



*Arianna's*  
Hero

HEROES OF SLEEPY HOLLOW

GIA COBIE

# Ariana's Hero

## **Heroes of Sleepy Hollow**



Gia Cobie

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Book Cover by Angela Haddon Book Cover Design

1st edition 2023

ISBN: 9798864408186

For my parents, for never telling me I had too many books.

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# Chapter 1

## **ARI**

I'm going to kill Thea for getting me into this.

We were at the wine bar last Friday night, watching as a sweetly nervous young man waited for his date. Mid-twenties, freshly shaven, crisply ironed shirt—sitting alone at a table, a bouquet of flowers in front of him, anxiously checking his watch.

He had been waiting there long enough for me to worry he was being stood up. Thea and I were taking turns throwing little concerned glances his way, our sympathy for the man growing by the minute. When he checked his phone, frowning at it, his expression dropping in disappointment, my heart twinged in empathy.

But then *she* arrived. The long-awaited date, rushing into the wine bar all pink-cheeked and apologetic, flinging her arms around him as he stood to greet her. When he handed her the

flowers, she kissed him on the cheek and the two of them beamed at each other like a scene from a Hallmark movie.

But just like the cheesy movies I secretly watch every Christmas—only Thea knows, and she’s sworn to silence—the scene had the unpleasant side effect of reminding me of my perpetual single-ness.

Not that there’s anything *wrong* with being single. It’s not like I’m desperate to be coupled up. It’s just sometimes when I’m home alone at night, watching a movie by myself, or cooking my tiny meals for one, I think about how it might be nice to have a partner.

But it never makes it past that. There’s always a reason not to make the effort. I’m too busy with work. Too picky. Too insecure. Not willing to give up my Monday night *Bachelor in Paradise* watching session with Thea.

Thea, who caught me at a weak moment, eyed me appraisingly. “When’s the last time you were on a date, Ari?”

“When were *you* on a date last?” I retorted, somewhat defensively.

“A month ago,” she said with a little smirk. “And a month before that.”

“Aaaand...” I raised my eyebrows at her, giving her a *where-are-they-now* face.

“They may not have been the right guys for me, but it was fun. And you never know unless you put yourself out there.” Thea took a sip of her wine before continuing.

“I’m not saying it’s bad to be single. Lots of women *choose* to be. But I know how much you love those silly Hallmark movies. To me, that means you *do* want to meet someone.”

Ugh. She had me there. I just don’t know if the right man is out there. Or maybe he *is*, but he’s just not interested in me.

Regardless, I caved. And now I’m here.

Here being the local Spanish restaurant, on my first date with a guy I met through an online dating site.

It seemed like a good idea in theory.

I set up my profile, got a surprising number of responses, and selected the most promising to reply back to. Men that weren’t necessarily the best looking, but ones that seemed kind and funny, and didn’t have crazy expectations for the women they wanted to date.

Like the sixty-year-old messaging me saying I’m a couple of years over his age limit, but since I’m attractive he’s willing to make an exception.

I’m *thirty-two*.

Or the guy who said I was hot but could stand to tone up a bit—but not to worry, he’s a trainer, he’ll be glad to help me.

So, when I started talking to Sean, he seemed normal. Nice. Good-looking without being full of himself. We texted for a few days before our date, everything was good, and I arrived here cautiously optimistic.

Twenty minutes into our date? Not so much.

When I arrived, he already had drinks ordered for us. “Spanish martinis are so much better than the American version,” he explained when I asked what it was. “You have to have one. You’ll see.”

It isn’t. It’s gross. I like wine and margaritas and drinks that don’t taste like straight alcohol. But I’m gamely trying to choke it down, not wanting to offend him.

If it were only the presumptuous drink ordering, I’d brush it off as being overeager. But there’s so much more than that.

Like how Sean doesn’t look like his photo. In person, his hair is thinner, receding over his forehead. His skin is acne-pitted, his face fuller, even his eyes are a slightly different shade of blue. Maybe it was an old picture, I know lots of people do that online. But it’s still disconcerting.

And he’s not nearly as nice. Smarmy, pretentious—flashing around his Rolex and bragging about his last trip to Barcelona, and yes, he pronounced it *Barthelona*—and worst of all, rude to our server.

He tried ordering for me again, scowling when I insisted on picking my own meal. When the poor server asked him to repeat something, he snapped at her, “I shouldn’t *have* to repeat myself.”

So I knew right away this date was going to be a flop. But I’m determined to get through it, primarily so I can tell Thea I did it. That I tried.

Sean has been in the bathroom for a while—which gave me the opportunity to rush to the bar and beg the bartender to make something to replace this nasty martini. “I don’t want to insult my date’s choice,” I explained to the bartender. “Maybe you could make something that looks like it, but doesn’t taste so...”

The bartender leaned towards me, his brown eyes twinkling. “I get it.” And he mixed up something with sugar water and lime and citrus vodka that looks just like the Spanish martini without the awful taste.

Now I’m waiting for Sean to come back from the bathroom, swirling my swizzle stick in my drink, and staring at my watch wondering how long this date will reasonably last for. We ordered the food ten minutes ago, so another ten to get it, then fifteen to eat, ten minutes to get the bill and pay—

“The facilities here are really subpar.” Sean flops into his chair, frowning. “Not even an attendant. And they claim this place is *nice*.” He takes a swig of his drink and eyes my half-full glass. “Don’t you like it?”

“Oh, yes.” Even though I don’t like this man, my mother would smack me if I wasn’t polite. “It’s really good.”

Sean’s expression brightens, and he reaches his glass out to me. “Cheers, then.” He winks. “Let loose a little. It looks like you could use it.”

*Ugh.* How long until this date is over?



*I feel terrible .*

My head is throbbing, heavy drum beats making me dizzy.

Nausea is rushing over me in waves. My stomach churns, bile rising in my throat.

It's like my worst hangover in college. Except I know I wasn't playing beer pong until four AM. Or taking shots of Jagermeister because my roommate dared me to.

How much alcohol was in that drink?

I focus on my stomach, commanding it to stop rebelling. I focus the echoing of my pulse in my head, on slowing down the spinning. I assess my body, testing my arms and legs. Everything feels heavy, it's hard to move, but nothing feels broken.

The fog around me is gradually clearing.

Am I home? How did I get here? Did I take an Uber? Did Sean drive me? I didn't drive myself home like this, *did I?*

*Am* I home? This doesn't feel right.

It's pitch black. I'm on something scratchy and hard. What I thought was dizziness isn't. Something is *moving*.

I roll over and hit something. Something hard. Then I try to sit up and smash my head.

*Oh God.*

All the scattered details coalesce into a horrifying realization.

I'm in a trunk. In a car. And I'm moving.

Terror rises up so quickly I'm breathless with it. *I'm in the trunk of a car. With who? Sean? Someone else? Where am I going?*

I open my eyes and it's still black and air is whistling through my tightening chest. Panic is suffocating me.

Shit. I need to do something. Not lay here helplessly, gasping for air, until whoever took me gets to their destination.

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood, the coppery taste filling my mouth. But it helps me to focus. Think. Observe. *What do I know right now?*

Carefully moving this time, I feel around the inside of the trunk. Nothing. No purse, no phone. But I can move. I'm not tied up.

Patting the interior of the trunk again, I remind myself to breathe. "Think," I whisper to myself, the sound oddly comforting. "There has to be a way—"

The trunk release. When I bought my last car, I noticed it in the trunk, and the salesman said all cars are required to have them. "Ever since 2002," he said. "All cars are required by law. So if you ever get stuck in one..."

I laughed then. I'm not laughing now.

But if I can find it... I roll over, twisting my body into a pretzel and trying not to vomit all over myself from the movement. It's still dark, I can't see anything, and I'm wondering if that salesman was a liar until—

There. A lightly glowing green button with an arrow on it. Thank God.

The relief is so intense I almost jab the button immediately. Only inches away, I jerk my hand back, my heart pounding hummingbird fast. I don't know how fast the car is moving. What if I open the trunk on a highway? I can't leap out at seventy miles an hour.

But if I wait until the car slows—then I could make the jump. Hopefully it's still dark out and I can find someplace to hide. I just need to pay attention to the sounds of the car moving.

It's not as hard as I anticipated. The car shifts from a smoother, quieter ride to a louder and bumpier one. I can feel the wheels slowing, the momentum as the car stops, then speeds up again.

The next time the car slows, I'm doing it.

But fear paralyzes me, and I miss my chance the next time the car slows down. Panic works at me, making me second-guess myself. What if I jump out and break my leg? My *neck*?

What if I don't escape and I end up wherever Sean—it must be Sean and that awful drink he ordered—is taking me? Whatever he has planned for me, I know it's not good.

I'll take my chances with the road.

The next time the car slows, I need to be ready. Thinking through the strategy I quickly came up with—tuck and roll,



stay low on the ground, try to make it to some kind of cover—I have my finger poised over the green button, trembling.

*Oh, please. Let this work.*

This time when the car slows, I make my move.

I jab at the button, a flicker of thought nearly strangling me—what if it's broken, what if it doesn't work? But it does, and the trunk pops open.

Then I crouch in the trunk and look out at the road. Oh, God. This is insanity.

But there's no turning back now. So I jump—tucking myself in a ball, head down, arms around my legs—and pray.

The road slams into me, the worst pain I've felt, ripping skin and forcing all the air from my lungs. But the brake lights are coming on and I need to *get out of here*. I'm rolling across the asphalt, my brain screaming *run, run, run, get on your feet, and run*.

Somehow, I make it off the road and I shove myself up, my arms and legs miraculously still working. Quickly looking around, I take stock of my surroundings.

There are trees on both sides of the road, but thinned out, and a yellow school bus sign up ahead. Close to civilization, then. At least, I hope. I bolt for the trees, breath coming out in whistling gasps, and I'm dimly curious why I don't hurt more, but I can't take the time to consider it further.

All I can focus on is running, trying to get deeper into the trees.

My heart is exploding with fear.

All I can think is *don't catch me, don't catch me, oh please don't catch me.*

I don't know how much time goes by, but I keep running, falling onto sharp sticks and rocks and shoving myself back up, surging forward. My terror is too great to stop.

When I finally see a building, I almost sob in relief, but I don't have enough air to do it.

It's one of the mausoleums in the cemetery. Which I'd normally be creeped out about but right now all I can think is it's somewhere to hide.

I sprint to the building, my pulse thundering in my ears. Once I get there, I crouch down, wedging myself between a bush and the wall, wondering if this is a good enough hiding spot. It's dark out, my clothes are all dark and dirty, and I didn't hear anyone coming after me, but I'm not *sure*.

When I realize I don't have my phone to call for help, I almost break down.

But then I remember—my watch. It has an SOS call feature. Even if I don't have my phone, my watch has cell service, so as long as I get a signal here, I should be okay.

Well. As the pain of my collision with the road starts to make itself known, I'm not sure if okay is the right word to describe me.

Alive. That's the most important thing.

And I press the button on my watch, listen to the 911 operator answer, tears finally bursting free, and I choke out, “I was drugged and put in a trunk. I jumped out and I’m at a mausoleum. I need help.”

## Chapter 2

### **CASH**

It's been a quiet night so far, and I'm down fifty-thousand dollars in poker.

I can't complain about either of those things.

When you're a volunteer firefighter, a slow night means no traumas or fires. As for the fifty K? It's not real money, though technically, I could afford it.

When it's a slow night at Station 4, we play cards—poker usually, though when it's Ian's choice, we play gin rummy instead. We place wagers using Monopoly money and the loser buys pizza for all the volunteers on duty.

When I first started volunteering here five years ago, we used real money. Then it got weird because one of the guys was going through a divorce and was hurting financially. And another volunteer lost his job, so he was picking up day labor gigs whenever he could, and it didn't feel right taking his money.

I've never had to worry about money, thanks to the family business. As the primary shareholder and CEO of Chatham Publishing, I could pay fifty-thousand dollars or cover any of the other volunteers' expenses easily. But they would never ask, and they'd never let me if I offered.

But I *can* be notoriously bad at poker and cover the cost of pizza most nights that I'm here.

And these guys at the station—my friends—know that if they ever need something, I'm here.

Some of my colleagues at my day job think I'm crazy for spending two nights a week volunteering here. Executives should spend their free time golfing and playing polo and going out for expensive meals and visiting exclusive clubs.

They think CEOs of multi-million dollar companies shouldn't spend their free time racing around in fire trucks, risking their lives running into fires, and dealing with car accidents and overdoses. When I was at an awards banquet several months ago, the CFO of a marketing company was aghast. "Why would you do that?" he asked, disdain dripping from his words. "Risking your life for strangers? Dealing with addicts and gang violence and God knows what else?"

"What if your house was on fire?" I asked sharply. "And no one came to help because they didn't want to risk their life for a stranger? And everyone deserves the best care. It doesn't matter *who* you are."

Sometimes people really piss me off.

Which is another reason I enjoy working here. At the station, I get to hang out with my friends, playing poker and watching ball games, instead of spending nights with work associates I don't like or hunched over my computer doing more work at home.

“Three pairs!” Ian slaps his cards on the table, crowing, “I won again.” He glances at me, his dark eyes flashing with humor. “I think that puts you at one-fifty down, Cash.”

Shaking my head, I grin at him. “I guess it's pizza on me again, huh?”

Ian raises an eyebrow at me, his lips twitching. “I'm not sure I've met anyone else as bad as you are at poker. It's almost *unreal*.”

I lift my hands in a *who knows?* gesture and reach for my phone. “What toppings do you want on the pizzas?”

“Extra cheese,” our newest recruit, Mitch, calls from the end of the table. “My wife is making a stink about being”—he makes quotes with his fingers—“*healthy*. It's all low-fat cheese and lean proteins and vegetables.”

Ian chuckles. “That's why I'm glad I'm single. I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want.” He lifts his chin at me. “Right, Cash?”

I'm stopped from answering when the dispatch alert goes off.

So much for a slow night, playing poker and eating pizza.

We jump into the fire truck and head to our destination—one of the mausoleums in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Sirens wailing, lights flashing, we rush to provide assistance to an injured and terrified woman.

The details the dispatcher gives are chilling. The woman woke up in the trunk of a car, still groggy from the drug her date slipped her during dinner. She used the emergency release to pop open the trunk, jumped from the moving vehicle, and ran through the woods to the cemetery.

“That’s fucking horrifying,” Ian grits out as we speed closer to the cemetery.

“I know.” I’m mentally running through this woman’s possible injuries. Depending on the speed the car was traveling, she could have broken bones, internal injuries, head trauma—not to mention the damage the road would have done to her skin.

By the time we get there, a police car is already there, its lights illuminating the stark walls of the mausoleum and the trees around it. Two uniformed officers are crouched around a small figure sitting on the steps, presumably the victim.

Details tick through my mind—she’s sitting up, appears to be talking—both promising signs, but adrenaline can mask a lot of serious conditions. But I’m hoping as we approach the woman that she somehow escaped this horrendous experience without any serious injuries.

Then I get close enough to see her face, and my heart stops.

“Ari?” My professionalism fades as fear takes over. The woman in the trunk is *my* Ari?

Ian glances at me, surprise and concern written across his face. “You know her?”

The word tears out of me. “*Yes.*”

Forget jogging; I sprint over, dropping to my knees in front of her. Rationally, I know I need to follow procedure, but I need to see her.

“Cash?” She looks at me, and it’s like someone punched me in the chest. Her face is all scratched, eyes wide and frightened, her cheeks shining wetly. She tries to say something else, but the words catch, and she starts crying harder instead.

“Oh, Ari.” I’ve known her for over fifteen years and I’ve never seen her cry like this.

Ian joins me on the ground, and I shove down the urge to hug her, forcing myself to focus. I need to triage her, see where she’s hurt, do whatever I can to make sure my friend is okay.

As Ian checks her pulse and I take her blood pressure, she whispers, “I was so scared. I didn’t want to jump. But I didn’t know what else to do.”

She’s shaking, most likely in shock, an adrenaline dump, hopefully not an indicator of something worse. Her breathing is fast, pulse racing, and I need to calm her down before she hyperventilates.



Her hands are trembling, raw and bleeding, and I clasp one of them between mine. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to take care of you.”

I don’t feel okay when I see the terrible scrapes revealed under torn fabric, raw spots on her soft skin, layers peeled away from hitting the pavement.

I don’t feel okay when Ian looks in her eyes and reports, “Definitely drugged. Pupils still dilated.”

And I really don’t feel okay when I examine her swollen wrist, hearing her pained cry as I touch it.

It’s a small miracle that Ari doesn’t appear to have any broken bones or the deep bruising that would indicate internal bleeding. And she doesn’t seem to have a concussion—as I carefully inspected her head for wounds, she whispered, “I tucked and rolled. I was trying to protect my head.”

And then she continues, “I knew I could break my neck. But I couldn’t bear to go wherever Sean wanted to take me.”

I’m growling in anger when Ian nudges me. “The ambulance is here. Give them some room.”

It’s two paramedics I know well—Ben and Ryan—and I give them both a quick nod as Ian fills them in on Ari’s condition.

Even though I’ve worked with them both for years and consider them friends, I’m still reluctant to give up her care to them. But I need to get out of the way and let them do their jobs.

“These guys will take care of you,” I tell Ari, patting her arm. Then I back away, but still close enough that she can see me.

On the stretcher, hooked up to various monitors, Ari flashes me a panicked look. Her voice wobbles as she asks, “Will you stay with me?”

“I have to get back to duty,” I say softly, my gut twisting, hating the look of disappointment and fear on her delicate features.

Shit. I meet Ian’s gaze, raising my eyebrows in silent question.

“It’s alright,” Ian says as we load the stretcher into the ambulance. “I’ll call Grant, have him come in for the rest of the shift. You stay with her.”

“Are you sure?” I really don’t want to leave Ari alone, but I can’t leave the station understaffed, either.

Ian jerks his chin at me. “I’m sure. If Grant can’t do it, I’ll get one of the other guys instead.”

My shoulders sag. “Thanks.”

I glance at Ben, one of the paramedics working on Ari. “I’m coming with her.”

He gives me a quick nod, his eyes widening in understanding, and gestures for me to join him in the ambulance.

She's quiet on the way to the hospital, just squeezing my hand and staring up at me with her expressive eyes—so scared, but trusting me to take care of her.

I'm sick to my stomach over all of this. My friend, one of the sweetest people I know, drugged, shoved in a trunk, and now so frightened and hurt.

When we get to the hospital and we're wheeling her stretcher inside, Ari clutches at my hand. "You're not leaving, are you?"

I brush my hand across the top of her head. "I'll be in the waiting room; as soon as they tell me it's okay, I'll be right beside you. Alright?"

Lips quivering, she gives me a little nod. Her voice is so tiny as she answers, "Okay, Cash."

Once Ari disappears into the emergency room, I sink into a nearby chair. My legs are weak, I feel wrung out—I've dealt with hundreds of calls, but never someone I knew so well.

Ben drops down beside me. "You doing okay?"

I drop my head in my hands. "*Fuck.*"

His gaze is dark with concern. "Is she—are you two together?"

Sighing, I shake my head. "No. But I've known Ari since high school. We were good friends, and we've stayed in touch since then."

My jaw clenches, shooting pains radiating down my neck. “But she’s special. And the thought of someone doing that to her, and seeing her so hurt. It’s just... Fuck.”

“She’s going to be okay,” Ben says, sounding a lot calmer than I feel. “Everything we saw, it doesn’t look like anything serious. Painful, yes. Bruises, some bad road rash, but I think she got lucky.”

“Lucky would be not ending up in the trunk of a damn car to begin with,” I grit out.

He sobers, his jaw tightening. “I know.” After a pause, he stands and claps me on the shoulder. “I have to get back to the station. Are you good here? Need anything?”

Shaking my head, I say, “I’m good. Thanks for letting me ride along.”

“Of course.” He shoots me a little reassuring smile. “She’ll be okay. I’m sure of it.”

Once Ben is gone, I’m left to stew in the waiting room. Minutes tick by as I alternate between worry and rage—worry that Ari’s injuries are more serious than Ian and I thought, and rage at the guy who caused her injuries to begin with.

I wrangle a phone from one of the nurses—mine is still at the station—and call my assistant to let her know I won’t be in to work in the morning. It’s already nearing midnight and I have no idea how long I’ll be at the hospital. All I *do* know is I’m not leaving until Ari asks me to.

Guilt hangs heavily on my shoulders. I'm not sure why, but I feel like I should have protected her. Like I should have known Ari was in danger.

Maybe if I'd seen her more often. Maybe I would have known if she was dating someone dangerous, if she was being set up on a blind date, and I could have done something about it.

Ari's been back in Sleepy Hollow for a few months now, and I've only seen her a handful of times—there's always a reason to stay home and text instead. Too tired, an early morning meeting, our schedules don't match up—

Considering Ari was my closest friend in high school, those are pretty lame excuses.

We still text, like we always have—Ari will share something funny one of her students has done, or I'll tell her about a great new author my company signed that I think she might like. We FaceTime for holidays and birthdays and nights when one of us has a story that's too complicated for texts. And when one of us is struggling—like when Ari's grandmother passed away, or my grandfather told me about his terminal diagnosis—the other is always the person we'll call.

That was enough when Ari was living hours away in Chicago or Atlanta, working for Teach for America. But now that she's back in town, I should have made the effort to see her more often. Even though we're both busy, we could have met up for coffee or dinner once a week.

Was I avoiding the way she makes me feel when I see her in person?

I don't know. Maybe.

But that's not a good excuse. And I'm definitely going to be checking in with Ari a lot more now.

"Mr. Chatham?" A white-coated man comes into the waiting room, looking years too young to be a doctor. I know most of the emergency room doctors by now, but this is either a medical student or a new hire.

My gut is twisting and cramping. He doesn't look like he's about to give me bad news, but then again, most doctors have indecipherable expressions. And I'm not family, so he may not tell me anything at all. "Yes?"

He pauses, eyeing me speculatively. "You're waiting for Ariana Quinn, correct?"

"Yes. How is she?" Impatience has me jumping to my feet.

"Miss Quinn has given me permission to speak with you about her condition. She's obviously suffering from some pretty serious abrasions and bruises from when she hit the road. Her wrist is sprained, but not broken. Overall"—he gives me a little smile—"she's very lucky. She'll have to take it easy for a few weeks, but she should make a full recovery."

Another person talking about how lucky Ari is.

In the big picture of things, I guess so.

But drugged and stuffed in a trunk, forced into leaping from a moving car? Fleeing through the woods, terrified and hurting? That doesn't sound very lucky to me.

“Can I see her now?”

He nods at me. “Yes, Miss Quinn is in exam room three. A nurse will come by with discharge papers soon.”

I'm already moving before he finishes talking. Being a paramedic, I've spent my fair share of time in the hospital and I know the emergency room well. When I get to her room, I pause in the doorway, not wanting to go rushing inside and startle her.

She looks up immediately, relief washing across her features. “*Cash.*”

I'm at her side in an instant, gritting my teeth as I take in her injuries again. Obviously, I saw them before, but in this sterile environment, with Ari looking so small and wounded, in too-big scrubs and bandages all over, it's another kick to the chest.

“How are you feeling, hun?” I lean in to inspect her, checking the small scratches scattered across her pale face.

“Those are from the trees,” she explains softly. “When I was running.”

Running from the asshole who stuck her in a trunk. Fuck.

“Ah, Ari. I'm so sorry.”

“I'm glad it was you,” she says, looking up at me. “Showing up there. I didn't even think when I called 911. But seeing you

—I wasn't as scared as I was before.”

My chest squeezes. “I'm right here.” Perching on the edge of the bed, I reach out my hand to her. Something flickers in her eyes—gratitude, relief, something else I can't read—and she puts her small hand in mine.

At first we sit quietly, Ari lost in her thoughts, until she whispers, “Will you tell me about some of your new books? Just, something so I don't have to keep thinking—”

I'm quick to respond. “Of course.”

So I talk to her about the books my company has acquired recently, trying to come up with the most entertaining ones. The memoir of a circus performer who ended up joining the Navy SEALs. A new series about vampires, but with an unexpected twist. A novel about Cleopatra, but reimagined as if she were in politics today.

My attempts at distraction seem to be helping—Ari even smiles a few times—until the police officers show up in the doorway. Then her face goes flat and tense, and she shifts closer on the bed toward me.

They're the responding officers from Ari's original call, two officers I've met many times before. Mike Troy is older, gruff, but kind-hearted. Kane Montague is a newer addition to the force, enthusiastic, fresh from the academy.

Mike steps forward, his gaze drifting across Ari's bandages before landing on her face. “Miss Quinn. How are you feeling?”



Before she can answer, Kane jumps in. “We understand this has been a traumatic experience for you. But the sooner we can get your statement, the sooner we can look for whoever did this.”

Ari clutches my hand, flinching at the pain, but she doesn’t let go. “I know.”

Then she turns to me, her pale green eyes pleading. “Will you stay?”

“It might be better if you stepped out,” Kane starts, but my glare silences him.

Turning to Ari, I meet her worried gaze. “Of course, I will. I’m not going anywhere.”

## Chapter 3

### **ARI**

I feel equal parts stupid and scared.

Stupid for not taking more precautions on my date. Assuming the drink that was waiting for me at the table was safe. Going on a date with someone I'd never met before and assuming it would be okay.

Scared as the memories keep hitting me again and again. Remembering the terror when I woke up in the trunk. The paralyzing fear as I lay in there, trying to dredge up the courage to press that green button. Leaping from the car, half-sure I was about to be killed or captured.

Every time I move, the aches and shooting pains are a reminder of how close I came to unknown horror. I could have been assaulted, trafficked, killed—

“Ari.” Cash’s soothing voice breaks in. “If you’re not ready, you don’t have to do this right now.”

“It would be better if she did,” one of the officers says—I can’t remember his name—Kade? Kody? Kane?

“Not if she isn’t ready,” Cash snaps. Then his voice gentles, and he lightly touches my arm. “Ari. Hun. You don’t have to do anything. You can talk to them now, or it can be later. It’s up to you.”

What I want is for tonight to have never happened.

Barring that, I want to keep sitting here with Cash, listening to him talk, and not thinking about anything else.

But I’m sure I’m not the only woman Sean has done this to. Which means I need to suck it up and tell the police everything.

“It’s okay,” I say, meeting his concerned gaze. His eyes have darkened from their usual light hazel to a tarnished bronze. “I need to tell them. Even if I don’t want to.”

Cash frowns, his strong features all shadows and angles. He rakes his hand through his dark brown hair, the same tell of frustration he’s had ever since we met in high school. “Just remember, you can take as many breaks as you need.”

He pauses, glancing at the younger officer—Kane, now I remember—and his tone roughens. “She’s been through a lot tonight. Take it easy.”

The older of the two officers dips his chin at Cash. Then he focuses on me, his gaze softening. “Okay, Miss Quinn. I understand this is difficult. If you could just start at the

beginning, tell us everything you can think of, and we'll go back to ask any additional questions at the end."

I can do this. But why is my heart pounding so fast?

I can do this. It's just like telling a story. The hard part is over.

Staring at my lap, I begin.

"It all started when I was out with my friend Thea."

At first hesitant, my voice grows stronger as I recall the impetus for the date. How I let Thea convince me that online dating was a good idea. "It's not her fault," I add quickly. "She had no idea. Neither did I. I thought it would be safe."

Then I tell them about messaging with Sean, first on the app, then over the phone. How he seemed normal, nice, and non-threatening. That's when I bark out a short laugh. "I guess I'm not a very good judge of character, am I?"

I keep it together pretty well as I talk about the beginning of the date. About how I was surprised because he didn't look like his photo, but I'd heard of that happening a lot online.

The younger officer breaks in. "How similar was the photo to his actual appearance?"

"Pretty similar. Close enough that I didn't doubt it was Sean. I thought it was just an old photo," I answer, thinking back. "I didn't think it was a different person. But I guess... it could have been."

And now I feel even more foolish. Why didn't I check? Ask to see his ID? Or just leave? Why did I have to stick out the date when there were so many red flags?

"I was so stupid," I blurt out. "The date wasn't going well; I should have just left. But I wanted to tell Thea that I went through with it."

"It's not stupid," Cash murmurs, one hand coming to the back of my neck and rubbing gently. "Not at all."

I'm not sure I believe him.

Pushing on, I tell them about the drink at dinner, how I thought it was presumptuous to have my drink ordered already. "I should have insisted on ordering something else right away. But I wanted to be polite. So I drank some of it, and then I got a replacement when he went to the bathroom."

As I explain about the dummy drink, how I asked the bartender to make sure it looked just like the original, Officer Troy looks at me soberly and says, "You only had part of the drugged drink. If you had finished the entire thing, you wouldn't have woken up in the trunk. The drug would have lasted a lot longer."

What he's not saying is I wouldn't have had a chance to escape.

My fingers convulse around Cash's as a shudder runs through me. *God.*

But the story isn't done, and it's only going to get harder.

“After our food was served, it’s all a blank until I woke up in the trunk.”

A cold sweat breaks out as I tell them about my initial confusion, then the absolute terror of reality. How the headache and sickness made it hard to move. Then the fear paralyzed me, and I almost missed my chance.

The moments before I jumped out of the trunk are the worst to relive. “I thought there was a fifty percent chance I’d end up dead. Or I’d break my legs, and I’d be lying there helpless while Sean stopped the car and came back for me.”

The memory swamps me, suffocating my voice.

Cash bites out a low curse, and the young officer grimaces. Officer Troy holds my gaze, his eyes calm and steady. “Go on, Miss Quinn. You’re doing so well.”

The rest comes out in a rush, the same as my frenzied and panicked run through the woods. Falling, leaping up, branches hitting me in the face, terrified that I’d fall and not be able to get up, that Sean would catch me. Finally seeing the building and realizing what it was, hiding in the bushes and using my watch to call 911.

“I still wasn’t sure he wasn’t following me,” I say, my voice trembling. “I just hoped.”

Suddenly I’m back there, in the dark.

Hurting. Terrified.

Praying Sean still isn’t coming after me.

What if he still is?

My wallet. My phone. *Oh, God.*

*He knows where I live.*

“Hey. Just breathe.” Somehow I’m sitting sideways on the bed, Cash in front of me, his worried eyes level with mine. He’s cupping my cheek, his thumb lightly stroking. “You’re safe. Okay? You’re safe.”

I’m full-on shaking now, my lungs frozen, my heart fluttering.

My throat is closed up, no words escaping. Gray dots are floating across my vision.

“Ari.” Cash’s voice gets sharper. “I need you to breathe. Look at me. Breathe with me.”

I cling to his voice. The feel of his hand on my face. His gaze—so familiar, like coming home—until everything starts to come together again.

I’m in the hospital, not in the woods. Not in the trunk.

I’m sitting beside Cash, one of my oldest friends. The man who’s held a piece of my heart for the last eighteen years.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper between shuddering breaths. “I just —”

Cash shifts his gaze to the two officers. His voice is low and strained. “I think she’s done for now.”

“We still have more questions,” says the younger one. “We’re not done here.”

“She’s done,” Cash bites out, his brow coming down. “You can ask her more tomorrow. This is enough.”

“It’s fine,” Officer Troy—who I like much better than the other one—soothes. “We have a lot more to go on now. We can talk again tomorrow.”

A nurse stops in the doorway, hesitating. “I have the discharge papers?”

“We can set up a time tomorrow,” Cash says to the officers, standing up and shifting so he’s in front of me. “It’s time for Ari to go home.”

Home.

Oh shit.

My voice is strangled as I force out the terrifying words. “My wallet, my phone, my purse, Sean must have all of it. And he—” My chest seizes. “He knows where I live.”

Cash grits out, “Fuck.”

Officer Troy doesn’t miss a beat. “You’ll need to cancel everything, obviously. We can put a car on your house tonight. Unless there’s someone else you can stay with?”

“I... I guess I could stay with Thea.” She’s going to be so upset when she hears about this.

“No.” Cash turns to look at me, his jaw clenching, but his eyes gentle. “You’ll come home with me, Ari. I can check on your injuries, make sure you’re okay. And I have security, plenty of it. You’ll be safe with me.”





“It still looks the same.”

As we walk into Cash’s expansive living room, it’s like stepping back in time.

It’s exactly as I remember it. The same elegant fabric wallpaper, the arching ceilings, soft leather couches arranged around the giant stone fireplace. Even the sculptures are the same—the sleek dog in one corner, and the hand-carved Headless Horseman by the large picture window.

When Cash told me he’d be staying in his grandparents’ house after they passed—choosing not to sell it and move to one of the luxury penthouses by the water—I imagined an interior decorator coming in and modernizing everything.

All the times I FaceTimed with Cash, he was always in his office or his bedroom, so I never got a good look at his surroundings. But when I thought about how this old 1800s mansion would look, I pictured modern furniture and bold colors and abstract art. Or it would have an industrial feel, all decorated in a range of gleaming metals and grays.

“I know,” Cash says softly. “I couldn’t bring myself to change it. I thought about it—” He pauses, two ruddy spots of color appearing on his cheekbones. “But it felt like I would have been erasing them. All the memories.”

Cash’s pain pierces through my own, and I grab his hand. “I think it’s perfect like this. I have so many great memories here, with you, and with your grandparents.”

He looks at me, his gaze softening, a tiny smile pulling at his lips. “We had some good times here, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. We did.”

I’m exhausted and aching, but I still take time to run my hand down the back of the steel greyhound, to trace my fingers over the rough edges of the horseman. “This always creeped me out a little,” I admit. “When I’d be leaving and all the lights were dimmed. Even though I was too old to be freaked out like that.”

Cash’s mouth twitches. “Do you want me to put it away while you’re staying here?”

“No. That’s okay.” I turn to him. “Sculptures don’t scare me anymore. And maybe he’ll scare away the bad guys.”

“No bad guys in here.” His gaze is fierce. “I promise.”

“I know.” I do feel safe here. Not just because of the state-of-the-art security system, but I know Cash won’t let anyone near me.

We make our way through the unchanged first floor and Cash points out all the security features—panic buttons and biometric access points and even the doorway to a small panic room. “I don’t think I need all this,” he says sheepishly. “But I had it installed when it was just my grandmother here, and I wanted to make sure she felt safe.”

Cash’s grandparents passed away almost ten years ago, only months apart, and I know he still misses them a lot. But being

here, seeing this giant house still kept just as they left it, imagining Cash rattling around here alone...

The reality of it makes my heart hurt.

I don't know about Cash's casual hookups—I don't want to know, and he's definitely never mentioned them—but I do know he hasn't had a girlfriend since one failed attempt in college. Unless he's been bringing women here nightly, which I seriously doubt, he's spent a lot of nights here alone.

And it's a lot of house for only one person.

He's never hinted at it, but now I have to wonder if Cash is lonely.

Or maybe he likes it this way, so he can focus on his company and his shifts at the fire station without the complications of a relationship.

"I thought you could stay in here." Cash stops in front of a closed door, and I recognize it as the one next to his old bedroom. He turns the knob and pushes the door open, revealing a sumptuous-looking king-sized bed topped with a thick comforter and mounds of pillows.

Once I see the bed, my mind refuses to notice anything else in the room. All the stress and adrenaline and the painkiller I finally took when we left the hospital are all catching up with me, my body feeling unbearably heavy.

I sway a little, and Cash quickly wraps his arm around my waist. He puts pressure on one of the abrasions on my back, but fortunately whatever I took dulls the pain to a low ache.

“Sit down, hun.” Cash leads me to the bed and I manage to sit before my legs collapse under me. Fatigue is pulling at me—each time I blink, it’s harder to keep my eyes open. “I’m sorry, Ari.” He’s frowning as he examines my face. “I should have gotten you up here sooner.”

“It’s okay.” I pat his arm, my hand moving through a thick fog. “I think the medicine is finally hitting me.”

Cash looks into my eyes and smiles a little. “I’d say so.” He pauses, then adds, “I’ll get you something to change into. My T-shirt should be like a nightshirt for you. And I’ll be right next door. So if you need anything at all, just come in. Or call out.”

Next door? “You never moved into the master suite?”

“Nah. I don’t need that much space.”

Through my exhaustion, I tuck away that little detail. Cash is still staying in his old bedroom, which is very nice, if I recall correctly, but definitely not a place you’d bring a string of women to.

“Hang on.” Cash jumps up. “Before you pass out, let me get you a shirt. I’ll put an extra toothbrush in the bathroom, and tomorrow we can get you all the soaps and everything else you need.”

As he dashes out of the bedroom, I’m left wondering dimly, *am I staying here after tonight?*

I must have dozed off sitting up because I startle when Cash comes back. “Ari, sorry,” he apologizes, laying the shirt on my

lap. “You need some sleep. Is there anything else I can get for you?”

There’s something I’m forgetting. “My work,” I blurt out. “I have to call in. I need to make sub plans, and get online to arrange for a sub, and—”

“Hey.” Cash crouches back down between my legs. “I know the principal at the high school. He works as a volunteer EMT a few times a month. I’ll call him. It’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” I’m officially at the end of my proverbial rope.

“I’m sure, Ari. I’ll take care of it.” He gazes at me, so concerned and kind, I could cry from the comfort of it. “Is there anything else? If you think of something in the middle of the night, just let me know.”

I’m weak and tired and my defenses are at zero, otherwise the next words wouldn’t slip out. My voice is small as I ask, “Can I have a hug?”

“Ah, Ari.” His features pinch, pain darkening his gaze. “You don’t have to ask. Of course.”

And as his arms come around me, so gentle—he’s trying not to hurt me—it’s the first time since this whole nightmare began that I feel a little bit okay.

## Chapter 4

### CASH

This entire night has been surreal.

It started out so normal. My shift at the fire station. Losing at poker. Heading out on a call.

And then everything turned on its side. Showing up to find my Ari—I know she's not *mine*, but I've known her since she was fourteen, more than half of my life—so hurt and scared. So many emotions. Fear, anger, protectiveness flaring hot—I wanted to hunt down this Sean and fling him onto a road, see how he likes it.

And then beat the crap out of him.

Listening to Ari tell the police about her traumatic experience was one of the worst things I've heard.

My Ari, the sweet woman who loves her students and spends hours of her own time helping them after school, who always remembers to call me on the anniversaries of my grandparents' deaths—Ari, who I'm not sure if I would have gotten through

high school without—she shouldn't have ever had to go through that.

Then bringing Ari home with me. Knowing she's in the bedroom next to mine, the first time she's spent the night here after all these years.

As the water in the shower rains down on me, washing away the sweat of the night, my brain is a flurry of questions. Some are simple, like how early is too early to call Paul, the principal at Ari's school?

Some are tougher, harder to stomach. Like why didn't she ever mention to me that she was dating?

Although I've never mentioned any of the women I've spent time with, either. But I would never tell Ari about a one-night thing that means nothing.

Over the years, we've settled into conversations about our jobs and friends and movies and books. Ari never talked about relationships or other men, and I never asked.

But now I'm weirdly jealous. Which I shouldn't be—Ari and I have been solidly in the friend zone for the entire time I've known her.

In high school, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't attracted to her. She has gorgeous light green eyes framed with long lashes and delicate features speckled with pale freckles and her hair is this hickory color that looks like silk in the sun.

She's deceptively fragile looking too, petite and slender, but she's one of the strongest people I know. Strong enough to

move around the country, teaching in underprivileged inner-city schools, winning over students whose default is not to trust adults.

Ari was strong enough to support her mother—working part time all through high school, even as she was dealing with the tragic loss of her father when she was thirteen.

And Ari was strong enough to stand by me—sixteen, angry, and hurting—comforting me while I raged against the loss of my parents and the sudden move to live with my grandparents. She was the first person to reach out to me that day in the cafeteria—just a freshman, nervous to approach an upperclassman—and offered me some of her lunch.

She didn't know why I didn't bring money to buy lunch. She didn't know that I could afford it easily, but I'd been attending a private school in Manhattan and didn't need to pay for meals there. I had no idea I was supposed to actually bring cash, or load money onto an account. I thought it was all taken care of, and I was embarrassed and angry when I realized my mistake.

All Ari cared about was being kind. And she's been my friend ever since. A friend I wasn't willing to risk by hitting on her in high school, not that she'd ever given any indication that she was interested in me.

She hasn't in the years since, either. Which is better for both of us—she deserves a real relationship and I don't do them.

So I shouldn't be thinking about hugging her.

Or the way she felt so right in my arms.



But maybe I should check on Ari again. She might be in pain, or maybe there's a complication the doctor missed. I should make sure she's okay.

I finish rinsing off and wrap a towel around my waist, walking over to the mirror to finger comb my hair and give my teeth a quick cleaning. Back in my bedroom, I throw on an old Cornell T-shirt and some athletic shorts and head for the door, impatience and anxiety quickening my speed.

When I get to Ari's room, I hesitate at the door. It's been half an hour since I left her; she's probably asleep, and I don't want to disturb her. Or scare her—in a dark room, a sudden noise, after everything that happened tonight—

But if she's *not* okay—

The door opens quietly, and I poke my head in, expecting to see a lump under the covers. But Ari's sitting up, hunched over her knees, the light on the nightstand casting her face in shadow.

Her head pops up as the door opens, her expression of fear quickly shifting to relief.

But as I step into the room and closer to her, I can't miss the rigid set of her jaw, or the tiny lines etched across her forehead. "Are you okay?"

She gives me a quick nod, but her lips are trembling. Softly, she answers, "I'm fine, Cash. You can go back to sleep."

She's not fine. Approaching the bed, I pitch my voice low and soothing, hoping to coax the truth out of her. "Ari, you

don't need to be fine. If something's wrong, if you're hurting, tell me. Maybe I can help."

When she's quiet, staring down at her knees for several seconds, I try again. "Why won't you tell me?"

Ari looks up at me, her eyes dark and shadowed. "I don't know," she whispers. "I guess I don't want you to feel obligated to do anything."

I plop onto the edge of the mattress, facing her. "Ari." My voice roughens and I'm a little pissed that she would even say that, but given the night she's had, I'll let it slide. "You're my oldest friend. I don't feel obligated to do anything. I want to help. Will you let me?"

She sighs. "I'm sore all over. I thought the medicine they gave me was helping, but every time I move something hurts. And... the dark is freaking me out. So I tried sleeping with the light on, but every sound makes me think he's coming for me, even though I know he can't, and I..."

Her voice drops again, so low I can barely hear it. "I'm scared. I've never minded being alone, but I'm terrified now."

*Oh.* A heavy boot slams into my chest, driving the air from my lungs.

I'm hit with this crazy urge to gather Ari into my arms, to hold her and whisper reassurances and promises to protect her until she's not scared anymore.

"It'll be okay," Ari starts, dropping her gaze from mine. "I'm sure it'll get better. I'll just lay here and eventually I'll fall

asleep.”

“No.” It comes out harsher than I intended, and I soften my voice. “No. It’s not okay. If you’re scared in here, if you’re hurting...”

I feel so helpless. I can’t fix her injuries. I can’t take away the thing that’s scaring her.

*Fuck.* I’m thirty-four years old. I run a damn company; I should be able to come up with something to help her.

And then it comes to me. “Do you want to watch a movie? You can pick any movie you want. I won’t even make snarky comments about it.”

After a pause, Ari’s eyes lighten from olive to a minty green. “*Any* movie? Even—” her lips tug up a little. “A rom-com?”

I make a terrible face at her, like I’ve just smelled something awful. Then I smile and say, “Yes. Even that.”

“And no snarky comments?” Skepticism tinges her voice. “Really? Not even when the quirky sidekick finds love, too?”

Snickering, I admit, “Fine. Maybe then. But that’s it. I promise.”

So, we end up in the TV room, Ari beside me wrapped in the softest blanket I could find, watching one of her favorites, *Never Been Kissed*. Which she guilted me into watching in high school, much to my dismay. I’ll watch fantasy, action, sci-fi, even horror without complaint, but a romantic comedy? No thanks.

But if it makes Ari smile like she's doing right now, I'll watch it a dozen times.

Because it's tradition, I have to tease her a little. "You don't think it's weird that this movie is about an English teacher getting involved with his student? And you became an English teacher..." I trail off, waiting for her to take the bait.

Despite everything else that's happened tonight, Ari doesn't let me down. Tilting her head to look at me, her lips twitch before she says, "First of all, Josie isn't really a student. She's a reporter. And nothing happens between them until Sam knows the truth. And he's an excellent teacher. Very inspirational."

"I bet you're an even better teacher." Although I've never seen Ari in action, I'm sure it's the truth. She's caring and funny and I imagine all her students loving her.

"Well." Her brows furrow as she thinks. "I try. It was hard in some of the schools. The kids didn't want to trust me. But when one of them finally did... it made it all worth it."

"Do you like it in Sleepy Hollow? Instead of doing Teach for America?"

"I was worried at first. Worried that maybe I wouldn't feel like I was making as much of a difference here. But these kids, they have struggles just like anywhere else. Even though they're not inner-city kids, surrounded by gang violence and poverty, they have things they're going through."

"Like we did."

“Yeah.” Ari’s voice softens, and she goes silent for a second. “That’s something I think about when I’m teaching. That one of those students could have just lost a parent, or a family member is sick—there are so many things—and I might never know. So I need to be gentle with all of them.”

I can’t speak.

How could anyone meet Ari and think of doing her harm?

Trying to ignore the lump in my throat, I change the subject. “What movie do you want to watch next?”

“Hmm.” She taps her lips with her finger. “How about... *Bridesmaids*?”

I mime that I’m choking, and the smile I get in return is everything. “Okay.”

But as the movie draws to a close, I’m pretty sure Ari isn’t going to make it to the next one. Her eyelids are drooping, and she’s leaning against me, her head on my shoulder.

“Thanks, Cash,” she whispers, her voice slurring.

“For what?”

“Everything. Finding me. Staying here with me.”

“Ah, Ari. You don’t need to thank me for that.”

I can barely hear her as she mumbles, “I do...”

And then she’s out. Her body relaxes, and she curls into me unconsciously, her hair brushing my chin, her breath soft on my neck.

My heart stutters. Seizes.

My arm comes around her, and it feels so right.

But I can't feel this way.

Ari's my friend. She's scared and traumatized, and she's just seeking comfort from me. She's never wanted anything more before, and she's definitely not looking for anything now.

She needs me to be her friend, her protector, and that's all.

I just need to remember that.

## Chapter 5

**ARI**

“I just feel so bad about it, Ari.”

Poor Thea has apologized at least half a dozen times since she got here ten minutes ago, and I’m ready to move on from it.

“Thea,” I say firmly, holding her watery gaze. “It is not your fault. Stop apologizing. You didn’t do anything wrong. Now, can we please talk about something else?”

Thea sighs, her forehead wrinkling, and she presses her lips into a thin line. After a beat, she takes a deep breath and sighs again. “Okay. Fine. I’ll stop. But I still—”

“Thea.” My voice rises. “*Please.*” I can’t take listening to her apologize again. Because then it makes me think about all the bad choices I made to end up in that situation, and then I start thinking about Sean, and then—

Then I feel sick to my stomach all over again. And my pulse races, and my chest gets tight, and I’d rather not have a panic

attack here in the living room in front of my friend.

“Sorry, sorry. Something else.” Thea scans the room, her eyes skipping from the giant fireplace to the expensive paintings on the wall, to the Headless Horseman sculpture by the window. She shudders at it. “I know I should be used to these things, living in Sleepy Hollow, but that one is extra creepy.”

I follow her gaze, my mouth lifting. “I know. It used to creep me out when I came here in high school. But now he’s growing on me.” In the two days I’ve been here, I’ve begun to think of the guy as sort of a mythical guardian, protecting me from bad guys when Cash isn’t here.

Like today, when Cash had to go back to the office after taking yesterday off to take care of me. He was worried about leaving me alone, even though the house is practically impenetrable, reminding me, “Call me if anything is wrong. Something scares you, or you’re in pain, don’t think you’re bothering me.”

I can’t say I minded his concern. It felt nice. Comforting. And the little flutter in my chest when he hugged me goodbye? Gratitude. That’s all it can be.

“So staying with Cash...” Thea leans back on the leather cushion and raises her eyebrows at me. Her blue eyes brighten. “How *has* it been staying here with him?”

“It’s been good.”



“Good?” She gives me a *that’s-all-you’re-going-to-give-me* look.

“Great,” I amend. “Cash has been great. He’s been bringing me food, checking my bandages, dealing with the police...”

Not to mention watching movies all day yesterday with me, keeping me distracted, and not complaining when I fell asleep and drooled all over him.

“And that’s all?” Her tone drips with skepticism. “There’s nothing more to it? Come on, Ari. I’m not blind. I see how your eyes light up when you talk about him. Always have, if I remember correctly from high school.”

I mentally curse old friends who remember everything.

“We’re just friends, Thea. That’s all we’ve ever been. He’s helping me out—I offered to go to your place to stay, but his security is better, and he has all this room—I couldn’t very well say no.”

“So there was nothing else?”

I shake my head at her. “You know Cash. He doesn’t do relationships, never has. And that’s okay.”

*Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

*Shut up,* I tell my annoying inner voice.

“Do you think he still feels that way?” Thea asks, then glances worriedly in the direction of the front door. “He’s not due to come home yet, right?”

I check my watch. “No, he won’t be home until after five. And I do think he feels that way. In all the years I’ve known Cash, he’s never talked about being in a serious relationship. I mean, I guess he could have been in one, and not told me...”

But Cash has always been honest with me. Though I guess it’s not lying if I don’t ask, and he doesn’t tell me.

Ugh. I wouldn’t even be thinking about this if it weren’t for that hug the first night I got here. Then waking up half draped over him yesterday morning, both of us on the couch, his hand resting on my leg. And the hug before he left for work.

Thea’s features are creased in thought, and I can tell she’s mentally debating whether to push for more information. After a few seconds, her face smoothes out, and she says, “Okay. You’re right. He’s just being a good friend.”

Before she can continue on the Cash-relationship line of questioning, her phone dings, and she jolts in surprise. Snatching it up from the coffee table, she frowns at it. “Crap. I didn’t realize it was this late. I have to get to the library. I’m on the evening shift tonight.”

She looks at me worriedly. “Are you going to be alright here by yourself?”

“Of course.” I smile at her, ignoring the tiny twinge of unease. “Cash will be back soon. I’ll be fine. You go do your librarian thing, cataloging and referencing and shelving and stuff.”

Thea stands up, shooting me a little grin. “That’s not quite it, but close enough.”

I walk her to the front door, trying not to visibly wince as my aching body protests the movements. Now that my road rash is starting to scab over—so attractive, I just *love* Cash looking at that while he checks my bandages—it also pulls uncomfortably whenever I move.

Not to mention the dozens of bruises scattered all over my body, now turning an array of purples and blues. To say I’m colorful looking would be a massive understatement.

Once Thea is gone, the silence is startling. In this house, I don’t hear the constant sounds like I do in the tiny ranch I rent over on the other side of town. I can’t hear the refrigerator kicking on, or my neighbors mowing the lawn, or the kids yelling as they play basketball down the street.

In Cash’s big house, with the acres of property around it, the silence echoes in the foyer where I’m standing.

It shouldn’t make me anxious, but I can’t help it. The silence reminds me I’m alone, with Sean still out there.

Except *not* Sean.

The only information the police have so far are the things that aren’t true about him. Like the photo, which was a stock photo found online—I felt really stupid when I heard that one. And his name isn’t real, his identity—all of it fake.

So there’s a mysterious stranger out there somewhere, who may or may not decide to come after me again.

And now I feel sick to my stomach. Again.

I head back to the living room—it has the best vantage point of the first floor—and curl up on the couch, scrolling through news on the new phone Cash gave me.

When the police found my old phone in a dumpster near the restaurant—screen shattered and covered with trash—they asked if I wanted it back and Cash’s face got all funny and he said, “I’ll buy you a new one. Please don’t argue with me. I want to.”

I wasn’t going to argue. I don’t want anything not-Sean touched.

A door closes in the distance, echoing. My stomach clenches, twisting and flipping. I know it has to be Cash, but still—

Cash comes into the living room and spots me, his expression clouding with concern. “Ari, hun, are you okay?” He rushes over and drops down next to me. “Are you in pain? I told you to call me.”

I can’t answer for a second.

I saw Cash as he was leaving for work, so I shouldn’t be surprised. But I was still groggy when he came into my room before seven this morning, eyes still bleary with sleep. I sat up to say goodbye and he hugged me but I didn’t really appreciate what I was seeing.

Not like now.

It's not like I haven't seen Cash in a suit before. But it was never like *this*.

Crouched in front of me, so close I can see the faint shadow of stubble on his face, the flecks of gold in his eyes, the way the fabric of his jacket pulls at his arms and shoulders just enough to hint at the muscles beneath. His bronzed skin is accentuated by a crisp white shirt, tucked into tailored gray pants belted around a flat stomach. And the angles and shadows of his face as he looks at me with so much concern—

He's entirely too good looking.

*Just friends*, I remind myself. We're friends. That's all we've ever been. And it's better that way.

"Ari?" Cash runs his hand through his hair, his forehead creasing as he examines my face. His eyes narrow, darkening. "Is it your wrist? Have you taken a pain pill lately? Maybe it was too soon to have company over."

"No, no," I rush to reassure him. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" He leans forward and touches my shoulder. "If you're in pain, tell me. There's no need to hide it."

"I'm just a little sore. No more than usual." At the skeptical raise of his brows, I give in. "I was feeling a little anxious after Thea left. Being alone."

"Ah, Ari." Cash's face falls. "I'm sorry. I had some meetings... but I should have canceled them and worked from home instead."

“No, Cash. It’s fine. I have to get used to it, right? I mean, I’m going to have to be alone, eventually.”

He frowns. “I guess. But I don’t like the idea of you here alone, feeling scared.”

Since Cash runs a large company and has to go into work, and I can’t magically make my fears go away, this conversation is clearly not going to go anywhere. So I change the topic instead.

“Tell me about work.” I shift on the couch so I’m facing him. “Did you sign any future best sellers today?”

Cash hesitates, still looking unhappy. Then he leans back against the cushions and sighs. “No new best sellers. My day was mostly meetings with different departments—advertising, editing, graphic design—lots of reports and figures, but nothing terribly thrilling.”

“No memoir about a concert pianist who becomes an astronaut, and plans to play a sonata on the moon?”

He chuckles. “Unfortunately not. And no books of poetry written by a hamster walking over a keyboard, either.”

I make an *aha* face at him. “I think I just figured out what to work on during my next summer vacation.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

I grin at him. It’s amazing how much better I feel already.

After a pause, Cash says, “Something strange happened today, though.”

He sounds pensive and a little worried. I lean forward in concern, searching his face. “What happened?”

“Brett called.”

That, I wasn’t expecting. “Your *brother* called?”

“I know.” Cash rubs his forehead, right above his eyebrows. “I was surprised too.”

My stomach sinks. I’ve only met Brett a handful of times—he’s older than Cash by four years, and he refused to move to Sleepy Hollow with Cash after their parents died tragically in a plane crash. So he only made a few visits back, and never to actually stay, only to beg for more money.

That’s the only reason he’s ever called Cash, too. Brett burned through his trust fund by the time he was twenty-two, spending the money on exotic trips and cars and lots of drugs. Then he moved on to gambling and selling drugs to keep up his habit, which quickly resulted in being sent to prison on an array of drug charges.

“What did he want?”

Shaking his head, Cash says, “Unbelievably, he said he wants to meet. That he’s gotten clean, stayed out of trouble, and he’s sorry.”

“That’s good...” Even if it sounds too good to be true.

“I know, Ari.” Cash knows what I’m thinking. “And he wants to come work at Chatham. He said he regretted not taking the opportunity years ago. I want to believe him, but...”

I reach over and take his hand. “Maybe it’s the truth. Maybe he *is* sorry, and he wants another chance.”

His fingers wrap around mine gently. “I really hope so. But I can’t help feeling suspicious about his motivation. That he’s really just going to ask for money again.”

Cash falls silent, his gaze going distant, while his thumb idly strokes across the top of my hand. The lines of his face are strained, and it makes me mad at Brett all over again. Mad at him for ditching Cash to begin with, and for all the times he called Cash only wanting money, and never trying to be a true brother to him.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” I ask, breaking the silence. “And order pizza? We can watch one of those car movies you like so much.”

His lips twitch, and he focuses back on me. “You mean the *Fast and the Furious* movies?”

“There are cars in them, aren’t there?” I say innocently. I know what they’re called, but I can tease Cash just as well as he teases me.

“It’s more than just cars,” Cash says, shaking his head at me. “There’s character development, a well-developed plot, action, and suspense—”

“If you say so.” I nudge his knee with mine. “So, how about ordering those pizzas?”

“Okay. But first I’m going to shower, then check your injuries, and then we’ll watch some *quality* movies.”



“Okay, Cash.” If it takes his mind off his brother and their meeting tomorrow, I’ll sit through a movie about people driving off bridges and miraculously not exploding into a ball of flames. “Sounds good.”

## Chapter 6

### **CASH**

He doesn't *look* like he's on drugs.

As Brett sits across from me in my office, I surreptitiously examine him for any of the telltale signs. Bloodshot eyes, dilated pupils, pale, unkempt, twitchy, perspiring, too heavy or too skinny. In the half dozen times I've seen him over the last ten years, he's always displayed at least several of them.

Not today. Today, Brett is smiling at me—slightly strained, but expected for the circumstances—and he looks completely sober. His clothes aren't all wrinkled and stained, like the last time I saw him five years ago. Now he's shaven and tidy, his hair combed back in lines, his off-the-rack suit recently ironed.

Maybe he really does mean what he said yesterday. Maybe he genuinely wants a fresh start, and he's not just here for money.

I hope.

“Cash,” Brett says earnestly. “It's really good to see you.”

I lean forward in my chair. “You too.”

If he’s truly sober, it is.

Brett glances around my office, his eyes lingering on the large cherry desk, the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, and the lush landscapes and seascapes decorating the walls. Then he leans forward and picks up the glass of water my assistant left on the table, taking a sip before speaking.

“It looks nicer than I remember when our grandfather was in this office.” His eyes rise to meet mine. “The entire building does. I remember it being very... stodgy.”

It wasn’t stodgy. It was classic and stately, all dark wood and lush carpeting and rich jewel tones. I only updated the interior design so we would seem more contemporary, modern, more in keeping with the digital age we’re embracing in the industry. But I loved how it looked before, in the days I came here as a teen.

My jaw clenches, and my tone is sharp. “I wasn’t sure you’d remember. You’ve only been here a couple of times.”

Brett’s smile dips, his eyes darkening.

I feel kind of bad, but then again, I remember how hurt Pop was when Brett turned his back on him. How much it wounded Pop when Brett only called for money. And I remember the look of disappointment on Pop’s face when he was dying, and I had to tell him that Brett refused to come see him.

Why should I make this easy for Brett, when he never made things easy for us?

“You’re right.” His expression goes sheepish. “I screwed up. Big time. For a lot of years. Starting with how I treated you and our grandparents. But I’m ready to start over.”

Anger flares hot to hear him gloss over his behavior so easily. “You didn’t even come to see Pop when he was in hospice,” I snap. “You didn’t come to his funeral, or to Gram’s —”

“Cash,” he starts, but I’m not done.

“You didn’t want to work here, fine. Your choice. You wanted to live on your own instead of moving here. Also fine. But you turned your back on both of them. For *drugs*. And now you’re back, saying you want to work here. How do I know you won’t turn your back on your family again?”

Brett winces and sets his glass down. Putting his elbows on his knees, he leans forward, widening his eyes at me. “I know. I deserve everything you’re saying, and I’m so sorry. I can’t go back and fix it, but you’re still here, and I’m hoping I can try to fix things with you.”

“You can do that without working here,” I retort. “Why do you want to work here now?”

He looks at me steadily. “Because I’m trying to start over. I’ll be honest, with my background, it’s hard to find a job. Not many companies want to hire someone with a record. But if you just give me a chance...”

As he trails off, the sun breaks through the clouds, the light through the window illuminating fine wrinkles around Brett's eyes and across his forehead. He looks older than thirty-eight, and he looks tired. Beaten down. And I can't help feeling sorry for him.

"Fine." I hold his gaze. "You can work here. But you're going to have to start just like everyone else. I'm not giving you an executive-level position just because you're my brother."

His brow comes down, jaw tightening, but he doesn't argue. "I understand."

I sort through possibilities for him, not wanting to give Brett too much responsibility, but wanting him to learn the company. After a moment, I say, "You'll start out as an editorial assistant. That will be a great way to get used to the company dynamic, and the industry."

"Okay, Cash. That works."

"And Brett—"

"What?"

"Please, if you're going to do this, mean it. Commit to it. This company means a lot to me, and it meant a lot to Pop."

Brett sticks out his hand. "I swear it, Cash. This is what I want."



I'm still feeling unsettled hours after my meeting with Brett. He seemed sincere, but it's hard to look past the years of dishonesty and deception. The years of getting called to post bail, or to wire money to some new place he just moved to.

Five years ago was the worst. He showed up at the house, strung out, cocaine residue under his nose, yelling and threatening if I didn't give him money. That's when I finally cut him off, years later than I should have. I called the cops on him when he wouldn't leave. And I fenced in the entire property, installing cameras and alarms, so Brett couldn't come back again.

Ari talked me down that night, after Brett had left. Dragged away screaming, actually. I still remember the conversation I had with her.

Ari was in Chicago, and she'd just gotten back from an evening event at school. It was late, and I only texted her at first, but she called right away. "Was I wrong?" I asked her, feeling sick to my stomach. "Should I have given him the money?"

"No." There was no hesitation as she answered. "You did the right thing."

"But what if he gets into even worse trouble now?" Then I voiced my worst fear. "What if some drug dealer kills him? Or a bookie? What if I turned my back on him, and he ends up dead?"

"Don't you even think that." Her voice was so sure. "Whatever happens to Brett is on him. Not you. Giving him

money is enabling him. You know it, and that's why you stopped. You did the right thing, Cash. I am one hundred percent sure of it."

And in the years since, I've called back on those words. On Ari's assurance that I did the right thing.

Hopefully, I'm doing the right thing this time.

But now I'm home, and I can focus on something far more pleasant. Like my new housemate, who I've already grown accustomed to living with. In just four days, I've gotten used to having dinner with Ari, instead of staying late at work, or coming home and eating over the kitchen counter.

I enjoy sitting in the TV room watching a movie with Ari, instead of going to my home office and working until I'm dozing off at my desk. And I like having someone to talk to when I get home from work, especially someone who smiles at me like I'm the best part of her day.

*It's only temporary.* As I walk through the front door, I remind myself, *it's only temporary.* The police will find this asshole and put him in jail and then Ari will want to go back to her own house, her own routine, and I'll be back to spending my nights at the station or at my desk.

It didn't feel lonely before, but now it does.

Ari isn't curled up on the living room couch—the same place I've found her the last three days after work—and a little sliver of worry jabs into my chest. There are dozens of other places

she could be in the house, but this was her first day back to work and I'm worried it may have been too much for her.

I think she should have waited, gone back next week instead, but Ari insisted. "It's a new job, Cash. I've only been there a few months. I've already missed too much work as it is."

But she's not sleeping well—I requested the week off from the station to stay nights here with Ari—and I've heard her tossing and turning the last few nights in her bedroom. She slept okay that first night, on the couch with me, but every night since then she's gone to bed once the movie we're watching is over.

Which is probably better for my mental well-being, but not so good for her sleep.

I check the kitchen, the TV room, the library, the solarium—nothing.

The early November weather makes it too cold to sit outside, but I check the back patio, anyway. No Ari.

She got home two hours ago—I saw the security system notification when she let herself in—and I know she didn't leave.

Is she in the shower? The bedroom? Is she in pain? A full day of teaching and moving around, with her still-healing abrasions and bruises couldn't have been comfortable. I'm working myself into a small panic, envisioning Ari hurting, in tears, all alone—



I don't want to intrude on her privacy, so I knock lightly at her bedroom door, even though I really want to burst inside.

What is wrong with me? I've never felt so over-the-top protective before.

There's no answer, so I knock again, a little louder this time. After a few seconds, Ari calls out softly, "Cash?" But there's a little tremor to her voice. Which means she's scared it's that piece of shit, which makes me so damn angry.

But I shove my anger down and open the door, hoping I'm not met with Ari in tears, white-lipped, her features pinched in pain.

*Oh.* Something is happening in my chest.

Ari is sitting up, her long hair all tousled, groggy-eyed, her cheeks flushed from sleep. A throw is puddled around her waist, exposing a thin T-shirt that clings to her slight curves. Curves that may not be large but are perfectly formed. Curves I shouldn't be noticing right now.

"I'm sorry." I hesitate in the doorway. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I just wanted to make sure you were okay after your first day back at work."

"It's okay, Cash." There's that smile again. "Come in. I'm glad you woke me up. I've been wanting to hear about your day."

Ari pats the mattress beside her. "Sit. Tell me about your meeting with Brett." She pauses and a little line forms between

her brows. “I mean, if you want to. It’s a family thing; maybe you don’t want to talk about it.”

I pull off my jacket and tie, laying them at the end of the bed. Sitting down next to her, our legs brushing, I give Ari’s face a quick inspection. Scratches healing, features mostly relaxed, still dark smudges under her eyes. Not great, but could be worse.

“Tell me about your day, first.” Taking her wrist in my hands, I start unwrapping the bandage, ready to check if the swelling is going down. “How about your pain? And school? Was everyone nice? Helpful? Was it too tiring?”

“It was... pretty good.” There’s a slight pause, and I cock my head at her.

“Better than I expected,” Ari amends. “Everyone was very nice. But all my students wanted to know what happened, and I couldn’t exactly tell them the whole story. What could I say—here’s a cautionary tale, don’t go on a date with a stranger you meet online without doing a Google deep dive first?”

Ari gives me a self-effacing smile, shame flickering in her eyes. “Hey,” I tell her, putting a hand on her leg for emphasis. “You did nothing wrong. Remember that. And if any of your students do know what happened—the entire story—they will be so impressed to hear how you saved yourself.”

“I guess.” There’s a short pause, and her lips curve up. “I guess teenagers might think jumping from a moving car is cool. But I don’t want to give them any ideas.”

“Probably not.” I grin at her. “So what about the pain?”

“Not terrible, but not great, either,” she admits. “It might have been a good idea to wait until next week.”

I press my lips together to keep from saying *I told you so*.

“Yes, I know.” Ari watches as I re-bandage her wrist. “So I took a pill when I got home. That’s why I fell asleep.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to get some more sleep?”

Ari nods. “I’m sure. I want to have dinner with you, hear about your day, and I have to call my mom at some point.”

“Does she know what happened?” Last I knew, Ari hadn’t told her mom anything yet.

Sighing, she says, “No. Not yet. I wanted to wait until she wouldn’t feel obligated to fly here from Arizona. Flights are crazy expensive, especially last minute. And even though she’s remarried now, she and Paul are still on a budget.”

“I could help—” I start, but Ari waves me off.

“It’s fine, Cash. I’m okay, I’m here with you; there’s nothing my mom could do other than stress me out worrying. Now.” Her expression gets stern as she looks at me. “What about your day?”

“Well, I met with Brett. And I kind of told him off. At least about some of it.”

“Good!” Ari threads her fingers through mine, squeezing. “I’m glad. He needs to understand how much—” Her mouth snaps shut. “Anyway. I’m glad. So what else?”

“I agreed to let him come work at Chatham. But only as an editorial assistant. He needs to prove himself. Prove that he’s sincere about working there.”

“That’s a good idea. He needs to learn about the company.” She pauses, and then adds fiercely, “And appreciate how much work you’ve put into it.”

How does Ari get it, but not my own brother?

Sighing, I say, “I don’t know if he’ll ever understand. He wasn’t there to see how much my grandfather loved the company. How crushed he was that my dad wasn’t going to take over for him. That was always the plan, and then...”

“Does Brett have any idea that it wasn’t your first choice to run the company, either? That you had to give up *your* dream to keep the company going? To keep it in the family?”

“I don’t know how he would. He was never around enough to know what I was interested in. Not after our parents died.”

“But Cash.” Ari frowns, her jaw going hard. “It was always your dream to become a doctor. That’s what you said. That even when you were little, you had those doctor kits, and every Halloween—”

Why did I tell Ari that I dressed up like a doctor every Halloween from five to fifteen?

“It’s okay.” She looks so affronted on my part, I could hug her for it. “Really, Ari. I was disappointed back then, but I’m happy with my choice now. I get to keep the company going,

and I get to help people by being a paramedic. It all worked out.”

“I guess.” Ari goes quiet. Then her chin juts out, and she looks at me with fire in her eyes. “But if Brett hurts you, I’m going to have words with him.”

“Ah, Ari.” My chest expands, warmth filling it. “I’m so glad you moved back here.”

Ari leans over and hugs me. “Me too.”

## Chapter 7

### **ARI**

Ever since the police called, I can't stop thinking about it.

Instead of memories lingering at the edges of consciousness, they've moved straight to the front, unavoidable and terrifying.

The day had been going well. It was the first day since I returned to work that I wasn't aching and tired by lunch. My students were well behaved—a miracle when snow is in the forecast and they're all praying for school to be closed tomorrow. And a project was due in my senior lit class and almost everyone turned it in on time.

So I was feeling pretty good, until the dismissal bell rang and I finally pulled my phone out of my desk to check it.

At first, it seemed innocuous enough. There was a text from Thea asking if I wanted to have a wine-and-movie night this weekend. Two messages from Cash, one suggesting Italian for

dinner, the other a review of a new movie we both want to watch. And then a voicemail from a number I didn't recognize.

It was a detective from the police department, saying he said he had an update on my case.

I should have waited to call him back, at least until I was back at Cash's house. Then I wouldn't have driven home on the verge of a panic attack, which I know wasn't safe.

Ever since I got home, I've been trying to distract myself—a hot shower, reorganizing my clothes, tidying the kitchen—but nothing worked. Mid-shower, I had a flashback to running through the woods, certain I was about to be caught. When I reached into the kitchen cabinet to get cleaning spray, I was searching for the trunk release all over again.

I finally gave up and I'm back on the couch, this time with two blankets wrapped tightly around me. My phone is on my lap, the time taunting me, and I just want Cash to come home.

Except it's not my home. It's Cash's home.

And he's my friend, not my boyfriend.

I shouldn't be relying on him this much—I know it's not a good idea—but I'm sick and scared and I don't feel like an independent woman right now; I feel like a terrified child.

When the door opens and Cash calls out, "Ari, I'm home," I almost sob from the relief of it. Another thing Cash has done to make me feel safe—calling out to me as soon as he comes inside so I don't panic, thinking he's an intruder.

I try to reply, but the words get caught in my throat.

Footsteps draw closer while I fight for composure—swallowing hard, blinking away the tears burning behind my eyes, trying to come up with something to say that won't sound weak or crazy.

This isn't who I am. Scared and jumping at shadows, even though logically, I know I'm safe here. Unable to force back the memories assaulting me. Not even trusting myself to speak.

“Ari?” Cash walks into the living room and his smile immediately fades. And I hate that I did that to him. “What's wrong?”

“I—” My throat clicks, drier than the Sahara. “I'm sorry...”

“Ah, hun.” He drops his briefcase on the floor and rushes over. “What's wrong?”

When he sits next to me, he looks at me like I'm the most important thing in the world.

“The police,” I start, and my voice catches. “They—”

“What about the police? Ari?” Worry bleeds through his words.

The memories swamp me all over again, and I can't keep the tears from escaping. I catch a glimpse of Cash's stricken face before he pulls me to him, his arms wrapping around me. I sob into his neck, the last few hours of turmoil pouring out of me.

“Ari, it's okay.” He keeps repeating it, rubbing my back in small circles, his breath whispering across my hair. “It's okay, you're safe.”



When my sobs subside into stuttering gasps and sniffles, he finally pulls a few inches away from me. His forehead is creased with worry as he inspects me, and he brushes away some damp strands of hair stuck to my face. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Now that my crying jag has finished, I feel foolish. Aside from the night of the escape—the assault, as the police called it—I haven’t cried, and now I do it over news that should ostensibly be good.

Ducking my eyes, I whisper, “They found him.”

“Who is he?” Cash’s voice is tight.

Even thinking the name sends flutters of fear racing through me. Which is ridiculous. It’s just a name. But—

“Ari.” He gentles. “Would it be easier if I called the police myself? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“No. I can do it.” *Get it together*, I tell myself sternly. “His name is Kyle Morgan. He’s—”

*Get it together.*

Looking up into Cash’s familiar gaze, I force everything out in a rush. “One of the stores down the street from the restaurant has a security camera that recorded him helping me into the car. With two other witness descriptions, they found him.”

Cash sucks in a breath. “Witnesses?”

Tears prickle. “One of the servers at the restaurant remembered me. He thought I looked... out of it. But Sean—Kyle—told him I was sick. And someone leaving the restaurant saw me stumbling, Kyle helping me into the car, but he thought I was just drunk.”

I draw in a shaky breath. “Two people saw me, Cash. I was drugged. I don’t remember any of it.” My voice rises. “But neither of them did *anything*.”

“Fuck.”

And the worst part. “He’s already out on bail.”

“*What?*” His expression goes thunderous.

“I know.” My voice is small and wobbly. “I can’t stop thinking about it. All of it. He’s out there. Free. After what he did.” A shudder shakes my body. “He could come back. And I keep seeing it. The trunk. The road. The woods. I can’t stop it.”

Cash is glowering, the muscles in his jaw working. “Shit,” he grits out softly, and he pulls me into his chest.

“I’m scared,” I mumble into his shirt. “I knew he could have come after me before. But now he’s been charged. He’ll probably go to jail. Unless—” Another shudder ripples through me. “Unless I’m not there to testify against him.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you.” His arms tighten around me. “Nothing.”

We’re both quiet for a minute, his heart thumping against mine. Then Cash lifts me away from him and holds my gaze.

“You are not going to get hurt again. And we’re not just going to rely on the police. Not that they aren’t good at their jobs—but it’s not enough.”

Before I can ask what he’s talking about, he continues, “There’s a company in town—Blade and Arrow Security. They’re all former Special Forces; they do private security and investigation, and they’re the best. They’ve done some work for me before and I trust them. I’ll call them today, get them on this, and together, we’ll make sure you’re safe.”



Two hours ago, I was crying.

But when I walk into the TV room and see what Cash has done, I burst out laughing.

“What?” Cash turns on the couch to look at me, his lips twitching. “Didn’t you say you wanted snacks?”

After my breakdown a couple of hours ago, as I sat on the couch with Cash, feeling raw and vulnerable, he said, “How about if we have a movie marathon tonight? There’s that new sci-fi we were talking about watching, and I think I saw a new rom-com on Netflix.”

“That would be nice,” I told him, my voice small and rough from crying.

He squeezed my hand, his smile comforting. “And instead of having a healthy dinner—” His mouth twisted in mock

distaste. “We could have a bunch of garbage snacks like we did in high school.”

So I agreed to his suggestion, both the movie marathon and the snacks. But I was imagining popcorn and chips and cookies—basically anything junk food-ish that we could scrounge up in the kitchen.

But this? I grin at Cash. “Yes. But I wasn’t imagining *this*.”

He widens his eyes at me innocently; the hazel turning a sparkling gold. “I said snacks like we had in high school.”

As I walk closer, I scan the large coffee table in front of me. “I didn’t realize you meant all the snacks we’d ever had.”

Now I know what Cash was doing when he told me not to come into the room until he gave me the all-clear. He was setting up a veritable buffet of junk-food goodness. Half a dozen types of candy, and an array of cookies and chips. There’s a tray of nachos with salsa and cheese dip and sour cream, popcorn with four different flavor toppings, soft pretzels with mustard...

I’m hungry just looking at it all, when ten minutes ago I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to stomach anything. But seeing all the effort Cash put into this... some of the weight bearing down on me lifts.

“Is it okay?” Cash searches my gaze, his expression sobering. “I thought it would be fun. But if it’s too much—”

“No way.” I snatch up a chocolate chip cookie and a handful of popcorn, holding both up at him. “Double fisting snacks is

the only way to properly watch movies.”

“That’s what I thought.” He reaches for my cookie. “Thanks for grabbing that for me.”

“Hands off.” I fend him off with my elbow. “Get your own cookie.”

He huffs at me, hiding a grin. “Fine.”

“So this movie you want to watch,” Cash starts, once we’re both settled comfortably on the couch, snacks within easy reach. “Is it as ridiculous as all the other ones? Is there a news reporter going undercover as a student and falling in love with her teacher? Or is it about a thirteen-year-old who makes a birthday wish to turn thirty?”

“Those are both excellent movies,” I retort, tossing a piece of popcorn at him. “And no. This one is about a librarian who discovers a man living in the library, but it’s not because he’s homeless, it’s because he’s trying to break the world record for reading the most books.”

There’s silence. Then Cash snickers. “Nope. Not a ridiculous premise at all.”

I throw another piece of popcorn at him, but he catches this one, popping it in his mouth with a grin. “I bet you could come up with something better, Ari.”

“What do you mean?”

He cocks his head. “You’re still writing, aren’t you? I remember your stories in high school were really good. Much

more creative than that journalist-undercover-student movie idea.”

“I haven’t done much lately,” I admit. “Before all of... this... I tried to write a few times a week. But it’s been hard...”

“If you need quiet time to write, just tell me,” Cash says. “If you’d rather work on that than watch movies, I won’t be insulted. Really.”

“It’s not that.” The last thing I want is more time alone to think. “I love watching movies with you, and having dinner, and talking about our days. It’s not that I don’t have time to write, I just haven’t... I just haven’t been very inspired.”

“I hope you don’t mind spending your evenings with me,” I add anxiously, my chest squeezing. “If I’m keeping you from work, or spending time with your friends, or...”

*Going out with a woman?*

Maybe Cash wants to go out but feels bad leaving me alone. And now I’m picturing him out in Manhattan, all handsome in a suit, a glamorous woman draped all over him—

“I like spending time with you.” He puts his hand on my knee. “I used to just come home and do more work. Sometimes I’d go into the city and make small talk with people I didn’t really like. I enjoy my shifts at the station, but other than that? My time at home was...”

After a pause, he says, “It was empty. And now it’s not. You’re my first choice to spend time with. You always have

been.”

*Oh.* Now my heart flutters, and it’s not from fear.

But maybe it should be. Because I shouldn’t be thinking about Cash that way. I’m sure he doesn’t mean that statement the way I would if I said it.

Still. There’s something in his eyes when he looks at me. I just don’t know what it means.

But I have to look away before he figures out how I really feel. Needing a distraction, I reach for the remote. “Are you ready to watch this movie?”

Cash blinks. He opens his mouth to say something but hesitates, snapping it shut.

A moment later, he smiles at me, teasing, “Am I ready for this quality romantic comedy that will definitely be realistic and not at all cheesy? Absolutely.”

“And no snarky comments?”

“Hey, wait.” Cash points a pretzel at me. “You never said anything about not making snarky comments.”

“Fine,” I huff, “but no more than five—” He pouts at me. “Okay, ten. And none during the big romantic gesture at the end.”

“Deal.”

As I hit the play button, Cash’s arm comes around my shoulder, tugging me into his side. My breath catches.

He tilts his head, looking down at me. “Is this okay?”

“Yes.” Relaxing against him, my head resting on his shoulder, my heart fills. “It’s perfect.”



## Chapter 8

### **CASH**

I keep remembering the expression on Ari's face when I came home yesterday.

Scared, but trying so hard to hide it. Her chin jutting out, lips trembling, her features shadowed and strained. All wrapped in those blankets, tucked in the corner of the couch, almost like she was hiding. And her voice, so small and frightened.

And then the worst of it. Ari sobbing in my arms, shaking, telling me about the flashbacks she was having, her fear—

All of it, so wrong.

Except holding her. That felt right. Even though I shouldn't have been thinking about it, not when Ari is so vulnerable and hurting.

Although, last night... Before the movie, when Ari looked at me with so much emotion in her eyes. It seemed like more than friendship, but—

Do I want Ari to think of me as more than a friend?

What about my insistence on not doing relationships? On not wanting to chance losing another person I love?

But then there's the way I feel around her. The flame that was always there, now strengthening. At least, it is for me.

But what if I do something, and it's not what she wants? Will I lose Ari?

She didn't pull away when I put my arm around her last night. I told myself it was just to comfort her, and that was partly true. But feeling her body tucked against mine, the soft swells of her curves, her slight weight, the silk of her hair on my neck—I didn't want to let her go.

But my feelings are secondary to keeping Ari safe. Which is why we're meeting with Cole Mitchell, my friend and founder of Blade and Arrow Security, to find out what he thinks our next steps should be.

I'm not thrilled that Ari is going to be at the meeting, even though I understand why she wants to be there. Of course, she would want to be involved, to learn everything she can about the man who drugged and abducted her, about the potential dangers she's facing.

But all my protective instincts are flaring, and I'd do anything to not see that same frightened look from yesterday.

Maybe we'll get good news from Cole. Maybe Kyle Morgan is cowed, secluding himself at home, not likely to be a threat to Ari.

Or maybe it will be bad news, which is what the pit in my stomach is telling me.

It's the same gut instinct that insisted I hold right before entering a burning building, seconds before the ceiling caved in. The same instinct that told me there was a child hiding in that kitchen cabinet, where there were a dozen other places he could have been. My gut instinct isn't usually wrong, but I'm really hoping in this case, it is.

But I'm not letting on that I'm worried.

I'm picking Ari up from school so we can head straight to our meeting, and as I wait in front of the building, I keep a smile plastered on my face.

Once I see her come through the front doors, my smile becomes more genuine. She looks so pretty, her hair swinging as she walks, cheeks flushed from the cold, and she lights up as soon as she spots me. Picking up her pace, she hurries to my car and tugs the door open, tossing her tote on the back seat and sliding inside.

After an exaggerated shiver, she asks, "How do I always forget how cold it gets? And it's only November."

Eyeballing her thin fleece jacket, I say, "Maybe it's time for a warmer coat."

"Probably." Her brow wrinkles. "They're all at my house, though."

"We can go there soon, pick up whatever you need." As I pull away from the curb, I silently curse myself for not

thinking of it sooner. We made one trip to her house the day after she went to the hospital, and Ari hasn't been back since. But of course she needs all her sweaters and winter coats and boots, especially considering I don't know how long she'll be staying with me.

I'd rather not think about an end date, honestly.

"So this Cole," Ari starts. "How did you meet him?"

"There were some threats against the company a few years ago. An ex-employee wasn't happy about being dismissed, and he started harassing some of his old coworkers, people in human resources, anyone who he thought had a part in him losing his job."

"Cash!" Ari's voice rises. "You never told me about that! You were threatened?"

Stopping at a red light, I turn to look at her. "I don't think he would have actually *done* anything. But it was upsetting the other employees, obviously. And he was careful about what he did, not leaving enough evidence for the police to do anything. But I had run into Cole around town and knew he had a security company, so I asked for his help."

"And he solved it?"

"He did." I turn right onto a tree-lined single lane road. "And his company has helped out a couple of times since then, providing security for high-profile events, investigative services—I trust Cole and his team. And I consider him a friend, so I know he'll make sure this is done right."

“Is this the place?” Ari’s looking out the window, wide-eyed.

“Yeah.” I park on the road in front of the large brick building. At first glance, it looks like any other office building, except this one is surrounded by a tall metal fence topped with floodlights and cameras. There are heavy duty gates at the driveway and front walk, both monitored by a state-of-the-art surveillance system.

Ari glances at me. “That’s a lot of... security, isn’t it?”

“Well—” I give her a crooked smile. “It *is* a security company, after all.”

As we wait at the front gate, I explain, “They don’t just work here, the team lives here, too. Some of the guys are married, or they live here with a partner. So they’re extra invested in making sure the property is safe.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” When the gate opens, Ari jumps. Flushing, she admits, “I’m a little nervous. I don’t know why. I just am.”

“It’s okay.” I take her hand without thinking and she startles. *Crap.*

But a moment later, her fingers tighten around mine, and she flashes me a grateful look.

Cole is waiting at the entrance, a small smile on his face, his gaze dipping to land on our entwined hands. He doesn’t comment, just steps forward to clap his hand on my shoulder. “Cash. It’s good to see you. Though,” his expression sobers. “I’d prefer it was for something more pleasant.”

I lift my chin at him. “I know. But I’m glad you were able to fit us in.”

“And Ariana.” Cole holds out his hand, and Ari drops mine to shake it. “It’s nice to meet you. Although I’m sure I’ve seen you around town. You look very familiar.”

Ari smiles back at him, some of her tension dropping at his genial tone. “Probably. I don’t go out much, but I think I’ve seen you around, too. It’s nice to officially meet you. And please—” Her eyes crinkle at the corners. “Call me Ari.”

“Ari, then.” Cole leads us inside, through the reception area, and into a large conference room. He gestures at the long, glossy wooden table surrounded by leather office chairs. “Sit anywhere you like.”

Ari and I sit next to each other on one long side, while Cole picks up a folder from the end of the table and settles in a chair opposite us. While he opens the folder and scans the first page inside, Ari clutches the arms of her chair, white-knuckled.

Not wasting any time, Cole gets right into it. “Well. We found some information on Morgan.”

“What did you find out?” Ari asks, leaning toward him. Her nails dig into the leather of the chair.

Cole hesitates, his gaze moving to me in an unspoken question. Gentle or straight to the point? I give a tiny shake of my head—gentle, please—and he nods in response.

Ari glances between us and her brow comes down. “I don’t know what *that* look was, but I’m the one he drugged and

stuck in a trunk. So if there's a question, ask me." She pauses, and her voice softens. "Please."

Shit. She's right. I cover her hand with mine, giving it a little squeeze. "I'm sorry, Ari."

"You're absolutely right," Cole says, his expression apologetic. "If I did that to Maya—my fiancée—she'd yell at me. So I'll ask you. Do you want the information gently, or right to the point?"

She gives Cole a grim smile. "Just tell me. Don't drag it out."

Cole dips his head at her. "Okay. So, Kyle Morgan is thirty-three and lives in Manhattan. His official job title is Equities Trader, but he's employed by his father, who owns the firm. His father, Lucas Morgan, is extremely wealthy, with an estimated net worth of over one hundred million dollars."

"Unofficially, Kyle doesn't do any work at the firm," Cole continues. "He just lives off his father's money. And he gets bailed out by it, too."

I grit my teeth. I have a feeling I know where this is going. "Bailed out how?"

Cole's expression goes stony. "Over the last five years, Kyle has been a suspect eight different times. All women, all claiming they were drugged, then physically and sexually assaulted."

Ari's hand trembles under mine. Quietly, she asks, "How is he not in jail, then?"

I think I know the answer to that, too.

“The charges have all been dropped,” Cole replies. “And conveniently, not one of the women will speak about Kyle Morgan, or even acknowledge that they know him.”

“Non-disclosure agreements.” I shake my head in disgust. “He either paid them off, or intimidated the women into signing.”

Cole gives me a sharp nod. “That’s my guess, too.” He hesitates, frowning, and looks at Ari. “Are you sure you want to hear everything?”

She swallows hard. “Yes.”

“There was one woman who refused to drop the charges and insisted on going to court. But two weeks before the case was supposed to be tried, she disappeared. Without her testimony, there wasn’t a case, so the charges were dropped.”

“*What?*” Ari stares at Cole, aghast. “She disappeared? And no one went looking for her?”

He shakes his head somberly. “No. Apparently, there was enough evidence to show that she moved to Mexico, wanting to start a new life there. There had been issues with her family, financial troubles, some legal issues... so people just accepted it.”

Fuck. This is as bad as I’d feared it could be.

Ari turns in her chair to face me, that terrible fear back in her eyes. “*Cash.*”



Dammit. My heart wrenches. She shouldn't have to go through this. "It's going to be okay," I soothe, swallowing back my own fear and anger.

"Will it?" Her voice wobbles. "What if I'm leaving work, and... what if I disappear too?"

"You won't," Cole assures her, leaning across the table. His gaze is solid and reassuring. "We have a plan, and we're going to make sure you're safe. Unfortunately"—he grimaces—"that woman didn't have people looking out for her like you do."

I level my gaze at Cole, trying to ignore the ache in my chest and the burning need to drag Ari out of here and fly her to a deserted island where she'll be safe. "What's the plan?"

"Fortunately, your home is very secure," Cole says. "So I'm not concerned about Ari when she's there. But I want to have someone with her any time she leaves the house. Taking her to work, shopping, visiting with friends... she shouldn't be alone in public."

Nodding, I add, "I'll protect Ari whenever I'm not at work. And I can try to get someone to cover my shifts at the station."

Ari interjects. "No, Cash. I don't want you changing your life even more because of me. And you love volunteering. I'm not taking that away from you."

"It won't be a problem," Cole reassures her. "With you living right here in Sleepy Hollow, it will be easy for us to coordinate protection for you. Cash can give us his schedule, and one of my team will be there when he can't be."

Sitting here beside Ari, holding her hand, watching her work to hold everything together, I realize I'd drop anything—my shifts at the station, work—if it means keeping her safe.

“We'll also keep an eye on Morgan, though it will be tough when he's in Manhattan.” Cole glances down to flip through his folder. “Ari, do you have security cameras at your house?”

She frowns. “Just a Ring doorbell.”

“It's a start, but I'm going to have some more cameras installed,” Cole says. “That way, we'll know if he shows up looking for you there.”

“What about school?” Ari asks. “I can't have someone with me inside the building. My students would be so distracted. And it's a new job; if I come in with a bodyguard...”

“As long as someone brings you to the building and back, it should be fine,” Cole replies. “From what I understand, it's all secure access there, right?”

“Yes.” Ari nods. “The only access is through the main entrance, and it's always locked. You have to go through security to enter.”

“Okay then.” Cole nods in approval. “So the only other things are the devices.”

“The devices?”

“Yes.” He gives her a little smile and pushes away from the table, walking over to a desk nearby. Picking up a small box, he returns to his seat and opens it. “Some self defense tools that we've found to be helpful to some of our other clients.”

As Cole pulls each item out of the box, he gives a brief description before handing it across the table to Ari.

“The whistle is self-explanatory—you can test it, if you want—but trust me, it’s very loud.”

“Hold the pepper spray away from your body if possible; that way you avoid getting it in your own eyes.”

“If you’ve been restrained, hold the keychain firmly between your fingers and jab back, toward their face.”

Ari’s face grows paler as each item is deposited in front of her.

“What about work?” she asks. “I can’t have some of these things on me in school. If a student got a hold of them...”

“That’s okay,” Cole reassures her. “Just keep them securely in your bag until you’re out of the building. But then make sure you have them ready for easy access.”

As Cole hands over a clear baggie with earrings inside, he says, “The earrings have trackers in them. So we’ll know where you are at all times. If you’re in trouble, press the center of either earring hard. We’ll get an alert and get to you immediately.”

She gulps. “O...okay.”

And then there’s the last item, another piece of jewelry. “A ring?” Ari raises her eyes in question. “Another tracker?”

“No.” Cole smiles grimly. “This is something we just started giving out, and only to clients we feel can handle it. Given

your calm thinking when you escaped the trunk of that car, I'm confident you will use it properly."

Then he presses something on the side of the ring, and a little blade pops out.

Ari recoils. "You think I could use *that*?"

Cole holds her gaze, his eyes dark and serious. "If you had that when you were trapped in the trunk, and you needed to use it to escape, would you have?"

Her jaw tightens. After a beat, she says firmly, "Yes."

The meeting wraps up quickly after that. Ari and I give Cole our schedules, and he tells her that his teammate, Finn, will be taking her to work and back for the week. "Anywhere else you need to go," he adds, "don't be afraid to ask."

As we're leaving, I clasp Cole's hand and clap his shoulder. Dipping my chin at him, I say, "Thank you for protecting Ari. It means the world to me."

Cole gives me a knowing look and the corner of his mouth pulls up. "I can see that."

Once we step outside, I take a deep breath of the crisp autumn air, feeling my lungs expand fully for the first time since we started the meeting. We have a plan. A solid strategy to keep Ari safe.

Ari stops on the front step and turns to me, her eyes haunted. Stress is etched into all of her features. "Cash," she begins, but trails off.

“What, hun?” I take her arms, rubbing them gently. She needs a warmer coat, I remind myself. Mittens. A scarf.

“It’s just...” Her chin wobbles. “It’s all so much. Kyle. Guards. Weapons.”

“Ah, Ari. I know.”

“And it’s all my fault.” Her eyes drop from mine, and she whispers, “If I had just been more careful.”

*No. Just no.*

Tugging her to me, I wrap my arms around Ari’s trembling body. “No. It is not your fault. Not any of it. I don’t want you to even think that.”

“Are you sure?” It’s a murmur against my chest.

“Yes.” I’m adamant. “I am absolutely sure. One hundred percent.”

Her arms twine around my back and she sags into me, giving me her weight. “Okay, Cash.” After a pause, she asks softly, “Can we go home now?”

I press my lips to her hair—what am I doing?—and say, “Of course.”

## Chapter 9

### **ARI**

It's still bubbly, cheesy, greasy pepperoni goodness.

Each time I check on the casserole, I hold my breath, hoping that it hasn't burned to a crisp in the five minutes since I looked at it last.

It's not that I'm a bad cook—I'm in the average to slightly above-average range. But Cash has this super high-end oven with a million dials and settings, and I'm used to something a lot simpler.

I'm almost ashamed to put my very basic—but yummy—pepperoni pizza casserole in such a fancy oven. Like the oven that costs more than my monthly salary is judging me for cooking something so simple.

Although, all I've seen Cash cook in it are frozen pizzas and appetizers, so maybe my made-from-scratch casserole is actually an upgrade.

As long as Cash likes it, that's all that matters. He's working a shift at the fire station, a six to midnight one, and I know he's not expecting me to be up when he gets home.

But Cash has done so much for me, and I really want to do something for him.

When I think about everything that Cash has done, I feel kind of guilty. Letting me live at his house, insisting on covering all the expenses—I know he can afford it, but still—not to mention whatever he's paying Blade and Arrow for their services. I brought it up last night, worrying, and Cash got all quiet and finally said, "I just like being able to help you, Ari. You'd do it for me."

He's right. If I was a multimillionaire, I would. But I'm not, so I have to settle for a casserole instead.

It's not just the money, though. It's how supportive Cash has been. Always coming home before dinner so I have someone to eat with, spending every evening with me. Comforting me when I get overwhelmed or when I wake up crying after a nightmare.

Like last night, when I dreamed I was trapped in the trunk again. But this time, the car stopped, and when the trunk opened, my dad was there. I was so happy—I miss him so much—but then it turned into my worst nightmare yet.

My dad was standing there, reassuring me, I was about to climb out of the trunk, and then Kyle was there. He was driving another car, and he ran my dad over, just like the drunken driver that killed him almost twenty years ago.

I couldn't stop screaming.

Cash sprinted into my bedroom, hair wild, bare-chested, and he just held me until I could breathe normally again. Then he laid down next to me—on top of the covers; I didn't tell him to, but he did it anyway—and stayed there the rest of the night. And each time the horrible images of the nightmare would grab hold of me again, making me shudder, he'd stroke my arm and whisper, "It's okay. You're safe."

I would have felt more okay with Cash under the covers, tucked up against him. But he still hasn't done anything to make me think he wants more than friendship. At least, nothing that tells me for sure.

The way he looks at me, it feels like there's something deeper than friendship. When he touches me—a hug, an arm around my shoulder, holding my hand at Blade and Arrow—it feels like more than friendship, too.

But he hasn't said anything, and I'm terrified I'm reading things wrong. That Cash is really just trying to be a good friend. He doesn't do serious relationships, so why would this be any different?

It's enough to drive me crazy.

But I'll take Cash as a friend over potentially making our relationship awkward by making a move he doesn't welcome. So I'm making him a casserole instead of all the sexier ways I'd like to show my appreciation.



Like jumping on him when he walks through the door, kissing his face all over. Peeling off his clothes and taking a shower with him, offering to wash his body. Which is very muscly and impressive, from the parts I've seen of it.

Then I'd go to his bedroom and kiss the rest of his body. And from there—

A door closes, the sound faint from this distance. Cash doesn't say anything this time, no doubt assuming I'm asleep. So I call out to him instead.

“Cash. I'm up. I'm in the kitchen.”

A minute later, he walks into the kitchen, and I can immediately tell something is wrong.

I didn't have much time to talk to Cash before he left for his shift. He got home from work with barely enough time to eat a snack and let me know Finn was on duty if I needed to go anywhere. He looked a little stressed when he left, but I thought he just felt bad about leaving.

Now I'm worried. His features are pinched, and there's a slump to his shoulders. And when he asks, “Ari. Why are you still up? Is everything okay?” his voice is strained.

“I'm okay,” I hurry to answer, coming around the counter toward him. Fear grips me as a new possibility reveals itself. What if he's hurt?

I examine Cash—freshly showered, wearing the same jeans and shirt he had on when he left—and I don't see anything unusual. But he could have been burned, cut himself, fallen—

“Did you get hurt?” My words rush out as panic tightens my chest.

Surprise flickers across his face. “What? No. Why would you ask that?”

“Because it looks like something’s wrong.” Or am I imagining things?

“Ari. Hun.” His hand comes around my upper arm, his thumb lightly rubbing. “I’m not hurt. But why are you up? Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Yes. I do. But—” I eyeball him again, noting the tiny lines etched between his eyes. “I wanted to wait up for you. I made you something to eat in case you’re hungry.”

“You made me food?” Cash’s eyes light up, chasing away some of the shadows. “What did you make?”

I take Cash’s hand and tug him over to the oven, flicking on the interior light to show him. “Pepperoni pizza casserole. I know how much you like pizza...”

“Ah, Ari. Thank you.” He pauses. “But if you want to go to bed now, I know it’s late...”

“Do you want me to go to bed?” There’s something wrong, I can tell.

After a heavy sigh, he says, “No. But I’m probably not the most fun to be around right now.”

His shoulders are drooping even more now. And I’m not leaving him. “Come.” I lead him over to the massive marble

island. “Sit. I’m going to get you some cheesy pepperoni goodness. And I’m staying here while you eat it.”

A minute later, I place a steaming plate of cheese and noodles and pepperoni in front of Cash, and he leans over and takes a deep sniff of it. “It smells amazing, Ari. Thank you.”

I grab a beer from the fridge and plop it down next to his plate, then sit on the stool beside him. “It’s nothing fancy.”

“It’s *incredible*,” Cash says after inhaling half of it. I’ve just been sitting quietly, watching him enjoy the food, and wondering if he’s going to tell me what’s bothering him.

Once the casserole is gone, he lays his silverware down softly and stares at the empty plate. A minute goes by, the only sound the faint clink of ice filling the dispenser in the freezer.

“One of our calls tonight was for a guy who had a heart attack. When we got the address, we knew who it had to be.”

I reach over and take Cash’s hand, resting it on my leg.

“When we got there,” he sighs. “We were right. It was Jim. He’s one of the volunteers at the station, a great guy, and he’s on the ground...”

“Cash.” I say his name softly, squeezing his fingers.

“He’s only forty-five,” Cash says. “He exercises; he’s a firefighter, for Pete’s sake. And now he’s in the hospital with probable heart damage.”

My heart squeezes. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know it happens.” Cash lifts his head and turns to look at me. “I know that. And at least we got to Jim in time. He’s going to survive, although it’ll be a long recovery. But after everything else today, it’s just...”

“What else happened?”

Cash frowns, his eyes darkening to a tarnished copper. “Brett.”

I’ve been afraid of this ever since Cash told me about Brett coming to work for him. As much as I try to see the good in people, to give them second chances, with Brett, it’s nearly impossible. Not after I’ve seen and heard how badly he’s hurt Cash over the years.

But Brett is his brother, his last remaining close relative. I can’t blame Cash for wanting to give him one more chance.

“What happened?”

“He’s been making a lot of mistakes,” Cash says with a sigh. “Losing files, coming in late, missing appointments. If it only happened a couple of times, I’d pass it off as nerves, or just getting used to the job. But...”

He shakes his head, his face clouding. “When I’ve talked to him about it, he always has an excuse. It was someone else’s fault. There was an accident, and he got stuck in traffic. I want to believe him.”

*I don’t.* But I won’t say that to Cash. Instead, I gently encourage him to continue. “But?”

“I’m worried he’s on drugs again.” He looks down at our hands, my smaller hand pale against his golden skin. After a pause, he continues, “It’s nothing obvious, like before. But he’s more irritable, and his eyes are bloodshot. It could be nothing; maybe he’s not sleeping well, or he’s worried about work...”

I force back the anger already bubbling up inside me. “Have you asked him about it?”

“No.” He barks out a short laugh, then looks at me sadly. “I know I have to. I guess I was hoping if I waited a little, it would get better on its own. It’s stupid.”

“No, Cash, it’s not.” His eyes are so sad, I just want to hug him. “It’s not stupid. He’s your brother, and you want to believe what he told you. That’s being human. Not stupid.”

“He already asked for a promotion,” Cash says. Disbelief infuses his voice. “A raise. And he wanted to know when he’d get some shares of the company.”

“*What?*” It’s sharper than I intended, and I try again more softly. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him no. Not yet.” Cash gives me a rueful smile. “He wasn’t very happy about my answer. But there’s no way...” He takes a swig of his beer. “I may have a weak spot when it comes to Brett, but not to that extent. Hundreds of employees rely on Chatham for their livelihoods. There’s no way I’m risking that.”

“Good.” It’s more blunt than I should be, but it’s the truth.  
“You made the right choice.”

“I need to talk to him about the drugs,” Cash admits. “And stop putting it off.”

God, I’m so mad at Brett. He could have had everything—a company to run, a relationship with loving grandparents, with Cash—and he threw it all away. And worse than that, he keeps coming back, hurting Cash over and over again.

“It’s going to be okay,” I reassure him.

But Cash’s shoulders are drooping, and his eyes are so sad. My heart aches for the man and the disappointed teenager he once was; wishing his brother hadn’t left him.

So I get up from my stool and hug him. With Cash still sitting and me standing, my head is level with his, and I rest my cheek on his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

His arms come around me, and this time, he’s the one leaning on me. “Thank you.”

## Chapter 10

### **CASH**

“My skills aren’t being fully utilized as an editorial assistant, Cash.”

I knew I should have had my assistant tell Brett I was busy. It was only yesterday that I told him he couldn’t have a promotion, and he’s already at it again.

Brett is leaning over my desk, his fingers making damp smears on the polished wood. His bloodshot eyes are pleading.

“I’m much smarter than the guy you have me working for. He keeps making all these mistakes—I’m trying to catch them all but some slip through—and I’m worried he’s going to end up making an error that ends up costing Chatham a lot of money.”

“Richard has worked here for over ten years,” I explain, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice. “He’s an exemplary employee. That’s why I assigned you to work with him.”

“Maybe he used to be.” Brett leans in, giving me a *just between us* look. “But from what I’ve seen, he cuts corners. Did I mention how many mistakes I’ve seen in his work? He’s a decent guy, I guess...” He moves even closer, his breath hot on my face. “But I think he’s cheating on his wife with one of the illustrators. Not very professional, in my opinion.”

*Don’t yell. Don’t yell. He’s your brother.*

Tipping back in my chair, I level a stern look at Brett. “Don’t worry about what Richard does. He’s my employee, not yours. And I’m not giving you his job.”

Brett scowls. “Cash—“

Then I’m saved by my phone. My cell is vibrating on my desk and I snatch at it, thankful for the interruption. Ian’s name appears on the screen, and I answer it, saying quickly, “Hang on, Ian. I just have to wrap up a meeting.”

Muting the call, I look back at Brett. “I have to take this.”

“Fine,” he grumbles. “We can talk more about this later.”

Or not.

Once Brett leaves the office, I unmute the call. “Sorry about that. What’s up? Do you need me to cover a shift?”

“Cash.” Ian’s voice is strained, not what I was expecting. “Sorry to interrupt you at work. But I thought you’d want to know.” Sirens blare in the background.

My stomach fills with lead. “Know what?”



“We just got a call, we’re on our way now.” Ian pauses, his voice muffling as he talks to someone on the other end of the line. Then he’s back. “Don’t panic.”

*What?*

I ask sharply, “Don’t panic about *what*, Ian?”

“We got a call to your girlfriend’s house. Probable carbon monoxide leak.”

“What?” I feel like a damn parrot. “My girlfriend? You mean Ari?”

“Yeah.” Ian pauses again, a staccato burst of voices rising in the background. “It’s her house. We’re nearly there.”

“She’s staying with me,” I tell him, willing my pulse to slow down. Ari isn’t there. She’s fine.

“No, man.” His tone drops. “She’s there. That’s what the call said. Two people with possible exposure, the resident and another man with her. I’m sorry, Cash, but I thought you’d want to get here.”

My heart stops. No. It can’t be.

I can’t breathe.

“Cash, I gotta go,” Ian is saying, but his voice is dull and distant.

Sluggishly, stuttering, my heart starts again. Already jogging out of the office, I jab at the phone to hang up and bark at my assistant, “I have to go. Emergency.”

As I run toward the exit—no elevator, too slow, stairs are faster—I stab at Ari’s name on my phone. The call rings, and I’m praying, please, please have gotten out of the house. *Please be okay.*

There’s no answer. God.

All the things that could have happened—could be happening—are flashing through my head like a horrific slideshow. Ari unconscious. Brain damaged. Dead.

*Please, no.*

I’m hurtling down the flights of stairs, dialing Ari on repeat. It’s a miracle I don’t pitch headfirst down them and break my neck.

Just as I’m slamming through the door to the parking lot, my phone rings.

Ari’s name appears and my heart staggers again. I gasp into the phone, “Ari?”

“Cash.” She’s not unconscious. Not brain damaged. Not dead.

I fire panicked questions at her. “Are you okay? What happened? Are you hurt? Where’s Finn? Please tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, Cash.”

I stumble, my legs going wobbly from relief.

Still jogging, I head toward my car. “What happened? Are you safe?”

“I’m safe.” Sirens blare, and her voice rises, trying to speak over them. “I came back here after work. Finn brought me. We were inside for... I don’t know, five minutes? And then he noticed something. Not a smell, but he knew somehow. So we ran outside and called 911.”

Panic resurges. How long was Ari inside? Was it really only five minutes? How high was the concentration? Could she have carbon monoxide poisoning?

“Make sure they check you out.” I unlock my car and jump into it. “Tell them how long you were in there, what rooms you were in, everything you can think of.”

Yes, I’m well aware that the other firefighters will ask, but I’m not there. I should be there to make sure she’s taken care of.

“Okay, Cash.” Ari’s voice steadies. “I will.” A rumble of voices gets louder, and she says, “I have to go, Cash.” Then, a little shakily, “Are you coming home?”

“Yes.” Squealing out of the parking garage, my hands sweaty on the wheel, I tell her, “Yes, hun. I’m coming right now.”



I’ve lost five years off my life during the fifteen-minute trip from White Plains to Sleepy Hollow.

The entire ride, I couldn’t stop thinking of the terrifying possibilities. That Ari wasn’t really okay, that she’d been exposed long enough to have lasting damage. That her

symptoms were delayed, and I'd arrive at her house to find her in the ambulance, fighting for breath. Or she wouldn't be there at all, having been taken directly to the hospital.

I talked to Finn briefly, and he said Ari seemed okay, but she was still being examined by the paramedics. But seeming okay isn't the same as actually *being it*. How could Finn know for sure? And Ian couldn't exactly give me updates during an active call.

So I'm coming in blind and panicked and all I want is to see Ari and make sure she's okay.

When I get there, Ari's little ranch is nearly hidden by the fire trucks and ambulances. My car is still rocking to a stop and I'm leaping out of it, sprinting down the street and toward the flashing lights. All the faces are familiar—fellow firefighters, EMTs, over by the police car, Officer Troy—but I only care about seeing one person.

There. Sitting in the back of the ambulance, holding an oxygen mask over her face. So small and fragile and my emotions are in chaos. All I know is I need to touch her.

I speed past several firefighters and screech to a halt at the foot of the ambulance. Ari is sitting beside Finn, both of them with masks, but his eyes are alert and scanning their surroundings. Ari lowers her mask and gives me a wobbly smile. "You came."

Forget rules and procedures, I hop into the ambulance and crouch down in front of her. "Hun, keep your mask on, okay? If they gave it to you—" Emotion stops up my throat.

She makes a little face at me, and the bands around my chest loosen a little. “I’m okay, Cash. Really.” But she puts the mask back over her face and watches as I take her pulse—a bit elevated, but considering the circumstances, normal—and I check her oxygen level on the pulse oximeter on her finger.

“What happened?” This time it’s directed at Finn.

Dropping his mask, he shakes his head, grim and frowning. “We were only inside for five minutes, max. I’m sure, because I checked my phone right before entering. I felt some nausea, and I knew immediately what it was.”

“I didn’t feel anything,” Ari interjects. “I felt fine the entire time.”

I move her mask back up, stroking her hair before pulling my hand away. Then I look back at Finn. “Thank you for getting her out.”

“Shit.” Finn glances at Ari, then back at me, his brow creasing. “I’m sorry. I never imagined—“

“It’s not your fault.” Ari pulls her mask down again, turning to Finn. “If I’d gone there by myself, I wouldn’t have known until much later.”

And now I feel nauseous thinking about it.

“Hey, you made it.” Ian comes up behind me, clapping me on the shoulder. “Sorry to have called you like that, but I thought you’d want to know.”

I catch Ari’s hand as she raises it toward her mask. This time I hold her hand gently, but firmly.

Turning to look at Ian, my voice goes rough as I say, “Thank you. I’m glad you called.” I take a steadying breath and gather my thoughts. “Who treated her?”

“Ben,” Ian answers. “But I assisted. And Ari is going to be fine. Oxygen levels are good, and the exposure was minimal. A little more fresh oxygen, and she should be good to go.”

Finn gets up. “I’m going to talk to the police again. And I need to check in with Cole.” He lifts his chin at me. “Should I assume you’re going to be staying with Ari for the rest of the night?”

“Yes.” And for the next few days, most likely. “You’ll let me know what you hear?”

He hops out of the ambulance, turning to give me a sharp nod. “Of course.”

Ian leaves shortly after, gesturing at me and telling Ari with a grin, “Don’t let this guy worry too much. Although—“ He smirks at me. “Looking at his face, that might be impossible.”

If he knew how right he was.

I never knew it was possible to worry about someone this much. Like if something happened to her, I’d be more than devastated. I’d be broken.

As I sit beside Ari in the ambulance, holding her hand, I work to rein my emotions back under control. Fear and worry are still rampaging through my body, not quite believing the truth of Ari being safe and unhurt in front of me.

And something else, this pressure building in my chest, familiar but so much stronger than it's ever been.

That feeling stays with me as Ari gets the okay to leave, and I lift her down from the ambulance, hugging her to me before putting her down.

It stays with me as I wrap my arm around her waist, my heart squeezing when she rests her head on my chest.

As we drive home, Ari's fingers entwined in mine, the feeling grows even bigger inside me.

I can't talk. My thoughts are all tangled and I'm not sure which ones to pull free.

What do I say to her?

*I've never been more scared in my life? You're more important than anything to me? I never want to let you go?*

Back at the house, in the living room, Ari tugs on my hand to stop me. She faces me, her green eyes soft, and says, "I'm okay, Cash."

"I know." Then why can't I let go of her hand?

She touches my cheek, her fingers so soft on my skin. "Then get that scared look off your face. I'm alright."

But she so easily could have not been.

And all my reasons drift away. How can I go one second longer without telling Ari how I feel about her? *Why am I so afraid?*

“Cash?” Ari stares at me, lines of worry etching into her forehead.

I don't tell her how I feel. I show her.

Cradling her face, I move toward the one thing I've thought about for weeks. Months. Years, if I'm really being honest with myself.

And then.

We touch. Her lips are soft and supple beneath mine. My body ignites.

Finally. Our first kiss.

Ari leans into me, sighing. Her hands clutch my arms as she stretches up to meet me. Her heart is pounding, jack-rabbiting against mine.

My fingers tunnel through her hair, the strands like silk. I drop one hand to rest at her lower back, drawing her closer to me.

Just this is enough to make me want *everything*. The brush of her nipples against my chest, her breathy little moans as our kiss continues, her slender body so perfectly fitting mine.

Ari couldn't miss my reaction, not with it pressing into her belly. But she just smiles against my mouth, nips my bottom lip, then licks the small pain away.

As much as I'd like to take the kiss deeper, I won't. Not this time. For our first kiss, Ari should be cherished, not ravaged.

That's for later, if she'll let me.



We finally pull apart, both of us gasping. Ari's cheeks are flushed and I can't resist tracing the tiny freckles scattered across them. Her lips quirk up. "That was—" She pauses for a moment. "Unexpected?"

My voice deepens. "Was it, though?" Holding her gaze, I ask, "Was it just me, thinking about it?"

Ari puts her hand on my chest, right over my pounding heart. "No. It wasn't just you."

She's so beautiful, I can't take my eyes off her. "I shouldn't have waited," I admit. "I've been wanting to. I just—"

"I was afraid." Her eyes darken, a rich sage green. "I've been afraid. That I'd ruin things between us." Looking down, she whispers, "That I'd be heartbroken if you didn't feel the same way."

*Oh. This feeling.*

I cup her cheek. "But I do. I do feel the same way."

Her gaze rises back to me, and I continue, "I was scared, too. Of ruining things. Being let down if you didn't think of me like that. And I was scared of letting you in and losing you. But Ari, you're already in my heart. You always have been."

"Cash." Her voice wobbles. "I feel the same way."

How did such a horrible day turn out so perfectly?

I gather Ari in my arms, pressing soft kisses into her hair. After a pause, she tilts her head back to look at me. "So." A

smile spreads across her face. “Does this mean we’re dating?  
Not just friends?”

“Yes.” Leaning down, I capture her lips, tasting her again.  
Pulling away, I tell her, “You’re still my friend. But we are  
*absolutely* dating.”

## Chapter 11

### **ARI**

Last night, Cash slept under the covers with me.

We were still dressed, and we only kissed and didn't come close to having sex, but still. Feeling his heat curved around me, the reassuring thump of his heart beating against my back, the way his arms would tighten around me and he'd sigh into my hair while he slept—

It was the best sleep I've had in ages.

Well, except for when I woke just as the sun was coming up, and Cash's arousal was pressing into me, nudging between my legs from behind. That's a new experience between us. My reaction was almost instant—nipples tightening, breasts throbbing, my core pulsing with need.

Each place Cash touched me—his arm around my waist, his big hand on my belly, the impressive length prodding me—my skin felt electric, little sizzles zinging through me. So I lay

there, hyper-aware of his presence, wanting him, while I watched the sun get brighter as it filtered through the curtains.

*Soon.* That's one thing I decided while I was getting ready for work this morning.

Cash wanted me to stay home for the day to recover, and he did his best last night to convince me. "I'm working from home, you could stay with me," he bargained. "We could order takeout, anything you want. I could give you a massage..."

Tempting, but my juniors were presenting their book talks in class today, so I really needed to be there to see them. And I was feeling fine, so I had no real excuse to play hooky.

But soon...

I know Cash and I have only been dating for less than a day, but I've known him for years. And I *know* how I feel about him. That's not going to change in a week or a month. So what's the point of waiting?

Would tonight be too soon?

I've never been this impatient to have sex with a guy before. Not that I've had all that many partners, a couple of short-lived relationships in college and one guy in my mid-twenties who was the exact opposite of Cash—a blonde, blue-eyed, surfer-type that I immediately regretted spending the night with.

It's like even though my brain tried to deny it all these years, my heart has always been waiting for Cash. Hoping, even as I

tried to tell myself it couldn't happen. Wouldn't happen. And now it has. Finally.

How could I not be eager to consummate our relationship?

But first, dinner.

I've been in my bedroom grading papers since Cash brought me home from work, and I'm more than ready to take a break from correcting pronoun usage and reminding students how to write a proper paragraph. One sentence is not a paragraph, no matter *how* long it is.

Fresh from my shower, I check myself out in the mirror, not wincing at my appearance for the first time since *that* night. The scratches on my face are almost completely healed, just a few tiny pink lines that are probably only noticeable to me. My hair is nice and shiny—I used a hair mask while I was grading—and I'm already anticipating Cash running his fingers through it.

I haven't missed how he always touches my hair. Before, I told myself it was a big brother-protective friend thing. But after that kiss yesterday... and the ones last night. And again this morning... Now I know his touch was anything but brotherly.

When I get downstairs, I head to the kitchen, already running through my idea for dinner. Another casserole, since Cash liked the pepperoni pizza one so much, but this time I'm thinking of a cheesy chicken and broccoli one.

His voice carries toward me, a low, unintelligible rumble coming from the direction I'm heading. I pause in the kitchen doorway, hesitating as I see Cash leaning on the island, talking on the phone and frowning. If it's something work-related, I don't want to interrupt him.

Cash glances over and sees me standing awkwardly in the doorway and waves me inside with a little smile. But it's tight, his lips pressed together, the smile not making it to his eyes. He doesn't look happy, his eyes dark and his brows drawn down with small creases etched between them.

I'm not sure what to do, so I hover halfway across the kitchen, my enthusiasm of a few minutes ago fading away. Is it bad news? What about? Brett? Kyle? My house? Could something else be wrong?

"I have to go," Cash says into the phone. "Ari's here. Let me know if you get any more information."

A pause, and then, "Thank you. Yeah." One corner of his mouth tips up. "I'll ask her." Another pause. "Okay. Bye." Then he ends the call and slips the phone in his pocket.

"Ari, hun." Cash walks over to me, looping his arm around my waist and kissing my cheek. "You don't need to wait for an invitation to come in. You live here, too."

I turn into his chest, wrapping my arms around him. "I didn't want to interrupt if it was something important. And you looked upset. I wasn't sure..."

His lips brush across the top of my head, lingering. “I’m not going to have any secret conversations in the kitchen. And I won’t keep secrets from you.” One hand strokes up and down my back. “I was frustrated, not upset.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“Want to?” Cash sighs. “Not really. But you should know, too.”

My stomach flips over. “What is it?”

“I was just on the phone with Cole. He spoke with the investigators and the police, and they found the source of the leak. There was a hole in the furnace flue pipe, and it was leaking carbon monoxide right into the house.”

“But what about the detectors? I know the house has them, and I checked all the batteries when the clocks changed.”

“The batteries were dead,” Cash says, his body tensing. “You’re sure you replaced them all?”

I pull back to look up at him. “I’m sure.”

“The police believe it was just an unfortunate accident.” His jaw clenches. “But...”

My voice rises. “You don’t?”

“I don’t know, Ari.” Cash cups my cheek, his gaze shadowing. “I want to believe it was a fluke. But I’d like to be *sure*. So I’ve asked Blade and Arrow to do some more investigating.”

My good mood is definitely gone now. I hadn't thought about the leak at my house as anything other than a scary accident, a faulty detector, a broken furnace—but hearing Cash talk about further investigation, my mind starts jumping to other terrifying possibilities.

Like Kyle sabotaging my carbon monoxide detectors and causing a leak.

“Hey. Don't freak out,” Cash soothes, a bit too late. “Ari, it's fine. I'm sorry. You're here, you're safe, and I'm probably just overreacting.”

He smiles, but it looks forced. “You're not the only one who was scared yesterday. I'm sure I'm making something out of nothing.”

I'm not so sure *now*, but I appreciate him trying to defuse my worries.

And he has a point. I've never seen Cash that scared before. Not even when his grandmother fell off the front porch in high school and broke her hip—I was with him that day—and he looked worried, scared, but in control even at just seventeen.

But yesterday? When I saw Cash running toward the ambulance, he looked more than scared. He looked terrified.

So maybe I shouldn't be quite so worried. I reassure him, “It's okay, Cash. I'm not freaking out.” *Much*.

He searches my face, guilt and concern still shadowing his features. “Are you sure?”



“I’m sure.” I bare my teeth in a giant grin, teasing a smile out of him. “So let’s not talk about it anymore. What about dinner?”

“Well.” Cash leans down to kiss me softly. “Cole made a suggestion, and I was thinking it might be a good idea. He’s going out this evening with his fiancée, Maya, and one of his teammates, Leo, is bringing his new fiancée, Georgia. He asked if we wanted to meet up, play some pool or darts, just unwind a little.”

“Where?”

“The Hop-less Horseman. Have you been there? It’s pretty low key, not too crowded, and we could order some food there, too.” His eyes meet mine, questioning. “If you don’t feel comfortable going out, we can stay home. I just thought it might be nice for you to go somewhere that isn’t here or work.”

Part of me wants to say no, to stick with my original plan of dinner at home and then seducing Cash. And not going near the restaurant I was abducted from, which is only a couple blocks away from the Hop-less Horseman.

But then again, it would be nice to do something normal and couple-y with Cash. A date. To go out and meet his friends, have a beer, to do something normal instead of being controlled by this constant undercurrent of fear.

“Okay.” I stretch up to kiss him, twining my arms around his neck. “Let’s go.”

So that's how I end up at the Hop-less Horseman, playing darts against Cash, while Cole's fiancée, Maya, gives me tips on how to hit the bullseye.

Cash is standing off to the side while I aim my throw, and he's a maddening combination of sexy and cocky. Because of course Cash is a darts expert—one thing I didn't know about him.

After he hits six bullseyes in a row, while my shots barely made the board, I make a face at him. "How did I not know you were so good at this?"

And he *smirks* at me—I'm going to get even with him later—and says, "I'm good at a lot of things, Ari."

From the lascivious glint to his eye, I have a pretty good idea what other things he's talking about. "I guess we'll find out," I murmur as I walk by Cash to take my turn, brushing my hand across the front of his pants.

He catches my arm, lightly tugging me back to him. When I glance below his waist, I'm the one smirking. Dipping his head so only I can hear him, he says, "I guess we *both* have some surprises, don't we?"

Then Cash leans even closer and nips at the skin just below my ear, and I never knew *that* was an erogenous zone, but whoa—my womb clenches and it's all I can do not to fling myself at Cash right then and there.

By the time I make it to my spot to take a shot, Maya is full-on grinning at me. "I've never seen Cash like this," she

confides. “Any time I’ve seen him out—here, in town, events with our friends—he’s never been so relaxed. Happy.”

I’ve only known Maya for about an hour, but I already like her, and I don’t hesitate to tell her, “He makes me happy, too.”

I’d also be happy if I got even close to the bullseye one time. Just on principle.

“It’s all about the follow through,” Maya instructs. “And hold the dart firmly, but don’t squeeze it. Keep the dart at eye level before you throw.”

Cash calls over, “You can do it.” He’s leaning back on one of the high-top tables, his dark blue shirt stretching just the right amount to show off his pecs and biceps. He catches me ogling his chest and gives a little flex, his eyes glinting with humor.

“I am *so* going to bend over when he takes his next shot,” I mutter.

Maya hears me and laughs. “You should.”

“You can do it!” Another voice jumps in, and I recognize it as Georgia, Leo’s fiancée. She’s also lovely and probably the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, which makes sense since she used to be a professional model. Until she was injured by a stalker, that is, a story she quickly told me only minutes after we met.

As we all sat down around one of the tables, she gestured at the faint pink line running down her cheek. “I had a stalker. Well, I had several, really. But the first one gave me this.”

“I’m so sorry,” I gasped. “That’s awful.”

“It’s okay.” Georgia took a sip of her beer and smiled at me. “It’s how I met Leo. He was protecting me. And now we’re engaged, and our wedding is next summer. So it all worked out.”

I guess so. But it still sounds terrifying.

“Come on, Ari,” Cole cheers from his spot next to Cash.

“No pressure,” I say dryly. But I concentrate, do all the things Maya told me, and I let the dart fly.

And I hit it. *Bullseye!* I give a hoot of triumph, and everyone claps. Which is actually pretty ridiculous, given that Cash is still winning, and it’s only a game of darts. But still. I’ll take a win when I can get one.

Cash comes over and sweeps me into his arms. His smirk is gone, his eyes are full of pride and affection instead. Quietly, he says, “I knew you’d get it. You do everything you set your mind to.”



It’s going to be tonight.

After spending the last few hours with Cash at the Hop-less Horseman, I’m desperate for him. After hours of hugs and kisses and heated glances, hands brushing across erotic places, Cash’s eyes constantly on me, watchful and protective and wanting.

I’m not sure where this bold woman came from. With my other relationships, sex ranged from *eh* to *okay*. But now? I

don't want to wait. I want Cash now.

My body feels electrified. Hyper-sensitive to Cash's touch, my heart jolting at his scent, his gaze, the weight of his hand on my back.

I know Cash would wait. He would never try to rush things, more concerned about my comfort than his needs. And I love that about him. His consideration, his protectiveness, how gentle he is with me.

But tonight, I don't want gentle or slow. I want the man I've spent more than half of my life dreaming about.

Which is why I'm making a bold move. Cash is in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and I'm waiting in the bedroom for him.

Standing in front of the bed. Naked.

Yep. I'm taking it out of his hands. This way, Cash doesn't have to be worried about rushing me. The only way we have a problem is if he doesn't want to have sex with me. But after tonight, I'm very confident that's not the case.

The bathroom door opens, and Cash is talking before he sees me. "I really think you could be better than me at darts, Ari. I played all the time in college, and you—"

He comes to a dead stop, staring at me. His mouth drops, his eyes going huge. "Ari?"

I've been thinking of my line for the last hour. With a teasing smile, I purr, "I figured you should congratulate me somehow."

Several things happen rapidly.

Cash's gaze sweeps down my body and up again, his features tightening, his expression heating.

He swallows hard, opens his mouth to speak, and snaps it shut again.

The bulge under his shorts grows significantly larger, pulling at the thin gray fabric.

I've never seen Cash speechless before. A tiny flutter of nerves erupts in my belly—that tiny, panicked voice whispering, *what if I read it all wrong?*

Then he steps forward, haltingly, until he's only a foot away. His voice is rough and unsteady. "Ari?"

Fighting back the urge to cover myself, I ask quietly, "Is this okay? I thought... well, after tonight... but if it's too soon..."

"Is it *okay?*" Cash asks, his brows shooting to his hairline. "It's more than—" He swallows again, looking more uncertain than I've ever seen him. "You look..."

*What? Beautiful? So-so? Hideous?*

"I look like what?"

"You look *incredible*, Ari." He reaches toward me, pausing inches from my hip. The bulge hidden by his shorts twitches. "I didn't want to rush you. We just started dating. I thought you might want to go slow."

"Do you want me?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

“Well.” I step forward, close enough to feel his breath on my hair. Looking up, I hold his gaze. “I’ve wanted you for a long time. And I’m tired of waiting.”

Cash touches my waist, his hand spanning my hip to the underside of my breast. He strokes my skin gently, almost tentatively, while his eyes search out mine. “Are you sure?”

I palm his still growing arousal, feeling it surge into my hand. “I am *so* sure, Cash.”

The last bands of restraint snapping, Cash closes the last few inches between us. Both his hands are at my waist, hot and searing into my skin. He dips his head and captures my mouth with his, nipping and sucking at my lower lip.

My hands go around his neck as I pull myself to him, feeling the hard planes of his chest against mine. His cotton shirt rubs against my sensitized nipples, tightening them into taut peaks.

Cash deepens the kiss, his tongue plunging into my mouth, dipping and stroking. His hands curve around my back, then over the curve of my ass, gently squeezing. When he drags his mouth from mine, his gaze is dark and hungry.

“Ari,” he groans. “I’ve fantasized about your ass for years. And it’s even better than I imagined.”

Now that he’s mentioning it... I drop my hands to his ass, and *oh my*—it’s tight and muscly and perfectly squeezable. And covered in too many layers. Tugging at his shorts and feeling extremely thankful for elastic waistbands, I pull Cash’s shorts down, letting them drop at his feet.

And *hello*. Even more impressive than I guessed this morning.

When Cash lowers his head to suckle my nipple, I take the opportunity to do some exploration of my own. Wrapping my hand around his velvety thickness, brushing my fingers over the beads of moisture and stroking up and down, testing out which movements he likes the best.

“Ari, hun.” Cash pulls away from my breast, my nipple slipping from his mouth with a little pop. His eyes are nearly black, pupils dilated so only a tiny sliver of green-gold is visible. “That’s amazing—” His jaw clenches as I stroke him again, adding a little twist this time. “But I’d rather be inside you when I finish. And I won’t be if you keep doing that.”

I pout at him. “But I’ve been fantasizing about this for years, too.”

“Fuck, Ari.” Cash yanks off his shirt and lifts me into his arms.

One hand cups my ass, the other supporting my back, and he’s at the bed in seconds. Laying me down, he grits out, “You are so fucking incredible. Everything about you. I don’t know why I waited this long.”

Splayed out like this beneath him, I don’t feel the slightest bit of self-consciousness. It’s impossible, the way his eyes are constantly moving across my body, not just looking, but worshiping.



And Cash—he’s all that I dreamed about and more. Muscles everywhere, not bulging, but perfect planes and edges, his skin all golden and flexing and his abs—

“God, Cash,” I gasp as he kisses his way up my stomach. “I knew you were hot. But this—it’s way beyond that.”

He lifts his head, giving me a cocky little grin. “I’m hot, huh?”

“Shut up,” I tell him, smiling as I kiss him. “You know you are.”

We keep kissing as Cash lowers himself over me, bracing his weight with one arm. I thrust my hips up to meet his, notching his length into the apex of my thighs. He slips inside just the slightest bit—even though it’s been a long time, I’m so wet and ready he could fill me without any resistance.

Cash drags his mouth from mine. “Are you sure? I was going to take my time with you.”

“I’m sure.” And I grab his hips and pull them down to mine.

He sinks in to the hilt, thick and long, and I’m so full, but it’s perfect.

Cash grimaces, his brows pulling into a V. “*God*, Ari, did I hurt you?”

“No.” I give my hips an experimental thrust, and he twitches inside me. “This is perfect.”

“I guess you really don’t want slow,” he grits out, still holding himself still above me. “But I’m not—I’m not wearing

—”

“I’m protected,” I tell him. “It’s been years. And I’m clean.”

“Same.” Cash sucks on my lower lip, nipping it lightly. “You’re okay with this, then?”

Thrusting against him again, I say, “I trust you more than anyone. And this time, I don’t want slow. That can be next time.”

Features tight and gaze filled with desire, Cash raises himself up and plunges deep, groaning with satisfaction. He loops my legs over his shoulders and cants my hips; the angle allowing him to fill more completely.

All hesitations tossed aside, we come together over and over, faster and harder. Whimpers and moans fall out of me, desperate pleas for *more, faster, again*.

The drag of him inside me, his hands on my skin, his mouth devouring me—I’m aching, the pressure, the sensations building, it’s incredible—

And then he presses against my sensitive bud and thrusts deep, and I explode around him.

As my walls clutch at him, fluttering, squeezing, Cash follows me over the edge, pulsing and jerking inside me, his heat filling me in an experience I’ve never had before.

Only Cash. He’s the only one I’d trust enough for this.

Rolling over so I’m draped across his chest, Cash still inside me, he presses soft kisses to the top of my head. “This was

perfect,” he murmurs. “You’re perfect.”

## Chapter 12

### CASH

I just have to get through this, and I can go home to Ari.

This last appointment has been looming all day, and I'm dreading it. Each time I looked at my calendar, the little reminder—meet with Brett—added another pound of dread to my shoulders.

But no matter how badly this goes, I still get to see Ari. I've been telling myself that all day. Once I leave here, I'll go pick up Ari from work—my *girlfriend*, I still can't believe it—and we'll have the rest of the night to relax.

We'll make dinner and watch this Christmas Hallmark movie—as Ari described it, something about a small town gingerbread factory that's being taken over by a high-powered CEO from the big city.

Cheesy? Unrealistic? Yes, to both. But once Ari admitted to loving Hallmark movies, especially Christmas ones, with this

adorable flush on her cheeks like she was embarrassed about it? There was no way I'd say no when she mentioned it.

And then after the movie... I'll get to see my gorgeous girlfriend naked again. To touch her satin skin, feel her soft curves pressed against me—her perfect peach-shaped ass and her breasts that fill my hands perfectly—and make love to her again.

Because with Ari, it's more than just sex. With Ari, it's everything.

So I just need to get through this meeting.

My intercom buzzes, and I take a steadying breath. As my assistant announces that my last appointment has arrived, I pull my chair to my desk and tell her, "Thank you. Let him in, please."

A moment later, Brett comes swaggering in. Shoulders back, confidence oozing, he flashes a toothy grin at me. "Hey, bro. I was thinking we could go out for a drink after to celebrate."

Well, shit. This meeting is going to go about as badly as I expected.

Once Brett flops into the leather chair across from my desk, kicking back, he continues. "There's a new place a few blocks from here, really fancy; they have a huge selection of champagne. I was thinking we could go there first, then maybe swing into the city. Pick up some women."

The last time I was in New York City with Brett was when I was thirteen, and our parents took us to a Broadway show. I've

never gone out drinking with Brett, nor have I gone trolling for women with him.

“I’m dating someone,” I tell him dryly.

His brows shoot up. “Seriously? Who?”

This is literally the first time Brett has asked me a personal question in over twenty years, and the shock of it has me answering. “Her name is Ari. I went to high school with her.”

“Ari?” Brett tips back in the chair, the leather squeaking. “Yeah, I think I remember seeing her one time. Really cute, hot in an understated way. I can see why you’d want to bang her.”

My teeth grind together, little jolts of pain shooting through my jaw. *Don’t yell. Keep this professional.* “Brett, that’s not why I wanted to meet with you.”

“Right.” He chuckles. “Of course. So, what’s my new position?”

Here goes.

“Brett. There isn’t a new position.”

His face jerks in surprise, then his forehead creases. “What do you mean? Isn’t that what this meeting is about? Or—” He stops, his expression brightening. “I know. It’s the shares, isn’t it? You’re bringing me in. What were you thinking? Fifty percent? Or forty, I know you’ve put more time into this place, although I *am* the older one.”

“Brett.” My voice sharpens, and I lean forward. “I know what you did.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The money, Brett.” Anger pulses through me again, for the hundredth time since I discovered what he was doing. “You stole fifty K from the company.”

His face goes crimson. “That’s crazy.”

“It’s not.” I pin him with my gaze. “I saw the proof myself. You stole it from the transportation reimbursement account.”

Brett scowls. “Come on, Cash. Fifty K is nothing. I borrowed it. And it’s family money, anyway. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal,” I snap, “is it’s money you didn’t earn. And you *stole* it. It’s unacceptable.”

“Fine. I’ll pay it back,” he wheedles, changing tactics. “Just give me a few weeks.”

“No, Brett. This is it.” And more than just today. I never should have given him this chance to begin with.

Setting my shoulders, I face off against the man who stopped being my brother decades ago. “You’re fired, Brett. I gave you another chance, and you lied to me. You stole from this company. I’m not going to turn you in; I’m going to pay it back using my own money, but you’re done here. Consider that the last *donation* I give to you.”

Brett glares at me, nearly purple with rage, his features twisting in anger. “Fine!” He jumps up from the chair, knocking it over. “Fuck you, Cash. I thought we could be brothers. But you’re a fucking traitor. Don’t worry, you won’t have to see me again.”

With one last vicious glance, he hisses, “Fuck you, Cash. *Fuck you,*” and storms out the door.

As my head throbs and my jaw aches, I sit at my desk in silence, rubbing my temples and wondering how everything with Brett went so wrong.

Enough of this. I push up from my chair and head for the door. Pausing at my assistant’s desk, I say, “Please make sure security knows he is not allowed on the premises. And inform HR that he’s fired.”

“Okay, Cash.” Her gaze is sympathetic. “I will. Right away.”

“Thanks, Angela.”

I’ll have to get her an extra nice Christmas gift after all this shit with Brett.

“I’m heading home,” I add unnecessarily, considering I’m holding my coat. “After you call security and HR, why don’t you head home early. Okay?”

I barely hear her answer as I wave a little goodbye to her. I’m already thinking about Ari.



It’s dark by the time I get to Ari’s school to pick her up.



I always forget how quickly the sun goes down once we head into the winter months. Before I know it, it'll be December, which means coming home in the dark and bitterly cold mornings and the long, depressing stretch of winter in New York.

Except maybe not so depressing this year.

Now that I have Ari, there's no way she's not going to want to celebrate Christmas.

I always have the token decorations at the office, but nothing at home. There never seemed to be a point. I volunteer to cover the holidays at the station so the guys with families don't have to, and a few times I've gone to one of their houses for Thanksgiving. But celebrating all by myself? No thanks.

But this year, Ari is insisting on Thanksgiving at home. "It's okay if you want to volunteer at the station on Thanksgiving," she told me. "I'll make dinner for you to bring for all the guys there. And the next day, we can have our own dinner at home."

How can I say no to that? Why would I want to?

Pulling up in front of the high school, I park the car and send Ari a quick text to let her know I'm here. Before she can respond, I'm out and heading toward the building—there's no way I'm letting her walk from the entrance to my car alone, and in the dark.

As soon as I get to the large stone steps, one of the glass doors opens and Ari slips out. All bundled up in a North Face

puffer coat and a fluffy hat, she looks fully ready for winter. And she looks adorable.

She darts down the steps and slams into me, her arms wrapping around my waist. Her face is pressed into my chest, so she's barely audible as she says, "I missed you."

"Hey, hun." I cup one hand around her nape, the other resting at the middle of her back. "I missed you, too." Just holding her makes my headache recede.

I don't realize something is wrong until we get into the car; the interior light illuminating Ari's strained expression. But she could just be tired—she had to stay two hours later than normal for an after-school program, so it's been a long day for both of us.

But halfway home, she's barely said anything, focused more on fiddling with her hat, her tote, and messing with the heat settings. At a red light, I glance over and her jaw is clenched tight, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Ari." I reach over and put my hand on her leg. "Is everything okay?"

She looks over at me, her brows pulling together, hesitating. And now I know something is wrong.

The light changes, and she gestures at it. "I'll tell you when we get home."

*What?* My headache resurges. Working to keep the tension out of my voice, I say, "Tell me now, please. If something's wrong, I need to know."

Ari sighs. “Nothing’s wrong, exactly. But,” she sighs again, more heavily. “I don’t want you being distracted while you’re driving.”

Shit. Now that she’s putting me off, I’m pretty sure I’m going to be very distracted by whatever she tells me. But I grit my teeth—again, I’m going to need to visit the dentist soon, at this rate—and we make the rest of the drive to my house in silence.

I can feel the tension coming off her in waves. As we walk from the garage into the house, Ari’s frowning down at the floor, her shoulders slumping. And that same instinctive sense is hitting me, shouting at me, telling me I’m not going to like what she’s about to tell me.

Once we get to the living room, I catch Ari’s hand, gently pulling her to a stop. “Okay, we’re home. Now tell me.”

She slips off her coat and tugs off her hat, leaving her hair all messy. Sinking onto the couch, she waits for me to join her, then says, “Kyle came to the school today.”

I bark out, “*What?*” and Ari flinches. Shit.

Deep breaths. Don’t take this out on the wrong person. But of all the things I could have expected—

Forcing a calm I’m not feeling, I smooth Ari’s hair and say gently, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“I know.” Ari touches my leg and looks up at me, her gaze anxious and worried. “But I knew you’d be upset. And after today... with Brett... I hate making it worse for you.”

“Hun, no.” Corraling all my self control, I shove down my anger and focus on comforting Ari. “You need to tell me these things.” I gather her in my arms, pressing my lips to her head. “What happened?”

“I didn’t actually see him.” She exhales a shuddering breath. “He came to the school and said he had an appointment to meet with me. That his brother was one of my students, and we were supposed to be discussing his grades.”

My stomach turns to lead. It was one thing thinking that Kyle could be behind the leak at Ari’s house, but for him to actually show up at her work... It’s clear he’s still a threat to her.

I almost growl, “They didn’t let him in, did they?”

Ari shakes her head quickly. “No. He couldn’t even name the student, and they would never let someone in without proper identification. Security made him leave, and he was pretty angry about it. He threatened to sue the school...” Her voice wobbles, and she trails off, looking miserable.

Alternating waves of fury and fear are crashing into me.

I’m fucking furious that he went there, to her job, trying to trick his way in—my guess is he thought he could intimidate Ari into dropping the charges, signing an NDA.

But icy tendrils of fear are snaking through me, too.

I thought the school was one place Ari would be *safe*. Kyle didn’t get in this time, but what if he comes back with a better excuse next time? What if he’s able to get inside, get to Ari in

her classroom? If she's caught alone with him... He could terrify her, hurt her...

"Fuck." It pops out, low and rough.

Ari's chin is jutting out, trembling, and she's on the verge of tears. Fuck.

I tip her chin up. "Ari, hun." I gentle my voice. "Don't cry. It's okay."

Swallowing hard, she says, "I'm not worried about him getting into the school. But he yelled at the security guard. And threatening to sue? I'm a new employee, and—" Her voice catches. "I'm not tenured. What if they decide to fire me because I'm causing too much trouble?"

Right now, I'd be happy if Ari wasn't working there. She could stay here, work on her writing, and I would *know* she's safe.

"Maybe you should quit," I blurt out, not exactly planning to say it, but liking the sound of it.

"What?" Ari jolts, her brows arching up in surprise. "Quit? Why?"

Now that I've said it, I really like the idea. Taking her hands, I explain, "You could stay here and work on your writing. My house is safe, you know it is, so you wouldn't have to worry about Kyle getting to you."

"Cash," Ari starts, frowning.

“You like it here, right?” At her stunned nod, I push on. “Think about all the writing you could do. And you’ve been under so much stress; this would take some of the burden off you, and—”

“Cash.” She says my name sharply, stopping me mid-sentence. “In this plan of yours, how am I supposed to make money? You know, for my bills and expenses?”

“I could pay for everything, Ari. I don’t mind.”

After a pause, her voice dips dangerously. “Well, *I* mind. I’ve been supporting myself for over a decade. I don’t need you to pay for everything. And I like my job. I don’t want to give it up.”

Frustration bubbles up inside me. Why doesn’t she see that this is a good idea? “What about being *safe*?” I snap. “Isn’t that important, too? What if he gets inside the school next time? What then?”

Ari jerks back, her eyes hurt, face paling. Pushing off the couch, she turns away from me. “I need to get changed.”

She walks away, and I don’t call out for her to stop. Why doesn’t she see it makes sense? Staying here, Ari would be safe.

I stew for a full five minutes, glowering at my phone, scrolling through emails without reading a word. Half of me expects Ari to come back into the living room and tell me I was right, and she’s sorry for walking away.

There's the other part that wonders if I just screwed things up.

Then I think about the hurt in her eyes. The hurt I put there when I snapped at her. Shit.

Guilt works at me, a lump growing bigger in my stomach. Ari is scared and stressed and instead of being patient, I let my own fear and frustration get the best of me.

Dropping my phone, I head after Ari. Although she's been spending the nights in my room, I have a pretty good feeling she's not in there now. So I knock lightly at her bedroom door, softly asking, "Ari, can I talk to you? Please?"

Silence drags and I wonder if she's going to ignore me. But after a few seconds, I hear a dull, "Fine."

She's sitting on the bed, still in her work clothes, her shoulders drooping. I walk over to the bed, hesitating before I sit down. "Can I?"

Ari sighs. "Of course, Cash. It's your house."

Her features are tight with stress and there are bluish smudges under her eyes, and all I want to do is pull her into my arms and make everything all better. This protectiveness I feel toward Ari is even stronger than before—when I think about someone hurting her, it makes me crazy.

"It's your bedroom," I tell her, sitting down close enough for our legs to touch. "And you live here, too. If you don't want me here, that's your right."

After another long pause, Ari shifts so she's facing me, folding her legs like a pretzel in front of her. "I'm sorry I walked away like that," she says quietly.

That's not what I was expecting.

"Even though I was upset," she continues. "I should have stayed and talked it out."

Ari's quiet apology deflates the last of my frustration. "I'm sorry, Ari. For snapping at you, and just assuming you would want the same thing." I reach for her hand, sighing in relief when she doesn't pull away. "I just started thinking about all the bad things that could happen, and..."

I take a breath, holding her gaze. "When I think about you being hurt, or scared... all I want to do is protect you. To keep you with me, so I know you're safe. I know that's not what you want, but—"

"It's not that I don't want it, Cash." Ari scoots closer to me, her knees resting on my leg. "I'd be lying if I didn't say the idea was tempting. Staying here, not worrying that something could happen when I'm at school—a fire alarm going off, or a bomb threat, and Kyle's outside waiting for me..."

*Fuck.* I didn't even think about that. I can't help myself, the sudden jolt of fear has me lifting Ari into my lap. "Please don't say that," I whisper into her hair. "I'm freaked out enough already."

Ari snuggles into me, and my heart unclenches. "Sorry," she murmurs. "But Cash, I can't hide all the time. And I worked



really hard to get where I am. I like my job. It would be one thing if I chose to quit for a good reason, like raising kids, or —” Her cheeks go pink. “Anyway. I’m not going to quit because some asshole forced me into it. I can’t.”

“I get it.” I really do. As much as I want to keep Ari behind reinforced walls and barricades, I understand.

Twining her fingers with mine, Ari tucks her head under my chin. “It’s a bad day for you to hear about it. That’s why I was hesitating.”

“It’s okay.” Although Brett’s raging face as he left my office will stick for a while.

“It’s not okay.” Her lips press against my throat, feathering light kisses across my skin. “Was it really bad?”

I lean back, pulling Ari along with me, so we’re laying on the bed together. She turns into me, draping her leg over mine, lazily tracing the buttons of my shirt. “He was upset. He thought I was going to promote him. Or give him shares of the company.”

“Oh, Cash. I’m sorry.” She starts unbuttoning my shirt, trailing her fingers down my bare chest as she goes. “That must have been so hard.”

“He’s not the first person I’ve had to fire.”

“Still.” Ari kisses a line across my collarbone. “This was different.”

My shirt is completely unbuttoned and tugged free from my pants. Slim fingers drift lower, slipping under my waistband.

Suddenly, everything else that happened today doesn't seem as bad.

“Maybe I can help you feel better,” Ari suggests. “And I think it would make me feel better, too.”

I pull Ari on top of me, capturing her mouth and teasing it open, nipping and sucking and tasting. She hums at me, a little purr of pleasure, and grinds her hips into me.

Pulling away for a moment, I fall into the luminescence of her eyes, so pure and sparkling. She's *everything*.

“I think that's a great idea.”

## Chapter 13

**ARI**

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell me where we’re going?”

I’ve been pleading and wheedling and bargaining for the last hour and a half, and Cash still hasn’t given in.

“Nope.” Cash glances over at me, grinning, his eyes crinkling up at the corners.

Gone is the stress from a couple of days ago, when we had the double whammy of Brett’s firing and Kyle’s attempted visit. When Cash woke me up this morning, he looked like a kid on Christmas morning, big smile, tousled hair, and nearly bouncing with enthusiasm.

I tried to burrow back under the covers, but he pulled them off and peppered my face with kisses. “We’re leaving for the day, and the car is arriving in an hour. I have the coffee already made, and we’ll grab donuts on the way.”

Not a bad way to wake up on a Saturday morning.

But I still have no idea where we're going. Back at the house, I tried cajoling, fishing for hints by asking what to pack, but he just smiled and said, "I already packed for you. Just wear jeans for the trip."

As we've wound our way through the Catskills, my stomach has been nervously fluttering. Not that I think Cash would plan something bad, but because I've never had someone surprise me like this before. A spontaneous trip to a mystery location? I can hardly believe it's happening.

I keep sneaking quick glances over at Cash, still not quite believing he's my boyfriend, either. Although it feels like so much more than that. After eighteen years of friendship, using the word boyfriend seems too simple to describe this next stage in our relationship.

And he's so handsome. I'm figuratively pinching myself, reminding myself that he's mine. Dark brown hair glinting with chestnut as the sun hits it, his golden-green eyes constantly changing, his features so strong, but softening whenever he smiles at me.

"Are you staring at me?" Cash looks away from the road for a second, the corner of his mouth pulling up. "Did I miss a spot shaving?"

My cheeks heat. "No, of course not." I focus intently on the road ahead of us. "Fine," I huff. "I was looking at you. You're pretty good looking, you know."

After a beat, Cash reaches over and takes my hand, resting it on my leg. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

*Oh.* A rush of warmth fills my chest, expanding.

I never knew it was possible to feel this happy.

Cash flashes me another little smile. “We’re almost there.”

I try again. “Where is *there*?”

He sing-songs at me, “You’ll see.”

“Cash...” My growl turns to a laugh.

Maybe if I was better with directions, I’d know where we were going. But as a directionally challenged person, I can barely tell north from south, let alone figure out exactly where in New York we are. Somewhere near New Paltz, which I know has a university, but I don’t know anything else about the place.

It looks like we’re driving into the country, traveling down narrow tree-lined roads and going under old wooden bridges I would definitely not want to use. We come to a small intersection, and I’m searching for a clue until Cash nudges me. Chuckling, he says, “There’s a sign, Ari.”

Cash knows how easily I get lost, so he always points out signs to me. It’s small, tucked amidst shrubbery, but when I finally see it—

My jaw drops. “Cash.”

Cash turns the car, driving towards a small gatehouse. “Yes?” His voice rings with innocence.

“The Mohonk Mountain House?”

He slows, pulling to the side of the road just before the gatehouse. For the first time today, his expression clouds. “Is that not okay, hun? I thought you’d like it—”

“Cash!” I lunge across my seat to hug him. “Of course... I just... I’ve heard about this place... but I never...” I’m stammering as I try to reassure him.

“Oh.” Smile reappearing, he cups my cheek and brushes his lips across mine. Like an adorable kid again, his face brightens. “I came here with my grandparents once, and I remember it was beautiful. I hope you like it.”

I’ve seen photos of the Mohonk Mountain House before, an all-inclusive resort tucked away in the Catskill Mountains. But I never dreamt of going there. As a kid, money was always tight, even more so once my dad passed away. And on my teacher’s salary...

Well, my salary is more Holiday Inn than exclusive resort.

As we approach the resort, my mouth drops again. The photos don’t do this place justice. It’s so much bigger than I imagined, this enormous Victorian Castle-like building perched on a glistening lake, surrounded by trees still clinging to the last of their fall foliage, the mountains stretching off in the distance.

“Cash, this is *amazing*.”

I must say it a dozen times as we make our way from the car to the reception area, and then to our room.

The valet is impeccably polite, guiding us through the resort, serving as almost a tour guide for us. When he hears it's my first visit, he beams at me. "You'll love it here. And there's so much to do. Hiking, the spa, the indoor swimming pool, the restaurants—and it's been so cold, they opened the skating rink early."

"Skating!" I'm bubbling over with excitement; now I'm the one on Christmas morning. "I haven't been skating in ages."

Cash kisses my cheek, his eyes sparkling. "We can go this weekend. And remember, I have that pond on the edge of the property. As soon as it freezes, we can go skating at home."

"I forgot about that." A vision flashes into my head—Cash and I skating together, holding hands, drinking hot chocolate...

"Are you planning out a Hallmark Christmas movie scene in your head?" Cash is looking down at me, his lips twitching.

I blush. "Maybe."

"That's okay, I don't mind." Then he dips his head, his mouth near my ear. "But I hope we can do more than have one chaste kiss at the end of the movie?"

Well. That is one thing about Hallmark movies. They aren't exactly steamy. "Yes," I whisper back to him. "We can take it up to an R rating."

We come to a stop and the valet announces, "Here we are. The Mountain View Suite."

And we walk into the nicest hotel room—sorry, resort suite—that I’ve ever seen. My legs actually go a little wobbly, and I clutch Cash’s arm to steady myself. “Cash,” I gasp. “This is too much.”

Cash nods to the valet, handing him a large stack of bills. Once the door shuts, Cash hugs me to him. “It’s not. Not for you.”

“But—“ I wave my arm around the room. “Look at this place.” We’re in an actual tower, with windows giving a panoramic view of the mountains around us. There’s a gorgeous sitting area, flanked by a carved wooden fireplace with a crackling fire. And stairs... “There’s a *second* floor?”

“Yes.” Cash loops his arm around my waist and leads me upstairs to the bedroom. A humongous bed looks out through even more windows with an even more impressive view.

We walk out onto one of the balconies and stare out at the mountains. From this height, in a tower up in the mountains, it feels like I can see for hundreds of miles.

“We don’t have anything planned except reservations for dinner,” Cash explains. He wraps his arms around me, protecting me from the crisp mountain air. “Whatever you want to do—there’s hiking, ice skating, a spa, an indoor pool—or if you just want to relax in the resort, that’s fine, too.”

I can’t believe he did this for me.

It’s not the money. Even though my instinct is still to tell him it’s too much, I know Cash can afford this easily.



But he thought of this place, a perfect trip away from everything; he took the time off from his weekend conference calls and volunteering at the station just to surprise me. To do something he thought I'd love.

"I love it, Cash."

Something else almost slips out too. Just one changed word, but so much more meaning.

Can I say it to him? Is it too soon?

Am I in love with Cash?

The truth is, I have been for years.

But does he feel the same way? *That's* the important question.

"I'm so glad." Cash nuzzles my head, pressing soft kisses there. "I just want you to be happy."



"My legs are going to be sore tomorrow," I groan, tempering it with a smile. "I used to be in shape, but now... I need to start exercising again."

Cash frowns a little, his brow furrowing. "You're fine, Ari. More than fine. And you couldn't exercise before..." He trails off, then looks at me fiercely. "I think you did amazingly while we were hiking. You put some of the guys at the station to shame."

It's sweet of him, but my weeks off while I recovered have not helped my stamina. The sex though... "I can think of another way to get exercise," I tease, and his frown disappears.

Eyes lighting up, Cash grins. "I was going to suggest jogging together, if you really wanted to do something, but I like that idea much better."

"Well, there is that giant bed in our room..."

Our server appears by the side of our table, placing two drinks in front of us. "The Mohonk Campfire for you, miss. And the Hennepin for you, sir. I'll have your desserts in just a minute."

Once the server leaves, Cash takes my hand across the table, stroking his thumb across my fingers. "Have you enjoyed it here so far?"

I take a sip of my drink and look out the window for a second, admiring the view—pinpricks of light spotting the mountains, the unspoiled sky filled with a swathe of stars—before looking back at him. "Yes. I've loved all of it so far."

"Maybe you should get a massage tomorrow," Cash suggests. "Take some time at the spa."

"Maybe. Or we could go ice skating. Or swimming." I don't really want to spend time away from Cash getting a massage. "The indoor pool is really nice. Although—" I smirk at him. "I'll have to fend off all those ladies again."

Cash in a bathing suit is very nice to look at, and I'm definitely not the only one who noticed. Like that cougar who

was chatting him up when I came back from the bathroom.

Not that I'm worried about Cash doing anything inappropriate. He's honest and loyal to a fault, and I know he would never cheat on me.

Cash starts, "You know I would never—"

"I know. I'm just teasing." I give his hand a reassuring squeeze. "I don't mind them admiring you."

We're interrupted by the server again, this time with our desserts. My tiramisu looks incredible, but now I'm eyeing Cash's chocolate cake. "Maybe we should share," I suggest, still staring at the decadent-looking chocolate confection.

"That's fine. I had a feeling we would. But first—" He fusses with his pants pocket, and a moment later his hand comes out, clasped around something. "I wanted to give you something."

"Something *else*?"

"Well. Yes. I haven't really had a chance to get you any gifts."

I laugh. "Um. Cash. Look where we are. That's a gift. And you've gotten me clothes. What about that North Face jacket?"

He shakes his head. "Ari, I bought you that jacket because the one you had was ancient and had literal holes in it."

"I didn't know I had moths in the closet," I defend myself, chuckling. "I hadn't worn it since Chicago, and that was four years ago. It's not like I needed winter coats in Atlanta."

“I know, hun. And I was happy to buy it for you. But that was something you needed. And this trip? This is for both of us. I want to give you something just because.” He reaches out his clasped hand and encloses mine with it, dropping something sleek and cool inside.

“I know the box would make for a better presentation,” he explains. “But that wouldn’t fit into my pocket. And I was afraid if I waited until we got back to the room, I’d forget. Because as soon as we get back there...” His eyes darken. “I’m peeling your clothes off and ravishing you.”

*Yes, please.*

But the gift, first. I open my hand and clap my other over my mouth in shock. “Cash.”

“I just thought—“ He swallows. “Well, I told you before that you’re in my heart. That you always have been. So...”

It’s a stunning heart pendant accented with diamonds on a delicate silver chain. Not too large, understated enough that I can wear it to school, but fancier than anything I’d ever buy for myself. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper, tears welling up.

All of this—it’s more than just a man trying to romance a woman. This is *my* Cash, doing whatever he can to make me happy amid all the surrounding chaos.

Cash gets up and comes around behind me, fastening the necklace around my neck. He kisses my nape, and chills rush down my spine, but it’s a good feeling. “I can’t believe it took us this long to finally come together,” I say, mostly to myself.

Back in his seat, he leans across the table and takes my hand again. “I know. I always felt something for you... not just attraction, although I thought you were stunning. But I knew I could fall for you easily.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? I never thought you liked me that way.”

“I was scared, I think,” Cash admits. “I didn’t think you saw me as anything more than a friend. And I had just lost my parents; I couldn’t stand the idea of possibly losing you, too. I convinced myself...”

He runs his hand through his hair before continuing with a sigh. “I convinced myself it was better not to let myself love anyone else. Then it wouldn’t hurt so much when I lost them. And then, when my grandparents both died... the fear grew even more.”

My heart aches for him. I lost my dad, but Cash lost his entire family. “I understand. I was scared, too. After my dad... and then...”

“I always felt something for you,” I confess. “Since high school. But you never seemed interested. And then you said you didn’t *do* relationships...”

Cash grimaces, his eyes flickering with pain. “Ari...”

“If I said something, and you pulled away from me... I couldn’t lose your friendship. If that was all I could have, it was better than not having you at all.”

“Ah, hun.” Cash’s voice vibrates with emotion. “You would never have lost me. If I had known...”

Tears prick behind my eyes, emotion welling up. “You would never have lost me, either. But maybe we needed this time to be ready. For both of us to be willing to risk it.”

His gaze sears into me; there’s so much feeling within. “I promise you, Ari. I’m willing to risk everything for you.”

I can’t speak. The words—I love you—are right there, a second from spilling out.

Not now. Not in the restaurant, and I just need to be sure about Cash’s feelings. So I whisper the next closest thing to it. “Me too, Cash.”

We stare at each other, our gazes heavy with things unsaid.

After a few seconds, Cash gives me a crooked grin. “What do you think about wrapping these desserts up? And we can enjoy them later. In bed.”

I smile at him, my heart so full it’s bursting. “As long as I get to try some of that chocolate cake.”

“Ari.” His voice softens. “You can have anything you want.”

## Chapter 14

### **CASH**

Coming out here is like stepping back in time.

Crunching through the snow, our breath puffing in silvery clouds, white-coated pines like a postcard around us. Behind us, twin trails of footsteps, one large, one small. And Ari beside me, pink-cheeked and smiling.

I can almost imagine Gran waiting back at the house with cookies she'd pulled straight from the oven. Because even though she could afford a cook, she insisted on making all her food on her own. "I grew up doing my own cooking," she'd say, patting her stomach as evidence. "I'm not stopping now."

She loved Ari—both my grandparents did. They would be so happy to see Ari and me together, holding hands as we walk to the pond I hadn't cleared off for skating in years.

Until this year.

There wasn't anyone else I wanted to come out here to skate with. But now that Ari is here, and she's so excited about

going skating, getting the pond ready was one of my priorities.

Second to keeping her safe, of course, but there's nothing to worry about here. My property is completely surrounded by an unscalable perimeter fence with dozens of security cameras. And there's a thick band of trees just beyond, so we're guaranteed privacy.

Privacy to recreate one of Ari's Hallmark fantasies, with some PG-13 activity added in. As we watched the ending of a particularly over-the-top cheesy movie a few nights ago—this one involved not just a candy cane factory, but a Christmas candy-making contest—Ari explained with a grin, “They only ever kiss at the end. And it's very tame. No hands going in sexy places.”

“I'll put my hands in some sexy places,” I growled, pulling her onto my lap and kissing her in a very non-tame manner.

We're nearly at the pond when Ari stops and looks back at the house. After a pause, she turns back to me. “I was just remembering your gran's cookies. She always made butterscotch chip when I came over.”

“She loved you, you know.”

“I loved her, too.” Her nose wrinkles up and her eyes go damp. “Both your grandparents.”

We make it to the bench next to the pond and sit down. I cup Ari's cheek, tilting her face to look at me. “They would be really happy to see us here. Together.”



Her eyes sparkle like pale green jewels. “Good. And Cash... I’m so happy to be here, too. This is... it’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

My heart swells, this incredible pressure in my chest.

My emotions are so big, so intense, it feels like they could explode out of my body.

I almost say it. I almost gather Ari in my arms and tell her the words I’ve been turning over in my head for weeks. Words that have been lodged in my heart for years.

But I don’t. I kiss her instead. And I tell her, “I’m so happy, too.”

As we put on our skates, I’m ashamed of myself. I could have said it. It would have been the perfect time.

But I’m still scared. A grown man, running a multi-million-dollar company, responsible for saving lives, but too scared for this.

“Come on, Cash.” Ari stands up, holding her hand out to me. “I have a feeling I’m going to fall a bunch of times, so I hope you’re ready to catch me.”

“Always.” I join her, walking on wobbly blades down to the ice.

That’s one truth I’m not afraid to say.

After twenty minutes of skating, it’s clear Ari has retained more of her skating skills than me. I can manage to go forward

and turn, but backwards? I ended up on my ass four times, Ari nearly falling over too as she laughed at me.

“It’s because I’m taller,” I insisted, when she completed a backward round of the pond without falling once. “You’re closer to the ground, so it’s easier for you.”

Ari just did a little forward hop and skated over to me, her eyes bright, a little smirk teasing her lips. “If you say so.”

Then we recreated the Hallmark scene, holding hands and making slow circles around the pond. And it was a lot more fun doing it than watching it.

Now we’re in the center of the ice, Ari trying to demonstrate backwards skating to me. She’s all in teacher-mode, so serious and earnest, and she looks so damn cute I want to kiss her all over.

“Think of it like making a C,” she says, executing the move flawlessly. “And keep your knees bent.”

She stops several feet in front of me, making a little spray of ice as she uses the edge of her blade to stop. “Okay, you try it now.”

I’m just about to move when my phone buzzes. It’s not a call or a text, it’s the tone I set up for my security system alerts, so I reach into my chest pocket to get it.

Ari raises her eyebrows at me. “Everything okay?”

I have to pull off my glove to open the notification on my phone, so all I can see on the screen are the words *Perimeter Alert*. “It’s the security system.” As her eyes go big, I quickly

add, “But it’s probably just a large deer. Sometimes they set it off.”

“Oh, okay.” She relaxes. “I forget you get deer in the woods around your property.”

“That’s probably all it is,” I reassure her. “Nothing to worry about.”

And then I open the app, and my heart thuds to a stop.

It’s not a deer.

It’s a *person* creeping around the outside of my fence.

Not a hunter—not dressed all in black, with a full knit mask covering his face.

Where is he? The cameras are all numbered, but which one is this?

But the fence is unscalable, so there should be nothing to worry about. Right?

“Is everything alright?” Ari’s voice wobbles. “You don’t look okay.”

*Fuck.* It’s the camera closest to us. Covering the thick band of trees not more than fifty feet from where we’re standing.

“Ari, we need to get inside.” I’m still watching the man—he’s stopped beside a tree, reaching over his shoulder—

*Oh FUCK.*

“Cash?”

*There’s no time.*

I lunge at Ari, grabbing her around the waist, knocking her onto the ice.

She yelps at the impact; I tried to cushion her fall, but it wasn't enough.

A sharp crack rings through the air.

Something whistles past, slamming into the ice only feet away.

*Someone just shot at us.*

Ari whimpers beneath me. "Cash?" Her voice is breathless and tiny.

My heart is thundering, loud drum beats in my head. Panic surges, but I shove it down. We need to get off the ice, get to cover. But where? How?

I lift my head for a quick glance, almost certain I'm about to be shot. But I'm not, and I see where we need to go.

Quietly, I tell her, "We need to get to the trees on the way back to the house." There's a small copse of trees twenty feet from the pond, but in the direction of the house. If we get there, we'll be protected and I can call the police.

There's a shaky snuffle beneath me, but Ari whispers, "Okay."

"Stay flat on the ice, but go sideways first—"

Ari wriggles out from under me, scooting forward toward the edge of the ice.

I don't want her moving ahead of me; she'll be unprotected.  
"Ari, wait—"

And this terrible situation gets worse.

There's a crack. And another. And several more in quick succession.

But it's not gunshots. It's the ice cracking.

"Oh, Cash..." Ari's voice is shaking. The ice is fracturing under her.

*Oh shit. Shit.* I pitch my voice low, trying to keep my fear from bleeding through. "Spread your arms and legs out. Go slow, it's going to be okay."

Flat to the ice, I work my way in front of Ari, keeping distance from the quickly appearing spider web of cracks radiating around her. As much as it's killing me to go slow and not rush to her, I can't take the chance of putting more weight on the ice.

Ari's moving carefully, doing just as I told her, but it's achingly slow progress. Little sniffles drift over to me, scared whimpers breaking my heart.

Another loud crack, and I think we've been shot at again. My lungs seize in terror. *Please don't have hit Ari.*

Then the ice shatters, dropping Ari through it.

She cries out, then it's suddenly silenced.

*NO.*

Her head appears above the water, and my heart starts beating again. “Cash!”

I thought it was bad. This is so much worse.

The shooter is still out there. We’re out in the open. And Ari’s in the pond, freezing.

“Okay, hun.” I channel all my experience as a firefighter—soothing terrified accident victims, calming a frightened child trapped in a fire. But this is Ari, and it’s so much harder to push back my fear.

I’m shuffling closer to Ari; at this point I’m willing to risk falling through the ice myself. “Can you stand?” She shakes her head, already shuddering with cold. “Okay, take off your jacket. It’ll make it easier to tread water.”

She’s scared, but does exactly what I ask. “Be careful,” she whispers through chattering teeth.

It feels like an eternity before I reach the edge. Ari is still paddling, though her movements are sluggish. “You can do it,” I croon, sounding calm though I feel moments from a heart attack. “Focus on breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

I’m still bracing for the inevitable gunshot, the flare of pain, a cry of agony, but for once in this horrible situation, my luck holds. I grab Ari’s hands, then her forearms, and I pull her back up on the ice.

As much as I want to check her condition, I can’t. We need to get to cover.

Once I get her to the edge of the pond, I have a decision to make. Go for the safer route, staying low and crawling to the trees? Or pick up Ari and make a run for it, the faster but more dangerous choice?

If Ari wasn't blue-lipped and shuddering with cold, I wouldn't even think about it. But she's probably hypothermic already and I can't waste any more time.

So I yank off my skates and scoop her up in my arms—she's so weak, so pale, please be okay—and I sprint for the trees.

*Please let us make it.*

*Please let Ari be okay.*

When we make it to the cluster of pines without any gunshots, I nearly burst into relieved tears.

Except it's only one part down. I need to take care of Ari and call the police.

I can't risk running all the way to the house; it's a good quarter mile and if the shooter is using a long-range rifle... he could pick us off easily.

So I need to start warming up Ari here. And get help on the way.

I yank my phone out of my pocket and dial 911, then put it on speaker. While I talk to the operator, I peel Ari's clothes off her, wincing at her pale, blue-veined skin.

"Cash." It's barely a whisper. Her eyes are dazed, unfocused. "I fell in the pond."

“I know.” I dry her off with my fleece, rubbing her arms and legs to help with circulation. Then I dress her in my shirt and pants, leaving me in my long-underwear and a T-shirt. Tucking her against my chest, I wrap my jacket around both of us, holding her shaking body against mine.

“Police are just a few minutes out,” the operator tells me. “Ambulances are just behind. We’ll have help to you soon.”

“I’m so cold,” Ari slurs, and my heart wrenches painfully.

Tucking her head into my neck, I kiss her damp hair. “I know. I’m so sorry. But it’s going to be okay. Soon we’ll get you all warm. I promise.”

Sirens draw closer while I rub Ari’s icy skin, using friction to give her some warmth. Almost drunkenly, she mumbles into my neck, “Can we... have a fire? And... hot chocolate? And... cookies?”

“Yes, hun.” I gather her even closer, kissing her again—if I could tuck her inside me, I would. “Of course we can.”

A cacophony of sound approaches. Familiar voices, commanding and urgent. A flurry of footsteps head toward us. Flashes of red bounce across the sheet of snow.

So soft I can barely hear her, Ari whispers, “Are we safe now?”

Pain slashes through me. I thought we *were* safe, and Ari was nearly killed.

“You’re safe,” I promise her, as the police and EMTs surround us. “It’s going to be okay.”



## Chapter 15

### **ARI**

I always knew Cash was protective, but this takes it to another level.

I'm sitting on the couch while he takes my temperature for the third time in the last hour. He's wearing the same expression he's had all last night and this morning—his mouth pinched, lines of strain etched into his forehead. While he waits for the thermometer to finish measuring, he re-tucks my blanket around me with the single-minded intensity of a surgeon.

"It's probably the same as the last time," I say, holding the thermometer so I can talk around it.

"Shh." Cash gives me a gently stern look. "Now we have to take it again."

*Okay, then.*

When the doctor checked in before releasing me from the hospital this morning, he said I was fine. "Just take it easy

today,” the doctor said with a smile. “Watch some movies, relax—tomorrow you can get back to all your normal activities.”

I think Cash has a different idea of what taking it easy means.

When we got home, Cash *carried* me from the garage to the house. I was getting out of the car and he just scooped me up, fixing me with a determined gaze. “Please, Ari,” he said as I started to argue. “Let me do this.”

That’s when I realized he needed it more than me.

He wouldn’t let me take a shower by myself, insisting on being in there with me. But not in the fun, showering together, sexy way—he just carefully washed and dried every inch of me before dressing me in layers of leggings and long-sleeved shirts and fuzzy socks and his giant Cornell sweatshirt that I love to steal.

I didn’t need help to get dressed, either, but by that point, I just let him do it.

Once I got settled on the couch, I thought that was the end of it. Nope.

In the last hour, Cash has been a dervish, rushing around to anticipate my every need. There’s the food: on the coffee table beside me is an array of snacks, an insulated carafe of hot tea, a bowl of steaming soup, and a sandwich the size of my head.

For entertainment, I have a stack of brand new Christmas romance novels—not sure where those came from, but I’m not

complaining—a pile of trashy magazines, and the TV tuned to the Hallmark Channel.

I asked about my laptop to do some grading and Cash outright refused. “You need to relax today. The doctor said.”

It’s not that I mind Cash taking care of me, but I hate seeing how upset he is, the guilt that tightens his features at random moments—like *he’s* the one who shot at us and dumped me into icy water.

If it weren’t for Cash, I could have died out there. He’s the one who knocked me out of the way, who pulled me from the water, and kept me warm until the ambulance came. And he could have been shot as easily as me.

Which is terrifying.

As to why we were shot at? Deep down, I’m afraid I know why. I was the target.

But I’m trying not to think about it. At least not now.

I’m not oblivious; I know we have to talk about the shooter and everything that’s involved with the incident from yesterday. But I’m back home, and I’m warm and safe and Cash is okay, and that’s all I want to concentrate on right now. Everything else can come later.

Cash pulls the thermometer from my lips and reads it, frowning. “It’s a tenth of a degree lower than the last time. I don’t like that.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I soothe, and pat the couch cushion next to me. “Sit. You’ve done everything. Just relax with me.”

He hesitates, his gaze bouncing between the thermometer and me. “Fine.” Cash sits down, sighing. “But I’m checking it again in ten minutes.”

It’s nice that he’s so worried about me, but it hurts my heart, too. I climb into his lap, sitting sideways, tucking the blanket around both of us. “I’m okay, Cash. Really.”

His strong arms wrap around me, snuggling me into his chest. “I know I’m being over-protective. But—” He takes a deep breath. “I just want to be sure you’re okay.”

“And I love that you’re so concerned about me.” I kiss his neck, the skin soft and warm and smelling of soap. “But I want to make sure you’re okay, too. Yesterday was hard for both of us.”

Cash swallows hard, his voice going rough. “I’ve never been that scared, Ari. Never.” His gaze holds mine, dark with pain. “Not when my grandfather was dying, not even when my parents died and I didn’t know what was going on. If something had happened to you—”

I rush to interrupt him. “It didn’t. We’re both okay. Thanks to you.”

His brow comes down, lines appearing across it. “I should have thought—”

“No.” I’m not going to let Cash blame himself for this. “It was my idea, after all.”

His face jerks in shock. “It’s not your fault, Ari. Don’t even say that.”

*It very well might be.* But I don't say that, I just force a smile and say softly, "It's not yours, either."

Cash gazes at me, his eyes softening to a grassy field tipped with gold. "Ari..." His voice throbs with emotion. "I..."

We both jolt in surprise as the doorbell chimes. The sudden noise sends my heart rocketing into my throat, and I curl into Cash instinctively.

Cash holds me to him with one arm while he reaches for his phone with the other. After a quick glance, he says, "It's okay. It's just Finn. He texted earlier to say he'd stop by to—" His mouth snaps shut, jaw clenching.

"To talk about the shooter," I finish for him, as I force my heart to settle back into a regular rhythm.

He exhales heavily. "Yes. But I'll meet with him in my office. You can stay here and relax."

*Relax?* While Cash is discussing the person who shot at us? A quick snort of laughter bursts out. "Are you serious?"

"Ari." His tone gentles, and he strokes my hair. "You just about jumped out of your skin when the doorbell rang. You're recovering after hypothermia. Not to mention everything else. You don't need to be strong all the time. Let me handle this."

"No way." I sit up straight. "As much as it scares me, I need to know. So I'm not going to hide from it."

My stomach disagrees, nervously flipping, but I keep my gaze steady on his.

Cash stares at me for several seconds before sighing, “Okay. But Ari—” He lifts me out of his lap and settles me back on the couch. “If it starts to be too much, please don’t try to force yourself through it.”

“I won’t.” *I will.* I’ll let Cash protect me from some things, but not from the truth.

Although I’m rethinking that when Cash comes back into the living room a few minutes later, Finn trailing behind him. Finn’s somber expression makes my gut clench, the soup I just had threatening to make a repeat appearance.

It’s not like I’m expecting good news, like *the police already caught the shooter and he confessed to everything*, but now that I’m facing the scary reality of it, hiding isn’t sounding like such a bad idea.

Finn allows a small smile when he sees me and comes over to the couch to give me a careful hug. “How are you feeling, Ari?”

“I’m feeling pretty good.” Glancing at Cash, I add with a smile, “Cash is taking really good care of me.”

Cash sits back down, wrapping his arm around me. His lips twitch. “When she lets me.”

Finn sits on the couch across from us, his smile fading. He pulls out his phone and taps a few buttons, his jaw tightening at whatever he sees. Then he says, “Ari. Are you sure you want to hear this?”

Again? What is with these men and trying to protect me from the truth?

I almost crack my teeth to keep from snapping at him. “Yes, Finn.” I swallow back my irritation—*he means well, I know he does, just like Cash*—and say calmly, “Seeing as how I was shot at, I want to hear everything.”

“Okay.” Finn gives me an apologetic look. “I wasn’t trying to insult you. Just with you being in the hospital and everything...”

Now I feel bad. “It’s fine, Finn. But I can handle this.”

“Let’s just hear it,” Cash says, lifting his chin at Finn. “What do you have?”

Finn sets his jaw, frowning slightly. “The security footage from your cameras isn’t going to help us. The shooter was too well-disguised. The only information we can gather is that it was likely a male, about six feet tall, probably around two hundred pounds, although that could vary depending on body composition.”

He looks down at his phone for a second before continuing, “From the location of the shooter to about where the bullet hit, it’s clear that the shooter was trying to hit one of you two. But without knowing the exact point of entry—which we can’t, since the ice is broken—we don’t know which of you it was.”

I can’t hide my shudder, and Cash hugs me closer, his arm tensing around me.

“So there’s nothing?” Cash asks, frustration edging his tone. “We have no way of figuring out who shot at me, shot at Ari, right on my property?”

“Not necessarily.” Finn meets Cash’s gaze. “It will just take longer. Leo—” He pauses, turning to me and explaining, “Leo’s our tech guy. He’s going to go through security footage in the vicinity—traffic cameras, neighboring security systems, CCTV—he’ll pour through them to track the shooter’s movements.”

A spurt of optimism chases the chill running through me. “You can find someone that way?”

“We’re going to try,” Finn answers. “It’s not certain; there are a lot of variables, but there’s a good chance we will. In the meantime”—he looks back at Cash—“we’ll increase surveillance on your property.”

Cash leans forward slightly. “What are you thinking?”

“Cameras in the woods outside your fence. Very small, so it’s unlikely they’ll be spotted. That’s still your property, correct?”

“Yes. About two hundred yards beyond the fence is the property line.”

“Okay.” Finn gives an approving nod. “So we’ll have those cameras installed this afternoon. And we’ll have two people guarding your property, as well. One of us will be stationed by the house, the other will be on a roaming patrol, and backup if we need it.”



Cash and Finn go back and forth for a few more minutes, discussing the security system and restrictions going forward. I bob my head obediently at everything—no more trips out in the yard, only get in and out of the car in the garage—feeling sick about it.

Bile rises when Finn suggests, “I would make sure to keep all the blinds closed at night. Just to be safe.”

When Cash says, “Maybe I should buy a car with bulletproof windows,” I dig my nails into my hands so I don’t burst into tears.

*I wanted to hear this.*

*I wanted to know the truth, and here it is.*

All of this—Cash paying all this money for protection, having to hide in his own home, talking about buying a car with bulletproof windows, not to mention being shot at—it’s all my fault.

No one will say it, but I know it’s the truth. I’m the one who’s already been threatened, not Cash. Kyle has motivation to keep me quiet. And he has the money to pay someone to do it.

If it was just me, it would be terrifying enough. But now Cash has been pulled into it. And he has to suffer through his worst fear—losing another person he cares about.

*Why did I go on that stupid date?*

*Would I have reconnected with Cash if I hadn’t?*

*But then Cash wouldn't have been shot at...*

My thoughts are all scattered, emotions tossing them all over the place.

I'm scared. Sad. Angry. Confused.

"Ari, hun, can you look at me?" A worried voice, but so tender, drags me out of my head. Cash is staring at me, his eyes dark with concern. "Where did you go?"

I blink. Finn is gone. It's just Cash and I on the couch. How long have I been spacing out for?

"Cash—" My voice breaks. I hate how weak I sound.

Cash answers my unspoken question. "He just left. It's fine; you just got quiet, that's all."

And didn't even notice Finn leaving? As everything refocuses, embarrassment sweeps through me.

"I was staring into space like a zombie?"

"No, Ari." He kisses me lightly on the lips and I lean into the contact, needing the connection with him. When he pulls away, his expression is filled with so much affection, I want to cry all over again. "I think you just disassociated for a minute. It's just something your mind can do when it's overwhelmed."

"Oh." My voice dropping, I whisper, "I guess I couldn't handle it, after all."

"No." Cash picks me up, setting me on his lap and looking at me fiercely. "You have been handling everything incredibly.

After everything... You are one of the strongest people I know.”

“It’s all my fault,” I blurt out. “And now you’re suffering for it.”

“*What?*”

I duck my gaze. “All this money you’re spending, and you’re like a prisoner in your own home, and you were shot at—” My voice rises. “You could have been *killed*. And we know I was the target. It has to be me.”

“Ari, you don’t know that—”

“Maybe I should drop the charges,” I blurt out. “Then this wouldn’t be happening.”

Cash sucks in a sharp breath. “Is that what you want?”

Do I? “No. I don’t want him to be able to do this to more women, but—” My voice wobbles, going tiny. “I’m scared of what might happen. That you might get hurt.”

“Ari, I’m okay.”

Tears are pressing behind my eyes; I’m blinking furiously to keep them at bay. “I feel sick about it, Cash. I could have gotten you killed.”

“Oh hun, no.” He gently tips my chin up, forcing me to look at him. “Ari, sweetheart, none of this is your fault. I swear it.”

The tears burst free, streaming down my cheeks. “Yes, it is.”

“No, honey, no.” Cash brushes my tears away, dropping light kisses in their place. “Listen to me. This is not. Your. Fault. At

all. Okay? Don't shake your head. Just listen.”

His eyes are so sincere, so caring, I can't look away. My voice is tiny. “Okay.”

“First of all, we have no idea who the target was. I own a big company, Ari. I've made enemies. It could have been me. And if it is Morgan, we're prepared for him now. This won't happen again.”

I don't believe him, but won't argue.

“Second”—he jostles me on his lap—“I would do anything to keep you safe. Anything. None of what I'm doing is a sacrifice. I get to be with you, Ari. I could be locked in a house for months with you and I'd be happy.”

My tears start to dry up as I stare back at Cash, wanting so badly to believe him. “But it's so much...”

“No. Didn't you hear me?” Cash looks at me intently, a depth of emotion in his eyes I've never seen before. “I would do anything for you. And I would choose to face any danger if it means I can be with you. You are everything to me. *I love you.*”

What? Did he...

“Oh, shit.” Cash grimaces. “This isn't how I meant to say it, with you crying and so upset and I thought I'd tell you when it was romantic—”

“You love me?” My heart expands so fast I think it might explode.

“Yes.” Cash turns me so I’m facing him, my legs on either side of his waist. “I love you so much, I can barely breathe from it. My heart has known for a long time, but I kept holding back from saying it to you. And it was so stupid to keep waiting just because I was scared.”

He caresses my cheek, the emotion in his eyes finally clear. “But telling you I love you isn’t scary. I can’t believe I ever thought it could be. Loving you is the rightest thing I’ve ever done. I love you so damn much, Ari. You’ve always been the one for me.”

“You love me?” I’m parroting it, hardly believing.

“So much. But—” His face pinches. “If you don’t feel the same, it’s okay. I shouldn’t have just blurted it out like that...” Disappointment bleeds through his words.

“No.” Cash flinches. Crap. That’s not what I meant.

“No, I *do* feel the same way,” I rush to explain. “I do. I just... I hoped one day...”

His brows pull down in a confused V. “You love me?”

“Oh, *yes*.” My tangled thoughts are gone, my worries, my fears—nothing exists except this moment.

“I love you, Cash. I’ve loved you for years. Even when I didn’t think there was ever a chance, you were still in my heart.”

“Ari...” Cash cradles my face in his hands, inches from his. “You’ve always been in my heart. I wish it hadn’t taken so long...”

I close the last few inches between us, brushing my lips to his. “I love you. How long it took to get here doesn’t matter.”

He kisses me, tracing the seam of my lips, dipping inside and tasting. It’s a tender connection, all soft kisses and whispering breaths and achingly gentle caresses—another way of saying *I love you* without any words.

And when we pull away, Cash gazes at me like I’m the most precious thing in the world. “I love you so much, Ari. Thank you for waiting for me.”

## Chapter 16

### **CASH**

We've never had extra volunteers on Thanksgiving before.

There aren't many people who want to give up their Thanksgiving to spend it at the station. Sitting around waiting for the next turkey deep-frying accident, eating Chinese delivery or sad frozen turkey dinners? Or staying home, eating freshly cooked turkey and stuffing, spending time with family, and watching football all day? I don't blame anyone for not being thrilled when their turn comes around.

We try to make it as fair as possible, not asking anyone to work both Thanksgiving and Christmas, and trying to cover the holiday shifts without having to use anyone who has kids. It doesn't always work out, but we try.

I've always worked both holidays until this year.

This year I'm working on Thanksgiving, but on Christmas, I'm staying home with Ari. It's our first Christmas as a couple, and I'm already planning how I can make it special for her.

Over the top decorations, inviting our friends over for a holiday dinner, gallons of eggnog—I hate the stuff, but she loves it—and as many Hallmark movies as she wants.

And presents. Lots of presents. Enough presents that Ari will definitely tell me I went overboard, and I don't care. Because I want to spoil the woman I love.

So Christmas is set, but Thanksgiving?

This Thanksgiving, Ari's coming to the station with me.

Which is why we have an excess of volunteers, because she's making a full turkey dinner for everyone. Once it got out that she was cooking, volunteers started coming out of the woodwork.

"Is there going to be pie?" Dave asked, when I mentioned it at our last shift together.

After a quick text to Ari, I told him, "Three kinds—pumpkin, salted caramel apple, and cranberry crumble. With fresh whipped cream and ice cream."

Dave's mouth dropped. "My mother is on a health kick. She's not having pie this year, only fresh fruit. I think I'll tell her I have to work at the station."

When Grant heard about the upcoming meal, he said, "I'll work on Thanksgiving. Delicious food *and* I don't have to hear my family ask when I'm going to bring a woman home to meet them? Sounds perfect."

So we have about twice as many people as usual signed up to work today, which is great for the safety of Sleepy Hollow,



but a little stressful for Ari.

She's been planning and prepping all week, and I've never seen someone spend this much time on one meal in my life. When I mentioned that, Ari burst out laughing at me. "This is what Thanksgiving dinner means, Cash. It's not just dinner for two. If I waited until Thursday to start preparing, I'd never get it all done."

I love that she's so enthusiastic about this, but I don't want her overdoing it, either. It's been less than a week since Ari was in the hospital, and even if the doctor said it was okay to return to normal activities, I'm not so sure about it.

But when I gently suggested that maybe Ari could settle for just a couple of side dishes instead of a whole buffet of them, she just hugged me and said, "Cash, I know you're worried, but focusing on casseroles and pies is a lot better than thinking about who shot at us."

There wasn't much to argue about there. Even though I hate it.

She shouldn't have to be thinking about someone shooting at her at all.

"Cash." Ari tugs on my arm, looking at me worriedly. "Are you sure there'll be enough food? I've never cooked for this many people before. I don't want anyone to be hungry."

"It's going to be fine," I reassure her, kissing her cheek. "There's plenty of food. Everyone is going to love it. Don't worry."

Finn glances in the rearview mirror, smiling at Ari in the backseat next to me. “Judging from how much food we loaded into the car, I think you have enough to feed a small army.”

Ari leans forward. “Finn, I’m so sorry you have to miss Thanksgiving to come with us.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He flicks on the directional, slowing to pull into the station parking lot. “I would be sitting at Blade and Arrow if I weren’t here, and no offense to my teammates and their women, but your food looks and smells better than what they’re making.”

When we planned for Ari to come with me to the station, we decided to have Finn come just in case everyone on duty gets called out at once. It’s unlikely, given all the extra volunteers today, but we can’t take the chance of leaving Ari alone.

“You’d better not let them hear you say that,” Ari laughs. “Or you won’t get any leftovers back home.”

Fin chuckles. “There won’t be any leftovers. Those vultures always eat everything right away.”

Ari makes a sympathetic face at him. “It’s okay. I’ll save some leftovers from tomorrow for you.”

Because of course, one Thanksgiving isn’t enough.

Ari insisted on having our first official Thanksgiving at the house, too. So tomorrow we’re having another meal—smaller this time—and her friend Thea is coming over to join us. And while I told Ari it wasn’t necessary, we could just relax and

order delivery instead, I'm excited about celebrating at home with her.

Home. It hasn't felt like a true home since my grandparents passed away. Until Ari came to stay, and now I can't imagine living there without her.

But I only just told her I love her. It's probably a bit early to ask her to live with me permanently. Right?

"Come on, Cash." Ari nudges me. "We need to get the food inside before it gets cold."

But there's no worry about that.

As soon as Finn pops the hatch of his SUV, revealing the stacks of insulated food holders, a small swarm of people comes streaming out of the station to help us.

"I guess everyone is hungry?" Ari whispers, as the crowd converges on the car.

Ian overhears her and shoots her a grin. "Ari. I cook for myself, and it primarily consists of cereal and sandwiches. I have been *dreaming* about this meal since Cash told me about it."

"I've been thinking about those pies..." Dave adds, eyeballing a stack of covered pie trays sitting in the car.

Grant sidles up. "And I heard there was going to be sweet potato casserole. That's my favorite."

Eloise squeezes between Grant and Dave and gives Ari a big smile. "It's been my turn"—she makes air quotes to emphasize

the word—“to cook dinner for years. My lazy sisters keep coming up with excuses. When I heard about Thanksgiving here, I was thrilled to have an excuse of my own.”

Ari is smiling but looks a little overwhelmed at the enthusiastic greeting. So I wrap my arm around her and say, “Okay, vultures. We need to get the food inside first. Then we can talk about eating.”



Several hours and many plates of food later, everyone is sitting around the station looking stuffed and satisfied.

There haven't been any calls yet, which is a minor miracle on Thanksgiving.

No flag football incidents, when one of the players gets too competitive and ends up tackling their cousin, breaking their arm in the process.

No microwave fires—we usually get at least one of those—someone leaving a metal spoon in a dish while reheating.

And thankfully, no domestic calls. Those are always the worst, especially on a holiday.

But for now, we have relative peace. Well, sort of.

The long dining table has been cleared of dishes and is now home to a cutthroat game of Pictionary. I've heard threats and bribes and apparently there's some kind of sabotage going on. At one point, Grant snapped, “It's the dog they sent up to the moon. How could you *not* get it?”

To which Eloise dryly replied, “You drew a stick dog in a circle. How was I supposed to guess Laika, the dog, from that?”

There’s another group huddled around the TV, watching one of the bowl games and wagering Monopoly money to see who gets the last piece of caramel apple pie.

Dave is in the kitchen popping Tums like they’re candy. But he’s still grinning and intermittently calling over to Ari, “Best pie I ever had. When are you making more?”

This time when he says it, Ari calls back to him, “Christmas Eve. I’ll make some and bring them in.”

“She’s a keeper,” Dave replies, loud enough that the entire station could hear him. “Ari, any time you get tired of Cash, you know where to find me.”

I shoot back at him, “Find your own woman,” and tug Ari closer to my side. But I’m laughing—Dave is goofy and outspoken, but he would never dream of approaching another man’s woman.

*My woman.* It’s caveman-esque, but it doesn’t change how I feel. This perfect woman, so beautiful and smart and funny—she gave it right back to the guys when they joked with her without even flinching—is mine.

How did I go this long without having this in my life? Not just Ari as my friend, but as my girlfriend? The woman who is everything to me.

She's tucked next to me on the couch, her head resting on my shoulder, and I'm so happy right now I could burst. Friends, food, and love. What more could I ask for?

Grant and Ian—my two closest friends at the station—are sitting on the couch adjacent to us. Ari is quizzing Ian about his dog, and he passes his phone over to her. “This is Baxter,” he says, his expression softening. “He’s a great dog.”

Ari peers at the photo and *awws* appropriately. “Ian, he’s adorable. Is he part golden retriever?”

“He’s part golden, part lab,” Ian tells her. “One of my clients at the gym works at the local rescue, and this guy came in from one of the shelters down south. He was all covered in fleas and ticks, malnourished, infections in both his eyes...” He shakes his head, frowning. “But if you look at him now, you’d never know.”

Ari smiles at him. “He’s so lucky to have you.” She pauses, her brow wrinkling. “I always wanted a dog. But I was always living in cities for Teach for America, and then with all the moves... it wouldn’t have been fair to get a dog.”

“Maybe we can look in the spring,” I offer, surprising myself with the suggestion. I always thought I was too busy for a dog, but now... The idea of sharing a dog with Ari, taking it for walks, watching her as she plays with it... I like it.

“Really?” Her face brightens.

“Yeah.” The idea solidifies, settling in. “It’ll be easier to train a puppy when it’s nicer weather, and everything should

be calmed down...”

Crap. I don't want to bring up Kyle and the impending trial and ruin Ari's good mood.

Her mouth tightens for a moment, but it quickly transforms into a smile. “I like it.” She rests her head on my shoulder again and adds thoughtfully, “I always imagined getting a big dog. Like a golden or a lab. Just a big, friendly, goofy dog.”

I press a kiss to her head. “Whatever you want, hun.”

The conversation shifts from dogs to Ian's classes at the gym. He's co-owner of the local gym and specializes in martial arts, so he teaches judo and Krav Maga and jiu-jitsu. I've taken some classes, but with everything that's gone on with Ari, I wouldn't mind getting a refresher.

“I was thinking of taking some classes again,” I tell him. “It's been a while, and I'd like to freshen up some of my skills. Do you have anything coming up soon?”

“You should try his Krav Maga class,” Grant suggests. “I took a series of them last spring, and they were great.”

As Grant is a former SEAL, that's extremely high praise.

“That's a good idea.” Glancing from Grant to Ian, I ask, “What do you think?”

“Absolutely. You don't need to wait for a new round of classes to start. I can come to your house and do it.” Ian's gaze is understanding as he continues, “I'm sure you'd rather stay close to home.”

I give him a quick chin lift. “I appreciate it. And maybe you can teach Ari some self-defense, too. I can show her the basics, but I’d like her to be trained by a professional.”

Although, I should probably ask her about it, shouldn’t I? “Ari, is that okay with you?”

When she doesn’t answer, I glance down at her, and my chest squeezes.

She’s fast asleep, all her features relaxed, lips slightly parted, and a tendril of hair falling across her cheek. And she looks so soft and sweet and the surge of protectiveness I feel for her steals my breath away.

Ian chuckles, smiling affectionately. He pitches his voice low as he says, “Of course, I’ll teach her self-defense. Any time she wants. You just let me know.”

Ari shifts in her sleep, curling against me, sighing, light puffs of air brushing along my neck.

“It’s been a long week for her,” I explain softly, brushing her hair away from her face. “Last weekend, and then all the cooking, plus she had to work...”

Grant leans forward, speaking quietly. “You don’t have to stay. We have plenty of volunteers here, and I don’t think anyone would mind if you brought Ari home. After what she did for everyone—”

Ian jumps in. “Absolutely. We can do without you for the rest of the shift.”



I'd like to take Ari home, get her into an actual bed, but I don't want to go back on my commitment, either. "I don't know..."

Grant stands up and makes a quick circuit of the room, stopping to talk to each volunteer. When he comes back, he's smiling broadly. "Everyone agreed. We'll clean all the dishes and bring them back to you. Take your girl home, Cash."

*Fuck.* How did I get so lucky to have Ari and friends like these?

I dip my head at Grant. "Tell everyone I said thanks."

I carefully lower Ari to the couch before standing, then gently scoop her into my arms, trying not to wake her. She shifts in my embrace, burrowing her face in my neck, and my heart explodes all over again.

Finn is already waiting, all our coats draped over one arm. "The car is already running," he says. "I'll open the door so you can get right in."

As I get into the car, Ari stirs, groggily peering up at me. "Where are we going?"

Kissing her forehead, I whisper, "We're going home, hun. Go back to sleep."

She drops her head back down on my shoulder, nearly asleep again. But she whispers drowsily. "Did everyone like the food?"

"Yeah, sweetheart." I kiss her again as the car accelerates, taking us back home. "Everyone loved it. It was the best

Thanksgiving I've ever had.”

“Good,” she murmurs. “That’s all I wanted.”

*I love her so much.*

## Chapter 17

**ARI**

“I think I’m going to have to fight off half the guys at the station for you.”

Cash comes up behind me and brushes my ponytail aside, kissing the back of my neck. His big hand comes around to rest on my belly, and he tugs me against him. He’s all warm, hard muscles and his lips nuzzle along my nape and up my jaw, sending little sizzles of electricity across my skin.

His fingers trail up my stomach, caressing the underside of my breasts. My nipples tighten and my core pulses with sudden need. As Cash’s breath whispers by my ear, I ask breathlessly, “Why?”

Humor tinges his words. “Because I’ve gotten at least half-a-dozen messages already saying how amazing you are, and asking when you’re coming back to visit.”

My breasts feel swollen, so sensitive to his touch. His thumb strokes around the tight point of my nipple, achingly slow.

Then he lightly flicks it and I arch into his hand instinctively, a low moan vibrating in my throat.

“They just want”—my breath catches as Cash sucks at the skin beneath my ear, a tiny nip, then the soothing swirl of his tongue—“someone to cook for them.”

“No. That’s not it.” Cash spins me around and lifts me onto the counter, his hands lingering at my waist. He leans in and captures my mouth with his, tracing the seam of my lips before delving deeper. I clutch at his shoulders as the kiss continues, my body kindling into an inferno of need.

All my obligations—cooking, company, food in the oven—are faint memories as the throbbing in my womb intensifies. Lust-addled questions fire through my head—is there time for a quickie? On the counter? Will anything burn if I have sex with Cash right now?

But then the stupid oven puts an end to my questions, chiming as the timer goes off. As much as I want Cash right now, I can’t let the turkey burn. Not for our first official Thanksgiving at home.

I pull away from Cash, scowling over at the offending oven. “The turkey needs to come out.”

Cash sighs, still staring at me with a hungry gaze. “Remind me, why aren’t we doing pizza today?”

I start to wriggle to get down. “Because it’s our first Thanksgiving together, as a couple, at home. Our friends are

coming. And I want you to have a real Thanksgiving here again.”

“Ah, hun.” A soft smile tugs at his lips. “You’re amazing. And that’s why the guys at the station all texted about you. Not because of the food, though it was great. But because of the effort you made to give everyone such a nice day.”

He dips his head, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “And you stay here. I’ll get the turkey out.”

While I should get down and check on the rest of the food, I decide to take a minute to admire Cash instead. He looks so handsome in his dark jeans and the sweater that matches the green in his eyes and his hair all messy from helping me in the kitchen. And his expression is so bright, so relaxed—he hasn’t stopped smiling all day.

He’s been so cute working as my assistant, too. Every time he’d help me with something, he’d run his hand through his hair and get this super-focused look on his face like he was about to tackle a huge business deal instead of making green bean casserole.

Cash turns away from the turkey to look at me. “I have to put foil over it, right?”

“Yeah. Just drape it over the turkey, and then tuck around the edges of the pan. It’s called tenting.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Tenting?”

“Yes.” I grin at him. “It’s a Thanksgiving thing.”

He does an admirable job, smiling triumphantly when he finishes. “I never knew Thanksgiving dinner took so much effort until this past week. I feel kind of bad that I never offered to help my grandmother when she made it.”

Hopping down from the counter, I go over to him. “I’m sure she didn’t expect you to. When we used to go to my grandmother’s for Thanksgiving, my Nan wouldn’t let anyone touch the food. She insisted on doing it all herself.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair,” Cash says, frowning a little. “Now that I know how hard it is, I’ll never leave you to do it all alone. I might not be as good of a cook as you, but I’ll do as much as I can.”

I love the way he talks about Thanksgiving, like it’s just a given that we’ll be celebrating it together in the future. I know I want to.

When I think about it, a series of images flash through my head. Cash and I cooking next year, maybe with a goofy puppy scrounging for missed scraps on the floor. Inviting our friends over for dinner, making our own kind of family. Sitting around the table with Cash gently rubbing my swollen belly, and a little boy with dark hair and green-gold eyes by his side.

So yeah. When it comes to Cash, I’m all in.

How could I not be? He’s everything I could want. Protective, kind, smart, funny, sensitive, not to mention handsome. And I trust him with my heart. I know he’s not perfect—I’m certainly not—but I know Cash would never intentionally hurt me.

A swell of love sweeps over me, and I fling my arms around Cash. “I love you so much.”

His arms come around me, enfolding me in his embrace. “I love you, too. More than I can say.”

We stand together for a minute, just holding each other and enjoying the closeness. Then another timer ruins the moment—again—letting me know it’s time to make the gravy. “I have to make the gravy,” I explain as I pull away. “The turkey should be ready to carve in about thirty minutes.”

Cash’s phone buzzes from across the kitchen. He crosses to pick it up, glancing at the screen. “Ben is on his way. So he should be here in about ten minutes.”

I check my watch. “Perfect timing. And Thea should be here any minute.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind entertaining Ben and his daughter?” Cash looks at me worriedly. “I know you were only planning for three people, but when Ben mentioned how poorly his own Thanksgiving went...”

“I don’t mind at all. Really. It’s nice to get to know all of your friends.”

Not only is Ben the paramedic who helped me twice, but he’s a single dad struggling to make Thanksgiving special for his young daughter. Apparently, yesterday’s attempt at cooking a turkey failed miserably, resulting in a charred, *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*-style mess. So when Ben

texted Cash, wondering if I had any advice for a second attempt today, it made more sense to just invite him over.

Cash comes beside me, his hand resting at the small of my back. “Ben is a good guy. He had a rough time when his ex left; his daughter, Laila, was only three, and he was working long hours for a cybersecurity company in Manhattan. But he started contracting out work from home, so he could be around Laila as much as possible.”

“Laila’s mother just *left*?”

“Yeah,” Cash sighs. “No real explanation. She just never came home one day. Eventually, she told Ben she was never coming back. She hasn’t seen Ben or Laila since. Ben feels guilty about it sometimes, like Laila is missing out on having a mom. But it’s not his fault; he tried reaching out to Amanda—his ex—and she said she wasn’t interested in having a family.”

“God.” My heart twists. “Poor Ben. And his poor daughter. That’s terrible.”

“Ben tries really hard to do everything for Laila, so she doesn’t feel like she’s missing out.” He pauses to kiss my cheek. “Which is why it’s so nice of you to invite them here. And Laila is great. I think you’ll really like her.”

His phone buzzes again, and he grabs it off the counter with a smile. “My phone has been busier today than it is when I’m at work.”

Then he reads the screen, and his smile dissolves, his lips pressing into a firm line.



I turn the burner down so the water doesn't boil over.  
“What's wrong?”

Cash glares at the phone, his jaw working. Flutters of unease fill my stomach. Yesterday and today, it's felt like we're in this nice little holiday bubble—no bad news, no threats—is that about to be over?

Turning to face Cash, my voice wobbles a little as I ask again, “Is something wrong?”

He takes a deep breath and sighs it out, visibly calming himself down. “It's Brett.”

*Oh no.* If stupid Brett ruins this day for Cash... “What does he want?”

Cash shakes his head, frowning. “He says he's sorry. That he knows he screwed up, and that he hopes one day I'll forgive him. And he's headed to rehab on Monday, somewhere upstate. That's all.”

“And...” I keep my tone carefully neutral. “What do you think?”

“I think—” He taps a few times on the screen, then lays it flat on the counter. “I think that I'm not responding. If he's getting help, that's great. But I'm done trying to have a relationship with Brett. And I blocked his number. Again.”

“Cash.” I wind my arms around his waist, squeezing him tightly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, hun.” He looks down at me, the stress wiped from his features, his gaze soft. “I have you. That's all I need.”

*I love him so much!*

When Cash's phone buzzes again, his head whips over and he nearly snarls at it. "Seriously?"

"I'll look at it," I soothe, and quickly snatch up the phone to check it. Thankfully, it's not Brett. "It's just Ben; he wanted to give a heads up that he's here. He's just unloading the car."

His shoulders drop in relief. "Okay. I'll go let them in. I'll be right back."

"Okay." I grin at him and stretch up to give him a quick kiss.

As he walks away, I frown at his phone. I really hope the message from Brett doesn't put a damper on today. I want so badly for Cash to have a great holiday—when he told me how he hadn't celebrated Thanksgiving here since his grandparents passed away; I wanted to cry.

While I was in Teach for America, I never came home for Thanksgiving. I didn't have much time off, and it was easier to pay for my mom to come visit me. But now I wish I had come back here, despite the stress of traveling, that I had insisted Cash join my mom and me for Thanksgiving instead.

I should have thought of it. But all the holidays I would FaceTime him, he never said anything about spending them all alone.

Well, he won't be alone anymore. Not if I have anything to say about it.

"Look who I found," Cash says brightly as he walks back into the kitchen. Just behind him are Thea, Ben, and an

adorable girl clutching a book in her arms.

Ben meets my gaze, smiling, and wraps an arm around his little girl. “Ari. Nice to see you again. Thanks so much for inviting us over for dinner. And this is Laila”—his blue eyes twinkle, and he looks down at her—“who is very pleased that she doesn’t have to try one of my turkeys again.”

Laila shyly looks over at me and says solemnly, “Dad burned the turkey really bad. The whole house stinks.”

“Not the entire house,” Ben retorts, shaking his head affectionately at Laila. “Just downstairs. Upstairs is fine.”

Cash chuckles, clapping Ben on the back. “Don’t feel bad. There’s no way I’d be able to cook a turkey on my own. Ari’s in charge of everything.”

I rush over to give Thea and Ben quick hugs, then offer my hand to Laila. “Nice to meet you, Laila. I’m Ari.”

She hesitates, then takes my hand. “Dad says you’re a teacher. Do you teach second grade, like my teacher does?”

“No, I teach high school. English, so we do a lot of reading and writing.” Her eyes brighten, and I ask, “Do you like to read?”

“I *love* to read,” she enthuses, smiling broadly now. “It’s my favorite thing. I have tons of books at home.”

“Well,” I glance over at Thea. “Did you know that Thea is a *librarian*? I bet she has some great book suggestions for you.”

It's like I just told Laila that Thea is Santa and the Easter Bunny combined. She yanks her hand out of mine and rushes over to Thea. "You're a librarian? My librarian at school is the best. How many books have you read? What's your favorite book? I love books about dragons. What do you like to read about?"

Thea is laughing as she tries to answer all the questions, and Ben says, "As you can tell, she loves to read. But I'm sure you don't want to talk about work right now."

I don't miss the way he looks at Thea, his eyes lighting with interest. Nor do I miss my friend's cheeks pinking up as she answers, "I don't mind. I love books, too."

*Thea and Ben...* I tuck that away for a later time.

A minute later, Laila has dragged Thea into the living room to show off all the books she brought over, Ben tagging along with a big smile on his face.

"Looks like everyone is getting along," Cash observes, walking back over to me.

"I can't believe they've never met," I add. "Considering they've both lived in Sleepy Hollow for years."

"Ben's been busy with work and Laila, and volunteering at the ambulance corps. But now—"

I finish his sentence. "Ben might be taking some trips to the library with Laila?"

His lips quirk up. "Maybe." Cash takes my waist and pulls me to him, lowering his head for a soft kiss. "It's funny, I've

had friends who got into relationships, and then it seemed like they wanted everyone around them to fall in love, too. I always wondered why.”

“You’re right.” Thinking back, each time one of my friends coupled up, they were so certain that I should, too. And I did wonder why they cared so much about it.

Cash side-eyes the pot of simmering water and stirs it briskly. Then he cups my nape, gazing into my eyes with so much love I can hardly breathe. “I think I get it now,” he says. “Now that I’m in love. Now that I have you.”

His thumb strokes my cheek as he continues, his voice gently rough. “Now that I know how incredible it can be, finding that one person, how happy it makes me, I want that for everyone I care about. I want them to feel the same joy that you bring to me.”

My heart flips over. “You make me happier than I ever dreamt I could be.”

And then my phone timer goes off again. I make a face at it, grumbling, “I like Thanksgiving, but it keeps ruining all the romance.”

Cash laughs. “All this cooking definitely doesn’t leave much room for sexier things, does it? But later, after everyone is gone, I was thinking maybe we could sit by the fire, recreate one of those scenes you like so much...”

“With eggnog?”

He makes a little face of distaste, then smiles at me. “Eggnog for you, at least.”

“And will it be...” I brush my hand down his taut stomach, lingering for a moment below his waist. “R-rated?”

“Oh, Ari,” he growls, his eyes darkening with desire. “It will *definitely* be R-rated tonight.”

## Chapter 18

### **CASH**

I start the morning by kissing Ari all over, gently rousing her from sleep.

First, I kiss her hand, lifting it from my chest, pressing soft kisses along her delicate fingers and her soft palm.

Then her arm, brushing my lips across her pale skin, lingering at each scattered freckle.

When she curls into me, her head resting on my arm, I kiss the top of her head, inhaling the sweet vanilla scent of her shampoo.

At this point, she's waking up, pale green eyes blinking drowsily at me. I kiss her nose, and her lips curve up, so I capture those next. Still just light touches, this is a slow seduction, just as I imagined while I lay in bed early this morning, watching her sleep.

Everything about her is so soft, so perfect—her glossy hair spread across the pillow, her silken skin, her small hand on my

chest, fragile but so strong—I almost burst from the rightness of it.

I want to worship her body this morning, give her some small measure of what she's given me.

Not just *two* incredible holidays, but everything else along with it. All her love and generosity and kindness, and the way she worked so hard to make my Thanksgiving special. But what Ari doesn't realize is, everything with her is special. As long as she's with me, I'm complete.

Now that Ari's awake, I move on to more parts of her body to kiss. As she watches me, I cover her other arm and hand, her neck, and all along her collarbone. When I pull down the blanket and start kissing my way down her chest, she giggles and asks, "What are you doing?"

"Kissing you everywhere," I tell her.

I peel away Ari's little sleep-shorts and the oversized Cornell T-shirt she stole from me.

And then I take my time.

I take my time with her breasts, plump and pink-tipped, just the right size for my hands.

Her stomach, so sensitive—she gasps as I trace the tiny constellation of freckles above her belly button with my tongue.

I turn my attention to her legs, slender and pale, kissing every inch of them.



And then I move to the apex of her thighs, lifting her legs and draping them over my shoulders. I lap at her opening folds, tasting the dampness that's there just for me. When I touch that tiny bundle of nerves with my tongue, her hips jerk, and Ari moans, "*Cash.*"

Her belly quivers as I keep devouring her, stroking and licking. I suck at her little swollen bud and she jolts toward me, her hips surging erratically. Placing my hand over her belly, I hold her in place and keep going, bringing her to the edge and slowing, building the intensity.

"God, Cash," she breathes, as I insert one finger, then two, inside her. Her inner walls—so slick, hot, perfect—clutch at me.

My fingers plunge in and out, her muscles fluttering, and I curve them to hit *that spot* inside, flicking my tongue.

And then I close my lips around her bud and suck hard, and she cries out, louder than I've heard her before.

"*Cash—*"

Her inner walls convulse around my fingers, drenching them with her release. It's incredible, and when I look at Ari's face, the expression of absolute pleasure and satisfaction is everything.

"That was one time," I tell her, my voice throaty with need. "Are you ready for another?"

Ari's eyes light up. "Oh, yes," she purrs, sounding so damn sexy. "Definitely."

“Good,” I growl, and yank my shorts off, flinging them across the room. I start to move over Ari, but she stops me, putting her hand on my chest.

“Wait.” Her lips curve into a wicked smile. “Let’s try this instead.”

Then she rolls over and gets on her elbows and knees, peering back over her shoulder at me. “How about this way?”

Her perfect ass is right in front of me and I almost swallow my tongue. “This works,” I choke out.

If I thought Ari was sexy from the front, seeing her this way—the curve of her cheeks, the flare of her hips, tapering to her slender waist—she’s incredible.

I start to sink into her slowly, but she pushes back, taking me to the hilt in one thrust. The feel of her tight around me, hot and silken, and watching Ari trust me with this; it’s almost enough to finish immediately.

But I force it back. I promised Ari a second time, and it’s happening.

So, I steady my pace, ignoring the urge to go faster, focusing on bringing Ari back to the edge again. Then I reach around to that spot right above our joining, and I start to rub it gently—I know she has to be extra sensitive and I don’t want to make it uncomfortable for her.

It gradually builds, faster and more intense, my thrusts more urgent, Ari coming back to meet me. Our bodies crash together in an explosion of heat and primal need.

I lean forward, kissing the back of her neck, her jaw, and then she turns her head and I capture her mouth. One hand palms her breast, flicking at her taut nipple. Little moans are spilling into my mouth, desperate sounds, and Ari drags her mouth away to breathe, “Harder. Now. *Please.*”

*Oh, fuck.*

I cant her hips up to change the angle, and I go even deeper. Faster. We’re both gasping, my heart is thundering, and I’m *so close*—

My thumb works at her bud, pressing and flicking harder than before. And this time when I surge forward, Ari jerks, her hips freezing as little detonations ripple around me. “Cash, oh, Cash,” she moans, her muscles tightening around me, pulling me along with her.

It’s a white wall of pleasure; I’m overwhelmed with sensation as I pulse into her, this incredible pressure releasing. Everything is so raw and my body is filled with static electricity, each touch sending little shocks zipping through me.

Being inside Ari like this, a feeling of one-ness fills me. This is where we’re both meant to be.

I feel Ari’s leg muscles quivering, so as much as I’d like to stay inside her, I reluctantly pull out and gently turn her over. “I’ll be right back,” I tell her, quickly going to the bathroom and coming back with a washcloth.

Once I've taken care of Ari, I pick her up and move us to the other side of the bed, laying down and draping her body across me. I wrap my arms around her, loving the feel of her naked body against mine.

She nuzzles into my neck, and I can feel her smiling. "Cash?"

I kiss the top of her head. "Yeah, hun?"

"Just so you know. You can wake me up like that anytime."



"Do you think they might have good news?"

Ari's hand is cold and trembling in mine. As she looks up at me, her eyes are big and pleading. "It could be good news, right?"

Her features are pinched, a marked difference from when we lay in bed just a few hours ago, relaxed and sated. I wish I could pick her up and carry her back to bed, kiss her until all the stress fades away again. Or turn back the clock and not answer the phone at all, so we wouldn't be having this meeting with Cole.

Gently, I say, "I'm not sure. It's possible."

But judging from Cole's tone when he called, I'm thinking it's not.

When my phone rang, Ari was still snuggled next to me, warm and soft in my arms. I thought about turning off my phone, silencing the outside world, and enjoying a lazy

Saturday at home with her. We could laze in bed for another hour, then we'd make a gigantic brunch, followed by a relaxing afternoon watching movies and cuddling.

But then my practical side kicked in, nagging at me, asking, *but what if it's something important?*

So I answered Cole's call, and now I wish I hadn't. All he said was a somber, "We have news about the shooting. Do you have time to meet today?"

I wanted to press him for more information over the phone, but Ari was right there; there was no way she wouldn't hear it too. And selfishly, I wanted to have at least a few more hours before hearing news I had a sinking feeling wouldn't be good.

Not that either of us could relax. For the last few hours, Ari's been too quiet, huddled on the couch in the living room, staring at one of the books I bought her but not actually turning any pages. I tried to get her to eat, but she just pushed the food around on her plate until everything was cold and congealed and soggy. And she keeps giving me these fake little smiles every time I ask if she's okay.

It's a stupid question. Of course, she's not okay. But I don't know what else to say.

Ari's sitting rigidly beside me, clutching my hand, and shooting brief glances toward the time on the phone. Cole said they'd be over at two, and it's just a few minutes short of that now.

“Maybe they found out it was an accident,” Ari offers quietly, doubt bleeding through her words. “A hunter, maybe. Or a kid messing around.”

The black-clothed person I saw with the full-face mask was *not* a hunter. And my property isn’t remotely close to any hunting grounds. But I’m not going to say that. So I just go with a vague, “Maybe.”

The doorbell chimes, and Ari flinches, her fingers tightening around mine. “It’s okay, hun,” I soothe, glancing at my phone. “It’s just Cole and Finn.”

“I know. Sorry.” She grimaces, shaking her head. “I don’t know why I’m so jumpy.”

“It’s fine, Ari.” I stroke her hair and press a soft kiss to her head. “I’m just going to let them in.”

Forcing another small smile, she meets my gaze. “Of course.”

When I greet Cole and Finn at the door, their grim expressions confirm exactly what I thought about this meeting. Pitching my voice low, I ask, “How bad is it?”

Cole’s jaw goes tight, his gaze shadowing. “It’s not good.”

My stomach turns to iron, dropping to my feet. “Shit.”

As we head to the living room, it feels like I’m being led to the gallows. Every step is one closer to receiving news I don’t want Ari to hear. Because I know it wasn’t a hunter or an accident. And any other outcome is going to upset her. Badly.

Ari tries to put on a good front as we come back into the room. She smiles at Cole and Finn, asking brightly, “Cole. Did you have a nice Thanksgiving?”

Cole takes a seat on the other couch, returning her smile. “I did. We managed to pull together an edible meal. Not as good as I heard yours was, though.”

“It was fantastic,” Finn agrees. “I haven’t stopped thinking about that caramel apple pie.”

“Oh, Finn.” Ari shifts her gaze to him. “I have some leftovers for you from yesterday. Not as much as I thought I’d have, since we had extra guests. But there should still be enough for a meal or two.”

“Ari, you didn’t have to do that.” Finn’s somber expression lifts a little. “But I won’t turn it down, either.”

Ari keeps smiling at the two men, but it’s brittle and strained. Her eyes are worried and anxious, and when I take her hand again as I sit down, it’s shaking.

After another few minutes of small talk, we get to the point of the meeting. Cole sets his shoulders and says, “So, our news. We found the shooter.”

Ari sucks in a breath. “How?”

“We had to pull footage from cameras in the area,” he replies. “Video doorbells, traffic lights, CCTV, and satellites. From there, we cross-checked vehicles and possible suspects that were in the vicinity at the time of the shooting. The

shooter parked several blocks away, so we had to follow his path using several different cameras.”

“He used his own car, so once we found that, we had the identity of the suspect.” Cole pauses, then explains, “The reason it took so long is because Leo had to use some... *creative* methods of accessing much of the footage.”

“Like hacking?” Ari stops, flushing. “Nevermind. It’s none of my business how you got it. I just... You won’t get in trouble, will you?”

Cole gives Ari a kind look. “No. Leo is very good at what he does. But maybe don’t mention it outside this room. It keeps things less complicated.”

Ari nods quickly. “Of course. I won’t say anything.”

I don’t care about how they found out, I just want to know *who*. “And the identity of the shooter?”

Cole gives me a sharp nod. “His name is Nathan Edgewater. He used to be a cop in the city until he lost his job a year ago due to drug abuse. Since then, his wife left with the kids, and he’s gotten himself in a lot of debt. Drugs, gambling, high-interest loans, house in foreclosure...”

“And?” My voice is tight.

“He turned to the dark web, looking for jobs that would give him some quick money. Then he found the ad for this job. A quick hit, money up front and more after it was done.” Cole hesitates, his forehead creasing.



“Who was he supposed to shoot?” Ari’s voice is stretched tight, close to breaking.

Cole sighs, regret etching into his features. After a heavy pause, he says, “You, Ari. He was supposed to watch for a time when you were out in the open. He wouldn’t do it when you were going to school; he didn’t want to risk hitting a kid. So when he saw you in the yard...”

*Fuck.*

My worst fear. Cold. Icy. Suffocating.

And then the anger. A burning need to kill this man.

Anger ignites into an inferno of rage. “He wouldn’t shoot at the school, but he’d shoot an innocent woman?”

Ari flinches, and I try to tamp down my anger, but it’s so fucking hard.

She’s breathing fast, stuttering out, “Was... was it... Kyle?”

“We don’t know yet, Ari.” Cole leans forward, his eyes not leaving hers. “But we’ll find out. It’s going to take some time to trace the person who posted the ad, since it’s all anonymous on the dark web. But there are ways to do it, and we will. I promise.”

I clench my jaw hard, trying to keep from exploding.

Ari is shaking hard, her hand jumping in mine. She whispers, “Since he didn’t finish the job...”

*Fuck.*

Cole meets her gaze, calm confidence in his dark eyes. “We’re going to protect you, Ari. No one will hurt you.”

Ari turns to me, stricken. Her chin is jutting out, trembling. Tears well up as she says, “I knew it was my fault.”

“Honey, *no*.” I wrap my arm around her, tugging her to my side.

Shit. She’s shaking so hard her teeth are chattering. “Sweetheart—”

“He could have hit Cash.” Her eyes go back to Cole, tears spilling free. “He could have killed him. Cash pushed me down. But then—” her voice catches, cracks. “It was supposed to be me. But Cash...”

Cole starts, gently, “Ari—”

Ari turns back to me. “He could have killed you. And it’s all my fault.” Her face crumples. “Cash, I’m so sorry.”

She starts sobbing, terrible, painful cries that tear at my heart. And her eyes—the fear and guilt and anguish—she looks broken.

“Honey, *no*.” I start to pull her into my arms, but she jerks away, her gaze skittering around the room. As her eyes pass by Cole and Finn, she shrinks into herself, gasping between sobs, “I’m so sorry... I’m sorry... I shouldn’t...”

Finn soothes, “Ari, it’s okay.”

“It’s not.” Ari looks at me desperately. “I can’t. I’m... sorry —”

Then she jumps up from the couch and darts out of the room.

My chest is carved out, aching. This is worse than anything I've felt, watching the woman I love suffer. Blaming herself for something that isn't her fault. Being tortured over and over by the same sadistic monster.

"Fuck." I need to be with her.

I'm on my feet, about to run after Ari, when I remember Cole and Finn.

They both stand, wearing matching sympathetic expressions. "I'm sorry," Cole says. "I know this is hard."

"It's too much for her," I grit out, teeth grinding, spikes of pain shooting through my jaw. "Even if we can keep her safe, this is going to break her." My heart wrenches, the pain stealing my breath. "I need to do *something*."

Finn's expression is stormy. "It's fucked up," he agrees, his voice rough.

Cole meets my gaze. "It won't be too much longer. Once the trial is over—"

Rage flares again. "That's weeks from now. And in the meantime, Ari has to suffer over and over? I have to watch the woman I love in pain, apologizing to me for this sick fuck trying to have her killed?"

Before either of them can speak, I know what I'm going to do. "I'm going to see Morgan."

“If you confront Kyle, it could backfire,” Cole warns. “It could affect the case. Or he could get more aggressive.”

“Not Kyle,” I snap. “His father. I have enough contacts in the city to impact his business dealings. He needs to know what will happen if he doesn’t get his son under control.”

Fuck. I should have done this already.

Cole’s expression is skeptical, but he says, “If you want backup, just say the word.”

I lift my chin at him. “Thanks.”

And now that I have a plan, I need to go to Ari.

“I’ve got to—” I glance in the direction of the stairs. “Can you let yourself out?”

Cole and Finn nod in unison. “Of course.”

“Go,” Cole says. “We’ll be fine. Go take care of your woman.”

My woman. Who is probably crying upstairs, wondering where I am. Blaming herself.

She needs me.

## Chapter 19

**ARI**

This is the worst I've ever felt in my life.

I can't stop crying.

The tears keep coming, torrents of them, my eyes are swollen and burning. Horrible, gasping, painful sobs keep tearing out; it feels like my heart is ripping out of my chest. My breaths are coming in stuttering little gasps, fast enough to make me lightheaded.

But the pain. Oh, God. Cash.

Every time I think I'm getting a handle on my tears, the same thought comes crashing back. *Cash could have died because of me.*

And then the sobs erupt all over again.

I'm on Cash's bed and being here makes it even worse. Because I catch his smell, or I remember this morning, before

everything went so bad, and I want to go back there so badly. To pretend none of this ever happened.

Cash could have died because of me.

He knocked me down. He could have been hit instead of me. *God.*

This pain.

I'm folded into myself, hunched over, clutching my knees. I don't know how else to keep from coming apart.

When my dad died, it was horrible. But this? Knowing the man I love more than anything could have been killed because of me?

“Oh, honey.” I never heard the door open, but Cash is here, the mattress dipping as he sits beside me.

“Please, sweetheart.” The pain in his voice makes me sob harder all over again. *All of this is my fault.*

“Ari, honey, you're going to make yourself sick.” He lifts me up, gathering me in his arms, settling me on his lap. One hand strokes my back in large circles, the other cupping my nape. “Just try to settle your breathing, okay?”

*I can't.* Everything Cash does makes me feel worse.

His touch on my back, so gentle and soothing, the soft kisses he's pressing to the top of my head, his voice, so worried—they all remind me how much I love him. And then the devastation hits me all over again.

“It’s all my fault.” A knife stabs through my heart. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper into his neck. “*I’m so sorry.*”

“No.” Cash hardens his tone. “Ari, no.” He cups my cheek, forcing me to look at him. I’m still crying and I hate that I can’t stop it and I’m so weak in front of him.

“Just look at me, okay?” His eyes hold mine, reassuring and calm. He takes one of my hands and puts it on his chest. “Breathe with me. Don’t talk, just listen to me. I need you to calm down, and then we’ll talk about this.”

Calming down seems an impossibility. My breath is stuttering, my heart beating hummingbird-fast. Two words are ping-ponging in my head. *My fault. My fault. My fault.*

But eventually, my sobs slow to small shudders and gasps, and I sag against Cash, completely wrung out. I’m sniffing into his shoulder—so attractive—and my face feels tight from crying.

Cash kisses my forehead, so soft and tender it nearly makes me start crying again. “I’m going to get some tissues. I’ll be right back.”

When he sets me on the bed, the loss of contact is terrible. But he’s back right away, a box of tissues in hand, and he pulls me back into his embrace. He hands me tissue after tissue while I blow my nose—I try to get up so he won’t see, but his arms tighten around me and he says, “Ari, sweetheart, I don’t care. I just want to hold you.”

There's a sizable pile of tissues on the nightstand by the time I'm done—lovely—but wonderful Cash just chuckles. “You should see my tissue piles when I have a cold. It's like the pyramids in here.”

Which I'm sure is not true—Cash is probably the neatest man I've ever met—but I appreciate him trying to make me feel better. Which, dammit, makes me feel terrible again.

“Now.” Cash shifts so I'm sideways in his lap, and he looks down at me very seriously. “I don't want to hear you talking about this being your fault. It is *not*. At all.”

It is. Miserably, I start, “But, I went on the date, and he—”

“Going on a date is not a mistake.”

“Maybe... but... it's still because of me... all of this...”

And then another thought comes to me. I hate it, but it might be the right thing to do. “Maybe I should leave.”

Cash rears back like I struck him. “*Why?*”

Tears prickle at my eyes again. In a small voice, I say, “I could go home. And we wouldn't see each other until after the trial. Then... you'd be safe.”

There's a moment of silence when I think Cash thinks it's a good idea, too. I should start packing; do I have food at my house, and how will I sleep through the night alone?

Then his expression goes fierce. “Ari, I can't believe you just said that.”

“What?”



“Do you seriously think I would leave you? Now?”

He looks pissed now, and I feel myself shriveling. “But you’d be safe...”

Cash frowns at me, his brows winging down. “*Ariana Quinn.*”

*Eeep.* Last names are never good. I squeak out, “Yes?”

“I love you. I. Love. You. More than anyone I’ve ever loved in my life.” His gaze softens. “And I know you’re scared, and you’re feeling guilty—which you shouldn’t—so I’m cutting you a break here. But I can’t believe you would ever think I’d just *leave* you.”

“I—”

“Shh.” His fingers press over my lips. “Listen. I am going to tell you some things that are the absolute truth. One, I love you, and I am not leaving you. Period. And second, none of this is your fault. None. Of. It. I will not allow you to keep blaming yourself.”

“And sweetheart.” His voice gentles. “You’ve been through a terrible time, and I wish more than anything that I could take that away. But you’ve also been incredibly brave. And soon, the trial will be over, and you can walk away knowing you did what you felt was right. What *is* right. And you’ll be walking away with me by your side.”

“What about...”

“What, honey?”

“After. When the trial is... do you still want...” I trail off, another fear closing my throat.

Cash frames my face, brushing at the salty streaks on my cheeks. His eyes fill with love. “Ari, I want you to stay here. Not just now. After. For as long as you want to stay here. I love you being here. I don’t want you to leave.”

A spark kindles and warms in my chest, chasing away some of the chill that’s been shaking me. “I don’t want to leave, either.” I snuggle into his neck again, needing the comfort of his warm skin, the reassuring beat of his heart against mine. “I want to stay here with you.”

His hand strokes down my hair, achingly gentle. “I love you, Ari. So much.”

“I love you, too.”



I’m not sure I’m up for a surprise tonight.

But after Cash was so sweet and patient with me earlier, I didn’t have the heart to say no. Not after he calmed me down and cuddled me, cleaned up my mountain of tissues, brought me water and ibuprofen for the headache I got from crying, and he told me he loved me at least fifty times.

After all of that, he got up with this glint in his eye and said, “Okay, why don’t you rest for a bit? Take a shower, a nap, read a little... and I’m going to come back up here to get you in a couple of hours.”

“What’s in a couple of hours?” I asked.

“A surprise.” My stomach dipped, but Cash looked so pleased about it, I had to say yes.

So one shower, a short nap, and fifty pages of a cheesy Christmas romance novel later, I’m waiting for Cash to come upstairs to reveal his surprise.

I’m just hoping he didn’t invite people over. I’m still feeling raw and tender, and I don’t feel up to being around anyone but Cash right now. But if he did invite his friends, I’ll make the best of it.

But if his surprise is watching movies and cuddling, I’d much prefer that.

A light knock at the door announces my impending surprise. After a moment, the door cracks open and Cash pokes his head inside. His gaze lands on me, quickly appraising. I can tell he’s looking to see if I was crying again.

He crosses the room, sitting on the bed beside me. “How are you doing, hun?”

“I’m okay.” I give him a little smile. “But you don’t have to knock to come into your own bedroom, you know.”

Cash cups my cheek, leaning in to brush a quick kiss across my lips. “I didn’t want to startle you by coming in without any warning.”

Oh. This man. I hug him hard. “Thank you.”

His arms come around me, solid and warm and comforting. After a moment, he asks, “How’s your headache? Are you up to coming downstairs?”

“It’s all gone.” Pulling away from him, I meet his gaze. “What do you have planned downstairs?”

Enthusiasm lights his eyes. “It’s a surprise.”

“Okay.” Please let it not be a bunch of people.

Cash stands and holds out a hand to me. “Don’t look so nervous, Ari. I think you’ll like it.”

As we walk down the stairs, I run through various possibilities in my head. An impromptu *cheer Ari up after she finds out she’s the target of a killer party*? Did he attempt to make a fancy dinner? Order something from one of our favorite restaurants?

Just before we get to the living room, Cash stops. “Close your eyes.”

A flock of birds takes flight in my stomach. “How about a hint?”

“No.” His voice firms. “Close your eyes.”

So I obediently shut my eyes and let Cash lead me into the living room. I cast my senses about, trying to get some kind of clue about the surprise. The room is quiet, except for the crackling of flames in the fireplace. No strong aromas of food—no pungent garlic, savory sauces—just a faint scent of pine.

Cash walks me a few more steps and says, “Okay, open.”

It takes me a moment to take in what I'm seeing.

Beside the fireplace sits a tall spruce, lush and full, ready for trimming. On the floor in front of it are dozens of boxes filled with ornaments. Strands of lights are coiled beside them, enough to wrap the tree three times over.

One of the couches is covered with an array of Christmas decor—a trio of carved wooden snowmen, sleek metal reindeer with red bows around their necks, a stack of red and green pillows, candle holders, even a duo of adorable gnomes with giant beards and tall hats.

Then there's the coffee table overflowing with cookies—gingerbread, spritz, frosted trees and candy canes, enough to feed everyone at the station for days. Alongside the cookies is a pitcher of something that looks like eggnog, two filled glasses next to it.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Cash pulls out his phone and taps it a few times. Classical Christmas music starts playing, and he grins at me. “Didn't want to give away the surprise too early.”

“Cash...” I keep looking at everything. There's so much, and it's all so beautiful.

“I thought we could decorate the tree tonight.” Cash squeezes my hand as he looks down at me. “If you want. I just...” His eyes flicker with uncertainty. “I thought it could be a good memory for us.”

“Where did it all come from?”

“Well. Originally, I thought we’d go to buy everything, but then I had the idea for tonight instead.” Cash hesitates before continuing. “I called the store in town that sells all this stuff, and I just asked for one of everything. But we don’t have to use it all, whatever you don’t like, we can return or donate.”

“Is that okay, Ari? Did I mess up by buying all this?” His expression is shifting to worry, and I realize I still haven’t told him how incredible this is.

“No,” I rush to tell him. “You didn’t mess up. I’m just taking it all in. All the ornaments, and the decorations, and the cookies—it’s a total surprise, and I love it.”

“Oh, good.” Cash lets out a heavy sigh of relief. “It’s not too much?”

“It’s amazing.” Still holding his hand, I tow him along with me as I approach the tree and ornaments. There are hundreds of them, delicate glass-blown bulbs, cute little fuzzy mouse creatures, waving Santas and crystal snowflakes.

Cash stoops, plucking one box from the rest. “This one is special. I bought it a while ago.” He hands it to me with the cutest expression, shyly hopeful, his cheeks flushing a little. “Maybe it’s silly...”

When I look inside the box, tears spring to my eyes. But for once, they’re happy tears.

It’s an ornament with a photo of us from high school. And below it, an engraving.

*Love Always.*

“Oh, Cash.”

His voice goes rough. “It’s true. Even when I didn’t realize it. I’ve always loved you.” His brow creases. “You’re *crying*.”

“Happy tears,” I assure him. “I love it, Cash. And I love you. This is perfect.”

## Chapter 20

### **CASH**

I don't like keeping secrets from Ari.

But if I tell her I'm heading into the city to confront Lucas Morgan, Kyle's father, she'll be worrying about it all day. And I don't want to give her something else to worry about. I'll tell her after it's done, and hopefully I'll have some good news to accompany it.

Like Lucas agreeing to rein in his son—accepting that Kyle is going to jail, and there's no way he's getting out of it this time.

I'm certain the elder Morgan has been bankrolling Kyle for years, allowing him to pay off the women he victimized. But this time, I have the contacts to impact his business. I know plenty of investors who could be persuaded to stop doing business with Lucas Morgan.

And I know men like him. He may want to protect his son, but if he could lose money from it? There's a chance I can



convince him to see it my way.

Or he could deny everything, take the financial hit, and my visit will have been for nothing. Which is another reason I'm not telling Ari about it. I really don't want to get her hopes up, only to crush them if this doesn't work out the way I want it to.

"I'm ready, sorry, my hair wouldn't agree with me today." Ari comes rushing into the kitchen, looking slightly flustered but perfect to me. She's wearing a fuzzy pink sweater that hugs her curves, her hair is like silk cascading down her back, and she has the cutest sheepish smile curving across her lips.

"You look great, hun." I wrap my arms around her, dipping my head for a kiss. We're on a schedule, but I can't resist tracing the seam of her mouth, dipping my tongue inside and tasting her. Ari sighs as she leans into me, clutching my arms, her breasts pressing temptingly against my chest.

All too soon, she pulls away, a little pout appearing. "I wish we could stay home and skip work."

"I know." Except not today, because I have a deal to make. "Maybe tomorrow," I offer with a smile. "You could call in sick, and I can work from home."

"I wish." Ari gives a rueful chuckle. "I've already missed too much work." She grabs the travel mug of coffee I have waiting for her, taking a sip and making a little moan of pleasure. "You make the best coffee, Cash."

Her moan sends a jolt of arousal straight through me. Ari glances down at the bulge in my pants and laughs. “Seriously?”

I give her a heated look. “Don’t make those sounds, then. You know what they do to me.”

Ari smirks at me, her cheeks pink. “I know.”

Shaking my head, my lips twitching, I say, “Okay, trouble. If you want to get to work on time, we have to go. Or—” I slip my hand under her sweater, trailing my fingers across her belly. “You’ll have to call for a sub, because I’ll be keeping you busy here.”

“Fine,” she huffs, her eyes sparkling. “But we’re revisiting this tonight.”

I’m so relieved to see Ari smiling after the news of this past weekend, I would agree to anything to make her happy. But sex after work? Definitely not a problem. “I think we should revisit it several times, at least.”

As we head to Ari’s school, her good mood continues. We talk about plans for dinner—another cheesy casserole, no complaints there. Ari tells me about the newest Hallmark movie that she wants to watch; ”all about a Christmas ornament factory this time, and, *shocker*, a big-city businesswoman who wants to take it over.

“But this time...” Ari says, trying to stifle her laughter—she knows how silly the plots are. “There’s an ornament designing

contest, as well. And the winner of the contest could win enough money to save the struggling ornament company.”

By the time we pull up by Ari’s school, we’ve both come up with several of our own ridiculous movie plots and we’re snickering like little kids. “I know,” Ari announces triumphantly. “A Christmas dog show, but all the dogs have to be dressed like Santa. And there’s a jaded woman from the”—she pauses for emphasis—“*big city* who has to judge it, but she’s been scared of dogs since she was chased by one as a child.”

“Sounds amazing,” I agree. “You should write screenplays for Hallmark.”

“I know,” Ari replies solemnly, then bursts into laughter.

After checking our surroundings, I escort Ari into school. At this time of day I feel relatively safe—there are plenty of other teachers and students milling around, so I don’t think anyone would chance taking a shot at her now. But I still keep it quick, keeping Ari tucked against me, shielding her, as we make the quick trip from my car.

Once inside, I give Ari a more chaste kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be back for you this afternoon—I’ll text you when I’m here.”

Her eyebrows go up. “You don’t have to stay at work?” Most days, I bring Ari to work, but one of the Blade and Arrow guys picks her up afterwards, since I don’t usually leave the office until after five, and Ari gets done with school at three-thirty.

“I’m out of the office today,” I tell her. “I have a meeting in the city. So I’ll come straight here afterwards.”

It’s not really a lie. I really do have a meeting.

“Okay.” She glances at her watch and frowns. “I have to go or I won’t have things ready for first period. Have a safe trip. I love you.”

I give her another quick kiss before backing away. “Love you, too.”



I’m still steaming after my meeting with Lucas Morgan.

The old saying, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree? It definitely applies here.

When he first agreed to meet with me without advance notice, I had a brief flicker of hope. Maybe he’d be reasonable, or at least practical enough to accept what I was offering.

But as soon as I met him, I knew. Smugly smiling, his attempt at dominance when he shook my hand—not likely, as I’m half his age and have twice the muscle as him. Pompous, flashing his watch with the embedded diamonds, barking orders at his harried assistant... And he had this greasy feel about him.

Once I met Lucas Morgan, I knew he was well aware of everything his son did, and he didn’t care.

But he cares about money, which is what I led with. Making vague statements and veiled threats, I let him know he had a

day to think about it. One day to decide if he wanted to get his son under control, or if he'd prefer to take his chances with me.

“I have numerous associates—friends—who could be convinced to move their investments elsewhere,” I told him. “And if it were to get out that they were pulling their money, that could cause... confidence issues with other clients, couldn't it?”

“I have plenty of clients,” he snapped, narrowing his eyes at me. But I didn't miss the flash of worry behind them, or the way he gripped the arms of his enormous leather chair.

“Perhaps,” I said dryly, leaning back in my seat. “But I'm sure you would prefer to keep *all* of them.” After a heavy pause, I continued, “Which you can, if you get your son under control.”

His jaw went hard, and he just stared at me for a moment. “I have another meeting. If you don't mind...”

I was glad to get out of there. Just being that close to him—the father of the man who drugged Ari, assaulted her, tried to have her killed—made me sick.

And it filled me with incredible rage. I wanted to lunge over his oversized desk and give him a taste of the pain and fear Ari's experienced at the hands of his monstrous son.

So I've spent the rest of the drive from Manhattan to Sleepy Hollow trying to tamp my down emotions. When I pick up Ari, I don't want her to think anything is wrong. I just want to

bring her home and spend a relaxing evening with her, do all the things we talked about this morning.

The traffic coming from the city is extra bad today, so I'm fifteen minutes late by the time I get to her school. I sent her a quick text while I was driving and she didn't respond, but she rarely messages me when I'm in the car.

"It's not safe to text and drive, Cash," she always scolds me.

"I'm not typing the messages," I explain every time. "I'm dictating them. It's different."

But she's not having it. "It still makes you distracted. If I need to text someone, I'll do it when I get home."

I'm trying to cut back. Most of the time.

Once I park outside her school, I send another text letting Ari know I'm here.

But five minutes go by, and she doesn't respond.

Then another five minutes, and I'm starting to worry.

But she could be talking to a student, a teacher, she could be making copies, figuring she'd get some extra work done since I was running late. It's probably nothing.

Except she knows I'm on my way. And she never goes this long without responding.

I decide to talk to the security guard inside the school and ask if he can call Ari's room. He knows who I am—I introduced myself the first time I came here with Ari—and he's happy to help.

“She’s probably chatting away with one of the other teachers and lost track of time,” he chuckles. “Ari’s such a friendly girl. Everyone loves to talk to her.”

But she doesn’t answer the phone in her classroom, either.

So the security guard—Steve, a genial man in his fifties—calls the office to ask if they can page Ari through the intercom. As he listens to the person on the other end of the call, his smile fades. Hanging up, his tone sobers. “Glenda said Ari went home a couple of hours ago. An emergency of some sort.”

An emergency? I wake my phone and scroll through all my calls and texts again. There’s nothing from Ari.

Why would she leave without telling me?

Steve is watching me with a concerned expression. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I manage, though my heart is pounding double-time. “I’m sure it’s just a miscommunication. She’s probably home. Thanks for your help.”

As soon as I’m back out of the building, I call Finn. He’s on backup duty today; maybe Ari was feeling sick and called him to pick her up.

He picks up right away. “Cash. What’s going on? You need something?”

I get right to the point. “Did you pick up Ari from school today?”

There's a pause, and my stomach lurches. I already know before he answers, "No, Cash. I thought you were picking her up."

I breathe in through my nose, blowing a slow breath through my mouth. "Could anyone else have picked her up? Cole? Leo?"

"I don't think so, but let me check." As he goes silent for a moment, my pulse thunders in my ears. When he speaks again, his tone is grim. "No one has talked to Ari today."

My legs go weak. "Her school said she left a couple of hours ago."

"And she's not home? Maybe a friend from school brought her. If she was feeling ill, maybe she didn't want to wait."

An icy chill is seeping through my body. "No. My security system would have notified me if she went home."

His voice lowers, all business now. "Okay. I'm going to get Cole and Leo on this. We'll pull up her tracker, find out where she is."

I jog to my car while I wait for Finn, jumping in and jabbing at the ignition. But I don't know where to go, so I just sit there, waiting and hoping this isn't as bad as I fear.

The wait feels like an eternity. I keep trying to think of possible explanations, but none of them make sense. Ari wouldn't just leave without calling me, or at least sending a message. Would she?



Finn's voice actually makes me jump. "We found her tracker. She's about thirty miles north of here, a rural area outside Peekskill."

"*What?*"

"I don't know, Cash. We'll figure it out." Finn speaks to someone on his end of the call. "We're going to head there right now. Leo will do as much research on the way, try to figure out how she got there."

"I'm coming with you." I punch the gas pedal, the tires squealing.

"I figured that," Finn says. "We're heading out in five. Since we'll be taking Route 9 north, meet us at the parking lot by the soccer fields. You can leave your car there and ride with us."

"Okay. I'm going to hang up and try calling Ari again. Maybe there's a reasonable explanation for all of this." But I don't believe it. Ari is too responsible to just take off without telling me. And she knows how much I would worry.

I call and call, but there's no answer.

Nausea keeps breaking over me in waves, my gut clenching and bile burning the back of my throat. That feeling has its claws in me and won't let go—the feeling that says something is *terribly* wrong.

I get to the parking lot ahead of the Blade and Arrow guys, and I practically leap into their SUV the second it stops. The second the door shuts behind me, I'm firing questions. "Is she

still there? What do you know? Did you see how she left the school?"

Cole is driving, and Leo is in the passenger seat, a laptop on his knees. Finn is in the backseat and he meets my gaze calmly. "We're going to get her, Cash. It's going to be okay."

Leo turns to look back at me. "She's still there. It's a rental house, but no lease on record. I pulled the security footage from outside the school; it looks like Ari left at one-fifteen this afternoon and got into a gray Elantra, also a rental car."

"Did someone force her into it?" *Fuck. Was it Kyle?*

A horrifying thought occurs to me. "I met with Lucas Morgan today. What if he took Ari as payback? Or Kyle did?"

It's hard to breathe past the panic taking over me.

"She got into the car willingly," Leo says, shocking me into silence. "We can't see who was driving. All I can see from the footage is Ari leaning over to look in the passenger window, like she was checking the identity of the driver, and then she gets into the car."

"There's no way she would just leave school, get into a rental car and go to some house outside town without telling me," I snap. "It doesn't make any sense."

Unless. What if she decided to make good on her suggestion about leaving? Could Ari really have left, thinking it would keep me safe?

"We're going to get there, assess the situation, and go from there," Cole says, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. "Let's

not assume the worst.”

“She said something this weekend,” I start, not even wanting to say it. “She suggested leaving, going home so it would be safer for me.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Finn jumps on it, but I don’t think he believes it any more than me. Going back to her house with Blade and Arrow protecting her is one thing—going to a random rental house without telling anyone is something completely different.

“Fifteen minutes out,” Leo says.

I need to calm down. Channel the same focus I use during emergencies. Whatever is going on with Ari, she needs me to be clear-headed and not freaking out.

After another minute of box-breathing, I think I’ve nearly done it.

And then my phone buzzes.

“It’s Ari.” I jab at the screen, relief sweeping over me. She’s going to explain everything. It’s all going to be okay.

But it’s not Ari.

And my chest freezes.

“*Brother.*”

His name comes out in a strangled wheeze. “Brett.”

“Are you looking for your girlfriend yet?” It’s smug. Slimy. Satisfied. “You really should keep a better eye on her.”

Rage surges through me. “*What have you done?*”

“Ah, Cash. Always assuming the worst.” He chuckles darkly.

I snarl at him, “Did you hurt her?”

He laughs again. “Not too much.” After another pause, there’s a harsh slap, skin on skin, and a muffled cry, soft and feminine. “Yet.”

A growl erupts from my chest. “Don’t touch her!”

“You don’t get to make the rules, Cash.” Brett’s voice goes hard. “I do now.”

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Not Ari. I can’t let him hurt her.

I clamp down on the terror, the anger, the panic. “What do you want?”

“You. Just you. None of your guards. No police. You come to the address I send you *alone*, or I’ll kill your little girlfriend.” He pauses, then thoughtfully adds, “Maybe I’ll take her for a spin first. See why you’ve been stuck on her for so long.”

Then he hangs up. A moment later, an address is sent to me.

The bone-chilling fear.

And this rage. I’m burning with it.

Brett. Not my brother, but my enemy.

But he’s already made mistakes. He doesn’t know about the earrings. That I’m already on my way. Or that I’ll do anything to protect the woman I love.

“I’ll kill him,” I grit out, my jaw clenched tight. “I’ll kill him before he hurts Ari again.”

## Chapter 21

**ARI**

I always knew Brett was bad news, but never like this.

A drug addict? A thief? I knew he was both of those.

But I never imagined he'd escalate to kidnapping and assault. And I'm terrified that's not even the worst of what he has planned.

What is Brett going to do when Cash gets here?

I wanted to warn Cash when Brett called him—to tell him it's a trap, that Brett has a gun—but I couldn't get anything out past the tape over my mouth. Just muffled cries that earned me a stinging slap across my face, and Cash snarling over the phone, "Don't touch her!"

Now Cash is on his way here and I'm helpless to do anything. I'm restrained with zip ties around my wrists and ankles, and Brett keeps jabbing his gun at me, laughing maniacally when I instinctively flinch away.

My head is throbbing from where Brett smashed it against the car window—I'm dizzy and nauseous and pretty certain I have a concussion. And my nose is sluggishly bleeding from the slap he just gave me.

Brett hasn't touched me anywhere else yet, but when he told Cash he might take me for a spin, I had to force back the vomit that threatened to come up.

To make things worse, I'm almost sure Brett is on something. He can't stay still, his gaze constantly darting around the room, and some of the things he's saying sound absolutely insane.

"This is all Cash's fault," he ranted after ending the call. "He's always been trying to fuck things up for me. It's his fault our parents are dead."

As Cash's parents died when their private plane crashed when Cash was only sixteen, and he was hundreds of miles away when it happened, I have no idea how Brett came up with that.

"And you!" Brett spins on me, grabbing my chin with punishing fingers. He drags me up from the couch, holding me eye level with him. "You were helping him all that time, weren't you? Feeding Cash information so he could turn me in to the cops."

*Oh shit.*

I can't speak, can't even shake my head at him. All I can do is stare back at Brett, my heart in my throat, hoping he doesn't

kill me right now.

“You’ll both be sorry,” he spits, and flings me back down on the couch. Terrified tears spring to my eyes and I try to force them back—if I start crying, my nose will get all stuffed up and I won’t be able to breathe.

Brett sets to pacing around the small living room again, every few seconds spinning to point the gun at me and cackling, “My rules now. *My* rules.”

*This is so bad.* Fear and guilt are crashing over me in waves.

Why did I get in the car with him? Why didn’t I call Cash to verify? Why didn’t I call someone at Blade and Arrow to come get me?

I know the answer, though. I was too scared, too panicked to think clearly. When I got the call at school—the main office put it through to my classroom—Brett was the last person I imagined hearing from.

Glenda, our kind but nosy secretary, rang my classroom phone, saying, “Ari, dear. I have a call for you. He says it’s an emergency, but didn’t give a name. Should I put him through?”

My heart jumped to my throat. Who would call me on the school number instead of my cell phone? Trying to keep the nervous wobble from my voice, I told her it was fine.

Then she transferred the call, and everything imploded.

All it took was two sentences.



“Ari, it’s Brett. Cash has been in an accident.”

Heart stuttering, I gasped, “*What?*”

Sounding so similar to Cash, for a moment I tried to cling to the idea it was a terrible joke. And then Brett continued, “As next of kin, I was just contacted. He’s at the Westchester Medical Center.”

My legs turned liquid, and I sagged over my desk. “What happened?”

Then the news got even worse. “He was shot, Ari.”

I couldn’t speak. Brett softened his tone. “I thought you would want to come with me. I’m near the school now. Do you want a ride?”

Of course, I told him yes. I couldn’t think beyond my terror. Trying to drive myself, finding Brett at the hospital, searching for news about Cash—of course, I would go with Brett.

So I sprinted down to the main office, blurting out something panicked, and raced to the entrance to wait for Brett. I wasn’t thinking about Kyle, or hit men, or anything other than getting to Cash.

Except, I did put my pepper spray back in my pants pocket, and the little self-defense ring on my finger. It was just a fragmented thought—Cash would be so mad at me if I went outside unarmed—so I did it. *When I see him*, I told myself while trying not to burst into terrified sobs, *he’ll be glad that I remembered*.

Except it didn’t help.

Because five minutes into the drive, I started asking questions. Like, *I thought you were upstate in rehab? And, Aren't we supposed to be going in the other direction?*

And before I could do anything else, Brett grabbed my head and smashed it into the side window.

The next thing I knew, I woke up here. I'm not sure where *here* is, other than a partially furnished house with a funky smell and stained carpets and furniture.

I don't know how long it will take for Cash to get here, but I know he was already on his way before Brett even called. I'm sure of it. Because as soon as Cash got to school and realized I wasn't there, he'd call Blade and Arrow. And they can track my earrings.

I just hope they can protect Cash, too. Because he's going to come into this house alone, I know he will; there's no way he'd risk going against Brett's instructions.

What about when he gets here, though? Can he sneak in a gun? Some other weapon? Is it possible that Brett won't check to see if Cash is carrying something?

God. I wish I could do something. I keep trying to come up with ideas, but it's hard to think past the pain in my head.

Brett is making one of his circuits around the living room, pausing to peer between the curtains. "Ha!" he crows. "He's here. Alone, just like I told him."

My stomach cramps, nausea surging. *God. I'm so scared.*

Not for myself. For Cash.

What is Brett going to do to him?

If Brett tells Cash to sacrifice himself for me, I'm terrified he'll do it.

Brett comes back over to the couch, standing beside it and pointing his gun at me. "Don't try anything funny," he hisses, jabbing the barrel into my arm. "I need you alive for now, but that doesn't mean I can't shoot you."

There's a knock at the front door, and everything in my body tenses.

After a loaded silence, Brett sing-songs, "Come in, brother."

And then, Cash. I want to fling myself into his arms the moment I see him. His eyes go straight to me, so filled with pain and worry I nearly burst into tears. After a moment, his gaze shifts to Brett, and his face turns to stone, pure fury in his expression.

"Brett," he bites out. "I'm here. Let her go."

"Oh, Cash." Brett laughs, a hard, jagged sound. "*Come on*. Did you think it would be that easy?"

Cash scowls at him. "What do you want?"

"Close the door first. And if you're thinking of trying anything"—Brett points the gun at my head—"I'll shoot her." After Cash obeys, Brett continues. "Lift up your shirt and turn around. Same with your pant legs. I want to make sure you're not trying to sneak something in here."

Did he? Fear snatches hold of me. What if Cash tried to smuggle in a gun? Would Brett shoot him?

I thought the trunk was terrifying. And the pond. But this? It's worse than both combined.

Cash spins around slowly, no weapons in sight. He grits out through a clenched jaw, "See? Nothing. Now, *what do you want?*"

Brett grins at Cash, evil slinking across his face. "I want everything, Cash. All the things you stole from me. I want them back."

"What?" Cash takes a step forward, his eyes steady on Brett.

"Yes." The gun lowers from my head as Brett focuses on Cash. "I want all of it. The company. The house. All the money. And you're going to give it to me."

*Oh, shit.*

Cash's tone is carefully controlled. "And how is that going to work?"

He takes another step and Brett jams the gun into my temple. His voice goes shrill. "Don't move any closer. I'll shoot her. I will."

"But then you wouldn't have any leverage over me, would you?"

Brett hesitates, and his gun swings toward Cash.

The band of fear wrapped around my chest yanks tight; I can barely breathe from it. Air whistles through my nose too fast,

sending gray dots floating across my vision. *God.*

*Is thirty-two too young for a heart attack?*

Cash glances at me, his jaw tightening. But his tone is gentle as he says, “It’s going to be okay, hun. I promise.”

“Ha!” Brett barks out a laugh. “You’re in no position to make promises.” His eyes narrow. “So Cash, what you’re going to do is sign everything over to me, and then I won’t kill your girlfriend. How does that sound?”

Cash regards him calmly, though I can see his fists clenching. “If I sign everything over to you, how do I know you won’t kill Ari after? Or me?”

“I won’t.”

“Really?” Cash moves closer to Brett. There’s still at least ten feet between them, but it’s too close—I don’t want Cash anywhere near him. “So you’re going to just let us go after I sign everything over to you? After you kidnapped Ari? Hit her? Threatened both of us with a gun?”

Uncertainty flickers across Brett’s face, and he just stares at Cash in silence for a few seconds. His gun dips again, and suddenly I have the tiniest sliver of an idea.

“I’ll make you both sign a non-disclosure agreement,” he finally replies. “I have all the other paperwork all drawn up, right over there.” He gestures at the round wooden table on the other side of the room. “When you sign those, we’ll add an NDA. Then you can’t talk about what happens here.”

Cash casts Brett a skeptical look, and I'm right there with him. Brett is just going to let us walk out of here after signing a hastily drawn up NDA?

"If I sign everything, I want you to let Ari go first." Cash holds Brett's gaze. "That's the only way I'll do it."

*"Do you think I'm stupid?!"* Brett screams at Cash, and I let out a muffled yelp of fright. "Then you won't sign! You've always thought you were so much smarter than me. You're wrong! You'll do this my way or she's dead!"

Fury flares hot in Cash's eyes, and he grits out, "Fine. We'll do it your way."

## Chapter 22

### **CASH**

I've never been this furious.

Or this afraid.

My brother. How did I never know he was capable of this?

Capable of pointing a gun at Ari, jabbing the metal into her soft skin, hurting her. Threatening to kill her.

Capable of kidnapping her, hitting her—I can see the lump on the side of her head, the blood trickling from her nose—tying her up, putting tape over her mouth...

*Fuck.*

Did he do anything else I can't see? Where else did he touch her?

This rage. It's like nothing I've felt in my life.

And the fear. One wrong step, and I could lose the woman I love. Not only love, Ari's been a part of me for more than half my life. I can't exist without her.

It's not just my fear, but hers. She's trembling with it, her eyes so big and frightened, the tape over her mouth—damn it—sucking in and out with her rapid breaths. I'm worried she's going to hyperventilate, and I wish there was some way I could reassure her.

She's not supposed to be going through this again. I was supposed to be protecting her.

Instead, it's my brother terrorizing her.

How did I not know? How did I let this happen?

“Come on, Cash.” Brett bares his teeth at me, a horrible joke of a grin. “Stop dragging out the inevitable. Just sign the papers.”

I snap, “I *will*, Brett.”

Just as soon as I get him far enough away from Ari.

I know damn well he's not going to go along with this ridiculous NDA idea. Not considering how far he's gone already. An NDA would leave loose ends and possible ways for me to get the company back, and there's no way Brett's going to go along with it.

All it takes is looking into his eyes to know the truth of it. Flat. Cold. Any residual affection for me is completely gone.

As soon as I sign these papers, he'll shoot me. I might be able to take Brett down long enough for Cole and his team to get inside and rescue Ari. *Maybe*.

I'll die for her without hesitation.



But that's not the plan.

Even though I came in here on my own, I'm not unprepared. Thanks to Blade and Arrow, I have some tools that will hopefully get both Ari and I out of this safely.

In one pocket, I have a small taser, strong enough to knock a full-grown man to the floor. In the other, small capsules of pepper spray powder—all I have to do is get one of those in Brett's face and he'll be blinded temporarily.

In my ear, a tiny two-way communication device will let the guys outside know when they can come in. Cole, Leo, and Finn are waiting just out of sight and will come in as backup when I give the signal.

And then there's the last weapon—me.

I might not be former Special Forces, but I'm in good enough shape to carry a two-hundred pound man out of a burning building or run up ten flights of stairs wearing full gear. Once the gun is out of the equation, I have no doubt I can take Brett down.

But first, I need to get him away from Ari.

“Cash, what are you waiting for?” His voice has a whiny note to it, the same tone he used to have as a kid when he wasn't getting his way.

And it hits me all over again. A searing blade through the chest. My brother. Has he *always* hated me?

It doesn't matter. All that matters is getting out of here.

As I walk closer to the dining room table—I'm at a snail's pace, but I'm moving—I sneak a lightning-quick glance at Ari. The fear on her face has transformed into something different, something more determined. Her features are stony, and there's a little stubborn jut to her chin.

Brett still hasn't moved from his post by the couch, which isn't what I want. I need him over at the table with me. Far enough from Ari that if he gets a shot off, it won't hit her.

I take a few more steps toward the table, still holding Brett's gaze. "Don't these have to be notarized?" I ask. "How are you going to get around that?"

He smirks at me. "Notaries can be paid off, too."

And I tried to give him another chance, after everything he's done. Fury burns white-hot inside me.

I'm nearly at the table, the stack of papers waiting. I'll have to come up with a reason for Brett to come look at them—some mistake, a missing signature, *something*.

Brett is watching me with this satisfied smile, like the fucking cat that ate the canary. He thinks he's won. His gun has dipped; he's more interested in what I'm doing now.

I chance another quick look at Ari, and this time I have to school my expression so I don't give my surprise away.

She's leaning over, one hand working at the zip ties around her ankles. For a second, I can't figure it out. How did she get her hand free?

*I can't let him see.* Focusing on Brett, I try to keep him distracted. “What are you going to say?”

Confusion ripples across his face. “Say to what?”

“Everyone.” I’m nearly at the table; I can read the writing on the top sheet of the papers. “The board. The rest of the top executives. All my colleagues in the industry.”

Brett stares at me, without an answer for the first time since I’ve gotten here. “I’ll... I’ll...” His forehead creases in thought; it would almost be funny how baffled he looks if this wasn’t life or death. “I’ll tell them you wanted out of the business. That it’s personal.”

Ari is moving behind him, sliding sideways on the couch, toward him. My chest seizes. *What is she doing?*

I’m at the table, and I need to get him over here right now. Away from whatever Ari is planning on doing.

Panic beats at me. All it will take is Brett turning away from me to look at Ari, and she’s caught. I can’t let that happen.

Snatching up the stack of papers, I flip through them quickly. Casting about for a possible complication, I lie, “This one has the wrong information,” as I wave a random page from the pile. “The shares are listed incorrectly. You’ve cut them in half.”

“What?” Brett takes a step away from the couch, his gun drifting down. “Impossible. I checked all the numbers while I was there.”

Of course. The fucker wanted to work at Chatham so he could figure out all the ways he could steal from me.

“I’m telling you, it’s wrong.” I can’t look at Ari. But I’m terrified not to. Swallowing my fear, I force a calm I’m not feeling. “Come over here and look.”

“Fine,” Brett snaps, and takes another step toward me.

Then.

Everything flips in one moment.

Ari leaps off the couch, her hands and legs free, and flings herself onto Brett’s back.

He staggers, letting out a grunt of surprise.

She’s clinging to him like a monkey, one arm wrapped around his neck.

“What the fuck!” he shouts, and flails his arms back at her.

With a muffled screech, Ari punches at his neck, jabbing at it furiously.

I’m running toward them, heart in my throat, fear clawing inside me.

Brett squeals, “Fuuuuuuck!” and swings behind his back blindly, smashing the gun into Ari’s face. Stunned, she lets go of him, crashing to the floor.

*Ari!*

“You fucking bitch!” he screams, and now I see the blood pouring down his neck.

Ari stabbed him with something. It takes another quick look and I realize it was the ring Cole gave her, the one with the blade.

Then Brett turns to lunge at her.

But now I'm in punching distance, and I'm not letting him get to her.

Not my brother. *My enemy*. And I'll do whatever it takes to protect Ari.

It's a one-two punch, first a crushing blow to Brett's nose, then a handful of pepper spray powder to the face.

He shrieks, clapping a hand to his eyes. "*What the fuck!*"

I don't say anything, I just reach back in my pocket and pull out the taser. Brett is swinging the gun around yelling, "You fucker, you fucker, I'll kill you!"

One quick downward strike to his forearm—thank you, Ian, for that lesson—and the gun is clattering to the floor. Before I can kick it away, Ari scrambles for it, snatching it up and curling her body over it.

Brett lunges at me and I tase him, and it's nowhere near what he deserves.

Once he's on the floor, I jump on top of him, pinning his arms behind his back.

Then a clatter of footsteps approach, and Cole says wryly, "Cash, feel like coming to work with us instead of publishing?"

Leo and Finn grab Brett from me, securing him quickly. Cole is on his phone, saying, “We have a guy for you. Kidnapping. Assault. Attempted murder, possibly.”

But I don’t care about Brett anymore. I just need to see Ari.

She’s still huddled on the floor, shaking all over, making these scared little noises that break my heart. Forcing back the anger, the panic, I gentle my voice. “Ari, sweetheart. It’s over.”

I have to say it a few more times before it sinks in. Before she unfurls herself, turning over to look at me. And my rage ignites all over again.

But I bite it back. Ari needs me. “Oh, honey.”

Her *face*. I’m gutted to see my Ari this way. The horrible tape, the dried blood beneath her nose, and now her cheekbone is deep red and swollen. There’s a gash under her eye from when she was hit by the gun, blood steadily flowing from it.

In front of her is the hated gun, and she glances down at it, flinching.

“I’ve got it,” Cole says, carefully picking it up with a cloth. “And we’ve got Brett. He’s not going anywhere.”

That’s all I need to hear.

First, I carefully peel the tape off her face. I know it hurts her—tears are welling up—and I hate that I’m causing her pain. Once her mouth is free, she sucks in several long, shuddering breaths before whispering, “I knew you’d come.”

I can barely speak over the lump in my throat. “Of course, honey.” Gathering her into my arms, I cradle Ari to me as I move to the dining room. I hate having to keep her in this house one second longer, but I need to check her injuries.

As I set her on the dining table—after shoving all the papers onto the floor—she looks up at me with tear-drenched eyes and says quietly, “I just want to go home.”

My own eyes tear up. I came so close to losing her. “I know, sweetheart,” I soothe, “but I need to see where you’re hurt.”

Each injury is another slash to my heart. Another stab of guilt that I didn’t see this coming.

There’s the lump on her head that’s most likely a concussion, especially when I flick on the overhead light and she flinches at it. The cut on her cheek, still bleeding, and a possibly broken cheekbone. The raw skin around her mouth from the tape stuck across it. And her hands—the delicate skin all cut from the blade on the ring.

“It was harder to use than I thought,” Ari whispers as I stare down at her poor hands. “Especially with my hands behind my back.”

Cole comes up behind me with a first aid kit, and I start carefully wrapping her hands. She’ll need to have them cleaned and bandaged at the hospital, along with a full exam and an x-ray, but I can at least slow the bleeding.

“Police and ambulance are five minutes out,” Cole says. His eyes drop to Ari’s bloodied hands, and he winces, but gives

her a little approving smile. “I knew you could use it if you needed to.”

Once I have Ari bandaged enough for the trip to the hospital, I pick her back up, needing the reassurance of her body against mine. “I’m so sorry,” I murmur into her hair, my heart aching. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“I’m sorry.” She presses her face into my neck and lets out a little hiss of pain, quickly pulling away. “*I’m* sorry, Cash.”

“Ah, sweetheart. What for?” Aside from scaring the ever-living fuck out of me when she jumped on Brett, but that’s a topic for another day.

“It’s my fault.” Tears erupt again, and her voice breaks. “I shouldn’t have gone with Brett, I should have—” Another crack. “I should have called Finn. Or made sure it was true. But I...”

And she starts sobbing, the words coming out between gasps. “He said... you were in an accident... shot. I was so scared... he said he’d pick me up... I just wanted... to get to you...”

That fucker. He picked the one reason Ari would leave with him.

If I wasn’t holding Ari, I’d go back over to where Finn and Leo have Brett restrained and beat the shit out of him.

But I am, and she’s the most important thing. So I shift Ari in my arms and press kisses to her head as I tell her, “It’s not your fault, honey. Not at all.”



She looks up at me, her chin quivering. “But if I hadn’t...”

“Then he would have figured out something else,” I tell her firmly, leaving no room for argument. “If someone told me you were in the hospital, my only thought would be getting to you. So don’t blame yourself. You did nothing wrong.”

The once-distant sirens draw closer, flashing lights seeping through the thick curtains. “Let’s go, sweetheart.”

And holding the most precious gift I’ve ever been given, I carry Ari out of the house toward the approaching ambulance, not once looking back at the man who almost took her from me.

## Chapter 23

**ARI**

I can't believe this day is actually here.

After all the fear, the stress, the nightmares, nearly *dying*—I'm finally about to face him one more time.

Kyle. The monster who's tormented my days and nights.

After all he did to keep me away, I'm still here. The carbon monoxide leak at my house, the shooter—Leo finally found proof that Kyle was behind both of those—thanks to Cash and my new friends at Blade and Arrow, I'm still here.

Am I scared to see him? Yes.

Every time I think about facing those flat blue eyes that still haunt my nightmares, I get nauseous and break out in a cold sweat. My heart races, my chest gets tight, and I have to struggle not to go back to that night.

It's a struggle not to flash back to the darkness, the confusion, the absolute fear when I woke up in that trunk. And

the pain and terror when I jumped out, so sure I was about to die.

Thank God for Cash, who has been working from home since that awful day with Brett. My Cash, who always seems to know when I'm panicking or having a flashback, and he drops everything to comfort me. To hold me, kiss me, reassure me that it's all over until my brain finally accepts what he's saying.

I hope that testifying against Kyle will help. That getting my story out will be another step toward healing. And I can see across the courtroom that he's just a sick, terrible man, and not the monster I've built him up to be.

And of course, I hope my testimony will send him to jail, which the district attorney seems to believe is a sure thing.

I want to believe her, but I'm still scared.

Which is why I'm clutching Cash's hand so hard I must be cutting off circulation to his fingers. And I'm trying this box-breathing thing he told me about, but I must not be doing it right, because I think I'm on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Sweetheart, it's okay." Cash pulls me back into his arms for what must be the fiftieth time today. But each time it makes me feel a little better—the feeling of safety in his arms, the warmth of his body, the press of his lips on the top of my head.

He rubs my back in large circles while I try to pull myself together. "Ari, you can do this. I know you can."

After several shaky breaths against his shirt, I tilt my head back to look at him. “I know. But every time I think about going in there and talking about everything in front of all those people, and *Kyle*... my body starts to freak out.”

“That’s normal, hun.” His eyes are soft and concerned as he gazes at me. “You’ve been through so much; your body is still trying to deal with it all.” His hand comes up to stroke my cheek gently, his fingers lightly brushing over the still-healing cut.

Brow creasing, he asks, “How’s your head feeling? Headache? Is the light bothering you?”

“It’s okay.” Due to the concussion Brett gave me, I’ve had lingering light sensitivity and an off-and-on headache for the last two weeks, but fortunately nothing more serious.

Cash tilts his head appraisingly. “Are you sure? Do you need more ibuprofen?” His eyes narrow at me. “What about your cheek? If you’re in pain, Ari, tell me.”

Weirdly, I feel more in control soothing his worry. “It’s really okay, Cash. My head isn’t hurting, and my cheek is just a little sore.” Which isn’t surprising, since Brett fractured my cheekbone when he hit me with the gun. But aside from looking like I just went three rounds with a heavy-weight boxer, it hasn’t been nearly as painful as when I had my run-in with the pavement after leaping from the trunk.

He still doesn’t look convinced, so I reassure him, “I’m not in pain. I’m just scared and nervous about testifying. And I’m ready to get it over with.”

“Ah, honey. You know you’re safe here.” He glances just down the hallway to where Leo and Finn are standing guard. “You’ve got me, and these guys—” He lifts his chin at them, getting twin chin lifts in return. “There’s nothing to worry about. Before you know it, you’ll be all done, and we can go home and relax by the tree.”

The thought of our beautifully decorated Christmas tree eases my tension a bit. Sitting on the couch, cuddled up with Cash, the lights sparkling and fire crackling in the fireplace...

“With eggnog?”

“If you want some.”

I widen my eyes at Cash. “Will you drink some, too?”

His mouth pulls into a little grimace of distaste, but quickly quirks into a smile. “Only if I get to add something adult to it.”

Pressing my uninjured cheek against his chest, I ask, “And cookies?”

“Yeah, sweetheart. Whatever cookies you want.”

We go back and forth for another few minutes, talking about Christmas and the cookies I’m going to bake for the guys at the station, my stomach and nerves gradually settling.

And then the district attorney comes up to us, and my heart stutters. “Ari,” she says, effortlessly calm and confident. “It’s time for you to go in.”

As we walk toward the courtroom, Cash dips his head to whisper in my ear. “You’re going to be great, honey. I have

absolute confidence in you.”



Thank God it’s over.

As I leave the courtroom, my body goes weak with relief. Cash seems to sense it and quickly moves to my side, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“You did it, sweetheart.” He gazes down at me, his eyes so full of pride and love, my heart bursts with it. “I’m so proud of you, Ari. You were incredible.”

I rest my head on his shoulder, taking a moment to just breathe. To breathe out the stress, the fear, the sick feeling in my stomach—taking a moment to let my body catch up with my brain.

It was beyond stressful in there, talking about the restaurant, and the drink, how Kyle urged me on, encouraging me to drink faster, and the trunk...

But I’ve never felt stronger.

Twining my arm around Cash’s waist, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “It doesn’t feel real.”

As we start walking away from the courtroom, Cash asks, “What doesn’t?”

Collecting my thoughts, I explain. “That it’s finally over. That the thing he was so determined I wouldn’t do... I did it. I feel like... no matter what the jury decides, I still won.”

His expression goes thunderous. “There’s *no way* they’re letting him go free. Not after what you said.”

Even though Cash already knew all the details, it was hard for him to hear them again. Whenever I’d cast quick glances over at him while I was testifying, his expression was stony and his jaw could cut glass.

“I hope not.”

A voice calls out, “Ari. A moment.” We pause as the district attorney catches up to us. There’s a rare smile on her face, which I hope means good news. “You did great in there.”

Cash tugs me closer to his side. “She did.”

“Thanks.” I meet her dark brown eyes, the warmest I’ve seen them since we met. “I hope it was enough.”

“I’m almost certain, Ari. If I were to bet on it...” Her smile broadens. “His attorney is suddenly talking about plea bargains, which means he knows his case is falling apart.”

Cash’s voice goes hard. “A plea bargain after he tried to have Ari *killed*?”

“We’re not taking it. I’m confident the jury will find him guilty. And he’ll be going away for a very long time.” She shifts her gaze from Cash to me. “I’ll keep you updated, of course. I imagine we’ll have a verdict fairly soon; closing arguments are tomorrow, and if my read on the jury is correct, they won’t take long to deliberate.”

The bands around my chest relax a little. “Thank you. For all your help.”

She smiles again. “It was my pleasure. Now, go home, and enjoy your holiday. Enjoy each other. You deserve it.”

After being drugged and thrown in a trunk, nearly poisoned by carbon monoxide, shot at, and kidnapped by Cash’s drug-addicted brother? Yes. We definitely do.

Thinking about it again as we get into Cash’s car, I laugh to myself.

His eyebrows jump up. “What?”

“Just thinking how crazy all of this has been. It’s like a Lifetime movie on steroids.”

I’m expecting Cash to laugh along with me, but he flinches instead. And instead of responding, he frowns at the road, his fingers white-knuckling on the steering wheel.

After a few minutes of silence, I ask quietly, “What’s wrong?”

Jaw clenching, Cash hesitates before answering. “I just... I hate it. Everything you had to go through... and...”

He drifts off, staring intently at the empty road in front of us.

“And what?” I put my hand on his leg, his thigh muscles rigid with tension. “Tell me.”

The little muscle in his jaw twitches. He sighs heavily. “I hate that I brought some of it to you. I was supposed to be protecting you, but instead, my own brother...” Glancing over at me, his eyes fill with pain. “You were hurt. Threatened. Almost killed. And it was my fault.”



“No.” It’s so forceful Cash jerks in his seat. “Pull over. Now.”

“Ari—”

“No.” I’m adamant, using my best teacher voice. “Pull over now.”

We’re on a quiet street so it’s easy for him to find a place to stop, and he puts the car in park, turning to me. “Ari?”

It’s nearly the first day of winter, so the sun is setting well before five, and Cash’s face is cast in shadows in the dim of the car. But I can still see the sorrow pulling down at his features, the guilt darkening his eyes.

But he shouldn’t be. And in all the times I blamed myself, Cash never gave up on me.

I firm my voice. “Cash Michael Chatham.” His eyes widen at the use of his full name. “Listen to me. None of what happened was your fault. None of it.”

“If I hadn’t fired him...”

“No.” Taking his chin, I hold his gaze steady. “He would have done it no matter what you did. And there was no way to know. What he did was crazy.”

“When I said it was my fault, you told me it wasn’t. *Every time*. The date. The pond. When I got in the car with Brett. You swore it wasn’t my fault, that it was the other person’s actions that were responsible. Are you saying you made that up? That it actually *was* my fault?”

His face jolts in reaction. “No, Ari. Of course not.”

“It goes both ways, Cash.” My tone gentles as I look into the eyes of the man I love more than anything. “It wasn’t my fault. And it wasn’t yours, either. We need to let go of this guilt, both of us. Okay?”

Cash stares at me, his jaw clenching, swallowing hard. “Okay. You’re right. It has to go both ways.”

Trailing my fingers along his jaw, I say, “And I think we should both get some counseling. I know I could use some help dealing with everything. Maybe we can go together sometimes.”

“Alright, hun.” He leans forward, kissing me softly, his lips teasing mine before pulling away. “It’s a good idea.”

“Okay.” I sit back in my seat, another band of tension releasing. “Can we go home now?”

Shifting back into gear, Cash pulls back onto the road. “Absolutely.”

The rest of our short drive home is much more relaxed. And each mile closer, my stress drains away a little more. Envisioning the rest of the evening, I tell Cash, “First, a nice hot shower. Then pizza. After that, a movie and some adult eggnog. And then maybe we can create our own sexy scene by the Christmas tree.”

“That sounds perfect. But”—he turns to me, a smile pulling at his lips—”first, a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

We stop at the entrance to Cash's driveway, and he touches the biometric access pad, triggering the gate to open. Once we start moving again, his smile turns to a grin. "You'll see very soon."

I can't help smiling. "You and your surprises." But he hasn't gone wrong yet. "You don't have to do special stuff for me, Cash."

"But I want to, Ari. You're the most important person in the world to me. Why wouldn't I want to do everything I can to make you happy?"

*Oh.* I actually clutch my heart—my love for Cash is so intense I'm almost breathless from it.

Then we come around the curve of the driveway, and I see the house.

And this time I really can't breathe.

"Cash—"

The car stops, and all I can do is stare. "Do you like it?"

The house is covered with lights. Thousands and thousands of them, lining the windows and doors and even the roof edges. More lights decorate all the bushes and shrubs, and the path to the house is edged with flickering luminaries.

Wreaths trimmed with red ribbons and twinkling lights are hung on each window, dozens of them. There's a small herd of deer to the side of the front door, each one with its own red bow.

And then there's one more thing, something I remember from when I was in high school. Right by the entrance to the house, the Santa blow mold that Cash's grandmother insisted on putting out every year.

"I don't care if it's not fancy," she told me the first time I came over and saw it. "It's tradition to have Santa, and tradition is something worth holding on to."

"Oh Cash." Tears spring free without warning. "Everything. It's so beautiful. And Santa..."

Cash turns to me, his eyes damp. "I haven't taken it out of storage since she died. But now... it seemed right. With you here, I think she'd be so happy to see us and her Santa."

More tears are falling even as I brush them away. "It's amazing. But how? I know it wasn't like this when we left..."

"Everyone helped." He takes my hand, kissing my palm. "The guys at the station. Cole and Maya. Georgia, too. Finn and Leo helped bring everything over before they met us at the courthouse. Once I said what I wanted to do, everyone wanted to help."

Leaning forward, he kisses the tears from my cheeks. "I hope these are happy tears?"

I never knew it was possible to love someone this much.

I climb over into Cash's seat, straddling him, and pepper his face with kisses. "They're happy tears. I promise."

## Chapter 24

### **CASH**

*Merry Christmas to me.*

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is an almost-naked Ari laying beside me.

The covers are drawn back to reveal an expanse of creamy skin and perfect curves, just the tiniest pieces of red lace covering her breasts and stretched across her hips.

She's propped up on one elbow, watching me with a mischievous smile and her pale green eyes sparkling. One hand lazily draws trails across my stomach, dipping below my waist and stroking the part of me that's rapidly awakening.

"Good morning." Her hand moves faster, soft fingers gliding across my heated skin. She brushes her thumb through the increasing dampness, smoothing it from root to tip.

A restless ache builds as I get even harder. I'm throbbing in her hand, her delicate fingers caressing and drawing out my arousal.

Sleep makes my voice rough as I say, “I’ve never been woken up on Christmas morning like *this* before.”

Ari leans close and brushes her mouth across mine. “I thought you might like it.”

Turning on my side to face her, I palm one of her breasts, feeling the plump softness filling my hand. The lace bra is nearly see-through, showing off her rosy nipples. As I gently flick at one, then the other, they tighten, flushing a deeper pink, straining through the thin fabric toward me.

Ari sucks in her breath when I dip my head to her breast, sucking her taut nipple into my mouth.

I reach down to the apex of her thighs and slide my fingers under the lace, finding her velvety folds already opening for me. She’s wet and hot and when I slide one finger inside, her inner muscles clutch at me.

Her hand tightens around me, rhythm stumbling as her hips jerk toward my hand. I plunge one finger, then two, inside her welcoming heat, curving them to hit that special spot deep inside. I flick at her swollen nub and Ari makes a low, keening sound—a primal sound of need.

“Cash—” Her hips jolt up as I press my thumb against her sensitive bud. She covers my hand with hers, stilling it. “I want to feel you inside me.”

“I know. But not yet.” As much as I want to, it’s still too soon.

“It’s been weeks,” Ari complains, pouting at me. “My head feels fine. You’re not going to hurt me.”

“You’re still recovering from a concussion,” I remind her. “And you have a fractured cheekbone. I don’t want to do anything that might slow your recovery.”

Ari strokes me again, swirling her thumb over the head, moving her hand in the exact motion she knows I like best. She widens her eyes at me. “We can be careful. *Please?*”

She sees me wavering and gives me a pleading look. “Please, Cash? I need you.”

*Well, shit.* How do I say no to her sad eyes and cute little wheedling voice and her wicked hand tempting me?

“Fine,” I grumble at her, couching it with a smile. “But you’re going to let me do everything. I don’t want you re-injuring anything.”

“Okay!” The puppy-dog eyes disappear instantly. Face lighting up, Ari grins at me. “You can do *whatever* you want.”

“Can I get that recorded?” I ask wryly.

“It only counts when we’re in bed,” Ari retorts, her lips twitching.

“That works for me.”

Now that I’ve given myself permission, I’m desperate to be inside her. It’s been torture for the last couple of weeks, wanting that connection between us, that last reassurance that Ari is safe and isn’t going anywhere.

I lay Ari on her back and peel the bits of red lace away, exposing pink-tipped breasts and pale skin flushed with excitement. From there, I kiss my way down her body, lingering at her breasts and her core. I use my tongue and my fingers to bring her right to the edge, my hand on her belly to keep her hips from moving.

She's so close, muscles fluttering around my fingers and tongue. Ari moans, "Cash, I need to finish with you inside me."

And that's when I yank my shorts off and sink deep inside her. It's the most unbelievable feeling, velvety soft heat squeezing and rippling around me. I hold still for a moment, appreciating this perfect completion—when I'm joined with the woman I love more than anything.

Then I bring her to the edge all over again. Sucking her nipples, flicking at her little bud, telling her over and over how much I love her. Slow thrusts, bottoming out each time, my thumb still rubbing at that sensitive spot—

With one more thrust, one more hard flick, a little tweak, I nip at Ari's neck, growling, "I love you so much." And she explodes, her inner walls tugging at me, urging me to come along with her.

As her muscles convulse around me, I hurtle over the edge, pulsing and throbbing inside her. Incredible pressure releasing, filling her with the heat of our perfect completion.

And it is perfect. All of it. The sparks of electricity zipping through my body, Ari's soft skin against mine, her slight



weight as I roll over, draping her across my chest, the warmth of her breath on my neck...

“I love you so much, too.” Ari cuddles into me as I wrap my arms carefully around her. “Merry Christmas, Cash.”

Oh. This feeling. “This is the best Christmas present I’ve ever gotten.”



My first Christmas morning with Ari is off to a great start.

My gorgeous, sexy girlfriend waking me up in the best way possible? *Great.*

Having Christmas morning sex with my amazing girlfriend? *Definitely great.*

And I’m excited about what the rest of the day will bring.

Because thanks to Ari, we have a day filled with wonderful things. First, Christmas breakfast in front of the tree—fruit and pastries and this quiche she prepared yesterday with spinach and bacon and cheese. Then opening presents, which I think is going to take a while considering the giant pile of gifts under the tree.

I may have gone a little overboard shopping.

But it’s our first Christmas as a couple, and I just want to make Ari happy after she’s been through so much. And I kept seeing things I thought she’d like. Jewelry. Books. A new Kindle. A new laptop. A fuzzy sweater to replace the one that got ruined the day Brett took her...

No. I'm not letting that intrude on our day.

So we're going to open presents, and then we'll watch a couple of Christmas movies while we relax and look at our gifts. No Hallmark movies this time—but we each picked one of our favorites. *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* for me, and *Home Alone* for Ari.

Then we're having dinner here, and we've invited some of our friends to join us. Thea—who doesn't have any family nearby—Ben and Laila, Ian, and Grant. We'll have eggnog and play board games and I think Ari has hopes for something happening between Ben and Thea.

And then tonight, when it's just us again, I have one last special gift for Ari. The final, and hopefully best, part of the first of many Christmases together.

While Ari's showering, I'm getting our breakfast together. The fruit is all cut, the pastries are piled on a dish, and the quiche is in the oven, bubbling nicely. When I shared my concern about ruining it, Ari patted me on the arm and said, "Just put it in at three-fifty, and I'll be down before it's done."

But she is taking longer than I thought she would. It's been half an hour, and when we don't have to work, she's usually done in much less time.

Worry slinks in, chilling me. What if Ari isn't okay? What if it was too soon to have sex? Is she in pain? Could she have passed out in the shower?

Each thought adds another weight on my chest. *What if Ari isn't okay?*

I need to check on her. Panic is bubbling up, fast and furious. Part of me knows I'm probably overreacting, that she's fine, just messing with her hair or something—but the other part keeps whispering, *what if she isn't?*

“Cash? Are you okay?”

All the air rushes out of my lungs in relief.

She's fine. Dressed in jeans and a red sweater, hair slightly damp and draped over her shoulder, her eyes wide with concern.

“Yes, I'm fine.” I rush across the kitchen and sweep Ari into my arms, burying my face in her hair. “I was just—”

Ari tilts her head back, meeting my gaze. Her eyes fill with understanding. “You were worried I had a setback or something.”

“Maybe,” I admit. “I just worry about you.”

“I'm really okay, Cash.” She looks at me steadily. “You didn't hurt me.”

I search her face, looking for any sign of pain. A slight wince from the bright lights of the kitchen, a tightening of her jaw, the tense set of her shoulders... I don't see any of those, and my worry fades.

Except.

“You look pale.” Frowning, I inspect her again, looking for anything else out of the ordinary. I know Ari so well, I’m attuned to most of her little tells—the way her chin juts when she’s feeling stubborn, the little quirk of the right side of her mouth when she’s trying not to laugh.

There. That tiny line between her eyes. “You’re worried. What’s wrong?”

Surprise flickers in her eyes. “What? How?”

“I can tell.” Picking her up, I set her on the counter so her face is level with mine. “You didn’t have this”—I trace the little line—“when I left you in bed. So I know you’re worried about something. Tell me, please.”

Uncertainty darkens her eyes. After a silent pause, she says quietly, “I was going to wait until later.”

“You *are* sick.”

“No. I swear I’m not.”

“Then what, sweetheart?” I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb across her soft skin. “Tell me. Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad.”

Another pause, and my heart kicks into high gear. *What’s wrong?*

Ari sighs, resigned. “You know how I had to take antibiotics after I fell into the pond? Just in case I swallowed anything icky?”

“Yes?”

“Well.” She swallows hard. “With everything going on, and the stress, and...” Her forehead creases, her gaze dropping. “I didn’t mean to forget. But...”

“What, honey?” I’m going crazy here.

“I’m pregnant.”

What?

Her words spill out in a rush. “I was late, and I thought it was just stress and then this morning I remembered the antibiotics and that they can mess with birth control and I took a test just now and I’m pregnant.”

*Pregnant. Ari. Having my baby.*

“I know it’s soon; we haven’t been together that long, and I didn’t plan it this way.” Her chin wobbles, her voice going small. “I’m sorry I messed up with the pills. But... I want this baby. If you’re not ready...”

*Ari. Having my baby.*

“I’m more than ready.”

“Are you sure?” Tears are welling up in her eyes, seconds from overflowing. “We’ve only been dating a little while ... and I don’t want you to feel obligated to be with me.”

Am I sure?

I kiss her hard on the lips. “Wait here.”

And I run into the living room, snatching a small box from under the tree. When I get back to the kitchen, Ari is still on the counter, tears wetting her cheeks.

“Honey, no.” I carefully brush the dampness away. “Don’t cry. I’m not upset about this. Not at all. Surprised? Yes. But upset? *Absolutely not.*”

Lifting her down from the counter, I set Ari in front of me, holding her gaze. “I’ve known you for eighteen years. I know I want to be with you. And that includes having children with you. The timing of that doesn’t matter. Now, in a year, in five? I want you. And our children. No matter when it happens.”

Then I pull my heart out of my chest and hand it to her.

And I drop to one knee, holding the box out to the love of my life.

“I love you, Ari. Since we met, you’ve had me. My heart has always known you’re the one for me.”

I flip the box open; the light hitting the stone and reflecting sparks of light across Ari’s face.

She’s never looked more beautiful.

“Cash—”

“You’re the one, Ari. I wish there were words to tell you how much I love you. But it’s more than words. It’s how I feel when I’m with you. It’s the greatest joy in the world.”

Tears are steadily falling now, and I really hope these are happy ones.

I reach out to her, both our hands shaking.

Her fingers wrapped in mine, always protected.

Pushing past the lump in my throat, I ask her the most important question of my life.

“Will you marry me?”

“Oh, Cash.” Love shines bright in her eyes, tears sparkling. “Of course I will. Nothing could make me happier.”

I slide the ring on her finger, marveling at it. *My Ari*. Soon to be my wife. The mother of my child.

It’s more than I ever dreamed of.

Lifting her into my arms, I kiss Ari over and over, still not quite believing.

After a minute, or an hour, we pull apart, gasping for breath. Lashes damp, gaze soft, she whispers, “I love you, Cash. I always have, and I always will.”

Then her stomach makes a little growling noise, and she giggles. “So much for the romantic moment.”

*Breakfast!*

And in unison, “The quiche!”

It’s not burned. But it *is* slightly charred.

“It’s okay,” Ari assures me as she looks over my shoulder at the sad-looking dish. “I like pastries better, anyway. Easier to eat while we’re opening presents.”

Ten minutes later, we’re sitting on the floor in front of the tree, presents and wrapping paper in piles around us. There’s the tiniest bit of glaze on Ari’s lip, and I lean over to kiss it off, turning the small taste into a passionate kiss.

Then I look at her.

Eyes sparkling, lips kiss-swollen, my ring sparkling on her finger, huge smile, and flat belly that will soon swell as our child grows inside her.

Beside the twinkling tree, the fire crackling nearby, the room filled with love, I'm struck by a sudden certainty.

"They would be so happy."

Ari tilts her head, her brows arching up in question. "Who?"

"My parents, my grandparents, your dad... I think they would be so happy to see us together like this. To know we came back together, that we're getting married. That we're having a baby."

Her gaze goes soft, and she takes my hand. "Oh, Cash. I think somehow they know. And I'm sure they're happy."

The swell of emotion silences me, and I gather Ari into my arms, pressing my lips into her hair.

*Now I know what Ari means by happy tears.*

We're both quiet for a minute, until Ari leans back and grins at me. "Okay. I was just thinking, after we open the presents, we should probably celebrate our Christmas engagement with some R-rated activity by the tree. What do you think?"

"I may have gotten you a gift to go with it," she adds, giving me a heated look. "Something *fun*."

*Yes, please.*



## Epilogue

### *3 Months Later*

**ARI**

“Sweetheart, you look gorgeous.”

Cash comes up behind me, resting his hand on my hip. He brushes my hair back and kisses *that* spot behind my ear, the one that always sends little shivers through me.

I turn toward him, gesturing at my stomach. “But do I look pregnant? Or just like I’ve been pigging out lately?”

He moves his hand to cover the small swell of my belly. “You look pregnant, Ari. Everyone who’s coming knows you are.”

That’s true.

Once we passed the first trimester, I’m not sure who was more eager to tell everyone. Cash bragged to everyone at the station, and I was thrilled to put my framed ultrasounds on my desk at school.

Of course, some people knew earlier—my mom, Thea, Ian, Grant—and Laila figured me out one day when she and Ben were visiting. She spotted me making ginger tea and burst out with, “My teacher makes that all the time. She’s pregnant, and she says it makes her tummy feel better. Are you pregnant, too?”

Thankfully, the morning sickness has passed, and I’m feeling pretty good. Happy. Safe. Excited about what’s coming next.

Life is good all around, really. No more crazy drama, Kyle and Brett are both in prison, and Cash and I can focus on our future together.

“You’re right.” I cover his hand with mine, my fingers pale against his golden ones. “I guess I’m just looking forward to when I really look pregnant.”

He flashes me a little smile. “I think that will happen soon enough.” Leaning in, Cash kisses me, his lips warm and tender and tasting slightly of mint. Then he bends over and presses a soft kiss on my belly, and my heart nearly bursts from the sight of it.

Straightening, he says, “Okay, hun. Are you ready to go downstairs? Most of our guests should be arriving soon.”

I glance at myself in the mirror one more time, taking stock. Hair long and shiny—one perk of being pregnant is my hair growing like crazy. Just a hint of makeup, some blush and mascara to highlight my eyes. A wraparound dress in a silky green fabric, clinging to my fuller breasts and the little bump I’m so excited about.

“Okay.” I take Cash’s hand, twining my fingers with his. His platinum wedding band gleams against the gold of his skin, reminding me all over again.

*My husband.* Because Cash couldn’t wait to get married, and neither could I.

After all we’d been through, we both know how quickly life can change. And as Cash said on Christmas night as we lay in bed snuggling, “I know I want to be with you, Ari. And I don’t want to waste any more time.”

So we went to Tahiti just after New Year’s and got married on the beach. It was just a tiny ceremony—we flew in my mom, Thea, and Ian—but it was *perfect*.

And today we’re having a big wedding reception for all our friends, now that my morning sickness has passed and I’m back to feeling normal again. All the people from the station, my coworkers from school, the Blade and Arrow team, plus most of Cash’s employees at Chatham.

“Remember, if you start to feel tired, take a break. Don’t feel like you have to entertain everyone.” Cash glances at me as we head to the stairs. “I don’t want you overdoing it.”

“I will. But I feel fine. Really.” Little lines of worry crease his brow, and I stop to smooth them away. “But I’ll make sure to sit down. And you can remind me.” Cash has been incredibly protective over the last few months, but I can’t really blame him.

After watching his girlfriend—now wife—nearly get poisoned by carbon monoxide, then shot at, not to mention kidnapped and threatened by his drug-addicted brother... Well, that was certainly enough to get his protective instincts going.

And now that I'm pregnant, he's even more determined that nothing will hurt me.

But I don't mind. I still struggle sometimes with everything that happened, and Cash makes me feel safe. So if he wants to get all protective of me, that's okay.

When we get downstairs, Cash draws me to him, enfolding me in his embrace. One hand rests at the small of my back, the other at my nape. His eyes are soft as he gazes down at me. "You look beautiful, Ari. I still can't believe you're mine."

I wrap my arms around his waist, smoothing my hands over the hard muscles of his back. "I can't believe you're mine, either. I never thought I could be this happy."

Dipping his head, Cash captures my mouth with his. At first tender, our kiss deepens, our tongues dancing together, stroking and teasing. My nipples go hard and my core squeezes, little sparks of need zipping through me.

Cash swells against my belly, and he makes this sexy growl as he kisses me, ramping up my desire even more. Maybe we could go back upstairs for a minute or ten...

"Okay, you two." Thea comes up to us grinning, her curls bouncing around her shoulders. "There are lots of people

waiting to talk to Ari. The whole new bride and expectant mother thing.”

I pull away from Cash and give him a smile filled with promises for later. “Sorry,” I tell Thea. “I blame the hormones. And my sexy husband.”

Cash kisses my forehead. “Go talk to your friends. But remember—”

“I know.” My smile widens. “I’ll take it easy.”

As I walk away with Thea, Cash is swallowed up by his buddies from the station. Out of the corner of my eye, I see lots of shoulder pats and back slaps and chin lifts—and in the middle of it all, Cash grinning proudly.

“He’s so cute,” Thea enthuses, tugging me over to one of the couches. She plops down and continues, “He can’t keep his eyes off you. And he’s so excited about becoming a dad.”

A server comes by and I take a glass of sparkling cider while Thea goes for champagne. “He’s amazing,” I agree. “Sometimes I still can’t believe it’s real.”

Thea takes a sip of the sparkling liquid, humming appreciatively at it. “I always knew you two would end up together. I just didn’t think it would take so long.”

“Yeah...” My eyes gravitate toward Cash, and he glances over, meeting my gaze. “But I think it was the right time. We weren’t ready until now.”

“And now you’re married, with a baby on the way.” She beams at me. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Ari, congratulations.” Maya pauses by the couch, smiling brightly. “Mind if I join you? Or is this—”

“No, sit down.” I pat the empty cushion next to me. “I’m so glad you could come.”

“Of course.” Maya’s eyes crinkle up at the corners. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Another server swings by, this time with tiny quiches. I chuckle to myself as I grab one, and Thea eyes me curiously. “Something funny about quiches?”

I shake my head. “No, just a thing between Cash and I.”

“So, is your mom coming?” Thea asks. “If she’s here, I’d love to see her. It’s been ages.”

“She and Paul are coming later; their flight isn’t arriving until five. Cash arranged for a car to pick them up at the airport, so they’ll hopefully be here by six.”

“I still can’t believe you never told her anything.” Thea shakes her head at me. “She must have been so pissed at you when you finally filled her in on everything that happened.”

Maya’s eyes go wide. “You didn’t tell your mom about the —” She snaps her mouth shut, flushing. “Sorry!”

I pat her arm, smiling. “It’s fine. And no,” I admit sheepishly. “I didn’t tell her about anything until after Christmas. At first, I didn’t want to worry her, and the longer I put it off... I knew she’d be upset.”

Thea snickers. “So you waited until you had good news to cushion the blow?”

“Pretty much. I kind of flew through all the terrible stuff,” I explain, looking between Thea and Maya. “And then I finished with—by the way, I’m engaged to Cash, and we’re having a baby. She had a hard time yelling at me after that.”

Maya laughs. “I’ll have to remember that.”

As afternoon turns to evening, I talk to everyone at the party.

Ian and Grant give me their suggestions for baby names—unsurprisingly, they each think *their* name would be best.

My mom scolds me again for keeping secrets, but then quizzes me about the pregnancy and asks how soon she can start buying baby clothes.

Laila presents me with a handmade card, Ben smiling beside her.

And I don’t miss how Ben keeps sneaking glances across the room at Thea, and I make another mental note for later matchmaking efforts.

When the party starts to slow, only our closest friends still staying, I sneak off to the library to get off my feet.

It’s quiet in here, a welcome respite from the busyness of the rest of the house. Slipping off my shoes, I sink onto the velvet loveseat near the window, wiggling my bare toes in relief. Fatigue tugs at me—even though I’ve had a great time, all the entertaining is still tiring.

The door opens softly and Cash comes inside, his jacket gone and his shirt slightly rumpled. He spots me and his shoulders sag in relief. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah.” I scoot over so there’s room for Cash to sit down, but he just picks me up and sets me on his lap instead. “Just a little tired.”

His lips press to my head, one of my favorite things in the world. “Do you want to go upstairs and go to bed?”

Snuggling against his chest, I nuzzle his neck. “No, I just needed a little quiet time. I’m not ready to sleep yet. I want to enjoy the rest of our celebration.”

Cash strokes my hair, his fingers trailing through the strands and down my back. “Did you have a good time?”

“I had a great time, Cash.” Tipping my head back, I meet his gaze. It’s so tender, filled with the same depth of love I have for him. “I’m so happy.”

“Me too, sweetheart. Me too.”



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## About the Author

Gia Cobie is an author and librarian in living in upstate New York. In her spare time, Gia enjoys reading and spending time in the Adirondacks. She has a soft spot for cheesy reality romance shows, although she also loves paranormal and fantasy. *Ariana's Hero* is the first book in her romantic suspense series, *Heroes of Sleepy Hollow*. Gia's other works include her military romantic suspense series, *Blade & Arrow Security* and her paranormal romance series, *Tenebris Desire*.