in place, and you will then be involuntarily committed. If you attempted to leave after that point, there would be legal ramifications.”

“Okay, so if I write this letter, in three days I’ll either be going home, or I’ll be looking at an indefinite stay . . .”

“Correct.”

“Tell me, Dr. Schneider,” I ask, “what do you think of all this?”

He draws in a long breath, one that makes his chest and shoulders rise beneath his brown-gray sweater. “I’d like to give this some more thought.”

My heart sinks, but my resolve strengthens.

“You can’t be serious,” I say.

He’s quiet, and I imagine he’s contemplating the liabilities and ramifications.

Dr. Schneider exhales, his fingers interlacing across his soft belly. “I’m going to have to make a few phone calls. Consult with some colleagues. But I will say that given the recent and limited evidence I’ve been presented, combined with your husband’s lack of transparency, your diagnosis is beginning to fall apart.”

It’s exactly what I wanted to hear, and yet it isn’t.

“Why don’t you start working on that letter for the board in the meantime?” he says, giving me hope in not so many words.

He hands me his notebook and pen, his gaze fixed on the floor. I’m sure he’s wondering how he missed the signs. How he could’ve been duped after decades of working in this field and earning a half dozen letters to place behind his name.

I find comfort in the fact that I wasn’t the only one.

“Dr. Schneider?” I ask, looking up from my letter.

“Yes?”

“Can we keep this between us? If I’m discharged, I don’t want Niall to know I’m coming home.”

He contemplates a response but not for long. “Given the circumstances, that shouldn’t be a problem. But, please, don’t get your hopes up. I’ll do my part and you do yours, and we’ll go from there.”

CHAPTER 35

NIALL

“Hi.” I call Brienne on my way home from work on Monday. Today was insane, transport page after transport page. We did at least three patients every hour, and my lunch break got cut short, so I didn’t have a chance to call Schneider like I’d planned.

We’d talked Saturday afternoon over the phone, and I’d shared my concerns with him—that “Kate” was faking her recovery. He said he’d visit with her first thing at the beginning of the week and try to decide at that point. I figured he’d have called me by now or left me a message at the very least, but nothing.

Radio silence.

“Hi,” Brienne says from the other end of the phone.

“How are you feeling? How’d it go today?” I ask, slowing my words so I don’t seem too anxious.

“Dr. Schneider said it’s completely normal not to remember everything at once,” she says, almost too casually. “I was concerned at first, but he said it doesn’t mean I’m not progressing.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I say, making myself smile through a clenched jaw so I can keep up the facade, even if she can’t see it. “I was so worried, Kate. It’s all I thought about all weekend. So what’s the plan? Where do we go from here?”

“He wants me to stick around a bit longer,” she says. There’s no affect to her voice. Nothing that suggests she’s happy or sad about this. “Until I’m 100 percent.”

I smack my steering wheel in celebration, grinning ear to ear.

The second check arrived earlier today, a little over nine hundred grand. I’ll make the deposit tonight after midnight.

I've already withdrawn the first quarter million from Brienne's checking, and I had another quarter mil wired to a wire transfer place the next town over. I paid some pimple-faced kid on a skateboard a hundred bucks to collect it for me, no questions asked. Pretty sure I made his day. I'll have to find another pimple-faced kid for the next transfer. I don't need anyone familiarizing themselves with me, my face, my car, or my dealings.

"I'm sure that's not what you wanted to hear." I lace my voice with balmy compassion. "But if that's what Dr. Schneider recommends . . ."

She's silent on the other end. I can't tell if she's pissed at me or the doctor's recommendation or the situation in general, but I need to keep her spirits up.

"I'm wearing my ring," I say, glancing at my naked left hand as I park in her driveway and enter her house. Sam's in the kitchen, staring at a takeout menu. I can't go in until this call is over. "Feels so good to have it on again. I'll show you next time I see you, all right? But I'm going to let you go now. Just got home, and Enid's waving me over. Love you so much, sweetheart. I'll call you tomorrow."

I almost snort through my nose at the fact that I sound like such a lovesick puppy dog. Sometimes I wonder if I should've gone into acting. What I have is a gift, no doubt in my mind.

I head in—going through the front door this time so I can check the mail.

No retirement check, but I suppose at this point it doesn't matter. With her withdrawal limits, I won't be able to get it all anyway, and what I will be able to get is more than enough.

The scent of frying hamburger fills the air, and I sneak up behind Sam as she stands over the stove, wrapping my arms around her waist from behind.

"Someone's happy to see me," she says as she turns to brush her cheek against mine. "You have a good day today?"

"The best."

CHAPTER 36

NIALL

“Dabney’s a moron,” I say to an attractive-in-a-small-town-sort-of-way nurse Thursday morning. She buries her nose in her computer after being reamed by one of the neurosurgeons, and I slide a cranberry oatmeal cookie into my mouth. She’s not crying, but her lip is quivering, and she’s trying to distract herself with work to keep the tears at bay. “You save his behind all the time. He’d be nothing without you.”

The nurse looks up at me through dark lashes. “He treats everyone like that.”

“Yeah, he didn’t need to go off on you like that in front of everyone.” I roll my eyes. “You’re one of the best nurses on this floor. Don’t let someone like that ruin your day.”

Nurse Monica manages a smile, and when she looks up, I see that her eyes are less glassy than they were a minute ago.

“You’re sweet to say that,” she says.

I don’t normally go around sprinkling sunshine all over people’s days, but I’m in a good mood today.

“Ah. Peds,” I say when a page comes over my radio. “My favorite.”

Her green eyes flash, like she’s seeing me in a whole new light, and I give her a wink before dashing toward the elevator. I would never cheat on Sam. Never. But I’m not dead. Any man who says his ego doesn’t appreciate a little flirting and attention here or there is a bold-faced liar.

The second I disappear behind the silver doors, my mood fades.

I hate pediatric transfers.

Hate.

The kids are always screaming and crying and thrashing. It's as annoying as it is depressing. All the theatrics and overreacting. The hovering parents and the "Threat Level Midnight" hysterics. It's draining.

When I land on the Peds floor, I find Brian already in the patient's room, which is surprising but only because I didn't think he could move that fast.

Dr. Lucas is chatting with the parents of the writhing and terrified angel, and they're glued to his every word. His voice is smooth, like a glassy lake, and instantly puts everyone in a ten-foot radius at ease.

He should voice meditations on YouTube. Or start one of those hundred-dollar-a-year subscription apps. I bet he'd make a killing. (On top of the killing he already makes as a pediatric surgeon.)

I might not be the most compassionate man to walk this earth, but I can appreciate a pacifying quality in others when the time is right.

"Hi, guys," he says to us when he's done briefing the parents. "We're just going to the recovery floor. Going to get this guy home by tomorrow if we can."

Dr. Lucas smiles at us the way he smiles at everyone. He doesn't treat us like lowly transporters, and I think that's what makes me respect him the most. He doesn't have a complex even though he very well deserves one. Guys like him are unicorns in the hospital world, and I've found myself wishing a time or two that I could be a bit more like him than me.

But those aren't the cards I was dealt.

Some kids are raised with blankets and nightly tuck-ins and learn to see the world from a gentler perspective. Not me. I was raised falling asleep to the sound of a growling stomach, only to be drowned out by my father screaming at Sonya in the next room and Sonya screaming back. That was the thing about her. No matter how awful he was to her, she always held her own. She didn't cower in a corner and take it. I always admired that about her. Life dealt her a bad hand, too, but she

always seemed to land on her feet no matter how hard she was thrown.

The parents give their kid a handheld video game to get him to stop writhing, and Brian and I wheel him to the next floor. I overhear one of the nurses mentioning that he just had an appendectomy. The kid, who's all of eight or nine maybe, ignores us, keeping his attention laser-focused on the handheld Nintendo Switch in his possession.

I bet he's never known a Christmas without a tree or had to use the same ratty, smelly schoolbag five years in a row.

Brian and I are halfway back to our office when he clears his throat and says, "So your Volvo . . ."

Here we go again. The guy must be obsessed. Does he lie in bed at night thinking about me and my car?

Probably . . .

"Aren't those, like, sixty grand or something?" he asks.

"Something like that." I keep walking, picking up my pace. I always like to keep a bit of distance between us so he doesn't interpret any of this as a budding friendship.

"I just . . . Was it, like, a salvage or something?" He manages to keep up with my pace. Impressive.

"Nope. Bought it off the showroom floor."

We round the corner to our dark hallway in our corner of the hospital.

"Yeah, but that's over twice your yearly salary," he says, slightly winded this time.

He can do simple math. Good for him.

"Been thinking it might be time for me to trade up," he says when we get to our office. Plopping in his chair, he blows a breath and spins to face me. "My Honda's been good to me, but I'm ready to move up in the world. You've inspired me."

I laugh.

He doesn't.

“Well, I mean, if you can afford something like that on our salary, then . . .” His voice trails off, his confidence waning. “I’ve been here six years now. I make more than you. I’m sure I could . . .”

“My car was a gift,” I say, taking my seat and positioning myself so my back is to him.

His shoulders deflate. I’ve burst his hopeless bubble. “Seriously? That’s some gift then.”

Shaking the mouse to my computer, I wake the ancient machine and log in to the system to chart the last transfer and kill some time. Sometimes when I pretend to be busy and make it obvious that I’m only half listening, he gets bored and finds someone else to bother.

“Where are you from, anyway? I don’t think I ever asked you,” he says.

We’ve been working together for months, and he’s just now attempting to dig up my past?

“A little late for that question, isn’t it?” I keep my back to him.

“I know, I know.” He chuckles. “But really, though. Where are you from?”

“Everywhere,” I say, fingers tapping the keys.

“Can you be more specific?” he asks with another chuckle, but I know he’s dying for a serious answer.

“Mostly Missouri,” I lie.

“What part? I’ve got family in the Ozarks area and some by Independence. Some cousins in Jefferson City.”

“Kirkwood.” I lie again.

“What brought you all the way up here?” he asks.

“A woman.” For once I tell him the truth, though I won’t be going into any detail. The context is none of his business.

“A woman.” Brian echoes me, a hint of incredulousness in his tone. “Maybe someday I’ll get me one of those.”

He snickers at his joke.

“You still with the woman?” he asks.

“Yep.” In a way . . .

But not for much longer.

“What’s her name?”

I turn to shoot him a look. “You’re getting all up into my business today, aren’t you?”

Brian smiles, and for a second I deem him harmless, but I also trust him as far as I can throw him.

“You have a kid, too, right?” he asks. He must be remembering that day he caught me coming out of the doctor’s quarters, when I managed to convince him I was a sleep-deprived new parent.

“I do,” I lie.

“Boy or girl?”

I stare at the phone to my left, mentally willing it to ring, but it responds with mocking silence.

“Boy,” I say.

“Got any pictures?” he asks.

“Not on me, no.” I click to another spreadsheet, leaning in to study the screen in hopes he catches the hint.

“What?” He chuffs. “You don’t have any pics of your kid on your phone or anything?”

“Of course I do,” I say. “But we’re not allowed to be on our phones during work hours. Not about to risk that to show you a picture.”

“Come on, man. No one’s looking.” He tries to coax me.

“Why are you so interested in seeing a picture of my kid? Honestly, it’s creepy.” If turning this around on him doesn’t get him to quit bugging me, I don’t know what will.

“Whatever.” Brian rises from his chair, palms lifted in the air in protest. “Going to grab something from vending. You

need anything?”

“I’m good,” I say, refusing to so much as make eye contact.

I’m not sure where his sudden interest in my personal life is coming from. All these months we’ve only ever made small talk and tolerated each other, and now he’s all but asking for my Social Security number.

There’s something up with him.

But hopefully I won’t be around long enough to find out what that is.

CHAPTER 37

BRIENNE

My foot bounces as I wait on a bench by the front door of the Crestview Psychiatric Center early Thursday morning. Another half hour, and my phone should be fully charged.

My sleep these last few nights has been spotty at best and last night it was virtually nonexistent, but this morning Dr. Schneider met with me and informed me that the board approved my discharge. It happened sooner than I expected. I imagine he weighed the legal ramifications of keeping me under false pretenses and decided the liability was too great.

I'm going home.

My packed suitcase rests beside me, and I've already rifled through the purse I surrendered when I arrived here over two weeks ago. Everything's intact—including my wallet, which holds the ID and credit cards that identify me as Brienne Dougray.

And that's another thing . . .

In all the reading I've done on this disorder, I've come across enough evidence to convince me that these alters will go to great lengths to prove they're real, but even now, as Brienne, I wouldn't have the slightest clue how to go about stealing someone's identity. I wouldn't have the nerve to set foot into the DMV with someone else's birth certificate and apply for a new license.

An hour ago, I signed myself out. Officially. And I've been sitting here since, charging my phone and using my shoddy internet connection to order a rental car from Enterprise in the next town over. In a few more minutes, I'll order an Uber or a Lyft or a taxi to take me from here to there, and then I'll be on my way home.

Niall doesn't know it, but in less than three hours, I'll be home.



I pull into the driveway shortly after two in the afternoon. The house that had once greeted me with her warmth and nostalgia now stands tall and looming. Uncertainty lies behind her ornate windows and antique doors. Never have I imagined coming home would feel anything quite like this.

It takes another minute, but I shut the rental car off and climb out to retrieve my bag. From the corner of my eye, I spot Enid Davies by her front porch, bent at the waist as she pulls weeds from her tulip beds. At the sound of my slamming car door, she cranes her neck this way, and as soon as she realizes who I am, she drops the weeds in her hand and rushes over.

“Welcome home, sweetheart.” She hugs me. A first. “How are you feeling?”

I’m not sure what Enid knows and what she doesn’t, so I offer a simple, “Better,” and pray that she buys it.

“When Niall told me you weren’t feeling *well*, I was just so grateful that he was able to recognize that and find you a place where you could recuperate. You know, privately”—she keeps her voice down—“years ago one of my sisters was going through something, but she had no interest in being . . . sent away . . . She was much too proud. But I know times have changed. I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you.” I eye the house, half of me prepared to charge inside and the other half of me second-guessing on account of what I might find.

At this point, all I know is that I know nothing.

“You should come over for dinner some night soon,” Enid says. “The two of you.”

“Yeah, sure. That’d be nice.”

“I’m sure you’re not going to feel like cooking for a while. And I see takeout deliveries going to the house almost every single night. I’m sure he’s tired of eating pizza.” She laughs, waving her hand before resting it on her chest.

Niall eating pizza? Almost daily?

The Niall I know was obsessed with his healthy eating, insisting processed, fried, fattening, oily foods were a major factor in the body's inability to ward off cancer cells. We had that discussion a handful of times—that I remember.

“And if his sister is still in town, she's welcome to join, too,” Enid adds.

His *sister*?

“Anyway, I'll let you get in and get settled.” She waves at a neighbor power walking down the sidewalk in a pastel pink tracksuit. “Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Enid gives me another hug before returning to her tulips, and I swallow a deep breath before grabbing my suitcase from the trunk of the rental.

My heart knocks in my chest as I wheel my bag to the back door. Stopping at the steps, I fish my house key from my bag and slide it into the lock. I give it a twist, but the door swings open on its own.

It wasn't even locked.

“Hello?” I call when I step inside. “Niall? You home?”

The grandfather clock down the hall chimes.

The clock on the microwave blinks to a new time.

There's something off about the kitchen. Dish soap left out by the sink and not tucked under. A rag drying, hanging from the neck of the faucet. Surely Niall in all his type A tendencies wouldn't have left things sitting out after cleaning?

I think of Enid's comments, about Niall ordering takeout almost daily, and I'm prompted to search the fridge for proof. Not that I don't believe her. But maybe he was ordering turkey subs or grilled chicken wings and not deep-dish pizzas?

I tug the handle of the refrigerator, only to be greeted with a half-empty gallon of store-brand 1 percent milk. I've always purchased skim milk and always buy the local dairy farm brand our supermarket keeps in stock. Niall, from what I

understand, is intolerant to cow's milk—it's why we always had a carton of almond milk in the refrigerator at all times.

Shoving the gallon aside, I find a couple of Styrofoam containers, and I pop the lids open to find various half-eaten pasta dishes, as well as a side of soggy onion rings.

I've never known Niall to eat like this.

I slam the door and make my way to my room next, passing the dining room, which appears exactly the way I left it, and stopping short in front of my bedroom door—which is closed.

My breath is shallow, and there's a slight tremble in my hand as I reach for the knob.

Anything could be waiting on the other side.

Or anyone.

I grip the key chain still in my hand, tighter, harder.

Heart whooshing in my ears, I charge into my room and plant myself in the dead center. Reaching above me, I pull the cord on the ceiling fan fixture until light floods the space. The faint scent of one of my perfumes fills the air—as if it's recently been sprayed, and when I look toward the small collection on top of my dresser, I find that one of the bottles has a loose cap, like someone didn't put it on all the way.

My bed is made—at least that hasn't changed, but upon closer inspection, I notice a small indentation in the covers, on the edge. Like someone sat there for a moment.

I scan the rest of the room. Nothing else seems amiss. The clock on my nightstand is unmoved. The empty water glass still rests on the coaster, traces of my lip balm on the rim.

I check my closet next. At first glance, everything seems to be in proper order—categorized by color and season, but a handful of the pieces are sticking out more than the others, as though someone rifled through them.

I run upstairs to Niall's room next.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for or what I'm going to do when I get there; I just know that I'm desperate for answers, for proof—but proof of what, I don't know exactly.

I'm breathless when I get to the top of the stairs, and I don't bother knocking. When I open the door, I'm met with the familiar scent of his aftershave and a made bed.

Nothing is out of place, though this is based on the limited memory I have from the short amount of time I've spent in his room.

I check his bathroom next. Flicking on the light, I release an audible gasp when I spot a small toiletries bag next to the sink. It's pink and orange, one of those "free gift with purchase" kinds from a department store beauty counter. And it's unzipped. Pulling it close for inspection, I find a powder compact, blush, mascara, and two tubes of lipstick.

This matches up with Enid's comment about Niall's "sister" being in town, but in a house with four other bathrooms and several unoccupied guest suites, why would they need to share this one?

I place the bag back where I found it and head to the stairs, stomach churning. Bracing myself on the railing, I make my way down, taking each wooden step with care because the ground seems to be moving beneath my feet all of a sudden.

When I reach the lower level, I stand by the front door, where I can see into the formal parlor, the dining room, and down the main hallway. From here, everything looks the same.

My office.

I haven't checked my office yet.

Rushing to the empty room at the end of the main hall, I burst in, only to find my desk exactly the way I left it. My chair pushed in. My computer connected to the charger and centered between a pen cup and a silver stapler.

Taking a seat, I lift the lid to my laptop and watch the screen spring to life. Sliding my fingertip across the trackpad, I tap on my in-box and watch as it populates mostly with junk mail.

But one message stands out.

It's from my accountant.

And marked with high importance.

I double-click on the body of the email and scan the words.

Brienne,

I was doing my monthly reports and noticed you requested cash-outs on your entire retirement portfolio. Before you deposit anything, we need to meet. I'm not sure what your plans are, but this could have major tax implications. If you're needing to liquidate, there are better options. Call me ASAP.

Bernard Van Outen

Financial Star Retirement Advisors, LLC

My blood turns to ice water, frigid in my veins, and my vision blurs. A second later, I'm scrolling through emails, sifting through the clutter until I find a series of messages all sent within the same one-hour time period. Password resets. Check request confirmations. Account closing notifications.

I realize now what this means.

It was about money from the start.

He needed access to all my accounts, so he made me believe I was crazy and he sent me away.

The son of a bitch cleaned me out.

CHAPTER 38

NIALL

“Hi, yes, this is Dr. Niall Emberlin. I was calling to speak with my wife, Kate, if she’s available?” I’ve got twenty minutes to kill on my lunch break, so I make a quick call to Crestview from the front seat of my car.

“One moment, please.” The woman places me on hold, the most God-awful elevator music filling my ear. Several minutes later, she returns. “I’m sorry. She isn’t available.”

“What do you mean, she isn’t available?” I’m relieved I don’t have to talk to her, but I have to keep up appearances. “Is she okay?”

The woman is quiet.

“Hello?” I ask. “You still there?”

“Yes, yes. I’m sorry. Why don’t I give you Nancy’s voice mail? She can give you more information. One sec—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I say.

I don’t like the sound of this.

“I don’t want Nancy’s voice mail; I want Nancy,” I say. It’s hard as hell to maintain the politeness in my tone, but I close my eyes and envision myself as Dr. Lucas in Peds, and it works like a charm.

“She’s with a patient right now; I’m sorry. If you want, you can leave me your number, and I can flag her down as soon as I see her?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and exhale into the receiver.

“Your number?” she asks.

“It’s in my wife’s file,” I say in a monotone. And then I rattle off the ten digits anyway. “It’s imperative that she call me *as soon as possible*.”

“Of course, Dr. Emberlin.”

I debate making a larger stink about this, offering to hold on the phone until Nancy is free again, but a quick glance at the dash clock tells me I’m eight minutes from having to head inside.

“Thank you.” I end the call.

I don’t know what could possibly keep her from coming to the phone or require that I speak to a nurse first, but something tells me I’m not going to like the answer.

CHAPTER 39

BRIENNE

It's the funniest thing.

I don't remember driving to the hospital, and yet here I am, parked in front of the main entrance, gripping the steering wheel so tightly the whites of my knuckles shine through my skin, bright and distracting.

My insides are icy. But my flesh is hot.

I keep thinking of my empty bank accounts—the swindling of my grandparents' hard-earned legacy—and for pockets of time, it almost makes *me* feel empty. But then that sensation gets pushed aside, and I get filled with anger instead.

Not just anger.

Pure, unadulterated rage.

I kill the engine of my rental car and storm up to the entrance, stopping at the front desk, where an innocent bystander working as a receptionist greets me with nothing but kindness in her tone.

Her soft expression evaporates the instant she gets a closer look at me. I'm on a warpath, and I'm sure it shows.

"I need you to page Dr. Niall Emberlin," I say. "Immediately. It's an emergency."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. If it's an emergency, we're going to need you to go around to the west entrance to the emergency room. They'll be able to help you there," she says, impressively maintaining her patience and professionalism.

"It's a personal family emergency," I say. "I need to speak to him right now."

"Have you tried calling him?" she asks. "If it's personal, I mean?"

No. I didn't. I didn't want to give the weasel a chance to run before I had the opportunity to confront him.

Exhaling, I come to a stark realization: as of now, he has my money. I don't know how much of it. Could be some. Could be all. So I need to be careful. One misstep, and the bastard gets a heads-up, and then he's gone, never to be found again. You can do that sort of thing with the amount of money we're talking about here. You can disappear. You can make people disappear. You can buy yourself a whole new life.

Shifting my demeanor, I offer a slow smile. "It's a surprise actually."

The poor woman is clearly confused, but I watch as she reaches for her receiver and punches in three numbers. She tells the person on the other line that she has a visitor here for Dr. Emberlin, and a moment later, she thanks them.

"You can head on up to the cardiac floor," she says. "Four-north."

"*Cardiac?*" I ask.

She nods.

"He's a surgical oncologist," I say, chin angled down and to the side.

The woman reaches for a stapled list on her desk and pages through it, chewing the inside of her mouth. "No, no. Emberlin's a cardiologist."

Refusing to waste another second arguing about this, I make my way to the elevator and press the button for the fourth floor. The nurses' station is located just off the elevator, and I do my best to compose myself before scaring another innocent soul who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Hi, I'm here to see Dr. Emberlin," I say in my sweetest tone, though my lips feel wavy and electric, and I'm sure my skin is noticeably flushed.

The woman doesn't say anything as she lifts a finger and makes a quick call.

“He’s finishing up a consult. He’ll be out shortly,” she says, studying me.

“Thank you.” Looking around, I don’t see a waiting area, so I find an empty bit of wall space and stand out of the way, arms folded.

Minutes pass. Five, then ten, then fifteen. I scan and scour the faces of every white coat that passes, and after a while, I begin to wonder if he saw me first or if someone tipped him off and he’s avoiding me.

I check the time on my phone.

Over twenty minutes now.

I half pay attention when a tall, thin man in a white coat with hair to match sidles up to the nurses’ station.

The woman who helped me earlier points at me, and the doctor turns my way.

I give a quick, polite smile to acknowledge them, and then I turn back to my screen.

The scuff of his soft tennis shoes quiets, and he comes to a stop in front of me.

“Hi, there,” he says. “I’m Dr. Emberlin. I was told you were looking for me?”

I attempt to say something, but my lungs are void of all air. All I can do is stare at his name badge: DR. NIALL EMBERLIN, CARDIOLOGY.

The man I’ve been living with these last six months is not Dr. Niall Emberlin.

The man I’ve been living with is a con artist.

A criminal.

A swindler.

A bilker.

“I . . . I’m sorry,” I finally say. “I think I have the wrong person.”

Before he responds, I all but sprint to the open elevator doors, managing to catch a ride down before it closes.

It's almost as if I blink, and I'm back in my car, the last three minutes walking back to the parking lot nothing but a blur that I couldn't remember if I tried.

I drive away with shaking hands and a realization that I'm not just dealing with a con man—I'm dealing with a dangerous stranger. And now that I'm back, I'm not just some minor inconvenience—I'm an obstacle: the only thing standing in the way of the one thing he wants.

I hated being in Crestview.

But at least there, I was safe . . . from him.

CHAPTER 40

NIALL

Brian is on his third fifteen-minute toilet break of the day when I pull my phone out and check my bank account.

The numbers on the screen are bigger than yesterday, which means the latest deposit went through. I grin until my face hurts, and then I send a text to Sam. Just a plain old **I love you**. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a little something to make her day brighter because she's my person and she deserves the brightest of days. But a second later, I decide I want to hear her voice. I've got at least another ten minutes before Brian comes back, so I grab the phone on the desk and punch in Sam's cell number.

"Hey," she answers on the third ring. "You must be bored."

"Nah. Just missing you. Wanted to hear your voice."

"*Awww.*" She releases a soft sigh into the phone. "How's work?"

"Same old." I rest my elbows on the desk and stare out the glass partition that separates our tiny headquarters from the hallway and the nearest nurses' station. "I was thinking. I want to take you somewhere."

"What do you mean? Like a vacation?"

"Yeah. Like a vacation. Somewhere warm. Palm trees. Ocean. Weather that makes your hair curly like it gets in the summer." I've known Sam long enough to know she's never seen the ocean. Hell, she's never been on an airplane in her almost thirty-five years. Sonya flew herself and me to Idaho once. One of her friends died, and we went to the funeral. It was my first, last, and only plane ride. The only thing I remember about it was that it was unexceptional until we flew above the Rocky Mountains. Everyone should get to see what

the world looks like from an airplane window at least once in their life. “Somewhere exotic.”

“Like Myrtle Beach?”

I laugh because I know she’s just being cute. “I’ve got to get back to work. Start thinking of places you want to go, okay?”

I hang up and spin in my chair, only to have the bejesus scared out of me when I’m met with Brian’s Rubenesque frame filling the doorway.

“Was that a personal call?” he asks. I can’t tell if he’s messing with me or not.

“No, I was just telling Dr. Lucas how much I loved him.” My sarcasm is probably lost on Brian, but oh well. “You going to turn me in?”

His stoic expression morphs into a fit of laughter as he makes his way over, rapping me on the shoulder.

“Dude, you should’ve seen your face,” he says. “I wouldn’t do that to a friend. What kind of asshole do you think I am?”

Oh, God. He thinks we’re friends now? Were all those cold shoulders for nothing?

I swallow the response I want to give him and instead offer a simple, “Appreciate it.”

Focusing on the AT-A-GLANCE calendar hanging on the bulletin board behind my desk, I remind myself it won’t be long before all this will be behind me, along with the nauseating smell of sanitizer that clings to my skin no matter how hard I try to wash it off and my sorry excuse for a paycheck.

A hospital page comes over the system for Dr. Emberlin.

The irony makes me smile.

CHAPTER 41

BRIENNE

I leave the hospital and head straight to Marisol's law firm now that I know she was, in fact, a friend of mine and that not all my memories were false. She changed her number shortly after my incident, and we haven't spoken in months. I hate that I'm seeking her out now, with our unresolved issues and while I'm in dire straits. But I need her. If anyone's going to help me make sense of all this and point me in the right direction, it's her.

It's funny all the things I can't remember, all the memories and parts of my life I lost from my traumatic brain injury, but here I am, standing in the lobby of Marisol's law firm, and it feels like only yesterday I was standing in this very spot waiting for her to finish up a call so we could grab a quick lunch at Chez Mimi on Oakmont Avenue—our spot.

It's as if nothing has changed. Same mahogany walls and vintage-reprint wallpaper. Same overstuffed leather chairs. Same yawn-inducing elevator music playing from overhead speakers.

"Hi. Can I help you?" A receptionist, one I've never seen before, appears from around the corner, taking her chair behind the front desk. I wonder what happened to Annette. I used to bring her Belgian chocolates from the Stam every time I'd stop by. It was right next to my office, and they were her favorites.

"I'm here to see Marisol," I say, clammy hands clamped in front of me. I offer a silent prayer to anyone listening that she'll talk to me.

"Absolutely. One moment." The chipper receptionist, who can't be older than twenty-two, lifts the receiver of her phone and presses three numbers. "Hi. Ms. Valdes? Your three o'clock is here."

I step forward, waving my hands and trying to correct her, but it's too late.

She hangs up. "She'll be right out."

"I'm not actually her three PM," I say. "Just an old friend."

The young woman lifts her hand to her mouth. "Oh. Oh, no. Um . . . hold on . . ."

With unmatched urgency she tries to call Marisol again, but it's too late.

Marisol is standing next to the front desk, arms folded across her chest, standing tall in her signature red-bottomed shoes, cream blouse, and navy power suit. "What the *hell* are you doing here?"

"I tried to call your office yesterday, and—"

Marisol's dark, hooded eyes narrow. "You have some nerve."

"I just want to—"

Pointing to the door, she says, "Leave. Now. Before I call security."

Since when has she had security? She has to be bluffing.

"Security?"

"Go."

"Marisol," I say, uttering some semblance of a laugh. This situation is ridiculous. We were friends. No. *Best* friends. We used to do everything together. We used to tell each other everything. There were no secrets between us. I'd have taken a bullet for her, and now she's threatening to have me escorted out of her office by security?

"Please, Mar. One minute of your time." I place my hand over my heart.

She glances to her receptionist, then to me, before exhaling. "Fine."

Turning, she heads back to her office, and I follow.

“You have one minute. That’s it,” she adds.

Once we’re inside, she closes the door and stands before me with her hands on her hips and a sharp stare pointed at me.

“Something has happened,” I say. “These last six months. Since the assault.”

She lifts a thin, manicured brow. If I know her, she’s half-curious, half-annoyed. She’s always been one who appreciates those who cut to the chase and don’t waste her precious time.

“It’s a long story. And I know you’re busy,” I say. “I know you don’t want to talk to me. But that’s why I’m here. And I need to ask you something before we begin.”

“O . . . kay?” She checks her watch.

“I need to know what I did.”

Marisol coughs, choking on her spit. “You can’t be serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t.” I shrug, hand tight around the strap of the weighty purse that digs into my shoulder. “All I know is that you guys came around shortly after my assault, and then all of a sudden, I stopped hearing from you. And then when I tried to call you, everyone had changed their numbers.”

“Okay, Bri. First of all . . .” Her voice trails off, and her face is pinched. “You’re not making any sense.”

“Right. I’m aware . . . That’s why I’m here.” I don’t tell her that I’m finally making sense out of the con man attempting to swindle my retirement, inheritance, savings, and investment portfolio out from under me, but I need to understand why my friends abandoned me in my time of need.

“So you’re telling me you have zero recollection of texting nude selfies to my husband?” she asks.

I laugh, as inappropriate as it might be, because her statement is preposterous and the last thing I expected.

“I’m not sure how you find any of this funny, Brienne,” she says. “Javier and I are separated right now because of you. I saw the screenshots. The pictures and the disgusting text

messages that accompanied them came from *your* number. There was no denying that.”

“I haven’t taken a nude picture of myself in my life,” I say, fingers splayed over my sprinting heart.

She rolls her eyes. “Right. I must have been hallucinating then. Must have imagined it all.” Marisol huffs. “I’m sorry, but the denial route doesn’t get anywhere with me. Just ask Javier. You can find him at the Motel 6.”

“Mar, you’re one of my best friends. Why would I do something like that?” I ask, only now I’m fighting back tears. Javier was always a bit of a flirt, but he flirted with everyone. And I never flirted back, never let it flatter my ego, never once fed into it. I remember how much it bothered Marisol and how many fights were had between them because of his Casanova tendencies, but I always stayed out of it unless she asked me for advice.

“All I know is what I saw. On his phone. With my own eyes.” Her arms are crossed tighter than ever, her lower lip quavering. Her bulldog act is just that. An act. Deep down she’s hurting. And she won’t admit it, at least not here and now, but she misses me just as much as I miss her.

“On my life, Marisol, I did not text your husband.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I wish I could believe you, Bri. I really do. But after your assault, you had the head injury, and there were times you weren’t yourself. I’ve tried not to be angry with you because I know you weren’t in your best state of mind, but—”

“I get headaches. Migraines. And sometimes I forget things. I struggle to remember almost all last year. But I swear to you, I did not text your husband.” My cheeks are wet now, and I realize I’ve shed a few tears.

I dig in my bag for a tissue, only to glance up and find Marisol handing me one.

It only makes the tears fall faster.

“Thank you.” I take the Kleenex and hand her my phone. “Go through it. My pictures. My texts. Everything.”

She studies me, but she doesn't take the phone.

"I will do whatever it takes to prove it wasn't me," I say. "It kills me that you've spent the last six months believing I would've done that."

Her expression softens, but her posture remains rigid. "I have an appointment. Should be here any minute."

"Can we finish this conversation another time?" I ask because it's far from over. "You know, if you hadn't changed your number, we could've—"

"I *didn't* change my number."

I pull up my contacts in my phone.

"Then explain this." I press her name on my screen and place the call on speaker, letting her hear the disconnected recording with her own ears.

"Let me see that." She takes my phone, her thumb swiping across the screen a couple of times before handing it back. "Okay, *that's* not my number."

"What are you talking about?" The area code is the same. As is the prefix. But I have to admit, I'd never taken the time to memorize anyone's numbers since there was never any need.

"The last four of mine are five, three, two, three," she says. "That's five, three, two, eight."

"I don't understand." I pull up our friend Stacia's number next and show her. Months back, when I thought Marisol had changed her number, I tried calling Stacia to figure out what was going on, only to get some strange man's voice mail.

I assumed she changed her number as well, which was why I didn't even try to call Amber. She was always one to go with the majority no matter what the issue was. I didn't expect her to have my back or take a stand if no one else did.

"That's not Stacia's number either," she says. "I don't know who that is, but it's not her."

I don't bother pulling up Amber's information.

This has Niall written all over it.

He had to have changed their numbers in my phone so I wouldn't be able to reach them. And while I'm not sure where the nude photos came from, I'm certain now that he had something to do with sending them from my phone to Javier's. That or he downloaded an app that let him spoof my number.

"Marisol . . ." I cover my hand with my mouth. "This . . . this is all . . . I didn't do any of this . . . This was him."

"Him?" she asks.

"Niall."

"Your tenant?" Her nose wrinkles. "The doctor?"

Oh, my God. I get it now.

"He needed to isolate me," I say, darkening my phone screen and shoving it into my purse.

"Why would your tenant need to isolate you?" she asks. "What are you talking about? You're not making any sense."

"How much do you know about him?" I ask.

Her arms fold tightly across her chest again. "I don't know. Just that he was some doctor who answered your ad for a roommate. But we never actually met him, and you rarely talked about him. Seemed like he was always gone or at work."

Marisol's desk phone rings, and she takes it. When she hangs up, she runs her hand down her blazer. "My appointment is here, so . . ."

I hate that we can't continue this conversation because I still don't know if she fully believes me yet. And I don't blame her. She's held on to this belief for months now, that I did something so atrocious, that I was instrumental in ruining her marriage. That's a lot of resentment to let go of, and it won't happen in one afternoon.

"I'd like to sit down together sometime," I say. "All of us. Stacia and Amber, too. There's a lot I need to tell you."

She reaches for a silver pen and blue Post-it and scribbles down a number—her number—before handing it over.

I fold the note into my bag and inch to the door. “Thank you, Mar. For hearing me out today. I’ll text you, okay?”

She nods, lips tight and eyes studying me.

Within minutes, I’m climbing into my car outside, letting my thoughts gather while my engine idles.

Niall still doesn’t know I’m back.

And I don’t know what I’m going to say to him when I see him again.

I check the clock and calculate that he’ll be home in less than two hours.

Good.

I have time to prepare.

CHAPTER 42

NIALL

A call from Sam comes over my Bluetooth Thursday as I'm driving home from another dumpster fire day at the hospital. The ZZ Top song I've been jamming to fades away as I answer.

"Hey, babe, what's going on?" I ask.

"Hey, there's some weird car in the driveway," Sam says. "What does Eleanor drive?"

"What kind of car?" I answer her question with one of my own before adding, "Eleanor doesn't drive."

"I don't know. It was tan," she says.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel. "What kind of plates on it?"

"I didn't get that close of a look. I just saw it, and I kept going," she says. "I'm at the apartment right now. Also, all the lights were on in the house."

My stomach drops.

In all the time I've lived there, she's never had a visitor that I've seen. And I can't think of anyone else who would just pull up and let themselves in. Then again, I have been leaving the back door unlocked lately.

"Oh," I say after I've collected myself. "Totally forgot Eleanor mentioned she might be coming back early. Maybe it's her brother's car? I bet that's what it is."

Five minutes later, I pull into the driveway, parking behind a shiny tan Toyota Corolla with South Dakota plates. If I had to guess, I'd say it's a rental car.

I hide my work badge and replace it with my doctor version before locking up the car and heading inside, but when I get to the back door, I find it locked.

She's definitely home.

But more important . . . how the hell did she manage to get out of Crestview? Last I knew, the doctor wanted to keep her at least a couple more weeks. Hell, he said that just a few days ago.

Guess I'll have my answer soon enough.

Digging in my pocket, I retrieve my key and jam it in the lock.

"Hello?" I call out a couple of seconds later when I step inside.

The light above the sink is on, even though it's nowhere near dusk, and there's a trail of light coming from the hallway.

"Kate?" I ask louder. "Is that you?"

"Surprise!" Brienne jumps out from the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, and while there isn't a lot that scares me in this life, I'm pretty sure she's almost given me an actual heart attack just now.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, though I make my voice upbeat so the question doesn't put her on guard. I go to her, wrapping my arms around her and swinging her around like I'm Ryan-fricking-Gosling in *The Notebook*. "I thought you weren't coming home for a while . . . I thought . . . Dr. Schneider said . . ."

"Turns out all I had to do was write a letter and ask the board to let me leave early," she said. "With Dr. Schneider's blessing, of course. He was pretty happy with my progress, so . . ."

"Happy with your progress?" I ask. "I thought he said a couple more weeks?"

She shrugs. "Are you disappointed?"

"God, no. Of course not." I force myself to hug her. "So you drove all the way here? By yourself?"

Her left eyebrow rises. "Yes. I wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?"

“You have no idea.” I hug her again, tight, wishing I could hug the life out of her. And then I make a mental note to grab the mail before she does. Two checks are still en route, and I can’t let her see them.

“How long have you been home?” I ask.

“Maybe five minutes . . . if that.”

Thank. God.

Brienne runs her mouth about the drive home, the weather, the lackluster music stations in some of the smaller towns, some podcast she listened to, and all the things she wants to do now that she’s home, but I only half listen. It’s almost like she’s talking just to talk, talking about nothing of any substance.

All I can think about is whether or not there’s anything I need to clean up before she sees it.

“Hey, honey, let me go upstairs and get changed. We’ll go out for dinner and celebrate, okay?” I suggest the kind of thing I think a good husband would propose so I can buy time. I need to check the bathroom upstairs and make sure none of Sam’s things are in there. This morning before I left, I had the forethought to slide Sam’s overnight bag under my bed at least, but lately she’s been getting sloppy about picking up her toiletries in the bathroom in the mornings. It’s my fault, though. I told her Eleanor was going to be gone at least another week, and I got lax. “You feeling up to it?”

“Yeah, I’d love to,” she says as I let her go.

I take the steps two by two until I find myself in the doorway of my bathroom. The second I switch the light on, Sam’s orange-and-pink makeup bag fills my vision and spurs me into action.

I hide it in one of the vanity drawers and cover it with a hand towel from another drawer. If Brienne’s only been home five minutes, there’s no way she’s seen this yet.

There’s no time for a shower, so I tear myself out of my work clothes and into some khakis and a navy gingham

button-down, simultaneously trying to think of anything else I might have missed.

I stop when I get to the third button from the top.

Her laptop.

I'd meant to clear out the myriad of password reset emails, but I hadn't gotten around to it since I thought I'd have more time.

Rookie mistake.

I finish dressing in record time and jog downstairs, praying she hasn't had a chance to check her email since she's been home. I would think she'd have other priorities—unpacking, relaxing, whatever—but who knows?

“Hey,” I say, relieved to find her in the kitchen messing with her phone. “Ready?”

“Yep,” she says, eyes on her screen. “This is so weird. My phone is saying I changed my email password, but I didn't. I can't get in.”

The stiffness in my shoulders leaves, making its way up my neck before stopping at my jaw. “I can take a look at it later if you want.”

Perfect.

I'll spend some quality time with her laptop tonight, and in the midst of “fixing” her email, maybe I'll “accidentally” spill some cabernet on the keyboard.

I place my hand on her lower back and steer her toward the door.

“We should get going,” I say, “if we want to beat the rush.”

“Can't I change first?” she asks, and I realize she's wearing the very same clothes she wore when I took her to Crestview a couple of weeks ago: yoga leggings and a Morningside College T-shirt.

“What have you been doing this whole time?” I chuckle, wishing I knew the answer to that question.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks.

“It’s a surprise.” For both of us. I don’t know yet.

She disappears down the hall, and I pull up my phone, checking my Table Finder app for last-minute reservations. I manage to snag one at Hesperides, which looks like a decent place. New and trendy and exactly the kind of spot that would impress someone like Brienne.

“Okay, I’m ready.” She emerges a minute later, dressed in a summery floral dress, with her dark hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head. Her lips are shiny and lacquered, and dangling earrings hang from her lobes.

She’s truly dressed for a date, for a celebration.

Taking her hand, we head out. I lock the house behind us, making a good show of it so she knows it’s “important” to me and I haven’t forgotten.

The ride to the restaurant is quieter than I expected. She’s not filling the silent void with chatter about nothing—which means she’s thinking.

I have no doubt the wheels in that little head of hers have been spinning, and I have to admit, while I’m frustrated by the fact that she’s here in the flesh, I’m also impressed that she managed to pull it off.

I may have underestimated her.

We’re halfway there when she taps my hand and says, “Oh, Enid said your sister was in town? Why didn’t you tell me? I’d love to see her.”

I hide my smirk at the fact that she’s pretending to know I have a sister. As long as I stay one step ahead of her, this game might actually be fun.

She should’ve stayed put at Crestview. By the time she would’ve been discharged, I’d have been long gone. Her pockets would be lighter, but she’d be fine. She’d still be able to carry on and retire and live the comfortable lifestyle afforded to her by her selfish grandparents.

“My sister went home last weekend,” I tell her. “But she sends her regards.”

I park outside Hesperides and decide that tomorrow on my lunch break, I’m going to stop by the AutoZone on the square and pick up some antifreeze. No need to get fancy or creative when a squirt in her mouthwash or milk will get the job done.

It had worked on Sam’s stepdad fifteen years ago like a charm.

No reason to reinvent the wheel.

I thought about making her dinner and mixing some of her migraine medication into her wine, but there’s no guarantee she’ll drink enough of it to render her out cold, and if she’s beginning to figure me out, there’s no way she’ll trust any meal I put in front of her.

If memory serves me, after a few days, she’ll be so sick she won’t be able to form a coherent sentence. And if all goes to plan, I’ll come home from work, find her unresponsive, and get her to the hospital like the good husband I am. And while they work to save her life as she fights this mystery illness, I’ll be halfway to Costa Rica with Sam, with not a care in the world.

CHAPTER 43

BRIENNE

“Love this. Great choice,” I tell “Niall” at dinner. He’s taken me to an upscale Greek place that recently opened. Under any other circumstances, it would make for a fine date night spot.

“Glad you like it.” He offers me a warm smile, sawing into the lamb on his plate.

“More wine?” I top him off before he has a chance to answer. I need him to be relaxed. I need things to be casual and fun. Celebratory. If he knows something’s up, he’s going to bolt—and he’ll take my money with him.

I managed to get a hold of Bernard earlier at Financial Star, and I told him those check requests were fraudulent. He told me one of them had already been deposited, the second one had been deposited that day but hadn’t yet cleared, and that he was able to put a stop payment on the last two.

According to my bank, the first check he deposited was just over three million, and he withdrew quarter-million-dollar chunks daily over the past week before wiring them to himself. I’ve now frozen all my accounts and opened a new, secret one at a small credit union on the other side of town.

It’s strange, staring into the calm blue eyes of a man who so casually acts like everything is normal when he’s sitting on well over three million dollars of my money like he’s going to get away with it.

I haven’t quite decided what I’m going to do once he realizes the cash cow account’s now frozen and the other two checks aren’t coming, but I’m hoping by then I’ll have already reported him to the police.

Until then, I need to do everything I can to keep him from going on the run.

As much as I wanted to confront him earlier and as much as I’d love to confront him here and now, knowing what I

know about him . . . it wouldn't be safe. There's no moral compass with this one. Anyone who would go to these lengths to steal someone else's money is pure evil. Ruthless. Crafty. Capable of unthinkable acts.

Who knows what he would do if I called him out now? At this point, I can't put anything past him.

We finish dinner between sips of wine and small talk, and I manage to quell my urges to clamber across the table and grab him by the collar every other second. It's not until we return to the house that the reality of having to keep up this charade hits me hard and fast and renders me physically paralyzed when I reach the hall to my room.

"You coming to bed, dear?" he asks, unbuttoning his shirt as he stands by the foot of the stairs. He nods upward, toward his room.

"Y-yes," I say. "Just give me a moment."

If I have to keep up appearances, I'm going to have to sleep with him tonight. Not sex, per se. But with him. Beside him. In his bed.

The very thought of spending the night in the arms of that sick bastard makes my palms dampen and my throat burn with bile, but what choice do I have?

I wash up and change into something conservative, a long-sleeved pajama top and matching pants, navy with white piping, and then I take my time making my way to his room, hoping he might be out by the time I get there.

It's pitch-dark when I arrive; pieces of starry moonlight escape through his lace curtains and paint the white T-shirt that covers his upper body in an eerie glow.

He's wide awake.

He lifts the blankets with a smile. I climb in beside him, getting situated. A moment later, his body presses against mine, and his arm pulls me close. His body heat burns against me, and the scent of his cologne invades my lungs.

It feels like a trap in every sense of the word.

After a while, his breathing softens and steadies, and it doesn't take long for him to pass out. As I lie awake beside him, I glance down at his left arm—the one holding me tight—and my gaze settles on his bare left ring finger.

Last time we spoke on the phone, he told me he'd put his wedding ring back on. There isn't so much as an indentation to suggest it was ever there.

He's getting sloppy, overconfident.

I'm not sure how I'm going to get any sleep tonight, trapped in the arms of the devil incarnate, but I have to try. I'm going to need all my strength, mental and otherwise, if I'm going to fight this and win.

And I'm going to win.

CHAPTER 44

NIALL

I clock out Friday at five o'clock on the dot, unable to get out of there fast enough.

I spent most of last night pretending to sleep, pretending I didn't feel Brienne's stare creeping over every inch of me. This morning I woke up extra early, whispering to her that I'd started going to the gym again and had a 5:00 AM session with a trainer. And then I ran into the twenty-four-hour Walmart in the next town over and bought some antifreeze using the self-checkout and paying in cash. I probably looked like a weirdo in my hat and sunglasses since the sun hadn't even come up by that point, but the store was empty.

When I got back to the house, it was just after six, and Brienne was still asleep in "our" bed, which worked out perfectly because I was able to slip into the kitchen on the main level and decant antifreeze into her milk and creamer while the coffee percolated in the kitchen. By the time that was done, I poured two mugs, one special for her, and carried them upstairs.

I kissed her good morning, placed her coffee mug on the nightstand, and hit the shower before she had time to notice I wasn't slicked with sweat nor did I appear like I'd spent the last hour at the gym. On my way out, I told her I was taking her laptop to work with me to figure out what was going on with her email. She seemed hesitant at first, saying I didn't have to do that, but I insisted it was no big deal, and I left before she could protest.

On my way to the hospital, I stopped and tossed it in a dumpster behind a dental office.

When I get home later, I'll tell her I'm having one of the IT guys at work look at it because I suspect a virus.

Making my way to the staff parking lot, I check my phone and find a text from the newest pimple-faced skateboard kid, the one I found outside a bowling alley in the older part of town smoking cigarettes behind the building.

THE WIRE DIDN'T GO THROUGH, he says.

Liar.

I have half a mind to remind him that I know his name and I can find out where he lives. Little twerps like him think they're so smart these days. If he thinks he can lie about the wire transfer and make off with tens of thousands and not have to deal with me, he's got another think coming.

I tuck my phone away, deciding I'll deal with him later when I'm less contentious and have more time to check into things. There's way too much going on right now, and I need to remain calm and focused and get home.

I got the mail this morning. No check. I was going to stop by the bank and do another fifty-grand withdrawal, but with all the running around and antifreezing, I was short on time, and with all the patient transports thrown at us earlier, I barely had time to log in and initiate the wire transfer on my lunch break today.

I go through my missed calls as I dart to the staff exit, and I find one from Sam. She's done working at Opal Green now, and as far as I know, she spent the night at that apartment at the Harcourt. Haven't really heard a peep out of her all day, which is surprising because usually we text off and on throughout the day. I'll call her back once I'm on my way home.

Bursting through the exit doors, I haul off, a man on a mission, eyes scanning the lot for my car.

There can be no more missteps.

I have to admit, I have half a mind to call Schneider and rip him a new one for not keeping me in the loop on Brienne's discharge, but that's neither here nor there anymore. There's nothing I can do about it now and no need to draw further attention to any of this.

A couple of minutes pass by the time I realize I've circled the parking lot and my car is nowhere to be found. Twenty feet away, Brian climbs into his Honda, a shit-eating grin on his round face.

I scan the row of cars one more time.

Mine is definitely not here.

"Son of a bitch," I say under my breath.

"Hey, you, uh, need a ride?" Brian offers, half hanging out his driver's side. "I saw they took your car earlier. I didn't know if you were having engine troubles or what . . ."

It was repo'd, you ignorant twit.

I wave him off. "I'm good."

The second he's gone, I'll call Brienne. I didn't think the repo was going to happen this soon, but then again, I've been distracted lately with Brienne's homecoming and focusing on optimizing the money transfer strategies. I watch Brian drive off, and in the seconds before I call Brienne, I realize I no longer have my Dr. Niall Emberlin badge, which was in my glove compartment.

It's gone.

Forever.

Just like the car.

Just like I'm about to be . . .

If all goes as planned, this time tomorrow, none of this will matter.

CHAPTER 45

BRIENNE

I need to go to the police, but all the hard evidence I have is on my computer—the one Niall took to work with him today. I could log in to my email account remotely to retrieve everything, but my passwords have all been changed.

I pace the parlor, eyes heavy, and think about running out for a coffee. I happened to be going through the fridge this morning and saw that the milk “Niall” had purchased was already open—yet the carton was still full.

Call me paranoid, but I’ve decided not to ingest anything in this house that man could have tampered with.

Checking the time, I realize he’s likely on his way home now. My phone vibrates the instant I place it on the coffee table, startling me into the present moment. When I check the caller ID, his name fills the screen.

“Hi,” I answer on the third ring, after I’ve collected myself. I need to keep this up at least through tonight. Perhaps we can have a “normal” evening together, and after he goes to bed, I can sneak off to the police station, file a report, and they can arrest him in the middle of the night before he has a chance to realize what’s going on, before he has a chance to flee.

“Hey, sweetheart.” His voice is sickeningly sweet on the other end. “So . . . small problem.”

I’m quiet, though my heart thrums in my ears. “What’s that?”

“Got into a bit of a fender bender today at lunch,” he says. “I’m okay. I’m fine. No injuries. But the car didn’t fare so well. Had to be towed. I’ve spent the afternoon getting X-rays and being checked for whiplash and all that. Standard insurance protocol. Anyway, you think you could come by the hospital and pick me up?”

“Of course,” I say, swallowing the hard node in my throat and praying he doesn’t have an ulterior motive. “Give me fifteen minutes?”

CHAPTER 46

NIALL

I stand over the sink after dinner, my gloved hands soaked in dirty water as I hum a happy tune under my breath. Brienne made a home-cooked dinner tonight, and I insisted she dig out the candles so we could make it a romantic affair.

I'm still pretending to be thrilled over her "progress" and return.

She's still pretending to be Kate.

It's a real dog and pony show in here, but fortunately the end is in sight.

I finish the dishes and rest the gloves along the sink, side by side as I always do around her.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and a second later, I read a text from the kid who assisted me in the last wire transfer. He asked if I needed his services again tonight. Idiot. Can he make it any more obvious that we're doing something that isn't exactly on the up-and-up?

I'm about to reply when I remember I no longer have a car.

Not to mention, I need to figure out why the last one didn't go through. A quick call to the bank should give me my answer, but I've been with Brienne since I got off work, so I haven't exactly had a chance to make that call.

"Hey." Brienne returns to the kitchen, heading to the mug cabinet. She's probably going to fix her nightly cup of Sleepytime tea.

"I'm going to run to the store, grab a few things. You need anything?" I ask. I don't ask to borrow her car because that's not what husbands and wives do, communal property and all that.

"Could you pick up some skim milk?" she asks.

“Skim milk. Got it.” I grab her keys from the counter.

“What’s with the 1 percent in the fridge?” she asks.

“Oh, that was my sister’s. You can throw it out.”

She doesn’t question me, but her gaze veers to my hand. I realize that taking her car means taking all her flimsy key chain weapons, too, but if it bothers her, she isn’t saying anything. She’s keeping up appearances, same as I am.

“Be back in a bit. Don’t wait up.” I kiss her forehead before heading out the back door, and before I get to the bottom step, I hear the lock click behind me. A second later, I climb in her driver’s seat and adjust the mirrors. As soon as I’m on my way, I’ll call Sam and let her know Eleanor came back early and we’re going to have to rain check our Friday-night plans.

Shifting into reverse, I check the rearview mirror and then glance back at the house.

Brienne is standing in front of the kitchen sink, staring, watching.

We make eye contact.

I smile and wave.

She does the same.

CHAPTER 47

BRIENNE

I wait until the taillights disappear past the end of the block before sprinting upstairs to his room. If he's running to the store, he won't be gone long, but so far I haven't managed to find a single bread-crumbsized clue that could tell me who he really is.

His closet is filled with scrubs and the kind of ordinary clothes any thirty-something man would wear on the weekends. Jeans, T-shirts, polos. A small collection of sneakers.

The drawers of his nightstand are empty.

There's nothing out of the ordinary hidden in his bathroom—I even went so far as to check under the sink.

I head to his study next, peeking between books and under books and looking for those fake books that double as hiding spots. It isn't until I'm on the second-to-last shelf that I discover one of the medical textbooks has what appears to be a garage-sale sticker on the spine—an orange circle, unsuccessfully scraped off. Squinting and examining it closer, I make out the number five next to a dollar sign. This was definitely not purchased at a collegiate bookstore.

I shake my head.

This room and the other are nothing but props.

The real Niall—whoever he is—won't be found in either of them.

I check the closet in the study last, tugging on the string light and rising on my toes before feeling around at the back of the top shelf. My fingertips brush against metal, and I try to stand taller. There's something back there, something out of sight.

My heart throbs in my ears, and I grab his desk chair to use as a step stool.

A second later, I'm in possession of a small metal box, the fireproof kind with the six-digit locks, and of course it's locked.

It's probably where he keeps his real identity and all the things he doesn't want me to find—unlike the diary. Which I now know he planted. Looking back, it was eerie how calm he was when he caught me going through his things. But now it makes sense: he wanted me to find the journal and the divorce papers. It was all part of his master plan.

I place the box back on the shelf, shoving it all the way in like I found it, and I return the chair to his desk.

I need to get downstairs before he comes home.

I have a feeling he won't be as calm if he finds me this time.

Returning to the main level, I grab my phone and the Post-it with Marisol's number. I need to see if she can meet up tomorrow. This can't wait.

I pace the dining room as I text, and when I'm done, I stand before one of the windows, glancing down the street in search of headlights. If he was just running to the store for milk, he should be back any minute now.

No headlights.

I'm still alone.

My phone vibrates with a response from Marisol. She's available. And more important, willing to continue our conversation. I shoot her back a quick reply, and when I glance out the window again, my stomach drops.

My red Audi is out front, only it's parked in the street, under one of the oaks. Squinting, I hit the lights so I can see better, but all I can make out is a figure in the driver's seat.

But before I have the chance to ponder my next move or rack my brain as to why Niall wouldn't have parked in the driveway, the car speeds off.

Oh, God.

I take a step back, away from the window.

I don't think that was Niall.

I think that was the other me.

CHAPTER 48

NIALL

I scan the milk at the self-checkout and toss a pack of gum in the bag before fishing out a five-dollar bill. Ten minutes ago I was parked outside the Quik Shoppe gas station, hiring some cash-hungry kid to help make a series of wire transfers . . . only to have my card declined.

The man working the counter was just as frustrated as I was.

He tried at least six times before handing it back and suggesting that I call my bank.

But I refuse to panic.

I tried calling the bank on the way over, but the live customer-support hotline was already closed for the day, and the automated system couldn't tell me anything.

First thing tomorrow morning I'll go to the bank and get it cleared up. I'm sure it's a glitch. Maybe the system is down. I paid the pimple-faced skateboarder a hundred bucks for his time and silence and told him to wait for me to get hold of him tomorrow.

There's no way Brienne's got this figured out—I'd bet my life on that.

I climb into Brienne's car a few minutes later with my grocery bag and head back to the house.

My phone chimes when I'm halfway there.

Sam.

"Hey, baby," I answer. "Did you get my message earlier?"

I called her on my way to the gas station a while ago, but she didn't answer, and the first time she called back, I was dealing with the card issue. I slow down, going five below the speed limit, and I take a few side roads, buying more time. It's

not like I've got anything else to do tonight. I told Brienne I was running to the store, and I've got her car. My options are limited.

"Yeah," Sam says. "Really sucks. I was looking forward to hanging out tonight."

"I know. Me too. I'll make it up to you, though."

"What are you doing right now?" she asks.

"Just ran out to pick up a few prescriptions for Eleanor," I say. "She came home with a nasty case of pneumonia."

Sam is quiet. It's unlike her not to offer any kind of condolences. She's got a soft spot for the elderly, having worked at a retirement home as a CNA all through high school.

"You want to stop over and hang out for a bit?" she asks. "Since you're out and about?"

"I wish I could, but I have to head back and give Eleanor her meds before she goes to bed for the night," I say, stopping at a vacant four-way stop. I decide I'm going to linger until I see headlights approaching from behind. "What are you doing right now?"

She's quiet again.

I don't like this.

"Sam?" I ask.

"Just . . . sitting at the apartment," she finally answers.

"Do me a favor, okay? Go do something fun. Call up some of your friends from your old job and get drinks or something. I don't want you to sit at home on a Friday night just because I have to."

"Yeah," she says. "I could see what they're up to."

There's a despondency in her voice that isn't usually there. A lack of animation. The way she's speaking to me is robotic almost, like she's lost in thought or like there's something she's thinking but isn't saying.

I'm about to ask her if anything's wrong when the jerk behind me lays on his horn.

I glance in my rearview mirror to find that I'm still alone at this intersection.

The sound came from her end. And it was loud, close.

She's not at home—she's out and about.

Sam lied.

And she never lies.

"I'm almost home," I say to her as I press my foot against the gas pedal. "I love you, okay?"

"I love you, too."

"Good night, Sam."

"Good night, Shane."

CHAPTER 49

BRIENNE

I meet Marisol at her house late Saturday morning, and it's just the two of us. She thought it would be better to talk in private for now, given the topic of conversation. I can't stop yawning. Another night of sleeping next to "Niall" means I'm running on scattered, unrefreshing sleep cocktailed with adrenaline and a boost of stress-induced cortisol.

I begin by filling her in on the situation with Niall. I need to paint a picture and illustrate for her what kind of deranged sociopath we're dealing with here. By the time I'm finished, she's speechless, and that isn't an easy feat.

"So now you see why it's not completely out of the question that he spoofed my number," I say. "He's crazy. He's insane. And he'll go to any length to get what he wants."

Her elbows rest against her kitchen table, her coffee untouched beside her.

A moment later, she clears her throat and sits up. "This is . . . this is disturbing."

"Right."

"I guess, Bri, if I'm being honest, I'm not sure why you're here with me and not down at the police station filing a report."

"I know." I bury my face in my hands. "I know it's hard to understand, but you don't realize what I'm dealing with here. It's like he's one step ahead of me. And if he knows I'm onto him or that I'm going to the police, he's going to run, and he's going to take my money with him and he's going to disappear, and I guess I was hoping I'd be able to get a name. Something. Anything—"

"His name?" Marisol laughs. "What good is a name to someone who doesn't use it?"

“He’s going to bolt any day now. I know he is. If I have his name, then the police can at least charge him with something. If he leaves today, he’ll get away with this scot-free. There’ll be no name to pin this on. I want justice.”

Marisol places her hand over mine, head tilted.

“Oh, Bri.” Her eyes hold sympathy, and she exhales. “I know they never found the person who attacked you last year. And I know you’d do anything to bring them to justice. But you need to be careful. Some things aren’t worth the risk. I’d hate to see you jeopardize your safety for the sake of some roundabout retribution.”

My eyes burn, but I blink away the sting of tears.

She knows me too well.

But it isn’t just that.

“I’m scared,” I admit for the first time.

“And you should be.” She removes her hand from mine. “You can’t stay in that house. Not with him there.”

“If I don’t stay there tonight, he’ll know I’m onto him.”

“Doesn’t he already, though? If *he* knows there’s no Kate. And *you* know there’s no Kate. But you’re both pretending that you’re Kate . . . the cat’s already out of the bag. Don’t you see what he’s doing? He’s beating you at your own game. And honestly, I bet he’s having himself a hell of a time. People like that live for this stuff. It’s sick. And that makes him dangerous.”

She’s right.

With everything that’s come to light the last couple of days, I’ll admit I haven’t been bringing my A game. I haven’t had a chance to thoroughly think any of this through or come up with multipronged strategies. I’ve been taking it all one day at a time.

I’ve never been the kind of person who strategized their way through life.

It’s a foreign concept for me, an alien way of thinking.

All this time I thought I was onto him when in actuality he is probably onto me.

I finish my coffee with Marisol, and when I leave, she makes me promise to stay at her place tonight.

When I drive away, I head to the Pavilion Plaza, an outdoor shopping mall with myriad specialty stores I have no need to visit, but if I take my time and browse them all, I could kill the better part of the day and avoid being home with *him*.

I let Marisol's words play in my head on the drive over, and I give myself two hours to decide whether or not I'm going to the police empty-handed—no physical evidence, not even the name of my perpetrator. I imagine being ridiculed, looked at like an idiot who trusted a stranger, treated the way that PI treated me weeks ago over the phone. And I imagine them bringing "Niall" in for initial questioning, only to have him run the first chance he gets.

And then he'll always be out there, haunting me just like the person who attacked me last year.

This could be my only chance to get closure, to bring him to justice.

But at what cost?

CHAPTER 50

NIALL

I try to decant another splash of antifreeze into Brienne's coffee creamer this morning, only the container is still as full as it was last time. She left an hour ago, saying she had to run some errands and would be back later. As soon as she was gone, I called up the bank to check on the status of the account, only to be told again by a robotic autoteller that the account had been "frozen at the owner's request due to suspicious activity."

I pressed "1" to be connected to a live person, who spent a solid five minutes verifying that I was indeed an authorized user on the account. Thank God I had the forethought to fill out that form last week.

I was then connected to a man named Hugo and politely insisted there must be some kind of mistake and asked him to remove the freeze. When that didn't work, I threatened to get my (fictitious) attorney involved.

There are people on whom that strategy works.

And then there are people like Hugo, who respond by saying, "I'm ending the call, sir," when my rant veered toward what the corporate world calls "abusive."

I place the creamer back in the fridge, next to the gallon of skim milk I purchased last night, which is still full.

Leaning against the counter, I cross my arms and stare at the closed fridge.

With Sam's stepdad, it was easy.

The bastard would polish off a fifth of Jack Daniel's on a nightly basis. Little did he know then that his days of making disgusting and inappropriate comments to his fifteen-year-old stepdaughter were numbered. The pervert was literally drinking himself to death anyway. I just helped things along.

But at this rate . . . with Brienne . . . I'm going to have to go to plan B.

Heading upstairs, I grab the box from the back of my closet shelf in my study and enter the code—Sam's and my anniversary. Buried beneath a collection of Social Security cards, birth certificates, and various forms of ID is the syringe and vial of potassium chloride I managed to finagle during a recent transport. We were taking some guy into OR 2 for a quadruple bypass, and the drugs were just sitting there on a tray while all the nurses were flitting about, prepping the room.

Everyone was busy.

Everyone was focused on their own duties.

It's not my fault none of them noticed the lowly transporter slipping a few vials into his pockets.

From what I've read, an injection of this stuff should stop her heart in under a minute.

Her death will be painful.

But it'll be fast.

And just like that, it'll all be over.

Brienne will be dead, and I'll be long gone before anyone has a chance to realize. Sure, Enid will know my face, and she'll be able to give a description to police, but by the time any of that happens, there'll be no trace of me on American soil, and I'm 100 percent sure the Quinnesec Bluff Police Department isn't going to spend their precious resources sending one of their sleepy-eyed deputies on an international wild-goose chase.

CHAPTER 51

BRIENNE

I'm sitting in my idling car outside a Le Creuset, mostly watching the clock as I waffle between heading to the police station or heading home to gather my things so I can go to Marisol's for the night.

I'm trying to think of the implications of the latter—how “Niall” would act, what he might think. But I draw nothing but blanks. This could go in a thousand different directions, consequences flying at me like shrapnel.

But it's getting late—just past dinnertime. I've been gone since 10:00 AM, and there's a good chance he might have already jumped the gun and he's halfway to Oklahoma City by now.

Glancing up, I draw in a deep breath, wishing I could stop this spinning ride and get off for just a moment, just long enough to catch my breath and gather my thoughts.

An hour.

I'm giving myself an hour to make a decision.

At 6:07, I'll either be heading home or heading to the Quinnesec Bluff Police Department.

I kill the engine and gather my purse, prepared to mindlessly browse enamel cookware for the next sixty minutes. But as I reach for my door handle, a car pulls up beside mine.

But not just any car.

It's an Audi A4, the spitting image of mine.

And when I peer out my window, locking eyes with the driver of the car, it's like looking in a mirror.

CHAPTER 52

NIALL

“Come on, come on, come on.” I’m pacing the house as I try to call Sam for the fiftieth time today. I thought since Brienne was going to be out, Sam could swing by and pick me up, and we could have a few hours together. Not to mention, she wasn’t herself last night on the phone, and I need to figure out if I need to do any predamage control there.

It always seems to make her happy when I fill her head with stories about how great life’s going to be for us someday.

Little does she know, someday’s right around the corner.

I’ve got everything prepped. We’ve got new IDs, and we’re picking up a car just north of the Mexican border. There’s a private airport on the other side, and I’ve chartered a local and his plane to take us to Guadalajara. From there we’ll board a plane to Costa Rica.

I shoot her a text—the twenty-third one of the day. This one’s all question marks.

It’s getting late, and it isn’t like her to out and out ignore me like this. That, combined with the fact that she straight-up lied to me last night about being at the apartment, is concerning.

I read through my texts beginning with the ones that say, **Hey, babe, let’s hang out today** and continuing on as they progress to **You’re not picking up. Are you okay? I’m worried!** and eventually escalating to **Sam. Not cool to ignore me. WTF is your problem? What are you trying to do here? FFS call me!**

In retrospect, I shouldn’t have lost my cool, but sitting here cooped up in this potpourri-and-mahogany-scented house with no car and no clue where my lying girlfriend is . . . is starting to get to me.

Taking a deep breath, I promise myself I won't send any more hostile texts to Sam, and then I order an Uber to the Harcourt.

Twenty minutes later, I'm there.

And she's not.

CHAPTER 53

BRIENNE

She rolls her passenger window down, waving at me, and it takes a second for me to realize this is actually happening. Wrapping my hand around my key chain, I crack my window but only a few inches.

My imposter begins to say something, but with the thick glass and the sound of the freeway behind the mall, I can't make any of it out. She must sense this because she climbs out of her car and walks over, her hand fixed to the Goyard bag hanging on her shoulder.

"I think we need to talk," she says.

She has kind eyes and a sweet voice with an almost childlike softness to it.

"There's a coffee shop about ten doors down," I say. "I'll meet you there in a few."

Before I head that way, I text Marisol and let her know what's going on. I also tell her if I don't answer my phone in thirty minutes to call the police.

Five minutes later, I'm walking into the coffee shop.

She's seated at a high-top table for two, legs crossed and foot bouncing as she scans the room before locking eyes on me.

I don't order anything, and from the looks of it, she didn't either.

My thighs are gelatin as I make my way across the room and take the seat across from her. The café is relatively busy for a Saturday night, which I'm going to hope will keep her from doing or saying anything crazy or dangerous.

"I want to keep this as civilized as possible," she says, clearing her throat, folding her hands, and adjusting her

posture. The red splotches forming on her neck tell me she's just as anxious as I am.

"Same," I say, keeping my words at a minimum so she can do all the talking. As far as I'm concerned, she's the one who has the explaining to do.

"Are you seeing him?" she asks, her warm brown eyes unblinking as they lock onto mine.

"I'm sorry. What?" That wasn't exactly the question I expected her to ask me.

"Shane," she says.

I glance to the side, confusion setting in as I try to make sense of this.

"You were at the house last night," she says.

"What house?"

"Eleanor's."

"Who's Eleanor?" I ask.

Her fist balls for a second, and her lips press together. She tries to speak and then stops herself.

"I'm sorry—I don't know anyone named Shane," I say. "Nor do I know an Eleanor."

Her eyes flick past my shoulder toward the parking lot, where our identical cars are parked side by side several spots over.

"I . . . I don't understand," she says before turning back. "I know it's you. I know you were there, at the house. The green house on Caldecott."

I resist the urge to confirm to this crazy woman that yes, I live in the green house on Caldecott.

"When we first moved here, I couldn't get a job," she says. "Shane . . . Shane gave me a name. A résumé. When I landed a job, he gave me a wardrobe full of beautiful clothes, designer bags, and makeup—the good kind. Took me to get my hair done, even had a picture picked out." She runs her

hand down her sleek bob. “And just last month, he rented me a place. A really nice apartment. Fully furnished. Brand-new everything. It was a gift, he said. He’s been working two jobs, working so hard . . . I thought he just wanted to take care of me.” She glances down, her fingers practically knitting a sweater, and I realize her hands are trembling. “Last night, we had plans, Shane and me. And he canceled them. Said he had to work. Now, I don’t know why, but something made me feel like driving past the house . . . just to, I don’t know . . . just to see. But when I got there, all I saw was you. Through the windows. You were on your phone, texting I think. But I could tell you were beautiful. And you certainly weren’t some eighty-five-year-old client.”

So it *was* her last night, parked on the street.

I listen, clinging to her every word, unsure of where she’s going with this.

“I’ve been with Shane since we were kids,” she says before placing a shaky hand over her heart. “I love him with everything I have. I would die for this man. He’s always been there for me, always had my back. I’ve never had any reason to doubt him. Ever. But when I got home last night, I did a reverse search of the address . . . and it came up showing the owner was a Brienne Dougray.”

She pauses, and I nod. “Right. That’s me.”

Biting her lip, she dips her hand into her bag and pulls out a wallet. Unzipping one of the slots, she produces a plastic driver’s license, placing it in front of me so I can read it.

The name on the right is mine.

The photo is hers.

“This is the name he gave me,” she says, “when I couldn’t get a job.”

I begin to say something, but she lifts a hand.

“Before you tell me what an idiot I was for going along with it, please know that I’m well aware,” she continues. “Love makes you blind, and Shane can be very persuasive when he wants to be. And I trusted him. I trusted that he had

my best interests at heart. And I believed him. I believed him when he said this was some made-up name and that we weren't hurting anyone."

"He told me his name was Niall," I say. "Niall Emberlin. And that he was a doctor."

She squints, and now it's her turn to be confused. "He works at the hospital, but he's not a doctor. He's a patient transporter."

"He had a badge . . . and he wore scrubs going to and from work . . ." My stomach twists, heavy with disgust as I think of the type of person who would go to such lengths. "He had medical textbooks in his study, and he'd always talk about research and different cases he was working on."

"He used to work in a nursing home as a nurse's aide," she says. "That's about the extent of his medical background."

I sit in stunned silence for a moment. "He was so convincing."

She swipes at a tear that falls from the corner of her eye. "You think you know someone."

"How long have you been together?"

Rolling her eyes she says, "Since we were kids. Our whole lives practically."

I can't begin to imagine what it would be like to be used like a pawn by someone you loved, someone who loved you.

She tries to compose herself, and I try to piece together everything I know so far. Only one glaring question remains.

"Why do you think he chose me?" I ask.

Eyes holding mine, she lifts a single shoulder. "Wish I knew."

"There has to be a reason," I muse out loud. "You two aren't from here, are you?"

"We're from Nebraska. Shane said he wanted to move here to connect with his stepmom's family, but as far as I know, nothing ever came of that. He always said he was too

busy working his two jobs, and things were going well for us for the first time in our lives—financially speaking at least—so I didn't push it. I figured he'd reach out to them when the time was right."

"His stepmom?"

I vaguely remember my grandparents mentioning that my mother had remarried years ago, and I recall my grandfather returning from a meeting with the two of them after my mother begged for a reunion. I'll never forget the expression on his face when he returned that night. He hung his fedora on the top hook of the coatrack and looked at my grandmother with narrow eyes and tight lips, shaking his head "no" before retiring to their room for the night.

He didn't approve of this new man, and that's all there was to it.

"What was her name?" I ask.

"Sonya," she says without hesitation.

My skin prickles with goose bumps and I let out an audible gasp, my fingers grazing my open mouth.

"What?" she asks. "What is it?"

"My biological mother's name was Sonya . . . You don't think . . . ?" My voice trails off as I consider the possibility that Shane may have been my mother's stepson. But I still don't understand why he would have targeted me, why he would want to hurt me. I did nothing wrong. It wasn't my fault that my mother didn't have the means—emotionally, financially, or otherwise—to give me a proper upbringing.

"Is your mother still around?" she asks.

I shake my head. "She passed a couple of years ago. Pancreatic cancer, I believe."

I only found out after the fact. Apparently she didn't want my grandparents to know she was sick, didn't want to give any of us a chance to say goodbye. It was a spiteful, manipulative, and selfish move, and my grandparents weren't the least bit surprised by it.

The woman rests her elbows on the table, massaging her temples. “Shane’s stepmom died of pancreatic cancer a couple of years ago.”

My throat is dry, and my blood turns to ice in my veins. The café is packed with warm bodies, but I swear it just got degrees colder.

“Oh, my God,” I say when I gather myself.

“What?”

“After he had me committed, he started siphoning money from my accounts,” I say. “He must have known how much my grandparents were worth and that they left it all to me. Sonya told him, I bet. *That’s* why he targeted me. He wanted that money. He felt entitled to it because of her. That’s got to be it.”

She’s quiet as she contemplates my theory. “I remember a long time ago, maybe when we were still in high school, Sonya had too much to drink one night, and she was telling us about her parents and how loaded they were. Millionaires, she said. She told us they wrote her off, replaced her. She was so upset. You could tell she wanted to hurt them like they’d hurt her.” She pauses, dragging in a ragged breath. “Shane was always so protective of her. His mom abandoned him when he was a baby, so he never really had a mother figure until Sonya came along. He idolized her. It was like she could do no wrong. They had an interesting bond, that’s for sure.”

I try to imagine my mother bonding with anyone, but I can’t visualize it. The only time she was ever sweet or loving to anyone was when there was something in it for her. Selfless and genuine wasn’t a language she spoke.

“He used us both to avenge her,” I say. “We were nothing but pawns in his sick scheme.”

Her bottom lip quivers. Maybe I should have been more sensitive just now, but there’s no way to sugarcoat what this monster did. I bet he thinks he did it in her honor. Or perhaps he feels entitled to the Dougray fortune because in his eyes, he’s the rightful heir, having been raised by Sonya.

My mother was a lot of things, least of which was an upstanding and decent human being, but she would never have approved of this. Sure, she didn't get along with her parents, but she never stopped loving me. She said so herself in all the letters she sent over the years—letters I wasn't able to read until it was too late. After my grandmother passed, I found them in a shoebox in her closet, held together by a handful of rubber bands. There must have been hundreds of them. I don't think she ever forgave herself for losing me, nor did she ever get over it. All the horrible things she said and did, it was because she was hurting, and hurt people hurt people. I imagine it was also a bit of a distraction from the life she left behind, the life she lost after a string of poor decisions.

I get up to grab a handful of napkins from the self-serve bar and bring them back to Shane's teary-eyed girlfriend.

"He has demons," she says, dabbing the inner corners of her eyes before shaking her head. "I knew they were deep. I just didn't know they were this deep."

"He lied to you. He lied to us both. How could you have known?" Never in a million years did I ever imagine I'd be sitting here comforting my imposter.

It crosses my mind for a moment that perhaps Niall—Shane—put her up to this. Perhaps this entire thing is nothing more than a ruse or a distraction or something to divert me—though from what I'm not sure.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask. "At the Pavilion today?"

She crumples one of the napkins in her hand, sitting up straighter. "I didn't. I'd been driving around all day, trying to be anywhere but home, and I saw the car. There aren't a lot of red A4s in town. Anyway, I pulled in . . . and then I saw you."

I suppose stranger things have happened.

She glances down as if she's lost in thought. "Thank you for talking to me, Brienne. I wanted to get my facts straight before I confronted Shane."

“What’s his last name?” I ask. I’ve decided as soon as I leave, I’m going straight to the police, and after that I’m staying with Marisol.

“Knudsen,” she says.

And just like that, I know his real name: Shane Knudsen.

“I don’t think I caught your name,” I say.

“Sam.” She tucks a glossy brown strand of hair behind one ear, and I can’t help but check out her earrings. They’re small studs the color of citrine—nothing close to anything I own. “Sam Tucker.”

“What are you going to do now, Sam?” I ask.

She glances at the sidewalk, her arms crossed in front of her hips. And she shrugs. “Going to go tell him goodbye.”

“Do you think that’s safe?” I worry the inside of my lip.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell him we talked.”

“No. I mean, do you think it’s safe for you? How’s he going to take it?” I ask.

“He’s not going to be happy about it, but he loves me. He’d never hurt me.”

CHAPTER 54

NIALL

A car pulls into the driveway just past seven thirty.

Brienne's finally home, which is a relief. I'd spent most of the day so focused on Sam that I didn't stop to give much thought to the fact that Brienne basically went MIA.

But now she's back.

I wait in the kitchen, checking my phone again.

Still no text from Sam.

A second later, the back door swings open.

"Hey, I wondered when you—" I stop talking when I realize it isn't Brienne at all. "Sam, what are you doing here?"

I'm torn between wanting to berate her for ignoring me all day and having the nerve to walk into "Eleanor's" house like she owns the place, but I force myself to remain calm.

"How could you?" Her voice trembles.

That's a loaded question. I contemplate a response before deciding playing dumb is going to be in my best interest.

"You *lied* to me, Shane. And you've never lied to me." She glances down, as if she can't look at me right now. "Or maybe you have, and I was just too stupid to realize it."

"Sam, I have no idea what you're talking about." Gaslighting worked on Brienne. It should work on Sam, too.

She scoffs before crossing her arms over her chest. "I know who Brienne is."

I wait for her to elaborate on how she knows, my ears pulsing hot and my heart in my throat.

She doesn't.

"You told me Brienne Dougray wasn't real," Sam says. "And then you dressed me up like her. You *used* me."

“Baby.” I’ll get on my knees right now if that’s what it’s going to take. A lump forms in my throat as I search for the right words. “I’m so sorry. Let me explain. I’ll tell you everything.”

I sound like every blowhard, second-chance-begging boyfriend from every romance movie ever made, but in this moment, I couldn’t care less. I’ll say and do whatever it takes to make this right, to get back in her good graces. She’s the only thing I’ve ever had and the only thing I ever want. She’s my constant. My everything.

I want to ask her how she found out who Brienne was, but the last thing a remorseful man should be asking is, “How’d ya catch me?” I’m sure I’ll find out later, when the smoke has cleared and she’s had time to cool off.

“Why, Shane?” Her eyes search mine.

“You have to understand,” I say. And then, just as I promised, I tell her everything. I tell her about Sonya’s asshole parents and her dying wish. I tell her about how perfectly everything aligned. I tell her about all the plans I have for us, for the future. And how the money I’ve taken so far has barely put a dent in Brienne’s net worth.

Sam is silent, warring with my justifications, but I’m confident she’ll come around. She’ll see it my way. She always does.

“No, Shane,” she says a moment later, voice broken. “Why’d you throw us away?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I didn’t throw us away. I did this for us.”

“You did this for yourself.” Her expression sours, and she turns her back to me, hand reaching for the back door.

“Sam, wait.” I can’t breathe. “We can fix this.”

She turns back to me. “No. *You* can fix this. And you will. Just leave me out of it.”

She’s on the back steps now, and I’m scrambling after her—something I’ve never done in my entire life. Over twenty-

some years together and plenty of fights, not once has Sam ever walked away from me.

I stop and check my watch. I have no idea when Brienne's coming back, but it's probably better that Sam leaves, just in case. Sam isn't the confrontational type, but I don't know what Brienne will say or do if she comes face-to-face with her doppelgänger in her own home.

If the past is any indication, Sam'll throw a fit, have her moment, and be back later. This time tomorrow she'll be all kisses and apologies and make-up sex, and everything will be back to the way it's always been.

I watch from the kitchen window as Sam backs out and speeds away.

She'll be back.

She always comes back.

It's almost eight when I send Brienne a text: **WORRIED ABOUT YOU. COMING HOME ANYTIME SOON OR SHOULD I SEND A SEARCH PARTY? :-)**

It shows as "delivered" immediately, and I wait for a few minutes to see if it changes to "read."

It doesn't.

Dragging my hands through my hair, I decide this day can screw itself, and I head upstairs to change for bed. But before I turn in for the night, I grab the syringe and load it with a full draw of potassium chloride on the off chance the opportunity presents itself sooner than later. When I'm done, I place it in my top nightstand drawer and climb into bed.

I check my phone one last time, the brightness searing into my vision in the dark room. Brienne still hasn't read my message.

Setting the phone facedown on the empty side of the bed, I roll to my side and shut my eyes. I'm moments from drifting off when I hear the back door open and close, the sound unmistakable in this silent old house.

Flinging the covers off my legs, I sit up and attempt to get out of bed making the least amount of noise as possible. Grabbing the syringe, I make sure it's capped before tucking it into the waistband of my sweats, and then I make my way to the hall, stopping at the top of the stairs.

The gentle pad of her footsteps down her hallway travels up to mine, and I take the first few steps, ducking down until I can peer through the dining room windows. From where I stand, I catch the tail end of her red car parked in the driveway.

I take the rest of the stairs in silence and round the banister when I get to the bottom, making my way to her room at the end of the hall. I'm moving in damn near slow motion, but my body is reeling, a surge of energy expanding to every extremity as my stomach cartwheels and my heart beats off rhythm.

Her bedroom door is cracked, open maybe a foot or so, but her room is dark. Peeking in, I spot Brienne standing in front of her dresser, her dark hair shining against the moonlight that trickles in from her window.

Reaching for the syringe, I pull it from my elastic waistband and ready the warm plastic in my damp palm.

CHAPTER 55

BRIENNE

“So what now?” I ask the detective when I’ve finished unloading my case.

Baker is the same detective they assigned to my assault case last year. In fact, I’m almost positive he’s the only detective the department has. While I’m disappointed in the lack of leads that came out of the last case, this one more or less solves itself.

“We’re going to dispatch someone over there shortly to bring him in,” he says. He hasn’t made eye contact with me more than a handful of times over the past hour. Either he thinks I’m certifiable, or he’s trying to wrap his head around this entire thing.

“And then what?” I ask. “Can you apprehend him? How does that work?”

I realize now that I’m shaking, and it has nothing to do with the temperature of his stuffy office. It’s adrenaline.

I shook for weeks after my attack, uncontrollable tremors that made my muscles ache for days at a time.

“Do you have a safe place you can stay tonight?” he asks.

“I do. But aren’t you going to take him into custody?”

Baker’s green eyes are half-wincing. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s not quite like that for identity theft. And I’m not sure we’d have enough evidence to get a warrant. You’ve given me quite a compelling story here, but aside from a few screenshots of your bank account, I’m not sure there’s enough hard evidence to build your case just yet. But filing a report is a good start. I suggest you get yourself a good attorney first thing Monday.”

I chew the inner corner of my lip.

This is exactly what I was afraid of. He isn’t taking me seriously, and there isn’t enough evidence to have Shane

apprehended. They're going to question him. And he's going to run. I know it.

"Oh, by the way, been meaning to call you," Detective Baker says, perking up. "Got a match on that DNA in your assault case from last year."

"Oh, my God." I lean forward. I vaguely recall they were able to scrape DNA from beneath my nails, but they told me not to get my hopes up and reminded me that sometimes it takes months to get results.

He turns to his computer, pecking in his password and entering some black-screened database.

"Name's Derek Dunham," he says. "He's currently serving time in Anamosa for a string of robberies he committed earlier this year." He angles the screen so I can see it better. The mug shot shows a young adult man with sandy hair, blue eyes, a pointed nose, and neck tattoos. "You know him?"

I study his face. "I've never seen him in my life."

Baker was right all along. It was random. Truly a crime of opportunity.

I'm disappointed in the fact that a human being would do this to an innocent stranger, but the relief that floods my veins is a small consolation. At least I wasn't targeted.

"All right, well, I'm going to send one of my guys over to the house," he says. "I suggest you find a place to stay for the night, and we'll reconvene in the morning."

I leave the station, texting Marisol as I head to my car. I let her know I'm on my way—but it's the strangest thing.

I thought I'd feel relief after this.

I thought I'd feel like we're making progress.

Instead, as I drive across town to Marisol's neighborhood, my body shivers harder than ever.

Shane is a planner. He pivots and strategizes. He's quick on his feet. If he had a contingency plan for everything, why

wouldn't he have a plan for this? All along, I've been worried about what would happen if Shane disappears, if he leaves town.

But what if he stays?

Oh, God. What then?

CHAPTER 56

NIALL

I'm halfway across her room, the sound of my movements camouflaged by the noisy ceiling fan whirling above us, when I've already decided how I'm going to dispose of her body tomorrow. I'm three steps away when I've decided I'm going to have to talk Sam into posing as Brienne first thing Monday so we can unfreeze her accounts.

Just a few more withdrawals, and we'll be golden.

My hand is wrapped around the syringe, and I move it into position before uncapping it. I've never killed anyone with my bare hands before, if you can count this as that. When Sam's stepdad passed, I surfed two straight weeks on a wave of adrenaline. It was a power trip like you wouldn't believe. I can only imagine how I'm going to feel after this.

Honestly, it's unfortunate that Brienne has to die.

She's the last of Sonya's bloodline, all that's left of Sonya in this world.

But really this is her fault. She never should have left Crestview. She never should have had the nerve to think she could beat me at my own game. She never should have underestimated me.

I take a long, hard breath.

And then I count to three.

The dark room that surrounds us goes pitch-black for a moment, and when I come to, I've pulled her against me.

She struggles under my hold, fighting with everything she's got, but I'm bigger.

Stronger.

More determined.

CHAPTER 57

BRIENNE

I can't stop thinking about the last thing Sam said to me earlier today: that she was going to tell Shane goodbye.

A man as ruthless and self-centered as him won't take it lightly. I can't imagine he'll shrug his shoulders, give her a devil-may-care "okay," and let her walk out of his life without any kind of a fight.

Sam seemed sweet. Naive but sweet. I'm sure she knows him better than anyone, but then again, she had no idea he was masterminding this grand scheme, lying to her and using her, all the while convincing her she was the love of his life.

"What's wrong?" Marisol stands in the doorway of the guest room I'm currently inhabiting in her house. "You're chewing your nails. You never chew your nails."

"I keep thinking of Sam," I say. Marisol wrinkles her nose until she realizes who Sam is. When I left the police station this afternoon, I came straight here, seeking refuge at Marisol's place, and I filled her in. "She was going to break it off with Niall—Shane, I mean. But I just have this bad feeling . . . I think I should drive by and see if she's there."

"And I think you're insane for so much as thinking about going over there." She crosses her arms. "What are you going to do if she's there and you happen to see something through the window? Are you just going to drive off into the sunset like it's not your circus, not your monkeys?"

Again, I don't answer.

"He blindsided her, Mar," I say. "She loved him. She'd been with him almost her entire life. And she never saw it coming. We don't know what he's capable of. If he hurts her and I did nothing to stop it, that's going to be on me."

"If he hurts her, that's on him. He's clearly a psychopath who has no qualms about breaking the law and destroying

anyone if it means getting what he wants,” she says.

“Try all you want. You’re not going to talk me out of this.” I check the time on my phone. It’s just past eight o’clock, and the sky is darkening by the minute.

Marisol rolls her eyes and leans against the door, arms still folded tight across her chest. “You’re brave . . . but in the worst kind of way. I’m only letting you leave if you take my Smith & Wesson.”

Before I have a chance to protest, she’s disappearing down the hall. Returning a couple of minutes later, she presents a shiny black handgun that fills most of her palm.

“It’s a peashooter,” she says. “Loaded. Not likely to kill anyone unless you *really* intend to, but it’s a good deterrent, a good distraction. And it’ll buy you time.”

I haven’t held a firearm since college, when I dated a criminal justice major for a couple of semesters and his idea of the perfect date night involved dollar pizza slices from Napoli Fratelli and a couple of hours at the Deer Valley shooting range. I never thought all those nights I spent trying to impress him with my natural sharpshooter skills would ever come in handy.

“Fine.” I rise from the foot of the bed and take the gun from her hand, checking the manual safety before grabbing my purse off the nearby dresser and hiding it inside. I have no intention of killing Shane, but I have every intention of protecting myself—and Sam. And I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure we’re both safe and that Shane walks out of my home and into the back of a police car.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Marisol says as she follows me to the front door.

I have to protect myself. And Sam. I refuse to let Shane make victims of us both.

With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I head to my car. A few minutes later, I’m soaring through the oak-lined Avenue of the Queens before coming to a hard stop when I get

to my place and spot Sam's Audi in the driveway and a myriad of lights on all over the house.

I park in the street and kill the engine before climbing out and closing the door with a soft click. Creeping up the driveway, I stop beside Sam's car and place my hand on the hood. The engine's warmth tells me she hasn't been here long.

The neighborhood is bathed in dark now, crickets chirping and wind rustling the leaves on the trees that obscure what hint of moonlight tonight's sky provides.

With my heart lurching higher and higher and anxious heat crawling up my neck, I make my way to the back of the house, gripping my phone hard in my hand.

Peering in through a window, I find the kitchen empty, so I head in through the unlocked rear door.

Voices trail from upstairs, and I tiptoe through the kitchen, past the dining room, and to the bottom of the stairs.

A door slams.

Sam screams.

A quick glance down the main floor hall, and I find that my bedroom door is open. Someone must have been in there today. With a damp hand on the banister, I climb the steps slow and steady, trying to avoid the creaky spots. When I reach the top, I'm light-headed, and I realize I've been holding my breath.

"Ungrateful . . . everything I did was for us." Shane's words are louder than usual and crystal clear.

I give myself a few seconds to catch my breath, and then I press my phone's power button five times to send it into SOS mode. In mere seconds, 911 will be dialed, and they'll trace the call and send someone to the address associated with my number. Talking to a dispatcher is too risky. Shane will hear me, and I need to catch him off guard.

I want to confront him.

I'm going to say what needs to be said.

And then I'm going to get Sam out of here.

Sliding my phone back into my purse, I exchange it for Marisol's Smith & Wesson and disengage the safety before stepping lightly toward Shane's bedroom door.

Charged with adrenaline, I force my way inside the room, the door swinging wide and hitting the wall behind it.

"What the . . ." Shane has his arm around Sam's shoulders, death-grip tight. An unzipped duffel bag rests on the bed, a few items thrown haphazardly inside it.

Sam's fingernails dig into Shane's arm, breaking the skin, but he remains unfazed. With his clear blue gaze locked on mine, a wicked leer covers his face.

"What do you have there, Brienne?" he asks with a nod, his gaze lowering to the gun in my hand.

"Let her go," I say, steadying the shake in my grip.

"Or what? You're going to shoot me with that BB gun?" He snickers, his hold around Sam tightening, and she gasps.

Lifting the gun, I point it at his head. It isn't anything I've ever dreamed of doing in my life, and for a moment, it almost feels like I'm outside my body, watching all this from somewhere else, but I continue on, undeterred.

"Do it," he says, positioning Sam as his human shield. Her eyes are glassy, colored in panic. "Shoot me."

He's trying to call my bluff.

I've never been good at manipulation. It isn't something that comes easy to me. But my mother was an old pro, and in this moment, I ask myself what she would do in this situation.

"Sam told me my mother raised you," I say, gun still pointed at him.

He studies me for a second, like he's trying to guess where I'm going with this.

"Do you really think she'd be proud of you? Seeing you like this? So desperate? So weak?" I ask.

He chuffs. “This is hilarious—you talking like you know a damn thing about her.”

“I know her better than you think.”

Shane rolls his pale eyes, readjusting his hold on Sam. “She might have given birth to you, but she was my mother, not yours. She raised me, not you. I was her everything. You were nothing to her. She wrote you off just like her parents wrote her off.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong.”

His eyes flash. He’s curious but also enraged.

The letters are in one of the guest rooms across the hall, in the top drawer of a rolltop desk. It’s maybe ten steps from here, but is it worth the risk of walking away and letting him run?

“She wrote me,” I say. “Hundreds of letters. Every birthday, every holiday, sometimes just ’cause. She told me all about her life in Nebraska. The job at the tire factory. The weekend shift at the casino. The piece-of-shit husband who used to beat her when she didn’t make enough in tips to cover his beer and cigarettes for the month . . .”

He says nothing. In fact, he doesn’t so much as move.

“But she also told me how much she missed me. How much she regretted the mistakes she’d made. She told me she never stopped loving me and missing me, and if she could walk away from her life in Nebraska and walk back into mine, she’d do it in a heartbeat,” I continue. I leave out the fact that the letters stopped after she mentioned her pancreatic cancer diagnosis. Unfortunately I was several years too late in reading any of these. I never had a chance to forgive her, to tell her goodbye. “Anyway, not once did she ever mention you.”

“Liar.”

I place my left hand over my heart, my right hand still gripping the gun pointed in his direction.

“Hand to God,” I say. “I can get the letters for you if you want to read them for yourself.”

“I don’t have time for that.” He wrinkles his nose.

“Then you’re going to have to take my word for it.” I shrug. My arms are getting tired from holding the gun in this position for so long. “She gaslighted you, Shane. The same way you gaslighted me.”

“Get the letters,” he says with a sneer.

I linger in the doorway for a moment before taking a few steps backward. When I reach the hall, I dive into the guest room and fish the bound letters from the rolltop desk. If I can get him to read them, he might let go of Sam, and that might buy us some time to get out of here. Before I head back to his room, I stop at the top of the stairs, tuck the letters under my arm, and check my phone.

It’s odd that the police haven’t arrived yet.

It had to have been at least five minutes if not ten.

Digging into my purse, I retrieve my phone and wake the screen with a slide of my thumb before checking the call log.

Gasping, I realize it never dialed 911.

I’m not sure if I didn’t swipe it the right way or if I didn’t press the power button enough times, but sure enough, the police are not on their way and have no idea I’m here.

Glancing toward the open door to Shane’s bedroom, I decide to dial 911 manually, and then I check to ensure my phone is on silent in case I have to hang up and they call back. I press the green “Call” button and stuff the phone back into my bag, but when I take a step forward, I collide with Shane, lose my balance, and stumble to the floor.

The stack of letters falls, and Shane scoops them up, examining the return address. He says nothing, but the bitter expression on his face indicates it registers as familiar.

“I told you,” I say as I rise back to my feet and rest my hands along the banister. It’s now that I realize I no longer have the gun in my possession.

Scanning the strip of hallway behind Shane as he thumbs through a handful of the letters, I spot something dark and

shiny in the distance, but he's closer to it than I am, and any sudden movements in that direction will surely not end in my favor.

An endless moment passes before Shane tosses the stack of letters, which flutter to the ground and land in a chaotic pile around our feet.

With his finger pointed in my direction, he opens his mouth to say something, only he doesn't get the chance.

Sam has jumped on him from behind, and her hands are around his neck.

Shane's face turns a deep shade of red, and his eyes bulge as he struggles for air. Sam is screaming at me to get out of here, but I refuse. I won't leave her. Not like this. Not with him.

Eyeing the gun in the background, I scramble in that direction, latching on to his arm when I get there, only he jerks away with an unexpected amount of force. The impact inadvertently frees Sam's hold on him and sends me tumbling down the stairs.

The most brilliant color fills my vision when my body comes to a hard stop at the bottom.

Seconds pass or maybe minutes. I can't be sure.

And then everything turns black.

CHAPTER 58

NIALL

“You know I’d never hurt you.” I squeeze Sam’s hand as she sits in the passenger seat of her Audi and I blaze through side street after side street, driving us south of here. It won’t be long before we’re out of Quinnesec Bluff for good. “What you saw back there . . . that wasn’t me. And I didn’t know that was you . . . what were you doing in Brienne’s room anyway?”

My voice is soft, but my heart is hammering. Too much adrenaline.

She hasn’t said much of anything since we left the house. She’s scared. She gets quiet when she’s scared.

I don’t blame her. She saw a side of me she’s never seen, and everything happened so fast. Once the shock wears off, she’ll be fine.

“Seriously, babe. What were you doing in there?” I ask again.

She clears her throat, staring ahead at the dark road beyond the headlights. “That ring you gave me. The opal one. It had an inscription on the inside . . . to Brienne . . . I wanted to give it back.”

Shit.

Rookie mistake.

Nothing I can do about it now.

I check the rearview mirror before turning my attention to Sam for a second. She’s facing straight ahead, sitting still as a statue. Interlacing our fingers together, I tell her, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

The second Brienne’s body hit the bottom of the stairs earlier, I didn’t bother grabbing the duffel bag I’d begun packing for us—I grabbed her gun, Sam, and the keys off the kitchen counter and got us the hell out of there.

Now here we are.

“I know that wasn’t you back there either,” I continue. “People get crazy when they’re upset, and we’re no exception.”

I check my rearview mirror for the millionth time, but so far, so good.

The city is dead tonight, hardly another car in sight. Getting out of here should be a cinch.

“I’ve got so much good stuff planned for us, baby.” I squeeze her hand again. “You have no idea. First, I’m going to take you to Costa Rica. How’s that sound? Maybe we can stop somewhere on the way and get you one of those red bikinis and a pair of the shiny sunglasses you like? Those aviators?”

We reach a section of town with unavoidable traffic lights, but it’s the best route to the interstate, so I hit the gas and fly through a yellow light just as it turns red.

“I’m sure you’re thinking a million different things right now,” I say in my most soothing tone. I’m sure she’s scared. She’s never seen me act like that before. She’s never seen this side of me in its full glory, but to be fair, neither have I. “Just know that I’ve got this. I’ve got *you*, Sam. And everything’s going to be okay. I swear on my life.”

Her hand trembles in mine, and I wish I could kiss away her fears right now, but it’s not the time nor the place.

I blow through a red light at an empty intersection, my heart booming in my chest when we make it through.

I’m halfway to the next light when cherry lights fill my rearview.

Resisting the instinct to swear or panic, I pull over and flip on the interior lights. Cops love it when you do that because it makes them feel safer, like you’re less of a threat.

“It’s okay, babe,” I say to Sam. “Just sit tight. This’ll be over soon, and we’ll be on our way.”

I keep my hands on the wheel at the ten-and-two position and stare straight ahead. A middle-aged woman in a blue

minivan passes by, slowing down and craning her neck to stare like this is any of her business.

“License and registration, please,” the officer says when he approaches. The flashlight in his hand is pointed in my face, damn near blinding me as I dig into my wallet. I select one of the fake IDs—Richard Hawthorne—and hand it over. If Brienne is somehow not dead and somehow managed to give the police my name in the span of the last five minutes, I’ll be damned if this is how I go down.

“Wait,” the officer says. The flashlight clicks off, and two familiar chubby hands rest on the window ledge of my door as the man lowers himself.

Turning to get a better look, I try to keep my cool when I recognize the moonfaced sloth staring back at me with a dopey smile like he’s actually happy to see me.

“Brian?” I ask, forcing a chuckle to make him think I’m happy to see him, too. “What are you doing in uniform?”

He taps the badge on his left breast, pointing to where it identifies him as a Quinnesec Bluff Reserve Officer. “Just a little thing I do on the side.”

That’s what I get for deliberately trying *not* to get to know him all these months . . .

I debate whether to act impressed, but I’m soon distracted by my fake ID nestled between two of his thick fingers.

“Shane,” he says, getting back to business, “you realize you blew through that light back there, right? Not only that, but I clocked you going fifty-nine in a forty-five.”

From the corner of my eye, I steal glimpses of Sam, making sure she’s not trying to draw any attention to herself—not that I think she would. Pretty sure she’s seen what I’m capable of here, and she’s not going to try to pull any stunts.

“Yeah, sorry. I wasn’t paying attention, I guess.” I feign regret as I run my hand along my bristled jaw. “Won’t happen again, though. I can promise you that.”

I reach for my Richard Hawthorne ID, but he jerks it back. “Still have to run it.”

“Seriously, man? I thought we were friends?” I remind him, recalling that day he caught me on my phone and did me a solid by not turning me in to management.

Brian nods toward the squad car with the flashing lights. “I’ve got a partner tonight, and he’s one of those by-the-book types. I’ll see if I can talk him out of the ticket, though. Anyway, this’ll just take a few minutes. Sit tight, okay?”

My hands tighten around the steering wheel.

As soon as he gets back and sees the name on the ID is different from the name he knows me by, he’s going to start asking questions again, and there’s no way he’s going to hand it back to me and let us go on our merry way.

“You doing okay, Sam?” I ask my girlfriend, placing a hand on her thigh. She all but recoils at my touch, so I let her go. Time. She needs time.

Sinking back into the buttery leather seats, I pull in a deep breath while checking the rearview. I can see Brian talking with his partner. And I can see his partner mouth something into the radio on his shoulder.

I rest my right foot above the gas pedal and squeeze my eyes, a chase scene playing out in my mind’s eye. My thoughts are loud, my heart thumping even louder in my ears. A victorious smile claims my mouth, and I bite my lower lip.

A second later, my decision is made, only when I open my eyes to reach for the shifter, I realize the dome light is on—and the passenger door is wide open.

Turning back, I spot Sam clambering to get into the back seat of the police car.

There’s a tightness in my chest, a physical pain. For a moment everything happens in slow motion, and I know the image of Sam turning her back on me will be seared into my memory forever.

But I don’t have time to wallow. Not here, not now.

My heart hammers, and my hand has a death grip on the steering wheel.

Shifting into drive, I floor the gas and peel away, tires screeching like something straight out of an action movie. There's no way they'll pursue me with an innocent civilian passenger in their back seat, so this will buy me some more time. I'm thirty miles from the state line, which means they're going to have to enlist the help of other agencies—it's a tedious process, yet another swing in my favor.

I glance up at the half-moon above and the sky full of stars, and I can practically feel Sonya smiling down on me.

CHAPTER 59

BRIENNE

“Oh, good. You’re awake.” Marisol’s voice fills my ear as I stir.

Electric pain sears through my head as I come to in an unfamiliar room. A quick glance at the wires and IV lines connected to me, coupled with the steady sound of my heart rate beeping on a monitor beside me, and I no longer have to wonder where I am.

I lift my hand to my head, expecting to touch flesh and hair, only to be met with a gauze bandage.

“You fell down the stairs,” Marisol says. “In case you’re wondering what happened.” She sighs, crossing her legs and leaning in. “You weren’t answering my texts, so I drove to your house, and just as I got there, I saw you driving away . . . only when you passed, I realized it wasn’t you. So I went into your house just as the police were pulling up. You must have called them before you fell? Or someone called them . . . And that’s when I found you lying at the bottom of the stairs.” She takes my hand.

“Did he get away?” I ask, voice groggy. I’d also like to know what day it is and how long I’ve been here, but first things first.

“You have a couple of cracked ribs and a concussion. In case you’re wondering . . .”

“Where is Shane? Did they get him?” My head throbs, but I fight through the pain, eyes unfocusing and refocusing on Marisol.

“They caught him,” she says, head tilted. “Guess he got pulled over just outside of town for running a red light, and at some point he decided to lead them on a chase—like a damn fool. He didn’t get far. They laid spike strips, and someone got him in the next town over. He’s in police custody.”

“Thank God.” I exhale, lifting a hand to my hospital-gown-covered chest. Everything about this moment is hyperreal: the rough texture of the thick cotton sheets on my legs, the sterile hospital scent that floods my lungs, the cool sensation washing over me as adrenaline leaves my system. “What about Sam? Where is she? Is she okay?”

I hold my breath, waiting for her response.

“Funny you should ask.” Marisol rises from her chair and grabs her purse off a nearby counter, fishing inside until she retrieves a white envelope. “She stopped by a few hours ago, but you were still out cold. She asked me to give you this.”

She hands me the envelope.

“I’m going to grab a coffee and call the girls,” she says. “They’ve been texting me every twenty minutes asking for updates. Be back in a bit.”

Marisol steps out, and I tear open the envelope before unfolding the letter inside.

Dear Brienne,

I wanted you to know that I’m deeply sorry for the stress Shane’s actions have caused you, but I’m even sorrier for my involvement in this. I swear to you, had I known what he was doing, I never would have had any part in it.

I also wanted to thank you because meeting you—and being you—has changed my life forever.

I’ve learned a lot these last few months.

When I was you, I learned about the person I was, the person I wanted to be, and the person I didn’t want to be anymore. And after meeting you today, I learned about the person I hope to become more like someday.

You are strong and resilient. You’ve been through the unimaginable, and your strength

inspires me.

I hope you can forgive me.

And I hope someday our paths cross again.

Sam

PS—I think this is yours.

At the bottom of the letter, attached by a strip of clear tape, is my grandmother's opal ring. I didn't even know it was missing. I'm assuming Shane helped himself to my jewelry box at some point and gifted that to Sam under false pretenses. Perhaps it was some part of his master plan that hadn't yet played out. I can only imagine.

Either way, it's over now.

It's over.

Lying back against my hospital pillows, I draw in a long, steady breath and close my eyes, remembering this saying my grandmother used to have hanging on our refrigerator: *In the end, it'll all be okay. And if it isn't okay, it isn't the end.*

I'm quite certain this is the end.

CHAPTER 60

NIALL

Orange has never been my color.

I'm seated in a holding cell, awaiting my initial appearance. Apparently they've deemed me high risk due to the fact that I led police on a ninety-mile-per-hour car chase, and I just happened to have a gun in the car (even though it was in the console).

I rest my head against the cinder-block walls and close my eyes.

Now that I'm alone with my thoughts, I find myself thinking of Sonya's letters to Brienne. I didn't get a chance to read them, but I refuse to believe she was gaslighting me all those years. If anything, she was probably trying to get back into the good graces of her daughter and family so she'd have a chance at her rightful inheritance.

As far as I'm concerned, Brienne doesn't know what she's talking about.

She didn't know Sonya the way I did. Sonya didn't sacrifice for her the way she did for me, and that's the true definition of love: sacrifice.

At the end of the day, even if this whole thing blew up in my face, at least I accomplished one thing: for the rest of her life, every time Brienne thinks of her mother, she'll be reminded of me, and every time she's reminded of me, she'll remember what a gullible idiot she was.

If Sonya would've raised her, none of this would've happened.

Sonya would've made a soldier out of her, of that much I'm sure.

"Knudsen, you're up." A guard in a tan uniform calls my name, and it's time to see the judge.

I place my hands through the opening in the door, and they fasten cuffs around my wrists.

This is nothing but a minor setback.

Sure, I stole money.

Sure, I'm going to spend a little time behind bars.

They'll hit me with some wire-fraud charges and slap my wrists, and it won't be long until I'm a free man again.

And Sam? It's her loss. One of these days she'll come crawling back. In the meantime, I've got time to sort out what I'm going to say when she does. My stepmom didn't raise a doormat.

Besides, it might be kind of nice going to bed at night without a care in the world. No car payments. No utility bills. No soul-sucking job to report to bright and early every morning. In a weird sort of way, Sonya's wish for me is coming true after all.

CHAPTER 61

BRIENNE

I knock on Sam's apartment door at the Harcourt. The hospital discharged me a couple of hours ago this morning, and I headed straight here, but not before making a quick stop.

She doesn't answer, so I knock one more time. There's a good chance she's already left Quinnesec Bluff. She'd have no reason to stick around and every reason to want to forget this chapter of her life. But just as I'm about to go, the door swings open, and a wide-eyed Sam stands before me.

"Brienne," she says, stopping in her tracks with a soft jolt. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping I'd catch you," I say. My heart is racing, and I'm not sure why. "Can I come in?"

She moves aside, stealing a quick peek at the bandage on my forehead. "Of course."

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She gives a slow shrug before shaking her head. "No. No, I'm not. But I will be. What about you?"

"Same," I say. "Still shaken up but . . ."

"None of it feels real." She hugs her sides, biting her lower lip, and I notice a small tremble in her hands. "I didn't sleep at all last night. Couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes . . ."

Her voice trails off, and she doesn't finish her thought.

"At least he's behind bars now. Where he belongs."

She lifts her brows, nodding. "I guess I'm still kind of in shock over it all. I saw a side of Shane I've never seen in my life. He's not the person I thought he was. I mean, he's done some things in his day, but never anything like this. Never this . . . extreme."

“My mom was like that,” I say. “Different personalities to suit her different agendas. All those letters she sent me over the years . . . While I want to believe they were genuine, there’s a part of me that will always doubt that. For all I know, she was trying to get back into the family’s good graces for some kind of personal gain. The woman always had ulterior motives . . .”

I glance around the apartment and realize most of it is boxed up, and two large suitcases rest beside the front door. She’s going home—wherever that is.

“I wanted to give you something.” I fish into my purse, retrieve the small gift I’d picked up on the way here, and hand it over.

“What is this?” Sam takes the velvet box and props it open, gazing at the dainty ring inside.

“It’s moonstone,” I say. “It’s supposed to symbolize new beginnings.”

“You didn’t have to do this,” she says as she takes it out and slides it over her right ring finger, fitting perfectly. Sam looks up at me, eyes glassy.

“I did,” I say, lifting up my own right hand. “Got one for myself as well.”

Her lips turn up at the sides, and we share a quiet moment, a wordless understanding.

“Thank you,” she says. “For everything.”

CHAPTER 62

BRIENNE

Three Months Later

We sit on the bare floor of the empty front parlor on a Saturday night. The old gang's all here—Stacia, Amber, Marisol, and myself—surrounded by open boxes of pizza and plastic Solo cups filled with red wine.

The last few months have been a roller coaster of emotion, but I couldn't have done this without them.

"It's so weird that some other family's going to be living here," Stacia says, gazing out the front window at the SOLD sign in the yard. "The end of an era."

"It's for the best," Marisol says, patting my knee. "Bri's got a lot of living to make up for."

They say a brush with death will do that to a person: give them a new lease on life, prompt them to make drastic changes and do the things that once terrified them.

"I'm going to miss this place." I sigh, taking another look around as if it's my last.

"Nah," Amber says. "It's not the house you'll miss. It's the memories. You can take those with you."

I'm trying my best to keep this moment positive, so I don't vocalize the fact that all these happy memories I've associated with this house were marred by a con man by the name of Shane Knudsen.

I refuse to so much as breathe his name ever again.

I'm not proud of what happened. I'm not proud of being made a fool, of trusting a complete stranger all because he said and did all the right things and made it so easy to believe him.

My phone buzzes across the room, but I'm too sore from packing and moving to so much as attempt to go for it. Odds

are it's an email from the forensic accountant I hired to recover some of the funds Shane stole. He promised an update by the end of today. It hasn't been easy tracking down the funds. Nor has it been cheap, but they've managed to retrieve about half so far. The bastard had the forethought to diversify, hiding it in various accounts as well as a handful of cryptocurrencies, which have since fallen in value by over 60 percent.

My attorney thinks he's holding out, thinking he can get a reduced sentence if he ponies up some of the account numbers, but we're not giving in to any of his demands, and honestly, I'm not sure we ever will.

They also found a syringe of potassium chloride in his possession—the very same medication used to stop a human heart. They were able to trace it back to the hospital where he worked, so the police have since added drug charges to their case against him. They also found a jug of antifreeze on the top shelf of his bedroom closet—a curious place to find something that belongs in a garage. After taking samples of various items around the house: mouthwash, milk, coffee creamer, and the like, they found them all to be contaminated. They concluded that he was trying to poison me, and if that didn't work, he likely intended to kill me—a single injection to stop my heart.

This situation was already a nightmare come to life, but the realization that it could have gotten much, much worse makes me physically ill when I think about it for too long. It seems that he was willing to do whatever it took in order to see his plan succeed.

I could have died.

And he could have gotten away with this.

I'm just glad Shane never came across the rest of the money my grandparents had left me in a trust. Keeping those account numbers locked away in a safe-deposit box was probably one of the smartest things I've ever done. I'd always done fine on my own, and they'd already left me the house, so I'd let the money sit there, accruing interest for years. I couldn't even begin to guess what it's worth these days, but I

do know the entire thing would've likely been wiped clean had he gotten his hands anywhere near it.

“So where to first?” Marisol asks, plastic cup in hand.

We spent the day loading all my boxes into a moving van after some hired college students moved the furniture for us, and tomorrow, we'll unload it all into a storage facility on the north side of town.

I'm officially without roots, though I'll always have a home here. With my friends. With the memory of my grandparents and my childhood. In Quinnesec Bluff.

“My flight leaves tomorrow evening,” I say. “Going to start in Seattle and work my way across the country. This time next year, I'm hoping to be on the other side of the Atlantic.”

My whole life I've stayed in this bubble that is Quinnesec Bluff, with the exception of my college career—the four years I spent in a town less than an hour away.

It's time to get away, to find a place a little less perfect, a little less isolating.

I want to experience it all so I can put the past behind me.

Something tells me if I stuck around here, I'd spend the rest of my life jaded, not trusting any person who dared to step into my life, and all this would have been for nothing.

What Shane Knudsen stole from me—my dignity, my sanity, my money—was more than made up for by the fact that he gave me my life back—the only one I have.

The only one I'll ever have.

The one I'll never allow anyone to take from me again.

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